

# Contents

|                   |   |
|-------------------|---|
| Chapter One ..... | 2 |
|-------------------|---|

## **Chapter One**

Kate Bradley arrived home early in the evening, tossing yet another empty fast food bag into the trash can in the kitchen of her small apartment, as she did most days since she had taken her new job in her far-flung sales territory. Each time she did so she longed for her previous position, where stops to see customers were often separated by several blocks, rather than miles of driving.

She stood for a moment, feeling weary and alone. She looked out the window above her kitchen sink, gazing with boredom at the blue Montana sky that appeared to be limitless in its emptiness.

At least that was how Kate saw the Montana sky. Where some others saw it as a place to live out a dream and to live a special kind of life, she saw it as void of any of the things she liked or cared about.

The drug sales representative for Conway Pharmaceuticals had spent another long day calling upon medical practitioners and pharmacies in Billings and the surrounding towns, many of which required a road trip of one to two hours one way. She had been with the company for four years, just long enough to be given what the company considered to be a promotion by no longer being anyone's assistant, but not yet long enough to be assigned to a larger metropolitan territory more to her liking.

That was why she had been transplanted from the Napa Valley of California where she had grown up and then worked as a junior sales rep, to service a senior account centered in Billings, Montana. It was a sizeable enough city, with some night life and adequate shopping. But she was warned that the winter weather was going to be a shock to the system for someone who had spent her entire life in California. The only time she had seen snow was when she and some friends had made their way to various ski resorts.

Now that she was in Billings, friends were in short supply, save for one very good friend she had made soon after her arrival. And her already very minimal and occasional dating life was in limbo. It had taken no more than a few conversations to find that men she knew in the Napa Valley were very different than the more rugged and self-reliant men in Montana. Of course, it was not that she had not found that more interesting than she would have expected in advance.

She liked sensitivity and culture in a man. She just would not mind if she found it combined with a handsome and rugged physique, in the form of a guy who could quite well take care of himself and her in the process.

There was something nice about having a date with the fellow who could appreciate and identify a fine wine and had a taste for the best French cheeses. But she was not averse to a man who enjoyed a good beer and a grilled steak who could also change a tire without missing a beat.

She had reached twenty-nine years of age, and although she had no compelling drive to settle down anywhere with anyone in particular, she wondered at times why she seemed to have no internal guidance system directing her to the kind of mate she would like to have for life.

The couple of men she had ever slept with, she would consider nothing more than interesting, in spite of their attractiveness to her. She had found the sex to be recreational, but little more than that in terms of emotional fulfillment. What physical satisfaction she had obtained in those cases was not at the level to make her really wish for the relationship to continue. Now, she was in a strange place, without knowing a single man.

She had arrived in early May, just as spring was breaking, and now, after two months of living in Montana, she was ready to go back to the Napa Valley. She missed her family and her old friends, and the lifestyle of the region to which she had become accustomed to at an early age.

Her western region manager was intolerable, critical and demanding, and the only thing she had going for her at the moment was that she was taking a week of long scheduled vacation that would provide her an opportunity to get away from the insufferable bitch. In terms of her occupation, things had turned out worse than she could ever have imagined.

She had no plans for her vacation, but she was certainly going to get away from the pressures of the job for a few days. Perhaps with a few days of solitude she could do some thinking about where she wanted to go with life. She simply had not determined where she would find that solitude.

Her one link to sanity was Brenda Cecil, a new but already close friend who she met the week of her arrival at a business women's networking conference in Billings. They had been randomly seated at the same table, and from their casual chat at the first break, their friendship fell into place.

Brenda was married and was the assistant manager of a small loan business. But one thing they had in common was their desire to live somewhere else. Brenda's husband had been transferred to Billings to manage a large, new automotive parts business, and she had been ripped away from her beloved small hometown in another part of the state.

From that first meeting, they had commiserated on their disdain for their present environment. Kate knew that she simply could have refused the relocation and looked for another job, but her pay and benefits package was tremendous for someone just twenty-nine years of age. At least she could stay with the company for a while to build up her resume and bank account, and then look for greener pastures later.

As for Brenda, refusal to go with her husband of two years had never even been a consideration. She was head over heels in love with Brian and could not imagine life without him. He was her best friend, a considerate and skillful lover, and she trusted his judgment and integrity to the hilt. But that didn't mean that she liked living in Billings one little bit.

Unlike Kate, she had lived in Montana all her life, but in a small town. She had lots of family in the state, but they were all three hours away, and she missed being with them. And it turned out that one of those family members would play an inadvertent but important role in Kate's life.

Brenda had quickly come to feel immense sympathy for Kate and her struggles with her new boss. She also listened as Kate regaled her with frustration over not knowing what to do with her upcoming week off, especially considering she had just moved there two months earlier and was still settling into her apartment.

