



# *Caroline's House*

Beverly Sims

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**ROMANCE**

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CAROLINE'S HOUSE

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BEVERLY SIMS

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## Part 1 Chapter 1

*Last night a ghost made love to me. Yes, a ghost. No human form. No dream either. A warm presence with soft lips, a rough beard, a probing tongue, incredible hands, and wonderful, working body parts. There was no doubt...all the physical reminders were there later. Moreover, it was not the first time, but the second. This time was in my bed, the first in the bathroom. He came to me like any horny man who had been without a woman for half a century. And he was good!*

One of the Conroy twins died on graduation night. Donald Conroy and his girlfriend Heather Johanson were drinking and simply drove off a cliff. That was not hard to do on the rugged coastline where Highway 101 hugged the top of steep drops into the ocean. The guardrails were not tall or sturdy enough to stop any driver truly determined to take a corner too fast.

Caroline Fleming was standing just about where the car had gone over, looking down into the churning waves as they broke against the craggy rocks, sending water and spray hundreds of feet in the air, dampening her hair and clothes with tiny droplets. As she had been her entire life, Caroline felt mesmerized by the power of the sea.

Her companion was a real estate agent, Tom Parker, a pleasant man in his mid 60s, gray-headed with a red nose suggesting he may have imbibed for a bit too many years. He spoke, "Yes, Miss Fleming, I do remember that accident. It cast a shadow over the whole town for weeks. They were classmates of yours, as I recall. Graduated about twenty years ago, didn't

you? Guess I'm surprised by your interest in this old house. Rumor has it that it is supposed to be haunted by your friends who died here. And it is so far away from town. Why don't you let me show you some of the more modern, less isolated places that will not cost you an arm and a leg to bring up to modern standards? Not that I don't want to sell it, but it is a virtual money pit."

"True. It was so sad. Heather and I were close friends. We double-dated with Donald and his brother David. As for the house, it is exactly what I want: isolated and away from people. I have learned over the years that interruptions and noises are disruptive to my writing. The sounds of the ocean are constant and soothing, just perfect for concentration and creativity. I am not wealthy by any means, but the sale of my last three books has generated enough for some necessary repairs. And besides, I rather like the haunted house aspect. It might just turn out to be fun.

"Just look at it. Shutters are hanging, the porch is rotting off, the roof has a hole or two, and the chimney needs repair. The yard is so full of weeds that even the rhododendrons and Oregon grapes are smothered—and defeating Oregon grape is not that easy to do. The house would probably have bats in the belfry, if it had a belfry.

"However, it has a forever-view and the inside appears to be in relatively good condition, considering the age. The fireplace is so huge you could roast a steer in it, and the kitchen could handle an entire staff of chefs, so one lone person should be able to warm a TV dinner in it...if the wiring can handle a microwave. No matter, I would like to make an offer on it. Today."

Tom could hardly believe his ears. He had been trying to unload this monstrosity for nearly ten years. Ten years during which the winds and ocean spray, not counting vandals and time itself, had taken their toll. Years ago, the house had been a white elephant even then, as its history was better known, and few wanted to live in a home where murder had taken place and ghosts were said to wander. He knew he should tell Caroline all about it, but his desire to be rid of the massive old structure was too deep to risk a lost sale. Besides, she should have done her own homework, being a famous writer and all.

“Let’s go back to my office and draw up the papers right now.” He took her arm and actually had to pull her away from the edge of the cliff, back to his car.

\* \* \* \*

Caroline signed the papers, and they faxed them to the bank that handled the finances of the long-deceased Mrs. Herman Olmsted. A phone call from the bank came almost immediately, followed by an acceptance before Caroline even left the real estate office.

“Tom, can I use your phone to contact some contractors and to get phone lines into my new house?”

“You sure can, Miss Fleming, and then I will take you out for drinks and dinner to celebrate. Take as long as you like.”

“Thanks.”

The first call was completed with a promise of a couple of phone lines next week, and Tom agreed to let the phone company in and have them follow the instructions she would give him before she left the following Sunday. The power company, tomorrow. Trash pickup, once a week. Water and sewer were a well, and septic system on her own property, probably not working, so she needed another contractor. She phoned her NY agent to tell her of her planned relocation and then made a plane reservation for her trip back to the big city. She would need to arrange for having her things moved west. She would drive herself back, in the company of her dog Gilligan and cat Snowball.

“Say, may I make a suggestion?” said the realtor. “We have a great general contractor in town. He came to town after you left. Why not give him a call and let him take care of everything? Here is his number.”

“Thanks, Mr. Parker.” She dialed the number, and a very pleasant woman’s voice answered, “Gardiner Construction.” She asked for Mr. Gardiner and then waited on hold.

Finally, another voice answered, “Larry here. How can I help you?” He too sounded pleasant. She told him what she wanted, and after a few minutes, they agreed he would handle the entire job at a price that she could hardly believe, coming from the East Coast back to this small town. They would meet at the house with the crews in the morning.

Tom Parker seemed a bit impatient. "If you are done, let's have some food and a bottle of champagne. What do you say?"

"Sounds fine, Mr. Parker. First, can I have the keys to my new old house? After dinner, I plan to take measurements for furniture, rugs, and probably a million other things."

Dinner was pleasant. Caroline had one glass of champagne, knowing she would be driving. Tom drank the rest of the bottle and then ordered another. Several people stopped by to say hello to him. He introduced her to some but not all, which she thought strange. Little did she know that he intentionally left out introductions to those he was afraid might say something about his foisting off the old place on an ignorant young woman—which he considered Caroline to be.

Finally, she took her leave, thanking him for everything. He picked up the bottle and moved to a table full of people who all seemed to know him.

Once outside, she took a deep breath and started walking around the town she had left so many years ago, vowing never to return. Nevertheless, here she was, and here she would stay. The air held the smell of the ocean just a mile or so away, reminding her of her youth. Amazingly, there were so many businesses and houses exactly as they had been years ago.

She stopped first at the Post Office. Old Mr. Haggerty looked much as he had 20 years before, a bit more stooped and white-headed, peering over his glasses. He seemed puzzled for a moment, and then broke into a full grin. "Why, is that you, Caroline Fleming? Yes, it must be. Can't be two such beautiful green-eyed redheads hereabouts! Come here to old Joshua for a hug, and then you can tell me what brings you back here." And hug her he did—so hard she was afraid of broken ribs. "Now, sit right down and start talking." She grinned. He was as irascible as he had been when she was a child, but she knew it was a facade.

"Well, Mr. Haggerty, it is all so simple. When I left here after graduation, I went to New York and started writing. I supported myself waiting table, walking dogs, anything I could find until I finally found an agent who liked my work. It took many years to make any money, real money. During that time, I realized that the city with the crime, noise, pollution, and rat race of people was becoming oppressive. So two weeks ago, I put my apartment on the market and had a buyer in three days. Now I'm returning to the solitude, freshness, and nature of the beautiful Oregon

coast—which, apparently, I never got out of my system. Can't get simpler than that. I just bought the old Olmsted place north of town and will start renovations immediately. I'm here because I need a post office box, unless you deliver out there now."

He spoke up proudly, as if he personally had accomplished the feat. "Yes, we do deliver out there now. Have for about five years, but never had anything to deliver there. Let's see. Your house and mail box number will be 27812 S. Pacific Highway. How do you like that?"

"I certainly do. I'll pick up a box right now and install it tomorrow or so. In the meantime, it was wonderful talking to you—or should I say, talking AT you." She gave him another hug and left him smiling after her.

She went to the hardware store for a mailbox, some cleaning supplies, a hammer and other small tools, a garden hose and nozzle, and miscellaneous other things she saw as she walked around the place, surprised that she had a full basket when she was done. She got curious looks from other shoppers, none of whom she recognized, but no one spoke to her. And that was how she wanted it, at least for now.

Once back at the house, Caroline carefully piled her purchases on the porch without climbing the steps, as they were so rickety she was unsure if they would take her weight and the parcels too. She unlocked the door, listening to the creak as it opened. It echoed throughout the empty, cobwebby rooms. Dust on the floor showed footprints from her and Mr. Parker's earlier visit. One by one, she carried her purchases to the kitchen, depositing them on the counters.

Something seemed out of place. She stood in the middle of the room, trying to figure out what it was. *Ah*, she thought, *the refrigerator door is closed. I am sure it was open when we were here earlier. Well, Mr. Parker may have closed it without my noticing.* She opened the door and jumped back in disbelief. Inside were bowls and containers of rotten food. The smell was incredibly foul. She rushed for the back door to open it, but it would not budge, nor would the window above the sink. The only thing she could do was close the refrigerator to stop the fetid smell from moving further into the room.

*Tomorrow, first thing*, she thought, *I will get all new appliances. No, better wait for the contractor and see about simply redoing the entire room. I can afford it, finally, after endless meals of instant noodles and popcorn to*



*fill the stomach.* It was a nice feeling, a sense of security she had never had.  
*When it is all done, this is going to be a wonderful home.* Her enthusiasm returned. She did not notice the refrigerator open as she left the room.

## Chapter 2

Once back outside, she drove several hundred yards to the end of her driveway to stop, park, cross the highway, and once again look down the cliff at the ocean. She found a place where she could move a few feet down into the brush, a place with an old log that was just right for sitting. She sat and stared at the rugged coastline, both north and south. Beautiful sandy beaches were kissed by surf where the tide rolled onshore in curls. Most were inaccessible unless you knew just the right places to climb down, as they had done during her high school days. They were great places for picnicking, drinking forbidden beer, serious necking and petting, and even some actual sex for the more daring, Caroline not included.

Caroline had been extremely popular in school and dated many boys. She remembered Jeff Donaldson, Donald Conway, Herbert Devlin, David Marsh, and others before she started going steady with Hal Hathaway. In retrospect, she was amazed by her poor choice of a steady boyfriend; most of the others were much nicer. She sat there until the fog started to roll in and the sun disappeared into a cloudbank, cooling the shore immediately.

Back in her shabby room at the Dew Drop Inn—yes, it was still here. Her friends in New York did not believe her when she described the places in this little town—she made copious lists of questions and things that needed to be fixed immediately. She would be back in a month and wanted the house at least livable. She slept, and then woke to a nightmare in which a car drove into the sky before dropping into the surf below.

*Caroline, you stop this immediately. You haven't had nightmares like this in years, and you are not going to start now. Go back to sleep and forget it. You just spent too much time sitting on that log, thinking of the past,* she told herself. But sleep was slow in returning, so she was tired when first light reminded her of all she had to do in the next few days.

The next morning, she was just turning off her car when the pickups started pulling up to park willy-nilly around the house. She had asked them all to come at the same time, so if they needed to work together on certain projects, they could coordinate now. One time through the house with a half-dozen men was better than a half-dozen times through with one man. She introduced herself, telling them to ask questions as they went along. She was pleased to see all but one man take out clipboards for notes. He seems more interested in her body than in the remodeling, as he looked her up and down, actually grinning when she gave him a dirty look. *Whoever this guy is, he will have to go. I want my house fixed, not my body*, she thought. *No more of that. I have had enough hurt for a lifetime where men like him are concerned.*

He had not missed an inch of her, from her mountain of curly red hair to her cat-green eyes, her full lips, and the sprinkling of freckles across her nose. He knew, some way some time, he was going to kiss those lips and work his way down her white throat to the full breasts he could see straining against her sweatshirt. There was no doubt in his mind that her long legs would be silky smooth and taste as good as she looked. He felt his penis stir, just thinking of what moist pleasures he would feel between her legs. He shook his head to wipe away the images, trying to keep his mind on his job on the house instead of the job he wanted to do on the house's owner.

As she warned them to watch their steps, they followed her single file into the interior. Some whistles of amazement, some "Well, I'll be damned" and "No one will believe this" followed as they looked about. The questions bombarded her in a never-ending barrage. They moved from room to room, filling page after page in their clipboards—with numbers and dollar signs, no doubt. As they neared the kitchen, she noticed that rancid smell again.

Sure enough, the refrigerator was open, full of rotted food. "Sorry, gentlemen. I know I closed it before I left last night. I will get it out of here as soon as I can."

"How about right now?" asked a burly man with an even burlier beard. He was James Duckworth, the roofer, and Caroline wondered how he would keep from falling off. She made a mental note to get insurance the minute she got back to town. "Come on. A couple of you guys give me a hand." Several moved forward and started pushing the refrigerator toward the outside door.

"I don't think you can get it out that way. The door would not open at all last night." One of the men turned the handle, and the door slid open easily. Someone mumbled about weak women, and they all looked at her. The refrigerator was outside with five minutes.

She laughed. "Guess I must be one of those women, don't you think?" But she knew it would not open last night, no matter how hard she tried.

A man moved to the sink and easily slid open the window. "That should help get rid of the smell," said the man who had so enjoyed appraising her body earlier. He was tall and slender with wide shoulders, dark brown hair in a ponytail, and muscular arms with copious dark hair showing below his short-sleeved shirt. In her mind, she could see the same hair on his chest and wondered if it was as thick down lower. *What is the matter with you, Caroline?* she asked herself. *You don't even like the guy, let alone care what his asset, or lack of them, might be. Get a grip, girl; it has not been that long.*

"By the way," he asked, "what was that crap? If this place has been empty for as long as people claim, how did it even get in here?" They all looked at Caroline, who had no answer. She just shrugged, but wondered, not for the first time, exactly what he had asked. She motioned them all to follow her up the back stairs to the second floor. The tour continued for almost two hours before everyone had his questions asked and answered. They all knew each other and soon agreed on how to get started and where to begin. She thanked them all for coming.

Once they were outside, they huddled around the tall, rude man who leaned against his pickup. For the first time, she noticed the words on its door: Lawrence Gardiner, General Contractor. She could not believe it. This was the man she had hired to run the entire remodeling project, the one with whom she had verbally contracted. He was so highly recommended by Tom Parker and Joshua Haggerty that she had not hesitated to hire him even without actually meeting him. Apparently, she had made a mistake and needed to rectify it immediately.

"Mr. Gardiner, may I speak to you for a few minutes, please?" She pulled herself up to her full 5 foot 7 inches, shoulders back, and face stern. He continued to talk to the men for a few more minutes, and then slowly moved toward her as the rest got in their vehicles and drove away.

“Yes, Miss Fleming. What can I do for you?” Once again, he looked her up and down rudely. There was no doubt what he had meant, and Caroline was not flattered by his insolence.

“First of all, I want you to remove your cap when talking to me. Second, I want you to keep your eyes on my face rather than my body. Thirdly, you are fired!”

He threw back his head, roaring with laughter. “First, I will remove my hat only whenever and wherever I feel like it. Second, I am sorry if my appreciating your form is insulting to you. Most women like to know they are attractive, but apparently, you are not most women. Thirdly, you can’t fire me, because if you do, you will have no one to fix up this dilapidated old firetrap you bought.”

“Well, sir, please tell me why that is. Why will no one fix my house?”

“Because, Lovely Lady, they all are on my payroll. If I tell them no, then no it is. I would rather not have to do that. because they all need the money. Work is hard to come by around here, but you would have no way of knowing that. So, do they work or don’t they work? Your decision.” His voice was calm, but she could sense his anger under the surface.

“I do know what it is like to have no work or money. I did not always have money and appreciate it very much now. I also know how scarce work and money are here. I grew up in this town, on this coast, and apparently, that has not changed. Actually, you are the newcomer here, not I.” Now he could sense her anger building. “However, as much as I dislike you, Mr. Gardiner, I will continue with the project not only for the men and their families, but for my own wants. Now, does that make you happy?”

“Yes, it does, Miss Fleming. Especially the part where you admitted your ‘wants,’ as you called them. I call that more like ‘selfishness’ and your desire to have what you want when you want it, and if it just happens to coincide with others wants, then all the better for you. It has nothing to do with the men. We both know it. Now, good afternoon. The men will start in the morning.

“Oh, yes—by the way, have you opened accounts at all the lumber mills, hardware stores, rock quarry, etc. for us to charge what we need? If not, I would suggest you do that today, IF you want us to work tomorrow.” He walked away without a look back, climbing into his truck and drove off, leaving her standing in the sandy road as the dust settled on and around her.

She was furious. No one had talked to her that way, ever. Her first impulse was to race after him to get in one or two more words—and then she thought how silly that would be. Instead, she went back inside to close and lock the back door and close the kitchen window, only to find them already closed. “I know they were open when we left this room. This time, I know it.” She thought aloud this time. The smell was gone, thankfully. She started to lock the door and, giving it another thought, tried to open it. It would not budge. Just like before. What was going on here? She looked out the window above the sink, out into the yard. The refrigerator was facing her, door open, nothing inside. It was completely empty.

## Chapter 3

If that was not enough to give Caroline a shudder of fear, when she went back into the living room, candles flickered on the mantle. She was sure no candles, let alone candleholders, had been there earlier. Actually, she was completely positive, because Lawrence Gardiner had leaned against the wall by the fireplace, one of his stations to watch her, insultingly. *Okay, now I get it. Someone is playing tricks on me. But why? That has to be the answer. Well, they will not get the better of me, whatever they are trying to do. I will NOT play their game.* Her thoughts were calming as she locked the front door behind her.

She had a few days before her planned return to New York, so she might as well get in touch with some old friends, if any were dumb enough still to be around here. Ha, talk about dumb. So who was back after 20 years?

This time, she drove further south, pulling off the highway onto a wide sandy area used by locals who knew the path to the beach. She pulled on her sweater and started down the path, which grew harder to see the farther she went, just as it always had.

When she reached the beach, she climbed over several logs thrown up by the last big storm, until there was only open sand between her and the water. The sun was still bright, and the wind blew. She sat in the sand, her back against a log, protected from the endless wind. She listened to the surf rolling and ebbing, the gulls calling as they dove down for a morsel of fish or whatever they could find, and the sound of traffic on the road high above her. She felt wonderfully at peace, now that she had put away in her head, the strange happenings at her house. The sun warmed her, and she slept.

Caroline was not sure what awakened her. She shook the sleep cobwebs out of her head. Looking north, a mile or so away, she saw something burning low at the base of a cliff. She rose and walked in that direction, but

things did not seem to be much clearer, even though she had come far enough that she should be able to see better. She started running, but soft sand got in her shoes. Caroline moved toward the water where the sand was harder, took off her shoes, and then ran as fast as she could. Finally, the distance seemed to shorten. She could now see a burning car, only a flicker of flame now and then.

As she neared, she realized the car had tumbled down the cliff. Nothing moved in or around the car. She moved closer, and a ragged scream of recognition tore from her lips. She knew that car. It had belonged to Donald Conroy. The last time she had seen it was when he pulled out of the high school parking lot on graduation night, with Heather Johanson snuggled against him.

This could not be. The smoldering car was 20 years old, but it had been Donald's pride and joy. She remembered how they had laughed as he polished nearly invisible spots off its bright red paint.

*Oh, my God, I smell gas. Run.* She ran at an angle, southerly and toward the water. She was up to her waist when she heard the explosion. She threw herself under the surface but felt debris splashing into the ocean around her. When her lungs could take no more, she bobbed to the surface. The car was smoldering, the last of anything combustible consumed by the greedy flames.

She ran back to the car, now only a frame of twisted metal. But it was hot, so this was not a dream. This could not be happening. It had happened nearly 20 years ago, the night Donald and Heather died on the beach below her new home. The beach where she had stood looking down yesterday, remembering them and their accident.

She sat for a long time, cross-legged in the sand, staring with empty eyes at what should not have been there, but was. How long she stayed, she did not know, or care. Finally, rain began to fall. She moved slowly as she wound her way back to the path and upward. Once there, she sat, dripping wet in the rental car, not caring that everything was drenched. After a long while, she turned the car around and returned to the Dew Drop Inn.

Tonight, the room seemed a safe haven. She threw her wet clothes in the shower and climbed into bed nude, pulling the blankets tightly around her. Finally, she slept.



## Chapter 4

Her alarm wakened her at six a.m. After showering and rinsing the salt out of her clothes, she dressed and returned to her new home. At the end of her driveway, she parked and crossed the road, looking down. There was no sign of a car, fire or anything there now. It must have been a dream. But what a dream!

Once inside the house, she looked at the mantle. The candles and candleholders were gone. All that remained were two dried puddles of wax. In the kitchen, a look out the window showed the refrigerator door was closed. Caroline rubbed her eyes, thinking she was seeing things. She tried the kitchen door and it opened easily, as did the window. She must be hallucinating or something!

Holding tightly to the kitchen counter edge, Caroline closed her eyes again.

“Are you alright?”

She jumped, startled, almost screaming. She turned to see Lawrence Gardiner standing a few feet in front of her.

“Dammit, you scared me to death. I thought I was alone. You could have had the courtesy to make some noise or something.”

“Well, golly, gee whiz. Dummy old me! I thought that since you knew I was to be here at seven, there was no reason to ring chimes or honk horns or whatever announcing my arrival. NOW, what is the matter with you?” he asked sarcastically.

Caroline felt a bit ashamed for lashing out at him, but not enough to apologize. She might have, had he not been so nasty in his tone. “Nothing is wrong. You just startled me, that’s all. Period! Forget it. Now, where do we start?”

In answer, she heard voices heading their way. Everyone had arrived. The roofer James Duckworth had a huge thermos and a couple dozen

thermal cups. "Coffee has arrived. And so have I." He bowed deeply to her while the others hooted at him.

Caroline curtsied in return. "You, Mr. Duckworth, are invaluable, and your coffee is more than appreciated."

Someone commented, "Yah, wait until you taste it." Someone else said, "Maybe you should wait with the invaluable stuff until he gets your roof done and doesn't fall through it." More comments and jeers followed until everyone was laughing, including Caroline. She sneaked a look at Lawrence to see if he was enjoying himself too, but he caught her eye, and she turned away before she blushed.

"Okay, guys, now let's get to work. The electric company truck just pulled in, so that is our first major project. We want it working in the morning so, we don't have to drink Duckworth's deadly brew after today." More laughter, and then the men separated and moved in different directions. Soon the house resounded with hammering, sawing, clanging, and every other noise Caroline thought possible. She left them for a quick trip into town to get insurance and to open charge accounts for construction material.

She returned just in time for lunch break. They were outside with lunch boxes and thermoses, sitting on the grass, the porch, anywhere. Camaraderie was apparent, as they seemed happy with their workaday lives. Caroline greeted them and then went inside to sit on a crate, listening to them and smiling. She pushed all thoughts of her beach walk yesterday back in her mind.

When the day was over, the workers bid her a good night. She moved through the house, amazed at the progress she could see. They'd determined that the well was fine but needed a new pump, and the septic system needed a new tank, but that was on the morning agenda. The last words Lawrence spoke to her were, "When there is enough money, nearly anything can be done in record time." He did not wait for her reply.

She locked the kitchen door without trying it and did not look out the window. As she exited the house, she turned for one last time. The candles were burning on the mantle, just as before. This time she just shrugged. No matter. Whoever was doing these pranks would just have to enjoy them by himself, because she was not going to let them bother her.

## Chapter 5

As she drove back into town, she passed the Oceanside Seafood Restaurant. She made a U-turn to return to the parking lot. She had eaten in some of the best restaurants in New York and beyond, but none had the fresh-from-the-sea Dungeness crab of her childhood. Fresh out of the shell, dipped in a bit of seafood sauce with saltine crackers, it had always been one of her favorites. A leisurely dinner would calm her frazzled nerves.

The sign inside said to seat yourself, so she did, by a window overlooking the beach below. A few people were walking in the sand and surf, wading with pants rolled up, but with jackets now that the sun was so low on the horizon. She saw exactly what she wanted on the menu and turned to look for someone to take her order.

As she waited, she noted the decor had changed little from when she used to come here with her parents, except that it was more grease-stained and dingy. The crab pots still hung from the ceiling, the wallpaper had shells and starfish all over it, pictures on the walls showed jumping whales and fishing boats, and the chairs had tape on the seats.

A short, plump blonde with dark roots in her cropped hair smiled as she looked at Caroline. Suddenly, she stopped. Her smile disappeared, and then became a full-fledged grin that changed her face into a pixie's. "Caroline, is that really you?" She came running as Caroline stood for the charging woman to grab her, hugging and kissing her cheeks. Caroline's mind was working, trying to place a name to the face. Finally, the pixie look jarred her memory as they separated.

Georgia had moved to town from Louisiana when they were in the fourth grade, and the girls became inseparable. Over the years, Georgia had lost some, but not all of her slow Southern drawl. When Caroline left for the East Coast, they had written back and forth several times, but as so often

happens, those letters dwindled down to cards at Christmas, then nothing at all.

“Yes, Georgia. It’s me. I see from your left hand that it’s not Georgia Cummings anymore. How are you?”

“No, it’s Georgia Cummings Jones now. Do you remember Doc Jones, a year ahead of us? We got married 18 years ago, had two kids, and bought this place not long after that. Doc does the cooking; I wait the tables and chase kids. Actually, they are both in school so that isn’t much of a problem, finding baby-sitters and all anymore. Like I said, Doc does the cooking, and I do the eating, as you can see.” She pirouetted in a circle, hands on hips, to display the enlarged version of the pixie Caroline now remembered clearly. “But he loves me anyway, he says—more to hang on to.”

Caroline laughed as expected. “Well, Georgia, you look lovely to me, too. Looks like not much has changed around here in 20 years. Any of the old gang still here?”

Georgia indicated she would be right back, took an order from the kitchen to the couple two tables down, took money from a foursome who were leaving, and then rushed back, two mugs and coffee pot in hand. She dropped into a chair and poured coffee. “Yes, several are still around. But first, what brings you back here?”

Caroline explained in almost the same words she had used at the Post Office. She described her plans for the Olmsted house and then asked, “Do you know Lawrence Gardiner? Somehow I got him as a General Contractor, and I’m not sure about that decision.”

“Oh, Larry. He is a doll. Most eligible bachelor in town. Well, practically the only bachelor in town, or the only one anyone would want. You couldn’t have a better guy remodeling your place. I have never been able to afford to remodel anything, but from what I hear, he is very good and charges reasonable prices. His subcontractors think the sun rises and sets over him.” She grinned. “And he isn’t bad to look at either. I notice you have a naked ring finger, but it looks like there used to be one there—still an indentation.”

It seemed best to drop the Larry conversation, so Caroline answered, “I was married for 11 years, divorced just a few months. My ex found he liked young, long-legged, nubile women of the Asian persuasion, and I got tired of supporting him and them. Apparently, his likes changed over the years,

from redheads like me to blondes to brunettes to Scandinavians to whatever. It actually feels wonderful to be out from under that cloud. I am just looking for some peace and quiet so I can work. I have three book contracts at present, so little time for much else. And I love it!"

Again, Georgia left to handle her customers, calling once to ask Caroline what she wanted. Soon she was back with the biggest plate of crab, crackers, coleslaw, and seafood sauce Caroline had seen in forever. She did not wait for Georgia to sit before she was savoring the wonderful flavor she had missed so much without realizing it.

"Now, eat away and I will answer your questions. Yes, there are several of our class and those before and after ours. Actually, while I think of it, we are planning a class reunion here in a couple months, and you will be the guess of honor. Don't say a word. We can talk about that later.

"Now, let's see. Dave and Linda Marquette. She was Linda Curry, remember? He works at the sawmill in Mapleton, so has a long drive every day. She leased the old 'Beauty for a Beauty' shop and is just eking by, from what I hear. Rumors, which I am naturally passing on, say they are barely civil to one another, and they both have other 'friends.'

"Sara Carter married Dean Sloan, but he was killed driving a log truck several years ago. Actually, it was only a short time after they were married. The truck was so badly burned after it tumbled down into a ravine that his body was never found. She lost the baby she was carrying and has never been the same since. She doesn't socialize much anymore, just quietly helps out at the grade school. Kind of like the kids are substitutes or something. She got a healthy sum from the accident because the company had not done required maintenance, so she does not need a paying job.

The restaurant door opened and two couples came inside. Georgia shouted to them, "Look who is here! Look who is moving back to town?" They all walked toward the table, looking intently at her.

Finally, one of the men spoke. "Well, I'll be damned. If it isn't Miss Homecoming herself. Give old Hal a real Homecoming hug." He pulled her off her chair, hugged her, and then bent down for a kiss that turned into a real kiss. She finally pushed him away. He laughed, "You didn't use do push me away, Caroline. Well, not some of the time."

She smiled as her mind raced back to those kisses they'd shared as sweethearts, the steamed windows in his old car, the nights on the beach

when she'd always stopped him before they "went all the way," and his anger each time.

Now, she looked at the tall woman who had put her arm through his as if staking claim. "My name is Margo. Margo Hathaway, Hal's wife. I don't think we have met. I moved here in time to snag this handsome man for my own. I was homecoming queen in Coos Bay, a school quite a bit larger than this one. Harder to get selected for that honor."

The group was quiet as she spoke. Caroline took an instant dislike to Margo, but tried not to show it. "That is so true, Margo," she said quietly. "Now that you are settled in here, what do you do with yourself?"

"Well, Caroline, or is it Carol? With Hal working so many long hours at the lumberyard...we own it now, thanks to my Daddy and his money. I find myself constantly redecorating our house. Do you know it? We own the big house above the town. The one old Mr. Boynton had. You know, the most expensive house in town."

Georgia finally could take no more, because she spoke with sarcasm, "Not anymore, Margo. Caroline"—she emphasized Caroline, not Carol—"has bought the Olmsted house and is having it completely renovated. Actually, Larry and the crews are starting tomorrow. Isn't that exciting? We will have our Caroline back."

That seemed to shut Margo up, at least temporarily. The other woman extended her hand. "Hello, Caroline, you probably do not remember me. I am Rebecca...Becky Hensley, now Brubaker, and this is my guy Brian."

"I remember you both. Becky, you headed the yearbook, best one ever, and Brian held the state record for playoff free throws, or something basketball-ish. Memory is going." Caroline smiled. "Please, all of you join us."

They talked for almost two hours before children at home and the responsibilities of adulthood pulled them back from their golden years of play, of high school. As they left, Hal leaned over to whisper in her ear, "If you ever get lonely out there in that old place, just give me a call and we can pick up where we left off." He quickly kissed her lips and followed his wife out to the car.

Gloria said, "If I know Hal, he whispered something obscene, or at least something you did not want to hear. He is a leech, no matter how you spell

it. Stay clear of him—he is bad news, just as he always was. Now, sweetie, I have to go help Doc with the cleanup. Come on and say ‘hi’ before you go.”

Caroline returned to her shoddy motel room for a sleepless night. Rotten food, doors, and windows that would not open, candles where they should not have been...they all crowded her dreams. Had she made a mistake returning here?

## Chapter 6

She was in no hurry to get to the house the next morning. She knew things would get done without her around, and she could avoid Larry Gardiner at the same time. Caroline left her car at the motel and started walking, looking in each store and building as she passed it. At the sign, “Marvin X. Slattery, Esq.,” with words “Attorney-at-Law” in smaller letters beneath his name, she smiled and opened the door. Inside was a mousy little woman who asked if she had an appointment.

“Oh, no, I guess I don’t. Never even thought of it. I am an old friend of Marv’s and thought I would stop in to say hello. My name is Caroline Fleming. Could you ask if...”

While she waited, she surveyed the room. Business apparently was as one might expect in a town this size. The furniture was worn, but clean. The prints on the walls might have come from magazines. The plants needed water.

Before she finished looking around, the youngster with buckteeth had become a tall, good-looking man who was holding his arms wide and moving to embrace her. She was dumbfounded to see the change. Apparently, he had learned many things while becoming an attorney. “Caroline, you are as beautiful as ever—even more so, I would say. Whatever are you doing in town?”

Once again, she recited her story, laughing at the end. “Maybe I should just take out an ad in the newspaper so I won’t have to keep repeating myself.”

“That, my dear, is a splendid idea. I will escort you over there personally.”

“Marv, I was just joking. Really!”

“I’m not,” he said. “Is there any reason why you can’t give an interview for the Coast Times so that everyone gets the actual story from the horse’s



mouth? Oh, sorry, poor choice of words. From the lips of the gorgeous best-selling novelist returned to her roots. How is that? Better?"

"Yes, I guess so. It's probably a good idea. But I do know my way across the street, Marv."

"Nonsense, Caroline. I want the entire town to see you on my arm. Actually, when we were in high school, it was one of my fondest dreams. I was dreadfully in love with you and even entertained thoughts of Hal's demise." He offered his elbow; she smiled and slipped her arm through it. "Jennifer," he spoke to his secretary/receptionist, "take messages. I don't know when I'll be back. Oh, yes, and call Charlie at the paper to be ready for the interview of the year."

Before crossing the street, he did indeed escort her down one side of the street and then back up the other, waving at each car as it went by. At first Caroline felt embarrassed, but then found it amusing and started waving too. When they arrived at the newspaper office, Charlie Dow was waiting for them. He had slicked back his hair as if trying to hide his bald spot. He smelled of too much cologne and had yellow teeth and fingers from the unfiltered cigarettes she could see in his shirt pocket.

"Hello, Charlie." Caroline offered her hand, not wanting a hug this time, but she was not that lucky. He held her close, and she held her breath.

"Ah, Caroline. You give the word 'classy' a new meaning. The epitome of glamour. The essence of beauty. The aura of...."

Marvin cut him off. "For Heaven's sake, Charlie, are you trying out some new words today or what? Caroline is a busy woman and has taken part of her day just to come for you to interview. But if you don't want...."

Caroline looked from one to the other. It was like a tennis match as they traded barbs. Obviously, this was nothing new, and obviously, they both enjoyed it. Finally she spoke, "Hey guys, remember me?" For a second they looked at her blankly, and then both laughed heartily.

Charlie asked countless questions, and Caroline gave completely honest answers. She avoided nothing he asked but used a bit of shorthand language to reply to some questions, such as those involving her ex-husband. When they were finally finished, they agreed it was time for lunch, so they moved to the little soda fountain in the drug store. Caroline was amazed it was still there. She would have to take picture to show her friends in New York, because no one would believe her without proof.

People came and went, some stopping to say hello, get a handshake and get kind of reacquainted. Caroline was glad, but by now she'd had enough contact for one day. She thanked the pair for their time and lunch and returned to her car, leaving them in one of their endless verbal sparring matches.

As she made the last sharp curve before her driveway, she saw a car pulling away from her new mailbox. At first, she thought it was her delivery person. Suddenly she was aware that the car was speeding directly at her, as if to hit her head on. She instinctively knew that to pull off the road on the right would take her over the cliff. Instead of slamming on her breaks, she sped up, jerking the wheel to the left into a field as the car sped past her. In that brief second, she thought the face she saw was that of Margo Hathaway. She was shaken, but not hurt. Nevertheless, she remained at the wheel until her nerves were under control again before continuing on home. Yes, she now thought of the house as 'home'—but with a big question mark behind it.

James Duckworth gave her a big wave from the roof, grinning from ear to ear. Thank God for insurance, she thought, watching his huge body moving around on the steep pitch. Once inside the massive building, she was again amazed at the progress she could see. "Well, look who's finally putting in a special guest appearance? Her Majesty, Queen Caroline." She didn't have to turn to know who it was.

Without turning, she replied, "Are you bowing? Is your forehead touching the floor? If not, it might be a good idea for you to remove yourself from my royal presence before I find something hit you with for your impertinence." She heard some noise and turned. He was nowhere to be seen. She was relieved, yet disappointed somehow.

The kitchen was painted a soft blue, the white appliances were in place, and the countertops had been replaced with white marble, trimmed in the same blue. Even the recessed lights were perfect. She loved the tiled floor, a soft off-white with blue touches. The white cabinets gave the room a sense of openness and beauty. All her selections from the samples came together to make a beautiful, inviting place to sit and sip coffee, which was what she did. There was no furniture, so she boosted herself up and sat on the counter. She decided to leave the curtains and drapes until she returned, then have a professional do the measuring.

Outside, the refrigerator was gone, taken away with the trash. She hopped off the counter and took off her shoes, letting her feet feel the coolness of the tile. She opened the refrigerator. Ah, nothing there but ice, thankfully. The electricity was on, although the septic system and new pump were not yet installed—but that was fine with her. She had a feeling of contentment that she could not define, despite the near accident out on the highway. All Caroline knew was that at this minute, she was happy. Happy in her new home.

Back in shoes, she wandered from room to room. Some showed no work, some a bare little, and some a lot. No matter—they had a month to get it done. She made notes on a little pad from her purse, carefully indicating exactly where she wanted all the phone jacks, the modem hookups, and which lines to go to which room for the phone company. The rest could just wait for her return.

Back downstairs, she found the crews leaving. Surprised it was so late, she hurried outside to wish them a good weekend. Gardiner was not there, but his truck was. *No matter*, she thought. *He does not matter at all as long as he gets my house done, right and on time.*

She locked up. Starting to her car, she saw him back behind the house, near the edge of the forest, quite some distance from the building. What was he doing back there? She wanted to wait to ask him, but decided it was really none of her business anyway. She drove back to town, not looking forward to a lonely meal and TV tonight. The accident—if it was an accident—was too heavy on her mind to let it go.

When she got back to her room, there was a note taped to her door. “Meet me at Heidi’s Kitchen in Agate Beach whenever you can make it. I will wait.” The signature was only an initial, one she could not read.

*Heck, why not?* She went inside, showered, and changed. Next stop, Agate Beach.

## Chapter 7

The drive was not very long, but it was curvy with steep drops just on the other side of a short guardrail—as was most of the coastline route, like across from Caroline’s house. In some places salal, ferns, and small trees lined the sides of the road. Caroline wished they were not so tall, so she could see the ocean as she drove. But perhaps it was better that she concentrated on the road anyway, after the near mishap earlier.

She slowed down to follow the 35 mph sign as she came into town. She pulled off to the right, where she remembered Heidi’s Kitchen had been, overlooking the water, but now there was just an empty lot. She turned off the car and sat for a long while, trying to get this newest development straight in her head. Yes, it had been Heidi’s—she was sure of that.

She got out, pulling her sweater tightly around her. Not a person was in sight, but that really was not too surprising. The only sign of life was an occasional car going by. It started to rain lightly as she walked to the edge of the empty lot. She stood looking down. Yes, she could barely discern some of the rotted stairs once used to climb partway down the hill to where a couple of paths meandered off in different directions.

It was raining heavily now as she ran back to the car. Just as she reached it, she heard brakes and the sound of gravel. Darkness was falling, and with the rain, she could not see clearly, but she was certain it was a shiny red car, a vintage one. The horn honked, and lights blinked as a window was rolled down. She heard her name called, but something stopped her from moving any closer. “Caroline? Is that you? Come on, get in. You are getting drenched out there.”

The car door opened, but no dome light came on, so she could not see the occupants. Slowly, she moved toward the idling car. An oncoming vehicle’s light shown brightly through the windshield. She saw clearly that there was no one in it

Panicked, she ran for her own car, locking it once she was inside. She started the engine and raced toward the little town of Agate Beach, just a few blocks ahead. She pulled into a motel parking lot and ran to the inviting lights of the office. A pimply faced teenage boy was reading a magazine with sports cars on the cover. He broke into a smile when he saw her, dripping wet.

"Hey, Lady, do you know it's raining out there?" He laughed at his own joke. "What can I do for you?"

"Yes, young man, for some reason I did notice the rain." She was trying to keep her voice light. "I used to live around here, but it was a long time ago. Do you have a policeman in town, and can you call him?" *No, wait*, she thought. *What will you tell him? That the occupants of an empty car invited you to join them?* Even in her panic mode, that sounded stupid to her. "No...on the other hand, where is the nearest restaurant? I was supposed to meet someone at Heidi's, but it doesn't seem to be there anymore."

He smiled through crooked front teeth. "I vaguely remember a bit about it. Think it burned down when I was a kid, maybe 6-7 years old. Couple people died in the blaze. County bulldozed the rest after the cops and fire-people investigated it, I guess. That's all I can tell you about it. If you are hungry, though, two blocks south are a couple nice diners. Great burgers and fries at The Hungry Hamburger and seafood at Captain John's. Take your pick."

Caroline thanked him and drove slowly until she saw the lights ahead. She opted for The Hungry Hamburger, mainly because there were several cars in the parking lot. Once inside, she sat at the counter and ordered the special of chili cheeseburger, fries, and a vanilla shake. So much for her diet. The waitress was in her late 50s or so, and pleasant. Caroline chatted with her about nothing for a few minutes, and then got serious.

"Mattie"—per her name badge—"would you mind if I ask you a couple of questions? I used to live here, and some of the changes have me stumped. Oh, by the way, my name is Caroline Fleming."

She extended her hand, and Mattie took it, shaking with a firm grip. "Glad to meetcha. I heard you were back in town. I'm Mattie Devlin. My son Herbert was in your class. Remember him?"

“Why, I sure do. We dated a couple times. He was always such a gentleman—no grappling in the backseat, that sort of thing. Where is he now? I really would like to see him again.”

A shadow crossed Mattie’s face, and her demeanor seemed to change to one of sadness from the smiling person of a minute ago. “Well, Caroline, he is gone. Passed, he and Sue Ellen McThomas. They died in the fire that burned down Heidi’s place neigh on 15 years ago. Fire started in the basement, and they just dropped through the floor before they even knew it was ablaze, apparently. At least, according to the official report.”

“Oh, Mattie!” Caroline took her hands in hers. She did not know what to say, but Mattie started talking again.

“I never believed that story, myself. It made no sense. There would have been smoke, noise, and heat, giving them plenty of time to get out. They were closing up about eleven. No customers to distract them or anything. They had become more than friends while they worked there and were talking about an engagement. She was perfect for him. They were such a nice couple. Now gone.” She was trying to compose herself, but the pain of remembering was so strong.

“Mattie...Mrs. Devlin. I am so sorry. I can think of nothing to say that will help, now or ever. All I can tell you is that you had a terrific son, and Sue Ellen was a good friend.”

Mattie smiled at her, wiping away a tear or two. “Be right back with your food.”

She seemed composed again when she returned. “Now, I want to see how a little bitty gal like you can get all that down.”

Caroline smiled and returned to small talk. Finally, she asked, “Mattie, do strange things happen around her nowadays, or am I losing my mind?”

Mattie questioned before answering, “What kind of strange things, Caroline?”

“Can I tell you something without you thinking I’m a total New York nut?”

Mattie nodded.

Carolyn skipped most of what she had experienced this week, just telling Mattie about the car in the old Heidi parking lot. Mattie’s face seemed to harden as she spoke.

“Well, I don’t know what to say about that, but I can tell you there have been some things that are not explainable. Some folks claim to have seen a car on the beach, as if it had just come over the cliff, still burning. Others say that ghosts are doing strange things in their homes, like messing with the TV or turning on appliances, even starting their cars in the garage. Nothing has happened to me, so all I can say is that they are rumors.”

It seemed she did not want to talk about it any further, as she wandered away, wiping counters and filling napkin dispensers.

Caroline ate a few bites of her food, drank most of the milkshake, left her money with a large tip on the counter, and then gave Mattie a hug before running through the rain to her car. She made a U-turn and started back to town and the dreary motel waiting for her. She sped up as she passed the empty parking lot where Heidi’s had been. No car in the lot. She had not gone a hundred yards when she saw headlights in the review mirror. There were headlights pulling out from the empty lot.

## Chapter 8

Caroline left town early Sunday for Portland to catch her flight back to New York. One part of her felt relief to be leaving, while another part dreaded the chores awaiting her in the big city.

Once back on the East Coast, she immediately missed the clean air and freshness of the West. She handled most everything with phone calls, but did visit some showrooms to select furnishing for her new home. That done and friends bid goodbye with promises to return or to have them visit, she piled her suitcases and two companions, Gilligan the dog and Snow White the cat, into her car and headed toward her new life.

The long trip across the country was uneventful. Once she'd arrived, Caroline drove straight through town to her house, stopping only at the supermarket for a few things she was sure she would need immediately. She stopped at the end of the driveway and stared. It was breathtakingly beautiful, painted white with dark blue trim. A swing moved gently on its chains on the wide front porch that narrowed as it continued completely around the building, with an ornate guardrail and trim around the porch roof.

Caroline drove up to the house. She gave a stern lecture to the animals about staying off the road, away from the forest, and in the yard, but was sure they were paying no attention. Once out of the car, they ran helter-skelter, sniffing, and examining every blade of grass, everything that moved, the gravel, the sand, the porch, and flower beds before disappearing around the house.

Flower beds—*oh, yes*, she thought—full of rhodendrons, azaleas, hardy fuchsias and colorful annuals and perennials. Spring here on the coast was a beautiful time of year. In the east, she had not seen so many flowers in one place except in costly gardens. Petunias of purple and pink surrounded a Snowball tree to the side. The native dogwood that would bloom in a month or so with white blossoms stood over random daffodils and tulips. Around



the porch were beds of plants not yet blooming, so a world of discovery was ahead to identify them when their blossoms burst forth. The lawn was sown and was still cordoned off to keep it from being trampled, but the dog and cat paid little attention to the colorful tape strung around it, except to chase the ends blowing in the wind.

She took a deep breath of contentment as she climbed the stairs. Looking down from there toward the ocean was a view she would love forever, and she could hear the surf as it broke against the cliff at high tides. Caroline unlocked the front door and stepped inside.

"Do you like it?"

She jumped, startled, thinking she was alone. Coming from the dining room was Larry Gardiner, dressed in tight jeans with a form-fitting t-shirt above them and a Seattle Seahawks cap on his head.

"You startled me. I didn't know you were here. Your truck was not out front. But to answer your question, yes, I love it. It is even more beautiful than I pictured." She turned to point at the curved bench under the side window, upholstered in a soft floral fabric, covered with plump pillows. "That is perfect. I could not have picked better myself. Did you do this? Who did you find with such great taste?"

Larry smiled. "Guilty as charged. With a bit of help from my sister Rena, who is a decorator in Portland. She has read your books, thinks you are awesome, and seems to have very opinionated ideas of what you would like. But if you don't, we can tear it out and replace it."

For the first time, she actually smiled at him. "Your sister found just what I would have selected. Be sure to give me her phone number so I can consult her for other things. I would pay her well, naturally."

"Naturally," Larry answered. "Actually, she left some kind of fabric books, marked with clips, where she thought they might work for certain places in the house. I think there are notes, too. No obligation, of course. All she wants is to meet you and have you autograph her books."

"Wonderful. When will she coming down? Or maybe I should go back to Portland. Well, that is for later." Feeling comfortable with Larry for the first time, she smiled again. "How about a tour of your accomplishments? That is if, you have time."

"For you, Boss Lady, I always have time." Nothing sarcastic this time. "And I even have some coffee in the kitchen. I am the last one of the crew

left here today, as usual, and have not dumped it yet. But, be warned, it is strong and may curl your toenails.”

They moved to the kitchen where the door was open, screen door closed. A ‘ruff’ and a ‘meow’ greeted them from outside. She opened the door, stooping to pet the animals’ heads. Gilligan, a black creature of no known parentage but predominately terrier, trotted over to Larry to sniff, as dogs do. Snow White merely sat and stared, her bright green eyes pools of reflective light on her long white fur. Apparently, Larry passed the Gilligan-test.

Caroline poured coffee, handing a mug to him. “Now, about that tour—if my friends here will let you go.” He grinned, reached again to pick up Snow White and got another harmless pop and hiss from her, back up and razor-like. He looked puzzled. Caroline laughed. “She’s not an easy mark like her companion. Takes her a while to warm up to people.”

“Like her mistress, apparently.’ Again, his smile was genuine. “Let’s start with the dining room,” he said as they moved back that way. She noted the dark wood base, the wainscoting, and the muted wallpaper she had picked before she left. The floor was polished hardwood, as was the living room’s.

“When my furniture arrives, it will be perfect in here. Will you be able,” she asked, “to come later and help hang wall décor, or should I find someone else?” Caroline honestly hoped he would say yes, but he did not.

“Miss Fleming, I am a bit expensive to charge for that kind of thing, but I can send over a couple good men to help, if that is all right.”

She masked her disappointment and nodded. They returned to the living room and up the stairs, where there were five bedrooms and three baths. Hers was to be the large one that ran all the way across the front of the house and included a sitting room. Double doors led out onto a wide balcony with guardrails and trim matching that of the porch. She immediately loved it. “Larry, this is perfect. Absolutely perfect. Some wicker furniture and plants. Oh!” She stopped. “I guess that will not work. I had forgotten how it storms here.”

“I have some ideas about that,” he said. “How about we add some kind of glass enclosure that will slide in place from the top or sides at the push of a button? Rena told me about a place in San Francisco that manufactures

them. They are not cheap, by any means, but I can check into that, if you like.”

Carolina agreed. “Sounds great. Let me know when you find out.” She surveyed her bedroom, noting the white crown molding, the pastel wallpaper on the back wall, the window seats on the sides under the massive windows there, and the triple set sliding doors to the balcony. “Wow, I can see China from here, I think! Larry, this is perfect.” She spun in circles like a gleeful child, not noticing the can of paint by her feet. She tripped and would have fallen if he had not caught her in his arm

She felt his strong arms around her, his muscular chest as he held her against him. Looking up at him, she thought for a split second he was going to kiss her, but instead he stood her up and moved away from her. Caroline felt a moment of disappointment, but gathered herself and said, “Thank you, Sir Galahad, for keeping the clumsy maiden from breaking her neck. I should look where I am going.”

Larry indicated it was time for him to leave, so she walked with him out back to his truck and then, when he was gone, around the house to her car in front. She unloaded her luggage, the animals’ necessities, a sleeping bag, pillows, and a few bags of groceries she had pickup up in town. She planned to stay here tonight, bed or no bed.

With everything put away, she went back outside and picked a bouquet of lilacs from the large bush on the corner by the porch. She used an old mug for a vase, intending to take it to her bedroom upstairs later. She poured herself a light whiskey and water into a paper cup, took it outside, and sat on the porch step to enjoy the sunset.

Her pets were with her, curled up and asleep, when she heard the sound of glass breaking inside. Not thinking that someone might be in there, she ran inside to find the lilacs strewn around the room and the mug broken on the hardwood floor, water spreading. She ran for paper towels for the mess and then, taking a small gun from her purse, started searching the house. She locked the back door in the kitchen. The door at the top of the basement stairs had a slide latch that she snapped into place, turning it down so it was firmly locked. Tomorrow, she would admit to the men that she was afraid to go down into that dark, unfinished place.

Going from room to room, finding nothing, she locked the door to the attic. Her heart was pounding. She was so thankful she had taken those

concealed weapons classes and gotten her permit to carry a weapon. She would have to get a license in Oregon, she knew, but that could wait. She turned on lights in every room and listened. There wasn't a sound but the normal creaking of an old house.

Returning to the front porch, she made sure she had her keys in her pocket and then sat down to with her drink to wonder what had just taken place. After a few minutes of calming herself, she and the animals went inside and to the kitchen for some light dinner. Thank goodness for microwaves. One last animal trip outside, then off to bed with them all. Her plan had been to sleep in her bedroom, but instead, she chose the back of the living room where the stair curved up. From there, she could not be seen from any of the windows—for whatever that mattered in a house where things seemed to break all by themselves.

## Chapter 9

The night was quiet until just before dawn, when Gilligan started growling low in his throat. Snow White made low hissing sounds. In the dim light coming from the dining room, Caroline could see the cat's ears laid back and her tail bristling. Gilligan moved carefully toward the dining room and began to bark loudly and as fearsomely as he was capable. She stood, gun in hand, and advanced on tiptoes around the stairs. Keeping against the wall, she moved toward the dining room. She listened, at first hearing only her pets, and then as she crept closer to the archway, she was sure she heard voices. Whispers, actually.

Once Caroline reached the opening, she spun into the room in a crouch as she did in target practice, legs apart, and both hands on the gun, arms extended. She looked right and left. Nothing. The light was bright here from the overhead she had left burning all night. She moved toward the kitchen, which was lit as well, still in shooting mode. Nothing there either. The dog ran across the room to the open door leading to the basement, barking into the darkness below. The door she had locked last night with a slide lock, the one that could not be opened from the other side, was open, all the way open. Quickly, she grabbed the knob firmly in her left hand.

"Who is there?" She heard her voice echo, but that was the only answer.

She pushed the door shut, again sliding the lock into place. *For whatever good that might do*, she thought. Caroline was shaking so hard it was a chore to start the big coffee pot brewing, but it gave her something to do besides shiver in fear. "What are we to do, you two?" she asked the animals. Gilligan barked his usual reply, and Snow White rubbed her legs. Caroline picked her up, cradling her close, letting her cheeks feel the soft fur, and savoring the contented purr. So much for their fears. If they thought it was safe, then it must be. But, before this day was over, she was going

down into the basement, with a whole crew of burly men, if she could, to find out who—she could not think ‘what’—had opened that door.

Caroline took her sleeping bag and pillow upstairs to her room just as the sun found its way through the high fog and lightened her world. She’d barely had time to get into her clothes when she heard the trucks pulling in. She and the critters, as she lovingly called them, hurried down to the kitchen, reaching it just as the knocking started outside.

The animals did not wait for introductions, but headed out for their morning necessities. She greeted the men, nodded to the coffee pot, and then asked if they had a minute for her. “Sure, beautiful lady. And men, did you notice she is even beautiful first thing in the morning? Will you marry me?” James Duckworth, all 250 pounds at least, knelt at her feet like a beau proposing. They all laughed.

“Seriously, guys—and if you laugh, I will start throwing mugs at you.” Larry had just come inside and was leaning against the counter as he had the first time she saw him. “Some strange things have been happening around here. To me, actually, since I first got here a month ago.” She did not miss the looks a couple exchanged, but did not mention them.

“Last night, before I went to sleep, I slipped that lock into place. This morning the animals came in here, barking and growling. When I got here, the door was wide open. Any ideas?”

James Duckworth asked immediately, “You slept here last night? Didn’t know you even had a bed.”

Caroline replied, “I brought a sleeping bag with me and the critters and I slept on the floor. Contrary to popular belief, I was a not always a New York literary personage—I was a Girl Scout and learned that bugs and mosquitoes love to sleep with you outside, on the ground.” That got a few chuckles. “And boy, does my back let me know it this morning.” More laughs.

“So, what I propose is to have some of you brave, handsome, burly, strong, clever gentlemen accompany me down there to see if we can figure out how that happened.” They laughed.

James Duckworth was already heading for the basement door. He opened it and turned to her. “If I solve the mystery, THEN will you marry me?”

Someone from the group answered, “Hey, Jim, how are you going to explain that to Sadie?”

"Anyone got a flashlight? The switch doesn't seem to be working. Maybe one of the new circuit breakers wasn't set," he asked.

"Hey, you saying I don't know my work, Duckworth? There were lights and everything was working perfectly Friday when I finished the wiring," said another crewmember.

Larry removed a flashlight from his carpenter's belt. Caroline could not help but notice again how slim and tight his waist and hips were. *For God's sake, Caroline, she asked herself, what is the matter with you? You don't even like the guy, so knock off the letching.*

Duckworth, the electrician, and a couple other people moved forward behind Larry. "Hey," she called. "Didn't you forget something? I said, 'accompany me down there,' not leave me behind while you go forth where no man has gone before." *Star Trek* had been the show of choice for most high schoolers of her era, even before it became a cult favorite.

Again, laughter, but no one moved to let her down the stairs. Finally, Larry called back to her. "When we get the lights back on, you can come down. Stairs are steep and it's dark and we don't want any more spills, now do we?" His voice had a mocking tone to it, but she had no recourse but to do as he said.

She could hear voices but saw no lights come on. Finally, the electrician came up, not saying a word but going to his truck and returning with a sack of light bulbs. When he had been back downstairs for a few minutes, lights began to come on. Caroline started down, hanging on to the handrail, as Larry had been serious about how steep and narrow the stairs were. As she neared the bottom, she could see glass on the floor, everywhere. She knew without asking that it had come from the light bulbs.

"Okay, any ideas, guys, what happened here?" No one spoke. "Did they all just explode somehow?" Again, no answer came.

Larry finally turned to her. "Well, Miss Fleming, it appears that someone broke them. Each and every one."

"Then how did they get out of the basement with the door locked from the kitchen side?" Caroline asked a simple question with no response. "Is it reasonable to assume that whoever did this had an accomplice on that side to let them out?"

"That would be my best guess," Larry answered, and several of the men murmured their agreement.

“So, apparently, while I was sleeping on the floor, someone...some ones were wandering around my house, vandalizing.” She shivered, thinking how vulnerable she had been. “Wouldn’t you suppose I would have heard the bulbs breaking?”

“I have an idea what happened,” Larry spoke again. “I think the bulbs were broken before you arrived, probably by some kids who thought it was great fun, probably to scare you. Then you locked them, or him, in the basement, and someone let them or him out. You know how kids love to stir up trouble.”

Caroline looked him directly in the eye. “In that case, how did they get back inside after I locked all the doors with their deadbolts, the same deadbolts that were still locked from the inside this morning? The same question applies if they were already inside. How did they get out with the deadbolts still locked from the inside?”

As she’d expected, no one answered. All seemed to have found something on their shoes that needed their undivided attention. Without another word, she went back upstairs.



## Chapter 10

She called the dog and cat that were playing a cat and dog game among the flowers. When they ignored her, she got in her car and drove to Newport, south of Agate Beach. In a furniture store, she bought a double bed with matching chests, nightstands, and a chest for the bottom of the bed, all with the condition that it be delivered this afternoon. Next stop was to get bedding for it, then a grocery to stock the kitchen a bit better. Her mind never stopped whirling as she drove. The last stop was a locksmith who agreed to be at her house within the hour to change all the door locks and add more secure ones to the windows. At least, all this made her feel better, and a bed in a spare bedroom was better than the floor.

Caroline went home. There was a lot of hammering, smells of paint, and general construction showing everywhere. Voices were not at loud and obnoxious as in days passed. She looked around but saw Larry nowhere. Gilligan and Snow White had found the window seat and curled together sleeping, only looking at her for a second before dropping back.

