

Love as a Fine
Species of Madness

Lynne Namka

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Also by Lynne Namka

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Prologue

“I have lived on the lip of insanity wanting to know reasons knocking on a door.
It opens. I’ve been knocking from the inside.”

Hafiz, 18th century Sufi mystic

Some people touch our soul so deeply that it’s impossible to let them go. And so we hold ourselves to that love secretly across a lifetime. The person may have been in our life for only a short time but with them that whisper of understanding awakens knowing that there is love in spite of the ugliness that life can bring. I suspect that my desperate connection to Brad was a reaction to the loss that I’d experienced. Without the early horrors perpetuated by my mother would the attachment to Brad have been so strong? Is not unreturned love that lasts the lifetime, whether it be a parent or a lover; is not unrequited love a distortion—a fine madness?

He’s dead now, but anyway I have his permission to tell our story and the love that spanned forty-three years. We made a pact before he died that I’d be the teller of his tale although I can’t really tell his story. I don’t know it, just the parts that he was willing to share with me and how my eyes saw him through the distorted lenses of love and pain. Brad was only a bit part in my life—a walk-on part really in terms of amount of actual life time spent together. However, much of my script, my very identity of who I became as a woman, was partially shaped around him.

So the tale is mine with bits and pieces of him in it and I can tell it the way I want. He has been a hovering ghost in my mind while other men, real flesh and blood men, some faithful, some untrue, were front and center. The truth is that the intensity of my loving Brad rattled my young bones.

Brad and I met as innocents when I was sixteen and fell in love so completely. Then broke up as most young love does. They say that puppy love doesn’t last and for the most part that’s true. But there was something between us—something hidden away in the deepest chamber of the heart—that didn’t, that wouldn’t let go even though we went our separate ways. The reality was that only at the end of our story did I understand why. The whole

of it was that love came at a young age when I was too young to understand it.

I've sought the truth about love across my lifetime and here's what I've come up with: Teen age love started as complete joy, became devastating pain and ended many years later with healing for both of us.

Men have loved me, but I take no credit in that. Of all the good and impossible men across my life, Brad was the one who reached into my innermost heart deeply. He certainly wasn't the best of men; it's said that no rock star can be a faithful, loving partner. Brad was my first love and I was his first and last. Even though we went our separate ways choosing different lives, whatever we had together—the feelings and the connection—continued. What I learned across the years is that the wrenching pain of loss when someone you love leaves can be offset by the wisdom gleaned from the time spent with them.

So here is what I've figured out: If pain shakes the bones, truth builds the bones. Seeking understanding can be a long, perilous, painful journey, but one that must be taken just the same if we are to find any type of sanity in life. And despite my chaotic upbringing, despite the desperate secrets, I've been a persistent seeker of truth across my years.

What is truth anyway? Truth is swarthed in shrouds, shadows and well-laid defenses of the capricious mind. No matter how perilous the journey, I've sought the bone-crushing truth across my days. Now that my aged bones are counting down to prepare for their final rest, I put this story down as I remember it.

In that way, I'm my father's daughter—the preacher's kid. For what I learned from him is that love, if it's true, never dies. Love is embedded in our hearts alternately comforting and paining us. True love, the soul kind of love, changes its form but it goes on and on even beyond death.

Chapter 1

There was always a sense of unrest, an unease in me as if I had done something wrong. Really, really wrong, something unforgivable as a child. Daddy died, mother disappeared off somewhere. The memories dried up, buried in some deep fissures of my mind. The theme of murder—a vague sense of evil keeps surfacing. Routinely I push the thoughts down as I've done most of my life.

But still the horrible question remains. Was I involved in a murder as a child? Did I kill someone? Preposterous, yes, but the fear remains. That bottomless sense of dread that started when my mother became severely ill was a place I tried to avoid. Preposterous, I tell myself for the thousandth time and blew my breath out sharply shaking my head. What had caused this fear to surface again?

Oh, yes, it was that disturbing Brad dream which came again last night sending me into confusion and pain. The same unsettling one I'd been having about Brad several times a year since I was eighteen, the year we broke up. Although the dream had different settings, the ending was always the same. Moving on parallel tracks together for a while then veering off into vague unsettledness. Always the discouraging theme of us being together and then not together. Feeling the connective tie and then not knowing if we were a couple. Images of moving closer then one of us pulling away—usually him and then his leaving. Images of my being alone crying. Then waking to longing. Raw pain.

Every time the dream happened, the turmoil plunged me back into that same unanswerable question involving murder. Somehow that loss symbolized in the dream was connected to an earlier one. There was no one left to ask, they were all dead or beyond answering. Father and my brother Bruce had died. My grandmother had refused to talk when she was still alive and my mother was out of it—literally out of her mind. So much loss. So much pain for one family, for one vulnerable little girl to bear. And I was the only one left.

Then I awake to my daily life which is also painful as I prepare to leave these golden, rolling hills of California and Gene. Life at the cattle ranch was sunny for awhile. Here's another loss: Looking back, I asked myself, what caused the loss of the happy, carefree young couple well known

on our college campus, who played at being ranchers? What happened to the happiness Gene and I had shared? We wore our custom made, cowboy clothes and diamonds and gave orders to the hired help but they ran the place. We knew nothing about running a ranch. And it all fell apart. How did we go from being the fun-loving college couple to becoming a pot head and a mad woman?

Predicaments. There was too much money from Gene's rich dad who bought him the ranch because it was the latest thing he wanted. He settled into perpetual adolescence and then into the slow takeover of addiction and further lessening of his ambition. He stopped caring about anything except getting high. That was Gene Smally. We all make our deals with the devil that is in us. Addicts make stronger deals that's all—soul-stealing deals.

And for me? I had my own deal, not with the devil, but with my own demons. Living with Gene's staying stoned was pulling me under and with my history, I couldn't afford that. I fell into a slow, dark tumble into that well-known sadness that was beyond sadness.

Depression. This I remember well from when my father died when I was young. And depression again after Brad and I broke up. As a lonely child there had been chaos in my life. The loneliness went away during that time in high school that Brad and I were together. He had given me a sense of belonging that I didn't even know about. Then he and that sense of peace were gone. Broke up. Broke my heart. Depression moved back in. It ran rampant in my family.

Finding connection was the lonely hope of the child longing for her mother. The mother who could not come back from her ramblings despite the child's hollow looks and desperate unspoken cry. Isn't the mother the very first love? I learned to live without a functioning mother early on.

The theme of a woman going crazy to find her sanity has obsessed me for as long as I can remember. Madness and the search for sanity have dogged my footsteps. Now it was hard to live with her illness riling up in me. I fear becoming her. I don't want to live if my life should turn out like hers.

The fear of going crazy was with me even as a child. I remember having vivid, bizarre images that floated through my mind as I fell asleep. I thought I was going crazy. There could be no other explanation for it—those

colorful shapes and dark figures that played themselves out in my mind every night interfering with the good comfort of sleep. And I didn't dare ask anyone. I couldn't let them know of my fear that madness was happening to me too. Too much else was happening in my family.

Years later in an abnormal psychology textbook I came across the concept of hypnologic imagery. That those wild images that filter through when you are in that halfway zone neither awake nor asleep are normal reactions in a mind that shifts into sleep. Normal. Relief. Such relief to find out what I'd experienced was just the workings of the mind seeking the deeper stages of sleep.

I remember searching my textbook frantically looking for a diagnosis that might fit my mother. Her hodgepodge of unrelated words and thoughts peppered with hysterical giggles, cries and then the hallucinations fitted most likely with the label of schizophrenia. The book called schizophrenia the most dreaded of the disorders of the mind—a cruel puzzle of distortions and ferocious splits from reality that the most brilliant minds in science had not worked out. I concurred. My mother, the cruelest puzzle of all.

Now at the lush California ranch I lived out my darkest fear of becoming deranged—losing one's mind—it was called back then. That slippery descent into the uncertainty of chaos. The anguish that clouds the spirit can be devastating. Am I to turn out to be the same cruel puzzle myself? For when the mind goes, what is left?

Leaving the Midwest for California where no one knew my family's history had been a welcome change for me at age eighteen. There was respite from the secrets of that small Indiana town where we last lived as a family. Getting away from those cloudy memories of childhood was a relief in my college years. The melancholy and languor of my last two years of high school started to lift as I explored new ideas in my major in design and the openness of the college lifestyle.

Gene and I started dating in our senior year in college. He was a BJOK—Big Jock on Campus. Fraternity guy. You know the type. Athletic, basketball player, good looking, rich. Golden boy. Never had a problem in his life. Never had to work for anything. We met as I came out of my literature class and he was getting out of his car. A red convertible, an English Triumph into which he fit his lanky frame. I smiled at him in passing and he grinned back. He got a guy we both knew to ask me if I would go out

with him—I didn't know it then but this was typical of Gene. He never did anything he could get someone else to do for him.

In the eyes of the girls at the dorm, Gene was a good catch. I was a nobody. Janie Perkins, a poor girl, a starving artist. A serious student in the design department with the reputation of knowing what looked good and how to put things together. No big-time sorority. No reputation on campus of being anything. My assets were my having good organization skills and having an aesthetic eye knowing what looked good. I suppose Gene liked my looks and personality. We fell into a routine of spending time together. My life changed drastically taking me out of the lethargy I felt after my brother Bruce died.

Gene and I didn't talk much—didn't really have that much in common. Instead we went on a whirlwind of parties, dances, football games, fraternity functions. Life was one excitement after another. With him, there was the quality of excess—too much, too easy. There was too much money and with that too much alcohol and pot. We flew down to Mexico with his buddies on somebody's private plane and took in the beaches and nightlife. He always returned with a stash of weed which he used freely. Drinking and smoking held no appeal for me. I always hated that out-of-control feeling; I had too much of that in my life as a child.

I always had some part-time job or another for some spending money to supplement my scholarship. Still it was a tight go of it, money wise. While I was working at my secretarial job, he hung out at the beach surfing or playing volleyball with his buddies. Another one of life's inequalities, I thought. Those that have money have an easier time of it in life.

Gene was on the edge of flunking out of his major in animal husbandry. I'd heard a snide remark from one of his fraternity brothers that he was majoring in lazy.

"Gene, don't you care about anything?" I would say, annoyed at his lack of ambition.

"“Why put forth effort, when it's not required,” he told me. “I can graduate with C's and D's a lot easier than working for higher grades.”"

"Well there's got to be more to life than parties. What are you going to do with your life?"

Gene shrugged. “My Dad’s buying a big cattle spread in Northern California. I’m going to run it for him. We are looking at a new cross breed of cattle that should do well on the grasses there.”

I gave up trying to motivate him. After graduation, I didn’t know what to do next. Still somewhat lethargic, there was no direction, no goals of what I wanted to do next with my life. I drifted, half hearted looking but not finding a job in the design field. Gene invited me to come visit him at the ranch. I visited. I stayed. Almost as if by default, I became the mistress, figuratively and literally, of a large, sprawling cattle ranch and the big ranch house.

The bright California sun, as it came through the windows of the old adobe-brick hacienda, calmed me. After years of being poor, it was fun having no responsibilities except in making things look good. And all the money to spend on anything I wanted. After all those years of going without, I found it easy to spend Gene’s dad’s money and we went on buying sprees decorating the old Spanish house.

Marriage with Gene wasn’t in the picture for me, that I knew, it was easy to let things drift. Hanging out with him seemed to induce a hazy, dream-like mood in me. I allowed myself to be lazy after the hard work of school. I worked on my drawings and painting at my leisure. I relished the luxury of having a cook and housecleaner—hard-working, good-hearted Mexican women whose soft Spanish accents comforted me.

Weekends we drove to some stage or bar in Sonoma County to hear a young folk singer-songwriter Kate Wolf and her band, The Wildwood Flowers. Kate’s songs were brutally honest about love won and lost and the riveting mandolin, guitar, banjo and old time fiddle with the wailing harmonica in the background complemented her strong melodies. I heard that she had a difficult life but her songs seemed to be written about me. She sang of the rolling landscapes of northern California and her pure descriptions of the landscapes of the heart touched many people. The soulful quality of her songs and her voice of clarity reached out to me. I bought all her records and her messages about love, lost and gained, whirled in my mind.

After a while, the dream of being the happy couple who play acted at running a cattle ranch started to slide. I must admit that Gene and I started that unholy dance that would split us apart. That resident darkness that had long been waiting to emerge could not be held off any longer. We lost the

golden, sunshine couple that glided gracefully through everything during earlier days. The worst of what the easy life of California had to offer took over.

After a visit to Las Vegas and a high-stakes poker game where he lost big time, Gene became beholden to a different crowd. He shifted into an abrupt change of heart about what he wanted in his life. The twice daily habit of pot now took over his life. He had an air strip put in at the ranch although he didn't own a plane. When I questioned about it, he said that it was for visitors. Soon men in dark suits, sunglasses and gold chains who gave orders in terse statements began to visit.

At first the men seemed harmless then I became fearful as I noticed how they were taking control. Watching more carefully I saw the guns concealed under their suits and how they dropped their voices and changed the subject when I came into the room. Some of the bigger silent men seemed to be there just to guard the big boss. Goons I secretly called them just under my breath. And then snickering to myself, I called them Goon One and Goon Two like the Dr. Seuss characters Thing One and Thing Two.

I tried talking to Gene who spent more time drifting in and out in a pot-induced haze. Catching Gene in a more lucid frame of mind one morning, I said, "Gene, what's going on? Who are these men and why are they here?"

He was noncommittal. "They are just friends of mine who like to get out of Las Vegas for a while and hang out on the ranch. They'll be gone soon. Pay them no mind."

"I can't when they are always underfoot watching me. Don't you notice how they almost keep a guard around you at all times? They only leave you alone when you're stoned."

He grinned, "You are imagining things. Smoking weed is no big deal. I'm just relaxing with the weed. It makes my mind more creative."

"It's not creative to be stoned out of your head all day, every day. Gene, pull yourself together. I want you back. Stop smoking every hour of every day."

“Janie, you’re exaggerating. I’m not doing that much. Just enough to help me relax a bit. A guy’s gotta relax. You’re worrying too much. Get over it!” He dismissed me by walking out of the room.

Futile. After several attempts to get him to wake up, I gave up. My antenna went on perpetual alert and my mind started to jump saying danger regarding the men who frequented our home. Now along with the question of murdering someone, I was afraid of being murdered. Paranoia over swept over me. What was real? What was imagined?

I developed a shrewdness I didn’t realize I had—such as how to come into a room silently and read the situation. The child who grows up with a crazy mother learns quickly to survive. Street smarts. That awareness of danger must be, I reckoned, a gift from my mother who used her own craftiness to hold on to some resemblance of sanity when the dark voices called to her.

Mother sometimes pretended to act normal to keep from being hauled away and locked up again. Faking good. As a child I had watched her talking excitedly to someone who wasn’t there and then shape up quickly when Daddy walked in the room. Now I played out the opposite—faking bad. I acted crazy to survive. I woke each day thinking of what crazy-making behavior I might indulge in to fool the goons into thinking that I was harmless.

I knew too much about the comings and goings of those men and what they carried in those black bags. They knew that I knew too much for me to be set free in a moral world where I might tell their secrets. I’d become a liability to Gene but not a threat. Gene would never hurt me; he was too trusting and too lazy, but I’d heard stories. Grizzly stories of those women of drug dealers who disappeared and their rotted bodies found down an abandoned mine shaft or left in the desert for the buzzards to pick their bones clean.

Daily, as I programmed my identity to disappear, my mood plunged to a deep, dark place. My long tawny hair, of which I was vain, became disheveled as I stopped daily grooming. I became this vague, depressed, rambling woman with dullness in my eyes. Looking like a raccoon, dark circles formed under my eyes as I stayed up late into the night and then fell asleep exhausted on a cot in the early morning hours in a spare room.

But part of me wondered was this really play acting—this act of the deranged woman? Depression stayed right at that edge of terror inside my mind. This was something more than just a low mood. What turn of menacing chemicals surged in my brain to carry me to this dark place?

I avoided contact with Gene. I kept my voice flat and mottled, empty of all connections to any of the good things that had been between us. He started to distance from me as well although sometimes we came across each other in the big, rambling house, rounding a corner and dropping our eyes.

I kept away from the men also. If they tried to talk to me, I drifted away mumbling something about my loco mother. The Mexicans among those men knew that word. Loco. Loco is something they fear as if it's catching. Someone harmless and undesirable to be around. I know how to keep people away from me, I thought as I replicated some of my mother's more bizarre reactions. Mental illness as a coping response, now that's crazy.

Gene was worried about my behavior so he agreed to my driving into the nearby city to see someone who could treat the black moods. He warned me to never mention the arrangements at the ranch to my doctor. I agreed and then responded by saying something insane totally off the subject. I saw the wide-eyed fear in Gene's eyes that I might not get better. So when I told him that I needed to talk to someone about the depression and childhood memories, he agreed to pay for the sessions. He wanted the old me back—that laughing, lighthearted girl he'd once known.

I was relieved to go for help as I was becoming more and more worried. What was this primitive urge to contract and withdraw into a cave where no one could touch me? This gray seemingly unending void. Sometimes comfortable, sometimes barren and cold; the way back out of the cave into the California sunlight was blocked.

There it is. There I was. What I was doing was flirting with danger and the greatest risk of all—of losing my mind.

Chapter 2

Off I went to the nearest town with a hundred seventy-five dollars for the two hour weekly therapy visit and a couple hundred extra for whatever I wanted to buy. Guilt money. Laundered money. Blood money, I was sure but I didn't let myself go down that track of thinking; it was too risky in my state of mind.

I made the day of it once a week and threw off some of the illness ruse as soon as the truck crossed the cattle guard at the far end of the ranch. Maybe I was not so crazy after all. Leaving the confines of the ranch did wonders for curing my low mood. First to my therapy session with Marion, to the gym for yoga, some shopping, to the Food Coop for a late sandwich and then a painting class.

I noticed one or other of the goons—was it Goon One or Goon Two?—following me during the visits to town so I avoided talking to anyone which might implicate my being a stooge on the drug cartel. Coming out of a store where a dark-haired thug was waiting trying to look inconspicuous, I'd duck my head and roll my eyes dramatically to act momentarily out of it.

Publically, I kept my face sober. Walking down the street, a tall, thin man in old clothes said to me, “Hey, you dropped your smile.” I had to chuckle at his observation as I walked on down the street as it fitted me perfectly.

The hour spent each week with Dr. Marion Clemmons was my lifeline to the good and real during my last days at the ranch. Marion. I called her Dr. Clemmons at first of course, but at some point, she gave me permission to call her by her first name, Marion, which seemed like such a sweet name to me. A slight calmness came over me the minute I took a deep breath and walked in her door.

What can I tell you about this woman who made a career out of trying to patch up the pain caused by others? Marion in her drab polyester pant suit, sensible shoes and her creative, wise mind. Never-married type of woman, glasses with an old maidish look and manner. Of course she did not talk about her personal history but I imagined her giving her all to those poor displaced souls who came to her for solace.

I had tried to find a man therapist, with my issues with women and all, believing that men are safer than women. Women had always been my designated enemy until proven to be absolutely safe. But the only man therapist in town was full up so I went to check out Marion figuring I'd at least give her a try in my desperation. And when I looked into her clear, gray eyes, I saw competence and no agenda except to provide a place of safety where I could talk. Where I could coax painful memories forth at the time that was right for me. No pressure. No hurry.

At first I sat gingerly on the edge of her couch ready to make a run for the door at any false move or any sign of threat. I was ready to leave if she pushed me in any way or indicated that she wanted something from me that I didn't want to share. I had to be in control. Any probing of any place that I didn't want to go and I was ready to bolt. I once read the word "bolter" in an English novel which described a woman who took off quickly when finished with a romance and had identified with it. Like a skittish deer, I definitely was a bolter.

I talked about my unhappy mood, anxious feelings and the inability to sleep. When I faltered, she prompted me with a few questions. I gave only a few details about my current life carefully watching her eyes to see if she judged me for living with my boyfriend.

Not wanting to give too many things away about conditions at the ranch, I switched to my history relaying my story of growing up in the Midwest, giving the facts that I could remember. Preacher's kid, his dying when I was ten. Mother mentally ill. I talked about my childhood; all that I can remember that is, with a lapse of memory from fourth grade for a couple of years.

My strategy was to get it all out—all the old childhood stuff and then talk about the fear that I was becoming like my mother. The words poured out—the rushing thoughts that kept racing through my head. Marion simply let me talk, reassuring me that things would get better.

I'd leave her office feeling raw and somehow strangely cleansed. It was like a purge. I'd felt like I'd been beaten up but experienced a great sense of relief. It would take me a few days to shake off the shakes and jitters that came with bringing up the past and then off I'd go again to have my time with her sorting out those things which had been confusing for years. At times I wanted to yell "Enough!" and quit due to the upheaval that came up

but some other part of me was driven to get those demons out that haunted me.

So I asked Marion tentatively, “Here it is—my biggest fear—am I losing my mind?”

She reassured me as she shook her head, “What you are feeling is depression which can be temporary, not severe mental illness. You don’t hear voices telling you what to do. You aren’t out of touch with reality as far as I can tell. You experienced relational trauma when you were young.”

“Relational trauma?” I asked. “What does that mean?”

She replied softly, “It’s when children undergo something terrible that is overwhelming to them through actions of their relatives and the child feels helplessness and out of control.”

I nodded. That was exactly how I felt most of my childhood. “I was always at the mercy of my mother and then later my grandmother who took us in after my dad died.”

“Depression is understandable given what you’ve been through. It happens to girls who lose a parent early on in life. You can sort this out and get through it. It need not become a life sentence. No wonder you don’t have many memories of those years. Repression of memories can be a sometimes useful thing when you can’t deal with upsetting events. It can be a blessing of sorts.”

“Will I ever remember all that happened? I’m not sure I want to know all the details.”

“We won’t go digging for them if that’s what you mean. What comes through, comes through on its own. We will deal with whatever comes up. I can help you do that.”

Reassured, I appreciated my gratitude. Nothing would be forced. No hurry. No agenda. Whatever happened, she would help me handle it.

Later when emotions of desperation started to break through, Marion asked me to sit with the dredged memories and simply breathe into them. She reminded me that I had been the child at the mercy of adults in a situation that was horrific. Time and time again she told me that I had been a

marvelous child who not only survived but became a strong and resilient young woman. Strong was a heady word for me to hear after the daily shaking and terror going on inside.

Relief, such relief. I relished Marion's description of me as being smart and resilient. I felt an almost joy at the diagnosis of depression. Depression was something I could handle. I'd been there and gone through that twice before. Losing my mind I could not. That was a trajectory I could not afford.

Chapter 3

Often I couldn't sleep and the nights were long. Images of my mother came more freely now. That discordant, disorderly woman whose rambling speech caused such discomfort in me. Thinking back, an astringent taste of shame came into my mouth and along with it, the forgotten, unspoken childhood wail, "Why can't you be like the other mothers? The Betty Crocker mothers? The P. T. A. mothers? The mother who loves her little girl so much that she acts normal?" Normal. Now that's a word I've chased down all my life. There was no comfort in my acting (or was it being crazy) seeing Gene warily watching me out of the corner of his eyes.

That's the way my brother Bruce and I had watched our mother as we had to stand and wait in her attendance until we were dismissed. We were leery of her peppery, short bursts of instructions that didn't make sense. We knew better than to look at each other in bewilderment or even to look at her. "That look, that look," she would say. "Don't look at me as if I'm crazy. I'm your mother for God's sake." As if we didn't know that. We would huddle together shoulders touching to get the human contact and nod as if we could interpret that strange, garbled language she spoke. We learned to recognize it for what it was—the language of madness.

Spells of fury and vehemence, then laughter were followed by bouts of amnesia. And then we would escape, knowing she would forget what she wanted from us. We learned to be out of sight, out of mind running away from those malevolent outbursts.

The storm of living in a family that is different and you don't fit in is a challenge for a child. There was a time when life went its own way marked by the holidays and school year's passage of time. There was a time of innocence, before knowledge and the resulting shame of having a different kind of mother. Bruce and I knew, to some extent of awareness, that our mother was strange. And he shielded me from this knowledge until it was brought home to me.

Invisibility was my trademark in childhood to study the mysterious world of adults. Once when I was seven, I sat behind a tree at the church and listened as two women talked about my mother. Kids learn a lot by blending into the background and listening to grownups. They were that type of

church women with the unchristian flaw of needing to put their nose in other people's business.

One woman said knowingly, "She has that taint of madness in her that came from her mother's side of the family. It runs in the family. One of her mother's sisters has been locked up for a long time. I knew Reta since she was young. She started acting differently shortly after she got married. Poor Pastor. What he has to put up with trying to raise those two children."

I froze hearing the phrase "It runs in the family." Was this my fate too? Even as young as I was, I got the drift of how some families had a strain of strange, disturbed behavior. I knew who was next in line. My aunt, Mother, me?

Prior to that moment of having a word to describe my mother's behavior, more than anything I had hated the feeling of being pitied as a child. We were always poor; the churches where my father preached were never affluent. Small churches afforded a living but we never had new clothes or bicycles like the neighborhood children unless some generous parishioner donated one. I hated wearing second-hand clothes and was always worried that some kid at school would spot their old shirt on me and make some pointy-fingered comment. Like the saying goes, we were poor as church mice.

Now to hear the women talking madness coupled with pity was devastating as I sat holding my breath. I wanted to hear more but at the same time stifled my urges to run away or run towards them screaming "That's not true. You're making that up." After that, childhood became a blur.

Madness. I had wondered for a long time as a young kid what that word meant. Finally coming to the conclusion that it was the strange ways that Mother acted, the best way to deal with it was to not be around it. Bruce and I would pack a lunch; go to the woods or to our friends' houses as soon as we got up in the morning and stay away until dark. We never had our friends over to our house and no one questioned that arrangement. Certainly our friends did not want to be around our mother and we were spared the embarrassment.

Survival. To run from insanity was simple survival that the child of a disturbed parent must learn. My brother and I became expert escape artists, accomplices in our crime of wanting to be free from the mercurial moods of

our mother. After his graduation, Bruce escaped our small town and headed for San Francisco. I watched him go with a heavy heart but cheered him on just the same. After graduation from high school, I followed him to the west coast to attend Sonoma State University in northern California working to supplement my scholarship.

Now late into the night, I sat and pondered on the meaning of love and its many forms. My father had loved me that I was sure of. Bruce and I loved each other as much as we were able. But Mother?

Suddenly I missed Bruce. My older brother and I had been close when we were young. He had looked after me which must have been a chore because no one was looking after him. While he was alive, he was the one person I could ask and get the truth from. But the details of our upbringing hadn't seemed important to talk about back when we lived in California. I just wanted to forget back then. Now, there were so many questions with no answers.

So where is that line between sanity and madness when it comes to love? Who draws that very fine line and when do we step over it? What is primitive and dangerous that lies underneath that line, pushing us or pulling one way or the other? Why had falling in love as a teenager driven me to the shadows of depression?

My head reeled. I warned myself to stop flirting with those questions that might push me over that dangerous edge of reality. Stop right now, I told myself. Stop thinking so much about the ravages of the past or the madness will take you over.

Chapter 4

In my free time at the ranch when I was not putting on the crazy woman act, I spent my time riding the hills with my chestnut mare, Georgia Girl. Such a beautiful soul this horse! She was my salvation and my grounding during this upheaval time.

Georgia Girl was part of the decision I made that I had to leave California as soon as possible. One day, we'd had a peaceful ride and I was feeling much better being away from the toxic atmosphere at the ranch. I had ridden up a gentle hill and looked down in the hidden valley to see a large plot of land with hundreds of plants with delicate filigree leaves. They were beautiful green, thin-leafed plants which moved gently in the warm breeze.

I stood for a while puzzling over it. If we were growing some crop, why wouldn't I know about it? Somewhere I'd seen pictures of these lacey plants before but I couldn't quite put my mind on where. Then it hit me. Pot! Marijuana! So we've become drug growers. That's it. That's why those men are here.

At times I know absolutely nothing. At times I know everything. And then the thought came through loud and clear, I have to get out. I am leaving. I am so out of here. Intuitively in the last session, Marion had encouraged me to question my current living situation saying that if it made me unhappy to make a change.

Georgia Girl and I rode hard through the gently-sloping hills of dried grass dotted with occasional patches of native green vegetation. We galloped as I tried to quell the anxious feelings that hammered in me. Exhausted, we stopped at a small grassy place beside a stream where Georgia Girl could drink while I splashed water on my overheated face. I talked to her saying what I have to do and cried over my sorrow at leaving her.

Drawing had always calmed me. Pulling my drawing pad from the pack, I made a sketch of her lifting her head looking straight at me with big brown, intelligent eyes as if she understood what I was saying. Horse wisdom can be a lot smarter than what comes out of the scattered mind of most people.

I racked my mind trying to come up with some plausible reason for leaving the ranch without arousing suspicion from the men. A rational enough excuse so that I wouldn't need tracking down should someone get apprehensive. The reason came, as smiling fate intervened when I got a call from Mr. Applebee, my mother's long-time trustee, saying she was dying. I was needed back home to be with her in the short time she had left and handle the arrangements for the estate.

Duty called. This was the irony of being the responsible daughter at last. Before I told anyone, I made plane arrangements to go back to see my mother. I felt relief at her dying and about leaving the situation at the ranch. I told myself that it was cruel to take advantage of my mother's passing to leave Gene but I needed out of this drug-infested place. The goons could not deny a woman being called home to the bedside of her dying mother.

Survival. Whether my continued existence was consistent with leaving or not, it sure felt that way. Now my escape, curiously enough, was based on my returning home to face my mother.

Giving Gene a fake home town and address, I said I'd call when settled. I gathered up my jewelry and diamonds and crammed other small niceties, perfume, silk scarves, lotions, into my suitcase knowing that I would be too poor on my own to replace them. Yes, there is a greedy side to me, but I rationalized my actions saying that Gene had bought most of them for me before the years of drugs and I was just being practical. I certainly wasn't leaving the diamonds for the next inhabitant of Gene's bed who, for all I knew, might be a drug-gang bimbo.

I left most my belongings so it appeared I was coming back soon. Glitzy California clothes had no place where I was planning to go although I had no idea at the time where I would land after my mother's passing. It pained me to leave Georgia Girl, but there was no way to smuggle her away unnoticed. I did take the custom made western shirts, the custom snakeskin boots and seven pairs of those five-hundred-dollar jeans. After all they fit my butt just right and I wasn't that crazy.

It's funny how when you know that you're done with some things, you are really done. I cried as Gene drove me to the airport pressing a couple of thousand dollars in my hand at the last minute. Gene thought the tears were because I'd be missing him and indeed there was some sadness at leaving him. It was for the old Gene that I was crying about. He had been

good to me before his infatuation with pot set in. The thing I mourned the most was leaving that chestnut mare and Marion and the safety of her small office.

Settled on the plane somewhere over the Rocky Mountains a striking image came to my mind that actually made me smile. I made up a story about myself to match. I'm Big Nose Millie hurriedly catching the twelve o'clock train to Yuma and then on to St. Louie. Big Nose Millie, professional gambler and sometimes by necessity hooker. My heart was broken by my true love years ago forcing me to become a lady of the night living by my considerable wits. I've quickly packed my bags and am high tailing it for parts unknown. I've double crossed the Big Boss and didn't want to be around when the guns start a blazing so was leaving California for good heading east to greener pastures.

I took out my pen and started sketching a caricature of Millie on a napkin. My face with a big nose and a knowing smile. I drew this shady lady with a short-waisted bodice and big breasts. Cleavage of course--low cut black taffeta dress, cinched in at the waist with a whale bone corset, laced up shoes, hair piled high, imitation gold circles in her pierced ears and faceted glass rings on three of her fingers. A fetching smile with a hint of her knowing what she was capable of getting away with. Of course no guilt. And a heart of gold for those she loved combined with that unsavory, selfish quality of taking care of herself. I drew a big heart on her sleeve and labeled the drawing Big Nose Millie and underlined her name three times.

Sometimes the cure for depression is to stop hanging out with jerks and moving on with life. Funny how getting out of Dodge did wonders to lift my mood.

Chapter 5

Out of the frying pan and into the fire with my depression going out one door and anxiety coming in another. As the plane crossed the Mississippi River, a queasy reaction in my stomach and chest set in. Is this all a ruse of my mother trying to get me back? Then I laughed and ask myself a more likely question. Was this her paranoia coming though in me? My mind was a mixture of relief of leaving California and the worry at what I might be needed to do with Mother. Would she expect me to nurse her as I had once done with Bruce as he was dying from that wasting-away disease?

I rented a car at the Indianapolis airport and drove south for several hours to get to my small home town. I observed the familiar sights of trucks parked in corn fields. Combines worked the fields, with dried cornstalks standing in rows. At a pull off I stopped and got out of the car to stretch my legs. A layer of dust hung in the air. Poison ivy, that lethal weed so hard to eradicate, was turning brilliantly red next to the goldenrod that blew brightly in the breeze.

It was a beautiful fall day with the leaves giving up their green and just starting to turn into their brilliance of reds, golds and browns. Red and sugar maples showing their vivid colors. Nostalgia hit me at the sight of the turning maple trees. Today is what my father would have called another splendid day that the Lord had given us. There was a cool, crisp feel to the air. The smell of the Midwest hit me with the realization that different parts of the country had different smells. Fall in Indiana meant a mixture of dirt, damp and some decay from the leaves that had already hit the ground.

My old home town looked pretty much the same. The smoke from the annual ritual of burning piles of leaves at the curb hit my nose as I pulled into town. People out raking the leaves waved as I drove past the edges of town and onto Main Street. I'd forgotten the friendliness of a small town I thought as I walked into Mr. Applebee's office. The sign which looked as if it had weathered many a storm said Estate Planning and Wills. The front door creaked a bit as I opened it and Mr. Applebee came out to the foyer to greet me shaking my hand and welcoming me home. His office was piled with stacks of papers and the newspaper clippings hanging on the wall were turning yellow with age.

Mr. Applebee had been a long-time friend of my father and I appreciated his looking after the trust fund and setting up the living arrangements that he and my grandmother had worked out to support my mother. Now he looked shorter and balder than I remembered but it had been seven years. Still he had that friendly twinkle in his blue eyes for me, the daughter of his old friend with whom he had played chess.

“Janie, it’s so good to see you. You are looking great. You’ve got a different look to you. What a great California tan you’ve got.”

“The stint in California was good for me. It’s good to see you after all these years Mr. Applebee. Tell me about Mother. How serious is her illness?”

“You’ll want to talk to Doc Baines yourself, but I can tell you that she’s had several heart attacks. Most of her symptoms associated with schizophrenia have been suppressed by medication. I was able to call in a favor and pull a few strings to get her out of the ward of the mental hospital she was placed in. There weren’t any protests from anyone in the town she last lived in and no one here in Warrentville knows her history. Brought her here so that I could look after her. These last few years have been quiet for her. She lives with a good Christian lady, Mrs. Roster, who takes in elderly women to supplement her income.”

“I can’t imagine my mother being a quiet, elderly woman. My picture of her was frozen of images of a vague, rambling woman from those childhood years. Grandmother never took us to visit her after she was admitted to that last hospital. You say her symptoms are cured?”

“Not cured exactly. More likely held in remission by the antipsychotic drugs she’s on. Doc said that these new drugs do wonders to suppress hallucinations. She doesn’t get out so I try to visit her every month or two. She was doing well until the recent heart attacks. Her mind is fuzzy as a result of the drugs over the years. Once in a while she asks about you. I told her that you are in school in California.”

“Yes. I finished school several years ago and have been living on a cattle ranch. Did Doc Baines say anything about the severity of the heart attacks?”

“He said that they were pretty severe and she didn’t have much time left. She may have had a stroke as well. She is very weak and it is just a matter

of days according to Doc. What are your plans? Will you be staying for awhile?"

My eyes were warily darting around the room. "I'll get a room at the motel. I'm rather nervous about seeing her after all these years."

"I'm sorry to say that you will find her a pretty much burned-out shell of a woman. She's very weak at this point. She doesn't have much memory and can't hold a conversation."

I jiggled my foot nervously as I sat for a while trying to figure a way to broach a conversation about the past. "Did you know my parents when they were young?"

"Your dad and I were in high school together. On the football team and the debate team. I remember when he started dating Marrieta. All the guys had a crush on her in those days. Reta was beautiful with a helpless air about her but also a strong-minded way of going about things. It was your dad who won her."

I smiled reflecting "My grandmother told us stories about her when she was a young girl. She said Mother was intense and dreamy and wanted the world to be hers. A selfish streak and determination that propelled her into trouble at times. She said that Mother acted strangely enough that she worried about what might become of her. Just slightly off with strange ideas and actions. Something wasn't quite right with her. My grandmother told us that Reta had reminded her of her aunt Mazie who was odd, who never married and ended up in an institution of some type being taken care of by strangers. She said that she set up a trust fund for her so that the money could be doled out to support her needs. And the relief she felt meeting my dad knowing he was a good man who would take care of Reta."

"And that he did. Joe could be trusted to take care of his own. He loved your mother so much. He was helpless to do anything about her illness. There weren't medications back in those days to help her. I miss your dad. We had some good times together."

We both sat for a moment lost in our own memories of my dad, Joe Perkins. A good man from everybody's perspective.

Mr. Applebee, why did we have to move around so much? Daddy was a good preacher. What I remember is always packing and unpacking. I must have gone to six schools before I was nine years old.”

“Well ministers are shifted around from parish to parish. Most small town ministers don’t settle down in one place.” He paused for a moment seemingly reluctant to go on.

Something was troubling me. “There’s more to it than that, isn’t there?”

He cleared his throat and looked up to the left. “Joe visited me one time and said that he had wanted to stay in Mount Pleasant. The parishioners there appreciated his sermons and he had hoped that there would be a long assignment there.” He hesitated and looked straight at me. “Janie, do you really want to know?”

I swallowed hard. Tears were coming to my eyes and my stomach was churning. “Yes, please,” I said in a small child-like voice.

“Your mother had gone into one of her worst times. Her behavior had changed radically. He had to keep her from going to church or even going out. She complained that her clothes hurt her. Her clothes were poisoning her and she wouldn’t keep them on. One day she went down town without wearing any clothes. Two kind women took her into the dry cleaning store and put a shirt around her and called your dad. The parishioners couldn’t handle her erratic behavior. Your dad had to leave Mount Pleasant. He had to leave other churches as well. He was so distraught that he couldn’t look after his duties. The Bishop suggested that he find other work. That’s when he moved here and went to work at the hardware store owned by one of our old classmates.”

I nodded. That made sense. Dad had loved being a pastor and helping people but had to leave it. He couldn’t take care of all the people who needed help at the church and Mother at the same time. “Was that when she was sent to the hospital?”

“She was in and out of the state mental hospital several times. Her behavior would get better and she’d be released. Then she would get worse again. Your dad bore it stoically. He never talked about it again. But it was a great burden for him to bear.”

A memory of an old brick hospital building with a not-so-good smell came up. There were people who looked different with odd jerky movements sitting on benches. One man standing on one foot for the whole time we were there. A woman screaming at someone who wasn't there. Someone in a white dress handing me a glass of lemonade. There was no distinct picture of my mother in that memory, just a blur of a woman who looked like her. "There's a vague memory of visiting her once at the state hospital. I must have been eight or nine."

We discussed the estate and my grandmother's trust fund which had been set up for my mother and now was transferred to me. Fortunately my grandfather had made some good investments in stocks and real estate buying at a time when the market was low. We spoke of Indiana law and the steps it would take to close the estate. After all those years of poverty, now I would not be a rich woman, but would have enough capital to do some of the things I'd always wanted to do.

"Mr. Applebee, there's one more question. Did I do anything wrong when I was young? Did I hurt anyone?" I held my breath waiting for his answer.

"Of course not. Where did you get that idea? You were just a kid." Mr. Applebee seemed uncomfortable and changed the subject. As we said our goodbyes, his last words were full of caution. "You'll find your mother to be different from how you last saw her. Don't judge her harshly. Mental illness must be the worst thing that can happen to a person. It makes a person look and act old long before their time. She lost her beauty years ago. She has had a hard life."

As I walked to the car, his request to not judge her rang in my head. Muttering to myself, I thought, how can I not judge her? This was a mother who didn't take care of me but murdered my kittens.

As a child, it had taken some time for me to figure out why all my cats disappeared or died. I kept bringing stray cats home. I was about seven years old at the time. I found my kitty down by the willow tree glass eyed and stiff as a board and went to get my dad. Dad said nothing but helped Bruce and me arrange a funeral complete with flowers and a small cross fashioned from a willow branch.

Dad told me not to bring home any more stray animals and arranged for me to have a kitten at the home of one of his former parishioners. I forget the woman's name, but I remember she had lots of cats and usually a litter of kittens. She let me choose a kitten for my very own and said she would keep it for me. I could come by anytime I wanted and be with my kitten. The kindness of strangers.

Copper, I called him. He was a short-haired alley-type cat with orange fur. Loving and playful. Copper didn't die. Unlike all the others, he lived to be a ripe, old cat. The woman became a substitute mother of sorts looking after me. She called me Dearie which I liked because she really meant it. I only had two dresses and she suggested that I alternate them and wash the one I wore that day in order to have it clean for the next school day. Later she found some more clothes for me. She helped me with my hair and showed me how to keep my nails clean. Was her name Mrs. Bowers? Mrs. Brokers?

I drove around the town square and located Mrs. Roster's house before I went to the outskirts of town to the motel. Needing some time to settle in, I called her to arrange to come by in the morning.

