

The Retreat

Chariss K. Walker



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*Madness need not be all breakdown. It may also be
breakthrough. It is potential liberation and renewal as
well as enslavement and existential death. ~R.D Laing
(1927-1989)*

Chapter 1

Amanda Connors woke with a start. The shrill, piercing scream echoed throughout her bedroom, jarring her further. She bolted upright in bed gasping for air, heart beating wildly and erratically.

She's had the same nightmare for more than a year. Even though each one ended with a different twist, her nerves were frayed and worn thin. The 'woulda-coulda-shoulda' of the situation haunted her and kept her in post-mortem despair.

A year ago, two shocking events threw her into this tailspin. They happened on the same day and it was devastating to the thirty-four-year-old woman. The circumstances left her rattled and unsure about her choices in life. She lost sight of herself and her goals in life.

First, her mother, Susan Toole, died from cancer. Although it was a long and painful disease, Amanda was still unprepared. She took it hard.

The last year was the worst.

As Susan's caretaker, she spent several hours each day with her mother. She made sure Susan had what she needed. After a mentally exhausting week, Amanda spent the weekends at home with her husband Billy.

It was a progressive situation. Just as the illness became more severe and demanding, so did Susan's needs. Amanda spent more time with her. She was often thankful that Billy called to say he was working late and would eat in the cafeteria. She thought his responses were attentive and

considerate. She was grateful that she didn't have to worry about him.

Time with her mother drew near the end.

She knew her mother needed to be in a hospital or long-term care facility, but again, Susan resisted. "Please, Amanda," she begged, "I want to be home surrounded by the happy memories of my life with you and your father."

Amanda abided her mother's wishes and soothed her, promising that she'd remain at home as long as possible. Although she wasn't sure how long she could keep the promise, she silently vowed—"I'll do whatever it takes to keep Mother comfortable, happy, and at home. I swear it!"

The oncologist sent hospice to assess the situation at Susan's home. Two nurses set up an IV that would allow a limited dose of morphine at the press of a button. These changes frightened Amanda.

"What are you doing," she worriedly asked.

"The morphine drip will keep her comfortable during the end. It won't be much longer now," one of the nurses explained. "It's time to place your mother in a long-term care facility."

"A nursing home," the other nurse added.

"No, I can't do that," Amanda refused. "I won't do it! If she doesn't have long then I'll spend what time she has left with her here."

"You don't understand," nurse number one advised. "Your mother's health will decline rapidly now. She won't even know where she is. She won't know that you are here. Make it easier on both of you and let us call to make the arrangements."

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“She might not know, but I will,” Amanda stubbornly insisted. “I promised to keep her at home and that’s what I intend to do.”

“B-but, she needs around the clock care now,” the second nurse stuttered in disbelief. She was frustrated that they couldn’t persuade or bully the daughter. “You don’t understand how difficult this will be on both of you. You can’t do it on your own.”

“I can and I will!” Amanda remained steadfast. “I’d like you to leave now.” Somehow, she had to find the strength to do it. She wouldn’t give up.

After hospice left, Amanda carefully considered their advice and admonishments. With her stomach in knots, she looked at the card they’d given her. She was to call that number when her mother passed away or if she changed her mind. Changing her mind wasn’t an option. She’d made a promise and intended to keep it. She placed the card under the corner of the telephone so she could find it easily when the time came. Next, Amanda called Billy. She wanted and needed his approval about the decision.

“Hey baby,” Billy answered the phone using his best silky voice, “what’s going on?”

“Hospice came today,” Amanda tearfully admitted. “The nurses said it wouldn’t be long now. They wanted to send Mother to a nursing home for the last short while of her life.” Her voice trailed off as she fought to hold back hot tears.

“And I’m guessing from your tone that you don’t really want to do that,” Billy acknowledged.

“I promised her, Billy,” she affirmed and then began to cry. “I promised that I’d keep her home as long as possible. The decision is overwhelming. I don’t want mother to needlessly suffer. You know that... Still, I made a promise to her.”

“You’re being a little stubborn, aren’t you?” Billy asked.

“How can you say that?” Amanda replied.

“You made that promise months ago,” Billy reminded. “You had no way of knowing how bad it would get. Neither did Susan when she put that on you.” He was silent for a few moments and then asked, “Is it still possible to keep her home, Amanda?”

“If I stay with her day and night now, I think it is.” The enormity of the responsibility hit hard, but she swallowed the doubt, nearly choking on it.

“That’s a lot of pressure on you,” Billy acknowledged.

“Yes,” Amanda replied, “but I can do it. I have to do it.”

“That means we won’t even be together on the weekends,” he admonished.

“I’m sorry Billy.”

“Do whatever you feel you have to do, Amanda,” he said with resignation. “Stay with her to the end. I support your decision whatever it might be.”

That was all she needed to hear. She needed someone to support her decision. Billy had done that. She knew it would be difficult, but there wasn’t any other choice to make.

“Thank you.”

“No worries, baby. Do you need anything else?” Billy asked.

“No, I have everything I need,” she answered. “I can always wash clothes here and I still have a few things in my old bedroom that will tide me over. If the nurses are right then it won’t be much longer.”

Chapter 2

The final days passed by quickly.

Amanda prepared fresh chicken broth each morning and took it to Susan in a china cup encouraging her to drink. She supported her mother's head and put the cup to her lips. Susan took a small sip and then shook her head. It wasn't that she refused to eat; she couldn't eat.

Amanda silently cried. The horrible and terrifying disease ate away at her once beautiful mother, taking everything with it. She sat beside the bed and held Susan's hand. There didn't seem to be much more that she could do other than make sure she was comfortable.

The morphine affected Susan's mind. Amanda often found her mother talking to others while staring into the corners of her room. She held a complete conversation with someone who wasn't there. It was unnerving.

"Mother, who are you talking to?" Amanda gently asked.

"Why honey, I'm talking to your father," Susan replied with confusion. She was startled when Amanda called her back to the present. Still, her eyes wandered around the room, searching.

"Dad's been dead for eight years. Have you forgotten?" Amanda asked with a shiver streaking down her spine.

"No," Susan replied. She looked into the corner of her room again and smiled. "He's right there waiting for me."

The next morning, it was finished.

When she checked on her, Susan was gone. She'd slipped away sometime in the early morning hours. Amanda, overwhelmed at the loss, sat beside her mother's bed for a long while. She cried, allowing the hot tears to wash away some of the anxiety. After the tears were spent, she began the practical responsibilities required after death. She looked through Susan's desk and found the will and instructions detailing her funeral.

Her mother and father made these arrangements years ago. When Amanda was still in college, they'd gone together to set up final wishes at the funeral home. A business card attached to a folder showed everything paid for and the name of the funeral home where the information was on file.

"This is so like them," Amanda mumbled aloud as she read over the instructions and the will.

She picked up the card tucked underneath the corner of the phone and placed the call. When the ambulance arrived to remove her mother's body, she gave the driver the name of the funeral home. By then, Amanda was dressed and she took the packet of papers she'd found earlier and followed the ambulance.

After everything was taken care of at the funeral home, Amanda went back to find Susan's address book. She placed the necessary calls to longtime friends announcing the news and the time for the wake. Susan's last wishes were simple. Immediate cremation. A small memorial at her home.

"*No lengthy drawn-out time of mourning,*" the instructions read.

Chapter 3

Amanda drove the twenty-minute drive to the home she shared with Billy to get a black dress she wanted to wear to the wake. It was sleeveless, but had a long-sleeve jacket that fell to the thighs and flared out stylishly. Both the dress and jacket were made of crepe and fully lined. The suit would be ideal to wear to honor her mother.

Planning to be there only a few moments, she parked the Jeep in the circular drive and used a key at the front entrance. When she neared the upper level, she heard voices coming from the master bedroom.

“Billy’s worked a lot of overtime lately,” Amanda silently reasoned; *“he’s probably taken some comp-time now that Mother’s gone. He knows I need him. Perhaps he’s changed his mind and will come to the wake tomorrow.”*

Amanda opened the bedroom door expecting to find Billy on the phone with someone, but what she found instead boiled her blood and froze her heart at the same time. The smile of greeting for her husband hardened like glass.

The bedcovers were on the floor and Billy was butt-naked. He wasn’t alone. Jennifer Costner was there too. She was as bare-butt as Billy. Her short blonde hair was damp with perspiration as long tanned legs encircled his hips.

In an instant, Amanda’s mind captured every detail. Like an old-time movie, the scene played out in time-lapse snapshots. Jennifer’s lusty gaze as she stared up at Billy. Slender arms wrapped around him. His hands on either side of her. Posed to give her all he had. His body glistened with

sweat as he worked to get Jennifer over the edge. His firm buttocks clenched tightly. Pumping. Lifting. Near the edge. She knew it all too well.

When the door clicked open, the adulterous pair turned to look at Amanda. Shock and surprise replaced the previous pleasure on each face. Jennifer's blue-grey eyes grew wide. Even though no words escaped the pouty lips, her mouth formed a perfect 'ohm'. Billy's sex-laden daze turned to embarrassment as his eyes glinted recognition.

Caught in the act.

Acknowledging the betrayal, his face turned a brighter shade of pink. His lips tightened into a shame-filled grimace. A deep sigh of resignation escaped his lips.

Chapter 4

Amanda softly closed the door. An icicle of hurt deeply stabbed her chest and stomach. She stood outside the bedroom for several moments, not knowing what to do. Nothing in her sheltered and perfect life had prepared her for this eventuality. Then, as if sleepwalking, she went to the kitchen. Her movements were mechanical and robotic. She was dazed. Today of all days... on the day her mother died she discovered that Billy was having an affair with Jennifer, one of her close friends.

"I have to do something normal," she silently reasoned as she began to make coffee. *"If I don't do something sane, I'll lose my mind! What on earth am I supposed to do in this situation?"* As she preformed the routine actions, more information sank in, *"He hasn't been working on a new project; he's been fucking Jennifer in our bed! Oh my god, what do I do?"*

The shocking bedroom scene ricocheted around in her head. It was too much. She took a sip of the coffee to calm the panic, hoping the hot liquid would melt the cold that encased her heart. She waited for something normal to return. It didn't. In harsh reality, she suspected that nothing would ever be normal again.

It seemed like only a few minutes that Billy was dressed and came to the kitchen to find her. "Amanda, I know how this looks, but honestly, it's not your fault...", he began and then hesitated.

His face, flushed from exertion and emotion, embarrassed her. She couldn't bear to look at him.

Everything about him made her feel sick and queasy. She looked away to stop the nausea that rolled through her body. Her knees were weak and she held onto the counter with all her strength in an attempt to stand upright. She wanted to be anywhere else other than here in the kitchen with Billy.

Amanda could smell Jennifer on her husband. The scent of their lovemaking permeated the kitchen. She turned away from the aromatic reminder of his unfaithfulness. She couldn't respond to anything Billy said either. If she opened her mouth to speak, she feared she'd gag. She didn't know what to say anyway. Everything inside her had simply stopped. Nothing worked anymore. Rendered speechless, she simply stood there unable to look at her husband.

"Look, I'll pack my things and move out today," Billy announced. "I know you have to take care of your mother's funeral arrangements and you'll be tied-up with that today and tomorrow. I promise to be completely out of the house by the time you return. I'm really sorry that you had to find out this way."

"That's it!" Amanda silently screamed. *"You're sorry I found out this way and you're more than ready and willing for our marriage to end. You're moving out today? You're a coward!"*

Amanda nodded. Outwardly, she appeared calm, but she was utterly floored. She'd lost her mother and her marriage in a single day, within hours of each other. Billy scuffed his foot across the floor and Amanda remained silent.

"What are the odds of this?" She silently mused.

Jennifer finally came out of the bedroom. She briefly stuck her head in the kitchen. "I'll wait for you in the car," she said to Billy and then left through the lower level to the garage.

Amanda heard the garage door open and then Jennifer's car engine started as she revved the motor twice. Billy went back to the master bedroom. He quickly packed a duffel bag

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and two large suitcases, hastily stuffing and throwing his clothing and toiletries inside the luggage. He set the duffle bag on one of the rolling suitcases and managed to get all of it down the split-landing to the garage without dropping anything. He left without saying another word.

Amanda remained in the kitchen for a long while. Frozen in place, she couldn't manage to move a muscle even if she'd wanted to. She didn't know if she could speak. As if a large bite of steak lodged there, her throat constricted, cutting off her air. She hadn't been able to utter a word to either Billy or Jennifer.

After they'd been gone for a while, Amanda finally found her legs again. She went to the master bedroom to retrieve the black dress-suit, a pair of black leather pumps, and the strand of pearls her mother had given her on her 21st birthday.

She got back in the Jeep and returned to her mother's home. She hadn't made a sound in over an hour now. She coughed to make sure her voice was still functional. It was and she breathed easier. Then, she began the preparations for the wake as if nothing had happened. She called the caterer and her two best friends, Bobbie Pierce and Marty Anders. The wake was the following day, but that night she needed her closest friends.

Chapter 5

Bobbie and Marty were there by six o'clock that evening with food and drinks. Amanda tearfully told them what had happened when she went home to get a dress to wear to the wake. They listened in silence as good friends often do and when the tale was done, each hugged Amanda and comforted her.

"I'll set up an appointment with my good friend, Jonas Peterson," Bobbie said, once the comforting was over.

"He's good," Marty commented.

"Who is he?" Amanda asked.

"A damn fine divorce attorney," Bobbie said. "You need to file first and I'll try to get you in to see him Monday or Tuesday."

"Do I need to rush like that?" Amanda asked.

"Amanda, you caught your husband with one of your close friends doing the deed in your own bed," Bobbie reminded. "He moved out and abandoned you. Yes, you need to act fast." Bobbie had always been more sophisticated and worldly than any of her other friends; she trusted her advice.

By Monday morning, everything was settled. Bobbie accompanied her to the appointment with Jonas Peterson. Amanda, still in shock, sat quietly in his very plush offices as she silently waited. The receptionist showed the women to the conference room and Amanda sat down. When the attorney joined them at the table, she was still dumbstruck. Bobbie explained why they were there and told Jonas what

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had happened. Jonas finally directed the questions to Amanda.

“Mrs. Connors, what grounds will you choose for the divorce petition?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” Amanda replied feeling overwhelmed. Divorce was one thing she’d never dreamed she’d have to consider.

“She should file for both abandonment and adultery,” Bobbie spoke up.

“It has to be her decision, Bobbie,” Jonas replied with a quick smile. “I can see that you’re close friends. You want to protect your friend, but Amanda is the client and I must hear it from her. Mrs. Connors, will you file for divorce on the grounds of abandonment or adultery?” he continued, directing the conversation to Amanda. The room was very quiet as they waited to hear her response.

“Abandonment,” Amanda confirmed.

“That’s actually better in the long run,” Jonas assured. “It should ensure that you keep the marital home.”

The rest of the appointment flew by as Bobbie gave the attorney addresses and other pertinent data while Amanda remained silent. She quietly stared at her hands, barely aware of the proceedings. If Bobbie hadn’t been there to lend assistance, she wouldn’t have gotten through it. Soon, she signed the legal papers notarized by the receptionist.

“Your husband will be served the day after tomorrow,” Jonas advised. “He’ll have thirty days to respond. I’ll let you know once his attorney contacts me. This is a community property state and assets divide equally. That can take some time, but we’ll get through it.”

“How long does it take?” Amanda finally joined in the discussion, not sure what ‘some time’ meant in legal jargon.

“It depends on how fast he responds and how fast the property settlement agreement is reached,” Jonas answered. “You own a home together. You also own part of his pension and company perks with Sandi Labs. The estate your mother bequeathed to you is off limits to your husband. It’s considered personal property and he has no rights to it. I don’t foresee any problems or obstacles that will hinder the settlement. It usually takes six months, but we’ll know more after I hear from his attorney. It’s just a waiting game now.”

In spite of Jonas Peterson’s bravado, nothing happened the way he advised. It ended up a grueling waiting game, especially for Amanda. It wasn’t over with the filing of the petition either. Billy delayed signing the appropriate papers. He refused to provide the necessary information requested by the court. His attorney filed numerous delays on his behalf because he couldn’t make up his mind. It took a year before Billy finally stopped putting off the inevitable.

Amanda felt like a trapped animal chewing off her own foot to get free. The current situation had been in the making for a long time. It dangled there even before she caught Billy with Jennifer, but she hadn’t known it at the time. When she couldn’t stand one more second of the delays, he finally came to a decision.

If she signed-off on any rights to his pension and company benefits, he’d quitclaim the deed to the marital home. When looking at both assets on paper, the equity amounts were about the same. Amanda was fine with that and signed away her rights to Billy’s company retirement and 401K. After it was over, Amanda Connors was once again Amanda Toole.

She continued to live in the marital home after returning from her mother’s wake, but each day was miserable and wretched. She moved her personal items and clothing to the guest bedroom and kept the master bedroom door closed. It was an attempt to shut out the memories. She thought the

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gesture helped, but the nightmares started the very first night she was there alone. They'd been relentless ever since.

That was the reason she sought Marty's professional help as a therapist. In the terrible nightly dreams, she relived the images of Billy entwined in nakedness with Jennifer. It was always shown in vivid details.

Amanda felt responsible in some way, but it was more than that. She couldn't shake the embarrassment or the indignity that she was speechless.

When she lost her voice, she felt as helpless as a child did. When she should've screamed out wrath, she'd completely shut down.

She had stood there like an idiot.

She was unable to tell either one to go to hell... to get out... or any other appropriate response to the adultery she had witnessed.

The idea of her ineptness tormented her. Overall, Amanda felt deeply ashamed. That emotion kept her bound in despair.

Chapter 6

She awakened Wednesday morning in a cold sweat. Once again, she screamed herself out of a nightmare. It was September 18. She made another mark on a piece of paper where she recorded the frequency of the horrifying dreams. There were eighteen marks, one for each day of the month. Marty Anders, her therapist and close friend, had insisted she keep a tally of the nights each month when the nightmares occurred.

“It’d be easier to keep score of the times when I don’t have the nightmares,” she’d stoically quipped.

“I know this is difficult,” Marty encouraged. She smiled and took Amanda’s hand, “But if you want to heal, you have to let this go once and for all.”

Amanda wanted to let it go, but it wasn’t easy. It wouldn’t let go of her. She couldn’t forget. The images were too strong, too forceful. Even worse was her reaction to what she’d seen. She hadn’t done anything at all. She’d only turned and walked out of the room as if she’d intruded or done something wrong by being there. She acted as if she was the one to blame. She was a coward and she simply couldn’t forgive herself for the lack of courage.

In each of the subsequent nightmares, she reacted differently. In the hellish dreams, she’d finally found the courage to react. Sometimes she responded in rage. Sometimes, in ridicule. Sometimes, in insanity. At least in the dreams, she did something. Even if she only screamed in outrage, at least she had a voice.

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In the nightmares, she wasn't helpless or embarrassed when she walked into the bedroom and caught her husband in coital position with Jennifer. She was livid and full of rage—she was a goddess of destruction! She acted completely insane and irrational as she crazily confronted Billy and Jennifer. Violent, she scared herself and frightened them. Her eyes blazed as she screamed out indignation and obscenities, expressing the rage she felt.

“Why is it so easy to free my anger in these dreams?” Amanda silently wondered.

Other times, the dreams were horribly vivid and bizarre.

Sometimes, her dying mother was in the same bed with her ex-husband and his girlfriend. Susan watched in horror as they clutched at each other while she wasted-away to nothingness. She was a wisp of smoke and then, poof, she was gone and so were they.

Amanda couldn't wrap her head around that aspect of the nightmare. She hadn't told Marty about it either.

Amanda felt sorry for herself again.

She knew she should avoid that very thing. She'd spent the last year feeling miserable as well as despicable. She'd had enough pity-parties to last a lifetime. Now, she was determined to do something different.

She had to.

Everyone in her small circle of friends and counsel recommended that she move on. They'd encouraged her to let go of the past and to find something else to occupy her time and energy. All well meaning words for sure, but Amanda still struggled with the past.

At their last session, Marty encouraged, “Figure out what you want for the next phase of your life, Amanda. Take time to do a little soul-searching. Find something that makes you happy; something that doesn't include Billy.”

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Once upon a time, everyone had thought she and Billy were the perfect couple, a fairytale come true. Ten years of marriage, two years in high school, and four years of college with Billy added up to sixteen years.

It was almost half of her young life.

She'd been Billy's wife for so long she didn't know how to be anything else.

Now, it was gone.

Chapter 7

After Amanda left Marty's small office in the historic district of Old Town, she met Bobbie for lunch. When she shared Marty's suggestion to take some time off, Bobbie was all for it. Always full of helpful advice, she encouraged her to consider it.

"Take a spirit quest," she eagerly asserted.

"What the heck is a spirit quest?" Amanda asked. "You know I'm not religious so why do you suggest that?"

"I didn't say take a religious quest; I said take a spirit quest. You know, a spiritual retreat," Bobbie adamantly restated with an indignant edge to her tone. "A spiritual retreat is where you find an isolated place to commune with your higher self, your soul. By definition, 'to retreat' is to step back, to withdraw from the situation."

"And you think I need to step back?" Amanda asked with surprise.

"You're embroiled in it every day," Bobbie affirmed. "You need to get away from that damn house for a while. It would do you a lot of good. Don't get pissy with me... Marty said it first. You know; do some soul-searching and find your purpose again. Head into the mountains and prepare to meet yourself, the real you. After that horribly messy divorce, I think it's in order. Take our advice and get the hell out of town for a while!"

