Finding Grace

**Chapter 1**

“The diner was built about thirty years ago by the current owner’s father.”

“Is the food any good?”

“You know, I’ve never eaten there. I do see a number of pickups and cars there every now and then.” Jack did a nervous foot shuffle.

“The rest of the buildings popped up shortly thereafter. And no one knows how it got the name of Jackass Springs.”

“How many people live here?” Cody asked as he scanned the greasewood and mesquite bushes dotting the area. The property had been on the market for what seemed an eternity with no one showing interest.

“There’s around fifty, if you count the people living in campers out past the row of bushes over there.” He pointed, and then quickly changed the subject.

“And, you’ll never guess what’s behind this panel,” Jack said as he rolled the panel to the left. Even though the stainless-steel door was dusty and caked with cobwebs, Cody Waters knew exactly what it was. He had spent months scouring real estate ads and doing internet searches looking for a bomb shelter that was remote and out of the way. The only question in his mind was how large was the shelter behind the door.

“Now, why in the world would a man want to build a bomb shelter way out in the middle of the Mohave Desert?”

“Ah, you knew,” Jack said with a laugh. “Who told you?”

“No one told me,” Cody said and helped Jack pull the door open. “I used to build these things, years ago.” He flipped the light switch but the lights failed to work.

“Huh, the batteries must be dead,” Jack said as he tried the switch at the bottom of the stairs. “I’ll see if I can’t find someone to check them out.”

“That might be good.” Cody lit the flashlight mode on his cell phone and glanced around the interior quickly before returning to the stairs. He didn’t bother to tell the realtor that the bomb shelter was a predecessor to the Extreme Patriot Bunker. He had worked on several of them, but this one was old, probably from the late seventies or early eighties, and from the decaying paper grocery sacks on the counter, it didn’t look as though it had been used.

“I think the original owner may have built it because of Edwards Air Force Base.”

“Maybe, but most sane people locate where the base isn’t. It’s a lot cheaper that way.” He shaded his eyes against the sun as he turned in a slow circle.

“Okay,” Cody heaved a sigh, “what are we looking at?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I want to buy the lot. I own a towing company, and this is a perfect location.” Cody walked toward the center of the property as he talked. “Right off Highway 14 halfway from Mohave to Lancaster. I’ve checked and there are a lot of people who break down or get flats on that piece of road. So, how much.”

“Well, Cody Waters,” Jack said with a smile, “let’s go back to my office and talk numbers and see if we can make you an offer you can’t refuse.”

Several hours later Cody Waters climbed into the cab of his truck and started the engine. He pulled his cell phone from his pocket and dialed a number. “Yeah, I got it. We’re in business. No, it needs some work. I can’t tell you that until I get the lights to come on. It gets kind of dark inside one of those. Yeah, I’ll let you know.”

**Chapter 2**

Six months later.

“Yes!” Grace Peterson shouted and pumped her fist in the air. She had spent the past two years skipping meals and missing sleep, juggling her time between school and spending time with her son.

“I take it you passed,” Kirk Randall said with a chuckle. This wasn’t the Grace Peterson he had just spent the last semester sitting beside in class. That Grace Peterson was reserved and seldom spoke. This woman had just earned a bachelor’s degree in education, and a teaching credential. She deserved to celebrate.

“I aced it!” She pointed toward her name on the list the secretary had just loaded into the website.

Kirk grabbed her in a bear hug. “I knew you would. Let’s go somewhere we can find decent food. How about Red Lobster? I’ll buy.”

“Oh, Kirk, I can’t.”

“Why not? Everyone has to eat. Even Jesus ate dinner with his disciples.”

“I’ve been away from Matthew for four days now, and he’s probably driving my mom insane. Besides,” she slipped her arms around his neck and grinned, “knowing my mother, she probably has dinner started and wants to celebrate as a family.”

“Yeah, but I happen to love you too. How am I supposed to compete with a two-year-old?”

“Oh, don’t be jealous of my son. If you married me, you’d be marrying him too. You know that, don’t you?”

“Yes, I do know that, but I can pitch a little fit of my own, can’t I?”

They walked hand-in-hand toward the parking lot and stopped beside her blue Honda. The wind had started kicking up and clouds of dust were billowing on the horizon. Grace unlocked the car door and gave Kirk a quick kiss on the lips.

