

Chapter One

One minute, I'm on a ten foot ladder adjusting the TV antenna on the twenty-four foot trailer behind Uncle Sid's house where I live with my mother, Faye. The next minute, I sail off the ladder, graze an electric fence and land face-down in a cow pie. Swear to God.

Though groggy and hurting, I rolled onto my back. A window in the trailer cranked open and I heard my mother scream. "Allie! Ohmigod! Somebody call 911!"

I was surprised Faye managed to open the window. She'd spent most of the last two years in bed since, at age thirty-one, she Retired From Life. But really, call 911? We had no phone and I was the only other person in the area. Who was she talking to? Blaster the bull? I smiled weakly at the thought of Blaster in a phone booth, punching in 911 with one gigantic hoof.

Okay, technically, I landed in a bull pie, not a cow pie. The mess dripping off my face was compliments of my Uncle Sid's prize bull, speaking of which...

It was then my wits returned. I felt the ground vibrate, heard the rumble of hooves. I reared up to see a half-ton cranky bull racing toward me, head down, mean little eyes fixed on my prone body.

Faye continued to scream shrilly. I moaned and crawled toward the fence, looking over my shoulder at Blaster who bore down on me like a runaway train. When I tried to stand, I slipped in the wet grass and landed on my belly. Oh God, he was just inches away. I wasn't going to make it! I rolled into a ball and screamed, "No, Blaster! Go back! Go back!"

Laying on the wet grass, trembling with terror, I watched as Blaster stopped on a dime, blew snot out of his flaring, black nostrils and released a thunderous blast of flatulence—that's what my teacher, Mrs. Burke, calls farting—and, of course, the reason Uncle Sid named him Blaster.

"Back off, Blaster," I said between shallow, panicky breaths. "Good boy."

I hoped the "boy" comment wouldn't tick him off, what with his fully-developed manly-bull parts dangling in full view as I lay curled on the ground looking up. Yuck!

Suddenly my vision narrowed and grew dark around the edges. It was like looking down a long tunnel with Blaster front and center, bathed in light. A loud buzzing filled my head. The next moment, Blaster took a tentative step backward, then another, walking slowly, at first, then gradually picking up speed until he was trotting briskly backwards like a video tape on slow rewind.

Mesmerized by the sight, I sat up and watched Blaster's bizarre retreat back through the tunnel. At that precise moment, I should have known something strange was going on. But hey, I was a little busy trying to save my life.

As I crawled under the fence, my vision returned to normal and the buzzing faded away. I stood and swiped a hand across my sweaty face. At least, I thought it was sweat until a trickle of blood dripped off the end of my nose. Surprised because I felt no pain, I touched my face and found the blood was oozing from a puncture wound in the center of my forehead.

I glanced up at Faye who continued to peer out the window, her pale face framed in a halo of wispy blond curls, her eyes wide with shock. She inhaled sharply and I knew another scream was on its way. I held up a hand. "Come on, Faye, no more screaming. You're making

my head hurt.”

“But, but, the bull....he, he...” Faye began.

I wasn’t ready to go there. “I know, I know.”

I staggered around the end of the trailer and banged through the door. Two giant steps to the bathroom. I shucked off my clothes and stepped into the tiny shower.

“You okay, Allie?” Faye asked.

She peered through the open doorway, paler than usual. Her right hand clutched the locket that held my baby picture, the one that makes me look like an angry old man. The only time she took it off was to shower.

“I’ll live,” I muttered.

“Weird, huh? Blaster, I mean. I heard you yell at him. Bulls don’t run backward, Allie.”

When I didn’t answer—what could I say—she waited a beat. “Use soap on your forehead. Did it stop bleeding?” “Yes, Mother.” I reached over and slid the door shut.

Deep sigh. “You don’t have to be snotty. I told you to be careful.”

The TV blared suddenly. Oprah. Not that I’m a spiteful person but I blamed Oprah for my swan dive off the ladder. Late last night, a sudden gust of wind knocked over our TV antenna. When I got home from school today, Faye insisted she had to watch Oprah. Like that’s going to change her life. I finally got tired of hearing about it and borrowed Uncle Sid’s ladder. Moral of story: never wear flip-flops on an aluminum ladder.

