



**"Shouldn't we head home?"  
Jace hollered.  
Home?  
Where was home?"**

# **Beneath a Camperdown Elm**

**Janet Chester Bly**

**Book 3, Trails of Reba Cahill Series**

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# Chapter 1

*Thursday, August 1st, 1991, Idaho*

On the goat trail known as Highway 95, halfway between Winnemucca, Nevada and Road's End, Idaho, known as home, Reba Mae Cahill relished a rare bit of full joy.

A God hugged day.

She hadn't felt like this since as a kid she escaped from Grandma Pearl's spider and rat infested root cellar. Or as a teen when she finally broke the wild black stallion, the love-of-her-life horse, Johnny Poe. A happy, almost delirious rapture welled up until she thought she'd burst. Her foggy vision cleared. She could see into her future and she liked it fine.

Just fine.

Driving next to her on red Naugahyde seats in the '55 Chevy, white convertible top down, Jace McKane gently massaged her warm neck. Her auburn hair tied back in a stubby pony tail whipped around, with the last remnants of Curly Cue treatment beaten straight as a stick.

She scanned Jace's profile, his tidy mustache, straight eyebrows, deep hazel puppy-dog eyes. The close-cropped, butch-style dark blond hair and boyish mug more deeply imbedded in her getting-to-know-him file. She'd learned something important on this trip from the southern California coast. She loved to be on the road with him.

Just *be* together.

In addition, he promised to come alongside her and Grandma Pearl to plot a fight to save the Cahill Ranch from long-time neighbor, Champ Runcie, and his unfair, crazy lawsuit. She could hardly wait for Jace to help them figure out a solution. And become her rancher husband.

Soon.

Very soon.

That is, once he learned how to ranch, the Cahill way. She planned to coach him immediately, in between dates at Grange Hall dances, movies and dinner out in Elkhville or Oroston or the big city of Lewiston. She also expected long horse rides anywhere on the Camas Prairie.

Jace could be top executive in a high paying company anywhere. Or own the company. In fact, he did for a while. Several of them. But he wanted something else. He decided to try the wild outdoors and landed in Road's End, of all places, for those content with dwelling in small places with ordinary folks. He traded his Guccis and Nikes for cowboy boots.

Behind her sat Jace's ten-year-old half-brother, Abel. He peered at her with round as marbles dark gray eyes as he held down a pack of Topps Desert Storm trading cards. They scattered his lap and spilled to the floor. She glimpsed pictures of Norman "Stormin'" Schwarzkopf, and Saddam Hussein, along with a Huey Cobra helicopter, framed in brown camouflage borders.

"Are we almost there?" Abel asked, his eyes glazed.

"Couple more hours. Better box those cards before they ..." One flew out and littered the road before she finished her warning. He tossed them to the floor and tried to stomp on them, straining against the seat belt.

"Better put the top up." Reba peered in the mirror. "Besides, I'm getting freckles."

Jace touched her hand. "You've got them all over."

She blushed. He didn't know that yet. "Yeah, but I don't like them on my face."

"Wouldn't hurt to make a pit stop anyway."

They took a side trip to a gas station off the highway. A dry summer breeze whipped through rolling hill fields as wheat stalks ground against a combine's whirring blades. Semi-truck wheels crunched while carting grain to town. An occasional citizen's band radio crackled and squawked. Smoke swirled from a nearby stubble fire.

"Watch out everybody," Jace called out. The white vinyl top with zippered plastic rear window slowly rolled over them with fits and starts.

Hunkered in her backseat corner, Reba's mom, Hanna Jo, looked caged in. But she had dozed off and on, a good sign. Light and shadows through the window played on her face and tricked an image of youth with sun-enriched gold highlights on strands of strawberry blonde hair. Effervescent in public, but often taunted with self-doubt within, Reba hoped this return to Road's End would finally untether her mother's heart from a shrouded slew of bad memories. And loose the grip of poor choices.

The previous night they endured an upsetting episode, the first one since they left Santa Dominga more than three days before. In a sweaty, hot Winnemucca motel room, Hanna Jo woke with chills, shivering. Hoarse, her voice cracked as she yelled about monsters charging her. The hallucinations finally stopped when they turned on the lights and Reba reminded her to take the night dose of pills prescribed by the Reno Desert City Mental Health Institution.

After tracing long miles of the Salmon River, finally the Chevy with the souped-up engine chugged the steep incline of White Bird Hill. At the top, the Camas Prairie stretched long and wide over the mountain. Reba scanned grazing cows, horse tails whipping flies, and wheat fields spilled with shiny shades of gold with heavy heads shouting, *harvest payday!*

Her mother mumbled something.

"What?" Reba said.

Hanna Jo leaned forward with a lazy smile. "I've got it figured out for the ranch. I'll train and care for most of the horses. I've dealt with it all—deworming, bellyaches, colic, twisted bowel—you name it. Reba, you take charge of the cows. Jace can oversee planting and the machinery. I'm a bit mechanically challenged myself, not that I couldn't figure some things out in a pinch."

"But I've got dibs on Banner to re-train." Reba thought of the buckskin mare promised her by Soren Patrick, to replace Johnny Poe, the black horse she lost when Champ Runcie skidded him over a Nevada desert cliff. An image of his broken body on the rocks stabbed her heart once more.

