1

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, and 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.

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 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 and 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.

3

FOUR CORNERS

It was early May, a perfect time to be on the river. From the grassy riverbank, I studied the current. Just above the tumbling waters, hundreds of tiny midges danced aimlessly in the late afternoon sun. Long shafts of low sunlight caught their miniature wings, magically transforming the insects into swirling specks of silver.

About a stone's throw downstream from where I stood was a beautiful stretch of water known as the Upper Flats. I knew it well. Here, a mile-and-a-quarter below the Navajo Dam on the San Juan River, the water calmed and spread to form several channels, pools, and back eddies in its main body. It is a favorite spot of mine for its deep holes, ledges, and flats, each guaranteed to be full of trout. This stretch of the river is also home to a fish known throughout New Mexico as the San Juan football trout because its thick, dust-colored belly is as fat as a football.

I scrambled up a boulder and spotted a reef of rock, just below the surface, that sent up a single wave. The dark green water fell upon it, then circled back, dizzy on itself, forming a bottomless eddy. Only a hint of breeze was in the air, so I knew the fish would be feeding.

"He's in there, all right. Are you going to pull him out, or should I?"

I jumped with a start and turned to find an old fisherman, stuffed inside aged neoprene waders, standing near the edge of the boulder. In one hand, he gripped an Orvis bamboo rod, similar to one that my uncle taught me to cast with. His fingers were swollen and cracked, something too much stream water would do. Over a freshly-pressed cotton shirt, he wore a fully-zipped fly vest tacked with all the standard flies for this leg of the San Juan: orange midge larvae in a size 18, emergers in gray, black, and olive, and of course, a variety of baetis.

He offered me a broad smile. "Go on, dear. He's in that slow backwash, fillin' his belly with bugs."

I glanced toward the water and back to the wrinkled face.

“You know your water,” I said. “But, he’s yours.”

“Alright then,” he agreed.

I carefully backed down from the boulder and onto the dirt trail. I watched the white-haired fishing veteran work his way downstream and out onto the broad shelf of slick rock covered in shallow current. He knew where the trout would be, and why.

When he had reached the flats, he widened his stance to steady himself but wobbled on a loose stone. I leaped toward him, sure he was about to lose his footing in the brisk current. He managed to steady himself and then freed the fly that had been secured to the cork shaft of his rod. The fishing line glistened in the sun. I anticipated a cast. Instead, he raised his tanned face to the sky, kissed the antique rod, and added two feet of line to his roll cast. I sunk my hands into my pant pockets and looked on. God, it felt good to be on the water.

The old man’s first cast fell short of the foam, so he drew back his line from the pool and laid it down again, perfectly. He flashed me a grin after the trophy cast, and I gave him a quick wave. In an instant, the trout struck the artfully placed fly with a fury. My fingers itched for my fly rod. I retrieved my gear from the tree I had propped it against and set out to find my own fishing hole.

Spring runoff from the Rockies had brought high waters, changing the face of the stream over the years. I had my heart set on a generous hole where I had caught and released a beauty three years ago. I hoped it hadn't been destroyed.

In a rolling river such as the San Juan, the trout tend to seek shelter in the slower currents where they don’t have to exert any more energy than necessary to load up on bugs. I knew there wouldn't be a single fish in the middle of the stream. Instead, they would be hugging the bank or in one of the newly formed eddies behind a rock, out of the swift-moving current.

Five yards from my jackpot hole, my head snapped toward the sound of a trout splashing back into its watery bath after a skyward leap at the insects flitting above the surface. My hands shook with anticipation as I slipped on my waders and boots, glancing around to decide which fly to tie on.

A midge hatch speckled the warm air, but the water was clear, so I opened my wallet-sized fly box—a gift from my late husband— and picked through it until I found an annelid. High water forces these little worms from the crevices between river rock and into the current, making them easy prey for hungry trout. I tied an orange one onto my leader and secured an additional red one to my cap.

