

Prologue

The sun setting over the snow-packed peaks of the Maroon Belles shot a ray of light through a fifteen-foot-high picture window at the front of Maliki Young's plush Aspen home. Tanya Springfield sat comfortably on a black leather recliner, digging her nylon covered feet into the thick carpet while sipping a glass of Pinot Noir held gently with both hands.

Maliki was holding a gold medal at the precise angle so that the sunlight filtering in the window momentarily shot a beam of light across Tanya's face. He noticed the reflection and immediately moved to the middle of the large living room and set the medal down on a mahogany coffee table. He had always been in wonder of the older woman, not only because she is a highly successful celebrity, but because of her incredible beauty.

"I know my father was never normal." Maliki was searching for an angle; a meaning to the story he was about to disclose. "It's ironic that he tried so desperately to escape something that he never was."

Tanya simply listened. She had planned and prepared for this meeting for the past six months and was not about to spoil the occasion by being overly aggressive. She was very good at extracting information from men.

Maliki sat down, sinking deeply into the sofa. They had already made plenty of small talk. Although they both seemed relaxed, there was a sense of uneasiness; partly from the fact the two were going to spend the next four days alone, and partly from the uncertainty of the information Maliki held about his father and the fabled money that had disappeared. "I was born to run." He referred to a question posed to him earlier as to why he liked running.

"You certainly are a descendant of runners." She reached up with her right hand and ran her fingers through her hair, thinking that at one time everyone in the country had been chasing his father. "It sounds like you have a legitimate shot at making the Olympic team this year."

"I can only pray. It's why I'm training at altitude." He noticed that her heavy makeup couldn't cover the wrinkles meandering from the corners of her still-pretty eyes and the pitch-black hair dye couldn't conceal all the strands of gray hair. Tanya leaned forward and placed her nearly full glass of wine on the coffee table. "Maliki. How much do you know about your father?"

"Everything."

"I find it amazing that you know everything."

"He told me the entire story."

"I have heard from several people that your father spilled his guts to you the night you were born." She couldn't help but notice that he had his father's chocolate brown eyes.

"That's right." He never blinked.

"And you remember what he told you?"

“Everything.”

“You were a full month premature.”

“Yep. I was only weeks away from being an embryo and little more than a heartbeat. I could fit in the palm of his hand.” He looked directly into Tanya’s eyes. “After he confessed his life’s sins, I already didn’t want to be like my parents.”

Tanya snickered. She had her doubts about this far-fetched story of remembering his father’s acknowledgments. There was no question he did possess much information about not only his father but about everyone in Medicine Bow, but for her to write an accurate exposé he would have to be honest with her. “You know, Maliki, every time I met your family I either said out loud or thought that their experiences would make a great story worth telling the world.”

“I’ve been looking forward to spending this time with you. I think you are the perfect choice to create a legacy for the Young family.”

“Thank you.” Tanya leaned forward in the chair. “But for us to have an accurate rendering of your family and the people of Medicine Bow, we have to be honest with each other.”

“I’m sure you will be satisfied with our time together.”

So confident, definitely a product of Medicine Bow, Tanya thought as she relaxed back in her chair. “Are you ashamed of your father?”

“Which one?”

“Obviously Troy.”

“No, I’m not ashamed of him. I think he was very sick.” Maliki picked up the gold medal and placed it around his neck. He stood up and walked to the large picture window and looked out at the beautiful sunset. “It’s so clean up here.”

Tanya walked over to stand next to him. Noticing he was much taller than his father; actually, both his fathers. “Shall we start tonight or would you rather start in the morning?”

He hesitated for a moment. “Let’s get started.” He turned and walked towards his bedroom. “I’ll be right back.”

Tanya was aware that Maliki was very successful and rich. He had made a lot of his money at a very early age in land development, with the help of Sam Blake, but beyond that she knew very little about him. As she waited patiently, she wondered why his six-bedroom, obviously very expensive, home would have such simple furnishings.

