
DANCY'S GOLD

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Published by Blushing Books
An Imprint of
ABCD Graphics and Design, Inc.
A Virginia Corporation
977 Seminole Trail #233
Charlottesville, VA 22901

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eBook ISBN: 978-1-64563-715-8
Print ISBN: 978-1-64563-716-5
Audio ISBN: 978-1-64563-717-2

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Cover Art by ABCD Graphics & Design

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Prologue

Did you ever open your eyes one morning and wonder how the heck you ended up where you were? It happened to me. I'm living in what was supposed to be a mecca of high fashion, plastic surgery, and multi-millionaires. It's true I live in Malibu. True, I have a closet full of expensive designer clothing, jewelry, and shoes. My husband, Maury, is stinking rich. It's all true, and I should have been happy—right? Wrong!

Fancy living is not what I started out wanting, and I'm pretty darn sure it isn't what I want now. Now, I have to tell you, there is nothing wrong with having money. Being rich makes living real easy. However, when the wealth comes with the price of your self-respect, it starts losing its glitter real fast. When you realize you're a goldfish swimming around in a tank of piranha, it's time to get the heck out of the pool. I am Dancy Ballister, married to Maury Ballister, a producer of Hollywood documentaries. We have been married for four and a half years, and I guess the best thing I can say about our current relationship is I'm a trophy wife. It galls me to admit it, but I have to confess to the truth.

Maury is forty-eight-years-old, while I am twenty-four. He

lied to me about his age when we got married. He has lied to me about a hell of a lot of things since!

My husband is a product of plastic and hair replacement surgery, and Lord knows what other kinds of medical fixes I don't know about. When I met him, those *touch-ups* made him look like the thirty-two he claimed to be to an incredibly naïve girl from the sticks of Oklahoma. I was a twenty-year-old, and I still had stars in my eyes.

The problem with plastic surgery, though, is it starts slipping after a couple of years. So has the massive pile of lies that have stockpiled over the years. Like anything built on a slippery slope, it will eventually crumble and slide downhill.

I was drawn in by Maury like a bee to pollen. I'd been in Nashville for a while, without any real success. I rode into town on a Greyhound bus, as the first and second-place winner of a string of beauty pageants. Mostly, I won the talent portion of those contests. I thought I had the world by the tail. I believed the music world would be clamoring to sign me to a contract. Talk about fresh off the turnip truck! What I found was a bunch of good old boys who wanted me, but not for a signature on a music contract.

I'd been making do, getting nowhere, but still believing I was going to be *discovered* any minute. Maury came to town courting a husband and wife team with a deal to film a documentary about their success. I was dumb and inexperienced about nearly everything.

He took one look at me and targeted me as an easy catch. He heaped on the lies, the bogus bullshit, and I fell for it hook, line, and sinker. I became wife number three.

Maury promised me fame, fortune, and him. I guess one out of three ain't bad. Maury, however, was not and is not the man he claimed to be when we got married. It took me a while, but I finally jumped off the turnip truck and got my brain jump-started. I actually started to use it.

I called it growing up, and those stars in my eyes blinked out a while ago. The hero worship has turned to something akin to suspicion and disgust. I also lost the dream of becoming either a country singer or a movie starlet. No matter what anyone tells you, the men and women who control the movie and music industries are still using casting couch ethics. If it has been miraculously wiped out, it's been since I left the business.

As it turns out, I'm a square peg trying to fit into a star-shaped hole. I was never going to make it in a world of fake and pretend.

Now with all this complaining and bitching, I know what you're asking yourself. What have I gotten out of this deal? Well, except for appearing on Maury's arm and looking damn fine, if I do say so myself, my husband has never given a damn about what I did with my time.

I never could figure out why anyone would want to follow a little white ball all over several acres of grass and keep whacking at it. The same applies to tennis, which gives me a crick in my neck from both watching and trying to play it.

So, out of pure boredom, and because I'm not totally stupid, I have acquired a set of college diplomas. I proudly framed and hung them on my bedroom wall, even if they do clash with the fancy ultra-modern décor. It's not easy living in six thousand square feet of endless black, white, and gray. If I don't leave the house for a couple of days, I start thinking I'm colorblind.

