

Heller on Wheels

By

Mariella Starr

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Published by Blushing Books®,  
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ABCD Graphics and Design  
977 Seminole Trail #233  
Charlottesville, VA 22901  
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EBook ISBN: 978-1-68259-950-1  
Cover Art by ABCD Graphics & Design

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## Prologue

Head up and eyes fixed on a tricky little valve on the undercarriage of the truck she was working on, Heller Tandy twisted slightly one way and another, then swore under her breath when the valve broke off in her fingers. Holding the tiny offending piece of plastic, which should have been made of metal, Heller pushed with her feet to roll the mechanic's creeper she was lying on completely underneath the carriage of the truck to the other side where she had extra parts laying on a tarp.

"Hey, Mick!"

"Hey, Noah!"

Heller heard the voice of Mick Doherty, her on-again-off-again boyfriend, and saw his size twelve feet standing by the driver's side door. Noah, one of Mick's high school football friends, joined him at the side of the truck.

"Where's Heller?" Noah asked. "I need my carburetor adjusted."

"I don't know. I could use mine adjusted, too." Mick laughed. "Heller's been on the rag or something, lately."

"No action, huh?"

"Not with her," Mick said, laughing again. "Daisy's putting out real good. I think I may have to switch sisters."

"Daisy is a round heel. She's more like her mother."

"Like mother, like daughter," Mick said. "Heller's not bad to have as a side piece, and she's a damn good mechanic. I've got the best of both."

Heller rolled out from under the truck and stood up between the men, facing Mick directly. "Not anymore you don't. Write me a check. I'm out of here." Wiping her greasy hands, she stripped out of her overalls as she moved toward her workbench.

"Hey," Mick shouted, following her. Noah hotfooted it out of the garage.

Heller threw her tools into her toolbox and rolled it across the garage floor with her now very *ex*-boyfriend at her heels. She heaved the three separate top sections of her toolbox one by one into the bed of her truck and then lifted up the base. She jumped into the truck bed to reassemble the massive toolbox and lock it into position so it would not roll when the truck was moving.

Jumping down, she slammed the tailgate shut.

"I want what you owe me," Heller demanded, walking toward the office.

Mick followed her and slammed the office door closed. "Come on, Heller. I didn't mean anything. I was talking smack with a buddy."

"You're screwing my younger sister!" Heller snarled.

"Yeah, well, so what? It's not as if we are married or something! You weren't putting out, and she offered."

"And you can't see anything wrong with that? You're a slimy bastard," Heller snarled again, spacing out her words in fury. "I'll take cash. I don't trust you to write a good check."

"You can't quit! Old man Marley just brought in his classic Cadillac. You're the only one he'll let work on it."

"Not my problem! Pay me what I'm owed, now. If you don't, I'll bad mouth you as a cheat to every decent auto shop in the state."

Mick opened the cash register and pulled out several large bills. "Don't think you can come crawling back when you need money."

"I won't," Heller snapped. "The one thing I don't need in my life is a lying, cheating, boyfriend!"

Heller was so mad she could barely see straight.

She drove straight out of town to the abandoned municipal airstrip mostly frequented by a group of illegal drag racers. She cut the fence chain and tossed the lock in the weeds. Her runs down the airstrip exceeded a hundred and twenty miles per hour (mph). She had no need for a speed gun to know how fast she was going. She made four runs before her temper was under control. Meanwhile, she had burned a lot of rubber off her tires.

When she was calm, she drove back to town giving a cheeky wave to the Dudley Do-Right parked behind the Tasty Freeze billboard and went to see Big Joe Bradford.

Big Joe had been her mother's live-in for a short time when Heller was eleven. The relationship between Joe Bradford and Cora Tandy had not lasted long. The friendship between Heller and Big Joe had been set in cement by the time her mother sent Joe packing.

Joe Bradford had found a mechanical soul mate in Heller. Even as a young child, Heller understood the workings of a combustion engine better than many of Big Joe's best mechanics. While most girls her age played with dolls, she was under a hood soaking in how to fix or adjust every single part of an engine. Under Joe's tutelage, Heller became a genius at restoring classic cars, and she loved doing it.

Joe saw her coming. He opened his office door and followed her inside. "What's got you in a tither, honey?"

"A lying, cheating boyfriend," Heller cried as she laid her forehead against his broad chest. "Do they see me coming, Joe?"

"Honey, it's not you," Big Joe grumbled.

"Then why can't I find a decent guy?" Heller cried.

"Sit down, Heller," Big Joe ordered, not waiting for her compliance as he pushed her toward the old duct-taped, leather couch. "You can't find a decent guy because you don't expect any guy to treat you with respect. Honey, do you want to end up like your momma?"

