

CHAPTER ONE

1981 — THE LADIES' ROAD TRIP

WITH ENOUGH CHOCOLATES, I swear, you can persuade anyone to do anything.

Which is how I induced my friend, Carol, to accompany me on a trip she should have avoided like a meerkat avoids a hawk. A few days before the trip, I'd laid a path of chocolates from her house to my car, and when she came out the front door there they were, soft-centered and chewy, snaking down the path and across the sidewalk, stopping right at my passenger door. "Of course after that," she said, "I had to come." Carol is one of those women who would surrender her soul for the right two pieces of See's candy.

But then, so would I.

The fact is, that fall of 1981, I needed Carol to travel with me to a neighboring state to sell my first published book, *Manbirds: Hang Gliders and Hang Gliding*. In spite of the excitement, the thrill of seeing my name on a jacket cover, the cracks an author could fall into were suddenly becoming evident. Quite casually, someone at Prentice-Hall mentioned a fissure big enough to swallow a whole new career. Mine. Just as I came aboard, the publisher found itself without a publicist—their promoter of retail sales. If I didn't become the book's nursemaid, its chief advocate, its gung-ho salesman, who would?

Until then, I'd been a peanut butter mom and casual tennis player

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living with my husband, Rob, and the youngest two of our six kids, both in their twenties, on a half acre in Southern California. From the street our property looked normal enough: sun-faded shingles on a ranch-style house, and a row of overgrown junipers that held up obliging arms to shield Rob when he ventured out in his underwear.

But the backyard still sported trappings from a wondrous era: a double-decker bicycle propped against a tree (reminder of our first son, Bobby, no longer with us), and lengths of aluminum tubing once used to create hang gliders for Bobby and Chris, back when our two oldest boys were U.S. champions and swept us into that awe-inspiring sport. I remembered those days constantly — both the excitement and the terrible way they ended.

Now our definition of “normal” had changed. No longer following where our children led, no longer streaming in the wind as tails on their unpredictable kites, Rob and I sought new ways to find excitement . . . and he more than I, for he was a restless man who thrived on stimulation.

Which is why he seemed a natural, at first, for my book-selling trip — though he hadn’t actually said he yearned to attend a hang gliding meet in Nevada.

“All those pilots I’ve profiled in *Manbirds* will be there,” I said. As always, we plotted and dreamed at the breakfast table. “I ought to go, don’t you think?”

“Maybe.” Lawyerlike, he considered me over his coffee mug. “Seems chancy to travel all the way to Carson City, just to sell a few copies.”

A few copies?

“You may find, Babe, after expenses, it’s a loser.” (He’d called me Babe for so long I doubted he could spell my name. Or that I’d recognize it if I heard it.)

“Then you won’t come?” I said.

“Don’t think so. But go if you want. You don’t need me.” Once more, he was turning me loose to grow up.

My psyche drooped. *But I can’t go alone.*

Then I thought of Carol and dreamed up my chocolate ploy. We’d been close friends and tennis partners for years, a bond strengthened

in spurts by Carol's quips and my fondness for startling humor. I never knew what she was going to say. But neither, I suspect, did she . . . else how could she have laughed as hard at her jokes as I did?

Ready to go without him, I imagined Rob was pathetically wrong about the Carson City event. I calculated the number of books sold as closer to several cases, a hundred books at least.

Over the years our marriage has been like that: I nurture rosy images of literary success — generous spending to make a good book turn into a bestseller, à la Danielle Steele, whereas Rob sees my promotional efforts as the equivalent of a kid's lemonade stand in the rain.

CAROL AND I needed another woman — and suddenly I thought of the ultimate good sport, our son's wife, Betty-Jo. Always the bright spark attached to Chris's escapades, she'd climbed mountains to film his hang gliding, perched on rocks reading books while he flew. "Will you go, Betty-Jo? And bring Christy? Five is a perfect age for traveling."

Two days later she said they'd both come.

"Great!" I cried. "An all-girl road trip. What could be more fun? Talk about adventure."

"But a hot adventure," added Betty-Jo, who radiates warmth and looks like everybody's idea of a classy PTA mom. "We go through some real bake-oven country. I'm glad we're taking your new Cadillac."

"Why would we take anything else?" I said.

IT WAS ONLY later, the night before the trip, that Rob said, "Don't take the new Seville, Babe." We were out in front of our blue house, hidden behind Rob's junipers, with suitcases and book boxes stacked nearby. "You're crazy to pack that pristine trunk with all those heavy books. Put the hard miles on the station wagon."

For a moment I just looked at him. "You actually expect a bunch of women to set out in that station wagon? With its two hundred and eighty thousand miles? When I have a dependable car sitting right here in the driveway?"

"Why beat up a new car?" he said, and I just shook my head. The

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excessive miles weren't the wagon's only problem. The air conditioner blew only on the left side, the horn blew whenever it felt like it, and the engine sputtered and popped after you turned off the key. Rob had everything backwards — as if we humans existed to serve our vehicles.

I glanced at my brown Cadillac. “Rob, I’m taking the *reliable* car. Okay?”

He shrugged. “Suit yourself.”

Then, proving he was a decent guy, he got up at five the next morning, loaded my four boxes of weighty books into the trunk and handed in my “MANBIRDS” sign on its very long pole; the pole reached from the dashboard to the back ledge and effectively blocked both passenger doors. He watched Carol crawl in under the sign. “Call me from Carson City,” he said. “I expect you’ll be there about noon.”

