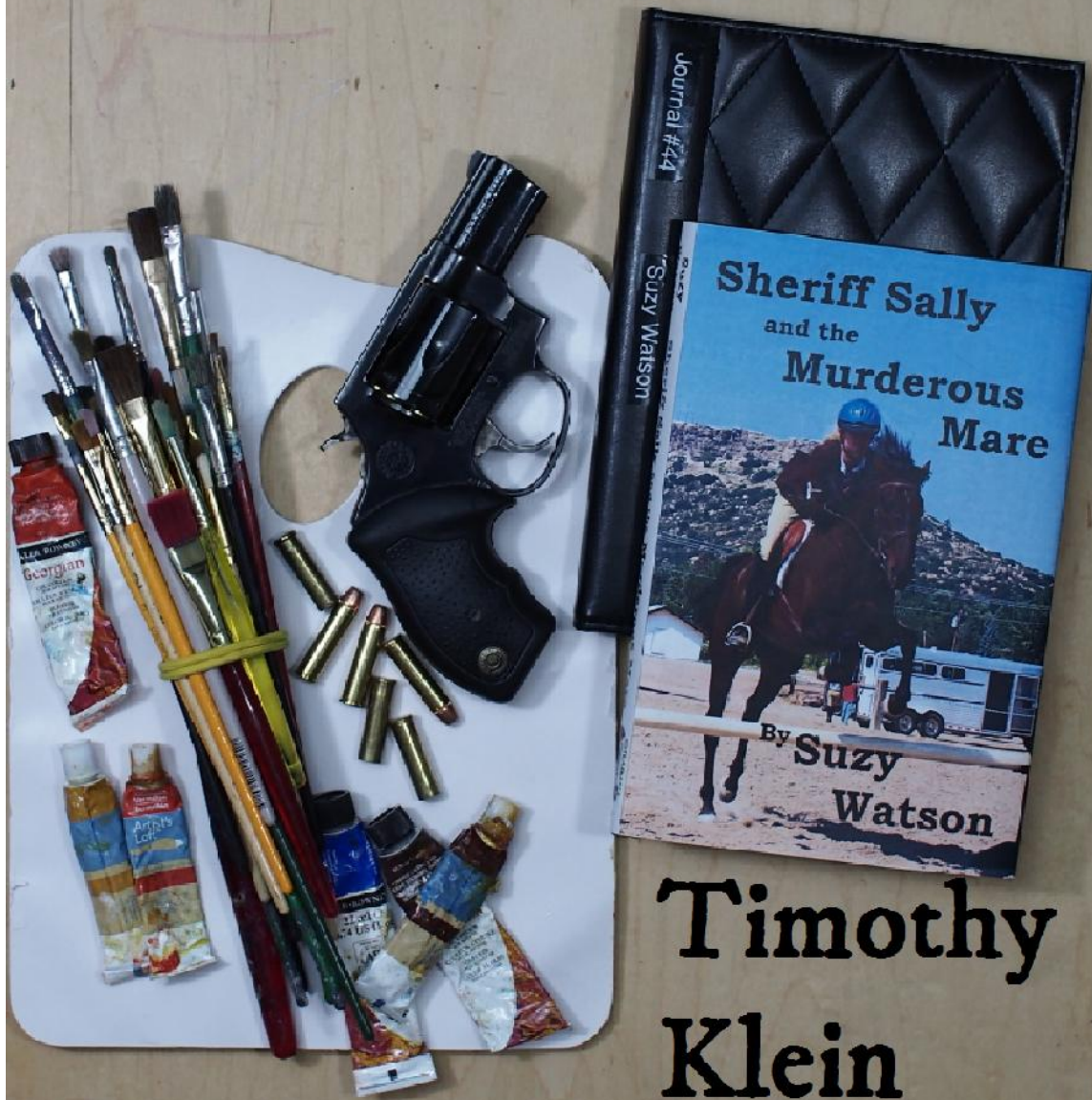


Three Wishes



Timothy
Klein

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Chapter 1

The snow was definitely getting heavier, the air crisper. She quickened her pace and shifted her shotgun to her other arm. It was still a forty minute hike to the cabin, and clearly the weather forecast had been overly optimistic; the sooner she got there, the better.

Now she wished she had taken the time to change clothes after a day on horseback. Her low cut riding boots were starting to slip on the well-worn path, and while her riding breeches were great for walking, they were not so great for keeping warm. The heavy denim jacket would suffice as long as she made it to the cabin before dark. Not a problem. She had hiked this trail at least weekly for her entire life... sometimes wearing sandals in the heat of the summer, sometimes in snowshoes, but she had never had to turn back.

The sound of heavy breathing and even heavier footsteps caused her to stop. Turning to her left, she spotted the source: a male hiker, probably in his early forties, was taking the path just down the hill from her.

She studied him for a minute; surprised that she didn't recognize him. After all, she knew everyone within twenty miles. "Who are you, and what are you doing here?" she yelled with a polite but authoritarian tone, as she adjusted one of the shoulder straps of her small backpack and shifted the shotgun to her shoulder.

"The name's Brett," he yelled back, sounding all too confident. He quickly cleared the twenty paces between them, dodging around the scrub oak that separated the trails.

He was breathing heavily, and was obviously a flatlander, not yet acclimated to the altitude. The backpack he was toting didn't help. It started just below his well-formed

buttocks and didn't stop until the back of his head. "The foreman at the ranch said I could hike up here."

