

Winter Harvest

By

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CHAPTER ONE

Dana Winter began her second life thirty-five thousand feet above the earth's surface. She resolved not to spend the rest of her life shackled by the depression of loss and failure. A new future beckoned, and she had responded to Aunt Lil's invitation to find healing on her cattle ranch in Colorado.

The cloud cover dispersed, and arid plains came into view. Dried creeks, arroyos, and ravines etched the surface for miles, though the mountains remained unchanged for thousands of years.

How did pioneer women crossing this unforgiving land in Conestoga wagons bear their losses? Pioneers lost children on the trek west, and Dana knew they grieved. They endured daily hardships, leaving little time to mourn lost children.

Behind closed eyes, her writer's mind visualized a covered wagon apart from the others. A family gathered around a small bundle wrapped in a faded blanket being lowered into a hastily dug grave. The dry heat evaporated tears before they fell. After prayer, work-worn hands refilled the space and patted down a mound of parched soil. A man and woman wearily placed rocks on the grave, faces grim with loss. Two small children, heads bowed, stood to one side. Were they wondering if they were next? Would they live to reach the end of the trail?

Okay girl, enough of that. Be positive. If you want to start fresh, think about the future.

Dwelling on the past is unhealthy.

Dana was not alone in her suffering, but grief had left her daily life in shambles. Words which once flowed effortlessly died on the vine. For her, being unable to write was akin to dying. *We are all dying from the moment of birth*, she thought. *It's harder when it's a child-my child*, Zoey. Dana fought back the impending dread that sucked her soul dry. The insidious numbness following Zoey's death did not comfort her.

She straightened as she mentally changed gears. A working cattle ranch would be exciting, just the thing to keep her busy and take her mind off her loss and the scandal.

Dana surveyed the patchwork quilt of farms below as the plane descended toward Denver International. Green rectangles and circles lay scattered and outlined by predominant browns. The green proclaimed the continuance of life, even in this thirsty terrain. Pockets of snow from last year's winter dotted the highest mountains.

Water is life here. Stephen's abuse and ultimate betrayal combined with Zoey's death had taken their toll. Dana's soul desperately needed the water of life, the affirmation of life to come. She needed to persevere and move forward, her confidence restored. This thinking brought the first peace Dana had felt in three years. Her audible sigh as she sat back in her seat stimulated a questioning look from her elderly seatmate.

"You going home?" The lady with blue-tinted hair peered over half glasses. Her nimble fingers continued crocheting, the hook plying the yarn as she spoke.

"No, just a respite."

“Are you one of those “breaking the glass ceiling” corporate women? Bet you didn’t think a woman my age would know that expression,” she said, her brow lifting and her lips curving with satisfaction.

“No,” Dana chuckled. She flew first class dressed in a conservative, gray Liz Claiborne suit and carried a laptop which combined might give that impression. “I’m a down-to-earth working girl who needs a rest.” Not wanting to invite conversation, she turned and looked out of the window.

The terminal came into view as the wheels lowered and locked. The concourses pin-wheeled around the terminal, its iconic roofline a series of white tent-like structures engineered to resemble Colorado’s majestic mountains.

“What do you do?” the lady persisted.

Dana wanted to appear that she hadn’t heard. “I’m a writer.”

“Oh, a writer,” her seatmate repeated. “Are you a journalist for some newspaper or magazine? Which one? What do you write? What’s your name?” The woman, silent the whole flight from Houston, morphed into a chatterbox.

“I’m an author. I write novels.” Dana regretted her reply as the woman perked up, her eyes wide, conveying recognition of possibly being in the presence of a celebrity. She had seen the look many times on the marketing circuit and at endless book signings.

“Well now, you’re the first author I’ve ever met. You do look familiar. I thought so the very first moment I saw you. Who are you, and what have you written?”

“Dana Winter.”

She barely got her name out when the woman squealed, “That’s who you are!” A crochet hook pointed in Dana’s direction. Heads turned as her voice carried, “I knew I’d seen you somewhere before. I saw you interviewed on television. That’s it. Oh, I just *love* your books.”

Dana went from peace to frustration in less than a minute. She pinched the bridge of her nose and tried to smile. *Why didn’t I say I was a sports writer?*

“I’ve read all your books,” the woman declared. “To think I’ve been sitting this entire time next to Dana Winter. My friends will be so envious.” She pulled a bulging bag onto her lap and rummaged through the contents. “I must find my camera and get a picture. This is just so exciting. It’s...” She looked at Dana and immediately saw her distress. “Oh my dear, I’m sorry. You don’t want attention.” Her hushed voice conveyed an apology. She looked distraught.

“It’s okay. My success is dependent upon people reading my books. I’ll be happy to have a picture with you when we deplane.”