I have fulfilled my part of the bargain. From my point of view, though, Maury hasn't. My husband knew from the starting gate I wanted either a career or babies. I forfeited my singing career, but I don't have any babies running around my house. He has also ensnared me into acting like his momma's best friend. Quite honestly, I deserve an Oscar for my performances in the category of Mother-In-Law from Hell.

Maury's mother, Blanche Rutherford, is a stereotypical Hollywood bitch. Having met quite a few bitches in my time, I

consider myself qualified to judge. She is a super bitch. Blanche was a starlet in her day, but that day passed about forty years ago. She has a seventh husband in her sights. I pity the poor man even if he is a legendary actor. He may be a nice, rich man now, but he is likely to be a pitiful, bitter pauper when she gets through with him.

If her track record runs true on course, she will walk away with more than half of what he has spent a lifetime achieving. She never signs a prenuptial contract. It's a shame, because I like her current victim. I have had a ringside seat to observe Blanche and the games she plays. She occupies the number one position on the list of the most selfish, self-centered women alive.

Now, of course, Maury doesn't see his momma like I do. In fact, if it was left to Maury, I would be a mini-me of his momma. My closet is full of Blanche's wardrobe selections for me. The designer clothing hangs in my closet taking up space, and it's never been worn. My jewelry box is full of what his momma thinks I should wear as a reflection of her son's position and generosity. It's too bad I'm not a sixty-eight-year-old woman who thinks she looks thirty-five. Trust me, she doesn't, and there are a whole bunch of parts slipping again. Her surgeons need stronger sutures. I admit that is me being bitchy.

Blanche's self-esteem is bolstered by professional hangers-on and cosmetic experts running the gamut from plastic surgeons to manicurists. She is good for the beauty industry economy, and she supports a lot of people to keep her illusions.

Excuse me if you think I'm hard on my mother-in-law. You have not met her. You have also not had to come in second to her for her son's affections. Maury is a forty-eight-year-old momma's boy, and I'm the idiot who has been trying to find a toehold in this threesome from the starting gate.

I have finally figured it out. I don't fit, and I never will.

As I lie here in a lounge chair looking out over the beautiful Pacific Ocean, I am not trying to get a tan. I am a redhead, a

natural flaming redhead, and every cliché you have ever heard about redheads refers to me. I freckle, and I burn in the sun. I don't care for either. I also have a hair-trigger temper, although I do try to not let it get out of control. Over the last few years, I have been pushed to the point of wanting to bash several people over the head.

I know it sounds awful, but thinking it never actually hurts anyone. It might be human nature, and it's not all my fault. If you had to be in close proximity to Blanche Rutherford for very long, it becomes a natural response.

I have learned to control my temper when I'm around her. Counting to ten doesn't work. I'm usually closer to ninety before I leave the room. She claims I'm rude. I think she's nuts! I figure I have a lot of life left to live, and I don't want to spend any of it in a jail cell.

Through the influence of my husband and mother-in-law, I have been a blonde for a couple of years. It was part of the mini-me, Blanche syndrome, only I didn't recognize it at the time. Sorry! Sorry! Blanche bitching is addictive.

I am sitting out on this beach contemplating my future. I am wearing a Paris runway bikini, bought for me by my husband for the ridiculous price of \$800.00. The swimsuit no one would dare use for swimming is three tiny scraps of fabric, and a designer tag that's supposed to indicate it's worth the price. I could have bought similar triangles for \$29.99 at the local superstore. Most of my clothes were bought there before I dipped my toes into Tinseltown rich. The problem I am having with this expensive bikini is it was given to me out of guilt. I didn't know it at the time.

Where I was suspicious before, now I know the truth. Part of me wishes I didn't, but it's too late to pretend otherwise. My husband is cheating on me, and not with only one woman. It's bad enough he's cheating, but the dog has been humping with almost every would-be starlet he has been in contact with over

the last three months. How long before, I have no clue. I have, in my hand, a private detective's report. It's documented, with timetables, affidavits, and photographs. I have to decide what to do about it. I should be shocked. I should be pissed off enough to cut off his wanker. Truthfully, all I feel is sick. Sick, sad, and dumb. Very, very dumb.

Excuse me. I have to go make a doctor's appointment to find out if my humping, dog of a husband has given me anything else I should know about.

Chapter 1

Dancy Mason raised the envelope holding the last of the court documents and looked at the mailing label with her maiden name in print again. She was no longer Dancy Ballister. The name change had not taken place through a divorce decree, as she had expected. She had petitioned the courts to change her name after Maury died.

