

A
FAST
AFFAIR

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B. B. MONTGOMERY

*To Bob, the love of my life
who has believed in me, supported me
in my dreams, and encouraged me
every step of the way.*

*Thank you to my editor and partner in
writing, Steve.*

ONE

As the white flag dropped, Ronni knew she had one more lap to pass him. Bob Johnson, a veteran driver of ten years and a demanding competitor, was going to drive hard and fast to keep her from moving to the lead position. It wasn't going to be easy. She prayed that the improvements made on her race car would give her the extra horsepower she now needed.

“Well, Ronni, ole girl, you'll never know unless you try.” She spoke to herself. She started feathering the gas pedal and as she began to catch up to Bob, she grinned. Ronni imagined the look on his face as he realized she was getting close enough to surge passed him.

The crowd in the stands was on their feet. The cheering and shouts could hardly be heard above the roar of the engines. It would be quite an accomplishment to have the first woman driver beating the all-time Benton Speedway champion. Bob had held that prestigious position for the last five years.

“Come on, Ronni, you can do it! Put the pedal to the metal! Come on girl; don't be afraid of that car!” Jim Danken hollered from the pit area inside the track. Jim was her cousin and partner in the

ownership of the race car she was driving. Together they invested their money and built it for Ronni. Jim owned his own car repair garage, and he was chief mechanic on her pit crew. All the new repairs were his ideas; he knew that Camaro inside out and backwards. Ronnie used to tease him about being able to fix it blindfolded. Now, she hoped it was the truth.

She suddenly swooped passed Bob on the inside and as she went down the straightaway, she let out her breath in relief. The perspiration beads standing on her forehead ran down her tense face. The smell of the engines and the raw power she felt in the car was enough to feed her adrenalin as she raced to the finish.

“Push it, Ronni! Yahoo! That’s it, babe. Now you have the lead, stand on it! Watch out, don’t lose it and for God’s sake, don’t lose your head!” Jim was so wrapped up in her driving that he didn’t sense someone walking up behind him. As Ronni got the checkered flag, signifying her victory, he jumped up and caught the man off balance. Both men ended in a heap on the ground.

“Oh, wow, am I sorry. I didn’t even see you – Rafe! Well, I can’t believe my eyes. Rafe Turner, with all the noise and excitement, I didn’t hear you walk up. Why didn’t you write me that you were coming? When did you get into town? How long are you going to stay? Are you here for racing?” Jim kept shooting questions at him.

“Whoa, slow down, buddy, one question at a time.” His voice was deep and sort of gruff. He put out his

hand so Jim could help him up on his feet. Once on his feet, he reached down and dusted off his cowboy hat and put it back on his head.

“I’m here for more therapy on this fool injury.” He pointed to his right leg. “I’m thinking of staying out at the ranch for a while. But first things first, let me congratulate you and your driver on the best race I’ve seen in a long time. That was a very well driven contest.”

“Thanks, Rafe, but...”

Not noticing Jim’s nervousness, Rafe continued, “You know I have always admired a talented driver and a well-built car. I see you haven’t lost your ability to hop up an engine. In fact, I think you’ve vastly improved!”

“Thanks, Rafe. Now you’ve gone and embarrassed me!” Jim shuffled his feet restlessly. “I’ve worked hard on that car but I think I should tell you that the driver is my cousin, Ronni.” Jim wasn’t sure how his friend would take the rest of his news. “Rafe, my cousin Ronni is a...” He didn’t get to finish, Ronni was just then pulling her #79 race car back into their place on pit row.

Both men went over to the car as she shut off the engine. Excitedly, she climbed out still wearing her helmet. As she started to undo the chin strap, Jim was yelling at her, “That was some great racing, cuz. I’m so proud of you.” He turned and was about to introduce Rafe when his friend came forward to shake Ronni’s hand.

“Congratulations! That was one of the best races I’ve seen in a long time,” Rafe started, but was suddenly quiet as she took off her helmet. He backed up

and with a look of surprise, scanned the woman standing before him.

She was slightly taller than the average woman but it just added to her striking beauty. Her chocolate brown hair fell in damp curls down to the middle of her back. She wore little makeup, he noted, her tanned face didn't need any artificial help. She had deep, rich ebony eyes and her brows arched naturally. Even with those outstanding looks she maintained an air of innocence, almost childlike. Right now her face was lit up and her eyes sparkled with a great joy.

"You're a woman!" Rafe's voice reflected the shock in his eyes.

She didn't reply instantly. The man standing before her literally took her breath away. She had dated plenty of men but had never been struck speechless. His cowboy hat covered up midnight black hair that begged to be touched. His eyes were the deepest blue she had ever seen. His jeans fit him like a second skin and she couldn't help but notice his taut muscles beneath the white tee shirt as it stretched across his broad chest.

Finally finding her voice she replied, "Of course." Her voice reflected her surprise at his statement. "What did you expect?" And then correctly interpreting the look in this eyes, added, "Oh, I know man is supposed to dominate this sport – but I just very successfully proved that women can compete with men in more than just the bedroom!" She snapped at him. He noticed how vibrant she looked with the anger igniting her fiery brown eyes.

“Wow, what’s with you two?” Jim intervened. “Ronni, before you bite his head off, let me introduce you to my dearest friend and a fellow driver, Rafe Turner. He just arrived back in town from the east.”

“Former driver you mean!” Rafe stated sharply. The tension was so thick you could cut it with a knife. He turned and started looking for his cane.

Jim chose to ignore the anxiety in Rafe’s voice and spoke to his friend. “Oh, you’ll be back in a race car in no time. Just give that leg a little more time to heal and we’ll be reading in all the papers about you regaining the championship.” Facing Ronni, Jim said further, “He was tops on the circuit and he’ll be number one again soon. Do you know this guy has more trophies than he has room to keep them?”

She didn’t answer but watched this silent, brooding man with an aroused interest. Ronnie was used to being as tall as her dates, but this man towered over her. As a medical professional she noted that he was in pain as he bent over to pick up his cane. She drawn to the thick black hair that his cowboy hat could barely keep under control. She wondered, too, what it would be to run her fingers through that black tangled silk. Shaken by such bold thoughts, she looked back to her cousin. She had to stop herself from any further thoughts regarding Rafe.

Trying not to be obvious, she watched as Rafe picked up his cane and turned back to her and Jim. Their eyes met but she quickly averted his gaze. She felt his gaze burning a hole through her and she felt very uneasy. There was something sensual about this

mystery man but she sensed something very sad and disturbing too.

“Hey look, Rafe, I’m sorry I snapped at you.” She didn’t want to start off wrong with this man; after all, she told herself he was her cousin’s friend. “I am so used to some of the other drivers bothering me about being a woman. I guess I just over-reacted.”

“No problem.” Rafe gave her no more explanation, but instead turned to Jim and said, “I’m going back to town. Come and see me tomorrow, Jim, and we’ll catch up on old times. I’m staying at the ranch.” He started to leave but gave Ronni another look. “You know this can be a very dangerous sport. I hope Jim has taught you all the proper safety techniques.” He didn’t say anything more, he just walked slowly away leaning heavily on his cane.

“Oh, what a strange man!” Ronni was bemused. “What is his problem, cuz? I never knew you had a friend in the national circuit.”

She didn’t have time to elaborate because Bob Johnson ran up, grabbed her and planted a big kiss on her cheek. “Honey, that was some great driving. I never thought I’d be kissing the driver that beat me!”

Ronni put her hands up and gently pushed him away. Up until a few minutes ago, she had found comfort in Bob’s arms, but now she just needed to be free of him. She just wanted to be alone and sort out the feelings going around in her head.

Veronica Leigh Danken, her given name, had come to live with her aunt and uncle in the little town of Hoot Owl Ridge near Flagstaff, Arizona a short five years ago. Right from the start, everyone assumed she

and Bob were made for each other. She never objected because since her parents' deaths, she needed some security, some stability in her life. Bob never put any demands on her and she liked it that way.

She had lived in Phoenix with her parents until life dealt a cruel blow. They had a beautiful home in the valley and her dad's business was growing. In her last year of college and at the tender age of 23 she didn't have a care in the world outside of her studies.

One fateful night the Dankens were home alone. Ronni had gone to the university to study but upon her return, it was to a house blazing with fire. It started in the attic with some faulty wiring. Her parents never had a chance.

Ronni tried to get into the flaming house to find her mom and dad. A fireman dragged her kicking and screaming from the blazing inferno. She cried endlessly when she realized they were gone.

The nightmares started and continued on a regular basis until she sought treatment from the group she now works for – Holistic Healers. Many nights she woke up screaming and her aunt came to comfort her. She held Ronni in her arms, rocking her like a child until the pale light of dawn.

Her Aunt Louise and Uncle Harold, Jim's parents, came to Phoenix and after the funeral brought Ronni back to Hoot Owl Ridge to live with them. Although they loved her very much and tried hard to help her adjust, she never quite got over the loss of her parents.

Hoot Owl Ridge is a small town of about 11,000 people located on Interstate 17 on the way to the

nearest “big” city of Flagstaff. Many consider the small town the perfect place to live and raise a family. Centered geographically in the middle of the state’s lush Verde Valley, the little community boasts a hospitable climate enhancing the rural, western lifestyle. Towering above the valley are majestic mountains that provide a scenic view of unsurpassed beauty.

With the help of Holistic Healers, Ronni found herself gradually learning to live with her parents’ death. She found a place to utilize her schooling and became a valuable part of the team with her physical therapy skills. The nightmares decreased as her ability to help others increased. She never quite got over the feeling of emptiness but Bob came along and helped fill that void in her life. He was ten years older and seemed as content to let their relationship progress slowly.

Bob had been racing cars since he was old enough to sit behind the wheel of one. With her cousin also interested in race cars, it didn’t take too long for Ronni to take an active role in race car driving. She loved to watch Bob and when he finally asked her to hotlap his car, she readily agreed.

Up until that point in her life, Ronni had never felt such excitement as the thrill of driving around the track – sometimes exceeding speeds of one hundred miles per hour. They raced a half-mile oval but that day it seemed much more to her. She felt like a Sunday driver at first, but with each race her confidence grew. Finally, Jim decided she needed her own car and that was how she came to love her good old #79. Each time out on the track, she learned something

new and as her knowledge grew so did her chances of winning.

Her second race night Ronni finished third in her heat race and that gave her the front inside pole position in the main event. It was then she discovered another emotion connected with racing – extreme nervousness. Jim was the calming force that helped her combat the apprehension. The butterflies in her stomach almost got the best of her, but after a lap or two all of Jim’s comforting words came back to help her. She went on and finished fourth in that main event.

That was one of the best nights of her life. She knew a high that was very natural, one that a person could never get from pills or alcohol, an immense satisfaction. She became hyperactive and couldn’t settle down because she knew her name would be on the sport’s page in the local newspaper the next day. Consequently, she spent the early morning hours sitting on the front porch waiting for the newsboy. It became a standing joke between them, for he knew if Ronni was there waiting, she had done well.

TWO

“Ronni, are we going?” Bob’s voice snapped her back to the present. “Well, do you want to meet everyone at Avery’s?” He waited for her to answer.

“Oh, Bob, do we have to go? I’m awfully tired. Can’t we just go to my aunt’s house?” Ronni knew that she was acting a little strange, but hoped he would never know the real reason for her hesitation. It’s Rafe, she thought to herself. How silly I’m being. This man had just popped into her life; his behavior bordered on rude and arrogant so why did he bother her so much? But rather than face that or upset Bob, she agreed to go to Avery’s.

“Ronni,” Jim yelled at her. “They want you to pull the car to the front straightaway for the trophy presentation. Come on, get a move on!”

The crowd cheered enormously for the champion lady racer. Very few women had even ventured into the late model class of racing at Benton Speedway, let alone win. It had been a long, hard battle but one Ronni was glad she had fought. As she took the huge trophy and smiled for the photographers, Ronni’s thoughts strayed to the brooding, distant man she had just met. I can’t let him ruin this night for me –

my night of triumph! The roar in the stands helped to erase the black mood Rafe had managed to invade into her thoughts.

Back at their place in the pits, Ronni pulled her race car onto the trailer. It would be an hour or so before they could leave and the crowd was already being let into the pits to visit with the racers. She settled down on one of the lawn chairs by their tow vehicle.

“Tired, cuz?” Jim plopped down on a stack of tires beside her. His almost carrot-colored hair was mixed with the usual grease spots and he rubbed thoughtlessly at more of those same stains on his coveralls.

“You drove great, Ronni. I am so proud of you.” He reached over and patted her on the knee. Ronni and Jim had always shared a special relationship, even as kids. He was the big brother she never had and he often protected her against the evils of the world.

“I couldn’t have done it without you, Red.” She used his old nickname, a privilege only she was allowed. “You taught me everything I know and I thank you for it.”

“I learned it all from Rafe.”

“Who is he, Jimmy? How did you get to know him?” Her curiosity was peaked.

“His family has been here in Hoot Owl Ridge forever. You know the Turner Ranch out on Highway 169.”

“He is one of those Turners?” She was surprised.

“He started racing here at Benton Speedway just like Bob. But he has a natural talent and soon got national sponsors and went on the circuit. I was on his pit crew here.” Jim remembered the days gone by.

“He was one of the best race car drivers I’ve ever seen.” He spoke proudly of his friend.

“What happened? Why does he seem angry at me?”

“It’s a long story, cuz. But believe me, he wasn’t angry at you, he’s just plain mad at the world!”

“Oh, and that gives him the right to be rude and egotistical.” She shrugged her shoulders carelessly. “Well, at least I won’t have to deal with him any time soon.”

Just as she finished speaking a swarm of well-wishers surrounded her and Jim. Ronni was taken aback as several of the people asked for her autograph. For several long minutes people spoke their words of praise and admired the car. Ronni loved her newfound fame and being the center of attention.

Finally the crowd was thinning, and Ronni stood up stretching her tired muscles. She went over to her helmet bag and took out a hairbrush. As she combed her long tresses free of the tangles, Jim mused over his favorite cousin. She was slender but that in itself was not an easy task. If she indulged her taste buds with a sweet treat, Ronni had to diet rigorously to keep it from settling on her hips.

“Hey, let’s go collect our winnings.” Ronni saw the cashier head towards the pay window. “The steaks are on me tonight, Jim. That is, if I win enough.”

“It’ll be enough. Although we should put some back for repairs on the car.” He reminded her of their partnership. They bought this new fiberglass race car together and split everything including the work, right down the middle.

Jim was definitely the brains behind their team, but Ronni on more than one occasion had to help him with the repairs and renovations. The only thing she hated about assisting Jim was the hard time she had trying to get the car grease from underneath her fingernails.

“Hey, you guys, let the winner go first!” Bob yelled at the people standing at the pay window. Everyone joined in with his jovial mood and stepped aside allowing an embarrassed Ronni to go to the front of the line.

“Bob, you shouldn’t have said anything. I would have waited my turn like everyone else.” She spoke softly to him.

“You’re not just anyone else, Ronni, when you’re with me.” He chided her.

For a moment she pondered that thought. Bob had made no secret of the fact that he liked her, that he would like for things to get more serious between them. She liked him, but Bob could never be anything more than a good friend.

He put his arm around her waist and pulled her closer to him. “You know I like you, Veronica Leigh. Let’s make it official, let me tell all the guys you’re my girl. Let’s take this thing between us to the next level.”

Ronni tried to hide the shock she felt. It was as though he had read her mind. She looked at the blond man standing next to her. He had a boyish smile and calm, brown eyes. But, it was dark hair and electric blue eyes that popped into her mind. You’re sweet, Bob, but I just don’t love you, her eyes said, but aloud she just kidded back at him.

“Now, be serious, Bob Johnson. I’m just now starting to win at this racing game, don’t try and start me off on another tangent.” It’s just too confusing.” Ronni was grateful when the cashier drew her attention back to the window.

As she held out her hand for the payout, Ronni’s eyes grew bigger and bigger. The lady kept counting out the large bills until her palm was quite full.

“Wow!” Bob exclaimed. “Just what I always wanted – a rich lady!”

“You know as well as I, that most of this money goes back into the car.” She laughed but quickly added. “Well, maybe not all of it! This will by my dinner and this will get me a new skirt and this...”

Jim came up behind her and quickly grabbed the bills from her hand. “I’d better take my half before it turns into a new blouse or something else we can’t use.”

He put his arm through hers and pulled her away from Bob and the others. “Come on, cuz, let’s go eat. I’m starved!”

“Hey, wait up Ronni! Are you going to Avery’s? Why don’t you ride with me?” Bob had to step up his pace to catch up with them.

“We’ll see you there, Johnson.” Jim answered for her, rudely cutting Bob off.

As soon as they were out of earshot, Ronni scolded her cousin. “Jim, you shouldn’t have been so blunt with him.”

“Oh, Ronni,” Jim started, “You know I can’t stand that guy. He’s just not right for you.”

“Alright, we’ll forget just for a minute that you don’t have the right to decide that for me and I’ll ask this just once. Why don’t you like Bob and why don’t you think he’s the one for me?” She stopped Jim in his tracks and confronted him.

“Jim, you’re the big brother I never had and I respect your opinion.” She implored him. “Please, tell me what you have against Bob. Not that it’ll change my mind, you understand.” She added jokingly.

“Just trust me on this one, Ronni.” He tried to explain himself. “Call it instinct, call it gut feeling, or call it what you will, I just have a feeling about that guy.”

“That’s not enough, Jim. I know you have always counted yourself my protector, but I’m a big girl now. I can make my own decisions.” She was firm about her stand.

“Okay, cuz, I can respect that, but if you need me, remember I’ll always be here to help.” Jim relinquished.

“Thanks, Red, you are very special to me.” She placed a small kiss on his cheek and laughed as she saw the red blush creep up his face.

“Aw, shucks, there little lady.” He went into his John Wayne imitation. “Now you went and embarrassed me.”

“Come on, let’s get going before I throw up.” She teased him. They finished loading the tool boxes and spare tires and then climbed into Jim’s truck and headed for the racer’s favorite haunt.

Most of the racing gang had gotten used to going to Avery’s Kowboy Kountry, a steakhouse, after the

aces to celebrate or to cry in their beer – whatever the case may be. They had a standing reservation in one of the banquet rooms and the owner appreciated the business. It was located up on the side of a hill overlooking the lights of their small town.

“It’s pretty, isn’t it?” Jim came around the truck to stand beside her.

“I love it here.” She was mesmerized by the view. “When I buy a house, I want it to be on the side of a hill, just like this. At night, I’d just sit on the porch and watch time go by.”

“I think you forgot one very important thing about that dream,” Jim reflected. “You need someone to share it with.”

“Oh, he’s out there somewhere. I just don’t know who he is yet.” As she spoke a certain dark hair, blue-eyed cowboy came into mind.

“Don’t tell me!” Jim exclaimed in mock surprise. “Are you actually trying to convince me that you’re one of those girls that believes in Mr. Right?”

She started to walk to the door of the steakhouse before she answered. “Yes, I guess you could call me an old-fashioned girl.” She thought for a moment before going on. “I truly believe that when I see him, those magical bells will ring and I’ll know he’s Mr. Right.”

THREE

I shouldn't be here, Rafe mused to himself. As if on autopilot, he pulled his four-wheeler pick up into the parking lot at Avery's. He parked his truck and sat for a moment, reflecting on his next move. Confusion reigned. I shouldn't invite any more trouble into my life. He felt the pull from those chocolate brown eyes, drawing him, enticing him to investigate further. This last year had been the worst of his life as well as the loneliest.

After his wreck, he had pulled away from friends and family as if punishing himself for being injured, for being weak. He soon realized that he needed his family after all. Hoot Owl Ridge had been his home for most of his life. He had roots in this little valley. His mother and father welcomed him home with open arms, only wanting him to rest and to heal.

Not wanting to dig any further into his reasons for being here at Avery's, Rafe opened the door and slowly made his way into the steakhouse.

Jim and Ronni had already entered the main dining room into the area reserved just for the racing crowd. The western band was playing a fast-moving tune and the dance floor was jammed. Carefully they

had picked their way through the moving bodies until they finally spied a table at the back of the room.

“Whew! I never thought we’d get through that crowd.” Jim plopped down on his chair. Craning his neck, he checked for the server. After she took their orders, Ronni and Jim sat back to watch the dancers. Several people came up and gave them their congratulations for the victory.

“How’s it feel to be a winner?” Jim beamed proudly each time someone spoke to them.

“I can’t believe I actually won. I’ve waited so long to take that checkered flag. It feels great!” Ronni stood up to leave. “I’m going to change from my fire suit. Be right back.” She grabbed her purse and headed out the door to the truck to get her other clothes.

After changing, Ronni checked her appearance in the bathroom mirror. Well, that’ll have to do for tonight, she thought to herself, not thoroughly dissatisfied with her looks. Wearing a helmet caused her to perspire and it usually resulted in her hair being pressed flat to her face. But tonight, for reasons unknown to her, Ronni’s hair fell in soft waves around her face. She applied a light amount of make-up and then, convinced that nothing else could be done, left the room.

She was just about to reach their table, when a pair of strong arms grabbed her. “Ronni!” Bob pulled her towards him and placed a big kiss on her surprised lips.

She pushed him away. “Bob, stop it!” Ronni heard the laughter from people around them as she tried to escape his grip. “Bob Johnson, I think you’ve already

had too much to drink. Just let me go, okay?" She spoke harshly but under her breath.

"Dance with me, champ. I deserve at least that from the woman that beat me on the track tonight." He was being rather obnoxious, but Ronni didn't wish to create a scene so she reluctantly agreed.

"Alright, but just one dance. My dinner will be ready soon." She glanced over to Jim just in time to see his frown deepen. Her eyes told him, I can handle this, don't worry.

The band played a slow-moving tune much to her dismay. She tried to get Bob to ease his grip on her a bit. "Bob, let go of me. You're holding me too tight." She was seeing a side of him she'd never seen before. Maybe Jim was right.

"Quit being a baby, Ronni. There's nothing wrong with a man wanting to hold his woman tight in his arms." Bob's words were slurred.

"That does it!" She broke free of his grip. "I'm not your woman and I don't have to put up with this for a minute!" She swung around, ready to leave him on the dance floor alone.

"Wait, Ronni, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it." He pleaded with her for forgiveness. "I just care deeper for you than I've ever felt for anyone else. I'm sorry, okay?"

"Now that's more like the man I know. Yes, you're forgiven. But I'm starved and I want to eat my steak while it's hot." She patted his arm and then went back to her own table before he could protest further.

"Don't start with me, Jim." She stopped his objections before they even got out of his open mouth. She

sat down, picked up her knife and fork and attacked her steak with a vengeance.

Jim was smart enough to keep his thoughts to himself. They ate their meal in silence although the room's noises surrounded them. Just as they were completing their meal, Ronni's boss and the head of their clinic walked up to the table. "Dr. Shaw!" Ronni exclaimed with surprise. "I didn't know you were a fan of the races."

"Veronica, I wasn't until you came to work for me. I just wanted to see what interested you so." Her quiet voice was barely heard above the din. "Congratulations, Veronica and please call me Elizabeth. I'd like to think we are more than colleagues." Her kind eyes indicated all that they had been through with Ronni's personal experience with the clinic.

As Dr. Shaw spoke to Ronni, her eyes were on Jim. Ronni quickly amended her manners and completed the introductions. "Oh, I'm sorry, forgive me. Dr. Shaw, this is my cousin and partner in the car, Jim Danken. Jimmy, this is Dr. Shaw, my boss at Holistic Healers." It was going to take a little concentration and practice to refer to her as Elizabeth, although she did admire her on a personal and professional level.

"James, so nice to meet you." Dr. Shaw put out her hand for him to shake. "Please call me Elizabeth." Ronni was thoroughly amused at her cousin's lack of response. He seemed totally tongue-tied.

She was about to help him out of his embarrassment, when she noticed Bob coming towards their table.

“Great!” Jim exclaimed. “Just what we need to finish our meal.” His dislike for Bob was even more evident tonight. Dr. Shaw watched the interaction between Bob and Ronni.

“Ronni, come with me.” Bob ignored Jim’s frowning face. “I want you to meet someone. I figured that you’d like to meet another champion.”

“Not tonight, Bob.” She objected. “We were just getting ready to leave. Maybe some other time, okay?” Ronni tried to appeal to her cousin, but as she saw Jim and Dr. Shaw in conversation she knew she was on her own.

“Oh, come on, Ronni. It’s still early and this will only take a minute.” He pulled her hand until she finally gave in to his demand.

She let him lead her across the dance floor through the people crowding the room, and on to the other side. But as soon as she saw where they were headed, Ronni tried to stop him.

“Come on.” He pulled at her hand again. It was useless to resist any further, she had already locked eyes with the man she was supposed to meet.

“Rafe,” Bob stretched out his hand in greeting, interrupting him. “Long time, no see. How’ve you been doing?” A crowd of fans were talking with Rafe, he was a local legend, and he responded with respect to those around him. “Excuse me a minute.” He requested politely.

Those cool, assessing eyes never left her face as he spoke to Bob. She moved nervously, shifting her weight from foot to foot, willing herself to stop meeting his stare, but it was useless.

“I’ve been fine, Bob. It’s good to see you.” Even though his words were friendly, his tone was brusque. He smiled to those around his table and tried to ignore the interruption from Bob.

“Are you here to race?” Bob pumped him for information.

“No, not really,” came the short reply. The people that had gathered around Rafe, made their excuses and left the table. “Who’s your friend?” He referred to Ronni.

“I thought you would like to meet the latest Benton Speedway champion.” Ronni flushed at the way Bob was making a big deal out of her winning the night’s race. “Rafe, this is Ronni.” He turned to the woman standing next to him.

“Ronni, I’d like you to meet one of the best drivers on the circuit, Rafe Turner.” She didn’t know what to say, so she mumbled something inane back in response.

“Bob, it’s time – I have to go.” She half-turned and started to leave when Rafe stopped her.

“Bob, is it alright if I try to dance with your lady?” Bob’s answer really infuriated her. “Ask her, yourself, Rafe. Ronni’s got a mind of her own.”

“Would you like to try?” He gave her little choice as he stood and led her the short distance to the dance floor. She noticed his limp, but his abrupt manner allowed no polite conversation.

The band was playing an oldie, but goodie tune from T. G. Shepherd. Ronni cursed the words as they fell on her ears – “There’s only one Mona Lisa, one leaning Tower of Pisa, and there’s only one you.” For

a brief moment she thought of the man standing beside her. His wildly tossed raven hair, his almost demonic look and she thought further – there is definitely only one Rafe Turner!

His movements were choppy and he had difficulty keeping rhythm with the music. Still, she didn't say anything.

“Would you mind if we stopped?” He spoke roughly. “Come on, I want to get some fresh air.” He ushered her towards the side door. It was refreshing to get outdoors away from the noisy, smoke-filled room.

Rafe had his back to her as he gazed out into the black, inky darkness. She stared at him. He was silent and brooding, a man angry at everyone as Jim had indicated. But Ronni also noticed a man in turmoil. He definitely wasn't used to being physically impaired. She watched as he ran his hand through his thick, black hair in agitation.

She smiled slightly as the breeze ruffled his locks into even further disarray. I wonder, she caught herself thinking, I wonder what that dark silk would feel like in my hands. Startled once again by such bold thoughts, Ronni decided to go back in, away from him.

“Wait, don't go.” He demanded and then changed his tone. “Would you stay and talk with me for a bit?”

“Why did you bring me out here?” She was cautious as she watched him move closer to her. Soon he was standing close enough to touch. “What do you want from me?” She asked again, this time her voice was barely heard.

“This.” He grabbed her arms and pulled her tightly against his body. She could feel his heart pounding wildly and for a split second she knew hers was beating in rhythm with his. He pressed his lips on hers, kissing her but not loving her.

She tried to fight his kiss, but part of her wanted to continue to feel his touch. Ronni raised her hands with the intention of pushing him away, but suddenly the kiss changed. She started to feel a tingling in the pit of her stomach. Slowly, as if it would never end, she reveled in his touch, running her hands through his hair. It did feel silky and wonderful.

Just as quickly, Rafe released her, pushing her back from him. He wiped his lips with the back of his hand as though to rid himself of her taste.

“I’m no good for you or anyone else for that matter. Go, racy lady, before you get hurt not only by me but by the very racing you love.”

“You bastard!” Provoked beyond reason, Ronni lifted her hand and started to slap him in the face, but Rafe stopped her in time. “Sorry, racy lady, but in time you’ll see that I did you a favor!” He released her arm. “See you around.” With that, he walked off into the night, leaving a thoroughly shaken Ronni behind.

“Here you are.” Jim’s voice startled her. “I was looking all over for you and Bob told me you and Rafe came out here.” He looked around. “Where’s Rafe?”

When the only answer he got was the deepening of the scowl on Ronni’s face, Jim correctly answered his own question. “You two had another confrontation, didn’t you?”

“Let’s go home, Red. I’m suddenly very tired of this place.” She started to walk towards the truck.

“What did he say to you?” Jim was still concerned. “I don’t know why you two can’t get along. Hey, wait up!”

“Oh, Jim, would you go back in and get my bag? I just don’t want to see anyone else tonight.” She pleaded with her cousin.

“Sure, Ronni, but I want to know what Rafe said to you.” He tried to find out more about their argument. “He’s really not such a bad guy.”

That’s what you think; she kept her thoughts to herself. Your friend, Rafe Turner, is certainly not the kind of guy you’d take home to meet your mom – he’s just not Mr. Right!

FOUR

Once in the safety of her own room at Aunt Louise's rambling ranch house, Ronnie let her thoughts wander to that of a man so ever present in her mind tonight. She could still smell his wonderful male scent as if he were standing there before her. She slowly and carefully took her clothes off and stood before the mirror looking for an imprint on her skin where his touch had burned her just hours before.

This is ridiculous! He doesn't even like me. He's hurting so badly and not just physically. That man has bruises on his very soul. I know because I have them too. I can never get close to him if I want to keep my sanity. Her thoughts tried to create normality in the middle of high emotions. She went to her bath and started the shower. Once in, she scrubbed fruitlessly trying to rid herself of his memories. She crawled into bed, but the sleep her body craved for didn't come until the early morning hours.

Shortly before dawn, her screams pierced the tranquil stillness of the sleeping house. Without hesitation, Aunt Louise pulled on her robe and scurried to Ronni's room. She sat down on the side of the bed

and cradled the sobbing girl in her arms. Rocking her gently Aunt Louise murmured words of comfort.

“There, there, child. It’s okay. You’re just having one of your nightmares.” She stroked her tangled tresses until she felt Ronni succumb to sleep once again. Her aunt quietly covered her and tiptoed out of the room downstairs to the kitchen where she started making the morning meal.

She looked up as Jim came lumbering through the door. He rubbed his hand through his hair and tried to get the sleepiness out of his eyes. “Did she fall back to sleep alright?” He evidently heard Ronni’s screams too.

“That poor child is finally asleep. You know, Jim, she hasn’t had those bad dreams in quite some time.” Aunt Louise put a hot cup of coffee in front of her son at the table.

“What do you suppose brought it on this time?” He asked his mom as he sipped the steaming liquid.

“When she first came to us the dreams were quite frequent, but as her wounds healed, they came less and less until she quit having them altogether. Then last year when that puppy we got her ran away, it brought that lost hurt back to her. She had a few more nightmares. I can’t imagine what’s happened this time.”

“Do you think this happens because she’s starting to care about something or someone and she fears the loss of that security?” Jim poked at the plate of food his mom had just sat down in front of him.

“I think it’s going to be a long while before Ronni can love without the fear of losing that person. But I

just wonder what stirred all this up last night?" She shook her head sadly and went back to finishing cooking breakfast. Jim kept his thoughts to himself.

Jim was alone in the garage when Ronni finally got there. Her afternoon appointment lasted much longer than she expected so she didn't bother changing and walked carefully into the grease-ridden place, avoiding direct contact with anything. Clean clothes were like a magnet to her cousin's place of business. Jim was leaning over the fender of her car, not working but in deep thought.

She roused him out of it. "Hi, Red. Now before we start over this heap's problems, what's this about calling outside help? I thought we agreed that you're the best pit crew a girl could have. Are you telling me now that you have faults?" She mockingly put her hands to her face and laughed.

"I hate to burst your bubble, cuz, but I'm not the perfect mechanic I've led you to believe. It appears that this engine has a miss at high revolutions. I've checked over everything at least twice, and I'll be hankered if I can find out what's causing it." Even as he was talking to her, Jim was checking things. It was rare for him to be puzzled over this car and Ronni was getting worried.

"I've ran the scope on it and that miss shows up every time. I'm hoping I've overlooked some minor thing but if we're going to win that next race, we'll have to take care of this now!" He was tracing spark plug wires back to the distributor making sure they were in the right order. Ronni knew he had, by now done that several times, but Jim was a thorough man.

She wanted to help in what little way she could. “What about that guy, what did you call him? Speed! Isn’t he the one that helped last time? Can’t he come and give you a hand?” She asked pensively.

