

Walking Straight

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Chapter One

Betty Sue Farris watched out the window as the bus made its way through still another small town in a series of small towns that had gone past her window tonight. They all looked alike in the dreary December night, which matched her mood all too well. It looked like it was sleeting again or maybe it was freezing rain. She never could tell the difference.

All she wanted to do was get to Kansas City and find a place to stay, at least temporarily, until she could manage to get a job that would then allow her to get an apartment. That was all she wanted. That should be simple enough, shouldn't it?

She thought about praying but put that thought out of her mind quickly when she remembered that it had never seemed to help before. Then another thought hit her almost with the force of a fist. After all, praying had never stopped Dave from hitting her, had it?

She must have dozed off again for they had to be going through a different little town now. She was sure of it, since this town was lit up for Christmas apparently from one end to the other. The thought of Christmas almost sent her into a depressing mood. Here it was two weeks before Christmas and she sure didn't think she'd be doing much celebrating this year . . . again.

All the other towns had seemed rather dreary from her vantage point. But this one was beginning to catch her attention. She was thoroughly enjoying the many Christmas decorations all along the street they were on which was also the state highway. She looked a little closer at some large red decorations on some of the light poles. They sure were oddly shaped. Were they strawberries?

Well, maybe there was something different about this little town. It sure looked like it from her perch in the bus.

She looked a little closer just before the bus pulled into the bus station and she saw a diner that was beautifully decorated and looked so homey and welcoming.

She had a strange feeling come over her then. It was like someone was telling her to get off the bus here in the middle of nowhere. Her ticket said Kansas City on it and that must still be another fifty miles or so but she suddenly had the overpowering urge to get off here in this little town.

As she stepped off the bus and got in line behind two other passengers for the driver to get her bag, she realized that she didn't even know the name of the town. Oh well, that didn't matter. What mattered was that she felt something here. It was a feeling that she hadn't had in a long time, years in fact. Yes, this place seemed to be . . . right. She was sure of it now. It was so peaceful and beautiful here with all the colorful decorations.

Once she had her large suitcase, she walked into the station, which was actually a convenience store that doubled as the bus station. There was a sign on the wall behind the register with the name of the bus line on it and, 'Welcome to Strawberry.'

Betty Sue laughed and the man behind the counter looked up and his face showed the surprise she was used to seeing when people first saw her. She ignored it, as usual. When he noticed where she was looking, he looked back there and said, "Yep, we claim to be the strawberry capital of the state. All kinds of festivals here every year in June."

She smiled back at the friendly older man and headed for the restroom. Now she knew for sure that those decorations she'd seen had indeed been strawberries. How quaint.

When she came out of the restroom, there were several people in line at the register so she stepped to the end of the line and started to wait her turn. That was when she remembered the diner she'd seen next door. She was very hungry and after all, somebody over there could probably answer her questions as well as the man here, couldn't they?

So she lifted her heavy suitcase and headed out the door. She stood in the parking lot for a moment to get her bearings. The bus had come in from her left so the diner was over there. When she looked that way, she also noticed a motel on the other side of the diner and it looked as if they were connected. Well, wasn't that just the most convenient thing she'd seen in a long time? Maybe her luck was finally going to change. She could only hope so.

The next decision was an easy one. Her heavy suitcase helped her make the decision to go to the motel first. Besides, it would have been rather awkward for her to lug the suitcase around in the diner.

When she entered the motel office, there wasn't anyone at the desk so she sat her suitcase on the floor in front of the counter and waited. She had the sudden thought. She used to be good at waiting, but not anymore. Dave had done that to her as well as a lot of other things. She didn't like to wait. It always meant that she was under someone else's control and she never wanted to be controlled by anyone else ever again, especially a man.

Finally, a man who looked to be in his mid-fifties with dark red hair and a protruding belly came out of a back room and said, "Why didn't you ring the bell. That's what the sign says."