"God, no!" Heller declared, wiping her eyes.

"Then do something about it," Big Joe said gruffly. "Heller, you need to get out of this town and away from your momma's reputation. It's dragging you down. You can make something of yourself. You have the brains, use them."

"What?"

"Get your butt in college," Big Joe advised.

"With what?" Heller demanded. "I can barely afford to take classes at the junior college. I was saving, and then Momma got behind on payments, and I had to bail her out."

"No, you didn't," Big Joe disagreed gruffly.

"We would have been put out on the street!"

"Then let it happen, Heller. Your momma will always be behind on something. Whenever she gets her hands on any money, she would rather loan it to her latest boyfriend or spend it gambling at the casino, or playing bingo. Those fancy claws and manicures cost her more than the trailer park rent. You are twenty years old and should not be bailing Cora out of her money problems. If you're not around, she'll find a way to pay for what she wants. She always does."

Heller closed her eyes. "She's already been before Judge Crawford twice for soliciting!"

"She did it honey, not you, and Cora is going to continue doing what Cora wants to do."

“I want out of this mess, Joe. I want out, so bad!”

“Then get out,” Big Joe chided. “You’ve rebuilt a classic truck, and you know what it’s worth. Cora has no idea or she would have sold it out from under you a long time ago. I’ll buy it for top dollar. I’ll treat it like my own and return it to you later if you want. The proceeds should be enough to put you through a couple years of college. You tell me where you’re going and I’ll see to it you have a job in one of the best garages in the country. I’ll have your back, baby.”

“I can’t just leave!”

“Yes, you can. Girl, you’re one of the best mechanics I’ve ever trained. I didn’t hire you to work here because I was hoping you would head off to college.”

“I wanted to go. I planned on going!” Heller exclaimed. “Something always comes up, one emergency or another.”

“Do you want out or not, Heller? You can’t amount to anything if you stay here! If you don’t leave, in five years’ time you will be a carbon copy of Cora. You’ll be married to some loser who will string you along with a song and dance, and your life will never get better. If you don’t want to be the girl from the wrong side of the tracks, then you have to do something about it. It’s not where you live, honey. It’s the kind of men you pick to hang around. They are same kind of men who have been drifting in and out your mother’s life all these years. You have been hanging around with the same kind of losers, only you can’t see it.

“No one can do this for you, baby. I’ll help all I can, but I can’t do it for you!” Joe hauled Heller out of his office and shoved her toward her truck.

“You go think about it, Heller. Only you can decide what you want to do with your life. Running away from here won’t get you anywhere. Running toward a future will be the making of you.”

Heller went home, parking five blocks away in the garage she rented. If she left her truck parked in the driveway on the side of the trailer, it would be stripped by the next morning.

She hated the idea of giving up her truck. She had dragged the rusted-out carcass of the 1940 Ford out of a junkyard when she was thirteen years old. Heller had spent the next five years restoring it under her mentor’s guidance. She had owned the Ford truck long before she was old enough to drive. It had to be registered in Big Joe’s name until she turned eighteen.

College had always been her dream. Joe had planted the seed early—build a classic, sell it, and use the proceeds for college tuition. Heller had lost sight of her educational goals over the last two years. Now, she was questioning herself. What was the purpose of making the honor roll and taking extra classes at the community college, if she wasn’t going to follow through with her plans?

Heller slammed into her mother’s trailer. She was immediately assaulted by the pungent odor of a home hair-permanent solution.

Cora Tandy glanced up from her supermarket tabloid. “Mick called. He told me you quit. He said if you didn’t get over your prissy attitude and show up for work tomorrow, he ain’t taking you back!”

“I’m not going back.”

“We need your paycheck,” Cora claimed with a calculating gleam in her eye. “Roy said the furnace needs replacing.”

“Then Roy can replace it,” Heller replied, moving through the crowded trailer into the tiny room she shared with her sister.

“It ain’t Roy’s business to replace it,” Cora said, following Heller and leaning against the doorway. “He said he would give us a break on the cost of the unit and he’ll put it in for half his regular fee.”

“How come we always pay your friends to work on something and within the next year or so, we wind up replacing what was supposed to be new or fixed, *again*?” Heller asked. “I’m not paying for a new furnace.”

“We’re going to have an awful damn cold winter,” Cora whined. “Jim’s been shorting me on my tips, again too.”

“Find a better job,” Heller retorted without much sympathy. Her mother worked part-time at the neighborhood bar. Cora had been offered other jobs, better jobs, but she always had a reason for turning them down. As far as Heller had been able to ascertain, the biggest reason was by the time her mother staggered in from her idea of fun, she would never have been able to get up in time to hold down daytime job.

