

## Chapter One

Anticipating the stir my visit was bound to create, I squared my shoulders, lifted my chins and marched through the doorway. After all, the company was still mine on paper.

“Be right there.” The voice came from behind a door on the left.

Sure my daughter-in-law would adamantly object to what I intended to do, I skipped the small talk. “Just me, Vickie.”

The door to my son’s office opened, and Robby stepped into the lobby, almost filling the doorway with his stocky six-and-a-half-foot frame. “Hey, Mom. I thought you took a couple of days off to rest.”

So, there it was. I was not expected, and most likely, not wanted. But as I said before, this was still my company.

I slid past my son. Just as I suspected, every stinkin’ trucker in our employment was there. I walked my eyes around the circle—somewhat amused with the assortment of emotions displayed on their faces. Surprise, of course. And a bit of guilt, embarrassment and discomfort. I took a seat. “Guess I missed the memo about today’s meeting.”

Robby took his place behind the large mahogany desk. “Let me be honest, Mom.”

“Good start.”

He smiled slightly—not an I’m-glad-we’re-together-on-this gesture, but one riddled with tension. “The guys want to discuss their future employment . . . with me.”

That hit hard, like I’d been plowed down by one of my own trucks. Most of these truckers had worked for me for years. Good grief, I’d seen them through divorces and custody battles and chemotherapy. I made sure I had their backs, and they always had mine. Like when they offered to take somebody out who threatened to sue me a few years ago. Not that I accepted their offer, but the thought got me through the mess.

“Discussing the future is always a good thing.” My eyes connected with each employee who would reciprocate. “Will it bother anyone if I stay?”

I faced my son. “Robby?”

He shook his head. “Can you step out a minute, Mom?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Then we might have to reschedule.”

A seasoned trucker, two seats to my left, shifted in his seat and crossed his arms. The wiry little man with clumps of grayish hair draped over his balding crown had been with me from the beginning. “Not necessary, Robby.”

Pete turned in my direction. “I’m sure I can speak for most all of us truckers. Ms. Biz, there ain’t no one we respect more than you when it comes to trucking know-how. Even though you sometimes get all up on your high horse, we know it’s because you care more about this company than life itself.”

Heat filled my cheeks. “Thanks, Pete.”

“None of us want to desert you. We took the coward’s way out, expecting Robby to pass the news on to you.”

My neck went stiff. I looked to Robby. “Desert me?”

“Things have to change, Mom, or the guys plan to work elsewhere. Some have already accepted other positions.”

I stared at the boy—the man—who sat behind the desk. I waited for someone to say he was wrong. But no one spoke, and the silent buzz in the room intensified until I almost plugged my ears to shut it out. I stood and responded with a false bravado to my voice. “Pay raises? That what you need?”

“It’s not that easy, Ms. Biz,” Pete said. “There’s no way you can afford to pay us the wages we can get from larger, consolidated trucking companies. Then there’s the flexible hours, the safety incentives, the most recent technology on them trucks and the on-the-job schooling they provide to keep our licenses current.”

“It’s the whole package,” a younger trucker added. “I can’t afford not to take advantage of the offer another company made me. I’m giving my notice, today.”

Several others nodded.

“Just can’t see no way around it,” Pete said.

“Right.” The company was going down before my eyes and I could do nothing to stop it. I reached for the desk as my hands began to tingle and my breathing became choppy. The room swirled around me.

Truckers jumped to support me and ease me into a chair.

The room cleared. Vickie appeared and insisted that I nibble on a cracker and take small drinks of water.

My breathing slowed. The meeting. The truckers, and . . . their demands for more than I could ever give them. “What am I going to do, Robby?”

I rested a bit in the break room, then spent a few minutes at the bathroom mirror, combing my fingers through my curly gray hair. I looked about as washed up as I felt. Not to worry about smudged mascara, I wore only a thin layer of face makeup. No eye shadow, blush or lipstick. Didn’t want to draw attention to myself. Not until I lost a few pounds.

Vickie was busy with a customer when I walked through the lobby toward Robby’s office. A ray of sunlight played on her curly Raggedy-Ann orange hair.

“Can you please explain this fee?” the customer said.

Vickie pointed to the invoice. “As you can see here, you never responded to our request that you confirm the order.”

I remembered the situation and stepped behind the counter. “Can I help?”

Despite the pleasant look on Vickie’s face, her expressive, green eyes spoke clearly. “I’ve got this, Biz.”

