

MOUNTAIN RANCH

Ray tore the blankets off Ruth. “Breakfast sure ain’t gonna cook itself.” It wasn’t his slow baritone that interrupted the serenity of a dream, it was the cold that ripped Ruth away from a sunny day and people she loved. Lots of people. Friends. Ray flipped the light on before leaving the bedroom, and Ruth hid her eyes in the pillow. The dreary February morning spurred her arthritis. Made turning seventy-five just another day to get through. She stood on the cold wood floor, toes bent outward, knotty joints, crinkled skin, and warped nails. Nothing like the pretty petite feet she once knew. She was sorry she had wasted those good feet on Ray. Sorry she wasted her good years waiting for things to get better. Things never get better, they just sort of subside. Ruth wrapped herself in her robe and a heavy dose of winter stoicism on the way to the bathroom.

The toilet seat was up as usual, and as Ruth swatted it down, she stepped in a wet spot. Ray’s aim was always off. *Rotten SOB*. She refused to clean it up today. A hand towel over the spot did the trick. But she was *not* going to pick up the towel. Not today. Today she wore her clean jeans and a gray wool sweater that was usually saved for special occasions but mostly funerals.

Snow swirled outside the window above the kitchen sink. Ruth moved the curtain, raised herself onto her toes, and squinted. “Looks like, what, six inches, maybe?”

Ray, baked hard by the sun and bad luck, slurped runny eggs through his few remaining teeth. “You fill the wood box?”

“Yes.” Ruth poured herself another cup of coffee from the old percolator. Ray Peterson refused innovations. Since buying the color television in 1988, he hadn’t purchased more than parts for the tractor or the truck. None of those cellular telephones. No satellite television, or World Wide Web hogwash. All of it was a ridiculous waste of time. Meals were made in or on the stove the way they should be. “Microwaves were invented by the Japs to infect us with cancer for kicking their ass in the Second World War,” he’d say.

Ruth disagreed with most everything Ray believed, but it was easier to keep quiet and clean house.

“You get my chew when you were in town yesterday?”

“Ughhhh. I forgot,” Ruth confessed.

“Goddamn it!” Ray slammed his fist on the table. “You didn’t forget.”

Ruth filled Ray’s coffee mug. “I was in a hurry—had to get to the bank before they closed. They said we were overdrawn again and—”

“Double dumb fuck.” Ray mopped his plate with his toast and shoved it in his mouth.

Ruth tightened her grip on the percolator handle. Imagined pouring hot coffee on Ray’s lap, then cracking his skull with the pot. The possibility of heaven and hell stopped her. It always stopped her—particularly when suicide seemed the most practical. She’d think of her son, Joey, and of the possibility of seeing him again after twenty years. She’d stop herself the moment her mind wandered to her daughter, Jessica, or Shawn, the father of her children, or the way things should have been—if he hadn’t left. Lacking real friends, money, or job skills, leaving was unimaginable. Ruth set the percolator on the table and sat to eat.

“You can just trot your fat ass back to town today.”

“It’s my birthday, you know. I was thinkin’, you get a free meal at Denny’s on your birthday. We could—”

“Just get the goddamn chew and bake a cake. White—with white frosting.”

“I like chocolate.”

“Course you do. If I’d a said chocolate, you’d want white.”

“It’s my birthday. I oughta have the kind a cake *I* like. I oughta have friends and a present from my husband.”

“You know where the gate is if you don’t like it.”

“If I had somewhere to go, I’d go.”

“Why don’t you track down your worthless son. Let him take care a you.”

“You’re the reason Joey left,” Ruth mumbled, knowing Ray couldn’t hear, and swallowed the lump in her throat. Joey had taken Ray’s constant criticism for years, but the day it become physical, he’d left and Ruth hadn’t seen him since. Her eyes stung as she stared at the cold, runny egg on her plate. Blinking back tears, she reached under the table and pinched her forearm as hard as she could, and under that gray sweater, little bruises freckled her arm.

