

Till the Cows Come Home

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Poisoned Pen Press



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*For Steve, Tristan, and Sophia,
who make the world a better place.*

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Chapter One

“It’s a boy! It’s a boy!” Zach shrieked.

“Oh no. Really?” I slumped to the floor, my elbows resting on my knees. “All that work for a boy?”

Carla grimaced. “Sorry, Stella.”

“Stop. It’s not your fault.”

“Poor old cow,” Howie said.

I sighed and leaned my head back against the wall. It was only mid-morning and already the temperature was in the high eighties. I wiped my forehead on my sleeve and looked at the mother, never one of my favorites. She’d just had a calf cut out of her side and now she stood there, dumbly chewing her cud, as if nothing had happened. I made a face at her.

“What now?” I asked.

“Now we sew ’er up,” Carla said. “Give me a hand.”

Doctor Carla Beaumont waded through the straw to her med kit and pulled out a hook-shaped needle and long pieces of thick thread. Her biceps-high gloves made the work cumbersome, but she handled the instruments with the deftness of an experienced veterinarian.

“Come on,” she said. “Hold this while I stitch. Keep the two sides out far enough I can get to them.”

I grabbed hold of the cow’s uterus, visible through the gaping incision in the side of the cow. It was slippery and warm, covered with blood and who knows what other kind of slime. I held on

the best I could and Carla started closing it up, pushing the needle through the thick flesh and bringing the two smooth sides of the cut together.

Zach, my fourteen-year-old farmhand, sat on the floor with the bull calf, his first very own Holstein. Since I'm a dairy farmer, bull calves aren't much use to me, lacking the necessary udders, and I'd promised Zach the next bull calf would be his. I usually sell them to a neighbor who raises them for beef cattle or veal, but one less sale this month wouldn't be too much of a loss for either of us.

Wendy, the cow, lifted up her hind leg below the incision, and her uterus slipped out of my hand.

"Whoops," Carla said.

I grabbed the uterus more firmly, and Carla had just found her place when Wendy lifted her leg again.

"Oh, stop it, cow," Carla said. "I should've numbed more than her tail, poor thing."

I got hold of the flesh and once more Carla started stitching. She had gotten a couple of inches down when Wendy started to shift.

"She's going down!" Carla shouted. "Keep her up, keep her up!"

I leaned into the cow with all my weight, pushing her in the opposite direction until she got all four legs under her. The last thing we needed was for her to lie on her side and fill the incision with straw and afterbirth from the floor.

"Dumb cow," I muttered.

"It's okay, Wendy," Howie said, patting her head. "Here, drink some water." Howie, my family's farmhand of twenty-some years, moved the bucket closer to her. She lifted her leg and the slipper muscle slid out of my hands.

"Stop kicking, you stupid animal!" I yelled.

Blood spurted over my shirt and face. I closed my eyes and spat.

"Come on!" Carla said. "This vein's gonna bleed all over the place!"

I got a good grip just in time for Wendy to kick again. I grabbed at her uterus and squeezed it.

“For Pete’s sake, Carla,” I said. “Hurry up. My hand’s cramping.”

“Shut up, Stella. And hold on tighter.”

“Yelling at Wendy isn’t helping, either,” Howie said.

“Fine,” I said.

Zach wisely kept his mouth shut.

We had a few quiet moments and Carla got to the bottom of the incision. “Okay, I have two more layers to go. You don’t need to hold them together, but stay here in case I need you.”

I tried to wipe the blood off my face, but my gloves were too messy and my shoulders were covered, as well. I looked down at my boots and they were hidden beneath birth muck and manure.

“She’s goin’ down!” Carla said.

I jumped forward and pushed against the cow, all of her five hundred pounds pressing my legs into the floor.

“Come on! Come on!” I yelled. “Stay up, damn you!”

She suddenly righted herself and I slipped and fell face first onto the floor.

“Oh, great.” The front of my overalls now sported a mixture of blood, afterbirth, and straw, just like the rest of me. “I knew there was a reason I didn’t like this cow.”

Carla tried not to laugh, and I pointed at her with a slimy glove. “Don’t you laugh, Ms. Vet. You’re looking way too clean.”

“Sorry,” she said, not meaning it.

“Are you about done? Or am I going to get covered in something else yet?”

“I’m on the last layer. If she doesn’t try to lie down anymore we should be fine. And she hasn’t kicked for about three minutes.”

