



**NO
CRY
FOR
HELP**

**His family has disappeared.
The police think he did it...**

**GRANT
McKENZIE**

About the Book

HIS WORST NIGHTMARE

When Wallace Carver's wife and children go missing on a shopping trip in America, he fears the worst. Returning home to Canada, he discovers all trace of his family's existence gone.

THE EVIDENCE POINTS AT HIM

Security cameras show Wallace crossing the US border alone. Now he is the main suspect in the police investigation.

TIME IS RUNNING OUT

All Wallace wants is to get his family back. But first he must find out who has taken them, and why.

Before it's too late . . .

Contents

Cover

About the Book

Title

Contents

Dedication

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

Chapter 32

Chapter 33

Chapter 34

Chapter 35

Chapter 36

Chapter 37

Chapter 38

Chapter 39

Chapter 40

Chapter 41

Chapter 42

Chapter 43

Chapter 44

Chapter 45

Chapter 46

Chapter 47

Chapter 48

Chapter 49

Chapter 50

Chapter 51

Chapter 52

Chapter 53

Chapter 54

Chapter 55

Chapter 56

Chapter 57

Chapter 58

Chapter 59

Chapter 60

Chapter 61

Chapter 62

Chapter 63

Chapter 64

Chapter 65

Chapter 66

Chapter 67

Chapter 68

Chapter 69

Chapter 70

Epilogue

Acknowledgements

About the Author

Also by Grant McKenzie

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NO CRY FOR HELP

Grant McKenzie

For Karen and Kailey,
laughter and love.

And for Mum and Dad,
who allowed their odd little boy
to be an odd little boy.

Late.

That wasn't like her.

Not *this* late.

Wallace Carver glanced at his watch for the tenth time in the last half-hour. He tapped its crystal face to make sure it wasn't broken. The tiny second hand ticked mercilessly, keeping perfect time.

A gift from the bus company, it was a proper watch. Heavy. Expensive. A four-letter inscription on the back. Apart from his gold wedding band, it was the only jewellery he ever wore.

Alicia teased him that she was jealous. She wanted to be the only valuable thing hanging on his arm. As if she ever had to worry.

No precious metal or jewel could shine as bright as his wife; at least, none he had ever seen.

Why else would he be sitting at an uncomfortable table in the noisy Food Court of a busy shopping mall, bored out of his mind, with sticky fingers and a well-travelled book of crosswords?

Wallace lifted his paper cup of coffee to his lips and grimaced when the cold dregs crossed his tongue. He had forgotten it wasn't fresh.

He looked at his watch again. It was after six. His family - Alicia and his two young boys, Fred and Alex - was supposed to meet him at five.

They hadn't checked into their hotel yet. Alicia and the boys had been so excited about driving across the border from Canada and going shopping in Bellingham's Bellis Fair Mall that they - by a vote of three to one - had decided to shop first and check in at the Holiday Inn just before supper.

The hotel was only a short drive from the mall, and the Olive Garden restaurant next to it promised a menu stuffed with the boys' favourite pastas, all-you-can-eat breadsticks, fountain drinks and, mercifully, a decent house red for Mom and Dad.

Thinking about the restaurant made Wallace's stomach grumble. All he had consumed in the last few hours were two large cups of coffee and a giant cinnamon bun smothered in cream-cheese icing. Granted, the promise of a sticky, gooey cinnamon bun had been his main lure for agreeing to visit the region's largest indoor shopping mall. His bad leg made walking for hours a chore and he had all the fashion sense of ... well, of what he was.

He often wondered if the reason he chose to drive a bus was because the job came with a uniform. He didn't have to think before he got dressed each day, just slip on the company's baggy TransLink blues.

He glanced at his watch. Six thirty.

The uncomfortable knot of worry in his stomach began to churn and turn sour.

Come on, Alicia. Where are you?

Originally, Wallace had wanted to take a different type of trip: leave the boys with family friends, Crow and Delilah; have Alicia all to himself; reconnect. It had been a while.

But Alicia knew how much the boys would love an adventure, even such a short one. Money had been tight of late and, despite all his promises, family vacations had been one of the first luxuries to go. Fortunately, things were looking up. He was back to work full time, Alicia had picked up steady part-time hours at a local florist's, and the damn insurance company was finally off their backs.

