SOMEPLACE North SOMEPLACE Wild

MOUNTAIN RANCH ADVENTURES

BOOK ONE

Gary Brumbelow

Chapter 1

They lie in wait for my life

Northern Idaho, Tuesday, October 13, 1987

After three months of intense planning, the murder seemed almost anticlimactic. Too easy.

Waiting for a random stranger to motor off around the bend and out of sight, Frank Johnson opened his driver's door. He reached in to steer and muscled the Datsun into motion. Its front wheels dropped over the shoulder's edge. With one mighty sweep, he slammed the door and shoved. The little car rolled into the lake and stopped, its rear protruding above the water like a giant feeding duck.

Perfect. The poor sucker's fingerprints remained intact on the trunk. And Joan would be dead in ten minutes.

He checked his watch. 11:32 a.m. Bye-bye, Joan.

With Joan, nothing was ever good enough. Ninety days after the marriage, the luster was gone. The original charm had mutated to deep dissatisfaction and moved toward disgust.

A divorce was against her religion. He didn't dare walk out since he worked for her old man. He'd accrued a small mountain of debt trying to please her and couldn't jeopardize his job. If only he could have back the three years he'd squandered funding her appetites.

Bubbles rose to the surface and burst.

11:33 a.m.

Mind you, she fooled her family and friends. She could put on a real show at any gathering, going out of her way to touch him and kiss him. Public was the only kind of affection he ever got.

They all believed the marriage was happy. But like some wag had said, "Beauty is only skin deep; ugly goes to the bone."

And it did get ugly. She'd never loved him, and his own heart had petrified.

Now it was over. No more coming home to hell. No more shame. The inconceivable had become the actual.

11:34.

On top of everything else, she couldn't conceive. That, too, was his fault.

"I should've married Brad. You're a pathetic excuse for a man. Can't even get me pregnant." She'd dated Bradford Reynolds in high school. Now he had his own commercial construction business and five kids.

Frank made decent money, but never enough—she outspent King Solomon.

But no more. No more buying jewelry he couldn't afford or flowers she ignored. No more cooking, cleaning, and coddling a spoiled woman who vegetated all day watching TV.

No more coming home every night to clutter, magazines strewn everywhere, dirty clothes mounded, sink piled with dishes.

11:35.

No more wading through her mess to reach the closet. He'd long since moved to the couch to escape the bedtime drama.

Whenever he closed his eyes and pictured Joan, nothing pleasant arose to his inner sight—no small joys, no mutual pleasures, no tender moments. Only two hearts blackened by cross words and dark looks. For far too long.

11:36.

How does anybody stay married? he wondered. Do people tolerate each other for decades? More than a few friends lived in pathetic relationships. He had witnessed their wretchedness, knew people who woke to misery every day.

Like him. But no more. A new future lay before him. The nightmare named Joan was fading fast. Five minutes to go.

He waded to the window to watch.

Chapter 2

I MUST GO ON MY WAY

Northern Idaho

Ten thousand diamonds danced in the sun on Bishop Lake as I drove the narrow shoreline road nestled in the thick Idaho forest. I could almost smell my long-held dream of a life in the Canadian wilderness, far from the boring high plains of West Texas.

Dad had given me a pocket tape recorder to journal about my trip. With one hand on the wheel, I punched the record button and spoke.

"Dad, you and I both know so many people satisfied to ranch by ATV on the dusty panhandle flatlands, fifteen minutes from the nearest Walmart. Not for me. I want adventure. Give me the raw contest of man against mountain in a wild land of cold and snow."

I hit the pause button and pictured riders on horseback pushing cows through remote grass valleys surrounded by snow-capped peaks. High mountain meadows somewhere in British Columbia called, and I must go. My four years of disciplined university studies were peanuts in exchange for adventure in the north.

I touched record again.

"I'm almost there. Just four hundred miles to my dream job—manager at the Double Bar Ranch in Cache Creek, British Columbia. That'll be the first step to having my own spread."

