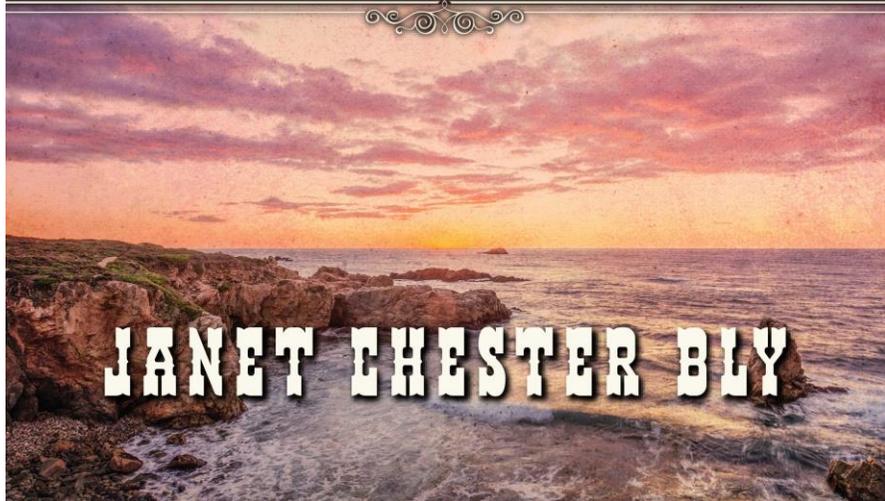




*Down Squash
Blossom Road*

◉ A TRAILS OF REBA CAHILL NOVEL ◉



JANET CHESTER BLY

**DOWN
SQUASH
BLOSSOM
ROAD**

Janet Chester Bly

A Trails of Reba Cahill Novel
Book 2

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and Characters & Places List

Chapter One

July 4, 1991, Road's End, Idaho

The dark speck in the sky floated toward them, then swooshed at a fast clip. Or so it seemed to the Welcome Home party of several hundred Road's End residents scattered along the field behind the Grange Hall.

"Here he comes!" Six-year-old Kaitlyn Runcie clutched handpicked bunches of Syringa and Indian Paintbrush for her great-grandpa flying in the sky. Three-year-old brother William crowded beside her on a child-sized tractor.

As the helicopter droned closer, Reba Cahill followed the gradual, graceful descent with a mix of trepidation and curiosity. Her head throbbed and her stomach cramped. Soon they would greet Champ Runcie for the first time since his tragic fall over a cliff in the Nevada desert, while riding Reba's favorite black horse Johnny Poe, and despite a protest and warning. This grand appearance of the city's leading citizen incited excitement and angst for them all amidst the July 4th city-wide celebrations.

He was supposed to arrive in time to be Grand Marshal in the Main Street parade, same as the past nine years. But when word arrived of a delay, Grandson Tim Runcie and wife Sue Anne took the honors on his behalf, riding and waving with their children in Champ's 1957 white Cadillac. The Mathwig triplets who owned the Road's End Hotel rode horseback behind them on their proudest possessions, sidesaddles with plush red seats. Afterward, parade participants mulled around to wait for the mayor's homecoming, including rodeo royalty and high school band members.

The woman who raised Reba clutched the arm of old friend and temporary fill-in Cahill Ranch foreman, Vincent Quaid. "Can you imagine? Paralyzed from the waist down." Grandma Pearl whispered the diagnosis everyone now knew.

Reba tensed as she shaded her eyes with sunglasses and a cowboy hat worn mainly to hide straggly hair needing a cut. Others fanned themselves with folded weekly Road's End Herald newspapers or the day's scheduled events flyers. The noon heat pushed toward a rare high mountain prairie ninety degrees with not a wisp of a cloud in the sky. She buzzed with questions. How would Mayor Champ respond to his traumatic injury? Had he learned a lesson in humility? Or would he be bitter?

Before his accident, Champ threatened to take over a large parcel of the Cahill Ranch by eminent domain with the excuse of using it for church property. Would that controversy still brew? Or would he let it die?

Prior to his fall, Reba might have greeted Champ's return with a ho-hum attitude. But not now. She knew too much about Champ's deep, dark secret past and his jarring relationship to her. How much more now since she learned he was her alleged grandfather.

Reba wasn't the only one buzzing around for a closer look. Many in the crowd bustled with curiosity. They wondered aloud about the possibility of changes in Champ, each for their own reasons. Tucker Paddy started an Attitude-Check betting pool. He'd gone around town asking,

"Did the accident help Champ appreciate life more and become kinder, or did it make him even meaner than before? Nicer or meaner, place your bets."

Fierce bidding followed with most money wagered on meaner. A side bet was started as an over/under--for how long it would take them to know. Even with a baseline of just one hour, the under was well ahead.

Suddenly, the helicopter jerked sideways. A chorus of gasps followed the chopper as it made a wobbling, futile attempt at recovery. Everyone watched in horror as the whirlybird dove into a free fall. Then they screamed and scattered while the rotors cranked to an un-powered auto-rotation slowdown and the flying machine crashed. The big bird nosed over, its gyrating blades hacking into the grass one

at a time, shattering. The crowd covered their heads with anything within reach when the tail end snapped and the shredded fragments flew in all directions.

After a brief, shocked silence a swoop of able-bodied men and EMTs present rushed to the banked copter, while a few others ran to their rigs to grab emergency bags. Reba's shock turned to disbelief as the rescuers pulled Norden McKane, Jace McKane's brother from the cockpit. What in the world was he doing there?

The EMTs tended to a gash on his forehead as several men yanked at the upturned copter door until it finally creaked open. Shrieks of cursing streamed from inside. The door slammed shut again, whether by force of weight or embarrassment, Reba couldn't tell. Were the others okay? Reba wrapped her arms around herself, feeling so helpless to stand there only watching.

Soon a dozen people surrounded a hapless Tucker dangling their watches in his face, more concerned about collecting on their bets. Apparently they figured Champ's outburst counted for the Attitude- Check betting pool. Tucker tried to argue that the stress of being in a crash landing didn't count.

Champ's muffled voice could be heard hollering an onslaught of more profanities coupled with banging on the copter door. The crew worked together to open it once again and hold the door ajar. Tim Runcie reached inside to help his grandmother clamber out. Hoots, hollers, and cheers greeted her escape—especially when she appeared to be okay.

Flashing lights and sirens blared down the road toward them as

Tim, both arms tightly holding her steady, escorted his grandma and set her down on a large rock a safe distance away. One of the EMTs crouched next to her and wrapped the blood pressure cuff around her arm, asking questions about possible injuries.

Tim sprinted back to the copter and reached inside, wrangling out a folded wheelchair which he handed to his

father, Don. He clicked it open as Champ ordered, "Get me out of here!"

"We'll get you out in a minute," Tim said, his face red with exertion and frustration.

The crowd stood around as though watching a circus perform while several men worked to get Champ out of the cockpit and onto a stretcher. Without a word of thanks, he muttered a stream of curses under his breath. Some mothers covered their children's ears or carried them away. But what else could any of them expect after all the past behavior of their illustrious mayor?

"Is he okay?" someone in the crowd called out.

Champ responded himself, his words still not appropriate for a gathering that included minors.

From the stretcher, his grandson and son helped him into his wheelchair. One of the EMTs readied herself to tend to him, blood pressure kit and oxygen masks in hand. Champ shoved her away and waved his hand, a silent command to the men to get him out of there.

Don took the handles of the wheelchair and pushed him across the field of mostly mowed weeds, crushing and scattering clumps of yellow dandelions and puffy, mature seed balls. The man who demanded dignity and respect from his townspeople, the man supposed to be perched in his Cadillac, the Grand Marshal of the Road's End Fourth of July parade, jostled like frailty rather than royalty over rough ground pocked with divots. Pale and crippled, he could only offer a series of limp waves to bystanders, his mouth moving in a covey of expletives.

Tucker received more demands for payment. He began shelling out.

The gathered crowd began to disperse, most following behind the mayor at a respectful pace, more procession than parade, as murmurs continued about the drama.

Reba studied the man lurching in his chair. Reality closed in on her. The fact this man who had always been her adversary was also her blood kin festered in her brain. Even more surreal, he didn't know it yet. She pondered when she'd ever tell him. She couldn't imagine a right time. Ever.

By the time they reached the Grange Hall, Champ mustered his familiar and infamous bravado. "It's okay," Champ shouted in a hoarse voice. "We were close to the ground anyway and the whole event played out like we were cruising. Didn't even seem like real time speed. Plenty of time for a nip on the way down." He pulled a small whiskey bottle from a pocket.

Another cheer erupted. "But I do need to fire the pilot," he added.

A nervous gaggle of half-chuckles sputtered around him.

Reba peered back across the field at Norden, the young man who had been at the controls, now surrounded by a circle of men who investigated the machine's damages. A bloody bandage swathed his forehead, but he refused a trip to the hospital. His ripped shirt sleeve exposed muscled flesh.

A group of out-of-practice teens who changed from their parade uniforms to shorts and tank tops broke out with their band instruments into a discord of Bruce Springsteen's "Glory Days" over and over until they almost got it right. A flag drill team twirled in a bumpy performance on the lawn as all the attendees streamed into the crowded Grange for lunch and a ceremony. Assorted fireworks shot from behind the cars and trucks, jarring horses and routing cats, dogs, and guilty youth to chase across the fields.

Inside the Grange, Beatrice Mathwig organized the entire event with her Road's End Fourth of July Celebration Committee. Flag decor covered the Welcome Home canvas signs and decorated chocolate marble cakes.

After the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag and a prayer led by Pearl Cahill, everyone made their way to the buffet which featured Champ's favorite barbecued grilled buffalo steak bites with garlic mashed potatoes and baked Cajun rainbow trout.

Sue Anne's dad, a Georgia native, insisted on bringing a big dish of spicy boiled peanuts, though Champ hated them. As far as Reba could tell, only one person spooned them on their plate.

After long lines filed through for first helpings and boisterous bantering around the tables, several area officials gave brief and humorous speeches at a lectern borrowed from Pearl Cahill's barn church. The jabs of lighthearted ribbing evolved into a full-blown roast fest.

"When Champ sees light at the end of a tunnel, he lobbies for more tunnel," wisecracked the mayor of Oroston.

Deputy Brock Lomax stated, "Nobody's perfect. Next time vote for Nobody."

"We can't give Champ a key to the city because we've changed all the locks since he's been gone," said the county sheriff who sweltered in his rarely worn official dark suit jacket and blue tie.

Instead of the scowl and thin-skinned defense Reba expected, Champ beamed with the appearance of genuine pleasure. He exhibited such good will, she wondered if Tucker would ask for his payouts back. The speakers avoided any mention of his bent form hunched into the wheelchair, legs limp and useless. He was no longer the towering frame of the man he used to be, large and in charge. Meanwhile, he garnered the usual center of attention he craved.

Next to him, in peach-colored polyester pantsuit, wife Blair's cheeks doused with tears. Perhaps in gratitude. Or pity. After an hour of the festivities, Blair rose, tapped on a glass with a fork and announced, "Thank you so much. We appreciate you all, but we're all wrung out. Now my husband must get home and rest."

"I'm praying for you, Champ," Pearl said as Tim wheeled him toward the door.

He nodded, but his lip curled in disgust.

"He appreciates it," Blair quickly assured her. "But he wouldn't mind half as much using a cane instead of that contraption."

Reba's half-brother Michael leaned in close. "Now that he's in such pitiful shape, no one dares to stand up to him for fear of seeming like a bully. All the joking was softballs."

"Yeah, I'm surprised they didn't even tease him about his real name. That usually gets a rise out of him."

"Which is?"

"That's right, you're still a newcomer to town. It's Marion. Don Runcie confirmed it one time when I pressed him."

"No kidding? Marion? No wonder he goes by a nickname. He's in good company though. Same reason John Wayne changed his name, I believe. Say, when is Jace McKane returning from California?"

For some reason, the abrupt, unexpected reference to Jace jarred her. How many weeks had he been gone from Road's End? Four? Five? Six? She had serious doubts he'd ever return. Why should he leave the bountiful resources of the Golden State to come to a tiny town in Idaho? The last time she saw him, he roared away with little brother Abel in his silver Volvo down the road south from Goldfield, Nevada toward the Pacific west.

She also relived a moment here in Road's End. The pang of the sting of the fierce slap of Champ's whip across her back, a strike meant for her runaway horse Johnny Poe, and Jace yanking the whip from the perpetrator. She recalled the flash of Jace's angry, deep hazel eyes and the feel good sensation of someone standing up for her. "Ask Norden. He should know." She peered around and noticed him chatting to a couple of gals in a corner of the room.

"I did. He said Jace has been dealing with issues concerning Abel. A custody or settlement battle of some sort."

"Oh?" She didn't know Abel's parents were separating.

Michael's blonde girlfriend, Nora Oscar, tugged on his arm. "Wasn't that something? Norden flying the helicopter for Champ."

Norden continued to cower in the corner of the room, as far away from Champ as he could be.

"I presume he has a license?" Reba commented.

"Yep." Michael beamed with vicarious pride. "Got it several weeks ago. I'm the one who recommended him to Don."

"I think he needs more practice."

Michael's beam dimmed. "Yeah. He volunteered to pick Champ up with a rented helicopter. Now he's got you-know-what to pay. To the rental company and to Champ."

Tim's wife Sue Anne huddled close with their two kids while he escorted his grandfather outside where a line formed to bid Champ farewell. His widower father, Don, held hands with Postmistress Lisl Monty, the apparent new couple in town. Reba noticed Deputy Lomax glaring at Don several times, perhaps a sign he resented the loss of, at the very least, Lisl's attentions if not her affections. The deputy further vouched that presumption when he remarked to Reba, "I am most sorry things didn't work out between you and Don."

Reba silently cheered with relief when the deputy sprinted to his patrol car before she could reply. What could she possibly say in all honesty and avoid the barest hint at a terrible secret? She absolutely could not date Don anymore since she recently found out he was her biological father. The horror of that knowledge still haunted her.

As soon as they tucked Champ and his chair into a special handicap accessible van, the Runcie family headed to Stroud Ranch Road and north to the Runcie Ranch. The bystanders smiled at a homemade "We Love You, Grandpa" sign taped to the back of the retreating van.

"When are you and Pearl leaving for Reno?" Tucker Paddy's wife, Ida, asked.

Reba pried her focus away from the departing van. "As soon as we can. Every day something prevents us from getting on the road."

"Are you looking forward to having your mom back in Road's End?"

Reba pushed up her cowboy hat to scratch her itchy forehead. "I think so. I don't really know her. I'm hoping we'll get re-acquainted on the long ride back from Reno."