He pointed at a bell on the wall with a sign above it. She honestly hadn't even looked around yet. But now, she did and the lobby and office didn't look too bad. Not being a chain motel, she hadn't been too sure what to expect.

She could tell that was when she registered his surprise as he took a second look at her. He shrugged his shoulders, "Well, do you want a room or not?"

She fought a frown at his rude behavior. She figured this must be the only motel in town if he could act that way to potential customers. He didn't even seem to be intimidated that she looked down on him from at least six inches above him.

"Yes, I would like a room please."

He shoved a paper and pen across the counter to her. "Fill this out and don't forget your car's license plate number."

She felt a chill run down her back. "I don't have a car. I came in on the bus."

He frowned and squinted his beady eyes up at her. "You got relatives here in town?"

"No."

Now what did she say. She was too tired to try to find another motel this late at night. Then she figured that the truth would just have to be good enough.

"I'm moving here from Springfield and just need a place to stay for a night or two until I can find an apartment or something."

He snorted. "Good luck with that. Ain't much for rent in this town. I ought to know. Got several of them myself and they're all rented."

But he didn't argue with her anymore as she finished the registration form, gave him cash, and he gave her a key.

She quickly went to the room and just set her suitcase down inside while briefly glancing around the room. Well, it wasn't the Ritz but it would do. She laughed to herself. She'd always wanted to be able to say that but there was no one around to hear it.

It hit her then that she was truly alone . . . again. She sat or almost fell onto the bed in despair. She had no one anywhere in the world. She fought tears unsuccessfully for a few minutes then wiped them off and went into the bathroom.

Oh my! Was that really her in the mirror? Her hair was flat on one side and sticking up on the other side. Well, what did she expect after sleeping on that bumpy old bus for a couple of hours?

She quickly repaired her hair as well as she could and went next door to get something light to eat. After all, she wasn't sure how long the little bit of money she had would have to last her.

* * *

Matt Livingston was looking forward to a night of partying. He felt that he deserved it since he'd just dropped his truck off at the terminal after a weeklong loop that took him to Des Moines, Chicago, St. Louis and finally back home. It was Tuesday night and he was off until Friday morning to do whatever he wanted to do. Party! Yes, it was definitely party time and he was more than ready.

He parked his Hog in front of a house on the outskirts of Strawberry, went up to the front door, and entered without knocking. The loud music hit him so hard it was almost like walking into a wall. He grinned and closed the door behind him.

As soon as he stepped into the living room, Jerry came up to him and got too close at first to look up into Matt's face, so he backed up. "How's the weather up there big man?"

Matt grinned. "It's fine up here. And it looks like the weather's even better down there. Where's the stuff? It must be good tonight."

Jerry just pointed toward the kitchen and Matt went that way. Once in there, he found all the necessary ingredients spread out on the kitchen table. He was soon on his way to a high to equal the dozen or so others he'd seen scattered around the living room. There were doubtless others in the bedrooms as well. It wouldn't be a Jerry kind of party without the activity back there. He grinned in anticipation of that part of the night's activities.

Later, how much later, Matt had no idea, he opened his eyes to daylight coming in through a window onto his face. He tried to move out of the sun but only succeeded in waking himself up even more.

He looked around him and realized he was in a huge bed with several others. No one else seemed to be awake or even moving for that matter. He slowly and carefully crawled out of the bed and began to search for his clothes.

That was when he had to laugh. Clothes of all kinds and colors were scattered all over the bedroom floor. But Matt had no difficulty finding his clothes. His were almost twice as big as any of the other clothes lying around the room.

He collected all of his clothes and quickly pulled them on. That was when he realized that all those quick movements were making his head swim. Thankfully, he didn't have a hangover since he'd not taken time to drink all that much booze. But all the other stuff still had him almost spinning out of control.

He looked around the room again but couldn't find his boots anywhere. Where in the world could they possibly be? After a somewhat thorough search of that room, he concluded that they had to be in another room.