The locksmith arrived and went to work, promising all the locks would be re-keyed and new security devices on all the windows by the time the crewmembers went home for the day. She wandered down into the basement again, noting the new drywall and fresh paint. The heating contractor was cleaning the old furnace but suggested a new unit would be more cost effective and take up less space than the monstrosity that was original to the house. She asked for prices, gave him the go-ahead, and then continued her tour.

The laundry room was at the base of the stairs and had a dumbwaiter that stopped in the kitchen before continuing to a closet in the upstairs hall. She had not noticed it when looking at the house but was delighted to think that she would not have to climb two flights of stairs to put things away. There were several cabinets, and the room was amply lit with fluorescent

lights as well as a small window. She made a mental note to be sure that the locksmith did the basement windows too.

Further exploration of the basement uncovered a huge room, perfect for casual entertaining. It had a wet bar, an old jukebox, some furniture that was solidly built but in need of recovering, a tile floor that would work for dancing, and a rollaway movie screen. There was a half bath off the room, in need of updating later.

There were several other rooms, some boxes of assorted stuff, furniture, and who-knows-what-all. She had no idea what she would or could use all this space for, but it was nice to have. Laughing to herself, she thought maybe she could take in boarders or rent the rooms out to tourists.

Back upstairs, the men were readying to leave for the weekend. Larry was passing out pay envelopes, and everyone was smiling. John Duckworth spoke, "Well, if you won't marry me, guess I will just have to settle for you supporting me with nice fat checks like this one." Caroline laughed, put her arm through his, and walked with him to his truck.

She talked to the locksmith, and he assured her all the windows were secure, including those in the basement. He handed her a ring of keys but pointed out that one key would work for all the deadbolts and one for all the regulars locks. She wrote him a check, sensing that work was rare and this job was most welcome.

Only Larry Gardiner's truck was still there. The critters had followed the men outside and were at her feet. It was as if they were sad to see them go. Caroline could understand that a bit, because now all was quiet but the surf far below. Larry came around the house, looking tired but handsome as ever.

"Miss Fleming, when this job is done, I would like to take you out to dinner to celebrate. Would you consider going?"

Caroline was surprised and pleased. She could not believe what she heard herself saying. "Why do we have to wait until then? What's wrong with right now?" She was an 80s Lady for sure, but she had never been so bold before.

"Well, I guess there's nothing wrong with that, but I already have a commitment for this evening. Otherwise, I would jump at the chance. Can I have a rain check?"

She felt her face redden. "Of course. Sorry to be so presumptuous." She turned and quickly ran up the stairs into the house, closing and locking the door quickly behind her. *How could I have been so stupid?* He would think she was some kind of...what would he think?

She heard his footsteps as he crossed the porch and rang the doorbell. She did not move and had no intention of answering, no matter how childish that seemed. The dog and cat had followed him to the door, apparently, as he could hear Gilligan barking softly like he did when he was petted. She could hear Larry's voice but not his words and remained steadfast, waiting for him to be gone.

## Chapter 11

Her humiliation was a result of her own impulsiveness, and as much as she would have liked, she could not blame him. She would just have to avoid him from now on until the job was over.

Hungry, she decided to go to the Oceanside Seafood Restaurant for some of Georgia and Doc's seafood. The parking lot was full. She recognized James Duckworth's truck. As she entered, he was sitting with a sweet-faced woman his age at the table by the door. He rose as he saw her enter, took her arm, and steered her over to his table. "Miss Fleming, this is my wife Sadie. Sadie knows you have refused my offer of marriage." They all laughed and spoke the normal introductory small talk. Caroline was about to decline their offer to have her join them when she saw Larry with a gorgeous brunette through the window, heading for the door.

"I would love to join you, if you don't mind." She took the chair James offered and sat with her back to the door. They had not ordered, so she carefully studied the menu. When she felt a hand on her shoulder, she knew whose it was. Why was he doing this? He must know how embarrassed she was.

"Caroline, I would like you to meet Savannah Bronson from Seattle, down for some quiet time from the big city rat race." Caroline had no choice but to turn to him. "Savannah, this is my boss lady Caroline Fleming, the famous New York writer, returned to the bosom of her childhood. I see you have found your favorite fan and his patient, oh so patient, wife Sadie. Savannah has known them for years."

Caroline mumbled the proper words and was relieved when they finally moved away. John spoke in his usual loud voice, "Wow, that is some kind of beauty. Must be all that rain up there." He was making a joke, indicating that Washington had more rain than Oregon. "Anyway, she is as charming as she is gorgeous." But he did not offer any further information about

Larry's date. Caroline nodded, feeling nauseous, still embarrassed. She was sure Larry was telling his gorgeous companion about her invitation. Laughter spilled away from their table, his hearty, and hers like tinkling bells. She hated them both right now, like a spoiled child.

The meal seemed a year long. She picked at her food, wishing she could leave. Larry and his companion had a short dinner and were in the parking lot as she came back from the ladies' room. She stopped to talk to Georgia and pay the check. Georgia was to tell John, who was stubborn and would be offended by her paying, that it was a bonus to Sadie for having to put up with him. She stopped by the table to thank them for the nice evening and left.

Once they were gone, she went back inside. The crowd had thinned out, so she poured herself a cup of coffee and took at table in the far corner. When Georgia had a moment, she flopped into the chair across from Caroline. "Georgia, do you mind if I sit here for a few minutes? I have some questions to ask, but not tonight. You must be exhausted. What is a good time to find you when you have a spare minute?"

"Hey, I have a great idea, Caroline," she replied. "How about I come out to your place in the morning, say about 9, for a tour and some girl talk? I don't do the breakfast thing on Saturday; we have a couple kids for that. 'Grow you own hired help,' so to speak. I am dying to see what you have done to that old monstrosity."

Caroline drove home without mishap. As she pulled into the driveway, she saw her house was lit up like a Christmas tree. It appeared every light in the house was on. She drove around to the back door, parked, and paused at the front door before unlocking it. She made a lot of noise as she moved through the kitchen. She double-checked the basement door, which now had a deadbolt lock, firmly in place. In the dining room, she turned off the lights. In the living room, she left only the one over the stairs lit after she had carefully toured the unfinished downstairs rooms, gun in her hand inside her pocket. Nothing.

She let the animals out for one last time. In the kitchen, Caroline hesitated before opening the refrigerator, then bravely pulled it open. Whew, no rotten food. She drank from the milk carton and then let the critters back inside. They all three went upstairs to the room at the end of the hall where she had put the new bed, where she would sleep tonight, after she turned off

all the remaining lights. She did not want to think how they'd been turned on in the first place, so she forced it out of her mind. She finally decided there must be a timer somewhere that she did not know about. Caroline really did not think that was the case, but it was an excuse she could accept until Monday, when the crew would return.

After a quick shower, she slipped on a soft blue nightie. She usually slept naked, but tonight she wanted something around her. She did not think about the reason, just slid into bed, an animal on each side. Within minutes, she was sound asleep.

The bedside clock said 2:07 when a cold draft broke her warm slumber. Neither pet seemed to notice it—or her, for that matter—as she headed for the bathroom. The draft seemed to follow her. Even with the bathroom light on, she felt it, like a cold presence. When she was done, she washed her hands, flipped off the light, and turned the door handle. It did not move, as if it were being held against her from the other side. She flipped the light switch to turn it back on. Nothing happened.

Caroline stood shivering in the dark, not sure what to do, when she felt a warmth surround her. It changed from a cold draft to a warm presence in seconds. It was as if arms had moved to hold her, breath on her cheeks. She could not break away from the embrace or whatever it was. It pulled her closer until she was sure she was feeling a body against hers. Something brushed her cheek, something she was sure was lips. They moved slowly down to her mouth, soft but forceful, as they pressed against hers, and then she felt a tongue slide between her teeth. It was a sensual touch, probing and exciting her. She had always loved being kissed deeply, and now that was happening. Something, someone lifted her arms to return the invisible embrace. She could feel the strong shoulders, the muscular chest as she pressed against him. By now, she had no doubts it was most definitely a HIM.

The kisses continued, and then she felt a pressure on her left breast, as if a hand was on it, through her gown. Then the right one. She stepped back, jamming her hip into the sink. The warmth moved closer again, hands now moving down her back, cupping her buttocks. There were cheeks against her own, whiskers chaffing lightly. Her gown was pulled away from her, and the warmth moved to her breast again, down over her stomach, into the V between her legs. She tried to cry out, but her mouth was covered again with

a warm kiss. The warm fingers began to move inside her. She squeezed her legs together, but the fingers kept their slow, sensual rubbing until she felt herself dampening and moving to meet them. She cried out, not believing she was reaching a climax.

As she sagged against the sink, her hand was moved down and forward until she felt what she knew was a hard penis, then in an up and down motion until she was moving her hand herself. A hand lifted one of her legs up over the end of the sink, opening her to what she knew was going to happen. She felt him slide into her wetness, felt the in and out rhythm as old as time itself. Again, she felt another climax near and pushed up against the invisible body that held her close. Then it was all over, but she thought she could see a dim shape as she felt all the warmth move away, leaving her sagging against the sink, cold and disbelieving.

Caroline started crying, soundless tears running down her face. She reached again for the light switch, which came on immediately. In the mirror, she saw her face, red and chaffed as if whiskers had rubbed against it. Her breasts were still hard, nipples enlarged and pointed. She grabbed a wad of paper as she slumped down on the toilet. It came away from her wet and slippery, as if she still held the residue of a sexual encounter. What had happened she did not know, but this feeling throughout her entire being was the same as she had always felt after good, satisfying sex.

She turned on the shower and stood in the hot water until it started to burn her. Caroline lathered every inch of the body that had been touched, loved gently, until her skin was raw. The nightgown at her feet was torn. She tossed it in the wastebasket. Only then did she reach for the door handle. It turned easily, and the door swung open to an empty room, save for a pair of sleeping critters on her bed.

## Chapter 12

Caroline awoke sharply at 7 am. She stayed in bed for a few minutes, trying to put the night into some kind of perspective. She felt her breasts to find them a slight bit sore and her cheeks still touchy. Whatever had happened was not a dream. She had been raped by something invisible. Raped, not hardly, she told herself. She had been a willing participant, enjoying it all from start to finish. Had it been so long since she had been loved that she'd conjured up this what-ever-it-was to satisfy her needs? Or was she simply losing her mind? On the other hand, she smiled. It HAD been nice. NO, she was wiggin' out, for sure.

The animals were waiting at the back door when she made it to the kitchen, in the biggest, heaviest robe she had, even though the house was warm. While she waited for the coffee, sitting with her chin on her hands, she stared off into space. Something was bothering her. Yes—the basement door was closed but unlocked.

She heard a vehicle out back and looked through the window. It was Larry Gardiner's truck. She could hear the critters answering whatever he was saying to them as he knocked. She pulled her robe tighter around her before she unlocked and opened the door.

His eyes took in every inch of her, including the red marks on her cheeks. There was no doubt that he knew what they were and how they got there. His voice was hard as he finally spoke. "I came here to apologize for my behavior yesterday. I should have realized that you were probably lonely out here by yourself, but obviously you were neither by yourself or lonely. I'm sorry I bothered you."

He turned and left her standing, somewhat ashamed, but for what she did not know. For whisker burns from a man who did not exist. From a ghost! There—she had finally put a name to HIM, the thing who had made love to her last night.



Yes, made love, not rape, or force. He had given as good as he got, and she had enjoyed it fully. Her climaxes had been real; there was no doubt of that. Nor were the marks on her face imagined or the soreness from his hands squeezing her breasts, as she liked them squeezed.

She took the dog and cat into the living room, and they all sat on the window seat, snuggled together, while her mind whirled around and around. She remembered Georgia was due at nine, so she roused herself to throw on some clothes. Back in the kitchen, she puts some cinnamon buns in a slow oven to warm for their coffee. Just in time, the doorbell rang.

"I'm sorry we have to sit here in the kitchen, as my furniture is not here yet. Scheduled to arrive Monday. I sure hope so. After all, Gilligan and Snow White can't reign solely over the window seat and my bed." Caroline motioned to the table where they sat for a while, drinking coffee, eating rolls, making small talk.

"Okay, Girlfriend, when am I going to get the grand tour?"

"How about right now?" Caroline answered and led Georgia from room to room, even the basement, where she wanted to look but was afraid to go by herself.

As they moved to the second level, Georgia asked, "Did that old Tom Parker tell you about this house when he was trying to foist it off on you?" She smiled so openly that Caroline was surprised. Surprised, because her time in New York had taught her that people were seldom open. Well, no, not actually. What should I know about it?"

Georgia was slow in answering. "Maybe I shouldn't have brought it up. Some of it is so strange and probably only rumor, added to with each telling."

"Hey, remember me? I'm a novelist. Anything can turn into a story," Caroline replied. *Like a ghost lover*, she thought to herself, thankful Georgia did not notice her red cheek.

"Well, here goes." They were standing on the balcony outside Caroline's bedroom. "There was supposed to have been a group of people standing out here on our graduation night, watching as Donald Conway's red car went over that cliff with him and Heather Johanson inside. According to the people in the cars that stopped after they saw Donald's car disappear, they could hear the people on this balcony hooting and clapping

as if they had enjoyed some grand spectacle. They could hear but could see no one, even though the moon was bright and shining right here.”

“I don’t remember anything about that. Wonder how I could have missed that rumor?” Caroline asked.

“Probably because no one said anything right away, like they might be nuts, like they had seen a flying saucer or something. By the time it became common knowledge, you had left town.”

Georgia continued, “Remember Taffy York? She was that mousy little thing who lived out by the old mill. The one who had such a crush on your boyfriend Hal? Well, anyway, a year or so after graduation, she went to work for Charlie Dow at the newspaper. Turns out, she was pretty good as a reporter, believe it or not. She decided to do a story on old houses in the area, preferably ones rumored to be haunted. Naturally, the Olmsted house was at the top of her list.

“No one had lived here since about 1940 or so. Old Herman Olmsted had died of questionable causes about 1910, and his widow Hettie lived here alone for another 30 years, give or take. She apparently did not like people much and refused to allow anyone inside or even to work outside. But she was seen walking, as if she were walking with someone, and talking. She would sit here on the balcony and on the porch below, rocking and talking to someone. Crazy part was that folks were sure the other rocker was moving too, but no one was there. All this came out in the old newspapers here and in nearby towns. Once in a while she would come to town in an old horse pulled buggy for food necessities, all the time talking as if she had a companion right next to her.”

They had moved back down to the front porch and were sitting on the top step, each leaning against one side of the guardrail. With little urging, Georgia continued.

“Taffy found records going so far back that she learned the house was originally build by a sea captain named Jed Hostetler or such, in 1880, a hundred years ago. He was supposed to have been the father of a little girl named Hester. No one knew what became of his wife; some suspected that he had killed her, but no idea where that came from. Anyway, Hester was a cute as a button, so Taffy wrote, and was the apple of her father’s eye. One day she was walking along the edge of the cliff across the road below when a man on a yellow horse, riding like the Devil was after him, came around

the corner and knocked little Hester over the edge. Her father heard her scream and came running, only to see the rider continue without stopping.

“He found her little shattered body on the sand below, rescued it just as high tide rolled in. If it had been much later, her body would have gone out to sea. He carried her back here. No one saw him bury her, but it was presumed he had done so.

“Old Hostetler began searching for the man on the horse. He followed the track left by the horse showing one shoe had a missing piece. He went everywhere, up and down the coast, looking at yellow horses, never telling anyone at the time what he was looking for. Finally, about a month later, he found a horse with a missing piece on its shoe outside a saloon down in Agate Beach. He carefully asked around until he learned who owned the horse. When the man came back outside, Hostetler was waiting for him. He first came up behind the man, slit his throat in front of several witnesses, and then dragged his body, bleeding all the way, down the dirt street to a cliff, where he threw it over into the waves below.

“Naturally, he was arrested, tried, found guilty, and hung. After his death, a lawyer went to his house for whatever lawyers did then, and now for that matter. Once inside, he smelled something rotten. Down in the basement, on an old cot, were the remains of little Hester. Rumor has it that the smell still lingers, but I sure didn't detect it when we were down there a while ago.

“There is more, but I sure could use a glass of water or a soda.”

She apologized and offered a full refrigerator of things to eat and drink to her friend. Caroline had been so enraptured with the story, her hostess-brain had slipped out of gear.

“What time is it?” Georgia asked. “I am so thirsty from all my gabbing, I could use a beer, if that is okay?”

Caroline laughed and opened two bottles. Georgia did not wait for a glass but upended the bottle, chugging half at one time.

## Chapter 13

“Your family is going to think you absconded with the profits or something, you have been gone so long,” Caroline commented.

“Are you trying to get rid of me?” Georgia asked, smiling.

“Not on your life. Just don’t want you in trouble with the tribe.”

“Mamma ain’t happy, ain’t nobody happy. Remember?” Georgia stretched, drank some more of her beer, and settled down at the kitchen table. “Now, where was I?”

“Okay, fast forward a couple years. Apparently, the house was sold to Ida and Samuel Hanson. There was a picture in the newspaper of them on their wedding day. She was half a head taller than her husband was and probably weighed half again as much. They fixed up this place after it had been neglected and let deteriorate for years. They apparently were hardworking folk, popping out a baby every other year. Taffy even found the names of each, but I only remember a couple. Malcolm was supposed to have been tall, dark, and handsome with a full beard. He was the most eligible man in town, and the girls fell over themselves fighting for his attention. He was a bit of a rascal as well and didn’t turn down any offers of anything the women had to share with him.

“More than one husband threatened him, but he just laughed, saying it was not his fault the ladies just loved him. He was charming, according to the stories, and no one actually ever tried to kill him or anything, until some new people came to town. Now, here it gets interesting. Malcolm met his match with Mrs. Virgil Hemingway. She was not interested in him, very much in love with her husband. Her name was Susan, and she was a mute. Malcolm grew impatient with her when the lovely lady ignored his advances. So, one night, he kidnapped her, bringing her here to one of the attic rooms, where he kept her prisoner, none of his family any the wiser.

"Have you ever been in the attic?" Georgia asked Caroline.

"No. Do you want to go up there?"

Georgia jumped up, grabbing two more beers from the refrigerator on her way toward the back stairs, just a few feet from where they were sitting. "Can we get to the attic this way?" she asked.

"I don't really know, but we will find out. I have only been here a few days, myself, remember?"

Nothing was done in the way of renovations in this part of the house. It was still bare wood, cobwebby, and dusty. They arrived on the second floor via a door at the end of one of the long halls. To their right was another door, locked. Caroline did not have a key that worked on it, so Georgia scurried back downstairs, returning with a knife and a screwdriver, which she manipulated in the lock until she felt the mechanism give way inside. "Voila," she announced as she pulled the door all the way open. No light switch here, so back downstairs for a lantern Caroline went. Finally, they climbed up the narrow stairs.

There was a long corridor running from one side of the house to the other, with several arms off it. They moved from room to room. Each was the same, not large, but perfect for children or servants. All had windows covered with dust. They found nothing of interest until the last room on the right. It was directly above Caroline's own bedroom.

Once inside, they could see that a wall had been removed so that there were actually two rooms. The first room contained a table and two chairs, a settee of red fabric and wooden trim, probably beautiful years ago. There was a matching wing chair and footstool and a musty Oriental rug that covered the floor but for a couple inches around the perimeter. On the walls were needlework pieces, as well as a couple of pictures and ornate mirrors. There was a large China cabinet with tableware and a sterling silver pieces, all tarnished with age. Several lanterns hung from brackets around the room.

They moved to the room farthest from the door. In it was a large old moldy bed, two chests, and several more lanterns and another rug. On one chest was a still beautiful pitcher and bowl, used for washing. A pile of books was on the desk under the window. Beside it was a picture of a beautiful woman, with half of its sepia print cut away so that the other person who had been in it with her was gone. The windows were covered with a black cloth, now tattered, probably to mask any light from outside

detection. A drawer in the desk produced paper and a quill pen. A chamber pot was under the bed. Both women stood still, feeling...feeling what? Something.

“Wow,” Georgia spoke first. “This place is kinda spooky, don’t you think? Not scary spooky, just different spooky. I bet this is where he kept her.”

“How could he have kept her quiet so that his family below didn’t know she was here?” Caroline wanted to know. “I know she was mute, but didn’t she pound on the door or walls or something?”

“Caroline, don’t go asking sensible questions. I have no idea. I’m just repeating what Taffy wrote in the newspaper. You always were a realist for all your fictional books. Now, let me get on with the story.”

“Apparently, he did not mind that she could not converse with him, only that she be able to satisfy his carnal needs.” Georgia giggled slightly. “I can’t believe I said that. Carnal needs. Really!”

“Her husband looked for her everywhere, even came here a few times, but Malcolm’s family could truly say they had not seen her. He became reclusive in the little house outside of town he had shared with his bride.”

Georgia continued. “Malcolm must have really loved her, because he never hurt her, not really. She said later—or rather wrote, because she could not speak—that he was always gentle and that he was a fantastic lover. Too bad he’s not still around; I could use a little fantastic loving. How about you?” She laughed. Caroline did not answer, already knowing that he was still around, in some form, and that he was a fantastic lover.

Georgia continued. “Soon she adjusted to her prison and looked forward to his coming every night. He brought her everything. Clothes, food, drink, everything. Toward the end of the second year, they both had to face the fact that she was pregnant, largely pregnant by this time. There was no answer but to take her and move somewhere where they would be safe and where they could raise their child. By this time, she was totally his, as only a prisoner can become to her keeper. One dark and stormy night.” She laughed. “Naturally, it had to be a dark and stormy night. He smuggled her back out of the house to the barn in back, put them both in a carriage and started south. “

Caroline continued, “The newspaper at that time later found that he had telegraphed to New York for a hotel and to North Bend to reserve a ship’s

berth to take them there. This was the first time in two years she had been out of these rooms. As they drove further out of town, they started to pass her old home. Whether it was memories or what, no one ever knew, but she jumped from the carriage and ran through the storm to the door, pounding for her husband. He came to the door with a rifle. When he saw it was Susan, he pulled her inside, locking the door behind them. In the dim candlelight, he finally got a close enough look to see she was huge with child.

“Later she would write that he howled like a mad man and hit her so hard she fell to the floor. He kicked her repeatedly until she passed out. Malcolm was pounding on the door, trying to kick it in. Virgil fired his rifle through the door, emptying it. Malcolm was dead instantly. Virgil looked at his unconscious wife, reloaded his rifle and, perhaps thinking he had killed her, he shot himself. End of this story!

“Oh, my dear God, look at the time.” Georgia looked harried. “I get to talking and can’t shut up. My brood will be frothing at the mouth. I have to go, Dear Caroline. I promise to come again and finish Taffy’s stories. Too bad she is gone, or you could get her to tell you herself.” Before Caroline could ask, Georgia’s face changed. “She died of cancer five years ago. She never married, but all of us really miss her. She was a kind, lonely soul.”

With that, she was down the two sets of stairs, running like a little round child. She sped down the drive but slowed considerably before turning onto the highway. Caroline had followed her down, thinking of what she had heard. In her mind, she now knew who her ghostly visitor had been. Malcolm Hanson. And Susan had been right; he was a gentle, considerate lover.

## Chapter 14

The rest of the day went by without mishap, at first. She wandered around again, starting with the basement, this time with no feeling of apprehension. It was as if her nocturnal visitor had somehow changed the feelings the house had for her. Now she was completely comfortable here. Then she went to the attic, where she discovered the rooms where Susan had been kept were now just rooms. The only sign of the things they'd seen before was the old bed. No chests, no books, no lanterns, no nothing. Everything else was gone.

As the sun moved down on the horizon, she put on a sweater, took the sample books Rena had left and sat on the porch swing. Larry had been right. His sister's choices were perfect. She would call her next week after the furniture arrived.

Now it was time to get back to work. She went into the room that faced the backyard, the one in which she planned to work. Her typewriter was waiting, along with a fresh ream of paper. She turned on a small lamp, wishing her desk were here—but she could use the card table until it arrived. Instead of her typewriter, she sat with a pad and pencil and began to make notes. By the time it was dark, she was pleased to see she had ideas on paper for an outline. Not a complete outline, but the beginnings of one. A good few hour's work. Her stomach informed her that she was hungry, as did the two furry creatures asleep on the window seat, their favorite place.

It was early, but she was tired. She took a book and headed upstairs to read herself to sleep. She was not going to think about Malcolm Hanson or the lovemaking of last night. Sure, she was not! She drew a full tub, shampooed her hair, shaved her legs, dried, and powdered her body. Surprised, she noted the nightgown she had thrown in the wastebasket last night was not there. She shook her head, perplexed. No one had been in here at all today. Her only guest had been that nasty Larry, and he was in the



kitchen for no more than a minute. Georgia was with her the entire time of her visit. So where was the nightgown? She smiled. Perhaps Malcolm wanted a souvenir.

He came to her again, this time to her bed. She felt his presence even in her sleep. The animals must have sensed him too, because they both jumped off the bed and disappeared down the hall. She opened her arms and welcomed him. She was now aware of his shape, dim but there nevertheless. She was sure she heard him whisper her name as he held her close. He was gentle but thorough in his touching, kissing, probing, and caressing. Caroline responded as if he were a live human and began to answer him with her hands and lips. Instinctively, she knew where to touch in the dark as she would have touched a real person. She could feel his excitement as it matched her own.

Their lovemaking lasted much longer than the night before, and it was wonderful. As he moved away, she realized that there was more form to the dim figure, but let herself slide into sleep with no further thoughts. She slept like a rock and awoke refreshed and in a great mood. A phantom lover was sure better than no lover at all!

After breakfast, she dressed for a hike, with long pants, a heavy shirt, and hiking boots. The animals followed her for a while, and then Snow White turned back. She was not an adventuresome type, but Gilligan would follow Caroline anywhere. At the edge of the forest, he whined a couple times but kept pace with her, although it was apparent he did not like this place. He was, after all, a city canine whose only meetings with flora and fauna had been in parks.

They walked awhile, pausing now and then to appreciate the tall fir trees and soft white trilliums growing out of the thick carpet of leaves and moss. She sat on a log and watched a doe and her two fawns, marveling at them as she had not done since childhood. Something in the trees startled the deer. They ran across the clearing into the forest in the direction they had come. Gilligan moved to her feet, making low growling sounds. Caroline patted his head softly but remained seated. She only hoped it was an elk, not a bear.

She heard nothing moving, even when they came out of the woods. THEY were transparent. She could see right through them, but they were there, in front of her. They were moving toward her. She was frightened but could not move. Afraid to move. Who were they? WHAT were they?

Slowly, she started to recognize some of them. Don Conroy had his arm around Heather Johanson as they stood beside his car. Dean Sloan jangled keys from a ring marked Wentworth Logging Company. Herbert Devlin and SueEllen McThomas were dressed in Heidi's Restaurant uniforms. Miss Taffy York was in a hospital gown. Sunny McLaughlin held a pistol. David Marsh and Jack Loman wore US military uniforms. Others she did not know, but all of them stood just a few feet away, looking directly at her. What did they want?

Finally, Caroline found the strength to stand and speak. "I know you, some of you. You're dead, aren't you?" Of course, there was no answer. Just transparent people from her past. They were dressed as they had been on the day they had died, as much as she could surmise. The ones she recognized, anyway. Others wore long dresses, buckskin, old uniforms, robes, short pants and long jackets, even wigs, as if they were a cross section from generations back. "What is this place, and why are you here? What do you want of me?"

This time, although she heard nothing aloud, she felt the words as they moved into her head. "We have been living in the house. It was empty, and now you are there. It is our house. You must go."

Caroline still did not understand. "Why must I go? It is my house now. You can continue to stay there, if you want, as long as you stay hidden and bother no one. That is the only way you can stay. Do you understand?" *Oh, God, here I am talking to ghosts, she thought. It's bad enough that I have a ghostly lover, but now I have a forest full of dead friends who want my house. I am definitely crazy. Not a doubt!*

She heard again, in her head, sounds of arguing, of anger, of dissatisfaction. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "When I open my eyes, you will all be gone. Please." It was more of a plea than an order. Just then, a car horn sounded from the vicinity of her house. When she opened her eyes, only she and Gilligan remained in the clearing.

Caroline turned and ran back the way she had come, dog ahead of her. He led the way, or she would probably have gotten lost. When she came out of the forest into the field, she saw a pickup behind her house. Still running, she made it halfway to the house, when she tripped and fell. Her ankle twisted under her. It was either badly sprained or broken. She tried to stand but could not. Gilligan nosed her several times and then ran to the house,

barking as he ran. The person in the pickup got out and petted him, facing the field. The truck started and sped toward her.

As it got closer, she realized it was Larry Gardiner's vehicle. Of all the people in the world to find her, why did it have to be Larry? He jumped from the cab without even turning off the engine. He knelt beside her, gently wiping her tears and dirty face that had landed in a damp molehill, covering her head and hair and even her shirt with dark wet dirt.

"What hurts, Caroline?"

"Mostly my pride, I think, and my ankle. Twisted or broken. Either way, I can't walk. If you hadn't shown up, I can picture myself crawling the rest of the way home. Not a visual I like," she replied.

He laughed. He bent down and picked her up as easily as he might have lifted a child. Holding her against his chest, he opened the passenger side door and deposited her on the seat. Gilligan did not wait for any invitation but jumped in and up onto the seat between them, nuzzling her and licking her face. Without another word, they drove back to the house.

She handed him her keys to unlock the door. She had no idea how she was going to get around, but she really didn't want the help of this man who had just yesterday passed judgment on her as if she had committed some unpardonable crime. If he only knew that her crime was having sex with a loving ghost.

He opened her doors, both the house and pickup. He bent down and removed her shoe and sock. The ankle was already swollen and bruised lovely shades of black and blue. He manipulated her leg, feeling the ankle deeply in spite the pain he was causing her. "We can take you to Newport right now to the hospital for x-rays, or we can wait to see Dr. Gillespie on Monday. She's out of town this weekend, at her daughter's in Eugene. It doesn't feel broken to me, but then, I'm no doctor."

"Dr., Gillespie?" Caroline asked. "Like on television? That Dr. Gillespie?" She laughed. "Really, I would rather wait to see him. He is always so charming and perfect."

Larry had to smile regardless of his attempt to remain staid. "No, not that Dr. Gillespie. Dr. Martha Gillespie. Didn't you hear me say 'SHE?'"

"No, guess I missed that. Was so excited about the Gillespie part. And to answer your question, no, no Newport. If you will just help me get inside, I will manage."

‘Okay, Wonder Woman, would you like to tell me how you will manage? I don’t see a wheelchair or a pair of crutches at hand.’ Again, he just picked her up and carried her into the house, depositing her none too gently on the kitchen table. “Do you have any Ace bandages or gauze? No, I don’t suppose you do.”

“Well, ha ha on you, Mr. Smarty. In the trunk of my car is a full first-aid kit I bought before I left New York.”

Larry did not reply, just went out to her car and returned with the kit. He was gentle this time as he carefully wrapped her ankle in a splint he fashioned, covered it with gauze, and finished it with adhesive tape. “That should help keep it from swelling any more, but you have to stay off of it until Madame Dr. Gillespie checks it. Now, let’s get you cleaned up. You look like you have been wallowing with pigs.” He picked her up again, taking the back stairs two at a time.

“Put me down. You are going to drop me, and then I will really be in bad shape.” He ignored her, moving down the hall to the room where she had been sleeping. He sat her on the toilet in the little bathroom and then started running water in the bathtub. When he thought it was the right temperature, he moved away, telling her, “I will be back in a minute to help you get in. In the meantime, take off your clothes.”

“TAKE OFF MY CLOTHES! You have GOT to be kidding. I am not going to take my clothes off in front of you, behind you, or any other way. I will sit in it fully clothed before I do that.”

He turned off the water. “Okay, if that is what you want.” He picked her up, clothes and all along with one hiking boot still on her foot, and deposited her unceremoniously in the tub. He grabbed her wrapped foot before it hit the water and draped it over the side. “Oh, golly gee whiz willikers, I forgot the bubbles and candles. Please forgive me this time.” With that, he left, closing the door behind him.

Caroline started to bluster at him, and then the humor of the situation hit her. She started laughing as she began pulling off her clothes, first the jacket, then the shirt. She pulled off her boot and sock, tossing everything on the floor. It was all dripping but she did not care, still laughing. The pants were more difficult, but she did get her good leg out, and wringing it as much as possible, draped it over the side with her bum ankle. The underwear she kept on.

First, she washed her face and hair. She could not manage to rinse well, but at least it was better than mud. When she tried to get out, she simply slid back down. Finally, she had to admit defeat and called, "Oh, Larry, the Damsel in Distress is still distressed and could use some help out of this quagmire of mud and soap." She heard him snort, or was it a chuckle, as he came back inside.

"My God, woman. you made a complete mess." He began to pick up the wet clothes, wringing them out over the tub, not caring where the water hit. He tossed her clothes in the sink and stood, eyeing her. "Doesn't look like you got too clean. Don't move. I am going to pull the plug and draw some fresh water. I promise not to scald you, too much anyway. No, better yet, I will stand you up, sort of, and lean you against the wall. One leg in, one leg out, and we can rinse you off in the shower. Here we go."

He did just that. With her weight on her good leg, her body against the wall, he released her and started the shower. Before she could say a word, he emptied some shampoo over her head. "Better keep your eyes closed. I don't have much practice at washing half-naked women. Completely naked, yes, but half-naked, no."

It actually felt to Caroline that he'd had plenty of practice whichever, because he seemed to know exactly how to wash and rinse her hair. He took a washcloth and soap to lather her face and arms, which were still muddy looking. When he reached toward her chest, she spoke, "Hold it there, buckaroo, I can do that myself. And my legs too, if you just keep me from falling."

"Maybe I will, maybe I won't. I would like to finish what I started. And you can't wash with all those clothes on." He found scissors in the cabinet and carefully started cutting off her pants.

"Hey, those cost \$300 and this is only the second time I have worn them."

Larry pulled back, looking her straight in the eyes. "\$300 for a pair of pants! Unbelievable! Next thing you will tell me is that the boots were \$500, the jacket \$800 and your bra and panties \$50 each."

"Pretty close on the underwear, but the jacket was five and the boots an even thousand. Now what do you think of that? Bet you're going to tell me your jeans were \$45, your jacket \$50 and your hat \$2.99."

“Ha,” Larry countered. “The cap was \$27.99 at halftime during the Seahawk-New York game. Goes to show you don’t know everything.” By now, they were both grinning. He finished with the cutting project. Once the scissors were back in the cupboard beside her, he reached one hand to her back and deftly unfastened her bra.

“Stop right there. I don’t need any more help washing—just get me out of here.”

“Weren’t you impressed at how quickly and cleverly I got that bra off? Haven’t lost the old high school touch yet!” He was obviously proud of himself.

She grabbed a towel from the rack to cover her breasts, which had hardened into points as the cool air hit her.

Suddenly his face changed. He looked deeply into her eyes and reached for the towel. She felt mesmerized by his gaze. She moved her face to him as he reached to hold her in his arms. His kiss was warm and soft. His hand moved down to cup her breast as his arm held her steady against the wall. He kept touching her, everywhere. She had no resistance, nor did she want any.

He lifted her again, this time putting her gently on the bed. He never took his eyes away from hers as he slowly undressed her. Her gaze stayed with his, even as her hands moved to his legs to draw him to her. “Now, can I take down those damn \$50 panties?” He did not wait for an answer, but removed them so quickly she hardly felt them leave her body. He laid beside her, kissing her lips, neck, breast, and stomach. Her hand touched him. He groaned and moved against her.

“Yes, yes, please. Oh, Larry, I want you.” He spread her legs with his knees as his hands rolled her breasts in gentle circles, further arousing her. As he was about to enter her sweetness, there began the most horrendous noises from all over the house. It was as if the house itself wanted to stop him.

Caroline instinctively knew what it was. Malcolm did not want this to happen. He did not want her with any other man. “Stop this, now! You don’t own me. Go away!” she yelled. Slowly the noise abated, but so had Larry’s erection. He moved away from her, still looking into her eyes.

“Would you like to explain this, Caroline? Who the hell were you yelling at? Who doesn’t own you? What’s going on here?”

Caroline could think of no way to answer. Her eyes beseeched him, but no words came.

“I guess it was the guy who left the whisker burns the other morning, huh? I should have known. What I don’t understand is why you need two men. Isn’t one enough for you? Is that how things are done in New York? Well, sister, that is not the way things are done here, in case you’ve forgotten.” He did not wait to fully dress before he left her, naked on the bed. His truck started and sped away, leaving her empty and forsaken.

How could she explain that a ghost had left whisker burns? That a ghost was jealous? That a ghost had loved her?

## Chapter 15

The rest of the day and night were more like a comedy of errors than anything that should have happened. First, still naked in her bed, Caroline rolled over and cried, long and hard, until her eyes hurt. Once again, she had made a fool of herself, this time in the most personal of situations. In her mind, she pictured the incident over and over. She felt shamed for herself and what she had done to Larry.

She moved to the end of the bed and tried to stand. No way. She slid down to the floor and crawled like a baby to the bathroom. Managing the toilet was not too hard. She leaned over the bathtub to retrieve the washcloth and drew water to wash her swollen face. She gathered up her wet clothes and dragged them down the hall, bouncing on her butt, to the dumbwaiter and sent them down to the basement.

*Okay, kid, she told herself, you are going to have to manage by yourself. So first are clothes.* Her things were in her own closet, not here in the spare room where she had been sleeping, but she did have some underwear and sweats in the chest. Fortunately, the chest was small, so she could reach them.

Caroline pulled the sleeping bag and pillow out of a closet. With them on her lap, she butt-bounced down the hall and down the front stairs to the living room. Once there, she managed to get behind the steps to make herself a bed on the floor again.

She crawled to the kitchen. Using a chair and the table, she managed to pull herself to an upright position. *Voila*, she thought. *I can now move freely, using the chair as a crutch. Pick it up, swing it forward, and jump to it. Repeat and repeat and repeat. Builds the arm muscles at the same time.* Soon she had it down so well that she could make something to eat for the critters as well as her rumbling stomach.



Dishes in the sink, she called Georgia, hoping they weren't still at the restaurant. Doc answered, and they chatted a few minutes before Georgia came on. "Hi, honey chile, what's happening?"

"Well," drawled Caroline in a Southern accent, imitating Georgia, "I have a small problem. I have twisted my ankle and am at the mercy of a kitchen chair for a crutch. Can I impose greatly? Is there a drugstore around that sells crutches? And if so, could I beg, beg, beg you to bring me a pair? I am 5 foot, 7 inches, if they want to know for measurement purposes."

"My God, girl, why didn't you call earlier? Yes, there is, and yes, I will. Be there in a few minutes. Then I am going to give you royal hell for not calling sooner. How did you twist it? Oh, never mind, tell me later." With that, Georgia was gone, only to appear 45 minutes later, banging up the front on crutches.

When Caroline opened the door, she continued in with the crutches. "Hey, crutchin' hurts under the arms. Well, it does me, but I have all this extra weight—no...beauty, in the form of pounds that you, my slim friend, do not carry. Did that make any sense?" Now, tell me, how did you do it?"

Caroline had known this question was coming and had been formulating lies to tell her friend, because the truth was too painful, and who would believe it anyway? For several moments, she simply could not answer.

Georgia watched her friend carefully. "Okay, Pal, spill it! I will not tell a soul anything you tell me, if that's what's bothering you. Did I ever tell anyone that you peeked at Bobby Dowell's spelling list in the sixth grade to get the correct test answer of 'Formaldehyde?' Or that you were madly in love with pimply faced Herbert Davis in the eighth grade? No accounting for tastes, there. Anyway, girlfriend, you can trust me." She took Caroline's hand as they stood in the middle of the living room.

Caroline still hesitated. She decided the best thing would be to leave out the ghosts in the clearing—but how to explain Malcolm? "Okay, here goes...but if you laugh, I promise to bean you with one of these crutches. But first, how about a cup of coffee, or a beer?" Georgia nodded, so they moved to the kitchen, Caroline on her new crutches and Georgia carrying the chair. Georgia opened a couple beers and sat them on the table. Once seated, she simply looked at Caroline and waited.

"This is going to sound crazy, even coming from me. Okay, remember the strange feelings we talked about when we were in the attic room where

Malcolm Hanson held Susan? That night, I had a dream that he came to me and we had sex. Georgia, it was so real that my breasts hurt, and I felt that contented feeling I always get after a good session of lovemaking. It the same thing the next night.

“Yesterday, I was walking in the field behind the house. I tripped and twisted my ankle. About that time, Larry Gardiner drove up. My trusty companion Gilligan raced across to him, acting like Lassie to the rescue. To make a long story short, he helped me clean up and stuff. He is so damn attractive, I found myself ready to make love when the entire house started rattling and banging. I yelled, sure it was Malcolm, telling him to stop. Larry wanted an explanation. How could I tell him that my dream lover was jealous? Now, get real. Anyway, he left, very angry. Even you don’t believe it, right?”

“Caroline, I think there is more than you are telling me. Honey, was it a dream? Are you sure—or was it real, at least to you? People who lived here in later years reported seeing his ghost, and a couple women even admitted, as they were moving out, that he had been in their beds. Is that what really happened, Caroline?”

Caroline lifted her head, looking into Georgia’s eyes. “Yes, what you heard is what happened. He came to me first in the bathroom the same way any horny man would, then the next night to my bed like a real lover. The critters just ignored it all completely, leaving the bed as if annoyed they were inconvenienced. Honestly, Georgia, it had to be a dream. How can a ghost make love?”

“You tell me. Was he a good lover? Be truthful to yourself—did you enjoy him?”

As if ashamed, Caroline answered. “I enjoyed every minute of it and wished he had not left me so soon. He was tender and thoughtful, and I wanted more. God, I can’t believe any of this!”

Georgia replied, “I can certainly understand Larry’s reaction. I’ll bet, knowing his temper, that he had some choice words to say.”

“Yes, he did, and I really can’t blame him. But the fact remains that I wanted Larry, and he wanted me, until Malcolm interfered. Now I doubt I will ever see him again. “

“I think that is a moot point at this time. First thing,” Georgia suggested, “is that you have to get rid of your midnight caller.”

The words were hardly out of her mouth, when there came a loud knocking from the basement. They stared at each other.

Georgia was amazed but not frightened. "Hey, Malcolm, come up here and communicate like a man instead of a spoiled brat." She opened the door to the basement and flipped on the light. "Come on. Come up here!"

The knocking stopped. Caroline was astonished at Georgia's reaction. She finally spoke. "Malcolm, my friend wants you to show yourself. Why aren't you doing it? Come up here, please."

Caroline's eyes grew large as she felt the cool presence move toward her. The shape was barely there, but it was definitely a man. A warm hand smoothed her hair back from her neck. Georgia sat, staring at the movement. "Is he doing that, Caroline?"

"Yes, he is. Malcolm, touch Georgia so she know you are here." Caroline felt him move away. "Do you feel the coolness? Now, any warmth?"

"Oh, Caroline, I can feel him. He is touching my back." About that time, she let out a small shriek. "Get your damn hand off my breast, you...you...you, whatever you are. Thank you. I am not in the habit of letting strangers, especially ones I cannot see, handle my private parts. Show yourself, and I may reconsider."

Georgia seemed so calm about the whole thing, Caroline was amazed. "Now, Malcolm, will you please just leave Caroline alone to get on with her own life? Can't you just stay in the basement or the attic or someplace and OUT of her bed?"

His reply was not with words, but actions. He lifted Caroline's arms to embrace him. She felt his lips on hers as his hands pulled her top up to expose her beautiful breasts. Caroline pulled her arms away and her shirt back down. "Damn it, Malcolm, you can't just molest me like that. Oh, God, Georgia, see what I mean? What am I going to do?"

"You will probably hit me with your crutches, but what if I said, 'Just relax and enjoy it' See, Malcolm likes that idea...he's patting my shoulder. Honestly, honey, I have no idea what you should or can do. I would just guess that he loves you, and he assuredly desires you. Period. Like he did Susan. Yes, he is patting me again.

Caroline watched the dim shape as it moved away from them toward the back stairs. "Georgia, did you see anything? Anything at all?"

“No, honey. But if you tell me you did, that’s okay too. Did you? But before you answer, do you have anything stronger than beer? I need it.”

## Chapter 16

They talked for an hour or so more, during which time Caroline told her friend about the empty rooms in the attic. They decided that what they saw was what Malcolm wanted them to see. No Malcolm, no scene.

As Georgia left, the animals took the opportunity to go outside to play. She called and called, but naturally, they chose to ignore her. Something moved in the darkness from around the house. As it got closer, she saw a cat and a dog seemingly floating toward her. She knew Malcolm was bringing them home. Curiously, neither creature seemed unhappy with the situation. As he got closer, she could see him—transparent, like the others, but she could SEE him. His pants were black, as were his boots and jacket, his shirt was blue, and he was hatless. She knew his hair was dark, somehow knew.

He put the animals down. Caroline watched as they raced toward the kitchen. Leaning on her crutches, she finally spoke. “Malcolm, this has to stop. I am a living human being, and you are a dead ghost. Well, not dead exactly, but a ghost for sure. You cannot love me, and I certainly cannot love you. This is a lose-lose situation, and we both know it. Your jealousy this afternoon was uncalled for, and I will NOT have it repeated again. I do not belong to you—do you understand that? I do not belong to anyone but the critters and myself.

“I do not know why you are here and why you don’t just leave. You are not wanted here. Period. Now, please just fade away like a good little ghost and leave me alone.” With that, she went inside, locking the door. She and her trusty crutches went from room to room, locking up and turning off the lights. She made herself comfortable on the floor in her bag, ready to sleep when she felt the cool presence, then the heat as Malcolm took off his jacket and boots and settled beside her. She could see his presence beside her.

“Didn’t you hear me? I said NO MORE. Now go away.” She rolled away, but he did not leave. He rolled as she had done, put his arm around

her waist, and pulled her to him. She would have sworn she heard him tell her goodnight as he kissed the top of her head. He seemed content to lie there beside her.

She was tense but then relaxed, finally drifting off to sleep. Sometime before morning, she rolled over and was aware that he had gone. That side of the sleeping bag was cold but for a warm white feline body. As she sunk back into sleep, a small part of her wished he had stayed, at least for one more night. *My God*, she thought. *What is the matter with you, Caroline?*

Morning came. She rolled up the sleeping bag and shoved it and the pillow deep under the stairs. She had barely finished her morning toilette when she heard the sound of trucks. Trucks, not pickups. She swung her crutches to the door. Yes, it was the moving vans. Several men piled out, opening sides and backs. One tall, distinguished man with a full head of gray hair moved up to her, clipboard in hand.

Within minutes, it seemed as if a beehive had produced large, strong men who came with large loads, small loads, and loads of every size in between. She sat on the living room stairs, giving directions as to what went where and so on. Many things she simply directed to the basement for temporary storage, many to the spare rooms upstairs.

The construction crew had arrived by now, too. The beehive was so busy there was no room for another body, except the one she was looking for. There was no sign of Larry Gardiner. But she would NOT ask about him, no matter what! She explained to all about her twisted ankle one more time, relating that she was fine. Caroline retrieved her lists from the kitchen counter, handing them to the proper workers: lights in the attic, a walkway to the garage they were adding today, and endless other items.

Just before noon, John Duckworth waddled in. "Hi, Miss Fleming. I'm mad at you for paying for dinner the other night. It was my treat, and I'm insulted that you sneaked back there and paid for it. I am only talking to you for two reasons: first, to tell you that Larry went to Portland to spend a few days with his sister and asked that I run the show until he returns, with your approval, of course. And secondly, to ask if you are sure you won't marry me. Sadie won't mind."

"John, you are incorrigible. Yes, you can run the crews with my full approval. And please don't be mad. I wanted to treat you for being so nice to me. You can get even later, I promise." She deliberately made no mention

of Larry. That embarrassment was still too fresh. She gave him a big hug and a smacking kiss on the cheek. "That was for Sadie, and here is one for you. Now, get to work. What am I paying you for, smooching up to the boss?" He left, laughing.

By quitting time, the moving vans were unloaded and most things uncovered in the places she had indicated they were to be placed. Her regular crew came peeking in the windows and through the doors. She called to John to hold the crew for a couple minutes. She signed for her movers. As they drove away, she waved the local men up on the porch.

"Okay, guys, if you have a few minutes, would you like a new two-bit tour? Everything is a mess, as you can see. Now, when you are all finished here and the house is ready to show off, I want each and every one of you to bring your wife or girlfriend here for a real meal. I might even be persuaded to pop a few corks, too, if you promise to let your ladies drive home. So for now, feel free to wander anywhere you like to see what is what is what."

They did, up and down stairs, in and out of every room. Whistles and comments were so nice to hear.

When they were gone, she and her crutches walked from room to room, not exactly sure where to begin in the morning. First, she needed a shower and shampoo, and stiff bourbon on the rocks, if Georgia had left any in the bottle last night.

She sat down at her typewriter, now on its own little table adjacent to her beautiful old desk. It was a massive roll-top with what she called a kazillion cubbyholes, and a couple of secret places she had found. She was sure there were more, but searching seemed futile. She adjusted the lamp just so, rolled a fresh sheet of paper in the old Royal, and then just sat there looking at it.

Her mind began to spit out words and phrases. This was how she wrote. Usually with only a germ of an idea, things began to take shape in bits and pieces as her fingers moved over the keys. When she had reached a breaking point, and only then, did she go back over what she had written. Sometimes it was wonderful, sometimes tripe. This time was somewhere in between.

It started, "*Last night a ghost made love to me. Yes, a ghost. No human form. No dream either. A warm presence with soft lips, a rough beard, a probing tongue, incredible hands, and wonderful, working body parts. There was no doubt...all the physical reminders were there later. And it was*

*not the first time, but the second. This time was in my bed, the first in the bathroom. He came to me like any horny man who had been without a woman for half a century. And he was good!*

This was not the kind of thing Caroline generally wrote, but why not? Maybe it was time for a change. A sexy book with actual words and scenes instead of fade-outs and ‘the blinds closed’ kind of things. They had made her a fortune, but why not try something new? If it did not go over well, then she could always go back to her beginnings and the books her fans seemed to like. *So, girl, she told herself, go for it!*

She wrote until long after the sun went down. The critters wandered in and out, finally sitting at her feet to remind her they were hungry, and so was she. Quitting time for now, she decided as she turned off the lights and wandered into the living room toward the kitchen side of the house, feeling pride in her use of her walking aids.

She stopped dead, nearly falling off her crutches. Sitting on the red silk brocade settee near the bottom of the stairs was a pair of transparent figures. Donald Conroy and Heather Johanson were there in a deep embrace, as they had so often been seen in real life, ‘making out’ everywhere. Only now they were dead. She knew that. Dead. As dead as when she had seen them in the clearing in the forest.

Finally, Heather broke off the kiss and pointed to her. Donald nodded. Caroline finally found her voice. “What are you doing here?”

In her head she heard, *What are YOU doing her?. We told you to leave. Go. Now would be a good time. You are interfering in our lives.*

Caroline saw humor in that. “Lives? You have no lives. You do not exist. Who do you think you are to tell me to go? This is my home, as I told you before.”

In reply, she absorbed, *Wait a minute. I think we know you. You graduated with us, didn’t you? Karen, Cathy, Carol, or something.*

“Yes, I am Caroline Fleming. I think I saw your car burning on the beach a while back, but 20 years after the fact. Did I?” Once again, she was sure she had flipped out completely. Not only was she conversing with ghosts, she was asking them questions as if they were old friends. But they had been old friends. She shook her head, as if hoping to shake all this away.



*Hey, gal, it's good to have you back. Guess it will be okay if you want to stay here, but you probably shouldn't tell too many folks that you have permanent guests. We won't hurt you. We will try to protect you, as we are friends...or were, but we may not be able to all the time.*

"What do you mean, protect me? Why do I need protection? And from whom?"

As Caroline asked her questions, Heather and Donald just faded away, leaving her looking at the settee, feeling like someone who had completely lost her mind. She had, she was sure. First, there is a ghost lover, and then a pair of old chums who had died nearly 20 years before.

The phone rang. She grabbed it, flopping in a chair by the end table where it rested. "Hi, sweetie pie. Any new developments out at the funny farm today?"

"Oh, Georgia, if only you knew. It is so good to hear a living voice. Heather and Donald just left me, and they don't talk aloud, just in my head. I am totally losing it. Call the men with the white coats to bring a strait jacket. I need it."

"Now, Caroline, slow down and tell me what you are talking about. Start with the moving vans. I saw them go through town and knew your stuff had arrived. Anything broken? Everything there?"

Caroline took a deep breath and related the day's happenings. She did not mention Larry or Malcolm. When she finally got back to her transparent friends, she told Georgia of their plan to try to protect her, but that she had no idea why or from what.

Georgia did not reply for a long moment. Then she said softly, "Well, might as well tell you some more about your house. Hope you have a few minutes, because we will need it.

"Taffy found that in the 1920 the house was used as a speakeasy and for hiding moonshine that was brewed out in the woods behind your place. Trucks from Portland would rumble down the highway to get the high-grade alcohol that was supposed to be made and stored in your house. The main level was for people to drink and party, the upstairs was where the 'ladies' entertained the gentlemen, and the basement was for the booze. The place was raided one night in mid-October, and several people were killed trying to escape. Most notable was a silent movie star on vacation, so the story goes.

“He and his girlfriend were upstairs when the noise started down below. They had seen the attic stairs behind that funny door, so they climbed up there to hide. The Revenuers apparently missed them, and they stayed up there all night. When morning came, they sneaked back down, only to find bodies everywhere and not a vehicle to be seen. The only way to get out of there was on foot. The girl did not want to leave, so he left without her. Guess he was no gentleman, that movie star! I have no idea why she would want to stay, but what do I know?”

“When the lawmen returned that morning to gather the dead, there were no bodies to be found but one. The girlfriend was hanging from a chandelier in the living room. No one else was there. No stool, no chair, nothing for her to have stood on if it were suicide. That was it. Someone unknown had murdered her. And no other bodies were ever recovered. After that, rumors galore spread of lights in the windows, people moving around, the usual haunted house stuff.”

“So you are telling me, Georgia, that as I sit here, the chandelier or one like it above my head was where the poor girl died? Now isn’t that a pleasant thought? Is that all, or do you have some more great nighttime stories for me?”

Georgia laughed. “Don’t you think that is enough for one night? I can’t remember everything Taffy wrote. Maybe you ought to spend some time at the newspaper going through the morgue for her articles. Hey, that is appropriate. Morgue.

“I have to go; Doc is up to his elbows in un-served plates. First thing in the morning, I will call for an update on your two lovers. Ta ta!” and she hung up before Caroline could answer.

## Chapter 17

She phoned Dr. Martha Gillespie first thing in the morning and was told to come by anytime. *Sure a far cry from getting an appointment in NYC.* Driving was not that difficult without a crutch, so off she went.

Dr. Gilligan was middle-aged with brown-going-to-gray hair pulled back in a severe bun. She was tall, perhaps 5 foot 9 or 10, and sturdy of bone and heft as well. Her smile was like a beacon of bright light. Caroline liked her at the first hello. She explained how clumsy she had been and how she did whatever she had done to her ankle.

"Feels like a sprain to me, but we will x-ray to be sure." With that done, the ankle showed no breaks. "This is a nice job of wrapping it. Maybe he or she should come to work for me. Who did it, if I may ask?"

Caroline felt uncomfortable even mentioning his name, but refusing to say would have really opened a can of worms. "Larry Gardiner. He is overseeing the remodeling of my house."

"Oh, Larry. He is a great guy. And does good work, too. Say, now I get the connection. You are the one who bought the Olmsted house, right?"

"Guilty as charged. It's coming along beautifully. Please feel free to stop in anytime for a grand tour. I love showing it off," Caroline replied.

"I will make a point of it, you may be sure," the doctor replied. "Say, I have to run down to Newport later this afternoon. Would it be imposing to come by about five? I have wanted to go into that old place since I moved here 10 years ago, but somehow I never did. Heard some interesting stories about it, too."

The doctor's acceptance of her invitation so quickly amazed Caroline. It certainly wasn't a big city response, but certainly etiquette for this place and Caroline was pleased. "Anything late afternoon, early evening would be great. And I want to hear the stories. I think I could write a book about that house. Maybe I just will have to do that."

Her next stop was the newspaper. Old Charlie Dow was more than happy to have her delve into the dusty shelves of his morgue. “Taffy, ah, Taffy. She was a sweetheart. The cancer took her so quickly. It was a sin. But she didn’t suffer from it, so that was a godsend. Her talent for human-interest stories even won her, and the newspaper, a couple of awards. See, over there?” He pointed to three framed citations, dust covered as was the entire place.

Caroline was glad she didn’t have on any \$300 slacks today. The memory of the \$300 slacks brought first a smile, then a deep frown. She shook both away as she stood, looking at the boxes of newspaper marked by month and year. The citations had been for the mid-1960s, so before that would be a great place to start. Charlie said he recalled Taffy starting the series Caroline wanted to read in 1962 or 63, so she pulled box after box, carefully checking the staff names until Taffy’s finally showed up in mid-February 1962. From that point, it was easy to research.

Indeed, Taffy had a real talent for writing. Her words brought laughs and near tears to Caroline several times. Finally, in January of 1963, she found the first in Taffy’s series about old homes in the area. This article covered the old Hoover House, a hotel turned private home turned apartment building before it burned down 1959. There were pictures, so Taffy had photos too. She would have to ask Charlie what sources Taffy might have used, besides the newspaper itself.

Two weeks later was an article about the buildings on the waterfront, and then in another two weeks, a follow-up on other waterfront buildings. Some had been for families, but most were apartments for those who worked in the area. They were interesting pieces, again with pictures.

The first mention of Caroline’s home, once the Olmsted House, was in June 1963. It told of the Hanson family and the supposed abduction of the beauty Susan Hemingway. And a beauty she had been, shown in a long dress trimmed with lace and a matching hat, parasol in hand. Her husband Virgil held her arm, almost possessively, in the sepia print. Malcolm’s picture was there, also, and he was even taller and more handsome than Caroline had imagined. Looking at him, she could almost feel him again—his hands, his lips, his long legs, his strong arms. Yes, she must find out where to get prints of these old pictures.

