

HIDDEN CROSSING

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Hidden Crossing

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*To my one and only guy whose Will you? on
December 25, 1978, launched me on 22 years (and
counting) heaped up and running over with laughter
and love, adventures and celebrations—and just
enough goofiness to keep fun a daily event.*

*To Jill, Gary, and Loretta—three people who know
first-hand the difference a picture can make.*

CHAPTER 1



Luke heard the café's back door open behind him and grinned lazily back over his shoulder. Patting a spot beside him on the top step of the loading dock, he crooned, “*Hey, good-lookin’—whatcha got...*”

“Please don’t even let the word ‘cooking’ cross your lips!” Cate begged. “Here; have a mid-morning jolt of caffeine.” Offering him a steaming cup and a smile that matched his, inch for inch, she sank down next to him with a contented sigh.

Any passerby who wondered what Luke Larson and Cate Jones had to grin about obviously didn’t live in Prairie Rose, North Dakota. Almost any of the 300 citizens could have brought the uninformed up to speed about that sizzling story.

Back in May, Luke had sidled up to the counter at Cate’s Café and claimed a stool; nothing unusual about that. But, he had barely grazed the red vinyl when his eyes locked with Cate’s and, before anyone could say *Boo*, he had set the stool spinning and followed Cate at bullet-speed through the swinging doors. What happened next set Main Street buzzing for days: *You won’t believe this: Luke just kissed Cate! Didn’t see it, but we all heard it.*

There had been countless Cate-and-Luke kisses twenty-plus years ago that had sprung from youth’s hot passion. But the kiss last month was the stuff legends are made of. Wags joked that Fred Becker should

have run that week's *Prairie Rose Chronicle* with the headline: THE KISS! because it was all anyone was talking about, anyhow.

Now, luxuriating in the fresh morning air that the month of June does so well on the Great Plains, Cate tucked her hand into the crook of Luke's elbow and leaned her head against his shoulder. "It's getting wild around here already, isn't it? Who would think re-opening a golf course could generate this much activity?"

"That happens when you add a celebrity to the mix—people tend to show up." He set his coffee mug aside and reached for her hand.

They sat in companionable silence, fingers entwined, for several moments. No words were spoken; no words were necessary. Running their successful businesses for the past two decades paled compared to what had occurred two days ago. That was June 23—the day Luke's *Will you?* met up with Cate's *Yes!* and suddenly there was nothing *same-old-same-old* for the owners of Larson's Grocery and Cate's Café anymore.

Luke loosened his grasp and splayed Cate's fingers across his palm. The newest engagement ring in town lived up to the jeweler's promise of drama and dazzle, sparkle and fire. "Nice ring, huh?" There was that grin again, boomeranging from one face to the other.

"What ring? Oh, this one?" she asked playfully. "I put a quarter in a gumball machine and out it popped! Cool, huh?" She nudged his ribs with her elbow and waggled her fingers, but quickly turned serious. "Luke, what if I lose the stone? My hands get such rough treatment all day long." She twisted the ring and then pressed her hand protectively under her chin. "If we just wore wedding bands, it would be safer."

"If anything happens to the diamond, we'll deal with it. Meanwhile, I like seeing it on your finger after all these years..." Cate knew instantly that Luke's eyes had misted over, as had hers.

Kitchen noises intruded on the moment. Luke cleared his throat. "Sounds busy in there, even for a Monday-morning crowd."

“Nothing Lucy can’t handle for a few more minutes.” A jaw-cracking yawn interrupted Cate’s words. “Sorry; I can’t believe how tired I am,” she said sheepishly.

“I should buckle you into my jalopy and whisk you out of town for a ride in the country, far away from ovens and kettles. That would rejuvenate you!”

“And just when would that ride be? *After* your meat, dairy, produce, and what-ever-else delivery guys get here? Or maybe *before* you meet with the Friday night entertainment committee? Or *during* the time you’re delivering the order for the Catholic Guild’s box-lunch supplies? Good grief, Luke, your schedule today is wretched, and I bet I don’t even know the half of it!”