The buckskin certainly presented a challenge. She suffered a kind of PTSD as a Gulf War warrior. Handsome cowboy Soren promised to bring the horse to Road's End after

they arrived home. She looked forward to bonding with the buckskin and Soren again. As well as his fiancée, Valery, of course.

"I'll let you both know right now," Jace said. "I'll be aiming for efficiency and cost effectiveness."

Reba touched his arm. "Sounds great to me. At least with the land and cattle, we can provide a living for ourselves and food for consumers. And how does Grandma Pearl fit in, Mom? What's she going to do in your scheme?"

"Same as always. Whatever she wants, when she wants."

More than she could imagine or hope for—a team of cowgirl Cahill women *plus* the man of her dreams. Reba quickly added, "These days, she prefers caring for the yard around the house, her mares, and the dogs and cats. That's her domain. I know the Younger boys have been helping off and on since I've been gone, as well as Michael and Vincent." Her half-brother, Hanna Jo's son, and Grandma Pearl's life-long friend.

Meanwhile, Reba realized they'd need to tweak duties and roles on the ranch with adding her mom and Jace to the team. Might as well spell it out from the get-go. "We'll take turns with some things, like mending fence, birthing calves, and all those numerous other duties. We can hire students to move the half-ton of field rocks."

"We'll see." Her mother yawned, stretched her arms, and leaned back in the seat.

A truck driver with "Please Drive Carefully" sign on back zipped back and forth in traffic and whizzed past them. Reba noted several crosses and wreaths on top roadside mailboxes.

Less than an hour later, the '55 Chevy pulled off the highway to Road's End as summer shadows crossed the evening road, like winks of shade in the summer heat. Checkered patches of dry, tan wheat and verdant grass surrounded them, touched with golden highlights.

Reba stole a glance at her mother. She kept rubbing her cheek and then her shoulder, back and forth, some sort of nervous gesture.

Sorry she agreed to come? Scared? Anxious how she'd be received? Or maybe she looked forward to getting back to the ranch, but with more than a little trepidation. Reba tried not to worry that she might pull back on her meds and not be able to deal with the pressure and tension.

With her newfound exuberance, Reba determined to do all she could to help her mom with the transition.

They passed Road's End Lake, with only two fishermen in a canoe, but smoke from campfires and dozens of row boats tied to a dock—no motors allowed—signaled full campsites. Once a mill pond for the lumber company formed in 1910, the logging mill provided good jobs for drifters and family men over the decades. Closed in the 1960s, the lake and forest converted to a park.

"Hey, Abel, don't be a GUBERIF," Jace said.

"What?" The boy sat straight up.

"The message painted on the road. No GUBERIF allowed here!"

"What's that?"

"Firebug spelled backward, which is someone careless with fire, who has never learned from Smokey the Bear how to prevent forest fires."

"Mom doesn't let me play with matches."

"That's good."

They eased into Road's End's, a rambling, rustic village of 400 residents, mainly divided between loners who've got something to hide, retirees from Seattle or California, and generational farmers and ranchers. Many owned a past that never got settled and still somewhere in the middle of their stories. Others stole in by rumors of hidden gold or promise of cheap rent. Many also soon move on, leaving single-wides and cabins behind, when they discover the long winters and lack of MacDonald's fast food or a mall mean too primitive a lifestyle for them.

Road's End—the only way to get out, retrace the way in.

Down Main Street past Paddy's Trailer Park and the two-story hotel, they cruised in front of McKane Outfitters where small flags flew from log posts showcasing huge elk horns. A slanted, tin roof covered the log building. Jace bought the shop, experimented with the slower paced rural life, then handed the business to his struggling half-brother, Norden. Jace picked him up from rehab and spirited him away to Idaho for a start at a new life. Norden rose to the challenge, seemed to fit in, tribal tattoos and all. Now, if he could only find and keep employees at the low wages he offered.

They stared at a shiny, red Harley Davidson parked in front of the store.

"Norden got a new motorcycle?" Reba asked.

"I'll check out things here later," Jace commented.

Reba peered up the hilltop at the alley between The Outfitters Shop and Whitlow's Grocery where Seth Stroud used to live with his niece, Maidie.

Hanna Jo followed her gaze. "I sure spent a lot of time at their place growing up."

"Grandma said you did a lot of caregiving for Maidie, during some of her sick spells."

"Uh huh. I'm sure glad I did, especially knowing what we do now. Do you think Seth and Hester are still here?"

"Don't know. Didn't see the purple Model T parked out front." Reba mused about the elderly newlyweds and their wedding in Goldfield, Nevada weeks before. "They said they wanted to honeymoon here, but you know the house burned down." Blown to smithereens, in fact. "All that's left is the garage, small apartment above it, some trees, and remnants of Maidie's garden."

Town seemed deserted. No cars lined the only paved street, not even in front of the saloons, Delbert's Diner, or The Steak House. Reba noticed Closed signs on business doors and windows.

A stricken Hanna Jo, face paler than usual, whispered, "Please! Mom didn't plan a homecoming party, did she?"

"Nah ..." Reba began, but uncertainty plagued her. She hoped not. Her mother looked ready to bolt, after all the progress she made to fight her panic attacks of returning to her hometown. She finally made it this far, after all these years away. "Besides, the whole town wouldn't attend."

Or would they? Most everyone she knew had a Hanna Jo Cahill story. She seemed well-remembered, whether they actually knew her or not.

