

Borders and Boundaries – Chapter One

WILDFLOWER SEASON

From behind the bar Jack slid the frosty mug right to her, a Sierra Nevada, the usual. He was good at Skee-Ball too, among other talents. “Well, Cass,” he said, “ya done it again.”

“Done wot?” she answered, then took a couple of swallows.

“Got yerself another ad-mirer.” Jack flared his eyebrows. He had a sharp jaw, a cleft chin and slicked-back dark hair. “And I mean somethin’ special...Jamie Flagg.”

Smiling at her pained expression, he moved closer and planted his elbows on the shiny wooden surface. “Christ!” Cass said. “You’re kidding!” Jamie Flagg was old enough to be her father, not to mention being Lamoille’s town weirdo.

But the goofy redneck banter wasn’t how she and Jack really talked. It was a private joke, for times they were alone in the dimness of the Silver Stake, like now, with Jack just opening up and Cass in town to check her PO box. A few years back she’d even had a fling with him, before he and that Native American gal got together over in Lee.

“Sor-ry,” he said, feigning sympathy. “But people in here just pour their hearts out.”

“If they’re not too drunk to speak.”

He took the bar towel and eased away again, slow and loose-boned, stopping at the juke box, where he made a show of polishing the chrome. “Jamie says you flirted with him,” Jack added, back over his shoulder, “came to the lookout for a visit.”

“That was no visit!” she said. “Place wasn’t open yet, but he showed up anyway.”

“Well, he’s gone all Patsy Cline over it,” Jack said, still polishing. Then he crooned, “*You walk by, and I...fa-ll to pieces.*”

“Please, you’ve ruined my beer.” Except he had a nice voice, and from tending bar, knew the words to a hundred cheesy love songs, especially Ray Price, George Jones and those guys. Probably sang them in the ear of his new gal in bed, like he used to with her.

At thirty-nine, Cass kept herself in good shape and wore a sandy blonde ponytail, but you’d never catch her in a skirt. Makeup was optional too. She lived in jeans, day or night, and drove a ragtop Jeep named Dusty Jose.

Jack let her sit quietly while he restocked the beer cooler and the ice cubes, but when Cass took her last sip and stood, he had more to say. “Word to the wise, though. He claims that driving in and out of town, he’s spied you in the ranch meadow, sunbathing, and I know how you like bein’ tan all over.”

“Bullshit!” she said. “You can’t see down there from the road.”

“He says you can,” Jack shrugged. “Think of his lookout job. Has to have good eyes.”

Typically Cass got on fine with men, as lovers or as friends, sometimes better than with women, but she didn’t really need a guy in her life. Her attitude was, *been there, done that*, and as for Jamie Flagg, forget it. If she had an itch she couldn’t scratch, there’d always been candidates, though it seemed like fewer lately. Not that she minded being alone.

Which was why she’d jumped at the chance to care-take Juniper Ranch that summer. So, leaving the Silver Stake behind, she drove Dusty Jose back out there in the July heat, her tires kicking up gritty, swirling billows on Toiyabe Forest 640, winding into the Ruby Mountains, that stood like a wall east and south of tiny Lamoille. Heavily forested, too, once you got high

enough, with trout streams, snow banks into August, and peaks topping 11,000 feet. Last thing you'd expect in central Nevada, but they were glorious.

Beryl Watson, who owned half the Lamoille Valley and a bunch else, didn't run the ranch for cattle anymore. It was his hunting lodge or whatever, a retreat from the Watson family compound out in the flats. Could be he also saw it as a future ski area or exclusive resort. But when his wife cajoled him into three-months in Europe, and he offered the place to Cass, with a small stipend if she fed the horses and watered the meadow, she was more than ready to lock her trailer two blocks from Main Street and go for something different.

In this next stretch of road, the canyon narrowed and crosswise ribs of granite bucked her jeep side-to-side, but she was out of the sagebrush now, and the worst of the dust, running along Stoddard Creek under sugar pines and ponderosas, where a marker said two miles till the ranch turnoff. Just the idea of it made her smile.

Beryl must have known from the grapevine that she had ranching in her background and came from Montana. True, as far as it went, but she doubted that he or Jack, let alone her pal Marlee, the head ranger's wife, would have anything to do with her if they knew the rest. No, she caught herself, Jack might. It'd give him another story to tell.

Because growing up, Cass had hated her parents' wacko religion, had run away penniless at eighteen to be a showgirl in Vegas, but first had worked under the name Rose at brothels in Winnemucca and Gerlach, saving cash for the big city. Good thing she had, too. No real harm involved and no diseases, but she learned a lot about life—about men—and Vegas could be a tough town if you arrived broke. She'd actually snagged a few minor chorus line gigs, but

mainly served drinks or dealt cards in the casinos, even after she and Don, also a dealer, got themselves married off for eight years.

