

Chapter 6



MEETING IRA

I was eating lunch in the cafeteria when Sister Mary Ellen tapped me on the shoulder and motioned me to follow her out to the hall. I broke out in a cold sweat when we took the dreaded turn in the hallway that led to the Mother Superior's office. A vision of a wooden paddle colliding with my backside came roaring back.

Since I hadn't been in another fight, I racked my brain to remember if I'd violated any other major rule that would warrant a trip to the office of the Mother Superior.

I felt a great sense of relief when Sister Mary Ellen whispered over her shoulder, "Don't worry, you're not in trouble."

If I'm not in trouble, maybe this is good news, I thought. Could my mom have finally come out of her two-month spell?"

"Thank you, Sister Mary Ellen," said Sister Mary Francis, dismissing the nun with a nod when we reached her office door. "Please come in, Miss Stone."

I came to an abrupt halt after the first couple of steps into the room, as I realized the Sister and I had company.

A thickly built, older-looking man stood up from his chair, holding a tan cowboy hat across his stomach and nervously shifting his weight from one foot to the other. His wrinkled, dark brown suit fit a bit too snug, and a recent boot polish couldn't hide the fact that his cowboy boots were well-used. A belt with a large silver buckle held up his pants. I thought his tie looked funny. Unlike the usual neckties worn in San Francisco, this tie had a single braided cord coming from each side of his shirt collar. The two cords were then joined and secured by a buffalo skull clasp. I would later learn it was called a Bolo tie, usually worn by ranchers and cowboys when they dressed up to go into town or to church.

But it didn't take long for my eyes to lock onto his face. I knew it wasn't good manners to stare, but I couldn't help myself. His face was broad and square, deeply tanned, and leathery. This man had obviously spent a lot of time out in the sun and wind. Unlike most of the older men that I had seen, he had a thick stand of hair that he wore in a high buzz cut. His hair color was somewhere between gray and pure white, and it looked like he'd used some type of butch wax to make it stand up. The full circle around his head where his hair was mashed down from the rim of his cowboy hat looked kind of silly, I thought. He had white, bushy eyebrows that framed his sharp blue eyes. I wouldn't say his eyes were cold; cool would maybe be a better term—stern and alert, for sure. His eye color was a deep blue. I had only been over the Golden Gate Bridge a few times, but his eyes reminded me of the blue water in the bay.

But the most distinguishing feature I couldn't peel my eyes from was the deep, crevice-like scar on the right side of his face. It started at the corner of his mouth and extended to the lower

part of the ear. As I looked closer, I realized that whatever had made the wound had also removed that little thing-a-ma-jig that hangs at the bottom of the ear—you know, the lower part of the earlobe. He had a hearing aid sticking out of that ear too, which the ear doctors did a lousy job of color matching.

“Maggie,” said Sister Mary Francis, interrupting my rude staring. “This gentleman here in front of you is Mr. Ira Stone. He is your grandfather, and he tells me you have never met. Mr. Stone, this is your granddaughter, Maggie Stone.”

You’ve heard the expression about getting a lump in your throat, right? Well, this wasn’t just a normal-sized lump—this was like trying to swallow a watermelon compared to a grape! I won’t lie, until my grandpa came up in the conversation with the doctors at the hospital, I hadn’t thought about him for quite some time. I wonder about my dad way more often than I do my grandfather.

Now, I should explain that my mom would clam up whenever I brought up either of them. When I was younger, I would ask, “What’s my dad’s name? Did he go to your school? Were you two girlfriend and boyfriend?” She would never answer my specific questions, and would only say, “He’s not a nice man. You’re better off not knowing anything about him.”

My mom would always answer questions about my grandma, but I ran into the brick wall again when asking about my grandpa. “Didn’t he like you? Did he get mad at you when you got pregnant with me? Did he kick you out of the house because of that? Why doesn’t he ever call or come to see us? Does he not like me?” I would repeatedly ask when I was younger.

But just like when inquiring about my dad, I would get the same dismissive answer. “Both your grandfather and I are stubborn and set in our ways. It’s for the best that we parted

ways, and that's all I'm going to say. I'm sorry that you don't have a father or grandparents in your life, but that's just the way it is. Worrying about people you've never known is a waste of time."

As thoughts of conversations with my mom raced through my head, I made an effort to swallow that watermelon lump in my throat and softly whispered, "Hello, sir."

I continued to stare at his scar before finally forcing myself to look into his eyes instead. He appeared to be as frightened as I was, nervously glancing back and forth between me and Sister Mary Francis before replying, "Hello there, young lady." His voice was deep and scary.

"Mr. Stone has come to take you to live with him at his ranch in, where is it you are located, Mr. Stone? Ah, yes—it's in Montana, correct?" inquired the Sister, then continuing in a tone that was kinder than usual when my grandpa confirmed with a nod. "You see, Maggie, you came to us because your mother got sick and could not take care of you. When no other family or friends came forward to petition to be your guardian, we accepted you into our St. Peter's Orphanage. But now, with your next-of-kin grandfather presenting, he has the right and legal authority to take you from here to live with him. Do you understand what I am saying?"

