

# The Reunion

## Part I

"Are you headed east?"

The woman stood a respectful distance from her. Frankie finished washing her hands and looked up into the mirror. The woman behind her was easily sixty. Although her face was carefully made up and her ash blonde hair was cut in a short bob that framed her face nicely, it was the look of someone hanging on at the edge of something—something she didn't want to know.

The woman was rigidly thin and smartly dressed. The Columbia Sportswear jacket, linen trousers with a deep crease, fashionable pumps—all in a rich shade of camel—all shouted money. Women who looked like this made Frankie feel frumpy with her loose clothing and extra pounds, and tonight she'd definitely dressed for comfort: soft black cotton slacks and a tunic of red and black. Her own dark hair needed brushing. She'd washed it before she set out and let it dry on its own. The side with all the wave was a tangle.

"I said, are you headed east?" The woman's eyes looked right at Frankie but they were too dark to read in the mirror.

Frankie turned toward her, her hands dripping. She didn't want to say yes or no. She didn't want the woman to know she was traveling alone, and she didn't want company. She needed solitude and space to think about what was waiting for her in Kellogg.

"I'm not asking for a ride," the woman said. "I've got my own car." She held up a computerized key as proof, the kind of key to something big and expensive.

Frankie's jaw and shoulders loosened their grip a little and she nodded to the woman. "Yes, I'm headed east."

"Montana?"

"Idaho, actually."

"Could we talk a minute?"

Frankie felt a surge of irritation. She'd been on the road for nearly two hours, and she was already weary. She'd stopped at the rest area outside the Dalles, hoping there'd be a coffee stand, but the welcome station was closed. It was 8:30 and the end-of-August dark was coming on. But she didn't want to be rude, and what difference would a few minutes make anyway? She could be kind to this woman. Maybe it would soften her heart toward Lola.

The woman followed Frankie out of the rest room and they stood next to the big map display. She took a small flask out of her Coach bag and took a swig. The fumes reached Frankie and a familiar irritation flashed through her. She pushed it down. A minute passed, maybe more, and the woman said nothing, just fidgeted with her handbag.

Finally, Frankie said, "What is it, ma'am?"

There was no response. Frankie turned away to leave, and the woman gripped her arm, then pulled her hand back.

"Please," she said. "Please."

Frankie turned back toward her.

"I'm not a bad person," said the woman. "I just can't do it." She didn't look at Frankie as she said this. Instead she looked at her hands, hands of loose skin and summers in the sun that were much older than her face. "I just can't do it."

"I don't know what you're talking about. I don't know how . . ." Frankie sighed. "How can I help you?"

"Thank you, dear," the woman said, and she touched Frankie's arm again. Then she reached into her bag and took out a blue velvet pouch and a manila envelope and handed them to Frankie. "Wait here. And thanks." She paused and looked as if she were going to say something more but she didn't. Instead she stepped off the curb and hurried across the wide parking lot to a late-model Volvo, the only other car in sight.

Frankie looked down at what the woman had handed her. The pouch was full, a bit heavy. It felt stuffed with paper and in the bottom something hard, round and hard. The thin manila envelope was blank on both sides and sealed with clear tape. She pushed her curiosity aside and looked across the pavement. The car was a nondescript color, beige or tan, and fading even more into the gathering gloom.

The woman stood next to the Volvo talking to a boy, who yawned and rubbed his eyes. She handed him a dark gym bag that looked as big as he was. Then she took him by the shoulders, turned him toward Frankie, and gave him a push. He moved slowly, and Frankie watched him struggling with the bag. Then she realized the woman wasn't by her car any longer, and she saw the headlights come on.

Frankie hesitated for just a moment, unsure. Then she could see what was happening and she started across the parking lot, yelling, "Hey! Wait! What are you doing?" She ran past the boy but the woman had already pulled away and was speeding up. Frankie watched the taillights fade as the woman drove onto the freeway. And then she was alone in the parking lot with the boy.

The dark was full on now and the lights from the rest stop shone down on the boy's dark hair. His face was in shadow but she could feel him watching her as she crossed the pavement. He had set the bag down and had stepped through the straps so no one could snatch it away. As she moved closer, he sat down on the bag.

She walked up slowly and sat down on the curb a little distance away from him. "I'm Frankie," she said, holding out her hand.

After a moment, he held out his and she shook it. It was small, soft, no real grip. He hasn't learned how to do that yet, she thought. "What's your name?"

