

LABRADORED TO DEATH

CB WILSON

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, institutions, events, or locales in this novel are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.



CHARACTERS, HUMAN

Barklay, Charlotte (Aunt Char): Mayor of Barkview, dog psychiatrist on *Throw Him a Bone*. Renny, a champion Cavalier King Charles Spaniel, is her dog.

Bruns, Austin: Texas baseball memorabilia collector. Related to Bertie Wallace.

Daniels, Owen: 1950s Fab Five 1st baseman. Deceased.

Hawl, Russ: Cat's husband. FBI consultant. Owns Blue Diamond Security.

Hawl-Wright, Catalina "Cat": Vice-President at KDOG. A cat person living in Barkview.

Manley, Amanda: Director of Barkview's baseball card museum. Stallone, a Basset Hound, is her dog.

Moore, Jennifer: General Manager at KDOG. Cinnamon & Nutmeg, two Cavalier King Charles Spaniels, are her dogs.

O'Donnell, Michael: Champ's trainer and handler. Champ, a black Labrador Retriever, is his dog.

Oldeman, Will: Elevator operator at the Old Barkview Inn.

Richards, Richie: Barkview Police Officer.

Richards, Hunter: Richie's cousin. He is a baseball memorabilia dealer.

Ruff, Rufus: A local baseball memorabilia dealer.

Schmidt, Gregory (Uncle G): Barkview's police chief. Max and Maxine, silver-point German Shepherds, are his dogs.

Sugarland, Carmella (Ella): Owner of the Candy Crusher baseball card.

Sugarland, Clark: Current president of Canine Caramel. The Candy Catcher's grandson.

Sugarland, Henry: Ella's father. Clark's brother. Deceased.

Sugarland, Kandy (Grandma K): The Candy Catcher's sister. Nana Dolce was her mother. Deceased.

Sugarland, Karl Jr.: The Candy Catcher. 1950s Fab Five Catcher. Owned Canine Caramel in the 1950s-2000.

Sugarland, Nana Dolce: The Candy Catcher's mother. She owned Canine Caramel 1925-1950.

Sugarland-Russo, Keke: Ella's mother.

Sullivan, Joe (Sully): 1950s Fab Five short stop. Deceased.

Turner, Gabby: Owner of Daily Wag coffee shop. Sal, a Saluki, is her dog.

Wallace, Bertie: 1950s Fab Five 2nd baseman. Deceased.

Wilcox, Artie: 1950s Fab Five 3rd baseman. Deceased.

Witman, Mel: Owns BIS Barkery with her sister Nell.

Witman, Nell: Owns Sit and Stay Café. Mel is her sister. Blur, a black Labrador Retriever, is her dog.

Woofman, Danny (Woof): Owns a glass replacement company. Bully, a Chihuahua, is his dog.

Woofman, Mary Ann: Woof's grandmother.

Wynne, Sandy: Cat's assistant and computer whiz. Jack, a Jack Russell Terrier, is her dog.

CHARACTERS, CANINE



- Blur: Mel's black Labrador Retriever.
- Brisbane: Nell's red Australian Shepherd.
- Bully: Woof's fawn Chihuahua.
- Cinnamon & Nutmeg: Jennifer's Cavalier King Charles.
- Jack: Sandy's Jack Russell Terrier.
- Max & Maxine: Uncle G's Deputy German Shepherds.
- Renny: Aunt Char's champion Cavalier King Charles Spaniel.
- Champ: Star Bat Dog. A black Labrador Retriever. Owned and trained by Michael O'Donnell.
- Sal: Gabby's Saluki.
- Stallone: Amanda's Bassett Hound.

CHAPTER I



Multimillion-Dollar Baseball Card Stolen!

Headlines like that sold newspapers—lots of newspapers. As the editor-in-chief and executive producer of KDOG, Barkview’s premier newspaper, digital TV, and cable network, I should be celebrating. If only I hadn’t been sworn to secrecy.

My name is Cat Hawl, and I have a thing about secrets—uncovering them, that is. Keeping them challenges my core reporter’s values. That front-page controversy surrounded the Candy Catcher baseball card made it even worse. What really happened that fateful June 1952 night when fire destroyed all but one of the Fab Five’s baseball cards?

You bet I wanted to know. So, when Amanda Manley, the executive director of Barkview’s baseball card museum, called me three days before the baseball game celebrating Barkview’s centennial, I figured she had something important to share. “What do you have?” Forget niceties. Amanda’s type-A personality preferred getting right to the point.

“Y-you’ve got to help me.” Panic, pure and simple, came right through the phone.

I straightened from comfy slouch to perfect posture in my executive chair. “Are you all right?”

“Yes. I mean no. The card’s been s-stolen.” Amanda’s voice cracked.

