

Three Can Keep a Secret

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*For Phil and Nancy Clemens
my parents, my friends*

“It is our fixed principle rather than take up Arms to defend our King, our Country, or our Selves, to suffer all that is dear to be rent from us, even Life itself, and this we think not out of Contempt to Authority, but that herein we act agreeable to what we think is the Mind and Will of our Lord Jesus.”

—Thirteen Mennonite Ministers of Pennsylvania,
May 15, 1755

“Three can keep a secret, if two are dead.”

—Hell’s Angels motto

Chapter One

Dr. Rachel Peterson stepped back and shook her head. “I have to tell you, Stella. I’m concerned.”

I glanced down at my arm where my tattoo, which used to say, “To thine own self be true,” lay disfigured by unadorned skin taken from my back. My leg, previously unmarked, would forever sport white patches of scarring after the motorcycle accident five weeks earlier had thoroughly scraped the skin off the entire left half of my body. It also itched like hell. I looked up at the doc. “I thought you said the road burns were healing nicely.”

“They are. It’s the rest of you I’m worried about.” She picked up my chart. “Your complexion is gray, you’ve got circles under your eyes the size of hoofprints, and you’ve lost thirteen pounds in five weeks. Not to mention your ribs aren’t healing.”

“I’m sorry.”

She let out a laugh. “You’re *sorry*? I don’t want an apology. I want changes. You can’t go on like this.”

I eased myself off the examining table and started pulling on my clothes, not trusting myself to speak.

“Stella,” Dr. Peterson said, “please. Sit down for a minute.”

I turned around, my shorts in my hand, but didn’t sit. It would take too much energy to get back up.

Dr. Peterson’s eyes glowed with kindness. “It’s not just the physical exertion, I know.”

I fiddled with a belt loop on my shorts.

Her voice was soothing, and soft. “Grief can tear you apart, if you let it. Do you have anyone to talk to?”

I shrugged, not wanting to be thinking about this. Around the same time I wrecked my bike I also lost my long-time farm-hand and mentor, Howie Archer. My dairy cows didn’t seem to notice the difference, but my dog Queenie and I felt Howie’s absence every day.

“I’m talking to you,” I said.

“No, Stella. You’re not.”

I turned back around and resumed putting on my clothes. The doctor sighed. “Can you find someone to listen? Someone you trust. A friend, your minister.”

I closed my eyes and breathed through my nose. I had friends. Friends who cared, who would be there for me. I supposed I could talk to Ma Granger’s minister, if I wanted to go the church route. The problem was, I didn’t want to talk. To anyone.

“Okay,” Dr. Peterson said. “You know how I feel about that. And about the farm work you’ve been doing.”

“Find me a competent employee, and I’ll start taking it easy.”

“Stella—”

“I mean it. How am I supposed to get my cows milked twice a day and maintain the rest of the farm without working twenty-four seven? I have Zach Granger helping, but he’s only fourteen. I can’t expect him to work full-time. And he heads back to school next week.”

“You are looking for someone to hire?”

“The farming grapevine is alive and hopping, well aware of my needs. Plus, I’ve got ads in the local papers and in *Hoard’s Dairyman*.”

“Which is...?”

“The national magazine for dairy farmers.”

“Ah. Any calls yet?”

“So far, I’ve had two very un-recovered alcoholics, one seventeen-year-old, a chick who’d never seen a cow in real life, and a guy who assumed I was the farmer’s wife.”

“Uh oh.”

“He stayed as long as it took for me to personally lift him back into his truck.”

Dr. Peterson laughed, but shook her finger at me. “Exactly the kind of activity you shouldn’t be doing.”

“Plus,” I continued, “I’ve had several kids from the Delaware Valley College Ag program, but they can only promise a year or two, and only part-time.”

“Which would be better than nothing till you find someone else.”

I ran my fingers through my hair. “I know. I was just hoping to find a hand who would stick around a while. I don’t want to go through this hiring thing again anytime soon.”

She patted my good arm. “The right person will show up before you know it.”

I grunted.

“And until then, you need to get some help. Even if it’s just temporary.”

“I have someone coming to apply this afternoon. Probably’ll turn out to be a serial killer or religious fanatic or something.”

She laughed again and led me down the hallway toward the reception area. “I want to see you again next week. No excuses.”

I saluted weakly. “Yes, sir, ma’am.”

She stopped at the desk and handed the receptionist my chart. “And until then, you can call me if you need someone to talk to. Now go get some supper. And eat it all.”

I left the office, holding my ribs as I walked down the stairs outside. The sky was a vibrant blue, spotted with puffy white clouds, and the sun beat down on the blacktopped parking lot with ferocity. I opened both doors of my truck to let it air out before climbing in.

It was a beautiful August day.

