

# Where You Go, I Go

By Beth Black

## CHAPTER 1

Every day was Bingo Day at the Rancho Royale. Cautiously, Bonnie Brennan lifted her hand to smooth an errant wisp of silky gray hair from her face. She did her best to move slowly — to fade into the invisible aged population. Despite her lifelong resemblance to Princess Grace of Monaco, bearing a fine-boned loveliness that deepened into gentle elegance during her 68 years, Bonnie didn't like attention. And she especially didn't want it today. Because, with just a little neglect from the staff, she might make good her escape.

She longed to spend a few hours wandering their town, Rancho Allegro. And then, of course, she would return. This was Bonnie's third try. *Three times charmed*, she told herself. Her first two attempts at bolting were really practice drills, anyway.

The facility had been designed to help aging inmates feel better about their situation. It appeared to be some pretentious aristocrat's estate. What an illusion! Bonnie didn't like her odds in this place, surrounded by fossils in wheelchairs — the lame, the doomed, the decaying, the moribund. Stealing a moment to peek out the ballroom's enormous picture windows, she was tantalized by the view that stretched beyond their little rose garden to the distant foothills. She remembered hiking scenic paths and breathing free. That was before the Parkinson's set in.

She forced her gaze down periodically, hoping that, if anyone did look, Bonnie would appear to be fascinated by that gaudy "senior-friendly" large-print game card on the table or — if she glanced up — the prize table sporting dozens of sapphire blue bottles of cheap shampoo. True, the Rancho Royale Adult Living Facility — or RRALF, as the locals called it — occasionally threw in a few additional activities — like chair Yoga, knitting, or potholder painting — but the one pastime you could always count on required discs, gridded cards, and a caller. Brains could be left in your room. Six months of this old folks' prison, and inmate Bonnie could swear that they played this game so much because it was literally mind-numbing.

“GEEE – THREE!” the caller bawled into his microphone. He was a young man from an insurance company, apparently, who came to the facility on a rotating schedule with other insurance salespeople. Blond, unblemished and suited up for business, he took on his role with oddly serious gusto. “ISN’T THIS A LOVELY DAY IN THE GRANDE BALLROOM?”

*Grande Ballroom. Like this was a gala event.* The size of the room and its décor did actually suggest a fantasy ballroom featuring grandiose chandeliers and a floral-themed carpet.

At the entrance to the room, not far from their Bingo spinner, Nurse Richard, uniformed in a starched white dress reminiscent of hospital horror flicks, escorted a new jailbird into the ballroom. The patient mumbled something that apparently hit a nerve. She grabbed his arm.

“No, I am Nurse *WRETCH-ED!*” Her shrill voice really stood out, embellished by its distinctive *Franco-Euro-Whatever-the-Heck-That-Is* accent. “*WRETCH-ED. NOT RRRRATCHET!*”

An odd vocal competition ensued, with Mr. Bingo caller giving it everything he had. The cacophony echoed against RRALF’s baroque wallpaper lining every wall of the Grande Ballroom like a rap beat piped into a rich Southerner’s insane asylum. It made Bonnie fidget with her cane and consider how far she could get if she left early. Ultimately, she had no choice but to wait for the right moment.

Despite the Parkinson’s effects on her balance, Bonnie was usually able to walk pretty well with the help of her trusty lion-head wood cane. It was a beautiful hand-carved gift from her daughters, Isabel and Emily. They’d dubbed it *Clyde*, and the name stuck. Walking was good. Running, maybe not so much.

“BEEE – FOUR!” the caller wailed, as though trying to remind people of something critical. No one else seemed to grasp the pun. They just stared at their cards while clutching those plastic discs and hovering them a few inches above. Her eyes wandered over to the row of glittering plastic vases on their long table — so much like crystal, and yet not -- bursting with pink and white plastic roses. This brought to mind the glass vase on her kitchen table that always held fresh roses from her garden.

