

## ACCEPTING CHANGE

An unusual thing about my mother is that she doesn't cry. Not when my father sold the only home she wanted, not when she entered menopause, not when her mother—whom she deeply loved, died, and not even when her leg was amputated. She saw emotions as a nuisance. They were complicated, unpredictable, messy, and something she simply wouldn't yield to. Crying was unthinkable. So when a tear escaped her eye today, I scarcely knew how to respond.

Unlike my mother, I live life through my senses. My shoes are rarely on; my feet connected to the cool earth. I bend to touch flowers and pause to feel the breeze on my skin. I've been climbing trees and wading in creeks since I first discovered them at the age of three. I love the outdoors. It is my home.

My mother is genuine, kind, thoughtful, overly compartmentalized, and logical—she works crossword puzzles in ink. It's safe to say that my mother and I travel in two very different orbits, but where our worlds do touch, there is love, and a mountain of understanding that's taken decades to build.

She lives in Southern Oregon. Her home sits on forested land along the Rogue River, about seven miles from town. The country road to her home is lined with fenced properties—home to cattle, horses, mules, goats, and sheep. It's rural, but neighbors know neighbors and are there for one another.

Two weeks before Mama's amputation, I came to live with her. Of her three kids, I was the one who swore I'd never move back to Grants Pass, yet here I was. The three of us had been raised to be responsible, but I was the oldest and had the

most flexible lifestyle, so I moved home. As long as I had a laptop and Wi-Fi, I could continue to design websites and lead women's self-development circles.

I remember the phone call when Mama told me she'd be losing her leg. Without hesitation, I said that I'd be there for her. Of course, our family had no idea what her care would entail. Mama had melanoma. Surgery had removed the cancerous cells, and radiation gave her a clean margin. Unfortunately, a follow-up biopsy of the radiated area never healed, and the open wound grew worse. In the year preceding the amputation, recurring infections plagued my mother, and months of antibiotics to treat the wound left her antibiotic-resistant. That's when her leg had to come off. Post-surgery, her attending physician explained that Mama had flatlined twice in the ICU.

Sepsis.

She was lucky to be alive.

The threat of dying from sepsis was very real. Mama was fragile and needed a home nurse, but we were at the height of a pandemic, so she got me. Mama arrived at her three-bedroom home on a gurney in a medical transport van. I didn't recognize her. She could have been anyone's mother. Mine was strong-willed, independent, and sturdy. The woman being wheeled into Mama's house was a ghost.

I was terrified.

No one was allowed into her home for the first two months, not her neighbors, not her church community, not even my sister, who had also moved to Grants Pass. Everyone was "sheltering in place."

A nurse came to visit once a week, signing in upon arrival for her scheduled visit, dressed head-to-toe in a sterile clean suit and hood. To this day, I couldn't tell you what the nurse looked like.

Eventually, the facial mask mandate eased, and my sister could help more. She was working full-time, though, so she took over the extra tasks of managing Mama's finances, appointments, medical transport, and picking up supplies and prescriptions.

In the year I've been here, I've learned to capitalize on the things that make Mama smile—for her sake and my sanity: cutting flowers from her garden, morning cocoa, and brushing her curly hair, because the reality of diaper changes,

2 AM medications, oxygen tanks, blood pressure checks, and complete dependence of one human being on another is a long list of wont tasks that no child, no matter how much they love their parent, looks forward to. I was exhausted. And yes, I cried.

And then it happened. In an attempt to alleviate the stinging nerve pain in Mama's stump, her doctor—who truly did care, prescribed a new medication. A side effect, however, was diarrhea. Mama was bedridden, and bathing her was interesting. It was a time-consuming process of laying plastic under her head, shampooing and rinsing her hair, washing and sponging her off, then rolling her to one side, removing the soiled sheet, scooting it towards her, laying down the fresh sheet and pad, rolling her onto it, then completely removing the soiled sheet and tucking in the fresh one. By the end of the laborious process, Mama required a nap.