They rolled to the end of Main and turned left at Cahill Crossing to reach Stroud Ranch Road. Her attention turned to a woman who strolled, then stumbled down the

road toward them, like she walked in heels over gravel. But this woman wore tennies on asphalt.

Blair Runcie? What was she doing out here, alone, without Champ, her invalid husband?

They got closer and stopped. A dazed Blair stared at them a moment.

Reba climbed out. "Blair, are you all right?"

"I don't know you," she said.

"Sure you do. I'm Reba Cahill. I just returned from California." Had she been gone so long a lifetime neighbor wouldn't recognize her? Was Blair suffering a bit of dementia?

Blair straightened, eyes alert. "Yes, of course." She looked at the Chevy. "Is your mom with you?"

Hanna Jo rolled down her window and waved. "Hi, Blair."

The unsmiling woman stomped ahead and didn't turn back. So unlike the steady, faithful, quiet but friendly mayor's wife the whole town sometimes admired, other times pitied.

Jace slid out and called, "Blair, can we give you a ride?"

The woman shook her head, slung a hand back in a "keep away" move, and kept walking.

Reba peered down the road from where she'd come, looking for evidence of an event, possibly at the Grange Hall. Perhaps Blair just hurried home to care for Champ. But why didn't she drive a rig?

Of course, she could be exercising, out for a hike.

As they turned down the long, dirt trail into Cahill Ranch, Reba studied the terrain to inspect what she could. Pearl's Blue Heelers, Paunch and Aussie, yapped from their confinement tied to the porch. The black and white barn cats moved their heads in tandem as they passed. Scat, the long-haired calico cat, watched them all from a tree.

They approached the Camperdown Elm, its knobby, twisted branches covered with layers of velvet, sticky green leaves which felt like sandpaper, a lush covering over a grotesque, woody skeleton, and the site of Grandpa Cole's death.

"I didn't realize how flat the top was," Hanna Jo commented.

Reba glanced in the rearview mirror at her mother's face, taut and tense. What turmoil must roil inside? She wished she could reach out and assure her everything would be all right.

She focused on the old elm tree instead, that familiar, mutant pillar from her childhood that now seemed to leer at her, asking, "Where have you been?" Not as tall as a regular elm, the crooked branches held many gnarled knots for a foothold. Often her safe haven, a great place for a kid to play. She loved to rest in the heart of the green branches and hide from the world among the rough leaves.

"An upside-down tree," Grandpa Cole called it and always with a curse. "Things are not what they seem," he chided. At other times he admonished her when things went wrong, "Get used to it, girl. Life's topsy turvy and pulled inside out, just when you least expect it." And he'd point his cigar toward the elm.



He proved it by dying of a heart attack beside an axe imbedded in the straight Scottish Elm trunk.

But now, blood flowed like sap through her body as she inhaled the sweet perfume of lilacs nearby. She felt alive, braced for adventure, looking for action.

"You can take an elm cutting with you," Pearl offered when Reba left for college. "Cole's father carried one all the way from Dundee, Scotland. He grafted it and others at every place he felt he could call home. He thought it brought good luck."

Reba once dared to broach a sensitive subject. "So, why did Grandpa try to cut it down?" Grandma Pearl issued a haunted look.

Now she reached for the extra house key under the cats' water dish. "Grandma!" she called, as she burst through into the living room. "Grandma!" she called out again.

Everything seemed in place as she whirled through—ottoman, roll top desk, shades down like usual; deep couch, wall of books, and fireplace. The stuff of home. "Grandma!"

A hint of echo sounded back.

She rushed to the kitchen, Grandma's bedroom, and her own room. Then, to Hanna Jo's, decorated in purple and cream, with black framed senior class picture, and a running wild horses watercolor on the walls. Her mother's attention fixed on the many items in the closet and drawers, while holding her old Kodak Brownie camera.

In a rush, Reba realized how much she missed the place. She'd been gone more than she'd been home this past spring and summer. She felt like hugging the timbered, two-story walls, this house etched many memories, as though welcoming her. At one time, she'd felt pressed down here, nearly choked by a sense of desertion. Today wasn't one of those times. She hoped the same for her mother.

But where was Grandma Pearl?

Signs of her scattered everywhere among the pine and oak furniture and casual clutter. Stacks of newspapers and magazines. Cupboards stashed with washed cottage cheese cartons and egg crates because Pearl considered hoarding as proof of scrupulous thrift. As sturdy and steady as a comfortable saddle, she also gave out kindness like others gathered gossip.

Reba knew her shoe size, the brand of bleach she preferred, the smell of her hair like apples or cherries after a shampoo. She knew the scent of her favorite Jean Naté powder, and the intriguing contents of her bathroom drawers--dozens of pairs of screw-on earrings, old cologne bottles, and grandpa's collection of pipes. But she had no clue why she didn't greet them right now with hearty hugs.

Especially to welcome home her prodigal daughter.

In fact, the bunkhouse looked empty too, though a couple old duffles piled in a corner. Who was taking care of the ranch? Getting hay to cows and horses? Checking water troughs and fences?

A clamor from the kitchen distracted her. "Reba, come here," Hanna Jo yelled.

She scooted through the dining room where her mother pointed to the fridge. She pulled off a scrap of paper attached by a magnet with her grandmother's penciled, pinched, and pithy handwriting.

*Apply mulch.*

*Fertilize.*

*Assess lawn.*

*Summer Camp Road 7:00*

"What's happening on Summer Camp Road?" Hanna Jo asked.