It was a troubling night with vague images of murder drifting through my half-awake, half-asleep consciousness. I woke once startled with my heart pounding and my head as well. I lay awake until the early hours wondering at the darkness of my mind and why the idea of murder kept filtering through. The images of murder stayed with me as a disturbing theme that would not let go. The last thought I held onto before fitfully drifting off to sleep was that if I did want to murder someone, I'd use poison. Poison like my poor mother thinking that her clothes were poisoning her.

Chapter 6

A cold front had come through Warrenville that night with some light rain. Indiana winds can be fierce coming off the river. I'd heard the wind rattling the windows during the night. It was cold in the motel room and I wasn't used to cold, wet weather. My body had acclimated too well to the generous warmth of California. Now, the drafts of the wind and of time whistled right through me.

So I pulled the covers up and stayed in bed and thought of the abrupt change in my earlier life after Daddy died and I went to live with my Grandmother Riley. And met Brad. And that woman who had become my saving grace, Mrs. Ketchum.

I didn't have a role model for the womanly graces as a young girl. Dad hadn't been much help. He always looked rather tussled himself. Bruce looked as disheveled as I did. My school picture that last year before we went to Grandmother's house showed a girl with wide, sad eyes and hair that needed styling. I had been a lonely, unkempt child. What got me through the difficult days were the different animals I temporarily adopted along the way and the many pictures I drew of them.

After Daddy died everything was a blur. I don't remember much. I know Grandmother Riley came to take us here to her house in Warrenville. The last time I saw Mother was when a car came and some men with badges took her away. Where she went I didn't know until Grandmother told me that she had gone to a hospital to live for good.

Grandmother was old-fashioned, prim and wore out-of-style clothes as she never threw anything away which was consistent with her frugal nature. She lived as if she were still in the traditions of the turn-of-the-last century. Her two-story Victorian home had stiff upholstered chairs, dark, ornate furniture and heavy drapes at the windows. Bruce and I felt we always had to whisper and behave at our best in this formal atmosphere.

So in the best tradition of my dad who had found the cat lady for me, I searched for another substitute mother. When I turned sixteen, I found a job waitressing at Jack's Diner after school. I started to observe women—all types of women. Tight-lipped ones who would snatch up the tip their men folk would leave when his back was turned. Blousy women who talked loud

and laughed often. Plain, homely women who acted thankful that they had managed to get a husband. Snobbish women who looked down on me and watched carefully to make sure their man didn't give me a second look.

I settled on Mrs. Ketchum, the banker's wife. Leslie Ketchum was a beautiful woman, stylish and elegant. And nice. She was always kind to me. Mr. Ketchum brought her and the family in sometimes for Saturday night dinner. She smiled at me and left her own tip even though Mr. Ketchum had left a handsome one already. Getting myself together, I took courage and went to the bank and asked for an appointment with the president.

Mr. Ketchum was surprised to see me thinking I wanted to open a bank account.

"Sir," I said giving my rehearsed speech, "I'm looking for a different type of job. What I really want to do is work for a family. I wonder if you and Mrs. Ketchum need some help. I can cook, clean and of course watch the children. I'd like a job where I can be around children. I'm a good baby sitter."

Surprised, he took in what I had to say and nodded his head. "I'll have to ask my wife. Leslie does have a lot to do with the children, the big house and all." He asked me to step outside for a moment while he called his wife. Then he called me back in and told me to come by the house the next day.

I felt shy sitting in Mrs. Ketchum's living room as she outlined the type of help she needed. "I can use some help with the cleaning and mopping. And of course vacuuming and dusting. Can you babysit with the children in the evenings when my husband and I have functions to attend?"

I nodded. Mrs. Ketchum offered me a wage that was slightly more than I'd been making at the diner and it was all set. She offered to come and meet my grandmother and explain the details.

We became friends. She was a fine, generous woman. I think she was a lonely woman who felt like she never fit into the small town life. She told me that she had been poor, gotten a scholarship and had worked her way through the first year of college when she met Mr. Ketchum. She encouraged my sewing that I had learned in Home Education class and let me use her sewing machine. I helped her sew for the children. Sandy was four and Tim

was a toddler. We consulted on fabric and patterns. She showed me how to alter a basic pattern to change the collar, sleeves or waistline. She explained how to make French seams and how to hem a skirt so that it did not show. In addition, she gave me her cast-off sweaters and helped me sew wool skirts to match them. My meager closet of clothes grew to some lovely outfits after I started working for her.

Once a month, we took the children into the big city to make a day of it with shopping and all. I liked to pretend that we looked like mother and daughter with the similar coloring of our hair. We would spend an hour at the big department store shopping; that's all the children could stand. And then we would go for burgers, fries and a coke at the drug store. We would stop by the fabric store and then to a park in the afternoon for the children to play. I never talked to her about my parents or anything. I don't know what the Ketchums knew about me. I never told anyone anything in those days.

Chapter 7

For a short while I had been the new girl in Warrentville, a town of about two thousand people. New kids are a rare commodity in small towns and everyone was curious about why Bruce and I had come to live with our grandmother. The story Bruce and I gave out to the kids at school was that our parents had died implying it had been in a car accident although we never actually lied. I quickly changed the subject acting uncomfortable which I was when anyone wanted any details.

My grandmother was a quiet, proud and proper woman. With her reticence about talking about anything improper, I knew she wouldn't tell why we had to live with her. And she had secrets of her own trying to live down being the mother of a crazy daughter. In those days, people did their best to avoid hanging their dirty linen out in public. I suppose there was an air of mystery about Bruce and me but people pretty much minded their own business after the initial curiosity died down.

Bouncing around living in several towns whenever my dad took a new parish, I had learned to look over the social groups of kids, decide where I fit in and make new friends fast. I made friends with Cassie Nichols who lived across the street from my grandmother. She was slightly overweight and had reddish blond hair with freckles which she hated and was always trying some bleaching cream on, none of which worked. Cassie called me "The Perk" and I called her "Half a Dime." Cassie became my best friend and we had overnights at her house, certainly not at my grandmother's house, with lots of food and lots of giggling.

In my junior year four small towns went together to form a school district to support a consolidated high school which was located in Warrentville. That's how small our town was. It took two other small towns to make up the new high school which was called TriCity. It was exciting to have a new group of kids to meet.

I was with Cassie and several of my girlfriends the day I met Brad. I was sitting at the local hangout in a booth with my back to the door laughing at some fool thing Cassie had said when I felt something rush through me. I remember that I was laughing one moment, and then a shock went through me. Maybe it was the hairs on my arms standing up on end. Confused, I

noticed the girls looking at the door. I turned around to see what was happening.

This boy looked at me just as I turned and our eyes locked. He smiled and of course I smiled back then turned beet red and sputtered out the coca-cola I was drinking.

Cassie laughed at my spitting coke all over the table. “Oh, that’s Brad Smith. Lots of girls have that reaction when they see him. He’s the captain of the football team. And he’s starting his own band. Cute guy. Want to meet him?”

I shook my head not wanting to meet anyone with my wits so scattered. I ducked my head and started mopping up the table. But he headed right for our booth and stood there grinning like he owned the place.

“Janie, this is Brad Smith. Brad, this is Janie Perkins.”

You know the fortune cookie saying about you will meet a tall, dark, handsome stranger who will change your life? That’s what happened to me. From that moment on, my life was changed. I would have been totally disarmed but a tiny spit bubble formed on the side of his lip making him more human and less of an Adonis. I kept my eyes glued to that spit bubble; it kept me from making a complete fool of myself. There is nothing in the memory bank after that about our meeting except for Elvis singing Love Me Tender on the jukebox. My mind is vacant from that point. I don’t know what happened. I just remember the shock wave that went through me before I even set eyes on Brad.

School settled in and the semester went by quickly with the fall festival and getting ready for the Homecoming Game. Cassie and I were on the decorating committee for the dance. We had an Autumn Leaves theme that year and spent hours cutting out leaves from red, gold and brown construction paper to staple to streamers from the center light of the gymnasium. Of course everyone was abuzz about who was asking who to the dance. Who had said no to whom. Who did and who didn’t have a date. Small town Midwest stuff, but it seemed so important at the time.

I was avoiding Wayne Biggers who rumor had it was going to ask me. I was rushing down the stairs to get away after third period and literally ran into Brad who was running up the wrong side of the stairs. Books went

flying everywhere and of course my face burned red again as we made our apologies. He bent down to help me pick my books up and said “Janie, would you go to the dance with me?” I nodded and rushed on down the stairs blushing to get away. I wondered if he thought that I was a complete fool for the disorganized state I went into each time we met.

TriCity won the Homecoming game. That I remember. I can’t recall anything about the dance except that I was very nervous and had made Bruce spend the week prior to the dance teaching me the jitterbug. Grandmother took me to the nearby larger city to buy a formal dress. I still have pictures of Brad and me in that dress with me looking enchanted. The formal was beautiful and I felt like an angel in it. Strapless, dark blue taffeta with a full skirt held wide with a crinoline. Mrs. Ketchum suggested that I have my hair cut and set by a beauty operator so I had my first visit to the beauty parlor.

I remember being very safe in Brad’s arms as we danced and very frightened at the same time. The night went by in a whirl and I was dizzy most of the time. He did not kiss me goodnight for which I was relieved.

We started going out to the movies on Saturday nights. We both were inexperienced in how to act having vague ideas of how dating should be. I don’t remember the first kiss. Brad told me later that he had to work up the courage for him to kiss me. We started sitting together at lunch and recesses and then he started picking me up to drive me to school in the mornings and taking me to the Ketchum’s house after school. Weekends I’d hang out with his band in a garage listening to their renditions of rock and roll songs. Exhilaration flooded in. I was radiant, happier than I had ever been in my life. On top of the world, I was in love.

With Brad I belonged. These were the only good times I’d known in my life. There were ball games to go watch him play and be with him afterwards. Sock hops and Sunday school picnics. Falling in love at age sixteen was wonderful and I knew it would go on forever. We joked about getting married and I believed that the good feelings would always be present.

There were two kinds of girls in town at that time. There were the good girls who didn’t give in to the boys’ urgent, hormonally-driven need for sex and those who had round heels, as we called it, and did. We all knew which girls were the bad ones. Once a girl’s fast reputation was talked about, first by the boys sharing their prowess, and spreading to the girls and then

the nosey adults who loved to spread the dirt, she was treated differently. Once she had slipped, her world could go into a downward spiral in the prescribed social circles affecting her future marriagability.

There was a moral, verbal code that was passed down to each generation of girls in small Midwest towns that spelled out the limits of courtship behavior. Gossip was the holder of the party line on what and what was not allowed.

We distinguished between those who put out and the nice kind of girl. Good girls could make out and all that but stopped at the line of allowing any physical intimacy. We all pinky-swore to the no going all the way until marriage. Any girl who didn't tried to keep it a shameful secret.

I, of course, was a super good girl with my secret identity preacher's kid background who did not dare to get in trouble. Still with Brad, I enjoyed being kissed. We started spending more time in his car at our make-out spot down by the river. Bodies of people with powerful attraction want to come closer and closer. Our kissing became like a hot sandstorm with no place to go. At times the passion between us came up so quickly that we had to stop and back off.

Brad respected this. With some unspoken agreement between us, we didn't push forward. He didn't test the limits as some of the other boys pushed their girlfriends for sexual intimacy. One of my friends told me that her boyfriend said that if she didn't give in he would go to the red-light district in the nearby big city. She didn't, being the highly-programmed good girl and broke up with him, instead choosing instead a low-key boy.

Brad and I kept our lovemaking, for that was what it was, innocent even with the intensity of the heat between us. Still there was this unfulfilled aspect to my body. I wanted more and knew he did too. I wanted the feeling of totally belonging to him forever and ever. At age sixteen, I wanted a full-blown love affair with no holding back. But I did, because I was saving myself for the wedding night of the man who would become my husband. At least that was what I told myself during those days. Still the intensity of the feelings between us started pushing the edge towards physical intimacy.

The height of my fever with Brad was intensified by the conflict between the increasing warning voices inside my head—the message that nice girls don't uncross their legs even if they are in love with a boy and that

pulsing instinct to love, to mate, to throw caution to the wind. Being adored, being loved by a handsome, popular boy was a heady narcotic for me. The maddening of love, they called it. Like a starving person who comes across a feast, the irrationality of new love filled me in and moved into those lonely places in my heart and in my very bones.

That was the year of happiness I had before Grandmother made me break up with Brad. She must have overheard some gossip at church about our going down to the river at night. What I remember was Grandmother's stern voice telling me that I couldn't see Brad any more reminding me that she had taken me in and I had nowhere else to live. I gave in realizing that she was old-fashioned enough to kick me out and there was no place to go.

Brad took the news hard at first but later showed such indifference that I wondered if he had been contemplating breaking up with me. Such is the fickleness of young love. After we broke up I heard rumors of his hanging around Ivey Pointier. Ivey was one of those wild girls who hung around a group of boys at the street corner going off with a different one each night. Then he took up with one fast girl after another. Rumors flew.

I felt betrayed and heartbroken. Unrealistically, I had expected him to wait for us to grow up so that we could be of age to be married. It was hard being at school and seeing him daily with other girls. I became awkward in his presence whereas before we were totally at ease with each other. We avoided making eye contact and kept apart.

The breakup plunged me abruptly into a depression that I hid from everyone. At school I put on a happy face that was excited about school activities. Proudly I held my head up high and became a flirt, quite capable of breaking other boy's hearts. At night while Elvis sang Heartbreak Hotel on the phonograph I wept over unrequited love, muffling my cries into my pillow so Bruce and Grandmother couldn't hear. Again I was the lonely girl confiding in no one, not even Cassie.

I wasted away inside with the constant public pretense telling others that I couldn't care less. But privately I felt great shame. What else could I do with the strong feelings of pride inside?

The romance between Brad and me did not end with the forced breakup, however. We ran into each other downtown in Warrenville when I came home from college. We had gone on a few spontaneous dates. We

could not deny that those old passionate feelings were still there between us. Still I held back avoiding the feelings of connection. By this time I had put up strong walls vowing never again to care so deeply that I could be hurt.

In our occasional encounters and later in phone calls over the years, Brad and I never talked about the breakup, that being an awkward subject between us. Once he told me that he wanted to marry me when we were older but was not in a position to do it while being with the band which was taking off. I didn't give him an answer. His proposal seemed vague and I was caught up in a totally different world on the west coast.

I felt comforted believing that he still cared, but kept myself away from him and his fast-paced lifestyle. They had changed the name of the band to The Wild Rockers and had signed a deal with a big name label. Once the band was feature on television, he became one of the glittering rising stars of rock with his raw sexuality and charismatic presence. We had set our different courses and had gone our separate ways. His world and mine grew even farther apart. Different universes. The desperation of my love for Brad faded away but remains of it lay dormant in a chamber of my heart.

Now I lay on the cheap, worn bedspread in the small-town motel room reflecting on the innocence of first love that had been interrupted and turned into heartbreak. Some part of my mind conjured up a new idea. I concluded that Grandmother had been right after all. If we had continued on I would have given into the urgency that young lovers have for total connection. I probably would have ended up becoming pregnant and enduring that small-town shame of having a child the gossips would call a bastard. Brad would have married me—doing the right thing by me—but we would have been doomed by his inability to be faithful to one woman. I had no concept of infidelity back then; it had never been an issue in the small confines of my life. I had been spared this dismal future by Grandmother's ultimatum and my following Bruce to the Sunshine State.

Being so far away from the Midwest and living in constant sunshine and the excitement of learning helped shift my mood. I spent many hours sitting on the beach taking in the healing qualities of the salt and spray of the Pacific Ocean.

In college I had kept myself rather hard holding myself apart from men including Gene. With the more open ideas about sexuality encountered in a liberal college, I decided that my earlier decision to not have sex until

marriage was foolish and gave in to Gene. I pretty much kept my heart out of it. If I must admit it, his easy access to money helped grease my heels. After college, it was easy for me to hide out at Gene's ranch staying immune to any more hurt and damage. There it seemed as if I could escape from the ghosts of the past, getting away from the repressive rumors and scandals of small-town people. It was much better being with people who had never heard of the mad woman Reta Perkins and her uncertain daughter.

Now sitting and reflecting back from an older and somewhat wiser place, I started thinking that there was something devious about the human heart that could inspire loyalty to the wrong person or even to a false idea. Is extreme loyalty not an aberration?

The hunger of my heart had become cemented caught all up with the need for connection at that earlier time. I had certainly suffered from those delusional ideas about love. The heart's die was cast too soon, I told myself, and then the cold card of reality set in. For how do we survive when the joy of first love was over after the fickle heart of the beloved betrayed us?

A noise from outside the motel brought me out my reverie. This was an early morning sound I hadn't heard for many years but I knew right away what it was. Someone was cutting the grass for one last time before the winter chill came, chopping up the leaves so they wouldn't have to rake them. It was time for me to deal with the present instead of spending time thinking about those awkward high school years.

Chapter 8

Glancing at the clock and noting that it was nine o'clock jarred me to my senses. I told myself that I'd better get going. Remembering those earlier times of my life had left me with a sour mood so to get myself into a different space I went to Jack's Diner for breakfast. The diner looked the same and had the same menu even though there was a new owner. The same smell of hamburger grease hung in the air. Hamburgers, fries, hot dogs and bacon, lettuce and tomato on toast for the lunch menu. I ordered the Number One Breakfast Plate: two fried eggs, easy over with toast and all the coffee you can drink. I watched the pale waitress who seemed to be a poor girl not unlike the one that I used to be with that very same job. I smiled at her when she brought my order and shyly she returned my smile. Getting on my coat and throwing my muffler around my collar, I looked to see what was in my wallet and left two dollars as a tip.

I drove around the block several times and stopped three blocks away from Mrs. Roster's nursing home to collect myself. My stomach was all in knots and I wished I had stopped at the first egg and the first cup of coffee. The last time I left Warrenville after my grandmother died, I vowed I'd never come back. Yet here I was shaking in my boots although the temperature was warming up heading towards the sixties. Worse yet, I had to go to the bathroom even though I had gone before leaving the diner.

Pulling myself together I decided that my stomach wasn't getting any better and my bladder would only get worse so I had better get it over with. Mrs. Roster's home looked like so many of the other wood frame houses of the Midwest built over fifty years ago. Squarish, squat, big porch with a swing. Sidewalk with broken cement leading up to the porch. Old forsythia bushes grown wild and unkempt under the front windows. A worn-out house with paint peeling off the north wall.

Mrs. Roster greeted me with enthusiasm, sized me up and down and said "You look just like your mother."

That was not something I wanted to hear. Once when I had been in a bad mood I looked in the mirror and saw her face. There she was looking back at me. I hated that I had to walk around wearing my mother's face. I smiled thinly at Mrs. Roster and asked, "How is she?"

She answered, “She is about as good as to be expected with all that she has been through. Poor thing, she doesn’t have long for this world,” as she ushered me into the house. Mrs. Roster was one of those round, always smiling women who reminded me of the good ladies at my dad’s churches. There was always one or two of them in the parish who would pinch my cheeks hard and ask if I had been a good girl. I can still feel that pinch. Bruce used to call them The Dimple Makers and we did our best to avoid them.

Mrs. Roster, however, didn’t pinch my cheeks although she did call me Dearie which made me smile because of the good feelings from the cat lady who had also called me Dearie when I was little. She introduced me to several old ladies some of whom seemed kind of vacant. The house was hot and steamy in contrast to the sharp cold outside. I noted that the other older ladies sitting in the parlor seemed happy enough even with having to live in a place without their families.

Mrs. Roster offered me a cup of coffee and a piece of pie before going to my mother’s room. It was the best piece of cherry pie I’d had in a long time and complimented her on her baking ability which made her beam. She filled me in on my mother’s condition which was going downhill and the physical complaints of the other ladies who didn’t seem to mind her talking about them. She went on to tell me about Mr. Roster who had dropped dead of a heart attack giving her no warning and no pension leaving her a widow in her fifties, well what could she do but take in borders—women all women of course, she didn’t want to have any man around, she’d had enough of that with Mr. Roster. It was a hard life taking care of old people. It made ends meet and gave her a modest living and the knowledge that she was doing the Lord’s work so what else could she ask for? The other ladies nodded agreeing with her.

I sat and generally thawed out while getting my bearings back to the small-town chatter after the quick trip from California. After hearing more about Mrs. Roster’s life than I wanted yet thankful for her small talk that delayed the mission of my visit, I felt fortified enough to go and greet my mother. I excused myself to wash up and took comfort in this home with its good cooking smells although there was a smell of closed-in mustiness and Lysol disinfectant.

We walked down the hall to my mother’s room. My heart throbbed and the general weakness in my knees signaled some strong emotion. Anxiety? Fear? If I had to be honest it was more like terror.

“Here she is Dearie; her room is right here. She’ll be glad to see you. Mrs. Perkins, here is your daughter come to see you.”

I was afraid I might faint as I walked into the room. Confusion. Is this the right room? There’s a woman lying in bed that I did not know. I hardly recognized this wrinkled, gray-haired, gray-faced woman with a sunken mouth. I grabbed hold of a dresser by the door.

Mrs. Roster went over and patted the woman telling what a lovely daughter she had and motioned for me to sit down. The woman in the bed laid unresponsive to our intrusion. Preparing to leave, Mrs. Roster turned to me and said, “Well I guess you’ll be wanting to catch your mother up on your life.”

I stood by the door for a moment trying to orient myself. I forced a smile and said, “Hello, Mother,” putting up a brave front for Mrs. Roster.

“Your mom can hear anything you say. She may not respond much. Just go ahead and have a good chat with her.” Smiling she left the room.

Slowly I moved to the wooden chair by the bed and pulled it back a few feet. Anxiety rose up in my chest as I sat tentatively on the edge of the chair ready to make a run for the door if necessary. I didn’t like the smell of the room which had a tinge of decay. I didn’t know what to make of this shrunken woman lying on the bed. She seemed oblivious to me. She lay with her eyes closed most of the time although she had opened them and looked at me when I first came in. Her hands opened and closed in a jerky fashion clutching at something that wasn’t there.

She didn’t appear to recognize me even though Mrs. Roster had told her several times who I was. Warily I sat back not wanting her to reach out and grab me. Gradually I realized that there was an unceasing ritual to her hand movements that had nothing to do with me.

I looked at her more closely. I could see a faint resemblance although the mother I knew was pretty with long wavy hair and fine features and complexion. This woman was so nondescript and gray that she had almost no identity. I looked harder hazily trying to connect the dots. Yes, the woman in the bed was my mother.

The mother that I'd known had always been immersed in her own private world of illogical, incoherent hell. Now she was quiet. Deathly quiet. This woman on the bed was caught in a zombie-like state of apathy although there was an underlying restless energy. Her eyes opened but she did not appear to register anything.

Looking around the room for some help, I noted that there was a cross over the bed and a picture of Jesus on the wall giving a sense of calm familiarity in the room despite her constant hand movements. "Mother, it's Janie. Janie. I'm here from California to see you." The words sounded hollow. Down the hall I could hear a mummer of the old women and Mrs. Roster talking. Mostly Mrs. Roster's voice.

Several times I spoke out trying to get my mother's attention but there was no response. No flicker of recognition as if she knew who I was. I gave up. Feelings of anger and hopelessness ran through me. I thought, "She doesn't know me. She doesn't even remember me."

I sat beside her bedside numb trying to fathom it all out. Trying to make sense out of a life that had none. I tried to pray but the words would not come. I started shifting in my chair and rocked back and forth the way I had as a child when I was upset.

It felt as if my breath was being sucked out of me and some troubled energy moving in. I felt cold even in this overheated house. With my body trembling uncontrollably, I couldn't stay any longer. I was becoming more and more agitated and had to leave. To run. To get away. I had borne too great a share of the tragedy that overtook my mother's life already.

I murmured goodbye and went back to the relative safety of Mrs. Roster and the old ladies. I felt appreciation for this good woman. There is something solid and true about women from Southern Indiana. I thanked her for taking my mother in and giving her a home where she was wanted. I told her I had some things I needed to do but I'd be back tomorrow and hastily took my exit.

Dazed and shaken, I sought refuge in the Episcopal Church where Grandmother, Bruce and I had faithfully gone every Sunday. You know the solid Midwestern church type. Brownstone, built 1899, rock solid like it will be around forever. The stained glass windows told the different gospels of Jesus with the halo with the light shining through around his head showing

his holiness. The dark, wooden floors, the hardness of the polished pews. Sitting quietly in the pew I wondered how many churches I'd been in during the first eighteen years of my life. I hadn't been in any these past few years. Grandmother's church seemed stiff to me, formal and slightly cold.

Leaving the church I drove to the old cemetery. Not the new one on the outskirts of town, but the one that has been there over a hundred years next to the old wooden country church that's been closed for years. The trees were bare and the leaves rustled as I carefully walked around the grave plots so as to not walk on the graves. I located my father's stone in our family's section and tried talking to him about mother's condition, but it was fruitless. I traced my fingers on the lettering of his gravestone. There was her name also— Marrieta Jane Perkins and her date of birth—a place marker prepared for her final resting place. That was scant comfort knowing Daddy would have her next to him at last.

I sat on a cold stone bench trying to find some clue in this quiet place of final rest that held the remains of many others. I'd hoped that the cemetery might produce some key, some lever that would click in my mind bringing sense to it all. There is absolutely no memory of any graveyard ceremony. I concluded that I've never been to this place before. I was still hoping for some sanity, some tie to reality, however, something closed up in me. Feeling caught up in loneliness, I thought of all those lives whisked away too soon. My life whisked away too of a different sort.

Heading back to town and stopping by Lefty's Drive In to get a quick lunch, I went to the Wabash River, a twenty-mile drive from town. Anything to get me distracted by the ambiguous fears and racing thoughts running through my head. We had gone there often in church outings and school group picnics, hiking the trails and building camp fires. As we started pairing up, the phrase "going to the river" became known as going to the make-out place.

I parked the car on a high cliff that overlooked the river and started thinking of my high school days ignoring the brilliance of the sugar maples and sycamores. There was a faint, sharp stench of fish and mud in the air. Of course it brought me back to thinking of Brad and that year of going steady. I remembered how proud I was when he gave me his class ring. This is the place we had parked to neck.

Reflecting on the happiness of that year when I didn't feel alone, I realized that I must have been depressed as a child. That made sense because I always seemed to be moping around. Mother had her bouts with depression and Dad joined right in when it became apparent she wasn't going to get any better. Bruce was unhappy too.

Driving back to Warrenville, I decided on a routine for visiting my mother that I could deal with. I made a schedule for myself of visiting my mother's bedside for part of each morning and afternoon. I'd take a long break in between, grabbing a sandwich and an apple and going out for a long walk to clear my head and distract myself from the intense emotions that swirled through me.

What seemed to be expected of me from Mrs. Roster and then by myself was that I come and sit by Mother's side. My daily presence for a short while was all that was required. It was difficult for me at first but I gradually got used to the silent and agitated figure on the bed by my chair. I brought a book but could hardly read sitting with her. My mind kept wandering away to reviewing my childhood or to my California experience which was still fresh in my mind.

By the third day I had the visiting routine down. I'd sleep in after a fitful night with highly implausible dreams, go to the diner for breakfast, visit mother, walk in the woods near town, visit mother and then escape for the day. I visited with Mrs. Ketchum and a few old classmates to catch up on the gossip, but mostly kept to myself. I checked in with Mr. Applebee as needed to get a handle on the legalities of the trust and completing the paper work for changing the estate to my name.

There were shadowy premonitions in my dreams each night that troubled me. Over the years I'd had bizarre combinations of sinister images in my dreams. Dark threatening figures, death and overwhelming confusion. I often woke in terror shaking over what I didn't understand. The nightmares were difficult to deal with and I tried to figure them out to no avail. What was at the bottom of that deep dark abyss of my mind that played out the fears of murder? Those dreams were my personal horror theater of the night.

Chapter 9

I could tell my mother was growing weaker by her color noting her body shrinking away physically. Mrs. Roster did her best to keep me up to date on small changes in my mother. “She just took a half cup of broth. She seems more restless today, Dearie,” she said. Then after a week, she took me aside to tell me that she through the end was near. “I’ve been through this many times before. I can tell by the transparency of her skin that she doesn’t have much time left on this earth. It won’t be long before the Good Lord will be calling her home. I’m going to call Reverend Jacob to come and say a few prayers if it’s all right with you.”

I let out a sigh. “Why does it have to take so long? She must want to be released from all of this. She’s had a hard life and this must be hard on her. What purpose does it serve drawing it out this way?”

“Now Dearie, this is not about what she wants or you and I want. This is about God’s will and His timing. We can’t understand it. I’ve been through this many times. What I’ve noticed over the years sitting with people as they die is that we each have to go through our own unique death. And we go through our own unique birth and our life. Dying is a process that allows people to sort out things.

I sat silently not knowing what to say just wanting my mother to move on to her release from this earth. She had spent enough years in pain. I’d had the same reaction as Bruce lay dying as he had been in such pain that I was ready to let him go even at the cost to me of being alone in the world. Even though I had been devastated at his going, I knew that it was best that he be released from the ravages of his illness.

Mrs. Roster continued, “Maybe your mother is spending this time trying to make sense out of what she did in her life and what went right and what didn’t. Whatever she’s going through right now is between her and God. Still it’s doing her good that you are here with her. She’s fortunate to have a loving daughter like you to be here with her at the end.”

Loving daughter? If Mrs. Roster only knew our story, she wouldn’t call me a loving daughter. The feelings I had for my mother were anything but loving. What would she make of it if she knew my mother’s disturbed history? But I wouldn’t tell her—wouldn’t even give a hint of our troubled

past. Secrets so long held have no purpose in being exposed. Mrs. Roster was a good person and all but she had that small-town trait of being a bit of a gossip. Small-town women garner some excitement at the well-known phrase, "Have you heard the latest?" I wouldn't share mother's secrets because they were my own painful ones as well.

So as I sat, I pondered about mother's past as well as my own. There seemed to be gaps and holes in it that I didn't understand. A headache started throbbing in my temples from trying to figure it out or maybe it was from spending hours in that overheated house feeling such great tension. The disturbing dreams at night which I couldn't remember weren't helping. I was becoming exhausted and somewhat brittle. On edge a lot wondering if my being here with her at this time when she was never there for me was part of my own unique history?

I'd had a fitful night and felt something different about the day the moment I woke up. Was it another one of my premonitions? As usual, I dragged myself out of bed, did my morning rituals and made it to Mrs. Rosters.

Mrs. Roster pulled me aside. "I think the time is near, Dearie. I've got a sense about these things having gone through it so much and all. She doesn't have much time left."

I nodded and instantly went numb. Going down the hall I wondered what the day would bring. I wasn't afraid of witnessing dying. I'd done that with Bruce's passing and felt an honor at being allowed to share that with him as a final gesture from his loving sister. Bruce had been in such a long decline and pain that both he and I had been grateful for his release.

I looked intently to see if I could fathom what Mrs. Roster saw to say that this might be my mother's last day. Mother did look grayer than usual with her arms looking bluish and her breath was labored. I sat there jumbled thoughts and ideas swirling through my mind.

Mother seemed to be drifting in and out of consciousness. She moaned, caught her breath and called out "Joe, Joe where are you? Joe, Joe, I need you here right now." Once or twice she cried for her father. Never for Bruce or myself. We must have been nonentities in her life. Or an afterthought of the two men who were most important to her.

Somewhere before I had started called her by her name, Reta, distancing myself from her and the parent-child relationship. I started talking to her out of the pain of the lost, neglected child I'd been. "I wanted you to take care of me. Pet my hair and hold me. I wanted you to love me but you couldn't." I cried long and hard uncaring if my words or tears were hurting her. There was no answer only the troubled breathing from her wracked body.

"Reta, you can't hurt me anymore. I've come to understand that you are harmless now. Thank you for giving birth to me. I'm glad I'm alive even as difficult as it's been for me." Sobbing I realized that I had grown past her. Somehow I'd become distant from her and who I used to be. Something shifted in me.

It came to me that giving life to me had been her job and her only job as far as I was concerned. She hadn't been the loving mother or the proper minister's wife my dad wanted. I felt sadness for those things she did that pushed people away from her. If I was unwanted, she did downright strange and unusual things that made her unwanted in other people's eyes. She had been completely on her own when she slipped into her own private hell.

There had been an angry little chip in my heart operating all these years since Daddy's death. Now I realized that my mother was not the monster I had painted her to be. I had seen her as evil all those years because she hurt us—all of us including Grandmother. Now I saw her as just a poor lost soul who did what she did and caved in when she couldn't cope with those voices inside. Her life had actually been worse than mine.

With that recognition, something inside me lessened. The energy in the room shifted. There seemed to be a loving presence around us—a sense of holiness filled the room. Something moved inside me and I felt slightly comforted.

Her agitation and restlessness ceased and her breathing pattern changed. Her face started to look different. She smiled slightly. For the first time I saw some of the beauty in the bone structure of that wasted face that she had when she was young. I wondered if she was seeing Daddy. The light? Or Jesus.

Tears flowed down my face silently as I prayed to the Holy Spirit. "Take her and give her peace. Help her pass over. She's suffered enough. I release her. I don't need her as a mother anymore." And then to her, "Mother it's time to go. Go to Daddy. It's okay to go. I can take care of myself."

There was quiet in the room. Something shifted in her energy. Something finite. The ending. The ending of a life not well lived by my way of thinking. One with choices taken away from her but it was a life, for all that it was. I bowed my head.

Then she was gone, freed at last from her years of suffering.

I saw her spirit slip out of her fragile body, go up, curl around and disappear like smoke wafting and thinning away. This spirit was not discordant the way her mortal existence had been. There seemed to be a sense of relief, of blessed peace of being finished with it all. No more delusions, no combative outbursts, no paranoid ideas, no diabolical demons. I mused over the dire straits of mortality watching as the shift of my mother's energy went from agitation to calm.

That noxious energy of my mother had thoroughly penetrated the texture of my existence when I was young. We were minutely interwoven—this woman and I— with thousands of experiences in those various pastor houses that the parishes had provided us. Now I felt the familiar tension, the racking muscles in my neck and back and the ever-present anxiety in my stomach. Her spirit had achieved calm, but the agitation remained as a churning force within me.

Now my reason, my sanity, screamed, what about me? Am I the innocent one placed in circumstances beyond my control or had I done something terribly wrong? The terrors of the imagination are horrendous and constant always ready to combust.

Summoning up something from a hidden refuge, a place despite the storm raging in my body, I drew courage. I will be resolute, I told myself. I will survive. Of the four of us, I am the one to go on. With that defining thought, I burst into heart-racking tears.

Tears ran down my face as I sat stiff as a board. Crying, not so much for the loss of her, as for the end of an era of which I was the only one living of the four of us.

Seeing her dead body on the bed was startling to me. Capricious fate and the twists and turns it brings to all of us. Now there was no more time to connect—to have that loving mother-daughter bond. Tears flowed freely first at my loss, her loss and back to my loss. My life-long dream of having a loving mother would never be realized. I tried to pray but the words wouldn't come except "Take her Lord. Take her and keep her safe. Give her the peace that Daddy preached about."

That night before drifting off to sleep in that dismal motel room, I thought I saw my mother's spirit pass by my bed. She was much younger more like the pictures of her earlier years. She smiled slightly and bowed her head slightly to me and then she was gone. I wasn't frightened sensing this presence but was strangely comforted. Acknowledged.

I felt different; it felt like something had been released. A piece of fear, perhaps. Or the need to be mothered. I needed her less. I felt different. A little of the tightness in my chest had opened up. I felt lighter and yet more grounded at the same time. Somewhat transparent.

I commended her soul to God. Somehow I'd come to a new understanding to make some new contract with my mother just before she crossed over to the other side.

Chapter 10

Yes, there was relief and a sense of freedom with my mother's passing. A release of being responsible for her somewhat although I hadn't been aware that I even had it. After her funeral, I left for Europe and spent several years traveling picking up small jobs waitressing and using some of the money from my grandmother's trust when money got tight.

Traveling around, soaking up the different cultures, I traveled light and lived with few expenses. The nomad style of life suited me for several years after the debacle in California. I spent some time touring Italy and Spain. I took in the art museums and the splendid architecture and ended up living in a small flat in Paris studying with several art teachers while working in the fashion industry. For a while I clerked in small Parisian boutiques and enjoyed the different vendors and customers who came to our store.

I made friends easily wherever I went and dated a bit during those years abroad. There were no serious contenders for my heart. The men had style and charm but not enough substance.

While I enjoyed living in the old-world culture, I couldn't put down roots. After a while I grew tired of the European way of life. I wanted to return to America. My European travels had turned me into someone who was sophisticated. I took stock of my skills and talents and decided that I could run a shop similar to several I'd worked at in Paris.

A year after my departure from the States, I called Gene from Europe, feeling safe being so far away. He said that after I left he had hit bottom and then gotten it together. He reported that he had stopped his daily use of smoking pot, started Narcotics Anonymous and kicked out the goons. I apologized for skipping out and for my breakdown during those last times that we were together. Gene had a new love in his life of whom he spoke respectfully. He had given Georgia Girl to a rehabilitation center that helped children with handicapping conditions. I felt relief and wished him well knowing that we would not talk again. That second chapter of my life was closed.

Then came another phase of travel to check out cities in the United States that would have the kind of clientele that my exclusive shop would cater to: Florida, Lake Tahoe and Palm Springs and then visited the Phoenix

area. Driving through the different communities and weighing where I wanted to live, it came down to the desert town of Scottsdale, Arizona. I set myself up in a downtown area just on the edge of the fashionable shopping district, where the rent was cheaper. I set out to make a small classy boutique like a shop I'd worked in while in France.

While in California, I'd painted a floral design on a leather handbag and made a belt to match. During my travels several European women admired my accessories and asked where they could buy them. While in Italy, I had found a factory that manufactured plain leather bags and painted brightly-colored medieval designs on them. I sold them to small boutiques which gave me extra funds to supplement my income.

It was an abrupt change from the quaint streets of Paris to move to the desert Southwest. Now I was in what I considered the next adventure of my life of becoming a shop keeper. The dryness and browns of the desert took some getting used to. The rivers were sandy and empty of water. The Sonoran Desert was hot and dusty and sometimes the temperatures went up to 115 degrees. Swamp coolers whirled from every roof bringing in cooled water mist. I appreciated the natural beauty here and the expansiveness of the desert sky which was a deep blue interspersed with white clouds and learned to appreciate the different shades of brown.

I was proud of my upscale boutique, named Designs by J. I had thought of calling the store Big Nose Millie's but resisted allowing this was my own private joke. Instead I framed the napkin of her picture and placed it above the cash register, next to a big painting of her that I'd done.

The store featured ultra-chic decorations, fresh flowers, and soft music with the scent of an expensive perfume spritzed near the door twice a day. I wore my skin-tight designer jeans and huge diamonds, high heels or those alligator boots and of course my hand-painted belts to round out my new image of old money. I switched to painting desert images and Native American motifs on the leather wear for my Southwestern store.

My custom-painted purses and belts began to catch on with a small, but steady stream of customers coming by and I was working on making necklaces and earrings with my next line of fine gemstones. My high-ticket, hand-painted goods complemented the imported scarves, hosiery and perfume from Paris from the contacts I'd made while living there.

I became part of the Scottsdale society scene; it was easy. Really. I was a dedicated volunteer always with a brilliant hand-painted purse on my arm. My Parisian clothes helped me fit right in. I became known to be good at organizing charity events and even to donate some money. I never gained entrance to the really in crowd with my shop keeper's status, but that didn't matter to me. I couldn't connect with those people whose main hobby was to look good. Hob-knobbing and getting my wares out there while doing the charity work was part of my marketing plan.

Little did anyone know that I scrimped by living above the shop. Anyway, the strategy to make my purses and belts known with the money set worked. My small shop became known as the go-to place for fine accessories and imported items from the continent.

Fortunately I found Shirley Finney to help me with the shop and felt fortunate to have found such a reliable, honest, cracker-jack of a sales woman. Big-boned. Heavy set and sensible. She opened the shop and stayed until one o'clock when I took over until closing. Shirley's presence allowed me the freedom to pursue my painting classes and attend workshops near the university.

After getting the shop established and we started making money, pretty big money for a store so small, I became restless. Dated a bit but was not impressed with the type of men that I met here in the valley. The students in my art classes were the stereotypical starving type. Most of my fellow shop keepers were women with a somewhat jaded air to them and their men seemed bland. I'd been around enough powerful men in Europe to understand that I liked men who had their act together. Tried out a few churches, went to lectures and to exercise classes but no man stood out enough to interest me.

The reoccurring dream started coming again. This time Brad and I were in a coffee house with dark shadows of some unknown origin. We're with a group of people and he sat next to me. Then off he went to sit with a woman at another table. No one paid any attention to me and I felt awkward and out of place. I don't belong anymore and am aware everyone knew that he left me. Small green balls that hold some type of threat drop from the light fixture like bombs from the sky and bounce around the room. I try to dodge them knowing they mean me harm. Then the whole room turns green and I'm in a meadow surrounded by pine trees. The mood of the dream shifts. Safe. I'm safe among the pines.

I woke up trying to shake off that mood of not belonging. Thinking of Brad being there and then going off, I remembered the whimsical childhood poem that I'd memorized so long ago.

Once a time upon a stair,
I met a man who wasn't there.
He wasn't there again today.
I wish to heck he'd go away.

The dream images were strange. I took stock of my life. I had become a successful business woman; the few business courses I'd taken in college had stood me well. Running a thriving, fashionable store was satisfying but it wasn't enough. There weren't any real friends, no lover. Shirley was a good-enough friend but she was my employee so I drew the line as to how close we became. At the end of the day I climbed the stairs to my small apartment alone. The days and nights became repetitive and as dry as the Sonoran desert.