Guess he couldn't blame Alicia for wanting to blow off a little retail steam, but still ...

Wallace unfolded his long legs from beneath the table, stood up, stretched his arms above his head to unkink his back and loosen his shoulders, and looked around.

Alicia would be easy to spot if she was nearby. A natural redhead with uncontrollably curly hair that swept past her shoulders in adorable ringlets, she stood out like a beacon in an unending ocean of bland blondes and dull brunettes. She also walked with a bounce in her step - like Tigger from *Winnie the Pooh*; her favourite book - as though she was twenty years younger than her recent milestone birthday would imply.

A faint smile crossed Wallace's lips as he thought of her. Even when they first met, when he had been younger and owned a gym membership that he actually used, Alicia had been out of his league. He knew he was nothing to brag about. What you saw was what you got: an everyday guy with a steady job on the buses that he happened to enjoy. Alicia, meanwhile, not only turned heads, she was smart as a whip, too.

In a box, somewhere in the garage or attic, there was even a nicely printed, but never framed, Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the University of British Columbia.

When Wallace questioned what first attracted her to him, Alicia would smile coyly and say he knew just how to

fill out a pair of blue jeans. He still did, although his waistband had expanded a notch or two.

At six-foot-two, two hundred and twenty pounds, Wallace was no pushover. But, truth be told, before the accident he had balanced the scales at a solid two hundred even. That extra twenty pounds was hanging around his middle like an anchor, forcing him to wear his T-shirts untucked to hide the flab.

The weight never seemed to bother Alicia, though. Then again, few things did. He was her Pooh Bear. She was his eternal optimist; his needle pointing North.

Wallace's smile faded. There was no sign of her.

Even if Alicia had found a to-die-for shoe sale, she would have checked in on him by now, if only to hurriedly drop off the boys so she could sprint back to the sale with unencumbered focus.

Wallace moved to the edge of the Food Court. One corridor connected the bulk of the mall with the atrium-style eating area. The spacious corridor was lined with shops and dotted with island kiosks offering everything from cellphones to real estate. It was all on sale. If you had the money, a lousy economy was a shopper's dream.

Crowds had thinned marginally since he last checked, as the weary headed home to feed their kids or soak their throbbing feet.

Wallace climbed on to a low wooden bench to peer over the tops of people's heads. He hoped to see Alicia threading her way through the crowd, face flushed, apologetic expression, a boy clutched tightly in each hand, their faces full of delighted mischief.

But she wasn't there.

Wallace looked at his watch.

Seven.

He wished he had brought his cellphone. Alicia had talked about bringing them. They both owned one, but he had been worried about roaming charges. He had heard horror stories about people who received outrageous bills when they travelled across the border without the proper international phone plan.

Wallace hadn't wanted to take the risk, it was just for the weekend, but now ...

He stepped down from the bench, ignoring the disapproving glare from a sour-faced shopper who was obviously wondering what he was doing up there in the first place. He started down the corridor at a slow pace, allowing the stiff joints in his left leg to loosen.

Commission salesmen from the island kiosks tried to coax him over to sample their wares, but Wallace ignored them. As a public transit driver, he had quickly learned how to tune out annoying people. It was one of the necessities of the job.

The corridor led into a large, circular hub. From the hub, three more corridors stuffed with shops and kiosks stretched into the distance. Discount stickers for thirty, forty and fifty per cent off littered every window display. There were so many signs it was difficult to tell what each store actually sold, just that it was on sale.

His family could be anywhere.

Wallace glanced at his watch and cursed under his breath. Twenty minutes past seven. This was getting ridiculous.

Alicia had a tendency to be easily distracted by the silliest of things. It was a quality Wallace found both adorable and annoying in almost equal measure. On the one hand, she had a unique perspective on the world and an ability to make him see wonder in the mundane. And on the other ... well, sometimes a rock was just a rock.

But even when she became distracted – grocery stores and craft fairs being the worst – she rarely kept him waiting longer than ten or fifteen minutes. To be over two hours late went against everything he knew about her. And after ten years of marriage, Wallace was pretty sure he knew it all.