She had made the decision to divorce Maury, and he had reluctantly agreed. He'd argued against the divorce, but his reasons weren't for any great love for her. Dancy had figured it out. Without her, he would lose his excuse and protection against getting involved too deeply with the young women he seduced. Apparently, the old *my wife doesn't understand me* gambit still worked. She discovered his other reasons later.

Once Dancy made her decision, there was no changing her mind. Maury moved out of the Malibu house and into the Hollywood condo. It was closer to his endless stream of naïve young women willing to trade certain benefits for the prospects of fame.

Dancy hired a well-recommended lawyer and a forensic financial specialist. Her hiring professionals had come as a shock

to her husband. He begged her to use his lawyers. Promised, and pleaded with her, and sworn he would be fair in a settlement, and she had nothing to worry about. One thing Dancy knew for sure. Maury was a liar.

He hadn't expected the unsophisticated girl he had married to be savvy enough to suspect he might be lying about many other things. Once he had talked her out of trying for a show business career, he'd thought she was under his thumb. Maury hadn't paid enough attention to know she was gaining wisdom and getting an education not only in college degrees but in life.

Dancy had expected the divorce to be a battle, but it wasn't. It probably would have been, except her husband had dropped dead on a tennis court. Several hours earlier, Maury's accountants had been court-ordered to turn over all his bookkeeping and financial files. Accompanied by a Sheriff's Deputy, Maury's financial and legal accomplices hadn't had time to hide or destroy an amazing amount of proof to his fraudulent endeavors.

When Maury had been informed his financial data was in the hands of his wife's divorce team, it must have been a shock. He tried to pretend nothing was wrong. He was playing with one of his current young women, tennis being only one of the games they played. Maury had wanted to finish his game, but he didn't.

The coroner's report indicated Maury had an existing heart condition. According to his cardiologist, Maury knew and had been warned of the impending dangers. In typical Maury fashion, he thought he knew better than the physicians.

Blanche Rutherford had cried foul and told the police, the tabloid newspapers, and anyone who would listen that Dancy had murdered her son. Minus any evidence, the rag magazines had run the stories. Several of those publications were careless with their printed words. Words like unverified, unsubstantiated, and alleged become very important when you are printing lies. It's called libel.

The coroner and autopsy reports revealed severely clogged arteries. The police investigation had found no indication of foul play, although Dancy had. Listed on the medical information was the previous removal of tonsils, appendix, and evidence of a vasectomy.

Maury's doctor had diagnosed and documented a serious heart condition eight months earlier, along with the recommendations of a quadruple bypass. Maury ignored the warnings and the professional advice.

The police had listened to Blanche's complaints and dismissed them. Dancy had been running a three-day marathon for a children's hospital fundraiser. She had hundreds of eyewitnesses who could verify her whereabouts for her days and nights as most of the runners shared hotel rooms with fellow runners. Dancy had done the same.

After the facts had been clearly established, Blanche Rutherford hired a lawyer to fight the dispersal of her son's assets.

Now, after six months of dirty cat-scratching and clawing, Dancy was signing the last of the paperwork. The arbitrators, the lawyers, and even a judge had agreed there was no reason to dispute Maury Ballister's final wishes. His last will on record and the amount of real estate and businesses co-owned with his wife were proof of his intentions.

Dancy might have been naïve when she had married Maury. She wasn't naïve now, and she had no illusions about why Maury had registered so much of his assets in her name. He did it to protect himself and let her be the scapegoat if he was ever caught in his shady deals. Although a wealthy man, her husband had not been satisfied with the payments of several million dollars for each of his documentaries. He had dabbled in business deals on the slippery side of illegal.

Her forensic investigators had discovered a great deal Dancy hadn't known about. Although her accountants hadn't been happy with her husband's ethics, they hadn't found any concrete

proof of insider trading or broken laws. Shady, sneaky, underhanded, and cutthroat dealings—you betcha! Apparently, those kinds of business deals weren't illegal. There were things called loopholes, and shady, wealthy businessmen knew how to use them to their benefit.