One day when Kate was nearly hyperventilating over her cup of coffee, Brenda put her hands up to slow her down. "Kate... Kate! Chill out. How would you like to go away for a few days to someplace totally quiet but beautiful, someplace where you can spend your days reading and listening to music? And most of all, it would be free!"

She immediately had Kate's attention. "My brother has a comfortable and quite plush cabin that's about ninety minutes from here. We're talking a little home theater and a satellite dish and a whirlpool tub and the works.

"The roads getting to it are not great, but we can give you a map. Once you get there, it is close to a tiny town called Alderman, and there is a store, and there is electricity going to the cabin. No one

can bother you there unless you want to be bothered. I think it would do great things for you.”

Kate folded her arms and considered the offer. “It does appeal to me. It does seem kind of ironic, that I would want to go to someplace even more remote, but it sounds kind of nice.”

Brenda nodded emphatically. “There is a nicer highway you can take to get to Alderman, but it’s an extra hour and a half of driving. My brother made up a really good map of the dirt and gravel roads going to the cabin, so you shouldn’t have any problems. Just use the driving app on your phone and you will be okay. I have a key, and I know that it’s going to be empty for the next month. It’s a really nice little place, and I think you should do it.”

Kate considered for another moment, then shook her head. “I’m going to do this. But I’m going to need your help with making a list of what I need to take along. My vacation week starts in two days.”

\*\*\*

Silas Holden waved goodbye to his friend and coworker Grayson Miller, as Grayson’s Jeep started back up the road that was little more than a dirt trail heading back up the mountainside. Silas stood still and silent for a moment, looking out over the terrain in front of him. He was finally at Hardship Mountain, a place he had never seen but for a photo yet had lived large in his heart and mind since he was a boy old enough to understand the meaning of the place.

He reached inside the sleeve at the top of his backpack and pulled out the laminated but faded photo from the magazine, concentrating on a tiny ink circle drawn near the bank of the river. He gazed out into the distance and saw exactly that very marked spot. Trembling with emotion, he slid the picture back into his pack.

Everything he had with him, and hopefully everything he would need, was in the large and heavy backpack that made him grunt as he placed his arms through the straps and positioned it on his broad back. Not every man could walk through rough terrain with such a burden, but Silas Holden was not like every other man.

At 6’6” tall, with a wide and powerful body, he was blessed with the ability to do many things that other men of a lesser stature could not do. It had helped him accomplish much as a high school athlete, and during six years in the Marines. Even at age thirty, he had the physical traits of a man ten years younger.

He looked down into the valley at the level ground through which the White Feather River made its way in its serpentine course for thirty miles before spilling over a fall. At that moment, the photo that had caused the man behind his journey to always want to come there had come alive. Now, Silas knew that he was looking at the river through the eyes of two men.

He stepped over to where the trunk of a large, fallen fir tree rested and sat down. He did not expect the flood of emotions washing over him, and he found himself sobbing uncontrollably for several minutes. It had all seemed like a dream to him before that moment, but the reality of it all lay before him in the near distance.

Before him was an expanse of green but for the stream. There were stands of Douglas Fir trees, but much of the terrain along the river was open. He knew that only a handful of people each year have the opportunity to look out upon what he was seeing. The setting was simply too remote and rugged for most people. But then again, that was the point of it all. It was why Hardship Mountain and the White Feather River held the importance that had brought him there.

The meaning of it all settled slowly over him, and he found his vision once again blurred by tears. He was gazing down the side of the base of Hardship Mountain and would soon be fishing for trout in the nearly still river. *That* river. And he knew that he really was not alone. And that added presence gave him comfort and peace.

He gave the strap of the heavy backpack on his right shoulder a slight adjustment and took his first step down toward the valley. Even from that distance, he could see that special place where he would pitch his tent, then wade out into the stream for that long-awaited first cast of the decades-old fly rod. He knew it would not be just his own hands guiding the flight of the trout fly.

\*\*\*

Kate yawned as she drove north from Billings in the early morning. The back seat and trunk of her small sedan were filled with two boxes of food that did not need refrigeration, one suitcase and several bags of perishable groceries. According to Brenda, she should be at her brother's cabin in less than two hours after leaving Billings.

Although she was sleepy, she was also buoyed by checking earlier that morning to see that her monthly commission check had been deposited electronically. It had been another good month, and that was the only reason she had stayed with the company and agreed to move to Montana.

She was confident that she would always do well in her work. She was knowledgeable when it came to the products, and she had a knack for clearly explaining things and answering questions. She was not at all ashamed of the fact that she always looked forward to those times when she spoke to a male pharmacist, or a male physician on those rare occasions where she actually got to speak to the doctor.

