

LYNDA RUTLEDGE



BRAVE
NEW
WANDA

a novel



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You know who you are.

We'll never forget you.

Chapter 2

*The European cuckoo lays its eggs in nests
of other birds and flies away leaving its
eggs to be hatched by others.*

—Wonderful World of Biology

Seven floors above, Dr. Charles Youngblood was wrapping up a consultation, speaking soothingly to the couple sitting in front of his big desk, holding hands, arms straining, straight as scarecrows. As he delivered the usual spiel, he made a mental note to remember to push the chairs closer together before the next appointment.

“Then we’d inseminate you with your choice of donation from our sperm bank catalog, matching physical characteristics as well as musical, mechanical, athletic abilities to your own.”

Finished, he interlaced his fingers, sat back in his plush leather chair and waited.

“I don’t know,” mumbled the man, snatching a glance at his wife. “Another man’s . . .”

The woman squeezed the man’s hand.

“Some choose to view it as adopting with half the child’s biological makeup yours,” the doctor added helpfully. He squelched an urge to check his watch.

“It would still be ours, honey. We could keep the secret,” the woman said.

“Who would this donor be?” asked the man. “Could he, you know, find us?”

The doctor smiled patronizingly. “He signs all rights away, and the records are permanently sealed. You’d probably be surprised how often this procedure is done.”

The woman perked up. “How often?”

“Some estimates suggest as many as 500,000 possible donor births in this country since 1950.” With that, the doctor smiled broadly, warmly, professionally, and got to his feet. “Ask my nurse Carla for some reading material, and call when you’re ready.”

The couple was hardly out the door when the phone beeped. He ignored it twice; it beeped again as a red-haired nurse stuck her head in the door.

“Dr. Crouch. On line 2.”

He made a face, looking at his watch.

“I think you’d better take it,” the nurse said and waited.

Not liking the strange look on his nurse’s face, the doctor picked up the phone: “Yes, Bill. What can I do for you?” He listened for a moment and then sank ever so slowly back into his chair. “Well, it’s possible . . . She’s where?” He switched the receiver to his other ear as he heard the rest. “Yes. Fine. I’ll look into it.” He put the receiver back on its cradle in slow motion.

The nurse was at the window craning her neck toward the doctors’ parking lot.

“Don’t you have some files to misplace, Carla?” the doctor snapped as he strode over to the door and held it open for his nurse to walk through. Closing it behind her, he moved to the window and gazed down at the parking lot scene. Absently, he started to crack a knuckle and caught himself: Awful habit. Instead he grabbed the phone and punched in an extension number:

“P.R.? Patty Hightower, please.”



Down by the doctors’ entrance, the big security guard wiped at his upper lip. He squinted at the asphalt sizzle; he checked his watch again; he flexed his grip on his walkie-talkie. The young guard fanned himself with his guard cap. In front of them, Wanda passed by, and then passed by again.

Wanda’s grandmother was now squirming in her seat, having watched her granddaughter pace like a fenced cat for going on twenty minutes. “Wanda Louise Ledbetter, my bladder’s talking to me now! If I had Harley Dean right here, I’d wring his scrawny trucker neck,” the old woman announced, having repeated the threat now more times than Wanda and the guards cared to count. “But first I’d make him admit he’s a liar! That devil started all this.”

Wanda kept pacing, mind revving thunder. Harley *had* started it all; she knew that. The dumb peckerwood had started most everything. Things were shitty enough living the whole last year in the doublewide mobile home out

on the edge of College Mound with the stupid trucker—only someone like her mama would take up with a guy who looked like a junkyard cowboy Elvis. Lately she'd even taken to keeping her grandma's old .22 loaded and ready under her bed since her tiny room's particleboard excuse for a door wouldn't close half the time.

Yesterday, though. Yesterday had been the shittiest of all. Bad enough her mama was dead, Harley killing her as good as if he'd put a gun to her head. And bad enough she had to stand there in the poor section of College Mound public cemetery, itching in her old Sunday dress she'd just about grown out of, alone with the piss-head trucker since they'd run out of relatives and Harley'd run off all their friends. But then she'd actually had to ride back with Harley to that tin house on wheels as if he were family, with him already halfway to pickled. The moment she hit the front door, she'd stripped out of that Sunday dress, whipped on her cutoffs and boots, grabbed her mama's beat-up suitcase and started throwing all her worldly belongings into it as quick as she could, the .22 resting on her bed. Just in case.

That's when Harley appeared, standing in the rickety door in his Western-cut suit with the dive-bomb yokes, bolo tie pulled loose, spitting snuff into an empty beer can. "Whatya doing, sweet thang?"

"What's it look like, Brainiac," she'd snapped. "I'm gone."

She heard Harley smack his lips. "Well, now, you don't have to do that. We're still family."

The trailer was so small, she could smell his beer and snuff breath over her shoulder as she packed. She could have puked right there.

"C'mon, sweet thang, your mama would've wanted you to stay. Gimme them keys. You can't even drive."