Maliki returned carrying three boxes and placed them in the center of the large dining room table. Tanya silently watched him remove the contents from the first box. He glanced towards her with a large smile. “Troy did tell me everything right after I was born.” He stacked several notebooks on top of each other. “He also documented everything right before I was born. He had nothing better to do while he was in jail.”

“Oh my gosh.” Tanya placed her hand on the notebooks.

“Also.” Maliki began pulling out several diaries from another box. “I have diaries from my mother, Aunt Rebecca, my grandmother, and even notes from Sam. I have something from almost everyone who lived in Medicine Bow.”

“Why didn’t you tell me you had all this information?”

“Nobody else knows. I suppose I like the myth the people of Medicine Bow have about Troy speaking to me when I was an infant.”

“Where in the world will we start?” Tanya began emptying her writing materials and tape recorder from her briefcase onto the table and opened her laptop computer.

“I’ve been working on this for several years and have it all organized.” Maliki held up the first notebook with a large number one on the outside. “With your help, we can tell a very compelling story. Let’s start a couple of weeks after Troy’s nineteenth birthday.”

“Okay.” Tanya placed the microphone in the middle of the table.

Chapter One

Dallas, Texas

Judge Murphy looked as though he had swallowed a field mouse and was afraid if he opened his mouth it would escape. The décor of his chambers was wall-to-wall oak; even the large desk he was perched behind so intensely eyeballing Troy Young, who was sitting calmly between his mother and lawyer, was made of dark oak. Everyone present, especially Troy, understood the futility of the judge's attempt at pretending his stern demeanor would have any long-term rehabilitative effect.

"Your honor," Troy's attorney broke the ice. "Mr. Young has made considerable progress over the past three years. Completely clean until this last smidgen of misconduct."

"He broke a table, three chairs, a window, and bashed the light in on a police cruiser." Judge Murphy struggled to remain seated as he pointed towards Troy's file. "And for Christ's sake! He was naked when he did this."

"Yes, sir."

"Disturbing the peace of the law-abiding citizens of the state of Texas may be a smidgen of misconduct to you, Mr. Harvey, but I take such behavior very serious, very serious." His eyes stayed glued on Troy. "Son, you may think this is a place where only small town justice will be administered, where you can get away with anything, but I guarantee your abysmal behavior will not be tolerated by this court."

"Yes, sir." Troy never moved a muscle.

"I understand you have some ... well, medical problems. Problems that could be causing you to act in the dreadful manner you displayed last month. Am I correct?"

"Your honor, Mr. Young has been prescribed medication which, when taken properly, allows him to live a normal life. He stopped taking the medication for a couple weeks and his behavioral problems ensued," said Mr. Harvey.

"What medication is Mr. Young taking?"

"Lithium, your honor."

"Son." The judge looked ascetically at Troy. "It seems you need this medication, but if possible this court would rather steer clear of administering any type of ruling on such a personal matter." He looked at the attorney. "I don't see it necessary for the court to oversee Mr. Young's medication."

"I wholeheartedly agree," said Mr. Harvey, knowing full well of the judge's friendly intentions.

“Mr. Young’s record with the courts goes back several years.”

“His problems began four years ago at the age of fifteen.”

“Juvenile court at fifteen,” mumbled Judge Murphy, more for his own benefit than anyone else’s.

Troy glanced at his mother who was sitting with her back as straight as a washboard with her pretty blue eyes fixed attentively on the judge. He wondered if she would speak up, attesting to the fact that his troubles had started much before his fifteenth birthday. She remained quiet.

“Your honor, I would like to have this problem resolved as quickly as possible,” stated Mr. Harvey, bringing the pretense that justice or rehabilitation were the recourse of the meeting in the judge’s chamber. The decision had been determined by the judge after a phone call with Sam Blake yesterday, and Mr. Harvey was due at a luncheon in thirty minutes.

“Son, I give you fifty hours of civic duty to be performed at the discretion of the town folks of Medicine Bow. They are the ones who have to live with you.” The judge stared directly into Troy’s eyes and closed the folder on his desk. “If you come before me again I will throw the book at you. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“What about the record?” asked Mr. Harvey.