“Speed’s out of town and we need help now. So, I called Rafe.” Jim stated matter-of-factly. He certainly didn’t expect her startled reaction.

“Rafe!” She sounded angry. “Oh, Jimmy, why him? You know I don’t want anyone else working on our car and Rafe Turner of all people!” She was pacing around their car.

“Why didn’t you call Bob? He would have come, you know that.” She disliked the way that Rafe seemed to be entering every phase of her life.

“Now, Ronni, no sense getting all worked up. Besides, you know yourself that Bob Johnson barely has the brains to drive a car, let alone repair one!” There was never any love lost between Bob and Jim; although she never quite understood why. “What’s wrong with calling Rafe? He is one of the few drivers that is also a top-notch mechanic. We might as well get the best advice we can, and for my money that’s Rafe.”

Ronni was fully aware of Bob’s lack of mechanical knowledge, but it didn’t help her to deal with facing Rafe again so soon.

“I know you two didn’t hit it off but, Ronni, he is a good mechanic and right now I need his help! He should be getting here shortly – so please behave!” He gave her a pleading look.

She sighed in resignation. "I just wish you would have told me before you called him. At least I would have had a chance to talk you out of it."

"There now, be a good girl and go put on my other pair of coveralls. They're on the hook behind the door in my office." Even though she knew where his office was located, Jim pointed to it. "I need your help tearing these heads off the engine."

"Are you going to tear it completely down? Will it be ready for this next race?" Ronni helped Jim often but never quite knew all that much about the actual workings of the engine. She didn't wait for him to answer and headed straight to his office.

She went to the office, took her good clothes off, and slipped into the old coveralls. The loose fit did nothing to emphasize her figure, but then Ronni thought sourly, I'm not here for a fashion show. She knew Jim would expect her to work as hard as he did on their car. After a night of working on the car, she spent days cleaning grease from her skin and underneath her nails. Oh well, she thought carelessly, one of the hazards of being enthused with racing.

She helped Jim loosen bolts on the top half of the engine and then she got on the creeper and rolled underneath to help him undo the starter. They were working so intently and Jim's radio was loud with country music that neither noticed Rafe walking in until his deep voice yelled over the noise. He moved slowly as he was trying to live without the cane.

"Hello, Jim." As he noticed the coverall legs sticking out from beneath the car, he added, "I thought you said you didn't have help. Who's that under the

car?” Rafe’s expression changed to surprise as Ronni rolled back out from under the front of the car.

“I’ll be damned!” He was completely taken aback. Ronni reveled in her first chance at shocking him. Her victory was short-lived, however, as Rafe’s words lashed out at her.

“You mean the lady racer actually dirties her hands and works on her own car!” His voice was dripping with sarcasm, but his short laughter softened the words.

“Oh, Jimmy, look at what the wind just blew in – an ill wind at that.” She quipped just as sourly.

“Okay, okay, you two can stand there exchanging verbal blows or we can make a concerted effort and get this car running. I think it’s time to call a truce.” Jim was trying to be peacemaker. “Now, shake hands and get busy working.” He went back to the car and left them to figure out their next move.

“I’d rather kiss the lady,” Rafe started, but as Ronni was about to protest, he quickly added, “Alright, let’s just shake hands.” He put out his hand and took her slender wrist into his grasp. She pulled, trying to release his grip, but now they were touching hands and she shook his big, firm grip.

When he didn’t release her hand right away, she looked up and saw the desire flaming in his eyes. Suddenly, there was no one but the two of them and the charged atmosphere in the garage. His touch burned through her and set her soul on fire with a desire equaling his own.

The clanging sound of a wrench dropping on the hard concrete floor brought reality crashing back and

quickly she snatched her hand from his. It took a great deal of concentration, but soon they were all working.

“Ronni, when you were out on the track last night, did you have any particular problems?” Rafe questioned her.

“I did notice that on several of the last laps I didn’t have full power on the straightaways.” She picked her memory to answer him as one racer to another. “It handled great in the turns.”

“Describe what you mean by not having full power.”

This exchange went on for quite a while until Rafe and Jim seemed to know exactly what they should be looking for. She suddenly realized that she enjoyed this time with Rafe – a time without the usual confrontation. She felt he was actually treating her like a fellow racer. Several hours later, shortly after dark had fallen in the Verde Valley, Ronni exclaimed, “Jimmy, I’ve got a headache starting. Can I go up to your apartment and rest?” Jim kept working as he answered her.

Jim’s apartment was a small room built on top of his garage. He often stayed there when he worked too late and had gotten overly tired.

Ronni’s muscles ached as she climbed the steps. She was used to helping her patients but this was substantially challenging in a different way. She wasn’t used to bending over the fenders of a car and it showed physically in her lower back. Her head had developed a dull, throbbing pain from the tension of being so close to Rafe. She was at odds with her

thoughts. She found him intensely attractive and at the same time, there was definitely a battle going on between them. One she didn't understand but had every intention of asking Jim about as soon as they had time alone.

The room was as neat as a pin. Nothing seemed out of place as Ronni crossed the room and found the bottle of pain relievers in her purse. She found a cold bottle of water in the refrigerator and quickly downed the pills. Ronni pushed aside the pillows on the couch and laid back to rest for a bit. Up here, away from the pressure of his nearness, she could feel her tired, aching body relaxing and soon she was asleep.

Jim wiped at the grease on his hands for the second time without getting rid of it. "Rafe, I'm hungry and I need a break. I'll go to my mom's and have her make us up something to eat." He gave up trying to clean his hands.

"That's sounds fine." Rafe agreed. "I'm getting tired, too. A break will do us good." He sat down on the nearest thing which happened to be a stack of tires.

Jim left on his motorcycle and Rafe sat there listening to the crickets outside when he first heard the sound. The noise repeated and Rafe clamored to his feet. All of the muscles in his body screamed with tiredness and pain as he went to the stairs leading to the apartment. He waited anxiously for another minute. His pulse quickened as he heard her screams loud and very distinctly now emanating from the upper room.

Rafe bounded up the steps, ignoring the shattering pain in his right leg, taking them two at a time. In two leaps he was across the room.

“No, God, no please! The fire is all around. Help me, someone please help me!” Ronni screamed in her sleep.

He was unsure how to proceed but soon grabbed her and pulled her sobbing body to him. She was still half asleep and kept rambling on about the fire. He sat beside her on the couch and gently stroked her raven hair.

“It’s okay, lady racer. I’ve got you. It’s a dream, Ronni, a very bad dream.” He held her gently and kept caressing her now calming shape. He felt himself relating to the images haunting her from her past. He, too, had demons that found their way into his mind.

“Oh, my God, they’re dead and I wasn’t there to save them.” She was fully awake now with the realization of her loss. “I couldn’t save them and now I’m here and they’re gone.” She cried softly into his muscular chest as he crushed her to himself, protectively.

“Ronni, I don’t have the words to help make things go away.” It was hard for him to try and comfort her when he had no comfort for himself. He let his hands and nearness do his talking. He was still stroking her hair and Ronni was holding on to him as a child grips her only doll for security.

“Please, don’t let me go. I don’t want to be alone right now.” She begged him to stay.

“It’s alright, I’m not leaving, darlin’. I don’t want to let you go.” He was being honest and letting his heart do his talking at this moment. Rafe feathered a light

kiss at her temple. She looked up at him and saw a tenderness in his face she had not yet seen. Their eyes met and she felt that clear, blue liquid flooding over her.

She wasn't quite sure when the moment had changed from one of comfort to desire, but she wasn't fighting his advances. He shifted her to sit on his lap.

He cupped her face between his strong hands and slowly raised his head to claim the waiting kiss. He expertly parted her moist lips to experience her inner sweetness. His hands caressed her up and down her back, lingering on her waist.

Ronni touched his face and tenderly traced her fingertips across his lips. He kissed each fingertip and unlocked a passion in her, she never knew existed.

"Ronni, you're so beautiful. Your eyes are as dark as the night and warm as the earth. I want to get lost in that warmth." He kissed the soft skin of her throat and she moaned in delight.

The fires were burning inside, begging for release. "Rafe, please don't." She was shaking and her voice was little more than a whisper.

"I'm hearing no from your lips, but your body is pleading for my touch. I want you, lady racer." Rafe's tone left no doubt in her mind that he could take her here and now.

His hands moved fast and soon he had the zipper undone on the coveralls she was wearing. The moonlight streaming through the open door reflected off her creamy, white skin. He kissed the softness of her neck and with each touch of his lips, evoked a sensation new and exciting to Ronni. He moved to the

hollow between her heaving breasts and she felt her head drop back to allow him free access. She didn't want this moment to end. Rafe was right – she wanted him and she wanted him now.

“Rafe, Ronni, did you guys abandon me?” Jim's voice pierced the room like an arrow hitting the bull's eye.

The blood curdled in her veins as she struggled out of Rafe's grasp. “Let me go!” She was getting hysterical. Ronni tugged at the zipper unsuccessfully.

“Here, let me help.” Rafe reached to restore the order to her clothes.

“I can do it! I don't need you or your help.” She tried to keep her voice quiet as she heard Jim call again.

“That's not the message I was receiving just a moment ago. You were begging me to touch you then.” He voiced without hesitation.

The cutting edge of his voice stopped her in her tracks. She looked up to see the hard, unrelenting coldness had returned to his face. Ronni saw without any doubt that the walls Rafe had erected were definitely back up. She shivered as she thought of the man whose arms she had just been in. She knew he could have taken her and Ronni wouldn't even have tried to stop him. Where was the man who had just held her and comforted her? Who was the real Rafe Turner?

They both turned and looked as Jim came trudging up the stairs. He held a basket with food that Aunt Louise had prepared. He went to the table and started setting their supper out.

“Are you okay, Ronni?” He finally spoke.

“I just had another nightmare.” She stammered. “Rafe came to calm me down.” She prayed her cousin couldn’t tell what had nearly happened.

“I hope you’re alright now.” Jim pretended to notice nothing. “I forgot the thermos. I’ll be right back.” He ran down the stairs leaving the tension-filled room.

“I told you that I could hurt you.” Rafe’s words cut her like a knife. Rafe tried to bring himself back to a stance he could live with – he didn’t want to care about this woman.

“You are so right!” Ronni cursed him. “I hate you!”

“You can hate me all you want, it might just save you, my lady racer.” He grabbed her tear-stained face and she went to knock his hand away. It was sheer pain to feel his touch now without the warmth of before. When Jim finally came back to the apartment, Rafe abruptly left.

“My leg is killing me, Jim.” He wasn’t telling a lie, his fast journey up the steps was taking its toll. “I’ll come back in the afternoon and help you finish her car. I have an appointment with a therapist in the morning.” He spoke as though Ronni wasn’t standing in the same room. He went to the door and paused, but changed his mind just as he was about to speak to her. The door slamming shut was the straw that broke the camel’s back.

Ronni slumped in the chair next to Jim and the tears flowed freely. This time it was a new pain, the hurt of her love not returned.

“Ronni, I want some straight answers! You have been a different person since Rafe came to town. Has he hurt you?” Jim asked her.

“Oh, Jim, I can’t take much more. He is the most confusing man I have ever met. But the saddest part of all...” She hesitated before saying it aloud. “I think I’m falling for him.”

“What’s so wrong with that?” Jim didn’t quite understand. “It’s not as bad as the plague.” He tried to make her laugh.

“Jim, he hates me! I don’t know why, but all I can tell you is that I’ve never seen such animosity in all my life. I keep asking myself over and over again, why? I’ve never done anything to him. Several days ago I didn’t even know him!” She was back on her feet, pacing up and down the floor.

“Sit down, cuz, and I’ll tell you a little story.” He kept eating as he talked to her. “Maybe it will help explain Rafe to you.”

She pointed her finger threateningly at her cousin, “One thing before you start, Jim, you have to promise me never to tell a living soul what I just confessed to you. I mean it, he must never know!” Ronni pleaded.

“Your secret is safe with me but what about Bob? Shouldn’t he be told something? I mean that guy thinks you’re going to marry him, God forbid!” Jim’s dislike of Bob was all too evident.

“I’ll deal with him later. Besides, maybe I’ll go ahead and marry Bob. He is, at least, not dangerous to my peace of mind. He does care for me, which is a lot more than I can say about Rafe!” She stated pensively.

“Ronni, you can’t be serious!” Jim was shocked.

“Don’t worry, Jimmy.” She consoled her cousin and best friend. “Bob Johnson is my problem. Now tell me about Rafe. I need to know more about what is driving that angry, sad man.”

“He wasn’t always so angry. He is really a very, nice guy.” Jim started. “The accident happened a little over six months ago at the Hodgdon 200. They hold that race annually for the circuit cars at Riverside Raceway. It nearly killed him; he was in a coma for several weeks. When he finally came around, he was like a crazy man because he had no feeling in his right leg.”

Ronni trembled with horror at the thought of that dark, athletic figure of a man confined to crutches, or worse a wheelchair! “How did it happen?” She asked.

Jim took a deep breath before he continued. “He was whipping into turn nine just before the pit entrance, when a young, female rookie lost control of her car. She careened into Rafe’s front quarter panel and rammed him into the guard rail.”

Ronni was seized by a new kind of fear. She felt the accident as vividly as if she had been there. She got up and nervously started cleaning the food from the table. She needed to be busy while hearing the gruesome details of Rafe’s wreck. “Please go on, Jimmy.”

“Are you sure you want to hear all of this? It isn’t a pretty story.” Jim looked as his cousin, afraid for her in this delicate state.

“Please, Jim. I’ll be okay. Perhaps, this will help me to understand him.” Her dark eyes were brimming with unshed tears.

“When he hit the guard rail, it caused his tire to blow out and the car rolled over and over, finally coming to rest on its side. The fire and safety crew managed to drag him out just before it exploded into flames!” Jim took a big drink of the coffee and went on with his recount of the disaster in Rafe’s life.

“Luckily he hadn’t lost consciousness before he could put on his extinguishing system. It helped delay the explosion of his fuel cell. The safety crew had to work feverishly to free his pinned leg before the fire took over. It had been crushed between the roll cage and the fire wall.” Jim thought a moment before going on, “He blames that rookie to this day! He refuses to believe that she couldn’t have done anything different than what she did.”

“But, I don’t understand how he could be so narrow-minded.” Ronni exclaimed.

“Wait a minute, Ronni. This man nearly lost his life, and just now is getting the use of his leg back. She robbed him of his career, too!” Jim was firm in his protection of his good friend.

“What do you mean she robbed him of his career too?” Ronni was a bit puzzled.

“Unfortunately, the papers played up the part of her being a woman. It ruined her career even though months later it was proven that a tie rod had broken on her car, causing the steering to be inoperative. It was too late for her, but Rafe was just coming around and, good or bad, it seemed to please him. It actually helped his recovery to find that she would no longer be racing.”

They sat there in stunned silence before Jim added, "Since that time, he hasn't so much as been to a race, let alone work on or drive his own car. That's why I think it's a good sign that he finally came to the race track. I hear tell his crew chief has been keeping the maintenance done on Rafe's car just in case the old boy comes to his senses."

"Wow! I had no idea he had been in such a horrible wreck." Ronni was aghast. "But, if they proved that she wasn't at fault, why does Rafe insist on blaming her?"

"I'm not sure, but just before that race Rafe had been serious about a woman." Ronni felt a pang of jealousy as Jim continued. "It turned out she was a young starlet using his fame to get 'noticed'. It worked and she left him for Hollywood."

"He must have been hurt very badly. That explains a lot but why is he taking everything out on me? I haven't hurt him." She sounded confused and angry.

"That's one question I can't answer, cuz. He's the only one that would know that. I would approach him like an old bear – cautiously!"

"What a mess. Jimmy, I think it's late and I have some thinking to do. I'm going on home and I suggest you do the same. I have a new client to meet with the team in the morning." She gave him a small squeeze on his arm. "I'll see you tomorrow. Don't stay too late. You work too hard and need to take it easier."

FIVE

“So nice to meet you, Mr. Turner.” Dr. Shaw reached out and shook his offered hand. He was surprised that the person in charge of such a well-respected medical facility was so young. She couldn’t have been much older than he was. “I am pleased you have contacted us. I am anxious for you to meet the team of professionals that will help you on the road to healing.” She indicated a chair in her office and as he sat, she continued. “Are you familiar with Holistic Healers and how we handle the healing process?”

“I have a vague idea. The surgeon that put my leg back together highly recommended you and your group when he found out I was coming back home to Hoot Owl Ridge to recuperate. From his description, I assume that you will address more than physical therapy for my leg.” He let out a deep breath. “I know that I have some other issues that may be preventing me from getting completely healed.” That admission came at a great price. Rafe had to allow his ego to take a back seat in his life, if he truly wanted to be the whole man he once was.

“You are on the right track. Here, we address all parts of a person’s life. We consider the physical healing, mental health and wellness, emotional well-being,

and spiritual beliefs and values. Holistic healing is really a lifestyle approach. I have assembled my team and they are ready to meet you.” She stood, “Are you ready to begin your journey?”

Rafe rose slowly and as he looked Dr. Shaw directly in the eyes, spoke softly, “I’m as ready as I can be. I do have to be honest with you, though. I am a bit afraid of what discoveries we might make.”

She appreciated his candor. “Mr. Turner, it takes great courage and strength to look inward and I appreciate your honesty. I think you are ready.”

They went through a door into a larger room. Sitting around a big conference table was five individuals, but the one that caught his eye was the lady with deep chocolate brown eyes and raven hair.

Ronni’s breath caught in her throat as she watched their newest client walk through the door. Leaning heavily on his cane, Rafe slowly made his way to a chair at the head of the table. He never took his eyes from hers. His face was expressionless. Ronni willed herself to look away but his enigmatic stare held her fast. Only when Dr. Shaw spoke did she look down at the notebook in front of her.

“Team, this is Rafe Turner. He has sought our help and I have given each of you a folder with his medical history.” She turned to Rafe. “Mr. Turner, if you are alright with it, I would like each of the team to give you their name and a small idea of what they will be doing to help you.”

He nodded his head but spoke not a word. Whatever emotion or feelings he was going through; he was keeping them close and didn’t reveal a thing.

After what seemed like hours, but was in reality only a few minutes, it was Ronni's turn. She cleared her throat before speaking. "I am the physical therapist for the team. I am responsible for helping you work with your leg and getting the movement and muscles as close to original as possible." She felt like the words were coming out in chunks and that she wasn't appearing as professional as she should.

There was a brief moment of awkwardness when Ronni failed to say anything more. "Do you have any questions, Mr. Turner?" Dr. Shaw asked when she realized that Ronni was finished.

"It is nice to meet all of you. Yes, I have a few questions now and I am sure I will have a lot more later." He directed his attention to Dr. Shaw. "When can we begin with the physical therapy? I am anxious to get rid of this." He held up his cane.

"Veronica, can you take a few minutes with Mr. Turner now and set up a therapy schedule? The rest of you can read through the file and contact Mr. Turner in the next few days with your proposed schedules." She turned to Rafe. "Does that work for you?"

"Absolutely." Was his one word response.

While he was saying his goodbyes to the rest of the staff, Ronni scrambled to gain composure. How could this be happening? Until a few days ago, her world was contained, calm, and she had her emotions under control. Or did she? Ronni mentally went back over some of the training she had received at Holistic Healers before coming to join the team. She needed to find a balance to her life and fast. She needed some

space, some time to regain her poise. That was not going to happen right now, though.

“Well, lady racer, what a surprise!” He turned and waited for her to speak.

“I... I am as surprised as you are. If you would like to have another therapist, I am sure Dr. Shaw can find a replacement.” She stammered.

“I don’t think that will be necessary. As an integral part of this team, I am quite sure you are more than qualified as a physical therapist. What sort of schedule did you have in mind?”

“I was prepared to get started today, but...” She didn’t finish her statement.

“What’s the problem?” He acted innocent.

“Rafe, I think you know what the problem is. It would be unprofessional to become your therapist with you feeling like you do about me.”

“You have no idea how I feel, darlin’.” He stated firmly. “Tell me what you have in mind and let’s get started.”

She looked into his eyes, trying to see into the mind and heart of the man, but failed. With resignation, she rose and indicated that they should head out of the conference room. “Let’s go to my examination room. I need to conduct an initial analysis of your condition and then I can accurately provide a plan of therapy.”

They walked the short distance to her area of the building and ended in a small exam room. She handed him a cotton gown. “Put this on and once you are ready just flip the switch on the wall and I will come

in and do the exam.” She left the room and stood just outside the closed door.

He stood there for a few moments with the gown in hand. I should leave; I should insist on another therapist, I should do a hundred different things. His thoughts were as jumbled as his emotions. Was she ready to see the scars on his body and his leg? Was he ready for her to see the worst thing that had happened to him in his life? Would she see the scars on his soul, his heart? Of course she has seen many wounds over her career and this would be no different, he would be no different, he reasoned.

She waited in the hallway and eventually saw the light come on. Taking a deep breath, Ronni opened the door and walked into the exam room.

He was sitting on the table. She prayed her nervousness didn't show. She prayed that she could maintain her professionalism. She prayed that touching him would not be her undoing.

She asked Rafe to turn and stretch his legs out. Remaining focused, Ronni reached out and pulled the gown up over his thighs. Her breath caught in her throat as she saw the extent of his scars, the redness still prevalent. “On a scale of one to ten, what is your pain level today?”

“I have a high tolerance for pain, so perhaps I can't give you an accurate answer.” His voice sounded strained as she laid her hands on his right leg. She was touching his leg, tracing the scars. “The pain is probably an eight today. What are the options for physical therapy?” He tried to steer the conversation

into a professional direction, ignoring the personal side of their relationship.

“There are several options available to us. Obviously, the oldest and most traditional form of physical therapy is the hands on massage treatment. Hydrotherapy is another option.” She was in her professional mode. As she examined his leg, Ronni was able to make a preliminary evaluation of his injuries. “I would like to start with the massage and alternate with some aquatic therapy. We have a full pool on the facility and can schedule the time for your therapy here.”

“I am concerned that you waited this long to seek therapy. It will take longer to restore mobility and reduce the pain.” She spoke softly and yet as an expert in her profession.

“I wasn’t exactly ready to face this.” He indicated his leg and the obvious injuries. “I was in a coma for almost six weeks and when I came to,” he hesitated. This was the part where he had to start facing his emotions, his fears, and most of all his anger. “I am not proud of my behavior to this point, but I want to try and put all that behind me. I want to walk without this damn cane and I want to feel like a whole man again.” His voice expressed the anger he still had to deal with in order to be completely healed.

Ronni looked at him. He didn’t realize that even with the physical limitations he had to deal with right now, he would never be less than a man, a very dynamic and commanding man. She turned to the sink and washed her hands, trying to take a few minutes to compose herself before responding.

“Rafe, we have a lot of work ahead of us. It isn’t going to be easy and I cannot promise that you will be 100% after we are through.” She raised her hand to stop his protest, “I can guarantee that you will be better than you are right now. But most of your recovery depends entirely on your cooperation. It will not be a cake walk.”

He proceeded to pull his gown down and turned to put his legs over the side of the examination table. “Bring it on, lady racer. I can handle anything you can dish out.” His words were confident but his voice showed his vulnerability. It tore at her heart strings.

“You can get dressed and I will meet you in the lobby. I will print out the schedule for our sessions. We start first thing tomorrow, if you feel up to it.” She opened the door to the examination room.

“Tomorrow is fine.” He climbed down from the table and she took a last look at the man standing before her. His eyes sparkled and the half grin on his face made him all the more appealing and very, very dangerous.

Ronni went to her office and put the finishing touches on the schedule she had begun before the meeting with Rafe. All she wanted at this point was to get out of here and away from him. She needed the solace of her secret place, her happy place.

She met Rafe in the lobby. He was laughing with the receptionist and for a quick instance; Ronni felt the pangs of jealousy. His face was relaxed and his smile brightened the sparkle of his blue eyes.

“Rafe,” she interrupted their folly. “I have the proposed schedule. Please feel free to make changes that

won't fit into your days." She handed it to him. He put out his hand to shake hers and reluctantly Ronni put her hand into his.

Just at that moment, the outer door opened and Bob Johnson walked in. He took in the picture before him. Ronni snatched her hand from Rafe's and addressed Bob.

"Bob, what a surprise!" She laughed nervously. "What are you doing here?"

The look on Bob's face spoke volumes. "Turner, what's up?" Instead of answering Ronni, he pressed Rafe for an answer. "What are you doing here?"

"Bob, that's Rafe's business." Ronni intervened. "What are you doing here?" She repeated and tried to turn the conversation in a different direction.

"I thought we could catch lunch." He answered her, but kept his eyes on Rafe. "I would love to spend some time with my favorite girl." He finally looked her way and moved closer.

"Ronni, I will see you in the morning." Rafe look amused as he moved toward the door. "Be ready, lady racer. I look forward to test your skills with your hands." He left a stunned Ronni behind with Bob.

"What did he mean by that?" Bob demanded. "What is he doing here, Ronni? Is there something going on with you two?"

"Bob, I don't really have time for lunch today." She was irritated with both men. The male ego can be extremely childish at times, she thought to herself. "I have to go now." She turned to leave when Bob stopped her.

“Ronni, we have been together for a long time now. I won’t have someone else coming along and taking you from me.” He stomped out the door.

Ronni turned to see the startled look on the receptionist’s face and quickly went through the inner office door to avoid any sort of comment from her. She got her purse, grabbed her car keys and headed out the back door.

SIX

Ronni was determined to go to her favorite place. One of the things she learned when she was a patient of Holistic Healers was to find a place where she could feel free from the pressures of the day. Think of it as a mental vacation, she could remember Carolynne teaching her. Carolynne was still the counselor on their team and was always willing to listen.

Ronni found a special meadow outside the old Benton mansion near the race track. She often spent time there right after her parent's accident. It had become a place of solace and peace. No one had lived in the Benton mansion for over ten years, so she didn't feel that she was trespassing. And trespassing or not, right now she felt a great need for the calming atmosphere of the meadow.

She started her car and was soon headed for peace and quiet. The sun was peeking from behind the clouds and a little breeze had kicked up as she drove out of town for a few miles. Carefully she parked the car beside the dirt road that lead to the mansion and found the pathway to the meadow. She passed through a thicket of bushes and trees. Stepping through the portal into the meadow, she felt so at peace in here among the pines and aspens. It was as

green and beautiful as she remembered; even nature played a musical tune as the wind whistled slightly through the boughs of the tallest trees.

“Oh, if only I could stay here and never have to think about anything!” She shouted at the trees. She felt able to do and say anything out here because this was her very own private world. Ronni took the blanket that she kept in her car and spread it out under a huge pine tree. It was so calming and peaceful, her thoughts could be put away and soon she was in a silent slumber.

The thunder cracked overhead, startling her awake. “Oh, no! I am going to get soaked.” She grabbed the blanket, wrapped it around her shoulders and ran for the shelter of her car just as the storm broke. Here in the Verde Valley the weather could change at a moment’s notice and today was no exception.

By the time she scrambled inside, her clothes were already soaked. She shivered and put the keys in the ignition. As she turned them expecting her car to start, nothing happened. Frantically, she tried the car again.

“Damn! This has got to be my rotten luck today.” She pounded her open palms on the steering wheel. “Lately nothing has gone right, so it only makes sense that you should act up too!” The rain was pelting down harder now and she felt the chill from her wet clothes. She grabbed for her cell phone, ready to call Jim. “Great, no phone!” She then remembered leaving it on her desk as she was in such a hurry to leave. Maybe I should just wait it out at the mansion, she

thought, not willing to sit in the close confines of the car. The lightning frightened her and she sought comfort in the house.

A bolt of lightning streaking across the sky convinced Ronni to grab her blanket and she ran up the short path to the house. As she dashed onto the wrap-around porch out of the once again pouring rain, Ronni realized things were obviously different. She looked at the porch, there were new pieces of outdoor furniture and she realized that painting had been started on the front of the house. I am a trespasser! She felt a new sense of panic. But a new thought suddenly occurred. Maybe they had a phone. I can call Jim to come and rescue me.

She heard the front door open and started to speak before she turned around. "I'm so sorry to intrude, but my car has broken down and I was wondering if you had a phone I could use. I didn't realize that this house had been sold..." Ronni stopped suddenly as the person stepped onto the porch.

"Rafe!" She could not believe her eyes. "What are you doing here?" This could not be happening! How many ways was he going to invade her life?

"Nice to see you, too." His eyes showed the amusement he was feeling. "Ronni, what are you doing here? Did you follow me?" He taunted. Rafe stood lazily against the door, his arms folded across his chest. His jeans were worn and his tee shirt had grease stains on the front. His hair was more tousled than usual, minus his cowboy hat. She noticed the sleepy look in his eyes. Even just waking from a nap

and in his grubby clothes, he was extremely virile and Ronni was all too aware of his maleness.

She stammered. "I'm sorry to bother you. I didn't know anyone had bought this place, let alone you. I thought you were living at the family ranch." She backed up and noticed his grin at her nervousness.

"Why shouldn't I buy this house? A man needs a place to call home, doesn't he?" He adjusted his position in the doorway and asked her again. "I repeat darlin', what are you doing here?"

Before she thought, Ronni responded, "I came to my meadow to get some peace and quiet..." She stopped abruptly, aware that he was intently listening to her.

"Your meadow? What do you mean? Is it near here?" He questioned curiously. The rain was still coming down hard.

She was already kicking herself for blurting out that information. No one else knew about her magical escape and now she had disclosed its existence to a man that increased her desire for that peace and quiet. It was too late to take it back so she continued, "Actually it's only short distance from this house. Now that it is your property, I suppose I won't be visiting my haven anymore." She was trembling from her wet clothes and suddenly sneezed.

"Hey, you're all wet! Come in. I have a nice fire burning in my room." As he saw her hesitation, he added, "I won't bite you. I promise to leave you alone, but you're going to catch pneumonia if you don't get some dry clothes on."

By then her body's needs overruled her heart's fears and she followed Rafe into the house, up the stairs to the master bedroom. He struggled and leaned heavily on his cane, but she could see he was determined not to allow his injury to stop him from leading her up the steps. She went over to the bright crackling fire and put her hands out to warm her frozen fingers. Rafe came back into the room and handed her some dry clothes. "Here are some extra jeans. They're mine, but we can fashion a belt from this cord. I have my flannel shirt and you can wear that too." He pointed her to the bathroom. "Hand me your things and I'll hang them by the fire to dry."

She took his clothes and headed to the bathroom to change. Reluctantly she handed her outer clothes to Rafe through the slightly opened door. She hung her under clothes on the towel bar to dry. When she had changed and came back into the room, she noticed that he had gathered some furniture and the room was quite cozy. Her clothes were hung over a hat rack close to the warm fireplace.

Rafe handed her a glass of rosy liquid. "Drink this wine. It'll warm you faster inside than that fire." She eagerly accepted his offer and drank the mellow wine.

"You come prepared, don't you?" She nervously stated. "Are you living here now?"

"Not quite yet. I knew I'd have to stay most of the afternoon and my leg has been hurting. The wine relaxes me without the after effects that those damned pills the doctor prescribed, give me." He was picking up some tools and handed her a tape measure.

“Now that you’re stuck here this afternoon, you can help me take measurements. I need to get some definite ideas for the decorators.” He sounded perplexed.

“What do you have planned for this room?” As soon as the words left her mouth, Ronni was sorry she said them. It would be dangerous to get too personal with this man.

He grinned mischievously, “Having you here gives me all sorts of ideas, but I suppose you were referring to the décor.” Rafe was teasing her but suddenly asked, “What would you do for this room?”

She stood for a few minutes thoughtfully considering his request. Quietly she started, “I would put dark, oak paneling on all the walls but that one. I’d mirror it and then I saw a beautiful, small chandelier in town that would give this room the sophistication it needs.” She paused for a moment and then continued, “I would put pink brocade drapes on all the windows with gold chain pullbacks. I would have a four-poster, king-sized bed. Over there I would have an antique bureau with an old-fashioned lamp with prisms dangling from the shade.” Ronni saw the room as clearly as if it were already done. “I saw a lamp and a washstand that would go nicely over there on that wall in an antique shop in town.” She stopped suddenly and turned to face Rafe, aware now that he was engrossed in her enthusiasm. “This old house has history and I would treat it so. I would emphasize the old western saloon look in this room.”

“I’m sorry, I guess I got carried away. You did ask for my opinion, though.” She defended herself.

“It sounds great. Maybe I’ll have the decorators consult with you.” He was standing by the window and asked her. “Now, how about helping me take those measurements?” Ronni agreed and helped him in the master bedroom and then, one by one they took each room and measured windows.

He asked Ronnie her opinion on how to decorate each room and they spent an enjoyable, pressure-free time. She found herself wondering about this man. He was so easy to be with at times, but then he could turn on her at the slightest moment. She never knew what would set him off. She felt herself longing to have him take her in his strong, protective arms, but she knew he would end up retaliating by hurting her when she was most vulnerable. She must never let him know her true feelings because she could lose another person she cared for – just like her parents.

“Ronni, tell me about the meadow. Why did you go there?”