It had been a messy divorce, and even though Billy's infidelity happened a year earlier, everything recently came

out in court. Although she'd petitioned for divorce on the grounds of abandonment, the sordid details were finally exposed.

Everyone knew she'd caught him with Jennifer. Everyone knew the real reason for the divorce was adultery. Everyone also knew he walked out when discovered.

She often wondered if her circle of friends knew about Billy's affair all along. Did they cover for him? She was aware of the sideways glances cast her way. Everyone always blamed the wife when a man strayed, but Amanda couldn't imagine why Billy looked for anything else. She was a good wife to him, wasn't she?

"Was this my fault?" She silently wondered. *"Did I get too comfortable in our relationship? Did my decision to help Mother in her final hours cause Billy to stray?"*

She didn't want to believe she played a part in their failed marriage, but she couldn't rule it out either. She wondered how her parents had stayed happy and in love for over forty years. It seemed so easy for them. Was it easy for everyone?

Then, she remembered how lost her mother was after her father died. It was heartbreaking to watch. In fact, yearning for what was lost had eventually put her mother in the ground.

"Am I also headed in that direction?" She silently mused.

The suggestions made by Bobbie and Marty suddenly sounded like very good advice. She was worn-out from everything. Knowing that she had to do something to snap out of the doldrums, she prepared for a weeklong retreat. She'd leave on Friday.

Chapter 8

The next morning, Amanda once again awakened to her own screams of rage. She clamped a hand over her mouth and bolted upright in bed. After a few deep breaths, she reached over to the nightstand and made another mark on the paper.

“Will it ever stop? Will I ever find peace again?” She tearfully wondered.

She went to the guest bathroom for morning toiletries. She hadn’t set foot in the master bedroom or bath for over a year. It occurred to her that she hated this home. Once filled with love and romance, it felt empty now. The house was now void of everything that once mattered. She rattled around in it like a lost puppy, keeping most of the rooms closed off.

After she dressed, Amanda left for her weekly appointment with Marty. When she arrived in Old Town, she parked in front of the small two-room office and entered the front door. A small bell chimed to let Marty know her next patient had arrived.

Amanda sat down in one of the plush leather armchairs to wait. She’d only thumbed through one magazine when Marty came out, escorting her last client to the door. When they were alone, the therapist took Amanda’s hand. She patted it softly for a few minutes and neither one spoke. In the private office, she closely studied Amanda.

“You look tired. Didn’t you sleep well last night?” she asked.

“Another nightmare,” Amanda admitted.

“How many have you had this month?”

“It’s September 19 and I have 19 marks on the paper sitting on my nightstand,” Amanda acknowledged.

“Let’s start from the beginning. Tell me about the nightmare,” Marty encouraged.

“Nothing has changed... Same old same old,” Amanda flippantly replied.

“Be specific,” Marty insisted.

“The nightmares are the same as they were a year ago,” Amanda affirmed. “Disgusting as ever. I’m still a raving lunatic in each one. I scare the hell out of Billy and Jennifer. I scare the hell out of myself too.”

“Yes, but talking about it always helps. Tell me about the most recent nightmare,” Marty urged.

“I was at my mother’s home making preparations for the wake,” Amanda sighed. “I went home to get a dress to wear to the wake. I parked in the front circle rather than the garage. I went in the front entrance and then upstairs. I heard voices and noises behind the bedroom door. It didn’t seem real. When I opened the door, I saw Billy with Jennifer. They were both stark naked and he was between her legs. They laughed and made love. The covers were off the bed and on the floor. I could see everything,” Amanda recounted and then paused, her face flushed red from the memory.

“Go on,” Marty encouraged. “What happened next?”

“In the nightmare, I threw things. I grabbed Jennifer by the hair and dragged her naked ass out onto the street. However, we both know that didn’t happen. In the real situation, I was in shock. I froze up and then closed the door. I went to the kitchen to make a cup of coffee. Billy took charge. He volunteered to move out. He left right then with

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Jennifer and a couple of suitcases while I stood there like an idiot, trying to hold back tears,” Amanda shamefacedly whispered.

“What causes you the most upset about this situation?” Marty thoughtfully inquired. “Is it because Billy left before you could throw him out?”

“Maybe,” Amanda admitted, “but I think I’m distraught because I froze. I didn’t know what to do or say so I didn’t do anything. I acted like a helpless child. I felt ugly and dirty... As if it was somehow my fault.”

“Amanda, life doesn’t come with a script,” Marty soothed. “We do what we think is best at the time and no one can fault you for that. Billy probably saw your inability to act as a moment of dignity, not weakness. Others see our actions or inactions entirely differently than we do.”

“Perhaps,” Amanda acknowledged, “but the nightmares are repeatedly played out in different scenarios where I could’ve and should’ve done things differently. In my subconscious, I wish I had. That desire is paramount in my psyche and I can’t seem to change it.”

“There comes a time when we have to accept things the way they are,” Marty counseled. “Even our reactions are the way they are and can’t be changed. I know that’s hard for you, but you have to accept that everything is exactly the way it’s supposed to be in order to find happiness in the day-to-day that you now have.”

“I know and I’m trying,” Amanda assured.

“Have you given any more thought to taking a short vacation away from the home that causes so much pain?” Marty asked.

“Yes, I talked it over with Bobbie after our last appointment,” Amanda agreed. “She recommended a spiritual retreat. Practically the same thing you suggested

when you said ‘take time to do some soul-searching.’ I leave Friday.”

“Where will you go?” Marty asked with a pleased smile.

“I’m going into Jemez Mountains to spend a week in isolation,” Amanda easily replied. She’d already thought it out and made arrangements.

“That’s a great idea, Amanda. It’s a great place to find yourself. It’s beautiful up there. I won’t be at all surprised if it inspires your creative side to resurface. Promise me that you’ll allow yourself to find ‘you’ again. I’m certain that the girl I’ve known for the last 19 years is still there. I’d love to see her come home again,” Marty encouraged as the session ended. “You’ll keep me posted?”

“Of course; I’ll see you after I return.”

Marty referred to Amanda as she’d been when they first met in high school. It was a time before she knew Billy Connors. She hoped that she could find this younger version of herself too, but she also wondered if that girl existed any longer.

Chapter 9

She left Marty's office and went to the café to meet Bobbie for lunch. Bobbie was already seated when she entered the small restaurant. She pointed out her friend to the hostess and then joined Bobbie at the small booth where she drank iced water with lemon. Bobbie immediately wanted to know the particulars about her session with Marty.

"I told her I leave tomorrow for the retreat," Amanda gave an update.

"What! You're leaving tomorrow? When did you decide that?" Bobbie asked with excitement.

"Well, I made the decision and started making preparations after our lunch last week," Amanda admitted. "How can I argue with the two best friends I have? Both of you seemed so sure it was what I needed so I made the plans right away."

"I'm happy for you, Amanda. I just thought it'd take a little more persuasion from both of us before you agreed," Bobbie acknowledged.

"I have to do something to pull out of this yearlong funk," Amanda said. "There's no reason to wait. To be honest, I'm afraid I'll end up like my mother. She was so lost after Dad died. I believe she literally made herself sick enough to die from grief. I don't want to let my loss cause a sickness in me. I have to do something now. In fact, I feel desperate to make a change."

“I agree, Amanda, but you’ve been in a funk for longer than the last year,” Bobbie bluntly divulged. “We all knew something was wrong a long time before that and even before your mother got sick. It’s just taken you a while to see it. In fact, I’m actually thankful that Billy exited your life. I hate the pain it’s caused you, but perhaps now, you can find a little joy again. You haven’t been happy in a long time.”

Amanda was shocked.

She didn’t know what to say in response to her friend’s assumption that Billy had caused her to lose the joy in life long before their marriage ended. She mulled it over, but for the time being remained silent. They finished the lunch with very little conversation. Then, Amanda went home to pack for a week away.

Chapter 10

Friday afternoon, Amanda drove up the side of a mountain, wondering why she was there. The retreat she promised to take began today. If everything went well, she would return the following Friday.

If finding ‘herself’ was possible, she had six days to do so. She laughed at the preposterous idea. How does someone find herself when she doesn’t know where to look?

Still, Marty and Bobbie had insisted that she at least try to find something to love again. Desperate for change, she’d taken their advice. The best part so far was being away from the home she’d shared with Billy. Other than short errands to the grocery store and appointments with Bobbie and Marty, she hadn’t left the home in a long time. Leaving it for a full week gave her an instant and immediate relief.

The route taken was Interstate-25 North from Albuquerque to Bernalillo. Then, she found Highway-165 West. From there, she’d take Highway-4 East. According to the map, she’d soon arrive at the planned destination. The drive took a little over an hour, but it was immediately clear after Bernalillo that she’d driven into a completely different world.

Towns were sparse and miles apart. Populations were very low in this area. Some small communities had only four or five dwellings or shanties. With the exception of an ancient Native American Indian walking along the roadside with a worn out backpack and walking stick, she hadn’t seen anyone in a while.

She drove the winding roads to Jemez Mountains slowly and admired the red clay landscape. At times, they were on her left. Then, on her right. As she climbed in altitude, the road twisted around the mountainside. She'd always had an eye for landscapes, but she hadn't thought about that in years.

Her ears popped from the elevation. She was nearly 6,000 feet higher than when in Albuquerque. She'd never ventured into this part of her home state. Now, she wondered why it had taken her so long to visit the nearby attractions.

She saw deer and all kinds of wildlife along the edge of the forest, even a small black bear. This was true wilderness. Would she really sleep in a tent with a sleeping bag in this wild terrain? She'd prepared for that eventuality, but it seemed surreal to consider it now that she was here.

Even in the daytime, it was a good fifty degrees cooler than Albuquerque was. She couldn't imagine how cold it'd get when the sun went down for the evening. She passed a few patches of snow and ice on the roadside, but the Jeep had four-wheel drive and could handle the climb in slick road conditions.

Amanda continued up the mountainside for a while. As she neared the very top, an easy calm settled over her. She hadn't felt peaceful in a long time. She relaxed and deeply breathed in the crisp air.

“Could it be that leaving the home and memories behind are already working a peculiar magic?” She wondered. *“What will it take for me to find myself? What am I willing to do to find real peace again?”*

On the right, she noticed a small A-framed cabin that announced ‘rooms for rent’ with a flashing sign.

It was the first indication of anything commercial in the last forty minutes.

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Relieved, she stopped to see what was available.

She didn't think a spiritual retreat required that she sleep in the woods. Here, it was too dangerous.

Still, she was determined to succeed at this.

Even though it was new to her, somehow she thought the key to a successful retreat was isolation, not necessarily discomfort or the danger associated with sleeping in the open air in this kind of climate and terrain.

Chapter 11

The A-frame was actually a rental office. Donny, the manager, told her that he had cabins for rent along the base of the mountains. The cabins were furnished with kitchen supplies so she could prepare her own meals. The mention of food and cooking made her think of one of Bobbie's well-meaning suggestions again.

"You don't want to eat a real meal while taking a retreat," Bobbie advised. "Just stick to dried fruit, water, and a little bread or cake."

"But I need my morning coffee," Amanda had protested.

"All right, have your coffee," Bobbie relented, "but don't eat a real meal. You'll get the most out of the retreat if you're hungry. It keeps you open to possibilities."

In the meantime, Donny checked the books. "Sorry, I only have one cabin left. Go take a look to make sure it will suit you," he encouraged.

She followed his directions and climbed the steep rocky driveway to look at the two-room rental cabin. Even though, he'd given her a key she didn't need it to enter the small rustic cabin, the door was unlocked. She went inside. It was cozy enough. There was a nice porch on the front with benches and rockers around the perimeter for seating. A sliding glass door overlooked the deck.

The first room was a living room with a loft that partially sat over the second room. The loft, accessed by a ladder, was

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open. It held two sets of bunk beds made up in matching western design.

On the lower level, a small full size cast-iron bed with a bright patchwork quilt sat against the left wall. It looked inviting with crisp white cotton sheets folded back at the edge of the quilt. A couch sat in the middle of the living room facing a large wood-burning fireplace. Wood and kindling were stacked and ready to light.

An old fat television with a built-in VCR rested on an end table. Donny had encouraged her to take a tape from the video library as he pointed to a bookcase that held about forty VHS movies. She hadn't seen a VCR recording in years, but she hid a grin behind her hand and politely thanked him.

The second room was nearly the same size as the first. It was an eat-in kitchen with a table decorated by an oiled red-and-white checkered tablecloth. A chair sat on each side of the table. The kitchen held the smallest stove she'd ever seen. An old-fashioned metal coffee percolator sat on top of one of the two burners. The sink, a single deep porcelain, had a laminated countertop. It held a dish drainer with a few recently washed plates still draining. There was a separate bathroom to the right with a single curtained shower, a washbasin, and toilet.

The cabin had plenty of light sources on both the front, back and end walls. A wall of windows in the kitchen overlooked the foot of the mountains directly behind the cabin and barely six feet away. To the right, just past the bathroom, a backdoor led to a covered stoop. Three steps led towards a trail that twisted up the side of the mountain.

"I can certainly live with this for a week," Amanda mused aloud. "It's so much better than sleeping in the open on the cold, hard ground. It's safer too with wild animals roaming around."

“If you want to rent the cabin,” Donny advised, “come back and move your car to the driveway. That’ll let me know you’re staying. You can pay at check-out.”

She walked slowly down the incline to where she’d parked the Jeep, noticing that the flashing ‘rooms for rent’ sign was extinguished. She decided to go inside to let the manager know that she’d take the cabin, but when she entered the A-frame, it was empty. Donny was nowhere around. A chill shivered down her spine when she realized how truly isolated it was here near the top of Jemez Mountain.

She took one of the hand-drawn maps that gave directions to the nearest grocery store. Then, she moved the Jeep to the driveway in front of the cabin. It was already getting dusk and Amanda decided that she’d start the actual ‘retreat’ first thing the next morning. She didn’t want to chance getting lost in the dark tonight.

She unloaded supplies and carried them inside. She’d packed a duffle bag with clothing and toiletries along with a recycled grocery bag that held some food and ground coffee. Amanda went about setting up the kitchen for the next morning.

She filled the metal coffee pot with tap water and then packed the stemmed basket with coffee grounds. She hung up the clothing in the small recessed space that served as a closet near the bed. When she’d left home, she packed sparingly. Now that she had a shower and a bed, she wished she’d brought more choices. She hadn’t considered how much colder the higher altitude would be. She giggled to herself, realizing that she was ‘roughing it’ as far as she could tell.

After she put everything away, she prepared her evening meal. She cut a slice of date and raisin cake from the fat loaf she’d bought at Trader Joe’s and then added a handful of almonds. Next, she poured a glass of papaya juice. Bobbie

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had advised her to cleanse and to think clean thoughts. She chuckled softly to herself as she considered her friend's well-meaning advice. She felt lighthearted for the first time in a long while.

When she'd eaten the sparse meal, Amanda washed the plate and glass and then put them in the drainer to finish drying. Next, she stripped out of her clothes, put on a pair of plaid boxers and a tee shirt before pulling back the brightly colored quilt. It was completely dark now and she felt tired. Perhaps it was the mountain air along with the altitude, but she was optimistic. After a good night's sleep, she'd be ready for whatever tomorrow would bring.

The weight of the heavy covers reminded her of childhood. She'd spent many winter breaks with her grandmother. Granny placed many quilts on the bed. The covers were so heavy she could barely move a limb, but she could usually wiggle her fingers and toes. Now, that nostalgia comforted her just as it had each night when she was feeling homesick.

Chapter 12

While in the toasty bed, Amanda thought about the past year. She didn't know how to stop yearning for what was lost. In spite of everything that had happened, she missed Billy.

Billy Connors had moved to Albuquerque with this family during her sophomore year in high school. He was the 'new kid,' but he was personable and a great athlete. He was handsome with a decidedly 'California surfer' look... blond hair and tanned complexion. All the girls chased after him and all the boys wanted to be his friend. He had that affect on people.

Amanda had three classes with Billy. Even though she didn't actively pursue him, he immediately noticed her. She was tall and slender with dark auburn hair and fair skin, plus Amanda had a beautiful smile along with a pretty face.

They talked often and casually flirted, but didn't begin to date until junior year. Billy fell in love after they'd dated for only a month. He wanted Amanda as his, exclusively. He gave her his class-ring as soon as it arrived and demanded that she be 'his girl' for the duration of high school.

Looking back on it now, Amanda realized that he'd been rather possessive. At the time, she was equally enamored with him. She was flattered by his attentions. She thought it was a sign that Billy loved her. Now, some seventeen years later, she wasn't so sure.

Billy had a great job at Sandi National Laboratories in the Research and Development division. Employed by Sandi Labs right after graduating from the University of New

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Mexico, Billy had worked for them since 2004. In fact, he'd worked part-time at the labs while he earned his doctorate in engineering.

Amanda earned her Master's in Art while Billy's more serious career provided them with a great living. That's what he'd called it, 'his serious job' compared to Amanda's passion for art. He didn't want her to work, so she hadn't.

She didn't paint either. The art she'd once loved was now only a memory, stored in a closet somewhere.

Bobbie and Marty insisted that she was a beautiful, intelligent, and talented woman who had a lot going for her. She needed to figure out what she wanted and do something about getting it. All good advice, but where did she start?

"I can start by stopping this constant self-pity," she silently scolded. *"I can start by making the most of this expedition. Do whatever it takes to find peace again, damn you! Get a spine and get out of this rut before it kills you!"*

Amanda wrestled with her thoughts and self-admonitions while she looked out the cracks in the blinds. It was pitch dark outside and a tiny chill ran up her spine when she once again realized how isolated it was on this sparsely populated mountain.

Clouds rolled in and covered the mountainside blotting out all light from the moon and stars. A light snow softly fell. It was part of the silence.

She didn't hear any sounds of traffic or the constant sirens that roared by on a regular basis at home. It was as if she'd dropped off the face of the earth. She listened to the nothingness for a long time as her mind ran rampant with thoughts of the past and Billy. Finally, the heavy quilts worked their magic just as they'd done when she was a homesick child. Amanda succumbed to the warmth of the covers and fell into a deep and restful slumber.

Chapter 13

When Amanda awakened the next morning, she felt dizzy and disoriented. It took a few moments to recall that she was in a cabin on Jemez Mountain. There was pressure in her ears as if wind simultaneously blew and sucked. It hurt a little. She gently tugged at her ear lobes to relieve the pressure.

A pinkish glow outside the cabin signaled dawn. She stayed under the warm covers for a few minutes to get her bearings. “What in the world was I thinking?” she mused aloud. “I should have my head examined. Here I am in the middle of nowhere... What did I think I’d accomplish? What did I let Marty and Bobbie talk me into doing?”

“No,” Amanda silently reprimanded herself as soon as the words were said. *“That isn’t exactly true. I do know why I’m here. I have to do something. If I don’t do something, I’ll die just like my mother... only sooner!”*

Amanda stayed under the warm covers thinking longer than she intended. One thought led to another and then another. She knew it was important to sort things out. During the last year, while things were building to the finality of the actual divorce, she’d refused to critically look at the situation.

“If you won’t willingly look at your life, the Universe will force you to see,” she silently acknowledged.

It’s the first day of the retreat, her first day of soul-searching. Determined and anxious to get started, Amanda got out of bed and quickly dressed in warm clothes to ward off the chilliness of the room. “How do I begin?” she

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wondered aloud. She was unaware that she'd already begun. She didn't recall that there wasn't a nightmare during the night.

She set the percolator on the front gas burner and struck a match to light it. While waiting for the metal pot to perk the coffee, she brushed her teeth and hair. After the glass knob on top of the coffee pot revealed rich, dark coffee, she poured a cup. She added packaged creamer that she had brought along for the wilderness stay. She laughed lightly as she looked around the cozy cabin. It was so much better than a tent. She cut another slice of the date and raisin cake for breakfast. While eating it, she thought about her plans.

She needed supplies, but wondered if the desire was merely an effort to put off the inevitable trek up the mountainside. "It's too cold here to go without food," she reasoned aloud. "Food supplies warmth. I need warmth and stamina to tackle the steep incline behind the cabin."

She added a heavy flannel shirt to her current wardrobe and then tied a thick fleece jacket around her waist in case the flannel shirt wasn't enough. She'd find the grocery store shown on the map and buy a few supplies before she took the dreaded walk into the woods. She didn't stop to question the reluctant feeling she had.

The fresh snow crunched noisily beneath her feet as she walked to the Jeep. It was only a light dusting from the previous night. It hadn't melted yet on the drive, but the deck was clear and moist, already melting from the sunshine.

Amanda followed the hand-drawn map to a small grocery store. It wasn't much more than a bodega or convenience store, selling only the basics. Milk and eggs. Bread and butter. Small cartons of real cream. Candies. Chips. Sodas.

She bought the things she'd need to make breakfast and fresh cream for her coffee. Then, she bought a cup of coffee

from the twelve-cup pot that sat near the checkout counter. While the tall, slender clerk rang up the purchases, she added a few packaged cups of half-and-half to the coffee.

Amanda drove back to the cabin and put the supplies away. She quickly drank another coffee topped with real cream. Then she packed a satchel with water, a bag of nuts, and another jacket. “All right,” she loudly encouraged herself, “you’ve put off the purpose of this quest long enough. Get going.”

