

No Stranger to Pain
Bonnie E. Carlson

He needed to get away—away from people, from devices, from civilization. To start over in a new place where no one knew him, to develop a new persona. Joachin had spent some time researching Silverton, Colorado, and was convinced that for now, this old mining town was his best bet. He'd found the name of the hostel online and made a reservation. For a mere twenty-five bucks a night, a bed in the bunkhouse of the Blair Street Hostel could be yours, shared with up to six other guys.

He hoped he could outrun his past, not that it was a very long or very bad past, but still, worth getting as far away from as possible. He yearned to be unencumbered by things of any kind. Possessions only got you into trouble after all, didn't they, even if you didn't have many? His one nod to civilization was an old iPhone 5 that still worked, sort of, as long as he changed the battery every year.

The timing was perfect. Early fall meant witnessing the leaves change into their autumn colors, something he'd only ever seen in photographs. No seasons to speak of or colorful foliage in Riverside, California, where he'd spent his whole life. Now, he longed for a glimpse of a craggy mountainside covered in bright-yellow aspens, with some evergreens thrown in for contrast. He wanted to escape civilization, to breathe crystal clear air, to fish in sparkling streams untouched by pollution, maybe see a beaver house firsthand. He longed to gaze at cathedrals of towering, spiky fir trees and listen to the quaking of aspens—a faint rustling—all golden and occasionally flaming orange. Was that too much to ask?

So, Joachin hitchhiked from Riverside to tiny Silverton with Cleo. The love of his life was a sixteen-pound mongrel with long, silky, fur, white and amber. Sure, Cleo was a bit of a froufrou name, he knew that. She'd come to him with that name while still a puppy. He didn't have the heart to change it. After all, it was short for Cleopatra, an awesome, royal name.

On the night Joachin arrived in late September, having hitchhiked through Indian reservations with a long-distance trucker who picked him up on I-40, he had to hike into town from the place where the trucker dropped him off. The ride through Colorado had been a disappointment. The trees were not gorgeous and astonishing, because this year the summer's drought had muted the colors. He saw plenty of faded chamisa though, its normally bright yellow flowers past prime and fluffy, the wind spreading its weightless seeds far and near.

Although Silverton had only a few streets, as soon as the trucker sped off Joachin pulled out a printed map he kept folded in his shirt pocket. In the fading light, he quickly located the hostel on Blair Street and dragged himself the few remaining blocks to a large, nondescript buff-colored building.

Tossing back his long black hair, he walked up a single step into the hostel. The odor smacked him in the face: bodies unwashed, stale cooking smells, and piss. He was pretty rank himself after five days on the road with no showers. He glanced around the large foyer. To his left stood a wooden counter with a mirror behind it. A fake Tiffany lamp adorned its linoleum surface. Not a soul in sight. Next to the lamp a large bell waited to be rung. He obliged. As he stared at his brown face in the mirror, he heard a young female voice yell from the bowels of the house, "Hang on. Be right there."

While he waited, he inspected the premises. The foyer looked into what appeared to be someone's parlor, large, with three faded old sofas pushed up against the walls. Only one wall had windows, two, that were covered by dusty-looking drapery, making it dark.

As he hefted a heavy pack off his back a young woman approached him. "Howdy."

Joachin pulled Cleo out of his jacket. "Hi. I understand you allow pets."

"We do," she said, pushing her long brown hair back behind her ears, "as long as you follow the rules. Who's this little cutie?"

"Cleo here won't cause any trouble. She keeps to herself and won't bark or anything. And she never does her business where she isn't supposed to." He put Cleo down on the floor. "I'm, uh...money's kinda tight, right now, so what's my best option?"

"Well, we have the bunkhouse—up to six guys—for twenty-five a night. And we've got three shared rooms with two to four people for thirty-five a night. Everyone shares a bathroom, and one shower a night is included with the price."

He sure could use that shower. Joachin weighed whether it was worth an extra ten bucks a night to have fewer roommates.

"You know what? No one's in the bunkhouse now, so you could have it to yourself for twenty-five bucks tonight." Her sparkling amber eyes smiled. "We'll have to see about the next few nights."

"Sold." He pulled out his wallet and signed a form she thrust in front of him.

He paid in cash, and she took him upstairs and showed him the room. It looked clean enough. Smelled better than downstairs, like Pinesol. Triple-decker bunk beds. If it filled up it'll be awful, he thought. But try not to get too far ahead of yourself, Joachin. Tonight, it's just you and Cleo.

He put his stuff down. "Can you recommend a cheap place for dinner?"

