

*An Excerpt from Falcon's Bend Case Files Vol I*  
by Karen Wiesner & Chris Spindler

*"Soon as she was gone from me  
A traveller came by  
Silently invisibly  
[He took her with a sigh]"*  
~William Blake

*"I touched a broken girl and knew that marble bled."*  
~"Oak and Olive" by James Elroy Flecker

## Chapter One

"I'M SURPRISED THERE is a motel in a stupid town this small."

Keith Pierce looked at his daughter. She'd pulled off her jacket and was sitting on the edge of the bed looking around the cheap motel in disgust. As if any of the foster homes she'd been in most of her sixteen-year life had been much better. But Keith knew that look. She wasn't thinking about their accommodations for the night. Something else was worrying her. He'd known her for all of two months, and he surprised himself with this revelation.

Quinn had the face of an angel... and the tongue of a viper. She'd spent many years of her life searching for him when the system hadn't been able to locate him and so had given up. She'd found a listing of Keith Pierces around the country and called every one of them. Keith would never forget that call, nor opening his door in the dead of the night to find her there claiming she was his daughter. If she hadn't said the words she had in explanation, he would have assumed she was insane.

After so many years of being passed from hand to hand, Quinn had become jaded and untrusting—traits that frequently translated into impatience, discontent, and resentment. The glimpses Keith saw of her vulnerability had been the only things that kept him from sending her back to the foster home she'd run away from to find him... at least he told himself that.

"What's up, kid?" he asked quietly, stopping with his boot half off to face her once more.

She'd dyed her long straight hair a strange combination of strawberry and white, but it suited her almost as much as her evasive expression did. Keith watched her lie on her stomach across the other bed nearest the door. "When will we get there tomorrow?"

"Early. It's only an hour from here." They'd stopped for the night when she'd complained his motorcycle was unbearably uncomfortable. He wondered now if she'd wanted to stop for more reason than that. Their decision to come had been spur of the moment earlier this afternoon. He'd called his boss, ready to lose his job if need be, but was surprised when he'd been granted an indefinite leave of absence; and he'd called his cousin Jen to tell her to expect them soon.

"So you grew up in Falcon's Bend?" Quinn asked like she couldn't care less.

Keith shook his head. "Not exactly." He finished removing his boots. When he glanced at her again, she'd pulled a cigarette out of the pack in his leather jacket. He'd smoked since he was twelve years old—what right did he have to forbid her?

"I've got relatives in Falcon's Bend, so I spent a lot of time there. We were close." He leaned forward and plucked the cigarette out of her mouth just before she lit it. She'd gotten used to him doing it, and she didn't waste a glare on him now.

"What relatives?"

"A cousin. Jennifer. And her brother. Scott moved to Seattle though. Jen's quite a bit younger than me. She's only twenty-five. She was born when Scott and I were thirteen. She started tagging along with us when she was just a toddler, and we didn't mind most of the time," he told her, tossing the cigarette on the shabby nightstand. He wasn't even sure why he kept the smokes in his jacket anymore. He'd all but quit since he'd gotten temporary custody of Quinn.

"And my mom told you she grew up in Falcon's Bend during your one-night stand?"

Keith frowned and she looked away. She'd asked him a million questions the first night she'd arrived and every day since, yet this one area made them both uncomfortable for some reason. He'd told her the truth—a truth he'd never been ashamed of, and wasn't exactly now.

“It was four nights,” he corrected. As she well knew. He’d met Kat—Katerina Fulton—his first day at an annual concert event that took place in mid-July in west-central Wisconsin. That night, she’d been in the tent he’d been camped out in. Everything between them had happened fast. Maybe too fast, but he’d never regretted his first and only encounter with something bordering on love. “And, yeah, she told me she grew up in Falcon’s Bend.”

“And you never met her when you were hanging out with your cousins in Falcon’s Bend?”

Keith shook his head. Falcon’s Bend was a small town, but it had over 8000 citizens.

“You think she’ll be there, Keith?” Quinn asked, and Keith saw the core of her fears in her dark eyes. She had Kat’s eyes. For just that reason, Keith couldn’t have turned her away when she’d landed unceremoniously on his doorstep claiming he was her father and she was his long-lost daughter.

Keith had never known Kat was pregnant. She’d disappeared the last day of the event, and he hadn’t been surprised by her abrupt departure. Based on what was known, Kat had given birth to Quinn eight months later. Despite coming early, Quinn had been strong and healthy. And Kat had abandoned her newborn daughter inside a church in New York City with a short note that told her daughter’s name, Keith’s full name and paternity, and her own first name. A lock of hair that had proved to belong to Kat had been attached to the note. None of that made sense.

Quinn was worried her mother had abandoned her because she hadn’t wanted her, and here the two of them were, determined to find her and figure out exactly what’d happened all those years ago. Before Keith accepted permanent custody of his daughter, he wanted to talk to Kat. He wanted to know the truth. Almost seventeen years ago, she’d told him she was going home to her brother in Falcon’s Bend, Wisconsin, a place Keith well knew. What had happened after that point?

“I don’t know, kid. I hope so, but I can’t make you any promises.”

She didn’t move away from him when he mussed up her hair consolingly. He didn’t know her well enough to hug her—he wasn’t even sure she’d let him. But he knew something had shifted in her when he’d gone out of his way to straighten out the situation with her foster parents. He’d established beyond a shadow of a

doubt that she was his daughter. His efforts had meant something to him.

