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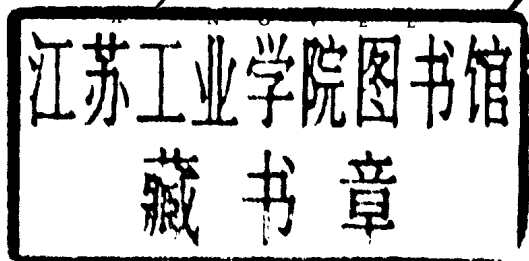
A N O V E L

Crowfoot Ridge



ANN BRANDT

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HESITATION

Avery drove by the shop after dinner. His shop, a converted depot. The sign said MARS MARSHALL, WOODRIGHT. Her hand trembled on the steering wheel. Her breath caught in her throat. Twenty-one years since she'd seen him. She'd spent all those years looking for life, while Mars had gone on and lived it. Avery wanted to stop, but couldn't.

She would sleep. Prepare herself. Avery fought for a balance between caution and harebrained recklessness. She would see Mars tomorrow.

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and *CROWFOOT RIDGE*

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with her debut novel."

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for Charlie and Jimmy

*Crowfoot, crowfoot, evergreen
Shall good luck forever bring.
Find it on the forest floor,
Keep it with you ever more.*

Appalachian Folklore

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

An amazing crew joined me on this voyage to guide me around the storms and rescue me from the doldrums. Their skills and generosity of spirit meant the world to me.

My agent, Jillian Manus, and my editor at Harper-Collins, Carolyn Marino, came aboard and charted a new course for this adventure. Peter Cooper taught me to believe first in the journey, not the destination. Ross Browne, Toby Heaton, and Janet Kent's writers' group helped man the lines. My Lotspeich relatives and my loyal friends came along for the ride, no matter where we landed. Most amazing of all were my sons, Charlie and Jimmy Brandt, who kept me on an even keel.

P A R T
O N E

Ken Kessler stood alert and prepared at the podium, ready to deliver the future. His infantry assembled in the company's new conference center. The sales team chatted in the aisle, dressed for business, not Florida's subtropical heat. Planners, accountants, and the others had taken their seats. He tapped a pointer on the lectern and waited for everyone to settle down.

"Friends and colleagues." He leaned into the mike and flashed his quick smile. "Welcome to the 1985 Kessler Properties annual meeting. You all have made this a banner year for us, and I want to thank you." He began the applause. When it subsided, he continued, "Some exciting projects are in the plan-

ning stages. To start with, we are advertising lots in Pelican Estates. Gina, the phase-two map, please." He waited while his assistant displayed the plan. "We expect to revitalize the project, kick it in the ass, as they say. My wife handles sales there, so contact Avery if you have any questions or need any brochures." He gestured toward her.

Avery, sitting at the far end of the second row, waved an acknowledgment. The last place she wanted to be was trapped for two hours on a plastic chair listening to her husband. She imagined him naked at the podium, a ploy to diminish his stature.

"The Tequesta project is under way," Ken said as Gina slipped the development map into position. "The entrance has been changed because the county had a problem with traffic congestion around a school." He indicated the change with the pointer.

Ken's voice had the sound of a late-night disc jockey, all optimism drenched with seduction. And so casual in his expensive tweed jacket. Avery tuned him out; she'd heard it all before. The company thought they owned the Treasure Coast and conducted their slash-and-burn conspiracy as if they were irreproachable. The world-famous diver Mel Fisher searched offshore for the wrecks of Spanish galleons with treasure spilled across the ocean floor, while Kessler Properties found their treasure onshore, leaving the land wrecked. Avery

shared the bounty and the blame.

Gina had the prodigious task of changing the maps on the easels. She'd been hired to answer phones not so long ago. Advanced fast, from receptionist to secretary, to office manager, and now assistant to the double-tanned vice president, first from golf and then from sailing. She positioned a new schematic plan, and Ken began to talk about it. With her brooding Latin eyes and enough black hair for two people, she was Avery's opposite. And Gina was ambitious.

During the seventies, Ken and Avery had been drenched with ambition, hope, and responsibility. His ambition was alive still, while Avery was left with the responsibility and a growing sense of catastrophe.

She wished she'd grabbed a glass of water before the meeting started. She heard the words "deer pond" and began to listen.

". . . exciting project," Ken was saying. "Deer Pond Garill be an exclusive community with a security entrance. A guard house here," *tap*. "As you can see, we are leaving park land, drainage ponds, wooded areas," *tap, tap, tap*, "here, here, and here."

"Deer pond?" Avery asked. "Excuse me for interrupting, but there aren't any deer left in this part of Florida."

