

HOW WILL SHE SURVIVE WHEN A RODEO COMPETITION
MORPHS INTO A RING OF HORSE THIEVES?

DIANE N. GATES

the thrill ride continues...

Twisted

Twisted

DiAne Gates

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

Twisted

COPYRIGHT 2017 by DiAne N. Gates

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission of the author or Pelican Ventures, LLC except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

eBook editions are licensed for your personal enjoyment only. eBooks may not be re-sold, copied or given to other people. If you would like to share an eBook edition, please purchase an additional copy for each person you share it with.

Contact Information: titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com

All scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version^(R), NIV^(R). Copyright 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.TM Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com

Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

Prism is a division of Pelican Ventures, LLC

www.pelicanbookgroup.com PO Box 1738 *Aztec, NM * 87410

The Triangle Prism logo is a trademark of Pelican Ventures, LLC

Publishing History

First Prism Edition, 2017

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-943104-93-2

Published in the United States of America

Dedication

Seven years ago, God brought seven aspiring writers together via North Texas Christian Writers. We formed a bond, determined to learn, and hone our writing skills. Each Wednesday evening, we met to discuss and edit our week of words. Just those meetings adds up to well over a thousand hours of face-to-face time, plus an avalanche of on line edits in between.

We became a family, bearing each other's burdens, and sharing our successes. Dubbing ourselves The Literati, I added a secondary title, The Magnificent Seven, after we swept the NTCW awards in 2011.

This ROPED series would not have become a reality without the sacrificial help and encouragement of Lori Freeland, Kathleen Brown, Katie Meyers, Richie Wines, Mario Mammina, and Antwuan Malone. Y'all are the best! I love and treasure each one of you—always!

Also Available

ROPED

1

An Apology?

Crissy Crosby, what are you doin' here? My brain screamed, *Help!* And my skin crawled.

Mama's, Daddy's, and Papa's boots struck a unified cadence with mine on the cement walk as we approached the steps of St. Francis Hospital in Tyler, Texas.

The Crosbys had arrived.

We must have looked like the Cartwrights from TV reruns of *Bonanza*—ready for a showdown in our starched jeans, with lined creases down the legs, white shirts, and black cowboy hats. Of course, each of us sported our own silver buckle.

The glass doors emptied into the main lobby and standing outside, seeing my reflection and knowing who waited inside, my stomach went swishy and my palms leaked sweat.

I'd been in a hospital once. When I was born. The smell of disinfectant burned my nose hairs, and other unidentified odors lurched my insides into barf alert.

Mama glanced at me. "You all right, sugar? You're white as Crisco."

"Do I really have to go with y'all?" I sucked in an ounce of air. "Please don't make me go in there. Not after Saturday night."

"We talked about this at home, Crissy. Mrs. Fairgate said Mr. Fairgate wanted to see the whole

family. She believes he intends to apologize. Let's give him a chance."

My legs that had tapped a rapid rhythm on the sidewalk didn't feel like they could shuffle into the elevator. Felt like I was perched on top of a rollercoaster just before the big plunge. This place gave me the creeps. And that man hated me. So did his daughter. Would I have to see her, too?

Jodie Lea's ugly head kept poppin' up in my mind, bloody and battered.

Mama pulled me close. "We're all here—together, dear. If there's one smidgeon of trouble, we'll leave. OK?"

I nodded and stared at the floor tiles. What was I supposed to say to Mr. Fairgate? What would he say to me? More lies?

Papa and Daddy led the way as we walked into the elevator. Daddy pushed the button to the second floor, and the elevator door opened to a stench that wrapped around us like tentacles on a slimy jelly-fish and saturated everything we wore. My knees went slack and my feet stuck to the floor. Aww, that stinks. And I thought the odor downstairs was bad.

"Come on, Angel Biscuit. I'll be right beside you. Anybody tries to bother you has gotta come through me." Papa winked and reached his hand out for fluffin', but must've had a second thought 'cause my hair was curled for dress-up. He chuckled and dropped his hand.

I raised an eyebrow and tossed him a quirky smile.

Mr. Fairgate's room was half-way down the hall on the right side. The door closed.

Daddy tapped, and Mrs. Fairgate opened the door and greeted us with a big, ole artificial thank-

goodness-you're-here smile.

I tucked behind Mama and Daddy and tried to make myself invisible.

Machines beeped. Wires attached to Mr. Fairgate 'bout every place they could find a piece of skin to hook one. Even had tubes running into his nose. He lay propped up on snow-white pillows in an equally white bed, but still managed to look like he owned the world.

A thousand tiny needles played tic-tac-toe up and down and across my body. I couldn't stop shaking.

Suzie Fairgate hugged Mama and smiled that fakey happiness at the rest of us. "He had a good night last night." Her voice sounded way too cheery for the facts. "They're running more tests this morning."

