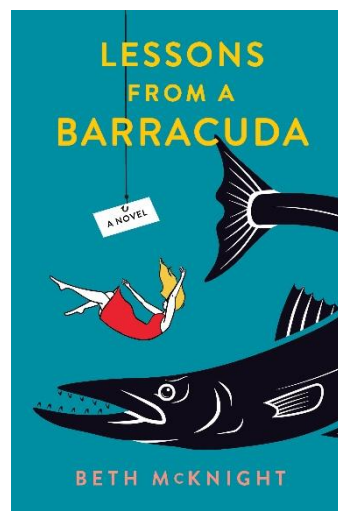


Not Just a Flower Child

An excerpt from *Lessons from a Barracuda*



"I'm so glad we could get together today, because I have some big news to share with you," Shelly says, grinning from ear to ear. It's a nice summer day, and Sandy, Shelly and I are sipping drinks and snacking on chips and dip on my deck after work.

"Ben and I have worked through our differences about having children," Shelly announces, "and we're having a baby. I'm pregnant!"

Sandy and I scream and rush to her and hug her, then we celebrate with a toast to the mother-to-be.

At about 7 p.m., it's still daylight, and we're laughing and talking about babies' names when my phone rings.

"Ms. McBride? This is the police. I have an important message for you. I need you to go inside your house if you're not already inside, and stay there. Luke Jelke escaped from prison this morning, and we have reason to believe he may be headed your way. You could be in serious danger."

"What? How can that be?"

"He escaped a little before noon today from a doctor's appointment in Canon City, and he could be in your vicinity any time now. We're sending undercover officers your way, but please take every precaution and stay inside."

"I have guests out on my deck right now. Should I tell them to leave, or should they go inside with me?"

"They should go inside with you. Now." So, the three of us head to my bedroom on the main floor.

My friends are huddled on the floor, and I'm keeping a lookout through the casement window, which provides a wide view of my side yard.

While keeping a constant vigil on the grounds outside, I think about Luke wanting to kill me a third time. What kind of desperation drives people like him, and how did he escape from a maximum-security prison? He must have had a way to pay somebody on the inside. Luke knew how to manipulate and steal, so he figured it out.

"Oh no," says Shelly. "I remembered to bring these snacks but forgot to grab my purse when we came in from the deck. It's got my asthma meds in it, and I can feel my throat tightening up. I'll just run out there and get it."

"No, don't," I say. "I'll get it."

I look out my window and see a plainclothes cop on the edge of my yard, so I open the window and holler to him. "Officer, my friend needs her meds from a handbag on my deck, so I'm going to get it for her."

"OK. Make it quick!"

I exit the bedroom, jog through the living room, and open the door to the deck, heading out to the chair where Shelly sat. Her large Michael Kors handbag is beside it.

I reach down to grab the handle on her bag when I see the plain-clothes cop coming up the steps to the deck. It's the guy I hollered to a minute ago, but something is wrong. Mounting the steps to the deck, he is raising a gun upward. There's nobody up here but me. Why would he have his gun drawn?

"This is no cop! It's Luke in disguise!"

I swing Shelly's large handbag back, and as Luke moves to the step just beneath the level of the deck, I slam the bag into his hand with the gun, which goes off as it falls out of his hand and lands beside the steps he just came up. His shot hits the floor of my deck, not far from my feet.

It's just Luke and me, for an instant now, facing each other before he runs down to pick up his gun. The only object near me that I can pick up is a large potted plant that I grab with both hands and throw down on top of his head with all my strength.

The pot breaks open, and the topsoil, perlite and small rocks from inside it pour down over Luke's face, as he falls backwards, knocked unconscious onto the ground below. The brilliant-red geranium that was planted in the pot lies on top of his head --- stems and roots exposed, but completely intact.

"Don't shoot!" I shout to the two officers now running toward us with guns drawn.

One of them is quick to handcuff Luke, even though he is not moving. His partner calls Dispatch to report what happened. "Jelke is out cold, but he's still breathing." he says.

The other officer turns to me and says, "Ma'am, you're really something. This man is a dangerous killer, and you fought him off with a handbag and a potted plant. Way to go!"