

MERCY CREEK by M.E. Browning

EXCERPT

Chapter One

Everyone had a story from that night. Some saw a man, others saw a girl, still others saw nothing at all but didn't want to squander the opportunity to be part of something larger than themselves. To varying degrees, they were all wrong. Only two people knew the full truth.

That Saturday, visitors to the county fair clustered in the dappled shade cast by carnival rides and rested on hay bales scattered like afterthoughts between games of chance and food booths, the soles of their shoes sticky with ice cream drips and spilled sodas.

Detective Jo Wyatt stepped into the shadow of the Hall of Mirrors to watch the crowd. She grabbed the collar of her uniform and pumped it a few times in a futile attempt to push cooler air between her ballistic vest and sweat-sodden T-shirt.

The Echo Valley Fair marked the end of summer, but even now, as the relentless Colorado sun dipped, heat rose in waves around bare ankles and stroller wheels as families retreated toward the parking lots. An older crowd began to creep in, prowling the midway. The beer garden overflowed.

Within minutes the sun dropped behind the valley walls and the fairground lights flickered to life, their wan orange glow a beacon to moths confused by the strobing brightness of rides and games. Calliope music and the midway's technopop collided in a crazed mishmash of notes so loud they echoed in Jo's chest. She raised the volume of her radio.

The day shift officers had clocked out having handled nothing more pressing than a man locked out of his car and an allegation of unfair judging flung by the second-place winner of the bake-off.

Jo gauged the teeming crowd of unfamiliar faces. Tonight would be different.

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Carnival music was creepy, Lena decided. Each ride had its own weird tune and it all seemed to crash against her with equal force, following her no matter where she went.

The guys in the booths were louder than they had been earlier, more aggressive, calling out, trying to get her to part with her tickets. Some of the guys roamed, jumping out at people, flicking cards and making jokes she didn't understand while smiling at her older sister.

Marisa tossed her hair. Smiled back. Sometimes they let her play for free.

"Let's go back to the livestock pavilion," Lena said.

"Quit being such a baby." Marisa glanced over her shoulder at the guy running the shooting gallery booth and tossed her hair. Again.

Lena rolled her eyes and wondered how long it would be before her sister ditched her.

"Hold up a sec." Marisa tugged at the hem of her skintight skirt and flopped down on a hay bale.

She'd been wearing pants when they'd left the house. The big purse she always carried probably hid an entire wardrobe Momma knew nothing about. Lena wondered if the missing key to grandma's car was tucked in there too.

Marisa unzipped one of her boots and pulled up her thin sock.

Lena pointed. "What happened to the bottom of your boot?"

Her sister ran her finger along the arch. "I painted it red."

"Why?"

"It makes them more valuable."

"Since when does coloring the bottom of your shoes make them more valuable?"

Marisa's eyes lit up in a way that happened whenever she spoke about clothes or how she was going to hit it big in Hollywood someday. "In Paris there's this guy who designs shoes and all of them have red soles. He's the only one allowed to do that. It's his thing."

"But he didn't make those boots."

"All the famous women wear his shoes." She waved to someone in the crowd.

"You're not famous and you bought them at Payless."

"What do you know about fashion?"

"I know enough not to paint the bottom of my boots to make them look like someone else made them."

Marisa shoved her foot into her boot and yanked the zipper closed. "You bought your boots from the co-op." She handed Lena her cell phone.

"You should have bought yours there, too." Lena dutifully pointed the lens at her sister.

“Take a couple this time.” Marisa leaned back on her hands and arched her back, her hair nearly brushing the hay bale, and the expression on her face pouty like the girls in the magazines she was always looking at.

Lena snapped several photos and held out the phone. “All those high heels are good for is punching holes in the ground.”

“Oh, Lena.” Marisa’s voice dropped as if she was sharing a secret. “If you ever looked up from your animals long enough, you’d see there’s so much more to the world.” Her thumbs rapidly tapped the tiny keyboard of her phone.

In the center of the midway, a carnival guy held a long-handled mallet and called out to people as they passed by. He was older—somewhere in his twenties—and wore a tank top. Green and blue tattoos covered his arms and his biceps bulged as he pointed the oversized hammer at the tower behind him. It looked like a giant thermometer with numbers running along one edge, and *High Striker* spelled out on the other.

“Come on, men. There’s no easier way to impress the ladies.” He grabbed the mallet and tapped the plate. “You just have to find the proper motivation if you want to get it up...” He pointed with his chin to the top of the game and paused dramatically. “There.” He craned his neck and leered at Marisa. Lena wondered if he was looking up her sister’s skirt. “What happens later is up to you.”

Never breaking eye contact, he took a mighty swing. The puck raced up the tower, setting off a rainbow of lights and whistles before it smashed into the bell at the top. He winked in their direction. “Score.”

Twenty minutes later, Marisa was gone.

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Lena gave up looking for her sister and returned to the livestock pavilion. Marisa could keep her music and crowds and stupid friends.

Only a few people still wandered around the dimly lit livestock pavilion. The fireworks would start soon and most people headed for the excitement outside, a world away from the comforting sound of animals snuffling and pawing at their bedding.

Marisa was probably hanging out near the river with her friends, drinking beer. Maybe smoking a cigarette or even a joint. Doing things she didn’t think her baby sister knew about.

