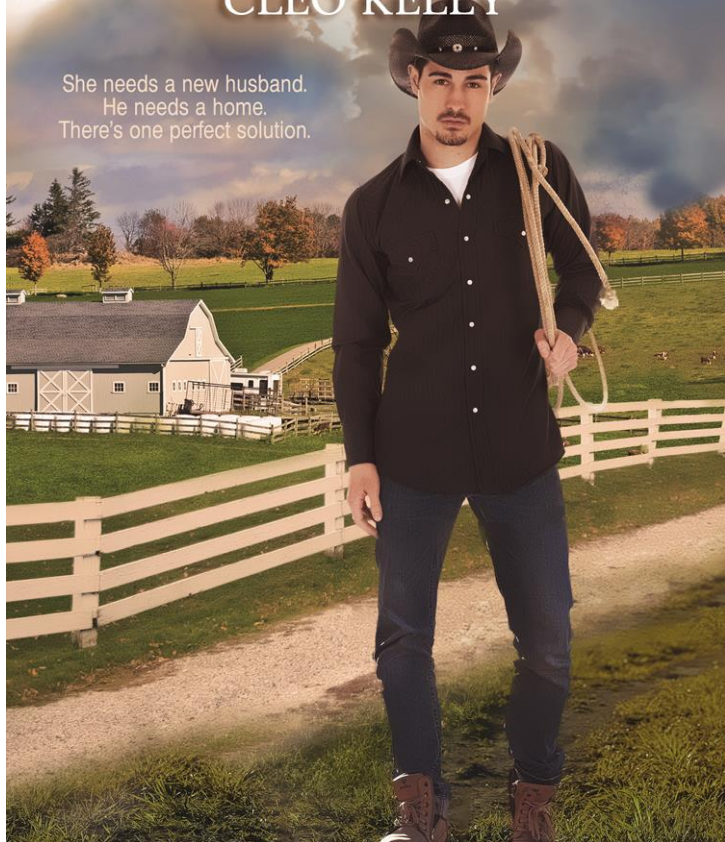


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## *Dedication*

To my children who allowed me to copy their personalities and idiosyncrasies into these pages.





# Prologue

Around her, the world hummed. Bonnie sat perfectly still, clutching the airline bag of memorial tokens tight enough to ward off curious conversation. On the direct flight from the west coast, her body remained frozen.

Flight attendants spoke in hushed tones as they slipped quietly to her aid.

She was frightened to the point that a vibrating tremor hovered beneath her skin. Her parents and grandparents were gone. Everyone. Her support network, her prayer warriors were gone.

*I still believe in God.*

Her brain had been repeating it like a mantra all the way from Los Angeles. Her heart kept crying, "Why?"

Tires hit the runway, and she turned to watch the Florida greenery flash by.

*Why?*

Memories of her parents and grandparents superseded the passing scene.

The plane taxied to a terminal, and the pulse and murmur of humanity moved into a hustling goal-driven line. The line disappeared as people moved to the terminal to pick up the traces of their lives.

Still she sat, dreading what faced her when she left her seat.

"May I help you with your bag?"

Bonnie looked into the kind face of the flight attendant. She could read the gentle sorrow on the woman's face. "I'll be fine." *I still believe in God.*

With stiff movements, she got out of the seat. Standing to pull her satchel from the overhead compartment, she preceded the stewardess toward the exit.

The woman touched her shoulder. "I'm truly sorry about your loss."

Bonnie willed herself not to burst into tears, even though she was drowning inside. "Thank you."

"Do you have the names and numbers of the airline counselors?"

She read the nametag. Christie. "Yes, I have them. Thank you for everything." She muttered the words over the blue-clad shoulder and hurried into the terminal. Fighting emotions, she made her way through the crowd and headed toward the parking lot where she'd left her car.

"Well, it's about time you got here."

The sound of her ex-husband's harsh voice stopped her, striking her as forcefully as a physical blow. "Did you have to be the last one off the plane? I have a job to go to."