Wanda pulled a drawer out of the plywood dresser and upended it into the old suitcase. "If you think I'm so young I'd believe such cock and bull, you're dumber than you look. And that's pretty dumb." She threw the drawer down and pulled out the other one and shook it out over the bag.

Harley sniffed. "You think you're better'n me, don't ya? You are such a little smart-ass. I'da whipped that out of you long ago if your mama would've let me."

Wanda turned her back on him, packing as fast as she could.

"You know, there's something real funny about you," he said. "Why, you haven't even shed a tear for your mama."

Wanda's fingers slipped off the drawer and it fell between them. She kicked

it. "Shut up, Harley—*just shut up.*"

"Where you going? To your crazy grandmother's?" He spat into the can. Saliva and tobacco dribbled down his chin, and he swiped at it with the back of an unsteady hand. "Hell, girl, you couldn't even get that old woman to the funeral."

She grabbed up the stack of library books piled beside the bed and dropped them like bombs into the suitcase. "She's just not feeling good, that's all."

"She's *nuts*," Harley said. "Probably down in that fallout shelter right now, or out asking strangers for nickels. If Louise hadn't gone and died, the old lady'd been in a rest home by now."

Wanda whirled all the way around. "Take that back. Mama'd never do that."

"And if I have my way, she'll still get there, if she gives me any flak over the stuff Louise stored over there. I was her husband, you know; I got a right to anything of value."

"You're lying through your fat face!" Wanda yelled.

"Call the rest home. The old lady can't take care of you. You quit that packing now."

He touched her arm.

She jerked away so hard from his touch that she all but fell back on the suitcase. "You're n-not my daddy—" she yelled, stuttering with anger as she scrambled back to her feet. "My daddy's dead. And—and—he was a generous, kind, wonderful man who'd never put Granny *anywhere* but in her own house."

Leaning heavily back on the doorjamb, Harley snorted. "There you go again about that damn sissy daddy of yours."

"Don't you say anything about my daddy or you'll be flat sorry. I'll sic Wild Thing on you—"

"I'll cut off its other ear. The mutt's lucky I hadn't poisoned it."

"If my daddy was alive . . ."

"Shut up about your daddy! I'm sick of hearing it!" Harley yelled. "That wimp couldn't even get it up. You don't have a clue, do you?"

Wanda stopped dead still.

Harley leaned near, smiling smugly. "Louise told me about you. That wonderful *daddy* of yours ain't no more your daddy than *Jeezus H. Christ*."

And then he had said it. Enjoying it, leaning close with his sideburns and his beer and snuff breath: "They bought a guy's sperm over there in Big D to

make you, smart girl. Parkland Hospital, where Kennedy croaked. You're not even natural. You're like some kind of bastard, some baby Frankenstein. Louise figured that was why you were so 'funny'. Hell, no telling who your papa is."

Liar! Wanda had yelled. *Take it back, take it back right now.* She had grabbed up the .22 and pointed it at him to make him take back those awful lying words. *Take it back!*

He sidestepped like a Gulf Coast crab. She jerked.

The gun went off.

Boom.

And they both stared down at the hole in the tip of his dress boot, fancy silver tip blasted clean away, neither of them breathing . . .

. . . until a trickle of blood came oozing out the black hole.

Harley swallowed his snuff.

"You . . . you . . . *SH-SH-SHOT* me!" Lunging at Wanda, he tripped and fell face down in a howl.

Which gave Wanda a second's head start. Her fingers frozen around the .22, she snatched her bag, jumped over Harley, stumbled out the door and down the trailer steps. Whistling Wild Thing frantically into the car, she somehow started the old Cadillac and roared away, jolting and jerking toward the road. But when she looked in the rearview mirror and saw that Harley was hobbling toward his eighteen-wheeler, she almost panicked. Without thinking, she stomped on the brakes, swerved the car around 180 degrees and put all those years of watching TV to practical use. Careening the Caddy between the teetering Harley and his rig, she aimed the .22 at the big tires and blew through the nearest set with all the shots she had left in the little automatic, the sound drowning out Harley's rolling cuss and Wild Thing's righteous barking.

But as she drove fast, faster, faster away, straining to see the road over the steering wheel, she began to think hard. She wasn't thinking about Harley's toe. She wasn't really thinking about Harley at all. She was thinking about all the differences she'd noticed between herself and the little bit of family she'd ever known. She didn't look much like any of them. Nobody was blond, or hazel-eyed, and there wasn't a double joint in the bunch. Except for her mama's big ears, she could be a stranger. And what about how smart she was? "It just happens," she'd heard the guidance counselor tell her mama. "That's why we call it 'gifted.'" It must have been from her daddy, she had always thought.

Her *daddy* . . .

She careened the Cadillac toward town as echoes of Harley's words rumbled

up like coming thunder in her bones. She could feel it in her chest, up her arms, into her fingers gripping the big steering wheel, quivering, coming fast.