Only eight more hours. Good thing. I had four days to start a job or kiss a quarter million dollars goodbye.

Go, Cody, Go. No time to lose.

Five winding miles farther, the road left the lake and slipped into a pocket of civilization, a tiny logging settlement whittled from the woods. A vintage country store boasted a single gas pump. I parked and stepped out into the fresh pine fragrance from the timber mill across the road.

A pay phone clung to the outside wall. This might be my last opportunity before the border to call home. Mom would be hungry for a scrap of news like Oliver Twist on a London street.

But I dreaded the conversation. When I had first announced my intention to pursue this career, she'd expressed shock and dismay, launching a one-woman crusade to change my mind. She was the best mom, but she couldn't understand why I wanted to leave. She feared I would suffer, maybe die, far from the nest. I loved her, but I would not abandon my dream.

"I love West Texas, the big sky, the plains that stretch out of sight, the winter storms … all of that. I love you and Dad. But I must do this. It's as simple as that." I went to bed, leaving her crying on the couch.

Now, two days later, I wondered if she was crying still.

I picked up the phone and dialed. She answered on the second ring.

"Hi, Mom."

"Cody. So glad you called. Are you there yet?"

"No, I'm at—"

"Wait, let me get Dad. Bob, Cody's on the phone." She paused. "It's so good to hear your voice, Cody. Where are you calling from?"

"I'm at a little—"

"Hello, son. How goes the trip?"

"Hi, Dad. It's going well, except I drove thirty miles out of my way to see Bishop Lake. Be sure and tell your neighbor Mike. I hope he's happy."

"What do you mean?"

"When he insisted on installing that fancy new oil filter on my truck the other day, he made me promise to visit his favorite north woods lake in exchange. And I have my doubts about that filter."

"You may be right. He saw a bulletin about it yesterday. Apparently, the weld sometimes fails, and you lose your oil. Better replace it when you get there."

"That's great. Another thank you to Mike."

Dad changed the subject. "How far will you go today?"

"I'm about an hour from the border. Need to travel as far north as possible tonight."

"Okay. No problems so far?"

"No, nothing really. I stopped to help a stranded driver a ways back. He seemed a little strange, but nothing happened."

"What do you mean?" Mom's voice registered concern.

"A guy's car was broke down in the middle of the road. Said his motor had quit and could I give him a push. We got his car off onto the shoulder as far as possible. He figured his distributor cap had come loose. Said it did that sometimes, and he didn't need any more help."

She spoke again. "Jerry called today. He was planning to come for your birthday."

"Oh. Would've been nice to see him." I sighed. "But, as you know, Grandpa's inheritance deadline didn't give me the luxury of sticking around."

"When will you call again?" Mom's voice had a familiar edge.

I clenched my teeth. "Still on the same plan, Mom. Don't expect to hear from me for at least a month once I cross the border." I held my breath.

After a moment, Dad spoke. "Son, everybody knows you can do this. You don't need to prove anything to anyone. We all need help sometimes. Remember when your brother had trouble getting started in Chicago? There's no shame in calling home."

I looked at my boots and shook my head. *Can't you accept I'm not Jerry*?

A scene popped into my mind, a memory that—ever since my departure Sunday—had visited me whenever I closed my eyes. I'm pulling out, Mom and Dad are grieving on the driveway, holding each other vertical.

"I don't need to prove anything to anyone else, just to myself." My toe found a stone to kick. "But don't worry. I'll be fine. And I will call. I promise."

The quiet lasted several uncomfortable seconds before Dad spoke. "Did you find the problem with that dash light? I'd rest better if you could read your gauges in the dark."

"No. But I'm not worried about it. This old truck runs like a scared coyote."

Chapter 3

I WAS APPOINTED A TEACHER

Wolf Creek, Chilcotin country, British Columbia

Julie Stewart suppressed a shriek of frustration. She laid down her book and shook her head in disbelief. Even hands against her ears failed to silence the whomp, whomp, whomp from the schoolhouse's back wall.