She sighed loudly, without being overly obvious. "Well, that's well and good, but here's the thing... the first storm of the season is almost here and trust me here, you don't want to be here when it gets here." That was a lousy sentence, she thought. It's a good thing he's an artist and not an English teacher. "What's in the backpack?" she asked, wanting to change the subject.

He readjusted the pack and stood tall. "Camera gear and camping stuff. I'm an artist; I heard that there's a rather picturesque waterfall down that path." He pointed in the opposite direction from where she was heading. "If I can catch the last of the fall colors with some fresh snow..." He stopped to smile while nodding his head. "That will be a photo worth the hike."

"Is it worth your life?"

"What?" he asked, in a half confused and half startled voice.

"Look, mountain weather isn't to be taken lightly. Granted, the forecasters say the snow won't get heavy until morning, but they're not known for being right. You need to hightail it back down the path, get in your car, and take pictures of something else."

"Okay," he said with a condescending tone. "I appreciate your concern, but a little snow isn't going to stop me. I've been in the mountains once or twice before, and, seriously, how bad could it get?" He grinned. "Besides, I don't have a car here. The guys at the ranch dropped me off at the road, and there's no cell phone coverage here, so I might as well go ahead. I'll be fine."

She huffed. "This is still my land, and I don't want you dying on it. Now take your city-slicker butt back to the road and thumb your way back to town." She had one hand on her hip, and the other was squeezing the stock of the shotgun as it rested ominously over her shoulder. She would not have been surprised if little puffs of smoke were shooting out of her ears.

"First, don't get so excited." He stepped closer, towering over her, which was an accomplishment... since she was close to five feet eight inches herself. He had to be

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pushing six feet three inches. "Second, I have the foreman's permission to be here, and he didn't say anything about some babe policing the woods. If you want me gone, go and get the sheriff and have me arrested for trespassing." He turned and started back down the path but stopped. "Or I suppose you could wing me with that shotgun, assuming you know how to use it."

Babe? Now there were puffs of smoke coming out of her ears. I should just let him go and freeze to death. Men! How can they be so stupid?

"I am not a babe." She had to clench her teeth to keep from yelling it.

He laughed quietly as he turned around.

"Sorry, I meant that as a compliment," he said. He stopped to study her, causing her to fidget. "Bright green eyes, reddish/blonde hair, cute little nose with those high cheekbones? Add in the dimples and sharp chin..." He paused, choosing his words carefully. "Riding breeches always do wonders for a girl's hips... well, when she's got hips like yours. And even under that jacket, I can tell you've got a nice ... figure. Sorry, but you are a babe."

All she could do was stand there and stare.

"Look," he continued, seemingly unaware of the dangers of angering an armed woman. "I really want to get set up before it gets too dark. I'd love to chat sometime. I'd even buy dinner, but right now I need to keep moving." He turned and headed off.

He made it only a dozen or so paces before he felt a sharp sting on his left calf, accompanied by the thunder of a shotgun blast. The brush to his left rippled with the reverberation of pellets. He turned to face her; his right hand disappeared under his jacket, as the other grabbed his leg.

"You shot me in the leg! You're right. You're not a babe... you're a crazy woman."

She stood with the gun leveled at him, probably more surprised than he was. "It just grazed the skin. Now start marching." She waved the muzzle, indicating she wanted him to head up the path ahead of her. "We're going to my cabin. There's no phone coverage here, but I have a phone at the cabin. I will call the sheriff, and I will have you arrested."

He walked toward her, limping.

"Please!" she said with a tone of irritation. "Stop the play acting. At this range, and with the heavy jeans that you're wearing, that pellet couldn't even break the skin."

"Yeah, but you still shot at me."

She stepped back from the path as he approached, keeping plenty of distance between them. After all, a man whom you've just shot might try something rash. She let him have a good three pace lead and then followed.

"You'll live. Just keep moving," she ordered. To say the least, the next ten minutes were rather awkward.

"You must hike up here a lot?" he finally asked. He had slowed down, causing her to almost catch up to him.

"Every chance I get," she answered, forcing herself not to look at him.

The path was disappearing, being erased by the fresh snow. "Good thing you know where we're going," he added. "I can barely see a hundred yards ahead."

"Don't worry. I've hiked this path in the dark, sometimes with only a full moon to guide me," she replied without thinking. "I guess I even hiked it before I was born. My mother would retreat to the cabin to escape my father." Not happy to have aired her family's dirty laundry, she quickly asked, "So where are you from?"

"That's a simple question with a complicated answer."

"We've got another mile and a half to go."

"I guess I'm from New York City."

"New York City." Her words dripped with disdain. "Been there and hated it. Big Apple? More like the Rotten Apple. That place stinks."

"It can, that's for sure. And I can't say that I blame you for hating it," he replied. "Truth be told, I only lived there because it was the center of the art world... at least for me, for awhile. Now I travel a lot more, not sure where to call home."

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"This has been my home since I was born," she answered quietly with a clear sadness in her voice.

"So why a shotgun?" he asked, still as relaxed as ever. "There aren't any birds here in the trees."

"I was hoping to take a squirrel or two," she answered firmly. By now they were walking side-by-side.

"Squirrel?" he asked with a snicker. "You eat tree rats?"