For the entire month I had been at the orphanage, I had dreamed of only one person coming to take me home—my mother. I just knew she would snap out of her spell, and we'd find a new apartment, and everything would return to just as it was before. I never wanted or expected anyone else to come and take me from the orphanage—certainly not this spooky-looking grandfather whom I had never met. And definitely not this man who never liked my mom or me enough to come and see us. I mean, he didn't even care enough to write us a letter

or make a phone call. Nope, I didn't like how this situation was shaping up—not one bit.

“Yes, Sister,” I answered, fully understanding but not liking what she was saying. I hated living at the orphanage, but at least it was in San Francisco and close to the hospital and to Cho, even though I only saw her occasionally since coming to St. Peter's. The thought of being suddenly uprooted and sent to Montana to live with a grandfather I had never even met was freaking me out. Heck, I wasn't even sure where Montana was, but remembered from Social Studies that it was a big state up by Canada, full of mountains, elk, moose, and bears. Wherever Montana was, I didn't want to go there. Not with this man, anyway.

Sister Mary Francis told my grandfather to stay in her office while she walked me to my bunk bed in the dormitory. The bottom two drawers of the chest that sat next to my bed were mine, and the Sister helped me pack my clothes and underwear into a garbage sack. I didn't have a suitcase.

The Sister then walked me and my grandpa out to his car, an older model, pea-green colored Ford that was shaped like a square box. Since I didn't think the Mother Superior even liked me, I was a little surprised when she gave me a hug and told Mr. Stone how lucky he was to be getting a girl as well-behaved and smart as I was.

I was even more surprised when she pulled me to the side as Mr. Stone was getting in his car and whispered, “Just so you know, I'm sorry I had to discipline you for fighting. I know Miss Cleery and those other two started the whole thing, and you were just defending yourself. But I had to apply the rules against fighting equally.”

With that surprise admission, I reluctantly climbed into the passenger seat and Mr. Stone drove me away from the St. Peter's

Orphanage and the hospital where my mother lay under the worst spell ever.

We had driven a few blocks in silence before I finally worked up enough nerve to speak. "Mr. Stone? What should I call you?"

"Well, young lady," he replied after a lengthy pause. "I guess you can call me Ira. That's what most folks back home in Montana call me. Yep, I reckon Ira will do just fine."

"Okay, Ira," I quickly replied. "Can we stop and see my mom before we leave?"

"Ahh, I stopped by the hospital to see her before I picked you up. I'm sorry, young lady, but she isn't well enough to see visitors."

I let that news sink in for a few minutes before turning back to face Ira. "Did you see her? Can she talk? She doesn't ever talk if she's still in one of her spells."

There was another long, uncomfortable pause before Ira finally responded. "No, no, she didn't speak. The doctor said it's like she's in a trance or something like that. They really don't seem to know what ails her and don't have any idea when she's gonna snap out of it, either. They just don't seem to have any answers—not now, anyway."

See what you've done? I scolded my mother silently as we passed within blocks of my old school and our apartment, then past Del's, Gable's and a park where Cho and I had played for hours on end. It hit me as suddenly as Sister Mary Ellen's paddle that those cherished visions of my old life with my mom were vanishing as quickly as the scenery from the window of Ira's Ford. *Please Mom, please wake up and tell this man with the scar to bring me back to you, bring me back home!*

"Can we stop at Cho's house, then?" I asked anxiously. "She's my best friend and she'll wonder where I've gone if I don't say goodbye."

“A-ahh,” he stuttered, “I’m afraid we can’t make any stops like that. I’m a-needin’ to hit the road and get back to the ranch,” Ira said. “It’s a 24-hour drive back to Montana and I can’t be expectin’ the neighbors to do my chores forever.”

I curled up my knees and snuggled so close to the passenger door that my cheek was pressed against the window. I pretended like I was napping, but I was too angry at this man—my so-called grandfather—to actually go to sleep. Tears began to slide down my cheeks. *So chores are more important than seeing my mom or my best friend? If not now, when will I get to see them again?* I also had a few thoughts for Ira. *Why now? Where have you been the last twelve years? What are you going to tell my mom when she wakes up and learns you’ve kidnapped me to your dumb ranch?*

We had been driving for what must have been a couple of hours and were well outside of San Francisco before I broke the uncomfortable silence. “Ira, we’ll keep checking on my mom, right? I mean, if she wakes up, I’m sure she will wonder where I am. I’m always there for her when she comes out of her spells. She’ll be worried if she doesn’t see me when she wakes up.”

“I promise I’ll keep in touch with the doctors, young lady,” the scar-faced man replied.

I won’t lie—I wasn’t sure if I believed he would. After all, until earlier that day, he hadn’t seen my mom since she ran away from home when she was sixteen. I was twelve, and he had just met me for the first time a few hours ago. So no, I wasn’t sure I believed him at all.