"I never knew your mom either, but so many folks talk about her. They seem excited to have her come back. Seems like she was real popular around here."

Maybe too popular. "Yeah, well, guess we're all going to find out what it's like to have her back." Reba tried to change the subject. "I wonder how Champ is going to cope with his disability?"

"It's got to be hard on him. And for everyone around him." Ida started to clear the Grange Hall tables.

Reba pitched in to help when Deputy Lomax tapped her on the shoulder. He lowered his voice. "I'm warning all the gals but trying not to cause panic. A Peeping Tom has been sighted in town."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. He skulked around a couple nights. May be gone by now. Tell me if you notice anything suspicious." He reached into a pocket. "This is for you." He handed Reba an envelope.

She thought she detected apology in his eyes. "What is it?"

"Just read it, but I strongly suggest you do it later. With Pearl."

She tucked the envelope in her jeans pocket meaning to take a peek as she scooted around the hall. Instead, she winced as Norden grabbed her arm.

He quickly pulled back. "Sorry, I didn't mean to hurt you. I'm just in big trouble."

She rubbed her upper arm. "Champ didn't seem too happy about the landing. How much is it going to cost to repair that helicopter?"

"More than I have. But I know why it happened. No wind gust. No engine error. I didn't mishandle the controls, but Champ will accuse me of that. It was that bell. I warned him it was too heavy."

"What bell?"

"The church bell. Maidie's bell, the one in her memory. It's in the front of the helicopter."

So Champ still determined to ramrod building the church though he wasn't a member. Or, by anyone's estimation, a

true believer. Grandma Pearl would not be pleased. "Won't there be an investigation about the accident?"

"It's already started. Sheriff Goode questioned me. May take weeks to prove anything. I also thought I smelled a bit of smoke in the cockpit a few minutes before the smashup. I can only hope it's mechanical failure. The funny thing is, I wanted that duty of flying him back to try to get on his good side, for me as well as other businesses in town. We heard rumors he's trying to get city taxes raised. Now I blew it big time." He tucked his hands behind him, rocking from one foot to the other. "Hey, I've been wanting to talk to you about something else. Can you come by The Outfitters for a few minutes?"

"Right now?"

He nodded, perspiration beading his forehead.

Reba hesitated before she said, "Well, I guess so." What could he possibly want to talk about? She barely knew the guy beyond him being Jace's brother and partner in running the outfitter store. She needed to start packing for the Reno trip to rescue her estranged mother Hanna Jo from the mental institute.

She hoped this wouldn't become another delay.

Chapter Two

Reba breathed in the smells of leather, canvas, and pine at Jace and Norden's Outfitters Shop. She scanned the choices of tack, horse grooming and saddle supplies and thought of the saddlebag in her bedroom stamped with the initials S.P. She anticipated stopping by Soren Patrick's horse ranch to return it on the way to Reno.

A flush of warmth flamed her face as she considered the tall, sun-bronzed man. He could train a horse better than she could, but she didn't resent it. Perhaps he could help find a worthy replacement for Johnny Poe. She missed that black beauty like losing a close friend. Very close.

"Can I interest you in some quality trail riding or fishing gear?" Norden intruded her thoughts with his salesman's pitch. Sporting camo shirt and pants, his complexion appeared darker than his brother Jace's, but not as swarthy as when he first moved here. The California beach tan must be fading. Not as confident and vivacious as his big brother, he spoke in a slow, even tempo and looked down more often than he looked up.

Reba stepped around a cart full of rifle and bow scabbards. "You've got a huge inventory here."

"Yep. Eats up all our profits as Jace and my dad are most happy to nag me about. But I can't seem to resist getting new stuff." He frowned and touched the bandage on his forehead. "Of course, with the accident today, I'll have to cut back to pay what the insurance won't cover on the helicopter damages." He pushed the heavy cart aside with a single heft.

"Well, you know what folks around town say."

He shrugged. "Not really."

"They figure since Jace made his money creating software programs, you guys can run this store more like a hobby than a real business."

Norden took on a grave expression. "Might be like that for Jace, but not me. Of course, he put up the money but I plan to pay every penny back. I'm no moocher."

"You like it here in Road's End, don't you?"

His sudden intensity disarmed her. "I really like running this store more than anything I've ever done in my life. It's not a hobby to me--this is all I want to do. And I'll fight anyone to keep it. That includes Champ Runcie, or Jace, or our dad."

"Jace? He's trying to get you out of here?"

"He may not have a choice. There's been some trouble. Jace has tried to get Abel back with his mom but she doesn't..." He stopped and looked down.

"Want him?"

"Not exactly. Doesn't want to be bothered, I guess. It's all very complicated."

"What does that have to do with the store?"

"Like I said, it's complicated."

He led her to the back of the store to a small office with typewriter, adding machine, desk phone, and reams of stacked papers beside a file cabinet. On the wall hung a football award from Santa Dominga City College and a karate certificate with Norden's name. A window revealed vacant property at the back of the store where Norden parked and chained his 1979 custom Harley Davidson motorcycle to a post.

"You ride your bike all that way to work?" she teased.

Norden grunted. "Someone's been trying to break the chain. Tried to hack it and banged on the body. No one's going to mess with my bike. Not acceptable. I'll beat them to a pulp if I catch 'em."

"I believe you would. Why did you ask me to come?"

"It's taken me a while to figure out what to do with this information," Norden began. "I was thinking today I believe you're the right one to tell. Jace mentioned several times how you and our brother Abel connected. In fact, if you care to know, he talks about you a lot."

She hoped her shock didn't show. She and Jace enjoyed a few good visits together on the road trip with Seth, but she hadn't seen or heard from him since. "Well, Abel is a great kid when he's not kicking me in the shins."

He scowled. "Yeah, I got kicked too. Other times he wouldn't have anything to do with me."

"That must have been hard when you and Jace tried to care for him."

"Yeah." He opened a drawer in the metal desk and pulled out a spiral notebook and handed it to Reba. "I found this in Abel's room."

She glanced at the Transformer toys cover.

"Look through it and tell me your opinion. It's like a journal. Some sort of a school assignment."

Reba hesitated. She felt uncomfortable with this invasion of Abel's privacy. She held the notebook and stalled. "That was quite a shock for you and Jace, wasn't it, to find him on your doorstep with no warning?"

"Yeah, but, so like our family."

Reba scrambled to think of another diversion but Norden kept stealing intense glances at the notebook. She relented and quickly scanned the first page. A couple cursive sentences. Stick people drawings. Some scribbles around the edges.

After an awkward silence, she pumped him for more information. "I know Jace's dad is yours too."

"We're half-brothers."

"Uh huh. Like me and Michael. Do you mind my asking about your mother?"

Norden sighed. "An affair between dad's wife number two and three. Well, not exactly between. She lives in Casa Tierra now with my stepdad and two stepsisters. I'm very fortunate I didn't get disowned when Jace exposed my existence, especially since I'm part Indian. There may be more of us out there, the offspring of Hugh McKane. Jace tries to keep up with it all."

"Really?"

"Yeah. That's because he's got this weird trait. He cares."

"And you don't?"

"I've got better things to do with my life than keep track of my father's ... uh ..."

"Indiscretions."

Norden broke out in his crinkly grin, the only similarity to Jace. "I do care about Abel. And Jace. They claim me as family and I like that."

"Abel's about ten, right?"

"Almost eleven. His birthday is next month."

She flipped to the next page in the notebook.

"Read it out loud," Norden prodded.

"April 1, 1991. I am writing this to Cat who is at my dad's house because I always talked to Cat about things. Miss Akers told me to make a list of what makes me afraid. I do not know if I should make a joke or not because it is April Fool's Day so here they are. 1. Sharks. 2. Getting hurt. 3. Lightning when I'm at the ocean. 4. Telling a joke in class and no one laughs. 5. Not being liked. 6. The bad man in the basement. 7. Getting in the ocean. 8. Making Mom mad. 9. Making Dad mad. 10. Not knowing where Kaylor is."

"Who is the bad man in the basement?"

Norden frowned. "I don't know. A nightmare?"

"And who is Kaylor?"

"Abel's older sister, a half-sister. She ran away from home last spring. Keep going."

"April 8, 1991. I am sad because my mom and my dad are getting divorced. I had an attack today at school and this time I did not call home. I sat on the side while the other kids played. April 15, 1991. I get mad real easy I don't know why. Sometimes it is little stuff and sometimes big stuff. I don't want to leave California because of my friends and my horse Ebony. I love riding my horse because I was really angry and now I am better but they won't let me ride him to school. April 22, 1991. Today it is settled I am going to Idaho. Aggy will get me and put me on the plane." She looked up at Norden. "I presume Aggy is Agatha, Jace's mom?"

He nodded and she kept reading. "I hope mom won't be too mad. I'm a little afraid she will." She peered closer. "That last sentence is crossed out and replaced with 'I'm a lot afraid.'" Some of the last pages were creased, folded, and smudged. "April 29, 1991. I tried hard not to cry today."

Norden twirled his thumbs and stared out the window. "We learned later part of the reason for sending Abel here was for his safety."

"From what?"

"Dad's rich. He knows how to make money and gobble up vulnerable businesses. He can also lose it just as fast. Sometimes other people get caught in the crunch. After Kaylor ran away, Dad received a ransom threat. He made a drop, paid the money asked for, but didn't get Kaylor back. Sloppy deal."

"Why did you show me Abel's notebook?"

"Because I want to know, what would you do about it if you were me?"

"Do?"

"Should I be bothered? Should I tell Jace?"

"What bothers you about it?"

He stayed quiet, but his eyes glittered with something elusive. Perhaps a shadow of suspicion. He squared his shoulders and his face distorted for an instant. She almost missed it because just as fast he eased into a tentative smile. "Please. Tell me if you notice anything ..." He seemed to search for the right words. "Anything at all ... not normal."

"Okay. But what aren't you telling me?"

"Nothing. That's it, as far as I know."

"I'm sensing a rest of the story somehow. Isn't Jace coming back from California soon? You can deal with it then."

"Maybe not. He sounds vague on the phone ... and weird."

"Weird?"

"Well, distracted. That kind of weird. Doesn't finish sentences. Not focused when we talk. Keeps asking, 'What did you say?' That sort of thing. Or ..."

Reba waited as Norden shuffled papers on the desk. "Or what?"

"Of course, Jace can take care of himself. But at the moment, I'm more concerned about Abel ... like it's a warning."

She studied the crude drawings. A shark with big teeth. A man with big teeth. A woman with big teeth. A girl with big eyes. And a boy with a rifle. A mass of red pools smeared in splotches through the drawings. "I don't know the signs for what's normal for his age or disturbing. However, if it were my kid ..." She trailed off, but she knew what she would do. She would totally freak out. She pointed at the girl. "I wonder if that is Kaylor."

"Could be. The man with the suit is definitely our dad. He almost always wears a suit." His stubborn stare forced the issue. "If it were your kid ...?"

She studied the drawings again, trying to discern some hidden significance. "No doubt about it. Finding this would bother me. A lot. I noticed he drew the girl like a giant compared to the rest."

He stretched his legs and got up with a stiff stance. "I'll be sure to mention this the next time Jace calls. I'm curious what he thinks. Thanks so much for coming over." His voice and body language signaled a sudden dismissal.

She headed to the store's front entrance. "Hope your mom likes it in Road's End," Norden called out to her.

"Well, she was raised here. She knows what it's like." And she ran away.

All the way home Reba mulled over the encounter with Norden and Abel's notebook, her curiosity piqued about the McKane family.

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When Reba arrived at the ranch she found Pearl with her feet up on an ottoman in the living room. She relayed her encounter with Norden.

"I think he should be more concerned about Champ's response to the rough helicopter landing," Pearl responded. "I talked to Blair at the party. She's trying so hard to stay strong."

"She has to be to survive living with a man like that. She's kowtowed to his every whim for years. At least, that's what it's seemed like to me."

"In part, that's what marriage is about. Lots of give and take. The best ones anyway. Not sure if that's the Runcie dynamic, but every couple is so different in how they work it out." Pearl swung her legs around and sat up. "Speaking of couples, did you see how Deputy Lomax sulked about Don and Lisl at the party? Poor man. It was so obvious."

Reba blinked hard at the mention of the deputy and slid her hand into her pocket. She slowly pulled out the mystery envelope.

Pearl folded her hands. "What do you have there?"

"Brock gave it to me after the party."

"Well, have you opened it?"

A shiver sliced down between her shoulders. "Not yet." And all of a sudden she was afraid to.

"What are you waiting for?"

She grabbed a letter opener from the nearby roll top desk and sliced the top. She unfolded an official looking paper. "It's from lawyer James Howe's office." She examined the wording of the message several times with growing alarm in her gut. "I can't believe it. I'm being sued for half a million dollars. And so is the Cahill Ranch."

Pearl tugged at the letter and muttered each word on the page as Reba collapsed on the couch. "So Champ thinks we are responsible for his accident?"

"How can it possibly be my fault? I wasn't even there. And Seth warned him not to ride Johnny Poe."

"It says here no one told him the horse was blind."

"Blind? That's ridiculous. You know Johnny Poe wasn't blind. Champ forced him over a cliff."

"As you said, you weren't there."

"But Seth was. He can be a witness."

"But meanwhile we pour money and energy into the lawsuit."

"That might be the whole point." Reba clutched her trembling arms as she realized she never hated anyone so much in her life as she did Champ Runcie at this moment. "What does he want from us? From me?"

"He's always wanted this ranch."

"But why? He has his own and it's much bigger than ours."

"Somehow he believes this land and all of Road's End was meant to be his family's. His father, Uriah, told my father the same thing. They claim they got here first and the rest of us are squatters. He's thinking of the family legacy. Maybe to avenge his father or something. Besides that, he believes our pasture ground and fields are more productive than his. I have to admit we managed to have more yield per acre the years we harvested wheat."

"We need to farm again."

"I'd like to."

"The whole thing is so ridiculous." How could they survive this lose-lose situation, whether they fought back or pleaded no contest and let it play out? The brazen arrogance and greed was beyond Reba's understanding. Turmoil inside her ignited resentment and resolve unlike any she'd ever experienced before.

She studied Pearl's face. No stiff lips or steely blue eyes like she often displayed when facing down Champ in years past. She seemed troubled but also uncertain, tentative. "We need to do something," Reba retorted into the tense room. "About this." She swatted the letter.

Pearl stirred to action. "I'll contact our lawyer. He'll help us figure out our options."

Reba pushed to her feet and ran her fingers over the dusty blinds in the front living room window. The litigation touched a nerve at the core of her being. If Champ succeeded, they would no longer possess the ranch. So what would she do

with the rest of her life? Ranching was all she knew ... and all she wanted.