“What’s got you in a *heller* of a mood?” Cora demanded.

“Does it matter?”

“Not to me,” Cora responded. “You need to get your head out of your ass, though. Daisy and me are playing bingo tonight. If you can get off your high horse, you can come with us.”

Heller shook her head no. “Did you know Daisy’s screwing around with Mick?”

Cora said nothing.

“Christ, Mom, don’t you care about anything?” Heller demanded. “Daisy is barely eighteen years old, and she’s already got a reputation for giving it out to anyone who asks! She’s whoring around with the guy who was supposed to be my boyfriend!”

“You always thought you were better,” Cora snarled. “Well, you ain’t.”

“I will be,” Heller vowed. “I will be!” She pulled a suitcase out from under the bed and started throwing clothing in it.

Cora snorted and shuffled down the hall. “Good luck with it, Miss High and Mighty!”

# Chapter One

Heller Tandy drove by the familiar Pawhuska, Oklahoma, sign declaring the town the gateway to the Tallgrass Prairie. For her, it was a gateway to purgatory, and she figured she had already suffered enough.

She had not belonged in Pawhuska for a long time and had only returned three, no four times, since her escape eight years ago. Three of those trips had been to bail out her mother or sister from financial and legal problems. The year before, she had returned to bury her mother, Cora Tandy. Heller was not in Pawhuska to visit family this time.

Heller had wanted to feel sympathetic toward her mother, but it was hard. Her mother had been as determined to live a disadvantaged life, as Heller had been to escape it. Cora had tried her best to drag her daughters down to her level of misery and keep them there. Heller had repeatedly tried to help, except her mother sabotaged every one of her efforts. Every time Heller thought she was fixing a problem, she wound up being the loser.

She had bought her mother a house to get her out of the ramshackle trailer. Cora used the house as collateral on a loan, which she promptly gambled away at the local Osage Casinos. Her mother then defaulted on the loan. Heller had ridden to the rescue paying off the loan and selling the house so she could at least break even.

After listening to complaints from Cora about how the house had been too big and she did not want to deal with yard work, Heller got the message. Her second try was to buy her mother a condominium. Heller ended up fighting with Cora for months over her refusal to put the deed in her mother's name. Once bitten, twice shy. Heller was not stupid, simply a sucker for trying to drag her family out of the gutter.

Cora had bitched endlessly about the condominium. After receiving a long string of complaints and being fined multiple times by the HOA, Heller had thrown in the towel. She sold the condo and plunked down money to purchase a trailer, which people now called a *manufactured mobile home*. Again, Heller kept the title in her name.

The doublewide was loaded with every amenity available and located in one of the newer mobile home communities in Pawhuska. Her mother hated it. She especially hated her new neighbors. To be perfectly honest, the neighbors were not fond of Cora Tandy, either.

Cora had wanted to go back to where she had lived originally, except she no longer could. The county had condemned and bulldozed the cesspool of broken-down trailers, travel trailers, and campers setting on old trucks with flattened wheels. None of the so-called *mobile* vehicles had moved since the late 1970s.

The few remaining residents were relocated to various low-income developments. The area had been razed under an auspiciously titled program called the Modernization and Beautification of East Pawhuska. Where Cora had lived was now a softball field.

Cora Tandy blamed Heller for that, too.

It had taken a long time, and quite a few therapy sessions with a college counselor before Heller stopped feeling guilty for leaving home. She finally came to understand she was not to blame for her mother's life decisions. Cora Tandy had needed a scapegoat, and she had chosen her oldest daughter to play the role. There would never be any maternal redemption for Heller because she had dared to leave and make something of herself.

Cora never understood what was wrong about going through life waiting for someone else to hand you a big break. Most people worked for what they wanted out of life, and those *breaks*



were earned. If Heller's mother had spent one tenth of the time she used complaining about being poor and downtrodden into learning a skill and working toward a goal, her life might have been different. Cora did not believe in planning. She believed a person was either lucky and life handed you the good stuff, or you made do as she did.

At least Heller's sister had settled into a somewhat normal life. Daisy was married and living in a house ten miles outside of town where she had two kids and was a stay-at-home mom. She had married Heller's one-time boyfriend Mick Doherty, four months after Heller left Pawhuska. Daisy had claimed she was pregnant and Mick had married her, although a baby had not come along for another three years. Daisy explained it was a false alarm, but she and Mick had something positive going on because they stayed together.

