



Wind in the Wires

JANET CHESTER BLY

**A TRAILS OF REBA CAHILL NOVEL
BOOK 1**

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*He went through the dry, wild desert,
waving his wild tail, and walking by his wild lone.
But he never told anybody.
Rudyard Kipling*

*Therefore I am now going to allure her;
I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her.
Hosea 2:14 NIV*

Chapter One

May 1991, Road's End, Idaho

She must find the runaway heifer. And get to Maidie's funeral on time.

Reba Mae Cahill urged her black quarter horse to trudge through the spring green, muddy terrain. Recent rains and snowmelt gummed the pine-dotted, wild flower sprayed high mountain prairie. Puddles and small ponds, tall grass and shadows made search tedious. But Johnny Poe stalled.

"Come on, boy. Don said he saw her near here. Got to find that cow before Champ Runcie does. And return home quick."

They rode the moss-covered wood post and barbed wire fence line as she checked the steel stays. A strong whoosh of wind made a ringing sound in the wires. She scanned the long length of Runcie Ranch fencing. Her glance caught at a break in the fence next to stacked tires filled with large rocks supposed to hold the fence in place. Certainly enough space for a moon-eyed, red bovine stray to escape. She peered closer and spied a cut at all five lines, now splayed on the ground. Why would anyone do that?

She slid down from Johnny Poe, pulled on leather gloves from her saddlebag, and eased the wire out of the way. A long strand was missing.

A quick image of a testy Champ flashed before her. Not the first time, she wished the Runcie and Cahill Ranches didn't butt against each other, with so many borders in common. Especially when one side determined not to be too neighborly. "Women, especially Cahill women, don't have what it takes to manage a ranch like theirs on their own," she could hear Champ say.

Reba backed the horse up to get him prepped to ease through the opening. He balked, as she knew he would. She flicked the reins. His ears flayed back. He reared and pawed the air. Reba hit the muddy pasture ground hard on her rear. Pain shot through as she scrambled to her feet and reached for the saddle. She glided on the old leather before he could bolt and cooed at him. "Come on, Johnny Poe, it's going to be alright. Please try. A step at a time."

She imagined what must loom in his mind. Memories of his mother dying, gashed and twisted from withers to poll in a barbed wire fence. Found as a colt by her side. His fear had a firm basis. She patted his neck. "We've got to cross over. We can do this. We have to do this. And now."

Johnny Poe snorted and dropped his head as if he'd surrendered to her command, but she knew better. Reba nudged him to a spot a few feet from the fence. "It's okay. Don't be afraid. That wire's not going to hurt you. I'll take care of you."

The horse breathed out, flaring his nostrils, and turned to her like he understood. "Go, boy." He ambled forward. "Good boy."

They crossed a dirt roadway that passed through both pine forest and prairie wheat fields. She heard moos and spied the Cahill Ranch heifer stuck halfway down a Runcie Ranch incline. As they closed in, Reba noticed the cow breathing heavy, head down. Like she was in hard labor.

In May? Surely you wouldn't do this to me.

Not the time of year when Cahill bovine delivered their calves. In October and February, Reba and her grandmother spent most of their days in the stable nursery. Out here she had no disinfectant. No Vaseline. No cozy shed. Only a weedy, scratchy mud hole for a stable. Another reason she couldn't do this ranch by herself.

I can't oversee it all. A first-time, two-year-old mama? An out-of-season pregnancy? The worst kind of birth.

Just like mine?

White circles framed the cow's bulging eyes and dark pools reflected fear and pain. A coyote howled from the draw, heightening the cow's quick, frantic pants as she attempted to raise up. Pain more than fear slit her dark, round eyes. The sound of water rushing over rocks sent Reba's gaze beyond the heifer to Broken Arrow Creek. If the crazed expectant mother charged for that water, she'd drown her newborn the moment it delivered. Poison ivy and a crisscross of debris and brush booby-trapped the slope and creek bank.

How much worse could this situation get? Reba glanced at her watch. "I've got to contact Grandma. I'm not going to get to the funeral on time."

Reba slid off her horse, dropped his reins to the ground, and reached into the saddlebag. She grabbed a walkie-talkie, pulled up the antenna, and pushed the talk button. "Grandma? Reba here. Got some trouble. Over and out." She released the button and stuck the portable radio closer to her ear to detect the hiss of static or her grandmother's voice. She heard neither. She shook the handheld device and tried again. No connection. She slapped it back into the bag and tried hard not to blurt out the words she was thinking.

She scowled at both the frenzied heifer and her skittish horse. She tied a rope to Johnny Poe's saddle horn and worked her way with care through the weeds and mud down to the cow. Times like this, she missed Grandma Pearl something fierce. The past year, she wasn't strong enough to do much of the physical work, what with her knees or hip buckling whenever she overdid. But she could provide advice and a calming influence. They partnered well together even now since they lost Grandpa Cahill.

"The Dynamic Dudettes," half-brother Michael called them.

Reba remembered her grandmother brag, "My granddaughter can wrangle cows and break horses as good or better than I can."

And Reba loved the freedom and fulfillment of hardy outdoor work. But Reba began to realize the last few months Cahill Ranch may be too much for one woman to work mostly alone. A full-time ranch hand would help. Or a rancher husband. Someone who would understand the connection to family land and to this lifestyle. And loved her like crazy. That would work.

When Michael Cahill showed up three years before and right after Grandpa Cahill's funeral, claiming to be Reba's younger half-brother, she'd hoped he might take on some ranch duties. But he was more interested in blondes, painting, and drums. He wanted to be an artist. Or a drummer for a rock band.

"Ranching is lonely work. Cows don't have souls. You can see it in their eyes," he told her.

Kneeling in the pungent weeds, Reba stroked the heifer's head and down the magenta coat. She slowly reached inside. One tiny hoof was hung up. The mama's tight muscles fought against her intrusion.

Like last spring. A calf died before Reba could pull it. She had to cut out the stillborn animal, piece by bloody piece.

Please, God, not again.

Clouds covered the sun, graying the landscape, and a breeze kicked up. Reba had sweaty palms and shivered at the same time, as the cow pushed. Reba grabbed the calf's feet, and tugged as hard as she could. The heifer let out a bellow like a long, low train whistle. They both gave a heave and the dazed calf fell into the muck. A black Angus calf born to a white-faced red mama. The unexpected timing made sense. The heifer had been courted by a Runcie Ranch bull. There would be words over this. On both sides.

She heard a rattle up on the road and an engine idle. She jerked around, half-expecting stern Champ Runcie to stand on top, bawling out accusations about the broken fence and trespass. She waited a moment, a hitch in her stomach, trying to think of what to say. Soon a male figure appeared.

Reba shook with relief. "Don! I'm so glad to see you."

"Have you called your grandma?"

"I tried to. No luck."

"Hold on. I'll be right back. There's better reception down the road apiece. I know she'll be frantic to know where you are."

"Thank you so much."

He turned and she heard the pickup drive away.

Widower Don Runcie, Champ's son, telephoned earlier to warn her of the errant heifer on their property. Her heart warmed at his concern that provided a chance to rescue the cow before Champ discovered it. This proved as much as anything his feelings for her. Perhaps their two recent dates had softened him a bit to her side of the Runcie-Cahill feud. However, she wondered what Champ thought of them as a twosome.

Her grandmother certainly hadn't minced her disapproval. "He's old enough to be your father," Pearl chided.

"We went to a movie and danced some at the Grange Hall. That's all." And he's a rancher.

"Almost every dance. Everyone in town is talking."

"Is that what you're worried about?"

Grandma pursed her lips tight like she was afraid to say too much. "You can do better than that," she concluded.

Not likely in Road's End, population 400. She'd certainly looked the field of possible contenders over many times from her cowgirl perch. Those rare few bachelors near her age were either divorced and in custody fights or not the ranch work type. Like the McKane brothers who recently moved from California. Jace and Norden bought and ran The Outfitters Shop as a kind of hobby, best she could tell. Jace made his money in software programs and wanted to play at wilderness living. Not her type at all.

"I want a guy to help run our ranch," Reba confided to Pearl and her best friend, Ginny George. Dependable. Faithful. Not with his career focus and dreams elsewhere. "And he cannot be the type to abandon me." Or our children. "He will be fully committed and sold out to the rancher lifestyle. Just like Grandpa Cahill." Didn't Don fit that description? A plus on her private Dating Don List.

She thought she had that with Tim Runcie, who was Don's son and her high school sweetheart. At least, she thought so. What a perfect pairing. Everyone seemed to agree. Except, as it turned out, her best friend Sue Anne Whitlow.

She took off her denim jacket, yanked it inside out and wiped herself and the wet clump of calf legs with the wool lining. She stuck a finger in and cleared the newborn's throat and mouth and shoved the baby bundle against the cow's nose. Then the heifer's mothering light flipped on. She mooed and rough-tongued her babe clean.

Reba tensed, mesmerized, as she often did at similar scenes. A hazy picture of her mom popped in her mind. Shaggy, long sable brown and streaked blond hair. Teasing smile. Circling a barrel on a buckskin horse at a rodeo. She'd seen a few photos in a scrapbook and had a framed one tucked face down in her bottom dresser drawer, but couldn't scrounge up live memories of her own. Abandoned at the Cahill Ranch at age three left her with the pain of an "I am not important...I am not valued" message.

She tried hard to avoid the questions that stole in. Did her mother know about Maidie's death? Will she show up at the funeral? Grandma Pearl revealed how her mother Hanna Jo and Maidie grew close over the years. Even Reba spent a lot of time at Maidie's house. Pearl told stories of the times Hanna Jo tended to Maidie during some of her sick spells. As Reba did with her guitar playing.

"Your mother showed care-giving skills in her early teens," Grandma said. "I thought sure she'd become a nurse."

She sure hadn't cared enough to look after Reba. How could her mom run away from her family and duty? The thought erupted unbidden like a dark, unprotected wound.

And why would she come to the funeral today? She hadn't made an appearance at Grandpa Cahill's service, her own father. She looked again at her watch. "I may not make it to Maidie's either. Where is Don? He arrived like the cavalry and disappeared like Custer."

Reba tried to direct the calf to its mother's udders. But it showed no interest in nursing. "Come on, little one. You've got to eat. Aren't you hungry after all that squeezin' out of your mama?" She tried again and again without success.

The newborn quivered. Reba wrapped her jacket around it, the cleaner side against its skin. Then she stood and faced the mama cow. "Recovery time is over," she hollered. "You have a hill to climb."

The heifer groaned to her feet and took a few steps. Reba grabbed the end of the rope she'd tied onto Johnny Poe's saddle horn and looped it around the new mother's neck. When she jerked on it, Johnny Poe backed up and tugged it taut.

The sound of an engine pierced the mountain air. She peered at the front end of Don's pickup on the ridge above, tires splaying mud, too close to the horse.

"Watch out," Reba yelled.

Johnny Poe reared and raised so high the rope yanked and twitched free. Reba lunged for the cow as she tumbled and scooted into the bulging river. "No!" she screamed, as she bound after her. "You can't drown. Help, Don, please help!" Panic stretched across her chest and froze somewhere in her lungs. "Help," she rasped again, barely above a whisper. She had to save that mama cow.

She splashed into the creek, boots and all, and reached for the floating rope, the line to life. Everything in her rebelled against the possibility a creature who had just gone through the agony of birth to a sickly, needy babe would now drown without a chance to care for the little one. After a slippery plunge beneath the surface, Reba grabbed traction with her boots on the bottom. The heifer's head burst above water and she bellowed in distress.

Reba raced to the bank, keeping her eyes on the cow's current-drifting pace. She could hear the calf blurt a weak cry. She twisted to see him try to get on his feet. That's good.

After another dip, Reba managed to pull the free end of the rope out of the water and tugged as hard as she could. In a flash, strong arms encased her with warmth and comfort and pulled her and the rope to the bank. She didn't resist the protection and assistance offered. With Don at her side and some hefty repeated yanks, the mother lumbered toward them and collapsed a few yards away. Reba trembled both inward and outward in a confusion of emotions. Relief over the heifer. Not wanting to leave the cocoon of Don's arms.

"Thanks so very much." Reba dropped, panting, as her teeth chattered.

"Don't thank me too much. Your horse escaped."

"Why didn't you go after him?"

"He was okay and you weren't. Besides, I don't think that horse likes me much. I've never been able to get near him without the threat of a vicious kick. My dad too. And Tim. He's got a thing against Runcies, I guess."

Is that a sign? The former warm feelings of camaraderie, teamwork, and maybe something more turned to a chill. "Do you know where he's headed?"

"Toward Coyote Canyon, looked like to me."

"I guess I'll chase him later." Reba tried not to show her dismay. She focused on getting to the funeral. "Help me get these two out of here."

He handed her a canteen. "That I can do. Never been a downed cow I couldn't get up." He lifted his head. "Even up a hill."

She filled the canteen at the creek. "I'll carry the calf."

"No, you won't. Get up there and I'll bring him to you."

Reba stiffened at the command. He sounded and looked a lot like Champ in that moment. But when Reba started to protest, her alarm increased for the listless, puny babe splayed on the ground. She gently rubbed drops of water on its mouth as its head drooped.

Don draped the limpid calf across his shoulders and stumped up the incline while Reba followed. A raging war grew inside her. Should she have insisted on carrying the calf herself? Was Don going to claim ownership of the calf, on behalf of Runcie Ranch? She was reminded again how nice it would be to have a capable man to come alongside. She looked ahead and admired his muscular, confident stride.

Don would make someone a good rancher husband, as he already had once with schoolteacher Marge Runcie. *Reba Runcie, that has a ring to it.* She imagined him at her side, plowing the fallow Cahill ground back into wheat fields or buying more cattle at auctions.

Reba cradled the calf and watched from the top as Don worked to nudge the downed bovine, all one thousand immovable pounds of her, to get up and go. If they had more time and materials available, they could manufacture a primitive sling to drag and hoist the heifer. "How inconsiderate of your Mama to go down at the bottom of a hill," she told the calf.

"Stop your muttering up there and give me some ideas," Don shouted.

So much for romantic fantasies. "Try to push her."

"She's too fat. What do you feed these cows of yours?"

Road's End pasture, same as you. "Then scare her."

Don stood straight and howled like a coyote. The heifer's eyes got wild, but she didn't move. He kept howling.

Reba didn't know whether to be impressed or amused. She craned around the calf to look at her watch. She prayed for God and his angels to move that cow, though she knew the heifer would get up when she was good and ready, and not before. "Try yanking her tail. Come on, we've got to go."

Don pinched her ear and pulled back hard on her tail three separate times. Just when they presumed this failed too, she heaved her hulk of a self off the ground as though it were no big deal and moseyed up the hill. Reba set the calf down in hopes he and the mama would connect. He bawled something pitiful and attempted a wobble on three legs. Reba scooped the critter into her arms again and swabbed its lips with water drops. Its eyes closed, legs hung limp, and ears drooped. "This calf is not well. He needs a warm tub bath."

It took both of them to corral the heifer through the barbed fence at the broken line. She and Don pulled back the spliced pieces as best they could.

"You do notice this has been cut," Reba remarked.

"Did you do it? Or your grandmother?"

"Of course not. That's ridiculous. Why did you say that?"

"Because Dad will ask me. This part of the fencing is closest to your ranch."

"But we have no possible motive." Reba shook against the sharp stab of accusation and the discomfort of confusion. *What is going on?*

As the heifer headed into Cahill Ranch pasture, Reba tucked the calf on the front bench seat of Don's pickup and helped him repair the fence. They crawled into the truck with muddy boots, stained jeans, and torn shirts.

"If we go like we are, we'll be only a few minutes late." Reba tried to imagine her grandmother's reaction to her showing up at Maidie's service looking like

something the pigs drug to the pen. They might be backwoods ranch folks, but Pearl Cahill insisted on looking cleaned up at social events.

"You look like a drowned fox. A red one, of course. A very cute one."

"Are you flirting with me?"

He grinned, his rugged face relaxed. "Just stating an obvious fact."

Reba scooted the jacket wrapped calf between them. "I had a clean rag in my saddlebag. Have you got anything like that in here?"

"Open the glove compartment."

She pulled out a large, folded piece of white cotton.

"An old t-shirt of Tim's. Do what you can. I'm sure he won't mind."

But I will. She smelled Lava soap and Tide detergent and something else not so clean, but pleasant. She didn't know how she could explain it was impossible to use Tim's shirt, to rub it against her skin. Tim Runcie, a classmate, her first and only real boyfriend. The guy who married her best girlfriend, Sue Anne Whitlow. And a reminder of at least one awkward part of dating Don.

The clouds cleared and a bright sunbeam sprayed through the scattered Douglas fir and ponderosa pines. "Thanks, but that's okay. Just get me home quick. This calf has to be fed."