“Bob, nothing will be on the record.” The judge rose from his seat and pointed towards the door.

Troy allowed his mother and attorney to exit first and followed them through the courtroom to the adjacent hall. Sara sat on a wooden bench.

“That’s that,” said Sara.

“Yes, that’s that,” said Mr. Harvey, condescendingly. “I’m sure we will be in touch.”

Sara allowed the attorney a malicious look as he scurried down the hallway. She turned to Troy and patted the hard wood bench. “Sit down.”

Troy sat next to his mother.

Sara took in a deep breath. She was far more relaxed than she had been for his previous indiscretions. It was as though she was getting ready to give him advice for the final time and wanted to make sure to give him something meaningful. “You know how embarrassing ...” She hesitated, realizing she was about to make this time about her and not him.

Troy glared at her. “I could have handled this myself.”

“I know you could have, but no matter what you think, your actions affect more than just you.” God only knows that she was still lost in understanding how to talk about the alcohol, drugs, and sickness that had a strangle hold on her son.

Troy loosened his tie and pulled it over his head.

“Tom and Rebecca are worried about you.”

“They can’t help me, Ma.”

“I can’t force you to take your medication.” She had noticed a glaze over his eyes. “But your actions are completely unacceptable when you are off them.” Sometimes it seemed futile, but she knew that she would never stop trying to help him.

“You don’t have to worry about that anymore. I’m fixin’ to leave.”

She turned her head and watched a group of people exit the courtroom across the hall. She didn’t have to look at his face, it was chiseled in her mind, and physically he was nearly flawless.

“I know I’ve caused you a lot of problems.” He sat up straight. “I do want to apologize for that. You and Rebecca have always stood by me.”

She looked at him somewhat surprised that he never mentioned Tom. He and Tom were classic twins who seemed to suffer through each other’s pain. They had always been very close.

“I’ve taken advantage of you.” He looked at his mother’s tired face. “It pains me that I do.”

Sara couldn’t understand how his behavior could be so dreadful, as it obviously was, from accounts not only from the recent police report but from the many accounts of misdoings given to her from friends and acquaintances, and then be so sensitive when in her presence.

“I’ll give you one thing, Troy. You are a survivor.”

“Sometimes that is not a good thing to be.”

Sara jerked her head towards him. “How could you say such a thing.” Suicide had been one of her greatest concerns.

“I mean a person usually has to have been through some sort of disaster to be a survivor.” He could sense the distress his mother was experiencing. “Don’t worry; I’m not going to kill myself. I just hate being treated like some sort of charity case.”

“How are you being treated like a charity case?”

“You know as well as I that Sam is the reason I was given such a light sentence.”

“Aren’t you happy Sam is willing to help? He was the one who found you help when you first became sick.”

“I was sick way before Sam found Doctor Starr.”

“What do you mean?”

“When I was hit by the school bus ...” He hesitated, wondering if he should come clean with one of his deepest secrets.

“Yes. You were eight years old.” Sara felt the accident was the cause of his sickness, although the doctors disputed her belief.

“The bus didn’t hit me. I jumped in front of it.”

“What?”

“I threw myself in front of it. The driver couldn’t have stopped.”

“Why would you do such a thing?”

“I just had this terrible urge to jump in front of it.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I know, Ma.” He shook his head. “Nobody understands how I feel. Usually I don’t understand. Sometimes it is as though I am invincible. It’s the greatest ... like having so much positive energy inside and not being able to get it out quickly enough. But when the down side comes, it becomes so unbearable that it hurts. It’s been that way as long as I remember.”

She looked closely at her son with his high cheekbones and dark brown eyes, drawing a second look from several of the well-dressed professional women walking so rapidly to their appointments. She knew he wasn’t a bad or immoral person, but at the same time she had no clue as to how she could help him.

“Let’s go home.”

Maliki and Tanya

“Maliki, I don’t think there is any question that Sara really loved Troy.” Tanya turned off the recorder sitting at the middle of the table.