She walked out on the back stoop and closed the door without locking it. Even in the daylight, the mountain trail looked a little scary and intimidating. Fit and healthy, Amanda had no doubt she could make the climb. Still, she was reluctant all the same. She began the journey anyway and as she did, she clearly heard the well-meaning advice of Marty and Bobbie, “Find what you really want, Amanda. Find that special something that you wanted before Billy Connors ever came into your life.”

As she climbed the steep incline, she thought about life before Billy. She’d met him when she was only sixteen years old. What did she know about life at that age? What did anyone know at that age? The real question was what had she wanted to do with her life before Billy? What were her dreams when she was five, ten, or fifteen years old? Hadn’t she wanted to be a ballerina when she was five?

“Yes,” Amanda silently recalled with a quiet giggle. “*I wanted to be a ballerina more than anything else in the world.*”

Early childhood memories revealed her dancing in a fairytale ballerina costume. A gift from her father... When he returned from frequent business trips, he always brought a present home for her and her mother. Susan was as excited by these gifts as she was. While he unpacked the treasures purchased for the women in his life, they joyfully and excitedly clapped their hands. The memories brought a smile.

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As an only child, Amanda had a good life growing up. There was always plenty of everything. Her parents loved her and they loved each other deeply. She was lucky to live in a home with harmony and peace. Amanda wanted this same kind of love in her own home one day.

It was a childhood dream, but it didn't end happily-ever-after. After her father died, Susan wandered from room to room in the family home. She was without joy or intention. She looked for something she couldn't find. Understanding dawned on Amanda. Her mother merely waited for her own life to end so she could join her husband.

Memories of her parents' relationship brought thoughts of her own failed marriage. While her mother's caretaker, she didn't worry overly much about Billy. He loved her. He'd understand family responsibilities.

He didn't understand though. He didn't asked her about it either. He didn't even demand equal time. He found consolation in someone else's arms. Amanda pushed the thoughts of Billy away as she continued the climb. Even when she resolved to let him go, he persisted in taking over her thoughts. Did he persist because she still held on?

She climbed the steep trail until it ended in a small open clearing. Sunlight streamed through the treetops and bathed the small meadow in brightness. It pushed the gloomy thoughts away. Filled with sprigs of life in violet, gold, and yellow, the small grassy field was beautiful. She wished she had a camera to capture the lovely scene.

Long ago, she had the mental ability to capture any image and paint it from memory. Now, the idea of that gift felt foreign to her. Amanda didn't know if she still possessed that ability. The talent might have slipped away. Still, thinking about the artistic ability watered a small, unknown seed of desire and a tiny sprout appeared.

A large flat boulder sat at the edge of the forest on the left of the clearing. Isolated and alone, it looked like a good place to sit for a while. The rock was three feet high, but Amanda easily climbed on top of it. She stopped to rest there and sat peacefully soaking up the sun's warmth. The temperature change felt good after the tree-lined and shaded colder trail she had just hiked.

She rested for several minutes and then pulled her feet up to sit in yoga fashion. She crossed her ankles and sat with hands resting lightly on her knees in the lotus position. Yoga was another joy that had slipped away over the years.

It felt as if the heavens were finally smiling on her again and lighting her path. Amanda wasn't religious, but she'd grown up appreciative of knowing that something larger than her was always there, always ready to lend a hand. She hadn't considered that in a long while.

While she enjoyed this special place, she felt transported to a clear city of pure light. Although she couldn't explain it, she instinctively knew it as the City of Lights. It instantly refreshed her weary soul and eased the past hurts and pain.

She admired the luminescence of the area. Everything was clear and fresh, glowing with love and light. She walked for what seemed like hours, but she was relaxed and at peace as she traveled the beautiful streets. Time held no meaning here and easily slipped away.

Amanda wasn't sure how long she sat on the boulder, but suddenly, she realized it'd be dark within the hour. There was an urgency to get down the mountainside while it was still daylight. She hurriedly gathered up the discarded satchel and then retraced her steps down the trail and to the backdoor of the cabin. She was grateful the trek down was easier than climbing it. It took only half the time.

She hadn't eaten anything since the cake and coffee earlier that morning. She was famished.

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She quickly scrambled some eggs and toasted a slice of bread for dinner. She slathered the toast with extra butter and ate hurriedly, enjoying the meal.

After a quick, warm shower, she was back under the heavy quilts. Soon, she slept soundly. She didn't even have a chance to worry and fret over Billy.

Amanda entertained only one brief thought before she succumbed to the heavy, warm comfort of the bed, *Is Billy becoming a distant memory at long last?*

Chapter 14

The next morning, Amanda felt refreshed. The walk and the time spent in the meadow was good for her physically, mentally, and spiritually. She was onto something and she resolved to do it again each day. In fact, she was anxious to get started now.

The dread Amanda had felt the first day had changed to anticipation. She resolved to get the most out of the retreat. Again, failing to realize she hadn't had a nightmare, Amanda dressed quickly in a shirt, sweater and the same jeans she'd worn the day before. Starving, she made a quick breakfast of more scrambled eggs and toast. Then, she repacked the satchel with a bag of almonds and raisins along with a couple of bottles of water. She planned to eat in the meadow today. After one last coffee, she left the cabin to begin the steep climb.

During this trek, Amanda didn't rush. She took time to look at the lively nature along the path. She was amazed at the deep undergrowth. The depths of the forest teemed with an abundance of wildlife. Small creatures were everywhere. During the first climb, she hadn't noticed at all. She'd kept her eyes focused straight ahead on the pine needle laden path and the destination at the top. Now, she noticed everything as her eyes awakened and became more alert. She chuckled softly at the thought and continued the slow ascent.

The climb took twice as long to reach the meadow. When she got there, she investigated the entire perimeter, looking closely at the clusters of delicate flowers. She picked

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one of the small purple flowers and threaded it carefully through her long auburn hair. It made her feel pretty, something she hadn't felt in a while. She giggled lightly because the gesture brought back more memories of her childhood.

Perched on top of the flat smooth boulder, she recalled a time when she was ten years old. She and Susan walked in a nearby park. They often made small excursions to interesting sights in the city. That particular day, she picked flowers for her mother.

At home, Susan brought out a colorful vase and art supplies. Her mother taught her to use the paints and thick paper to its best advantage. Together, they painted the bouquet of flowers in the lovely vase. Later, Susan had the painting framed and hung it on the wall along with other favorite artwork. It was the beginning of Amanda's love of art.

"I really did love to paint," she silently avowed. *"What happened to that love?"*

During the years of marriage, Amanda devoted her life to Billy, making certain his career was successful. She held dinner parties and went to social events all designed for boosting her husband's professional image, especially as it pertained to his position at Sandi Labs. Her art took a backseat to that obsession. Then, it became something of the past, only a memory.

Now, Amanda longed to have a studio again. In that solitude, her creativity flowed and flourished. She sat on the boulder with her eyes closed and envisioned the studio her mother prepared when she was a teenager. It was still there in the family home. Untouched. Was it waiting for her return?

Then, once again, she transported to the City of Lights. Everything was shiny and beautiful; even the streets were clear and illuminated. The many different colors were clear

and transparent. As Amanda gazed at the amber, red, blue, and green lights surrounding her, she silently marveled. *“How is that possible?”*

The purity of the light caused the colors to appear clear and translucent. It was a mystery and she wanted to fully understand it. She didn’t want to leave that peaceful place. It was refreshing and inspirational; she thoroughly enjoyed the sights. Suddenly and instinctually, she felt eyes watching her.

She wasn’t alone in the meadow. The hair on the back of her neck stood up as a shiver streaked down her spine. It was a warning and one she must heed. She didn’t know how long she sat on the boulder that day, but when she opened her eyes to look around, the sky suggested it was late afternoon. Time had slipped away again as it had the day before. Caught off guard, she was afraid. Amanda slowly and carefully looked to the right where she felt eyes watching her. She inhaled sharply and then held her breath, afraid to make any outward sound or movements.

“Oh my god!” She silently exclaimed. *“What sharp teeth?”*

A wolf stood in the clearing. He was gray with black tinges to his thick fur coat. He probably weighed about seventy pounds. When he noticed her perched on the tall rock, he froze just as she did. Without blinking, he stared back at Amanda with clear golden eyes. The color was the same as the amber lights in the strange city she had visited.

The wolf had extremely sharp teeth and his mouth was open in what appeared to be a grin. Everything about the situation frightened Amanda and her heartbeat rapidly sputtered and pounded against her chest wall. Oddly enough, the wolf didn’t make a movement towards her. Even though he could easily rip her to shreds, he didn’t threaten her in any way. In fact, he wasn’t aggressive at all.

The woman and animal stared at each other for several minutes, neither one seeming to breathe. Amanda wondered

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what she'd do if he came towards her. Would he attack? She didn't have a weapon or time to hatch a plan of defense.

"I'm completely vulnerable," she silently acknowledged. *"I'm dinner to the wild creatures in this area, a sitting duck, an easy meal! I was foolish to come here."*

When the wolf finally broke the stare, she still berated herself. Looking away first, he moved stealthily across the remainder of the meadow. Then, he disappeared into the woods, out of sight. He was gone in an instant. She didn't catch a final glimpse of him in the forest.

Amanda sharply exhaled and then breathed a deep sigh of relief. She'd had enough adventure for one day. From the looks of the sky, it'd be completely dark in a short while. When night fell, she wanted the safety of the cabin. She scrambled off the boulder, quickly grabbed the satchel, and headed down the steep path. She slipped twice on the muddy residue from the melted snow, but regained her footing and hurried on.

Once inside, she hurriedly closed and locked the door. Too fatigued and frightened to prepare a meal, she stripped off the jeans and sweater and quickly climbed under the quilts to take a short nap. Shaking from the cold and the chance meeting with a wild creature, she was exhausted.

As she lay under the heavy, warm quilts, she drifted into sleep. She couldn't fight it. The pull was too compelling. That night she dreamt of a perfect studio. It was filled with clear lights of many different colors. She thrilled at the knowledge... she painted again. When she recognized her own completed works of art displayed around her, she felt proud of the accomplishment. It was back and long overdue.

Chapter 15

Amanda slept through the entire night. When she awakened, she was alert and aware that something had changed. She was different. She didn't recall dreaming the night before. In fact, it occurred to her that she hadn't made a single mark on the nightmare tally since arriving here. Naturally, she wondered if Jemez Mountain was responsible for the change. On the other hand, could it be that living in the marital home caused the nightmares and suffering? Either way, the changes were welcome.

She'd made progress and desired to make more of it. Even after encountering the wild animal yesterday, she was anxious to return to the meadow. She couldn't stop now. She couldn't let fear keep her from accomplishing what she came here to do. Already, the sense of dread and ugliness that had tainted her life for the last year was gone. Something about the encounter with the wolf had restored her self-confidence and self-esteem.

She had survived the encounter.

Although she froze when she saw him, she hadn't panicked. She didn't run away like a frightened rabbit either.

Her reaction to the wolf was the same as the afternoon she caught Billy with Jennifer.

Now, she didn't think her response to either incident was shameful. It was what it was.

When meeting the wolf, remaining immobile had saved her life. By freezing up the day she discovered Billy cheating,

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she saved her dignity. She could clearly see the situation as ‘Survival 101’ now.

“Funny how things can seem one way and, with a little perspective, turns out to be different than what we thought,” she silently mused.

Although she couldn’t avow to it with any degree of certainty, she didn’t think the wolf was intent on harming her.

He was merely a much-needed lesson on this spirit quest. If they crossed paths again, he wouldn’t harm her.

Chapter 16

She made a large breakfast of scrambled eggs and several slices of toast slathered with butter. She needed the extra fat to keep her warm today. She dressed hurriedly, brushed her long auburn hair until it had a lustrous sheen and then rushed out the backdoor of the cabin.

“Oops,” she mumbled as she returned to grab the satchel.

It still held the snack of almonds and raisins she’d prepared the day before. She was anxious to return to the meadow and continued up the steep incline again paying close attention to the natural life around her. She slowed her pace as she watched a family of squirrels playing like a litter of kittens. They ran in a circle and rolled into affectionate balls of fur and fluffy tails.

When she once again arrived at the meadow, she walked the perimeter and gathered a few of the colorful flowers that still bloomed under the sun’s warm light. Using her fingernail to puncture a small hole on the stems, she laced the flowers and linked them together to make a wreath.

Amanda placed the flower arrangement on her head. Once again, she felt pretty. She returned to the flat boulder at the edge of the clearing and perched there thoughtfully. She recalled childhood memories, enjoying the reverie. Her mother inspired her to paint the natural landscapes of the local area. The recollection fast-forwarded to a time when she was fifteen years old. Once a small well-lit porch, she sat with her mother in the transformed personal studio.

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“You’re very talented, Amanda,” her mother said as she looked around the studio, indicating the completed paintings. “What will you do with this ability?”

“I want to continue painting, of course,” Amanda replied, very sure of herself. “I want to attend college and take more classes, but you’re the one who taught me the true basics and love of art, Mother.”

“Yes, Amanda, but what will you do with the talent? Will you open a gallery one day and continue to use this gift?” her mother persisted.

“I hope so, Mother. Is that what you want to hear?” she asked, looking closely to find a clue for the questioning.

“I want you to be happy, Amanda. When you’re painting, the look on your face is pure inspired joy. I hope you’ll always have this joy in your life, darling,” her mother thoughtfully replied. “We all need something just for ourselves that gives us happiness and fulfillment.”

“I can’t imagine there will ever come a time when I don’t paint, Mother,” Amanda had replied with confidence.

Now, she wondered how she’d ever let her love of painting slip away. Had the joy left when she put her art supplies in the closet and devoted her life to Billy’s career and happiness? If she had remained true to herself and her own joy, would she be facing this current situation? Somehow, she knew the two things were connected.

Once she had stopped painting, she had lost her real joy for life. She replaced it with making Billy happy. Sadly, it didn’t bring her any joy to do so. Had the sacrifices she made brought Billy any real happiness? Was either one of them really happy?

“What do I want now?” Amanda wondered aloud. “What will bring me happiness? Can I return to the joy of art

and find what I'm looking for there? Did I lose myself when I lost the love for art?"

She caught a glimpse of her past self at dinner parties and social events. She looked pasty and it shocked her. She was a white, painted china doll with a stamped smile on its face. Was that how she really looked? Was it what she'd become over the past few years? On the other hand, had it happened the moment she put her art in the closet?

She recalled the last lunch with Bobbie. Her friend insinuated that this had been going on for a long time. She clearly heard Bobby, "Amanda, we all knew something was wrong before your mother got sick and before your breakup with Billy. It's just taken you a while to see it."

Were Bobbie's words true?

Somewhere along the way, something went wrong. Billy stopped looking at her with the lusty love he'd shown for so many of the early years of their marriage. The romance in their relationship slipped away. She molded herself into the perfect wife for her husband. In doing so, she lost herself. She lost her own joy. She became a *Stepford Wife*. In the process, she lost Billy, too.

Had her friends been aware of that change? Why hadn't she noticed it before? She recalled many parties and social gatherings where Billy wasn't standing by her side as he'd once done. He was off with another group and that group more often than not involved Jennifer.

"How long were they in an intimate relationship?" Amanda wondered.

She thought the affair between Billy and Jennifer happened during the year while she'd cared for her mother. Had it? Perhaps, she only wanted to believe that. From the memories recalled, it certainly could have been longer.

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“...I want you to be happy, Amanda. Are you happy?” Susan had asked during one of her more lucid moments near the end.

“Of course,” Amanda had replied. “I have a wonderful home and a husband who loves me. What more could a girl want?”

“What indeed?” Susan replied.

Now, Amanda was certain that her mother knew about Billy’s affair. She knew that Amanda’s life with Billy was a lie. Everyone knew. The reality stabbed deeply into Amanda’s heart and she cried.

Billy had cheated long before she caught him in bed with Jennifer. A flash of their naked bodies in passionate embrace flitted across her mind again. Once upon a time, he’d been passionate with her like that. How long had it been since they’d both felt white-hot desire flare between them? It used to flame from only a glance or touch. Now, Amanda couldn’t remember the last time it happened. When they lost the flame, did he sleep with others? Was Jennifer the first or the last?

“Does it really matter?” she silently questioned. “Do I really care how many there were? It’s over now. I don’t have any reason to care. The affair with Jennifer caused me enough embarrassment to last a lifetime already. It caused a cacophony of gossip and allowed me to see who my true friends were. I wish I could move away and start over. I don’t want to flee like he did, but I wish I could leave it all behind.”

While married to Billy, they’d shared a large group of joint friends, other couples and a few singles that were always involved in the same social events.

Now, that social group was loyal to Billy and Jennifer.

It hurt that most of their friends sided with Jennifer.

Jennifer had replaced her in the life previously shared with Billy.

“Amanda’s out—Jennifer’s in.”

Amanda’s current group of friends was exceedingly small now compared to those who remained faithful to Billy.

In fact, she counted only three real friends after the dust settled. They were her friends long before she and Billy became a couple—Bobbie, Marty, and Ashley.

Chapter 17

As she sat on the boulder that day, she considered those friendships. She and Bobbie Atchley were classmates in third grade and throughout elementary, middle school, and high school. Bobbie's parents were true jetsetters and often traveled the world on business or pleasure. Although Bobbie had a live-in nanny, she preferred to be with Amanda's family. When growing up, she practically lived at their home. Bobbie had her own special social life. She was single and vowed to remain that way. Her social circle was also a single crowd. When out, it was rare for her to run into any married friends.

She met Marty Parker during freshman year as the neighboring middle schools converged into one central high school. Marty's career kept her from socializing overly much. She didn't want to chance an awkward moment by running into a patient while out on the town. Marty always preferred a quiet life at home with her husband and their two dogs.

She met Ashley Taylor during their first year at the University of New Mexico. Ashley was a workaholic who had little time for a long-term relationship. She confessed she had too many goals and too much to do to split her time between her career and a husband. Still, she was on Amanda's list as a trusted ally.

She'd remained friends with them throughout college and the years that followed. She trusted them. None of the three best friends was ever a part of the social scene she had

as Billy's wife. Now, Amanda wondered whether she could maintain those friendships if she left the area.

As she wandered through the City of Lights, she had many questions and concerns. She carefully considered her life... everything that had brought her to this moment. Once again, time flew by. It didn't exist.

She thought it was only a short while that she perched on the rock. In reality, it was hours. It was late afternoon and would soon be dark. Amanda suddenly felt a prickle of fear and pulled her attention away from the City of Lights. Then, she noticed something else. Something was in the woods directly before her. It was large and moving in her direction.

A chill streaked down her spine and the hair on the back of her neck painfully rose in warning. She heard loud breathing as the animal snorted, digging at the roots in the deadfall of the forest. It made its way towards the clearing, drawing ever closer.

There wasn't time to get off the rock and run to the path. Whatever was out there was too large and too close. Amanda heard a low throaty roar and instinctively knew that the creature was a bear. She knew it before the animal even stepped into the meadow. She was utterly and completely terrified. Holding her breath, she feared to make even the slightest sound.

She froze.

When she saw the massive creature standing only fifteen feet away, it took every ounce of strength and courage she had to stay completely still. Its jaws opened wide as it bawled. Its jowls flapped from side-to-side as the great beast repeatedly shook its massive head back and forth, back and forth.

Every instinct she had screamed—run! Flee this danger now! She wanted to jump off the rock and run down the incline as fast as she could, but she knew she'd never outrun

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the bear. He was too massive. With four feet, he'd easily catch her. Instead, she forced herself to remain perfectly still, not even daring to breathe.

The bear ambled towards her and she cast her gaze down, carefully avoiding eye contact. When he got closer to where she sat, he skirted the boulder by habit. He'd made this trek through the clearing many times and now he traversed it by rote.

Amanda clearly saw the bear from the corner of her eyes. He passed right by her without giving any notice at all. His head came up to her shoulders and his fur was thick and brownish-black. She continued to stare straight ahead. "*Just pass on by,*" she silently implored. "*Please God, just let him keep going. Just keep going. I don't exist.*"

Then, a strong gust of wind blew through the meadow. It picked up her scent, tossing it at the giant creature. The bear turned his head, sniffing the air. He was behind her and she felt his warm breath on her back. Her hair blew out around her face when he exhaled. She waited for large jaws to sink into the back of her neck. Her spine chilled and then froze in tension. Although she couldn't have moved if she wanted to, she forced herself to stay as still as possible.

"*Is this it?*" she wondered. "*Will my life end here today? Will I be devoured by a bear on a spirit quest?*"

The warm sniffing stopped and the heavy footsteps retreated into the woods. The noises of his passing grew less distinct as the bear slowly ambled away from the meadow. Thankful she'd survived the encounter, she waited another five minutes to make sure he was gone. Then, she quickly gathered up the satchel and fled down the steep incline toward the safety of the cabin.

The previous snow made for muddy ground in places. In her haste, Amanda slipped several times, landing on her backside. She slid even further down the trail, but was back

on her feet and moving as fast as she could in only a few seconds.

When she got to the stoop that led to the backdoor, she leapt up the stairs and inside without stopping. Then, she closed and locked the door behind her. Her racing heart pounded loudly in her chest. She twisted around to look at the back of her jeans and saw that mud streaked them from hips to thighs.

She slipped out of the pants, sat down at the small table and drank a full bottle of water in an effort to calm herself.

After finished, she climbed under the safety of the quilts. Overcome with exhaustion, she didn't even bother to remove the rest of her clothing. She shivered more from fear and her narrow escape with death than the cold. Amanda fell asleep as soon as the chill left her body and the weight of the comforting warmth overcame her. She'd come close to death that day and that reality changed everything.