At the onset of the diarrhea, and diapers unable to contain it, the cumbersome task, now foul, was performed four to six times a day. Five days into the nightmare, both my mother and I were spent. She suffered from dehydration, discomfort, and being shoveled from one side of her bed to the other. I, from a lack of sleep, the sheer physical exertion, and the mound of things I still had to accomplish—because my tasks didn't stop just because Mama and her bed needed cleaning. I called her doctor, and he prescribed yet another medication for the diarrhea.

The day my mother cried was especially brutal. I remember waking to her moaning, the bedside clock reading 2:07 AM. With a sigh, I peeled back the thin hide-a-bed blanket, slipped on my robe, and covered the short distance to Mama's hospital bed. The monstrous bed had taken over her dining room, claiming most of the space once devoted to family meals, game nights, and the occasional dinner guest. Our once-joyful activities had been cleared to accommodate this chapter of Mama's life. There was no need to flip on a light to know what had stirred her awake. I could smell it. I was sure I could manage the chore in my sleep now, but for Mama's sake, I lit a dim light and leaned towards her.

"I'll be right back, Mama," I assured her, but before I could rise, she reached for my wrist. Her bony fingers were cool on my skin and conveyed what she could only whisper. "I love you too, Mama," I said. "We'll get you cleaned up and back to sleep in no time."

But she didn't let go.

"Mama?" I asked, feeling her squeeze my wrist firmly enough that I sat on the edge of the bed. Her bedding was disheveled, and she had somehow managed to tangle a blanket around her only leg.

"What is it, Mama?" She was silent. I placed her hand on her chest and ran my fingers through her hair. "I'll be right back. I promise."

As I stood and turned toward the stack of linens, I secretly prayed that Mama might find a comfortable position after her bed bath and nod off easily. I knew she was tired, and honestly, I couldn't take another night without sleep.

I gathered supplies and returned to Mama, washing her and changing her bedding. When I had finished, I kissed her forehead, turned off the light, and made my way to my bedroom. I'd been sleeping on the hide-a-bed nearby to hear her easily. But tonight, I needed to be in my own bed, where I wouldn't hear her, and finally get some rest. I loosened my robe, let it drop to the floor, and collapsed naked onto my bed.

The sound of a barking dog startled me awake. Had sleep actually lifted the exhaustion and brain fog, I might have realized that hours had passed and my mother was lying in a mess, but it took a moment to come awake. I slowly pulled myself from bed, stepped into panties, and moved like a wrecking ball down the hallway towards the dining room... and Mama. The smell met me before the disaster did. I inched closer, leaning in. She was distressed, and the sight of her pained face gripped my heart and shoved a knife blade into it. I wanted to take her pain. I wanted to make it go away.

I reached for her shoulder and began to cry. Mama shouldn't have to suffer like this. When would that prescription finally kick in? I swallowed and could feel bile rising in my throat at the smell. I wanted to be strong for her, to be healthy for her. I needed to be strong and healthy. If I was, maybe she could be too. But I was failing. I was a wisp of myself—tired, too wrung out to be strong, let alone healthy. I could barely see straight, and it didn't help her. Nothing I was doing was helping her.

"Oh, Mama, I'm so sorry. I'll get you cleaned up," I said as I stood. "I'll be right back. I promise." But my words sounded hollow... scripted; the ones I'd repeat every time she needed to be cleaned. I felt like an impostor. Was I a

daughter, a caregiver, an angel, a failure? Mama wasn't getting better, and I knew it. Failure pretty well summed it up.

Mama stared up, her eyes fixed on me, heavy in their sockets. And then I saw it: a tear. Never in my life, not once, had I seen my mother cry.

I pushed myself away from the hospital bed. I couldn't bear to see—to feel, my mother's distress. I headed to the kitchen sink and turned on the water. Washing my hands—that would ground me and bring me back to sanity. As I waited for the water to warm, I glanced out the window, and my eyes landed on the rafters of Mama's carport. A strange, wonderful, terrifying, exhilarating thought came to me: I wondered if the aging rafters could support my weight. The rafters would end all this. They'd bring sleep. Oh, glorious sleep. I stared at them affectionately. No child should have to choose between sleep and a parent. Screw this pandemic. I just couldn't do this alone. Not anymore.