“Unquestionably. She had sacrificed a lot for her children. Having three children and losing a husband when she was only nineteen made her a real survivor herself.”

“What happened to her husband? Your grandfather?”

“He was killed in an automobile accident outside Joplin, Missouri, when Tom and Troy were two and Rebecca was just a baby. He worked in the oil fields and he crashed on his way to work.”

“So Sara was only nineteen when she was widowed.”

“I believe so.” Tom stood up and yawned.

“Sara is five years older than I am.”

Maliki couldn’t help but think how good Tanya looked for a lady in her fifties. She had a sensuality about her that no other woman he knew possessed. “Would you like something to drink?”

“Sure.” She looked at her still full glass of wine sitting on the coffee table. “Oh, I still have wine.”

Maliki took her wine and poured it down the bar sink. “Would you rather have something besides wine?”

“Wine is fine.” She had always admired a man who took control.

“It’s only eight. Shall we keep going?” Maliki opened a bottle of water for himself but handed Tanya a glass of wine.

“Definitely. I’m kind of a night owl. I really am enjoying this.” She took a sip of wine. “How did your grandmother end up in Medicine Bow, Texas?”

“After her husband died ...”

“Your grandfather.”

“Yes.” Maliki sat down at the table. “After Grandfather died, his Uncle Martin insisted that Grandmother and the three kids move to Medicine Bow.”

“Did she have any other family?”

“None she could count on. She was penniless and in dire straits. Uncle Martin thought Medicine Bow would be a great place to raise the three kids, so he offered her his home.”

“I was in Medicine Bow about a week after they were in court.” Tanya turned on the tape recorder and pulled her laptop to the edge of the table.

“It’s all here.”

Medicine Bow, Texas

The annual harvest festival in Medicine Bow had become a trendy place for the people of Dallas to spend an anomalous weekend away from the stress and anxiety of the city. The small-town celebration was reminiscent of the country fairs that were once a cherished part of the fabric of communities scattered throughout Texas.

The prior year, one visiting couple, on the premise of spending a leisurely afternoon at the fair, found that the blithe of country life was more than a three-legged race and hayrack ride. Upon witnessing a contest where pigs were greased and then chased by the local children, they stepped in to admonish all adults within shouting range. They were quickly sent on their way and upon returning to Dallas immediately reported the cruelty to a local television station. The charges hit a nerve with Tanya Springfield, a local television celebrity. She, along with several members of an animal rights group, hightailed it to Medicine Bow in time for the Sunday afternoon pig chase—um, contest. After witnessing the kids chase the pigs, the activists refused to leave until they were assured that the event would not be held again.

A year later, Pastor Lola Dodge and her husband Theo, the fair organizers, scheduled the contest for early in the morning. A television crew was expected to arrive around lunch time to interview the town's hero, track sensation Rebecca Young.

The early morning sun reflected off Lola's shiny black skin as she greeted everyone with a large smile. "Welcome to the fair. Don't be afraid to spend some money. Everything is a fine item, indeed." Her low, authoritative voice booming from deep in her large belly.

Many of the people looking at the sparse selection of hand-knitted sweaters, socks, and assorted crafts situated on two long tables, sitting precariously on the church lawn, knew Lola. She was the vociferous pastor who brought them salvation every Sunday morning.

"Delphia. Go find Jesse and tell him to get over here. Now! Mr. Blake and Mr. Ortiz are getting ready to grease the pigs," Lola yelled at her daughter. "I'm going inside the church and get out of this awful heat. Y'all come in and get me before you start chasin' them pigs."

Delphia was at an awkward stage where her appearance could be described as homely. It would most definitely be a mistake for anyone outside the confines of Medicine Bow to describe her as such. Nothing was more valued in the community than the children.

"I'm goin' to catch me a pig this year and sell it to Mr. Ortiz for twenty dollars." Delphia turned to look back at her mother as she began to run away. "I bet I catch one and Jesse doesn't."