Reba peered at the rooster clock on the wall. "It's 7:00 now."

"Let's check it out," Jace said.

Hanna Jo held up her left hand. "But first, look at the calendar."

Under a picture of clustered white daisies with gold centers, Tuesday, July 30, marked with a big red X and circled.

"That was two days ago," Reba said. "She didn't mention anything special happening when we talked before we left Santa Dominga."

"What *did* she say?"

"See you when I see you."



## CHAPTER 2

Reba opened the garage doors and found Pearl's two-tone green 1958 GMC Carryall in the stall. Reba's pickup parked in the place of her grandmother's deep red 1953 Jeep Willys with big tires. She'd missed her rig too, which, in addition to a horse trailer, remained her main earthly possessions. She peered inside her rig and all around. The truck had been washed and cleaned recently. She patted the hood and looked forward to a full tour around the ranch soon. With Jace, of course.

They pulled Abel away from Paunch and Aussie and Jace drove down Stroud Ranch Road past the Grange Hall and Mosquito Ridge Cemetery where Cole Cahill and his parents lay buried. He turned east on Summer Camp Road. A half mile down they spotted a field crammed with vehicles. Most of the town's citizens and a passel of strangers crowded lawn chairs, as though to watch an impromptu baseball game. But no bats, bases or players gathered. And no farmers doing harvest present either. They'd be working the fields until dark, within an hour.

Jace parked beside a broken place in a fence and they scrambled toward the mystery event. Reba searched for Grandma Pearl among the familiar citizens, visitors and campground spectators. They rushed forward amid shouts, cheers, and applause and a blast of musical sounds. Then she gawked at the display among the native boulders, rocks, and fallen logs.

Piles of lumber of varying heights scattered the stubbled ground, along with a long row of saw horses, one of pallets, and another of long ladders. Bricks stacked near a cement truck and bulldozer, plus a backhoe, dump truck, slabs of cement, several tractors, large concrete pipe, and hay bales. Resembled a construction site, surrounded with yellow and red 'Caution Keep Out' signs.

In the middle, an out-of-place, old phone booth like the non-working one at Delbert's Diner. And a teardrop camper trailer, an unattached flight of steps, and a big brass bell which she guessed to be the Maidie Fortress Memorial Bell that Champ Runcie instigated.

The most amazing part of the display ... two persons wearing hard hats rode squatty, thick-tired bikes rolling over everything—jumping, sticking, and balancing, including on the machines. They smooth-wheeled on each of the objects, then added flips and pirouettes, and sideways twirls, before they leaped over spaces. Mesmerized, Reba stared until the finale when the pair rose up on back wheels, synchronized, on opposite sides of the huge display.

A ballet of trick riding, up and over an obstacle course, to music from a boom box. The whole time a medley of jaunty, pulsing instrumental tunes blared, with an occasional bagpipe in the background. She couldn't escape the irony ... a mere half-mile away, a landfill existed with rusty, old bicycles and broken parts sprawled everywhere, because they weren't used much, except by the hardest of souls, on these rugged, graveled streets. Perhaps that would change after this fascinating show.

When the music stopped, the bikers bowed to claps and cheers. They pressed forward to shake hands and take pictures with all who wanted, while the matronly Mathwig triplets, owners of the Road's End Hotel, stood in front of the slowly dispersing crowd with metal pails for donations.

After the couple loaded their bikes into a large white van and pulled off their hard hats, long hair tumbled from one of them. The guy and gal backed the van up to the teardrop trailer and attached it behind.

Reba waved at Tucker Paddy and his two sons, Amos and Pico, and Cecily Bowers in black spiked heels and apple green pants and blouse, white upswept hair tucked into an apple green straw hat. She spied Tim and Sue Anne Runcie with their son and daughter hustling to their rig.

But still no sign of Grandma Pearl.

Beatrice Mathwig accosted them with a round of hugs. "I don't know where Pearl is," she said, "but she had something important to do ... before you and Hanna Jo got home. 'A task I've left undone' were her exact words. This really frosts my cookies, but she insisted on not telling us the details. She didn't want to worry us, she said. I think Seth and Hester went with her." She frowned in an obvious snit. "And Vincent too. Even he wouldn't divulge anything. However, I thought they'd be here by tonight, for the circus act and ... your homecoming."

Reba stirred with conflicted emotions. And tried to read Beatrice too. After her mention of Vincent with Pearl, she avoided direct eye contact. "Who is that couple?" She pointed to the white van with magnetic plates.

"A brother and sister act traveling across the country. They've been here all week. Everyone's enamored with them. Sure have enjoyed them at the hotel. They've got the most charming accents. Thick Scottish burrs. Started in New York, they said, and headed for western Canada. Then they'll journey east and back to Scotland. They're on holiday, as they put it, a gap year from their universities."

"Where in Scotland?"

"They mentioned both Glasgow and Edinburgh Universities, I believe."

Reba pressed her lips together, trying to assess all the news.

She started to ask about all the construction supplies strewn around, but Beatrice scooted away before she could. After a greeting from Tucker's wife, Ida, Reba blurted out, "What's going on here?" She spread her arm around.

"The new church. Isn't it exciting?"

"But who ...?"

"Champ Runcie. He's got everything up and going. They hope to start on it soon. Quite a few signed on to help, including my Tucker. They're waiting for a building permit."

Other folks hugged them or held out their hands to Reba, Hanna Jo, Jace, and even Abel.