The truck bumped over the three miles of unpaved road to the Cahill homestead as Reba held on tight to the calf and the truck door. They rolled past charred remnants of a cabin, struck by lightning and burned to the ground. A wooden water tower for an old logging camp at the end of a former railroad spur sagged and leaned so far as though a gentle push would topple it.

A bevy of twenty quails scurried across the road in front of them. They slowed and passed a guy on the roadside in pullover shirt, Bermuda shorts, and deck shoes changing a flat tire on a brand new '91 silver Volvo.

Don rolled down his window.

"Don't stop," Reba said. "We don't have time."

The man turned around and Reba recognized Jace McKane, one of their newest citizens. In his thirties with blond boyish good looks, he looked nothing like his dark and ruddy younger brother, Norden. "Thanks, Mr. Runcie. I'm doing fine. I'm real used to this."

Mr. Runcie? Even Don's dad was called Champ by everyone.

They drove on, in sight of the Cahill driveway turnoff.

"I've seen him tinkering with his car before. Must be a lemon," Don said.

"I hear he's got plenty of money. Why doesn't he just buy a different car?"

"Must be attached to that one."

As they turned right onto Stroud Ranch Road and another right onto the Cahill driveway, Reba leaned over the calf. "Oh, dear."

"What's the matter?"

Reba checked her charge for signs of revival. At her touch, a muscle moved and he slit open one eye. She dabbed him with water again. "I'm glad we're almost there."

They passed Grandpa Cahill's sprawling mutant Camperdown Elm.

Reba caught sight of a red Jaguar parked behind the bunkhouse. *Who in the world did that belong to?*

Reba hugged the calf close as she slipped out of the cab. Tied to the front porch, Paunch and Aussie, Grandma Pearl's Blue Heelers, eyed them with disinterest. Scat the long-haired calico cat crouched nearby, ever watching, always alert.

Don gestured at her. "I'm going to head home and clean up. If I miss the main service, I'll see you at the graveside later."

"Oh, wait. Here's your canteen."

"Keep it. I'll get it later." He grinned. "Good excuse to see you again." He backed down the driveway.

As Reba eased up the steps in front of the house, Pearl rushed over. Salt-and-pepper hair pulled back in a twist, lips touched with soft pink, dressed in black denim western cut pantsuit and her Sunday best Nochona black leather boots. And eyes squinted in worry. "Reba, you okay?"

"Besides being covered with mud and cow blood, just fine."

Pearl checked the calf. "Get him on a bottle immediately."

"He wouldn't nurse."

"The funeral's running a bit late anyway. I'll do what I can. You get yourself decent." The calf's ears drooped when she picked him up.

Reba knew that look of her grandmother's, steely resignation. "You don't think he's going to make it, do you?"

"The good news is, the vet is here for the funeral. He'll get Dr. Whey's immediate attention." Pearl wheeled around and called out to the first person she saw. "Joe! Joe Bosch, go to the barn and get Olga Whey. Send her here to the house. Emergency calf care needed."

Joe Bosch, Runcie ranch hand, arrived for the service looking stiff and rigid with brown hair slicked down, dressed in navy blue suit, navy striped tie and matching kerchief-stuffed pocket. He tipped his hat at Grandma Pearl and muttered a polite, "Yes, Ma'am."

As he sprinted to the barn, Reba swallowed and tried to smile. "The heifer's safely in our pasture and... Johnny Poe ran away." Reba couldn't interpret her grandmother's response beyond an expected frown. At least she had given her the full report.

She headed for her bedroom and stopped when she heard strains of Bette Midler singing "Wind Beneath My Wings" from the guest room. She stepped closer and wafts of a scent like musk and mulberry misted the hall.

The door from the bathroom at the hall's end opened wide and Pearl appeared. "I forgot to tell you Ginny arrived from California."

"My Ginny? Ginny George Nicoli?"

Pearl nodded.

The music stopped at "I can fly higher than an eagle" when she knocked. With a swish of shoulder-length, corkscrew dark curls and a sweep of black and purple faille, out popped the gal with skin like she'd rubbed it in walnut oil and buffed it to a gloss. She swept up Reba and swung her around. "Surprise! So good to see you, Reba Mae."

"Watch out. I'll mess you all up."

"Don't worry. I brought lots of changes."

"I believe that, but I can't believe you're here." Reba felt as elated as when she'd given up finding elk on a season's last trip she stumbled onto a large herd. "You didn't mention a word about coming to Idaho on our last phone call." Reba thought hard. "Did you?"

"No, it was a last-minute decision. I decided to give myself some time off, the benefits of working for a family business. Good grief, girl, you look like sunburned spit."

"I've been birthing a calf." Reba peered down the hall at the bathroom and closed door. "The red Jaguar. Is that yours?"

"Yep. I drove twenty hours straight."

"You must be beyond exhausted."

"I'll catch up later. I had to be here for Seth and Maidie. And you. And there were other reasons." She squeezed a sad face. "I still can't fathom she's gone. She and Seth have been like fixtures here, like the Hanging Tree, and Champ and your grandma. I can't imagine Road's End without her."

I'd like to see Road's End without Champ. "Yes, they are Road's End. Just like Grandpa was too." A sudden depression gripped Reba. Life and love so fleeting. And all will die.

But Ginny nudged her. "Now, hurry. We've got to get you to the barn on time."

"Too late. We're already fifteen minutes overdue."

"We've been given another fifteen minute extension, by order of Pearl Cahill, the head honcho around here."

"Unless Champ Runcie's on the premises."

"Oh, he is. He and your grandma were exchanging terse words when I arrived. Something to do with his part in the service."

Please, Champ, leave us alone for once. "Grandma suspects he's going to try political posturing at the funeral. She's been firm with him this service is about Maidie and nothing else."

"Like what would he do?"

"Oh, give a stump speech for his re-election as mayor, something like that." Anything to mix it up and mess it up for Pearl and Reba. But, why bother? He had no opponents. He was a shoo-in.

Dr. Olga Whey burst into the house in navy polyester and pumps, carrying a black medical bag, straight brunette hair flowing. Reba pointed her to the bathroom. "I don't think I'm going to get a bath or shower," she informed Ginny as Dr. Whey squeezed by.

"Go out in the backyard and I'll hose you down like we did as kids."

"Okay, but this time with my clothes on."

"And then they come off." She opened a closet door in the guest room. A half dozen outfits hung there that Reba presumed as very expensive. Charcoal gray silky pajamas, a rose pink pantsuit and teal green caftan scattered across the bed.

"You know we don't wear the same size."

"But one of my scarves or jewelry will brighten up whatever little thing you put on."

"And you know I rarely wear jewelry."
Ginny sighed. "How did we ever become best buds?"

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Reba snickered as she peered into her bedroom mirror at the tangle of pine needles and cobwebs in her auburn hair. Bloody dung streaked her face. No wonder you're still single at age twenty-five.

After a quick backyard hose shower, she changed into a blousy, v-neck black pullover dress and black flats. She blow-dried her straight hair and shook it out.

Pearl Cahill stomped down the hall. "Olga's going to stay with the calf, bless her heart. She gave him electrolytes and Sulpha pills. All we can do is wait and pray. I'm going to the barn."

Reba peeked in on the calf sprawled in the footed tub. At least his eyes were open. "I'm sorry you have to miss the service. Thank you so much."

Dr. Whey shrugged. "It's what I do."

Reba knocked and scooted the guest room door open. Ginny had changed into a brown suede skirt with brown velvet blazer and brown heels with crisscross straps. "The hug stained my black. This will have to do." She looked Reba over and pulled button pearl earrings, a single-strand pearl necklace and a black and cream scarf from her suitcase. "Simple and classy. You'll look great. And it's nothing garish, so don't fuss at me."

Reba smiled. "I wouldn't think of it. Put them on. Dress me up like a doll, just like you used to."

Ginny snapped the necklace and earrings on and draped the scarf straight without a tie.

Reba touched her ears and the pearls. "I'm so glad you're here."

Ginny admired her touches with a twirl around her. "You're good. Let's go!"

Reba picked up her guitar case as she and Ginny hiked the half-mile to the barn. "You going to sing?"

"Grandma insisted. I often sang for Maidie when she had one of her spells. Seemed to calm her down. Do you ever get a chance to play your harp?"

"Not really. I've got it in storage. Takes up too much room in our apartment. Seth must feel so alone without Maidie, after all these years taking care of her. Such dedication for his special needs niece."

"Grandma and I will look in on him as often as we can. He's going to speak at the service and he's real nervous. I promised to provide him support."

"We still have the toys Seth carved for me and my brothers back when we lived in Road's End."

"Most everyone in town has something Seth made for them." They passed Seth Stroud's Ford Model T., and assorted pickups, SUVs, and motorcycles cluttered around the Cahill Ranch pasture. Reba pushed into the barn and gasped.

## Chapter Two

A huge crowd of mourners chatted in hushed, reverent tones. The death of Maidie Fortress crammed hundreds of Road's End residents in the barn that also served as the town's only church sanctuary. Horse flies buzzed the intruders like bombardiers on a mission. High voltage lights overhead shone from naked bulbs. Folding chairs borrowed from homes and businesses crammed into rows of fours with aisles. Instead of the usual collapsible metal music stand for a pulpit, Lloyd Younger stained and varnished a rustic podium and platform made from barn boards. Two large wicker stands of purple and white iris decorated each side of the platform.

Reba waved at brother Michael and did a quick study of his new bleached blonde. Pretty as usual. Good posture. Friendly smile. Reba noticed Ginny eyeing the gal as well and they exchanged a private glance. Where did he find so many different girlfriends in this backwoods region? Reba found the pickings slim.

More than the usual Sunday morning congregation of twenty-five gathered, even though that meant pressed cotton western shirts, polished boots, and stiff Wranglers. And in spite of the fact the past couple decades reclusive Maidie mainly bunkered in her cabin unless she ventured out to her garden. Between Polly Eng and Maidie Fortress, they cultivated spectacular vegetable and flower gardens.

"Road's End could sell tickets for tourists to see them," Cicely Bowers suggested more than once when the city park needed renovation.

Maidie did get out when Seth cranked up his Model T to do their errands and shopping and on occasion he took Maidie for rides in the country. Seth waved at everyone, but shy and withdrawn Maidie rarely did. However, sometimes a flute solo could be heard soaring from her cabin balcony. A number from *Swan Lake* or *Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy*.

Reba sighted Seth leaning against Pearl, his bent shoulders and wrinkled face confirming his ninety-one years.

Each of the town's folk had his or her way of showing respect for the loss of one of their own, as much for Seth as for Maidie.

Lisl Monte flew the post office flag at half-mast.

Tucker Paddy sobered up for three days in a row.

Beatrice Mathwig, one of the hotel manager widow triplets, took to having one of her cranky fits and got the whole town cleaned with mowed lawns and junk piles hauled away.

And the town kids tied the Hanging Tree with lavender ribbons to contrast with frayed yellow satin bows displayed in honor of Gulf War soldiers, as though they hadn't learned the war was over and the heroes had come home.

But the service still hadn't begun. So Champ running for his tenth term as mayor shook everyone's hand as they entered and again after everyone sat down. Ushers Lloyd Younger and Franklin Fraley scurried around for extra seating for eight members of the Thomas Hawk family of the Nez Perce tribe and

guided a few last stragglers like Jace and Norden McKane into random empty chairs.

"I'll go sit next to one of those gentlemen," Ginny whispered. "I know you need to be on the platform with Seth and your grandma."

Before Reba could object, Ginny whisked a folded chair that leaned against a barn wall and set it up in an aisle beside Jace. He had traded his usual Bermuda shorts for tan slacks with an open yellow striped long-sleeved shirt and no tie. Of all the people in this crowded barn she could have chosen to sit by, Reba wondered why that one? He was new in town. She didn't even know him.

Reba worked her way to the platform as she continued to survey the crowd. She brightened at the sight of her grandparents' long-time friend, mine investor and bachelor Vincent Quaid of Boise. He was the grandpa she lost, the dad she never knew. Sometimes they didn't need to talk. They could communicate without words. His puckered smile and nod contained sincere sympathy for their loss.

Next to him, Cicely Bowers from Seattle who ran a bed and breakfast in her home, the only woman wearing a hat and a big, floppy black and yellow one. A woman older than Reba and with redder hair in a black beret leaned into Cicely. Trish, the visiting niece with the bumpy past.

Reba half-expected to see Champ's two eldest sons, Richard and Randall. They and brother Don didn't resemble each other much except for the tendency to reddish highlights in their dark brown hair, like Champ had in his younger years. Prodigals to Champ because they left the ranch, they were successful Coeur d'Alene businessmen to everyone else.

Don who managed to arrive spiffed up in a black sport coat sat next to his grandkids, three-year-old William and Kaitlyn, six, looking like a lost puppy. Grandma Pearl started the barn church soon after his wife's funeral. She imagined Marge beside Don, resolute and resigned, with her thick brunette hair in short waves and ready smile. A Spokane city girl who fit into Road's End as the elementary schoolteacher, her students adored her, including Reba and Ginny back in their elementary days.

How could Reba possibly take her place? How could she bear having Champ for a father-in-law? And Tim as a stepson? *How weird is that?* Reba noted three minuses on her mental Dating Don List.

She stole a peek at Tim. He whispered something in his wife's ear. Sue Ann flinched, scowled, and then smiled. Reba admired her new hairdo. Long blond hair cut in a stylish, mature, chiseled upsweep. Made her look old enough to be a mother.

Reba finally made it to the platform and stepped up. Pearl directed her to sit next to Seth. She hugged the old man and scooted her guitar under her chair. Pearl sat on the other side of her and then Champ.

Spruced up with pine cologne and gelled hair, Tucker Paddy began the service by playing a medley of heaven-as-home hymns with his acoustic guitar. He'd been asked by Seth to do the honors because Maidie considered him one of her few friends. He'd come to visit Seth with his guitar and the three of them

would jam together. At the conclusion, he mumbled to Reba, "Is Hanna Jo coming?"

Reba shrugged. Her mom never showed for any event in over twenty years, and folks still thought she should be part of things. Even Don asked the same thing.

Seth joined Tucker's guitar with his fiddle for a duet of "I'll Fly Away." The aging marks of years seemed to melt as the elderly man energized the bow. His arthritic fingers struck and stroked the strings with apparent ease.

Reba affirmed Seth with a nod and smile. Amazing fiddle player at ninety-one. And he made that violin himself from cedar. *I wonder if he'd make me a guitar.* What a treasure that would be.

After Tucker slumped down on the platform, his legs hanging over the edge, the four seated themselves on the one portable pew at front stage: Pearl, Champ, Reba, and Seth. Many in the audience waved paper programs like fans. Reba rubbed Seth's arm as he began to shake.

"Are you okay?" Reba whispered.

"Yeah. I think I forget to eat today. Feelin' a bit weak."

Reba handed him some water.

Pearl marched to the podium. Her tough, leathery skin denoted a woman with strength who'd worked outdoors all her life, yet she wiped tears as she mentioned Maidie's name. Her firm, deep voice carried to every corner of the barn as she read from Psalms and Thessalonians.

Then Champ rose, tugged at his American flag bolo tie, and stomped forward. With cheek lines tight on his grim face, the sort that is stingy with smiles, and his farm-hardened body rigid, he pulled a sheet of paper from a coat pocket. He snapped open a pair of reading glasses to read the following obituary from the Bitterroot County Press:

*Maidie Fortress was born November 15, 1912, in Goldfield, Nevada, to Billy Fortress and Molly Stroud Fortress. She died in Road's End, Idaho, on May 1, 1991. She moved with her uncle, Seth Fenton Stroud, and her grandfather, Moses Stroud, to Road's End in 1913. She was preceded in death by her grandparents, Moses and Eve Stroud; by her mother and father; and by her three aunts Lucina, Valmy and Radene Stroud. She is survived by her uncle and cousins Pearl Stroud Cahill and Reba Mae Cahill.*

Reba tried to calculate. If Seth and Grandma Pearl were first cousins, what was she to

Maidie? Third cousin? Fourth? She was family, though distant. That's all that mattered.

Champ continued, "From my earliest remembrance is a picture of Maidie wearing bright-colored smocks, usually purple, and making up silly rhymes. And at the oddest moments, she'd claim to hear church bells. I'm sure she's hearing them all the time right about now."

Reba envisioned Maidie in the light of beauty and with a whole mind. At the end, it was so sad. Maidie all skin and bones, her eyes wild like a wounded bird.

Champ looked around the barn and took a quick peek behind him. His eyes seemed to avert Pearl's. "First of all, I want to assure everyone I know the

Westminster Confession and the Wesley Method, taught me by my parents, Uriah and Roberta Runcie."

"A Calvinistic Arminian?" Pearl whispered to Reba. "That explains a lot."

"I was baptized at three weeks old. But as I've told you often, we've been blessed here in Road's End. For many decades we had no need for a jail and no need for a church."

Reba sat straighter. Where was he going with this? Why was he making it all about him?