But she obviously didn’t. Not that I could blame her. She’d only been working the front office for a little over two weeks. Robby’s idea when I started getting daily migraines and the doctor insisted I was juggling too many tasks.

I noted the customer’s name on the invoice and extended my hand. “Hi, Mr. Ralston. I’m Biz McNeely. How can we resolve this situation to your satisfaction?”

Within minutes, the charge was deleted and our satisfied customer left, thankful for our willingness to work with him.

Vickie, on the other hand, was obviously not happy. In fact, she didn’t even look up when I reminded her to delete the charge on the books.

She’d learn, with time. Right now, I needed to settle things with Robby.

I could hear the roar of engines and other shop sounds through Robby's open office window. "You know we pay for air conditioning around here, right?"

Old joke. Everyone knew Robby refused to be cooped up in artificial air all day. I'd forfeited that battle years ago.

"Are you feeling better?"

I nodded and sat in front of the desk. "We need to talk, and not about how I'm feeling."

"Yes. Just let me get a refill on coffee. Want a cup?"

"Sure. Two sugars."

Robby returned and sat next to me. He blew on his drink. "First let me say that we are not finished."

My eyes clogged, despite my resolve to keep a tight rein on my emotions. "But the truckers were right. I can't compete with the larger companies, and I refuse to—"

"Stop there, Mom. We've had this discussion. At this point, you have to face reality. We only have three choices."

"I'll go under before I'll sell out to a consolidated firm. I mean it, Robby."

Robby picked up his pad and rifled through the pages. "We have friends, Mom."

Yeah, that's what I thought, too.



I headed for the country. The one place in all the world that calmed me when life got too big for me to handle. Usually I just crept along the back roads at random. Relaxed into nostalgic scenes of homesteads dotted with faded barns and swinging gates and combines in the fields. Flipped off the air conditioning and rolled down my windows to hear my tires crunch the gravel and inhale the familiar scent of cow manure and freshly mown grass and whatever else goes into the delicious country aroma.

But today was different. Today I drove with purpose. My heart hurt, and I needed to remember better days. Taking a right turn, I drove about a mile down the road and slowed to a crawl as I neared my destination.

A wooden bridge crossed a bubbling creek at the entrance. The driveway wound upward among heavy oak trees to the white two-story house at the top of the hill—the home of my dreams.

Feeling a little foolish, I pulled into the drive and pretended I'd come home. Shut my eyes and allowed myself to imagine that I held the key to my dream.

This house and I had history. As a teen, I babysat here for a family who laughed and loved and forgave mistakes. As I cuddled their tiny children, I dreamed of one day creating a home of my own here, where my children would feel safe and wanted. I listened to their friendly chatter. Watched their gentle touch. And joined them for engaging games of Monopoly and warm chocolate chip cookies at their kitchen table on Sunday afternoons.

They took me in as one of their own, and looking back, I wondered if they knew the conditions I endured every other day of my life.

If only life had turned out differently. If only I hadn't let the business override the true dreams of my heart. I sighed as I shifted my truck into reverse . . . and backed into reality.

I grimaced as I pulled into my drive. Across the street a rusted washing machine had been hauled to the curb, flanked by oily auto parts, a pee-stained baby mattress and a couple of milk crates overflowing with beer bottles. This eyesore would probably remain on the curb for the next three weeks before anyone took time to call the city for a pickup.

My next-door neighbor's garbage can also stood by the curb. Nasty. Cracked plastic. Dribbled food dried to the rim. I wheeled it to the side of the house and walked around back to let myself in. "Hazel. It's me, Biz."

I walked down the dim hallway to the family room. My elderly friend stirred in her recliner. Dressed in gray slacks and a floral-patterned blouse, muted blue in color, she wore a string of pearls around her neck that perfectly accentuated the baby-soft skin on which they rested. Pale pink gloss tinted her lips, and her wispy white hair, coiled neatly in a bun at the nape of her slender neck, spoke of gentle elegance.

"Oh, hi, Biz. Is it lunchtime already?"

I laughed. "Lunchtime and beyond. I thought your granddaughter planned to be home at noon today."

Hazel inched forward in the chair and reached for her walker. "She had to go in early for some extra training. But she promised to come home early this evening."

Wrapping my arms around Hazel's waist, I helped her to her feet and steadied her. "You should have called. I could have come sooner."

Hazel laughed. "No problem, Bizzie. I just appreciate you stopping by when you can."

Slowly, we stepped to the bathroom. I turned on the shower, gently removed Hazel's clothing and soiled diaper, and helped her onto the shower bench. "So what's new on the Soaps?" I stood outside the glass door. "Did Rosalyn tell Miguel the truth, yet?"