She'd changed him, too, in ways he could never have imagined before her appearance. He'd spent a selfish life, living for the moment and for his own gratification. He'd lived without regrets. Going on as the careless rogue had suddenly seemed wrong to him. He had a daughter. He had a responsibility to more than his own hide.

Quinn smiled at him, that playful grin that made him think of Kat until his heart felt enchained by it. "I still can't believe you let me cut your hair."

Keith chuckled. "I can't believe I did either."

His long hair had been his pride and joy most of his life. Quinn had insisted long hair on men was long gone. Her lecturing and begging had finally prevailed. He'd let her cut his hair last night. His whole head felt different.

"Now all we have to do is get rid of that scruffy beard."

"Scruffy? I'll have you know women have swooned over this face."

"Imagine what they'd do if they could actually see it,"

Quinn said, her voice like silk. "Do you have a razor?"

"Never touch the evil things."

"We'll get some tomorrow. I'll give you a proper shave."

"Let you put a razor to my neck?"

Quinn rolled her eyes. "If I wanted you dead, I would have bumped you off the night you let me in."

He thought about asking her why she hadn't but instead pulled his shirt over his head. She aimed the remote at the TV, quickly found a music channel, and punched the volume up. A minute later, though, she asked, "So what's your cousin Jennifer like? Is she married?"

"Yeah. She married Warren Jensen—they started dating when they were fourteen. We knew they'd get married right out of high school, and they did. They—and Scott—were my best friends. I went to Falcon's Bend every chance I got." He'd grown up less than ten miles from Falcon's Bend in another dinky town in west-central Wisconsin.

"What do they do?"

"She owns a garage. She's a hell of a mechanic. I bet she'd give you a job for the summer. Keep you out of trouble." Keith

had warned his boss he might be gone most of the summer. He had a good feeling it'd take at least that long to find out what'd happened to Katerina seventeen years ago.

"I guess it'll be something to do in a boring town. What about her husband?"

"Warren's a cop for the local police department."

"Geez, Keith, you're gonna have me in a detention center in no time!" She groaned.

Her life of crime had already been well established. Part of the reason she'd been passed around so often was her penchant for finding trouble and following it home.

"Keep outta trouble, kid, and maybe we can find a way to stay together."

She glanced at him, a sober look on her face before she turned back to the fuzzy television screen. He'd been just as wild as she was as a teenager. She'd have to learn her lessons the hard way, the way he always had. Ironically, she was the one who'd taught him that lesson. What goes around comes around, one way or another. And once accountability showed up at your door, there was no way to duck out the back way. It was there to stay.

## Chapter Two

SHE TRUSTED HER instincts. Her entire life had been based on following what felt right to her. Tonight was no exception. When she'd seen the motorcycle parked in front of the rundown motel, her gut had told her it was a good place to stop for the night. She'd been on the road since four a.m. She was beat.

After setting her black helmet on the nightstand, she threw her duffel bag containing everything she owned on the bed. She stopped long enough to count her money. Her gut instinct didn't agree now about stopping there—she was down to less than five bucks, which would be just enough to put some gas in her motorcycle to get to Falcon's Bend in the morning. Breakfast would be whatever she could scrounge. If nothing, she'd go hungry. But that was the story of her life. A person who trusted the call of the wind either lived like a peasant or a king—never anything in between.

From next door, she could hear the TV and wondered to herself if the occupants were deaf or the walls were paper-thin. After kicking off her boots, she stripped down to a short tank top and panties before collapsing on the bed. Impossibly, the bed smelled worse than she did, but she was too tired to care. The music next door was too loud for her to feel any peace that might allow her to drop off to sleep. She tried covering her head with the pillow, willing the noise to disappear, but it didn't. If she didn't ask them to turn it down, she'd never get any sleep.

Dragging herself from the bed, she didn't bother detouring for anything. She banged on the door on the left side of hers. She'd be lucky if she could be heard over the blaring music.

She was about to bang again two seconds later when the door opened a crack, then wider. An extremely tall guy about her

age stood in only not-tight, not-loose jeans that rode his slender hips like they'd been designed especially for him.

He didn't bother hiding his gaze, which moved over her face, down every inch of her nearly nude body, and then back up to her face. He had the nerve to grin when he'd finished his thorough inventory. Much as she would have liked to deny it herself, she liked not only the looks of him, but the way he looked at her.

She glared at him. "I'd be willin' to bet you're disturbin' the peace, honey. Mind turnin' it down, or preferably *off*? The walls are paper-thin. I could hear you breathin' if the music wasn't so loud."

Her words were as futile as a whisper. His deep blue eyes were all over her again, lingering on the swell of her breasts, her tight stomach, and her legs. Yet he managed in a drawl, "Anything you say, sugar." His gaze returned to hers just before he turned and told the kid on the bed nearest the door to turn it down. The girl glanced back at them. She had the same face shape and mouth as this guy. They had to be related. The girl's gaze made the same trip her old man's did over her, then she did as she was told with a mumbled apology. The world was thankfully plunged into blissful silence.

The guy turned back to her, and his grin was in place. "What can I say? I'd love to hear you breathe," he said, as though he'd obeyed her request for just this reason.

If she wasn't so tired, she'd give him points for originality. She stepped closer to him, taking several huge breaths and letting them out with a flourish. "What can I say?" she murmured when she backed off. "I'd hate to keep you from sleep tonight, honey."

She started back to her room without further ado, but his voice called her back. He'd stepped out of his room. "Hey, you didn't tell me your name, sugar. I won't be able to sleep if I don't know."

