

Spring Equinox 2022

Blue Ribbon Rose

Brock Veneman drove into Kansas, flat broke and out of luck. He coasted down Park Street in the town of Whisper, rakes and shovels clanking in the truck bed. He should've tied them down, but he'd been in a rush to leave Missouri. Intimidating people for loan sharks was an easier gig than shoveling dirt. Until things had gone sideways.

Whisper looked a lot like any other small and oddly named Midwestern town—Tight Wad or Hard Scratch or Peculiar. The main drag was windblown and weedy, mostly boarded-up storefronts, no one going anywhere fast. Brock groaned at the filling station prices. He should've stopped in St. Joe where gas was ten cents a gallon cheaper.

Story of his life. Lady Luck pissed on him whenever she could.

The attendant, a middle-aged man with a cigarette hanging out the corner of his mouth and a belly hanging over his belt, grunted as he smoothed Brock's crumpled twenty.

Brock leaned against the grimy counter. "Know anyone needing a gardener?"

Through lips clenched around the cigarette, the attendant said, "Best bet? Missus Penney. The pocket Victorian off Chandler. Drive south. You can't miss it."

Brock aimed the truck south and when he spotted the house, he understood. Decades old, dusty-blue and loaded with green brackets and corbeilles, the house sat on a foundation no more than thirty-by-fifty. It stood three-stories high and boasted four gables and a turret shingled in burgundy fish scales.

Hands-down, it won the prize for the ugliest house Brock had ever seen.

But damn if the grounds didn't remind him of Grandma McCain's front garden back in West Virginia. A thick barberry hedge surrounded the yard on three sides, with a Chinese fringe tree taking pride of place in the middle of the lawn, and off to one side, white crabapple trees bloomed.

Where climbing roses covered a series of wooden arbors, Brock looked for signs of aphids or disease. He'd never seen healthier plants or a more pristine yard. Why would the owner want a gardener?

Cursing his luck, he turned away.

But a voice called, "Yoo-hoo!" A woman raced around the corner, tiny like the house and just as ugly. She raised claw-like hands to stop him, jogging on legs thin as toothpicks, orange slacks flapping. Smooth-skinned face, huge nose, her turkey neck was sagged and wrinkled. Late sixties? Seventy?

Chin-length hair fluttered away from her face in the breeze. Brock, who never noticed much about women, saw how evenly that hair was cut, how perfectly the silver and gray strands blended to make her head look like she'd dipped her hair in old pewter.

"You Missus Penney?" He plastered on a smile. His empty stomach rumbled. If this didn't work out, he'd have to rob the town bank.

"You stopped at the filling station on Park." Her voice was soft, but her accusatory tone said he'd best tell the truth.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You asked about work. Are you here to stay, young man? Or will you be moving on?”

His grandma had taught him to wait for the lady, but he stuck out his hand. “Brock Veneman, gardener and all-round handyman—at your service. I’d stay the summer if you have work.”

“Where’s your family?”

“Just me.” Grandma McCain, his last living relative, had died two years ago. He felt a twinge of loss and fingered the one thing of hers he carried—the Miraculous Medal she’d worn till the day she passed.

“I am Messalina Penney.” Her gaze followed the motion of his hand. “That’s *Missus* Penney to you. I’m a widow.”

“Condolences, ma’am.” He scuffed the ground with the toe of his boot, thinking of his grandma.

She clucked her tongue. “The husband died more’n ten years ago, so I’m over it.” She went to his truck, and raised up on tiptoes to see inside. “Good that you have your own tools. And it looks like you’ve used them a time or two.” Turning on her heel, Missus Penney waved. “Follow me.” She led the way along a pea-gravel path to the backyard.

Here, Brock came to a halt. His jaw dropped.

Missus Penney’s backyard spread for at least a half-acre to where a country fence bounded her property from a cow pasture. Long row after row of raised beds surrounded a white gazebo. Roses filled the garden beds.

Brock counted, stopping at sixty. There had to be a hundred different rose hybrids.

