

# Mariah

A Horse Whisperer Novel

by

**Carol Devine**

MARIAH by Carol Devine

copyright © 2017 Carol Devine Rusley

All rights reserved. Except for brief excerpts for review purposes as described by copyright law, no part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed or transmitted in any form or by any means including digital, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, film, lyric, video or otherwise without the prior written consent of the author at [authorcaroldevine.com](http://authorcaroldevine.com)

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

First Edition  
ISBN-13:9781535015929  
ISBN-10:1535015926

MARIAH by Carol Devine

## **Dedication**

*to*

*Meg and Jo*

## **Acknowledgements**

I thank the creators of the British TV Series, Doc Martin, which inspired me to create the fictional town of Grizzly Springs and her quirky inhabitants. Editors of this book include Steve Rusley, Barbara Trexler, Angela Keane of Story Preserves, the BooksGoSocial network of Indie writer, and especially Sue Paluska, who definitely knows her copy editing stuff. Janel Clarke and Facebook's Friendly Horse Questions helped me with the horsey stuff and, along with Mary Clark, Nancy Cole and Lou Casteel, inspired the formation of many of the characters in this book.

[authorcaroldevine.com](http://authorcaroldevine.com) currently sponsored by Weebly.

Cover design by Carol Devine

# One

"Take the bait, you stupid trout!"

Mariah McBride muttered expletives under her breath and recast her line, flying it out over the white water in the middle of the creek. She aimed for the eddies around a shallow area filled with cattails. Flicking her rod, she picked her way among the wet rocks piled along the bank, intent on spotting her next meal. A half pack of powdered donettes and a bottle of Muscle Milk did not a decent breakfast make.

*Fidelity, Bravery, Integrity*, her FBI motto, had given way to the ole Benjamin Franklin classic, *A penny saved is a penny earned*.

Fortunately, the sun cut heat through the cloud cover on occasion, warming her enough to withstand the May chill. Her water-resistant outerwear seemed to be holding up well, even though the last time she wore it was twelve years ago. Why Bird had squirreled it away, she didn't know. Didn't care.

"I know you're in there," she whispered, measuring the distance while watching for a tail fin. Deeper water rushed through the middle of the creek, faster than she liked. The angles for casting were better there though. Edging out, she reeled in and recast.

She never saw the horse and rider coming. The steady roar of water muffled the sound of galloping hooves. A giant black

horse skidded on the bank, rearing. A tall man jumped off, cowboy-hatted in black. He wore jeans and a denim jacket, and his sudden appearance with the big black horse scared her into slipping backwards.

She fell, fanny first, into the area filled with white water, strong enough to drown and punish her body. She gasped, stung by the freezing cold inside her waders. Heart pounding, she sprang forward, scrambling over slippery rock on her hands and knees, making it to the shallows.

Her fishing rod swept by, caught in the current. Lightning quick, he hopped the bank and grabbed the rod, tossing it into the clearing. He reversed, switching gears, and slapped the hindquarters of his horse to get it out of the way. It whinnied and leapt the bank in one jump, disappearing behind the trees.

By the time Mariah got her feet under her, he'd stretched his arm, reaching for her, mindless of his cowboy boots in the mire along the shore.

She scrambled sideways to avoid him, mortified at being caught unawares. She had floundered in a few feet of water like a beached rainbow trout, her waders filled with gallons of water and her clothes, saturated. She stood, furious.

"Who do you think you are? Sneaking up like that? I'm completely soaked!"

"I didn't sneak up--"

"Yes, you did! How else did I land in the creek? Look at this!"

She kicked off her boots and undid the suspenders holding her waders. The water weight inside made them fall around her ankles. Dirty water gushed out, leaving her sinking in a mud puddle. Stepping out, she tripped and landed on her knees, forcing her hands into god knows what else. "Dammit!"

He hooked her arm. "Let me help you up."

She shook him off, whipping her ponytail and sending it flying like strands of blonde caramel across her face. Swiping her hair back, she encountered a crap load of slime, infuriating her further. "Just go away, will you? You've done enough damage for one day."

Slowly this time, she began the careful rise to her full and indignant height. His was several inches taller, an athletic and rangy build, lean and broad-shouldered, set in the well-balanced stance of a cowboy. His eyes, shadowed by the black brim of his hat, had so much blue they reflected the sky, and his face, shaped by concern, showed calm in the face of her ongoing storm.

"I can't just leave you here," he said. "Like you said, you're soaked. You need to get out of those wet clothes. Where are you parked?"

Mariah pointedly said nothing and managed to kick the waders out of the way so she wouldn't trip over them again. The cold was biting. Her socks made a squishing sound as she slogged up the bank.

Already she was shivering from the breezy air. Her pants clung to her legs, having lost their water-resistant properties. She waddled like a toddler in diapers, aiming for her front pack. He beat her to it, shouldering past her.

"I'll take care of your stuff. You go dry yourself off."

He scooped up rod, tackle box and pack in the time it took her to halt. She glared at him.

"Give me my gear."

"Are you parked by the trailhead?" He started in that direction.

"No."

"No? Where then?"

"I'm not parked."

He stared at her, clearly surprised. "You walked in?"

"I live close by."

"Only body that lives close by is Bird McBride and you're definitely not him." He appraised her more carefully, making her more conscious about how wet and dirty she must look. He, on the other hand, looked fine.

Too fine.

With the western shirt and boot cut jeans, he could step into the leading role in the latest Hollywood incarnation of the American West. That Clint Eastwood squint of his was sizing her up. Her wet, clingy clothes forced her to take refuge behind formality. "May I have my gear back, please?"

She held out her hands, dripping water at his pointy-toed, cowboy booted feet.

"You do look a little like Bird. Long-legged, blue eyes, same blond hair. You his daughter?"

Her jaw clenched. "Yes."

The wind gusted. She clamped her arms to keep from shivering. He dropped her gear on the ground and started unbuckling his belt. "You're hypothermic. Take off your clothes."

Appalled at the suggestion, Mariah turned to find the trail. She suppressed her chattering teeth. "N-never mind. I'll come back later."

Three long strides and he was blocking her way. He pulled off his belt and worked the buttons on his jeans. "I'm taking off my pants and you're taking off yours and putting mine on."

"Who do you think you are?"

"The guy who's gonna keep you from freezing to death. Off with the pants. I mean it, McBride."

Fly undone, he hopped on one foot and removed one cowboy boot, then the other, revealing red wool socks.

Dropping his jeans, he held them out.

Shuddering with cold, Mariah still had the wherewithal to give him the *you-are-absolutely-crazy* look.

He shook the jeans at her. "What do I gotta do? Put 'em on you myself? You know I'm right, 'less you're so deep into hypothermia you're nonsensical."

Struck by his use of such an old-fashioned word, she replied with the most force that could be mustered when one's lips were blue. "*What* did you say?"

"Nonsensical. Not making sense. Take off your pants."

She noted the plaid flannel shirttails that didn't quite conceal his baby blue boxer shorts and made another monumental effort to speak clearly. "You look ridiculous."

"No more ridiculous than you. Your butt is sagging with water. Go on. Strip."

He was right about the butt. The pants were sliding down because of the water weight, sliding to the point where they might fall down by themselves. And he'd made a good point about hypothermia. Pure snowmelt fed the creek, making the water temperature close to freezing. Human beings couldn't survive in such conditions.

Worst problem was, he was right and she was wrong, and she absolutely hated being wrong.

Disgusted with herself for being in this humiliating situation in the first place, she stripped off her sodden socks. Fumbling with the front of her pants, her numbed fingers struggled with the canvas belt. He stepped forward to help but she twisted away.

"Don't," she said.

"Hold this," he said. He pushed his balled up jeans into her hands and grabbed her waistband just as her frozen fingers registered the warm, dry denim.

He undid the belt, zipped down the fly and yanked her pants down. It shocked her, how easy it was for him to do and how quick. He started yanking down her soaked underwear, too. Mariah dropped the jeans to stop him.

"I said, don't!"

"I'm not looking, okay?"

His grip on the underwear was much better than hers and he won the fight before it really got started. He knelt on the ground in front of her and his hands closed around one of her lower legs, forcing her to raise her ankle as he peeled off the wet clothes from one foot, then picked up the jeans and inserted the same foot inside them. She started helping him, finally, using his lowered shoulders for support. She maneuvered her second foot out of the wet and into the dry.

She tried to pull the jeans on with her shaky hands but he was the one who really did it, rising to his feet to snug them over her hips and waist.

"34 inseam, same as me. 34 waist is way too big, though. Need the belt for that."

He lassoed her with his leather belt and cinched it below her waist to ensure there was a good two inches of fabric sticking above the belt. The knot he tied in the leather robbed her of breath.

"Too tight?"

He loosened and retied it like he knotted thick leather every day; which he probably did. She finally had an inkling about who he was. The most famous and favorite son in Grizzly Springs. His name eluded her but she was pretty sure this man was the one who owned the town stables after a rather storied

career winning the World Championship of Rodeo seven or eight times.

"I'm giving you my jacket, too."

His hands burrowed under her Henley shirt, peeling it away from her stomach and spine. The shirt turned inside out as he pulled it over her head, with the wet sleeves forcing her arms to straighten towards the sky.