Tucker spit on the ground and called out, "Hey, Champ, I remember when you used to say we had no need for mayors either."

As the barn rumbled with laughter, Tucker stood up and twirled on the platform. His wife Ida marched up the aisle and pulled him down to a chair beside her.

One of the smaller Younger girls sitting in the middle of the throng tossed yellow and white silk rose petals from a paper bag, then blew air into it and stomped it with a loud bang. Her mother Ursula yanked her outside as the girl complained, "But, Mommy, it looked like it was time for the party."

Champ cracked a forced grin. "That's right, Tucker, but things change. We go with the demand of the times. And right now Road's End needs ..." He paused and smirked like a cheeky choir boy about to do a first solo. "... a genuine church building. And a real preacher. It's a shame and a sin our one church meets in a smelly barn." He took a deep breath and faked a gag. "More people would attend, including me and my house, if the setting was a bit sweeter."

He waited for the buzz of chatter to subside. "Road's End deserves a place where we can hang a Maidie Fortress memorial bell. And I'm going to see we get it." He stole another glance at Pearl who sat like stone except for her eyes blinking very fast. "And if there's no objection, I'll be glad to take on the duty as chairman of the committee."

A stunned Reba gawked at Champ. Outrage grew inside her. She studied her grandmother's glare and fully expected her to rise and shout a protest. Champ's not even a church member. What right did he possess to dictate anything about what the folks at the church do? Or don't do. And certainly not at Maidie's funeral. What can he be thinking? He's over the edge.

When her grandmother remained in her seat, Reba started to jump up to blurt out an objection, but scattered applause broke out and grew louder. Tucker strummed "Peace in the Valley" as Pearl grabbed hold of her hand and gave a tight shake of her head.

Reba had seen Pearl Cahill stand before the state legislature and speak out for tax relief for farmers and home schools. She mediated peace with Nez Perce tribal councils over reservation issues. She debated national representatives about wilderness boundaries. So why didn't she confront this brazen, arrogant, completely out of order man?

Champ shuffled off the podium and sat in the audience next to his wife, Blair. Her steel blue eyes pierced straight ahead, shoulders slumped, as though she suffered one of her migraines. A woman accustomed to coping with pain, she

once told Pearl, "I went home to mother so many times, I finally told him I was tired of packing. He could go home to *his* mother."

Tucker finished his song and Pearl strode to the podium again. *What will she say?* Reba's stomach churned with anticipation.

"Thank you, Champ, for your part in this service and your interesting challenge. Most of you know about that first Sunday several years ago when we first met as a church in this barn." Pearl's eyes were wide and alert, her face and stance firm. "You were all invited. I personally made the rounds of the bars, Delbert's Diner, the Steak House, Paddy's Trailer Park, and the Quick Stop on the highway. I even made a special trip to the Runcie Ranch."

Everyone turned to Champ. He gave a quick nod of assent.

"And now, because of Maidie, I'm glad you all were able to come."

Nervous chuckles and sheepish grins flowed through the crowd. Reba held her breath.

Pearl opened her Bible. "This was one of Maidie's favorite verses from Psalm 55: 'He ransoms me unharmed from the battle waged against me, even though many oppose me. God, who is enthroned forever, will hear them and afflict them--men who never change their ways and have no fear of God.'" She panned the crowd before she continued. Some squirmed in their seats. Others frowned. Several had heads bowed and gave the impression of praying. Ginny and Jace had their heads together in fervent conversation. "And now Reba will sing one of Maidie's favorite songs."

*She's not going to say a word about Champ's unprompted and out of line suggestions?*

Reba fumbled for focus. She felt the sharp barb of disappointment. Her mouth chalky dry, the last thing she wanted to do was sing. Maybe this isn't the time and place. But neither was Champ's announcement. Is a church built by an unbeliever better than no church at all?

*Sure wish I had some water.*

She fumbled under her chair but couldn't feel the water bottle she'd stashed there. She found a peppermint in her purse and tucked it in her mouth against her cheek. She picked up her guitar, strummed an intro in minor chords, and began in her country western alto voice, "Amazing grace! How sweet the sound-- That saved a wretch like me!" As she repeated the last refrain, "We've no less days to sing God's praise than when we'd first begun," Seth trudged to the front.

Stooped by sorrow and age, Seth grabbed the sides of the pulpit with both hands. His face had more lines than Champ's, but fuller, softer. Gray suspenders showed under his black suit coat. A tousle of silver hair flopped over his forehead. His eyes red but dry, he said a few words, firm with purpose, but very low.

Many strained forward to hear. Reba attached a cordless microphone the funeral home loaned them to his white shirt collar. He cleared his throat and began again. "As most of you know, Champ and I go way back. His older brother and I competed for newspaper customers on the streets of Goldfield, Nevada when we were boys." He and Champ locked stares for a moment. "But there's



another story. Today I want to tell about two miracles that happened to me, both in the same day. One involved Maidie.”

Champ startled everyone by bolting out of his chair. “I didn’t know you were going to go there. No need for that.”

Seth paid no attention to the interruption. He kept talking, his voice clear and strong. “In 1908, Papa barbered in Goldfield. That’s why I took up the trade here in Road’s End. A family tradition. But that’s not what I’m here to talk about.”

Seth waited and Champ finally sat down, but he leaned as far forward as he could. “Mama and my sisters prospected by themselves in a place she called Worthy, on the west side of the Montezuma hills, near Goldfield. Mama discovered an underground spring there. Her name was Eve and she made her own Garden of Eden in the dry, harsh desert.”

Chairs scraped and necks craned as everyone scooted for a fuller view of Seth. Ginny stood in the aisle and snapped a few pictures.

Seth moved his hands to the center of the pulpit and clutched them together. “I got worried ‘cause Mama hadn’t come to town for her provisions, a week overdue. Papa assured me she’d show up soon, but he couldn’t leave his shop. So ... on my own, I loaded two burros for Worthy. I waited until dusk, dark enough for the curious not to get my direction. I headed out. Way late into the night, I set camp in the sage cause it got real cold. My ears pained me so much I couldn’t hear. Listening is crucial in the desert.

“As soon as a peep of light shined, I led the burros to the trail that veered up the mountain past some prospectors who weren’t the friendly sort. All day I watched for the familiar signs. A shaggy head-shaped boulder. A forest of stubby pines and red dirt. A triple crown from the Silver Peak mountain range. Most of all, I listened for the sound of wind wailing in the wires.”

Seth sipped from the water bottle Reba handed him. His hand shook, so Reba scooted closer and offered a silent prayer.

“Mama surrounded her place with six-strand barbed wire. The wind produced a low-to- high swirl and whoosh sound. The more gusts, the higher it got. But the air was so still I hardly had oxygen enough to breathe. Already, I was runnin’ out of water. The good thing, I knew that was one thing Mama had plenty of in a land where water cost more than liquor.” He took another drink.

Tucker whispered loud enough for Reba to hear. “I heard one time about a girl who got strangled with a piece of barbed wire.”

Reba shuddered with a frown.

“My eyes burned with strainin’ to study the cliff sides. My ears rang with tryin’ to hear something, anything. Finally, exhausted, I made camp again and tried to sleep. Before sunrise, the wind tore over the mountain. I couldn’t walk against the fierce gale. So, I buried my head in my coat to keep the grit out. When it quieted down, I tried to walk, but my legs gave out. I was so weak I sprawled on the ground and didn’t move. Then I heard something. A whirring noise, a *whip, whip, whip* kind of tone.”

He began to sag and Reba pushed a chair beside the podium. He slumped into it.

“Music it was. I thought God Himself was singin’ hymns, it was that sweet.”

"Bring me my fiddle." Reba handed it over. "It sounded a bit like this." He hovered over a few strings and made them moan and whine like a squall, up a half scale.

Reba heard a hissing sound and darted her attention back to the vicinity of where Champ sat. He glared at Seth so fierce she wondered if he would stomp to the podium again. But why was he so agitated?

He set the instrument on his lap. "I scratched and pulled my arms and legs best I could, till I shimmied to the cliff and scooted down. I near rammed into the barbs, it was so close. I yelled for Mama and my sisters, but my voice croaked so bad.

"Layin' there, helpless, I did something I'd never done before. 'Help, God,' I cried. And He provided. Cain't nobody tell me otherwise. I felt delicious air in my nostrils, punchin' breath back into me. I gathered so much strength, I crawled up the hill for my canteen. I slurped the last swallow of water, as wet and refreshing as I ever tasted. I gave thanks to the Being who'd saved me. That was the first miracle."

Seth leaned back in the chair. Reba held the water to his lips. He trembled as he sipped and waved it away.

"You okay?" Reba whispered.

He nodded and inhaled. "I called for Mama as I ran down the trail, so she'd know not to shoot me, but no one came." He paused for another breath. "I could hardly wait to hug Mama and show her I'd brought her some goods. I stopped at the dugout entrance. The sun blazed on my back and I couldn't see inside the small window slits.

"Then I heard a strange sound, like sobbing. It was much like the wires, but more human and I turned in every direction to search for the source." Seth peered around as though he saw the scene again. "A canvas tent awning flapped open. Weavin' beside it, hands clutched to a pole, was Molly, my oldest sister. Her long hair streamed as she called out somethin', delirious-like.

"Where's Mama?' I shouted. I scooted past her and squeezed into the tent. When my eyes adjusted, I saw the infant lyin' flat and still, eyes glazed. I thought she was dead. 'Mama!' I screamed and started to massage the hushed chest of the little one, then her stiff arms and legs. I didn't know what else to do. I stroked the bloodless skin till my nerves ached. I prayed again for the second time in my life and in the same day." Sweat beaded on the old man's forehead.

Reba forgot where she was and who else was with her, she was so focused on Seth.

"Again, God had mercy on me. The baby's lashes fluttered and pinkness swirled into the precious cheeks. I snuggled her into my arms and raced to the creek to smooth drops on her lips. She closed her eyes and seemed to drift asleep. I didn't know whether to wake her or not. I kept swipin' her mouth with moisture as I peered around for sight of Mama or my other sisters, Lucina, Valmy, and Radene." Seth's eyes shone with intense light. "All I could think of was, where is Eve and her children?

"After awhile, the baby cried. It was a puny kind of cry, but a welcome sound." Seth let out a deep sigh. "That infant survived and she was my Maidie."

After a moment, Seth ended with, "And last week I again saw her flat, still, and glazed. This time she sat in her chair. No amount of stroking could bring her back. She was gone."

He motioned to Reba and began to rise from the chair.

Is that all he's going to say? What happened next? Where were his mother and other sisters? What became of Molly? Reba suspected everyone in the crowd wondered the same thing, but she didn't push Seth to continue. Instead, she helped him back to the pew on the podium.

Pearl stood up. "Thank you, Seth. We all appreciate your sharing your story. Perhaps you can tell us more sometime." She smiled at him and announced, "The graveside service will be held at the Mosquito Ridge Cemetery, as soon as we can get there. Everyone's invited to stay afterward for lunch at the Grange Hall."

She gave the benediction. "Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen and Amen."

The funeral home director opened the casket and ushers Lloyd and Franklin led people forward, row by row. They walked by the waxen form lying on a silk pillow, resting place.

Reba held Seth's arm as he stepped down from the platform, then they both stared into the casket. She had meant this to be a tender last parting to a woman who meant more to her than she realized. Her world was so small. Maidie's loss would leave a big hole.

But when the moment arrived for her to pause and ponder, nothing seemed natural to say or do. She stared at a gold band with three small diamonds on Maidie's left hand. An engagement ring? What's that doing there?

She wished she'd brought some special token to tuck in the casket. A framed photo of the two of them together. Maybe the heart necklace she and Seth gave her for high school graduation.

Seth whispered something toward the casket. Reba leaned closer. He was saying, "You're okay now, sweet Maidie. Hush, sweet baby, don't you cry. I'll take care of everything."

Pearl from behind placed a firm hand on her shoulder.

"Was Maidie ever engaged?" Reba asked.

"Nearly married Zeke Owens. He died of a broken neck many decades ago. Fell off a roof while chasing birds from a chimney."

Reba reeled back in shock and wondered why she never heard that story before?

Seth nodded at them as though in confirmation, his face grim with grief. And maybe something else. He waved her away when she offered an arm.

"You and Ginny follow Seth in his Model T. I'll ride with Vincent," Pearl said.

Ginny insisted they hop in her red Jaguar. Top down, cool breeze, Reba wished she had on her cowboy hat. She suspected her hair would wimp out of any hint of style. The long line of mourners slowly surged to the canopied hole in Mosquito Ridge Cemetery. Old-timers carried extra jackets, knowing the open

cemetery ground could whip up a chilly wind any time of the year. However, today spring sun warmth hugged them.

A determined Don, in silver and turquoise bolo tie and copper-colored western sports coat, edged closer to Reba and Pearl in the reserved-for-family chairs. Reba motioned him to sit down beside her.

"But I'm not family," he said.

"Doesn't matter. They're going to be empty otherwise." She ignored Grandma Pearl's elbow punch.

Ginny had declined reserved family seating and now strolled between Jace and Norden, attentive to something Jace said. She offered him one of her teasing smiles.

*Watch it, girl, you're a married woman.* "Where's your dad?" Reba asked Don. He shrugged.

"I thought he insisted on starting the service," she said to Pearl.

"It's time and everyone else is here. We'll go on without him."

"Maybe Don could..."

Pearl shot her a warning glance and nodded at Thomas Hawk who offered a brief eulogy. "In her younger days, Maidie Fortress jammed with us. We played our drums. She joined in with her flute. She also participated in several pow wows. She was a good friend and we never forgot." He concluded, "All of us alive on this earth make up a small tribe compared to the numbers who sleep beneath us. They're the majority. Their words and actions while among us should be heeded. Now Maidie has united with them."

His grandson, Elliot Laws, drummed in his desert camouflage uniform from Gulf War duty. Reine Laws, his mother, accompanied with flute for a haunting rendition of "God Be With You Till We Meet Again."

At the end, Pearl asked them to play it again and invited Thomas to sing the song in Nez Perce. "Many of you may not realize that Thomas Hawk is one of less than a hundred people who still speak the Nez Perce language. If you catch on to the words, please join in."

Thomas began with, "Godki pewakunyu hanaka." By the end of the last verse all his family and many in the crowd harmonized the final chorus:

*Pewaukunu, Pewaukunu,*

*Jesusnim akthwapa noon.*

*Pewaukunu, pewaukunu,*

*Godki pewaukunu hanaka.*

A whoop and holler rang out from the far end of the cemetery. Riding fast, American flag flying high on a pole and in full rawhide cowboy regalia, Champ charged in with his sandy bay quarter horse. After an abrupt stop, he climbed down and announced, "Sergeant Elliot Laws, will you please come forward?"

Elliot furrowed his brows and took some tentative steps toward Champ.

Champ marched in front of the young Indian man. "As mayor of Road's End, Idaho and as a representative of the city council and citizens, I present you the key to our city, in honor of your service on behalf of our country in peace and in war." He bowed as he handed Elliot a large gold key engraved with *Road's End*

1991. "This key symbolizes that you are a trusted and respected friend of this city's residents, now and forever."

Cheers rose from the crowd as Elliot flushed. "Thank you," he muttered.

"You are welcome to say a few words," Champ urged.

"All I can think to say is thank you again." In an awkward moment, he tried to find a place to tuck the key. Half-hung out of his pant's pocket, his father yanked it out and raised it high. More applause erupted.

Reba peered at Don. He seemed pleased. And why shouldn't he be? His dad rewarded a hero. Nothing wrong with that. But the timing! Champ had this funeral figured out from beginning to end, for his own personal agenda. That was his style. Another reason not to get any closer to his son? One more minus on the Dating Don List. Maybe that counts for extra negative points. Or should she presume the son had his own life and Champ didn't enter into it? After all, she'd never known Marge to complain.

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After the graveside service, a long line of rigs led by Seth's Model T, Pearl's green '58 GMC Carryall, Ginny's Jaguar, and Champ's '57 white Cadillac with front steer horns serpentine to the Grange Hall, a country block away. Most stayed outside in groups to reminisce about shenanigans and exploits of early pioneers and caught up on local news. A few sneezed and pulled out inhalers or popped allergy pills.

The churchwomen prepared the food. Ursula Younger covered tables with purple tablecloths and centerpieces of multi-colored pansies in baby food jars. The two large purple and white iris bouquets from the Cahill barn book-ended each side of a chest freezer, over which Reba stretched a cream lace cloth. She arranged a collage of pictures Pearl brought of Maidie and Seth through the years. A pretty girl. A handsome guy. A love story of an entirely different sort.

Lisl Monte kept her eye on Deputy Lomax circling the crowd. "We found a broken window and what looked like forced entry when we came earlier this morning. Brock thinks it might have been a baseball or rock thrown, but I'm not as sure."

Brock? Deputy Lomax? So these two have been getting friendly, like the scuttlebutt claimed.

