

Tall Willows by PC Feather

CHAPTER ONE

The slap of his dress shoes hitting the pavement quickened along with his breathe. Hector Alvarez yanked on Golden Valley High School's small blue employees only door. The force of his pull almost sent the papers in his awkwardly held manila folder flying. Clutching them like a newborn, he caught them, heaved a deep sigh, and stumbled through the door.

During summer break the halls were unlit and the main office glowed from a solitary, overhead fluorescent. The two secretaries' desks were unoccupied. One was neat and tidy. The other looked as though a twister had hit it, leaving scattered papers, files, and paper-clips in its wake. Hector's gut sank when he saw the frosted glass windows of Principal Rodriguez's office were black. He turned when he heard someone fumbling under an old copier machine.

"Paper's jammed," a loud cheerful voice rang out. "Goes to figure. I try to get some work done when I can have the copier all to myself and the paper jams or the toner leaks or some other stupid problem."

Hector had no clue what to say to this creature; a woman clad in blue jeans, a grey hoodie, and oversized ball cap.

"I ... I ... I have an eight a.m. appointment with Principal..." he petered out. Her unexpected presence threw off his concentration.

"He'll be back any minute honey. Rodriguez came in a little bit ago and turned right around. Said he had left somethin' at home. He told me to tell anyone lookin' for him he'd be back in twenty. Then my paper jammed and I've been fiddlin' with this darn machine ever since." She pulled out a piece of crumpled paper and presented it like evidence to Hector.

"Will you gimme a hand honey," she continued, "since you have to wait anyways? There's a box of colored copy paper in the storage closet. Trouble is, the lights don't work too good and when the door shuts it goes pitch black in there. If you hold the door for me I might be able to make some copies before the morning's over."

Hector didn't want to help, but she grabbed his arm and pulled him toward the door.



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“I need to wait for Principal Rodriguez,” he said.

“We’ll be done before he gets back,” she said, “the closet’s just down the hall.”

Hector distractedly dropped his thick manila folder on the nearest desk before she whisked him out the door.

She led him down the dark, locker lined corridors of the old high school. They turned a corner and entered a newer and brighter addition that offered a picturesque view of the Southern Colorado Rockies through oversized double glass doors. The school’s football, baseball, and track fields stretched out until they touched the majestic purple mountains.

Hector paused in front of the doors to admire the beautiful scenery. He had gone over the school’s budget with a fine tooth comb but couldn’t recall spending reports for the athletics department. More money went to school sports than math, art and music combined; *It wouldn’t be surprising if Coach Wayne got greedy, felt like he deserved a little more than everyone else.* Wayne would be the first person Hector looked into after his meeting with Rodriguez.

Hector looked at his watch; 8:05, now he was late for his meeting. “I have to go. I must speak with Principal Rodriguez.”

From the stairwell the woman called as she glided up the stairs, “The closet’s just up here honey. Besides I don’t see his car in the parking lot yet.”

She was right. The principal’s parking spot in the lot below remained empty.

“If you just hold this door for me, you can be on your way and I won’t bother you anymore,” She called down from the top of the stairs.

Hector climbed the stairs and joined her outside a door. Black painted letters on it said DARKROOM.

“It’s just storage now,” she chattered. “The box of colored paper is on a shelf in the back. I’ll hold the door open and you grab it for me.” She stood firm by the door, not moving to go inside.

Hector decided to get the paper so he could get back to the office and on with his meeting. His hand patted the wall for a light switch. He flicked it on. Only a dim red glow



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emanated from the back of the closet. He flicked the adjacent switch and a florescent weakly flickered. Hector shuffled through the small cramped closet. He only saw old camera equipment and film developing chemicals.

“Ma’am, I don’t see any box of paper,” he called to her.

“I know it’s in there! Check under the shelf!” she demanded, her voice taking on a distinct edge.

He didn’t have time to protest. The lights went out, the door clicked shut and the sudden darkness blinded him. He assumed he was alone in the pitch black closet when the red light flicked on. A bright flash produced an ear splitting sound. His thigh burned in intense pain. He grabbed his leg, it was warm and wet. *What the ... His mind raced. Is this ... blood?* Hector didn’t have time to form another thought. He heard one more earsplitting crack before the second bullet penetrated his skull.