The rest of the story did follow very closely to the one related to her by Georgia. Malcolm died instantly, Virgil committed suicide, and Susan recovered from her injuries and left town for good. It was sad for all involved. She especially hurt for Susan, loved by two men, who both died trying to keep her. Had she loved either one, truly loved him?

A later column, now a regular piece once a week, focused on Caroline's house after the 1920s raid. The interior pictures did show bullet holes and blanket-covered bodies on the floor. Another one was of the chandelier on which the young woman was found hanging. Her identity was unknown, and the county had lost track of her burial site. Her actor friend was also unknown, and some theories suggested he might have killed her. However, the missing bodies...no one ever found them.

Now she was in previously uncharted waters, as Georgia had not related the next columns Caroline read. In 1945, the owner of the house was Cleveland Ames. He was a retired sea captain who had seen the house from the ocean as he sailed south. He returned to buy it, presumably for his new bride Clare, who was much younger than he was. She had been in the military when he met her, a nurse who had served during the war. She apparently came to the marriage bed already with child, but he loved her and then the child, a son, as his own. Two years later, she bore a daughter, but this child had decisively dark skin. The captain and his wife were both of Scandinavian decent, and he was furious, positive it was not his baby. He strangled her that night; no one knew what became of the newborn. Apparently, the same night, he took the other child in his arms and jumped from a cliff into the ocean. There were witnesses to the suicide and murder of the son, but only guesses, actually, of the other two murders.

She made notes of everything she had read. This seemed a good place to stop, at least for today, because she knew she would return tomorrow and every day until these was nothing left to read.

"Quitting so early, Caroline?" asked Charlie. His hands were permanently ink stained, but his touch was gentle as he took her hand.

"Enough for today, I guess. But I did want to ask about the photos." Before she could continue, he moved into a back room. On a handcart, he had stacked four large boxes.

"All the old pictures are in these boxes. Unsorted and mostly unmarked. If you want to take them home to go through them, please feel free to do so. Just bring them back when you are done."

Caroline felt excitement. "Are you sure? Sure you trust me with them? Honestly, Charlie, that would be so wonderful. How about I only take one box at a time? Can I keep out the ones I want to have copied and then bring them all back? I promise to keep them sorted by whatever box they were in. Oh, Charlie, I can hardly wait."

He laughed. "Okay, but would you do me a favor while you are at it? I would like, if you can, to have them sorted by anything identifying such as dates, who they are, et cetera. So, you see, this is not an easy task you are taking on. But if you don't want all that work, I understand, and you can still take them with you."

"Heck, Charlie, glad to do that. Helped support myself one term in college by doing just this kind of stuff for a newspaper in the small town where I got my education, all two years of it. You are a doll!" She hugged the blushing old man. He carried a box to the car, seeing that she was still on crutches.

Next stop was the stationery place for a box of large envelopes and one of those expandable strips with the alphabet on it for sorting papers. She could not remember its name, but the girl there knew what she was talking about. "Can I ask you a question?" the young woman wanted to know.

"Ask away," Caroline replied.

The girl produced a copy of one of Caroline's books from under the counter. "Will you autograph this for me? Daddy said he was sure you would. My name is Lisa Hathaway."

"Hathaway, as in Hal and Margo Hathaway?"

"As in Hal, not Margo. She is my stepmom. Daddy married her after my own mother died."

"Who was your mother, Lisa? Did I know her?" Caroline asked.

"Probably. Daddy said he and she were high school sweethearts. Her name then was Sunny McLaughlin. I was born right after they got married. Do you remember her?"

"Of course I do, Lisa. I just did not remember them being sweethearts in high school." Especially, thought Caroline, as he and I went together for years before I left after graduation. Her memories of Sunny were dim, but

she did remember there were rumors that Sunny was a favorite second date for many of the boys...the date they would pick up after they took their real girlfriends home. She felt a bit ashamed now, recalling that many of the girls said that they were saved from rape by horny boyfriends because the guys knew Sunny would be more compliant than they were.

Caroline signed Lisa's book. Mr. Nugent, the pharmacist, had them pose while he took their picture. He was a confirmed camera nut who drove folks crazy taking endless photographs. He even helped her to her car with her purchases and snapped several more pictures of her on the way outside. Just what she wanted: posterity seeing her clumsy demeanor on crutches.

## Chapter 18

The workers were still busy when she arrived home. James came out to greet her before she was even out of her car, wearing a perplexed look on his large face. “Miss Fleming, can I talk to you for a minute?”

“You sure can, James. Is there a problem? Caroline asked, his expression indicating it was not something good.

“Yes, Ma’am. I think we have a big problem, but I waited until you got back before doing what I know I have to do. See, the thing is, we were digging out to form the cement for your new garage, and...well, we came across some bones. A lot of bones. And even a skull. The law requires me to notify the police immediately, so I guess we will have to do it. But do you want to take a look first? That is, if it will not be too upsetting to you.”

Caroline could see then why he was so upset. She linked her arm through his, smiled up at his concerned face, and said, “Lead me on, sir. With you as an escort, nothing can hurt me.”

They went around the back of the house to the excavation area. As they approached, several men stopped what they were doing and came forward.

James stepped down into the pit area, marked with strings and the beginning of cement forms, and offered her his hand as she stepped beside him. He moved forward, still holding her hand, and then pointed at a bunch of tumbled bones with no coffin wood. At the top was a partially covered human skull, no doubt.

She took a deep breath and knelt beside the bones, looking closely. What she expected to find, she had no idea, but she did understand that they would need to call the authorities right away. “James, do you want to call the police or have me do it? Personally, I think it should come from you, as you and the crew found the bones, but I will call if you want.”

“No, Miss Fleming. I will do it.” They walked back to the kitchen door, where he went straight to the phone. Once connected, he carefully explained



who and where he was and what had been uncovered. When he hung up, he sank into a chair before speaking. "They will be here in a few minutes. We are not to touch anything further until they finish investigating. Officer said we should have stopped digging immediately when we found the first bones, but we figured it was probably just some animal. Sounds like I could be in some trouble." He sighed deeply, rose, and went outside without another word.

Seconds later, Caroline heard sirens. Several police vehicles, both county and state, raced up the drive and parked helter skelter all over the yard. She walked outside to stand by James and the crew. A short, overweight man who introduced himself as the Lincoln County coroner Ben Cooper went immediately to the bones, which were clearly visible from almost anywhere in the vicinity.

Ben Cooper turned to the men. "Didn't any of you have the brains to know that bones found in the ground are to be untouched once located and that you were required by law to call it in immediately?" All looked down as if seeing their work boots for the first time.

"I guess I am the one you need to arrest or whatever you plan to do," said James quietly. "I told them to just keep digging, so it was my fault. I figured it was just some animal bones...a deer or some family's pet, until we found the skull. Then I called."

A tall, uniformed state patrol officer had moved forward and now spoke. "Howdy, James, Ben, fellows." Most of the crew seemed to know him, and he did look familiar to Caroline, but she could not place him. He looked at her, touched his hat, and then smiled. "Hello, Caroline. I heard you were back. I am Jeff Donaldson, class of 1960."

"Jeff Donaldson. I can't believe it," Caroline smiled and took his offered hand. "It is so nice to see you again, after all these years. How have you been? What..."

"Ex-cusssse me, if you don't mind." The coroner was clearly unhappy with the turn of events as he interrupted. "If we can get by 'old home week,' we have some bones here. Remember? Now, let's get to it."

The scene became a hive of activity with police photographers, lab assistants measuring, area cordoned off with police tape, and officers with notepads in hand questioning the men. Jeff Donaldson became very professional as he began to question Caroline. "What was the reason for the

digging out here? Why is it so deep? Who is in charge of this project? Do you own the land?" He asked endless questions, sometimes the same ones repeatedly.

Caroline finally held up her hands. "You might as well haul me in or hang me by my thumbs, because I cannot answer if you don't give me time to do so."

For a minute, Jeff looked angry, and then he started to smile, then laughed. "Sorry, you're right. Is this your property?"

"Yes, as of about two months ago. You can check with Tom Parker, who sold it to me. And the county surely has the transaction recorded. How else will they be able to tax me?"

She continued, "And, as to some of your other questions, we are building a garage here. It is deep because I want a root-cellar type basement to store yard equipment and the like under it, with both stair and ramp access. Lawrence Gardiner is the contractor, but he is out of town apparently and James Duckworth is running things. What else do you want to know?"

Jeff thought a minute before replying. "Well, will you have dinner with me tonight? There is nothing more I can do here until Ben Cooper and his staff of smiling faces is done."

Caroline burst out laughing. No one member of the coroner's group seemed to know how to smile, perhaps afraid it was unprofessional of them to smile over bones. "I would love to have dinner with you if you are sure your wife won't mind."

Now it was Jeff's turn to laugh. "If you wanted to know whether or not I am married, all you have to do is ask. The answer is no, not now. Once was enough. I do have a child, a son, age 12, who lives in Medford with his mother. I have him quite often during the year, and all summer."

"Well, sir, my finishing school teachers would not have been happy with my asking such a direct question. I probably should have simpered or such too. Anyway, I am sorry about your marriage. Mine ended the same way, but you are fortunate to have a son from it. All I got was a pile of bills, a not-too bright dog named Gilligan and a haughty cat named Snowball. Now, about that dinner, I am afraid I spoke too soon. I will have to pass, as I nearly forgot Martha Gillespie will be stopping by any minute for a grand tour. Can I have a rain check?"

"No, you may not. We will wait for Martha, and all three of us will go eat. She is one of my favorite people. My son loves her...she told him he could eat pizza and ice cream for breakfast if he likes, that fathers' sometimes have old-fashioned ideas about nutrition."

As if on cue, Martha drove into the yard and ran out of her car with her medical bag in hand. "Hi, Jeff, Caroline. Anything wrong here? Can I help?"

"Well, from the looks of those bones, you are years too late," Jeff spoke. "Caroline's crew dug this up probably hours, maybe days before calling us." He sounded serious but was grinning. "We are heading out for dinner. Please join us. We were waiting for you."

Dr. Martha, as Caroline now thought of her, looked from one to the other. "Think I will pass, don't want to be the third wheel on a date."

Caroline spoke for the first time. "No date, just dinner. Please come along, or I will have to stay home and eat peanut butter sandwiches again." She put her arm through each of their arms, waved goodbyes to the crew, and led them all around to her car. "No cop cars tonight, officer—I don't like the back seats." She tossed her keys to Jeff and climbed in the middle between her two new friends.

They drove almost to Lincoln City, but instead of a restaurant, Jeff drove to a pretty but old two-story house a couple blocks east of the highway. "Welcome to the Donaldson's humble abode. Tonight I will whip us up some gourmet cuisine, straight from Safeway's produce department via fishermen's wharf. I have clams to steam, salmon to roast, crabs to pick and two lovely women to toss the salads. I even know how to use a wine bottle opener. So let's get to it!"

The food was wonderful and the company delightful. Caroline could not remember when she had been so relaxed at a meal with folks who were actually veritable strangers. Too soon, it was time to call it a night. Jeff drove them back to her house. They watched Martha drive away, with the promise to return for that promised tour.

The men, both the police crew and Caroline's workers, were gone, but the entire house was lit up with lights. Jeff commented about her power bill as they walked to the front door. She thought he might try to kiss her, so she quickly offered her hand, with a warm thank you and goodnight as she moved inside.

Once she heard his car driving away, she locked up and started turning off the lights. The critters were nowhere to be seen, so she called, wanting them to go outside before bedtime. When they did not come, which was unlike them, especially when dinner time had

come and gone, she felt a small wave of apprehension. She ran upstairs to check...no animals. At the basement stairs, she hesitated and then, after turning the lights on, went down in search of them. Still calling to them, she heard a noise near the laundry. Wishing she had her gun, she moved quietly into that area before realizing the noises were coming from within the dumbwaiter. She leaned forward, staying as far away from the doors as possible, and pushed the button to open it.

They were both there, both absolutely filthy—covered with mud and God only know what else, from the smell of them. They tumbled out, crying and acting confused. She grabbed towels from a cupboard and tried to dry them, but neither seemed to want to be touched. Gilligan actually snapped at her for the first time in his life, and Snowball used her claws to get away.

They raced upstairs, leaving Caroline holding a dirty, foul-smelling towel, which she tossed into the washer. She ran after them, knowing they would be in her bed before she could even get to the main level, when suddenly in front of her was Malcolm, with one animal under each arm. She could see through him, but he was there as surely as she was. He moved ahead of her, back down the stairs to the laundry again. He nodded at the utility sink.

Caroline knew he wanted it filled. When the water was warm and the sink half-full, he carefully handed Gilligan to her. This time the dog did not try to bite her, just hid his face under her arm. Malcolm slid the screaming cat into the water, gently soaping her, wrapping her in a clean towel, and rubbing her dry.

Snowball did not run this time, just sat looking very bedraggled as only a wet cat can look. Malcolm then took Gilligan and repeated the bathing. After the dog was on the floor, he shook, throwing tiny droplets around the room. Both animals seemed to be waiting. Caroline asked them if they were hungry, and before the words were completely out, both were halfway to the kitchen. She followed, opened their favorite canned foods, fed them, and sat on the floor between them, an arm around each.

Only then did she look at Malcolm. "Thank you, thank you so much. Do you know what happened to them?" He nodded, that she could see clearly. "Can you tell me?" He shook his head no. "Please?" Again no. "Were they hurt?" No. "Did it happen outside?" Yes. "Did they get into something they shouldn't have?" He did not reply.

Caroline felt apprehension again. "Did someone do this to them?" He nodded. "Who?" He did not answer. She stood up, moving toward him. "You saved them, didn't you?" Yes.

"Did you put them in the dumbwaiter?" No. "Who did?" No answer.

Instead, he took her hands, one in each of his, and pulled her up from the floor and forward until she was against him. His hands held hers around him as he looked into her face. She could see his eyes, dark brown, but she could still see right through him, too. She did not understand and tried to pull away. He held her fast and then lowered his lips to hers and gently kissed her, again and again until she returned his kisses. Then he released her, taking only one hand, leading her upstairs. She knew where he was taking her and knew she should stop him, but the kisses had robbed her will to refuse.

Once in her room, he bolted the door, dimmed the lights and started to remove her clothes, slowly, caressing her as each piece hit the floor. When she was naked, he quickly dropped his trousers and threw off his shirt. He was still transparent, but she could see him, could see his manhood, erect and large. He moved closer until his penis touched her. This time she knew she had heard a groan, a groan of an excited man, hungry for a woman. She touched him and then curled her hand around his hardness. Again, she heard him. His hands moved to her breasts, yet she should see both the hands and her breasts as they were covered, but it felt wonderful.

He lifted her into his nearly invisible arms, all the while kissing her, as he moved to the bed. She closed her eyes and let her body feel the wonder of his love. This could not be happening, but once again, it was. *Dear God, I must be insane, but what a wonderful insanity.*

"Oh, Malcolm, don't stop." She was moaning just as he had.

"Caroline," came a whisper. "My beautiful Caroline." He slid inside her. His movements were so perfect, so fulfilling, she climaxed when he did.

This time, he did not disappear, but lay beside her, his arm under her, her head on his shoulder, just like any couple who were relaxing after

satisfying sex. But they were not just any couple—she knew that. When she tried to sit, he held her back, planting kisses on her lips as he rubbed her breasts and stomach. Soon she was totally in his arms, totally his once again. Then she slept.

When Caroline awoke, the room was still dark but for a nightlight in the bathroom, throwing its light to guide her there. She lay covered with a sheet, and the bedroom door was ajar. Both animals cuddled beside her. Her hands moved to her breasts. Yes, they were slightly sore. She knew it had happened, once again, Malcolm had loved her.

## Chapter 19

The sun was shining brightly as she and her two furry friends entered the kitchen. The coffee was ready, and a mug and her newspaper were beside it. Even the pets' dishes were full.

She smiled, thinking a gal could get used to this. However, no matter how great the sex, he was not a man—not a living man, anyway. A man...what a man, yes, but not a real person. *Caroline, you have a problem, and the problem is you, Caroline, YOU.*

She called to him but got no reply. Had he gone or was he hiding? She thought about suggesting that they meet again in her room but was afraid he would be waiting there. Again she called, and then simply sat with her coffee.

There was no sound of work outside, but she was not surprised. Jeff had indicated last night that nothing more could be done until the investigation determined who or what was buried on her property. Caroline did not intend to go anywhere today, so she dressed in sweats and socks. Today would be for writing and going through the first box of pictures from the newspaper.

In her office, the first thing she noticed was that her roll top desk was open. As she moved forward, she could see little drawers and doors that she had not known were there. She remembered the other day, wishing she could have found more, now there they were. A startling thought hit her. Could Malcolm have read her mind? She was sure she had not said anything about it aloud...or had she? How else could he have known that she wanted to find the secret compartments? She was so disconcerted that the idea of writing right now seemed impossible, so she moved back into the dining room, where she opened the box and started sorting.

She did not have time to start before she heard trucks and looked out to see several police vehicles driving around to the back. She 'crutched' to the back door just as the coroner and Jeff McDonald climbed the stairs. Jeff

smiled. "Good morning. You are as lovely in the morning as you were last night, no small feat for most women, I understand."

Bob, the coroner, scowled at them. Caroline wondered if he had any other expression. "McDonald, if you don't mind! Miss Fleming, tests have determined that the bones were from a man in his 20s, probably buried in the 1920s. Since the bodies of those killed in the raid here about that time were never found, we think it is possible there will be more bones around your yard. I would like your permission for us to search the area, or if you refuse, I will simply get a warrant from a judge and do it anyway. Choice is yours."

Caroline laughed. "Since you put it to me so clearly, I guess it is just simpler to grant you permission. All I ask in return is that you do it as quickly as possible so the men can return to work. There is so much to be done this summer and when winter hits, construction will dwindle down, as will the wages the men need to earn during good weather."

He grunted what Caroline thought might be an affirmative answer and turned without another word. She laughed again and invited Jeff inside for a cup of coffee. He smiled but declined, saying he had to go to his office and file some paperwork, but would like a rain check on the coffee. And other things, he thought. Caroline went back to her box and sorting.

Taffy had been thorough, probably as much as was possible with old photographs, usually unidentified. In this case, she had used a soft lead pencil and carefully, so as not to leave an imprint or damage the photo in any way, written as much as she knew about the people or scene.

Caroline started out by making neat piles with pictures that she could connect, such as waterfront, old hotels and motels, businesses, farm houses and barns, ships and boats, cemeteries, lighthouses, Beacon House, Hoover House and finally Olmsted House. Even before she came across her own house, she was completely engrossed in the others. A couple were of places she did not remember from her childhood or school days, probably gone now, but Tom Parker might know where they had been, or perhaps she could trace the records at the courthouse. Why she wanted to do this she really did not know, but some deep urge from within had her making notes, questions to ask, and more. in no time. The cemeteries had struck a chord that just kept humming in her head.



Pictures of her own home were of the most interest to Caroline, but she decided to continue her project until the box was empty. She marked the envelopes with various names and subjects. Using the alphabetizer made sorting go more quickly, and soon the envelopes were full, except for the one marked Caroline's House. All those photos and drawings were still stacked on the table.

She heard the trucks and police cars leave without so much as a 'thank you' or word of any finding. She felt a mild irritation at the lack of courtesy but shrugged. She would mention it to Jeff and certainly the coroner the next time she saw him.

Later, she went to the kitchen for a fresh cup of coffee. From her window there, she could see movement across the field, near the edge of the woods. This time, she hurried to the living room for her binoculars. Once she had focused the glasses, she stood in shock. Larry was out there with a group of figures she could see through. Ghosts surrounded him. Was that what he had been doing the first time she saw him there? Moreover, what was he doing in her field when he was supposed to be in Portland? She saw his pickup a short distance from where he stood, but obviously he had driven it in from a different direction, because he had not come in on her driveway.

Caroline watched for a few more minutes, until he moved toward his vehicle and the figures moved back into the forest. What should she do? Or should she do nothing? He really had no right to trespass on her property, but what did it matter, really? She just wanted an explanation, but it was too late to catch him even if her car could have traversed the rough field, which she was sure it could not. She watched him drive even farther back into the field and turn into the woods at the northern boundary. She had never been back there, so she had no idea if there was a road or what. He had a four-wheel drive truck, so a passable road was not too much of an issue.

Okay, Caroline decided, she would rent a truck or something to go out there. After her fall and twisted ankle, she knew she could not go on crutches there, but she could in a vehicle. She tried the yellow pages first. No, no rental in town. No surprise there. Maybe Georgia had an idea.

Georgia certainly did. "Hey, honey, we can use Doc's old hunting truck. I've driven it a few times, and it's a lot of fun. Things are slow here this

morning, so Doc can handle the crowd for an hour or so without me. I'll be there in a few minutes, and you can fill me in on what's going on."

Caroline saw no reason to change from her sweats, so she just added a jacket and boots. She would not be getting out of the car, probably, so the crutches would not be a problem. As good as Georgia's word, very few minutes had passed when the old beat-up once-white truck with bald tires raced up the drive, honking all the way. She climbed in and pointed in the direction she wanted to go, Georgia shifted gears like an old truck driver, and across the field they bounced.

In between laughs, Caroline told Georgia about seeing Larry with people. She did not say they were transparent, but that the group went into the woods and Larry drove away. When they got to the far corner of the acres of field, they found a road. Probably an old logging road, long unused, but Georgia simply shifted down and headed into the woods.

If they had bounced before, it was nothing like this time. Instead of laughing, Caroline was having a time hold on. "Slow down, girl. I'm going to be a mass of bruises if you don't."

Georgia glanced her way. "Old Malcolm probably won't care how bruised you are. Bet he would like to kiss them all well. I'd guess he has visited your bed again, hasn't he? And that you liked it? Right? Come on, 'fess up."

"Watch the road, girlfriend, or we will be as ghostly as he is." Caroline did not answer the questions or reply directly to her friend's comments. The truck slid sideways and hit a log on the edge of the road, stalling out. "God, Georgia, are we stuck out here?"

"No, we are fine. Just let me get it running again." She cranked the key, and nothing happened but some grinding. "Oh, no. You won't believe this. We are out of gas. I didn't even think to check the gauge, just jumped in and hit the road. Well, let me look in the back. Sometimes Doc keeps a can back there."

She got out and poked around under boards, rags, and who-knows-what else back there. She looked at Caroline and shook her head—no gas can.

"Okay," Georgia said, "no time to panic. Let's just think this out. Okay," she repeated, "Since you can't possible hike back on those crutches, you will have to stay here while I go for help. It should not take me more than 45 minutes to get back to your place, and then I can call for help. Say

another hour beyond that for someone to bring gas, and me, back out here. Will you be alright?"

"What can I say? I will have to be alright, now won't I?" answered Caroline.

"Say, you're not mad at me, are you?" Georgia looked close to tears.

"No, I'm not mad. Just frustrated that I can't hike back with you. Just hit the road, jack, and come back, come back. Isn't there a song in there someplace?" Caroline smiled and watched her friend start the long walk back. *So now what, Miss Had-to-Follow, what now?*

She climbed carefully out of the truck, bouncing on her good foot while holding onto the side. Once at the back, she lowered the tailgate and sat on it. For a while, she was content to look at the tall fir, spruce, and cedars, to listen to the birds. She spied a rabbit and some squirrels, but little else. Maybe I will take a nap, back in the cab.

As she bounced back toward the front doors, she heard a growl coming from the woods beside her. She jumped inside, slamming the door just as a cute little bear bounded toward her. *Oh, Lord, not a baby bear! A baby means a mama, and a mama means trouble. Big trouble.* The thoughts were scarcely formed before Mama came running straight at the truck. She lifted herself to her hind legs as she started swatting at the window.

Caroline knew that if Mama bear broke the window, Caroline was going to be bear food. She had no idea what to do, other than honk the horn. She slid into the driver's seat, holding the horn down. Yes, the horn worked, which somehow surprised her, considering the rest of the truck. The noise momentarily startled the bear, then seemed to anger her even more. Big Mama jumped into the back of the pickup. The rear window was no longer tight and was not as heavy a glass as the front ones. Claw marks began to appear in the glass. The window started to move and crack. It appeared that Caroline was going to die. She saw nothing to save her now. The window was coming out, and the claws were coming in. She looked into the bear's eyes and started to pray.

As suddenly as she had appeared, the bear growled and jumped out of the truck bed, and with her cub, moved back into the forest. Only then did Caroline see the reason: a group of ghosts had come to her rescue. There were Indians, trappers, sailors, farmers—men of several generations and all walks of life. Most seemed to be rotted, but some were whole.

They looked at her and slowly faded away. “Wait,” Caroline yelled after them, but they ignored her. “Please wait.” Then they were gone. There was literally no sign that they had even been there. But they had saved her life—of that she was sure.

No sooner had they disappeared than she heard another truck, coming toward her from deeper in the woods. As it came into view, she saw it was Jeff, this time in a State Patrol off-road vehicle. She did not move or even acknowledge him as he stopped and moved to her door. He opened it and reached inside to put his arms around her. She was still shaking and petrified with fear.

“Hey, honey, what are you doing out here by yourself? Whose truck is this? What happened? Caroline, talk to me!” He was patting her back as he held her close.

Now she started to cry. “Oh, Jeff, it was horrible. A baby bear and then the mama came out of the woods, and she tried to get at me. I honked the horn and she got madder. Look at the back window. She would have had me in seconds if the....” She stopped. How could she tell him ghosts had scared the bear away?

Jeff moved just far enough away to look into her face, red and swollen with tears. “In seconds if what?” he asked.

“How did you find me?” she asked.

“I heard the horn. I was in the brush, looking for poachers. Had found some dead deer and was searching for clues. Now, again, what are you doing here?”

How could she tell him she was chasing Larry and some ghosts? Instead, she slowly related seeing some people in her field and wanted to know who they were and why they were there, so she called Georgia, and from that point on, what she said was truth. Up to the bear leaving, which she said must have been because the bear heard his vehicle. She knew Jeff did not believe her completely, but he said nothing. She would have to warn Georgia about her lies before Jeff talked to her. She knew her friend would back up her words.

Jeff took a gas can from the back of his State vehicle and poured fuel into Doc old truck.

“Can you drive with that bum ankle?” he asked. Caroline nodded, started the engine, and backed down the old logging road until she found a

place to turn around. Jeff followed. About halfway across the field, they met Georgia and the garage man from town.

As they all drove back toward the house, Caroline noted that the police trucks and coroner's car were all back. This time they had a couple of backhoes and small dirt moving equipment. The coroner motioned to Jeff to stop. They talked for a few minutes before Jeff came to the house.

Caroline paid the service man and hobbled inside, Georgia beside her. "I had to tell a couple lies to Jeff about the see-through people who ran off the bear that was trying to crack open the safe, so to speak, with a morsel called Caroline inside. I sure couldn't tell him about ghosts or that we were chasing that Lying Larry, so please don't give me away."

When she returned, they were chatting like the old friends they were. She sat and listened, letting them catch her up on folks in town. Finally, Jeff looked at her. "Caroline, are you sure you told me everything?"

"What more could there be?" she asked in reply. "But, Jeff, I would like an explanation as to what they are doing out there in my yard now. They left this morning without so much as a word. Now they are tearing up everything within sight. Why?" She hoped that would stop his questions, at least for the moment.

"Well, it seems that our illustrious Mr. Good Humor Man and his gang have found another, perhaps two bodies. Until they are satisfied that is all there is, they will be working here for who knows how long. They will do their best to stay out of your way and put things back as well as they can when they are finished."

Georgia shivered. "That is kind of creepy, having a bunch of dead folks stuck in groups willy-nilly around here. Do you suppose there was a cemetery here at one time?"

"Probably not," Jeff replied. "It will probably turn out to be the burial place for those 1920s shoot-out bodies. We will probably never know exactly who they were or who buried them, but it will be investigated—that I promise."

Georgia indicated she must go also but would be back later, after the restaurant closed. For that, Caroline was grateful. She then returned to her dining room, where the pictures were in envelopes. The pile with her house and its inhabitants was missing.

## Chapter 20

Caroline stood looking at the empty spot on the table. She moved to a chair and then, taking a deep breath, she yelled, “MALCOLM. Come here, NOW!” The house was silent. “I mean it, Malcolm. Show yourself.” Again, nothing. “Okay, any of you. Come here. All of you!”

In seconds, figures seem to materialize through the walls, the floors, down from the ceilings. Caroline sat quietly, amazed. There were so many! She tried to count, but some were so faint she was not sure they were actually there.

She spied Taffy York in her hospital gown. “Taffy, did you take the pictures? I know you think they belong to you, but they actually belong to the newspaper. Do you have them?”

Taffy would not look at her. Finally, there was some movement among the others. As if listening to voices, Taffy extended her hand full of old photographs. Caroline took them, depositing them on the table. She was not sure what to do or say now. She had called them. They had come. Now what? Finally, she spoke.

“Do you all live, or should I say, stay here? How many are there of you?”

‘Yes,’ a voice came from somewhere—this time it was not in her head. “Sometimes there are many of us, sometimes only a few. We come and go when we want, but we liked it better before you came. Now we have to be quiet and stay hidden. So, would you please just go away again and leave our house to us?”

Caroline felt a flash of anger. “First, this is MY house. Not yours! And no, I will not leave. You all can leave. Every one of you. Go back to wherever ghosts live when you are not haunting MY house.”

The voice in the room answered. “Some of us will leave because we do not like it here anymore. We will move on to other empty places, or back to

the homes where we lived before we died, or the ocean if that is where we ended our lives. Most will go back to their graves, where you won't disturb them. Some of us must stay here. Like Malcolm and Dean and Donald and Heather and some others. We have been here since we died and have no other place to go, except to live on the beach or in the wood. We cannot go until the records are in order for us to go. You would not like to throw us out onto the street, now would you?"

Caroline was so confused it took her awhile to reply. "What records? In order how? Throw you out? In a blink of an eye. You are not human beings. You can exist anywhere, can't you? Why does it have to be in my house?"

Again, the voice came. "Some of us died here, some close by. Those cannot leave. They belong here. Many, many for years. From history before the house was even built. Native Indians and pioneers and seamen and the like."

There was much movement among them. Most seemed to be fading away completely, until only a couple dozen remained. The voice spoke. "Are you happy now? They have gone back to where they were before they joined us here. It was a nice place with no outside influences, like YOU."

"You are telling me that all of you, all those who were here, are waiting for records to be closed or whatever? How long does that take? And why can I see some of you so clearly, but some hardly at all?" Caroline wanted to know. Suddenly, the whole thing was more than she could handle. She was now positive that she was insane. A house full of spirits was just too much.

She lowered her head onto her folded arms and started to cry deep, sobbing tears. When she finally looked up again, she was alone. Her questions still hung in the air, but no one was there to answer them now. Did her tears drive them away, or was it her fear for her sanity? It seemed to Caroline that they could read what she was thinking, as she suspected Malcolm had the other day, with the roll top desk.

She locked the house and moved like a crippled zombie on crutches, up the stairs to her room. She turned down the bed and slipped under the blankets. Sleep, she must sleep. When she awoke, she would call Dr. Martha and ask for the name of a place she could check into for mental evaluation. She knew she was crazy and needed help.

Sleep came quickly, but along with it came dreams. None of them made any sense, even to her subconscious mind, but she was not frightened. They

were not nightmares, but rather soft thoughts of things she had heard and seen since she bought the house. She felt Malcolm slip into bed with her, but he simply held her close and whispered her name. When she finally awoke, he was still beside her.

Caroline did not move, just gazed at his face. It seemed to be almost a human face, now, not quite as transparent as before. He watched her and moved his finger down her cheek. He pressed her head to his shoulder and put his arms around her, holding her as if she were a child. It was incredible, but she felt completely safe in his arms. Softly she cried again, this time for the feeling of security she felt and for his presence. He seemed to understand, nodding and wiping away the tears as they slid down her face. She dozed once again.

When she awoke, he was still holding her in his arms, smiling down at her. Again, he touched her cheek and then kissed it gently. He slipped out of bed and moved toward the door as if to leave. Caroline called to him. "Wait. I want to ask you some things." He did not stop, just turned his head and smiled as he left the room. She called to him again, but he did not reply. Instead, several other shapes started to take on substance.

Taffy moved to the bed, waved a small goodbye, and faded away. Herbert Devlin and SueEllen McThomas took Taffy's place by the bed, waved and disappeared. Both men in the military uniforms did the same. Of the ghosts she had known personally, only Donald and Heather, Dean Sloan and Sunny McLaughlin remained. They stood around the end of her bed, simply looking at her.

Malcolm glided back inside. He sat on the edge of the bed and took Caroline's hand. For the first time, she actually heard a voice, a real voice, from him. It was low but masculine as he spoke. "Caroline, we will not hurt you. Taffy and the others left because their records are complete. Your dislike of their presence here apparently pushed their trials ahead. You probably will not understand what I am trying to tell you, but please listen.

"Different religions call it different things with different meanings, but most commonly it is known as purgatory or an astral plane or A'raf or gehinom or hamistagan. We who wait for a decision as to our afterlife place refer to this place and time as 'Decision of the Records.' Taffy should have immediately gone to Heaven, but somehow that was missed. In your world,



Caroline, it is red tape or governmental bureaucracy. Whatever...your presence here has resulted in the Records on some of us being closed.

"Like Taffy, Herbert and SueEllen were innocent of any moral crime bad enough to cause their detention here any longer. David Marsh and Jack Loman, who died in Vietnam, are now with the good men of their units who gave everything to protect their country.

"Dean Sloan is still here because he was a thief. He was stealing logs from the company he worked for. His body was never found because the truck burned so completely, there was nothing to find."

"Donald and Heather will probably go on next time the Records are reviewed. They had often broken laws by drinking, reckless driving, lying, and other things rebellious young people often do. But until then, they are stuck in between Heaven and Hell or the others places other religions have.

"Sunny McLaughlin Hathaway committed suicide. That is a grave crime. She may never pass on, at least not for a long time," Malcolm continued.

"I am here for eternity, I would guess, or until the Guy Below decides he wants me. I seduced many women, including you, my darling Caroline. I kidnapped, raped, and held captive an innocent woman and caused the death of her husband as well as myself. But God only know how much I loved her and she loved me. My family was shunned and disgraced. I could roam the earth and reside between the lands for eons."

The others faded away until she and Malcolm were alone, and then Caroline asked, "How do you know all these things, about the others, I mean? And how is it that you become clearer and can now talk to me? I don't understand any of this." She shook her head as if trying to clear away cobwebs in her mind.

Malcolm returned to the bed, beside her as she sat. He gently pulled her down, head on his chest, arms around her. "I will try to explain it as well as I can. Each time I come in contact with you, as you did so willingly and I did not force you to touch me, I gain strength. The strength to solidify a bit, to talk, to move as a person again. This will only last as long as you allow it. If you turn me away, I will again fade to nothingness as I was when you first moved here. But if you do, I promise I will understand and will never harm you. I will try to protect you as long as I can, but as I fade, so do my powers over those who are still completely evil. My intentions were never 'evil' in

that sense. I was just selfish and loutish and uncaring, never cruel, nor did I ever intentionally cause pain. Eventually, my beautiful Susan began to love me, and had not I impregnated her, forcing our move, we would have been happy together until we died naturally.”

He slowly kissed Caroline’s eyelids, her face, and then her lips until she stopped him with her fingers across his lips. She finally had to ask the question that had been bothering her from the first meeting with Donald and Heather in her living room: why did she have to be protected, and from whom?

Malcolm was slow to answer. “There are forces here, around us, unseen, that are far more powerful than I or all the good people you know, plus others. This house, and the ground it is on, has been the place of incredible savagery, of murders so foul you cannot comprehend, crimes against God and man. You could not have chosen a worse place to live. I beseech you, My Love, to take the advice of the others and leave this house and never return. Go right now with our blessings, all of us.”

Caroline simply looked at him. She turned her lips up to his and kissed him softly. When she spoke, it was with a cold fury in her voice. “I will NOT let anyone run me off of my home, out of this house. I have done nothing to them, so there is no reason they should want to harm me or you, either, for that matter. I am staying!”

With that, there came strange sounds permeating the entire structure.

“You can moan and groan all you like, but I am not leaving. So get over it!” she answered. The sounds stopped. The sound of pipes being hit heralded a flood of water from her bathroom, across the floor, soaking into the beautiful new carpeting. The roof seemed to separate and let in a torrent of rain from a clear sky, but actually it was overhead sprinklers. The dog and cat came running and jumped on the bed, soaking wet. Caroline and Malcolm stayed where they were. Caroline was totally drenched; Malcolm remained dry. He moved his body to cover her as best he could, but she was already soaked, and the water went right through him anyway.

She was shaking in fear but also in anger. “A little water never hurt anyone, so stop it. I am busy here, can’t you see? And as I already said, I am not leaving. So go away and leave me...us alone.” She put her arms around him and began to kiss him deeply. It was she who needed the love, not for

sex exactly but for some primeval wanting. As he responded, the water stopped flowing.

"You are incredible," Malcolm whispered in her ear as he moved to slide off his pants, then hers. She sat up, pulled her top over her head and cupped her breasts as if to show the world. He moaned and began to love her everywhere with his mouth and lips. This time, Caroline's lovemaking was more violent and demanding than ever before, and Malcolm met her every need. When they were sated, he rolled away but continued to look at her.

"I have never felt such passion in my life, Caroline. I believe your love was greater than any man on earth has ever felt. At least in my case. It was as if you were fighting with the evils by loving me, and you won, at least for the moment. Not that I have any complaints—I'm just stunned with the power you showed. Your love is giving me power, too. I can feel it."

"Malcolm," Caroline spoke softly, "What we did was not love, it was lust. Some kind of incredible passion and wanting that was not love. I do not love you, Malcolm, you know that. I want you. God knows I want you and the things we do together. But, it was not for love, of that you can be sure."

She felt rather than saw his deep disappointment. She knew in his way that he did love her, but it was a love that could never be. After a few minutes, he rolled away from her. At the door, he stopped and turned to look at her. After several moments, he asked, "Caroline, would you love me in death as you do not love me in life?"

The question so startled her that she could not think of an answer. Her face must have reflected her inability to reply, because after what seemed an eternity to Caroline, he turned away and left the room. At first, she was simply sad for him, and then she felt a wave of apprehension. Was that a threat? Did he think if she died, she would be his forever? What was in his mind? She remembered the things he had done and knew as a human, he was capable of letting his selfishness rule. Was he the same now?

## Chapter 21

She felt melanchony and near tears again but pulled herself up off the wet bed and into the soaked bathroom for a shower. The walls were still dripping, the drywall in chunks on the floor. She could see the pipes that appeared to have been grabbed and pulled apart. The poor plumber was going to think his work was the cause of the destruction, and he could not be told any different. She mopped the floor in the bath, changed her bed linen, leaving it bare to dry, and dragged the wet/dry vacuum cleaner up from the kitchen to try to deal with the carpets. She heard a car outside and remembered Georgia was planning to come after closing at the restaurant. Yes, it was that late already. She pulled a caftan over her head—at least the closet was still dry—and raced down as quickly as she could on crutches.

Georgia looked at her, smiling. “Just out of the shower, are we?” she asked.

Caroline took her hand and pulled her toward the stairs. “You have no idea! Come and see for yourself.”

As they entered Caroline’s bedroom, Georgia took a deep breath and said, “What the hell happened here? Water balloon fight or garden hoses at twenty paces?”

As best she could, Caroline related the ordeal with the animals, Malcolm’s help, then the disaster with the water, the feverish sex, and her fear after his question. The question about her loving him if she were dead.

Georgia looked stricken. “Was he threatening you?”

“I don’t know, but we can be sure he is listening even now. And another thing,” Caroline mentioned, “each time we have a physical connection, he seems to get stronger and less transparent. More solid. He can speak now so I can hear him. And I can feel his substance in a more solid form, if that makes any sense. It’s as if he draws something from me.” She regressed and

explained as best she could about purgatory and so on as he had told her...and about Taffy and the others leaving.

Georgia listened and then spoke again. "That is all well and fine, my dear Caroline, but frankly I care less about the dead ones and am only concerned right now about the live ones, meaning you. It sure sounds to me like Malcolm was threatening to have you with him forever, in his world. Honey, please move out of here, right now. I don't believe you are safe here."

"Georgia," Caroline was adamant, "I am not leaving. This is my house, my home. I think it is time to talk to Malcolm, don't you? Malcolm, please come here and show yourself to Georgia."

They waited, but he did not appear. After calling to him again, Caroline this time asked if any of the others were listening. Again, no answer.

"Do you suppose they're gone? That they've left?" Georgia asked.

"Somehow I doubt it," replied Caroline. "I think there are more powerful entities here than Malcolm or any of the others we know. And I think they are afraid of the powerful ones. I have no idea why they would be, as they are all the same...ghosts. Unless some of them are more evil than others. I don't know. What do you think?"

"Besides the fact that you need to leave here, right now, I suggest we talk to Larry. You said you have seen him with the ghosts by the forest two different times. Right?" Georgia asked.

Instantly, Caroline drew herself up to refuse, but before she could say a word, Georgia had picked up the phone and started dialing. Georgia spoke quietly. "Larry, this is Georgia. I am at Caroline's house, and we have a problem. I think you can help. Before you say a word, just listen. We both know that you have had contact with those invisible people that come out of the woods. Caroline has seen you twice with them. So you must know that they are here, in her house, too. And that they are creating a living nightmare for her. No, don't talk! You should see what they have done to her rooms upstairs. Completely ruined it with water and...."

This time Georgia did the listening, saying only a "hummmmm" or a "no, I don't think so," or such. She started to hang up the phone but said, "Wait, stop someplace for some whiskey and vodka. It could be a long night." She dialed again. "Hi, Honey. Look, Caroline has some real problems here, and I think I will stay the night. Larry is coming." She

listened and then spoke again, "Okay, honey, if you want. I could sure use you, myself. I love you, Doc."

"They are both on their way. Whether or not you want Larry here, he is coming and he can help. So let's go down and wait. It is kind of soggy here." With that, Georgia laughed and led her friend back downstairs to the living room.

Caroline did not argue this time. When they were down, she went to the dining room and returned with a stack of photographs. "Here, Georgia, look at these."

"Oh, My God. Is this Malcolm? He is positively gorgeous. Wow! No wonder you did not put up a fight, if that would have done any good anyway. Hey, Malcolm," Georgia shouted, "did you hear me? I think you are handsome. If you want to feel my breast again, you are welcome to do so." Caroline was not sure if her friend was joking or serious, but either way, the ghost failed to take her up on her offer.

## Chapter 22

As soon as the men arrived, in separate cars but at almost the same time, Georgia ushered them in. Doc got a big hug and a noisy, mmmmmm kiss from his wife. Caroline and Larry merely nodded at each other. Georgia spoke first. "Okay, fellows, I think we need to start upstairs. You in particular, Larry, need to see what happened this afternoon when whoever, whatever got upset with Caroline.

They went up in single file, Caroline first, and then Larry behind her. Georgia took Doc's hand to slow down his progress so that the first couple had a few seconds alone.

"My God," Larry exclaimed, "What the hell happened here?" He turned to Caroline for an explanation as the other couple entered the bedroom."

"Hey, Caroline, nice waterbed you have there." Doc's joke did relieve the tension a bit. His reward was a little punch from his wife, whom he pulled to him and hugged.

"This is hard to tell, but I must ask first how long and how expensive it will be to make the repairs," Caroline asked. "I don't want the crew to think they were at fault in any way for the damage, but I want it fixed as soon as possible. Larry, please. Can it be done right away?"

"It depends, Miss Fleming," he answered, "on how truthful you are about it. Tell us exactly what happened."

Georgia moved to the other couple, who were practically nose to nose, Larry definitely furious. "Come on, you two. Back off Larry. Give her a chance and stop bullying. Now that you have seen the mess, let's go back down to the living room, or better yet, the kitchen, pour some drinks and start the tale at the beginning. I have a feeling it's going to be a long night."

They did as she had suggested. Once the cocktails were poured, they sat around the kitchen table. Caroline started, "Larry, right after we started the renovations here, I saw you out by the forest talking to a group of people. I

did not know at the time they were not living people. No, don't say anything yet. Then this morning I saw you again, but you went off into the woods on an old logging road. You were supposed to be in Portland. Would you mind explaining that?"

"We are not here to discuss my whereabouts," Larry started to protest.

Georgia stopped him. "It's a legitimate question. and I would like to hear your answer myself. If we're going to get anywhere with this, everyone has to be truthful. So please, Larry, will you answer?"

Slowly, he nodded. "I did go to Portland for a couple days but came home yesterday. Yes, I was out by the woods both times Caroline apparently saw me. Yes, they are not living people. They were buried in the old cemetery deep within the forest, most for so long no one even remembers a cemetery being there. It was an old Indian burial ground and then a pioneer cemetery, not exactly together, but close enough for the spirits to not take exception to the later burials."

"I came across the place several years ago," Larry continued, "right after I settled here. I was deer hunting. It got late and started storming when I realized I was lost. I tripped over what I found later to be a tombstone. In the meantime, I hunkered down by a large log, planning to wait out the night. My mistake was not realizing the log was the home of a very large, unhappy bear that was apparently planning to spend the winter there. Next thing I knew, I was tossed in the air like a child. When I landed, my leg was under me and snapped. The sound is one I hope never to hear again. At the time, I thought I was going to die, so the leg wouldn't have mattered anyway. The smelly mound of fur ran toward me, snarling, and then suddenly stopped dead in its tracks. It snarled some more and then turned to run back into the forest, leaving me broken and scared shi....oops, sorry, ladies. It was too dark to see anything now, under the heavy tree limbs and raining so hard I was soaked, every inch."

Larry continued, "I felt myself being moved by hands I could not see...hands I could feel. The hands were gentle as they carried me deeper into the woods. I was in and out of consciousness, so I had no idea of the time. When I finally awoke, it was starting to lighten. I found myself in an old, rotten cabin, probably some pioneer place, long abandoned. My leg hurt like hell, but when I reach down to feel it with my hands, I found it wrapped in old rags around some wood pieces like a splint."



No one spoke as Larry continued. "I leaned against the cabin wall, wondering how I was going to get out of wherever I was. My gun was next to me, so I unloaded it, put the shells in my pocket, stuffed leaves in the barrel to keep out the dirt, and used it as a crutch. As I limped out into the woods, there were transparent people everywhere, but they were not frightening. They offered by gesture to carry me, but my pride was too dumb-headed to agree. They walked with me, helping me up when I fell, which was often, until we got to where I had left my pickup.

"I spoke to them but there was never an answer, at least not this time. After my leg recovered, I came back to see if I could find them again. I knew they were around, I could feel them, but they did not show themselves then. I wandered around, this time with a compass, until I finally came across what I was sure was the pioneer part of the cemetery. I looked around and then sat on the ground and waited. Eventually, a couple men in buckskin moved silently as if only in my mind. There is much more, but I hope that is sufficient for now. I am thirsty and have some questions of my own I want answered." Larry lifted his glass and drained it. Without asking, he made himself another, much larger than the first. "Okay, Caroline, your turn."

## Chapter 23

Caroline looked at Georgia for support. Her friend nodded and squeezed her hand. “Okay,” Caroline began. “I had only been here a day when I first started noticing things that were not right. I saw a car explode on the beach, but it had happened 20 years ago. I found a note on my door telling me to meet someone at Heidi’s in Agate Beach, only Heidi’s was no longer there. Two of our high school friends had died in a fire there. Someone in a red car, exactly like the one that blew up on the beach, pulled into that parking lot, and someone called for me to get in with them. I sped away, but when I passed by the empty lot on my way back to town, a car pulled out of the lot. And it was empty too.”

“I will cut some of it out, like meeting old friends, et cetera,” she continued, “except for finding my Georgia and Doc again. She knows about everything that has happened to me and can vouch for a lot of it, as she has experienced stuff here too.”

“Larry,” Caroline asked, “do you remember the rotten food in the refrigerator, the broken light bulbs in the basement, the backdoor and window that would not open for me but did for you easily? Well, that was just the beginning. I had glasses break, flowers torn asunder, candles lit, and all kinds of other things.

“Then the night before I invited myself to dinner with you and you already had a date, leaving me so humiliated, I had my meal with Duckworths and slithered home to lick my mental wounds. I got up in the night to use the bathroom and found I could not get out. The light switch did not work. After a few seconds, a kind of coldness filled the room, followed by what I swear were warm hands touching me, holding me, caressing me. Lips covered mine, but no one was there. A ghost was making love to me. Stop looking at me like that, Larry Gardiner. It is the truth, damn it. You wanted to know; now you are hearing. Furthermore, that is where I got the

razor burn you got so pissed off about. So wipe that smirk off your face and just listen.

"He came to my bed the next night, but oddly, the animals were unafraid of him. When Georgia came to visit, she felt his presence, too, and even his touch—didn't you?"

"Yes," Georgia agreed. "I felt cold at first, then warmth. He actually put his hand on my breast. I told him only people I can see can handle my private parts. Sorry, Doc, it was too good to pass up. Anyway, as Caroline and I talked, he would pat my shoulder if I said something that agreed with him. He actually pulled up her sweater, just to show me he could, I guess. And by the way, Larry, Caroline has very nice breasts." Georgia chuckled.

"I have seen them, Georgia, and yes, they are very nice. I was about to make love to her when the house started rattling and rolling," commented Larry, "but Miss Fleming only yelled at her ghost lover to stop and refused to offer me any explanation."

"Honestly, Larry," Caroline sounded irritated. "You would not have believed me then any more than you do now. What I do not understand, Mr. High and Mighty, is how you can accept spirits helped you in the woods...probably saved your life, but you refuse to believe I have ghosts here. You can't have it both ways." Her voice was angry.

Doc spoke for the first time. "She's right, Lar. You can't have it both ways. Georgia told me all about Malcolm and what had transpired here. I believed it because she did. Now that I hear more, I am more inclined to believe it all, including the room in the attic."

"What room in the attic?" Larry asked.

"The rooms where Malcolm kept his kidnapped lover Susan," Georgia answered. "When we first saw it, it was just the way it must have looked 60 years before. When she looked again, Caroline found it just an empty place. Do you want to see it?" No one even bothered to answer. They all went up the back stairs to the third floor and then down the hall to the last rooms. When Caroline tried the light switch, nothing happened.

"I know all the lights up here were working the other day." Larry tried it himself. He tried the switches in the other rooms, and all illuminated but this one. Back down to the kitchen went Georgia for a flashlight to save Caroline and her crutches the long climb down.

The flashlight would not work in the room either. This time she brought up two lanterns; one was old-fashioned kerosene, the other a modern Coleman. The latter would not light, but the kerosene did. It revealed the rooms as the women had first seen them.

"I'll be damned," said Doc. "This is incredible. Do you think he really kept her here for two years without anyone knowing about it?"

"We think so," replied Georgia. "Old houses had mice and rats and squirrels and whatever, so other folks in the house probably blamed any noises they heard on rodents. Seem logical that no one bothered to investigate. Why bother?"

"Any comments, now, Mr. Know-It-All?" Caroline asked. "Now, do you believe me?"

"After seeing all this, and since Georgia and Doc believe it, guess I have to also. But I want to know what happened to make the house flood in your bedroom only and not get anything wet up here above or downstairs below."

"How my room got wet," Caroline answered, "I have no idea. Why it happened? I think to frighten me into leaving."

"What were you doing or saying to anger whoever or whatever did the water damage?" Larry demanded. "Something must have triggered the deluge. What, Caroline?"

"It is none of your damn business, Larry Gardiner! Just suffice to say it happened, and now it needs to be fixed. Can you do that without interrogating me about something you do not understand and never will?" Caroline was furious now. "If you can't, then just say so and get out of here. Now!"

"Hey, hey, you two, calm down." Doc put a hand on each of their shoulders, and Georgia took Caroline's hand and gently pulled her back downstairs. The guys stopped first in Caroline's bedroom to take the wet mattress out to the balcony, hopefully to dry. Once in the kitchen, Georgia made fresh drinks for everyone and then spoke again. "Now, let's talk about this rationally. Well, perhaps 'rationally' is not the word to use here. But talk, anyway. Caroline is right, Larry—she is entitled to her privacy, like it or not. And Caroline, Larry naturally would want to know what set off the flood upstairs. So if either of you just want to let it lie, fine. Undoubtedly, though, we can figure out what to do better if we all know everything. It is up to you, Caroline."



## Chapter 24

Caroline took a deep drink from her glass. She looked at each of the others and then started to speak slowly. "I discovered some of the old photographs from the newspaper were missing from the piles on the dining room table. I was angry and called for all the spirits to come. Taffy returned the pictures, but my anger was still there, so I ordered them all, each and every one, to leave. I told them I did not care where they went, but they had to go. Later, Malcolm explained to me about the Records."

Caroline related to the other three what Malcolm had told her. She explained that the ghosts of Taffy York, David Marsh and Jack Loman, and Herbert Devlin and SueEllen McThomas had waved their farewells, but that others had to remain. Those remaining were the spirits who had lived less than exemplar lives and had to remain awhile more in limbo, maybe forever, or until they were called to Hell to begin their eternity there. This telling took quite some time, and when she was finished, she simply laid her head on Georgia's shoulder.

No one spoke for a couple of minutes, and then Larry looked at Caroline's face and said, "I believe all that, Caroline. But I still want to know what you were doing when the water started."

Instantly, Caroline was angry again. "Fine, Larry, if you must know, I was in bed with Malcolm and I refused to leave the house. First, it rattled, and then all Hell broke loose, as you can see upstairs. The pipes in the bathroom burst, and sprinklers came on. We were drenched. I pretended to ignore it all and kept making love with him. Finally, the house stopped, but the sex did not. It was wonderful, as always. I must add something interesting here: each time we had contact, Malcolm seemed to gain strength and substance. He was less invisible and even began to talk aloud, rather than in my head."

Larry was sarcastic as he answered. "I like that ... 'had contact' ... why didn't you just say that when you fucked, he got stronger? Isn't that what happened, Caroline?"

"Hey, Larry, watch your words." Doc was not happy with his friend's crude comment. "It sounds to me like you are more than just a bit jealous of ol' Malcolm."

"Jealous? My God, Doc, have you lost your mind?" Larry's anger was apparent. He stood as if to leave and then dropped back into his chair. "Well, maybe I am. Caroline, you are a beautiful woman, and I have wanted you since the first time I saw you. Instead, I find you are bedding some person you couldn't even see. Does that make any sense to any of you?"

"Makes perfect sense to me." Georgia took his hand and patted it. She looked at Caroline, as if expecting her to say something, but she remained quiet.

"I think I have heard enough for one night," Larry spoke and turned to leave. "I will be here in the morning, Caroline, to fix what I can. I agree we should not tell the crew what happened. Who would believe it anyhow?"

Before Georgia and Doc left, they pleaded with Caroline to come home with them or to let them stay in her house for the night. She refused both offers. "You two are wonderful, but you have your own lives, and I have mine, here in my haunted house. I'll be all right, as long as I don't make the Head Honchos mad. I think!" With that, she smiled and locked up as her friends drove away.

Caroline was mentally exhausted. She decided not to even attempt to write tonight. Instead, she wandered into the dining room to look at the photos again. This time, she opened the envelope she had marked 'cemeteries.' With her always-present yellow legal pad and mechanical pencil, she began to make notes from the notations on the backs of the pictures. Some were so old they were faded...perhaps the photography studio could bring up the writing. Some were in a hand she came to think had been Taffy's writing. About others, she had no idea. Careful viewing with a magnifying glass yielded written signs or street names or landmarks that would give her places to start her search. And search she was going to do. As soon as Larry started the repairs, she would head out with her pictures and lists. She did not want to spend any more time with him than she had to, especially alone with him.

As it turned out, Doc came with him. Georgia had said she could handle the early morning crowd as long as he was back in time for the tourists 10 AM breakfasts and locals 11 AM lunches. The men arrived just before seven, before the coffee was even doing perking.

“Good morning, Caroline.” Doc spoke, but Larry did not. “Any problems last night?”

“No, Doc, and thanks for asking,” Caroline replied. “Actually, it was the best night’s sleep I’ve had in quite some time.”

“What, no midnight lover? No incredible spooky sex?” Larry did not look at her as he spoke, and she did not bother to reply to him.

Caroline did speak to Doc again. “I can’t tell you how I appreciate your offer of help. But it’s not fair to expect Georgia to handle everything. So please head back to the restaurant. If Larry needs any help, he will have to make do with me, if he can stop being mean and sarcastic long enough to get anything done.”

“Yes, Doc, for once she is right. You go on, and we can manage perfectly. I will work her buns off.”

Reluctantly, Doc did leave. Caroline found Larry in her bathroom, so she grabbed her shabbiest clothes and locked herself in another bedroom to change. She found she could maneuver now with only one crutch, which left her one hand free. She returned to her bedroom and watched Larry working in the bathroom, pulling damp drywall and shoving it into a large plastic bag. His arms showed ripping muscles as he worked, tiny beads of sweat appeared on his face and forehead, and there was a sense of urgency about his actions.

“Okay, Mr. Boss-Man,” Caroline finally spoke, “what can I do to help?”

He did not turn before answering with a question. “Just what the Hell do you think you can possibly do on those crutches? Just go away and let me work.”

She moved forward, picked up a piece of wet muck from the floor and shoved it into the bag as he reached for the wall again. Her movement startled him. He then noticed she was leaning on one crutch and trying to fill the bag with the other. He did not speak for a long moment.

Finally, he said, “Good. How about trying that wet-floor vacuum out there in the bedroom? You can sit on the bed or a chair and push the wand that way so you don’t have to stand. I checked when I came in. The carpet is



undamaged, just wet, and the vacuum is strong enough to pull the water out. You might want to open the door to the balcony to allow the wind to blow in and circulate the air."

Caroline did exactly as he suggested. Barefoot, she could feel it was now just damp, not bubbling up between her toes, so she moved from one part of the huge room to another, dragging a chair with her.