"Oh, please," she snapped back at him. "Properly prepared and seasoned, squirrel is an absolute delicacy. You city people figure that unless the restaurant is charging you a fortune for some fancy, foreign concoction that you can't even pronounce... "

"Okay, enough," he held up both hands to shush her. "I'm just teasing. I've eaten squirrel, in New York City no less. Just trying to lighten the mood."

"Oh," she huffed. She found herself staring at him and quickly looked away.

Even though the temperature had dropped, their quick pace had warmed them up to the point that she had unzipped her jacket and removed her gloves.

"So, I'm guessing you're divorced," he queried.

"Why do you think I'm divorced?"

"Well, you're not wearing a ring, and you're too..." He stopped again to choose his words carefully. After all, she had proven she was willing to use her gun. He continued, "...attractive to have never been married..."

"Not divorced, widowed."

He stopped, then turned and looked at her. The sadness in his eyes not only surprised her; it was downright disarming.

"Sorry, I know how hard that can be." The words were soft and straight from his heart. They were free of bravado; words of experience.

She looked back into his eyes. "Really?" was all she could manage.

After a pause, he volunteered, "I lost my wife seven years ago; drunk driver." He stated it as a fact, but she could see the pain flash in his eyes.

"I'm sorry."

"Well, it happens. It shouldn't, but it does," he replied. "Any kids?"

"No." She shook her head. "It's something that should have happened but didn't. Do you have any?"

"Yeah, four... all girls." He turned and started walking again. "The youngest was only six when Carol died. That was the hardest part, explaining everything to them and to their friends. Then, for the first time in my life, I really had to understand women. What an adventure.

"So, what do you do when you're not shooting trespassers?"

"Well, I don't shoot all of them," she said trying to sound funny. "Actually, I'm a writer."

"Oh," he answered suspiciously. "And what do you write? Marksmanship guides?"

"Okay, okay, enough already. I write romance novels," she hesitated, "...with moral undertones. My main work is a series about a cowgirl turned sheriff who solves crimes while riding around on her horse."

He let out a laugh. "Come on. It's volume fourteen already! Sheriff Sally needs to marry the doctor and settle down. Everyone knows she's going to. Enough already."

That stopped her in her tracks. Her mouth fell open, and she just stared. Realizing that she had stopped, he turned to face her.

"I'll admit it, Mrs. Suzy Watson," he teased her with a shallow bow. "I've read all of your books."

"Really?" she asked, clearly bewildered. Then she answered her own question, "Oh, your daughters."

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"Obviously... though really just my two oldest," he answered. "After all, men, real men anyway, don't read your fluffy romance novels. But my daughters love them, and I appreciate the Christian values they promote."

"Thanks." She didn't know what else needed saying.

They continued walking, now chatting about her books, his girls, and nothing in particular. Soon, for reasons she did not understand and against her better judgment, she clicked the safety on the shotgun and cradled it against her forearm with the barrel pointed away from him. He was clearly in excellent physical shape and could easily snatch it away from her, should he feel so inclined.

"Look," she said, stopping to wait for him as he huffed his way up a steep section of the trail. "Forget about the Sheriff. When we get to the cabin, I'll just call the ranch and have them send someone to get you in the morning."

"That's mighty hospitable of you," he replied.

"I don't want to have to worry about you freezing to death," she answered. Realizing that sounded far too demure, she quickly added, "Besides, if you had gotten lost, there'd be the hassle of a search party and having to identify your remains... all messy stuff."

He grinned in amusement, and they resumed the hike.

The snow was now several inches deep, and the slick soles of her riding boots forced her to slow her pace. He reduced his stride to match hers without comment. She considered stopping to change into the boots in her backpack, but she didn't want to take the time. It was obvious that if they didn't hurry, they'd have to finish the hike in the dark.

There was less than forty minutes of light left when they reached the bridge over Drunk's Creek. Prior to her father building the bridge, the only way across was to climb down the steep bank and tightrope walk across a log that had been felled for that purpose. Only sober men had ever made it across without getting wet.

The bridge was about sixteen feet in length and a solid eight feet above the water. It was really nothing more than two beams with planks nailed between them, bolted to

short piers on each side of the bank; there were no hand rails and no other supporting members. The bank of the creek was steep enough to be intimidating and carpeted with pine needles, exposed roots and volunteer saplings of every sort. Since it was late in the year, the creek was no longer the raging torrent that had carved the gulley. However, the water was still ten feet wide and three feet deep, rushing its way down to the river.

"Um, are you sure that bridge is safe?" Brett asked, his frown added to the concern in his voice.

"Good grief, yes." She huffed past him. "I've crossed this bridge hundreds, no thousands of times." She confidently strode onto the structure and stopped a fourth of the way across to turn to him. "Come on, it's getting dark." With that, she turned back to the bridge, and cradling her shotgun with an elbow, started to zip up her jacket.

She stepped forward. A distinctive crack broke the silence, the unforgettable sound of wood surrendering. For just an instant, she felt herself suspended in space as the bridge snapped in two. The ends, still anchored to their posts on the bank, pivoted and opened like a trap door, slammed against the bank of the creek, and sent her into the rushing water below.

She landed on her feet on the far side of the creek, facing upstream. The successful landing was only temporary though, for between the excruciating pain in her right ankle and her forward momentum, she performed a swan dive into the icy water. Her hands extended forward, attempting to prevent a complete face plant, but to no avail.

