

Donan Berg wins 2016 1st Place Romance Gold Award

Donan Berg's novel, *One Paper Heart*, topped the Feathered Quill 2016 Romance Awards. Enjoy a taste of *One Paper Heart* later in this book.

Author Berg also earned the romance winner's circle seven times in The Dixie Kane Memorial Writing Contest.

What others say about his novels:

A Body To Bones

“A winning plot . . .” Kirkus Discoveries

The Bones Dance Foxtrot

“Clues eventually fit together in clever and significant ways . . . dramatic tension builds around which woman Jake will pursue.” National reviewer.

For family and friends.

We all share life with special people be they grandparents, parents, spouses, brothers, sisters, sons, daughters, godchildren, cousins, nieces, nephews, guardians, or friends.

In meaningful little ways, remember to say thank you to each of them.

If you find my fictional story triggers a warm feeling, a happy heartbeat or a joyful recollection, I dedicate all the blissful moments to you and yours.

Books by

Donan Berg

Novels

A Body To Bones

First Skeleton Series Mystery

The Bones Dance Foxtrot

Second Skeleton Series Mystery

Baby Bones

Third Skeleton Series Mystery

Adolph's Gold

Abbey Burning Love

One Paper Heart

Short Stories

Bubbling Conflict and

Other Stories

Amanda

Alexa's Gold

Donan Berg

Chapter One

“**R**ich men don’t date exhausted women.” Grandma’s oft-repeated admonition ebbed into the minutiae of Alexa Hovey’s grief. She squeezed the steering wheel of her battered F-150 pickup. The tension that distended the light-blue veins on the backs of her slim hands reverberated to grip her fragile heart.

A squeal from Alexa’s two-year-old son, Samuel, shredded her veil of invisible melancholy. After the rural Iowa county gravel road ruts jiggled Samuel’s Popsicle, orange melted-ice drips stained his Chicago Cubs bib.

Alexa welcomed her son’s distraction. He reigned as her life’s never-ending joy. His throne a child seat belted onto a faded-gray fabric bench seat. When Alexa’s rust-pocked red pickup crested a pointed hill, he laughed. She swallowed a sharp inhale when her vehicle’s front suspension hung in midair, momentarily weightlessness, until the spongy, in-need-of-repair-shocks bounced her and Samuel. Alexa’s strained seatbelt stretched without a tear.

“Whee, Samuel,” Alexa shouted as her butt thumped her seat a second time. Buoyed by the exuberance of Samuel’s giggling, she vowed to protect him without the need for a father figure.

Alexa’s peppermint Lifesaver stuck like a barnacle to the roof of her mouth. She lowered the driver’s window and, without guilt, spit the half-dissolved disk into the dust-filled afternoon air. She doubted the suspicious neighbors Grandma decried in their long distance conversations would see the disk, or the airborne saliva, fly. *And, if one or two did, so what?*

Samuel’s glee a full pivot from his whining and chair-kicking in the office of Grandma’s estate attorney, their last stop. The black-haired, angular faced Attorney Brad Haberkorn had tried to calm Samuel without success. Samuel’s tantrum disturbed Alexa less than her mother’s telephone shrieks last week that culminated in Mother’s threat: “If you don’t share, you’ll get nothing, not one red inheritance cent.”

Alexa bit her tongue when her mother’s rage rambled on to Mother’s speculation about Grandpa’s hidden treasure. Alexa honored her sworn promise to Grandma not to verify Mother’s theory one of Grandma’s recipes held the clue to buried gold coins.

After two coughs she raised the driver’s window to within a half inch of full closure to shut out the road’s dust. Alexa harbored no doubt her hoarseness would heal and the sale of Grandma’s farm would guarantee Samuel a safe home, fund his college nest egg, and buy her a SUV. She never spoke of her SUV desire, which would be her first new car of her twenty-eight years. Similar to Samuel’s bedtime teddy bear, Alexa was adamant in her belief that material possessions brought comfort without reciprocal love.

The glass-encased church bulletin she passed announced the 2010 Easter week services. Alexa’s anticipation rose since Mr. Haberkorn said Grandma’s farm was two-to-three miles west of the church. Alexa’s purse carried Grandma Anderson’s last mailed postcard, which she had cherished since its receipt the week before Christmas. With words few and letters scribbled large and wavy, Grandma’s mailed expression of her love for Alexa and Samuel infinite. Also in Alexa’s purse, a copy of Grandma’s will that gave Alexa the farm and all associated assets except for \$1.00 individual bequests given to each of twelve relatives. The first named relative was Alexa’s mother.