The Mathwig triplets fluttered around the tables adding silverware and orchid paper napkins. Clones of each other with fading brunette hair and pale eyes, but in different shapes and sizes, they kept busy as they responded.

Adrienne Mathwig opined, "Burglary in Road's End? To steal what? No valuables here. I'll get that window replaced before the next Grange meeting."

Beatrice Mathwig slipped her opal ring in her red-striped broom skirt pocket. "We've got to make more treasures for heaven where thieves and robbers can't break in. Or maybe someone needed a place to stay the night."

Charlotta Mathwig dispensed her usual litany of warnings. "Big city crime has hit Road's End, especially with folks like the McKanes moving in. Better get used to locking your doors, having timed and motion lights, and tucking a gun under your pillow."

Polly Eng and her daughter, Kam, the only ones in town besides Maidie who could grow healthy gardens with the short growing season, bent over steaming woks full of stir-fried vegetables and pork. She steamed the best stir-fry and rainbow trout with Teriyaki sauce, said the citizens of Road's End. Now Polly frowned at her daughter. "A car load of intoxicated juveniles drove around town last week lighting M-80s and scaring our dogs. Fireworks got shot off our deck."

"They thought it was Chinese New Year." Kam blushed a pretty pink.

Ursula, who lived in the big house on the highest knoll reported, "Sure are a lot more dogs roaming around town, even with our leash law. At least one of them is a snarling, foam at the mouth mad dog."

Cicely Bowers, splinter skinny in four-inch black spike heels, bleached white hair swept into a wide-brimmed hat cocked to the side and tied under the chin, and black leggings ending inches above the shoes, added sliced boiled eggs to her huge bowl of famed potato salad with mustard.

She introduced Trish Hocking Stanton. "My niece's daughter from Missouri. She's been staying with me, helping me out. She told me a man failed to pay for his room last week at my B&B. Plus he stole a pillow. Deputy Lomax caught him running our one stop sign. He had false plates and invalid driver's license."

"Tucker left his car parked next to the Trailer Park behind the Pick Me Up Saloon overnight and found two windows smashed," said Ida Paddy. "I keep telling him that's not a good place, especially after 10:00 p.m. We need a curfew."

"I'm sure the bar's a handy draw for your customers," Cicely remarked. "Some of mine complain they have to walk or drive two blocks to get there."

Pearl handed Reba a large tray of sliced meats and assorted cheese to take to the buffet tables, next to Pearl's famed jalapeno and cheddar cheese corn muffins and stacks of potato rolls. "Lawlessness can happen anywhere."

"True, but a combo of high mountain elevation and sparse population tends to weird people out. Present company excepted, of course," Cicely remarked.

Reba headed outside. "Lunch is ready," she shouted.

Women followed children who rushed in. Most of the men lingered on the lawn. Reba opened the door wide for fresh air and to encourage the hungry. She sauntered over to Seth.

"I've had my hand shook and backslapped so often," he told Reba, "I feel beat to cake batter."

"What happened to your mother and sisters?" she blurted out.

A shadow crossed his face. He bowed his head and shut his eyes.

"I'm sorry. I'm guessing you've got painful memories."

"I'll tell you about it. I promise. But not yet."

Her heart beat faster. *Should I be excited or fearful?*

Elliot Laws bumped into her. "My apologies."

"So glad to have you back. We watched you on TV."

"Oh? When was that?"

"The war, I mean. Strange, scary, and exciting to be in the spectator chair for real live battles. We felt like we were watching history happen."

Norden McKane pushed in. "Surgical and quick laser-guided smart bombs. A-10 fighter pilots. F-15 fighters. Tomahawk cruise missiles. Patriot antimissile system. Hey, it was like a video game, only we weren't at the controls."

Elliot turned solemn. "I can assure you, it was quite different from the perspective of those on the ground."

"Why didn't you bring down Hussein while you could?" Norden retorted.

"Following orders." Elliot excused himself and sauntered to the punch table.

Is that a limp? Reba considered going after him. She felt somehow she needed to make amends. He'd had an attitude since he got back. She wondered if he felt uncomfortable playing hero.

Norden turned to Vincent. "How are Idaho opals doing? Should I buy silver or gold?"

"I just purchased a new opal mining claim. That's what I'm into."

"Did you know we've got garnets right here in Road's End? I found some that had washed out of an old roadbed. Interested?"

"I sure am. Let me know where and when I can meet you."

Ginny greeted Vincent, after she pulled away from Jace. "I remember when Reba ran away to try to find her mother after my family moved to California."

"I headed by bus to Boise to his place," Reba said. "Vincent drove me the four hours back to Road's End and promised to look for her himself."

"I sent you regular reports," Vincent said.

"Yeah, she was driving truck with a boyfriend across the southwest. Then she was a lab technician in Thailand. Then a hospital business manager in the Bahamas. I sent cards and letters to the addresses he gave me, but they were all returned. I finally guessed he might be making this up. The last story he told, he claimed she was a nurse's aid in Vegas."

Ginny grinned. "You have quite the imagination, Mr. Quaid."

Michael barged in. "Or maybe it's all true. I know for sure half of it was."

"Why didn't she ever come our way?" Reba asked.

"She wanted to. She wanted to be there for you. She told me that herself."

"Grandma, Grandpa, Vincent, even Seth and Maidie, those were the ones there for me."

Michael plunged his hands into his jeans. "I'm glad you had them. All I had was Mom."

Ginny turned back to Vincent. "Weren't you the one who helped send Reba to UCSB?"

Vincent nodded.

"I'm sorry to say I only lasted one year, as you know."

"We did have two semesters together in the dorm. Then it was you who left me."

"That's because you were such a heavy sleeper. No late night parties with you around," Reba teased.

Vincent hugged Reba's shoulders. "I was so proud. You aced the whole twenty units."

"But I couldn't stand that cooped up, tied down feeling. I wanted back at the ranch. Don't need a college degree for that."

"I thought you loved watching the ocean waves," Ginny said.

"Uh huh. I still miss that part." Reba punched Michael's arm. "Introduce us to your guest."

He tugged at the arm of the pert blonde behind him and preened like a peacock. "This is Nina Oscar. She's going to be a doctor someday."

Reba held out her hand. "That's quite an introduction. Glad to meet you." *And why are you attracted to Michael?*

"Pediatrician," Nina corrected. "Like my mother."

Nice catch, brother. Is she a keeper?

Chapter Three

A cool noon Spring breeze blew through the open Grange Hall doors as Reba noticed Ginny chatting with Sue Anne Runcie at the food tables. She sashayed toward them and heard Champ discussing his plans for a new church building to a mixed crowd of members and nonmembers. He drew a sketch on a piece of notepaper. "We'll want orange for the upholstery and rugs to go with harvest and Thanksgiving celebrations, since we're a farming community."

Pearl calmly marched over, but Reba noticed fire in her eyes. "Champ, church members will choose their own building, if and when they want one. And they most certainly will decide their own color of carpet. I'm sure the women will have an opinion."

Champ started to speak but Pearl cut him off. "Can we tell the Steak House what color to paint their walls? Do we force the Mathwigs to add on new rooms to the hotel?"

Reba moved closer and silently cheered that her grandmother finally intervened.

Champ's face burned crimson as he scowled like a sea captain whose orders had been defied. "It will be on city property. We can all have a say. A church is different. A church belongs to everyone." He looked around at the skeptical faces and softened his approach. "There's no way your small crew can raise enough funds without a larger support base. Surely you can see that."

"Oh? Where do you propose we put the church?"

"I've already talked to Seth about it. On the Stroud Ranch property on the other side of the Grange."

"But that's Cahill Ranch land."

"Oh no, it isn't."

"Not technically," Pearl retorted, "but we've leased that land from Seth for over fifty years."

"Not anymore. The city is taking part of it over for public use. Eminent domain."

Reba trembled in fury. "How much land do you think it takes for a church?"

"Well, I figure we'll need at least a hundred acres. For parking, playground for the kids, future expansion, possible future public buildings, a well, and other facilities. For the common good."

A hundred acres! Reba and her grandmother needed every acre they had right now to make a viable ranch.

She lashed out at the man in tall tan cowboy hat. "You're powerful in this town, but don't take on God. You're definitely outmatched there."

"Surely your pride isn't so inflated," Champ blustered.

"My pride is not the issue." Pearl raised her five-foot-five-inch frame taller. "It's a matter of relationship."

"But we're all friends. You, me, Seth, Maidie--we go way back. We've pretty much grown up here. Tell me the right words. Anoint me or something. The citizens of Road's End expect their leader to do the honors."

"It's your relationship with the Almighty I had in mind."

A determined glint formed in his eyes. "I'll bring this matter to a vote of the whole town."

"Spiritual commitment is more important than politics."

"But that doesn't require a town vote."

Lloyd Younger tapped Pearl's shoulder. "Some stock of yours got loose on the road. I'll need some help."

"Don and Tim will go," Champ offered.

"I've got my granddaughter," Pearl shot back. "She's all I need."

She and Reba headed toward Pearl's Carryall as Don followed them out.

"Can I call you tonight or sometime tomorrow?"

Reba felt like a bull seeing red. Why didn't Don challenge his dad on their behalf? Another huge minus got added to The Dating Don List. "I don't know. I've got some things to work out." With a mix of regret, she watched him hurry back to the Hall. He was an otherwise decent guy, unlike his father.

"Watch out, Reba. Champ is using Don."

"Why would he do that?"

"That man's like a double prong. Always has been. He goads you so you'll kick somebody. Someone he's trying to get at. And in this case, it's no mystery who it is."

"Me? Or you?"

"He's not getting my ranch."

"But Grandma..." If Reba and Don married, they'd have access to more than one ranch. What's wrong with that?

Pearl frowned her the-subject's-closed face. "I don't know why our cows keep getting out."

"Somebody cut a piece out of the Runcie fence where the heifer got through. You know I check all the fences as often as I can. I suppose I could check more often if there were two of me."

"Maybe..." Pearl began.

"Maybe what?" Reba nudged.

Pearl sped up as they rode down Sourdough Road and turned west toward Coyote Canyon. They stopped by Cahill Ranch barbed wire, lying limp on the ground. "Here's your answer. Someone cut here too."

"It doesn't make sense. Bits and pieces here and there."

"Let's get the cows back in and fix the fence."

"Then take a quick trip to the Canyon. Don said Johnny Poe ran that way."

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They herded cows for about half an hour before they coaxed them back on home soil, then another half hour to fix the severed wire. Next came the search for Johnny Poe, which ended in defeat. When they returned to the house, Reba noticed the Jaguar gone. Dr. Olga Whey met them at the door on her way out. She looked Reba in the eyes. "I'm sorry, but the calf didn't make it. No one to blame. There was something internal wrong with him."

Reba's shoulders drooped in dismay. "Thanks for trying, doc." Not my best day. Not the first lost calf nor the last. But each one stung.

Pearl hugged Reba as they headed inside. Vincent greeted them with "How's Johnny Poe."

Grief over the calf turned to concern for her horse. Reba paced in front of the orange divan with mahogany claw legs. "No sign of him. But we did see remains of campfires, one very recent. Johnny Poe hates fire almost as much as he hates barbed wire." Where is that horse? And where's Ginny? "I sure hope he's not holed up on Runcie land."

"I'm sure he'll show up soon," Vincent encouraged then grinned at Pearl. "Some folks at the service today insisted you would make a better mayor than Champ Runcie."

"I sure hope he never hears that."

"He already did. Tucker argued with him whether men or women's blood vessels narrowed faster with age. Adrienne Mathwig said the blood supply to women's brains was better maintained for longer periods of time. She used to be a doctor, you know."

Pearl frowned. "She was a dentist. But what does that mean?"

"Percentages prove you'd serve in office better and longer than Champ."

Reba stretched her arms to her knees, then her toes. "Grandma's got more influence serving every cause she can think of at the county and state level. Being mayor would slow her down."

"Stop your fidgeting, Reba. You're making me nervous," Pearl said.

Reba spread her arms and stretched her legs. "If I were running for mayor, I'd campaign to move the dumpsters outside the city, limit the issuance of liquor licenses, establish a logging truck parking lot, and advocate for building western decor false fronts for all the businesses."

Vincent and Pearl cheered.

"You got our votes," Pearl said.

Reba sat on the arm of the couch. "Well, I'm trying to stay ahead of our present mayor." Then to ease her frantic mind, she proposed, "I'm going out first

thing in the morning and drive every trail on our ranch and on the prairie, if I have to. Johnny Poe's got to be hiding somewhere."

The phone rang. Pearl lifted the receiver from its black cradle.

"You were wrong. He's hurrahing citizens on Main Street," Pearl said when she hung up. "Vincent, help me check on the heifer. Reba, get your rebel horse."

Reba ran to hitch the pickup trailer and looked for heelers Paunch and Blue to help corral her horse. *What's going on Johnny Poe?* He had never run toward people before. If he bolted, he dashed for the wilderness.

She felt a chill. Unruly horses get shot by no-nonsense Road's Enders.

Reba hooked up the trailer to the pickup and sped over gravel roads into town. Shadows crossed the late afternoon route as she turned on the one paved street in Road's End. Reba drove past the Steak House, leather shop, Delbert's Diner and Gifts, the post office, and the apartment complex where Tim, Sue Ann and the kids lived while their house was built on Whitlow property.

She looked down every alley as she drove by Whitlow's Grocery owned by Sue Ann's parents, two of the six saloons in the area, and Jace and Norden's Outfitters across the street.

Some of the same folks who had been at Maidie's funeral just hours before now shouted along the wooden sidewalks while others stood watching in front of the Pick-Me-Up Saloon. Next door the Mathwig triplets and roomers craned for a look from window views from their two-story hotel.

An agitated Johnny Poe cowed before a man with a whip.

*Champ! This will not end well.*

Reba yanked open the pickup and rushed over as she tried to talk her horse down. She grabbed the rope hanging from the saddle horn. His coat reamed with sweat, eyes wild, mouth foamed. "Come on, boy, settle down. I've got you. You'll be okay."

A loud crack snapped in her ears as a burning pain lashed across her back. The force and shock of the blow whirled her around and the pain grew intense. Through clenched eyes she saw someone from the sidewalk grapple with Champ and muscle the whip away from him. Hunched over in agony, she couldn't believe she'd been whipped.

Firm hands yanked the rope from her and reached for Johnny Poe. She looked up to see brother Michael talking in a low monotone. He pulled an old navy blue bandanna from his pocket and wiped lather from Johnny Poe's neck. Then he slid the headstall over the horse's ears and dropped the bit out of his mouth. He straightened the saddle and murmured a kind of chant. As he uncoiled one of his own ropes and slipped a makeshift rope halter over the horse's head, he led Johnny Poe by the whispering crowd to the trailer.

Gentle hands eased Reba to her feet, her back seared like a brand. A tube was shoved in her hand. "Rub this on your welt. It's the best stuff we sell." Reba peered into the deep hazel eyes of Jace McKane, a scowl on his face, and Champ's whip tucked under his arm. He rolled up the sleeves on his white on white pin stripe shirt he'd worn to the funeral.

Ginny appeared beside him, concern creased on her full, winsome face. "How are you feeling?"

"I hurt bad and I'm kind of dizzy."

"Come on. I'll drive you home. Jace, you get the Jaguar." She tossed him the keys.

They eased into Reba's pickup with Johnny Poe in the trailer. Michael hopped into his 1980 bronze Mustang Cobra behind the Jaguar. As they made a U-turn, she caught sight of Don opening a truck door for Champ, helping him into the cab.

Why wasn't he helping her instead? Why didn't he take the whip away? Another big minus on the Dating Don List.

Ginny cruised slowly to the Cahill homestead with Reba straight in the seat, back touching nothing but shirt, which Reba wanted to peel off, with great care.

"Where have you been?" she managed to say.

"Took a ride around the lake and arrived in town in time to witness your drama."

"Alone?"

Ginny clutched tight on the steering wheel. "No, not alone."

"Jace could pay a big price for wrestling Champ's whip away."

"Someone had to do it."

Ginny parked beside the Camperdown Elm and as Reba gingerly got out of the truck, Michael backed Johnny Poe out of the trailer and led him to the corral. Jace hiked after him and Ginny followed Reba into the house. Reba downed some ibuprofen pills as Ginny applied Jace's salve to the swollen, beet-red welt on her back. "I can't believe what I'm seeing," she said more than once.

Reba shut her eyes and tried mentally to move out of the pain. "How come Jace came with us?"

"Because he drove my car. Because I invited him. Because I'll take him home later."

"What's up with you two?"

"Absolutely nothing. He's an easy guy to talk to and he understands my world."

"That's what you said about Paris...you remember, your husband?"

"Before we got married, you mean. I can't understand why you aren't paying attention to Jace yourself."

"He's not a part of my world. We have nothing in common."

"He used to own horses."

