

Secrets of the Heart / Gerald L. Guy

SECRETS *of the Heart*

By
GERALD L. GUY



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Secrets of the Heart

DEDICATION

To secret lovers everywhere. Hold on for dear life.

PREFACE

Sometimes, death comes too quickly, leaving behind love-stricken widows and widowers, children and grandchildren and mournful siblings and friends. When the loss is a spouse, many times survivors are left with the feeling of lovelessness.

What is that?

It's life without love, a vacuum that tugs at the heart and invades the psyche, goading it with the idea love is too fleeting to ever be experienced again. The emotional drain can be debilitating if allowed to grow and fester.

That's why experts say it is best to freely express thoughts about lost loved ones, so memories can be steppingstones, rather than roadblocks, to the future.

Annie Coldwater and Brian Warren found a way to step from their grief and found something more rewarding than life itself. Here's hoping there are scores of others whose golden years are marked by love's resurrection and endless devotion.

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*“Some secrets are spoken only to the
wind, so the riddles of life and love
remain hidden and cherished.”*

Brian Warren

CHAPTER ONE

His assistant guided him to the entryway and pointed Brian Warren in the right direction. He hated people to think he couldn't take care of himself, find his own way or that he was less of a man because his eyesight had partially abandoned him. He was old, ornery and grieving.

"It looks like the service is about to start," she whispered in his ear.

"Damn funeral service can wait a few minutes until I pay my respects," he muttered sternly.

"The center aisle is about six feet wide, set with folding chairs on both sides and straight ahead. The casket is about twenty-five yards straight ahead. There aren't many people here. So, your path is relatively clear. I'll wait for you in this spot."

"I'm counting on it!" he said sharply.

The white cane that guided his steps made a clicking sound as he tapped the path before him, checking to make sure there were no obstacles to trip over. It would be a hell of a thing if he made a scene amidst such solemn surroundings.

Every head in the small viewing room at Ross' Funeral Home and Crematorium looked his way when they heard him approaching. He was tall and thin but

had a full head of gray hair and a white goatee and mustache that gave him an air of distinction. He was dressed smartly in khaki slacks and a black Polo shirt, to mark the occasion. He moved forward with a cautious grace and knew nothing of the dozens of eyes that stared at him.

As he approached the casket, a woman grabbed him by the arm and asked, “Are you a friend of the family, sir?”

“No,” he said rather caustically. “I’m a friend of the deceased. I don’t think I’ve met any of her family, but I know of them. In fact, I know quite a bit about them, but we’ve never met.”

“Would you like to take a seat? The service is about to begin?” the woman whispered.

“Hell no! Didn’t come to worship. Came to pay my respects to a wonderful gal. If you don’t mind, I’d like a moment alone with her before the service begins. I see she is just ahead. Please excuse me.”

He hung his cane on his forearm and walked the last half dozen steps to the side of the casket before the woman could respond. He could hear whispering as he approached but paid no heed. Their words came clearly to him, but he disregarded them. The idea human senses compensate when others fail, was true. He could hear a paperclip drop while it was oblivious to someone nearby. He didn’t care what anyone said. He’d come a long way to say goodbye to the great love of his life, and he didn’t give a flip what anyone thought.

When he got to the casket, huge tears rolled down his cheeks as he looked down at the woman he had

secretly loved for twenty years. He couldn't see her as clearly as he once had. Nonetheless, at age eighty-nine, she was still as beautiful as the day they met. He reached in and wrapped his fingers around hers one last time and whispered, "It wasn't supposed to end like this, Annie. I guess we're not going to be able to celebrate turning one hundred. You know the party won't be the same without you.

He stood there quiet, sorrowfully reminiscing about the time they met.

"What's this book about?" she asked, standing in front of the table where he sat hawking books at the St. Augustine Flea Market. "I love the cover."

"Thank you, I created every word, as well as the cover. I'm glad you like it."

"Is it a sports story or a romance?"

"Well, it's sort of both," he replied. "It's a story about a high school athlete who has the world in the palm of his hand until an injury wrestles the playing fields from his grasp. Then, a young woman lifts him from the depths of despair, gives him direction and points him to success."