The woman smiled gratefully as she sank back into her seat and continued to move the contents of her bag around. The wheels touched down several times before the plane settled into a smooth approach to its berth. She triumphantly held up her camera and put away her crochet materials. She remained silent, but Dana heard whispered comments of others. The seat belt sign chimed off and people stood, eager to leave.

A middle-aged woman in the row ahead turned saying, “I couldn’t help but overhear. I read your books, too. *Night Shades* is my favorite. You resemble your picture on the cover, only thinner. I mean ...” Her face reddened, and her voice faded with embarrassment.

“I’m glad you liked that one,” Dana said, taking up the slack. “It was one of my first and a favorite of mine also.” She slid into the aisle.

A tall, young man with a blond buzz cut and a winning set of dimples pulled Dana's hand luggage from the overhead compartment. "I haven't read your books, but I'm going to look for one."

"Thank you," she replied as she took possession of her bag. She was used to the furtive stares that came her way as she hurried forward. Were they remembering the scandal, the tragedy, her success as a prolific author of seven books, three of them bestsellers? What did it matter?

Her seatmate waited for her at the end of the tunnel. She sheepishly wagged her camera, mouthing, "I'm sorry."

Dana walked up to a young man waiting to board. "Would you please take a picture of us?"

"No problem." He grinned and complied.

Dana thanked him, said goodbye, and ducked into a restroom before heading to Baggage Claim. As she washed her hands, she took stock of her appearance. She vaguely resembled her cover shot, but her cheekbones were more prominent now, and the violet circles beneath her blue eyes bespoke sleepless nights. Her black hair, pulled away from her face in a loose chignon, emphasized her pale complexion. Dana looked and felt every one of her thirty-one years. *Well, old girl, take stock of the positive side, no gray hairs. All you need are a few pounds and a sparkle in your eyes. Today's a new day. Get a life.*

Buck Bannister sat back on his heels after removing the birth sack from the foal's head. The foal breathed on its own, so it needed no further stimulation. Buck lifted the tail of the quivering mass and quietly said, "That's a fine-looking colt you have there, Lil." He reached for

a towel to wipe Mariah's blood off his hands and arms. A satisfied grin belied his knotted shoulders and weary arms as he stood.

Lil Tanner launched herself into Buck's arms, unmindful of the blood, nearly bowling him over. Tears streamed down her face. "Thank you for comin' as quick as you did. I could've lost them both. It was pure luck I was with her when her water broke, and I saw the birth not progressin' as it should."

Lil stepped back to allow Buck room. She had seen plenty of calves born. Nature took its course most times in pastures unaided. Horses delivered more quickly than cows, which increased the possibility of complications. The anticipated birth of Mariah's first foal had kept Lil on edge.

"Everyone's gone, and John had an emergency down near Montrose. Vets don't keep to schedules when there's trouble. We didn't expect her to foal until tonight." She swiped the tears on her cheek. "You're a godsend, Buck."

"You know you can call on me anytime, Lil."

They quietly walked outside the stall to give the mare time with her foal. Mariah looked back at her quivering newborn and made soft sounds to the bundle at her feet.

The foal rocked several times and rolled up his head until he was lying on his chest.

"Good job," Buck whispered to the colt's mother as Lil expelled her breath.

Mariah got to her feet to investigate. As she stood up, the umbilical cord broke. Buck reached for the bucket Lil had prepared for this moment and retrieved the cleansing disinfectant mixture to splash over the navel. He walked into the stall, and as he worked, he stroked Mariah, quietly telling her she was a good mama. "Mariah hasn't passed the whole placenta," Buck told Lil. "You don't want to force it. A tear can lead to internal problems or infection for the mare." He

reached into the bucket and took out the gauze. He tied the lower end of the placenta with the gauze and brought it up to tie to the placenta just under the vulva. "You want to save it for John to see when he comes, and you don't want either of them to step on it."

They watched as the foal attempted to stand.

"Have you settled on a name for your colt?"

"Maybe Crusoe, after another survivor."

"That's appropriate," Buck agreed. They watched a while in silence as mare and foal bonded. Mariah nuzzled her foal and guided him to her udder and teats. Instinct took over and the colt tried to nurse. After a few false starts, he suckled, bumping Mariah when he lost the teat.

"I never tire of watching new life begin," Lil said to Buck.

"Neither do I."

"It just seemed like everything happened at once. Roy's first great-grandchild was born yesterday, so he's in Durango. Farley's havin' a wisdom tooth pulled. And you sendin' Curly and your plane to pick up my niece at the last minute is more than neighborly. How can I ever repay you?"

"You're welcome, Lil. No need to think payment. Seeing Mariah and this little fella doing well is thanks enough. Will Farley be back soon?"

