

A Chance Worth Taking

A Worth It Series Novel

By

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Chapter 1

Hadley Bruce white-knuckled the steering wheel so hard her fingers cramped. Walls of snow packed both sides of the rutted San Juan mountain trail, leaving little room for her rented Jeep. It was June, for heaven's sake, but apparently Mother Nature hadn't seen the calendar.

Hadley side eyed her cousin Sophie. "Remind me again why we're here."

Sophie sat up straighter in her seat. "Today we're checking out the Colorado ghost towns of Animas Forks. It's going to be –"

"Don't say fun."

"– fun."

Hadley sighed. She couldn't count the number of times Sophie had said that word in the past few weeks. All to coerce Hadley to join her for this trip. Work had been a convenient excuse until Hadley's boss had unexpectedly forced her to take a sabbatical. Sophie was convinced it was a sign.

Hadley didn't believe in signs, but Sophie had been relentless.

A black SUV crested the ridge above and barreled toward them.

"Scoot over," Sophie urged. "Traffic coming down the mountain always has the right of way."

“Scoot over where? There’s nowhere to go.” Hadley squeezed the Jeep as far to the right as she could. The passenger mirror scraped the snow as the other vehicle barely slowed to pass. “Where’s the fire, buddy?” she mumbled as she pulled back to the center of the trail. “Man, I hope that didn’t damage the mirror. We didn’t get the extra insurance.”

Sophie opened her window and leaned out to inspect it. “It’s fine. You worry too much.”

“Yeah, well, it’s my name on the rental agreement. Your Civic is safe and sound back at the hotel.”

As they climbed, the trail opened and the snow gave way to the beginnings of vegetation with even a few spring flowers here and there. Hadley had to admit that the high mountain vista with the white, fluffy clouds overhead was breathtaking.

They rounded a curve and a collection of historic buildings greeted them, all nicely preserved. The wooden structures looked as if they could have come straight out of an old western movie.

Sophie tapped Hadley’s arm. “Stop here. I think this is the place.”

Hadley sure hoped so. Sophie had promised they’d head back to Ouray for lunch if she could find the perfect picture for her upcoming post on her travel and adventure blog. Hadley shoved the gear shift into park then glanced at her watch.

“I saw that.” Sophie shot her a grin.

“Can’t help it. I’m starving,” Hadley grumbled. “If you hadn’t ticked off our waiter this morning, we’d at least have eaten a decent breakfast.”

“He was the jerk who messed up our order. Twice. And he was super rude.” She wrestled her camera out of the backseat. “Come help me find something to capture the ghost town feeling.”

Hadley removed her sunglasses. The stillness and quiet that surrounded them pressed on her. Except for the buildings, she could almost believe humans had never been here before. She hurried after Sophie. “What, exactly, are we looking for?”

Sophie shrugged. “I don’t know yet. Something special.”

Hadley surveyed the area then frowned at Sophie’s back. She should go sit in the Jeep for all the help she’d be. It all looked good enough for a nice photo, but what the heck did *something special* mean?

“How do you know we’re even at the best spot?”

Sophie turned to her with another wide smile. “I don’t. That’s why it’s an adventure.” She took the three stairs onto the porch then stepped into what, according to the plaque posted on the wooden pedestal, was once someone’s rustic home.

Hadley stood outside for another minute, still reluctant to get sucked into yet another of Sophie’s escapades. She’d avoided them since their senior year of high school when they’d almost been busted for trespassing. She couldn’t afford a blemish on her record then, and she sure as hell couldn’t afford it now.

“Suck it up, buttercup,” she whispered as she followed Sophie into the building. “This isn’t illegal. And the only thing standing between you and lunch is a single picture.”

Hadley found her cousin crouched on the floor, her camera angled to catch the rustic table edge and the window beyond. There wasn’t much else to see in the sparsely furnished room. It was preserved for tourists, but the few kitchen items on display were nailed down to discourage potential thieves. At least it was clean, and the brilliant sun slanting through the paned windows had warmed the building to a comfortable temperature.

Sophie groaned as she stood. “This isn’t working.”

“What did you expect? There’s not much here.” Hadley skimmed the dustless fireplace mantel with her fingertips. “They don’t call these places ghost towns for nothing.”

“You’re funny. Did you know that there are more ghost towns in Colorado than existing towns? But most are run down skeletons. Not very many have been kept up like this one. I want to capture the essence of what it would’ve been like to live here during the silver boom.”

Hadley shuddered at the thought but let Sophie return to her work. “You’ll get it. I’ll check out the upstairs for inspiration.”

