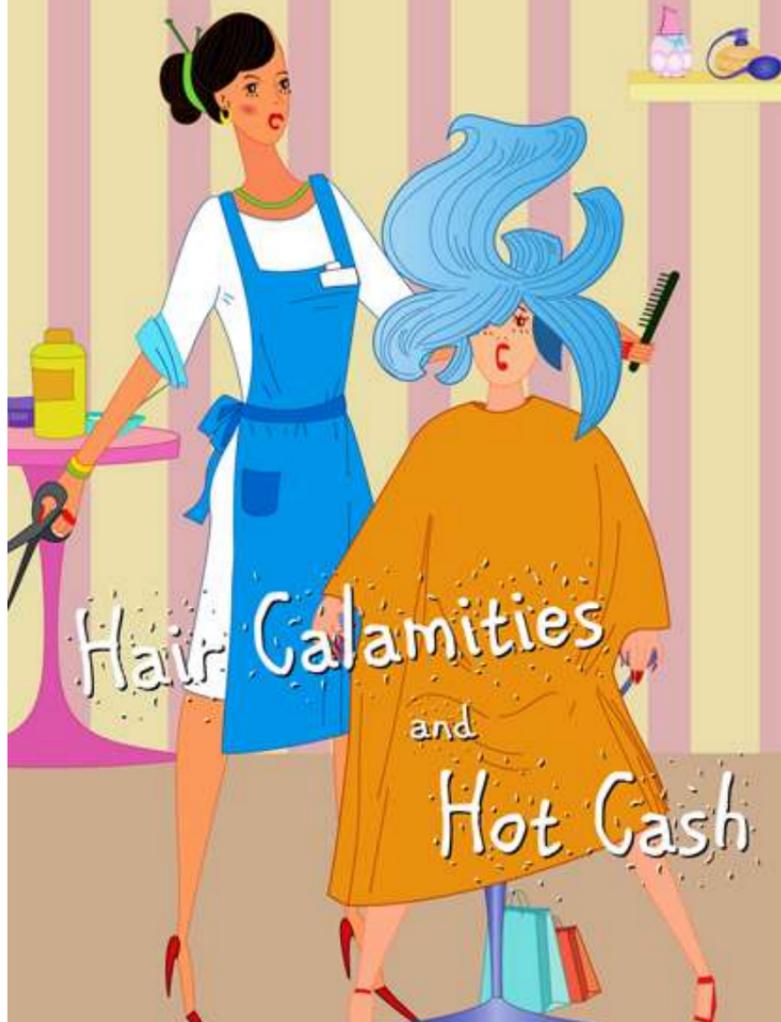


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GAIL PALLOTTA



Hair Calamities
and
Hot Cash

Hair Calamities and Hot Cash

Gail Pallotta

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Hair Calamities and Hot Cash
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Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

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

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Publishing History

Prism Edition, 2018

Paperback Edition ISBN 978-1-5223-9791-5

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-5223-9790-8

Published in the United States of America

Dedication

For my mother, Evelyn Mathis Cassady.

Acknowledgements – Thank you to hairstylist Carlee Cowin and my writing partner, Lisa Lickel, for their encouragement and input; to my publisher, Nicola Martinez, and my editor, Jamie West, for believing in *Hair Calamities and Hot Cash*, and to God for His many blessings.

What People are Saying

A car crash, a threatening note, crazy hair? What is going on in Eve Castleberry's salon? She turns to handsome, stockbroker Philip Wells for help. What ensues is a comedic romp from small town to big city in search of missing money, hair catastrophes, and love. A truly fun read.

~Cynthia Hickey, author of
Shady Acres Mystery series

1

Philip Wells glanced at the majestic blue-tinted mountains in the distance. New York City stress fell from him like the waterfall he passed on his right. He turned into a winding curve and climbed a steep grade flush with green hardwoods, white dogwood blossoms, and pink wildflowers. His taut muscles loosened. If he'd known the Western North Carolina Mountains would bring such peace, he would've *asked* George to send him here on a business trip.