"All my books are on sale today, a flea market special of five dollars. Would you like one?"

She didn't answer, but her gorgeous eyes said, "Yes!" They were a color he had never seen before, somewhere between green and violet. They sparkled every time her perfectly-shaped lips moved.

Something deep within Brian Warren's psyche signaled him to learn more about the gorgeous, middle-aged woman standing in front of him. She was short,

vivacious and had a crooked little smile that trumpeted mischievousness. A little voice said, "She's the one!"

He reached out, took the book from her hand and said, "Let me sign it for you. May I ask your name?"

"Ann Coldwater. Do you come here often?"

"No, this is the first time I've rented space here. I heard it was a great place to sell books but, as you can see, business has been kind of slow," he said, pointing to stacks of unsold novels. He smiled as he scribbled a personal message on the inside cover and returned the book to her.

She read it and said, "That's very nice, thank you, but I didn't agree to buy the book."

He flashed a startled look. She was biting her bottom lip to hide her delight. He said, "Oops! My bad! It's yours now, and it's on the house. Enjoy it Annie. Here's my card, please leave me a review on my web site if you like it."

She took the card, stashed it into the back pocket of her skin-tight capris and burst out laughing. The silky blue tee that protected her from the sun's rays, hugged her figure and hung loosely to her thighs. It jiggled as joy spread across her face. Then, she handed him a folded five-dollar bill and said, "I was just teasing."

"Testing me, were you?"

"Sort of. I've never met an author before. No wonder you guys are as poor as church mice; you're too quick to give away your life's work."

"And you are not only beautiful, Annie, but very perceptive. Writing is a labor of love, a way of sharing joy with the masses."

She paused to find his name on the cover of Grand

Slam and said, "Why, thank you, Brian Warren."

Warren's inner voice kept telling him not to let her leave. So, he made small talk, as thunder began to rumble in the distance and dark clouds approached from the Atlantic coastline.

"Do you come here often?" he asked.

"No, it's my first time, too, but I'm glad I came."

"Do you live nearby?"

"Yes, just southwest of here in the suburbs."

"I love St. Augustine. As you probably saw on the back of the book, I live in Palm Coast, south of here."

She looked over her shoulder at the approaching storm and said, "I hate to say it, but we're about to get rained on. You should probably pack your things up and find shelter."

"Shit!" he said, as the first droplet landed on the right lens of his glasses. "Excuse my French. You're right. But there's no shelter in sight at this wide-open market. I didn't bring my canopy because it wasn't supposed to rain. And my ride won't be here for a couple more hours."

She helped him gather up his things. They stacked books into two canvas bags with handles as the raindrops became more frequent.

"You can come sit out the storm in my car," she said. "I'm parked right over here."

She pointed to a black, late model foreign job that promised him shelter.

The rain was coming harder and he said, "Lead the way."

It was the first of many times he would sit and admire Annie from the passenger seat of her Nissan.

He was still holding Annie's hand when one of her daughter's rushed to his side and demanded, "What are you doing, sir? Did you just slip something into my mother's hand?"

"That's between your ma and me," he said irritably. "And you'll leave it be or I'll take this cane to your backside."

"I doubt that, sir. Who the hell do you think you are? Why I ought to..."

"It's Brian, Mama's friend from Florida," Annie's other daughter declared and stepped in to make peace.

"I don't care who he is. He can't talk to me like that, not when I'm here to say goodbye to the most wonderful mother and grandmother in all the Carolinas. Where is the director? I want him removed immediately."

"You'll do no such thing," her sister said. "Mama wouldn't approve of it, nor will I. We're all here for the same reason; we've lost an important person in our lives."

"You didn't hear what he said to me. I'm..."

Before she could finish, Brian pressed the cane against the agitator's big toe. He applied enough pressure to bring her threat to a halt. Then he said, "Don't say something you'll regret, young lady. I'm sorry if I offended you. I just came to pay my respects. Your mother was the finest woman I have ever known."

It was then the preacher stepped in and quietly asked the feuding attendees to take a seat so he could begin the service.

The peacemaker wrapped her arm in Brian's and

said, "Come along now. You'll sit with me. It's only going to be a short service. We can talk later."

"You're Kelly, right?" he stated.