They were back at the master bedroom and Ronni sat down on the chair pulled closest to the fireplace. Rafe sat on the hearth and poked at the fire, adding some wood to keep the blaze going.

“It’s a technique I was taught when I was a patient with Holistic Healers. Carolynne will teach it to you when you have your appointments with her.” She watched the flames flickering in the fireplace and avoided making eye contact with him.

“You tell me, lady racer.” He softly commanded. He had turned to face her and waited for her response.

“I am not the counselor and am probably not qualified to teach this technique.” She tried to maintain a professional stance.

“Please, Ronni.”

She took a deep breath. “It’s a technique taught to relieve stress. Carolynne teaches it as a mental vacation. She encourages a person to think of a favorite place, a place where one would feel safe, contented and at peace.” She remembered her session and tried to repeat the words. “I had always pictured a little meadow in the tall pines with the wind gently whistling through the trees and the sun beating down on me.” She smiled a little and her face lit up.

“I have loved this house since I moved here over five years ago. I used to come and sit on the front porch steps and imagine myself as the owner. It was during one of those trips that I stumbled on the path to the meadow.” She was suddenly aware that she had captured his attention completely.

“I didn’t have to take just a mental vacation once I found the meadow. I could go there at any time and feel relief and comfort for real. It helped so much just to be there and feel the warmth and peace of that little piece of land.” She stopped talking. “Silly, huh?”

“I don’t think it’s silly at all. You don’t know how much I’ve prayed for some peace and sanity.”

They sat there for a bit. It was as if both were deep in their own thoughts about their pasts.

“Ronni, are you going to marry Bob?” His quiet, deep voice pierced the silent room.

His question took her completely by surprise, but before she could regain her composure and answer,

he shook his head and went on, "Never mind. I shouldn't have asked that of you. It's none of my business."

Ronni finally found her voice. "That's okay, Rafe." She took a deep breath to help calm her beating heart and continued, "I think Bob is ready for more from our relationship." Her heart screamed at him. Please, Rafe, I love you and would marry you today! Foolish girl, she told herself, he hasn't even said he likes you – let alone propose!

"And when, darlin', will you give this delicate hand in marriage?" As he spoke, he took her hand and pressed it lightly to his lips. His kiss sent a shaft of sensual delight through her body. She jerked her hand from his grasp and quickly sat back in her chair, putting some space between them.

"Please, Rafe, don't. You promised to leave me alone." She folded her arms in front of herself to still her trembling form. As he reached to put his hands on either side of her face, she was frozen into immobility.

"And so I did, but Ronni you are so desirable. You have a fire smoldering in you that Johnson will never be able to bring to flames." He started gently caressing her neck and face. "I can feel your passion burning." He pulled her up into his arms. He closed his arms around her and kissed her sensually. He was a master in arousing her passion and she could feel her pulse pounding in her head.

"See, darlin', you need and want the fuel I can give your flaming desire." He still held her in his arms and was showering her slender neck with light kisses.

“Rafe, please don’t hurt me. You are always starting something and you never finish.” Ronni knew she was going to lose this battle of wills. She was fighting the urge to throw her arms around him.

“I don’t mean to hurt you. I just can’t seem to get rid of this devil on my back.” Rafe released her and turned away. In a pained voice, he stated flatly, “I promised you I wouldn’t bother you and I mean it.” The room was now as cold as her heart from his rejection.

Ronni forced herself to go to his side and tenderly placed her hand on his arm. “Rafe, let me help you. We’ve both had terrible losses handed to us. We can ease each other’s pain.” She almost told him how much she loved him. Oh my God, I do love him. That realization dawned on her and caused some major misery. How could this have happened so suddenly?

“You drive me crazy!” Rafe crushed her in his grip. “Just when I think I’ve gotten everything sorted out, you come along and mess it all up!” Just as violently he pushed her away. “Stay away from me, lady racer, or you will get hurt. I can’t be held responsible for what I’m thinking or what I want from you. A fast affair is all we can have!”

A loud knock sounded at the front door downstairs. “Damn!” Rafe swore. “Your cousin has the worst timing of any one person I know.”

“Jim, what’s he doing here?” Ronni paced nervously. “How did he know I was here?”

He turned at her with a sheepish look on his face. He was a man caught in his own trap. “I called him about your car. What’s the matter? Are you afraid

he'll tell your precious Bob of our secret meeting?" She put her hands to her ears to shut out his painful words. It had happened again. Rafe was torturing her with his own demons.

"Stop it! I don't want to hear anymore!" She screamed at him.

Rafe had started down the hall to the stairs, but at her scream he stopped and stared at her for a few seconds before speaking. Softly, he said, "Don't worry, darlin', I'm sure you can trust Jim. The question is..." He paused before adding, "Can you trust yourself?"

He went down the steps just as Jim poked his head in the door. "Rafe, you called me about Ronni." He stopped speaking as he saw her coming down behind him. His face showed the shock his voice didn't reveal. He took in her appearance, the clothes that obviously belonged to Rafe.

"Ronni," Jim cleared his throat. "What happened to your car?" He acted casually uninterested in the circumstances for her presence in the house.

"I couldn't get it started and when the storm broke, I just ran here. I didn't expect anyone to be here." She felt like a child caught cheating on a test in school. She played with the buttons on Rafe's shirt.

Seeing her apparent embarrassment, Jim made his escape from the tension-filled room. "The rain stopped over an hour ago. Give me your keys and I'll see if I can get it running."

Ronni pressed herself flat against the wall to avoid contact with Rafe as she went to her purse and

retrieved the keys for Jim. Silently he took them and went out the door.

By this time, Ronni's temper and embarrassment was in full force. She flung herself around and shouted angrily at Rafe.

"You deliberately planned that. Why didn't you tell me that you called Jim?" She used all the hurt inside herself to fuel her anger. "You know how this looks – me standing here in your clothes, the two of us coming down from..." Ronni was getting more and more flustered and her voice faltered as she finished her statement, "from the bedroom!"

When he still didn't say anything, she went on, "The only thing I can't figure out is why use Jim? I thought he was your friend. Why use poor, sweet, innocent Jim to satisfy your own twisted ego?" With a stabbing pain in her heart, she cursed him, "I hate you for that!"

Rafe shrugged his shoulders in what appeared as total unconcern. His voice was distant and pained as he told her, "I told you to stay away from me. I warned you that you would only get hurt." His defense mechanisms were up and in place.

With all the power she could muster, she stood up to him and cried, "Stay away is exactly what you are going to get! If I get within a mile from you, it will be too close. It's about time you rejoin society, Mr. Turner. I've had a bad break in my life too, but I don't go around abusing people to appease my wounded pride." She headed back upstairs for her clothes. Before she got too far, she faced him and pathetically cried, "Someday you'll need someone to care for and

no one will be there for you. I hope to see you on that day – it's called justice!"

She went shakily on up the steps and went to the bedroom. She heard the door slam and upon hearing only silence, figured that Rafe went to help her cousin. She sat down on the hearth and fought desperately to hold back the tears that were slipping down her cheeks. She clasped her hands around herself in a futile attempt to stop the trembling.

"Oh, God, please release me from the torment of love. I loved my parents and they're gone. I love this man with all my being and he doesn't feel a thing for me!" She cried unashamedly now and felt the pain of loving him fully as her tears helped ease the hurt. He has so much pain, I don't think I can get through to the man below inside.

After what seemed ages, she got up, grabbed her now dry clothes, and changed back into her things. She stood in front of the mirror and made a mechanical effort to restore some order to her disheveled appearance. She saw the red, puffy eyes that stared back at her. With a bit of misplaced humor, she said aloud to her reflection, "How the women in the movies cry and still manage to look glamorous is beyond me."

Finally giving up, she walked back into the bedroom. I have to get out of here. I don't want to see Jim or Rafe right now, but I have to leave, she mused at her predicament. She heard the front door and voices indicating that the men were back from looking at her car.

Oh, I hope Jimmy got it running, she thought earnestly. She tiptoed to the top of the stairs and listened

to their voices, trying to distinguish what they were saying.

She heard Rafe telling Jim, "You better go and tell her that her car is running. I don't think she wants to see me." Ronni smiled with the knowledge that her way out was operable again. Now if only they would leave then I could go, she thought to herself.

She started to go back to the bedroom when she heard Jim's quiet voice. He sounded disturbed as he talked to Rafe, "I know it's none of my business, and you know that I'd be the last to interfere, but Rafe, I need to know what's going on between you two."

Rafe's mocking laughter reached her listening ears. "You mean you want to know my intentions? Really, Jim, I think you have overstepped your bounds!"

She didn't mean to stay there and eavesdrop, but her curiosity got the best of her. As she stood there transfixed, she heard Jim's reply only now he sounded angry.

"Look here, Rafe, she's had enough hurt to last a lifetime. She doesn't need some guy to come along and give her more. My only concern is for Ronni and her happiness."

"I get the message and I don't think you need to worry about me hurting Ronni. Your lady racer can take care of herself!" She wondered what he meant by that, but she didn't have time to think about it because the voices of the two men were coming closer. She scurried out of sight and as she heard the front door shut for a second time, she realized she was alone again. Ronni looked out the upstairs window

and saw them heading towards the garage out back. Rafe's tall, muscular figure with his hair blowing in the wind, made her heart throb at the sight.

"You're right, Rafe, I can take care of myself. I must never let you know how much I love you. The best way to cover that love is to keep my anger aroused." She spoke firmly and was aware now that he knew she had the strength to fight him. And fight him, she must!

It suddenly dawned on her that now was the perfect time for escape. She ran downstairs and went into the front room. She saw her keys on the mantel of the fireplace and quickly put them in her purse. Without further hesitation, she ran out the front door and down the steps to her car. Jim had evidently pulled it up to the house when he got it started.

She got in and was well on her way back to town, when she finally let her feelings crowd back into her thoughts. She could only think of the love for that man and how he must never know. She also knew she needed to talk with Dr. Shaw first thing in the morning.

SEVEN

“Dr. Shaw, do you have a moment?” Ronni peeked her head into the doctor’s office. She found that in this professional environment, she needed to address her in the formal manner.

“Of course, Veronica.” Dr. Shaw had always used her formal name, one of the few people that did. “What can I help you with?”

Ronni had the strangest feeling that Dr. Shaw was already aware of the dilemma she felt she was in. She cleared her throat as she sat in the chair at the front of the desk. “I’m afraid that I cannot perform the physical therapy for Rafe Turner.”

“Please explain further.”

“I’ve only known him for a very short time, but I have a personal relationship with him. Well, not exactly a relationship, it’s more like we know each other and he doesn’t like me. I mean, from the first time we met, he was angry with me. It has to do with me driving race cars. You have been apprised of his past and the fact that it was a rookie racer that caused him to wreck. It was a woman and he seems to take that out on me. I mean...” She stopped suddenly as she realized that she was rambling and not making much

sense. "I'm afraid that it would be a violation of professional ethics for me to continue as his therapist."

"Veronica, I heard from Mr. Turner this morning. He is most eager for you to continue as his therapist. As you are well aware of, our approach is to treat the whole person, not just the physical." She paused as though searching for the appropriate answers. "I have asked him to see Carolynne for the next few days instead of starting on the physical therapy side of his recovery process. She can help us decide if you are to stay on or if the need to change is justified." She came around and stood next to the chair. "You have come so far in your own healing and yet," She hesitated a moment. "And yet, I think there is a part of you that still needs assistance. Mr. Turner might be good for you and I am inclined at this moment to think that you will be good for him."

Ronni trusted Dr. Shaw and the team implicitly. With that in her heart, she agreed with the decision. "You'll let me know what the final conclusion is and when the physical treatment will begin?"

"Of course, Veronica, you will be the first to know."

The week went by quickly and soon it was Saturday – race day. Ronni grabbed her helmet bag from the trunk of her car and headed into the garage. She was a little apprehensive because she had avoided Jim and the garage since he walked in on her and Rafe. They had talked once on the phone about the race car, but nothing else had been said.

Jim was loading tools in the box that stayed with the trailer. "Wait, Jim, before we load the car, I want

to talk with you.” She sat down dejectedly on the race car trailer.

He didn’t stop what he was doing, but jokingly told her, “Now, cuz, if you think you’re not going to race after all my hard work, I hate to be pushy, but I’ll put you in that car myself.”

“No, it’s not that. I’ve never wanted to race so badly but I don’t feel I deserve to drive this car.” She looked at him with sadness in her eyes. He knew his cousin was hurting and it made him feel helpless. She went on, “I should have been here helping. I want to tell you about what you think you saw the other day.” She was very serious and started to pace the garage. Her long, dark tresses were pulled back into a bandana scarf.

Jim chuckled under his breath at the sight of that scarf. The first time she wore it, he teased her about being a cleaning woman – not a race car driver. She retaliated by telling him that she needed her hair kept out of her face so she could ‘clean up’ on the track.

Ronni fidgeted nervously with the hood pin on the race car. Jim faced her and set about putting her mind at ease. “Look here, Ronni, I don’t think anything went on and besides, it’s none of my business. As for helping me on the car, Rafe was here all week.”

She spun around with the full impact of his words. “You mean to tell me that Rafe was here helping on my car?” She was trying to comprehend what this meant. “Why didn’t you say anything to me?”

It was Jim’s turn to be a little nervous. “He didn’t want you to know he was here. You really don’t mind that he helped, do you?”

She thought for a moment and then reassured Jim. “No, I guess not. I’m just shocked that he would have anything to do with helping me after what I said to him.”

Jim shrugged his shoulders and got back to loading up the tools to take to the track. “Come on, let’s get this baby loaded.” He patted the race car affectionately. “If we want a good place to park in the pits, we had better leave now.” Jim started putting the spare tires on the trailer rack. Ronni and Jim had invested in a well-designed trailer. It held everything they could possibly need for a night’s racing.

Ronni still hadn’t moved so Jim hollered at her, “Come on, lady racer, these cars don’t load themselves!”

She looked sharply at her cousin as he spoke. “Why did you call me that? I don’t like it. Rafe uses that for my name when he is being his usual sarcastic self.”

“I didn’t mean any harm by it.” Jim apologized.

“I’m sorry I snapped at you. I know you didn’t mean it to hurt.” She finished speaking and added, “I guess I’m taking things much too seriously lately.”

She started to climb through the window of the race car. “You know, I remember the first time I got into a race car.” Ronni laughed as she recalled. “I asked Bob to open the door because I couldn’t find the latch. Little did I realize these doors are molded into the fiberglass body. Even if I make it through a season with no wrecks, I still have bruises from getting in and out of the car.”

Ronni flipped the starter switch and hit the button. The engine lit up the first time and she grinned at Jim in satisfaction. This is when the adrenaline starts pumping. Just sitting in the car gave her goose bumps. A lot of hard work had gone into the building of this car and she felt it was all worth the effort when she could hear the engine running smoothly in a race.

Jim guided her to the trailer ramps and with his help, she got the car loaded. She shut the engine off and as she climbed out of the car, spoke to her cousin. “You’ve done an excellent job, cuz. I’ve never heard that engine sound so solid.” She leaned against the car and asked Jim, “What did you do this time?”

Jim was grinning from ear to ear with pride, but all he said was, “No trade secrets given out.” He put his hands up in mock seriousness. “Let’s just say I’ve given you the racer’s edge with a little help from my friend.”

She knew that friend was Rafe. It gave her a comforting feeling to know that he had a hand in making her car run great, that he wanted to help her succeed. Maybe there was hope for Rafe after all.

The racer’s edge, she thought to herself, was what every driver strived to achieve – that split second advantage over the opponent. Jim and Rafe had both worked very hard to give her that margin. Everything in the engine had to be precisely timed and perfectly balanced. It was a labor of love for the men. If only Rafe could love me as much, but then that’s totally absurd. Surely, it couldn’t be a sign of his feelings toward her. Foolish girl! She chided herself. The only love Rafe felt was towards the sport that surged

through his veins, whether he was willing to acknowledge it or not. He helped Jim because they are friends and because he was a winner and wanted to see Jim's car become a winner.

She put those aimless ideas in the back of her mind and climbed into the truck, as they towed the car towards the track. When they pulled into pit row, she swallowed the lump in her throat and felt the butterflies stirring in her stomach.

"Nervous?" Jim asked unnecessarily. He knew that until she got out on the track and took a few laps, Ronni was as anxious as a cat on a hot tin roof.

"Sometimes it gets so bad, I feel the need to have someone break both my legs so I can't drive." She laughed dryly. "You would think that I had a gun to my head making me crawl in that car and drive!"

He patted his cousin on her tightly clasped hands. "You have it bad, Ronni. When racing season starts, I think you have motor oil pumping through your veins instead of blood." Together they shared a special moment of understanding and then he told her, "Okay, kid, go sign us in and draw your pill." Jim parked the trailer so they could unload the car.

It had always seemed strange to her that a sport of skill should be started with luck. The drivers had to draw numbers from a box to determine their starting positions. These numbers or pills were then divided and put into heat races. Where you finished in your heat determines your starting position for the main event.

"What pill did you draw?" Jim came walking up behind her at the pit board.

“You’ll never believe my luck! Maybe it’s an omen. If so, Bob won’t get one of his wishes tonight.” She referred to his wish to regain his first place title. “I drew number one! That gives me the pole position for the first heat.” She grabbed her helmet bag and headed for the ladies room to change her clothes.

“Don’t take too long. I think you should hot lap the car tonight.” Jim held up his hand to silence the protest she was about to make. “I know you don’t like to, but we made some big changes and you’ll need to know how to handle the extra horsepower in the turns.” Her dislike of hot lapping was tantamount to an actor’s superstition about whistling in the dressing room. But Jim felt she needed to be sensible about it tonight. He didn’t give in to her pout this time, but firmly pushed her towards the bathroom. “Now hurry.”

Ronni quickly changed into her fire suit. Jim hadn’t wanted her to order black but she loved the way it looked. Men never understand that even in a race car, a girl likes to look good, and look good she did. Even Ronni could admit that when she first put it on in front of her mirror at home. The fire suit was coal black in a two piece cut with a yellow stripe up the side that matched her car. Her name was hand stitched above the breast pocket and her sponsors’ patches were sewn on her right sleeve. It had been custom tailored to accentuate her slender waistline and hug her firm breasts. After tossing her other clothes in her bag, she hurried out to her car and an impatient cousin.

“Come on, cuz. We haven’t got all day and they’ve been out five minutes already!” Jim was helping her into the car and noticed her hesitation. “What are you looking for, or should I say who are you looking for?”

She blushed at his observation and casually said, “I thought maybe Rafe would be here to see all his hard work pay off.”

Jim grinned knowingly. “Ah, well, he gave me a message for you. I wasn’t going to tell you, but it seems he knew you would ask about him.” She frowned but when she didn’t respond, Jim went on, “He said he didn’t want to see the lady racer try and tackle more than she could handle.”

Ronni was flabbergasted, “He did, did he? Well, we’ll see how much I can handle. Help buckle me in!” She was fuming and as Jim helped tighten down her safety harness, he chuckled under his breath.

“Now, don’t lose your cool. Rafe didn’t mean anything by it, I’m sure.” He handed her the helmet through the window.

“I’m not so sure! Don’t worry your pretty head about me. I know this car like the back of my hand and any changes will only increase my ability.” I’m going to push this machine like it hasn’t seen yet.” She flipped the visor down on her helmet and pushed the starter button. All at once the sound of the engine resounded in the pits. Ronni backed the car out and headed down pit row to the track.

Rafe had made her so angry that she didn’t have time to worry about her fears of hot lapping. The track was wet down before the races and all the cars had to go out and pack the water into the clay. This

prepared the surface for racing. These hot laps or wheel packing, as everyone called it, was a messy job because mud got splattered everywhere. The cars and drives were so caked with the wet clay that the pit crews had to scrape mud from the cars. The hot laps served another purpose, that being a chance for car and driver to adjust to each other before the night's program got underway.

Tonight was different for Ronni, though, because she had to be very cautious with the new improvements on her car. She took a few slow, careful laps but as the track was becoming more packed, she decided to see if it would be more than she could handle.

"Okay, baby, let's show Mr. Turner we are a team regardless of his new changes." Ironically she thought of how his touch affected her and with a smile, she thought of his touch now influencing her car's performance.

"We can handle it. I have no doubts." Ronni often talked to herself while racing. If anyone could hear her, they would think she was crazy but it relaxed the tension she felt on the track.

She was just coming out of turn two and decided to push it even harder. The car jerked to life and she was amazed as she started passing the other cars. It seemed as though they were standing still and she was the only one running. Her hands clenched the steering wheel in a newfound respect for her race car.

"Whoa, baby! This is definitely more power than you used to have. I will have to be very careful or Rafe will have his curiosity appeased." She breathed easier

now as she slowed down to head back to the apron of the track and then into the pits.

“You looked good out there, Ronni.” Bob was standing beside a grinning Jim.

“You look like that Cheshire cat from Alice in Wonderland, cuz.” She knew Jim was very pleased with his work.

“Did it run okay?” Jim asked facetiously.

“The engine couldn’t have run any better, but the car felt like it was pushing in the turns.” She knew he wanted to know about any problems now, so he could make adjustments before racing started. Immediately he was all attentive and asked her, “Was it steering alright?”

“Yes, the car steered fine, but the rear end of the car acted like it wanted to pass me.” She hoped her not-so-technical description helped him find the problem.

“Which way was the car pushing you?” He was methodically going through a checklist in his mind.

“It was pushing me high on the track. Is it serious?” She started to get concerned.

“No, I’m pretty sure I can eliminate the problem if I adjust the weight in the rear end.” He went to the car and removed the back fiberglass section. “Ronni, roll that floor jack over her and get this car lifted.”

She knew that when Jim got started on an idea, speed was of the essence. All changes and repairs made in the pits were exceptionally difficult because conditions weren’t always the best. There was poor lighting, repairs usually were speedily done, and the noise sometimes proved to be quite a distraction.

She got the car jacked up and Jim placed the jack stands under the frame near the rear tires. He grabbed his tape measure and calculated the distance from the ground to each tire.

“What are you doing?” Ronni asked puzzled. Through the years as his racing partner, she had seen Jim do a lot of strange things to repair her car, but this was something new.

“Yep. That’s just what I thought.” He stood up and went to the tool box for a crescent wrench.

“Are you going to tell me or do I have to play twenty questions?” She was getting slightly impatient with him.

“Rafe and I didn’t reset the weight distribution when we redid the engine. That’s why I wanted you to hot lap the car. We couldn’t determine the proper setting for the weight jacks until the car was actually running on the track. It will be just a minor adjustment and you’ll be running smoothly again.” He took the wrench and tightened the left weight jack and loosened the right. He re-measured and with satisfaction, told her, “That should do it. You now have four inches higher on the right so it will go through the turns without pushing you.”

He took the hood off and started checking things there. He was always checking the car after she ran it. Jim was very meticulous and took his responsibility as her chief mechanic seriously.

Bob spoke again, surprising Ronni. She had forgotten he was still there beside her.

“Shouldn’t you be getting ready for the trophy dash?” He didn’t notice that she hadn’t realized he was standing there.

“The trophy dash!” Ronni screamed hysterically. “Oh great, how could I forget such a thing. Bob, I can’t do it! I’m too nervous.” Fear clutched her heart as she thought of that next race.

“Oh, come on, Ronni. You have to be out on the track in a few minutes. You mean you really forgot?” Bob sounded doubtful.

“I honestly didn’t remember that I qualified for the trophy dash.” She was coming apart at the seams.

Bob put his arms around her shaking shoulders and drew her to him. “Now, now that’s a good girl. Take big, deep breaths and calm down.”

Oh, Rafe, she thought silently, you should be here holding me. I need to hear your comforting words in my ear, not Bob’s. She was so shook, she felt her stomach tied up in knots and she was starting to hyperventilate.

Bob didn’t know how to handle her quickly failing confidence so he yelled at Jim. “Quick, get over here, Jim! She’s panicked and I don’t know what to do. I think she is going to pass out if we don’t get her to calm down and start breathing steady.” Bob was losing his control, too. Jim had just pinned the car body back into place. He strode over to where they were standing and looked at this cousin’s wildly excited state.

“Ronni! Snap out of it!” Jim yelled at her. Bob had released her and Jim now grabbed her by the shoulders. When she didn’t immediately respond, he shook her.

“Damn it, Veronica Leigh! If you don’t stop acting like this, I’ll pull the car from the line-up.” Jim was trying to get through to her.

“Jim, I’m sorry but I’ve never been in a dash before, and I don’t know if I can meet the pace.” She was very near to tears but he showed no sign of giving in to her fit of fear.

“Maybe Rafe was right.” He interjected. She spun wildly around and snatched her helmet off the top of the car.

“Damn Rafe to the devil! I hate him and his arrogance!” She perched on the window of the car ready to climb in. Jim’s reminder of Rafe’s words was like a cold slap in the face and renewed her intense anger at him.

“Don’t you ever give up on me, Jim Danken! I’ll race this dash and you’ll see that I can compete with anyone!” She was upset because her cousin had never talked so harshly to her.

Jim’s tone was gentler now as he spoke, “Ronni, you know you can do it. A dash is the same as any other race.” The look on his face showed that he had succeeded in his attempt to get her emotionally grounded and back into the race.

A trophy dash was different in the fact that there were only four cars and they took only four laps. It was a distinguished accomplishment to even be in a dash. To qualify, you had to finish in the top four positions from the last race. The line-up was inverted and that meant Ronni was on the back row, outside position. The winner after the four laps got a trophy for their race.

Just then the loudspeaker announced the line-up for that very race.

“Ronni, get in and let’s show Bob that your win last week wasn’t just an accident.” Jim helped her buckle the safety harness and then guided her back out of their space in the pits. Ronni realized that once again she had forgotten about Bob. He had already left them to go ready his car for the dash.

She pulled her car to the front straightaway and shut the engine off. The track officials always made a special effort and had a small ceremony as the flagman introduced each car and the driver. As she was the only woman in this division, Ronni was used to the few hecklers in the stands. Mostly, though, she received a fair portion of the crowd’s shouts.

The flagman motioned the drivers to start their engines and the cars got under way rumbling down the track into turn one. This form of racing began from a running start. The green flag was thrown only if the cars were following the pace set by the pole car, the one in the front, inside position. There was a definite advantage to being in the pole position. If your car started better with a slow start, then you set a slow pace and vice versa. Ronni learned fast, she liked being the pole car but tonight, she would have to concentrate on grabbing a chance at the lead.

The car was running great and they were just coming out of turn four. The flagman was looking them over and satisfied that all were in line, Ronni saw the green flag drop.

Immediately the track came to life with the roar of the engines. Ronni saw her opportunity, so she

punched the gas pedal and managed to squeeze between the two cars in the front row by the time they were coming out of turn one.

“Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you.” She giggled aloud. “Jim and Rafe knew what they were doing!” She had always wanted to do that. At the track, they referred to that move as the ‘slingshot’. It was a thrill to surprise those lead cars and shoot between them before they realized what was going on.

“I can’t believe myself!” She was very excited but quickly got serious. “Now to hang onto this lead for four whole laps.” She knew Bob would be right on her tail. Mirrors were against association rules so a racer had to depend on their sixth sense. When she first started racing, Ronni made a lot of judgment errors, but as her skills progressed, so did her intuition.

Like any other sport, part of successful racing was knowing your opponent. She had watched Bob enough to know that he would be trying his hardest to get past her.

The white flag was thrown and now she had the last lap to go. She still had the lead, but this was beginning to feel like the longest race of her career.

“Where is everybody? I feel as though I’m racing this one all alone.” Ronni knew the others should be right behind her, but she couldn’t feel their presence. Coming out of turn four, she saw the flag stand and the man held the checkered flag.

“No yellow flag, so that means you guys are all right behind me!” She feathered the gas pedal out of that turn and sailed passed the flag stand with the checkered flag flying high above her.

With her heart full of happiness, she slowed down to go back to the pits. “Oh Rafe, where are you? We should be sharing this moment together.”

EIGHT

As she was pulling back into her space in pit row, Ronni was swamped with friends and admirers expressing their congratulations on her victory. Jim didn't even give her a chance to climb out on her own, but grabbed his cousin and physically jerked her out of the car.

"Ronni! Ronni! I always knew it in my bones that with a whole bunch of encouragement, you would be one of the best racers on this circuit!" Jim was his old self now and was more excited than she had ever seen him. You would have thought that he had driven the car himself.

After the excitement died down somewhat, Ronni plopped into one of the lawn chairs and took a deep relaxing breath.

"I think you're giving me more credit than I deserve. That was only a trophy dash. I still have a heat race and the main event to get through yet tonight." She was silently very pleased with her performance, but she also knew who deserved some of the credit for her success.

She shut her eyes and for just a sweet moment quietly thanked her cousin and the man she loved for their hard work.

“Here, dear, you look like you could use something to cool you down!” Bob’s voice dripped with sarcasm but she ignored it, not wanting to fight him at this particular moment. But Bob was deliberately trying to provoke her as he went on to say.

“I hope you don’t drive that fast in the main. I was worried about you. I think Jim has overdone it this time and given you too much horsepower in that engine.” He still held both sodas and as he spoke, she glared at him.

“Oh no! Not you, too!” Ronni jumped out of her lawn chair, faced him and adamantly stated, “I’ve just about had enough of all of your male egos. No one doubts your ability to handle the power your engine has, so why doubt mine?”

He just stammered and couldn’t look her in the face. When he didn’t retort, Ronni angrily concluded, “You and the Rafe Turners of this world can all go straight to the devil!” She turned on her heels and stomped off leaving a shocked Bob sitting alone.

He recovered his control quickly, threw both sodas to the ground and chased after her. “Ronni, please wait for me.” As she had no intention of stopping to argue with him, Bob grabbed her arm and swung her around to face him. Angrily he asked, “What do you mean? I don’t like being compared to Rafe. Have you been seeing him? I have a right to know.” Aware of people staring at them, he jerked her to him and led her to a vacant place behind the concession stand. Bob never liked to put on a public display in the pits.

“Bob, you’re hurting my arm. Let go of me!” She demanded haughtily. He hesitated for a second but

soon realized that he had pushed her too far, and released his hold on her arm.

“In the first place, I resent you manhandling me! If you ever so much as look at me wrong again, it will be the last time, Bob Johnson!” She meant every word.

“I’m sorry, my love, I didn’t mean to hurt you. But I love you so much. I just get crazy with worry when you are on the track.” He was backing down and this only infuriated her.

“I’m not through with you yet!” She was going to make sure he regretted his attack on her. “This is the one and only time I’ll explain myself to you, so you had better listen closely! Rafe likes me as much as a cat likes a dog, but if I decided to have some sort of relationship with someone else, you will be the first to know.” She wondered how she ever thought that she cared for this man. He was totally dominated by her now and his manner thoroughly irritated her.

“Please don’t talk like that, dear. I couldn’t stand to lose you.” He stood there with his head bowed like a whipped puppy.

“I never thought you of all people would question my ability on the track. You taught me everything I know and if it bothers you now that I’m winning, then that’s your problem not mine!” She paused as she heard the loudspeaker crackling out the line-up for the first heat race.

“This is my heat, so we will have to finish this after the races.” She stormed away from Bob towards her car.

She grabbed her gloves and juttred her fingers into them. She climbed in and Jim handed a helmet

through to her. He double checked her safety harness and finally spoke, "Are you okay?"

When she didn't reply, he told her firmly. "I think Bob is trying to play mind games with you so he can have an advantage out on the track. Get yourself under control, Ronni!"

Without saying a word, she started the car and drove to the front straightaway. Sitting there waiting for the rest of the cars in the line-up gave her a few minutes to collect her wits.

Jim was right about one thing, she had to get everything in proportion. One moment of hesitation or one second of inattention could be deadly on the race track. This was no child's game and she had better start controlling her life or she would have no life to control. Just as the flagman motioned the cars to start rolling, she looked over and gave Jim the thumbs up signal. This meant that everything was going to be alright.

"Well, number seventy-nine, it's you and me again. With the pole position and that extra horsepower, we ought to be able to make an easy win of this one." She had decided to put all her concentration on her racing and leave her problems back in the pits. Comically she decided that's where they belong - in the pits!

It took two laps to get the cars all lined up for the start. Coming out of turn four, she saw the green flag wave and with a burst of sudden speed, left no one wondering about her intentions. She grinned with delight as she soon sped away, leaving a cloud of red dust from the now drying track in her wake.

This heat race went surprisingly fast compared to the shorter trophy dash. There were no altercations and soon she received the white flag, signifying one more lap to go.

“So far, so good.” She said with smug satisfaction. “Now to get through this last lap and I’ll have my second race won tonight.”

With no trouble at all, a racer’s dream, she breezed out of turn four and went on to win her race. A small, salty tear managed to squeeze out of her eye and slowly slid down her cheek.

As she pulled her car back into the pits once more tonight, she sighed and sobbed aloud, “Oh, Rafe, darling, if only you were here to see me race. I want you to love me so much, that I would give up the only part in my life right now that means anything, my racing!”

She climbed from her car and removed her helmet to wipe her tears away before her cousin could see. Too late, he had already noticed but mistook them for tears of joy.