“Honey, don’t touch your sticky fingers to your pants.” Samuel raised his chubby right hand to his uncombed dark brown hair. Alexa swiveled her head to the deserted road. Samuel’s giggle shifted her gaze to him. He patted the crown of his head. Alexa’s frown, exaggerated by the

muscle tenseness beneath her facial skin, softened when Samuel's grin displayed a lower gum gap where a tardy front-tooth hadn't yet sprouted.

Alexa flipped down her windshield visor. While the action gave relief to her eyelid squint into the setting sun, the visor did nothing to sweeten the spring's smell of decomposing manure spread between withered corn stalks. Sagged wood-slatted snow fences a sad reminder of December's snowy blizzard that had prevented Alexa's four-hour journey from her Chicago apartment to attend Grandma's funeral. Alexa longed to show Samuel his great-grandmother's farm and drive herself into the farmyard of her childhood's greatest memories.

Alexa remembered her yellow-flowered sundress and dashes across Grandma's lawn to chase the buoyant dandelion seed parachute. The tug-of-war between wind and gravity upon the dandelion fluff ball scrolled in slow motion beneath Alexa's raised eyelids. Her fantasy staved off the nebulous fear tremors that her mother would be at the farm with tools to install new locks.

Her glances to Samuel and her desire not to drive past the entrance to Grandma's farm distracted Alexa from the Iowa landscape undulation peppered with bright red barns and picturesque square white houses. Grandma hadn't divulged why she blessed Alexa with the farm and not Alexa's divorced and remarried mother who lived in Ohio. Alexa doubted her opinionated Grandma's dislike of divorce severed a mother/daughter biological bond.

"That's your unpredictable grandmother," Mother had said in a conciliatory tone that evaporated after Alexa refused to sign a legal paper that renounced her will beneficiary status.

Alexa bit her lower lip. To avoid shame she had capitulated. For two years she lied to Grandma that the U.S. Army had deployed Samuel's father to Afghanistan. Alexa's plan to explain the truth to Grandma in person never materialized. When fate and Grandma's stroke denied Alexa the opportunity, she forced all regret deep into her heart. Alexa lived day-to-day with a manufactured rationalization distilled from unforgettable cowardice that Grandma's health wouldn't have withstood the truth.

"Honey, we're almost there. Look. A green tractor."

Samuel's miniature blue eyes gazed at her and not at the landscape's rolling hills.

Alexa slowed to read a posted RFD number. The name Erickson on the mailbox signaled Alexa was within three farm entrances of Grandma's. She counted aloud, "One." Samuel raised his right hand forefinger. "Two." He added his second right hand finger. "Three." His giggle filled the cab and Alexa's heart with playfulness.

Alexa swiveled her head left. Joyful moisture welled behind her eyes, a throat lump formed, and then she gasped.

The large oak that shaded Alexa's dandelion chases now sawed to a three-foot wide stump.

The two-level front porch roof of Grandma's log-cabin-styled house sagged in multiple places. One broken windowpane allowed a tattered inside lace curtain to flutter. Plywood nailed over a far window. Wood stain blistered. Caulk between logs cracked or missing. And then . . . and then . . . her gaze bumped across three rows of evenly spaced stewed mounds of black dirt, clay clogs, and white clover blossoms next to holes dug in the front lawn. Alexa tallied twelve piles before she quit her count in disgust.

Who else sought Grandpa's buried treasure? His stashed gold. She had to find Grandma's apple cake recipe. Alexa's right hand re-crossed her heart as she mumbled last summer's pledge to Grandma not to reveal the recipe clue Grandma hadn't fully explained.

Alexa coasted to a stop. Her right hand reached into her strapped brown leather purse to remove her cell phone and Brad Haberkorn's business card. He'd promised to recommend a local Realtor. Her budget envisioned three or four weekend trips to rehab, list, and sell.

“Mr. Haberkorn, I’m at the farm. You didn’t tell me Grandma lived in . . . ah . . . in a ramshackle house. The likes of which haunt the streets near my Chicago apartment.”

“Hang up. I’ll speak with you directly.”

Alexa, pleased that Samuel hadn’t chewed his Popsicle stick, switched her gaze left. She did not understand why someone parked a three-windowed, two-toned tan mobile home under an unlit yard security light and in front of a dense spruce windbreak.

Four knuckles rapping on the dusty window glass next to Samuel startled her. Samuel, restrained by his seat harness, reached his arms to her. She recognized Attorney Haberkorn. “It’s okay, Samuel.” Alexa’s right hand on her driver’s door steadied her until her launch landed her dark-blue sneakers on gravel. She stretched her torso erect and, behind her opened door, self-consciously smoothed the billowed sides of her white cotton blouse. The blouse and designer denims purchased last week at her favorite thrift store.