Larry filled bag after bag with damaged materials, taking them one at a time out to the balcony and dropping them to the ground. "I will haul them off when I leave, so no one will ask about them." Those were the only words he spoke for hours.

Later, he made many trips up and down the stairs carrying fresh dry wall and the other materials he needed to repair the water damage. He even brought matching wallpaper and paint, which she knew would have to wait a few days until the new walls were dry. When it was done to his satisfaction, it was near twilight, and they had eaten nothing all day.

Caroline said, "Isn't this enough for one day? Will you come down and let me fix us something to eat? I know I'm starved, and you must be too."

"No thanks," Larry replied. "I just came to do this job, and now I'll be on my way."

"Please, Larry," Caroline spoke. "Can't we just have a civil sandwich or something together? I know you are mad at me. Can we talk about it?"

"No, to both questions. There is nothing to talk about, and I only eat with my friends. You are my employer, nothing more, and I will bring my bill when I come tomorrow to do the bedroom ceiling. I hope you have a place to go so that I don't bother you." That was surely the most unsubtle hint Caroline had ever heard, asking her to disappear because he did not want to see her again.

"Of course, sir, if you would prefer my not being here, I could remove myself. However, since I am the employer, as you have pointed out, and you are the employee, I will be the one who determines where I will be tomorrow, Mr. Gardiner!"

"Fine," Larry replied. "Oh, yes, and one more thing. Call me when you hear from the police regarding the coroner's findings about the bones so I can have the men back to finish the job. Once and for all, we will be done here."

With that, he turned and quickly walked away. She heard his truck as it idled in front. She knew he was loading the trash bags to haul away. She moved to the balcony, where she sat for almost an hour, lost in thought as she looked out over the ocean until the fog began to chill her.

## **Chapter 25**

Georgia telephoned just as Caroline was putting out the critters for the last time that evening. "Anything new, sweetie?" she asked.

Caroline replied, "No, nothing to report."

"I asked Larry the same thing when he came in a little while ago for dinner. Ate everything not nailed down. Didn't you feed the poor man?"

"Georgia, believe me, I tried. He flat out said he only eats with friends. That I'm his employer, and that's all. If he had hit me, it would not have been more of a surprise. I asked if we could talk, and again the answer was a flat NO. I give up. When the work is finished, it will be the last I have to see of him. Sooner the better. Tomorrow when he comes to fix the bedroom ceiling, I will make myself invisible so as not to upset him any further."

"Interesting choice of words, don't you think, Caroline? 'Invisible.' Freudian, perhaps?"

"Not funny, my dear friend. Actually, I'm going to try to find some of the old cemeteries that were in the pile of photos from Taffy's collection. That way I can be gone when he is here. First instinct was to hang around just to irritate him, but why bother?"

Georgia sighed deeply and asked, "Cemeteries? Do you think that's a good idea? You'll probably just get yourself into more trouble. Please rethink that idea, or at least take someone with you."

"Hey, great idea. I'll ask Malcolm to come with me. We can make love on a tombstone or something. Why didn't I think of that?"

Now Georgia sounded irritated. "Honey, that is not funny. Not at all! Listen, Caroline. I'm serious. This whole thing is getting out of hand, and Doc and I are worried about you. Have you even considered selling that monstrosity now that it is renovated? You would make a fortune from it. Then you can get yourself a nice, safe, ghost-free place to live and work.

How about one of those new condominium things they are putting up on the cliffs south of here?"

Caroline understood her friend's worry, so she put a smile in her voice, and replied softly. "Dear Georgia, I really do appreciate your and Doc's concern, but, honey, I am safe here. No sign of Malcolm in a couple days now. I think he has given up and is going back to doing whatever he did before I got here. So please stop worrying. I am off to bed now with a pad and pencil for thoughts for my book. I promise to phone you in the morning."

The critters were waiting outside the door to come back inside. As she moved in front of the kitchen sink, her crutch slipped, and she fell, hard, on her bottom, again with her ankle under her. She sat there hurting before finally pulling herself up. *How did the water get there? I have not used the sink all afternoon. Perhaps a leaky pipe? Guess Larry can check that again tomorrow.*

Once abed with the lights out and just before sleep took Caroline, the house began to make noises again. Rattling came from downstairs, and then footsteps above her from the third floor. She refused to acknowledge any of it and pulled her pillow over her ears. Gilligan gave a couple of irritated barks, but soon all was quiet. Whatever...whoever was acting childish was not going to get any satisfaction from her tonight.

Caroline put a pillow over her ears, but now it seemed to be pressing down on her face. She tried to lift her head and to move it to either side but could not move it. She was having trouble breathing and started flailing her arms and legs. She was smothered, being murdered in her own bed. She stopped moving for a split second, and then with all her strength, she threw her legs up against whatever was holding her down and at the same time rolled away and off the bed. As she lay on the floor, gasping for breath, she felt a cold presence near her, but moving away. Someone had tried to kill her. Gilligan had chased it down the hall and was growling and barking from somewhere downstairs. She picked herself up and limped to the door, closed and locked it.

She grabbed the phone, called the police, and then waited by a window for the siren and lights to turn into her driveway. Only then did she move toward the stairs, with both crutches again after her fall. She got to the front door just as "Police. Open up!" reverberated throughout the room.

She unlocked the door but left the chain attached until she was sure who was there. It was Jeff Donaldson and another officer. Caroline let them in, feeling such relief that she nearly collapsed into Jeff's waiting arms. "Okay, honey, it's okay now. What happened, Caroline? Here, sit down and tell me what's going on."

She related the ordeal to Jeff as his partner started moving from room to room around the house. When he returned, Jeff introduced him as Amos Black. Amos was a very tall, thin black man with hands the size one would expect on a basketball player, which it turned out he had been until his knees gave him a change of careers. Caroline liked him instantly and asked what he'd found. He replied, "Well, Miss Fleming, not a thing, unfortunately. No unsecured windows or doors anywhere that I could find. A kind of funny couple rooms in the attic with old furniture and books, and the like, but nothing else out of the ordinary."

Caroline decided to make light of his discovery upstairs. "Those rooms are for our resident ghost. They were that way when I moved in, and I haven't gotten around to doing anything with them."

Both officers laughed. Jeff said, "Well, Caroline, I sure hope your ghost likes you, unlike whoever was here before. In the morning, I will come back and check for footprints, but with all the building activity around here and the crime lab people digging, it is unlikely I will find any. However, I think, for tonight, it might be a good idea for you to stay somewhere else until we can investigate this in daylight. We can take you wherever you want to go, or you can stay at my place...in the spare room, of course."

"Jeff," said Amos. "Perhaps we should take her over to Dr. Gillespie to have her checked out."

Caroline started to object, but Amos was already on the phone. When he hung up the receiver, he informed her that Dr. Gillespie definitely wanted to see her and to bring her things, as she would keep her for the night. On some level, Caroline felt great relief that she would not be alone here tonight, but on the other hand, she was angry that she was being a coward and running away.

## Chapter 26

Martha Gillespie checked her out and found nothing out of the ordinary but some bruises on Caroline's face. She suggested that they have a glass of white wine and some conversation before retiring. Caroline knew that Martha's intentions were good but was not sure she wanted to share the things that had been happening to her with a stranger, even one as nice as the doctor. In answer to Martha's probing, Caroline did admit that someone had tried to run her off the road awhile back, but not that she thought the person looked like Margo Hathaway.

They chatted mostly about Caroline's house and the remodeling and then went to bed. Caroline did not fall asleep immediately, but made mental lists of everyone she knew and those who would...could...hate her enough to want her dead. There was no one on the second list! Well, except Malcolm, but he did not hate her, he loved her. Was there truth in the old adage that love and hate are close kindred emotions?

Morning brought the smell of bacon and coffee to Caroline's nose and growling stomach. She showered and dressed quickly and joined Martha in the kitchen just in time to eat. Freshly squeezed orange juice, cinnamon rolls, fluffy scrambled eggs and perfectly fried bacon was a feast to Caroline, who normally skipped breakfast altogether or just grabbed a piece of toast. "Honestly, Martha, if I ate like this every day, I would be as big as a walrus, or at least a seal, in no time."

"This is a special occasion breakfast. So full of calories and bad stuff your doctor would tell you not to partake, but once a month or so will not hurt. Besides, you are underweight by at least 10 pounds, I would guess," Martha replied.

"Underweight! You have GOT to be kidding. I need to lose at least 10...probably 15 after I eat all this," Caroline argued. They both laughed

and bantered back and forth. When the dishes were done, Caroline indicated that she would need to call a taxi for a ride home.

Martha laughed. "You have been gone too long, honey bunch. This little burg still doesn't have a taxi, but I already planned to take you home or wherever you want to go. So what will it be?"

"Home, for sure. I want to get my car and do some research for the book I'm writing. Or, rather, for the book I intend to write. We can have another cup of coffee while you look through the pile of old photographs from the newspaper...the ones I mentioned last night."

"Done deal," replied Martha.

Larry's truck was in the driveway. Coffee was ready in the kitchen. The pets' dishes had food, and the critters curled up together in the sun on the front window seat. Caroline had not mentioned the water deluge as being Larry's reason for being here, just commented that he was doing some touchup work upstairs.

The women took their coffee to the dining room after Caroline gave her a tour of the main floor, with the promise of a full one when all was complete. Martha was immediately enthralled with the photos, looking at them carefully. She made a couple suggestions as to where the buildings might be or have been and knew how to find three of the old cemeteries. "You will probably not believe this, Caroline, but I have a really off-the-wall hobby, especially out of line with what people think of a doctor. I do cemetery rubbings. You, know rubbings of old tombstones, crypts, and the like. Some I have done are pretty good, but most are in a drawer in my bedroom. Remind me to show you the good ones.

"The Oregon coast has so many wonderful old cemeteries, from Astoria to Brookings," she continued. "I've wandered around here and probably visited most of these places, although the pictures do not give enough clues for me to recognize the locations. I would love to take you to with me, but we will have to wait a couple more weeks until you are up to long hikes again. In the meantime, stay off your feet as much as you can. I have to get to the hospital now, so see you later." With that, and thanks from Caroline, Martha was gone.

Caroline felt a kind of loneliness with her departure. She refilled her cup in the kitchen and moved on one crutch to her office. A sheet of paper waited in her Royal, as she had left it a few days ago. She reread the page

she had written before and waited for thoughts to flow. Soon she found herself looking out the window into the flowering yard, her mind at a dead stop. *Okay, Caroline, if you can't write about Malcolm this minute, at least you can do some descriptive passages about the house, surroundings, beaches...whatever, to get moving again* . Her little pep talk seemed to work, because by the time she heard footsteps on the stairs, she had a dozen pages stacked neatly, upside down in her holding basket.

Her wristwatch showed 12:45. She rose and turned toward the door, startled, as she had not expected anyone to be there. There he was, in broad daylight. Malcolm, a bit transparent, stood leaning against the door jam, watching her. He turned away. "Malcolm, wait," Caroline spoke. "Please, wait a minute." He acted as if he had not heard her and glided away.

Glided, as in no footsteps. Those on the stairs must have been Larry, which meant Larry and Malcolm were within 20 feet of each other. Could Larry not see him, or did he simply choose not to acknowledge the ghost?

Through the window, moving around the lilac, she saw Larry climb into his truck where he sat eating his meal out of a black lunch box, accompanied by her traitors Gilligan and Snowball. Her first instinct was to invite him back inside, but remembering how he had treated her the day before, she shook that thought away and went to the kitchen to a sandwich.

Once there, she heard a noise from the basement. She would investigate it and start her laundry at the same time. Carefully, she moved down the narrow stairs to the machine and the full dumbwaiter. She started the washer and turned...directly into the arms of a man she had never seen.

He was only a shadow figure, another spirit, but dressed in a costume right out of the 1920's complete with spats, hat, and pinstripes. His arms tightened around her, but she struggled, and finally he released her. She knew who he was, not his name, but his presence. He was the actor who had abandoned his young companion the night of the raid on the speakeasy.

"Who are you, and what do you want?" He did not reply, just stood smiling. He was handsome, tall, with shining white teeth and the demeanor of a self-satisfied man. "If you cannot answer, then you can just leave. You are not welcome here. Any man who would abandon his girlfriend among bodies of the dead is not someone welcome here. Did you murder her, too?"

His smile became evil as he nodded. Yes, he had killed her. He seemed proud of it. Now he reached again for Caroline, grabbing her arms. The one



crutch she had used to support her downstairs fell away. Caroline pulled away and fell backwards. The room exploded in an array of stars as her head hit the corner of the washer. Then all was black.

She felt herself returning to the real world. Not the one she had just left. It was a spinning atmosphere of noise, jazz music, narrow suits, and bobbed hair under cloche hats, liquor, and flappers dancing the Charleston, gunfire, blood flying, and bodies everywhere. She had been in this house the night of the raid. The night the girl died. She watched in horror as the ghost, then a real substance, had tied a rope around the slim neck as she was fighting for air. He threw the rope around a chandelier and pulled it until she was dangling. He tied the rope to the banister and then stacked table on table until he could reach the dangling body. He then tied the rope end to the chandelier so that the girl could not drop. He was laughing as he moved the table into position under another chandelier. He moved toward Caroline, carrying another rope. He was going to murder her. He was going to hang her. In her 1920s world, she fainted.

She had regained consciousness slowly until she became aware of where she was. She was on a cot in the basement. Her head was slipping in pain. She opened her eyes, but everything was fuzzy. She felt a hand on her shoulder and screamed...and screamed...and screamed

Caroline realized she was going to die. The dream was not over. She heard a voice; she felt arms and then a chest, holding her close. It whispered to her as if she were a child, soothing her with words of comfort. With each passing moment, she felt the world righting itself. Her screams lessened until she was only sobbing.

She began to hear the voice. She felt strong arms meant to comfort and the heart beating in the chest under her head. "Can you hear me, Caroline? Can you hear my voice?"

She nodded. Her eyes still refused to focus, but she knew without seeing that Larry was holding her. Larry was caressing her cheek and head in comfort. She felt his lips as he brushed her head, as he held her close.

"Caroline, can you see me?"

Her voice was shaking as she answered. "No. It is as if I am trying to see underwater. My throat hurts. My head. My leg. I hurt everywhere." She did not move her head from his chest but clung to him even closer. She was frightened still, and his strength was now her strength.

“Honey, can you tell me what happened?” Larry asked, “But if it hurts too much to talk now, that can wait. Now I am going to move away, just to get you some water. I will be back in half a minute. Just sit still, don’t try to move.”

“Good girl. I think that is the first time you have ever done what I told you to do. Now, have some water. Slowly, not too fast.” He began to dampen her tear-soaked face with a soft cloth and then dried it away. He gave her more water as he held her in his arms. After awhile, he felt her relax and gently guided her back onto the pillow. “I am going to go upstairs and call an ambulance and Martha to meet us at the hospital.”

“No,” Caroline sat back up. “No ambulance. How can I tell anyone I was hurt in a bad dream? They will think I’m crazier than they even suspected. No, no ambulance. Just call Martha and ask her to come. Please, Larry, then come back. I am afraid to be alone right now.”

He bent to kiss her lips gently and then disappeared up the stairs. As she settled back, her eyes began to focus. What she saw was so frightening, she screamed again. There at the foot of the cot stood Malcolm and the man who had tried to hang her. Both were looking at her, the murderer with that evil smile, Malcolm with a sad expression.

Her scream brought Larry back, bounding down the stairs three at a time. He stopped dead as he looked at where she was staring. “So, this is Malcolm,” he spoke in a very low voice. “Were you part of whatever just happened to Caroline?” Malcolm made no move or answer to admit or deny the question.

Caroline was watching the murderer. “Larry, can you see the other one? He is the one who was trying to hang me, like he did his girlfriend when this was a speakeasy and illegal moonshine place.”

Larry moved to sit beside her. “No, honey, only Malcolm. There is no one else with him...at least that I can see.”

Caroline looked at the ghostly presence that was her former lover. He was much fainter than the last time she had seen him. That was the night she told him to leave, that she would never love him. It was as if without his contact, physically, with her, he was losing his substance. Maybe he would eventually fade away again to nothing, if she stayed away from him.

That hope was suddenly taken away from her as the murderer walked up behind Larry and hit him over the head with the a heavy piece of wood left

behind by one of the workers. Larry fell to the floor, blood running from his head.

Before she could move to help him, Malcolm had moved forward and was straddling her body, ripping her clothes away as he held her arms and pushed down his pants. He nuzzled her breasts, kissed her neck, and held her head to the pillow with his face as he pushed his tongue into her mouth. He spread her legs with his knees and drove his swollen penis into her. Her dryness and his roughness were painful as he grunted into her repeatedly. "Malcolm, please," she begged, "You are hurting me. Please make me wet so it does not hurt so much."

He slowed and withdrew his gigantic penis. He ran his fingers inside her mouth and then moved them into her vagina, rubbing her clit until the moisture began to rise. As soon as he felt it, he slid back into her to complete his lust. She did not return his sexual actions, because it was not lovemaking as before. She was not fighting, but there was no longer any enjoyment in it for her.

When he was done, he sat beside her on the cot. She heard his words in her head...he could not speak aloud now. "You could have been loved for all eternity, as I wanted, but you refused. So now you will feel my wrath as you just did, any time I desire you. If you do not comply, I will send you back to the speakeasy, and they will find your body swinging from a chandelier, just like the other one. Do you understand? Oh, and one more thing: get rid of this man, or we will kill him. I will visit you again tonight and hope you are more loving. It will go better for you if you are."

## Chapter 27

Now it was her turn to take care of Larry. She limped to the sink for more water and clothes. He was beginning to make small noises that resembled swear words and got increasingly louder. As his memory returned, he tried to stand, looking wildly around the room. He finally noted that Caroline was mostly naked. That stopped him.

“What the hell happened? Who hit me? Why are you naked? Oh, my God, did Malcolm....” She put her fingers over his lips to stop his words.

She pushed him down on the edge of the cot again as she applied the damp cloth to the back of his head. “The ghost you could not see, the one with Malcolm, came up behind you and hit you with that board,” she said as she pointed to it. “When you were out, Malcolm reminded me of his offer of love and showed me the results of my refusal. He said if I did not become more loving in the future, he would have the other one take me back to the 20s and hang me. There are articles about that and other murders here in the house, on the dining room table. Can you walk? Let’s go upstairs.”

Larry was not as shaky as she might have expected, angrier than anything else. He took one of her arms, put the crutch under the other, and together they climbed stairs. Somewhere he found a large shirt left by one of the workers, which he draped over her shoulders. He smiled at her as he spoke. “It isn’t as if I don’t like you without clothes, but that will have to wait.”

Once in the kitchen, she ran warm water over his cut, smeared some salve on the cut, and handed him a glass of ice water. “Drink it. I am going to drive you to see Martha. You can tell her you rose up under something or that I beamed you, which she would more likely believe.”

“Forget it,” Larry replied, “I am not going to see any doctor. What we ARE going to do is get you out of here. Permanently! Before you start squawking, Caroline, you have to listen. It is unsafe for you here. Malcolm

you might convince to be nice, for favors, but the other thing just wants to kill, pure and simple. Unless you have a solution to get rid of him, you will have to leave. Now, let's go upstairs and get your things."

"Whoa! Slow down, Buck-O! I am not going anywhere. I will not let a bunch of no-see-'ums run me out of my house. Give me a minute to think of some solution. Like, hey, you could move in here too. And Doc and Georgia and their kids. And Martha and Tom and Charlie and James and the whole town, except for Hal and Margo. They can go somewhere else. What do you think?"

His face was red, as if ready to explode in anger, but it exploded instead in laughter. He shook his head from side to side, smiling as he gathered her into his arms. She loved the sense of security she felt there, with her head on his chest. "You are the damnest thing I have ever met, Miss Fleming. Even when I want to strangle you, I want to kiss you."

Caroline raised her lips to meet his. She felt her eyes close and the world shift until there were only the two of them in it. She tingled and returned his rising passion as the kisses became deeper, the caresses more lustful. They stood this way, holding tightly together, every inch of them touching. He had pulled the oversized shirt away and was running his hand up and down her back and buttocks. "You are the smoothest, softest woman in the world. I want you, but not here, not now."

He pulled away, picked up her crutch, and helped her upstairs to her room. Grabbing suitcases from her closet, he started taking clothes off hangers and throwing them into the luggage without regard to what he was doing or what he was taking. From the bathroom, he brought toothpaste and a brush, a comb, and a handful of cosmetics that he tossed on top of the clothes. She moved to her closet and took down a pair of slacks and a blouse, a pair of shoes, and a jacket. From the bureau, she retrieved underwear and a bra. Without a word, she dressed, closed the suitcases, and nodded to him. He said not a word as he made several trips down to the truck with her luggage.

On his last trip, he helped her down, but she detoured through the kitchen to load a bag with food for the pets that were standing outside by his feet. She added the envelopes of photographs to the bag, and then the pages of her novel in a file folder. For some reason, leaving them there did not seem like a good idea.

Caroline calmly locked the door and, with one crutch, made it down the stairs. She walked straight into his arms, took his face in her hands, and kissed him deeply. She finally spoke, “This is not a permanent move, Larry—it’s just until I can figure out what to do. I will not let anyone or anything chase me out of my home.” She opened the door for Gilligan to jump into the truck, picked up Snowball, climbed in herself, and looked back at the house as they drove down the drive.

At the highway, she asked him to stop for her mail. She handed it through the window and, with her crutch, walked across to the log in the brush where she sat to watch the ocean. He joined her on the log, where they sat for a time just staring out to sea, not touching, each lost in his or her own thoughts, until the truck horn honked. A bouncing black bundle of Terrier energy had apparently been enough weight to make the horn sound. They laughed and together crossed back and headed to town.

## Chapter 28

"Where are you taking me? Just stop at the Dew Drop Inn and I can get a room there, no problem," Caroline said.

"No, I am taking you to someplace no one will think to look for you. Not my place, or Martha's, or any of the usual. We will stop to see Doc and Georgia and have dinner first and tell them not to worry when we disappear for a week or two."

Caroline looked at him in wonder. "A week or two? No way. A day or two maximum. By then I'll have it figured out. I hope."

Larry did not reply, just smiled. They pulled into the parking lot at the Oceanside Seafood Restaurant and parked by the door. He came around to help her out of the truck. She tried to remember the last time a man had done that. Must be a long-gone courtesy in this era, as she could not remember, but she did enjoy having him take her hand and then her arm to move her inside.

Georgia looked up, eyebrows lowered as she watched him carefully lead her friend to a booth and take her crutch once she was seated. He seated himself next to Caroline, instead of across, which was the normal thing to do.

"Okay, Larry, I get it." Georgia moved forward with menus. "You're hemming her in so she can't get away. I saw you gripping her arm outside so she couldn't run. Right?"

"Wrong," he replied. "I was just practicing my etiquette. My mom used to drum into my head that a gentleman did those things. Maybe, Georgia, you're just too old to remember?"

She hit him with the menu and flopped into the booth across from them. "What's going on? Not that I

m unhappy to see you two seemingly at peace. I'm looking to see where the hatchet is buried...in whose head. Looks like both heads. Start talking."

By the time the story was told, Georgia was shaking her head. "I completely agree with Larry, honey. You cannot stay there any more. With Malcolm watching out for you, you were safe. Now he is angry with you and has a henchman, and you are anything but safe."

Turning to Larry, she asked, "Where are you taking her?"

Caroline looked at Larry. "I wish you would tell me that too. Please, Larry."

"No," he replied. "I'm telling no one. I don't want those see-through folks to have any clue where she is. That is the only way I can think of to keep her safe. But I promise to have her back in a couple weeks. All healed up, so I can chase her without giving her a head start anymore." He laughed, but the women did not.

Doc joined them between customers and came out to kiss Caroline before they left. "We will take a ride out there every couple days to see if everything is okay until you get back. Have a good, SAFE time."

No matter how she cajoled him, Larry would not tell her where they were going. They made two stops, the first at his house, for him to gather clothes. He took her crutch so she could not follow him. "Place is a bachelor pad, unfit for the eyes of a lovely, refined lady such as yourself." He jumped out before she could throw anything at him.

The second stop was at the Duckworth's home, where he took Gilligan and Snowball with him to the door. James answered his knock, bent down, and scooped an animal in each arm. Larry set the bag inside the door and nodded to James, who waved at Caroline.

"You had that all figured out, didn't you?" Caroline asked. "When did you arrange all this?"

"I called James while I was packing. I am a multi-talented type person. Can pack and talk into the phone at the same time. Now, sit back and take a nap. We have a long drive ahead of us." Larry leaned over to place a gentle kiss on her lips, then her eyes, then her cheeks. "Crap, I had better stop now or we will never even get on the road, Caroline."

She smiled at him. "Would that be so bad?"

He merely smiled and started the truck, heading south. He followed the coastline for miles and then moved across to Interstate 5 South. She was asleep when he turned east toward Lake Tahoe. When she awoke, it was



very dark, and so mountainous she could see nothing but the roadside reflectors and an occasional traffic sign.

They made small talk until she simply said, "I have to pee." He pulled off the road at the next wide stop he found. He helped her out of the truck and turned his back while she emptied her incredibly full bladder. Once she was inside, he relieved himself too and then climbed back behind the steering wheel. "No more strangers after that," she said, laughing.

After an hour, the night sky started to lighten, and traffic picked up. Finally, she saw a sign indicating a turn to Lake Tahoe, to Carson City, to Reno. He stopped the truck and looked at her. "Name your game, my lady. Where do you want to go?"

"Any place with a swimming pool, although I didn't pack a suit. Any place with a big bed with smooth white sheets. Any place with endless restaurants with more food that one can ever eat, of every kind. Any place you pick."

"Okay," Larry answered. "I'm picking one with the biggest bed I can find. One with satin sheets, big enough for two."

Caroline giggled. "Can you find a round one? Or one shaped like a heart? Or like Liberace's piano?"

"Darling, if that is what you want, then a round one it is. Or heart shaped. Piano...well, I'm not so sure about that."

He pulled into the first casino/hotel on the highway, left her in the truck, and came out grinning. "Okay, I found one, so hang tight." Moving down the road, he pulled into Caesar's Tahoe parking lot. Before going inside, he pulled her close and kissed her deeply, hungrily. She responded. "Whew," Larry moved away, "Now look what you've done. I can't go in there like this." He pointed to the huge mound between his legs. "Guess you will just have to go get us that room."

"You found what?" Caroline wanted to know, while ignoring his last suggestion.

"A heart-shaped bed. Are you or are you not going inside to get us a room?"

"I am most certainly not," Caroline replied. "I absolutely refuse to. I will sleep here in the truck first. I will stand outside in the sprinklers for a shower. I will mug people for food. I will sell my body for money. So there!"

“Okay, I get the point,” Larry said. “Guess I’ll just have to watch all that. Will you take off you clothes in the sprinkler, as little girls do? Can I watch while you sell your body? Maybe I’ll learn some new moves. What do you think?”

By that time, they were both laughing so hard, his erection had lost some of its size, at least enough so he felt safe to go find them a room. He was gone such a long time, Caroline started to wonder what had happened. When he returned, he gave a valet the truck keys, while a porter unloaded their luggage and preceded them inside.

The lobby was magnificent. Marble floors, Roman statuary, fountains, and toga-covered employees were everywhere. Just ahead of them was the casino, bright and noisy, humming with life. But neither of them was interested in it just now. Larry in particular was anxious to get up to their room. He was so anxious for Caroline to see what awaited her.

The porter opened the door to a suite of rooms. A balcony was off to the left, looking out over the entire town and lake beyond. A fully equipped bar, mirrored and crystal, was to the right. In the center were sitting areas, music areas, a dining area, and an area in front of the fireplace next to where they had just entered. A bottle of champagne stood in a bucket by one of the fireplace couches, which surrounded a furry rug on the floor.

Moving ahead of them, the porter exited straight ahead, turning on the lights as he went. Through the door, they could see a huge heart-shaped bed covered with a white satin quilt. Above it was a canopy of white satin with matching gauze, all accented with dark purple bows and flowers. On each pillow was a dark purple rose. There were chairs of purple and white, accent tables and mirrors in gold and white. The carpet was purple, so the white seemed to glow around the entire room.

“Larry, I have never seen anything so beautiful in my life.” She turned to him.

The sound of a throat clearing reminded him that the porter was awaiting his tip. Larry handed it to him. With a thank you, he indicated he would lock up on his way out.

She moved into his arms for an endless kiss. Slowly, she started to unbutton his shirt, but his hands stopped her. “No, not yet, darling. First, I need to ask you something. I thought about this the entire time you were

sleeping on our way here.” He dropped to one knee, looked up at her, and asked, “Will you marry me?”

Caroline was dumbfounded. She could think of nothing...nothing at all. Was she dreaming, or was he joking? That must be it...he was joking.

She took his hand and pulled him to his feet. “Larry, that is really not funny. I know that you are not serious. You hardly like me, let alone love me. And I feel the same about you. So stop being silly, and let me get a shower.” She turned away quickly because she did not want him to see the tears in her eyes. In her heart, she knew she did love him, probably had from the first day she saw him leaning so indolently against her kitchen counter, appraising her body, making her shiver, and making her body respond inwardly.

She practically ran into the bathroom, too upset to notice the gold and white appointments. Stripping off her clothes, she pulled aside the curtain, turned on the water, and stepped inside. Now the tears could flow, and it would not matter as she held her face to the falling water. A sob escaped her throat, and she dropped down to the shower floor, head bowed, crying into her arms.

She did not hear him move behind the curtain with her. She was startled to feel his arms around her as he knelt beside her. He lifted her face, gently kissing her eyes and then her lips. As they kissed, he pulled them upright. He slid his arms so tightly around her that she could feel every inch of his body against her. He touched her face, her hair, her neck.

“Caroline, it was not a joke. I do love you. I want you to marry me. I want you to love me. I want to protect you. I want you to be mine. Even if you do not love me now, please consider that you might love me in the future. If you cannot say ‘yes’ now, I will understand and wait as long as it take for you to say it later.” He kissed her again, softly, over and over until her mind was reeling.

She moved her head away from him, knowing that if he continued to kiss her like that, he would never stop. She had to tell him, “Larry, please listen. I do love you and I do want to marry you, but right now all you want is my body, and I want yours. When this flurry of passion is quelled, you will wish you had not asked. I understand that. Can’t we just give in to the passion and love each other without the ties of a marriage?”

It was his turn to pull away completely. "No, Caroline, we cannot. If that is what you think, then you're right. We should not marry. Nor should we just have sex. Yes, I want your sex, but I want you more than that." He stepped out of the shower, grabbed his clothes, and moved into the bedroom.

Caroline was still dripping wet when she reached him, her towel barely wrapped around her. "Please, Larry, don't run off again. Let me explain."

"Honey, you can explain all you want, but I won't be here. I will arrange for you to stay a couple weeks and then fly home from Reno to Portland. I'll drive back and finish the house and be done with you. Hell, I think I'll even move away, maybe back to Portland with my sister for a while or even another state. I can't live there this way any more. Goodbye, Caroline, have a good life."

"Wait!" She grasped his arm. He shrugged her away, moving to the door. "Larry, I love you. Yes, yes, yes, I will marry you." She dropped to her knee at his feet, towel spilling around her on the floor, exposing all her charms. "Larry Gardiner, I love you with all my heart. Will you marry me?"

For long moments, neither of them moved. She finally rose. He made no movement to touch her or even speak. At last, he reached for her hand. Looking deeply into her tear-swollen eyes, his eyes too filled with tears. "Yes, Caroline Fleming, I will marry you. But we will do it right. I will arrange a wedding fit for a queen. My Queen Caroline. I will call you in the morning, and we'll go shopping. You will need a dress and I a suit or whatever men wear."

He leaned forward and kissed her forehead. "Goodnight, my sweet." He unlocked the door and closed it gently behind him. She was standing naked with the towel at her feet, and he had left her. She sank to the floor and cried.

## Chapter 29

Morning came to find Caroline wrapped in one of the huge towels, asleep on a couch. When the phone rang, she awoke, confused as to where she was. "Hello. Yes, but give me five minutes."

It was not Larry, but rather room service, asking if they could bring a light breakfast for them. For her. She felt tears but decided enough was enough. She ran into the bedroom, careful not to look at the bed. She pulled on some clothes and gathered her dirty ones from the bathroom floor, shoving them in a bag provided. She would not have them laundered here but would do that when she got home tomorrow, or even tonight.

Room service arrived with a covered tray. The server took his tip and left. She opened the tray to see a pitcher of coffee, some pastries and juice, and an envelope. For a long while, she debated rather or not to open it, but finally she eagerly pulled out the paper inside.

"Darling. I understand there is some stupid custom that a groom is not to see his bride on their wedding day, so I will abide with it, even though I would rather come up there and ravish you this very minute. A car will be waiting for you in front at 10 AM. Just tell the bellman your name. They will know your destination. Larry. P.S., I love you more every second."

Caroline was smiling ear to ear. She read and re-read the note a dozen times while she drank her juice and coffee. At 9:55, she took the elevator to the lobby. At the door, a bellman asked her name. He motioned her ahead of him outside to a waiting limo, long and white. The chauffeur nodded to her and then drove off. She had no idea where they were going until the limo pulled up in front of a lavish wedding store.

As she entered, a woman asked her name and smiled. "I am Madame LaMoora, and I will assist you. Please make yourself comfortable in the pink chair to the right and watch as the staff brings out items for your selection. We will be a bit longer than planned, because the gentleman had

no idea of your size. I truly think he would not know a size 4 from a 24, but it is so obvious he adores you. Is a size 10 right?"

Caroline nodded, took the glass of wine offered, and nodded yes or no as each dress passed in front of her. When she had seen enough, she indicated she would like to try them on.

It was no problem choosing. She selected a soft lavender gown, so light it was nearly white. To the delight and amazement of the staff, she asked if they had a dark, dark purple cloak or cape that would match. They did! She selected shoes, undergarments, including a garter belt and very sexy rhinestone hose, a barely-there bra and two incredible nightgowns. The people there were enthralled at how lovely she looked when adorned in her wedding attire. They even asked if they could have her photographed for their front window. One of them crept forward to ask for an autograph for a copy of one of her books; until then, no one had known of her celebrity, which she'd asked to remain secret for a few weeks.

Once the gown was chosen, Caroline was amazed to find that she was to spend most of the day in the back of the building that opened up into a full spa. After selecting a dress, she allowed them to groom her. Next they gave her hair a trim, submerged her in a fragrant bath, subjected her to a manicure and pedicure, and then redressed her to go. Madame LaMoora came for her. "My dear, apparently you were not told. You are to return to the waiting limousine for the last part of your trip. The driver knows where he is to take you."

Caroline thanked them all and signed for the purchases with a more than healthy gratuity added. The chauffeur again nodded, closed the door, and drove back to the hotel, but this time to a side door, where he rang a bell and waited for a response before handing her out. She moved inside. It was rather dark after the bright late afternoon sun.

A tall, elegant woman of indeterminable age was waiting for her. "We will take a private elevator to the chapel. This way, please!" The elevator was so silent that it was wherever they were going before Caroline was even aware that they had moved. She stepped out into a hall while the woman moved to a phone behind a sliding panel and spoke.

The woman indicated for her to enter a room off to the side. It turned out to be a dressing room where her gown was hanging and her underwear awaiting her. A maid in black and white was waiting to help her into her

wedding ensemble. She looked at herself in the mirror and saw a beautiful woman glowing with happiness.

As she emerged from the room, a photographer began snapping her picture. She smiled for him and then looked at the elegant woman who was waiting. The woman opened the sliding panel and spoke on the phone again.

Immediately the sound of the wedding prelude came from behind a pair of doors that were slowly opening in front of her. There were only four people she could see ahead of her. She started to move carefully forward, a bit unsteady without either crutch, when a tuxedoed James Duckworth, who whispered, "I am giving you away, if that is okay," took her arm. His grin was so big it lit up the entire chapel.

Caroline was amazed to see Doc and Georgia standing with Larry in front of the minister. The music faded away. The minister began the ceremony. When he reached the "Who giveth this woman" part, James proudly said, "I do," and sat down by his wife in the front pew.

Larry came to her, took her hands in his, and looked at her with such love she thought she would faint. The ring he slipped on her finger was a shiny gold, simple and beautiful. The ceremony finally concluded with, "You may kiss the bride." He moved his lips to press against hers, but forced himself to stop when her response inflamed him so that he could hardly stand it. Everyone applauded, and there were kisses all around.

It took a few minutes outside the chapel for picture taking and explanations. Larry was incredibly handsome in his white tuxedo with a purple cummerbund. The other men wore black and white tuxedos. Both women were adorned in purple, too, although it was not until much later that Caroline found out the others were hidden away at the wedding salon until she had made her selection, so their attire would match. They were both in new hairstyles, too, and full makeup. Doc spent a lot of time nuzzling his plump wife, and even James planted a husbandly kiss or two on his wife's cheeks.

Apparently, Larry had phoned the Duckworths and Joneses the minute he left Caroline in the suite the afternoon before. He arranged for flights for all four and accommodations for three nights. They had arrived very late that night and would leave early two days from now, after a couple nights of shows and gambling or whatever. Larry had paid for everything, but as he

said, "The gambling losses are on you!" They agreed to meet for brunch the following morning.

Once alone, they held hands and kissed gently several times. Many an "I love you" was whispered. They found the elevator and took it back up to their suite.



## Chapter 30

Larry unlocked the door, pushed it open, and scooped his bride into his arms. It was a good thing there was nothing in the way of his movements when he walked inside, because they were so tightly together in their passionate kissing. As he set Caroline on her feet, she began to pull his tuxedo back, forcing him to drop his arms so she could remove it. With his arms held behind him, she licked his lips and slid her tongue inside, giving him a lightning strike through his whole body.

He dropped the jacket to the floor and reached behind her to unzip her dress as he whispered, "You are so beautiful, so sexy. I have had an erection all day, waiting for this moment. Caroline, I love you, I want you." He pushed the dress down below her waist so that it fell in a shimmering lavender pool around her legs. He took a deep breath. She was wearing a strapless bra so skimpy that it barely covered her breasts, forcing them to mound like molten ivory. He unfastened the bra as she unbuttoned his shirt, sliding her hands inside to caress his chest and gently pinch his nipples. His desire was so great, he felt he might explode, so he pulled away to remove the shirt, cummerbund, trousers, and shoes and socks, adding to her excitement as she watched him. He was as beautiful as Adonis, and plainly aroused. She wanted him as much as he desired her.

Her bikini panties slipped down easily in his hands. His eyes feasted on the satiny white garter belt holding the hosiery glittering with rhinestones. "Darling, oh my God, darling," he groaned. His mouth took each nipple in turn, licking it and sucking it to a point, as Caroline reached into his black shorts to feel the huge penis that she wanted.

Afraid again that it was too much too soon, he dropped to his knees to kiss his way down over her stomach into the curls below. The garter belt and nylons only added to his frenzy as he pushed his tongue into vaginal lips

until he felt the aroused clit, which he began to lick until he made her spasm, spasm and spasm again.

He stood, again taking her into his arms, kissing her as he laid her on the bed. It was covered with gardenia blossom that immediately gave off their heavenly fragrance as they crushed under her body. He removed his shorts, knelt between her legs, and said, "Darling, I cannot wait a second more." Caroline opened her legs wide to let him slide his throbbing penis into her wet, waiting softness. He moaned as she wrapped her legs around him. He set the motion, slowly in and out at first, and then with increased intensity until she cried out and he exploded.

Later, after the initial minutes of divine ecstasy and momentary exhaustion, they entwined around one another, arms and legs tightly together. He pulled her close, and they kissed again. She licked his nipples, ears, cheeks. He sucked her breast until again they hardened. Larry was amazed to feel his penis hardening again. He put her hand around it and closed his eyes as her hand moved up and down gently, making it start to throb. She replaced her hand with her mouth, loving his erection.

When it was so hard, she feared it would not wait for her; she sat astraddle his waist and lowered herself down on him, feeling the smooth but rock-hardness of his penis within her. She moved up and down on it as he gazed at her face before taking it in his hands to pull her up just a bit to kiss. The movements did not last long, as their excitement was simply too much. They exploded together. Caroline fell forward on his sated body, and they slept.

The rising sun over the mountains woke them. Together, still naked, they stood at the window looking out over the lake, surrounded by homes and resorts, but with an abundance of wilderness still. Larry ran his hand up and down her hip until she turned to him to press her breast against him. When she felt him harden, she jumped away, laughing.

"Come on, you satyr, we need to shower." She ran and had the water running by the time he moved up against her back, sliding his penis between her legs. "Are you ever satisfied?" she asked as she rubbed herself against him.

"How could any man be satisfied with someone as beautiful and sexy as you, beside the fact that I love you?" They stepped into the water and began to soap and shampoo each other until they were clean and then started

soaping again, this time for fun. Within seconds, Caroline had her legs around his waist as he leaned against the wall, holding her as she moved on his penis. When he arched up into her, she knew nothing but love for him, from that moment to forever.

They returned to their bed, where they lay talking, whispering love words until they dozed again. The telephone woke them.

"Hey, you two. We are in the lobby waiting and are totally starved. Do you know what time it is! Probably not, but you have one hour to get your tired butts down here." Doc was laughing as he talked. "Do you hear? one hour, not one minute more! If you're not here by then, we will all be up to drag you out, no matter how much or how little you have on."

Caroline had held her head next to the phone and heard the conversation. Wearing a perplexed expression, she asked, "Sweetheart, can you think of something we can do for the next 55 minutes?" They laughed, and the lovemaking began anew. He brought her to climax time and again with his lips and hands and then slid himself between her legs to finish them both.

They had it to the lobby with 5 minutes to spare. Both wore shorts, tank tops, and walking shoes. "Okay, guys, here we are! What is it you wanted?" Larry asked.

Georgia replied, "I want a complete accounting of everything that happened between the time you left us last night and just now. Okay, who wants to start first?" Both James and Sadie looked flustered, and Doc swatted her butt lightly.

"Watch your mouth, woman. I will try to find out for you later," Doc whispered aloud. "Now, how about some food—on you, of course?"

After a hardy breakfast, they took advantage of the pool. The men found a card game, and the women found boutiques. Later, they piled into a rented car and toured the lake, stopping at casinos and wherever they felt like stopping. Back in their rooms, they dressed for dinner, except for the newlyweds who undressed for sex and then dressed for dinner. They met at the Rivera in the Continental Theater to see Barry Manilow, who was one of Caroline's favorites. Larry spent the rest of the evening trying to serenade her in his best Manilow voice, but all agreed that Barry had nothing to worry about.

Lovemaking this evening was not strictly for the bride and groom, but was the evening's finish for both the Joneses and Duckworths as well. James patted his wife on her bottom as they snuggled to sleep, saying, "Sadie, my love, you are still something else!"—and he meant it. In their room, Doc brought Georgia to multi-climaxes with his mouth and hands. He was asleep before she returned from her shower, eyes still red with tears, as they were on so many nights after they made love.

The last day for the six-some together included a trip to Virginia City, where they saw Eddie Arnold and Kenny Rogers playing tourists. Seeing them thoroughly delighted the women. The men liked the table at the Bucket of Blood Saloon and actually left it with change in their pockets.

Back in town, the evening's highlight was the performance of Tennessee Ernie Ford, whom they all adored. They said their goodnights, as four had a very early flight to catch back to Portland in the morning. James said he would check with the police to see if they could resume work, and Georgia promised to check 'their' house, as it was no longer 'Caroline's,' every day to be sure all was fine. The newlyweds said they would return in about ten days, "but don't hold your breath."

They spent the next days together, learning about each other. Who liked clam sauce on spaghetti, and who liked meat and mushrooms? Who liked to read in bed, and who liked to watch TV...if making love was not an option here? Who loved bluegrass music, and who preferred jazz? Who liked football best, or who liked baseball? Who yearned for a Jaguar, and who wanted a Rolls Royce? Who knew how to water-ski, and who learned in the icy water of Lake Tahoe?

They learned that their birthdays were two days apart, plus 7 years, Caroline being older. What was her favorite flower and his favorite sport? Who liked mountain climbing, and who like spelunking? And who is Savannah Bronson?

Larry laughed loudly when she asked about the lovely woman he had taken to dinner the evening he refused her invitation. "Were you jealous, my dDarling wife? I have to admit she is a gorgeous woman, even if she is my cousin."

"Your cousin? You creep! Why didn't you introduce her as such, instead of making me wonder all this time?"

Larry became serious. "Actually, I didn't want you to know. I wanted you to wonder. I was trying, I guess, to get even on some level for the razor burn and all the other things. I admit it...I was, and am...jealous of ol' Malcolm. Or any other man who might have even a glimmer of want for you. I love you, Caroline. I love you more than you can even imagine."

"I love you, too, Larry." They leaned forward to kiss, and nature took over from there.

\* \* \* \*

Evenings, they attended shows. At the Sahara in the Congo Room, they saw James Darren and Lou Rawls on different nights. In the Versailles Theater, they enjoyed Kenny Rogers one night and Paul Anka another. The last evening, Larry had selected Lido de Paris 80 at the Stardust's Café Continental. He enjoyed the barely clad women and showed Caroline his appreciation of them by putting one arm around her shoulder and one hand between her legs, where he stroked through her panties until she had to bite her tongue to keep from crying out. He pulled her hand away from his bulging slacks because he knew if she continued, he would leave with a huge wet spot.

They had plans to leave early in the morning, so they ordered from room service. They dined, drank champagne, and made love on the furry rug in front of the fireplace for one last time. In bed naked, they cuddled like spoons and fell asleep immediately.

Toward morning, nature called Caroline to the bathroom, where she shut the door and moved the switch. Nothing happened—no light. *No, not again*, she thought, *it can't be. Not here, not now*.

Yes, Malcolm was there. First, she felt the cold cloud, and then his warm hands as he leaned against her, pushing her back until her back hit the counter. A large mirror above it reflected the small amount of light coming in under the door so that she could see him, faintly. He had more substance than she might have expected without her contact with him. "How did you find us? Why are you here?"

His hands moved to her breast, squeezing none too gently. He bit her ear and whispered in it. "Hello, Caroline, my unfaithful woman. A plump, sexy little birdie told me where you were, and for that, I have thanked her as she

wanted. And, I dare say, she enjoyed herself thoroughly. I am here because you belong to me, now and always.”

“Let me go, Malcolm. I love my husband and no one else. I will have no other man, alive or dead, touch me ever again.” She struggled, but he held her tight against the counter.

Malcolm laughed, harshly, as his hand roamed her naked body. “Listen, Caroline, and listen well. If you do not cooperate, do not love me as you once did, do not return to our sexual encounters willingly, then I will simply kill him. Do you understand?” His mouth covered hers as if to give her time to think.

Thinking did not help. Caroline saw only that she had to do what he wanted. She let him move her hand to wrap around his penis as he ran his finger into her curls. He turned her so they were both facing the mirror, so she could watch as he rubbed her. Before he was finished, he had her on the floor so he could touch and feel every inch of her, so he could lick and taste her entire body. The touches that at one time had been wonderful were now repugnant to her, but she had no choice.

After Malcolm left, she turned on the light. Caroline showered until she was bright red from the hot water. She wrapped herself in one of the huge hotel towels and quietly moved out of the bath through the bedroom, shutting the door softly behind her. She stood outside on the balcony, looking down on the lake and town below. Only a light or two tinkled around the lake, and all might have been dark directly below were it not for the never-closing town and casinos. She sat in the patio chair, pulled the towel tighter around her, and cried softly.

She had to keep Larry safe, and the only way she could that was to obey Malcolm, forever. She could never tell Larry. Their marriage now had its first secret.

## Chapter 31

She returned to the living room. The sky was lightening ever so little. She called room service for a couple pots of coffee and an order for one large and one small breakfast at seven. When the coffee arrived, she sat, curled up on the couch, and waited for daylight.

She heard Larry as he moved around the bedroom, presumably to the bath. She waited until she was sure he was there, and then quietly crept back to bed. He came out with only a towel around his body, his muscular chest still damp with water. "Hey, beautiful, where were you? I was about ready to call a search party or the National Guard to find you." He dropped the towel and slid in beside her, taking her in his arms, kissing her face and eyes. "What is this? You've been crying. Why, darling? What's wrong?"

Caroline smiled up at him with tears returning. "I was sitting in the dark, thinking that I am the luckiest woman in the world to have you. I love you so much it brought tears to my eyes." She closed her eyes and found his lips. Soon she moved under him, trying to block out all memories of what had happened in the bathroom. Finally, they dissipated in her passion and love for Larry, but came rushing back in as she lay beside him, spent from their lovemaking.

*Dear Lord, she prayed to herself, please do not let this be this way for the rest of our lives. Larry does not deserve it. Please tell me what to do.* There was no answer.

They casually ate the breakfast she had ordered, hers hardly going down. "Honey," he said, "You have got to eat. I hate skinny women. And I really appreciate all this food. Are you trying to fatten me up? Well, I can think of one way to burn off some of these calories." He pulled her into his laps, kissing her shoulder, moving his hands under her robe.

Caroline forced herself to laugh. She had to act normally, or he would wonder what was wrong. "Listen up, you insatiable brute—we have to hit

the road. Those were your orders last night. I am going to get dressed now. Alone! By myself! Without any assistance!" She planted a kiss on his head as she scurried to the bedroom, closing the door behind her. She leaned against it for a couple of minutes and straightened herself, vowing to win. Somehow!

The trip back was uneventful, although the one long day it should have taken turned into two as they came across a lovely old mountain inn. They were taking a different, more scenic route home and could not pass up the ambience of the place. They had a long walk, an early dinner, and a wonderful evening of each other.

They arrived home at dusk. He parked the truck and went ahead to unlock the door. When she reached his side, he picked her up again to carry her across the threshold. Kissing and touches, many, excited them both as they moved up the stairs. This was the first time they had made love in their home, and it was wonderful. They snuggled together without turning on any lights, simply holding each other.

Larry finally spoke, "It appears that the house has finally decided to accept me. It did not rain on us, or shake, rattle and roll, or any of its outstanding abilities. Frankly, I was afraid I might have to take a crowbar to it or something."

Caroline giggled, sincerely this time, in agreement. What a relief!

"Now, sweetie, I'm going to run to town for the mail and some groceries. Be back in an hour or so," he said as he slipped into his clothes. He bent to kiss her as he hurried down and out.

"Well, wasn't that sweet?" Malcolm's voice startled her. She felt him slid in beside her. "A little domestic bliss. I actually did enjoy watching. I think that will become my favorite pastime. No matter what he does, I will do it better. And you will think so, too, won't you, my unfaithful lover? Starting now."

She felt him touching her and pushed herself from the bed. "Malcolm, I will do what you want, but I have some rules of my own. You will NEVER come to this bed again. I will not have sex with you as long as my husband's love still surrounds me, inside and out. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Caroline, I do. We will take care of that now." He grabbed her arm, dragging her to the bathroom, and shoved her into the shower. He started the water and began to soap her body. "We will wash him off you,



although it might have been more fun with you still wet inside. Never mind, you will be again soon.”

When he was done with her on the floor, he simply rose, pulled up his trousers, and walked away without a word. He was hardly transparent anymore. This time she did not cry, but rather washed herself again and dressed in a pretty peignoir and gown with matching slippers. She went downstairs to put ice in its bucket, chill a bottle of champagne and make some canapés. It was very pleasant outside, so she moved it all to the front porch, where she waited for the headlight to move up the driveway to the house. She stood so he could see her in the lights and waved.

Once again, he could not keep his hands off her, but she reminded him that sometimes a woman, even a bride, needed a break, that her period had started and she did not feel like sex. He moaned, groaned and grumbled, but kissed her gently. “Guess I was hoping you might have caught a baby while we were gone. I would like nothing more than a dozen little Carolines running around under foot, crying and pooping, as long as they are as lovely as their mother.”

Caroline laughed and returned his kiss before sitting down, handing him his vodka on the rocks. Inside, she was not laughing. Was it possible to get pregnant by a ghost? That was another thing to worry about, but she would take measures to be sure it did not happen. She had birth control pills but had not taken any for months, as she had not been sexually active since her divorce, until she came here. Larry would be disappointed, month after month, when she did not conceive. Now there was another secret in their marriage.

Five full days went by before she sensed Malcolm again, close to her. She did not know if he had been watching them in bed but had decided she didn't care. Her period had ended, and she had been more than delighted to resume sex with her wonderful husband. When she and Larry made love, it was making love. What she had to do with Malcolm was simply sex—blackmailed sex.

The coroner's office finished tearing the property apart and published findings that the bodies were from the 1920s but unidentified. Jeff stopped by to tell them the project could continue, so the work resumed, making the crew happy with paychecks again.

Larry was outside with the crew, still being razzed for marrying the boss. James had given a complete report as to the wedding, the casinos, the shows, the food, and everything. He said Caroline was the most beautiful bride he had ever given away, before admitting she was the first and only one. Nevertheless, he stated she was still the most beautiful bride in the world—even Sadie had agreed.

Caroline felt Malcolm's coldness as he moved up behind her to reach around her, sliding his warm hand inside her blouse to cover her breasts. "Hello, beautiful Caroline. You and that man spend so damn much time doing each other that it is hard to find you without his essence on or in you. I knew I would have the opportunity when he was working and you had washed him off your body. Like right now."

"Malcolm, stop that. Larry might come inside any minute," Caroline replied.

"No, he will not. I heard him tell the men that he's going to Newport to pick up some materials and will be gone a couple hours. See, there he goes now. Oh, good. Look who is driving up." He did not remove his arms or hands but slipped one of them down the front of her jeans.

The doorbell rang. "Yell for her to come in," he ordered. Caroline complied, mystified that he did not disappear, as he was almost completely visible now. The door opened to Georgia, who stepped inside, only to stop short, eyes wide. "Come here, pretty Georgia. Come join our little party."

Caroline jerked away from him, understanding his mention of a 'plump sexy birdie' who told him where she and Larry were. Georgia. Georgia, her friend. Georgia, whom she trusted, had betrayed her.

Malcolm laughed, as he knew she understood everything now. He did not pursue Caroline, but moved to Georgia, pulling her to him, pressing his mouth down on hers. This time, she too struggled away. "Now one of you needs to satisfy my desires. Who will it be? Shall we draw straws?" He laughed again. "Tell you what; I will sit right down here while you two talk it out. Should be an entertaining conversation."

The women looked at each other for a long time before Georgia spoke. "Caroline, please let me explain."

"I can't think of any explanation you can offer that will wipe out your promise to help us, to keep our location secret."

“Hey, ladies, I think you are just jealous of one another. Do not worry—there’s enough of me to handle you both.” Malcolm was grinning.

Caroline glared at him. “Shut up, do you hear me? Shut up! Okay, Georgia, I’m listening. Why did you betray us?”

Georgia sat with a thud on one of the loveseats, tears flowing. “I came here to check the house, like I promised. Malcolm was here and started touching me. It had been so long since any man had shown desire for me like that; I simply gave myself up to the feelings, to the lust and need for loving, even from a stranger. A ghost—and you can’t get much stranger than that, now can you?” she asked, trying to make a joke.

“What do you mean, you need loving? Doc loves you; that is clear to everyone. We all saw that every day we were gone.”

“Yes, Doc loves me, but he can’t make love to me. He has not been able to for about 10 years, after he got an electrical shock rewiring our old barn. Not that he hasn’t tried, bless him. He does what he can to help me, but sometimes what I need is more than his fingers or his mouth. I need his cock, and that he can’t give me. When Malcolm put my hand on his erection, I couldn’t stop. I wanted it and him, and he gave it all to me. Every day when I came to check on the house, I came for Malcolm.

“Oh, Caroline, I am so sorry. One day when I was so lustful, he denied me what I wanted unless I told him where you were. I knew it was wrong, but I needed him so desperately that I told him. The minute I did, he laughed and left me on the floor panting in desire, unfulfilled, as he went after you. He used me, and I let him and enjoyed it too. I just wish I had kept my mouth shut about Tahoe.”

“Oh, Sweet Georgia, come here, little one, and I will finish what I did not that day. And, I do not want you to keep your mouth shut. I have something I want to fill it with.” He moved to where she sat and pulled her up, pushing his tongue into her mouth.

Caroline totally ignored him. “You are why he has continued to gain body substance. He is using us both to become complete again. First me, then you, now both of us. Georgia, we have to fight him. Pull away, knee him in the groin. Do something.”

“Now, Caroline, that was not very nice. Suggesting that she knee me. Shame on you! Look at her. She does not have the will right now to even stop my kisses, do you, little bird?” Malcolm continued to caress and nuzzle

Georgia. Her blouse was open under his hands, and she was making tiny mewling sounds.

Caroline rushed across the room, yanking Georgia away from him. Georgia groaned, "Please, Caroline, I need him so badly." Caroline pulled back her hand and slapped Georgia's face, not hard enough to leave a print, but hard enough to pull her back to reality. Georgia looked stunned. She collapsed back on the loveseat, with Caroline's arms holding her.

Caroline patted her head as she whispered to her friend that everything would be fine. However, in her heart, she knew better. Things were only going to get worse.

## Chapter 32

Malcolm stood watching them. Finally, he spoke. "Okay, ladies, I don't really care right now which of you it is, but I have a big lust and it needs to be attended right now. Georgia, I have told Caroline that if she does not comply, I will kill that man she married. Now, the same goes for you. I will kill that Doc person if you deny me anything. So, who is it going to be?"

Georgia rose. "Caroline, all this is my fault. I will handle him for now. But not here. Upstairs, all the way, to Susan's room. That is it, Malcolm. Okay with you?" He just grinned as they moved up the stairs.

Caroline went up to her room to sit on the balcony. Above her head as she passed through the room, she could hear the faint sounds of lovemaking. No, not lovemaking—just sex taking place. Well—maybe not, maybe for Georgia it still was lovemaking. And if so, okay for her. But for Caroline, it had to stop.

