

Drama and Drizzle

We can say that the earth has an organic soul, that its flesh is the land, its bones are the structure of the rocks . . . its blood is the pools of water . . . its breathing and its pulse are the ebb and flow of the sea.

– LEONARDO DA VINCI

Angela steadied herself on the granite incline. Near the highest of the three peaks, she gazed down at the changing landscape. Climbers starting out at the base looked like beetles. Below them, hikers on the loop trail looked like ants.

Suddenly dizzy, she lurched against the solid rock, regaining her balance, grounding herself. She breathed in the Hill Country's fresh air to collect herself. Inhaling, she filled her lungs with the subtle scents of bluebonnets mixed with mountain laurel.

"Fresh, isn't it?" asked Tulah, her college roommate and weekend hostess.

Wearing rappel gloves and hiking boots, Tulah gripped the rock like a weathered mesquite. Her shoulder-length blonde hair was swept back in a ponytail and tucked through a baseball cap. Blue eyes smiling, her tanned cheeks rosy from the climb, she grinned, apparently unfazed by the steep slope.

Angela nodded as a stiff breeze blew her shoulder-length dark hair into her eyes. Brushing her hand across her high cheek bones, she finger-combed the errant strands of hair behind her ear when she heard Tulah's younger sister, Kelby.

"Ozone." Kelby lifted her nose and drank the wind. "Yup, rain's on its way."

“Nothing in the forecast.” Shrugging, Tulah turned back to the climb, leading them toward the top of the dome. Minutes later, she called over her shoulder. “How’re y’all doing?”

“Okay.” Kelby grunted but continued to inch her way up.

“What about you?” Tulah glanced behind her at Angela.

“I’m taking it one toehold at a time.”

“Cautious is good. This climb isn’t as easy as it looks.”

“I’ll second that.” Twisting her mouth into a crooked smile, Angela compared the two sisters’ styles. Tulah scaled the slope like a mountain goat, literally jumping from niche to perch. Kelby clung to the granite with both hands and feet, seeming to crawl, not walk, up the rocky surface.

They continued to climb Enchanted Rock, following the sun’s ascent, but instead of the sky getting lighter, a bank of clouds obscured the sun.

Suddenly, a streak of lightning flashed in front of them, temporarily blinding Angela. She heard the peal of thunder a moment later as it echoed against the rock. From nowhere, a light smattering of rain began falling, dampening their hair. Then it turned into a downpour, drenching their clothes, making the smooth granite dome slick as ice. Another flash of lightning stuck nearby, branching in several directions.

With a shriek, Kelby teetered as she lost her footing, scrambling, slipping on the wet rock. Arms spread wide, she dug in with her fingernails, grabbing anything to break her fall. The only plant hardy enough to sprout in sheer granite was a prickly-pear cactus, and she screamed as her bare skin connected with its spines. Though it slowed her descent briefly, the cactus pad broke off in her hand as Kelby began sliding down the dome on her belly, gaining momentum.

Angela watched as Kelby approached the edge and then suddenly changed course, veering toward a granite outcrop. With a sickening thud, she heard Kelby crash into a boulder below. Tulah

scrambled after her sister, calling to her. Angela carefully backtracked to Kelby, vertigo slowing her descent.

The girl lay moaning as Tulah took off her own jacket and placed it under Kelby's head. "Call nine-one-one!"

Angela held up her cell. "Just waiting for them to answer." Then she spoke into the receiver. "There's been an accident on Enchanted Rock, about thirty feet below its peak. Am guessing it's a compound fracture. The bone's sticking out of her leg."

"Don't move her," said the dispatcher. "Keep her stable until the helicopter arrives."

After giving the details, Angela hung up and turned toward Tulah. "They're on their way."



Within minutes, they heard the whir of blades. They watched as the helicopter hovered overhead and two medics rappelled down a line toward them. One wrapped Kelby's leg in a splint, while the other guided a rescue basket and helped load her.

The medic glanced from Kelby to the rocks below them. "You're one lucky lady. If you hadn't slammed into this boulder, nothing would have stopped your fall for two hundred feet."

Tulah took a deep breath. "It could've been worse."

"It can always be worse." Angela raised her eyes to the figure only she could see. *Thank you*, she mouthed.

Dressed in buckskin, his hair in braids, the Native American acknowledged her with a solemn nod.

Oblivious to the figure, Tulah stared through him, asking the medic, "Where are you taking my sister?"