He'd resented leaving the country club when George appointed him to take care of Mr. Jacobsen's account, but not anymore. Riding through these hills gave him new-found freedom. His heart danced until he zipped into another curve at the edge of a cliff and glimpsed the precipice beyond the guard rail. He gripped the steering wheel as the need to secure his space on solid ground rushed through him.

He'd driven on the highway for miles and hadn't seen another car. According to the GPS, he'd round a few more bends and pull into Triville, located sixty miles northwest of Asheville. George had reserved a room for him at Triville Motel near the base of Mr. Jacobsen's mountain. Philip glanced at the towering peaks surrounding him and tried to imagine owning one. George had instructed him to contact Mr. Jacobsen, let him know he'd arrived, and set up a meeting.

Who would've thought Make More Money's

newest and biggest client would live up here? Hey, he could see how the guy wanted to own one of these magnificent hills. He'd never seen a view this gorgeous out his office window, but what about the coffee houses, parties, custom-tailored suits, and civilization? What made someone tick who chose this type of life? Did the old codger not like people? A twinge of uneasiness pricked Philip's skin. What sales approach should he use?

Philip rounded a curve, and a truck barreled toward him on his side of the road. His heart jumped in his throat as he swerved to miss it. It grazed the side of Philip's car, jarring him while sending his vehicle onto the shoulder. Philip's heart clenched. He steered toward the road and tapped the brake as he started downhill, but his car gained speed. The trees blurred as he whizzed past them. He mashed the pedal. It slammed to the floorboard, and a helpless sensation rippled over Philip. His leg shook as he pumped again and again.

~*~

The bright May sun beaming through the window of my beauty shop created a stripe across the black shampoo bowl. Every day the ache in my heart for Jordan reminded me that Eve's Clips was my life now. I leaned Joyce Westmoreland's head back and scrubbed her blonde locks. Then I reached for the conditioner on the metal shelf behind the shampoo bowl. The bottle was empty, and it was the last one I had. That ne'er-do-well Durbin Brown hadn't delivered my products.

A breeze hit me in the face as the door swung

open, the pink flowered curtain flapping.

“Hello, where have you been? You were supposed to come on Monday.” I held out the container. “I’m out.” My insides boiled at such bad service, not to mention that my creepy new salesman reminded me of Ichabod Crane.

He plopped down several cardboard boxes, ripped the top off one and handed me Strawberry Fields Conditioner.

“Thank you.”

Durbin pulled a small pad out of his pants pocket, flipped it open, and tapped his foot. “I’m writing a bill for you.”

The building shook. Metal crunched. Bricks fell amid loud scraping.

My nerves vibrated.

Durbin’s mouth twitched.

Joyce bounded out of her chair.

“Quick, under the vanity,” I yelled out.

Joyce shot to it like a bullet, but Durbin froze. I grabbed his spindly arm and pulled him behind me, the heels on his black boots scraping across the gray laminate floor. “Get under here.” I couldn’t help but use a harsh tone. He hunkered down, and I scooted in beside Joyce. He nuzzled into my shoulder and shivered like a wet puppy. My head spun as the walls shook, shards of glass fell, and drywall dust trickled into the air.

Finally, the structure stood still and quiet. I crawled out, and my legs nearly buckled under me.

Joyce and Durbin followed.

Then we all turned toward the window.

My heart sank and landed like a rock in my stomach.

A blue car stuck through the wall and lower portion of the large glass window. Two airbags filled the vehicle's cracked windshield.

I stumbled to a salon styling chair and dropped down. First Jordan, now this. Was the driver all right? Would the ladies of Triville desert me if I couldn't fix their hair?

Joyce plunked down in the chair in front of the shampoo bowl. She appeared shaken, water trailing down her face from the half-rinsed hair. Durbin was as white as Triville's winter snow, the smirk he usually wore gone. He collapsed in the seat underneath the upturned hair dryer as the door on the driver's side of the wrecked car creaked.

A man with a trim athletic build staggered out.