She paced before Pearl and tried to clear her mind. "Why can't I counter sue at least for attorney fees ... and ... for the loss of Johnny Poe's companionship, his help on the ranch, his very life? Something like that. If Champ hadn't forced riding him, things would have been very different."

She knew she needed to work through her emotions and reach for reason and logic. Perspective, that's what she needed. She mulled over several options. She could ride one of Pearl's mares to the hills. Perhaps she'd calm down enough to figure out a safe and sane approach. Or she could take action and see what happens.

She studied Grandma Pearl again, who sat quietly, waiting, and most likely praying. She stomped to her bedroom, yanked keys out of her purse, and marched to the door.

"Where are you going?" Pearl asked.

"To the Runcie Ranch."

Pearl looked at the clock. "It's near dinner time."

"Then we'll barge in uninvited, like he's always doing in our lives."

"Don't you think you ought to wait until you've calmed down, thought this through?"

"Yeah, probably." Reba clomped out on the porch.

"I'm going with you." Pearl scooted after her and slammed the pickup passenger door as Reba slid the truck into reverse. She touched Reba's arm. "Don't forget he's an invalid now."

Reba glared at Pearl and pried the letter from her. "That invalid is suing us!"

"Your confronting him won't make it better. Why don't you wait and talk to someone like Vincent about it first. He's counseled all of us many times through the years. Or even Don. Maybe he'd have some insight into the behind the scenes situation."

A realization hit her. "I'll bet you anything Champ banked on my marrying Don."

"Of course he did. I tried to tell you that myself."

Another reason to keep mum about her mother being Champ's daughter. Instead of shame for his sin, he'd most likely consider that grounds to claim their property.

All the pent up frustration over Champ through the years burst to a rolling boil. Every yard closer to the Runcie Ranch in the fading sunlight and tree shadows tracing the road fueled her resolve. An image pried her heart. She envisioned Maidie Fortress, a frail old lady in a coffin wearing an engagement ring, who died without justice for her fiancé, her twin babies, or the criminal violence against herself.

She braked beside the van in front of the Runcie house and almost tripped over a dog and a cat sprawled on the porch before she rapped on the door. She hadn't noticed either Tim's or Don's rig, but no matter who appeared, she would not be deterred.

The door opened a crack.

Blair's pale eyes pierced Reba's, but her voice was hushed. Reba leaned close to understand the words. "Reba, I'm sorry. Champ is taking an after dinner nap. Could you come back another time?"

Reba gazed at worry lines on a thin face. She almost softened. Instead, she rationalized in that moment in some way she came on behalf of Blair too, whether the woman wanted the defense or not. "Are you two here alone?"

"For a little while. Don said he'd return later." She avoided Reba's eyes and looked off in the distance. "He and Tim and some others are, uh, moving Maidie's memorial bell from the helicopter to inside the Grange."

Relief pushed air into her lungs though she cringed at the reference to a very sore subject. She'd rather face the old man alone. "I really must talk to Champ. It has to be now. Why don't you go out and visit with Pearl? I'll watch him for you." When Blair hesitated, she added, "I'll only be a few moments."

Confusion crept across the woman's weary features. She blinked several times as her chin quivered and calloused hands made jerky movements. "He needs peace and quiet."

She hesitated. As Champ's protector, she tried to portray a stern school teacher. Her eastern family had been wealthy and well educated and she had a diploma from Barnes Business College in Denver, besides her teaching degree. But at present, she seemed to Reba as nothing but Champ's appendage.

Blair took a step outside in a sleeveless, grease stained yellow shirt and faded white jeans. Pearl scooted around the rig and held out her hand. "Why don't you tell me about what you went through at the hospital? I'm sure you need to talk to someone." She pointed to lawn chairs next to the grandkids' swings. Blair teared up and clung to Pearl as they strolled across the lawn.

Reba quickly slipped into the ranch house foyer. A silver vase with white summer roses in full bloom centered an antique oak table and complemented the light Wedgewood blue walls. She stole into the living room, the carpet muffling the sound of her boots.

Champ's head drooped in the wheelchair next to a velvet covered armchair with deep cushions where he used to sit. A low light shined through etched and frosted glass lamp shades. Heavy cherry blossom drapes were drawn in folds at the front window. Deep pink brocades upholstered several chairs with oval framed pictures and a beveled mirror on the walls. All signified Roberta Runcie, Champ's mother, whose decor still ruled the house.

Reba considered what to do next. Should she make a noise to waken Champ? Should she nudge him on the arm? Or should she forget the whole thing, steal away, and return home?

She took a long look at the stooped figure, dressed in loosened

American flag bolo tie, robe tucked over his lap and slippers on his feet. A glass pitcher of Syringa and Indian Paintbrush on the end table beside him. A speck of sympathy emanated for the man.

Perhaps if Champ knew the whole story ... But that was absurd. He must never be told.

Reba backed up a few steps.

Out spit a growl. "What are you doing here?"

Reba recoiled as Champ's head rose and he honed in on her. She quickly studied the grim, rigid face. She extended a kind of peace smile offering, a nervous gesture without a hint of inner warmth. At the same time, she pulled out the lawyer's letter and shook it open. "I'm here about this."

"It's a lawsuit."

His terse reply resembled the old Champ in every way, like the whip across her back. "I know that." She studied his angry expression. His response ignited her own inferno. She couldn't hold back now. "You're the one who should face charges." She shouldn't be saying this, she knew, but no one was here to stop her. The forbidden words exploded. She no longer had control. "Maidie's fiancé Zeke Owens falling off your roof." She breathed in sharp.

"Because of the oil." For a moment she feared she'd faint. "And the rape."

Now she had done it. Those words of direct accusation could never be taken back. But she couldn't forget the shock of reading Maidie's old diary, of the revelation disclosed on those pages.

His complexion turned bloodless, gray like pewter. She truly feared he'd rise from the wheelchair and slug her. Or worse. "That's ancient history and a lie," he roared. "You're full of lies. That's defamation of character. I'll sue you for all you're worth." He stopped to gulp for breath. His hand flailed around the table and knocked over the flower vase.

Reba trembled with rage. She reached for the crumpled bouquet to set it straight in the vase as water spread across the carpet. "Maidie wrote down everything that happened to her."

"Doesn't matter. She was a crazy woman. Many people have stories to attest to that. Besides, none of that has anything to do with your killer horse. If you had trained and

disciplined him properly, I wouldn't be paralyzed." The old fire of confidence still burned in Champ's eyes.

Reba fought for self-control. She strode to the kitchen for a towel to dab at the soaked rug. Pearl was right. She made everything worse by confronting Champ. She shouldn't have come.

*Trust Me, Reba Mae.*

Reba stood stock-still a moment with a shiver of goose bumps. Who said that? She twirled around the Runcie kitchen, in the house of her most persistent enemy on earth. She wasn't in the church barn this time or meditating out on a sacred hill. Yet she recognized the pressing, penetrating voice of her heavenly Father. The sacred hollow of divine contact.

"Lord, I know that's You." She wiped weepy eyes with a towel and lifted the other hand toward the ceiling with her faltering faith. "I'm trying to trust You, Lord, but it's so hard." A hiccupped sob escaped. "Please help me."

She waited as long as she dared before she slipped back to the living room and gently positioned the towel on the rug to soak up the spilled water. The old man's eyes were closed, but she presumed he wasn't asleep.

"Goodbye, Champ," she said, as a test and a farewell.

She headed to the front door fully expecting another outburst. When none came, she stole out of the house, hugged Blair, and took her grandmother home.

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That night Reba awoke at midnight to a volley of fireworks and couldn't get back to sleep. She rolled over several times and reached to the night stand to switch on the light. She groped for her Bible.

She pulled out the photos her friend Ginny took during her recent visit to Road's End. A number were of her and Ginny, but others showed her and Seth Stroud, her and various citizens around town, and the gathering at Maidie's grave. One captured Reba controlling her black horse. Another of

Johnny Poe controlling Reba. A stab of melancholy. Her life in pictures.

She flipped the Bible open to Ecclesiastes and scanned several chapters.

For the living know they will die but the dead know nothing.

Time and chance is all any of us know.

One evil act destroys much good.

There's nothing new under the sun.

Life is a trap.

The same ole, same ole over and over.

Did anything really matter?

The sentiments fostered her despondent mood, but she finally settled on a resolution.

Even so, I trust you, Lord.

She switched off the light and sunk her head deep into her pillow and dozed into the foggy oblivion of blessed sleep.

Chapter Three

The next morning Reba rose at her usual 5:00 a.m. and fried bacon and eggs for just herself since Pearl hadn't stirred yet. She pulled on coveralls and boots and stole out of the house by 6:00 to the strains of a haunting 1940s melody drifting from a record player in Pearl's bedroom. A Doris Day song: "Again, This Couldn't Happen Again."

Grandma, a romantic? She couldn't help wonder who was on her mind. Maybe Vincent?

She fed the dogs, Paunch and Aussie Blue, and Scat the cat, then on one of Pearl's mares she checked the newborn calf, rode the east fence, and assessed the amount of rocks cropping up in the fallow fields. By 8:00 she joined Vincent and Michael near the barn.

She watched her brother practice roping a few old posts and several plastic and iron calf dummies. "Not bad," she concluded.

"Hey, Road's End ought to have their own rodeo, don't you think?" Michael said.

"You're not that good."

"I could improve with serious competition."

She and Michael walked over to help Vincent analyze the old machinery, including the fifty-year-old haying tractors and the harvester they hoped to get up and running again for fall seeding of winter wheat and next year's summer harvest.

"Buy new everything," Michael advised.

Reba pushed her hands into her throbbing lower back. "We can't begin to afford that. Grandma and I know our equipment pretty well. We can keep them up and running." With Pearl fading in strength and stamina, she didn't begrudge admitting, "With your help."

A whole engine perched on a wooden pallet in the field, mostly covered by a bungeed blue tarp. Reba circled a pile of treated wood posts lying ready for mending and building

fence where the cows broke down boards on corral panels. She almost tripped over baling wire as several coyotes howled in the distance. She stopped at one of the aging four wheelers and studied it.

"That engine needs new parts," Michael yelled out.

Vincent shrugged with a spread of his arms toward Reba who shot back at Michael, "Sometimes I think you have no clue how to work a real ranch."

"A piece of cake," Michael said. "Or should I say, cow pie."

His smugness riled her. "It's hard work, not just throwing money around."

"There are better ways, you know."

"You think you're so smart, little brother. Wait until fall and we start picking up rocks, tilling and fueling, drilling and seeding, weeding and spraying. In winter you break ice on the water troughs, haul hefty hay bales to feed the cows, and help tend the calf nursery."

"That reminds me, I want to go see my dad sometime soon. Real soon. In Alaska. I hope I can talk him into a visit here."

Reba started cleaning a seeding drill. "So, you've had contact with him?"

"Once. I think he's real sorry he took off."

At least he could connect with him. She steeled against the stream of regret that her recent knowledge of Don Runcie being her own biological father must remain hidden. "Well, please wait at least until we get back from Reno before you head to Alaska. We need your help."

"Yeah. Maybe."

"Maybe what?"

"Besides being kicked in the shins by calves and cows getting them out to pasture, there's not a lot to do here right now."

"You want to compare bruises?"

His sassy grin reminded her of Jace McKane, for some reason. "Nah. I'm teasing."

"Well, I guess it was too much to hope you'd stay to help us farm the fields again."

"I'll be back. However, I'd rather work horses. When are you going to replace Johnny Poe and get some more rowdy pals around here to train? That's what I was born to do. Let's make this a real horse ranch."

"We wouldn't mind that, as long as we could at least break even."

"What is Grandma going to be able to do?"

Reba's neck stiffened. "Besides doing the books, going to grower meetings, and keeping the mares happy?"

"And taking afternoon naps."

Reba bristled with a terse, "A lot of ranchers take naps."

"Can't you take a joke?"

"That wasn't funny."

"Well, just remember, you can't brand cows on a rainy day."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"Nothin'. I'm just bored."

Vincent grabbed a rag and rubbed oil off his hands. "Did you notice how Michael has been bulking up? I caught him lifting some weights."

"Yeah, a special diet too. Egg whites. Sweet potatoes. Lots of protein." Twenty-one year old Michael flexed his muscles. "You can touch if you want."

"What's up with that? You going into boxing?"

"I told you. I'm anxious to go to Alaska. Dad says there's lots of rough and tough wilderness there. I want to keep up."

"Plus all those Mad Max movies you've been watching," Vincent added.

"Then why don't you head to Australia?" Reba said.

"Because my dad's not there."

"And I need to take a trip back to Boise soon," Vincent replied. "Got some business deals."

A deflated Reba sensed the troops deserting. "We'll only be gone a couple days."

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Reba returned to the house at noon. Prompted by the conversation with Michael, she did some stretching and took off at a run down the driveway. Lungs pumping. Heart racing. Muscles stretching. Feet pounding. Felt good. It wouldn't hurt her to toughen up too.

Musing about the Peeping Tom, she reviewed the tips she learned at the self-defense class Cicely Bowers taught at the Grange Hall for all the ladies in town. More than thirty women and girls attended. She remembered most of them. She rummaged through her pickup, found the leather boxing gloves they used in the class to punch hay bales, and air jabbed under Grandpa Cole's Camperdown Elm.

She recited:

Be aware of your surroundings.

Point a key between knuckles as you approach door or car.

Shout, "Back off!"

Talk the attacker down.

Kick or elbow: eyes, nose, or ears; neck, groin, or knee.

Fight for your life, not your wallet.

Use purse as weapon.

Aim for the eyes: pepper spray, perfume spray, hairspray, strobe flashlight.

*Bring it on, Peeping Tom. I'm ready.*

However, Peeping Toms were usually measly cowards who didn't approach their victims outside their homes. She didn't need self-defense for a creep like that. He most likely would run away if anyone caught him in the act. She'd been running or hiking at least three miles a day since she lost Johnny Poe. Maybe she should add a little weight-lifting.

After a lunch of a protein shake and a salad, she turned to the task of preparing for the trip. In her room she tossed a change of clothes and toiletries in a backpack. She picked up her guitar. Should she bring it? A four day excursion at the most. No campfires. No opportunity to sing. As she slipped it back in the case and leaned it against the dresser, she wondered if Soren was musical. How perfect would that be? Her and the rancher singing together after a hard day's

working horses and cows. Like in the old Roy Rogers and Gene Autry western movies.

She shook herself back to the job at hand, the journey to Reno. Leave first light in the morning. Head to New Meadows to visit with Grandma Pearl's friend Hester and return horse trainer Soren Patrick's saddlebag ... and stay flexible for whatever else might materialize. Then pick up her mother from the institution and head back.