Heller was not sure she would see Daisy this trip. Her sister rarely picked up Heller's calls and never returned her messages unless she wanted something. Daisy was following a similar path to their mother's when it came to Heller, although she and Mick seemed to have a good marriage.

The last eight years had been busy and exciting ones for Heller. Best of all, they had been fulfilling, although the first two years while she attended the University of Illinois had been lonely. Those years had been nerve racking, too. She was racked with guilt as her mother constantly tried to convince her she was needed at home. More to the point, Cora had claimed they needed Heller's paychecks to survive.

For every phone call, Cora made to Heller pleading with her to come home; Big Joe made two calls threatening to kick Heller's ass if she left school. Joe had made good on his promise to support her decision to go to college. Often, when money was scarce for Heller, Joe had paid her tuition and sent her living money. She always worked; yet attending school full time, studying, and sending money home had been difficult.

When Heller won a full-ride scholarship to California Technical Institute to complete her degree, she had jumped at the chance to attend one of the best engineering schools in the country. Big Joe had made the promised phone calls and got Heller a part-time job in the garage of Billy Stockton's #46 NASCAR Racing Team. Even though her college schedule prevented her from attending most of the races, she was a valuable member of the team at the home base.

With the ink barely dry on her college diploma, Heller went to work full time on Billy Stockton's team, taking over as Head Mechanic. Her innovative approach to redesigning the restrictor plates needed when speeds reached two hundred mph, caught the entire racing industry by surprise and focused a lot of media attention on her.

The press had a field day when they learned the revolutionary redesigned engine part would also cause a change in NASCAR rulings. Any change to the rulings caused a ripple across the entire automotive industry. When the patent was purchased by Toyota, every motorsport magazine featured the *new* look to the future of racing. The press had discovered the part had been invented by Heller Tandy—a young and beautiful woman.

Heller knew it was all hype, but the media loved to use her as a pin-up girl for the sport of NASCAR. With her luscious strawberry blonde hair, sapphire blue eyes, and the body of a pin-up girl, every driver on the circuit wanted her in their stable of mechanics. They wanted her in their beds, too. However, she was an expert at derailing both the driver's plans and their egos. Heller was a damned good mechanical engineer and she expected to receive credit when credit was due. She also wanted her reputation based on her talent, not her sex life.

The year Heller was named in Forbes "30 under 30 List," her name became synonymous with mechanical perfection. She had worked hard for respect and had gained a certain amount of

notoriety in the sprint car racing industry. Her patents for parts in the automotive industry made her a sought after commodity.

Heller wanted to be anywhere, except Pawhuska. In every city with a racing track, she was respected as a woman at the top of her field. In her hometown, she was still her mother's daughter.

Parking in front of Big Joe's Garage, Heller pulled out her key, went inside, and flipped on the light switches. Joe had enlarged the showroom a few years earlier, and now it had room for eight to twelve cars depending on their size. Now, there were only five completed cars along with her rebuilt truck. Big Joe had displayed her Ford truck in his showroom ever since she left home. He would never have sold it.

"Hello?"

Heller turned to face a county sheriff. He was tall, lean in the hips, and fit with a broad chest and biceps that showed without the effort of flexing.

"Sheriff Tyler Foster," the man said offering his hand to one of the few celebrities Pawhuska had ever spawned, certainly the prettiest. "I saw your car outside."

Heller held up her key. "I didn't break in. Did you know Big Joe?"

"Yes, I did," Sheriff Foster, replied as he looked around. "I was in here at least once a week when I was in high school. He let me drool over his cars, and he taught me a thing or two. I think you and I crossed paths several times when you were a kid. Joe sold off most of his prized cars to pay his medical bills. Then one day, he told me he was leaving. The next day, the shop was locked, and he was gone."

Heller nodded. "I talked him into moving to Santa Barbara to a hospice. He wanted it that way. Joe was a proud man. He didn't want anyone to see him sick. Besides, I could visit with him there. He didn't want me nursing him, but we liked spending time together. We talked cars and mechanics, his two favorite things."

"You knew him that well," the sheriff observed.

"Yeah," Heller replied, nodding to her truck. Next to it was a full-sized poster of her standing beside Billy Stockton holding the AAA Texas 500 Sprint Cup. Someone had chopped off Billy's part of the poster, and it showed only Heller standing with the cup. Billy's ego would take a hit if he ever found out. "Big Joe was a father figure to me and my biggest supporter. He taught me everything I know, at least on the classic car side of mechanics."

"There has been some speculation in the *Pawhuska Bulletin* about who is taking over his businesses. Joe employed quite a few people around here. If his businesses close, it will have a negative effect on the town's economy. Did he have any family?"