*I’ve been sidelined.* Her body felt hollow; The rollicking energy fueling Bonnie for a lifetime of outdoor activities had begun to dissolve the day she was told that residents must stay inside. After that, her only happiness came from the girls’ visits. Oh, Bonnie’s family still loved her, but they kept her on a shelf to be dusted and viewed occasionally. Isabel brought baby Mia

to visit every Saturday. And Emily stopped by twice a month, always bringing her a fresh cupcake from Maggie's Muffin Stop, the town's best bakery. Bonnie understood that she'd raised competent, confident women who enjoyed busy lives. *They've grown and flown.* She was proud. But she also missed her life, her home, and the people she cared about. The months rolled by like a hearse leaving a church. She had to take action, or the emptiness would eventually consume her completely.

Finally! Ten o'clock, and the uniformed attendant at the garden exit door walked off to take his break. According to her mental notes from several days of keeping track, there would be a 15-minute opportunity in which she could slink out that door without any argument about rose bush thorns, hazardous paths and a busy nearby parking lot.

A frumpy man in plaid, coincidentally answering to the same name as her cane, coughed and sputtered in the chair beside her. For several weeks, Clyde had made a habit of seating himself nearby and striking up conversations at any opportunity. He slammed a plastic disc onto his card, drawing her attention. Offering a toothless appraisal and a wink, he murmured, "Hey, Bonnie, why do you want a *plastic* Clyde when you could have a *real* one?"

"He's not plastic," she answered firmly. Desperate to avoid yet another feeble pass from this doddering Don Juan, she stood up and pointed at his card. "Oh, LOOK! You've WON, Clyde!" Waving her cane excitedly to attract the caller, she shouted, "Bingo! HE HAS Bingo!" No matter that it wasn't true. Half the time, people shouted out by accident, anyway. Still, the excitement woke up the room.

Double-checking that her fanny pack purse had been strapped on securely, she backed away from old-fool Clyde just as the attendants — some garbed in stark white uniforms and others in colorful scrubs — rushed at him, congratulating their winner.

Clyde tossed her one last sad smile before reluctantly accepting their attention.

Turning from her washed-up wooer, mournful though he was, Bonnie ambled down the table aisle that led straight over to the garden door. Nobody noticed.

Shouting erupted from a nearby table, as a woman who wore pink pajamas repeatedly demanded, "WHO WON? WHO WON?" An attendant suggested she sit back down, which made her shout, "I ONLY NEEDED O-3 to WIN!"

Nurse Richard grabbed the caller's microphone and announced, "VALSE ALAHM! Let's CON-TIN-NEW!"

Reclaiming his mic, The caller bellowed, "OOOOH TWO!"

Pink PJ Lady clucked and slapped the table, which then bounced all the pieces off their cards. And she was no slouch with five cards. She plopped each piece back onto its rightful square, though one or two required some guesswork. She muttered something unintelligible.

*Stick with the plan! Keep moving!* But she tottered slightly and grabbed the wheelchair handle of gentlemanly old Mr. Theodore who was now parked before her. He had to be 105 years old. Unfortunately, his wheelchair slid forward, making him scream. He calmed down when she apologized and pulled him back. Then she let go and stepped away, but her balance faltered, and she wavered briefly. That signaled a sweet-faced attendant in flamingo-themed scrubs to run to her. "Mrs. Brennan," he began. "Don't we like our Bingo game today?"

"Not so much. How about you?"

"Well, I - uh," he stammered.

"Y'know, I think I'd like to go rest up for chair Yoga. That takes so much energy. It's at 4:00, right?" She smiled innocently.

Checking his watch, the attendant asked, "Leave now? So early? But you'll miss out on these fabulous prizes."

"Oh, dear, call me when it features two tickets to Hawaii. But only if it includes a surfboard."

"I know you're messing with me," he teased.

Desperate for another decoy, Bonnie noticed Mr. Theodore resting his forehead on his Bingo card. Before she could point it out, the attendant raced past her to tap his shoulder gently. Waking suddenly, Mr. Theodore leaped out of his wheelchair with amazing vigor and yelled, "Bingo! I WIN! I WIN!" That, of course, wore him out, so he slumped back to be wheeled toward the hallway exit and his room. As they passed the prize table, his bony hand darted out, snagging a bottle of shampoo for the trip.

And while everyone gawked at that, Ms. Bonnie Grace Brennan crept out the garden door.