Hard to imagine Hanna Jo in Road's End again. She and the mom who abandoned her at age three had twenty-two years of catching up. Could they navigate the mine fields, the inevitable hurts that would be stirred with every conversation? Could they overcome the resentment of years of neglect and misunderstanding?

The realization hit her hard that Hanna Jo would finally arrive at Cahill Ranch. The specter of Hanna Jo in the rig with them, living in their home, a part of Road's End life again, the whole abandonment issue, seemed surreal. Into the mix, Reba's other personal dilemma, her non-existent love life. How could she possibly find a man, manage to develop a relationship, all the while dealing with her mother?

Or dare she hope she and her mom would quickly bond, the strain of the years separated melted away, in a miracle of peace?

She grabbed her black sling purse with shoulder strap, checked it for the basics like the spray and flashlight, then added a bulging wallet, lip balm, mints, hairbrush, nail clippers, and sunglasses. She heaved it and groaned. She drug the saddlebag with the S.P. initials burned into the leather across the floor, the one Soren gave her full of jerky, sardines, sharp white cheddar cheese, and a loaf of sourdough bread. Now empty, what could she put in it for a return gift?

She wandered around the room looking for an idea. Nothing too personal, just a kind of 'thank you.' She scurried to the kitchen and filled a burlap cloth sack with Grandma

Pearl's special granola trail mix that elk hunters raved so much about. Some dried apples too.

She hoped Soren would be home at his New Meadows horse ranch. And able to visit. The longer, the better. She didn't dare speculate beyond that.

She forced her thoughts away from Soren and back to her mom and to the beautiful, one-of-a-kind, expensive gold and turquoise squash blossom necklace she inherited from Maidie. She dug around at the back of a bottom drawer where she hid the velvet lined wooden case and sprawled the treasure on the bedspread. Double rows of gold beads. Six gold encased turquoise rounded triangles on each side with gold tassels. The blossom pendant at the end seemed like long turquoise petals ready to burst open.

She'd been told the necklace held great value. Perfect condition. No cracks or broken, missing, or loose stones. Nothing bent. The Oroston jeweler offered her a tempting rental sum, just to display it in his store for a year.

Grandma Pearl urged, "You ought to wear it, at least on special occasions. What's the point in hiding it?"

Because it was too large and heavy for her. In fact, Reba rarely wore jewelry at all. Too impractical for ranch work and her lifestyle in general. However, she might make an exception sometime.

In high school, she hung Tim Runcie's class ring around her neck. And several years later, she wore Enoch James's name encrypted silver bracelet for a while. So much for the lasting sentiment of wearing a guy's keepsake. Meanwhile, Vincent Quaid would be horrified to witness the gold and turquoise tossed so casually on her bed. He warned her to store it in the Wells Fargo bank safety deposit box in Oroston. Should she bring it with her to Reno instead?

She should give it to her mom. It really belonged to her. And at this point, a kind of peace offering. On the other hand, should she risk possible loss, damage, or theft on the road? But who would know or guess she had it?

*I could wait until we got home to give it to her.*

That made more sense. The pull was so strong to give her mother a special gift. What better present could she possibly think of? She slipped the necklace and case in her ergonomic purse, then piled out a layer of boot socks from the drawer. Beneath the socks she saw the last note from her mother she had hidden there. She pulled it open one more time.

*I can leave now. Come get me please. Love, Mom*

A tinge of softness stole into her chest.

*Yes, I must bring the necklace.*

She peeked in for another look at the guest room next to hers where her mother would stay, Hanna Jo's former bedroom. Reba had washed the lilac drapes and cream chenille bedspread, mopped the wooden floor, replaced dead lightbulbs, and hung her mom's black framed senior class picture on one wall and a water color of wild horses running across the desert on another.

She and Pearl even spent an hour pushing a sturdy arm chair embroidered in lavender heather and purple ribbons from the dining room. Those were Maidie's favorite colors.

"Your mom loved flopping in it as a teen," Pearl said. "To do her homework and chat with friends on the phone. Maybe it will help her feel at home."

*At home.*

As she looked over the room one last time, she prayed healing for herself and her mom.

She noticed a faint scent of musk and mulberry still misted the air, a remnant left from Ginny George of California who stayed there for Maidie's funeral in May. Though Reba and Ginny were best friends, they differed quite a bit. Black curly hair and swishy scarves and bling jewelry Ginny. Nothing like Reba.

She wondered if she and her mom shared anything in common.

What would they do?

Of course, they'd ride horses.

"Wild Horse Hanna" the Paiutes of the Nevada desert labeled her. But they'd need something more than Pearl's

tame mares. Would she also help with herding cattle, birthing calves, and the other general work of the ranch? What kind of team would the Cahill women make? At the last moment she recalled the wooden warrior Seth carved for her. She pulled it out of her sock drawer. She still didn't know why Seth gave it to her. She traced the sword on the figure that indicated, *Back off! Don't mess with me!*

She thought of a sword she did possess: the sword of the Spirit. She tucked her Bible in the backpack too as she heard the front door open and close.

"I'm packed," Reba announced.

Pearl stomped down the hall and shot a quick glance at the bulky bag Reba slung over her shoulder. "There's a difference between packing and stuffing."

"It's only for a couple days." She looked closer at the older woman. "You cut your hair."

"No, Richard James down at Seth's old barber shop did."

The swept-back swoosh bun behind the head was replaced with a short, tight silver gray sweep against the head. "Cute."

"Thanks, but I wasn't trying for cute. I was..."

The door creaked open again with a scraping of boots on the front mat and a holler. "Grandma, Reba, where are you?"

They shuffled out to greet Michael.

"What's up?" Reba noted a few dark stains streaked on the front porch.

"I'm not here for a chat." Michael plunged his hands in his pocket. "Some animal killed the newborn calf." Before they could react, he stared straight at Pearl. "And your only black mare. Could be coyotes, but likely not. You'll see what I mean."

"Is the calf in the barn?" Pearl asked.

"It was drug quite a ways. The mama must have been distracted somehow. The newborn's in the south pasture. Not a pretty sight." Michael headed to his bronze Mustang as the two women rushed toward Reba's pickup.

Vincent careened down the driveway in a Dodge Ram as they slammed the truck doors. They rolled down the windows to give him the report.

"I want to see the downed mare first," Pearl said.

At the corrals, they inspected the horse that lay in a stream of blood. Pearl and Michael knelt down for a closer look as Vincent and

Reba stood back.

"Took at least one blow each to the head and neck first," Michael noted. "Probably just stunned her or made her unconscious long enough to slit her throat and bleed her out."

Reba tried not to gag. "Most definitely not a coyote."

"Nope. Knew that before we got here," Pearl affirmed. "No coyote in this area ever tackled an animal as big as a horse, no matter how hungry. And certainly not in summer. They've got plenty of mice and other critters out there." She waved at the fields and forests toward Coyote Canyon.

"I'll report this to the sheriff," Vincent said.

"Call the vet too," Pearl replied. "She'll know what needs to be done."

Reba and Pearl followed Michael to the south pasture.

Reba recalled the first time she found an attacked calf, but that was in the middle of winter. She'd vomited on the spot. The coyote had long gone since he could see and hear her coming in her rig from quite a distance, yet left tracks in the snow. She and Pearl often carried .223 rifles during calving season to take care of coyotes.

This calf was also dragged away from the mama, but most of the parts remained.

Pearl leaned closer. "Looks like it was sliced at the neck too. Same as my mare. This predator had a knife."

Reba relived flashes of memory of her own black horse Johnny Poe down a Nevada desert cliff, crashed against a boulder, lifeless body bent. It was like losing him all over again. She tried to imagine any human who would do such a thing. Was it personal against them? But why? She wrestled with outrage at such ruthless destruction. She hunched her

shoulders as she knew what she needed to do. "We can't go to Reno until this is figured out."

No Soren Patrick. Not yet.

Michael rose in protest. "Vincent and I can handle this. And you'll only be gone a couple days. You can help out when you get back. This trip is very important for both of you." Michael, the novice rancher, pulled off his shirt and covered the calf, now a mound of carnage.

"Grandma, what do you think?" Reba prodded.

"Maybe it's God's will for us to delay, for some reason we don't understand."

Reba felt herself sinking into self-pity that bordered on depression. She catered to it while trying to make sense of the killing of their animals.

Michael intervened again. "We've got it. No reason for you to stay."

Pearl pulled off her cowboy hat and swiped at her sweaty brow. "We could wait a day or two."

"The sheriff and Deputy Lomax will back us. You've already delayed more than a week. I'm sure Mom is getting very impatient." Michael scratched at his chin. "She gets that way sometimes."

Reba assessed that comment. What was it like for Michael to be raised by this woman, by this stranger she would soon call *Mom*?

"I want to bury my horse," Pearl said.

Reba shivered with revulsion over the butchered animals. Such cruelty. Such a waste. In this case, they were certainly dealing with more than a Peeping Tom.

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Saturday morning Reba fought a pall of depression with the resolve to try to dwell on pleasant, positive thoughts. Like seeing Soren again. When she passed a mirror, she frowned at the vision of her straggly hair. She pulled it up in a ponytail

with not the slightest improvement. The notion hit her that she had time to get a trim.

She drove to the Main Street barbershop which advertised "Walk-ins Welcome" and strutted in without an appointment. She scanned the walls of the barber shop hung with Burma-Shave ads and photos of Moses Stroud and his son, Seth, the original barbers. Reba wanted to caress the wrinkles on Seth's face. Though he'd only been living in Goldfield, Nevada less than two months, she missed the old man and his fiddle and his purple Model T.

A shelf underneath Seth's photo displayed his old shavers, scissors, brushes and mugs. Several whiskey bottles sat next to a sign: "Liquor used for pulling teeth and taking out bullets."

Barber Alfred James greeted her.

"I need a haircut. Is your nephew Richard in today?"

"He sure is." The man who took over Seth's shop sharpened a razor and spit out chew into a wastebasket. "I heard about your calf and horse. Made all the cattlemen nervous."

"The sheriff says to watch for anything suspicious, like strangers in town who don't seem like typical tourists."

"I told him to check the saloons first. They were running a vicious dog fight the other night. Some big betting going on."

"Did you hear about the Peeping Tom?"

"Oh yeah. Franklin Fraley chased a guy snooping around Cicely's Bed and Breakfast. Almost caught him."

"What did he look like?"

"He said he couldn't tell. Too dark. After 10:00 at night. However, Amos and Pico Paddy told me they spied someone around their trailer park who looked like a bad guy."

"Why did they think that?"

"He looked like a man who scared them once before, someone who threatened them."

Before Reba could question him further, a bell rang above the door and Joe Bosch, a Runcie Ranch employee entered. "You got time for a cut and shave, Alfred?"

"Sure do." He whipped out a white wrap. "How's that boss of yours doing?"

"Same as always, only more so," came the cryptic reply.

Alfred nodded at Reba. "Richard is in the side room."

Reba flashed him a smile and headed to the curtain that served as a door.

"Did you know my grandson Enoch is getting married?" Alfred called after her.

She stopped and turned. "I thought he was married already."

"Didn't last. He got hooked too fast, if you ask me, after you two broke up. But he took it much slower this time. I have hopes this one will take."

"I'm real sorry it didn't work. I wish him the best. He's a great guy."

"And you're a great gal, Reba. So sorry you couldn't stay together."

He wasn't a rancher. And he wasn't ... other things. She ducked behind the curtain.

The first thing she noticed about Richard James was the curved nose and prominent bridge. The second was the unicycle in the corner. "You ride that or will it be part of your circus decor?"

A rustle of interest broke his bored exterior. His bright brown eyes glittered with amusement at her blunt remark. "It's my main mode of transportation right now, that is, unless you want to make an offer." Again, there was that sparkle of gaiety.

"You like doing hair?" She pulled out the rubber band around her perpetual limp, shaggy ponytail.

"I don't dislike it. I just don't love it, which is quite different. Just graduated from college. A late bloomer. I'm working here with Uncle Alfred until I get a real job."

"What was your major?"

"Not exactly a major, but I loved science, especially chemistry."

"So, what do you want to do when you grow up?"

"I love to cook and fish. And invent things. The irony is, my dream was someday to retire and live in a place like Road's End."

She sat in the revolving chair as he pulled a white cotton wrap around her neck. "It's obvious you need a cut."

"At least a trim. It's a bit dry on the ends. Aren't you going to wash my hair first?"

"Not until I talk you into a new hairstyle."

Uh oh. Red flag words. "I'm in a hurry. I'm leaving in the morning on a trip." I think.

He turned the chair round and round as he studied her hair. "You're the perfect candidate."

No, I'm not. I don't want anything changed. "Just shape it up. I love my ponytail. Wrap it and go."

He held some strands. "Shape it to what?"

She frowned and seriously considered a run out the door.

He must have sensed her mood. He dropped the strands and patted her shoulder, almost massaging it. "Hey, I'll show you what I'm thinking." He tossed around some styling magazines on a table, picked one up, and flipped through it. "Here. This is you."

Just ... cut ... my ... hair.

Reba peered at the model with paprika colored, full waves. "Um, my hair isn't that shade of red and it has always been thin and straight as a board. Not me at all."

"That's what my girlfriend told me and she used my special formula and it worked wonders. I'm going to patent it soon. You can be in the trials too."

A shake of panic rushed up Reba's arms. She gripped the chair, ready to run. "What happened to your girlfriend?"

"Waves." He made semi-circle motions. "All over her head. And they lasted too. What I'll do is apply the solution, let it set for thirty minutes, and wash it out. You'll be amazed."

"What solution?"

"Don't worry. Nothing artificial, except a bit of color I'll include. It's all natural. Made of plants like aloe and marshmallow and wheat protein. If I told you the exact secret

ingredients, I'd have to shoot you. I'm trying to develop my own line of products."

"What if it doesn't work. What will it do to me?"

"It will work. You've got the wave, you've just never teased it out. I'll bet you see it when you get out of the shower or after swimming. But you probably call it frizz."

No, it's wet, stringy hair. "No matter what I do, it's flat on top. Never can get it to lift. That's me. I'm used to it."

"Well, all of that's about to change. You will be a totally different woman when you walk out of here." He leaned closer and whispered, "I will tell you I call it Curly Cue." He gazed into her eyes. "But no pressure. I wanted you to have this special option."

Now! Be firm! "I don't think today ..."

"And it's free! The whole thing--Curly Cue treatment and haircut. The only thing I ask is if you like it, tell your friends. If you don't, I'll leave town quietly and never return like the scoundrel I am." He placed the magazine model in front of her.

Watch it, girl. Never buy under duress.

With reluctance, she glimpsed the sultry face, slanted part, shapely henna ringlets. Freckles sprinkled on her cheeks. "I don't know. I don't have freckles like hers." Except on her arms and legs. She wondered if Soren would admire a girl like that. She heaved a part of her reserve. Only one way to find out. "Okay."