"What are you doing here?"

"Who else would come? It's not like you have a wide variety of people who run at your beck and call."



His snorted sarcasm made her jaw clench.

She didn't have to take this belittlement anymore. Anger filled her, forcing her to move forward. *Not now, Lord. I can't deal with him now!*

"Is that all you have with you?" He nodded toward her case.

"Yes."

"Well, let's get moving, then."

*No!* The silent shout resounded through her being. "I have the car. You didn't have to come."

"I retrieved it. The kids don't fit so well in the front seat of a truck."

He took her car?

"That's my car."

"I let you keep the car, so you'd have transportation for the kids." He kept walking with ground-eating strides as he blithely rearranged the truth.

"If I remember correctly, you tried to get the judge to allow you to sell it so you could have half the money."

"Don't be ridiculous! The piece of junk is so old it isn't worth any money. Keep up will you? I don't have all day."

She trotted to match his strides.

*God, please don't let me lose my temper. Keep me calm. But, God, why do I have to face him now?*

He unlocked the driver side door and slid in leaving her standing.

She bristled at the casual way he commandeered her possessions. The overbearing assumption that she would automatically fall in line with his orders had anger stiffening her shoulders. "It's my car. I'll drive."

"I don't have time to argue. Get in," he insisted.

She shifted her weight, wanting to argue, but noticed the curious looks they were drawing. She walked around to the passenger side.

They stopped long enough for her to pay the parking attendant and were moving along the truck route when Ed began talking.

The old familiar bitter taste replaced the salty tears clogging the back of her throat. *Now we're getting to the real reason he's here.*

"We have to decide what to do with your parents' house."

Shock kept her silent. Even for Ed this was going too far. She felt the all-too-ready frustration building in her chest. He would just keep arguing morning and night to get his way. During the marriage, it was his method to wear her down until she just didn't care enough to fight. *God, I can't take this!*

"We need to sell it and bank the proceeds. I'll set up—"

"No, you won't." Bonnie felt her jaw tighten as she interrupted the flow of words.

"We can't deal with a property." He refused to stop.

"We won't deal with anything. There is no *we*. You have nothing to do with me or what's mine." She gritted her teeth, her trembling voice rising into a low roar.

"Now, Bonnie, just because we had a little spat—"

"We didn't have a 'little spat.' I came home from work to find you had cleared out—with all the furniture. We are divorced!"

"You never take credit for anything. You told me to leave!"

"I told you to get counseling or leave. You

conveniently forget that first part." She huffed. *Why God? Why now?* The tension in her chest was affecting her breathing.

"Well, I did what you wanted."

"Are you saying I wanted you to steal the kids' beds and furniture?"

"You told me to leave." Ed stubbornly stuck to his story. "I knew you wouldn't be able to support the kids, so it was only reasonable that they come with me."

"Yet you kept the furniture while I kept the kids? You haven't taken the kids for more than a weekend since the divorce."

"I believe the money from the sale of your family's home should be used for the kids. It should be put into an account for us to use to benefit them."

*You being the "child" it will benefit.* The thought ran through her head but she bit her tongue. "Do you see any part of this as unreasonable? I just returned from dealing with the fact that my mother, my father, and my grandparents died in a plane crash! Their bodies haven't even been found—they may never be found. Yet, you are trying to squeeze money out of their *death*? Pull over now, and get out of this car!"

"You are being ridiculous. I'm trying to have a reasonable conversation about the future of our children, and you are becoming hysterical. It would be better to work this out now rather than having to go to court over it."

Bonnie wrapped her arms around her chest and sobbed at the veiled threat.

Ed kept on scolding her. "You needn't get so emotional. If the judge could see you like this, he'd never let the kids live with you."

Sobbing, she leaned her head against the window.

"You need to pull yourself together, Bonnie. You always were unbalanced. It's affecting the kids. I don't think this kind of behavior is good for them. Maybe you need psychiatric help."