“Stupid cow,” I said again.

“Why don’t you go clean up,” Howie said. “I’ll make sure she doesn’t go down.”

“No sense in your getting messy, too. How’s your calf, Zach?”

“He’s great!” Zach’s face lit up the room. “Thanks. Thanks a lot. His name’s Gus.”

I grunted. “Just make sure you get him colostrum as soon as his dumb mother can give it.”

“Oh, I will, I will.”

I knew I didn’t need to tell him about the mother’s first, and most nutritious, milk. I couldn’t use her first three milkings after delivery, anyway, so we’d save it for this and any other calves we had out in the hutches.

Zach continued using a towel to wipe down the calf, even though it was completely dry. I had a feeling Gus was going to turn into the farm stud. The way Zach’s face looked, there was no way the calf would ever be sold for beef.

“There’s a hutch all ready for him out back,” I said. “You can move him into it when you’re ready.”

“Do I have to? Can’t he stay in the barn?”

“You know he’ll be safer out there. It’s clean, there aren’t any big cows to step on him, and besides, there are two chick calves out there to keep him company.”

“Okay, Stella, she’s all sewn up.” Carla stepped back from the cow and stripped off her gloves. She threw them on the ground and felt around in her med kit until she came up with a can of antibiotic spray. She covered the incision with several yellow coats of medicine.

“This should kill whatever happened to get in there,” she said. “But I’m going to leave you a can to spray on tomorrow, too.”

“Great. Thanks a lot, Carla. I appreciate your coming out so quickly.”

I had awakened earlier than usual that morning to Wendy’s keening. Cows usually moan when they’re giving birth, and since Wendy is one of our more dramatic cows I figured she was just playing it up. Unfortunately, after several hours of her wailing and me rooting around in her uterus, I knew there was no way she was having the calf without the help of a vet. That’s when I called in the pro.

“Hey, it’s my job,” Carla said. “Besides, I only get to do three or four of these a year, so I got some variety in my day.”

I put my hands on my waist and rolled my head forward, trying to loosen my tight shoulders. A very pregnant barn cat sat on a bale of hay, watching.

“You’d better have an easier time of it, girl,” I told her. “I ain’t going through this with you, too.”

She stared at me, unblinking.

“It looks like you’ve had some happenings this morning.”

Another voice entered our conversation and we all looked to see who it belonged to.

My stomach turned. “Well, well, if it isn’t our local land poacher.”

“Stella,” Howie said softly.

Hubert Purcell put up his hands. “Hey, now, I came on friendly terms.”

I heard a threatening, guttural noise and realized Queenie, my dog, had followed Hubert into the barn. Hubert jerked back against the wall, and I smiled. Not many people are afraid of collies, but Hubert is one of them. Of course, it didn’t help that my dog disliked the man, and she was baring her teeth.

“It’s okay, Queenie,” I said. “He’s leaving now.”

Hubert Purcell, owner of CHP Properties, was a little man in every sense of the word. He stood about five feet five, even with the cowboy boots he liked to wear, so at five nine I towered over him. I probably outweighed him by thirty pounds, too, and I’m not even close to fat. Hubert made his living by buying out farmers and putting as many cheap houses as he could over the entire acreage. He’s been after my farm since the day my father died when I was three.

His “communities,” as he liked to call them, all looked pretty much the same—full of white bread yuppies and money. Hubert loved Republicans as much as he feared everyone else—blacks, Koreans, bikers. All in all, he was a pretty pathetic specimen.

Queenie growled again, and I enjoyed the pale fear on Hubert’s face. But I’m not cruel. At least not much.

"It's okay," I said. "Sit."

Hubert looked around at the bales of straw.

"I meant the dog, not you. What do you want, Hubert? You can see I'm a little busy here."

He smiled. "I brought someone to meet you. That's all."

I felt a quiver of unease. It couldn't be that simple, I knew, because Hubert wouldn't waste his time coming to talk with me unless he had a reason. I'd told him in no uncertain terms he would get my farm when the world ended or everybody else in the world, including me, was dead.

"I'm not exactly in my hostess gear," I said.

"She's not going to care. Besides, you don't look that much different from usual."

I scowled at him.

"Should I bring her in?" Hubert asked.