"You mean, played at owning horses. I hear he got bored with starting computer businesses and decided to try the small town lifestyle as a lark."

Ginny scowled. "Are you still pining over Tim so much you've forgotten how to look anywhere except the Runcie Ranch for your men?"

Reba's face burned almost as much as her back. "I don't pine over married men." Not much anyway.

"A heart pines for what it pines. Tim's even cuter now than in fifth grade, in a rustic cowboy kind of way, with that full sweep of chestnut hair under his hat. Are he and Sue Anne happy?"

"I think I'd be the last to hear. And you're giving me reasons to pine, not turn away. What's up with that?"

"That's not my intent. Just an honest analysis." Ginny wiped the cream off her hands and fumbled with her necklace. "I know Jace's father. That's what we mostly talk about. Jace is very concerned about him and he should be. Hugh McKane's a charmer, but he's not a nice man."

"How do you know him?"

"He's a business acquaintance of my grandpa's. And he's in the national news some. He's into the corporate merge-and-purge game. I'm surprised you haven't heard of him."

"I don't read the newspapers much."

"The man's often caught up in some controversy. He seems drawn by new ventures that are, let's say, outside the mainstream."

"Doesn't sound too stable."

"But he's good at making money."

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Ginny insisted on calling Deputy Lomax to file a complaint. He arrived within a half hour. "As a rule, that's a criminal offense," he admitted, upon hearing their version. Clearly, it wasn't the first narrative of the incident he'd heard. He held his breath as though fearing she would pursue. Oh, sure, she'd like to see him try to arrest Champ and keep his job. "I won't press charges. It was an accident."

"He didn't even apologize," Ginny retorted. "We at least wanted you to know."

The deputy shut his book, heaved a sigh of relief, and quickly changed the subject. "You should know that four prisoners escaped from the minimum security at the Elkhaville facility yesterday. Used a hacksaw blade to cut cell bars and scaled the wall with a ladder constructed in the prison machine shop by a fellow inmate. But that's a county matter. Unless, of course, they head this way."

"Why should they?" Reba replied. "What were they in for?"

"Petty theft. Scams. Burglary. One of them roughed up a couple girlfriends."

"Well, there's nothing to steal here."

"But how would they know that? They walked away from the minimum-security area and caught a bus or thumbed a ride. Incredible. Still in their prison rags and with ID tags. They were scheduled to go before the review board for parole hearings next month. Never been a discipline problem before. So, go figure. Now they'll be charged with felony escape and could get five years added. Anyway, keep an eye out."

The deputy whisked away with a head nod as Reba and Ginny hiked over to watch Matthew massage Johnny Poe. The horse refused to drink at the free-flowing water source and lapped up shallow rain puddles instead.

"You're good with horses, especially if you can manage Johnny Poe," Reba said.

"He'll let me fuss around, but I'm not going to ride him. You're the only one he'll let do that."

"Seth too. Seth has ridden him before."

Vincent and Pearl met up with them. "The heifer seems to have partial paralysis," Pearl reported. "We'll have to watch her close." Pearl's gaze stopped at Reba's face. "What's wrong? What happened in town?"

When Pearl heard the report of Champ and his whip, she stormed into the house to call the Runcie house. Reba followed, hoping to hear what Champ had to say. She listened in on the extension.

"Champ didn't mean to hit Reba. He's so sorry," Blair Runcie began. "He would say so himself, but he and Don already left for Spokane. They got a call to look at a deal on some new farm equipment. And to order a bell."

"What bell?" Pearl wheezed.

"You know, the memorial bell, for the new church."

Pearl slammed the phone down and waited a moment while she fought for calm. She breathed deep, in and out.

The others slunk in as Reba stepped toward Pearl and forced a pause before she offered, "I'll stay with the heifer tonight."

"No need. Tomorrow should be soon enough." Pearl straightened her blouse and put on her stoic face. "Anybody hungry? There are plenty of leftovers from the service. And we can throw on some steaks too. I'll call Seth to come. Meant to tell him earlier, but things got so hectic."

"Vincent, you going home tonight?" Reba asked.

"No, he is going to stay at the hotel for at least a couple days." Pearl's eyes hugged him.

Ginny winked at Reba who turned to Michael sprawled on the orange couch. "Will you stay? Nina too?"

"She had to get back to study for early exams in the morning. But, sure, I'll stay. You know I'm always hungry."

Ginny turned to Jace. "How about you? Will you eat with us?"

Jace faced Reba full view. He rubbed his close-cropped, butch style dark hair. For the second time that day, she peered into his handsome face with what she detected as sincerity and politeness written all over it. "It's up to Reba Mae and her grandmother."

Reba Mae? Only a few called her by that familiar name. *How dare he.* And she didn't want him staying for dinner. But she had a debt to pay. "I haven't properly thanked you for your intervention on my behalf. And the cream worked wonders on my back." She forced herself to add, "Please do stay."

"And Norden's welcome, too," Pearl called from the kitchen.

"Thank you, Mrs. Cahill, but he told me he'd be busy tonight."

Reba and Ginny excused themselves so Reba could pop some more ibuprofen tablets and Ginny played nurse to her back again. "Interesting group for dinner tonight," Ginny offered.

Reba ignored her and then fed Paunch, Blue, and Scat as Ginny and Jace hiked to the Grange Hall. She shoved a leaf in the dining table and set it for seven.

"Add a few extras," Pearl said. "Just in case."

She prepared several more place settings as Seth drove up in his Model T, followed by Ginny and Jace in his Volvo.

Pearl handed Reba a charcoal drawing of a horse that looked like Johnny Poe. *For Reba*, it said. *Love, Kaitlyn*. "I believe she drew it during the funeral. She asked me to give it to you right after."

"Tim's daughter," Reba explained to Ginny. "I'm so glad I've gotten to know Tim's kids some. They are sweethearts." Not their fault what their parents did.

"Is Don coming over?" Ginny asked.

"Nope. He and his dad have gone to Spokane."

Dinner ready, they moved into the dining room. Reba sat across from Ginny and Jace who both managed to change into casual clothes. As casual as Ginny ever got, that is. A scatter of rhinestones on a silver silky pullover over jeans. Silver sandals. Jace wore tan khaki shorts and soft yellow pullover shirt. She studied him while he chatted with the others. Slim yet muscular. Green tint to his eyes. Straight white teeth. *I do appreciate the cool balm on my back*.

"Your story today," he was saying to Seth, "it hit a chord. I'm tempted to make fun of things like supposed miracles. But I still feel the tug...well, sometimes I think I could believe."

"It's not hard when you experience it." Seth spooned Waldorf salad on his plate.

Pearl passed steamy mashed potatoes and gravy.

"Did you find your mother and sisters that day?" Ginny asked the question they all wanted to know.

Reba watched Seth's strained face. What she'd suspected she saw there now. Something bad happened. And he avoided talking about it. He looked around the table, complexity in his black eyes.

Pearl cut in. "Jace, if you don't mind me asking, what is your religious background?"

"I had a praying grandmother. But my father worships the almighty dollar. My mother took us to a Presbyterian church."

"Was that Norden's mother too?"

"No, we're half brothers. Different mothers. My parents are divorced."

Ginny gave Jace a saucy look. "How did you make your money?" She ignored Reba's scowl of protest.

"It's a long story. I'll give you the shortened version. It started with McDonnell Douglas in Huntington Beach, which led to Kaiser Aluminum, which led to Itron, which led to Logue McDonald, then Byte Dynamics, then Kaiser Mead, then Nynex of New York, and then Internet Capital. I mainly designed software and built semiconductor test equipment. Have I bored you yet?"

"No, I'm not bored. Very impressive resume."

"Thank you."

"So why in the world did you move to a place like Road's End?"

"As long as I had small companies scattered around, I could keep a low profile. I stayed pretty much invisible. But as it got bigger, more diverse, I lost the obscurity. Here I've regained it."

"But is this as fulfilling for you?" Reba tried not to sound too nosy. Or too interested.

He wiped his mouth with a paper napkin. "It is. For now. Besides, the industry I started continues and I could probably enter back whenever I wanted."

"You think you'll want to?" Ginny prodded.

"Return to that stress? Not likely."

"You are a strange one," Pearl interjected. "So many young people here try to get out, to see the world."

Like my mom? Reba wondered again what drove her away.

"He traded his Guccis for hip boots," Vincent quipped.

Jace snickered. "That's about right. Working with a computer is a yawn compared to white water rafting on the Salmon River. Or backpacking in the Seven Devils. Or even shooting the breeze with my customers. This is the closest I'll get to being a cowboy." He peered at Reba. "I realize folks here are the real McCoy."

Was that some kind of backhanded compliment? Or a taunt?

"What's Norden's background?" Pearl asked.

"He played football in college. Had to quit when his grades weren't good enough. I'm trying to encourage him to register at the University of Idaho this fall."

"That's where Nina goes," Michael said. "Maybe she can nudge him. On second thought, maybe not."

He's not that confident of her yet?

Vincent pushed away his plate and rubbed his bushy beard. "Elliot Laws got through college on the ROTC program and did quite well until he got action in the Gulf. He seems shaken by the experience. Even popular, short wars can be hell."

Scat took the pause in chitchat as an invitation to jump on Jace's lap. "I overheard you ladies talking about crime in Road's End. What's the biggest problem you face?"

"Yellow thistle," Pearl said.

"Excuse me?"

"Yellow star thistle. A weed that infests our pastures. We hire crop dusters use hand sprayers. It's expensive but thistle's fatal for horses if they eat it."

Reba plunked down her fork. "Our biggest problem? Champ Runcie." She raised out of her chair. "Anybody ready for dessert? We've got Charlotta Mathwig's huckleberry pie. Or Ursula Younger's triple fudge brownies. Or Pam Eng's fortune cookie cake."

"I'd be grateful for one of each," Vincent said.

A chorus replied, "Me too."

Reba balanced a stack of dishes as Pearl cleared some space on the counter. "So, Jace, how do you see Road's End as a community? How would you describe us?" Reba inquired.

He folded his arms and leaned the chair back. "It's a place of reluctant spring thaws with a lot of unpaved roads and few fences in common. That's a quote I remember reading somewhere. It fits this place."

"But what about the people?"

"In the few months I've been here, it seems many folks come to hide from something or someone. Or be left alone."

Quite a speech. And what are you hiding from, Jace?

Vincent leaned forward. "The people endure long, hard winters, and Champ Runcie. Thus, they have to be survivors."

Jace chuckled. "Very well said. Road's End is full of loners and independents who at times succumb to teamwork."

Ginny joined in. "Team. Together Everyone Achieves More. My Grandpa Bony loves constantly reminding us of motivational slogans like that."

"Tell me again, what's the name of your family's business?" Vincent inquired.

"George's Marketplace Deli chain. Only in California. Four of them so far. Every time the family grows, Grandpa talks of starting a new store. He wants as many of us as possible to stay with the business. Our headquarters is in Santa Dominga." She looked at Jace. "Also home to kingpin Hugh McKane."

"Is that another brother?" Reba handed out plates of assorted desserts that included Pearl's rhubarb-apple pie.

"No. It's my infamous father."

"That's right. Ginny mentioned him." The way he accented infamous sounded like bad blood between them.

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After dinner, Vincent and Pearl washed dishes. Seth lounged on the orange couch, argyle stocking-feet stretched out on the leather top table. No one commented that they didn't match. Reba spread a Pendleton blanket across him but the motion irritated her back. She gritted against the pain. "You ought to spend the night with us, Seth. No need to go back to that empty cabin alone."

The old man's eyes closed and his chest gently heaved. "I'm okay."

Reba tried to read Seth's response. Worn and weary body. His face furrowed. No mystery there after the long, emotional day. But there was something else. A brooding. She'd never known him to be like that, even during Maidie's long months of illness. He stayed alert to care for her needs. Now, he seemed to mull something over. Did he have a decision to make? A problem to solve? Or was he depressed? Understandable. Almost like losing a mate.

The others pulled up chairs. Reba longed to slather more of Jace's cream on her wounds.

"This house always smells so...horsey," Ginny said.

"No horse has ever been in this house," Reba huffed.

"I think you bring it in with you. But it's nice. I like horse odors. And I like your furniture. Everything you own has feet on it: the couch, the chairs, the Duncan Phyfe dining room table. Even your bathtub. It's charming."

Pearl stuck her head into the room. "You wouldn't think charming if you had to dust all this stuff."

"Grandma, you never dust anything and you know it. I swipe a rag around when I can't breathe any longer." Reba twisted to try to ease the pain.

"Dust protects the wood. It sure never hurt a tree." Pearl returned to the kitchen.

Seth left two heel prints on the table as he slowly repositioned to lay prone on the couch.

"Did you hear about the escaped prisoners?" Ginny asked. "Pretty exciting."

"I shudder to think of criminals anywhere near." Reba winced and tried to grab Ginny's attention as her back throbbed.

"But it's easy to steal things here," Michael replied. "No one ever locks their doors or anything else."

"I'm sorry, Ginny, but I need to pull you away from our guests." Reba grimaced as they excused themselves and scooted to Reba's bedroom.

Ginny grabbed the ointment. "You'd better watch out for Jace. He's hiding something. Beware of men with dark secrets."

"What? Just hours ago you complained about my narrow choice of men. At least he had the guts to challenge Champ. Nobody else around here seems to."

Ginny pressed the ointment a little too hard. "But Jace may be your bigger challenge."

"Jace is nothing to me, barely an acquaintance." Reba stopped, an image of Champ's whip in his hands. "But I do owe him."

When they returned to the living room, Ginny offered to give Jace a ride home.

"I can do that," Michael said.

"Then I'm going to my room. I'm exhausted and I need to call home." She stretched and

yawned and headed for the guest room.

Seth set up and pulled on his shoes. "I'm going, too."

"Can I hop a ride?" Vincent called from the kitchen. "My car's at the hotel and I've been wanting to cruise town with that Model T of yours."

"Yes, sir, I'd be glad to have a passenger." He reached over and touched Reba's arm. "But I hoped Reba would come over this evening. I've got something to give you, something that belongs to you."

"Why, sure. I can come over. Did I leave something of mine at your house?"

"Not really. Maidie, uh, left you a present."

## Chapter Four

A taupe whitetail doe foraged on twigs of the Cahill's Camperdown Elm. She didn't seem to mind it was a mutant. When she spied intruders Seth and Vincent she flagged her tail and trotted toward the pasture with a fawn behind her.

Vincent stared at the elm as they walked to the Model T. "I remember so well Cole planting that tree on Scottish elm stock, bringing a bit of Dundee, Scotland with him, he said. He was so proud of it. In later years, I heard him several times call it 'a cursed tree, an upside down tree.'"

"A curse came down on us all." Seth thought of the tree with its strange twists and turns. He sank into the slough of despond again. He could feel the intensity of Vincent ogling him.

"Are you talking about Maidie?"

Yes. *Maidie*. The old man wondered if he should tell Vincent what he suspected. He was a good man. He cared about Maidie. And Reba Mae. And Hanna Jo. But what could he do? What could anyone do? "A curse fell on the whole earth," he finally responded.

"Oh, I see," Vincent said. "You're talking about Adam and Eve in the garden."

"Yes. About Eve." *My Eve*.

"I'll kick the tires. You twist the tail," Vincent teased as he circled the T.

Seth nodded in the evening shadows. He scooted into the driver's seat to turn the switch on at the coil box and retard the spark. He got out and hobbled to the front, pulled the choke wire out and the crank up, pushed the choke wire in, then pried the crank up again. When the car started with a rumble, Scat jumped and banged his head on the fender. Seth scurried around to the driver's side and reached in to advance the spark lever. Scat scrambled off the rolling tire and stiffened in protest. The cat looked all fur ball and teeth, milky eyes aglow.

Seth hobbled around to the passenger door and climbed in, scooting to the driver's side. He made further adjustments to the spark and throttle and waved in Vincent. He set the emergency brake to neutral and touched the low pedal to keep from killing the engine. Automatic movements of a lifetime habit.

"Thanks so much, Seth. This is great." Vincent breathed in deep and stretched out an arm in the fresh evening air.

Seth allowed himself a moment's splurge of relief from the day's grief. He basked in the man's exhilaration of a Model T ride. "I'm surprised this is your first time. Surely Boise has some cranks." He pulled the throttle down slightly and eased the clutch pedal as the car edged forward.

"I have to confess, the oldest car I've ever ridden is a 1935 Ford pickup. But this reminds me that the early cars shrunk the country. And later planes shrunk the world."

"That '35 Ford sounds pretty modern to me." Seth pushed the throttle lever up a bit, let up on the clutch pedal, inched into high gear, and cruised down the road.

"Would sure take a lot of practice to manage this setup. Let's see...brake pedal on the right, clutch and high-low pedal on the left, reverse peddle in the middle...that would mess me up right away."