And I was miserable.

Chapter Two

On an average day the traffic on Old 309 is so bad I want to swerve around traffic and speed by on the gravel shoulder. That day, on the way home from Doc Peterson's, there wasn't even room to do that. I took deep breaths to calm my rising blood pressure and craned my neck to see what was holding us up. Couldn't see a thing.

Fifteen minutes later I finally got a glimpse of the traffic light at Bethlehem Pike and Route 113. The changing of the light's colors made no impact on the flow of traffic, since a police officer stood in the intersection directing vehicles around an accident. As I crawled by I did my share of rubber-necking, but couldn't see anything other than a pickup with a bashed-in front end. The ambulance must've already left, since the only people I saw were emergency folks trying to rid the road of glass.

It brought back way too many memories of my accident just weeks before.

Finally free of the worst of it, I drove the remaining distance to my house and pulled into the lane, parking in the shade of a maple tree. A well-used Ford Taurus sat in the drive, and a woman stood leaning against the door, her face turned toward me. I stepped down from the truck, careful of my sore ribs. The woman stood up straight, her expression anxious.

I walked toward her. "You must be Lucy."

She scrutinized my clothes and tattoos—especially the one of the cow skull emblazoned on the back of my neck that peeked around underneath my ears. "And you must be the boss."

“Name’s Stella.” I stuck out my hand, and she shook it firmly. So far, so good. In the next few minutes I was sure she’d do something to disqualify herself, but until then I’d hope for the best. She looked the most promising of the candidates I’d seen so far, even if she was a bit small.

“Your last name’s Lapp, right?” I asked. “Sounds Mennonite.”

She smiled slightly. “It is. I’m Mennonite to the core. Is your next question going to be why I don’t look Amish?”

“Sorry to disappoint you. Living around here, I know plenty of Mennonites who wear jeans.” Such as the entire clan of Grangers, including Abe, my best friend since I was ten. “Not too much about the Mennos could surprise me anymore. Now, if you don’t mind waiting a few minutes, I’ll change my clothes and we can get to work.”

“All right if I walk around a bit?”

I pursed my lips, not sure I wanted some stranger snooping around. I finally decided she couldn’t do too much harm in such a short time. “Suit yourself.”

I started jogging to the house, slowing to a walk when my ribs protested.

In my bedroom I took a second to roll my neck and ponder the woman outside. Physically, we were exact opposites. At five-nine, I could look straight over her head. Bulk-wise I could throw her down and truss her up in a matter of seconds. Not that I’m fat. My body is basically one big muscle. No curves, no softness, just angles and bones. Especially now I’d lost that weight the doctor was complaining about.

Lucy was built more like a cheerleader—short, with curves in all the right places. But older. Her skin tone and the lines beside her eyes said she definitely wasn’t in high school anymore. And the look in those same eyes was tired, and hard. Had to be a story there. I wondered if she’d be around long enough for me to learn what it was.

Once I’d donned my barn boots, jeans, and T-shirt, and had popped one of my Motrin, I found her outside, checking out

the site where my heifer barn had burned to the ground a little over a month before.

She turned when gravel crunched under my boots. "Electric?" she asked, indicating the barn.

"Arson."

That sparked some interest, but I wasn't ready to fill her in until I knew she was staying.

"Ready to milk?" I headed toward the milking parlor, and she soon followed.

Zach was guiding the cows into their stalls when we arrived. My collie, Queenie, lay in her usual corner. She got up and trotted over to me, ignoring Lucy, which meant she must've checked her out already and decided Lucy was okay. Score one for Lucy.

"Hey, Zach," I said. "This is Lucy Lapp. She's applying for the farmhand position."

He clipped a cow into her stall and came over, wiping his hand on his jeans before offering it to her.

"Hi, Lucy," he said. "Don't let Stella intimidate you. She's not as scary as she looks."

"Gee, thanks, Zach," I said.

Lucy's lips twitched, but the impression of humor was fleeting. Gee, this one was a laugh a minute.

"Why don't you help Zach get the girls in," I said to Lucy. "I'm going to go see about my temporary help."

Zach grinned, knowing I meant Abe.

"Did you check on Poppy?" I asked Zach. To Lucy I said, "We have a cow soon to calve, and Zach and I have a bet going as to when she'll produce. The sooner the better, for my wager."

Zach's grin grew. "She's still huge."

"Don't count your calves before they're hatched," I said, and left Lucy in his capable hands.

When I got to the office I peered through the window in the door to see if Abe was there. He sat at the desk, chin on his fists, staring at the computer screen. He worked weekdays at Rockefeller Dairy, doing their books, and spent every other

available moment doing charity work for me. I was surprised he wasn't asleep.