Heller shook her head no. "He was married once, long before you or I were born. He served in Viet Nam where he was captured and held in a prison camp for over three years. While he was serving his country and a prisoner of war, his wife had a kid, obviously not his because of the timing. When he returned home, he tried to make a go of the marriage, but it didn't work, and he divorced her.

"I probably shouldn't be telling you all this. Joe only confided in me at the very end. He was high on painkilling drugs, and half out of his mind."

She cast her eyes around the showroom. "Joe came clean and told me he had terminal cancer. He also told me I would inherit the garage. Besides me, the garage and his cars were his babies."

The sheriff was surprised. "You're Joe's daughter?"

Heller laughed. "Biological? No. Joe couldn't have kids. Whatever those people did to him when he was a captive in Viet Nam, it caused him to be sterile. Regardless, his lying, cheating

wife tried to pawn off her two kids as his. It was the lying that got to Joe. He felt sorry for the kids. He even put money into college funds for them so his ex-wife couldn't get her hands on it. It was contingent on them finishing high school and going on to college. Apparently, neither of them took him up on the offer. Joe said neither one of them finished high school.

"I would have loved to have been his daughter. You might as well know, my mother was one of the most bigoted people I've ever met, and growing up a Tandy, I met a hell of a lot of them. I grew up hearing all the slurs for every nationality. A man as large and dark as Big Joe stood out like a sore thumb in our little redneck part of town. Even so, my mother was involved with him for a short time. She needed her car fixed, so she targeted the guy who could do it. When the car was running great, she gave Joe the boot. During their relationship, I latched onto him and tagged after him like a lost puppy. He became my friend for life."

The sheriff surveyed the showroom and whistled as he glanced out the window. "That's a sweet car out in the parking lot."

"1958 Ford Fairlane, primo condition," Heller agreed with a smile.

"Licensed to show or drive?" he asked in his official capacity. He had not checked the plate when he walked by it.

"Everything I build, I drive," Heller declared.

"Including the sprint cars?" Tyler asked.

"Especially the sprint cars," Heller agreed. "Speed is my thing, but only on an empty track or out in the desert. I'm not into the competitive part of it except on a personal level to build and drive the best. I won't have an idiot make a mistake on a track and take me out with him."

"There will be no racing in my town of any kind. Not on the roads or anywhere else, understood?" Sheriff Foster ordered sternly.

"We used to drag out on the old airport tarmac," Heller admitted with a slight smile. "The guys tried to make a rule that girls couldn't compete. Mostly it because I skunked them every time."

"I repeat," Tyler responded, dropping down his sunglasses and making sure she saw the warning in his eyes. "No racing in my town."

"Okay," Heller agreed. "I bet I could still outrace them!"

"If you are in town a few days, Ms. Tandy, I would like to talk to you about your mother," the sheriff stated.

Heller stiffened at his words. "Have you found out anything?"

"No," Tyler confirmed. "It was a cold case when I took over the job. There wasn't much of a file or evidence to document. She was discovered in her car with a gunshot wound to her temple. It was only a graze though and not life threatening. The coroner listed her actual cause of death as a heart attack."

"Then nothing has changed," Heller, said. "Someone killed Cora Tandy and the Pawhuska Sheriff's Department could care less. I know what my mother was, Sheriff Foster. She was part of the downtrodden, and she gave into her fate a long time ago. Most people around here looked down their noses at her. I know she did things skirting the edges of the law. I know she took men home with her when it suited her, and she took money from them. My mother considered it survival.

"God knows, I had my problems with her, but she was a human being. She didn't deserve to have someone shoot her. No one deserves that!"

"Although you might want to know who shot her, Ms. Tandy, it wasn't a fatal wound, and it had nothing to do with her death. I reviewed all the outstanding crime files when I assumed this position. I talked to her neighbors, and no one remembers any disturbance the night she died.

Whomever she got into an altercation with, there were no witnesses. According to the medical examiner, the main arteries to her heart were clogged, and she died of a heart attack.”

Heller glanced at her watch and looked around the showroom one more time. “I have to go, Sheriff.”

“How long will you be around town?” the sheriff asked.

She studied the man for a long time and could see the interest in his eyes. “I have no idea. I have decisions to make.”

\*\*\*

Heller dressed in what she considered her daily uniform—designer jeans that fit like a glove, a blouse with a few feminine frills, and steel-toed cowboy boots. The latter was a concession to working around heavy equipment. Two broken toes were a lesson learned. In a field dominated by men, Heller wanted it known she was a woman who could hold her own. On the other hand, she had no desire for those same men to crawl all over her when she took off her overalls. Yes, she was a woman. Yes, she would stack her skills against the best. No, she was not a woman to be passed around from man to man to feed their male egos.