CHAPTER 2

Joe climbed out of his pickup, “We’ll unload the horses here. I’ll go find Shep.”

“Sure thing Granddaddy,” Ruth answered. She jumped out and opened the ramp of the horse trailer. A myriad of thoughts churned in her brain. High school senior year would begin in less than two months, but in less than two weeks she would take her first college final. Now she had been roped into performing at the annual Kiwanis Club benefit rodeo. *Why did I say yes to this rodeo? It’s too much on my plate,* she thought.

Joe Willows was a consummate member of the Kiwanis Club and proud owner of Tall Willows Horse Ranch. An active and spry seventy-two years young; tall and lanky, his blonde hair had turned white, and his skin was tanned and weathered from seven decades of working out in the elements. Ruth’s parents and sister had moved back to Colorado, nearly ten years ago, to help Joe run the family business after Grandma Loretta died.

As Ruth began unloading horses from the trailer, Joe and his old friend Shep emerged from the barn.



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“Put’em in that paddock till everyone shows up and we can decide who suits who best,” Shep told Ruth. “You ridin’ Blue?”

“Yes sir”

“Some of the team’ll ride our horses,” Shep continued. “There’s a beautiful black geldin brought in yesterday. It’s the Silver boy’s horse.”

“Silver’s you say?” inquired Joe.

“Yup”

“That just might be one of our horses.”

“When you see Kenny, you can ask him,” replied Shep. “We might need only two or three of your horses, Joe. Can you stay and help me match up your horses with my riders?”

“Shep, I don’t know a rodeo coach better than you, but I’d be glad to do what I can.” Joe closed the corral gate and they headed to the barn.

Ruth said, “If you don’t need me, I’ll take the shuttle over to main campus.”

“I was hoping you could meet everyone and take a look at the schedule. We’ve only got three weeks to put this shin dig together,” said Shep.

“I have class at eleven, but I can stay for a while.” Ruth conceded.

“Thank you dear.” Shep gave Ruth a one armed bear hug. “It’s summertime, so tell me what you’re doing taking a class here at the university, did you graduate high school already?”

“My Grand-baby is not only beautiful but also brilliant,” Joe beamed. With a mischievous glint in his eye he added, “And you watch what you’re doing you sly old fox. You’re old enough to be her father.”

Ruth’s porcelain skin flushed red. Joe knew teasing and compliments unnerved his granddaughter

“You ignore that old goat, and tell Uncle Shep all about it Ruthie dear.” Shep leaned his back against the side of the barn and wiped his forehead with a handkerchief. Nights were cool in the west, but by nine in the morning, the July days were already hot.

“I’m in the College for High School Seniors program,” Ruth explained.



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“What does that mean?”

“I’ve gone beyond our high school’s math and science programs.”

“She gets that from her Daddy,” Joe interjected.

Ruth continued, “I still have to take classes at high school, but I can take my math and science classes here at Southern Colorado University. Then I can apply those credits to whatever school I go to next fall. I’m taking Biology now. I can take math theories in the fall, then molecular bio in the spring. That’ll give me a good head start for the programs that I’m looking at for next year”

“Darlin’ you’re growin’ up too fast! I remember when I first met you shaking in you brand new pink cowgirl boots.”

Ruth gave her adopted Uncle a hug, “Well, you were a lot bigger and scarier lookin’ back then.”

Shep laughed, “And you’ve grown a lot smarter than me. I’ll have you on that bus in an hour, promise.”

The radio blasted as they walked into the university’s beautiful barn, “... *police still searching for local school official Hector Alvarez. It has been three days since the recently promoted school official was reported missing by his family. Authorities...*”

“Stu, turn that dangd thing down!” Shep hollered down the wide aisle, “We’ve got guests.”

“Sorr-ry,” Stu’s sing song voice called as he stepped out of a stall with a pitch fork full of muck and tossed it into a nearby wheelbarrow. He quickly turned off the radio.

Stu and Shep had worked together for many years. Shep with his barrel chest, flaming red handlebar mustache and matching hair was the antithesis of Barn Manager Stu who was a thin live wire of a man. His skin was espresso brown and his hair cut close to his head. He had a kind and gentle way about him that made animals feel safe and secure. Stu said hello to Joe and Ruth then hauled the wheelbarrow out of the barn.