She glued her gaze to Mr. Haberkorn’s profile until they met at the F-150’s front bumper. The toothy smile she gazed up at resembled his law firm’s online bio photograph. He radiated an awkward shyness. She had been pleasantly surprised the thirty-year-old online birthdate was in reality true. His blue blazer, not seen in his office, struck her as nerdy with its white pocket protector flap imprinted with Baker, Haberkorn Law Firm.

Alexa’s ingrained big city paranoia caused her to keep a two-arm length separation. “You surprise me, Mr. Haberkorn?”

He arched and relaxed his trimmed dark eyebrows. “Please, you can still call me Brad.” She nodded. “Probably not what you expected.”

Did he refer to himself or the farm? *Be Cool. Assume house.* He’d intimidated her when behind his office desk, not acted flirty. She’d play it safe. “It’s been three years. I have this . . .” Her purse hung from her left shoulder. She fumbled to retrieve her wallet from inside her purse and unzip a photograph compartment. “Here’s what I remember.” She showed Brad a snapshot of a smiling woman and a child standing on the lawn in front of a blurry white farmhouse.

“Assume that’s you with Mrs. Anderson.” He cradled the photo between his right hand thumb and four fair-skinned fingers. His manicured fingernails consistent with right palm flesh devoid of calluses.

“Yes. I was eight, no seven.” She stowed the picture and wallet in her purse.

He gazed past her right shoulder. “You could see the beauty even then.”

Alexa’s cheeks warmed from the inside out. She’d already authorized his fee from Grandma’s estate and had expected him to be polite, not a rural Casanova who made her feel he searched deep into her soul. Her trance broken when Samuel cried “Mommy.”

“Excuse me.” She circled Brad, unlatched Samuel’s door handle and swung the door toward her. With her purse tossed onto the bench seat, she unfastened her son’s car seat buckle. Samuel’s untied bib became her temporary washcloth to wipe his face and hands before she straddled his legs on her right hip. “No,” she whispered in response to his wiggles. “You’ll fall into a hole if I let you run.”

Feet square beneath his shoulders, Brad’s once distant dark smoky eyes floated up and lazily descended in his direct gaze at Alexa. He stood patient; his unbuttoned sport coat hung limp. With Samuel on her right hip, she rejoined him a foot from the driver side front fender.

She’d stockpiled vacation days and saved gas money before she telephoned to advise him of the new dates for her twice delayed Iowa trip. A flutter of small brown birds from the windbreak spruces attracted her gaze to the mobile home. The birds landed on, and then darted from, the home’s roof as she stared.

“Land tenant Oscar Erickson.” Brad began. “He owns the trailer. Son Joe lives in it.”

“Was that agreed to by Grandma?” She searched Brad’s eyes for a clue.

“Don’t recall.” Brad folded both arms to his chest. “Likely something oral.”

Alexa gazed to the front lawn. “If the son lives here, why didn’t he stop this digging?” Brad rotated his waist and tilted his right shoulder toward Samuel. His right hand’s feeble attempt to high-five her son failed. “Thought you knew your grandmother moved into in a nursing home last summer. Joe Erickson works highway construction. Doubt he’s here very often.”

“Then why not put the mobile home at his parents?” She squeezed Samuel tighter.

“Independence I would gather.” He shrugged, squared his shoulders, and refolded his arms. “Anyway, the Erickson’s are friendly folks. I’m sure they’ll accommodate whatever your wishes are. I’ve collected the cards of three local Realtors for you to interview.” Two of Brad’s right-hand fingers extracted business cards from his white-shirt pocket.

Her left hand thumb and forefinger clasped the stacked cards. “Thanks.” She crammed them into her rear jeans pocket. Alexa cleared her throat, puzzled as her right eye caught Brad’s right hand stretch open his front pants pocket.

“Forgot to FedEx you these two keys.”

What else has he forgot to tell her?

“Think they’re both for the house,” he continued, “but not sure.” He closed his right-hand fingers around a purple key fob. “I’ve a duplicate set of these and others in my office. I’ll gladly relinquish them to you after probate’s final distribution.”

When his right hand fingertips grazed against her outstretched left palm, her hand trembled, and dropped six inches. Unleashed energy tingled her nerves until it fizzled at her shoulder.

Samuel squirmed against her right side as he reached his right hand for the dangling keys.

Alexa snatched the keys, careful to avoid Brad’s second touch. Her left hand forced the fob and its two keys into her front jeans pocket opposite Samuel.