Through tears, I turned towards Mama and then returned my gaze to the window. Could I do it? How would I do it? Familiar tears returned to my eyes. I wept for her—and me. At that, an insatiable burning filled my throat, and I lowered my head just in time to vomit into the sink. Stunned, yet relieved, I cupped my hands beneath the stream of water—now warm, that had been flowing in the sink, sipped it, and then washed my vomit down the drain.

"I'll be right back, Mama," I called over my shoulder, then toweled off my mouth and entered my room to pull on some clothes. I'd slept on top of my bed, and though wrinkled, it was made, and the throw pillows were untouched. The small joy raised a smile on my face. I stooped to pick up my robe and hung it on the door peg. Oh, how I loved this room. It was my sanctuary—a sliver of solitude and restoration within this foreign world of prescription charts, bed pads, and pureed foods. Here, I could retreat and meditate, read, write, talk with a friend, or, at least, exhale.

It was a beautiful room. Its single window faced east, and in the mornings, the rising sunlight would touch teardrop crystals I'd hung between swags of sheer fabric draped above my bed, casting a panorama of rainbows onto the walls.

The meditation cushion was well used. Books, crystals, and candles rested on the tidy shelves, and the framed photographs of friends and grown children filled

my lonesome heart with the memory that these people remained in my life, though I was far from them and the world they lived in.

I glanced at the wall clock: 7:20 AM. God, not another day. Please help me. I opened a dresser drawer and absently pulled on a sports bra and leggings, grabbed some tissue from the Kleenex box, and walked to my bathroom.

I stood at the sink for a moment, thoroughly dried my face with a hand towel, and took a deep, measured breath. Thirty seconds at a time is how I'd made it through the most intense moments of Army basic training. I could do this—I just needed to get through thirty seconds, and then, another thirty seconds.

I grabbed a can of disinfectant spray and medical gloves, then walked to the stack of linens, collected what I needed, and gathered supplies for a bed bath into a bucket. As I neared the dining room, I reminded myself that I could do this. Like a parachute that had opened 500 feet from death, the mantra caught me. Hope that lived within some invisible speck drifting aimlessly in the air settled on my breath and found its path to my tired heart. It fed fresh light to my weary soul, propping me up.

The decision to place Mama in the dining room was a conscious one. Natural light, even on drizzly April days like today, streamed through the large windows, and from there, she could watch the world, and I could keep an eye on her. My siblings and I had decided that Mama did not belong tucked away in a bedroom, away from life. It was out here, where the cooking, laundry folding, and conversations lived that filled her heart and lifted her mood, which lifted mine.

Usually.

A canopy of white mosquito netting hung from the ceiling above her bed, separating her space from the adjacent living room. It cascaded onto the rails of her bed and to the hardwood floor. It was lovely—airy and feminine, and she often remarked that she felt like the “Queen of Sheba,” sleeping beneath it.

Nearly a dozen orchids lined the windowsill, and her most treasured mementos sat on the shelves of a built-in dining hutch, repurposed to hold medical equipment

and hygiene essentials. The room was beautiful, and it delighted Mama. The orchids were my touch and had arrived with me from Portland.

Truthfully, there were few days when I didn't question my decision to move back home. Once the reality set in, the choice felt hasty—reckless, even. It was a gamble I seemed to be losing. This new life had taken me by surprise, crashing into me like a tsunami, sweeping away the life I had so carefully built. I had worked hard to create a life that allowed me space—space in my home, in my relationships, and in my day. There was a reason my life had the flexibility it did. Now, all of that was gone.

For months, I fought to hold onto the remnants, guarding the sacred parts of my old life. But the tsunami of change would not allow it—it took everything. This decision was demanding that I release my grip on everything familiar: my livelihood, my purpose, my relationships, and enter an unknown world. I could have gone quietly and surrendered to what was, but I resisted, caught in the tension between my past and future, never fully living in the present. Deep down, I knew that clinging to my old life, wishing things were different, was draining my soul. And yet, I held on, refusing to let go. It came at a cost—I suffered, and the suffering was of my own making.