The coffee tasted crunchy again. Half water, half loose grounds. Practically sludge. Its aroma had promised so much and so too had the mug's pleasant warmth on his stiff, aching hands. Shoulder

cocked to hold the cell phone pressed against his ear, Roy Alfaro demanded, “No, *you* listen! An old magician like me never dies. We just get *disillusioned*! Funny, eh? But that’s exactly what will happen to my guillotine. You won’t find an old folks home around here that’ll take my guillotine!” Once again, his son had pushed him about selling the house. “And I suppose you want me to dump the severed head, too! Do you know how hard it is to find a fake head? Can’t just order those off the Internet!”

Distracted, he took another, bigger, swig —sputtering out grounds. The phone fell from his ear, clattering to the medium-gray, wire-brushed hardwood floor he’d recently spent a week installing by himself. No need to mention that to his son. He did it to make his home nicer – not to fix it up for sale.

Shouting emanated from the device, “DAD? DAD? What was that? Are you okay?”

He reached down and grabbed it, but the darned thing slipped free, banked off the dishwasher, and skidded across the wood floor of the spacious country kitchen, coming to rest just under a matching gray oak cabinet. “DAD!” it shouted.

*Would audiences applaud now? Some lousy sleight of hand, right?* For a brief moment, Roy allowed himself a little self-pity over his retirement from magic. *That’s it! This morning is over! End of show!* He slammed the mug down on the granite counter, noting that the muck inside barely moved. Wiping at his beard in frustration, he forced a slow breath — an old trick from his performing days to calm his nerves. Not that he’d call it stage fright. It was just *nerves*, since, after all, he was threatening to sever heads from bodies. And that would make anyone think twice.

The beard felt foreign to Roy’s fingers. A tidy salt ‘n pepper Vandyke spread over his chin – a new experience. Boy, he’d never again take for granted the rugged chin that had spared him the facial-hair hassle for years. But at 70, his jawline required a little renovation to correct a slight softening around the edges. Still far better than a lot of men. But it was one sign of aging that presented itself, literally, right under his nose. A beard did the trick.

Well, okay. Back to the coffee. Once again, he’d put far too many grounds into the filter. So sharp-tasting crunchy bits overflowed and escaped into the coffee pot. After all those years working as a lawyer and then as a professional magician, remembering so many important details, Roy figured he’d earned an occasional lapse. Though he realized that his kids didn’t agree. Sighing, he swooped down and reached under the counter, locating and carefully

retrieving his phone. “I could climb the Eiffel Tower,” he announced into it. “I’m that good. Yes, really! I’m okay!” Brax was the most meddlesome son any man could regret bringing into the world. Even at 42, with a busy career, a wife and child of his own, the kid just wouldn’t let up.

All Roy could do was try to irk him into turning back. “Oh! Wait, *there’s* a chest pain. Yep! Nope! Oh, yeah! There it is! I’m goin’ DOWN!” Annoying his son was Roy’s best chance for a little reprieve or even a laugh. Sleepy little Rancho Allegro didn’t offer much in the way of entertainment. Not like Vegas, where his son lived and performed in the big shows. But at the moment, Brax was calling from his SUV, speeding to Southern California to see for himself if the old man needed to be put away. Roy would have no piece of that. “Wait, don’t call 911. Of course I’m kidding! I am FINE, I tell you!”

Brax muttered something about dead men cracking jokes then added, “We’ll be there in about an hour.” He hung up.

*He’s irked and he’s coming anyway.* Pocketing the cell, Roy had to act fast. The house could not appear to be neglected by an unkempt old man with a bum ticker. He thrust the can of coffee beans back into the freezer, squeezing it between three TV dinners and a folded frozen pizza. The can popped back out and he caught it midair, swearing under his breath. Roy retained a habit of never swearing aloud from his years of performing magic at children’s birthday parties. He yanked out the frozen *fettuccine al carbon*, tossing it into the trash. This freed up space for the coffee.

Next, he crossed the kitchen and opened the rear door leading to the backyard patio. He unlocked the knob and twisted open the deadbolt so the door couldn’t quite close. Roy needed this for his plan. Only one more thing. Digging a large chocolate bar out of a canister, Roy set it on the kitchen counter. Okay, the kitchen was done.

