

EXCERPT

“That is one ugly dog.” Ashleigh’s cruel laugh drew Nikki’s attention from where she was glaring at Daniel.

Nikki stepped into the dining room where she saw that Elmo, wearing a black bow tie, had decided to introduce himself to Ryan. She wondered who had put the bow tie on him. A wink from her mother answered that question.

It was bad enough that Ashleigh was ogling Ryan with her professional football player husband right next to her. But when she called Elmo “ugly,” the Momma Bear in Nikki reared up. Before Nikki could reassign Ashleigh Addison from the anchor desk to the frog-jumping contest beat, Ryan knelt next to Elmo and scratched the dog’s white chest.

“Didn’t you hear, Ashleigh? Ugly is the new beautiful.”

Nikki stopped.

Ugly is the new beautiful? That was Elmo’s tag line in his profile on social media. Ryan must have seen it.

Ryan confirmed her deduction.

“Elmo and I are friends,” he told Ashleigh and Conner while rubbing Elmo’s chest and scratching his ears. “Aren’t we, big guy?”

Elmo greeted Ryan with a lick that left his face coated in dog drool.

Killer Deadline

“He’s proof that there are many faces to beauty,” Ryan said. “Elmo has over a hundred thousand followers.”

“That’s twice what you have,” Conner told Ashleigh, who scowled at the news.

“I’d adopted Elmo in Vegas,” Nikki said. “His human was an elderly woman who picked him up at a park. He was the last one in a litter of pups, the runt. She watched a bunch of dog training videos to learn how to train him and discovered that he was extremely smart.”

“How smart is he?” Becca, who had elbowed her way to the front of the party guests, asked.

A slim grin crossed Nikki’s lips. “Elmo.”

Elmo looked up at Nikki.

“Get my phone.”

Elmo gazed up at her without moving.

“Yeah, I can see how smart he is,” Ashleigh said. “Talk about seventy pounds of loose skin and dog drool.”

There was a nervous titter among the party goers.

The corner of Nikki’s mouth turned upward. “Elmo, I’m sorry. That was very rude of me. Can you get my phone, *please?*”

Immediately, Elmo stood up and sniffed around the kitchen. He continued sniffing around until he ended up in the hallway. Necks craned to watch the dog trot down the hallway to the foyer where they had entered the house.

Elmo’s ears perked up when he picked up the scent of the phone. His pace quickened as he galloped up the stairs to the second floor. A moment later, the dog hurried down the back stairs with the cell phone in his mouth.

The guests cleared a path for him to Nikki, where he sat in front of her. She reached down for the phone only to have Elmo jerk his head away.

The dog cocked his head and looked up at her.

Lauren Carr

“Thank you, Elmo.” She held out her hand and Elmo dropped the phone into her palm. “Mom always insisted that we say ‘please’ and ‘thank you,’” she said while wiping the drool off the phone.

There was a round of applause throughout the house.

“Elmo can also open doors, close doors. Load the dishwasher. Put dirty clothes into the washing machine,” Ryan said. “You should see the videos on his social media page.”

“He even runs the vacuum cleaner,” Kathleen said. “Unfortunately, he doesn’t do windows.”

“No, but he can climb a ladder,” Nikki said. “I didn’t teach him. His previous human taught him to do all of that.”

“How did you end up with him?” Becca asked.

“She was a murder victim. The victim’s sister said that the killer had locked Elmo in a closet. Elmo hadn’t mastered picking locks. When the police got nowhere, the victim’s sister came into the station and asked me to look into the case. They’d assumed robbery was a motive because the victim had an envelope with thousands of dollars in a drawer in her dresser. The money was gone. Elmo had landed in a shelter because the sister’s landlord didn’t allow pets and the victim’s son-in-law was highly allergic to dog. No one in the family could take him in. I knew Elmo was a witness, and the sister had told me about how smart he was. When I found him, he was so depressed. He looked horrible. So, I adopted him—just in time for the funeral. I took him to the graveside service. It was a long-shot, but I wanted to see if Elmo could identify the killer. I was right. Immediately, he bit the victim’s grandson in the butt.”

“He’d decided to take a bite out of crime, huh?” Becca said with a laugh.

Nikki nodded her head while patting Elmo on the head. “The police said that was not enough to get a warrant. But it was enough to make the victim’s daughter suspicious. She had

Killer Deadline

never seen Elmo so aggressive. She went searching through her son's things and found the bank envelope that her mother had kept her money in. It was empty and there were drops of blood on it. *She* turned her own son into the police."

Harrison stepped up behind Wyatt to tap him on the shoulder. He spoke to him in a low voice. "Sorry to bother you, Wyatt, but Suzanne seems to be getting into some trouble in the game room."

As Wyatt hurried away, Harrison said, "All Lucy and Ethel have ever done is scare the inn's guests."

The guests focused on the pair playing tug of war with a rubber mouse. Upon becoming aware of unwanted attention directed at them, Lucy uttered a growl from deep in her thin chest.

"Elmo has quite a following online," Ryan said. "He's been photographed with practically every celebrity who's gone through Vegas."