Chapter 18

During the night, Amanda startled awake. Was she reliving the bear's appearance in the meadow? Everything was eerily familiar. She was certain it was those same sounds, the sound of an animal searching around the cabin, which awakened her. She could hear him snuffle the leaves and dry branches. She plainly heard his heavy footfalls. She knew it even before she heard his roar.

It was the bear!

He had followed her scent to the cabin. He knew she was inside. He was after her. The bear put both feet on the end wall near the bed and pushed on the cabin. The walls shook and trembled, rocking and shivering from the force. A single souvenir platter from Arizona crashed to the floor but didn't break.

The bear bawled in surprise.

"Oh dear lord! He followed me here. He picked up my scent! He knows I'm inside," she silently screamed in panic and terror.

More chilling and scary thoughts followed. Was she in real danger? If he was determined to get inside, could the cabin keep him out? Amanda shivered again. The bear was huge and powerful while the cabin was old and weathered. She didn't feel safe at all. She remembered the loft and the single wooden ladder that made it accessible. If she must, she could climb the rungs to the upper level of the cabin. Would he hear her fleeing footsteps and become more determined to get inside? Did she dare make a sound?

Then, just as she was about to give up hope, she heard dogs baying in the distance. The barking grew closer and the bear moved away from the cabin. He took shelter, moving back into the woods that led up the mountainside. The hounds, still yelping and yapping, circled the cabin several times before following the bear's scent. The sounds grew more indistinct. Amanda's wild erratic heartbeat calmed the further away they got. Far away, they chased the bear back to his own domain.

The threat was over. She hadn't seen any signs of a population. She hadn't been aware that there were other homes nearby... homes that supported pets or watchdogs. She was grateful they were there all the same.

After some time, Amanda finally went back to sleep. That night, her dream was beautiful. She dreamt of a clear City of Lights with bears and wolves walking mildly along the illuminated streets. They accompanied the other inhabitants of the city. There was nothing to fear. No harm anywhere. These creatures were simply on their own journey of self-discovery the same as every human was. The dream caused her to relax even further as deep, restful sleep settled over her.

Chapter 19

Amanda awakened later than she'd intended. She was awake for a long time the previous night listening to the bear and the dogs that chased him away. She recalled the dream of the City of Lights. She visited the same city in the meadow.

In her dream, the city was filled with all manner of creatures. They walked among the people. Neither man nor beast felt fear. She wasn't afraid there either. She felt only peace.

She threw back the thick covers and cautiously touched the floor with her foot. It was icy cold. The small baseboard heater didn't seem to be cycling regularly. It didn't keep the room warm. She quickly took a shower and dressed for the day in thick socks and warm clothing.

She thought about the danger encountered on the mountainside. Indeed, there was a risk of harm, but healing waited for her there too. She wanted wholeness more than anything else. Amanda couldn't return to the miserable life she had lived for the last year. She wouldn't return to it.

Anyone else might think she was crazy to climb the trail, to return to the meadow. After all, she'd met two wild predators there. One of them followed her to the cabin. However, desperate for change, she had to do it. She had to keep going. There was still a lot to learn about herself. She needed to discover everything she could while here even if it put her in harm's way. Now, more than ever, she needed a higher purpose... she needed to find her true self.

In the dream last night, she was brave. It confirmed that she didn't need to fear or worry about either the wolf or the bear. They wouldn't hurt her. She was sure of that. Amanda wasn't aware of the courage it took to have this unconventional attitude, but changes were afloat now and she was on the path to recovery as well as self-discovery. Today, she'd be fearless.

She was now anxious to return to the meadow to find more answers. The meadow held the key. It was responsible for the clarity about her life. There, she worked out many answers and found many solutions to a previously unhappy life. When in the meadow, she felt more alert and alive than she had in a long time. The meadow afforded transparency as she looked closely at her life, all of it, not just the parts that included Billy.

Before this retreat, everything was ambiguous and hazy, as if a film covered each detail. She couldn't wrap her head around things that should have been clear for many years. Now, she saw everything in a different light. Perhaps the City of Lights allowed her to see with precision. Regardless, she now saw every detail in a clear and more concise way. With that clarity, came hope and confidence in the future. It was the first time in over a year that she felt optimistic about her life. If she was truly honest, it was the first time she hoped for the best in a long, long while.

She ate a hearty breakfast of fried eggs and dipped the edge of the toast in the yokes before piling the remainder on the bread and hurriedly eating it. Next, she drove back to the small grocery store to buy more cream and eggs. When she arrived, the cashier was a Native American woman from the Zuni tribe.

Although her hair was stark white, signifying a long life, it was also shoulder-length and held a delicate braid on the left side of her face, indicating an eternal youthfulness. She was spry with alert eyes and mannerisms. The woman smiled

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at Amanda and held her gaze for several seconds while, the astute eyes seemed to read everything about her.

“Hello. I am Aiyana, Eternal Blossom, but I am much more than that name,” she introduced herself.

“Hello,” Amanda greeted.

“I have clear-sight. I see you very plainly. You’ve found your first two totems, the wolf and bear. Soon, you will meet the hawk and bees,” the wise woman knowingly said as she nodded her head in agreement to the statements she’d made.

Amanda nodded in return. She was surprised that Aiyana knew about the wolf and bear. She wasn’t sure what to say. As she paid for the purchases, she recalled what she knew about totems. It was part of an art class during college. A totem was a symbol for who she was... If her personal totems were a wolf, bear, hawk, and bees, what did that mean? Moreover, why did she have four totems? She’d thought a person only had one.

“Do not worry; these totems are great signs for you,” Aiyana continued. “The wolf represents loyalty, a sign to be true to yourself. The bear is courage to face the changes ahead. The hawk is a messenger of healing that comes your way. The bees are a reminder to celebrate life. You will see the wisdom in these things shortly.”

“Thank you,” Amanda sincerely replied.

She quickly carried the purchases to the Jeep and returned to the cabin to put away everything. Then, Amanda grabbed the satchel and went out the backdoor once again to climb the trail to the meadow. She still hadn’t eaten the almonds and raisins. During each previous visit, she’d lost track of time. Often, it was time to return to the cabin before she had a chance to feel hungry.

Now, as she walked up the steep path, she gently tossed the contents of the bags into the forest. Nature would take

care of it. She climbed slowly up the incline taking time to notice all the activity in the surrounding undergrowth. She wasn't anxious to face the bear or wolf again, but she refused to let a little fear stop the completion of this mission, this retreat.

Amanda felt vibrant and alive. She wondered how long it'd been since she'd felt so energized and ready to meet life head-on. Was her spirit drained and weakened while caring for a sick mother? On the other hand, had it happened long before that?

Years ago, during the early years of her marriage, she anxiously rushed to the door each evening to greet Billy. When he got home from work, she was eager to see him. More and more often, he'd called to say he had to work late... that he'd eat dinner in the cafeteria. She lost the excitement and stopped making dinner. She waited a lot. What was she waiting for? Why hadn't she called a friend? Why hadn't she had dinner out while Billy worked into the night? Was she waiting for this very moment? Was she waiting to find out Billy's true character? Did she wait to discover he cheated and that the marriage was over?

Perhaps, it was over long before she discovered these things. Maybe, Billy was a coward and didn't have the courage to end the marriage on his own. Maybe, he wanted Amanda to discover the affair with Jennifer. It was the only reason to take his lover to their home, their bedroom.

Marty often advised, "People face the reality of their lives only when they're ready to see that reality. The realness might've been there all along, but most don't or can't see it until it's the right time. You must remember that the mind protects us from those things we aren't ready to see."

At the time, the advice had sounded like psychological bullshit to Amanda. Now, it felt true. Amanda hadn't seen Billy's affairs or the look of lost love in his eyes because she

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wasn't ready to see him with clarity. If she really saw Billy the way he was, she'd have to see herself reflected in his eyes.

"Am I ready now?" she silently mused. "Am I ready to take a good look at myself? If I look closely, will I like what I see?"

She reached the meadow and walked the perimeter paying close attention to everything there. It was truly beautiful and the perfect place for a spiritual retreat. Ironically, the retreat turned out to be a much-needed wake-up call.

She sat on the flat boulder, pulled her legs up, and crossed her ankles. She sat comfortably in the lotus position as she closed her eyes and drifted to that beautiful place with many lights. Again, she saw the wolf and bear. They walked the streets in perfect harmony with their surroundings and the other inhabitants.

She visited some of the shops and looked at the pretty-colored glass. It was everywhere. She bent down and examined the street and its luminescent shine. She wasn't waiting for something to happen now. She was 'living' while in that wonderful place. She enjoyed each moment.

Amanda didn't know how long she'd been there enjoying the beautiful lights. Suddenly, she felt a rush of wind and a slight brush of a wingtip on her cheek. She opened her eyes. A hawk glided directly past her and then circled overhead, making several loops around the still, quiet meadow. The hawk sharply shrieked as it glided past her. Then, it returned to circle the meadow overhead. The bird was brown speckled with a white breast. It flew so close she could've easily reached out and touched it.

"Kee-eeee-arr!" the hawk cried many times as it returned to the sky to fly directly above the clearing.

Amanda didn't know if the hawk was a symbol of the third totem or the actual totem. She continued to watch the

graceful flight with admiration. It was exhilarating. She felt as free as the bird while she watched it fly.

“Kee-eeee-arr!” Amanda mimicked the sound. She felt even more alive as she watched the hawk circle one last time and disappear over the tall forest surrounding the meadow. Its flight was majestic. Had he been waiting for her response before he flew away?

One look at the sky warned it was time to head back to the cabin. The twilight had slipped up on her once more. She grabbed the satchel and slid off the boulder looking carefully around to see if either the wolf or bear was nearby. She didn’t see either of them.

Grateful, she carefully picked her way down the pine needle laden pathway back to the cabin. She didn’t feel panicky as she had on the previous two days. She took her time climbing the back stoop. When she got inside, she locked the door and then sat down at the small table to think about what the wise woman had told her at the grocery store.

“You’ve found your totems; the wolf, bear, and soon the hawk and bees. Don’t worry; these totems are great signs for you. The wolf is a reminder to be true to yourself. The bear is courage to face the changes ahead. The hawk is a messenger of healing and the bees are a reminder to celebrate life.”

She’d already met the wolf, bear, and the hawk. The wolf brought dignity. The bear returned courage. The hawk restored the joy of life.

After meeting the wolf, she admittedly felt more like the girl in high school. She was ready to be true to the young woman who had cherished art. That girl existed long before she met Billy Connors. Amanda Toole existed before she’d given up her own dreams to help someone else realize their own. She hadn’t been true to herself in a while, but she was confident that she could start.

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After meeting the bear, she also felt more courageous. She survived the terrifying encounter and she now saw the wisdom in her responses. She could face whatever changes came after she left this small cabin and returned to her life.

The hawk had indeed brought healing. Its message was to live well and soar to new heights. She felt alive and restored to health mentally and physically. The traumas of the past no longer bothered her. She could now let it go.

Soon, she'd face the bees. Would that signal the retreat's end? Would she begin to celebrate life once more? Would it signal the return of joy and the sweetness of life?

She slipped out of her clothes and climbed under the covers wearing only her panties and the undershirt she'd worn for extra warmth. She was asleep in only moments. Again, her dreams were peaceful and full of hope. Amanda returned to the City of Lights and visited her own gallery filled with light and the beautiful paintings she had created.

Chapter 20

The next morning, Amanda awakened with a huge smile on her face. She'd had a good night's sleep and was refreshed. She flipped back the covers and hurriedly tiptoed to the small bathroom. She washed her hair and brushed her teeth while showering. She sang a tune and felt happier than she had in years.

A plan formed, but she couldn't quite put it into words just yet. She knew that by the end of the retreat she'd know what she wanted to do for the next phase of her life. She could imagine how Bobbie and Marty would react when she told them.

After a hot breakfast of fried eggs and toast, Amanda gathered the satchel and went out the side door. Anxious to get started, she ran down the three steps and towards the path that led to the meadow. She looked into the depths of the forest as she climbed and laughed at the antics of the wildlife all around her. Beautifully spun silk spider webs. Thousands of crawling creatures in the deadfall. Playful squirrel families. Rabbits frozen in terror until she'd passed by.

Most of the creatures ignored her, but the poor rabbits didn't know whether she was a predator or not. They reacted the same frightened way they did to all unexpected visitors. Amanda realized she had reacted the same way when she encountered the wolf and bear. Evidently, it was the correct way to respond.

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“When I caught Billy with Jennifer, it was also the correct reaction,” she silently mused.

In the meadow, she danced around the perimeter feeling joyful and energetic. She sang a tune. Like the ballerina she'd once aspired to be all those years ago, she twirled in abandonment. She giggled, falling down in the center of the meadow, stretching her arms and legs wide as if making snow angels.

The warmth of the earth was as nice as the sun's. It seeped into her body while the sunlight beamed down on her. She closed her eyes and laid there for a long time, again slipping away to the City of Lights. There, everything sparkled. Everything was clean and bright. It was a perfect place of peace and restoration. Her artist's eyes took in everything with admiration.

On this visit, she met a man dressed in a long white, hooded robe. He walked beside her. Although no words were audibly spoken, the conversation with him was profoundly deep and animated. Thoughts quickly and easily passed between them. They conversed in this way for a very long time. Amanda had a sense of *déjà vu*.

She knew him and had always known him. His entire persona was all too familiar. Had she known him for eternity? Had she known him for as long as she had existed?

She had many questions and he willingly answered all of them. They walked the entire city by way of the perimeter and then down the side streets and alleyways.

The talk continued into the night and the next day and then the next night.

Amanda would never grow tired of asking questions or receiving the responses her new friend gave.

As they walked, the bear and wolf approached.

Her companion laughed heartily and vigorously stroked the bear affectionately. The wolf stood on hind legs and placed his paws on the man's shoulders. The wolf's long tongue licked the side of the man's face. When the man urged Amanda to greet the two ferocious animals, she held her breath.

Here, the bear and wolf weren't wild and savage. They were affectionate and domesticated. They greeted her in the same manner and she finally laughed as the bear playfully nudged her with his shoulder.

Everything was so beautiful and ethereal that Amanda began to wonder if she was dreaming. She'd dreamed of the City of Lights before; was she dreaming now? Would she awaken in the bed at the cabin? Was she here in the meadow stretched out on the warm earth with the heat of the sun beating down on her?

She felt something buzz her lips and then the tip of her nose. Amanda startled back to the present moment. A bee sat on her nose. It gazed directly into her eyes. It didn't sting her. It only looked at her while she looked back at it.

Just as suddenly, a swarm of bees surrounded her.

They lightly touched down on every part of her body.

She became as still as death.

Covered by a bee suit, she wondered if this was the end. Would she die here in this meadow stung to death by thousands of bees?

The bees had no intention to sting her.

They only visited for a brief moment, offering a mere suggestion. Their sticky feet lined her body. She giggled at the prickly sensation on her body.

As the sound surfaced, the swarm lifted up in unison to fly away. One bee remained. It sat on her nose. Its feet, firmly

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planted in place, while wings beat a steady pace, ready to take flight at any moment.

Amanda puckered her mouth to mimic the buzzing noise the single insect made. The bee instantly flew away.

She smiled; satisfied that she'd met all of the totems assigned to her. She got up from the warm ground, picked up her satchel and retraced her steps to the cabin.

It's done.

The spirit quest, the retreat, was complete. Amanda had found her true self. She knew it as sure as she knew her own name.

Chapter 21

When Amanda awakened the next morning, she knew with certainty the retreat had worked its magic. She'd come here to find herself and she had.

She knew what she wanted to do with her life.

Making it happen might be a little tricky, but at least she had a goal and the desire to attain that goal.

She took a warm shower and dressed.

She wouldn't return to the meadow. That part of the quest was finished. Today, she'd take in the sights of this amazing mountain.

She followed the hand-drawn map and went to the trading post. It was really an antique store of sorts and she browsed for a while.

She had lunch in its small, quaint diner. The taco and beans tasted good, but anything would've been good after living on eggs and toast for the last week.

It'd been six days since she began the retreat.

She had planned to return home tomorrow, but she didn't want to go home. She didn't care if she ever set foot there again. Nevertheless, if she didn't return home, then where would she go?

Amanda went back to the cabin and packed her belongings. In a spur of the moment decision, she took a new direction.

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She checked out and asked for directions to Santa Fe.

Donny handed her another hand-drawn map.

A quick look at it revealed that she'd retrace her steps along Highway 4 West to US 550 South. From there, she'd continue on 165 East to Interstate-25 North for about forty miles. The trip would take about an hour and a half.

Then, she was off.

This was the next leg of the journey.

It would take her back to the Amanda she'd once been.

Chapter 22

Amanda checked into the Hotel St. Francis in historic old Santa Fe that afternoon. The unique hotel was located one block from the Santa Fe Plaza. It was a wonderfully restored and renovated piece of history from Santa Fe's early Franciscan missionaries.

She registered for a deluxe queen guestroom with city views and advised the desk clerk that she'd check out Saturday morning. After that, she drove around the city carefully looking over the area. It was an artist community. What better place to nurture her creative self than here?

She picked up several newspapers and 'homes for sale' brochures and took them back to the hotel. There, she sat at the patio table on the balcony to peruse the printed items closely. She found three properties, all with studios. From the descriptions, a home with a studio would provide the place needed for painting.

Next, she called Debbie Hadley, the listing realtor, "I'd like appointments to see these homes tomorrow morning," Amanda informed. She gave the addresses.

"I'll make the arrangements," Debbie affirmed. "I'll see you at ten o'clock in the hotel lobby."

Amanda felt good after the call ended. She looked forward to beginning a new life in this place. After making that one simple decision, she felt truly joyful. "Have I really decided to do this?" She wondered aloud. "Yes, I have! I'll move away from the painful memories of the past and begin again."

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She compared her reaction to Billy with the ones to the wolf and bear. She'd remained frozen in place long after the danger had passed. It was time to take action, to move on. Although it was wise to remain immobile in the meadow, staying fixed in one place for too long was as dangerous as moving too soon. If she'd fled immediately when her instincts screamed for her to run from the bear, she'd have been in more danger. If she'd stayed frozen in the meadow too long, it could've also led to her death. The bear could've returned to find her. Inability to react might cause her to appear wounded. Predators often chose to kill the weakest prey. At long last, Amanda fully comprehended why it was necessary to make the changes at this particular time.

Then, she went to Tabla de Los Santos, a fine dining restaurant in the Hotel St. Francis. She didn't remember the last time she dined out solo. She ordered the Parmesan Crusted Trout, served in a fine, lemon reduction glaze. Amanda enjoyed the meal immensely and the lovely ambience of the restaurant soothed her soul and enlivened her spirit.

When she returned to the room to retire for the evening, she took a very long, hot shower. It felt wonderful. Unable to get the water temperature more than warm in the cabin, she soaked up the heat with relish as it soothed achy muscles and tendons. Amanda climbed under the down covers of the queen size bed and stretched luxuriously. She was asleep in only a matter of minutes and slept as soundly as an infant sleeps.

Chapter 23

At ten the next morning, Amanda was anxious to see the real-estate properties she'd selected. She met Debbie Hadley, the realtor, in the lobby to begin the excursion. The homes chosen were near the Santa Fe Historic District. Amanda desired to be in the midst of things and would enjoy walking around and living in the area. Perhaps she'd even paint the nearby landscapes. The quaint and peaceful surroundings would easily inspire creativity.

They viewed the first three homes before Debbie got a complete picture of what Amanda was looking for in a personal residence. It became clear that her new client wanted a studio for her artwork, not a studio for additional guests. Once Debbie understood that distinction, she was able to show Amanda additional properties that fit her requirements. They stopped for a light lunch and then the day wore on as Debbie drove to more homes in the area.

At last, Amanda found what she was looking for on Sena Avenue. It was perfect. The home, filled with light, had private courtyards on two sides with a lovely wooden gated entrance. The street was quiet and tree-lined which also helped to buffer any traffic noise. The main home was spacious at twenty-four hundred square feet, especially for a single occupant.

“As you can see,” Debbie informed, “the kitchen sits between two oversized bedrooms. They have large roomy baths and closets. The remainder of the home... the living

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room, dining room, and study... circles around the kitchen and faces the front of the home. I love the brick floors.”

“So do I,” Amanda agreed.

“The kitchen is updated in warm colors,” Debbie continued. “The stainless steel appliances are new.”

“The rooms have plenty of natural light,” Amanda added.

“Showing a home empty without staging it isn’t usually advisable,” Debbie commented.

“Although it’s empty, I can easily visualize the possibilities,” Amanda interjected.

“I suppose being an artist helps,” Debbie acknowledged as she continued the commentary. “The living room is warm and inviting with a corner fireplace. The study, lined with wooden bookcases, has an additional fireplace on one wall. I like that a door connects the study to the master bedroom. Both bedrooms also have brick fireplaces on the end walls, but they’re now converted to gas logs.”

“I like it,” Amanda enthusiastically admitted.

“You like it or you’d like to live here?” Debbie asked. When Amanda didn’t answer, she continued. “From what you’ve described, this is the real selling point. The attached studio is entered from either the kitchen or the master bedroom. It’s large and bright from natural light.” Amanda’s heart skipped a beat. “It also has a small separate kitchenette and full bath,” Debbie described, “with a private courtyard as well. What do you think?”