Chapter 11

After a couple of years Scottsdale lost its bloom as the hot summers dragged on. I became bored by the charity life and the type of superficial women that frequented my shop. That loneliness that first reared its head after my father died came back now with a vengeance. Depression and lethargy moved in.

One day I was in my shop with scarves and gloves strewn around trying out different placements of the merchandise. I noticed a tall, attractive man the moment he came in the door. Western cut business suit, bolero tie and the cowboy hat required of men of that age. Men rarely visited my place unless they were the credit card that accompanied some woman. He was alone and from his focus I could tell he was a man on a mission. Dark hair, square cut jaw, deep tan, expensive suit of modestly done, in-style pinstripes. A presence. A man women notice and wonder about. He smiled expansively and he really meant the smile. Immediately I looked to see if there was a wedding ring. There was.

“I’m looking for a purse for my wife’s birthday. She saw one of your handbags with the flower designs at the Angel Ball last week. Fuchsias are her favorite flower and she has a new gown the color of that deeper purple. I thought I would surprise her.”

I was not happy to hear about a wife but was always touched by men who care enough about the wives to go the trouble of planning something special. Smiling back, I said, “Your wife. Tell me about her. What is she like?” Later I ironically remembered that the first words I had said to him were “Your wife.”

“Lisbeth. Tall, willowy, stylish, a little high-strung. Skittish. Particular. She knows colors and design. Always wants the best and gets it. Decorated our home in Italian antiques.”

I knew the type of woman he had described. I pulled several stock purse shapes out for him to choose which style might fit his wife. We discussed how I could paint the fuchsia design to flow across the front of the bag and paint a matching scarf. I noticed with approval his unmanicured, shortly cut nails and the fine, white hairs on the back of his tanned hands.

Gold wedding ring. If my first impression was correct, she was one lucky woman. As he moved closer, I was taken by a pleasant, masculine smell.

He chose a medium-sized bag and settled the bill. I always think my prices are exorbitant but the clientele I draw from always seem happy to pay. We stood talking of the recent charity event and the good work that the money did to help abused children.

"I'm on the money-raising committee," I said, "Maybe you'd better tell me your name so I can hit you up for some big bucks." I grinned. Actually I had recognized him from his car dealer ads on television. A big, smiling flamboyant man who urged viewers to come on down and make a deal and sign a contract. But this man here before me wasn't coming across as flashy and colorful. Just a charming, sincere man whose hand reached out for mine. For a moment it didn't make sense.

"Gary Breckendale. I have the Ford and Cadillac dealerships here in town," he said shaking my hand briskly. "That's where you can find me to get my contribution. Always nice to meet another business person. And yours?"

The touch of his hand on mine was electrifying. "Janie." I hate to admit it but I stammered over my own name, "Janie Perkins."

"Well, Janie Perkins, it's been a pleasure doing business with you. You look like you've got what it takes to be a big success." With that and a tip of his hand to his hat, he strode out the door. I was left wondering about the tingling in my hand.

The next week, he came back just before closing time. "A scarf for my kid sister. We had a small tiff and I was totally in the wrong. A peace offering."

With my throat dry, I asked, "Tell me about your sister."

"Mary has pale skin, tall like me, an art dealer by trade and can be quite feisty. She owns The Happening Place, an art gallery over in Tempe that sells the latest modernistic artists. I like feisty women," he offered.

I smiled liking this about him. Feisty was something I had always aspired to be. Again we stood close while extolling the virtues of the

different scarves and siblings. I told him briefly about the fun my brother and I had chasing fireflies as children. Then I noticed that he was as nervous as I was. This reassured me and calmed me somewhat.

“You know for special customers, I offer a glass of wine.” I motioned to the overstuffed chairs near the back of the store. “Part of my marketing for the shop was to have two big comfy chairs for the men to sit down to wait while the women shopped. That makes it easier for them to part with some of their hard-earned cash.”

He laughed and settled into the chair appreciatively. “It’s good to be off my feet at the end of the day. We sold fifteen cars today. It’s been a good day in the car business. How was yours?”

“Good day here all around. Actually with the recent sales, I’ve stopped holding my breath. It was a risk putting so much money into buying this building. But I can’t complain. Things just seem to fly off the shelf without my even trying. Of course, shopping here is a rich experience with the free chocolates and the champagne. Seems to be working. I was afraid my prices would be too high, but that doesn’t seem to be the case.” Then I caught myself up short. What was this about my offering trade secrets to someone I barely knew?

He laughed. “The more you charge, the more these society women will buy. Never sell yourself short, Janie. But you don’t. I can see that. Your store has a nice feel. Where are you from?”

“Small towns in southern Indiana. Dad was a minister and we moved around a lot. The last town was Warrenville where I finished high school.”

“Funny. Preacher’s kid, huh? You’re a P K. I had you pegged as a rich California girl. You have a sophisticated air about you. Any man in your life?”

I blushed at his directness and shook my head. I hadn’t gotten red in the face much since high school and today I had blushed twice. I poured him a second glass of wine purposefully avoiding refilling my own. For some reason my head was in a whirl and I wanted to keep my wits about me. As I moved my hands back in confusion, our hands touched briefly. Static electricity seemed to spark between us and we both started. I tried to cover

up with a smile. “Well I went to college in California and then lived there for a while. I guess some California rubbed off on me.”

“I’m a small-town boy myself coming from the distinctively dusty town of Casa Grande, Arizona. My dad was a blue-collar plumber and from him I learned how to run an honest business, to keep my tools clean and lay my cards on the table. A kind man who never knew a stranger. Well-liked by all. My mom was a stay-at-home mom who helped my dad with the bookings. She was my Sunday school teacher who taught me to live a moral life and enjoy good home cooking. Two sisters and me, the oldest.”

“How did you come by two enormous car dealerships in Scottsdale? I drove by your Ford place the other day and the new cars went on for a whole block.”

“I was an ambitious kid who came to the Phoenix area to go to college. I could sell anything so I looked around to see what I could make money at. The bigger ticket items were cars and houses. I didn’t know anything about houses, so cars it was. Worked for Mr. Jim Bob Dannerson who had the Cadillac franchise. He took a liking to me and showed me the ropes. Soon he had me moving up and being more than just an asphalt walker trolling for customers.”

I nodded visualizing him as a young man hungry for customers and developing his salesmanship. Sales required a special type of intelligence and being able to size up a person quickly.

Gary continued, “Jim Bob took me home to meet the family and in particular his daughter Lisbeth. She was the finest thing I’d seen up to that point. So I put two and two together and said “Why not?” Beat out six of her other beaux—all rich guys so I was the long shot but the one she chose. She must have liked the rougher edge in me. Probably helped that her dad was backing the deal—our getting hitched was a natural I mean. My father-in-law loaned me the money to buy the Ford dealership. Jim Bob and I remained friends up until his death and now I run both places. That’s it. Story of my life. Now tell me more about you.”

For some strange reason I started talking about Bruce who I never talked about to anyone. “One reason I went to northern California was to be near my brother who had moved to San Francisco. He had a job at an ad agency and we would meet midway or I’d go down to visit him every third

weekend. He had always been a sensitive, shy kid. At times he seemed more tortured than usual. Over the course of the two years, I became worldlier about life and how it works. Not that my father had ever preached much about sin, being more of a give-and-forgive-kind of preacher. So now from my brother, I gradually realized that the friends he brought with him were different somehow. And I learned about Bruce being gay, although he never came out and told me. That's when I came to appreciate the wicked humor that the gay men have." My voice grew quiet as I refrained from saying anything more. I had surprised myself, my talking about my brother in such a vulnerable way.

Gary sat listening, nodding and reached out and touched my hand gently. That's nice having a brother you are close to."

I choked up, not knowing how to reply. I didn't want to go into Bruce's death so I said, "Bruce died several years ago and I helped nurse him through to the end. But enough about me. Tell me more about doing business in Scottsdale," I asked moving the subject back to a safer topic.

Gary talked about the days when he had come here to college and how the town had changed along with the greater Phoenix area. He gave a colorful history of the politics, financial deals and how big money had changed the little western suburb to a desirable place to live. We sat talking long past when all the other shops had closed and I was conscious of the flow of energy that seemed to radiate between us.

Chapter 12

I guess that it was inevitable. Gary started coming by on Thursday nights just before five o'clock. There was fierce anticipation while waiting for his arrival. His dropping by became a comfortable routine and we sat and talked over a glass of wine. I enjoyed his company at the end of a long day. We talked for several hours before he had to leave to go home.

One evening we were laughing at some fool thing when he glanced up and said, "There must be a story about that picture hanging behind the cash register. Friend of yours?"

I chuckled at the thought. It didn't seem likely that I would have Millie as a friend if I met her on the street. "She's Big Nose Millie, my alter ego. She's a feisty lady with a heart of gold. She's all loyalty until she's been taken for a sucker, then she packs her bags. You'd better watch out for her. She's got a wicked laugh and lives by her wits. And other things."

"She looks like a colorful character. I haven't seen any evidence of her in you so far."

My eyes twinkled. "You don't know me that well. There are many parts of me that you don't know about. For example, I love to draw but I've never done much with it other than the purses and belts. Millie is one of my favorites."

"Fancy lady. I'd like to meet her and her heart of gold sometime."

"Well, stick around and maybe you will. Don't you have any rougher edges to you?"

"Yes Ma'am. Pleased to meet you Ma'am. My name is Horse-trading Jake and I'm a greenhorn just in from the East coast. I've got this bundle of goods I'd like to sell you. "

Grabbing a pencil and a piece of paper, I sketched Gary dressed in old-fashioned Western clothes looking directly in the eyes of Big Nose Millie. We laughed and took on the personas of our characters for the rest of the evening.

During our visits we spent several hours comparing notes about business and talking about the safe areas that could be shared about our families. It was nice to have a friend to talk to who was an intelligent, strong man. I shared things with Gary that I had never told anyone except Marion.

I had to keep myself from reaching out and touching him. The draw to have this man's skin under my fingers was irresistible. Noting it, I kept my distance. At times he became clumsy as if he felt the attraction too. But he did nothing. He wasn't seductive like the men I'd known in Paris. He was a properly married man. I spent some time fretting over his unavailability. And yet, I didn't tell him to go away. Fire. I knew I was flirting with fire.

I was intrigued with this big man and unable to stop myself. Under the surface of our conversation, there was a vibration of uncertainty. This unstated flirtation, couched in the properness of business language, had an element of recklessness in it. An electrifying force was being unleashed in me that I did not want to stop.

The fifth time he came I laughingly said, "Another woman in your life needing something costly and superfluous?"

He shook his head and looked sheepish for a moment. "This is a personal visit. Janie, I've not been the same since I've met you. There is something different about you and how we are together." His voice was shaky but now it trailed off. He glanced up to see if I could deny the facts of what he implied.

Not knowing what to say, I nodded and kept my mouth shut and held my breath. And waited with my heart beating fast.

"Ms. Janie Perkins, there is something you should know about me right here and now. I may be way off base saying this to you. If I am, stop me and you won't see me again."

I knew how to fend off men from my years in France. And yet I didn't say anything to indicate that he needed to put the brakes on right then and there.

"I'm a married man of nineteen years and I want you to know that I intend to stay married. I'm undivorceable. I can never leave Lisbeth; she would fall apart and so would my daughter who is just as fragile as her

mother. You need to know this up front.” He took a gulp and said, “I’ve never done this kind of thing before; this talking to a woman on a personal level. But here I am and it feels good. I’ve very attracted to you and can’t figure out why. I’d like more.” He looked me straight in the eye.

It might have sounded strange his coming right out with it like that, but I knew as well as he did where this thing, this undeniable attraction between us, was going. I could have put a stop to it at anytime. He was giving me a chance to say, “Now Mr. Breckendale, it’s been nice doing business with you and you come back next time you need to buy some overpriced item for a family member, you hear?” But I didn’t and noticed that I was still holding my breath while my body was leaning closer towards his.

So we sat down and put forth a contract between us like any two good business people. I’d like to say I hammered out a deal but Gary laid out the cards on the table just like his dad had taught him to and I merely agreed. Mostly it was about what could not happen. He went down the list as if he thought it out ahead of time to protect all the parties involved. I nodded at each one.

“No public meetings. If we are at the same social event, we are smiling acquaintances. No calls to the home. Emergency calls to the office are impersonal. I can’t be here holidays and will do my best for your birthday. No travel together except for a cabin in the mountains that I know where we could have a few days together.” He paused to check my reaction. “No children. Absolutely no children. I couldn’t bring an illegitimate child into the world.”

That wasn’t a big one for me. I had already decided not to pass on my mother’s crazy genes. I sat for a few moments taking it all in. I agreed to all his terms. My need was as great as his. I would have agreed with anything he asked at that point. We worked out the details in a methodical way.

For the practical way we had gone about handling the details of our affair in advance, the passion between us was spontaneous. Gary was a thoughtful lover and as good at meeting my needs as he had been at writing the contract. My body responded to him in ways that I had never known possible. Something inside me shifted. Something, I can’t describe what, healed. After our lovemaking, I lay in his arms silently crying. I was shaken to

the depths of my core. When he asked me what was wrong, I merely said that I was touched deeply.

We had our time together once a week in my little apartment above the shop. Gary had to leave around ten o'clock to return home. I bought bright Mexican dishes and multi-colored place mats and napkins from Guatemala. We settled in. Read ethnic cook books, shopped the small stores and the marketplace and planned exciting meals.

Even with my happiness, the decision to have an affair took its toll on me. I had never thought of myself as someone who could have an affair with a married man. I was too proper, too straight laced, too much conscience driven being my father's daughter and all. The moral platitudes of my mind trained in Christian faith protested, but we were caught in the predictability of two bodies that recklessly leaned towards each other. For the unattached and unloved, the longing for love is a series of adjustments of a downward nature one after another. I meant no malice, no devious plan, nor maliciousness towards his wife.

I ignored the voice from my conscience as we created a world of our own, away from all others. Illicit love's illusion was that we were private lovers who could not be touched. The name of Liz was banished from our conversation by mutual consent. Soon I became adept at erasing it from the morals clause in my corrupted scruples.

Gary teased me by saying that he had always wanted to have a tryst. It sounded romantic, but I smiled ruefully wanting to say that I needed more but not daring to say so. My unspoken yearning lay poignant in the air at times, yet pride held me back. I was skating on three wheels on a wobbly roller skate and they all were love.

So I settled like women for eons have done when there can be no marriage contract in sight. I told myself that the arrangement that we had was enough. We were lovers and good friends. He was a man who loved me well and gave of himself what he could. I pushed down the shouting conscience pangs that spoke otherwise. Gary spoke of his daughter who was now in her teens and quite an accomplished horsewoman winning awards in competitive riding. At times I was jealous. Again I was the girl on the outside looking in to other families that seemed happy. Looking into a family I wasn't allowed to have.

In that small apartment, an earlier version of my mother was so much with me. A healthier version of her presence hovered over me as I cooked for this strong man I had let into my life. This must have been the happier identity of my mother that I hadn't known perhaps before we children were born.

My imagination eagerly let this story come through. The young wife eager to please her husband by learning the skills of domestic life. Burning the meat loaf and laughing about it. Cutting her finger when chopping vegetables. I believed that my mother and dad must have been much in love in their early years, those poor years of divinity school and of bologna sandwiches and homemade bookshelves of bricks and boards. I took some comfort in this fantasy of their sharing a special love before her illness came through stealing her sweetness and sanity. And breaking my dear father's heart. My imagination stopped cold here at this sobering thought. Enough.

Chapter 13

My focus became narrower and I lived for Gary's visits with six days and nights of lonely in between. I started to pull into myself again becoming afraid to go out. Twinges of scruples rose up to bother me about having a love affair with a married man. I pushed them down rationalizing that after all if Gary had a happy marriage he wouldn't be coming to be with me. And what about me? Didn't I deserve some happiness in my life after all I'd been through? Out of all of the hundreds of men I've met on two continents, Gary was different. No man had ever moved me so much since Brad.

On a whim I called Brad. We hadn't spoken for some time and I hoped that hearing his voice might cheer me up. It was a quiet day at the shop so decided to go for broke. I'd kept in touch with my high school friend Cassie who had married John Noland, Brad's friend shortly after we graduated from high school. Cassie knew somewhat about my inability to let go of my feelings for Brad although by unspoken agreement we never talked about it. John spoke with Brad occasionally and had his private number at his beach house on the east coast.

I dialed Brad's phone number with trepidation not knowing if it were current. I rehearsed some phrases in my head in case it was awkward and did deep breathing before dialing to calm my nerves. "Brad? This is Janie. I'm here in Scottsdale, Arizona and thought I'd give you a call. John gave me your number. Is this a good time to talk?" There were sounds of musical instruments in the background and people talking.

"Janie, Darlin'! How are you doing? It's good to hear from you! What are you doing in Scottsdale? We might play there on our next tour date."

My heart was quaking in my throat as I tried to make my voice sound casual. "I own a fashion boutique here. I spent several years in Paris and Europe knocking around after college. After a while I got tired of living abroad and came back home. I finally decided that what I wanted to do in life was become a shop owner. How are things going with the band?"

"We are cutting our fifth album. Days of Hope and Doom it's tentatively called. It should be out early next year. Watch for it. It's going to be one of our best. I can't believe you called. It's so good to hear from you. How long has it been? What is your life like?"

“I live alone and have some friends. I paint and take art classes. It’s fun living in a big city—big I mean after what we were used to in Indiana. I’m thinking about buying a house.” I kept the details general not wanting to give away the vulnerability I was experiencing. “How about you? What do you do in your spare time when you are not working with the band?” And I thought, but did not say, how is your love life?

As if he had read my mind, Brad shot back. “Hey, I got married a few months ago. Her name is Kris. She’s great—she’s a librarian in the children’s section of the downtown library here in Georgia. Met her at a big charity bash here. Beautiful, of course, that goes without speaking. We’re buying a house and are expecting our first child soon. I’m going to be a daddy.”

That lump in my throat turned to stone. I forced myself to say, “Brad, that’s great. I can’t picture you married and settling down.”

He laughed. “You’ve been reading the fan magazines. Life’s been pretty wild for me since I left Indiana. I decided to give marriage a try. If anyone can settle me down, Kris can.”

Now I forced a laugh. “Yes, you always were a wild one. I can’t believe that you finally tied the knot. Congratulations. That’s great news. Kris must be a wonderful girl. Is the news private or can I share it with John and Cassie?”

“No, I think I’ll give him a call. We haven’t talked for a while. I want to hear his surprise when I tell him the big news.”

Feeling confused and overwhelmed, I cut the call short making an excuse. “I’ve got to go now. A customer just came in the shop. If you are in the Phoenix area, give me a call. I’d love to go to one of your concerts and meet Kris. It’s so good talking to you after all these years. Congratulations again.” I gave him my phone number and hung up.

I sat down hard. Now I really was jarred and depressed. I suppose some part of me held onto hope that somehow Brad and I would get married some day. What did he say the name of the next album was? Hope and Doom? Doom and Hope? Sounded about right where my head was now.

Shirley noticed something when she came back from lunch. “What’s wrong? You look like someone just shot your best friend.”

“Oh, I did a stupid thing and called my old boyfriend from high school, the one I’ve never quite gotten over. He has gotten married and they are expecting a baby. Not quite the news I wanted to hear. It seems like everyone in my graduating class is married but me.”

Shirley came over and put her arm around me to give me a hug. She had been divorced for about ten years from her alcoholic husband. “I’m sorry Janie. That’s rough... Men, what are we ever going to do about them?” She shook her head and gave a long sigh.

Shirley understood about my situation with Gary. She had a long-standing relationship with a jewelry salesman who came to Scottsdale once a month. Married of course, like all those fast-talking salesmen seemed to be. Shirley and I had talked of life, its twists and turns and how it hadn’t exactly turned out like we planned. We commiserated together sharing stories about women who put up with a portion of a man. A fraction of a whole life.

Still it was good to be with Gary. We settled into a routine. We watched old movies on television and he brought in Chinese food on the nights that I didn’t cook. I told myself that it was enough but it wasn’t. It’s not how I envisioned my life would be being second best and riddled with guilt. I know not to ask because he would never leave his wife. Despondency and anxiety came over me as I settled for having half a life. I tried not to show it but at times the disappointment broke through when he was there. We didn’t talk much about my downcast feelings. When the sadness broke through, Gary just held me close against the dark shadows of the night.

Chapter 14

It was one Thursday afternoon around one thirty. I was looking forward to Gary's coming over after work. No customers were in the shop and I was doing the ordering from Paris after talking with the sales representative about a new line of face creams. The shop was doing so well that I'd been looking at a home to buy. Put down some roots maybe. Settle into a nice home that I could call my own.

I looked up when I heard the bell chime to see a tall, dark-haired agitated woman rush in. Her face was white as she glanced around wildly. For a minute I thought with her frenetic energy that she might be going to hold up the place. There was a wild, crazy look in her eyes. She stopped and then rushed towards me in a menacing way. She looked me in the eye and I froze. Lisbeth!

Her voice was low as she hissed, "Mine! Get out of his life!" The contempt in her voice nearly knocked me over.

My throat went dry and I stopped breathing. My body and voice were paralyzed. She looked at me and I felt a rush of venom pour through me. Adrenalin poured through me with my heart beating wildly. The language of the outrage of the betrayed wife cracked me across the face. She shouted obscenities accusing me of a profession of which I had never considered. She fumbled in her handbag, not one of mine I might add, and pulled out a gun.

My heart sank in my chest and stayed there throbbing wildly. I was rooted to the spot. This was surreal.

A bullet zeroed over my head landing two inches from the picture of Big Nose Kate whose amused expression seemed to say "Well whore's drawers! What did you expect messing around with a married man?"

The reverberation of the shot rang in my ears. I jumped. She jumped. We started as if we each had been shot.

My eyes widened as I entertained the thought, is this it for me? Am I to be the target of a jealous murderess? And then curiously enough, if she kills me, will she get away with it?

With a vicious wild-eyed look, Lisbeth turned and stalked out of the door with her head held high.

Busted! I was so busted. I ran and locked the door after her, put up the closed sign and turned the lights off. I sat down for a moment trying to get my breath. I'd seen that crazy look before. Gulping for air, I started to think what to do.

I headed out back to go up the outside stairs to my apartment. Glancing at my car, I froze again. There was sticky stuff all over my car. A distinct, rotten smell of human excrement. Bright brownish lumps mixed with something that looked like blood covered the back of the car. A note written in black crayon that said "You're going to get it!"

At first I felt confusion, then it dawned on me. Shock. My heart leaped to my throat. That woman is completely crazy! Fighting back tears I grabbed the hose to wash the car before somebody saw it. How could she do something like this? This is one deranged woman. What else might she do? My knees almost buckled and I leaned against the outside wall to steady myself. Shakily I used the strong water pressure to hose down the car.

I ran back to the store and took most of the cash out of the register. Rushing up the stairs to the apartment, I threw some clothes into a suitcase. Jeans and old shirts mostly and a heavy jacket. Gathered my painting supplies and my hiking boots and riding boots and grabbed food from the fridge and threw it into an old cooler and poured ice cubes on top. As I hauled my suitcase and cooler down the back steps of the apartment, the hot Scottsdale air hit me full force.

I pounded on my heart to try to calm it down as I drove towards the freeway looking a car wash that would wash the remaining bits of egg and what turned out to be catsup from the car. That completed, I felt somewhat better as I told myself that I was washing the horrid traces of shame out of my life. I stopped at a grocery store to load up on supplies and call Gary. I couldn't stop the tears from falling.

"Gary. She was just here. She told me to get out of your life."

Silence. Dead silence except for his breathing.

“Gary, are you there? Did you hear what I just said? Lisbeth came by the store. I thought I’d better call to prepare you. I’m headed out of town for a while.”

“Are you okay? What happened? Where are you going? How can I contact you?”

“I don’t know where I’m going to be staying. I’ll call you when I get it figured out. I need a vacation anyway. I’m driving north. Or West. I don’t know. Maybe up through Colorado. I’ll let Shirley know so she can run the shop while I’m gone. “

“Tell me what happened. How did you know it was Lisbeth?”

“I saw a picture of her in the society pages. And then I saw her at the Toys for Tots charity luncheon last year. She rushed in and yelled at me to leave you alone. Then she ran out of the store. She looked wild and crazy. I’m headed out of Phoenix. I’ve got to get away. That’s all I can tell you right now.” A lump came up in my throat and I started to cry. I couldn’t tell him about the mess on the car.

“Janie, I’m sorry. Sorry I put you in this position.”

“Well I’m a big girl. I asked for it. I’ve got to go now. Bye.” Shaking, I hung up before he asked more and started crying again. I stood in the phone booth shaking and crying at the frustration of it all.

Feeling persecuted by the contemptuous events that took me out of Scottsdale, I took off north. I was furious with myself. What had ever possessed me to take up with a married man? “Thief,” I said out loud. “Thief! I’m not a thief!” And yet I had taken something that wasn’t mine. Guilt and shame poured through me as I remembered my dad preaching a sermon on the sacredness of marriage vows. The preacher’s kid in me was working overtime now. The guilty conscience I had pushed down for so long now ran rampant.

Thou shalt not commit adultery. After all, I had memorized the Ten Commandments in Sunday School as a child.

Embarrassment and humiliation poured in mixed with shame. Why did I take up with Gary knowing that he was married? What kind of woman

am I that can't find a decent man for myself and settle down? Why do I choose men who aren't good for me? What kind of stupid fool am I? And for the first time I asked myself what would my dad think? My sweet, loving dad. Hot tears spilled out and ran down my face as I drove. Berating myself even more, I had to pull over as the overwhelming emotions of guilt and shame took over.

I couldn't stop beating myself up for what I'd done. Guilty feelings flooded over me. I'd stolen a man from his marriage. Deep in my heart I knew it wasn't right but overrode the message telling myself that no one would get hurt. She would never know. I'd felt too happy with Gary not to bring him into my life even though I knew how wrong it was. I couldn't not, I sobbed. I couldn't not.

Lisbeth in her superficial, even in her hysterical, malicious way, is a sister. I had harmed another woman—a sister. Her glaring eyes burned in my mind haunting and challenging me. It was wrong. Oh, God. How insane was my thinking I could get away with having an affair with another woman's husband? Vexed, I grappled with my selfishness in trading for my own happiness at the expense of someone else. How callow. The year of exhilaration we'd had went out the window now thinking of the pain that I had caused. I had to pull off the road for a while.

Back on the road again when I was calm enough to drive, I decided to do something I always wanted to do. Something completely different from the asphalt and artificial atmosphere of the city. So remote that no one will know who I am. Somewhere safe so different from the life I'd been living; somewhere where I couldn't be found. Somewhere I could lose myself. I headed north with my destination being the Hopi Reservation.

Toast. I think. The shop is toast. Lisbeth is a vindictive woman. She's out to get me. She'll spread rumors and no one will buy from me anymore. I'll have to close the shop. I'm toast. Burned. It hit me. All of it at once. The loss of it all. The store. All I'd worked for. Gary. It's over. I'm done in the Phoenix valley. This part of my life is over. Five years of my life were invested in the hot desert town and now that's over.

Leaving is always about loss. That's what I'd learned in childhood moving around a lot. Get in fast, make friends but don't get too close to people because you will have to leave them. I had to leave several best friends when I was a child. That is a special kind of heartbreak. We would

always promise to write and keep in touch but we never did. Loves lost. I'd learned not to care too much because what I had would be taken away.

It's true isn't it? Everyone I've loved has been taken from me. Daddy. Brad. Bruce and now Gary.

Daddy and Bruce died and Brad left me. I couldn't stop any of that from happening. But Gary. I had a doing in that. I shouldn't have started anything with him knowing he wasn't free. The attraction to him was so strong that I went against my values. I threw out my beliefs about fairness, the sanctity of the marriage vows, morality and even the Ten Commandments my dad's faith was based on. I knew better but that didn't stop me from following my heart.

The reality—cold harsh, unsympathetic and unchanging—despite my wanting to hang on—was this: Gary is an undivorceable man just as he had told me right from the start. Sobbing and bending over double, I thought of never being with Gary again.

What I wanted was that moment of grace that would tell me things will be alright. That moment when the heavens open up and I would be reassured that all was okay. As my dad used to say just wait for that A-okay moment that lets you know that God is in his heaven smiling down on us.

But that didn't happen and I was definitely not okay.

Chapter 15

Heading north, my mind raced replaying the recent explosive events. I was shocked at the explosion of emotions that were unleashed in me. She tried to shoot me, for gosh sake! The audacity of it all. She'd come with a gun to shoot me. Talk about the Wild, Wild West and woman fight for your man!

Lucky for me that woman was a bad shot. Did enough damage scaring me the way she did, but fortunately we both escaped the notoriety of the newspapers by her coming to her senses as she did and running out. I noticed as I was thinking about her that I still couldn't say her name.

Wake-up call. That's what she had given me. A wake-up call.

I broke down in tears again as I thought of Big Nose Millie and how she was on the lam again riding her pony out of town with the saddlebags packed with as much of her earthly goods as she could cram into them. Big Nose Millie was crying too as she was leaving someone and a life she loved once more knowing deep in her heart that her own wickedness caused her downfall.

Hours later, I went north on Route 89 then cut off to travel through some of the unmarked roads of the Navaho Nation. The land was sparse and brown and I marveled how creative people must be to survive. Dark-haired children played near old houses with dogs sleeping in the shade and chickens scratching in the dust. I got lost several times and kind-hearted people would set me straight and point me on my way.

Traveling on, I drove up a mesa into the Hopi Indian Reservation in the middle of the Four Corners area. Something inexplicable had drawn me to the land of the three mesas where the Hopis, who were called The People of Peace, lived. I started weeping as I drove up the slow road to the flat-tabled-topped mesa where the Hopi people lived. The arid wilderness of the land touched me and I wondered as to what it would take to live here. I had read that there were small patches of Indian corn, squash, native beans and pumpkins hidden away farmed by men well-adapted to the seasons and the harsh way of life.

I went to First Mesa noting the clay pueblo architecture of the homes placed closed to each other. I liked the sound of the names of the small, dirt

villages: Mishongnovi, Shipaulovi, and Shumapovi. Driving on to my destination, I went to Second Mesa and got a room at the motel that was run by the tribe. I stayed there for a few days eating blue corn tortillas and pancakes, chili, mutton stew and hamburgers and fries in the restaurant that was part of the complex. I walked the mesas soaking in some ancient vibrations and visited a small museum with pictures and artifacts from the earlier days.

Outside the museum I talked with a kindly older artist whose work seemed to incorporate some of the deep spirituality of the region. "I'm John Tuvayesva" he said. "I've been working silver into jewelry for nearly forty years. I learned the craft when I went to study with a Navaho craftsman when I was a young man."

He grinned from ear to ear when I complimented on the fineness of his work and bought two of his pieces plus some pottery with the distinctive black and brown Hopi markings made by his sister. The heaviness of the Navaho silver pieces I'd previously seen had not appealed to me but John's work had a strength and delicacy that called out. I inquired about upcoming spiritual events on the mesas. "Are there Kachina dances coming up that I might attend? Is it alright for me to go?"

"Be respectful and you will be welcome with our people. The Flute Ritual dance should be this afternoon in the next town. Our Kachinas will be dancing to sing for the growth of the corn. We have a legend that Blue Corn Girl comes to help the corn mature."

I was moved to hear of Blue Corn Girl and wanted to know more. "Tell me about the Kachinas."

"The Kachinas dance to preserve the peace and harmony of the Universe," John said as he gave me instructions how to get there and the approximate time the ceremonies would start. "Our dances honor the mysteries of our greater world. We humans are the humble caretakers of Mother Earth. We ask Grandfather Sky to give us rain for our crops. We dance to hold the balance of the world. As goes the inner world, so goes the outer world."

I drove over to Third Mesa where an afternoon dance was scheduled. Parking in a dusty lot, I walked down the dirt path to the village. A Hopi woman joined me at a junction and we nodded and smiled. I had expected to

feel out of place but the people seemed to accept me as we walked by. The woman invited me to stand by her and we lined up along with the broad-faced Hopi people and white travelers who seemed over dressed along the main street of the pueblo. Some Hopi families sat on their flat roof tops for a better view. The native people waited patiently for the position of the sun to be just right calling forth the Kachinas but the tourists were restless.

The murmur of the crowd ceased as the dancers came in from the edge of the village shaking their gourd rattles painted brightly with symbolic designs. The stones inside the gourds made a sharp sound. Single file they came with bare, dark bodies painted with bright colors and masks signifying the embodied Kachinas dancing as masked, feathered gods. The spirits of great natural forces of the clouds, sun, trees, plants, animals and birds had spoken to the men as they designed their dancing masks. They chanted to instill the web of spirits, sky, and earth into the simple devotedness of the people to make sure that the fall crop would be fruitful. They sang an ancient song of the harvest chanting and dancing as they had for centuries. The reedy sound of the flute called to the spirit of the corn turning hard in the fields. The flutes hummed to the vibration of the earth.

Dust rose from the shuffling feet of the dancers. The air was hot and hard to breathe, but I was transfigured. Union. The dances seemed to be conveying union of the great cosmos and her people. I became caught up in the rhythm of the dance. A great power was unleashed by the dancers and the receptivity of the audience. It cast a strange spell over me and there was a sense of familiarity as my body swayed and my feet could not keep still. Somehow I felt like I belonged. I was one of them even though I was this white woman with gold hair. Tears started to run down my face as I stood entranced for several hours as the sun slowly went down in the west. The dances were more holy than any church I'd ever been in. There was a deep symbolism I didn't understand, but I felt and knew just the same.

As we walked back down the path, the woman motioned for me to follow her. A yellow dog came out to greet us. The woman invited me into her home, a shack really with a dirt floor and only a wooden bench and a ramshackle table. It was primitive but looked beautiful to me and I tried to convey this to her but she did not understand English and of course I couldn't speak her language. So we sat and communicated in the language of woman to woman without benefit of words. She seemed to want me to have a pair of turquoise earrings carved in the shape of a feather. Not knowing what to do or say, I offered her a small, gold heart locket I had on and

pressed forty dollars into her hand and we clasped hands for a moment before I left.

That night I cried deep into my pillow. The native ceremony had shaken something out in me. Tears of great relief. There was an air of redemption that the ancient rhythms and rituals had worked deep in my soul. Even though there were many questions, finally there was a place of peace where I could sleep soundly without dreams. I wished my dad had been here to feel the deep spirituality that the dances invoked in me. He would understand of the deep connection and emotions that I felt in these gentle people.

The next day I parked by the side of the road and hiked up through some of the ancient paths worn smooth by the Hopi boys who participated in long runs and the farmers on their ways to the field. I sat for hours looking out over the mesas. Coming back, I sought out John and told him what I had experienced. He understood and said, “That is good, my daughter. You are connected to this red earth—this land. This red dirt will always be under your fingernails.”

I liked his image of my being a part of this flat, arid land. I showed him some round rocks I had found that had deep indentations in them like small bowls. Some of the holes had worn through at the bottom creating a ring.

John laughed. “Holy rocks. Rocks with holes in them are always holy.” He pressed them back into my hand saying to keep them with me always. “These holy rocks will remind you of your connection to Mother Earth and the Hopi. You will be back,” he prophesied.

Chapter 16

The cleansing that I felt during the ceremony and the relief of flight overtook me. I felt the urge to be on with my journey and left Arizona to drove west through two nondescript larger towns, Shiprock and Farmington. After a short time in New Mexico I continued north crossing over into Colorado. The scenery changed from the dry desert to green, rugged country as I drove into the Rocky Mountains. I was astonished after years of living in a dry brown environment. Who waters all these trees to get them to grow so big and green? This natural land, raw and virgin, lit up my senses. The smell of pine, of damp earth and old growth invigorated me.

I stayed a night in Durango where I sought out a used bookstore and purchased books on driving the Rocky Mountains, wild flowers and a Colorado map. I spent some time soaking in the small hot springs towns farther north.

What saved me from a complete utter fall into depression was listening to Kate Wolf's songs about the twists and turns about love on the audio cassette player. I'd followed her work as she grew in fame and toured the nation and had most of her tapes. The quality of truth in her clear voice singing about love, pure loneliness and somehow redemption in the same song gave me solace. Grit plus grace is how I perceived her songs.

The mountains were always there in the distance. They were rugged, steep and foreboding in their grandeur. This was Mother Nature at her best I decided and felt comforted by their ever presence. The names of the peaks and valleys were stunning. Precarious Peak, Buckskin Pass, Castle Peak and Cathedral Peak. I wondered on the origin of the name Conundrum River. I rose each day and gave a slight bow to honor these mountains that seemed to shelter me, ruminating on the comforting bible verse from childhood, "Lift up thine eyes towards these hills."

I drove north, on to the small towns of Montrose and Gunnison. I drove along the highway flanked for miles by the Gunnison River. Driving north of Crested Butte I noted a small stream that ran beside the road. It was glistening black with a polished look. The bed rock was a shiny black slate hard and slippery underneath the fast moving water. I stopped and walked up river listening to the music made by the slight rapids as the water fell an inch or so from one level to another.

Sitting down beside the stream, I picked up a black rock with etchings on it. My first impression was that the tightness of eons was stored in that small piece of slate. My body knew that density—being pressed and pushed from every which way until everything was seamlessly smooth. Dense. The compression of centuries. That's how I felt. Compacted and squashed together.

The smooth, shiny rock felt cool and comforting in my hand as I examined it further. Turning it around. I noted how it fit my hand perfectly. There was a thick groove coming up from the bottom which split off into a fork with two thin lines running to the top. At one point there was an even finer line connecting the two forks although they both went on to the top of the rock as if they were two different paths or roads that could be taken.

The vulnerability of the water splashing on the edges of the stream and evaporating innerved me. I sat by the stream dipping the rock in the cool running water and shivered when I placed it on my forehead. Somehow my action of dipping the stone in the cold water and holding it on my forehead both calmed me and made me want to cry.

I sat thinking of the extremes in moods that I'd gone through in the past few days. I reflected on the strange beauty of the movements and rhythms of the Hopi dances and how they had touched me. Some of the brittleness and vulnerability I'd felt in Scottsdale started to leave. My mood started to shift responding to the beauty around me. Holding the hard, slate rock grounded me, giving me something solid to hold on to. Comforted somehow. I stuck the rock in my pocket as a reminder of the goodness of Nature in assisting with healing.

Wondering about the dense composition of the rock, I doubled back and inquired about the rock in Crested Butte, a small, quaint tourist town that held an old-fashioned western mining town that served the nearby ski lodges. The stream was part of the Slate River which meandered down the mountains in that area. Slate? Isn't that what blackboards are made of?

I continued north letting the roads take me wherever they went. I followed roads and byways up and down winding, mountain roads with a narrow path through the tall pines on either side, blue skies above. It doesn't make any difference which way to go when you don't have a particular destination in mind. One road was as good as another so when a side road

beckoned, off I went. Drove for miles without seeing anyone and then would come upon a small town of a few buildings.

Driving with nowhere in particular to go gave me plenty of time to think about where my place in the world was. I didn't have a clue.

More memories came up, mostly at night in those unfamiliar motel rooms. There were disjointed images, snatches of awareness, bits of memory fragments, and flashes of feelings. Different towns, different schools, different houses. Always packing up and moving on. There was a glimpse of me sitting on the steps of the parish house crying about having to move again. Leaving the old place and wondering what the new town would be like. The awkward phase of being the new kid and making friends all over again. Wondering if they would like me. The grief of leaving friends and places to start again once more. Copper. I cried now for that little gold kitty I had to leave behind when Grandmother said absolutely not that she would not have a cat at her house. Under all the grief was the knowledge that I never had anything that I loved that I could keep.

I stopped at one small town consisting of two houses about to fall down, a post office and an ancient gas station. A tired-looking mutt came over to me wagging his tail and giving me a beseeching look. Not quite an adolescent judging by his size. He was frazzled looking and his ribs stuck out. He was friendly enough with his whole back side wagging along with his tail. I offer him half of my sandwich which he wolfed down immediately, his tail wagging even more furiously to show his appreciation. A gaunt-looking woman in a thread-bare housedress came out of one of the houses.

She looked at me with an appraising eye. "Want a puppy? Someone dropped that fool dog off a week ago and we're not keeping him. I keep running him off but he keeps coming back. My kids must be sneaking him food; I'll give them what for if I catch them. This dog here sure needs someone to take him and give him a good home."

Now I did the appraising. A dog? He had darkish gold fur and looked as if he might have some yellow Labrador in him and something else, I couldn't be sure. Whatever it was, the mixture was pleasing with flecks of gold in his eyes which showed intelligence despite the obvious fact that he was down and out. Black nose and gums. Big tongue hanging out. He cocked his head and looked at me with soul-searching eyes as if he knew what I was considering.

I looked at him hard but couldn't find any reason to turn the offer down. I had never thought about having a dog. Dogs need more room than my small apartment. But wait, I reconsidered, I'm not going back to live in Scottsdale. Well, I don't have to decide whether to keep him or not right now. I can let him hitch with me until we hit a bigger community where he'll have a better chance at being adopted. I arranged a drink of water for him, got a soda for myself, filled up with gas and then set off.

It's different with a traveling companion even if he is a dog. A strong doggy smell filled my car. "Dog, what is your name?" I asked. That's how the names of all my pets came about. I told them they had to name themselves and then I listened until they told me what it was. His tongue wagged out of his mouth with a contented air. No particular answer came. I tried several names: Guy. Rover, Jimbo, Frisky. Nothing seemed to fit.

He sat there in the front seat like he was my co-pilot and then curled up and went to sleep snoring with little moans. When we hit a larger town, I inquired if anyone wanted a puppy but people said no quickly and looked the other way. So I went to a small grocery store and stocked up on dog food as well as my own traveling supplies.