There was a time in her past when Heller had been heading down the same path as her mother. She had bounced from boyfriend to boyfriend after high school, believing she would find her Prince Charming. She now considered that phase of her life as her *young and stupid* period. Big Joe Bradford had ended it by giving her a much-needed boot in the ass.

Today, Heller had an appointment with Gerald Evans, Big Joe’s attorney. She had no particular liking for the local attorney. However, she had hired him several times to represent her mother in court. She left another message for Daisy although she didn’t expect a return call unless her sister needed money.

Heller had tried to be generous with her family until she eventually had to admit their idea of help was a bottomless pit for her. Her therapist and financial advisors had expressed to Heller time after time the same message. There was always a point when even family had to be told NO in big capital letters. Cora and Daisy should not expect Heller always to be there to bail them out from their self-inflicted legal and financial woes.

Three hours later, Heller was back in the middle of Big Joe’s showroom. She was now the sole owner of Bradford Auto Restoration, in addition to a string of Winner’s Circle Service Centers dotted across the state from Oklahoma City to Ponca City. Big Joe had also left her his private home, and property outside of town, and a stock portfolio that had stunned her.

She opened the large bay doors into the showroom and drove her classic Fairlane inside. Then she raised the hood to her 1940 Ford truck. When she was satisfied everything was in top working order, she dug around in Joe’s office finally finding a set of dealer plates. She put them on before backing her truck outside. She had been behind the wheel of her old truck exactly three times in the eight years since she had sold it to Big Joe for college money.

Heller had known her truck would be in perfect running condition before she raised the hood. She had always known she would get it back. She only wished it had not been as a result of Joe dying, especially in such a manner. Pancreatic cancer was a hell of a hard way to leave this world.

Tyler Foster was pulled off on the shoulder of Old Lake Road as he followed up on a reported road kill. The dead deer was at the exact spot where it had been reported. He dragged it off the edge of the road and rolled it into a nearby ditch. The coyotes and vultures could get to it there without endangering drivers or creating more road kill incidents.

The 1940 Ford truck whizzed by him, and it was going at least double the posted speed limit. He knew the truck since he had seen it often enough over the years. He also knew where the driver was going. Heller Tandy was on her way to Big Joe's property outside of town. It was about a hundred acres of land mostly leased to the adjoining rancher for growing hay. He suspected the rumors were true and Heller was the beneficiary of Big Joe's legacy.

Sheriff Tyler Foster called in and informed his dispatcher he would be off duty for a couple of hours. He was only a phone call away if needed. He drove to the Bradford property and parked behind the truck, admiring its restoration.

Heller turned to him and held up a key ring with at least two dozen keys dangling from it. "Still not trespassing, Sheriff."

"My name is Tyler or Ty, and I'm not here on an official call. It's a good thing I am off duty. Old Lake Road is not a race track, and you were driving like a bat out of hell."

"It's a fitting comparison," Heller replied, eyeing him. He was worth a second look. "I feel like I'm back in hell."

He raised an eyebrow at her comment. "You are suitably named for it. Where did you get a moniker like Heller?"

"I was born to it," she admitted. "My mother was living with an oil rigger in Texas when she was pregnant with me. Apparently even unborn, I moved around a lot, kicking and raising a ruckus. According to Cora, my father called me a *heller* when I was still inside her. If true, my name was the only thing he gave me. Cora kicked him out before I was born. Are you here for a reason, besides giving me a ticket?"

"I'm giving you a pass on the ticket this time. Don't try for another one." He pointed to the front door of the house. "I thought you might need company. It will be hard going into Big Joe's place."

Tears prickled Heller's eyes at his words and his offer. Everyone assumed she was tough. Sometimes she wasn't. Walking into Big Joe's home would be devastating for her. She wondered how the sheriff knew as she nodded her head in agreement.

Heller was not past the front room before her tears began to flow. Every wall, mantle, and table surface were covered in framed photographs of her. Pages had been cut from magazines, along with articles from newspapers. Most of them were touting her accomplishments and awards. A framed copy of her college diploma hung over the mantle. She'd known about some of the framed pictures, she had visited Joe every time she'd come back to Pawhuska. She had given him the duplicate of her diploma as he was partially responsible for her earning it. He'd gotten carried away in the last couple of years. There were photographs of her and Big Joe together. Joe had been a robust man in the prime of his life, and he made her feel tiny in comparison.

Heller covered her mouth with her hand as her expressive eyes took in Joe's love and pride in her.