"Okay? Did you actually say, okay?"

"I did, but I'm liable to change my mind any second."

"Sit there." He scrambled to the cupboards and pulled out four small ceramic bowls, brushes and bottles. For several minutes, he mixed concoctions and hummed what she recognized as a popular Dolly Parton song. He placed the bowls on a large round platter and centered it on a portable stand. "I call it Regal Red." He pulled a long box of foil, ripped off several strips, crunched them into balls, and plunked the foil package in Reba's lap. "Here. Do what I did. Make a dozen more."

Reba tore pieces as even as possible. "Does your girlfriend live here in town?"

"Nah, she split."

She wanted to ask if the gal left soon after he gave her Curly Cue, but couldn't make herself. Her head and neck tensed as he grabbed a lock of her hair and dabbed globs of the mixture to the roots and spread along the strand. "I've noticed that while I fuss with hair that women tend to face the mirror but men don't. Why do you suppose?"

Because women, especially this one right now, are scared spitless about what's happening to them. She heaved a breath.

"You're wanting me to say that women are more vain, aren't you?" Thin and dry when she came in. Thin and dry when she left. Or maybe it would all fall out. *I'll be bald!*

"Not really. You know, if you'll massage your scalp more when washing your hair, that will be a big help too. I also advise you to use gentle sudsing agents and conditioners. Find a shampoo with a balance of vitamins and minerals, plus amino and essential fatty acids. Fragrance is nice too. Mint. Lemongrass. Rosemary. Also look for tea tree, hemp oil, balsam, things like that."

"I suppose you happen to sell such products."

"I do. But no pressure." He opened a Cheshire cat grin, full tooth and gums.

Reba kept smashing round shapes and sneaking peeks at the mirror.

Several hours later Reba gawked at the rich Regal Red shade of shiny, springy hair bouncing all over her head. She kept tugging on it to make sure it was hers. Not what she'd call curls, not like what her best friend Ginny George had, but definitely twists and squiggles. Waves and thickness. How could it be? She stared in amazement as she twirled in front of the glass.

She paid for her bag of hair care products--shampoo, conditioner, gel, mousse, and something Richard called a Curly Cue protector--and winced at the price he quoted. She

hopped in her pickup and all the way home she tried to flatten and straighten her hair back to the old, familiar style, but she got nothing but recoil. And there was an actual crown on top.

No more ponytail for me!

She stole a dozen looks and tried to describe the Regal Red color as she headed to the Cahill Ranch. Like strawberries? No, more like fire and gold. Like sparklers! That's it. Like red and gold sparklers. So fitting for the season.

Who is that woman in my mirror?

She looked away to prepare to turn at the Cahill Ranch driveway and noticed a thin, dark skinned man sitting beside the road perched on a large pack. A black and white bulldog huddled next to him. He pulled down a sloppy brimmed hat before she had a chance to define his face. Something about the profile caught her attention. She jerked as the bull dog lunged at her as she passed.

She squinted and peered through her side vision, then tried hard to keep looking ahead as she kept going. Had she seen him before? She gaped into the rear mirror as he straggled to his feet and hiked toward the direction of town. Shabby clothes. Slumped back. Was a man like that strong enough or vicious enough to kill their animals? Everything about him screamed, "Loser."

Her pickup bounced along the rutted road as she rolled along the driveway. She scanned the old white ranch house that hid its secrets well, even from Peeping Toms. Unwashed and streaked double-paned windows couldn't be budged without breaking them first. Shades usually down. Lights dimmed low. Front and back wood doors did get opened for air through tightly locked screen doors for several hours on the occasional hot summer nights. But most often they bolted down any open hatches since the break-in and trashing of the place on a May Sunday while they attended the barn church. Before that, everything stayed unlocked.

Reba tried to forget the bum on the road and basked in the glow of her first hint of that illusive feminine experience of *style*.

Chapter Four

They decided to wait until after Sunday worship service at the Cahill barn church to start toward Reno. Dressed in traveling clothes of worn jeans and scuffed boots, Pearl and Reba joined the twenty attenders scattered out among the folding chairs. It was one of those off-feeling Sundays with cranky kids whining, a baby whimpering, and a stray dog wandering in and circling three times before settling on top Beatrice Mathwig's white pumps.

A distracted Pearl forgot to announce Reba's special music number before starting her inspirational message. With no visiting preacher available that day, Pearl served as worship leader, as she often did. At the close of the service, she called on Reba to sing accompanied by her guitar, "On the Wings of a Snow White Dove."

After a quick lunch of canned chili, hotdogs, and corn chips with Vincent and Michael, Pearl suggested they drive her green '58 GMC Carryall rather than the red Jeep. "We don't know how much Hanna Jo will want to bring with her. This has the most space."

They hopped in, cruised through town and soon passed the lake, a grove of cottonwoods, pockets of pine forest, and burst onto the highway lined with wheat fields, some harvested.

"Grandma, you haven't said anything about my new hairdo."

"I haven't?"

"Not a single word."

"Sure I did."

"Nope."

She gave a quick once over glance. "Well, it's a really big change."

"That's it?"

"That's six words."

"But do you like it?"

"As long as you're happy."

Reba was so disappointed at her grandmother's response, that at sixty-five mph, she missed her favorite but brief view of the Seven Devils Mountains, the rugged peaks with perpetual snow on top. She chided herself for brooding over a small perceived slight and brushed it off as they stopped in Oroston a half hour later to purchase a couple gifts for Hanna Jo. Reba decided not to admit yet she brought the squash blossom necklace.

Pearl picked up a Tupperware canister. "I made her favorite lemon bars. At least, they used to be her favorite. I thought it would be a taste of home. I also want to get her a purple scarf or lavender lotion or something like that."

They entered a drugstore that included a gift shop.

Reba tucked her heavy purse on her shoulder and pushed it back to keep from knocking into shelves and merchandise. She decided to look for another gift, just in case she backed away from giving the necklace for some reason. "I have no idea what to get Mom. I know so little about her."

"I don't know her any better myself. Her tastes may have changed."

They wheeled a cart down several aisles. Reba picked up a Lady Stetson cologne bottle. "Do you think she'd like this?"

"Don't know."

"Well, I would. If she doesn't want it, I'll take it."

Pearl plucked at a box of soaps. "Lavender and citrus fragrances. Look, they've got some mini-sprays too."

"How about some candy?"

"She used to love Jelly Bellies and Gummy Bears."

Reba picked up some packages. "Not very fancy for a gift. What flavors?"

"Doesn't matter. How about assorted chocolates too?"

"That might work. At least we would enjoy them, as long as the box includes dark chocolate for me and caramel for you."

Pearl stopped at a display of hats. "Would you look at this? A purple spangled cap. Something about it makes me think of my Hanna Jo."

"Grandma, she could really hate it."

"Or love it. I'm going to get it for her." She picked up a matching purple scarf too.

They purchased the gifts along with purple paper and bows and wrapped them out in their rig.

Several miles outside Oroston they passed the winding Noxell

Ranch driveway and picnic tables and kept going to the rim of White Bird Grade. As they descended from the 4,245-foot elevation peak, Reba glanced at the Old Grade off to the left toward the trail head to the Chief Joseph Nez Perce war battleground. Reba started singing, "God Be With You" in Nez Perce, "*Godki pewakunyu hanaka.*"

Pearl joined Reba's alto with a tenor harmony.

When they finished singing, Reba asked, "Did you let Hester know we might come by?"

"No, I didn't. She's the type of hostess who doesn't need a call ahead." Pearl slammed a hand against the steering wheel. "But doggone it, I did intend to call the institute. Plumb forgot."

"They don't know we're coming?"

"I guess not. Sorry. We'll use Hester's phone."

"So Mom hasn't heard from us and the folks at the clinic have no clue. This whole trip could be a total waste of time."

"So sorry," Pearl repeated.

An hour and a half later, they turned onto a dirt road outside the town of New Meadows and drove up to a large, two-room cabin with porch. 1940s style. Single story with a long, low roofline. Two-car garage with one side empty, the other crammed with an over-sized pickup. They expected any moment to see the smiling face of Hester Owens Vaughn and Killer, her Border Terrier.

"She must be out on the ranch somewhere." Pearl knocked on the door several times, then tried to twist the knob. "The door's locked. She must be gone."

"Let's check with Soren. He would know where she is."

Reba felt a flash of cold, then hot and her limbs tingled as they hiked through the woods to the acres of open pasture and ranch house. She gazed around for sight of the tall, muscled man with dusty tan cowboy hat, dark brown hair almost black, and sun-bronzed face. Her mind flashed the time she bumped into him as a stranger in the Oroston jewelry store years before. She with Enoch James, Soren facing a teary woman with long, straight honey-brunette hair. All four had been gazing at engagement rings. Neither couple made it to the altar.

And then, there he was again, riding toward them on a tall, stately blood bay horse, waving his black hat at them. *Be still, my heart.*

"We were looking for Hester," Pearl said.

"She's not here. She went to Goldfield to visit Seth Stroud. I'm watching over her cows while she's gone." He invited them into the house with its warm, musty pine and oak furniture, casual clutter, and the overriding smell of distressed leather and cowboy coffee.

Reba explained the reason for their trip and concluded, "I've got your saddle in the Carryall."

"Do you have your snuffy horse with you?"

"No." She hated saying it. "Johnny Poe ... he's gone. He fell over a cliff near Goldfield."

"You mean, Champ pushed him," Pearl snapped.

"Whoa, hey, I'm so sorry. I know what that horse meant to you."

"Thanks. It has been hard, especially the way it happened."

"I've been thinking about him and you and I thought of a trick we might use to help with his attitude."

"Really. Thanks." Reba sighed. Then she studied Soren's face. Open, eager, honest. Her spirits lifted.

At the same time, he seemed to concentrate on her. An electric moment. "If you're interested, I've got a horse out in my corral right now that I think is meant for you. Good mind and disposition. A beauty. Just got her from Vegas."

"What on earth made you think it might be for me?"

"I've got a sense that way. Can't explain it. You know we breed mares and sell the weanlings and yearlings. I'm always on the look to match to the right owner."

"And don't you train race horses?" Pearl prompted.

"If they show promise."

"By any chance," Pearl continued, "Could I use your phone for a long-distance call? To Reno. I'll pay for the charges, of course."

"Sure. No problem. Can you stay for dinner? Bacon and tomato sandwiches sound okay? I keep Sunday meals real simple."

"No need to bother," Pearl said. "We can get on down the road right after I make my call."

"I won't have it," he said. "I don't get much company. Please do me the honor."

To Reba's relief, Pearl relented. "Well, in that case..."

Reba assessed the cowboy while Pearl punched buttons on the phone. She stole subtle glances at him, getting acquainted with his closeness, the way he moved around the kitchen. While he grilled the bacon in the oven and tossed together a coleslaw salad, she admired his ease in food preparation.

"Do you cook a lot?"

"I live alone, so I cook for myself or starve. Of course, Hester helps out on occasion."

She grabbed a knife and started slicing tomatoes. "Do you have a garden?"

"Yes. One of my employees helps with the dirty work. I admit I've been told I have two abilities: quick reflexes and a knack of disguising strange ingredients."

"Sounds like a true chef to me. Point me to the dishes. I'll set the table." She washed her hands and pulled out blue speckled tin plates and cups.

Soon after Pearl reported on her call. "The officials knew nothing about her pending release, but they said it's not impossible, though there are some conditions. They'll prepare the papers for us. The good news, apparently Hanna Jo has been a model patient since we visited her last month."

"How so?"

"She doesn't fight them, doesn't curse the other patients, and takes her meds instead of throwing them in the toilet."

"Oh, brother. Is this a hint of things to come for us?"

Pearl pursed her lips and bowed her head as though praying.

Outside she heard a sound like thunder though it was a clear, July early evening. A quick look out the window heralded the dozens of horses whose hooves pounded across the pasture ground in the distance.

"There she is," Soren announced. "The buckskin in the center. The one I believe is made for you, Reba."

She watched the handsome tan horse with black mane and tail prance around the pasture with the others. Playful, strong, spirited, perfectly formed, and fine-boned. Graceful movements. A striking, rugged beauty. Before they left, she had to ride her.

Reba excused herself to the bathroom and noticed a silver framed picture hanging in the hallway of Soren in cowboy hat and chaps with a woman dressed similar. A cozy couple. The long, straight honey-brown tresses confirmed she was the gal at the jewelry store with Soren several years before.

Why did he display this photo where he could see it all the time?

Reba tucked away her few images of high school sweetheart Tim Runcie and more recently, Enoch James, in a storage chest in an upstairs attic. Sometimes she considered tossing them. They represented the painful past, her history, not her present. She couldn't imagine making them visible anywhere in their home.

Had he not moved on?

Or maybe it was a guy thing. Maybe removal hadn't even occurred to him. Perhaps this had become so much a part of the decor he didn't really notice the painful reminder anymore. Reba decided on the spot if she and Soren ever got close, real close, she would definitely mention the object in his home that stuck out like a snorting bull. That gal had to go.

She strutted back to the kitchen and all during the meal she tried her best flirting techniques. Both of them. She hung on his every word and threw in a bit of flattery. "These are the best bacon and tomato sandwiches I've ever had." She conquered his attention with a full-on stare and honey-sweet smile. "I especially love them toasted."

"Good. I realize they're not everyone's favorite."

"I know people who hate anchovies, but I'll bet you could whip up a dish they couldn't say no to." She waited, hands clenched to a knife and fork.

"Actually, I hate them too."

She downsized to a half-smile as she noted with chagrin Soren never once mentioned her new hairdo. After all, she did it mainly for him. But then, she mused that most men paid little attention to a woman's hair, at least to hers. And it proved they weren't close enough yet for such an intimate remark. Even so, she swished her head several times in her best copycat of a move she'd seen Julia Roberts do in a movie. When that didn't attract him, she tried another offense. "Your home is so comfy and cozy. You do a great job of housekeeping for a bachelor."

"I'm used to it. Even when Valery ..." He stopped and took a big bite of his sandwich, mustard leaking out. He swiped his hands with a napkin.

Reba steeled herself as she prompted, "Valery?"

"My former girlfriend. The gal you saw in the jewelry store."

"*Ahhh* ... the one who got away." In a flash, she let go the phony pretense. It didn't fit her anyway. She relaxed instead into this moment of potential honest sharing. "One disadvantage of memories, we expect things to stay a certain

way, like they were in the past. Have you noticed that? We hang on when we should let go." She blushed as she wondered how that sounded to him. She ignored the shot of Pearl's quizzical glance. "Does that make sense?"