I sucked in my breath. No need to ask which card. Barkview’s centennial celebration revolved around the unveiling of one card. So did the National Baseball Card Collectors gala. Even Champ, the bat dog, a nationally-recognized black Labrador Retriever who fetched hitters’ baseball bats, already appeared at events to build the hype. Did I mention that Barkview is the dog-friendliest city in America? In this town, designated leash lanes lead to hound playgrounds, and everyone has a BFF (best furry friend) except me. I don’t hate dogs. In fact, over the years, I’ve developed a true appreciation for that special human-canine bond. Is there a right one for me? Perhaps. Let’s just say, I’m a work in progress.

“The display case has been smashed. There’s a Louisville Slugger and that bat dog’s necklace next to it.” Amanda’s voice trembled. “The c-card is gone.”

“The card?” My mind wasn’t wrapping around this yet.

My shriek brought Sandy Wynne, my millennial production assistant, running into my office. Jack, her Jack Russell Terrier, jumped like a spring-loaded bobblehead at her feet.

“Are you okay?” Sandy held her tablet like a weapon she would use to defend herself.

I changed my phone to speaker. No sense hiding information from my own personal Watson.

“I don’t know how it happened. The alarm was disabled.” I pictured Amanda’s manicured, blood-red nails yanking through her pixie-cut hair.

“What’s Uncle G’s opinion?” He’d have one. He always did.

Although he was not technically a blood relative, but rather my Aunt Char's second husband's brother-in-law, I still called the veteran military policeman "Uncle."

"The chief doesn't know. He can't. No one can know. I mean, no one. You need to promise me." Her insistence sounded downright desperate.

"You can't be serious." Gossip moved at the speed of light on the Barkview information superhighway.

"As long as the baseball card is back before its official unveiling on Saturday after the opening-day game..."

My intuition reacted to the catch in her voice. "That's seventy-two hours from now." Unless the game went into extra innings. "Disappointed collectors can be handled."

"Not Clark. He's circling like a vulture, waiting for the opportunity to shut down the museum and repossess all of his family's baseball memorabilia." Amanda's voice shook.

The vision of Clark Sugarland, the current President of Canine Caramel and director of the baseball museum, with his long neck and beaklike nose ready to swoop, stuck in my head. "What? Why?" Since its inception in 1925, Canine Caramel had issued short-run baseball cards that had been sold like the more common bubblegum-accompanied cards, only with their famous caramels. The collection was a true piece of Barkview's storied past and drew year-round visitors to town.

"I don't know. He made a stink about the security. Here in Barkview? It's, like, the safest place in the world."

Apparently, not today. Sandy handed me her tablet. The Candy Catcher baseball card's value flashed at me. I gasped. I couldn't help myself. "That baseball card is worth millions?" An old baseball card of a catcher who'd only played three seasons in the majors? How was that even possible?

"Yeah, I know. The Fabulous Five were the only college team with a season batting average over .500 ever." She let

that sink in before adding, “The museum is on the stadium’s security system. It’s top of the line.”

For protecting baseball bats and trophies maybe, but a pocket-sized, million-dollar baseball card? My husband, the security expert, would have an opinion on this for sure. “What kind of alarm did Clark want?”

“A display case with motion and infrared sensors.”

Like the one we’d used when the Shepard Diamond had been loaned from the Smithsonian to Barkview as part of our Founder’s Day celebration two years ago. Not that it had helped then.

Amanda’s regret came out in a ragged breath. “I honestly thought his demand was just another delay tactic. We’d been promised that baseball card for months. Now, I wonder if he knew something.”

“Like what?” What wasn’t she telling me?

“I don’t know. Baseball card collectors can be a nefarious lot.”

“Dangerous baseball card collectors?” Was that really a thing? I remembered my father’s pride when he’d shown me his boyhood collection stuffed in a dilapidated shoebox in the hall closet.

“Absolutely. You’d be surprised at the offers I get for the cards in our collection.”

Not all of them legal, I assumed. A question to ask Clark, subtly. “What exactly do you want me to do? Prove that the dog did it?”

“Yes. I mean, no. I don’t care who did it. Just get the card back before Clark finds out. I need to clean up. The museum opens in an hour.”

“Wait! No! I need to see the crime scene.” Find a missing card with no evidence? “I’m on my way. Don’t touch anything...”

That stretch of silence before her agreement concerned me. I needed to hurry. I pushed back my office chair and skirted my monstrosity of a desk. An actual shrine to a nineteenth-century English library, my office hadn't measurably changed since the first Barklay editor-in-chief had proofed copy at this very desk. Although each subsequent occupant had left their mark, like the crystal vase filled with fresh sunflowers left by Aunt Char, I planned to do a much-needed modernization. Neutral paint and, dare I admit it, a TV would help. We needed to enter the twenty-first century already.

Tell that to the long list of remodelers unwilling to touch a splinter in these hallowed halls. Why couldn't they understand that five Pulitzers meant we needed to adapt to continue the tradition? Listen to me, the last living techno dinosaur, advocating for progress.

Seventy-two hours to secretly find a multimillion-dollar baseball card in a town packed with cutthroat collectors. Talk about challenging.

"Champ's owner didn't do this." Sandy's emphatic defense, followed by Jack's bark, refocused me.