She was now completely submerged in the rapidly flowing stream. The current was fighting her, spinning her around, seemingly trying to hold her under, as it carried her downstream.

Meanwhile, Brett slid down the bank and scampered across the old log and up the opposite bank. He ran along as the creek dragged her away.

Even though the water was now only knee deep, the slippery bottom and fast current made it impossible to stop. Twice, in spite of the current's gyrations, she managed to grab a breath of air. The third time, a dose of the cold water reached her lungs, sending spasms through her body.

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By instinct, she started clawing at the muddy bottom, struggling for a handhold. Fortunately, the creek widened, the current loosing its strength in the shallows. Gaining a handhold on a large rock, she pushed herself up. Her face was now just an inch from the rushing current. Coughing up water and still in a state of shock, she slowly rose to her knees.

The snowflakes didn't seem to care and continued to decorate the scene, lingering on her jacket. By now, she was struggling to her feet as water drained from her backpack, her hair a tangled mess, hanging in her face. Brett dropped his pack and scampered down the bank.

"I ... don't ... need ... your ... help," she said without conviction as she stood up. Brett stood by waiting with an arm extended. It was a good thing, for as soon as she tried stepping forward, her wounded ankle raised its objection. Brett caught her.

"Well, that bridge is ... older than I am ... must have rotted away," she stammered. "The boys have talked about replacing it ... I didn't think it was ... in that bad of shape. Where's my shotgun?"

"Worry about that later," Brett ordered. "We need to get you dried out. Two questions: how far to the cabin, and can you walk?"

"Too far," she answered, as she again attempted to put weight on her foot. "And no." She was already starting to shiver.

"Climb up as far as you can," he instructed, pointing to the creek bank. Between pulling on saplings, with Brett's help, and performing a one-legged hop, she managed to climb almost four feet up the side of the bank. Brett climbed up past her to the top, and then reached down to offer her a hand.

She hesitated, and then reached up and locked wrists with him. With one heave and a small grunt, she was standing beside him. He didn't ask permission but just picked her up and carried her toward the nearest break in the trees.

"Wait here." As he said it, they looked at each other. "I guess I probably don't need to tell you that."

"No," she answered. "It's good ... that you did. I was thinking ... of jumping back in ... and looking for my shotgun." She was fumbling with the zipper on her jacket but gave up and just pulled it in tight around herself.

By now the snow was so heavy, and she had been carried far enough downstream, that they could no longer see the remains of the bridge. She started to panic when Brett disappeared from sight as he retrieved his backpack.

His ghostlike form soon came back into view, and he dropped the pack at her feet, opened a pocket on the side, and retrieved a machete. With a surgeon's precision, he relieved the tree of several dozen small branches and used them to form a bed under the trees' canopy.

"First rule of survival: get up off the cold ground. Sit on those." He pointed with the blade. After returning the blade to its sheath, he pulled out a tightly wrapped bundle, and within minutes a tent was erected on the pine branch bed. He didn't have to suggest anything. In fact, she had invited herself in before the last guy rope was secured.

She had barely gotten her backpack removed, when he crawled in after her and zipped the door shut. Without asking, he slid his hand under her shirt and felt her stomach; she could see him swear to himself.

"Look, we don't have time for a fire. You're in serious trouble, but I have good news." He started untying a bundle from the pack.

"Good news? What could ... that be?" She was past shivering and was trembling badly, either from cold or fear or both. She didn't know or care.

He unrolled a sleeping bag out on the floor. "You get to crawl naked into a sleeping bag with me." He tried to sound like a doctor giving a happy diagnosis but failed. He had to grin. "Now, don't tell any of your girlfriends; they'll all get jealous."

"I ... am ... not ..." She didn't get to finish. She couldn't finish, for hypothermia first drains your willpower, then your life.

"Second rule of survival: get out of wet clothes." He took off her jacket and then started unbuttoning her blouse. She couldn't assist, nor could she resist, as he forced her arms apart and peeled it off.

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"What?" he exclaimed as his fingers slid under the soaked fabric of her bra. "TWO sports bras!" He shook his head. "Why are you wearing... oh, it doesn't matter, but I know how hard these things are to take off." With that, he reached into the magic backpack and retrieved medic's blunted scissors. With a surgeon's skill, he sliced through the shoulder straps and up between her breasts and then tossed the garments behind her.

"Why did you do that?" she stuttered. "I just ... bought those ... now they're ruined."

That caused him to pause for a second, "You're lost in a mountain blizzard, can't walk; you're dying of hypothermia, some guy you don't know, who you just shot at by the way, is cutting your clothes off; and you're worried about a five dollar Kmart special?" He shook his head. "You must be in worse shape than I thought."

She had no reply. She just crossed her arms and stared blankly into space, while her whole body continued to tremble.

"Okay, babe. Lie down... those wet pants have to go. Are you wearing undies?" He grinned again. "Actually, it's okay if your not..."

"Are ... you ... trying to ... make me ... mad?" Her quivering jaw made talking almost impossible.

"Yes, actually. I need to keep you awake and fighting." By then her pants were off.

"I didn't take you for the granny panties type," he said, trying to sound casual.

"They're comfortable ... for riding." She was starting to slur her speech.

Two more swipes with his scissors, and she was completely naked.

"Here." He handed her a shirt from his pack. "Dry off what you can." Taking another shirt, he dried her back and wrung the water from her hair. Then he helped her into the sleeping bag.

