

Read on for a preview from *Girl Gone Home*.



CHAPTER ONE



“Willy Wally came to a bad end,” Fran said. “Just like I predicted.”

“Only you’d gloat over the dead at a funeral.” I’d just walked in, looked at my watch. My mother irritated me in less than sixty seconds. A record.

“We don’t do funerals, Delilah. The stiff puts a real damper on the festivities.”

“Right. Memorials after the fact only.”

“Who even knows where the nearest funeral home is?” Fran said, unimpeded by the Marlboro in her mouth, long ash miraculously still intact. “Okay, I know where it is, but who gives a highfalutin crap? Potluck and booze give whoever croaked a fine send off—this *is* a bar for Chrissake. You’re back on the Highway. Better forget those fancy city ways.”

From my spot bellied up to the bar I watched the sea of cowboy hats attached to heads full of rampage and Coors from the tap. They went whole hog at these things. The only commercial enterprise for as far as the crow flies, Vi’s Place teemed with quasi-mourners spilling through both front and back doors to the overflow outside. The middle of nowhere meant good business for anyone with stuff to sell.

“No idea why I let you drag me to this thing,” I said. “I’m still knee-deep in unpacked boxes.”

“Still? You move in geologic time. It’s the food. That’s why you came. You’ve always been a sucker for the highway potlucks. Besides, won’t kill you to show some respect for a guy you went to school with. Dead just like that.” She’d have snapped her fingers if they weren’t already occupied with the whole cigarette/ashtray/coffee cup situation.

“Nothing says respect like eating beanie-weenies while drunks heckle the bereaved,” I said. “Good times.”

“Good turnout.”

“I should hope so. Willy Wally wasn’t even forty.” I stopped when I noticed Fran paid a lot of attention to my words. “Never mind.”

She flicked her ash into the ashtray. “Doc Bates won’t show. Accident or no, tough to look your daughter in the eye after you shoot her husband.”

“Isn’t Doc in jail?”

“You know he’s not. Investigation’s still on. Doubt it’ll turn up anything criminal. Shit happens out here.”

“Like there’s gonna be a real investigation.” I rearranged my butt on the hard stool, scooted it closer to hear Fran over the hootin’-and-a-hollerin’. “Unbelievable. What a fiasco. Whole thing’s terrible.”

“What do you care? You didn’t even want to come.”

“I don’t and I didn’t. Well, that’s not altogether true. Of course, I care. It’s sad isn’t it? A young man killed?”

“Culling out the herd. You see Wally’s widow, Wanda? Jesus, Mary and Joseph try to say that three times fast.”

“I don’t know. Probably wouldn’t know her if I did.”

Fran slipped her cigarette into the slot on the ashtray on the bar. “You’d know her all right—still two-bagger ugly. Wanda and Willy Wally Watkins. Why on earth poor Willy Wally didn’t strangle himself with his own umbilical cord, I’ll never know, with that dumbass name.”

Nothing sordid happened that Fran didn’t know about in great detail. Whatever the backstory, and there was *always* a backstory, she knew it and loved to tell me about the whole mess. I got zippo this time. Fishy.

“What do you know about this, Fran? You know something. I can tell.”

“You obviously can’t, since I know zilch, other than Willy Wally and Doc went hunting like always. Doc accidentally shot him. Makes sense to me. Willy Wally’s schnoz made him look like a moose or some such.”

“You’re talking a mile a minute. Like you do when you’re dancing around the truth.”

“Shit happens around here.”

“I’m aware. Fran, you—”

“Dee, aren’t you a sight.” Vi amputated my interrogation with a voice that sounded like someone dragged a cheese grater over her vocal cords. Her familiar shortening of my name gave me a warm fuzzy. “Been trying to get over to this end to say hey, but this crowd, no patience.”

“Not much changes on the Fifty-Three,” I said.

Including Vi who still looked like a jack-o-lantern left too long on the porch.

“If it did, I’d know it. Been behind this bar fifty years if you can believe that. But look at you. You’re fresh as peach pie. Damn shame your TV show got cancelled,” Vi said.