After searching around and among sleeping bodies in the other two bedrooms, Matt decided that his boots weren't in any of them either. Now what? He wasn't about to try riding his Hog without shoes of some kind.

Finally, he found his boots out on Jerry's back porch. How in the world had they wound up out there? Oh well, at least he found them and he could now get on his Hog and go get something to eat. He knew from experience that there would be absolutely no food left in Jerry's house after a party like last night had turned out to be. And he also knew that there wasn't any at his apartment either.

He drove slowly and carefully. He didn't want old Hal Wallace to see him and stop him right then. Matt knew that Hal was just waiting to catch him doing something wrong. The guy sure had it in for him.

Finally, he pulled into the combined parking lot of the Strawberry Inn and Diner. Just as he started to get off the bike, his head started spinning again. Good thing that didn't happen on the way over here.

He waited a few minutes for it to stop spinning before attempting to get off. He sure didn't need to fall on his butt out here in the open like this. Someone would call Hal then for sure. And he knew who it'd be too. Mike Stockwell, the owner of the place had it in for Matt too.

It wasn't Matt's fault that some friends of his had once trashed one of Mike's motel rooms. He hadn't even been there. But that didn't matter to Mike or Hal either for that matter. In their minds, they figured he was guilty by association. For some reason, that made him laugh.

Finally, he lifted one long leg over the gas tank and placed both feet on the gravel. He knew from experience to do this in stages. First, both feet on the ground. Then slowly stand. Finally, start walking equally slowly toward the diner entrance.

As he went into the diner, he stood in the doorway and looked around for a moment. He had to make sure there weren't any people in there that he didn't want to deal with right then. And that especially meant his preacher dad. All he needed right then would be for the right Reverend Henry Livingston to see him and start in to preaching at him . . . again. Or was it continue preaching at him?

At any rate, he wasn't in the mood for that, if he'd ever be. That was when he wished that his little sister still lived in the area. Grace had always been the only person who ever understood him. She was a little more than a year younger than he was and Matt had always been able to talk to her. People had always commented that they were more like twins.

Grace had always been way more mature than her age. In fact, if Matt would be honest with himself, she'd always been much more mature than her older brother.

After all, she was the one with a college education and a good teaching job, even if it was up in St. Louis.

But, Grace wasn't here. He did think that the last time he'd talked to his mom, she'd said that Grace was trying to get on at the high school here for next school year. Man, wouldn't that be great to have his little sister back? Then he'd finally have an ally against his constantly nagging parents.

Not seeing anyone that he thought might pose a threat to his present mood or condition, he decided to take a seat at the counter on the stool nearest the door. That way, he could make a quick exit if he needed to do so.

He looked around again but didn't see Trish anywhere. In fact, he didn't see the other daytime waitress either. What was her name? He couldn't remember. She hadn't been working there very long and as far as Matt was concerned, she could just leave. She had always been rude to him.

He got that sometimes from a lot of people, especially strangers. He knew that being six foot seven inches tall and weighing right at three-hundred pounds was a put off for a lot of people. It took quite a bit for people to get to know him. Well, he had to admit that he didn't always make it very easy for new people to get to know him either. That made him laugh again.

Then he saw her coming out of the kitchen. He leaned over the counter to make sure she didn't have spike heels on. Man, was she ever tall. She had to be the tallest woman he'd ever seen.

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Betty Sue hadn't slept very well. She attributed it to several things, one of which had to be all the time she'd spent dozing on the bus last night. But she knew the biggest reason was that she kept expecting to hear Dave pounding on her door.

Now, this morning, she had a decision to make. Should she stay another night here at the motel while she looked for a job or not? Then of course, she had to decide for sure if she was even going to stay in this town. Would she be safe enough here rather than in the bigger places she'd always tried before?

Finally, she decided to go next door for breakfast first. She always thought better on a full stomach and the bowl of soup she'd eaten the night before hadn't stayed with her at all.