Seth considered this. "I suppose. If it's not what you're used to. But it's so easy for me. And if something doesn't work right, I know how to fix it. Most folks just turn a key, shift into drive, and expect to get where they intend to go. They've got no idea the mechanics of the thing. All while listening to loud music on the Hi-Fi." He made a grunting sound. "A driver's got to listen. Feel. Coax. Get in harmony with the machine. Most modern drivers know nothing about that."

"Quite a speech for you, Seth. But all this openness must be tough on the highway. Bugs and all?"

"You do need to learn how to grin with your mouth closed."

Vincent chortled. "So, you increase speed with the rods at the steering wheel?"

"The throttle is the one on the right." Seth squeezed the wheel with his hands and they roared down Cahill Crossing at thirty miles an hour. Then he slowed to take a right at the Steak House on Main Street. He headed to the Road's End Hotel where the lighted lobby revealed the Mathwig triplets and a couple guests huddled around the TV. He applied the brake, put the clutch pedal in neutral, and as the Model T rolled to a stop pulled the hand lever back with his left hand.

"Thanks again, Seth. You take care of yourself. Please let us know if you need anything." Seth nodded and Vincent waved as he entered the hotel.

Seth turned the Model T around in the empty street and turned right on Sourdough Avenue between Whitlow's Grocery and Jace and Norden's Outfitters. Up the hill beyond Lisl Monty's white wood frame house, he passed Polly Eng's gray stone and brick home where daughter Kam pulled clothes off a line. He returned her wave.

Back at home, Maidie's poodle stretched out in the driveway, so fat and old her teeth fell out. She had long forsaken chasing any of Maidie's dozens of cats. Now that the cats had suddenly disappeared, she boldly claimed any part of the property as her napping ground. There at the last, Seth asked Maidie if she had any special requests.

"Yes, I do," she said. "Two requests. One, put all my cats to sleep. We might as well all go out together."

So he did. And now he was about to do the other.

He parked the Model T in the garage.

A weathered chopping block on the cabin's front porch displayed assorted half-finished wooden carvings of cottonwood horses, dogwood owls, and pine howling coyotes. Works in progress. Other carvings looked like slugs or acorns. Red cedar bait plugs for the McKane brothers. A cardboard box held enameled ones with eyes and hooks.

Inside, the coffee table spread with chunks of close-grained cottonwood and dogwood and assorted knives. Comical old men's faces carved out of tree knots crammed around a penknife, a small jackknife with three blades, knives with thin handles and long blades, as well as pieces of copper wire. The tools of Seth's handiwork. His offering of service to God and to the citizens of Road's End.

Various other items sprawled around. A black chest. A pile of elk horns. The large bookcase filled with volumes. And more samples of Seth's carved sculptures on the dining table: sailing ships, a nativity scene, an antlered stag.

And one masterpiece recently completed. In the center of the table spread a chunk of pine formed into faces and abstract limbs joined in a flowing twist of seven people, some adults, but most children. Their open mouths and closed or squinting eyes caught frozen in the midst of a sudden catastrophe.

Seth still slept in the simple, small apartment above the unattached garage. He didn't feel comfortable even now invading Maidie's space in that way. The interior of this home looked like it had been sculpted out of the forest landscape that surrounded them. Seth had crafted most every square of it. He kept the log cabin chinked and varnished. He had always considered it Maidie's home and a

display case for his finished work, until he gave most of it away. Or sold it when the receiver insisted on paying. He gently rubbed one of the carved horses.

Two huge pine beds dominated the two bedrooms. A smaller twin size in the living room had been Maidie's hospital bed the past year. She loved looking at the hand carved frames that held pictures on the walls of Road's End and desert landscapes, reminders of the world outside her confined domain. He imagined Maidie lounged in her favorite chair of upholstered purple flowers, long hair braided or up in a bun. Rocking away with sandals or bare feet, eyes closed, intent on listening to every sound as though a blind person.

Seth would often meet Reba at the door with, "Come play your guitar and calm Maidie. She says I've fiddled enough."

Maidie never wasted anything. She even used her gout medicine to kill the cockroaches.

"Best exterminator ever," she insisted.

She kept ants away with mint plants and sniffed cotton balls dipped in peppermint or lavender oil. *I could use some of that right now.*

Though the place was as neat and clean as Maidie left it before she got so ill, he noticed a musty scent and a rotten egg smell. He checked the vents from the furnace.

*Please, God, not a gas leak now.* He did not need that added hassle, especially with Reba coming to visit at any moment. He wanted the presentation to her to be perfect as possible. Meanwhile, he had to settle things in his mind, how he would do it.

He entered the kitchen and the odor got stronger. He sniffed around the gas stove. Just as he was certain he would have to call someone to come help, he noticed a dozen eggs on the window ledge above the sink. Rotting. The last time he had brought groceries in, how many weeks ago, he forgot to refrigerate them. The sight not only brought relief, but made him chuckle. The sound and feel of it felt foreign, like from a far away country, a distant land.

He held his breath and tossed the egg carton in the back porch garbage can and rolled it out to the backyard. Then he returned to the dining room table. He picked up a four-inch deep antique wooden cigar box which once held cigars imported from the Philippines. He fingered the Pongee and Fine As Silk logos carved on top. He shut his eyes tight. What would he say? How would he explain what's inside? He knew so little himself. But from what he suspected, he sensed a pivotal moment coming. To what, he wasn't sure.

He heard a familiar pickup sound outside and soon a gentle tap at the door. He carefully laid the box on the table and called out, "Come in." His favorite redhead entered, spry and sassy and full of love for him. "You didn't ride Johnny Poe?"

"It's getting dark and I didn't dare take him anywhere near Main Street again so soon."

He strolled to the kitchen and brought back sodas, Henry Weinhard Root Beer for him and Mountain Dew for her. He knew she preferred cold from the frig poured over ice and squirted with lemon. However, she guzzled the lukewarm

carbonate with zeal. "Sure am thirsty all of a sudden." She tapped her nose as though getting a whiff of the unpleasant odor.

"I had to toss out some rotten eggs." Seth wasn't quite ready to reveal Maidie's treasure. He stalled by showing her a glass bottle with cork, on its side. Inside lurked a large black bug with eight legs, a pair of claws, and narrow, segmented tail.

"What is it?"

"A scorpion. Don't worry. It's long been dead. Part of what I found up in Maidie's attic. Think it was Papa's." He plodded to the dining table and picked up a long pair of tweezers. He pried the cork, poked in the bottle and plucked out two flat yellow bits stuck between the scorpion legs. "I'll bet they're flakes of solid gold." Dropping the morsels on the table, he added, "One way to figure, they resemble cereal flakes in size and weight."

She studied the flakes and scorpion a moment then her attention roved to the wall above the table. "You've hung up some new pictures." She ran a finger around a black and white framed photo of a young man naked to the waist who raced bareback in a herd of wild horses. In another the same male stood barefoot on top two horses, one hand raised, one held the reins. "Is this you?"

He swelled his chest and shoulders. "Yes, and this is my family." He pointed to the faces of five children, pinched heart mouths the same as the stately mother next to them. The woman's neck clustered with pearls, hair set prim. The man had neat beard, mustache curled on the ends, dark suit, dark tie and dark frown. Four of the children wore a single strand of choker pearls, a token of their mother's taste. Their hair bathed in light on the right side with one piled up, one pulled back, the other two flowing free.

"Which one are you?" Reba asked.

He pointed to the youngest, a child about two wearing a dress and hair in ringlets. Seth could feel his face pucker as tears rolled down the crevices of his cheeks. "We lost them. We lost them all." He hadn't meant to break down like this, but the photo brought it all back. The sorrows. The curse against his family.

She patted his back. "Yes, I know. It's so hard. With Maidie's passing, they're all gone now. You're the only one left."

"We lost them," he kept saying. He felt the agitation grow. *I'm losing it. Can't let that happen.*

She placed an arm around his stooped shoulder. "Now I know why you're so good with Johnny Poe." She pointed to the horse pictures. "You've had lots of practice."

*Thank you, Reba Mae.* His back muscles relaxed. His mouth still twitched, but he leaned his head against her and let out a deep sigh. "I knew him, you know. I met the real Johnny Poe."

"The real one? You mean, he was a real person? I got the name from Grandpa Cole, of course. The way he used the name it was like cussing."

"He claimed to be a cousin of writer Edgar Allan Poe. He played on that connection fierce to get himself in and out of trouble. We were in Goldfield during the rush and he was lookin' for adventure. He wanted to be a mercenary in anyone's army. His luggage was fifty-two pieces: a deck of cards." Seth paused,

reliving it. The sights and sounds and smells of Goldfield in his youth returned to him. "When a customer in one of the saloons ripped an American flag from the wall, Johnny raged till that fella and the saloon was a total wreck."

Seth muttered a few words he recalled from a long ago poem. Reba leaned closer. He repeated, "You rode your mud-caked shoes right on, just as you used to though, no honest tackle brought you down. They killed you, Johnny Poe."

"Who killed him?"

"Not sure. I heard he fought and died with the Scottish in World War I. So did your great-grandpa Bruce Cahill, only he survived the war." Seth tried to ignore the remnants of the rotten egg odor nuzzling his nose. "Johnny Poe's best friends in Goldfield were my Papa and Father Dermody, a big-hearted Irish priest. Papa said he and the priest got along great since Dermody never tried to talk him into being Catholic and Poe never tried to talk him out of being one. We went to the Protestant church a few times. My sisters and I would kick and punch each other during the singing then I fell asleep during the sermon. But not Mama. She stared at the pulpit like it was the throne of God." Seth sighed. "That gives me some comfort now."

He stopped as two shots rang out close to the house.

Seth and Reba scooted across the carpet and opened the door in time to catch a boy with a .22 taking aim at one of Ursula Younger's Pekingese. Reba shouted and dashed toward him. Seth trailed behind.

The boy aimed at Reba.

*Kaboom!*

The blast came from behind them. Smoke billowed out the rear of the Stroud cabin. Seth wheeled around, fell, and crawled on his spindly legs. He scrambled toward the cabin as he heard Reba yell at the boy, "Call 911." And then she ordered, "Seth, don't go in there!"

But he wobbled through the front door. He gasped for breath as he plucked photos off the wall. Then he laid them down and grabbed for the cigar box and tried to push the cardboard box under the table with his legs and feet.

"I'll get them," Reba said. "You get out of here."

"The book . . . the box . . . everything," he wheezed.

Reba shoved him toward the door. "I'll carry whatever I can."

He pushed her aside and reached for the table. He heard a man's voice nearby. Someone with firm, strong arms led him away.

The fire spread quickly and smoked spewed the house. Reba pushed boxes out the door and ran back and forth throwing armloads of books and carvings. She finally came out with a tablecloth bundled like a knapsack. She rubbed her eyes and coughed and staggered in a circle. Seth wanted so bad to get up and help her but he couldn't make his legs work. The same man who helped him thrust out his arm and propelled her toward him. She soon sprawled on the lawn beside him.

By the time EMTs Lisl Monte and Polly Eng arrived with volunteer fire chief Buckhead Whitlow and crew, the cabin erupted in full flame. Lisl put Seth on oxygen and took his blood pressure.

"Norden saved us," Reba told Deputy Lomax. "Good thing he was nearby or I'd never have gotten Seth out of there."

The volunteer firemen hosed the garage and perimeter of the burning cabin.

Seth pulled off the oxygen and refused to go to the hospital. Reba tried to talk him into going with Lisl and Polly, but he shook his head as he stared at the blaze.

"I'll take him home with me," she assured them. Reba reached for the treasures he'd risked his life for, but he still clutched them tight. "Seth, you can stay with us for as long as you need to."

"Obliged." He stumbled over to Reba's pickup, piled into the passenger side, and hung his head.

Buck Whitlow scurried over. "We've saved the garage and the apartment on top."

"How about my Model T?"

"We saved it also, but it'll be a bit waterlogged a day or two."

"Who was the boy with the .22?" Reba asked Norden.

"I don't know who you mean." Norden stretched around as though checking to see who was in earshot.

"Well, he saved our lives, whether he meant to or not."

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At the Cahill house, Pearl met them at the door. "I heard what happened. Tell me all about it. I'm so thankful you both are okay."

"They think it was a gas leak. I thought I smelled gas the minute I walked in. I should have checked it out."

"But I already had," Seth insisted. So it wasn't the rotten eggs after all.

Reba detailed what else she knew for her grandmother as Seth set several horse carvings and the free flowing wood sculpture of faces and limbs on the mantle, the one with the bald man with clean shaven face and the woman and children with long, tangled, and intertwined hair.

After Seth laid the photos he'd saved on the Cahill coffee table, he balanced the family grouping against the sculpture. The same number of persons in the two settings. Same proportion of adults and children, but no other resemblance. One winsome, expressing unity. The other a caricature of horror. One seemed full of rich history and hope. The other full of death. *The story of my family.*

While Reba stepped out to check on the horses and the heifer, Seth piled his smoke-drenched clothes against Pearl's closed bedroom door. He pulled on some of Cole's old pajamas that Pearl handed him before she went back to bed.

When Reba returned, she scooped up the dirty clothes. "I'll take them to the back porch to wash."

A piece of paper drifted to the floor. Seth picked it up. A torn page from an old Goldfield News, part of an article by W.P. DeWolf with no date showing. He read part of it:

An indefinable attraction attaches to a mining camp and to the followers of such excitements it appeals with the same tenacity

as does the odor of the poppy to the dope fiend. It is an insidious disease....

His handwritten note at the side: "Mama and her girls, God rest her soul." He rubbed it flat on an end table. Soon he heard the washing machine filling and spinning.

Ginny stirred out of the guest room. "What's going on? Why all the lights? I'm trying to sleep."

"My house blew up." Seth started to tell her more about it.

"Oh. Well, tell me again in the morning." She shut her door.

"She's probably sleepwalking. That girl can sleep through anything," Reba whispered as she tiptoed back in. "I'm headed to bed too. Anything else you need? You can sleep on the couch or out in the bunkhouse."

"I'll stay in here tonight." All of a sudden, he didn't want to be alone. Then a thought crashed over him. *The cigar box!* "Wait. Reba Mae, I almost forgot." He broke out in a cold sweat. This wasn't the way he pictured this presentation. It was all wrong. Awkward. No finesse. But it had to be done.

He stood in front of the two large cardboard boxes, tape-strapped by the EMTs after the fire. He scooted them down the stairs from the attic days before. "These were all Maidie's treasures," he reported. "I need to open them. Now."

Reba scurried to the kitchen and brought back a serrated knife. She sliced them both down the middle and tore back the top.

Seth pulled out the wooden cigar box. "Reba, this is yours. Maidie wanted you to have it." He watched her puzzled look. "Inside. What's inside it."

She took the wooden box and carried it to the dining room table. She slowly lifted the lid, then a piece of parchment paper covering. She tugged at a gold chain.

Seth's heart beat faster as he prepared himself to view this treasure once more. The last time he'd seen it, before bringing down from Maidie's attic, was around his own mother's neck, about eighty years before.

Reba pulled up a long string of attached small turquoise stones as brilliant as robin's eggs. They formed ten ladybug shapes, five on each side, trailed to larger stones on a double-rowed circular center. Delicate multi-strands of gold held them together and encased each setting. "Oh, Seth! How beautiful. I've never seen anything like it."

"It's a squash blossom necklace. Maidie wanted you to have it."

Reba spread it out on the lace tablecloth. "I don't understand. Why would she give it to me?"

Seth almost froze as the moment of decision finally came. Did he tell her the truth? Or skirt around it? "If she got a notion in her head, hard to change it."

"But did she mention any reason?"

Seth felt a chill on his heart. He hesitated and then blurted out, "Because you were so kind to her."

"But so were lots of other people. Grandma too. In fact, I wonder if she's awake. Maybe she is. Unlike Ginny, she's a light sleeper." She slipped to Pearl's door and gently tapped. In a few moments, Pearl peeked out.

"Grandma, look what Seth just gave me. From Maidie."

Pearl's eyes changed from droopy to alert. She admired the necklace with plenty of oohs and ahs. "I'm so glad you were able to save this from the fire. What a treasure."

"I don't mean to be rude," Reba began, "but you both know I don't wear jewelry much. And certainly nothing like this. Doesn't fit with mendin' fence, cuttin' calves, and shovelin' manure."

Pearl helped her clip it around her neck. "Yes, that was rude. Accept the gift. Figure out what to do with it later." She turned to Seth. "Did Zeke give this to Maidie? Or was it her mother's?"

"Zeke Owens? Her fiancé? How romantic." Reba fingered the stones and links.

"Sorry. No to both. It was her grandmother's. I do know my mother had it special made using turquoise and gold from her Worthy, Nevada mine." He looked Reba in the eye. "To tell you the truth, I have no idea how Maidie got it. It was nowhere to be found after mother's death, though she always wore it. My father and I looked everywhere. I sure would like to know how Maidie came by it. I wish I had asked her before..." *Before she died.* "She told me to fetch the necklace from the attic in the cigar box. She passed before I brought it downstairs. I had no idea...I didn't realize it was *that* one."