“Yeah, well thanks. TV shows come and go.”

“She can still cook like the dickens though. What with that cooking class.”

“Cordon Bleu is hardly a cooking class, Fran. I—”

“Now you’re back home where you belong.” Vi wiped down the bar with a snake-tattooed hand, pulled a frothy topped beer. “Where in Jesus’s name are those good-for-nothin’ bums I hired to help me out today? Goddamn-lazy-bastard-shit-for-brains . . .” She carried the mug to the other end, insults trailing.

“Is she wearing the necklace I gave you for your birthday?” I said.

Fran brushed crumbs off the front of her “Smooth Move Ex-Lax” t-shirt.

“Oh, that little bauble? Well, yes. Vi went on and on about how much she wanted it. I didn’t—”

“Do you know how much that little bauble cost?”

Fran gave zero fucks about the cost.

“Never mind.” I put a sock in it.

“Lord a mercy, Delilah.” Margene Cox made a beeline, heaped plate in hand. “I liked to fell out when I heard you’d come home. Wondered when we’d finally lay eyes on you.”

“Only been back a couple weeks,” I said. “Still settling in.”

Margene draped the silk sweater around her shoulders that I’d bought Fran last Christmas.

“Nice sweater,” I said.

The sharp stab of Fran’s elbow to my ribs shut my mouth.

“Fran give it to me. She’s generous as always. Only fits if I don’t wear it. So hot out here the devil up and left, but still cools down like the dickens at night.” Margene stuffed a whole jalapeno popper into her mouth. I felt mildly surprised most of her teeth looked intact. “You out at the old Winston pig farm?”

“Mm hmm. No pigs anymore.”

“You missed Jefferson Davis.” Margene licked her greasy fingers. “Dadgum it. He’s dyin’ to bend your ear about that farm.”

“My loss.”

“You know Willy Wally passing the way he did near tore my heart in two.” Margene wiped a nonexistent tear. “You dated him didn’t you, Dee?”

“Mercy no,” Fran said.

“Well, I swanee,” Margene said. “Dee nursed a crush on Willy Wally ya’ll could see from space back in the day.”

“Emily dated Willy Wally,” Fran said.

For once I didn’t mind Fran’s poking in.

“Oh, right. Emily. Land’s sake.” Margene pushed her plastic fork through the turkey tetrazzini on her paper plate.

“Where’s Arthur?” I looked around for Margene’s husband.

“Oh, honey, had his memorial right here a couple years back.”

“Lots of memorials the last few years,” Fran said. “I told you about Arthur’s.”

She probably did but I hadn’t been listening.

“Not the same without Blanche and Edith, is it?” Margene squeezed in closer, set her plate on the bar. “Blanche dyin’ of the cirrhosis after Earl died in that car wreck, drunk. Too many memories. And Edith with the Alzheimer’s over to her sister’s in Portland.”

Before she could run on any more, Willy Wally’s father hushed the gathered to thank everyone for coming. I wandered away from my lunch, Fran, and Margene’s census update. A drunk blocking the exit got a free swat from me. Heat plus the pissy sour outhouse smells slapped me hard. Came as no revelation Vi still resisted indoor plumbing.

“You look just like you do on TV,” a man said two seconds after I got out.

“Huh?”

The sun glittering off the rows of cars lined up on both sides of the highway made me squinty. I got closer. Strange man held out a too elegant hand, flashed a badge with the other.

“I’m Billy Dale,” he said. “You’re Delilah Diamond from *Fork in the Road*. Am I right?”

“Billy Dale what?”

Name like that usually preceded a Jim Bob or Buck Dee.

“Just Billy Dale.”

“You’re not from around here then,” I said.

“Nope.” He withdrew his unshaken hand.

Billy Dale’s kick-my-ass-why-don’t-you ensemble cheered me somewhat. His slicked-backed hair, *GQ* chin stubble, casual Friday Brooks Brothers khakis and pink polo made me want to open the bar door, throw him in to see how he fared. The small crowd milling around outside to avoid the teary farewells inside dispersed as if they smelled an unfamiliar no good cop. Nothing like stranger danger to speed folks along their way. Billy Dale peered over the top of his sunglasses, looked past me at the open vista, dirt, and sagebrush.