“It’s perfect,” Amanda breathlessly affirmed. Hooked, was the only word that came to mind. The home met all her requirements. “The entire home is exactly what I desire.”

“Will you sell a home in Albuquerque to make this work?” Debbie asked.

“Yes, I have two homes there that I’ll have to sell,” Amanda truthfully replied. Although she had funds from the estate her parents had left to purchase outright, Amanda couldn’t imagine owning three homes at one time. The term ‘house poor’ came to mind. “If I sell one home, I can probably make it work,” she added.

“We can do a contingency offer,” Debbie suggested.

“How would that work?” she asked.

“Let’s head back to the office and sit down with pen and paper,” Debbie easily suggested. “You want the property. With desire, we can figure out some options.”

Chapter 24

It was late evening when the meeting finished. Still, the only thing Amanda knew for sure was that she wanted the home on Sena Avenue. The actual method or ways and means necessary to acquire the home was a lot to consider.

She hadn't yet listed the two homes in Albuquerque. She worried that she was getting ahead of herself. She returned to the suite at the St. Francis to make some calls. First, she spoke to Bobbie and then Marty. They were excited to hear from her and asked about the retreat.

“When you come to dinner Sunday night, I'll tell you all about it,” she promised.

After those calls ended, she contacted a favorite caterer to choose the dinner menu for the reunion with her best friends. She felt good about the direction her life was taking and wanted to share the changes with them. Had the bees inspired this sweet celebration?

After completing the arrangements, Amanda returned to Tabla de Los Santos for a lovely dinner of Cedar Plank Roasted Organic Salmon. The dish came with sweet onion and Meyer lemon risotto. She enjoyed the meal immensely. In the plush room, she took another hot shower and climbed into the luxurious queen size bed. Once again, she slept like a baby, free from worry or concerns.

Chapter 25

After she checked out of Hotel St Francis that day, she walked the Plaza and visited many art galleries. In the past, her talent was as good as any paintings and portraits on display. Did she still have the ability? It had been a long time since she had painted.

If careful, she could buy the home and still have enough money from her parents' estate to spend the time necessary to regain whatever ability was lost. Perhaps she only needed to take a class or two.

Surely, she hadn't completely lost her artistic touch. She only needed inspiration and the desire to pull it out of dormancy. Those thoughts soothed her mind as she continued the acquaintance phase with her new city—the city that would soon become her home.

She had a coffee with an egg salad croissant for lunch at a tiny bistro in the Plaza. As she sat there alone, Amanda realized she was reluctant to leave. She dreaded going home. She couldn't bear to face the home she had shared with Billy again.

Once away from the memories, she hadn't had any nightmares at all. She couldn't risk they'd begin again when she returned. Her stomach queasily flipped at the prospect of going back, but she didn't have another choice. "Wait a minute," she softly gasped aloud. "I can spend the night at my parents' home."

"It's really my home now," she silently mused. *"It's exactly the way it was when mother was alive."*

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The comfortable home she inherited was still furnished with the utilities on. The same housekeeper came twice a month to air it out.

Amanda could bear the memories of her mother's frailty and death better than the memories of Billy and their failed marriage.

With that in mind, she resolved to live there for the time being. The solution, once ambiguous, was now simple.

Chapter 26

Amanda drove to the home of her childhood and parked in the driveway. She made a mental note to find the garage door opener and put it in the Jeep. The home smelled pleasantly clean with a faint vanilla scent.

She took the duffle bag inside and began to wash a load of clothes. The muddy jeans, rolled in a tight ball to keep the debris from getting on anything else, were stuck together. She washed them separately. While the clothes washed, she examined the home with a critical eye.

“Should I keep this home and only sell the home I shared with Billy?” She wondered aloud. “Is it better to cut all ties and move on? Can I begin a new life in Santa Fe completely free and unencumbered?”

After her mother died, the family attorney advised that she should wait a year after a death or divorce before making any hard and fast financial decisions. It had already been a year since both events. Was it enough time? Was there any reason to hang on any longer?

Her mother would want her to be happy. Amanda had to let go and letting go of her dead parents was as important as letting go of the failed marriage. It was time.

As she sat on the sofa in the living room, she wished she'd planned to have the celebration dinner with Bobbie and Marty here rather than at the other home. Still, she was saying goodbye to that home and life. She'd let her closest friends know the decision in the other home as a final farewell. She

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resolved to call a realtor the next day to put her plans into motion. It was all that she could do for now.

After the laundry finished, Amanda went to her childhood bedroom. She found a pair of clean pajama pants and a worn tee shirt, dressed in the comfortable clothing, and then climbed into the four-poster bed.

After she turned out the lamp, she slept well.

She was greatly relieved that the horrible nightmares didn't recur with the return to Albuquerque.

Chapter 27

Amanda had coffee on the covered patio of her parents' home Sunday morning. It occurred to her that the real estate business didn't take weekends off and rarely took a holiday. She thumbed through her mother's address book and placed a call to an old family friend, Trina Brown. The call went to her voice mail. She left a message with her name, her relationship to Susan Toole, and that she had two homes she'd like to sell. Then, she had another cup of coffee.

Trina, in her late fifties and polished, returned the call within the hour. She came by to talk to Amanda in person that very morning. She expressed sympathy for the loss of her mother again.

"Amanda, I'm familiar with this home. I visited your mother here many times. Please show me the other home you want to sell," Trina encouraged. "We can list them at the same time."

Amanda, reluctant to step foot in the home again, knew she'd have to go over there eventually. Perhaps, it'd be better to go with someone rather than to return alone. When they got there, she showed Trina each room and then carefully closed the doors after they'd exited.

"I'd like to sell the homes furnished," Amanda finally said. "I don't want anything here other than my personal items."

"If that's what you wish, we can do that," Trina kindly accepted the decision. "Homes sell better if staged. Your furnishings are very nice. They will show the home to its best

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advantage. However, with your permission, I'll have a decorator come in and add finishing touches. She'll also remove any personal items so that each home shows in the best possible light."

"Yes, that's fine," Amanda agreed. "I'll remove everything that I want to keep right away."

"Will you stay at your mother's home for the time being?" Trina asked.

"Is it that obvious?" Amanda affirmed.

"Well, I can tell you're not happy here," Trina acknowledged. "Believe me I do understand. You're not the first woman who's faced this situation. I admire the way you've handled it, Amanda. It takes a lot of courage to move on after a marriage ends."

"It's taken a full year," Amanda admitted.

"You've waited the appropriate length of time before making changes and you'll be fine," Trina softly encouraged. "Your mother often worried about your marriage, dear. She'd be proud of you for picking up the pieces now and making a new life for yourself. What will you do once the homes sell?"

"I plan to move to Santa Fe and renew my art career," Amanda found herself sharing the details. She wondered why she was so forthright with Trina and then realized that she missed talking to her mother and, for lack of a better comparison, talking to Trina was similar to talking to Susan.

"Oh, I know that news would make your mother very proud, Amanda," Trina enthused. "She often talked about the great talent you have. She dreamed that you'd open a gallery of your own one day."

"I've found a home in Santa Fe," she divulged. "The realtor wants me to make an offer with a contingency on one of the homes here selling. I wasn't sure what to do. I'm afraid I left the matter unsettled and did nothing."

“If the home there is exactly what you desire, let me work with the realtor there on your behalf, dear,” Trina suggested. “Is it?”

“It really is,” Amanda acknowledged. “In truth, it’s perfect.”

“Then, I’m sure we can come up with something to make your dreams come true,” Trina avowed.

“That’d be great,” Amanda said with relief. “I have an additional card for her in my purse. I’ll get it now.”

“I don’t think you have anything to worry about, Amanda,” Trina soothed. “With the right staging, both of these homes should sell quickly. They’re well maintained, in excellent condition, updated, and located in great neighborhoods. Those are the things that buyers covet most,” Trina said as she took the business card for Debbie Hadley in Santa Fe. She thoughtfully looked over the card and then added, “I know her. She’s an excellent realtor and resource too. You can’t be in this business as long as I have without meeting almost everyone in the state.”

Trina filled out the listing forms and Amanda signed at the bottom. After the paperwork was finished, they said their goodbyes at the door. Just as the realtor left, the caterers arrived with the dinner menu. Everything was carefully wrapped for the refrigerator. Amanda led the way to the kitchen and watched the delivery personnel store the meal.

She’d begin the preparation at six o’clock in anticipation of her guests arriving at seven-thirty. With that in mind, she went to the guest room, packed up the rest of her clothing along with makeup and toiletries. She locked the house before returning to her mother’s home. She hoped there wouldn’t be a need to return after the dinner tonight.

Chapter 28

Amanda spent the rest of the afternoon putting away her clothing. Then, she packed her parents' personal items in boxes she found stored in the garage. After securing each box, she labeled the contents, and then returned it to the garage. She only packed the most intimate items from their lives, photos and mementos, but she already had six large boxes. The rest of the items could remain with the home or Trina could arrange an estate sale.

Time passed quickly. She got ready for the dinner party with Bobbie and Marty, dressing carefully in casual, but stylish, clothes for the occasion. She wore dark orange Capri pants with a long sleeve bronze shirt sewn with orange stitching to match the slacks. Next, she slipped on a pair of pewter-colored sandals and then applied makeup, something she hadn't done in many months. The last step was to brush her hair to a shiny luster.

Amanda drove back across town to the home she'd previously shared with Billy and set about preparing the dinner. She hummed a light tune and sipped a glass of Pinot Grigio. By the time her two best friends arrived, everything was ready and her mood was light and breezy. After the initial greeting, Amanda poured two glasses of the wine for her guests.

"I have to say that you look great, Amanda," Marty complimented.

"I agree," Bobbie added. "It's great to see you taking pride in the way you look again."

“Did I really look that bad?” Amanda asked in bewilderment.

“You dressed as tiredly as you looked and felt,” Bobbie truthfully affirmed. “It was worrisome, but you look great tonight. Please keep it up.”

“All right, then,” Amanda acknowledged. “I’ll try to do better. I invited you here to tell you the news... I’m selling both homes and moving to Santa Fe to renew my art career.” She held up her glass. “Salud!”

Stunned, Bobbie and Marty didn’t respond at first. Then, it hit them. Amanda’s back! After clinking glasses and a few claps on the back, they each drew Amanda in for warm hugs and congratulated her on making a decision. She was ready for the next phase of her life and her best friends couldn’t have been happier at the news.

“To your health,” Bobbie and Marty chorused.

Amanda spent the rest of the evening sharing the events of the spiritual retreat, including the meadow with the wolf, bear, hawk, and bees. By the time she finished the tale, Bobbie and Marty were breathless.

“The bear really sniffed you?” Marty asked.

“He did,” Amanda replied. “My spine was stiff from terror.”

“You’re lucky to be alive,” Bobbie asserted. “I don’t know how you sat there. I would have run as fast as I could. I would’ve probably ended the retreat after meeting the wolf.”

“Me too,” Marty agreed. “I’m not sure I would’ve had the courage to climb the path to the meadow to begin with. I certainly wouldn’t have gone back up there after meeting the wolf. I don’t know how you found the courage to do it either.”

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“I had to,” Amanda acknowledged. “I wanted to heal more than I wanted anything else... even to live, especially if I had to live like the last year.”

“But, he followed you to the cabin!” Bobbie exclaimed. “He could’ve eaten you.”

“He could’ve huffed and puffed and blown the house down!” Marty squealed. “From the way you described it, he could’ve pushed the cabin over.”

Amanda shared what she had discovered about her life before Billy and during Billy. “Now I’m ready for something new and I suppose that this new phase can technically be called ‘life after Billy.’ Doesn’t that sound about right?” she asked and laughed at the truth of the statement.

Bobbie and Marty laughed with her. It was great to be together once again in this way and enjoying life’s celebrations. Yes, Amanda was back and the impromptu dinner party was a true celebration where each enjoyed her homecoming.

Chapter 29

Amanda once again had morning coffee on the patio at her parents' home while she read the newspaper. She felt good about the dinner party the night before. It was the first time in a long while that she'd really enjoyed herself. She hadn't felt like a fake version of herself either.

Although she dreaded it, she knew the next step was clear out all personal items from the marital home. She'd already accomplished that here, but she had to do it there too. Just as she was thinking about the distasteful prospect, Bobbie called. After Amanda told her what must occur next, Bobbie offered to help. "I'll meet you there and help you out. Do you need boxes?" Bobbie volunteered.

"I have enough boxes here," Amanda replied.

"What time do you want to meet there?" Bobbie asked.

"Is ten too early?"

"No, I'll bring coffee and Danishes," Bobbie offered.

Amanda put on a comfortable pair of faded jeans and a lightweight tee shirt. She applied makeup and brushed her hair to sheen. The jeans were loose and she decided that she liked them that way. Her usual size five was now roomy and she could live with that small amount of weight loss.

Amanda took many steps to simplify her life. This time, she remembered to add a garage door opener to the visor in the Jeep. Pulling into the garage while living here would make her stay more comfortable. Baby steps were progress too. She didn't aspire to perfection, only healthy change.

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When she got to the other home, Bobbie was already there and parked in the driveway. Amanda got out and they entered the split-level front entrance. It was a large five-bedroom home, best suited for a large family. There were three bedrooms downstairs and two upstairs. She and Billy had lived on the upper level. When they'd first bought the home, they often talked about having a large family. The talk stopped after the first five years of their marriage.

"Were our problems brewing even then?" she silently wondered.

Since the lower level was mainly for show or guests, it didn't have any items that needed boxing. After the coffee and Danish, Bobbie and Amanda started on the upper level. Bobbie offered to take the master bedroom and Amanda gratefully accepted. She couldn't stand looking into the room, much less entering it. At one point, Bobbie came into the guest bedroom to ask, "Should I use a separate box for Billy's personal items?"

"I didn't know he left anything behind," she admitted. "Is it stuff he'll want?"

"It's personal stuff," Bobbie admitted.

"In a way, I can't help feeling that it's his loss if he didn't take it with him when he left," Amanda spouted.

Bobbie laughed.

"I suppose I should reconsider," she explained. "So far, our divorce has been amicable. I don't really want any bad karma on my head if I mishandled things now."

"You're probably right," Bobby agreed. "I'll start a separate box for Billy."

"All right, but you can be the one to take it to him. Agreed?" Amanda interjected.

“Agreed,” Bobbie replied with enthusiasm and then grinned at Amanda. “I’ll be very happy to do that. I’d love to see the surprise on his face when he realizes that you’ve moved on.”

“Like he really cares,” Amanda lightly speculated.

“Oh, he cares,” Bobbie argued. “He’s enjoyed your masochistic doldrums for the last year. It’s his way of punishing you. Now, he’ll find out that his passive-aggressive tactics no longer work.”

“Sounds like you’ve given the situation a great deal of thought,” Amanda sighed.

“I have,” Bobbie affirmed, “and I can’t wait to see his face when I hand over these boxes.” She laughed.

They continued to work, diligently boxing up all personal items. The chore was finished by one o’clock. Billy’s personal items had required two boxes. Next, Amanda cleared out the closet with her old art supplies. After so much time had passed, she didn’t remember what was there anymore. Bobbie agreed to help her. It took another hour.

Too damaged to use, the art supplies were of no value, but the paintings were another story. They were dusty and could use a little touch up and a final coat of varnish, but the completed paintings were a welcoming sight. She took a load to the Jeep and lifted the hatch placing the canvases flat. Bobbie followed her with the last load.

It was finally finished.

Her art and personal items were now loaded in the back of the Jeep. There was nothing more that she’d ever need or want from this home. She could finally walk away from the painful memories. Something overwhelming once again turned out to be simple.

Bobbie carried Billy’s boxes to her brand new sports car, a cool blue Scion FR-S. She admittedly liked fast cars and fast

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men and vowed to never marry or drive anything that couldn't get her to Santa Fe in forty-five minutes. Amanda waved goodbye. Bobbie was anxious to return the items to Billy and was taking them to his office at Sandi Labs first thing in the morning.

Bobbie Atchley was a trust-fund baby and dedicated writer of a local news blog, *The Real Talk about Town*. She didn't work outside the home and arranged her own schedule. She always had time for her closest friends. The blog included the grittier side of Albuquerque's rich and famous as well as their social lives. Sometimes, she got up at three in the morning to write the articles or to edit other articles for the popular blog.

"It's when I do my best work," she'd acknowledged.

In the meantime, Amanda returned to her parents' home. She'd spend the rest of the time in Albuquerque there.

Bobbie had promised to drop by often and keep her company, but they'd also meet for lunch at least once a week.

When Amanda arrived home, she pulled into the garage and unloaded the paintings first.

Next, she placed the boxes with her personal items along with the boxes of her parents' belongings.

Finally, when she was finished with those chores, she called Trina. With all personal items removed from both homes, the realtor could call the decorator to stage the homes.

"Great news, Amanda," Trina enthused. "I already have the decorator lined up for tomorrow morning. Knowing that you've cleared out all personal items will be a great help to her."

"That is great news," Amanda agreed.

“If you want to drop by to see it after she’s finished, I’ll let you know,” Trina offered.

“No, I’m good,” Amanda declined, unwilling to spend any more time there. “Just do what needs to be done. You can schedule the decorator for this home too.”

Trina agreed and the conversation ended.

Amanda breathed a sigh of relief. With a great many things already accomplished, it was obvious the retreat had successfully changed her life.

Chapter 30

Trina provided many updates and tips. Today, the decorator would begin the staging process for both homes. Although glad to get the news, Amanda was also anxious for the conversation to end. She was eager to return to the work planned for the day.

The paintings were now in the glassed-in porch she'd once used as a studio. Oil paints had always been her medium and some of Amanda's work needed TLC. She'd already cleaned the paintings and had let them dry overnight. Now, she applied a fresh coat of varnish. It was the final step to ensure lasting beauty. She diligently administered the care needed and lined up the artwork along shelves. She was still in the studio when the decorator arrived later that day.

Patty LeBeau was a transplant to New Mexico from Louisiana, but she was a very fine decorator and had successfully carved out a life for herself in an area that didn't easily welcome outsiders. She looked over the three-bedroom home with a critical eye for detail and then found Amanda in the studio to explain her plans for this home. When she entered the bright space used for an art studio, Patty inhaled sharply.

"Your work is lovely, Ms. Toole," she gasped. "I'd like to use a few of these to stage both homes and maybe some of the other homes I have coming-out next week. I'll get them framed. Would that be all right?" She expressed the desire with hope for a positive response.

“I suppose it would be all right,” Amanda hesitantly agreed. “These paintings have been in storage for many years. They’ll need to dry before framing, but yes, it should only be another day before you can make selections.” Amanda brightly smiled. The decorator’s offer was a good start to the realization of her dreams.

“But some of them are already finished,” Patty said as she lightly touched the corners of a few of the canvases to see if the varnish was dry. “Can I take those to get a start on framing?”

“I suppose so,” Amanda replied again, happy about Patty’s obvious eagerness. “Do you have transportation that allows for the paintings to lie flat?”

“I can lower the seats in the back of my SUV to accommodate them. I’ll take good care of them. You don’t need to worry. I’ll draw up a contract showing the items I’ve borrowed and we can sign it and renew it as needed and as additional pieces are ready,” Patty enthusiastically offered.

Amanda selected the pieces to move. Some were dry, but others were still tacky, not completely dry. She had five dried pieces that Patty could take that day. She relocated them to the kitchen table and then Patty, true to her word, filled out a list for consignment. Amanda didn’t realize when she agreed to lend the items to the decorator that money would change hands. She happily smiled when she saw the sum at the bottom of the list.

Patty would pay the amount each week she used the paintings. If a buyer wanted to purchase any of the paintings, Patty would get twenty percent commission and, of course, she would check with Amanda to set the price for each painting. Amanda accepted the first payment feeling deep satisfaction.

“We’ll draw up a new agreement each time you have other paintings ready,” Patty easily assured.

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“Lovely,” Amanda replied just as easily.

As soon as Patty left, Amanda was out the door in search of new art supplies. Patty’s enthusiasm for her art had been the incentive Amanda needed. She was ready to resume her art career right then without wasting another day.

The small studio from her youth would suffice until she moved into her new home. Not only would she repair the older paintings that had been neglected in storage for so long, she’d begin new paintings. The first painting she planned to paint was the beautiful meadow.

Things were looking brighter each day.

Chapter 31

When Bobbie stopped by with coffee and donuts the next morning, she found Amanda in the studio. She wanted to tell her about dropping off the boxes to Billy and couldn't wait to see Amanda's reaction.

"You should have seen his face, Amanda," Bobbie spouted as she mimicked Billy's mannerism. "He had this hurt, little-boy expression and he actually stuttered. 'D-do you m-m-mean Amanda is s-s-selling our h-h-home?'" Bobbie giggled.

"Oh Bobbie!" Amanda interjected. "Don't be cruel."

"I'm telling you, the way he said it made it sound as if you were selling a child," Bobbie continued. "He took the boxes, looked through them briefly and then said something to the effect, 'This is all I have left after ten years of marriage?'" Bobbie paused for a few moments before continuing, "I'm telling you, Amanda, it was priceless! And satisfying... I knew all along that he still cares about you and his actions prove it."

"I don't feel the same elation over Billy's distress as you do," she acknowledged, but she listened attentively and laughed when appropriate. "I don't hate him, Bobbie. I don't even wish him ill will or harm. I'm merely 'done with it.' Knowing that the strong emotions are over lets me know I'm over Billy. Do you think he wanted more than what was in the two boxes?" she asked a little confused by the way Bobbie described his reaction.