"HC Memorial Hospital, Ma'am. By the time you arrive, we should have her leg set—"

"Don't forget these cactus spines." Kelby held up her right hand, her fingernails bloody, her hand a puffy, red pincushion.

The medic gave her a sympathetic smile. “And the cactus spines will be tweezed out.”

“Some people will do anything for attention.” Tulah hugged her sister gently. “Don’t worry. You’ll be good as new. We’ll meet you at the hospital as soon as we climb down. Not everyone can be air-lifted.” She glanced at Angela. “Some of us have to get down the old-fashioned way.”

“At least it stopped raining.” Kelby gave her a crooked smile. “All drama and drizzle, no measurable precipitation.”

“Yeah, no rain in weeks, and today we get a trace, just enough to make the rock slick.”



Tulah called her parents with the bad news.

“They just left Midland,” she told Angela, “and should be in Fredericksley in about five hours.”

Tulah in the lead, Angela clambered down the rock face as fast as vertigo and smooth, wet stone allowed. Then they hopped in the car, and Tulah careened along Ranch Road 965. “Not enough rain to even wash off the surface oil. All that drizzle did was make the road slick.”

By the time they arrived at the hospital, Kelby was being wheeled back from an MRI scan. She looked pale and appeared to be sleeping.

Tulah caught her breath. “Is she all right?”

“She’s been examined and X-rayed,” said the nurse, “but she’s drowsy. You can talk to her for a few minutes until the doctor arrives, that is, if she can stay awake.”

Leaning over her sister, Tulah took her hand. “Mom and Dad are on their way. They’re bringing Brooke back with them.”

Kelby’s eyes fluttered. “What?”

“Mom and Dad will be here in a couple hours. They said to give you their love.”

Kelby's eyes closed, and a moment later Angela heard light snoring.

"Don't worry," said a man entering the room. "We've given her something to ease the pain, and it made her sleepy." Smiling, he transferred the chart to his left hand and shook hands with Tulah. "I'm Dr. Franks, and you're . . ."

"I'm her sister, Tulah Bankhead, and this is my roommate, Angela Brannon. How is she?"

"The X-rays show no other bones were broken. They're still interpreting the MRI images to determine if there are any hairline fractures or broken pieces. Once we have the results, we'll wheel her into surgery to set the bone."

"How long will that take?" Tulah watched him with anxious eyes.

He shrugged. "It depends on whether or not we need to insert pins, screws, or plates."

Tulah's eyes opened wide. "It's that bad?"

Reacting with a sympathetic smile, he said, "Let's not borrow trouble, but you can expect surgery to last from two to six hours. In the meantime, why don't you and your friend get something to eat and try to relax?"

"And fill out the paperwork," said the nurse.

Angela took out her cell phone. "While you do that, I'll update your parents."



An hour later, they pushed open the hospital doors and breathed deeply. The sun was shining. Surveying the robin's-egg-blue sky, Tulah grimaced. "Why couldn't it have been like this for the climb?"

"It was, all except for a passing shower."

Tulah glanced back at the hospital. "And look what that caused. No precipitation in weeks, and that tiny rain cell cost Kelby her broken leg."

Angela shrugged. "It could've been worse."

"How?"

Angela tried to read Tulah's eyes, debating how much to share. "Did you notice how Kelby's fall seemed to suddenly change course?"

Tulah narrowed her eyes and gave a delayed nod. "Now that you mention it."

"She didn't slide down the rock in a straight line. Didn't it seem odd, that at the last minute, she veered toward a granite outcrop?"

"Why?" Tulah watched Angela closely. "Do you know something I don't?"

"Let's just say someone was looking out for her."

Tulah's eyes opened wide. "What *are* you saying?"

"It could've been much worse."

Tulah's forehead wrinkled. "You sensed something?"

"I *saw* something." Angela took a deep breath. Still debating, she peered into Tulah's eyes and made her decision: *I can trust her*. "Actually *someone*, I saw a Native American man in braids and buckskin catch her arm, change the direction of her fall."

Tulah nodded slowly. "For years, I've heard legends about a 'Guardian of the Rock,' supposedly some shaman named Wind Spirit that protects climbers, but that's all I thought it was, stories and legends." She exhaled quickly. "I don't know what to say."

"Let's just say Kelby's guardian angel was watching out for her." Angela smiled. "Come on, let's get something to eat. I don't know about you, but I'm starved."

"Now that you mention it, so am I." She returned a grin. "Like German food?"



