



The
COLOR
of DUST

CLAIRE
ROONEY

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*This book is dedicated to:
The untold millions of beloved partners, companions and spouses
whose names are still not written into the family tree.*

Author's note

The town of Columbia on the James is a real place. However, at the time of this writing, my description of it is entirely fictional. If you visit, don't blink, and bring your own lunch.

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To Lesa who didn't.

And not least, to my darling wife—not that I have one, I've just always wanted to say that.

About the Author

Claire Rooney lives on the East Coast and divides her time between the mountains and the sea. During the day, she moonlights as an analyst, holding a degree in computer science with a minor in creative writing. At night, she comes home to an ever revolving number of critters and works hard until the wee hours writing and trying to keep cat paws off the keyboard. Claire has been a frequent collaborator and contributor to *Sister Speak*, a literary journal and was the guest editor in 2007. She is, at this time, far enough over forty for it to be rude for you to ask and 100 percent certain that gravity works. But she's still cute as a button. Check out her Web site for news and events at www.clairebooks.com.

CHAPTER ONE

The rich cream-colored envelope looked out of place in Carrie's mailbox, tucked in between a bright orange flyer good for one free kung fu lesson and a shiny booklet full of buy-one-get-one-free pizza coupons. She shut and locked the door of the box without pulling any of it out. It had not been a good day. Summer came early this year and it was turning out to be a hot one on the bright streets of Chicago. The glare of the sun off all the mirrored glass kept giving her a headache, and the heat rising from the concrete sucked the rest of the life right out of her. She didn't have the energy to deal with any more crap, especially of the paper variety. It had been a trying day, full of irritations and frustrations, snippy e-mails from her clients and irksome memos from her new boss.

She paused with the mailbox key dangling in her hand. What if it wasn't crap?

Carrie shoved the key back into the lock, opened the door and pulled the letter out. The envelope was thick and stiff with

its own importance, an arrogant missive with fancy scrollwork decorating the front. *Bell, Dumfries & Howe, Attorneys at Law* the return address intoned in its fancy, pompous font. Her name was written on the face in a bold flow of curling ink. Miss Carrie J. Bowden, 77 West Erie Street, 908-A, Chicago, IL. The faded pink postmark was from some smeared place in Virginia.

She felt like banging her head against the front panel of the mailboxes. Hard. Repeatedly. But that wouldn't solve anything, and she already had a headache. This hot and ugly June was turning out to be the worst month of her life. At work, she had been stuck with a new hypermasculine, superhomophobic boss. At home, the problem was Megan and the bunny girl and then, insult to injury, she lost the fight over the cat. Now, here was some ominous looking letter sure to be full of fresh disasters. God only knew what it was. Maybe some ex-tourist from Podunk, Virginia, was suing her for bumping into them on the subway or stepping on their toe or poking them in the ass with her umbrella and causing them mental anguish, pain and suffering. Or some such shit.

She didn't have the strength to open the envelope. Carrie tossed the circulars into the trashcan and slipped the letter into her handbag. The top to her ChapStick was missing, and it smeared a gooey line across the tips of her fingers. She almost wiped her hand on her pants before she remembered that she was still in her good clothes. That was a stain she didn't need on top of the coffee she dribbled into her lap that morning. Carrie fumbled around inside her bag trying to find a tissue, but she only came up with loose change and cracker crumbs that stuck to the smears on her fingers.

Fine. Whatever. She would just go upstairs to her dim, drab, mostly empty, very lonely, nearly abandoned apartment, wash her hand, reheat yesterday's Chinese food, eat and then go to bed. Alone. Without Megan and without the cat. She closed the door of her mailbox and locked it again. Maybe tomorrow would be a better day. Or maybe it wouldn't. She shuffled her tired feet over to the elevator and punched the button. Her finger left waxy

cracker crumbs on the up arrow, but it didn't light. She punched the button again and then looked up. The sign on the doors said *Closed for Maintenance* and, of course, Carrie lived on the ninth floor.

