

Full Circle

By

Mariella Starr

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Prologue

Josie Raintree had an epiphany on her eighth birthday. She didn't know what that was at the time, but that was the day she realized that she wasn't like the other children in her third-grade class. She wasn't going to have a birthday party.

She realized this during recess because she was so excited that she snuck back into her classroom expecting to see her teacher setting up for her party. All the children in her class were given a party on their birthday, right after recess. But Mrs. Thompson wasn't putting up the streamers or setting out paper cups or plates. Her teacher looked up and noticed her and smiled.

"May I help you, Josie?" Mrs. Thompson asked.

"Am I going to have a party?" Josie asked.

Mrs. Thompson looked startled. "Oh, honey, I didn't realize. Is it your birthday?"

Josie nodded.

"I'm sorry, Josie, if I had known, I would have brought you a cake."

"Don't you give everyone a party?" Josie asked.

Mrs. Thompson shook her head. "No, honey, the parents bring in the cakes and the cupcakes and the party favors. I'll tell you what, I'll go out at lunchtime and pick up some cupcakes, and we'll have a party this afternoon."

That's when Josie realized that it wasn't her teacher that made sure the kids in her class felt special on their birthdays; it was their parents. She didn't have any parents, and she would never be special. She shook her head, backed out of the classroom and ran.

Her teacher ran after her, calling to her, but she ran. She left the playground, ran home, and she locked herself in her room.

Josie cried. She cried until she couldn't cry anymore. She cried because she didn't have a Momma or a Daddy. She cried because she would never get a pretty, ruffled dress for her birthday or get to wear the sparkly crown of a birthday child. She cried because no one cared that it was her birthday—except her.

After Josie was cried out, she wiped away her tears. She crawled into the little hidey-hole closet under the eaves of the house, and she pushed the door closed. No one would find her there,

and no one would know that she was a forgotten child. Josie looked around her hidey-hole where she hid her prize possessions. She would like to be a superhero, like in her comic books, but she knew that wasn't real.

She pushed aside her boxes of broken Barbies and play clothes. She didn't want to be a girl anymore. She wanted to be more like a boy. Boys were tough; boys didn't cry. She found her box of plastic cowboys and Indians and decided that's what she would be—a cowboy. There were lots of cowboys in town; they showed up for the parades and the rodeos down at the fairground.

She would be a cowboy. Josie was a determined little girl, and set about getting what she wanted. She hacked off her long black braids with a pair of scissors. She found a set of cowboy guns and holsters and a pair of too big, used cowboy boots in the rummage sale room at the Church of God. It took her several weeks of swapping and sometimes swiping, to get her cowboy gear together. At last she had everything she needed: cowboy hat, guns, boots, and even spurs. All she needed was a horse, and she knew where she could get one. There was a slight problem—the horse didn't belong to her. Jack Rawlings owned the horse she wanted, and he caught her dead to rights stealing his horse—three times.

Sixteen-year-old Jack Rawlings was considerably aggravated after chasing down his horse for the third time. He hauled Josie down off the back of his horse and delivered a light dose of discipline to her backside. He took the little hellion home and told her uncle, Mason Raintree, that he didn't have the time to keep running after a hardheaded, smart-mouthed little kid, and to keep her off his daddy's property.

Uncle Mason yelled at her and told her to get out of his sight. While Josie hid in her little hidey-hole, her uncle went back to drinking from that smelly bottle as he did every day. The next morning, all four of Jack's truck tires were flat because someone had let the air out of them. Jack couldn't prove Josie did it, but he knew, and so did she.

Josie Raintree watched Jack Rawlings grow up and mature into a young man through the eyes of a little girl eight years younger. Josie liked to keep a safe distance between them because every time Jack was near, she got into trouble. It was Jack who caught her stealing a little bottle of nail polish from the general store, marched her into the storeroom, stuck her nose in a corner and wouldn't let her out for a whole hour. He told her the punishment for stealing could be a lot worse if he called the sheriff.

Jack was the one who caught her at the top of the town water tower in the middle of the night. He climbed all the way up and carried her back down, her skinny ten-year-old arms wrapped tightly around his neck. He sat her down on the grass and talked to her a long time about behaving and accepting the consequences for her misbehavior. He scolded her about getting into so much trouble—trouble that could get her seriously injured—and he took her by the hand and walked her home. When she was fourteen, it was Jack who pulled her out of a parked car, away from the boy in it, and put the fear of God into her horny male companion.

It was always Jack's eyes that she remembered. They were a reflection of disappointment, hurt, and a lot of the time, temper. All told, Josie lost count of how many times Jack interceded to keep a little girl in desperate need of boundaries and stability, out of trouble. For seven years, she carefully plotted out her revenge plans but she rarely dared to enact them. Sometimes she tried to get him back, and that's why she knew that revenge against Jack Rawlings was not a good idea. He always knew who was behind the mischief, and he would come looking for her. That was why when Josie saw him coming in her direction, she took off in the opposite direction.