She saw Georgia's car drive off and felt nothing for her friend. No sorrow, no anger, no hope. Nothing. Whom could she talk to about this? No one. She would just have to live this life, loving one man and hating the other. She now thought of him as a man because except for a thin layer of transparency, he was whole, and she suspected that after his encounter with Georgia upstairs, he might now be complete again.

Suddenly, she had a thought. Strange idea, but was it possible. Once he was whole, no longer in spirit form, would it be possible to kill him so that he could not return? She did not know, but decided she needed to talk about part of it to Larry, only not any part with her shame and lies in it. Now if Malcolm was full again, it would be harder for him to listen to them without being seen. She sat and waited until Larry returned and the crew left for the day.

He was not too taken with her idea for a walk on the beach, but a few loving kisses and a promise of more later convinced him that it was a great

plan. They took a bottle of wine and a couple of glasses in the picnic basket, along with some crackers and cheese and a blanket and drove a ways down the coast to the hidden paths to the beach. When they reached the beach by themselves, Caroline was sure—they found a large log protected from the wind and spread their blanket on the soft sand.

“Hey, baby doll, this is a great idea. Not a soul on the beach as far as I can see, and no one can look down on us from above. Now, would you like to explain to me how you know this place?” Larry was grinning as he reached for her but stopped when he saw how serious she was. “What is it, Caroline—what’s wrong?”

She chose her words carefully, so as not to say anything that might give away the dreadful secrets she was keeping from him. “Malcolm is getting stronger and is almost completely whole again, Larry. I saw him today, and he is barely transparent. Before you say a word, let me tell you that Georgia has been his newest prey. Whenever she came to check the house, he seduced her, and it was not hard. But telling you this is hard.” She paused a minute before continuing.

“Doc cannot get an erection. He cannot make love to her as she needs, so when Malcolm made his advances, Georgia took what he offered. Repeatedly. Even today when I was home. He threatened her, but I don’t think it was the threat, but her desire for fulfilling sex, that made her comply.”

Larry did not reply at all, but just looked at her, waiting for her to continue.

“Every time Georgia was with him, he gained more of his body back. He will be complete again soon, and God only knows what will happen then. You know as much about these spirits as I do, so do you think that when he does get his body fully again, we can somehow destroy him? I think that is the only way to free Georgia from him. We can never tell Doc anything, or it would destroy their marriage.” She waited, but again Larry did not answer.

“Honey,” Caroline asked, “what’s wrong? Why don’t you make some comment?”

“Perhaps I will when you decide to tell me all of it. When you decide to stop with the half-truths. What are you not telling me, Caroline?”

It was her turn to stare at him, trying to think what she had said or let slip that made him suspicious of her. She knew she was not a good liar, but she had not lied. She had just not told everything, and somehow he knew. Trying to stall to give herself time to think, she opened the picnic basket to take out the wine and glasses, but he slammed it shut under her fingers.

"Talk to me, Caroline. You are hiding things, and I want to know what they are. Don't you trust me enough to be honest with me? Have you been with Malcolm again? Are you making up this thing about Georgia to cover the fact that he is repairing from sex with you?" He took her by the shoulder, shaking her. "Answer me, Caroline."

"No, I'm not making it up about Georgia. She seems to want him as much as he wants to use her."

"Fine, Caroline, so far so good. Now answer my other questions. Have you been with Malcolm again? Okay, I can see you have. God, Caroline, this hurts more than you can even imagine. Where and when? How many times? God, aren't I enough for you? I would give you the moon if you wanted it, and all I ask in return is for you to be my wife, mine alone. Did you enjoy him? No, I don't want to know. I'm sure you did, as you told me a few weeks ago that you had. Is he better than I am? Apparently so." Larry's hurt and anger were evident as he waved his arms, shouting at her. "Answer me."

Instead, she hung her head, as she had once before when she did not want to answer his questions, could not answer his questions.

"Okay, Caroline, I get it. Same as the time the house shook when we started making love. You looked like a whipped puppy then, and you look the same now. Shit." He stood still a long time before he headed up the beach. Over his shoulder, he said, "You take the truck. I will walk back to the house. Have my things packed when I get there, or just throw them off the balcony for all I care. I will get out of your house and your life and leave both to Malcolm. That should make you both very happy. Goodbye."

Caroline ran after him, trying to grab his arm, but he shrugged her off. He ignored her as if she did not exist. Finally, she stopped chasing him. She sat in the sand, watching him as he became smaller and smaller in the distance until he was but a little dot. She finally returned to the log where they had been. She pulled the blanket around her. She poured wine into one

of the glasses and drained it in one long pull. Then she refilled it, sat down behind the log, and simply stared into space.

Her love had just walked away from her, out of her life, this time for good. Malcolm had won, and he had not had to do a thing but threaten her. She was lost but could still save Larry. He was her world—gone or not, she wanted him safe, and she knew of only one way to ensure that. She had never been a coward, never been a person who did not face the problems in her life straight on, but this time they seemed insurmountable. She had not even tried to tell Larry about the threats, because she knew Malcolm would kill him. Her mind had become numb with hurt and fear. In her grief, she failed to consider that he knew her intercourse with him was unwilling sex and would do him no good in solidifying or remaining so. That would not change even if he killed Larry, so perhaps he would not follow through with his threat. But she could not take a chance.

When the bottle was empty, she watched the sun dipping into the water as it set. She stood and dropped the blanket. She took off her shoes, walking barefoot behind the log. She wrote, “I love you, Larry, forever” in the sand and then walked toward the water. It was terribly cold, as the Pacific Ocean off the Oregon Coast always is. She could feel her feet numbing already. She waded out to her waist, then sank to her shoulders and began swimming away from the shore until it was but a stretch of white sand in the distance. She rolled over onto her back and let the sea carry her in its bosom. Caroline would miss her class reunion.



## Chapter 33

Larry climbed the path up the cliff to the pull-off on the road across from the house. He had cried as he walked, deep, heartbreaking sobs roaring from his throat. He had never felt such pain in his life. He loved her so. It was impossible for him to comprehend that she had been unfaithful to him, in a marriage of only a few weeks. What did the ghost give her that he could not? What did he do wrong? What could he have changed to make her love him more? Why? Why? Why?

He crossed the highway and walked the driveway. His truck was not back, but he did not care. He went inside, found an old suitcase, shoved some clothes in it, and went to the bathroom for his razor and personal items. Inside the medicine cabinet, he accidentally knocked over a bottle of pills from behind a row of prescriptions. He had no intention of picking up any of the mess he was making when his eye caught the name on the bottle. It was for birth control.

He picked up the bottle, holding it in his hand until the pain of knowing she had no intention of having a child with him was more than he could bear. He threw the bottle, and it hit a mirror, breaking everything. Glass was shattered around the room, and several small pieces hit his hands and face, making small cuts that dripped blood as he moved. Little pills rolled all around the room. He stepped on them and glass as he ran down the back stairs trailing blood and then out through the kitchen door. As he closed the door, he heard laughter, masculine laughter, deep and victorious.

A company pickup he used on his jobs was there, so he took it. The laughter spurred him into even deeper anger. He spun the tires in the gravel and sped down the drive with such speed that the work truck tipped on two wheels as he pulled out onto Highway 101, heading north. One quick last look at the house verified what he knew he would see: a man stood on the balcony outside Caroline's bedroom.

He passed Doc and Georgia's busy restaurant, sped through town, and headed north toward Portland. He had talked to his sister since the night they married, making Rena one of the first to know, and she had been so happy for him. Now he could tell her that his beautiful wife was a slut who preferred a ghost to him. At a rest stop on Interstate 5, he pulled into a dark area in the parking lot to sleep. He could go no further that night.

When the crew arrived the next morning at the house, they were surprised to see the work truck and Larry's personal truck both gone. No one answered either door, although the animals were barking and mewling. James drove back toward town after giving the crew his work plans for the day, and then he went to see if Georgia or Doc knew where they were.

"Hi, little southern gal." James grinned and hugged Georgia. "Just came from Caroline's house"—a slip of the tongue—"and neither she nor Larry seems to be around. I don't have a key anymore, but no one inside answered but the animals."

Georgia picked up the phone, dialing their number. It rang at least a dozen times before she hung up. "Hey, Doc, honey, I am going with James to see what is wrong...hopefully nothing...out at the Gardiners. Be back in a few minutes," she called to him. They heard a mumbled reply and then were out the door.

"Listen, James, I will take my own car so you don't have to bring me back after we find them. Probably still in bed, as good newlyweds should be." Georgia felt a moment of apprehension. To herself, she thought, *Dear God, you don't suppose Malcolm got mad at her and killed Larry? Or maybe both of them. His temper is horrendous when he doesn't get his way, like a spoiled child.*

Once in front of the house, Georgia parked while James went on around to the back. She unlocked the front and ran through to unlock the back, all the time yelling out the couple's names. James followed her up the back stairs, down the hall, and into the master bedroom. It was a shambles with clothes on the floor, hanging out of bureaus and slipshod on hangers in the closet. The bed was made. No one had slept in it last night.

The bathroom was worse. Glass was everywhere, and drops of blood were in the sink and on the floor. Georgia picked up the cracked prescription bottle. Seeing what it was, she wondered why Caroline was taking it, as

Larry had made it so plain he wanted a dozen kids. She knew she should have put it back down, but instead she slipped it into her pocket.

James finally spoke. "I think we had better call the police, Georgia." He moved back into the bedroom but decided it would be better if he used the kitchen phone in case there were fingerprints there. He ran downstairs. Georgia could hear his voice, and then she felt those familiar arms wrap themselves around her and the beard against her neck as the lips nuzzled her cheeks.

Georgia pulled away and spun around. "Don't touch me. Did you hurt them? Where are they? I know you know, so tell me."

Malcolm gave her one of his most sardonic smiles. "Now, now, little bird, calm down. I didn't do anything to either of them, but I can tell you that Larry came home, packed a bag, and took the work truck when he left. Carolyn did not come home at all last night, after they left together with a picnic basket. I suspected they were planning a tryst on the beach. Caroline probably wanted a place where I would not watch. She was right—I simply did not have the inclination to follow them and hide, since I am sure now even stupid Larry can see me."

"So come here, little bird, and let me touch you. We only have a minute before that rumbling hulk of a man gets back up here, but I want to feel your wetness and a few kisses to tide me over until one of my sexy women returns to satisfy me. Ah, yes, that is nice. Now, put your hand into my trousers. Good, good, now rub me. Perfect. Here, a few spasms for you to enjoy. Oh, the elephant is back. I will be on you later, literally—that I promise."

He left Georgia shaking indeed in the aftermath of his rubbing her between her legs. She really wanted to finish what he had started, but there was no time for either him or her to give completion. She held on to the door knob until she felt strength return to her.

"Police are on their way. Said we should go back down to the kitchen and wait. I put some coffee on." James took her arm as they moved back down the hall. "Honey, are you alright? You're shaking like a leaf."

Ashamed, Georgia answered, "Guess it's the fear that something must have happened."

James pointed out what looked like blood drops on the carpet runners, and George was sure he was right. They sat, waiting. The coffee wasn't

finished when they first police car pulled up in front. No one even knocked, just called, “James, you here? It’s Jeff Donaldson.”

“In the kitchen, Jeff. Me and Georgia.”

Jeff took a chair backwards, straddling it and facing them. In his hand, he held a small notebook. “Okay, tell me what’s going on.”

They could hear other men moving around inside the house, especially upstairs. They took turns telling Jeff what they had done and seen, what little they had. There were no real differences in what they reported, which pleased Jeff. In his mind, if there had been some crime here, he was certain these two were innocent, although Georgia seemed very nervous. He made a note of that as a future reminder. He told them to remain in the kitchen as he moved away and up.

It seemed an eternity before Jeff returned. He nodded at them and then went to the telephone. They heard bits and pieces of his conversation, but with other police talking, they missed more than they heard. When he hung up, he turned to them. “Larry’s pickup has been found on the side of the road a couple miles south. It was cold, hadn’t been driven for many hours. I’ve sent a team down to the beaches to search. You might as well go home, because there’s nothing more you can do here. Forensics will be here in a couple minutes to do blood analyses, et cetera, so no one will be allowed back upstairs for a day or so, or until we find them. James, best you send the workers home too. I want to keep this place as pristine as we can. Georgia, I’ll let you both know if I find out anything.”

James returned to the crew and Georgia to her car. She has just turned north on Highway 101 toward the restaurant when she saw a movement in the rear view mirror. So startled she nearly drove off the road, she steadied the car and pulled into a side road on her right. She turned toward the backseat. “Malcolm, what are you doing here? You scared me half to death.”

“I am here, little bird, to finish what we started. Too damn many cops in the house, and it is too chilly on the ground for your sweet body, so this vehicle will just have to work this time. Unless you have a blanket somewhere. That would be less confining. Don’t give me that look. You are going to service my needs, and I will give you what you ALWAYS need. That is, if you want to keep your happy little family together.”

Georgia knew she was beat, by both his threat and her wanton lust for what he did to her. She turned and drove the car farther into the forest until she found a place she could turn around. When the car was in a return position, she turned it off. From the trunk, she removed a blanket. She walked deeper into the wood. She heard nothing but knew he was right behind her.

Malcolm pulled the blanket from her and spread it on the ground. He started to undress her and arouse her at the same time. He removed his clothes slowly, smiling as she looked at his huge erection. "I know that you want it inside of you, even as you look at it, but first you will taste and relish every inch of it. Lay down. Yes, that is perfect. This position, you living ones have a name for it. Some number, I believe. I like it this way. I can watch you take me in your mouth while I taste your wetness. Let us see how many times you climax before I finally give you the cock you want so badly. Do you want to count them? No, better I do—you will be too busy to keep track. Ah, here comes the first one. Oh, yes, I love to watch your hips move."

When he decided he had teased her enough, he mounted her from behind and then, resting back on his lower legs, knees bent, he pulled her up on him with his penis deeply inside. "Now, move up and down on it. Use your feet to raise yourself, and I will pull your hips down. Yes, this is a nice rhythm. You are enjoying it, are you not, my sweet?" He stopped talking as he closed his eyes and let himself go with the pleasure. Georgia cried out one last time as he impaled her down on him so hard she felt pain and ecstasy.

He left her on the blanket, heading alone through the forest back toward the house. She was wet with sweat and fluids that she wiped away with leaves and the blanket. Like always after their encounters, she felt disgusted with herself but knew she could not stop as long as he wanted her. She drove home to shower, throw the blanket in the washing machine, and change before returning to the restaurant.

## Chapter 33

At the restaurant, Georgia went to the kitchen to give Doc a hug and tell him what had transpired at the house. "I already know about it, Georgia." Doc turned his cheek away from her kiss. "James and a bunch of the men were here for quite a while and told us all about it. Even James commented that he had expected you to be back before he got here. After we close, perhaps we can sit down and you can explain where you have been. Now, if it isn't too much trouble, will you take these plates out to Hal and Margo Hathaway? They've been waiting quite awhile. I got behind having to cook and wait tables both." He turned his back to her, returning to the stove.

Georgia felt a stab of fear run through her. She had never seen Doc so cold, nor had he ever before questioned her whereabouts. *What's wrong? Maybe he's just worried about Larry and Caroline. Yes, that has to be it.*

She took the meals to Hal and Margo. Margo started to complain before Georgia even got to the table. "It's about time, don't you think, Georgia? We have been waiting forever, and I'm starved. Hal is too and he gets belligerent without food, don't you, dear? It's probably cold anyway. Yes, just as I suspected. You can just take it back and get warm food for us."

"Nah, Georgia, these are just fine. After all, the only difference between a warm sandwich and a cold sandwich is a couple of degrees." He took a big bite. "Mmm, just great. Can I have some more coffee, please, and then some information?"

Georgia knew he was going to ask about Caroline and she had no answers. She poured the coffee and brought some more water for Margo, who spoke first. "I hear your little friend has disappeared. Did she kill her new husband, do you think, or did he do her in? Either way, fine with me. She will be gone to her grave or jail. Think I will throw a party to celebrate."

Hal just pretended not to hear, but Georgia was seeing red, literally. She wanted to toss the hot coffee in Margo's face. Maybe that would wipe off the sneer. "Margo," she asked as calmly as she could, "how can you say that? Caroline and Larry are too wonderful people who are very much in love. Why should anything they do concern you in any way?"

"Oh, I know you think she is a friend of yours, but I doubt if she has ever had a real friend." Margo looked pointedly at her husband. "She is a user, a taker. All she's done since she got to town is cause trouble. She is all anyone talks about, like she's a queen or something, instead of someone who just writes those stupid little books."

Georgia could take no more. "Margo, you are the stupid one. Her books have been on top of every bestseller list in the country. She has been paid millions for them and her appearances on TV and in bookstores. Her talent is more than the rest of this town put together can compare. She is a kind, loving soul who would never hurt anyone. And if people talk about her, it is in praise. Present company excepted, I am sure! Hal, if you still have a shred of decency, how can you sit there and let her talk like this?"

Hal looked uncomfortable but replied, "Guess I have to admit she is a nice person, always has been. Generous, too. Give you the shirt off her back." Before he could continue, Margo cut in.

"Shirt off her back, Hal? We both know she gave you a hell of a lot more than her shirt. You yourself told me all the things she did to you and you did to her. Even those foursomes you did with other couples. You always like to watch as much as participate, and you had a good teacher."

He jumped up, grabbing her wrist, tipping over his chair as he pulled her up. He yelled, "Shut your damn filthy mouth, Margo." He dragged her out of her chair and out the door. At their car, he opened his door and shoved her roughly inside. He climbed behind the steering wheel. People in the restaurant could see and even hear their argument. After a couple of minutes, he pulled back his hand his hit her on the side of her face. She doubled over, but he hit her again.

"Hey," one of the old men started outside, leaving is dinner on the table. "You stop hitting her, damn it. No decent man hits a woman, even one who deserves it as much as she does."

Hal jumped out of the car, fists in the air. "You gonna stop me, you stinkin' old man?"

The old man stepped back. Hal yelled, "Didn't think so. Mind your own business, or next time I will beat the shit out of you." He returned to the car and sped away, throwing gravel everywhere.

No one said anything when the rescuer returned to his table. Georgia brought him a big piece of apple pie a la mode and patted his shoulder with a whispered "thank you."

\* \* \* \*

Jeff Donaldson wandered about the house, taking notes. He sat at Caroline's desk, idly looking through the desk drawers, her calendar, her files. He noted the pile of papers stacked neatly upside down in a box on one corner of her desk. He inverted the box onto the surface, careful not to bend or fold any sheet. He began reading. *"Last night a ghost made love to me. Yes, a ghost. No human form. No dream either. A warm presence with soft lips, a rough beard, a probing tongue, incredible hands, and wonderful, working body parts. There was no doubt...all the physical reminders were there later. Moreover, it was not the first time, but the second. This time was in my bed, the first in the bathroom. He came to me like any horny man who had been without a woman for half a century. And he was good!"*

Jeff stopped there, surprised that Caroline had written something like this. He had read everything she had ever written, and none of it was remotely like this. Maybe it was a diary...did people type their diaries? Whatever it was, it was more than he could believe. He was still sitting there when the first of his investigating teams returned. He indicated chairs in her study.

The two officers had worked so long together that they even sounded alike when they spoke. One would start a sentence or thought, and the other might finish it. But they were always accurate. "Well, Jeff, we checked out the pickup and nothing there. We found a trail down that look like it was freshly used. Just a few yards from the bottom, we say a blanket dropped in a pile on the ground behind a large driftwood log. There was a picnic basket with cheese and crackers in it and one wine glass. The other was in the sand with an empty wine bottle. Behind that was some writing in the sand, but the wind had obliterated most of it. There were what looked like footsteps heading down to the water, but we couldn't tell if they were a man's or



woman's. There was another set going north. We secured the site and waited for the rest of the crew to arrive to bag, measure, photograph, et cetera. The truck will go to the police garage this afternoon for further investigating. Oh, yes, Dick Darrow and Clarence Clark went on up the beach following the prints north, but again, no idea if the wind and surf will leave anything for them to find."

Jeff asked them a couple dozen questions just to get it all straight in his mind before thanking them and telling them to follow the pickup and take the evidence to the crime lab. He then reread the beginning of the book Caroline had on her desk. This time, he read everything she had written. *This is incredible*, he thought. *She writes like it actually happened. But of course, it didn't...couldn't. It's no wonder everyone thinks she's such a great novelist. If I didn't know better, I would believe it myself.* He carefully returned the pages to the box. He hoped the fingerprint people had not missed her desk. When he saw dust, he felt reassured. It would be interesting to see whose prints were on her book.

Jeff could remember every word he had read, so he decided to follow her words around her house. He tried to keep in mind that initially there was no furniture to speak of in the house. Behind the stairs—he knew she had slept there. He moved upstairs to her bedroom again. He could not help thinking that he would have liked to be the man who shared her bed, instead of her husband. He actually liked Larry, but he hadn't been able to get Caroline out of his mind since her return. Her marriage took away any hope he might have had in the direction.

He found the narrow steps up to the third floor. It was still dusty, but ample lighting was installed, so he could see clearly in every room. In the last pair, the ones over Caroline's bedroom, he noted the decaying old bed and wondered why no one had tossed it. On closer inspection, he found stains that appeared to be fresh. He returned to his car for an evidence kit and then to the bed to take some samples. Without testing, he was sure in his mind that they were semen. It seemed unlikely that anyone would want to have sex on that disgusting old bed, but in his career, he had seen much worse places people had copulated. He also found some hairs, which he suspected were both from human heads and pubic areas. How this would have any bearing on the Gardiners' disappearances, he had no idea, but he would find out.

He had just finished his house tour when he heard two very excited voices. The police car with his second team had just pulled up. The two men literally ran to the door as he opened it. “Hey, what’s going on? I haven’t seen you this excited since the Trailblazers won the championship.”

Clarence was the senior partner, so he spoke first. “Well, here is what happened. We headed north trying to follow those footprints that left the log. From the depth and stride, they probably will test as a man’s. They disappeared as the creeks running down the cliffs washed them away. We were still about two miles from the cliff below this house when we heard a horrendous noise. A car was coming over the end of the cliff. It hit the ground so hard it seemed to flatten completely. We ran for it as fast as we could. It was a red sporty thing, but before we could get close, it started to burn and then exploded. We had to duck to keep from being hit by flying debris. It was just a few metal pieces by the time we got there. No sign of anybody or anything! I called for assistance, but there was no one to assist. While we waited, the fire went out. We walked up the path onto the highway. But, Jeff, there was no sign that a car had gone over. Not a damn thing. And when we looked back down, there was no sign of a car. No metal, no burned area. No nothing! Craziest thing I ever saw, or should I say, did not see.”

Jeff had listened without a word. “Dick,” he asked, “anything to add?”

“No sir—that is exactly what happened.”

The three sat in Caroline’s living room, on Caroline’s furniture. “Say, Jeff, isn’t this the room where that girl was found hanging in the 20s after that bootleg raid?” Dick Darrow asked. “My grandpa told me all about it, even had some old pictures. He worked for the newspaper then, typesetting. Said it was never solved.”

“As far as I know, all that is true,” Jeff answered. “One of these old chandeliers, apparently.”

“Kind of a spooky place to live, wouldn’t you think?” Clarence seemed to find the place distasteful, and Jeff could understand a little. There were too many strange things that had happened and were now happening to allow anyone to feel comfortable here. Nevertheless, apparently, Caroline had. So where was she now?

## Chapter 34

Caroline washed up the day after she disappeared. Late in the afternoon, a pair of lovers had found a hidden place just a few yards from where she and Larry had gone to picnic. The sea and animals had been kind to her, coupled with the fact that she was only in the water for such a short time; there was surprisingly little evidence of her state.

The couple walked toward a pile of logs where the center was unseen from the outside world. He was so excited, he had already removed her top and bra as they walked. The cold wind coming off the ocean had caused her breasts to dimple and harden. She cried that she was cold and ran ahead of him, only to come to a screaming halt just a couple feet from the body. Caroline's body.

The young man ran for help as the girl dressed. She was crying as she found her way back up the cliff to wait for his return. He had started honking the car horn the minute he started it, hoping to get someone's attention. A police car came his direction, waved him over, and called in his report. The officers were Dick and Clarence, just finished with their talk with Jeff. Even before they made it to the beach, they knew who it was, and they were right.

Jeff arrived only minutes later. Dick was taking a statement from the young lovers as Clarence stayed by the body. Caroline was fully clothed but for her shoes, which they had found by the log. He turned to Jeff without saying anything, just spread his hands as if wordless. Jeff nodded and knelt by the woman who had so enamored him, both recently and 20 years before. Her face was swollen and white. Seaweed clung to her limbs and hair.

He closed his eyes, trying to wipe away this body to replace it with the one he had held in his welcoming arms when they had met recently. He knew there was no point in torturing himself, but he realized now he had loved her, just the beginning of a mature, wanting love. His mind kicked

into its 'all business' mode as he issued commands and waited for the coroner. He knew now his work was just beginning.

\* \* \* \*

"Is the coroner on his way?" Jeff asked Dick, who nodded an affirmative.

"Actually, Jeff, he is still at Caroline's House...I mean, the Gardiner house. His crew is on the way. Actually, they are on their way down the path now."

"Ok, then put out an APB for Lawrence Gardiner. Cordon off the entire beach, for what good it will do now, but maybe we will get lucky," Jeff replied.

"Jeff," Dick said slowly, "you're acting like this is a crime scene. Do you think foul play here, not an accidental drowning?"

"We don't know yet if it is a drowning or what, and until we do, we will just follow procedure. Stay with the coroner until he moves the body. I assume he will transport her to Newport for an autopsy, but make sure. Once he and his cohorts are gone, you two go over the entire area with a fine-tooth comb. If we have to strain every inch of the sand here, we will do it. Call me if you find anything at all. I'm going to talk to Georgia and Doc Jones and then go to the house."

He started to walk away but turned back. "And mark everything here, from the shoes to the picnic basket, as evidence. Just in case. I sure hope it was accidental, but my gut instinct tells me different."

Jeff Donaldson had no idea why he felt it was not an accident, but the feeling was heavy, and in his experience, any feeling this heavy was generally correct. *Maybe I'm biased because Caroline was important to me. Maybe I'm looking for someone to blame because she's dead. Maybe...maybe...maybe...*

By the time he reached the restaurant, rumors were running rampant. The closed sign was up, but Jeff could see the couple and went inside. Doc was holding Georgia in his arms as she sobbed endlessly against his shoulder. There were tears in Doc's eyes as well. Jeff squeezed Doc's shoulder before going to the coffeepot behind the counter and returning with three steaming mugs. He took a chair across the table from them and waited.

Doc spoke softly to Georgia. Finally, she raised her swollen face to look at Jeff. He leaned across the table to kiss her cheek. Her voice was husky in her raw throat. "Jeff, tell me what we heard was a lie. Caroline is not dead!"

"Honey, I'm afraid it's true. It appears that she drowned."

"That's crazy. She could swim like a fish, even in that icy water. Sometimes a bunch of us would swim out to the nearest buoy, and she was always the first one back. She said the cold Pacific would make anyone swim fast, just to get out of it."

Jeff took her hand. "Georgia, I know that. I was one of the imbeciles who did that dumb swimming along with you and Caroline. I tried to keep up with her but ran a poor tenth or twelfth out of eight. That girl could swim, no doubt of that. Preliminary investigation shows an empty bottle of wine with only one used glass. We should know soon who drank from the glass, and if it was Caroline, that might have been a factor in her swimming ability."

"Now, honey, and you too, Doc, have you seen Larry? No one has any idea where he is. Do you?"

Doc spoke first. "You don't think Larry knows anything about this, do you? Maybe he does not even know his wife is dead. God, what a horrible thought."

Jeff did not answer, but looked deeply into Georgia's eyes. "Were they having troubles? Did they argue often? Tell me about their relationship."

Georgia bristled, instantly angry. "Jeff, you may be my friend, but I will not have you asking me about my other friends. They were so much in love it was unbelievable. They were together every possible minute. He worshiped her, and she felt the same. No two people I have ever seen are better matched. So you just stop thinking Larry had anything to do with her death, or I will never speak to you again. Now go away, I don't even want to look at you right now."

"I'm sorry, Georgia, but I have to ask these questions. I'm not trying to hurt you, or Larry either. It's important for us to find Larry. He might be dead, too, for all we know. Can you give me any idea where he might have gone?"

Georgia was still a bit hostile, but she finally answered. "He has a sister, Rena Gardiner, who lives in or near Portland. She is an interior decorator,

and according to Larry, a pretty good one with a lot of clients. I don't have an address or anything."

"Thanks, honey. We can find her. Now, why don't you just go home and get some sleep. I promise to call you when we know something." They watched him walk to his car. His anger began to spill out as he opened the door. He pounded his fist on the top of the vehicle until Doc thought he might cause damage. After Jeff entered the car, he crossed his arms across the steering wheel and rested his head on them. They both knew he was crying and turned away to allow him his private grief.

## Chapter 35

Larry awoke with an aching back and a headache. After leaving the rest stop, he continued north, leaving I-5 again at the Aurora/Donald exit. He pulled into the truck stop there for breakfast. He was so deep in his thoughts that he did not notice people looking at him nor the newspapers they were reading, or he would have seen both his and Caroline's photos on the front page of the Portland Oregonian. He noted the police cars that pulled in, sirens blaring, but gave them no thought but to wonder whom they wanted here.

He found out immediately, as four State Patrolmen moved to surround him, guns drawn. They motioned the other people to move away. One ordered him to stand, which he did, confused. "What's going on, officers? I have done nothing, unless it's an unpaid traffic ticket I forgot." His joke fell flat as they handcuffed his arms behind his back and patted him down for weapons. "Hey, this is enough. What am I being arrested for?"

One officer took his wallet, opened it, and nodded. "What is your name?"

Larry looked at him and said, "You already know, for Christ's sake. You just looked at my driver's license. I'm not saying another word until you tell me what's going on here."

Another replied, "It's not what we are doing—it's what you may have done. We're taking you in for questioning about the death of Caroline Fleming Gardiner."

Larry stood, looking at the man in disbelief. "Caroline? Caroline's dead? No, I do not believe it." He shook his head back and forth, as if trying to shake away the words he had heard.

"Well, son," replied the oldest of the four, "you'd better believe it. Her body washed ashore yesterday morning. They think she drowned on a beach just a ways from her home. Now, those folks over in Lincoln County want

to talk to you. We're taking you to the courthouse in McMinnville, and they will pick you up there. Now come along like a good boy and don't give us any problems." They read him his rights, and he nodded that he understood, but if they had asked him if he could fly by flapping his arms, he would have nodded his agreement to that too.

Larry was too stunned even to think and, like a zombie, he did exactly as they said. Caroline could not be dead. She did not drown. She was waiting at the house for him to return. He was sorry he had doubted her. She loved him, he knew. And he loved her. She was not dead. No way, they were going to convince him. They were lying, pure and simple. He did not even consider why they had arrested him. He refused to believe any of it and simply rode with his head in the corner of the car, against the window.

\* \* \* \*

Jeff stood outside the Lincoln County courthouse where he had waited until the car arrived with Larry. He could see when they took Larry inside that he was pretty much out of it, but in his fury, Jeff thought it was guilt he was seeing. He knew he had to table that observance until there was guilt proven, and not before. After all, there was not a shred of evidence at this time to even point to a crime. Yet!

Still in a daze, Larry was hardly aware that he was in a cell until Jeff Donaldson appeared through the bars. Larry jumped up. "Jeff, what is going on? Where is Caroline? They told me she's dead, but that's crap. Please, Jeff." He was holding on to the bars so tightly his knuckles were white and his nails were digging into his palms.

Jeff simply stood, looking at Larry, not answering. Finally, he spoke. "Larry, I think you need to answer a few questions before I can answer any of yours. When and where did you last see your wife?" It was hard for Jeff to utter those words. Had she been his wife instead of Larry's, she would be safe and sound, not full of seawater in the morgue. Jeff felt bile in his throat and hate in his heart. He knew he had to keep his voice calm and detached. "Come on, Larry, answer me."

Larry returned the stare, as if just finding his way out of a dream. "Jeff, are you saying Caroline is dead?"

Jeff merely nodded.



“Oh, God, Dear God. NO! NO! NO! Not Caroline! Are you sure? It’s a mistake, right?” But this time, in his befuddled brain, the dimness of truth began to flicker. He dropped his face into his hands and began to sob, heart-wrenching sobs. Watching him, Jeff felt pity, knowing how he had felt himself when he knew she was dead.

Jeff turned to one of the guards. “Take him to one of the interview rooms, but give him a few minutes to pull himself together. Call me when he’s there?” The man nodded and locked the door as Jeff exited. Even the guard, a man of many years in his profession, would later admit he had never heard such pain before. Even when his own Emily died, he did not hurt this bad, he was sure.

Larry sat in the interrogation room, staring at the floor, when Jeff arrived, carrying two cups of very black coffee. He took a chair facing Larry, but turned it so he could lean against the back as he straddled it. “Larry, when did you see Caroline last?” He pointed to the small tape recorder he had placed between them. Larry nodded okay.

“She and I were having a light picnic on the beach. Some sandwiches and a bottle of wine. She loved to do that, even when the weather did not cooperate. That was yesterday, I think, maybe the day before. Things are kind of fuzzy now.”

“Tell me what happened,” Jeff asked.

“What do you mean what happened? We talked awhile, and then I walked up the beach and headed for home.”

“Why did you leave Caroline on the beach? Did you have an argument or something?”

Larry did not look up but studied his handcuffs as if he had never seen them before. In almost a whisper, he replied, “Yes, Jeff, we had an argument. I just left her there and went home to pack some clothes and stuff. I was going to Portland to my sister’s to think things out.”

“What was the argument about?”

Larry hesitated. “You wouldn’t believe it if I told you.”

“Try me anyway.”

“Jeff, I am not answering any more questions until you tell me what is going on.”

The policeman knew Larry well enough personally to understand that he was not going to say another word until he got his answers. “Larry,

Caroline's body washed ashore in the morning's high tide, just a few yards from where we found the empty wine bottle and picnic basket."

For a long time, Larry's eyes met Jeff's fully. "You don't think I had anything to do with her death? Did she drown or fall off the cliff or what? Tell me, damn it, Jeff."

"All we know for sure right now is that she drowned. She did not have any abrasions or cuts to indicate any trauma before she was in the water. If you would just help me out here, we can figure this out together and let the poor woman go. Tell me about the argument."

Larry refused to answer. Jeff waited. "Larry, if you aren't going to cooperate, I suggest you get a lawyer. I'm not saying there was any foul play here, but by refusing to help, it looks like you have something to hide. Do you want me to call one for you, or do you want to do that yourself?"

"I am entitled to one call, right? I want to call Doc and Georgia. I will tell them what I want."

"Fine, Larry. I will have a phone brought to you here so you can call before you go back to your cell. And, Larry, think this through. No one wants to say you had anything to do with her death, but your attitude does make one wonder."

## Chapter 36

“Georgia, this is Larry. Just listen, as I have only three minutes. I am in jail. They think I had something to do with Caroline’s...you know!” He could not bring himself to say it again, as it was too painful. “I apparently need an attorney. Will you call Marv Slattery and have him come down here ASAP? County Jail. Honey, I have no idea what’s going on, but I loved her more than life itself. You know that.

“We had an argument about our mutual friend who haunts our lives. She refused to talk about him or answer my questions, so I knew she was lying again, as she did when the old Malc did not like me in her bed. So I just walked away, got a truck from the house, and headed for Rena’s. I would sooner die myself than have a single hair on her head hurt. I would like you and Doc to come see me too, if they will let you. I don’t know. Jeff Donaldson seems to be in charge here and is trying to be fair. At least, I think he is. I have to go now—apparently my time is up.”

When Georgia realized Larry was on the line, she motioned for Doc to listen as she tilted the phone so they could both hear. As soon as the call disconnected, Doc phoned Marvin Slattery and quickly explained where and why Larry need him. Marvin said he was on his way and would get back to them when he knew something.

Doc and Georgia moved to each other, their arms offering solace and love. He kissed the top of her head as she brushed her cheeks against his. Doc knew the entire town was now abuzz with news of Caroline’s death and Larry’s arrest. “Honey, we should close and go home to avoid all the questions and horrible things we will hear.”

“No, Doc, we aren’t cowards. Larry...and Caroline...are our friends, and we’ll be here to offer whatever we need to in the way of truth. We both know he could not be guilty, that he adored her. Now we have to figure out how to prove it. Perhaps we can squelch some rumors and vicious tongues.

Besides, we can't afford to turn away customers." With that, she turned the sign to OPEN and began washing off the tables. Doc started the coffee and went to the kitchen to heat up the stoves.

The place filled up rapidly, but few people mentioned either Larry or Caroline, though there were many questioning looks aimed at Georgia. She ignored them as best she could, until Jeff came in. He nodded to her and took a stool at the counter. Without a word, she poured him a cup of coffee and stood looking directly into his eyes. Jeff lowered his first. Georgia moved away with the coffee pot to refill other cups. The quietness of the morning was replaced with whispers, as the customers had not missed the exchange. Georgia put away the pot and went to the back to tell Doc that Jeff had arrived.

Doc left the kitchen area to come to the counter. He offered his hand, which Jeff shook. "When can we see Larry?"

"Anytime between one and five Sunday afternoon. Call ahead and tell them when you will arrive."

"Thanks," Doc replied and returned to the kitchen.

No one left the restaurant until Jeff finished his coffee, tossed a bill on the counter, and left in his squad car. With his leaving, it was as if a dam had burst, as everyone wanted to pay their check at the same time so they could leave to pass on to the rumor mill the exchanges between the policeman, the friends of the deceased and the suspect.

\* \* \* \*

Marvin X. Slattery, Esquire, was waiting for Larry in one of the small rooms set aside for lawyers and their clients. They shook hands, although Larry's were in handcuffs, which Marv told the guard to remove. Once the guard left the room to stand outside the door, Larry looked directly at Marv and said, "Marv, I had nothing to do with Caroline's death. God, I can hardly even say it. I loved her. You have to believe me, because I'm sure no one else will but my sister and the Joneses, I hope."

Marv nodded. "Larry, it appears you are refusing to supply the police with answers to many of their questions. Jeff Donaldson seems to think that the only thing standing between you and the outside is your refusals. What

can't or don't you want to tell them? If I am to help you, you have to confide in me."

Larry spread his hands on the tabletop and examined them as if he had never seen them before. "Marv, if I tell anyone about the argument I had with Caroline, they will lock me up in the sanitarium in Salem and throw away the key. I know I would. I know the entire story and can hardly believe it myself. Doc and Georgia and I and a few invisible guests in Caroline's house are the only ones who know."

"What do you mean, 'invisible guests'? Are you referring to the stories of the house being haunted? Taffy York did a series of articles about the house before Caroline bought it, but no one really believes ghosts live there."

Larry sighed. "I knew, Marv, there was no point in trying to tell you...that you would not believe it. Nevertheless, it is true. There are things, call them ghosts if you like, there in that house. Things that are good, but a few bad. Cruel and willing to destroy whomever and whatever gets in their way. Apparently, Caroline was one of their victims, intentional or otherwise. Now, knowing that is what I have to tell, can you understand my reluctance in doing so? If you like, I can try to find someone else to represent me, because what I told you is the truth. There is nothing else."

"I have always prided myself in being a sane, everyday man with no illusions. Your story is not something I can easily assimilate in my rationale. Obviously, you believe it, so therefore I must too. However, I think we need to start at the beginning."

Larry replied, "Even that I cannot tell you without permission from Doc and Georgia, because it's part of their lives too. I can't call them again, but you can."

Marv knocked on the door to ask for a phone to be brought in. When the guard was outside again, he let Larry place the call. "Doc, it's Larry. Marv is with me and wants to know the whole story of the house and its residents. I cannot tell him without your permission. I care about you all too much to put you through this if you would rather not. You know the repercussions if it all comes out...your home, your restaurant, the kids, everything. It's up to you, and I do understand if you want to keep it to ourselves. They have no concrete proof that I have done anything, which we all know I have not, so I

can just take my chances without the secrets of Caroline's house." He hung up the phone and turned to his lawyer.

"Okay, Marv, here are the provisions. I will tell you everything, and then you stop at the restaurant on your way home to talk to the Joneses. But, you will use none of what I tell you unless I say so. Okay?"

Marv nodded, wondering what could be so bad that the three of them were frightened to have it public record. Two hours later, after Larry had quietly and without emotion told the entire story to his disbelieving attorney, Marv sat shaking his head. "Larry, this is so Twilight Zone I have trouble saying honestly that I believe it. I know you think it's true, and we will work under the assumption that it is. I'll be back tomorrow and let you know what the Joneses tell me."

They shook hands. Marvin left for his car while Larry returned to his cell. He lay in the dark on the hard, thin cot chained to the wall. He closed his eyes to bring his images of his beautiful wife to his mind. He pictured her as they kissed in the Lake Tahoe wedding chapel, as they made love in front of the fireplace, as they ran down the beach like children, and tears scalded his face until sleep finally won out.

## Chapter 37

Marv stopped to see Doc and Georgia. He told them that Larry had related a crazy story and that they could verify what he had said. What they said, while dissimilar on minute points only, was the same story as Larry's. He felt overwhelmed. He had heard the haunting stories his entire life, but never really believed any of it, until now. Even now, he was not sure. He had no idea how he could use any of it to defend Larry, especially since it provided a motive for Caroline's death...jealousy.

Jeff arrived at his office only minutes before the lab report regarding the evidence found in Caroline's house. Or lack of evidence, was more like it. The blood on the glass shards was type O, so no help there. The pills on the floor were birth control, but there was no prescription bottle. The fingerprints on the manuscript were outlines only, no squiggles or swirls, just blank outlines. The lab forwarded them to the State Police Lab in Salem. Missing men's toiletries were undoubtedly the ones found in Larry's luggage in the truck. So, nothing of any help. That left only Larry.

Jeff had Larry taken to an interview room. Getting to the point immediately, he spoke, "Larry, my intuition tells me you did not have anything to do with Caroline's death, but I have to prove it one way or the other. I have no evidence that you did or did not. You have to help me out here. There is not even enough evidence to hold you much longer, but I would like to release you with all suspicion removed. I know that is little consolation with her gone, but at least the shadow over you personally will disappear. So, please, talk to me."

Larry spread his hands open wide on the table and looked at them as if he had never seen them before. "Jeff, I loved her more than life. Without her, I have no life, so it doesn't matter if I am in or out of prison. All I can tell you, beyond what you know, is that I had nothing to do with her death."

"Have you read the book she was writing?" Jeff was afraid to ask.

“No. She did not want anyone to read it until the first draft was done. Why?”

Jeff watched Larry’s face carefully as he spoke. “Well, I have at least the first few pages. Your wife was a gifted writer. Her words almost convinced me that an amorous ghost who enjoyed Caroline, at least twice, as the opening chapter of her book relates, haunts the house. And that she enjoyed him as well. What do you think about that?”

Larry’s look of amazement changed immediately to a stoic expression. He did not answer, just looked at his hands. “Damn it, Larry, that book gives you a motive for her death...jealousy.”

Larry finally looked at him. “No judge or jury in the world will convict a man of being jealous of a ghost. You are so eager to see me as a killer that you have lost your perspective. Or is it because you loved her too and need someone to blame?”

Jeff’s anger built, and he did not care who knew it. He yelled at the guard to take Larry back to his cell and then stalked out of the courthouse, flinging, “I’m going to Caroline’s house. Don’t know when I’ll be back,” to those at their desks.

His anger did not subside as he drove into the driveway. It began to boil when he saw Georgia’s car ahead of his. If she was in the house, she had broken the law by going under the crime scene ribbons. He entered quietly, hoping to give her a fright for being where she was not supposed to be. He heard noise from upstairs, from one of the bedrooms. What he saw when he stepped into the first one was Georgia in bed, making love, having sex with a man who was not Doc.

“What the hell are you doing?”

She screamed in surprise and tried to push off the man on top of her. He turned his head to smile at Jeff, but continued his rhythm as he moved on her until he closed his eyes and moaned his climax. He climbed off, picked up his clothes, and walked by Jeff without a word.

Georgia pulled the sheet over her nudity and sat, sobbing as she looked at Jeff. “God, Georgia, what is wrong with you? I can’t believe what I just saw. Who was that guy? Why were you fucking him? Isn’t your husband enough? He loves you, and you do this behind his back. I always thought you two were the happiest married couple in town. Shit!”



She continued crying, sobbing deeply. "Please don't tell Doc. It would kill him. He loves me."

Jeff picked up her blouse and bra off the floor and threw them at her. "You should have thought of that before. Get dressed. We'll talk downstairs."

\* \* \* \*

She slid into a chair across the kitchen table from him but jumped up immediately to shut the basement door and slide the lock into place.

"Why are you here? Who was that man you were fucking? Gee, sorry to break up your little party." Jeff's sarcasm showed his anger. "Why did you lock that door? Talk to me, Georgia, or I will take you in for crossing a crime scene tape. And NOW!"

Her voice was low, but the tears had stopped. "I came here to pick up the animals—since you have Larry in jail, there's no one to feed them. No one but that man, as you call him. His name is Malcolm Hanson, and he has been dead for 60 years. He kidnapped a married woman and kept her here in a room upstairs. He died and has stayed here ever since. He loved her, and apparently came to love Caroline. He seduced her, and then after she married Larry, he used me the same way until she came home."

"You expect me to believe this hogwash, Georgia?"

"Whether or not you believe it, it's the truth. Then to make matters worse, he began to do her again, even though she refused at first. He threatened to kill Larry, and Doc, too, if we did not comply. Caroline grew to hate Malcolm, as did I on a lesser plane." She raised her eyes to look directly at Jeff's face.

"While he enjoyed the sex immensely, the main motive for all this was something entirely different. Each time he used us, but apparently, it could not be rape, we had to oblige. Hence the death threats. Each time gave him more power. Neither Caroline nor I understood what or how it happened, but he became more human and less ghost. At first, we heard him only in our heads, but eventually he could speak. He was originally just a shape, but today you saw the man. He was always a good lover, and then he became exceptionally virile. His prowess left a woman fulfilled like never before and made her wanting him repeatedly. That is my own feeling."

“Caroline loved Larry so much she hated to give in to Malcolm. He would even make her have sex with him after Larry was asleep. She learned that her sex did not help him toward his goal of being near living, but rather was a punishment for her preferring Larry to him. Malcolm loved her, but the love turned to hate when she rejected him.

“Malcolm would watch them make love and demanded whatever he had seen them do, only more. He would take her anywhere he found her—on the floor, or standing up, in the wet grass, anywhere, even in that rotten old bed upstairs where he kept Susan, the kidnapped bride. His jealousy was so intense, I suspect Caroline was afraid he would kill Larry anyway. She asked me once if I thought Malcolm would leave her and Larry alone if she were dead, because she would be of no use to him anymore.”

Jeff asked, “Have you read Caroline’s book in progress?”

“No, I did not know for sure that she was writing again. Malcolm seems to have disrupted all our lives. Why?”

“Come, let me show you.” Jeff led Georgia to the little room Caroline used for writing. He handed her the first page and watched her eyes widen as she read. She handed it back to him and returned to the kitchen.

“Georgia, do you think Caroline might have drowned herself to keep Larry safe?” He could not believe he was even asking that question.

“Of course she would. And I’m sure she did.”

They sat without speaking. The critters banged on the door, and Jeff rose to let them in. They raced through the house, obviously seeking Caroline. Gilligan returned first, nuzzled Georgia’s leg and made a little woeful sound. She petted him and then watched as Jeff picked up Snowball and petted her. She rose to feed them and returned to her chair.

“There is more, if you want to hear it.”

He nodded.

“Malcolm is not the only ghost here. There are many others, some of them bad guys. When this place was a speakeasy, many died in a shootout with the revenuers, and a woman was hanged from a ceiling lamp. She is not here, but the man who murdered her is, and he is beyond evil. People we knew are here too: Dean Sloan, who was a thief, Sunny McLaughlin, who committed suicide, and Don Conway and Heather Johanson, who were drunk when they drove off the cliff on graduation night. There had been others, too, but Caroline said they had gone.”

She looked at the clock. "I have to get back to the restaurant before the lunch crowd arrives. I am asking again that you not tell Doc. It would not do any good. If I don't comply with Malcolm, he will kill Doc, and he has even threatened the kids."

"Okay," was all Jeff said as he watched her with a pet under each arm as she climbed into her car and drove away. He locked the house on his way out, drove to where the Gardiner's pickup had been parked, and climbed down the hill. He walked in the sand to the log where Caroline and Larry had started their picnic. He sat, staring into the roaring surf. Almost as if he were praying, he asked, "Caroline, did you die peacefully? Did you die to save Larry, or is it all a sick story? Oh, Caroline, forever gone."

## Chapter 38

A man named Lucas Tyler came for a late lunch at the Oceanside Seafood Restaurant. The place was nearly empty. Georgia was wiping down the counter when he entered, taking a seat at a small table in the corner. She brought the coffeepot and a mug, but he wanted a milkshake, vanilla, and a cheeseburger with fries. As she set his order in front of him, he asked if she had any idea why there were so many cop cars on the highway and cops on the beach yesterday. She explained that a body had washed ashore. He nodded.

“Say,” Lucas said loudly, “Was it by any chance a slender gal with a mountain of red hair?”

“Yes,” Georgia said slowly, “why do you ask?”

“Well, I was driving south, kinda slow late in the afternoon and saw a gal lookin’ like that wading into the surf. Thought at the time how damn cold that water was and why anyone would want to risk getting frozen feet, or worse.” He chuckled.

“You saw her? You saw Caroline wading? Are you sure?”

“Hell, I don’t know her name, but the hair got my attention.”

“Doc, come out here. Quick,” Georgia yelled. “Please tell my husband what you just told me.”

Doc extended his hand to introduce himself, and the man did the same. “So, Lucas, what did you tell Georgia that got her so excited?” Georgia ran to the phone. Doc heard her ask to talk to Jeff, and then she practically yelled for someone to find him and send him to the restaurant immediately.

“All I said was that I saw a slim woman with red hair wading in the surf.”

Doc felt the same electricity surge through him that Georgia had felt. He tried to stay calm, asking, “See anything else unusual during that drive?”

"Hell, yes. I damn near ran over a guy crossing the road out by that big old house just got fixed up. Must have been drunk or drugged, 'cause he didn't seem to even see me. He was running like the devil was a-chasin' him."

"So you saw the woman before you saw the man? Do I have that right?"

"Yup. What's all this about?"

Georgia had heard Lucas. She bent down to hug him, planting kisses on both cheeks. "You have just saved a man's life." She dropped into the chair and slowly explained the situation, including Larry in jail.

Jeff's car roared into the parking lot. He came through the door like a charging bull. Doc met him, whispering a few words, and then introduced him to Lucas. Lucas answered all Jeff's questions, including, "Did you see anything else unusual that day."

Lucas thought and then answered. "Well, there was a pickup beside the road about where I saw the women in the water. That's about all."

It was enough for Jeff. With this witness, Larry would be released, exonerated. Caroline's death would be ruled either a suicide or accidental drowning. Since there was no suicide note and nothing to indicate she was under stress, the coroner would rule drowning. Doc, Georgia, and Jeff nodded, tacitly agreeing that no one need ever know the ghost story. Jeff would not tell Doc, but Georgia also knew she must stop going to Malcolm.

## **Part 2**

### **Chapter 39**

There was no funeral, just a small memorial get-together at her house. Larry had not wanted to go back to the house again, ever, but Georgia and Doc convinced him that Caroline's soul was there in the home she'd loved so much.

She was cremated, as per her will. Larry climbed down the cliff to the beach below as their friends stood on the roadside above and he cast her ashes into the wind. All said their own silent goodbyes—all but Larry. He could not bring himself to say goodbye. She was in his heart and mind now and forever.

She had not changed her will in the few short weeks they were married, but she had no living relatives. Probate would turn it all over to Larry, with an inheritance tax near the national debt, Marv as his attorney, pointed out. Caroline had been a very wealthy woman.

The get-together was more of a celebration of her life than a solemn affair. James Duckworth made sure there was plenty of imbibes. He brought everything from sodas to beer to a couple cases of hard stuff. Sadie helped Georgia with snacks and canapés. Larry put a pile of records on the player, all the artists he knew she'd loved. It was hard for him, for them all, but he was determined to see it through. Soon the drinks relaxed everyone, and each had one or more funny stories to tell about Caroline.

Martha Gillespie had to leave, sober and early, for rounds at the hospital. Sadie decided James needed something more than coffee...she proposed sleep as she helped him to their car.

Jeff had passed the invitation to join them; no one was surprised. Lucas Tyler stopped in at Larry's request and did not pass by the envelope of money Larry pressed in his hand. Marv Slattery and Charlie Dow of the

newspaper came for a short time, but left when they decided their companion Tom Parker, the realtor, had consumed more than his share of the liquor. Hal and his daughter Lisa, without Margo, brought a framed photo of Caroline and Lisa the day she signed the girl's book at the stationary store.

Doc and Georgia stayed to pick up after everyone was gone. The three of them sat in the kitchen, talking little, but drinking a lot. Larry remembered Jeff's asking about Caroline's novel. He found it on her desk and returned to the kitchen to read it aloud. He read only the first page before wadding it up and throwing it across the room. His pain and fury were etched in lines on his face, a face that had aged 10 years in two days. He would burn the damn thing in the morning, he thought. Later, in the light of day, he simply boxed it up and put it with other unfinished works he would find in her little writing-room.

Georgia stood and found herself swaying. "Doc, I am too drunk to drive and so are you. Call the kids and let them know we will stay here tonight and be home when our eyes can focus in the morning, but in time for the breakfast crowd. Larry, hope you don't mind two uninvited guests." With that, she flopped back in her chair. Doc smiled as he picked her up to carry upstairs to one of the bedrooms. She had not even heard what Larry had said.

Larry watched his friends and was proud to have such loyal people, people he knew he loved and could always count on. He called the pets inside, fed them, locked up, turned off the lights, and went upstairs. He stopped at the door to the big room that he had shared with his beautiful wife. Remembering their nights of lovemaking felt as if someone hit him in the stomach. He rushed to the bathroom to rid himself of his overindulgence of alcohol. He staggered back to the bedroom and dropped face down on the bed. Within seconds, he was asleep, or more likely passed out.

He heard Doc leave and assumed Georgia had gone too, so he just rolled over and went back to sleep. Sometime later, he heard noises, enough to force him awake and to the bathroom before he could investigate. He splashed his face with water and dried it as he moved down the hall to where the noise was. The door was open.

Malcolm grinned at him as he continued his sexual movement on top of a naked Georgia. Her eyes were closed, but her arms and legs were around

him, and she made little murmuring sounds. Larry turned away when Malcolm called out, "Come on in. Maybe you would like a turn. She's not as good as Caroline, but she likes it better. Sometimes I don't think she can get enough."

His voice was enough to bring Georgia out of her lust. She saw Larry and once again tried to push Malcolm away, but he would not stop until he was finished. Larry did not stay for the ending but went back to the bathroom to throw up again; this time not from alcohol, but from nausea and disgust at what he had seen. In his mind, he pictured Malcolm on his wife the same way he was fucking Georgia.

Larry wanted to run from the house never to return, but his brain refused to leave Georgia to this monster. He ran back to the room, where he grabbed Malcolm's arm to pull him up just as Malcolm reached his climax and was defenseless. Larry hit him with such strength that he rolled off Georgia, bouncing his head on the floor so hard it sounded like rocks breaking. He did not move. Georgia jumped over him, running to the bathroom to retch. She returned for her clothes, dressing quickly but unselfconsciously.

"Larry, I never meant for this to happen again. I promised myself that I would never give in to him again, but that doesn't seem to matter to him at all, as long as he can get me to cooperate. Lord knows, I can't stop myself from cooperating with him. It is worse than any addiction. I use the excuse that he will kill Doc if I don't comply, but down deep, I know it is simple: I want him. I don't know how to stop this, aside from following Caroline to the grave. Malcolm is a monster."



## Chapter 40

Malcolm did not like the feeling in his head when he became conscious. Pain was something he had not experienced since he died 60 years ago. He sat on the floor, shaking his head, trying to make his eyes focus. He felt the wetness on his head and took his hand away to see red, weak-colored red, but blood. He had enjoyed the pleasures of alcohol and food and, most of all, women these past years, but never discomfort. He did not like it at all. His first instinct was to go after Larry and kill him, but that would not solve the problem; it might actually make matters worse.

Besides, without that damn Caroline, maybe Larry would just leave. Malcolm could not understand why she had drowned herself. As long as she did what he wanted her to do, he would not have harmed her husband. He hated even to think the word 'husband,' as she really did belong to him, and until Larry came along, Caroline was a more-than-willing participant in the loving. His ego, in death as it had been in life, was so self-absorbed that he could never comprehend any woman preferring anyone other than himself. After her marriage, he had enjoyed her for his own pleasure, as once she was no longer a willing participant, rather than one he blackmailed into submission, sex with her did nothing to increase his humanness. But the joke was on her: he had no real intention THEN of harming Larry, so if she had refused his advances, he would have simply let her go.

Well, now he would make Larry's life miserable. He knew Georgia would not stay away from him, and he would make sure each time that Larry was aware of their contact, but in such a way that Larry could not hurt him any further. Larry loved Georgia like a sister—this Malcolm knew. *Too bad*, he thought, laughing. *Larry ought to try her out the way Malcolm used her; she was nice!* He would devise ways to keep Georgia.; although right then he was not sure of what they would be. Maybe he would even let Doc

see them. Oh, yes, that would be great fun. Maybe the whole town. He would make everyone suffer and he would enjoy it.

He had resurrected himself about as much as any spirit could and could not understand why others did not do it too. Most indicated it was too hard dying to do it over again, especially those who were heading above to be with angels and loved ones. For Malcolm, that was not the case. He knew that his turn would come up soon, and his next stop was in Hell.