She knew that being able to speak about prescription drugs with such a clinical knowledge base, combined with a certain tilt of the head, a flip of her long red hair off her shoulders and the occasional eyelash flutter added to her commissions. She was subtle with such tactics, and she was successful.

Once she was outside of the Billings metropolitan area, the terrain suddenly grew remote and rugged. During her first hour of driving, she was comfortable and confident, as she was still on the state highway. The map drawn by Brenda's brother was on the seat next to her, and while she knew that she should have pulled over to the side to glance at it, she was in a hurry to get to her vacation spot. After all, she had closely examined the map and had a good memory.

After another half hour of driving, she realized that it had been quite some time since she had seen another car, and she knew that she was definitely gaining altitude. She remembered that soon she should be coming to the first turn off the state highway. She picked up the map and gave it a cursory glance, convinced that she was about to come to the unmarked dirt road that was the first leg to the cabin.

She remembered that she was supposed to take the first road into the forest that she came to after she went past a sign to a hunting lodge. And surely enough, one hundred yards ahead was a large sign advertising the establishment, so she slowed down to make sure she did not miss the turn off.

Her attention was captured by a movement two hundred yards ahead on her left, and she watched with interest as an elk walked slowly along the highway. And then, out of the corner of her eye, she saw up ahead a primitive roadway going off into the forest. She never considered the necessity to ensure that she had not passed the opening of a road while her attention was diverted.

Unaware of the road fifty yards back that she should have taken that took her into the forest and then to a sharp left turn, the road that she took made a distinct right turn, so she took a deep breath, slowed down due to the fact that the road she was driving down now was not paved, and drove slowly on into the wilderness.

After twenty minutes, she began to wish she had taken the longer route to that small crossroads of a village near the cabin. At least she would have been on a standard highway where there would have been some other traffic eventually meeting her.

The crude road stretched on straight ahead, far in the distance. Suddenly, she felt cold and clammy, and brought her car to a stop. She fidgeted with her long, reddish blonde hair, then nervously began to run the palms of her hands down the thighs of her blue jeans. She felt vulnerable and alone, even buttoning the top button on her blouse, as if Sasquatch himself might be gazing at the cleavage of her generous breasts.

She glanced once again at the map and looked at the address of the general store at the small village a mile from the cabin. Brenda suggested that she use that as an arrival point for her driving app. Feeling a bit flustered, she reached inside her purse to pull out her phone.

Suddenly she was almost hyperventilating as she nearly tore the purse apart trying to find her phone. In a panic, she tried to recall when she had last used it, then felt her blood turn cold as she remembered that she had stopped for a cup of coffee at the truck stop on the edge of Billings. As if she was watching a movie, she saw her hand place the phone on the counter as she reached inside her purse for money to pay for the coffee. And she could not remember putting it back in the side compartment of the purse where it belonged.

She had no driving app, and no way to call Brenda, or even call 911. All she had was the hand drawn map. She had to hope that Brenda's brother's handiwork was accurate.

She looked at the map, then turned it, because it seemed to her she was not going in the right direction. She never began to consider she may have missed the correct turn or could know that she was now twenty-five miles off course in the Montana mountain wilderness.

She had no way of knowing how infrequently the dirt path she was on was ever traveled. For that matter, the Jeep that had passed that way two days earlier, scheduled to return in two days, had been the first vehicle to take that path in two months.

\*\*\*

Kate was nearly in tears during her next thirty minutes of driving at a snail's pace along the path. Just because she had never been where she was going before, did not mean that the map was not right. She and Brenda would have a good laugh several days later, after Kate had returned to Billings by way of the state highway she should have taken in the first place.

Once she was at the cabin, stretched out on the comfortable sofa Brenda had told her about, in front of the comfortable fireplace, she would smile to herself in satisfaction that she had indeed managed to find her way. She would sigh in contentment as she opened one of her books to settle in for some days of total relaxation.

As for the moment, she had to keep her anxiety in check. Brenda had warned her that that way to the cabin would take her through some rugged but absolutely beautiful country. And Brenda had certainly been right.

It was now early afternoon, and Brenda was trying to convince herself that nothing was wrong, although she knew she had been driving for much longer than she would have expected before reaching her destination. At least she was seeing some breathtaking scenery between breaks in the trees as she found herself slowly descending into what appeared to be a valley. And then, off to her right was a glint of blue, and she assumed that she was seeing a peek at a river.

Whether it was from anxiety or appreciation of the scenery, she allowed her eyes to stray right when the dirt road took a sharp left. As it would happen, Kate did not.

Kate had never heard such a piercing scream as the one she emitted as her car began sliding down the rocky hillside. Her foot was jammed on the brake, but there was simply no traction as the loose stones clattered loudly beneath the car.

