

Fog of Dead Souls

Chapter 1

Ellie McKay walked into the Maverick Bar about 9:30. The sun had set hours earlier but the sky remained light to the west in the crisp September air. She'd been driving since mid-afternoon, and she was ready to get drunk.

She took a room at the Bide-a-While motel. It wasn't ambiance or even the price that drew her in, but the fact that the Maverick was just down the street. She hadn't seen a grocery store or a liquor store on her way into Farmington, and she didn't want to drive anymore. Besides, she was tired of being alone.

Some nights she tried restaurants—the kind with a cocktail lounge that will bring a double rye on the rocks a couple of times without looking askance. But tonight it was too late to eat, too late to be hungry. She had promised herself that she wouldn't get drunk in the bar. The blackouts were unpredictable and she wanted to choose what happened. She wanted to face the end, if it was coming her way, with her eyes wide open. She just wanted a good buzz, some way to really slow down so that she could sleep and not dream of Joel and the hotel room, enough to feel all right again and to feel loose enough to ask for a bottle that would carry her through the night with maybe enough left over to start the next day.

When you've got one bag, it doesn't take long to unload the car and she never unpacked now, just showered off the road and put on clean underwear and walked on down to the tavern. There'd been rain earlier in the day and the neon flashed in the puddles that remained: Coors Light, Coors Light, Coors Light. There were only a half dozen pickups parked in front of the Maverick, and she noted that with relief. Bars were easier if they weren't too crowded. Men got rowdy in crowds and they got mean.

She pushed the door open and walked right to the bar. It's always straight ahead in a country tavern and she knew if she made a beeline for it, there'd be no need to make eye contact or suffer the reactions of the patrons to the newcomer. She felt more invisible that way.

The bartender, a young brawny redhead in overalls and a red denim shirt with pearl snaps, put a napkin down in front of her right away. "What'll it be, miss?"

She smiled. She liked kind bartenders who'd pretend she was still young. "Double Maker's Mark," she said. "Go easy on the ice."

"You got it," he said and the drink too was before her in no time.

She let it sit a minute though the craving was strong. She'd thought in Santa Fe that she might stop again or at least slow down.

The bartender noticed her hesitation. "Something wrong, ma'am?"

She saw the worry that played at the corners of his eyes, so she pushed away her resolution. She needed him on her side. She laughed and said, "Just giving thanks to the bourbon makers of America. My way of saying grace."

The redhead chuckled at that and moved away.

She took a sip, then another. Alone, she'd have drunk it down, trying to get to that place of no fear. Instead she decided to pace herself, watched the digital clock next to the cash register. But after five minutes, the drink was gone, and the bartender—she decided his name was Billy—looked over at her from the beer tap and she nodded and he fixed the next one.

The Maverick had a big mirror behind the bar. She liked that because she could watch the action without having to be part of it. There were four booths over to one side of the front wall and three of them

held couples. Two of those couples were kids. Boys barely old enough to shave, let alone drink. Cheerleader girlfriends. When did the world get so young? In the third booth, the couple seemed different though they were necking and laughing too. When they disentangled themselves, she saw that they were both grey-haired and thick in the middle. Somehow that made her feel better.

The older woman, she decided to call her Maudie, got up and disappeared in the back, while her boyfriend, Roy—why not Roy—went to the jukebox. There'd been two honky-tonk tunes in a row, but now George Strait's croon came on. "I still feel 25, most of the time..." When Maudie came back out, Roy whirled her around the floor a few times before they sat down and went back to nuzzling each other. Billy took them a fresh pitcher.

By now, her second bourbon was pretty well gone. Here came the hard part. Had she schmoozed enough with Billy Bartender to get him to sell her a bottle? She didn't like to drink more than two in the bar. She could get back to her room without a problem on two drinks. If she ordered a third, she'd be making a different kind of decision.

She glanced into the mirror. She still looked like herself. Dark straight hair, dark eyes and brows, skin surprisingly smooth for her age. The extra pounds, she'd lost count after 30, were still there but she didn't look half-bad, she thought. She'd never been a classic beauty—jaw too square, nose a bit too wide, a smile she'd never been fond of. But she was still shapely and she knew men still looked at her legs.

She stared a moment into her own eyes. She wanted another drink, a third or fourth and if she drank them, she'd be able to yuck it up with Billy and maybe some guy and get that bottle and go home, alone or not, she didn't care. And if it turned out to be him, whoever he was, then it did. And there'd be some relief in that. She was tired of running.