“Most of it is, but not this part.” He drew her closer for a long and tantalizing coffee-flavored kiss.

She ran her tongue over her lips and allowed her eyes to drift shut. “Wow, who needs rides in the country? *That* brought me around!”

“I thought it might.” Luke trailed his finger down the bridge of Cate’s nose to let his fingertip trace her lips. “Any ideas on when the Jones-to-Larson name change might happen?”

“Hmmm, nothing new since the last time you asked, which I believe was last night!” Cate teased gently, knowing that Luke’s patience with her was as steady as everything else about him, but with the stress of the week ahead, even the Rock of Gibraltar would wobble. “It’s a big leap we’re making, Luke, even though we’ve known each other since our mothers pushed us around town in strollers. We’ve still got a few kinks to resolve.”

Luke read all she did not say in her eyes and heard the echo in his heart. He enclosed her in a one-armed hug and brushed his lips against her ear. “And we’ll work through them all. Meanwhile, think about a wedding over Thanksgiving. Doesn’t that holiday say it all for us?”

Cate nodded vaguely as a drum roll surged through her. Only when she felt a rhythmic pulse rumbling beneath the steps did she realize it

wasn't her physical response to Luke's question or his close proximity. "What is *that*?" she asked incredulously.

Luke chuckled. "You thought you'd felt the earth move under your feet, like the old Carole King song, huh? Nope; that's the power and sound of a Porsche engine! Head back inside and you'll learn more, I guarantee. Unfortunately, I'll miss it all because I need to get back to the store." He pulled his favorite five-foot-six-inch woman up from the step, cupped her chin and bent to kiss her on the tip of her nose before he headed down the alley, whistling.

Cate stared after him, catching snatches of the hit song they'd played top-volume on the car radio 'way-back-when as they'd raised dust on country roads. *A Porsche?* She flung open the screen door and entered the café kitchen. Automatically sliding the two cups onto the dirty-dish cart, she snagged her apron without breaking her stride. As she breezed past an astonished Lucy, the reverberations lingered in the air and Cate could have sworn she heard pans rattling on the stove. She pushed the divided swinging doors open and froze in place.

Propping one door open with her foot, she retied her apron and mentally absorbed two details. First, the same customers from fifteen minutes earlier still lolled around the tables, and second, *Whoa! Who on earth is this dude?* A fellow with MONEY written all over his six-foot-plus frame stood on the threshold. Glancing past his broad shoulders, Cate saw a sleek and sexy silver convertible—the likes of which had never before angle-parked on any street in this county.

Except for random cup-spoon-saucer noises, the café was eerily quiet. Cate gulped inwardly and said, "Welcome! If you're interested in breakfast, the menu's on the wall." She tipped her head in the direction of the whiteboard announcing the daily specials: French toast/maple syrup 3 for \$1.95; Green peppers/sausage egg-bake w/ biscuit \$2.95; Pancakes/strawberries 3 for \$1.75.

He might have been the predictable collection of skin and hair holding bones and muscles together, but every eye followed his journey

between tables to the counter as if God had somehow improved on His age-old pattern for assembling a human being when creating this one. Watching him, Cate realized that some people walk, and others *walk*. This young man owned whatever space of earth he occupied at the moment. He oozed self-confidence and virility, even on a sleepy Monday morning.

“Thanks, but I’ll just have a tall caffe mocha, no, better make that a grande caffe latte, half decaf—oh, let’s live a little and go with a venti frappuccino, light.” He stroked a moustache that added just the right touch of male vanity to his finely chiseled features.

Cate blinked at him and felt an odd tightening around her temples as she tried to pull a recognizable request out of the mish-mash she had just heard. “How ‘bout a cup of good old-fashioned coffee?” she asked and turned to wash her hands at the sink behind the counter. “It’s a fresh pot,” she added.