She bounced off one fir tree, sending her sideways down to careen off yet another, both sides of the car now badly damaged and the right rear door and trunk lid popping open due to the way the impacts had misshapen the car. She could not see because the airbags had deployed with the sounds of gunshots.

And as Kate wondered how it could get any worse, her car flipped over and rolled several times down to the foot of the mountain, more side airbags loudly deploying and protecting her from any significant harm.

The car came to rest right side up, the windshield gone after having been popped out by how the car was bent by the rollovers. She sat breathless for a moment, even looking around her to see if any blood was visible or any detached limbs were laying around the car.

It took her a minute to realize that she had escaped major injuries after such a spectacular event. Her left elbow had a large abrasion, and her left knee ached, but she could sense no other wounds. And that was fortunate, but she knew not where she was. All she knew was she was somewhere in the Montana wilderness, with no way to contact anyone.

As her senses cleared and her breathing and pulse slowed down, she tried to open the driver's side door, but it was too badly damaged to move. She crawled across the console to the passenger side, only to find that it would not open either. She looked back to where there was a gaping hole where the right rear passenger door had been, but she saw some jagged metal, and she did not know what hazards may await her if she crawled over the seat.

She looked out at where the windshield had been, seeing only ragged edges of the glass. She took her seat belt off and began to poke at the remnants, then realized that the safety glass was made to prevent any sharp edges being left behind in case of damage.

She took a deep breath, then slid up on the dash and began to slither out the window. At least she would not have to kick a window out.

She made her way out onto the car, relieved that what she considered to be her overly plump hips and backside had still allowed her to easily pull herself through the gaping opening. She then carefully slid off the hood and onto the ground, although her legs were very wobbly from fright.

She stepped several feet away from the car, grateful it had not caught fire with her trapped inside. For a moment she felt very fortunate, until she looked up the hillside to see her belongings scattered chaotically up a hill too steep for her to climb to retrieve them.

Still not certain that she was actually unhurt, she began to walk away from the car, out onto the

level ground that extended from the base of the mountain. She looked around to see a pleasant valley, and in the distance, she could see a blue ribbon that must have been the water she had spotted minutes before.

She placed her hands on her hips and began to pace. She pressed the palms of her hands to the sides of her head, as if forcing her mind to come up with some kind of a solution to her predicament. And then, in the distance, she saw a small curl of smoke coming from what appeared to be the shore of the river.

\*\*\*

Silas stood several feet out into the river, his boots and socks on the bank, the water not quite touching the cuffs of his cargo shorts. All his concentration had been on the rhythm of the backward cast of the fly line. That was until he heard a rumbling sound.

He looked up in the sky but did not see any indication that a thunderstorm could be nearby. Perhaps the rumble he heard was a far-off rifle shot.

He shrugged and decided whatever the sound was, it was nothing to concern him. It was time to keep fishing.

He whipped the line forward once then back, then forward and back once again, then cast the artificial nymph made of deer hair to land near the rock where he suspected a fine brown trout could be waiting.

He was now in his second day along the river, and although he had often fished before, he had never fished for trout in a river quite like this. He was learning with each hour that went by, and he was simply convinced that one particular large brown rock simply had to be sheltering a good specimen.

His suspicions were correct. As soon as the lure touched the water, there was a swirl and the nymph was sucked under. He waited two seconds until he felt a tug on the line, then raised the rod to set the hook, to be rewarded by a sharp bend in the rod as the trout began its attempt to escape.

He saw his line move toward the bank, near where some brush had fallen into the water. He began to pull in line that fell into the apron he wore, preventing the trout from trying to escape into the cover. Now, the trout took off back into the deeper water of the stream, but Silas was reeling in the excess line, and when the trout could run no further it leapt into the air with an acrobatic splash that made the fisherman's heart race.

The battle lasted for another two minutes, until finally the exhausted fish was close enough that Silas could reach for the net clipped to his waist and bring the fish out of the water. It was the largest he had caught since his arrival there, and after he unhooked it he happily placed it in his creel, most of his evening meal now secured.

He stood in the slow-moving river examining the nymph lure to ensure that it was still in good condition, when he noticed movement in the far distance between the river and the base of the mountain. He hurried to the bank, reached to his rifle and chambered a round, then looked through his binoculars to ensure that nothing hazardous such as a bear, or worse a mountain lion, was approaching.

He lowered the binoculars, stunned by what he thought he had seen, then raised them to his eyes once again. He assumed that he was the only human within many miles of where he stood, but walking toward him was a redhaired woman, a quite fetching and curvy redhaired woman. His

immediate thought was that Grayson had made arrangements for his three days in the wilderness to be a little more interesting.

---