Lena walked through an aisle stacked with poultry and rabbit cages. The pens holding goats, swine, and sheep took up the middle. At the back of the pavilion stretched a long row of three-sided cattle stalls. The smells of straw, grain, and animals replaced the gross smell of deep-fried candy bars and churros that had clogged her throat on the midway.

Near the end of the row, Lena stopped.

“Hey there, Bluebell.” Technically, he was number twenty-four, like his ear tag said. Her father didn’t believe in naming livestock, but to her, he’d always be Bluebell—even after she sold him at the auction to be slaughtered. Just because that was his fate didn’t mean he shouldn’t have a name to be remembered by. She remembered them all.

She patted his hip and slid her hand along his spine so he wouldn’t shy as she moved into the stall. She double-checked the halter, pausing to scratch his forehead. A piece of straw swirled in his water bucket and she fished it out. The cold water cooled her hot skin.

“You did good today. Sorry I won’t be spending the night with you, but Papa got called out to Dawson’s ranch to stitch up some mare.”

He swished his tail and it struck the rail with a metallic ring.

“Don’t get yourself all riled. I’ll be back tomorrow before you know it.”

If she hadn’t been showing Bluebell this afternoon, she’d have gone with her father. Her sutures had really improved this summer and were almost as neat as his. No one would guess they’d been made by an eleven-year-old. If nothing else, she could have helped keep the horse calm.

Instead, she’d go home with Marisa and spend the night at Momma’s. She wondered if Marisa would show up before the 4-H leader called lights out in the pavilion or if Lena would have to walk to her mom’s house by herself in the dark.

She reached down and jiggled the feed pan to smooth out the grain that Bluebell had pushed to the edges.

“That’s some cow.”

The male voice startled them both and Bluebell stomped his rear hoof. Lena peered over the Hereford’s withers. At first all she saw were the tattoos. An ugly monster head with a gaping mouth and snake tongue seem to snap at her. It was the carny from the High Striker standing at the edge of the stall.

“It’s a steer,” she stuttered. “And my sister isn’t here.”

“Not your sister I wanted to talk to.” He swayed a bit as he moved into the stall, like when her mother drank too much wine and tried to hide it.

Lena ducked under Bluebell's throat and came up on the other side. She looked around the pavilion, now empty of people.

"Suspect they're all out waiting on the fireworks," he said.

The first boom echoed through the space. Several sheep bleated their disapproval and Bluebell jerked against his halter.

"Shhhh, now." Lena reached her hand down and scratched his chest. "All that racket's just some stupid fireworks."

"Nothing to worry about," the man added. He had the same look in his eyes that Papa's border collie got right before he cut off the escape route of a runaway cow.

A bigger boom thundered through the pavilion. Halter clips clanged against the rails as uneasy cattle shuffled in their stalls. Her own legs shook as she sidled toward Bluebell's rear.

He matched her steps. "What's a little thing like you doing in here all by yourself?"

"My father will be back any minute." Her voice shook.

He smiled, baring his teeth. "I'll be sure to introduce myself when he arrives."

A series of explosions, sharp as gunfire, erupted outside. Somewhere a cow lowed. Several more joined in, their voices pitiful with fear.

"You're upsetting my steer. You need to leave."

"Oh, your cow's just fine. I think it's you that's scared."

He spoke with the same low voice that Lena used with injured animals. The one she used right before she did something she knew would hurt but had to be done.

"You're a pretty little thing," he crooned. "Nice and quiet."

Her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. She stood frozen. A warm trickle started down her leg, and the wet spot expanded on her jeans.

He edged closer. "I like them quiet."

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Jo ran.

The suspect veered off the sidewalk and slid down the hillside toward the creek.

She plunged off the side of the embankment, sliding through dirt and duff, closing the distance. She keyed her shoulder mic. "Entering the creek, heading west toward the Animas. I need someone on the River Trail."

Narrow-leaf cottonwood and willows shimmered silver in the moonlight and wove a thicket of branches along the water, herding the suspect toward the cobbled stream bed.

Jo splashed into the ankle-deep water. Close enough now to almost touch.

Her lungs burned. With a final burst of speed, she lunged. Shoved his shoulder while he was mid-stride.

The man sprawled into the creek. Rolled onto his feet with a bellow. A knife in his hand.

Without thinking, she'd drawn her gun. "Drop it!"

Flashlight beams sliced the foliage. Snapping branches and crashing footsteps marked the other officers' progress as they neared. Estes shouted Jo's name. Her eyes never left the man standing just feet away.

"Over here!" She focused on the man's shoulder, watching for the twitch that would telegraph his intentions. "You need to drop the knife. Now." Her voice rose above the burble of the stream. "Or things are going to get a whole lot worse for you tonight."

She shifted her weight to her front leg and carefully shuffled her rear foot until she found firmer footing and settled into a more stable shooting stance. "Drop the knife." She aimed center mass. Drew a deep breath, willed her heart to slow.

The knife splashed into the creek near the bank.

"On your right." Estes broke through the brush beside her.

"Get down on your knees," Jo ordered. "Hands behind your head."

"It's my friend's truck," the man said.

Jo holstered her gun and moved forward while Estes covered her. She gripped his fingers and bowed the suspect backward, keeping him off balance while she searched him for weapons, then cuffed him.

"Not according to the owner." She double-locked the cuffs while Estes radioed dispatch they had one in custody.

An explosion above the treetops made Jo flinch. Fireworks slashed the darkness and burst into balls of purple and green and dazzling white that sparkled briefly, then disappeared.