Soren stayed with cool charm and host politeness. "I think so. I once heard of a man with poor memory who was the happiest man alive. He started each day delighted with things like drops of rain, clouds in the sky, every little flower. Each bite of food thrilled him like he'd never tasted it before." Doubts flooded her. Was he trying to say that's the way he still felt about Valery?

Instead, he smiled at Pearl. "You take what's thrown at you and try to make a life of it. Isn't that right, Mrs. Cahill?"

"Yep, you called it. I'm sure you're deferring to my many years of presumed learning from mistakes."

He winked at her. "I'm sure they were few and far between."

Insecurity stabbed Reba. She carried dishes to the sink and insisted on washing them. "You and Grandma visit awhile. I've got this."

She meditated in silence and sniffed her nose as she heard them chat in the living room. When the front door opened and closed, she stole a peek. Soren and Pearl sauntered toward the pasture and the buckskin. She lingered in the kitchen until she tired of her solitary confinement and joined them.

Soren swung a rope and tossed it over a fence post. He hummed a tune and spit some chew. He yanked the rope and playfully tossed it in her direction, whipping it against her legs. He spit an arch that landed on one of her boots. She didn't flinch. She kicked her boot as the glob flew off, climbed over the fence, and marched across the pasture to the buckskin.

"Hey, what are you doing?" Soren yelled.

She slowed down close to the mare, gently approached, and looked deep in her eyes to discern the rust factor. The mare fastened a gaze in return, batted long black eyelashes, and looked away to nibble new shoots of green grass. In that

moment, Reba had no doubt this was the one. She found her Johnny Poe replacement.

Soren scooted beside her with a saddle. "I don't think she's quite ready."

"Yes, she is."

He nodded with a jerk. "Okay. But be careful." He carefully nudged on the saddle. "If you don't mind, I'll stay close."

Reba rose in the saddle and hung on, ready for any bump and jolt. She sensed the alarm and jitters, but she nudged her forward. Then Reba rolled in rhythm despite the sudden ups and downs, zigs and zags, twists and turns. When the mare reached her limit, she jumped off. Soren's face flushed with relief. Maybe admiration too. "Good job."

She turned around as Pearl clapped and hurraed from the fence. "I tried to ride some of the rough out of her," Reba said.

"That you did."

"How much do you want for her?" she asked Soren.

"Well ..." His voice began to drift. "I don't know ... do you really think you can afford her?"

Reba panicked. She calculated her modest bank account, certain treasures she might sell, including the gold and turquoise necklace she inherited from Maidie. And a possible loan from Vincent Quaid. "Try me. I'll figure it out."

He pulled off the saddle and hiked toward the gate.

Reba scurried after him. "Just tell me the bottom line." She never wanted anything in her life at that moment like she did that horse. Not even Soren. Well, maybe not Soren.

The cowboy turned and finally displayed the dreamy eyed look toward her she'd wanted since they arrived. "She's yours."

"What?" Her mind spun from adding money figures to trying to understand his meaning. "Okay, thanks, but you still haven't told me how much you want."

"I don't want a single dollar. You're the new owner, free and clear."

Pearl interrupted. "What's the hitch?"

He tipped his hat to both women. "That valuable hunk of horse comes with one condition. You invite me to your ranch to watch the ride when she's totally broke."

"But, I have to pay you something." Reba leaned against the fence to try to catch her breath and slow the racing jumble of thoughts.

"No, you don't. I don't want the horse going to just anyone.

She's very special." He gazed across the pasture where the frisky buckskin circled the field. "Besides, she was given to me for free. Long story."

Did this have anything to do with Valery?

If so, would it make a difference?

She gazed at the cavorting buckskin again, black tail and mane waving, flipping back and forth, head tossed high. Nice set of withers. Forelegs like rockets. Flight of joy in her limbs. She relented of any misgivings in an instant. Nothing else mattered. This gorgeous hunk of horse belonged to Reba now. And maybe sometime in the near future, so would Soren.

"One problem," she said. "I can't pick her up right away, not until ..." She tried to settle on a date in her mind after their Reno trip and return to Road's End.

"Doesn't matter. Just give me a call before you come to make sure I'm home. Here's my number." He handed her a business card.

"We've got to get on the road," Pearl announced. "It's getting late."

"Why don't you stay here tonight? I've got a guest room all ready for you."

Reba peered at Pearl.

"I'm vacillating between needing to nurse my knees and wanting to get going," Grandma said.

"You can leave early in the morning and still make good time. Meanwhile, Reba can get better acquainted with her new horse."

"Well, okay, but don't plan breakfast for us. We'll be on the road at first light."

"I'll get your saddle." Reba hummed the 1940s Doris Day song all the way to the Carryall: *Again, this couldn't happen again.*

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After Reba took another long look at the buckskin, memorizing each detail, they stole out early the next morning under a hot color staining the sky like a banner of fire. Reba noticed Soren's horse already gone from the ranch house.

After nearly two hours on the road, Pearl said, "I think someone is following us." She peered in the rear view mirror.

"Um, this is the only highway in Idaho north and south. If this two-lane goat trail has any traffic at all, they have to follow us."

"But that's the same car behind us when we pulled off at New Meadows and we were there overnight."

"Oh. Are you sure?" Reba turned around to investigate.

"Same old jalopy only ..."

"Only what?"

"Well, the same dog was in the front seat but different driver. The other one looked like a guy with dark brown hair. This one's a blonde with shoulder length curly hair."

"Maybe they traded drivers. Or it's coincidence and a different car. If it bothers you, slow down at the next passing lane and let them go by."

"I already did that. They stayed behind me."

"Then stop at a turnout and see what happens."

Pearl signaled and made a sharp turn to a roadside outhouse.

The nondescript, rusty with blue paint peeling vehicle cruised past them as a black and white bulldog in the passenger side window slobbered and glowered. She didn't recognize the driver, but the dog resembled one she'd seen recently.

Reba yawned and opened her door. "Two problems solved. I needed to stretch anyway. I was getting sleepy."

"Come on, let's take a walk." Pearl pulled out a knapsack of snacks they bought in Oroston.

They sauntered along the Snake River kicking pinecones and listening to skittering sounds of squirrels and other varmints. A fresh mountain breeze heightened their senses. A V-line of Canada geese honked above in a buzz-by. They waved at three kayakers who braved the morning chill to get in some exercise.

Reba's heart pounded as she thought of her new horse and of the present owner. Soren both attracted and frustrated her. She never got a solid read on his feelings. "What do you think of Soren, Grandma?"

"He's a decent guy. A great catch. Is that what you're getting at?"

"I guess so. If you don't mind my asking--you and Vincent, do you think you'd ever be a couple?"

Pearl stopped beside a cottonwood to take a breath. "At one time I thought so. But I recently realized how much I still miss Cole. It still grieves me we'll never talk again. I'll never see him sit in his chair or watch that jaunty walk of his out to the corrals. The world is a very different one without him in it."

"Yeah, I miss Grandpa too. I always knew he loved me and was on my side."

Pearl chuckled. "Oh, definitely. He spoiled you rotten."

"Has Vincent said how he feels about you?"

Her face turned a slight shade brighter. Her elderly voice rang with young wonder, silvery, clear and light. "Don't be shocked, but he tried to kiss me once. I pulled back in that split second before it happened. I couldn't do it. It seemed like a betrayal to Cole. In a way, I sense Vincent is conflicted that way too since Cole was one of his best friends."

"But Grandpa's gone and even if he knew, he wouldn't care."

"Yes, I realize Cole wouldn't mind so much, that he would be happy for me, especially from where he is now."

Reba reveled in the rare moment of intimacy between them as Pearl dabbed at a tear.

"Are you okay?"

"It's nothing. Just a memory."

With reluctance, they turned back toward the highway road stop.

"One thing I really appreciate about me and Vincent—we have history together. It's so hard to enter into a relationship at my age with someone who didn't know me back when. Yet, he can still accept the aging changes now. I like the fact that he knew Cole and that they were friends. I don't have to explain him, how special he was." After a pause, Pearl pushed on with her private sharing. "We do get along. We have compatible natures and ... I so enjoy our quiet moments together."

"So, besides missing Grandpa, what's the problem?"

"I admit I'm lonely for male companionship. But there's freedom and some pleasure in independence. Marriage is ... so up close and personal. It's the ultimate invasion of privacy, you know."

"You had a good marriage with Grandpa. It could happen again."

"We had our good years and bad. I'm so thankful we ended on a great year."

"Except when we found him collapsed underneath our Camperdown Elm."

Pearl wheezed. "Yes, except for that."

They hopped back in the Carryall.

"It's weird," Reba commented.

"What's weird?" Pearl gunned the engine.

"Us talking about you and Vincent."

"Maybe some day we'll be chatting about you and Soren."

"Maybe." Perhaps the buckskin would bring them together.

"I aim to go all the way to Winnemucca tonight, if my legs don't give out."

Reba felt alert and invigorated after their walk. "I'll trade driving with you."

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After a restless sleep at the Winnemucca Lodge, they ate a breakfast of ham, eggs and orange juice, served by a glum waitress and next to a Lotto machine designed to pick winning numbers for the Lottery. Afterward, they drove through the mountain pass and two more hours to arrive at the Reno Desert City Mental Health Institution by noon. Pearl parked in the back at the main entrance.

"Are you nervous?" Reba asked.

Pearl stretched her legs as she got out of the Carryall. "Yes, but I also aim to fully welcome my prodigal daughter back home."

Reba hauled out her clunky purse and decided to introduce the awkward subject. "Last time we were here I wore Maidie's squash blossom necklace."

"Uh huh. Turned out to be a good idea."

Should she tell her she had it with her and wear it? The necklace could provide a connection point again. However, if she put it on now, it would be a bit tacky or awkward to take it off and give it to her mother. And Grandma Pearl might fuss about it, what with Vincent's warning. Then what would she do?

She sighed. Bringing it was a dumb decision. She'd be so glad to get back home and hide the heavy chunk of rocks. It was nothing but trouble. "I don't know what to expect today."

Pearl pulled out the wrapped gifts. "We'll have to roll with the punches."

They walked down the cobbled path to the front doors of the brick building. High window slots resembled a prison atmosphere. The tall, fenced cement floor basketball court was empty of players and all the balls and shoes were stored in a huge net.

Inside, Pearl said to the gal at the reception desk, "Dr. Joyce Castleberry please."

The doctor soon appeared, all business and decorum. "As I told you before, the court allowed Hanna Jo to claim 'voluntary commitment' on her record if she stayed a prescribed amount of time. This will be early release but it's been okayed if she's accountable to a legal guardian or responsible next of kin. You must provide constant oversight and fill out reports. Are either of you willing to take on that duty?"

Reba looked at Pearl. "Can both of us act in that capacity?"

"Sure, as long as one of you knows what she's doing and where she is at any hour of the day. We will be making periodic phone calls and can make unannounced visits to your home, if we choose. Be sure to keep us posted on any change of contact information." She thrust papers at them. "These must be read and signed."

After completing the paperwork, once more they clomped down the hall with its pungent odor of urine and bleach, unwashed bodies and antiseptics. Faces brightened as they glided by. Bent figures slumped in chairs with more alert ones engaged at game tables. Reba extended friendly waves to them all.

They found Hanna Jo standing in a doorway, sea green eyes and shiny strawberry blonde hair coifed in a soft curl bob down to her shoulders. She smelled fresh like summer rain with a hint of honeysuckle.

She gawked at Reba. "You've changed your hair."

"Yes." Reba held her breath. What her mother said next would set the tone for their first few hours together.

She reached out with a gentle jab at her shoulder. "It does wonders for you. A keeper."

She gave her mom a brief hug and wanted to hold on longer. She longed for those affirming words. From Grandma Pearl. From Soren. That they came from her long-lost mother greatly amazed her.

Pearl set the gifts on a hall table.

A woman of about sixty years old trundled out of a nearby room and hunched against the wall. "Open your presents in front of your visitors. It's so much more fun."

"This is Betty Nielsen," Hanna Jo said. "I call her Bumper."

Bumper dropped her head and muttered to herself.

"She fears for her life," Hanna Jo whispered. "She's terrified someone's trying to poison her. She won't eat anything she doesn't cook herself."

Bumper's head lifted. "Did you know Hanna Jo and I were both married to Billy Kelly? Isn't that something?"

"Is that right?" Reba asked.

Hanna Jo shook her head.

Bumper held out a stubby arm to Reba, so she walked over and took her hand. "Please tell Heloise to open her presents."

"Heloise?"

She pointed to Hanna Jo who said, "She never can remember my name but she knows all the words and verses to at least fifty hymns. And recalls the name Heloise every time she sees me." Hanna Jo partially pulled the ribbon and picked tiny pieces of the paper from one of the presents. "Do you mind? Let's wait and do this later."

"No problem. You ready to go?"

"I've been ready since the day I arrived."

When they reached the parking lot, they loaded Hanna Jo's suitcase, a couple large paper bags and the gifts in the back where Reba sat. Her mother scooted into the front passenger seat.

"Mom, is that all you have to take?" Reba asked.

"For now. I've traveled light. Pretty much lost it all. Or given it away."

Pearl eased into the driver's position. "Are you hungry?"

"No."

"Well, Reba and I haven't had lunch yet. Do you have a restaurant to recommend?"

"No. The only thing I know about Reno is the inside of that facility."

Pearl backed up the Carryall, drove down the street, and pulled into traffic on the McCarran loop around the town. "Reba, let me know if you see a place to stop."

"Up there to the right is a Red Robin. I like their hamburgers."

"I like Wendy's better," Hanna Jo said.

Reba could see Pearl's terse frown reflection in the rear view mirror as she turned toward the first Wendy's sign they approached.

Pearl and Reba ordered hamburgers, sodas, and fries at the counter. Hanna Jo asked for a salad and water. Pearl paid the bill and they scrunched into a small corner table in the back of the filled-to-capacity dining room.

Reba tried to keep her right arm from bumping her mother's.

"So, you're a lefty?"

"Yes, I am. Always have been."

"Except when you play baseball, as I remember," Pearl said.

"Uh huh." Hanna Jo ate a few small bites and drug her fork through the plate.

"Hey, I'll bring in the presents." Reba started to get up.

"Don't bother. I don't have any use for any of it."

"But ..." Reba was floored. "You don't even know what we got."

"Sure I do. Candy, something smelly, and *fou-fou*."

Fou-fou? She must refer to the purple scarf and sparkly hat. But how did she know?

Pearl sniffed. "If you were a child of mine still at home, I'd scold you for your rudeness, young lady."

Her lip curled. Her face flashed with an undertow of emotions: desperation, pain, and perhaps a touch of fear. Defiance also lined the rigid angles of her body. "You might as well know right now. I'm not going back to Road's End with you."

"Of course you are." Pearl wagged a French fry at her. "You've got to stay with us or return to the institute. Is that what you want?"