"Yes!"

"Your mother always said you got the brains and Chrissy got the mouth. I think she was right."

Kelly chuckled as they took a seat in the front row with the rest of the family. Chrissy was shooting daggers at her sister as the ceremony began.

THE SERVICE WAS over in less than twenty minutes, but very touching. Annie's small family was in tears throughout most of it. It's always hard saying goodbye. They left him seated in the front row as they withdrew to the back of the funeral parlor to thank visitors who came to pay their respects. Brian sat alone, his head bowed sorrowfully. For him, saying goodbye was devastating. He and Annie had so many plans. Now, she was gone.

When all was quiet, Brian again stepped to the casket, took Annie's hand in his and whispered his sentimental farewell.

"How dare you up and leave me like this," he said. "You were always as strong as an ox. It was me who had all the nagging little maladies.

"Don't you worry, though. I'll be along soon. I've heard from a reliable source there are some wonderful beaches in the hereafter. You scout them out for me; we'll walk them together, just as we always have.

"Oh, and if you run into any of your ex-husbands there, which is doubtful, give 'em both a swift kick in the family jewels for me. Neither of them deserved a

woman as fine as you.

“I’m going to miss you, darling.”

With that, he checked to make sure Chrissy hadn’t removed the medallion he placed in her hand. When he was satisfied it was there, he wiped away his tears and strolled toward the exit.

Kelly met him halfway down the aisle and said, “I don’t know what you placed in my mother’s hand, but I’ll make sure Chrissy doesn’t remove it. I’m sure it is there for good reason.”

“Thank you. You’ve got your mother’s kind soul,” he replied.

“I don’t know about that. My mother was a saint.”

“Annie would object to that characterization, but she was as angelic of a woman I have ever known until you got her riled up. Then, Katie bar the door.”

They both laughed.

“We’re going to have a little gathering of family at mother’s condo tomorrow. Would you come?”

“I’m not sure your sister will approve.”

“She’ll get over it!”

“We didn’t get off on the right foot. I wouldn’t want to do anything to disrupt your family time. Annie wouldn’t like that. Frankly, she wouldn’t like the fact I’m here at all.”

“Why would you say such a thing?” Kelly asked.

“I... us... whatever we were. Annie preferred we remain a secret.”

“Really? Why was that?”

“She preferred it that way, and I almost always conceded to her wishes. She was an amazing woman, your mother.”

“Something tells me she is smiling down at us this very moment,” Kelly added.

“She did have a wonderful smile. God, I’m going to miss her,” Brian said and glanced back at the casket.

“We all are. But I refuse to take ‘no’ as an answer. Where are you staying?”

“Hilton Garden Inn, just down the road.”

“I’ll pick you up at 11 o’clock.”

“No need for that. I have an assistant who will drive me to your mother’s place. I know where it is.”

“You do?”

“Of course. Been there many times.”

“You have?”

“Ten years ago, I helped her pick it out, silly girl,” he said, looking up at her with blood-shot eyes. It was obvious his grief ran deep.

Kelly stopped immediately and looked at him questioningly. “You really did know her well, didn’t you?”

“She was my last love and my finest!”

“I believe I want to learn more about this relationship mother kept so secret. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“I’ll look forward to it.”

CHAPTER TWO

While friends and family paid their last respects, Warren's assistant, Rebecca Watson, sought out the funeral director and handed him a court order that served as an addendum to Annie's last will and testament.

"What is this?" asked Clarence Ross, the owner and operator of Myrtle Beach's finest and oldest funeral home and crematorium.

"You'll find it is self-explanatory," Watson said.

Ross scanned the document and said, "Oh, this is highly irregular."

"It may be out of the norm, but it is legal and binding. You have no choice but to abide by the decedent's final wishes. You will see it was signed by Judge William Blackstone less than six months ago."

"Um... I... Is the family aware of this?"

"No, but they will be tomorrow when you complete the terms of Mrs. Coldwater's post-mortem desires. It's a simple decree. I'm sure you have seen others like it," the assistant said.

"Of course, but this seems sort of clandestine. I've never..."

"I was told you were a bit prickly about procedure," Watson said. "If you question the order's authenticity, I can give you the judge's private telephone number.