Jack Rawlings continued to keep an eagle eye on Josie until she was fifteen, and then he did an awful thing. He left town and he never came back.

Jack went off to college, but before he graduated, he joined the Navy. Later, Josie heard he was a member of one of the elite SEAL teams. Most folks in town figured Jack would never come back because he didn't get along with his family. Even when his father, Big Cal, died, Jack didn't come home for the funeral. Some folks thought it was wrong, and shook their heads saying it was shameful. By that time, Josie was a senior in high school, so she did some research and discovered that Jack's unit had deployed to the Middle East. She sent him a letter, but she never knew if he received it or not.

Eventually, Josie stopped thinking about Jack Rawlings. He'd been gone a long time, and he was part of her past. She grew up. Now, she wore a Stetson, a holstered gun, cowboy boots and a badge. But by no means was this merely the fulfillment of a childhood ambition. Josie Raintree was, in fact, the Sheriff of Rawlings, Oklahoma.

Chapter 1

Sheriff Raintree was on routine traffic patrol today along with Deputy Clay Tucker. She parked on one side of town while her deputy was on the other side. Both of their stations were near the schools, as those were the only places in town besides Main Street that they cared if anyone was speeding or not. It was usually easy duty in a small town of slightly over eighteen hundred people, which included some of the surrounding smaller towns that still carried their names, but had pretty much dried up and disappeared over time.

Rawlings was a small town. It had one main street that was slightly less than three-tenths of a mile long. Their town had the prerequisite number of businesses necessary to keep a small town going: grocery store, pharmacy, hardware store, feed store, pizza joint and sub-shop. There were other businesses. Some of the businesses had been there for decades handed down through the generations, others were new and time would tell if they lasted. Most of them still struggled in hard times, profited in better times, but they hung on. That's what country people did; they coped and they struggled, but they didn't give up. That simple fact was one of the many reasons Josie had returned to her hometown.

The irony was she had spent years working her butt off to get out of Rawlings. As the orphaned niece of the town drunk, she was the girl that no one expected to do anything worthwhile with her life. She spent years working at waitressing, data entry, and night janitorial work in office buildings. She had taken any extra jobs that had evening or grave-shift hours. She'd taken any hours that didn't conflict with her classes. Weekends, she worked in the trades on home-renovation projects with tradesmen who earned extra money working their days off.

Josie began her quest to get out of Rawlings in high school and earned her way into an advanced placement program that paid for her first two years of college at a small Baptist University. She had transferred those credits to the University of Oklahoma where she received a specialty degree in criminal justice and investigation. After being accepted to and excelling at the state police academy, she had worked in Oklahoma City with the highway patrol for several years. Realizing she wanted more, Josie applied to a federal agency where after nearly a year of vetting, she was hired. She'd spent another year in training, and another eight years in service before handing in her badge and heading home.

Home, it turned out, was Rawlings after all. Josie had not come home to be Sheriff. She had come home for some peace.

The driver of a Jeep Wrangler pulled out of Clearwater Street, did a quick tap on the brake, but failed to come to a complete stop at the stop sign. Josie knew the vehicle was speeding. She pulled out and trailed the vehicle for four blocks before pointing her speed gun at it, and hitting her lights and siren.

The Jeep pulled over. She got out of the patrol car and walked up to the window, judging the situation as she approached. There was a big guy inside, but he wasn't reaching for anything or making any quick moves. Josie tapped on the window. It buzzed down, and she looked straight into the chocolate velvet eyes of Jack Rawlings.

"Josie?" Jack questioned after a long stare at her before recognition kicked in. He had seen her picture on the town website, but it was a really bad picture and did not do her justice. He gave her a thorough all-male appraisal. Even decked out in the masculine uniform of a Sheriff, Josie Raintree was pure woman—an exceptionally beautiful woman. She had the heart-shaped face of her youth and the high cheekbones and jet-black hair that spoke of some distant Native American heritage. The slim nose, arched brows and naturally rose-hued lips were set into a dusky tanned complexion. She had a trim body, a confident stance, and, in spite of the uniform, he could see she had developed some curves. Her long hair hung down her back in a single neat braid.

"Jack, I didn't know you were back," Josie said, removing her sunglasses and revealing smoky gray eyes. "You failed to stop at the stop sign at Clearwater and West Street, and you were going fifty miles per hour in a twenty-five zone. On top of that, you whizzed right through a school-crossing zone that was flashing yellow, which means the speed limit was fifteen. License, registration and proof of insurance, please."

Jack cranked his head around and looked down the street. Yep, yellow flashers were still going. He looked over to a new elementary school across from the flashers, and back to Josie. "You wouldn't give a guy a break, would you? That wasn't here the last time I was in town, and I wasn't paying attention."

"It's been a long time since you were in town, and some things do change even in Rawlings," Josie said. "This is a school zone, if it were anywhere else I might be more forgiving, but not in a school zone. As for admitting you weren't paying attention—that's a pretty lame

excuse to give an officer of the law. May I have your documents, please?"