She'd have to go out, again, and ask Danny to please stop bouncing the basketball against the building.

The boy would exasperate a basset hound. Why he persisted in this irritating behavior, she could not understand. He was neither mean-spirited nor stupid. What was it with him?

She exited the schoolhouse, walked to the back, and stood by the corner of the building. He pretended not to notice her, but she knew subterfuge when she saw it.

"Danny." Whomp, whomp. "Danny." She raised her voice without yelling.

He caught the rebound, held the ball, and looked at her, eyebrows arched.

"Do you know what I'm about to ask you?"

His wordless answer, hunched shoulders, and a blank look said it all.

"Please stop throwing the ball at the building. If you want to play with the ball, please use it on the court." She pointed beyond him to the concrete slab.

As always, he shrugged and turned away.

She returned to her desk, sat, and looked around. Within these four walls she taught eleven children grades one through six. This one-room school on the reserve, a far-flung First Nations village of twenty-five households, comprised her professional domain.

"I belong here. I love what happens here."

Her heart warmed every time a student lit up with a new insight. But two months into her first job after graduation from university, she was questioning her judgment. Out loud.

"Have I made the biggest mistake of my life?"

On the gravel road ten meters from the schoolhouse a loaded logging truck lumbered by. The driver was bound for the mill in the nearest trading center, a small town two hours away. Older students boarded there for high school. That arrangement was a key factor in Julie's decision to apply. She wasn't ready to manage a cluster of prepubescent hormones but liked the idea of teaching multiple younger classes in one room.

"They didn't tell me about Danny when I signed on. Was that by intention or neglect?"

Every day she woke up with Danny on her brain. Every night she laid her troubled head on the pillow, second-guessing her actions, or inaction, in her effort to educate that boy. A school day seemed like one continual battle of wills—Danny's versus hers—relieved only by the occasional delightful discovery by another student.

But she was managing, partly by acquiring the skill of self-reflection.

"I'm down but not out," she told herself. "He's thirteen, I'm twenty-two. He's tough, I'm tougher." She reached for her book. "Besides, I signed a contract. I must find a way through."

With a sigh, she returned to *Great Expectations*. Two paragraphs in—whomp, whomp, whomp.

Julie peered at the clock. Three more minutes of recess. She expelled a lungful of air and decided to persevere rather than correct Danny this late in the period. But she needed a change of scenery.

Outside Julie stood on the stoop and held the clapper of her brass handbell, listening to children playing in the beauty. The little valley formed by Wolf Creek stretched westward, and beyond, four hundred kilometers of wilderness rose higher and higher to the Coast Mountains before dropping into the Pacific Ocean.

Ten summers ago her family rented a cabin somewhere out here. She and her sister had spent a week climbing the slopes, exploring the woods, wading the streams. The rustic charm had invaded her heart, and she'd secretly vowed to return someday.

Julie closed her eyes and whispered, "I love this place. I was born to teach. And I'm going to learn how to reach Danny."

She called to mind her visit with Danny's mom last week. She'd walked to their house at the other end of the village and knocked.

"Come in." The female voice from inside suggested no emotion, neither welcome nor displeasure. Julie hesitated then pushed the door ajar.

"Did someone say come in?"

"I did." A woman was tending the fire in her woodstove. She turned to Julie, and the briefest glimpse of surprise showed on her face. "Oh, sorry." She stood and stepped toward the door. "I thought it was my neighbor. She's the only one in the village who knocks." She bit her lips to suppress a smile while gathering her long, black hair behind her head.

"Oh. Well, I'm new. I have lots to learn about how things are done." She stuck out her hand. "I'm Julie Stewart. The new teacher."

The woman placed her hand in Julie's without gripping. "Everybody knows that."

"I suppose so."

"Come in." The woman backed up and threw out a welcoming arm.

