

GUILT TRIP

The Mystery

By Donna Huston Murray

Chapter 1

The bottom right drawer of the barn-office desk is the only one locked, so that has to be where my brother hides his stash. I already spent ten minutes scavenging for the key.

Dammit, Lauren, I scold myself. Concentrate!

Pulling an old cardboard box full of harnesses onto my lap, I dig through tangled leather smelling of cow sweat and buckles black with age. My reward? Dirt and bits of hay.

I drop the box and kick it back against the wall, wheel around and survey the room. Ron probably doesn't carry the key on him—too easy to lose out there working the fields. No, it has to be here, for convenience if nothing else.

“So where, Ron? *Where?*”

Back in high school a kid dared him to do a shot of tequila. True to his nature, Ron downed seven and nearly died of alcohol poisoning. The resulting reputation for risky behavior dogged him up until his wedding day, when he promised Karen once and for all not to “take stupid risks.” If he's drinking in secret now, he's in trouble, the sort of trouble a man keeps from his wife. Considering his mortgage and the rent on the new acres, my best guess is financial. He's a farmer, after all.

And whatdaya know? Farming happens to be the most dangerous occupation in the world. A second of inattention and your jeans get snared in moving machinery. There goes your leg. You're driving your elderly tractor along a slope. It slips and rolls over—on you. You're chopping the crust at the top of your grain bin. Fall in. Suffocate. These accidents happen to sober men. Attempting the work drunk, or even hungover, is pure insanity.

The tractor grunts have grown distant, but my brother will soon reach the edge of the field and turn back.

I hustle over to the shelf of seed catalogs and equipment manuals. Shaking the big binders with two hands yields nothing but clouds of dust and a pair of paperclips.

The tractor completes its turn and heads back.

My two little nieces got the giggles at breakfast the other day, a sound so heartwarming it inspired a fantasy about Ron and me actually getting along. I imagined us toasting marshmallows in the barbecue coals while Karen put the girls to bed, burning our fingers on the goo, marveling as fireflies floated up off the lawn, joking about the weather.

Ain't gonna happen. In his six-year-old brain I ended Ron's golden reign as an only child. Then while I was still a sweet little blonde with hazel eyes and messy pigtails, gawky, insecure Ronald Beck persuaded himself that I was our father's favorite. Nothing has been said—we are adults now, after all—but it probably didn't help that Dad sold the family homestead to pay my medical bills. My brother loved that old piece of ground the way lungs love oxygen.

Will he thank me for trying to save his life? More likely he'll kick me to the curb for butting in, and I can't say I'd blame him.

The desk deserves a second look. Centered in the room as it is, I can keep one eye on the door.

Nothing under the computer monitor or tower. The middle drawer holds only a stale cigar, a pen advertising a seed and feed company, three pencil stubs, and a comb. As I crouch down to check the kneehole, the office windows begin to rattle. I freeze, waiting, waiting, until finally—*finally*—the tractor grumbles through its gear change and commences its noisy drone back toward the far turn.

Another glance around and I spy a pair of muddy, army-green boots side by side under a bench. Reaching into the left one yields only worn felt and grit; but when I turn over the other, a silver key on a thin wire ring hits the floor with a clink.

A clink. The tractor noise stopped.

I lunge for the locked drawer and work the key with trembling fingers.

Inside is almost exactly what I expect. A black folder-style checkbook for doing payrolls and paying bills. A nudy magazine dated June, 2004. A twenty-two caliber pistol for shooting whatever or whoever dares to threaten the Beck family and its livelihood, ammunition elsewhere for safety's sake.

Plus three 1.75 liter bottles of vodka, one half empty, the others with unbroken seals—the same cheap swill I pour for the Pelican's Perch customers if they don't specify a pricier brand.

I want to grab Ron's sweatshirt in my fist and pull his face so close we're breathing the same air. I want to hit him upside the head and scream and stomp until he gets it, really gets it. Right now. Right this second. Life is precious. I learned that the hard way. Why hasn't he?

Unfortunately, finding a few bottles of booze doesn't prove a thing. The whiff I caught at breakfast might have been after-shave or mouthwash. Last night's stumbling/mumbling slipup could have been just that, a once and done.

My five years on the Landis, PA, police force taught me that accurate information is the best weapon of all. Without it, you have nothing. I need to summon the patience to monitor Ron's stash for awhile. If it turns out he is playing Russian roulette with a bottle, I'll share my findings with Karen. She's the one he promised; he might listen to her.

I take a big, steadying breath, nick the level of the opened vodka bottle on its blue off-brand label, and return it to the drawer. I've just tossed the key back into the right boot before Ron bursts through the door.

"Lauren! Can you come back to the house?" His skin is drained of color. His eyes blink as if he can scarcely see. "The kids...Karen..."

"What?" I ask. "What's wrong?" I've taken a step toward him, but no more. He and I never touch.

"Toby. You know Toby...?"

"Sure. Karen's older brother."

"He's dead," Ron tells me. "Suicide."

