

A Rose by the Door

By Deborah Bedford



Chapter One

Beatrice Bartling jolted awake. Something banged on her front door, twice. three times. cutting through the stark silence of night. The sharp blows came again. A fourth time. A fifth. terse, hollow, insistent.

She hadn't any idea what time it was or what the emergency might be. "Just a minute," she croaked into the darkness. Just a minute, while, to no avail, she did her best to quell the pounding in her own heart.

Across the room, she could just make out the silhouette of her bureau, the shapes and shadows of the night reflected back to her in the mirror, rainbow shades of gray. The digital clock in the corner read 3:08 A.M.

Who could need her at this hour?

Why would someone come to the house in the middle of the night?

Fear made her move slowly. She folded back the covers, swung her feet to the floor, gathered her nightgown around her with one clutched hand.

"I'm coming."

She stumbled her way to the hall, flipped on a light in the bathroom, and donned her robe from the hook. Her feet felt their way down the stairs; she made certain every step supported her before she put her full weight on it. When she reached the front foyer, she turned on the porch light and squinted through the peephole.

Parts of two people extended into her vision—an officer's hat, a beehive nest of someone's hair. "Who is it?" She didn't dare open the door before she heard an answer.

"Mrs. Bartling?"

"Who are you? What do you want?"

"Deputy Triplett from the Garden County Sheriff's Department. Can you open the door, please?"

She opened it partway, saw the whole of the sheriff's deputy and his cohort.

"Can we come inside?"

"What is this about?"

He glanced past her left ear, as if he expected someone else to be standing there. "Are you here alone, Mrs. Bartling?"

Bea kept her fingers wrapped around the edge of the doorknob, unwilling to let them enter. Even though she wondered whether or not she should tell them that she was alone, she nodded anyway. He showed her his badge and she read his name. Jay Triplett. He motioned to the woman who stood at his side. "This is Jane Rounsborg, from Garden County Social Services."

She knew Jane. They'd sat at the same table during the BPO Doe's meeting, a female version of the local Elk's Club, last month. The woman was several years her junior, with a tendency toward domed hairstyles and the profession of counseling those who couldn't afford mental-health services anywhere else. Beneath her tortoise-shell bifocals, Jane Rounsborg's skin was bare. She smelled faintly of Pond's Cold Cream.

"Is there someone you could call to come be with you?" Jane asked. "I'm afraid we have difficult news."

The officer's car waited beside the curb, its engine still running, its lights throbbing blue-red-blue-red against the leafy limbs of her neighbor's trees. From someplace far away she heard the broken static of a police radio. "No." She removed her hand and stepped aside so the pair could enter at last. "There isn't anyone I can call."

Later Bea would remember how she'd led them to the stiff old armchair in the family room, how the deputy had gestured for her to sit there instead, how he'd waited for her to situate herself with Jane Rounsborg beside her so she'd have support as he delivered the news. He wore so much leather-his holster, his belt, his boots-that his body creaked when he knelt before her. Handcuffs jangled. She smelled the starch of his shirt, saw the sharp crease etching a line of shadow. His nose bore a smattering of freckles. All of this seemed real to her; the deputy's words did not.

"We've had a report from the coroner's office in Omaha, Mrs. Bartling. There was a motorcycle accident in the city yesterday morning."

Bea stared at him.

"A man named Nathan Roger Bartling was killed."

The only reality around her the buzz of the overhead light in the kitchen, the flashing red and blue through the gauze curtain in the front window.

"How did you find me?" she asked and she could see, the moment she said it, that he was startled by the unreasonable hope in her voice.

Had Nathan asked for her? Had he told someone where to find his mother?

"They ran a search of birth records, Mrs. Bartling. In this case, it's taken almost twenty-four hours to notify the next of kin."

Her hopes plummeted. "I'm the next of kin."

"Yes."

The realization, the anguish, began somewhere deep inside her spirit and burgeoned within her, filling her until there was no room for anything else inside her not breath, not even the beating of her own heart.

Numbly she counted backwards in her head. Yesterday morning. Where had she been and what had she been doing?

Heavenly Father. She remembered repeating it even twelve hours ago while she'd snipped wilted blossoms off her pioneer rosebush in the heat of the day. *When will you bring Nathan home?*

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Bartling. Apparently your son was traveling at a high rate of speed when the accident occurred. There wasn't another-"

Bea held out a hand to stop him. "No. Don't tell me about it. I can't bear it tight now." She gripped the arms of the chair with both hands.

Yesterday morning. So long ago. If only Nathan had been home, this might not have happened. Perhaps she could have done something; perhaps she could have stopped it some way.

"Let me call someone for you." The social worker brought over a glass of water and a wrinkled hanky that she must have found on the writing desk in the corner. "Bea, I have sedatives. Would you like to take something?"

She shook her head at them.

"Isn't there a friend? A neighbor? A pastor? Someone?"

"No." She saw her own hands gripping the armchair as if they belonged to someone else, the knucklebones white knobs beneath the skin. She whispered the words to no one. "Nathan is never going to come h-home."