I took a moment to study him and wonder where our relationship was headed. He had brought home another woman the month before, and I had finally admitted—to myself and to him—that I wasn't sure I liked it. He didn't like it either and was eager to pledge me his unending devotion. I wasn't quite there yet. I had suffered through a quick and painful romance with a barn painter at the same time Abe had brought the city gal home, so I wasn't sure I was ready for just one man, no matter how much I cared about him.

I pushed open the door, and he jumped. "Geez, you scared me."

"Sorry. Didn't mean to."

He spun his chair around. "What did the doctor have to say?"

I raised an eyebrow at him. "And that's your business because...?"

"Because I care about you. And your health."

"Oh." I considered that, and felt Dr. Peterson's presence beckoning me to share my feelings. She might be right, but that didn't mean I had to like it. "Let's just say I'm not her model patient."

"Surprise, surprise."

"I told her if she found me a farmhand I'd slack off a bit."

"Then let's hope today's the day. Lucy Lapp should be here any minute."

I cocked my head. "She's in the parlor, helping Zach."

"Oh. I guess I missed her driving in."

"That's unlike you. What's so fascinating on the computer?"

He looked at me warily. "You sure you want to know?"

"Oh God, Abe, not girlie sites?"

Red rushed to his face. "You know me better than that."

I laughed. "And I know you'd never stray off the straight and narrow. So what was it?"

"Well...."

"Come on."

“Okay. You know your finances aren’t any too hot right now.”

“Tell me another one.”

Since the shit hit the fan a month before, I’d been lucky to keep my phone and utilities paid up, and food on my table. It had been discovered that my cows were producing tainted milk because of their food, so besides having my feed stores cleaned out and new feed brought in, I’d had to milk my cows for several days and watch the milk get carted away for destruction until the FDA had proclaimed my herd “cured.” Needless to say, the government wasn’t giving me any help with the money, and insurance interpreted the situation as an Act of Terrorism and was therefore denying reimbursement. After September Eleven insurance companies had to rethink their stance on terrorism claims, but so far their policy changes hadn’t done me any good. Thank God for the free help I’d been getting from Zach and Abe, along with some charity from other folks. Not that my farming friends have much to give—time or money.

“Anyway,” Abe said, “I’ve been thinking about some of the extra expenses that have come up lately. Your truck has been giving you problems, you’ll need money to hire a new farmhand, and of course there’s the obvious project of the heifer barn.”

“I can fix the truck myself, I was paying Howie anyway, and insurance will pay for most of the barn.”

Abe ignored me. “I’ve been studying some possible sideline incomes.”

“Oh, great. Waitressing in between milkings? Bagging at the grocery store?”

“Something here at the farm. Did you know the Hoffmans are considering an ice cream parlor?”

“What?”

Marty and Rochelle Hoffman were other small-time dairy farmers, good friends of mine.

“They haven’t mentioned it to me,” I said.

“You have enough to think about these days. They didn’t want to burden you worrying about them. Anyway, there are all kinds of things to do. Run a vegetable stand, sell flowers, let

a phone company build a cell tower on your land, rent out one of the barns for parties—”

“For Pete’s sake, Abe. Next thing you’ll be wanting me to give hayrides and have Easter egg hunts.”

He shrugged. “Why not?”

“First off, I scare children.”

He grinned. “Only ones who don’t know you.”

“Second, we have no barn to spare at the moment.”

“That will change as soon as we get the heifer barn rebuilt, and you said insurance will be paying for it.”

“Third, what should I tell Jude when he wants to plant my back acreage and he can’t because the phone company’s erecting a permanent eyesore?”

“All right, I understand those problems. But what about the other stuff?”

“Which?”

“Flowers and vegetables. Basically no contact with the public if you use the honor system, and it would take up lots less land than a phone tower.”

“And I’m going to tend the plants with what time?”

He looked at me steadily. “How about the time you’re putting into fixing up the bike that almost got you killed?”

I stared back at him. “That Harley is all I have of a life outside this farm, Abe. And most of my friends are bikers.”

“I’ve offered you another way.”

I stifled a groan. “Marry you and become the perfect yuppie wife?”

“Is that so unattractive?”

I pushed myself out of my chair. “Abe, you know you’re one of my favorite people, and I appreciate all the work you’ve done for me. But this farm is all I have left of my parents. Of Howie. No matter how I feel about you, I’m not ready to abandon it.”

He studied me. “Well, then, isn’t it worth it to consider one or two of these other options? I want to help save the farm. You know I do.”

I jammed my hands into my pockets and looked out the window at my house. I did love the place. But how much more sacrificing was I going to have to do for it?

“So leaving my bike behind and tending a garden has become my only option?”

He tapped on the computer screen. “I’m doing my best to come up with others. None of them leave much room for joy-riding. But look at what it means in the end.”