It was a humiliating position to be in, standing exposed in front of a relative stranger. She tried not to picture what she must look like to him. Unfortunately when stressed, her imagination heightened her self-consciousness by a factor of ten. She was wearing one of those underwire, seamless t-shirt bras, devoid of lace or other support features. The wet material was unabashedly see through.

Seeking to ensure he was indeed adhering to his promise not to look, she dwelled on his face. It had the character of most cowboys: strong-jawed and clean-shaven, lined in attractive ways by sun and wind. The ends of his hair picked up shades of burnished brown under the hat brim. But his eyes were striking, thickly lashed and an unholy blue, and glinted with good humor.

Cowboys were supposed to live by an uncompromising code of honor, hard work and loyalty to kin and country, and somehow the wealth of expression in those eyes didn't quite fit. It sparked a memory, a suggestion of a name.

Either that, or the cold had numbed her brain.

He whipped off his jacket and tossed it over her shoulders. The sheepskin warmth shook her knees. She groped for the armholes.

"Wait," he said. "Your bra."

He *was* looking, studying the water-logged bra clinging to her like a second skin. He reached under the jacket, snaked his

hand up her back and unhooked the bra like an expert, pulling it down her arms and tossing it on the ground. At that point, even if he had been leering at her, she didn't care because she needed to get her arms inside the sleeves of his jacket and absorb what was left of his body heat.

"Thank you," she said.

"All in a day's work. We're not done yet, though." He whistled shrilly and his horse appeared, trotting in from the other side of the clearing and stopping beside him like a trained dog.

"Look, you've done enough," she said. "I can get home on my own."

"Bull-headed as you are, you probably could. But I want my clothes back. No cowboy worth his salt would ride home to the ranch without his pants."

Fortified by body heat, she responded in kind. "Mercy me. After what you've done, I guess I can't let you make such a dad-gum fool of yourself."

"I was hoping you'd say that."

He smiled, including the crinkling of his eyes. It tempted her to smile back. But no matter how attractive or nice he was, she wasn't interested.

"Bend your knee," he said. "I'll give you a leg up."

"Uh... you don't expect me to ride that thing, do you?"

"Bird's place is a good two miles away and you said you were done arguing."

"I never said that."

"I'll be up there, too, steering and making sure you stay on. Up with the leg."

He boosted her into the saddle. She tried to look dignified despite her rookie status, towering above him in the borrowed

clothes and bare feet. It made her mouthier than usual. "Just for the record, I don't like to be bossed around."

"Me, neither."

He gathered the reins and tugged the horse, leading it to where he'd discarded his boots. Tipping back from the horse's move, Mariah grabbed the saddle horn.

"Stand," he said and dropped the reins. The horse stayed in one place but dropped its head to snuffle at its owner as he sat on the ground, removed his socks and then pulled his boots on over his bare feet. Rising, he shook out one sock and moved close to put it on her foot.

She spread her toes out wide. "You don't have to do that. I'm warming up fine."

He wiped the dirt off her foot with his shirtsleeve and kept trying to put on the sock. "Anyone ever tell you, you like to complain?"

"I don't need your socks."

"But you're getting them just the same."

Uncooperative as she was, he ended up pinning her ankle against the side of his horse to get the sock on. Fearful of kicking the horse and making it go by mistake, she let him.

He went from one side to the other, pulling them on.

"Thanks for not fighting me on this one."

"There's no point in wasting energy when I'm freezing. And since you're naked from the waist down, you're probably not much better."

"Hey, it's Sunday, so I've got my silk boxers on. Traps the heat." Gathering the reins, he pushed her left leg forward and used the stirrup to mount the horse and slide in behind her.

"Walk on."

The horse plodded forward, leaving Mariah aware of the mastery of the man behind her. "I know who you are, by the way."

"If that's true, you should tell me your name."

"McBride, like you said."

"Okay, McBride. Do you have a first name?"

"Mariah."

"Which do you prefer, Mariah or McBride?"

"Which do you prefer, Kelly Shane or Youngblood?"

"I suspect you know Kelly Shane is the name I used in my pro rodeo days. My first name is Kellen but most folks around here call me Shane."

"Call me Mariah."

"Pretty name."

She bristled at the compliment, disliking the flirtatious way he said it, as though she'd solicited it somehow. From the corner of her eye, she could see his bare legs snuggled up against hers. The only barrier between them was denim. She was practically sitting in his lap. Every movement of the horse forced her shoulders to sway against his chest. She didn't want to think about his boxer shorts, undoubtedly stretched thin.

"You're squishing me," she said.

He readjusted his seat. "Sorry. Saddles aren't designed for two."

"I'd be happy to walk."

"I'd be happy to not. Would you mind if we went faster? I promise you won't fall off."

She did a death grip on the saddle horn. "Tell me before you take off."

"We're taking off."

The horse leaped into a lope. Mariah bit back a scream because it happened fast and they were moving fast but after

the first few seconds, she began to realize that if she rocked in rhythm with the horse's head, it wasn't as scary as she first thought. Plus he had his arms on either side of her and was holding the reins, which made her feel pretty darn safe, much as she didn't want to admit it.

After fifteen minutes, she saw the towering cottonwood that stood like a sentry on Bird's half acre of land. To be heard over the sound of hooves, she yelled, "We're at the house!"

He slowed the horse to a walk. Once they made it past the tree, the house came into view.

She should have said camper because she made it a point of pride to tell the truth, especially when it was this unvarnished. The truth was, it was hardly a camper either, since the wheels were long gone. Up on blocks, it had withstood many winters and summers and still looked like a giant aluminum bread box, shiny in the sun.

A permanent awning made of sheet metal and scrap jutted out from over a wooden front door which must have come from an old outhouse because there was a half moon carved near the top.

Bird liked to sit in the shade and he'd arrayed a good number of chairs in front from his favorite pursuit, dumpster-diving. The only class around the joint was her three year-old, mid-sized SUV, the only major asset she had left in the world.

"This is where you live?"

She resigned herself to the pity in his voice. The last of her retirement funds had gone to pay for her attorney's fees, leaving her with just enough savings to start over in Grizzly Springs.

"This is where my *dad* lives," she said with careful emphasis. "I'm looking for my own place in town."

Shane halted the horse on a sandy strip with a few clumps of crabgrass. Mariah would have loved to leap down like a graceful Lady Godiva, but riding lessons didn't come with growing up in a camper set in the middle of nowhere. She waited for instructions.

"Is he home?"

"Not this time of day." Impatient, Mariah blew out a breath. "Can you help? I don't know how to get down."

With his long legs, he certainly had no problem getting down, achieving it in one supremely athletic move. He grabbed her waist and guided her off the horse, his hands lingering as she fought her shaky legs.

"Grew up in cattle town, Colorado, and never had a chance to ride?"

Flinching, she lifted her chin. Once she figured out a college degree was her ticket out of this dump, what the other kids in town did with their time no longer mattered. "You have your interests, I have mine. Excuse me while I change."

It was embarrassing to have to go to the SUV for her clothes, but no way was she storing anything she valued in the nicotine-drenched camper. The camper was the better place to change, however. At least she could stand and turn around and, thanks to a decent-sized mirror, clean her face.

She entered the tiny bathroom. Her reflection showed muddy green streaks on her forehead, cheeks and neck. She wiped them with the towel, scrubbing hard.

Her pale cheeks colored pink, emphasizing the strong bone structure of her face. Too much like her father's, Mariah thought. What she failed to appreciate was how her contrasting coloring softened the edges, making her eyes stand out against her dark eyebrows and the bloneness of her hair.

Mariah removed Shane's coat and socks, folding them carefully. Unknotting his stupid belt was a problem, however. She shrugged on two shirts and her down vest to make up for the fact that she didn't have another bra to wear and marched out of the camper in his jeans, his folded jacket and socks in her hands and flip flops on her feet.

She halted in front of him. "This frickin' belt won't come off. It makes me feel like I'm five."

"Hmmm," he said and untied the belt. "You're definitely not five."

She bunched the loose waistband in her fist and made a crisp about-face, blushing at his remark. Sans his belt, she returned to the camper with ramrod posture. With him watching, it turned out to be a lesson in willpower. She liked to think she pulled the whole thing off with a certain panache.

Once she got her own jeans on, she felt a great deal more like herself, which meant she didn't need help and could hardly wait to send Shane Youngblood on his way. She hummed a happy little tune, opened the door and found Shane and Bird standing in the yard, yakking.

Her humming unhappily died.

Bird waved at her, grinning, showing off his missing front teeth. He yellow and silver hair sprang on top of his head, angling every which way. The ripped buttons on his overalls meant he had to wear a rope to hold them up. His canvas high tops were devoid of laces, showing mismatched socks.

"Lookee what I found, girl, roostin' in our roost with nary a stitch on."

Avoiding him, Mariah delivered Shane's jeans. He'd already removed his boots and replaced his jacket and socks, thank god.

"I fell into the creek, Bird," she said evenly. "Shane was kind enough to lend me some clothes." She turned to him, her appreciation real. "Thanks, by the way, Shane."