Jane stood and moved toward the door. She talked as if Bea wasn't even in the room with them anymore. "I'm going to find one of her neighbors. Surely there's someone who can sit with her until the sun rises. Or until we can contact someone in her family."

The officer laid his hat beside him on the floor. "I've heard she doesn't have family."

"I know her. She drives to the Antelope Valley Church over in Oshkosh. Call her pastor, Jay."

He creaked again as he rose to his feet and Bea could smell the leather of him. A pistol dangled in the tooled holster at his side. He had kind, sad eyes. "I'm so sorry, Mrs. Bartling. Jane and I won't leave until somebody else comes."

Most visitors arrived on Bea's front stoop during the time of early summer gardens, when children were kept busy catching katydids and lightning bugs, when fathers fired up outdoor grills and lawnmowers whirred from faraway yards, when whole neighborhoods smelled of supper and new-cut lawn.

A stream of cars pulled up to her curb and parked there for long moments, the drivers and passengers trying to decide whether they should intrude at someone's private home.

But intrude they eventually did, spilling out onto the carefully trimmed grass, moving closer toward the house, *oozing* and *aahing* over the profusion of yellow roses that grew en masse on the sunny side of the porch.

"We were just passing through town," they would explain when Bea met them, smiling her welcome, at the door. "The curator at the museum told us about your place."

Bea would point to the blossoms lining her walk and proceed to tell stories that they'd already heard once at the museum. How a pioneer woman had brought the roses with her along the Oregon Trail. How she had grown the bush from a cutting. How she'd kept the cutting alive poked in half of a raw potato, wrapped in burlap on cold nights, while the wagons jolted across the moving, shaggy red grass and the swells of unbroken prairie. She told how the wagon had broken down near Ash Creek and how they'd decided to not go along further, but to stay.

"Did they build a house right here?" someone would always ask.

"In this very spot. A sod house made of thick mud and fine grass."

"This is right where she planted the roses?"

"She planted them right here."

"Can we pick one?"

"No. Because if everybody did, then they'd be gone." Then, because she couldn't stand for them to be dejected by her answer. "If you'd like to take a cutting with you, I'd be happy to pass one of those along. Long ago, these roses grew in some places where grass couldn't grow. In places they couldn't find the ruts or the trails anymore, some people followed the roses instead. Just one sucker is all you'll need--one wood stem with a bud. Keep it in water and, I promise you, it will root when you get home."

More often than not, after the tourists had seen what they'd come to see, Bea would bring out a tray of warm cookies and hurry along to brew up a pot of tea. "Don't rush off." She'd set the teapot and a tray of cups in the shade beneath her maroon-striped awning. "Stay a while longer. I'll tell you more about the area's history. There's so much."

But those who came were just traveling through with other places to go, other attractions to see, and nobody spent too much time there or wanted to linger. They would make their excuses, Bea would wave them off, and she'd be alone again. Every time it happened, folks in the little town of Ash Hollow, Nebraska, thought it sad. Because everyone from miles around knew the history of Beatrice Bartling's roses. And everyone knew the history of her family as well.

For each person she hurried to greet on her doorstep, she longed to greet someone different instead. Everyone she welcomed she looked past, to the next and the next and

the next. Each face that peered through the screen, she searched and found no resemblance to the child who had run away from home years before.

With every visitor who appeared on her lawn, she yearned to greet, not a stranger, but a son.

And though the townspeople knew of her sadness, they did not know of the hours that she spent on her knees beside her bed, her head bent in supplication, her heart uplifted to God.

Dear Father. Please, please let Nathan return to me.

Long ago, as she'd watched her children departing for school each morning, bounding up the steps on the Garden County school bus with their backpacks wagging, she'd never thought that Nathan would be the one to forsake her. Nathan, with his shining green eyes and his small manly fingers curled around her own, who'd once gazed up at her and asked, "Mama, if the sky is the floor of heaven, then wouldn't we hear God walking around?"

The years had passed and still she'd stood each morning with her fingers threaded through the Venetian blinds and her nose almost pressed to the glass, watching the bus go, even after she'd realized they wouldn't turn to wave at her anymore before they embarked on the bus. It wouldn't do for their friends to see them looking back on their way to school as if they had qualms about leaving home. But she'd stood at the window anyway, knowing if one of them glanced back to find her, he'd be forlorn not to see her there.

"Enjoy your children while they're this young," she'd say to frazzled mothers of toddlers when she overtook them in the aisle at the Oshkosh Superette. "The time goes by so fast."

The time goes by so fast. Until one day no more time can be had a! any price.

From the other room, Bea could hear Jane Rounsberg whispering on the phone. Deputy Triplett retrieved his cap from the floor and ushered in the neighbors. From somewhere in another world, the telephone rang. The room overflowed with people. Voices murmured like the sound of gentle water, undistinguishable, indistinct. Nancy Law from across the street placed tea beside her on the table, the china cup set firmly in the center of the pretty shell-shaped saucer. "Can you lift this without spilling?" Nancy asked. "If you can, it will make you feel better." Bea tried and, despite her hand shaking, found herself able to slowly sip the hot brew. It did help. The fragrance tickled her nose and seemed to open her, at last, to breathing. Their eyes met over the rim of the cup.