CHAPTER TWO

The town was just a tiny dot on the map about an inch away from Richmond on an outside bend of the James River, but from her hotel on the outskirts of the city, it had taken Carrie nearly three hours and two wrong turns to get there.

She drove slowly down Fayette Street for the second time in the last two minutes. It was a very small town, about ten city blocks long and only about six blocks deep. Small clapboard sided houses dotted the back streets with scraggly rhododendrons bordering tiny square patches of lawn. The town seemed to have everything it needed. Along Main Street, she had seen a grocery store, a diner, a movie rental place and one fast-food restaurant of some odd variety that she had never heard of before, but they served a decent burger and a generous cup full of crisp, skinny fries with a friendly smile. The street itself was a broad, blacktopped boulevard with bricked sidewalks and antique-looking streetlamps. Small shops lined the road in two rows of three-story cinderblock buildings. The broad front windows of

the buildings all had badly painted signs that advertised healthcare items, secondhand clothes or today's luncheon special at Danni's Diner: BLT, chips and a Coke for \$3.99. The lawyer's office was not hard to find. It was the only one.

Bell, Dumfries & Howe, Attorneys at Law said the sign painted across the storefront window in letters that arched over a bad rendition of vaguely lopsided scales. The building looked old with white paint peeling off a red brick façade. It had a wooden door at the entrance, brass hinged, with a knocker in the shape of a lion's head. A shiny brass plaque repeated their names in a flourishing script and announced the hours of business: 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Monday through Friday.

Carrie slid her car into the space reserved by the front door, shoved the gear into park and unbuckled her seat belt. She pulled the letter out of the glove compartment and read it one more time. The words hadn't changed since she made her decision back in Chicago. Coming to Virginia seemed like a good idea when she was sitting alone in her apartment on the bright square spot of carpet where her couch had once been. Now that she was here, she wasn't as sure. It could be a trick, some elaborate hoax designed to... To do what? What would anybody want from her? She didn't have a lot of money. She didn't have important family. She didn't have any family at all, anymore. She wasn't exceptionally pretty. She was just an average kind of middle-class person of middling height with medium length muddy brown hair. She was not too tall, not too short, not too skinny, not skinny enough. Just an average kind of schmo. Not too bad, but not really very good either. She was not anything anyone would want, particularly.

She thought of Megan and then wished she hadn't. Megan had wanted her, once upon a time, but it had been almost six months since the day their argument turned a different kind of ugly and everything went so very wrong. Carrie touched her fingers to her cheek and felt every second of her nearly thirty years. It seemed, sometimes, that it all happened just yesterday. Sometimes, it seemed like it was a hundred years ago and she

could almost feel her old bones crumbling. Thirty wasn't that old, she knew, but she felt old. Megan had made her feel old. Today, she just felt tired and dry. She read the letter through one more time, looking for the trick, the spam, the virus. The paper was thick and bumpy, the printing bold and black. Carrie sighed and folded the letter carefully. She put it back in the envelope and opened the car door to a wave of damp summer heat.

A bell chimed softly when Carrie opened the front door of the law office. A phone rang from somewhere deep inside. An older woman with a short bob of silver gray hair looked up from her computer screen.

"Good afternoon. May I help you?" The woman spoke in a soft lilt of tangled vowels.

Carrie squeezed her purse in tighter against her side. "I have an appointment to see Mr. Dumfries. I'm Carrie Bowden."

The woman looked at her for just a fraction too long before she smiled and got up. She pointed to a plush armchair beside a table piled high with crisp new magazines. "Please have a seat. I'm sure Mr. Dumfries will be with you right away." She disappeared down a dark paneled hallway with a fast swishing of her skirt. Before Carrie picked up her first magazine, the woman came back and ushered her down the same hallway. She showed her into a spacious office full of neatly lined bookshelves and red leather chairs.

Mr. Dumfries sat behind a large ornate desk. He was an older gentleman, his grizzled hair tending mostly to gray, his long face descending into droops and jowls. He stood slowly when she came into the room and limped out from behind the desk with a hand outstretched.