"Third rule: share body heat. Now the fun part; damn it's cold." He peeled off his own jeans, keeping his boxers, and slid in beside her. Then he removed his coat and laid

it aside. Then off came his sweater, his shirt, and finally his t-shirt. He stuffed them into the foot of the sleeping bag.

She used what little strength remained to fold her arms tightly across her breasts and turned her back toward him.

"As you wish, madam," he said, pulling the sleeping bag over her head and zipping it. He pulled it tight, leaving only his face exposed. "I hope you can breathe in there."

"Keep talking to me," he ordered. "Keep talking until you stop shivering."

He kept at her. If she stopped talking, he started calling her babe or bimbo. Worse than that, he actually started criticizing her writing by finding the tiniest plot holes. Once, he even dared to imply, no, he actually stated, that she wasn't good enough to be published by Harlequin.

She didn't know how long it was before she had stopped shivering, but she was finally warm. She could feel his hairy chest against her back, and soon his quiet snoring lulled her to sleep.

She awoke in the darkness of her warm cocoon, and to her surprise, she remembered exactly where she was and what had happened. Even more surprising, she found that she must have turned herself around, for she was now cuddled up next to him with her bare breasts against his hairy chest; her right arm lay under her; her left arm rested on him. Her left leg was tangled with his. Good thing I shaved yesterday.

Except for her throbbing ankle, she was quite comfortable. She laid her head back on his shoulder, his arm holding her close. No point in fighting it. I might as well sleep. She dozed off.

The next time she awoke she was a bit confused, and alone. Her watch informed her it was just after nine in the morning. She slowly recalled the events of the previous day: meeting Brett, shooting at him, swimming in the creek, getting stripped, and being stuffed into the sleeping bag. But something was out of place. Her nose told her that something didn't belong. Fresh coffee. She sat up, and still clinging to the sleeping bag, crawled toward the tent's door. Am I still dreaming? she thought as she studied the scene.

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For the small tent was now grafted into the side of a teepee, constructed from a tarp clearly designed for this purpose, and supported by half a dozen freshly cut long poles. The peak was almost high enough to allow her to stand and the base was over eight feet in diameter. It even sported a small window, complete with a bug screen.

The pine needle carpet was gone, leaving a floor of bare earth. A fire burned in a shallow pit that was dug into the center with wafts of smoke drifting up and out of a strategically placed slot near the top. A small canvas awning protected the slot, venting the smoke, but blocking most of the snowflakes. Three flat rocks ringed the fire pit. A coffee pot sat on one of them, and Brett was stirring something in a pan that rested on the other two. He stopped when he noticed she was awake.

"Here," he said pouring a cup and offering it to her. "You had a rough day yesterday."

"That's an understatement," she said taking the cup, and cradling it with both hands. She paused to inhale the aroma and then took a sip, "This is good coffee, really good coffee." The she looked into the sleeping bag; it hadn't been a dream, she really was naked.

Chapter 2

"Don't worry, you're still a virgin," he said with a smirk. He poured himself some more coffee and took a sip, while looking over the rim of the cup for her reaction.

"I wasn't really worried." She started to take a drink herself but stopped as panic spread across her face. "What do you mean? A virgin? You know I was married for sixteen years."

"Yes, but I also know you talk in your sleep."

"That, that was just rambling," she stammered. "I don't know what you think you heard, but my husband and I had a very ... strong romantic life, I'll have you know."

"Really?" He raised an eyebrow. "Last night you said, quote 'I knew he was gay before I married him,' end quote."

She waited to collect her thoughts and then replied enthusiastically, "Oh, that! That's part of a new romance series I'm working on. I haven't gotten very far, but it could turn into something."

"Oh," he replied. "Okay."

He leaned over to check the pan on the fire. "You know, for someone who makes up stories for a living..." He cocked his head to the side and grinned. "...you're not very good at telling them."

She put down the cup and leaned forward, letting the sleeping bag drop, but she caught it before it revealed anything interesting. She was starting to panic, and she knew it. So did he.

"Look, if word got out that the great romance writer ... had never really had a romance." She was breathing heavily with her arms across her chest and clutching the bag tightly around her. "You cannot, absolutely cannot tell anyone. No one knew... not

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his parents, not my best friends, no one." She swallowed hard. "Please, please promise you won't tell."

He held up a hand to stop her from pleading. "Don't worry. Your secret is safe with me."

"Thank goodness." She relaxed just a bit. "You're serious? You won't tell?"

"I won't tell," he replied. Believing, or at least wanting to believe that he was sincere, she started to relax and took another sip of coffee.

"However, I am curious," he said. "After all, you did mumble a lot, and I couldn't catch all of the details."

Suzy noticed her shirt and breeches hanging across from him, near the fire. "Can I get dressed before we continue? Are my clothes dry?"

He rubbed the fabric of the breeches between his fingers and then tossed them to her. She disappeared with them into the sleeping bag, carefully working them over her injured ankle, and then squeezed into them.

Popping her head out of the bag, she asked, "How about my shirt?"

"I believe it is dry as well," he replied as he went back to sipping his coffee, while staring at her over the rim on the cup.

She waited a second. "You're not going to hand it to me, are you?"

"Um..." He faked a grimace. "No."

"Well, you've already seen them." She wiggled out of the sleeping bag, crawled the short distance across the hut, and grabbed her blouse. She didn't even bother turning her back to him but let her breasts swing away as she redressed.