“I’ve developed them all, some glorious, some failures. Look here, young man.”
Stopping in front of a raised bed, she clucked her tongue again and pointed. “What’s that?”

“Witches’ broom.” He poked his finger between thorns, checking the stem for softness.

She smacked her lips. “The scientific name is *rose rosette*. What’s to be done?”

He shook his head. “Destroy the bush. There’s no cure.”

“And this?”

“Spider mites. See here, the stippling on the leaf. But...” he paused, looking from the plant to her.

“Yes?” she asked.

“Have you tried strong water spray?”

She grunted. “You know your roses. Two hundred a week, room and board. All your meals. But you have to sleep in the gazebo.”

“I don’t mind,” he said. *For now.*

“There’s a privy at the back of the garden.”

An outhouse? “That’s fine.”

“And a hand pump for washing up before coming inside. Scrape your shoes. No tracking mud over my clean floors.”

Brock drew the line there. “I’m working in dirt. I’ll need a shower, not just a wash-up.”

She narrowed her eyes, lips disappearing in a tight mouth. “One shower a day. But wash at the pump first. And clean the bathroom when you’re done.”

He put out his hand, and she took it. Missus Penney had hands so small he could crush her bones with a careless squeeze. He encompassed the yard with a wave. “Ain’t never seen anything like this.”

“My father was a professor of horticulture. He taught me everything he knew, but *he* never won a State Fair ribbon. I’ve won nine. My mother knew her way around what the prairie grows wild.” Missus Penney smiled a sour smile. “Claimed to be part Kiowa, but I never believed her.”

She strolled along the pea gravel paths, pointing to different roses, many with “Messalina” in the name. He followed, stooping to sniff a pale-yellow rose with a lemony scent.

That,” she pointed to a low-growing bush thick with maroon buds. “Is a ground cover rose I developed ten years ago.” Her narrow chest puffed up. “My first blue ribbon. I do whatever it takes to keep my reputation. You must do the same. Understand?”

“I understand.” This flyspeck of a woman reminded him of Grandma McCain, who loved her roses too, but *her* State Fair winner was a delicious chocolate pie. “What’s your secret, Missus?”

“Hah.” She crossed her arms as if to hold the information tight. “Fertilizer. My own special mix and never will I reveal it.” She led him to where the beds stopped, coming so close that her perfect hair brushed his shoulder.

Her fragrance enveloped him. Roses, of course, and something else, something *sharp*. Thyme or pennywort or maybe—he sniffed—burdock root? Wise-woman herbs. Grandma had been a wise one herself, though she’d never held truck with what she called witchery.

“The new bed will be here,” Missus Penney said. “You’ll find posts for raising near the fence. Build the bed, then drive—*your* vehicle, mind—to the garden supercenter and get the soil. I’ll pay for your gas.”

His stomach rumbled again. Missus Penney laughed.

“Go on then. I’ll cook your supper—chicken-fried steak, mashed potatoes, gravy, and the best apple pie you’ve ever eaten.”

Brock’s mouth filled with saliva. He swallowed. “That sounds like heaven, Missus.”

She grinned, exposing perfect teeth, so white they looked as artificial as her pewter hair and baby-skin face. In her seventies, Grandma McCain’s face had been a mass of wrinkles, her grin toothless. When he was little, Grandma had scared him, spitting when she yelled at him to be a good boy or else Grandpa would give him *such* a wallop. But at fourteen, Brock had whopped Grandpa and threw him down the well. It’d taken three neighbors to pull him out.

Grandpa never hit Brock again, and Brock stopped minding what Grandma said.

After a childhood like his, Missus Penney didn’t scare him, not one bit. She waved a flirty hand over her shoulder and disappeared into the house to make his supper. Hoping she was a good cook, Brock shook off thoughts of his younger self. Better get to work. He moved the twelve-foot-long posts into place and hammered them together. By sunset, the new bed was filled with garden soil.