What if one of the boys had taken ill or been injured? He dismissed the thought. If Alicia couldn't reach him, she would have had him paged. Despite her sense of whimsy, Alicia had always been good in a crisis.

In the middle of the hub was a circular backlit sign that displayed the floor plan of the mall. Wallace crossed to the sign and studied the map. Every store was catalogued both alphabetically and by the type of merchandise it sold. A letter and number ID tag beside each listing corresponded with a location on the map.

Wallace found the one he was looking for. The map showed it was located a short distance down the B corridor on his left.

Stuffed between a T-shirt shop that specialized in rock bands Wallace had never heard of and a women's lingerie store, a narrow hallway led off the main thoroughfare. Halfway down, a plain white door was labelled *Security*.

Wallace knocked and entered without waiting for an answer. He had grown too damn worried to be polite.

Two men in white shirts, black pants and skinny black ties sat in wheeled office chairs behind an old wooden desk. An adjoining door was open to a second, slightly larger office that glowed with both colour and greyscale monitors displaying various parts of the mall.

Wallace had entered in the middle of a joke and the larger of the two security guards was near-choking on a mouthful of egg-salad sandwich.

‘Wrong door, I think, sir,’ said the smaller guard. He had sandy blond hair and a button nose that made him look awkwardly elfish.

‘Isn’t this Security?’ said Wallace.

The larger guard swallowed and swiped a paper napkin across his mouth. He was mostly bald and his freckled forehead was large enough to rent out for advertising. He also wore three stripes on his sleeve, compared to his partner’s one.

‘It is,’ he said. ‘How can we help?’

‘I need to page my family.’ Wallace’s jaw locked tight.

‘Is there an emergency?’ asked the younger guard.

‘I don’t know.’ Wallace suddenly felt self-conscious and a little ridiculous. ‘I can’t find them. They’re missing.’

‘Missing?’ the younger guard scoffed. ‘It’s a large mall, sir. You sure they didn’t just lose track of time?’

‘I’m sure. We were supposed to meet,’ Wallace glanced at his watch, ‘two and a half hours ago. Can you page them?’ He unclenched his jaw and squeezed out, ‘Please.’

The two guards exchanged a glance that spoke volumes. They could have just as subtly twirled a finger at the side of their heads.

‘Did you try Customer Service?’ said the older guard. He sounded weary, as though chewing his sandwich had been enough of a chore for the day.

‘No. I came here.’ Wallace locked eyes with the senior guard, getting a read. He felt his worry turning to anger, but kept it in check. He had learned on the job that if someone was nice to him, he could be their best friend, let them know when the right stop was coming up or what connecting bus to catch. But when someone pissed him off, it was easy to make a mistake and drop the jerk blocks

from his intended destination. 'You're the professionals, right?'

The guard puffed up his chest. His nametag caught the light: *Victor Schulz*.

'That we are,' said Schulz. 'But we don't normally—'

'I'd really appreciate it,' Wallace interrupted. His voice held a note of desperation and he allowed it to show. 'You must have kids? A wife? I'm really worried and you guys know this mall better than anyone.'

Schulz sighed. 'OK. What are the names?'

Wallace told him.

'Hold on.'

The guard spun his chair to face a small black microphone. He flicked a series of switches until a row of red lights glowed across the front of an outdated electronic Public Address system. Glancing over his shoulder he said, 'When the mall first opened, we used carrier pigeons.'

Wallace didn't smile.

Schulz rolled his eyes in sympathy for the wasted joke and returned to the microphone. He hit a button on the main panel, waited for a burst of static to clear, and then issued the page.

'Attention shoppers. Would Alicia, Fred and Alex Carver please report to the security office in Corridor B. That's Alicia, Fred and Alex Carver. Your husband is worried. Thank you.'

The guard switched off the microphone.

'Can that be heard everywhere?' Wallace asked. 'In every store?'

Both guards nodded.

'What about the large department stores?' said Wallace.

The guards exchanged another glance. Schulz stuck a finger in his mouth to dislodge a chunk of something green and crunchy from a gap in his back teeth.

