
Prologue

The red convertible raced along the two lane highway. Since the top was down, the driver had turned the music to top volume to be heard over the rush of the wind. It was a glorious spring day and Mabel was excited to have escaped the final doldrums of a New England winter and begin a new adventure in the South, which had already turned warm. There was nothing that excited her more than hitting the highway with a wide open schedule. She sang at the top of her lungs and bopped along to Steppenwolf's *Born to be Wild*, one hand on the steering wheel while the other made grand gestures in the air in time with the beat. Just as she saw the sign with the new speed limit for the Menton town line and began to slow down, the song finished; and before *Magic Carpet Ride* could begin, Mabel heard the siren and noticed the flashing lights of the police car behind her. *Uh oh! This is not good!* she thought as she obediently turned on her signal and pulled off to the side of the road, shutting off the music.

“Good morning, Officer,” she said with a bright smile as she greeted the man who approached her car. “Isn’t it a beautiful day? I guess I must have been going too fast. I’m sorry about

that. I slowed down as soon as I saw the town limits speed sign. It's just such a lovely day to hit the open road, I guess I got carried away."

Ray studied the young woman from behind his mirrored sunglasses. She had light blue eyes still shining with the exuberance she had been feeling a short time earlier and soft pink lips with a friendly smile. Her long, light brown hair was wildly tangled from the wind turbulence and her halter top sundress left a great deal more skin exposed than he was accustomed to seeing, as local women tended to dress more conservatively. It was going to be painful for her; he could already see the sunburn she would soon discover.

He raised his hat respectfully. "Good morning, miss. Yes, you were going too fast. You also refused to pull over when I signaled you. The excessive noise from your vehicle was probably a factor. License and registration, please."

Her smile faltered. "I pulled over as soon as I heard the siren." She was searching in her large shoulder bag for her wallet. "Here's my license. This is a rental car, so I don't think I have a registration, unless the rental agreement counts."

"Yes, ma'am, the rental agreement is fine. I followed you for more than two miles with lights and sirens going. Your music was so loud you couldn't hear me, and you were too busy enjoying that music to be paying attention to your driving and notice the lights. That is some seriously reckless driving. Please wait here while I call this in."

"Yes, Officer, of course." She slumped in her seat. This was so not the way she wanted to make her entrance into her new hometown!

Back in his patrol car, Ray looked over the papers Mabel had given him and picked up his radio. "She's here, Boss. I just pulled her over. And from the looks of it, you're about to have your hands full, big time."

Chapter 1

Mabel drove sedately down the main street in the small town, signaled and turned into the lot for Johnson's Groceries. She parked carefully and climbed out. She knew that the rental agent had promised to have her new kitchen stocked with basic groceries for her, but she wanted to get some of her favorite foods so that she could focus on settling into the furnished house that would be her new home for the next six months, and not have to immediately go out again. She grabbed a cart and began to go slowly up and down each aisle of the store studying the shelves, looking for insight into life in her new hometown.

"Are you looking for something in particular, miss? Can I help you?"

She smiled at the teenager who had been carefully stacking a display of boxes of laundry detergent under a sign that proclaimed they were the super special of the week. "No, thanks," she replied cheerfully. "I'm doing fine. I just love looking everything over carefully and seeing all there is to see when I come to a new place. Thank you for offering, though."

He blushed and ducked his head in a nod. “You’re welcome, miss. Let me know if there is anything I can do for you.”

Mabel spotted his nametag. “Thank you, Jimmy, that’s very kind. I will keep your offer in mind. I hope you don’t have to work too long today. It is a beautiful day outside; you should get a chance to enjoy it.” She flashed him another smile and continued on her pattern of exploring every aisle.

When she got to the checkout she was pleased to find that there were no lines and she was able to immediately put her items on the conveyor belt. “Good morning,” she greeted the cashier. “I’m sorry I don’t have any bags for my groceries. Do you have any I can buy?”