“Teroy.”

“Nice to meet you, Leroy.”

“It’s Teroy,” the boy said, spitting out the T.

“Sorry, Teroy. I’ll bet that happens to you a lot.” Frankie had to will herself to stay in this conversation. Her mind wanted to dart off in a dozen directions, most of them impossibly complicated.

“Yeah, that’s okay.” He stared at his shoes. Frankie looked at them, too. They were new. Nikes.

Frankie glanced at the rest of him. He was a thin, wiry boy but with a trace of baby still in the cheeks and jaw. He had dark eyes, long lashes. Something about the eyes reminded her of the older woman, but maybe she was just hoping. His brown hair, straight and silky, was cut well. His clothes were new and the right size, but somehow they didn’t fit him. Frankie wondered if the Volvo woman had picked these out for him, if he’d had no choice about that either. The skin on his face and hands looked brown in the odd light from above, but whether from summer tan or heritage, she couldn’t tell.

“What’s your last name?” she asked.

“Thompson,” he said, the voice still low and almost muffled.

“Is that your mom’s name, too?”

He shook his head.

“Your dad’s then?”

The kid just looked at her and she couldn’t read his face. She nodded at him.

“How old are you?”

“Nine.”

Frankie looked around. Behind her, past the restrooms, were a couple of trucks parked sideways but there were no cab lights. She didn’t want to wake a sleeping trucker. She waited another moment, looked over at the boy, and said, “It’s getting cool, Teroy. Do you think we could get in my car? It’ll be a little warmer there.”

A look she couldn’t read crossed his face and some of the horrors that happened to kids these days swirled through her mind.

“Hey,” she said as lightly as she could. “I don’t have a bag to sit on and my butt’s getting sore. My car’s got comfy seats.”

The boy grinned at that, just a little, and then shrugged his shoulders and stood up in that effortless way kids do.

Frankie stood, too, though with more effort, and they walked over to her old Civic. She unlocked the passenger side and the boy pulled on the seat to get in the back.

“Don’t you want to sit by me?”

He shook his head.

“Okay,” she said and released the seat catch. The boy muscled the bag in first and climbed in after it.

Frankie went around to the other side and got in behind the wheel. Then she remembered the pouch and the envelope and she went back to where they’d been sitting and retrieved them off the pavement.

Back in the car, she turned as best she could to look at the boy behind her. “Can I ask you something?”

He nodded.

“Who was that woman? The one you came here with.”

“Mrs. Louise.” The boy’s voice was even softer than it had been before.

“Is she related to you?”

The boy shrugged.

“Yes? No?” Frankie tried not to sound impatient.

He shrugged again. “I don’t know.”

“Okay. Were you living with Mrs. Louise?”

He nodded.

“Did you live with her a long time?”

He shrugged.

“Is she your grandmother?”

He shook his head.

Frankie decided to see what would happen if she waited. So she waited and continued to look at the boy. Finally, he said, “She said she wasn’t related to me. That she wasn’t related to anybody like me.”

“Honey, do you know where your parents are? Your mom or your dad?”

He shook his head.

“Who took you to be with Mrs. Louise?”

“My mom.”

“How long ago?”

She saw his chest heave and then a flash of something in his eyes—in an adult, it would have been bitterness. “A lot of nights,” he said finally.

“Okay, Teroy. Just one more question. What did Mrs. Louise say to you when you got out of the car?”

The boy’s face brightened just a little. “That you’re a friend of my mom’s and that you will take me to her.”

Frankie nodded and turned back to the wheel. “Why don’t you get some sleep now,” she said over her shoulder and she started the car.

By the time they got on the road, it was a bit past nine and when she looked back, the boy had fallen asleep anchored to his bag. For the first half hour, Frankie let the anger and

bewilderment wash over her. She had only unkind thoughts for Mrs. Louise, for the boy's mother, for his father. How do you just dump a kid on a stranger? She could have been some molester, some sex trafficker, some child slaver. She could have refused to take him and left him at the truck stop, at the mercy of someone else.

She realized she hadn't asked the boy if he were hungry or thirsty or even if he needed to go to the bathroom. For a brief moment, she turned the anger on herself. She'd only thought to ask questions, to solve the problem. She'd seen the kid as a problem, just as she'd seen the woman as a problem, as an obstacle in her way. Not as someone who was suffering. How could the kid not be suffering? She might not know much about kids but she knew about abandonment, Frankie did. She knew about suffering. She told herself that was why she'd put the kid in the car, and that was why she wasn't stopping at a police station to turn him over to someone else.