Cicely Bowers offered to Hanna Jo, "Remember this and you'll survive fine—the people of Road's End don't like to gossip. They *love* to gossip. That's their problem, not yours." She hugged Hanna Jo a second time. "You remind me so much of my niece, Trish. Please come visit."

After that, the field vacated quickly.

"Who is Cicely?" Hanna Jo asked.

"She's been here a couple years. From Seattle. She's become a good friend of the Mathwig triplets. She loves hats and runs a Bed and Breakfast in her home. She bought that big old Stroud house from Seth."

Finally, only the four of them and the traveling couple remained. Reba sauntered over to meet them. She thought she detected a quick glance between the two when she mentioned her name.

The young woman wound her tawny hair, longer, thicker, and curlier than Reba ever dreamed of having, even with a Curly Cue treatment, into a careless knot. "So, you belong to Pearl Cahill. We thought you weren't arriving until tomorrow or later." The burr on the *r's* didn't soften the obvious disappointment.

"I'm Archie," the young man inserted. "This is my twin sister, Aileene. What she means is, Pearl invited us to stay at her place. We've been doing a few chores for her. But, of course, since you're here ..." His flat voice trailed off. The statement hung in the air, a dangling question attached.

"Do you know where Grandma Pearl went?"

"Sorry, no. We told her we'd watch the place until she returned or you arrived."

Hanna Jo stomped to the Chevy, face flushed, shoulders curled over. Reba sensed her flinch of rejection and for once, they experienced this feeling together.

"We meant no harm," Archie replied. "We try to help out wherever we go, as well as entertain. And we *ken* a thing or two about horses and *coos*."

"*Coos*?" Reba repeated.

"The beef. Your animals. As mentioned, we've been helping a wee bit."

She wondered if he'd washed her pickup.

"Great riding," Jace interrupted. "How'd you learn to do that?"

"Lots of practice. Back home." Aileene splashed an awesome smile all over him. Flaxen hair, rosy cheeks, energetic, slender with dark, snapping eyes, and rich, warm voice. The tantalizing accent could charm a viper. "We learned from a man in Edinburgh. We're not half as good as he is though."

"Really?" Jace plied his best grin.

Reba contemplated whether to be bothered or not.

"Would you teach me?" Abel tried to peer in the van. "I'm almost eleven."

"Maybe we could show you a thing or two." Archie side-glanced Reba. She wondered if she should encourage them to stay another night. Maybe the duffles in the bunkhouse belonged to them. Typical Road's End hospitality. Only she didn't feel up to it. And she worried about her mom.

"You know, I wore Oshkosh dungarees at your age," Archie said to Abel.

"And you hated them," Aileene reminded him.

Abel scrunched his nose. "I don't know what that is."

Archie tapped the boy's shoulder. "That's a good thing."

Sergeant Elliot Laws suddenly appeared beside them, "I've met some of your countrymen," he said. "I heard the Scottish regiment play the pipes in the Gulf War."

"Aye, a bagpipe is meant to inspire fighters and provoke enemies." Archie reached into the van, pulled out a bagpipe, and on the spot played some bars from "Danny Boy." His small audience grew to a few more passing by on the road who stopped, so he expanded the song. All applauded when he finished.

"Incredible bike and bagpipe performance," Jake remarked as the two eased into their van.

They soon rolled down the road toward the stop sign as the Chevy followed. The van kept going straight to town and the Chevy turned left.

Reba hoped the Scottish twins could stay at the Road's End Hotel and braced for a full-blown Hanna Jo meltdown. Instead, her mother heaved a sigh and said, "Actually, it's better this way. I didn't want a fuss. We can go about our business and the transition in private and figure out our next steps."

Reba let go the gulp of breath she held. "That's right."

Jace braked the car, pulled over, and turned off the lights. "Look up at the sky."

Bursts of beams shot across like a fanned out tail.

"Shooting stars?" Hanna Jo nudged Abel who rolled down his window for a clearer view.

"No, the Perseids," Jace replied. "Meteor showers. Here comes some more! Hundreds per hour this year, they say. The dust particles will remain almost forever."

They all piled out of the car.

Brighter than before, they watched the heavenly lights in awe. Was it a sign of good things ahead? Or some sort of omen? Either way, Reba treasured viewing the display right here, right now, with these people. "How do you know so much about it?" she asked Jace.

"Hobby of mine."

Reba loved learning new things about her future rancher husband. She leaned in tight. "Thank you," she whispered.

"For what?" he whispered back.

"For being here. For being mine. For loving me." She squeezed his firm shoulder and inwardly embraced his support and nearness while she set aside the perplexing situation ahead.

They lingered at the spot as the universe seemed to put on a production just for them. Finally, Jace turned on the engine, a rude intrusion in the almost holy stillness, and cruised to the ranch house.

He dropped suitcases and bags on the porch and kissed Reba goodbye. "Call me if you hear from Pearl," he said. "I'll see you in the morning." Then he and Abel headed back to town and the apartment they shared with Norden.

## CHAPTER 3

After Reba unpacked, she peeked again into Pearl's room. Nothing out of place. No clues. She tapped on her mother's door. Her bedroom looked like a bomb exploded. Contents of drawers tossed on the bed. Closet emptied out. High school memorabilia scattered. She noticed something new already added ... posters of singers from the sixties on the wall with masking tape, such as Bob Dylan, Glenn Campbell, and the Fab Four Beatles.