“Espresso?” Seeing Cate shake her head, he improvised as he chose a stool. “Maybe a cappuccino?”

“Tell you what: try what I’ve got and if you don’t like it, there’s no charge.”

The young man’s forehead furrowed, and then he offered a smile as blinding as the sunspray shooting off the windshield of his car. “Sure; why not?”

Cate performed a trick-of-her-trade—the mid-air pour without a wasted drop—and slid the sugar and creamer a few inches closer. He added both in precise measurements and inspected the spoon before he stirred with it. The air around him crackled with unasked questions as people shifted subtly in their seats to get better glimpses either of this man or his automobile.

Not one man in the room was personally acquainted with slacks that sported a crease like this young fellow’s. And each man present would have mortgaged the home place just to be able to zoom up and down the highway in *that* beauty sitting on the curb. Or even just the chance

to be *seen* sitting in it, right hand dangling ever-so-lightly off the steering wheel and left arm resting along the window's edge while he waited for the Missus to finish shopping. No, hold it right there—this wasn't a car that a guy sat in to *wait* for anybody; this was a *Come on, babe. Hop to it, let's go* set of wheels.

Each woman sipping coffee knew a vibrant yellow shirt like this stranger's hadn't been near her Maytag, no matter which detergent she used. And every female on the premises wondered if her hairspray would hold if this hunk of manly pheromones offered her a fast ride in his shiny car with its top down. Because she'd go. *Oh, Lordy, yes!* He would hold open the door for her and wait until she got tucked in. They'd hardly be away from the curb before he would bring her hand up to his lips and...*Mercy!* Women surreptitiously fanned and patted their faces and necks, hoping they weren't experiencing a full-blown hot flash.

And then there was the matter of his shoes: the only time footwear that fancy walked along the streets of Prairie Rose, it was either Prom Night or somebody's wedding. Tasseled loafers, they were, made of soft-looking leather like expensive gloves. All around the room, scuffed work boots and serviceable sneakers disappeared under tables and chairs.

Cate collected her wits and eased into the awkward silence. "I'm Cate Jones and that's Frank Wilson, our town barber, at the other end of the counter. Frank and Helen own the Clip and Curl."

The stranger nodded and smiled faintly. Instantly, Cate knew that after thousands of mornings of ordering coffee to-go, introductions were even more disconcerting for this fellow than striking out on his beverage-of-choice. He obviously came from a place where nobody knows your name and where the counter crew hands over those *grande-frappy* things without batting an eye and customers drop change in a greedy little jar labeled TIPS.

The barber's fine-tuned gift of gab finally exerted itself. "How ya doin'?" It wasn't much, but it was the best Frank could do under the

circumstances. He'd already gotten an eyeful of the young man's pleat-front trousers. Sneaking peeks at the shirt that only needed a silk tie to make it perfect, Frank wondered idly if he could still tie a Windsor knot. He frowned at the precisely rolled-up cuffs. He'd bet that was no farmer's tan, either—it spoke of sandy beaches and full-rigged sailboats and everything else Frank dreamed of all winter and never saw.

Then there was the matter of the haircut—it was a style that made Frank nervous, doubtful that he could duplicate it if called upon to do so. All those sappy magazines Helen insisted they order for the Clip and Curl talked about *finesse*, but looking at this guy with his feather-cut brown hair with subtle auburn highlights, Frank knew he would see this face with its perfectly trimmed moustache whenever he heard the word from now on.

The fellow's fingernails were blunt-cut like every other guy's in town, but had a look that could only mean *manicure*. Frank took another bite of coffeecake, his body language shouting his desire to be any place but here. Suddenly, he was eager to drop a towel around a familiar neck and clip and buzz away everything that didn't look like a sensible North Dakota haircut.