You can call him if you like, but I assure you the judge does not like to be disturbed on the weekend.”

“You know the judge?” the director asked.

“You might say that. His son is married to my sister, Rose. She practices law in Florida now, but is well known for her legal work here in North Carolina.”

“Your sister is Rose Blackstone?”

“Rose Watson-Blackstone.”

“I see!”

“I’m glad. So, I won’t take up any more of your time. I know a short service was planned, and you have things to do. My phone number is on the other side of the card I just gave you. If you have any questions, I’d suggest you call me before you call the judge.”

Then, she turned and walked away, leaving the perplexed funeral director in a dark corridor, his mouth hanging open.

KELLY AND CHRISSY went from the funeral home to their mother’s condo to begin the laborious task of sorting through Annie’s belongings and support each other as they mourned. They wanted to look through things and prepare for the next day’s gathering.

“What are we going to do with all of mother’s things?” Chrissy asked. “Every closet, drawer and cabinet in this place is loaded with stuff she accumulated since moving here.”

“Her will stated we should go through everything, select any items we want, and the rest should go to Goodwill or be sold,” Kelly said.

“There’s nothing here I want,” Chrissy said. “Have you looked in the spare bedroom closet? There must be

scores of tie-dyed T-shirts in there. She loved tie-dying tees, but did she have to keep every single one she made? We're going to need some boxes, maybe a dumpster."

"Why don't we start by going through the master bedroom," Kelly suggested. "I know there are some pieces of jewelry I'd like to have, and we should pick something out for each of her grandchildren."

"Good idea!" Chrissy added as they walked into the master suite. "Where do we start?"

"Why don't you go through the dresser. I'll search the nightstands and storage around the bed."

The first drawer Chrissy opened was filled with lingerie. She was surprised to find a lacy bra and a black, silk bodysuit. Wrapped between the folds was a black mask, the kind one might see in movies like *Les Misérables* or *Eyes Wide Shut*. It certainly wasn't what the daughters of Ann Coldwater expected to find in their mother's dresser drawer. With an item dangling from each forefinger, Chrissy whirled and said, "Kelly, did you know she had things like this? For heaven's sake, she was almost ninety years old. When do you think she last wore something like this and why?"

"You go, Mama!" Kelly replied with a big smile. "Our mother was more active than women her age, but I have no explanation for that."

She walked over to her sister, took the bodysuit and held it in front of her. With a smile, she asked, "How do I look, sis?"

Again, Chrissy gasped and said, "It's see-through!"

Kelly was laughing as she examined the garment closer. She roared as she exclaimed, "And it's

crotchless!”

“Mama! Mama! Mama!” Chrissy chimed in as she grabbed the bodysuit from her sister and asked, “You didn’t answer my question. Do you have anything like this in your lingerie drawer?”

Kelly looked at her deviously and said, “Frankly, I’m a little like Mama when it comes to things like that. I like feeling sexy sometimes.”

“Of course, you do,” Chrissy accused. “You inherited Mama’s figure and probably have one for each day of the week. I got daddy’s flab.”

“What I meant was, whatever is in my lingerie drawer, I consider unmentionables. Mama always said, ‘women need something that screams sexy.’ I don’t have anything like that, but I’ve got a couple slinky nightgowns Craig likes. Don’t you have something, too?”

“Lord no! James would have a fit if I walked around in something like that,” she replied.

“Are you sure? You should try it sometime. You might get lucky!”

They burst out laughing, and Chrissy said, “You’re incorrigible; you really are.”

They parted and continued their search for hidden jewelry boxes and other valuables.

When Kelly uncovered a cache of cards in one of the nightstands, their searching again came to a halt.

“Chrissy, look at this,” she said, summoning her sister to her side. “There are dozens of cards here. They appear to be homemade and some contain the loveliest messages.”

“Let me see!”

Chrissy grabbed a handful of cards off her sister's lap and began opening envelopes. She gasped immediately and tossed a handful of envelopes across the room as if a spider had crawled out from under one.

"What's wrong?" her startled sister asked.

"It's Mama," Chrissy said, pointing her finger at a card that was leaning against the wall.

"What?"