Nevertheless, his physical contact with women must continue. Once he was finished with Georgia, he would find some other willing companion. Maybe when he had a replacement, he would kill Georgia, but that husband first so she could see him dead. Only one thing was sure for Malcolm...he wanted to be as close to living as possible, but only for the pleasures and none of the pain. He knew he could not be killed, even now—but better to avoid the pain at all costs.

\* \* \* \*

Georgia drove home, leaving Larry to wander the house like a lost soul. The critters seemed more content today than they had since Caroline left them, but they followed him from room to room, always looking expectantly at him. He moved to sit on the window seat in the living room, their favorite place, so he had two lap-pets on him immediately. He closed his eyes and all three slept, until both animals bounded off the seat and raced upstairs, barking and meowing happily.

“Hey, you two, what are you doing?” he called after them. After a couple quiet minutes, Larry decided to see where they had gone. He took the stairs two at a time, which was easy for a man with his long legs. He looked in the open doors as he moved along the corridor. He would have to change the bedding on the bed where he found Georgia before anyone saw the evidence as well as the blood on the floor.

When he got to the master bedroom, the wall of sliding doors was open and the animals were on the wide porch swing as if nestled against someone, just like they’d done with Caroline. It pained him even to think of her, so happy here, swinging back and forth with a cat on one side, the dog on the other, petting each as she smiled at the ocean below.

As he started to turn away, the swing began to move, probably from the wind. Then he felt a hand, a soft hand, touch his face. "Hello, my darling. I have returned to you." In his head, he heard her words

. "Please, don't play tricks on me. My beautiful Caroline, if it is not you, please stop this. I cannot stand to be tormented anymore."

Instead of an answer, he felt soft lips touch him. He cried out as tears ran down his cheeks. It was her kiss, a kiss like none other. Somehow, his arms found her, pulling her to him. They kissed gently at first and then with more passions. Larry wanted to devour her; he wanted to feel every inch of her. She guided his hand to her breast as she kissed his neck and slid her tongue into his ear. He moaned his want as she led him to the bed. She slowly unbuttoned his shirt as her lips pressed his.

As in a dream, he felt her loosen his belt as her mouth took in one nipple and then the other, nibbling on them gently. She slid his pants down and off his feet. He could feel her breath against his loins, making his penis ache with desire. Her hand encircled him, moving the skin up and down. She cupped his balls in her other hand to squeeze them gently. His hunger was so intense, he was afraid he would explode before he even entered her.

She drew him down on the bed with her, opening her unseen legs for him. Her fingers ran up the tight muscles of his legs, rubbing the inside of his thighs. He thought he would go mad until he felt her guide his throbbing penis to the place they both wanted it.

They rocked, kissing and touching. He was sure he could hear her sighs and the sound she always made just before she came. He felt her legs around him now and her hands on his ass. He buckled like a rutting stallion, pouring his love into her. She met him at his peak, and they exploded together.

He knew he was heavy, but he did not want to move off her for fear she was not there. He ran his hands down her sides...yes, oh God, yes. She was here, lying under him with his now limp penis in the heat of her vagina. He rolled off, pulling her with him so she now rested her head on his shoulder, her soft breasts against his chest and her legs between his.

He kissed her head as he slid his hands around her. "Is this a miracle? Is it really you, darling?"

Larry could not see her face, but he heard her voice in his head, sounding amused but serious. "Yes, it is I, or an invisible me. I could not stay away from you, even though I know I should have. I love you so much,

and I need to tell you why I did what I did. I will not come again after this, as you need to find a new life, not stay here and mourn for what cannot be.”

He gripped her so hard he felt her cringe. “Don’t you dare say you will not come again,” he fairly shouted at her. “Caroline, you are my world. If the only way I can be with you is in death, then so be it.”

## **Chapter 41**

“Larry, don’t even think like that, let alone say it. Death is not the solution.” Caroline’s arms tightened around him.

“Then why, Caroline, did you choose it? Why didn’t you stay with me?”

“I had no choice. Malcolm would have killed you in a heartbeat if I had not agreed to let him have my body any time I liked. Dead, I was no use to him and there was no reason to kill you, because it would not change things. Now he will use Georgia and carry out his threat if she does not comply. It is that simple.”

“Simple. Damn it, Caroline, we could have beat him somehow, together. We could have left here.”

“Larry, he would have found us. He found us in Tahoe. He waited until you were asleep and took me on the bathroom floor.”

“God, with me in the next room, he forced you?”

“Yes, but he never hurt me. You must remember that. He does not hurt Georgia either. And yes, I know you found him with her this morning. Please understand, Georgia cannot help herself for the same reason I could not...fear for her husband. In addition, he gives her something she cannot get from Doc...a penis. He had an accident that made him impotent and he does the best he can to satisfy her, but it is not enough. For years, she has been without sex and when she found a partner, she couldn’t get enough of him. Plus, he is not human, so technically she remains faithful to Doc. It is a fine line, but one that helps her conscience.

“I was delighted you hit him, but watch yourself. He is selfish and might decide to retaliate now. Larry, I also know you found the birth control pills. I wanted to have your children, a dozen of them, but was afraid that if I got pregnant, it might be Malcolm’s. I don’t know if spirits can reproduce, but I do know he can ejaculate liquid material. I just could not take a chance.”

“Caroline, why didn’t you just tell me these things? Even if it wasn’t my child, it would have been part of you, and I would have loved it. Couldn’t you trust me? I adore you enough to forget having children as long as I had you.”

“If I told you, I would also have had to tell you that he was still using me and that he would never stop. He must have a female body to maintain his almost-human being, but apparently, it has to be a willing woman, even one coerced. Again, I am not sure about this stuff, having been in this realm so short a time.”

It was as if a light came on in Larry’s head. He fairly shouted, “Caroline, you can do the same thing. You can use my body to return to me, if only in a semi-human state.” He laughed. “You know I will always be willing.” He hugged her closer, kissing her unseen lips. His passion began to build.

Soon they were deeply aroused and ready, but he did not enter her. Instead, he slid down between her legs. He could not see them, but he could feel every muscle in her long, smooth limbs as he moved his hands to the junction of her thighs and the mound that was her womanhood. He licked the valley there and was rewarded by her sharp intake of breath, telling him she liked it. As he licked, he slid his hands into her wetness. With one hand, he slid two fingers into her depths, rubbing the roof of her canal, which drew moans from her this time. The fingers on the other hand found her tiny pearl clitoris and squeezed it, bringing her hips off the bed, arched to push against him. His lips replaced those fingers as he sucked her clit until she began to explode, repeatedly.

“Larry, now, oh please, darling. I want to feel you inside me. Please, oh yes, perfect. You are always perfect. Let me ride you until you cum.” He rolled her over onto him, feeling her passage slide down over his wanting penis. He was so hard it was almost painful, but her movements eased the pain and brought wave after wave of wonderful sensations until he could hold back no longer. He pushed himself into her as he pulled her down on him. They both cried out their pleasure and fell, exhausted. Soon they were asleep with her still holding his penis inside her as she lay atop him.

They woke to the doorbell ringing frantically. Larry pulled on his jeans and ran to answer it. Doc was standing outside, his face red as if he had been crying. Larry did not say a word, just put his arm around his friend and

pulled him inside toward the kitchen. He put on a fresh pot of coffee as Doc sat at the white, blue-trimmed table.

Finally, Doc spoke. "I have seen this Malcolm person. At least I think it is Malcolm. Either that or my wife is fucking more than one person. Hell, she is probably fucking half the town for all I know." A sob tore from him as he covered his face with his hands.

"Doc, do you want to tell me about it?"

He did not answer but dropped his hands. His head was spinning around, and he had a frantic look on his face. Larry heard Caroline in his head, telling him that she had her arm about Doc's shoulder and her cheek against his head.

"Doc, you're not losing it, I guarantee. What you are feeling is Caroline. Or her spirit, I should say. She came back to me today. I cannot see her either, but I know it is she. I have felt her, her kisses, her body. She is here. I still do not know how or why, but it doesn't matter. I have my Caroline back. Listen in your head—maybe you can hear her talk too. Caroline, talk to him."

Doc shook his head, looking at Larry as if they both were crazy. Then, in his head, as a barely audible whisper, he heard, "Doc, what is wrong? How can I help?"

"My God, Larry, I heard her. Caroline, is that really you?" He felt her arm tighten around his shoulder and the tiny 'yes' in his head. He put his arms out and found her body beside him. He pulled her to him, burying his face on her chest as tears streamed down his face.

"Doc," Larry asked, "tell us what happened."

"Georgia, my damn wife, is why I'm so upset. I went out to get a change of clothes after sleeping in them here last night. I wanted to look half-presentable before opening the restaurant. She was on the floor in the living room with a man on top of her. Her eyes were closed, and she looked like she was sure as hell enjoying what they were doing. The guy saw me and grinned. I ran out of the house and came here."

Larry took a deep breath and explained as best he could about Malcolm. Caroline's tiny voice inserted a thought or two. Doc sat looking at Larry with disbelief. "This can't be, Lar—Georgia would never let any man touch her unless she wanted him."

“Two reasons,” Caroline voice whispered in his head. “First, because he would kill you if she did not comply. Second, because she still has needs your accident took away from you. I know this is hard, Doc, but it is the harsh truth. At first, I am sure he seduced her, but he is a masterful lover and gave her everything any woman could want. He needs contact all the time and is capable of arousing a woman to want him whenever he desires. I am telling you this from experience.”

“But you stopped, Caroline, when you married Larry.”

“No, Doc, I did not. I tried, but his threats allowed him to use me as he wanted. One of the things he wanted was to please me, so every time, he did. I would try to fight the desire, but he was too good. My only solution was to take my body away from him, permanently.”

Both men felt rage and fear that Georgia might come to the same conclusion.



## Chapter 42

Caroline spoke her silent voice. "I have an idea. I don't know if it will work, or if it is even possible. I don't want to get anyone's hopes up, so I won't tell you about it yet. I have to do some research in the world in which I now dwell. PLEASE, don't either one of you let Georgia know that I am back, because she may decide she can die and still be with Doc. In addition, Doc, you must treat her the same as always, never letting her know you are aware of Malcolm. I know it will be hard for you to play a charade when you want to lash out, but as long as Malcolm has access to her, and she to him, I don't think she will make any decisions."

"Actually, as much as I hate to ask you, Doc, can you arrange for her to have more time on her own? And you, Larry, give her complete access to the house. Tell her you are moving back into your old place for a while because it is too painful to come here. Have her feed the critters so she has an excuse to come here. Before either of you say anything, I know that this will give Malcolm more time for them together. We need that and no suspicion on his part if my plan is to work."

Doc was swearing as he listened. He still held a fresh picture in his mind of his sweet wife with her legs around that monster, moving in rhythm with him. Doing as Caroline asked was to replay this scene every time she was out of his sight. Could he live that way? He knew he had no choice. He left shortly after their conversation, having cleaned up in the bathroom and changed into one of Larry's shirts.

When he was gone, the Gardiners...one alive and one deceased...returned to their bedroom. They showered together, soaping each other, laughing like children. He turned off the water as he soaped her body. He could see her outline and shape with the soap covering. It was not the same, of course, but he at least could hold a soapy being. They touched each other all over until their passions rose again. He lifted Caroline in his arms

as he leaned against the wall. Slowly, he lifted her with her legs around his waist and let her guide his penis into her wetness. Soon they were both reveling in the rolling climaxes, crying out their delight until exhausted.

It was dark outside when they awoke. Larry could not believe that his cock wanted her again so soon, but she obliged first with her mouth, and then her vagina. As he lay beside her again, she spoke, "Darling, this has been wonderful, but we cannot continue this pace. I know what you are trying to do...bring my being back from invisible to substance, but we can't do it all in one day. I want something left of you when the time comes. There are things we must do. First, pack your things to return to your old house. Stop by the restaurant to ask Georgia to feed Gilligan and Snowball and reassure Doc, if you can, that this is the only way. I will come to you later in the night. I have things I must find out on my own. Some of the ghosts here will help me, I hope. Get some sleep, too, because you are going to need it." He heard the laughter in her voice and felt her swap his butt, and then she was gone.

Georgia and Doc both looked haggard when Larry stopped in for dinner and conversation. She whispered her thanks to him for keeping her secret; he nodded and smiled weakly. He explained his returning to his former home and asked if she would take care of the animals. She looked confused. "Larry, if I go there, you know what will happen. He will be waiting, and I cannot say no—you know that."

Larry spoke slowly, trying to keep his voice even. He was not accustomed to lying, so it was hard to get out his words. "I've been thinking, honey, that if you enjoy it and it's not really hurting anybody, then you might as well do it. Just make sure Doc doesn't find out. I am not sure how he would handle it." Georgia looked at him with puzzlement in her eyes. He continued, "Hell, life is too short not to take pleasure where you can. Caroline is an example of that."

Georgia moved away to wait on others, so he took the opportunity to visit Doc in the kitchen. "God, Larry, how am I supposed to hold her, kiss her, touch her, without thinking of that thing pounding his lust into her? I want to vomit every time I think of it, which is every minute."

"Hang in there, Doc—we have to trust Caroline on this. Maybe you should suggest a joint shower and some playing there. It will make you feel more in control, and you can show her how much she means to you. Or

whatever you two do in that department. You can't stop now, or she will get suspicious. How about you take a day off, and we'll go fishing with James and some of the other guys? The kids can help Georgia here, and it will give you some time away. Call me."

Doc nodded.

Larry ate, surprised at how hungry he was. Sex always had that effect on him, and nothing had changed there, except he now needed something to keep him perpetually hard. Maybe a vacuum system or such, he thought. He had to bring his woman back to life, or as close as he could get her.

At his little house, he showered again before falling into a dreamless sleep. When he awoke, Caroline cuddled next to him, seemingly asleep too. Did ghosts sleep? Did they need to eat? How did they converse among themselves? Could they read and write? There was so much he had to learn about his dead bride.

## Chapter 43

Caroline was busy after she left Larry and their lovemaking. Malcolm was aware that she was there but pointedly ignored her, much to her delight. She found Don and Heather in their red car in front of her house. As there were no living souls around, they seemed ready to do a rerun again of their graduation night escapade of killing themselves. She stopped them, asking if she could talk to them awhile.

“Sure,” Heather said, “Slide in next to me. We heard what you told your husband, so now we understand why you chose the ocean. To protect Donald, I would have done the same. We at least are here together, which is a heck of a lot better than the loneliness you both face.”

Donald was not so diplomatic. “I never liked the water, so swimming with the fishes would not have worked for me. But a fiery car crash, even unplanned, was a great way to go. That is why we do it again every few months, just for fun. Only problem is when some damn live person sees or hears it, as you did.”

Caroline asked, “Could you help me? There are so many things I don’t know or understand about being dead. Like, is Malcolm the only one who is doing this sex-to-live thing? I want to try it too. How far can it go, and for how long?”

Donald answered. “As far as I know, old Malcolm is the only one now. There were a few people in the past who did it, but it did not help them when their time to move on came up. Dean Sloan tried it with his wife, but she had become a bit touched in the head when his body was never found after his log truck burned. All we could figure out was that since she was not capable of participating, it didn’t work for him. He headed out last week for an eternity due south. So did the bootlegger guy...the one who threatened you. We were glad to see him go...he was strictly trouble, even for us.”

Caroline questioned again. "What about all those other people I saw at first? What happened to them?"

Heather took up the story. "Apparently, the fiasco that took place while you were here with the ones who had been here in limbo for years brought their laxity to some of the big cheeses who had let them fall through the cracks.. Red tape and bureaucracy here too," she laughed. "Now it is almost weekly that some go...up or down. Sunny McLaughlin is still wandering around here because she wants to watch her daughter; she doesn't trust either Hal or Margo and now wishes she had ignored his beatings and endless womanizing. The law was no help to her then, so she took what she thought was the only way out, and for her then, it probably was. She was delighted that you have been so nice to Lisa and will thank you personally, I think, when she sees you. Lisa being here at the goodbye party has kept Sunny smiling ever since."

Donald spoke, "How long a spirit can stay near human again is anyone's guess. Malcolm has done it longer than anyone else who has ever been here."

Caroline hesitated as she asked, "Has any woman here ever gotten pregnant or had a baby while she was here?"

Heather replied, "Not that I know of. Spirits can't get pregnant by spirits, that I can guarantee, because if it were possible, Donald and I would have a dozen kids by now. I think I know what your next question will be: Can a near human like you will be, or like Malcolm, have a child with a living person? I don't know. It hasn't happened while we've been here."

Donald said, "There is a handsome pirate who had more than a few willing, living women, I've heard told. He is buried in the old cemetery. He was one of those who helped your Larry that time he was lost in the woods. He raped, pillaged, stole, and murdered, so his destiny is Hell, but apparently even the devil is in no hurry for him. We can ask him, if you like."

Caroline told them she would appreciate it and slid out of the car. She watched, smiling and shaking her head, as Donald revved the engine, drove at breakneck speed, and soared over the cliff. The flames were high in the sky in a few second. She mused, *Well, I guess even ghosts can have fun—if you consider that fun.*

## Chapter 44

Georgia woke, feeling miserable. Guilt, she thought, could cause nausea and the shakes. She lay awake for hours after Doc insisted they shower together. He appeared loving and did his best to please her, but for the first time in their marriage, she faked her orgasm. She sensed he was just going through the motions, and there was no true affection there. She was relieved when she heard his gently snoring.

She came up with plan; one she hoped would keep Malcolm at bay. She would take the kids with her when she went to feed the animals in the afternoon. She would even have considered the idea, had she known Doc had seen her and Malcolm. She knew this was not what Larry wanted her to do, but she knew she **MUST** break away from a monster that had so much control over her and her physical needs.

She unlocked Caroline's house. The critters ran through the open door like a pair of wild animals. Gilligan jumped, barked, and ran in circles. Her Majesty Snowball actually rubbed their legs and purred. Georgia called the kids to follow her to the kitchen, where she filled empty bowls. She looked out the window in the back door just in time to see a pair of two-legged and one four-legged creature running across the field toward the forest in the back. Her fingers did not seem to work on the door lock. She wanted to call them back; she did not want to be in the house alone.

She knew he was behind her even before she felt his hands move to cover her breasts. "Hello, little bird. I have been waiting for you. Have you missed me? Your nipples tell me you have."

Georgia tried to break out of his embrace, but he held her close, turning her to lick her lips and press his tongue into her mouth. "Stop, Malcolm, please stop. My kids are right outside. Please stop."

He laughed a harsh response. "Do you think that matters to me at all? They can watch, for all I care." His hand was inside her waistband, sliding

her jeans down. "But if you're in a hurry, that's alright with me." He turned her again, moving his hand down between her legs until he felt her pearly button. Almost instantly, she moaned. He wasted no time, bending her over the table so he could enter her from behind. As much as she wanted him to stop, she gave in and began to move with him. It was quick this time, but satisfying for them both. She cried out her climax as his fingers moved inside her. When he was done, he gave her butt a light slap and moved away.

He watched her as she pulled her clothes back in place, grinning. "You know you cannot resist, so why pretend? Next time, leave the brats at home so we have more time. Admit it—you like it long and slow." He left her with tears running down her cheeks. The kids were still in the field, giving her enough time to clean up and look presentable. Lord, what was she going to do? Maybe Caroline had the right idea.

Her relationship with Doc seemed to be unraveling like a roll of film, just more and more celluloid lying useless in the light of day. They slept back to back and spoke only when necessary. She did not understand why he was so distant but was afraid to ask.

To make matters worse, she felt sick half the time. This morning she had vomited the minute she got up, which reminded her of when she was carrying her children. Suddenly, the sickness became a full-fledged agony. Just like when she was pregnant. Dear God, please, she couldn't be pregnant. It could only have been Malcolm. This would kill Doc! She returned to bed, trying to think. The only one she could talk to was Larry. No one else knew. An abortion...but how did one abort a child of a person who had been dead for more than 60 years?

## Chapter 45

The phone woke Larry. Caroline was in a semi-sleep, as deep as a spirit could go. His hand found her cheek to caress before he picked up the receiver. "Hello. Hi, Georgia. What's the problem? Sounds like you're crying. Sure, come on over. I will put on the coffeepot. No, no bother. Give me half an hour for a shower."

"What's the matter? Georgia doesn't cry very often," Caroline wondered in his head.

"I told her half an hour, should have said an hour. Need at least that much to love you properly," Larry replied as he started to slip out of bed.

"I think half an hour will work fine. Let's hit the shower, bucko."

He laughed as he felt her hands on his body. He got up, took her into his arms, and carried her weightless body to the shower. Within seconds, they were making love as the warm water ran down their swaying bodies. It was a short but sweet lovemaking, ending in gentle climaxes for both.

"God, Caroline, I love you. That was wonderful. After we see what Georgia wants, we can go back to bed and do it right."

He was hardly dressed when Georgia came through the back door without knocking. "Oh, Larry, I need your advice. The worst thing has happened, and I have no idea what to do."

"Honey, just sit down and have some coffee and tell me what's wrong."

"No coffee, Larry. I probably couldn't keep it down anyway." She hesitated a moment. "Only one way to say it, I guess. I'm pregnant."

In his head, he heard Caroline gasp and mumble, "Oh, My God, no."

"Why?" Larry answered Caroline, not realizing that Georgia would think he was talking to her.

"Why what?" Georgia looked confused. "Why am I pregnant? Pretty easily, apparently. You know, when a man, or in this case, an almost man, puts his penis in a vagina..." She let her words fade.



Larry finally understood. "Malcolm." It was more of a statement than a question. "Well, now we know the answer to one question."

"You aren't making any sense, Larry. What question?" Georgia demanded.

"Sorry, honey," Larry replied. "We...er, I wondered if it was possible for this to happen, and obviously it has. Have you seen a doctor? Are you sure?"

She sounded a bit irritated now. "I have had two kids already and am an expert on morning sickness. I don't need a doctor to tell me."

"Okay, okay, I believe you. I'm beginning to understand your full situation now. Doc cannot father a child, so it can only be Malcolm. Let me think."

Caroline spoke to him. "Nod to answer. Should we let her know I'm here?" He shook his head no, then immediately indicated yes, then no again. Finally, he spread his hands in an "I don't know" gesture. After at least a full minute, he said, "Yes, I think we should."

Georgia looked perplexed. "We should what? Larry, you are confusing me."

"Should tell you that Caroline is here. She returned to me, just as Malcolm has."

Georgia felt coolness and then the warmth of a pair of arms that wrapped around her from behind and a head against the top of her own. She started crying again as she rose and embraced her unseen friend. "I had hoped, prayed you would come back. Didn't know how these things work, so I tried to face the fact that you might not. Now you have. Thank you, God."

Larry put his arms around both of them. "Okay, Ladies, we are all happy to see one another, but we have a major problem here. Let's start with the facts. Georgia, Doc already knows about you and Malcolm."

Georgia didn't say a word, just dropped back into her chair and covered her face with her hands. Her sobs were so deep, it was painful to listen. Finally, she raised her swollen face to ask, "How long has he known? How did he find out?"

"He saw you on the floor in your living room the day after you two stayed at Caroline's house. He went home to change clothes. In all honesty, he was crying when he came to see me."

“He knew before last night? We showered together and made love the best we can. Why would he do all that, already knowing what I do with Malcolm?”

“Because he loves you more than you can imagine; he said he would die before he let Malcolm touch you again. Caroline is positive Malcolm would kill Doc if you refused.

“The three of us discussed it, and decided it would be best if you continued with Malcolm, for the time being. Doc said he would try, but he was not sure he could handle it. She has a plan to end all this, but I don’t know what it is. Can you tell us now, darling?” Larry asked.

Caroline’s voice filled their minds. “Actually, I would rather not. Right now, you would be sure it won’t work, and I can’t be discouraged. It’s not a firm plan, and I don’t have enough ‘ghostie’ information yet to see if it’s even feasible. I don’t want to get your hopes up, because it might not work. One thing, Georgia—we will all stand with you no matter what. Don’t go thinking any stupid ideas as I did. This time there are people who will help you. So let’s talk about the pregnancy. I think Doc needs to know.”

“So do I,” Larry agreed, “but honey, the choice is yours. You can hide the situation for a couple months, can’t you?”

“Yes, but how can I look Doc in the eye? If he saw me, he knows it is more than just Malcolm using me...that I participate and enjoy it. He must feel that his world has burst into a million pieces, and it has! And the kids, what if they find out? I must figure out where I can get an abortion. There must be someplace.”

Caroline once again held her friend close. “I will see if I can find out where you can go. Donald and Heather probably know. If that is what you want, then we will help you. For all we know, you might not even be pregnant; perhaps it’s a phantom thing. Again, I will try to find out. Now, wash your face and go home. Tell Doc you are ill, and it sure appears to me that you are. I will let you both know what I find out.” She kissed Larry and was gone.

## Chapter 46

Caroline looked everywhere in her house for Don and Heather. She found Sunny in the yard, watching the critters. "Good morning, Sunny. I hear you were pleased to see Lisa here the other night. She is a charming young woman, not a child anymore. You should be very proud of her."

"I am, Caroline. Thanks so much for the kind words and being so nice to her, despite the actions of her dad and Margo."

"You are most welcome, Sunny. Can I ask you a few things, as a newcomer to the world of ghosts, goblins, and things that go bump in the night? Is there any way to get rid of a spirit who is making life miserable for the living?"

"No doubt you are referring to Malcolm. He has been a pain in the ass since I got here and long before, I've been told."

The two of them moved to the porch to sit in the swing. Sunny continued, "He does exactly what he wants and cares not a bit whom he hurts. Like you first, and then your friend Georgia. Rest assured he will carry out his threats with no conscience whatsoever."

"How to get rid of him? I really don't know for sure. He is the only one I know who achieved so much toward being alive again, or at least in appearance and things. If he can be destroyed, I think you will have to focus on his getting stronger, and then try to get rid of him as a living thing. Even then, I am not sure it will work."

Caroline replied, "That is what I thought. The only way to do that is Georgia, unless I can find some willing prostitute. Do you think that might work?" Sunny shook her head no. "You're probably right. That would not be the same. Damn, I have to think of something."

Caroline wandered from room to room through her beautiful house. Her bedroom door was closed. She opened it to find Malcolm sleeping in her bed. He opened his eyes. "What the hell do you want?" he asked.

She replied, knowing he could hear her. “Well, in case you have forgotten, this is my bed in my bedroom. I would appreciate it if you would remove yourself back to the attic where you used to live.”

Like a petulant child, he said, “And what are you going to do about it if I don’t?”

“I guess there is nothing I can do, actually, but I thought there might be some bit of civility in you. I am not surprised.”

He bristled with annoyance. “You sure used to like me in your bed, and everywhere else I wanted you, for that matter. Remember those days and nights of endless fucking before that asshole came into your life? If you had not killed yourself, we could have continued. I was even thinking of having Georgia join us. I haven’t had a threesome in...hell, I can’t even remember how long. Now go away and leave me alone. Your sexy friend is sure to stop in this afternoon, and I want to be refreshed for a long bout with her.

“Oh, and one more thing...the joke is on you.... Once you did not want me anymore, I just kept using you for the fun of it, because your sex did not help me. If you had refused me, I would have just left you alone, and that husband of yours too. So, Pretty Caroline, you committed suicide for nothing. How does that make you feel?”

She stood, looking after him as he laughed and exited her room. There were no words to describe how she felt. She had ended her life in a pique of fear and depression without thinking it through. She knew now she should have talked to Larry...and to Malcolm...before taking that rash action. If she believed Malcolm now, killing Larry would have gained nothing for him any more than her sex helped him. But was he to be believed? He held the same threat over Georgia’s head...was it an idle threat or the truth? There was no way to know.

She collapsed on the floor. No tears for her invisible body, just despair deeper than humanly possible. Somehow, she had to destroy Malcolm before he could ruin any more lives.

\* \* \* \*

Caroline knew there was nothing she could do at present, so she wandered back downstairs to find Don and Heather returning. Don spoke, “Hey, Caroline, we have some news for you, good and bad, depending. We

found the old pirate, rotting in his grave, so ugly and smelling to high Heaven. He was not willing to talk until Heather gave him a bottle of your wine from the kitchen. That loosened his tongue.”

Heather jumped in. “Apparently, he did find several women to return his advances for many years when he was still in his original death state. Seems that once he returned from near-living, his body began to decay so fast he did not have time to find another woman until it was too late and none would even come near him.”

Caroline nodded as Don began talking. “He said he had several children by these women. The kids had deformities in some way, mostly small things, like a sixth finger, birthmarks, or hair in more than one color or such. Only one was seriously deformed, and it died at birth. They were all human like their mothers, but with special abilities. One could read minds, another could see in the dark. Stuff like that. He couldn’t remember much about them, except once they were born, their mothers never returned to his bed. He said after the first one, he always had two or three women available so he could just stay near-alive.”

Caroline wanted to know, “Why has he not gone to Hell before now? What happened to his children?”

Heather answered, “As long as he stayed in his coffin, he was overlooked. Coming out for us means that he will probably be on his way down, down, down, even as we speak. Couldn’t happen to a more deserving thing, unless it is the one coming down the stairs. As for the children, he had no idea. Never saw them after the mothers left him.”

Caroline turned to watch Malcolm pass them as if they did not exist. Never in her life had she felt such hatred and self-loathing as she did looking at him.

Georgia drove into the yard. They had not heard her approach, but Malcolm had and was waiting on the back porch for her. He moved down to the car to open the door and take her hand, so gentleman-like, as he grinned.

“Welcome, my pretty bird. I’ve been waiting for you. Today, you get to pick which room you want us to use to make love. Caroline’s bedroom, the basement, on the dining room table—wherever.” He could see Caroline, Don, and Heather watching them. He brazenly pulled up Georgia’s shirt to drag her bra down from one breast so he could suck it in front of his audience.

Georgia tried to protest, but he merely picked her up like a child and went back in the house, ignoring the three onlookers. Caroline felt such disgust and shame for her friend, she could not stay to see or hear what she knew was going to happen.

And it did, in the middle of Caroline's big bed. He stripped her completely, even as she tried to stop him. His lips on her body turned her distress into the pleasure he knew it would. Soon she did not struggle but gave into the sensations and lust.

## Chapter 47

Larry and Caroline made love, over and again, all afternoon. She teased him about trying to transform her in record time. Suddenly, a light had come on in his head. "Darling, darling, I can HEAR you. HEAR. Not in my head, but with my ears. We are making such progress, we need to keep 'contacting.' He laughed and began to taste her nipples again, hoping to arouse her, but this time she pushed his lips away.

She had returned from her house and gave him a quick synopsis of what she had learned, but their own needs came first. Sated, they lay together, touching and talking. Caroline said, "It made me sick to see Malcolm take Georgia upstairs, knowing what would happen. I am sure she would stay away from him if she were not afraid he would kill Doc. We have to do something. Even if she tells Doc about the pregnancy, that will not change anything. He could still kill Doc if she tries to stop having sex with him."

She was quiet for so long, Larry looked to see if she was asleep. Suddenly, she sat up. "Yes, this just might work. I talked to Sunny about a prostitute, but she didn't think it would work—but how about this? We find one who is willing to stay in the house and be paid to service Malcolm. He will think she is willing and that their contact is for real. From what I have just found out so far, it must be a true lovemaking, not faked, but if she is good, he will never know. He will start to fade, and if he fades far enough, he will be too old and weak to do anything. Like the pirate I told you about. What do you think?"

Suddenly, she feared he would note her comment about true lovemaking. But apparently he missed it, at least for now. She knew in time he would remember and she would have to admit her selfishness had ended her life, and their real marriage.

"Sounds like a plan that might work, as long as he doesn't think he needs another woman and keeps Georgia, too."

“No, Larry, I don’t think he will. Toward the end, one day he told us he did not care who did it, but one of us had to go with him. I think it would work?”

Larry grinned. “How do you plan to find this woman? Put an ad in the newspaper?”

“No, silly, you’ll find her. Go to Portland; try Williams Avenue, Union, or 82<sup>nd</sup> St., maybe the Albina area, to get one. Malcolm does not seem to have a favorite female type, so it should be easy.”

“So you want me to waltz into Albina or up and down Burnside and ask all the Ladies of the Night if any of them is interested in staying in a mansion and being paid for servicing a ghost?” He laughed aloud at the idea but saw she was serious. “Sorry, darling.”

“You can laugh all you like. I guarantee that if you approach them...pick out one who appeals to you personally...she will be more than happy to oblige you in anything you want. You are so damn handsome; no woman in her right mind would refuse you.”

“Hey, it took me long enough, Miss Caroline, to get you into my bed, as I recall.”

“You recall wrong, Sir Lawrence. We hardly knew each other and were in the process of getting to know each other WAY better when Malcolm played rock and roll with the house. But stop changing the subject. I’m sure there are prostitutes nearer than Portland, but one from far away would be better. No, never mind Portland—go to Seattle.”

“Whoa, Caroline, think this through. Are you sure Malcolm would not guess and do something to hurt someone, maybe even the woman? Or one of us, or the Joneses?”

“Okay, let’s bounce it off Doc and Georgia. Have them come here tonight, or we can go to them as soon as they close. Whatever they want.”

They wanted to meet at the restaurant. Larry and a now shadowy Caroline went inside as Doc turned the closed sign and shut the blinds and Georgia dimmed the lights. They were both were ecstatic to see Georgia’s dim form, and that brought up the problem of others seeing her too. Doc congratulated Larry on a job well done, or at least started, shaking his hand. They all laughed. Caroline asked them to save that discussion until they had heard her idea.



She explained what she had in mind, and they all agreed. The only misgiving was how to get a woman to agree to what they had in mind. Doc suggested that when they found one, they would tell her it was a gift for a man who was dying but didn't know it. That sounded fine to all, but the initial questions remained...how to locate such a woman and how to explain her presence in the house to Malcolm, just in the remote chance he asked.

Georgia thought Caroline's idea of using handsome Larry was a great one, but Larry demurred. Again, Doc had the solution: find a pimp with a stable of women and let him make the arrangements. He gets money, prostitute gets money, and Georgia gets free. The guys laughed, saying maybe they ought to get two women so that ol' Malcolm got tired out quicker.

## Chapter 48

The next morning, a Saturday, Doc and Malcolm, using Caroline's car, headed up US 101 toward Portland. Georgia and her kids would handle the restaurant for the weekend, and Caroline planned to spend the time working on her book. She had found the first pages wadded up where Larry had tossed them in his anger. She'd smoothed them out, planning to retype when necessary.

They drove north, taking US 99 first, and then I-5 into Portland. The scenery was beautiful from the rugged coast through the wild Coast Range into the fertile Willamette Valley, but on this trip, neither of them noticed. They were nervous.

"Larry," asked Doc, "tell the truth. Have you ever been with a hooker?"

"No, Doc. Never had to, and that is not meant to brag. Hell, I have no idea even how to approach one, do you?"

"Me neither. From what I've heard, you just drive by until you see one you like, she climbs into your car, you settle on a price, and off you go."

Larry thought awhile. "You know, with our luck, it would be an undercover cop and we would be arrested for solicitation. We never thought of that before."

"Just the pimp idea. That might be safer after all. But I have not the foggiest idea how to find a pimp—do you?"

"Well," Larry said, "guess we wander in and out of bars looking for a man with a big Cadillac, covered with gold chains and flashy rings. Oh, yes, and a hat and high-heeled boots. And a fur coat."

They were still laughing as they found a bar and grill on Burnside. They would have a bite to eat and maybe get some information. The Iron Bucket was shabby and smelled of a lifetime of stale grease and spilled beer. The bartender was a man in his 60's more interested in TV than them, until Doc finally whistled to get his attention. They ordered a couple of beers and

hamburgers. When he brought their order, Doc asked, "Say, any idea where we might find a gal or two for a party?"

"Depends on what you want," the bartender answered. "And how much you're willing to pay."

"We're kind of new at this," Larry said, "and are afraid of approaching anyone for fear of being arrested."

"Good thinking, gents. There is a guy, named Curtis down the street at that strip joint two block east. He runs a stable. Tell him Joe sent you. He's fair and his gals are clean. You will find him easily. Just look for a fur coat and lots of jewelry, which, incidentally, is for real."

"Thanks, Joe." Without cracking a smile, even though they were ready to explode with laughter at his description of this Curtis person, they ate their burgers and thanked Joe again with a large tip.

The minute the door closed behind them, they laughed until they ached. Once in the car, they waited to calm down before driving the two blocks to "Satan's Playpen."

This place smelled no better than Joe's had, plus a mixture of alcohol and cheap perfume. Tinny music from some hidden source provided the women pole dancing with enough rhythm for them to entertain the handful of men watching them. They spotted Curtis right away but waited until the break to see if the dancers would approach them, and one did. She was a thin, dark-skinned girl with long hair that she pulled back in a ponytail as she sat down.

"Hi, guys. Buy a girl a drink? My name is Sahara." She did not wait for an answer but motioned a waitress. Her drink would be tea to look like whiskey, at a high-end whiskey price. She appeared to be just what they were looking for. She was slim and beautiful. She was of mixed blood that gave her an exotic look. Her breasts were full, pushing up above the low neckline of her blouse. Her waist was small, hips wide. Her black hair and dark eyes were enough to stir any man. The two looking at her felt as much attraction as any man would.

She smiled and pulled her hair from the band holding it, allowing it to fall around her face, knowing that she was sexier that way. "Looking for some company? I have a place upstairs next door. Single or together is okay with me. I'll even give you a discount if there's no rough or funny stuff."

“Sounds good,” Doc replied, “But we are thinking something more long term than a quick roll. More like a couple weeks, maybe more.”

“A couple weeks? You’ve gotta be kidding. You two got a year’s supply of Viagra or what? Never heard this before. What’s going on?” Sahara wanted to know.

Larry explained again, but she still did not seem to understand. Finally, he asked, “Do you have a boss, or protector?”

She got up, walked to Curtis, and pointed to them. Arrogantly, Curtis shuffled over to their table, turned around a chair, and sat in it backwards facing them. “What you talking about? Couple of weeks or more?”

They took turns describing their sick friend...the one who was dying and did not know it...and how they wanted to make his last days as great as they could. They assured Curtis and Sahara that the friend was not contagious and would not infect her with anything. They even promised to pay for a doctor when the time was over, if they thought it was necessary. They assured the pair that she would not be harmed in any way, but she must make the friend think she was having sex with him because he was so attractive and she was lonely. In other words, make him think she was willing when she was not.

“How much you willing to pay for this?” Curtis demanded.

Caroline had said to pay whatever was necessary, and if they really wanted two women, that was fine too. Larry answered, “\$5,000.” Curtis laughed, and the haggling began. As the figure rose, so did the smile on Sahara’s face. Even her portions after Curtis got his were more than she earned in months. Curtis told her to go get their things and be back in an hour.

They left Satan’s Playpen and headed back to the coast, tracing their original route. On the way, they explained a few of the ground rules to Sahara. She was to be a close friend of Caroline Fleming, who had invited her to visit any time she was in the west. She had an interview in Portland and thought she would surprise Caroline, only to find, when arriving in town and asking for directions, that Caroline was dead. Someone directed her to Larry, who would take her to the house to stay for a few days, or however long she wanted. It was a flimsy charade, but neither thought Malcolm would question it.

When they got to the part about Malcolm's attire and demeanor, she seemed to get upset. "You didn't tell me I'd be fucking a loony. Not for even that much money. What if he goes creepy and hurts or even kills me?" They reassured her that he was an actor who liked to live out his roles, and his last one had been a man in the early 1900s. She seemed to accept that and fell asleep in the back seat. Once in town, they checked her into the Dew Drop Inn and headed home to their waiting wives.

## **Chapter 49**

As planned, Georgia and Caroline were both at Larry's little house, asleep. The door opening roused Caroline, who ran quickly to throw herself into Larry's arms. Doc moved to the bedroom, where he kissed Georgia's face until she awoke. It was late, so they agreed to meet there at five in the morning to discuss what they had done. Doc took his sleepy wife home.

Larry slipped his hands down the front of Caroline's nightgown. He had brought it and several dresses from her house to replace the one in which she was cremated, as it brought him horrible memories. She snuggled her face into his neck, licking him as he squeezed her breasts. Her mouth met his as she unzipped his pants, practically undressing him as he slid her gown to a puddle on the floor. Their passion was so intense that they had no time for foreplay. They wanted to mate immediately, almost frantically, knowing the next time would be slow and sweet.

Climaxes were quick and intense. They lay together, caressing each other's bodies in lazy touches until she felt him starting to respond again. She rolled on top of Larry's wonderful, muscular body. She ran her tongue in and out his ears, knowing that it drove him crazy. He rubbed her butt cheeks, down into the joining of her thigh and hip, just outside her mound. He loved the sounds she made while he caressed her there, aware that her desire was mounting too. Her fingers ran through the dark hair on his chest, moving to his nipples, where she pinched them and, as they hardened, moved her lips to nibble on first one, and then the other.

He lifted her up to sit on his stomach as he played with her breast. He could feel her hot pussy so close to his cock, he had to control himself to keep from pushing into her immediately. Instead, he lifted her again to sit on his face. His tongue found her button, and she began to rock as he brought her sensations until she collapsed forward. She came long and wet, the way he liked as he licked her.

She was still breathing hard when she moved down his body to slide her throbbing vagina onto his rock-hard cock. They rocked, arms and legs intertwined. Their climaxes were intense. They fell asleep, exhausted, just as they were...penis and pussy still joined.

Pounding on the door announced the arrival of Doc and Georgia. Larry pulled on his pants to them and returned to the bedroom. He stopped short as he turned on the bedside lamp. "My God, Caroline, I can see you. Well, almost all of you. So, unless you want your guests to see your wonderful assets, you had better put on a robe." He wrapped a robe around her as she got up. His arms went around her so tightly she could hardly breathe. "I never dreamed I would see you again, but I can. Dear God, thank you." He had tears in his eyes as he released her and fled to the bathroom.

Caroline opened the door to admit their friends. Georgia gasped, "Oh, my God, you are mostly all there. I can't believe it! So quickly."

Doc grinned. "Is making love all you to do?"

"Yes, as often as I can," replied Larry as he emerged from the bathroom. He put his arms around Caroline from behind to bury his face in her hair. "Look at her. She's almost as good as new. To see, I mean—she is good as new every other way already." He grinned as he motioned them to sit down.

Georgia wanted to know, "Are you taking this woman to the house today?"

"No," Caroline replied. "You are. Larry does not want to go there, remember? So you can take her, show her around, shop on the way for whatever she needs...all that girl stuff. Be sure that Malcolm knows you are there. As soon as you leave, he will make his moves on her, no doubt. I hope she realizes that she is only acting, not really enjoying him. Because if she does enjoy him, this plan will not work."

Doc explained how Sahara became a bit upset thinking Malcolm might be a loony, or such, and they had reassured her that he was acting out his old roles.

"Maybe it would be helpful if you could instill more confidence as to his sanity, Georgia," Caroline thought aloud. "How about you call him to meet Sahara before you go? Maybe during the conversation, you be sure to let him know you will not be back as often. That will spur him on to get her to bed as quickly as he can. From then on, I guess we will have to leave it all to her."

Georgia said, “Since I won’t be going there, thank God, and Larry cannot trust himself to go there, that leaves only Doc to check on her. Is she pretty, guys? Can I trust her to keep her hands off my guy?”

They all laughed. Larry drove to the Dew Drop Inn in his pickup, while Georgia drove Caroline’s car. Doc went to the restaurant. Caroline headed for the shower as soon as she changed the linen. She would be waiting for her man to return to make love to her again.



## Chapter 50

Once at the Inn, Georgia took a deep breath as Larry knocked on the door to Sahara's room. She whispered to Larry, "I have never met a hooker before and I have no idea how to act or what to say."

Larry just grinned as Sahara opened the door. Georgia was stunned. "Oh, God, you are beautiful. I had no idea...."

Sahara smiled without warmth. "Did you think I would be old and fat with needle marks running up and down my arms? Let me reassure you, I am clean in all ways, and being with me will not contaminate you." Her sarcasm was apparent.

"That is not what I meant, and if I gave you that impression, I am sorry. Please, it was simply a compliment, because you ARE beautiful. The only woman in this town ever as beautiful was Caroline, Larry's wife. God bless her soul."

Sahara smiled again, this time a friendly one. "I'm sorry too. It's just a defensive habit, I guess. Caroline, she's the one I came here to visit? I'll be staying in her house? With some nut case who's dying and needs some female companionship before he goes? This whole thing is bizarre, to say the least, but money is money. Are you positive he will not hurt me?"

"The only way he could hurt you is wearing you out with his never-ending sexual needs," Georgia replied.

"How can you be so sure?"

"Ahem, Ladies, I think I will leave you to yourselves. I'm going home now," Larry said as he left, knowing that his wonderful Caroline would be waiting, fresh and sexy in his bed.

Georgia and Sahara were chatting like old friends within minutes. Georgia liked everybody, and few ever found any reason to dislike her. She was so honest that when Sahara asked again how Georgia could be so sure

Malcolm would not hurt her, she waited only a couple seconds before replying.

“It is a sad and ugly story, one I am ashamed to even tell.”

Sahara laughed. “You could not possibly have any sad or ugly stories to compare to mine. So spit it out.”

“Well, you must promise to tell no one, especially my husband, what I am going to tell you.” Sahara nodded her acceptance. “My Doc is the most wonderful guy in the world, but for one thing. He cannot get an erection, because of an accident many years ago. He does what he can for me, but it isn’t the same. One day when I was at Caroline’s house, Malcolm came on to me and before I knew it, I found myself in his arms and in a bed. He was fucking me the way I used to love it. Let me tell you, it was so good, that I could not refuse him any time after that. Malcolm’s dying wants was never an issue, just my own need. Then Doc found out. He was so crushed I promised to stop.”

“Honey,” Sahara asked, “Has Doc seen a doctor...no pun intended...about this problem he has? There are some things done nowadays that can help. Hell, I could even show him a couple myself. Why don’t you could talk to him about it? Have you even done a threesome? We could do that, and I can show you both what to do. No extra charge. And personally, I like threesomes, especially with a sexy morsel like you are, Georgia.”

They were sitting in the car in the local Safeway parking lot, calmly discussing sex in a way that nobody in town would believe. To her surprise, Georgia was not the least embarrassed to share her problems with Sahara, nor did she feel any shame in the idea of a threesome. Actually, the thought of it made her a bit horny. She could practically envision Doc and this woman and herself touching, kissing, and sharing sex. *God, what is the matter with me?* she wondered.

Groceries and necessities purchased, they drove US 101 until they reached Caroline’s driveway, where Georgia stopped. “Look at the house there on the hill. That is where you will be staying.”

Sahara looked dumbstruck. “Larry told me it was a beautiful home, but I never pictured a mansion. It’s incredible. Wow.”

Once inside, the house no less awed her. When they stepped into the master bedroom, Georgia spoke. “This is the only room off limits. Larry and

Caroline were so much in love that he cannot bear the idea of anyone else in their bed. I hope you understand.”

“No problem. Every room in the house is so gorgeous, why would I need this? Oh, Georgia, this is makes me feel like a princess in a castle. Oh, Lord, it will be hard to go back to my old life after this. Oh, well, bring on this addlepatated man. We might as well get down to why I am here.”

## Chapter 51

“Oh Malcolm, come out, come out from wherever you are,” Georgia sang out. “There is someone I want you to meet.” They had moved back downstairs to the kitchen. Malcolm came into the room from the basement. He smiled at them, bowed deeply, and took Sahara’s hand to plant a lingering kiss on the back of it.

He could not have been any more charming as he continued to hold her hand, looking deeply into her eyes, and said, “Who is this beautiful lady? I am in love at first sight. I would fight dragons for the right to become a suitor.”

Sahara was taken aback by his flowery speech and the fact that he would not let her withdraw her hand from his. Georgia, on the other hand, found it amusing and said, “Malcolm, if you would let the lady have her hand back, I will make the introductions.”

Malcolm did not release her hand, but held it once again to his lips. “You are so delectable, beautiful lady, that I could eat you, every inch.” Sahara jerked her hand away and stepped back, as if to hide behind Georgia.

“Malcolm, you stop that.” Georgia shook her finger at him. “This is Sahara, a friend of Caroline’s. She will be staying here for a while, so you be nice to her. Remember, you are a guest too, and need to act accordingly.” She knew Malcolm understood her meaning but chose to ignore her. As they’d all hoped, the lovely woman enthralled their ghostly friend, no doubt about it.

Doc arrived in his truck and poured himself a cup of coffee as he walked into the kitchen. He knew he had to turn and that he would have to keep his calm, because he wanted to kill Malcolm. How to kill a ghost, he had no idea, but he wanted to do it nevertheless. He faced the trio, nodding at them, but spoke only to Georgia, “Are you ready to go? Caroline’s car can stay here for Sahara to use, according to Larry. So let’s go.”

Georgia gave Sahara a quick girl-hug and said, "If you need anything, call me at home or the restaurant. Or if you get lonely in this big old place, let us know and we'll stop in some evening to see you. Bye, now."

Doc started the truck and turned to look at his wife. "You women seemed to be pretty chummy already. I never expected my chaste little Georgia to become fast friends with a hooker." She sensed anger and hostility in his voice as he turned back to his driving.

"What's wrong, honey?" she asked.

"You tell me." His reply was so curt she said nothing more until he dropped her off at their home.

At Larry's home, the lovebirds were dozing after an hour of leisurely sex. The rain had started a few minutes before and was now a torrent hitting the roof. Caroline lifted her head from his shoulder to rest it on her hand as she looked down on his satisfied face. "As a carpenter, are you one of those who repairs for others while your own leaks?"

He sat up suddenly, pulling her to him and then on top of him as he lay back down. "If it leaks, I will just use you to keep the water off me. Before that might not have worked, but now, my darling, you are so close to human again, I will stay dry. Except from here." He ran his fingers between them to touch her vagina. "See, you are wet now. What do you need? I promise, I can fix it."

"That is from you, and it needs a shower. Honestly, husband, if we keep this up, you will need a new hot water heater."

Together, soaping each other led to more than just getting clean. Soon they joined as he held her slim body on his throbbing penis, pushing her against the shower stall so her breasts mashed into his washboard chest. "I am so glad your legs are so muscular," she whispered in his ear as her tongue played in it, "otherwise you would not be able to keep up this...this...this, oh, I'm coming." He followed immediately.

They again lay in bed, backs against the headboard. "Honey, we have a problem, and I have no idea what to do about it," Larry began. "You are not transparent anymore. I'm not complaining, God knows, but unless you intend to stay in this house forever, someone is going to see you and know you are Caroline, a dead Caroline."

"I have come up with an idea so crazy that it might work. That is, if you want me to share your life as we once did." That comment drew a long, loving kiss that made Caroline smile. "Is it safe to assume you meant yes?"

"What is your crazy idea? At least you have one, crazy or not."

"Okay, here it is. Don't start laughing until I'm done. Did you know I had a twin sister? We were separated when our parents died in a boating accident on the Columbia River the year we were born. We had no other relatives, so we went to separate foster homes. My foster family adopted me. I never knew what became of my sister or that I even had one until a friend in New York claimed she had seen a woman exactly like me painting landscapes on the bank of the Seine in Paris. I hadn't believed it possible until my friend brought me a letter from this woman. When I tried to contact her, she seemed to have disappeared. I went to Paris in search of her four years ago, but to no avail. I hired private investigators, too, but they had no luck either. I simply let the hope slide and forgot the whole thing."

Larry looked so bewildered. "Is this true? Caroline, you never told me."

Caroline put her finger to his lips to silence his questions. "Then I got a call from my publisher the day before I drowned. He said a woman who looked exactly like me showed up at his office looking for me. She had seen my picture on one of my books and hoped he could help her. She gave him an address which you found a few days after my death on a notepad by the phone, but you did not know who it was, so you tossed it."

"Honey, I don't remember any address on a notepad, or anything like that."

Again, she shushed him. "Apparently the woman returned to my publisher after seeing a newspaper article about my demise. You must remember, any New York writer makes big headlines if it's something morbid or scandalous. Anyway, he gave her our phone number at the big house. Now, you will have to start going to the house again, so you can get a call from her, but not until we get Malcolm out of the way and Sahara back to Curtis, if she wants to go. If not, the house is big enough for you, her, and my sister who is going to come to live with you. Do you think I can fake a French accent?"

She sat waiting for him to say something. "Well?"

"This is so crazy it will probably be simple to pull off. No wonder your books have waiting lists before they even come out. What a concoction your

idea is! Won't people talk with my having your sister live with me, let alone a beautiful prostitute? Maybe they'll call it 'Larry's Harem' or such. Come here. All that talking you did made me so tired, I need to have sex again to recuperate." She laughed and moved into his waiting arms.

## Chapter 52

Later, Larry called to suggest that Doc and Georgia join him and Caroline on the beach south of their house for a wiener roast and a few beers. Georgia giggled that it would be fun, something she and Doc had not done much since they'd had children. Grumbling, Doc agreed, after Larry explained that Caroline was getting cabin fever. She'd announced earlier to him that yes, spirits get fevers to be outside and for making love, so he was happy to oblige on both accounts.

In his truck on the way to the beach, Larry felt her warmth and excitement at being in the air and beside her beloved ocean. She fairly ran down the steep path to the beach, mindless of the slick mud from the rain that morning. Caroline laughed when he told her to be careful or she would hurt herself. "As if that is possible, you silly man. You're the one who should be careful."

By the time the Joneses arrived, Larry had a blazing fire going and was snuggling with his wife under a warm blanket, sharing a beer and kisses.

They all four got comfortable and made small talk, until Doc asked, "There must be a reason for this impromptu beach party, aside from cabin fever and having a picnic. Want to clue us in?"

Caroline unfolded her tale of an identical sister to explain her own reappearance. The plan met with complete approval. They all four discussed some details to be ironed out, but nothing major. They drank their beer, ate their snacks, and froze their buns off in the chilly oceanic wind until Georgia called an end as her nipples were hurting her from the cold. Doc volunteered to warm them, and she agreed, once they got home.

When they were gone, Larry slid his hand inside Caroline's sweater. "No hard nipples here. Why not?"

"Because I do not feel much of temperature anymore, unless it's yours. Want to see if you can make them hard?"



She didn't have to ask twice before he pulled her to him, wrapping the blanket around his shoulders as he exposed her lovely breasts. Since the chill of the night did not bother her, he was free to expose her completely. From her mouth to her legs, he worshipped every inch of her with his hands, mouth, and hard cock. Her nipples grew so hard they became tiny points surrounded by dimples of excitement. He caressed the inside of her thighs until she moaned and lifted herself to sit on his penis. They rocked together until his spasms shot his seed into and ran back down over his tight balls. She rubbed those tight globes until he stopped shaking. He loved to feel her pussy wet with his juices, and she loved to feel him rubbing those juices all over her. She exploded with wave after wave of sheer ecstasy, crying out his name as she crested time and again.

Caroline rose, pulling him up. "Come on, let's wash off in the water."

"You have got to be kidding. This is not Hawaii or the South Pacific. That water is probably just above freezing. I love you more than life itself, but there is no way you are going to convince me to wade out there. I will wait for a hot shower." He pulled his clothes on and dowsed the fire as he watched her in the shallow water, splashing like a child. It hurt to see, thinking of her drowning, even knowing nothing could kill her now, but lack of love.

They looked up at their brightly lit house as they drove back to town. "I wonder how your Sahara is doing with old Malcolm," Caroline wondered aloud.

"What do you mean, my Sahara?" Larry demanded a bit angrily. "She's not MY anything. She's here for only one reason...to help destroy Malcolm and free Georgia. You can't possibly think I have any desire for her."

Caroline was smiling as she replied. "As I recall, you were more than a little turned on by those naked performers in Tahoe. Not that I objected, because you serviced me well."

"Serviced? Is that what I did? Is that what I do? Is that...?"

She laughed aloud. "Yes, and a damn good job you do too." She slid her hand down between his legs and squeezed lightly. "Besides, it might be fun to watch you and this apparently beautiful woman. What do you think?"

"I think you need your butt smacked for even thinking something like that."

"Ohhhh, butt spanking. I love it when you try new ideas."

Their laughter filled the truck cab as they parked and went inside Larry's little house.

## Chapter 53

In the other pickup, things were not as joyous. The tension between Doc and Georgia was thick, and neither really knew why. "Doc, what's wrong? Are you mad at me? Can we talk this out, whatever it is?"

"Are you sure you want to? I mean, it could get pretty ugly. Nothing the kids should know or hear?"

"Honey," Georgia spoke quietly, "is it about Malcolm?"

Doc's rage exploded. "You're damn right it is. I know you've been fucking him for weeks, maybe months. When I picture you with him, I want to kill you for getting what you need from something that is not even alive. Things I cannot give you. God knows I do the best I can. I think we should just get a divorce and be done. Then you can find a man to satisfy you and not some dead thing." Tears were running down his cheek. He pulled the truck off the highway onto a side road.

Georgia reached for his hand, but he slapped her away as he sobbed into his arms folded on the steering wheel. They sat in silence for some time before she spoke. "Doc, I don't want a divorce. I love you. I have no excuse for what I've done. I don't blame you...just myself, and that damn thing at Caroline's house. I really don't want him, not like you think, but his threats on your life, and the children, give me no choice. That's why I HAVE to stay away from him and find him some other woman to feed his needs. He does not care at all about any woman, or me for that matter. He wants what he can get from them to prolong his existence." Now she was crying too.

They moved together and embraced in comfort, not lust. "Before you get mad again, there's something else I want to tell you. Sahara wants the three of us to have a ménage. She promises that she knows ways for you to get a hard-on and keep it. I know you want that, don't you?"

“Let me get this straight. The whore wants to have sex with both of us. She thinks she can make me a man again? Hogwash! That is the dumbest idea I have heard in years. You can’t be seriously thinking of that, are you?”

“Yes, I am serious. Think about it. She’s beautiful. and no man in his right mind, including you, could refuse what she’s offering. Remember, years ago, we used to fantasize about group sex and how much the idea turned us on? Why not try it? We have nothing to lose and a whole lot to gain. Don’t turn down the idea until you think about it for a while.”