She suggested a hamburger place around the corner on Green Street called Golden Block Brewery. "Nothing here's cheap, but they have excellent burgers and Mexican food. By the way, I'm Cassidy." She thrust her hand out.

"Thanks. Joachin." He shook her pale, soft hand. "Will my stuff be safe here?"

"It'll be fine. Be back by eleven."

He showered, donned clean jeans and a red plaid flannel shirt, then headed off for dinner, Cleo on her leash. Golden Block was dark inside. A long, curving wooden bar with a mirror behind it lined one wall, with booths lining the other. A few beat up wooden tables littered the space in between. He sat at the bar even though he didn't drink, not that he was old enough. Seeing what drugs and alcohol had done to his mother, he decided to avoid that shit. Who knows what that crap might have done to his father, whoever the hell he was?

He perused the menu, noting the boast that the burgers were made with fresh, local—never frozen—Colorado beef. He nursed a lemonade and overheard two grizzled old guys talking at the other end of the long bar.

"Know anybody who wants a dishwasher job?"

"Who's looking?"

"Whitey."

"Okay. Good boss. I'll ask around."

He stared at his image in the mirror. I could do that, he thought. If it turns out I like this town well enough to stay. But first, dinner.

An oldish guy who looked like he'd been around the block a few times shuffled toward him. Craggy dark skin and an almost white ponytail down to his waist. "What'll you have, sonny?" When he talked his full gray beard moved.

Sonny? Had anyone ever called him that? He ordered a burger with green chili sauce and Monterey Jack cheese and sweet potato fries.

The bartender followed up with, "How about some guacamole and chips while you're waiting?"

Joachin nodded. A splurge.

"Looks like you could use it."

He hated it when strangers commented on how thin he was.

After he finished his dinner, as tasty as the hype on the menu, he walked back to the hostel. Carrying Cleo in his arms, he mounted the stairs to the bunkhouse and tossed his clothes onto an empty bunk. Then he and Cleo fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

After a good night's rest, with Cleo on her leash, Joachin left Blair House the next morning to explore and find breakfast. The handful of streets formed a long, thin grid. Mountains surrounded the town. A railroad came up from the south, from Durango, bringing loads of tourists.

By the end of his day of exploration, he liked the feel of Silverton and decided to stay for a while—if he could find a job. Somehow it felt right, with its tacky gift shops and coffee shops and roaming, elderly tourists. No Starbucks, a good sign. Everyone knew that Starbucks was synonymous with civilization.

In a little town like this, he guessed the way you found out something was to ask around. The idea of being able to get to know everyone held appeal. Standing in the Blair House foyer, he rang the bell to find Cassidy. Maybe she could steer him toward a job.

She sent him back to Golden Block, where he'd eaten last night.

When he'd asked about the dishwashing job, the guy he talked to told him to take a seat in the last booth in the back. Someone would be with him shortly. Twenty minutes later the bartender from the other night came over and slid in.

Without introducing himself or asking Joachin's name he said, "So you think you want to live in Silverton for a while and wash dishes at my bar?"

Joachin stared at his tan, wrinkled face, feeling a flush rise to his ears. "I mean, yeah, I think so. My name's Joachin." He thrust his hand across the table toward the man.

The man ignored it. "You ever been around winter? Where ya from?"

"Well, we didn't really have winter in Southern Califor—"

"See, that's what I mean. You got no idea what you're gettin' yourself into."

Unsure how to respond, Joachin squirmed in his seat. He honestly hadn't thought about winter, whether he could handle it or not. How bad could it get? As he considered how to

respond, the guy thrust his hand across the table—finally—and said, “Howdy. Name’s Whitey. This here’s my place. What brings you to our tiny little town?”

This guy Whitey sure asked a lot of questions. Joachin hesitated. After all, he’d come to Silverton to escape his past not unload it onto a stranger. He cleared his throat. “Well, Whitey, I came to start over, to find something different from what I was used to in Southern California.” He wasn’t going to say more. Unless he had to.

Whitey fingered the end of his long, white-gray ponytail and then looked up at Joachin. “How old are you?”

Shit, he should have anticipated that. He was tempted to say that he was already twenty-one, but then what if Whitey asked to see his ID?

“Twenty-one next summer.”

Whitey raised his eyebrows. “You look much young—”

“I get that a lot.” Another thing he hated—how young everyone thought he looked. He went for his wallet in his back pocket. “I can show you my ID.”

Whitey waved it away. “Don’t bother. I believe you. What kind of jobs have you done before?”

