

# WHEN THE ROAD COMES AROUND

A NOVEL



KATIE POWNER

CHRISTY AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

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**KATIE POWNER**



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*To everyone in need of a little grace.*

# one

Tad Bungley had always hoped Sam's habit of disappearing would keep the kid safe from women like Maddie Pine. Women who knew how to get their sharp, painted fingernails into a guy and not let go until the moment it would cause the most damage. But as Maddie's red Mazda RX-7 wound its way up the dirt road to Come Around Ranch, Tad had a bad feeling.

Real bad.

"Sam?" Tad called into the barn, though Sam never responded out loud to his name. He just came. Or not. "Sam, you in here?"

Dust mites floated through sunbeams, and a kitten mewed. The kid was probably tucked away somewhere with Curly, the oldest mutt Tad had ever seen. But he should stop thinking of Sam as a kid. Sam was twenty, after all. Only four years younger than Tad, although somewhere along the line, his brain had stopped keeping up with this body.

Tad's brain had grown up like it was supposed to, though he wouldn't blame anyone for wondering after all the dumb stunts he'd pulled. Far as he could tell, the only real advantage his brain had over Sam's was he knew a set of dangerous

fingernails when he saw one, and he had plenty of scratch marks to prove it.

Where the dirt road turned to gravel near the Wilsons' house, the Mazda crunched to a stop. Sam's parents, Dan and Anita Wilson, had hired Tad to work on the ranch, not mind their business, but Tad found himself marching briskly to intercept Maddie before she could walk up to his new employer's front door. Anita had the kind of heart that loved to take in strays and give second chances, and Tad had the kind that didn't trust Maddie as far as he could throw her.

She opened her car door and slid out in one fluid motion, flicking her long brown hair over her shoulder.

He stepped in front of her, squinting in the sun. "What are you doing here?"

Her face gave nothing away. "Thaddeus Bungley. Huh."

"It's Tad, and you know it. What do you mean *huh*?"

"The rumors were true."

His heart sank. Just what he needed. More people telling stories about him. "What rumors?"

"That the Wilsons were the only ones in the whole county who felt sorry enough for you to take you on."

He bristled. Okay, so maybe he himself was one of the strays in need of a second chance that Anita's kind heart had made room for, but that couldn't be the *only* reason the Wilsons had hired him. He was good with horses, decent at manual labor, and had always stuck up for Sam at school when other kids—including Maddie—were jerks. Surely all that counted for something. Plus, *his* intentions were pure. He needed a job and was willing to work hard. As for Maddie? Who knew what intentions might be lurking behind those fancy sunglasses.

"I don't put much stock in rumors," he grumbled. "Now,

back to my question. What are you doing here? We're all busy. The guest houses are booked from May to November. We've only got two weeks to get everything ready."

"I also heard your dad got in a fight with Scooter. And lost."

What he wouldn't give for a cigarette right about now. And what could she possibly know about his dad?

He tried his best to glower. "Maddie. What do you want?"

She turned up her nose. "Can't a girl get out of town for some fresh air and sunshine once in a while?"

He made a face. There was plenty of fresh air and sunshine *in* town. No need to come all the way out here.

Gravel shifted behind him, and he spun around. Sam was trekking toward them, walkie-talkie in hand and Curly at his side. The dog's grizzled face drooped like every step was a hardship.

Sam grinned at Maddie. "You came."

"Of course I did." She squeezed his shoulder. "How could I turn down an invitation from my favorite farmer?"

Tad scowled at the sudden sweetness in her voice. How dare she act like she hadn't tormented Sam all those years in school?

She turned to him. "Sam told me about his new kittens at church yesterday. I didn't see *you* there, by the way."

Tad grunted. He didn't know much about a lot, but he knew there was no way she'd come all the way out here just to see Sam's kittens. Or for the sunshine. He'd known her since fifth grade, when he'd been held back and had to get used to a whole new set of classmates. She was the one who started saying he'd "bungled it up" every time he messed up a project or bombed a test. She was the one who would bait Sam into some blunder and then act offended when everyone laughed at him.

How could someone as wretched as Maddie Pine and someone as caring as Anita Wilson go to the same church?

Maddie reached a hand toward Curly but stopped short of touching him. "What's your dog's name?"

"Curly."