"Where did you get those?" Reba asked.

"Obviously you haven't cleaned behind the dresser. I hid them back there long ago."

"You need to frame them and hang them proper."

The turquoise and gold necklace inherited from Maidie Fortress spread on top the dresser out of the open velvet lined wooden case.

"You need to store that necklace in a secure place."

Hanna Jo looked up from a stack of photos. "Uh huh."

"A penny for your thoughts."

"I'm on overload with memories and dealing with, who am I? Who do I belong to? Why did I make such stupid decisions?"

"Whoa! That's way more than a penny's worth."

"I'm reminded too that I've always been a fighter, whenever I find something that's not right."

"Like what?"

"Like cruel treatment of God's creatures. Or a toxic climate. Along the way, I've learned to trust my instincts."

Was that before or after she found out Maidie was her real mother and Champ her father? Or after she realized Don Runcie was her half-brother? And also the married man with whom she had an affair? No wonder she couldn't deal with life. Hers was so messy and sordid, which spilled over to Reba too.

"I've come to the conclusion," Hanna Jo said, "I think I could live here again and survive. At least, I'd like to prove it to myself. And to you and Mom. It's like the time my horse fell and I was caught by one foot in the stirrup when he got up again. I reached to grab my foot fast so he wouldn't run and drag me."

"A lot of ranchers wear six-shooters for that reason," Reba added, "so they can shoot the horse to save their lives."

Her mother tapped her senior picture on the wall. "Did you know I was a cheerleader?"

"Yep."

"I was a happy kid and teen too, until ..."

Reba tensed. *Until I was born?*

"When I found out I was pregnant, I headed to Boise, to stay with Vincent and his wife. You never knew her. She died a few years later of cancer. A wonderful woman." Hanna Jo pushed against her forehead with a palm. "Don't know if it makes any

difference to you, but I suffered post-partum depression. With Michael too. That's when I found out what to call it. I was very fearful, lived almost as a recluse. After Griff left me, I headed to the Nevada desert. That's where I became known as Wild Horse Hanna by the locals."

Reba listened to her ramble as she pushed away thigh high panty hose, green eye shadow, and vinyl records including "Yellow Submarine" by the Beatles, to ease on the bed. She didn't want to interrupt this rare moment of open sharing.

"Don't think Mom knew this," Hanna Jo continued, "but Papa Cole found me once. Through Vincent, I think. He made sure I was okay and my needs met. He tried to coax me home. Maybe if I had ..." Her eyes squinted. With her mouth pulled down, she looked years older. "I attended a party of sorts. Out in the desert. Had only a few drinks, but got crazy drunk. I wandered away and flung myself on one of my favorite wild horses. I fell off and suffered a concussion. Did some bizarre things, I'm told. That was the first time I was taken to the mental institute."

Reba ventured a question. "How did you take care of yourself, pay for all of that?"

"Well, I admit I'm not good at saving money. If I have it, I spend it. Griff certainly knows that about me. But I never went into debt and do have a few dollars left. All those odd jobs I talk about—that is real. But none lasted long, especially the truck driving. I'm not the best driver. Had plenty of fender benders." She faked a grin.

Reba thought of her crash in Reno on McCarren Boulevard shortly after running off with Pearl's rig, right after they rescued her from the institute.

"Another thing, Papa Cole funded me a few times." Hanna Jo groaned. "I'm going to need a real job."

"Hey, you're back at the ranch. Grandma pays me wages plus room and board, of course."

"But can she afford us both full-time?"

Jace too. And whoever he'd need to hire for the farming.

"We'll make it work," Reba insisted. She fully believed Jace could come through for them, one way or another.

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At 5:00 the next morning, Reba poked around in the cupboards and fridge to prepare a breakfast of strong coffee and buttermilk pancakes with huckleberry syrup, enough for a crowd. She added sizzling bacon to awaken her appetite and ate a plate full. The rest she warmed in the oven while she scanned the county newspaper, read through a stack of unpaid bills, and contemplated the first day of riding the ranch with her future husband.

Pure bliss.

Her mother appeared, dressed in jeans, tank top, and old boots, looking ready to work. "What's on the schedule?"

Reba smiled, heartened by her enthusiasm. "I thought we'd head to the barn, manage the horses, and then off to the main pastures to check the cattle. Not sure what's been going on, but, as usual, I'm sure there's plenty to find to do."

"You ride out to the pastures with Jace. I'll stick with the horses."

"Aren't you interested in the cows at all?"

"Not really. Have at 'em."

While Hanna Jo ate, Reba packed roast beef sandwiches and potato chips in brown paper bags and filled a couple thermoses with coffee and punch Kool-Aid. Hanna Jo strolled outside and Reba tromped after her. Sunlight haloed one of the corrals and weedy, overgrown, surrounding lawn. Grandma Pearl had neglected yard duty.

"This ranch used to be my safe haven from so many things," Hanna Jo said. "Now it spooks me."

"Only if you let it." Reba tried to keep up with her mother's longer stride. "My friend Ginny George and I liked to hunker around here more than any other place."

"Funny, I had a lot of so-called friends, but no one special person very close. Even those have moved away, last time I heard."

Reba mused about that. Everyone in town talked about her mother so much, she presumed she was very popular. Didn't mean she couldn't also be lonely.

"Actually, my best friends were the Runcie brothers," Hanna Jo continued.