Tyler heard her suck in her breath and saw her eyes floating in tears. He hauled her into his arms where she buried her face into the front of his shirt and cried her heart out. He held her until the worst was over, and then guided her toward the kitchen.

He had been to Joe's house before, checking on him after his cancer diagnosis. Tyler had seen the pictures while Big Joe had talked about how proud he was of Heller Tandy. Pushing her into an old dinette chair, Tyler opened the refrigerator and found a single soda, beer, and a bottle of water. He offered her first choice.

Heller took the bottle of water and then got up to run tap water on a wad of paper towels, wiping her face and eyes. "I'm sorry, I usually don't fall apart."

“Everyone is entitled. You were close to Big Joe,” Tyler replied gruffly. “Why don’t we get out of here and go find out what the heck is in all those big storage sheds back behind the barns.”

Heller opened the barn doors first. She had been inside them years before and was not surprised. Rows of shelving and cubbyholes were organized and filled with auto parts, all neatly labeled with magic marker on masking tape.

“I’ve never heard of some of these things,” Tyler declared. “Brookwood?”

“Chevy. Came off the assembly line in 1958 through ‘61 and then was relaunched in 1969 through 1972,” Heller replied, not bothering to look up. She was reading other tags on the shelves.

“Impala, Del Ray, Bel Air,” Tyler read off the tags in front of him. “At least I recognize some of these cars. Superior Series? Oakland?”

“Superior Series Roadster,” she informed him with a smile over her shoulder. “An Oakland is a 1923 touring car.”

Sheriff Tyler Foster was sucker-punched with the casual smile Heller aimed at him. He drew in his breath and felt a part of him rising, a part which should not have been affected so easily. She was merely being friendly, not flirtatious. She had no idea he had been struck by a lightning bolt as he tried to recover. “Is there anything you don’t know about old cars?”

“Loads,” Heller admitted, glancing around the obsessively organized barn. “Old cars were Big Joe’s passion. They were mine, too, before I went into racing. I still love them. Every chance I get, I’m rebuilding one. Vehicles are a beautiful part of history and there are only a few people left who can resurrect them from the dead with dignity.”

“I’m more curious about the steel buildings,” Tyler admitted. “They started appearing about five years ago. There was a lot of truck traffic going on back here, but Big Joe wasn’t one to share information. He got the building permits from the county, but what he used them for was his business.”

“Let’s find out,” Heller announced, striding toward one of the huge buildings. There were four of them, and each must have been two hundred feet long by one hundred feet wide. She went through six or eight keys until she found one to work the massive lock. They pulled open the wide doors and stood spellbound as they gazed at a sea of old vehicles of every shape and size, in various degrees of condition.

“Whoa,” Tyler exhaled.

“Wow,” Heller exclaimed. “This is the holy grail of antique cars. Just from here, I can see a 1953 Ferrari 375 Pininfarina Spyder. There’s a ‘64 289 Shelby Cobra and, holy crap, do you see that! It’s a 1958 Porsche Gullwing Roadster!”

She turned to the sheriff, grabbing his arm. “You have to promise me you won’t say a word about this to anyone! If the other buildings have the same type of inventory, we’re talking a potential of millions of dollars in antique vehicles. In parts alone, these cars are worth a fortune. Restored, I can’t even imagine their worth.”

Heller contemplated the inside of the building for a moment before turning and going back outside with the sheriff following her. “There’s no security on these buildings inside or out! Was Joe failing mentally? If he was, I didn’t see any evidence of it!”

“I don’t think so. I spoke with Joe regularly and came out to check on him once in a while,” Tyler agreed. “He probably didn’t put in a lot of security so he wouldn’t draw attention to the place. If he had put up fences and security cameras, people would have suspected he was hiding something valuable. Everyone knew he collected old car parts, but they didn’t necessarily understand the value of them.”

Heller went back inside the building and took a deep breath before she climbed onto a battered hood for a better view of the contents. Then she jumped down and walked out of the building, locking the door behind them. She strode toward the house.

“Where are you going? Tyler asked, matching her stride.

“Back to my hotel,” Heller announced. “I’m moving out of there and into the house.”

Tyler regarded the house critically. Other than the old paint chipping, it appeared in fair condition from the outside. “Are you sure it’s habitable inside? It’s been empty a while.”

Heller laughed. “I spent twenty years in a 1953 Pacemaker Travel Trailer, which never traveled anywhere. There was nothing vintage or antique about it. It was a rusting, leaking, eight by thirty-three-foot trailer with faulty plumbing. Come to think of it, everything was faulty or needed to be replaced. Living here will be a breeze.”