I turned slowly toward him. “What it means is I lose one more part of my life that brings me happiness. I don’t have too many of those left.”

He seemed about to say something, but I couldn’t listen anymore. I left the room, closing the door a little harder than I meant to. I leaned against the wall and pushed on my temples with my fingers. It had been five weeks since my life had changed irrevocably, and I wasn’t in a place to be adding more responsibilities to my already overflowing plate of chores. Let alone manage the stress that comes with trying out a new take on an old relationship.

I shoved myself away from the wall and went to check on my farmhand hopeful.

The cows were hooked into their stalls and Lucy was placing the milker on the first one when I got back to the parlor. Zach caught my eye over a cow’s back and gave me an enthusiastic thumbs-up.

I stood and watched Lucy work. Seemingly oblivious to my presence, she projected an understanding of cows, unlike some of my loser applicants. She was gentle, patting their rumps and talking to them, but not so delicate she wouldn’t put a knee in their leg to move them over, or prod them awake with her boot. Her hands on the milking apparatus were sure and steady, and she moved like she was at home.

Hope began creeping its way into my chest, and I had to work hard to stifle it, afraid of yet another disappointment.

I steeled myself and went into the feed room to get the cows’ grain. There was no way to tell it anymore, but that little room was where I had found Howie, my beloved farmhand, taking

his last breaths. I couldn't even look at the doorway to the room without feeling queasy.

I made it out to the parlor just in time to see Lucy avoid getting peed on by a cow. She waited for the river to stop, then stepped beside the cow to wipe off the teats with a paper towel. Another good attribute for a farmhand. Cool in times of excrement.

Zach was busy in his row with the same routine as Lucy—wiping off the teats and hooking on the milkers. I had just started filling the feed trays when Queenie growled a low, bone-chilling rumble. From where I stood I couldn't see her, but I could see Lucy, who had frozen.

“What?” I asked, and took a step.

“Stop!” Her voice was a forced whisper.

I stopped.

“We've got a problem,” Lucy said.

By shifting my weight I could get my eyes around the cow blocking my view, and I sucked in my breath. Queenie crouched low on her haunches, her teeth bared. About a foot from her face a beautiful black and bronze snake lay at attention, its eyes locked with Queenie's. A copperhead. Venomous and not at all friendly.

“Holy crap,” Zach said. “Where did that come from?”

“Stella,” Lucy said. “Do you have a rifle?”

“In the office, but there's no way—”

“Somebody bring it to me.”

I took a deep breath and let it out. She seemed to know what she wanted, and I was no expert on snake extermination. “Okay. Zach, you're closest. Go—”

“Slowly,” Lucy said.

“—and get it. You know where it is. Grab some ammo, too.”

Lucy, Queenie, and I stood stock still, keeping our eyes straight ahead, while Zach made a slow and quiet exit. Once he was gone Lucy's shoulders relaxed a little.

“Keep him far away,” she said. “Copperheads can be lethal to kids.”

“What about you? You're smaller than Zach.”

“It’s not necessarily your size that matters.”

“Here it is,” Zach said from the doorway.

Lucy angled her eyes toward him. “Okay.” Her lips barely moved as she talked. “I want you to hand the gun to Stella without taking another step, then the ammo. Then get out of here.”

Zach stretched his arm out, and by leaning slightly to the side I could reach the gun. He was too far away for me to reach the bullet, so I wiggled my fingers and he gave it a gentle toss. I closed my hand over it, then watched as Zach took a backward step and retreated into the hallway.

Lucy’s arm was already stretched over the cow between us. Her eyes, focused on the snake, were cold and hard. By standing on my toes and balancing against a cow I could just get the gun to her fingers. She transferred it slowly to her left hand, swiveling her eyes toward me. I said a small prayer, then repeated Zach’s process of tossing the bullet, which fortunately found her hand.

All of this seemed to be taking an eternity, but in reality it must have only been about five minutes. It took another year for Lucy to get the bullet into the twenty-two and rack it. A tremor shook my chest as she raised the gun to her shoulder. There was no way she’d hit the snake from where she stood. She was much more likely to hit Queenie or ricochet the bullet around the room, killing a cow or one of us.

“Lucy,” I said.

She slid her eyes toward me impatiently, and the look in them silenced me. I shook my head and she went back to taking aim.

The shot pierced the air in the concrete room, and I recoiled violently, slapping my hands over my ears. Lucy’s ears had to be ringing, too, but when I straightened she nodded and walked carefully toward the snake. I stepped out from behind the cows and watched as she scooped up the dead serpent with the barrel of the gun.

“Good grief,” Zach said.

I stared. “Lucy. We need to talk.”

“I hate snakes,” Lucy said.

Chapter Three

“What the hell was that?” I asked.