Julie stepped into a spacious area that combined living room, dining space, and kitchen. The pleasing fragrance of wood smoke and

moosehide leather filled the log home. She felt like she'd entered another era. "I love your house." She scanned the interior in a half second. "Is Danny here?"

"No, he's at his cousin's. Why? What did he do? He's always getting in trouble."

"No." Julie groped for words. "I didn't come because of anything he's done." She clasped fingers together in front of her. "I mean, I'll admit he can be a challenge, but I didn't come to tell you anything. I came to listen."

"I don't understand. Listen to what?"

"Are you Danny's mother?"

"Yes."

"And your name is—?"

"Dorene."

"Okay, Dorene. Good to meet you." Julie stroked her forearms held against her stomach. "Do you have a moment? I would be grateful for anything you could tell me about Danny."

Dorene's narrative had explained much and armed her with helpful information. Now to apply all she'd learned to the situation. Progress would require patience, resolve, and prayer. Much prayer.

She joggled the bell. "Time for class, everyone. Let's come back in."

Chapter 4

My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle

Northern Washington

Two frustrating hours later I was still fifty miles from Canada, crouched on a narrow shoulder at a low point between hills, changing a flat tire. I groaned, putting all my weight on the lug wrench. The cussed nut refused to move.

Semis, seeking momentum for the climb, roared past ten feet from my back, their draft rocking my pickup. After retrieving my cap twice, I stuck it in the truck and attacked the lug nut again. Every hour counted now, and this one was disappearing like Cinderella down the stairs. I did not want to overnight in my truck at a closed border crossing.

The nut finally yielded, at the cost of knuckles shredded by the pavement. I wrapped my hand with a hanky to staunch the bleeding, finished the job, climbed behind the wheel, and motored up the hill.

Cresting the ridge, I reached for my recorder. Time to give Dad an idea of what's happening.

"Just changed a flat on a narrow shoulder with semis whizzing past. I've had my share of problems on this trip. But I reckon a person doesn't set out on an epic journey for comfort and ease.

"At least it's not raining. Or dark. My motor's running fine, and I've got plenty of gas. Now that I've finally changed that confounded wheel, I'm guessing the worst is behind me."

I could not deny this adventure was my own doing. That was the whole point. Hadn't I just told the folks I need to do this myself?

I hit the record button again. "If I'd taken your advice to buy hubcaps, I wouldn't have wasted an hour fighting lug bolts encrusted with grime. I'd be in Canada right now."

I mentally flogged myself and drove on. Canada or bust.



Bishop Lake, Idaho

Idaho State Police Sergeant Greg Barlow and Officer Doug Willis stood on a narrow lakeside road and watched a tow truck winch a car from the water.

"Great way to spend my first anniversary." Willis sighed and shook his head.

"Congratulations," Barlow said with a smirk. "Get used to it. In my experience, criminals rarely show consideration for our schedules. If you're worried about that, you might prefer a job at the library."

Barlow clenched his teeth, recalled nasty wrangling with three successive wives before he'd abandoned marriage entirely. Police work and matrimony didn't mix well. Willis had better adjust his expectations, and soon. The workload emerging from the water right in front of them—plus three aggravated assaults and an armed robbery case on his desk back in Coeur d'Alene—left little energy for empathy.

Nearby, a camera operator captured video of a young female reporter standing before the lake.

"Police say they were directed to this spot on East Shore Road where Coeur d'Alene resident Frank Johnson's 1975 Datsun was mostly submerged in Bishop Lake with his wife's body inside. Johnson told investigators his car was pushed into the lake by an angry driver who had been unable to pass on the narrow road. Police are looking for a suspect described as a white male in his mid-twenties. He may

be driving a 1975 red Ford pickup truck with Texas license plates MPG-06H. The truck was last reported heading south from the scene about 11:45 a.m. Anyone with information about this matter is asked to call 208-555-0112. Susan Collins, KXLY news."