Doc started the truck and drove home, all the time thinking of Sahara’s suggestion. No doubt about it, she was sexy enough to make any man’s blood boil, and her doing Georgia was something he would love to watch. His wife was a hot little thing, and she deserved pleasure wherever he could find it for her. And himself, too. He could picture his hands all over Sahara’s body. Yes, they had talked about those things years ago, and even the thoughts were enough to drive them both into nearly insatiable sex. Sure was something to think about.

## Chapter 54

Sahara and Malcolm were treating each other as mere acquaintances. He was watching television in the living room while she had a snack in the kitchen. She fed the critters, and they immediately loved her. She had never had a pet as a child, so this was a new experience, one she found herself enjoying. She decided that she might as well get on with her job.

She returned to the living room and sat at the other end of the couch on which he was sitting. She moved so her legs stretched out toward him. "Miss Sahara, you have beautiful legs and feet. You are tempting me with them, do you know that?"

"No, I'm sorry. I will move them if they're bothering you, but the floor is cold and so are my feet. I should go upstairs for some slippers, but it's so comfortable that I hate to move."

Malcolm did not miss the chance. "Here, let me rub them for you. That will warm them." When she didn't refuse the offer, he lost all attention for the show he'd been watching. His hands did warm her cold feet. He let his hands move to her ankles and calves. When she didn't stop him, he knew he would have her within minutes but was surprised when she stood and slowly undressed, removing one garment at a time to let him savor what he was seeing.

She bent to offer her breasts to him. He pulled her down onto his lap, nuzzled her neck, and licked her nipples. His lips found her, and he searched her mouth for her tongue. Soon, they were both naked, wrapped in intertwined arms and legs. He was amazed at the things she did to and with him. No other woman had drained his cock so completely, and then demanded he do more. He was in his own heaven, not noticing that she asked nothing in return. When he tried to touch her, she moved his hands to let hers work on his body and limpness until he was ready again.

That night they continued one bout of sex after another. Sahara had to keep reminding herself that this was a job, not for pleasure, because Malcolm was truly good. She came close to demanding a release. Maybe next time. That thought made it easier to ignore his talent of making love.

They parted, and she went up for a shower and bed. Her vagina was swollen and throbbing for fulfillment. She masturbated to climax before she fell asleep. Sometime in the night, she felt him again, but this time she took her pleasure as well as giving it. This was just a job, but what could it hurt her for her to enjoy herself too?

The following morning, as per their plan, Georgia stopped by to see Sahara on her way to the restaurant, after her daily bout of morning sickness. She rang the doorbell, but no one answered. She let herself in with her key. Upstairs, she heard voices. Actually, she heard Sahara. She recognized the sound, one of sexual climax. No, she was not to enjoy him...that would keep him near life. Damn, this was not going to work if Sahara enjoyed him, the way she had.

She ran up and into the bedroom, where Malcolm was moving atop Sahara's body. Her legs were around his waist and her eyes closed in rapture. "Sahara, what are you doing?"

Her eyes flew open, but Malcolm answered. "Sweet little bird, it should be obvious what she is doing. Same thing you did so many times. Say, why not join us? Two of you will give me double power." He reached for her, never losing his rhythm, but she pulled away. He grinned as he rocked into Sahara, not noticing that she was no longer returning his ardor. When he climaxed, he picked up his clothes and left the women alone.

Looking dejected, Sahara sat naked in the middle of the bed, legs crossed, totally oblivious to her nudity. One hand moved lazily through her nether hair, as if Sahara was not aware of it. "God, Georgia, you should have warned me. He is incredible. The first few times, I held out, but last night I simply did what comes naturally. It was one of the best climaxes I have ever had. So, I figured why not kill two birds with one stone...fuck the hell out of him and enjoy myself at the same time."

"Cover up, please," Georgia said, "and get some clothes on. We need to talk." Georgia had to admit that the prostitute was sexy as hell, even to her. Her breasts were large, firm, and high on her chest, much bigger than one would expect on so slim a woman. She had almost no rosettes, but gigantic

nipples that turned up from her breasts. Her long legs crossed to expose her Y of dark curls that seemed too large for her compact body. Her color was like a dark tan, but it was natural, not something from the sun. Georgia had seen her dark race naked only in Doc's magazines years ago, and none of those women was anywhere near as lovely as this one.

"What's wrong with talking right now? You are a girl; I am a girl. Why not take your clothes off and join me? Say, better yet, we could call Malcolm back."

Georgia lost her temper. "Damn it, at least put on a robe. You are not being funny. Come downstairs. There's something you need to read."

Like a tawny cat, Sahara arose from the bed, no longer insolent. She grabbed a gown and followed Georgia downstairs into the little room where Caroline wrote. Georgia handed her a stack of papers from the box on the desk, pointed to a chair, and said, "READ!" As the dark girl read, Georgia thought how aptly named she was...Sahara was the perfect name for the dark, graceful woman who held so much attraction that Georgia felt it too. Somehow, she had to get Doc to agree to a ménage and to learn how to get a long-lasting erection. So much depended on it. There was only one more roadblock for her to handle...her pregnancy.

## Chapter 55

When Sahara looked up, Georgia could read the dismay on her face. “For Christ’s sake, am I fucking a ghost? Did Caroline too? I think you had better tell me what’s going on.”

“Yes, you are. As Caroline and I did, but she stopped when she married Larry. Or tried to, until Malcolm threatened to murder Larry, just as he has threatened my Doc. Her solution was to take away her living body so he could not hurt either one of them any further. I have considered the same thing, but I am too much of a coward. The solution we four came up with was you.”

“Four—what do you mean, four?”

“Sahara, do you believe in ghosts?”

“I don’t disbelieve in them, I guess. Why?”

Georgia took the book from Sahara’s hands and returned it to the desk. She took a deep breath and told the entire story to the sultry woman staring at her with wide eyes. She left out part of it, knowing Malcolm was probably listening. Finally, she suggested again that Sahara get dressed so they could take a walk on the beach, looking for some shells after the high tide last night. When Sahara seemed to decline, Georgia moved to whisper in her ear that she wanted to finish the story away from eavesdroppers. Sahara nodded but pulled Georgia to her, kissing her gently on the lips. Georgia felt immediate desire but pulled away. Sahara smiled and went up to change clothes.

They walked down the path across from the house and sat on a log. Georgia explained the unbelievable...that sexual contact with some spirits could allow them to return to near human form again. Malcolm and Caroline, for example. That the only way to reverse the process was to deny them willing partners. Unwilling partners would cause the reversal process, but the spirit could not know it was just pretense.



"Let me get this straight," Sahara said. "If I enjoy him, he continues to grow stronger. If I pretend to be a willing partner but do not actually enjoy it...a la a hooker...he will weaken to nothingness. That is what the people hired me to do, so that is what I will do. But, honey, I still think I'm entitled to something beyond money. I think I'm entitled to a few good rolls too. I still want you and Doc together. Did you talk to him about it?"

"Yes, but he said it was a crazy idea. I think I can convince him, maybe, if we can go somewhere where no one will know, except Larry and Caroline. I will ask them if we can use his house, and I am sure they will say yes. Caroline is getting cabin fever often now, as she is nearly her old self again. Larry is on her every possible minute...he claims it's just to bring her back, not because he can't keep his hands off her."

Sahara laughed. "I would like to get my hands on him too. Haven't you ever thought what he would be like?"

Georgia started to deny it but then nodded. "I felt guilty even thinking about that. He and Doc are the best of friends, and Caroline is his wife now, and my best friend."

"When am I going to get to meet this illusive Caroline? If she is as gorgeous as everyone says, I might want a shot at her myself."

"Sahara, I can't believe you! I thought ladies of your persuasion did not like sex."

"I don't know where you got that idea, but let me assure you that whores like me do enjoy sex, probably more than most women. But only sex with people we desire, not the Johns we service. I am bisexual, meaning I like sex with men, women, or both together. I really enjoy group sex because everyone gets so much more out of it than just a couple together. I promise, if you can convince Doc, I can prove it. Hell, you can invite Larry and Caroline, too, if you want. I can do all of you, and you will all enjoy it as much as I do."

Georgia realized her hands were shaking and her mind was picturing naked bodies touching and moving. She stood. "Let's go—I have to get to the restaurant." She didn't want Sahara to know how excited her words had made Georgia feel.

## Chapter 56

Caroline felt trapped in the little house, especially those hours Larry went to work. She was not a game show person, and she thought the soapies were so poorly written, she laughed when she was suppose to cry. Larry teased her about all her money but said he had to continue to work, for his own sanity, at least until they could be a normal couple again. Not that being with her 24-7 was not enough—he needed to do something more than make love all day. That would have been fine, he said, if he had been capable of doing it, but nature and a limp penis won out.

She felt much the same, wanting to continue writing. His old truck was outside. She pulled on a pair of jeans and one of his old shirts. A hooded sweatshirt and high-neck scarf would hide her face, if she was careful. No one saw her as she drove to her house and parked behind the building. Oh, how she had missed it! A pair of delighted critters met her at the door as she let herself into the kitchen.

As she crossed into the living room, she spied Malcolm on the couch watching television. He smiled. “Well, if it isn’t my former lover. Look at you! Nearly whole again. Nice feeling, isn’t it? That Larry must be some kind of non-stop Casanova to have brought you back so quickly. I would enjoy you myself, but it would not do either of us any good, unless you’re just looking for a satisfying fuck. If that is why you’re here, I’m happy to oblige. For old time’s sake, I mean.”

He started to remove his shirt, but she stopped him. “Thanks, Malcolm, but I have more than I can handle at home so I will have to pass. It is thoughtful of you to offer, though.” Her sarcasm missed him entirely. “I am only here to pick up my typewriter and a few things I need. I want to get back at it. It sure is quiet here nowadays. I don’t feel any of the others. Where are they?”

Malcolm stuffed his shirt back into his trousers. "You haven't been here for awhile, so you probably don't know. They are all gone, all but me. It was roll call again, so to speak, and Heather and Donald, and Sunny too, went north. The actor definitely went south, along with that larcenous truck driver friend of yours. Some of the cemetery folks, like the pirate, are burning too, but most of the rest...those who were ready to go...went into the clouds. I, and now you, are the only two left. Say, did you know I am going to be a father? Georgia is carrying my child. I want to name him Malcolm the Second, but she probably won't do that."

Caroline was so amazed at his brazen announcement that she did not notice the dark woman who had entered the room until she spoke. "Malcolm, you are a bastard," Sahara yelled at him. "How dare you act as if her pregnancy is the greatest thing that ever happened? Do you have any idea the hell you're putting her through? Her life must be an agony as it is, much less what it will be like later."

"Oh, ladies, calm down. It could be worse. I could let old Doc know, but I haven't so far. Maybe she will start balling me again to keep him from finding out. Interesting idea."

Caroline saw red. She swung her arm so hard on the side of his head with her fist that he toppled, shaking the floor as his weight hit it. "If you ever tell him, or anyone else, you will be sorry you ever stuck your cock in her or anyone else."

Malcolm laughed as he stood. "What, dear Caroline, do you think you are going to do about it? You know as well as I do that there is NOTHING you or anyone else can do." They could hear his laughter as he moved through the kitchen and down the stairs to the basement below.

Caroline turned to Sahara and offered her hand, much to the woman's surprise. "Sahara, I am Caroline. Pleased to meet you. Larry told me you were beautiful and he was not exaggerating. Georgia thinks you're the best thing to happen around here since sliced bread. Can we talk?"

"Certainly, Caroline." She could see why Larry was head over heels for this woman. Sahara, who knew she was beautiful, felt eclipsed by the glow and serenity of the taller woman. "I'm sorry if I overstepped myself, but I rather lost it when I heard him talking about Georgia like she is nothing but something for his use."

Caroline smiled at her. She took her hand and led her to one of the couches. "I lost it too. Wish it had hurt him instead of only amusing him. He is a monster and totally devoid of feeling for anyone but himself. Perhaps now you understand why we wanted you with him, instead of most other females."

"I certainly do, Caroline, and I will do exactly that, starting right after you leave. What is Georgia going to do? She should have it aborted. I know I could never have a child with an asshole like that. Hell, I can help her with that too. That way, Doc would never have to know."

"We haven't discussed it, only Malcolm, but I will talk to her later."

"There is one other thing, Caroline. She also told me about Doc. I can fix his problem, if he will let me. I already have what he needs, so now all he's short of is information. And to be honest, I find both of them to be sexy as hell and suggested it might be easier if we bedded together in a ménage. You know what that is?"

Caroline nodded slowly, as if unable to digest what she was hearing.

Sahara continued. "I'm positive Doc would never bang me without Georgia—and I'm also positive that she would like to do it. Only problem is where? So, could you and Larry go somewhere for a night so we can get to know each other better? No, no actually, so we can fuck without anyone knowing?"

"Wow, Sahara, you sure don't pull punches, do you? I'll see what Georgia says and talk to Larry." Caroline was flustered. "I must go now. I came for my writing things. Would you mind helping me carry them out to the truck?"

After the typewriter and supplies were stowed in the front, as the rain had started again, Caroline put her arms around the dark, slender woman and kissed her cheek. It surprised her when Sahara returned the embrace and put her lips on Caroline's own, letting her tongue slip inside to touch the other tongue so quickly it was as if it had not happened. Before Caroline could speak, Sahara had turned to run back into the house, closing the door without a glance back.

Caroline stood in the rain for a minute, her hand on her lips. The kiss had left her unsettled, and she did not know why. Inside, Sahara leaned against the door, feeling her body hot with desire. She wanted that woman more than any other woman she had ever met.

Malcolm had watched the exchange out the window and now came down the stairs. He moved directly to Sahara and ran his hand down inside her shirt, pinching her nipples. "That was most interesting, Sahara. Are you hot and wet for her? I bet you are. Let me see." He grinned as his fingers moved to feel inside her panties. "Yes, oh yes, you are. Well, I sure don't mind. Here, let me add to it."

Sahara closed her eyes and began to let Malcolm undress her, touching and feeling her as he did. Once he had her naked and spread on the floor, he was over her within seconds, moaning his lust while paying no attention to her at all. *Perfect*, Sahara thought, *perfect!*

## **Chapter 57**

Larry was pacing the floor when Caroline arrived home. He heard the truck and ran outside. The downpour, typical Oregon weather, had turned even heavier. She laughed in the rain as she stopped him with her mouth. His fright at her absence turned to anger and then to desire as she held him close, pressing her breasts to his wet t-shirt. He pulled up her sweatshirt to let his hand roam over her mounds to find the pointing nipples. He wanted to take her right there but forced himself to pull her onto the porch under the roof. There were no neighbors, and it was raining so hard no one could have seen them if they were standing ten feet away.

She began taking off her clothes as they kissed. He unbelted his pants and pushed her jeans off. He picked her up to set her down on his throbbing penis. She wrapped her legs around him, pushing her feet against the door to lift herself up and down on his shaft. His hands cupped under her ass, and his fingers found her wetness where his cock was moving. That was enough to trigger his climax. She slid off him as he rocked. She dropped to her knees to take him into her mouth to suck every drop he had left. He was so drained he could hardly stand. Caroline opened the door, took his hand, and led him inside to the bedroom.

He reached for her, but she stopped his hands. "I need to tell you something important. No, before you say anything, I went to the house for my writing things. Malcolm was there. He announced that he wanted Georgia's child named after him. I didn't think he even knew, but he did. Sahara heard him and called him everything but human, and I decked him. Naturally, it did not hurt him, but he is now threatening to tell Doc if Georgia does not return to him."

When she stopped for breath, Larry jumped in. "You decked him? Really? Wow, I hope you never get that mad at me." He grinned and pulled her to him. "Anything else, Rocky?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, there is," she replied. "Sahara says she can show Doc and Georgia how he can get an erection again—and hold it. However...and I'm sure she is right...she knows Doc would never do anything without Georgia. She proposes a ménage, here, where they won't be seen. She wants us to vacate for a night while they get it on."

"Let me see if I understand all this." Larry looked perplexed as he asked, "Sahara thinks she can cure Doc and wants to have a threesome with Doc and Georgia. She thinks Georgia is willing and wants it too. Sorry, honey, but I can't picture little Georgia having sex with a woman, even with Doc there. I also can't imagine Doc doing anyone but his wife. No way can we contribute to her plan."

Caroline thought a moment and decided honesty was the only way. "Larry, darling, lover, sweetcakes, studmuffin, angelpuss, sexy rexy...I have news for you. Sahara is a damn sexy woman, and I felt an attraction to her myself, so how can I deny that Georgia feels the same way? Now, tell the truth—you feel that same desire, don't you? Both you and Doc must have thought what she would be like. If she can help Doc, then that helps Georgia and their marriage too. How can we deny them the chance to try? Close your eyes, Honey, and think of Sahara...her soft skin, her raven hair on a white pillow, her full lips, her breasts, flat stomach, curls between her legs." As she spoke, she slid her hand down to encircle his penis, which was already hard. "See, you got hard just thinking about her. You can't deny it. I can feel it!"

"Bull crap, Caroline, that hard-on is for you. I don't need any woman but you."

"I never said you needed her. Just that like a normal sexy man, you find her desirable and under different circumstances, you would have sex with her any and every chance you could."

"Bull crap, again. You are all I need."

"I hope so, but admit it. You know I'm right. So, if they want the house for a night or a week, we can easily take a little second honeymoon for however long they want. Personally, I would like to go to Hawaii, where no one knows us. I've never been there. Maybe warm sandy beaches, soft breezes, and tropical nights might make you want to have sex with me. What do you think?"

“Want to have sex with you? Woman, are you sure you can handle any more than I already give you?” By now, his hands were moving over her body. “Okay, baby, if that’s what you want, we’ll do it. But maybe Sahara will have to teach me how to keep it up all the time.”

Caroline smiled. “Yes, that is certainly something to think about, darling. Have you ever done a ménage?”

Larry did not answer. He was too busy.



## Chapter 58

Georgia picked up Caroline at the house as soon as the kids were off to school. So far, she had been able to hide her morning sickness, but if it did not stop soon, someone would notice, and she was not ready to handle that yet.

Together they drove to Caroline's house. Caroline had her hair up under a turban and scarf around her neck. Sahara had coffee made when the women entered the kitchen. She was in a delicate peach-colored peignoir with matching high-heeled slippers.

"I hope you don't mind my borrowing some sexy stuff from your closet, Caroline. This one is probably knee-length for you, but floor-length for me. Our feet are the same size, too. I will see that they are all laundered before I leave. Malcolm seems to like these kinds of things, if you know what I mean."

"No problem. Wear and use whatever you want. Malcolm has good taste in clothes and in women, too, apparently." Sahara's breasts were much larger than Caroline's, so the tops were barely halfway to her nipples, which pressed in points in the soft fabric. The thinness of the gown allowed a shadow to show at the top of her legs. Georgia could not take her eyes off the beautiful prostitute, and Caroline again felt her attraction.

"Have you talked to Doc, Georgia?" Sahara asked. "Let me show you what I have for him...and for you." She opened a cupboard and removed a box. Inside was a strange apparatus that resembled a small vacuum cleaner. "This is so simple once you get the hang of it. I buy them for certain clients who return with them to me often. The tips are much bigger, and the guys literally swear by them. Of course, they could do it themselves but seem to prefer my administering to them. I wonder why." She smiled, knowing why. "I will show both you and Doc how to use it. We will all have fun. How about you, Caroline—would you and Larry like a little Sahara fun, too?"

Caroline smiled. "We are newlyweds, remember, still getting acquainted. Ask us again in a few years. As for using the house, it took some convincing, but Larry has agreed to you using it. All it's costing him is a trip to Hawaii for the two of us. Just let me know when you want it, and we'll be gone. Wish you would hurry up...I have never been to Hawaii and hear the place is an aphrodisiac itself."

They discussed how to convince Doc to participate. Finally, Sahara said, "I think I can make it happen. All you have to do is get him to the house and be ready, Georgia, to experience pleasure you have never known before. He will be more than willing when he sees what I am going to do to you. I promise."

"Is that my little bird I hear upstairs?" Malcolm's voice rumbled up from the basement. He appeared in the kitchen, heading straight to Georgia, lifting her into his arms. He pressed his lips to her stomach. "Hello, little baby. Are you warm and snug in there? I think your mother and I need to see if we can make a playmate for you." He pressed his lips to hers as she struggled to break loose. "Now, now, you must be missing me by now, with that dud of a husband unable to give you what you need."

That was enough to anger Georgia enough to get away from him. Sahara slid between Malcolm and the shaking blonde. "Oh, baby, you are making me hot, just watching you kissing her." She put his hands over her breasts and kissed him deeply. He did not need any more encouragement.

Caroline and Georgia fed the critters after the rutting couple moved down the stairs. They could hear the sounds of sexual mating below. Georgia spoke, "God, but for Sahara that would be me down there. Let's get out of here. And, Caroline, make your reservations for as soon as you can."

## Chapter 59

Larry's house was small, with a combination kitchen/dining/living room and two bedrooms with a bath between. It was furnished a la a second-hand store, but with sturdy pieces, including some throw rugs and pillows. She liked the efficiency kitchen, perfect for a slow cooker dinner with some hot rolls, which she set to making with some mixed vegetable and soup bones.

As Caroline waited for Larry to return home from work, she created a small area in the spare bedroom as a place for her typewriter and other things. She had already come up with a solution to the problem of her death. She would do the writing under Ghost Writer as the author, with Larry in charge of everything. That pseudonym amused her.

She rolled a sheet of paper into the carriage. Her plan was to finish the book using all their names and then change them before publication. She had used that technique before and found it worked to give her insight into her characters' thoughts and lives.

She had left off writing her story just before she floated to her death. Now it seemed hard to continue...hard to announce to the world that she had killed herself. It would probably be better if she changed the names now, rather than struggle with current events in their lives. She sat at her little table, pondering the problem, when Larry came home.

It had become a ritual for them at the end of his workday. They would shower together and follow where nature took them, which was sometimes to bed, but more often on the floor. Which room was not an issue. Tonight was different, each sensing in the other some tension not normally there.

Caroline wanted to discuss their Hawaiian trip but knew whatever was bothering Larry had to come first. Finally, she asked, but she was totally unprepared for his reply. "Today, I saw Malcolm leaving out of the Hathaway home. He stopped at the door, turned, and kissed Margo as he left. Yes, Margo! She was quite open about it, as if it did not matter if the

whole world knew, and her husband Hal in particular. Obviously, Malcolm has expanded his horizons. If he has found one unhappy woman seeking some extramarital fun, he is bound to find others. So much for our plan with Sahara. I haven't told Doc and Georgia yet. They will be devastated."

Caroline looked at him with wide, disbelieving eyes. "It can't be! Sahara is keeping him busy. I can vouch for that. They were together when we left the house this morning. Oh, dear God, what are we going to do now?"

For once since they had reunited, outside elements had broken their chain of endless lovemaking. Larry ate his dinner while Caroline watched, noting that he had little appetite. He telephoned Georgia to say they would be coming to the restaurant after it closed. Caroline donned her usual camouflage, and they arrived just as Georgia turned out the lights. Once inside, they helped pull the blinds, except for the windows overlooking the ocean. The moon was full and bathed the beach with a beautiful eerie glow. There were a few lights from boats on the horizon; otherwise, it was as if the four of them were in a world of their own.

When their coffee cups were full, Larry took a deep breath and related what he had seen that day. No one spoke for a long time until Doc said, "Well, apparently he is expanding his horizons, but all I see ahead is trouble...capital T and all. Some irate husband is going to try to do him in, and when he can't, the entire town will know about it. Where will it go from there?"

"Does anyone have any idea what we can do about it?" Georgia's face was white. "My God, is there no other way to stop him?"

No one replied. Finally, Caroline spoke. "I'm going to the house to try to talk to him."

"Honey," replied Georgia, "you know that won't work. Look at how he laughed at you when you hit him." As soon as she spoke, she knew she had said the wrong thing, and her fear proved correct.

"Caroline, you hit him? Why?" Doc asked.

"Oh, he just irritated me so much by something he said, I just hauled off and did the old right cross. He fell like a big old fir tree, but it hardly hurt him. He cannot feel much pain, apparently, only pleasure. What a life he leads."

Doc looked at her. "Do you feel pain? What did he say that made you so angry?"

Caroline started to answer, "Yes, I feel discomfort, not pain as you know it..."

Before she could answer the rest of his question, Georgia jumped from her chair and ran to the bathroom. Doc arose too. "What's wrong with her? What did I say?" He sat again, looking bewildered. She returned in about five minutes but stood looking out the window at the rolling surf. Doc moved behind her, putting his arms around her. "What's wrong, honey? It can't be so bad you can't talk to me about it."

Georgia began to cry quietly. "Yes, Doc, it is too bad to even talk to you about." She noted that Larry and Caroline had risen as if to leave. She waved them back. "Don't go. I need you both here. It's time for the truth, even if it means the end of our world, Doc."

## Chapter 60

“I’m pregnant, Doc.”

He pulled away. “Pregnant? I can’t....”

He turned from her, unlocked the door, and ran to his truck in the parking lot. Larry ran after him, grabbed his arm, and said, “Doc, please listen to her. There is more to this than you can even imagine. Please come back inside and hear the whole thing.”

Reluctantly, he reentered the building. Larry locked the door behind them. Caroline was holding Georgia in her arms as they sat on a bench against the wall.

Georgia whispered to Caroline, and Caroline nodded.

“Georgia asked if I would explain to you, all of it. Please don’t get angry or run away until I’m done. We all know the story but kept it from you to protect you, the kids, and your marriage. We’ve been trying to work out a solution so that you would not be hurt, but the time for that is past.”

“The child’s father is Malcolm. He has that ability, but we didn’t know that immediately.” Doc did not move; he sat staring at his hands. “Georgia came to me when she found out. She also told me of your problem and that it couldn’t be yours. I found out from other spirits that children born of such unions are always extraordinary, having some of several talents and abilities not of ordinary children. Such as mind reading, levitation, and so on...any one of several supernatural powers.”

“Doc, you know she loves you and would do anything to save you pain. She had decided to leave this world, as I did, to take away all your problems, but she has more common sense than I did, plus you already have two children who need her. She planned an abortion, rather than have you know about this. We were planning a day trip, just us girls including Sahara, to Portland next week. Sahara knows someone....”

Doc cut her off. "Georgia, why didn't you trust me enough to tell me? I know you don't believe in abortions, any more than I do. I love you too much to let you go through anything like that. We will have the child and raise it as our own, because if it is yours, then it is mine." She ran into his open arms. This time, Larry and Caroline did leave.

Once home, they undressed slowly, touching and kissing gently, as they lay on their bed and joined in tender intercourse. Larry moved ever so slowly in her vagina as he touched her breasts, pinching her nipples into hard points. He nuzzled her neck as she ran her hands down his hard back to his round ass-cheeks, rubbing him the way he loved. She slid one hand between them so she could caress and squeeze his balls. That caused a deep intake of breath and a faster and deeper movement into her. She wrapped her legs around his hips and rose to meet his every stroke. They came together.

Without moving from her, he replaced her hand with his and began to touch her clitoris. He loved the little breaths of pleasure she made as he moved to bring her passions up. He used two fingers to spread the skin back from her clit until it was throbbing and swollen out of its cover. He held it outside as his thumb rubbed it. Her response was intense as she cried out her climaxes. She rode each wave to its highest, moving under him with complete abandonment. When she fell back to the bed, he slid between her legs to continue the ecstasy until she cried "no more." Then they slept.

Meanwhile, Doc and Georgia lay together on their big bed, touching only with their hands. "Darling, I've been thinking about what you asked the other night...about Sahara having an idea to cure my impotency. More than just about anything in the world, I want to be a real husband to you. You are pregnant because of me, not due to me. If I had been able...."

She cut him off with her lips and then her breasts. He nuzzled them the way she liked but stopped as she pulled away. "Remember how that used to drive you crazy? How your big beautiful penis stood at attention for me to lick it like a lollipop? Sahara will show us how to make that happen again. I want to feel you fuck me. I want to see you fuck her. I want to have her do what she knows how to do for both of us. I want us to experience sex at its fullest and maybe best. I don't know, Doc, but I want us to try."

She leaned down to take his limp penis in her hand. She ran her tongue around it. "Can you feel it?" she asked. He nodded. She put the end in her mouth and sucked. "Feel this?" Another nod. "I will do it all night if you

enjoy it, you know that. As before, even without a hard-on, Doc, I want to please you. Lay back and let me.” She did so until he lifted her head to kiss her lips.

“Yes, it feels wonderful, but with no hardness, there’s no climax. No erection, no ejaculation. I want it all again, darling. When can we start?”



## Chapter 61

Instead of a Hawaiian vacation, Larry and Caroline decided to move back to the big house above the ocean. No one would see them but Malcolm and Sahara, and neither was a problem. She called Georgia the next morning to give them the 'all clear' for Larry's little house, and then told Sahara in whispers that it was set for the next night. "Shucks," Sahara replied, "that means another night before my reward. Unless," she was whispering too, "you and Larry let me join you two. I promise to be gentle. And if I can't join you, can I watch?"

Larry swatted Sahara on the butt in reply. She wiggled it at him and then wandered off to find Malcolm. Soon noises from the basement let them know Sahara had been successful. "Let's peek," Caroline suggested, knowing Larry would decline. To her surprise, he took her hand, and they moved down the stairs until they could see the rutting couple on the floor. Sahara's long legs were spread wide, and Malcolm was pushing in and out between them. Her big breasts were bouncing with the rhythm of Malcolm's movement. Larry could not help it—his penis stirred at the sight. It was a one-sided mating, but exciting nevertheless. They went quietly back upstairs.

"You have a huge erection, my king. Methinks my liege would like his slave Sahara. Your loyal wife would not mind if you do...you are too much man for one lowly woman to satisfy. What do you think, my lord?"

"I think you are nuts, but I will admit the thought is provoking. Perhaps another time. For right now, how about our big bedroom upstairs? It has been empty long enough." He picked her up and carried her up the stairs, two at a time. One nice thing was that if he dropped her, she would not be hurt.

She lay on the bed, her dress up around her waist so he could touch her. He dropped his pants, letting his penis jump to attention above her. She sat

up, licking it around and down, and then into her mouth as if she were sucking a long banana. He moaned, arched into her, and climaxed deeply as he moved his fingers in her vagina. She lay back, letting his semen fall to her open mouth. She licked her lips and then his penis again. He fell to the bed beside her, reaching between her legs once more. Her climax was as strong as his was.

Later they walked across the field to the woods, where the opening led to the old cemetery. Gilligan trotted ahead of them, but Snowball preferred Sahara's lap on the front porch. Malcolm was momentarily satisfied. He kissed Sahara on the lips as he informed her he was going to town for a few hours and if she were a good girl, he might bring her a present. Last time, he'd brought her a stale box of chocolates, so the thought was there anyway.

Larry picked a bouquet of flowers in the field and presented them to Caroline with a courtly bow and a big hug. Inside the forest, it was considerable cooler and smelled of dankness. Moss grew on everything. It would have been frightening if Caroline had been alive rather than a denizen of another plain. When they finally reached the cemetery, she was surprised that it was free of downed branches and weeds. All the headstones were in place, and the names were easy to see.

"Did you do all this, Larry?"

He nodded. "They were my friends, and my lifesavers. It was the least I could do. Come, let me introduce you to some of them.

"Here is Hettie Olmsted, who once owned your house. The old pirate you know about is here...Captain Ebenezer Pomp, and beside him are two of his wives. Nellie bore him two sons, and Hortense had three daughters by him. He was a virile man, and the ladies adored him. Like your friend Malcolm, I suspect." Caroline smacked him lightly on his arm. He smiled. "Poor choice of words, I expect. Anyway, he apparently had several other children, without benefit of marriage. Those women are in the gravesites just below this row: Felicity Armstrong, Margery Cone, Chastity Morgenstern, and two more that I could not figure out when I cleaned them."

Caroline seemed to listen a minute and then said, "They are Emma Jonny in this one and Suki Brown in the other one. That unmarked one there is Jane Donnish, another of his women. He certainly did enjoy himself

through the years. I wonder, did he actually do any harm to others after he died and before his love life ended?"

Larry answered, "I suspect he may have threatened those women, much as Malcolm does, to kill or hurt their families. Whether or not he actually did...well, we have no way of knowing."

They continued through the tombstones into an area where there were no markings, just depressions in the soil. "What are these?" asked Caroline.

He did not answer right away. "Did you know there was an old settlers' village near here years ago, farther back in the forest? Back there afforded more protection from the violent winter winds and some from the freezing cold, as the trees sheltered them. The people who lived there were mostly trappers, and that ilk, I suspect, and most were probably illiterate. They would have buried their dead in crudely made coffins, if anything. Eventually the wood rotted away, leaving hollows like these, or the bodies decomposed, leaving no marks at all. Indians had villages near here too, but they did not bury their dead, instead burning them on platforms, so there's no sign of them either."

"How do you know so much about all this? I grew up here and never heard of any of it."

"You were young and probably interested only in giving ol' Hal a run for his money. Say, did he ever make it into your panties?"

Caroline slapped his butt. "Never once...not even close. Usually by the time he thought I would give in, he was too drunk to do anything about it anyway. BUT, I will have you know that I was a virgin bride when I got married to the ass, and instead of thinking that was a gift I saved for him, he made some snide remarks about my being either frigid or so unattractive no one wanted me. God, how I could ever have married him, I don't know." She shrugged and moved into Larry's arms.

## Chapter 62

Larry and Caroline spent the next day preparing the little house for their friends' introduction into the world of group sex. They changed the bed linen, laundered all the towels, chilled several bottles of wine and champagne, filled the refrigerator with snacks, found soft music for the phonograph, and even provided candles and fresh flowers in every room.

When Larry returned with all those necessities, he laughed and told her, "You should have seen the clerks watching me, probably trying to figure out what I was going to do with all the booze and flowers. The checkout woman even asked if I was having a party. I kept a straight face and said no, but that my friends are. Bet she passed that on to the others, and now they're all trying to figure it out."

As they left the house, Caroline looked around. "I think I'm forgetting something, but I can't think what."

Larry started grinning from ear to ear. He grabbed a pen and paper and wrote a note, which he put into an envelope marked Sahara and slid in the nightstand by the bed. Caroline wanted to know what it was, but he just kissed her and said, "It's a man's thing."

She tried to coax him with more kissing and touching until he grabbed her hands to pull them away from his ass and penis. "You keep that up, woman, and we'll be messing up that bed before they even get here."

To the three participants in the night's plan, the day seemed to pass like cold molasses. Even Sahara felt an excitement she seldom experienced anymore in her rather jaded life. She found Malcolm mid-morning and asked him if he would like to wash her back, and, of course, he was naked in the bathroom before she even had the bathwater drawn. He came up behind her as she tested the water temperature and rubbed his hard cock between her legs, then up into her vagina as he bent her over the tub. It was not

comfortable, but it was quick. She thought to herself, *only one more time with him today should do it.*

Later that afternoon, she stripped and rubbed her body with honey. She found him in the basement on his lounge chair, napping. When she leaned over him, pressing one sweet-tasting tit on his lips, he was awake in a second and had licked off every sticky drop, all the while moaning and caressing his penis. It was erect and throbbing when he pushed her back on the chaise and slid into her. He whispered to her how wonderful she was and insisted on rubbing her clit as he drove into her. She felt herself succumbing to his fingers and quickly pushed them away. She arched up to meet him until he came, groaning his lust. When he was done, he stayed on top of her, again trying to bring her to a climax as he kissed and sucked her tits. This time she gave in to it, and it was good. After all, he was fucking more human women than just her, so what did it matter?

After he was gone, she drew a full tub of water, added perfumed oil from Caroline's room, and soaked and shaved her body completely until every inch of her was clean and smooth. She'd learned early in her career that a naked pussy was one of the most sensual things for a man used to seeing hair between a woman's legs, and she was sure Doc would be no exception. Hell, she might even shave Georgia herself...another fun thought. By the time she pulled the car out of the driveway, she was as excited as she'd been in months.

Doc and Georgia were both nervous as a pair of virgins on their wedding night. The kids were on weekend excursions for school now that summer vacation was over; they went to Portland for concerts and plays, so they wouldn't be home for two days. They told the kids they were closing the restaurant for the weekend and taking a leisurely trip down into the redwoods. All bases were covered but for their own apprehensions.

They were nearly to Larry's house when Georgia turned to ask him, "Honey, do you feel like I've forced you to do this? We can still turn back if you want, and I'll understand."

"Getting cold feet, sweetheart? Well, I hope not, because I'm looking forward to seeing you naked with Sahara. I have been picturing this since the other night when we agreed we wanted to do it, but if you don't want to go through with it, it's okay. But we're here now, so it's now or never."

They moved together and kissed deeply. He opened the door, helped her out, and walked onto the porch. Caroline's car was still warm, so they knew Sahara was inside. He rapped lightly, and then opened the door. The house was lit only with candlelight in every room. Sahara had set the scene as seductively as she could. Three glasses of wine waited, and soft music came from the phonograph in the dining room.

Slowly, with the light behind her, Sahara moved toward them. She wore a gown of white lace so sheer it left little to the imagination, which suited Doc just fine. She moved first to Doc to kiss him gently on the lips, almost maternally. She moved to Georgia and took her face in her hands, opening her mouth to push her tongue between Georgia's lips. She heard Georgia's response, as did Doc.

Sahara continued to kiss Georgia deeply as she removed first Georgia's blouse and then her slacks. She caught Doc's eye and indicated he should help her undress his wife. As in a trance, he moved to slip the trousers from her legs, shoes from her feet, and then her panties. He arose to unfasten her bra, sliding his hand under it to cup her breasts. He could feel her nipples and knew she was excited. His penis felt the excitement, too, but failed to enlarge, as he knew it wouldn't.

He was, at the moment, satisfied to watch the talented prostitute seduce his wife. Sahara began to suckle the hard nipples surrounded by tight dimples of her aureole. She pulled Doc to her, kissing him deeply this time, and then moving him to share in the feast of Georgia's swollen breasts. She dropped to her knees, first to unfasten Doc's pants and kiss his hard stomach. She let her tongue run from his waist to his belly and then lower, as she opened his underwear so she could take his flaccid penis in his mouth. Embarrassed, he tried to move away, but she held him firm. She licked Georgia's stomach too and then rose.

"Come, let's go into the bedroom. It's time, I think, to give Doc his new toy. Now take off all your clothes."

She directed him to lie on the bed, with Georgia beside him. She opened a box she pulled from under the bed. Before doing anything else, she moved up beside him and began to kiss him, rolling her tongue inside his mouth. He groaned, and she smiled. "Do you want to take off my gown, Doc?"

He did not answer, just sat up to pull the gown over her head. He looked at her perfect body and groaned aloud when he saw her naked pussy. His

hand moved down to it, rubbing it. He dropped to his knees to examine her closer. He could not believe what he was doing as he moved his mouth to taste her. She opened her legs for him to slip his tongue into her warmth. He heard Georgia tell them to move to the bed so she could watch. Sahara leaned over to kiss Georgia deeply as she lay beside her.

The women were pressing their breasts together as Doc again opened Sahara's legs. Georgia moved down beside him as he began to touch and probe inside the hairless mouth of Sahara's mound. As Doc licked and sucked, Georgia cupped his balls in her hand and squeezed them gently. She rubbed the big dark breasts with the other hand. Doc could see and feel what his normally modest wife was doing, both to himself and to sexy Sahara.

Sahara cried out as he rubbed her button with his tongue and then finger-fucked her until she came again. He knew Georgia was watching, and that excited him even more. He looked at her to see that Sahara was now rubbing Georgia's breasts again too.

"Doc," Sahara asked, "Can you wait just a few minutes? I am so horny for your wife, I can't wait." She didn't wait for an answer but lay down atop Georgia's body to rub their breasts and nipples together. Then she sandwiched their legs so that their wet pussies were rubbing together as they moved together. Doc watched, amazed to see how hard the breasts of both women had become. He reached out to take one and then the other, in his hand. He was rewarded by two happy smiles, so he continued his manipulations.

After several minutes of body rubbing, Sahara moved her lips down the torso laid beneath her. When she reached the curls below, she spread the lips apart and touched inside Georgia's vagina here and there. Georgia moaned her desire as the tongue began to move into her wet canal. It was like nothing she had ever experienced. Doc had been wonderful doing this, but Sahara was incredible. She seemed to know places to touch that Georgia did not even know herself she had. Soon she was rolling and arching her back while pushing Sahara's face deeper inside her.

When she fell back to the bed, Sahara lifted her head to grin at them both. "Wait until next time. That was nothing compared to what I'll do later. I love the taste of you and am satisfied for a few minute. I hope...."

She now turned to Doc. "Are you excited? Is it time to fuck your wife?" He nodded, confused. She opened the box and removed a strange looking

tube with a pump on the end. She slid the tube over his penis and tightened it snugly. She took Georgia's hand and showed her how to pump it. Also immediately, Doc felt his penis hardening and growing. He could feel his blood circulating into the veins that had been dead for years, but were now so wonderfully alive. "Tell her when you want her to stop. Don't let it get uncomfortable. It must feel like it used to."

Doc took Georgia's hand from the pump. Sahara nodded. She pulled a narrow black band from the box and slid it down his erect penis the minute she removed the tube and pump. It was tight but not painful. Without a word, he rolled over to take Georgia into his arms, sliding his throbbing cock into the wetness of her pussy, made dripping by Sahara's mouth. He closed his eyes, sure he had died, and this was heaven. She wrapped her arm and legs around him, moaning his name, and she climaxed.... Once. Twice. Three times.

"Okay, Doc, when you are ready, you can either pull the tab on the front of the band or let nature take its course. This first time, I suggest you pull the tab."

Through his lust, he heard Sahara's voice. More than anything, he wanted this to go on forever, but he pulled the tab. His semen burst up and out of him like a volcanic eruption. He cried and moaned as he continued to pour his seed into this woman he loved more than anything in the world.



## Chapter 63

At home, Caroline and Larry ate a light dinner and settled in to watch TV. They were snuggled together on the couch, a cat on her lap and a dog on his. Malcolm wandered into the room, flopped into a chair, put his feet on a footstool, and settled in as if to spend the evening with them. Larry instantly bristled. "What the hell do you think you are doing, you asshole from purgatory? Get your dead body out of here and go back to wherever bodies like yours go to rot."

"Now, that is not a nice way to talk. After all, your beloved wife is the same as I am. Do you want her to go someplace to rot with me?" He was smirking as he rubbed his genital area.

Larry started to rise, but Caroline held his arm to prevent him from moving. "Malcolm," she asked, "what do you want? Why can't you just go away and leave us alone?"

"Well," he answered, "for several reasons. I like watching you two getting it on. Honestly, Caroline, you really do seem to like him better than me. That is crushing. I always am the best, but in your case, apparently he is better. No matter—there are ample women in this town who want what I have to offer. When you brought that beautiful Sahara here, I was delighted. Then I found out she was a ringer...only here to make me think she wanted me. Tsk, tsk, all four of you. No matter, because she is an incredible fuck, when she is turned on. You two should try her out, like your friends are doing right now."

Caroline asked quietly, "How did you find out she was a ringer? How do you know what they are doing right now? What women in town have you seduced? Is nothing sacred or secret from you?"

"No, nothing. I have the newfound ability to read minds a bit. Most interesting what you can learn with that talent. Right now, Larry is trying to come up with a way to kill me. Well, forget it, chum. I am so strong now, I

cannot be killed, even without willing women. I would prefer those who want it in return, but even unwilling ones will do for a while, I expect. So, why not just relax and let us have a pleasant evening together until it is time for my date with the o-so-willing Margo? She is a hot number. Have you tried her, Larry? You should, I guarantee.” He yawned and turned his attention to the flickering television set.

“Okay, Malcolm. Don’t you realize that one of these times when you are doing some man’s wife, he will catch you? Have you any idea of the repercussions in this town if he tried to kill you and can’t? Who else have you had?” Larry asked quietly.

Malcolm smiled and replied without looking at them. “I don’t give a damn who catches and tries to kill me. Ain’t going to happen, just as you said. I can’t be killed now. I will have to die when I am too old to find women to fuck anymore, and that will be years. Like that old pirate. Caroline, too, unless you like trying to get it up in 40 years or watching her slowly rot away before your eyes. Moreover, I could care less what happens to this town. I will fuck everyone I can get my hands on. Who else, you asked—well, that little beautician friend of Caroline’s and one of her clients. We had a threesome, and those beauty salon chairs came in real handy. There are a couple barmaids who can’t get enough, and the gal who delivers the mail...we did it in the back of the truck parked in the driveway. After Margo, I have my sights set on that little girl of hers...what’s her name...Lisa? Now that is a peach ready for plucking. Wooie!”

Caroline stood, outraged. “Damn you, Malcolm, damn you to hell. Leave that child alone. All the others, too. Have you no moral fiber left in you? God, you make me sick.”

“Okay, okay, Caroline. I love your anger. Your breasts rise and your mouth just begs to be kissed. However, if you like, I can let the girls alone until I run out of women. There are a couple older ones on farms around, mostly living by themselves, who are as horny as ol’ Margo is. Are you happy now?”

He stood up and frowned at them. “You two are soooooo boring. How can you even stand yourselves? Guess I will wander off to find a woman or two, unless you want me to stay and add a bit of interest to your routine sex. At least Doc and Georgia are having a good time. Think I will stop by for a

peek...no, they will not know I'm there." With that, he left the room and the house with no further comment.

Larry jumped up and headed for the phone. "Stop, honey," said Caroline. "Don't call them and ruin this night for them. If he said they won't know he is there, I'm sure they won't. Malcolm is a voyeur, and who can blame him. We peeked at him and Sahara ourselves, and as I recall, we both liked watching. That makes us almost as bad as he is. But I would do it again, wouldn't you?"

Larry dropped back to the sofa and took her in his arms. "You are always so damn practical and usually right. To be honest, I would like to be a fly on the wall in my little house tonight myself. How about you?"

"Yes, so would I, but since we aren't, let's just enjoy each other for now. Perhaps Sahara is to be in our plans soon, too, if you want. Do you?"

"Hell, no. All I want is you."

Caroline smiled. "I bet you would love to watch her rub my breasts and suckle my nipples. I bet you would love to run your hands all over her beautiful body as she goes down on me with her ass in the air, waiting for you and your cock to fill her wetness. Here, I will put my ass in the air, you can close your eyes, and we will imagine the scene I just described. Oh, yes, that is perfect. Now deeper, darling, harder. Harder, oh, yes. God, Larry, you are so good. More, more, more."

In their mind's eyes, they both imagined the scene. Exhausted, they lay together on the floor in front of the couch, sated and loving. "You are something else, wife. I think you would like the real thing instead a mental picture. Would you?" She nuzzled and tongued his ear, breathing in a whispered, "yes."

After they retired to bed, too exhausted for more loving right away, they discussed the Malcolm problem. Larry tried to think of ways to get rid of him but gave up with a deep sigh. Caroline sat up with a start, the sheet dropping to her waist to expose her full, sexy breasts. He reached for one, but she pushed his hand away. "I think I have an idea that might work. It means we will have to take a couple days' drive south, but no one will know me there...I hope. I know just the place for Malcolm and his money."

"What money? Where is it?"

"The money we will give them to keep him happy for the rest of his life. It is a commune in the forests of northern California, near the coast. They

are free-living folks who do their own farming and wife swapping and open sex with anyone and everyone who wants to participate. I will see if I can find more about them tomorrow, and we can plan. What do you think?"

"I think not only are you the most beautiful woman in the world and the sexiest, you are the most brilliant. Come here, and I will show you how much I appreciate you." She moved to him and was surprised when he left the bed only to return with a bottle of oil. "Turn over, Caroline; I am going to turn you into a quivering mass of sex before I am done with you tonight."

He began at her feet, rubbing them and listening to her purr. Her ankles and calves were next. "Oh, Larry, this is wonderful. My pussy is wet already, and you aren't even near it." He gently massaged the inside of her thighs. She moved up and down as if she were on top of his body, demanding fulfillment. Instead, he moved up to her back and down over her buttocks, teasing her with feathery touches just inside her mound. She arched to him, her body demanding more.

He turned her onto her back. He began kissing her as his hands moved in circles on her breasts, oil making them glisten in the moonlight coming in the window. "You are driving me crazy. Please, please, fuck me. I am so ready." He laughed and just continued the massage. He moved down to her stomach, where he planted kisses, and then down to her inner thighs again. By now she was begging, and his cock was so hard it hurt. "What do you want, baby? Tell me what you want me to do."

"I want you. I want that incredible cock inside me. Please, I need you. PLEASE."

He lay down beside her, his cock at full attention. She rose to her knees, placed one on each side of his hips, and lowered herself down onto him. She moved to take him in, deeper with each stroke. He watched her face as she used his shaft, tits bouncing with nipples as hard as rocks. He had never imagined her capable of such abandon and was enthralled by it. Suddenly, she arched and plunged down on him as hard as she could, grinding her pussy onto him. He could hold back no longer. His climax was so incredible; she came again before collapsing on him, panting for breath.

"Next time, I get to massage you, husband, and I swear you will feel excitement like never before. Now, kiss me goodnight. I am too exhausted to even lift my head."

## Chapter 64

Malcolm moved through the air, not quite walking but not flying either. Within minutes, he was outside Larry's little house. He moved through the wall, staying in the shadows. Doc was inside Georgia's pussy from behind while Sahara lay under him, sucking his balls. He moved, and the women changed places. Malcolm felt a rush of excitement, wanting to join them, but decided it would probably ruin their party. Another time.

He watched them change positions again. This time Doc, was fucking Sahara while she was eating out Georgia. He had to admit, she did it with finesse and skill that he himself did not possess. He needed to take lessons from her, considering the way Georgia was responding. Her cries and their movement made Malcolm harder than hell, so hard he had to release himself into a cloth he found on the table. Weak, he left after one last look backward at the tall, muscular man who seemed quite capable of satisfying both women.

Soon he was outside the Hathaway house. It sounded like they were having a party. He knew that Hal would be drunk and passed out by 11, like every other night, so it was always safe to visit Margo then. He was early and restless. He had incredible restorative powers and would be capable of full sex within in a few more minutes. Maybe he should just go inside and join the party. It might be fun to make the moves on all the women there. He liked the idea of a challenge like this.

He moved to the master bathroom for some cologne, which he spattered liberally over his body and face. Bay rum was all he used to have, but this new stuff was sure nice, and the women loved it. He unbuttoned his pants to rub more on his cock. He might even do a survey to see which kind the women liked best in their mouths.

His life now was filled with one woman after another, and he wanted nothing more. No food, no drink, nothing but sex...endless sex. He pitied

human men who had to recuperate after a climax, as he needed only a few minutes. He had even considered other men as potential partners, but with so many females available, he would wait on that until a later time.

Back downstairs, he moved into the living room, helping himself to a glass of whatever it was, and moved to a tall but overweight woman in a too tight dress that nearly spilled out her big tits. He did not say a word, just put his arm around her and kissed her, deeply. She tried to pull away, and then gave in to the feeling of his mouth. She returned the kiss, pressing against him. She could feel his hard cock against her stomach and moved to rub it.

“Hey, who the hell are you? That is my wife you are kissing. Let go of her.” The man grabbed his wife’s arm and jerked her from Malcolm’s embrace. It was obvious to all that he was aroused, largely aroused.

“Maybe you should ask her if she wants me to let her go,” Malcolm grinned. “Seems to me she was enjoying herself immensely. If you don’t believe me, feel her pussy...bet it’s wetter than a rain barrel full of spring water.”

Everyone gasped at the crudeness of his remarks. The man swung at him. Malcolm just laughed, catching the fist in mid-air. Still holding the fist, he bowed to the woman, “Would you like to go somewhere so we can finish what we started? I would love to suck on those big tits and maybe even fuck them. Guarantee you will enjoy yourself, probably more than any other time in your life.”

The woman ran from the room, crying. Malcolm released her husband and patted him on the back. “I think I will go see how your wife is doing. Would you like to come with me?” The man did not move. “Okay, never mind then. I promise I will not hurt her. If she says no, then I will be a gentleman and let her alone. But I bet...what do you want to bet?...that she does not say no.”

He left the room with Margo behind him. “How dare you come into my house and upset my guests,” she yelled at him.

He stopped, turned, and said, “Do not worry, my sweet, there is more than enough of me for both of you.” His eyes took in the crowd. “More than enough for all you ladies. You can even draw straws for who is next if you want. Otherwise, I will have to do the picking myself. I should be back in 45 minutes or an hour.” With that, he followed the woman up the stairs. Margo ran upstairs behind him, shouting his name.

She ran down the hall, opening every door as she passed it. Only Lisa's door was locked. She pounded on it, calling Malcolm's name. A sleepy girl, rubbing her eyes, opened the door. "What do you want, Margo? I was asleep. I have to be at work early."

By now, Hal and several others, including the angry husband, were crowding around her. "Who the hell is that man?" Hal grabbed Margo's shoulders, shaking her, as he demanded an answer.

"I have no idea, honey. Just some party crasher, I would guess." Margo smiled at him, even as she shook with fear of his finding out more than he already suspected.

"Bullshit, Margo. You know who he is. Have been fucking him, too, along with Doug, my assistant at the Lumberyard. Are there others I don't know about? Well, I have had enough. Pack your things and go back to your daddy. Maybe he can buy you another husband." He slapped her face so hard she fell to the floor and then turned back downstairs.

"Where is my wife?" the irate husband wanted to know as he ran down the hall. He too tried opening every door but did not find her. He leaned against the wall, slid to his butt, and turned his head upward in defeat. He jumped up, pointing at an attic door. He saw a chair through Lisa's open door and drug it under the ceiling door. Standing on the chair, he pushed the door open, stuck his head through it, and swore. "God damn you to hell, Hazel. You look like a whore, fucking away while everyone is looking for you. Well, honey," he said sarcastically, "you just go at it as long as you want, but don't bother coming home. You don't live there anymore."

Malcolm turned and grinned, never breaking his rhythm, although a panicked Hazel tried to crawl out from under him. His ass continued to move up and down as he said, "Oh, that is good, then Hazel and I have all night. No need to hurry, now is there?"

The husband dropped back out of sight, only to be replaced by head after head.

"I want to see, too, damn it."

"Me too."

"Wow, look at him pound her."

"Hey, Hazel, when he's done, we don't mind sloppy seconds."

By now, she was crying but was still unable to escape him. Finally, she gave up and lay there waiting for him to finish.

Malcolm turned his head to look at the men taking turns watching him. “Now that you have all seen how it’s done, shut the damn door and let me really enjoy this woman. You all ought to know how much better it is with an avid lover. So take your wives home and fuck their brains out. Just go away.”



## Chapter 65

Larry and Caroline were asleep when Malcolm returned home. He peeked in on them like a wayward teenager making sure his parents were asleep. He yawned and made his way to his private space in the basement. Boy, the shit would hit the fan in the morning.

He was upstairs with coffee made for them when the frantic calls from Georgia and Doc and maybe even Sahara tried to reach them and could not get through. He had gone outside, cut the line, and then returned to the kitchen to wait for the fun to begin. He was disappointed when no cars came into the driveway, so he decided to go investigate for himself.

The town was a beehive of activity. He noted the police cars up the hill at the Hathaway house. He slipped in through the basement without being seen. Carefully, he climbed the stairs to the kitchen door that he opened just an inch so he could see and hear. Lisa sat at the table, crying while some fat old policewoman patted her shoulder. Lisa was telling her what had transpired the night before.

“After Margo left, Dad came downstairs waving a gun. He was drunk as usual and tripping over his own feet. Hazel Dimwhittle was still upstairs in the attic with the strange man. Her husband had a rifle when he came back upstairs. I saw him climb into the attic and heard loud voices arguing. He called her a lot of bad names. I heard a shot. I climbed on the chair and looked inside. Hazel was covered with blood all over her chest. That man was still on top of her...well, you know. It was like her husband had shot the man in the back, and it went through him and killed Hazel. The strange man got up, pulled up his pants, and headed for the opening where I was. Mr. Dimwhittle shot at him again, and I swear it hit him, but he just grinned. Mr. Dimwhittle turned the gun to his head and fired it.

“I jumped off the chair as the strange man dropped down beside me. He grabbed me and ran his hands all over my body, even put his hand down

inside my nightgown. He laughed and said something about promising to leave me alone, whatever that meant. He whistled as he went down the stairs and out the door. That's when I ran down here to call the police. Oh, Lord, it was horrible. Does anyone know where my dad is? I want him." Her crying was like a miserable little girl, not a teenager.

No one told her that her father and Margo were both dead. He'd found her walking into town, beaten her until she was unconscious, pushed her into his car, and drive straight down the hill into the bay. Two people had witnessed the whole and both, being totally inebriated, had just struggled on home, thinking perhaps they had imagined it all. The car began to emerge from the water just a short time before, when the tide turned from high to low.

At Larry's little house, the love-in had exhausted all three. Doc heard the sirens but just turned over and returned to sleep. He lay sandwiched between the two women who had turned him into a sex slave before giving him a break.

He looked down at Sahara's naked body spread-eagled beside him. He could not resist cupping one full breast while nibbling on the other. He let his hand move to the smooth, shaved mound between her leg. It was about the sexiest thing he had ever felt. He could not stop caressing it even when Sahara whispered, "Would you like to watch me shave Georgia? It is heavenly to lick and suck a naked mound and pussy."

He nodded, kissed her deeply, and then turned to look into his wife's just opening eyes. He kissed her and took her into his arms. "Do you still love me, munchkin?" he asked. She nodded and snuggled against him, eyes closed.

Suddenly she jumped up. "Last one to the shower makes the coffee."

Deliberately, Doc hung back to start the percolator. He moved into the bathroom to watch his women soaping and shampooing each other. When Georgia saw him watching, she reached out to take his hand, but instead grabbed his penis to pull him in with them. Soon, they were all three laughing, rubbing, and kissing.

Sahara took a large bath towel to spread on the bed. She found Larry's shave cream and razor. "Doc, bring our girl here. It's time for her surprise."