The small second story was nothing more than a single, empty room with a window on each wall. The floors creaked as she walked, but when she stopped, silence filled the space. Certainly no inspiration here. If anything, it reminded her of her sparse childhood home and memories she’d just as soon forget.

Hadley watched her cousin stride toward one of the nearby outbuildings. She was everything Hadley used to wish she could be – beautiful, vivacious, daring. As a kid, the world had been Sophie’s playground. Hadley smiled as Sophie climbed over a short fence and slid around the side of the building.

Apparently, it still was.

They shared the same blond hair and Hadley’s eyes were a shade darker blue, but that’s where the similarities ended. Unlike Sophie, who was still figuring out what she wanted to be when she grew up, Hadley had planned obsessively for her future out of necessity. There was no safety net if she failed.

Hadley turned from the window but caught movement out of the corner of her eye in the trees to the east. A red rag waved from a tree branch, its color bright against the dark evergreen. She squinted. A shirt, maybe?

Curiosity propelled her down the stairs and out the door. She was almost to the outbuilding when Sophie pulled the camera from her face in surprise. “You look like a woman on a mission.”

“Thought I saw something. I’ll be right back.”

Sophie followed her. “Please tell me you did. Because so far, I haven’t found a darn thing to inspire me.”

As they approached the spot, Hadley huffed from the altitude and her heartbeat pounded in her ears. When she stepped around the large boulder, she almost forgot to breathe at all.

She saw the boots first. Worn leather with soles that had seen better days. They were on a man whose back was to them. He looked as though he was spooning the boulder sleeping, or maybe passed out drunk.

“Sir?” She shoved her hands in her jeans pockets as she approached.

“Is he okay?” Sophie grabbed Hadley’s arm in a death grip, her voice about an octave higher than usual.

Hadley poked the guy’s leg with the toe of her boot and Sophie screamed, causing them both to jump.

“Jesus, Sophie,” Hadley said, clutching her chest. She pointed to a nearby tree. “Go stand over there.”

After making sure Sophie had followed her instruction, Hadley swallowed hard and gathered enough courage to tug on the man’s shoulder. His left arm flopped from his side to the ground, the momentum turning his torso and head. Hadley sucked in a breath as she stared at his open, unseeing eyes.

“Oh, hell,” she whispered.

“What is it?” Sophie called.

Hadley turned a slow half-circle, stomach churning. “Soph. It’s the kid, the waiter. From the restaurant this morning. He’s dead.”

Sophie shook her head, eyes wide. “No way.”

“Come look.”

Sophie approached, the color draining from her face with every step. “We should leave. Now.” As if released from a sling shot she took off running toward their car.

“Wait, Sophie!”

Hadley managed to catch up with her as she shoved her camera into the Jeep’s back seat. “What are you doing?”

“What’s it look like? We’ve got to get out of here. A group of tourists could show up any second.”

“Slow down. Everything’s going to be okay, but we’ve got to think this through. We should call 911 before we do anything else.”

“Are you kidding me? Let someone else report it. Everyone in that restaurant this morning saw me arguing with him. We’re the reason he stormed out, remember? That’s called motive. What if people think I did it? I could go to prison for a crime I didn’t commit.”

Hadley shook her head as she maneuvered Sophie into the Jeep’s passenger seat. Her cousin sure hadn’t outgrown her flare for drama. Hadley waited until Sophie met her gaze. “That’s not motive. And you’re not going to jail.” She spoke with a calmness she didn’t feel. “We don’t even know that he was murdered. Maybe he got drunk and fell. Hit his head or something. The cops will investigate and figure out what happened.”

Hadley strode to her side of the Jeep, trying to capture a deep breath around the tightness in her chest. Whether he’d been murdered or not, she’d discovered a dead body. The young man’s

lifeless face filled her thoughts, and the soft breeze she'd enjoyed minutes ago turned cold and biting as the sun hid behind a cloud.

Her shaking fingers finally punched in the emergency number on her phone, but she couldn't get service. After another second to fortify herself, she grabbed the door handle and sank behind the wheel. She would do what she always did. Control the situation.

She straightened her shoulders and threw her phone into the change cup. "There's no signal up here. We're going to drive back to town and report what we saw."

"Maybe we could —"

"No way. We're not leaving that kid out here to get eaten by God knows what."

Sophie glowered at her. "I was going to say, make an anonymous tip."

"Oh. Well, we're not doing that either. Even if we could. They're never really anonymous, and that would only cast suspicion on us."

The bumpy, jerky ride out of the pass took much longer than Hadley had hoped, and by the time they pulled into the parking lot of the sheriff's office, her nerves were even more on edge. With a couple of calming breaths, she looked at Sophie. "You ready?"