Darn. He should have expected these questions and thought it through. “Let’s see,” he said, buying time. “Um, I’ve had three or four jobs since I graduated from high school, like Dunkin Donuts and a hardware store—”

Whitey held his hand up in a stop motion. “Okay, here’s the job. It’s running the dishwasher, putting away the clean dishes, clearing and bussing tables, mopping floors. Whatever else around here the boss asks you to do. It’s hard work for minimum wage.”

“Benefits?”

Whitey threw back his head and roared. “You mean like retirement? You planning to retire in the next couple years?” he asked, still chuckling.

Joachin felt the hot blush spreading from his neck to his brow. When he got out of foster care, they told him to ask about benefits. Now he looked like an idiot. “No,” he stammered, “I meant, like, health insurance.”

“You got some health problems I should know about?”

“No!” Joachin blurted out. “I’m healthy I just...”

“Relax, kid.”

Joachin was feeling anything but relaxed though, his mind racing as he tried to figure out how he could salvage this interview. The more elusive the job seemed, the more he wanted it.

He inhaled a big breath and let it out. Looked straight into Whitey’s ice-blue eyes. “Listen, I think we got off on the wrong foot. I’m a healthy twenty-year-old who hasn’t had too many jobs yet. I’m trying to make my way in the world and I’m willing to work hard.” The words rushed out. “That’s me,” he says, pointing to his chest, with pride. “That’s who you’ll get if you hire me.” His voice shook and his face burned. “You won’t regret it.”

“Okay, kid, simmer down. The job is yours if you want it. When can you start?”

Joachin’s jack-o’-lantern grin and sparkling dark eyes could have lit up that room. “Tomorrow?”

Sure, it only paid minimum wage, but he'd get two meals on the days he worked, which made it a good deal. He couldn't afford to keep staying at the hostel though, even at only twenty-five dollars a night.

He started the next day at lunchtime and put in a full day. It was busy, so the day passed quickly, and he wasn't all lost up in his head like usual. He hoofed it back to the hostel at nine, where he'd paid for two more nights. Cassidy sat in the otherwise empty parlor.

"Hey. How are you? I got that job I was asking you about yesterday. With Whitey. Thanks for the tip." He tipped his faded baseball cap.

"Oh sure, anytime. Glad it worked out."

"Well, I'm bushed. Heading to bed. See you tomorrow."

A couple of days later she came in at six with a little girl for dinner. Joachin noticed them as he hauled a heavy gray plastic bin of dirty dishes to the kitchen. Cassidy reached out and touched his arm. "Hi, Joachin."

"Hey, Cassidy. Hi. And who's this?" He grinned stupidly at the toddler, then made a funny face, acting like clown.

"This is my two and a half-year-old, Zephyr. Say hi, Zeph."

The kid shook her head no and Joachin laughed. "Where's my respect, little one?"

"When are you off?" Cassidy asked. "Maybe we could get together."

Was she asking him out?

"Not off until ten tonight." He shifted the heavy bin of dishes to the other side, the glasses and china clinking together in the gray bin.

"Bummer. That's pretty late," Cassidy said. "I'm up early for my job with the little ones... How about the weekend, or your days off?"

"You have another job besides the hostel?"

"Yep. I work two jobs. I'm at Zephyr's day care during the day."

That surprised him. Both that she had a day job and had a two-year-old. "Okay, so let me ask Whitey what my schedule's gonna be. I've only worked a few days so far so I'm not sure."

That night after work, as he strolled back to the hostel, he couldn't stop thinking about Cassidy. What her long brown hair would feel like, how she would smell. How soft her skin would feel. He looked forward to seeing her at Blair Street when he got home. Her interest in him made him ridiculously happy. But when he walked through the front door the place was empty, and he didn't think he should ring the bell. His shoulders slumped as he mounted the stairs to his room.

Never having had a girlfriend, Joachin wasn't sure how to behave. He should have gone back to her table before she left to tell her that Whitey wasn't there tonight, so he still wasn't sure about days off.

He asked around for a new place to live, in a rooming house maybe, if such a place existed. It only took two days to find an affordable room upstairs in somebody's attic. At six feet

he mostly couldn't stand up in there, and his bed was just a mattress in the floor. He did have a comfortable chair though, where he could read. Only a shared bath and no kitchen facilities, but that was okay for now.

Two weeks later, Joachin took Cassidy on their first date, dinner at another restaurant, a little fancier than the brewery.

Cassidy looked up from the menu. "So, Joachin, how'd you end up in Silverton? You know we've only got less than seven hundred people living here?"

He grinned at her. "And it's at 9,300 feet, which makes it one of the highest towns in the U.S. I studied it before I came here." He paused to take a sip of his lemonade. "Have you lived here your whole life?" He loved her pale skin, those freckles and that upturned nose. Tonight, she wore eye makeup that accentuated her amber eyes.