For a minute, she looked him over the way he'd looked her over. There was nothing not to like. "My friends call me Cyn," she told him softly. "And I'll sleep just fine not knowin' your name."

She heard his soft chuckle before she slipped inside her room and closed the door.

## Chapter Three

“WOW, LOOK AT this place,” Quinn said as she got off the back of the motorcycle. They’d gotten up early, and Keith had caught himself a half second before he’d knocked on the door of their luscious neighbor of last night, planning to invite her to breakfast. But she’d looked both gorgeous as sin and drop-dead tired. He’d decided in a split second that he had to let that go, restless dreams about her the night before aside. He and Quinn were looking for her mother. He didn’t have time for more than that. With Quinn in his life, he couldn’t have pursued anything transitory anyway.

Quinn’s legs were weak after only an hour on the bike, and she swayed a little after removing her helmet. Keith steadied her before looking around with her at the farmhouse where his cousin Jennifer and her husband lived. Jen loved animals. They had horses in the barn, dogs and cats running around everywhere, and a profusion of all kinds of birds chirping contentedly in the morning sunshine.

He knew Jen and Warren were trying to have kids, but he wondered how they’d have time for each other, two full-time jobs, animals, and a baby. But he thought about them having kids together, and that just seemed to fit. They’d work it out. Fairytale lives always worked out one way or another.

“You ever ride?” Keith asked, pointing to the barn.

“A horse? No. They really have horses?”

Despite herself, Quinn was enchanted with the place. Keith could see it in her awed expression as she looked around without hurry. The property was set on forty lush acres of forest land, complete with the barn and an oversized farmhouse that’d been updated and modernized during Jen and Warren’s eight year marriage.

“This is a place where you can hear yourself think, kid. No traffic. No police sirens. Just crickets and screech owls at night. Think you’re gonna go stir-crazy for the summer?”

For an instant, Keith caught her smiling slightly, as though she liked the thought of all those things compared to her own culture norms while growing up in various parts of New York and then living with him in Chicago for the past two months.

“This isn’t so bad,” she offered, looking at him honestly for a rare moment.

Keith let himself put an arm around her shoulder, preparing himself for her rejection, but she allowed the half-nelson hug he gave her. She even smiled up at him. “Let me guess—they don’t lock their doors ever?”

“Nope. That’s Falcon’s Bend, kid. And if I know Jen, she’s already got our rooms made up. It won’t take us long to unpack. You wanna go meet Jen after we’re done?”

The soft expression on her face surprised him. She looked away from him, moving toward the saddle bags, but he had a feeling she had tears in her eyes. The thought of that did a pretty good job of choking him up, too.

## Chapter Four

KEITH GRINNED LIKE he always did when he saw the sign on the brick building—Jen Jensen’s Auto Shop. She’d started the garage right after she and Warren were married.

Quinn glanced at him with an eyebrow raised. “Jen Jensen? I think I would’ve kept Pierce. Does she look like you? Tall, big?”

She was nervous about meeting what would qualify as a second flesh-and-blood relative, Keith realized. He couldn’t help grinning at her as he put an arm around her shoulders. “She’s as tiny as a doll, but as strong as a construction worker. She’ll love yah, kid. She’s like that.”

Quinn’s expression took on her usual uncaring, too cool one.

The garage was noisy and filled with all the nostalgic smells Keith remembered of his childhood. Scott and Jen’s old man had worked at a garage, and he and Scott—Jen never far behind—had hung out there a lot. Jen had picked up on mechanical stuff early on. By the age of seven, she could take apart a carburetor and put it back together in under ten minutes. Keith had spent most of his teenager years and his twenties working in a variety of jobs that included repairs before he’d settled at the computer repair shop in Chicago.

In the past two months, he’d discovered that Quinn had the Pierce family aptitude for mechanics as well. Though her expertise was in cars, she’d picked up computer repair just as quickly.

Keith saw Jen sending a car up on a hydraulic lift. He moved up behind her and grabbed her gently around the neck. She gave a cry of alarm and turned around with a scolding grin on her face. After she hit him and told him he was dangerous, she hugged him like she hadn’t seen him in years.

At barely five foot six, Jen was slim with dark hair caught up in a messy ponytail, complete with the usual grease streaked at various angles over her trademark squarish, Pierce-shaped face. As Keith had told Quinn, she looked utterly delicate, but her biceps were as honed as Keith's.

Quinn had her arms crossed over her chest, glancing around the shop like she was bored completely out of her skull.

"Oh God, Keith, look at her," Jen murmured. "She's got that stubborn Pierce jaw. I'd know she was yours in a heartbeat. I still can't believe you of all people have a daughter."

Quinn stared at Jen now, and she didn't seem too happy about being spoken of like she wasn't there.

"Listen to me. I'm completely starstruck. I'm so thrilled to meet you, Quinn, I'm going to sound like a babbling idiot. I'm Jen."

Nodding, Quinn awkwardly stuck out her hand.

Jen laughed out loud. "None of that!" In another second, Jen had caught Quinn up in her arms and hugged her. Quinn's expression over her shoulder was completely stunned. Keith grinned at her, and she relaxed slightly.

When Jen pulled back, she asked, "You guys went to the house and let yourselves in? Made yourselves at home?"

"You got a great house," Quinn murmured, coming to stand next to Keith, a lot closer than he expected her to.

"Isn't it! It belonged to Warren's grandpa, so we got it for a steal. I'll introduce you to Samson and Delilah tonight."