When we—now I noticed that I was using the pronoun we—found a motel, I asked the owner if it was alright if he stayed in the room with me and promised I would keep him off the bed. Before bedding down for the night I pulled him into the shower and gave him a good scrub down with my shampoo. He patiently bore it while under the water and then shook water all over me as wet dogs are supposed to do. This was the first time I had laughed in a long time. I rubbed him down with a towel. He seemed content to lie down over in the corner making me think he hadn't lived in a house where he shared the bed with people.

The next day on the road seemed brighter. "Any name come up yet that you would like to be called?" The dog just sat there patiently listening to whatever I said. So I told him a bit of my story. I had to admit that he was a good listener but not much of a conversationalist. Still he was company and I hadn't had much of that lately.

My mood had taken a definite up shift. I started to see Colorado differently. Dog, as I conveniently called him, had gotten into the swing of our journey and stayed close by as I stopped to make purchases or buy gas.

He watched and headed for the car as I came out of the store. I tied a red bandanna around his neck as a colorful touch to match my change in mood.

Pulling into the small gas stations and grocery stores, I engaged the owners in conversation. "Tell me about living in Colorado. How do you like living here? What's the best and worst thing about life in these mountains?" I had done some of this line of questioning traveling through Europe and found that it gave me a bit of the local color.

I heard a bit of each of the stories that were offered, sometimes just a noncommittal grunt or two, but there was a consensus that there were advantages to small-town living in the Rocky Mountains—that is if you were a certain type of a person. "I could live anywhere in the world," said one young man wearing bib overalls and a long-john shirt. "I'm from Pennsylvania and just drove through and stopped. Never wanted to go anywhere else after stopping here. Then I met my sweetie here and decided this was the place on God's green earth that I needed to be." He motioned to the back of the store and Sweetie smiled and nodded.

Ah, I thought, life should be so simple. But mine wasn't and I reckoned that I had had something to do with that.

After the fourth day, I stopped asking if anyone wanted a dog. I could live here, I mused. I liked the solidness of the people I met. They seemed hardy and real compared to the people in Scottsdale. There was something about the fresh, clean smell of the pines that moved me. I drove on talking to strangers and noted that there was an old-fashioned quality of kindness in them. Even when there was a bit of curmudgeon in some of them, it was a kind quality of gruffness, not a meanness of spirit.

The further north I drove, the more pine trees I saw. The frosted hillsides were full of a riot of colors. There were cottonwoods by the streams and scrub oaks and a few mountain willows. Oranges, reds, browns and the dark greens of pine trees all showing their colors. Up to the left was a strand of aspen trees turning yellow and gold in the sharp Colorado sun with their tear-shaped leaves undulating in the wind. The under story of the aspens was teaming with grasses and flowers of many hues. In the background were the different mountain peaks, rounded and smooth or jagged with snow glistening in the sun. There was a warmth of a color palate that appealed to my eye which sought out beauty to offset the unhappiness of my mood.

High above, the mountains green with pines with peaks of snow were a strong back drop. It seemed that I was always driving up or down some steep mountain road with sharp turns and double backs. Sparkling water streams rippling across shiny rocks. We stopped at pull offs where there was a stream to hike near. I ventured putting my feet in the water but pulled them back quickly at the icy coldness. Dog loved the water and headed for it as soon as I opened the car door. I found he could play fetch and bring back a stick from the stream numerous times without ever getting tired of this game. Laughing I reached out and rubbed his damp fur. He was beginning to smell like a dog again with my flowery shampoo smell fading no doubt of which he was pleased

No-name dog and I hit the road just poking around going down byroads as the mood struck me. I stopped often to take out my pad and sketch the wild flowers. I loved the names that I looked up in the wildflower book: Lousewort, dogbane, sneeze weed, bergamot and Indian paintbrush. I found a wild iris called the Rocky Mountain Iris in the book and a climber named Rock Clematis. There were minute flowers as ground cover so tiny and delicate whose names I couldn't find.

Another drawing project that took me out my sour mood was sketching some of the gray shacks and buildings which were on the verge of falling down. There was history and charm in the run-down shacks of the old run-down towns. At times I'd let my imagination run wild and make up stories of a miner who might have lived here and his woman who had followed her man. Of course my flights of fancy always had happy endings but that was how I'd programmed by Walt Disney's movies as a child. I'd grown up believing in Snow White's theme song "Someday my prince will come."

When I wasn't diverting my mind to focus on the gorgeous scenery, it would go back to a state of disappointment and regret of the choices I'd made that left me alone in the third decade of life. And the shame at being caught in an affair. I considered how some of my classmates were solidly married with children. So far, I'd made major mistakes in choosing the three men that I'd cared about. What was it about my common sense that I would continually strike out? Three men, three losses. Time, energy and years had been lost in fruitless endeavors with men that thought only of their own happiness and not of me.

Now looking back, I regretted going steady at age sixteen at a time when I wasn't mature enough to handle it. I felt remorse for the time spent on the California ranch with Gene just coasting along while he drifted away into drugs. And most of all I regretted getting involved with a married man and not being able to disengage. Leading with my heart had gotten me and kept me in a state of struggle and uncertainty.

Stopping and heading up a grassy slope that continued up to some peak, I pulled out the black slate rock out of my pocket to hold and absorb its solid coolness and took the time to ponder serious questions, "What do I really want?" I'd made a decision early on not to have children for fear of passing on the genes of schizophrenia. So far my choices of men had been terribly off base, I had to ask "What is that right path for my life?" The rock was cool at first, almost cold and then warmed as I held it across my forehead. As the rock responded to my living temperature, my mind responded in kind with the swirling thoughts lessening.

Somewhere in the back of my head I heard a small echo saying that finding a man wasn't the answer and that it was time for me to stop my expecting that a man could define and fulfill me. The realization hit me that it was my inner landscape that needed enriching instead of expecting an outside source to fill me up. The flight from the imaginations of my fears that Lisbeth had triggered had sent me into this life crisis.

I sat for a long time on a tall slope asking these questions. Somehow seeing my car as a miniature blue Matchbox car down below put something in perspective, what it exactly was I couldn't say but my personal problems seemed miniscule in relation to my toy car of several inches below.

Did I have any viable goals except the ambiguous concept of happiness? I went back to the question of creating my own destiny—being the captain of my own fate. Drifting aimlessly like I'd done in Europe wasn't the answer. "What do I really want to do with my life?" I went into a slight trance in the thin atmosphere, cool breeze and warm sun and went somewhere else until back in the furthest recesses of my mind I heard the word, "community."

Chapter 17

One small hole-in-the-road town stuck out in my mind. It was almost a ghost town with a few gray, paint-peeling empty buildings not too far off the main highway close to the ski resorts of Aspen. It had six or seven homes strung out along the highway and several empty store fronts and a big empty building which had a faded For Sale sign out front. There was the usual post office, a gas station and a small bank saying First National Bank of Lodesville. This was unusual. Why was there a bank in a run-down place like this?

Dog followed me as I walked around to the back and stood looking up at the empty two-story structure. I liked the solidness of the building and the architecture although it certainly looked as if it needed some care. It certainly needed painting. There were columbines blooming and ferns around the perimeter of the building. Looking to the east I could see a few more older homes and some that looked more like old shacks tucked away. Empty storefronts were at the right.

I turned away from the building to see what lay behind it. There was a tall stand of quaking aspens just starting their turn of leaves into brilliant gold. The white of the bark of the trees contrasted with the gold leaves as they shimmered in the sun. There was a break in the trees to the left with a meadow filled with more columbines, pink, orange and blue. Nearby I heard the tinkling of a mountain stream. The freshness of beauty caught my breath and I wished I could paint this scene to capture it forever and take its brilliance with me wherever my travels took me.

I stood for a moment savoring this treat for the senses until Dog came and pushed his nose into my knee. Telling Dog I'd be back soon, I headed for the bank which consisted of a lobby with one older-woman teller who greeted me warmly. I introduced myself and asked to speak to the president. The teller ushered me into the office in the back and introduced me to Mr. Harold Hopper, about fortyish and portly with fringes around the dome of his balding head. He looked like an old-time book keeper with his spectacles down on his nose. He immediately jumped up and smiled as he pumped my hand. "Call me Hal by the way, everybody else does."

I liked the man's briskness and friendly manner. "I'm Janie Perkins, a business woman from the Phoenix area. I'm wondering about the type of people who live here?"

"They are pretty much like you find anywhere else. Hardy. I call people who brave the cold winters here hardy. Pioneer stock or that at least if they are new transports from elsewhere. Some people here are descendents of miners and the mining industry. You have to be adventuresome and hard working to last around here. Tough people. Good people with a few bad eggs thrown in now and then. A town drunk. Every town has one. You know—your typical mix of people."

I laughed at Hal's description. "That sounds pretty much like the people I've known in the Midwest. I've been on the road driving through mountain towns for the past three weeks. I'm falling in love the Rocky Mountains. The air is so crisp and clean and the wild flowers are lovely. Could you tell me about this town?"

He nodded tapping his pen on the desk as if he were delighted to be interrupted from his work with numbers. "Lodesville was a small mining town which hit it big when an old-time prospector, Harold Hanks found a vein of silver just north of town. My folks named me Hal for that old timer. They used to laugh and say it was a lucky name and would make me do well with money. The original Hal staked a claim and kept it quiet for a while but the word leaked out. There were prospectors, miners and money people down on their luck coming from all over there for a while. Then the silver vein wore out and the town shut down."

"I'm surprised to find a small bank tucked away here. I used to work for the wife of a banker back in my small town back in Indiana. How did you come to be here?"

"I was a bookkeeper working for several of the bigger ranch operations about ten years ago. I realized the whole county didn't have any banking services for the regular guy and the ranchers of the area. Many of the banks in Aspen deal with the rich type of customer. I got several of the old-time ranchers to put in together and we opened this bank. Jim Howard and two brothers, Moss and Jake Wrigley put up the collateral for starting the business. We're small potatoes here but there is a need for a bank that understands that the local economy is more than the ski resorts. Farming and agriculture make up most of our customers' businesses. We've done well

enough. The local people appreciated our efforts and have supported us. This is a pretty quiet area of the county.”

“What can you tell me about that big old building across the street? What kind of business did it have? It looks like an old time, all-purpose store. Or maybe a hotel. Has it been empty for awhile?”

“Ever since Miss Farquant died about ten years ago. The elder Miss Farquant that is. Maude. The Farquant sisters were raised on a large ranch near here. Their father was a domineering man, a tyrant who ran off every man that came to court his daughters believing that they were fortune hunters. The sisters never did care for each other much even when they were young. They fought over some fast-talking man who swindled them out of most of their money. They became like fighting peacocks that stick together for life. They decided the ranch life was too much for them and built the Merchantville building shortly after the turn of the century. Embittered against men and each other, they split it down the middle. They had separate apartments built above the store for their personal use. And each had their own store. Miss Maude took the right half for a general merchandise store. Miss Bertie tried a bit of everything from selling hats to dry goods. Later she figured out what the people really needed was a feed store.”

“They sound like characters. Did they make a go of it with their store?”

“Well I can’t say that they knew much about running a business establishment, but they sold enough to support themselves along with the money from selling the ranch. Those sisters had a competition going for most of their life until Miss Bertie died. Her dying kind of took the starch out of Miss Maude and she didn’t seem to have much to live for after that. She died a few years later. I manage the estate for some distant relatives who would sure like to sell that store.”

I smiled at the image of these women both dominant in their own way trying to outdo each other. I’d seen some women shopkeepers like that in Scottsdale. So busy worrying about trying to best the competition that they didn’t mind their own store. “Did you know the sisters?”

“I grew up around here so I have memories of them when I was a boy. I used to come to town with my dad. They were tough ladies not to be reckoned with. You know the wicked witch in the Wizard of Oz? That’s

what Miss Maude looked like. Scared me as a boy. By the time I came back to start the bank, times had changed. Their prices were higher and people started shopping in the nearby city. The Mercantile went downhill and finally closed. What type of business do you have?"

"I have a small store in downtown Scottsdale that sells fine ladies accessories but I'm ready for a change." I surprised myself by admitting to this man I'd just met. Still he had the air of a sensible man. "I'm looking around to see what else I could do. Fill me in about the number of people who live in the county and what their needs might be. I don't need to earn a big living; I don't have many expenses. I just need something that would keep me going."

Hal talked about the demographics of the area while I looked around his office. Bank calendar on the wall. Neat and tidy like with accountant books stacked on a table in the corner. No pictures of wife and children.

"Do you know what the sale price is on the big building? Is there any acreage with it?" For some reason this old store fascinated me and I wanted to hear more details.

"She, I don't know why I always think of the Mercantile as a "she." It must be the old lady energy in it. The building sits on ten acres of land to the back. A little stream runs behind the place coming down from a spring from the top. No roads. I've got a key if you want to look inside. The asking price is \$59,500. The bank here has handled the property since the last Miss Farquant died."

I was curious enough to ask to see the insides of the building. We walked across the street. "This is Dog, my traveling companion. He's a new addition and doesn't have a name yet."

Hal reached down and let Dog smell his hand and then scratched him behind the ears. "Hey Dog. Hey boy. How are you doing there, boy?" Dog reciprocated the friendliness by wagging his tail furiously. We stood back and took a good look at the building which to me was starting to look like a grand old lady.

"She has good bones," said Hal. This building was built to last with a lot of money going into her to make her strong. I always say that if a building has strong bones you can't go wrong."

I smiled at the old-fashioned key that Hal pulled out to open the front door. "I haven't seen one of those old keys since my grandmother's house. I'm from the Midwest. Southern Indiana by the Wabash River which feeds into the mighty Mississippi. Country. Our fall is brilliant with gold like this when the frost hits the maple leaves."

Hal nodded holding the door open. The building was unusual with a hall running down the center of the building. It was set up as two big rooms to accommodate the two separate stores held together with one big roof. Each store had a wood stove and lots of shelves and had a big front window on each side that let in ample light. There was an old-fashioned bathroom at the back with a solid-looking staircase going upstairs.

"The water here is good and clean coming out of wells that take in the water coming off the mountain. Good water, clean air. Good neighbors. I couldn't ask for a better place to live. Let's head up to the second floor."

We walked up the stairs coming to a landing that split off to the left and right. Each apartment had a big living room with great views of the mountains, bedroom, spare room and a fair size kitchen. Fortunately there were two more bathrooms on the second floor with old enameled claw tubs in surprisingly good condition. Dog had followed us in and sneezed after poking his nose in a dusty corner.

"There must be at least ten years of dust stored in here," I said. "I'll tell you what. I'm like Dog here poking my nose in different corners of Colorado seeing what makes me sneeze. This building is a possibility. I've got a few more places to visit." I liked that Hal didn't ask more questions showing he didn't need to pry into my business.

We shook hands again and he offered to help in any way he could. As Dog jumped into the car, I fished around to find the map. Locating our position on the map, I drew a big circle around Lodesville.

Even with the beauty of Colorado that my eyes feasted upon daily, my depression lingered so I set up an occasional phone call appointment with Marion. I figured that I'd better get my head straight before starting a new business venture. I planned my stops around bigger places where there was a phone available in a motel room.

One day I was feeling sorry for myself and complaining and Marion challenged me. “You are still looking for that all-protective father who will guard you from the ills of the world. You are still caught up in trying to find safety and trying to find that love that you feel you’ve missed.”

I let out a big sigh. “Well I just want someone that will be there for me no matter what.”

She laughed gently. “I’m sorry to tell you but that’s idealistic and unrealistic. There are no guarantees of “everlasting” in love. You can’t depend on anyone to take care of you for the rest of your life. Love doesn’t work that way. It’s not from the outside in. It’s from the inside out. You are the only one who will be with you forever. ”

I wondered how this unmarried woman knew so much about love. I considered that she must have had some torrid love affairs in her life for her to be so wise. “I’m so happy when I’m with Gary that I can’t bear to let him go. It’s just overwhelming thinking of being without him.”

“I know that you feel special with Gary, but it’s keeping you from moving on. He may make you feel safe but it also keeps you depressed. Janie, you aren’t a part timer. You rationalize that what you have is okay but it’s not working for you. You see the folly in Shirley’s choice for her affair with a married man but not in your own. You’ve had some legitimate loss in your life. Making the decision to be with Gary set you up for more loss. Affairs are a ticket to disaster and depression. Married men are a big, flashing arrow neon sign that yells Danger! Danger! This way to a broken heart.”

I wasn’t ready to hear what she had to say. Resentfully I said, “But he’s my soul mate.”

Marion sighed. “I’ve heard that soul mate business mostly from highly-romantic people who have gotten themselves involved with an unsatisfactory partner they couldn’t let go of. I’ve come to the conclusion that this soul mate idea is mostly a romantic ideal that keeps people from seeing what is really there.”

I disagreed with her but didn’t speak out. I longed for that one special person who was destined to be with me forever. Still I had to admit that it hadn’t happened to me yet.

That's when Marion said, "Let me explain about the split self. Some people split their love between two partners so they will always have a safety net. If one love fails, they have another to run to or to fantasize about. It keeps you from fully committing to one person and risking everything. Keeping those feelings going for Brad has kept you from being totally there for anyone else."

I slumped down further in that old grungy chair that all cheap motel rooms seemed to have. What Marion said hit home and I didn't like hearing the truth about what I'd been doing.

At one point Marion said, "Try to understand that the choices you've made have to do with your low mood. Wanting something you can't have keeps you depressed. And it prevents you from finding the man who can give you what you want."

Her putting words to what hadn't worked by juggling the feelings for those two men—Brad and Gary—came to me as a jolt. The words of a song I hadn't thought of for years came. "Darlin' you can't love two. You can't love two and still be true, darlin' you can't love two." Love divided. Maybe I learned it from that old saying about not putting all your eggs in one basket.

"I know. But I can't seem to do anything different."

Marion said, "Come on, Janie. Everyone wants to be loved in their own way. You can't be happy with a man who is in love with a bottle. Or weed. Or one with a wife. You deserve to have a whole love. Figure out the way you want to be loved, choose wisely and then take the risks needed to get it."

I nodded, but in truth I didn't have the slightest ideas how to go about it.

"Actually, with all the obsession, the drama, the intrigue, it's a trick of the slippery mind in choosing unavailable men as a way to avoid real intimacy."

"What?"

“Sure, with the fantasies in your mind of going back and forth between the two men you avoid deep connection. It’s a sickness, almost. Call it love sickness.”

Love sickness! Suddenly a smile came across my face. For some odd reason I found this curiously reassuring. I had thrown away the magnifying glass and become myopic to his shortcomings as lovers always do. Euphoria blurs reality. “If I can see love as a sickness that comes over a person, namely myself, perhaps it is a sickness from which I can—no, I will recover.”

Hanging up and thinking over the conversation, I berated myself again for being so stupid to ever fall love with a married man.

That night in the motel room I woke up, sitting straight up and screaming “Murder!” With my heart pounding and my legs kicking the bed violently, I screamed the word again and again until I was exhausted. Spent. Coming back to my everyday senses, I realized that I was in a strange motel room, alone with a startled dog beside me.

It was four in the morning according to the clock that ticked loudly on the bed side table. Tense and disconcerted, I couldn’t go back to sleep after that trying to pound out the unlikely idea once more that as a child I’d been involved in a murder.

Chapter 18

Despite the terrors of the night, I plunged on in my journey. I got back on the main road and drove on to Aspen where Dog and I stayed for a few nights at a bed and breakfast. Staying in people's homes was certainly different than the motels I'd been sleeping in—much homier and more personal. I talked with the owners who had bought the place five years ago. They shared the pros and cons of running a bed and breakfast and the details of working with the tourist trade. Inviting guests into the home is labor intensive for the early mornings with the rest of the day to market the business. It took a certain type of person to have a turnover of people—all kinds of people—in your home each day. I calculated the money they would take in by counting the number of rooms by the amount that I was paying per night. Running a small lodge was a definite money-making business if there were enough rooms to let out.

Later I walked downtown and got a feel for the ski resort that was preparing for its first set of skiers for the winter. The town was still quiet just waiting until the first snowfall and the height of the ski season. I looked hard at the merchandise that was selling in the resort-town stores quizzing the clerks and owners. Expensive candies, home-made baked goods, varieties of ice cream and types of colas in the sweet shops. High-end jewelry, designer clothes, purses and shoes in fancy boutiques. There were several gear shops which sold everything to ski down the mountain from lightweight jackets, ski pants, goggles, mittens, mufflers to skis. I looked at the layout, colors and atmosphere of each store. Each place seemed to have its own attitude from the snobbishness of the exclusive shops to the friendliness of the general family places.

I sat on a bench and counted the number and types of people that went into the different stores. There were more families with young children and teenagers than I'd seen in my entire time in Scottsdale. I watched as the flighty type of women I catered to came out of the expensive shops with big shopping bags. I could make a living here. I'd have to change the type of products I carried but I could make money. The big question was did I want to live in a resort town?

A younger man with long brown hair sat down beside me and volunteered his life story and the perils of his wandering life. It was clear he was interested in more than just being a listener to his story but I smiled and

moved on. Dog wasn't too taken with him either. Dog, I noted, was a good judge of character.

Aspen people were different from those in the small Colorado towns that I'd experienced. The workers of the ski trade were young, healthy looking men and women who waited tables, cleaned rooms and ran the ski lifts. I began to see that there were three classes of people; there were the rich people, those who catered to them and the mountaineers who lived by just getting by. I talked to everyone I met about the atmosphere and culture of the Rocky Mountains.

I got excited as a plan began to formulate in my head. The next step was to talk with the money makers—some bankers and real estate people. The entire area was growing along with the ski trade in Aspen. Acreage and homes cost a lot more than they did a few years ago. That the area was in an economic boom excited me more.

The next question I quizzed everyone on was what happened to the town during the summer. Did it dry up after skiing season was over? The people at the Chamber of Commerce assured me that there were festivals planned for every month during the summer. The resorts planned off-season events to bring tourists to town keep their rooms occupied when the snow season shut down.

There was one woman at the Chamber I liked and offered to buy her lunch. Josie Jenkins was a petite, energetic woman of about thirty-five. She had long dark hair and smiled a lot. She filled me in about some of the history of the area. We sat at an outside restaurant eating huge salads while I quizzed her about the history of the area.

"I've heard that three S's defined this area: Silver, snow and skiing," I remarked trying to get a sense of the economy.

"That's right. The silver has dropped out but it played a big part in getting this place settled," said Josie. "I can give you the entire history of this valley. It was first settled by the Ute Indians who called these mountains 'shining.' When gold was discovered at Pike's Peak, the area became filled with miners. Some early prospectors discovered silver in nearby Leadville in 1897. Aspen and other small towns shot up and over 300 hardy souls roamed the hillsides and lived here looking for silver and gold. Many of the other towns weren't so lucky and were abandoned when the silver veins of ore ran

out. The town was called Ute City for a while and then renamed for the beauty of the aspen trees.”

“You sound like a regular historian,” I said, eager to know more. “Who explored these mountain peaks in those early times?”

“It’s part of my job relating the local history to the tourists, so yes, I’m a walking encyclopedia on the Aspen area. Many different nationalities of people passed through here and some stayed on. The French trappers and other mountain men were the first to explore this Elk mountain range. Fortunately for us today, some of the early folk were Swedes who loved to ski. The thin slats they brought with them became a more accessible way to travel during the winter. Everyone made their own skis from boards by curling the ends themselves. Skiing caught on as a pleasure outing and competitions were organized with other mining communities. There were 12,000 people living here in 1983 with schools, banks, newspapers and two theaters and an opera house.”

“Oh, and there was a frisky red light district of course. Miners had their needs.” She grinned. “But as the silver mines became less productive, Aspen lost most of its population but continued as the county seat and a center for the small ranches and farmers.”

“I’ve driven through a lot of small towns that looked like they have seen better days. Is that a result of the mines closing?”

“Yes, many of the miners and the industries that supported them folded when the silver ran out and formerly booming towns became ghost towns. Later, some rich businessmen saw the potential of developing a recreational ski town. They built ski lifts to the top of the biggest mountain and put in hotels. The wives started a cultural push and organized a music festival and school. Some soldiers were stationed here for ski training in World War II and some returned after the war.” Josie laughed showing her dimples. “Well that’s the official speech that I give several times a day. Tell me what brings you here to our fair town.”

I hadn’t had a good girl friend since Cassie in high school and wondered if I could trust this vivacious, open woman. “I own a specialty store down in the Phoenix area and am looking to relocate. Dog and I’ve been traveling around the state here exploring possibilities.”

“What kind of a store do you own down in the desert?”

“It’s a ladies fine accessories store—I import from Paris and sell my painted handbags,” I said showing her my purse.

Josie admired my hand bag and said, “That type of store would work in Aspen with the rich clientele. Have you considered moving here and opening a business?”

“I’m looking for a change. I don’t want to replicate my old store here. Actually I’m getting bored with selling things to rich women.” I looked up to see if she disapproved of what I’d said. She indicated that she understood, so I continued. “I am good at selling and running a business but there’s got to be more. It’s got to be something different to keep me interested.”

She listened thoughtfully. “I know what you mean about wanting more than just selling things. But do consider moving here. These mountains are deep and they can change a person. This is a great place to settle and the business opportunities are great. The Chamber can help you explore ideas for a retail business. And how about your personal life. Husband? Children?”

I shook my head no. “Men are the last thing on my mind at this moment. No encumbrances. Just me. Although I did pick up this stray dog traveling though the southern part of Colorado. I’d planned to find a home for him along the way but it looks like he’s with me to stay. What is it like to be a single woman running a business in this recreational area?”

“There are plenty of men available around here. I’ve been dating Josh Keary who is the manager of a big resort here. If you like I’ll introduce you around. I know of several single men you would like.”

“Josie, your enthusiasm is a breath of fresh air after what I’ve been through. I’m looking for a big change in my life after suffering a broken heart. I’m making a brand new start but I’m not ready to start dating after being burned.” I wasn’t ready to divulge any more of my personal life. I turned the conversation back around to business. “I’m going to look at possibilities here in town.”

“That’s great. I can set you up with my real-estate friend who can show you some properties to buy or rent. She knows the possibilities for creating a business here.”

“Josie, one more thing? Could you come down to Lodesville sometime soon and give me some advice on a property I’m thinking of purchasing?” “I’d love to get your opinion about my starting a six bedroom lodge and gift shop there.”

“I know Lodesville although I haven’t been there since I was a kid. There’s a faint memory of some big empty building there; that must be what you are considering buying. Running a lodge is a lot different than selling to rich clientele with more money than they know what to do with. And a lot more work. That should challenge you!” She smiled as we got up from the bench and set a day for her to come down and examine the Mercantile.

I gave in to my longing for contact with Gary and called him one day to give him a bit of my daily routine. Told him I was looking around as I didn’t think it was wise to come back to live in the Phoenix area. Teasing him a bit, I said I’d found a good-looking, good-smelling traveling companion and we were hitting it off well. Gary didn’t take the bait, maybe he was too worried to ask for details. He reported that he had talked to Shirley and things were okay at the shop but sales had been hit hard. I kept our talk light and noncommittal. We didn’t exchange any intimate talk and I know we were both waiting to see what happened next. When we hung up there was a big lump in my throat over what had not been said.

Next I called Shirley and told her I was considering moving to Colorado and asked her if she would like to become general manager of the Scottsdale shop in my absence. We negotiated a raise and outlined her new duties of keeping the books and doing the banking as well as ordering the inventory. I told her to hire another part-time saleswoman to help if needed. I asked her to close the store temporarily and box up the goods and put them upstairs while the walls were being repainted. I gave her the names of the painters who had worked with me before and the new colors I wanted for both the inside and outside. I choose the deep and muted colors of the petrified rocks I’d seen in Northern Arizona.

I asked Shirley to spread the word that the store was in the hands of an out-of-state business owner which was partially true. I told her I planned to come back to oversee the new layout of the fixtures and handle some publicity details. After that I would come back to Scottsdale occasionally to visit and work out any details. I’d leave the apartment as it was set up for now so I could use it but would eventually rent it out. Shirley was sad that I would be leaving, but understood my reasons as I described Lisbeth’s

behavior. I ended the conversation telling Shirley that I was fortunate to have someone like her who could handle the store in my absence and gave her my blessing at her new promotion.

I sketched out the design of the new sign for the front of the shop. I'd been studying on a new name for the shop and decided on The Painted Desert. I called the sign painters I'd used before and made arrangements for the frontage sign which would look entirely different from my old Designs by J. The difference in design and adding new items from the Southwest would get the message across that ownership had changed. Designs by J. was history and so was I in the dry, desert town of Scottsdale.

Chapter 19

Driving on, I continued my usual stopping in small out-of-the-way places and going back and forth about the pros and cons of living in Colorado. I took my time. Whereas the decision to move to the Phoenix area had been quick and had worked out well business wise, now I took my time meandering through the southern part of the state. This was the way I had taken in Italy taking it slow going to one small town, one plaza at a time, talking to the local people and getting my sense of the richness of the place. Now my journey had a personal purpose. The Mercantile building intrigued me and the chaos that rattled inside my head began to subside as I focus on the more practical consideration of buying an old building.

Dog and I went up the main route to the Continental Divide—that highest place of the Rockies. The climb up seemed relentless heading right up into the sky. After reaching the highest point and crossing over I had to choose between venturing on or backtracking down the way I had come. At some point each traveler knows that there is no need to push on and finds that turning back point. By now the weather was getting colder and I'd seen enough of the rugged mountain roads to know that it was time to head back south. I didn't want to risk getting caught in the snow in my car without tire chains.

In the end I didn't check out the Aspen properties but drove back to Lodesville instead and stopped to talk with Hal to about getting an appraisal of the Mercantile building. We went through the old building again and I noticed architectural details that I had missed before and noted with approval the hardwood floors which were in a rough condition but could be refinished. I took measurements of the rooms and examined the foundation, plumbing, heater and the windows more carefully. I asked Hal's opinion of what repairs would be needed and how much it would take to heat the place in winter.

Dog and I drove off to the nearest motel. My head was full of details that night as I tried to get all my questions and calculations down on paper. I needed the appraisal figures before I could make my final decision so I was holding off falling in love with the project until I knew whether I could afford it or not. Hal had talked with the appraiser from a near-by town who could stop by the next day. I slept soundly despite the whirl my head was in.

We went back the next day to ask Hal if I could spend an hour or so alone in the building. I wanted to get the feel of the building and its energy with just Dog and me. Turning the key in the lock was exciting. Stepping through the front door I could almost see Big Nose Millie sitting at a gambling table looking around for a rookie to swindle. I sketched out the purposes I'd thought of for the different rooms. I opened one of the windows. A cool breeze blew through with the front door propped open. The image of Big Nose Millie filled my mind again and I figured out where I could hang her picture.

The appraiser was an older man with a quiet manner and we walked through the building for the inspection. I wrote down everything he said would need repair from replacing the windows on the north side to updating the heating system. The roof would need some patching and might require a complete roof job in a couple of years. The plumbing was solid enough although some spots in the electrical system needed rewiring. A new washer and dryer and a stove and refrigerator would be needed.

Josie came down one morning to see the building. She whistled like a man when I told her my plans. "Wow! That's a great idea. The hotels here aren't always full, but there are always people looking for a different kind of experience other than what the big resorts have to offer. We get calls for bed and breakfasts at the Chamber from people who want a family-type experience. We certainly could refer some of them to you."

We went for a hike with Dog up in the aspen grove. Josie brought a picnic lunch since our town didn't have an eating place. "You would love living here. I was born three counties over and never want to leave. The area around Aspen is like nowhere else on earth. I'm so lucky to have a job telling people how great it is to visit here. Did you think any more about my offer to set you up with one of the local guys? We are going to a big hotel party next week. You could go as our guest and meet some of the men."

I was amused at her matchmaking attempt but turned her down. "I'm still trying to sort out what happened with the last guy I dated. Gary cared a lot for me but he couldn't get around to committing." I omitted telling her the reason Gary was noncommittal.

"Men! Josh was the same way until he thought he was losing me to some rich guy from Hawaii that stayed at his hotel for a month who took a big interest in me. That's when Josh decided he had better put a ring on my

finger.” She waved a sizable diamond ring which was dazzling in the bright sun. “Maybe you should try to make him jealous.”

“Right now my commitment is to getting my business off the ground. I don’t want the distraction of any man right now. My full time energy has to go with my business. There will be major remodeling and decorating if I decide that this is what I want to do. Even now I’m knee deep in estimates and figures to see if I can swing the deal. It’s good to hear that you think I can make a go of it.”

Josie brushed the crumbs from her lap and stood up. “You can do it, Janie. Hey, I’ve got to get back to work. Let me know what you decide to do.”

I spent the rest of the day making ballpark estimates on what the repairs would cost. I added extra money for furniture, new appliances, paint and wallpaper. My mind walked mentally through each room in the Mercantile figuring out what would need to be changed. I also tried to gauge what the operating expenses would be. The big unknown was how much it would cost to heat her during the winter months. And then there was insurance. Coming to an estimated figure I added an extra ten thousand dollars to the budget for unwelcome surprises should that happen.

Satisfied, going over my figures one last time, I called Mr. Applebee and talked with him about pulling out some money from the estate. I told him my plans for opening a lodge and gift shop which would draw from the Aspen trade. I mentioned how the property would appreciate in the next few years due to the ski business interest in the area. Mr. Applebee understood the idea of land appreciation. Bed and breakfasts were a new concept for him, but he acknowledged that buying property in a booming area would be a good investment. He asked me to call back as he needed to check the figures from the books for the trust to see which stocks could be sold and what tax liability that might cause.

I sat nervously holding on to the slate rock for good luck figuring what I would do if there wasn’t enough money that could be taken out of the trust. I could always sell my diamonds or the Scottsdale store. My preference was to hang on to it. The real reason for keeping it if I would admit it was that having a business there gave me a reason to go back and see Gary.

Mr. Applebee called back with a smile in his voice. He said that it would be tight but there were enough funds in the trust to take out \$75,000. He complimented my grandfather once again of his choosing stocks in the telephone and banking area that had appreciated over the years. "We can swing it," he said.

I caught my breath. Now was the time for this decision that would change my life drastically. Questions began to surface in my mind. Would people come and actually spend their money? Did I have what it takes to run an establishment catering to travelers? Could the business keep six rooms full each night during the off season? I had always sought to reduce uncertainty and manage control in my life. Buying an old building in a small mountain town seemed a risky thing to do.

Painting has always calmed my mind so I set up my easel across from the Mercantile. My artist's eye took over. Three scenes to paint of this grand old building came into my mind. There was the old lady of the building as she was today. It struck me as funny that I saw the building as a Grande dame who needed some sprucing up. I'd paint her as she sat today washed-out gray and in need of repair as she looked with peeling paint and slightly sagging porch. Then using my imagination, I'd paint her in her youth as she must have looked brand new. The third painting was the one that excited me. I'd paint her as she would become with my loving care. I saw her exterior with dark forest green with barnyard red on the trim with slight accents of metallic gold. I'd put in a two-seated rocking chair and a swing on the porch and pots of flowers out front and to the side. The brilliant aspen grove out back blazed behind each version of the building.

I hauled out a canvas and started working on the updated version of what she could look like with some love and a lot of paint. So much depended upon Hal being able to come down on the price somewhat so I'd have the money for repairs and to get me through the first few months of operation. Soon I was caught up in mixing colors on the palate and getting the right perspective of how to angle the picture. Several people from the community came over. I introduced myself welcoming the opportunity to see what ideas others might have for sprucing up the front of the building.

As I painted and the design came forth on the canvas, the fluttering of my heart calmed down and my resolve strengthened. The financial side of the decision was set aside. Could I survive the winters with the extreme temperatures here? Did I really want to take on this much responsibility?

Refurbishing an old building was a lot of work. Was I biting off more than I could chew? I flashed on a memory of my dad talking to Bruce about making a career decision. Dad said something about going with what made your heart happy. His message had been something like follow your heart, do good work and the good Lord will smile down on you.

Resolutely, I put down my paint brush and marched down the street to the bank, took a big gulp, grabbed hold of the black rock in my pocket and made an offer of \$50,000 on the Mercantile.

Hal grinned like I was his long-lost friend. "And what would you be doing with this fifty-year-old building?" he inquired. "That's a lot of room for one woman and a dog."

"I plan to turn her into a lodge, gift shop and community center," I announced eager to see his reaction. "I figure we are near enough Aspen that some of the tourist business might over flow here. I'm going to call her 'The Painted Ladies Lodge. The different guest rooms will be fashioned after a different wild flower. The columbine room. The violet room. The skunk cabbage room." I laughed. "Well maybe not the skunk cabbage room. I'll paint a picture of each flower and a lady of the night to match the flower. There will be a community room where people can gather which will be called Big Nose Millie's. I already have her picture painted waiting for a new place to hang her."

"Why Janie Perkins, you surprise me. Ladies of the night, huh? That's clever. Those Farquart sisters would be turning over in the grave. Spinning actually." He grinned. "I think it will work. We aren't too far from the highway and with a big sign, the tourists would come. It will be good to bring some life back into this small place which was becoming a ghost town."

"Are there any ghosts in the Mercantile? There might be a market for those people who like a little light haunting. Gentle ghosts they would have to be. Maybe one that could be confined to just one of the guest rooms and not bother the others?"

"I'm sure we can dig up a tragic ghost or two for those people who want a haunting experience." He grinned catching my enthusiasm. "Ghosts are pretty easy to come by around here."

“Come over and see the picture I’m painting of how I see the Mercantile,” I offered. We walked down the street.

Hal whistled when he saw the updated version. “She will be a beauty all right. You’re a great artist. Have you considered selling your work? Pictures of Colorado sell well around here in the shops. Tourists love to take a piece of the local color home with them.”

Ignoring his question and changing the subject. I excitedly told him about the other two pictures I had planned and asked if there were any photographs of how the Mercantile had looked when first built. I also asked about photographs of the Farquant sisters who were the original dreamers of the building. I wanted pictures of the feisty sisters immortalized in paintings hanging in the hallway of the building. I wanted to incorporate some of their feistiness myself.

“We walked back to the bank and I showed Hal my figures asking his opinion of my estimates and on other hidden expenses I hadn’t counted on. He still hadn’t given me an answer on my offer to buy.

“Hal, come on now. You are keeping me in suspense,” I said. “What about my offer?”

He looked thoughtfully and scratched his head. “I wanted to hear your ideas and whether they were economically feasible or not before I gave you an answer. You are right on. A sensible business woman who’s thought things out instead of acting on a whim. You and the new lodge would be an asset to our community. So your offer is to purchase the Mercantile and the acreage for a round fifty thousand dollars. Sounds doable. We haven’t had an offer on the property in the ten years that the building has been empty. I’d have to run your proposal by the Farquant family of course.”

“Let’s do it!” I offered him my hand and we set the deal in motion.

Chapter 20

I was ready to drop the bomb on Gary about the upcoming changes in my life and how it would affect him. Tough, I told myself. I deserve more than what he can give me—a part time man. Being the other woman wasn't enough for me. I took out the black slate rock which had come to represent calmness and grounding when I was nervous. Cupping my left hand around it and taking a deep breath, I dialed Gary.

“Janie, where are you? Honey, how are you? I’ve been wondering and worrying about you.” The relief in his voice jumped through the phone.

I briefed him in with my plans, rushing out the words so that he would not interrupt. “I know my Scottsdale store can’t be a success as long as I’m there so I’m moving to Colorado and will be the absentee owner of the shop with Shirley as manager. I’ve settled on a small town near Aspen. Lodesville, it’s called. It’s an old mining town that is almost a ghost town with a few empty buildings, a post office and a bank. I’ve been talking to the banker about purchasing an old building. It has possibilities for growth as the Aspen properties are increasing in value now that celebrities are moving in. I’ve done my research and am going to open a lodge and gift shop.”

“Ghost town? What do you mean that you are not coming back to Scottsdale? What’s this about moving to Colorado?”

He either hadn’t heard my business plans or was trying to ignore them so I plowed on. “Just what I said. I’m personally done in the Phoenix area. Lisbeth has taken care of that by now from what I’ve heard so I’ve closed the shop. No one will buy from me there so I’m moving on. I’ve got to make my own way now somewhere else. I’ve done my homework and run the figures backwards and forwards and have talked to a ton of people. I’ve made an offer on a fifty-year-old store in Lodesville. Hal, the banker who holds the property, is contacting the owners.”

“Hal. Is that the sweet smelling guy you’ve been traveling with? I don’t like you taking up with strangers.”

I smiled with satisfaction noting his jealousy but I wasn’t ready to enlighten him. Let him stew for a bit longer. I’d certainly stewed enough over him. “No, Hal’s the local banker who is supporting me in this business

venture. He's becoming a good friend." There, I thought. Let Gary have two threats to worry about even though unknown to him, one of them is a dog.

He didn't follow up asking any more questions about the new men I'd put into my life. I didn't offer any more details and turned the attention back to my new adventure. "I'm thinking of calling the place The Painted Ladies with a wildflower theme I'll paint for each of the rooms. Think of Big Nose Millie with friends. I'm hiring an all-around handy-man who can help me turn the building into a showplace." Now I was aware that for the first time I did not seek Gary's approval.

"Mid-Colorado is so far away and difficult to get to. If you have to leave town, why can't you open your store in Palm Springs? Janie, what about us? I miss you so. I need to see you."

I'd been practicing in my mirror and now I let him have it. "Gary I'm trying to sort us out. I'm not sure about where we are going. I miss you too. But I have to move on. I want more than you can give me. I want more than just being a mistress of a married man. That's not who I am. It's been hard for me. Lisbeth did me a favor shocking me out of that rut I was in. The Scottsdale life was beginning to pall on me and pull me down."