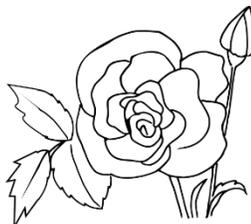
Remembering the rule about mud and her floors, he washed up at the pump. Made of cast iron, the piston was ice cold in his hand, the water more so. The taste on his tongue was as bitter as poison.

Dinner turned out better than promised. She carried their meal outside, perfuming the breeze with fried chicken and fresh-baked pie. Brock gobbled two helpings of

everything while Missus Penney, resplendent in an orange tunic over red tights, nibbled hers.

“I like a man with appetite. You need feeding-up, Brock Vipermann.”

Fork raised in thanks, the last bite of apple pie speared on the tines, he said, “Haven’t eaten regular in a while. That was delicious.”



Night fell around eight o’clock. Missus Penney handed him a pile of blankets before he headed to the gazebo. “Just in case it turns cold toward morning.”

Brock smiled. Missus Penney had no idea what cold was. He’d chased deadbeats all winter, his truck sliding on ice from Texas to Arkansas, crawling through snow from Omaha to Minneapolis—half the time without a working heater. Now *that* was cold, and by the time *this* year turned cold, he’d be gone. Right after the State Fair. To do what? Not chasing deadbeats again. Pure trouble that. Something else.

Settling into the hammock, he yawned and watched the moon rise. He inhaled the April night perfumed with roses and the remembered taste of apple pie. Let the future worry about itself for now.

He closed his eyes, but a shadow born of movement disturbed him. Rising on one elbow, he watched Missus Penney’s white-robed silhouette pace along the crisscrossed paths behind the gazebo in a counter-clockwise circle. Slipping out of her robe, skeletal in shape and color, she had scars where her breasts should be—a mastectomy like Grandma

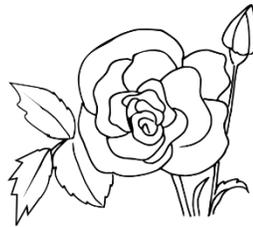
McCain, though Brock had never seen his grandma's naked chest. He hovered between fascination and repulsion.

She stepped inside the newly raised bed and paused again to remove her hair.

He should've known that too-perfect hair was a wig. Chanting nonsense words, holding a glass bowl in one hand, she sprinkled something over the ground as she went.

Was this her secret fertilizer?

Grandma McCain used to plant vegetables by moonlight too. Crazy old ladies. Brock sank back into the hammock. The work and heavy meal combined to make him sleepy. He couldn't keep his lids open.



A sharp pain woke him. Missus Penney knelt beside him, holding his left arm over her glass bowl. Blood spurted from his wrist and into the bowl.

He thrashed. His legs tangled in the blankets, trapping him inside the swaying hammock.

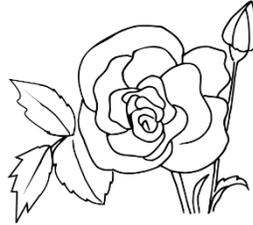
Missus Penney clucked. "Hush now. Close your eyes and go back to sleep. It doesn't hurt."

"Hurts..." A knife slash always hurt. But his eyes blinked shut, almost like he'd been drugged.

Missus Penney's hand touched his forehead, her skin warm against his clammy face.

"Everything's fine."

He had no choice but to sleep.



Missus Penney called Brock in for breakfast. Her kitchen was dark, filled with black cabinets topped by blood-red tile countertops, the grout yellow with age. The upper cupboards touched the twelve-foot ceilings, reachable only with the ladder leaning against one wall. The ancient gas stove smelled like burnt meat.

But fluffy pancakes dripped butter and real maple syrup. Brock ate like a starving man and drank a gallon of orange juice along with four cups of coffee.

She grinned and gestured. “Replenish. You’ve lots of work today.”

His wrist hurt, bandaged in gauze and adhesive strips. He hadn’t dreamed of her cutting him for blood.

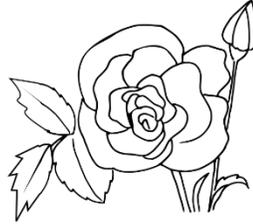
He should leave. A smart guy would just go. She’d taken his blood—without so much as a by-your-leave—and no doubt she’d try something worse.