Hazel babbled nonstop as she bathed. She always insisted on doing this herself, but by the time she finished, she was exhausted. I dried my friend's frail body, helped her into a fresh nightie and undergarment and shadowed her to the kitchen. Our daily routine . . . for over three years.

"Want some soup and a grilled cheese?"

Hazel nodded. "That sounds wonderful, sweetie."

As a pat of butter melted into softness in the skillet, so my friend's affection oozed through cracks in the walls I'd built to keep people away. Truth was, it never mattered what condition I entered this house. I always left feeling loved and appreciated. Well, at least I would always have that.

When I got home, Robert was in the backyard watering his flowers. I took a migraine tablet and sipped on hot tea as I heated our supper.

By the time Robert came inside, the pain behind my eyes had subsided considerably.

He washed his hands at the sink. "How's Hazel?"

"The doctors said her lungs are almost clear from the pneumonia. She's breathing so much easier."

Robert scooped a hefty helping of coleslaw onto his plate. "Robby says you stopped by the office this afternoon."

My forehead tensed. "Robby explain our dilemma?"

"He started to, but I stopped him. Said I'd rather hear it from you."

"Thanks, honey. I was bamboozled. The truckers hadn't said a word about being unhappy . . . at least not to me. And then Robby tells me he already has a plan that will fix things."

Robert bit into a juicy chicken breast and wiped his chin with his napkin. "A plan?"

"Yes. But I'm not sure where he got the idea I needed him to plan for the future. Good grief, I hired him as an accountant, not a soothsayer."

Robert laughed. His cell phone buzzed, and he checked the screen. "Sorry, honey. I need to take this in my office."

I toyed with my green beans until Robert returned.

“So what do these plans of Robby’s look like? Any common sense behind them?”

I shrugged. “I can’t fight the fact that the larger, consolidated companies offer a much better benefit package. Robby has contacted other small trucking companies and proposed a sort of merger with them. A consolidation of sorts, but set up to allow individual owners to maintain a high degree of control. Calls it Mom and Pop United.”

“What do you think?”

“It looks impressive on paper. But I’m nervous about investing everything I own. So many things could go wrong.”

“Good point. Of course, investments always involve risk. Would you really need to put up everything?”

“Robby says I do. We’ll need to update technology and order new trucks. And he wants to hire some financial guru who supposedly has a good handle on what’s ahead in the trucking industry. How do you even find such a guy?”

Robert stacked our dishes. “It is a lot to think about.”

I reached for the empty vegetable bowl, but Robert took it from me. “I’ll get these. Your head’s really hurting, isn’t it?”

“Well, actually . . . yes. Did I say something, or—”

“I can see it in your eyes. Why don’t you go lie down for a while? We can talk later if you want to.”

“But I need to make a decision. The guys at the shop are ready to walk out. Robby said it’s just a matter of days.”

“I’m sure the decision can wait at least a couple of hours while you rest. Want me to run you a bath?”



As I soaked in a tub of bubbles with a hot washcloth over my face, I appreciated Robert’s gentleness. But everyone has two sides, and Robert’s other side didn’t handle conflict well. In fact, one time, when I paid for a new roof at the shop after he suggested just patching the leaks, Robert was clearly offended. He completely avoided me for days.

Fortunately, I’d let Robert know, early in our marriage, that I’d been an abused pawn in my father’s control game and didn’t intend to let it happen again. Ever.

I could hear Robert whistling as I climbed into bed. He was right about one thing. The decision could wait. Maybe even until the next day . . . after Robert left for work.



My cell phone rang around ten on Tuesday morning. “Hey, Robby.”

“Hey, Mom, could you come in to the office today? I’d like to schedule a meeting with some potential investors.”

“I’m having lunch with Lettie. I could come after that. But aren’t you jumping the gun a bit?”

“Maybe. But I need to proceed with the business side of things. We don’t have a lot of time to play with here.”

“Why hold a meeting when we don’t really know anything for sure?”

“We know for sure that we’re about to lose the company. Isn’t that enough?”

His irritation was clear. “Listen, Robby. I don’t care—”

“Mom.”

I stopped.

“I’m sorry. Look, I’m just putting out feelers with this meeting—not making any commitments. The people coming know that. This is common practice. Please trust me.”

“So, you’ve already called the meeting without my approval?”

Silence.

“Never mind, Robby. We’ll deal with this when I get there.”