"Miss Bowden." His voice was rumbly without being particularly deep. He shook her hand warmly and studied her with eyes that were bright and clear underneath the tired sag of his upper lids.

"Welcome to Columbia on the James. I can't tell you how glad we were to hear from you so we can finally put this matter

to rest. Would you like some tea?" He turned to the open door and yelled at the hallway. "Gillian! Gillian, some tea for Miss Bowden, if you would be so kind." He let go of Carrie's hand and pointed to a chair beside his desk. He sat himself in the opposite chair with a little hitch of his trouser leg and a grimace that slowly turned into a rueful grin. "Old bones just aren't made for sitting and standing," he said. "Summer's not as bad as winter, but I'm still not sure that getting old is worth the trouble." His smile flashed a yellowish set of small flat teeth.

Carrie didn't know what to say to that. People who hadn't had the chance to get old would probably not agree with him, but she wasn't old enough herself to argue the point. Feeling old wasn't the same thing as being old. She nodded at him and that seemed to be a sufficient answer.

Mr. Dumfries turned in his chair and reached across his desk to pick up a sheaf of papers. "I trust you had a pleasant drive. It's about fifteen hours from here to Chicago, isn't it?"

"Only about thirteen." She could have made it in ten if she had pushed the speed limit to the edge and not stopped for meals, but she didn't like driving like that. Drive-through litter made a mess out of her car, and she always managed to squash a packet of ketchup underfoot. It was a pain in the ass trying to get dried ketchup out of the floor mat.

"Ah, yes." Mr. Dumfries laid the papers across his knees. "I forget how fast you youngsters like to fly. Like time is of the essence." His hands tapped thoughtfully on the top sheet of paper, a blue coversheet with tilde lines and small dense type. "I suppose it is, though, I've always wondered why you young people move through the world like your tails are on fire when you have so much time ahead of you, and yet, we old folk move as slow as molasses even though we're fast approaching the finish line." Mr. Dumfries looked at the blue paper. "But I don't suppose you came all this way just to hear an old man philosophizing."

"No, sir." Carrie clutched her purse tighter as she watched his mouth twitch in a little ghost of a smile.

"So then let's get on with this, shall we?" He flipped a few

of the pages back and then looked up at her. “You said when we spoke briefly on the phone that you weren’t aware you even had a grandmother. Did I understand that correctly?”

“Yes.”

“Well, we’re not sure if your grandmother knew she had a granddaughter, but that doesn’t change anything. Rest assured that we traced you very carefully. For the sake of propriety, please bear with me as I go over the particulars one more time.” Mr. Dumfries took a pair of half-moon glasses from his inside jacket pocket and perched them on his nose. He tipped his head back and held the papers out at arm’s length. “You are Carrie Jane Bowden, born September 28, 1980, currently residing in Chicago, Illinois.” He looked at her expectantly.

“That’s correct.”

Mr. Dumfries nodded. “I’ll need to see some identification at some point, but all in good time.” He looked back down at the papers. “And your mother was Jane Burgess Bowden, of our fair town, Columbia, Virginia, born 1935, died 1982.” He stopped reading and peered over the rim of his glasses at her. Deep lines creased the sides of his downturned mouth. “I can’t tell you how sorry I was to learn of her passing. I knew your mother, if not well, then at least by acquaintance. I remember her fondly. She was a lovely girl.”

Carrie’s heart seemed to stutter with a slight hitch in its rhythm, a faint faltering in its stride as it tripped over an old pang. “I don’t remember her at all, Mr. Dumfries. I was only two when she died. I didn’t even know that this town was where she was born.” She tried, not too successfully, to keep the guilt out of her voice. There was so much she never knew about her mother. So many things she never thought to ask.

Mr. Dumfries lowered the papers and put them back on his knees. “You were born late in her life, were you not?”

“Yes. Perhaps...” Carrie looked at her hands. “Or perhaps not.” That was not a good line of thought to follow, right here, right now, if ever.