I swallowed my tears and stared at him. I'd never seen him before. As handsome as he was I'd remember if I had.

In moments he opened the shop door and joined us. "Ma'am, I'm sorry. Is everyone all right?"

My insides exploded with sorrow over my ruined shop, but I wasn't physically harmed. "I'm OK." I directed my gaze at Joyce.

"Just frightened," she said.

Durbin leapt up as though someone had injected him with adrenalin, stiffened, and held out his writing pad and pencil. "Back to your bill."

How could he think about that now? I must've looked at him as though he had three eyes, because he said, "I have other clients." He gestured toward the stranger with his pencil. "I can't stay here just because this dude rammed his car through the window. I have to keep moving."

"All right."

He pointed to a line on the small notebook, and I signed. "Would you please come on Monday next month?"

"It's out of my way, so I have to make a special trip, but I'll try. I suppose all the ladies need to spruce up for the Cow Flop Festival or whatever is on the busy agenda on the outskirts of nowhere." The familiar smirk reappeared.

Joyce clenched her jaw, sat up, and ruffled the burgundy cape I'd placed over her blouse. "Now, you wait just a minute, Mr. uh..."

Durbin brushed drywall dust from his lapel. "Brown, Durbin Brown."

I wanted to tell him to take his products and never come back, but I needed them, and my shop was at the base of a mountain quite a distance from most salesmen's routes. He turned and strutted out the door.

"I apologize for the mess I've made, but..." the man who'd run into my shop peered at me with pleading, powder-blue eyes. "I need to use your landline." He shook his cell phone. "This thing won't work."

If only Jordan were here. My head swirled as I tried to think what to do about Joyce's hair, keep my blood from boiling over at Durbin, and not cry over the disaster this man had made in my shop. The color had drained from the poor guy's face. *What did he say? Oh, his cell phone won't work.* "No, it wouldn't. Eve's Clips is in a dead zone."

The way he gazed at me he might as well have said, *I agree. This whole town's in a dead zone.*

Ralph Wisner and his wife lived in the house next door, the only people for miles around. They both worked all day, or they would've been over here to see

what was going on. Triville was a nosey place, but everyone knew everyone else, and people cared about each other.

"Uh..." I gestured toward the landline, sitting untouched on my desk. "Help yourself."

Joyce stared at the man with wide eyes.

"I'll need to cancel my appointments today, but I'll finish your hairdo." I tried to reassure Joyce then I redirected my gaze to the man. "Sir, if you don't mind, sit at this end of the desk away from the debris." I tapped the unaffected area. We dared not touch anything until the police and insurance adjuster checked the damage.

"Yes, ma'am." He pulled out the straight-back chair with a flowered cushion that matched the curtains.

The glass crunched, and I shivered inside at the mess he'd made. What was he doing way out here? Eve's Clips was on the main highway, which wound up steep hills dotted with pines, hardwoods, and apple trees. Few people traveled it after November thirtieth when the tourists left.

Joyce touched her tresses. "I appreciate your willingness to fix my hair. I can't go to work like this."

The man spoke into the receiver. "Mr. Jacobsen, this is Philip Wells. I'm sorry, but I'll be late arriving at your house. I'm at Eve's Clips in Triville. I've had a bit of car trouble."

That was putting it mildly.

He kept his ear glued to the phone. "Yes sir, I appreciate your patience." The man's pale, handsome face drooped.

It wouldn't hurt me to show him and Joyce some southern hospitality. "We need to call the police." I

looked at the man. "And your insurance adjuster. But why don't I go in the house and bring us all a cup of coffee?" I stuck out my hand. "I'm Eve Castleberry." I motioned toward Joyce. "Joyce Westmoreland."

Joyce gave a half-smile.

He shook my hand. "Philip Wells. I'm sorry to meet under these circumstances. I phoned my insurance company before I called Mr. Jacobsen, but as for the police, should I contact 911?"