“Gee, cuz, I didn’t realize you were so sentimental. You are doing fantastic and if you can take the main event, you’ll have the triple crown tonight!” He was truly excited as he added, “Even Bob has never done that.” Jim took her helmet and set it down for her, before he went over to the car and checked the engine.

She wished she could feel the same excitement as Jim. She had earned her victories but somehow they didn’t seem as important as they once were. There was only one victory that would fill her with such happiness.

A great emptiness washed over her, leaving her with the lack of fulfillment in her soul. She was alone more now than at any time in her life. She wanted to be in her magical meadow right now and escape the hurt she was feeling. Bob had been closer to the truth than he knew, but she had been clever in her answer.

No, Rafe didn't care for her that was more than true enough. But what she hadn't told Bob was of her feelings for Rafe. She loved him, pure and simple. It had happened so fast and without warning. She would live her life for him, if he only would give her a sign. But Rafe was hurting from a deep-rooted pain and he had built a wall around himself.

She thought with despair, "If only I could convince him that my love is real. If only I could penetrate that wall he has built around his heart. If only," She stopped because she knew the futility of such wishes.

Ronni sat down and leaned back in the lawn chair. She shut her eyes and for a wild, extravagant moment was standing in her meadow with Rafe, their arms around each other, the picture of perfect happiness. The races rumbled on around her while she indulged in her own private, sensual fantasies.

"Ronni, my beautiful lady racer, you have brought light to my otherwise dark world." Rafe looked tenderly into her deep, dark eyes. Time stood still as they shared each other's love until he finally lowered his head to claim her lips in a never-ending kiss.

The blood raced through her veins as his embrace tightened and his kiss deepened. She wanted and needed his touch on her now hot skin. She could feel

his desire mounting and wanted to match it with an undeniable need of her own.

“Oh, Rafe, I have longed for this moment. I love you so much that words alone cannot express.” Her voice shook with the anticipation of her love fulfilled.

The sun filtered gently through the tall, stately pines edging the meadow. The ground was cool as he lowered her softly down onto the grassy bed and when he spoke his voice was gruff with wanting her.

“Ronni, my lady, words are only one way to express the love we feel for each other.”

She trembled, not with fear or coldness, but with a longing to express the love she felt. “Please hold me, darling. Never let me go.”

He pressed her to his heaving chest as he spoke, “Wild horses couldn’t keep you from me. I love you more than life itself.”

The wind that until now had been calm started swirling the leaves around the ground as if trying to feed their flaming love.

He tugged carefully at the buttons on her silken blouse and soon released her milky, white breasts to his velvet touch. He bent down and kissed her fully aroused tips, sending shivers of near ecstasy coursing throughout her body. All of nature was in perfect harmony as the two souls merged and they became one.

“Ronni, didn’t you hear the announcer?” Jim looked concerned at her blank expression. “Go quickly and check the board for your position. They just called for the main event line-up.” She jumped up and ran to the pit board.

Jim stared after his cousin with worry in his thoughts. She was on an emotional tight wire and the last time he saw her so preoccupied was right after her parents' death. It took several years to get her back to a normal existence. He pounded his fists on the back of the car in a fit of anger.

"Damn! Neither one of those men are worth their weight in salt if they destroy her. I'll never forgive them." He muttered aloud as he kicked at the ground.

"Jim, I'm sorry I didn't hear the line-up call. I didn't mean to upset you." Ronni had seen him pound the car.

"Oh, Ronni, I'm not mad at you." He was reluctant to tell her his fears. To race a driver needed to be in top physical and mental condition. Otherwise, mistakes can be made and these errors can very often be fatal. He knew she had been upset over her discovery of love for Rafe and now Bob was putting pressure on her.

"Please, help me buckle in this last time tonight." Ronni asked quietly.

"You sound tired, cuz. You don't have to race this main. The world wouldn't stop turning if you pulled out." He was trying to talk her out of this race. "I know you have a lot on your mind but, Ronni, don't take a chance with your life!" She just smiled and patted his hand. As an afterthought he firmly stated, "Neither Rafe nor Bob is worth that price." Jim knew her better than anyone else and he pleaded with her to reconsider starting that race.

“I’ll be fine, Red. Trust me to know my limitations. I’ll be the one to decide if I need to pull out of a race.” She reassured him.

She pulled the car to the front straightaway and got into her position in the third row, inside place. There were twenty cars in the main event and it always took a short while to get everyone lined up.

With the engine silent, she looked over to the crowd and hopefully scanned them looking, searching for his face. He was there, she was sure. He was watching her now; she could feel it in her bones. That same electricity she had felt the very first time they met was now rushing through her tense body, and as she held onto the steering wheel, she felt his masterful touch curl around her own nervous hands. A strange euphoria settled down on her and she knew he was going to help her drive this race. This was the way it should be, she thought, we could be the perfect team in life as well as racing. She felt a new confidence as the announcer finished the line-up and motioned the drivers to start their engines.

“This last time is all I’m asking.” She patted the steering wheel affectionately. “Well, at least all I’m asking from you for tonight.” She wanted to win this race in the worst way and she knew she could do it with heads-up driving. No mental errors could be made. She felt Rafe’s presence to help assure her success.

Every time out on the track, she had learned something new. The idea that would help tonight was the fact that no race was won or lost in the first lap. She was in the fifth position, so for the beginning of the

race, all she had to do was maintain that place, choose her groove, and then start passing cars, one at a time.

The crowd was on their feet in excitement as the green flag was thrown. The noise of twenty cars roaring into turn one passing the grandstands was deafening. In some places, the cars were three abreast and it seemed a sure bet that they would definitely crash. The drying red clay from the track formed a billowing cloud from the tires of the cars, as twenty speed-hungry drivers surged through number one turn. If the pack of cars made it through this turn successfully, the race usually went with very few wrecks.

As she came in view of the safety man in turn two, Ronni saw no yellow caution flag so the race was on. Her strategy was to pass a car each lap and then hang onto the lead.

Carefully she worked her way through the speeding cars making swift, precise moves. The car, thanks to Jim's extra efforts in the pits, was still at peak performance and as she passed the flag stand and received that halfway sign, she had captured the lead position.

"Okay, now we have to be totally calm." She cautioned herself, because although she had the lead, she also had another ten laps to go and anything could happen in that length of time. She thought again of the tall, dark, brooding man that had invaded her life. Please, Rafe, help guide me through to victory.

Suddenly the flagman in turn two frantically waved his yellow caution flag and all of the safety crew was pointing to turn three. She immediately

slowed her car down as she approached that corner known as the widow-maker. Turn three was so dubbed because a driver speeding out of the back straightaway had to be exceptionally cautious when taking that curve of the track. It was sharper than the others, and if a driver was too high on the track, that notorious wall seemed to jump out and grab the race car, bending metal and destroying a driver's chance at victory. Once a car hit the wall at those high speeds, very little of the man or machine was left.

Ronni swore an unladylike curse because this yellow flag meant a touch of bad luck for her. Under the yellow flag, the other cars line up directly behind the lead position, cutting her advantage down. This gave the second place car a better chance at taking over the lead when the green flag was thrown again.

Each lap that they took under the yellow counted towards the total. She watched the safety crew working furiously to clear the track of the wrecked car. The tow truck was dragging the dead carcass of number 182 off the track as she passed for the third time. Once more lap went by and she saw they had the corner free again, so all drivers were prepared to get the green flag this time around.

The cars were now lined up in single file as they came out of turn four looking for that green flag.

Ronni knew she had to be in first place when they all came out of the first turn and as she saw the signal, she put the pedal to the metal and prayed for the maximum power her car possessed. She knew the second place car would be giving it his all to pass her now.

She was exploding from turn one into two when suddenly she got a whopping jolt on the right side of her car. Her immediate reaction was anger, because someone was trying to pass her and they weren't caring how they did it.

She looked in shocked dismay as she saw Bob's car smashing into her passenger door. He was deliberately trying to push her off the track onto the apron.

"So, you were the second place car! Oh no, you don't!" She yelled into her own ears as her helmet kept the sound trapped inside. "You aren't going to push me around, Bob Johnson!" She turned her wheels directly into his car and the two of them went through the turn, sides scraping, sparks flying from the grinding metal, and locked in mortal combat! She knew that by the rules of good sportsmanship that they both should ease up and untangle themselves, but instinct told her that Bob was out to win this race at any cost – even her life!

It was all happening much too fast for her natural reaction of fear, instead it only fueled the anger she felt. Now she reached to the very depths of her being for the courage to drive away from him. She punched the gas and with a neck-snapping lurch, pulled away from his car leaving him eating her dust.

However, things were still not right! "Oh, my God, I think he punctured my tire." She knew this because the car was pulling to the right. It took all of her already taxed strength and muscle power to keep the car straight on the track. As she passed the flag stand, she saw the white flag and she exclaimed in frustration, "One more lap! I can't stop now! Come on, baby,

we can win this one. Please don't quit on me." She coaxed her car.

The strained lines in the man's face were white with fear. He knew his lady racer was going to push hard this last lap and that she wasn't going to give up. "Ronni, you little fool! If you go and break that beautiful neck of yours, I'll never forgive myself!" Rafe was on his feet and gripped the railing on the grandstands. I should have never helped Jim give her more power. I couldn't bear it if anything happens to her.

The car heaved to the right as she came out of the second turn and she saw shreds of rubber flying over her onto the track. She realized that she was now running on the bare rim, and if the devil himself was on her tail, she couldn't have gone any faster.

Jim was past the panic state by this time. He saw the tire disintegrate and thought for sure she would roll the car. But to his total amazement, she emerged out of the widow-maker and started down the last few yards. The loss of her tire caused the brake to rub and the whole rim was a vivid, flame red from the friction. He only hoped that she would be able to stop the car without a wreck.

As soon as she saw the checkered flag waving wildly overhead, she started the slowing-down process. Ronni knew that an abrupt stop would send her end over end, rolling the car. Finally, somewhere along the back side of the pits, she rolled to a halt.

A wave of people flooded around her as she climbed from the car. She was hugged and kissed from all sides. She could see the crowd in the stands waving and shouting for her. Jim ran over to where

she was standing and quickly had her in a big, bear hug. He was ecstatic and as he released her, was grabbing and dancing with anyone that walked too close to him.

The loudspeaker interrupted their celebration as the announcer called for the winners of each division to bring their cars to the front of the track. The presentation of the trophies was always a crowd pleaser and it gave the press a chance to take pictures in the winner's circle.

Jim hurriedly grabbed a spare tire to put onto the car so Ronni could drive it to the presentation. She knew that very few drivers in the history of Benton Speedway had won all three races in one night, let alone a woman! Already, the flashes of the cameras were going off in her direction as fans poured from the stands in eagerness to see the lady champion racer. Her eyes strained to see his familiar, black wavy hair or his cowboy hat topping over the crowd. But try as she might, Ronni never saw him.

She did see Dr. Shaw come through the gates onto the track. It pleased her that her boss and friend had come to support her. Or did she? She watched as Dr. Shaw searched for Jim and went straight to him. They acted like two bashful teenagers at their first dance. Soon, Dr. Shaw turned to Ronni and gave her a big hug. "Congratulations, Veronica. I understand this is quite a coup for you!"

After the trophy ceremony most of the crowd retreated to Avery's, but she and Jim stayed a little longer to collect her winnings. This would be quite a purse to add to their account.

“Jim, look at all that money!” Ronni’s eyes were huge as the cashier counted out the bills on her open palm. “I hope the repairs don’t take all of this. I would like to buy a new helmet or something!” She laughed with excitement dancing on her face.

“You mean you really want to buy a helmet?” Jim teased, “I know you better than that! It will be a new dress or skirt or something as impractical, cuz.” He was happy to see the restored liveliness in Ronni’s manner.

“Oh, you’re awful.” She knew his playfulness was just to aggravate her and not meant seriously. “Come on, sweet cousin. Let’s go have one hell of a celebration! I think you might want to dance with a certain doctor.” She teased gently as arm in arm, they strode over to the truck and left to join the party already in full force.

NINE

The music from the country and western band, The Timbermen, floated with the breeze to Ronni's listening ears.

"Hurry, Jim, I want to go and dance till the cows come home!" She moved her slender body in time with the song.

"You sound like your Aunt Louise with her old sayings." Jim locked the truck and led a dancing Ronni into Avery's.

"Hey, everyone! Here she comes! Now we can really celebrate." Someone shouted from within the dimly lit room. A huge cheering noise started and Ronni became embarrassed at the commotion being made in her honor. She dashed into the ladies room and for a few seconds stared at the image in the mirror.

"Well, young lady, what do you do now? They think you are something special." She pulled the bandana from her head and started brushing the sweat and tangles from her long, dark hair. Once a reasonable order had been restored to her somewhat haggard appearance, she took a deep breath and went out to the waiting crowd.

As she was trying feebly to push through the crowded room, people were grabbing her hands and

patting her on the back. Some even congratulated her with a kiss on her flushed cheeks.

The room was slightly quieter now as the band had taken a break. "Ronni! We're over here!" Someone was definitely trying to get her attention. She held her hands over her forehead and focused her eyes to where the sound emanated. Bob and his crew were at a corner booth waving for her to come and join them.

"Oh, I'll join you alright. I have some things to straighten out with Bob about his driving attack on me tonight." She muttered to herself. Ronni was fully aware of the fact that she should have formally protested Bob's rough driving, but she felt that as friends, they could settle it between themselves, or at least she hoped she could make him see he was wrong.

Before she could say anything, Bob grabbed her and pulled her roughly to him. He kissed her full on the lips, but she put her hands to his chest and forcibly pushed herself away from his pawing grasp.

"Bob, what's gotten into you?" She forgot her anger at his rough driving as she smelled the alcohol on his breath. She immediately decided that now was not the opportune moment to start their discussion about the incident on the track.

Sneering, he spoke sarcastically to her, "I'm just giving the new triple crown champion a well-deserved kiss!" His words were slurred.

"You've been drinking and I think you've had enough." She was struggling to keep out of his grasp. She was afraid of this side of Bob. This was behavior she had never seen from him before now.

The band started a rousing, fast-paced number and Bob seized her hand, dragging her to the dance floor. "Come on, Ronni. Let's dance!" He stumbled a bit as he turned to take her in his arms.

She tried to pry his fingers off her arms as he pulled her to his side. "Bob, I don't want to dance. You're hurting me!" She hissed under her breath. Ronni didn't want to create a scene here, especially in front of the people from the track.

He swayed on his feet as he turned to face her. His speech was slightly slurred as he cruelly spoke, "What you mean to say is that you don't feel like dancing with me. I'll bet if Rafe was here, you would be falling all over yourself to be in his arms!"

"I won't even justify that idiotic statement with an answer! I'm not going to stand here and be insulted or pawed!" She swung around and started to push her way through the mass of bodies on the crowded dance floor.

Bob swore and lunged at her, catching Ronni off guard. He had her in a tight, menacing grip as he spat out at her.

"Oh, no you don't, big shot racer! I have a surprise for you and now is as good a time as any." He motioned to the leader of the band and the music stopped.

"Attention, everyone! I want to say something." Bob yelled for the noise to cease and soon he had the crowd's curiosity aroused. Ronni was too stunned with his behavior to stop him from doing or saying anything.

With a sly look in her direction, Bob released his grip on Ronni and faced the waiting people. "I have the great pleasure to announce that Ronni and I will be getting married! She just agreed to set the date."

Ronni couldn't believe her ears as she stood there in a trance. The fans surged towards the 'happy' couple and she felt like she was drowning in a sea of people. The bombshell Bob had just dropped on her created a burden too heavy for Ronni to cope with.

The band started to play a new song and she was grabbed from the side. Someone was dancing with her, but before she could register that fact, she was whisked out the side door. The damp, cool night air hit her like a slap in the face. As she felt the numbness leaving, she turned to her captor and a thousand raging flames flickered throughout her shocked system as she recognized her savior.

"Rafe!" Her voice was little more than a hoarse whisper as she spoke, "Where did you come from?" She felt faint from the quick change of temperature and he put his hands out to steady her. His touch was firm but gentle and she leaned against his strong chest for just a few seconds of peace and security.

He looked so handsome and her heart beat so loudly, she was sure he could hear it. He had on tight-fitting jeans with a western style shirt. His cowboy hat was shaped the way the bull riders in the rodeo wear, but even then, his unruly, black silken hair hung slightly down his forehead. He looked like her knight in shining armor, lacking only a horse, she thought smiling.

He finally spoke, "He'll never have you, lady racer." He towered over her and with a groan, crushed her to his lithe body, kissing at her hairline.

He didn't try to further the sensual tension between them, but was content to hold her. He stroked her hair and she felt the same peace that had enveloped her in the race car.

He pushed her back so he could see into her eyes as he taunted, "You'll walk all over him and be bored before the morning dawns on your honeymoon."

Determined not to get angry, she hesitated before asking, "What makes you the expert? You don't know me as well as you would like to think you do." She didn't want to fight with this tall, sexy man. She just wanted to have his arms hold her and feel his tantalizing lips on her own, bringing their denied passions to surface.

Ronni fought hard the urge to disclose her love to him. She longed to agree with him about Bob. She now knew that she would never be satisfied with anything that Bob could give her in the name of love. The feelings that Rafe had awakened in her would scream for fulfillment.

"I know that what is between you and me will not let you alone. Until we have our fill of each other, you will never know a minute's peace!" He said it with a touch of arrogance, but was his arrogance covering up his own insecurity?

At these words, she lost the control she fought to keep. "Why do you do this to me? You come along and sweet talk, but leave me flat when the time comes for any sort of commitment."

She pulled herself away from his hold and struggled to keep the tears back. "You run from love as fast as you race, and I won't be hurt that way!" She spoke in broken sobs as the tears slid down her face. She wiped them back with her hand before turning to face him. As long as Rafe wasn't willing to meet her halfway, she couldn't let him know of her undying love. "Leave me alone! I just might marry Bob and you'll have to accept it."

Those last words tore out her heart to say them, but it was necessary for her survival. Now she needed the physical strength to walk away from him. Tenderly he took her face in his rough palms and softly caressed his thumb across her pouting lips.

Move you idiot! Her head screamed to her heart. Move before you lose all to him! But she lifted her lips to meet his, and the warnings were forgotten as she swam in a sea of forbidden love.

Breathlessly, he whispered in her ear, "Accept it? That I'll never do, darlin', he'll never have all of you, I'll be able to take what I want, when I want. You feel it. Something happened from the very beginning and we both know it."

"Rafe Turner, you are the most arrogant, egotistical, self-centered man I've ever had the displeasure of knowing!" She was shaking with anger as she lashed out at him. "I will marry Bob and you'll never have what I will give to him freely."

"You push me too far, Ronni!" He went to seize her arm, but before he could, the door opened and Bob stepped out.

“I should have known I would find you with him.” Bob sneered and pointed to Rafe.

She stepped between them and tiredly told him, “Don’t start anything, Bob, he was just going back inside.” She led Bob a few steps away and said flatly, “We need to talk, but I’m too tired tonight. I’m going home.”

Bob sarcastically snapped back at her, “But the queen of the racing circuit can’t go yet! Your covey of admirers wants to toast you. You can’t let them down.”

Rafe, who had been silent during the exchange between them, opened the door and mockingly bowed for her to enter. She avoided his gaze, and with as much dignity as she could muster, Ronni strode into the lounge.

She forced a smile to cross over her scowling face and with a full glass of champagne the waiter had just handed her, raised it in salute to the cheering crowd. It was tingling all the way down and in her erratic emotional state, the effects hit her faster than normal. She had several more when someone started to chant, “Speech! Speech!”

Ronni raised her hands in protest, but the rest of the people joined in and before she knew it, she was being pushed towards the bandstand.

She looked at her side to see Bob shoving her to the microphone. She pleaded to him with her eyes as she had no desire to speak tonight, or any other night for that matter.

“Come on, Ronni. Don’t be a spoilsport. They just want a few words from their champion!” He bitterly emphasized the last word.

She had lost track of Rafe’s whereabouts since they had come in and now, she searched for his presence to no avail. Reluctantly, she stepped up on the bandstand and as she held the microphone, the crowd grew quiet anticipating her words.

“I’m not exactly sure of what you want me to say.” She laughed nervously. “I would like to take time to thank you for the cheering support you all give me in the stands on race nights. It really helps boost my confidence.”

She shrugged her shoulders and started to step away when someone yelled for her to tell of her hopes and dreams for the next races. “I hope to keep winning, of course!” She stated matter-of-factly. The crowd laughed at the seriousness of her answer.

Quietly, his deep resonant voice cut from the crowd. “It takes more than a fast engine and luck to keep on winning.”

Like Moses parting the sea, the crowd pulled back and a path was opened directly to Rafe. Through the smoke-filled room, she finally saw him leaning on the bar, his arms folded in front of himself. He was smiling but the cold, hard steel look in his eyes told her that he was not going to let her off easy.

As she started to speak, he cocked his hat back on his head so he could see her completely. “Are you trying to tell me that you think I’ve just been lucky?” She didn’t like what Rafe was doing to her, but as she

attempted to climb down from the bandstand, he spoke again.

“I think you have the potential to be a great racer but,” the pause was nerve racking but intentional. “There are a few lessons you haven’t yet learned.”

There was a deathly quiet silence as the normally boisterous crowd watched this verbal tennis match go back and forth between Ronni and Rafe. She looked to Bob for support, but immediately saw she wasn’t going to get any from him. This is Rafe’s way of getting back at me for the scene outside, she thought miserably.

“I suppose that you think you are the one to teach me how to be a great race car driver?” Ronni’s barbs found the bull’s eye and she saw him flinch. Her brown eyes blazed crimson with a raging fire fueled by a fast-growing anger. Rafe still didn’t answer and what seemed hours passed by.

“I repeat, Mr. Turner, do you think you are the right man to teach me what I need to know?” She feared the heavy stillness hanging over the room.

“I don’t know about being Mr. Right but, I’d love to teach you all a girl should know. Your place or mine?” He took his time as he looked her over, undressing her with his eyes. The crowd loved the sexual implication in his retort. After the whoops died down, he added seriously, “But, I was referring to your driving ability, not your sexual prowess.”

“Now, you’ve done it! If you think I’m going to stand here and let a washed-up driver tell me how to race, you have another think coming! Please be so kind as to explain to me why the great Rafe Turner

isn't back into racing if he knows all the answers?" She stood there, still wearing her fire suit, her eyes blazing and as she straightened to her full height, her dark curly locks fell down her back with the electricity in the room bouncing from the sheen.

"My reasons are my own. I simply wanted to help you race better the next time." Rafe seemed to have gotten caught in his own trap.

"The only way you'll know if I've done better, is to come to the track. Better yet," She drew a sharp breath as she searched for the courage to finish her statement. She swallowed the lump in her throat as the still-silent crowd waited anxiously for her to continue.

"Better yet, I challenge you to a grudge match! You and me, alone, on the track for eight laps. Then everyone will know who needs to be taught!" She felt the world stop its motion while they waited for him to accept her challenge.

She met his stare and saw the cold, hard eyes of an enemy. She had lost him before she ever had a chance to win his love with her persistent prodding about his return to racing. He knew what she had done by challenging him in front of the people they both knew from the race track.

Now, he also knew what he had to do. Speaking slowly and deliberately, he told her, "I'm having my car brought out here by my pit crew. We will be ready to meet you on the track before the trophy dash next month. But, I need to know one thing before I accept!"

She found her reluctant voice and shakily asked, "What is it?" Her knees were about to collapse and she wished this was all a very, bad dream.

He stood up and readjusted his hat. He never looked better to her than at this moment. She loved this man desperately, but because of her foolish pride, had lost forever any chance of winning his love. Never again would she feel his arms around her. Never would she know the sexual ecstasy of his lovemaking. Her heart grew cold and lifeless within her trembling body.

He spoke gently as if for her ears alone, "Do I win the lady when I win the race?" He turned and left, never really wanting to hear her answer.

She quickly jumped off the bandstand and headed for her chair as the band started playing a lively tune. The crowd had started talking again and soon the party was back in full swing.

She collapsed in her seat and reached for her drink. As she touched the glass to her lips, Jim appeared out of nowhere. By his side was Dr. Shaw.

"Are you crazy? What on God's green earth possessed you to challenge Rafe? Of all people to race against, why him?" He shot the questions at her. "Really, Ronni, he is the best driver I've ever seen!"

Before she answered her cousin, Ronni signaled the waiter for another drink. When that too, was gone, she finally spoke.

"Don't you see? This was the only way I could think of to get him back into racing, and hopefully, he can get over his bitterness. Without racing, that man

is like a fish out of water." She smiled weakly and sat back to finally relax.

Jim was amazed at his cousin's admission. "You honestly do love him." He ran his hand through his hair, but still puzzled about something, asked her, "I don't understand one thing, though. Why did you agree to marry Bob tonight in front of this whole place?" He gestured with his hands. He looked to Dr. Shaw for answers, for help, but found she was just standing there smiling at Ronni.

Ronni laughed aloud at Jim's question as the drinks were taking effect and she was beyond feeling any pain. "I'm sorry for laughing, cuz, but that seems so funny to me now. You see, I never agreed to marry him. In fact, I almost tried to do quite the opposite and break away from him."

"Then, why the big announcement? What is Bob trying to do?" Jim scratched his head in confusion.

"You're a man; surely you can figure that one out!" She snapped at him and was immediately sorry. "I'm sorry, Jimmy. I'm afraid I've had too much to drink tonight."

"You sure have had quite an evening. Winning the triple crown, announcing your engagement, and challenging Rafe. What next?" He joked with her, but added seriously, "Why did Bob do that?"

"He's had a severe blow to his ego. I have done what he couldn't by winning all three races, so I think to save his image he wants to claim me for his own. That way, he gets credit for having a wife that also happens to be a champion driver!" She giggled again. "It sort of keeps it all in the family."

As Jim was watching another table, he spoke gently and nodded his head in that direction. "If he keeps that up..." He spoke as Ronni turned in the direction he indicated. She saw Bob getting close to female race fan, their heads together and looking very intimate. "He'll have trouble convincing the public his intentions are honorable."

He turned to see if the scene they had just observed was a shock to his cousin. She was void of any expression.

"I'm sorry, Ronni. Does it bother you to see them?" He was slightly afraid that her silence meant she was upset.

"Actually, it takes a load off my mind. I don't want any ties with Bob." She didn't feel the slightest twinge of jealousy. In fact, the only thing she felt was relief and a little bit sorry for that woman.

Jim stood up and nudged her. "Come on, cousin dear, you have had enough for one night. Let's get you home."

He turned to Dr. Shaw and shrugged his shoulders. "I guess I'll take a rain check for that dance. I've got to get her home." He smiled as she agreed with his intentions.

"Another time, James." She patted his arm and turned back to her own table.

As they made their way through the crowd, she came face to face with Rafe. Their eyes locked and for a few seconds, there was only the two of them in the world. The band was playing an old tune and the words filtered their way into her mind and heart, 'I

just kissed the one I love for the last time, never have her sweet lips felt so good’.

Ronni raised herself up and placed a gentle, tender kiss lightly on his lips. It wasn’t a sensual kiss or a long kiss, but it meant something very special.

Slowly she pulled away and followed Jim out to the truck. Her heart was heavy but there was a peace in her soul.

“You okay, cuz?” Jim was worried about her.

“I’m going to be fine, Jimmy. I have a lot of work ahead of me, but all is going to be as it should be.”

TEN

“Come on, Rafe, I can hear the music. Open up!” Ronni pounded on the door of the Benton mansion. She tested the knob and found it unlocked and opened it slightly. “Rafe!” She cried into the interior of the house. As she ventured further inside, she realized the music was coming from downstairs in the basement. The door was open and slowly, Ronni took the steps to the space below, not sure what she was going to find.

Completely taken aback, Ronni took in the sight before her. The basement had been transformed into a complete gym with all the equipment necessary to keep an entire football team in shape. She noticed the treadmill, the stair stepper, free weights and then her eyes stopped on the spa. Rafe was sitting in the hot tub, his eyes closed and his head leaning back on the side. The strains of George Strait surrounded the room in music.

Not sure what his reaction would be, she moved forward slowly. The padding on the floor muffled her footsteps, so when she reached out to touch his arm, Rafe jumped at the contact.

“What the hell?”

“Sorry, I knocked, no one answered.” Ronni backed up a bit.

“What are you doing here?” He demanded as he left the spa and found a towel. His usual wild hair was wet and completely out of control. The urge to smooth it back in place consumed Ronni. She tried to not stare at his body, but failed miserably as she took in his glistening frame.

Snapping her attention back to reality, Ronni explained, “You missed your first physical therapy appointment.”

“As you can see, Ms. Danken, I am already pursuing my own treatment plan for my recuperation.” He motioned his hand to include the entire remodeled basement.

“Mr. Turner,” She mimicked him back. You are hardly qualified to conduct an effective treatment plan.” The tension in the room was almost palatable. “Dr. Shaw has approved the plan I prepared and I am here to make sure that we start your treatment.”

“I don’t need you. I don’t need your treatment plan.” He stubbornly refused to cooperate.

She moved around the room taking in the well-equipped basement. The only thing the room was lacking was a pool. Obviously there wasn’t enough room, otherwise he would have put that in too.

“Rafe, I am the expert. This is my field of specialty. I can help you.” She tried to appeal to him.

“Give it up! I don’t need nor want you here. I don’t want you anywhere. I don’t want you in my life!” He growled.

His anger was a force to be reckoned with, but Ronni was determined to be stronger. “Rafe, you have a little over a month to get ready for the race and I intend to get you physically prepared.” Convincing him to allow her to help was going to take much more effort than she originally thought.

“I intend to win that race.” She stated firmly, watching the scowl deepen on his face. She didn’t back down and looked him directly in his blue eyes. “I want to make a deal with you.” She waited to see if he would take the bait.

“What deal?” Despite his feigned indifference, she could tell his curiosity was peaked. “Tell me, lady racer, what do you want from me?” He allowed his towel to fall and stood there in just his swim trunks. His upper body was still in great shape, but the scars on his right leg were an ugly red. If she was serious, she had to be able to face the terrible scars on his leg as well as the scars on his heart and mind.

“I will work with you daily to get you into a much better shape. In return, I want you to teach me how to be a better racer.” She waited for his reaction.

“That’s rich. You want me to teach you how to beat me?” His voice held disbelief.

“Yes, you are the best and I have a lot to learn. Why not learn from the best?”

He moved restlessly around her and went to grab his shirt from the hook on the wall. As he pulled it down over his head, she waited anxiously. The music still filled the room around them. George Strait sang about unconditional love and a promise to give all that he had to give to make a dream come true.

Ironic, she thought, as she listened to the words floating about them. Please, Rafe let me help your dreams come true. Let me help you come back to life and race again.

“Okay,” he finally spoke. “But there are certain terms I insist on.”

“Name them.”

“We do all the physical work here in my gym. I have all the equipment necessary and if you need something else, I’ll get it. I’ve looked at your proposed schedule and I don’t think it’s enough. I’m tired of using that cane and I want to be able to successfully drive my race car in a month.” He held up his hand to stop her from interrupting. “I intend to do that with or without your help.”

“Is there anything else?” She felt he was not finished.

He looked at her and knew she would not be prepared for his final condition. “This is strictly business between us, nothing personal!” He watched the pain cross over her face but admired her restraint.

“Agreed.” She hoped her voice was stronger than she felt. “I agree to all of your terms. Get ready, Mr. Turner, we have a lot to do. I intend to push you harder than you have ever been pushed before.”

She finally sat her bag down and walked over to the massage table. “Please, get on the table. Since you just got out of the spa, I can start the massage on your leg.”

He sat down and swung his legs up on the table.

“Lie down and try to relax.” She started to lightly touch his right leg. “Our biggest concern is muscle

atrophy. When there is an injury such as you had, it affects the nerve that connects to the muscle. It's called neurogenic atrophy. A technique for strengthening the leg is to focus on three planes of movement. We will work on a front to back, side to side, and a rotational form of exercise." She continued her gentle massaging of his leg.

So far, so good, he thought. I can do this. I can ignore these feelings in my heart. He focused on her touch and willed his body to relax.

"I will give you some exercises to do on a regular basis. It would be better if we had a pool. Hydrotherapy is used to reduce the muscle workload." She spoke softly as she continued to manipulate the muscle tissue.

"Another treatment we can use is ultrasound. I know you don't have that type of equipment down here." She knew she had agreed to conduct all the treatments here, but she had to make him realize that going to the clinic would be beneficial too. She was in her element as a physical therapist. For these few minutes it was strictly professional and she felt the heady sensation of being able to help someone towards healing.

"There, that should do it for today. Let me show you those exercises. You can do these several times a day." She went to her bag and retrieved three rubber balls. She showed Rafe how to use the balls in simple exercises to include the three planes of movement.

"I will see you tomorrow at the same time." She started to pack her bag and turned to head up the stairs.

“Ronni,” The sincerity in Rafe’s voice stopped her in her tracks. “Thank you for coming.”