Daddy and Mr. Fairgate just gawked at each other. A starin' contest? Daddy's jaw clenched, unclenched, and clenched again. But I couldn't read either one of them. We stood, waiting for the man to speak. I had the feeling Mr. Fairgate knew he held all the aces and enjoyed every minute of control.

I looked at his eyes. They were hard as steel—angry eyes. My mind whispered, *There ain't no apology behind those eyes. Nuh-huh, not today.*

And my heart sank.

Mr. Fairgate's eyes shifted to me. My heart pounded and my neck hairs spiked. But I stared straight back at him, just like my daddy did.

He blinked, released my stare, and shifted his attention back to Daddy. He moved his hand slightly off the bed and motioned Daddy to come closer.

Then he spied Papa.

"Who invited you, old man?" His voice came out croaky, but with the same old familiar snarl.

My head jerked around to look at Papa. His eyes

were closed. I knew my Papa. He was praying. He opened his eyes and looked real steady at Mr. Fairgate, but didn't speak a word.

Mrs. Fairgate slipped between the two men and whispered out loud. "I did, Ed. They came as a family. At your request." She patted his head and smoothed his forehead with her hand.

He slapped her hand away.

Except for the beep of the machines and the echo of the intercom in the hallway, silence hung like a shroud.

"Ed"—Papa's deep-toned voice filled the room—"You've been given another chance to turn your life around and rescue your family. Don't squander this one, too. Remember—twenty years ago?"

"Yeah, old man, I remember." Mr. Fairgate rolled his eyes and twisted his lips to a hiss. "Still harping that old God thing? Give it up."

I looked from Papa to Mr. Fairgate. Twenty years ago? Before I was born? The two men stared at each other. Papa's eyes puddled to sadness—Mr. Fairgate's with contempt. Mrs. Fairgate looked from Papa, back to Mr. Fairgate. Mr. Fairgate shifted his gaze back to Daddy and motioned for him to come closer. Again.

The heat rose from my toes to the top of my head. My brain screamed, *Let's get out of here—right now.*

But Daddy took two small steps toward the bed.

"That's close enough, Crosby." He scooted higher on the pillows and eyeballed Daddy, long and hard.

How could this man have enough energy to be hateful? Thought heart attacks meant a person could die. He sure didn't look like he was about to—

Mama reached down and clasped my hand. Her hands were as clammy as mine.

The twitch in Daddy's jaw intensified.

I wanted to run out the door, down the hall, and back to the truck.

Mr. Fairgate motioned to Mrs. Fairgate. "Woman, raise this bed up so I can see all of 'em when I talk." He issued orders to Jodie Lea's mother as though she were a field hand 'stead of his wife.

She scurried to reach the button, raised the bed, and patted Mr. Fairgate's hand again.

Sick or not, I woulda smacked the sass out of him. The air was so thick I couldn't inhale enough to fill my lungs.

Mr. Fairgate cleared his throat. "Crosby, I have friends in this county. I've spoken with most of 'em this morning and we all agree—sell your ranch and get outta Terrell. You'll never work here again. Ya hear? You're through. You and your lyin' brat tried to ruin my reputation. Now you're all gonna pay." Every syllable flew from his lips hitching-and-pitching-to-piercing.

I gasped and tucked closer behind Papa. My brain continued to scream, *OK, guys, let's get outta here. Time to go. He's crazy.*

Suzie Fairgate looked at Mama and Daddy and mouthed, "I'm so sorry." Her forehead wrinkled and her eyes widened into circles of fear. She clasped her arms around her chest, her face washed pale, her body shaking.

I thought of the years of abuse she had endured at the hands of this evil man.

"When I get out of this hospital I'm going to sue you, Crosby. And you"—he turned his head toward his wife—"I'm sick of your sniveling. Get out of my house. Go on back to your mama. Jodie Lea and I don't

need you."

My mind hit the *whoa* button. Her mama? Wait a minute. She's dead. Papa said Jodie Lea's grandmas died. All of 'em.

Then his beady eyes settled on Mama and narrowed. "Deborah, I told you one day you'd be sorry you chose this piece-a-dirt. If it weren't for your old man and that witch he married, things would be different between us."

I clapped my hands over my ears. What was going on? I didn't want to hear another word of this out-of-control nightmare growing worse by the minute.

"Ed?" Mrs. Fairgate gasped.

Mama glanced at Papa. He shook his head. The vein in Daddy's neck went from twitching to vibrating, and his eyes burned to broil, but he kept quiet. Though I couldn't make sense of anything, I knew Mr. Fairgate shot his mouth way beyond my daddy's ability to endure.

The machines ratcheted their beeping. The nurse call lights flashed and another contraption screamed a warning racket. My mind raced out the room before my body could react. Papa took hold of me and pulled me toward the door.