"Do I have a choice?"

Hadley reached over and squeezed her hand. "There's nothing to worry about."

No one manned the front desk, nor did anyone appear when the bell jingled over the door. Hadley surveyed the reception area then leaned over the counter. "Hello?" she called.

A few moments later, a door in the short hallway opened and a woman in uniform rushed out, her cheeks flushed. "Can I help you?" she asked as she finger-combed her hair.

Hadley probably should have told her she missed the second button on her shirt in her haste, but that was the least of her worries. "Are you the sheriff?"

“I’m Deputy Wilson.”

“My name is Hadley Bruce and this is my cousin, Sophie Kingman. We’re here to make a report.”

A squat man emerged from the hallway and stood next to the deputy. “I’m Sheriff Callaway.” He offered Sophie a phony smile while his eyes drifted toward her chest. “What’s brought you girls in on this fine day?”

Hadley had spent the entire ride back to town thinking about what they would say, but it wasn’t as if there was a class on proper etiquette for this sort of thing. Short and to the point would work best. “There’s a dead body behind a big boulder near the Animas Forks ghost town.”

“What kind of dead body? Like an animal?”

Hadley’s eyes widened at his obtuse question. “No. Like a human.”

“You sure it wasn’t someone taking a nap?”

His condescension rankled Hadley. “Eyes glazed over? Not breathing? Yeah, we’re sure.”

He scowled then addressed Sophie. “How long ago did this happen?”

“We found him about ninety minutes ago,” she replied.

The sheriff turned to his deputy and jerked his head toward the door. “Head on up to Animas. See what you can see.”

The deputy’s stony glare hovered over the sheriff for a moment then she turned and marched out of the office.

Sheriff Callaway shifted his gaze from the deputy’s backside and returned his attention to them. “I know you all are tourists, but I have to ask. Any chance you recognized the body?”

Sophie choked on a sharp intake of breath, but Hadley spoke over her. “We aren’t sure, but he looked a little bit like the server at the Ouray Bed and Breakfast where we’re staying.”

“Hmmm. Okay, have a seat.” He motioned toward two hard plastic chairs. “You two can stay put right here until I hear back from Lucy. There’s coffee if you want it.”

Well, crap. Hadley had hoped to escape back to their hotel, but she didn’t want to ask for fear he’d refuse her request. Sophie was still anxious, and if they had to stay long, her imagination would run wild.

An hour and a half later, Sophie seemed to be in control, writing in the journal she’d pulled from her purse. But after two cups of bitter coffee on an empty stomach, Hadley was wired.

Sheriff Callaway had gotten the call from Deputy Wilson requesting the county coroner, but then their conversation had become hushed and Hadley strained to hear them. The sun was setting early over the mountain ridge to the west when Wilson finally returned and walked straight back to the sheriff’s office, barely sparing them a glance.

Sophie’s head popped up and followed the woman’s progress. “She doesn’t look happy.”

Hadley shoved her granola bar back into her purse. “Not our problem.”

The sheriff entered the reception area and motioned them to his office, his lips pinched. “A couple more questions, if you please.”

Hadley shrugged at Sophie. They’d done nothing wrong, and they had absolutely nothing to hide.

So why was she nervous?

The dated paneling in the office matched the reception area, but without any windows this room was stuffy and dark. She and Sophie took the offered seats and Hadley watched the silent interaction between the sheriff and his deputy, a pit forming in her stomach.

“The person you found today was Jose Morales. You said you knew him from the hotel, right?”

“We don’t *know* him,” Sophie said, with a sideways glance at Hadley. “He was our server a couple of times.”

Wilson put a hand on her hip. “What about the name Miguel Herrera? Ring a bell with you?”

Sophie shook her head, and with a silent sigh of relief, Hadley relaxed against the back of her chair. Maybe they could finally get out of there. “From around here? Nope. The only Miguel Herrera I’m familiar with is Miguel Herrera Holdings out of Denver.”

Tense silence filled the room as Callaway leaned forward, elbows on his desk. “You know Miguel Herrera Holdings?”

Hadley swallowed. She wished she could take back the words. “Strictly in a forensic sense.” *Oh, crap.* “Accounting. Forensic accounting. I work for a large firm and his companies are audited by us.”

“Is that so?” Wilson said.

It wasn’t the words as much as her tone that set Hadley’s teeth on edge. “Yes. They’re a public company that requires independent verification. Is that a problem?”

Sheriff Callaway’s eyes narrowed. “It just might be.”