She felt he wanted to say more but understood when he went back to practicing the exercise she gave him. Ronni went up the stairs and let herself out the front door. She sat in her car for a moment, resting her head on the steering wheel. Lord, give me the strength, she silently prayed. Help me to remember the goal getting Rafe back to full strength and health.

For the next several days, they fell into a pattern. Ronni went to the mansion and helped him with massage and several different exercises. They both worked hard to keep their relationship on a strictly business level. By Saturday, Ronni had to force herself to go to Rafe’s house. How much longer could she pretend that she didn’t care, that she didn’t love him?

She parked her car and as she started up the steps to the front porch, she was surprised to see Rafe sitting on one of the chairs. “Rafe, what are you doing here? Am I late?”

“Not at all,” he stood up and reached for a bag sitting at his feet. “I thought that we could start your training today.”

“My training? I’m not sure you’re ready for that.” She was unsure how to handle him in this situation.

“Come on, lady racer, surely you’re not afraid?” He propelled her towards her car. His limp was not as pronounced but he still used his cane. “You can drive us to the track.”

“The track?”

“If you’re going to repeat everything I say, it’s going to take twice as long to get there and we are wasting

time, darlin’.” He settled himself in the passenger’s seat after he helped her in her side of the car.

“We’re going to Benton raceway?” She started the car and turned down the lane to the road.

He simply shook his head.

They arrived just a few minutes later. For the second time that day, Rafe thoroughly surprised her. Sitting in the pits were several race cars including her own. Jimmy was there as well as a group of men she didn’t know.

“Rafe, I don’t have my fire suit or my safety equipment. I’m not really prepared to race in these.” She indicated her scrubs.

“I had Jim bring your stuff. I want you to meet my crew. I have a car that is a two-seater for training purposes. I just want to see what you can do up close and personal today.” He was already getting out of her car; his eyes caught hers for a few moments. The men stopped their conversation and came towards the two of them.

“Hey, cuz, how’s it going?” Jim greeted her.

“Guys, I’d like you to meet Ronni Danken, Jim’s cousin. She races here at the speedway. This is Dustin, Scott, and J.D. They are one of the best crews in the entire racing world.” Rafe spoke proudly of his friends.

“Hello,” Ronni suddenly seemed shy. “What’s up?”

“Here, cuz, go and change into your fire suit.” Jim handed her the bag he held.

She went towards the ladies room, still mystified by the turn of events. She had tried to prepare herself to face Rafe in his gym once more. It was getting

harder and harder to maintain her professionalism when all she wanted to do was love him. She was totally unprepared by his plans for the day.

As she headed out of the ladies room with her fire suit on, Ronni took in the scene before her. Jim was in her car, the others were also in cars and Rafe was waiting for her beside a fourth car. The man called J.D. was talking with him.

“What now?” She was visibly unsure of what to expect. Rafe finished with J.D. and turned to face her. “Get in.” He struggled but climbed in the passenger side.

“Rafe!” She exclaimed with frustration. “What do you want me to do?”

“Get in, put this helmet on and buckle up.”

Ronni did as she was told even though her natural tendency was to protest. Jim was here and if he was involved, she didn’t think it could be all that bad. As she put on the helmet and buckled the chin strap, she received another shock. Rafe’s words came into her ears loud and clear. The helmet was equipped with a radio.

“Well, lady racer, let’s see what you can do. Take us out and go slowly so you can get used to this car.” She shivered at the deep timbre in his voice.

Ronni pressed the start button and the car lit up. She grinned and felt the adrenaline surging through her veins. I’ll show him, she thought confidently. She pressed the gas pedal and immediately stalled the car.

She heard his laughter and was embarrassed at her own foolishness. As she restarted the car, Ronni slowly pushed the gas and headed out onto the track. They

took several laps and she waited for more instructions from Rafe. When they didn't come, she pushed the car faster.

"Is that all you got, darlin'?" She finally heard him say. "How am I supposed to help you if you putter around the track like grandma going to Sunday dinner?" He taunted her.

"Okay, Mr. Turner, you asked for it." She was feeling the power of the car and was confident that she could handle it. She punched it and they started the fourth lap around the track.

All of a sudden, she heard the roar of the other cars. They were no longer alone on the track. Gathering her wits about her, Ronni tuned in to the whereabouts of the guys. Jimmy was as competent on the track as most and she knew he would push their car to prove that it was the best. She had no idea as to the ability of Rafe's team but had to believe they could hold their own.

As she rounded turn three, the widow-maker, Ronni's competitiveness kicked in. She wanted to be out front, she wanted to win even when there wasn't a race to win. She pushed the car faster. At this point, she almost forgot that Rafe was in the car with her until she heard him swear.

"Don't jerk! You must be one with the car. You must create fluid movements."

For a quick moment, his words made her chuckle. Be one with the car. What kind of Zen nonsense was that? She had no time to reflect further as Jim passed her in their car. Ignoring Rafe's instructions, she pressed forward and tried to regain her lead.

Finally, she saw that J.D. had the white flag waving in the front straightaway. Great, if she didn't act swiftly, she would lose this race. She quickly moved her car to the higher groove on the track. "Are you sure you want to do that?" Rafe's voice came through loud and clear.

"Damn!" She swore. She was so involved in the race that she practically forgot he was in the car. He was right. She shouldn't be driving on the high side of the track. That was a rookie mistake and she just made it with Rafe in the car. There wasn't enough time to correct her mistake. She just had to deal with it when the checkered flag was thrown for Jim.

She slowed the car down and headed back to the pits. As she climbed from the car and took the helmet off, Ronni hesitated before looking at Rafe.

He climbed slowly from the car and reached for the cane that J.D. handed to him. He unstrapped his own helmet and took it off. All the time, he was silent.

"I blew it, huh?" She asked rather timidly.

"Thanks, guys." Rafe took the time to show his appreciation to them. They started to clean up the equipment and load the cars back on the trailers. Ronni felt like the day had been a total waste. Rafe still hadn't answered her.

"Rafe?"

"Lady racer, take me home and we'll talk." He limped over to her car. She got in the door he held open for her and sighed. The short trip back to the Benton mansion was done in silence.

They climbed the steps to the house and Rafe sat down on the front porch. “Ronni,” Rafe began. “Tell me what you did right.”

When she hesitated, he reached over and pulled her down beside him. “Don’t beat yourself up. Just tell me what you think you did right.” He patted her on the knee in comfort.

“Once I got the car running right, I took the time to get used to it. I didn’t go all out with speed. I got the feel of the pedal and the track. I was able to adjust the speed with the conditions on the track. I did fine until...” She hesitated before continuing. “I did fine until the other cars entered the track.”

He waited, but she didn’t speak. “Tell me what went through your mind when you knew the guys were on the track with you.”

“I wanted to win! I wanted to win a race that didn’t exist.” She claimed.

“Then you have learned your first lesson.” He still had his hand on her leg. They sat there for several long minutes before she responded.

“I let my emotions and my competitiveness override my common sense.” She suddenly felt at ease and took a deep breath. “Thank you, Rafe.”

“You’re welcome.” He took his hand away and used the banister to help himself into a standing position. He used his cane and headed into the house. “Let’s have some lunch and then you can thank me by giving me my treatment. I still have a long way to go if I’m going to be ready to beat you on the track.”

After lunch and the therapy session, Ronni felt drained. She needed to get out of there, away from

him. She needed her meadow, her peace and quiet. As she started her car, she didn't turn toward town but rather went up the lane to the path that led to her own piece of sanity. She needed to escape and find her sense of balance.

The wind whistled through the pines and she drank in the solace of her special place. After a short while, Ronni knew what she had to do. She gathered up her blanket and headed home to make a phone call.

ELEVEN

Ronni sat at the table nursing her tea. She checked her watch once again. Maybe he wasn't going to show. She was just gathering her purse, preparing to leave when she saw Bob walk through the front door. Her stomach twitched nervously and she quickly gulped down her drink.

"Hello, my love." He kissed her politely on the cheek and sat down across from her. "You look beautiful today." He reached for her hand, but she pulled back from him. She looked at Bob as if seeing him for the first time. He was nice enough looking, but the image she saw in her heart was of the dark, sensual man who had captured her love. Rafe's being was so vividly alive in her mind, that she would never see Bob as anything more than a friend.

"You can't forgive me, can you?" He hung his head down like a scolded child. "I had way too much to drink, and I was feeling sorry for myself. After all, I had quite a blow to my ego when I got beat by a rookie! A rookie woman that I helped start in racing and that was even worse!" He was stumbling for words and gestured with his hands. He nervously looked around for the server, but not finding her, continued.

“I want to ask you properly, today, now!” Before he could finish, she abruptly stopped him.

“Please don’t, Bob. I can’t marry you.” She hated this moment, but everything had to be said. “Bob, you tried to hurt me on the track. You deliberately crashed into my car!”

“Ronni, you have to believe I would never hurt you. I never meant to crash your car.” He tried again. “I was careless and was driving over my head. I lost control of my car. I love you and want to marry you. We’ve been together since you came to Hoot Owl Ridge. Everyone expects us to get married.” His words just kept tumbling out of his mouth.

“I know that we’ve been together for a long five years and we have shared a lot of wonderful memories, but after...” She took a deep breath to steady herself before she revealed her true feelings about Rafe. “Well, anyway, now I feel as though you’re more like...”

“Now it’s my turn to stop you. Please I can’t bear to hear you call me a brother! I thought we had deep feelings for each other. I love you and I want us to get married!” Bob pleaded with her.

Ronni spoke quietly and with tender feeling. “My emotions have changed and I can’t be anything more to you than a friend. Please, Bob, don’t make this any harder than it has to be.”

“It’s Rafe, isn’t it?” Ronni was visibly shaken when he shocked her with that question. “He’s no good for you, Ronni. I’ve known him a lot longer than you. He uses women and then leaves a trail of broken hearts behind him. When he was tops on the circuit, women

would throw themselves at him. He had his pick from plenty." Bob's face had become twisted with jealously raging throughout his being.

"I have no intention of discussing Rafe with you, or anyone else for that matter!" Ronni's temper was aroused now. "I can tell you this, Bob Johnson, he feels nothing for me. He's here for therapy and once that's completed, he'll go." It broke her heart to voice aloud her fears.

Bob was digging for reasons to shake her up. "Didn't you wonder where he came from? How did he just happen to come back here after all these years? Did you know your cousin used to work on his pit crew? Jim has never liked me and I think he wanted Rafe here to break us up. Please, sweetheart, don't let that happen!"

"Don't be absurd! Jim is one of the nicest people I know. Only someone like you could conceive such a scheme. Rafe's family home is here in town. Where else would he go?"

Bob got up, too angry to sit at the table any longer. "You'll be sorry you took this attitude, Ronni. I'll show you who the schemer is!" He stomped out of the restaurant, nearly toppling their server.

Ronni apologized to the young lady and left the diner a few minutes later. She was upset about the confrontation with Bob, but over all felt a sense of relief. At least that part of her life was completed and she would no longer be expected to share her life with a man she didn't love.

Gathering all her courage and strength, Ronni headed out to the Benton mansion once again. One

week down and three to go, she thought with trepidation. How much more can I endure? How much do I love him?

As she walked to the front door, Ronni hesitated. I need to talk him into going back to the healing center for the rest of his therapy. That would relieve some of the pressure of being with him on a personal basis. The treatments would be on a more professional level instead of here, in his home, and with just the two of them present.

She knocked on the front door and waited. She was determined to talk Rafe into coming to the center for some hydrotherapy. She was startled when he came around to the front porch from the back instead of answering the door.

“Rafe,” she exclaimed. “You startled me!” Her eyes took in his bare chest and his swimming trunks. What was he up to?

“Come,” he held out his hand for her. “I have something to show you.” Reluctantly, she put her hand in his and allowed him to lead her off the porch and around to the back of the house.

What she saw blew the air out of her argument for continuing therapy at the center. Rafe proudly pointed out the above-ground pool, filled to the brim with cool, clear water.

“We can do that water therapy you wanted to do right here!” He was like a kid proudly showing off a new toy. “This will be perfect for that.”

She looked at the new pool with amazement. It was five feet deep and in a long oval shape. It was indeed perfect for the type of treatment she wanted to

conduct with him. How did he know? How did he get this done in such a short time?

“Rafe, I am very surprised.” She started. “How did you get this done so quickly?”

“Money.” He stated quite simply. “I have a lot of it and you would be surprised what an offer of extra money will do to stir a contractor into action.” He moved to the stairs that lead to the deck surrounding the pool. Once again he held his hand out for her. She took the railing and helped herself rather than taking his offering. His grin showed her that he realized what she was doing.

“Rafe, I’m not prepared for this. I don’t have a swim suit and the equipment I need to show you the exercises.” She stared at the water rather than face his grin.

“Wait here.” He slowly went down the steps and headed to the back porch. As he came back she could see that he held the foam water noodles and a small bag. “Are these the ‘equipment’ you need?” He held out the brightly colored pool noodles that would help keep him afloat.

“Yes, those are perfect.” She grabbed the noodles from him, but avoided the bag he held out.

“I guessed at your size, but I think this will fit.” He forced her to take the bag.

Slowly, she took the bathing suit out of the bag. It was a modest one piece, very plain and certainly not sexy, nor tempting in any way. It was the right size, but for some reason, Ronni was disappointed. Why did he not pick out a bikini? Or at least, a two-piece that would show some skin?

“Anything wrong? Is it the wrong size?” Rafe asked innocently.

“No, it’s fine.” She stammered. “I wasn’t prepared for this today.” She excused her disappointment.

“Ronni,” He stated. “I told you, I want to get rid of this cane as soon as possible. You, yourself, told me that water therapy was important. Please, can’t we begin today?” He looked at her with pleading in his beautiful, blue eyes as he held out the blasted stick.

Ronni sighed. How can I resist him? How can I not keep my word and help him with his recuperation? Slowly, she took the suit and headed down the steps.

“Go ahead and get into the pool. I’ll be back as soon as I change.” She turned toward the house. As a second thought, she added, “Don’t do anything other than get used to the water.”

He laughed and she relished the sound. Quickly she changed in the bathroom located off the family room in the back of his house. Ronni grabbed a towel from the stack resting on the table outside the back door. Self-consciously, she wrapped the towel around her before climbing the steps to the pool. He was just quietly walking in the water, waiting for her.

Ronni slowly lowered the towel and took the steps. It was cool, refreshing and felt great in the warm, afternoon sun. She grabbed the noodles and made her way to where Rafe was standing.

“Isn’t this great?” He questioned. “I love the water, always have.” She could see the little boy in him. She wondered what kind of a child he had been for his parents. “Is your name a family name? I mean Rafe is not a commonly used name.” She was trying to ignore

the feelings of passion that stirred inside her at the sight of him. Water glistened down his body and his normally wild hair was plastered tight to his head. She ached to reach out and ruffle it back into his wild, dark look.

“I thought you knew. My family has been here for a long time.”

“I haven’t been here that long. I know a little about the Turners. I mean you can’t live in Hoot Owl Ridge without hearing about the Turners.” She explained.

“My momma is Hispanic and she named me.” He seemed lost in thought but continued. “My full name is Rafael Domingo Turner. My grandfather, her dad, was Rafael Domingo.” His grin was infectious. “She loved her heritage and Dad loved her with all his heart.” He continued with affection showing in his voice. “So, I became her little man. She wasn’t real pleased when my racing sponsors shortened my name to Rafe.”

Ronni relished this time with Rafe. After all their heated battles, this time seemed especially poignant. She snapped herself out of it. “Let’s get started.” She was back to being the professional she needed to be.

For the next several minutes, she showed him the exercises that he should conduct several times a day. He was a quick learner, emphasizing his desire to heal. She watched as he intently concentrated on the movements. She could see his desire to be completely normal and free himself of depending on the cane. His desire to win was going to be his best asset in the war to succeed in healing completely. Oh, how she admired this man. How, under different circumstances, they

could be the ultimate couple. They were both competitors with a desire to be number one in their worlds. Shaking herself mentally, Ronni moved further away from Rafe in the pool.

“That’s it.” She encouraged him. “Let the water take the blunt of your movements.”

With a sly grin, she added, “Be one with the water.” His deep resonant laughter was the reaction she had wanted.

She watched as he moved in the water, slowly but methodically practicing the exercises. His determination showed in the furrow of his brow and his ability to ignore any pain the movements caused.

They worked for another hour or so, and then Ronni called the session complete. “Rafe, that’s enough.” She started towards the steps and proceeded out of the pool. She quickly grabbed the towel and wrapped it around her. She handed Rafe the other towel as he slowly moved up the steps. She offered him his cane, but he declined.

“I’m going to go and change.” She started down the steps only to be stopped by his words.

“Stay, lady racer.” He didn’t want this time to end. He wanted to tell her how grateful he was for her expertise, her professionalism. He wanted to walk again without pain and certainly without a cane and he believed she was going to help him accomplish that. But he had insisted, even made her agree to keep this time on a professional level.

“Never mind.” He corrected himself as he avoided her look. “I can work on this tonight myself.” He didn’t try to stop her again as she headed into the

house to change back into her scrubs. The pain was not in his leg anymore. Tonight he felt the aching in his heart. They could never be. He was a racer. He would be gone as soon as his leg was healed well enough to compete on the circuit again. This was only an interlude, a brief part of his life.

Once in the safety of the bathroom, Ronni allowed her heart to break. These next three weeks were going to be the hardest of her life next to losing her parents. They say that God only gives you what you can handle; would He like my opinion, she thought candidly. I don't know how much love I can lose in a lifetime.

As she went out back to say goodbye to Rafe, he was sitting on the porch in darkness now. The stars were the only lighting and she felt his aloneness. She wanted to stay, she wanted to share this night, and she wanted his love. None of it was meant to be.

"Tomorrow, same time?" She asked tentatively. She stood next to his chair but did not touch him as she so wanted to do.

"Yes, but after our session, I want to take you back to the track. We have more lessons to learn." He didn't look up and seemed lost in his own world. "I'll have Jim bring your gear."

She was dismissed. Ronni forced her wooden legs to move as she walked down the steps and around to the front yard to her car.

The drive to her aunt's was uneventful. She went in the back door to the kitchen and found Jim there eating a late dinner. "Hey, Jimmy, how's it going?" She feigned a light mood.

“Hey, cuz. What are you up to?” He kept eating but indicated the food on the stove. “Are you hungry? Mom left some good stuff for us.”

Ronni sat down and declined the food offer. She didn’t have an appetite right now. Her heart, mind, and soul were in too much turmoil to deal with the everyday task of eating.

“I took care of things with Bob today.” She started tentatively with her cousin. “He didn’t take the news well.”

“What news would that be, cuz?” Jim asked innocently.

“I told him that I couldn’t marry him.”

“Did you tell him why?” He probed further.

“No, Jimmy, I don’t want anyone to know that I love Rafe.” She sighed and then added, “Or should I say Rafael.”

They both laughed. “He told you his family name?” Jim sounded surprised.

“Yeah, he did.” She smiled and tenderly remembered their time in the pool. God, the next few weeks were going to be extremely trying, she thought quickly.

Jim got up and took his dirty dishes to the sink. He rinsed them and opened the dishwasher. “Ronni, are you going to be okay? I mean, you know he is going to leave and go back to his life on the circuit once he is healed. Where does that leave you?” He finally turned to look his cousin in the eye. “Can you honestly say that you are okay with that? Can you really help him heal and then let him walk out of your life?”

TWELVE

Both Ronni and Rafe were determined to make it through the next three weeks unscathed. Gritting her teeth and using all the strength she could muster, Ronni put him through his therapy sessions with fervor and determination. They spent at least three days each week on the track as Jim and his crew helped her learn the hard lessons of competitive racing. Tempers flared and patience was pushed to the point of breaking.

I made it, she thought as she sat at the desk in her office. She was making some last-minute notes on Rafe's file. The race was going to be held two days from now. Rafe had shown definite improvement to this point. He would need to keep up with some therapy and exercises but not the extreme schedule they had been conducting over this last month. He was driven; she gave him credit for his sheer determination and willpower in his attempts to regain his top physical condition.

"And then what?" She questioned aloud. Her heart sank. She stopped writing and pondered her future without him. He would soon leave and return to his life on the track. "What am I going to do without him?" She knew there would never be another like

Rafe. If only, she let her thoughts run wild. If only he could love me as I love him.

Just then Dr. Shaw stepped into her office. She knocked softly on the open door, startling Ronni out of her thoughts. “Veronica, may I come in?”

“Of course, Dr. Shaw, Elizabeth.” She stumbled on that. “What can I do for you?” She sat her notes aside and pointed to the chair. “Please, have a seat.”

“I was visiting with each member of the team on Mr. Turner’s case for some updates. Perhaps, you could take a moment and provide me with your most recent notes.”

“I was just putting down some notes, but I do have one last session with him tonight.” She hesitated, “I would like to complete that appointment and then I can provide you with the final notes in the next day or two.”

Dr. Shaw was perceptive, perhaps too much for Ronni’s comfort. Ronni fiddled nervously with her pen and avoided direct eye contact with her. Time passed slowly as Dr. Shaw waited for more information.

“Veronica, how has this experience been for you?”

Ronni was stumped. She didn’t expect this conversation to get to a personal level. She wasn’t sure how much information to give or not give. As she mulled it over, Ronni decided that Dr. Shaw was not only her boss, but a trusted friend and she deserved the truth.

“It has been sheer joy and agony at the same time. Elizabeth, I’ve fallen for the man.” She waited for some sort of response from her, but getting none continued, “I have remained professional through it all.

In fact, he has no idea that I care for him other than as his therapist. His determination to heal has been remarkable. I pushed him hard and he never complained. Knowing him has made me realize that I need take a chance on trust and to let love back into my life.” Her voice wavered at that last revelation.

Dr. Shaw still made no comments, waiting for Ronni to continue. Her folded hands indicated that she was expecting more.

“Elizabeth, you are aware that I will be racing against Rafe in just two days – a grudge match.” Ronni watched for her reaction.

“I am quite conscious that this grudge match is going to happen. I am also mindful that you were the initiator of the challenge as it were.” Again she let silence guide the conversation.

Ronni couldn’t sit still any longer. She got up and proceeded to the window that overlooked the serenity garden in the middle of their complex. As she stared at the flowers and watched the fountain gently trickling water down over the rocks, Ronni felt the tears falling slowly down her cheeks. “Maybe I was wrong.” She turned back to her supervisor, “He was hurting so badly and not just from his physical injuries. I felt he needed a jolt back to his world, back to reality.”

“His recovery is going well, then?” Dr. Shaw prompted.

“Yes, like I said earlier, I have never seen a person so determined to get well. His unwavering dedication to his exercises has propelled him to the point of no longer needing my help.” Her voice faltered, but Ronni took a deep breath and continued, “Soon, very

soon, he will be leaving to join his world and my presence in his life will be just a wisp of a memory.” She picked a tissue from the box and wiped at the tears as they fell.

“Veronica, you have one more session with Mr. Turner. You don’t need to think any further than that.” She started to rise. “I would like you to see Carolynne today. She has some free time right now.” Dr. Shaw headed to the door. “Veronica, something my mother used to say seems appropriate. Don’t borrow trouble.” With that, she left a stunned Ronni standing in her office amazed at the wisdom of her friend and mentor.

Seeking out her meadow before her last session with Rafe, Ronni reflected on the meeting with Carolynne. She felt a peace within herself that she hadn’t experienced since the death of her parents. Walking to the meadow this time was different. Instead of seeking a solace, a place away from her troubled thoughts, Ronni was looking for affirmation. She now knew she was complete. Her parents had given her the best of life, love, and happiness. She wanted to give that same wonderful experience to the man she loved, even if he didn’t return those feelings.

The sun was getting lower in the sky and as she broke through the bushes into the meadow, she marveled at the beauty of this private world. The late afternoon sun sparkled off the leaves and needles of the trees, a slight breeze ruffled the boughs. She soaked in the calm, peaceful atmosphere of this serene place. As she stepped further into her place of escape, Ronni

realized that she no longer needed that getaway. She was content, she was complete, she was in love.

She heard the noise of something coming through the brush on the other side, the side that led to the mansion. As she looked in that direction, she was startled by the sight of Rafe coming through the shrubs.

“Lady racer, I thought I might find you here.” He grinned at her shocked look.

She took in the sight of him, standing there with his feet apart, hands on his hips. His cowboy hat was in its usual position just set back on his head slightly. His black, raven unruly hair was peeking out from the brim. His jean-clad legs appeared strong and suddenly she noticed he didn’t have his cane.

“Rafe, where is your cane?”

“I got rid of it. Thanks to you, I don’t need it anymore.” He moved closer to her. “I don’t mean to intrude on your special place.” He brushed a stray hair out of her eyes.

Ronni shivered at that tender gesture. “It’s your land. You’re not really intruding, are you?” She wanted to step back, but couldn’t find the power to do so. She looked into those gorgeous blue eyes and tried to see into his soul.

“I know this is an extraordinary place for you. Carolynne taught me that same method for dealing with my demons.” He took a step even closer, almost daring her to move away from him.

“Would you like to see my haven for healing?” His voice whispered across the short distance. She had to fight the urge to lean into him.

“Is it close? We need to get to your last session.” She tried to steer the conversation back to the reason for her being here at his home.

“It’s not too far. I brought some transportation.” He pointed through the trees. She looked but didn’t see his truck.

He held out his hand for her to take. Ronni hesitated. “Do you trust me?” He spoke softly again and kept his hand out for her. Without any qualms, she put her hand into his and immediately felt the warmth and security in his big grasp. Rafe led her through the path he had emerged from and she was astonished to see an ATV parked there. She must have been so engrossed in her own responses to the meadow that she didn’t hear the sound of his engine as he pulled up.

“Have you ever ridden one of these?” He questioned as he started up the bike. He scooted forward and indicated that she should get on behind him.

“I’ve seen them, but never had any reason to get on one of these things.” She put one foot on the foot railing and swung herself up behind him. Ronni tried to sit back and not lean into him, but failed as he pushed the throttle. With a lurch, she was suddenly pressed up tightly against his strong, firm back.

He shut his eyes as he felt her breasts pressed firmly in his back. It felt so right, it felt so good. He pressed the gas a little to see if she would put her arms around him.

The noise of the ATV prevented any conversation. She gripped him tightly, wrapping her arms around his waist and leaning her cheek on his back. This

moment would be one she would remember forever, she thought tenderly.

It wasn't long but the ride took them further into his land and through more forest foliage. They had to duck their heads several times to avoid low-hanging branches. The sun was almost completely down by now and Ronni was even more curious as to their destination.

She realized they were heading into a small clearing. He stopped the bike on the path next to a small lake. She saw the sunset reflecting in the calm water.

"I didn't know there was a lake here." She was in awe of the beauty of the pond.

"It's not much, probably not even classified as a lake. But it's mine and I love it." He spoke proudly like a father talking about a child.

"Is this your haven?"

"When Carolynne talked to me about going to my mental vacation spot, I remembered a little lake over by Prescott that I used to go to as a child. Has-sayampa Lake used to be owned by the City of Prescott and during the summer, many town folks used it as their swimming hole." He reminisced. "I envisioned myself on a raft, floating on the blue waters with a cool breeze blowing through the pines and the sun warming my face."

"So, how did you find this?" She could relate to his ability to escape into his secret, stress-free place.

"I have searched my property thoroughly. I want to know what I own and what I can do with this acreage. One day, I was riding this ATC hard and fast and nearly ended up in the water. Isn't it beautiful?"

She was so pleased that he chose to share this special place with her. Maybe, just maybe, she hoped this was the time that he would profess his love for her.

Instead, he pressed the gas and pushed the bike further down the path. As she looked in the direction they were headed she could see lights on the far side of the lake. He parked the bike and shut the engine off at the edge of a wooden deck-like path. He held out his hand to help her dismount the bike. He didn't let go as he lead her down the path. Little twinkling lights showed the way as he guided her to the gazebo at the end of the pathway.

It was unlike any gazebo she had ever seen. Even though the walls were built up halfway, the screen allowed the fresh air to float through on all sides. He opened the screened door allowing her to go in first. "Was this here?" She questioned him as she stepped through the open doorway.

"It wasn't as you see it today. I had the builders use my plan and this is the finished product." He spoke proudly.

What she saw nearly brought tears to her eyes. On the far side was a table complete with candlelight and settings for two. On the other side was a couch and chairs set around an enclosed fireplace. It was evident that this was designed to be a very romantic place. But why were they here?

"Rafe, I'm confused. Why are we here? Shouldn't we be getting to your therapy session?" She made another attempt to bring this interaction to a professional level.

He took both her hands in his and looked directly into her big, brown eyes. “Ronni, we have a race day after tomorrow. We have been at each other’s throats and fought some great battles. One valuable lesson I have learned on the track, is to never go into a race with emotions running high with negative thoughts. I want us to declare a truce. This is my attempt to make sure that when we race our grudge match, there won’t be any lingering feelings of anger or resentment.”

She longed to tell him that she could never be angry or resent him in any way. She was so close to telling him how she felt.

Rafe stepped away to reach for a remote control device and suddenly old country and western music filled the air. She recognized the words of her favorite old-time country singer Conway Twitty as he sang ‘It’s Only Make Believe.’ Her heart sank. Of all the songs he could have chosen, this was the closest to her reality.

The words reminded Ronni of the unrequited love she was feeling for Rafe.

“Ready for some wine and dinner, darlin’?” He asked, totally unaware of the feelings this night was stirring up for her. He held the chair out for her and poured some wine from the chilled bottle in the bucket. He poured his own glass and held it up to toast.

“Here’s to a successful month of therapy and to a great therapist.”

She added her own words. “Here’s to a safe race on Saturday.” They clinked the glasses together and each took a drink of the wine.

They ate the delicious meal prepared by his housekeeper. It consisted of a chilled salad. She hadn't noticed the small refrigerator until he pulled the food from it. Instead of a hot meal, their dinner consisted of gourmet cheeses and meats with dips and soft dinner rolls. It was fantastic. The wine poured freely and Ronni was not of a mind to stop it.

When Rafe suggested that they take their wine glasses to the couch, she had no desire to protest. He started a small fire in the beautiful, round fireplace located in the middle of the sitting area.

"What kind of a fireplace is that?" She was fascinated by the enclosed system.

"It's called a Spin-A-Fire. It is completely safe because it's enclosed and the beauty of it all, is that the fire can be seen at any angle. I was thinking of putting one in the master bedroom in the Benton mansion."

"Why are you still calling it the Benton mansion? Shouldn't it be the Turner mansion now?" She took another drink of the tasty wine. Perhaps she should monitor her alcohol intake she thought for a second, but quickly disregarded her own advice.

"I think tradition is important, especially to a small town like Hoot Owl Ridge. I'm content to wait until they start calling it the Turner mansion." He came close to her and offered his hand. "Want to dance?"

"Are you sure? I don't want to hurt your leg." She hesitated.

"Darlin', I owe you a decent dance and I'm ready to do that now." He pulled her into his arms. Once again a slow moving tune by Conway was playing – "Slow

Hands.” She moved into his arms like she was born to be there. He wrapped his arms around her and they moved in rhythm to the words of the song.

She felt him press a soft kiss to the side of her face. She turned so that his lips would find hers. They swayed to the music as the kiss deepened and Ronni felt herself happy and content to be here in his arms. Her pulse was throbbing and desire burned its way into her body.

“I quit.” She whispered as his lips left hers.

“What?” He questioned as if he didn’t hear her.

“I quit. You need to get a new therapist.” She claimed his lips once again. The song pulsed through their lips as she felt his desire pressing against her.

“Are you sure?” His words came breathlessly against her lips.

“Rafe, I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life.” In her excitement, she knocked his cowboy hat off his head and ran her hands through that black silk. He met her lips and their kiss ignited the fires that had been slowly burning since the day they crossed paths. He backed her into the couch and they fell, arms entwined and lips locked.

The music swelled and Rafe stopped their kiss long enough to look directly into her eyes. He raised himself enough to give a small space and spoke softly, “Ronni, are you sure?” He was giving her a chance to stop the madness.

His heart pounded in his chest as he watched the emotions flash through her eyes. He knew she wanted him, he knew she desired him, but most of all, he didn’t want her to have regrets. Rafe had never felt

this way about a woman. She had stirred his anger and his bitterness, but she had inspired his protectiveness. He wanted to make sure she was safe on the track but also that she was continuing to heal from the loss of her parents. Ronni had pressed him into getting better physically and emotionally. She had pushed him beyond what he thought was possible in just a short month. He was able to move around without depending on that blasted cane, he could hold her in his arms and dance. He could feel her heart beating hard; he heard her draw a ragged breath as she tried to gather her emotions and thoughts.

She tried to think rationally and logically, but all sensible thoughts seemed to abandon her. Ronni knew she would only have this one night with the man she had grown to love with all her heart. After the race on Saturday, he would go back to the life he knew, back to the circuit, and the starlets. She wouldn't even be a dot on the map in his thoughts. Would this be enough? Could she live with only this one night of experiencing his love? Without feeling any further doubts, she nodded to his question. She wanted to give him a chance at the best of life, love, and happiness just like her parents had given her.