He was silent not knowing what to say. "You're right, of course. Still there must be a way for us. We are so good together. I've been at wit's ends since you've been gone. Are you coming back to town soon?"

"Yes. I will be back soon to square things up at the shop and make some purchases for the lodge. Oh, Gary. I need a truck. A big, heavy one that I can haul things in and one that can handle the ice and snow of the winters here. I'll trade my car in. Will you start looking for a good deal on a truck for me?"

He agreed and then paused. "I love you. Honey, I don't want to let you go."

There was sincerity in his voice which pulled at me. He did love me and I was throwing him a curve just as Lisbeth had thrown me one. Just as I had thrown one to her. I wound up the conversation. "I know. I love you too. We'll talk when I get back."

On my way driving back to the Phoenix area, my mind bounced around to thinking of him jumbled in with the excitement of moving to Colorado. I tuned into a radio station that played one “somebody done somebody wrong song” right after another. Started to feel sad then caught what I was creating in my mind and decided to get out of the self-imposed miseries. The time with Gary was a mixed bag of happiness, joy and disappointments and regrets.

The brooding was getting to me. Thinking of that I had to laugh out loud. Brooding like an old mother hen setting on a dud egg waiting for it to hatch. That’s me. I’m becoming an old broody hen. Enough! Enough already! This thing with Gary was never going to hatch. It is never going to be anything more than it was now—an affair with a married man. That thought sobered me up and gave me one more nudge towards my decision to leave Scottsdale.

There was a small pull out ahead, so I stopped the car. It was time to give Dog a break from the confines of the car. He went bounding off ahead of me as I walked over to a small grove of pine trees that were reaching towards the sky. Dry, brown, pine needles crunched under my feet, but I was oblivious of the beauty of the scene focusing on my thoughts.

I need a new love I told myself. Something else that will get me out of my brooding and pining and help me move forward. I looked up and took in the deep, pungent smell of pine. A substitute love, but it’s not going to be any man. I need something else to wrap my mind around. Something solid.

The picture of the mercantile building flashed in my mind. The sharp wind blew across my face. I looked up at the nearest peak with the deep blue of the sky dotted with clouds framing the scene. I could fall love with Colorado. The pine trees. The mountain peaks. The rustling fast moving streams. The wildflowers. A new project like refurbishing a building and running a guest lodge. I could fall in love with this I told myself. It would be a heck of a lot better than going back to the desert and pining away. Pines instead of pining.

Again I noted the drastic change of scenery as Dog and I left the Rockies and drove south into the Sonoran desert. The desert looked dry and parched after leaving the luscious greenery of the pine forests and mountain greenery. Heading west I went back to the Hopi Indian Reservation again driving up from the desert floor to the flat mesas. I wanted to spend time

with John, the silversmith I'd enjoyed talking to on my trip north. After talking with him about sales contacts for merchandise from the other Native American tribes, I showed him the rock from the Slate River. "For some reason holding this rock is calming to me. I've been placing it on my forehead to cool off and holding it before I go to sleep. Do the markings on it have any significance?"

John took the rock and turned it over in his hand. He pointed to the deeper groove at the bottom. "Rocks are special things. Look how the natural cracking splits off here. This wide line represents the soul or the heart that we Hopis call The Path of Life. We all start out on the same heart road and go down it for a while. There is a split in the road that shows the two ways we can go in life."

John indicated the fork that went in two directions. "This is the place where we decide which way we will go. These are the two roads you can choose to take. You can see by its jaggedness in this line that there will be trials and tribulations. You might choose the detour one that is rough and rugged which takes you away from your true self. Or you can choose the continuation of the Path of Life. It is the way Masu, our Creator wants you to go. If you deviate from the Path of Life and go down the rough road, your spirit tries to call you back. This horizontal line represents cutting across to get back on your Path where you are supposed to be." He turned the rock over in his hand feeling its weight and smoothness.

I caught my breath and sat still as stone myself. It was as if John's description of the lines on the rock had outlined my own life. I was at a fork in the road. "How do you know this rock says all that?"

"It's an old Hopi legend. There is an ancient petroglyph up in the hills that tells the same story. We call it the Prophecy Drawing. It tells of the times to come where people must decide which path to take. It also tells the story for each of us as we journey on this earth. Your rock tells the same thing. This is a special rock. I've never seen anything like it before with its smoothness and strength. Where did you find it? It doesn't look like it's from around here. This is not a desert rock. This is a river rock washed smooth from running water."

"I've been traveling up through the mountains and valleys in Colorado. I was feeling kind of blue one day and stopped by this stream running over dark, shiny stone bedrock. I felt called to sit there for a moment

and reflect on where I was going with my life. I put my hand down and felt this satin-finished rock all smooth and hard. It appeared to call to me. I knew it had some special meaning for me and I've been carrying it around ever since."

John looked at me gravely. "You were meant to find this rock. It has some power for you. Ask permission from the earth to take it with you. Treat it with reverence."

We worked out a deal to add John's line and fellow artists on consignment to my Scottsdale store and the one that I was planning in Lodesville. I talked with him about my setting up a scholarship to train some promising young person from the mesas in silversmithing in exchange for having an exclusive deal for displaying his wares. I chose some of his stock to take with me back to Arizona and left a deposit. We shook hands and I gave him my contact information and promised to keep in touch. John's last words to me were prophetic as well as a blessing. "Daughter, may you find peace in your heart. May you choose the right path for you."

Chapter 21

The desert heat started to hit a few hours out of Scottsdale. The further south I went, the hotter and dryer the terrain became. In some spots the land looked almost barren and devoid of life. The brown and tans of the desert were almost a shock to my eye which had been accustomed to dense green with fall colors mixed in. I drove down the main street with trepidation remembering that crazy look in Lisbeth's eyes as she shouted at me. I felt like I was slinking into town.

I contacted Gary the minute I got to the apartment. I had planned to be distant but rushed into his arms the moment he came up the stairs. I caught myself and disengaged from him sitting in a chair across the room. He broke into the awkwardness between us by inviting me to go downstairs and see the truck he had picked out for me.

It certainly wasn't a looker. Gary leaned up against the old gray truck and I had the thought that he must have come from a long line of men that leaned up against trucks. Men with tanned skin from working on their vehicles in the desert sun. Men who were comfortable in the company of other men and not quite sure what to do about the woman they brought into their lives except to escape to the garage or under the mesquite tree while they did their men talk. There seemed to be something strong and reliable in men who are comfortable leaning against their vehicles.

"This '75 Ford F250 will do well hauling loads on mountain roads. It had the cleanest motor on the lot and should give you decent gas mileage. The truck doesn't look so good on the outside, but it was well maintained motor wise by the former owner. You could always have it repainted. What do you think?"

I looked at its dull gray color somewhat bleached out by the sun. I had to turn off my artist's need for color. "Gary, its fine as long as the motor is strong and reliable. People aren't much into looks where I'm going to live. I haven't thought for a minute about fashion since I've been away." We settled for a price on my car as a trade in and completed the deal. "Thank you for finding me a dependable truck. Maybe you can recommend someone who can paint it a fire-engine red."

As we walked back up the stairs he looked hard at me and said, "You look different, Janie. Stronger. The mountain air must have agreed with you."

Nodding, I said. "Gary, it's been an experience and I've fallen in love with those mountains. Rugged peaks, blue skies and fresh air. Quiet, such quiet, you wouldn't believe. No sound most of the time except for a few birds chirping and water running if there's a stream nearby. The property I bought has ten acres with a small stream on it that runs around an aspen grove. There is so much water there that everything is green. You should try it," I said with a touch of irony.

He smiled but there was pain in his eyes. I plunged on being abrupt. "You know I have to do this. I can't stay here any longer. We can't go on the way we were with Lisbeth's knowing. My staying would only prolong the pain for all concerned. How are things at your house?"

"Lisbeth was furious for awhile. She let me have it and then didn't speak to me for two weeks. She gave me an ultimatum that it was either you or her. She threatened divorce and said she would ruin my name in town. Even threatened to keep me from my daughter. I saw a vindictive side in her that I've never been seen before. I tried to play it all down to calm her and told her you had left town and I didn't know where which was true at the time."

I bristled, ready to be touchy and distant. He played down his feelings for me? Coldness came over me and some part of me wanted him to hurt as I'd been hurting. I knew his logic for staying in his marriage was correct and all. But I wanted him to stand up to her, tell her he loved me and choose me. Which he hadn't obviously. "What do you plan to do?"

Gary shrugged his shoulders. "I can't leave her. Our finances are all tied up together and I'd lose the Cadillac dealership. My daughter would fall apart. She's not a secure kid and divorce would ruin her life. I want you, Janie. I want to be with you, but I can't destroy these two people who mean a lot to me."

"Oh, Gary. This is so messy. I had to leave town with my tail between my legs. You've still got everything going here."

What could he say? "Tell me about buying this old building and let me hear your plans. I hate to think of you being so far away."

Ignoring his last comment, I went over the details of my plans for the new business. We discussed some plumbing problems which he knew about having worked for his dad when he was a teenager. He pointed out some business details I'd missed. I kept the communication impersonal until the last minute when he was leaving.

I watched as my body ached to be close to him. My head was going along with the business talk, but my body betrayed me and I found myself reaching out for him. We embraced and his old familiar smell and feeling of being safe took me over. We clung to each other crying about the hopelessness of our situation and despite my good intentions to stay away ended up in bed. Longing overrode my newly-found, well-intentioned morality. Bodies sought each other out not for lust but for comfort.

Shirley was glad to see me and both excited at the chance to manage the new shop and disappointed that I wasn't returning. The painting of the inside walls had been completed. We rearranged the display cases and the newly-upholstered chairs differently to give the illusion of a different store. I set out John's Hopi jewelry on a deep blue velvet display next to pottery from native artists. We fretted for a while on how to price the Hopi silver and pots to get the best commission for John plus some profit for the shop. Satisfied with the changes, I went out the front door and came back in to get the perspective of the customer. With the new color scheme and different Southwestern theme, the store looked like a brand new place.

I circled the estate sales in the newspaper in the ritzier parts of town and hit them early in the morning. I looked for mahogany and solid oak furniture for the bedrooms. The dining room table and chairs would have to wait until I had more room in the truck. I made snap decisions, bidding on drapes and bedspreads and sheets and pillowcases. I bought two sets for twelve of fine Haviland china with gold-rimmed edges and embroidered linens for the table and big pots to cook in. There was a brass cuspidor that I outbid some cross-looking man who looked as if he might be a dealer and three tall old Victorian fern stands for which I had definite plans.

The next few days I went on shopping sprees at different department stores to round out what I couldn't find at the sales. I purchased heavy comforters, bedspreads and matching drapes along with towels. The interior of the cab of the truck was piled high with furnishings. I found a paint and wallpaper store where the prices were reasonable and loaded up. I'd decided

to furnish one guest room at a time and put the rest of the furniture that I couldn't haul back in the storage room in the back of the shop

Gary came by every day spending as much time as he could during the week I was in town. We talked of the changes the move would bring for us but avoided the subject of his marriage. This was a poignant time for us knowing of the long separation ahead both in time and distance. "Bittersweet love," I said out loud to myself with a cynical tone. "Stolen love is always bittersweet."

It had been some time since I had talked to Marion so with a lot to tell her about the big changes I was planning; I set up another phone appointment. When I told her the details of my plans she said, "Janie that's great news. Colorado will be good for you. Mountain people are a different sort—hale and resilient. I like your business reasoning. Your voice sounds stronger."

We went back to talking about my past and how her comment that I was afraid of being hurt by love had hit me. If anything, Marion was a realist, just what I needed to offset my wild fantasies of hoping it would somehow work out with Gary.

I could almost feel her smiling indulgently. "Ah the fantasy of every young girl of happy ever after. As you grow older, I hope that you will have less of a need for romantic fantasy in your thinking. Perceptions are skewed when people fall in love. Did you ever notice how much time you spend in filtering reality to make up the fantasy you want?"

I knew what she was saying was true but didn't want to admit it. Fantasy living is easier than the real world. Sometimes I hated this therapy process of looking hard at myself. When what she was saying was too harsh, I simply blocked it. Then back I would drag myself into tuning in to what she was saying.

"Janie, you are bound up. Stuck. There are levers that are tucked away in people's heart that can be moved if you open up to love and choose a stable partner. Think of those levers inside your head that are stuck. You need to grease them up and give them a tug to get them moving. What did you know of levers?"

I took the conversation away from myself. “Well my dad was a mover of levers. He could say the right thing and move people until depression took him over. Then an insight hit me. “Depression! Much of my life has been spent in depression. I’ve been worrying about the wrong thing. I don’t have my mother’s schizophrenia heredity. I’ve been worrying about the wrong mental illness all these years. “

“We don’t know yet how much is inheritance of traits and what causes depression. But your low moods are always about men and the ones you’ve chosen. That’s for sure. There’s misery in a woman’s life when she chooses the wrong type of man.”

This was my opening to tell her of the time I was spending with Gary again and the conflict it caused in me. “We are seeing each other again. I’m caught up in right and wrong. I know what is right to do but can’t make myself let him go.” I shrugged my shoulders helplessly.

“Janie, look at your pattern of picking unavailable men and hope that they will be there for you.”

She was right, of course. I changed the subject and went back to talking about my plans for the lodge. I hung up the phone feeling unsettled. Unresolved. The conflict was too much and so I turned my mind back to my new project. I had one more stop before leaving town and swung by the Penney’s store to buy some heavier jeans, flannel shirts and sweatshirts. Wrangler Jeans were required for heavy work. Tough clothes for my new tough life. Yet lingering back in the recess of my mind I wondered if I were naming the lodge for myself. Mistress of a married man. Wasn’t I the original Painted Lady?

Chapter 22

Back in Colorado, I threw myself into the hard work to help clear my head. Hal was a wonderful resource for my finding hard-working, honest people for help. Living in the area all his life, he knew everyone and their finances in the community. Of course, he couldn't share any financial details about anyone but could warn me about their personal quirks that might throw a monkey wrench into my plans.

"Guy Benson is the best handyman around. He can do anything. Good work. Reasonable wages. There is one thing though. How do you feel about having an alcoholic work for you? Could you handle a fairly reliable worker? Not reliable, but fairly reliable? "

"Guy Benson. Is that the man with a limp I've seen walking around town?"

"Yes, he fell off a roof a few years ago. Alcohol has been his downfall ever since then. He has a nice wife and two kids. Marylou, that's his wife's name. She used to be a Potter until she got married. Those Potters are hard-working people and Marylou is just like them. Her life's been difficult but she raises those kids the best she can dealing with Guy's drinking and his lack of a stable job. The trouble with this community is that there are so few jobs for people who want to live here."

"Do they have a little blonde-haired girl who looks like she needs some new clothes I see playing down at the east end of Main Street?"

"That's Marie. The son's name is Johnnie. Guy is a hard worker and can do any carpentry job and can keep on working steady even when he's been imbibing. He drinks a small amount pretty much all day to keep a buzz on. Hiring him would mean that you would need to monitor that amount that he has taken in on any given day and keep him away from high places when he's taking in more than just a little. And know that there might be days when he might not show up. Could you handle that kind of handyman? He has the skills you need for your project but can you deal with the baggage of alcohol and all?"

"I looked away at the sun pouring in the window. "My dad had a similar situation in his parish when he hired a man with a drinking problem

to be the janitor. The wife came to him for help and dad arranged that the checks be given to her to cash. He talked with the man about how that was best for him and the family and the man was so desperate for work that he agreed. The arrangement worked for everyone concerned. You would have liked my dad. He was good at motivating people. ”

Hal smiled then looked serious. “There is another thing you need to know if you are going to survive around here. You need to be hard because that’s what is expected of people who make it in business around here. Only the tough survive the rigors of this climate and these mountains. If you hire Guy, you’ll have to stand up and be tough with him. Best think it over before you decide on him for sure.”

I thought long and hard about how to best approach Guy Benson so that his pride wouldn’t be hurt. I went by their house although it was more like a shack. Marylou tried to keep things neat inside. Guy had that definite smell of alcohol about him. Marylou had that dull look that I had known so well in my own life. I introduced myself and inquired if this was a good time to talk with the both of them. They nodded and I started into my prepared offer.

“Mr. Benson, I’m looking for a carpenter who can make repairs on the Mercantile building. I’m planning to open a lodge—sort of a bed and breakfast but I can’t do it all by myself. Hal at the bank told me that you are the best there is at building or fixing anything that needs it.” I paused and smiled letting my compliment soak in. “And I’m also looking for someone to help me do cleaning and laundry once I get the lodge up and running. Doing everything myself is too much for my shoulders. Marylou, would you be interested in helping me out?”

There was a flash of excitement in her eyes and then she looked to Guy for assent. He thought for a while as if he were pondering a deep philosophical question and then nodded.

I continued on with my proposal. “What you need to know about me is that I’m a straight shooter. That’s a trait I learned from my dad who was a pastor back in the Midwest. Some people can’t handle my direct talk.” I smiled and looked at Guy. Somewhere, probably in France, I’d learned to smile at a man before I lowered the boom on him. “I would like you to work for me—you’ve got a good reputation as a fine craftsman. I need someone who can be reliable.” With this I paused again.

Guy signaled with his eyes that he understood and waited for me to continue.

“Here’s the deal. I level with people. Some people can’t handle that trait in me but others appreciate it. Are you interested in hearing my conditions?”

He nodded. Marylou seemed to be holding her breath.

“So here it is. I know you have a drinking problem but I can’t let that get in the way of my getting my business ready by next spring. I’ll pay you the going rate for around here. My dad was one of the finest men I ever knew and here’s a deal that I learned from him. Half of the money you make I’ll send directly to the grocery store in the next town for your account. A fourth goes to you and a fourth goes to Marylou. I’ll treat you good as I treat all my employees. But I’m a tough lady and any hitch up though and I’ll get someone else.”

A little girl with freckles and stringy blonde hair about eight years old peeked around the doorway. I smiled at her and she ducked her head back. “You have a cute daughter there,” I remarked to Marylou buying Guy some time to think over my offer. “Hal said what this town needed was more opportunities for employment. My establishment just might be the first of a turnaround for this community. I’m staking my life here not going for mining silver or gold but on setting up a travel hotel business I can earn a living at. But I can’t go it alone. I need some hard-working, decent people to help me.”

Guy seemed to be thinking pretty hard. Good, I thought, he’s not an impulsive man. But he has to work through his pride with the challenge I just gave him. “How about it? Do we wave and say ‘Hi neighbor,’ or will you call me Boss Lady? Or just Janie? That will do.”

He responded to my question with a half smile and said, “Fair enough. Boss Lady, we got a deal. When do I start?”

I offered my hand to Guy and then to Marylou. “Good. One more thing. I’ve spoken with Coach Jackson about getting some of the football and basketball team members in to help with the painting. That will make the work go faster. I want the outside painted before winter sets in. Would the

two of you walk over with me and look the place over and help me come up with a priority list of what needs to be done first?”

I watched Guy’s approach to inspecting the old building. He had an eye for the fine craftsmanship in the architectural details of the molding. I showed them my proposed list and the expenses I’d outlined and the rough outline on how the walls needed to be changed to frame out the bedrooms. “Where do we start on her?”

Guy scratched his head. “There is some repair that needs to be done on the outside then I recommend that we put insulation in the attic before it gets much colder and then start to work on the windows. That will cut your heating expenses down some. The inside wall work and plumbing and inside painting can wait until last.” He seemed to be doing some figuring in his head. “If we don’t run into any unknown problems and we all pitch in, I would say that she will be ready for opening come spring.”

I handed Guy a sheet of paper. “I’m going to the Phoenix area next week to bring up some more furniture. Make up a list of supplies that you will need that can’t be bought locally. While Guy walked around the different rooms making the list, Marylou and I took measure of each other. “There is a ton of dust here that needs cleaning out. There is going to be a lot of work to get this place up and running.”

She looked around to make sure that Guy was gone and grabbed my hand and said with a half sob, “Thank you.”

I nodded and changed the subject to a lighter matter. “I’ve got this painting of Big Nose Millie, a woman who went to the Wild West to make her fortune through gambling. She’s a red headed, big hearted, racy woman whose picture hung over the counter at my last business. Brought me luck at least down in Phoenix. Now she will hang right there on the wall. I’ll match that shade of green with gold and russet in her dress to make some curtains. This will be the color scheme for this room which will be the community room.”

“Why a community room?” I noted that Marylou was a woman of few words and direct herself which I liked. I decided that the Lodesville people should know a few things about me so I filled her in on some details.

“My folks are all dead and there is no permanent man in my life. I’ve got friends of course, but they live far away. I’m drawn like a fly to honey to these mountains. It’s just Dog and me. I’ve run businesses before by myself and it can get lonely. I figure a community room where people could drop by and chat, hang out or have a place to have meetings would give me some company.”

Marylou picked up on the phrase I’d tried to slip past her. “No man? That surprises me. I’d think you would have men falling all over you.”

“It’s more like I’ve had bad luck in choosing men. Anyway I’ve decided to get along without any man for a while. What do you think about the community center idea? You know the people around here. If we fix it up cozy and make people feel welcome, would they come by and sit for a while?”

“I reckon they would. I’ve always been real shy like and never talk much. Now you’ve gone and made me feel plain welcome. I’d come by myself for a bit some mornings when I got lonesome if I didn’t work here.”

I showed Marylou pictures of the couple of two-seater old-fashioned wooden rockers that I’d ordered from a catalog from Tennessee. One for the community room and one for the front porch. “And I can use these shelves for books so we can make a small library where people can donate books. The children would like a place to come and read, wouldn’t they? I’ll be buying used furniture to fill up the room with tables and chairs. Do you know anywhere I can shop for good bargains on wooden tables and chairs?”

“There is a second-hand furniture store over about thirty miles from here. Some of their wood furniture is pretty beat up but if you can paint, you could make it look good. If you like, I’ll show you how to get there.”

“Sure, can we can go day after tomorrow? We can take the kids and make an afternoon of it. I’ll need to stop by the paint store there and get an order in for the paint for the outside of the building. I’m looking for someone who can draw and copy designs I’ve made. Do you draw or know anyone who can copy a design?”

“No, I can’t but you might talk to the art teacher. She has taught most of the students in this valley for the past twenty years. Why do you need someone who can draw if you’re an artist?”

"I've been painting designs on leather bags and belts for a number of years and selling them at several stores. Now that I'm going to be busy running this place, I need someone to take over the wild flower reproductions on the leather goods. That's a good idea. I'll talk to her."

I pulled out a few of my sketches. "The Painted Ladies" is the name I'm going to call the lodge. Each room will have a wild flower motif with a fancy lady with a dress in color of the flower. I'm trying to capture the personality of each flower to give to the different ladies." I pulled out some of my preliminary drawings." Here is Miss Bluebell who is kind of sweet and retiring and Black-eyed Susan who is feisty and mischievous. And here is Miss Iris. She is tall and proud just like the Rocky Mountain Iris."

Marylou actually clapped her hands. "Oh I can see you aren't going to be stuffy to work for. How about doing a Miss Lilly room? There are some beautiful Mariposa Lilies around here. I noticed them blooming the other day when I was out walking. I'll show you where they are."

"Miss Lilly it is." We got out my wildflower book which gave a picture of the lily. "Would you allow me to use your face on Miss Lilly? You have a beautiful face with strong, intelligent eyes. Do you have a picture of yourself that I could use as a guide?"

Marylou blushed. "Me? Me as a model? Oh, I couldn't. I'd love to I mean. I'd have to ask Guy of course." Then she looked worried. "It gets pretty slow around here in the summertime. Are you sure you can support the place in the off season for skiing?"

"I've been talking to a new friend from the Chamber of Commerce over in Aspen. We could pull several small towns together and organize some festivals and fairs to draw in summer visitors. How do you think a wild flower festival would go over?"

Guy had wandered back in. Hearing what we had just said, he replied, "If you make it fun, dang-fool people will spend their money on anything. Boss Lady, I can see you have some solid ideas. You're not just some air head coming in here from a big city with a fool-hardy dream. Still, any new business is a risk."

"I've tried to think of everything I can. It's going to take more than just me to get this place up and running. Making this place earn her living is

going to take a community effort. I'd welcome your input on any ideas you might have." The couple looked at each other in a thoughtful way.

The work went along well with few surprises. The old store had been well built and took the renovations well. True to Hal's recommendation, Guy was a hard worker who could do the carpentry even though he drank some off and on through the day. Marylou and I worked along beside him doing what we could. Even though I was officially the Boss Lady, when working with Guy, I turned the role of Carpenter Boss over to him. He knew what he was doing and I became the apprentice.

I relished the relief of hard work after the headiness of what I'd been through. My muscles were sore from wielding a hammer and calluses formed on my hands. Marylou and I vacuumed and swept the dirt out whenever we couldn't handle the bigger jobs. I slept hard at night and thankfully there were no more bad dreams. Dog settled in comfortably at the foot of my bed.

There were no big surprises in the structure of the place and no setbacks. I drove to Aspen and dropped by the Chamber of Commerce to find out the dates and themes of scheduled festivals. Josie and Josh and I met for lunch and she told me excitedly of the plans they had for a Christmas wedding.

I was thrilled for Josie. I liked Josh, who was a local boy who had gone away to college like many others in the area to get a degree in the tourist trade and hotel management. He was personable with a good head for business. His training had paid off and he was now at one of the more popular hotels in Aspen. He reassured me that I could always pick his brain for ideas. And I liked him even more for his clear devotion to Josie.

"I want you two to hear an idea I got from my dad who was a minister in a small Southern Indiana town. He preached a sermon about sharing resources to make a bigger pie. He said that people could do one of two things when it seemed that there wasn't enough to go around. They could fight over the pieces of the pie or they could make the pie bigger. I'm proposing that we join resources with other small towns nearby to spread the word that the Aspen area is a great place to come visit in the summertime as well as during snow season. Kind of 'You all come and we all will benefit.'"

“That’s a great idea,” responded Josh. “I know the other hotel managers will get behind it. We can expand our resources and create a terrific summer agenda for the area.”

Josie agreed to bring my idea up with the other members of the Chamber and showed me the schedule of Aspen’s festivals that had already been set. There were several weekends that were open during the summer so I booked them for various festivals we would set up.

As I drove back to the Lodesville area through the winding mountain roads, I realized how happy I was. I’d gone through a whole day without thinking of Gary even once. And the idea of Brad had faded in the background.

I had a phone installed and gave Cassie, my old friend from home, a call telling her of the abrupt changes in my life. She responded to the enthusiasm in my voice. “Oh, a small hotel in a resort area. Janie, you amaze me. When you put your mind to something, things happen. Remember when you were editor of the yearbook and organized the fund raising drive?” We reminisced for a bit about high school days and I asked her about her children.”

“They are growing like weeds. Todd started first grade this year and thank goodness he had Mrs. Swingly as a teacher, not that mean Mrs. Gardian who was my first grade teacher. She should have retired years ago. Nothing much happening around here except we are planning the class reunion. Can you come? We’ve located most everyone and the old gang will be there. Brad said he was coming.”

That was all I needed—to see Brad with a new wife was more than I was up to. “I’m going to have to beg off this year. Too much happening here for me to get away. Maybe the next one. I’d sure love to see you though. You and your husband have a standing invitation to come visit the neatest small establishment in the Rocky Mountains. Just let me know when you can come.”

A few weeks later I got a call from Brad. In his slightly mocking voice, he asked, “Janie what’s this I hear about you becoming a mountain woman? You are running a hotel?”

Immediately I went on alert. I could tell from his energy and the mild slur in his voice that he had been drinking. Pulling up a chair I sat down to recover my composure with my news for him. “Well not a hotel exactly. It’s a lodge. I’ve purchased a big building and am refurbishing it. We are about done and planning a spring opening for”

He cut me off, “Colorado? We played Denver last year. That place really rocked. Love that Colorado scene. What town are you in?”

“Lodesville is near Aspen....”

Impulsively, he interrupted again, “John and Cassie called to tell me about the reunion. You going?”

“No, I’m not able to leave the construction that we are doing here. Maybe I’ll make it to the next one. Brad? Are you okay?”

“Never been better. We’ve had another hit album. Selling like hot potatoes. Wife and new kid are fine, fine. Love being a dad. Everything’s great. I’m going to try to go the reunion. I want everybody to meet Kris.”

“Well say hello to everyone for me and that I’ll try to make it next time.” I needed to get away. My heart felt heavy and the conversation was unsatisfying so I begged off. “Brad. I’ve got to go. Here comes my contractor with some big question for me to solve. Talk with you later.”

“Yeah. Let’s keep in touch. See ya.”

I felt unsettled thinking that what the fan magazines had reported about Brad was true. The band partied hard with all vices available in plentiful supply. Sex, drugs and rock and roll. His call shook me. I felt disappointed and didn’t want to know about his drinking. The town gossip back then was that his father had died an alcoholic. I was concerned for Brad and felt helpless. This man whom I had just talked to was not the sweet boy I had known. I noted with regret that those lingering feelings for him were still there.

Chapter 23

The high school boys that Coach Jackson sent over did a fine job with the painting inside and out. It was fun having the teen age boy energy about the place and I gave them plenty of compliments joking with them that I could hire them out as a team of professional painters. I made a big batch of cookies, sandwiches and pitchers and pitchers of lemonade.

As the painting project ended, I invited their parents and girlfriends over for a pot luck supper. The Good Luck Pot Luck I called it. We spread the word for anyone and everyone to come. Pot lucks were a good draw for bringing people together. I'd learned from my dad that having good people close to you was too important to be left to chance. And that food was always a draw. I paid careful attention to details to make everything homey and inviting.

Forty people turned out with fried chicken, casserole dishes, Jell-O salads, potato chips, brownies and pies galore. I shook hands with everyone who came through the door welcoming them to the new community room and my establishment. Josie and Josh came down from Aspen to share in the festivities, holding hands and being happy in love. Standing back to take it all in, I felt a sense of satisfaction to see the people talking and laughing, children darting around.

I smiled at Marie who had just taken her third brownie. The get together so reminded me of my dad's weekly suppers in the basement of all the churches where the congregation pitched in wherever he pastored. He must have been devastated when his last church had to stop hosting the dinners due to my mother's deteriorating behavior.

Hal appeared almost as giddy as I felt. He introduced me as the woman who was bringing new life and jobs to the community. "This here Janie is a fire cracker to get this big project moving. You've got to hear what she's thinking about in bringing excitement to this community."

"No, no, wait," I protested. "This is not just about me. I'd like to point out all the people who've been helping with this endeavor." I had Guy and Marylou stand and take a bow and then introduced all the boys from the football team who had worked long and hard painting the place. The townspeople clapped after each introduction.

“I’ve got The Painted Ladies started and all but anything we do from now on will be a group effort. For this lodge to make it and keep things going, we can organize some festivals to bring people to town. Your food is so good that it would be a shame to not share it with the world and you could make a profit with some of your crafts and wares. Get your thinking caps on and let’s have a meeting next week to throw some ideas around. Think of the type of town get-togethers and festivals that you might like to attend.”

We set a date and time and I asked if there were any questions. One of the women, I didn’t catch her name, asked about the community center she had been hearing about.

“I’d be honored if our place here could become your home away from home. This big room is ready for you to come by anytime during the day if you’re looking for some company or just want to hang out. The coffee pot will be on and there are records here you can put on my old record player. Bring your own music if you like. You might get a group going of your friends and make it a regular date. How about a mom’s group and bring the kids? And an old timer’s morning coffee time? My only request is that you smile at the guests and make them feel welcome so they will come back.”

The townspeople murmured assent. “We’ll have low-cost soft drinks, sandwiches, cookies and muffins from our kitchen. Coffee and hot chocolate. Bring checkers, chess, jigsaw puzzles, books, board games and anything you think people might like to share. This room will be open for whatever meetings you can think of. I’ve heard a lot about many of you from Hal, your friendly banker here. You are good people. I’d love to share this big space with you. You all come, you hear?” I put on my best Southern drawl and flashed a big smile. Well I was from southern Indiana and could pull up a drawl when I wanted to include everyone.

Mr. Keith Pfeiffer, a sprightly elderly man with a red bow tie who looked like he might be in his nineties, spoke up. I had heard that he was an old prospector. He pointed to the painting of Millie hanging on the wall. “Now who might this fine lady be? Is she anybody we might know?”

“Well maybe she is. This here is Big Nose Millie. She’s an image that hung around my mind long enough giving me a message for me to paint her. She’s been knocking around the west looking for a permanent place to hang

out. I'm hoping she will have a long-lasting stay here in Lodesville. There are more of the Painted Ladies pictures in the various rooms."

Of course everyone wanted a tour of the place and nodded and clucked over the decorations that were being finalized and admired the paintings of the wildflowers and the accompanying fancy ladies. We ended the evening by arranging to have community pot lucks on a monthly basis.

Before she left, Josie whispered in my ear as she gave me a hug. "I'm so proud of what you've done here. You've reached out and grabbed something real here. You've almost got the brass ring. Now all you need for true happiness is a man to share it with."

I gave her a weak grin as I waved goodbye from the doorway of the lodge. I remembered what she had said about grabbing for happiness. To me the brass ring of happiness had been Gary but that ring had become tarnished on me. My life had been a merry-go-round of dizziness and disappointment where men were concerned. Sometimes, I mused, you have to grab the potentiality of happiness rather than stay on the carrousel too long. If an attractive man came along offering stability, I needed to grab that brass ring and turn it into a gold one holding on for dear life rather than continuing this spinning around. Otherwise I was going to end up an elderly spinster like the Farquant sisters.

Waking early the next morning, I had one more important detail of the lodge to work out. The type of woman I was looking for as a cook hadn't appeared at the Good Luck Pot Luck. They were good cooks and all but I had in mind a woman with an outgoing personality who would bring warmth to our place. I talked over this next hiring project with the Bensons, but they didn't know anyone so I went over to the bank to see Hal.

I brought him up to date on latest progress made, discussed a few technical details and then said, "I'm looking for a part-time cook. Someone cheerful who is full of good will who can spend a couple of hours a day baking cookies and muffins and making a loaf of bread, meat loaf or a pot roast now and then. Is there anyone you can recommend?"

"Who comes to mind right off the top of my head is Mrs. Figgy. Elmira Figgy is known for her cooking from scratch. No mixes or frozen food for her. She's won all kinds of cooking contests with her creative edge. She puts all kinds of concoctions together to make a different kind of dish

get an edge on the other contestants. She is a phenomenal cook known all over the county.”

“And her personality? I’m looking to hire someone who’s fun to be around and is good with children and all kinds of folks. When I was a kid there was this lady—I can’t remember her name—but she was kind to everyone. I was a kind of forlorn child and she made me feel welcome at her house whenever I dropped by. She let me claim one of the many kittens at her house for my own. I’ve never forgotten how good I felt at her house. What’s Mrs. Figgy like? Elmira Figgy. I like her name.

“Elmira is friendly and outgoing. She has several grandchildren and is well-liked by everyone. She lives about twenty minutes east of here. Here’s her phone number.”

I called and asked Mrs. Figgy if I could come visit her. I liked her on sight. She was a buxomly woman in her early fifties with a deep laugh which she brought out often. I told her of my plans for the business and outlined what I needed in a cook. She indicated interest.

I plunged in. “Your day would start around 6:30, is that too early? We’ll settle on a rotating menu for simple breakfasts for the guests. Breakfast will be buffet style set out around eight o’clock. Also we’ll need a daily batch of cookies, muffins or yeast bread that we’ll have available for the local folks and the guests in the community room.”

Mrs. Figgy smiled and said, “I can handle that easily with one hand tied behind my back.”

“The only drawback is that the kitchen is on the second floor. How do you feel about that? I’ll be the hostess and do the running up and down the stairs with the food. That will save wear and tear on your knees. I’m thinking about having Guy put in a dumb waiter. All you need to do is the cooking and cleaning up. Is this something you would be interested in doing?”

Mrs. Figgy nodded her approval. “Call me Elmira? I’ve got some great recipes that have won prizes at various fairs. What this community room about?”

“Every small town needs a place where people can come and hang out. We can cost out the price of the ingredients and your labor and keep the prices on coffee, tea and your baked goods inexpensive. We can sell prepared sandwiches with homemade bread and roast beef. Not a restaurant, that'd be too much work, but just sandwiches prepared ahead of time. I'm hoping if we make it pleasant enough that folks will drop by.”

Elmira said, “That's a good idea. People need a place to go and get a cup of coffee. I can see the people dropping by early mornings for a chance to catch up on the latest gossip. This place thrives on the local gossip.”

I continued on, telling her of my plans to welcome children into the place. “You and I can take turns with a story time for the children, if that's all right with you. I've got this great big rocker that will hold at least one adult and two children. You would be finished around two o'clock. We could serve something easy on Sunday made the day before like chilies and cheese casserole and banana bread and whipped cream so you could go to church. What do you think? Could you help me make the old Mercantile into a homey place where people want to come? Can you handle the work?”

“Oh yes, my health is good. I'm in need of something to do since my last daughter moved off to Denver. I'd love to come work for you Janie. This will be a good change for me.”

Elmira and I settled on a good hourly wage and made plans for her to start as soon as the community room and kitchen were finished.

“I'll be dropping by with some of my favorite recipes for you to taste,” she offered as she walked me out to my car. I was pleased with Elmira's warmth and energy. She would be a welcome addition to the small group of people I was gathering around me. “One thing I insist on Elmira; you can't stay tucked away working in the kitchen all the time. I'm going to put in a big wood stove in the community room and part of your job will be to come out and put your feet up for a while. We'll make this place welcome for everyone.”

Chapter 24

One day Dog and I hiked up in the Aspen grove behind our place. I sat on a rock to take in the colors of the hillsides which were ablaze with ruddy colors of yellow, gold and brown. Dog was particularly feeling frisky chasing some small animal that quickly dashed into its hole. Dog sniffed excitedly at the hole, his golden fur glistening in the sun light. I saw the beauty in the scene with the riot of the gold spectrum in the dog's coat and nature laid out before me. Yellow upon gold upon goldish brown to brown. He rolled around in the aspen leaves and looked up at me with knowing eyes.

"Dog!" I said. "I'm still waiting for you to tell me your name." A flash of an idea came to me. "Gold. Are you telling me your name is Gold?" He waited patiently his tongue lolling out. "Goldie. Is your name Goldie?" He came over to me and put his head in my lap and looked up at me with his big eyes. "That's it, isn't it? Your name is Goldie."

All at once I had an inspiration. I would get a female orange tabby kitten and name her Miss Copper in memory of that long-ago kitty that I had to leave behind. And I'd get a light gray kitten and name her Miss Silver! I would put the word out right away looking for kittens. Every big old building such as mine needs a couple of mousers to keep the unwanted critter population down so that the guests wouldn't be scared.

Fall came up quickly and then the winter. The winter was cold and I got my first taste of snow, sleet and ice of the Rockies. "Powder" the local people called it and they appreciated the white powder that fell from the skies that brought the tourists to the ski areas. The lodge was warm enough but there was no fireplace so I bought a big silver pot-bellied stove for Guy to install in the community room with its stovepipe going out the side wall. Part of his duties then became building a roaring fire for all who dropped by each morning. I noticed how carefully he trained his son Johnny to take over this job and soon I had Johnny on the payroll.

I'd put up a notice about wanting an orange tabby and a grey kitten on the bulletin board we put up in the community room. Someone from two counties away called saying they had a litter of five kittens born late in the summer that were ready for new homes.

I made an outing of it. Marylou gave me permission to take Marie and Johnny with me. I told the children they could help with choosing two kittens but I specifically wanted a gold one and a silver gray one. I asked Marie if she would like to adopt one of the kittens for her very own, letting it stay at my place. She chose Silver, the little girl and the quieter of the two.

Johnny allowed that he didn't want a kitten as he was more of a dog person and could he have Goldie as his special pet. "You call him over and if he comes to you, it's a deal." Of course Goldie came right over wagging his tail as usual and Johnny threw his arms around the big yellow dog. I was happy to share ownership; it is just right that every boy should have a dog and every dog should have a boy.

The local people were starting to drop by in the mornings sitting around the pot-bellied stove. I made it a practice to drift through the community room often to welcome everyone personally thanking them for making the lodge to become known as a family-friendly place. I continued decorating the bedrooms with more of the furniture and beddings I'd brought back from Phoenix. Two of the rooms were finally ready for occupancy. A few guests who had heard about us started to book the place before we officially opened so we could put our new routine to the test.

Elmira, Marylou and I laughed as we hatched a ghost legend—we called it a legend rather than present the story as a fact. Well there were many creaks in the night in that old building so maybe some part of our story was true. Our resident ghost was called Miss Violet who was one of the ladies I'd painted.

Our story was that Miss Violet had fallen in love with a good-looking miner and pined away when he started hankering after another girl. We installed her picture in the last room upstairs and I sprayed the room with some leftover violet-scented perfume once a day so the room took on a faint permanent odor of flowers. If anyone asked about our resident ghost we would say innocently, "That the rumor that is going on around here. We haven't seen Miss Violet ourselves but some people say that there is the feel of a definite presence in that room. Not harmful or scary but just a feeling that something sad happened once upon a time. Some people just love a ghostly experience of the gentle lady kind."

With Hal's story of those spinster sisters who were abandoned by the same man, it was true that something sad had happened in our lodge. I was

ever thankful that the old building long since vacant did not harbor any actual ghostly energies. There was enough activity going on inside my head without any extra supernatural goings on.

As I sat and thought about it, I had to laugh reasoning out that the theme of loving and losing happens to most of us. And loss definitely figured in with my finding this special place in Colorado. Without Lisbeth, none of this would have happened. And the Rockies and the Farquand sisters' building had become my new love.