"No, call the sheriff, Thad Waters. I'm on the outskirts of town." My shivering nerves calmed a bit knowing he understood his responsibility. I went to my desk and turned on the laptop. Shards of glass hit the floor, and the urge to slap the stranger for ruining my shop hit me like a lightning bolt, but he peered at me with regret-filled blue eyes that soothed my anger.

"That's Thad's number." I pointed to it on the screen. "Thad grew up here. He's so mild-mannered it's hard to imagine him running down criminals. However, at six-feet-three inches he's big enough to intimidate most people, and he's wanted to be a sheriff for as long as I can remember. He'll assess this situation accurately." Words flowed from my mouth as though they had been programmed.

"He sounds like the person we need. How about a tow truck?"

"Call Lloyd Rock. His number's there too." I took a step back and tried to grasp how the wreck happened. "What went wrong?"

"My brakes failed." The man slumped in the chair.

"I see." I understood his words, but the disaster in my shop still seemed surreal. "Well, I'll be right back."

I patted Joyce on the knee. "Don't worry. I'll have you as cute as a ladybug in no time after we have our

coffee.”

She flashed a forced-looking smile.

I left and went across the yard to the house, but the image of the car stuck in my window spun in my head. I unlocked the beveled glass door to tomb-like silence.

My coffee didn't taste as good as Jordan's. I missed the smell of the mocha blend wafting down the hall when I woke up. Most widows were middle-aged, and here I was only thirty-four. I'd never dated anyone but Jordan. Even if I had the will to try, most of the men in Triville were married. Tears rushed to my eyes.

If Jordan were here, he'd tell me everything would be fine, and I'd believe him. How long would repairs take? Would I have enough money to pay my bills this month? Would I find the will to get out of bed without an appointment?

I blinked back the tears as I passed the pine table and poured three cups of coffee from the pot I'd made this morning. I stuck them in the microwave with a shaky hand and tapped my foot while I waited. Finally, I set the mugs on a tray and headed toward the shop. I could at least style Joyce's hair and send her to work looking great, couldn't I? I pushed the door open with my shoe.

Joyce wiped dripping wet hair from her face, took two cups off the tray and handed one to the stranger. Then she sat back down in the shampoo chair and sipped.

I sank into a seat, swallowed, and welcomed the quiet filling my pores. Every bone in my body wanted to fix the shop immediately, but I needed to concentrate on giving Joyce a nice do. I got up, set her cup on the shelf above the shampoo bowl, and washed

her hair, my eyes misting the entire time.

I applied the conditioner and suds built in the bowl. As upset as I was, maybe I'd picked up the shampoo. I turned up the product and stared at it—Strawberry Fields Conditioner. My stomach tightened as I ran my hands over her locks trying to work more water through them. The soap persisted, and my lower lip quivered.

2

The shampoo bowl faded as I stiffened my jaw and focused only on the suds stuck to Joyce's blonde hair. "My new salesman's products are different from those I've used in the past."

She peered at me with kind eyes. "I'm not worried, darlin.' I always look better when I leave here. Everyone knows you're the best hairstylist for miles around."

"Why thank you." I'd attended three refresher courses and salon shows to keep up with the latest trends. With all the strength left inside me, I wanted to work magic on Joyce's hair. I raised her up and patted her shoulder.

Foam from the shampoo bowl crept onto the floor. Her blue eyes widened. She tip-toed over the bubbles and plopped down in front of the mirror. As I worked I took a step to the right, slid, and gasped. From then on I snatched the curlers and rolled them in fast-forward speed. Could I produce a great hairstyle for Joyce amid this chaos? I showed her to the hair dryer, turned on the timer, and handed her a women's magazine.

The boxes Durbin had left soaked up the liquid oozing across the floor. I wanted to shake him, but he wasn't here. I glanced at the car in the window, and wanted to sit down and cry.

"Lloyd and Thad are on their way as well as the insurance adjuster." Philip stood, and his gaze went to

the floor then met mine. "What happened? You must use lots of shampoo."

"I put conditioner on Joyce's hair, and soap overflowed." I blinked back tears as I surveyed the disaster.

