

Fool's Profit

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Chapter One

Reggie Thornton was ticked off. Well she had to admit that it wasn't exactly anything new. She'd been that way a lot lately. Also, if she was honest with herself, she knew why. She was living all by herself in a big, two-story house that had been built for a family of five.

First, her parents had been killed several years ago in a car wreck down in Phoenix. Then the year before last, her brothers got it into their heads to build their own houses, one on each side of the old ranch house. Sure, they were really nice about it and let her have the big house for her own. And that had been okay for a while, since neither one of them had much time to work on the houses which weren't finished until just recently.

But the building process speeded up this summer. Her brother, Blake, who was two years younger than her, had up and married Dixie Gordon a couple of months ago. Of course, that had been really nice for a while, since Dixie and her twin four-year-old daughters had stayed there in Reggie's house with her for a month before the wedding.

She sure had grown to love those two little girls. Sara and Sheila were identical twins but Reggie could already tell them apart. True, with them living next door, she still got to see them quite often. But it just wasn't the same as them actually living in her house. Oh well.

Then her other brother, Kirby, who was four years younger than her, had married Robin Beck just over a week ago.

So now, Reggie was bouncing around in this big old house all by herself and she just plain didn't like it. No sir! She didn't like it one little bit.

And right then, as she was sitting at her kitchen table drinking a cup of tea and feeling sorry for herself, she realized that it was Friday afternoon and she hadn't gone to the post office yet to get their mail.

So, she jumped up, set her cup in the sink, and went out the front door to her truck.

When she was pulling into the parking lot at the post office, as they often did, her eyes went to the sheriff's office substation, which was directly behind the post office. Of course, that also led her thoughts immediately to Chip Green who was the resident county deputy in Bear Creek.

Chip had originally moved to the valley when his dad, a Forest Service Law Enforcement Officer, had been transferred to this district. She had been in the fourth grade and he'd been in the sixth grade. Since then, they'd always been around each other a lot,

mainly because there were so few people in Bear Creek but especially since it was the type of town that had a lot of community events throughout the year.

Basically, everyone knew everyone quite well. She frowned when she thought about that though. It was more like everyone knew too much of her business, at least for her way of thinking. On top of that, her brothers had become friends with Chip and he'd been out at the ranch quite a bit over the years.

Ten years ago, Chip had gone to the state police academy down in Phoenix and then signed on with the county sheriff's office down in Stillwater. He'd been down there until about five years ago when he'd been assigned to the one deputy sub-station in Bear Creek.

If Reggie was honest, she'd always liked Chip ... a lot. But she'd always been the tall, gangly girl that the other kids made fun of. Even now, at six feet tall, she was so much different from the other women in town.

But even though Chip had teased her some when they'd been kids, he'd quit doing that by the time they were teenagers. Now, she really didn't know how he felt about her. He never let on in any way.

But when she forced herself to admit it, did she really know how she felt about him?

Well, she wouldn't think about any of that right now. She was in the post office and had to talk her way past several people to get to the family's box.

After talking her way past several more people on her way out to her truck, Reggie breathed a sigh of relief when she finally shut the door, thus closing out the world, at least temporarily.

She just sat there a minute, thinking again, about where her life was going. Nowhere, that's where!

Then she finally looked down at the mail in her hand. There were several bills and some others, which were obviously junk mail. She tossed them all on the seat next to her.

That was when she noticed a piece of paper under her windshield wiper. What in the world? Why would anyone put something under her wiper?

She jumped out of the truck and lifting the wiper blade, pulled out a regular size sheet of paper that had been folded in half. She climbed back into the truck before opening the paper.

What she saw written inside made her sit up and take notice. It looked like a first grader had been printed it. The whole thing was written in large rather shaky looking capital letters.

"KEEP THE MOVIE PEOPLE AWAY FROM BEAR CREEK OR ELSE!"

Her first thought was why would anyone have a problem with the movie people coming there? A Hollywood movie company was going to be filming a movie on her

ranch and up at the old ghost town. There wouldn't be very much filming anywhere else in the valley.

She couldn't imagine why anyone would care about that. For the most part, it would bring money into the town. Her family wouldn't be the only ones benefiting from it. Every business in Bear Creek would see an increase in sales with a hundred new people in town for a couple of weeks.

Why?

She suddenly came out of her stupor and started the truck. She drove around the post office to the substation and was disappointed when she didn't see Chip's patrol vehicle sitting there. She pulled into the small parking lot and started to back out when, out of the corner of her eye, she saw a vehicle coming in.

It was Chip all right. His quad cab 4x4 with a light bar on top was hard to miss and neither was his smiling face.

Reggie sat in her truck until Chip jumped out of his truck and started walking toward her. She then jumped out to meet him face to face a few feet away. She still had the note in her hand and pointed to his office with her other hand.

"Let's go inside." She waved the paper in the air between them. "I had a little surprise on my windshield when I came out of the post office just now."

One of the things she liked about Chip was that he didn't question her but led the way to the door and after unlocking it, stepped aside for her to enter ahead of him.

* * *

Chip followed Reggie into his office wondering what had her all stirred up this time. He'd known Reggie for right at twenty years now and he'd always observed that it didn't take much to get her going. What could it have been this time?