"Just find him." Lola stepped into the church foyer and fanned herself with the harvest festival itinerary. She looked down the aisle of plank flooring where she could see the sunken figure of someone sitting alone in the front pew. "Is that you, Troy Young?"

"Yes, ma'am."

“Are you in here to keep from melting in the sun, or are you prayin’? I hope if you are prayin’ it isn’t in order to win a bet.” She pulled her blouse away from her huge bosoms to let the air cool her body.

“I’m just sittin’ here.” He moved over to allow her room to sit.

Lola had always held a soft spot for Troy, and she always found time to converse with him. She knew he was pondering over some problem and was avoiding eye contact with her. He should have known better. She was one of the most analytical people to ever walk the face of the earth and could read people like reading a road map.

“I’m leavin’ Medicine Bow,” Troy said, softly.

“Well, honey, it’s about time.”

“I’m goin’ to Denver.” He ignored her lack of surprise.

“Do you have a job? And are you goin’ alone?”

“Yes, ma’am. We do have a job.” He fidgeted. “I’m goin’ with Billy Ray Lockett.”

“Oh good Lord.” Lola clasped her hands together. She knew Billy Ray up until the time he turned twelve and the Lockett family moved away from Medicine Bow. He was a handful at that time. She heard that Billy Ray and his cousin had spent some time in jail.

“We’re drivin’ to Denver in his cousin Larry Lover’s Cadillac. Their grandfather has a cabin in the mountains outside the city.”

“Give me strength.” Lola looked up to the stain-glass window high in the vaulted ceiling. “Misery does enjoy company.”

“We plan on leavin’ right away.”

Lola turned toward him. “Sometimes problems have a way of following a person.”

“I feel like I need to move, to do something, even if it is all wrong.” He looked Lola directly in her eyes. “Being sick the way I’ve been has made me question a lot of things about life. I don’t want to embarrass my family anymore.”

Before Lola could respond, she was interrupted, “Ma, I’m about ready to catch one of them greasy old pigs,” Delphia yelled through the front door of the church before running away.

“You have always had an inquisitive mind, but I want you to remember that what is essential in life is often invisible to the eye. I’ll be praying for you.” Lola placed her arm around Troy and gave him a quick hug. “Now, I’m goin’ out into the heat and enjoy the fair.”

Lola stepped from the darkness of the church into the bright sunlight with an uneasy feeling in her belly. She had a bad feeling about his leaving as she watched Sam Blake with a large group of kids crowded around him in the vacant lot between the church and the Youngs’ home.

“Come on, Sam, get them lined up.” Manuel Ortiz was struggling to keep five small pigs within the confines of a wire fence situated about fifty yards away from Sam. “The television crew is going to get here shortly, and we’ll have a heck of a mess if they see these kids chasin’ pigs all over town.”

“To hell with them.” Sam’s voice echoed off the church. “If they don’t like what we do in our own town, they can all go to hell.” He motioned the mass of children to their starting position. “Come on, y’all, make it fair.” He subconsciously looked down road Ten leading into town to see if there might be a cloud of dust from the television crew. A year ago the Dallas newspapers had a field day portraying him as being cruel to animals. He held out his massive arms, trying to keep the anxious kids from jumping the start. His pants were covered with dust and grease making it difficult to recognize him as one of the richest men in Texas.

“Come on, Sam,” Manuel yelled.

“Just one second, Drew Fudderman!” Sam screamed at a large man at the end of the line of kids. “You aren’t planning on chasin’ the pigs, are you?”

“No, su.” Even though everyone knew chasing the pigs was his intention just as he had the previous year where he was cheered on by the onlookers.

“Go on. Step back.” Sam waved his arm at Drew.

“I’m movin’.” Drew stared at Sam with his beady eyes as he moved his huge three-hundred-pound body away from the line of kids, wishing he had arrived at the festival an hour earlier so he could have talked to Sam about any employment opportunities.

“I’m goin’ to count to three and say go. Remember the pig has to be carried across the finish line for it to be yours.” Sam held up his right arm. “One, two, three, go.” He lowered his arm.