"Horses," Keith clarified.

"Oh. I've never ridden before."

"Samson is gentle. He'll give you a smooth ride. Warren can't wait to meet you, too, Quinn." With another soft cry of excitement, Jen hugged Quinn again. This time, Quinn looked slightly amused by her second cousin's enthusiasm.

"Keith tells me you've got the Pierce mechanical skills, babe," Jen said to Quinn. "Wanna show me what you can do?"

"What's wrong with this one?" Quinn asked of the car up on the lift.

Once Jen explained, Quinn removed her jacket and went right to work. Keith drew Jen aside. "I know you don't know everybody in town, Jen, but remember when I told you guys about Kat Fulton after I met her in 1979?"

“The only Fulton I know is Rick Fulton, but I don’t know him well. Warren has some friends who go hunting with Rick up north. I don’t remembering him ever saying he had any relatives named Katerina.”

“What about Cynthia?”

Jen shook her head. Kat had told him her closest relative was her sister Cynthia. The two girls had been in an orphanage together before they were both adopted by the Fultons at the age of five.

“I can’t believe you took an indefinite leave of absence like this, Keith. You have a daughter now. Can you afford this?”

Keith glanced at Quinn working with her full concentration. “I have to find Kat. I’m not the only one who wants to know why she dropped our daughter at a church. If her intention was to bail, why did she leave a note and her hair? It almost seems like she wanted Quinn to find me. She wanted me to know Quinn was our daughter. None of it makes sense.”

“You want to know why she left you without saying even goodbye seventeen years ago,” Jen said softly.

Keith couldn’t ignore the shaky exhale that rose in his chest. Yeah, though he had some idea why Kat had done it, he’d never gotten over the fact. What they’d shared... Hell, it should have been no different than any other sexual encounter—no thoughts, no recriminations, no desire for it to last beyond what it was. But he’d wanted it to last with Kat. She’d been different. Anyone who knew Kat Fulton would understand why it was different. From the minute he’d laid eyes on her, she’d intrigued him. She’d enchanted him with her zest for life. Her unbelievable trust and vulnerability should have left her wide open to attack all her life, yet she hadn’t been jagged or hard. She’d been soft and sweet. He’d fallen for her in five minutes flat.

“Keith, what if she didn’t want Quinn? What if she didn’t want what the two of you shared to go beyond what it was? Do you really want to know that? Do you think Quinn needs to know those things?”

Jen had several good points, but Keith had been over it all before in his mind. He and Quinn had talked about everything Jen brought up. They both wanted the truth, even if it hurt. It was better than not knowing.

“Is there another reason you’re doing this?”

Keith glanced toward Quinn again. She was looking at them, but turned away quickly when his gaze reached her. "I have a daughter," he said in the same wonder he'd felt when he'd forced himself to face the fact that it was more than possible that Kat could have gotten pregnant. They'd made love so many times in four days. Quite a few of those times had been spur of the moment. Birth control had been as far from both of their minds as aliens taking over the earth. When he'd run out of condoms the second day, she'd told him what he'd known deep down was a lie—that she was on the pill. She'd been careless, too. Neither of them wanted it to end, regardless of the consequences. He'd spent almost seventeen years wondering if anything had come of their recklessness, but, conscienceless rogue that he was, he'd never tried to find out. Partly, he'd been unwilling to admit to himself how much it'd hurt him when she'd disappeared the last day of the event without so much as a "Been fun. See yah around, or not."

Keith glanced back at his cousin, seeing her worried expression. "I have a daughter, Jen—one who went out of her way to find me. One who's been passed around from foster home to foster home like a dog in a kennel. I should have gone out of my way to find Kat long ago to see if she was pregnant. If I had, maybe Quinn wouldn't have had to go through everything she has. I owe it to her. I don't wanna disappoint her now that she found me. I can't imagine why she'd wanna stay with me."

Jen hugged him, saying softly, "You've made mistakes, but you'll be a good father to her now. I think she knows that. She knows you won't abandon her."

Even if it was just for closure, he and Quinn needed to know what happened to Kat. And he was going to find out.

## Chapter Five

THE FALCON'S BEND Police Department was just off Main Street. Keith found it didn't look any different than it had when he was a kid. He'd never been inside, nor had he ever wanted to be. Today he was entering by choice. Quinn had stayed back at the garage with Jen.

The front doors led to a waiting room with picture frames on all the walls and pamphlets on the table. The receptionist's desk was behind glass—empty at the moment. Keith felt his patience leave him a few minutes later when no one had appeared and he couldn't find a bell to ring.

There was a door that said PLEASE SPEAK TO THE RECEPTIONIST. Frustrated, Keith walked up to the receptionist's desk and squatted down to the little opening that would allow someone to pass something through. "Hey, anybody back there?"

Less than a minute later, a red-haired guy with freckled muscular arms appeared with a Styrofoam cup. He wasn't dressed as a cop.

"Sorry, our receptionist got sick this morning. How can I help you?"

"I'm looking for Warren Jensen."

"He's out on patrol. Any specific reason you're looking for him?"

Keith straightened, sighing. "Warren's my sister's husband. I was hoping he could help me find someone who grew up here."

"Why don't you come on back?"

*Now we're getting somewhere*, Keith thought. The red-haired guy was waiting for him when he went through the door. He held out his hand. "I'm Detective Pete Shasta, investigator."

"Keith Pierce."

"Feel like some coffee?"