I took hold of my fly rod, and it came to life in my hand. Without so much as a thought, it was above my head, sweeping through the sunlight in a metronomic cadence as natural to me as breathing. The year it had been out of my hand seemed to vanish.

My first cast coasted to a soft landing on a quiet bath of shallow water and disappeared beneath its surface. I stepped into the chilly water, and the cold water washed over my feet, instantly cooling the lightweight waders pressing against my thick socks. It felt delicious.

With another step, the water lapped onto my calves, and my felt-bottomed boots gripped the slippery rocks beneath. I gave a little flick of my wrist, and the fishing line gently rolled above the current, coaxing the fly upstream. A few more steps and I was in an isolated world of floating green.

This was my third trip to Four Corners—an area located in the southwestern section of the United States, named for the point where the state boundaries of Colorado, Arizona, Utah, and New Mexico meet.

I first came to Four Corners seven years ago. My husband had died from Leukemia a few months earlier, and I traveled to San Juan for some solitude and fishing. Roger and I had always talked about stealing away to the San Juan River to fly fish. He never made it, so I was there for both of us that year.

I'd had my heart set on a stretch of water in southeast Utah called Grand Gulch. It's a labyrinth of rocky terrain in the heart of Cedar Mesa, bordered to the south by the San Juan. The tributary flows across the high mesa, goosenecks for some fifty-six miles, and finally pours into the San Juan. The west-flowing river then zigzags another sixty miles through deep canyon gorges, past Mexican Hat, and eventually empties into Lake Powell. Spring runoff can lead to Class III rapids through Grand Gulch, but off-season water levels are generally low, and rapids are few.

It's gorgeous country, with buttes, mesas, and canyons as far as the eye can see, in hues of soft reds, ambers, rich loam browns, and bleached tans. It's tough water to fish, though, completely unforgiving and not very generous.

I'd spent many summers of my life in trout streams. The year I lost Roger, I brought a new Sage fly rod with me that I was eager to put to the test. Feeling ready for a challenge, I decided to take on Grand Gulch.

The hike into it was quite an adventure. I passed a remarkable dry falls, where water, when it had once thundered through, had carved out hollows and holes, staining the walls with ribbons of purple and gray. High above me on the canyon walls were tiers of milky-white and pink-colored rock, faulting into layered ridges. The pinyon and junipers spread their fragrance throughout the canyon, rising out of the parched ground in contorted shapes, their gangly roots reaching into the cracks and crevices in the rock.

After hours of hiking in the sun, the beauty of the country turned ugly. By noon, tremendous heat was radiating off the rock walls. I decided to turn back. A cloud of biting gnats swarmed just above the ground and attacked my unprotected legs. Finally, out of desperation, I snapped a branch from a pinyon pine and began swatting my legs with it to ward off the pests. I had seen no fish, which made the hike out of the canyon even less tolerable.

My heart was pounding and my muscles were beginning to fatigue. I was particularly concerned about dehydration, as I could feel its effects creeping up on me. I ducked into a thin overhang of shade to drink water from my Camelback. As I was ringing out my bandana to tie it around my forehead again, I saw something move on the far side of the canyon.

I wasn’t alone.

Closer observation revealed a figure—a man, hidden among the rocks, slowly picking his way along the ridge. He was level with me, but far enough to put a soccer field between us. I took a short sip of tepid water and watched him carefully choose his steps. From my vantage point, I could see no sign of an established trail, so I scanned ahead of him to see if I could determine his destination. As far as I could tell, he was heading toward a dead-end ledge, or so it appeared. Needless to say, he held my attention.

I set down my gear and took another sip. What was he doing here? He wasn't a fisherman—of that I was sure. He had no fishing gear. The man pushed on, too sure of his steps to be a novice hiker. A few minutes went by as I cooled in the shade, slowly sipping my water. He was at the dead-end ledge. A bead of sweat crept its way down my cheek. I untied my bandana, then poured a trickle of water into my cupped hand and splashed it onto my face. I dabbed it dry and retied the bandana around my forehead. When I refocused my eyes on the ridge, he was gone. I scoured the canyon wall. There was no sign of him.