Jack produced the three required documents and handed them to her.

"Wait here, please," Josie said and returned to her car. Five minutes later, she handed him a ticket and recited the legalities about signing the ticket or being subject to arrest.

Jack took the pen automatically to sign, and saw the amount listed on the ticket. "Are you nuts? I'm not paying that!"

Josie didn't look surprised or bothered by his statement. "The normal fine for speeding is doubled in a school zone, and when the yellow flashers are on, the fine is tripled. If you don't know, the flashers mean children are either going to or leaving from the school premises. If you recall, we have many children in Rawlings who walk to and from school. We take the safety of those children seriously. If you refuse to sign the ticket, I will have to arrest and book you. This type of ticket is subject to six months in jail if you have to appear before the magistrate's bench. You will appear before Justice Harris Montgomery."

"Harris Montgomery is still alive?" Jack questioned.

Josie's lips twitched and almost formed a smile. "Yes, he's still alive and I believe he recently celebrated his 75th birthday. He's still as sharp as a tack, but he is getting crankier by the day. If I have to drag you in front of him, he will miss his favorite afternoon game shows on TV, and he won't be pleased. It's your choice."

"Welcome home to me," Jack quipped as he gave her a look of exasperation and signed the ticket.

"Drive more carefully, and don't forget to stop by the courthouse to pay the ticket," Josie said as she ripped off his part of the ticket and handed it to him. She gave him a tip of her hat.

Jack leaned out the window as she walked back to her patrol car. "Josie?"

"What?"

"Anybody spanked your ass, lately?"

Josie stopped, turned and gave him a long assessing stare. "Not since you left, why?"

"I'm guessing you could use a good one," Jack said, grinning. "No telling how much trouble you've been in since I left."

"It's been a long time, Jack," Josie said, tipping her sunglasses down and looking over the top of them. "I grew up, and if you were to try it now... well, all I can say is it would be a real shame that you survived all those years as a Navy SEAL unscathed, only to come home and get

your gonads shot off."



Jack Rawlings parked his Jeep and walked the town where he had grown up. The town of Rawlings was named after a grandsire of his—five, six, maybe more generations back. He never could keep it straight because he never cared one way or the other. At six foot four, he was an imposing figure of hard, toned muscle. He worked hard to maintain his body as he needed to stay in shape for his job. Nineteen years was a long time, yet some people still recognized him. People who did remember asked if he was home for good. He couldn't give them an answer. He didn't know the answer himself. He hadn't survived unscathed after all his years of service. He'd spent much of his time in dangerous combat zones and special missions, which was why he was here, now—on medical leave. They should have called it mental leave. He doubted any Navy psychiatrist was going to release him back to full-duty OIC (Officer in Charge) of a SEAL team. He had doubts they would release him back into his unit at all. If he couldn't do the job, it was time to move on or get out. With only six months left to fulfill the requirements on a twenty-year retirement benefit package, he couldn't see himself walking out now. He couldn't see himself staying in, either.

Jack walked over to the courthouse to pay his ticket, and he had to deal with Wilma Sims. She was older than sin and still as uptight and pinched-mouthed as when he had sat in her sixth-grade classroom. She filled out the paperwork, scolding him the entire time as if he were still twelve years old. Having done his duty, he walked back outside and headed to his family property.

He was vaguely aware that the estate executor, Mr. Gilders, his father's attorney, had made sure the taxes were paid, and that the land was leased out to other ranchers. Nineteen years was a long time to leave a property abandoned, and Jack had not been back since the day he had walked into the recruiter's office. He was surprised when he drove in. The damage was not as bad as he had expected.

Someone had nailed plywood over the windows of the house, and there were padlocks on the front and side doors. The yard had been mown, and someone had kept it from becoming a wasteland of weeds. There was a pile of fallen limbs and brush in the field beside the house, accumulated for burning later. The fences looked the worse for wear, but they were still standing—mostly.

A Sheriff's Department vehicle pulled up and parked behind his Jeep. Josie Raintree got out, walking to the front porch.

"I figured you might be heading out here and would need a key," she said, handing it to him. "The horse in your barn is mine, his name is Ozzie. I figured boarding him here was an even trade for keeping the vagrants and the vermin out, and keeping the place from falling apart. I patched the roof on the barn a year ago, but it needs a new one."

"You've been taking care of the place all these years?" Jack said.

Josie shook her head. "I left Rawlings two years after you did, but I, at least, came back occasionally. Uncle Mason was still here, so I tried to keep an eye on him. County services put him into a facility about ten years back to dry him out. He didn't last long in there. Still, when I did manage to get back, I'd come out, pound in a few nails where needed, and crank up a mower.