“Hey, I know!” Ray startled her. “Better yet, go live with your druggie daughter. Probably back in jail.”

“Jail’s gotta be better than livin’ with you.” She said it loud so he could hear.

Ray stood and Ruth looked down. When he went to the fridge and chugged milk from the carton, Ruth cleared his plate and took it to the sink. “Whorin’ around with niggers, takin’ drugs. Blame me all you want—*ain’t* my fault Jessica’s useless. Hell, she probably got herself killed a long time ago anyway.”

Ruth turned and faced him. “You’re a pig. A heartless, pathetic pig.”

“And you’re a worthless cunt.” His cruelty had lost its sting so long ago that it allowed space for an idea to bud, then bloom. Her refusal to waste one more moment forced an epiphany. It was perfection. Maybe God had been watching and bestowed upon her the flawless ploy. Atonement gave Ruth all the courage she needed.

“Not today.” She marched to the bedroom.

The double-barreled shotgun was wedged between Ray’s side of the bed and the nightstand. Ruth cracked open the breech; a shell filled each chamber. The old gun stuck twice before Ruth forced it shut and walked out with it at her waist.

Ray was planted on the pot when Ruth came into the bathroom, shotgun cradled in her arms. “What the hell you doin’?” His dirty britches gathered at his boots—a *Western Horseman*

magazine open on his lap.

“Give me the keys to the truck.” Ruth held out her hand. The gun followed.

“You’re crazy.”

“I’m leavin’ you, Ray. Give me the keys.”

“Ruth, darlin’, what’s got you all twisted up?” Ray’s smile was unconvincing. “Come on, we’ll go to Lenny’s and—” Ray grabbed for the gun but missed. Ruth recoiled; she didn’t mean to jerk the trigger. Pieces of ceiling fell like hail as Ray dove into a fetal position on the floor.

“Jesus Christ, woman!”

“Give me the dang keys, Raymond!”

Ray squirmed on the floor and pulled up his pants. He fought his pocket to find the keys, then held them out. She snatched them. The mix of adrenaline and satisfaction caused something as close to ecstasy as Ruth could remember. A laugh emerged from deep inside that would not be contained.

Melting snow wept from the tin roof. A dark cloud of spent diesel purged from the tailpipe as the old Dodge fishtailed up the snowy drive and out the front gate. Ruth followed the plow truck until snow turned to rain. The gas gauge hit *E* after half an hour, but Ruth reached San Andreas. Tommy’s Bakery caught her eye. She had always wanted one of those fancy coffees, but Ray didn’t approve of doing business with queers. Ruth parked the truck and walked in.

The air was a delicious mix of warm vanilla and coffee beans. A young man with a creamy complexion slid a tray of cinnamon rolls into the display case, then popped out and smiled.

“Well, good morning. What can I get you?”

“Got any chocolate birthday cakes?”

“No, so sorry. Let’s order one, shall we? Have it by tomorrow.”

“That’s okay.” Ruth inspected the fruit-glazed tarts, the pies, muffins, scones, and sophisticated-looking pastries of all sorts.

“So, *whose* birthday?”

“Mine.”

“Oh! Happy birthday. Let me guess. Fifty—fifty-one?”

“Haaa!” Ruth liked this guy even though she knew he was just being polite. “I’m seventy . . . plus five.”

“Well, you look absolutely fantastic, let me tell you.” The guy clasped his hands and held them at his chin. “Do you like tortes?”

“I—don’t know.”

“I have a fabulous chocolate torte that someone ordered. Someone I’m not very fond of, unprofessional, I know, but, whatever, I could”—he looked around as if someone would hear his secret—“let you have it and make another one.” He pressed his finger against his lips. “Shhh.”

“It’s not that important.”