Rafe slowly lowered his lips to meet hers again. This time the kiss was demanding, pressing. She met his desire, heartbeat for heartbeat. Rafe worked his hands up and under her shirt touching her bare skin.

When she first stepped in his arms to dance, Ronni had felt a little self-conscious about being in her therapy scrubs, but now, she felt desired. He pushed her

top further up and bared her skin to the crisp night air. Ronni helped him by adjusting herself and allowing him to completely remove her shirt. As she lay there with her bra showing, Ronni felt exhilarated and wanted to feel his bare skin against her own.

She reached to the western shirt he was wearing and quickly pulled the snaps apart revealing his chest. He helped by removing the shirt completely and Rafe pressed his muscled chest to her quivering body. She shivered with anticipation.

“Are you cold?” He responded attentively.

“Not at all.” She adamantly replied. “I want you. I want you now.”

He got up from the couch and motioned for her to join him. As they were standing beside the sofa, he stepped her back so that he could open the couch to its full potential as a bed.

She took the opportunity to remove her bra and started to push her pants down. Rafe finished what he was doing and turned to help her with the task. As she stood there, completely nude, his face showed the appreciation he felt for her body.

“You are so beautiful.” His voice was gruff with passion. He reached to take her in his arms and she willingly went. Ronni kissed him with abandon, soaking in his scent and taste. She reached to undo his belt. He stepped back to help her and removed his belt and jeans. As he stood there in his boxers, Rafe realized she was the first woman to see him naked since his accident. She had already seen his scars and he knew she was not repelled by the sight of the ugly redness.

He wanted to give her one more chance to change her mind, but his desire to have her overrode his good intentions. He grabbed her and pushed her back onto the bed, kissing her passionately. They were on their sides, facing each other. He looked deep into her eyes, searching her soul. He wanted to take her breath away and never let her have a chance to think about what they were about to do. He needed her, and this night, maybe more than she needed him.

The music played more romantic tunes as they discovered each other's bodies. His hands were rough but created a sensual pathway on her heated skin. The only lights were the torches on the deck and the candles still burning on the center of their table. She reveled in the exploration of his body, running her hands up and down his chest and back. Their kisses promoted the feelings each was experiencing on their different levels. Ronni was wrapped in her love for him and Rafe was eager to escape the bonds of his accident and pain.

She reached up and ran her hands through his black, silky hair. "I've wanted to do that since the first time I saw you." She confessed.

"Really, I thought you would've rather had your hands around my neck." He laughed, the sensual tension made his voice gruff.

"Oh, that thought came after you spoke." She teased him back.

He leaned over and brushed her lips with his own. "That's what I've wanted to do since that first moment." She brought his head down to hers and deepened the kiss.

Words became unnecessary as she felt his hands on her breasts. Ronni arched her back to try and get closer. She didn't want his explorations to end. Rafe pushed her on her back and continued his gentle touching. He lowered his head and took the nipple in his mouth. She moaned with desire, encouraging him to treat the other in the same way.

He lowered his hand to stroke down her stomach and her breath caught in her throat as she anticipated where he would move his hand next. Rafe seemed aware of her thoughts, but in a teasing, sensual way, kept his hand just above the source of her heat.

"Rafe," She groaned and tried to move her body to meet his probing hand.

"What do you want, lady racer? Tell me what you want me to do. Help me learn what will please you."

"Touch me, light me on fire." She begged.

Without hesitation, he moved his hand to the source of her desire. He stroked her gently, bringing her quickly to an excited climax. "Please, Rafael, don't stop now."

He grinned at the use of his formal name. It sounded so good on her lips and with her breathless voice.

"Darlin', I have no intentions of stopping now." He moved on top of her and silenced her with a demanding kiss. Things had progressed too far to be gentle any longer. With a great thrust he entered her willing body and both matched rhythm with desire. Their climax was simultaneous and Ronni moaned aloud, his name on her lips.

"Oh, Rafe," She whispered breathlessly.

“Yes, darlin’, I felt it too.” He moved to his side and continued to breathe deeply. He pushed a stray hair from her glistening forehead. She was lying there with her eyes shut, just celebrating their union.

The music continued, the candles were nearly burned out, and a slight breeze gently swayed through the screens. If only I could lie here forever, she thought carelessly. She reached up and stroked her hand down the side of his cheek. His day old beard was rough on her hand. God, how she loved this man. Oh, to be able to tell him, she let herself think recklessly.

“You don’t have to go tonight, do you?” He asked cautiously.

“Why, what did you have in mind?” She teased, knowing full well where his thoughts were taking this conversation. She stretched out fully and teased him with a view of her nude body. “I don’t have anywhere special to be until Saturday. You remember? You know that little thing we have to do at the race track?”

He took another deep breath before speaking. “Ronni, we don’t have to do it. We could just cancel.”

“Not on your life!” She propped herself up on her elbow. “The track has been advertising it as the race of the ages. It’s the whole reason for the hard work we’ve done over the last month.”

“Are you sure you want to race against me?” He prompted.

She threw his question right back at him. “Are you sure you want to race against me?” Her temper was starting to show itself until she saw the grin erupt on his face. “You rat!”

“I just needed to know that you really want to go through with the race. Remember this night was to declare a truce, to make sure we buried any anger and negative thoughts.”

She reached over and drew him close enough to kiss, but stopped just at his mouth. “I think we declared more than a truce, don’t you?” Then she pressed her lips to his in a long, soul-searching kiss.

They made love several more times and then exhausted fell into deep sleep. Ronni awoke to the sun shining through the screened windows and rolled over to stare at Rafe. He was sleeping peacefully and she hated to stir him. She tried to move without waking him but to no avail. He reached out his arm and stopped her in motion.

“Where do you think you’re going?” His voice was grumpy.

“Rafe, its morning. I need to go home and make sure Aunt Louise isn’t worried.” She reached for any valid reason to leave without revealing her feelings. Any more time in his arms was going to give her thoughts about forever and love until death do us part.

He sat up and moved to his side of the bed. He ran his hand through his already tousled hair, but it didn’t do any good. “I guess we’d better go then.” He got up and in his wonderfully nude state walked across the room to gather his clothes. She lay there admiring the view.

“Come on, lady racer. I’ll get you back to your car and you can go home.”

His lack of protest confirmed her fears. This was a one-time thing. Rafe would be going back to his life after the race tomorrow. Her heart was breaking but he could never know.

Putting on her bravest face, she got up and started to dress. Soon they were on the ATV and heading back through the woods to her car. Words failed her. At her car, she fumbled with her keys. Talk about awkward, not knowing what to say, she avoided his gaze.

As she opened the door and started to get inside, Rafe stopped her. "Darlin', thank you."

She held up her hand to stop him. "Please don't."

"I want to thank you for the therapy and for the great care you have given me over this last month, not for last night." As he saw the look on her face, he tried to amend his words. "Ronni, I don't mean that it wasn't special, I guess I just didn't want you to think that making love was my intention."

"Rafe, just let it go. I made that decision and I don't regret one minute of our night together." She reached over and placed a slight kiss on his cheek. "We're fine. I'm ready to beat you tomorrow – no anger, no negative thoughts!"

Before she begged him to love her back, she got into her car, and pulled away before her courage and strength failed her.

THIRTEEN

As the amber sun started sinking slowly in the west, the butterflies in Ronni's stomach reminded her of the soon-to-be grudge match. After the tenderness Rafe had shown her, she felt a strange and new confidence that once this race was finished, they could start over with each other.

She hadn't seen her car because Jim wanted her to stay away from the garage. He had arranged to let Rafe keep his race car there too, so his crew could put in some last minute tuning. Jim felt she was nervous enough without seeing her competition working away. Rafe's own garage was not complete and his team needed the space. They had also agreed that she would meet Jim at the track, so she decided to get dressed into her firesuit at home.

Her fingers felt all thumbs as she nervously pulled at the zippers on her clothes. "Damn!" She cursed as she broke a fingernail on her perfectly manicured hand.

She slumped down on the edge of her bed and spoke softly to herself. "My God, what have I gotten myself into this time? I was so worried about Rafe backing out, but I wish I could do that very thing right now, myself."

“Are you sure you want to go through with this, dear?” Aunt Louise’s voice was full of concern for her niece. She and Uncle Harold had returned from Phoenix earlier that day. She saw the newspaper stories about tonight’s race and had avoided upsetting Ronni all day, but the desire to protect her niece from harm grew too great to ignore.

“I just feel that you shouldn’t race tonight.” She was wringing her hands and picked at imaginary specks on her dress. “I would be the last one to cast doubts on your ability, but I have had an uneasy feeling all day about this match of yours.”

“Please, Auntie, I’ll be fine. You are just being overly concerned.” Ronni hugged her aunt firmly. “Help me get these zippers done and then, I’m on my way.”

Although she treated her aunt’s warning lightly, the drive to the track found Ronni’s mind dwelling on it. Aunt Louise’s sixth sense had shown itself several times since Ronni had moved in with the family. She and Jim had gotten used to listening to her advice, but tonight Ronni recklessly ignored the danger signs.

She recalled the first time her aunt had revealed her intuitions, was the time Uncle Harold had gone to Phoenix to pick up some new equipment for their small ranch. Aunt Louise had asked, practically begged, him to wait until the following week, but Harold thought her warnings foolish and went anyway.

They got the word from the sheriff’s department a few hours after he had left, that his truck had skidded off the road and he was being transported to the

nearest hospital. He came out of it okay, but it just served to let all be aware of her premonitions.

I can't worry about that tonight. I have too much else on my mind, she thought. Ronni had reached the pit entrance and was slowing her car down. She glanced at the parking lot and was amazed to see so many cars already there.

It was still early, but the stands were filling up fast. This, of course, did nothing to help her nerves. She parked her own car and walked into the pits. Like zoning in on radar, she saw him standing beside the most beautiful machine she had ever seen on a race track. Like its owner, she thought.

The car was sleek, shiny black like her firesuit. The lettering was in silver with a golden yellow trim and fire engine red accent. He was leaning over the hood talking to a short, bald man, obviously about the car, and didn't notice her standing there staring at him. It was one of his crew she thought.

His firesuit was almost the opposite of hers, yellow with a thin black stripe running down his long form. It fit snugly to his trim waist and accentuated his broad, muscular shoulders. She felt a now familiar surge of passion as she watched him. His hair pressed damply to his forehead as though he had just taken his helmet off. He must have just finished hotlapping his car. She looked around to see the whole pit area watching him, full of curiosity.

Sensing her presence, Rafe suddenly glanced up and before she could glance away, their eyes met. His lithe, graceful body, now with no visible limp, came towards her, freezing Ronni to the spot. She wasn't

sure what to do. Should she stay or leave to avoid him.

“Ronni, wait. I want to talk with you.” He put his hand on her arm to stop her from walking away. His touch melted through seven layers of her firesuit. She didn’t look at him for fear the love burning in her ebony eyes would surely show through.

“Hey, lady racer,” He spoke softly with no malice intended. “Is everything green for the race?”

“I’m fine.” Her feeble voice couldn’t manage anything more. He dropped his hand, but before turning back to his car, gave her the thumbs-up signal that all racers considered good luck.

She felt tears welling up in her eyes and stumbled away before he could discover them. Then, she saw her own car parked just down the row. She wanted to find Jim and see if he was ready for her now.

“Wow! I can see why you didn’t want me to come to the garage. That is quite a car!” I think I might have to call this whole thing off.” She tried to make light of the situation.

“You don’t fool me, cuz. I know you are as nervous as you can be, but things always work out for the best. Remember that!” Jim tried to calm her nerves.

The announcer started his messages and soon he was ready to introduce Rafe and Ronni on the front straightaway. The press was there in full form and waiting for both cars. They pulled to the flag stand and cut their engines.

The photographers were asking for some pictures of the two of them shaking hands before the start of the race. Rafe climbed out of his car and came over to

help her out. His big, strong hands spanned her slim waist as he pulled her from her car. She shut her eyes as she remembered his hands on her bare skin. Would this pain never stop?

He turned her around to face him and she felt his cool stare searching through to her heart. She prayed he couldn't detect how full of love it was. He was a professional now in this moment, as he dropped his hands and grinned, waving to the cheering crowd.

How calm and in control this man can be, she thought to herself. Two can play at that game, and I'll show him I can be cool as ice too! She waved at the crowd, although her movements were mechanical as her heart jumped into her throat.

"Now, shake hands." A photographer was encouraging them. The press wanted to have a huge ending to the stories they had run all week.

"How's this?" The smile died on her face as she realized what Rafe intended to do. He put his arm around her and dipped her way back and kissed her on her shocked lips. The crowd went crazy with delight and cameras flashed all around them. Even though his movements were meant for fun, his kiss made her knees go weak. She wanted to stay here in the tight grasp of his arms, but he soon put her back upright.

"Oh, Rafe, let's not go through with this. I was wrong to challenge you." Ronni's voice was so quiet, she wasn't sure it could be heard above the roar of the crowd. He tenderly stroked his fingertips down her cheek and his eyes softened as he reassured her.

“It’s okay, darlin’. Let’s just give this crowd a good show. You have performed very well during our lessons and I expect a highly-competitive match.” He left so many things unsaid as he carried his helmet and she pulled her helmet from the roof of her car. With one last look his way, she moved to climb into the racecar.

The moment of truth had finally arrived as the flagman motioned them to start their engines and both cars headed, side by side, into turn one.

She didn’t put her visor down on her helmet right away, but raised a gloved hand to wipe her eyes clear of the tears that seemed to crop up a lot these days. Her heart was heavy with the dilemma she had put herself into.

“What do I do? If I win this race, I lose him. On the other hand, if he wins, I still lose him. He’ll go back into the racing circuit and I’ll never see him again. Isn’t that what you wanted?” She knew her questions were useless and right now, she needed to put all her thoughts on this race. She knew Rafe expected nothing less than a first-class performance from her.

“Okay, Mr. Turner, you had better get ready for a run for the money. I intend to do my best!” With a determination driven by her powerful love for the man, she snapped the visor shut and put all her concentration on this race, a race for love.

She had the inside position because of the coin toss. Rafe had been willing to give her a half-lap advantage, but she adamantly refused. This would have defined her as a woman, not a racing equal which was one of her goals at the track.

Coming out of turn four, she saw the flagman throw the green flag. Expertly, she became all racer and stepped on the gas. Rafe was still beside her as they went speeding into turn one. For two entire laps, they ran side by side. After sweeping past the flag stand on lap three, Rafe shot in front of her and for several seconds, Ronni couldn't see anything but the red Verde Valley clay splatting through the wire mesh shatter screen they used in place of her windshield. Even with her helmet on, she had to fight the temptation to duck the mud clods flying at her.

"Oh, I see how it is! You were just playing with me. Don't get too confident, Rafe my love, I'm coming up fast behind you!" She started to rely on the information she had learned during the last three weeks. Jim said that, unlike Bob, Rafe wouldn't fight dirty. He liked the inside groove and in order for her to pass him, she would have to go high on the track.

She watched in amazement as he expertly drove his car. Her heart soared as she realized that together they had accomplished a huge goal for him. He was back in his element as a competitive driver.

For several more laps she was right on Rafe's bumper. She had the power to pass, but was waiting for the right moment. He would soon go low in a corner and then she could seize the chance to pass him on the high side.

She thought the opportunity had come on lap six when going into turn two, Rafe dropped low. But suddenly, his car swerved up, nearly hitting hers and she had to drop back.

“Now why did you do that? I thought Jimmy said you wouldn’t play dirty!” She was puzzled, but then her thoughts turned back to her aunt’s warning. “Maybe something is wrong.” She was getting worried, and what was only minutes on the track started to feel like hours.

She watched him driving the car in front of her. He looked so natural speeding around the oval. He drove as though he had never left racing. A man and his car must be as one to be a winner – and this man was certainly that!

They passed the flag stand as the official threw the white flag. “This is it, the last lap. It’s now or never!” She drew a deep breath for added courage.

Ronni kept right on Rafe’s rear bumper, shadowing him around the track. Shooting down the back straightaway, she saw him dive for the widow maker – turn three. She took advantage of this and started to swing by him, on the high side.

She’ll never forget the ear-splitting, heart rendering sound as Rafe’s car lunged into hers, tearing at her driver’s door. The impact shoved her flying into the concrete retaining wall. At the extremely high speeds she was going, she was tossed like a helpless leaf in a gale.

After the car hit the wall, it flipped over and over with pieces of the shredded fiberglass body flying off in all directions. The car finally slid to a halt on the roof. She was caught upside down and fading fast.

She was lapsing in and out of consciousness, fighting to stay alert. Her helmet had protected her from most of the impact, but she felt the roof crushing

down upon her. “What did Jimmy tell me? She struggled with the impending darkness to remember her cousin’s voice. “Please, God, just a few minutes more to hear Jimmy’s words! She prayed aloud.

His words came to her, slowly and distinctly, “If the car crashes, remember, Ronni, always remember to shut the engine off, no matter what!”

She reached for the button, but her right arm didn’t move. Ronni strained until she tasted the salt from the tears rolling down her face. Her arm was not responding, and just then she saw the flames.

“Oh, my God! No! Help me, Rafe. Please help me!” She screamed. Her throat constricted with a fear rooted in the very depths of her being. The crowd had come to their feet, but not a sound could be heard. They stood and watched as the fire and safety crew ran to get to her.

Rafe had immediately pulled to the apron of the track and was out of his car. He threw his helmet off and ran for all he was worth, straining his leg, but ignoring the pain. He had to get to Ronni, still trapped in her now blazing car.

The next realization she knew was that of being ripped free from the safety harness in her seat. She felt the brute strength of the only man she could ever love; pull her from the burning shell of a car.

He carried the limp, lifeless form to the grass in the middle of the track. Bob and Jim, along with most of the people in the pits, came running up to see Ronni lying still – oh, so still – in Rafe’s arms.

“Not her! Damn it, not her!” Bob’s face contorted with hate and fear simultaneously, as he pointed at

Rafe. "It was supposed to be you!" Rafe didn't hear his rant as his attention was solely on the woman lying deathly still in his arms.

Upon hearing that, Jim turned in his steps, grabbed Bob by the neck of his shirt, and with a look of total disbelief, confronted him. "What the hell are you saying? Did you cause this?" When Bob didn't answer immediately, Jim shook him vigorously. "Bob, I'm asking you a question! What did you do to Rafe's car?"

The ambulance had been notified and pulled around the track to the wreck. Rafe still held her in his protective arms, and Ronni opened her eyes just as the paramedics came up.

"Don't talk, my love, save your strength." Rafe softly kissed her forehead and carefully pushed her hair out of her face. Her scarf had come off when he had pulled at her helmet. Her long, dark tresses were limp with sweat and there was a streak of crimson coming from the left side of her face.

"Rafe, you saved me." She choked and was having trouble speaking. "The pain, oh my God, I can't bear the pain!"

"Do something for her!" Rafe demanded of the medics. To them, he was harsh and left no one wondering how masterful he could be, but to her, his eyes were soft and she felt herself slipping into the cool, blue recesses of his mind. She again passed into the world of unconsciousness.

She and Rafe were holding hands and running through the freshly fallen snow. She loved to see the pines all covered in white and the Verde Valley was

the most beautiful place on the earth in the winter. She felt the coldness sting her face, but with Rafe at her side, knew only the warmth of his love.

They stumbled and fell, making an imprint in the snow. Laughing, she rolled over on top of him, kissing him all over his smiling face. His look was not the harsh one she had gotten used to seeing, but one of love was etched on his handsome features.

“Ronni, darlin’, you are the world to me.” He held his arms tightly around her. The sun was glistening down on the soft, white powder, giving a fairy tale look to their world.

She jumped up and started to make a snowball. He was still sitting in the snow, leaning on one arm. “You little minx! You wouldn’t dare!” She threw the snowball and caught him on the chest. He immediately jumped up.

“Oh, Rafe, no!” She laughed and tried to run from him. He tackled her and they rolled joyfully in the cold, wet snow. She felt so warm and safe in his arms as they laid there, laughing and enjoying life to the fullest. He kissed her again and again. Each kiss became more and more passionate.

“Ronni, don’t leave me now!” His pleading voice brought her back to reality. The medics had placed her on a stretcher and were trying to lift her into the ambulance.

“Sir, you’ll have to let her go. Please, sir.” The young medic took Rafe’s arm and pulled him out of the way.

“Wait,” she whispered. “Let me see him, please.” She lifted her eyes to the attendant, pleading with him to let her see Rafe.

“I’m here, lady racer.” He was sitting by her side. The doors of the ambulance were still open, and a crowd of people were standing there watching the tender scene.

She raised her left hand to gently touch the single tear that was slipping down his cheek. “You win the lady.” That was all she said before the enveloping darkness claimed her back.

The medic quickly motioned Rafe to leave, and as they shut the doors, he could see them working on her. They soon had her stable enough to transport to the hospital.

Outside, Rafe beat his clenched fists on the hood of his own race car. Jim came over to comfort him. “Hey, buddy, she’ll be okay.” He put his hand on Rafe’s shoulder. “You know she’s a fighter, and she has a strong will to live.”

“It’s all my fault! I goaded her into this. She just wasn’t ready.” He shuddered in fear for her life. Instantly, something dawned on him and he looked to Jim.

“Jim, I lost control of my car. Something snapped and I couldn’t steer it.” He was trying to sort things out in his mind.

“Rafe, I have to tell you something, but you must calm down first.” Jim knew he had to tell him about Bob’s sabotage before he learned about it from someone else at the track. At least now, Jim could try and

control Rafe. He swallowed a big gulp of air and continued.

“Bob loosened the tie rods on your car.” Jim finished before he lost the courage, “He was jealous of you and he wanted Ronni to beat you in this race. He figured that if she won, you wouldn’t want her!”

Rafe’s face became hard and cold as ice. He jumped at Jim and grabbed him by the shoulders. “You mean to tell me that bastard did this to her? I’ll kill him!” He flung Jim back and like a man possessed turned to go and find Bob. Jim tackled Rafe and for a few seconds, the two of them wrestled on the ground.

“Rafe! Stop and think about what you’re doing! Ronni wouldn’t want you two guys to beat each other’s brains out.” The struggle stopped momentarily. “I’ve already informed the track officials and they’ll take over from here.”

“How could he be so stupid? Didn’t he realize that she could have been killed? She could be dying right now. I’ve lost her and she’ll never know....” He hung his head and suddenly he was sobbing. “I’ve lost her before I could tell her.”

Jim had never seen his friend so overcome with emotion. At a very high price, maybe her life, Ronni had inadvertently succeeded in bringing Rafe back to the real world of emotions. He was now loving and hurting at the same time.

“Come on, Rafe, let’s go to the hospital. They’ll be restarting the races soon and we have to get across the track.” Jim guided the grief-stricken man to the car parked out back by the pit gate. “I’ve already told our pit crews to clean up and bring it on home.” He

was trying to keep Rafe's thoughts from closing in on him.

Rafe spoke in a broken voice, "If anything happens to her, I'll never forgive myself."

FOURTEEN

They looked very conspicuous as Rafe and Jim walked through the emergency entrance and up to the nurses' station. Rafe was still wearing his firesuit and Jim was grease from head to toe.

The ride to the hospital had been a very quiet one. Both men were deep in thought over concern for Ronni. She was important to both of them, in different ways.

"We're here to see Veronica Danken. They brought her in just a short time ago from the race track." Jim explained to the nurse in charge. She looked them over and pointed to the waiting room.

"You'll have to wait in there until the doctor is done with his examination." She told them bluntly.

"Can't you tell us anything? How is she doing?" Jim was anxious to hear some news of his cousin's condition.

"I can't tell you what I don't know. When the doctor is done, he'll talk with her family." She looked over the top of her glasses. "Are two related to her?"

"Yes," came Rafe's short reply. He was too upset to put up with anymore from this bossy nurse. He went to the room the nurse had shown them, and sat down to wait for the doctor's report.

For what seemed to be an eternity, they waited and nothing was said between them. Rafe sat with his head bowed in his hands and Jim paced the floor. Each time someone came into the room, the men looked up in anticipation, only to realize it wasn't their doctor. Finally Jim broke the silence.

"I can't take much more of this!" He ran his hands through his hair. Just about then the door to the emergency room swooshed open and they looked up to see Aunt Louise and Uncle Harold coming in.

"Oh, Jimmy, baby, what is going on? What have they told you?" His mother hugged him tightly and patted him on the back.

His dad hung back waiting for the emotions to settle down.

"Mom, you remember Rafe?" He broke the hug to point his friend out to her.

"Of course," she went to Rafe and grabbed him in a great big hug. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, Mrs. Danken, I am more concerned about Ronni's condition." He felt the love from Ronni's aunt even though he knew he didn't deserve her affection.

Aunt Louise turned back to her son and exclaimed, "I told Ronni not to race tonight. You know how I get these feelings?" She didn't wait for Jim to confirm, "I had a premonition that things were not going to go well and now..." She left her sentence unfinished.

Once again, the door to the hospital room opened and two more people came rushing in.

"Rafael," His mother came right up to Rafe and hugged him tightly. "Son, are you alright? How is she?"

“Mama, what are you doing here? How did you know about this?” He was reluctant to let go of her. “Dad, thank you for coming.” He reached out to shake his father’s hand but was shocked as the older man grabbed him in a hug that included both his son and his wife.

“We were at the track.” She looked to her husband for support. “Mijo, we were so glad that you have finally come to your senses and when we knew you were going to be racing tonight, we couldn’t stay away.”

Rafe was stunned to find out that his illness and subsequent depression had affected the ones he loved so much. It was a wonder to have them confirm their support and love for him in this way.

“Mama, do you know Ronni’s aunt and uncle?” He remembered his manners and proceeded to make the necessary introductions. While the two families were getting to know each other, the door opened with a resounding noise. All eyes turned to see the latest entry into the waiting room and a collective sound of anticipation was all the noise one could hear.

“Bob,” Jim was the first to respond to the visitor. He was aware that only Rafe and he knew what this man had done. He turned quickly to see Rafe moving toward Bob in a very aggressive manner. “Bob, this isn’t a good idea. You need to leave, now!” He tried to defuse the situation before it started.

“Son, what is going on here?” His mother asked at the same time as Aunt Louise’s words came out.

“Jimmy, what’s the matter here?”

“Bob sabotaged my car and caused me to crash into Ronni.” Rafe’s words were angry and he appeared to be using all his strength to restrain himself.

The entire room was in shock as they took in the latest information about the crash at the track. Disbelief and amazement was rampant among the occupants of the hospital emergency room.

“You need to get the hell out of here,” Rafe approached Bob as he stood just inside the door.

“Rafe, Jim, I cannot tell you how sorry I am,” Bob started but stopped as Rafe came within a few feet. “I never meant for anyone to get hurt.” He disregarded his own safety as he tried to explain his reprehensible actions. “Rafe, you’ve got to believe me. I love her. I would never deliberately hurt the woman I love.”

At that Rafe grabbed the collar of his shirt and put his face into Bob’s. He was drawing his fist back when his mother spoke.

“Rafael!”

His name was spoken with authority and love and it was enough to stop Rafe in his tracks. Both his dad and Uncle Harold had gotten close to Rafe just in case they were needed to stop him.

“She’s right, Rafe, Ronni wouldn’t want you to do this.” Aunt Louise confirmed.

“Rafe,” Jim added, “Let the track officials handle this. Bob will probably be banned for life and there could be criminal charges brought against him. Our concern has to be for Ronni right now.”

Bob lowered his head in shame and headed out the door before anything further could be done or said.

Just then the doctor came into the now full waiting room. "Are you all waiting for Miss Danken?" Immediately Rafe and Jim started shooting questions at him.

"Whoa, one at a time," The doctor held up his hands to stop them. "Are you all related to her?"

The entire room spoke in the affirmative. Even though the physician doubted their replies, he could see that all were concerned and needed some answers.

"First, let me tell you what I know right now. Her right arm is broken and, in layman's terms, she has a rather nasty cut on her face. It's up in the hairline and her helmet kept it from being much worse." He saw the shaken looks on the two men, Rafe and Jim.

"Can we see her?" Jim asked the doctor.

"She's still unconscious, and I don't think she would even know you are here." The doctor shook his head. "We have her stable right now. I have called Dr. Shaw and once she gets here, we will make further assessments about her needs."

"Why is she unconscious? She seemed okay when I pulled her from the car. She even spoke to me in the ambulance." Rafe was going over the incident, step by step.

The doctor seemed reluctant to answer the question. "I can only make assumptions at this point. I'd rather wait for Dr. Shaw to get here and then we can conduct more tests and then we'll know more." He stepped back and was about to leave when Aunt Louise had one more question.

“Is she burned from the fire?” She had to ask but was fearful for the answer.

“No, she was very lucky and very smart. I’ve seen you guys from the race track come in here badly burned because of the poor choice in firesuits. Ronni had the proper safety suit on because it had the required seven layers of protection. That, along with the extinguishing system in her car, and the fact that she was pulled from the car quickly, prevented her from any serious burns.” Aunt Louise let out a big sigh. She knew that a fear of fire was paramount in Ronni’s mind.

“Rafe, thank God you got there so fast and pulled her out.” Aunt Louise showed her immense appreciation by giving him another big hug.

“Go home, family.” The Doctor spoke again, “Go home and when Dr. Shaw and I have finished more tests, we’ll let you all know. She is stable and under the best possible care. She will need all of you when she comes around. You won’t be any good to her if you are all exhausted.” He knew his words would fall on deaf ears, but he had to try and encourage them to get some rest, too.

“Please, just let us see her for a few seconds before we go.” Aunt Louise’s eyes misted with tears.

The doctor hesitated, but reluctantly agreed to let them, one at a time, see her. Aunt Louise went in first, and was not prepared for the poor sight Ronni made.

She was dressed in a hospital gown, but still had the mud from the track on her hands and face. Her hair was dirty from the blood and lay limp on the

white pillow. They had a heart monitor hooked up and intravenous tubes in her arm. She was breathing on her own, but as an added precaution, they had oxygen readily available. A nurse was taking some information and recording it in the laptop at her bedside.

Aunt Louise reached into her purse for a hanky and dabbed at the tears rolling down her own cheeks. She touched her niece's face tenderly and brushed her hair back.

"Listen here, girl. I want you to get better, so I can take you back home where you belong!" She spoke to Ronni. The nurse looked up and smiled encouragingly, to the older woman.

"Can I bring her own gown and robe from home?" She quizzed the nurse.

"As soon as she regains consciousness, we can dress her in her own clothes. I'm getting ready to bathe her now, but these hospital gowns are easier for us to deal with." She told Aunt Louise.

"Well, I'll bring them later, so they'll be here when she wakes up. I know Ronni would have fits if she had to stay in that gown for very long." She kissed her affectionately on the forehead, avoiding the bandaged area, and left the room so Jim and Rafe could come in to see her.

Jim saw the state his mom was in, so he held her in his big, comforting arms as she cried. "She looks so bad laying there. I begged her not to race tonight, but you two are so stubborn when it comes to that track." She became aware of Rafe standing there against the wall. She put out her hand and patted his arm.

“You’ll have to forgive me; I’m not usually so rude. I’m not sure anyone takes my premonitions seriously.”

Rafe put his own hand over hers and tried to smile. “I wish we could have met under better circumstances. I’ve known Jim a long time now and I am sure he understands your intuitions very well.”

“I just hope you have had no bad feelings over this wreck. I know that you are a safe driver, from what Jim tells me, so you mustn’t blame yourself!” She could see the guilt Rafe was feeling.

“Jim, you better go in before they make us leave.” She told him. “Just talk to her and maybe, if she can feel the love we have, she’ll come out of that black world she has put herself into tonight.”

Jim had always hated hospitals. His mom teased him, saying it was because he was always greasy and hospitals were clean. The nurse was done with his cousin’s sponge bath, and although she was now cleaner, she still was bruised and battered looking.

“Hey, cuz, how about a hamburger instead of that bottle of stuff they’re feeding you?” Jim teased. He hated seeing Ronni like this. She was always so vibrant and full of life, but now she wasn’t even aware of the world around her. He also kissed her, and left the bedside.

As soon as he was outside the room, Aunt Louise started to cry again. “Oh, Jim, she’s so little and helpless. I just want to take her in my arms and rock her until the hurt goes away. It always worked when you were a little boy.” She cried.

Uncle Harold approached her and put his arm around her shaking shoulders. "Come on, boy, let's take this one home. We need to get some sleep so we can be here first thing in the morning." He led his wife and son out the door.

Rafe's dad came up to him, "Son, do you want us to go in with you?" His mother was standing there ready to help.

"No, go on home. I need to do this alone." He kissed his mother on the cheek and patted his dad on the back. "Thank you so much for this. I love you both."

He watched his parents leave before he turned to face the door to Ronni's room. He stood there for a few somber minutes before he finally stepped into the room where she was lying in a coma.

He fought the trembling in his body to cross the room and stand beside her. Even in this disheveled state, she was beautiful to him. He didn't speak, but reached out and touched her lips with his fingertips. He drew the outline of those soft, desirable lips, remembering the feel of the kisses they had shared.