"I'm Justin Campbell-Lampman. I'm staying at The Johanson House Bed and Breakfast Inn," the visitor volunteered.

Silence.

"How's that workin' out for you?" Frank asked, belatedly.

"Fine. It's very comfortable."

Silence.

"How long you plannin' to stay?"

"Haven't decided yet."

Silence. Justin Campbell-Lampman and Frank Wilson simultaneously ran dry on conversation.

Cate came to the rescue. "How did you hear about The Johanson House?"

“I saw an article somewhere, and then I logged on to BJ Kendall’s Website and got the details about him coming here for the re-opening of your golf course. I’m a huge fan of his, so I searched the Internet for places to stay, and here I am. BJ’s coming, right?”

Frank’s eyebrows arched. “Yeah, but you’re a bit early. Like five days.” He nodded at the wall. Next to the menu board hung the oversized Golden Plains Insurance Agency 2001 calendar with the red circle someone had drawn around June 30. “So he’s not here yet,” he said pointedly. “He lives in California.”

“Right. I just wanted to take a look around and make sure I got a room in town. How on earth did Prairie Rose land someone like BJ Kendall anyway?”

“He’s Tori Johanson’s personal friend. In fact, she performed his wedding when he married one of her childhood friends.” Noting Justin’s puzzled look, Cate added, “She’s *Reverend* Victoria—Tori—Johanson. She’s married to Doctor Alex Johanson, and it’s his grandparents’ house you’re staying in.”

It was a lot to follow and a bit weak on details for someone not part of the local action, but Justin tracked it well. “I see. But even so, it’s quite an accomplishment for a place this size.”

Frank wasn’t interested in defending Prairie Rose to Mister Finesse, so he waved a wordless farewell and headed for the cash register. He pulled a card out of a box, made a notation before replacing the card, and left the café.

“What did he just do?”

“Who? Frank?” Following the direction of Justin’s stare, Cate said, “Oh, he added to his tab.”

“His tab? People don’t pay?”

“Sure; but this way, they don’t need to wait around for me to make change or always have to carry cash. And I’m not about to start taking credit cards!”

“How do you know they’re writing down the right amount? And how do they know what things cost? Whatever Frank had isn’t even listed on the menu board.”

“People know, or they ask. Coffee is fifty cents, free refills; muffins, coffecake and such are always fifty cents. Not a lot of math involved. We keep it pretty simple.”

Justin Campbell-Lampman eyed the smoothest cup of coffee he’d had in a long time and took another swallow. He knew he had laced it with pure cream; he made a silent vow to never again tolerate anything called creamer that hadn’t spent time in an actual cow. “Fifty cents? You’re kidding, right? Do you know you could get two dollars a cup for this?”

Cate laughed outright. “Maybe wherever you’re from I could, but do you know how many cups of coffee I’d sell at that price around here?” She formed a zero with her thumb and index finger.

One of Justin’s two cell phones rang and he quickly pulled it out of the belt-held holster. During the second buzz, he glanced at the displayed number and frowned; after only the slightest hesitation, he punched the button that turned off the phone. He looked up and caught Cate’s mystified glance. “Sorry about that. It’s my business partner—except she’s calling the number she uses when she’s thinking of herself as something more. Well, I’m on vacation from work and women.”

All sorts of questions popped to mind, but Cate voted for safe rather than sorry. *This guy might be richer than God, but he’s dumber than dirt if he thinks merely ignoring a woman’s calls will get her off his back!* Stifling such thoughts, she asked, “How about a refill?”

“How on earth do you make any money?” he queried, holding up his cup without hesitation.

“I’ve got a corner on the market, you might say, plus, a very loyal customer base. And, from what they tell me, I’m not a half-bad cook.” At

that moment, Lucy entered from the kitchen bearing trays of baked goods.

