

BRAVE NEW WANDA

Acknowledgments

*W*anda and I would like to express our appreciation for the support received from grants, scholarships, residencies, and awards given by the Illinois Arts Council, Ragdale Foundation, and Squaw Valley Community of Writers, and for the encouragement from friends and mentors at Sewanee Writers Conference and the Columbia College Fiction Writing Department who were there for her beginning.

You know who you are.

We'll never forget you.

Chapter 1

*The New Mexico Whiptail lizard
produces offspring without the
benefit of sperm.*

—Wonderful World of Biology

A blond, moon-faced girl in cutoffs and boots hopped down from the hood of a rusting Cadillac, illegally parked behind the huge Dallas hospital. Blowing the bangs out of her eyes, she sized up the man emerging from the doctors' entrance, eyeballing him good.

"Hey, *MISTER*," she yelled, as he strode by. "Are you my fucking daddy?"

The man jerked his head around. "*Ex-cuse* me?"

She squinted. "Nose looks right. You double-jointed?" She hyperextended an elbow, making a bow back the wrong way.

The man quickened his pace toward his car. The girl followed, boots clomping.

Inside his Mercedes, the man punched the auto lock as the girl pressed her nose against the tinted window. Then, quickly, he pulled the car around her and away.

Stomping back to the Caddy, she reached up to pat the one-eared yellow dog poking its huge head through the rip in the car's ragtop.

"Don't you come near me with that nasty mouth of yours," warned the chubby old lady in a faded housedress, overflowing the driver's seat.

Cracking a knuckle, the girl gazed back toward the hospital doors. "You've got to talk that way, else nobody hears you. Don't you get cable?"

The old woman harrumphed, dabbing at her neck with a handkerchief. "If your mama, God rest her soul, could see you hounding these fine, upstanding men as if they'd thrown her down in the middle of Highway 80 and had

their way with her, it would just kill her.”

“She’s already dead, Granny.” The girl cracked another knuckle.

The old woman groaned. “Why do you believe that no-good stepdaddy of yours? Your daddy was your daddy! And if he ain’t your daddy, then I ain’t your granny, and nobody but your granny’d put up with you half the time, Miss Wanda Louise Ledbetter.”

The girl screwed up her face. “Wanda—just *Wanda*, now, okay?” She pushed a stray clump of hair behind an ear just as the automatic doors of the doctors’ entrance swished open. “Here comes another one.”

“You said we was going to Poetry Cemetery, and this ain’t it,” the fat woman griped, swatting the big dog’s wagging tail out of her face. “Now get back in this car right now! My feet are starting to swell.”

An anemic siren filled the air. The girl turned to see a white security car, yellow light twirling, jolt over a speed bump and halt directly behind them, inches from the Cadillac’s bent bumper. Two guards, one with a belly testing the limits of his khaki uniform, the other young and skinny as straw, hopped out of the vehicle.

“Young lady, what do you think you’re doing?” the big guard called, straightening his Stetson to mean business.

The girl crossed her arms, moving nearer the overgrown yellow dog. “If you were a big-shot hospital official or even a real policeman I might answer your questions, but since you are obviously either a police force reject or a retiree without any real power, I don’t see it’s any of your business.”

The skinny guard sniggered and stifled it with a cough.

Puffing up, the big security guard propped his hands on hips wide enough to still be moving, and growled: “Unless you’ve got a permit to park that hunk of junk here, you’ve got yourself a little problem.”

“Oh, big woo,” sneered the girl. Just then, another doctor exited the hospital. “Excuse me.” She pivoted on a boot heel.

“Just hold your horses.” The big guard grabbed her arm.

The dog bared its fangs.

The guard let go, thinking better of it.

One eye on the dog, he tried again, this time with a smile. “Now, honey. What business does a nice young lady like you have in a place like this?”

The girl stuck out her jaw, inched directly under the big dog’s head, crossed her arms even tighter across her chest and said, “I’m here to find my daddy and no pisshead asshole sumbitch’s going to stop me.”

“Whoa—” hooted the skinny guard, “has she got a mouth on her.”