The girl snapped her gum as she stared at Mabel, mystified. “You don’t need ta buy ‘em, we give ‘em to you for free.” She rang up the groceries and Jimmy, who had come to the front of the store, worked to bag them and return them to the cart. “That’s \$159.67, cash or check?”

“Oh!” Mabel said, surprised, “I was expecting to pay with my credit card. Is that a problem?”

The two teenagers stared at each other. Finally Jimmy said, “I’ll get Mr. Johnson.” He loped towards the back of the store and quickly returned with an adult.

“Hello, I’m Ed Johnson. Are you Miss Wainwright?”

Mabel blinked in surprise. “Why yes, how did you know?”

Mr. Johnson chuckled. “Well the whole town has been eagerly awaiting your arrival, Miss Wainwright. Welcome to Menton! We are very proud that you have selected our town to be where you write your next novel. How can I help you today?”

“Oh, my,” she responded faintly. “The whole town has been waiting for me? How did you know I was coming?”

“Why, Mavis, from over at Huneman Reality told us all about you. She said that you’re here to write your next best seller. She had me pick out your groceries to stock your kitchen. You just let me know if I’ve sent something you don’t like and I’ll be

happy to take it back and replace it. Now what can I do for you?”

Mabel gestured to the cashier. “Uh, Sue Beth here asked cash or check and I’m accustomed to paying with my credit card. I don’t carry my checkbook – it would be an out of state check anyway – and I was hoping I didn’t have to use up all my cash on my first morning in town. Don’t you take credit cards?”

“Well, of course we do, Miss Wainwright!” He smiled broadly and turned to the cashier. “Sue Beth, take her credit card.”

“Um, I don’t know how to do that, Mr. Johnson. I thought you said we didn’t want to take credit cards.”

Mr. Johnson moved to stand close to the cashier. “Take her card, Sue Beth; we’ll take Miss Wainwright’s card. Here, let me show you how it’s done.”

Feeling confused, Mabel handed over her credit card. “Are you sure it’s okay, Mr. Johnson? It seems like you’re not accustomed to doing this. Am I causing a problem? I can pay cash, if it’s a big problem.”

“Not a problem at all, Miss Wainwright. Here you go, sign here please.” He presented the slip and pen with a flourish and chuckled. “I guess I’m the first person in town to get your autograph, Miss Wainwright.”

“I thought we weren’t supposed to ask Miss Wainwright for her autograph,” Jimmy said in confusion as he placed the last bag of groceries in the cart and started wheeling it towards the door.

Mabel finished signing and shoved the paper back toward the man as she watched her groceries go out of the store. “Wait!” she called to Jimmy’s back.

“Oh, don’t you worry none, Miss Wainwright; Jimmy’s just putting them in your car for you,” Mr. Johnson assured her. “Here’s your receipt.”

“Thank you.” She was distracted as she took the slip,

watching Jimmy go out of sight with her groceries, but remembered something and turned back to the storeowner. "How did you get paid for the groceries that you stocked my kitchen with? Do I owe you more money?"

He shook his head. "No, ma'am. Mavis paid me upfront. I reckon she's getting together an invoice for you with all the initial costs."

She smiled at him. "That's good. I don't want you to be waiting for your money. Thank you, Mr. Johnson."

Jimmy reentered the store with the empty cart. "Good thing you have the top down on your car, Miss Wainwright. The doors were locked, but I just reached right over and put your groceries in. You've got a sweet ride, ma'am!"

"How did you know which car was mine, Jimmy?"

"Well, now you're joshing, right? I know every car in town, probably the whole county. No one has a red convertible. Had to be yours."

"Right, of course. Thank you, Jimmy. Well, I guess I better get on my way. Don't want the ice cream to melt. Thank you, everyone; nice meeting you." She gave a tiny wave and headed towards her car.

Will Bates leaned against his SUV and spoke into the radio microphone that he'd pulled through the open window. "Where is she, Ray?" he growled. "She should have been here at least twenty minutes ago. She seem like she was likely to get lost?"