They found an outdoor table in a beer garden just off Main Street. Ancient live oaks shaded them from the sun, while a balmy breeze caught their hair.

LONE STAR CHRISTMAS

Angela looked over the menu. “I’m not familiar with German cuisine. I don’t know what to order.”

Tulah’s taut face relaxed in a grin. “Try the sampler. It’s got a little of everything.”

Angela read the description: “Bratwurst, knockwurst, and pepperwurst served on a bed of sauerkraut, red cabbage, and sweet and sour potatoes.” She looked up at Tulah. “Sounds delicious.”

She grinned. “Just wait till you taste it.”

“What can I get you?” asked the waitress, pen and pad in hand.

Angela noticed her outfit: white apron over embroidered black jumper. “I’ll try the sausage sampler.”

Tulah said, “I’ll have the wiener schnitzel and a flight of beer.”

Angela cocked her head. “What’s a flight?”

“It’s a sample of six seasonal brews, like that.” The waitress pointed to six tiny glasses at the next table.

“This isn’t just a pub,” said Tulah. “It’s a microbrewery. They make about two dozen seasonal beers each year. A flight gives you a taste of each, and it’s different every time.”

“You talked me into it.” Turning toward the waitress, Angela added, “I’ll have a flight, too.”

The woman hesitated, assessing her. “I’ll need to see some ID.”

Angela felt her cheeks burn as she reached for her purse and handed the waitress her driver’s license.

Tulah grinned as she turned toward Angela. “That’s what you get for looking so young.”

“The day will come when you’ll be glad to look underage.” Their waitress laughed. “Be right back with your flights, ladies.”

Tulah’s cell phone rang, and she quickly answered it, speaking low. “Hi, Mom.” Whispering, she gave an update on Kelby. Apparently responding to a question, she glanced at Angela. “I’m trying not to annoy the other diners. Angela and I are having lunch.” She listened silently for a few minutes, her expression getting more serious, and then said, “Okay, see you in about an hour. Love you.”

The waitress brought their flights. “Start with the pale ale on the left. It’s the lightest flavor, and work your way to the dark stout on the right. That’s the heartiest.” She smiled. “Should have your orders out in a minute.”

Tulah lifted the tiny glass on the left. “*Prost.*”

Angela followed her example. “*Prost.*”

“Not bad.” Tulah set down her glass, seeming lost in thought. Then she became silent, her stare unfocused.

Angela watched her friend. “You seem a million miles away. What’s wrong?”

Tulah started. “What?” She shook her head. “Sorry, something my mother said.”

“What was it?”

“She’s worried about Kelby, first and foremost.”

“But . . .”

“The family business needs all of us to help out at the winery. Now that Kelby’s out of commission, she’s worried about finding someone to take her place.”

“What does Kelby do at the winery?”

Tulah absently sipped her beer. “She drives the tram, takes guests on tours through the vineyards to the winemaking complex. Then she finishes with a private tasting, where guests can sample and compare wines.”

Angela mulled it over. “Does it pay anything?”

“That’s the problem.” Tulah gave a mirthless grin. “It’s a competitive market. Especially during this drought.”

Angela squinted as she raised her shoulders. “What do you mean?”

“We can’t afford to hire anyone. The whole family pitches in just to keep the winery open. With Kelby on the sidelines . . .” Tulah grimaced. “A salary could make or break the business.”

Angela mentally rewound the past semester. Catching her breath as she recalled the pain of her mother’s sudden death two

months earlier, she remembered how Tulah's family had opened their home to her over weekends and now Easter. "What if . . ."

Tulah sat up straight, watching her. "What's going through that beady little brain of yours?"

"What if I fill in for Kelby this summer?"

Tulah shook her head. "The job doesn't pay anything."

"How about room and board?" Angela looked hard at her friend. She raised an eyebrow. "Would that work?"

Tulah's eyes lit up, and then sighing, she shook her head. "It wouldn't be fair to you."

"Actually, you'd be doing me a favor."

Tulah scoffed. "How do you figure that?"

"You knew my adviser had helped me get an internship at Enchanted Rock."

"Yeah . . ."

"She said I'd earn credit for the experience and could graduate in August."

"What's wrong with that?"

"State Parks barely pay interns. I'd have had to turn the job down because I couldn't afford living expenses." Angela stared at her friend. "See? You'd be helping me, not the other way around."