By then, she'd been planning to dump him for playing around, but he ended up dead in a car wreck and left her their little condo and a decent chunk of insurance money. So, with the goal of drifting north again, she'd padded her savings by signing up as a high-end escort, and then used her map to zero in on Lamoille, which seemed her best move ever. Cost of living was low, the big cottonwoods and willows framed against vistas of mesquite, alfalfa and sage had made her feel at home from day one, and she could reliably earn extra cash by cleaning motel rooms or staffing the desk.

At the *Juniper Ranch* sign, she swung onto the rutted access road, but the sign's other arrow, *Mt. Fitzgerald Lookout – 6 Miles*, brought her back to Jamie Flagg. What the hell had she done to set him off? Except being female?

Back in May, having promised Beryl she'd move to the ranch after Memorial Day, Cass had driven there one afternoon to check it over. She'd been thrilled at what she found, too, the un-mown grass dotted with flowers and the cozy lodge house, and afterwards she headed up the mountain for the view everybody raved about.

Sure, she knew Jamie was the regular summertime spotter and had been for years. Pretty much a miracle that he could be doddering drunk at the Silver Stake most of the time or on the bench in front of the feed store, yet was nothing but diligent, sober and responsible for his three or four months on duty.

Where he got cash for all those drinks nobody could figure either, but he'd worked at the played-out gold mines in eastern Oregon before showing up in Lamoille and renting a dumpy shack, and the rumor was that he'd done some high-grading and had nuggets and dust hidden away that he sold on the QT in Reno.

He also had a reputation as a perv, and her divorced friend, Annabelle, who ran the hair salon, had even called the sheriff on him for hanging around outside her house after she'd warned him to quit. He started by coming in for haircuts—she did men and women, both—then he'd talked about how she was better looking than those models in Playboy and how he liked to imagine her that way, and next thing, there he was, waving through her side windows at home. No one could prove for sure that he'd been in her yard and not on the public street, and no charges were filed.

As another story went, he'd been run out of Oregon after luring a teenage girl into his vehicle and trying to take her to a motel, but true or not, he wasn't supposed to be at the lookout that day. It stayed closed till June, and when Cass got there, she could see why. Two-hundred yards from the summit the jeep track ran smack against a crusted, football-field-size snowdrift maybe six feet deep that stopped her flat.

So she walked the rest of the way, in sparse to nonexistent tree cover, sliding and falling on her butt a couple of times, but the view from the rocky outcrop she reached was killer. Elko and Highway 80 like some kind of toy train outfit thirty miles to the north, f-ing salt flats and desert east and west, and all around to the south, three or four other snowy peaks set onto deeply carved, velvety slopes of pine that spread and spread.

It was cold too, even in full sun, colder than a fleece vest could handle, and she wrapped her arms around her chest but couldn't tear herself away. Which was when Jamie's voice came out of nowhere.

"View up here don't quit, does it?" he said, crunching along the edge of the snow, with the stone and steel lookout tower, windows all boarded shut for winter, looming above him like something from a prison-camp.

"Jesus!" She about jumped off her feet. "Scared the crap out of me."

"No worries. I needed to know if storms might've wrecked the place again, saw your Jeep and thought havin' company'd be nice."

Nice for who, she wondered, except he hadn't been drinking, because when he did, his cheeks puffed out and he'd just sit sluggish, hardly saying a word. Like reverse shyness, since booze loosened up most guys, but in the red-light trade, she'd seen it before. Some customers would roll in hale and hearty, buy themselves, and her, a drink, yet in private be so nervous and shamefaced they could scarcely go through the motions.

But that day's version of Jamie had an alert stance, and beneath the billed cap, his broad, pale face bordered on healthy pink. Even so, handsome, he'd never be. Not with the clownish nose and the dull-blue buttons of his eyes set way too close to be proportional. His mother was Basque, they said, which supposedly explained his coloring, but who would you blame for the short-legged, blocky body, the adolescent squeak in his voice and the oddball way his feet kicked forward when he walked? Ungainly was the truth of it, right down to his everyday wardrobe of raggedy Carhartt overalls. And somehow, which he never seemed aware of, he made the people around him feel ungainly too.

“In a couple ’a months,” he said, ignoring the lack of response from Cass, “all under where that snow is will be wildflowers...columbine, primrose, three or four kinds of lupine, balsam daisies, paintbrush, mountain spray, you name it. Somethin’ to see, I’ll tell ya’.”