Finally, after months of fighting reality, I let go. I softened. I began taking walks along the river, finding solace in its steady flow. I rested my soul on its grassy banks, watching blue herons, bald eagles, ospreys, egrets, and ducks as they went about their lives with calm patience. I kicked off my shoes and placed my bare feet on the earth, wading into the creek, and watching the clouds drift by. I listened to the crickets, frogs, and geese.

In the evenings, after washing the supper dishes, I slipped out the back door and walked the country road, listening to Sarah Blondin's meditation, "Accepting Change," on repeat. I sat on the front steps, pouring my heart out to the evening sky, and she sat with me, listening in quiet companionship.

I lay beneath the branches of an old mulberry tree, free of judgment, and it whispered its wisdom to me. Gently, it urged me to step out of my restless mind and notice the fertile ground I had been given. Mama wouldn't always be here, but while she was, I could embrace this time with her—be present, fill her days with joy.

Nature—my first mother—became my redeemer. I spoke with her often, feeling her strength and resilience, her rhythm and divine timing. She knew how to let go, unaffected by delays or imperfections. Slowly, my perspective shifted and softened. And at last, I embraced the days that made up my life.

And then, there were mornings like this.

I returned to Mama, comforted and cleaned her, then placed the soiled bedding into a large plastic bag, tied it off, and set it just outside the back door. I'd deal with it later. I pulled off the medical gloves, tossed them into the garbage, and washed my forearms and hands. When I looked in on Mama, she was already nodding off, so I stroked her hair.

“Sleep well.”

## 2

# IN THE WAKE

With Mama bathed and settled, I slipped into the shower and ran the water warmer than usual. Streaming over my head and skin, I became aware of my body for the first time today. I felt detached, bereft from my own life. Naked, I leaned against the tiled wall and just let the water have me—hold me.



“Help me, please,” I said, surrendering my tears to the rushing water. My life felt unremarkable. Unimportant. Unsustainable.

I hoped this thought would pass. I needed to be strong—needed to continue. A neighbor would be coming in tomorrow to relieve me, giving me a few hours of respite, and I fantasized about the sleep I knew this would afford me. Toweling off, I took inventory of my day. It would be a day like every other.

Until it wasn’t.

Mama went into cardiac arrest, and the flurry of calls, paramedics, and neighbors’ concern at the sight of them became the cyclone tearing through our day. My sister, Linda, arrived within minutes.

You know, it’s strange what is remembered in the final moments of a person’s life. The paramedics were working on Mama. Linda and I were seated, cupping her hand in ours. It still had color. I remember turning it and studying the veins beneath her skin. I stroked the back of her hand and thought of the million things these hands had done for me during her lifetime: they had washed my hair, ironed the dresses she’d made me wear, prepared my lunch, and reached across the passenger seat to protect me. They had sewn a comb into my bridal veil, and they had held my newborns—her grandbabies.

Her life passed before my inner eye. I saw her as a little girl, wild and carefree. Then, the moments of her life shuffled quickly through my vision, eventually slowing, until all I saw was her frail frame and her hand in mine. I gently brushed my cheek against her hand. Not a moment later, she was gone. My sister and I turned to one another in disbelief, and we wept. The paramedics noted the time, completed their work, had Linda sign some paperwork, and then carefully transferred Mama onto a gurney, wheeling her to an ambulance.

As dangerously close as Mama had come to death in the ICU, nothing quite prepared me for how quickly she actually passed, or the sudden realization that I had no parents on the planet. However fragile she was, she was our matriarch, and now she was gone.

Linda pulled me close and we held one another for a long minute on the driveway. I lowered my head to her shoulder and strengthened my hug. She had no idea that I had started the day wanting to take my life, and by its end, our mother had given hers.