Except he didn’t have a dime to his name. He had to stay.

Brock gobbled down his breakfast, then worked hard and fast. He put the finishing touches on the rose bed by noon.

“You know,” he said, carrying 40-pound bags of compost, “there’s such a thing as blood meal.”

“Not the same as fresh.” She watched him, arms akimbo, her wig slightly askew. “Not near the same.”



Spring with its thunderstorms turned to summer with its humid heat and dry prairie winds. Brock spent his time weeding and getting Missus Penney's jury-rigged irrigation system to work. Most days, he thought about leaving. Hell, he'd be thirty years old in October. Was this to be his life, drifting from place to place, job to job? He needed something better.

But what could he do? Start his own landscaping business? He'd little eye for design. Those guys, the ones in business, had all sorts of fancy degrees. The big landscaping companies wouldn't touch him without college.

Brock couldn't forget that she'd taken his blood. He sat up as long as he could every night—and that wasn't long since the hard work exhausted him—waiting, watching for her. And then the food started tasting odd.

While eating her beef stroganoff, he drummed up his nerve. "What's in this?"

"Writing a recipe book, are you?" Sarcastic, that question. "Just noodles, beef and sour cream sauce."

"No, Missus, I mean, what's in the sauce?" Maybe a touch of flattery would work? "Never tasted anything like."

She preened, sitting straight as the cockiest rooster in the hen house. "That's *my* secret."

Whenever Missus Penney didn't want to say, she claimed *secret*.

Brock took a break from her cooking, driving into Paola and stopping at the Corner Cafe. He'd half-finished the breakfast special—eggs, sausage, biscuits and gravy—when the sheriff, a young guy, face fresh-shaven with a shock of black hair, a cup of coffee in hand, pulled out the other chair at his table.

“Mind if I sit?” The sheriff stuck out his free hand. “Sheriff Conroy, Steve Conroy, from Whisper. Got business here in Paola?”

Automatically, Brock shook the sheriff's hand, wondering whether the cops in Missouri had a bench-warrant out for him.

Conroy didn't wait for Brock to reply. “You're the fella working for Messalina Penney, ain't 'cha? Dotes on them roses. Won a bunch of ribbons down t' Hutchinson.” Conroy took a long swig of coffee. “I come up from Arkansas, oh, 'bout six months ago. But now, here's the thing.” He took another swallow of coffee, gaze fixed on Brock.

Brock waited. Did this sheriff know about Arkansas? That one guy, Thomas... Thompson... something. Brock had broken his ten fingers to motivate him to pay up.

“Missus Penney,” Conroy was saying, “People here say she's had a lot of men like you working for her. Where are they now, I wonder. Not one stayed in Whisper.”

Brock shook his head. “Job ends in October once the roses are bedded for winter. Can't winter in the gazebo. And the house is too small for two.”

Conroy hummed. “You'll be moving on, then?”

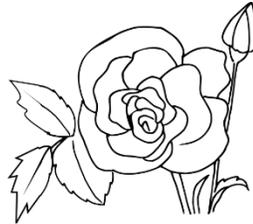
“Guess I will.” Brock shifted to take his wallet out of his back pocket.

Conroy raised a hand. “My treat. And to pay me back, take some advice. Get you gone now. Take that truck of yours and just move along.” He shook his head. “Strange goings-on over them roses. I ask myself a lot of questions about Missus Penney and haven't come up with answers. Leastways, no good ones.”

Standing up, he handed Brock his card. “Something bothers you? Call me. Ain’t worried ‘bout your past.”

So, Conroy *did* know. Nodding, Brock pocketed the card.

Questions filled his mind as he drove back to Whisper. Maybe the same questions Conroy asked. And like Conroy, he found no answers.



Hands on hips, strands of perfect wig hair blowing across her face in the ever-present Kansas wind, Missus Penney waited as Brock pulled into her driveway and got out.