"Statues of deer, Avery, not real deer." Everyone laughed.

"Life-sized statues will be scattered around in the green areas and especially at the various drainage ponds. We still have deer in Florida, don't we?"

"Price range, Ken?" someone asked from the back.

Everyone was still chuckling.

"Quarter mil and up." Ken circled the map with his pointer indicating the boundary fencing.

Avery couldn't remember the last deer she'd seen in this overpopulated region, and tried to think when she'd ever seen wild deer. On one of her family's vacations to North Carolina, a doe, a buck, and a little spotted fawn had come to drink from the pond at Sylva's house. She and Sylva were both seven years old, and it was the first time she'd ever been allowed to spend the night with Sylva. Hard to believe thirty years had passed. She chased the thought away by running her locket along its chain.

The caterers were brewing coffee at the back of the room. The aroma of French roast blended with perfume, aftershave, and the formaldehyde of new carpet. Avery took a glass of white wine after the meeting and nibbled a Swedish flatbread spread with crab-laced cream cheese. She hung back, away from the giddy award winners, away from the rabble of doting accomplices around Ken. He was in his element at these functions. His casual confidence, the company's success, their gilded future, attracted people to him.

"Avery, hi. Where have you been hiding?" Two

prim-figured women from accounting joined her.

"Ladies, how's it going?"

"Pretty darn good for Gina, if you ask me," one said. "I heard she's taking over Golden Sands."

"Not Golden Sands." The other snapped her fingers as if trying to come up with a name. "It's those new condos over on Jensen Beach."

"Taking over?" Avery asked. "As property manager?"

"Interesting, isn't it?" The woman's eyes were elusive behind bifocals. "Funny it wasn't announced today."

Avery nodded and felt ambushed by innuendo.

"We just thought you'd like to know. Ken has mapped out a grand year for 1985. He's terrific, isn't he?"

"Yes, terrific. What would I do without him?"

The two women looked puzzled; they waved and moved back into the crowd of eager employees.

Avery wormed her way through the big-boned contractors and divorced realtors, speaking to people she hadn't seen in a while, nodding to others.

"There you are," Ken said.

"I don't mean to intrude. I see you're busy."

"Not at all," he said to the others. "Avery's done a great job with Pelican Estates." He put his arm around her, drawing her into the circle. "Ten years she's been running the project."

"Thanks, but I don't run anything, Ken." Avery smiled a tenuous smile. "I just wanted you to know

I'm getting ready to leave. I'll see you at home."

"I'll be late, we have the corporate meeting here tonight."

Ken kissed her forehead.

Avery slipped out the side door and walked to her car. The afternoon had turned dark as twilight. She glanced around at the active sky, smelled a shower on its way, felt a hint of moisture on her skin. She pulled out of the landscaped grounds surrounding the corporate headquarters, passed a decaying strip mall with a row of rusting newspaper racks out front. Plastic bags were caught in their feet.

Avery was heading home on the old two-lane parallel to I-95. Rush hour snarled the interstate on Fridays, but the secondary road stretched out mostly deserted, flanked by the marsh on the left and the canal on the right. She drove fifty miles an hour on a collision course with the storm, watching it inventing itself until thunderheads boiled above the horizon.

Deer Pond Gardens? She laughed and tried to imagine statues of deer all over the place. They would put Bambi on the letterhead, no doubt. She wondered about Kessler Properties, but everything they touched turned to treasure.

The wine had left her mouth dry. She blind-searched her bag for a Life Saver, fingered the roll, and loosened the candy with her fingernail. It tasted of lime. She turned on the radio to help

erase thoughts of the new projects and the natural places they would destroy. The creamy sleeve lapped at her wrist, and her gold ring caught a glint of dashboard light. On public radio a local debate about the endangered wetlands reassured her. Someone cared.

Lightning flashed way off in the distance, framed against a reddened sky. Raindrops beaded and slid sideways off the windshield. She flipped on the wipers, watched the blades hesitate on the downbeat.

Avery switched on the headlights, accelerated, pulled out to pass an old man in a compact, wondering how he could see over the steering wheel, and left him diminished in the rearview. The storm eclipsed the sunset and blackened the sky.

The wipers struggled against the increasing deluge. Headlights reflected the lonely spirits of highway, leaving Avery defenseless. The center-line Morse code faded out of sight while gale-force wind buffeted the car. Pea-sized hail danced on the hood and bounced on the asphalt. Storms like this were usually contained to small areas, furious and fast; the trick was to move through it.

The BMW fishtailed and recovered.

Her measure of apprehension rose a notch, and she slowed down.

A deer appeared out of nowhere, stranded in the rain, paralyzed in the Beemer's headlights. Avery