Tulah took a deep breath, seeming to think it over. Then she met Angela's eyes. "But if you're working at Enchanted Rock, when would you have time to help at the winery?"

"That's easy." Angela smiled. "It's a shared internship, which means I'd only have to work twenty hours a week at the park. The rest of the time, I'd be free to help with the winery tours and tastings."

"But—"

"Careful, they're hot." Handling the plates with a towel, the waitress set them on the table.

"Thanks, this smells wonderful." Angela breathed in the piquant aromas of her steaming sampler.

"How's the beer?"

Angela glanced at their nearly untouched glasses. “We’ve been too busy talking to find out.” She caught Tulah’s eye and winked. “But something tells me I prefer wine to beer.”

As the waitress left, Tulah’s blue eyes looked gray as they focused on Angela.

“Despite your making it sound like we’d be doing you a favor, you’re the one who’d be helping us. You don’t want to spend your last summer in school working two jobs. The winery isn’t your problem.”

Angela shook her head. “You’re wrong. It is my problem. You and Kelby wouldn’t have taken me climbing today if I hadn’t been considering this internship and wanted to see Enchanted Rock. In a way, it’s my fault she fell and broke her leg. The least I can do is take her place.”

Tulah scoffed. “It was the freaky weather that caused it, not you.” Then her eyes homed in on Angela’s. “What about Kio?”

Angela glanced at her engagement ring. “He’s in Fort Davis, working nights, trying to establish himself. We knew our time together this summer would be limited.” She looked up at Tulah and smiled. “That’s what phones are for. From my point of view, it’s all settled.” Angela held out her hand. “If your parents agree, do we have a deal?”

Tulah shook on it.



By the time they finished lunch and walked back to the hospital, Tulah’s family had arrived, and her mother was busy signing the paperwork.

Tulah hugged her father and then threw her arms around her sister Brooke. “Look at you!” Holding her at arm’s length, Tulah ran her eyes up and down her sister’s bloated frame. “Eight months’ pregnant, when are you due?”

“Eight months next week.” Brooke corrected, deadpanning. “But who’s counting? I’m due in five weeks.”

“Wow, a baby in the family, it’s hard to imagine you a mother and me an auntie.”

Their father smiled. “Or imagine your mother and me grandparents.”

“Proverbs 17:6,” said Mrs. Bankhead. “The crown of the aged is their children’s children.”

Turning toward Angela, Tulah introduced her to Brooke. “This is my obviously pregnant sister, Brooke. She’s going to stay with us until after the baby comes.”

“My husband works on oil rigs,” said Brooke. “We’ve been moving from boomtown to boomtown across west Texas. Noah works days, nights, weekends, and holidays, rotating his schedule between forty and a hundred and forty hours a week. He’s never home.” Brooke gave Tulah an affectionate wink. “I need to be with family when our baby’s born.”

“Wouldn’t have it any other way.” Holding out his arms, their father drew her toward him in a bear hug.

“And this is my friend and roommate, Angela. She’s spending Easter with us and will be . . .” Noticing Angela’s high sign, she broke off mid-sentence.

“Will be what?” asked her father.

Tulah took a deep breath as she glanced at Angela and told him their idea. “What do you say?”

Angela gave Tulah an anxious smile as they waited for his answer.

He drew a deep breath and ran his hand through his hair. “I’ll have to talk this over with your mother, but as far as I’m concerned, Angela, consider yourself one of us.” He put his arm around her shoulders and hugged her. “Welcome to the Bankhead family.”

“What’s this?” Tulah’s mother walked over in time to hear the punch line.

Tulah explained, filling in her mother on their idea. “So what do you think?”

“*What do I think?!*” She put her arms around Angela. “I think you’re heaven-sent, pure and simple. Welcome to the Bankhead family.”

Absorbing their warm hospitality, Angela swallowed hard to control her trembling bottom lip. Their affection was overwhelming after the loss of her mother. Before she could speak, Dr. Franks approached them, and Tulah introduced him to her family.

“How is she?” asked Mrs. Bankhead.

“The MRI indicated there were no head injuries, and it was a clean break, no hairline fractures or broken pieces. We’ve set the bone, put on the cast, and your daughter’s ready to be released.” He spoke to the nurse and rejoined the group. “Kelby will be out shortly.”

A few minutes later, they watched a nurse wheel Kelby toward them. Tulah grimaced when she saw the size of her sister’s cast. Then she put on a bright smile and took a pen from her purse.

“Let me be the first to autograph it.”