“Where in hell’ve you been? Here it is, middle of July, dry as a goddam bone, and that white rose of mine, the one to win my tenth blue ribbon, is withering on its bush.”

Brock turned on his heel, walked back to his truck, and climbed in. No question. He’d drive away. Fuck Missus Penney and her precious roses and her weird food. He’d find something else. He always did. He had money now, enough to survive a few weeks.

“Wait!” Missus Penney ran to the truck door and put her hand on the window. “I’m sorry. I’m just... worried sick.”

He banged the steering wheel, not violently, just frustrated. The air inside his truck was taut with indecision. He knew he should go.

She waited too, her claw of a hand gripping the car door.

Finally, he asked, “What’s wrong with it? Since yesterday.”

“I think it needs something. Come look at it. Please, Brock.”

He sighed, opened the door, and stepped out. “Just talked to the sheriff,” he said. “Asking questions.”

“What did you do?” Missus Penney took him by the wrist, like whatever the sheriff wanted with him didn’t matter because she knew he was a good person deep down. Brock followed. His hand went to Grandma’s medal under his shirt, hearing the last thing she’d said to him.

“Be a good person, Brock. It’s all I ask.”

Maybe a good man would stay and help Missus Penney. A smart one would leave.

He let Missus Penney pull him to the back, where the rose registered in the State Fair competition as The Messalina White bloomed. Brock’s irritation eased, and with it, his questions.

Missus Penney yammered on about the rose, ending with, “Calcium will do the trick!”

“Got bone meal?”

She shook her head. “It needs to be the right kind. Not just a bag from the store. Who knows what’s in the bag?”

What would she do? Grind up chicken bones? Brock didn’t know or care. The need to leave hammered at him, but at least for today, he was staying. He did his chores, watering, weeding, checking leaves for pests or viruses.

Still digesting breakfast, he refused lunch.

“You’d better be hungry for supper.” Missus Penney’s tone sounded like *or-else*. She didn’t scare him. She’d begged him to stay. Said please and sorry.

Supper that night—a pasta dish smothered in mushrooms and garlic and butter—tasted way off. The garlic came from her garden, but he couldn’t tell if she’d used last

year's storage or this June's crop. And the mushrooms—hadn't she gone foraging the other day? He would've asked about the mushrooms except he knew she'd cry *secret*.

Watching Missus Penney slurp hers down, Brock picked at his meal, realizing he hadn't seen her put the food on the plates.

"You've hardly eaten a thing," she said.

He shrugged.

"You'll be sorry later."



More awake than usual, Brock settled down in the gazebo. The moon was almost full again. He'd slept all night through May and June. Missus Penney hadn't yammered about fertilizer since April.

Until today.

Sure enough, she came out the back door, naked, the scars where breasts should be gleaming white. After finishing her dance, she put her robe back on and came into the gazebo.

"Don't go taking my blood again," he said.

She gave a little jump and he chortled. She'd expected he'd be fast asleep and here he was bright-eyed.

"It's not your blood I'm after." The chef's knife she held shone in the moonlight.

He tried to sit up. His body failed him, limbs limp as the noodles she'd fed him.

Short of breath, he fell back into the hammock. Missus Penney held him down, one unexpectedly strong hand on his chest.

“Hush now,” she whispered. “Should’ve eaten your supper.”

His foot was on fire. He heard a crunch, a pop, and then a twisting agony. She yanked something off his foot.

“Wait... What...?”

“It’s just a toe. You don’t need this little toe. You’ll be fine.”

He shivered, his teeth chattering, while sweat ran down his back. God, what had she done?

“Missus...” He turned his head, retching, vomiting a thin and undigested stream of noodles and garlic and mushrooms onto the gazebo floor.

She made soothing sounds, humming under her breath and repeating, “Told you... should’ve eaten.”

She fumbled in the pocket of her robe, pulled out a vial and poured whatever it contained on his foot, making it burn worse than anything. He let out a short scream and vomited bile.