She moved to the other side of the fire. "Do you always carry scrambled eggs and bacon on a hike?" she asked.

"Powdered eggs, frozen bacon," he answered. "Not as good as fresh squirrel. Do you want to try some?"

She nodded yes and then, in a voice of resignation, continued, "So what did I tell you?"

He scooped a generous serving of yellow fluff onto a plate, added two strips of the extra crispy bacon, and handed it to her. "It started when you awoke around three; you said you had never cuddled up with a man like this before and that you liked it. I asked how that could be since you had been married. That's when you started talking."

He dumped the rest of the eggs and bacon onto his plate and started eating.

"And?"

"From what I could gather, you married him for his horses; he married you..." he paused, "...for cover."

"Well, it wasn't quite that cold, but it's a long story, and these are surprisingly good eggs."

"There's a foot of snow out there, and more coming," he said between bites. "We've got time."

She waited until they had finished breakfast, took a sip of coffee, and then started talking. "Phil was almost ten years older than I; a nice guy, a bit quiet, and rather handsome actually. Anyway, I was back from college for the summer and was attending a friend's wedding. They had that ridiculous bouquet toss, and I missed it. Jumped out of the way would be more accurate. My friends saw what happened, asked why and..." She stopped to think. "I don't know just what I said, something about not trusting men, never wanting to get married, something. Whatever it was, Phil heard it, or it got back to him." She leaned forward and added, "News travels fast in a small town."

"Anyway, he visited me a few days later and wanted to go for a walk. We walked for two hours. Phil told me his big secret; he said it was his cross to bear, and he wanted it kept secret. By the time we were back to my place, the plan was set. We started dating, I dropped out of college, and we eloped just before Thanksgiving. The only time he ever kissed me on the lips was when the preacher told him to do it." She stopped again.

"Seems like a rather drastic move for a young woman," Brett said.

"Looking back, yes, it was," she replied quietly. "But at the time ..." She paused, summoning up the courage to continue. "My mother was trapped in a bad -- no horrible marriage. Now, my father never actually beat her but he was just plain mean. My

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grandmother's marriage wasn't any better. They never stopped fighting. And the few conversations regarding sex that Mother and I had?" She grimaced. "She made it sound ... dreadful. And then the guys I met my first year at college didn't help any either. You can't imagine ..." She was shaking her head.

"I don't have to imagine," he interrupted. "I used to be one of those guys."

After a second of silence, he added, "So you played it safe."

"Yes," she answered. "Or so I thought. It's sad, but I didn't know that there were happy marriages until Patty got married. She'd talk about their love life and how much she enjoyed it, and all I could do was nod along in naive agreement."

"Then what? How did you become a romance writer?"

"Started reading romances," she replied. "I had always loved to read. In fact, so did Phil. But we'd read westerns, spy dramas and a lot of detective stories."

"Sherlock Holmes, Mrs. Watson?"

"Please, I've heard every joke there is, and many that aren't jokes," she answered. "Oh, and my favorite is Rex Stout, not Doyle; I think I developed a serious crush on Archie Goodwin." She said, with a smile that vanished quickly. "Anyway, it was really Marjean's fault."

"Obviously," he added sarcastically, "but I didn't want to say anything bad about good old Marjean."

"Sorry," she said, "Marjean is an old friend who forced me to read my first romance novel. At first I thought it was silly: girls who liked sex? Sounded like it was made up by some guy trying to seduce women. But then Patty seemed to enjoy it, and so I read more."

"By the time you learned the truth, you were trapped." Brett said firmly.

"No," she objected, "well yes, but it was a comfortable trap. I mean, we grew to love each other, but he had no interest in a physical relationship. Believe me, there are a lot of sexless marriages around."

"Having been in a marriage based almost entirely on sex," he said, "your situation may have better."

Suddenly, she looked like she'd panic again. "If people learned that I've never... you know..." She shook her head as she continued, "It would be a public relation's nightmare." She paused again thinking, "Of course, it might get me out of my book contract with my publisher."

"You want to stop writing?"

"I want to stop writing about the silly cowgirl sheriff and move on to something new."

"How bad is the contract?"

"Oh, it's not that bad. I mean the money is starting to come in, but I don't have a lot of freedom as a writer. Besides," she sighed heavily, "I'm tired of the same old characters and, like you said, so are the readers."

"But as long as they keep buying books..."

"You got it. I owe them nine more books. That's why I'm selling the ranch, well, part of the reason. The only way out is to buy my way out."

"Then what?"

"Oh, I've got several other publishers waiting, chomping at the proverbial bit, but until Stearman Press lets me go, no one will touch me."

"This land must be worth a lot. How much do you need to ransom your soul?"

"Well put," she answered. "After taxes, paying off loans, and finding another place to live, I need to clear almost \$350,000."

"What? That sounds crazy."

"It is, but their CFO, Marlene, figured it all out based on future revenues, lost opportunity costs, previous investment, and a whole bunch of other numbers ...mostly of which I think is nonsense."

"What can you get for the ranch?"

3 Wishes

"I had put it up for sale, asking one point six million. I knew that was pie in the sky, but why not start high? Anyway, our local used car dealer, Kelly, offered to buy it for a million three. Seemed like a fair price to me, just enough to get me by, so I initially agreed." She grinned. "Here's the funny part: some wacky Texan heard about it and wants to build a lodge/resort." Suzy leaned forward and raised her hand to add emphasis. "He made a no nonsense, full price offer... no financing, cash on the table. Well, I almost feel guilty taking it."