I backtracked the pencil-thin trail, crisscrossing every possible intersection. There was no one. Dear God, where was he? Had he fallen? I stepped close to the drop-off and

looked into the deep canyon. It made me queasy. I returned my gaze to the beige wall, examining the ledge again, looking for something—anything. My heart was pounding fast now. Where was he? My eyes swept upward, and I froze in an instant.

"Oh, my God!" I'd been looking at eye level—too low. There, about twelve feet above the trail, were four or five masoned stone buildings tucked under a cap rock dome. He was wandering through them. But how had he gotten there? How had the buildings gotten there?

I'd never seen anything like them and had certainly never come across ruins in America. Lewis and Clark historical sites dotted Oregon, but they are barely a century old. These looked ancient. Just how long had they been there, anyway?

Curiosity trumped my plans to fish. I knew I couldn't miss this opportunity to check out the ruins. Exactly how far the cliff rooms were by foot, I couldn't tell. I only knew that I had to get to them. If the man had found his way to the cave, so could I. I broke down my fly rod and stowed it near the trail with a note, checked my Camelback for water and fly vest for food, then slipped it back on and set out. As I neared the drop-off ledge and my vantage point shifted, I could see that the canyon rock face formed a large arc. The man I'd seen had hiked in from the South. I'd be hiking from the North.

I spent the remainder of my afternoon picking my way across the jagged rocks toward the cave. It was a weary, meticulous trek, keeping one eye on my goal while pinned close to the canyon wall, selecting just the right rock to grab or step on. I dared not look down as I worked my way across the ridge.

The heat held by the rocks radiated off the steep wall face. The temperature was bearable, but I continued to perspire. Fat beads of sweat formed along my hairline and crept down my face, neck, and back, but with my hands gripped onto the rocks, I had no way to swipe away the pesky beads, making the trek intensely nerve-wracking.

The night was closing in when I pulled myself into the alcove. My time as a fitness trainer was still paying off, and I was glad for it. There was no sign of the man or animals—only rodent scat, which eased my concern that big cats might frequent the area.

The first thing I noticed was how cool the cave was, and how wonderfully soothing it felt to my skin. I was tired, but that soon gave way to excitement. I was here. I sized up the alcove, estimating it to be sixty feet wide and fourteen feet high. Towards the back of the cave was an impressive row of neatly mortared rooms made of various-sized, beige-colored stones and clay mortar. I admired the craftsmanship and was sure it must be ancient. A few walls had collapsed, but it was remarkably well preserved. The

structure had small windows, no larger than a basketball, and extremely low, narrow doors that linked the rooms. Who had built these? And why here, high on the canyon wall?

Since daylight was thin, I decided I'd better look for a suitable place to bed down for the evening. The floor of the smallest room would do. I sat, removed my fly vest, and opened its pockets. My supplies amounted to a bag of almonds, trail mix, a protein bar, a first aid kit, fly-casting paraphernalia, and a half-full Camelback. I sighed. Had I been over-confident? Was this reckless?

I was no stranger to demanding conditions. Fourteen years of Army bivouacs and five months thru-hiking the Pacific Crest Trail found me sleeping on every ground surface imaginable. But it had been a while, and I was out of practice. I'd spent the past several months in the leukemia ward at Wilford Hall on Lackland Air Force Base with my husband. He was active duty Air Force—a flight surgeon, and, in the wake of a leukemia diagnosis and then not surviving the bone marrow transplant, my own Army commander placed me on "reserve status," so I could focus on my (then) teenaged children, manage estate details, and grieve. This first trip to Four Corners was my way of taking care of myself. I smiled. Roger would have appreciated finding these ruins.

The ground of the cave was hard and unforgiving. Fortunately, night came fast, and exhaustion pulled me easily into sleep. Staying asleep, however, was the real challenge. Since Roger had died, I'd only been sleeping four, maybe five hours each night.