The papers rustled under Mr. Dumfries’s hands. “Cancer

takes people of all ages, Miss Bowden, and for all sorts of reasons. One can't argue a cause-and-effect relationship in your mother's case. She, herself, was born late to her parents, and her mother suffered no ill effects at all."

Carrie nodded. It was true, what he was saying, and she knew it, but her small sense of guilt was the only piece of her mother that she still had left. She wasn't willing to let it go on the advice of a stranger, even if it was good advice.

A knock on the door jarred her thoughts. Carrie looked up as a woman came into the room carrying a tray with two tall glasses full of softy clinking ice cubes. Thick slices of lemon were wedged onto the rims.

"Ms. Bowden," the woman said, flashing a warm smile at Carrie. "Welcome to Columbia on the James." She set one glass on the table next to Carrie and the other glass next to Mr. Dumfries's elbow. He gave the woman a light pat on the arm.

Carrie tried not to stare, but it had been quite a while since a woman smiled at her so warmly, with such open and friendly eyes. She couldn't recall any smile ever at all from a woman quite so elegant as this one. The woman wasn't beautiful in the traditional sense, her mouth being a little too wide, her chin a bit too flat, her nose a touch too long, and yet she struck Carrie as being very beautiful, indeed. It might have been the way she carried herself or the way she carried the tea or the way she carried the dress she had on, in soft folds of fabric, neat tucks and pleats that curved in and out at all the right places. Her hair, a dark blond twisted up behind her head in an elaborate braid, made her look very lawyer-like. Suave and professional. A tiny bit scary. The woman lifted an eyebrow just a fraction as her cheeks pinked a little.

Carrie was staring. Maybe with her mouth hanging wide open. Probably drooling all over herself. Undoubtedly, with a look on her face that shouldn't be there for a woman who had only just walked into the room. She dropped her eyes to Mr. Dumfries who was smiling broadly.

"This is Gillian. My daughter." He looked at her with proud eyes. "She's not a lawyer, much to my regret, but she likes to help

out here in the office now and then.”

Carrie looked at her again. The woman was still smiling, warm and broad.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Ms. Bowden.” She held out her hand and Carrie shook it. It was a real handshake, the tight curl of fingers, the firm press of a thumb, the kiss of palms. “If there’s anything else I can get for you, please let me know.”

“Thank you. I will.” Carrie tried not to smile like a fool, hold her hand too tight or look at her in any other way but a casual one. That was hard. She was used to flirting when she felt like flirting. This woman, Gillian, was certainly worth flirting with, but there was no telling what century this town was living in. It wouldn’t be a good idea to irritate the lawyer by offending his daughter in the first thirty minutes she was there. It wouldn’t be unlike her, though. Circumspection was not Carrie’s strong point. She tended to be a bit too direct, a bit too blunt. She would have to be careful while she was here. The woman, Gillian, walked out of the room, but Carrie didn’t watch her go. Instead, she picked up her glass and sipped at the tea. Point for her. And it was good tea, too, if a little on the sweet side.

Mr. Dumfries smiled fondly at the door and then resettled his glasses on his nose. “Gillian is about your age. If, while you’re here, you find yourself in need of some girl talk, I’m sure she’d be happy to lend an ear.”

Carrie wasn’t sure what “girl talk” translated into in this part of the country. For her, it meant something close to “pillow talk,” the soft, unguarded conversation that two worn-out women had when the sun was just starting to lighten the sky. She doubted very much that was what Mr. Dumfries had in mind, but she smiled her thanks as politely as she knew how.

“Now, to continue.” He rattled the papers again and shuffled them around on his lap. “Your father, Michael Bowden, no middle name, of Colchester, Connecticut, married your mother in 1953 in Chicago. He died in 2002 with you, yourself, being his sole surviving heir. Do I have that right?”

“Yes.” She couldn’t swear to the dates, but the names and

places were right.