A crisscross-crust deep-dish cherry pie, the morning's second pan of cinnamon-pecan rolls, a chocolate three-layer cake, and two dozen saucer-sized snickerdoodle cookies hooked Justin's attention. Cate could actually see his nostrils twitch; it had been a long time since she'd noted such an unguarded response to her culinary abilities.

"What time is lunch?"

"I'll change the menu board at eleven."

"I'll be back in hopes of getting a piece of that pie." He pulled out a slim monogrammed leather wallet and handed Cate a bill. "Can you change this?"

"Do you have anything smaller? I don't want to clean out my cash drawer this early in the day."

"I left my small change and dollar bills on the chiffonier in my room this morning. Wait, I may have some quarters out in the car left over from the toll booths."

"Nah, don't worry about it. If you're around for lunch, you can pay then, or stop by sometime over the weekend."

"You'll trust me? You don't even know me."

Cate grinned. "I think I can absorb a fifty-cent loss if you split town! And about that pie? I'll save you a piece through the noon hour, but I'll let it go for the afternoon coffee crowd. If you're planning on lunch, get here early because today's soup is Curried Broccoli Cheddar which is a local favorite and goes awfully well with pie."

Justin looked at her thoughtfully and then swung the stool around and faced a roomful of people who abruptly became very interested in the light fixtures or the condiment baskets in the center of each table. He strolled by the table where Lewis and Mitchell hurriedly hid behind the latest issue of the *Prairie Rose Chronicle*. He paused to ask, "Excuse me; can either of you gentlemen tell me where I could get a copy of the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post* this morning?"

Mitchell lowered the paper and dipped his head to allow a look over the rim of his reading glasses. He prided himself on having lived an interesting life—what with teaching himself how to wiggle his ears, and possessing the ability to whistle a duet with himself, and seeing combat during WWII, and falling off the roof of his barn and living to tell about it. But this fellow had just posed a question that, to Mitchell's knowledge, had never been asked within the borders of his hometown. Yes, sir; Mitchell now had a stellar addition to his repertoire of interesting tales. Meanwhile, the question hung in the air. "Maybe Williston," he responded with weak assurance.

"Williston's? Is that a drug store?"

"No, Williston. The town. Down the road a piece."

"Which way do I turn once I hit the dirt road?"

Lewis stiffened. "You'll go west; a left turn. On the *gravel* road. It's not a dirt road."

"Oh." Justin stuck a thumb in the unbelievably trim waistband behind a hand-tooled leather belt and rocked back slightly on the heels of those enviable shoes. "Well, what's that you're reading?"

"Local paper." Mitchell was *this close* to offering to share his newspaper when the next question blew in and shut down his generosity like an ice storm snaps power-lines.

"Does it have national news or a financial report in it?"

"Of course," Mitchell said staunchly, trying to recall exactly what was on the pages he held. "Most times, the news is local, but that's why we read it."

Justin nodded contemplatively. "Mind if I join you?"

Lewis and Mitchell looked at each other with something between fear and fascination. "Sure, have a seat."

Justin pulled back a chair and brushed off a crumb before sitting down. "I'm interested in how intelligent people keep current on national news in a small town."

It had been some time since anyone had labeled the two retired men *intelligent* and, even though it would be argued *ad nauseam* over the ensuing months whether or not Justin had applied the term to them, Mitchell and Lewis unconsciously squared their shoulders. “Well now, there’s your TV news, of course.” A toothpick bobbed in Mitchell’s mouth.

“Yes sir, with a high antennae or one of them satellite dishes, you can get real good reception and bring in Canadian stations. That’d be international news,” Lewis added helpfully.

Justin’s apparent interest in their answers pleased the men; they’d obviously said something thought-provoking. But when he spoke again, they looked at each other with bewilderment that increased the longer he talked. “I survived life for a while in the five-and-dime and then headed to the Big Apple, and I suppose you could call me a dot-com-kid, but I’ll tell you the egoboo isn’t where it’s at for me anymore. You know, living in a place where the local news is what’s important, that intrigues me.”