Shep turned to Ruth, “I need you to look at the schedule, it’s posted outside the office. We’ll do most of the work in the evenings, except for Saturdays.”



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Ruth nodded and took two steps toward the office, when a gorgeous site stopped her in her tracks. A beautiful black quarter horse was led out of a stall by a tall, handsome cowboy.

“OOOHHH.... He’s beautiful,” she gasped.

Joe and Shep eyed each other and couldn’t help themselves. Shep chortled “She talking about the horse or the cowboy?”

Ruth took a closer look at the young man holding the lead rope; *not too bad himself*. She gently lifted her hand up to the horse’s forelock and he dipped his head down for a scratch.

“Don’t know if you recognize him, Joe, but this is Ken Silver,” Shep said.

“I thought you looked familiar son, good to see you again,” they shook hands. “Is this the horse your daddy bought off of me years ago?”

“Yes sir,” Ken smiled. “This is Remington.”

“Well, he’s a fine specimen. What have you been doing with him?” Joe asked.

“We did some rodeo in school and a lot of trail riding and camping,” Ken said. As if on cue Remington turn his face towards Ken for a kiss on the top of his soft nose.

Shep interrupted with another laugh and slapped Joe on the shoulder, “Now there’s a cowboy for you. Takes his horse to school and he kissed the horse instead of the pretty girl standing next to him.”

Ken looked over his shoulder. Ruth had worked her way down the horse’s flanks, around his hind quarters, and up the other side. He returned the appraisal he’d unknowingly received from her; she’s a *very pretty* girl. She was tall and slender and it was easy to fall into her aqua-blue eyes. Out from under her cowboy hat, wisps of white blonde hair fell around the delicate features of her face. Her arms and legs were long and graceful as she gently stroked Rem. A halfcocked smile inched across his face as he thought *what an appropriate name; Willows*.

“Ken, where you putting your horse?” Shep’s voice snapped him back to reality.

“How about in the little pasture near the barn?” Ken asked.



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“That’s good,” Shep agreed, “it has a fence down the middle, close the gate and put Remington in the bottom half. Ruth, you put Blue in the other side.”

Ken took Remington out the large sliding door at the end of the barn; Ruth headed out to get Blue.

Ken leaned against the gate waiting for her as she walked Blue to the pasture, She got a good long look at him as she walked towards him. Back in the barn with him close up, she’d had to look up to see his eyes. They were warm and as brown as melted chocolate. His face was kind, and strong. Other girls would ooh over his broad muscular shoulders or coo at his deep dimples. They might drool at how his legs seemed to go on forever in those old jeans. She admired all that too, but she was more fascinated with his handsome face. His nose of all things. *It’s straight, it’s not too narrow or too wide; it’s a really great nose!*

She led Blue into the small field, closed the gate behind her and removed his halter. Blue immediately trotted over to a rack of hay and began munching. Remington was content doing the same on his side of the field.

“Guess they’ll be all right.” Ken walked toward her and removed his cowboy hat. He extended his hand to her, “We weren’t properly introduced. I’m Ken Silver.”

“Hi,” she smiled and took his hand to shake it, “I’m Ruth Willows. Joe’s my Granddaddy.”

“Good thing he’s your grand-daddy. Thought I’d have to call you Grand-baby too.” He kept hold of her hand.

“Only my Granddaddy gets to call me that, cowboy,” she said with a wink.

“Then I’ll have to find something else that suits you, Baby Doll.” He returned her wink.

They held each other’s gaze for a long, awkward moment. “I should have known,” Ken finally broke the silence and his stare.

“What’s that?”

“That Blue was a Blue Rhone. He’s beautiful.”



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“Thanks.” He let go of her hand and they started back to the barn, “But I didn’t name him cause of his color.”

“Oh? Why then?”

“Well...it’s stupid... but,” she paused to decide if she really wanted to elaborate.

“Well, there was a really old TV show I watched, when I was really little. It was about this family, and they lived in the mountains and stuff. They had the prettiest white mule named Blue. I told everyone that I wanted a mule named Blue. Mom promised me a horse when we moved here, and said I could name it Blue.”

Ken laughed.

Defensively Ruth stammered, “Hey, I said it’s silly...”