Manuel pulled the fence away, releasing the pigs. The five pigs didn’t move until Jesse Dodge, who was much faster than the other kids, jumped into the midst of them, grabbing the first pig he came to by the leg. The other four pigs shrieked and ran in opposite directions. A couple of seconds later two screaming children jumped on Jesse’s pig, knocking the animal from his grasp. The chase was on. The kids were running all over town chasing the pigs.

“Look there.” Sam slapped his knee. “Here comes Delphia with one.”

“I caught me a pig, Ma.” Delphia, covered in grease from head to toe, held onto the slippery animal as she came across the finish line and handed the pig to Manuel. He placed the pig into a pen in the back of his pickup.

“You shore did.” Lola patted her greasy daughter on the top of her head. “I hope Jesse does too, or we will be hearing about this for a long time.”

Monty Camp, Sam’s hired hand, Earl’s boy, was the next greasy tike to tote a pig to the finish line. Renaldo Ortiz, Manuel’s grandson, came next, followed by Trey Camp, Monty’s older brother.

Everyone was clapping and cheering as Jesse, exhausted and covered with grease, even more so than the other children, pulled the final and largest pig towards the yelling crowd. He was one hundred feet away, but his arms ached and he had a cramp in the calf of his right leg. He leaned over to lie on top of the pig to rest. The pig's mouth was wide open. Jesse could see its pink tongue. The animal wasn't breathing very hard. He placed his arms around the slippery animal and lifted with all his strength. The pig squirted out of his arms and landed a couple of feet away. Another boy, a boy from out of town, picked up the pig and easily carried it to the finish line. Jesse fell to his knees and slammed his fist to the ground.

"I caught a pig and Jesse didn't," chanted Delphia in a loud screeching voice. "I caught a pig and Jesse didn't," she yelled in a lower voice as she danced around in a circle. "I caught a pig and Jesse didn't," she sang in as low a voice as she could make, getting down on one knee and pointing toward her brother.

"Leave that boy alone," yelled Lola. "He's goin' to whup the tar out of you. Now go wipe the grease off your face."

Sam and Manuel both laughed and congratulated each other on another pig chase—um, contest without protestors interfering and everyone having a great time. All the townspeople joined in the laughter.

"Oh my goodness. Will you look there." Sam stopped shaking Manuel's hand and turned towards the Youngs' house.

All the people turned to see what Sam was looking at. Rebecca and Sara Young were walking arm in arm towards them. Both mom and daughter were dressed in black slacks with white blouses. Rebecca was slightly taller than her mother, but both possessed the same high cheekbones and shoulder-length auburn hair. Sara was naturally beautiful, and it was hard to tell if she was wearing any makeup. Rebecca was wearing a slight amount of eye shadow and a little lip-gloss. She easily could be mistaken as a fashion model from New York City.

"Oh my gosh." Sara stared at all the dirty children. "You all are one big mess."

"But we did have fun." Sam moved towards Sara, looking her straight in the eyes.

"Sam Blake, you are just as dirty as the children." Sara smiled at him.

"Y'all missed one of our best contests." Sam could smell the lotion and perfume from Sara. "Where is Uncle Martin?"

"He's not coming out in this heat until it's time to pitch horseshoes." Sara kept an arm's length from Sam.

Sam stood with his mouth open, much the same as the pig was doing moments earlier. His infatuation with Sara was a common known fact by the citizenry of Medicine Bow. The amount of money and time he invested in the town was due to his amorous feelings towards her. On occasion, he had asked her to drive to Dallas for a dinner and a movie, but any type of romantic involvement never evolved. Mostly because Sam would turn to mush in the presence of Sara. He could make split-second multimillion dollar decisions about land developments and negotiate deals with the shrewdest of oil men, but when he was around Sara Young, his knees would shake and the breath would leave his lungs.

“I caught a pig,” Delphia interrupted with a loud booming voice. “And Jesse didn’t, because he couldn’t carry it across the finish line.”