Had Justin Campbell-Lampman turned the air blue with curses, it would not have as effectively stunned all within hearing distance. *Five-and-dime? Dockommiekid? Ego-what?* Whereas stabs of unidentified jealousy had lurked in several hearts around the room when Justin had passed right by their tables, there was hardly a person who now didn’t think *Sure glad he didn’t sit with me!*

Lewis scratched his cheek and murmured, “I hear ya.”

“Granted, there’s significant money if you’re willing to live your life on the nerd birds and take a chance that a ladder bypass will work out, but that’s about as scary as banking on cyber squatting coming through for you.”

It was Mitchell’s turn up to bat. He adjusted a suspender, letting it snap back into place. “That’s for sure.”

Justin leaned forward and looked earnestly into Mitchell’s eyes. “I tell you, coming here has made me realize how dangerously close I’ve come

to turning into a scrounger. In just twenty-four hours, I'm seeing my life through a different lens."

"You don't say?" Mitchell said.

"Granted, I realized I was signing on with a youth grinder back at the beginning, but then I got a lucky break and landed a place on the NYC scene, and now I've got everything I've always dreamed of—in triplicate. Naturally, some say I figured I was better than I am, but I'm already showing them. I am! And now..." he waved his hand vaguely, "I land in a town where there's not a ticker tape in sight, and you know what? Life is fine! It really is."

Mitchell rolled up his newspaper and stuck it beneath his chair. He looked at Lewis who was staring blankly at their tablemate and nudged his knee under the table. Lewis snapped to attention and said, "You've done a bit of thinking," in an attempt to sooth the obviously agitated young man.

Justin ran his fingers through his picture-perfect hair, each strand of which immediately fell back into place. "Even though I'm not aware of what your occupations are, I'd bet I could learn quite a bit if I hung around with you. And that's what's missing when you deal with post-IPO millionaires."

Lewis cleared his throat, quickly turning that into an outright cough. *Post-eye post office millionaires?* "Hmmm." He quickly sipped coffee.

Justin pulled a napkin out of the metal holder and absentmindedly rolled it into a tight ball. "They're so focused and self-centered on their climb to success that if you get in their way or, God forbid, hope they'll mentor you, forget it! Sure, they've got tickets to the Met and invitations to all the headline parties just because they're bringing down the seven-figures, but you find yourself wondering if hanging with big names is really what it's all about. You know what I mean?"

Justin's audience of two promptly pasted earnest, sympathetic expressions on their faces and nodded in unison.

“Okay, maybe I’m just a transplanted Silicon Valleyite, but I’m well on my way and I’ve seen my company’s name in the financial pages’ headlines over the past two years. Not to brag, but *Time* gave me several column inches—and the company’s getting some serious look-see from the powers-that-be. Right from the beginning, I landed a start-up angel and we worked the numbers and put in the hours and now, I’ll admit it—it’s sweet.” Justin clenched and unclenched his fists and abruptly reached for another napkin and shredded it.

“Hmm, that’s something.” Mitchell tapped his fingers rhythmically on the tabletop. “*Time* magazine. That’s a big one.”

“In just four years, I’ve seen the bottom line fly, and without naming figures, I’m doing fine. My family has believed in me ever since I cut my first deal back when I was just a kid and they’re behind me one-hundred-and-ten percent, but I’ve really made it on my own and without turning into either a parasite or a cave dweller; neither one is the way I want to live.”

Lewis had turned glassy-eyed, so Mitchell coughed and searched the shadows of his mental fog for something luminous and memorable to say, finally landing on “Well, who would?”

“It’s so good to talk with people who...” Abruptly, the young fellow emitted a sound between an exclamation and a gasp. He struck his palm against his forehead and erupted from his chair. “I. Am. Sorry.” Each word swelled with deep emotion. “I interrupt your day and then don’t even introduce myself. Please forgive my temporary lack of social graces.” He extended his hand. “Justin Campbell-Lampman,” he said, completely unaware that no one within spitting distance had missed a word he’d said in the past half hour.