"I expect him any time. He said he'd be back by four, and it's near three now," she said, checking her watch. "Dana and Curley should be in the air by now. I hope she's not upset because I wasn't at the airport to meet her."

"You'll have to tell me about your niece. She's your sister's daughter if I remember right. Does she also live in New York?"

"Yes, New York City. She's a writer and goes by her married name, Dana Winter."

“The author? June used to read books by a Dana Winter.”

Lil surveyed Buck’s wide shoulders and confident stance. *He would make some woman a fine husband.*

“Yes, she’s an author. Dana’s havin’ a hard time now. I wrote her a couple of years ago after her daughter was killed in an accident, but she declined my invitation. Two weeks ago she called and asked if the offer was still open.”

“What about her husband? Is she married?”

“Don’t even get me started on that creep,” she said, her hands balled into fists. “It sounded on the phone as if Dana’s on the verge of a breakdown. She’ll find her healin’ here.” *Maybe you’ll both find healin’ together. What a lovely thought!*

“If anyone can help her, you can.”

Mariah nudged Buck’s shoulder over the rail.

“I think she’s thankin’ you for your help,” Lil said.

Buck stroked Mariah’s jaw. “She did most of the work. Why don’t you go on up the house and get cleaned up so you can meet your niece. I’ll wait for Farley and fill him in.”

Baggage Claim was crowded. Dana observed her fellow travelers, knowing each one had a story. She enjoyed guessing occupations and interests by people’s dress, actions, and types of luggage.

“Dimples,” who had retrieved her bag on the plane, appeared before Dana with her latest romance, *Night of the Tiger*, now out in paperback. He grinned. “I found this in the news shop. After looking at the cover, I hope to give my girlfriend a signed copy.”

Dana smiled and asking his girlfriend's name, took the book and pen he held out. "To Sonja, May you enjoy many happy escapes. Dana Winter," she wrote. Several others had also found copies of her book. Dana signed them and allowed pictures. The conveyor belt began its circuitous route. She looked around for Aunt Lil.

"Ms. Winter?" a deep, raspy voice asked behind her.

She turned and saw a lean cowboy, not much taller than her petite self, with deep crevices carved into his weathered face. He snatched his hat from his head and nodded. Ears too large stuck out from curly brown hair. Dark brows marched together across his forehead in one, long line above a nose that looked as if it had been broken more than once. It was difficult to determine his age. He wore a denim shirt and faded Wrangler jeans held up by a belt with an enormous buckle.

The cowboy scanned the little crowd around her. "Guess that rigmarole comes with the territory. I'm Curly Mason. Your Aunt Lil sent me to fetch you to the Double Bar-T" His blue eyes crinkled with amusement, his dusty, boot-shod feet shifted side to side, and his cowboy hat turned nervously in his hands.

"Miss Lil told me you'd be the prettiest woman gettin' her bags. She was right, but I seen your picture in her kitchen, so I knew you right off. I'll get your bags if you point 'em out.

Didn't have a bit of trouble pickin' *you* out of the crowd, no siree,"

Dana pointed out her blue bags as they appeared.

Curly didn't wait for a response, but went to wrestle her luggage off the conveyor belt and without using the wheels, moved in the direction of the doors.

Dana followed in his wake, amused at the sight of his bowed legs and the fact he held her heavy suitcases out from his sides as if they were contaminated. He displayed strength, she'd give him that.

A good-natured passenger from her flight opened the door for them. Curly turned sideways and carried her luggage through.

"We got to get a ride to Centennial Airport," he said over his shoulder as he steered her to the taxi line. "It's about twelve miles from here. The plane's parked there."

"Plane? We're not driving?" Dana panicked, affirming her fear of flying in a small plane.

"No ma'am." He dropped her bags by the curb. "Whew! I think we'll have our weight limit," he said facetiously. "See, it's too far to drive over the mountains." His eyes looked into the distance. "The plane's faster." He lit a half cigarette cupped in his hand. "Tryin' to stop," he said, indicating the stub now hanging from one side of his mouth. "Cut'em all in half and they last longer. Cheaper, too."

Dana had a disquieting thought. "Are you the pilot?"

"Yes ma'am." His chest puffed out. "You're not nervous, not goin' to get sick, are you?" he asked, observing her face closely.

She shook her head.

"Good! Been flyin' for years, fifteen in the Yukon and twelve here. See, it's not my regular job. I'm a mechanic, but I kept up my license and got special training for this baby." His hand skimmed through the air. "Rides like a dream. Not to worry, I'm a good pilot. Well, no hot doggin' with me anyways," he added, a lopsided grin displaying yellowed teeth.. "She's reliable. That's what counts."

The taxi arrived, and he dropped the cigarette on the concrete curb, stubbing it out with the toe of his boot.