"No. I'll come out there." I wasn't going to discuss anything with him in front of Carla and Zach. Howie knew everything that happened at the farm, but the other two didn't need to be subjected to Hubert's crap. Besides, I didn't want Hubert, let alone his friends, invading my barn. "I'll be out in a minute."

Hubert smiled again, setting my teeth on edge, and went outside.

I peeled off my gloves and grabbed a paper towel, rubbing it over my face. I wouldn't look beautiful for his friend, but I didn't care. I stomped out of the stall, and Howie gently grabbed my arm.

"Stella. Don't do anything you'll regret."

I shook off his hand. "Stop mothering me, Howie. I promise I won't kill anyone."

His face closed and he turned away.

I sighed. "I'm sorry. You know how he gets to me."

Howie nodded but didn't look at me. I told Queenie to stay, and walked outside.

The sun beat down on the farmyard, and I shaded my eyes with my hand. Hubert and a woman were standing over by Carla's truck, peering into her Port-a-Vet. Her F250 sparkled

amidst the dust of the farm, and the large storage cap on the bed was open, revealing her medicines, syringes, and other tools. I was sure she wouldn't have appreciated the scrutiny her property was getting.

"I hope you're studying to be vets," I said. "I would hate to think you're snooping."

The woman spun around at the sound of my voice, and I grinned. "Pam Moyer. Since when are you back in town?"

She held out her hand. I held mine up to show her the filthy condition of it, and she laughed.

"Wait a minute," Hubert said. "You ladies know each other?"

I snorted. Ladies, indeed. Wouldn't my mother have laughed at that one. Howie, too.

"Of course we know each other," Pam said. "Stella used to defend me from the white collars on the bus."

"And the playground," I said.

"Oh, God," she said. "Don't bring up that time on the jungle gym."

"You mean when Jacky Landis ended up with his shorts wrapped around the bars?"

Hubert grunted, reminding me of his presence.

I gestured to him. "So, Pam, what are you doing traveling around with *that*?"

"Hey," he began, but Pam shushed him. "I somehow let the town council drag me into duty. Well, more like Sonny Turner talked me into it."

"The council president? Isn't he the Turner Enterprises guy?"

"And the richest man this side of Philly. Can't hurt to listen to his advice and jump on board. So here I am. The *Agricultural Liaison*." She waggled her eyebrows.

"Sounds fancy."

"Eh. Anyway, I'm supposed to be 'reacquainting myself with the farming community.' Hubert's on the council and volunteered to drive me around."

"Who else have you seen?"

"Actually, you're the first."

“Figures. Hubert can’t seem to get me off his mind, can you Hu?”

Pam grimaced. “And I’m not sure who else we’re visiting.”

I opened my mouth to make another smart comment but was interrupted by a large milk truck rumbling onto the driveway and backing up to the milkhouse. The truck stopped and the driver hopped out of the cab. He looked from Hubert and Pam to me, then smiled.

“Howdy, Stella.”

“Wayne. You’re looking cool today.”

He had on a uniform of a red shirt and shorts, with the trucking company’s emblem of a happy milk-drinking cow on the left breast pocket. He wasn’t even sweating.

“You betcha,” he said. “And you’re looking...especially attractive. Hard calving?”

“C-section. Carla’s just finishing up.”

“Hope it was worth it.”

“Bull calf.”

“Oh well. Better luck next time.”

I glanced at my watch. “Running a little late?”

He rolled his eyes. “Got tied up at one place. No biggie. Just means I’ll have my lunch a little later. I haven’t decided if you’re my favorite or least favorite farmer, since you’re right before lunch.”

He pretended to tip a hat, and got on with the business of getting the milk from our tank. Our milk gets collected every other day, sometime in the late morning. Wayne was responsible not only for collecting our milk, but for procuring samples and measuring how many pounds of milk we had that day. He’d been our milk hauler for about ten years.

I turned back to Pam, noticing she looked a lot the same as she had fifteen years before on the school bus. About a head shorter than me, but not a weakling. Brown hair, tan skin. Her years at school had done nothing to turn her farm girl muscles into fat.

“So what’s your real job these days?” I asked her. “Or is the council a full-time gig for you?”

“Yeah, right. I’m working part-time at the University of Penn. Crop research. I only have to go down a few days a week, so I’m helping Dad on the farm, too.”

“You graduated from Penn, didn’t you?”

She put a hand on her heart. “My dear alma mater.”