"I want to go see Seth and my friend Thelma."

"Seth is in Goldfield," Reba replied.

"I know that."

"And I thought Thelma worked at the Institute."

"She's on maternity leave. In Silver Peak."

Pearl leaned forward with as firm a look as Reba had ever seen. "Hanna Jo, I have got to get right back to the ranch. We can stay here tonight, but that's the longest we can wait. We're headed north to Road's End in the morning."

Hanna Jo folded a paper napkin until it scrunched into a tiny square, her demeanor set at stubborn. "I can't go back to Road's End. Anywhere but there."

Reba studied the face of this stranger who claimed to be her mother. What in the world did she think she was doing? "Then why did you contact us? Why waste our time and yours by coming to get you?"

"Because ... because I did want to see you again. Both of you. And in a moment of weakness, I thought ... I might could go back." She thrummed the fingers of both hands on the table. "But now I know that's impossible."

Reba's head pounded with irritation and hurt. "So, what do you expect us to do?"

Hanna Jo pushed the plastic plate away, crossed her hands in the table, and faced them both. "Drive me to Goldfield and leave me there."

Pearl leaned in close to her daughter. "We can't. We'd have to report you and they'd commit you again, this time by force with no easy release."

"I know." She looked around the crowded restaurant. "I changed my mind. I do want to open those presents. I'll go get them right now." She grabbed the ring of keys from the top of Pearl's purse, pushed away from the table, and squeezed her way to the front door.

"Watch her," Pearl warned.

Reba craned her neck toward the window. "I am. Uh, oh. She got into the driver's side." She scooted toward the door, slammed her way through some college age customers, and yelled at the retreating Carryall. "Why did I let her get away with that?"

Pearl limped beside her. "There's a phone booth. Call the police and a cab."

"Police?"

"You're right. Forget the police. We'll just follow her. Which way did she go?"

"She turned right." Reba raced to the booth.

Within minutes, Elmer's Taxi Standard Cab arrived. "I'm Elmer." He held out his hand. "Sorry for the delay. There's a messy accident down the road."

"Which direction?" Reba asked.

"East." He pointed right.

"That's the way we want to go."

"Not sure if we can get through or how long it will take. A big Carryall has one lane blocked."

Pearl gasped as alarm spilled over Reba. "Hurry! That may be Hanna Jo."

Chapter Five

Whether there had been an actual collision or not, Pearl and Reba couldn't tell. Several police cars with lights flashing directed one car at a time through a narrow lane of traffic. They spotted Hanna Jo conversing with an officer. Pearl tossed the taxi driver a wad of one dollar bills and they crept toward the accident scene.

"There's the owner." Hanna Jo turned to them with urgent pleading in her eyes.

Reba scanned the crash scene next to a familiar but empty decrepit jalopy crammed against a concrete divider scraped with blue paint streaks and tire marks. She searched around for the driver.

Pearl addressed the officer. "Yes, I'm the owner of the Carryall. Any damage?"

Hanna Jo showed her the front. "I don't think so. I never hit anything but I had to stop when a crazy guy pulled in front of me. I barely missed rear-ending him."

"Where is he now?" Reba asked.

"The strangest thing. He gunned the motor a few times, then he got out, jogged over to me, looked in the rig, and rushed off with his dog. Haven't seen him since."

"Did he happen to have a bulldog?"

"Yes, a black and white one."

"Did the guy have blond hair?"

"No. Pure black. So was his mustache."

Reba walked closer to the beat up car. Just like the one on the highway yesterday. She managed to eke out, "I'm glad you're okay, Mom."

Hanna Jo grabbed hold of Pearl. "I'm sorry for leaving like that. Did you report the Carryall stolen?"

"No, but we could have. Were you going to just leave us stranded?"

Her eyes puddled with tears. "I don't know. I don't know what came over me. I was just so desperate to not go back to Road's End."

They waited while a tow truck toted the car away and the police asked Hanna Jo more questions. They piled in the Carryall. Reba got into the back seat so she could better connect with her mother in front.

"We need to talk." Pearl eased into the slow lane of traffic.

Hanna Jo slumped down in silence. Blood drained from her face making her look ill and vulnerable.

Reba's stomach churned into a sickly pain, trying hard to understand. "Were you just going to leave us there?"

A chalky face turned her way. "I wasn't running away. I'm going forward until something makes sense. There's a difference."

Pearl pulled down the visor. "It's obvious the past still bears heavy on your present. When are you going to let it go and live in the real world?"

"That's what I'm trying to do. I want to get away, to clear my mind, to breathe fresh ideas. This is my time to leave everything and not look back."

Reba shuddered over what she just heard. "I can't believe you'd have the gall to say that. What have you been doing for the last twenty plus years, if not that?"

Hanna Jo shut her eyes. Her head dropped as she seemed to shrink in size. "If you take me to Road's End, I'll escape the first chance I get. I promise you that."

What was she so afraid of? Reba wondered if it was some of the same things that troubled her. "What are you thinking, Grandma?"

"We're not getting anywhere like this. Let's give it a little time. We can find a room for the night and think this through the best we can." Pearl turned on Virginia Street and pulled up to a Vagabond Inn. "I'll make arrangements."

"I'm coming with you," Hanna Jo said.

"Then so am I." Reba slid out of the car.

"I want my own room," Hanna Jo retorted.

While Hanna Jo talked to a man with a pair of poodles next to a coffee pot, Pearl and Reba stood behind a large woman holding a small, long haired dog at the check-in desk.

Pearl lowered her voice. "This puts me in such a bind. You know I've got to get back to the ranch."

"Well, so do I. What are we going to do about Mom?"

"I don't know." Pearl's face wrinkled into a scowl as her mind obviously whirled in a search for answers. "Someone has to stay with her. Why don't you rent a car and take her to Goldfield?"

"But we'd be giving in to her. And maybe she'd just run away again."

Pearl shrugged. "Or, maybe she'd finally find what it is she's looking for. You know, I feel like we broke through a wall only to get bit by a snake."

"Yeah. Here she goes again, mom derailing my life."

The heavy woman with the dog turned around. "Cuddles and I left you a room. Had to cancel one."

"Don't they have vacancies?" Pearl asked.

"Not with the big dog show this week. Didn't you see the No Vacancy sign?"

As if on cue, in walked two men and two women leading several Dachshunds and Pomeranians.

The clerk said, "Do you want the room? It's got one king-sized bed."

Pearl twisted around to Hanna Jo who apparently heard the exchange. "All three of us in the same bed?"

Reba winced. So far, they couldn't even get along in the same car.

"Is there a couch?" Pearl asked.

"No, ma'am, and all the rollways are taken. But a recliner chair is included."

"Maybe we can find an inflatable mattress or sleeping bag somewhere," Reba suggested.

"Yeah, that could work."

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They piled into their room, avoided each other's space as best they could, fussed with bags and cases, and took turns in the bathroom. Hanna Jo marched in first without a hint of 'please.' When she came out, Reba forced a bright smile into the crackling silence. "Anyone hungry?"

They ordered delivery cheese pizza and Hanna Jo turned on the TV and started flipping through the channels. On the beginning of the third round through, Pearl snapped, "For Pete's sakes, pick one."

"I have." The screen cleared to a scene of "Magnum, P.I." A tanned Tom Selleck in Bermuda shorts and floral Hawaiian shirt verbally jousting with John Hillerman. She cozied into the reclining chair and lifted her feet on the ottoman. "Change the channel if you get bored."

Pearl and Reba punched and molded the pillows and leaned back on the king bed.

Reba squinted at the small screen. "It's been a long time since we saw this show."

"It's been a long time since we watched TV together."

"*Shhhh*," Hanna Jo ordered.

Reba fisted her pillow and tried to immerse in the action-packed beach shores of Magnum's world.

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That night they kept changing the one in the middle of the bed. Pearl wanted to move because a mystery light bothered her. "I'm an old lady with bad eyes, but I can certainly see that bright flashing light. How come you girls can't?"

Hanna Jo poked Reba in the back and whispered, "Is she hallucinating?"

"I don't think so."

Reba finally settled in the center spot but couldn't sleep. On one side, each breath tortured. On the other, a nasal sound full of adenoids. Finally, a low, rough and croaky voice. "Reba, you awake?"

She turned toward her mother. "Yeah."

"I think I bruised my ribs in the car accident today. I can't find a comfortable position."

Pound. Pound. Pound.

"What's that?" Hanna Jo whispered.

Another pound, then a double rap.

"Someone's banging on our door," Reba whispered back.

The pounding continued and then abruptly echoed farther away. Dogs up and down the hall began a chorus of yips and yelps. A half-hour later, they ground down to a few whines and growls.

"How can Mom sleep through all of this?" Hanna Jo asked.

"She's always been a heavy sleeper ... and she's getting hard of hearing."

"Reba, I'm sorry, I know I'm messing things up, but I must refuse to go back to Road's End."

"Why?"

"That place is not me. Maybe it never was. I've learned to live like someone left the gate open. Why would I want to be corralled again?"

Her answer stung. Reba replied with a knee jerk reaction. "If it's any consolation, I'm not sure I want you back in my life." She immediately regretted saying that.

"To be honest, neither am I."

To her surprise, Reba found their exchange freeing, a release of some sort, kind of a cleansing. "Are you still determined to go to Goldfield?"

"Yep. Will you take me there?"

Reba considered the alternative. Dump her mom and ride away? She realized she couldn't do it. Her mother had a tiny hold into her being she'd never felt before. "You're quite a manipulator, you know."

"Most women are."

Reba noticed she didn't say most moms are. An odd omission. No longer tight-lipped with years of stored frustration, she knew she was going to spew something again.

"Not me. I'm *not like you*."

Hanna Jo peered at her, as though really looking for the first time. "I'm glad for that, but it looks like we're stuck with each other."

"That doesn't mean we have to like it."

"No, but I have a plan."

Reba burst out between gritted teeth, "I'm sure you do. You know what? You are nothing but trouble."

"Thank you. That's better than being nothing at all."

Reba inhaled and a retort caught in her throat. With the greatest difficulty she fought back humiliating tears. She was saved by the sound of a chink against the window. She bolted straight up and stole across the dark room to pull back a sliver of the curtain.

The clear night sky sparkled like sapphires and diamonds, even with the dimming of city streetlights. As her vision sharpened, she sighted a dark figure skulking between the cars in the parking lot. A bulldog pattered beside him.

Had he thrown something at their window?

Her stomach felt like the first sign of chill forecasting a coming storm. Someone intent on harassment roamed out there. A memory tugged at the corners of her conscious. She studied the silhouette until her throat burned and she tried to swallow. She stared evil down at least once before. A hitchhiker accosted her in an Idaho rest stop and Johnny Poe trounced him. He said his name was Quigley and he vowed to get revenge.

"I'm going to come get you," he threatened as the police drove him to a hospital and then off to jail.

Sweat beaded her lips in a flicker of fear. Surely that wasn't him. In fact, he was most likely still behind bars. This was just some drunk. Or someone forgot their room number. Reba's head pounded as she tensed by the window and kept stealing glances as the man scrunched into himself and wrapped his arms tight against his shoulders. He now looked small like a harmless boy.

"Who's out there?" Hanna Jo whispered.

Reba shook her head. She could no longer see him. After a while she heard the noise of both her roommates softly snoring. Soon, her heartrate back to normal and no movement in the parking lot, she settled in as quietly as she could into her space in the bed.

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Reba crawled out of bed the next morning with a headache. She declined the muffins and bananas Pearl brought them from the free continental breakfast downstairs, and ignored the mental onslaught of what was said and done the evening before. She sauntered to the window and peered through the curtain. In the street below someone shouted, followed by a roar of laughter. Trained dogs of various breeds crouched in controlled groupings with their owners around plantings of multi-colored summer blooms groomed by careful gardeners.

A movement diverted her. A man lurked in the bushes below, holding back a growling, lunging bulldog beside him.

"Mom, come quick."

Hanna Jo put down a blueberry muffin. "What?"

"Come look at this man. Is he the one who drove the car that crashed?"

The show dog presenters backed away to the motel front door amid a chorus of yips and yowls. Several large men stood stern guard against the mongrel intruder. By the time Hanna Jo reached the window, the man and dog slinked behind garbage cans in an alley.

"Rats, he disappeared."

Reba and Hanna Jo gazed out the window a few minutes. He didn't appear again. Soon cautious conversation buzzed between Pearl and Hanna Jo, somewhat strained and clipped. About the butchered calf and mare. About the pending lawsuit. About Michael.

Reba entered the conversation. "Michael's headed soon to visit his father. In Alaska."

"Oh." Hanna Jo responded with some heightened interest. "I didn't know ..."

"You didn't know what?" Reba prompted.

"That they were communicating. Or where Griff was."

"Your son would like to see you before he goes."

An abrupt slam of Hanna Jo's palm on the small table made the forks and knives jump. "I can't go back. How many times do I have to say it?"

Pearl folded her arms in her no nonsense way, assuming the straight backed, determined stance of the grandma Reba had known all her life.

Now it comes. *Mom's going to get what she deserves.*

But soon the shoulders sagged. Reba wanted to hug the elderly woman, to will away the gloom. To tell her it didn't matter. But it did, very much. "I've reached a decision," Pearl began. "I must go back or I'll lose the ranch. If Champ doesn't take it from me outright, I may have to sell it to pay for court costs."

Reba shivered at the dire words. She so wished she had been more respectful to their town mayor, for her grandma's sake. Why did she insist on confronting him? "It's all my fault."

Pearl shook her head. "I never said that."

"But I know it's true."

"Champ Runcie had his sights on that ranch long before you appeared and I want you both to know I do believe God is in control of this situation, including you two and the ranch. He knows what's going on and He knows the future."

The room sizzled with poignant silence.

Hanna Jo spoke first. "Right now my life seems so confusing. I can't accept what makes no sense."

Pearl reached across and touched her arm. "But it's not the end of the story. We're all somewhere in the middle."

Hanna Jo stood up and cleared the room service dishes and set them outside the door. "Look, I am sorry I summoned

you here under false pretenses. I realized soon after I mailed that letter to you I wasn't going to return to Road's End. Could you please help me out? I want to go back to Goldfield and Silver Peak one last time."

Last time for what?

They signed papers to legally agree to never let Hanna Jo out of their sight. The one moment they did at the restaurant, she got into trouble. But maybe if her mother got this obsession of a side trip south out of her system, they could get on with their lives. Wishful thinking?

*Lord, guide us!*

Calm settled Reba piece by piece like the best day riding to the top of Coyote Hill with Johnny Poe. As the contention inside subsided, she reached the moment she could finally say, "Grandma, I think I'm going to take her to Goldfield and Silver Peak."