“Are you kidding me? It’s your birthday. Ma’am, if you are really seventy-five and have yet to experience a chocolate torte, it is my duty—no, my honor—to serve you. My tortes are *amazing*.” He opened a stainless-steel refrigerator, pulled out a triple-layer chocolate torte. Baby-blue and lavender-colored pansies planted along the top and bottom reminded Ruth of the small bouquet Ray had brought her when they married at the courthouse.

“Oh my gosh.” She had never seen a more magnificent cake. Probably expensive, though. “What sort of fancy coffee would go with it?” Ruth bit her smile.

Customers crowded into line as Ruth sat at a corner table, sipped her cappuccino, and watched young, normal, happy people with their entire lives ahead of them. Without looking up, they knew which drinks to order while thumbing their phones. Knew how to live in a world where neighbors smiled and waved; didn't threaten to call the sheriff because your cattle busted through the fence. They lived with pets who were allowed in the house, who served no purpose other than companionship. Their world had family and friends and birthday parties.

Ruth finished her extra-large slice of torte, letting the last bite linger. The smooth chocolate coated her tongue, and she washed it down with the last of her cappuccino. Like a cow working a salt block, Ruth licked her fork clean, then slid it into her coat pocket. A pink box held the remaining torte, and Ruth took a long last look before closing the lid.

The old Dodge rolled to a stop in front of Wells Fargo. It coughed and farted when Ruth killed the engine. She grabbed the shotgun off the floorboard and unloaded it, her heart throbbed in her chest as she stared out the fogged windshield. Shadows of cars passed every so often, and Ruth caught herself wondering where they all were going. She was putting it off and thought about going home. In less than a moment, Ruth took the gun and the pink box into the bank.

"Hi, Ruth!" Helen, who worked at the Mountain Ranch post office, was filling out a deposit slip.

"Hi, Helen. How are you?" Ruth smiled and set the pink box on the counter.

"Great. How are—" She noticed the gun.

Ruth raised the gun and stepped up to the only teller. A redheaded girl, still battling acne, smiled disbelievably. "Hey, Mrs. Peterson."

"Hi, Amber. I'm sorry, sweetie, but can I please have *all* your money? I'm robbing the bank. Okay?"

Amber dropped her chin and raised her brow before she opened her drawer. "What am I supposed to put it in?"

Ruth hadn't considered details. Fear quickly fogged her mind. Her heart began to beat impossibly loud in her ears and caused her hands and legs to tremble. Light-headed and unstable, she felt like she might buckle at any moment. Everything told her to sit down, tell Amber she was "sorry" and "never mind, it was only a joke." But it was now or back to Ray. "Find something!" It felt good to yell. She grabbed a deep breath and watched Amber remove the plastic bag from a trash can. "Good thinkin'."

Amber filled the bag with cash from the drawer and handed it to Ruth as the new branch manager, a woman in her forties and a navy suit-dress, ducked behind a desk.

"Thank you. Now go press the alarm or whatever you're supposed to do." Ruth used the unloaded gun like a cane, hugged the pink box with the cash riding on top, and took a seat in the waiting area. Soft jazz played while the new manager, and Amber, and especially Helen, watched Ruth dig the fork out of her coat pocket and eat her birthday torte.

"Ruth? What in the *world* are you *doing*?" Helen asked from across the room.

"Leaving Ray."

It seemed like forever for the Sheriff's Department to arrive, but when they did, they came in full force. Six of them in flak jackets with assault rifles scanned the area for the bandit. The manager pointed to Ruth. With the fork in her hand, Ruth raised her arms like she'd seen the bad guys do on reruns of *Magnum, P.I.*

"Drop the weapon!"

Ruth dropped her fork.

“Stand up and place your hands on your head!” a voice from behind her roared. Ruth stood, did as she was told, and her chair flew sideways. Strong hands expertly pinioned her arms behind her back. The cold cuffs were on in an instant, and Ruth grinned all the way to the police car. She grinned while being fingerprinted. Even grinned in her booking photo.