“And your degree is in what, exactly?”

“You sure you want to know?”

I shrugged.

“I have a Ph.D. in Genomics and Computational Biology. It basically means messing with DNA and computers.

I raised an eyebrow. “So do I have to call you *Doctor Moyer*?”

“Only if you want to send me into a fit of giggles.”

“Don’t knock it,” Hubert said. “You’re our town’s only Ivy Leaguer.”

She wrinkled her nose. “In a sense. I was just a scholarship kid.”

“Doesn’t matter how you paid for it,” Hubert said. “You’re still one of them.”

Irritation flashed across her face, to be quickly replaced by a tight smile. “Well, Hubert, I’m sure Stella has better things to do than stand around yakking with us all day.” She turned to me. “I guess officially I’m the one you call now if you have any concerns or questions about farm stuff.”

“You know me,” I said. “As long as I’m left alone to run my place and take care of my herd, I’m happy as a pig in shit.”

Pam chuckled and they turned to go. I touched her elbow. “How’s your dad doing?”

Her face dropped, and her eyes swiveled toward Hubert.

“Give us *ladies* a few minutes, Hu,” I said.

He put out his hand. “No problem, no problem. I’ll see you soon, Stella. I wait with anticipation for the day you call me.”

“Then you live for disappointment. Get lost.”

He dropped his hand and stalked to his car.

“So what’s up?” I asked Pam. “Your dad’s still farming, isn’t he?”

“Turning the ground over every year. I swear one day he’ll die sitting on top of that damned combine. If the vultures don’t run him out first.”

I grunted. “Developers?”

“If that’s what you want to call them. Hardly a week goes by he doesn’t get some kind of offer. Wouldn’t you know I have to put up with the worst of them driving me around today.”

We glanced over at Hubert’s Lincoln Town Car, where he was feigning disinterest.

“Your dad holding up okay?”

“He’ll keep the farm if it kills him. Every day I see him grow older and more determined. Breaks my heart. If Mom were still around he’d be living off Social Security by now.”

We watched a cow meander up to the paddock gate and sniff at the lock, turning her lip up at the smell.

“You?” Pam said.

“Same old, same old. I drive Hubert away every chance I can. I won’t sell, either, but I can’t say my checkbook’s happy about it.”

She shook her head. “Dad goes into debt deeper every year. Has a bad crop, has to borrow to make up for what he didn’t make. Then the next year the bank won’t lend him as much because his profit was so low. In fact, we have an application in at the bank as we speak. Should be hearing any day. Not that I expect anything.”

I sighed. “I’m right there with him.”

We stared at the cows some more until Pam shook herself. “Guess I’d better crawl back over to the Devil’s car. Can’t believe I have to spend the day with him.”

“You’re a strong woman. You can handle it.”

She smiled. “I learned it all from you.”

I laughed and jutted my chin toward the car. “Just don’t sign any papers he gives you.”

“Don’t worry. He gives me papers my dad’ll run him over with a tractor.”

Now that was a pleasant vision.

Pam smiled again and trotted over to Hubert’s car.

I crossed my arms over my chest, then regretted it when I felt more slime from my coveralls transfer to my skin. I stayed that way, however, and watched while Hubert and Pam drove off in the Town Car, kicking up a cloud of dust. The CHP design on the door looked incongruous with the expensive vehicle. CHP, meaning Communities of Hubert Purcell. I thought of it as CHEaP.

Queenie came running, barking at the departing car, and I went back into the barn, musing over Pam Moyer and hoping she wasn’t being played for a fool by Hubert Purcell.

By this time, Carla had packed up her tools and was squatting on the floor, checking out the calf and talking to Zach. Howie was gone, off to do some other chores. Wendy stood lazily munching some hay Howie had put out. I glared at her, then grabbed a pitchfork and started cleaning up the mess around her feet.

Carla pushed herself up and gathered her bags. “Isn’t it about time you got ready for lunch?”

I poked the fork into a cake of sticky straw. “I want to get this cleaned up first. Why? What time is it?”

“It’s already noon. Weren’t you supposed to be there by now?”

“Be where?”

She looked at me with exasperation. “Your birthday dinner, you dope. Ma Granger said we’d eat as close to noon as possible.”

I smacked my forehead with my hand, which was a mistake, given the spray it produced. I had forgotten all about the dinner. I had forgotten all about my *birthday*.