Bird blinked in his typically fuzzy, unfocused way. "Look at you, talkin' nice. She ain't usually like this, Shane. Got run out of the FBI and showed up with her tail between her legs."

Shane opened his mouth to speak but Mariah beat him to it and waved him toward his horse. "Please don't bother. It's not worth arguing with a drunk."

Shane motioned for her to join him. "I'm not comfortable leaving you here with him."

Bird trailed them, leering. "Did you hear that, Mariah? It's love at first sight."

Proving she was fully in command of the situation, Mariah edged toward the horse and transferred the reins to Shane.

"I've been dealing with him for 33 years. Like I said, I'm moving to town soon."

Bird's laugh cackled with an eeriness that rankled. "She'll be happy to move right in with you, Shane. Mariah ain't one to wait for a formal invitation."

Shane didn't give Bird the courtesy of a single glance and locked his gaze on Mariah. "Maybe you should stay with me for a few days until you find your place. I've got a couple of extra bedrooms."

"Extry bedrooms? Can I come, too?"

Dead-eyed, Shane faced him. "No, you're being an asshole to your daughter and I won't stand for it." Shane nodded toward Mariah, then the SUV. "That's yours, right? Meet me at my stables in half an hour and I'll give you my key."

Mariah shook her head for emphasis. She didn't need him poking his nose where it didn't belong. She was still smarting from the betrayal and loss of her DC support system, the

friends, colleagues and the profession she had held most dear.  
"No, thank you. You've already done enough."

"What's your phone number?"

Bird cackled again. "I been tryin' to get ahold of that myself."

Mariah lowered her voice, aiming it directly at Shane.  
"Your stables are open to the public, right? I'll look up the number and call you later. But I need you to leave now. This really is none of your business."

"I'm making it my business," Shane said. "Don't stay here. It's not good for you. Him, either, if you want to know the truth."

Damn, he was relentless. It triggered an impulse to lean on him, an impulse she needed to squelch. Depending on the men in her life was one reason she had to return to this god-forsaken place.

"Who died and made you king?"

Bird whistled through his teeth, applauding them both.  
"You got her on her high horse now, Shane. Might wanna watch out."

Shane pointed at Bird. "Shut up."

Mariah redirected the pointing, pushing Shane's arm down.  
"Antagonizing him doesn't help. Get on your horse and get out of here. I can handle him."

"There's no handling him. I'm from a long line of drunks, so I know. You deserve better than this."

"Yes, I do, but you're not obligated to provide it. I can take care of myself."

"It's not you I'm worried about. It's him. Everyone in these parts knows Bird. If he didn't live out here in the middle of nowhere, out of sight and out of mind, he'd be in jail."

She folded her arms across her chest. "If you know so much about drunks, answer me this. If you were me, and I was arguing with you in front of your father, what would you be saying right now?"

He stared at her for a beat, those blue eyes deepening to navy, digesting her words until he reached a disgruntled understanding. He drew his horse close and mounted, contemplating her from above. "Okay, I hear you. But you better call me at the stables before dark tonight or I'll be back."

Shane spurred his horse, trailing a sand cloud behind him.

"He'll be back!" Bird said and danced an uneven jig, pretending to play his guitar. "Hoo-wee, girl, we caught us a live one today!"

## Two

Shane couldn't find anyone who personally knew Mariah McBride until the next day, completely by accident. Dressed in his usual jeans, boots and western-style shirt, he was looking over the shoulder of his business manager, Ana Garcia, who was similarly dressed, both of them studying the cash flow summary spreadsheet, when it occurred to him that as a Grizzly Springs native, Ana might recognize the name.

"You know Bird McBride?"

Ana's espresso eyes showing utter disdain. "Doesn't everyone? I avoid him like the plague."

"I met his daughter yesterday."

Ana raised her ebony eyebrows to the point where they disappeared under her neat, ebony bangs. "Mariah's back in town?"

"Do you know her?"

"*Dios mio*, of course, I do. We're the same age. I'd love to see her. In high school, we were best friends."

"Best friends? You know her that well?"

"Bird did his darnedest to prevent it but growing up, Mariah was practically an orphan. Mama and Papa would have none of it. Mariah slept over at our house a lot."

"I don't remember ever seeing her. She's not the type I'd forget."

"How often were you in my house? You and my brother spent all your free time at the rodeo ring. Besides, you were long gone by the time I hit high school and that's when Mariah and I got close. Where's she living?"

"With Bird at the moment."

"Uh-oh."

"That's what I thought, too. But I couldn't get her to budge. She called me last night."

"She called you?"

"For like two seconds. She thanked me for my help but basically told me to leave her alone."

"She's been going through a rough time. I hope you didn't go off on a tangent and ask a bunch of questions like you usually do. She's pretty private."

"Why would I ask questions? I've never met her before."

"Don't you follow the news?"

"What news?"

"The national news. Mariah's been on C-Span a fair amount the last few months. They've been showing clips of her, testifying before Congress, especially on the cable news networks. I've even seen some coverage on local TV."

"I've got enough on my plate dealing with the weather report. Bird said something about her being in the FBI, and losing her job."

"There was a scandal. Something about a hostage situation and federal agents getting killed. Mariah took the fall. You must be the only one in Grizzly Springs who hasn't heard about it. Since she's Bird's daughter, people are talking up a storm."

"I'm not one for sitting around, gabbing."

"Aside from you, she's the most famous person ever to come out of this town. Although, I doubt she'd want to be this famous. It's one thing to be a celebrity like you. But she was dragged before Congress. There were numerous investigations. It seemed like she'd be questioned until hell froze over. And I certainly didn't expect her to come back here. She and Bird don't get along."

"So I gathered."

One of Shane's employees popped his head inside the office door. "Billy wants you to come quick, boss. Genuine Hero's thrown a shoe. He thinks the horse is coming up lame."

"Damn, not again."

Spinning on his heel, Shane clapped his hat on his head and disappeared out the door.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mariah skipped the shallow steps two at a time to get into what passed as the main public library in Grizzly Springs. Housed on Tabor Street in a square stone building that once served as the county jail a hundred years previously, it was open Monday, Wednesday and Friday for very abbreviated hours.

She paused, rereading the hand-written sign taped on the door. Three days a week, 9 to 2. Where did the geeks and brainiacs go when they needed to study? When she was in middle school, she used to come here every day just to avoid going home to Bird.

She juggled her laptop and purse and pushed her way inside, wincing as the door squeaked and groaned. Her goal today was to find suitable office space. She needed Wi-Fi access to search real estate listings and, judging from the scant

amount of time the library was open, her next challenge would be to find a leasing agent who was available every day for more than fifteen hours a week.

In order to blend in on her first foray to town, she'd achieved her best attempt yet at Colorado casual wear: designer blue jeans and a t-shirt she'd unearthed for participating in a NYPD charity road race.

The library's interior was dank and gloomy, another bad break from the past. The last time she'd been inside had been the day of her high school graduation, when she'd come to say goodbye to Violet Penrose, the librarian who had made this place Mariah's second home. A magician with the town's scant funds, Violet had a collection of second-hand lamps on top of every shelf and was known to set up a card table outside churches on Sundays, appealing for extra money to buy books.

Today, the lamps were gone and the book collection, decimated. The desk was manned by an indifferent teenager, a greasy-faced boy with a half-shaved head, wearing a hoodie, red gauges in his earlobes and a nose ring.

"Wi-Fi's down," he said without looking up from his phone.

Mariah came to an abrupt stop. "Where else can I get it?"

He yawned, blinking at his screen. "70 miles, in Aspen."

"Are you shittin' me?"

The boy gaped at her. "Who the fuck are you?"

Mariah raised a cool eyebrow. If Violet Penrose was looking down from heaven and saw the condition of her life's work, she'd be turning in her grave. "Nobody you'd like to know."

Mariah stalked out. She halted on the sidewalk and checked the corner of Tabor and Main, hoping to spot public Wi-Fi signs. Nothing. The street was deserted at 9:45 on a Thursday morning.

She considered the Sweet Shoppe, which might be a possibility but didn't open until eleven. Aside from the General Store, the only other open places were Cordelia's Greasy Spoon, which didn't even have a computer on the premises, and Sam's Hunt and Fish, the closest thing Grizzly Springs had to a sporting goods store. In front of the store's picture window were a couple of upended wooden packing boxes with two men perched on them. They wore yellow Caterpillar caps, beefy jeans and heavy work boots, and were drinking coffee from Styrofoam cups.

She headed there. In their mid-twenties, both men touched the brim of their caps in acknowledgement as she nodded and breezed by. If they recognized her, they didn't show it.

Score one for the girl dressed in blue.

Sam's interior was one cavernous room and as gloomy as the library. Except this gloom was caused by the blocking of sunlight from the picture window. Crowded with merchandise, a rope stretched across the top of it, sagging from the weight of different types of sleeping bags, hanging like laundry. Suspended from the ceiling was a bat cave of polartec and down jackets hanging on hooks. At least they was colorful.