Suddenly, in torment, he slumped into the chair beside the bed. He bowed his head, and with a great deal of pain, began to speak, "Hey, lady racer, will you ever forgive me? I've been so stubborn, so stupid!" He lifted his head to look at her.

"Please wake up, so that I can make it up to you." He was clutching at the sheet covering her. The nurse came back into the room and upon seeing Rafe, tried to talk him into leaving.

"I'm not going to leave her side until she wakes up." He spoke with such authority, that the nurse

didn't try further, but instead brought in a more comfortable chair. Rafe was still sitting there asleep the next morning when Jim walked into the room.

Jim shook him and Rafe woke with a start. "Have you been here all night? Why didn't you go home?" He queried the sleepy man.

"I'm not leaving, Jim, until I see those big, brown eyes of hers." He straightened in the chair and tried to restore some dignity to his ruffled appearance.

Jim knew that once Rafe had made his mind up about something, it was useless to try and change it. "Has there been any change in her condition?" Jim asked. He was on his way to the garage, but wanted to stop and check on Ronni first.

Rafe solemnly shook his head, which clearly showed the frustration the man was feeling. The nurse came back into the room to take a blood sample from Ronni's arm.

"Oh, now, that's a good sign." She exclaimed as Ronni's arm jerked at the poke of the needle. Both men were alert now.

"What happened?" Jim asked the nurse anxiously.

"She reacted to pain, and that means that she's coming out of her sleep. It could still be awhile, but I'll go and let the doctor know." She left the room quickly. Jim held onto Ronni's hand.

"Okay, cuz, I think you can hear me now. I have to go on to work, but I'll see you later on today." He bent down and whispered to her. "I love you, Ronni Danken." He turned to Rafe and the two embraced, words were meaningless at this point.

Rafe sat back down beside her after Jim left. He was silently thanking God for a good sign. He bowed his head and rested his eyes for a few seconds on the side of her bed.

Although she was not awake, her heart told her that Rafe was near. She felt his very strength in her body, and slowly opened her eyes. She saw him with his head resting on the side of her bed. Her mind was foggy and she struggled to remember all of the events leading up to this moment. She closed her eyes as she relived the moment when Rafe's car slammed into hers. She wished they had the radio helmets on at that minute so she could blast him with questions. She knew Rafe wasn't one to use dirty tricks on the track, so something drastic must have happened.

The next memories were painful and she had the desire to slip back into her dark oblivion rather than relive the sounds, smells, and sensations of the crash. She could hear the metal and fiberglass of her car ripping away as she rolled over and over. She could smell the heated brakes and the coolant from her radiator.

Her head hurt as she recalled the way it was banged around inside the cage. She winced as she remembered the moment her visor popped open and broke off. When that happened, it had scratched across her exposed forehead.

The memory that brought the worst fear was knowing that she was upside down and the fuel was pouring from the engine onto the heated engine compartment. She knew that Jim had trained her to immediately hit the kill switch and shut the engine off if

she ever crashed. This would stop the fuel from pumping and help the extinguishing system control any flames. Her mind kept the recall of events flowing and she opened her eyes to look at the cast on her right arm. I couldn't shut the engine off, she realized with horror. My arm wouldn't respond.

She looked again at Rafe. It killed her to see this proud man with his head bowed in defeat. She wanted to see his piercing blue eyes and feel those soft, demanding lips on her own. She wanted to see him vibrantly alive with the arrogant, self-confidence she had grown to love. She reached out with her left arm to touch his tousled hair. He looked up shocked as he felt her hand touch his head gently.

"Rafe, you're here." She was barely heard even in this quiet room. Her throat burned as she tried to form words.

"Don't talk darlin'. You need to rest. Sleep now and we'll have time to talk later." He put his fingers to silence her lips. She fell into a drug-induced sleep with her hand locked into Rafe's big, powerful grip. He knew she would be alright now.

The next few days were a blur as she was kept under close supervision. Dr. Shaw prescribed pain pills to subdue the aching she was feeling. Each time she was awake, she looked for Rafe but other than the nurses, she only saw her aunt and Jim.

Finally, on the fourth day Dr. Shaw had just come in to see her when Ronni had become angry at one of the nurses.

"Dr. Shaw, I won't take any more of those pills! I hate that dopey feeling they give me!" She screamed.

“I can’t remember the past few days, and I won’t start depending on those awful tranquilizers just to get me through the day.”

The doctor chuckled at her outburst and told the nurse to change the medication. “Okay, I agree with you to some degree. If you are doing well enough to argue, we’ll only prescribe a sleeping pill at night and a milder pain killer in the day.” She went on as Ronni grinned in victory.

“However, if the pain causes too much stress, the nurses have orders to administer a stronger pill. I trust you will let them know if it gets to be too much to live with.”

“Of course, Dr. Shaw.” She agreed sardonically. “I’ll agree to anything just to get rid of the hazy feeling.”

“Now that you’re feeling a little better and most of the test results are back, I think we can move you to a regular room. That way you can have more visitors. The press has been asking to see you and we have had tons of calls from your fans.” She finished writing notes in the laptop and was prepared to leave.

“Dr. Shaw, please hold off on letting the newspaper people in here. I have to get some answers to questions of my own before I face them.” She pleaded.

Dr. Shaw turned back, with something obviously on her mind. “Veronica, how much of the accident do you remember?”

“I can recall most of the minutes of the crash. It seems to be playing in slow motion in my head when I shut my eyes.” She displayed some discomfort. “The

main question I have is about the cause of the crash. I know that Rafe is an excellent driver and would never drive dirty. So, that leaves me confused as to why he hit me and what happened to cause him to do that.”

“I would like you to speak with Carolynne if you feel up to it.”

Ronni was suspicious of the doctor’s request. Was it because of the fire? Was it because Rafe was involved? “Why?” She decided the direct approach was the best one.

“Your physical injuries aren’t as serious as we first thought. Yes, you have a broken arm, a small concussion and many bumps and bruises from being tossed about in that car.” She seemed to be choosing her words carefully. “Veronica, as part of our team, you know that we take care to treat the entire person. I am sure you would agree that a visit with Carolynne is warranted.” She left no room for disagreement.

Ronni shook her head in agreement, but added, “I would like to wait to see her tomorrow, if that’s okay. I am feeling a bit tired and would like to have one day’s rest without those drugs.”

“That’s settled then.” Dr. Shaw consented.

“Elizabeth, thank you.” Ronni spoke softly. “As a friend and a doctor, thank you.”

“Get some rest. I’ll order you to be moved to a regular room in the meantime. That way you can have a little more freedom.” She patted Ronni on the shoulder and gave a small smile as she left the room.

She laid there for quite some time thinking about the questions she had in her mind. Had Rafe been hurt in the wreck? Where was he now? I thought I

remembered him being in my room, but was it just a dream? She looked around at the flowers and gifts. Maybe he sent some of those, but which ones? If I could get out of this bed, I would read the cards and find out.

She was rescued from her own thoughts when her aunt walked in the room. "Auntie, you are a sight for sore eyes!" Ronni beamed with delight.

"This is a surprise! I have been here every day and this is the first time you were awake enough to talk. You look so much better when you smile." Aunt Louise patted her lovingly and sat beside the bed to talk.

"Speaking of looks let me see a mirror." Ronni groaned as she looked at her reflection. "Would you see if you can get the nurse to help me wash my hair? I can't do it by myself with this silly cast on my arm." She lifted her right arm up to emphasize her point. "I'm not allowed out of bed yet, either."

"I'll help you do it myself. I also brought your own gown and robe. I think we can put that on you, too." She went and checked with the nurse for approval.

Aunt Louise came back into her room with shampoo and all the necessary basins to help Ronni wash her hair. Shortly, after a little work and a few laughs, she had restored a brilliant sheen to her niece's dark hair. Ronni was freshly dressed in her own mauve colored gown and robe.

She leaned back on her pillow and rested herself. It was amazing how such a simple act as washing her hair could wear her out. In spite of her promise to Dr. Shaw, Ronni did not want to take another pain pill.

She wanted to ask her aunt some questions and see if she could gain a few answers.

“Now you’re pretty as a picture. The nurse said they were going to move you to a regular room a little later. So with your hair all nice and clean, and your own gown on, you’ll be ready for visitors.” Aunt Louise cleaned up the shampoo mess.

“Are you sure you’re not too tired?”

“I’m fine, just a little tired and I seem to have so many aches and pains. Auntie, have you spent much time here with me?”

“Yes, dear, why do you ask?” Her aunt was curious.

“Well, I’m just anxious to know about my visitors. I mean, I want to know who has been to see me while I was knocked out.” And also, I need to know if Rafe has been here, she thought to herself.

“Oh, Jimmy and I have been here every day. Your uncle has been a few times, but you know how busy he is with the ranch and all. All of the people from your office have stopped in to see you.” Aunt Louise was busy arranging the flowers and cleaning imaginary dust from the counter tops.

“What about...” Ronni started but couldn’t bring herself to ask about Rafe, so quickly substituted, “What about Bob?”

With the mention of his name, her aunt suddenly stopped what she was doing and avoided looking directly at Ronni. “No, he hasn’t been in.” She answered curtly. She quickly gave a sigh of relief when the nurse came in to announce the room change.

Ronni took full note of her aunt’s change in behavior when she mentioned Bob’s name, but with the

hustle and bustle of getting ready to move, was unable to pursue her aunt's lack of information.

"Well, are we ready for a new room?" The nurse inquired. She put up the side rails on Ronni's bed. "I'll have an orderly bring those things up for you." She pointed to the flowers and cards.

"Oh, I can help." Aunt Louise volunteered. She seemed distracted and Ronni couldn't help think that her aunt wanted some space for a minute or two.

It took quite some time but Ronni was finally settled in her new room. She was still in a private room, but there was less equipment and a better view of the countryside. As soon as her aunt and the orderly brought in the gifts, Aunt Louise made her excuses and left a confused Ronni.

She spent the rest of the afternoon dozing off and on in her new room. The effects of her accident were draining to her strength and the pain was still very high. She fought the urge to cry as she thought about Rafe.

He didn't come. He was only here in my dreams. Surely they would have told me if something had happened to him. I was right when I told Bob that I didn't mean a thing to Rafe! She shut her eyes and let the hot, stinging tears roll down her face. It was the release that she needed to try and get him out of her system. But down deep inside, she knew it was useless. After their wondrous night together, she knew no man would ever make her feel like Rafe had.

FIFTEEN

Trying to do just simple, mundane tasks were difficult with the cast on her arm and the pain each movement brought. The next evening she was sitting on the edge of her bed trying to eat her dinner when the door burst open. Jim came strolling through the door, grinning from ear to ear.

“Are you ready for the feel of wheels beneath you again?” He exclaimed.

“What on earth are you talking about?” Ronni was caught up in his excitement.

He didn’t answer but instead reached out into the hallway and produced a wheelchair. “Ta-da! This is your new set of wheels as long as you’re in this institution. Come on, let’s go for a ride.” He rolled the chair over to her.

She was so excited at the thought of getting out of that hospital room, that she forgot the intravenous tube in her arm. “Whoops! I guess I forgot about this bottle of stuff they’re putting in my arm. What do we do with this?” She held up the tube and laughed.

“No problem, cuz. That’s why they have this gadget here.” He took the bottle from her bed, hooked it to the wheelchair, and soon she was seated, ready to go.

“Where does the lady wish to go?” He mockingly bowed and pushed her into the hallway.

“Red, find me the outside world! I want to feel the breeze on my face and smell the pines! These last five days have been horrible, because I couldn’t get out to the real world.” She rambled on to him as he pushed her towards a patio area.

Once outside, Ronni took a deep breath to feel that fresh mountain air fill her lungs. She was so overjoyed at being alive, that a little tear escaped the corner of her eye. Jim saw it and commented.

“Hey now, what is this?” He hated to see Ronni cry for any reason.

“Just a delayed reaction, cuz.” She turned to face him. “It’s time for some answers. I didn’t feel strong enough to cope with the truth before, but now I need to know.”

He settled himself into a lounge chair and crossed his arms in front of his chest and waited for her to start.

“First, I want to know about our car. How badly wrecked is it?” She saw the look of dismay cross his face and held up her hand to stop him. “Don’t answer that. I can tell by that look on your face that we no longer share the ownership of a certain race car. Was anything salvageable?”

“I haven’t even touched it. I was so worried about you; I just couldn’t face it. I think the engine can be saved, but the rest looks like a heap of twisted metal and bits of fiberglass.” He shook his head sadly, remembering all the hours of hard work they put into

that car. "Now, why don't you ask me what you really want to know?"

"How is he?" She asked meekly. Jim stood up and turned away from his cousin. He hesitated before answering her.

"Jim, he's not hurt is he? Oh my God, he didn't get... I can't even say it aloud!" She was getting hysterical.

"Hey, hey, he's alright. He didn't so much as break a fingernail in the wreck." Jim stooped down and facing her, patted her knees.

"Then why hasn't he been here to see me? I'm going crazy in here, and he doesn't have the decency to at least tell me he's alright!" She was getting very angry now; the hurt was being replaced by her temper flaring. "Answer me, Jim. Where is Rafe?" She demanded. Then suddenly, she exclaimed, "He hasn't left town already, has he? He left without saying goodbye?" Her heart was breaking.

"I think it's time to take you back to your room." He stood up and started to push her back down the hallway.

"Stop this thing! Jim, I want you to stop this chair now, and answer me!" She was completely at his mercy and Jim kept the chair rolling down the hall to her door.

Once inside, she put her foot down to stop and tried to stand up, only to fall back from fatigue. Jim grabbed her to keep her from falling and helped her back into bed.

"I guess I'm not as strong as I thought." She let him tuck the covers around her. She put her hand on

his arm to stop him from leaving. "Please, Jimmy, you're the only person I can ask. Why won't you tell me?"

"Ronni, I love you like the sister I never had, but there is more to all of this than you know." Once again, she got the feeling that something was being kept from her. First Dr. Shaw asked of her memories of the wreck, Aunt Louise became nervous when she asked about Bob and now, Jim was refusing to deal with her questions. Yes, there was definitely more to this whole situation than she knew. "Cuz, now is not the time. You've been in a serious wreck and we decided we needed to give you time to heal. Please, let it go for now."

He was about to exit when Dr. Shaw walked into the room and went up to Jim.

"I hope this one hasn't been giving you too much trouble. She can be quite the handful." He offered his hand as he spoke to her. Ronni watched in amazement as the doctor beamed a huge smile at her cousin; not that Dr. Shaw didn't smile, but this was hugely different. She also realized that her cousin's grin was special and he held her hand a little bit longer than necessary.

"Nice to see you again, James. How's this cousin of yours tonight?"

"Liz, she's ready to argue, so I think she is doing fine." He finally released her hand.

"I see, James." Came her soft answer.

"Hello," Ronni finally spoke. "I'm over here." She was fast growing tired and wanted to be alone. "I want out of here. I can't stand being trapped in this

infernally hospital room. Aunt Louise can take care of me at home!" She was like a volcano just waiting to erupt. "I'm sorry to be so short, Dr. Shaw, but I can't bear to stay another day. Please, please, let me go home."

"That's always a good sign when the patient starts to argue with the doctor." Dr. Shaw joked. "There are a few things to settle before I agree to release you. First and foremost, no racing the rest of this season."

With a sharp intake of her breath, Ronni exclaimed. "No racing! But Dr. Shaw, I'm only five points away from the championship. If I quit now, I'll not beat Bob Johnson." She looked to Jim for support and watched the looks that passed between him and the doctor. He recognized the pleading look in Ronni's eyes and took up her defense.

"Can't we come to some sort of compromise, Liz? She only has two more races and the next isn't for a whole month. They are running the Sprint Classics at the track this month and you said the cast on her arm would be off in about three weeks. We promise that she'll take it completely easy for the next month." Jim finished, but he was definitely displaying discomfort at the doctor's stare.

"James, you did not tell her?" She asked quietly.

"Tell me what?" Ronni was now convinced that something was definitely going on and she was determined to get the answers to her confusion. "What is going on? What is it that I am not being told?"

"James..." Dr. Shaw prompted him, her voice softly encouraged him.

“Ronni, there is something you don’t know about the accident.” He stammered but continued. “Rafe’s car was tampered with and that caused him to crash up into your car.”

Ronni had to concentrate in order to process the information she was getting from her cousin. “You mean someone deliberately caused the wreck? Someone wanted to hurt me?” She shivered with the revelation.

“Yes, Ronni, someone tampered with his car.”

“Who?” She was afraid to know but needed the truth.

Jim took a deep breath and looked to Dr. Shaw for support as he spoke quietly to his cousin. “Bob... Bob sabotaged Rafe’s car.”

Time seemed to freeze as Ronni dealt with this latest news on her wreck. It couldn’t be true. It just couldn’t be reality. Why would Bob want to hurt her? He has professed to love her. As the news slowly sunk into her consciousness, she understood that love once again had abandoned her. She slumped back onto the pillow and shut her eyes.

“Why would Bob want to hurt me?” She asked painfully. “I don’t understand any of this.”

“Veronica, this is why I wanted you to speak with Carolynne. I was made aware of this information when you were brought in and I knew it would be devastating for you. Have you done that yet?” Dr. Shaw watched the battle of emotions cross over Ronni’s face. Jim and the doctor waited for Ronni to assimilate the facts of her wreck.

“I thought Bob loved me. I can’t believe that he would want to hurt me.” She slowly opened her eyes and appealed to Jim. “Why would he want to do that?”

“Ronni, it wasn’t you he was trying to crash.” He pulled at the collar of his shirt nervously. Jim was never good at these emotionally charged scenes. Dr. Shaw patted him on the arm encouragingly.

“Bob figured that you wouldn’t be good enough to keep up with Rafe and when his car crashed, he would be way out front. He thought that Rafe would just wreck and no one would actually get hurt. That way, when you won, Rafe wouldn’t want you anymore and he would get you back.” He finished in almost a whisper.

“Oh, my God!” She cried. “What on earth possessed him to do such a horrible thing? I’ve known Bob for over five years and would never believe him capable of such a terrible act of violence.”

“I don’t think he meant for anyone to get hurt let alone you. He is devastated over his actions.”

“What’s going to happen to him?” She wondered aloud.

“The track officials are deciding if they are going to ban him from the track for life. I’m not sure if they will pursue criminal charges against him. It’s all pretty ugly.” Jim shook his head in disgust.

“Does Rafe know?” She was still trying to put all the facts together.

“He found out that night down on the track. It was all any of us could do to keep him from killing Bob.

He was like a man possessed.” Jim stopped abruptly from saying anything more.

“Veronica, now you know why I wanted you to see Carolynne soon. Please let me call her and have her come over to talk with you. This type of situation would be devastating for any one person and you are no exception.” Both people waited for Ronni to give her consent.

“I want to continue racing, Dr. Shaw. I’ll make a deal with you. I’ll see Carolynne if you’ll agree that I can race in a month.”

“No deals, Veronica.” She smiled smugly. “When you first came to us, you tried those same tactics. They didn’t work then and they won’t work now.”

A little ashamed of her attempts to deal, Ronni spoke, “Elizabeth, please call Carolynne and have her come over when she can. We can talk about my racing in a few days. Are you going to let me go home tomorrow?”

“Let’s wait to make that decision after you’ve spoken to Carolynne.” Her words were final and Ronni could see that any more ploys on her behalf would be met with total resistance.

“Ronni, your body has suffered a traumatic shock, and these things take a slow, steady recovery.” Dr. Shaw made some notes in the computer as she continued talking. “That soft cast on your arm allows some mobility, but you must not overdo it. You will need to be extremely cautious and watch for signs of trauma such as dizziness, headaches, and so on. Once I get the results from those tests we did yesterday, I

will consider letting you go home. I'm quite sure your aunt will give you the best of care."

She finished and signed off the computer by Ronni's bedside. Both her and Jim said their goodbyes and left the room together.

Ronni once again shut her eyes and tried to deal with the painful news she just received. The evening stars were starting to pop out in the night sky as she willed herself to relax and try to go to sleep. She must have dozed off for a bit when she heard someone come into her room.

"Ronni," Bob's voice was not very loud even in her silent room.

For a few seconds, she tried to clear her mind of the haze from being asleep. She heard her name a second time and opened her eyes to see Bob silhouetted in the doorway. Oh God, she thought miserably, I don't know if I want to deal with this now.

He moved in closer to her bedside and Ronni was forced to confront reality head on.

"What do you want, Bob?" She pushed the button on the bed to sit up straighter. She felt at a disadvantage because she couldn't face him standing. She wanted him to see a strong, confident woman, not the injured, weak individual she was tonight. The only light in the room was from the hallway and she preferred it that way.

"Please give me a minute. I just want a little bit of your time." His voice pleaded with her.

"Bob, you tried to hurt me and Rafe. What could you possibly have to say that I would want to hear?"

She made herself sound more powerful than she felt. Did she actually hear him crying?

“Ronni, please I need you to forgive me. I never meant to hurt anyone let alone you.” He wrung his hands and moved closer to face her. “I have made the biggest mistake in my life. I wasn’t thinking clearly. All I could hear was your words telling me that we were through. You’ve got to believe me...” His voice cracked. “I would never hurt you and it kills me to see you like this.”

She took a moment to gather her thoughts. Bob was going to pay for his actions for the rest of his life. She was going to recuperate and life would go on, but Bob’s life would be changed drastically for the worse.

“Bob, I can’t give you what you want right now. I’m in pain and I have a long hard time ahead of me to try and get better. All I can tell you is that maybe, in time, we can talk again about the horrible choices you made.” She rolled over to face away from him. Ronni heard him shuffle out of the room and she breathed a sigh of relief.

She let the tears roll down her face. It was hard to treat him that way. She was a kind and generous person by nature, but he could have hurt or killed Rafe and that was something she couldn’t forgive easily. Rafe was the man she loved and if she had lost him that night, she couldn’t let her thoughts go any further. The thought of losing Rafe to a car crash and death was more than she could bear.

She knew that he was probably already out of town, but at least he was alive and safe. That was the most important thing for her to know right now.

A FAST AFFAIR

She finally fell into a fitful sleep. The thoughts that had plagued her after Jim's revelation and Bob's visit turned into nightmares.

SIXTEEN

Six days in this place have felt like an eternity, she thought grimly as she finished her breakfast. Her aunt had brought some clothes the day before yesterday and Ronni was anxious to get dressed for her trip home, if Dr. Shaw approved.

“Finish your breakfast, dearie. The doctor just signed your release papers, but you have time to eat because the front office has to process them.” The nurse bustled around the room gathering Ronni’s things to help her pack. “I already called for your ride, too.”

Ronni moved slowly off the bed as it was still difficult to move. She was bruised from head to toe and when she faced the mirror to put on her makeup, she laughed at the greenish tinges on her forehead.

“Should I put on eye shadow to match that color?” She jokingly asked the nurse. Delicately, she put the finishing touches on her face and went into the bathroom to change. That task took a lot longer than normal as she had to stop and rest between attempts.

Standing before the mirror in the room, she brushed her long shining tresses to a brilliant sheen. Her own clothes felt so much better than wearing the hospital gown. She thought briefly about her firesuit

and wondered where it was and what condition it was in after the accident.

“Your ride is here, sweetie.” The nurse said to Ronni’s back. Without turning around, she continued combing her hair as she spoke. “Jim, I want to go to Benton Mansion and tell Rafe...” She stopped dead in her tracks as she saw those vivid blue eyes meet hers in the reflection in the mirror. Slowly she turned to face the man of her dreams. He was dressed in his boots, jeans, and a tight-fitting tee shirt. He was a sight for her eyes to behold.

“Tell Rafe what?” His deep voice sounded amused. He stood there holding on to the wheelchair she was to ride out in, hospital regulations.

She finally, through concentrated effort found her voice and over the beating of her heart spoke, “Rafe, I expected Jimmy to pick me up. What are you doing here?” It was happening all over again. He had her feeling like a starry-eyed school girl.

“I’m here to take you home, silly girl.” He bent down and patted the seat of the wheelchair. “Come, Cinderella, your carriage waits.”

She looked at the man that sent her pulse rate soaring and saw a cool, calm smile cross his handsome face. His hair was still unruly, but he had tucked it under his cowboy hat. It took a great effort to cross the room without giving away her erratic nervous state. She sat down and he put her small suitcase on her lap.

Without saying a word, he carefully pushed the wheelchair down the corridor, stopping at the nurses’ station to get the doctor’s final instructions. An aide

had a cart loaded with her flowers and cards and pushed it behind the couple. They rode the elevator down and still without speaking, he wheeled her to the curb, and opened the door to his truck. He put her suitcase and the flowers on the back seat of his crew cab pickup. He reached out his hand to help her out of the chair. She quivered at the slightest physical contact from him, but he simply helped her make the step up to get in the passenger seat of his truck.

He went around and started the vehicle, but before pulling away, she put her hand out to stop him. She found the silence unbearable and spoke up, "Rafe, where have you been? I thought you were gone." Her nerves were about to scream at this man's cool and collected attitude.

"Not now, my love." He dismissed her question and pulled away from the curb.

Her mind had frantically searched for the reasons he stayed away from the hospital. Now he was sitting here, driving her to her aunt's house as if it were a normal, everyday occurrence.

"Would you like to stop for some lunch before we go home?" His question broke into her jumbled thoughts.

This is insane, she screamed to herself. It is impossible to behave normally with this man so close to me. "No, I just finished my breakfast and I'm not hungry yet." She snapped at him.

She turned and stared out the window to avoid further conversation with him. She watched as Rafe drove past the turn to her aunt's house. "You just missed the road." She expected him to slow down but

when he didn't, she spun around to face him and demanded.

"Where are we going?" He didn't answer but kept his eyes on the road ahead. She looked back outside and like a hard slap in the face, it dawned on her.

Completely surprised, she blurted out, "We're going to Benton Mansion. You are taking me to your house! Rafe, stop this truck immediately. I want you to turn around and take me home." When he still didn't respond, she started again, "Rafe Turner, I demand that you take me home to my aunt's house."

"Relax, lady racer. I told your aunt that we would talk to her later." He offered no further explanation. He kept his truck to the right as he turned onto the lane that led to Benton Mansion.

She forgot some of her hostility as his big, beautiful home came into view. It was the most stunning sight she could behold. The house had been painted a soft, delicate sky blue and the shutters sparkled with a shiny coat of white paint. She felt a stirring of excitement in the pit of her stomach as she looked at him and saw the blue color of the house reflected in its owner's eyes.

"Oh, Rafe, it is gorgeous beyond words." Her face was all aglow with pure delight. He was very pleased with her reaction.

He parked the truck and came around to help her down. "I have something to show you. Are you up for a short walk?" She nodded and he put his hand under her elbow to assist her across the driveway. It was all she could do to keep from throwing herself into his

arms. She was very confused and didn't know what Rafe had up his sleeve.

"You're full of mystery, aren't you? Where are we going now? I've never noticed this path before." She saw that the path had been freshly cut through the dense brush. The trees swayed overhead to a gentle breeze blowing through their green boughs.

The path had been made with old red bricks and on either side nature had been left alone to decorate the way. Ronni bent down to smell a wild rose growing next to the newly made path. Not wanting to ruin the magic of that minute, she didn't speak but instead, very eagerly followed Rafe along the twisting, turning path until all at once, they came upon the meadow.

"Oh, Rafe, I can't believe this. You found my meadow!" She looked at him – wanting to believe, but still afraid of his rejection. "I just don't understand."

He led her to a solitary park bench placed under the biggest pine tree at the edge of the meadow. As she sat down, she waited for the answers to the questions she had.

"You truly don't understand? Can't you see what I'm trying to say?" His blue eyes never looked so gentle. "I love you. I have loved you since that time I saw you win your first race only I didn't realize it then." He pulled her up to him and found her soft, inviting lips.

She longed to touch him, hold him, but the cast on her arm was not the only thing that kept her from showing all the love she had for him.

“Rafe, I’m afraid to believe. I want you so much, but I’m hesitant to trust, to have faith in all of this.” She sat back down for fear that her shaking legs would no longer hold her.

“Please believe in me, believe in us. I have so much to explain. When I thought I had lost you, I almost died.” His face took on that hard, cold look as he spoke again, “I wanted to kill Bob for what he’d done!” He took her hand in his own and took a deep breath before speaking. “Please, Ronni, can’t you find it in your heart to forgive me?”

Words failed her at this moment. She pulled her hand from his and tried to find the words she needed to speak. “Rafe, you’re the second man in as many days to ask for my forgiveness.”

She could tell by his reaction, that he had guessed the identity of the other man. “Bob?” Was all he asked.

“He came in to my room late last night. I was shocked and I really didn’t want to deal with him yet.” She hesitated.

“And?” Rafe encouraged her to continue.

“He told me that he never meant to hurt anyone. He said that he would never hurt me. He cried and I felt very badly for him.” She looked Rafe in the eyes and knew that everything had to be out in the open now. “Rafe, I couldn’t give him the forgiveness he wanted. I hadn’t seen you or heard from you and until I could see for myself that you were alright, both mentally and physically, I couldn’t give him the peace he wants.”

“We both seem to be having the same reactions. I had never been so intensely angry in my entire life. Once I left the hospital, once I saw you were going to be okay, I saw him sitting in the parking lot. When I saw him there, I felt all the hatred and anger break loose inside me. I grabbed him and jerked him out of his car. I just wanted to make him hurt for what he had done to you. I was just about to hit him when he broke down and started crying. I couldn’t go through with it.” He laughed sarcastically. “I actually felt sorry for the guy, because it was precisely at that moment I knew how much I loved you.” He sat back down beside Ronni and caressed her dark hair softly blowing in the breeze.

“He was a man in love and driven by jealousy. He felt the electricity between us, even if we didn’t acknowledge it ourselves.”

“But he could have seriously injured one of us.” She repeated her stance.

“In my talks with Carolynne, I have come to realize that I need to look for the good in the events that happen in my life.”

He revealed.

“What possible good can come from this?” She held up her right arm with its cast.

“Darlin’, there are several important things that I have come to realize. After our crash, I recognized that when I was in my wreck, it wasn’t the other driver’s fault. That woman could no more have controlled her car than I could mine. I can now put that bitterness behind me.” The expression on his face was the gentle, caring one Ronni had seen in her dreams.

“More importantly, my love, I have found the one I want to be with for the rest of my life. I have found you.” He tried to pull her closer, but Ronni got up and moved away.

“Wait, Rafe, this is all going too fast. There are still some answers I need.”

“Ask away, lady racer. I am anxious to get all of this settled and then we can discuss our future.” He was the epitome of an attentive lover, a change she had longed for, dreamed for, but was still reluctant to accept.

“Have the track officials decided what to do with Bob?” She asked.

“No, Jim and I turned the information over to the track officials and they’ll take it from there. I know they are considering a ban from racing at that track at least. I don’t want to press criminal charges. I think the man is already paying the price. I doubt if he will ever get back into racing, at least not here.” Rafe patiently answered her.

“What about you? Are you going back to racing?” She breathlessly awaited his response.

“Come, my lady racer. I have a second surprise to show you.” He took her hand and together they slowly walked the path back to the house. Instead of going in, Rafe directed her around to the back where the garage stood.

“Now shut your eyes until I tell you to open them.” He was like a kid with a new toy. He pushed a button and the door slid open.

“Okay, you can open your eyes!” He was waiting for her reaction.

She stood there motionless, too stunned to say anything. Parked in the garage in front of her were two identical race cars. One had Rafe's name painted above the driver's door and his number on the side.

As she finally felt life flowing back into her numb limbs, she walked around his car to look at the name on the other. It was painted the same shiny black as the first car. However, it was her sponsor's names and her familiar number seventy-nine on the side. The final shock was the name over the driver's door.

Ronni Turner – she quietly mouthed. She ran her fingertips over the name as if it might not really be there.

“Rafe, does this all mean what I think it does? I'm so unsure, so confused.” She rubbed her forehead, and then ran her hand through her hair, leaving it tousled. She looked like a child surprised with her birthday wish come true. “Can this truly mean what I want? I'm so afraid, Rafe.” She whispered as she went to his waiting arms.

“I'm asking you to be my wife, darlin'. We can spend the rest of our lives making up for the wrongs that have been done.” He nibbled tenderly at her ear.

“I can't think straight with you so close.” Ronni stated nervously.

“That's the idea.” He laughed. “Do you like your car? Now we can be the hottest team since Orville and Wilbur!”

“The Wright brothers?” She asked bewildered.

“They were high flyers and so are we, my lady racer. Come and we'll race the fastest tracks in the coun-

try. Or we can just stay here in Hoot Owl Ridge and be the champions." He was ecstatic.

"Are you sure that I'm the one you want to get old and gray with?" She asked, looking up into those wonderful, happy eyes.

"I can see I'll have to use my trump card to convince you." Once again he took her hand and led her around to the front of the house. He helped her up the steps and swung open the front door for her to go inside.