“I’m not laughing at you Baby Doll,” Ken smiled apologetically; “You’re talking about *The Walton’s*, right?”

“Yeah, I think that was the name of the show.”

“I loved that show. I always wanted to be John Boy,” Ken chuckled. “Well, I wanted to be the oldest so my sister couldn’t boss me around, and I wanted to be a writer.”

As they walked back through the barn doors Ruth asked “And are you?”

“What?”

“A writer?”

“Well, sometimes I...”

Ken was interrupted by Shep whistling through his fingers. The group of riders had arrived and Shep called his meeting to order. “Every year the Kiwanis Club holds a benefit rodeo. We help them out by doing the opening ceremonies each day and some demos. Everyone will ride in the drill team demo. If you did a demo last year you can do it again. If you didn’t, we’ll find one for you to do.

“Some of our regulars are out of town for the summer so we have a few ringers here to take up the slack. This here is Ken Silver,” Ken tipped his hat, “Lynette Jones,” she smiled, “and Ruth Willows,” she smiled too. “And this gentleman here is Joe Willows,” Shep indicated Joe, “he’s brought us a few horses to use.



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“Before you leave this barn this morning I want you all to look at the schedule to see what you’ll be doing and when I need you here to do it. If you have a problem with the schedule tell me now...Derrick...not ten minutes before you’re supposed to mount up.”

A stocky boy with a round head of curly black hair grimaced when the guy beside him punched his arm.

“Also before you leave this barn this morning I want to know what horse you’ll be riding. Mr. Willows has agreed to stick around and help out with matching you up with the best horse for your needs.

“Lastly, say hello to our new riders, I can attest that they are all very good at what they do, otherwise I wouldn’t have asked them to join us.”

A tiny girl with short mousy brown hair, a little turned up nose and slightly bulging eyes bounced up and down in her seat trying to get Shep’s attention, “Oh yes, please welcome a new member to our team, Miss Katie MacKay.”

The pug faced girl jumped up with a little pop and gave everyone a big wave and “Hi ya!” Before she sat back down on a hay bale.

“Katie’ll be joining the team this fall and I thought it would be good for her to participate in this event too.” Shep concluded, “Now go do what you need to do.”

The crowd relaxed. Ruth said hello to Lynette. She didn’t know her well, but she knew that she was Stu’s daughter.

Derrick came over to introduce himself. Lynette looked at his extended hand, turned and walked away. “Wonder what bug crawled up her ass and died.” He said loud enough for Lynette, but not her father, to hear. He grabbed Ruth’s hand and held it rather than shook it, “I’m Derrick Gills. Anything you need little lady, you just let Derrick know.”

Ruth bit her tongue hard. She didn’t want to laugh, but she always found it amusing when a guy shorter than her called her ‘little lady.’ She managed a polite thanks before Katie the pug popped up beside her.

“Hi there. I’m Katie.”

“I’m Ruth,” she said still biting her tongue.



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Derrick grunted at the intrusion on his time and space.

“I’m so excited to be riding on the team this fall!” Katie began, “And even more excited to be doing demonstrations at the rodeo. When I was little my folks took me to this rodeo every summer, and now I’m gonna be riding in it. It is so... so... so exciting!”

Derrick and Ruth stared in wordless astonishment at Katie. Derrick grunted, then turned and walked away.

Katie asked, “What are you goin’ to be doing’ Ruth? I show western pleasure and showmanship.”

“Well, actually I need to check the schedule.” Ruth hoped their conversation would end when she walked to the board to study the schedule, but Katie followed.

“So, you don’t actually ride with the team during school? I can’t wait to meet everyone. I hope there are a few more girls on the team, but if all the boys are cute, maybe it’s better if there aren’t as many girls....” Katie chattered and giggled.

Ruth glanced at her watch, “Oh no, I’m gonna miss the shuttle!” she gasped. Katie didn’t get a chance to finish her thought before Ruth turned on her heels and ran to Joe and Shep.

“Shep the schedule’s fine, see you tomorrow. Granddaddy, can I call you for a ride home after class? I came with you and I don’t have my truck.”

“Anytime Grand-baby,” he answered with a smile.

Ruth kissed him on the cheek, then fled across the dirt parking lot down and the lane to the shuttle stop.