Horizontal rows of sporting equipment were arranged on the side and rear walls. The goods on display looked new but were bunched together in odd combinations like a secondhand thrift store. Skis alternated with fishing rods, snowboards with canoe paddles, golf clubs with bike helmets, hockey skates with lacrosse sticks, shotguns placed high on the wall but underlined by rows of soccer and basketballs. Along the baseboards were shoe boxes, stacked to form low tables. Shoe and boot samples were arrayed on top. Mariah noted there were far more cowboy and hunting boots than running shoes.

Spanning the back wall was an old-fashioned wooden display cabinet with three modern cash registers, the high-end kind. Each was surrounded by baskets of smaller merchandise like sunglasses, pocket knives, packaged fishing hooks, flashlights, ski goggles, hand warmers and such.

The middle of the store was strangely empty, except for a small round table with a big stainless-steel coffee urn, powdered cream and canistered sugar, and a stack of upside down Styrofoam cups.

A beer-bellied man in his fifties, dressed in pressed khakis, flannel shirt, a hunting vest and camo cap, came out from behind the register area. He peered at her over his reading glasses. "You must be Bird McBride's daughter."

Mariah couldn't help the curdling of her stomach. He'd recognized her even faster than Shane Youngblood had. Maybe dickboy at the library and Mr. Sam Hunt-and-Fish were harbingers of challenges to come. She faked what she hoped was a affable smile and offered a handshake. "Yes, I'm Mariah McBride. You must be Sam?"

"Sam Adams." He shook her hand with enthusiasm. "Like the beer. Or the revolutionary. If you know the difference, you can have a free cup of coffee."

"If you have a brother named John and a sister-in-law named Abigail, I do know the difference. But what I'm really looking for is a decent Wi-Fi connection. I'd pay for a cup of coffee if you'll let me access the internet on my laptop for awhile."

"I'm connected all right. Got a high speed line. Have to, in this day and age, or the state won't let me issue hunting licenses. But I don't really use the internet. Keeping the store afloat takes most of my time."

"How much would you charge for a cup of coffee if I could use your connection, say, for a couple of hours?"

"This ain't one of those fancy gourmet coffee stores. This here is Grizzly Springs. My coffee is free for the asking. Go ahead and help yourself."

"I appreciate the offer but what I really need is your internet connection. The one at the library isn't available and the research I have to do on the web is pretty detailed, making it difficult to read on my phone."

"You'd pay for a cup of coffee in order to use my store's internet?"

He sounded startled by the idea. "Uh... yes. As a matter of fact, I would."

"Will wonders never cease."

"How much?"

"Well, I don't know. If you want to work, I suppose you'd want a chair to sit in."

"A chair would be helpful, yes. Thank you, Sam."

He gestured toward the coffee urn. "Would you like to use this table, too? If you're going to buy coffee, I probably should provide some room for you to work, move the pot closer to the cash registers."

Mariah settled her lap top on the table. "This is an ideal set-up for me. Much better than the dusty old library."

"County can't afford extras these days. Me, I like to keep my store free of dust and dirt. Kind of a stickler that way. My wife calls me a germophobe. But I learned in the Army, neat and clean is the only way to go."

"I appreciate your service," Mariah said. Shmoozing Sam might help in her quest to find office space in Grizzly Springs.

"I was stationed at Fort Carson. Met my wife in Colorado Springs. She made me leave after two tours of duty. Couldn't stand the worrying. I couldn't blame her."

"Yes, that's understandable." Mariah glanced around the store, trying to be complimentary. "You certainly have plenty of space in the middle of your store."

"Have to for when hunting and fishing licenses come up for renewal. Sometimes the line fills the whole place and snakes out the door."

"How often does that happen?"

"Depends on the season. Five, six times a year."

"In that case, maybe you should think about..." She paused, making it overly long and dramatic. "No, never mind."

"Maybe I should think about what?"

"Oh, no, I can't. Obviously, you know much more about customer service than I do. This store has been around for a long time, hasn't it? I'm sure those two gentlemen outside in the front drinking your coffee, I'm sure they came in early. What sports equipment did they buy?"

Sam shook his head sadly. "They work construction. Every morning, they come in for the free coffee. I'm thinking about cutting them off but I've done that with other guys and they won't come in anymore, even if they do need something. I don't understand why they got angry. It's my store, but I like my coffee. I'm trying to attract more people to come in. Seems to me it's a fine gesture of goodwill to offer it to my customers. I'm learning the economic importance of goodwill from some business books I'm reading. Truth is, I inherited this store from my dad a few months ago. I'm actually Sam Junior. Retired after 30 years as a prison guard. I've been learning the best way to run a retail store ever since. Goodwill is a critical concept when it comes to owning your own business."

"You're absolutely right. That's why I appreciate free access to your internet while I spend my money on your delicious coffee." Mariah circled the coffee urn. "Do you use a high-priced brand?"

"Don't tell anyone but I grind my own out of three different kinds of beans. It's not as expensive as buying the high priced stuff. I add them together so the beans really have a chance to mix and bring out the flavor."

Mariah pulled out her wallet. "How much do I owe you?"

Sam carried the urn to the cash register area. "I have no idea what to charge you."

Mariah consulted her phone. "Let me check the going rate at Starbucks."

"Starbucks! That's big time."

"Economics is all about supply and demand, isn't it? The only other place around here with coffee this early is the diner. If you decide to sell your own, your advantage will be convenience. Provide a quick cup of coffee with maybe a few chairs and small tables to sit at. Most people won't be interested in the Wi-Fi, as your construction worker friends are clearly proving." Mariah checked the Starbucks website. "Looks like I owe you at least a couple of dollars."

"For one cup of coffee?"

"That's for the regular cup of plain coffee. Of course, if you offered an extra large cup of something special, you could charge as much as..." Mariah peered at her phone, calculating. "Five times that."

"Ten bucks?" His voice had risen two octaves.

"For a triple espresso super gigantic specialty drink. But if you just wanted to have a larger size of your special blend available, three or four dollars seems like a fair price to me."

"Even if I only got two bucks a pop, the beans to make a whole urn cost at most, three or four dollars."

"Is that a good return on investment compared to the other things you sell?"

"Compared to retail goods? It blows the top off. Even if I only made twenty bucks each morning, that's twenty bucks more than I would have made otherwise. Pays for *my* coffee. And it'll give me something to do when it's slow. I'm an early riser and I like to get here at seven."

"Seems to me there are plenty of people who like drinking coffee at seven in the morning."

"Tell you what. Since you want to stay for a couple of hours, you can have three cups of coffee for three dollars. How's that for an instant deal?"

Mariah handed over three dollars. "As long as it comes with free Wi-Fi, you can write your own ticket, my friend."

"I'll fetch that chair so you can sit down and get to work."

"Thank you, Sam."

"Thank *you*, Mariah. You gave me a great idea."

Sam carried the cups and cream and sugar canisters to the cash register area, then hustled into the back room before returning with a wooden folding chair. He set it up and Mariah seated herself, and inputted the password he gave her.

After the little bump in the road at the library, Sam had been as friendly as could be. The possibility of cultivating other store owners around town made her wonder if she should reconnect with Shane Youngblood. If she kept things strictly about commercial space, she could shmooze him like she did Sam.

Maybe folks around here had better things to do than watch C-span and the national news. Since Sam had taken charge recently, maybe he hadn't had a run-in with Bird.

The bottom line was, the sooner she found her own place, the better.

The next morning, Mariah met with Angel Furman, a part-time real-estate agent who was also a full-time ICU nurse. She worked 12-hour shifts three days a week at Aspen Hospital, leaving time to indulge in her second passion, tracking properties she could invest in. Mariah was happy to learn her FBI problems and relationship to Bird were of little interest to Angel. She was far more focused on making money, enough money to move to Aspen and escape her long commute.

If Mariah could pick a role model for dickboy in the library, Angel would be it. Her hair was styled short, crisply edged, handsome in a feminine way, curling over her brow. She was medium height and weight, a well-muscled woman in her mid 20s. Outfitted in running tights and fluorescent tank top, she exuded plenty of bright-eyed energy, certainly enough to bring off exercise attire in Cowtown, USA. Mariah felt totally overdressed in a pinstriped pant suit and white blouse. But spending her dwindling cash on clothes was the last thing on her list.

The first place she was ushered into by Angel was a vacated space above the General Store. McNally's was the centerpiece of town, housed in a century-old brick building, opposite the old railroad depot, which was once the site of prodigious activity from Colorado's gold rush days. McNally's sold a wide variety of merchandise, from groceries to touristy knick-knacks.

When Mariah was a child, the store was half the size, selling only groceries and limited ones at that. It had been

founded by two brothers, both butchers by trade. The store started as a meat market, with slabs of beef, bison, elk and headless grouse and chickens hanging on display behind glass partitions, separating the refrigerated section from the rest of the space. The only fish for sale was fresh trout.

Basic fruits and vegetables were the rule. Varieties of apples, onions, potatoes and assorted citrus complemented most meats, and the brothers' stocked them year-round. In summer there was corn, cantaloupe and peaches grown on the Western Slope. The closest she came to tasting those was school lunches. The head of the school district happened to be married to the patriarch of Winslow Farms, an early supplier to farmers markets. When in season, the fresh stuff was cheaper than canned.