"A mystery necklace. How fascinating." Reba scrutinized the design more closely in the mirror over the dining room hutch. "I will wear it and proudly, since it was important to Maidie. In fact, tomorrow at church. That is, if I can find something worthy enough from my cowgirl wardrobe."

"Good. And Ginny will help you," her grandmother reminded her.

Seth pointed to the boxes. "Pearl, I want you to have anything you want in them. All mementos from Maidie."

"Thanks so much. I'm honored. But I don't think I'll look at them right now. Too late tonight and too soon emotionally for me. Besides, we should look at them together. There may be items you'll want to keep."

Reba pressed Seth once more. "In all those years of taking care of Maidie, of living so close to her, you never had a hint she possessed an exquisite gem like this?"

Seth avoided her eyes. A hazy memory hovered over his aging mind. Hanna Jo coming to the cabin to get a high school graduation present. Maidie all *hush-hush* about it. Hanna Jo storming out and running away from home soon after.

"Aha, you know something. Spit it out."

"No, I don't. Well, maybe. I'm not sure, but that's all I have to say." I've said too much. Was Maidie trying to give her this necklace? If so, why did she refuse it? And what so bothered her that she had to leave home?

Reba stroked the metal and stones. "I want to know everything. I will know, sooner or later. Don't hold anything back, Seth."

A tense current passed between Seth and Pearl with a quick-shared look of alarm. What have we stirred up? Seth regretted more than ever they had never revealed to Reba the whole truth. At least, what they knew of it. Now that Maidie was gone, perhaps this was the time.

Pearl cleared her throat. "It's late. Let's go to bed and talk more tomorrow. It's been a long, tough day."

Pearl closed her door and Reba sauntered to her room, full of wonder. And worry.

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Seth lurched and pitched to scrunch his backside into a comfortable position on the lumpy couch, his mind in turmoil with a flood of memories, a tide of speculations. His mother and sisters secluded at a desert plateau garden. Him stalking Goldfield streets seeking newspaper customers. His father plying his trade as a barber. A family split. Connections broken. A mother entrepreneur, ambitious, intelligent, and beautiful. A decent, faithful father, frightened for her safety, scared he'd lost her. Her love. Her life.

He swayed back and forth in agony, mourning once more his mother and sisters. And sweet Maidie, his lifetime charge, a fresh, stark loss. Watching Maidie's life ebb day-by-day reduced him to a helpless youth again.

He squirmed to push his head deep into the cushions, trying to still Molly's pleading voice and baby Maidie's cries. He thrashed the cushions, wishing he had a club to beat the swirl of demons that seemed to surround him. Nothing stopped the image of finding his murdered mother. A gunshot splattered in the middle of her forehead. And no necklace to be found. Anywhere.

Did the murderer take it? If so, how did Maidie get it? And keep it secret for so many years?

Right under Seth's nose?

And did she try years ago to give it to Hanna Jo?

With some effort he wriggled to a sitting position on the couch and attempted to find the switch on the end table light. He bumped his hand on several objects and prayed he wouldn't cause a noise and disturb the house's other residents. Especially cranky Ginny George.

A beam snapped into the dark and he made his way to the cardboard boxes. He rummaged around until he found the leather bound book he determined to avoid reading in his ardent respect for her privacy: Maidie's journal. But he raged with so many pressing questions. More every day. Perhaps she supplied an answer within those pages.

The entries started in 1925 and ended in 1945. The years her mind stayed most steady, sane and clear. Before the craziness began. He read for several hours, suppressing sobs and reliving long ago, but not far away joys. Early days in Road's End. Visits to her grandfather's barbershop. Finding true love with Zeke Owens. Zeke's honorable discharge from the army toward the end of WWII. Coming to Road's End to work for the Runcies. Doing carpentry and odd jobs. He'd forgotten about her working too, as a nanny for Champ and Blair Runcie.

*I love little Donnie and his brothers so much. Looking forward to children of my own.*

*With my wonderful Zeke, of course...*

Seth mourned her loss again. And her own tragedy...

Seth flipped the light off as he heard Pearl and Reba stir. He heard them whisper about checking distress noises emanating near the barn. They stole past him and out the front door.

After they left, he turned the page and his heart nearly stopped. He sat up straight. He read the cryptic notes over and over. He conjured every interpretation he could imagine and only one surfaced. Stunned, overwhelmed, he soon righted himself after a lifetime of practice, from thoughts of vengeance to fervent prayers for a righteous-anger kind of solution.

Dear God, should I have given that necklace to Reba? What if she wears it in public? What will happen? Is she in danger?

*Trust Me, my son.*

"Lord, is that you? Are you talking to me?"

*Trust Me.*

"I will. I am. Show me, Lord, what to do and I'll act." And soon. By anyone's calculation, his earthly days were numbered. His spine electrified with excitement. With God's help, at least two very cold cases could be solved. But why bother with such ancient history from many decades ago?

Two reasons.

Because every life matters.

And so does justice.

He heard Pearl and Reba's voices and clomps on the front wooden deck and slipped a hand on the light switch. He slunk down on the couch and pretended sleep with a random snore or two. As he devised a plan.

## Chapter Five

Reba snuggled under the cozy blankets. Covered all over, thoughts and all.

She blessed Him who invented sleep as she sought to sink back into that reset of oblivion.

But soon her mind buzzed with the day before. Birth and death. The loss of another calf. A paralyzed heifer. Maidie's funeral. The whip on her back. The explosion at Seth's house. The shock of the gift of the squash blossom necklace. And another frantic cow alarm last night. At least, this time it happened in the barn. Another late heifer. Another black calf and red mother. However, this one stayed home. No escape to Runcie land.

She burrowed into her pillow and groaned as her back raged. She peeked at the nightstand clock. Five o'clock? What day is it? Not Saturday.

*Sunday?*

Her eyes popped open as she peeled a cocoon of covering and pulled out of her private shelter. She staggered to her feet to fumble with the arms of her faded blue flannel robe. She slid open the creaking bedroom door to see if Ginny or Grandma Pearl had ownership to the bathroom.

*Empty.*

She grabbed Jace's cream and wondered how she'd dab it on herself. She crept past the closed guest room. No use in bothering Ginny this early.

She grabbed a clean towel and took it to the kitchen, wet it under the sink and stuffed it in a plastic bag. Grandma Pearl claimed a cold pack would work as well as cream. She popped it in the freezer at the top of the frig. *How long? Ten minutes? Twenty?*

She braced herself against the pain, grabbed the ibuprofen bottle, and popped four pills.

"So, you're up?"

Startled, she turned around. Seth stood in the clothes he'd worn yesterday and must have pulled from the dryer. "What are you doing up?"

"I'm going home."

"Right now?"

"Yes, ma'am. It's too noisy here. People up and down, in and out during the night. Snores and moans. A fella can't rest at all."

"Give me a half-hour. I'll take you back."

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Reba's attempts to talk Seth into staying failed, so she drove him home, leaving behind all his sculptures, pictures, wood carvings, and Maidie's cardboard boxes.

Reba tried one last plea. "The cabin's burnt to the ground. Your apartment's probably soaked. What are you going to do there?"

"I can sleep outside. Done it plenty of times. And I've got lots of work to do. Might as well get started on it."

"You're a stubborn old man. You know that, don't you?" She gazed at him and her concern turned to alarm. Though he tried to smile, his face sank into grimness. "Seth, if you're depressed, you need to stay with us. You can sleep in the bunkhouse. It's quiet in there and you'll be left alone. I promise. It's just temporary, for a few days."

He reached out and rubbed her arm. "I'm okay. I didn't sleep well last night. I've got an old hammock in the backyard and it does wonders for my aching bones. I'll catch up with a long nap there and be right as rain."

"You want me to come pick you up for church?"

"No, I'll either get there on my own or I won't. I'll make my peace with the Almighty wherever I am."

By a miracle, the hammock had not been touched by the fire. Reba left him there, collapsed and cozy. She also tucked a basket of non-perishables into the Model T. The old touring car had mostly dried and Reba surmised with some polishing would look better than ever.

On the way back to the Cahill Ranch, her rig rattled around a meshed tangle of cottonwoods and aspen trees. A remuda in one of the pastures came on the run. She spotted the black one with silvery right foreleg among the streaks of pulsing horseflesh. Johnny Poe was still her favorite and the only thing besides

her truck and trailer she could really call her own. She parked her truck and greeted her horse. After she watched him chew some flakes of hay, she checked the heifers and noticed the one lost-and-found at Runcie's still stiff and not moving well.

Better call the vet.

She prowled around the barn and corrals, shoveled muck, and tried to groom Johnny Poe. Grandma Pearl complained she treated him more like a show horse than a ranch animal, but today she needed to keep her mind off the loss of the newborn and the fire of pain coming from her back. Pain pills and fussing with her horse helped a lot.

After she brushed the thick black mane and set the saddle, she tightened the cinch, climbed up, and made three rounds. She trotted Johnny Poe around the headquarters then reeled him across the north pasture and down to Runcie Road. She avoided pavement and gravel and as many peering eyes as possible. She took the long trails of the detour route to Coyote Hill.

When they reached a certain side trail, Johnny Poe snorted, reared, and yanked his head in the direction of home. She grabbed firm hold of the reins and forced him forward. He took two steps and stopped. No matter what she did, he wouldn't budge.

A bird sang in the pines like the incessant ring of a telephone, but she couldn't answer or turn it off. "Hey, boy, there's no barbed wire here. No wires at all today."

She rubbed his neck and mane and kept talking. Gradually he nudged ahead. As his attention darted from tree to tree, he plodded one slow leg in front of the other. She began winning a victory of sorts, but didn't dare gloat.

Reba did her best thinking perched on a horse. And Johnny Poe rode real nice, when he wasn't stalled. He loved storming the hill, flying with the breeze. He craved speed. At eight-years-old, he was still fleet and agile. Right now he pranced like a hyper kid off his Ritalin. They didn't stop until they reached the top. She reined him in so she could peer around at the farms and city below.

Road's End, a settlement surrounded by dozens of crisscross mountain valley cow trails. A good place, as Jace said, for loners. *Why wasn't it good enough for Hanna Jo Cahill?*

Reba felt free on this mountaintop. But not full. Emptiness gripped her insides. She grieved for Maidie, a lonely old woman who few understood. She mourned a mother who left her and never returned. And she longed for the perfect romance, a kindred spirit, a soul mate that always eluded her.

Johnny Poe pawed the ground.

"I see you're through with meditation time."

His eyes twitched as she ran her hand down his sleek, sweaty back. He faced due south toward the exhilarating downhill gallop back to Road's End. "Be patient. Give me a moment. We'll get back when I'm good and ready. You might as well settle down."

This was the spot her mother brought her before she dumped her at the Cahill Ranch. She tried to see what Hanna Jo viewed that day. What was she

thinking? Why did she leave this place? *Why without me?* She kept Michael and raised him. Why not her too? What would her life have been like with her mom?

She patted her horse. "Michael gives me hints. They led some sort of vagabond life, traveling here and there. No connections. No security. Every stop temporary. No permanent duties or responsibilities. No commitments, except to each other." She sighed. "Not sure I'd like that. Maybe..." *Maybe I was better off in Road's End?*

She tied Johnny Poe to a ponderosa and scooted under a huge spider's web glistened with morning dew, strung between two pines. She hiked to a boulder and eased down against it sideways, avoiding her back. Her horse neighed in protest as he beat against the ground. She peeked back and waited until he settled down in the grass, with several birds landing on top of him. He shook himself until they flew away.

"Sorry, boy," she whispered. "I need time to myself."

Wildflowers covered the hill in purple thistle and pink and fuchsia wild rose bushes. She surveyed Road's End again, the rambling village she called home. The layout looked like stray tramps had claimed squatter's rights long enough to throw up roofs and walls, then move on. With some exceptions. The businesses on Main Street. The ranch houses. The sprawling Younger spread above Seth's still smoldering cabin.

Reba relaxed as she sensed Johnny Poe settle down. She snapped a sprig of rare mountain elevation rosemary, crushed the leaves, and inhaled the robust fragrance. She thought about Maidie humming in her garden. Maidie playing her haunting flute on the balcony. Maidie over the edge after the tragic death of her fiancé. Maidie pining all those years, also unlucky at love. Maidie in agonizing pain, prone on her hospital bed, daily asking to see Reba to bring some relief. Maidie white and angel-like, finally at peace in her casket.

Where would Reba go now, when Grandma Pearl got too bossy? When she missed her mom real bad? Whose feet would she rub? Whose shoulders would she massage?

Reba grabbed a stick and dug holes in the dirt to make a mini-trench around a clump of yellow and orange forest lilies.

Maidie fed the town with garden surplus and stubborn rumors. Reba noted the irony that she thought more of her now than when she lived among them. She wondered what Maidie, in her limited capacity, wanted for her life? And did she get it? She shuddered to consider the answer.

"I never wanted to be a cowgirl," Reba shouted to the wind. "Not at first anyway."

She was seven-years-old again and Grandma Pearl ordered her to shovel manure in the barn. She missed her mom terrible. She fussed and fumed to no avail and then tossed flakes of hay to the most ungrateful bunch of beasts God ever created. The next day she initiated a sit-down strike in the root cellar. She didn't move a twitch. She never felt such a sense of power as she did down in that hole.

She snickered. *It took Grandma until noon to find me.*

Grandma Pearl took one look at Reba crouched in that tangle of spider webs and rat droppings and said, "All right, you'd rather live down there, that's fine. I'll bring you supper once a day and you can come out once a week for baths. I'll hire someone else to help with our ranchin'." She slammed the door lid and stomped away.

The old rat's den that had seemed a heavenly hideaway moments before soon transformed into a pit of terror. She learned right then it's one thing to choose your own poison, quite another to be force-fed. She scrambled up those rickety stairs so fast she cleared off ten years of serious cobwebs. But Grandma had clamped the cellar door too hard for her fifty pounds to raise even an inch.

She banged until her knuckles bled and her heart nearly burst. Finally Grandma Pearl and sixteen feet square of the sweetest patch of clear Idaho sky appeared overhead.

"That's when I determined to be a cowgirl Grandma's way." She continued her flashback crouched on the hill, tears burned into her dusty eyes. "And that's what I am. So, why am I crying?"

At sixteen Reba broke Johnny Poe before he broke her. He still liked to test her mettle. Her grandfather once told her, "Black beauties steal away innocent girls and urge them to an endless childhood. She felt long past being a child, but still innocent. *Naïve innocent. Ignorant innocent.*

A distant sound like a simple, lilting tune caught her attention. She listened as a full sunrise of burnt orange and gold splayed the sky and heightened visibility. Curious, she stalked behind some high growing wild rose bushes. A light glinted from a far away window and beckoned her through the trees. Drawn to the music as it grew louder, her heart hitched to the rhythm. She began to recognize measures from an old hymn "Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee." Or was it Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*?

She crept closer near Bullfrog Meadow, which sheltered a patriot's field of white daisies, blue bachelor buttons, and Indian paintbrush. Random tree stumps scattered the field, some burnt or moss-covered. Reba crossed a private bridge that creaked over a narrow stream with a "Cross At Own Risk!" sign. She plodded over broken top boards and twisted around piles of cut branches, a load of dry, dead logs, and scattered wood chips. Logging residue. Great fodder for a fire.

Sun sparkles shimmered atop the aqua tinted waters of Bottle Lake. A black moose waded in to feed on pondweed and water lilies. A few red cedar trees competed with a blanket of lodge pole pines around the small lake and streamed up the hills. Sage hens purred as she caught a glimpse of a stripe of colored neck feathers. Flies buzzing seemed as loud as an electric saw.

Rough splintered wood formed a crude sign with drippy red painted letters of "NO." No what? No shooting? No hunting? No trespassing? All of the above?

Not far away she spied a man whose hat shadow made a moon shape on his face. His jaw set hard like he tried to keep his teeth together. He pulled out a gun and shot once. He hiked eight steps and lifted a huge striped garter snake. The twitching skin hung straight and witless as a rope.

He turned around. His eyes glowered and seemed to meet hers through the swath of tall grass. She tensed, ready to run. *Champ Runcie?* Was he already back from Spokane?

He pulled out a bowed knife and hacked weeds and pulled down grass. Then he sunk down in silence with occasional glances around. After he hiked away, Reba found the stomped and cleared place next to a stone marker with two short lines: Daniel David, February 23, 1945.

The same day of her mother's birth. *How curious.* Was David his last name? Was the date of his birth or death? *Curiouser and curiouser.* She registered the surprise and amazement of an Alice in Wonderland. She caught her breath and half-expected the morphing of talking animals, singing flowers, and a quarrelsome queen or two. What's going on here? How come she never knew about this place before? She determined to ignore any signs that read, "Eat me!"