“Jesus,” he said. “You could seriously get off the grid out here.”

“What do you want?”

“Just making inquiries about the shooting incident.”

“At a memorial? Willy Wally’s barely cold.”

“When I drove up didn’t realize this, whatever this is, was going on.” He gestured toward the food covered picnic tables.

I kicked up a puff of dirt with the toe of my Converse, shifted my weight from one foot to the other. Billy Dale studied the fly-infested open jar of mayo on a nearby table, waiting, silent, doing that let-them-talk-to-see-what-spills cop thing. He flicked an imaginary something off his shirtsleeve. His blank face and open-too-wide eyes gave him a real dimwitted appearance—the kind of guy who moved his lips when he read.

“Where’s Rusty?” I said. “He’s been the law out here forever.”

“On a bender probably.”

“No doubt.”

“Mind if I do some asking now?” he said.

I let that hang like a corpse from a noose.

“You know,” I finally said after the silence got too awkward even for me. “I just came back here. Moved away eons ago.”

“So I heard.” Billy Dale leaned against a clean sedan that must’ve been his. “Some say they’re surprised to see you back.”

“None more than me.”

“You came back for the—this—potluck thingy?”

“No. Coincidence.”

“Coincidences give me cramps,” Billy Dale said serious as all get out.

Like I cared about his bowels.

“Willy Wally your old high school boyfriend?” He went on.

“Christ, no. He dated my friend. Emily. She—”

“You all right?” Billy Dale said.

I’d swayed to one side. The beer I’d chased lunch with gurgled its way up the back of my throat. I beat it back, steadied myself.

“I’m fine. This heat, outhouse smell, I’m not used to it anymore.” I pulled away from the hand he’d gripped my arm with, snooty-like. He probably did it to help, but too bad so sad.

“Right. Well, Jefferson Davis told me you—”

“Oh you’re already on a first name basis? Jefferson Davis and I haven’t so much as cast shadows near each other in twenty years.” Droplets popped up above my top lip.

“Right. Well, speaking of names. You call your mother by her first name?”

“Always have,” I said halfway lying. “Fran *is* her name.”

I’d replaced *Mom* with *Fran* when we moved to the highway, when she went full wacko, to distance myself from her in the only way I could then, to get under her skin. Joke was on me since her skin proved unyielding, but it stuck.

“Fran knows Doctor Bates well?” Billy Dale said.

“Everybody here knows everyone else well.”

“Willy Wally too?”

“Yes, but they didn’t exactly run in the same circles since Fran’s old enough to be his mother.”

We stared each other down. I wondered if he could see me sweat.

He blinked first. “Can you think of any reason Fran would’ve called Willy Wally the day before he got shot *and* the day of?”

“Who knows? It *is* a small town,” I said. “Why don’t you ask Fran?”

“Did. Said she doesn’t recall.”

“She’s no spring chicken. Memory’s going.” I twirled one finger near my ear.

“Fran called Willy Wally four times the day before he died, twice the next.”

“She’s a talker,” I said.

There it was.

Fran did know more than she'd admitted. I crossed my arms over my chest, shoved both hands under my dripping armpits, worked hard to keep my face from going funky.

"Not to mention six calls to Doctor Bates." He'd taken out a notepad, which I guess meant business.

"I'm sure for harmless reasons."

I turned on my heel. Eat my dust sucker.

Billy Dale hollered at my back, "I'm sure I'll find out."

Like Girl Gone Home?



[Order it now!](#)

Copyright © 2019 Kathleen O'Donnell

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the author, with the exception of brief quotations used in reviews and articles.

This is entirely a work of fiction. Characters, organizations, agencies, corporations, places, aircraft, and incidents depicted in this book are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, or events, is entirely coincidental or used in a fictitious manner.

The publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for third-party websites or their content.

***II* ITALICS**

Italics Publishing Inc.

Edited by Joni Wilson.

Cover and interior design by Sam Roman.