The sheriff's department substation in Bear Creek was just a small wood frame building, about thirty feet square. It was one open room inside with a bathroom and small holding cell taking up the whole rear wall.

When Reggie stopped in the middle of the large room, Chip pointed to the conference table on the left, which took up half of the area. His desk and file cabinets took up the right side of the room.

She stepped up to him and looked him in the eye the way no other women he'd ever known could. Heck, she was only two inches shorter than he was and he was tall for a man.

She again waved the paper in his face then tossed it down on the table. "Look what some lowlife just stuck under my windshield wiper over at the post office."

Chip almost laughed at the rather comical expression on the tall woman's face. Having the normal redhead's pale complexion, when Reggie got mad, her face lit up like a red light.

He watched the paper float down until it landed on the table. Then, he leaned over to look at the writing on it. It was barely legible but he could make it out well enough.

When he read it, he looked back at Reggie. Okay, maybe she had a good reason to be upset this time. "Didn't see anyone messing around your truck?"

"No. I went in to get my mail and talked to several people on the way in and on the way out both. I wasn't looking out at the parking lot at all until I went outside. Even then, I didn't notice the paper on my windshield until I was already sitting behind the wheel."

This time when Chip motioned for them to sit, Reggie pulled out a chair and almost fell into it.

"Well?" She pointed at the paper, which was still sitting on the table between them. "What do you think about that blamed thing?"

Again, Chip almost smiled at her intensity and tone of voice. He leaned back in his chair and said, "Where are Blake and Kirby right now?"

She thought for a moment. "I'm not too sure but I think they're somewhere around the barn or stable. You can call the ranch number. It rings in my house and both of those places too."

He hit the speed dial button on his satellite phone and waited five rings before Kirby answered.

Chip didn't waste any time or words. "Kirby, Reggie is down here at my office right now. Someone left a threatening note on her windshield while she was in the post office. You think you and Blake could come down here right away?"

Chip had noticed that Kirby had calmed down considerably since he'd gotten together with Robin Beck and was pleased to note that Kirby didn't question him but said, "He's right here. We'll be there in five."

He turned back to Reggie. "They're on their way."

He grew a bit uncomfortable with the way Reggie was staring at him.

As she kept staring at him, she said, "What do you think this means, Chip?"

He tried to think of any possibilities as quick as he could but didn't come up with any. He shook his head. "I really don't know Reggie. Do you know of anyone who doesn't want those movie people coming here?"

She shook her head. "No one that I would say was mad enough about it to threaten us. Sure, some of the old people around town don't like the idea of so many new people coming to town."

She snorted. "But they don't like it when even one new person comes to town."

Chip sat there thinking about that for a long moment then he said, “No one has sounded like they were really mad about it though?”

She shook her head and they both sat there in silence for a few minutes until they heard a truck pull into the lot. He looked out the front window and saw Blake and Kirby heading for the office door. They were both walking fast with determined looks on their faces.

He smiled to himself. Reggie Thornton may be the biggest woman around the valley and could put in a full day’s work on their ranch to match her two younger brothers, but those same brothers were extremely protective of their sister. And he knew it made her mad every time they did anything like that too.

When they walked in, Blake, as usual, was in the lead. He didn’t say a word but when he looked at them, he saw the paper sitting on the table. He stepped up to the table and looked down at the note with Kirby looking over his shoulder.

They both turned on Reggie then and Blake said, “You didn’t see who put it there?”

She just shook her head and Chip could tell that she didn’t care for the question.

No one said anything for a moment while Blake and Kirby both took seats at the table across from Chip and Reggie. He couldn’t help but notice that Reggie’s face had lost most of the redness that it had displayed earlier.

He couldn’t help thinking how attractive the woman was when she wasn’t yelling, swinging or just plain mad about something.

When Kirby slammed his fist down on the table, Chip almost jumped out of his chair and he noticed that Reggie did too.

“Blake, didn’t you say that you saw signs of someone staying up at the old ghost town?” Kirby scratched his chin. “Wasn’t there something about a black and white dog too.”

Chip looked at Blake then. “Yeah, Blake. I remember now. Someone even took a shot at you up there once just before those partners of Dan Gordon’s came down from Denver.”

They were all three staring at Blake now, waiting for him to answer. Chip really liked his old friend, but Blake sure could be irritating at times. The guy just didn’t do much of anything fast, especially thinking or talking. So they all waited.

Finally, Blake looked at Chip and said, “Yeah, we found signs of someone living up there. But I really think it was one of Dan’s partners who shot at me.”

Then he obviously thought a little more. “I was up that way just the other day and I heard that dog barking again.”

He took off his cowboy hat, laid it on the table, and run his hand through his hair.

He looked at Kirby then back at Chip. "Maybe we ought to go up there and take a look around."

Kirby spoke up then. "Yeah, if there is somebody staying up at the ghost town, they may not like all of those movie people going up there. They'd probably have to leave for a while."

Chip thought about it for a moment then looked at his watch. "It's two now. We'll only have time if we go by horseback."

