

ONE

The air above the blacktop rippled as Sheriff Elizabeth “Bet” Rivers drove west. The tiny town of Collier struggled under a heatwave that had swept through Washington State and turned the last week of June unexpectedly brutal. The sun, barely over the tops of the mountains surrounding the community, already beat down hard. By midday, it would be merciless on the traveling Carnival Roma where they’d set up on the hardpacked dirt at the far end of the valley.

Bet parked the SUV in the makeshift visitor lot and eyed the temporary fencing around the fairgrounds. It didn’t encircle the entire footprint, tempting reckless souls to take a shot at getting in through the back for free.

She sauntered up to the empty ticket booth where Robert Collier Junior stood with an unreadable expression on his face. He cocked an eyebrow. “Mornin’, Sheriff.” His voice was warm and low, teasing her with his formality.

Pretending deference, she tipped the brown campaign hat that covered her auburn curls. “Mr. Collier.”

At thirty-seven, Rob had more than a few care lines etched into his tanned face, and the dark, neatly trimmed beard had begun to show hints of gray. He held out his arm. “Shall we?”

“We shall.” Bet wrapped her fingers around the crook of his elbow, enjoying the tingle that always arrived when she touched him. They had stopped and restarted seeing each other so many times since they’d met last September that her head spun, but the physical attraction was always there—at least for her. Rob played his feelings close to the vest. Recently, there had been phone calls and texts that he ignored in her presence, or left the room to answer, giving Bet the impression she wasn’t the only woman in his life. She worried that they had missed their chance at something wonderful and would fall into the awkward role of “friends.”

It surprised her how much that hurt.

Following Rob through the turnstile, she kept her fingers tucked against his arm. “I feel special getting in before opening day.”

“It’s my role as the person renting the land to do a walkthrough, and as the head of local law enforcement, you should confirm that everything meets your approval.”

“And as a bonus, you get to show off your newfound status as feudal lord of the manor.” She meant it as a joke about his recently expanded fortune but caught Rob’s grimace from the corner of her eye. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean—”

“It’s OK.” He stopped and pulled her around to face him. “It’s not your fault that I’m uncomfortable owning an entire town.”

Not to mention international corporations and properties across the US. His sudden riches had regularly taken him away from their remote high elevation valley, interrupting their progress as a couple and turning him into someone else. Toe-to-toe, she got a better look at the dark circles under his eyes. There was a toll to all the travel his new position forced on him. Rob had left the Collier family responsibilities behind years before to pursue a career with the FBI, but his father’s death had sucked him back in. As the sole heir, he felt obligated to the people his father’s businesses employed and responsible to various organizations.

He tugged her closer, and she closed her eyes, the heat of his body seeping through their clothing in direct competition with the weather. Standing together, the world felt right, even with a heat dome hovering over their heads.

All too soon, Rob stepped back with a glint of amusement in his eyes. “I wanted to join the circus once.” The brim of his hat cast a shadow across his face and for the briefest of moments, he looked like a stranger.

Bet wasn’t sure if he was joking. “Because you wanted to run away?”

“Because I wanted to be Buffalo Bill.”

“And star in a Wild West show.” Bet could picture him on his big Morgan horse, shooting targets at a full gallop.

“Something like that.” The two continued their walk, and with no one around to see them, Bet kept her grip on his elbow, touching the soft blue denim of his shirt. It made them feel like a real couple. She’d never wanted that until now, when it wasn’t clear if they would ever be committed.

The midway split the meadow in half. Food stalls filled one side while games of skill and chance filled the other, with rides scattered in between. The big blue and white striped tent at the far end promised trick horses and acrobats, shimmering in the heat like a mirage. Carnival Roma combined the food, rides, and fun of a carnival with the live performances of a circus, guaranteeing tourist dollars for her often-overlooked town and spectacle under the big top.

As they made their way along the empty “street,” Bet imagined Rob in a fringed coat, performing with the big horse he’d brought with him to Collier almost a year ago. “You still got to carry a gun to work for the FBI. That’s almost like Buffalo Bill.”