"She's wearing that black thing..."

"Let me see."

Kelly got off the bed and retrieved the cards including the one against the wall. She sat back down and turned it over so she could see the image on the cover. There was Annie, dressed in the silk body suit. She was enjoying a good laugh and looked ten years younger.

Kelly smiled and said, "This wasn't that long ago. She was in her middle seventies when this was taken. I can tell by her hairstyle. It was taken in the front room of her Florida home. How long ago did she sell that house?"

"I don't know, but I think it's shameful."

"Why? Look at her. She was having fun. How I used to love to see her laugh. Sometimes, she'd laugh so hard she'd pee herself."

They laughed until their cheeks again were wet with tears.

"The question remains, why was she wearing something like that? Who was she modeling it for?" Chrissy asked.

"I don't know, but she might have had someone we didn't know about who was special."

“What do you mean ‘special?’”

“A male friend.”

“Not our mother,” Chrissy said. “After Walter died, she said she was done with men.”

“She still was a young woman then and living alone in that huge Florida home. We were up here, miles away. We have no idea what she was up to,” Kelly suggested. “I mean, look at that figure. I hope I look that good at seventysomething.”

“Stop it! That’s too much information!”

“Regardless, I think there was a side of our mother neither of us knew about. I’m happy for her.”

“I think it’s perverted. Who do you think took that photograph?”

They searched for the identity of the sender, but none of the envelopes had a return address.

“That’s odd. Who would mail so many cards but never use a return address label?”

“Someone with a secret they didn’t want revealed,” Kelly replied.

“Dah!”

Kelly’s eyes began to sparkle. Then, she smiled as a thought rattled through her brain. She began tapping the stack of cards against her leg as she sorted possibilities.

“What? Do you think you know who the pervert is?” her sister asked with a sound of irritation in her voice.

“Maybe.”

“Who?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Tell me!”

“Brian!”

“Who?”

“Brian, the gentleman who came to pay his respects at the funeral home,”

“He’s blind! Mama wouldn’t...”

“He’s not completely blind; only visually impaired,” Kelly replied.

“How do you know that?”

“I’m a nurse. I observe people. When he got close to the casket, he draped his cane over his arm and walked right up to it and grabbed Mama’s hand.”

“That no good, rotten, son of a...”

“Hold on, sis,” Kelly interrupted. “We don’t know anything about him, and he knows things about us only Mama could have told him. He seemed nice to me, and there is no doubt he loved her.”

“Damn it!” Chrissy muttered.

“Stop that! You have no reason to feel such animosity.”

“It’s not that. I meant to see what he slipped into Mama’s hand. I forgot all about it. What do you think it was?”

“I haven’t got the slightest idea, but we’ll have to ask him tomorrow,” Kelly replied.

“What do you mean?”

“I invited him to come here tomorrow for the wake.”

“No, you didn’t!”

“I did!”

“Why?”

“He loved her, and he traveled a long way to pay his respects. I think Mama would approve.”

“I can’t believe you didn’t consult me first,” Chrissy said.

“Well, I don’t care whether you approve, sweet sister of mine,” Kelly said. “You’ll think differently tomorrow when we get the opportunity to ask him about the origin of these cards, especially this one.”

She held it up in front of Chrissy’s eyes and smiled graciously.

“Oh, gross!”

“Stop looking at her body and focus on the joy on Mama’s face. I want to know where it came from, and I’ve got a sneaky feeling Brian will be able to fill in some of the blanks.”

“I don’t want to know. It turns my stomach and makes me ill!” Chrissy said as her hands covered her eyes.

CHAPTER THREE

Brian Warren was a career journalist, who traveled the country documenting weather anomalies and disasters. He was a storm chaser, who studied victims rather than atmospheric phenomena. It was the resilience of countless Americans, caught in nature's fury, who captivated his interest. He turned his photographs and interviews into hundreds of tales of sorrow and triumph. They filled the pages of more than a half dozen, coffee table books that spotlighted efforts to rebuild lives and communities in the aftermath of floods, tornadoes, earthquakes and hurricanes.