She had to revise her claim after actually moving into Big Joe’s house. The house might have been okay for a seventy-five-year-old bachelor, but Heller was used to her creature comforts. After her first night, she took a trip to the mattress store, which promised to deliver her newly purchased mattress and haul away the old one. Her next stop was to an appliance store offering the same guarantees. She ordered a new stove and refrigerator, not top of the line, but serviceable. She also ordered a microwave. How could anyone live without a microwave? It was beyond her comprehension. What was in the house worked. However, there was evidence of rodents making their home in the kitchen. It was gross! Heller could hold her ground in just about any situation, but she turned into a screaming girly girl when it came to creepy crawlies and rodents.

She called an exterminator. She was not willing to share her home with bugs or anything else that scurried around at night. Joe had not lived in the house for the last six months of his life while he had been in Santa Barbara at a hospice. She was leery of taking chances there might be even more unseen, and uninvited guests.

Heller was setting up housekeeping, at least on a temporary basis, until she figured out her next move. She had not evaluated what she wanted to do with her life for a while. She had been too busy working and making a name for herself in the industry.

She was also fresh off a complicated breakup with Brad Stockton, Billy’s younger brother. It was not exactly a breakup since they had never been romantically involved. They had sort of a non-relationship friendship. Brad had never taken her out or even tried to romance her. He was simply familiar and was always hanging around the garage and his brother. She got used to him. The problems started when he claimed he needed a place to stay and had crashed at her house for what she thought was a temporary stay.

Since Heller was out of town on the road a lot during the racing season, it was convenient for her to let Brad stay at the house instead of hiring a house sitter. She had been upset when she found out he was telling people he was her boyfriend. When he *borrowed* her ATM card and a credit card, she had been pissed.

Heller had grown up with a mother who had different live-in boyfriends moving in and out constantly. When Cora wanted to break off a relationship, all she had done was toss the guy out on his ass with his stuff following him.

She tried to kick Brad out of her house; only to discover it was not so easy in the State of California. He had lived in her home for more than ninety days so, according to the law, he had *rights*. Even though he was not the owner of the house and not paying rent, according to the law, they were cohabitating even if he was not sleeping in her bed. Brad had been sleeping in her bed, she admitted to her lawyers. The thing was—they had not both been in the bed at the same time!

Heller discovered how although squatters might not own a property or pay the mortgage, the taxes or the upkeep, in the State of California, they had to be *legally* removed from a residence. Heller had been forced to go through a lengthy process to evict Brad from her property. After several court appearances, the Judge assigned to the case still wanted to give Brad more time to find another place to live before he was displaced. She'd just about gone ballistic! The man was squatting on her property!

She knew it for what it was—a scam. Unscrupulous people like Brad pretended to be disadvantaged to squat, use, and abuse property not belonging to them. They were smart enough to know how to use the laws on the books against the homeowner. It was free rent for quite a while since the courts were backed up for months with eviction cases.

In hindsight, Heller realized she had sunk right back into her old pattern of trying to rescue someone who did not want help, but instead wanted to take advantage of her. She truly was a magnet for people who wanted a permanent sucker. Trying to help Brad had been a huge mistake. Heller hated making mistakes. She also hated being lied to, and worse, being conned.

Billy Stockton had been more worried about losing his head mechanic than pissing off his brother. He had been a witness on Heller's side of the lawsuit. She was not the only one Brad had tried to swindle.

For some reason, her lowlife meter had been faulty, and Brad had slipped right under her defenses. He was an opportunist with a big fat 'O' stamped on his forehead, and she had missed it. Brad was now the *ex*-house sitter. He had been fined and ordered to pay Heller's huge attorney fees, thanks to one of the few judges capable of using common sense and recognizing a con game for what it was.

Heller had no sooner finished dealing with the Brad crisis when Joe admitted his cancer was terminal. Since then, she had been busy with his care. She was also working with her attorney on her latest gizmo, which she suspected would net her a major windfall. She had given little additional thought to Brad Stockton. It was a case of out of sight, out of mind.

After the refrigerator had been delivered, Heller went to town to fill it. She had been popping up all over Pawhuska where some people recognized and remembered her. Some were favorable, others not so much. Mr. Kingman, her high-school math teacher, had held court outside the drug store, telling anyone who would listen how she was one of his best math students ever. On the other hand, Cindy Harris, the checker at the Food Mart, was obviously still upset because Heller had beaten her out of the position as head cheerleader in their senior year. It was strange how some people never matured much past the high school level.

Heller shook her head at the memory of pom-poms and handsprings. It was hard to believe she had been so desperate for acceptance when she was a teenager. Her younger self was certainly a far different person than who she was today.