At the sound of Ed's line of attack, Bonnie straightened. "You're right, Ed. We all need help. You should be the example for your children and set up psychiatric counseling for yourself, and we'll be glad to follow suit.

"If you want more money to go to the children and less toward our rent, I could just move to Pennsylvania, and you won't have to be concerned with any of us again. After all, I have a nice, completely paid-for, furnished home."

"You know it's included in the divorce that you can't move out of state. For this very reason. You are not taking the kids away from here. The judge is the only one who can make a decision on that. Do you want to go to court again?"

*If need be, you parasite.* She kept the thoughts to herself as they pulled into the drive of his rented house.

*Give me grace. Give me grace. Give me strength to bear this.*

"You need to smarten up, Bonnie. Children need their father."

"So you're saying you want the kids to come visit you more often?" She squeezed as much sweetness as she could into the question.

"I just had them for three days. I had to take them to school and find a sitter for Hope." His voice conveyed the abuse he had suffered.

"I thought you were using my babysitter?"

"I had to get the kid to her house. It's not as though I live anywhere near there."

*This is how much better off they'd be with you?* "Yes, Ed, I do this every day. I know how much work it is." *Shut up, Bonnie!* Her brain was willing but the words just popped out of her mouth. "Sometimes, I think the only reason you want to have *joint* custody of the kids is so you don't have to pay child support. You want them to live with me, yet you don't want to be bothered with them or support them. It makes me wonder whether you'd sell them if you were given a good offer."

The angles of his face reddened. "You just refuse to make things easy for yourself. You haven't heard the end of this. There is supposed to be equitable disposal of marital property. We could have worked something out on our own. Now we'll have to go back to court." He slammed the car door shut behind him and strode off.

Emotionally battered, Bonnie slid behind the wheel and with automatic movements, shoved the car into gear. She was pretty sure Ed couldn't get anything she inherited after they divorced, and the judge would agree, but Ed would take her to court anyway, just because he could.

At the end of the block, the building pressure inside her gave way, and she began to shake so hard her hands couldn't grip the steering wheel. She pulled to the curb as her vision blurred. The feeling of being trapped and unable to breathe had her scrambling out of the car. Wrapping her arms around her waist, she leaned against the gray metal, sobbing.

"God, do you hear me? Please help! Give me a sign that you care!"

"Ma'am, are you all right?" A small car had pulled in behind her. The white head bobbed between bent shoulders as the woman hobbled toward her.

Bonnie straightened, half irritated that the lady disrupted her petition to God. "I'm fine."

"Has something happened to upset you?"

Tears began coursing down her cheeks. "My parents and grandparents were on Flight 1274." The words slipped from her of their own volition.

"That's the one that went down in the Pacific, Monday. Oh, my!" Fragile arms circled her with cherished empathy. "Oh, my dear."

She cried over the woman's head until her breath was coming in deep gasps. A stillness settled over her. "I'm so sorry." She pulled away wiping her cheeks.

"Never you mind." A lacey handkerchief was thrust into Bonnie's hand. "God's ways are not our ways. I was just to the bank to deposit my check and saw you crying here."

The common thread of everyday errands washed over her, channeling her thoughts away from the aggravation of Ed's challenges. "I shouldn't have stopped. I have to get my paycheck to the bank before I pick up my kids." The thought of them steadied her.

"That's the girl. First, I'll pray for you. What's your name, dear?"

"Bonnie."

The white head dropped lower between the bent shoulders. "Dear God, this precious child is in need of a blessing. Life has overwhelmed her. Her burdens seem too much to bear. She has children who need her, and her mother has gone home to be with You on high. She feels deserted and alone without her father's guidance. Please comfort her and give her wisdom as

to Your will in her life. Make her a blessing to her children, her home, and the world around her. Light her way, dear Lord. Light her way. Give her help for the journey ahead. Thank You for Your everlasting presence and the answers You have for us today. Amen."

"Thank you. I do feel better," Bonnie spoke softly.

"Are you a believer, honey?"