Reba took in a sharp intake of breath. She wondered whether to encourage a sore subject. "Don too?"

Hanna Jo closed her eyes. "Oh, yeah. He was the worst tease. Liked to call me spitfire." She peered around and inhaled. "Love the perfume of mountain air and the pungent earthiness of a barn."

Reba agreed with that.

"The horses are shedding and the hooves could use a trim," her mother commented.

They fed and brushed down the horses until Jace and Abel showed up. The boy climbed behind him on one of Pearl's mares.

"We need a kid horse," Hanna Jo announced. "In fact, lots more horses of all kinds."

"Hold that thought," Reba replied. "We'll talk to Grandma about it. Be back in a couple hours." Reba mounted Pearl's favorite mare with a press of rising excitement. Now began Jace's first official training lesson in becoming her rancher husband.

She noticed a cloud cover blowing in from the north. Partly cloudy? Or summer shower? Nothing would dampen her mood. She turned to her riding partner. "You set a nice seat, cowboy."

He tipped his hat. "Why, thank you, Ma'am, and so do you."

Living her dream, Reba rode beside her man out on the Cahill property, breathing in Cahill air, viewing the spread of a Cahill landscape. They followed a moss-covered wood post and barbed wire fence several miles before Reba scouted for the first sign of cows in the pastures. She'd expected to see them before now.

For Lesson One, she began with stats. "Just so you'll know, we've got about ten miles of fence."

"That's nice. Your eyes ... they're so green this morning."

Reba blinked. "They're hazel, according to my driver's license."

"Not really. Despite the fact they sparkle at times, they're a disturbing shade of emerald green."



"What's disturbing about them?"

"They made me fall in love with you. That and the dusting of freckles on your ..."

"On my what?"

"Your neck."

She snickered. "And what about my Curly Cue hair?"

Jace lightly slapped at the reigns. "Everything about you. Your impish smile. Your radiance. Your exuberance. Your blushes. So charming."

Abel gagged. "You guys are grossing me out."

"Listen and learn, buddy," Jace said.

Reba got serious. "No, you listen and learn. You, sir, are trying to divert me from an important matter. Pay attention. Now, how much fence do we have?"

"Ten miles," Abel replied.

"Good for you." She turned to Jace. "And the Cahill Ranch covers 1200 acres."

"How tall are you, anyway?"

Reba scowled. "5' 3 1/2". Born 1966. I play guitar and sing at church when Grandma insists. I've been known to cook a mean beef stew with lots of basil and beef veggie soup with lots of dill. Anything else you want to know?"

"Your greatest fear."

Reba looked around. "That's easy. Losing this ranch." Her grandma's ranch, that is.

"And ..." Jace paused.

"And what?"

"Being like your mom."

Reba flinched. He pulled that from the core of her. Like being abandoned again. She needed to change the subject quick. "Moving on, we care for sixty head of cattle."

"Let's see, that's at least two bulls."

"Good! That's right, one for every twenty-five or so. And we pack elk hunters weekends in the fall. It's fun and brings in extra funds."

"You look so comfortable on a horse," Jace continued, "like it's an extension of you."

"Yeah. Riding exhilarates me. Helps me enjoy myself ... and life in general, as well as forget unpleasant things." Such as her sad family history. "No hour is wasted that is spent in the saddle."

"Said Winston Churchill, I believe."

She thought she heard distant thunder rocking far away through the canyons. "I'd better finish this quick."

"Finish what?"

"Lesson One of the ranch training of Jace McKane."

"Okay, go for it." He shifted in his saddle and rode a bit closer.

"If we'd seeded any crops this year, we'd have to harvest, and clean and service combines and trucks right now."

"Maybe next year?"

She nodded in delight. "We've basically been letting the ground go fallow since we lost Grandpa two years ago. It's long enough."

"What crops do best here?"

"Bluegrass and wheat, canola and barley. Also, peas and clover. And August is a good month to hire a crew to pick up rocks in the fields before seeding. We've got very chronic rocky ground and must do that backbreaking task every year."

"Ever thought about adding pigs?"

"Pigs? Ha! Had several for 4-H projects. That was enough for me. They're ornery and sneaky."

"And smart, I hear, as well as very tasty. Or how about llamas?"

She shrugged and pointed down a draw. "There's some of our *coos*. Using the Scottish word made her wonder if they'd see Aileene and Archie any time soon. Or ever again. They seemed like drifters passing through.

She started right in on Lesson Two. "We vaccinate cows in Spring for various diseases, castrate the bull calves, and brand them with a red hot iron."

"Does it hurt them?" Abel asked.

"Not really. They're tough. Then we pair up cows and calves and haul or drive them by four wheelers out to these pastures. After that, we check on horn flies, porcupine quills, rattle snake bites, poisonous plants, and their water source. We also supply them salt blocks or loose salt in the feeder--about a ton a year."

Jace snickered. "And the bulls just do their thing."

"Gotta watch the bulls closely. They're notorious for getting injured--feet go bad, they break legs, get cut up fighting near barbed wire fence, infections or injuries ... in private places." She avoided looking at Abel or Jace and immediately felt foolish.

*Come on, cowgirl, you're tougher than that. Just say it: penile sheath.*

"Well, they are very active," Jace remarked. "Where do you get your bulls?"

"Private treaty or bull sales. They're expensive ... \$2500 or more for a range bull. Trouble is, the better the bull, the more likely he is to go bad. Cahill's Law. Anyway, sure seems like it."