Judge Amy Jackson leaned forward on the bench at Ruth Peterson’s arraignment. “Considering the severity of the charges, this is a difficult case. The defendant lacks any criminal history.”

“‘Cause she ain’t no criminal, Judge. Just let her come home. I need her . . . I’m starvin’ to death.” Ray stood behind Ruth and patted her shoulder.

Judge Jackson slammed her gavel twice. “Mr. Peterson! You must refrain from speaking. I’ve warned you, these outbursts will not be tolerated—next time, I will have you removed and fined, do you understand?”

Ray twisted his ball cap in his hands. “I think freedom of speech is still my right as an American, ain’t it?”

“Get him out of here,” Judge Jackson ordered.

Ruth and her sweaty public defender, David Mendoza, watched as the bailiff and the security guard escorted Ray out the heavy doors.

“Your Honor, my client pleads guilty to all charges and wishes to refuse bail.” Mendoza’s statement sounded more like a question.

“Considering the special circumstances of this case, I find the bail schedule to be excessive. The fact that the defendant failed to remove the money from the bank’s premises also challenges the robbery charge. Until I can further review and determine the specifics pertaining to this case, I am ordering the defendant to house arrest.”

“What? What did she say?” Panic filled Ruth.

“You get to go home, Mrs. Peterson.” Mendoza patted Ruth’s shoulder.

“No!” Ruth shook her head. “I don’t want to go home.”

Ruth had been home two days before she shared secrets with the mounted deer head next to the woodstove whenever Ray was near. “Don’t worry, I won’t tell him,” she’d say. “Wait ’til he goes to sleep, then we’ll get him,” she’d whisper loudly so Ray could hear. Then she’d cover her mouth and giggle. By the fourth day, Ray put the deer head in the shed. He hid his collection of hunting knives that once decorated the living room, and the shotgun was no longer loaded or next to the bed.

At dinner, Ruth set a casserole dish on the table and folded her hands in prayer. Ray ignored her and lifted the lid. Steam off the olive-colored meatballs caused him to gag. There was no mistaking the smell of horse manure.

“You goddamn lunatic! I’m callin’ that probation fella.”

Ruth rushed to the refrigerator, pulled Probation Officer Joshua Nelson’s card off the door, and handed it to Ray.

By noon the next day, Probation Officer Joshua Nelson sat at the kitchen table and watched Ruth peel two bananas with her mouth. She held one in each hand.

“Last night, I woke up—she’s standin’ over me with a goddamn butcher knife singing ‘Happy Birthday.’” Ray crossed his arms and leaned back against his chair.

“Has she seen a doctor?” Joshua asked as Ruth bit each banana.

“No.” Ray eyed Ruth while she filled her mouth and cheeks.

Joshua wrote on a tablet in his file folder. “We should start with a basic examination followed by—” Ruth spit the entire mouthful of banana on Ray’s face.

“Ruth!” Ray grabbed her hands. The mess crept down his face as if he were melting and justified Ruth’s laughing frenzy.

“You’re gonna make me pee my pants!” Ruth hurried to the bathroom. Pulled her pants down without closing the door.

“I’ll order an immediate evaluation,” said Joshua.

“Evaluate this.” Ruth squatted and peed on the floor.

Ray leaned sideways in his chair and watched Ruth repeat, “I’m not cleanin’ it up. I’m not cleanin’ it up.”

“She’s pissin’ on the goddamn floor!” Ray stood, arms akimbo, and eyed Joshua. “She’s fucking nuts.”

“I’ll call someone,” Joshua delivered in a somber voice.

Not answering even one of the evaluation questions caused the county to label Ruth incoherent. The second series of evaluations identified her behavior as dementia. Taking her home was not advised.

Paradise Ranch Senior Care gave Ruth her own room and an extra-large flat-screen high-definition television with channels galore. They cleaned her bathroom twice a week, organized yoga, and bingo, and polka night. After a month, Ruth had over a dozen friends. One in particular, Charlie, saved the chocolates his daughter brought and shared them with Ruth.