The woman in the mirror nodded at her, and Ellie nodded back. She looked down the bar. A couple of truckers sat to her left, wearing the road like a badge of honor. One winked in her direction. She smiled back. Then she turned and looked to the right. A cowboy with a gray beard was nursing a beer and a shot. He too smiled at her. But nothing sparked and she decided to try her luck with Billy to get the bottle and go. The young man was busy unloading a tray of clean glasses, so she waited for him to get finished and look my way.

It was then that Al slid onto the stool next to her.

She saw him in the mirror first. He was tall, so tall that his head and shoulders showed well above the row of bottles that lined the shelf behind the bar. She was tall herself but she had never been drawn to the tall ones, preferring men her own size. But this guy had a mane of thick silver hair that fell down over a weather-lined brow. Similar lines crinkled his eyes and creased the corners of his wide, handsome mouth.

The man grinned at her as he took off his black hat and laid it on the bar and to her surprise, something in her went soft and felt safe for the first time in all these months.

"What'll it be, Al?" Billy asked, coming down the bar.

"Coffee," he said. "Big coffee." And he grinned at her again.

Billy poured a big glass beer mug of coffee from the hot plate next to the maraschino cherries and lime slices. She could smell that it was long past fresh. He set the mug down in front of Al along with a carton of half-and-half.

When Al had finished turning the black stuff white, he turned to her. "Where you from?"

"Not here," she said, although she heard her words come out kind of snippy and she hadn't meant them to. She felt flustered all of a sudden, so she drained the ice melt from the glass. Billy tried to catch her eye to see if she wanted another but she avoided his eyes. Truth was she was waiting to see what Al

would say next. But he said nothing. Just put his elbows on the bar and sipped at his coffee. Maybe it's my turn, she thought. She looked up at Billy and asked for a glass of water.

At that, Al looked over at her and at the empty glass on the bar. "My name's Al," he said. "I own a ranch about 15 miles out of town. I do pretty well, considering that bush-whacking G.W. in the White House. I'm 64, my hair and teeth are my own, haven't ever had a major illness and don't plan to have any."

She didn't know what to make of these revelations. She took a big drink of the water in front of her and thought about that third drink.

"Well," she said, finally, when she realized he was waiting for her to speak. "My name's Ellie. I'm 60, and I've been a teacher most of my life. I too have my own hair and teeth. I have also had two major illnesses that are none of your business."

Billy had his back turned to them and was wiping between the bottles but Ellie could see his shoulders shaking with laughter.

Al didn't say anything in response, just nodded solemnly. Then he signaled Billy for a refill and the smell of overcooked Folgers wafted towards her again.

He took his time with the coffee, pouring dollops of cream into it and stirring them in. All Ellie could imagine was that there was an exact shade of brown he was looking for. Then he asked her if she wanted another drink. She thought about it for a moment, then lied and said no, and Al nodded to Billy, who brought her a cup of the coffee. She poured in a little cream but she knew it would make her sick so she left it sitting there on the bar, moving the cup around a little to be polite. And she held on to the whiskey glass as if it were a life preserver.

"It's nice, isn't it," he said after a while, "just sitting here together like this."

Again that feeling of being safe and soft came over her, and Ellie felt her shoulders relax, really relax, and she looked at the aging cowboy sitting next to her. "Yes, yes it is," she said and smiled at him.

They were quiet another few minutes. Then Al drank down the last bit of his coffee and he turned to her and put his hand ever so gently on her forearm, which lay on the edge of the bar. "Ellie, have you ever wanted to be a rancher's wife?" His eyes were serious, dead serious.

She managed a smile. "I've never thought about it." She paused. "Say, does Jesus enter into this somehow?"

He frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I mean I need to tell you that I am not religious. No way, no how. I'm not cut out for Sunday School and prayer meetings and being the good little woman at home. I'm more the hell and damnation type, if you know what I mean."

He leaned towards her and she caught a whiff of Old Spice. "Do you have to do it alone?" he said.

"Do what?"

"Raise hell. Can someone else come along? Be there to pick up the pieces? Bring you back home to yourself?" Then he smiled at her with that wide, handsome mouth and she couldn't help herself, she went weak in the knees.

"Sure, I guess," she said to Al. "Why not?" And Ellie pushed the coffee away, held up the whiskey glass, and nodded at Billy, who brought over the bottle.