"I can't help you there. I don't know much about women's beauty supplies, but could I do something with those?" He pointed at the boxes.

I swallowed hard. "If you wouldn't mind."

"Of course, not, that's the least I can do. I'll unpack them too."

The heavy weight on my shoulders lightened. If he took care of that task, I could put away the clean towels and organize my supplies. "All right, thank you."

"Where would you like these?" He wrapped one arm around each container.

"I'll show you."

He followed me to the back of the shop and set the boxes on the floor. "What next?"

My supply closet was five boards installed above a chest, washer, and dryer in the narrow hall outside the restroom. "Just place the products right here." I patted an empty shelf.

Cardboard ripping filled the air as I folded towels. I stuffed some of them in a drawer in the chest then darted up front and laid a few on the shelf over the shampoo bowl. Concentrating on the small act of normalcy relaxed my tight muscles. If only I could close my eyes, open them, and see this was a bad dream. But it wasn't. Eve's Clips wouldn't be operational again soon.

The man returned to the front with a mop and stared at the foam. "I don't mind cleaning up."

"No, that's all right, I'll get it la..."

The man's lips turned up on the corners, his gaze going soft and twinkly.

I smoothed my hair as warmth ran through my veins. That hadn't happened since my dear Jordan died. A pain pricked my heart because he was no longer with me, but I still had what was left of my shop. I grabbed at the mop. "Here, I'll take that."

"No. I'm happy to help." He stopped the creeping bubbles before they flowed into the glass shards. I sighed in relief.

The foaming mess inched up on his pants.

"Oh, no. Your expensive clothes are ruined." I bent down and brushed his trouser legs off. "I'll bring a hair blower right now."

Philip stood in the soapsuds, gazing at his leather slip-on shoes with tassels across the tops. "You have a point. Well, all right, we can dry them."

What was he thinking traipsing around in the middle of that watery disaster wearing his good clothes? I dried the slacks then smoothed them with my hand. "If they shrank it's not enough to tell. They look fine."

"Sure, it's nothing to worry about. I'll sit over here and wait for Mr. Rock." He took a few steps, and the liquid seeped from his socks over the sides of his shoes. He snatched a towel off the shelf behind the shampoo bowl and wiped it. His lips turned up on the corners in a sheepish grin as though he now realized he may have ruined his fancy loafers. He looked like a little kid who'd gotten the last cookie out of the jar.

The timer buzzed.

Joyce lifted the dryer off her head, moved to the second hairstylist chair and sank into it.

I placed my hand near her scalp to avoid yanking out strands of hair as I struggled to untangle it. She said nothing, and my pulse quickened at her silence. Did she expect me to fashion my usual beautiful “do” out of the twisted, snarls?

She sneezed as I applied more gel. “I hope you aren’t allergic to drywall dust. I’m sorry.” I glimpsed at the hood of the car in the window and nearly gagged.

“It’s all right. I’m fine.”

I combed so much gel through her hairdo it wilted like the camellia blossoms right before they fell off the bush. Her creased brow reflected onto the mirror, and my heart sank. I parted off sections of her hair, grabbed the curling iron and created ringlets. I brushed them out, and they crimped as if she’d stuck her finger in a live electrical socket. I covered my mouth to conceal my gasp. My reputation, my livelihood, all that I lived for frizzed out of control.

Joyce whipped off the burgundy cape and bounded out of the chair. “I have to hurry home. Hubby will be worried.” Her eyes glistened. She was too kind to say anything rude.

My self-confidence shrank to nothing. “I’m sorry your hair’s unruly. If you’ll come back, I’ll style it for free.”

“Maybe I can do something with it at the house. I hope it won’t look like this tomorrow when I go to work.”

The sole person in charge of customer service at Ray’s Department Store on Main Street, Joyce handled exchanges and wrapped gifts for customers. I doubted she wanted to face them with her hair out of control.

The stranger had his chin lowered as though he tried to hide a large smile. Joyce patted her locks.