I turned on the water, stood under the weak stream and checked for damage. Other than a slight tingling in my arms and legs and the hole in my head, I seemed okay. I towed off my curly, dark-brown hair and pulled it back into a messy ponytail. When I wiped the steam off the mirror, I saw a dark-red, dime-sized circle the size of a dime in the exact center of my forehead. I touched it gingerly, expecting it to hurt. But it didn’t. Instead, a weird sensation shot through my head, like my brain was hooked up to Dr. Frankenstein’s machine, that thing he used to make his monster come alive. I must have given a little yip of surprise because Faye said again, “You okay, Allie?”

“I’m fine,” I said. “Just a little sore.”

“Did you check the mail?”

“The first’s not until Friday. Today’s the twenty-ninth,” I said.

“Sometimes it comes early.”

The welfare check never comes early. The state of Washington was very reliable when it came to issuing checks.

“Yeah, okay,” I said, not wanting to burst her bubble.

Wrapped in the towel, I took two steps into the living room/kitchen, reached under the table and pulled out the plastic crate containing my clean clothes. I dug around and found clean underwear, a tee shirt and a pair of cut-off shorts.

I slipped into my bra, once again thinking how cool it was I finally needed one. Though I hoped for peaches, I’d managed only to grow a pair of breasts roughly the size and shape of apricots. Oh, well, apricots are better than cherries. Our valley is called “The fruit bowl of the nation,” hence, my obsession with naming body parts after produce.

I slipped into my treacherous flip-flops, headed out the door and spotted Uncle Sid darting behind the barn. Faye says Uncle Sid is not a people person but I thought he was just

trying to avoid Aunt Sandra and her constant nagging. That woman's voice could make a corpse sit up and beg for mercy.

I trotted down the driveway, stopping suddenly when I spotted a pair of denim-clad legs sticking out from under the Jeep Wrangler parked next to Uncle Sid's house. Legs that belonged to Matt, Uncle Sid's son, older brother to spoiled brat, Tiffany.

How can one kid—Tiffany—be so annoying and the other—Matt—so totally hot? I tried to avoid Matt because of the way I get when I'm around him. Though I'm normally loquacious (last Wednesday's vocabulary word that I copied and vowed to use at least three times), one look at Matt and I lose my power of speech. My jaw drops and my mouth goes dry. There's just something about him—sleepy blue eyes, light brown hair that usually needs combing, a crooked grin and a sculpted rock-hard body.

It's not some creepy incestuous thing since Matt and I weren't real cousins. Sid was Faye's step brother. Nope, we don't have the same blood coursing through our veins. Matt's was probably blue, while mine came from the mystery man Faye refused to talk about. I tiptoed past the jeep to spare myself further humiliation. I'd almost made it when he rolled out on one of those sled thingies and grabbed my ankle.

"Hey, kid, how ya doin'?"

The warmth of his hand against my bare skin turned my normally frisky brain cells to mush. Sure enough, my lower jaw was heading south.

"Uh, just great, Matt," I said, averting my eyes and licking my suddenly parched lips.

He released my ankle and stood up.

"Good," he said. "Your mom still got that...whaddaya call it?"

"Fibromyalgia."

As I said the word, I felt my upper lip curl in a sneer. "So she says."

"She getting better?"

"She's trying to get social security benefits, you know, the one for disability."

The words tasted bitter in my mouth.

"Oh yeah," Matt said. "I saw Big Ed's car here the other night. He's her lawyer, right?"

My hands automatically curled into fists. I narrowed my eyes and studied Matt's face, looking for a smirk or maybe a suggestive wink. Even though I didn't want to punch him, I could and I would. I knew how to punch. Faye had made sure.

No problem. He'd moved on. Wonder of wonders, he was looking at me. I mean, really looking at me with those sexy blue eyes. His gaze lingered for a long moment on my chest. Whoa! Was he checking out my 'cots? I was suddenly aware I'd outgrown my shorts and tee shirt. Not knowing what else to do, I shoved my hands into the pocket of my cut-offs and took a step back.

"Well, hey, I gotta go check the mail. See ya, Matt."

His voice followed me as I headed down the driveway. "Hey, kid. If you ever need a ride somewhere, let me know. I got the Jeep running real good."

Because my mouth had fallen open once again, I settled for a casual wave of acknowledgement even though I wanted to pump a fist in the air and scream, "YES!"

As I trotted to the mailbox, the late April sunlight warm on my shoulders, I pondered this strange turn of events. Even though he called me "kid," clearly Matt had noticed a couple of new bulges on my formerly stick-like body. Hmmm. Had my tumble off the ladder followed by electric fence

zapping released some sort of male- attracting hormone?