I lay there until it became apparent that it was going to be another short night. From my pocket, I pulled a tiny flashlight and carefully made my way to the belly of the alcove where a half-moon, hanging low in the sky, could be seen. I shined the light around until I was satisfied I was safe, then clicked it off and stood in the dim moonlight.

I had no experience with grief, and losing Roger thrust me into an unfamiliar territory I had few skills to navigate. I'd never lost anyone close to me before. My father and grandmother would soon follow, but when Roger died, I had no idea what grief was or where it would take me.

Without skills to navigate grief or an awareness of the internal terrain that I would cover, I saw grief as something to steer clear of at any cost. It felt like a deep, dark hole—

one I was terrified of falling into. I had no idea where I'd go, how long I would stay, or if I'd even come back.

Standing in the alcove, I looked at the dark canyon and wondered who had lived in this high mountain perch. Why had they chosen such an inaccessible spot? Did several families live in the rooms, or was it generations of a single family? What did they do with their days? What troubles did they have? Which one of them stood right here because their troubles kept them awake at night, too?

The thought was fleeting, but I pictured a Pueblo mother, her spirit heavy with grief over the loss of a child, staring into the mournful night. The image sent a wave of anguish crashing through me, tearing at my heart. In my exhausted state, my own sorrow spilled over. My grief-stricken heart was so full that her imagined tears broke my levee, unleashing a flood of my own.

For weeks, I had been paddling with one oar, coming precariously close to the levee's edge. Now, the flood carried me over the falls, and I took a nosedive, sinking like a chunk of cement into my sorrow. Nothing could stop this pent-up grief.

I dropped to my knees and fell onto my back, pinned there by a loss that could no longer be shushed. I sobbed. I wailed like a madwoman. I prayed for my man to come back. I yelled at the dark. Was anyone listening? I needed my husband. I cried and cried, and begged the dirt to swallow me. I curled into a fetal position and sobbed.

That's when I detected a hint of stillness within. It fluttered—barely noticeable at first, and then, softly, it came into my awareness and quieted me. As I became silent, I felt a presence—not next to me, but in me. I can't say that it was God. This didn't feel like the God the priests had warned me of. This was a Presence, and it felt soft, yet strong. It felt big—immense even, and yet, it felt as though it was nesting in my heart, like a tiny bird's nest, cradling life… my life. I felt a sensation of calm, and it reminded me of a place I couldn't quite pinpoint—someplace familiar, yet far away. This far away, familiar place felt like I belonged there. It felt like home, safe and secure, where I was loved and anything was possible.

I lay motionless for several minutes. The Presence remained and comforted me. Eventually, I stirred and sat, hugging my knees, in the dirt. Roger crossed my mind, and as I sat there, recalling him, I felt a new presence. A chill passed through me, and I detected Roger's aftershave. It took a moment to register the scent, but there was no question that it was his. And then, I sensed my lover, my companion, my husband, and the father of our children, near me. He kneeled, facing me, and in my mind's eye, I ran

my finger over his lips. I traced his closed eyelids, his brow, cheek, and chin, and squeezed the lobe of his ear, just the way that made him smile. I brushed a lock of blonde hair from his forehead and smiled at this handsome man.

I then sensed his eyes open, and felt his gaze meet mine—his crystal blue eyes piercing and steady. The warmth of his breath enveloped me, and I felt his touch—his caress that had intoxicated me from day one. He kissed my lips, and a shiver ran through me. I felt his love, his patience, and the spark of our eternal flame.

He moved, sat beside me, and we spoke of life, of love, and of letting go. He told me he was happy and that I wouldn't believe him if he told me of all that awaited us beyond.

"I know. It can seem like we're insignificant specks of dust in the galaxy," he said. "But that's not true. Each soul is unique. Each gains its own unique experience, adding to the larger expression of life itself."

I smiled again, hearing his voice and the passion in it.

"We're stars. No, really—it's true. We are made of the components of heaven. We are stardust. Did you hear me? We're made of the same stuff as stars. We are light beings. If you could see things the way I do now, you'd see just how much light you're giving off. You are beaming with light right now."