"Sheriff Bowles was a good friend of your father's and he kept an eye on this place, and later mine, when I moved out of state. He was the one that had it boarded up and kept watch over it. If you recall, he was not one to allow vandalism or thieving in his town. He ran this town with an iron fist and God help anyone who dared cross his path and break the law. When the County put Uncle Mason in that home and I left, the Sheriff did the same for my place. I put Denny Mosser on a yearly retainer to mow here and at my Uncle's place in town and to keep a general eye on both places for needed repairs. When I took over for Sheriff Bowles a year ago, I also took on the job of watching out for this place and a few others. I opened it up and cleaned out a bunch of mice. Other than that, it didn't look like anyone had vandalized or stolen anything. Not that I would have been able to tell, since I'd never been inside. But there didn't seem to be any gaping holes where furniture should have been. I did toss anything and everything that mice could use for nesting material. I'm sorry, but it had to be done. There aren't any couches, chairs, mattresses, drapes or the like in there anymore. People in town knew I was taking an interest in both places. Being a Fed put a scare into anyone who might have thought about breaking in."

"You were a Fed?" Jack asked, surprised.

"Yeah, was," Josie said with a half laugh, but she shifted her gaze from him to fields. "Well, if you're home to stay, I'll find somewhere to board Ozzie. A friend runs a riding and boarding place about four miles up the road. I'll talk to her. Can you give me a few days to make the arrangements?"

"Leave him here," Jack said. "I don't know how long I'm staying, but you're welcome to

use the barn. Thanks for looking out for the place."

"No problem," Josie said. "Welcome back, Jack."



Jack worked steadily at his place for the next three days. He tore the plywood off most of the windows and had the electricity turned on. He got the water pump working—the plumbing was loud, but water ran through the pipes. The old appliances kicked on, but he brought in a bar-sized refrigerator because he didn't trust the old one. The place was surprising clean. There was an overall neatness to it despite a coat of dust over everything. There was no trash lying about; the cabinets were empty, and bottles of cleaning liquids were under the kitchen sink. Ancient linens and towels were clean and sealed in plastic tubs.

There were also dozens and dozens of disposable mouse and bug glue traps laid out everywhere, in cabinets and under the edges of old furniture. It seemed like every time he took a step—he was stepping in a glue trap. Josie! He grumbled and swore each time he had to peel one off and got sticky gunk on the soles of his shoes. He noticed several cats hanging around the barns and crumbling outbuildings. He also realized they must have been neutered and spayed because there weren't any younger ones running around, and the one good barn wasn't overrun with vermin.

He had not seen Josie again. Her horse was being cared for, but he hadn't caught her out there. It was almost as if she were avoiding him.

Although Jack spent those three days reacquainting himself with his home and hometown, he had never felt more alone in his life. Solitude had never bothered him before. He was used to it and usually liked it, but that was before, when he didn't have something eating away at his gut. Now, three days of solitude were more than enough for him, although to be honest, he had been talking to some of the old-timers he knew in town.

He went to the grocery and hardware stores, and haunted Cherilynn's Café, thinking it was a logical place for the town sheriff to show up. He also spent some time at the local watering hole, Riley's Tavern. Riley Connors owned it now. They had gone to high school together, and even run into each other occasionally in the Navy. However, as most transient men did, they'd eventually lost contact with each other. Kids he had gone to school with—now young men—hung out at the tavern. Some lounged around and complained about the lack of jobs and work. Others stopped in for a drink after they had finished their day's work.

He had looked up a few select friends he actually remembered, Riley being one of them. Some women from his high school days had stopped by and put out some feelers. Some of the women at the bar had made some blatant passes. Jack had never had a problem attracting women, but he wasn't interested at the moment with one exception. The woman who had peaked his attention seemed to be MIA.

Sick of his own company, Jack headed for town. He took a roundabout way and drove by the old Raintree house. The house was a quirky structure built about the same time as his parents' house in the late 1890s. It was a big place, nearly as big as his parents' place, but didn't have any of the ostentatious features of his old Victorian-style mansion, which had always been oddly out of place on the ranch.

The Raintree house looked almost whimsical; a combination of Queen Anne and Southern Plantation, with touches of Gothic Revival and even some Craftsman features added into the mix probably during a remodel at some point in its history. The house had towers and eyebrow windows, elaborate double porches on the front, balconies on the back, and lots of stained-glass windows. The clapboard siding was decorated with rows and rows of patterned shingles, and there was gingerbread millwork everywhere. The roofline was elaborate peaks and gables and detailed with slate designs that replicated the shingle designs. It was an architect's nightmare, but it had always been one of his favorite places. Someone had picked all their favorite parts of different styles, stirred them up and built a house. It should have been an eyesore but somehow it worked in a quirky way.

As Jack approached the Raintree property, he slowed down and steered off onto the dirt shoulder. The entire house was surrounded by ladders and scaffolding, and it was being painted. Someone was renovating and breathing life back into the old Raintree house, which had been a unique, but mostly dilapidated house, when he had lived in Rawlings. Josie stood outside the house talking to a tall, lanky man and pointing out something. He got out of his Jeep and joined them.