She laughed. "But he's got the straightest fur I've ever seen."

Sam leaned forward earnestly and gave his best Billy Crystal impersonation. "He's like a saddlebag with eyes."

This time Tad laughed as a confused expression twisted Maddie's face. "It's from the movie *City Slickers*. Sam's favorite."

Tad had only worked at the ranch for a week, and already he'd heard Sam quote the entire movie at least twice.

Sam stuck his walkie-talkie in the back pocket of his jeans. He never went anywhere without it. "Want to come with us, Tad?"

"I wish I could, but I've got to keep working."

"Okay." Sam grabbed Maddie's hand and pulled. "Come on. They're in the barn."

Sam was strong and Maddie couldn't weigh more than a buck twenty. As the kid practically dragged her away, Curly limping along behind them, Tad's heart sank a little deeper. As much as he wanted to keep a close eye on Maddie, what he'd told Sam was true. He had work to do. Dan had made it clear when he gave him the job that he expected Tad to keep himself busy. "*And if I ever catch wind of you smoking on C-A-R property . . .*" he'd said, and then let the words hang there ominously.

Tad returned his attention to the task he'd been starting when he first saw Maddie's red car—cleaning the guest house gutters. He'd already loaded the ladder, hose, and gloves in the



back of the farm truck. As he walked past the barn, he heard Sam's laughter from somewhere inside and kicked himself. Why hadn't he taken the time to meet the new kittens? Sam had begged him repeatedly, "*Please, Tad, please, Tad, please.*" He should've done it.

But Tad wasn't here to babysit Sam, much as he liked the kid. He was here to earn money for his own place so he could finally follow in his older brother's footsteps and move out of his dad's crap-hole shack. The sooner, the better. He couldn't help but keep an eye on Sam—the kid followed him like a baby duck half the time—but the ranch had to be Tad's priority. He had to make Dan happy and keep this job.

He hopped in the farm truck and drove toward the guest houses, thinking about Maddie and her stupid sunglasses and everything she'd said. The idea of his dad getting beat up by Scooter MacDonald sparked conflicting feelings in his gut. He didn't mind too much the thought of his dad, the infamous Bud Bungley, being put in his place. But man, he hated that Scooter guy. Scooter was a couple years older than Tad and the type who would throw a sack of puppies in the river just for fun.

When had this fight happened? His dad hadn't said anything. He'd been his usual surly self. Maddie had probably made that story up to get Tad's goat.

He pulled up to the first guest house and turned off the truck. Joke was on her. He didn't have a goat.

## two

The big, blue Montana sky was turning gray as Tad finished the gutters on the last guest house. It wasn't much of a house. None of them were. Just small cabins with one bedroom, one bathroom, a kitchenette, and a sitting room with a stacked washer and dryer in the closet. No TV. No Wi-Fi. Yet schmucks from out of state paid hundreds of dollars a night to book one of these things a year in advance and encounter what the C-A-R website called "an authentic Montana ranch experience."

Well, he was happy to do his part, though he wasn't sure if the guests about to flock here from far and wide were going to be any easier to handle than the Herefords the Wilsons used to run. At least with cattle, you always knew what they wanted: something to eat, something to drink, somewhere to get out of the wind. With people, there was no telling.

At the truck, he took a swig from a bottle of Mountain Dew and saw Maddie's Mazda driving away. She'd been here this whole time? Didn't she have anything better to do? A job or something? He tossed the bottle back in the truck and wiped his mouth with his sleeve. She probably worked for her dad, the man whose face was on every For Sale sign, newspaper

ad, and park bench in Grady. *Pining for a new home? Call Matthew Pine, Realtor.*

Speaking of schmucks. Matthew Pine walked around Grady like he owned it just because he had more money than everyone else, swooping in to buy up houses whenever people fell on hard times. It had never set right with Tad the way Matthew would shake his head and say “*What a shame*” the morning another place went into foreclosure and then make a deal with the bank before dinner the same day.

Two-faced. Like Maddie.

The three guest houses sat on a small hill overlooking the long, winding driveway, about fifty yards apart from one another. With the mountains in the distance, there was a great view even when clouds formed. Tad eyed the darkening sky with a grimace. Good thing he got those gutters finished. Rain was coming.