Jace surveyed the terrain. "Not much good eating left in this pasture."

"Since we've got no alfalfa or grain fields to turn them to, we supplement, feed them with grass hay--35-40 pounds per cow per day--and protein tubs like soybean, canola, cottonseed meal mixed with molasses."

"Sounds spendy."

"Yep. Another reason to get our field crops going again soon."

"Any predators?"

"Not so much in summer. Coyotes get plenty of rodents to feast on. We do lose an occasional calf to bear. Or even full-grown cows to a wolf. It's rare though."

The thunder roared closer. "And they occasionally get hit by lightening," she added. Charcoal clouds hovered overhead and released a splat of sprinkles. "We'd better ..." she began and stopped.

A rig headed their way, fast and furious. As it got closer, she shivered, like a frigid wind blew in the sultry, late morning heavy humidity. Surely she wouldn't have to face the Runcies so soon. She wasn't ready. She needed major prep.

She knew she had to go to great lengths to ignore them. She hoped to figure a way to co-exist somehow, as one of a dozen surrounding area ranchers in this close-knit community. However, not right away, not this moment.

But there they were.

Driver and passenger piled out of the pickup, slamming the doors.

Tim Runcie held back, while his father, Don, stomped forward with a greeting.

"Reba, Jace, nice to have you back in town. Mom said she saw you last night."

Reba fought for control of the mare that tried to rear and circle and of herself at this unexpected sighting of the two men. They stood so close, while hidden secrets enclosed them in steel barriers, like separate prison walls. She tried not to let the knowledge pounding her mind so loud look too obvious. Surely they could hear it, sense it.

Don with the strong, sun bronzed jaw, her biological dad. Tim with the sun-streaked dark hair, a half-brother. She presumed they didn't know that fact. She hoped they never would. With a start, she realized Jace probably didn't either. Should she keep knowledge like that from a fiancé, from a husband? Surely not. She suspected marriage might be the ultimate invasion of privacy. No secrets allowed.

She may be forced to share deep, painful truth she wished even she didn't know. She'd give anything if none of it ever happened. However, she'd come to realize that not knowing could cause her much harm.

Meanwhile, why had Don gunned his engine like that, like he owned the place? Shouldn't he be harvesting?

"What's up?" she said.

Don began coughing and quickly pulled up the bandanna around his neck over his nose and mouth, his notorious allergies acting up. "Nothing, really. We were looking for that last herd of cows. We thought they might be down here." He held out a grimy, calloused hand used to hard, heavy work, to both of them.

Reba marveled again how this man, and others like him, stuck to farming with all their related miseries. Allergic to his job, what irony and agony. "I don't understand. This is our pasture." She looked down the draw again as the thunder rumbled louder. "And our cows. Look for yourself. They're red with Cahill brands." Their trademark fat Hereford cows so auburn they were almost magenta starkly contrasted with black Runcie Ranch cows.

He sneezed more than once, stared at her, and cleared his throat several times. "You don't know, do you?"

"Know what?" That chill again.

He slammed his eyes shut, his forehead creased with anxiety. "Reba, I had no idea ..." He hunched over as if in pain. "I didn't expect to be the one telling you. I thought Pearl ... you see, actually, Cahill Ranch is Runcie pasture now, including all the cattle."

His words resonated like a death chant against the roll of thunder. She reeled as she tried to process the words. She couldn't bear to look at Jace. Had he heard what she did? Surely she was mistaken. "Don, are you crazy? This is Cahill land and you know it."

He looked down, shifted from one leg to another, his hat crooked on his head. "No, it's not. Dad and Pearl signed the papers days ago."

"Days ago?" Jace retorted. "Even if that was so, you surely couldn't take immediate possession. I know about legal matters. Those things take time."

"Pearl insisted we get right on the land and take it over. She gave us permission." Don looked around and coughed again. He turned red stained eyes toward her, then averted her glance.

He looked so miserable she didn't have the heart to tromp him with her horse on the spot. But she could have gladly shot him. He had the gumption to realize that an absolutely good thing for him, translated to the worst news ever for her.

He straightened his shoulders, as though to try a re-set. "Way too much star thistle here. We'll have to remedy that." Reba strained to devise a snippy comeback when Don said, "We're looking for extra help, if you know of anyone." He squinted at Reba, then Jace with both apology and hint of loaded question. "Gotta run. Big day of harvest." He gaped at the storm brewing sky. "Well, maybe not." He marched back to his truck.

He and Tim jumped in, the motor revved, and they disappeared over a rise as quickly as they arrived.

Don might as well have beaten Reba with a tire iron and left her for dead. The effect wrenched the same. With a few words, a chance encounter, her joy wadded up in a bloody rag at her feet.

"Reba Mae," Jace began and stopped.

A blast of wind dashed over them, spinning ground debris like devil dust. A loud crack and crash of thunder and then jagged light splayed.

Jace mumbled something.

Reba turned the mare, tried to ignore him, and shut out the whole world.

Jace shouted through the storm. "I think we just got offered a job."

"On our own ranch." Reba spit the words with pent up anger edged with growing rage. She tried to calm herself and the mare as lightening flashed again over the canyon. She clutched the mare's mane as a splat of rain pelted her face.

"Shouldn't we head home?" Jace hollered into the downpour.

Home?

Where was home?

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*Beneath a Camperdown Elm* scheduled for Winter 2018 release ...

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&

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