“Here.” From her other pocket, she took a different bottle, held it to his lips and tipped its contents into his mouth. He gagged at the bitterness. Spat on the floor.

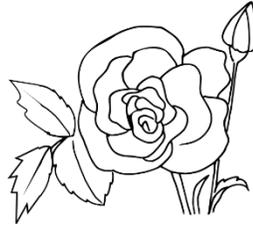
“More,” she said. “Keep it down.”

Because he had no choice, he drank. The concoction, like fire in his mouth, made him sleepy. His eyes heavy, he remembered being hypnotized by a stage magician in some Minnesota bar. Whatever was in that bottle made him feel the same way. No longer in control.

Terror rose because he didn't know what she'd do—how far she'd go—to get fresh fertilizer for her damn roses.

“Shush. Don't be afraid. All done for the night.”

He couldn't stop from drifting into unconsciousness.



Next morning, Brock limped to put his shovels in the truck.

Missus Penney, a floral bathrobe loosely tied at the waist and a purple satin nightgown showing underneath, flew out her front door. “Where are you going?”

“Where the hell do you think I'm going? You cut my little toe off.”

“You can't leave. Don't be foolish. It's just a toe. Come in for breakfast.”

He turned on her. “Just *a toe*? It was *my* toe, and you had no right to cut it off. You're putting something in the food to knock me out. I'm not eating any more meals here.”

She knotted and unknotted the belt of her bathrobe. “Fresh is best.”

“I needed that toe. Just like I needed my blood. What will you take next?”

Her claw-like hands grasped his forearm. “Come with me.” She dragged him to the backyard.

The soil around the plant had been lightly tilled. A flower bloomed, a single rose, creamy white, the stigma palest pink with dark red anthers. Its perfume reminded Brock of strawberries. He bent over and sniffed. Yes, strawberries, but something else, too—a hint of something dead—his *toe*.

“I don’t deny it,” Missus Penney said. “But now you see.”

“Nice for you, Missus. But I’ve lost a toe.”

“All right. Stay or go, as you please. I won’t keep you.” She walked away.

Brock half-expected her to beg like she did before. But she kept on walking toward the house. He stood, hesitating, calling himself crazy for his indecision. But the Grandma in his head kept telling him to be good and not a quitter.

No, he needed to call the Sheriff, tell what Missus Penney had done and leave town.

Missus Penney turned back. “You’ve worked hard on this rose. And I appreciate *all* the sacrifices you’ve made. Let’s say I pay you fifty dollars more a week. And if we win the blue ribbon, you get a thousand-dollar bonus.”

True to the cliché, Brock had never seen that much money all at one time. Still, he hesitated.

“Two thousand,” Missus Penney said.

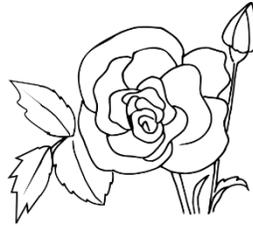
“But I won’t eat at your table.”

“You’ll starve in Whisper. Where will you eat? And you know I’m a good cook.”

He barked a laugh, his eyes burning at the same time. “You learned about herbs from that Kiowa mother of yours.”

She stared him down. “You’re not a *bad* man, Brock Veneman. And not stupid at all.”

Maybe he was good like Grandma wanted, but he must be pretty stupid, trading a toe for money, even if it was two thousand bucks.



For the next few weeks, Brock ate what he bought at the local grocery—peanut butter, bread, jelly, fruit, cold cuts, chips, bagged salads. He ignored Missus Penney’s attempts to get him back to her kitchen. She tried hard, opening her kitchen window to let out the lusciousness of baking, the savory fragrances of roasting and frying.

Brock broke only once, unable to resist the lure of bacon and scratch waffles. But he caught her little smirk and was nauseous all day. Feeling sick brought back his anger over the toe and he decided to call Steve Conroy.

“Want to press charges?” Conroy asked. “Mebbe your DNA around that rose for proof?”