Dancy had the locks changed on all the doors on all the properties to keep her entitled mother-in-law out. She sold the houses and the condos on both the east and west coasts, all but one. She sold the businesses, the real estate, the boats, the cars, and the pretentious, downright weird art Maury claimed to collect as investments. Who in their right mind would buy a gold-plated plastic grocery sack? Someone did, through the same art dealer her late husband had purchased it. It had increased in value, and a collector had paid a pretty penny for it!

Maury had been right about the art. It had sold for astronomical prices, but it hadn't changed Dancy's mind. She still thought the paintings and sculptures were weird and ugly. All the art critics in the world were not going to change her mind.

She sold the furniture and jewelry. She donated the designer clothing to be auctioned at a charity event. Blanche had nearly fainted when she'd found out, claiming she would have worn them. Dancy had clamped her mouth shut and didn't say what she wanted to say. There was no way her mother-in-law was going to fit her fat ass in Dancy's size 6's. She changed her phone number to keep Blanche from calling her.

Blanche was claiming her son's wife had lost her mind to anyone who would listen.

Call it whatever you wanted to call it. Dancy was tired of pretending.

She kept the Malibu property and turned the house over to a friend of hers who had also divorced recently. Lori's divorce from a struggling actor had left her owing debts. Dancy gave her friend a two-year lease, for twenty-four dollars. Her friend was

there to keep an eye on the house. It would provide Lori the time to work out her financial problems since she wouldn't allow Dancy to give her the money to clear her debts. Dancy was more than happy Lori would have use of the house and the beach access.

Dancy filed libel suits against every rag magazine that had printed accusations without proof. It would take years for the cases to filter through the courts, and the lawyers would make a lot more money than she did, but it was the principle of the matter.

She'd had her forensic teams dig deep. When possible, retribution had been paid to people who had been legally swindled. As an act of contrition for all of Maury's shady practices, Dancy arranged for massive donations to various children's hospitals and cancer treatment centers. The death taxes were reduced considerably because of the donations.

Blanche's scathing comments about her son's money being given away to people who did not deserve it had cost a young attorney his license. It was discovered he was being paid to filter confidential information from Dancy's attorney's office to Blanche.

As far as Dancy was concerned, Blanche didn't deserve a penny, but she didn't want to play the woman's game of greed either. The large donations were retribution for her husband's selfishness, narcissism, and dirty deals. There would never be a cure for her ex-mother-in-law.

When it was all said and done, Dancy had given almost half of what was left to Blanche Rutherford. As her attorneys had repeatedly told her, she was under no obligation to share.

Dancy, in turn, told her team it was a payoff. She wanted Blanche out of her life, and the quickest and easiest way to accomplish the goal was to bribe her with a whole lot of money. Blanche signed an agreement to never contact Dancy again for

any reason. In the contract, she also agreed to never try to sue Dancy for more money. She was also required to run retractions and apology ads in the same newspapers and magazines where she had given interviews spouting her lies. If Blanche refused, all those lovely millions, and there were plenty of them, would go to charities.

Was it blackmail? Yes. Did it work? Like a charm.

Dancy was under no illusions anymore. She knew which choice her former mother-in-law would take. Humiliation over cash was not a hard choice for Blanche. In those interviews and written apologies, Blanche had cried and claimed she'd simply been overwhelmed by the death of her son. Her actions were simply more proof of her lousy acting. No one believed she was repentant, but she'd held up her end of the bargain, and the money was transferred.

Dancy checked *Revenge on Blanche* from a mental bucket list; she was sort of ashamed of keeping. She hadn't written it down because she was a little scared her Aunt Dora May's spirit would rise and give her a good thumping for being mean-spirited. Dora May hadn't had to deal with the woman.

The bank accounts her teams had discovered in offshore accounts remained a secret. Those funds were legal, and their locations meant the taxes were lower. She wasn't breaking any laws, and she didn't want Blanche to know about them. Dancy had more money than she could ever imagine spending or needing in her lifetime. How much money did one person need?

In the world of her Maury and her ex-mother-in-law, the answer was infinite. In Dancy's, enough was enough. Dancy was tired of living a life built on fluff and lies. She was tired of living like the pampered pooches a lot of women she knew carried around in their purses.

Dancy was tired of feeling useless. She carried her family name of Mason again, and she was on a quest. She had wasted years trying to be what someone else wanted her to be, only to

realize she wasn't happy. One sleepless night, she did make a bucket list in writing. It was a long list. Things she wanted to do and places she was going to see.