"Hi." Josie's smile was pure delight, her smoky gray eyes bright with excitement. "Jack, do you remember Jimmy Richards?"

The man she introduced laughed. He was a good-looking man with a tanned face and eyes surrounded by laugh lines from spending a lot of time outdoors squinting into the sun. He was beginning to get that bit of a paunch around his middle that men gained in their mid-thirties

if they didn't work hard at not gaining it. "If you don't remember me, I sure remember you. You about scared me to death, and I was barely sixteen!"

Jack nodded realizing that this was the boy he'd caught groping Josie when she had been much too young to be going out with boys. "I remember," he said with a scowl.

Jimmy held up both his hands, but he was still smiling. "She's been safe from me ever since, Scout's Honor."

"Stop it," Josie said, laughing. "Jack, this is Jimmy Richards. Jimmy owns the general contracting company that is helping me put this place back together, and he's been acting as a personal consultant when I need other tradesmen from the area."

The two men nodded to each other.

"I like to see these old places resurrected instead of torn down," Jimmy admitted. "It's going to be a beauty when you're done with it."

"How long is it going to take to finish the exterior painting?" Josie asked.

"We'll be finished with the primary color today. That light greenish gray is a good color-match to the original," Jimmy promised. "There's a lot of trim and decorations, so painting all that is going to take extra time since you want us to match the original colors as best we can except for that God-awful purple that was in the mix. That's labor-intensive. We'll paint as much of the trim as we can from the scaffolding. After we take that down, we'll bring in cherry pickers for the fish-scale details and the trim pieces up by the gables. Three, maybe four more days and we should be done."

"The neighbors will be glad," Josie said. "I keep getting complaints. They can't go through me, so they've been calling the mayor."

"What are they complaining about?" Jack asked. "This place was an eyesore when I lived here. Are people actually complaining because you're fixing it up?"

Josie nodded. "You'd be surprised what people will complain about. This place has been going downhill for the last fifty years or more. Nevertheless, complain they do. We're making too much noise. The construction is making the place an eyesore. Do we have the right permits? Mrs. Jenkins next door complained about the industrial-sized dumpsters I brought in while clearing out the place. I asked her if she would rather have fifty years of booze bottles in the backyard and a hoarder's garbage in the neighborhood. I wanted to tell them to shut their traps and mind their own business, but I didn't" She wrinkled her nose and rolled her eyes. "As the

Sheriff, I have to be polite."

"Which takes some considerable effort on your part," Jimmy agreed, shaking his head with a laugh.

"I made some fresh coffee. Would you like some?" Josie asked the contractor.

"No. It's time for me to cut off coffee for the day," he answered. "Mary Anne says if I drink too much caffeine, I snore at night. She's got me on that decaf stuff. I've got to go. The crew knows what they're doing. I'll be back in the morning to check on the work before they get started again."

"Thanks, Jimmy," Josie said.

"I wouldn't mind that coffee," Jack said. "Providing the coffee is caffeinated."

Josie gave him a look and a nod. "That's the only kind I drink. Follow me through the maze. It's a little tricky to get through the scaffolding."

Jack followed Josie, ducking under a lot of metal tubing and ladders to weave his way to the back door. He watched the curvy ass filling tight jeans swaying in front of him and felt his jeans getting tight. "Are you seeing Jimmy, again," he asked.

Josie laughed. "Jimmy has been married since he was eighteen years old and straight out of high school. He has five boys." She measured out marks indicating heights with her hand—"two, four, five, seven and ten. They're like stair steps and as cute as can be. Jimmy married Mary Anne Shearer. Her parents moved here when she was in her first year of high school. She was in the class below mine. You had left town by the time her family moved here. Jimmy and Mary Anne have been busy. The rumor grapevine says she's pregnant again, but they haven't made it official. Both of them wanted a big family, and they're certainly going for it." Josie stepped on a piece of rug at the back door, carefully wiped her boots and took them off. "Rule of the house," she said bluntly. "At least until the construction and outside painting is completed. I don't want that mess tracked inside."

Jack complied and followed her across a screened-in back porch. He understood why when he stepped into the house. The ancient mix of changing decades over a hundred years plus was gone. The peeling wallpaper, rusting metal kitchen cabinets and ancient appliances were all gone. There was no more hoarder's garbage stacked everywhere. Now, a sophisticated showroom kitchen opened up into a family room. He could see beyond that to an elegant curving stairway. The basic bones of the house were still there, but the downstairs was an open floor plan with one

room easily blending into the next.

A skinny towheaded boy of eleven or twelve with large blue eyes was sitting at a stone countertop bar with his head leaning on one arm as he flipped through a schoolbook. When they came through the door, he sat up and frowned.

"Having problems with the math?" Josie guessed.

"Some," he mumbled.

"I'll help you later," she promised, giving his shoulder a squeeze. "Alex Carter, this is Jack Rawlings. They named the town for his family way back in 1895 when the town was founded. Jack is a Navy SEAL."

"Yeah? How do you know, Josie," the boy demanded.