WELL, SWEET RELIABLE took us two hours from home, meaning part way up the steep grade to Victorville, before it abruptly and very quietly died. All at once I pressed the pedal and nothing happened. There was no noise. No fanfare. No last, gasping cough. Just a silent end to everything. A T. S. Eliot moment. It seemed the car had suddenly lost its engine.

Astonished at my useless gas pedal and all that thundering quiet, I said to the others, “Can you believe this? The car just quit!” I barely muscled it to the left shoulder, and there we were, at a quarter-to-eight in the morning, three women and little Christy, standing by the side of the road with this dead machine and no idea what killed it.

“What do you think the problem is?” asked Carol. She was very pretty — dark, laughing eyes, short raven hair.

“I haven’t a clue,” I said. “But I suppose we should look under the hood.”

“That wouldn’t do ME any good,” said Betty-Jo. “I wouldn’t know what I was looking at.” Of course, she spoke for all of us.

“Well,” I said, “at least we’d know if something was steaming . . . or smoking . . . or pouring out on the ground.”

“But we wouldn’t know what that something was,” said Carol, and

I realized nobody had said we needed a man.

Still, there seemed little else to do, so the three of us took turns grappling near the hood. At last I found the obscure latch, and with all of us heaving as one person we managed to hoist the lid into the air, like raising a barn wall.

After peering down into the pipe-and-wire tangle and ascertaining that no liquids were dripping and no hoses perceptibly parted, Carol recalled that neither had the panel of lights come on with any of those helpful red messages like, “Engine Tired. About to Quit.”

Just as we were closing the hood, a California Highway Patrol car pulled up behind us and the officer offered to call a tow truck. We held a quick caucus — three women, with Christy poking up between Betty-Jo’s legs — and we made a decision. “We think we’ll let the motor cool and try it again.” Which we did, and ground the starter until the battery died.

When the CHP officer came back to check on us — and thank God he did — Carol said, “We’ll take that tow truck now.”

He drove off, and after a while a tow truck — presumably ours — struggled to climb the freeway grade on the slow inside lane, its turn signals flashing hopefully in our direction. Just as we knew for sure we’d be rescued, we realized the man was foolishly trying to outrun a Maserati, which of course he couldn’t do climbing a grade in a two-ton truck. We turned as one to watch him flash by, still three lanes away, and disappear up the hill.

Betty-Jo said, “*That* was sure dumb!”

Carol said, “Do we really want to be towed by anyone that stupid?”

“Maybe not,” I said, suddenly grateful I wasn’t in this alone. With the two of them standing beside me, this setback had a different feel, like a minor crisis in a light-hearted play.

About then the CHP officer returned; he was beginning to look like family. He, too, was disgusted and said he’d call a different tow company.

Not long afterwards a second tow truck arrived and lifted my ailing Cad by its tail. Soon, with all of us in the truck’s cab (Carol pressed

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against the driver's thigh and Christy on Carol's lap and Betty-Jo on the front edge of the seat between my knees), five of us rode like desperate hitchhikers to the Cadillac dealership in Victorville.

The first thing the head mechanic said was, "We don't have time to deal with your car. Our mechanics and our racks are all busy."

All busy? At eight-thirty in the morning?

Carol, Betty-Jo, Christy, and I went to the waiting room for what would become a familiar conference. We were all starving. But our combined intelligence told us it would be folly to go off and eat. "Let's go back to the service area," Carol said with a wicked grin, "and hover. If we annoy them enough, they might find a way to get to our car."

I smiled down at tiny, tow-headed Christy. "Do you suppose if I pinch her she'll cry a few tears?"

Christy looked up. "Why would you pinch me, Grandma?"

"Never mind, honey, I won't," I said, and we all hung over the nearest mechanic and it worked. To get rid of three lurking females and a small, wide-eyed child, they lifted the hood and began studying the insides in earnest. With that much progress, the four of us went to Wendy's for a late breakfast, little dreaming this would be our last meal of the day.

An hour later, a confident mechanic told us we'd blown a fuse (now replaced), and the cause of the blown fuse was probably a failing fuel pump (not replaced). He was an intelligent-looking fellow, neat haircut, alert expression. In all seriousness, he also explained that if the problem was indeed the fuel pump and it happened again, we had only to wait by the side of the road thirty minutes to let it cool and our car would start immediately.

We realized later that he'd done a bit of play-acting equal to ours, at the very least concocting a scenario based entirely on our womanly ignorance of auto mechanics. But he did succeed in getting rid of us.

Cheerfully, we sailed out of the Cadillac dealership in our good-looking brown car and returned to Highway 395.

It was now obvious I'd be getting to the hang gliding meet well after noon, meaning I could only hope that the pilots would fly until late that day — and all the next day. Without the competitors,

Maralys Wills

the trip had absolutely no purpose. As we rocketed up the highway toward Carson City, I prepared myself mentally for some intense and truncated book selling.

As Betty-Jo took a turn and drove, I could see heat rising in shimmering waves from the pavement. Thank the fates, I thought, for competent mechanics and reliable air-conditioning and a lovely, restored Cadillac.

My superstitious self should have known better than to offer premature thanks to anyone — still miles from Carson City. Suddenly, the car, as it had done before, went ominously quiet.

I stared out the window in disbelief. Why hadn't I learned my lesson . . . you never thank Lady Fate in advance. She'll find a way to yank your chain, just to prove she's still in charge.