"But you're going to take it?" he asked, leaning back against his backpack.

"I said I almost feel guilty; of course I'll take it." She finished her coffee and surveyed her rescuer. He was wearing the same heavy shirt as the day before but a different pair of jeans, black instead of blue. His light brown hair was sporting the first wisps of gray, adding a mature and distinguished look to his now unshaven face. Even in the dim light of the teepee, she could catch the flash from his blue eyes and his boyish grin. He had an average nose, strong jaw line, and a nearly perfect smile, all mixed in with manly aromas. Feelings were being ignited that she thought she had abandoned long ago. "So enough about me. When did they start teaching survival skills in art school?"

"They don't," he snickered, "but they probably should. After all, most artists don't make enough money to live even this well. It could be handy for many of them. However, the U.S. Army does teach it. In fact, I taught it for them."

They let the silence hang in the air for a moment.

"So," she hesitated. "This is literally just a walk in the park for you?"

"Pretty tame. No landmines, no IEDs, no worrying about two dozen macho troops getting themselves lost; no one trying to shoot me." He stopped. "Well, no one who knows how to shoot anyway."

"About that," she sighed. "I didn't mean to hit you. I was aiming ten feet away, but you stepped sideways and..."

"Don't worry about it. I've had worse in the Army."

"Former army, I take it?" she asked, wanting to change the subject.

"Yeah, I served eight years, and got tired of it." He frowned. "Actually, I didn't get all that tired of it. Just wanted more time with the wife, and by the time my third daughter was born, I knew I needed to stay home more."

"So you went from guns to brushes? That's quite a shift, I would think."

"Not really." He leaned back with his hands behind his head. "I had always been drawing, sketching, painting when I had the time. Actually, there was a lot of down time. I had started to make a name for myself even before I got out of the Army. Some buddies had gotten out before me and went into the business world. They helped line up the right commercial contacts. Pretty soon, we were doing rather well." He shifted, obviously studying her. "So, do you come up here a lot?"

"Oh, yeah," she sighed. "It's my escape from the ranch."

"What's wrong at the ranch?"

"Oh, nothing. It just gets old," she said with a sigh. "We run part of it as sort of a dude ranch with lots of you city slickers flying in to play cowboy... and cowgirl. And we run different camps for kids. I was planning to come up a week ago, but we had a surprise booking for a dozen Californians who wanted a mountain trail riding class. They didn't fall off as much as I expected." She smiled as she thought about it. "Of course, we get a lot of people who have never been on a horse and think it's easy. I enjoy it, but I can't get any writing done."

"So everyone knew you'd be coming up here?"

"Sure," she shrugged. "Got any more coffee? So what brought you up here?"

"I'm looking for the next Mona Lisa," he answered, as if avoiding the question. "How many guys work at the ranch?"

She looked a bit irritated but answered anyway. "Well, you've met my foreman, Ashley..."

"Ashley?" He interrupted. "That gorilla is named Ashley? He must be six feet six and three hundred pounds."

3 Wishes

"Sounds about right. I guess he's named after a great grandfather; it's an old English name," she replied. "Funny, I've never heard anyone tease him about it."

"Not more than once anyway," Brett added with a chuckle. "Who else?"

"Then there are usually six or eight others, depending on the time of year, etc." She shifted around in the sleeping bag. "So do you mainly paint in oils or what?"

"Oils or acrylic, depending on the customer. I'm not any good with watercolors." He was staring off into space. "So do you have any siblings or other family members involved? You mentioned you didn't have a great relationship with your father. How about the rest of the family?"

"There isn't any. Why are you asking me all of these questions? You already know my biggest secret. What else do you want to know?"

He swallowed hard, "I've got some bad news."

She didn't know how to respond, so she didn't; she just sat and waited.

"Um, I went back to the bridge this morning. I figured it would make pretty good firewood and ..." He paused way too long.

"And what?" she insisted.

He took a deep breath. "It hadn't rotted away. Someone cut the main beams from below, almost all the way through. They must have had to hang onto the post near the bank and lean way out there, twice. Both beams were cut. They also removed some of the lag screws and bolts that held things together."

She stared for a second and then said, "That's ridiculous. You're imagining things or trying to tease me or..." She stopped as he retrieved a small camera from his shirt. He turned it on, pressed a couple of buttons, and held out the evidence. She moved over closer.

"See here," he said as he zoomed in on the image. "You can see the clean cut of a saw." He scrolled to another photo. "And here." Another photo with another sabotaged beam. "And here's the other end of that beam; same cut." He handed her the camera.

"But, why?" She mumbled as she paged through the photos.

"Someone wants you dead."

Chapter 3

"Dead!" She exclaimed in disbelief, shaking her head. "No, that can't be."

"It's the only explanation I can think of," he replied politely. "Can you think of a better one?"

Again they sat in silence.

Finally, with her lower lip trembling, and in a quiet, deliberate voice, she answered, "No."

"Someone knew that you'd be coming up here alone, that you'd have to cross that bridge and ..."

"And if I went swimming in an ice bath," she interrupted in a whisper, "I'd have no chance." He nodded silently.

"Okay," he broke the silence. "We can't solve this here. You said you have a phone at your cabin?"