Mariah learned from Angel that a husband and wife team, the Cabrillo's had recently taken over. She filed the information away as a possible client source. The place was lacking security cameras and merchandise locks on the high end goods most attractive to shoplifters.

The second floor, once home to the bachelor McNally brothers, had been divided into office space. Angel unlocked the door that opened into a three room suite, recently vacated by a dentist. He hadn't been able to attract enough patients to support his practice in town. Mariah decided it was a bad omen. The space was much too spacious and expensive for a one-woman operation done on the cheapest of the cheap.

It was flanked by two other businesses, which seemed to be doing okay, judging by the number of people waiting in the hall. One was a CPA tax specialist; the other a General Attorney. His name was stenciled on the old-fashioned door: *Emilio Whitehorse, Esq.* Spelled out underneath was '*No Divorces*'.

Mariah was glad to move on to the next possibility, which was more to her liking, at least as far as rent was concerned. Once Angel had done her thing, and promised to email the leasing contract, Mariah returned to her SUV. She'd parked it at the old train depot which aligned with the town park. Behind her vehicle, a Greyhound bus was chugging smoke, blocking it in.

She circled to avoid it. A black garbage bag flew out the bus door, landing on the sidewalk with a plop. A boy followed, jumping straight from the platform to the pavement. His cowboy hat fell off and rolled, coming to rest at Mariah's feet.

"Scuse me, ma'am."

He scooped the hat, jammed it on his head and smiled at her. He had a mouthful of braces. Mariah had the distinct feeling that she'd seen him before. It was that leap off the bus, the black hat, the cool swagger in his step. Unlike Shane, though, he was short, husky, built low to the ground, more boy than man.

The rest of him was pretty sharp--dark jeans, a tight black t-shirt, LeBron James high-tops. Most incongruous was the cowboy hat, the wide brim, sombrero-like. It didn't have that urban vibe.

"Welcome to Grizzly Springs," she said.

He squinted. "Do I know you?"

"Small town, we say hello. I'm Mariah McBride."

"I'm Kelly Shane Travers."

"Kelly Shane?"

"I don't use my middle name. You can call me Kelly."

"Are you related to Kelly Shane Youngblood?"

"I sure am. He's my dad."

Mariah blinked. "Dad?"

"I'm headed to his house. Which way is Main Street?"

Questions flitted through Mariah's mind. Never been here before? Too young to have a phone and the directional apps that went with it? And Shane definitely did not give off a fatherly vibe. His was more about accomplishment, about living-on-the-edge as the ultimate in cowboy cool.

She pointed to where Main Street intersected with the feeder road to Highway 61. The east direction led to Aspen. To the west spread the wide open spaces of the Red River basin. The Youngblood ranch was on that side. "Half-mile up the hill, right side of the street."

"Thanks." He started off, then turned back and tipped his hat. Rather inexpertly, she noticed. "Nice to meet you, ma'am."

"You, too, Kelly."

He swung the garbage bag over his shoulder and jaywalked, following her directions. She followed him, heading for Sam's Hunt and Fish. There *was* a resemblance to Shane in that free-wheeling saunter and budding male confidence. The coloring was similar, too. Dark hair, easily tanned skin. But brown eyes, hard to read, unlike Shane's. Less impactful. Still growing, starting to spurt. She estimated he was in the twelve or thirteen year-old range.

He passed Sam's and halted, scoping it out. He ran his hand along the front window, examining the framing, back and forth, up and down, looking for all the world like he was casing the joint. He tilted back, checking the second story. His hat fell off. He cursed loud enough for Mariah to hear.

She hurried, picked up the hat and handed it to him. He screwed it back on. "Thanks," he said.

"Can I help you with something?" she asked. "You look a little lost."

Wide-eyed with innocence, he juggled his belongings. "Nope. Window-shopping."

Mariah studied the half-filled garbage bag.

"It's my clothes and stuff," he said blithely. She cocked her head as if she didn't believe him. If he saw it, he ignored it and sauntered away, continuing up Main Street.

He had answered a question she didn't ask. A classic sign of deception. Watching his progress, Mariah had a sinking feeling that Shane was in for a helluva surprise.

\* \* \* \* \*

Fifteen minutes later, Shane was experiencing that surprise. Kelly stood on his front porch, hat in hand.

"Hello, Mr. Youngblood, sir.

"Can I help you?"

"You're my dad."

Shane checked the sidewalk both ways, looking for an audience, suspicious of being punked. "Who says so?"

"Me. I'm Kelly Shane, same as you." He offered a handshake. Struck by the boy's sincerity, Shane shook it. He remained skeptical, though. "Do you have a last name?"

"Travers."

"That doesn't ring a bell."

"My mom is Jessie Mae Riverton Travers."

Shane recognized the name but tried not to show it. A man didn't forget a woman like Jessie Mae. "Where is she?"

"She couldn't come."

"How did you get here?"

"The bus."

"By yourself?"

"Yes, sir. Can I come in?"

Still skeptical, Shane checked up and down the street. Seeing no one, he decided he had to get to the bottom of

whatever was going on. "I think you'd better. Hang your hat on the antlers by the door."

Kelly obeyed, craning his neck to peer upstairs to the second floor. "Do you have other kids?"

"No. How did you know where I live?"

"I looked you up on the internet. You're pretty famous."

Shane studied the garbage bag, looking like it was half-filled with clothes. "Does your mother know you're here?"

Kelly hung his head and shuffled his feet, guilty. "No. But I don't want to live with her anymore. I want to live with you."

"I bet she's worried sick about you. Don't you think?"

"She cries a lot. She misses my dad. The guy I thought was my dad. He died."

Shane nodded, unsure about how to handle the situation. Because of his fame and the size of his bank accounts, he was careful to make sure something like this wouldn't happen. Didn't mean it couldn't, though. Booting the kid out was premature. Too many details to discover. "I'm sorry about your dad. But we need to call your mom, straighten this whole thing out."

"Mom says I'm not old enough to have a phone."

"We'll use mine." Shane ushered Kelly to the kitchen. "If she's already feeling bad, you leaving home is going to make everything worse."

"She might give me a whupping for running away."

"She may be angry, yes. But I'm sure she'll feel better once she knows you're safe and sound. What's her number, son?"

*Son.* A minor slip of the tongue.

"Will you talk first?" Kelly asked anxiously.

"Yes, I'll talk first."

Sighing, Kelly rattled it off. "512-555-0187."

Shane dialed the number, assessing Kelly's looks. "How old are you?" Shane asked as the line connected.

"Twelve. Almost thirteen."

The timing was right. The phone started ringing. "What grade?"

"I'm starting 8th in the fall. Middle school."

The call transferred to voicemail.

*"This is Jessie Mae Travers. Please leave a message and I will return your call as soon as I can."*

"Jessie, this is Kellen Shane Youngblood calling about your son. Please get back to me as soon as possible." Shane ended the call.

"Maybe she's not answering cause she's looking for me."

"I'm sure she is."

Kelly eyed the large refrigerator. "Do you have any peanut butter and jelly?"

"What All-American cowboy doesn't have peanut butter and jelly?"

Shane slapped the sandwich together while Kelly dropped into a chair at the kitchen table, checking the room out, looking impressed. The kid did look a little bit like him. Brown hair, medium-toned skin, a sturdy build that was strong but boyish in stature, a late bloomer. To turn up here on his own initiative, took some cajones. Street smarts didn't always come easy but Kelly had more than most kids his age. Shane added chips to the plate and served it.

Kelly chomped happily, finishing in two minutes flat, another trait they had in common. "Do you have any chocolate chip cookies?"

"Oatmeal raisin."

Kelly made a face. "Yuck."

"Maybe after we talk to your mom, we'll go buy some."

Shane's phone rang. He saw it was the number he dialed for Jessie and quickly answered. "Hello?"

"Oh, my God, Shane. Is Kelly with you?"

"Yes, he's right here, safe and sound. I'm putting you on speakerphone."

Jessie's voice softened. "Kelly? Are you okay, honey?"

Kelly hunched over the phone. "Sorry, Mom, but I wanted to meet my dad."

"He's not your dad, honey. I know how hard this whole thing has been for you, but Mr. Youngblood as nothing to do with this."

"He is, too, my dad!"

"Kelly, no." Jessie's voice became firmer. "How did you find him?"

"The internet, Mom. I saved up my birthday and chore money and took the bus."

She sighed, sounding tired. "Shane, are you there?"

"Yes."

"I hardly know what to say. I'm sorry you're caught up in this."

Shane returned the speaker to off mode. "I think the best thing is for me to keep an eye on him and bring him home."

"Where are you?"

"Colorado. You?"

"Austin, Texas."

Shane glanced at Kelly, impressed. "You came all the way from Austin?"

"I'm not a baby. I know what I'm doing."

Jessie interrupted. "I'm sure you have better things to do than to chaperone my son halfway across the country. I'll take the first plane out. Where in Colorado are you?"

"My hometown. Grizzly--"

"Grizzly Springs. I remember. I'm checking flight schedules as we speak. Looks like I can catch a flight to Denver tonight, connect to Aspen in the morning and be there by afternoon. Can you take care of him until then?"