Dana wrinkled her nose, bent down, retrieved the stub, and took it to a nearby trash container.

“Sorry ‘bout that,” he said as he helped the driver with the bags.

What have I gotten myself into? She had been twelve when she last saw her aunt. Dana’s only real memory of her was the feisty redhead’s dressing down of her socialite mother’s indifference to her. She had offered to take the kid off her sister’s hands. Aunt Lil had immediately rocketed to the top of Dana’s hero list, which was probably why her mother denied further contact. Any mention of her mother’s sister after that included words like, “rowdy, unconventional, ingrate, and ignorant.”

When Dana’s daughter, Zoe, was killed in the accident, Aunt Lil had sent a long, newsy letter describing her secluded home located in a horseshoe valley of the San Juan Mountains. She outlined daily life on a cattle ranch and described its colorful work force. Her letter included condolences and an invitation to “a quiet place, a healing place.”

Dana berated herself for not taking the offer sooner. She’d spent almost two years tormented by anger at Stephen and mourning her precious little girl. New York had lost its glamour and navigating its environs became stressful. Focusing, writing, and pretending to be happy around even her closest friends became impossible. It was especially difficult with her publisher. Grant Holcomb was CEO of Holcomb Publishing, just one of his conglomerate of international companies. Grant, her former husband’s half-brother and a great friend, offered his help, but she didn’t want or need a relationship outside of their professional working

arrangement. She mentally repeated her mantra of survival. *I'm doing the right thing, cutting ties, starting over.*

Her aunt's invitation became a temptation she could no longer ignore. Dana realized her sanity hung in the balance. The letter was a lifeline, and she'd called her mother's sister to see if the invitation was still open now. It was, and here she stood two weeks later, looking at a sleek, white single engine Cirrus SR22 with blue and gray stripes.

Curly stowed Dana's luggage and buckled her up front into one of four gray leather seats. He proceeded to inspect the plane in a competent manner, checking the instruments, and then disappearing into a nearby building. He returned, carrying a leather folder. Curly stroked his hand over the side of the door as he pulled it down and bragged, "Yep, she's a beauty, *and* she comes with a special package." He pointed upward, "a built-in parachute canopy that can be activated in an emergency. Course we never want to use it, but you just feel safer knowin' it's there."

"Is this Aunt Lil's plane?" The aircraft impressed her, and Dana wondered why Aunt Lil hadn't come. She decided not to ask.

"No ma'am. Belongs to Michael C. Bannister, but his friends call him Buck. He's a neighbor, the kind of neighbor who helps people out when they need it if you know what I mean?"

Dana gripped the seat as they became airborne. "Hmm, the best kind," she said after expelling a held breath. Dana looked down on the changing scenery. Evergreens interspersed with low trees and dry brush dotted the landscape.

"You betcha. Indeed it is," he agreed, "indeed it is."

Curly was silent a while and then he began pointing out some sites. “We’re flyin’ over the Rocky Mountains, and in the distance is Leadville, the famous silver town. You might’ve heard about the “Unsinkable” Molly Brown of Titanic fame. She started out in Leadville, or so they say. Nobody knows if she really burnt up all that money in the stove though. And Doc Holliday moved to Leadville after his part in the OK Corral shootout. Plenty of gun fights happened in Leadville, too.” Curly used his hands while talking, and now he pointed his fingers like a gun at her and made a shooting sound. “Boom! Guns just seems to follow the money, just like they always have.”

Dana pushed his hand aside, and he snorted.

“Why does a silver town carry the name Leadville?”

“Well, they actually found gold near there first, but it was hard to get to because of lead-like sand that was traced to a big source of silver.”

“Now, this is the Sawatch Range,” he continued, gesturing toward the mountains ahead. “Mt. Elbert over there is the highest mountain in Colorado. We’ll be crossin’ the Continental Divide soon. On this side of the Rockies, the snow melt runs to the Arkansas River, and on the western side, it runs to the Gunnison, Roaring Fork, and Eagle rivers.”

A short time later, they flew low over a wooden farmhouse with a line of sheds, a large barn, and fenced pastures, corrals and pens. “Your Aunt Lil’s place,” he said, dipping a wing, flying low.

Dana gripped the seat as fear constricted her throat.

They landed several miles away on a paved airstrip. Curly taxied toward a steel hangar before coming to a stop. “A trip by car ordinarily takes seven hours, but we did it in less than an hour. He smiled. “Your Aunt Lil’ll be here in a jiff,” he said as he unloaded her luggage.

Dana looked around with misgivings. She was a long way from New York City and the luxuries money and convenience provided. A sudden gust of wind swirled dust, and her stomach clenched with apprehension. Unfamiliar territory surrounded her.