"After I reported his story about how he'd identified his human's killer, he became a celebrity," Nikki said. "Everyone wanted to meet him. I set up his social media account. I'd take him everywhere, because that was what his other human used to do. At the station, guests would meet him, and I'd take their picture and post it on his page. Then, the marketing folks at the station noticed a trend. When I posted a picture of Elmo with a guest, there would be a bigger viewing audience."

"You should do that here," Conner told Ashleigh with a grin.

"Do what?" Ashleigh asked with wide eyes. Her face turned white.

"Have your picture taken with Elmo and post it on the Internet." Conner smoothed his hair and tucked in his shirt. "You can slap his picture on the station's website with a banner saying, 'WKPG-TV welcomes Elmo to the family.'" He whipped out his phone and held it out to Nikki. "Take our

Lauren Carr

picture so I can put it on my social media page. This'll be great for my image." He grabbed his glass and wrapped an arm around Elmo.

Half-camera hog, Elmo leaned in next to Conner. Elmo loved having his picture taken. His generous jowls seemed to naturally turn-upward when he saw a phone aimed at him.

The two of them posed for Nikki to take the picture.

"Come on, dear," Conner urged his wife. "Have your picture taken with Elmo."

"I'm not posing with any dog," Ashleigh said. "Especially an ugly one. His face looks like he rear-ended the back of a truck."

"At least he has a fan base," Conner said.

Ashleigh's eyes grew wide.

"Oh, oh. This isn't going to be pretty," Julie warned Nikki.

Gripped with fear of the impending scene, the party guests scattered.

Ryan held out his arm to ease Nikki back. Sensing a change in the atmosphere, Elmo stood in front of Nikki while facing Ashleigh.

"And you think I don't?" Ashleigh asked in a low tone.

"Used to. Not so much anymore," Conner said.

Ashleigh waved her hand. "Did you see the crowd that turned out this past July for Summer Fest? Hundreds turned out."

"They turned out for the local pop singer whose song had made the top-40," Conner said. "They didn't come for you. The truth of the matter, Ash, is this. Beauty fades. Brains and talent are forever."

He gestured at Nikki. "Nikki is a perfect example. What she lacks in looks, she's made up for with brains and talent. Her brains will take care of her long after her breasts and butt droop. You, Ashleigh, your beauty got you to the anchor desk,

Killer Deadline

but where are you going to go from there? You're a has-been. A dog with a pushed-in face has a bigger following than you."

Ashleigh looked around at the guests staring at her. She responded by slapping Conner across the face. "I'm not a brainless twit!" She spun around. "You just wait. All of you! You just wait. Monday evening, six o'clock news, I'm going to break a story that is going to have every news journalist across the country talking." She gestured at Nikki. "Even the award-winning Nikki Bryant will be in awe."

She whirled around to eye all of them before elbowing her way out the door and into the darkness.

"That was weird," Nikki turned to her mother. "What story is she talking about breaking?"

"I have no idea," Kathleen said while opening the back door for Lucy and Ethel to scurry out like two over-sized rodents. "Becca works pretty closely with Ashleigh." She turned to the young journalist. "Becca, do you have any—"

"No," Becca said. "Ashleigh has been a generous mentor, but she's never really gone into any particulars about any stories that she's working on."

"Now and then, Ashleigh will talk about wanting to hunt down a big news story. It's usually after another journalist gets picked up by one of the major hubs," Camille said. "But then, once she sees how much work it is, she decides she's happy where she is."

"Is Ashleigh going to get herself into trouble?" Ryan asked Conner who was opening a fresh beer bottle. "If she doesn't know how to go about an investigation, she could very easily end up in over her head."

Conner lifted a shoulder. "A few years ago, I guess I got through to her. I've been telling her that if she wanted to move up, that she'd need to prove she was more than a talking head. Not long after that, she tossed me out of the house. While we were separated, she told me that she had gotten a lead on a

huge story. She claimed it would win her all kinds of awards and make her a journalistic legend here in Pine Grove.”

“I remember that,” Camille said. “She was very excited about it. I thought that finally she would apply herself to some real journalism. I got the impression that she was actually working on it.”

“A legend?” Becca asked. “What story would make her a legend?”

“Solving Ross Bryant’s murder.” Conner nodded his head. “The cold case of WKPG’s station owner. That’s the story that she claimed she was going to break—back then. But then she never did follow up on whatever lead she’d claimed to have uncovered.”

“What kind of lead did she get?” Nikki asked. “Did she uncover new evidence?”

Conner shook his head. “Either she didn’t do anything with it or it didn’t lead anywhere. She dropped the case as soon as I came home, and we went on our second honeymoon. Or was it our third? Maybe it was the fourth.” His voice trailed off.

Camille snapped her fingers. “I remember it was after Gram got sick. Ashleigh helped me by sitting next to her bed with her to give me breaks. I remember her saying that she was working in a huge story while sitting there all those hours... But then after Gram passed, Ashleigh never talked about it again. She just seemed to drop it.”