Lucy and I sat in my office, where a little air conditioner chugged away in the window. My sweat, arising from both milking and the snake confrontation, chilled my skin, and my arm itched like mad.

After the snake had been properly disposed of behind the feed barn, Lucy, Zach, and I had finished the remainder of the milking before we women left Zach to clean out stalls and scrape the walkways. Now I needed a few answers.

Lucy shrugged. “I grew up on a farm. I’ve known how to shoot a gun since I was twelve. One time I shot a bat out of the sky.”

That seemed a bit unbelievable, but then, she had just shot a snake.

“What’s a good Mennonite girl like you doing with aim like that?” I was only half joking.

“We Anabaptists may resist hurting other people, but we can handle killing snakes.”

“Which you do very well. You stayed calm under life-threatening pressure today.”

“Not really.” She leaned back in her chair. “You most likely won’t die from a copperhead bite unless you’re a kid or old or unhealthy. But the pain is almost worse than dying.”

“You’ve been bit?”

“Once. Hurt like the dickens.”

“I bet. So you grew up with cows?”

“And pigs. And chickens. And sheep. Whatever my dad was into at the time. The pigs didn’t stay long. Mom finally said it was her or the oinkers. Couldn’t stand the smell.” She lifted a shoulder. “But there were always the cows.”

I looked her over from where I sat behind my desk. She really was small, but she’d proven she was no weakling.

“So where were you before and why did you leave?” I asked.

She stiffened slightly and looked down at her hand, her fingers picking at the arm of the chair. “I’ve had several long-term jobs at farms, but not for a few years now. I...took a break. My husband was ill, and I stayed home to care for him.”

Suddenly I understood the dullness in her eyes. “And your husband?” I asked quietly.

She swallowed, a tightness forming around her mouth. “He’s been gone a little over a year and a half. He died the day after Christmas.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You can call my last employer if you want. He’ll tell you how I did.” She scribbled down a name and number and I took it and smoothed it on the top of my desk.

“Why get a job now?” I asked.

She cocked her head. “It’s a combination of things. The main reason is I miss it. I miss the cows, the routine. Believe it or not, I miss the smells.” She angled her face away. “But other things have been sneaking up on me. A year and a half is a long time to be grieving a lost husband while living with my parents and my in-laws right down the street. To be honest, they’re driving me crazy. I mean, I love them, but—”

“You don’t have to explain. I’m a great believer in personal space.”

“So you understand. I cut out your ad in *Hoard’s* two weeks ago, but have been holding off on any decisions.” She gazed at me with what looked like desperation, and something deep inside me reached out to her.

“The job is yours if you want it.”

Her mouth quivered, and I wasn't sure if she was getting ready to laugh or cry. "You mean it?"

"One thing you'll learn quick is I don't say things I don't mean."

She looked away for a long moment, and when she turned back, determination showed on her face. "I'll do a good job."

"I know. When can you start?"

"Today."

I smiled. "How 'bout tomorrow. I'll do the morning milking—that's always been mine. Why don't you come whenever you want and move into the apartment..."

The apartment. The space above the garage where Howie had lived. Now Lucy would be living there, and I needed to clean it out. Not that there was much to move. I'd put it off as long as I could, and I certainly wasn't looking forward to facing Howie's ghost.

"So I'll see you tomorrow," I said.

I suddenly felt emotional, realizing this person was here because Howie was gone, so I stood up. Lucy clasped her hands and peered up at me like a nervous high-schooler.

"What?" I said. "You don't see another snake?"

"Oh gosh, no. It's just...I have a couple more things to talk to you about."

I sat back down. "You're not an alcoholic, are you?"

"No." She let out a surprised chuckle.

"Use drugs? Been convicted of something?"

"No."

"Are you a serial killer? Escaped convict?"

She held up her hand. "Can't claim either."

"Okay. Good. So what is it?"

"Is the apartment big enough for two?"

I blinked. "Two?"

"I'll be bringing my daughter, Tess. She's eight."

I thought about this. I liked little girls okay, I guessed. I wasn't used to having them around the farm, but I could handle it, if it meant having Lucy.

“She’s a good girl,” Lucy said, “and she’ll be in school starting Monday, as long as her registration goes through.” She flushed. “I stopped by the administration building this afternoon, just in case...well, in case it worked out here. School’s the main reason I finally took the plunge and came to apply. I realized it was starting next week, and if we were going to be here I wanted Tess to be able to start on day one. She deserves that chance.” She hesitated. “I promise she won’t be a problem.”

“Why would she be? I’ll be glad to have her. Sorry you can’t stay tonight.”

“I have to go back to Lancaster, anyway. Tess is with my folks. I’ll bring her tomorrow. By the way, is the apartment furnished?”

“Got all the necessities. You want to see it?”