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“He didn’t say, but he sure looked through the boxes as if he expected to find you in one of them,” Bobbie replied and then chuckled again.

“He walked out,” Amanda stated. “He could’ve made arrangements to take anything he wanted or sent for it during the first year after he left. Now, he can’t because I’m selling the home furnished.”

“You’re damn straight he could’ve.” Bobbie adamantly asserted. “But he didn’t. Don’t you go feeling sorry for him, Amanda. He doesn’t deserve your sympathy or pity. Billy Connors doesn’t deserve any of your thoughts at all. I’m only telling you about his reaction now because it was so damn comical. As your closest friend, I hated him for what he did to you. He was a pure and evil bastard.”

“Well, you need to get over it too, Bobbie,” Amanda softly announced, shocked at her best friend’s vehement admission. “Seriously, if I can get over it, so can you.”

“I’m just very glad that you’re back, Amanda. I’ve really missed you,” Bobbie sheepishly commented. “I hate what you had to endure to get back to being you, but I’m certainly glad you made it.”

They enjoyed the coffee and donuts and then Bobbie looked in the small studio. She was pleased to see that Amanda was once again taking time for her creative side. Amanda told Bobbie the good news about the consignment deal and Bobbie offered sincere congratulations. She took time to admire *The Meadow* that Amanda had begun to paint and then left to get started on some research for her blog.

Chapter 32

Amanda hugged Bobbie at the door and then returned to answer the phone. It was Trina. “Amanda,” she greeted, “I just wanted to let you know that the first home is now staged and in the MLS listings. I already have three appointments with prequalified buyers to look at it this afternoon. I thought you’d be excited to know that.”

“That’s good news,” Amanda lightly agreed.

“I have another bit of good news,” Trina breathlessly continued. “Debbie Hadley talked to the owners of the home in Santa Fe. They’re willing to do a lease purchase since the home is vacant.”

“What does that mean?” Amanda inquired.

“It’s good news too, dear,” Trina explained. “Let me reassure you. No need for worry. Here’s an example... let’s say that the owners are willing to allow you time to make arrangements. They might agree to take twenty thousand down as a lease fee and allow you to live there as if it’s your own home until one of your homes sells. If you buy the home within a year, they’ll apply that down payment to the purchase price. It gives you the option to occupy the home and live there as if it’s already your home.”

“And if one of my homes doesn’t sell in that period of time, say in a year?” Amanda worriedly asked.

“The down payment becomes a lease amount and isn’t applied to the purchase price but you’d probably have the option to renew the lease at the end of the year. This is only

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an option, but it's a good way to move on and start living in Santa Fe," Trina reported. "Don't feel pressured about it, dear. As I said, it's only one option to consider. You don't have to decide right now. Sleep on it and let me know if you want to pursue it. That's what your mother always advised—to sleep on things. Now, one more thing; Patty will be back tomorrow to stage that home. Will that work for you?" Amanda agreed with the timing and then ended the call.

Susan Toole was famous for quips of good advice and 'to sleep on it' was one of her best. Still, Amanda wanted to talk to Bobbie and Marty about the option. She'd invite them to dinner again over the weekend. With their schedules, that was the best option.

Amanda returned to the studio and continued working as she thought about the home she wanted to buy in Santa Fe. It was perfect for what she hoped to accomplish in her new life. She was confident that, in time, the pieces would fall into place to make it hers. She felt cautious about the lease option. It didn't feel right and she couldn't shake the feeling.

She wanted things to flow smoothly, not push or shove to get them to work. The lease option was pushing. If it was meant to be, she was certain things would work out to her advantage. One of the homes would sell soon. In the meantime, her instincts told her to wait and give it time to flow in its own accord.

Chapter 33

Patty, accompanied by three men, returned to stage Amanda's current home. While she gave instructions to the heavy-lifters, Amanda continued to work in the art studio. She not only restored damaged paintings; she gave new life to her soul. She called forth the talented artist of her youth as she applied each brush stroke. Each dab of paint added to the fresh canvas took form as she healed. Each color expressed itself and strengthened her creativity.

She worked from memory to recreate the lovely meadow. It grew in beauty each hour. The likeness on canvas was even more appealing than the actual place because Amanda used the City of Lights for insight and inspiration. Her work took on an entirely new focus and integrity.

When Patty finished, she found Amanda in the studio. She admired the newest creation and selected five more paintings. Patty took them to the kitchen while Amanda cleaned and dried her hands. They signed another agreement and Patty wrote a second consignment check.

"We can do very well together, Amanda," Patty agreeably smiled. "Have you put a price on any of your paintings yet?"

Amanda thought about that for several moments and then a price came to mind. She snatched it out of the air, or so it seemed, but in reality, it was inspiration. She wrote numbers on the back of three cards and handed them to Patty one at a time. "This is the price for my small paintings. The price increases by size as you can see from these cards... small, medium and large. Does that work?" Amanda

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confidently presented and then continued, “These prices are comparable with most gallery pieces. Until my work is showcased again, it’ll do.”

“Very well,” Patty easily replied. “With your permission, I’ll print price cards for the corners of those I’m using.”

“Of course,” Amanda agreed.

“Come, walk with me to see the changes we made,” Patty encouraged.

“I see you used most of the current furnishings,” Amanda acknowledged and praised, “but you thinned it out a bit. The occasional chairs are missing... it makes the living room feel open and airy. The dining room table is reduced to seat four... it makes that room look larger too. There are very few items sitting out... reducing clutter. Every change you made creates a more spacious look and feel to each room. You did very well. I like it.”

“Thank you,” Patty gushed. “You should take time to look at the other home. It’s truly amazing and I wouldn’t be surprised if it sells the first week. Of course, you’d already done a nice job decorating it yourself, but with a few simple changes... Like I said, I bet Trina has an offer right away.”

“That’s exciting news,” Amanda affirmed. She waved her arms around the room to indicate the staging. “If this home reflects the work there, I’m sure it’s lovely.”

An offer meant that she wouldn’t have to worry at all about the lease option. She’d be able to buy the home in Santa Fe right away.

Of course, she still needed to purchase furnishings for it. She didn’t want to take anything that reminded her of the previous life—she wanted an entirely fresh start.

She helped Patty take the paintings to her SUV and then returned to look through the home again.

Patty's touches were personal and yet somehow impersonal, allowing a buyer to see the home with their own memorabilia and furnishings.

Bobbie stopped by again and Amanda walked the home with her.

"What do you think?" she asked, wanting her opinion.

"She did very well, Amanda," Bobbie claimed. "I really like the changes. It's not too much or too little. We have a 'goldilocks' home!"

They laughed together and then decided to go out for an early dinner.

Chapter 34

While they dined, Amanda shared her worries about the lease purchase option available for the home in Santa Fe. Bobbie attentively listened to Amanda's concerns before encouraging, "Amanda, you don't need to worry about any of it. Just relax and let it play out the way it's supposed to do. You're back in the natural flow of your life. Just allow it to unfold. Patty's probably right; the home you shared with Billy will sell quickly."

"If it does, I'll be very happy," Amanda admitted.

"In the meantime, enjoy the studio you loved as a child and find your rhythm again," Bobbie suggested. "I honestly believe that when it's time, everything will fall into place without anyone kicking and screaming."

"I know," Amanda acknowledged. "I don't want to chance losing the home there while I wait here."

"You won't," Bobbie affirmed with conviction. "Listen, if the home in Santa Fe has been empty for a while, then there's obviously a limited market for the very things you love about it. Keep the faith. It'll still be available when one of the homes here sells. Just relax, please."

Amanda did relax, right then and there. She'd felt stressed ever since Trina had told her about the possibility of a lease purchase option. Now, she let it go. Moreover, she was enjoying the studio she'd used as a child. Designed for her by a loving mother, it was comforting and inspiring at the same time.

“I am finding my rhythm again,” she reported.

“All artists have a particular pattern to their work whether they’re writers, painters, decorators or one of the many other creative souls,” Bobbie divulged. “Each one has to find their specific heartbeat in order to succeed. Some artists, forced to labor around the schedules of their loved ones, still make it work for them. Others might have to get up at three in the morning to find time for their craft. Either way, each one must discover when their creative energy is at its peak or flows on its own.”

“I’m still revisiting that time,” Amanda admitted. “I need to rediscover my personal artistic flow... when I’m at my best and it moves freely and fluidly.”

“Give yourself time,” Bobbie encouraged.

“I will,” Amanda agreed. “It’s sound and reasonable advice to wait for free-flowing movement. I can wait for the best time to buy a home in Santa Fe. I won’t push or shove, I promise. I’ll relax.”

“Always a great idea,” Bobbie sighed.

“If you’re not too busy this weekend, would you like to have dinner with me and possibly Marty and Ashley?” Amanda asked.

“I’d love to. Which night are we talking about?” Bobbie easily replied.

“Either one; I can get a consensus from the others. Is a particular night best for you?” Amanda asked. She knew that Bobbie had a busy social life and didn’t want to interfere.

“Either one is fine with me. I usually hit the nightlife long after we’re finished with dinner,” Bobbie replied with a grin.

The meal concluded and they went their separate ways.

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Amanda returned to the home of her childhood and Bobbie went wherever Bobbie was prone to go for evening entertainment.

Amanda called Marty and Ashley to get a consensus about the best night. Both agreed on Saturday.

She sent a three-word text to Bobbie, “Saturday at seven.”

She received an immediate response, “Ok.”

Chapter 35

The next morning, Amanda still felt good about the decision to wait. She'd slept on it. Sometime in the night, she felt assured that living in her childhood home worked its own brand of magic just as the retreat had done. It allowed her to find artistic rhythm, the heartbeat of her craft.

She had coffee on the covered patio. Drinking coffee was part of an established ritual, like brushing her teeth. After the hot java, she went to the studio to begin another painting. She'd completed *The Meadow* and was ready to paint *The Cabin*.

While she worked, Amanda once again reflected on the recent changes. She no longer dreaded each day. She now had a bright and fresh outlook on life. She'd returned to a love of painting. She felt joyful for the first time in a very long time.

Although painting is a focused task, it did allow the mind to wander and work on other things while applying brush strokes. As Amanda worked, time slipped away. Soon, it was the noon hour. She heard the phone ring and went to answer it. She'd never liked the insistent ringing and interruptions of telephones. She vowed not to have one in the new studio in Santa Fe. With so many things pending now, she had to take the call.

"I have great news, Amanda," Trina cheerfully greeted. "We have an offer on the home you shared with your ex-husband. It's a little less than what we wanted, but in this market, it's close enough to make your dreams come true."

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“That is great news,” Amanda agreed. “Tell me the details.”

“They want the home with the furnishings, but they’re willing to pay cash if you’ll take ten thousand off the asking price,” Trina explained. “That means no waiting, my dear. I don’t want you to feel as if they’re low-balling us. They’re not. It’s the exact amount of cash they have on hand. Now, I can tell you from experience that usually the first offer is the best offer. We can always make a counter offer if you’re not happy with their proposal and, since it’s the weekend, we have seventy-two hours to think about it. What would you like for me to do, dear?”

“I’m very happy about the offer,” Amanda affirmed. “I’d like to think about it. I didn’t expect to hear anything so soon, and frankly, it’s taken me by surprise. The money difference isn’t that great... we priced the home with some leeway. It still allows plenty of money to buy a home in Santa Fe without touching my parents’ estate. I need to digest the newest changes. Let me sleep on it, Trina.”

“Never a bad idea, dear, never a bad idea,” Trina repeated. “I’ll expect your call after you’ve had time to process the news.”

Amanda went back to the studio and continued to work. Being in the small and brightly lit space affected her in the same way the meadow had. Time seemed to slip away. She didn’t think about food or eating. Although she got up to make a cup of coffee every few hours, it was more to stretch her legs. She felt peaceful and relaxed to be back in her natural creative flow.

Chapter 36

Amanda did sleep on it as her mother often advised. She awakened feeling good about the offer. The proposal was fair. It met the requirements to purchase the other home in Santa Fe. She attributed the previous reluctance to surprise.

She had coffee on the patio and then went to the studio to continue painting. She'd discovered that her peak time to work was during the early morning hours. She felt most energetic and enthusiastic after her first cup of coffee.

Amanda worked until noon and then called Trina. She had a few questions that required resolution for her own peace of mind, but she'd already decided to accept the cash offer. When she got Trina's voice mail, she left a message. Then she returned to a day of painting.

She finally stopped at four o'clock to prepare for her guests. Then, she shopped for the ingredients of the planned evening meal. After finished with that, she prepped the meal and then looked through the kitchen cabinets to select dinnerware. In the very back of the top cabinet, she found a new set of square dishes that she'd never seen her mother use. Called Santiago, Amanda immediately fell in love with the Southwestern pattern.

"This will be perfect for the new kitchen," she softly acknowledged while admiring the lovely design.

She continued to look in the cabinets and found all the matching serving pieces and stemware. She set the items aside. She'd use the dinnerware tonight for her guests and take the full set to the new home in Santa Fe when she

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moved. Finding the dishes was serendipity and she was happy to take this small part of her mother with her.

At seven, one by one her guests arrived for dinner. Bobbie was first, then Marty, and finally Ashley. She poured each a glass of wine and they sat at the now small dining room table while the meal finished baking. Everyone was eager to discover what news Amanda had to share. She filled them in on the offer for the marital home and explained that she planned to accept the offer as soon as she heard from her realtor. "I'll move to Santa Fe as soon as everything is finalized."

"I love how everything is falling into place for you," Marty affirmed.

"I told her it would," Bobbie added.

"Yes, me too," Ashley agreed. "I've been worried about you for the last year, well actually for a lot longer than that."

"No need to worry anymore though," Bobbie quipped. "Our Amanda is back."

Everyone had a hearty laugh. Amanda served the meal. After dinner, she set out a rich cheesecake to go with coffee. The evening was pleasant and light. While they dined on the sweets, Bobbie told the others about taking the personal items to Billy at work and everyone laughed about that too.

"I know he treated me shamefully, but I'm not out for blood," Amanda admitted.

"You're feeling sorry for him," Bobbie lightly accused. "You shouldn't. He doesn't deserve your sympathy."

"That's so true," Marty and Ashley acknowledged in unison.

"I don't know if I'm actually feeling sorry for him, Bobbie," Amanda emphasized. "I just see things more clearly and a lot differently now. It recently occurred to me that Billy

knew the marriage was over long before I did. However, he didn't have the courage to end it."

"You mean balls," Bobbie interjected.

"Either one," Amanda smiled. "Anyway, I'm not sure I would've had the courage either. He allowed me to find him with Jennifer in our home because he knew that would do the trick. He knew I couldn't and wouldn't take him back after that."

"That actually makes sense," Marty agreed.

"Now, I'm not saying that he did it in that way on purpose," Amanda theorized, "but it was his subconscious intention. It had the same effect too. Like a fox chewing off its own foot when caught in a trap. My shock and silence pushed him to the next stage of leaving. In his mind, that was the next logical step. He either left or I threw him out."

"Amanda, I'm amazed at your perception on this," Marty complimented.

"You've come a long way, baby," Ashley said before grinning widely. Everyone laughed again.

"Yes, you finally see what the rest of us saw," Bobbie commented.

"But you couldn't see it until you were ready," Marty added.

"And none of you were going to tell me," Amanda speculated.

"It wouldn't do any good for us to tell you, Amanda," Marty admonished.

"It's something you had to discover in your own time," Bobbie finished Marty's thought.

"Telling a friend something they're not ready to see or hear is never a good idea," Ashley added.

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“I know. I know,” she accepted her friends’ well-meaning responses. “I did have to come to the understanding on my own. Those old clichés such as ‘you can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make him drink’ are more accurate than we suppose. When it gets right down to it, I couldn’t see the truth of the matter until I was ready to see it.”

They said their farewells and Amanda cleared the dishes and put away the rest of the meal.

When finished, she went to the studio for a final look.

Satisfied with what she saw, she went to bed to get a good night’s sleep. Knowing that morning was her best time to work allowed her to go to bed earlier, anxious for a new day.

Chapter 37

She didn't immediately find sleep as planned. While she lay under the lightweight quilts, she again reflected on Billy's actions. They were both miserable, but didn't know how to end a relationship that had run its course. They'd known each other for a long, long time. When they met and fell in love, they were practically children. Perhaps the relationship was more habit. Maybe, it was more ritual and convenience than love.

Billy was her first and only lover. More than likely, she was also his first. Even if he'd had other girlfriends before her, she was his first real love. That's a difficult habit for anyone to break. Although her parents managed to stay in love for over forty years, most couples weren't so lucky or committed.

In all truth, she and Billy could've chosen different colleges and grown apart years ago before they ever married. It happened all the time. Statistically speaking, high school sweethearts don't always end up together. Such was the case with Marty and her first love. They'd gone to different colleges and found someone else to love.

Amanda didn't wish the situation was different or that she'd never met Billy Connors. She logically and dispassionately looked at their circumstances now. She was grateful for the understanding gained from the marriage. The years spent with Billy taught her several important lessons.

Pay attention. Never give away your own happiness for someone else's. Be true to yourself. Don't let someone else

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pick your career. Never let someone else determine your self-worth. Don't give away your personal power.

She also felt compassion for Billy now that it was over. When she mentioned the story of the fox earlier, it perfectly fit Billy. He had chewed his foot off to get free of their marriage. He had an affair with Jennifer in the very place where he was certain, if caught, it would end everything.

Amanda knew that the tainted past of being a cheater would follow him much longer that it'd follow her.

Everyone would remember what he'd done.

In the end, Jennifer wouldn't fare well from the history either. People usually remembered the sordid details and had a tendency not to let those involved forget either.

Amanda finally closed her eyes and slept well.

Chapter 38

Amanda was awake before dawn and was glad to be out of bed so early. She'd already discovered it was the best time to work. She softly laughed as she recalled her mother labeling her "a morning person" from the time she was a small child. It was an apt description. Even on weekends, she didn't sleep late unless some school activity kept her out past bedtime.

Now, she glided around the kitchen. She made coffee and reheated a tiny plate of food from the previous evening meal. She nibbled at the leftovers and then took her first cup of coffee on the patio.

Afterwards, she went to the small studio to begin the day's work. Amanda wanted to complete *The Cabin* that day. It was her priority. When the telephone rang at ten o'clock, she was surprised at the time.

"Amanda, it's Trina," the voice on the other end of the phone called out. "I'm sorry I didn't return your call right away. I went to visit my mother and was out of town for a little while. Have you made a decision?" she breathlessly asked.

"I wanted to ask you a few questions, Trina," Amanda easily replied.

"All right, dear," Trina cautiously responded.

"How long does it take for a cash offer to close? Are we secure enough to move forward with an offer on the home in

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Santa Fe or do we need to wait until the contract is finalized?” Amanda hurriedly asked.

Trina breathed an audible sigh of relief and then laughed. “We can easily move forward with an offer on the Santa Fe home,” she announced. “If you accept the offer on the home here right away, it should close in as little as two weeks and it could be less. Can I assume you’re accepting the offer?”

“Yes, I accept their offer,” Amanda restated and then laughed with relief to hear the words out loud. “And I’d like to get started right away on whatever needs to be done to secure the home in Santa Fe.”

“You do realize that the buyers want the home exactly as it is?” Trina worriedly asked and then hurried on. “You removed everything that you wanted to keep before I started showing it, right?”

“Yes, I removed everything that I wanted several days ago,” Amanda confirmed.

“Then we’re good to go on that. Once you’ve accepted the offer, the furnishings belong to the new owners. I’ll prepare an offer for the home in Santa Fe, dear,” Trina cheerfully replied. “In fact, I’ll try to get you moved into the new home as soon as possible. Your immediate occupancy will be terms of the contract.”

“Great!” Amanda excitedly replied.

While she worked on *The Cabin* painting, she relived memories of the quaint and cozy retreat.

It provided solace and comfort when she needed it most, especially after the scary encounters with the wolf and bear.

Meeting the bear had frightened her most and the fact that he followed her scent to the cabin didn’t help.

Chariss K. Walker

Now, she honestly felt amused by the events. When she met the animals again in the City of Lights, the fear was gone.

In the end, she'd received healing and courage from them. For that, she was truly grateful.

Chapter 39

When the telephone rang, Amanda busily worked in the studio. Again, the loud jangling jarred her out of reverie. It was very early for normal phone calls. She assumed it must be urgent. Reluctantly, she left the painting and went to answer its annoying ring. She hoped it was Trina and that she already had good news about the home in Santa Fe.

“Hello?” she said into the receiver.

“Hello, baby,” Billy softly whispered, using his best silky voice. “How are you, honey?”

“I’m fine,” she answered. After spending years with him, it was an automatic response.

She hadn’t spoken to him on the phone since the day she called to let him know the details of her mother’s wake. His response then was to lie. He said he had to finish a project deadline and wouldn’t be able to attend the formal service. Now, she waited to see what he wanted.

“I heard you’re selling the house and I wondered if I could go by and get a few things that I might want or need,” he proposed, still using the soft mellow voice utilized when making love.

“Yes I am,” she easily replied, “but it’s already sold.”

“He’s trying to soothe me in order to get what he wants,” Amanda silently laughed. *“Funny how I recognize it. It’s what he always did when he wanted something.”* Accustomed to his manipulation tactics, she didn’t let Billy’s velvety-smooth voice sway her.

“I mean, I didn’t take anything except my clothes, Amanda,” he continued to persuade. “So, there has to be lots of things I could use. Things I need.”