In the days that followed Mama's death, family and her church community swooped in, assuring me that my only task was to rest, which I attempted with marginal success. My brother was the first of the visiting family to arrive. As executor, Dan pulled me aside and asked if I would like to stay in the house. As picturesque as the setting is here, that was an easy "no." This was Mama's town, Mama's people, Mama's life.

He stayed ten days, arranging Mama's funeral and burial in the Veterans' cemetery alongside my father, and managing estate details. He was the last to leave town. Standing before the double doors of the airport, Dan hugged me longer than I had ever known him to hug another human.

"Words seem inadequate," he said. "You've been our hands and feet, Sis." I felt him take a breath. When he spoke again, it was slower and gentler.

"I know you gave up your life for Mom—for us, to do this. You need to take care of yourself now. Okay? I mean it, True. Don't just work. This has been a lot. I'm sure I don't know the half of it."

My brother was a meteorologist, and a fine one, at that. His specialty was hurricanes, and he was one of nine meteorologists at the National Hurricane Center in Miami. It's safe to say that, as a scientist and a lover of all things math and numbers, he navigated life using his intellect. I admired him as a man and looked up to him. He had known since childhood that he wanted to be a meteorologist. I had changed my major three times before deciding on journalism. What we had in common was our love of nature. As kids, we were usually together and were either wet or covered in dirt.

Dan was an incredible human—caring and wise, and able to keep emotions in check. I had not known him to lead with his heart often or to extend such empathy. I wondered if his own grief had given rise to it. Standing there, I became keenly aware of his strong arms around me. I gave my weight to them, wept, and let my brother just hold me.

"Thank you," I said. "Thanks for being here, for handling arrangements, and being here for me. It means a lot. I love you."

"Of course, Sis," he said, looking at me. "I love you and am here for you. It's time you take care of yourself now. Okay?"

He pulled me near again, this time holding himself a little straighter, ready to step back into his own life. I squeezed him one final time, let go, and watched as he turned and entered the terminal. The drive home was silent as I pondered what caring for myself might look like.

Later, alone in Mama's house, I walked the simple floor plan. The house felt cool, so I eased up the thermostat. It was oddly quiet—still. Afternoon light streamed through the large windows and lit dust, swirled by my entry. The specks danced in the sunlight, unaware that life no longer lived here.

At the doorway between the kitchen and dining room, I paused. Mama's bed was gone. Church members had apparently moved it in my absence, so this moment would be easier on me. I studied the vacant room and sighed. This was as easy as it was going to get, I suppose.

I mindlessly opened one of Mama's drawers: adult diapers. Oh, how I'd cursed these things. I could still feel the stinging resentment of changing diapers in my bones, and I felt embarrassed. I closed the drawer. What else needed attention? I scanned the lonely room.

"Oh crap, the orchids."

On cue, I picked up a dutiful pace and filled a bowl with ice cubes. This was a weekly ritual of mine, and each week, I would humor myself, as setting the ice cubes in the pots felt like hiding Easter eggs. I grinned, grateful for the small joy. These fine orchid ladies were holding up well, even with my neglect.

Orchids are vain, you know. Many people cannot grow them because they don't understand them. These ladies need to be reminded of just how beautiful they are. With attention, verbal compliments to prevent them from dropping their blossoms, and grown in the company of other orchids, they'll flourish.

I walked to Mama's closet and ran my finger along the clothing I knew well, then turned away. Honestly, I don't know why I stopped in the hallway. That only happened on really bad days. But there I was. Or, more accurately, there it was.

Before me was a familiar family portrait—likely no less than eighteen by twenty-four inches. It depicted my brother and me. I assumed, because Linda

wasn't in it, that I must be about four, with my brother at two. On desperate days, I would stand right where I now stood and look into the eyes of that little girl. I would wonder what she wanted for the grown-up me—the sad me, the frustrated me, the one who felt trapped and alone.