We started a new tradition when cold weather set in called the "Warm Virgins" that I had read about in an old magazine. In the olden days, a Warm Virgin was a wine bottle—the crock type ones were best—three quarters filled with water and corked. Placed under the pot-bellied stove to catch the warmth, they became hot water bottles for the guests to take to bed each night as bed warmers. We always had an assortment of different sizes and shapes of bottled warm virgins wrapped in a brightly-colored flannel pillow case heating under the stove. I was on the lookout to find things that gave our lodge more personality. My sign that said "Take a Warm Virgin to Bed" gave everyone a chuckle.

Copper and Silver, the two new kittens were a welcome addition adding to the friendliness of the place. Goldie of course, never knew a stranger but the kittens were shy hiding away at first and peeping out from under the beds. The kittens quickly made themselves at home and soon we had two little kittens rumbling and tumbling and running about the place. Elmira reserved the right to use a squirt bottle with water to keep them out of her kitchen. And when the kittens finally conked out, they snuggled up with Goldie near the fire. The guests were amazed to see a dog and his two kittens getting along so well together. Marie and Johnny were underfoot as well which gave our place a homey feel.

I'd been scouting around on my hikes up the mountain for a Christmas tree. Marylou, Guy and the two children and I went to choose one from a pine grove that wasn't too far from the lodge. We laughed as Marie wanted the tallest one of all which was about twelve feet high. We had to talk her out of it choosing instead the biggest one that would fit just under the ceiling of the community room. We took turns hauling it down the mountain leaving in imprint of crushed snow in our wake. I put the children to work stringing cranberries and popcorn and making chains of red and green construction paper.

Christmas Carols played softly in the background. The lodge smelled like the scent of an old-fashioned Christmas. On the top I put the one remnant of my Christmas past—an ancient star that Daddy had placed on our tree each year when I was young. For some reason I had packed it carefully and taken it to California when I went to college and kept it with me ever since. It was the one thing I had left of my early family life. I got a good feeling thinking of how happy Daddy would be to see me keeping up this ritual.

For Christmas we decided to host a community dinner and make it a big deal production. China was washed. Goblets were polished. Table cloths were starched and ironed. I gave a silent thank you to the original owners of this finery that I'd bought at estate sales at totally ridiculously low prices. How fortuitous of me to buy two sets of twelve place settings of bone china with a big platter and soup boats and all. The table was beautiful with red and green candles set in deeply scented pine boughs complete with pine cones.

We asked the few guests at the lodge to pitch in by buying the soft drinks in exchange for their meal. Elmira did herself proud with a golden brown turkey, mashed potatoes and three kinds of pies—pumpkin, cherry and mincemeat. I showed Marie how to make real whipped cream from the richest cream we could find, real vanilla and confectioner sugar. She and Johnny got a well-filled beater to lick while I claimed the bowl.

Hal brought a vintage wine and his elderly mother who I liked. We had put the word out and many folks who didn't have a place to go on the holiday came with their casserole dishes of baked sweet potato pudding, green-bean casserole with batter-dipped onions on top, macaroni salad, cranberries and three kinds of Jello concoctions. There were relish dishes, condiments and my favorite holiday treat--spiced, cinnamon-flavored apples. We had asked for local card tables the week before and now they groaned with food.

After dinner, Mr. Pfeiffer brought out some polka records for my old record player. He pulled out his violin and played along with the music while we danced the polka with great energy laughing at all the mistakes we made. The teens groaned and I whispered in the ear of one who lived nearby to run home to get some current rock and roll. No one wanted to hear my Elvis records but I played "Love Me Tender" just the same which invoked my memories of Brad. I was sorry I had played it.

The party was such a roaring success that we repeated it again a week later to celebrate the turning of the year. I proposed a toast to the Farquant sisters, those sturdy pioneer women who had built the sturdy Mercantile. Without their vision we wouldn't be having this good time right now. Hal caught my eye and smiled raising his cup. As we toasted in the New Year I had tears in my eyes and gave special thanks for this new family of people who had come to grace my life.

Chapter 25

The spring was welcome after the long, cold winter and we planned a big celebration for the opening of The Painted Ladies along with the Spring Wildflower Festival. The committee had painted the fronts of the empty building with bright colors. I'd drawn wildflower designs for the teenager I'd hired to paint my purses and belts and these were reproduced on the empty buildings.

Hal talked the owners of the empty stores into opening up just for the weekend so the women could sell their baked goods and we looked like a thriving town. The women had been baking pies, cookies and cakes all week to sell. We brought in cases of soft drinks and gallons of ice cream. I painted a big sign complete with wild flowers of course for the highway to point the way to the festival.

The Painted Ladies establishment looked gorgeous herself in her new dress with new dark green paint with contrasting trim of barnyard red and gold. We had gotten the children involved in planting delphiniums, pansies, columbines and lobelias in large sized pots. I laid a brick sidewalk around to the back where I put out picnic tables and lawn chairs. Guy had built a large deck that wrapped around the back of the lodge and put in a hot tub which was gave us wonderful soaks on the cold winter evenings.

I hired a tall, lanky wandering troubadour to serenade our guests playing ballads from the last century. He had flirted with me, calling me pretty lady, but I blew him off knowing that he was an itinerant traveler looking for a warm bed for a few nights. I was lonely but not desperate and besides I had more than enough to do than start a new romance.

Artists and crafts people from the area had heard about our event and set up their booths on Main Street. We challenged the children to build lemonade stands. Marie and Johnnie also sold wildflowers wrapped in tinfoil and cones made from the flowered wallpaper left over from the lodge. The children proudly set up their stand in front of the lodge and I painted a fancy sign with their names on it.

Other festivals were in the works later in the year. So far we had settled on an Old Miners Day, Cowboy Poetry Weekend and the Summer Wildflower Festival. Later in the year we'd host a Best Tasting Cookie this

side of the Rockies competition. The judge would be no other than Mrs. Figgy. The local cooks were relieved that they didn't have to compete against her.

Local word about the lodge had been spreading. I'd made friends with a reporter from the Aspen newspaper and he featured us in an article the week before. The Painted Ladies had filled up a month before the event. Everyone commented on how they enjoyed the hominess of our lodge with the many people, children and animals that frequented our place

Just before the festival, I opened a gift shop in the lodge using old oak library tables I'd bought on my various shopping sprees in Arizona to display some antiques I'd picked up along the way. My painted purses and belts with many of the local ferns and wildflowers were featured along with John's Hopi jewelry, and bowls with native designs and I added the left-over silk scarves and perfumes from France.

Marylou took over the handling of the gift shop. She whispered to me that Guy had been drinking less and that things were much easier around the home. Certainly Marie and Johnny were looking less haunted and a lot happier. Being so thankful to Guy for the long hours he had spent repairing and sprucing up the place, I tried to figure out a special job for him during the celebration. I took him aside and asked him if he would be willing to take visitors on a tour of the different guest rooms, contingent of course that his breath was pure as the mountain snow. We had made up stories of the different ladies whose pictures graced the rooms. Guy who ordinarily was a man a few words had a gift of blarney that made him a loquacious tour guy when he was put in a role of local storyteller.

Hal was excited to see the activity around town and had hopes that it would bring other business to town. He enlarged the bank parking lot and gave away free pens with the bank's name printed on them. I had photos made of my pictures of The Painted Ladies to make into post cards which we gave away for free to add to publicity. I'd brought back bolts of taffeta and trims and patterns from a fabric store in Phoenix and the women had made dresses similar to those worn at the turn of the century. The men wore their old dirty jeans and work shirts with kerchiefs imitating the old miner look from pictures of that era.

We sat back, held our breath and wondered if the people would come. They did and they came in droves. Folks from the neighboring communities came mostly out of curiosity. It was a roaring success.

It was all small-town stuff but we had pulled together and made the festival and opening a success. I remembered that I was truly a small-town girl at heart. The committee and all who had helped came by the community room Monday morning and we groaned about the amount of work it had been and then laughed that the weekend had given us a true Rocky Mountain high. We compared notes on what we would do differently next time and set up a rough timeline on what needed to be done when before Old Miner's Day which was six weeks away. One of my favorites of the elderly men that I flirted with, Keith Pfeiffer was put in charge of finding as many of the old timers as possible to invite them personally to the festival. Several townspeople volunteered to let them stay over in their homes and I made a note of who had extra bedrooms available for when we had too many people trying to book our lodge.

I was so proud of how everyone pulled together to share the work. I took a back seat and watched how the mountain folks worked together joking with each other. There is a true esprit de corps here, I thought, borrowing a word from my days in France. Community. This is true community.

Wading through the details of the festival helped me get out of my own head with my personal problems. Now I could sit back and run my establishment drawing from the townspeople to help out. As Marion had said, I was getting down more to the business of living instead of trying to figure things out.

Chapter 26

The hustle and bustle of the festivals made the time go fast and we enjoyed the slower periods between festivals. My favorite time of the day was after breakfast when it was story time for the children. Elmira and I took turns reading to the children in the big two-person rocker made comfy with overstuffed pillows. I had bought out the children's book section of some thrift stores in Phoenix and local people donated books to round out our library. We read the all-time favorites: Dr. Seuss, Harold and the Purple Crayon, Where the Wild Things Are, Winne the Pooh. Later we started on the children's classics such as The Black Stallion, Kidnapped, The Secret Garden and then on to some Jules Verne and the Nancy Drew series.

There were always seven or eight children in attendance at story time when school wasn't in session and I noticed that there were more and more grownups who dropped by the community room at ten o'clock when story time started. I loved the reading of stories with a child or two sitting beside me snuggling up while the rest listened big eyed from the big hooked rug on the floor. Our library, with bookshelves which ran along the left side of the community room, did a brisk business. We trained each person who wanted to check out a book and swore them in as an official librarian.

One fun idea that Elmira started was giving each child and adult a free cookie with their name on it the first time they came by the community room. She kept a bag of icing in the refrigerator for piping their name on an extra-large oatmeal cookie. We made a fuss over every new visitor and told them to tell their friends to come by for their own first-time, special cookie.

I placed small advertisements in skiing and travel magazines and invited their reporters to come with their families for a free weekend. The magazines reciprocated by featuring several articles about The Painted Ladies and the word spread. Then I branched out to the Audubon Society and a gold prospecting magazine. We were booked year round. After several guests inquired about massage I mentioned it to the Festival Committee people. They put me in touch with an older woman who had taken massage training and was building her business called, appropriately enough, Have Table, Will Travel. Another one of the empty buildings that flanked The Painted Ladies was put to good use.

Small, steady monthly checks came in from Shirley for the new Scottsdale store. The Painted Desert did as well sales wise as the store had under its previous name. The Hopi jewelry and pots sold on a steady basis providing more money for the Hopi scholarship fund. I gave Shirley a raise and started a small retirement plan for her later years.

Things were settling down business wise but still I ruminated on my love life or lack thereof. I phoned Marion occasionally for an appointment to get her input. At times, her directness was hard to take at times. I winced one day when she told me that I had created my own unhappiness.

“I know this is hard for you to hear, Janie, but I’ve got to be straight with you. For you to be happy, you’ve got to get over your fear of being hurt. Stop falling for unavailable men. And you have to be at that same readiness for commitment for that to happen. Risk, it’s called risk, but risk with the right person who wants the same thing that you do—marriage.”

I sat taking in what she said, not wanting to acknowledge it. I choked and tears came to my eyes. Then an insight broke through. “I’ve been looking for someone to just take care of me. I’m that one. I’m the only one who will always be there for me.”

I could almost hear her smile over the phone. “You think? Tell me what you mean.”

“I fantasize about an ongoing perfect relationship. It’s been miserable with ideas of Brad and Gary rattling around in my head but there is no real man in my life. I get it. I’ve got to stop putting my cap on men who are geographical unavailable, marriage unavailable or unavailable because they are in love with the bottle or something else. It takes two to make a relationship work.”

Marion clapped her hands. I could picture her big grin. “Now that you’ve figured this out, you will figure out how to live it.”

Later I recognized that she had told me these ideas before. I was just a slow-learner in taking it all in.

Chapter 27

I made several more visits taking the long drive back down to Scottsdale each time bringing back more bedroom sets and antiques from the estate sales and thrift stores for the gift shop. My time while there was spent taking care of the details of the store and shopping for the Colorado endeavor and, of course, seeing Gary.

Gary and I continued our clandestine trysts in the apartment which sat empty between my visits, but it wasn't the same as before. I couldn't bring myself to rent the apartment out and justified that I needed a place of my own to stay the few days I spent in the area. Seeing Gary for the week that I was there always opened up the longing to be with him again and the guilt flared up from my conscience. I settled down between visits putting my shoulder to the wheel of hard work to distract myself but the contacts only increased my feelings for him. The visits went fast and the parting was always hard.

One day, he posed a question about his visiting Colorado. "Janie, I've been thinking. I'd like to see The Painted Ladies first hand. How about if I get away and come to your neck of the woods for several days? I'd like to see for myself how you live and meet the people you talk about."

I froze, not knowing what to say. I had considered having him visit of course, but decided it was cleaner to keep my two worlds apart. Cautiously I asked, "How would you explain your absence to Lisbeth?"

"I have to go to a dealership meeting in Las Vegas. I could extend it a few days. You could meet me in Las Vegas and we could fly back to the Aspen airport so I could spend some time seeing your new home and business."

I had no interest in going to Las Vegas with its glitz and glitter. I shuddered and thought for a moment how life on the ranch with Gene had changed after our visit to Las Vegas. Too much was happening here for me to leave. I surprised myself by saying "No to Las Vegas. I don't know about your coming to visit. It would be awkward for me. I'll think about it." I became more direct and straighter with Gary speaking my mind instead of trying to please him.

It was time for me to head back to the mountains and tackle the eight hundred miles it took to get back home. As I drove back to Lodesville, my mind went back and forth about Gary's possible visit. Part of me wanted him there of course and it would be good to show him what I'd accomplished. The rest of me disagreed wondering what the townspeople would think of me having a boyfriend and the questions it would raise.

It was good to get away from the lodge into the desert for a while for a change of pace, but driving back always made me anxious to get home. Elmira had adopted me as her third daughter and Guy and Marylou Benson and the children and the animals rounded out my sense of family.

Troubled at Gary's request, I decided to risk talking to Hal about my situation. He had become a good friend the past few years and I felt that I needed a confidant and a man's point of view. He was always ready to put his work aside whenever I dropped by.

"Janie, good to see you. What can I do for you today? Want to buy another building?"

"You wish. I know you want me to buy the whole town. No, not in the building-buying mood today. I've come to talk to you about something entirely different. I need to have an old-fashioned Dutch uncle talk. You know, the kind where I pick your brain and see things from someone else's way of looking at things. From a guy's perspective."

"I'm just the fella to come to." He grinned and went over and closed the door and tuned in some music on the small radio that was on his desk to mask our voices from the bank teller out front. "Now what is this all about?"

It was hard for me to begin. "Since I've been here, I've kept my personal history kind of quiet. There's a reason for my needing privacy." I hesitated, took a breath and continued on. "Now I need to talk something out and get some advice. This is awfully hard for me to say."

"Nothing you can say would surprise me. I may be an old bachelor, but I've heard it all handling the financial affairs of people like I do, I've heard a lot of personal things too. The worst and the best. Nothing surprises me anymore."

Still it was hard for me to spit it out and I ducked my head and turned away embarrassed. "There was a reason I left my store in Scottsdale and moved here. I did a dumb thing. I fell in love with a married man. When his wife found out and threatened me, I had to leave. That's the reason I ended up here. I was looking for some place different to settle and earn a living. And a life."

Hal grinned and shook his head. "It happens. Attractions between people can be pretty strong," Hal said philosophically. "Was he a good man?"

"Oh, yes. He's a good person and we were happy but when it came out, he couldn't leave his wife. I knew that he wouldn't from the start. I've tried to break up with him, but somehow I haven't been able to. It's still going on. We only see each other when I make the trip to Scottsdale when visiting my other store."

"He's a lucky man to have you, Janie. You love him?"

"Yes, that's the problem. I know I should stop it with him and get on with my life. I thought that moving here and getting involved in a brand new business venture would help me forget him, but it hasn't. Now there is something that's come up that is bothering me."

Hal looked thoughtful and waited. "Now what is this problem all about?"

"Gary, his name is Gary, wants to come to visit me here. I'm not sure whether it's a good idea or not. I've love for him to see this place and all that I've worked for. But I wonder what the gossip will be if he comes and stays at the lodge."

"People will always gossip whether there is any truth in it or not. Some will speculate and some will make things up. Whether they see things as sinful is up to their character. Some people are actually pretty broadminded. You forget that this part of the country was founded with brothels. We all joke and say that we are the descendents of prostitutes and miners."

I smiled and asked, "But what will they think, me being a single woman and all running a respectful business?"

In this thin air with the high altitudes, people have to be hardy. And tough and broadminded. Around here, rumors fly and then they fall off. New ones take their place. That's human nature. The real question is do you want to have him come for a visit?"

"Yes. No. I don't know. I just don't want people to think badly of me, that's all."

"What people think of you is none of your business, my mom used to say. People talk. Life goes on. Anyway, you are pretty strong minded and can handle whatever happens. That's the question. Could you handle it if people gossip? Because they will."

I thought for a moment and then laughed feeling foolish. The way Hal put it made it seem pretty simple. "Hal, may I ask? Were you ever married? Do you mind my asking?"

"Nope. Never married. There was a girl in high school I was in love with. She went off to college in Vermont and never came back. I was a pretty serious guy in those days working long hours getting established in the banking business. I just never took the time to find another girl. Then before I knew it I was middle-aged and pretty much set in my ways. There was a widow who I was interested in for a spell but I couldn't stand her bratty son so that didn't go anywhere. I get along well with Mom providing a home for me."

"You know I like your mom. She's sure proud of you."

"She spent many years trying to get me married off. She wanted some grandchildren and I'm sorry I couldn't give her some. She finally stopped trying to find me a wife." He grinned ruefully. "How about your parents? I've never heard you mention them."

"My folks are dead. Dad died when I was young and my mother a few years ago." I wasn't ready to divulge any more of the skeletons in my closet today. Revealing the love affair with a married man was enough for now.

I changed the subject. "Thank you Hal for all you've done for me. I couldn't have found the courage to start such a big-scale operation like The Painted Ladies if it hadn't been for your encouragement. I'm glad that you are my friend."

In the end I decided that I did not want to mix my two separate worlds of the desert and the mountains. It seemed just too sticky for Gary to come to visit. He was disappointed but respected my decision. His measure of disappointment was minor compared to what I had personally experienced since meeting him.

However, Marion came for a visit at my urging that summer. She stayed two weeks taking a right proper vacation as she called it. I promised her that she would be treated like an honored guest and I wouldn't bug her with my issues. We decided to keep our relationship simply professional, of the traveler and inn keeper. I picked her up at the airport and was surprised to see her in sturdy slacks, well-worn hiking boots and hat.

I told Elmira and Marylou that she was a long-time friend who had helped me sort out the pain of my childhood with an ill mother and swore them to secrecy not wanting to be the recipient of the local gossip. They made Marion feel welcome and of course Goldie, Silver and Copper found her presence reassuring seeking her out often for some special attention. Marion was soon volunteered by Marie and Johnny to read at story time. She brought *Lassie Come Home*, one of her favorite childhood books, to donate to our growing library. It was fun to hear Marion working out the Scottish brogue accent in the book. The word about the old children's classic being read spread and more housewives and a few men took to stopping in to catch the original story.

Marion had never been to the Rocky Mountains before although I found out that she was a world traveler taking a major trip every few years. She admired *The Painted Ladies* and congratulated me on what I had developed. She brought books to read and spent time in the community room writing an article for a professional journal. She became caught up in the lush greenery, abundant streams, winding roads and the mountain peaks. She went for daily hikes up the mountain taking Goldie with her saying it did her good to take a respite from the issues of people and be with Mother Nature.

One day I invited Marion to hike up to a special spot I'd located up in the hills past the aspen grove. We drove to a nearby stream and followed it up its gradual incline until we came to a level spot with rock outcroppings. The sound of the rushing water was inviting and exhilarating while being calming. We took one of Elmira's special lunches packed securely in my back pack and spread a red-checkered table cloth to sit on.

Everywhere we looked was beauty. Alder trees grew in spots close by. A Canadian Jay, curious and obnoxious, hopped around our small square of red table cloth probably hoping for a hand out. I felt contented and relaxed with no need to talk about myself, although I couldn't resist confessing, "There is something I've held back from telling you. Don't worry; I'm not going to turn this into a therapy session. No need, but I just feel strange holding something back. When I was in California, one of the major reasons I had to leave was the ranch was being turned into a major pot operation. I don't need to talk about this. I just wanted you to know."

She shrugged. "I figured something else was going on besides what you were telling me. Well, it's good that you left."

Changing the subject, I asked, "Marion, would you tell me a little of your life? If that's allowed of course. How did you get to be so wise and all?"

She smiled and shook her head. "There is nothing much to tell. I grew up in Sonoma County and married a local boy out of high school. John was his name. It was a good enough marriage and our only problem was that I couldn't have children."

I was surprised to hear of her marriage as I had assumed from the way she looked and talked that she had always been single.

She frowned slightly as she straightened out the corner of the tablecloth which had become rumpled. "We weren't married long and he died in the Second World War. It was devastating at first and eventually I made my peace with it. For a while I didn't have any idea of what I wanted to do. My dad practiced law and he was a pretty astute man. He told me that I always liked people and listening to their problems so I should go to the university to study how to make a living from it. So I spent seven years in various universities that California provides. Then I started my private practice."

"You never remarried?"

"There were several men that I dated, but I never found anyone I wanted to share my life with enough to give up my independence and deal with all that man stuff. Somewhere along the way I became kind of stuck in how I wanted things. I'm too independent and don't need a husband to feel complete. Some women try marriage and when that's over, they find that it

suits them to live alone. I have my friends, church, the garden and my two canaries.”

I held my breath and then let it out slowly. “You know so much about men and women and love gone wrong. Did you ever have an affair with a married man? You don’t have to answer that if you don’t want to.”

“No, I’ve learned most of what I know from my clients. That and my studies. Mostly I’ve learned from the lives of others who have shared with me over the years.” She grew quiet and I took it as a signal that she didn’t want to talk about herself anymore.

“I want to thank you for what you’ve done for me. You’ve given me so much of your wisdom.”

“It’s been a pleasure, Janie. You’ve come so far and have been satisfying to work with. It’s good for me to see firsthand what you’ve done building this life and bringing people together. You’ve got grit by overcoming your personal setbacks. I’m proud of you.” With that, she reached out and patted me on my hand.

Grit I thought. I’ve never thought of myself as having grit but Marion had put her finger on something. I did have the ability to stick and see things through. I acknowledged her compliment and then turned the subject to the tiny purple wild flower that made up the composite of grass and other miniature wild flowers that we were sitting on.

As we hiked up the slope I noted a stubby piñon pine sticking out on a ridge. It was perpetually bent by the prevailing winds and twisted, first this way and then that. Other pines grew straight and tall, but this misshapen pinion took my eye. It had character seemingly formed from adversity. “Now that’s grit,” I remarked and Marion concurred and we hiked on each caught in her own thoughts.

Chapter 28

The bank account in the Lodesville bank had grown each year until there was a substantial amount. Shirley had bought out the Scottsdale store last June after receiving an inheritance from her uncle. I rented the upstairs apartment from her but only went down there occasionally when I needed to purchase some things for the lodge and to keep in touch with Gary.

The last few years had gone by quickly and now with time on my hands and plenty of money, I needed another investment and a new project to engage my mind, as I told myself. So after thinking hard, I went across the street to call on Hal. "How is my favorite banker today? Still bent over the books, I see." I said teasing him about his hard work ethic. "Back home in Indiana, the local bank closed at three o'clock. Banker's hours they called it. How come there aren't any banker's hours of ten until three o'clock for you?"

"Folks here get up early and work until late so I work eight to five. And they get cranky if I'm not here to help them. I'm thinking of getting one of those new computers that would help me summarize all this data held in the books. That's the new way to go in banking nowadays. Janie, what can I do for you this fine morning?"

"We are stuffed to the seams at the lodge and could use another guest room. I was thinking about moving the gift shop to another building. Would you consider me a safe enough bet to give me a loan? I'd like to expand and buy two of the empty buildings down the way."

"There are several left with the Baker sisters renting the old Miller store to sell their home-made fudge, caramel corn and cookies. Which buildings were you thinking about?"

"The house that sits three doors down from the lodge and that empty storefront next door. Doesn't the bank hold the mortgages? I like the look of the house with the open front porch and gingerbread trim. I plan to rent it out to the Bensons; they have proven to be steady workers and that shack they live in is about ready to fall down."

Hal nodded as he reached for a different book with flyers which listed property. "Yes I could see that would be a good investment if you hold

onto the property for some years. And you said that the empty store next to your property takes your interest?”

“That storefront that we rent during the festivals for the townspeople to display their homemade crafts. Is it still for sale? I could start several new businesses in there. I’ve talked with Marylou about opening a thrift store so the poor people of the community would have a place to get clothes. If we cut a door between the rooms, she could handle that as well as the gift shop. Then I’d like to have an exercise room. I’m looking for someone to teach an exercise or a yoga class. And I’ll get some dumbbells and used weight machines for the boys on the sports teams.”

“Yes, the bank holds the mortgage on that also. I can see that you are thinking of increasing your business operations. Expansion would be good for the community.”

“Hal, this is my home now. I want to give back to these people who have been so generous with me. Anything else you can think of that this area needs?”

“A church would be nice. Any interest in starting a church? Folks here have to drive a few miles to find a church.”

“I’d support one of course, but my interest lies with my business ventures. I’m afraid I had enough of churches as a child to do me a lifetime. But if you hear of any group—make that a friendly group of people—wanting a place to meet Sunday mornings, they could meet at the lodge. I’m also thinking of a small museum. There is so much mining history around here that could be shared. I’ve been collecting old iron mining equipment. People love to visit museums and we could get the county historical society involved. We could start small and grow with time as people donate their old items.”

Hal nodded putting away his papers. We walked over to inspect the buildings which I had been in several times when they were temporarily opened up for the festivals. Now I looked at them from a different perspective seeing one as a home and the other divided into small stores. The empty store had one big room which could be subdivided to be used for different purposes and a fair-sized back storeroom.

We settled on prices for the two buildings and made arrangements for the new loan. Hal said, “By the way, I ran into Grace Howard the other day when I was visiting Aspen. She and several other artists are looking for a place to rent. Her water colors of the local landscape are beautiful. They are starting an artist’s cooperative. I’ll send her to talk with you if you like.”

“Hal, that would be great. I’ve missed having creative artists around me. Does she live around here?”

“Grace has been away to college and just returned. I’ve mentioned her dad, Jim Howard before. His wife died a few years ago and he runs a cattle ranch with a few hired hands. He’s glad to have Grace back home. You’ve met his son Jim Junior who we call J. B. and his wife Nellie who operate the feed store over in Hankston. He helps his dad out some on the ranch. Nice family all around.”

“I’ve heard of the Howards but never placed just where their ranch was.”

“Jim has over 100 acres of grass lands and raises cattle down that side road that cuts west just before the river in the next county. Great guy. Hard working. I’m surprised you haven’t met him. Now let’s go over these figures on the mortgages on the two buildings.”

I contacted Coach Jackson to hire a new crop of young men from his football team for the painting work. The last young men who had worked on The Painted Ladies had graduated and many had gone on to college. I spoke with Coach about putting in an exercise room and he gave me ideas of the type of work out equipment to look for the next time I visited the Phoenix area. The house and empty storefront would be easy to restore after the gigantic effort of the lodge. Guy had contracted himself out on many remodeling projects since our endeavor but now he was ready to go back to work for me.

One morning I was working on the books at a table in the community room when I heard a cheery voice call out. “Hello, I’m Grace Howard. This is my friend Zack Garcia.” The young couple approached. “Grace was short and wiry and in her early thirties. She had frizzy brown hair that was escaping from loosely-plaited pigtails and she had on a brown t-shirt that said, “Artists of the world unite!”

Zack was stocky, looking the part of an artist in his slightly paint splattered, old clothes. “We are part of a group of friends that are forming an artist’s cooperative. I’m a potter and Grace is becoming known for her water colors of the mountains. We are looking for some rooms to rent that would be reasonable, us being starving artists and all. You can see how starving I am,” he said laughingly as he grabbed a roll of fat from his side.

I liked them as a couple. They were two handsome people who had an easiness between them looking at each other and laughing often. Their easy familiarity touched off some sense of yearning within me.

“Wow, this is a great room,” said Grace. “I hear you are an artist too. Your lodge looks like it is decorated by an artist with its lively sense of color. You’ve done wonders with this place. I remember it as a gray old building from when I was a kid.”

“If it’s one thing I enjoy, it’s lots of color. Big Nose Millie here,” I said pointing to the picture of Millie hanging out in her domain, “The rich colors of her red hair and green taffeta dress stood out in my mind when I first made a sketch of her. I tried to put the attitude of her sense of adventure and a bit of her shamelessness into the picture.”

“That is a great painting. It’s like she might step right down out of the picture,” said Grace. I’m sure she could wipe me out in poker. Have you done any other paintings we could see?”

We looked at the paintings hanging in the front hall I’d made of the Mercantile and the Farquand sisters and walked upstairs to see the different painted ladies pictures. It was fun to see two artist’s view of my paintings. Artists with their unique perspective see the world different from other people. We talked of my choice of contrasting and complimentary color to enhance the personalities of each of the ladies and how that had been reflected in the various guest rooms.

We walked over to look at the rooms that were available in the storefront. “The two front rooms would work the best as retail stores and your gallery. They have the best light with the big front windows. We plan to put a used clothing store and an exercise room in the back.”

We discussed the cooperative of fifteen artists that wanted to lease the place. Many of them had been friends for some time and several had

displayed their work in Aspen and other resort galleries. “We are looking for something where we can have more control over how our art work is displayed,” said Zack. “We will take turns on staffing the gallery.”

We discussed a reasonable monthly rent. Grace and Zack said they would be back with the rest of the group on Saturday to see the place. “I’m pleased with your plan for an artist’s gallery,” I said. “It will bring more customers to town and it will be good to have the energy of some younger people in the town. I’m glad to be in the company of artists again.” We said goodbye and the young couple invited me over to their home to see their work.

The remodeling of the storefront went quickly and the new stores were soon ready to be opened to the public. I liked Grace. Unlike many artists, she had a sensible head on her shoulders and some business sense as well as a fine hand with water colors. I started going over to the gallery on the days that she ran the place to visit with her. Together we organized the classes for the exercise room. I taught yoga and she taught a jazzy aerobics class just after story hour. We had between ten and twelve people come, mostly women to stretch their bodies and get their heart pumping.

One day as Zack, Grace and I sat and had a cup of tea with Elmira’s chocolate chip cookies after class, she said, “I’ve been thinking. I think you should meet my dad.”

“Your dad? Why?” I knew her father was a rancher but didn’t understand why she wanted me to meet him.

“Dad’s a great guy. He’s been alone since my mom died. I’d like you to meet him. Everybody likes my dad.” She reached out and took Zack’s hand. “Just like Zack.”

“Oh, Grace, people are always trying to fix me up but I always resist matchmaking. My life is too complicated as it is. I don’t want to go making it any busier.”

“No, you’d really like him.”

Oh great. That’s just what I need, another man in my life, I thought. Time to change the subject. “We’ll see. I’m changing the name of my gift store. I’m going to name my new store Rocky Mountain High,” I said to

change the subject. “I’m developing a floral perfume with a perfumery vendor in Paris, France that I used to work with who has been sending me samples that I’m choosing from. Rocky Mountain High will be the name of my new perfume line.”

We discussed other products and sales and I was glad to hear that the gallery was selling well enough to keep the artists’ cooperative renting the space. The bi-monthly festivals brought enough people to town to keep sales at a brisk pace. My life was really settling down. I went to bed pleased each night with the excitement of running a bustling guest lodge.

Chapter 29

The lodge and gift store businesses were going well. I was starting to get a sense of the flows of the different seasons of the Rockies which corresponded with the influx of tourists. Afternoons I had taken to stealing some time away from the lodge each day to hike up towards the mountains. After a hectic tourist weekend I was glad to get away for a while to clear my head. Goldie went with me, of course, always ready for an adventure, but surprisingly Copper started coming along as he got bigger and stronger. He was pretty observant and we couldn't sneak off without him, so I got to saying, "Hey Copper, got your hiking boots on?" When I picked up my walking stick and he would come trotting after us. Silver was content to stay at home curled up or dashing around getting into mischief, but Copper followed us and did his kitty best to keep up with Goldie and myself although at times we had to slow down and let him catch up. He seemed to think that he was a dog and enjoyed the outing jumping up on any rock outcropping to gaze around for small animals perhaps and then dashing to keep up with us.

We hiked up high through a pine-flanked path to a grassy knoll where I could look down and see the buildings in our small town below and then we stopped to sit on an inviting grassy incline. The sharp pine smell of the needles as we stepped on them always assailed my senses and I inhaled deeply. The snow-capped mountains were pristine shining in the distance. I called this special place which was sheltered under an old bent pine tree my introspection stop and used the time to reflect on where I'd been and where I hoped to go. An obnoxious, but comic Canada Blue Jay perched on a limb of a nearby scrub oak scolding us energetically. The two animals jumped and played until they were tired and then curled up beside me on the blanket to sleep in the sun after our strenuous hike. Goldie had worn himself out chasing the brownish-grey ground squirrels that always dashed into a hole as he came close.

I had been deeply troubled lately wondering where my relationship with Gary was going. We had been in limbo for the last several years. I'd slowed my visits to Arizona to twice a year. We were together and yet we were not the same. The angst was strong in both of us when we tried to end the relationship. The past year we had stopped the physically intimate side of our relationship by mutual agreement, but we couldn't seem to break the whole thing off.

Lying back in the grass with my eyes closed, I started thinking of the reoccurring numbers in my dream last night where my body was emaciated. I'd been walking down a long corridor of black boards with numbers written on them. I was confused as I read the simplest of addition and subtraction problems which repeatedly jumped out at me. Some of the numbers were wavery and some were tall but there were the same addition and subtraction combinations repeated. $1 + 1 = 2$, $2 - 1 = 1$ and $2 - 2 = 0$ were written in different sizes, colors and shapes over and over. My head was throbbing with vertigo as I had to travel the corridor with the numbers jumping around as there was no way out and the exit behind was closed.

Goldie rolled over in the sun making his sleepy doggie contented moans and Copper snuggled up beside him. I sat there wondering of the confusion that had taken over me in the dream. Finally I gave up trying to make sense of it and sat in a semi-conscious trance looking at a minute yellow wild flower.

So much beauty around me. Beautiful surroundings. Beautiful people. I realized that good people have been there for me, the motherless child. At one time in my life I had decided that I couldn't trust women because of my mom's erratic behavior. Now I reconsidered that childhood decision. There had been church women who have looked after me as far back as I could remember. First was the cat lady that my dad found. Then Leslie Ketchum, Marion, Shirley and now Elmira and Marylou as they cheerfully helped out at the lodge. I remember reading somewhere that if there was one good person in a child's life if they had a difficult upbringing that they could survive anything. Well there certainly had been more than one good woman in my life influencing me and cheering me on.

The sun was warm on my skin and soon I felt drowsy. As my mind slipped away into reverie, I recalled something that Marion had said last year when I'd complained of being too busy. I still had occasional phone sessions with her now and then but had gotten in the habit of talking to her in my head when troubled about something. Sometimes I heard her answer me spouting forth something I needed to understand. Actually the Marion in my head voice was pretty wise.

"My dear, you have a math problem," the Marion in my head said. "It's basic first grade math. You have done too much addition in your life. You need to do some subtraction."

While weekends are always a bit hectic, things were settling down. No this unsettledness wasn't about the guest lodge. Still the numbers loomed up large in my mind seeming to represent some part of myself. What had I added and what did I need to subtract? What was it that I couldn't erase from my mind? What did I have two of that was causing me such grief?

I reached down to pet Copper who immediately began purring in his sleep, rubbing his paws into the blanket and giving small yawns and meows contentedly. The answer when it came made me laugh out loud echoing down the valley. I felt like the pulley bone of the Thanksgiving turkey being pulled both ways at once! No wonder I'd been so thin feeling pulled between Brad and Gary and not fed by neither. I needed to erase old feelings from the confines of my mind. But I didn't have an eraser and didn't know how to relinquish them.

Sadness welled up when I thought of how many years I'd gone unfulfilled trying to solve this puzzling equation. I'd tried in vain to keep the phone connection with Brad and the physical connection with Gary but all I really had was my longings and fantasies.

Marion had instructed me often to go to my true longing when I was upset. "Get out of your head and into your truth," she would say. "What is it your heart truly desires? Drop down in your heart and find what you really want," she would say to get me out of my racing mind.

I remembered with contentment how the word community came to me on a similar mountain ten years ago out of my longing for connection. Somehow I'd made that happen by diving right in. So now what did I want? And what was I willing to do—no let go of—to get it? There was lunacy in my obsessions with men. Subtraction, Marion in my head had said. I shuddered as I asked myself what crazy idea do I need to let go of?

I knew the answer and my chest constricted. The habit of holding on to lost loves had weighed me so far down that I couldn't breathe.

"Sane up, Janie," Hal had told me once after one of our talks when I told him that sometimes I felt so crazy. "You are one of the uncraziest women I've ever met. So stop thinking you are crazy. Sane up."

I'd laughed at his choice of words at the time. Hal was right. It was time for a sanity check. His fortuitous choice of words stuck to me like a

glum phrase that would not break loose. Mother had her brand of insanity and I've certainly had my obsessions with men. Hot, stinging tears fell on Goldie as I recounted the years of trying to hold on to first Brad and then Gary. I don't know how to sane up, I said out loud. Love has no logic. I don't know how to emotionally let go. Goldie stirred, put his nose on my arm nudging me back to the present and then he went back to sleep.

I sat for a while until the sun started to set and then temperature drop. Then I went plodding down the incline with a heavy heart towards the lodge. I knew I had to drop the insanity of caring for Gary.

Chapter 30

The years went by sometimes slowly, sometimes quickly, mostly uneventful. The days were pleasant with the running of the lodge and the coming and going of guests but the nighttime drama continued off and on. Nightmares can summon up that sinister, tragic past that reached out to the present. My unsettled mind demanded to solve the old mysteries. The dream images replayed drawing forth from my own insurmountable private Chamber of Horrors.

After a night of those torrents of confusing images, the sense of dread would haunt me for days on end. My baffled mind did not dare look further. Mercifully it always stopped at that one ghastly question and went blank. It did not go further to conjure up any other horrible imaginings or gruesome certainties. After all, did I really want to know?

Now the disturbing images were after me again sending me to the edge of panic. Pictures of small green balls bubbling in a pan on the stove surfaced dreamlike at night or during the day when my mind was unoccupied. In the dream my nose crinkled up with the sickening, strong smell of burned sugar. There was a sense of loss for Daddy. The scenario repeated until I woke up with my heart pounding.

Flashes of memory that were associated with terror broke through. Then another disturbing bunch of images came forth. I was sitting in my upstairs apartment looking out the window at the far-off mountains when a chill came over me. There were flashes of something associated with fear that was most disconcerting.

I saw myself as a young child, maybe ten years old wearing a pink dress which I liked. I'm looking down at my lap as if the color pink will save me from the terror I'm feeling inside. There's a hot courtroom tense and crowded with the strong smell of hot, sweaty people sitting with anticipation greedy for the experience of someone else's misery. They turn around crook-necked to look at us as Bruce and I go into a small side room. The people gawked at us as if we were creatures in a zoo. We are confused, not sure why we are here. Helpless. Then nothing. Blank.

That's funny. I've always hated pink. Yet there is the distinct idea that I once had a favorite dress that was pink. I feel weak all over while my heart beat with a throbbing rhythm.

As I sat there in acute emotional pain trying to figure the images out, another memory came. This one was mixed. There is an old house with faded curtains where I am safe. A worn green sofa. A faint smell of kitchen lilac. Someone is looking after me, fussing over me. I want my Daddy. Crying. Then lapses of memory. I am riddled with despair and uncertainty.

I called Marion and set up weekly phone appointments. We begin again. The disturbance pokes it head and then refuses to break through. Fears of losing my mind surface again.

"You are not going crazy," she said firmly. "You are having flashbacks of some type of early trauma. That is different from having a mental breakdown. The images are your mind's way of trying to let things out."

"What is happening to me? My heart races and I'm scared all the time."

"Flashbacks are pieces of something. They are bits and pieces of what your mind registered that are still stuck. You couldn't take it all in and process it as a child. It would have been too overwhelming."

"Why can't I remember? Why is this happening now when I'm happier?"

"I call this forgetting of trauma events early on sweet amnesia." Marion's eyes twinkled. "I've often thought that denial must have been what the master of horror, H. P. Lovecraft, meant when he said, 'The most merciful thing in the world is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance.'"

"You mean that not knowing something frightening until you are older could be a blessing?"

She nodded. "What your mind couldn't deal with as a child, it simply chose to forget and shut down the bad memories. That's okay. You don't have to remember it all. You have more resources to deal with whatever

happened to you now with the stability in your life. You're lived through it and you are safe now. Remember to keep breathing."

I was both willing and not willing to know what had happened that loomed in my dreams at night that seemed so terrifying. Following Marion's instructions, I breathed and breathed. Most days I pushed the troubling images down by getting busy using my strong will.

The memories were like a vague dream of those missing years that faded in and out. For what is memory but a series of related and unrelated snatches of time and events connected by feelings? And distortions of the mind sometimes playing tricks on you?

I called Gary to share my concerns and he helped by listening. He seemed helpless not knowing what to do or say to me. He had no knowledge of these things and not all that much interest I must admit, but I was grateful for his listening.