"No, sir," came back the tinny voice. "She had one of those GPS things on her dash."

"She say anythin' about her plans? Ask you anythin' about the area?"

"No, sir."

"What was her frame of mind? You think she's upset?"

“No, sir. I handled her with kid gloves. Just told her to be sure to talk to you as soon as she could.”

“You think she went straight to the office?”

“No, sir, I made sure ta tell her that you weren’t there this morning.”

“Do a drive through town and see if you can spot her.”

“Sure thing, Sheriff.”

“No, wait. I can see her car comin’ now. Never mind.” He tossed the mic back into the SUV and waited with his arms crossed against his chest as the convertible turned into the gritty dirt parking area that made up the driveway next to her house and came to a stop.

Mabel looked at the number on the house and then at the paperwork she had. After driving through the area, she had a better understanding of why the realtor had laughed when she asked for helpful clues to identify her house. Two story houses were not common and she hadn’t seen any other houses, regardless of design, with a cupola. She seemed to be in the right place, but why was there a man standing there looking like he was waiting for her? His hat cast his face in shadow and she couldn’t read his expression. Was it safe? Should she drive away? She watched as he uncrossed his ankles and stood up straight, moving away from his vehicle, which she could now see was the sheriff’s car. Uh oh! Was she in trouble for not reporting directly to the sheriff’s office? The deputy had told her he wouldn’t be in this morning; she wasn’t to blame!

“Um, hello,” she called nervously as the man, the sheriff, approached. “I thought I was supposed to come to your office this afternoon. I’m sorry if I misunderstood.”

The man stopped by her car door; he was tall and had the sun behind him. She tried shading her eyes with her hand as she looked up and up and up, but his face was still in shadow. She had no idea how to interpret the situation. “Am I in trouble?” she asked.

The sheriff removed his hat in greeting. “Well, Miss MaeBelle, you are in trouble; but not because you haven’t reported to me yet. We’ll get to that soon enough. Do you remember me from Wheatleigh College, Will Bates?” He replaced his hat and opened her car door, offering a hand to help her out.

Relief flooded through her. “Of course, Will! How are you? How’s Stacy?” she asked as her eyes automatically scanned his hand for a wedding ring and not finding one. Her suitemate had dated Will for most of their senior year. “What a small world! I had no idea you were in Menton; I’d have thought you’d go back to Texas. As soon as you called me that, I knew who you were. Mabel is so mundane and you gave me such a pretty nickname. That will always be special to me. So, you were waiting for me?” She bit her lip; she was starting to babble.

He recognized her nervousness and smiled. “Yes, ma’am. Stacy and I broke up after graduation; we had very different ideas of what we wanted in life. I haven’t heard from her in years.” Mabel made a moue of embarrassment. “It’s okay, no hearts were broken. Seem’ as how we’re old friends, I thought I would help you get settled into your new place. Give you a rundown of the town.” He spotted the groceries. “Ah, so that’s why you took so long gettin’ here. I was worried; about to send Ray out to look for you.” He reached in and grabbed the bags. “I’ll get these for you.”

“Oh thank you, Will, or am I supposed to call you Sheriff? I can get those!”

He ignored her protests; she scampered alongside him as he strode toward her front door. “Call me Will. And don’t mind me helpin’. It’s not right for a man to stand by idle when a woman has heavy liftin’ to be done. Do you have the key? I know where the spare is hidden if you don’t.”

“No, no, I’ve got it right here.” She pulled a pink sparkly keychain from her purse and fit the key in the lock. Then she

turned to look at him over her shoulder and grinned. "This is so exciting! My new home." She threw open the door and stepped in, looking around. The room was a very bland mix of green and brown utilitarian furniture. Her broad grin faded as her shoulders slumped.

Will came in behind her. "Now don't you worry, it'll look a lot more homey when you've put your special touches on it, Miss MaeBelle. Right now it's just a place waitin' for someone to make it their own. I'll put these bags in the kitchen for you." He stepped around her and headed to a doorway in the back of the living room.