At the town's one stoplight, she stomped both feet on the brakes, bouncing Wild Thing into the dashboard. Swerving the Cadillac over a curb, she came to rest behind the College Mound Public Library, eyes peeled for the town's lone cop, and rushed in the back door to the greetings of the librarians.

"Look who's here! Wanda Louise! How you doin', sugar?"

"Such a shame about your mother, sweetie. Anything we can do?"

Wanda made a beeline toward the catalog computer.

"Ethel, you ever see this girl read?" one of the librarians said to the other. "Photographic memory, like nothing I ever seen. And since I gave her that book on speed-reading, well!"

Wanda hit the computer search, her fingers now thundering blind.

The librarians shared concerned looks. "Sweetie? Can we help you?"

But the librarians kept their distance as Wanda located the thickest volume on human and animal reproduction the library owned, *The Wonderful World of Biology*, and checked it out. Then plopping down in front of the Internet computer, she searched, downloaded and printed out everything she could find about artificial insemination and quick links to stuff called "assisted reproductive technologies," jumping each time somebody came in the tiny library's door. Finally, grabbing up the book and the paper pile in her arms, she hurried past inquiring librarian eyes and out the back door.

Pushing Wild Thing over, she thrust her armful into the Caddy's backseat, started the Caddy with a jerk and lunged away down the closest country road. When she felt safe, she pulled onto a side road and began to speed-read the entire pile, committing it all to her photographic memory. She read and read, the facts jumbling and bumbling through her mind, as if even her thoughts would stutter with the weight of it all. Finally, when there was nothing more to read, nothing more to grab, nothing more of words to stop the thundering, she stumbled out of the car and fell back against its rear bumper.

Wild Thing hopped out of the car, sniffed at the air, then nudged Wanda's arm with a wet nose, but Wanda barely noticed. Holding her head in both hands, she clamped her eyes shut, trying hard to think straight: Things were shitty, all right. Things hurt you bad enough when you're just hanging around, just getting from one minute to the next trying to figure out why you're here and who sent for you and what the poot it all meant while you're stuck all day with kids dumber than dirt and teachers with run-down eyes, studying the

geography of places you'll never get to go and the spelling of words you'll never use. Then your mama takes off with some no-good jerk she tells your secrets to and then dies. And then dies . . . And then goes and goddam dies. And now you find out you might not be even the mess you thought you were.

Wanda took a deep, dull breath. It might have been a shitty life, but at least it was hers.

Suddenly, tears began pushing hard against the back of her eyeballs. And that got Wanda moving. Jumping to her feet, she decided right then and there she wasn't going to blubber. No sir. Ordering Wild Thing back in the car, she threw open the passenger door. There, on the floorboard, lay her mother's cowhide saddle purse, busted open, its insides spurting from it, having rolled finally from its hiding place under the seat where her mother must have shoved it one last time.

Wanda took hold of the saddle-horn flap with just her fingertips and turned the purse right side up, picking up her mother's runaway things: lint-covered Tic-Tacs, a rat-tail comb, her lucky Las Vegas lighter, a lipstick tube (Revlon Million Dollar Red), a pack of her stinky Virginia Slims and her old leatherette wallet, open to the picture compartment. Only there weren't any pictures. Except the one of some old-time movie star named James Dean that had come with the wallet, now so worn-out that the scratched plastic was stuck to the guy's face.

Wanda eased down onto the broken seat, running a finger slowly across the paper picture's face. You'd think her mama would've had one picture of her. Other mothers do that, carry pictures of important people, to show them off. Some stupid school picture or something. But all she carried around was a picture of this dead movie star, dead as her mama, dead as her daddy. No, *not* her daddy, not her *real* daddy . . . The tears pushed from behind her eyeballs again; she pushed back, staring soulfully at James Dean. Hey—*he* could be her daddy, for all she knew.

And then Wanda Ledbetter got stubborn, as only a brand-new orphan could upon hearing she might have an extra parent somewhere.

What would she do?

She'd get mean. Everybody thought she was a pain now? A difficult child? Well, hide and watch. Let Harley call the cops. She'd make a run for it, hit the road. Never look back, Jack. She was going to be too mean to live, that's what she was going to be.

But first, she was going to find her daddy.

Her real daddy.

She stood up straight and worked hard at feeling mean clear through.

Then, eyeing the streets for Harley or the law, she had driven back into town and over to her granny's house, where she talked herself blue making promises she never meant to keep in order to coax her granny, and her driver's license, onto the road toward the secret that lay somewhere in the Dallas hospital now covering the sky behind her.

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Wanda stopped pacing. The parking lot smelled of hot tar and gasoline fumes. She took a big breath, glancing around her, security car on one side, dead mother's junk heap on the other. Swallowing back a sudden tremble of leftover thunder, she quickly crossed her arms, too mean to live once again. Then she turned her gaze toward the tall hospital building, as the two guards fidgeted near the security car and her grandmother mumbled in the Cadillac, everybody waiting for the next move.

"Yes, God's truth, I'd do it," Wanda's grandmother was saying. "I'd wring Harley's neck good for all this, that's for danged sure. But first I'd go to the bathroom."