The car clock turned 10:00 and she felt a deep pain in her chest. She wanted to call George, call Dimitri, but even if that were possible, and it wasn't, none of them would get the irony of this. A child thrust upon her as she went east to confront her most intimate model of bad parenting. She could call Callie but advice was not something they had ever shared.

She crossed the Columbia at Biggs and headed east along the river, then north. She was ready to stop about 10:30 but the motel signs in the small towns, already few and far between, all said no, and so they didn't stop until Pasco, where a bored clerk at the Holiday Inn took her credit card and gave her a key without even the usual hint of corporate politeness.

She'd locked the boy in the car. He was still sleeping when she came back so she got her bag and computer out of the trunk and took them to the room, all the while unsure that her choices were the right ones, all the while worried someone would snatch him away. But he was there when she went back, sleepy and docile, and he stood by the car as she pulled his bag out. It didn't weigh all that much and a great sadness washed over her. Then she put her arm around him and they went up to the room.

While he was in the bathroom, she wondered again if she should feed him but he said no when he came out, and he put the bag next to him on the bed nearest the windows, crawled under the bedspread fully clothed, and was soon fast asleep again.

She waited a few minutes, sitting there on the edge of the other bed, watching him sleep. Then she gently pulled his trainers off, tucked his feet back under the bedspread, and went down the hall for a soda and a bag of cheese curls from the vending machine. Once back in the room, she sat down at the small round table in the corner and pulled the velvet pouch and the manila envelope out of her purse.

She ate the cheese curls slowly, pulling one from the bag at a time and chewing thoughtfully. She took small sips of the soda and put the bottle back down between each sip. She'd learned to soothe herself this way when the anxiety ran high. Curiosity and fear were doing a tug-of-war in her chest. She wanted to know and she didn't want to know what

was expected, for that's the way it felt. Expectation. Responsibility. Things that always seemed to land on her.

Then the cheese curls were gone and there were only a couple of sips of soda left. She thought about going back to the vending machine but she let the urge pass, then dredged up her courage and picked up the velvet pouch. The blue cords had been tightly knotted and she worked them free. From the mouth of the pouch, she pulled out a thick wad of money folded in half. On the outside was a hefty layer of old, worn bills, an assortment of fifties, twenties, and tens. It looked like someone's savings. In the middle of that were crisp new thousand-dollar bills, ten of them. She counted them all and it came to \$14,682. A jumble of questions played around in her mind but they told her nothing.

She picked up the pouch again and up-ended it. Wrapped in dingy pink tissue paper was a heavy gold locket about the size of a silver dollar. She opened it. On the left side was a snapshot of a teenager with her arms around a shaggy mutt. The girl was mugging for the camera, and she looked happy. Frankie looked for a resemblance to the boy but nothing was evident. On the other side of the locket was a grainy black-and-white cutout from a magazine of a young Kevin Bacon.

She picked up the manila envelope. It felt wrong to tear it open, and so she got her manicure scissors and carefully slit the tape. Inside was a folded sheet of yellow legal-pad paper with Henry Lee printed in a neat hand and an address in Victor, Montana. Under the address was a number written like a social security number: three digits, two digits, four digits. She put the papers back in the manila envelope. She wanted a walk in the fresh air to clear her head. But she didn't know the town, she didn't know the neighborhood, and she didn't want to leave the boy alone in case he woke up and needed her. So she used the toilet, brushed her teeth, climbed into the other bed. She was already exhausted from the trip, and it had barely started. She realized she was exhausted from the thought of the days ahead that she hadn't lived through yet.

Frankie woke with a start. Next to her on the bed against her flank was Teroy, curled into as small a space as possible. In one hand, he held a Transformers action figure. In the other, a handgun.

Her heart pounded in her chest and in her ears. Frankie took a deep breath, reached over, and very gently took the gun from Teroy's hand. He shifted in his sleep, mumbled something she couldn't get, then curled in on himself again.

Outside the night was coming to a close.

The gun was not a revolver, but one with a clip of bullets. Frankie had never held a gun before and she wasn't sure how to get the clip out of it or if the safety was on. She got up and set the gun down on the table and turned on her computer. Before long, she found a site that

could tell her what to do. Then she buried the clip in her suitcase and put the gun in her big computer bag.