So, leaving her suitcase in the room and putting the 'Do Not Disturb' sign on the doorknob, she headed next door for breakfast.

She sat at the far end of the counter this morning just as she'd done the night before. She thought that she might be able to blend in much better that way.

She was really getting hungry by the time a waitress came out of the kitchen with several plates which she proceeded to serve at one of the tables behind Betty Sue.

Before she could gain the woman's attention, she was back in the kitchen. Now what? She sure was hungry. Finally, the older woman came back out with more plates.

But this time when the woman headed back to the kitchen, Betty Sue spoke up. "Ma'am."

The woman stopped and turned back toward Betty Sue. "Sorry, I didn't see you back there in that corner."

Then, as the short, heavyset woman approached Betty Sue from the other side of the counter. She shook her head. "Are you standing Dear?"

If she hadn't been so hungry, Betty Sue would have gotten up and stomped out of the place. She'd had to endure jokes about her height all her life and now had zero tolerance for them.

The waitress leaned back to look up at Betty Sue and must have seen the anger on her face. The woman quickly said, "Oh Sweetie, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to upset you. Please sit back down and I'll take your order right now."

Betty Sue hadn't realized that she was actually standing and was now looking down at the woman who was about a foot shorter than her.

She sat back down. "I'll have the biggest breakfast you have here as long as it has lots of eggs, meat, and pancakes."

The other woman grinned back at her and stuck out her hand. "I'm Trish, and I run this place. I hope you'll let me make up for my lack of manners before."

When Betty Sue nodded and tried to smile back at Trish, the woman just grinned at her. "Biggest Breakfast huh? Well, that would be our Lumberjack Special. It has three eggs, two sausage links, two slices of bacon, a thick slice of ham, hash browns, and three pancakes."

This time Betty Sue was able to smile back at Trish. “That’s just what I want.”

With that, Trish went back into the kitchen, leaving Betty Sue to her thoughts. The place was beginning to fill up now and she was getting more than her share of stares from the locals. She knew that if she’d been normal height she’d still have been stared at since she was a stranger in a small town. But the second and third looks had to be due to her height. Oh well, she could handle it. After all, she’d been doing just that for most of her twenty-nine years now.

As she was eating her breakfast, Betty Sue couldn’t help but notice that Trish was the only person waiting on tables and the poor woman was moving as fast as she could but was continuing to fall further behind by the minute.

That gave Betty Sue an idea. She quickly finished her breakfast. Just as she finished, Trish came by and said, “My, my, you sure do have a healthy appetite. If I ate like that, I’d weigh three-hundred pounds.”

Betty Sue ignored the comment and screwed up her courage to say, “I couldn’t help but notice that you’re the only waitress today. Could you use some help?”

Trish stood across the counter from Betty Sue and even though Betty Sue was sitting, Trish still had to lean back to look up into her eyes.

After a long moment of staring into Betty Sue’s eyes, she said, “You planning on staying here in Strawberry, Sweetie?”

Betty Sue could only nod.

“Do you have any experience waiting tables?”

“Yes, but it’s been a few years.”

Trish chuckled, “Well, I always say that waitressing is kinda like riding a bicycle. Once you learn it good enough, it’s always there for you to fall back on.”

Betty Sue was holding her breath now.

“Well, being as my other daytime waitress just quit on me, I’m hurting as you can see. Come on back here and let’s see if we can find something you can put on that’ll make you look like a waitress. I know none of my things will do, that’s for sure.”

With that, Betty Sue followed Trish back into the kitchen where she was greeted with another surprise. There, turning eggs on the griddle was the rude little guy from the motel last night. And he was giving her a dirty look too.

Trish ignored the cook and continued on through the kitchen to an office with the door open. She turned around so quickly that Betty Sue bumped into her. Now she just knew that she was going to lose this job even before she started it. Trish’s nose hit Betty Sue’s stomach and the top of her head was several inches shy of Betty Sue’s chin.