"Don't worry about it. Give me a call when you get close to town. I'm off of Main Street. There's a big sign with my initials, KSY Stables. It isn't hard to find."

"I'll rent a car. May I speak to Kelly again, please?"

Shane handed the phone to Kelly. "It's your turn."

Kelly gingerly held the phone to his ear. Shane could hear her voice coming through, strident.

"Kelly, you behave yourself. None of this father stuff. Have I made myself clear?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I love you, baby. I'll see you tomorrow."

Kelly punched the end button, then slumped, morose.

Shane ruffled his hair. "How about we buy some chocolate chip cookies?"

Transformed, Kelly punched his fist in the air. "Yes!"

A half hour later, Shane shepherded Kelly out of the General Store, cookie package opened as if he were starving. Shane saw Mariah crossing the street.

"Hey, Mariah!"

She whirled at the sound of her name, her pony tail capturing sunlight as it tumbled over her shoulder. She was dressed pretty formally for Grizzly Springs, wearing crisp black pants, black heels and a silky-looking pale blouse. Although she appeared distracted, she gave Shane a friendly wave. "Hi, Shane."

Shane hurried Kelly across the street to catch her. She was poised like a Colorado magpie, not smiling exactly, but ready to say hello. Two nights ago, he'd called her to see if she'd found a

place to live. He left a voice mail, then a text message, attaching a photo of a decent apartment above the Tavern. She hadn't responded. Probably still adamant about doing the footwork herself.

Bird had always been part of the Grizzly Springs landscape, panhandling on street corners or loitering around the liquor store. He was the most common of clichés, always with a pint in a brown paper bag. Shane had rarely paid much attention. The thought of Bird raising a kid in that camper was mind-blowing.

The shitty way he had treated Mariah... Shane scrubbed his neck as if he could clean the memory of out-and-out derision Bird had displayed. There were problem drinkers in the Youngblood family but completely dysfunctional, falling down drunk? No. Not even close.

He could still hear the rot-gutted voice, corrosively sing-songy, spouting what sounded like bizarre nursery rhymes. Yet here she was, poised and pretty, picking up the pieces of her life.

Shane tipped his hat. "Have you moved yet?"

"Soon. I just signed the lease." She switched her attention to Kelly. He was acting like they'd never met. "Hello," she said neutrally, to see if he remembered.

"Mariah, this is Kelly Shane Travers. Kelly, this is a friend of mine, Mariah McBride."

"Pleased to meet you, ma'am."

"Pleased to meet you, Kelly."

Shane pointed across the street. "Hey, Kell. See that feedstore? I'd like you to go inside and buy a twenty pound bag of horse feed for me. Here's enough cash to cover it. Remember, horse feed, twenty pounds."

"Yes, sir."

Kelly closed the package of cookies, exchanged them for the cash and obediently jogged down the street, entering the store.

"He looks a bit like you," Mariah said casually. "Is he related?"

"Maybe it's the jeans and cowboy hat."

So that's how Shane wanted to play it. "Your name and his are rather similar."

He flashed a self-deprecating smile. "You'd be surprised at the numbers of parents who seem to think naming their kid Kelly Shane is a good idea."

"He's very polite."

"Yeah, I'm doing a favor for his mom and taking care of him until she picks him up tomorrow."

"I see." Mariah pawed through her purse, unwilling to push further. The detective in her needed to be paid, not give out free advice. She extracted a stack of business cards. "I'm trying to get the word out. I'm getting ready to open my business."

"Business?"

"Yes, I'm renting a little storefront on Rio Grande Avenue. The landlord is finishing the space as we speak."

"What are you selling?"

She handed him one of her cards. "I'm starting a private investigation firm. McBride Investigations. Aside from the usual cheating spouse surveillance, I'll be doing background checks, cyber crime prevention, litigation support, missing persons... you name it. Do you happen to know anyone who might need those services?"

"Here, in Grizzly Springs?"

"In the general area, yes."

"In a town as small as this one, I can't see you getting enough business to support yourself. Aspen is where you

should be setting up shop. It's only an hour and a half drive and it exposes you to a larger market."

"I thought about it. But Aspen... it's so..."

"Fake?"

"It's more about the population, the rich and famous.

Discretion is required. Who wants to be seen going in to see a PI who has a shingle out on Main Street?"

"In other words, the rich and famous don't always want to be seen as the rich and famous."

"Exactly. Plan A is to open my office here. The rent is much cheaper and, as you said, it's not a terribly long drive if people need to consult with me personally. I can always go to Aspen, if that's what a client prefers, meet wherever they are comfortable. Of course, I'll advertise in both places."

"You'll have to. No offense, but I should warn you. People are talking and not in a good way."

"Remember the old adage, there's no such thing as bad publicity? According to the news and what my critics have said about me, my sin was not incompetence but being overaggressive. Scandal makes people curious. Curiosity will draw them to my door. I think it will work to my advantage. Even if it doesn't, there aren't too many PIs with a resume like mine who have access to my contacts, analysis skills and technology. I should do okay."

"That's one way to look at it, I guess."

"If it makes you feel better, I'm also working to attract business from other areas. Between my phone, computer and tablet, I can have a consultation with anyone, at anytime. Plan B is to move to Grand Junction or possibly Denver, but only if I have to."

Shane's phone rang, blaring his barn manager's ringtone. "I have to take this call."

"Go ahead. I have a million things to do." Mariah hurried away.

By the time Shane finished his call, she was long gone. Kelly was returning from the feed store, handling the twenty pound sack of feed with ease, proud of himself.

Shane had to admit, he was, too.

## Three

Late in the afternoon of the following day, a small economy sedan parked in front of Shane's house. A pretty, petite woman exited, wearing a conservatively styled skirt and pink sweater twin-set. She ran up the sidewalk to Shane's front door. Before she had the chance to knock, Kelly opened the door.

Even though he was an inch or two taller than his mother, Jessie lifted him off his feet, hugging tight. Her hair was the same color as Kelly's but shorter than Shane remembered. Back thirteen years ago, she had a very dramatic, Kardashian type look, with waist-length hair, a tight little body and killer dance moves. Her figure was still impressive, curvy in all the right places, but her clothes definitely pegged her as more motherly now.

"I can't thank you enough," she said to Shane.

"No problem."

Jessie gripped Kelly's shoulders. "You had me so worried. What were you thinking, running away like that? And to a stranger, no less. I should whup your ass."

Shane joined them on the porch. "But you're not going to because everything turned out fine."

Jessie gave Shane a look of warning. "Get your things, Kelly. We're leaving."

Suspicion creased Shane's brow. "What's the big rush? You traveled all day. Come in and I'll make you a drink."

"Yeah, Mom. Can't we stay awhile?"

Jessie slapped Kelly upside the head. "Don't you back talk me."

"Hey!" Shane stepped in front of Kelly.

Jessie fisted her hands on her hips, elbows out. "Don't you dare tell me how to raise my son."

"That's what we need to discuss," Shane said tightly. "If you want to do it out here, it's fine by me. Kelly can watch TV."

Kelly scurried inside before Jessie had a chance to protest. She turned on Shane. "Who do you think you are?"

Shane gestured to one of two rocking chairs on the porch. "I'm trying to find out. Sit down."

Looking murderous, Jessie plunked herself down. Shane sat opposite her. "Austin is a 700 mile trip. Kelly came a long way to find me. The question is why."

"He ran away. It's not behavior I'm willing to tolerate."

"I can't blame you for that. You have my condolences regarding your husband."

"Sweet talking me is not going to get you anywhere. My husband died in a car crash. It was instant, on impact. Kelly has not gotten over it. He found an old photo of you and I together and came up with this story about a new daddy. That's what his therapist says anyway."

"I'm glad to hear he's getting therapy."

"I know how to take care of my baby." Jessie opened the door. "Kelly, out here now!"

"Why not spend the night? It will be dark soon and in these mountains, driving when you're tired is dangerous."

"Kelly! Outside! Now!"

Frustrated, Shane closed his hand over hers on the door. "How are you going to keep him from coming here again?"

"Didn't you hear me? I'm his mother."

"Kelly needs someone to explain the truth to him, the facts. I'll take a DNA test to prove--"

"No way in hell am I putting him through any tests."

Kelly appeared looking chastened, holding his garbage bag and hat like a shield. "Mom?"

"You don't need to hear this." Jessie shoved him toward the stairs. "Get in the car."

Shane blocked the way. "Come on, Jessie. One night. We need to work this out."

"Please, Mom? I promise to be good."

Faced with her pleading son, Jessie looked torn. But when she considered Shane, she lifted her chin, defiant. "Staying with you is out of the question. Besides, I have to be home by tomorrow in order to get to work on time."

"Mom, can't you call in sick, just once, for me?"

Shane knew if he could keep her from getting back on the road, he'd have the advantage. "I'll pay for the B&B down the street. The owner's a good friend of mine. You won't even have to move your car."

Kelly also sensed her waffling. "We can go home in the day, when it's light and it's safe. Right, Mr. Youngblood?"

Shane squeezed Kelly's shoulder, tamping the boy's hopes, trying to give Jessie an easy out to save face. "Give your mother a chance to decide, Kelly. This is her call."