Dancy June Mason needed to find her true self.

Dancy parked on the grassy shoulder and walked into the First Baptist Church cemetery in Gene Autry, Oklahoma. The town of Berwyn had been renamed after the famous movie star cowboy of the late 1930s, '40s, and '50s. He'd come to Berwyn, bought a lot of land, and named his new ranch the Flying A, intending to raise rodeo stock. In November 1941, the town had been renamed to honor him. The celebration and renaming had brought thirty-five thousand people to the tiny town for the auspicious occasion. The townspeople had expected a flood of tourists and town growth from fans wanting to live near their movie hero.

World War II was declared on December 7, 1941. Gene Autry returned to California to attend to his personal business and to fulfill his studio contracts. He joined the Army in 1942. Whatever plans he'd had for the ranch and a town named after him were abandoned.

She walked through the cemetery and laid flowers on three gravestones. She spent some time talking to her Aunt Dora May, thanking her for raising her and being there for her when she'd been a little girl. She moved on to her parents. Both her momma and daddy were here, buried side-by-side. She didn't remember much about her momma. Jean Louise Mason had died when she was only five-years-old. Not a month after her passing, Digger Mason, her daddy, had skipped out to an oil well job. He left Dancy behind with his sister, Dora May.

Digger had always returned, but he never stayed long. When she was a little older, he had taken Dancy with him when he left.

If he could, Digger kept her for a while. Most often, it was only for a few weeks during the summer school vacations. Dancy remembered every single time he had returned her to Dora May's house and slipped away in the middle of the night to another adventure.

Digger hadn't been a bad father. He had been a careless one. She knew he loved her, and she knew he truly believed she was safer and happier with Dora May, instead of traveling around with him.

The needs of a little girl couldn't compete with jobs, adventure, and good old buddies, who traveled the oil fields together. Digger had the knack for finding whatever was buried deep in the earth. What he didn't have was the financial backing to bring it to the surface. He found the oil for the big corporations. He dabbled in finding gold and silver when he had the time. Her father had never had a significant stake in those minerals wrestled from their hidden depths. By the time Dancy had the money to finance Digger's dreams, he was gone, and her world was crumbling.

Two years before, a tire had blown out on a long stretch of highway. Digger's old truck camper had flipped over, and Digger had been killed. Her father wasn't one to change his ways. He'd never worn a seatbelt and claimed no government law had the right to force him.

By the time Dancy had been notified of his death, Digger had already been buried. His crew had moved onto another job. She had compiled the paperwork and gone through all the endless legal entanglements to get her father exhumed and reburied beside his wife.

"If you had hung on, Digger, if you had given me time to grow up, I could have helped make your dreams come true," Dancy whispered as she stroked the tombstone.

"Should've, would've, could've, Golden Girl. I had my dreams, and I did fulfill them. It's about time you got on with making your own."

Dancy jerked around. She'd heard the words, hadn't she? They'd been Digger's words, in his voice. Out loud! She spun around in circles, but there was no one in the cemetery. She was alone.

Stepping away from the gravestone, Dancy's eyes were darting in all directions. She took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and counted to ten, twenty, thirty. Dancy didn't believe in ghosts or spirits, but she was still grieving her father's death. Her mind was playing tricks on her! It couldn't be anything else.

Dancy's biggest regret was she hadn't chased after her father and made him spend more time with her when she was old enough to follow him. It was one more thing she blamed squarely on Pake Sutter's rotten hide.

Feeling a bit foolish, Dancy kissed her fingertips and laid her fingers on her momma's name, and then her daddy's on the shared gravestone. "I'm trying, Digger, I'm trying. Take care of Momma when you finagle your way through those pearly gates."

Dancy stood in front of the mirror, reading the directions on a box of hair dye she had bought at the drug store. The flaming reddish-gold color was as close as she could get to her natural color. She pulled her long, processed blonde hair into a ponytail and cut it off. She secured both ends with rubber bands and dropped it in a large envelope. She would mail it to a wig company that made and provided wigs to people who had received cancer treatments. It had taken her several phone calls to find a company that would accept processed hair.

Dancy had spent a summer working at Miss Pauline's Cut and Curl before she had left Gene Autry. Being a hairstylist had not been a dream of hers. She'd taken the only job available. She was fairly sure the summer job had been created by her Aunt Dora May and her best friend, Miss Pauline, to keep her busy.