"Probably not, but someone wants us to believe he was involved." One look at my dry-clean-only slacks and I wished I'd dressed in comfy jeans and a blue-and-white-striped Barkview Barkers baseball jersey like Sandy. Her attire not only advertised her community support but also made practical sense.

"Why?" Sandy asked.

I shrugged. She knew everything I knew now.

"Do you really think Clark would...?" Sandy asked.

The fourth-generation candymaker could use more sweetener in the get-along-with-others category, but steal his father's baseball card? I flashed her Aunt Char's you-can't-be-serious look. It worked. Sandy shuffled her feet.

“Technically, Ella owns the baseball card. Her grandma willed it to her,” Sandy reminded me.

Fifteen-year-old Carmella, or Ella, as she preferred to be called, had a lot of her what’s-right-is-right grandma in her. She’d need that resilience to take her place in the family’s caramel business. Since Aunt Char had been named the executor of Kandy Sugarland’s, Grandma K to most folks around Barkview, will until Ella’s twenty-fifth birthday, I knew far more about the family’s private affairs than most.

“How did the Candy Catcher’s sister end up with the baseball card?” Sandy asked.

I shrugged. “She was the executor of her brother’s will.”

“Which is odd, too.” Sandy hated it when things didn’t add up—not that I blamed her in this case. Why had Karl Sugarland, the Fab Five’s famous Candy Catcher, appointed his twin sister his executor instead of his son and heir? There had to be some secret there.

“Grandma K passed months ago. Why did Clark insist the card be released now?”

That I understood. “Unveiling the 1952 rookie card at the team’s hundred-year baseball celebration is good PR for Canine Caramel.”

Sandy huffed, unimpressed. The VIP baseball card collectors, who were already filling the Old Barkview Inn in preparation to view the uncirculated baseball card, disagreed.

“Fans love Champ. Just look at these pictures.” Sandy glanced toward the there-ought-to-be-a-TV-there wall before handing me her tablet.

The black Lab, dressed in a blue shirt with a bling-worthy “C” pendant swinging on a chain around his neck and a Louisville Slugger proudly balanced in his mouth, filled the screen. Even more of a fan favorite than anticipated, I realized as I scrolled through the photos. The dog really did make the

perfect master of ceremonies. His saintly patience impressed me. Kids yanking on his ears and riding him like a pony only widened his doggy grin. “Michael O’Donnell did a great job training Champ.”

“He started throwing mini-bats when the puppy was eight weeks old,” Sandy explained.

Even I knew Labs were genetic retrievers. “Is it any wonder his dog-training company is doing well?” Michael’s talents would be in high demand in a town like Barkview, where dogs outnumbered people by forty percent.

“I don’t think you’ll get him to leave North Carolina. You didn’t see last night’s interview yet, did you?” Sandy asked.

I hated to hurt her feelings. “Not yet. Date night...” I felt my cheeks heat. This newlywed thing messed with my schedule. That’s my excuse, and I’m sticking to it.

Sandy’s *hmm* communicated understanding and a bit of envy. I don’t blame her. Who knew marriage could be so, well, interesting?

“Champ is the most popular star we’ve had in town in years,” Sandy said. “Look at the line for his paw-o-graph.”

“His what?” Not another millennial thing? I really couldn’t keep up.

There was no missing her eye-roll. “It’s a dog’s autograph. A paw-o-graph. Get it?”

I got it. Sandy’s conclusion appeared right on. The queue circled Barker Field, Barkview’s historic baseball field. We’d had celebrity canines before, but never one this popular. I could already see tomorrow’s headline: “Champ: Baseball’s Newest Bowwow!” Maybe we could keep the missing baseball card a secret.

“Champ wore the ‘C’ necklace during last night’s interview. I’ll check with Michael and ask when he noticed it was missing. I’ll also start scanning social media for photos to see if

I can pinpoint when he lost it.” No further argument. Just action. I liked that about Sandy.

“Limit the timeline as best you can. I’ll need the dog’s schedule since arrival, too.”

Sandy nodded, already tapping on her tablet. “I’ll look into Clark, but that answer isn’t going to be easy without law enforcement access to personal information.”

True. Stealth required subtlety that routine questioning wouldn’t allow either. I knew where she was going. My husband wasn’t technically a cop, but being a security consultant to both the FBI and local police didn’t make him precisely impartial either. His resources might make the ask worth it, though. “I’d better see what’s up before I call Russ.”

Secrecy amounted to zero if we couldn’t find the missing baseball card in time.

Want to keep reading *Labradored to Death*? Get your copy today!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



The award-winning author of eight Cozy Pet Mysteries and counting, C.B. Wilson’s love of writing was spurred by an early childhood encounter with a Nancy Drew book where she precociously wrote what she felt was a better ending. After studying at the Gemology Institute of America, she developed a passion for researching lost, stolen and missing diamonds—the big kind. Her fascination with dogs and their passionate owners inspired Barkview, California, the dog friendliest city in America.

C.B. lives in Peoria, AZ with her husband. She is an avid pickleball player who enjoys traveling to play tournaments. She admits to chocoholic tendencies and laughing out loud at dog comics.

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