'Target and Macy's have their own systems and security detail,' explained Schulz. He sounded annoyed at this division of labour, as though a piece of his kingdom had been usurped. 'We're patched into Sears and JC Penny, though, so that's most of the mall.'

Wallace glanced at his watch. Seven forty. The mall closed in just over an hour.

'I'll wait outside,' he said.

Wallace exited the office and made his way back down the short hallway. He stood between the T-shirt and lingerie stores and watched the flow of traffic, hoping to see an embarrassed flash of ginger with a hurried bounce in its step.

It never came.

At ten minutes after eight, he returned to the security office.

'Can you page them again?' he asked.

Schulz seemed about to say something contrary, but the look on Wallace's face made him swallow his words. The guard flicked the switch and broadcast the same message as before.

Wallace returned to his spot between the two stores. His head was like a lawn sprinkler, moving left to right and back again as he scanned the thinning crowd.

Twenty minutes later, Wallace returned to the security office for a third time.

When he opened the door, he was older. A year for every footstep along the hall. Eyes red, irritated and moist. Fingernails chewed to the quick, near bleeding. The worry no longer churned, it was boiling, gushing through his

veins like an injection of hydrochloric acid to burn his nerves raw.

‘Page them again.’ His voice trembled, but only a fool would mistake it for weakness.

‘Look,’ said Schulz, ‘maybe they’ve gone home. You know? They were looking for you, you were looking for them. You missed each other and they—’

‘NO!’ Wallace ground his teeth and his eyes darted quickly between the two guards, but he was no longer seeing them. ‘They would have waited.’

‘Did you try calling them?’ said the younger guard.

A violent hiss escaped Wallace’s clenched teeth as his breathing grew shallow and his tone went dangerously flat.

‘We didn’t bring phones. We’re visiting from Canada. We haven’t even checked into the hotel yet. They would have waited. Page them again.’

Every word was uttered as a separate sound with barely controlled enunciation.

‘Look,’ said Schulz, ‘we’ve paged them twice and—’

Wallace’s balled fists slammed on to the desk with such force that everything on its surface jumped and something deep within the wood splintered with a loud *crack*.

The younger guard leapt out of his chair and backed up against the far wall. His face had gone shockingly pale and his fingers twitched spasmodically above the leather holster at his waist. He looked like a nervous young gunfighter suddenly called upon to draw against Doc Holliday. He had all the training, but no real-world experience.

Wallace’s eyes flicked to the ham-hock-sized butt and menacing steel hammer of a large Smith & Wesson revolver nestled in the young man’s holster. It looked big enough to

be used as a club, but at that particular moment, Wallace just didn't give a damn.

'Page them again,' he demanded.

'OK, OK.' Schulz held up his hands to calm the situation. 'I'll page them.'

He issued the alert for the third time.

At nine o'clock, the stores locked their doors and the mall began to empty.

Wallace stood in the Food Court and watched everyone leave. Couples, singles, a few families. None of them belonged to him. After the final customer had left, it was the store employees' turn. Wallace stood alone, watching them go, his heart sinking deeper with every passing face.

The mall was empty.

His family was gone.

When the police arrived, Wallace explained his situation.

The uniformed officers listened. Asked questions. Told him to calm down when he grew irritated that *they weren't doing anything*, and then radioed for a detective.

Two showed up.

'You're Canadian,' said the first detective. She was a hard-looking woman in a gunmetal grey pantsuit with short black hair in a Dorothy Hamill bob and a light olive complexion. She identified herself as Detective Stacey, stepping close to him, shaking his hand. Only later did Wallace realize she had actually wanted to look into his eyes and smell his breath; check for alcohol or the glassy signs of drug use.

'Yes,' said Wallace, 'but my wife is a dual citizen. She was born here. Well, south of here. California.' He was rattled, babbling, trying to keep it together. Failing.

My family is missing, how does it matter what bloody nationality we are?

'Does your wife still have family there?' asked the detective. 'In California?'

'What?' Wallace was confused by the question. 'No. Her parents died when she was just a kid. She moved to Canada to live with an aunt when she was eight.'

'Do you have a photo?'

'Of my wife?'

The detective chewed a wad of greenish gum and seemed disinterested to the point of insulting.