“That’s all right. From your expression I can see it would be better to wait. A good number of my things are in storage, anyway. We’ll just bring a few personal items, until we see what we need.”

“Fine. Was there something else you needed to discuss?”

She winced. “We can work around this issue, of course, with whatever your wishes are, but I want to at least mention it.”

I waited, expecting the worst.

“Might it be possible for me to have Sunday mornings off, so Tess and I could go to church? I mean, unless you go, then I’m willing to miss it.”

I leaned back, relieved her request was innocuous. “I’ll do morning milkings, anyway, so I can’t see why that would be a problem. And I try to keep Sundays relatively free. Sunday could be your day off. That doesn’t seem unreasonable.”

Her eyebrows lifted. “Wow, that’s just...that’s great. I’ll make it up to you the other days.”

I flapped a hand at her. “Gotta have time off sometime. I should know. I haven’t had any lately, and it’s killing me. I can even point you toward a good church, unless you already have one in mind. Some of my closest friends go to Sellersville Menonite. Been going there for years.”

“Sellersville?” An expression of amusement flashed across her face. “That might work out very well.” She stood up. “I’ll be here to relieve you tomorrow. Unless you really would like me to stay for this evening. I can.”

“No, go home to your daughter. I’ll survive a few more hours by myself.” I could practically feel Dr. Peterson’s presence slapping me on the forehead, but I ignored it.

Lucy walked toward the door before stopping and looking back. “What happened with your last farmhand, anyway?”

I concentrated on my breathing. “He died.”

“I’m sorry.” She didn’t push for a further explanation, perhaps recognizing the grief on my face. For the same reason, I didn’t probe into her husband’s illness and death.

She turned the doorknob. “I’ll see you tomorrow, then.”

When she’d gone, I picked up the paper where she’d scribbled her reference’s name and number. Looked like he lived in Morgantown. It was a little late for a referral, seeing as how I’d hired her already, but I called the guy—Martin Spunk—anyway. He answered, and his voice made me want to laugh. All heart and no bite.

“Stella Crown?” he said jovially. “As in the farm with all them troubles last month?”

“That’s me.”

“I read about that. I was real sorry to hear about Howie.”

“You knew him?”

“From way back. Worked together at a big farm in Wisconsin, oh, sixty-two or thereabouts. Good hand. Good friend.”

“The best.”

We had a moment of silence.

“So what can I do for you?” Spunk finally asked.

“Wanted to check with you about a former employee. Lucy Lapp.”

“Lucy?”

“I hired her today, and I’m calling to make sure I did the right thing.”

“No doubt about it.”

“She did well for you?”

“Best farmhand I ever had.”

“So how come you let her go?”

“Had no choice. Her husband got hurt and she decided he was a bigger priority than me. Course that’s the way it should be.”

“I thought he was sick. She called it an illness.”

“I guess you could call it that. Fell down the basement stairs. Paralyzed from the neck down. Nasty business.”

Nasty, indeed. “And he died about a year and a half ago?”

“Yeah, real sad thing. She came back looking for a job a month or so ago, but I didn’t have nothing to offer her. I was right sorry about that. How’s that pretty little girl of hers? Tess?”

“I haven’t met her yet, but she’ll be coming tomorrow.”

“You tell her hello from her Uncle Marty, will ya?”

“I’ll be glad to, Mr. Spunk. And thanks so much for the reference.”

I hung up and sat for a moment, wondering if I should consider the small discrepancy in Lucy’s story. Would I call being paralyzed an illness? Perhaps if I didn’t want to explain things. Made sense to me. And she seemed prickly enough I wasn’t about to ask her. At least not till she’d been around a while.

I put that aside and tried to digest the Howie connection I had made. Talking to Spunk I had found out things about Howie I’d never known.

Zach found me in the same position ten minutes later.

“You hire her?” he asked.

I shook myself out of my trance. “She’s ours. Thanks for your input.”

“She seemed to know what she was doing. And was a good shot, too.”

“She’s bringing her daughter with her.”

He brightened. “My age?”

“Is that hormonal interest I’m seeing? Sorry. She’s only eight.”

He grinned. “That’s all right. I haven’t decided to sign my life over to girls yet. That can wait a year or so.”

“Good plan. Besides, I thought I was your only woman.”

“You are my only woman. High school chicks are just girls.”

“As long as we’re clear.”

He laughed. “My dad’s here. I’ll see you tomorrow. Everything in the parlor’s done.”

“Thanks, Zach.”

I walked to the window and waved to Jethro Granger, Zach’s dad and Abe’s oldest brother. His bulk filled the driver’s side of his Chevy Dually, and his arm hung big and meaty out of the window. He wagged his fingers and they drove away, spitting up a cloud of dust.