"Yes, it has an Internet connection as well."

"So it must have electricity."

"Of course," she answered. "I've been fixing it up for years. Anyway, it has solar panels, batteries, a generator for backup, and a high speed wireless link to town."

"When the storm stops, we'll head to your cabin," he said.

"But how far are we from the bridge?" she asked. "That creek must have carried me half a mile, and it's not an easy hike ..."

He interrupted with a laugh, "It might have felt like half a mile, but it was only a hundred yards or so."

3 Wishes

"Wow. Time sure flies when you're having fun," she replied. "Of course, there's another trail just east of here that would take us to the nearest road, and that's only about a mile or so away. Our phones should work, and we could call for help."

"Have you forgotten that someone is trying to kill you?" he asked firmly.

"No," she answered quietly. She sat up on her knees and nearly shouted, "Of course, we have to let them think they succeeded. Silly me. And I write this stuff for a living. We'll keep going to the cabin and formulate a plan there." She stopped talking and sat back down. "But what if they're waiting for us, I mean me, at the cabin?"

"I doubt it," he answered confidently. "Whoever sabotaged the bridge isn't going to hang around to see if it worked. They're miles away. Obviously, they're pretty clever to come up with this scheme, and they're probably too clever to tip their hand by hanging out around here."

"You're right," she said. "However, they'll want to know if it worked." She paused to raise a finger. "They won't want to ask too many questions; they'll have to wait it out, and see if I show up or not. So what do we do?"

"Like I said, we head to the cabin," he answered.

Seeing that she was still in shock at the prospect of being the victim in a crime story, he changed the subject.

"How's your ankle?" he asked.

"Better, but I don't think I could walk very far," she replied. "At least not yet."

"Okay," he smiled. "Let me see it." She carefully extended her leg. He touched the swollen joint so lightly, that had she not been watching, she might not have noticed. "Sprained but not broken."

With that, he retrieved his medic's scissors and began slicing the remains of her sports bra into strips about two inches wide.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Come on. The great mystery writer should be able to figure this out." He only glanced at her and continued cutting.

"The problem with being a mystery writer is that everyone thinks you really are Sherlock," she confessed. "In reality, I've had days to figure out what my character needs to see in a minute."

Half a second later, she added, "Okay, you want to play doctor."

He selected the longest strip of fabric and, using his daddy knows best voice, said, "This is probably going to hurt a bit. It's okay if you cry a little, just don't kick." With that, he started to wrap her ankle, pulling the fabric snug. He finished it up with another piece of the shredded bra and wrapped it with a plastic bread bag.

"You've done this before, haven't you?"

"Whoever started the myth that girls don't get hurt as much as boys never met my daughters." He grinned as he said it. "Between dance classes, soccer, and, well, kids just being kids, I'm always playing medic. Funny, the first aid taught in Army survival school has been one of the most useful things I've ever learned."

Then he announced, "Okay, stick it outside."

"What?" she asked in surprise.

"You heard me." He moved over and opened the flap on the teepee door just a crack. "I don't have an ice pack, but we've got lots of snow."

Knowing he was right, she slid over to the door and stuck her foot into the snow bank that had drifted against the shelter. "Ooohh, that is so cold."

"You'll get used to it. Give it about twenty minutes, and we'll take a look."

He rolled up the sleeping bag, "Here, you can lean back against this. She sat up as best she could, and he placed it behind her. She wiggled against it, making herself as comfortable as possible. Then he handed her a foil pack of Ibuprofen. "These will help with the swelling."

"Hand me my coffee, please."

He grabbed her cup and said, "Refill?"

"Just warm it a little."

3 Wishes

He added a splash of hot java, handed her the cup, and then moved across to the other side of the fire. She downed the drugs, then turned herself toward him as far as her leg would allow, while sticking it out of the teepee door. He was now to her right, just in front of her, and she had to turn her head slightly to look at him. Brett had settled himself against his backpack and was looking straight at her.

"While we wait," he said, "we can discuss my three wishes." He tossed another branch on the fire.

"What?" She giggled in surprise.

"The way I see it, I've saved your life three times. Therefore, you owe me three wishes."

"Oh, no." She started to blush. "I can guess what your first one will be ..."

"Don't panic," he interjected. "I'll be a gentleman about it; nothing illegal, immoral or outrageous. In fact, I'll try to make sure that they are reasonable, painless, and easily granted."

"But three times?" She raised her palm, questioning his math. "I only count one." She pointed her right index finger at him. "After I fell into the creek."

"That was the first," he replied in a smooth, confident voice. "But if I hadn't discovered the murder plot..." He paused for her to process his argument.

She thought for a second. "Oh, they'd just try again, and they'd probably succeed, because I wouldn't be expecting it." She started to nod in agreement. "They seem to be pretty diabolical, by planning to leave me to freeze to death." She shuddered. "But how do you get to number three?"

He grinned, his right hand disappeared in a flash and the next thing she knew she was staring down the barrel of a howitzer. The dot from its LASER site was centered effortlessly on the coffee cup in her left hand, the beam reflecting off the silver surface and dancing around the teepee. He slowly raised the barrel and returned the gun to his shoulder holster. She had stopped breathing.

"I didn't shoot back," he said, carefully articulating each word.

"Oh, and I'm a much better shot than you are." He added with a smile.

"Okay," she said as she took a deep breath. "Three wishes it is."