In a swale surrounded by high weeds and pines, and down a long corduroy path made with perpendicular stripped branches, she stumbled upon a tiny dilapidated chapel with cross that ministered to a rodent congregation. A piano retired under decades of dust. Smells of mildew and bat dung permeated the building the size of a twelve by fifteen shed. Perhaps some scrubbing and hammering and the strains of old hymns could be heard again through the shabby walls.

Reba lifted the instrument's rusty lid and tried to play on the yellowed ivory keys. She noticed on the bench an imprint in the dust of someone who recently sat there. Was Champ playing this piano? Or did he have some sort of boom box with him? She didn't move as she tried to soak in a moment of wonderment and determine if it was also sacred. It certainly was undisturbed, heavenly calm.

She finally pulled away from the mystical mood, crept out of the building, and hiked up the hill to her antsy steed.

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Back at the Cahill corrals, Johnny Poe trotted, laid back his ears, and reared high three times. Reba fell off and smacked hard on her bottom. Her throbbing back wracked with agony.

"I thought you had that beast whooped."

Reba grimaced and strained to get up. "Michael, what are you doing here?"

"It's Sunday morning. Thought I'd come to church for once. Might do me some good, if the barn doesn't cave in."

"Hey, that's great. Glad to have you join us." She popped some pills she tucked in her shirt pocket and reached for her canteen just in time before Johnny Poe kicked his hind legs in fury and jumped the corral fence. "It's your red Polo shirt," Reba yelled. "He doesn't like red."

Michael yanked off his shirt and sauntered forward. As he got closer to the agitated horse, he clamped hard to the reins and nuzzled the bright red cotton into the animal's nose. Johnny Poe took some tentative sniffs, rubbed against it, and visibly settled down. Michael handed her back the reins. "You should have neutered him."

Reba remounted, her back raging, raring for a fight. "You claim to hate ranch work, yet show off like that."

"I never said I hated it." Michael pulled his Polo with striped collar back on, leaving it unbuttoned. "It's just not as easy with this." He shoved his left hand toward her with two short stubs. Blown off in a fireworks accident, he claimed.

"You could learn to adapt, if you really wanted to." Reba felt an easing of the fire as the meds kicked in.

"Which I don't." He softened the response with his easy going grin. "Nina and I would like you to come over to my place for pizza sometime soon. Will you come?"

"I've got Ginny George staying with me. What day works for you?"

"Tonight."

"I suppose you and her will still be going together by then?"

Michael scowled. "I'm really serious this time. I hope she stays."

"Can Ginny tag along?"

"Oh, sure. I like Ginny. So does Jace McKane. Want to invite him too?"

Was her flirting so obvious to everyone? "Sorry. Not a good idea. Ginny's married, you know."

"But you're not. I was thinking of you."

Oh, sure. "Um, I don't think so. It's just me and Ginny, if she's available." Besides, I'm kinda, sorta dating Don.

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"Never connected with Paris last night or this morning." Ginny's brow furrowed in worry.

"Maybe he's staying with one of your family members. Or a friend," Reba suggested.

"Maybe." She patted her forehead with makeup and powder over the wrinkle of creases. "That squash blossom necklace will go with most anything in your closet, including denim. Wear it with pride and confidence and everyone will think it's the newest style. That's what the professionals do."

Reba wasn't a professional anything, unless it had to be with a rope or saddle. She settled on black denim Wranglers and black round-necked chiffon blouse with her black Noconas.

Ginny adjusted the necklace, exactly centered, all gems in full view. She pulled out some turquoise dot earrings. "These will match perfect. And they aren't too big. In fact, you can keep them. Too small for me." In her teal caftan dress with black beads, she swirled around her burnished auburn friend. "Stunning!" she ruled.

They sauntered down to the barn with the guitar case. Reba almost slung it across her back before the pain stopped her. When she groaned, Ginny grabbed it by the handle and rolled up the strap. "I hope no one challenges me to play this."

"But you could. You know how to play the harp. They both have strings."

"Not the same thing at all. Especially without practice. And it's been so long on the harp."

About a fifty person church service that morning, twice the usual number, including Jace with a familiar looking boy about eight years old. Reba worked her way over to them first and Ginny followed.

Jace began with a soft whistle. "You girls look gorgeous." And followed with, "I'm so sorry about Seth's place."

Reba bristled at the dubious compliment. *He meant Ginny and had to include me.* She looked around for Seth and couldn't find him. "Who is your young friend?"

"I'd like you to meet Abel McKane, my youngest brother. I think."

"Oh!" Reba wondered why Norden seemed puzzled when she'd asked about the lad.

"You think?" sputtered Ginny.

Reba recovered. "Well, he saved me and Seth from certain harm by alerting us with his .22 in time to get away from Seth's exploding cabin."

"Oh!" Jace turned to the boy. "No guns. You leave our weapons alone. Understand?"

Abel scowled. "I hear you." He glared at Reba.

"How long has he been here?" Ginny asked.

"He was at my doorstep when I got home last night. Norden left the place unlocked and he had his run of the place before I arrived." He paused. "And no, I didn't know he was coming. His, uh, parents wanted it to be a surprise."

"Hugh's boy?" Ginny probed.

"Yep." His eyes and brows curled up as if embarrassed.

"Who is the mother?"

"His latest wife." He lowered his voice. "She couldn't keep a nanny and didn't want to be bothered anymore."

"So they sent him to two bachelor men in the wilds of Idaho? And without a warning?"

Jace shrugged. "Not the first time."

Before Reba could ask a question, she stepped out of the way as Tucker Paddy in red suspenders bumped her. Wife Ida with their two sons in tow angled for seats together. The biggest stunner of the morning happened with the arrival of the entire Runcie clan, including their ranch hand Joe Bosch.

Reba greeted Don. "I thought you went to Spokane."

"We looked at the equipment and came right back. Wasn't what we needed."

"Sure glad to see you all here today." She thanked Kaitlyn for the horse picture.

"It was Johnny Poe," she said. "He's my favorite, even if he won't let me ride him."

"Yeah, he's not a kid horse." She hugged the girl.

When she raised up she noticed Champ staring at her. His attention fixed so long, she wondered if he'd seen her that morning at the gravesite. His face flushed crimson. His eyes seemed to puff large, infused with a red rush. He looked like he'd started down a steep hill too fast and couldn't stop.

What is bothering him?

He shoved her in the aisle, away from his family. In an instant his fury reached a near boiling point. "Where did you get that?"

Reba searched around for protectors. The deputy. Grandma Pearl. Even Jace. Or Don? Her supposed romantic interest fussed with his grandkids, tugging off Kaitlyn's sweater, pulling crayons from his pocket. "What are you talking about?"

"That." He punched hard with a finger near her Adam's apple. "That necklace. Who gave it to you?" Champ loomed so close she inhaled minty breath and the ticking of his watch vibrated against her skin. "Or did you steal it?"

Astounded the necklace erupted such a reaction, she took a moment to consider her response. An assortment of retorts spitted around in her mind. She settled on, looking him straight in the eye. "I'll answer you, if you'll tell me who David Daniel is." She immediately realized her mistake.

What shot from his mouth resembled a rattle and hiss. He jerked around, stomping on her toe, and motioned to Don. "All of you. Get up. We're going."

Blair blinked hard. "What?"

"Now. Out of here." He glared down each one of them...Blair, Don, Kaitlyn, William, Tim, Sue Anne, and Joe too. "We're not going to a church full of hypocrites. They are liars and thieves."

A crowd circled around them.

"What's the matter?" Pearl asked.

"Nothing," Don replied as he scooted to the aisle.

Pearl reached out to hug the children. "I don't get the sense that it's nothing."

Don's eyes met Reba's, etched with bewilderment and perhaps shame. "I'm so sorry. Dad's not feeling well. We're going to take him home to rest."

With that, the Runcie crew exited the building.

"It was about my new necklace," Reba said. "He wanted to know where I got it and called me a liar and thief."

Vincent leaned over and studied the jewelry. "Beautiful work. I think you should get it assessed. Looks worth a lot of money."

"Perhaps you shouldn't wear it at all," Jace said. "I suggest you put it in a safety deposit box."

Reba fondled one of the stones. "What's the point in that?"

Pearl directed Reba to the platform to play a chorus or two. Subdued, everyone settled into their seats and Pearl tried to prepare their hearts for worship. She began the service. "Heavenly Father, we thank you for this barn where we can freely meet. Fill this place with Your presence. May all who come and go, arrive and depart with Your peace."

Reba thought of Champ's angry face and the cowed looks of his family as they left. She didn't understand any of it. She wished Seth were here to perhaps explain.

After singing hymns and choruses, Thomas, Floyd, and Franklin took up the offering with leather saddlebags. Pearl shared encouragement and exhortation from Psalm 34:14, "Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it."

Reba only half-listened, but bits and pieces pierced through.

"Turn from evil. Don't get sucked in. Run. Flee. Do good. For anyone, anytime, however you can. Good overcomes evil. Seek peace. Be a mediator. Pursue peace. In turmoil, stay calm."

Reba felt anything but peaceful. Her insides riled up as she replayed the scene with Champ. Why didn't she tell him how she got the necklace? That's all he wanted to know. That would have steadied him. She should have known the secret place where she spied him that morning was a sore mention for him. A very private spot. And none of her business. Why did she goad him that way? *Forgive me, Lord.* She wasn't open with the simple truth and Champ's whole family plus Joe paid a price. They may never come back to this church again.

After the service, Jace grabbed Reba's arm. "Have you ever had a regular preacher or pastor?"

Reba eased her arm free. "Pastor Kiersey from Elkhaville fills in on occasion. But he has his own church and youth ministry. Or sometimes a traveling missionary shares with us."

"What did you do before you had the barn church?"

"It was just the three of us. Grandpa did the reading. I led the singing. And Grandma preached. In good weather, we met under Grandpa's Camperdown Elm. In the winter, in our living room." Reba considered whether to say more. "I think Road's End may have had at least one small chapel in use. I think I saw it. This morning, in fact."

"Really? Maybe you can show me sometime."

Reba hesitated. If she showed him the chapel, he'd see the grave too. She didn't want to incur any more of Champ's wrath, if she could help it. On the other hand, she'd like to go back there herself. That would provide an excuse. "Maybe."

Did his face light up? With a maybe?

Pearl tapped her elbow. "I'm going home to prepare lunch for our guests. But don't hurry. We're having more leftovers." She smiled at Jace. "Invite anyone else you want."

Pearl scooted away and Reba turned to Jace. "I think she meant you. Want to come for lunch?"

"How about it, buddy?" he asked Abel. "You hungry?"

Abel nodded and dealt a swift kick to Reba's shin.

Jace popped him on the bottom. Abel kicked him too. Jace grabbed the boy and offered her a chagrined smile. "As you can see, there's lots of work to be done."

Reba felt a trickle of empathy ooze into an unguarded prick of her heart. For the first time, she observed a side of Jace as more than an arrogant playboy. He was willing to patiently mentor his needy brothers, both Norden and Abel. He showed signs he'd make a great father himself. A positive mark already checked on her newly crafted Possible Future Date Jace List.

But she must also enter a negative. A big one. He wasn't a rancher.

With a blush over her private fantasy, she started to respond to Jace, but noticed a determined Don walking toward them. She offered an awkward greeting.

Don nodded at Jace and crossed his arms. "I need to talk to Reba. Alone."

"No problem." Jace turned away, his hand on Abel.

"But you'll come to lunch, won't you?" Reba said.

"We'll be there." Jace sauntered toward Ginny who chatted with Vincent and Elliot Laws.

She realized her mistake. In a bind, having mentioned lunch to Jace, she said, "You're welcome, too, Don. We're having after funeral food."

Don dismissed the invitation with a wave of his hand. "I'm so sorry, but Dad insists that necklace belongs to him. He had it made to give to my mom years ago and it got stolen. He wants it back."

Reba touched the stones and chains. Sure, it was a bit gaudy for her simple style. And she'd only owned it a few hours, so no special attachment, except her love for Seth and Maidie. In addition, she didn't want to turn this into an uglier situation than it already was. But something didn't ring true. "Is he sure, Don? Could there be another necklace like this one?"

"No way. Look at the intricacy. It's not the type made on an assembly line. He's absolutely positive."

"But Seth gave it to me. He told me it belonged to Maidie and she wanted me to have it. Seth said she's had it for over forty years. At first, I presumed she got it as a gift from Zeke Owens, her fiancé."

"Well then, Zeke stole it. He worked for my dad, you know."

Reba's stomach churned. How quick Don accused a dead man unable to defend himself. She took offense on behalf of sweet Maidie. She tried to recall everything Seth told her about the necklace. "No, I was wrong. Seth told me this necklace belonged to his mother, to Maidie's grandmother. It was made special for Eve Stroud using turquoise and gold from her Nevada mine."

Don hung his head. "Unfortunately, that's a lie. It belongs to my dad."

Reba hit an impasse. She didn't know what to do. But she had no doubt who she believed. Seth had been proved many times as honest, faithful, and true, both to Reba and to Maidie. As for Champ, she didn't trust him as far as she could spit him out. And Don toiled as a mere minion for his father. He knew nothing.

Trouble is, as far as she could determine, there was no way to prove legitimate ownership either way. However, Champ held power chips over ordinary citizens like her or Seth. If Champ can have anything he wants, except one thing, that's what he'll go after. With a vengeance. Reba had seen him haggle over prices at Whitlow's Grocery. He could get real irate over a can of peaches, especially since he believed he owned part of the leased store, the land underneath.

She took a big breath. "Tell you what. I won't wear the necklace. I'll store it in a safety deposit box until we can figure this all out."

"Dad won't be pleased, not at all."

But it's a peaceful solution. *I'm trying to be a mediator here.* "He wants me to turn it over to him just like that? On his say-so? Without any proof or legal papers or anything?"

Don averted her eyes. "Uh, huh. What do you think? Surely you know my dad well enough to surmise that." He seemed focused anywhere but her face.

Champ finally did it. He provoked a head-to-head with Reba. This was no accidental whiplash as she intervened to tame down Johnny Poe. This was direct hit confrontation. She must decide: fight or turn tail and run, like most did. And here she stood in the stall of the barn church where Grandma Pearl exhorted them just minutes before to seek Christ's way of peace.

She flipped around and noticed the dozen or so who still lingered in the barn, chattering with vigor in small groups. She did a quick study of them all. She walked over to step up on the platform.

"Ginny," she called, "Come help me."

Ginny rushed over and she helped Reba unclasp the necklace.

Then she called everyone else over, including Don. "You all are our witnesses. Champ Runcie claims this necklace belongs to him. Seth Stroud gave it to me last night and told me Maidie Fortress kept it in her attic for decades. Before she died she told him she wanted me to have it. I don't know why she said that. I certainly don't feel I deserve it. But here it is." She held up the beautiful, cascading squash blossom.

"I want you all to witness I'm surrendering the necklace to a mediator. If you're agreeable, Vincent Quaid, I give this to your safekeeping. As most of you know, he is a gem collector and assessor. He's fully capable of this duty. Are you willing, Vincent?"

Vincent hopped up on the platform. "Good idea. I will hold the necklace until an official ruling of some kind can be made as to who this necklace really belongs to."

"Thank you," Reba replied. "Meanwhile, you are free to store it as you see fit."

"We can immediately lock it up in the hotel safe," Adrienne Mathwig announced.

Don rushed the platform and tried to grab it. "I object." He peered around, fire in his eyes that resembled Champ's. "Dad won't agree."

Reba determined to stay cool, to lean on reason. "But if this truly belongs to him, he'll be able to figure a way to prove it. We're a society of laws. That's the way we do things. Nobody can demand he or she owns certain property without a proper claim."

Jace held up his hand. "Possession is nine-tenths of the law. That means the onus is on Champ to make his case."

Don hit the back of his neck and screwed up his face into a frown. "Okay. I'll give you round one. But you know my dad will charge out on the second round."

"But he'll be dealing with me," Vincent said, "Not just Reba Mae."

"And me," Jace said.

"And me," all the others gathered agreed.

"We'll be here to make sure it's done proper and legal," Jace stated.

Jace had yanked another whip from Champ. Her heart soared at the display of the fellowship of community, the power of group support. But she realized

she'd alienated Don, perhaps forever, by going for the jugular of his loyalty to his father. She might as well rip up that Dating Don List.

But if there were a smidgeon of evidence the necklace belonged to Champ, she'd turn it over to him. No fuss. No regrets. Whether she got Don back or not.

Don marched out of the barn in a huff, slamming the door behind him. Nobody envied his job of reporting the turn of events to Champ. His curt exit dashed Reba's meager hopes she'd ever find a Road's End rancher husband.

Jace snapped together a folding chair. "He knows he's smart and assumes everyone else is less so."

As they cleared chairs, Seth strolled in and peered around. "Am I late for church?"

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