Fairgate pointed his shaky finger at me. "Don't you leave, missy. I'm not done with you. Show your face at school and Jodie Lea will make your life a living hell. You don't mess with the Fairgates and live."

Papa held me in a one-arm hug and pushed me out the door and into the hallway. Chills ran up one side of me and then down the other like electric currents on steroids. But I couldn't leave Daddy and Mama in there. I hugged the edge of the door.

Daddy's face heated radish-red, and he lurched

toward the bed. Mama grabbed his arm and held him back.

He growled. "You're a lunatic, Fairgate. If you get outta here alive I'll see you behind bars."

"Not one step closer, Crosby," Fairgate yelled. "Now all of you, get out." He looked at his wife. "Yeah, you too, woman. You'll all hear from my attorneys. Soon. Got no use..."

The sound of running feet smacked the floor behind me.

A nurse rushed into the room. "Everybody out," she ordered.

Mama supported Suzie Fairgate by her shoulders and led her to a room down the hall, across from the elevators.

Mr. Fairgate's breaths came in harsh, short gasps. I turned to see his fingers clutching his hospital gown, his face a pasty shade of gray.

My feet were nailed to the floor. I couldn't breathe.

"Ahhhh." He screamed. His eyelids slammed shut and his arms slumped flat on the bed.

Another nurse sprinted in, punched numbers on her phone pad, and shouted, "Code Blue, Code Blue. Room 256."

Daddy took my right arm and Papa my left and they steered me down the hallway behind Mama and Mrs. Fairgate.

The hospital intercom squawked, "Code Blue. Code Blue. Room 256."

A team of techs raced by with a crash cart. Nurses and doctors poured from every hallway, to converge on Mr. Fairgate's room. I heard someone shout, "Clear."

It was Saturday night all over again.

2

The Vow

The down arrow blinked red and the elevator slid open. Jodie Lea sat slumped in a wheelchair accompanied by a nurse's aide, her scabbed face bruised a dark blue and black. Frail. Fragile. Leftovers from Saturday night's beating.

She wasn't the Jodie Lea Fairgate I'd sat next to on the school bus. Nor the girl who knew how to push all my hot buttons. I almost didn't recognize her and for a moment, she looked as though she didn't recognize me.

Then those swollen eyes exploded like frizzy-firecracker flames matching the wild red of her hair and her face twisted to rage.

"You!" She spit the word and her eye-daggers hurled straight at me.

This was the Jodie Lea I'd come to know and dread.

She slammed her fists against the arms of her wheelchair. Half-syllables I couldn't understand erupted from her lips, spewing like hot lava.

Mrs. Fairgate broke through the gathering crowd. "Sweetheart." She bent over Jodie Lea, smothered her daughter in her arms, and sobbed.

Jodie Lea squirmed free from her mother's arms. "What's wrong with you? Get your hands off me." She

pushed Mrs. Fairgate away. "Why are you all staring at me?" Her rant squelched every whisper. "Stop your sniveling, Mother, and take me to my daddy's room. Right this minute."

Mrs. Fairgate's gasp whispered through the room.

Well, a beatin' sure hadn't taken the starch outta her. I gulped and my stomach knotted, remembering the events of the last half hour. Events that shoulda siphoned the anger plumb out of anyone's heart.

Now it was my turn to squirm. Sure would be easier to deal with the angry version of Jodie Lea. The frail and fragile image? Not so much. I didn't know what to do with a wounded Jodie Lea.

Mrs. Fairgate's tears dried up quick as turning off a water faucet. She dropped her arms, dismissed the aide, grabbed the handles of Jodie Lea's wheelchair, and pivoted her brat-in-a-sack into the small room across from the elevators. Mama followed and the door clicked shut behind them.

But I could still hear Jodie Lea's shriek, "No, Mother. Get me outta here."

I could imagine her face.

"Crissy Crosby"—then I heard nothing until—"You hear me good. I swear by the Fairgate name, if you've hurt my daddy again, I'll kill you." Her shrieks blasted through that wooden door as if it were tissue paper.

Chills flared in my heart and chased a wave of 'em up and down my body. No tellin' what this girl and her father were capable of. I'd yanked the tail of a rank bull stompin' his young Saturday night, now his whole family had turned on me.

Hey, I'm not the bad guy here.

Two doctors burst from Mr. Fairgate's room

pushing a gurney. They raced toward the emergency elevators. A third doctor rode the gurney, straddling Mr. Fairgate, pumping his chest. They shoved the rolling stretcher into the elevator and the doors snapped shut. The lights blinked down three floors and stopped.

Another doctor ran into the second elevator barking instructions to the nurses who ran behind him. Then he shouted instructions into his phone. The silent steel door slid shut.