I would look long into her eyes. They were so bright, so full of wonder and curiosity. So blue. So eager to play—to giggle. She would pull me into her imagination and whisk me away. I would be with her, and this foreign world of medication and decline around me, nipping at my heels, would fade, and her bright eyes would fill me. Sometimes, I would find wild, spontaneous joy with her; sometimes wonderment at tiny seeds discovered in a simple pinecone; sometimes delight in dunking toast into hot cocoa, or swinging high from the branch of a tree. Wherever she took me, I always returned able to meet another day. In return, I would pour so much love into her, maybe because I knew what she would face in her life, and she would find a way to meet it. But mostly, because I love that little girl with all my heart. I love the woman she became. Standing there, I felt urged to speak to her.

“Bunny?” I said. “I’m not doing so well. This tiny world swallowed me whole. I don’t know how to not be sad—how to not have one eye and ear open—how to not be on alert. I’m always ‘on.’ What happened to me—the fun me, the deep, soulful, inspired me? Where did I go? I don’t know how to find my way back. I’m so lost, Bunny. Help me, please. Help me.”

I then took a long walk along the country road, stopping to pet the horses and speak with a young couple I passed as I returned home. I stepped into the kitchen, prepared a simple meal, readied for bed, and pulled the covers over myself. Stillness punctuated the house as I lay there alone in the dark. A bamboo water feature in the living room was the only thing moving in this deserted place.

I thought of Mama and the wide arc our lives had traveled. There was a reason I’d left home; a reason I said I wouldn’t return to Grants Pass and live near Mama. I didn’t trust her. Not in an outright dishonest way, as though she’d taken something or deceived me, but in a covert dishonest way. Because she couldn’t—or wouldn’t—respond to life, she felt two-dimensional. Even as a kid, it didn’t jive that my mother was always “fine.” She may have considered overriding human

emotions a superpower, but as a child living through my senses, it felt dishonest—counterfeit. And I didn't trust her because of it.

My siblings and I were forever guessing Mama's mood as if it were our job to figure it out. Was she fine or frazzled? Were we measuring up? Were we just meeting or surpassing her expectations? We were always "adjusting fire," looking for a clue we had Mama's approval—had her love. Lord knows how my father survived. Mostly, I didn't like the person I was when I was around my mother, ceaselessly seeking acknowledgment, approval, and affection; even as an adult—especially as an adult.

I left home, and truth became my religion. I excavated life for truth and meaning. I pondered what lived in the murky waters beneath conversations and behavior. I developed a nose for things that didn't quite smell right. I would ask questions—I'd speak up. And, I excavated for truth, deep within myself. Truth became my North Star.

Unfortunately, trust wasn't so easy to excavate, especially when it came to Mama. Decades of unpacking my own "stuff" eventually opened a space where I could see my mother for the rare human she was, and the pain she endured keeping everything hidden, locked away from herself and everyone who loved her. It took years and a dozen trips back home to rewire the way I behaved around her. When the call came about her amputation—and my subsequent move back home, I prayed that I could hold my own and not get sucked back into seeking her approval.

I placed both hands on my chest and let out a deep sigh. What a ride the past year had been. Only my soul would have thought to plop me into four walls with my mother in the midst of a pandemic to open my heart to her. Oh yeah, she triggered me, and God knows I swore and squirmed, especially in the beginning. Seven months in, though, the winds changed and damned if it didn't soften me. I suppose I should trust that the Universe knows exactly what It's doing—knows how to time things just so, but death is a tricky thing, and tonight I just hoped for peace. I hoped that Mama was at peace... and at peace with me. I hoped she knew I loved her.

I turned my attention to my hands resting on my chest and let my thoughts fall away. I paid attention to the rhythmic rise and fall of my ribcage. It expanded and

fell with no effort on my part. It was a simple reminder that my heart knew to beat and my lungs knew to breathe. I sensed an intelligence living within them—living within me and everything that exists.

I then closed my eyes and sensed that life force energy moving in and through me—supporting and loving me without question or obligation. It felt light, full, intimate, and divine, and I spoke to it.

“This hasn’t been easy. Still, thank you for the time with Mama. Help me grieve. Help me heal, whole and healthy. I feel spent; I feel like I’ve tapped into my Chi—my life force. Help me know how to restore it, care for myself, and feel vitality again. Help me come back to myself—to the peace, joy, and awareness I know myself to be. I am here, I’m yours, and I am listening. Thank you.”