Blake nodded and said, "Kirby and I'll go on back to the ranch and have the horses saddled and ready by the time you get there."

As her brothers were going through the door, Reggie shouted out after them. "Make sure you saddle four horses. You're not going without me."

Blake hesitated in the doorway but simply shook his head as he headed on out to his truck.

She then turned to Chip and said, "Now, Chip Green, you'd better not try to talk me out of going either, if you know what's good for you."

He just grinned and said, "Let's go."

* * *

Reggie was still almost in a state of shock that none of the three men had put up a fuss about her going along to the old ghost town with them. She'd known she could talk Blake and Kirby into it but she hadn't been so sure about Chip, since her brothers were both reserve deputies and she wasn't.

What was even more interesting was that Chip had been giving her some strange looks all afternoon. Were those looks of admiration or something else entirely that she saw there? Oh well, she'd have to think about all that later. Maybe he'd say something that might give her a clue.

Now, as they were all four on horseback and going up the trail single file, she saw him up ahead of her giving her a look over his shoulder every now and then. Now what!

Soon, they were entering the only street in the old Bear Creek ghost town. Reggie always loved to come up here. When she and her brothers had been teenagers, they had come up here all the time, just to get away and have fun. Chip and a few others had often come with them too.

Now, Blake, who was in the lead, turned his horse around to face Chip.

"Why don't Kirby and I go up the back of the buildings on the left by the creek and you and Reggie go up the back of the buildings on the right?"

Chip nodded. "Sounds good to me."

He turned to Reggie. "You ready Reggie?"

She grinned at him and said, "Yep!"

Now why in tarnation had she grinned at him like a silly teenager with a crush?

She followed Chip around behind the buildings on the right and once back there, he reined in his horse and waited for her to catch up with him.

All of a sudden, Reggie couldn't get over how good Chip looked sitting on that horse. He was one of those men who wore a uniform very, very well. Even from where she sat on her horse about five feet away, she could see those beautiful light blue eyes that made him look rather devilish when he smiled like he was.

When she rode up beside him, Chip looked down at her 9mm on her belt and then at the Winchester in her saddle scabbard.

"I don't want you to have to use either one of those Reggie. I'll be in the lead. So if anything happens, I want you to promise me you'll get behind the nearest building."

She laughed. "Don't you worry about me Chip Green. I can take care of myself and I also know not to do anything stupid."

When he just stared at her, she frowned. "Okay. You're the cop. You lead and I'll follow." She grinned at him then. "Okay?"

He nodded and turned his horse to the West and began making his way along behind the buildings, keeping them on their left and the woods on their right.

They'd traveled the whole length of the old town, all the way to the Western end, when Chip turned his horse in between two of the buildings. Reggie recognized one of them immediately.

"Chip." When he stopped and turned in the saddle to look back at her, she pointed to the building on the left. "That's the building we stayed in last month when we were up here after that yahoo kidnapped Robin and her cousin."

He waited for her to come up beside him again and spoke softly. "I can tell from out here that someone has been staying in the building on the right ... and recently too."

"Who do you think it might be?"

He shook his head and steered his horse on between the two buildings and out onto the street where Blake and Kirby were waiting for them.

As soon as they joined her brothers, Chip dismounted and said, "Looks like someone's been staying in that building over there." He pointed to the one he'd told Reggie about.

"I'm going in there to check it out."

Before he could finish whatever he was about to say, Reggie spoke up quickly. "I'm going in with you."

She glared at Chip then at each of her brothers but no one said a word. Chip shook his head and turned to go into the building so she followed him.

Chip entered the building through the open doorway. Most of the old buildings had neither doors nor windows anymore. After all, the old town had been abandoned for over a hundred years.

The building was empty but they did see plenty of signs that someone was actually living in there.

Once they were back out in the street with Blake and Kirby, Chip said, “Yeah, someone’s staying in there all right and I saw signs of a dog too. So it must be the same person you kept almost running into this summer Blake.”

Kirby spoke up then. “What do we do now Chip? Whoever’s staying here must be plenty good at keeping out of sight or someone would have seen him by now.”

Chip shook his head and looked at Blake who was in what Reggie always thought of as his thinking mode.

When Blake didn’t say anything right away, Kirby said, “I can stay up here overnight to see if I can catch whoever it is.”

Chip blew out a sigh. “No, Kirby, I’m not so sure that would be a good idea now. As far as we know, whoever’s up here hasn’t broken any laws ... yet.”

Kirby opened his mouth and Reggie knew he was about to argue but Chip cut him off.

“We don’t know for sure if that guy even wrote the note that Reggie found on her windshield.”

Reggie knew Chip was right, but it seemed an awful waste of time for them to have ridden all the way up here and not get any more answers than they had. All they knew was that someone was indeed staying in the ghost town. She sure didn’t like it.

But she could see why Chip didn’t want Kirby staying. She only wished they could find whoever it was and just talk to them. Maybe they’d get a few answers then.

All the way back down to the ranch, Reggie followed behind Chip and she certainly enjoyed the view of his broad back.

Whoa! What was going on? What was happening to her all of a sudden? Sure, she’d always liked Chip Green, but she didn’t like him that way. Did she?