He turned off the water and dried himself first, then his wife. He kissed her, picked her up in his arms, and laid her on the towel. "Honey, do you

like Sahara's naked little twat?" She nodded. "Good, because you are going to be naked too."

Sitting on her knees between Georgia's thighs, Sahara began to rub streams of shave cream into Georgia's curls. With careful movements, she began removing the hair one small stroke at a time. Georgia was surprised that it felt so erotic. It made her tingle. She sighed little noises as Sahara drew the razor across and down her vaginal lips, letting the back of her hand rub the clit with each stroke. When the delicate area was naked, Sahara handed the razor to Doc. He rubbed more shave cream on the outer hairs and slowly removed them. He lifted her knees wider apart to get the lower area too.

When Georgia was completely without pubic hair, she pulled Doc down between them. "Now, sweet-cakes," she announced to her husband, "it's your turn." He tried to protest, but Sahara's tit in his mouth made it impossible, so he closed his eyes and felt his wife removing his hair. It was an erotic feeling that made his cock stir. As soon as she was done, he grabbed his vacuum and pumped his cock harder than ever before. The band held it tight as he moved between the two open pair of legs, first one, and then the other. No man could want more than the heaven his wife and her friend were giving him.

Later in the day, they decided they were too tired to continue, no matter how much they would like to. They showered and cleaned the house, laundering the bedding and towels, of which there were many. With everything done, Georgia drew Sahara to her and kissed her. Doc held her close and kissed her too.

Sahara was partway out the driveway when she saw the police cars at Hal and Margo's home. She backed up to relay the scene to Doc and Georgia, who locked the house and followed her out onto the street.

## Chapter 66

Jeff Donaldson's state patrol car was coming down the Hathaway drive when Doc spied it and stopped. When the cars were side by side, Doc rolled down his window. "Hi, Jeff, what the hell is going on?"

"Nothing good, I can tell you. Hal and Margo are dead. Apparently, he finally had enough of her screwing around and drove them both into the bay. They had a party last night, and Hazel Dimwhittle and some guy were getting it on in the attic when her husband found them. He shot her, the guy, and then himself. Except there was no body for the guy. We have a witness who saw it all and who claims this man was hit twice at point blank range and left laughing."

He gave them a small wave and drove off. The Joneses were both too stunned to talk. Georgia began to cry softly. "Dear God, Doc, we were having sex, obscene sex, while our friends were dying. What kind of people are we?"

He moved the car off the road and took her in his arms, kissing her head as he held her close. "Honey, now you stop that. It would not have mattered if we were mountain climbing, peeling potatoes, or making love...it would have happened no matter what. What we did or did not do has no bearing on the deaths. But we do know one thing. We know who the guy is that would not die. Malcolm! Here, let me dry your tears, and no more guilt trip about any of this. We had a wonderful sexual encounter, and now, because of it, I can be your husband again. I think we need to go see Larry and Caroline and tell them what has happened."

Malcolm was in the kitchen when Sahara arrived. "Hey, did you have a good time? Looked like it when I stopped by to watch for a while. Nothing like a good fuck fest to give the body a workout. Was old Doc enough for both of you? You two women sure do like each other. Why, I was kind of

jealous watching you down on my little bird. She really likes that stuff, doesn't she?"

Larry and Caroline came into the room as Malcolm was taunting Sahara, who did not bother to reply. Sahara moved to Caroline, kissed her cheek, and said, "Thank you, both. We all three had a great time, and Doc is a new man. I did not say anything to either of them, but if he had just gone to a doctor about his problem a couple years ago, that doctor probably would have given him just what I did. Not the sex," she laughed, "but the vacuum device. Georgia was in heaven with him again, and he feels adequate now."

Malcolm laughed and said, "So now Doc can get it up again. Guess that means little bird will not be joining me anymore. A real shame, as she did so enjoy our mating. I am telling you, Larry, you have missed a good thing there. She really knows how to get your rocks off."

"Oh, shut up, you walking cadaver," said Sahara. "Not everyone in the world thinks of nothing but sex the way you do."

"True," he replied. "But if most men could be ready again in only minutes after blowing their wads, they would be looking for a woman as often as I do. Like right now. Sahara, would you do me the honors of joining me downstairs for awhile?" He bowed at the waist and reached for her hand. She slapped it away.

They all heard the truck racing to a screeching halt outside. Larry opened the door just as the Joneses climbed the back steps. It was obvious they were upset. "Sit down, your two," he said. "Here is coffee—now tell us what's wrong."

Doc took a deep breath and related almost verbatim what Jeff had told them. No one spoke until he was done, when Caroline exploded. "Malcolm, you are beyond evil, even worse than I had thought possible. How could you do that to those people? Don't you have a shred of decency left in you?"

Malcolm pulled himself to his full height, indignant. "I certainly do. I honored my promise to leave that Lisa girl alone. She was standing right in front of me in a sheer nightgown with all her sweet young parts just waiting to fondle, but all I did was cop a couple feels. Nice firm tits, yummy. I even told her that it was hard, but I had promised to let her alone."

"You lecherous asshole!" Larry was blind with rage. He knew that he could not hurt Malcolm, but his anger won out. He swung a right cross that Malcolm caught in his hand. He pushed Larry so hard he went flying across

the room into the back of Georgia's chair. She fell to the floor with Larry landing on top of her. Malcolm grabbed Doc by the hair and spun him before throwing him toward the basement steps. Caroline helped Larry up. Georgia arose and ran to her unconscious husband. She tripped over one of his legs and went headlong down the stairs. Caroline followed her, yelling for someone to call for an ambulance.

Doc began to wake up as Sahara fed him small sips of water. When he saw his beautiful wife like a rag doll at the bottom of the steps, he bellowed and ran to her. He wanted to pick her up, but Caroline convinced him not to move her. Blood had begun to run across the floor from under her facedown body. Caroline knew instinctively that the baby was gone but could only pray that the ambulance would be in time to save the woman she loved more than any woman she had ever known.

Larry was beside her, lifting her up. "Come on, darling, you can't stay here. They will see you. I know you think you don't care, but you have to. You can move back behind the furnace where you can hide and still see. I promised to take care of her. See, now the emergency people are here. Sahara is bringing them down. Come, we must hide you." She objected, not wanting to leave Georgia's side, but forced herself away, knowing he was right.

With the ambulance came several other emergency vehicles, including Jeff Donaldson in his police car. He rushed into the house even ahead of the medical people. He found the disaster easily from the crying and noises in the kitchen and basement. He was down the stair like a mad man, kneeling by Georgia with the others. Even in his dismay, he could not help but notice the dark, beautiful young woman with one arm around Larry and the other around Doc. Just looking at her made his heart skip a beat, and he knew instantly that he wanted her more than he wanted any other woman he had ever seen. Who she was did not matter now—only Georgia mattered—but she was etched in his mind forever.

## Chapter 67

Dr. Martha Gillespie was standing beside Georgia when she awoke and Doc was holding her hand on the other side of the hospital bed. She smiled at her patient. "How are you feeling, Georgia? You gave us a pretty good scare, young lady. I think everything will be fine now, except...." She looked at Doc.

"Honey," he said, bending down to kiss her cheek. "Honey, you lost the baby."

Georgia simply shook her head. Finally she spoke, "We can always have another one, can't we?" Martha thought that an odd question, but her years in practice had convinced her most of what she heard in patient's room seldom did.

"Well, not exactly, honey." Doc held her hand tight and caressed her cheeks with his lips. "According to Dr. Martha here, you were pretty scrambled inside and to save you, they had to remove some of your organs. I don't know the technical terms, but there will be no more children. We have two beautiful ones already. Just think of diapers, spitting spinach, temper tantrums, slamming doors, ear infections...that should chase away any thoughts of more kids."

He was making jokes to help with the melancholy he knew she was feeling. She loved children and would have had a dozen were it not for his sexual problems. Another way, he told himself, he had failed her. God, he loved her so. "And, honey, if you want more, we can adopt. But we have time to think about it later, once you are well and home. Now, speaking of kids, there are two outside who want to see you, if you are up to it."

She nodded, and soon the room was filled with her sweet laughter, two noisy teenagers and one husband filled with mental anguish and such intense love, he fought his tears back. If she could forgive them, he would give her the moon on a golden thread. To add to his pain and guilt, he had come to understand, from things Sahara had said, that he could have received help years ago for him impotency, were it not for his pride that kept him from seeking medical help. None of this would have happened but for his

selfishness and her love for him, no matter what. Somehow, he had to make it up to her—or die trying.

\* \* \* \*

At the house, Jeff's presence made it impossible for Caroline to leave her hiding place. Larry introduced him to Sahara. Jeff could see they were both nervous and wondered why. Perhaps the accident was the cause, but instinctively, he sensed there was more to it than that. Larry hinted that perhaps Jeff should get back to work, but Jeff ignored him, trying to figure out the problem. Finally, when Sahara offered to walk him to his car, his desire to know her better won out. Instead of going to his car, however, he closed the front door behind them, took her arm, and moved to the porch swing.

They made small talk for several minutes while Jeff worked up enough nerve to ask her to have dinner with him that evening. She did not reply right away, but looked out over the trees at the fog closing in on the ocean and shoreline. Finally, she looked him in the eyes and said, "I appreciate your offer but think it more prudent to pass. You are a nice man, and being with me might cause complications for you later. Again, I thank you, but no."

She arose and ran quickly into the house. Jeff followed her but stopped short just inside the door with disbelief at what he saw. Larry and Caroline were climbing the stairs...but it could not be! Caroline was dead. He had seen her body. He had cried over her face as he kissed her cold, lifeless corpse goodbye. He had tangled his fingers in her red curls as he ached for her passing. No, it could not be Caroline. Nevertheless, it was—as sure as the sun had played in those strands of gold when they were teenagers, as sure as the taste of her lips the first time he had kissed her, as sure as the desire he felt every time he looked at her, as sure as the hate he felt for Hal when he knew Caroline was in those arms rather than his.

Without taking his eyes off her, he moved toward the stairs. Sahara moaned, "Oh, I am so sorry. I did not think he would come back inside." She turned to him, trying to push him back toward the door. He grabbed her shoulders gently and moved her aside. "Please, Jeff," she pleaded again, "go back outside. It is not what you think."



““What do I think?” he asked, as he climbed toward Caroline. “It is you, isn’t it? You aren’t dead. Oh, my God, thank you for this miracle.”

Caroline moved her hand to lay it on his shoulder. “Jeff, it’s not what you think. Yes, I am dead, but not dead as you remember me.” She looked at Larry and asked, “Now what? How do we explain this?” Her eyes were full of tears as she took one hand from each of the men. “Help me, please, darling. And you too, Sahara. Do you agree Jeff is entitled to the truth?”

The room was silent as they all took seats around the beautiful room. She sat with Jeff on one of the love seats, still holding his hand, while Larry and Sahara took chairs close by. “Sahara,” she asked, “will you bring the papers from my desk for Jeff to read?” Sahara handed the pile of papers to Jeff, who simply held them in his hand after scanning the first page.

Finally, Jeff spoke. “Caroline, I read these after you died, or whatever happened. That thing about the ghost? Is it true? Can it possibly have happened? My mind says no, but here you are, as alive as before your accident. Hell, I can’t believe this. I do not believe in ghosts. I know strange things happen, but not like this. It is too incredible to believe.” He bowed his head for several minutes before asking, “Will somebody say something? Tell me I haven’t lost my mind.”

“No, Jeff, you are as sane as the rest of us, however sane that might be. What you read in my book is all true. Malcolm used his sex appeal to lure women into his bed to bring himself back to life, or as close as he can ever be. It is no different for me...I use Larry and his love to bring myself to what you see. Those sexual encounters, mine as well as Malcolm’s, make us flesh and bones again. We cannot feel pain, as you do, but do experience discomfort. We do not need to eat or sleep in the way you do, but we can do both a bit. What we do experience is sexual gratification, intense sexual gratification...the kind you can only dream of, and there is no limit to it, but there is one down side. The sex must be given freely. No rape, no coercion, no drugs, nothing but open desire and lust.

“Malcolm is an accomplished lover who has no trouble finding willing bedmates. Fortunately, I only need Larry, but in all honestly, without him I would have to seek others to continue to ‘live,’ for lack of a better word. In my case, without Larry I would not want to continue, but Malcolm has never met a female he did not desire. That is the problem.”

Jeff was clutching her hand so hard that were she to feel it, she would have screamed. "I hear what you are saying, I believe you mean every word, but my mind just will not accept it."

Larry spoke for the first time. "Jeff, sit back and get ready for a roller coaster ride between reality and the land of shadows. I will tell you the entire story, but you must promise never to reveal any of it. So many people would be hurt. Georgia, Doc, and their kids in particular."

Jeff nodded. Larry took a deep breath. Sahara quietly disappeared into the kitchen to return with a tray of soda, beer, hard liquor, glasses, and ice.

## Chapter 68

Dr. Martha told Georgia she would have to stay in the hospital for a few days' observation. After Doc and the children left, Martha returned to sit with her patient, watching her sleep. She knew there was more to the pregnancy and miscarriage than she had been told, but no one seemed willing to fill her in on the details. She was about to leave when a tall man dressed in strange clothing suddenly appeared beside her. She was certain the door had not opened, but there he was. "Who are you, and what do you want?" she asked without rising.

"I am Malcolm Hanson, come to see my little bird. I heard she lost our baby. Was it a boy or girl, or something?"

"Your baby? Hardly—she is married, and she and her husband are dismayed at the loss. Now, I must ask you to leave."

"Hell, no, not until I talk to my little bird." Before Martha could react, he had moved to the bed and was shaking Georgia awake. "Hi, sweet bird. Guess that fall ended Little Malcolm, huh? Twice my women lost my babies. Do you think I am destined to be childless?"

It took Georgia a moment to make her eyes focus, as the painkillers were still working. "Get out of here, Malcolm," she said. "Haven't you done enough harm already? I hate you. Go away. I never want to see you again." She clamped her eyes closed and pulled the sheet over her face like a sad child.

Martha spoke as she grabbed his arm to pull him from the room. He merely shrugged her hand away. "Come on, little bird, you know you don't mean that. Guess you and I can't make another brat, but we can go back to trying. Sahara won't do for me any more, and old Margo bit the big one, so right now that leaves only you. I can't wait too long, so I will be expecting you again soon. In the meantime, there are those beauticians and a couple sex-starved old farm women, but you are so much better." He pulled the

sheet down, bent and kissed her lips, sliding his tongue inside as he squeezed her breast.

“That is enough,” Martha pushed him away this time. “Leave now, or I will call security and have you arrested.”

Malcolm grinned at her. “You aren’t a bad-looking old woman. Are you horny? I can help you out with that, and I’m good at satisfying those needs. Aren’t I, little bird?” With that, he moved away and was suddenly gone, just as he had arrived.

Georgia did not cry, just stared into space as if in a trance. She did not respond to Martha’s administrations or questions. Martha reached for the phone and called the restaurant. When she explained to Doc what had happened, he swore and said he would be right there. She resumed her seat by the bed, feeling helpless, not knowing what to do. She decided to wait for Doc before doing anything further.

Doc arrived with Larry Gardiner and two women. One was a small, dark girl, the other a tall, graceful woman wrapped in a scarf. Martha paid no attention to the females, just addressed Doc. He moved directly to the bed, where he encircled his wife with his arms. She shook her head as if coming out of a sleep, smiled at him and pressed her face to his chest.

Larry quietly closed the door and leaned against it, as if to stop anyone from entering. Martha looked confused. Doc mumbled reassuring words to Georgia and then looked straight into Martha’s eyes. He said, “Martha, what we are going to tell you is within doctor-patient confidentiality and must not be recorded on her chart or written anywhere else. Is that understood?”

Martha nodded, clearly confused. Doc began to talk, calling on Larry for help now and then. Even exhausted Georgia added comments of clarification.

When she heard the tale, Martha looked as bewildered as any human could. “I don’t think I can believe this. Any of it. It is entirely outside my comprehension. I am a woman of science, not the occult. And I don’t want to hear any more, any of you.” She stood defiantly, glaring at the three who had spun the story.

“Perhaps you will listen to me, Martha.” The tall woman unwrapped the scarf from her face. Martha grabbed the chair as if to keep from falling. “No, it can’t be. I pronounced you dead myself. You are NOT Caroline. You cannot be Caroline. What are you people trying to do?”

“Yes, Martha, it is I. I am dead, but not quite as dead as when you saw me last. My body was cremated, but my soul is here. Larry has helped me back, just as Malcolm has used Georgia to regain his near human being. Please sit and let me finish the story.” Martha sat, and Caroline pulled a chair up beside her, took her hand, and in a soft voice completed the preposterous tale.

When she was finished, everyone waited for Martha to react. Finally, she spoke. “Caroline, I can feel you. I can see you—you *are* Caroline. I do not understand any of this, not really, but if you all believe it, so must I.” She stood and wrapped her arms around Caroline, tears in her eyes. “Welcome back, Caroline, welcome back.”

## Chapter 69

After Martha left them all in Georgia's hospital room, Caroline spoke softly. "So many people in this town are aware of my return and Malcolm's wanderings and his inability to die. There are several things we can do, one of which is getting Malcolm away from here. I have found a place where I think we can take him and he will be welcomed. It's a hippie commune in northern California just a ways inland from the coast. They have a free-living community...and by free, I mean free. Free love, free drugs, free whatever you want. He should fit in there fine. Larry and I will take him down there tomorrow, and Sahara has volunteered to come with us, to help keep Malcolm occupied on the trip. Larry will arrange to send them money each month as payment for letting Malcolm stay there, because we all know he will not contribute anything mental or physical to the group. He will not help grow food, fish or any of the other daily chores there, so we will contribute money, which they would probably rather have anyway. The women outnumber the men almost two to one, so there should be no shortage of willing companions. Any questions?"

"Okay," she continued. "Now, the problem of my identity...I am going to become my twin sister. Larry and I already have concocted a barely believable story to cover her arrival. Down the road a few months, they will marry, and soon the town will completely forget Caroline Fleming ever existed except on the back cover of her books. I have several more novels in my mind, so maybe she can ghostwrite them in some sort of AKA thing...anyway, we will work that out later. Any questions now?"

"Yes, I have one," Sahara said. "How did you get so damn smart?" They all laughed and, after kisses and hugs, returned home for a good night's rest. It would be a long drive for the foursome, but first they had to prepare Malcolm for his trip to a new home, and they knew it would not be easy.

\* \* \* \*

Easy it was not! "What do you mean, you're moving me? This has been my home for more than 60 years, and I see no reason to leave now. There are at least a hundred, if not more, women around here who want to be fucked and, as you know, I fuck them so good that they cry and beg for more." His ego had grown with each of his seductions. "Why, Caroline, those two beauticians want me to help them change the color of their pussy hair with some kind of dye. I think that will be fun and I know they will enjoy it. And those two old maids in that dilapidated house on the cliff above the harbor have discovered, with my assistance, of course, how much fun they can have with just each other when I'm not there to help them out. That ancient farmer Martin with the young wife...he likes to watch me while I'm giving her what she wants. And one of the best things of all is when those young marrieds get drunk on the beach and make bets to see how many of their females I can do in one night. So many folks here need me. No reason to go anywhere else, so forget it."

Larry was enraged, but Caroline's hand on his arm stopped him. "Malcolm," she said, "we realize you are needed here, but you are needed at the new place too. It will be a never-ending parade of wanting women asking you to service them. The community is expanding, too, so there will be new people there now and then. By last count, there were more than two females to one male there. They really like that orgy stuff...just think of how the men will envy you and how the woman will fight over you. Maybe you could teach sex education classes to those who do not have your abilities. Does that sound good?"

"Well, yes," Malcolm replied slowly as he thought over what she had suggested. "But what about my girls here? Those lonely women who will have to go back to being lonely? The farmer's horny wife? Plus the crop of nubile young women growing up without me to take their cherries in the upcoming years?"

Again, Larry fumed. He hated Malcolm and his crude remarks and his threats to young girls, but he kept his mouth shut and let Caroline handle Malcolm. Larry thought he might be wavering with Caroline's suggestions.

Malcolm asked, "How far away is this place? Maybe I could go there to help them out, but return here from time to time to please my ladies here."

Caroline hesitated before answering, not sure how to respond. "It will take us all day to drive there, so it is far. However, it is just as close to San Francisco as it is to here. Just think of the beautiful women by the Bay. Surely thousands of them would love you and your abilities, don't you think? I hear they have stage shows in some of the after-hours bars there where people pay to watch studs like you with eager females. You'd probably be the hit of the show doing that."

"Okay, I am convinced, but with one stipulation. Ha, Larry, you will hate this. I want you one more time. I want to fuck you while your dear husband watches. And Sahara, too—she can watch or participate. Hell, Larry, you can even join in if you want. Let's have an orgy. Here, right now."

"Hell no, you will not have my wife again." Larry was livid with anger, so furious Caroline was afraid he would have an attack of something.

"Honey," Caroline put her arms around Larry, "It's no big deal. He can have my body, but he will never have my soul. Just close your eyes and picture us in front of the fireplace in Tahoe. It will be over in no time at all." She turned to Malcolm, sliding her sweater over her head. He tore his clothes off and reached for her. Larry moved toward them, but Sahara stepped between Larry and the couple. Malcolm had her naked and was suckling her breasts while his hand moved between her legs.

"Look, Larry, look at how she likes what I do to her."

Sahara spoke, "Malcolm, take me instead of Caroline. She is with child and you might hurt her, you are so big. And I will enjoy what you do, that I promise." She slipped out of her clothes quickly and rubbed her big breasts against his back. "Feel how hard my nipples are for you already? I want you. I want to feel you inside of me. I want your mouth on me. I want to suck your cock."

Malcolm turned but did not release his hold on Caroline. "I should take you both then. Is the baby mine? No matter, I like children, so I will not hurt her. But, Larry, see how easy she is for me to touch, feel, stroke, and fuck if I want too. Did you like my hands on her and in her? Bet you did not, did you?" His laugh was a terrible sound as he continued to feel her body. As if now bored with her, he pushed her toward her husband and turned to the woman pressed against his back.



“Okay, Sahara, I will give you the ride of your life.” He picked her up into his arms and bit her nipples, making them dimple with his mouth. She closed her eyes and let him do as he wished, and true to her word, she began to respond and enjoy him as he enjoyed her.

Caroline picked up an Afghan from the sofa and draped it over her body as Larry held her close. “Are you alright, darling?” She was more concerned for him than for herself.

Larry kissed her face, eyes, everywhere he could reach as he held her head between his hands. “I am fine. Did he hurt you?”

“No, not at all.” They both turned their heads to watch the rutting couple on the floor. It was like an aphrodisiac. Larry felt his penis harden and Caroline opened the Afghan to press her breasts his chest. She knew it was Sahara he was watching. The woman was responding with abandon to everything Malcolm did to and with her. Caroline felt a heat building between her legs and her nipples harden. Now she understood exactly what Georgia had felt. She took Larry’s hand, and together they moved up to their bed where they made love. He brought her to climax after climax, and as they reached the top together, she whispered in his ear, “Tomorrow night, darling, tomorrow night.”

## Chapter 70

Malcolm was already waiting in the back seat of Caroline's car when the other three exited the house for the day ahead. The women had filled two vacuum bottles of coffee and brought cups and muffins. Before they were even out of the driveway, Malcolm was trying to undress Sahara in the back. "Knock it off, Malcolm. At least wait until I'm awake. I'm no good first thing in the morning. You can wait an hour or so, can't you?" He pouted beside her, but every few minutes ran his hand under her sweater or tried to put it down inside her jeans. Each time, she would slap it away.

"It's going to be a long day, I think," Larry muttered. He was still grumpy after asking Caroline last night if she was pregnant and hearing her say no, that it was a ploy Sahara used to get Malcolm to release her. She patted his cheek, kissed him softly, and again whispered her, "Tonight, darling." He did not know exactly what she meant, but he had a pretty good idea. Thinking of that, his mood improved until he was actually humming softly to himself.

They stopped for lunch south of Gold Beach at a small carryout place on the beach. They took their white paper bags to logs in the sand, where they ate like starving children—except for Malcolm, who ate nothing. He was restless without sex for so long, so he was again acting like a petulant brat. Sahara called him over to sit by her as she finished her meal.

"Malcolm, I want to play a game with you. Unzip your pants. Good, now let me put my hand inside. Nice. You are growing already. Now, if you are a good boy when we back in the car, I will let you put it in my hand for a minute. Do you like the game so far?" He grinned and nodded. "Okay, so zip back up for now. We can't walk the beach with your thing hanging out."

With that, she got up and ran to the curling waves that ebbed and flowed around her ankles, sometimes up to her knees. She pulled her skirt high so that her thighs were bare, knowing he would be enticed and follow her. She

had plans for a long afternoon of “Teasing Malcolm,” as she thought of her little game.

Caroline and Larry watched, and Larry even laughed. “Ol’ Malc reminds me of a panting, starved dog chasing a juicy bone.”

She smiled and kissed his lips gently. “Before this day is done, my husband, you will be panting like that too, for the same reason.” She felt his penis in his jeans, noting that it was enlarging too. “She has beautiful thighs, doesn’t she?”

Larry took the tactful way of answering. “But not as beautiful as yours.”

She smiled again before calling the wading pair back to the car. Again she whispered her “tonight, darling” in his ear. He felt his cock jerk but did not want her to see it now. Instead, he said, “I’ll race you to the car, and even give you a head-start.” He did not wait for her to begin, but sprinted ahead so that his now hard penis would have time to subside before she noticed it.

The game of “Tease Malcolm” continued in the back seat, but Malcolm had read her mind a bit and knew what she planned and decided it would be a fun way to while away the day. Sahara would kiss him, running her tongue around his lips, darting it inside his mouth, and then move away. Now and then, she would ask him to unzip and free his penis, which would start to grow immediately. Sometimes she would stroke it, sometimes even slide her tongue over the tip. When he demanded more, she would just laugh and tell him to be patient. Sometimes she would lift her sweater for him to worship her breasts; sometimes she would unzip her jeans for him to put his hand inside on her stomach. When he tried to reach further, she would pull his hand away and promise more later.

The couple in the front could hear it all, and Larry could see them in the rearview mirror. Caroline would simply turn in her seat and watch as Malcolm’s discomfort grew and subsided. The trees around them grew taller and denser. They had entered the forest of redwoods for which northern California is so famous. When Larry made a turn from Highway 101 onto a sandy side road, they all knew they were near.

By now, Malcolm was tired of the game and had become irritable. He tried to pull Sahara’s pants down, but she slapped his hand away. “That is your last time for fondling or fucking me, old boy. You will just have to wait until you get to the harem that awaits you just down the road.”

They arrived within minutes at a clearing in the woods. There were several small cabins and a couple of large ones. Flowers grew around each, and a huge vegetable garden was planted behind the rows of clotheslines, piles of wood, and some old fashioned smoke houses. There was an old bus and a few cars, but most of the equipment was farm items. It looked to be a self-sufficient spread.

A tall man with a white beard opened Caroline's car door as Larry shut off the motor. He offered his hand to help her out, and then pulled her into his arms for a very thorough kiss, letting his tongue feel her mouth as his hands squeezed her butt. She pulled away, but he did not seem to mind. He repeated the greeting with Sahara. "You are most welcome. Can I hope that you ladies will be joining our happy family? Oh, and the gentlemen too, of course. My name is Caleb. These are the members of the family." He gestured to encompass those who had moved toward the newcomers.

Larry shook his hand. In quiet tones, he explained who he was and that the other man in their party would be joining Caleb's group. With that, Caleb gestured for Larry to follow him into one of the cabins, leaving the others outside to meet and greet the residents. Caleb did not want the others to hear of the financial arrangement Caroline had discussed with him on the phone. He gave Larry a piece of paper with a P.O. Box address written on it and took the check Larry wrote to him. He looked at it, nodded, folded it, and put it in his pocket. Larry reassured him that an equal amount would arrive the first of every month as long as Malcolm stayed with them, voluntarily, and that they would stop by time to time to visit him. It was a way to ensure that Malcolm was there and the money was not being taken under false pretences.

Outside, Malcolm was surveying the people, the women in particular. There were many more females than males, and most of them were between their late teens and middle age. Some were actually pretty, some were not, but all were ripe enough to please him. He already had introduced himself to several, asking if they were married or not, and found out that was immaterial. Better words never had hit Malcolm's ears, but one woman whispered that all loving was done out of sight from the many children. He knew he was going to like it here, and there was always San Francisco and sex shows. Hooray for California, he thought. He walked away with a woman under each arm, never once looking back.

## Chapter 71

As they drove back north up the beautiful Oregon coastline, the sun was low on the horizon, causing the water to sparkle like diamonds. The surf was calm, rolling in lazy waves up the sandy shoreline. It was mesmerizing to Caroline as she entered a realm of memories. With the night she had planned so prevalent in her mind, she recalled her conversation yesterday with Sahara. It had been difficult to broach the subject in a genteel manner, so she had blurted out her question. "Sahara, I know you are probably ready to return to Portland, but I have one more thing I would like to pay you to do: will you spend a night with Larry and me?"

Instead of answering, Sahara looked dismayed and then angry. "You don't have to pay me for that, damn it, Caroline. I WANT to do it. I've wanted to make love to you from the first moment I saw you. I am bisexual, completely, and desire women as much as I do men. Larry is sensual, and I have often thought of him on and in me. But your question hurts. I have grown to love you both. And the Joneses, too. Never in my whole life have people been so kind to me, so honest and so open. Never once, until now, has anyone here referred to my being a whore, so I guess I'd just hoped my past was past. Yes, I will have sex with you, but out of love for you, not for pay." Her eyes brimmed with unshed tears as she turned away.

Caroline felt like she had been hit in the stomach. The last thing in the world she wanted to do was hurt Sahara in any way. "Wait. Please wait." She took Sahara by the shoulders and turned her so they were face to face. She put her arms around the smaller woman and pulled her to her. She bent to kiss her eyes and then her mouth. "Sahara, I am SO sorry. I meant no harm, and I only offered money because I...well, I don't know why. It's hard for me to ask what I want from you. I've always been such a prude where these things are concerned, especially about sex between two women or two men. And how to ask another woman to have sex with my husband.

It all seems so depraved and unnatural. I want you for you and you for Larry. Please forgive me.”

Sahara responded with a smile and by putting her cheek against Caroline’s. They kissed again, but with sweetness, not passion. Passion was for later. Now, Caroline’s reminiscences ended as Larry turned the car into the parking lot of the new resort overlooking the ocean near Brookings. She turned to smile at Sahara and took her hand as Larry went inside to get a room for the night.

Instead of one room, he got a suite with two bedrooms, a fireplace, and that new invention...a hot tub. They were all nervous as they went inside, amazed at the luxury of the space. Nice artwork, not motel-type items, adorned the walls. Statuettes and tasteful knick-knacks were everywhere. A sofa and loveseat faced a huge television with a stereo attached. A table and four chairs faced the bank of windows and a heated balcony that looked out over the ocean. On it were several bowls of snacks and fruit, and beside it was a bottle of champagne on ice. In the bedrooms, each bed was huge, covered with a silk spread and perfumed satin sheets, all in a sea-foam green. The bath held the hot tub and featured a huge shower with duo showerheads and the most incredible thing...heated towels.

“Man,” Larry spoke first. “I could get used to living like this. Say, let’s enlarge the bathroom in our house and have hot towels too. And we could heat the balcony, and how about adding a tower too? This place gives me all kinds of ideas to remodel our place.” He turned to look at the two beautiful women and said, “And it gives me a lot of other ideas too.” He moved to Caroline, kissed her deeply, and asked, “Are you sure about this?”

She smiled and began to remove her clothes. She reached for Sahara and pulled her to them. “Let’s get naked and try out the hot tub and see where things go from there. Last one in is last one to...whatever.”

Within seconds, they were submerged to their necks in fragrant water. Larry sat between the women and relished the feel of their breasts against his arms, then his chest as they moved to press them there too. He kissed one pair of lips and then the other. He felt a hand on his penis, but with the bubbles, he could not tell whose hand it was, and he did not care. His own hands roamed the breasts that bobbed upon the surface of the water. He ran his fingers down soft stomachs into Caroline’s soft curls and Sahara’s naked nether lips, touching and probing until he heard both women respond.

Larry stood and pulled them both out with him. He handed hot towels all around, drying one and then the other. His penis was at full attention, and he noted that all four breasts dimpled as the nipples had hardened to points. They moved to the first bed. Larry pulled all the bedding off and indicated they should lie down in front of him.

He stood for a moment, looking at them. He had never seen two such sexy, beautiful women awaiting him...and he wanted them both. Sahara's breasts were larger than Caroline's, and her naked pussy was so exciting, he dropped to his knees in front of her to put his face between her legs. He rubbed Caroline's clit as he sucked Sahara. He was so excited he thought he would cum before he even entered either of them, but Caroline moved to take him into her mouth as he fingered her and used his wonderful tongue inside Sahara's naked mound. Sahara climaxed first, and then Larry bucked and moaned as he filled Caroline's mouth. Sahara rose to kiss him before dropping between Caroline's open legs and spread her wide enough for her mouth to find the little pearl she loved to suck. Larry lay beside her, caressing and biting her nipples as Sahara brought his precious wife to a moaning, hip-raising climax.

They collapsed, exhausted, for several minutes before trying out the shower. They soaped and lathered one another, giggling like kids, until the washing became serious. This time he stood behind them as they bent forward, inserting himself in one wet pussy and then the other until Sahara tightened her vagina to squeeze him into another climax. "A little trick of the trade," she explained later, when Larry asked about it. She explained to Caroline how to contract her inner muscles to tighten, then loosen, then tighten. "It drives a man to cum every time, if you are in a hurry, or just want to give him a little something extra. Hold off finishing him if you want and just use it for fun."

Caroline began practicing as she sat sipping her champagne with her two lovers. The sun had set in a clear sky, letting the moon begin its path among the stars. Talk was light, but without tension. Finally, Larry said, "You two are the most incredible women in the world. I have never experienced anything like this before, and if I died now, I would go happy. I wish I knew how to make you as happy as I am."

"Darling," Caroline said, "You make me happy every day of my life, or should I say near-life. I loved watching you and Sahara enjoying each

other.” She kissed first Sahara lightly on the lips, and then Larry. “And as soon as you two are up to it, I’m ready to do it again.”

They laughed, and Larry said, “You are an insatiable wench. I guess we will just have to try to do better next time. Is now too soon?” They began to kiss and caress again, but this time with Larry between them. The women focused first on him, before turning to one another. This time was less hurried and more fulfilling.

Later, they slept, awakening again as the moon illuminated their room for another wonderful bout of sex. The other bed became their place to sleep, but when morning came, it became their first-light scene of more sex, again and again until Larry admitted he was too sore to continue but wanted to watch the women together one more time before they showered and headed for home. The ladies were happy to comply.

All concerned knew that what they had done was a once-in-a-lifetime thing. The Joneses and Sahara had come to the same conclusion. Both couples were thankful for what she had offered and knew that she was their friend, but not lover, forever. In his mind, Larry had to admit he might want a repeat, but unless Caroline mentioned it, the subject as done. The irony of it all was that each of them, including Georgia and Doc, had entertained the same thought.



## Chapter 72

Once they returned home, the charade of Caroline's sister, called Carmine, began. Sahara cut away Caroline's mound of curls, leaving her with a very short cap of red hair with wispy curls around her face. Caroline changed her makeup to a more flamboyant look and began to wear flashing clothes instead of the sedate wardrobe of her past. Larry teased her about her new look, saying she was bound to get many offers for more than a dinner or movie. She said that Carmine was the type who liked men and was a bit looser morally, not above a one-night stand or two. He said the one-nighters had better be with him.

They visited Georgia and related the end of Malcolm in their lives. Georgia was going home the next day but needed, care so they decided Doc and the kids would come to Caroline's house for a few days and Carmine and Sahara would care for her. That also covered the issue of Larry in the house alone with two gorgeous women...how people would talk. He was tired of pretending to live in his little house and sneaking to the big house every night to be with his wife.

That night, Larry took his sister-in-law Carmine and her friend Sahara to dinner at the Oceanside. She was no longer transparent in the least. He made a point of introducing her to everyone who showed an interest. The remarks, "You look so much like Caroline, you could be Caroline," or, "You are much prettier than she was," or best yet, "I don't see any resemblance between you two," made them all smile.

The charade was a success, or so they thought, until Jeff Donaldson came in. He stopped at the door in shock before moving to their table. Without an invitation, he sat down. Sahara sensed his dismay and took his hand. "Things are not always what they seem," she said. "For example, you thought me to be a nice little friend of Caroline's when you invited me out

for dinner. Remember my telling you that it wasn't a good idea. Do you want to know why?" she asked in a quiet voice so no one could eavesdrop.

"Oh, I already know why," Jeff replied. "I ran a check on you the first time we met, so I have known from the beginning about your past."

Sahara withdrew her hand. "Oh, so you asked me out, probably figuring you would get dessert later in your bed, is that right?"

"Hell no! You are a charming woman, and frankly, I could care less about that part of your life. I simply wanted to take you out because I like you. Actually, I think I more than like you, if you would just give me a chance. If you want my promise to stay at arm's length, forget it! I will not lie and pretend I don't find you incredibly sexy, which I do—nor will I pretend I would not like to take you to bed right now, which I would."

No one spoke for a couple minutes, until Jeff finally looked at Carmine. "I read Caroline's book about the ghost, and Georgia told me a strange story when I found her with a man not her husband. Still, I had trouble with the premise of ghosts, especially ghost lovers. Then when a man killed his wife by shooting her lover in the back and the lover walked away, I had no recourse but to believe it all. Not that I can ever explain any of it—and I will have to continue to look for the man who was 'raping' Hazel in the attic of the Hathaway house."

"By the arrival of an unknown twin sister, I assume that spirit is out of your lives and you want to resume whatever life you have with your husband. So from now on, you are Carmine. Larry's sister-in-law."

"For now," Larry answered. "I am sure we will get to know each other well enough to marry in the near future." It was all he could do not to take her hand or kiss her. That kind of public display would have to wait, but nothing would make him wait for her in his bed every night.

Jeff joined them for dinner, focusing his attention on Sahara. He invited her for a drive as Larry and Carmine stood to go home. She was not reluctant in accepting, assured that he was honest and would not rush her. She felt like a real woman, not a hooker, for the first time in years. At that moment, she decided she would never return to her old profession, no matter what.

## Chapter 73

With the four Joneses in her house along with Sahara and Larry, Caroline enjoyed her roll as Carmine. She loved the teenagers, vowing to get a second phone line. Neither child seemed to think Carmine was anything but a sister. The house had plenty of room, and the kids immediately staked out places on the third floor, arguing as to who should get the big room...the one Malcolm had made for Sarah. Larry settled the argument by promising to enlarge another one the next day, so the argument became "who gets the new room." He laughed and left them to settle that between them.

Georgia chided them for being so presumptuous, pointing out that it was a short stay, not forever. Carmine pointed out that she loved having them all there and that there was no reason to move back to the little house they shared. In her tactful way, she convinced Georgia that she needed her to stay, that the kids loved it, and extracted a promise that they would not go if she could convince Doc.

It was not easy, as he felt she thought he was an inadequate provider, and all the other things a man's ego made him think. It took Larry and a day of fishing to convince them to stay, for at least a month or so. Doc gave in, but with the provision that he and he alone provided for his family and would do at least half of the household chores. "Hooray," Larry replied, "Now, I won't have to eat Caroline's...oops, Carmine's cooking."

The days grew into weeks, weeks into months. Jeff and Sahara became inseparable, finally eloping to Reno. The entire town threw them a party, and no one ever mentioned her life before she arrived in their community. One man in town had enjoyed the beautiful woman on a business trip to Portland and wished for another chance, knowing that she had been worth every penny it cost him and it would never happen again.

Caroline's house was the home now to four happy adults, two teenagers, two phone lines, and a pair of critters whose main concern in life was which bed to sleep in at night. That was not a problem for the now-pregnant Carmine, who married her brother-in-law in front of the Christmas tree by the fireplace in the massive house.

Life was wonderful until the day the baby arrived. He was born badly deformed and lived barely an hour. Dr. Martha was silently relieved he did not survive, but she never mentioned that to anyone. Caroline was inconsolable, and Larry became withdrawn. Caroline spent most of her time either in bed or on the balcony outside the bedroom, wrapped in a blanket.

After a week had passed, as Larry was dressing for work, he asked, "Honey, how about throwing on some clothes and going downstairs for breakfast with me? I'll cook." He grinned.

"Thanks, but I would just rather stay in bed with a magazine or something."

"Caroline," he said slowly, "Dr. Martha told you that you will get your strength back quicker if you resume your regular activities, maybe even write a bit."

She snapped back at him. "Well, Dr. Martha didn't just have her baby die, and maybe I don't want to write or do anything but lie here or sit on the balcony. What difference does it make, anyway? So just drop the subject. Period!"

Larry felt his anger build. "It does matter! I hate to see you like this. This isn't the Caroline I know and love...the one who is so full of energy and life. I love you and want you back." He knelt beside the bed and reached for her. She pushed his hand away and rolled away from him.

"When I want you to touch me, I will let you know. Now, just go away and leave me alone."

He stood, aching inside, wanting to comfort her and resentful of her refusal to allow him to hold her. "Fine, Caroline, if that is what you want, then that is what you'll get. I'll sleep in one of the spare rooms tonight and forever if that is what you want. Nevertheless, remember one thing while you are in your own little pity-party: I lost a son just as you did. He was as much a part of me as he was of you, and I feel the loss just as much as you do. Remember that!" He turned and left the room, slamming the door behind him.

The cloud over the house crashed down on even the lively teenagers, who asked their parents if they could move back home. Georgia agreed and went upstairs to talk to Caroline, who did not answer her knock on the bedroom door. She tried the handle and found it locked, so she returned downstairs and wrote a note thanking Caroline and Larry for everything and saying she would call later. They packed their things and left silently, feeling like thieves in the night.

Larry did not go home that night. Not knowing the Joneses were gone, he decided to stay at his little house for a couple days, hoping she might call him and ask him to come home. When she didn't, he became angry and decided not to phone her either. The third night, he went to a bar and consumed far too many drinks and woke up in the morning with a woman he did not know. He felt worse than at any time in his life, other than when he'd thought Caroline was gone forever. The woman resented having to leave his bed and house hoping for an encore. He had been drunk, but she only partially inebriated, and he had been a good fuck. Larry practically pushed her out the door, as he could not stand to look at her, so disgusted he was with himself.

As soon as she was gone, he drove to the big house on the hill, noting that there were no cars but Caroline's anywhere. The critters were delighted to see him, but he ignored them to run up the stairs, two at a time. The bedroom door was locked, so he pounded and shouted at her until she finally opened it. "What do you want?" she asked, turning away from him and heading back to bed.

"We need to talk, Caroline." He grabbed her arm, pulling her around to face him. "Oh, my God, you are fading. No, please no." He wrapped his arms around her and she moved to him, but only for a moment.

"You stink. You smell like stale sex. God, you disgust me! You come from some bitch and want to be with me. Well, forget it, Charlie. I know now just how important I am to you. Ten days since the baby, three days out of this house, and you are already wallowing with some other woman. I would rather be dead again than this." She shoved him backwards out the door and locked it behind him.

"Open it, Caroline. Let me explain. You are right. I have no excuse. I just got drunk and woke up this way. Honey, I love you. Please let me back in." He kept knocking and begging her, until he had a sore throat and red

knuckles. "Alright, I will go shower and be back. Please unlock so we can at least talk without my having to yell at you through the door."

He found some clean clothes still unfolded in a basket in the basement and used one of the bathrooms to cleanse himself. When he returned to the bedroom door, he could not get in. "Damn it, Caroline. I will break this friggin' door down if you don't let me in." She did not unlock it, so he made good on his threat and kicked the double doors in. When he finally got inside, she was in bed, facing the wall. He moved to the bed, lying down with her, turning her over. He kissed her eyes, which she did not open, her lips that remained unmoving. "Caroline, you are fading. I can't let you fade away from me, out of my life. I love you. Please let me make love to you, please!"

She lay still, unmoving, as he began to nuzzle her neck and move his hands over her breasts. When he touched them, he felt the nipples wet from milk meant for their child. "I know it is too soon, but let me love you the best we can without intercourse. We can make love without that, darling, and you will begin to mend again." When he pulled up her nightie, she slapped him away.

"You should have thought of that before fucking whoever it was. Well, if you want to pacify yourself with my body, go ahead. I am too weak to fight you, but it will be one-sided sex. And we both know if I'm not willing, it will be useless in stopping my regression back to nothingness. So do what you must, Larry. I'll just close my eyes while you satisfy yourself."

She did not move as he caressed her thigh and breasts, hoping that his touch would make her respond, but it was useless. She might as well already be gone, as lifeless as she felt to his hand and mouth.

"Please, Caroline, please." His eyes filled with tears that he shed without embarrassment or shame. "Honey, I love you. Please forgive me." She was still and silent. He rolled away and unabashedly cried, loud, sobbing tears which made no apparent impression on her. He finally stopped crying and just lay beside her, as unmoving as she was.

## Chapter 74

Later that night, the phone by the bed rang. Caroline picked it up as if to answer but instead put it down, breaking the connection. She removed it again, laying it on the beside table so anyone trying to phone again would receive a busy signal. Larry watched her action but said nothing. When the sun rose above the forest behind the house, he moved to kiss Caroline, but she turned her head again. He had no idea what to do, but he must do something. She was fainter this morning than she had been yesterday. He would talk to Georgia, Doc, and maybe Sahara, too.

Downstairs in the kitchen, he found Georgia's note and only then realized how quiet the house had become. He sighed, remembering the laughter, the chaos, the wonderful place this had been only a couple of weeks ago. He fed the animals and locked up as he left the house.

The parking lot at the Oceanside was full, as was usual any morning. Doc's breakfasts were ample and delicious, better than any other place around. Larry found an empty stool at the end of the counter by the kitchen, poured himself a cup of coffee, and patted Georgia's ample shoulder as she squeezed past him with arms laden with plates. "Be right back," she said.

"Larry, you look like hell. What's wrong? Never mind, I'll get you something to eat, and then when it thins out in here, you can tell us what is going on."

True to her word, she placed a full—heaping, actually—plate of food in front of him, refreshed his coffee, and kissed his cheek as she returned to her customers. When it got quiet, both she and Doc grabbed coffee and moved to the far table by the windows, where Larry had moved to wait for them.

"Things have gone from bad to worse since you people left—not that your leaving had anything to do with it." Larry leaned his elbows on the table and held his chin in his hands. His expression was so sad, Georgia felt like crying. "Caroline never leaves her bed now and isn't even showering.

She refuses to let me touch her and she is fading. Fading so fast, that I think within a couple days she will be invisible again, and worse yet, she does not care.”

Georgia asked, “What happened? She was depressed but seemed okay the first few days after...” as if she could not bring herself to say the words.

Now Larry hung his head. “It is my fault. I was angry with her, went to a bar, picked up some dame, and took her back to my house. In the morning, I went to see Caroline, and of course she smelled sex on me. That was the end. She is just going to die away, and I can’t stop it. If she does, I will take a swim like she did, because without her, I have no reason to live.”

“Damn it, Larry,” Doc spoke for the first time. “Don’t even talk like that. She loves you; you know that. Her depression makes her unreasonable...I know that from experience. Sorry, wifey, but it’s true. Somehow, you must make her accept your love, if only to stop the regression.”

“I tried, believe me. She simply said go ahead, but without her co-operation, so it would be for nothing. I don’t know what to do.”

Georgia stood and removed her apron. “Honey, can you handle things without me for the afternoon? I’m going to go try to talk some sense into her head. But first I’m going to get Sahara to go with me. I’ll call you later.”

With that, she was gone.

\* \* \* \*

The rain started and then turned into a full-fledged storm by the time the two women ran inside Caroline’s house. They pulled their wet raincoats off and hung them in the basement. They immediately went upstairs, talking loudly so Caroline would hear them coming. They called out to her before moving through the broken doors, but she did not reply.

She was in bed, so pale they could hardly see her. Her hair was uncombed, and she looked bedraggled. “When is the last time you had a shower?” Georgia asked.

Caroline shrugged. “It doesn’t matter.” She closed her eyes as if by not seeing them, they could not see her.



"Okay, honey-cakes. Enough is enough." Georgia's voice was soft but firm. "You are going to go shower and get cleaned up, and then we will talk. Talk seriously."

"No, I am not going to shower or talk either. Just leave me alone."

"We will NOT leave you alone," said Sahara. "You are fading, Caroline, and we want it stopped. We all love you, and you can't ignore our love and just fade away into nothingness again. You need to live...we need you to live. All of us, and most importantly, Larry."

"To hell with Larry." Caroline's voice was weak and without emotion. "He sure does love me a lot. So much that ten days after our baby died, he was in some floozy's bed. Did he tell you that?"

"Yes, he told us and cannot forgive himself. He said, too, that you will not let him love you or make love to you."

"Why should I? He doesn't care that our baby is gone. None of you can understand how I feel."

"Bullshit, Caroline, I know damn well how you feel! Did you forget that I lost a baby just a few months ago when I fell down your basement stairs? I know exactly how you feel. It might not have been my husband's child, but I wanted it as much as you wanted yours. Plus, you can have more children, while I can never again feel the little kicks and movements inside my womb. It is time for you to stop feeling sorry for yourself and think of other people. We two are here to help you, so the first thing we are going to do is clean you up. Now, get out of that bed. NOW!"

Shocked by Georgia's tirade, Caroline obediently slid out of the now-soiled bed. Sahara pulled the sheets off the bed, rolled them up and took them to the laundry chute. She found clean ones in the linen cupboard and began to remake the bed. Georgia found some clean underwear and a nightgown in a bureau and, taking Caroline's arm, led her into the bathroom. She set the shower temperature and removed Caroline's dirty clothes. She held her hand as she stepped into the shower.

Georgia was scared when she saw how faded her friend was. She slipped off her jeans and shirt and stepped into the shower, soaping the taller woman from head to toe. She shampooed her, rinsed her, and wrapped her in a warm towel...a towel from the heater Larry had installed after their trip down the coast. She turned her back while Caroline checked to see if she was still flowing from the birth, but it had stopped.

The bed was ready with clean blue flowered sheets, plump pillows and a fresh comforter. Georgia held her arm as she escorted Caroline back toward the bed. She removed the towel from the pale body and put her arms around Caroline. She held her tight and kissed her lips. Caroline softly returned the kiss. Sahara moved to them and pressed her lips on Caroline's neck, running her tongue down her shoulder. Caroline shivered, not from cold, but from her friend's mouth that now held one of her dripping breasts as her tongue flitted around the nipple, which she felt harden.

"Caroline," Sahara said, "We love you. You know that. Let us love you. Please let me touch you. Do you want to lie down?" Caroline nodded as she moved to the bed. Georgia stripped off her wet bra and panties and lay down beside her. Sahara was naked within seconds and caressing Caroline from the other side of the bed. She used her mouth to tantalize the warm thighs, forcing them open gently. Georgia continued the kissing, to which Caroline now responded, and then took the other breast in her mouth. Sahara moved her hand into the dampening lips where the shaved hair was just beginning to grow back. She felt Caroline respond as her fingers touched the clit, moving its covering with two gentle fingers as she rubbed it. Caroline gasped for breath and wrapped her arms about her friends, one on each side of her. She held them tight as her vagina began to radiate waves of incredible spasms. Her hips moved up as if to meet a lover as she began to climax.

When she dropped back to the bed, she hugged her friends even tighter. "That was wonderful. You are so good to me. Let me touch you two now. It must be complete lovemaking to help me, and I want to feel your excitement too." She put one hand down into the Y of each pair of legs. Her fingers found the pearls of sex in them and began to stroke gently at first, and then faster and harder until first one woman, then the other, cried out their explosions.

Georgia and Sahara showered together and quickly returned to the bed where Caroline sat up, smiling at them. She opened her arms to them, kissing one pair of lips and then the other. "I am tired now, but I want to do it again. Can you wait until I nap for a while, or come back? I love you both."

"Honey, we want you again, too, but I think that is enough for one day," Georgia rubbed her back as she snuggled against her. "I will call you later, if

you will stop taking the phone off the hook,” and she laughed as Sahara hung it up properly. They dressed and tucked her in like a pair of Mamas with their child. Each kissed her goodnight, and they returned to the restaurant, surprised to find Jeff’s police car there too. Georgia looked at her friend and noted some tension on her face. “Will Jeff have a problem with what we just did?”

## Chapter 75

“I really don’t know. We’ve never discussed anything I did before we were married. It never entered my mind that I would ever be unfaithful to him, with a woman or a man. Now I have been, and I’m not sure if I should tell him or not. Damn it, it was for Caroline, at first at least, not for me, but that may not matter to him. I know he has always loved her and at one time had hoped to marry her, but before he could even get close to her, she met and married Larry.”

They entered the restaurant, glad it was busy. Georgia immediately grabbed her apron, and Sahara hugged her husband from the back as he sat on a stool at the counter. Larry sat at a table by himself, staring out the window. The sea was rough, heralding a storm, if the weatherman was right. Sahara whispered to Jeff that she was going to see Larry for a minute and then they could go home, but he said he had to go back to work for a couple hours and left.

Sahara sat and took Larry’s hand in hers. “Honey, you look worse than any man I have ever seen. Well, chin up, honey, because we got your wife to shower and....”

“And what?” he asked. Georgia passed the table as they spoke and gave Sahara a shrug as if to say “it’s up to you.”

Sahara held his hand tighter. “And we made love to her. The two of us loved her, and she responded. She is tired now, and probably asleep. Go home to her.”

Larry tightened his hand around hers until it hurt. “She had sex with the two of you?” His voice was a hard, cruel whisper, so full of anger that Sahara was frightened. She had never seen him like this. “She welcomed two women to her bed, but threw me out? Her friends can share her body, but her husband can’t? I know she liked sex with you, almost as much as I

did, but I never thought she preferred you to me. Well, I guess I was dead wrong." He hung his head as he started to rise.

"Now, wait a damn minute." Sahara was angry. "You had better sit down and think this through. She is fading away, as you yourself told Georgia, and does not seem to care. Well, we care and did something about it. We went thinking she needed friends, which she does, and some serious talking-to, which Georgia did. We showered her and got her into clean clothes. We held her and kissed away her tears, and one thing led to another. Soon we two were making love to Caroline. You watched Caroline and me and know that our love was soft and good. She trusts us, but she does not trust you, at least not right now. Instead of being angry with us, or her, for that matter, you should be thanking God that we were able to at least slow down her disappearing."

Larry continued to stare out the window as if he was alone, but he was listening. "You are right, I know that. Nevertheless, it hurts. Her rejection hurts like hell. I should be thankful for what you did. Hell, maybe I should ask Doc and Jeff to make love with her too, as I know they love her. Maybe anyone and everyone she would take, just to keep her alive. Dear God, what should I do?"

Georgia had overheard their conversation as she slowly wiped down the table next to them. She walked to Larry and turned his head to kiss him on the lips. "I love you, Larry, nearly as much as I do Doc. I know he feels the same way about Caroline. If that is what it takes, we will do it, but the real solution is you. Maybe you ought to go home and see if you can at least talk to her."

\* \* \* \*

The house was dark when he unlocked it and relocked it behind him. The animals met him at the door and ran to their bowls. He fed and watered them, giving each some serious petting, as if taking solace in their appreciation of his affection. He slowly climbed the stair and entered their bedroom through the broken door, without turning on any lights.

"What are you doing here?" her voice came from the bed, clearly visible through the open shades as lightning illuminated the room, followed by

thunder so close it shook the house. "Go away. Go back to her, whoever she was."

He moved to the bed and sat down. "Please let me talk. Please at least listen." When she did not reply, he continued. "I have no excuse for what I did and I am sorrier than you will ever know. Instead of being there for you, instead of giving my support, instead of wrapping us together in our pain and love, I let us fall into separate pits of pain. We lost our child, but your loss was more than mine, although in my selfishness, I never considered that. On some level, I suppose I resented his death, blaming you because you died rather than staying alive with me to create our child. I suppose I thought it was your now-life that was the reason, or maybe your age. Whatever I thought was just selfishness. I never stopped to think you were blaming yourself exactly as I did, and that in reality, none of it was your fault.

"Caroline, I love you. I want you back. I want my shining red-headed angel in my arms again, in my bed, in my love. I know that is not possible, that you despise me too much for that. I know your depression has taken away any desire to stay whole if it means being with me. I understand that. Georgia and Sahara told me what they did for you today, and I am so thankful. Hell, I know you love Doc and even Jeff, and I will beg them to come and make love with you to keep you from going. I will do anything and everything to stop you from leaving us, as we all love you."

He had talked without a word from her. He rose and went to the bathroom so she would not see him cry, but even with the water running, she could hear his pain.

As he exited the bathroom, another strike of lightning filled the room. He saw her standing naked in the pouring rain on the balcony. The doors were open, and the wind was whipping through the room and down the hall. He stood where he was, just watching her as she turned and moved back inside. It seemed she moved through the air, gliding toward him. Her arms were wet and cold as she put them around him. Her lips were warm and wet as they met his in a soft, loving kiss. He cried out as he encircled her body, sobbing into her dripping hair. "I love you, darling. Please say you remember the love we had together. Please say you will try to find it in your heart to forgive me."

"Shhhhh. Just kiss me, Larry. Just kiss me." And he did.

\* \* \* \*

*Their son was born ten months later, healthy and robust. Georgia and Doc became godparents, as did Larry and Georgia for the little girl born two months earlier to Jeff and Sahara. Caroline/Carmine resumed writing, now with a word processor, under the name Larry Gardiner, Ghostwriter. When Caroline had the next child a year later, it was to be a present for Georgia from Doc and Caroline, with Larry's blessing.*

**THE END**

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Beverly Sims and her husband Bob, an avid fisherman, live in Central Florida. They enjoy travel throughout the U.S. visiting the most off-the-wall places they can find, anywhere coast to coast, Canada to Mexico. These adventures add fuel to the fire of endless novel ideas in her head.

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