Missus Penney wouldn’t be giving him a bonus if he pressed charges. Brock said no and went his way, reasoning that at least the Sheriff knew what she’d done.

The Kansas State Fair was scheduled to begin on Friday, September 8, with horticulture judging later that week. As August flew by, Missus Penney anxiously waited for new buds to appear.

Brock sat up at night, poised to take his tools and drive off.

On August 25, she inspected the rosebush several times, then paced from the house and back again, muttering about fertilizer.

“Don’t be thinking about my toes.” Brock gave a short laugh to tell her he was only joking. The look she gave him ran chills up his spine.

She made him dig a deep and narrow trench in front of the *Messalina White*.

“I know what’ll do the trick.” Her fingers caressed the thorny stems where buds promised the blue-ribbon blooms. She disappeared into the house and returned with a baggie filled with rusty-colored mash that looked like hamburger.

She made him spread the greasy pulp below the root level. It smelled nothing like proper fertilizer, more like old roadkill.

“Dig it in deep,” she said. “Get it down in there. Use your hands.”

“That won’t work, Missus. Roots don’t grow that deep.”

“Never mind all that horticultural mumbo-jumbo, my man,” she said. “My father—the professor—was never able to do what I’ve done. Just follow directions.”

He did as she asked, washing at the pump afterwards, soaping his arms above his elbows, throwing away the gloves he’d used.



Whatever the stuff was, it worked.

By September fifth, the tiny green buds turned plump and white. The night before the State Fair, glorious roses unfurled, creamy white with pink and red centers.

Missus Penney beamed. “Come eat with me, Brock.” She flicked back her pewter-colored wig with a flirtatious hand. “I’ve a special supper planned. Then after supper, I’ll drive to Hutchinson.” She handed him an envelope, eyes shining.

He looked. Twenty hundred-dollar bills.

“Thanks,” he said, not knowing what else to say. “But you haven’t got the blue ribbon yet. Wasn’t that the deal? The bonus if you win?”

“Oh, I’ll win. I want you to stick around to see it. Feel free to sleep in the house while I’m in Hutchinson.”

He didn’t want to stay in her house. He didn’t want to eat her supper. But he didn’t know how to tell her no.

At five o’clock he went inside. Missus Penney’s cooking always smelled good, even when it tasted funny. But tonight, the air reeked of old meat. His stomach turned over.

She’d made goulash—ground beef, elbow macaroni, and tomato sauce, a dish he’d always liked. But the beef was off. He pushed the plate away.

Shoveling food in her mouth with more than her usual gusto, Missus Penney glared at him. Without comment, she took his nearly full dish to the sink and scraped it into the disposal.

Dessert was just as terrible—a gummy ginger pudding with chocolate sauce. He didn’t eat it either. Without a word, she toured him around the house.

At last she left. Even with the stove off, the house still reeked. Opening the windows, Brock rummaged under the kitchen sink for air freshener. The smell was worse there. Sweat beaded on his forehead between the smell and a terrible foreboding. He removed everything from the cabinet. All he found was a dead roach.

He should just go. He had his money. For whatever reason, the stench beckoned, compelling him to find it. Steeling himself, Brock breathed deep. Was it coming from the basement? He opened the door, took the stairs two at a time, only to find broken furniture and cardboard boxes piled high. Nothing nice except in one corner, a big freezer chest.

Going closer, he gagged. Missus Penney must’ve turned the freezer off by accident when she got out the hamburger for dinner.

Funny thing, though. The basement was cool, cooler than the air-conditioned house. The meat shouldn't have gone bad in one afternoon. If it'd been off longer, surely she'd have noticed.

But no. The meat inside must've spoiled before now because that goulash had been rotten. Missus Penney was old and had maybe lost her sense of smell. That made sense. Nothing scary here. Time to leave and damned if he ever came back to Whisper, Kansas.

He started for the stairs, but something stopped him. Opening the freezer door, he held his breath and looked inside. It was filled to the brim with baggies, each containing the same hamburger-like mash he'd spread around the rose bush. In the back, nine thick envelopes were bunched together, just like the one she'd given him.