Keith grinned. The smell of burnt coffee pervading the area was an immediate turn-off. "I think I'll pass, but thanks anyway."

"You're better off," the detective told him, and Keith chuckled. "Why don't you come in my office, and we'll see what we can find out."

Keith followed him into a tiny corner office. There was barely room for the chair the investigator indicated Keith should sit in. "Thanks for seeing me, Detective."

"Call me Pete. What can I do for you?" Pete took a seat behind the paper-littered desk.

"It's a long story, actually, which was kind of why I was hoping Warren could help since he knows the whole story. But maybe you'd have a better chance of helping me."

"Let's give it a shot."

"All right. About two months ago, a teenager knocked on my door. She claimed she was my sixteen-year-old daughter. Turns out, she is. Her mother was a woman I had a brief affair with during a concert event when I was twenty-one. Katerina Fulton was her name. She told me she grew up in Falcon's Bend. She and her sister Cynthia were adopted by a couple when they were five. Kat mentioned she was going to call her brother Rick, who lived in Falcon's Bend, to ask him to help her out of the bind she was in. When I woke up the last day of the event, Kat was gone. I'm looking for her now, and this seemed the likely place to start. Like I told you, I also have relatives in Falcon's Bend, but Warren and Jen don't know Kat. She's not listed in your phone book. Neither is her brother."

"You said Katerina was in trouble when you met her. In what way?"

Keith was reluctant to go into too much detail, but he had a feeling he'd have to disclose the truth sooner or later. Maybe they'd find Kat faster if he got it out of the way from the start. "The first night I met Kat, she told me she was on the run. She'd borrowed quite a bit of money from a loan shark, not to mention embezzling from her employer in Chippewa Falls. She actually got into the event by lifting a ticket off someone."

"She told you all this?" Pete asked like he couldn't fathom a woman up to her eyeballs in trouble being so honest with a total stranger about her situation.

“It was hard for me to believe any of it. She was too damn nice a girl to imagine her getting herself so far into trouble she couldn’t do anything but run.”

Pete didn’t seem quite so sure, but he waved it away. “All right, did she tell you anything else about her situation?”

“She told me pretty much everything. The morning of the last day of the event, I woke up and she was gone. I figured her brother showed up sometime in the night, and she went with him. Her brother’s name is Rick.”

“Rick Fulton?”

Keith nodded. “So now I know Kat must’ve gotten pregnant back then. Quinn was found in a church as a newborn with a note that told her name, my full name, and Kat’s first name identifying herself as the mother. Attached to the note was a plastic bag that held a lock of hair. Quinn has kept it all these years. I can only guess Kat wanted someone to find me so I’d know I had a daughter and I’d know who gave me my daughter.”

“Apparently that didn’t happen,” Pete said.

“Apparently it didn’t. Quinn did an Internet search for men around my age with the name ‘Keith Pierce’ and found a couple dozen possibilities. She called every one of ’em. When she called me, she asked if I’d ever known anyone named Katerina Fulton. Less than a week later, Quinn was knocking at my door.”

“Your paternity was proved, I’m guessing.”

“Yeah. She’s mine.”

“And you’re sure the mother was this woman you met seventeen years ago?”

“There’s no doubt about it. I have no idea how to go about finding her now.”

Pete leaned back slightly on his chair. Keith could see he was evaluating his words carefully before he asked, “Are you sure she wants to be found? If she abandoned your daughter, maybe she didn’t want her.”

“I’ve considered that, Pete, but it doesn’t make sense to me. First of all, because of the person I knew Katerina to be. I just can’t see her abandoning a baby. Why bother going through the pregnancy if she’s just going to abandon her own child? Why bother leaving the note and hair—like she wanted to make sure Quinn and I found each other? Why did she want me to know Quinn was *our* daughter?”

“Do you think Kat left you from the concert event because she was in danger? Or do you think she wanted your relationship to end?”

“I’m not sure. But Kat thought the men working for the loan shark were on the grounds. She saw ’em, and she was pretty upset about it. She wouldn’t leave my tent until she came up with the idea of calling her brother, and only then after dark. If I’d had the money, I would have given it to her, but I was living hand-to-mouth myself back then. All I could offer her was the money to call her brother.”

“Any chance she told you the name of the loan shark or her employer in Chippewa Falls?”

“Actually, I think she did tell me the loan shark’s name, but I haven’t been able to remember it. Her employer was the supervisor of some major canned goods factory in the area. Kat was an accountant there.”

Pete had written notes and sat back now looking at what he’d written. “Well, I guess we can start with her brother. If Rick Fulton still lives in the area, we should be able to talk to him soon. Do you have a number I can reach you at?”

“Quinn and I are staying with Warren and Jen.”

“All right then. I’ll let you know if I find anything out.”

## Chapter Six

THE TWO-STORY, rough limestone, and overlapping cypress house Cyn had grown up in was locked, no sign of her brother. She'd peered in the carport and saw a car but no truck. Her stepbrother had always had a truck. He was such an avid hunter, it was the first vehicle their parents had purchased for him.

Cyn and Kat had left home with little when they were eighteen. Kat had agreed with her about not accepting the offer from their parents of enough money to set them on their feet for many years. They'd come to this house with no money. Leaving with a load of it after what had happened not long before had seemed wrong to Cyn. But after only a few years of the vagabond life, Kat had grown restless for more. More wealth, more pampering, more of the life she'd become accustomed to a bit too easily.