In spite of my mini triumph Matt-wise, a dull headache began to throb painfully at the back of my skull. I opened the mailbox and, as predicted, Faye's check had not arrived. There was, however, a familiar tan envelope from the Social Security Office of Adjudication and Review. Probably another form for Faye to fill out asking questions like, "Are you able to push a grocery cart?" "Can you walk up a flight of stairs?" Questions Faye had already answered "no" and "no." When I handed her the envelope, Faye sighed and dropped it, unopened, onto the pile of similar tan envelopes stacked between the bed and wall.

"Big Ed's coming tomorrow. I'll let him deal with it." She looked pointedly at her watch.

I took the hint. It was time for Fay's nightly ritual, two slices of peanut butter toast and two cans of Busch Light. The menu varied only on Thursday night. Big Ed night. He always brought burgers, fries and a fifth of Stoli. Not that I'm around on Thursdays. No way. But, when I come home on Friday, the place smells of grease and vodka.

Let me make this crystal clear. Big Ed is Faye's lawyer, not her boyfriend. That's what Faye said. He's been working day and night on her case for two years. That's what Big Ed said. Me? I have my doubts.

Later that night, I heard the sound of Faye's rhythmic breathing and tiptoed back to the bedroom. I gathered up the empties and the plate littered with peanut butter-smeared crusts and tossed them in the garbage.

Tomorrow was Thursday, Big Ed night. I'd be staying with Kizzy Lovell, the town witch. That's what a lot of kids called her. Since I wouldn't be home until Friday, I made sure I had clean underwear in my backpack.

As the evening wore on, my headache grew steadily worse. At ten, I turned out the light. I pulled the curtains back so I could see the night sky, a brilliant canopy of far-flung stars and a full-faced moon. I held my hand up to the window. Bathed in moonlight, my palm looked washed in silver, its tell-tale lines carved in dark relief by the unknown maker of my fate. I thought about the times Kizzy studied the lines on my palm and said, "You're a special girl, Alfrieda. Like it or not, you have the Gift."

Every time I'd say, "What gift?" Kizzy would smile mysteriously and say, "You'll see," which really irritated me because, clearly, the only gift I had was the ability to get all A's on my report card. Even that wasn't a gift since I hated Algebra and had to work my butt off.

I had no sooner wrapped up in my faded pink quilt and snuggled into the couch bed when I remembered the aspirin and glass of water I'd placed by the bathroom sink before I brushed my teeth. I groaned and switched on the light. The bathroom was only a few steps away. But in my present state—cotton-mouthed and head pounding with pain—the distance seemed as vast as the Sahara Desert. I swung my feet to the floor and turned my head slowly toward the bathroom. I could see the glass of water perched on the counter like it was taunting me, "Come and get me, Allie."

I reached out a hand, thinking, "It would be a whole lot easier if you came to me," and it happened again. The whole dark-around-the-edges, tunnel vision, buzzing-in-the-head thing. The glass teetered back and forth, danced a little jig across the counter and shot into the air for a moment before it slammed onto the floor and shattered into about a jillion pieces.

"What the hell's going on, Allie?"

I looked up to see my mother standing in the narrow hallway. My hand, still extended toward the glass that wasn't there, shook violently.

"I dropped it. That's all," I said. "Go back to bed. I'll clean it up."

Faye's eyes narrowed in suspicion but finally, she turned and trudged back to the bedroom.

When I opened the door and stepped outside to fetch the broom, I was greeted by a symphony of night music. Strangely, the pain in my head was gone. The soft spring air was alive with a chorus of crickets backed by a full orchestra of spring peepers, their mating songs accompanied by the tinkle of wind chimes.

But, hold on. We don't have wind chimes. We've never had wind chimes. I walked to the back of the trailer and stared up at the gnarled old apple tree next to Blaster's pasture. Nudged by a gentle breeze, long silver tubes bumped together creating a melody with subtle variations as the air around them ebbed and flowed. It was stabilized by a dangling iridescent glass ball whose surface caught and held the moonlight.

Vowing I'd figure it out in the morning, I grabbed the broom, opened the door and froze. A woman sat on my couch bed. A woman with flowers in her long, dark hair, wearing a pink and yellow tie-dye dress embellished with a blazing purple sun. A woman, smoking what looked and smelled like weed. I opened my mouth, preparing to scream so loudly and shrilly, the shards of glass on the floor would shatter into even smaller pieces.

The woman said, "Hi. I'm Trilby, your spirit guide. Guess what? You just passed your first test. Isn't that groovy?"