As Maddie’s car disappeared around a bend, his fingers itched to pull the pack of Camels from the inside pocket of his coat. If he slipped around the corner of the house and hid the butt back in his pocket when he was finished, no one would ever know if he took a quick smoke break. Dan was down behind the barn in the round pen, working the horses, and last he saw Anita was in the house.

He leaned against the west side of the cabin and drew in a lungful of satisfying poison, his thoughts returning to Maddie. She was hot, he’d give her that, but her heart was stone cold. Sure, maybe he had some trust issues with women after his mother split when he was eight, but that wasn’t why he harbored deep suspicions when it came to Maddie Pine.

A rumbling sound caught his attention, and he stiffened. Not thunder. It was Dan’s four-wheeler. Shoot. He tossed his

cigarette in the dirt and quickly ground it out with his boot. As he bent to pick it up, he could hear the four-wheeler come to a stop behind the farm truck. Tad shoved the butt in his inner coat pocket and coughed as he came around the corner of the cabin to meet Dan, resisting the urge to wave a hand in front of him to clear away the smell of smoke.

Dan stood beside the truck, arms crossed over his chest as if he knew exactly what Tad had been doing. As if he had seen through the walls of the cabin and straight into Tad's soul.

He gave Tad a long, hard look. "You about done up here?" Tad swallowed. "Just finished."

"No gutters on the west side."

Tad tried to think of an excuse but couldn't. Quick thinking had never been easy for him. He settled for a change of subject. "Looks like it's going to rain. You want me to fill any of those potholes before I go?"

A load of gravel had been delivered that morning to be used to smooth out the driveway, which was riddled with potholes the size of Sam's dog. Since Dan worked four tens at the hardware store in town, Tuesday through Friday, he probably wouldn't be able to deal with the gravel until the weekend, unless he got it done tonight.

Dan hesitated, then shook his head. "Me and Sam'll do it. But Anita wanted me to tell you to stop by the house before you leave. I don't know what, but she's been baking something."

Tad perked up, his stomach already anticipating the buttery goodness of shortbread or chocolate chip cookies or almond bars. Anita's baked goods were well known to Tad. Even before he started working here, Anita would sometimes bring treats by the house for him and his dad, them technically being neighbors and all. *"Every time you take a bite, remember I'm*

*praying for you*,” she’d say, and he couldn’t even be annoyed about it because she was so nice.

Maybe it was a pie!

He tried to keep his lips from twitching into a smile. “Will do.”

Dan uncrossed his arms, shifted on his feet, then crossed them again. “Look, Tad, I’m going to be straight with you. It was Anita’s idea to bring you on, and I wasn’t thrilled about it, but now that you’re here I figure it’s best for everyone if it works out, right?”

Tad tensed as he became aware of a prick of heat from the vicinity of his inner coat pocket. He stared dumbly back at Dan. “Yes? I mean, I want it to work out. Uh, Mr. Wilson. Sir.”

He’d blown every other job he’d had the past five years, and he needed this one to take if he was ever going to get his own place.

“Then I’ve got to be able to trust you.” Dan looked him in the eye. “When guests start arriving, I’ve got to know there aren’t going to be any problems.”

Tad looked away. Dan and his dad Bud were different as night and day on the outside. Dan was tall and lean and had gray specks in the light brown hair under his cowboy hat, while Bud was built like a bull, all muscle and rounded shoulders and aggression. Dark eyes, dark hair. But apparently they had one thing in common: a steadfast belief in Tad’s ability to screw things up.

Okay, so maybe he didn’t have the greatest track record when it came to employment, but anyone could’ve accidentally thrown the deposit bag from the gas station in the dumpster with the trash. And he never would’ve delivered that pallet of feed to the wrong ranch if he’d been given better directions.

“No problems.” Tad shoved his hands in his pockets, heat spreading across his chest. “I won’t let you down. Promise.”

Tad thought maybe Dan would say something about where Tad could put his promises or how they weren’t worth diddly-squat, but he didn’t. That was another way Dan and Bud were different. Bud never missed a chance to tell Tad exactly how big of a loser he was.

Dan dipped his chin. “Okay, then. See you tomorrow.”

He turned and climbed back on the four-wheeler. As he drove off, Tad tore open his coat, and a puff of smoke escaped. He fished out the smoldering butt and examined the small hole singed through his inner pocket, feeling like maybe there was a lesson there somewhere but not sure what it was.