Early one morning some very dark material broke through as I sat on my bed. It wasn't a dream this time but vivid mental images. My heart started to beat as I wondered was this a hallucination? Fantasy? No. This was not made-up material of the mind. This was real. Long-lost memories were flashing in my mind.

My anxiety shot through fear and settled on terror. There was an image of being questioned by some man in a black robe. Bruce was crying and I joined in not knowing what was going on but knowing it was bad. Really bad. Somber people were sitting around a table. No one was there to comfort me. Where was Daddy? I don't know where and I'm really scared. The man asked us about mother. What happened to us? Something about a trial.

Poison. Something about poison. Another flash of seeing Daddy's gray crumpled body on the floor. Someone came and took me away. Suddenly I know what the problem is. Why Daddy was lying on the floor. Poison. Suddenly it is clear. Mother poisoned him. Gave him rat poison in his coffee.

Anguish. I became tense and overwhelmed with terror at the sudden episode of memory. These images are real, not something my mind made up. These I can't deny. Then I numb out.

God, I come from flawed people.

The image of little green balls surfaced again. Little green balls on tall stalks along with some beautiful spring poppies waving red and pink in the wind. Those poppies that grew next to the garage. Little green balls! These were the green balls that kept dropping into my dreams. But why was this dream image so terrifying to me? Why did they seem like a lethal substance?

Then a horrifying memory of Bruce and me in old Dr. Gray's office came up. I remembered the old medicine smells of the family doctor's office and start to feel dizzy. Dr. Gray asks us if we have been eating poppy seeds. Again there's that smell of green, rawness and burnt sugar. The darkness in my mother's face as she stands over the stove mumbling something about cooking up some laudanum from the poppies to give to us. Her arguing with and then agreeing with the voices that told her what to do. Laudanum? What is laudanum? Then there is a taste of something bitter and vile in my mouth.

The memory blacked out. Then nothing. Sweet amnesia that I'd had since childhood. Sweet Jesus. Jesus loves me, this I know.

Immediately another memory surfaced. The old garage with its high shelf of old boxes and cans. Daddy telling us to never bother those containers; he said that they were poison. There was a rusty can left over from the previous pastor family with a skull and crossbones on it. I remember being frightened of that black skull and crossbones. Arsenic for the rats. A chilling thought passed through my mind. All those puppies and kittens I brought home. Is that what happened to them? And then us. We became the rats. Slowly the horrifying recognition dawned.

She tried to poison us too. The carnage of family.

Those pale bombastic images of poppies disoriented me. The memory of the deranged laughter of my mother mocked me. My heart raced rapidly and my chest tightened. I couldn't breathe. This is unbearable terror.

But Bruce and I didn't die. Daddy died. We were very sick but we didn't die. We were in the hospital but we didn't die. I felt the hot taste of bile and vomit in my throat.

We didn't die. The words pounded in my head in recognition. Anguish. Agony mixed with torment came over me. Sweating, sobbing I held myself in a curled up position with my arms hugging my legs.

I lay there curled up in a fetal position in desperation as if locked in trying to figure out these unbidden images. The green balls were a forbidding message about something.

The understanding broke through and I stifled a scream. Mother cooked up those green balls on the stove. She cooked those poppy pods. The fat green pods oozing some white, sticky substance when the petals fell off. She must have run out of arsenic. I moaned and pulled my body tighter.

It's crazy. I told myself that this can't be. But another part of my mind told me that it was. How crazy does one woman have to be to kill her husband and her children? I cried out loud, "She's a monster."

Sickened and appalled, I wanted to block it all from my mind, but it was too late. The mind finally had decided to remember.

Poor Bruce. He must have suffered too. We never talked about it. We both tried to put it behind us. The picture of two very somber children came up. Bruce thirteen and me three years younger. Not knowing what to do. Doing what was expected of us. Did what adults told us to do. We were the preacher's obedient children. A courtroom scene surfaced of a man in the black robe telling us that our mother was going to a hospital and we were to live with Grandmother Riley.

I lie sobbing, my soul jagged and raw. It felt as if I were out of my body, floating, tranced out. I want Gary and he's not here and never will be. I replayed the scenes in my mind. Finally, clutching a pillow tightly to my chest, exhausted sleep overtook me.

The next day I was fatigued and overwhelmed. Then without warning, new emotions broke through. Ones I'd never allowed myself to have before. Anger. Rage. Fury. Monster. She's a monster. I hate her. I hate her for what she did to us. I became agitated, pacing back and forth.

Pure bottled-up energy flowed through of me. I couldn't go out and face people so I turned the power of raw emotions to cleaning the lodge. Intense cleaning as if to wash away some of the residue of overwhelming

emotions that seemed to stick to me. I read in a book when I was a child about the first wife of a Mormon man who took out her jealousy and anger when her husband took a second wife by tearing apart her wedding gown and using it as a rag to scrub down the house. I cleaned the floors, woodwork, doors, and walls going at it with a furious pace until I was exhausted. I did penance in the hard work but to no avail. I was all in, emotionally and physically.

I called Marion and, with my heart racing, briefly related the disturbing break-through memories. She helped me calm down and suggested that I fly to California for some emergency sessions. She told me that this was a breakthrough but I felt lost and forlorn as I drove myself through the mountains to the Aspen airport. I tried telling myself that it was okay but in truth I wanted Gary to be beside me holding my hand.

On the plane I ruminated thinking of my poor, innocent father's death at the hands of my mother. What was the foul contradiction of a marriage where one partner loved unconditionally and the other murdered? Her action did not seem to be a crime of passion, as far as I could tell, nor for material gain but from her obsessive mind lost in darkness turning more and more morbid and then to malevolence. I asked myself, what uncanny justification of her off-kilter mind dismissed her internal moral code with which she had been brought up? What malice of mind, what sin of pride, what genuine wickedness conceived such a plan?

Or was it just an act of pure evil with her reason moving out and something evil moving in? Was the idea of evil just a figment of my imagination or fallacy of my own thinking? Thinking of the question of evil gave me a headache so I forced myself to turn away from this direction of thinking. However I could not stop alternating between disbelief, anger and terror about the memories. People looked at me in my agitated state and quickly glanced away. I must look like I'm a mad woman. Never have I felt so alone.

After landing in California, I got settled in at a motel. It was a relief climbing the steps to Marion's office. It was comforting to be back in her room although I dreaded relaying all the memories. I told her about the rage and the great energy it gave me taking me out of terror for periods of time.

"Rage is the ego's outrage because of a great hurt. You were so outraged at your mother killing your father and so overwhelmed that you had

to push those memories down. You didn't have the resources to deal with it as a child. Now you do."

"This is so bad that I don't want to know anymore," I wailed.

"Janie, going into what you want to avoid the most is called courage. If you face the worst, you can handle whatever happened. You lived through it. You made it. Now you can look at it from the adult perspective."

Trembling I paced the therapy room with great strides. I could scarcely breathe as I told her the details of being in court. Marion stopped me every so often to encourage me to breathe with her. I collapsed on the couch, breathed through each horrible picture, holding myself rocking back and forth like an autistic child. Marion comforted me telling me to chop up each picture and send it away.

Marion sat calmly before me bearing witness. It was excruciating work. At one point, I collapsed sobbing into her arms and she merely held me and stroked my hair telling me things would be alright.

After a night of tossing and turning, I awoke with a new realization. Maybe she didn't mean to kill us but only wanted to drug us to make us sleep. I told Marion, "What if my mother didn't really want to kill Bruce and me? What if she only wanted to drug us to keep us quiet?"

"That is a possibility," Marion replied slowly. "Laudanum was more in the mind of people back then especially if they did any reading in the turn of the century books about English people who used it as a tranquilizer. The idea is even in *The Wizard of Oz* with Dorothy and her friends getting sleepy after walking through the poppy field."

I pulled up an image of Dorothy and her three friends yawning and wanting to lie down to sleep in the poppy field. "Just wanting to drug us to keep us quiet or make us sleep would be a whole lot easier for me to deal with than thinking she wanted to kill us." I shook my head.

"Yes. That would be easier to live with. The fact is that you may never know. You will have to find a way to live with not knowing."

"I'd prefer to think she just wanted us out of the way temporarily. That even in her unhinged condition she didn't try to kill us."

“It is a distinct possibility. Let’s just breathe together into that likelihood. Tell yourself that you can never know but it’s okay to consider the lesser alternative. Acknowledge that you can never know the workings of your mother’s mind.”

We took each disheartening snatch of memory and forced the breath into it. She had me focus on acceptance of what happened and the past began to hold less of a grip on me. One day I said, “I’ll never know for sure. It seems easier to accept the hypothesis that Mother only wanted to keep us quiet. Was that the truth? I don’t know. It’s not going to do me any good to keep wondering about it.”

Marion smiled slightly and said, “Yes. It’s better to put things we can’t really know to rest.” It took quite a few meetings for me to work the majority of the other memories through. As I faced the overwhelming helplessness I’d felt with my father’s dying and with Mother’s trial, her calm voice continued to break through the horror always reassuring me that the worst was over. I heard her words reminding me that I was a strong woman.

I took comfort and thanked God for Marion, this knowing woman who kept reassuring me that it was not my fault. Gradually, the terror and the vividness of the details faded and the jagged, raw energy inside me subsided. My mind calmed. My sleep became less eventful with disturbing dream images.

Finally she pronounced me ready enough to return home. There was such relief to have the most difficult part of it over. Needing some time alone, I decided to spend some time in Scottsdale before returning to Colorado.

Coming back, the desert sky looked unusually bright. I steadied my pace when the stored-up heat of the Arizona sun hit me from my rented car. Alone. I felt so alone. Everything looked unreal—a greenish glow-- as I drove the freeway to get to my hotel. Gary came by. He simply held me as I related the pieced-out story of anguish. There was another shift into a deeper acceptance in me, more healing perhaps, in his acceptance of me for who I was and not flawed goods.

Returning to Colorado, Marion and I continued to talk over the phone to dismantle the remnants of memories that still teased my mind. She talked me through every fear. One day I hit on how I felt being alone much

of the time. "I'm an orphan. I'm the one that had to live on. They all died. Daddy, Bruce, Mother. There is no family here for me." I said, sobbing.

"At some time if we live long enough, we all become orphans," she said. "That is the way of life. That means you are free to pick out your own family now which you have been doing." She reminded me that I will never have it as bad as I did as a young, helpless child. We examined my Mother Wound as she called it. In some convoluted way, I understood that Marion had become the good mother that I never had. Tentatively I told her of my wish that she could be my mother.

"I'll accept a small bit of that role temporarily," she said, "But I am not your mother. I'm your therapist and I'll stick to that. You must become your own mother now. You must learn to mother yourself in the way that you wanted to be mothered."

"Your family failed you in meeting your needs of safety. This is not to blame them for your dad did the best that he could and your mother simply wasn't present with the severity of her illness. The adults around you couldn't help you and your brother with your mother's disruptive behavior and your dad's despair with the loss of his love. No man is strong enough to deal with the type of mental illness she had. And your grandmother had such guilt. She couldn't handle a daughter with mental illness living in a gossipy small town. She must have been afraid to love you for fear you might turn out like your mother."

Later I remember Marion's line about my father's inability to deal with his lost love. Thinking of Brad I shook my head. I knew something about the inability to deal with a lost love.

Chapter 31

Grace and an older man who looked like her were sitting in the community room having a cup of coffee and Elmira's famous cinnamon buns with Mr. Pfeiffer. They looked up when I came in and Grace motioned for me to come over. "Janie, this is my dad, Jim Howard. Dad this is Janie Perkins."

Both men stood up and Jim offered his hand. I noticed that his hand was rough and calloused not soft like Gary's hands or those of the guests who frequented the lodge. The hands of a hard-working man, I noted. The hands of a true rancher thinking briefly of Gene.

But it was his eyes that I noticed first. Blue like the cornflower-blue flowers that Kate Wolf sang about in her songs with crinkly white lines around them that broke into the tan on his face when he smiled. And then a grin that said he was pleased to show what he felt inside as he offered his hand. He was wiry like Grace and short, actually not much taller than I am with dark tanned, leathery skin that most real cowboys have from working outside in the elements. He wore the unofficial rancher dress of our area: unpolished boots, checkered western shirt and jeans. His weathered cowboy hat looked as if it had been worn for years. I could tell that he had not dressed up to meet me. But then, neither had I and that was typical of the mountain folk. I'd become a take-me-as-you-find-me kind of woman.

Jim pulled out my chair and I sat down. The pretext that brought us together was that I was considering buying some riding horses and putting in a small stable. We had added rentals of Nordic style skis the winter before to augment our snow shoes rental that had proven popular with some of our guests. The more experienced cross-country skiers took off on their own gliding silently over the snow-covered hills and valleys.

Now we talked horses—the best kinds to buy that would be gentle for untrained riders. "I am considering two mares although I suppose we need four horses for a family to ride. Real gentle ones of course."

"Four horses are a lot of work. Do you have someone to help you? Horses are a costly proposition what with the feed and the vet bills. Horses are not a money-making business."

I had to admit that I hadn't thought the idea through this far. "Maybe I'll start with one horse for me to ride. I had a great horse—a chestnut mare—in California years ago. I used to ride her up in the hills. Maybe just one horse to start with. I don't know anything about buying a horse."

"Why don't you come over to my ranch next week and try out a few of the horses that we've got. Then I can get an idea of the type of horse that will be suitable and help you start looking around for one."

I liked Jim and could see where Grace got her steady, calm way of looking at things. I agreed on a visit midweek when the lodge was at its slowest time.

The Howard ranch was tucked away in a grassy basin at the end of a long, dirt road with its back to the mountains. Driving through the big log entryway framed with log poles with the sign Howard Ranch and their brand, which was an H with a half circle around it, I took in the picture-perfect setting of the house with the mountains in the background. The big house was made of pine logs and the place looked as if it had been sitting there for a half century or more. I examined the place. It would make an outstanding painting but I also have to admit that I looked at it with my business eye and also considered what a great lodge it would make. Jim and two Australian sheepsdogs came out as soon as he heard my truck pull into the driveway.

"Jim, this is a wonderful place. The setting and home are marvelous. A work of art. How long have you been living here?"

"All of my life. My grandfather built this place for his bride. I was born here and learned ranching from my father. Don't know anything else. It's a good life for me."

The inside of the house was rustic with the pine logs exposed and a polished pine wood floor with old Navaho rugs and steer rawhides. There was a great room with a big stone fireplace which looked well used. There were numerous leather chairs and a worn leather couch long enough for sleeping on. There was a large dining room table and chairs by an open door which led to the kitchen.

I was surprised by the number of Indian pots and baskets that were scattered through the large space. Some looked quite old and faded. "Jim,

what a collection you have here. These are exquisite. How long have you collected Native American baskets?”

“My mother started the collection when I was a young man. I drove her to the various trading posts down in Arizona and New Mexico. After she learned of various weaver’s work, she went to the basket maker’s home to see her work. I learned from Mom about the fineness of quality of the different styles of basket making. Grace must have gotten her artistic ability from my mother. My mom started painting when she was around fifty and from then on we had artistic people visiting the house.”

I nodded and took in the portrait of Jim’s mother that hung above the fireplace. “And your wife? Was she artistic as well?”

“Not exactly. Betty Lou couldn’t draw or paint, but she could arrange things in a beautiful manner. She appreciated beauty. You can tell from her rose garden and flowers out back. My mom lived five years longer than my dad and she invited us to come back here to live after Gracie came along. Mom and Betty Lou got along fine, but until my son was born, I was outnumbered by women folks.”

I smiled at the image of the two women bossing Jim around. “I bet you needed a lot of keeping in line. Tell me about Betty Lou. What kind of woman was your wife?”

“She was a generous woman always there to help others. She knew what was right to do and she did it. She did a fine job of raising the children to be decent, hard-working people. Grace is a tribute to her mother; she is just like her.”

I wanted to know more about the woman who had shared Jim’s life for a long time. “How long were you together?”

“We had just had our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary when she started having heart trouble. We had a big spread—a big party—and must have had fifty people here to celebrate our anniversary. Several months later, I noticed Betty Lou standing quietly and looking puzzled as if she was watching something that wasn’t there. Her heart was beating irregularly. By the time she figured it out and went to the doctor, damage had been done. She had several heart attacks and then the big one that took her away.’ He looked up at a portrait that showed a smiling woman of strength.

I liked the woman I saw in the portrait and could see that Jim loved his wife and they had a good life together. “How have you handled being without her?”

“Her passing was seven years ago. It about killed me too. I was an empty man wandering around in this big house for a long time. The kids were grown enough and settled in their own lives but they came home to visit often. I threw myself into hard work and took on a bigger herd of cattle. Hired more men to manage. Hired a housekeeper and cook. Lonely.”

I felt for Jim. He was a good man who had experience loss. “I’m sorry you’ve had such pain.” I moved closer to him and touched his arm gently.

“Yeah. Pain. Part of life,” he replied briskly and took me into the kitchen to meet Lucia, the housekeeper.

Chapter 32

The search for the right horse became a journey that helped foster our friendship. Jim and I visited a few auctions and ranches but none of the horses we looked at seemed to be a keeper. “You’ve got to go for heart, intelligence and spirit in a horse,” said Jim. “Don’t give your heart to a looker. It’s more important what is on the inside. I look for a horse’s common sense.”

Being more visual as an artist, I looked more at the outside package but gradually began to understand what Jim meant about horse sense and heart while listening to him talk with other men about the attributes of a horse. He and the other men joked with each other a lot in a friendly-sort of way.

One quality I noticed about Jim which I liked was that he paid intense attention to whatever he was doing. If he saddled his horse, the horse became the recipient of all his energy. When he met someone he knew, he gave his entire manner to them making them feel as if they were the most important person in the world. After shaking hands with a fellow rancher, he often stood natural like with his hand on their arm with their joshing about some fool thing or another. His manner to me was quiet and respectful which I later identified as old-fashioned courting. Still he had not made a move to be anything but friends.

Our trips to look at horses became fascinating expeditions as Jim took it upon himself to show me some parts of the mountains known only by those who grew up in the region. He was a great tour guide and delighted in showing me some interesting sights such as private lodges that were off the beaten track, unusual mountain ranges and even hot springs. He knew the ins and outs of the mountains having ridden or skied over much of the area when he was younger.

One day I could almost feel the excitement in him as we drove up a long, rocky road to an old mine.

“There’s someone special here I want you to meet. Horace has been a friend of mine since I was nine or ten years old.” He honked the horn and an elderly man came out of the small mine opening which had a rail track leading into it. There were several old ore cars with rocks and dirt out front.

A little shack with a stove pipe sticking out it stood near the entrance of the mine. A mutt with brown and white spots came up to us wagging his tail hopefully. The old man grinned with pleasure to see Jim, brushed his hand on his dusty pants and extended his hand. "I'm Horace Hightly. Pleased to meet you. I've known Jim here since he was a little scoot. Even had him come help me out in this mining operation for one summer when he was a young fella."

Jim groaned. "Horace almost broke my back with all the hard work he threw at me. He had me digging and carrying buckets of dirt out from dawn until sundown. If we found any gold, I didn't hear about it. All I heard was "Need your help over here, Jim."

Horace laughed and winked at me. "Your dad decided that you were getting a little too wild after you got your first car. You had done some dumb wild thing and your dad figured that he needed to take you down a step or two. I recollect that he sent you to me to get your mind off some little gal."

"That's right and it worked. While I was doing slave labor up here, she took off with some other guy." He laughed at the joke which had been played on him. "Luckily I didn't have to pull the same trick on J. B. He picked out a good wife from the start and I've been proud of him."

We donned miner's hats with lights and Horace took us down into the mine following the rail tracks using a broad-beamed flashlight to show us the way. There was a dark deep smell of damp earth and the feel of coolness as we walked down the narrow shaft where the walls seeped with water.

"I've been prospecting most of my life and have been working this dang-fool mine for the last twenty-five years since the Harrow Mining Company closed down. I'll soon celebrate my eighty-eighth birthday here. Their assays showed that there is a good vein of gold that cuts on beyond that is about three hundred yards away. I can't blast because there is an underground stream close by and the big explosion would open up a rush of water. So I'm hand picking it."

We came to the end of the shaft and there was evidence of fresh digging. "I must move twenty or so buckets of dirt out a day," Horace said with determination. "I can only work the summer months of the year. During the cold winters I have to close down and go off to live with my daughter over in Denver."

“Three hundred yards. Looks like you are getting closer,” I said smiling at his enthusiasm. “How many yards can you go each summer?”

“Ten yards,” he laughed and pulled off his hat and smacked it on his leg.

Quickly I did the math. At age eighty seven with three hundred more yards to go, it was unlikely he would hit the gold! Horace roared at his joke and Jim and I joined in.

“Now Janie, you can see what gold fever does to a fella,” said Jim. “Luckily since meeting Horace, I’ve steered clear of it. It robs you of all of your common sense,” he said teasing Horace. “I’m sticking to cattle.” We shared some of our sandwiches with Horace and wished him luck in hitting that gold lode.

We continued our trips looking for the right horse. Jim was patient with me as I wasn’t ready to choose one of the horses he recommended. “This horse may be great, but it just doesn’t steal my heart,” I would say. He would nod and off we would go to another ranch.

Finally I settled on a five-year-old brown mare named Charlie with sweetness and steadiness to her and some beauty and style as well. I was thankful for Jim’s tutelage and without it would have bought the first pretty horse I saw. I boarded the horse at his ranch while waiting for Guy to finish his latest carpentry job so that he could build me a corral and a small barn at the lodge.

Chapter 33

Outings with Jim continued after the inclusion of Charlie into my life. “There is somewhere special that I want to show you,” Jim smiled as we headed south one day and cut over towards Crested Butte. We drove along the Slate River, the place where I had found my special rock. We got out of the truck to stand beside the water with the smallest of rapids as it poured over small indentations in the black, shiny bedrock.

I surprised myself by telling Jim about finding the slate rock that had become a worry stone of sorts to me, calming me with its energy that was of the earth. I pulled it out of my pocket to show him. “Here are the etchings naturally formed by the cracking of the rock that signify the Hopi Prophecy with the detour that takes people away from the path with heart and then the fork in the road of a life where there’s an opportunity to make an important change. John, my Hopi friend explained this all to me at a time in my life when I was at an important crossroads. He said the Hopis called it The Path of Life. I’d been headed into a path with no future and a lot of pain. This rock became a talisman for me of sorts and I’ve pulled it out in moments of confusion to remind me to take a breath and settle my mind. Prior to coming to Colorado I was heading in the wrong direction.”

“I know what you mean, Janie. So many people have to ride down the wrong path for a spell. You know it, but you keep on going until something happens and you realize that you can’t keep going down that wrong-way road any more. Hopefully you find a cut over to get to the right road so you don’t have to back track. Cutting over is preferable to back tracking.” He grinned at me.

I laughed, nodding my head. “You got it,” I said emphatically. “I wish I understood what it is in human nature that makes us so stubborn in making the wrong choices. And remaking them. Sometimes things are as plain as the nose on my face, but I can’t seem to change to save my soul.” The wind picked up and I shivered.

“And what is it that you can’t move on from, Janie? It seems to me that you’ve got things figured out and wrapped up neatly with your success at the lodge and store and all.”

I stooped down to feel the slick bedrock of the river polished clean by centuries of fast-rushing water making it satiny smooth and hard. And fell silent for a moment wishing I hadn't brought up the subject of being stuck. The wall that went up when Jim touched a vulnerable place in me was monumental. A Berlin wall of sorts. And yet this was the time to show my warts. If I were going to allow Jim into my life, he needed to know the kind of troubled woman he was dealing with. The walled-off part won and I shook my head and remained silent.

Jim accepted my silence. We drove on further up the road which twisted and turned parallel to the meanderings of the stream. As we drove higher, we noted the many flat-ridged meadows giving way up high to the Ponderosa Pine. We stopped to pick handfuls of the ripe red raspberries that grew wild in the area. Jim carried the picnic basket filled with Elmira's goodies as we walked through meadows strewn with brightly colored flowers. One meadow seemed brighter than the others.

"This is the Oh Be Joyful meadow," Jim said. "It's practically impossible to be sad here when you are in the presence of such beauty."

He was right. There seemed to be a serene harmony in this small valley which echoed its name. Goldie and Jim's dogs jumped and bounded through the tall grass showing a true appreciation of the meadow's name, Oh Be Joyful. There is nothing like the energy of dogs running wild in the beauty of nature to show true ecstasy.

We sat on the blanket and as we ate, Jim shared stories of growing up as a ranch kid. I laughed at his stories of being bucked off a horse and learning to deal with his hurt pride when the ranch hands laughed at him. He talked of the differences between his father's quiet, determined ways and his mother's loving, somewhat stubborn reactions and how they had worked things out between them. I felt at ease and relaxed and found myself sharing some of my childhood with him.

"I had a different kind of experience growing up. My dad who was a minister was gentle and loving. He was a philosopher, different from most small-town ministers in that he read Ralph Waldo Emerson and Thoreau. My mother became mentally ill when I was quite young. My memories are of her acting strange and being in and out of the state mental hospital. My brother and I raised ourselves although the women in my dad's churches sort of looked out for us, I guess. I was ten years old when my father died and my

brother and I went to live with my grandmother. She was a stiff, old-fashioned woman who didn't know much about children. Bruce and I were close so when he went off to San Francisco to work, I followed him west to go to school in Northern California. It was good to get out of the Midwest." I stopped there deciding to go slow in revealing much of my history.

Jim's response to my story was to reach over and put his hand over mine. We had been on several outings and this was the first time he had reached out to touch me. It felt comforting so I continued. "Later I started having bad dreams, nightmares really, about people dying. I spent some time with a therapist who helped me work things through."

Jim's eyes got big as he registered what I was saying. He said quietly, "I'm sorry about your folks. You've been through a lot. No wonder you have the air of wisdom about you."

"Wisdom? I never thought of myself as being wise."

"I've seen it in horses. If they come from good stock and have been gentled right, when rough things happen like a fall, they acquire a steadiness if their owner is solid with them. Horse sense, that's what they call it."

"Well, with losing my dad when I was young and my brother just before my twentieth birthday, I guess I'm pretty equipped to deal with anything now."

Jim crinkled his eyes and picked up my hand and brought it to his lips and kissed it. Although it felt reassuring to be in this exquisite place, I stiffened—was it that wall of mistrust? My body did not move towards him.

He didn't seem to notice, or if he did, he didn't show it. Nor did he move forward in pursuit. "You are pretty amazing, Janie." He stretched out on the blanket and looked up at the clouds. "If you are really quiet, you can take in the gratitude of this place. Let's just soak in as much of it as we can. Oh Be Joyful."

Chapter 34

Strange premonitions had always haunted my dreams. I had gotten used to dreaming about events before they happened, but was never comfortable with my lack of understanding what a dream meant. At times, the vague warnings seemed more like a curse. Now disturbing images of Brad wafted up and disappeared like fine smoke. I had the sense that something negative was happening although what I couldn't interpret.

After the fifth night of the unsettling images, I called Brad. We hadn't spoken for five years and it was time to make contact again. I knew he and his wife had divorced several years back. I'd read in a celebrity gossip column that she had had enough of his drinking and womanizing. The band had disintegrated into drugs and various rehab centers and then broke up after the death of the lead singer due to a drug overdose.

So I composed myself to make the call. "Hey Brad. This is Janie. Haven't heard from you for a while so I'm calling to see what's happening in your life."

"Janie, you sweet thing. It's great to hear your voice. Where are you?"

I was relieved to hear from the steadiness in his voice that he was sober. Still he did not sound quite like himself. Weaker perhaps. "I'm still in Colorado running my guest lodge. Everything is going well here. Tell me, what's going on with you?"

"Gee, there's so much that's happened since we last talked. Did you hear that Kris and I broke it off?"

"Yes, I remember reading something about it in the paper. What happened?"

"She said she couldn't handle my drinking anymore so she found herself some rich guy and left me. She kept hoping I would change in all those years and I didn't. When she left, I finally admitted I had a drinking problem and started going to Alcoholics Anonymous."

It was such a relief to hear that he was seeking help for the drinking. “Oh, Brad, I’m so glad to hear you’re in AA. Good for you. I’m sorry to hear about your marriage breaking up.”

“Yow, well, it happens. Now I’m living alone in my huge condominium overlooking the Atlantic Ocean. Can you hear the waves hitting the shore? How about you? Did you ever find a man to settle down with? Did you ever marry?”

“No, I’m still single. Several love affairs but I’ve always chosen the wrong kind of man. The unmarrying kind so far.” Switching the subject away from me, I repeated the humorous story of the ill-fated loves of the Farquart sisters and how I’d found their building while driving through Colorado. So I’m running a guest lodge built by two spinsters which suits me fine. There is a fine community of people and friends who help and support me.” Then throwing caution to the wind, I said, “Why don’t you come and visit?”

“I’m not traveling right now due to my doctor’s orders. The doctor has me on another round of chemotherapy but there’s no talk about another bout of radiation. He says I’m too weak for it.”

My heart almost stopped. “Chemotherapy? Radiation?”

“That’s right. The big C. Hodgkin’s disease. From all those years of smoking which I gave up as well as the drinking. I’m fighting it though. “I’m giving it a good fight.” His voice had a nervous quality to it.

“Wow. That’s a big hit. Are you okay? Do you have family with you?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Don’t have much pain. I’m puffy, yellow and moon-faced. Ugly as hell. Doing a lot of doctoring. My daughter comes by to help out. Don’t see much of my son. I just sit on the couch watching television mostly.”

I tried to picture Brad sick but couldn’t conjure up the image. “You are too young for this. Do you have good doctors?”

“Good enough, I guess. They get after me to eat better. I’ve been too big of a fan of those drive throughs. Burgers and fries have been my main

diet.” He groaned. “Sometimes I think those doctors don’t know what to do with me.” His voice seemed to grow weaker.

“I wish you could come to visit me. The Rocky Mountains would give you a boost. We’ve always got a room for you here at The Painted Ladies if you could come for a visit.”

“I’d love to come to Colorado to see your place. Mountain air would be good for me, but I can’t travel right now. Too many treatments.”

We talked a bit more but I could tell that he wasn’t in a good space and talking was wearing him out, so I hung up promising to stay in touch.

I sought out Goldie and buried my wet face in his fur. Then I put on the snow shoes and sneaking away from Copper who couldn’t handle the snow, Goldie and I went up the mountain. I went fast and furious stomping the snow down as I walked. As far as I knew, there weren’t any good treatments for his type of cancer. What I’d heard about it was people didn’t have much time left after getting this diagnosis.

Thinking of the weakness in Brad’s voice, I didn’t buy his somewhat optimistic attitude. That and my dreams told me that if I wanted to see Brad alive, I had better go see him soon. We had the last festival of the year to contend with so I waited a few weeks ruminating on my decision.

I kept in touch with Brad on a semi-weekly basis and I could tell by his lack of energy that things were not going well. He seemed grateful for my calls but his news wasn’t good. One day he told me that the doctors had given up on him. They didn’t know what to do with him anymore. When I asked if he needed another opinion or more specialized doctors, he blew my suggestion off. That’s when I realized that he’d been told that he didn’t have much time left.

Waking one night around one o’clock and looking out the window seeing a whirling snow flurry, I made the abrupt decision to go to Florida to see Brad. I called him the next morning and told him that I had some business to attend to on the East coast and would be out his way. We reminisced on how good it would be to see each other for a visit and with some reluctance, he agreed to my visit.

I drove over to Jim’s ranch the next morning for a ride. We bundled up and saddled the horses and rode a direction I’d never gone before. We

rode high up through flat topped outcroppings of dark gray rocks covered with lichens. The crusts and colors of rust, green, and orange with an occasional red looked like splashes of paint against the dark background showing through the snow. The cold, thin area tempered by sunshine and Jim's presence invigorated me.

We dismounted and looked out over the valley of his spread seeing the cattle and horses looking like miniature toy animals below. Even the ranch house seemed to be toy sized. The dogs were nosing around sniffing holes of a small mountain rodent-like creature called a Pika. Every so often we would hear a squeak and the dogs would rush in that direction, then look puzzled as it dashed down a hole. Jim pointed out a hawk that flew overhead intent on spotting some small game animal.

I smiled and reached out and tentatively touched his arm. Jim and I were progressing in getting to know each other slowly. There was a flow of friendship slowly being accentuated by his courtship of the old-fashioned variety and I needed to honor what lay between us.

Turning to him I said, "I am going to Florida to visit an old classmate. We have kept in touch all these years and now he has Hodgkin's disease. I'm going to visit him and see if there is anything I can help with. His name is Brad and he may be dying." I felt the old familiar pull and my voice sounded uncertain even to me as I said the words.

Jim looked at me sharply. "Hodgkin's. That's a rough one. Tell me Janie. Who is this classmate and what is he to you that you go off across the country to see him?"

Then shoring up my courage, I decided to go for broke, "Brad is more than an old classmate. He was my first love and we dated for a year in high school. We broke up because my grandmother didn't want me to get serious with him. I went to California to college and he went on to be a rock star. You may have heard of his band The Wild Rockers?"

Jim shook his head. "No, I never got caught up much in rock and roll." He looked straight at me. "This man. What are your feelings for him now?"

That was Jim—straight and direct. This was the time for me to be truthful. So I swallowed hard and said, "I still care for him. I've never

stopped loving him, but it's not a romantic love at this point. I believe that Brad doesn't have much time left and not much family to help him. I know how to nurse people who are dying. I'm good at that. I want to spend some time with him before he goes, that's all."

He nodded but there was a far-away look in his eyes. I wondered what he was thinking but did not push it. Jim and I were getting closer but the barrier inside me remained and I sensed that he knew it. It seemed like there was no more room in my heart for another man. This wall was too full of pain to let anyone else in. Something in me shouted out that men are too much trouble. Too troublesome. Or was I the one that was troubled?

I looked at Jim and admitted, "There's more. You need to know that I'm a pretty complicated woman. There is another man, much more recent, that I've been involved with on and off for some time. Out of my troubled youth came a troubled midlife," I admitted ruefully and recounted my affair with Gary. "I was in an unhappy phase of my life becoming bored with the shallow Scottsdale lifestyle and this man popped in to my store one day."

My head was down and I turned it slightly to the side covering up part of my face with my hand. "We talked a lot and got to know each other over time. The problem was that he was married and couldn't leave his wife. He told me his situation from the start so I didn't harbor any delusions. And yet it felt so good being with him, that I overlooked my moral compass. I fell in love with a married man. It was the stupidest thing I've ever done and yet I haven't been able to let it go. That's why I moved to Colorado to get a new start. It's been going on for a number of years although it's more of a friendship now. So you see, I'm the original painted lady," I said in an embarrassed voice.

Jim blew out his breath. "I wondered if you had ever married. This explains why not. So two men that you care about..." His voice drifted off as he seemed to be sizing up the situation. "I've sensed a reluctance in you to get involved—a holding back that I've not seen in other women. That's why I've taken it slow to show you what type of man I am."

I agreed feeling grateful that he had been sensitive to my reticence to become romantically involved. "I thank you for letting our friendship evolve instead of diving right"

Jim broke in with an urgency I hadn't seen in him before. "I've seen men who trifle with a woman. They won't give her a lasting relationship. That's not me. Janie, I don't want to just date you. I decided a long time ago after my wife died that I would not have one relationship after another. Serial relationships, I've heard it called. I want marriage. With the right woman, marriage is good for me. If we are to continue to spend time together, it must be because the friendship we have is going somewhere."

Tears rose up in my eyes and I reached out and touched his arm recognizing the sincerity of his words. I didn't want to hurt him and yet so much in me was unresolved that I couldn't give him any reassurance. So all I could say was, "We'll see. I know I have to go to Florida, that's all I know. After that we will see." We rode silently back down to his ranch and before I left I reached out and gave him a hug which felt comforting.

I told Elmira and Marylou that an old classmate and good friend out east was ill and needed some help and turned the lodge over to them. I made preparations to fly out of the Denver airport. Driving to the airport, I crossed the Continental Divide again and felt that thrill again at being at the highest top in the continental United States, but my heart was heavy.

Far in the distance I could see three mountaineers with ropes slowly and gallantly scaling a steep peak. They were tiny figures of color against the white snow of the mountain. They moved so slowly that they hardly seemed to be making any progress at all.

For some strange reason seeing the rock climbers sent me thinking back of Brad and the high profile life he had lived. It seemed to me that he was always looking for that homage that was not his due. That the applause from the crowds must have appeased some of his need for adulation. Perhaps the attention had not soothed his conscience but distracted him from it. At least that's what I thought of him, whether true or not.

Looking to those brave climbers giving their all against the elements, I thought, here are the true rock stars. And then thinking of Brad, I said out loud. "Oh Brad, why couldn't you have been this kind of rock star?"

Chapter 35

The air travel to Florida was uneventful and I settled into a small casita near the beach and Brad's condominium. I rose early the next morning and faced the rising Florida sun to prepare for what I knew might a challenging day, wondering that I'd even had the courage to come.

I'd been mentally preparing myself to deal with any changes in Brad. My body was tight with a dull pain behind my eyes. Truth was, for all my bravado, I was afraid to see him. I was worried how Brad would look for his sake, not for mine. His appearance has always been so important to him. He was one of the vainest men I had ever known. Even as a child, he'd had that child movie star, darling expression with the brightest of blue eyes and blonde hair—not that I knew him as a child but I'd seen pictures. Engaging smile even as a three year old as if he knew that the world belonged to him and all he had to do to get it was to smile. He morphed into that handsome boy I had first known. As he moved into his confident style, he embellished it. That had put a crack into the later stages of our relationship.

Myself, I became even more insecure in those days with all the girls who flirted with him even in my presence. His personality started to shift to cockiness. A tad of arrogance. Later he flaunted his looks and from the looks of the fan-magazine pictures he flaunted fame. Riding high on something insubstantial my dad would have said.

I hadn't worn make-up for years in my take-me-as-I-am-or-leave-me attitude that is typical of the women living in the mountains. But now off I went to a local department store to have a makeover. I bought small jars of products with exotic names at ridiculously expensive prices and then went to the ladies room and looked in the mirror and saw a real painted lady. Time for a make under I told myself and removed half of what the overly-eager salesgirl one third my age had put on me.

I'd chosen my outfit with care and my hair which was now gray hung in a cut just below my ears. I had to admit that I looked good with the lines around my eyes evened out with the makeup. I told myself I was doing this make-up job for Brad, but the insecure teenager inside me knew that it was really for her.

I stopped at a natural foods market and shopped for ingredients for sandwiches buying the healthier version of the junk food that most men like. I remembered he had always liked cherry pie so found one that looked edible and picked up a quart of vanilla ice cream.

I practiced my opening lines in the taxi. Ringing the doorbell with my heart pounding, my knees joined in the quaking. He opened the door quickly and we stood staring for a moment then grabbed each other furiously. "You look great," he said while I threw out the line, "You're still that handsome devil I knew when you were seventeen." He grinned and we hugged each other again. I was so glad we had that over.

In truth Brad looked terrible. His cheeks were sunken. Almost seemed to be touching each other. His skin was cloudy. His ribs showed beneath the tight, black T-shirt that blared out "Still a Rebel after All These Years." His walk was tenuous and he sat down slowly on the couch motioning for me to find a place to sit. His appearance and energy gave a clue to what I'd been wondering: how much time he had left. And yet the strength of his voice showed me that he was doing somewhat better than when we had talked on the phone.

Instantly I blocked out the realization of death lurking by, still feeling foolish about the still-ample amount of concealer, foundation, blusher, powder and mascara shining brightly on my face. Then letting that bit of foolishness go, trying not to be nosey, I took in his apartment.

A bachelor pad once active, but now on the brink of decay and disorder. An old couch and recliner which were well worn. A large screen TV of course hanging on the wall across from the sofa. Dark burgundy drapes that shut out the morning sun. A musty smell of cigarettes built up from long ago. Pills, magazine, old papers on the coffee table. Pictures of two handsome young people which must be his children. Collage on the wall of his children at many ages that must have been put together by his wife. Dust in the corners. He apologized saying he hadn't had time to straighten up.

We did the niceties of talking about my flight and a bit about the weather of this sunny spring day. That over, I steeled myself away from the purpose of my visit and set about to make things okay between us. That's what we women do when any hint of tension creeps in. We make things okay and more than that we make things friendly. Women friend and befriend I think the phrase is.

The years fell away between us as if we had never been separated. We both started talking at once about inane things as if we hadn't been conversing on the phone off and on for the past two months. In my nervousness, I brought him up to date on the latest gossip from our old classmates, some of whom were getting diseases. He moved from this topic rather abruptly—he didn't seem to want to know that people grow decrepit. Said he preferred to remember them the way they were. Okay, that was a rule I could live with. Stay in the present.

Pulling the drapes open just a bit to peer out, dust motes jumped from the fabric dancing in the air without a care in the world. The brightness of the sun sparkling on the waves hurt my eyes or was that a different pain hiding there behind my eyeballs? "What a great view of the ocean," I said. "When I went to school in California and became upset over a class, a test or how foolish I'd been acting lately, I went to the beach and just sat for hours. Taking in the sun and smell and the wind. Wondering about who set those rhythms of the surf crashing and receding."

He smiled. "Yeah, that beach is one reason I bought this place. In better days, I walked for miles and miles on that beach at night when I couldn't sleep. Wore a path in the sand and called it the Lonely Brad Memorial Path. It kept getting covered up by the tide," he said chuckling.

I shook my head at his metaphor. "Did you figure anything out? All that walking and thinking?"

"Yeah, I figured out that I was a damn alcoholic with a life running out of control. I saw that path in the sand as a rut I was in and couldn't get out. That's what drinking a pint of vodka daily does to you. I called myself the perpetual drunk. Started AA six years ago and I've been sober ever since. Well, intermittent sober. I've been true sober the last year since getting the Big C diagnosis."