He flicked one open. Sure enough, it held a stack of hundred-dollar bills.

Brock slammed the lid shut.

He'd go upstairs and call Sheriff Conroy. Then he'd get in his truck and drive away.

Greed stopped him. Opening the freezer door again, he gathered all the envelopes, stuffing them into his pants pockets.

Grandma McCain would've said, "Don't be greedy. Be good."

He turned at the sound of footsteps on the stairs. Missus Penney held a gun raised in two hands, pointed at his chest.

"Just like all the others. So predictable. You *have* to see where the stink comes from."

He took a step toward her. She fired. Missed.

"I don't care about the bodies or the money." He pulled the envelopes out of his pocket, dropping them on the floor. "You can have my two thousand back. You paid me all summer. I'll take what I have in the bank and be on my way."

She laughed, shoulders shaking and gun wobbling. “Stupid Brock. The money in that envelope? That’s *your* money. I got it from your bank account this morning. I’m a widow. I don’t have thousands of dollars to throw around.”

“You don’t trust banks. It’s why you keep your savings in the freezer.” Along with the ground meat of dead men. Brock gagged, knowing what had gone into her goulash.

Missus Penney nodded. “You could’ve been something. You’re clever. That grandmother of yours raised you right. Except you don’t listen to your instincts. Shoulda left long ago.” She sighed. “Goodbye, Brock.” She shot him again and this time the bullet grazed his shoulder.

High on adrenalin, Brock felt no pain. He took a step toward Missus Penney. The gun shook in her hand.

“You’re not too tiny,” he said.

“Too tiny for what?” She shot a third time. Missed.

“For this.” The strength from a summer in the garden made him fast enough to reach her. Strong enough to grab her hand and take the gun. To shoot her.

Brock didn’t miss.

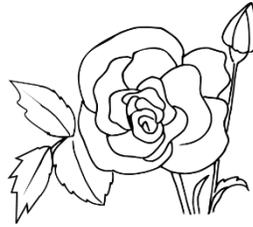
Missus Penney sprawled face-up on the concrete, hands clutching her chest, dark blood puddling beneath her.

“Brock.” But whatever else she would have said was silenced forever.

He wanted to tell her why she’d failed to kill him when she’d killed at least nine men before. They must’ve been good men. *Good* men never attacked tiny women.

“Your mistake,” he said to the body. “Grandma McCain said I’d never be good. She was right.”

He picked up the envelopes, opening them, counting. Thirteen thousand dollars, including his two thousand. Not as much as he wanted. More than he deserved.



Brock walked around the pocket Victorian to where Steve Conroy stood watching a backhoe. Bodies in various stages of decomposition lay next to a pile of dirt.

Conroy raised a hand in greeting. “How was Hutchinson?”

Brock waved Missus Penney’s tenth blue ribbon.

“Damn,” said Conroy. “Bet she’s looking up from hell, wishing she hadn’t tangled with the likes of you. Shoulda just let you take the money and go. No one would’ve been the wiser.”

“The horticulturist from K-State was pretty broken up when he heard she was dead.” Brock grinned. “Thought he’d cry tears till I told him I’d saved her hybrids. Thanks to you.”

“They would’ve been destroyed when we dug up the bodies. We found eighteen in all. Missing fingers or toes.”

Eighteen? She must’ve spent the rest of the money. Brock looked longingly at the crime-taped house, wishing he could go inside and search. But no. His thirteen thousand would do.

“What now?” asked Conroy. “Off on your travels again?”

Brock sighed. "I'm going back east. Grandma left me some land in North Carolina. She told me I'd figure out what to do with it if I was good enough. Guess shooting a serial killer dead qualifies. Gonna start a business."

"What's the plan?"

"Roses. I've got the Messalina hybrids and the rest, even some that didn't do well here in Kansas, but might do well back east. I'm changing the names. I got the name for this one already."

Conroy raised one eyebrow and Brock laughed.

"Gonna call it the blue-ribbon rose."

END