Kelby’s mouth lifted in a half grin. “Sure, first up the rock, first to sign my cast, competitive to the bitter end.”

Tulah chuckled as she signed and read aloud. “Kelby Bankhead, Best in Free Fall Class.” Then she handed Angela the pen.

Angela read aloud as she wrote. “The last shall be first,” she looked up with a grin, “at least down the hill.”

“Two comediennes, just what I need.” Kelby looked at her cast and bandaged hand, still swollen from the cactus spines. Then she rolled her eyes. “I should’ve known something would happen today. It’s new moon.”



Easter Sunday dawned sunny and bright. As Tulah drove to church, Angela looked out at the hillsides of bluebonnets, their

hues seeming to blend into the Texas-blue skies. She rolled down her window to breathe in their subtle fragrance.

“They’re gorgeous.” Angela leaned out to get a better view of the blue fields.

“This is part of the Willow City Loop,” said Tulah, “thirteen scenic miles of blue, red, pink, white, and yellow flower-filled valleys and meadows. It’s one of the Hill Country’s prettiest springtime spots.”

“I believe it.”

“We got a good crop of bluebonnets this year despite the drought. Even though sprinkles like yesterday’s showers don’t do a thing to recharge the aquifer, they seem to be enough for the wildflowers to bloom.”

“What are those reddish-purple flowers?” Angela pointed to a patch near crushed granite.

“Those are wine cups,” said Tulah. “They’re native Texan. In fact, we’re picturing them on our newest label.”

Angela glanced at her with a smile. “Wine cups. Clever marketing, which reminds me. When do you want me to start at the winery?”

“The tourist season’s already heating up. The Wildflower & Wine Trail happens over the next three weekends.”

Angela squinted, trying to understand. “What do you mean ‘trail’?”

“They’re events where all the wineries participate in tastings. Tourists can sample the wine and enjoy the wildflowers all along the trail from Austin to Fredericksley.”

“So the ‘trail’ is basically Highway 290,” said Angela.

“For the most part,” Tulah grinned, “but small family wineries like ours also take part. Since we’re off the beaten path, it helps attract new customers.”

Angela nodded. “It makes good business sense. So it looks like tourist season’s already begun, and next Saturday’s my official first day on the job.”



They met the rest of the family outside the church. With Kelby hobbling on crutches, they slowly made their way up the steps and down the aisle. Just as they took their seats, the organ began playing the entrance hymn: *Rain Down*.

“How appropriate,” Kelby whispered.

After the opening prayer, the priest said, “Let us renew our baptismal promises.” The choir sang *Water of Life* as he and the deacon sprinkled the congregation with holy water.

The first reader addressed them from the lectern. “A reading from Isaiah 43:16-20. Thus says Yahweh, who made a way through the sea, a path in the raging waters . . .”

“Water again,” whispered Kelby.

“I am making a road in the desert and rivers in wastelands . . .”

Soon after, the priest stood up and smiled. “How fitting our first reading was about water and deserts. During this drought, water is on everyone’s mind.”

Kelby made a sour face.

“As Lent came to an end, some of us might have felt we’d stumbled through a spiritual desert. Easter may have seemed a heat mirage along our journey, always appearing just beyond the horizon. We started Lent intending to use its forty days to grow closer to God, to grow more self-disciplined. But instead, maybe we found ourselves straying, drifting, wondering what had happened to our noble intentions. Drudgery, not devotion.”

He paused as he looked at the congregation.

“Maybe this is why Lent lasts forty days. It gives us enough rope to hang ourselves. Forty days gives us time to reflect on our weaknesses. By Holy Thursday, we were parched, thirsting for living water.

“Not just during Lent, many times, we find ourselves starting out with high hopes, meaning to get it right this time. We end up

staggering instead of striding, dehydrated with a spiritual thirst, waiting for God to send 'rain' to continue our journey.

"Maybe you've seen a nature documentary, or seen arroyos, dry riverbeds, and dusty ground where plants and animals wither as they wait for rain. Suddenly, water that fell as rain many miles away gushes in a torrent, turning the dust to mud, then into a lush wetland where all life thrives.

"Maybe this was what Isaiah had in mind when he wrote 'water in the desert.' In ancient times, as now, parts of Israel have seasonal rainfalls that bring the desert to life. The desert's a good parallel to a Christian on a pilgrimage. We all rely on God's outpouring of blessings, especially when we're plagued by doubt and spiritual drought. We pray God will rain down the grace to continue.