“To wit, that leaves you as the sole heir to the estate of Celia Covington Burgess, your mother being her only offspring and you being a direct descendant. Is it correct that you have never been married, Miss Bowden? I ask only because, Virginia laws being what they are, your being married or divorced would complicate things a bit.”

“I’ve never married,” Carrie said dryly. She would have been married if it were legal. But then again, she would also be in midst of an ugly divorce. A nasty settlement dispute. A custody battle over the cat. So maybe there was a bright side after all. For her, at least.

“Very good.” Mr. Dumfries reached for a pen and made a tick mark on the blue paper. “So, you don’t have any specific ties to Chicago?”

There was a question underneath the question that Carrie could hear but couldn’t quite catch. “I was born and raised in Chicago. I think that counts as some sort of a tie, but I have no other family there, if that’s what you mean.” Not since Megan left her for a barely-into-her-twenties cocktail waitress with a short skirt and a bunny tail. Not since their ten years together disappeared in the twitch of a nose, the swing of a fist. Their apartment was empty now of anything she cared about, which, at this point, meant the cat. She really missed the cat.

“Have you ever thought about moving to Virginia?”

Carrie sat up straighter. It hadn’t occurred to her to think about it. Up until the letter arrived, all she knew about Virginia was that it lay somewhere around the middle of the east coast on the wrong side of the Mason-Dixon Line. She had heard of Mount Vernon, Jamestown, Richmond and Robert E. Lee, though she only had a vague notion of where Mount Vernon was and no idea at all of what the E. stood for. Prior to her arriving here, thoughts of Virginia brought to mind small green mountains and screechy fiddle music played by old men with no teeth.

Even after arriving, she didn’t have too different a picture. On her way to Richmond, she drove over and through a series of

small green mountains, and Carrie met some interesting people on her drive to Columbia, especially during her wrong turns. Virginia surprised her. She had not been prepared to like the small green mountains and the tall trees that covered them, or the old man in the checkered shirt sitting on the front porch of the convenience store who told her a funny story while his wife laughed with her mouth wide open, slapping him on the knee. It stirred something inside her that she hadn't known was there. She couldn't help but wonder if her grandmother had been a woman like that and what she had missed by not knowing her.

Carrie shook her head hesitantly. "I wasn't thinking about moving. The truth of it, Mr. Dumfries, is that I'm not sure why I drove down here. I had the vacation time and I guess I just wanted to see things for myself."

"An admirable sentiment, Miss Bowden, and a wise decision. I suppose I should get on with showing you the things you drove here to see." Mr. Dumfries paused to take a sip of his tea and then put it back down on the old cork coaster. He shuffled through the papers and pulled out a thick stack, grayish white and stapled at the corner. He handed them to her. The papers had the same small dense type covering all the pages, with whereofs, hereins and therefores scattered all across them. Carrie frowned.

Mr. Dumfries chuckled softly at her expression. "This will was written in 1972, before you were born and before every office in town had a computer sitting on every desk." He cast a disparaging eye at the large flat screen sitting on his credenza. "Your grandmother was eighty-two years old when she wrote that will and she never changed a thing." Mr. Dumfries took off his glasses and pinched at the bridge of his nose. "She was one hundred and eight when she died. Short of the record for this county by only six months and for all of Virginia by only six years. Even so, her death was something of a shock." He put his glasses back on and gave her a thin smile. "We all thought she would outlive the mountains." Mr. Dumfries reached inside his jacket pocket and pulled out a small flat box. "Here are a few of the things that go along with the will." He handed it to Carrie.

She put the will on her lap and opened the box. Inside was a large brass colored key, a small gold ring with stylized flowers etched into it and a very old pocket watch. She picked up the watch and looked at Mr. Dumfries.

He shrugged just a little. "I'm afraid I'm only the keeper of the things. I don't know what they mean exactly. The key, I imagine, is to the front door of the house, but I'm not sure because no one has used the front door since 1953. That was the year your mother ran away to marry your father. The rumor of it is that after your grandmother found her note, she closed up the front part of the house and never went in it again. The pocket watch, I believe, belonged to your grandfather, Robert Burgess. Leastways, his initials are on the back. I have no idea who the ring belonged to or why your grandmother thought it was important."