“Well, I’ve gotta get this taken care of—”

“Stella!” Zach yelled. “Watch out!”

Before I had a chance to react, Wendy lifted her tail and sent a stream of urine gushing out, splattering off of the floor and

onto my legs and arms. I jumped out of the way and slipped on a pile of manure, Wendy's other most recent gift, and fell right into the pouring stream.

Zach and Carla stood open-mouthed and silent as Wendy's tail lowered and the river stopped flowing. I opened my eyes and took a deep breath through my nose. If either one of them showed a hint of laughter, I was going to have to deck them. Luckily for them, their eyes showed not a flicker.

We all looked at each other without moving.

"Well," Carla finally said. "I guess we'll tell Ma you're going to be a little late for dinner."

Chapter Two

Carla was gone, headed over to Ma Granger's with Zach in the passenger seat, itching to tell his family all about his new calf. Howie was in his apartment, located above my garage, and I stood in the lane, watching Wayne and the tanker truck disappear.

Only when I realized I was standing in the full sun and the filth on my body was starting to dry did I make a move toward the house. Ma would understand my lateness and would go ahead and get the Granger clan fed while I took a much-needed shower. I really wasn't looking forward to a birthday party, anyway. The only reason I had agreed to any kind of celebration was that Ma was throwing it, and that meant a family get-together. There would be a few people there who weren't actually family, including Howie and Carla, and even me, but as far as Ma was concerned, we were all family.

The Grangers and Howie are all the family I know. When my father died in a farming accident when I was three, my mother was bound and determined to keep the farm and make it work. Howie Archer was our farmhand at the time, and my mother made it clear he was welcome to stay. He had stayed, and had been living in an apartment above the garage for almost thirty years. There were times I was sure he would have liked to exchange his bachelor's quarters for the farmhouse and my mother's bed, but he never brought it up, and by the time I was sixteen my mother was dead from breast cancer and Howie was still alone, living above the garage.

I wasn't a typical sixteen-year-old, having lost both parents and being a farmer to boot, and Howie made sure nobody, including Hubert Purcell, got anywhere close to taking anything from me. In fact, if it hadn't been for Howie, who knows where I'd be by now. I glanced up at the garage and hoped Howie hadn't been too hurt when I'd snapped at him that morning.

I took off my boots outside the back door and shook out my hair the best I could. Stopping in the mudroom, I stripped down to the skin, loading the clothes into the washer and starting it right away. The smell was already invading the house, and it would have been too much for even me.

Upstairs, I went into the bathroom and started the shower, stepping in only when I was sure the water was cool enough I wouldn't suffocate on this hot July day. I washed my hair twice and scrubbed as hard as I could with the Lever 2000 bar, and the water running down the drain eventually cleared.

I was pulling on my underwear when I snagged a callous on my finger. I looked at my hands, chapped and dry, and thought if anything showed my twenty-nine years, it was them. The rest of me was holding up pretty well.

I never was one to win beauty contests. Not that I tried. But my body is hard and angular where other women are soft and round. I may not fill up a swimsuit the way other women do, but I can throw bales of hay five feet up into the hayloft and wrestle a cow to the ground, if I have to. The sun's done its best to age my skin, but fortunately I have my mother's olive tones, and I can't burn if I try.

"You about ready, Princess?"

I looked out my open window, hiding behind the curtain, and Howie peered up from the yard.

"I'll be down in a minute."

I threw on some jean shorts, a black T-shirt, and some tennies I dug out from the back of my closet, and ran a brush through my short dark hair. I keep my hair short partly for the fact it's wash-and-go and partly to show off the cow skull tattooed at the base of my neck. The horns reach around to the front so you

can just see the tips of them when you're looking at me head-on. Howie about *had* a cow when I came back with it, but he's learned to ignore it. He wasn't so appalled when I came home with "To thine own self be true" scripted around my left biceps, but he didn't acknowledge it, either. Zach is constantly after me to get "Got milk?" engraved on me somewhere, but so far I've managed to put him off.

I glanced in the mirror, decided I looked presentable, and ran down the stairs to meet Howie.

"You want to drive?" he asked.

"How soon do you need to get back?"

"The milking parlor's ready for tonight, and I got the feed set to give out. I can stay away a few hours."

"All right, we can go together then. It's too hot to take the Harley, anyway. C'mon, Queenie."