She followed him. "How do you know the kitchen is back here?"

"I'm your nearest neighbor. I used to be in here a lot helpin' Miss Florence before she moved to the rest home. Why don't you take a look around and decide which bedroom you're gonna use. I'll put these groceries away while you explore and then I'll bring in your suitcases for you."

"Thank you, Will, but there's no need. I don't mean to have you take time away from your job."

"I'm just bein' neighborly; I've arranged for the mornin' off, my hours are pretty flexible. And as far as my job is concerned, as sheriff, we do have some business to take care of."

"Oh."

"Yes indeed, 'oh'. Now off you go and take a look at your new place. This'll just be a minute and I'll catch you up."

"Okay, thanks!" She spun around and practically skipped back into the living room.

Will chuckled and shook his head. He'd forgotten how she had trouble keeping to a walk, she was always in a hurry to get where she was headed; apparently that carried over to her driving as well. That was going to have to change.

After Will finished with the groceries, he started back to the front door, intent on bringing in her suitcases, when he had a

strong urge to turn, instead, and go upstairs. He followed his inclination, raising his eyes to the upper floor, searching for the cause of his unease. What he saw had him suddenly racing, as he took the steps two at a time.

“Oh, no you don’t, little girl!” His strong hands spanned her waist, plucking her off the ladder she had begun to climb. He swung her around and set her on her feet, stepping in front of her to block her as she immediately headed back toward the ladder. “Mabel, no! No one has climbed that ladder in years, it’s not safe.”

“It’s fine, Will. I didn’t feel any weakness. I want to go up there. That cupola is why I selected this house over all the others. I want to write up there in the tree tops.”

“I said no, and that’s final.” He crossed his arms over his chest.

“This is my house and I have the final say, not you. It’s nice that you are concerned for my safety, but it’s fine, I’m sure that there isn’t a problem.”

“There will be, if you don’t stay away from that ladder, little girl,” he warned.

“Will, I know that you were a senior when I was a freshman, but that was years ago. I’m not a little girl, I am a grown woman who lives here now and I have every intention of going where I want in my own house!” She stamped her foot in frustration and put her hands on her hips to glare up at him.

He looked her over, resisting the urge to smile. She was a cute little thing, even while acting just like the little girl he had called her. “You have no intention of listenin’ to me, do you? As soon as I’m not here to stop you, you’re goin’ up that ladder, aren’t you?” When she nodded and smiled, he sighed, turned around and gripping the ladder on each side, gave a mighty pull, detaching the ladder from the wall. “I guess I’ll just have to take the temptation away then.” He headed down the stairs, carrying the

ladder, and continued out the front door. Once outside, he turned and cut through her backyard.

Mabel was caught off guard and had to hurry to catch up to him. “Will! Bring that back; that’s my ladder, you can’t just take it!” He strode on without giving any sign that he had heard her, so she raised her voice. “Will Bates, you bring that back right now!”

By this time, he had crossed over into his yard and headed for his open garage. He tossed the ladder inside, where it broke into several pieces as it hit the cement floor. “There you go, Miss MaeBelle. That shouldn’ta happened. I was planning to close the garage door and lock it, but now I guess there’s no reason, it’s just useless scraps of rotten wood now.” He turned and headed back to her house.

She surveyed the scattered pieces of wood with dismay and was surprised when he walked away, having to trot to keep up with him. “Will, you broke it! Now what am I going to do?”

“You’re gonna stay safe. That’s what you’re gonna do, little girl. Now let’s get your car unloaded and put the top up.” He opened the trunk and began hauling suitcases out. “Tell you what, you go get your keys and run the top up and close all the windows and I’ll carry everythin’ in.”

“Don’t call me little girl; I don’t like it. Why do I have to close it all up? I didn’t think I’d have to worry about crime here.”