Shortly after celebrating his twentieth wedding anniversary, he exchanged a two-dollar ticket for \$564 million in lottery earnings in the mid-1990s. He bought his wife and two children new homes. Carey Warren, his late wife and partner in publishing, never got to enjoy his winnings. She took her own life during a bout of depression the night before they were to move into a mansion along the Atlantic coast in Flagler County, Florida. His wife's self-destruction cemented Brian's conviction money could not buy happiness.

Shock and despair led him to sell the house and begin a sojourn across the country in a luxury camper, working for Habitat for Humanity and waiting for a storm to strike. The camper sucked more gas in a week

than most American's used in one month. It was a vagabond lifestyle, but one he embraced because it helped erase his pain.

After two years on the road, he returned to Florida and became a novelist. It was during that time, he crossed paths with Ann Monroe-Smith-Coldwater. He was determined she would learn nothing of his wealth.

They were an unlikely pair. He was looking for companionship. She sought romance after the death of her second husband. He was tall and dark. She was short and fair. Coldwater was raised below the Mason Dixon Line and he was a Midwesterner. Annie was used to a structured life as an administrative assistant. He was accustomed to agendas with no boundaries and spur-of-the-moment decisions.

They were not neighbors, nor did they live in neighboring communities. But their instant attraction pulled them together. If ever there was love at first sight, they became Cupid's victims on a brisk April afternoon on the shores of the Intracoastal Waterway in historic St. Augustine.

Cherished but kept secretive, their instant attraction matured into love that transcended time, endured joy and hardship and was the heartbeat of two lives lived separately but as one. They were destiny's lovers, a couple who defied age and social norm.

Sometimes, they would spend three-day weekends together, joyful times walking the beaches of Florida and touring historical sites in neighboring states. She loved visiting Orlando and Myrtle Beach, where they could stay for free in a luxury condo for two or more nights if they agreed to take part in a sales presentation

that had no chance of success. Annie liked the gamesmanship of the deal.

He liked visiting places like Savannah, St. Augustine and Key West, where he could rummage through historical houses and inspect history with a twenty-first century eye.

Other times, months would go by, during which they would not see each other at all. He would be off chasing interviews with storm victims, and she would drive off to visit family north of the Sunshine State. Always they stayed in touch; neither was ever too far away or too busy to accept a phone call or text message. Estrangement made their love stronger. Their hearts and minds were inseparable.

Annie was like nobody he had ever met, full of surprises and constantly on the move. Most northerners came to Florida for the winter months. Not Annie. She annually left the Sunshine State before Christmas and spent three months in freezing temps with family. While he missed her dearly, he vowed never to stand between Annie and her children or siblings. Their happiness allowed them to endure.

After one extended absence that stretched into April, she surprised him on Tax Day, a date they frequently spent together. Without notice, she returned to Florida a week early with devious intent.

Winter's chill had just surrendered to Spring's warm sunshine, but the night air was still chilly. Brian had been up late writing, as he always did when Annie was away. He was sound asleep when she snuck into his house beneath a clouded moon, left a trail of

clothing from the kitchen to his sleeping chamber, and slid into bed next to him.

When her bare breasts pressed against his back and her cold nose snuggled into his neck, he awoke with a start – albeit one of the most wonderful awakenings of his seventy years.

“Well, look what the cat drug in,” he said pleasantly.

“Shut up and get me warm, you old coot,” she whispered. “I drove all night to surprise you.”

“You did do that,” he replied. “Damn good to see you finally, even better to feel you against me in the wee hours. Fortunately for you, I haven’t forgotten how to get you warm, beautiful.”

And warm her he did, lifting her on a wave of heated passion she welcomed with youthful exuberance.

They were wrinkled and gray, but they possessed a vitality uncommon among people their age. They were active seniors and passionate lovers. A fiery fervor burned deep inside each of them. They defied age and time. They seized each moment together as if it were their last. They remained entwined mentally, physically and spiritually

When Brian’s eyesight began to fail and he gave up his driver’s license, they both cried. They knew it would alter their relationship but not their passion. He was determined. She was supportive. Their bond grew stronger.

Twice-weekly dates, weekend getaways and tiny staycations dotted their calendars and left them with more happy moments than they dreamed possible. Five

years older but in fabulous physical health, Annie struggled financially. Out of pride, she refused Brian's help, even though a hefty house payment depleted her income shortly after her late husband's pension check arrived each month.