I stood there, wondering what to do next. I considered going to find some supper, but the heat had pretty much sapped whatever appetite I’d rustled up. I pondered a few other possible activities, but when I actually considered counting hay bales in the feed barn I knew I was just postponing the inevitable.

I had to face my demons and clean out Howie’s apartment.

Chapter Four

The dusk-to-dawn light flickered on as I made my way across the drive. Bad Company's song *Seagull*—an echo of my loss and sorrow flitted through my head, and I tried to shake off the eerie feeling enclosing my heart.

Queenie trotted after me, making playful leaps at the garbage bags draped over my shoulder. She had no idea they would soon be filled with Howie's belongings. I guessed technically his belongings were mine, now.

I stopped at the base of Howie's stairs and took a deep breath, hoping to fortify myself. It didn't work. I procrastinated more by looking in the garage to make sure the washer and dryer were ready for Lucy. They were a bit dusty, but usable. The cupboard above them even stored part of a container of detergent and some dryer sheets. Howie's gift to Lucy.

The garage held a lot of other odds and ends, including the generator Howie and I had pulled out of retirement during a power outage last month, but there was an empty space where my hog usually sat. Hog as in Harley. My beautiful black 1988 Low Rider was now recuperating at the Biker Barn, my friends Lenny and Bart's mechanical nursing home, reclining among other bikes that were in pieces.

Queenie jump-started me by sticking her nose in my crotch, and I gently pushed her away. "Okay, okay, I'll get to work."

Queenie followed me up the stairs and lay down on the landing with a huff, apparently not wanting to go inside. I couldn't blame her. I didn't want to go in, either, but the door was unlocked so I didn't have any more excuses. I braced myself for an emotional rush and eased the door open.

Surprisingly, the wave of grief I had expected passed me by. The apartment, devoid of Howie's presence, felt at first like what it was—an empty space. Sure, there were items of furniture, but nothing felt alive or even remotely as if Howie were lingering there. My headache started to go away.

It came back as soon as I realized I had to move. My first attempt at action was to flip on the main light. At least I'd accomplished something.

I tackled the kitchen first. If any room was in dire need of cleaning, that would be the place. I knew the worst would be gone because Belle Granger, Zach's mom, had come over after Howie's funeral to take care of things. The only items she'd left in the refrigerator were baking soda and empty ice cube trays. I filled the trays with water and stacked them carefully in the freezer.

The cupboards still held lots of Howie's stuff—plates, silverware, and such—and a stash of canned goods and other non-perishables occupied the pantry. More gifts from Howie to Lucy, if she wanted them.

Howie's little table sat bare, a chair at either end. Just right for Lucy and her daughter. I ran a cloth over the table, displacing dust, and allowed myself a small smile, imagining Howie's expression if he'd known a woman and girl would be living in his place. He loved women and kids, but, like me, would have blanched at having to share his space. Granted, I have a lot more space in my farmhouse than he had in this little apartment, but our feelings about cohabitation were the same.

Other than the dust and a few mouse turds I cleared away, the kitchen was ready to be occupied.

The living room didn't need anything, either, other than a light dusting. Howie had a sofa and a television/VCR combo on a stand as his main furniture, with a little desk and folding

chair off to the side. On the desk was a blueberry iMac, complete with printer.

I sat in the chair and ran my fingers over the computer keyboard. It was hard to imagine Howie, in dirty overalls, pounding those keys, but I knew he had. It was partly his computer research that had gotten him killed.

Because of that, I considered the fate of Howie's second-most expensive possession, the first being his truck, for only a moment before deciding it would stay right where it was. I certainly didn't need to be looking at it every day. It was hard enough having the apartment looming over my shoulder. Besides, Lucy's daughter could probably use the computer for school, and I had no idea what Lucy did in her spare time. Maybe she was an eBay junkie.

"You okay?"

I twisted around in the chair. Abe stood silhouetted in the doorway, leaning against the jamb, his hands in his pockets.

"I didn't hear you come up," I said.

"Soft as a barn cat's feet. So are you?"

I shrugged. "I guess." I turned back to the desk and rested my face in my hands.

"I take it this means you hired Lucy?"

"Yup. She starts tomorrow. I think she'll fit in fine. Real quiet."

"You mean she'll let you get on with your life without interfering."

I didn't say anything. He knew me too well.

Abe walked across the carpet and I soon felt his hands kneading the steel plates that were my shoulder muscles. I closed my eyes and let the pain radiate from my neck to the top of my head. When I dropped my forehead onto my arms the pain dulled. After several minutes I even relaxed a bit.

"You done up here?" Abe said quietly.

I shook my head and my neck immediately tensed up again. "I have to do the bathroom and the bedroom yet."

"Want me to check them out?"

I sat up. “No, I should do it.” I looked up at him. “Thanks.”