Trish stepped back and looked up. “No offense, Sugar, but just exactly how tall are you?”

Now she knew she was lost for sure. “I’m six feet two inches tall.”

Betty Sue was already turning around to leave but Trish reached out a hand and grabbed her by the arm to stop her.

“Hey.” Trish now had a puzzled look on her face. “Don’t leave now that we’re just getting to know each other. But I don’t even know your name yet.”

Well, maybe all wasn’t lost just yet. She quickly said, “Betty Sue Farris.”

Well Betty Sue Farris, this will be the last time you ever hear me talking about how tall you are. Okay?”

Betty Sue couldn't help it. Trish had such a serious look on her face that she broke out in a grin. "Okay."

"Now, let's see. Hey Mike can I take one of the cook's aprons and just tie it around her waist for today?"

The short round man didn't answer at first. He made some unintelligible sounds for a few seconds, glared at Betty Sue, then back at Trish and finally said, "Why not."

Betty Sue slowly let out the breath she'd been holding. Did that mean that she now had a job, at least for today? Oh, she had momentarily forgotten about her room. No problem, she had enough money to cover one more night. Then, hopefully she'd be able to find another place to live.

Betty Sue found that even though it had been almost ten years since she'd waitressed, back before she'd married Dave. But she was able to pick it back up fairly quickly. Trish seemed to be amazed at how many plates Betty Sue could carry at one time.

The morning rush was over and Trish came up to Betty Sue and said, "Let's sit a spell and talk. I need to get you to fill out all the employment forms."

Betty Sue sat on a stool on the kitchen side of the counter while Trish went to the office for the proper forms.

That was when Mike came up to her and said, "If we hadn't been a hurting so bad this morning, I never would of let Trish hire you."

At her look of surprise, he laughed. "Yeah, I own the motel and this place too. So if you don't work out, I won't have any qualms about tossing you out on your ear. Understood?"

All she could do was nod and then Trish was back. Mike went back into the kitchen then.

"What was that all about, Sweetie? Did Mike harass you?"

Betty Sue never could keep anything from showing on her face no matter how hard she tried.

Trish patted her hand. "Don't you worry about Mike Dear. I'll take care of him. I run this place and he runs the motel. He's just filling in for a sick cook today. Besides, his bark's worse than his bite anyway."

After she'd filled out all the necessary forms, Betty Sue was about to take the coffee pot out to make a refill run when the front door opened and a giant of a man walked in. He was not only extremely tall but he was as big around as the oak tree that had been in the back yard of her Granny's house. Wow!

She barely noticed the long hair and beard.

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Matt continued to stare at the woman as she took a coffee pot out to several old geezers who looked like they were camped out for the day.

When she came back toward the kitchen, she looked at him as he sat on his stool. Something changed in her eyes. No, it wasn't the same thing that most people had in their eyes when they first saw him. Yes, there was a little shock, but he was sure there was a little bit of something else and he could only hope that it was admiration.

Now, there was a woman for him if there ever was one. With her, he wouldn't have to bend over so far just to talk to her.

She held up the coffee pot with a questioning look and he nodded. So she came over and filled the coffee cup he'd just turned right side up.

"Do you need a menu?"

He was caught. He'd been staring at her. And he of all people should know how bad it felt to be stared at because of his size.

“No, I don’t need a menu. My name’s Matt, what’s yours Honey.”

As soon as he said that, he knew he’d made a mistake. Her face clouded up and she stomped back into the kitchen without saying another word to him. Well, that had gone really well.

He looked toward the door where several people had just entered. They didn’t appear to pose a threat to him and he was about to turn back around when someone grabbed his left ear.

“Matthew Wayne Livingston. You ain’t so big that I still can’t take a broom after you.”

He turned to see Trish Howard glaring up at him with her hand still holding his ear and it was really beginning to hurt now.

“Don’t you ever let me catch you being rude to that poor girl ever again. Do you hear me?”