“Oh Jesse. After all the practice we had with speed running, and you still missed catching a pig.” Rebecca rolled her big brown eyes towards the sky.

Rebecca never took losing slightly. She was the fastest high school girl in Texas at both the eight hundred meters and fifteen hundred meters. It was very unusual for a girl from the smallest classification in Texas high school athletics, basically a girl from a small country school, to be so successful, not only in Texas but on a national level. Her remarkable success as a runner was the only reason the television crew was on its way to town.

“Sara.” Sam watched as the crowd headed towards the grassy area of the open field to begin the egg-tossing game. “You look very nice this morning.”

“Thank you, Sam. You look a bit on the dirty side.”

Sam looked at his grease-covered pants. “I’m fixin’ to go clean up.”

“Come be my partner in throwing the eggs.” Sara moved closer to him.

“No, no, no.” Sam moved back. Setting up and helping Manuel run the pig chasing contest was the extent of his involvement with the fair, and he never took part in any of the other contests or games.

“Now, I won’t take no for an answer.” She took hold of his dirty hand and led him to the wire basket of eggs. She picked the smallest egg and examined it for cracks.

Sam looked like a child who had been scolded, even though he was six feet three inches tall and weighed two hundred fifty pounds. He stepped in line with the contestants opposite of Sara, who was only ten feet away.

“Troy, I want to toss an egg with Luther.” Lola motioned to Troy who was standing in the doorway of the church. “You still owe this town some reparation. You be the judge and we will call it even.”

Luther Barnes had been Lola’s partner for the past twenty years. He was seventy-seven years old, and everyone in town, except Lola and Sara, called him Square Shoulders, because the top of his shoulders came up to be level with his large ears. He and Lola usually won the contest. The thick skin on his calloused hands was in stark contrast to the pillow soft hands of Lola.

“Hey, Tway. I can help ya be the judge.” Drew Fudderman picked up the wire basket with three remaining eggs and cradled it in his massive arms.

“You can help, Drew, but don’t get in the way.” Troy had always been kind and patient with the oversized country boy, even when they had attended elementary school together and everyone else made fun of Drew. Troy remained steadfast in being his friend.

“All right. Everyone throw yore egg.” Troy’s order came before everyone was ready. The eggs flashed through the air in several different waves as each contestant lobbed their egg.

Ethel Camp, who didn't have an athletic bone in her body, was the only one to drop an egg.

"Jesus Jehoash fat, Ethel!" Her husband Earl threw his cap to the ground. "Playing catch with five children over the past twelve years, and you can't catch the egg once."

Ethel gave Earl a lethal look as she stepped away from the line into the shade of the church. Earl didn't say another word.

"Step back, Drew." Troy noticed Drew moving closer to the contestants. "And put the basket of eggs down."

"I don't want somebody to step on um."

"Nobody is gonna step on um. Now put um down."

"Okay." He placed the basket on the ground.

"Everybody step back one pace." Troy motioned with his arms.

"Sam, you need to move back a little mo." Drew waved Sam back.

Sam glared at him. "Keep your eyes on the egg," he yelled to Sara as he tossed the egg.

"Don't worry about me." Sara easily caught the egg.

"Step back." Troy motioned the contestants back, noticing that three more people had dropped their eggs.

"You need to move back a little mo, Sam." Drew stepped directly in front of Sam and scratched a straight line in the dirt with his finger. "You need to stay even with the west of the people."

There were a few snickers from everyone because of the derision Drew was bestowing on the rich and highly respected Sam Blake. Sam simply moved back.

Sara tossed her egg the twenty feet to Sam, who cradled it in both hands and let them fall gently towards the ground. Lola threw her egg high into the air over Square Shoulders's head, but he took a quick step back and jumped high enough to snare the egg with one hand.

"Luther, you ought to try out for the Dallas Cowboy's next year," yelled Lola, joining everyone in laughter.