He ran his hand over my hair and cupped the back of my neck. “How ’bout I come along for the ride?”

We made our way about fifteen feet to the bathroom door, and I switched on the light. Belle had been busy in there, too. Everything was clean under the light layer of dust, and the medicine cabinet held nothing personal. All that remained were Tums, a bottle of ibuprofen, and heavy-duty hand lotion. A small stack of towels and washcloths sat on the toilet, ready for use.

The bedroom was just as bare. The dresser drawers were empty of the most personal clothing, handkerchiefs, or anything else I might have found disturbing, for which I was thankful. The top drawer held a few white—or almost white—T-shirts and a package of socks that hadn’t been opened, but the other drawers sported only lining.

The closet was completely bare except for one pair of fairly new overalls that brought my heart to my throat. The carpet had been swept, removing any trace of Howie’s boots. A wave of dizziness washed over me, and I put out my hand to rest on the back closet wall.

“Stella?”

I shook my head and we stood quietly for a few moments, the crickets outside the only sound.

“What’s that?” Abe finally said, breaking the silence.

I looked where he was pointing and saw a small keyhole hidden in the dark grain of the wood panel next to my hand.

“Don’t know.” I leaned closer and made out minuscule lines in the paneling, forming a square. “Looks like a hiding place.”

“See any keys?”

I searched inside the closet, but didn’t find anything.

“Could be in the living room,” I said. “I forgot to even look in the desk drawers.”

We traipsed back to the computer, where Abe pulled open the top drawer.

“Ta da.” He held up a little key on a string. “How much you want to bet this is the magic opener?”

He was right, and a little door swung out from the closet wall as soon as he stuck in the key. It was a safe, about one and a half by one and a half feet.

Abe looked at me, and I shrugged. I'd had no idea it was there, and wondered if Howie had added it during his years in the apartment or if it had been built in originally. Right now, all that was in it was a flat, square box, which Abe carefully lifted out. He carried it over to the bed and we sat on the mattress. I moved a pile of clean, folded sheets to make room.

Inside the box was a stack of photographs. Not exactly what I'd expected in a wall safe, even if it was a flimsy hiding place. Abe tipped the box onto the bed, and out spilled a collage of color photos and black-and-whites, wallet-sized rectangles, and eight by tens that looked like they had at one time been in frames.

My throat tightened as I began to recognize faces in the pictures. My dad. My mom. Howie, of course. Dogs several generations before Queenie, and lots of the Granger clan, including Abe. From what I could see, the photos ranged in time from my birthday party last month all the way back to the year I was two, when Howie first joined our family. When both of my folks were still alive.

I could feel Abe's gaze on the side of my face. "Want some company while you look through these?"

I fluttered my fingers over the photos. Dr. Peterson had stressed the need to share my grief, and who better to do that with than Abe? No matter what the state of our romance, he'd been my best friend for almost twenty years, and that hadn't changed.

I stared at the bedspread, afraid to meet Abe's eyes for fear I might do something embarrassing, like cry. "Do you mind?"

He picked up a photo. "I'd love to."

We sat quietly for a few minutes, shuffling through the pictures, occasionally sharing a particularly special one. Abe finally spoke.

"I know I was a little pushy about your bike today. I'm sorry I can't feel more positive about it."

"Me too. I know you hate it."

“It’s not the bike itself. It’s just...I worry about you. There was another article in the paper today. Some poor guy—can you believe his nickname was The Skull?—got killed on his way home from work. Truck pulled out right in front of him. He was thrown a hundred feet. Happened right there in Souderton, at the intersection of Old 309 and 113.”

My head snapped toward him. “Yesterday?”

“Yeah. In the afternoon.”

“Oh my God. I drove by it.”

“The accident?”

“The aftermath. The bike must’ve been hidden behind the truck. I didn’t even see it.”

He looked at me for a moment before picking up another picture. “That’s why I wish you’d stop riding. Because bikers get killed. Not because I want to take something away from you.”

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. Guilt crashed into me. Guilt for worrying Abe. Guilt that I hadn’t known a fellow biker had died just feet from where I’d driven.

“So now you know how I feel,” Abe said. “I’ll try to keep my mouth shut about it from now on.”

I nodded, not sure what to say. I was glad he cared about me, but burdened by his anxiety.

“So which dog was this?” Abe asked. “Any relation to Queenie?”

I shook myself out of my thoughts and looked at the picture he was holding of my very first dog—not actually an ancestor of Queenie, although Ringo had been a collie, too.

Life had thrust me into a horrible place during the past few weeks, but now I was here, with my best friend, looking at things that meant a great deal to me. I made myself as comfortable as I could on the bed, and let myself drift into Howie’s compilation of his, and therefore my, history.