The three of us hopped in my truck, an older version of Carla's, and headed to the Grangers'.

Howie give a big sigh and settled back into his seat. Queenie stood behind us and stuck her head out the back sliding window. Her tongue flapped in the wind and made splatter marks on the window panels, but I didn't care. I'd gotten her when she was two months old, and that little ball of brown and white fluff had turned into one of my closest friends. Man's best friend? Make that "Woman's," and we've got an agreement.

I took my companions' cue and relaxed, too, trying to fend off the feelings of hopelessness that had been brought about by Pam's visit. The ride to Ma's would take ten or fifteen minutes, and it was mostly a pretty one. We had to pass several packed developments that had popped up, but eventually we came to more open countryside. I had to wonder how soon that would be gone, too.

A few miles from home, Howie turned to me. "Time to place your bets."

I grinned. "How 'bout one of those new Hummers?"

"Oh, good one." He rubbed his chin. "I'm feeling sophisticated today. I say a Cadillac Sedan DeVille. Black."

We approached the bed-and-breakfast, and I slowed. Das Homestead, a family home dating back to the 1700s that housed General Washington during war years, pandered to the elite, and it was a game for Howie and me to guess what vehicles would be gracing the parking lot on any given day. The more expensive we guessed, the better chance we had.

I smacked the steering wheel when the parking lot came into view. “Damn, I’m good. Look at that thing.” The Hummer sat in its spot like a huge toad. An armored one.

Howie grunted. “Birthday luck. What do you want to bet my Caddy’s there on the way home?”

“Sore loser.”

About half a mile from Ma’s I had to slow down to negotiate some curves that took us almost perpendicular to the road we’d been traveling, and then back again—a regular S curve. I had to shift down to get the truck around them, and I wished I was on my bike. Those curves were fun on the hog—maybe because they were a little scary. The right angles and the menacing gravel along the sides of the road, not to mention the steep ditch leading down to a creek, made for exciting riding.

Once we were out of the curves, we could see Ma’s house in the distance.

The party was in full swing when we got there, with numerous Grangers seated under trees and at picnic tables, and kids running around with water pistols. The crowd seemed smaller than usual, though, and I wondered about it.

I parked along the lane amidst the other trucks and cars, and hopped out. Queenie jumped out behind me, wagging her tail furiously.

“Whose little toy is that?” Howie asked, pointing to a shiny red Volkswagen Beetle.

I stared at it. “I have no idea. None of the Grangers would be caught dead in it.”

Howie chuckled at the thought.

“Well, well, if it isn’t the birthday girl finally making an appearance.” Jethro Granger, father of Zach and oldest of the Granger eight, enveloped me in a bear hug.

“I was busy giving your son a new pet,” I said, extricating myself from his huge arms.

“Don’t worry, we’ve been hearing all about little Gus. Now come on and get some barbecue before Ma throws a fit.”

Queenie stood looking at me with expectation, her eyes bright.

“Go ahead, girl,” I said. She gave a little yelp of excitement and ran ahead of me.

I waded through children and adults, shaking hands and getting lots of hugs, until I finally reached the kitchen, where Ma stood over the sink.

“Aren’t you going to sit down and take a break even when the guest of honor’s here?” I asked.

“Oh! Here you are at last. Let me fill you up a plate of meat, then you can get the rest out on the picnic table. I’ve been keeping this warm in here for you.”

“Thanks, Ma. You spoil me.”

“Nonsense. Your mother would have done the same, so I figure she’s watching from heaven to make sure I’m taking care of you.”

She handed me a plate with a slab of beef, and I gave her shoulders a squeeze with my free arm. “Whatever. I sure appreciate it.”

“Now get on out there and eat up. You need your energy.”

“Yes, Ma.”

The picnic table was full of all the usual goodies: cole slaw, baked beans, deviled eggs, and potato chips. All very healthy, I’m sure. I put a forkful of Ma’s homemade potato salad into my mouth and closed my eyes, savoring the flavor.

“Hey, birthday girl.”

I opened my eyes and looked into a pair of beautiful hazel ones. I forced myself to swallow through my suddenly tight throat. “Abe. What are you doing here?”

“What kind of a welcome is that? I was due for a long weekend, so I came home. Wouldn’t have missed your party.”