“Does that make you Annie Oakley?”

They reached the first of the games—multi-colored balloons to pop with darts, metal targets to hit with little peashooters, heavy white milk cans stacked into pyramids waiting to be knocked into the dirt by an oversized softball. Memories of the past filled her, the view of those games from a child’s eye level. Her father always waving off trying his hand at hitting the targets. A crack shot, he didn’t believe guns should be used as toys.

The stalls were unattended, but a tall, gangly man stood not far away watching them—his blue polo shirt had GUS stitched in gold letters on the left side and a patch with the carnival’s logo on the right.

Rob gestured toward the shooting gallery like a game show host pointing out the grand prize. “Care to prove your gunslinger skills, Sheriff?”

“Only if Gus’ll let us use the dart game.” Bet didn’t hold the same belief as her father, toy guns didn’t bother her, but she refused to fail at hitting the targets with the carnival rifles because the sights were bad.

Gus started his singsong patter as he climbed over the knee wall in front of the games. “Hit a balloon and win a prize.”

Hefting a dart, Bet readied her shot. The pink balloon popped as the point found its target, but before they could finish the high five she aimed Rob’s way, a sharp crack rebounded down the valley. “That was—”

She caught Rob’s startled expression, and they finished with eyes locked together, “—a gunshot.”

Bet’s hand went instinctively for the gun in her holster. But before she drew, she reached down to her backup weapon and held the Smith & Wesson Shield Plus out to him. Planning a fun morning off, his weapons were all back home in his gun safe. Rob gave her a nod, the micro-compact looking tiny but lethal in his hand. They started toward the far end of the carnival grounds, their steps in sync.

Carnival workers streamed toward them, away from the blast at the north end of the midway. With the carnival opening in two days, performers and other staff had likely been at their various tasks and rehearsals. Now they formed a mob, racing toward the entrance, their voices loud and frightened.

Bet grabbed the arm of a young woman running by, wearing a glittery costume. Her silver tights and gold leotard were draped in spangled scarves and netting, which sparkled in the bright sunlight. “What did you see?” Bet asked her.

“Nothing.” Her wild eyes focused and she took in Bet’s sheriff uniform. “I was inside the big top when I heard the gunshot. It sounded close, like it came from out back where the trucks are parked.”

Bet let the woman go and she slipped into the crowd as Bet picked up speed in the other direction. She caught up to Rob, who had paused a short distance away. “Could have come from behind the tent,” she said.

His expression was grim, his body taut as they jogged toward the far end of the midway. “At least there haven’t been any more shots,” he said.

If this had been a spree, the report wouldn’t have stopped at one. But Bet wasn’t taking any chances. Kane Stand, her sole full-time deputy, answered his cell on the first ring.

“We may have an active shooter at the carnival,” Bet said before he could get a word out. “Call Clayton and get him back here now.” She hoped her part-time deputy was still in the area, his night shift had only recently ended.

Kane’s calm voice came through. “Will do. He just left, so he hasn’t gotten far.” Kane grounded her as she fought to steady her breathing. “Do we need Addy?” he asked.

Addy Jamisen was an EMT who owned the only ambulance to serve the rural valley.

“Yes, please. Call her too. But wait with her and Clayton at the front entrance while Rob and I determine if someone has been injured or there’s still a threat.”

“OK, but if I hear gunshots, I’m coming to back you up.” Kane’s voice said not to argue with him doing his job. “Keep me posted on your location.”

“We’re heading past the southeast corner of the tent to get behind it. I’ll be in touch.”

She made eye contact with Rob, and they moved faster in tandem again, weapons drawn.

The tent blocked their view of all the travel trailers for the crew and performers parked behind it, along with transport vehicles for rides and booths and animals. As they came around the side of the tent, the forest of vehicles and trailers threw angular shadows onto the ground. Danger could hide in the fractured light.

Fifty feet away, a man lay face down in the dirt near the back of the tent—as if the gunman had already hit the bull’s-eye, only to slip away in the crowd.