As I closed my eyes, it occurred to me that I was living a moment I knew would one day come. Mama was gone. My work here was finished. The only thing I need do right now is sleep. But sleep didn’t come that night. Or the next. After a third restless night, I asked Linda if I could sleep in her guest room. My sister and her pets were what I needed. I lay on her guest bed at 11:30 AM. She woke me at 10 AM the next day with tea. I smiled at the sight of her, sat up in bed, and propped a pillow behind my back.

“I know you want coffee, but I don’t know the first thing about making it. I hope this will do,” she said, putting a steaming mug in my hand. “Did you sleep well?”

“Yes, thank God, finally. Oh, this is good,” I said, lowering the cup. It felt wonderful to be with my sister. Linda possessed a calmness that infected those around her. She could rise to the surface in situations like a buoy, knowing what to say to soothe, nurture, or ground people. A good thing that had come from my time at Mama’s was that my sister and I had grown close—very close. I loved moments like this with her.

“Chai with a bit of milk. You know, almond milk,” she said.

“Well, it’s good. Thank you, and thanks for the room.”

“It’s here for you whenever you need it,” Linda said. She looked at her mug thoughtfully and sipped from it. “You need anything, Sis?”

“Actually, do you have a minute?” I asked.

“Of course,” she said, the interest rising on her face. Linda lowered herself to the corner of the bed and faced me. I took a long sip of my tea and then looked at her.

“I need to get away. Someplace where I can be alone for a while, let go of all this, and just take care of myself.”

Linda’s face softened, and she smiled.

“I was hoping you’d say that. It’s been a hard year for you. You need to unplug, rest, and take some time for yourself.”

“Yeah, I know,” I said, then swirled the remaining tea in my mug. I wasn’t sure the enormity of the year had caught up with me yet. I was still in it. I’d been grieving with—and for—my mother all along. Now, a fresh grief had found me.

Still, as hard as it had been on me, Linda wasn’t far from the impact zone. She’d assumed everything—business, medical, and financial—regarding Mama’s affairs and was my rock. Dan, thankfully, supplied the funds for Mama’s ongoing needs so I could focus on her round-the-clock care.

As resilient as I knew myself to be—knowing that I would be all right once I regained some balance and normalcy in life—I knew that Linda would right herself quickly. She had stayed with the Church, and it made her buoyant and sturdy.

“Where are you thinking?” she asked, with heightened curiosity.

“Someplace quiet. I need to be in nature, be still, and figure out what’s next.”

“I thought you might go back to Portland—back to your close friends. I know you miss them.”

I looked at my sister fondly. Her male Shih Tzu puppy had wandered into the room and was at her feet.

“Yeah, maybe, but not yet,” I said. “I’m thinking of heading to the San Juan. Some time on the river will do me good. You know I love it there.”

She smiled. “That sounds perfect.”

“Yes. It’s been three years. I might even take my fly rod,” I said, smiling.

“That’s even better! Oh, I’m so glad to hear it. Take all the time you need, Sis. Dan and I have things covered here.”

“Thanks. The San Juan feels like home, and it’s calling me.”

“I understand that. How about I bring your orchids over here and swing by Mom’s periodically, just to check on things?” Linda asked.

“That’d be great.”

“Okay. Let me know if there is anything else I can do to help you get out of town.”

“A ride to the airport?”

“Done. You go do you, and don’t give this place a second thought.”

“Thanks, Sis. I love you,” I said, then tossed back the covers, crawled towards her, and wrapped my arms around her. She laughed, which roused her puppy. He jumped onto the bed, toppling Linda onto me and igniting more laughter.

Over the next few days, I unsealed boxes that had been stored in Mama’s garage and sorted through my belongings. I found my camping and fishing gear and felt alive for the first time in a long time. I knew this was the right choice.

I booked a flight from Medford, Oregon, to Albuquerque, New Mexico. Two weeks on the water, that’s what my soul needed.