A nurse double-timed toward us. "Mrs. Fairgate?" Her eyes darted over the crowd.

Daddy pointed to the consultation room where Jodie Lea's tantrum still fried the air.

The nurse tapped on the door.

The shouting inside stopped.

Mama opened the door and the nurse motioned Mrs. Fairgate to come with her. Once in the hallway, the nurse whispered to Mrs. Fairgate and they dashed to those same elevators that took Mr. Fairgate away.

"Mother?" Jodie Lea's words flew after her. "Don't leave me. Please don't leave me."

Mama walked to the open door. "Get a nurse, John." She sighed, turned back into the room, and shut the door.

The only sound left—Jodie Lea's sobs.

People in the waiting area seemed to evaporate. I wished I could vaporize too. I glanced around looking for an escape route, a bathroom, any place to run and hide. Papa patted the cushion beside him and I plopped there, sentenced to wait and worry. Mostly worry.

A grandmotherly nurse with deliberate steps, with no sign of panic, marched back down the hallway with

Daddy. She knocked once on the door and pushed it open—the picture of composure, a fluffier version of our Dean of Girls, Mrs. Davenport.

I saw Mama's eyes light up when she looked up and saw nurse-lady. She stepped away from Jodie Lea's side.

This gentle, gray-haired lady knelt beside Jodie Lea, took the girl's bruised, tear-stained face in her hands, and pulled her into a grandma's hug.

Jodie Lea's breaths came in short, raspy sobs. She clung to this stranger's comfort like one would grasp the rungs of a ladder to keep from falling.

"Jodie Lea." The nurse spoke with authority laced with the softness of fleece. "The doctors are operating on your daddy, child. To fix his heart."

"I need to see my daddy. Now." Jodie Lea choked.

"That's not possible." She stroked Jodie Lea's hair with her hand and brushed it out of her face. "But we'll take you downstairs to be with your mother if you'd like."

Jodie Lea's head yanked to eye level with the nurse, her tears dried up, and those flaming eye torches reignited. She pointed a shaky finger at Mama, wadded her face like a prune, and snarled, "Take your family and get out of here." She turned to the nurse. "Make her leave. Right now."

The nurse glanced at my mama who shook her head in that *absolutely not* motion I'd seen all my life.

"Jodie Lea, your mother asked Mrs. Crosby to stay with you. She's not leaving. You can stay here with her, or we can all go downstairs to the surgical waiting room with your mother, unless you want to go back to your room."

The nurse stood and laid her hand on Jodie Lea's

shoulder. "Where do you want to go, child?" Her words were kind, but firm.

"To. My. Room." Jodie Lea's monotone resonated, but she leaned toward Mama. Her eyes narrowed to slits, just as I'd seen her daddy do. "Anywhere but with this stinkin' woman and her family."

Mama shrugged. The nurse wheeled Jodie Lea around and pushed her out the door toward the elevator.

Daddy, Papa, and I crouched small in the corner, across the hall, and watched the elevator doors open. The nurse pushed her wheelchair inside and turned her around.

Our eyes locked.

Hers were a torrent of hate.

Mine stung with puddles of fear that sprang from my heart and leaked out my eyes.

The elevator door shut and we watched as the lights blinked up a floor.

My legs quivered like tight rubber bands. Would this nightmare ever be over?

I covered my face with my hands and tried to make my heart stop pounding. This is what I get for keeping her daddy from beatin' her senseless or worse? Shoulda kept my mouth shut, walked away, and let her daddy beat 'er Saturday night. He'd been abusing her for years. What difference would one more night have made?

3

The End of the Beginning

Oh, Lord Jesus, where did those awful thoughts come from? I didn't mean 'em. Honest. He woulda killed her, right? No way would I have walked out and left her there. I'm sorry, Sir. I glanced around, feeling heat crawl up the back of my neck, certain everyone could read my evil thoughts.

A raging river of tears begged to unleash in Mama's arms, but she sure didn't need to nursemaid my emotions. A storm of chaos surged up and down those hospital halls and I wouldn't add my selfish stuff to the mix. So, I just hugged her.

Mama's face wrinkled worry. "I'm going downstairs to stay with Suzie. What else can we do?"

Daddy rubbed his chin. "Any family nearby?"

"I've never heard her mention anyone. After her parents moved away, she refused to talk about them. Even when we'd heard they'd died." Mama shook her head and pulled me closer. "Should we call Ed's brother, Bo?"

"No. Never." The clip of his words shouted anger. "He'll weasel back to Terrell on his own. Those stinkin' kinda animals can smell blood and money."

Wondered if Bo Fairgate was the one Papa called the rotten sheep? Seemed to me they all had issues.

Daddy slipped his arm around Papa's shoulder. "Jack, mind if I run the two of you back to the ranch