Digger had vetoed her plans to join him, claiming the site where he was working was too dangerous to have her around. That same summer was when she started plotting her escape from Gene Autry. She'd considered running away, but she knew Dora May would have had her brought back. Back then, she'd still had the dreams and naivety of a child.

Dora May had died the year after her high-school graduation. Miss Pauline's beauty shop, located on her closed-in back porch, was gone. The house was empty and neglected, as was a good portion of the town. At the Service T Truck Stop, an older woman told her Miss Pauline had moved to Ohio to live closer to her son. Most people still living in town went to Ardmore for whatever they needed.

Most of the businesses she remembered were gone. A few were holding on. The Service T was the one-stop gas station/convenience store and restaurant positioned by the main highway exit ramp.

Dancy looked at her image in the mirror. The woman in the reflection was close to the real Dancy Mason, a small-town girl from the flatlands of Oklahoma. She'd be using a lot fewer cosmetics, and her hair would grow again. Her hair was reddish gold, and those corkscrew curls were hers, natural and the torment of her youth. For the first time in years, she saw a reflection of the real Dancy Mason.

The shorter hair raised a host of memories of Dora May's constant warnings. *'Dancy June, If you don't comb that curly mop, I'm gonna cut it with the hedge clippers!'* Dora May had been her mainstay, while Digger moved from adventure to adventure. She'd hated her aunt, sometimes. Childishly, Dancy had blamed Dora May for Digger not being around. At the same time, she had loved Dora May and depended on her desperately to be there for her.

Dancy smiled at her image. She'd wanted to rid herself of the person she had become over the last several years, and this was a start. Without a plan or an itinerary, Dancy felt a little lost.

She cleaned the mess she had made in the tiny bathroom and realized once again, the small travel RV was the right choice. Dancy had looked at and test-driven a lot of motor homes. Most were luxurious and fully equipped, but she didn't want to drive or pull an RV that was the equivalent of a tractor-trailer.

She had found a smaller pull-behind travel RV. Initially, it was purchased and decked out by a defunct rock band. The one-hit-wonders had only used the RV once before disbanding. The RV and the almost brand-new Ford F-450 twin cab, super duty pickup truck, were painted with a western desert background with wild black stallions running across the sides of the vehicles.

Dancy had loved it at first sight. The knock-off price, because it was technically *used*, had been an incentive. The truck was powerful enough to pull just about anything, and the RV was the right size for her. It had everything she needed, efficiently designed into a space half the size of the bathroom in the Malibu guesthouse. There were two parts to the RV. A small sitting area was equipped with a loveseat/pullout bed facing a flat-screen TV. There was a tiny kitchenette with an equally small microwave and refrigerator. A separate room, behind a folding door, had a full-sized Murphy bed and a tiny bathroom.

The truck sucked gas, but it allowed her to stop wherever, without worrying about hotels and motels. The unit was self-contained, carrying a supply of water, propane, and produced electricity with solar panels on the roof. The RV had air-conditioning and a satellite dish. She had laughed when she first saw it, and it had taken her several hours to figure out how it worked, but it did work. She could survive living in the RV, as long as she stopped for a hot shower every couple of days.

Digger had traveled around in an old truck camper most of his life, and it hadn't been equipped with the necessities. Her best memories of her father were living in the tiny, crowded camper.

The only motel in Gene Autry was closed. After she took care

of her business with the preacher, she parked in the church parking lot overnight.

Dancy woke up the next morning hungry, and the only café in town was attached to the gas station. She drove to the Service T Truck Stop, filled the tank, and went inside for breakfast.

Dancy slid onto a counter stool and looked at the laminated list of what was offered. It had been a long time since she had read a menu that didn't concern itself with calories and fat content. She wanted a real breakfast.

She ordered a #3 special, which was a chicken-fried steak breakfast. In Oklahoma—steak didn't mean Filet Mignon. In Sooner country—it meant a cut of steak pounded into submission, breaded, fried, and smothered in gravy. Biscuits, fried eggs, bacon, and grits came on the side.

“Ms. Mason, or is it Mrs. Ballister?” A small man wearing an outfit of jeans with a western-style suit jacket and a baseball cap asked. He offered his hand to her.