Sighing, Cyn looked over the well-kept grounds, asking herself what the hell she was doing back here. She'd promised Kat she wouldn't come, and she knew damn straight that Rick wouldn't welcome the prodigal daughter home with open arms. She'd had her own reasons for not returning anyway. She wouldn't willingly come within an inch of her brother if there wasn't damn good reason to do so.

Cyn's stomach growled menacingly. She had a bag of chips for dinner last night, a candy bar for breakfast. Like it or not, she had to get work fast. She didn't like the thought of what she might have to do to get food if she didn't.

She had just enough gas to get her back into town, where she asked the first person she saw if there was an auto repair shop in town. Her motorcycle ran on mere fumes by the time she saw the sign that read "Jen Jensen's Auto Shop." Being so hungry, she

probably wouldn't have the strength of mind to sweet-talk anyone into giving her a job.

Parking her motorcycle in the lot on the side of the garage, she walked inside the busy place. "Where can I find the boss?" she asked a guy with a barrel stomach.

He pointed to the glass-windowed office tucked back toward the center of the shop. Before she got to the door, Cyn saw a woman in the office sitting at the desk writing something in an appointment book. A discarded, only half eaten lunch sat in front of her. Pizza. Half of the pie was untouched.

Cyn knocked on the office door. The woman looked up, saw her, and called, "It's open."

Time for charm, if she could manage it. Cyn walked in, desperately trying to ignore the tantalizing scent of the pizza, extending her hand as the other woman stood up. They were about the same height, and their handshake was firm on both ends. "I'm Cyn Fulton. I just got into town, and I'm looking for work. I've got a lifetime of mechanical experience. Fixed up my first beater when I was seven."

The other woman smiled. "Seven, huh? I'm Jen Jensen. What did you say your name was again?"

"Cyn Fulton."

A strange look passed over Jen's otherwise kind face. "Are you related to Rick Fulton by any chance?"

"He's my brother. I'm his adopted sister anyway. Do you know him?"

Jen smiled warmly. "My husband does. Sit down."

Cyn did, trying not to look at the pizza like a famished animal.

"What are you doing in Falcon's Bend, Cyn? Just back for a little family time?"

She would have laughed if she'd had the energy. No, she definitely hadn't returned expecting "family time" with Rick. "You could say that."

As loud as a car backfiring, Cyn's stomach growled in the otherwise quiet office. The pizza was so close yet so far away. She wasn't even aware she was eyeing it until Jen pushed the box toward her. "Have you had lunch? I ordered more than necessary."

"Would you mind?" Jen smiled, and Cyn realized she liked her. She always went with her gut instincts about people. Jen was good people. She could be fairly honest with her.

“Please, go ahead.” Jen stood and went to the dorm refrigerator on top of two file cabinets. She came back with a can of diet soda, offering it to Cyn, who already had her mouth full.

Mumbling thanks, she took it and kept eating.

Jen watched her for an embarrassing minute that Cyn couldn’t help, then she said, “So are you thinking of staying in town for a couple weeks?”

“Maybe longer,” Cyn managed, knowing employers didn’t like to hire here-today-gone-tomorrows.

“I think we could work something out. When can you start?”

“Today.”

“Tomorrow’s soon enough. You might want to get your bearings tonight first.”

Cyn nodded. “Thanks. That’d be great.”

“Do you have a place to stay, or are you staying with your brother?”

“No, actually... to tell you the truth, I let myself get pretty low before I started here. I know my brother won’t be too thrilled to see me, but... would you consider giving me an advance on my salary? ‘Two weeks’ should be enough, just so I’ll have a place to stay and food.”

Jen looked at her as though trying to evaluate her trustworthiness, then she said, “I’ve got a good feeling about you, Cyn. Would you consider staying with my husband and me until you’re back on your feet?”

“Are you joking? You don’t even know me.”

“I always trust my instincts about people. We have a big old farmhouse just out of town. We can provide you with room and board.”

“In exchange for the advance on my salary?” Cyn asked in surprise.

“No. We don’t have to do it that way. I’ll pay you for your work, and I can give you something of an advance today in case you need gas or something else. We’ll just call the room and board hospitality. Welcome back to Falcon’s Bend, Cyn.”

Cyn Fulton had never been one to look a gift horse in the mouth, especially one given out of pure kindness as she sensed this was. “If you’re sure you’re husband won’t mind, I’ll take you up on that, but just until I can get myself a place.”

And find out what had happened to her sister more than sixteen years ago.

## Chapter Seven

“YOU’RE NOT GOING to believe this,” Jen said, greeting him before he’d even cut the ignition on his motorcycle. He’d grabbed some lunch after leaving the FBPD knowing Jen would make sure Quinn was fed.

“Believe what?”

“She’s back in town.”

“Who? Kat?”

Jen shook her head. “Her sister, Cyn Fulton.”

*Cyn?* The woman at the motel last night had been named Cyn. What were the odds that Kat’s sister and that woman were one and the same? *Practically no chance of that being the case*, Keith thought.

“She said her brother is Rick, but she won’t be staying with him. I gave her a job and told her she could stay with us until she was on her feet. The poor woman was practically starved. If I hadn’t fed her, I think she would have keeled over.”

“She agreed to stay at your house?”

Jen nodded. Well, that would be convenient. Maybe she had some idea where her sister was. But he couldn’t help wondering if this was the first time Cyn had been back to Falcon’s Bend since she and Kat had left after graduating high school. If it was, why was she back now? Especially since, as Kat had told him, Rick and Cyn hated each other.