"AA has saved many people from themselves. I'm glad you found them and had the courage to go. How are you dealing with all of this now?" motioning to the darkness of the room, the pills and the uncertainty of the future.

"I lie on the couch and watch TV most of the time. I'm really into the History Channel. And I know some of the reruns on the Nature Channel by heart. It's funny how those furry and fierce creatures have taken a hold on

me. I know more about those damm lions killing their prey than any man needs to know.” He shrugged, “It keeps me from thinking.”

“What don’t you want to think about?” I almost willed him to be on line with what was happening to his body and his past.

His voice dropped as he took the opening. “About how I’ve wasted my life. The years are a blur. The partying. Endless bars. Fights. Women chasing. Money slipping away. Not knowing the kids growing up. The marriage with Kris...” His voice trailed off as he sat looking regretfully at the pictures of his children, darling children who had his killer-smile, both of them.

For an instant I was angry at his nature that could not be faithful. “So, the love of a good woman couldn’t redeem you?”

He looked away with his head slightly down, shoulders hunched and stayed silent.

I got it in that moment that he felt guilty about the way he had treated Kris and perhaps other women. And that this was much as he could say, as much regret he could muster up and admit. My anger at him diminished witnessing the tortured anguish in his voice. So there was agony about how he had lived his life. I wanted to go sit on the edge of the recliner and put my arms around him. What he was saying about the wreckage he had created for others was true. The gossip columnists had accurately portrayed his decline back when he was still news worthy. “That’s what looking back is for. Especially at we wind down our lives. Looking at those paths not taken. Those choices made and those turned away from. I have some regrets myself. Too smart too late. But that’s what this time we have now is for. For looking back and changing to the way we’d like to be if we look back six months, a year, five years from now.” I said this thinking that he probably didn’t have even the lesser of those amounts.

He picked up on my thought. “Yeah, well I’m dying. The doctors have stopped all treatments. They say that I don’t even have six months,” he said cynically. “My number is about up.”

“Surely there must be something they can do,” I said. “What about one of those experimental treatments that I’ve read about?”

“Nope. They have pretty much told me to take this time and get as much out of life as I can without the bother of being nauseous and vomiting all the time like my last bout of chemo. They said to get my affairs in order. They have me check in and all but there isn’t anything else they can do other than make me comfortable.”

“Then you’d better hurry up and figure it all out,” I said getting tough and looking him straight in the eye. I’d decided to be frank with him before I came but now I was amazed how brutal that sounded. “I’m sorry that came out a bit brusque. It’s just I had to start figuring things out from early on to survive living with my mother who became crazy. What you don’t know about me is that I lived with a mentally-ill parent before I moved to Warrenville. I was angry about it for years but finally worked it through. Tell me about survival for you.”

“Survival always meant hanging on to make that next album with the band. It was such pressure coming up with those lyrics that would blow people away so that they’d keep buying the records. It meant always being on the road doing a gig and never meant staying in one place. The stress of living the rock and roll legend of being the wild man. Drinking and drugging were a way to survive. I partied to get away from that pressure that built up in me. I was pretty stupid keeping myself drunk most of the time. Always a little buzz on to keep the excitement going. God, I must have been addicted to excitement as well as to the booze.”

I felt the sadness swell within me. “You mean as well as the fame and women? And the fast life? You weren’t raised that way given your sweet mother and the Christian way she brought you up. “

“Ah, yes, sweet Regina. She was gentle alright but you didn’t know my dad. Ken was a hell raiser. I have a few good memories of this big, booming man who threw me up on his shoulders and told me I was a chip off the old block. He was a musician too and played the trumpet in some small-time band. He was killed in a bar room brawl when I was six. He fell and hit his head and never got up.” His eyes drifted down to the floor. “I’ve never told that to anyone. Technically it was an accident and no one was charged as he was the one who started the fight. It was pretty hushed up with my mom being friends with the wife of the police chief. Small-town people did things like that back then. The newspaper reported it as a heart attack and people never found out. It was a seedy bar over in the neighboring county. I used to hang out there some when I got my motorcycle. I could picture his body lying there in front of the bar.”

Now that was too much raw pain for me and I went to the arm of the recliner and put my arm around him. We stayed there for a moment and then I got up. “Parents, huh. I’m sorry that happened to you. That’s rough. You loved him?” Brad had previously told me his dad died of cancer. I remembered that addicts lie. Addicts lie when they can’t face the truth. To themselves and to others.

He nodded his eyes focusing on somewhere long ago caught in memory. “He made us laugh. Mom never wanted any other man. Everyone else was small next to him she always said. She loved him even more than she loved us kids. She was probably depressed most of my childhood after he died. But we were from him and she soldiered on for us for his sake keeping him alive in our minds with her stories of his bigger-than-life personality. She said he had some wild Indian blood in him and we had to watch out when he went on the war path. Some funny story about him jumping up and swinging from the chandelier and it came crashing down on him. How he sat on the floor with blood running down his face yelling ‘Whoopee!’ She’s laugh every time she told it, like it was the funniest thing in the world. God. That wild man was my legacy and I fulfilled it.”

“Sometimes what we get from our parents is something we can’t escape. We’re true to our parents or untrue as the case may be. Your dad was a handsome man. I remember that picture of you sitting next to him on his motorcycle. Did you ever forgive him for dying?”

“Hell no. He went off and left me confused about what it was to be a man. Then I discovered music. Drums. Guitars. Rock and roll, drink, drugs and women. In that order.” He grinned wickedly, and then shook his head regretfully.

“So you did.” And that broke my heart I said silently to myself. But this wasn’t the time to speak about this old hurt. “So you did,” I repeated. “It was your legacy, but no longer if what you’ve been telling me is true about being clean and sober. Or is that a bunch of bull crap you’ve been feeding me?”

I noticed that my talk was turning tougher, more explicit around him. That I was unwilling for the first time in my life to self-censor what filtered down from my brain. Maybe I thought he needed the punches. I could no longer play sweet Janie with him or any other man for that matter. Even in his vulnerable state, he was emotionally tougher than I had realized and there

just wasn't time. The years in AA and the dying process had deepened him. I looked up to see his reaction to what seemed like tough talk coming from me.

It didn't faze him. "Unlike my dad, I lived long enough to sober up. I was in my share of brawls. Usually over a woman who seemed important in the moment. Nothing else worth fighting about was my motto for years and then after a painful bruising and some broken ribs, I threw that one out. Only took me thirty years."

"And the forgiveness thing?" I pulled him back to the course I wanted him to go, not wanting to hear old war stores of his women. "The last part of life is about forgiving. I learned that with my mother as I sat by her bedside while she was dying. People who don't die quickly have some time to work out the questions of a lifetime. The bigger plan as I see it is that we are supposed to forgive ourselves for our so-called sins before we die."

He looked away as if to consider that forgiveness might be a part of dying. "Forgive ourselves? And did your mother?"

"I'm not sure. I never really knew my mother. She was still pretty out of it, mind wise. Once for a moment she looked at me with a lucid look in her eyes. Stared me right in the eyes like maybe she knew who I was and what she had done. I'd like to think she tried to offer up an apology but that may just have been my wanting one. Anyway, whether she forgave herself or not is beyond my knowing. But forgiveness did happen. I sat one day silently crying, holding back the noise that came shaking up from my heart. Then I let it out like an animal that had been wounded, like it came out from a rent in my soul. I forgave her for not being the mother I wanted."

"Come sit beside me on the sofa, Darlin'," he motioned. And so we both moved to a common ground that we had never talked about, never even realized we had. Parent loss. Grief and confusion. Then an inspiring thought came out of my mouth before I even realized what it was. "Your dad probably didn't have time to forgive himself, dying so quickly. So it's your job to do it for the both of you."

His body tensed and his breath sucked in sharply and tears rolled down his sunken cheeks. Something shifted slightly in his energy. He became very quiet almost trance like. Somewhere in the distance an ambulance wailed; someone else was in pain.

We sat there with my head on his shoulder feeling the old consolation of each other's bodies until I noticed he was exhausted. Feeling strangely comforted, I said, "Okay rebel, you take over from here. I'm going to go fix some lunch."

I went to the bathroom to wash up and sat on the toilet seat and cried. Deep bottomless, silent sobs but for whom I couldn't tell. Me, him, my poor parents, his. All of us. For not knowing how to do life better and come out the other end happy. For the ravaging scars within that caused bright dreams to become lost. For the despair of it all of those two teenagers who had lost their parents earlier on and found each other to hold off the pain for a short while. I cried for the despair of my decision to never have children of my own.

I peeked out of the bathroom and saw that Brad had drifted off to sleep. For a short while, I fantasized about a different outcome for us having a happy life and growing old together. Him working at the garage and ending up owning it and me being a housewife raising our dark-eyed, blonde children, planting a garden, pot lucks, maybe even running for the school board. Small town, uneventful lives that found a sense of purpose. Children running through the house. The exquisite feeling that came with holding the first grandchild. My dream for the happy family. What might have been.

If the craziness gene hadn't run through my family and the addictions gene through his, our love might have had a different middle and ending. Then the pictures of his children Julie and Todd flashed in my mind and I told myself to get over it. To get back to reality. Then steeling up my will, I dismissed my need to have things differently. It hadn't happened and that was it.

Families. They meant so much to us, everything really, and we both had gotten a raw deal with one of our parents. I remember hearing something that if you don't like the parents you got, pick a new family not of your blood, but one of similar interests. I ended up thinking about that second family of people I'd put together in that small Colorado mining town.

Chapter 36

Through an unspoken agreement, I stayed on with Brad past my original visiting plan of two weeks. Feeling my way slowly I straightened up his place, first the kitchen and then the rest a bit at a time. Hired a cleaning service to come in for window cleaning and deep work. I brought in some plants and a small water fountain and opened the drapes slightly to let some light in for the plant. Brad growled whenever I added something new, but it was a false growl. Anything to change the energy of the place. It took some time, but I tracked down some CDs of obscure jazz artists he'd mentioned that he enjoyed.

Brad groaned when I did energy work in the condo to let the energy flow more easily. "That's a California thing. It doesn't work here on the east coast." But it did and the place had a much better feel. I started to forgo the healthy diet and brought in the hamburgers, fries and milkshakes he craved and anything else he wanted. "Hell," he said. "No more special diets. I'm dying. I can have anything I want."

"Well if that's the attitude, I'm having chocolate. Give me good dark chocolate over junk food any day." He laughed when I came back one day with his favorite fast junk foods and five pounds of all kinds of chocolate.

I settled into a routine of checking in with the staff at the lodge and then going to Brad's place mornings around nine thirty. I'd bring something for lunch and we'd spend time just hanging out. He usually took a nap in the afternoons so I'd leave for a while and come back around dinnertime to fix a simple meal.

Afternoons after walking long stretches on the beach I went to explore the richness of the city. I loved walking through the Cuban section of town. I visited the churches and small mom and pop stores that sold exotic goods. The smells of Cuban cooking permeated the atmosphere: onions, garlic and peppers sautéed in oil along with wafts of a rich tomato sauce made my mouth water. I enjoyed hearing the gentle rhythms of the Spanish language spoken and the blaring of Cuban music.

The ocean was always there pounding the sand or retreating from it. I spent several hours a day either walking or wading in the surf. I sniffed the salt air, so familiar, yet different from that of the beaches of the west coast.

Sitting on the sand my low mood took over. Much of my alone time was spent reflecting with some crying. Again I was mourning. The salt tears that fell were for what might have been.

Could I have saved him from his life of addiction? I had entertained the idea for some time and came to the conclusion that the roots of destruction were sowed in him long before we met. I had known the best of him during his shining days of youth. Later he had avoided his pain turning to anything that would calm the demons within him for a while. His choices seemed inevitable and I couldn't have done anything to keep him from reaching for the bottle or other women. He was a driven man and nothing could have stopped him from the self-destructive path.

I sat on the beach in a private spot and cried over the fact that we had so little time left. That is when I shook my fist at God and yelled that it wasn't fair. Then I'd taken it all back, got a grip and told myself that life is not a fair and there aren't any merry-go-rounds or Ferris wheels around or any cattle and pigs being judged for 4-H kids to win ribbons. Life wasn't meant to be fair. Life is. It just is.

Finally I calmed down and gave up my anger at God. My crisis of faith which I had side-stepped all my life passed. Death is part of life I told myself and accepted what my eyes told me daily. Brad was definitely in a rapid state of decline.

One day Brad said softly, "I regret that we didn't get married. Maybe my life would have turned out differently if we had gotten back together after high school." He sighed and looked a little embarrassed.

"I've given that some thought. I hid out on a ranch in northern California for a few years after college. I decided not to be in contact with you. I had enough of my own stuff to deal with. You still would have had to deal with the addiction problem. I had to deal with a schizophrenic mother. I was such a mess I couldn't have helped you with that. Kris was probably more stable for you than I would have been in those years."

"Yes, she was there for me. For the children. She was a good woman and still is. She did what she could to create a home for the kids while I was away. She tried to get me to stop drinking and screwing around. It was me. I was on a high of fame that played itself out in drinking and carousing. I blew

it. Kept blowing it. No one could talk any sense into me. Finally she couldn't take it anymore and she left me."

Shifting his mood, he grinned and said. "I feel a sniveling attack coming on. A. A. has helped me own my stuff. Their rule is 'No Sniveling.' I wasn't to go there. I've hung out in that place long enough. Here's what I finally figured out. I've had two good women love me—first you and then Kris. There was something within me that couldn't be content with that. I was too restless." He shrugged. "I blew it. In AA, they told us to come to peace with our past. That's what I'm trying to do now. God, I made bad choices."

I sat quietly not know what to say. Everything he said was absolutely true. But his mood was not one of blaming himself. He simply was stating a fact as if that was how it was.

"Janie, it's been great having you here with me, not judging me. It helps me to stop beating myself up for what I've done and use this time I have left to spend time with those I love. Julie and Troy are seeing a different side of their old dad, now."

I looked over at the pictures of his children who I had yet to meet. "Finally they have a dad who can pay attention to them without outside distractions. I'm glad you have this time for them. And for figuring out who you are as a person."

He threw his hands up in the air and said, "As if I'll ever the Hell know who I am. Oh well. It's been a trip."

Suddenly I had an idea. "If you are up to it, we can have a party and invite all the people you care about. I'm known for my ability to organize some pretty wild parties. Polka music and all."

He laughed. "Janie, I love you." Brad reached out his hand and I took it. The old feelings came back and for a moment we were right back there in high school laughing at silly things that didn't mean a thing.

This wasn't the wild, passionate, unfulfilled love we had together in high school. This was an older mature kind, that of two old lovers who had stood the test of time. "I know. I love you too. I've never stopped loving

you. I'm just so grateful we have this time together at last even though we are old folks now."

He grinned at the idea of us being the old folks and raised an eyebrow.

"Well we are old. We will be sixty years old next year; that is if you hang around until that long." We were comfortable with each other enough that I could tease him a bit about dying.

He raised his glass, "I plan to. Darlin' to sixty. To life and death and love in our old age."

We never did get around to having the party although we talked about it and how wild we would make it. Some days we talked of serious matters and other times we just hung out. One day Brad asked again about my not getting married. "Janie, I've been wondering. Why did a good-looking girl like you never marry? You must have men falling all over you."

This was the opening for me to tell him about the romances in my life, so I took it. "There was a fraternity guy I was pinned to during college in California and lived with at his ranch. He wanted to marry me but there just wasn't enough there for me to make a lifetime commitment. Then I went back to Indiana when my mother was dying and then traveled in Europe. There were always plenty of men interested around but no one that interesting. Then I moved to Scottsdale and started my first store. I met this wonderful man who I fell in love with. We were together for a number of years before I moved to Colorado."

"Why wouldn't he snap you up? Not the marrying kind?"

I got up and went to the window to look out at the ocean. "No, that wasn't the problem. He was married and couldn't give up his family." I hung my head feeling slightly embarrassed admitting it yet knowing that he above anyone else would understand. "It still goes on. I still see him every so often."

He shook his head as if he understood, and said, "The eternal, crazy love triangle. It goes on and on until somebody stops it."

He said this with a tone in his voice that made me wonder if he had had this setup with his wife and some other woman. I didn't want to go there

so kept the conversation on me and said, “I made the fatal mistake of giving my heart to someone who wasn’t fully mine. Still, he’s a good man.”

“Well, he’s not such a good man to string two women on like that. You are worth more than that, Janie.”

That stung but I knew what he said was true. As long as I was discussing my love life, I decided to bare it all. “Now there is a rancher I’ve been seeing. He is a widower of seven years and a good man. Solid and caring. He wants to marry me.”

“And you? What do you want?”

“I’m confused. I care for him, of course, but it doesn’t seem fair to marry him when I have strong feelings for someone else.” I left out the part about my unresolved feelings for him.

“There is a different triangle for you with the two men who care about you. If he’s a good man as you say, I hope you work it out, Janie. You are too good of a person to go through life alone.”

I remained silent not knowing what to say.

Brad continued, “What I want for you, not that it is any of my business as I gave up that right a long time ago, is to have someone to take care of you.”

I said, “Yes,” feeling glum. Then I smiled and moved forward to take his hand. We held hands for a moment and then I went to the window where I stood looking out at the sunset over the waves.

I had met Brad’s daughter Julie when she came by to see him. At Brad’s urging, we met for lunch. She had known about me for years—the old flame, first love, etc.—and was curious to meet me and wanted to hear about her dad as a teenager. I liked her immediately. Blonde hair, natural but touched up with casual highlights, blue eyes like Brad’s. My heart ached just seeing her smile and the expression that was so much like her dad’s full of anguish.

I regaled Julie with stories about her dad winning the Homecoming football game with a last minute touchdown, about the old car he bought

with his hard-earned money from working at the local garage pumping gas, his stubbornness about coaxing that old sedan to keep running. How we got stranded two miles from town and had to hoof it back laughing all the way. How we were forced to break up and how I'd reasoned that we were not supposed to marry each other or we would have. That he was meant to marry her mother and that she and her brother were meant to be. That I'd accepted taking a way, way back seat in his life just touching base now and then.

I told Julie of my nursing experience with Bruce's illness and of the time sitting with my mother when she was dying. I carefully explained my role in being here at this time of Brad's life. Told her just enough of my story and softly inquired about hers. Just listened basically. She related growing up with her dad always being gone except on some exciting holidays and exotic vacations. And how she had become closer to him in these past few years. We talked about her new job. Her ambitions. We shook our heads over her current lover, a pale replica of her dad, of course. Women together, we commiserated over the heart mysteries of love and loving.

I met with Kris; Brad's ex-wife was a nice woman just like his cousin had once told me. If we had met in any other circumstances other than caring for the same man we might have been friends. Without speaking about it, we seemed to recognize the pain that we each carried for the love of this man, although hers had been much greater than mine. She had given several decades of her life to him living on the front line of his private war. She had those bad years; I'd been spared those. She'd stayed with, hung on, hoped that he would wake up to his self-destruction, prayed for change and finally divorced him and gone on about her own life.

I told Kris of my admiration for her for being a trooper doing what it took during that what must have been hell of their long years together. Twenty two years, Brad had told me, she held out before she left him. The marriage worked as well and as long as it did because of her. I know I couldn't have stuck it out with him as long as she did. I would have kicked him to the curb after the second affair. Now Kris was married to a good man who was devoted to her. I liked her and invited her and her husband to come to Lodesville someday to visit the lodge, knowing of course that she never would.

As the weeks went on, Brad's condition continued to go downhill. He was pretty weak most days spending more and more time lying quietly in

the bed. Brad had told his doctor that I was part of his family. As his supposed cousin, I kept in touch with his doctor reporting on his condition.

It seemed as if the days were counting down and they were. One day after lunch, Brad went back to the bedroom to lie down and fell asleep. I tidied up around the place as was my custom and then went in to look at him. He looked so vulnerable and weak lying there with face thinned and his mouth slightly open snoring gently. As I sat on the bed, he stirred and woke somewhat to smile up at me.

I nudged him to turn over to one side and said, "Move over." Then I got a wicked thought and said, "It's been a long time since I crawled into a man's bed."

"Well, Darlin' I'm not much use to you now," he replied still half asleep.

I smiled and carefully lay down beside him. As I put my arm around him, he murmured some endearment, what I couldn't tell, but it was enough to know that I was welcome.

I lay there beside him listening to his breathing which was irregular. For a time I tried to breathe in rhythm with him but my pattern of breath was longer and deeper than his. For a moment I felt the pangs of the old unfulfilled lust left over from the teenage years rise up in me. I smiled and told myself to let it go. It was too late now for any sexual energy left over from those unexpressed early years to come up.

Sometimes two people who care about each other have the unique opportunity of being in the right place at the right time. And so this is ours, I thought. It's taken us many years to get our bodies together and now here we finally are. Let the past be passed. Here we are never-to-be-lovers whose affection has spanned many years. All we have now to give to each other is some companionship and the comfort of old love which is considerably different from young love.

Chapter 37

It was no easy work watching someone die that you've loved for such a long time. My mind was in an emotional turmoil, but something inside told me that this was the storm before the quiet. I didn't fight the inner commotion, but merely watched as different moods passed through me. In the worst of it all I heard my father's voice offering that comforting verse from the bible, "This too will pass." And with that assurance, I leaned into the storm instead of trying to avoid it.

I was finally coming to terms with Brad's dying, but to accomplish that extraordinary task, I had to come to terms with life. And that meant coming to grips with the pain and suffering I had carried for so many years. Some of the pain had been foisted upon me; some was of my own making. Here I was losing someone I cared about once more. And the loss seemed threefold now. Daddy, Bruce and Brad. Gary was there somehow in all the mix.

Of course I asked myself, the way everyone does when they experience great tragedy, the "why" questions. Why must people suffer? Why must people die? Why is there so much pain in the world? As I called out the "why me?" question, I heard a small voice inside me giving the answer, "Why not you? Are you so special that you should escape suffering?"

So my angst gave way to the realization that some questions are not answerable and to simply accept the facts. People are born; they live; they suffer. And then they die. Some people find some happiness along the way some of the time. Life is what we make it.

I remembered reading somewhere that wisdom can come to those who go through adversity and go out the other side without sitting down to feel sorry for one's self. I had to be willing to stay with the pain and not distract myself by running away. And so with that, the measured realization finally came that it was time for me to let go of something that never was mine to begin with.

For the first time I considered letting the pain empty me. As I confronted mortality and all that it means, the possibility of my moving beyond it came forth. I bowed to the understanding that even though

suffering had stalked me for much of my life, in spite of it all, I valued life. And I valued what lay beyond life. Whatever that was.

I had to let my grief be grief and know at the same time that it was okay. Brad is mortal. I am mortal. All passes away. And that is okay. I couldn't come up with a fancier word. It is just okay.

As Brad had once said, "Sometimes you just have to take a deep breath and chuck yourself out of the plane. No parachute, no safety net, it's free- fall time. That free fall without a net, without a hesitation—that's surrender." He was surrendering in dying and I was to surrender to the greater order of things—God's plan for our world of which the death of those we love is a part of the bigger picture, a task I'd been working on since childhood.

My head went down and my hands automatically went to the prayer pose. There was a tingling in my mouth and my throat softened. Tears came to my eyes and I said simply, "Thank you. Thank you for all of it."

As I allowed the emptiness to pass through me, a turning point came and I let go. Of what I could not say, but a big load was lifted from my shoulders and that tightness that had clamped a vice tightly on my heart released.

Perhaps it was the fear of people leaving me that had permeated my life.

Chapter 38

As it turned out, Brad and I had a month together hanging out and talking over the paths our lives had taken. One day when he had more energy than usual we spoke again of the choices in life. I decided to share what I'd been mulling over. "Well I've learned one thing for sure. At least I hope that I've learned it."

As I paused, Brad broke in. "Live and learn as we say in AA. And what is that one sure thing?"

"To stop choosing men from the Unavailable List."

Brad considered what I said for a moment. "I'm sorry I wasn't there for you, Janie, Darlin'."

It was a moment of consolation. It was the closest thing to an apology from him as I could ever hope for. A luminous understanding came over me and the old hurt of near half a century dissipated. I shrugged and smiled. "Well you're available now. We're finally available for each other."

It was a comforting idea somehow. We didn't have all those lost years; we didn't have the future but we certainly had this time between us. Comforting. It wasn't much but it was the time that we had now. We each became lost in our own thoughts for a moment.

And I thought of the fever that love brings. So what is love-sickness? Certainly a disease of the fertile mind that turns obsessive by single mindedness honing in on a singular person being necessary for one's own happiness. Once the idea of love saving me from loneliness had not been fixated in my young mind. Then after dating Brad, it was. Curious what first love can do for and to you.

The days winnowed down and shortly after his birthday, Brad grew weaker. We talked less and just hung out. The quiet time spent together was bittersweet just being together.

The wrenching emotions of torment had quieted but a profound sadness remained. I knew from being with Bruce and my mother as they lingered between the world of the living and the world of the dead, that the

passing goes easier when those who are to continue on do not try to hold on. I mentioned this idea to Kris who talked to her two children about the need to let go. Julie came by everyday and the three of us made small talk until that became a chore for him. Then we simply sat beside him with silence. The more I saw of her, the more I liked her quiet competence as she grieved but welcomed this time with her dad.

Brad seemed to become more and more comfortable with his passing. We spoke of dying and Brad told me that he was ready for release as he was worn out with life. He grew quieter and appeared to come to some sort of peace about the life decisions he had made. His appetite declined and he was weak most of the time.

Brad had been in a semi-coma for several days drifting in and out of consciousness. He was well medicated and not in much pain. Kris, Julie and Todd had been coming by more often just to sit for a while in silence each with their own memories. I took a back seat and started to spend more of my time on the beach.

One morning, the home hospice nurse who came by to check in told me that this would probably be his last day. She said that his arms and legs were becoming blue which meant that the blood was being pulled into his chest. I called his family to come right over.

Kris and Julie sat on either side of the bed holding his hands. Todd kind of lounged around with a nervous energy leaving the condo often to catch a smoke.

I sat at his feet. That's how it should be I reasoned. Tears welled in my eyes watching the family reunited at last. Hanging together even through the worst of times. So this is what it takes to be a family.

Somehow with all that we had gone through together, Kris, Julie and Todd seemed like long-lost relatives of my own. I saw strength and dignity in Kris as well as her sorrow. Kris, dear Kris. I let myself feel love for this woman who Brad had chosen to share his life with, bear his children. And his children, his beautiful children, troubled adults who had yet to discover who they were.

One of Brad's requests was for me to talk to his family about his love for them. I tried to figure out what to say to his family. I asked myself, what is the heart of the thing? This thing called life. And of death?

Daddy always had that quality of saying the right thing to his parishioners when they were hurting. I used to listen wondering how he knew the right words. The main thing I had learned from those far wiser than myself was to go to a loving place inside and let go of what I wanted to happen. If we love, we can't attach to the outcome.

Brad seemed to be in a coma. A calm state of mind came over me as I told the stories Brad had shared about his love for them. How he had chosen Kris out of all the others to share his life with. How happy he was on his wedding day. How proud he felt when he first saw each of his babies. The memories of being at the beach house, his delight in teaching Julie and Todd to swim, his happiness when he got their letters when he was on the road.

Maybe I made some of it up. Something seemed to speak through me. The heart has the capacity to open up in times of sacredness when someone passes. I just let it flow. I talked about his regret that he had not been there for them and of his struggle between the high life on the road and being a family man. His guilt that he had not lived a better life. They sat weeping silently.

I spoke of their longing for Brad's love and how he couldn't give it fully because of his own pain. And that he was changed by their love. He was a man who wanted love that was more than ordinary. Extraordinary love to make up for the hurts and stings he had experienced. We all are extraordinary in wanting love in our own way and we get it in ordinary ways. Did Brad hear me drifting in and out of consciousness? I'd like to think so.

I ended up saying part of one of the bible verses I had learned when we had to memorize verses in fifth-grade Sunday school. Speaking more to Brad than them I said, "A time to love and a time to die...." Choking up, I couldn't remember the rest.

I am the preacher's kid after all. My good father's daughter.

I had talked with his family the day before about the dying process and of the death rattle that sometimes comes just before passing. That the

eerie sounds from the chest were merely the person's last attempt to gather breath to remain on earth a little longer. When the rasping sounds came, I stood up and was surprised to find myself reaching out to his son Todd who was silently shaking. When the noise stopped Brad's eyes opened wide as if in surprise just for a moment and he looked upward. He gave one last breath and passed over.

We three women burst into tears sobbing simultaneously.

Then seeing Brad's body lying there absolutely still, I faced the reality of what I'd been preparing myself for. The mourning I'd been doing for this last month had helped.

Ahhh, Brad. I said silently to him. Brad. I'll see you next time. I'll see you next time around. But if you come back an addict, I'm not loving you. Then feeling foolish as if I could will myself not to love someone in a new reincarnated form, I said his name. Brad. Blessings to you.

Chapter 39

Leaving the condo, I felt disoriented. Unglued. Dizzy. A feeling of unreality overtook me. With all the high emotions of the day I needed connection with nature and light—lots of it. I headed for the beach to take in the great healer of surf and sound. The bright sun glistened and the waves repeatedly lapped up against the shoreline. I thought of Brad and the twists and turns that our lives had taken. How our lives had touched base back and forth across the continent and through the years.

I sat on the hot sand and thought about the conclusion I had come to that he had not been the best man for me. Best! Well if best was the priority of loving someone I should have chosen Wayne Biggers. Wayne who had never had the courage to ask me out in high school but followed me around with big calf eyes. Wayne who had rushed over to me breathlessly at every class reunion as if I were the most important person in the room. Successful Wayne who had gone on to get his doctorate in English and became a department chairman at Indiana State and who married the banker's daughter—Sandy Ketchum, the little girl I used to baby sit. I heard that they were a loving couple with several grandchildren. Why couldn't I just have married a sensible, good-hearted man like Wayne and settled down living happily in a small Indiana town?

Love? Such a funny, unpredictable state of mind and emotions that bids us love. The heart has the capacity to open up in times of sacredness when someone passes. We don't do the choosing. Remembering the illogic of love, do we have anything to do with it at all? Falling in love at sixteen had been a big mistake, but there it was. Was there any choice with my wanting to feel connected to someone that could take me out of the black hole I lived in?

So here's the sum of it. Men have loved me and broken my heart. And I've loved and broken their hearts. Would I have had it any different? Love's coming and going is the way of the world. I smiled and thought back of the four men in the sixty years of my life. Of Brad, Gene, Gary and now Jim.

I sat on the sand as the western sun went down trying to puzzle out the fate that takes over a life. Why is it that some people get the charmed life and others go through so much misery? Why did some people, seemingly

good people, have it so hard? Mentally-ill people and addicts seemed to have it worse than others. There was such injustice of those who had driven behaviors that steal the choice to have a quiet life. A connected life. These questions were too much to take in so I gave up. Well, I reasoned, at least Brad had his family with him at the end. And Mother and I had made some sort of peace.

Finally I got around to thinking about death. Despite his wild years, Brad accomplished a good death. He had achieved a valiant passing after the three-year battle with cancer. I had helped arrange some of that, smiling as I thought of how he had teased me about my organizing his life and tidying up things. It seemed that my need to organize things was just one way of coping when my mother's sanity slipped. I smiled thinking of the little girl I used to be who'd baked cookies and made the house neat to keep her mother happy.

In spite of the heat, a small chill went across my heart as a new thought passed my mind. Who would organize my death? Who would arrange my funeral? Who would care enough to be with me at the end? I thought of the happiness of the extended family I'd brought into my life in that small Colorado mountain town. And of Jim. Good, hard working, honest Jim. All of a sudden I felt homesick for those dear people.

Thinking of funerals caused another long-ago, forgotten memory to surface. There was a vague picture of me being small in a church with a coffin up front. The feeling was how confused I'd been at my father's funeral. How I wanted my daddy to come and fix everything for me, but there was no daddy. I didn't remember him lying in the coffin but there was some sense of a kind woman taking me in hand and holding me tight against her bosom.

Mrs. Galloway. I hadn't thought of her in years. The crush of her softness. The smell of her lilac perfume. The comfort of being held with no expectations except someone really being there for me. Mrs. Galloway. Funny that I remembered her name now. A jolly woman. Cushiony. I wondered what happened to her. Bruce and I must have stayed with her during the trial before Grandmother came to take us to live at her house.

Children don't understand death. Nobody does really, I reasoned. Jim was right, I reflected, there's wisdom of learning to live with loss but having the fortitude to go on. It's the antidote to loss. And with tears running down my cheeks, I told my lonely little girl inside—that little girl who had so many

losses—that finally I know that it will be alright. Love comes around again. Love, if it's true, never dies. It may change its form but it continues even after we shed this material form of the body.

Now I sat with the great mystery and marveled at the beauty and efficiency of death as the waves crept up the shore line and the wind endlessly blew. The continuity of life goes on. People are born and die. The tides rise and fall; the wind blows despite our personal pain. It's all part of a bigger plan than my little life.

Returning to my casita, I sat on the bed and literally fell over on the pillow. I slept without dreaming mercifully until dusk. I awakened and reflected on the events of the day and Brad's dying with his family surrounding him.

But the line between the living and the dead was not quite as finalized as it seemed. Brad's spirit was somehow still with me. I said some private things to him. And then smiled thinking of my forty-year reoccurring dream of our coming together and parting. Now it was time to stop reflecting on Brad. I prayed for his spirit that seemed to hover near me as the wind from the fan blew across my face drying my tears. I sat in gratitude for the role he had played in my life. I wished him well on his journey.

Feeling restless, I picked up my shiny black rock from the Slate River and put it on my forehead to cool it. I clicked on the small cassette player that always graced my nightstand. Kate Wolf's haunting ballad, *Some Kind of Love*, came out with her sweet, clear voice. This song had been one of her biggest hits plaintively laying out the pangs of love. Funny, I'd heard the song numerous times but now I strained to listen to the deeper meaning of the lyrics that rang out strong and true.

Kate sang of the love that comes too soon, that which tears your heart and that love which is like gold but hard to hold. And then the heart-breaking wrong kind. The song concluded with searching for the love that never dies. I felt from the emotion in her voice that she had lived these loves she sang about. I read years later that Kate had died of complications from a medical procedure she'd had for leukemia and hoped she'd finally found that solid kind of love.

Suddenly I felt exhausted like with my energy deflating like air escaping from a balloon. This life-long experiencing of the different facets of

unsatisfying love had worn me down. Isn't it all just an emotional illusion, delusions born out of the desperate need for connection? Doesn't every single person in the world have some of these experiences of love gone wrong? I sat reflecting. Maybe the way love had played out in my life wasn't so unique after all. Maybe this funny thing called love took several universal ways of being expressed and some of us have to go through them all.

Maybe, as Marion had once warned me, it was time to stop thinking about love so much and just settle down and dive into it. To throw away the safety net and go into free fall. Then I chuckled thinking of Brad and his free-fall life. What if I just took a deep breath and chuck myself out of the plane without the parachute? No net. No guarantees.

I stiffened. Could I make the plunge into trusting again? To love is to court heart break. I saw it with my dad. I knew it in myself. There was instant tension in my body as I contemplated this alternative.

Perhaps I reasoned, as my finger traced and retraced those familiar etched lines on the rock that represented the different life paths taken, it is time to get back on that path that actually takes me somewhere. Perhaps this right path is called surrender.

Which brought me to thinking again of Jim. There wasn't the instant attraction with him or the fireworks going off in the air I'd had with Brad. Being with Jim wasn't the excitement I'd felt first with Gary.

Jim was low voltage. My hand didn't tingle when he touched me; chills didn't run up my arm. He was a solid man through and through. What we shared this past year had grown slowly due to my skittish nature and his sensitivity in not rushing me. I treasured his friendship. What I felt for him was the old friend type of love which keeps growing on you. That old shoes feel—those old moccasins that feel so good when you slipped into them.

Yes, but the fear in me replied, you still are in jeopardy if Jim dies. He's several years older than me. True, but there is also danger in not choosing love, another part replied. There is the risk of growing old without someone to love you. Of withering up inside and becoming stale.

It comes down to if you choose love, you risk. If you don't, you risk. My fingers continued to trace the deeply-cut lines in the rock as I

remembered my dad and his willingness to love my mother despite the pain that living with her brought.

I splashed some cool water on my face to clear my thoughts. Perhaps the most trusted legacy from my mother, despite her lack of grasp of reality, was this fierce passion to live on. I exhaled hard and long. Tears streamed down my face.

I sighed and an extraordinary emotion descended. An untroubled calm came over me. That moment of grace that my father had always talked about. Utter peace.

Sometimes the will that resides in us moves in a swift decision even without our conscious mind concurring. Without a second's hesitation, I took the plunge. The decision was wrenching but still it came automatically. I reached for the phone knowing that Gary would still be at the car dealership. "Gary," I said with a small, determined voice, "I'm through. I'm done. I won't be seeing you again. I am the preacher's kid after all."

I heard the silence on his end as he took in the finality of my voice. We held together for a moment truly not wanting to let go. I could almost hear the gears of his mind working and feel the pain in his heart. Not wanting to let me go but understanding that he couldn't keep me with the choice that he had made.

Gary, who was this wonderful but totally undivorceable man to whom I'd given too many years of my life, spoke out in protest. "Janie, let's not end it like this. Give it some time. We need each other. Why don't you come to Scottsdale and talk? Or I can meet you somewhere?"

I knew that he did love me, but not enough to make a respectable married woman out of me. "I can't go on. It's over." Tears were running down my face but my heart was resolute and unyielding. "I'm saying goodbye now." Gently, I placed the receiver back on the hook.

That was over and with this move, I felt flooded with peace. Sadness. Regret. Loss, yes, but most of all that keen, sharp place of peace.

It was over. It was so.

Suddenly the world became more lucid. For the first time since I was a small child, my mind seemed clear. The discontented heart was no more. I noted something surprising rising up in me. There was still room left in my heart for something more. Brad's death had freed something powerful up in me. No, it wasn't his passing that had done it; it was my acceptance of his leaving.

With a sudden tenderness in my heart, I put through another call. Jim sounded winded as if he had run to catch the phone or maybe he was holding his breath to see what I would say. "Jim, he's passed on. I could let him go. And I'm free now. I've resolved my feelings for the other man I told you about. I've worked it out in my mind what is important in my life. I'm coming home. If you'll have me, I'm coming home to you."

Finale

Jim and I have been married for fifteen years now. After I returned from Florida, he proposed at the jam-packed community Thanksgiving dinner. Grace had spread the word that something exciting was happening and near forty people came bringing their favorite side dishes and fixings. Dressed in his cowboy best, Jim went down on one knee under the eyes of Big Nose Millie and presented me with a ring right there in front of our friends, Goldie, his dogs, Copper, Silver and God.

Later I was heard to say that I was proposed to before the best spread of food that the surrounding counties had to offer. Jim's version was that he was so carried away by the excitement of the occasion and all, that he just up and asked me right there on the spot.

We were married that Christmas at the lodge which was lovingly decorated to a standing-room-only crowd. The bride wore skin-tight designer jeans that still fit my butt perfectly (the required old and blue of the wedding), embossed boots and two somethings new—a new white canvas shirt on which I had painted Colorado wild flowers and a white cowboy hat. The groom wore his Sunday best—a new shirt and jeans, some pretty fancy boots for a working man and a new hat, my present to him. Hal was my best man and Grace was Jim's best woman. Our three dogs and two cats were some of the many witnesses of our union.

At the reception we offered a toast to our families, present and those who have passed over. I thought of my family and how I was the only one who was allowed to achieve happiness. Mother, Dad, Bruce. How far away and long ago the pain of living with those people seemed. And then we toasted the Lodesville community that had taken me in and supported me and now welcomed us as a couple.

Marion sent her love and a card and note that expressed, as I read it, some motherly hint of pride.

These last few years have gone by fast with my dividing my time between the lodge and the ranch. Marylou and Guy run it mostly nowadays but I still keep my hand in. With good health and all, Jim and I just might make it to our twentieth anniversary.

I woke up at three-thirty this morning laughing to remember my latest Brad dream. We were at a night festival of some sorts. There were many huge boxes stacked up from largest to smallest which seemed to be alive and walking with us as we happily held hands and strolled down the main street. Twinkling Christmas lights framed the thoroughfare which made it all very merry. The boxes walked along as rock music blared through loud speakers.

In the dream, Brad looked around and said, “Hell, what are all these boxes doing going along with us?” I laughed and said, “Hell, I don’t know.” We came to a fork in the road and he stopped and grinned—that fabulous grin that always drove me and other women wild. “See, ya, Darlin’,” he said and gave a wave as he walked on. I smiled watching him go. Letting him go.

I lay there in the dark thinking about the crazy ways of love for a few minutes before finding the heaviness of eyes and limbs that would pull me back to sleep. The heat of love is a type of madness in and of its self, especially the unrequited kind and the not-requited-enough kind. I’ve been blessed, I thought. I’ve been much loved in my life. Men have loved me and I’ve loved them back.

My conclusion of these my later years is that the best kind of love is not that which keeps you jumping with excitement but that which is reciprocated, lending itself to respect. What has worked for me, after all those years of choosing the wrong kind of love is devoted partnership based of friendship. The soft, old-moccasin kind of affection that fits around you without any effort. It warms your bones even if they are aged ones now.

Thinking of Brad’s wicked grin in the dream I smiled, hunkered down under the covers and curled up to Jim’s sleeping back, which is always welcoming. He reached out to me even in sleep as he always does, found my hand and patted it for a moment, then fell back to sleep. I said a prayer of appreciation and with a few tears of gratitude in my eyes, nodded off.