Carrie put the watch back in the box and looked at the key with some surprise. "She left me a house?"

"Yes." Mr. Dumfries shifted in his chair. "Forgive me if I wasn't clear about that on the phone. There's an old house and a little bit of land to go with it, about twenty-five acres or so. It's detailed on page eight of the will."

Carrie touched the key. It was big, for a key, with fancy scrollwork on the turning end but only three plain teeth on the other end. "Twenty-five acres. Is that a lot?"

Mr. Dumfries pursed his lips and wiggled his hand back and forth. "It depends on what you want it for. It'd be a bit much for a front lawn, but it's a right decent size for a horse or five, though not enough for a herd of cattle. A few goats or sheep would be all right."

A picture flashed across Carrie's mind of herself dressed like Little Bo Peep chasing a flock of fuzzy white lambs bouncing across a bright green pasture. She grinned.

Mr. Dumfries gave her an odd look but he didn't ask. "I'll be happy to drive you out there and show you around. Please keep in mind that it's an old house and it's been sitting empty for a while. It needs a bit of work, but it could be nice if someone put

some care into it.” His eyes shifted down. “It would be good to see it lived in again.”

An old house. The Bo Peep image vanished as Carrie thought of moldy drywall and sagging ceilings, swollen doorframes and wallpaper peeling off the walls. She didn’t mind doing some repair work. She was handy with a hammer, knew which end of the screwdriver to hold and was passably efficient with a paintbrush. Maybe, instead of taking the historic tour of Richmond, as she had planned, she would stay here for a week or two, throw on a coat of paint, fix the leaky faucets, patch the drywall and tighten the screws. She could do that. She would even enjoy it. It would be good to be busy.

“There aren’t many formalities left,” Mr. Dumfries said, pushing his glasses further up onto his nose. “I just need for you to sign a few papers. I can file them with the court first thing tomorrow then we can get to work putting everything in your name and paying off the tax man, etcetera.”

Carrie hadn’t thought about that. Maybe this was the trick. This could be the part where the kindly old lawyer asked her to empty out her bank account and then stuck her with a tax bill that she would be paying on for the rest of her life. She put a hand back on her purse. “Is there enough money in the estate to cover the expenses?” Carrie watched Mr. Dumfries very carefully.

He blinked at her for a second. “Just flip over to the last page of the will. The estate totals are listed there.”

She flipped the pages and froze. There were numbers there that hardly made any sense. “I thought you said there were only twenty-five acres?”

“You asked about the house. Twenty-five acres is what surrounds it. The rest of the land is scattered all over the state. If you add together all the various holdings, it’s about four thousand acres in all. Most of the land is rented cropland or pastures, but there are a few more lucrative holdings. Those are leased to companies that have buildings on them and they bring in a bit.”

A bit? Lucrative? No shit. Even by Chicago standards, it was a respectable income. Almost three times what she was making

shuffling papers around her desk and spending the day avoiding her boss. She wouldn't need that job if she didn't want it. There were choices here and decisions to be made but none to be made lightly. She thought of Megan again and her forever questing for things that were bigger, better, younger, stronger. She would have wanted Carrie to sell everything fast and cheap and run with as much as she could stuff in her pockets back to Chicago. She would have insisted, and Carrie would have fought her, if only for the sake of fighting. It was a good thing that Megan wasn't here with her.

The taste of regret lay sour on her tongue as she thought of the many things they had both done wrong. That was the bad thing. The good thing was that she could take her time deciding what to do. This time she would do the right thing instead of doing the impulsive thing.

Mr. Dumfries cleared his throat. "If you'll just sign and date the back page and initial all the rest. I'll need to make a copy of your driver's license, get your tax ID and then we'll be done here. When you're finished with your tea, I'll drive you out to the house. It's not too far."

*We hope you enjoyed this
Bella Appetizer.*