"We grew up in this town together," he said, looking over as the woman in question was pouring coffee. "I've known Josie since she was seven or eight years old."

"Yeah?" the boy said, perking up and looking interested.

"No telling tales!" Josie laughed. "You don't want to give Alex any ideas. He needs to be on his best behavior for a while."

"I'm going to my room to finish my homework," the boy said. "You're missing something."

Josie looked around the kitchen quickly, but the boy grinned and took off up the stairs.

At Jack's questioning look, Josie shook her head and rolled her eyes upward.

"It's a game we play. He picks something of mine and moves or hides it *in plain sight*. It can't be my keys or my cell phone. Sometimes it takes a while to figure out what is missing before I can even attempt to find it. When I do find it, I turn the tables on him." She laughed. "It took me two days to find the computer mouse. It was sitting on the kitchen counter by the phone charging station. It's all about paying attention and being observant."

"Your kid," Jack asked.

"Hopefully, he will be," Josie said, passing a mug of coffee to him. "Do you need that doctored?"

Jack shook his head. He drank his coffee black.

"I'm his foster mother for the time being." Josie gave a quick look to make sure the boy wasn't in listening range and lowered her voice. "Alex's mother has drug problems, and she's being evaluated as to her fitness to remain his parent."

"That sounds rough on him," Jack said.

"It is. I know what he's going through, having lived through it myself with my uncle."

"Mason Ramsey wasn't on drugs that I ever heard about," Jack said.

"Same scenario, a different choice of drug," Josie said dismissively. "Mason used alcohol. Marcy Carter uses alcohol, cocaine and anything else she can scrounge up enough money to buy. Neither of them was fit to raise a child. No one stepped up for me, but I'm stepping up and doing what's best for Alex. I found him sleeping in one of the old sheds out back. He was cold, hungry and defiant. He slept in the shed because his mother was hooking to feed her habits. Not all her clients were satisfied with what they paid for—some of them thought an eleven-year-old kid was fair game."

"Jesus," Jack said with feeling. "Was he hurt?"

"He says not, but he admits it was close sometimes. He found places to hide, places to run, too. I intervened about eight months ago, pulled some strings and got my foster parent credentials fast-forwarded because of my background and clearances on record. I had to take a bunch of classes for foster parenting, CPR and first-aid refresher courses. Social Services placed him in a group home for a couple of months, while I was trying to get all the paperwork squared away. It was bad where they put him, and he ran away and came back here, twice. I was able to bring him home with me when the Judge and social workers agreed it was better for him to be with me until the courts and the psychologists decide if his mother is sincerely trying to rehab herself. He doesn't want to go back to her, but the system tries every venue to keep the child with the natural parents. They don't seem to get the idea that some adults can't keep themselves afloat, let alone be responsible for a kid.

"The hoops these people jump through to quote/unquote 'help' people who couldn't give a damn about their kids amazes me. Meanwhile, the kid is left dangling out in limbo with no security, no commitment and no hope. The system is a typical bureaucratic mess, run by regulation autocrats that think one rule applies universally to all. It sucks big time, but I have to work within their rules." Josie made an exaggerated motion with her hands. "Please, this is my personal soapbox topic. I need a change of subject!"

Jack chuckled. "How long have you been back in Rawlings?"

"A little over a year," Josie said, taking a deep breath.

"Are you bored?"

She laughed. "I haven't had time to be bored. I came back and started clearing out this place while I was deciding what to do with it. For a while there, I thought I was going to have to bring in a Haz-Mat company to get it cleaned out. Two months after I got here, Sheriff Bowles had a massive heart attack and died. It was awful; no one suspected he had heart problems.

"The town has three deputies. Two of them are young and inexperienced, and the third one doesn't want the job of sheriff. The mayor and town council asked me to takeover as sheriff temporarily. I took the job because they were a little desperate at the time, but I'm only the acting sheriff. The town council is supposed to be looking for someone qualified to replace me. Since it's been almost ten months, I don't think they've been looking real hard, but I keep refusing to take the full job title."

"It's not exactly a fit for an ex-CIA undercover field agent," Jack said.

Josie lifted an eyebrow. "What kind of a job does my training make me a match for, exactly?"

"Good question, but I have my sources, so I ran a search on you—ex-police officer, ex-CIA agent, three commendations, and two citations in eight years. You were on a fast track to promotion."

"I was on a fast track to die young," Josie said matter-of-factly.

"So you had an epiphany or something and bailed?"

"Yeah, I did," Josie admitted with a hint of a smile. "It was a big 'ta da' moment in my life so far and it was life changing."

"So tell me," Jack said. "I'm sure a lot has happened in the last twenty years."

"You want my life story?" Josie laughed.

"Yeah, at least the highlights. You went from town hellion to town sheriff. I want to know how," Jack admitted. "I was invested in your life for a lot of years. I'd like to take a little credit for keeping you on the straight and narrow at least for a short time."