Wallace found himself fighting a reflex to raise his voice. From the moment he lost patience with the uniformed patrol, he had seen the cold calculations flow like ice water behind their eyes. He saw the same gears churning inside the two detectives when they took over.

A man ditched at the shopping mall by his wife and kids. Obviously, he must be an abusive asshole who had beaten her one too many times. She had simply taken the opportunity of a shopping trip to run away.

This kind of thing didn't happen to happy, loving couples, right?

Wallace wanted to scream that they had it all wrong, that he had never, could never, raise his hand to his family. But he felt powerless. If he showed his anger, they would only interpret that as proof he had done exactly what they already suspected him of.

'I don't carry a wallet,' said Wallace in answer to the detective's question. When you sit on your ass all day at work, a wallet is not your friend. 'But I have all our passports in the van. We needed them to cross the border.'

Detective Stacey turned to her partner. Detective Paul Petersen was a slim-built man with a hawkish nose and unusually bright hazel eyes. In his early thirties, the end-of-shift shadow showed he shaved his head for vanity. Otherwise he might be mistaken for a tonsured monk. The only stubble was on the sides.

'Go with him to the vehicle.' Detective Stacey snapped her vile-looking gum. 'I'll see what Security has to say.'

Wallace's green minivan stood alone in the deserted parking lot: a seven-year-old Dodge Caravan with British Columbia plates and a cracked rear bumper from the time Alicia had backed into a light pole at the boys' school.

Wallace dug out his keys and hit the remote button on the fob to disengage the locks. The van beeped and flashed its lights in compliance.

'The passports are in the glove box,' he said.

Detective Petersen yawned and scratched his cheek as Wallace slid into the passenger seat and opened the small compartment in the dash. He reached in and pulled out a plastic Ziploc bag.

Instantly, he knew something was wrong. Instead of four passports, there was only one.

He quickly opened the bag and yanked out the lone booklet. When he flipped it open, his own horrid mug shot stared back at him.

This wasn't possible.

He pulled everything out of the glove box. There wasn't much: two roadmaps, registration and insurance papers, some extra fuses, an expired McDonald's gift certificate from the previous Halloween, and a Dollar Store plastic tyre gauge.

'Is there a problem?' Petersen asked.

Wallace turned to him, his face a blanched mask of disbelief. 'They're gone,' he croaked. 'The passports are gone.'

The detective narrowed his eyes and pointed at Wallace's lap. 'What's that then?'

Wallace glanced down at the slim navy blue-jacketed book. 'That's mine,' he said. 'But Alicia's and Fred's and Alex's ...' He couldn't finish.

Detective Petersen frowned and moved around the van. He peered through the back window at the cargo space behind the middle seat. The rear seat had been folded flat to make room for luggage.

‘You all just have the one bag?’ he asked.

Wallace scrambled out of the passenger seat and moved to the large sliding door in the van’s side. He threw it open with such force it nearly jumped its tracks.

Their luggage was missing, too.

Before they left home, Alicia had packed a backpack for each of the boys so they could pitch in and carry their own clothing. She also liked to have her own suitcase, a small hard-sided model to make sure her clothes didn’t get wrinkled. Wallace usually just tossed underwear, socks, bathing suit and an extra shirt into whatever duffle Alicia left out for him.

The only piece of luggage in the back of the van belonged to him.

The detective eyed Wallace with renewed suspicion.

‘Their luggage was here,’ said Wallace. He knew he sounded desperate, but what else could he say?

‘Uh-huh.’

‘Somebody must have stolen it.’

‘But left behind *your* bag and *your* passport?’ Petersen struggled not to roll his eyes.

Wallace snapped. ‘FUCK!’

He slammed the van door closed with enough force to rattle the window and spun on the detective. The muscles in his neck bulged from the strain and his face flushed crimson as a flood of adrenalin made his blood pressure shoot off the charts.

‘They didn’t leave me!’ He was gasping, his words barely coherent. ‘Something has happened. You need to believe

me.'

Petersen took a backwards step and held up one hand. His other hand drifted down to the weapon on his hip. 'Let's just take it easy,' he said. 'No one's accusing you of anything. We're still investigating. OK?'