"Poor Nathan. We always thought he had so much going for him, until he left home. We're going to get you through this, Bea."

Jane Rounsberg came to Bea's chair and bent low beside it. "Your pastor called. He's on his way, but it's going to be fifteen minutes or so. He's driving over from Oshkosh."

The tea jostled precariously as Bea set the cup and saucer on the end table beside her. She squeezed Jane's hand in silent, sad gratitude. "Thank you."

"Is there anyone else I should call? If you've got an address book, I could go through the pages and find the numbers."

This would be the perfect time to phone Ray. The perfect time to phone Nathan's father and tell him to come home, that their son had died.

Nancy suggested it aloud. "Nathan's father?"

Bea sat very, very still for a long while before she shook her head. She wouldn't know where to find Ray, even if she tried. Her chin lowered against her chest in despair. Why invite someone who had deliberately chosen not to share his son's life to come share in his death instead?

"No. No, I don't think so."

Ray left a long time ago. He didn't care to see his son while Nathan was alive. Why should he care now?

"Are there other relatives? Or someone I should call at your job?"

"I have aunts over in Potter. Or my boss at work." Bea wrapped her arms around herself, below her bosom. "But it's the middle of the night." She needed time herself to absorb this. She needed time to work her way through the numb, awful fog of acceptance. "Don't call anybody else yet. I'm just not ready." She squeezed her arms tighter around her own ribs. "Please."

Outside, the dark shroud of night sky had begun to lift, replaced by the lilac tinge of early dawn. Another sharp rap on the door, then another. Finally Bea heard the squeak of hinges and, amidst all the other talking, Pastor Sissel's soothing baritone. "I got here as fast as I could. How is she holding up?"

"Like most people do when they first find out. She hasn't taken it all in yet."

"This is a shock. Such a shock."

Someone, she didn't notice who, led George Sissel to her side. She struggled to push herself up out of the armchair, but he stopped her. Instead he knelt and clasped both of her hands in his own, her sadness reflected in his face.

"Why, Bea, this is a nasty turn of events, isn't it?"

Bea felt tears pooling in her eyes for the first time. She mustn't let herself cry. For in her soul there waited to spring up an eternity of tears, from a fathomless depth of sorrow. She fought for control even as she spoke. "This isn't what I expected to happen, Pastor George." She removed her hand from his and gripped the hanky beside her just in case. The tears slipped down her cheeks anyway, no matter how hard she tried to keep them at bay.

"Bea," he said. "I know that the Father must be feeling your pain."

She squared her jaw and pursed her lips in reply. Words would no longer come. Tears flooded. They streamed down over her mouth and dripped from her chin. Pastor George gathered her in his arms and held her close against him as she wept, rocking

her, sometimes her weight bearing toward his, other times his body leaning into hers. She felt nothing, no other sense, except for the vast desperate *goneness* of her son. She might as well have been a heavy stone of loss entrapped beneath a single thin layer of flesh.

"I can't do this." She cried the words into the warm tweed wool of his jacket.

"You must, Bea. You must know that the Lord will lead you through."

He repeated it over and over again until, after a good length of time, Deputy Triplett stepped forward, his hat in his hands again, to make his good-byes. Perhaps he thought since the pastor had come he needed to say something especially kind before he took his leave. "I'm so sorry," he told her once more. His voice was soft, almost a sigh. "It's terrible, what's happened. I know how you must feel."

On the outside, Bea could only shoot him a sad smile. On the inside, she screamed, *You've never lost a child. There isn't any way to describe this pain, or to imagine it. You don't know how I feel.*

Indeed, no one could. No one, not even Pastor George Sissel, knew the immeasurable, awful circumstances that had brought her to this place. All she'd ever asked was that Nathan return home again. All she'd ever sought was for her boy to accept what had happened to them. To perhaps give her a second chance. To love her in spite of the choices she'd made, the ones that had torn their lives apart five long years ago.

How many times had she'd watched Nathan return home in her dreams, taking his place around the table again, with his knobby knees bumping the underside of the wood, jostling everyone's milk and his Oreo cookies all in a stack on his napkin? He had always been so longlegged and handsome. Maybe he would even say, "We all make mistakes, Mom. Even though you did what you did, I still love you." The Bible said, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find." How many years had she begged the Father for this? How many nights, on her knees at her bedside, had she sought resolution?

She supposed the Bible must have been written with somebody else in mind besides Beatrice Bartling.

God, if you ever really listened to me, how could you ignore the cries of my heart?

Now that the pastor had come, Bea's neighbors and other friends began to depart.

"I'll be back over with a casserole in a while."

"If you need someone to sleep over tonight, I'll come."

"Don't you worry about watering the roses today, Bea. Cory can walk over and do that."

"Thank you," she told them all again, as she managed to heft herself up out of Ray's old chair.

With most, she accepted their offers of assistance with a careful, sad smile. But when Geneva proposed to send her grandson over to water the roses, Bea solemnly shook her head and nixed the idea.

"It will do me good to have something to do out in the yard."

Those flowers were the only living things that had ever flourished under her tending. Grief or no grief, she wasn't about to let anyone else take care of her roses.