Remarkably, five more contestants dropped their eggs, leaving only three pairs of contestants. In past years, after so few tosses, only two or three eggs would have been dropped. The excruciating heat was making it more fun to be a spectator drinking a cold cup of lemonade in the shade than standing in the hot sun.

Troy was taking his job as judge very seriously. He noticed something queer happening with Monty Camp and his cousin Jimmy. He conspired to keep an eye on them. "Move back a step and throw when you are ready," he yelled.

Drew kept a close eye on Sam.

Sara and Lola easily caught their eggs, but Monty dropped his, yet it didn't break. He picked it off the ground, wiped it off and stepped in line as though nothing happened.

"Monty Camp. Bring me that egg." Troy pointed at Monty.

The thin, red-haired boy looked at his cousin for support as he shook his head and moved towards Troy. He handed Troy the egg and stared at his large feet.

Troy took the egg and threw it to the ground. It cracked but didn't splatter. "Just as I thought. A hardboiled egg. You little pip-squeaks are disqualified."

"That's bad to cheat." Drew shook his finger in Monty's face. "Don't eva do that again."

"Well, well, well, we uh sowwee," yelled Monty, mocking Drew.

Troy grabbed Monty by the shoulder and spun him around. "Cheating is one thing, but disrespecting Drew is another thing. It's just plain mean. I won't have it, and if I ever hear it again, I'll whup you good."

"It's okay, Troy. They got the message," yelled Sara.

Troy glared at Monty.

"I'm sorry, Drew." Monty looked at the physically imposing farm boy.

"That's okay." Drew's outlook on life had never been fazed by how he was treated by others. His carefree and jovial disposition made him a pleasure to be around. Those closest to him knew he was neither dimwitted nor stupid; on the contrary, he was quite intelligent. He simply could not pronounce his r's. "Let's finish this contest. I want to see how fa Sam can toss an egg."

"Take two steps back this time." Troy was wanting the contest over. He was regretting the fact he had left the cool confines of the church.

Rebecca stepped into the playing area, carrying two cups of lemonade and handed one to her mother and the other to Lola. "Be careful not to wipe your hands on your white blouse." Rebecca remained precariously close to her mother.

"Stand back, honey, so I don't hit you when I throw the egg. Hold our drinks while we throw." Sara and Lola handed their drinks back to Rebecca.

"Throw the eggs." Troy's command was more intense than he had anticipated.

Sam and Square Shoulders both made shaky catches. All the spectators were very much engaged in the contest and applauded.

"Take two more steps back, and throw when ready," barked Troy.

Square Shoulders threw his egg at a perfect arc towards Lola. She made an easy catch as the egg fell gently into her soft hands.

Sam, who had been throwing the egg underhanded, decided for no particular reason to throw the egg overhanded, like a baseball. Although he had not thrown a baseball for over thirty years, he reared back and heaved the egg. All Sara saw was a shiny white object flying through the bright sky before it hit her directly between the eyes, hard enough to make her take three steps backwards. The egg splattered the front of her blouse, with the remainder of the yolk and shell hitting the front of Rebecca's white blouse. Surprised, Rebecca hunched over, taking several steps to the side, throwing the two drinks in the air and stepping into the wire basket with the remaining eggs, before landing on the seat of her pants.

Sam felt his heart jump into his throat as Lola moved to Sara's aid, and Rebecca jumped up from her fall, rubbing her right knee.

"I reckon that throw was a might bit hard. Sorry." Sam moved slowly to where Sara was wiping the egg from her clothing, unsure if he should try to wipe some of the gooey mess from the front of her blouse or let well enough alone.

"It's not your fault, Sam." Sara held her blouse away from her body, allowing the egg to dry. "Are you all right, Rebecca?"

"I'm okay." Rebecca continued to rub her knee.

"Well, we better go change." Sara rubbed her forehead.

Sam watched the mother and daughter walk towards their home. His feelings for Sara were genuine, and there was no other person he would rather share his fortune with. In business, he had always surrounded himself with highly qualified advisors and staff who he could delegate decisions to, but this personal matter was one he would have to handle himself.