Pearl sighed into resignation. "What will you use for transportation?"

"That's another thing," Reba said. "I really can't afford to rent a car right now."

"I have money. I can pay for it." Hanna Jo pulled out her wallet as though to prove it on the spot.

Reba didn't know how to respond. Where did she get her money? She really should find out. At the right time.

Pearl offered a huge concession. "Let's check out how much it will cost. I've got a little cash with me. Maybe we can pool our resources to at least get you both on the road."

Her mother's startled stare mixed amazement with victory. "Okay, let's go see about a rental car."

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They pulled into Nifty Thrifty Rentals and right behind them a man with baseball cap, sunglasses, and grizzled beard raced into the parking lot on a Harley. He parked the bike, pulled off his cap, and exposed wispy hair with bald spot on top.

"Hi. Can I help you?" he said in a deep, resonant, booming voice. He wore a plastic tag with the name Herman and Nifty Thrifty Rentals insignia.

"We want to rent a car." Reba appointed herself the official spokesperson for the Cahill women.

"Hey, you came to the right place. Our cars aren't lookers but they are cookers. And the prices are down now."

"Cookers?"

"They stay hot on the road and never break down. When do you need it?"

"Right now."

"How long?"

"Not sure yet."

"We have weekly and monthly deals."

"What's your price?"

"\$5.00 a day. You want a sedan or a coupe?"

"I was hoping for a pickup."

"That will be extra. Do you want a Ford, Dodge, or Chevy?"

"Which is cheapest?"

"The Ford."

"Okay, we'll take the Ford. How much?"

"I've got one in the back that's the most economical."

"I think we should check it out first." Hanna Jo measured each word as she forced Reba's attention. Her fair face was troubled, her lips pulled in distaste.

She doesn't trust this man.

Reba knew she was out of her element. She never rented a car before, especially in a big city. She looked to Pearl who nodded encouragement. "Okay, Mom, you take a look at the pickup in the back while he adds it up for us."

Hanna Jo scooted behind the small building as Reba and Pearl followed Herman the Harley guy into a tiny cubicle office. Herman pulled out a pad and fussed with a pen and form and soon Hanna Jo came in and gave a thumbs up on the pickup. Herman handed a paper to Reba. She scanned the bill. "\$500? I thought you said \$5.00 a day."

"With a \$500 deposit."

"Are you crazy?"

"I'm as sane as any human you ever met. Except ... "

"Except what?"

"I'm left-handed and an arm wrestling champion." He flexed his arm and Reba wondered if another lefty, her mother, could take him on. "And that's the monthly charge that includes supply and demand for pickups, a penalty fee for not reserving ahead, added insurance for collision, damage, theft and vandalism, plus a security deposit. And my time for haggling with you. Also, there will be two drivers under twenty-five."

"We are not!"

He winked at Hanna Jo. "Prove it."

Reba and Hanna Jo showed him their driver's licenses. Reba marveled her mom had one. "We want to pay for a week."

"Additional charges may apply. It says so right there." He pointed to fine print on the last page.

"Then we'll go to another company."

"Won't help. I'm the cheapest in town."

Reba did a quick study of the tall man with broad brow and piercing stare. No more phony nice. To argue would be futile. "Give me the week's total, please."

He pulled out another form and filled it out. "Here!"

"\$150? Is that the total?"

"It is right now. Take it or leave it."

"We'd like to talk about it. We'll be back in a half hour."

"I can't guarantee the pickup will be here."

"That's highway robbery."

"In that case, additional charges may apply. In fact, I can't promise *I* will be here." He pulled on a cotton V-neck sweater over his shirt and grabbed a tennis racquet from behind his desk.

Reba felt color rise in her cheeks and threaten to mottle her skin. Didn't he want to make a sale? Or was he applying pressure on three supposed hapless women?

Pearl waved them outside and they slipped into the Carryall. "Herman was putting on the full court press. I didn't like that. I'll bet you could even take a bus to Goldfield."

"A possibility. But what would we use to get around once we got there?" Hanna Jo asked.

Reba fumed inside. This was all her mom's fault. Why didn't she ever take responsibility for how her actions affected others?

"Seth's purple Model T. A taxi. Hitchhike. I don't know." Pearl looked ready to wipe her hands of the whole situation.

"Or maybe some wild horses." Hanna Jo interjected a smile. "I'll bet that pickup isn't going anywhere. It'll still be parked on that spot into infinity."

Reba bolted to attention. An idea hit. Jace McKane's '55 Chevy! Was it still in that warehouse? If so, they could backtrack east to Fernley and then south to retrieve it. She tried to recall. White convertible top. Glacier Blue body. Red interior. Needed some repair.

She didn't know if it was still there, and even if it was, Jace may not let them borrow it. He absolutely loved that car. But if it was and if he would allow them to borrow it, they could drive it to Goldfield. They'd stay just long enough to talk her mother into returning to Road's End, then maybe drive it all the way home. Jace may appreciate the delivery.

Or not.

A real long shot.

A lot of *ifs*.

Feeling very foolish, Reba mentioned the possibility of checking on the '55 Chevy.

Pearl backed up the Carryall. "There's a phone booth across the street. Give Ginny a call. Won't know until you ask. I'll drive you down to Oliver's, if that's feasible. Or ... we'll check another rental place."

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Reba finally reached Ginny in person after a half dozen busy signals.

"Reba!" Ginny squealed. "I can't believe it. Your voice is like hearing an angel's."

"How are you, sweet friend?"

"Awful. Just terrible." Ginny ruptured into a jag of weeping.

Stunned, Reba kept her voice low and composed. "Hey, talk to me. What's going on?" she said a number of times.

"Where shall I start?" she sniffled. "My family's ready to disown me because we moved from Grandpa's compound. Paris pays no attention to me. And ..." She wailed again. Reba waited until the gasp of a whisper ended with, "I'm fatter than ever. I keep gaining weight. No matter what I try, I can't lose it."

"Oh!" That's all Reba could find to say. Any one of the pronouncements would elicit that response. The triple whammy completely shut her down.

"Reba, I need you! Please come see me."

"Ginny, I'm so very sorry, but that's impossible. I'm sorta stranded in Reno right now. With my mom. I have no wheels and I've got to take mom to Goldfield to see Seth Stroud and her best friend. Long story. I won't burden you with it."

"You're stranded?" Ginny's voice instantly cleared, not slurred with tears, ready for the rescue.

"Yes. Grandma drove us here and she has to get back to the ranch. Another long story. Mom refuses to go home with us, so I've got to take her south somehow. We wondered ..." Reba hesitated to make her presumptuous request.

"Oh, oh, oh!"

"Ginny, did you hurt yourself?"

"No. I have a scathingly brilliant idea."

Reba leaned against the glass wall of the phone booth. She pushed the palm of her hand against her forehead as another headache pulsed. Did Ginny not understand the situation?

"Well, what is it?"

"I'm handing the phone to Jace."

*Jace? Why is Jace there?*

"Reba, long time no hear."

"Well, hi."

"So, you need some wheels?"

"Yeah. My mom refuses to go back to Road's End. Grandma has to return to the ranch. And renting a car is too expensive for me right now."

"Perfect. Go get my '55 Chevy. I need it like yesterday but can't get away right now. After you go see Seth, hightail it to Santa Dominga. I'll explain everything when you get here."

Reba's ears began to buzz. She thought she hadn't heard right. "What did you say?"

"My car is in a warehouse nearby."

"I know that."

"If you can get there, you can drive it. But there's a catch. You must head south to Vegas and then over to the California coast to deliver my car."

Ginny yelled into the receiver. "Do it, Reba. Come be my buddy for a few days."

Jace chimed in again. "I'll pay for your flight home. It's perfect. It will hardly take you a minute longer."

*A minute longer than what?*

Not exactly perfect. However, mention of Jace's Chevy jolted her to the core. How uncanny. "Jace, are you sure you won't mind my driving your special car?"

"Got no choice. But be extra careful. I have a buyer who made a generous offer."

"Why sell it before you enjoy it at least a little?"

"I'll explain later."

"Thanks Jace. Your offer definitely solves one problem." And complicates another. Now she had to talk her mom into going to California. And then to Road's End.

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Pearl drove to Fernley and turned south on Highway 50 to Fallon. The three women spoke little, each lost in their own musings. They soon passed the area where Reba nearly got caught in a flash flood with Johnny Poe and met Egan Toms, a Paiute lawyer from Phoenix vacationing on his family's land. She couldn't see the hovel of a rundown cabin he used from the road. It was here she first heard the name "Wild Horse Hanna" and started the hunt to find her mother. And it was where she first spotted the gold and turquoise ring on Egan Toms' finger, with similar design to the necklace Seth gave her.

Reba rubbed her rib where the wood case in her bag banged against her. This was as good a time as any to mention it.

Reba glanced at Grandma Pearl intent on the road and rear view mirror. She took a deep breath. "Mom, you know Seth gave me the beautiful squash blossom necklace that belonged to Maidie. But I know they really wanted to give it to you. It's really yours. You should have it." She reached for her purse.

Hanna crooked her elbow, palm open. "Please, you keep it. I don't want it. I've got no use for it."

"But let me explain."

"No!"

Reba felt slapped in the face. What *did* her mom want? And what should she herself do with the necklace the rest of the trip? Bringing it was such a stupid idea. It was so in the way. She would give it to Grandma Pearl to take home. It belonged in a bank vault.

Grandma Pearl shot her a stern, don't-push-it look. Not needed. Reba longed to get away. She wanted to let go with a banshee scream or a crying jag. Or both.

They kept riding in sulky silence and soon coursed by Walker River Paiute Reservation and rolled along Walker River. Lumps of deep charcoal in the sky tempered to stony gray. Thunder roared like a far, distant mountain lion. They finally approached the massive junk yard otherwise known as

Oliver's Fire Sales & Salvage. Assorted wrecked cars, crushers, junkers, as well as hordes of mice and other critters scattered the field. One man's treasure is another man's trash came to mind.

They parked and piled out of the Carryall, stretched their legs, and headed to the warehouse building crammed with items of all sorts. Once inside, they soon sighted the '55 Chevy convertible with cobalt blue bottom, white top, and red interior.

Hanna Jo whistled. "What a beauty. We're going to ride in that?"

"Yeah, if I can convince Oliver we've been given permission to take it." Reba ran her hand along the fancy grille and some of the chrome.

"Did I hear my name?" A man in fedora felt hat with wide brim and indented crown sauntered over, his arms wide and thick like oars.

Reba held out her hand and wished she hadn't. She winced as he squeezed with a crunch. "I'm a friend of Jace McKane's. We came to pick up his car."

"Ah, yes. He told me you were coming and he described you pretty well. In fact, in great detail ... except he said you had the straightest red hair and usually pulled back in a ponytail. Yours looks curly."

Her face tinged with heat. She reached up and twisted a strand of Regal Red.

"She's been to the beauty parlor since Jace last saw her," Pearl stated.

"And so have you." Reba patted Pearl's perky, short 'do.

"Let me tell you, this Bel Air is more than a beauty," Oliver told them. "Comfy to ride and handles well." He pulled a chamois cloth tucked on a shelf and swiped a smudge near the jet ornament and shined the hood. "However, you'll have to be careful. Very poor gas mileage." He handed Reba a pair of slim silver metal GM keys with bell-shaped hole.

"I think I need practice for a car like this." That she had to keep in pristine condition. "I'm not even sure I could back out of here."

"I'll do that for you. Take a roll down the frontage road until you get used to it."

"Thanks, Oliver." She began to feel the pressure. All those rough hours ahead on desert roads with potential for sandstorms, rocks splattered from passing vehicles. Or hitting a critter. She sure wished she had her pickup!

The three Cahill women strolled to the Carryall. The time had come to part. For how long, anyone's guess.

"One last chance to change your mind, Hanna Jo." Pearl stood tall and firm, feigning confidence, but defeat tinged her tone.

Reba ached for her as the desert sky hung heavy over them. She felt road worn already, wishing they were all headed north to Road's End. Sadness wrote volumes in the lines of the elder woman's face. When Hanna Jo shook her head, Pearl slipped into her rig and threw a kiss to the air.

Reba instantly regretted not giving her grandmother a farewell hug when she had the chance. She reached through the open window to tug Pearl's arm. "I'll miss you," she whispered.

Pearl's eyes misted. "I'll miss you too." She peered at Hanna Jo who hung back as though trying to avoid even the air kiss and the emotion of parting. She exhaled. "Both of you." Then she added, "Being unhappy can become a habit if you're not careful."

As Grandma Pearl drove away, Reba recoiled from the abrupt realization that a mother and daughter bond formed such a small blip in Hanna Jo's universe. Did relationships of any sort matter to her? And now the one person who might possibly provide a connector between them headed north toward Road's End, taking a piece of Reba with her. A diminished Reba must cope with a prickly mother she barely knew, tied to her by a legal document. All Reba could think

about was the ranch, the history and heritage, and how much she wanted to be going back right now. She belonged there.

Once long ago she instigated a sit-down strike in her grandma's root cellar at seven-years-old because she didn't want to be a cowgirl. But that was then. Now the ranch was her life, her only life.

Charcoal clouds formed over their heads and the desert landscape. A few drops spilled from the sky. As they tossed their bags in the back seat of the Chevy, Reba realized she forgot to give the squash blossom necklace into the safekeeping of her grandmother. She inwardly groaned as she glided onto red upholstery with tuck and rolled back. Fuzzy, mottled black and white dice hung from the rear-view mirror. Shiny knobs marked lights, windshield wipers, radio, lighter. She turned the key in the ignition and geared into Drive. The car jumped forward. She punched the brake. Another jump and brake.

"Give it the throttle. And lock your door." Hanna Jo slipped on a seat belt.

"Why?"

"Because there's a guy creeping up to the car on your side."

Reba peered around. Behind her a man and dog sprawled in the dirt. Even with hair color change, he had the same build and the same dog. Now, she was sure of it. They were being followed.

She veered onto the highway and within seconds sped to sixty miles per hour. She kept her attention both ahead and on the rear view. "We'll flag down the first police car we see."

"No! No police." Her white-faced mother clutched at her arm. "They'll send me back to that place."

“But there’s a potential crazy guy out there. He could be dangerous to us or others.”

“Okay. Next chance we get, we call and make a report. But make it anonymous. Don’t mention my name. Or yours.”



Janet Chester Bly is the widow of Christy Award winning western author Stephen Bly. Together they published 120 fiction and nonfiction books for adults and kids. Janet and their three sons finished Stephen’s last novel, *Stuart Brannon’s Final Shot*, a Selah Award Finalist.

Down Squash Blossom Road is Book 2 in the Reba Cahill contemporary western mystery series.

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Dawn L. Ailor

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