“I’m sorry Billy, but the house has already sold, as-is, and furnished. Nothing can be removed now,” she calmly informed.

“B-but... but... that’s not fair! I know there are things there that I want!” Billy’s voice immediately lost the softness.

“It’s out of my control,” Amanda remained firm. “You had over a year to decide about that, but now, it’s too late. The contract is official and I sold the home furnished. I can’t change anything now.”

“That’s not fair and you know it, Amanda. I just found out last week that you were selling it,” he argued.

“If that’s the case, then you’ve had a week to ask for what you wanted. You should’ve made your request known earlier,” Amanda held firm.

“How was I to know the house would sell so quickly?” he sullenly replied.

“Like I said, you had a year to decide. You could’ve sent for anything you wanted during that year. Now, it’s simply too late. I’ve signed an official contract and there’s really nothing I can do,” Amanda assured.

“I... I made a mistake, Amanda. I should have never left you like that,” Billy remorsefully apologized.

“Be that as it may, it’s too late now,” Amanda acknowledged.

“It... it was a mistake... I made a mistake,” Billy repeated. “I screwed up.” His voice was sad and downcast now, but she didn’t let it affect her. She was determined to set him straight. He needed to hear what she had to say.

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“No, Billy, it wasn’t a mistake. We were over. We’d been over for a long time, but neither one of us knew it yet. It’s no good to look at the past with regrets. Things worked out exactly the way they were supposed to and I’m happy again. You will be too with time,” Amanda confidently avowed.

“I... I love you, Amanda. I was stupid... I really messed up. Can’t we try again?” Billy pleaded.

“We already tried it every way we could. There’s nothing left to try,” Amanda softly acknowledged. “Take care, Billy. Goodbye.”

After she hung up the receiver, the tears finally came. After all that time, she hadn’t shed any tears for the end of their relationship. She’d only had tears of self-pity. Now, she had a good cry over the years they’d spent as children playing house. She didn’t consider it a waste, that wasn’t why she cried. She cried because they’d both been too young and naïve. The end of the relationship signaled a unique launch into adulthood. It was painful. Growing pains, filled with hurt and discomfort, were often painful.

Chapter 40

Trina called the next day at ten o'clock. Amanda chuckled softly as she wiped her hands clean. She hoped the realtor had good news about the offer on the new home in Santa Fe.

"Amanda? It's Trina. I have good news...are you there, dear?" she called out.

"Yes, I'm here." Amanda replied.

"I'm on my cell phone and I'm having a difficult time hearing you," Trina explained. She moved the phone around several times in an attempt to get better reception.

"I'm here," Amanda repeated.

"The owners have agreed to your terms for the home on Sena Avenue, dear. You can have the keys as early as tomorrow. How does that sound?" Trina excitedly asked.

"That sounds just about perfect!" Amanda replied with equal enthusiasm. "Oh, I have so much to do now! And the other home here; is everything still a go?"

"Of course, dear," Trina easily confirmed. "The young buyers are busily making preparation now. In fact, the title company has already done a lot of the preliminary steps and as soon as the new owner insurance is in place, we should get a closing date."

"This is such good news!" Amanda said joyfully. "I'll go to Santa Fe right away. I have to buy furniture now and make arrangements for delivery."

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“You know, Amanda,” she suggested, “You’ll have a better selection of new household furnishings here. Everyone delivers to Santa Fe, dear.”

“You may be right about that. Perhaps I should do my shopping here,” Amanda agreed. “But at any rate, I have to get started right away. If I can have the keys tomorrow, then I hope to spend the first night in my new home on Friday. Oh! I could just kiss you, Trina!”

“Dear, hearing your joy is simply music! I better let you go so you can make preparations,” Trina said and then chuckled. The perceptive realtor knew how much effort it took to move and get a new home set up. She was happy to see Amanda move on and start a new life.

Chapter 41

Amanda made a list of what she'd need right away. The first order of business was a bedroom suite and furnishings for the new studio. Her excitement grew as she thought about it. She quickly left to go on the shopping expedition.

She found a lovely queen size bedroom suite in a finely grained ash. It would look lovely with the brick floors in the new bedroom. "*My bedroom,*" she silently corrected.

She'd also need plush rugs for warmth and lovely quilts and linens. She decided to spend the first shopping day to outfit the bedroom. Then, she'd take each room, one at a time.

Amanda had spent the last year cooped up in misery. After everyone knew about Billy and Jennifer, she stayed out of the limelight on purpose. She hid from the stares and whispers that seemed to follow her everywhere she went. Now, she thoroughly enjoyed being out and shopping. Her attitude had changed and she didn't care who she ran into or what they had to say.

Furnishing the new home brought joy. Technically, it was work, but it certainly didn't feel like it. After finalizing the purchases, she arranged a specific delivery time. Then, she took the new linens home to launder them. Even though she struck out when searching for studio furnishings, she'd accomplished a lot in only one day.

As she worked, she looked at the small studio critically. Amanda wanted to take enough of the furnishings with her as a reminder that her mother had created this lovely space. She

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wanted to remember painting her first few pieces. She never wanted to forget that her mother encouraged her artistic talent.

With that certainty, she decided to take everything that wasn't a structural part of the studio. It would fit well in the new home on Sena Avenue... like a studio within a studio. The decision felt good. Most of it could easily fit into the back of the Jeep with the seats folded down.

Bobbie stopped by for an unexpected and welcome visit. Amanda warmed food and served it with glasses of wine. As they sipped the beverage, Amanda told her the news. While they had coffee and some of the delicious cheesecake for dessert, she shared the call from Billy.

"What did he expect to get from the house that he hadn't already replaced after a year?" Bobbie asked.

"I don't know," Amanda acknowledged, "but as I told him, he could've had anything he wanted until the contract was signed. I even asked why he didn't make a request when he first found out I was selling the house."

"Ahh," Bobbie conspiratorially reported. "He's been living at Jennifer's home. I bet he wants his own place. Now, he needs stuff again. The knucklehead is about to leave her behind and he'll need everything... beds, kitchen equipment, you name it. Another priceless example of Billy being Billy."

"Really?" Amanda asked.

"Really," Bobbie confirmed. She'd know. She kept up with all gossip and news in the area. "Why didn't he ask sooner?"

"He said he had no idea the home would sell so quickly," Amanda replied.

"That was his way of saying that he had no idea you'd move on so quickly. He didn't want to face the truth. He didn't want to accept that you're really over him and that the

life he once had with you is over. I told you,” Bobbie insisted. “I told you that he was acting the entire time. He’s still in love with you. I guess you can see that for yourself now.”

“No, I think he’s just homesick for what he once had, but that doesn’t mean that he really loves me, Bobbie,” Amanda easily advised.

“That’s a peculiar word to use,” Bobbie interjected. “Homesick?”

“Why?” Amanda chuckled. “Homesick describes it perfectly. It’s as if he went away on vacation. That’s what he did while having a fling with Jennifer... he was on vacation. However, vacations get old after a month or so. When he was ready to come home, he didn’t have a home anymore. He finally realized that and he feels the loss, the homesickness.”

“When you explain it like that, I guess you’re right,” Bobbie thoughtfully admitted.

Chapter 42

The next day, Amanda continued furniture shopping. She bought a large soft-brown leather sofa with an oversized chair and ottoman for the living room. Then, she selected end tables, lamps, and rugs. Next, she found a beautiful mission-style dining table with six chairs. Finally, she purchased a wooden desk and another oversized chair for the study with complimentary rugs.

She'd never liked a living space to feel crowded or cluttered. For the time being, the items purchased were ideal. They filled the need without overdoing it. As time passed, she'd shop for small items to compliment the purchases. She arranged the delivery time for Saturday. She'd spend Friday night in the new home and be there to accept delivery. She felt great joy at the thought of awakening for the first time in her new home.

Later that afternoon, she found an envelope lying on the floor just beneath the mail slot in the foyer. She picked it up curiously and discovered it was the key with a note from Trina—"Didn't want you to have to wait to get the key to your new home, dear. Enjoy! Trina."

Amanda began the process of establishing utility services at the new home. Everything was set. She'd use her cell phone as she always did until everything connected in Santa Fe. Overall, she'd made a great start on the move and returned to her studio to get a little work done. She was sitting before the easel when the phone rang again. "Maybe it

wasn't such a good idea to get a home phone," she mumbled, pushing the irritating interruption aside.

"Hello?" she answered.

"Hey, baby," Billy used his softest seductive voice. It felt like velvet caressing her ear, but she wasn't having any of it.

"What is it, Billy?" Amanda sharply asked. She had to nip whatever this was in the bud as quickly as possible. She didn't want communications with him to continue. Their relationship was done and over. Billy needed to get on with his life as she had done.

"I just wanted to make sure that you really meant what you said earlier," he crooned.

"I meant it," she replied, feeling the strength and courage of the bear fortify her.

"Y-You... you really don't want to try again?" he asked.

"Billy, we were children playing at love, playing house," Amanda matter-of-factly spoke the harsh words. "We weren't mature enough to know what we wanted or needed at such a young age. We were babies! Over the course of our sixteen-year relationship, we've already given it every chance we could. There's nothing else to do except let go. I've let go. Please do the same."

"I... I could've been better to you, Amanda," Billy stuttered. "I... I could've been more supportive when your mother was ill, especially when she died. I... I left you alone in that. Y-you had to attend the wake alone. You've been alone a lot in our marriage. I was always working. Y-you were always waiting. I... I've given this a lot of thought... I should've done things differently and been there for you. I should've been a better husband."

"It's water under the bridge, Billy," Amanda asserted. "I don't have any regrets and I don't want you to have any either."

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“But I do have regrets,” Billy uttered in dismay.

“Stop,” Amanda warned. “Just stop, all right? I want you to move on with your life. I hope you and Jennifer will be very happy together. I’m happy again and I’ve moved on with my life. The home we shared sold. I’m moving tomorrow.” Amanda was clear and succinct, but Billy didn’t hear anything she said.

“Why don’t you go away with me for a week or two?” he begged. “We could hop a jet to the islands and enjoy the sun and sand, drink a few umbrella drinks at the pool, and be together... you know, make love listening to the waves crash on the shore.” Unaware that she was now immune to it, Billy turned up the intensity of the velvety-lined words.

“Do you honestly think that would make it all better?” Amanda tolerated.

“We’ve haven’t had make-up sex in a while,” he admitted. “It always healed us before... you know, before your mother died.”

“I’m already healed,” Amanda stated, feeling the wolf’s wellness surround her. “In fact, I’m shocked that you would propose such a thing while in a relationship with another woman.” Then, reality washed over her. “I don’t know why it would surprise me... It’s exactly what you did while we were married. You’re a cheater, Billy—and you always will be.”

“That’s not fair!” he screamed. “You’ve never played dirty before, Amanda? You’ve never wanted something so badly that you’d do whatever it took to get it?”

“I don’t want to play dirty now, Billy,” she warned, “but you’ve given me no other choice. You keep pushing even after I’ve told you it’s completely and unequivocally over.” Amanda thought about how badly she’d wanted the strength and healing she got during the retreat. She risked her life to face the wolf and bear to get what she needed most, but this was different. She no longer wanted the same things Billy

wanted. “I can’t imagine how many times we’ve done this dance in other lives. How many times have we reconciled and tried again only to discover that it failed each time?”

“You’ve lost me,” Billy admitted. “Who cares about other times or other lives? A fresh start is exactly what we need now. It might just show us what we threw away.”

“Billy, we didn’t throw anything away. It ended...,” Amanda began, but Billy interrupted.

“Then why can’t we try to get it back? We could take a second honeymoon as I suggested,” he sounded frantic and very much like a little boy who went to camp and came home to find that his parents had moved away while he was gone. Amanda had to put a stop to this even if it required harsher words.

“There isn’t anything to get back,” Amanda firmly announced.

“Love never dies. I love you, Amanda. With quality alone time, you’d know you love me too,” Billy insisted. He switched to the silky voice again to coax and woo, “Think about a romantic getaway, just the two of us making love with the sound of the surf pounding on the beach outside our bedroom window.”

“Billy, you’re the last person in the world I’d spend a week with on the islands,” Amanda declared. “It’s over. Accept it. I’ve bought a new home and I’m moving away from Albuquerque tomorrow. Please don’t call me anymore. I don’t want to say hurtful things to you, but I don’t want to hear from you again either. If you persist, then my responses to you will only become crueler. Goodbye, Billy.”

That time, Amanda didn’t have any tears at all.

She’d cried for over a year, and then, more profoundly after the last call from Billy. The tears had washed away any

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remaining regrets and all doubts. Like the relationship, the tears were simply gone.

It was over.

As long as Billy was in her life, she'd never remain true to her personal joy. It was the primary lesson discovered during the retreat.

This moment was a test of faith.

It had nothing to do with Billy. She couldn't let the Amanda she'd found on the mountainside down and she couldn't let her go. She had to hold on tightly to this version of herself. It was far easier to let Billy go.

And, she let him go.

Chapter 43

The next morning, Amanda backed the Jeep into the garage and lifted the hatch. The move began today. The first load packed was for the kitchen. It included the newly purchased coffee pot and the set of dishes found the night she had guests. Wrapped in paper and boxed, the heavy crate of dishes and stemware slid in the backseat and against the driver's backrest. Next, she added the stainless steel cookware and the heavy silverware, all from her mother's kitchen.

Susan always bought quality. Even though Amanda rarely cooked anymore, she wanted these items in her new home. She couldn't bear the thought that they'd end up in an estate sale, sold for a fraction of their value.

After that, she set several packed suitcases with toiletries and clothing in the cargo area. With the luggage in the back half of the SUV compartment, she laid hanging clothes flat on top. There was room for some of the paintings so she laid a row on top of the clothes. It was enough for now. She'd make more trips throughout the day.

After a final cup of coffee, Amanda drove to the new home on Sena Avenue. The drive took about an hour, the traffic was light and the day was sunny and bright. She pulled into the driveway and used the key to open the front entrance. She immediately breathed a sigh of relief. "So far, so good," she muttered to the empty home.

Amanda went directly to the kitchen to check the drawers. She found the garage door opener right where she thought it'd be. She clipped the opener to the visor and

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backed the Jeep into the garage. Once parked, she quickly unpacked in reverse order. The paintings went to the new studio and her clothing went to the closets. She left the suitcases in the closet to unpack once her bedroom furniture arrived. Finally, she put the kitchen supplies away.

After the Jeep was unloaded, she didn't waste any time. Amanda immediately locked the house and returned to Albuquerque to get another load. Her bedroom furniture was scheduled for delivery during the afternoon and she could make two more trips before she had to stop for the day to wait for its arrival.

She began again.

This time, she packed the items from her studio and the freshly laundered bed linens went on the front passenger seat. It didn't take long at all to fill the Jeep. She walked through the home to see if anything else could safely ride between other items already packed. She noticed the first painting of the bouquet; it was the first sample of her artwork. She placed it in the back cargo area with the rest of the studio supplies. Then, she made another trip to Sena Avenue.

After that load was unpacked, her cell phone rang, "Hello?" Amanda answered.

"Ms. Toole," a male voice replied, "I know we're early, but would it be all right to deliver your furniture now?"

"That would be better than all right," she assured.

"We'll be there in thirty minutes or less," he replied.

When she saw them pull into the driveway, Amanda joyfully clapped her hands. She anxiously watched as they unloaded the heavy bedroom suite. It looked beautiful in the new room with the rich rugs and brick floor.

After they left, Amanda made up the bed and then stretched out on top of it looking around at everything she had accomplished. It was miraculous and happened so

quickly. In less than three weeks since the retreat, her life found new meaning. As she surveyed the miraculous changes, she felt whole.

Two more trips to Albuquerque completed the move.

She was done.

After the next delivery, everything would be in place.

Although she planned to spend the first night in her new home on Friday, she couldn't bring herself to leave that evening.

She stayed the night and slept in the new bed feeling secure, safe, protected, and more importantly, at home.

Chapter 44

Friday morning, Amanda awakened and stretched luxuriously in the new bed. Once again, she was amazed at the speed of her relocation. She'd also slept incredibly well.

“I'm home! I'm home for the foreseeable future—and it is divine!” she squealed.

She admired the new purchases chosen specifically for her bedroom. She loved it! After a hot shower, Amanda got dressed. Then, she went to the kitchen to make a cup of coffee in the new coffee maker.

When shopping for a coffee pot, she went with something different and more modern. She found an espresso machine that ground the beans, steamed milk, and then made one perfect cup of coffee at a time. The process insured that the single cup of coffee was always fresh. It was a novel idea to her since she'd used automatic drip coffee pots for most of her adult life. However, as her life changed, she tried new things too. As she sipped the first coffee, she agreed it was an excellent change to make. It was delicious.

Amanda went to the new and bright studio and began to put it in order. She worked for most of the day. First, she used the items brought from the small porch in Albuquerque. She surveyed it critically and was amazed at how well the old studio worked with the new space. The light was good for painting, but might not be as good for some of the delicate oils. She needed a cabinet for storing paints away from the light. It could wait. With a little luck, she'd find what she

needed in one of the many antique stores and bring it home in the Jeep.

When satisfied with the arrangement of the studio, Amanda sat down to begin a new painting. The natural light inspired her to begin a scene from the City of Lights. She painted a woman with long auburn hair walking along the luminescent streets with a bear. The bear gazed lovingly at the woman while her hand rested on the scruff of his neck. The gentle easiness and respectful friendship between the two vividly came across on the canvas.

Although Amanda didn't realize it at the time, this particular painting would bring fame. It was the best, most enchanting work she'd ever done.

She worked into the evening and until the light streaming in the windows began to fade. Then, when she felt tired, she went to bed.

Chapter 45

The next day, Amanda awakened early. She rested in bed as she thought about the newest changes in her life. The retreat. Her renewed love of art. Selling the marital home. Letting Billy go once and for all. The move. The new home. The new studio. The new direction of her paintings. She'd never felt so alive or inspired.

All the decisions made since the retreat were as 'right as rain.' They were as right as the decision she'd made to care for her mother during the last hours. As she looked back on everything, it was perfect.

Anxious to begin another day, she quickly dressed. Then, she paused briefly, struck by the irony of now-vs.-then. Now, she awakened refreshed. Then, she awakened from nightmarish screams. Now, she was eager and anxious to begin each day. Then, it was an effort to get out of bed. Now, she painted each day. Then, her art was locked in a closet along with her heart.

She finished the first coffee when her cell phone rang. "Have you already moved?" Bobbie asked. There was amazement in her high-pitched voice.

"Yes, do you miss me already?" Amanda easily joked, lightly laughing.

"Actually, I do and I did," Bobbie admitted. "I stopped by to see you last night and nobody was home. I think I got a little dose of what Billy felt." She chuckled again and Amanda joined in the laughter.

“I’d already brought a few loads in the Jeep and had everything sorted out and in its place by the time my bedroom furniture arrived. Everything felt so inviting that I spent the night here. It felt so natural... you know me, I did what felt right. Bobbie, I love it here. I can’t begin to tell you how right it feels,” Amanda enthused.

“When will the rest of your furniture be delivered?” Bobbie asked.

“It’ll be here today before noon,” Amanda answered.

“Will I have a guestroom there?” Bobbie asked.

“Always,” Amanda easily replied. “You’re welcome wherever I am. *Mi casa es su casa.*”

“Good,” Bobbie replied, “I couldn’t bear for that to change now!” They laughed again.

Bobbie was a regular at Amanda’s home for nearly three decades. Neither of them relished that changing. “I’ll drop by for a visit Sunday evening. Maybe we can have a nice dinner out and then spend some time visiting and catching up?”

“That sounds like a great plan,” Amanda agreed.

Chapter 46

She returned to the studio. She continued to work on a new painting titled *Friendship*. Time seemed to have little significance while she worked. In fact, it slipped away.

When the rest of the furniture arrived, it was noon. Amanda excitedly gave directions for its placement and admired what she'd bought. Everything went very well in each room.

There was a decidedly lived-in and comfortable quality once the items were in place. In fact, it looked as if she'd always lived here.

After that task was completed, Amanda went to the grocery store. She needed to stock up on breakfast items and have supplies on hand for guests. Since she was buying almost everything needed to stock a new kitchen, it took the rest of the afternoon. The purchases filled the back of the Jeep.

At home, she put the items away. Then, Amanda started a load of wash and opened a bottle of wine. She poured a glass and made a snack of prepared chicken salad and crackers as she worked on the rest of the home. If Bobbie decided to stay the night during the Sunday visit, she wanted the guestroom bed made up and fresh.

Amanda hoped her good friends would visit often. She didn't want to lose what they'd had for nearly two decades... three decades when she counted the friendship with Bobbie. Even if it required monthly visits to Albuquerque for special dinners, she silently vowed to do her part to stay in touch.

Chapter 47

Amanda was in her studio early Sunday morning. She held a cup of coffee in hand while she critically looked over the new painting, *Friendship*. She didn't even remember painting it and instinctively knew she was inspired during the creation process. It was already completed and she couldn't imagine how that had happened either. As she closely studied the painting, it was as if she was looking at someone else's work. Perhaps this was the direction her art would now take, inspiration from the City of Lights. She placed *Friendship* on a different easel and set it across the room. From there, she could easily view it while she worked.

She set a new piece of canvas on the work easel and immediately lost time. Once again, Amanda transported to the City of Lights. Inspiration filled her as she painted all morning and into the late afternoon. When she heard the doorbell ring, she was jarred back to the present. Looking at her watch, she was amazed to discover that it was already four o'clock. Without inspecting the work before her, she hurried to the door to let Bobbie in.