His tablemates scrambled to their feet, requiring others at tables nearby to quickly right their tottering chairs. “I’m Mitchell Young and this fellow is Lewis Clifton. It’s been nice talking with you.”

Justin shook their hands with a firm grip, clasping his left hand over the joined right hands each time. “The pleasure’s all mine. Thanks for

taking time to talk, Lewis and Mitchell. You know, I'm glad I came to Prairie Rose as early as I did. You're good people here. I'd like to spend more time with both of you, if you can fit me into your schedules." With that, he left the café, but not before Lewis noted a hint of moisture at the corners of his eyes—yet another detail to replay during future contemplation and discussion around café tables.

Everyone close enough to the windows or doorway watched Justin walk to his car. The door glided open like honey dripping off a hot knife. The driver's seat hugged him like one of those leather Scandinavian chairs in the furniture store in Bismarck. He fastened his seatbelt, brought a pair of reflective sunglasses out of some hidden cavern on the dashboard and parked them on the bridge of his tanned nose.

He started the engine and let it idle for a moment, setting quite a few heartbeats racing in the café. He then wrapped his left hand around the steering wheel, shifted into reverse and backed away from the curb with the grace of a bird taking flight. A cloud of Kenny G's magical saxophone floated out of speakers recessed in the leather interior just as he shifted into first gear and disappeared from sight. A collective masculine sigh wafted through the café.

"Seems like a nice young man," Mitchell said, at last.

"Did you understand a single thing he said?" someone asked.

"Barely a word," Lewis admitted slowly. "He seems quite unsettled."

Questions spilled out like coins escaping a holey pocket:

"Where'd he say he'd left his money? Something about chiffon pies, I thought he said, but that don't make much sense."

"Did he say he's from New York?"

"Could be, but isn't that Silicon-Valley place out in California?"

"He mentioned five-and-dime, so he must be an heir to the Woolworth fortunes."

"Well, he looks like he comes from society folks, don't he, now?"

"Did you see that belt he was wearing?"

“I’ll bet it was a money belt. Seen them in catalogs. You need one of them if you’re traveling with a lot of cash.”

“Five cows’ worth of leather in that car, for sure—and only room for two people, which don’t seem all that practical, now, does it?”

“What kind of vee-hicle was that, anyway?”

“My boy told me last night it’s a Porsche and he’s right—I saw it up close this morning outside the B&B. The top was up then, but I could still see inside.”

A whistle split the air. “A Porsche! *That* set him back a few bucks!”

“What kind of a last name is *Cambelapan* anyhow?”

“What’s he gonna do around here for the next five days, huh?”

“Was that a hundred he wanted you to break, Cate?”

Cate stiffened. “Not that it’s any of your business, Charlie, but no, it was a fifty. Which, I might add, isn’t all that uncommon for someone who is traveling.” Her words were the thread, her tone the knot that mended the conversational pocket’s hole in a blatant attempt to stifle the flow of questions.

“Was he asking for one of them coffee drinks that’s got booze in it?” asked Myra, never one to pick up quickly on clues.

“Nah,” Ed said, just loud enough to cover Cate’s snort of disgust, “He wanted an *ex*-presso—and that takes a special machine, not a regular coffee pot. I ordered an *ex*-presso once when I was out in Seattle seeing the kids. Like to tell you, it practically lifted my hat right off my head. I was jittery all day.”

“Well, you may be out the four-bits he owes you for coffee, Cate. That’s how those big city folks can be—he’s probably already forgotten about that whole conversation.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, Arnie. I don’t think he’ll ever forget it,” Cate said firmly and gathered up coffee pots to make refill rounds while Justin Campbell-Lampman drove into the countryside where the fields were green and growing and cream-producing cows meandered in the sun.