Sam and Curly were waiting when Tad parked the farm truck next to the barn and got out.

“Maddie said my kittens are the cutest kittens she’s ever seen.”

Tad bit back a sigh. What did Maddie want with Sam, anyway? She’d never been his friend. Then again, she *could’ve* come here to see the kittens. What other reason was there? Even though he didn’t trust Maddie, he didn’t need to be so paranoid all the time.

“I told her she could have one when they get big enough,” Sam continued. “I think she likes the white one with the black spot on its face. Do you think I should name it Spot?”

Tad shut the truck door. “You should probably let Maddie name it, if she’s going to keep it.”

Sam nodded solemnly. “She’s nice.”

Tad didn’t have the heart to dispute that, so he turned and

walked toward the house. Sam followed a half step behind. He was a couple inches taller than Tad and at least twenty pounds heavier, but then, Tad had always been kind of scrawny. Which his father hated. From the corner of his eye, Tad saw Sam take a big swing at a rock with his foot and miss.

“Holy huckleberries.” Sam laughed. “Did you see that, Tad?”

“I saw.” He pointed to another rock.

Sam grinned and tried again. This time, his foot connected. “One, two, three, four, five, six.”

Tad smiled. He’d learned that Sam liked to kick rocks as hard as he could and count until they came to a stop. “That was a good one.”

“I’m going to help my dad move gravel.”

“I heard.”

“My dad said I’ll be in charge of the shovel because he’s feeling old.”

Tad chuckled and glanced at the darkening sky. “I’m guessing you’ll both be doing plenty of shoveling.”

“Are you going to the house? Because my dad said my mom wants you to go to the house.”

“Yeah, I’m going.”

“Okay. Bye, Tad.”

He spun around and headed back to the barn before Tad could even respond. That’s how Sam was. When he was with you, he was really with you. When he wasn’t, he wasn’t.

Tad reached the house and slowed his pace, suddenly feeling like an intruder. He didn’t belong here, did he? With people like this? People who went to church and stuck by one another and gave second chances. People who would never doubt Maddie’s intentions for coming to the ranch. The house’s welcoming

warmth had an irresistible pull, however, and he took another step closer.

He knocked timidly on the front door. Anita opened it with a dish towel in her hand and a smile on her face.

“Tad, you get on in here. You don’t need to knock.”

He prickled inside. He wasn’t going to just walk into their house like—

“We’re all family around here.” Anita ushered him toward the kitchen. “And we’re all so happy to have you helping out.”

Right. Except for Dan. But Tad figured it would be best not to bring that up.

“It smells good.”

Anita’s smile grew. “I made some maple pecan bread. I was going to send you home with two loaves, but I gave one to Maddie. She looked like she could use an extra hug, you know?”

His mind started to form the thought that Maddie didn’t deserve a hug from a woman like Anita, but he stopped it. He was pretty sure he didn’t deserve one either.

She held out a loaf wrapped in colorful fabric that had been rubbed with beeswax, and he took it. It was still warm. When was the last time he’d had something homemade like this, still warm from the oven? His dad had maybe warmed up a Pop-Tart for him once or twice when he was younger, but he had long ago quit making meals for Tad. “*When are you gonna grow a pair and stop mooching off your old man?*” he liked to ask.

Tad looked at the loaf in his hands. It was only bread, but his throat tightened. “Thank you.”

Anita squeezed his hand. “See, it’s like getting a hug. And every time you take a bite . . .”

One corner of Tad’s mouth lifted. “I should remember you’re praying for me. I know.”



“Good. Bring that fabric back when you’re done, and I can reuse it.”

“All right.”

Before he could get too comfortable or start doing something stupid like spilling his guts to Anita, he said good-bye and hurried out to his beater 1989 Ford Taurus. He’d bought it from a guy at his last job for two hundred bucks. Most of it was gray, but the rear driver’s side door was maroon and rattled like a carnival ride at the county fair. As he did his best to navigate around the potholes down the long driveway, the smell of the maple pecan bread filled him with an undefinable longing.

He thought of his dad. The Wilsons had known Bud since they were growing up together in Grady. It was a small town. What had Bud been like then? As a kid in school?

Wait. Tad raised one side of his upper lip in a snarl.

Did Anita pray for Bud too?