“Charlie.” Ruth loved saying his name. Loved the way it sounded. *Charlie*. Loved the way his luminous gray-green eyes listened when she spoke as if her words mattered. Loved his gravelly voice when he read and explained D. H. Lawrence poems. Loved the minty smell of his brown skin.

It was April Fool’s Day when Ray visited. “Heifers did good, not much trouble this year.” He sat on the edge of a chair in the corner of Ruth’s room and watched her work the fancy TV remote from her upright bed. She paused on the Superior Livestock Auction taking place in Nebraska. “What is this?” Ray perked up and watched the cattle being sold. “That herd don’t average no eight hundred pounds. Turn it up,” he ordered. Ruth changed the channel to Oprah, tried to ignore the odor of cow manure that always festered on Ray. “Turn that back right now.” His chest and shoulders swelled.

Ruth turned up the volume. “Hush. I’m watchin’ Oprah.”

Ray snatched the remote from Ruth. She laughed when he pressed the on-off button three times. “How the hell you work this damn thing?”

“You have to be nice to it.” Ruth knew he couldn’t see the buttons because he was too stubborn to wear glasses.

“Well, I come to visit you.” Ray tossed her the remote. “Try and *remember that*.”

“Remember? I don’t remember you.” Ruth looked confused. “Who are you?”

Ray bent close to Ruth’s face. “You know goddamn well who I am. You ain’t foolin’ me one damn bit.”

“I don’t have to,” Ruth said. And she never spoke to him again. Not one word when he visited twice in May.

In June, Ray found Ruth outside at a picnic table, sitting too close to Charlie. They worked a

jigsaw puzzle under the shade of cedar trees. With a handful of wildflowers, Ray stomped up in a crisp white button-down and new jeans. “Guess we can figure why your daughter likes them colored boys, huh?” He spit a stream of tobacco juice. Tried to rile Charlie with a long, threatening glare. When Charlie high-fived Ruth for placing the last puzzle piece, Ray threw the flowers at them and left.

February felt like spring. Charlie knocked on Ruth’s door just before noon. She sat on her bed, reading *The Complete Poems of D. H. Lawrence*. He left the door open and sat on the bed next to her. “Happy birthday, Ruth.” He smiled like he meant it and handed her a box wrapped in gleaming gold paper.

“What did you do?” Ruth held the gift, admired it a long while. “It’s so beautiful.” A warmth washed over her. “Probably the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.” She didn’t fight the lump in her throat or the happy tears when they came.

“Come on now—none of that.” Charlie put his arm around her. “Open it up, Ruthie, lunch is getting cold.” He pulled her in close and didn’t look away when he wiped her tears.

“Thank you, Charlie.” She would have been satisfied to sit on that bed with Charlie for the rest of the day. Maybe the rest of her life.

“Please open the present. I can smell the lasagna. I’m hungry.”

“Okay, okay.” Ruth removed the tape and unwrapped the box without ripping the paper. She wiggled the lid off. “What the heck is it?”

“It’s an iPad. They’re wonderful. You can take pictures, check the weather, watch videos. You can even download all the books or poems you like. I’ll show you later.”

Ruth filled her lungs, felt them expand, felt the privilege of just being alive. Then, in the space of a heartbeat, she wrapped her arms around Charlie’s neck. Their kiss was simple, soft and slow, but most of all, it was sincere. Something Ruth had forgotten she needed. The appreciation of how enjoyable life had become in only a year of trying was not lost on her.

“That was nice.” Charlie leaned in and kissed Ruth again. “I’ve wanted to kiss you since you got here.”

Ruth giggled and blushed like a schoolgirl.

“I’d like to kiss you again after lunch. *If* that’s okay with you?”

Ruth nodded. “Yes.”

Charlie was all smiles when he took Ruth’s hand and hurried her down the hall.

“Shhh, here she comes. Quiet everyone.” Hushed voices escaped from the cafeteria.