She rubbed her temples and considered the two of them together. "God, you look like twins."

"Please?"

She sighed. "All right. One night. But then we're leaving first thing in the morning." She grasped Kelly's chin between forefinger and thumb, forcing him to look her straight in the eye. "Understood?"

"Understood."

Kelly and Shane said it at the exact same time.

\* \* \* \* \*

Shane saw Mariah through the plate glass window of Sam's Hunt and Fish, entered the store, stopped at her table, held up two paper bags from the local bakery and shook them in front of her face.

"I bring gifts," he said.

As soon as she made eye contact, he joined her at the table. Her laptop was open and she looked a little irritated, but since he'd come armed and ready with a freshly baked bribe, Shane figured he could get her to at least hear him out.

"Good morning, Miz McBride," he said with his most winning smile.

"Mr. Youngblood." She barely looked up from her screen.

She was more comfortably dressed today than yesterday, wearing jeans, albeit tight, acid-washed ones, and a t-shirt advertising the NYPD. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail, which must be typical for her since it suited the strong shape of her face so well.

Word had gotten around town that Sam's Hunt and Fish now had a coffee shop inside the store, complete with a half dozen small tables, a dozen folding chairs and two sizes of cups, featuring Sam's Special Blend. In a flash of marketing genius, Sam had also prepackaged his blend in whole bean form, using slower times during the day to study the Starbucks website and its corporate pages. Mariah had showed him how to access both on his computer.

She eyed the bakery bag, her expression dubious. "Is this business or pleasure?"

"Are you open for business?"

"Not yet. The day after tomorrow, the first of the month."

"It's pleasure, then." He opened one of the bags. "Your muffin choices are bran or banana nut."

"I'm real busy, Shane."

"I have a problem and you're the only one I know who might be able to help me with it. Bran or Banana nut?"

"This is about muffins?"

"It's about DNA." He shook the muffin bag. "Well? Choose or lose."

"Bran."

"Masochist."

Shane set the muffin on a napkin in front of her, then inhaled a massive bite from the banana nut one. As usual, he radiated maximum sex appeal, the expression in his eyes fiercely determined. She managed to ignore the effect.

"Can we get to the DNA?" she asked.

Nodding as he chomped, Shane removed a red bandanna from his pocket and used it to extract a soda can from the second bag. Swallowing, he set the can on the table. "I need to have the DNA on this analyzed."

Mariah eyed the can. "You think there is viable DNA on there?"

"Kelly drank from it yesterday. I'd like to know who his father is, ASAP, preferably by tomorrow."

"You've been watching too much television. Forensic pathology can't be rushed. Plus it takes two DNA samples to establish paternity."

"You're looking at the other sample. Do I spit or give blood?"

"Are you sure about this, Shane? What do you really know about him?"

"He says I'm his father."

"But you say you're not."

"I might be. The timing's right. He's twelve and I was with his mom thirteen years ago."

"Thirteen years? That's a long time to wait before making a paternity claim. What's her story?"

"She says her late husband is his father. She wants me out of the picture. Hence the need for DNA."

"Do you recall if you used protection?"

"I always use protection."

"This situation suggests otherwise."

"Know this may be difficult for you to believe, McBride, but thirteen years ago I was a pretty sought-after commodity in the rodeo world. Grand World Champion, on my way to eight years running. I was beating them off with a stick, and I ain't talking calves and sheep. Wasn't going to take chances, not when most of the groupies had already made the rounds."

"Was his mother one of those who made the rounds?"

"Actually, no. Jessie was a class act, a backup singer for one of the country western stars who performed in the same venues we competed in."

"How long did your relationship last?"

"A few days. We were between shows and didn't want people to know."

"Why was that?"

"I'm not a kiss-and-tell kind of guy. I don't recall what her story was, but afterwards, I never saw her again."

"Supporting your claim with some witnesses might be helpful."

"We were holed up in a penthouse suite in one of those stupendous Las Vegas hotels. Didn't have reason to go out much."

Mariah bet he didn't. His looks alone guaranteed female companionship. His Championship fame meant he chose from the cream of the crop. "Do you have any written communications from her, like a letter or a card or text message?"

"No."

"What about photographs of you two together?"

"Not in my possession. Kelly says he's seen one, though. When I asked Jessie about it this morning, she said she got rid of it. I talked her into staying another day but playing twenty questions isn't going to help me. Truth is, things happen, protection fails. He resembles me in more ways than one. He's going through a rough time and needs some help."

"What kind of help?"

"He just got here. I'm not sure yet."

"Please tell me this is not about money because twelve years of child support adds up to a good chunk of change."

"Jessie doesn't want money. She wants to take him away. She doesn't want me to spend any time with him. There's got to be a way to prove he's mine before that happens. That's why I need this DNA analyzed. Can I get it done by the end of the week?"

"If she's uncooperative, you're asking the impossible."

"Help me here, Mariah. There has to be a way."

"Where's home?"

"Austin, Texas. And yeah, I checked. She lives there. Her husband died a few months ago."

"Paternity tests are more accurate when the DNA comes from an uncontaminated source, collected as a blood or saliva sample, not an aluminum can. Residing in a different states complicates matters, and may raise further legal questions. You need to consult with an attorney in Texas, as well as Colorado."

Or an attorney who is licensed in both states. At the very least, you need more time. This Jessie woman seems to think you're a threat of some sort. Deal with that first."

"How?"

"How should I know? She's your girlfriend."

"Was."

Shane chewed the rest of his muffin, thoughtful. Disturbed by her unhealthy interest in the many Jessies in his life, Mariah refocused on her computer screen.

"Hey, you going to eat that?"

Shane pointed at her untouched muffin. Mariah studiously avoided eye contact. "Go ahead. Consider this a freebie."

"Thanks. Later." He vacated Sam's like a whirlwind, bran muffin between his teeth.

"Your only freebie," Mariah muttered.

What remained in her mind, unfortunately, was a picture of Shane and this lovely Jessie woman, rolling around together in bed.

\* \* \* \* \*

The first person to come into Mariah's little storefront who wasn't the landlord or delivery person was Shane. Wearing what was apparently his everyday uniform of jeans, plaid shirt black cowboy hat, he strolled past the plate glass window fronting her rental space, examining the exterior.

It was the first day of June, Thursday morning, an hour after her open sign turned on. Mariah was sitting at her desk, wearing what passed as her everyday uniform at the FBI: black skirt, conservative heels and a formal silk blouse. She was using her phone to surf the web, trying to look busy. As the glass door

swung open, the bells she'd tied to the door handle jingled, and he stepped inside.

"Hey, Mariah."

"Hey, Shane," she said, smiling and rising to greet him.

"Come on in."

"Got your message. You're open for business, huh?"

"Yes. Thanks for stopping by."

He jiggled the door, making the bells jingle again. "Guess no one's sneaking in with this thing hanging on your door."

"Better than a watchdog."

He did a quick scan around the room, looking impressed, which meant he was pretending to be impressed because her storefront-slash-office was a 225 square foot hole-in-the-wall worth of Encyclopedia Brown.

"So this is the place." he said.

She picked up a packet of promo materials she'd prepared. "I'm hoping you can help me get the word out I'm open. I have some brochures in here, along with some pens and refrigerator magnets for advertising purposes. "Would you feel comfortable taking some and putting them out where people can see them?"

"Sure." He examined the packet and held one of the magnets up to the light. "The word's definitely out, though. Never seen a better publicity campaign. Heard the Presbyterian minister wants to hire you to search for church members who've been ducking services."

"Well, I'm dying to hear about what's going on with Kelly and his mother."

"Not much to tell. I talked her into staying an extra week so he and I could spend some time together. But she absolutely refuses to okay a paternity test."

"Hmmm. That makes her claim suspect in my book."

"Mine, too. But I need some time to learn about Kelly and get to know him better."

"For a small fee, I'd be happy to check out her story for you."

"I may take you up on it. But let me do this my way first. I'm making progress and Jessie's touchy enough as it is."

He hung his hat on the set of coat hooks by the entrance. It was the first time she'd seen him hatless and without it, he was even more attractive, with thick, sun-burnished hair. It brushed his collar. His skin looked darker, impossibly tanned, making the white of his smile and the ocean hue of his eyes all the more appealing.

She kept trying to sum him up with a succinct description. Colorado cowboy didn't cut it. Maybe charismatic male model or A-list movie star. He had that rippling confidence that said he knew what he was doing, whether handling himself in public or private when it came to the ladies. And despite her show of resistance, she was hardly immune.

The idea that he might stay awhile worried her some. Her small space already seemed crowded by his restless, larger-than-life presence.

He cruised around, inspecting things, starting with the center of the room where she had been sitting. "I see you found the right desk."

"The right desk?"

He used his knuckles, knocking the dull gray surface. "You know, old school, solid metal through and through. Much better than wood. I want to see how it looks when you sit down."

She wrinkled her brow in confusion. He had a tendency to make unusual observations, like using 'nonsensical' when they first met. "You want me to sit at a secondhand desk because it's metal?"

"Pretend I'm a client." He settled into one of the two chairs she'd set up for consultation purposes. "What's the first thing you'd say if I came in, wanting to hire you?"