Josie nodded, picked up her coffee cup and pointed him to the family room where she curled up in the corner of one of the sofas. "Some of the credit is yours. Not long after you left town, I set some lofty goals and became obsessed and determined to meet them as only a teenager can obsess. My obsession lasted over ten years.

"Being who you are, what your family was to this town, you have no idea what it was like to grow up as the kid of the town drunk. People looked down on me and didn't expect

anything of me. Kids made fun of me and my cast-off clothes. I was picked on and bullied for no other reason than I was Mason Raintree's throwaway niece. Being a target for ridicule when you're a kid hurts, and I'm not talking about the physical. I was an angry little monster who walked around with a lot of bitter stuff inside. You kept me straight, pretty much, although your reasons weren't exactly altruistic. You were just plain pissed most of the time because you were my target for a lot of that anger.

"That last time, when you yanked me out of Jimmy's car, you yelled at me. Before that, you'd talked to me, you'd stuck my nose into corners, you'd spanked me, but you never yelled at me. That time, you yelled at me, and you said I was better than that. You said you expected more of me than acting like a whore in the backseat of a car. You were angry, and those words hurt. You left town a couple of weeks later. You have no idea what your words and Kitty Cartwright's words set in motion."

Jack held up his hand, looking perplexed.

"Oh, sorry," Josie exclaimed. "About a week after my big date with Jimmy, I overheard Kitty gossiping with some of her friends in the girls' bathroom at school. She said I'd let Jimmy fuck me. Those were her exact words. She said I was a trashy whore, and I'd be pregnant and wouldn't know who the father was before the year was out."

"I take it you didn't?"

"Not with Jimmy or anyone else for many years after that," Josie admitted. "You have no idea how much it hurt to hear her say those things. I ditched school and cried for hours. You had said I was better than that, but the rest of this town had a different opinion and much lower expectations. That realization hurt, but it finally sank in that no one was ever going to expect anything of me. If I didn't want Kitty to be right, I had to do something.

"I got mad and used all that anger to buckle down. I decided that I'd show her; I'd show this whole damn town that I wasn't trash. I got an after-school job, and I studied like a demon. Up until that point, I had regularly gotten C's and B's without any effort. After that, I became the best student at Victor Rawlings High. I put the teachers into a state of shock. A couple of them even accused me of cheating, but they got used to it. I took on extra assignments and shot to the top of my classes.

"By the following year, Mrs. Freeman had me in an accelerated program where I was bussed over to Wayland Baptist University for college courses in the afternoons. I did that during

my junior and senior years. I didn't know it at the time, but the whole program was being paid for by a scholarship Mrs. Freeman arranged for me. After high school, I moved to Altus and took every course I could get at Wayland Baptist. Tuition costs are considerably lower there than at the university. Later, I transferred those credits to the University of Oklahoma and picked up some decent scholarships. From there, I went to the police academy. A couple years later, I was accepted into the CIA. Eight years after that, I was fast-tracking my way to an early demise."

"Is this where the "ta da" moment comes in?" Jack asked.

"Almost," Josie admitted, but her eyes took on a faded, haunted, dullness. "I worked undercover—deep undercover. I fit the profile and was able to work my way into a lot of dicey situations. I was often the bait, the hook, and the takedown."

"Because you're beautiful," Jack said matter-of-factly.

"Thank you," Josie said, acknowledging the compliment, but she moved on unfazed. "Yes, and I got the job done. Polish and dress me up, and my target usually took the bait. I took acting lessons in addition to self-defense and marksmanship. I can play the part of a ditzzy, dumb bimbo with a killer body or the helpless female, whatever was needed. I was trained long and hard to never break character. It got me into a lot of situations where I was privy to information that could help our cases."

"It also put you in danger," Jack said frowning.

"Yes, it did," she agreed. "On my last sting operation, something went sour. In the aftermath, I figured it was probably a tip-off from inside the agency. Someone took a payoff. I got a feeling something was going wrong, and I requested to be pulled out, but it was denied. No one has that power! When an agent asks to be removed—they are to be removed immediately. Someone made a bad decision, and I wasn't extracted. A woman died along with her two-year-old child.

"The bad guys, serious drug kingpins, beat the hell out of me, but they didn't kill me. They had other plans to use me—horrible, disgusting plans. However, one of them screwed up and underestimated me. Where he's spending the rest of his life, he doesn't need his balls. I escaped, but I left a lot of damage behind me on my way out. The Agency called it *excessively violent behavior*. I called it survival. The end of that mission was too close to the edge for me not to reevaluate what was important in my life."

"Shit!"

"Exactly," Josie agreed, as she looked into her cup. "I was supposed to shake it off since that's what a good operative would do. I'd done it before. But I couldn't, not that time. We're not living in a time where the good guys wear the white hats. Sometimes the guys that are supposed to have your back are as corrupt as the criminals. I don't regret what I did to those three men that were holding me. I didn't then, and I never will. I fight to survive. The only thing that mattered to me was that two innocents died. I kept trying to change the scenario of those events in my head, trying to figure out what I could have done to prevent those casualties."