After warm greetings, Amanda gave Bobbie a tour. She was pleased to see that her best friend loved her new home too. Bobbie made many comments that boosted Amanda's confidence about her decorating choices. She loved Bobbie and trusted her opinion. Her admiration and approval made Amanda feel exceptionally good about the work she'd done. When they got to the studio, Amanda viewed her work for the first time.

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She'd painted the same woman with long auburn hair again standing on the luminescent streets of the City of Lights. This time the woman was with a wolf. It wasn't just any wolf... It was the wolf from the meadow.

He faced the woman with paws placed directly on her shoulders. His long tongue licked the side of her face. Her eyes were closed and her face crinkled in laughter. Even so, it was clear there was love between them. It was vividly displayed for all to see on the finished canvas. Bobbie gasped when she saw the two newest paintings.

"Oh my god, Amanda! This is the very best work you've ever done. They're simply amazing. However did you paint these?" Bobbie asked in reverent awe.

"I can't honestly say, Bobbie," Amanda admitted. "I was simply and utterly inspired. I don't know how I did the work, but the bear and wolf are friends from the retreat. I don't even know how I completed the pieces so quickly. Only pure inspiration can explain it."

"You have to raise your prices on these unique pieces, Amanda," Bobbie emphasized as she continued to admire the artwork. Amanda gazed thoughtfully at her friend, but Bobbie was adamant. "Amanda, these kinds of paintings put a person on the map. Don't let them slip away without putting a true value on them."

"What would you suggest?" Amanda asked.

"Price them so that the buyer knows the value," Bobbie suggested.

"Perhaps you should do that," Amanda replied, not sure what else to say. "I trust you."

"I'll be very happy to do that," Bobbie volunteered. "In fact, let me take them to my favorite art gallery in town. You'll get top dollar for the pieces there. Unbelievably,

Albuquerque has more tourist and traffic in a month than Santa Fe could ever hope to get in a year.”

“Is that true?” Amanda asked in confusion. “I moved here because it’s an artist community.”

“I know, I know,” Bobbie encouraged. “It is an art community. The peaceful atmosphere will add to your astonishing talent. There’s no doubt about that. You made a wise choice to live here. Still, it’s not an easy place to get to and it caters to a very select clientele. With your permission, I’ll take these back with me. They’ll be on display in the finest gallery in Albuquerque within a day, most likely on Monday. How does that sound?” Bobbie asked.

“Like I said, I trust you, Bobbie,” Amanda affirmed. “I’ll follow your lead on this.”

“And you really don’t remember painting them?” Bobbie asked.

“To be honest, I have no memory of the work involved while painting them. I sat down at the easel and when I looked up again, there they were, completely finished both times,” Amanda acknowledged.

After Bobbie settled down about the paintings, they went to dine at Geronimo Restaurant on Canyon Road. Amanda ordered the Fiery Sweet Chile and Honey Grilled Mexican White Prawns and Bobbie had the Green Miso Sea Bass. It was a delightful meal and felt very celebratory. They returned to Sena Avenue to share a bottle of wine. When Bobbie accepted a second glass of wine, Amanda knew her friend planned to spend the night. The conversation grew serious.

“Amanda, Billy called me this week,” she admitted. “He’s trying to enlist my help and support.”

“Oh?” Amanda quizzically asked.

“He wanted me to talk to you on his behalf... to intercede for him,” Bobbie explained. “The bastard wants me

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to coerce you into giving the relationship another go.” Bobbie stopped abruptly, all the while shaking her head. “I can’t stand it. I told him that I was the last person on earth who’d do that. I told him it’d be a cold day in hell before I’d see my friend return to absentia. Still, he kept badgering me.”

“What day did he call?” Amanda lightly asked, unconcerned by the news.

“Please don’t tell me that you’d consider it,” Bobbie cried.

“What day did he call?” Amanda repeated.

“Wednesday... at least I think it was. It might have been Tuesday,” Bobbie answered. She was downcast and discouraged by the way her friend responded.

“You don’t need to be worried about it, Bobbie,” Amanda reassured. “I’m just checking the timeframe. You see, I talked to him both Tuesday and Wednesday. I told him to get on with his life. He tried to talk me into a second honeymoon, a trip to the islands. It dawned on me that he wanted us to cheat on Jennifer together.”

“He what?” Bobbie squealed, accidentally spewing some wine out with the statement. She rushed to the kitchen to get a dishtowel. “Sorry,” she called over her shoulder.

“You don’t have to worry,” Amanda assured when Bobbie was back. “His conversation successfully riled me. I called him a cheater and told him to stop calling or I’d have to say crueler things. It’s over, Bobbie. Don’t worry. I’m done with him for good.”

“Yeah,” Bobbie agreed. “A trip away would’ve amounted to cheating. I know you hold no true regard for Jennifer, but it was the right thing to do. I’m relieved to hear you say it, Amanda. I had a sinking feeling that he’d somehow get to you. I was afraid you’d give him another chance. It had me pretty worried.” She paused briefly before continuing,

“You’ve really found yourself, Amanda. It’s not just that... you’ve found the best version of you. I love what the spirit quest did for you. The retreat... who knew? You’re back and better than ever. I really love the new direction your artwork has taken and this home. If you remain steadfast and on the chosen course, I only see great things ahead. I hope you see that too.”

“Like I said, you don’t need to worry,” Amanda easily affirmed. “I’ve never been happier or more content with my life and my artwork. I’ve found the best version of me and that doesn’t include the distraction of a man in my life... At least, not in the near future. I’m home and I’m here for the long haul. Moreover, in case I haven’t told you a thousand and one times already, let me tell you again, I’m very grateful that you and Marty relentlessly pushed me to take a retreat. It saved my life and allowed me to find happiness again.”

Thank you for reading. If you enjoyed this book, please share your thoughts by leaving a review on Amazon, Goodreads, and any other online sources! A few sentences will do and be appreciated.

Reviews are very important for every author. ♥

Epilogue

Amanda spent the next five years fervently painting scenes from the City of Lights, the meadow, the trail to the meadow, the deep and active wildlife along the forest path, and the cabin where she found healing.

These paintings share ‘the possibilities to change’ discovered while on the retreat.

Her artwork, recognized in many famous galleries around the world, is still a topic of much discussion among art critics and students alike.

During the fifth year, she met Maxwell Phillips, a curator for an art museum that displayed her work.

They married shortly after and travel the world together.

Although Amanda continues to receive great satisfaction from painting and is still passionate about sharing scenes discovered on the retreat, she’s also found balance between art and family obligations.

Chariss K. Walker

Amanda and Phillip currently spend their time between the home in Santa Fe and an apartment in New York.

She remains friends with Bobbie, Marty and Ashley.

Turn the page for a bonus excerpt from *The Journey*.

The Journey – An Excerpt

Chapter 1

Katherine Rutherford Barrett thought life was good. She'd finally found love again and it was something she'd thought was lost to her forever. She had no idea what a rude and harsh awakening was ahead. When it hit, the reality blindsided her.

Affectionately called Katy by her family, she'd lost a lot over the last eleven years. Her husband, Hank Barrett, died while on active duty in the military. She was pregnant with Samantha at the time of his death and Hank never met his daughter. He'd made Katy promise to nickname her 'Sammy' to honor his older brother who'd also died while serving his country.

She had to fight tooth-and-nail for every inch of Hank's military benefits. Five years after his death, she finally succeeded in getting his life insurance payout and Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC). In the meantime, she'd relied on her parents for help and support.

Hank didn't have any relatives that could help Katy. His father left when he was ten and Sammy was sixteen. They didn't know whether he was dead or alive. Their mother, worn-out and exhausted from the struggles of a single mother, had died only eight years later. Without resources

and other options, Sammy Barrett encouraged his brother to enlist. Three years later, Sammy was killed in action while serving in the Gulf War.

Hank had already served eight years when Katy met him. He was still enlisted, but being stateside, he'd also taken advantage of the veteran educational benefit and arranged college classes around his military schedule. They met during her second year at Jacksonville University.

Hank, polite, disciplined, and handsome, was exactly what Katy needed at the time. She was looking for something more than the rebellious years recently experienced. She'd gone a little wild during the first few years away from home and without parental supervision.

They dated until both graduated in their perspective fields. With diplomas in hand, the couple quickly married in Ft. Pierce, Florida. Katy's parents, Josh and Susan Rutherford, looked on with approval. They knew he'd take good care of their only child. Hank was mature and had a good career with the military. When Hank was transferred to Afghanistan, Katy was already pregnant. He never made it home from that tour. He never saw his newborn daughter.

Katy was devastated by her husband's death, but reality closely followed on its heels. Reality that she had no idea what to do. She was alone with a newborn baby and had very little money. How would she make ends meet? When Josh and Susan saw the dilemma their daughter faced, they willingly gave the assistance needed. Katy was truly grateful for that... and the many other ways her parents filled the loss of her husband.

Often, once an adult child leaves home, parents are reluctant to allow them to return. In this case, it was different. Josh and Susan invited Katy, and their newborn granddaughter, Sammy, to live in the cottage situated directly behind the family home. It was usually reserved for in-laws' visits, but times were desperate for Katy and Sammy. The

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Rutherford's freely opened their home, hearts, and lives to the small family.

Josh and Susan offered to babysit Sammy while Katy worked as a bookkeeper for one of the large citrus groves in Ft. Pierce. They also offered to babysit so that Katy could have a bit of social life. She was very thin and pale. The only time she smiled or laughed was when she looked adoringly at her baby girl. Although grateful that her parents kept Sammy while she worked, Katy was too tired after the long days and simply wanted to be home with her only child after work was done. And, when she did have a social life, Katy preferred that Sammy and her parents were included.

Susan prepared the evening meals and Katy dined with them. Occasionally, on Friday nights, the family dined at one of the local restaurants along the Indian River. The cottage where Katy and Sammy lived had only a small kitchenette and wasn't equipped for more than making coffee and toasting bread. It was outfitted with a small dinette set and a separate bedroom to the right with a screened-in porch. The bathroom was on the opposite end of the cottage near the kitchen. Josh had built the cottage and plumbed it for convenience, not practicality. For the last several years, it was home to Katy and Sammy.

After the long wait to get Hank's much deserved benefits, Katy offered to buy a home of her own and move out, but Josh and Susan were now settled into this new life. They didn't want Katy and Sammy to leave. They enjoyed the responsibility of watching over their granddaughter and couldn't imagine how their retirement would feel without her in their lives. Sammy gave new purpose to her grandparents.

Days once spent fishing or working in the garden, were now spent making sure Sammy had a good breakfast and did her homework before Katy got home from work. Since Katy left for work at 7:00 each morning, either Josh or Susan drove Sammy to school and picked her up each afternoon. With a

new rhythm to their lives, they felt needed and wanted for the first time since Katy left for college. They reassured her that she and Sammy were welcome to stay as long as they liked.

Rather than buy a new home, Katy listened to her father's investment advice. She had the DIC monthly stipend direct-deposited into an investment account as he suggested. It became a 'rainy day' fund. Without rental expenses, utilities, and very little food costs, Katy and Sammy easily lived on her paycheck from the citrus grove. It was a good living. They had all that they needed.

Chapter 2

Eight years into the arrangement, tragedy struck. Josh and Susan went to Ft. Lauderdale to get supplies. Katy had a 'bad feeling' about the trip and asked them not to go that day, but they'd given her a warm hug and told her not to worry.

While still at work, Katy got a call from the school. No one came to pick up Sammy that afternoon. She rushed to her daughter's school. She tried her parents' cell phones repeatedly, but didn't get an answer. Later that evening, while she and Sammy paced her parents' home, a highway patrol car pulled up. The 'bad feeling' was now a reality. Josh and Susan were involved in a four-car pile-up on I-95 south. Both were killed instantly.

She listened to the notification news and wiped away tears. She confirmed that she'd go to the morgue for the identification process. Then she held her daughter close as they cried together over the great loss that had come too soon. She couldn't believe it, and yet, she knew it was true. Why didn't her parents listen to her when she'd tried to warn them?

Later, when Katy looked through the paperwork in Josh's desk, she found everything she needed in a large folder, including their wills and final instructions for burial. Josh and Susan had gone several years earlier to make their final arrangements and update their wills to include Sammy in the estate. Katy was grateful for that, but she couldn't stop crying.

Living at home again with her parents had forged a strong bond of love. When only a sullen teenager, they'd never had that same connection. Then, she couldn't wait to leave home, to head off to college, and get away from them. Now, she missed them terribly and so did Sammy. During the last eight years, they'd become surrogate parents to their grandchild. Katy realized she was crying for her own loss, but she couldn't help it.

After the funeral, Katy and Sammy met with the family attorney, James Kegel, and listened closely as he explained Josh and Susan's wishes. The estate left for Sammy would remain in trust until she was twenty-one years old. Before that age, the funds could only be used to pay for college tuition. The home was left to Katy. If she decided to sell it, half the proceeds from the sale would go into an already established trust for Sammy.

When it was all said and done, Josh and Susan had left a moderate estate and neither their daughter nor granddaughter would ever be without the things they needed again. Their final wishes had been a blessing to that end. Still, Katy couldn't think about that right now. Their deaths were too fresh in her mind. However, she did have to consider the family home. At Sammy's insistence, they moved into it the following weekend.

"It's what Grandpa and Grandma would want," Sammy said with conviction and Katy realized that her daughter was right. For an eight-year-old child, Sammy was incredibly mature. It was only to be expected since she'd been surrounded by adults most of her life.

Sammy was a beautiful child with perfect features. Her dark hair was thick and shiny, hanging down her back to the waist. She had a creamy complexion and a heart-shaped face with thick lashes that framed clear green eyes, like her mother. And yet, Sammy had a definite 'tom-boy' thing going on.

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She preferred jeans and a tee shirt, refusing to wear dresses from the time she was two years old. She'd followed Hank around after school and on weekends and even had a certain swagger that was similar to her Grandpa's walk. Katy found these traits endearing and adorable. There wasn't anything at all that she'd change about Sammy.

After the death of her parents, the home reminded Katy of them every day, but it wasn't a bad reminder. It was comforting. She could still feel their love and care all around her. Sammy took Katy's childhood room and Katy took her parents' master bedroom. She refurbished and updated the rooms with new beds and dressing, but left most of the home the way it was. Susan was a natural decorator and everything was in pristine condition anyway. It didn't need any improvements.

Katy began to work fewer hours at the citrus grove so that she could take Sammy to and from school each day. The first year went by quickly and Sammy transitioned from third to fourth grade with ease. During that first summer, they took a short vacation to the Florida Keys and stayed at the Silver Palms Hotel. The hotel was within walking distance to all the colorful city had to offer.

Katy and Sammy walked hand in hand, taking in the sights. They visited Hemmingway's home and observed the Southernmost Point Marker. The large concrete buoy was the closest spot in the US to Cuba, which was only ninety miles away. They rode bikes and swam in the nearly deserted, huge hotel pool. It was a time to relax and refresh. It was a time to heal after everything that had happened that year. Especially after the deaths of Josh and Susan.

This vacation became a ritual for the next several summers, and soon, Sammy's fifth grade year was nearing an end. With only a few more months before summer vacation, Katy felt a little overwhelmed that Sammy would soon enter her first year of middle school.

Middle School!

It was a vast structure where all the elementary schools in the area converged into one massive group of sixth, seventh, and eighth graders. It would be a huge transition for any child and Katy worried how her daughter would manage the new school environment. She also wondered how she'd handle this newest transition in Sammy's life.

Chapter 3

During March, the weather grew warm and sunny. Katy and Sammy honored Josh and Susan's tradition by dining out at one of the many Indian River restaurants they'd frequented together as a family. To anyone observing them, it was apparent the mother and daughter were content with the life they shared.

Katy was very youthful—she could've been mistaken as an older sister to Sammy. They had the same clear green eyes and dark, shiny hair framing heart-shaped faces. Katy and Sammy usually dined out on Friday evenings and often sat on the open-air decks to soak up the early afternoon sun. It was during one of those dining-out experiences that Katy caught the eye of Chuck Reeves.

Chuck was tall and handsome with dark brown hair and hazel eyes. His face was often a mask of pleasantries as he kept his emotions and thoughts closely guarded. He watched the mother-daughter exchanges silently and on the sly. He didn't make his presence known then, but instead inquired about the two girls who obviously had a strong familial bond. That was the first of several times he watched them from afar. After Katy and Sammy finished their evening meal, Chuck had a drinking buddy drive him as they followed the young mother and her daughter home.

"Don't get paranoid," he jokingly told the friend. "I only want to see where they live."

A few weeks later, Chuck sat in a more open area and sent a note to their table as soon as Katy and Sammy were

seated. The note asked for an introduction even though his previous inquiries had already garnered their names. He already knew the mother was Katy and the daughter was Sammy. He also knew where they lived and that Katy's parents had been killed in a terrible crash on I-95. He knew that Katy's husband died before their daughter was born. Chuck knew a great deal of other trivia also. After all, it was a small town and people liked to talk about the tragedies of others easily enough when you bought them a drink.

"What's your name?" Katy read the slip of paper before refolding it. She surreptitiously looked around the open-aired deck. An eager, smiling face was only a few tables away. Chuck raised his hand in greeting and nodded. She reflexively smiled, but quickly looked away. She dropped the note on a serving tray without answering it.

The next time they dined out, Chuck tried a different approach. He sent a note with his name and a little information about himself: *I'm Chuck Reeves. I'm thirty-six years old. I'm a supervisor in the construction industry. I'm originally from Asheville, North Carolina.*

Katy read the note, but still, she didn't respond. She wasn't sure she wanted anything else in her life right then. She and Sammy were content and satisfied with things the way they were. She had a good job. They were happy. Even with the prospect of middle school hanging over both their heads, they liked their established routine. Katy sometimes wondered if she was more nervous and concerned about the changes on the horizon than Sammy was.

She didn't long for love or a relationship the way some of her friends at work did. She was comfortable with her life. She wasn't out looking for more. She didn't hope that a man would somehow fill a void. There wasn't a void to fill. Things were good the way they were.

As they dined, Katy glanced at Chuck on a few occasions, but she didn't see any potential there. Although he

The Retreat

dressed neatly in jeans and spotless work boots, a polo-style shirt, and was handsome, she easily dismissed him and his insistency. She wasn't interested in a relationship.

That would change.

Chuck made sure of it. Over the next few weeks, it didn't matter which restaurant Katy and Sammy chose; they always ran into this very determined man. Still unwilling to give up, Chuck sent the note to Sammy, asking her to intercede on his behalf. He was very persistent; Katy had to give him that. She took the note from Sammy and finally responded with her name and age. That was all the encouragement it took, and although Chuck only nodded when he read the message, he knew he'd won a great victory. He'd cracked Katy's protective shell.

The next weekend, he was prepared. He brought a bouquet of flowers to their table in person. It had been a long time since she'd received flowers. Something about the gesture melted a small spot in Katy's heart. Against her better judgment, she finally relented. From then on, Chuck Reeves became a member of their party each time he chanced to be at the same restaurant, which was often.

Now, he didn't wait for an invitation, he simply joined them as soon as they were seated. Katy wondered how he knew where they dined each Friday. Admittedly, it was a small town and the information was easy to discover.

Chuck inched closer and closer. Soon, he paid for their meals. Next, he planned where and when they dined. Reluctant in the beginning, Katy felt flattered by the lavish and thoughtful attention. His romantic interest eroded her resistance.

Sammy, now eleven years old, reserved her opinion about Chuck Reeves, but she was cordial to the new person who seemed intent on gaining her mother's affection. It was a new experience for Sammy because she didn't recall ever

seeing her mother with any man other than Grandpa. Katy had certainly never dated anyone. Although she'd seen many pictures of him in photo albums, Sammy didn't remember her father at all. When asked, her grandparents agreed he was 'a very nice man.' Sammy had learned not to judge 'newness' right away; she'd 'wait-and-see,' as her Grandma would've said.

By late-April, Chuck took them to dinner in his dark-blue king cab pickup. He was courteous, energetic, and always offered to lend a hand. Even though Katy and Sammy preferred to dine along the river, they went along with his idea of a better restaurant when he took them to nice restaurants along the beach.

Everywhere they went the locals greeted him by name. The other patrons were friendly to Chuck, and therefore, courteous to Katy and Sammy by association. After so many dark days, Katy liked the attention. Seeing so many people who seemed to know, like, and respect Chuck mistakenly had confirmed he was worth knowing. Katy misread the entire situation...Even though popular on the surface, generally, Chuck wasn't well liked.

End of excerpt. If you enjoyed this excerpt, you can find the completed book on Amazon, B&N, and many other online retailers.

Thank you.

About the Author

2018 Indie B.R.A.G. Medallion Honoree

Award-winning author, Chariss K. Walker, M.Msc., Reiki Master/Teacher writes both fiction and nonfiction books with a metaphysical and spiritual component. Her fiction expresses a visionary/metaphysical message that illustrates growth in a character's consciousness while utilizing a paranormal aspect. Her nonfiction books share insight, hope, and inspiration. Even though Chariss writes dark-fiction about insanely dark topics, such as sexual abuse, incest, pedophilia, sexual assault, and other inappropriate dinner conversation, there is always an essential question of the abstract nature that gives a reader increasing awareness and perception. All of her books are sold worldwide in eBook, paperback, and many are in large print.

You can learn more about Chariss at www.chariss.com.

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