“I’ll call you in a few days and let you know when you can visit the competition, if you want.”

“Are you kidding? I’ve been begging to meet your son and your mother since I met you.”

“Now you’ll get your chance. I’ve got to go.”

She kissed him again and ducked inside her car. Kirk Randall watched her pull away with a dark feeling inside his chest.

\*\*\*\*\*\*

"Agh! No, not again.” Grace yelled and pounded the steering wheel with her fists. The traffic had ground to a complete stop. Some people were exiting their cars in hope of seeing what lay ahead. One poor soul had taken off hiking but turned around and ran back to his car the instant the gusting wind peppered the side of her car with sand and bits of gravel.

Grace checked the instruments on her dashboard. She had plenty of gasoline and the oil looked fine. The coolant however seemed low and the temperature of the engine kept climbing higher. She looked around as if to find an answer hanging in the dusty air. She heaved a deep sigh and called her mother and told her about the dead traffic and that she had no idea when she’d arrive home. Her mother calmly looked at the traffic report on the internet.

“I hate to tell you this, honey, but there’s been a major accident. A big rig overturned about five miles ahead of you and is completely blocking the highway, both ways.”

“Well, my car’s starting to overheat and I don’t know what to do.”

“Is there any place to pull over and turn the motor off?”

“Well, across the other lane. I see an old café and garage. I guess I could try there.”

“Do that honey, and we’ll celebrate tomorrow.”

Grace cranked her steering wheel hard left, crept across the other lane and pulled into a large gravel parking lot then parked in front of the café. The interior lights were on and the word *EARL’S* painted on the window stood out clearly. She locked the car door and dashed toward the café. Besides the young man in the kitchen and a chunky waitress, there were only two customers inside the place.

“Whew,” Grace said as she pushed her hair back with her fingers. “It is really windy out there.”

“Yes, darlin’ it is that. And according to the internet, it ain’t supposed to stop until sometime tomorrow,” the waitress said. “Besides a place to escape the wind, what can I get for you?”

“How about an ice tea with no sugar?”

“One sugarless tea coming up. It’s a little early yet, but if you’re hungry, Earl grills up a pretty good burger. You might want to try one.”

She slid a tall tumbler of tea in front of Grace and smiled.

“By the way, my name’s Sue.”

“Well Sue, give me a few minutes to collect my thoughts and I might take a cheese burger. But first, my car was starting to heat up. Is there anyone around here that can take a look at it?”

“You might try Cody Waters over at the towing place.” Sue pointed toward the barn. “I’ve had him tinker on my old clunker a couple of times and he seemed okay.”

“Okay.” Grace set the tea on the counter. “I’m going to take my car over there and be back as quick as I can. Then, I’ll try the cheese burger.”

Cody had her pull the Honda inside the barn and he lifted the hood. He plugged a computer into the car only to unplug it a few minutes later. He tinkered under the hood some more before pointing toward a spot on the engine.

“Looks like you need a new thermostat. See? You go on driving it like that and you’ll ruin the engine.”

“How do I get one of those? I’m kind of stuck here.”

“Well, let me see.” Cody rummaged through his meager collection of parts and returned with a small box.

“This here should take care of the problem. All we got to do is wait until the engine cools and I’ll pop it in and you’ll be on your way. That is, as soon as the traffic starts moving again.”

“Yeah, there’s always that. How come you’re not out towing that big rig off the road?”

“The wreck is closer to Mohave than here. The Highway Patrol is using one of the wreckers in town.”

“Do you take credit cards?”

“Yes I do. We can take care of it when you get back.”

Grace returned to the café and ate half of her cheese burger and fries, then had Sue wrap the rest into a paper sack. The traffic was starting to creep like a snail and she wanted to check on the status of her car. She stopped at the door and stared as Cody Waters ran a damp towel across the hood of her car.

“Take a seat, ma’am. I’ll be finished in a minute.”

“Is it fixed?”

“Oh yes. Replacing a thermostat is real easy. It runs like a champ. Here,” he pulled a chair to a small desk and cleared a space and sat her tea in the middle. “I just figured a nice car like this should look as good as it runs.”

“Thank you. It’s starting to get old, but it really is a good car.”

She sat sipping her tea as Cody finished drying the car. She yawned several times as he hung the towel and went to fetch his card scanner. As she watched him slide the card her head rolled to one side and she fell from the stool.