"Nah, just a few years. Followed a boyfriend here. Good riddance to that asshole. That's how I got Zephyr."

He wasn't sure how to respond. Did she regret having Zephyr or was she happy about it? Must be hard to support a little kid on your own being so young. He wondered who was babysitting her tonight. "That sounds tough. I'm impressed with how hard you work."

Cassidy blushed. "You do what you need to do." She sipped of her coffee. "You still didn't answer my question. What brought you here?"

Damn, he should have expected this. Of course, if he got a girlfriend—or any friend, probably—they were gonna want to know about you, who you were, where you came from. He needed a minute to think, to decide how much he wanted to say.

"I hitchhiked here from Riverside—near Los Angeles—where I grew up. Big city. Lived there my whole life."

"Is your family still there?"

"I, uh, don't really have any family—"

"What do you mean? Everyone's got a family."

His face felt hot. This was a mistake. "Um, well, what I mean is...the family I had is... kinda gone, I guess." The urge to bolt, to get out of there as fast as possible, slammed him.

"You know what, Joachin, it's none of my business. I didn't mean to pry. It's just that—"

"How 'bout you?" He'd never learned small talk and felt tongue-tied. What did people talk about on a first date? "Where'd you live before Silverton?"

She told him about growing up in a little town in New Mexico, the middle child in a big family she got lost in. "My dad was a drunk and beat my mom. Couldn't wait to get out of there. Left when I was seventeen." Her voice turned bitter. "Thought I'd be so much smarter than my stupid mom and ended up with a jerk that treated me just as bad as my dad."

The uncomfortable silence demanded to be filled. "I guess my background's not all that different. Well, it's different, but just as shitty, probably worse."

"Like, how?"

Were they going to play the game of who had the worst childhood? “Never met my dad. Spent most of my childhood in foster care, changing schools all the time, ’cause Mom had some pretty bad mental issues. Plus, she was an addict—”

“Ooh, way worse. Sorry. No brothers or sisters?”

Did he really want to get into this? This ugly past he was trying to escape? He sighed. “How about if we save that for another time. Wanna take a little walk around town?”

They did walk and he took her hand. She seemed to be leading the way.

“Where are we going?”

“I thought we’d head back to my place. Visit a little longer there. I need to let the sitter go home.”

“Sounds good.” His heart raced with excitement. Was he finally going to get to kiss those full lips?

Cassidy lived in a dingy one-bedroom apartment above a coffeeshop. She handed a twenty to an older woman who said Zephyr was sound asleep and left. They sat on her lumpy brown sofa, the only place to sit. Would there be more small talk? He’d only ever had sex a few times, hookups with girls he didn’t even much like. This felt different, more serious, more real.

Cassidy surprised him when she climbed on top of him straightaway, straddling her legs across his body. She weighed hardly anything. His lust awakened, he finally got to kiss her. It was as thrilling as he’d hoped. After a few minutes of smooching, Cassidy unbuttoned her blouse, revealing milky little braless breasts. He leaned in to kiss her nipples and she led him into the bedroom where Zephyr snored softly in a tiny bed next to hers.

He wasn’t prepared for this. “I...I...I didn’t bring condoms or anything. You already have a kid and I don’t—”

“Don’t worry. I won’t let you come inside me.”

“Can we turn the lights off?” Discomfort made him squirm as he realized she was more experienced than he was. Still, he loved every second of their lovemaking.

Afterwards, as they drank chamomile tea with honey, the urge arose to tell her about his past. In fact, he wanted to tell her everything, a surprising feeling he’d never had before.

Winter settled in, with its snowfalls and frigid weather. The ground stayed white, which turned to brownish gray as the winter wore on. Whitey was right, it took some getting used to for a SoCal boy. His thing with Cassidy didn’t unfold the way he’d hoped, not that he knew what to expect. They didn’t see each other as often as wanted to, which made him even crazier about her. He and Zephyr worshipped one another. And Zephyr adored little Cleo.

By the time they’d survived the holidays, Cassidy knew all about the past he was running from. The father he searched for but never found. The little brother, Diego, who got sent to different foster homes because, as his social worker explained, “No one wants both a toddler and a teenager.” He even told her about how he stopped trying to make friends, because losing them hurt too much.

In fifth grade, he’d had a best friend for three whole years, Connor. Then he had to move families again and change schools. Losing Connor tore his heart out. He’d vowed right then and

there, no more friends. No more sharing of secrets. No more tales of the crazy mother he had, a troubled young Latina bouncing around the mental health system, in and out of the hospital. On her meds, Mom was okay. But she hated taking them and then stopped. Street drugs eventually replaced prescribed meds.