The big guard scowled. “That’s no way for a little girl to talk.”

The girl popped out her chin. “I’m thirteen. In some cultures, I’d already be contributing new members to the tribal status quo.” Her chin went higher. “And just so you know, I *also* happen to be in personal communication with the Governor.”

“Hmmpgh!” came a comment from the Cadillac.

Both guards leaned down to see into the car.

The skinny guard squinted. “Who’s your granny talking to?”

The girl moved protectively between the guards and the old woman. “Leave her alone.”

“Ma’am,” the big guard called around the girl, “is this your granddaughter?”

The old lady looked up. “Why, yes. She’s really a nice girl when she’s not being a toot. She’s just been all pent-up since she shot Harley.”

The guards popped to attention, yelping in unison: “Shot *who*?”

“Always had a mind of her own and a mouth to boot,” the old woman rattled on, as both guards jumped back, scanning the scrawny kid for firearms. Standing there in her T-shirt, cutoffs and cowboy boots, she seemed presently unarmed, her jaw the only thing cocked.

The grandmother droned on: “I’d say, ‘Louise’—that’s my daughter-in-law, Wanda Louise’s dead mama—‘don’t let that girl walk all over you or you’ll live to regret it.’ Well, looks like I’m the one living to regret it. I got to go to the bathroom.”

The big security guard’s ears perked up. “Ma’am, did you say the child’s mother is dead?”

The woman sighed. “Died last Sunday. Strangest accident you ever saw. Didn’t have her in the ground good before I’m being dragged down sixty miles of bumpy Texas highway to this fool place.”

The guard frowned. “What about her daddy?”

“Dead, too. My sweet son—not even twenty-five years old. Bless his weak heart.”

“He wasn’t my daddy,” snapped the girl.

The grandmother was still talking. “Men don’t seem to live too long in our family. I’ve got three dead husbands myself. John Sr., my first, came back dead from the war. My second, Dewey, came back dead from the road. My third, Cecil, he came back dead from the cow pasture. Dead, dead, dead, dead. It just

ain't safe out here. Now, Wanda Louise, I got to go feed the chickens."

The girl turned her face away from the guards to whisper, "Granny, you don't *have* chickens anymore."

The old woman gasped. "They're all gone, too? Well, that's just my point!"

With a bulky sigh, the big guard readjusted his Stetson, then leaned into the girl's face. "C'mon, honey. Your own grandma just said your daddy was dead. Why are you bothering these good doctors after they've put in a hard day's work taking care of sick people?"

The girl didn't budge. "Because one of them's walking around with my genes, that's why—and I'm not your honey."

The big guard threw up his hands.

The girl gazed past him and up at the twenty-story hospital building. "It happened here. And my research says it was probably, like, an intern. Somebody'll know where he is."

The big guard looked back at the grandmother. "Ma'am, what is she talking about?"

The old lady shrugged. "She's always been like that—a walking library. Real smart. But we love her anyway."

The big guard rubbed his face with both beefy hands hard enough to make his jowls jiggle. "Okay, back up. Which doctor is your daddy?"

The girl rolled her eyes. "The one whose sperm was inseminated in my mother; don't you know anything?"

The young, skinny guard was suddenly sputtering. "L-Leon! She's talking about that sperm bank up on the seventh floor! My cousin did it. Got paid a hundred bucks for jacking off to girlie magazines!"

"Well, duh," sneered the girl. "How dim are you guys?"

For a long moment, no one moved. The big guard stared at the trouble before him. Then calmly, evenly, he said: "You just go on home now, young lady."

"I'm finding my daddy," came her quick response.

The big man fumed, moved his belly around and fumed again. "You ain't going to leave." He said it as a sad fact.

Wanda Ledbetter raised her chin as high as it would go. "If I do, I'm coming back, sure as shit shines."

"See what I mean, officer?" came the grandmother's moan from the Cadillac. "Stubborn as stinkweed."

For a beat, the big guard fingered his belt, then he pulled out his walkie-talkie.

The skinny guard blew a whistle through his teeth, loud, long and appreciative: “A donor baby, back for revenge. And I thought this job was going to be boring.”