Wallace couldn't speak. His breathing was out of control. A sharp pain stabbed into his chest, and then he bent over and vomited on the ground.

The detective jumped back in disgust. He lifted his radio and called for a uniformed officer.

'Let's talk about this back in the mall.'

While Wallace clutched the side of the van and struggled to breathe, Petersen's eyes never looked away and his hand stayed close to his weapon.

3

Inside the mall's compact security office, Detective Stacey listened to her partner's report. After he was done, she told Wallace to sit in the chair facing her.

Detective Petersen rested his hip on the nearby wooden desk, while the uniformed officer who had helped escort Wallace in from the parking lot stood in the doorway. The two security guards had moved into the adjoining room where they were scanning through surveillance footage on the wall of monitors. So far, they hadn't turned up anything out of the ordinary.

'You know how this looks, right?' Detective Stacey said. 'You've got quite the temper.'

Wallace sighed. His throat was raw, but his panic was under control, replaced by a cold, aching dread. He cleared his throat. 'I know you think I had something to do with this, but I didn't. I don't know how to prove it to you, but my family really is missing. They're in trouble and I need you to help me find them.'

Stacey scratched her nose and snapped her gum. 'You said you crossed the border today?'

'Yes.'

'What time?'

'Just after two. We had a late start.'

'We could check that,' Petersen interjected.

Stacey turned to her partner and raised one eyebrow. 'You still dating that blond hunk at Border Patrol?'

'I wouldn't exactly call it dating,' Petersen said drily. His lips curved in a smile.

'He working tonight?'

Petersen nodded.

'Call him,' said Stacey. 'Ask for a favour.'

As Petersen flipped open his cellphone and stepped into the hallway, Stacey turned her attention back to Wallace.

'Every vehicle that crosses the border is automatically photographed at Customs,' she said. 'Our tax dollars at work. If we can get proof that you're not bullshitting us—'

'I'm not,' said Wallace.

'Good.' She turned her head and spat a wad of spent gum into a nearby trashcan. Before it finished bouncing off the sides, she had replaced it with a fresh piece. It was small and square with a white candy shell. She didn't offer to share.

Petersen stepped back into the room.

'Ten minutes,' he said.

Fifteen minutes later, the detective's cellphone rang. He answered and listened.

'Do we have email here?' he asked.

Schulz cleared his throat and entered from the adjoining room. He pointed at a small monitor, mouse and keyboard sitting off to one side of the PA system.

'We have email on the company computer,' he said.

Stacey snapped her gum and told Schulz to give her partner the address.

Two minutes later, the computer's Inbox showed the arrival of a new message with an attached file.

Stacey clicked on a tiny paperclip icon and waited while a new window opened and the enclosed image filled the screen.

The photo was large and the detective had to scroll down to see the central part of the image.

Wallace moved to look over her shoulder and his breath caught in his throat.

This wasn't possible.

The photo showed Wallace in the driver's seat of the van. The passenger seat beside him was empty and nobody occupied either of the seats behind.

Except for Wallace, the van was empty.

Wallace staggered away from the computer and collided with the desk.

What was happening? How? Why?

He couldn't make sense of it.

Detective Stacey read aloud the message attached to the photo.

'Lone driver. Identified by Canadian passport as Wallace Gordon Carver. Crossed Peace Arch border at fourteen twenty-two today. Zero passengers. Border Patrol has no record of Alicia, Alex or Fred Carver entering the United States of America.'

Wallace's mind reeled.

Photographs don't lie.

But this one did.

It had to.

4

Crow Joe slapped the steering wheel of his '97 Ford pickup in rhythm to the music and laughed at the lyrics. Man, he loved Country music. Those dumb-ass cowboys were always getting themselves into hilarious shit - and that was only the stuff they could sing about on family radio.

The cowpunks he'd known on the rodeo circuit had stories that would curl your toes and make your stomach roil. The clowns and bull riders were the worst. Those boys were downright insane.

Back then, Crow thought he had what it took to ride the lightning and get all the pretty girls cheering. His damn-near Hollywood good looks gave him every advantage: bronzed skin; proud nose and chin; hair the colour of raven's wing, braided into two thick ropes and held in place by his grandfather's traditional Orca headband.