I grinned. Abe was the youngest of the Granger clan, about six months younger than me. He was also the only son whose name was something other than a Biblical “J” name. Ma somehow knew from the point of conception that Abe was going to be different from the rest of the gang, and had named him accordingly. How right she’d been.

I had been instituted as the “adopted” Granger daughter when I saved Abe from drowning at the age of ten. My mother and I were picnicking at Lake Nockamixon when this dumb kid had fallen out of a boat minus a lifejacket. Without thinking I had dived into the water and dragged him out, kicking and screaming. How humiliating to be saved by a girl. He eventually got over the embarrassment and we’d been the best of friends ever since. We may have been more, but we were both too stubborn to admit it.

But just then, on my twenty-ninth birthday, my insides began tapping out a little line dance they hadn’t done before. Abe was looking awfully good.

“Well,” I said. “I’m glad something can bring the black sheep home again.”

“Hey, just because my collar’s a different color doesn’t mean I’m not my mother’s son.”

“Tell it to the judge.”

A hand snaked around his elbow. “Abie? Aren’t you going to introduce me?”

My line dance froze. “*Abie?*”

Abe smiled uncomfortably. “Missy, this is Stella. Stella, Missy.”

“How do you do?” the little brunette said, sticking out her hand.

I looked at it a moment before taking it.

“I’ve heard so much about you,” she said. “It’s wonderful to finally meet you.”

“Bug,” I said.

“I beg your pardon?”

“You own the VW Bug.”

She smiled. “That’s right. How did you know?”

I looked at Abe, but he avoided my eyes.

“Lucky guess,” I said. “I’m going to go eat now. Nice to meet you.”

I found Howie sitting at a table with Jethro and his wife, Belle. She looked a little pale, but I didn’t think it would be polite to comment on it.

“Who’s the co-ed?” I asked.

Jethro laughed. “I thought you’d be surprised. Ain’t she something?”

“How come nobody told me about her?”

“Aw, they just started goin’ out. Anyway, we figured you’d meet her whenever she showed up. Why does it matter?”

I shrugged and kept my eyes averted. “It doesn’t.”

“Great barbecue,” Howie said. “As usual.”

“Don’t worry,” Belle said. “It probably won’t last.”

“The barbecue?” Howie said, concerned. “Is it almost all?”

Jethro laughed again. “Abe’s new girlfriend, she means. But I don’t know. He’s pretty sweet on her. And she’s smart. Works in his accounting firm and all.”

Belle looked at me and I shrugged again. “It’s his life. How’s she getting along with Ma?”

Belle grinned. “Okay, except for when she tried to put her luggage in the same room as Abe’s. Ma made it very clear there was to be no fornicating under her roof.”

This pleased me an uncomfortable amount.

“Hey, Stella!” Zach came running up. “Grandma wants to know if you’re about ready to open presents.”

“Presents?”

“Of course presents,” Belle said. “We can’t have a birthday party without presents.”

“Oh, all right. Remind her I just got my food. Let me at least finish my lunch.”

Zach ran off, and Jethro slapped Howie on the shoulder. “Told you she’d hate presents.”

“Where’s Mallory?” I asked, to take the attention off myself.

Mallory is Zach’s older sister, baby-sitter extraordinaire. Usually at these occasions she would be herding the smaller tikes, but I didn’t see or hear her today.

“Oh, she’s got that flu,” Belle said. “Just came down with it last night and feels something awful. I wanted to stay home with her, but she insisted I come. Said the baby-sitter didn’t need a baby-sitter.”

I laughed. “Sounds like her.” I pushed my plate away and leaned my elbows on the table. “What is this flu? Aren’t lots of kids getting it?”

Jethro nodded. “Just the last couple weeks. Must be some new strain. Haven’t found a medicine to beat it yet, so it must be viral.”

“And it’s just kids?”

Jethro shrugged. “Pretty much. Not many adults have gotten it, except ones who’re already sick with something, or real old folks. That could change, though. They say it might just take longer for grown-ups because of our immune systems or something.”

“Any of the other cousins have it?”

“Joseph and Joshua each have a sick one,” Belle said, talking of Granger sons number two and seven. “Jacob” (number five) “says Nina is keeping a close eye on their two. She wouldn’t even bring them today, in case someone here was contagious.”

Jethro rolled his eyes. “Like a kid’s gonna die from a little cold.”