"Oh, yes!" she answered quickly. "Though lately I keep asking why. Why did my life fall apart? Why is it so difficult? Why am I so alone?"

The bony blue veined hand reached up to pat her face. "I know just how you feel. When I lost my Harold, I felt just like that. My boys were all grown up. But, sweetie, God had a plan. A great plan. We just have to be brave enough to follow it."

"Thank you, but I have to go if I'm to make it in time to pick up the kids," she said while nodding in agreement to the woman.

"You go, dear. Remember that Angie Lynaire will be praying for you. I'll get my prayer buddies to add you to their list."

With a pat to Bonnie's cheek, she hobbled back to her aging, sky-blue car.

An aura of calm surrounded Bonnie on the drive to the job site. Waving a casual hand to the calls of the construction workers, she walked to the office trailer. Inside, she opened her desk and found her check.

The first wave of workers came in the door, jostling each other as they ask how she was doing and if they could help.

Todd, the site foreman, leaned against the copy machine and watched with his usual silent gaze.

She tried to field their questions but was saved

from another emotional breakdown when a short stout man shouted his way into the trailer.

"I ain't payin' ya'll to come gawk over the girl. It ain't like you've never seen her before. She don't wanna see your ugly mugs staring at her. If I don't see your skinny tails back on the job, I'm gonna shred those checks."

The men shuffled out the door, grumbling. Some paused to buzz her cheek with a comforting whiskey salute from Dick, their supervisor. He followed behind, shoving and goading them out the door. He turned his steel gray head to glare at her. "How'd it go? What the airline have to say? Do you need time off?"

The tall foreman moved away from the copier with languid ease. "Get off your high horse, Dick. Leave the girl alone."

Bonnie felt tears prick behind her eyelids at their rough show of kindness.

The short construction boss turned on the tall thin man. "Now look at what you did. You know I hate crying women and now you gone and done it!"

Bonnie hiccupped, trying to strangle a sob. "Sorry, I never know when they'll hit."

"Pay him no mind." Todd pulled out a cigarette. "His mouth runs at both ends. How can we help?"

"Make Ed go away." She didn't even have time to think before the words popped out.

"What did he do now?" The foreman's hands stopped short of lighting his cigarette.

"He came to pick me up and told me how we needed to sell my parents' house and set the money in a joint account."

Dick started cussing and stomping until Todd kicked him. "There's a woman present, you jerk."



“Well, what’s wrong with that man? He’s trying to make a buck off a tragedy that hasn’t even played out.”

“We could go huntin’.” Now lighted, Todd puffed smoke.

A watery chuckle had the two men focusing on Bonnie again. “I might have taken you up on that a half hour ago. But, a little old lady stopped and prayed with me a few minutes ago and I’m all right. I’ll be OK.” She did feel lighter. Maybe it was being around the support of these men. She was still intensely lonely. The deep-seated fear that she wouldn’t do enough of the right things to raise her children was still there. But hope was unfurling in her heart.

“None of this would have happened if you’d married up with a true-blooded American cowboy.” Understandably, Dick started pitching his favorite topic. “Why, I know rodeo riders that would sell their souls for a chance to settle on enough land to breathe somewhere. That’s what you need. A true A-mare-ee-can cowboy.”

“Dick, shut up,” Todd growled.

The events of the past week hit her and she felt faint.

“Bonnie, don’t pass out on me.” Dick grabbed her arm.

Todd pulled out a chair, and guided her gently to it.

She clutched Dick’s arm. “I have one.”

“What do you have?”

“A ranch! Land! That’s the answer. If I can marry and provide a stable home, I can move away. Far away! It’s written in the divorce papers as a stipulation. I can move if I show stability and a way to provide for the kids. I have two homes now. Mom and

Dad's in Pennsylvania and Gram's in Wyoming! I'm the sole heir!" She jumped up and strode around, suddenly inspired.

"Bonnie, what are you talking about?" Todd tossed the cigarette out the door.