Yeah, it would be interesting to meet Kat’s sister formally.

## Chapter Eight

PETE HAD LEFT more than one message on Rick Fulton's answering machine, both at his home and at the family butcher shop he now owned exclusively. As it was the only of its kind in the area, it'd been highly successful since it'd opened. His parents had started out in the butcher shop business back when the trend of grocery stores doing their own butchering had become popular enough that most independent butchers were falling by the wayside. Fulton's Butcher Shop had started popular, though, and it was even more popular today.

The Fultons had died in a car accident roughly sixteen years earlier, and their son had taken over the shop and their estate. Rick had never married, nor did he have any children on record. No law trouble whatsoever. All Pete had been able to find out was that Rick Fulton loved to hunt.

What he'd found on Katerina Fulton was little outside of what Keith Pierce had told him. Kat had been found in a back alley when she was just a baby and nothing was ever discovered about her parents. She'd gone into an orphanage run by nuns.

Cynthia Fulton had been taken away from her parents after they'd been charged with neglect. As there were no relatives she could go to, she'd eventually gone into the same orphanage Kat was in. The Fultons', who were already in their late forties and had a twelve-year-old son, had adopted Kat and Cyn when they were only five years old. By all accounts, the girls' lives had turned around for the better.

However, following graduation there was little known publicly. Kat had turned up a few years later in Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin, doing the accounting for a top manufacturer of canned goods. She'd apparently lived a life outside her means. Her credit

card debts—some of them still outstanding—were phenomenal. Pete hadn't found anything else on her or her sister.

He dialed the employer in Chippewa Falls, not expecting the manager who'd been in charge almost twenty years ago to still be there, but when he asked about a previous accountant for the factory, Katerina Fulton, he got an immediate reaction.

"Kat! I haven't heard that name in more years than I should be able to remember."

"You were her employer?"

"One and the same. My name is Samuel Nicks."

"I'm Detective Pete Shasta. I'm an investigator for the Falcon's Bend Police Department. I'm trying to locate Katerina Fulton. Have you heard from her?"

"Not since she took off... boy, how many years ago was it?"

"Seventeen?" Pete suggested after a minute.

"That sounds right. I still can't believe Kat would steal from the company. She just wasn't the type."

Pete remembered what Keith had said about her. *She was too damn nice a girl to imagine her getting herself so far into trouble she couldn't do anything but run.* Apparently, Keith wasn't the only one fooled... or taken in... by Kat.

"I couldn't get myself to turn her in. I told her if she paid it all back, we could keep it just between the two of us. But then she told me she was in debt up to her eyeballs, and she'd taken out a considerable loan already—one she also couldn't pay back. She admitted she'd done her business with a local loan shark and he was demanding she repay him what she owed. I hated to see her in trouble, but I couldn't just forgive what she'd done. My own position in the company would be at stake, and I had a family to take care of. I told her to go to the bank and try to resolve her debt. She promised me she would, and she'd pay me back as soon as she could, but she was gone the next morning. She'd left without telling anyone."

"And you haven't heard from her since?"

"No. And I probably made a mistake doing it, but I paid what she owed the company out of my own pocket. I don't know how to explain that to myself let alone anyone else, but Kat was the kind of woman you take care of. She was so vulnerable, I just knew I could never forgive myself if I brought a tumult down on her head."

Pete gave him his contact information in case he remembered anything else, then thanked him for the information. He wondered if these men had known the real Kat, or the one who'd cheated them blind yet left them with stars in their eyes over her.

*You've been alone too long*, Pete berated himself. Donna had divorced him two years ago, and the thought of ever leaving himself wide open to another woman had kept him... *lonely. But safe.* Maybe Katerina Fulton was true blue. Whatever she was, she left a wake of trouble whenever she went. Finding that trail shouldn't be too difficult.

## Chapter Nine

JEN AND WARREN were cooking up more than dinner together. Since the minute Warren had walked in the house, he and Jen had a grand total of three minutes away from each other. Keith and Quinn kept looking at each other, at first scandalized and then amused. The couple couldn't keep their hands off each other. Jen reached for a spoon to stir the taco meat and the next second Warren was reaching for her.

"Are they always like this?" Quinn whispered across from him at the huge, rough-hewn table in the kitchen.

"I think Jen said something about them trying for a baby."

"Right here?" Quinn screeched, and Jen laughed, breaking away from her husband. She told him to stay back, but it was obvious she wanted the exact opposite. Each time she glanced at her husband, the way she felt was broadcasted loud and clear.

Warren was tall, though a little shorter than Keith, lean with short blondish-brown hair and a deep tan that came from being outdoors most of the time. He'd had eyes only for Jen from as far back as Keith could remember.

"Wonder where Cyn is. I hope she understood my directions," Jen said, glancing out the window as she set dishes on the table.

"Did she say when she'd be here?" Warren asked.

"I told her dinner was at six thirty. I don't think she'd willingly miss a meal, not after seeing her at lunch. She's so tiny; I don't think she can afford to lose anything either."

The sound of a motorcycle came up the road just after Jen decided they shouldn't wait any longer to eat. She jumped up immediately and rushed out.

"Mother hen," Warren murmured in affectionate scolding. "She takes in any stray that comes her way."

“And that’s what you love about her,” Keith said. Warren conceded with a long nod.

A few minutes later, Jen ushered her latest stray in. It was the woman from the motel, Keith noted immediately, and he saw that she recognized him right away, too.

“Cyn, this is my husband, Warren.”