“Your son looks like he could be a handful.”

“What can I say?” Her left hand helped solidified her right-hand grip on Samuel. “He’s a growing boy.” As Brad’s gaze lingered to probe her eyes, she tempered her impulse to let Samuel become a relationship bargaining chip and averted her eyes.

“If you have any question, please call me. I’m parked near the machine shed.”

Before Alexa lifted her gaze, she listened to the gravel crunch as he briskly strode away. Annoyed at herself for not uttering a courtesy good-bye, she elevated her left hand. The dust cloud of his departing Buick offered no hope he saw her belated wave.

Alexa steadied her son’s tiny rubber soles on the pickup’s fender. Except for Grandma and Grandpa, Alexa couldn’t recall a time when any adult said to her they were glad she visited. The mid-April twilight lengthened the spruce tree shadows and neither mother’s car nor any other interrupted their steady farmyard advance.

She grabbed her purse, and with one right foot kick, propelled the pickup’s driver door shut with a loud click. Alexa clutched Samuel and scurried thirteen elongated strides across the paper-strewn side lawn. She bounded up the four wooden steps to a redwood-stained twenty-by-thirty-foot rear deck.

Her sneakers left a dusty trail. Grandpa Henri’s favorite three-legged stool straddled the threshold of the farmhouse’s kitchen door.

Rats. Had Brad or Mother beaten her to Grandma’s apple cake recipe? Alexa believed Grandpa Henri, while his death was suspicious, had neither betrayed Grandma’s recipe clue nor unearthed his golden coin treasure.

“Anyone here?” Alexa shouted. The sound of her voice died without a response. She repeated her question as she stepped around the stool and into the kitchen. The sun’s last fading ray streamed through the window above the sink to highlight her toes. She toggled a wall switch. The ceiling’s 1930s light fixture didn’t even flicker and Alexa decided she had neither light nor time to check any basement fuse box.

In Grandma Emma’s post-Thanksgiving telephone conversation, Grandma said she’d tucked a typed apple cake recipe into her recipe collection. Alexa grabbed Grandpa’s stool and set Samuel on it. Her upper and lower oak cabinet and drawer rummage discovered no cookbook.

Alexa hoisted Samuel to her right hip. Her left hand flung aside the dining chair that propped open the pantry’s six-panel solid wood door. With plans to be quick, she guessed Grandma locked up her county fair recipes. In Grandma’s five-by-eight-foot walk-in pantry, plank-board shelves wedged a four-drawer black metal file cabinet into a far corner.

Alexa’s slender left hand fingers yanked the key ring Brad had given her from her front blue-jeans pocket. She surmised the smallest key had the best chance to pop the pushed-in oval lock in the cabinet’s upper left corner. Her left hand thumb and forefinger pressed the key shaft teeth to engage the lock’s inner tumblers. Alexa focused every pound of her one hundred and twenty pounds to rotate the key. Her second effort deepened a key edge imprint into her reddened thumb. Its flesh resembled soft tinted putty.

A loud click behind Alexa propelled her to twirl one hundred and eighty degrees. Samuel’s scream stung Alexa’s right eardrum. Alexa’s left hand grasped the light fixture chain that dangled a foot above her head. She pulled. Nothing happened except a soft click. Samuel’s wail pierced their black hole darkness.

“Samuel, Samuel, it’s all right. Mommy’s here.”

Small fingers squeezed her neck. The salty wetness of Samuel’s tears dampened her chin. She lowered Samuel to the floor, and he clutched her left leg.

Alexa’s right elbow bumped a hard, unknown object. *Ouch.* Keys jingled when the fob and its circular metal ring hit the floor. She crouched to retrieve it and her effort failed. She patted the closed panty door until her right hand grasped its doorknob. Two hard twists failed to turn the reluctant doorknob. She stretched her right-hand fingertips high to search the two-inch molding above the door for a spare key. *Who put a pneumatic door closer on a pantry door?* She dismissed her grumble to worry about how she and Samuel could escape. Her nostrils inhaled the doorjamb’s disturbed dust that floated past her face. After her right-hand fingertips discovered no doorknob unlock button, her fingertips confirmed a slot outline for the insertion of a key not within her grasp.

Alexa stretched a pocket’s denim to dry her right hand wetted by a swipe of Samuel’s face. She dared not dump her purse to find the keys FedExed to her last week by Attorney Haberkorn. Alexa encouraged Samuel not cry as she guided him to her right leg. She clutched her purse to her midsection. Her bent right index finger snagged her Grandma’s farm building keys.