"I have a ranch. You said a cowboy would work land, right? Cattle and horses. I can raise the kids there—if I'm married and show a stable home life." She turned to Dick and kissed his startled face on both cheeks. "Buy me a cowboy, Dick. Make him a really good one. He has to marry me first, and I'll deed him half rights to my ranch in Wyoming." She grabbed her check and raced for the door suddenly empowered. "Buy me a cowboy" floated behind her as she bounced away from the startled men.

# 1

The white coffee mug was warm in his hands despite the fact the coffee was tepid. How had he gotten to this place? It had been over three weeks since Dick left him on the little spread in Wyoming. He had flown to Florida yesterday so he could meet the owner.

People walked by the diner, busy with their lives.

Baya looked at Dick again and wondered if this was one of his more infamous practical jokes. The little rodeo judge would get a lot of joy setting him up with this meeting, just to pull the rug out from under him. Todd said it was on the up and up, and he had never known Todd to lie, but Dick had been known to pull all kinds of people into his bizarre brand of humor.

His thoughts returned to the valley he had been shown. Even if it was a joke that would backfire and make mockery of his dreams, it was worth the risk to get on the land. Old land already populated with fat beef. The herd was small, from what little he had seen, but the stock was good. He breathed a half laugh. He had been known to sell himself for less. Every rodeo bull he knew on first name basis had trounced him one

time or another.

"She's not here," Dick growled. "Why do women have to be late for everything? You'd think we had nothin' better to do than wait for them."

Baya narrowed his eyes. Now was the perfect time to hit him with the punch line. If he knew Dick well, and he did, there were not enough riders around to laugh at his ultimate humiliation.

A tall redhead was visible out the window as she walked down the street. She was a big woman, large boned, and brawny. Was this the one? On the corner across the street, a tired looking brunette waited for the light to change.

He had no idea what she looked like, this person he was ready to sell his life to, the woman who held the deed to the land in Wyoming. He had refused to question Dick when the man methodically asked if there was anything he wanted to know. But, the thought had been on his mind since he sobered up three weeks ago.

Dick shifted in the padded seat of the booth. His frown was digging deeper into his weathered face.

"What's she look like, Dick?" He could have bitten off his tongue. The last thing he wanted was to let the old coot know he was curious, that he cared one way or the other. The milder painkiller the doctor had him on must have kicked in and affected his head. After weeks of keeping his mind strictly on the ranch, his first day in Florida had him running off at the mouth.

Instead of wicked glee filling the face across from him, the old man's features softened. The sharp gray eyes looked at him from under bushy white eyebrows. Something gentle struggled within the steely gaze before he looked away out the window.

“If I weren’t married, I’d have her.” Since Dick wasn’t known for his faithfulness, the answer told him absolutely nothing.

“I take it you already have.” He heard the disgust growl through his voice. Shifting in the seat, he cursed the medicine. If a thought went through his head, it came out his mouth.

Every inch of Dick’s frame was rigid with anger. His eyes flashed. “She’s not that kind. Wish we hadn’t had to leave her there by herself. But, we finished the job and the company sent us west.”

Dick had been slyly taunting him ever since he agreed to this venture. For him to get huffed up now didn’t make sense.

Baya glared back.

The door to the diner opened with a jingle, and he glanced over the old rider’s head. The coffee cup stopped turning in his hands.

Strength. Warmth. The woman glowed with both attributes. Stunning in dark blue jeans and a white cotton shirt, she stood looking over the customers at the counter. The slenderness of her body fell away from straight shoulders to tuck into a waist he could have spanned with his hands.

Dick slid out of the booth.

She smiled and began moving toward them.

The rodeo judge slipped his arm around her, and she bent to kiss his cheek. He turned her toward the man at the table.

Baya managed to push out of the booth without tripping over the crutches or his bandaged feet.

“Bonnie Gibbs, meet Baya McKnight. He’s willing to talk to you about the arrangement. He’s a little beat up. He lost out on the turn of a mean bull.” Dick’s