He told her about all of that, bared his soul. Dumped his secrets. It was all out there on the table. It left him as vulnerable as a newborn kitten and wanting to be with her every second.

In February, Zephyr's father returned, the "asshole" Cassidy had mentioned on their first date. And just like that, their relationship ended. No real explanation other than, "He's Zephyr's daddy. She deserves a father."

He knew all about not having a father. But still.

At the restaurant everyone figured out he'd been dumped. No secrets in tiny towns. He moped around wearing a glum expression, didn't eat.

One night, Whitey came up to him at the end of his shift. "Jochin, I'm worried about you. You okay?"

"I don't know. I guess." In the months he'd worked at the bar, Whitey had become the closest thing to a father he'd ever had. He couldn't look at Whitey when he was lying. Never was a good liar.

"What happened? You're not your old cheerful self." He reached out and lifted up Jochin's head, peering into his dark eyes. "Somethin's wrong. You wanna talk?"

Word around town was Whitey was a long-time recovered heroin addict. He ran a drug-free support group for locals and those passing through at Silverton's only church. So, he knew a thing or two about messed-up guys. They sat down in a booth after the restaurant closed and Jochin told Whitey what had happened with Cassidy.

"I hate to tell you this, son, but I'm not surprised. Cassidy's a sweet young thing, cute as they get, but trouble. Not that it'll make it hurt any less, but you're better off without her."

Tears sprang to his eyes. "She broke my heart."

"Yep, heartbreakin' is what she does best. But you'll survive. Listen, I have a suggestion. It's gonna sound weird but try to keep an open mind."

"Okay." Jochin was all ears.

Whitey told him about a Buddhist group that met every week to meditate or chant at the church where he held his support group. Jochin didn't even know what Buddhism was. Despite his skepticism, he started going. They were a ragtag group, men and women, mostly older than him. Some of them also attended the drug support group, no strangers to pain. A few of the older guys took him under their wing.

He'd heard of karma but never understood it before. It was odd to think of life as an endless cycle of suffering and rebirth. He got the suffering part, though.

The meditation was hard, and he fidgeted when he should be still. His monkey mind raced all the time, unbidden thoughts bombarding his brain.

"Happens to everybody," a gray old codger observed. "What's important is your intention, so keep trying."

He did better with the group than he did on his own.

As spring approached with its longer and warmer days, purple and yellow crocuses poked through the ground and he began to meditate daily at home. It calmed him down some, so he could think about his future.

One sunny spring day, snow melting everywhere, daffodils blooming, he accepted a ride down to Durango. At the Durango Roasters, while ordering coffee, he overheard three people talking about their classes at a local community college. After he returned, he googled it and found Pueblo Community College in Mancos, just south of Durango. Maybe it was time to get on with his life, to stop hiding. He thought about his high school grades, which had never been important before. Maybe this was his chance for rebirth, to start over, to move forward with his life. Wasn't that why he came to Silverton in the first place?

He spoke to an admissions counselor who suggested he might be eligible for admission. The prospect of college brought out his worst inner critic. Unwelcome voices told him, You're not good enough for college. Not smart enough. Kids like you don't go to college.

But the guys in the meditation group encouraged him to apply. On the other hand, Whitey tried to talk him out of it. It confused him, left him feeling restless and unsettled.

Nevertheless, he got in and enrolled. In August he made plans to move to Mancos with Cleo. He had no idea what he would study, where it would take him. He found a job at a diner waiting tables, a step up from dishwashing with the tips. He needed to find a place to live and a junker to drive.

In late August, he tried to say goodbye and thank Whitey, who said, "Son, I think you're making a mistake. There's nothing wrong with your life here."

Joachin teared up. He'd intended to hug Whitey but recoiled instead. Why couldn't Whitey be happy for him? His inner critic reared its Gorgon head. *Was* he making a mistake? His stomach did flip-flops. He wouldn't know unless he tried.

After he moved, he found out that Whitey felt hurt and betrayed when Joachin decided to leave. He kind of understood that. But still, why couldn't Whitey be happy for him?

He started classes, harder than he expected after his few years out of school. He had to really buckle down, work at studying, pay attention. He kept up with the meditation, which helped. He enjoyed waiting tables, and between school and work he made friends. So far, he hadn't dated anyone, cautious, not wanting a repeat of what happened with Cassidy. He couldn't afford that kind of hurt right now. This was his chance to reinvent himself.

He'd learned so much during his brief time in Silverton, like wherever you go, there you are. That life can be messy no matter where you are. That you can't escape yourself. But you're not just your past. Or you don't have to be.

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