"It would depend on what you wanted to hire me for," she said, taking her chair. "But I'm still wondering about the whole desk thing. Why does it matter if it's metal or wood?"

"It's better if it's metal."

"Why?"

"Stops the bullets."

"What bullets?"

"In case someone gets mad and shoots you. You can hide behind the steel walls of your desk and return fire."

He said it with a straight face, making her wonder if he was kidding or not. Since he very well could turn into a future client, she took the safe route and shrugged. "I think you've been watching too many detective shows."

"I'm too busy for TV. Got my own business to run." He abruptly rose to wander again, examining a couple of gun safety posters she'd tacked on the wall, low shelves stuffed with psychology books, enforcement codes, weapon guides and other assorted reference books, and a private corner behind a half wall where there was a bathroom and a massive storage cabinet. He tested the two metal handles on the doors but they were locked.

"What's in here?"

"Stuff."

"If it's a gun safe, it's the biggest one I've ever seen. Must have an arsenal."

"A girl's gotta have her guns."

Thankfully, her clothes, air mattress and sleeping bag were safe. He moved on to the counter space and cabinet near the back door.

"I like your little kitchen, too."

"It's not a kitchen. It's a small refrigerator and a microwave."

"And a coffee-maker. It's enough to live on. Handy, too, having stuff to eat and drink where you work. That's why I set up a nice little kitchen at the end of the stable block where I have my office. My employees like using it and I keep it well stocked. If I miss a meal, my energy level dives like you wouldn't believe."

"I can see how that might be a problem for you."

He swiveled, offended. "Are you calling me *fat*?"

It was such an outrageous question, she suspected he was pulling her leg again. Unfortunately, he had the capacity to act as innocent as a baby for an extraordinary length of time. "No, of course not. The opposite, in fact. Besides, I would never deliberately offend a possible client such as yourself."

"Just checking." He nodded at the wall behind her. "I see you have your credentials up. Pretty impressive. Columbia University, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, Doctorate in Psychology. I checked out your dissertation online, by the way."

"You checked out my dissertation? Why in the world would you do that?"

"It's a subject that interests me, Dr. McBride. Something about 'Alcohol Addiction and its Effect on Creating Criminality in Families.'"

"It's pretty dry reading."

"Like I said when we met, I come from a long line of drunks. It's one thing we have in common. Although, aside from Bird, the McBrides who originally settled in these parts have been a pretty upstanding bunch."

"It sounds like you've been investigating me."

"You know how people like to gossip in small towns."

"People like to gossip in big towns, too. I advise taking what you hear about me with a grain of salt."

"Some say you're a tough cookie who got blamed for something you didn't do. In your profession, you gotta be cynical or you'd pass over the quote, unquote 'nice' seeming people you should suspect the most."

Smacked by another one of his non-sequiturs, Mariah was beginning to lose her ability to maintain her calm equanimity. "Would you like some coffee?"

"Sure."

"Cream or sugar?"

"Black as mud. Are you planning on offering your clients coffee?"

"I'm offering it to you, aren't I? It's an easy way to establish rapport."

"Is that what we're doing? Establishing rapport?"

Mariah made sure her manner was strictly professional. "Even if you weren't a client, you might refer me to one. I have to view every person who comes through these doors as a potential source of business, whether they're quote, unquote *nice* or not."

The coffee machine bubbled and produced the requested dark-bodied cup. She set it on the desk.

"Thanks," he said.

"It's the least I can do. For you to stop by... it's very *nice* of you."

He shot her a humorous look which said he got the inference. Victorious at last, Mariah decided to enjoy herself. Nothing like schmoozing a schmoozer.

"You are a charmer," she said. "You may have the makings of a con man."

"Yeah, my therapist once told me that. I think she was actually trying to convince me to spill my guts, since I was trying hard to show her what a *nice* guy I am."

"If you have a background similar to those known to produce a criminal mind but you're not actually a criminal, that's a pretty good indicator of a *nice* character."

"What a *nice* thing to say. Do you believe me about the therapist?"

"Yes."

"I'm just telling you in case you ever need to talk to someone who's been through the same stuff."

"I go to Al-Anon for that. But it's a very *nice* thought."

He smiled ruefully. "I think we beat the hell out of that word."

She decided to share his smile. He deserved the award for highly original bullshit. Not that she would confess that. "Sorry for the *niceties*. I have a bad habit of making light of serious subjects."

"You may have noticed, I battle the same habit, too. How's Bird?"

"The same. He's not going to change."

"I want you to tell me if he's bothering you."

"Most everything he does bothers me. That's how I know I still have my head on straight. But I appreciate the offer."

"I'm having a few people over to my place Saturday night. Would you like to come?"

The happy fluttering in her stomach was alarming. Their companionable dynamic was crossing the line. Getting along with Shane Youngblood was one thing. Hanging out socially quite another. Time wasn't to be squandered on some casual hookup with a superstar cowboy who could, by sheer force of his personality, undercut her drive to succeed.

"What's the occasion?" she asked cautiously.

"Birthday party for one of my staff, Ana Garcia. She says she knows you."

"I remember Ana. She and I were in the same grade."

"She said you were very *nice*."

Mariah couldn't help chuckling. "God, you're awful."

"You started it."

"About the party... I'd like to bring my promotional materials, hand them out."

"Come on, Mariah. It's not that kind of event."

"Those are the only kind I'm going to at the moment."

"Everyone knows you're open for business. Handing out business cards at a social gathering is going to turn folks off. That's your future clientele, right?"

He had a point. "Tell you what. I'll think about the party and get back to you."

"Seven o'clock. She's arriving at 7:30, so don't be late."

"It's a surprise party?"

"Yep. Mum's the word."

"Ana doesn't like surprise parties."

"How do you know?"

"Does it matter? I wouldn't do it if I were you."

"You're serious?"

"Yes."

"But you won't tell me why."

"No."

He drummed his fingers on his thigh. "I don't know if I believe you, Doc. But I can't think of a reason you would warn me off a surprise party. Can you give me a clue as to why? I've already invited a ton of people. If I change the plan now, they're going to ask."

"Don't change the plan. Just tell Ana ahead of time. She'll put on a good show."

"I don't think if she would go along with that. She's worked for me since before I retired from the rodeo circuit. Fourteen years. She's pretty straightforward. Doesn't put up with liars or cheats, so telling her to blow the surprise..."

"Pretending to be surprised is a far cry from a bald-faced lie. In fact, you're the one who's lying to her by omission. If you already know she hates liars and cheats, then explain to me why you thought this surprise party was a good idea in the first place."

"Actually, it wasn't my idea. It was her boyfriend's."

"She should get rid of him then."

He reared in his seat, palms out. "Woah, that's harsh. Have you talked to her about this?"

"I haven't seen or talked to her in years."

"Then how do you know?"

"Why won't you take my word for it? It's a dumb party."

"Is it something to do with your background? Is there some deep psychological reason why surprise parties should be off-limits to a friend you haven't talked to in years?"

"Is there some deep psychological reason to dismiss me out of hand? Seriously, I want to know. I can't be a private investigator if people ignore my advice."

He sipped his coffee, considering her over the rim of his cup. The fluttering exponentially grew. But she was pleased by her ability to crush it down, keep him in the business acquaintance box. Maybe she should consider the party; use the opportunity to get people's reactions to her in a more relaxed setting. Test the waters, so to speak.

"You're a mystery to me, Doc. But I do think I should listen to your advice. Does that answer your question?"

"You don't trust people easily. I get it."

"Now I feel like I being dissected."

"No, I'm not good at dissecting people. It's why I gravitated toward law enforcement. I'm terrible at one-on-ones which is being demonstrated as we speak. You're trying to do a generous and thoughtful thing and I'm screwing it up for you. Probably what I should say is, one, I'll come to the party. Two, thank you for inviting me. And three, I'll be there after 7:30."

Her apology seemed to bring out his mischievous streak. "I'm kinda tempted to keep the surprise part intact. I want to see what happens if Ana does get upset. You're right about her boyfriend. He's a scumbag who thinks he's God's gift. I could tell her he planned the whole thing because he did. The only reason he wanted to have it at my place is because he's a cheapskate and my house is bigger."

She shrugged. "Maybe that's the way to go. Karma does have a way of circling back and hitting the occasional, well-deserving scumbag in the face."

"Amen to that." He rose from his chair. Mariah had never met anyone who moved as quickly and often as he did.

"Daylight's burning and I have a sweet filly I'm training for a show competition next week."

"Thanks again for stopping by. Let me know if you hear of anyone who might need my services. If I don't see you at the party, good luck with the competition."

"After all this jawing, you better come to the party."

"No promises. That's just the way it is."

"The only excuse I'll accept is you eliminating a scumbag or two around town. Lord knows the Sheriff's Department needs a little help."

"I think you're jerking my chain again."

He winked. "We're getting to be good friends, you and I. See you Saturday."

Committed to remaining non-committal, she stayed seated. "Bye, Shane."

He grabbed his hat and slipped out the door. Before it closed, an older man came in.

Turned out to be her first client.

MARIAH by Carol Devine