"You can't change it. The result will always be the same," Jack said seriously. "Unless you were negligent in doing your job, it will always end the same."

"I wasn't negligent, and I know you're right, that's standard procedure by the manual," Josie admitted. "It's still hard to accept."

"So, you had your epiphany and walked."

Josie smiled, again. "Yeah, it was my *or something*. A couple of weeks later while still on medical leave, I was taking a walk trying to get my head screwed back on straight. I stopped into a sub shop for a bottle of water. For once, there wasn't a long line to the cashier register and I ended up buying a lottery ticket. I tucked my ticket into a jacket pocket and forgot about it."

"You won?"

"This is my story and I get to tell it my way!" Josie chided, but she was smiling. "As I said, I forgot about the ticket. I had things that were more important on my mind. I had to make a decision to go back to work or quit the job I'd worked hard at getting and keeping for years. A month later, I stopped in at the same place to buy another bottle of water, and I remembered the lottery ticket in my pocket. I fished it out and asked the clerk to run the numbers."

"You're killing me, here."

Josie gave Jack a serious look, and smiled. "It's not a secret, but it's not something I broadcast, either. It wasn't one of the major jackpots, but I did win. I took the payout—three-and-half million dollars after taxes."

"Holy shit," Jack laughed.

"Exactly," Josie agreed. "Chump change compared to the big mega-lottery payoffs they announce on the news, but more than I'll ever spend in my lifetime. This is where the epiphany or my 'ta da' moment came into play. I could do anything, go anywhere and have anything I wanted. Only, I didn't know what I wanted. The only thing that was crystal clear in my head was

that I did not want to go back into deep cover, ever again."

"So you came home to Rawlings?"

"Not right away. The thing about working in the government is that it's basically a massive corporation with a corporation mentality. The thing about working in the CIA is that what they did to me was a corporate mentality screw-up, and initially they were trying to drop the blame on me to protect their big-time bonuses. I wasn't having any part of it. The decision to leave me out there stranded on my own was a calculated decision by one desk jockey in a position of power who had never worked in the field. A dead agent would have solved his problem. I didn't die, but two innocents did, and I was pissed. Someone was going to pay for his decision. The higher-ups closed ranks to protect him, but a court order to release taped phone calls, and e-mails changed their tunes real fast."

"You took them down," Jack said with admiration in his voice.

"Not exactly," Josie said. "I wanted to, I intended to, but I'm not an idiot. When something goes that wrong, and you're on the inside of it, you feel powerless to fight back. Suddenly, with several millions of dollars backing me up, I didn't feel so defenseless. I quit my job and got myself a very shrewd lawyer.

"I didn't want to play their game, but I wasn't about to let them throw me to the dogs either. Ultimately, my lawyer was better at playing their games than they were. Three idiots lost their jobs, and at least I know that their bad decisions won't put any more agents at risk. I got a nice retirement fund out of it, and they even paid my lawyer fees which I must say would have been costly but well worth it. The Agency got to play the good guys in the press after I signed about three million affidavits promising not to be a whistle blower and rat them out to the press along with their promises to protect my record of employment. I refused the last commendation they offered me. I felt like they offered it as part of the payoff, not because I earned it, which I did.

"After all that, I needed a breath of fresh air and I took a trip. I visited England, Ireland and Scotland, and roamed around Europe for a while. There's a lot over there to enjoy. Each country has something special and unique, but I was a visitor—a tourist, and I didn't belong there. I did enjoy backpacking, staying in little hostels, catching busses and trains. I even booked myself onto a fancy cruise ship that visited a lot of islands. But I very quickly realized I didn't fit on that cruise. I guess I wasn't meant to live a rich and pampered lifestyle. I left the ship in mid-

cruise, and I realized that I didn't need or want a rich lifestyle. Instead, I needed real, honest, hard-working, normal people in my life.

"You can't get any more real than Rawlings. I had a house here, but Uncle Mason's Trust, which had been paying the taxes for all those years, was about gone. I had to make a decision to get rid of the place and move on, or move in and make something out of it and stick. I decided to stick. By the way, neither my lottery win nor my legal settlement is public knowledge. If I didn't trust you not to spread it around I wouldn't have told you about it. If someone wants to dig deep enough, they will find the information, but it's no one's business."

"No one has questioned where you came up with a chunk of money?" Jack asked.

Josie shook her head and shrugged. "It's not all in one place. The rumor is that I was married and fleeced my ex-husband in the divorce settlement."

"Doesn't that bother you?"

"Not really. It's a small town, Jack. Some people are never going to change their minds about me and will always think the worst. I know what I've accomplished. My record speaks for itself, and that's enough for me."

"I never changed my mind about you," Jack said thoughtfully. "I always thought you were a plucky little kid that needed a keeper. You're still plucky, but now I have to upgrade my mental list to add beautiful, smart and tough."