"Like spring showers, Easter's the seasonal 'rain' for us, bringing us rivers in our spiritual desert after our Lenten journey. As the Israelites wandered through the desert on their way to the promised land, they relied on God to sustain them each morning. They longed for the time the deserts would be true oases of living water, when life would triumph over death.

"Easter, that glimmer at the end of the Lenten journey, is not a mirage. It's not an arroyo or intermittent stream. It's the river in the desert that sustains us throughout the year."



On the way home from church, they crossed a bridge over choked, bone-dry land. Angela stared at the rock piles and crushed granite below.

"Seems like an odd place to build a bridge."

Tulah glanced at her. "What do you mean?"

"There's no water."

"That's because it's an arroyo. You should see it when it rains. Water gushes through here fast enough to wash away a car. Then a day or two later, the swollen stream shrinks to a slow-moving

creek and then to a trickle. Tadpoles and minnows hatch in its shallow waters. After a week or two, it stops flowing. All that's left are evaporating pools of water."

"What about the tadpoles and minnows?" Angela watched her closely. "What happens to them?"

"The tadpoles sprout legs and hop away as frogs. Raccoons and birds eat most of the minnows—"

"Just like fishing in a barrel."

Tulah nodded. "But a few escape downstream and survive. Finally, the pools dry up, and the river becomes the dusty arroyo you see now."

Angela shook her head. "Seems like a short life cycle."

"It's enough to hatch a new generation of frogs and fish to spawn the next. In Texas, nature has to catch its opportunities when it can."

Angela knitted her brow as she scanned the dry landscape. "Without water, how does nature survive?"

"Good question." Tulah took a deep breath. "Every river, every lake, every drop of water in Texas is allocated. Until recently, nothing was reserved for wildlife."

"What's it used for?"

"Over half the water's used for irrigation. Municipal use accounts for a third of it. Ranching, mining, and manufacturing use the rest."

Angela narrowed her eyes. "You mean, no water's allocated for fish or wildlife?"

"Technically, the people of Texas own all surface water—streams and rivers." Tulah took her eyes from the road to glance at Angela. "Aquifers are another topic altogether. Texas gives out water permits, but until recently, not a drop of water was set aside for the environment."

"What?" Angela looked out the windshield at the miles and miles of dusty land. "How can fish and wildlife survive without water?"

“Texas started introducing environmental flow protection in 1985, but only on *new* permits. Most permits were issued—”

“Before then.” Angela finished the sentence for her.

“Exactly.” Tulah nodded. “Less than ten percent of all permits have been issued since 1985. Many river basins are over-allocated.”

“Meaning . . .?”

“Texas has issued rights to pump more water than exists.”

“So if the permit owners use all they’re legally allowed, some rivers and streams would run dry in a drought. Wow.” Angela took a deep breath, letting the idea settle in. “That is so sad.”

She thought of the internship paper she had to write. *Maybe I could write something about water for wildlife.*

Suddenly Angela felt the car swerve as her seatbelt tightened. “What happened?”

Pulling over, Tulah parked on the shoulder. “Just missed hitting a turtle. It must be looking for water.”

Angela glanced around as they stepped out of the car. “I haven’t seen any water in miles. Is there a spring around here?”

“Not that I know of. Am guessing instinct told this guy to head for the riverbed.” She surveyed the parched landscape and sniffed. “Which is dry as a bone.”

Angela picked him up and noticed the red stripes on his neck. “He’s a red-eared slider, a water turtle.”

“He won’t find any around here.”

Angela looked at her friend. “Is there a pond or creek nearby?”

Tulah scratched her head. “There’s a stream that runs near the cabin.”

“Is it nearby? Could we drive him there?”

Tulah looked at her watch. “Mom’s having the family over for Easter dinner.” Then she looked at the dusty turtle. “Sure, it’s only a couple minutes out of the way.”

As they started back to the car, a red convertible sailed past them. Both girls watched the clouds of dust billow behind it as it sped out of sight.

Angela held up the turtle. “Good thing we happened along when we did, or this guy would have been history.”

Tulah turned off the county road onto a caliche ranch road. Then she parked in front of a rustic log cabin with a built-on porch. Baskets of petunias hung from its rafters.

Angela noted the porch swing was gently rocking. “Who lives here?”

“This is one of the B&B cabins we own.” Tulah led the way along a crushed granite path, where red Turk’s Caps and purple Mexican Sage grew wild. “Good, it’s still flowing.”