“Okay, okay, Trish, I won’t okay?”

She finally let go but continued to glare at him. “She’s a decent girl that she is. And you’d better treat her that way or you’ll answer to me and Smith.”

He almost laughed at that one. That was Trish’s way of reminding him that she had a Concealed Carry Gun Permit and she always had her Smith & Wesson .357 magnum in her purse. Most women carried a small gun like a .38 or a .22, but no not Trish.

He threw his hands in the air over his head in an act of surrender and said, “Yes ma’am. I’ll surely remember that.”

With that, she stomped back into the kitchen and shortly the new waitress came back out with her order pad at the ready. But she was standing a little farther away from him this time. He almost laughed. That was when he noticed the temporary nametag on her blouse that had ‘Betty Sue’ written on it.

He figured he’d have to drop back and regroup with this one. She was obviously under the watchful eye and definitely the protection of Trish Howard and he’d better be careful how he approached the girl from now on.

She wouldn’t meet his eye so he knew he had better do something. “I’m sorry Betty Sue. I had a hard week driving several thousand miles then I partied a little too much last night. Will you forgive me?”

She did look up at him then and he wasn’t sure but he thought there might be just the beginning of a smile on her face.

He was shocked when she spoke, especially at what she actually said.

“I’m sure you get this just as much as I do so why don’t we just get it out of the way right now.”

Now she surly had him stumped this time. When he gave her what he hoped was a puzzled look, she said, “I’m six two how tall are you?”

It was all he could do to keep from laughing then. But he succeeded, barely. “I’m six seven.”

With that, she did smile. “Okay, what do you want this morning?”

Matt tried to get Betty Sue to stop and talk with him several more times while he was eating his breakfast, but she always just smiled and told him she was too busy to stop and talk. But he knew better. He could see Mike Stockwell back there cooking. And he knew the jerk was probably back there watching her every move just to be able to hassle her about every little indiscretion. So, he didn’t really blame the girl for not stopping.

He was even more disappointed when he paid his bill that Trish took his money instead of Betty Sue. Oh well, better luck next time. And you could bet your bottom dollar that there would be a next time. Matt would make double sure of that. He wanted to get to know this Amazon of a woman, a woman who was just his size. How about that? He’d never even seen a woman that tall before.

When Matt left the diner, he wasn't sure what he wanted to do next. He was fairly sure that he was down enough now not to have to worry if he ran into Hal, but he didn't want to go back to his apartment.

He looked at his watch and realized it was almost time for the high school to let out for the day. He decided to stop in there and talk to his mom. It was just about the only time he could talk to her without his dad around. So he jumped on his Harley and headed out to the high school.

When he walked into the high school office, his mom was at the counter apparently helping a student with something. Linda Livingston was the school secretary and more or less ran things around there. She'd been there since before Matt had even been in high school and he'd graduated ten years ago.

When the kid walked off, Linda Livingston took one look at her son and said, "Oh Matt, you look like you've been out partying again."

He should have known he'd never be able to keep anything from her, never had, never would. So the best thing for him to do would be to admit it and try to do damage control from there.

"Yeah, Mom, Jerry threw a party for me last night after than long trip I just made."

He knew she wasn't buying any of it, so he just leaned over the counter and kissed her on the cheek. She swung at him playfully and he ducked out of reach of her hand.

He suddenly realized that this was a scene that the two of them had played out dozens of times before. That made him stop and think. Where was his life going? In the toilet that's where.

But, as he thought about it, how could he do anything about it? And for that matter, did he even want to?

His mom was talking and he'd missed it. "What did you say Mom?"

She gave him a searching look but said, "I said, will you be in town this weekend? Grace and Brianna are coming home Friday."

Matt banged his fist on the counter. "No Mom I won't. I gotta take a load down to Dallas, leaving Friday morning and I'm not sure yet where they'll send me after that."

If he'd been in a bad mood before, he was even worse after he left the high school. He missed his little sister.