

# The Clovis Incident

## Chapter 1

I should've stayed in bed.

Instead, at 9 a.m. on a sunny Sunday morning, I went to work. By 10 o'clock, I'd been fired. Meet yours truly, Sasha Solomon, *former* director of PR for "TrueHealth: *Your Alternative HMO.*"

Things didn't get better.

First, there was the stress. Other people get heartburn and take antacids; I get hallucinations. Yeah, I see a therapist. In the year since reality began doing the mambo, I've been poked and prodded, my molecules knocked hither and yon. No one has an explanation for the visions. As long as I'm not too stressed out, they only show up as dopey conversations with my cat.

Which brings me back to my story.

I drove home from my erstwhile place of employment. Tears blurred my view of defunct volcanoes to the west and sacred Mount Taylor past them, as I headed into Albuquerque's once lush - but now drought dry - valley. On Fourth Street my little Tercel zipped past a used appliance store with some of its wares on the sidewalk. Then beyond a French pastry shop in a crappy strip mall, and a razor-sharp wire fence encircling an adobe church, before turning onto Aztec. From there, it was a quick left into Cuidado Street - my duly named neck o' the woods.

As my car bounced up the dirt driveway to my little *casita*, I prepared for an all-out moan and groan.

Leo da Cat was at the door, tail high, claws ready, smart-aleck comment dangling from his thin black lips. His left ear bent with an old injury, giving him a cocky air of insouciance.

"You look like someone stole all your catnip," he said, his voice a dead ringer for a cabbie from the Bronx.

"Ha, ha."

I fumbled for my keys.

"I mean it. You smell wrong, too. Upset." He pulled his back leg forward, prepared to lick. "Wanna talk?"

"Leo, please. Not right now," I said.

You get the picture.

Actually, I knew the origin of my hallucinations but the neurologists and radiologists would never believe it. TrueHealth was Albuquerque's only holistic HMO. Its practitioners were the groovy set: spirit healers, energy manipulators, psychic seers. During my first week on the job, I'd visited a shaman, an acupuncturist, a pyramid healer, and a Reiki master. They'd done their voodoo-whodoo on me and had detonated a metaphysical meltdown. The healers had their own take on my nuttiness. They said I was opening to my higher self. Yeah, right.

My gig at TrueHealth had had another lousy side effect. During the year I'd been there, I'd let all my old clients slip away. It's amazing what a regular paycheck and

health insurance will do to the entrepreneurial spirit. Well, that was going to have to change, *pronto*.

But first, I needed to think.

After feeding Leo, I took a walk along the irrigation ditch near my house. The cottonwood trees shed red catkins, frilly caterpillars against the dirt and new green growth of spring. I kicked a couple of them, but didn't feel better. My swollen eyes hurt from too much crying for a job I'd planned to leave anyway. It was the firing that stung. That, and the timing.

With sore legs, I went home. Mae King had left a message on the machine. I planned to stay at her place for the few days I'd be bidding on the Clovis Chamber of Commerce project. Mae sounded *off*, but she was crusty by nature. I returned her call and began another round of telephone tag in our years-long friendship.

At a little before noon, I threw cold water on my face, my suitcase in the car, and headed toward St. Kate's for a dreaded weekly obligation. Mom. The drive left me plenty of time to wonder what on earth to do about money. My upcoming Clovis trip had transformed from a lark, a professional adventure, to an absolute necessity.

The St. Kate's parking lot scattered the midday sun off a hundred cars. Inside the rehab hospital Mom languished, waiting for a miracle. Room 133 at the farthest end of the brain-injury wing was quiet when I stopped to listen at the door.

A nurse whizzed by, then returned to say, "Your mom's in the cafeteria."

I retraced my steps through the double doors and cut across the lobby to the dining room.

No salt, no sugar, no fat. No wonder Mom's expression was sour when I walked up to the table. Paul Katz, her boyfriend, stood to welcome me and pulled out a chair. Gilda, a long-time bridge companion, also rose to say hello. Mom transferred her frown from me back to her food.

"Hannah, try a little more," said Paul as we sat down. "You can do it."

This was one of Mom's bad days. Her latest stroke ruled her, cruel as a silent sadist. She gripped the fork in a two-year-old's fist, her green beans falling off as she brought them to her mouth. Angry, Mom put the utensil down and grabbed her tuna melt. Her vise-like hands clasped it with such ferocity the contents spewed out the sides. She grunted with frustration.

"I think I'll have some lunch, too," I said, springing away from the misery.

Sandwiched between two wheelchairs in the cafeteria line, my ability to walk blared, television commercial loud, flaunting my wholeness. I was certain people resented me.

"Come on, I don't have all day," croaked a voice at my side.

I looked down and into the eyes of Mary Stanford, another of Mom's bridge friends.

"What are you doing here?" I said.

"You look like a startled lamb, Sasha. What's gotten into you?" Mary laughed. "Your mama didn't tell you I was in here?"

"No," I said.

"Funniest thing, one morning I woke up and my legs didn't." She rolled forward a half-turn of the wheel. "Doctors don't know why. So, I got into Gimps 'r' Us as fast as I could."

“Doesn’t this place depress you?”

“Misery loves company,” she said.

I snorted, then handed money to the cashier who met my eyes with a glare.

“No, really,” Mary said, ignoring the cashier’s rudeness. “What would I do at home? Feel sorry for myself? No. This place is full of people with real troubles. It keeps me grateful.”

We made our way back to Mom’s table. Mary joined us without an explicit invitation.

Mother scowled at her friend and said, “Hello, Miss It-Could-Be-Worse.”

“And a fine hello to you, Miss I’ll-Be-as-Ornery-as-They-Let-Me,” said Mary.

Five people at the table and not a peep from anyone. I resuscitated the conversation with details about the trip I’d be taking later that afternoon.

“What if something happens to me?” said Mom.

“Why Clovis?” said Gilda.

“What if something happens to me?” Mom again.

“Friend of mine says Clovis is the only city that makes Lubbock look good,” said Mary. She took a bite of enchilada. “I know a woman who grew up there. Left thirty years ago and swears she wouldn’t go back for three million dollars.”

“Oh, it’s not that bad. Have you ever actually been there?” I said.

“Sure. My daughter Connie lives there. Her husband works at the air force base. I’ll give you her number. She’ll be glad to talk to someone about something besides airplanes, cows, and Jesus.”

“Why are you going, Sasha?” Mom’s little girl voice made me want to run. “What if something happens to me?”

Oh, how I hated her strokes. Each one pulled my once fiery mother further toward feebleness of mind and body. And even though our relationship had always had more fury than fun, I missed the intelligent, independent person she’d been. Being near her now caused me such discomfort I perpetually wanted to flee and felt doubly guilty for my response.

If I were a *good Jew*, I’d stay with Mom, comfort her, *do* for her. Taking care of the infirm was a *mitzvah*—a commandment, a good deed. And though I’d been raised nominally Jewish - Albuquerque doesn’t have much of a Borscht Belt - Mom had hammered hard on the *mitzvah* idea. Especially when it came to doing good deeds for *her*.

After all the years she’d sacrificed for my sister and I - and never let us forget it - she now expected payback.

But I couldn’t do it. Not the way she wanted.

I left as quickly as was politic. Tried Mae again from the parking lot. No answer. Well, I’d be in Clovis by 8 o’clock. Whatever she wanted could wait a few hours. Couldn’t it?