Immense cypress trees, hundreds of years old, lined the stream’s banks. As Angela stared, she saw their beauty twice. Once as the aged sentinels standing guard, and a second time reflected in the narrow stream. Their feathery green fronds, lacy in the dappled light, simultaneously gave the image of timeless strength and ethereal vulnerability.

She noticed the wide rocky shores on either side of the stream and marveled. “Is this whole area ever under water?”

Tulah nodded. “When we’re not in a drought, this river’s filled from bank to bank.”

Slowly turning, Angela took in a panoramic view. “Even this small stream is lovely, but I wish I could see it in its full glory.”

Tulah gave a dry laugh. “If it ever rains, maybe you will.”

Angela walked onto the dry riverbed along the brook. Then she set the turtle on the sand and watched him run toward the water. “It was a short drive, but how far was it from where we picked him up?”

“A mile or two,” said Tulah, “but a long walk for his little legs.”

“And that’s if he knew which direction to take.” Angela smiled. “Thanks for taking the detour. It was probably the difference between life and death for this guy.”

Tulah raised an eyebrow as they started back to the car. “Could be.”

As they approached the cabin, Angela looked at its limestone chimney and tin roof. "You said your family owns this place?"

"Yeah, my parents installed electricity and converted it into a B&B a year or so ago. It's even got its own rainwater collection system." Tulah pointed toward the cistern.

"Is anyone renting it?"

Tulah stopped in her tracks and turned toward Angela. "Why?"

"It's adorable, but I don't see any car here." She shrugged. "Just wondered."

Tulah hesitated for a moment and then sighed. "It was booked for this weekend . . ."

"But . . ."

She grimaced. "The couple cancelled. In fact, they were the sixth cancellation we've had. People stay a night and then leave."

Angela's ears perked. "Do they say why?"

Tulah smiled sheepishly and then hunched her shoulders. "They say it's haunted."

"Really?" Angela looked at the gently rocking porch swing. "So then this cabin's available?"

"You might say that," Tulah chuckled, "since no one's ever stayed here more than a night."

Angela looked at the surrounding grounds. "Is this place very far from your house?"

"Five minutes away by car, two if you're walking."

"Really?"

"We took Hall Road, the back way here, but it's right next door to our house."

As they climbed in the car, Angela stared at the cabin, thinking. Then she nodded to herself. *It just might work.* Her thoughts trailed off.

"Have you?" Tulah's tone told her she had been daydreaming.

"Sorry, was just thinking about that cabin." Angela grimaced. "Have I what?"

"Ever had barbecue for Easter dinner?"

“Barbecue for Easter?” Crinkling her nose, Angela grinned. “Can’t say that I have.”

“Then you’re in for a treat. Wait till you taste my daddy’s brisket. It melts in your mouth.” She smiled as they turned into the driveway. “Hope you’re hungry.”

Angela watched through the sunroof as they passed beneath the rows of ancient live oaks lining the drive. Their branches reached across, touching each other, creating a green canopy overhead. Tulah found a place to park in the crowded cul-de-sac in front of the house.

“Looks like the family’s started arriving.”

They walked up the flagstone steps to the cedar-and-limestone entry that was part of the wide, wraparound porch. People sat in small groups on rattan chairs, chatting, drinking iced tea or lemonade.

Brooke waved from the side lawn. Cupping her hands, she called to them. “We’re finding Easter eggs. Want to help?”

They looked at each other. “No, that’s okay,” called Tulah. “We’ll let you have all the fun.” Then she whispered. “She loves this stuff.”

Angela watched Brooke help some of the younger children find their eggs. “She certainly seems to love kids.”

They made their way to the kitchen slowly, stopping every few feet for Tulah to introduce Angela.

“Oh, there you are,” said Tulah’s mother. “Can you two start carrying the food out to the table?”

“Sure.” Angela inhaled the steaming platters’ fragrance. “It all smells wonderful.” She picked up one of the tureens. “What’s this?”

“Fried black-eyed peas,” said Tulah, “crunchy on the outside, and creamy in the center. ‘Course Mom adds smoked paprika and brown sugar for a little zest.”

“Sounds delicious.” Suddenly, Angela realized she was famished.

They carried out baskets of freshly baked hot cross buns, tureens of fried black-eyed peas, smashed potatoes, fresh buttered

peas with caramelized pearl onions, and platters of deviled eggs that looked like Easter chicks with olive-slice eyes. They brought out the plates, silverware, napkins, and several pitchers of iced tea and lemonade. At a second table, they set out several bottles of their label's merlot.