When Brian finally convinced her to sell her house – it was far too big with four bedrooms and a swimming pool – they cried again. Brian asked her to move in with him, but Annie felt she had no choice but to move north to live closer to her daughters. They knew distance would never dampen their love, and they vowed to remain as devoted as ever.

Brian dumped his home and moved into a condo that was surrounded by every amenity he might require. Grocery, shopping and dining were all within walking distance. So was Flagler Beach. He memorized the paths and counted the steps to every store and street corner, his white cane clicking against a blurred sidewalk as he came and went without reservation.

When they relocated -- he was 71 and she was 76 -- he offered to buy her a condo in Myrtle Beach. Of course, she refused his generosity. "I'm your lover, not your damn mistress," she said emphatically.

So, he came up with an alternative plan. A real estate friend happened to own a luxurious condo in Myrtle Beach and agreed to rent it to her at a price she couldn't refuse – four-fifty per month, including all utilities. The only catch was she was required to oversee the care of the development's Olympic-size swimming pool. That meant she was required to hire a company to monitor water quality and upkeep, as well as make sure a lifeguard was on duty every weekend. She hired a

college coed to stop by each morning to oversee pool activities. Her boyfriend helped her stow away tables, umbrellas and chairs by eight o'clock each night.

It was easy-peasy, a no-brainer. Annie sold everything she owned in Florida and moved to the beach condo immediately.

Distance did not dampen their love. If anything, it made their bond stronger. Few mornings passed without text messages back and forth. Daily telephone conversations continued.

Music was one of their shared passions. Brian made it a habit of beginning every day with a link to a YouTube song, never repeating a tune in more than ten years. Well, except for the Oak Ridge Boys' "*Old Hearts.*" It described their relationship to a tee and was her favorite. It would make her smile in the darkest of times.

Annie's death came suddenly, a few days before her ninetieth birthday. Of all things, she died of a massive heart attack while playing ping pong with her great-grandson. They were amidst a tiebreaker she was determined to win.

Brian knew something was wrong when his text messages went unanswered. Finally, her youngest daughter, Kelly, answered her cell phone and informed him of her death. Immediately, he made plans to travel north for her funeral.

Fortunately, Brian's lottery winnings had provided him with comforts other seniors his age could only dream about. It was the one secret he kept from everyone except his immediate family. He lived modestly and invested in family and anything that

promised a lucrative return – including Annie, who gave him more joy than he had experienced at any other time in his life.

He hired a limo for the ride north, accompanied by his long-time assistant, Rebecca. She was the great-granddaughter of a former associate and working her way through college. He paid her tuition in exchange for her on-call services.

CHAPTER FOUR

The gathering at Annie's condo was small; only immediate family attended. Brian was the lone outsider. Of course, nobody was aware he had visited the condo dozens of times or that he and Annie had christened every room in their own special way.

Brian's heart was heavy. A piece in his complicated life was missing, but he could sense his long-time lover's presence the minute he stepped into the modern, thirteen-story complex. He didn't know if Annie's death would ever find a comfortable resting place within his heart and mind. She was his soul mate and last love.

His frown turned into a smile when he arrived at the threshold of her apartment. The door had been left open slightly, as Annie often did when she knew he was en route. Of course, Kelly greeted him warmly. Chrissy was far less cordial. Though he could no longer see clearly, he felt contempt radiating from Annie's oldest daughter. They got off on the wrong foot at the funeral home, and twenty-four hours had not healed the wounds. An angry lioness was sleeping within, waiting for a chance to pounce. He was determined to win her over or, at least, not to add fuel to the simmering fire. For Annie's sake, he would tread very carefully and do everything in his power to make amends.

“Thank you for inviting me,” he said upon entry to the two-bedroom, tenth floor apartment. “I know this is a solemn time for everyone. I don’t know how I will be able to repay you for including me.”

After Kelly introduced him to grandchildren and great-grandchildren, she explained, “Well, the funeral home will deliver her ashes here in a short while. We’re using this time to go through some of her things to see if there is anything anyone wants -- mementoes, jewelry. etc. If there is anything you might want, please speak up, Brian.”