Warren was as polite as patrol cops tended to be. Then Jen turned their guest toward the table.

“Are you sure I’m not gonna be inconveniencing you?” Cyn asked at seeing so many people in the kitchen.

“I love having a full house. Don’t we, Warren?”

“It’s no trouble at all, Miss Fulton.”

“Ah God, call me Cyn. Only Uncle Sam calls me by my full name.”

Warren nodded. “Call me Warren.”

“Cyn, this is my cousin, Keith Pierce, and his daughter. They just got into town today, too.” Jen took her duffel bag and put it on the bench in the hall while Keith and Cyn eyed each other.

“Keith Pierce,” she said in a tone that implied she knew it. Or maybe that she could have known it last night if she’d stayed out long enough.

“Small world,” Keith said under his breath, just loud enough for her to hear.

But Quinn had recognized her as well. “Weren’t you the one who told us to turn down the TV last night?”

“That was me.”

Cyn looked at Quinn closely. Keith couldn’t escape the feeling that she was looking for something there.

“Quinn’s going to be working at the garage this summer, too, Cyn.”

Jen told everyone to sit down, and Cyn was looking at Keith again across the table as she did. Her expression was nowhere near as friendly as it’d been the night before. “Keith Pierce,” she muttered. “I think we’re gonna find how small the world is soon.”

## Chapter Ten

GETTING CYN TO himself wasn't hard at all, the way Keith expected it to be. After dinner and Jen and Warren's refusal to allow any of them to do dishes, Cyn said she wanted to go outside for a smoke.

Keith followed her a minute later and found her in front of the barn, no cigarette in sight. If he had to take a guess, he'd say she almost seemed to be waiting for someone. "What happened to the smoke?" he asked.

"I don't smoke."

"Look, Cyn—"

"You're the one, aren't you? Keith Pierce," she demanded suddenly.

"That's my name."

She shook her head. Her hair looked like two bird wings—black and white and curved back from her face—when she flew at him. "You're the one my sister was with near Chippewa Falls almost seventeen years ago. Don't tell me you're not. She said you knew some people in Falcon's Bend. You're the one."

"I'm the one. She told you about me?"

She snorted. "Yeah. It meant something to her, even if you never looked back."

"Hey, she's the one who walked out on *me*. She was gone when I woke up."

"Did you go after her?"

Keith glanced away from her compellingly accusing brown eyes. "No. I didn't go after her."

Surprising him, she now sounded confused. "You didn't?"

"Look, Cyn, I'm here because...Quinn was kind of a surprise for me."

“Quinn? Your daughter? Wait, are you—? Do you mean—?” The emotion on Cyn’s previously angry face was almost too much. He knew Kat and Cyn weren’t biological sisters, but something about Cyn’s expression just now reminded him of Kat’s vulnerability.

“Quinn is Kat’s daughter,” Cyn said breathlessly, as if Keith had just socked her one in the gut. “*Your* daughter. Oh God. She never told me. I knew something major was happening with her, but she wouldn’t tell me. She wouldn’t even tell me where she was.”

“She didn’t tell me about the baby either. Quinn showed up on my doorstep two months ago.”

Cyn raised her tear-sparkling gaze to him. “Where was she before that?”

“She was found in a church in New York City when she was only a couple days old. She’s gone from one foster home to the next since then because the state couldn’t locate her biological parents. Quinn only found me because Kat left a note with Quinn when she was a baby. The note had my name on it, reminding me of our time together. Quinn was the result. I haven’t seen Kat since the last day of the concert event almost seventeen years ago.”

“So you came back here to find her?”

“Last thing she told me was she was gonna try to get her brother Rick from Falcon’s Bend to give her some money. I didn’t have anything else to go on.” Keith glanced around the peaceful evening, wondering at the coincidence of him coming here just when Cyn decided to come back, too. “Why are you here? It’s been a long time since you’ve been back, hasn’t it?”

The look of distrust on her beautiful face seemed to fit her, like she’d spent a lifetime distrusting everyone she’d ever known. But how could he blame her? All she really knew about him was that he’d had an affair with her sister and then never bothered to find out if anything tangible became of it.

“I felt Kat calling me,” Cyn said softly, in a guarded tone.

“What?”

“I haven’t seen her either. She called me a couple times after she left you, but I haven’t seen or heard from her for almost as long as you. We always stayed in touch. Before we went our separate ways, we made a blood pact that we’d always know where the other was. She told me to stay away from here the last time I

talked to her on the phone, and I was only too happy to comply, but... I feel her calling for me now. I have to find her. You were the last person who saw her, other than Rick.”

The implication that he'd had something to do with her disappearance was clear yet uncertain. “You have no reason to trust me, Cyn, but I felt something for Kat. I wasn't looking to settle down just then—I thought that at first anyway—but... ah hell, you can't know Kat for five minutes without falling for her.”

Cyn looked up at him, a wisp of a woman who, based on the things Kat had told him, had endured things no one should have to as a child—a woman who cared about her sister more than anything. The naked hope in her eyes left Keith feeling ungrounded.

“You really did know her... if you know that much.” Under her breath, she whispered, “Oh, Kat, we found our wings together. Where are you now?”

He'd done nothing but remember the feelings he'd had for Kat since Quinn showed up on his doorstep. This woman made him feel just as strongly—things that maybe he shouldn't feel at all. Things like attraction and the instinctive need to hold her as silent tears slipped out of her eyes.

*end of excerpt*

*Read Falcon's Bend Case Files Vol I*

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