Angela did a head count. Not including the children, she saw twenty-four people. "How large is your family?"

"Oh, this is just daddy's side." Tulah chuckled. "You should see when the whole family's here."

Tulah's father and uncle carried over deep pans of barbecued brisket. Then her father rang the triangle near the grill. "Come 'n' get it!" He waited for the group to gather, led them in a prayer, and said, "Dig in!"

Angela and Tulah brought their plates to the sunny side of the covered, wraparound porch. Comfortably shaded by the roof, they could look out at the irrigated vineyards.

"The vines look so healthy," said Angela, "yet we're in a drought."

"Like I said, half Texas's water goes for irrigation," said Tulah. "In this case, gray water, but without it, these vines would wither and die like the scrub grass you saw along the road."

Angela nodded thoughtfully as the talk again turned to water. "Maybe you can help me pick a topic for my internship paper."

"Sure, we were just talking about irrigation. What about the role water plays in agribusiness? Helping out at the winery would give you plenty of background material for your paper."

Angela's forehead creased as she thought it over. "That's true, but I can't stop thinking about that turtle and about something you said on the way home."

"What was that?"

"You mentioned over-allocation of surface water. You said the rivers could run dry in a drought, that practically no water's been set aside for wildlife." Angela looked at her. "What if I write a paper, not just about the water shortage in general, but specifically about the lack of water for wildlife?"

Tulah nodded. "Texas is blessed with all sorts of feathered, finned, and furry critters. It wouldn't hurt to increase public awareness."

"And something else." Angela studied her friend. "I can't stop thinking about that cabin. You said it's near here?"

Tulah pointed to the crushed granite path alongside the vineyard. "That's the same path you and I took to the stream. The cabin's just past that stand of live oaks."

Angela craned her neck and could just make out the hanging baskets on the front porch. "Instead of imposing on your family this summer, what if I stay in the cabin?"

"No, you're welcome to stay here. There's plenty of room."

"Appreciate that." She smiled. "But I don't want to be in the way. Staying in the cabin, I'd only be a stone's throw away, yet not underfoot."

"We wouldn't have invited you if we hadn't wanted you to stay."

Angela shook her head. "With Brooke pregnant and Kelby out of commission, your family has enough to deal with. You don't need a live-in guest, too."

Tulah nodded as she shrugged. "I can see your point, but that cabin's haun . . . might be haunted. Wouldn't you be afraid to stay there alone?"

Angela set down her fork and grinned. "Let's just say, the idea of ghosts doesn't scare me."

"You mentioned seeing the 'Guardian of the Rock.'" Tulah's eyes opened wide. "That wasn't mist or your imagination?"

Angela shook her head. "I've been given a gift." Then she smiled. "Look at it this way. With me staying in the cabin, I'll end any rumor that it's haunted, and your parents will be able to rent it out."

"They'd like that." Then she caught Angela's eye. "Like I said, it's a bed and breakfast. You're a two-minute walk away from all your meals."

"Which reminds me, you're right about your dad's brisket. This is wonderful." She took another bite. "Something tells me I'll need to watch my weight this summer."

Kelby stumped toward them on her crutches. Angela pulled out a chair for her as Tulah took her crutches and pulled up a second chair.

“Here, rest your leg on this.”

“No need to baby me.” Kelby made a sour face. “I’m going to have this cast on for the summer. Might as well get used to it.”

“Kelby . . .” Angela rolled the word on her tongue. “I’ve never heard that name before. Does it have a meaning?”

Kelby shared a grin with her sister. “It’s Gaelic for ‘place by the fountain or spring.’”

“I like that.” Angela nodded as she turned toward Tulah. “And your name’s unique, too. What does Tulah mean?”

“It’s short for Tallulah, as in Tallulah Bankhead.” She blushed. “I guess with the name Bankhead, my parents just couldn’t resist.”

“Are you related?”

Tulah shrugged. “Who knows? Supposedly, a distant cousin of our grandfather was her father, but it may just be a family story.”

“Does the name have a meaning?”

Tulah nodded. “It’s Choctaw for ‘leaping water.’”

Angela smiled as she glanced from Tulah to Kelby. “Leaping water, place by the fountain or spring, and your sister’s name is Brooke. Does water play any role in your parents’ lives?”