

CHAPTER 1

The Strawberry Patch

The pleasing aroma of freshly brewed coffee combined with apple-cinnamon potpourri drifted through the store as Mrs. Barnett took her position behind the cash register. She was waiting for her first customer to enter the Strawberry Patch. The tall, middle-aged woman had arrived early to make sure everything was ready before opening the doors to the public. It was her first day on duty, and Mrs. Barnett was very excited about managing the gourmet coffee and gift shop. She and Bo, the famous black Labrador retriever known for helping police solve mysterious burglaries with his crime-sniffing nose, were in the central Texas historic town of Salado. They were visiting their friends, Ruby and Mike Cameron. During Mrs. Barnett's visit, the Camerons, who owned

the Strawberry Patch, were called out of town unexpectedly. As they prepared to leave, Mrs. Barnett agreed to house-sit, and when the Camerons ran out of options in finding someone to run the store, they turned to her.

“I am sorry to ask this of you at Christmastime,” Ruby had said, “but since you are so familiar with our store, and as a former teacher you have supervised any number of classrooms, will you manage the Strawberry Patch?”

Before Mrs. Barnett could reply, Ruby went on to say, “The store is well stocked with plenty of coffee and items to sell. Our employees’ assignment sheets, along with their times to work, are posted for the week. I know the hours will be long this weekend. You will need to open the store at 10 a.m. and close at 9 p.m., but it is such an exciting time. Our annual Salado Christmas Stroll is well attended and has visitors coming from everywhere, even from out of state.”

“Oh, my,” murmured Mrs. Barnett, overwhelmed by Ruby’s request. “I have attended the Stroll a number of times and have friends who come every year, but . . . I have Bo with me.”

“He will be all right in our fenced yard. The weather is nice, and even at this time of the year it’s not very cold.”

“But you don’t know Bo . . . you have flowers and shrubs and . . . ” Mrs. Barnett tried to explain that Bo was a “digger,” but Ruby insisted the dog would be just fine, and reminded her that the store was only a short distance away. “You can check on him from time to time.”

“But we keep him busy taking him for walks and giving him a lot of attention. I won’t have anyone doing that while I’m at the store,” explained Mrs. Barnett.

“He will find things to do,” replied Ruby with a smile.

“That’s what scares me,” thought Mrs. Barnett, remembering the times Bo dug under her backyard fence before she had big rocks put around the bottom and how she gave up having flower beds after Bo destroyed them.

The shop’s door opened. Pushing strands of blondish-grey hair into place, she smoothed down her red sweater with an appliquéd snowman and a brightly jeweled Christmas tree before greeting her first customer.

“Good morning,” she said, giving a bright smile.

The man nodded and walked past her on his way to the coffee bar.

Becky, a petite, dark-haired girl, managed that part of the store, and as she made him a cup of coffee another customer entered. When Mrs. Barnett greeted her, the lady walked past her, answering back that she was in a hurry but had to stop for a cup of coffee.

Looking at her watch, Mrs. Barnett assumed these were local people on their way to work. The tourists would probably arrive later.

Becky stayed busy as more people ordered beverages. Most of them preferred regular coffee. After the customers left, Becky called out to Mrs. Barnett, “When the tourists arrive we’ll have more orders for gourmet coffees.”

“Do you need me to help you with anything?” questioned Mrs. Barnett.

“No, I am fine,” Becky answered as she brought Mrs. Barnett a cup of coffee.

“Oh, thank you.” Mrs. Barnett beamed, appreciating Becky’s thoughtfulness.

“Karen will be here in a few minutes to take over the cash register. I can handle everything



until she arrives if you want to check on Bo,” Becky said.

“That’s a great idea,” replied Mrs. Barnett, holding her coffee and grabbing her purse with her other hand.

Arriving at the Camerons’ house, she was glad to see the fenced front yard was safe and sound. The ficus tree was intact and Ruby’s plants had not been disturbed. Watching from the car window, Mrs. Barnett saw Bo sleeping next to his empty food container and half-full water bowl.

“He ate his dog food, drank some water, and fell asleep,” said Mrs. Barnett, relieved, reminding herself that she had filled both of them before she left. Not wanting to awaken him, she remained in the car and watched Bo’s chest slowly rise and fall in undisturbed sleep.

“Let a sleeping dog lie,” she commented as she returned to the store.

“This is quite a challenge,” she told herself. “I came to see friends and since I was only staying a few days, I brought Bo. Now, I’m running a store, trying to keep Bo out of mischief, and extending my visit for I don’t know how long.”

As her thoughts continued, she acknowledged she was excited about managing the store and flattered the Camerons had confidence in her ability to do it, but Ruby had no idea what a nuisance Bo could be. Her neighbors and friends in Argyle were certainly aware of the messes he could get into.

Heaving a sigh, she hoped that Bo would behave. If some of her friends attending the Christmas Stroll stopped by the Strawberry Patch, perhaps she could ask them to lend her a hand.

Suddenly an impulse hit her. Quickly she turned into the parking area of a small shopping center. Opening her purse, she took out her cell phone and called Jody Bell, a neighbor who planned to attend a ceramics workshop here this weekend. There was no answer, but Mrs. Barnett left a message on the answering machine giving Jody directions where to find her, and ending with, "I really need to see you."

Next she called the Altoms, who planned to attend the Christmas Stroll. Andrea, their energetic ten-year-old, frequently visited Mrs. Barnett's house to take Bo for walks.

She talked to Andrea's mother and learned that since they had a conflict in plans they would not be attending this year.

Disappointed that she hadn't found anyone to help her with Bo, Mrs. Barnett started up the car engine and headed for the store.

On her way, she remembered that Ruby had told her that her assistant, Karen, had two youngsters, Mike and Jennifer. She wondered if they would take Bo for some walks to keep him busy and out of trouble.