I imagined seeing myself the way he was seeing me, and leaned on his shoulder.

"All souls were enlivened in the same moment, so technically we're all the same age. What varies is the number of lifetimes we've lived and the experiences we've grown through."

I listened, amazed at what he was saying.

"We grow on both sides of the veil," he continued. "I love my life on the other side; I'm constantly growing and learning. But here's the deal," he said, and paused. "We choose to come to Earth because of the contrast it offers. See, fear doesn't exist where I am now. Earth is the one place in the universe where love and fear are present. We choose to come here because we can grow so much faster with contrast—with the dicey dance between fear and love. It makes for exponential growth, so we choose to keep coming back to Earth." He smiled.

"Really?"

"Yep. What's hysterical about the whole thing is that when we're on Earth, we keep dreaming of the other side, and how wonderful heaven seems without contrast—

without all the human emotions and choices to be made here. You're navigating love and fear, but it truly leads to exceptional growth."

He went on to say that we choose what experiences we want to have each lifetime; the lessons we want to learn, and the people who would best allow all that to occur. He said that we have a life path and an exit point—that there are no mistakes when someone leaves this planet—that the time and means of death were on their life path. We could take solace in that… and that those who pass are happy on the other side. Sometimes, the way a person dies is for the growth or life lesson of those left behind.

I told him that the kids and I miss him so much. He replied that he could see that from the other side, but it felt different for him. He immediately started living a new life there and didn't feel sorrow or grief.

He then placed his arm around my shoulder and pulled me close.

"You are not alone, Darlin'. If you ever feel that way, remember it's just a thought. I didn't 'go' anywhere. I'm right here," he said, and placed his other hand on my chest. "Don't you dare let our best memories break your heart."

I began to cry and attempted to dab the tears from my face with the back of my hand.

"Souls can't die," he said. "The way it works on the other side is kind of like a flashlight. When you think of me, I see your thought as a light, and can energetically be with you, just as I am right now. When you think of me, I become aware of you. It's how souls connect. However, this little sit-down of ours won't always happen. Your 'flashlight' was blinding tonight, like the beam of the Lexor in Vegas. I couldn't miss it. I came because you needed this. I needed it too, actually. Do you have questions for me?"

I looked into his eyes: flirty, ambitious, wise. This man knew me better than anyone on the planet. He knew how to crack me up with his crazy antics, how to tease out the best in me, or talk me off a ledge. Oh, how I loved this man.

"How do I pull the pieces of life together again?" I asked. "I feel fragmented, lost. And the kids… what do they need?"

"Feel what you need to feel. Life—living, dying, failing, rising… and doing it all over again, is the essence of the human experience. You're soul, yes, but you've got to be human. You came to Earth to be human—to grow, learn, expand. So let it happen. As far as the kids go, never let them guess or wonder if they are loved. If they know that—if they feel your belief in them—and you allow them to gravitate toward whatever ignites their souls, they'll be just fine."

We stood, faced one another, and hugged.

“Darlin’, you’ve got a lot of life ahead of you… You have no idea. I can’t tell you about it, of course, but you’ll bring so much light to this world. Remember, I’m with you, and you are so much more than you believe you are. Don’t you forget that.”

I felt him kiss my forehead, and he was gone.

I awoke in the morning on my back, staring up at the uneven roof of the cave, blackened by long-ago fires. In the narrow chasm of Grand Gulch, the early morning sun had touched the massive cliffs that plunged to the canyon below. I felt like a newborn, opening my eyes to this world for the first time.

I sat up in the dirt. Breakfast was a protein bar and a handful of almonds. I was spent, but felt a calmness that I hadn't known since childhood. I suppose at that moment, the cave became sacred ground to me. Hiking out of the canyon that cool morning, everything in my life seemed changed, though nothing had changed but me. I made a silent pact with myself and God that I would return to the San Juan often. I’d been back just once—three years ago, so this trip seemed especially poignant. Mama was gone. It had been seven years since that sacred night with Roger in the cave. The San Juan wanted me, and I was happy to give myself to her.