“Come on, Stella!” Zach stood about thirty feet away, the still-healthy kids around him, anxious for presents even though they weren’t theirs.

I pushed myself away from the table. “I guess this is it.”

“You make it sound like going into battle,” Jethro said.

Howie laughed. “For her, it is.”

I made a face. “Bah, humbug.”

Finally we were all gathered in one general area under some trees so I could do the embarrassing thing and open presents.

Gifts ranged from flannel shirts to chrome knick-knacks for my Harley to a Stevie Ray Vaughn CD. Quite a haul.

With my thumb and forefinger I picked up a gift bag, decorated with flowers and overflowing with pink tissue paper.

“That’s from me,” Abe said.

I looked at the gift and then at him.

“Well, from us. Missy wrapped it.”

I stuck my hand in the tissue and came up with a variety of shower gels and lotions and one of those puffy washing things. I looked at Abe. He turned a bit pink, making him a match with the gift.

“Um, Missy picked it out.”

She smiled. “I figured with all the work you do on the farm you could use some good smelling things. You know, to pamper yourself.”

“Sure,” I said. “Thanks a lot.” I put them back in the bag. They wouldn’t see the light of day until I could find someone else to give them to, but she didn’t need to know that.

“Okay, here’s the last present,” Jethro said. He lumbered over, carrying a large flat package. He was grinning from ear to ear.

I ripped open the paper and caught my breath. It was an aerial photograph of my farm.

“Oh, wow,” I said. “It’s beautiful.” I ran my fingers over the glass. Everything was there—the milkhouse, the heifer barn, the farmhouse, and a little of the fields surrounding it all. There were even dots of cows in the pasture.

“It gives a good look at the manure lagoon,” Jethro said, laughing.

Belle elbowed him in the ribs. “We thought you’d like it. Jude and Marianne pitched in, too. It’s from the four of us.”

I looked at Jude with surprise. Jude was number six of the Granger boys, five years older than me. His wife, Marianne, was my age, and not from a farming family, which she was always quick to point out. Jude worked my land and planted crops on it. The Granger acreage wasn’t enough to support them, and

mine made up the difference. In return, he kept my cows in hay and silage from his harvest.

“We thought you’d like a picture of your most prized possession,” Marianne said. Her snide tone of voice made me wonder why she allowed Jude to even give me a present, but I wasn’t going to let her spoil the moment.

“It’s great,” I said. “It’s going up in my office tonight.”

A baby wailed somewhere in the mess of people, and Marianne flinched, then looked down and started picking up the wrapping paper I’d thrown on the ground. I was surprised how much there was.

“Thanks, everybody, for all the great stuff.”

I don’t know if anybody heard me. Their attention was diverted by Queenie, yelping happily as the kids decorated her with cast-off ribbons and bows.

People started to get up and walk off. I turned toward Abe to see if we could do some more catching up, but Missy’s hand looked permanently grafted to his elbow. I ditched that idea and went over to give Ma a hug. “Thanks for a great party.”

“I thought you’d come around and enjoy yourself, eventually.”

“Want me to put this in the truck?” Howie asked. He held up the photograph.

“Sure, why don’t you—”

“Stella!”

Jethro lumbered toward me, a look of fear on his face. My heart skipped a beat.

“What is it?”

“You seen Zach? Where is he?”

“Over there.” I gestured toward the side yard where Queenie and the boy were wrestling, ribbons and bows flying. “What’s wrong, Jethro?”

Instead of answering, Jethro hustled over to Zach, hauled him up by the arm, and started pulling him toward his truck. Queenie leapt up and stood in front of them, teeth bared.

“Queenie!” I yelled. I ran over and grabbed her collar before Jethro could do something stupid. “Jethro, what the hell is the matter with you?”

Queenie quieted, but didn’t sit.

“Out of my way, Stella. The dog, too.”

“What did I do, Dad?” Zach said. “You’re crushing my arm!”

Jethro’s face changed suddenly and he looked down at his huge hand, encircling Zach’s elbow. He dropped Zach’s arm and ran his hand over his face. “Sorry, son.”

“Jethro—”

“Just shut up, Stella, and let me talk, okay? Belle just took a phone call in the house. We have to get home to Mallory.” He stopped and swallowed.

“What? What was the phone call about?”

“You know little Toby Derstine?” he said. “Lives just down the road from you? He came down with flu symptoms three days ago. Now he’s dead.”