In the living room, he dusted his replica of Houdini’s substitution trunk as well as the guillotine. He checked to ensure that its locking pins still held. They did. *Solid workmanship!* Turning to the wall, he carefully wiped the old photo depicting the moment in his final stage show where he poured milk out of an empty pitcher. Lots of kids loved that old trick. So did their moms. He chuckled at the memories.

In his empty house, Roy’s laughter echoed off the pale blue walls. With the speed of a practiced magician, he whipped off his gray T-shirt and tossed it into the laundry room hamper.

Then he walked down the hallway lined with family and show photos to arrive at the two unoccupied bedrooms.

His master bedroom provided a comfortable retreat, sporting a western king bed framed in solid oak and matching furniture. After Marie left ten years earlier, it was his one self-indulgent purchase. The sales clerk had said that all divorced men buy a bed before anything else, even sooner than a TV. So he took the leap of faith that he wouldn't be sleeping alone forever in such a monster-sized model. That a second wife might be on the horizon. *Predicted that wrong! Oh, well.* Later, he replaced the TV lost in the divorce, and it kept him company on more than a few solitary nights.

In truth, he never wanted to give Anita the wrong idea about the two of them. *Ah, Anita Simone!* She was a skilled magician's assistant who always turned heads in her costume. With that fiery red hair and model's figure, she could have been a showgirl, after all. She didn't seem to mind the occasional visit, and he liked having fun with her in Laughlin once in a while. But Roy eventually concluded that it just wouldn't work into anything permanent. They simply didn't love each other. He hardly ever invited her to Rancho Allegro, saying the drive would be too much trouble for her. Instead, he'd go see her, once in a while, and that had been enough for the past few years.

Anyway, Brax was probably bringing Lomasi, his wife, and Dodger. Roy drew a red and green Hawaiian shirt out of his closet and threw it on. The bright hibiscus flowers made a strong impression, not his usual taste, but he had a good reason for wearing it. He also changed into his brown slacks and dark running shoes. A matching red handkerchief tucked into the breast pocket completed the deal.

Moving on to the guest room, he straightened the two twin beds purchased in the hope that his kids would prefer a hotel. As much as he loved them, it was always too much pressure to act 20 years younger so they wouldn't nag him to move to some Godawful home for the aged.

Instead, he hoped that Brax would just send his grandson, little Dodger, to visit. The boy's real name was Roger, but someone started calling him Roger Dodger and it stuck. Now, it was just plain Dodger, or Dodge, or Dodgie. He seemed to prefer Dodger, so Roy called him that. Maybe next year when Dodger turned ten Brax would just let him stay over. One could dream. He swept the dust rag over the nightstand, admiring his antique magical milk pitcher — the one portrayed in the mosaic — still in mint condition.

Only two sounds reached his ears. One came from the kitchen, a *brrrr* of the freezer cooling itself and outside, the comforting *chug chug* of a trash truck rolling past his driveway. This was indeed a peaceful home that he enjoyed so much after the years of quarreling clients followed by more years of rowdy hecklers. Hiding old mail under the bed, forcing the hall closet door closed on a jumble of coats, dusting a bit more, finishing with a quick spin of the vacuum and ... voila! Roy scanned his fairly decent house. If Brax didn't open the oven or snoop behind the shower curtain, everything would be just fine.

Aside from the coffee mix-up, he could take pretty good care of himself and his belongings. He paid his bills on time, stocked plenty of groceries in the house and saw the doctor occasionally. Almost everything ran smoothly. Granted, it could be a little quiet. But he'd grown accustomed to the evenings spent alone in front of the TV or sitting with a book. It bothered him more when he played music, probably because he'd had no one to hold close for a while. He solved it by not playing much music at home. And also by attending some public dances over the years. And, of course, there were those occasional visits with Anita. Perhaps Roy had lost touch with his daughter, Naomi. She hadn't called in a few weeks. *So different from her brother, always*, Roy mused. Naomi lived a busy modern, single life across the country in Boston. She ran her own company, which made him incredibly proud, especially since he'd doubted that there would be a market for animal snow boots. Roy was happy for her that Boston had proved him wrong on that account. Anyway, he resolved to ask Brax if he'd heard anything from his sister recently.