“Must be beautiful,” she said, grudgingly.

He came closer, standing beside her now. “I hear you’re babysittin’ Juniper Ranch.”

“Starting next month,” she replied, without looking at him. But word sure got around fast. She felt her ponytail, hanging from the vent of a cap much like Jamie’s, brush against her neck in the breeze. “There’s lots of flowers in that meadow already. I love them.”

“Not like these up here,” he said, “but once I start my job, I get days off every three weeks and pass right by old Beryl’s place, goin’ to town.”

“Only road there is,” she said, unsure of his implication. She also felt him examining her like some exotic life form, so to cut that off, she side-stepped and locked eyes with his.

He showed a smile with his crooked teeth. “In the little bogs,” he said, waving his hand as though it held a magic wand, “I get wild onions too.”

“Well use those for turkey stuffing,” she said firmly, hoping to end the conversation. “I saw a big flock of Rio Grandes, toms and hens, on the road coming up.” She turned away.

“Saw that myself,” he said, squeaky voice getting quieter, “except I can’t eat ’em.”

“They’re good. You hunt, right?” Since he wasn’t giving up, she faced him again.

“Not them,” he said, still quiet. “I’ve made my peace with turkeys.” He craned his head around, like he feared being overheard, or possibly punished. “Years ago,” he went on, “my mom raised ’em, and she used to...”

Cass laughed, in recognition of her own family's chicken coop, but also at his ludicrous unease. "Oh," she said, "the bloody hatchet."

He looked offended. "No," he went on, "my mom done that part. She'd have my big brother and me chase down a nice fat one, then he would hold it and I had to tie a length of twine on its neck. We'd lead and shove the thing to where she kept this thick box and she put the open side down over it. My brother sat on the box and she made me yank the string and step backward to stretch the head out under the edge, flat on the dirt."

His voice was nearly a whisper now. "Poor helpless thing could only see me with one scared eye, all creepy-like, till our mom brought down the axe and red spurted out. 'Best way I know to do it,' she always said."

Head down, he abandoned Cass to the silence of where they were, which felt about total, save for the breeze. And his story was sickening, she'd give him that. "First time tellin' anyone," he added, and drew a long breath.

Briefly, she had a new vision of Jamie. That the boy he'd been back then looked almost how he looked now—an overgrown boy, or worse for him, a lost boy, lost in a man's world. "Guess I'll head into town," she said, sorry she'd stayed as long as she had.

"OK," he nodded, seeming distraught.

She moved back toward the snow, but after a few steps he partly followed. "Tell ya' one thing. I'm probably too old for you, but make me even five years younger and the only way you'd stop my attentions is with a restraining order."

She felt a stab of alarm, but he winked, like he'd just told a joke, so she replied in kind. "Not sure I'd need one," she said. He had to know she owned a 20-gauge shotgun, could use

it, and was famous at the Silver Stake for bagging her limit of sage grouse every season, when plenty of local men came up short. “I’m pretty tough.”

She hopped up on the drift and walked off as rapidly as the footing would allow, worried that he’d keep following, but he didn’t. And just below, alongside her jeep, was his truck, a battered brown Dodge 4x4 with one of its quarter panels a mismatched green and the rest so smeared with Bondo that gray made a third color.

But damn, she realized, while sitting in the ranch kitchen sorting through the mail she’d just picked up in town. The key point was the restraining order thing. He was so clueless, he took her joking reply as a come-on. Not that she needed protection. Summer was half over and she hadn’t laid eyes on him since being on the mountain, and if he showed up here she’d put him in his place so fast he’d forget his own name.

What bugged her was his I-Spy routine, because she also remembered that after dropping three thousand feet from her trip to the lookout, and coming around the nose of the ridge above the meadow, she’d known Juniper Ranch was right below, down through the dense trees and brush somewhere, but the road had gotten tricky just then, with tilted shelves of exposed rock, and she’d had to focus on that.

So damn again. Maybe you *could* see a slice of the meadow, even if she’d never seen the road. Heard it sometimes, off in the distance, but not seen it.

Or was this just Jack bullshitting, or Jamie blowing smoke for whoever was in earshot? Good chance, but the fact was, she valued her privacy and did like an all-over tan, and no one had a right to violate that. Or what if Jamie could see her from the tower?

Outside, she stepped off the porch to scan the ridge through a pair of Beryl's binoculars. The tower was way beyond that, with not a blip of the damn thing poking up anywhere, and the meadow was more sheltered yet. Still, the idea of being intruded on pissed her off, almost enough to grab the shotgun and drive there to confront him.