"Is there no end to the surprises? This is absolutely wonderful, Rafe." Ronni went from the entry to the front room, taking in all the furniture and décor. Lovingly she touched the faux suede chairs sat at angles near the fireplace. They were complimented by deep, rich oak stands. The fireplace had been redone in old, red brick.

"Now you see why I didn't come to the hospital. I wanted all of this ready for your homecoming. If there is anything at all that you don't like, just say the word and we'll change it." He came up behind her and put his arms around her waist drawing her nearer. He nuzzled close to her ear and kissed tenderly down the side of her neck. The flames of desire burned at her and she turned around to face him. He saw the wanting in her eyes and they kissed passionately. He pulled away and eagerly questioned her.

"Now, do you believe me? I love you a thousand times over! Say you'll marry me. Say you'll be my partner in life and on the race track." He looked deeply into her eyes and his soul searched for an answer.

Without hesitation, she happily exclaimed, “Yes, oh yes! I love you! I have wanted to say that for so long. I love you, Rafael, now and always!” They sealed their commitment with a kiss.

At last he broke away and with a small tug at her hand, said, “I have the last surprise for you upstairs.” His voice was thick with desire.

One by one, he opened the doors along the hallway. Each was carefully decorated. Two rooms were cheerfully designed for children. One room was obviously meant to be a trophy room and at that she stopped.

“Where did you get those?” She pointed to her trophies from the track.

“Aunt Louise was more than happy to supply those awards. I didn’t want this room to just hold my awards. Remember, going forward this is an equal partnership.” He kissed her long and hard and she found him hard to resist.

The next room was set up as an office, equipped with a computer, desk, and bookshelves. “I thought we might need to keep accurate records of our winnings. You do know how to do that, don’t you?”

She laughed. “I’m sure we can figure it out once we start to get those big checks.”

“What do you think? Do you mind?” He asked with a little insecurity creeping into his voice. “I mean it when I say you can change anything you don’t like.”

“Do I mind? I love you for thinking of all this. If I ever doubted you before, now I am convinced.” She looked around at the love showing in these rooms.

Without speaking, he motioned for her to follow him down the hallway to the master bedroom. He threw open the double doors and Ronni's eyes filled with tears.

The room was finished in a dark, rich walnut wainscot. The upper part of the walls were painted a soft, ivory color. The room was softly lit by crystal sconces on either side of the bed. Everything was exactly the way she had described to him that rainy day. She ran a hand over the newly refinished wash stand and her voice broke as she spoke, "Rafe, it's as beautiful as I imagined. I'm so pleased that you remembered."

"The only thing I've forgotten is to carry you over the threshold." He crossed the room and picked her up. He carried her to the bed and gently put her down.

Passion was taking over, but Rafe hesitated as he pulled back. "If you didn't have that damned cast on!" He touched her injured arm.

"Cast, what cast?" She pulled Rafe down on top of her and the last thing she said before their love took flight was, "This isn't going to be a fast affair, Rafe Turner. I want a lifetime!"

EPILOGUE

The gazebo was decorated, the mansion was prepared, and Ronni was ready to become the wife of the man of her dreams. So why was she so nervous? She paced the master bedroom of the Benton Mansion as she waited for Aunt Louise to come back to help her with her final preparations.

The last six months had been a whirlwind of arrangements and decisions. She had moved into the house with Rafe and loved getting to know the man destined to be her husband. They had loved, argued, and grown closer each and every day.

The door opened and Aunt Louise bustled in with the last-minute accessories. “Here you are sweetie. I have your mother’s locket for the old, my rodeo sweetheart buckle for the borrowed, your western shirt is definitely the blue and I might add it matches the groom’s eyes. Here is the new.” She proudly handed a small box to Ronni.

Ronni kissed her aunt affectionately and hugged her tight. “Auntie, you are the best. I couldn’t have done any of this without you.”

Aunt Louise wiped at the tears slipping down her cheeks. “Open the box.” She prompted her niece.

Carefully, Ronni opened the small jewelry box. She was stunned and looked up to meet her aunt's smiling eyes. "Aunt Louise, these are beautiful. I can't even begin to thank you for these." She stared at the heart-shaped onyx earrings lying in the jeweler's box. She held up the black jewels and admired the delicate work. She quickly put them in her ears.

"Honey, they're from your love. Rafe said to tell you that you freed his black heart and he will love you forever." Both ladies hugged and cried. How did he know that onyx was her favorite stone?

"Now there, stop those tears or you'll mess up your makeup. We need to get going to the gazebo or he'll think you changed your mind."

"Never! I can't wait to get this over and become Mrs. Rafael Turner." They gathered up the rest of their things and headed down the stairs.

The wedding was going to be a small, private family affair with a huge reception afterwards in the Benton Mansion. Rafe's mother and father, Aunt Louise and Uncle Harold, Jim and Dr. Shaw were the only people involved in the actual ceremony. Both Rafe and Ronni had preferred it this way. They planned on wearing their best western duds as the after party would be handled by Avery's Kowboy Kountry.

As they headed out the back door, Ronni and Aunt Louise stopped to admire the way the back yard was all done up. Avery's had turned the entire area into an outdoor hoedown. Tables with red checkered tablecloths were neatly arranged next to the buffet area. As she glanced to the right, she saw a dance floor had been laid close to the bandstand. The Timbermen

were scheduled to entertain throughout the night. Several bars were set at convenient locations and lanterns gave the entire place a romantic glow.

“This is going to be the party of the century.” Aunt Louise exclaimed. “The entire town is going to be here. They all just love you two.” She hugged Ronni.

“Well, not everyone.” Ronni couldn’t help thinking of Bob.

“Ronni, honey, he is going to be fine.” Aunt Louise knew she was talking about Bob. “He moved to Texas with his Uncle and from what I hear he is doing just fine. He is even dating a woman from the neighboring ranch. He needed a new start and I think he’s getting that. Now, stop your worrying.”

“Yes, you’re absolutely right. Let’s go get me married.” They went to the ATV, loaded their things and got in the front seats.

“Are you sure you know how to drive one of these things?” Aunt Louise seemed unsure of her niece’s talents.

“Auntie, I drive race cars!” She laughed aloud.

The short trip to the gazebo was made in record time. Ronni heard music and admired how the gazebo had been decorated with flowers and ribbons.

“They’re here!” She heard someone shout.

Suddenly the wedding march started and Uncle Harold came down the pathway to greet the ladies. He ushered his wife in first and came back for Ronni.

“Well, young lady, are you ready?” His gruff voice brought tender tears to Ronni’s eyes.

“Oh, yes, Uncle. I’ve never been more ready for anything in my life.” She kissed his cheek. “Let’s get up there before Rafe changes his mind.” She teased.

“There’s no chance of that, little lady. That man is completely smitten.” Uncle Harold replied in his own way. “I’ve never seen a man so ready to put on the yoke of matrimony.” He put out his arm for her to take as they walked down the wooden sidewalk.

As they approached the deck surrounding the gazebo, Ronni looked down the distance to her love. He was the most handsome man she had ever laid eyes upon. He was dressed in the same western cut shirt as her own, with his tight fitting jeans hugging those now muscular legs and his black shiny cowboy boots poked out from the bottom of his pants. He wore his best cowboy hat and once again she noticed that wild hair of his was still untamed. She had waited for this moment for the last six months and was not disappointed as she raised her eyes to meet his.

Nothing mattered except this moment when the love of her life met her eyes. She held her breath as she waited for his reaction and was not disappointed. She saw that now familiar sexy grin reach his dynamic blue eyes. This was the instant that melded their love and their lives together forever.

Uncle Harold guided her gently down the makeshift aisle to Rafe as he waited her arrival. The preacher asked who gave this bride and Uncle Harold bent down and placed a tender kiss on her cheek before answering. “Her aunt and I do.” His voice shook with emotion as he placed her hand in Rafe’s waiting grasp.

She handed her bouquet to her maid of honor, Elizabeth. She considered her as a friend as well as her colleague and found a small opportunity to pair up her cousin Jim and Dr. Shaw. Since that exchange in the hospital, Ronni realized that there was a definite attraction between those two and it wasn't beyond her to help romance, if she could.

The rest of the ceremony went by in a blur and soon she found herself facing Rafe as his wife. The preacher announced the new couple and encouraged the groom to kiss the bride.

He tenderly placed his hands on either side of her face and slowly descended to meld their lips together. Their nights of passionate love making were the highlight of their growing love. But this tender, love-inspired kiss was the one a girl dreams about her entire life. She lifted her eyes and met his and smiled as their fate was sealed.

The small group cheered and clapped their hands and the newly married couple went back down the aisle. They reached the end of the wooden walkway and found that someone had mysteriously decorated their ATV with streamers, flowers, and the traditional tin cans.

"Don't get lost, you two!" Jim teased. "We want you at your own wedding reception." He held his arm out for Elizabeth and she willingly put her hand through the crook of his elbow. He grinned down at her. "Ready for that dance, Liz."

She smiled tenderly. "You bet I am, James. I cannot wait to feel your arms about me." She spoke boldly.

He blushed and escorted her to the next ATV. It was a four seater and he motioned for his mom and dad to get on board. The last ATV was already full with Rafe's mom and dad and the preacher. All of them made their way back to the main house and the reception that was waiting to get into full swing.

As soon as the band saw the row of vehicles coming down the pathway, they played the traditional wedding march. There was a huge crowd of the townspeople and a roar rose for the newly-weds.

Rafe turned to his bride, "Veronica Leigh Danken-Turner, I love you with all my heart. Are you ready for the rest of your life?"

"Rafael Domingo Turner, I have never wanted anything more." She kissed him passionately.

"If you keep that up, we won't make it through the next few hours. We might just have to escape early."

"Promises, promises!"

Read on for sample chapters of
They Call Me Raven
the first book in the Salt of the Earth series.

PROLOGUE

Raven looked up from her painting long enough to stare out the window at the falling snow. It had been constantly coming down for the last three days now. To most people a dreaded situation, but to the tall, dark beauty standing at the wall of windows, it was heaven. She loved the solitude of her loft and the snow just added an additional blanket to her privacy. The piece she'd been working on wasn't going according to her plan, so Raven welcomed this break in her day. As she placed her palms on the glass between her and the outside world, Raven could feel the cold soaking through the window into her soul. With a deep breath, she turned and walked slowly back to the painting, but the soft whining of her loyal companion saved her once again.

"Beau, what's up?" She spoke softly to the dog by her side. Raven reached down and patted her dog on its head. Beau's tail wagged with gratefulness, and he rubbed up against her leg for more affection. Raven loved her wire-haired pointing Griffin with his curly brown hair because he was such a wonderful companion.

"We'll go down in a bit. I know it's almost your dinner time." Raven turned back to clean up and put

away her paints. Her own stomach signaled that she hadn't eaten all day either. I shouldn't deprive myself like this; she chastised herself for skipping meals.

With one last look out into the nearing dusk, Raven hesitated as she thought she saw a flash of light below near the barn. Now turning to stare more intently at the location of the beam, she squinted her eyes and put her head closer to the cold surface of the window in an attempt to see the light again. Not seeing anything, Raven shrugged her shoulders in defeat.

"It must be the snowflakes." She spoke to her dog that sat patiently, waiting by the steps, ready to go downstairs. She turned off the lights to the loft and made her way down the steps.

As Raven made it to the bottom, Beau was already dashing to the kitchen, eager for his meal. She reached into the storage bin and gave her faithful companion a treat. "That'll hold you until I can mix your dinner." Beau was too busy chewing on the biscuit to give her a second look. Raven quickly mixed his food and set it down on the mat. Beau gave up his treat to come and sit beside the dish. He always waited for her to give the command before he approached his food. As soon as she spoke, he was diving into his meal.

Raven turned on the radio that sat on the kitchen counter. Soft country tunes soon filled the room from her favorite cd. She went to the refrigerator and with the doors wide open, shopped for the ingredients for her evening meal. Grabbing the necessary things to make a simple salad, Raven was soon sitting at the kitchen table attempting to enjoy her fare.

There was the slightest of sounds but all of a sudden, Beau perked up and went directly to the back door, barking loudly. Raven got up and quickly opened the door to the mudroom. She grabbed the flashlight before donning her parka and snowboots. As she opened the back door, her heart was pounding hard in her chest. Perhaps it was just a critter looking for some food in the trash cans, perhaps it wasn't anything, but with the sighting of the light earlier, Raven was anxious to check it out.

Pulling the hood of her jacket, she bundled up to cover her head from the still-falling snow. After grabbing the snow shovel, Raven stepped out on the concrete back porch. With several huge scoops, she finally had the snow cleared enough to venture out onto the back lawn. Slowly, with her LED flashlight leading the way and Beau by her side, Raven took hesitant steps toward the barn. The wind was blowing and shifting the snow everywhere and she shivered as it cut through her warm clothes. As she got closer, Raven could see what looked like a pile of old clothes lying by the closed barn door, covered with a light dusting of snow. Halting a few feet away from the object, still shining her flashlight, Raven realized it was a man and called out. "Hey, who are you and what are you doing here?" The sound was almost indiscernible, but she distinctly heard the male voice trying to get her attention.

"Help me!" His voice held pain and showed the strain he was obviously under. The man rolled over and looked up into her startled eyes. "Please."

CHAPTER ONE

Without hesitation for her own safety, Raven leaped into action and bent down to inspect the man and his condition. As he stared blankly up at her, she put her hand on his face. He was feverish and his breathing was labored. “Where are you hurt?”

When he didn’t respond, Raven spoke a little more harshly. “You’ve got to help me here. What’s happened to you? What are you doing here?”

Struggling to even move, the man reached down and tried to open his coat. Seeing the amount of pain that the effort this was causing him, Raven unbuttoned the jacket and suddenly understood his most immediate problem. “We’ve got to get you inside. Please! You have to help me. You’re too big and heavy. I can’t do this alone!” The wind was blowing even harder now and she had to focus as it blew the snowflakes into her face.

As the injured man struggled to sit up, Raven put her arms around him and proceeded to help the best she could. “I’m called Raven. What’s your name?” Her attempt at keeping him alert garnered a crooked but weak smile as the dirty, disheveled man managed to finally get in a sitting position. “Chase.”

“Okay, Chase, do you think you can get to your feet? We’re going to have to get you inside so I can see how badly you’re injured.”

“I’m not sure I have any more strength.” His breathing was still coming in short spurts and Raven felt it was all he could do to talk. The howling of the air around them dampened his weak words.

“I’m going to go and get my wagon. I use it to bring in firewood to the house. I think we can use it to get you inside. Will you be alright for a minute?”

“Sure.” He replied but she wasn’t convinced. Raven paused but knew that time was of the essence and left him anyway. Before she quickly dashed up to the mudroom, Raven ordered Beau to stay. He went over and sat next to the silent man. Once in the room, she dragged the oversized wagon outside along with an old quilt. It might not hold him completely, but she felt they could use it to hold the bulk of his weight.

Chase had his eyes closed but heard her come back to his side. As he opened them, he looked at the wagon and then at her. “I don’t think that’ll hold me.”

“Probably not, but it can give me the help I need to get you into the house. Chase, try to sit on the wagon sideways.”

“I’m too heavy. You don’t look strong enough to pull me.”

“I’m stronger than I look, so just get on and let me do the rest.” She was determined that time and the weather was not on their side and needed to push him into moving faster. “Chase, do it!”

With the snow still lightly falling on them, the two people worked together and finally had Chase in a semi-sitting position in the wagon. Without a second thought, Raven tugged at the heavily loaded wagon and eventually got it moving towards the back door.

Beau followed closely beside. She heard Chase moan as the wagon hit bumps on the pathway but didn't stop as she was totally convinced that he was in bad shape and until they could get into the house, she couldn't help him at all.

Once she got the wagon up over the little step to the concrete porch, they reached the back door and as the wagon rolled over the doorstep into the mudroom, Chase nearly fell out of the wagon. Against the strength of the storm, Raven struggled to close the back door. She stopped long enough to make sure he was okay and with one last yank on the wagon, Raven got him into the mudroom. "Stay put." She commanded and left him there.

Just as quickly as she left him, Raven returned with the rolling chair from her office. "Chase, take a deep breath and let me help you into this." By hugging him to her, Raven finally got him into the desk chair. "Okay, now we're going to get you into the guest room." By this time they were both soaking wet from the snow and a bit from sweat at the physical effort it had taken to get him into her house.

Carefully, using every last bit of her strength, Raven pushed the chair into her guest room. Once there she pulled back the covers on the bed. As she turned to help the exhausted and injured man from the chair, she heard him speak. "I'm dirty and bleeding, I'll ruin your bed."

"Nonsense! Get in there and we'll be able to assess the damage." She wasn't going to stop her efforts to help this stranger now.

Chase was entirely too weak to protest and with his last amount of energy, literally fell from the chair onto the bed. As he lay there, Raven started to remove his muddy boots and once done with those, reached around to see about getting him out of the wet jacket. His eyes were closed, but she could tell he was still conscious as he winced when she attempted to remove one arm from the coat at a time. It seemed to take hours instead of just minutes as he was heavy and of no help to her. The snow had soaked his clothing thoroughly and she could feel that precious minutes were taking more of a toll on his immediate health situation.

Raven's breath caught in her throat as she surveyed the large stain of blood on his left side soaking through his shirt. Whatever had happened, her immediate concern was to clean his wound and make sure that the bleeding had stopped. With grit and determination, Raven lifted his shirt and exposed the injury. "Chase, I've got to get this up over your head. Can you lift up at all?"

With one last push of energy, Chase managed to sit up enough to remove the offending garment. As he lay back, Raven was astonished at his tan, muscular chest exposed. This was a man used to being outdoors, she thought. Shaking her head to garner her wayward thoughts, Raven looked down to his left side. It took all of her concentrated effort to not gasp out loud at the bloody mess there. Looking to make sure that he was not aware of her movements, she went silently from the room and went to gather the

needed supplies. Lastly, she brought a glass of water and a bottle of whiskey she possessed.

Sitting on the side of the bed, Raven soaked the washcloth in the water basin. "Chase, this is not going to feel good." When she got no response, she reached over and placed the warm cloth on his side. He barely moved as she continued to clean the dried blood from the area. The surprises weren't going to be over, she realized as it dawned on her that his wound had been caused by a bullet. "Oh, my God! How did you get shot?"

The only response she got was some semblance of mumbled words she couldn't understand. Raven had to make sure that the bullet wasn't still in there, so she pushed as gently as she could and rolled him over enough to check for an exit wound. Sure enough it was there and Raven gave out a sigh of relief. "Well, at least Mr. Chase, whoever you are, we don't have to deal with my digging a bullet out of you."

She used the simple first aid supplies to further clean up the wounds. She saw him shiver and realized that she needed to get him out of the rest of his wet clothes. Recognizing the difficulty of getting him out of his jeans, Raven decided that he was just going to have to keep wet pants on even though she knew it would be better to get him dry. She did at least unbutton them to give him a little more breathing space.

It took several more minutes to clean the wounds entirely and once satisfied that the bleeding had stopped, Raven placed her homemade poultice on the areas and then completely covered them with bandages. Finally, exhausted with all the excitement and

strain of finding this injured man on her doorstep, Raven stood up, covered Chase with the blankets and left him alone.

Through this entire episode, Beau had never left her side. She was surprised that he'd kept silent and hadn't barked at the strange man. "Beau, what'd you think? I'm guessing that you would be barking your head off if you thought he was a bad guy."

Before she sat down on the couch, Raven stoked the fireplace and once that was done, finally put her head back to rest. Beau jumped up beside the resting woman and placed his head on her lap. She reached down and stroked his short fur gently.

"What am I going to do with him? Who is he and how did he get shot? Is he a bad guy or one of the good ones? Beau, I wish you knew the answers." In no time at all, Raven dozed off and the house grew still with only the sounds outside and the fire crackling in the fireplace. Her sleep didn't last long as she was awakened by a crash coming from the guest room.

Beau beat her into the room and the scene before them both was of Chase laying on the floor moaning. Raven ran across the carpeting and quickly bent down to him. "What were you trying to do?"

"I was reaching for the whiskey you left on the stand. I need something to take care of this pain." His words were laced with the ache he was experiencing.

"All you had to do was call, I'd have come to help."

"You've done enough, I didn't want to bother you anymore." His answer was short. "I'm not helpless, well not entirely."

“Then help me get you up and we’ll get you back in the bed.” Her voice was soft, not displaying any emotions she might be feeling.

With great effort and her help, Chase was soon on not-so-steady feet. It wasn’t that difficult to help him back to the safety of the bed as he just had to fall back onto it.

He was mesmerized by her calm demeanor. Here was a woman that had no idea who he was, nor how he came to be injured, and yet, she was giving him care and concern with no regard for her own safety.

As he lay back on the bed, Raven took a moment to make sure the bandages were still in place. As she turned to grab the whiskey and a glass, Chase spoke. “Thanks. I’m sorry to be so much trouble.”

“Rest now. We’ll talk more in the morning. Here, take these. They’ll help with the pain.” She held out her hand so he could take the small pills. Raven offered him the water or the whiskey and no surprise to her, he chose the alcohol. Once he downed them with a swig of the liquor she’d handed him, Raven said, “Good night.” With those simple words, Raven and Beau left the room. Before he gave in to the pain and exhaustion, Chase allowed himself a moment to wonder about his unwilling hostess.

Raven went to the linen closet and efficiently made herself a temporary bed on the sofa. Beau tipped his head to the side and she laughed at his confusion. “Come on, baby, we’re going to sleep out here tonight. He might need us again.” She patted the couch and as he jumped to join her, Raven scooted over to make room. The two of them lay there listening to the howl-

ing of the storm blowing outside the safety of their home.

The morning hours gave way without much sunlight. The snow was still coming down, but the peace she'd felt the day before because of the weather now eluded Raven. The only thing Raven could be grateful for was the fact that the wind had subsided somewhat. She had an unwanted and uninvited guest in her house and in her space. Beau nuzzled her hand, indicating that he was aware of her stress and anxiety. "It's okay, fella. Let's get you fed and then we can check on our patient."

Their morning rituals were handled in a faster mode than normal as Raven was anxious to get some answers from Chase. She fed Beau but neglected to fix anything for herself. Before going to the guest room, Raven went to her own closet and dug through some of the older clothes she had hanging there. In the past, she had been a much larger size than now and she'd always kept a few of her sweats just as a reminder. Maybe these will fit him, she thought as she grabbed an old tee shirt too.

She went to her bathroom, washed her face and combed her long black hair into a smooth, straight wave that fell closely around her shoulders. One last look in the mirror and she went down the hall to his room. Softly knocking on the door casing, Raven stuck her head into the guestroom. "Are you awake?" She asked before coming further into the room.

"Barely." His voice was rough and Chase moaned as he tried to raise himself up further in the bed.

“Don’t hurt yourself. Just stay put. You’ve been through a lot and I don’t think you want to open that wound again. I brought these. I hope you can fit them.”

“Why are you doing this? I could be a serial killer or drug dealer and yet, you’ve put me in your house.”

His words surprised her, but Raven stood her ground. “I helped you just as I would anything that was injured.”

Chase looked properly chastised. “I’m sorry. That doesn’t make me sound very grateful, does it? Thanks. What was your name again? I was pretty out of it last night.” As he spoke, his voice was labored and broken with the energy it took to talk.

“I’m called Raven.” She stood there with her long, dark hair curling down her back and framing her white creamy face. She wore a simple vee neck tee shirt and her well-worn jeans. A half smile came as she watched the emotions cross over his face. Raven waited for the next question as it always came.

“Who calls you Raven?”

“The locals.”

It appeared that he was going to have to push if he wanted more information about the unusual name. “Where exactly am I?”

She raised her eyebrows at this question. “Where do you think you are?”

He hesitated before answering, “I’m tired. Can we talk later? My side is killing me.” Chase avoided the rest of the conversation by closing his eyes.

Although Raven felt he was putting her off, she allowed him that privilege for now. When he was

stronger she was confident that she'd get the answers to her questions. "Are you hungry? I can fix you some breakfast."

"No, not really. I just need to rest and get my strength back."

With that declaration, she left the room and went back to her kitchen. Finally deciding that starving herself wasn't going to get rid of her unwanted guest, Raven went over and started the coffee maker. "Beau, want a treat? I can fix us some eggs." Even though she knew he didn't understand, one thing Raven was sure of was that when she was in this room, Beau knew he had a chance at a treat like a yummy scrambled egg. Her faithful friend went to his usual place and sat down, waiting patiently for the goody she was fixing.

As they both sat down to eat their morning meal, Raven reflected on the events of the last twenty four hours. What was she going to do with this unexpected visitor? If she had the internet, she could do some research and try to find out more about him, but she was basically off the grid way out here. That was one of the things she loved most about living on her family's land. For a long time now, Raven had valued her privacy and solitude and she wasn't about to regret that now. She was going to have to rely on her gut feelings and instinct.

"Beau, I need a distraction. Let's go to the loft and paint." She put her dishes in the sink but as she turned to head up the stairs, Raven looked at her dog. "You need to stay with our guest."

As they walked past the guest room, Raven saw that Chase was sleeping soundly. She stood there for

a few minutes to observe him. Although his breathing was shallow it was steady. "Beau, stay."

She could see that her loyal companion would rather follow her, but always obeying his master as usual, Beau stayed as commanded.

Once in the loft, Raven went to the wall of windows and stared out at the now clear skies. It wasn't snowing just yet, even the wind was calm, but she felt it could start anytime now, even the wind was calm for now. This was without a doubt the worst weather she'd experienced in quite a few years. Raven allowed herself to go back in time when she'd first made the decision to give up on city life and retreat to the family homestead. Her parents, God rest their souls, had left the 640 acres to all three of their children. Raven, as the oldest, was allowed the original house, while her brother, Lochlin took the hunting cabin and her sister, Annie had the cottage by the lake.

Her house was called the Powder Box Church as it was originally constructed in 1939 of old blasting powder boxes from the local mining operations. Sabino Gonzales constructed the building as a church for the Mexican American families that worked in the local copper mines as they weren't allowed to enter the other churches frequented by the white families. Raven's family became the owner in the 1940s when they shut down the mines and most of the residents of Copper City left for other job opportunities.

Raven and her siblings were all content with the living arrangements. It seemed her parents knew each of their children's wants and needs very well. Most people wouldn't be happy at all with the lack of

technology in their home, but to Raven it just helped her maintain her seclusion and privacy. Although right now it would have been nice to have access to a cell phone or an internet connection, she thought dismally. Who was the mystery man in her guest room?

Shaking off those thoughts, she got to her current project and as she immersed herself into the painting, Raven felt the block from yesterday melting away. She watched in wonder as the colors from the forest became vivid on the canvas. Seeing her thoughts come alive in front of her, Raven marveled at the effort. Sometimes she felt as though her hand was guided not by herself but some other force. Suddenly she saw a shadow of a face in the upper right corner of her painting. Her breath caught in her chest as she realized it was her houseguest. It was an image blending in with the sky and clouds in the painting, not meant to be in the forefront.

As she stopped and stood back, Raven slowly put her brush down and stared at her half-finished piece. What did this mean? She'd only laid eyes on this man just a little over twelve hours ago and yet he had made a definite impression on her subconscious. Working without thinking, Raven cleaned up her brushes and put the paints away.

Still in a daze, she moved slowly down the stairs to the guest room. Beau stood, eagerly wagging his tail at her appearance. As she peeked around the corner she saw that Chase was sleeping soundly. A quick look at her watch showed her that it was well past time for a lunch meal.

“Beau, I’m sorry, buddy. Let’s get you a snack and go outside.” They moved to the kitchen, grabbing some doggy treats and Raven donned her jacket and snowboots from the mudroom. It took quite a bit of effort to push the door open due to the drifting snow from the storm, but eventually Raven was successful. Once again, she had to use the shovel to clear the back stoop of the snow. Beau seemed very happy to finally have a romp outside and Raven felt herself feeling the same delight. They walked for a bit as far as they could in the deep snow piled around. It was a dry snow and their footprints sank in the deep piles of the cold substance. As they got close to the spot where she found Chase, Raven noticed a backpack that she hadn’t seen the night before. It was almost completely buried beneath the white powder.

“Beau, this might be just what I wanted.” She reached down and picked up the heavy object. Maybe, just maybe, there’ll be something in here that will tell me who is sleeping in my house, she thought hopefully. It was starting to snow again and Raven and Beau hurried into the house. Raven laid the backpack on the table and went to check on Chase.

As she poked her head around the door, she could see that he was awake. “Chase, how are you feeling?” She moved closer into the room.

“It’s kind of embarrassing, but I need to visit the little boy’s room. Can you help me?”

“Sure. I’m sorry, I should have thought of this earlier.” She moved closer to the bed and waited for Chase to move to the edge.

“I might as well take these and change into something more comfortable.” He indicated the sweats and shirt she’d given him earlier.

“I hope they fit. It will definitely be a lot easier on the injury.” With a lot of effort, he was on his feet and with her help they soon found themselves in the bathroom. “Can you do this alone?” She hoped his answer was in the affirmative.

“I’ll be fine. I’ll call you when I’m ready.” He looked at Raven to see that she was calm. This mystery woman certainly intrigued him. She appeared calm, cool and collected even when presented with the situation they were presently experiencing.

The door was left open and he noticed that she ducked away unseen into the hallway. Struggling to keep his balance, Chase pulled his jeans down and off. The effort caused him a great deal of pain but he managed to keep his poise. Once he’d completed his mission, he sat down on the seat and proceeded to pull the sweats up and as he stood, he tried to pull them up over his hips. He had to lower them a bit to avoid the extremely tender areas of his wounds. “Damn!”

His curse brought her into the room. “Are you okay?” She stopped as she saw him struggling to stand. “Chase, let me help you.” Raven quickly went to his side and putting her arms around his waist, helped Chase to his feet. “Let’s get you back to bed.”

Once in the bed, he rolled onto his back and looked up to his dark angel. “I never considered myself a weak man, but this has certainly put a damper

on my strength and stamina.” He looked to his rescuer, “Raven, thank you for all you’ve been doing.”

“I hope that you would do the same for me. But I don’t know when I would ever need rescued from a bullet wound.” She tried to smile at her little joke.

He grinned but she could see that her words hit home. “Chase, what happened to you? Why are you here?”

“Raven, I’ll answer all of your questions, but I just need a few days. I do owe you that much.”

“I should change the poultice on your wounds. It works best if it’s fresh.” He looked up to her and asked, “Is this your creation? I seem to remember my great aunt making such things, but I didn’t think people used them these days.”

“When you live in such a remote area as I do, you have to learn the ways of the old ones in order to survive. I don’t just run to town when each little thing happens.”

“You call this little?”

The look on her face showed her regret. “Oh, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to belittle what you’re going through. I simply meant that I have learned to take care of myself out here. You must be worn out by now. Can I bring you something to eat? It will help you regain your strength.”

“Yeah, I think I could eat something now. Don’t go to too much trouble, though. I’m not sure how much I could get down.”

“I’ll bring the new poultices when I bring your lunch.” She quickly left the room. She could hear his soft laughter as she retreated down the hallway.

Raven took her time preparing a small lunch of soup and crackers with a half of chicken salad sandwich. Once she had the ingredients on the tray, she also included the new poultice for his wound. Beau was at her side and she looked down at her faithful companion. "What'd you think, buddy? Should I send him on his way?"

As her dog whined to the question, Raven agreed. "I know I can't really do that, but I don't want him in my space for very long. You should know that."

With deliberate steps, the two of them walked down the hall into the guest room. "I have your lunch. I'd first like to change the poultice and put on fresh bandages."

"That's fine," Was his only reply.

She worked swiftly and soon had new bandages with a fresh poultice on the gunshot wound. As soon as Raven was done, she put the tray on his lap. "Anything else I can get you?"

"Like I said before, you've already done too much. This smells good. I hope I can do it justice." Chase tasted a bite of the sandwich and the look on his face pleased Raven. "This is great! Is this homemade?"

"Of course, what did you think that I ran down to the local fast food place and picked it up?" She was teasing and he soon realized that her whole face lit up when she was pleased. "I'll leave you to finish your lunch. I have to take care of Beau."

With those words, he was left to his meal. Chase felt his appetite was stronger than he originally thought. He was soon munching away on the food she'd prepared.

Once in the privacy of her own kitchen, Raven stopped long enough to take a deep breath. Her thoughts were chaotic as she mechanically prepared Beau's noon meal. When she finally fixed herself a sandwich, Raven sat down at the kitchen table to figure out a plan of getting rid of her unwanted house guest. The thing she valued most in her life these days was her privacy and her solitude. This man was invading her world and the sooner he was gone, the better.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A professor on the path to her Master's degree posed this question – “If you were arrested today for something you are passionate about, would there be enough evidence to convict you?” B. B. Montgomery's passion for writing spans back to her childhood. As a human resources trainer for over 25 years as well as an instructor at the local community college, she has written numerous facilitator's guides, participant guides, and collateral pertinent to the subject being taught in her classes. She finally found the time to pursue her passion, dust the manuscripts sitting on her bookshelves, and finish what she started years ago. Yes, there is enough evidence!

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