Dancy shook his hand.

“Jeffery Applebee, Attorney. Ma'am, I apologize for interrupting your breakfast, but I heard you were in town, and your being here saves me a trip to Los Angeles.”

“Do I know you?” Dancy asked.

“No ma'am, but one of the locals recognized you, and called me,” Jeffrey Applebee said. “I knew your father, Digger Mason. I handled some legal business for him, and if you would give me a few minutes of your time, we can settle this matter in short order.”

“Did Digger owe you money?”

The attorney shook his head. “No, ma'am. Could we take this over to the far booth? This is your private business, and gossip is the only form of entertainment left in town.”

“Sure,” Dancy said, her interest piqued. She slid from the counter stool and followed him over to the booth. She did see the two waitresses whispering to each other.

Mr. Applebee set his briefcase on the table and pulled out a folder. "Ms. Mason, we have not met before. Could you show me your identification?"

Dancy dug into her purse and produced a brand-new driver's license and several credit cards now carrying her maiden name.

The attorney viewed the California driver's license and slid it across the table. "You are legally divorced from Mr. Maury Ballister?"

"No," Dancy corrected. "Officially, I am his widow. I decided to carry my maiden name."

The attorney nodded his head in agreement. "Thank you. This agrees with the information I received from an associate in Los Angeles." He opened the folder and pulled out a sheath of papers. "Ms. Mason, your father had these documents and deeds transferred into your name three years ago. His last will on record can now be executed. His instructions were specific. You would not receive this inheritance from him as long as you were involved with or married to Mr. Ballister. He didn't give me a reason for this request, nor was he required too. I have honored his wishes. If you would sign where I have the red flags, our business will be completed."

Dancy scrawled her signature several times, taking the time to scan a few lines on each document to make sure she wasn't signing away her life. He removed the top sheet and slid the folder over to her side of the table.

Dancy's eyes widened as her breakfast, served on a platter large enough to have held a full-sized turkey, was slid onto the table. She knew she wouldn't be able to eat all of it, but damn, the memories returned. Oilmen were a hearty breed with big appetites. She was going to have to remember—there was normal size, and there was cowboy country-sized.

"Have you had breakfast?" Dancy asked the lawyer.

"No, not yet, but it looks good."

Dancy waved at the waitress and asked for a second plate.

She split the breakfast onto the second plate and took a bite of the biscuits and gravy. She closed her eyes in a *forget the calories and cholesterol* state of nirvana.

Jeffrey Applebee didn't waste any time digging into his share of the breakfast.

"From what I understand, my father hadn't had a gusher in a while. What did he leave me, Mr. Applebee? Beyond his old truck, which I was told was totaled in the accident, Digger didn't have anything of value," Dancy said. She had eased her initial pangs of hunger and was slipping into the range of gluttony.

The attorney raised his eyes from his plate. "For reasons of his own, your father kept a lot of secrets. I do know one of his reasons was he didn't trust your husband. He had quite a negative opinion of Mr. Ballister.

"Your father chose not to flaunt his wealth, Ms. Mason. He owned a large piece of property, named Bird Lake. The property has now been transferred into joint ownership. You and Pake Sutter own Bird Lake. The property is located near Circle City, Alaska. He told me in confidence he had discovered gold there. I wasn't sure if he was telling me the truth or not." Mr. Applebee set his fork aside, contemplated the last piece of bacon on his plate, picked it up with his fingers, and ate it. The attorney slid out of the booth. "He also left you, personally, a sizeable bank account, in the Sooner First National Bank in Ardmore. You should read those documents thoroughly before you leave the area. If you don't understand something, my card is included in the folder. I thank you for breakfast, ma'am."

"Wait!" Dancy exclaimed. "Is this a joke?"

Mr. Applebee turned to her. "I only met your father on three occasions, for very short intervals, but I don't believe so. It would probably be in your best interest to contact Mr. Sutter. I'm not a hundred percent certain, but I don't believe Mr. Mason told him about his part of the inheritance either. There is a sealed envelope in the packet. It needs to be delivered to Mr. Sutter by

request from your father. The will, nor the instructions in those envelopes, could not be conveyed until your father's conditions were met. Digger was hoping you would divorce your husband, Ms. Mason. Mr. Ballister's death preempted the issue. Good luck, Ms. Mason."