“You should always be aware that crime is a possibility; people are people wherever they are, and sometimes people are weak and give into temptation. But what I am really tryin’ ta head off is getting a layer of dust over every part of your interior. Take a look, it’s already started.” He nodded towards the dash and then turned and gave her a lazy smile. “I’ll make you a deal, you don’t act like a little girl and I won’t call you one. But that’s not how I meant it when I called you that before; it’s just an affectionate nickname around these parts. How ‘bout I call you Sweet Pea instead?”

“Oh. Sorry I yelled at you then, but being short makes me sensitive to comments about size. I guess that’s fine.”

Will nodded, chuckling to himself that she had completely missed the implication that she was small as a pea.

Mabel didn’t notice his dancing eyes, as she reached out and ran a finger above the instrument panel and was dismayed to see that it left a distinct track. “Well that stinks! So, I have to put the top up and down every time I go out?”

He grinned. “There’s a reason you don’t see many convertibles driven by people from around here, we have a lot of dirt roads, stirs up a lot of dust. Another is the fact that as summer comes, there’s a decent probability of sudden thunderstorms ‘most every afternoon and chances are good that at some point the top will be down when one hits. The final reason is your shoulders. Do you feel that sunburn yet? You’re gonna to be miserable by night time. Which of these bags has your hairbrush and some kind of lotion you can put on that burn?”

She pointed to a medium sized one. “That’s the one where I put all the stuff from my bathroom. Why are you asking about my hairbrush?”

He smiled at her. “You’ll know once you take a look in a mirror. Women generally wear a scarf or tie their hair back when ridin’ in convertibles. How long have you been drivin’ this one?”

“I just picked it up a couple of hours ago at the airport.” Her hands had crept up to feel her hair and she gasped at the tangles she encountered. She squealed, ran into the house and up the stairs to the bathroom; he followed, his long legs keeping up with her easily. “Oh no, Will. I walked all over the grocery store looking like a fright monster that had put her finger in a wall socket!”

He chuckled and put the suitcases on the bed in the larger of the two bedrooms. “Go ahead and fix yourself up and then I’ll take you into town for lunch. Where are your car keys? I’ll close it up for you.”

She was already opening the suitcase looking for her hairbrush. “I think I put them on the table by the front door when I put down my purse.”

By the time she was satisfied with how she looked, Will had finished unloading her car and had locked it up. “Hungry? You’re in for a treat. The Blue Bell Diner, right here in town, has the best food in the county. Plus, it’s time for you to make an appearance. I imagine the town folk are about to burst with curiosity.” He helped her climb up into his SUV and then went around to the driver’s side.

“Can I ask you about that?”

“Sure thin’, Miss MaeBelle, what can I answer for you?” He started the engine and put it in gear.

“At the grocery store Jimmy said that he thought that people weren’t supposed to ask me for my autograph when Mr. Johnson was excited because I signed the credit slip. He made it sound like people had been talking about me and making plans or rules or something.”

Will raised an eyebrow in surprise. “Ed Johnson took your credit card? Well, don’t that beat all! Miss MaeBelle, I’m gonna be straight with you. The town has been talkin’ and plannin’ about you comin’ to live with us for a while now. You’re the biggest thin’ that has happened here in a very long time, probably since the bank was robbed by the Barker Gang. I’m gonna be watchin’ out for you to help you get acclimated; so ask me anythin’ you have questions about and come to me if you have any problems.”

“You sound like you were assigned to me.” She laughed a little uneasily. “There was an actual meeting about me?”

Will reached over, patted her hand and then wrapped it with his and held it. “Yes, Sweet Pea, there was. I was hopin’ to ease into things. If you can contain your curiosity until after we’ve had a chance to eat and then have an opportunity to talk where we won’t be interrupted, I’ll fill you in.”

“Okay,” she answered, uncertainty clear in her voice. “Can you tell me one thing about this now and I’ll hold the rest until later?”

He nodded.

“Were you assigned to me because you are the sheriff, because you knew me from college or because you’re my neighbor?”