All he was missing was talent and the sheer buck-stupid lack of self-preservation it took to make a living in eight-second increments on the back of an 1,800-pound Brahman that wants nothing more than to step on your skull and spray your brains in the dirt.

He got bucked off so many times that the only purse he ever took home was Delilah. Short, sassy and with a dimpled smile that could part clouds, Delilah nursed his bruises, knit his bones and made his body tingle. Later, she bore him two beautiful daughters, neither of whom had

even seen a real Brahman bull, never mind tried to ride one.

The biggest beast Crow straddled now was the padded driver's seat of a 28,000-pound, forty-passenger, diesel-electric bus.

Crow slapped the steering wheel of his pickup again and raised his voice to sing the chorus of Joe Nichols' 'Tequila Makes Her Clothes Fall Off'. Mercifully, he was riding alone.

Before his off-key rendition could shatter glass and assault the night air, it was interrupted by the vibration of his cellphone.

He dug the small silver phone out of his shirt pocket, glanced at the Caller ID and winced. He switched off the radio and answered the call.

'Hey, baby.'

'Where the hell did you run off to?'

'Didn't you get my note?'

'I got your damn note. Here, let me read it to you. "Gone out." What kinda note is that?'

'Short and sweet. Just like you.'

'Don't ...'

Crow heard it in her voice. The tiniest pause; the smallest rumble of laughter. Delilah wasn't as angry as she was making out. He guessed he should have talked to her instead of leaving a note, but the girls were acting all moody and whispery and had trapped their mom in the bathroom for some big powwow over something they didn't want him to share in.

'Look,' he said, 'I'm sorry, but you and the girls were in some big discussion and I didn't know how to help and—'

Delilah laughed. 'Do you know what we were talking about?'

‘Well, no, but I knew it was probably something girly and —’

‘Menstruation.’

Crow blanched. ‘Oh.’

‘Yeah, *oh.*’ Delilah’s imitation of him made Crow sound like Fred Flintstone. ‘One of the girls’ friends had an embarrassing accident at school, and they’re both getting to the age when they need to be prepared. At least the school seemed to handle it with some sensitivity, which makes me happy. In my day—’

‘We should have had boys,’ Crow interrupted. Not that a discussion of reproductive cycles made him squeamish – he had been in the delivery room with her both times, and that kinda kills squeamish for ever – it was just, well ... he loved that Delilah was a woman, for all the obvious reasons, but he didn’t really need reminding of all the ins and outs that entailed.

‘Uh-huh. You think boys would have been easier?’

Crow shrugged, then remembered Delilah couldn’t see him.

‘Maybe not easier,’ he said, ‘but less—’

‘If you say gross, I’ll scream.’

‘Complicated,’ said Crow, sounding defensive. ‘I was gonna say complicated.’

‘And you think teenage boys jerking off in their bed sheets twenty times a day is less complicated?’

Crow cringed. ‘Now who’s getting gross?’

Delilah laughed again. She had always loved to make him squirm. And she was a master at it.

‘Where are you anyway?’ she asked.

‘Wallace asked me to look after the house.’

'Wallace? I thought they were only going away for the weekend?'

'Yeah, but there's been a stray cat hanging around the garden shed and the dummy wants to make sure it gets fed. He didn't want to leave food out 'cause the raccoons would get it all.'

'What's he need a cat for? Aren't two boys enough?'

'Beats me,' Crow said. 'I told him he should take the garden hose to it, but you know these white men. All soft in the head.'

'But not white girls, right?'

'Well, now that you mention it—'

'Hey!'

Crow grinned. 'You know it's your forked tongue that kept me on the Rez.'

Delilah nearly purred. 'Well, why don't you turn the truck around and we'll put that to the test.'

Crow grinned wider. 'I'm almost at Wallace's. Let me feed the damn cat and then I'll head straight home.'

'Wake me if I'm asleep.'

'Count on it.'

Crow hung up the phone and turned off the main road into the quiet cul-de-sac where his best friend had lived for the last ten years.

An unexpected sight caused him to slam on the brakes. The front tyres squealed in protest and the old Ford's chassis shuddered.

Four police cars blocked the way, their red and blue flashers near-blinding in the dark.