The clock chimed its favorite chord, and Brax pulled his shiny SUV into the driveway. Roy steeled himself for their visit.



*Great business today!* mused George Main, as he stood in the vibrant doorway of his creation, the most popular bike shop in Rancho Allegro. Unlike most other bike shops, his enticed customers with bold nautical colors and one full wall that featured a larger-than-life mural of happy riders and their rainbow array of bikes. People came in just to experience the joy of the place.

The breeze brought in just enough coolness to freshen things up after a long bout of hot weather, and a few scattered showers around town would brighten up the pansies in the park. The street had stayed fairly dry, as did the bike path entrance down the street.

He took the flowery pink 24” step-thru in hand rolling it toward his *magical line ‘o bikes*. Everyone loved the bikes out front. And oh, how they made his store even more attractive. Like chorus gals, those trim metallic bodies boasting colorful turquoise and pink fenders with a sleek little twist-throttle never failed to attract shoppers and renters. And even though it was Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>, business was great. This promised to be a very successful weekend. He had three families go out on rentals before noon and the afternoon was sure to bring in shoppers ready to buy.

VeloCity had been a really great idea and an even better investment. Sure, Rancho Allegro was a pretty little town, and George didn’t mind spending his days here, but his first bike ride nearly did him in and proved that the hills would be trouble without an electric bike. *Let the teenagers wear themselves out on Mussorgsky Road*, he thought. “I’ll take this little rocket, right here,” he whispered lovingly to a military green men’s design boasting a 400-watt rear-hub motor and 48 powerful battery volts of yee-haw giddyap. Whipping a shop cloth from his pocket, he polished up the handlebars, removing a smudge from last night’s test ride — some guy who worked for the city. That prospect didn’t buy it last night, but George knew he’d be back. This was one fun bike.

Not that its military colors made George happy. Far from it. His days in the Vietnam War had left him lugging around memories he could never leave behind. People of color who came from big cities, like him, were usually the grunts, and they saw the worst of it without any ability to change the brass’s plans. Despite carrying a rifle everywhere he went, even to the latrine, that time had filled him with the most powerless, helpless feelings he’d ever had in his life — even in all the years since. No, he was as done with the military as they were with his skinny old carcass. But he’d learned how to repair bikes as a kid and then went back to it after getting out of the Army. After that, George liked being in charge of his life. So he could appreciate a muscle bike that got him where he wanted to go without any argument.

And all these years later, he finally had a shop of his own. Surveying the store with a cocky smile, he loved putting all that know-how to use in a form that truly impressed people. And with the time spent studying bicycle mechanics, and then electric bike — “ebike” —

engineering, George eventually learned that his most important study had been the customers. He prided himself on being able to tell about people the minute they walked in the door. And he was usually right in choosing a favorite model and color that would bring 'em back with friends.

He finalized a returned rental and checked over the bike, cleaning it up before returning it to the line out front. Upon reentering the store, he whistled a bit of Mendelssohn's *Wedding March* while brushing past the black tandem with beige wheels, a popular rental for weddings, since its two tones suggested a formal tuxedo. Then George sauntered over to his most spectacular model, a royal blue step-thru ebike all the way from Seattle, where they built only the best. He stationed it up on a platform in the window to attract even more people. At nearly four thousand, this one was more expensive than the others and totally worth it. Just a gorgeous baby — the show's star attraction. And at night after closing, when the rental fleet was locked up inside, he aimed a spotlight on that bike in the window. He loved sitting in the Diva Diner across the street, eating at a window booth, and watching people stop to gawk at its gleaming beauty.

Noon flew by like a brakeless fixie winning a downhill race. Before George could catch his breath, the clock on his cash register showed it was nearly 2:00 in the afternoon. The day really dashed past, as his window baby did such a good job of attracting shoppers into the store. When it sold, which it would eventually, he'd have to invest in another one. The phone jangled, so he hustled to answer it with one last over-the-shoulder at the royal blue charmer.

*It could fly up to the sky. And the right customer just might make that happen. Any minute now!*

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