Alexa fumbled in the darkness to insert each of Grandma’s four keys. She tried teeth up and teeth down. None fit. *Stupid attorney sent the wrong keys.*

Had Mother sunk her claws in? Mother’s telephone threat to deny Alexa her inheritance had ignited a restless apprehension within Alexa and hastened her trip to Grandma’s Iowa farm.

“The farm’s mine!” Mother’s scream ricocheted in a never-ending loop within Alexa’s skull. “Grandma Emma wasn’t in her right mind to give it all to you. Neither your pretty face nor throwing yourself at that young attorney grandma hired will work, either.”

Mother can go to hell. Shrouded in darkness, Alexa cringed as her deep-seated maternal

hatred bubbled to the surface. This day it eclipsed her need for Samuel to enjoy extended family stability to compensate for a missing father and dead grandparents. Until Mother's call revived her anguish, Alexa had taken to heart that all humans bore a personal cross. Today she vowed to redouble her effort to ignore Mother's selfishness and reconcile without wrecking her and Samuel's future.

The fear in Samuel's pleas fueled Alexa's helpless frustration. She rapped her right hand's bare knuckles on the wood door. After six rap sequences, Alexa sucked her right hand's two middle knuckles and, without the taste of blood, gulped a deep breath of musty, dry air. Her dread continued to escalate. While she racked her probation-officer-trained brain for a tidbit that offered her hope for escape, her left hand rubbed her foolishly bruised knuckles to soothe the aching joints.

File cabinet contents would save her. Prior visits taught her Grandma kept a vise-grip or locking pliers in its bottom drawer for stubborn Mason jar lids. Either tool would provide her with the leverage necessary to twist and expose the doorknob's interior lock mechanism and allow her to retract its bolt.

Thanks, Grandma.

Alexa's left hand separated Samuel from her leg. She dropped to her knees to fish around and past Samuel's sneakers for the dropped key ring. Her dry throat exploded with an itchy, raspy cough. She apologized to Samuel. The panty's confined space augmented her search effort. With the fob in hand, she stood.

Two key attempts proved as unsuccessful as her first try had minutes earlier. With the second key anchored in the key slot, she forsook her key effort to brace her hands on the cabinet's top left and right corners.

"Don't move, Samuel." Alexa's blue sneaker toe kicked the lowest drawer. Pain in her right big toe persuaded Alexa to pivot and bang her right heel against the drawer. When she crouched and yanked each drawer, none budged.

Alexa cursed the blackness and smelled the sour, sweaty odor of oncoming fear—her fear. She'd never considered that irrational fear would ever freeze her brain. Her parked pickup outside had a flashlight in the glove box. Neither could she retrieve it nor could her two-year-old Samuel transform into a sheet of paper, slip under the door, and toddle to her pickup.

That's it. She reached into her left front jeans pocket for her flip-phone. Gone. Then she remembered. She'd plugged it into her pickup's cigarette lighter to charge. This very moment it drained her vehicle battery as she lamented her bad luck. Alexa dispelled all worries for Samuel's immediate safety with the belief they would discover a way out of the pantry before dehydration. Her right hand wiped a forehead beaded with moisture, this time hers.

Alexa patted the air to locate a shelf's edge for balance. She leaned back and twice slammed her uplifted right sneaker sole square against the pantry door. The hinges jiggled. Neither the lock nor the hinge pins dislodged. She coughed twice into the crook of her right arm and listened. Silence. Tingles beneath her jeans denim crept up her left calf. Her extended left hand verified it wasn't Samuel. Alexa shook her raised left leg. Unsure of the results, she angled her left heel to her right knee and swatted at her sensation's creator. *Damn bug.* The faded skin prickles and Alexa's grab of Samuel's small right hand calmed her.

The rumble of tire treads and crunched gravel seeped into the pantry.

"Help!" Alexa bellowed. "In here." Her expelled breath unnerved her when it bounced off the door into her face. Alexa clamped her right hand to her mouth. Her eagerness to hug Samuel

one last time, rather than the budding anxiety of not knowing who entered the farmyard, swelled her brain until logic overpowered emotion.

She positioned her useless keys to protrude outward from between her curled right hand fingers. She didn't need two fingers pressed to her wrist to count her blood-vein throbs to realize her heart thumped against her chest's rib cage.

Alexa pressed her left ear against the crack between the pantry door and its doorjamb. Metal hinges, other than those in proximity to her, creaked. Faced with a choice between another shout and silence, she chose the latter. She choked what could be her last breath at the bottom of her throat. Her right hand assured her that her body shielded Samuel.

Footsteps in an ambient hush slithered through the pantry door perimeter cracks. Alexa flinched when the footsteps abruptly stopped.