His duffel was still on the other bed. It gaped open. She hadn't wanted to go through Teroy's bag. Everybody deserves privacy. But now she knew she had to. She pulled it between her and the boy so she could keep an eye on him and then she carefully pulled out the contents. Six pairs of neatly folded white underpants. Six neatly folded t-shirts in red, blue, and green. Two pairs of jeans. Six pairs of athletic socks. A red-and-blue striped sweater. A navy fleece jacket. The clothes were all new, stiff from no wear. A well-thumbed Ultimate Spiderman graphic novel. A clear plastic toiletries kit with toothpaste, electric toothbrush, floss, shampoo, and two bottles of Flintstone vitamins. There was a cloth wallet with fifty dollars in it and a picture of the girl from the locket, though she was older, maybe mid-teens. Again she was clowning for the camera but this time it looked forced. In the duffel there was also a small stuffed dog, old, very worn. Not a toy from Teroy's childhood. Maybe the girl's? And a notebook with a ballpoint pen in the spiral. It contained an assortment of drawings: airplanes, cars, trucks, something that resembled the Transformers toy clutched in the boy's hand. On the front his name was printed: T. Roy Thompson. Now she knew how to spell his name. Somehow that made him more real to her.

There were no more weapons.

She put everything carefully back in the bag. She wasn't going to pretend to T. Roy that she hadn't looked but she wanted to treat his things with respect. She put the bag back in the center of the empty bed.

The clock read 5:54. No going back to bed now. She made tea water in the coffeemaker in the bathroom and sat down again at her computer. There was an email from Callie. The subject line read "WTF?" She passed that by and opened a couple of messages from editing clients. Projects if she wanted them. She didn't, but she needed them. Work had been slow the last month and if she didn't work, she didn't make money. So she said yes and tried to figure out a deadline that would work and how she could do the work from the road.

At last, she turned to her sister's email. Callie had only been in Kellogg a day and in that time, she'd become fifteen again. *Where the fuck are you? I need you to get here now. Time has not mellowed the bitch. She's impossible.*

Frankie deleted the message without replying. Time enough to deal with Callie—and with Lola. She went to take a shower. The boy was still asleep when she came out, so she made more tea and sat in the armchair, meditated, and thought about nothing at all.

The toilet flushing woke her. The bathroom door was closed and Frankie saw that the duffel was open. Then she heard the sound of the electric toothbrush. A bit of relief washed over her although she couldn't have explained why.

"Good morning," she said when he came out.

He nodded at her.

"I'm a morning person. How about you? Are you rarin' to go in the morning or does it take a while?"

"Takes a while," he said.

"Got it. Are you hungry? Let's go downstairs and see what they have."

He nodded again and picked up the Transformers toy.

An hour later, they'd packed and checked out. It was just past ten and they had another two hundred miles to drive. Frankie asked the desk clerk about a toy store, and they stopped and she bought a doodling book for T. Roy and some comic books. She would probably have given him anything he wanted, but he wouldn't choose so she guessed at what might appeal to him.

Once in the car, she hoped he would settle in. Secretly, she hoped he would sleep again. He was so much easier while he slept. Of course, she knew that was unrealistic. And she knew some of it was because she wanted to sleep again herself. Sleep was preferable to the day that lay ahead.

They followed the I-90 signs out of town and were soon on the road. The traffic was light with occasional caravans of semis. Again, T. Roy had wanted to sit in the back and he spread out the new books.

"Do you get carsick reading?" she asked him.

He shook his head.

"Okay, well, if you need anything, let me know." She could see his eyes in the rearview mirror.

He nodded this time, then bit his lip. "Are we going to find my mom today?"

"Not today, T. Roy. Problem is we don't know exactly where she is. It's going to take some sleuthing to find her. Do you know what sleuthing is?"

He shook his head again.

"Well, you know what a detective is, right?" She held his eyes in the rearview mirror.

"Well, sleuthing is what they do. They gather clues and pieces of information and then solve the puzzle. I'm going to need you to be my assistant detective, okay?" She saw a glimmer of interest in his eyes.

"Okay," he said.

They were quiet then for a few miles and she put her mind on the road ahead. Then he spoke again. "Where are we going now?"

"We're going to see my mom. I haven't seen her in a long time, and she's sick."

The boy was quiet a long moment and then he said, "Did she leave you when you were little?"

Frankie looked into his eyes in the mirror. "Yes," she said. "Not as little as you but yes, she left me."

“How old were you when she went away?”

“Sixteen.”