Especially since the ranch was the nicest place she'd ever lived. The pump house, the split-rail fence, the stable and the barn were all original, set in a lush box canyon laced with ditches for irrigation. Only the main house was new, one of those custom-built, cedar-log places, a story-and-a-half, with vaulted ceilings, multiple skylights and oversize windows. Custom furnishings too—rough-hewn tables and chairs, Washoe pottery and baskets, Navajo rugs and a natural stone hearth. Pretty much heaven by her standards, and to top it off, horses she could ride.

Further mulling the situation, she went inside, poured a glass of wine and fixed some eggs with chorizo and a salad for supper. Later on, she tended the hay in the stable and adjusted the flow in the ditches, as the moon rose to an unseen choir of coyotes. Then, no hardship involved, she took herself upstairs to read. Cass was big on books and had been since her first county library in Montana. You were never bored and always learning.

When she woke in the morning, having finally put Jamie Flagg out of her mind long enough to sleep, she had an answer. To hell with him! She was doing whatever she wanted at the ranch, and if that pathetic old lost-boy perv stole an eyeful through some secret peephole, he could have one. And if he blabbed in town, so what?

The following week, high summer, the weather was as sweet as it knew how to be and Cass spent every afternoon in the meadow, where the last wildflowers, tired-looking clovers,

mule ears and penstemon still hung on in isolated patches. She used sunscreen, of course, but had long since turned golden bronze and felt great. She could easily live on what Beryl was paying too, so however sinful her leisure, it wouldn't touch a dime of savings. She had also started a really good book, nice and long, called *Angle of Repose*, that pulled her right in.

After lunch on Friday she cooled down by standing knee-deep in the icy ditch for a minute, flopped onto a blanket ready for a new chapter and eventually dozed off. Until a hellacious noise snatched her back awake and she sat up in one motion, panicked, to see a dust plume coursing straight into the air against the wooded slope.

Rockslide? No, too metallic, a mobile hollow banging, but now gone so quiet even the birdcalls had stopped, same as with that train derailment she'd heard as a kid. On her blanket, naked and dumbfounded, barely able to move or breathe, she could only stare at the equally static plume, hanging like a Vegas stage set suspended from invisible wires.

Holy shit! A car'd gone off the road! She grabbed the beach robe and ratty tennis shoes she'd worn coming out from the house, threw them on and stood, as her pulse amped to a roar in the continuing quiet. But wouldn't passengers or the driver be screaming for help? Unless... Christ! The ranch had zero phone service, and for emergencies, just the shortwave Beryl'd taught her to use. Except a rescue team would take forever and Cass did know CPR.

Lurching forward, she raced across the meadow, hopping ditches and plunging into the brush. It was steep, rocky and miserable, the maze of low branches tearing at her robe and hair, and her breath sounding in her ears. Up she went, zigzagging where she had to, with only the dispersing plume to navigate by.

As she got higher, the trees were bigger and her route opened a bit. “I’m coming!” she shouted, sweat running down her neck. “Yell to help me find you!” No answer. Then, above, she saw where a big tree limb had been newly sheared off and pushed toward that, climbing through boulders slippery with fallen pine needles.

And in a shallow bowl, something flashed like chrome or glass, so she fought her way to...to...Jamie’s truck! “Jamie!” she called. “You OK?” Still no answer, but he might end up with a new fantasy to share at the Silver Stake, since she’d do mouth-to-mouth for sure if he needed it. She really wanted him to be alive. That made no sense, but she did.

The truck itself had swan-dived cab-first into the base of a rock slab as big as her trailer and was lodged with the bed canted up sixty degrees. The windshield lay shattered all over, but she could see in by squatting. From the open passenger window, closest to her, a double armload of flowers—yellow, white, pink, red, blue, purple—had spewed out on the ground, accompanied by a sign made from the flap of a cardboard box that her eyes decoded instantly even though it was upside down: “For Cass,” it read, in smudged marker ink.

Everything happened so fast, she hadn’t felt herself tear up, and only when sparkling drips slid from her jaw did she know she was crying. Her head and spine kept slumping forward, and without the force to speak, her lips mouthed, “Oh, Jamie...you poor fool.”

Because she’d suddenly seen him on the other side of the cab, slid toward her beneath the steering wheel, blood running from his ears and mouth, and with his neck, elongated by the impact, caught at the chin in the V of the truck’s shoulder and lap belts. One of his eyes, open and glazed, stared straight at her—through her—past her—like she wasn’t there.