“That is exceedingly kind of you, but I have my memories. They are far more precious than anything she might have owned. Your mother was a wonderful woman, and it was my life’s great honor she shared time with me.”

He shook hands with everyone but Chrissy. Kelly’s sister stood off in a corner with her husband, tapping her foot in nervous resentment.

“Would you like your filthy cards back?” she blurted out.

The room of less than one dozen people suddenly went silent. Annie’s family knew a tempest was brewing.

“Chrissy!” Kelly admonished.

“Don’t Chrissy me! I simply asked a question,” she snarled.

“This isn’t the time...” Kelly replied.

“As far as I’m concerned, it is as good a time as any.”

Kelly tried to lead Brian to a chair, but he pulled away and turned to the tormented daughter. He let the

cane tap the floor as he took three steps in her direction.

“You and I obviously got off to a rough start,” he said. “Let me apologize with the hope we can be civil out of respect for Annie. This is the very reason she wanted to keep our relationship secreted from you all. I think she knew you wouldn’t understand.”

“Oh, I understand! You took advantage of my mother in her later years when her mind wasn’t as sharp as it once was.”

Brian glared at the antagonist and said, “You obviously didn’t know your mother as well as I did. On the day she died, I’m sure your mother’s mind was as sharp as your tongue, child. And, if I were you, I’d listen to your sister and let this be.”

“Not until I get an answer!”

Brian took another step forward, so he and Chrissy were nose-to-nose. Her husband, James, stuck an arm between the two rivals out of a sense of protection. Brian slammed his cane into the marble flooring he had installed before Annie moved in.

“Inferiority fuels confrontation. You do it to intimidate. I might be old, but I cower to nobody. I recommend you adjust your attitude for the sake of your grieving family. I’m here to celebrate your mother’s memory. I can tell you many things about her you never knew. But they should be told in private, not before this audience.”

James spoke up and said, “He’s right, Chrissy. You’re making a scene that is uncomfortable for everyone. Back off!”

Chrissy looked Brian up and down. With a snarl that could have turned a lesser man to salt, she said, “It can

wait.”

Brian smiled, imagining flames shooting out from both of Chrissy’s ears. He didn’t say a word. Kelly directed him to a seat on a sofa next to her.

“You know this is such a lovely apartment. I assume we’ll have to have it cleaned out by the end of the month. If there is anything you want, Brian, just ask,” Kelly repeated, trying desperately to change the subject and bring calm to chaos.

“I can help you with that,” Brian said quietly.

“You live in Florida. How could you help?” she said.

He was reaching into the breast pocket of his coat and about to explain when the young man next to him said, “Gram told me about you once.”

Brian looked at him blankly as Annie’s two daughters simultaneously blurted out, “She did?”

“You must be Stewart, the ping-pong whiz,” Brian said. “Your gram talked about you quite often. I don’t mean to offend anybody, but I think you were her favorite.”

Brian didn’t see well, but he saw the young boy’s chin sink to his chest and heard his breathing turn to a sob. He knew his words had stung. Brian reached out and put his hand on the young man’s knee and said, “Don’t you dare blame yourself for what happened, son. She told me what a competitor you were and how challenging she thought it was to keep up with you. Do you remember the last time she beat you?”

“Yes, sir. It was last year some time,” he replied. “Twenty-three to twenty-one. She took it to a tie-breaker.”

“Yes, it was over the July Fourth holiday,” the old man said. “How she crowed about that. She was so happy she could still move around a table well enough to challenge a twelve-year-old whiz like you. It was one of her proudest moments. If I gave you a dollar for every time your grandma mentioned you in praise, you’d be a rich young man. She adored you, and if she could have chosen a time to pass, it would have been during a nail-biter of a game with you, son.”

His praise didn’t help, the boys still was sniffing.

“Annie and I were old friends with fewer years ahead than we had behind us. That’s for sure. I couldn’t play ping-pong with your mother, but I’ve watched her play, and I assure you she went at it fiercely. She used to play most of the men at the senior center left-handed, just so they might not get shutout. It was an amazing thing to witness.

“She said you had the same competitive heart. She wouldn’t want you to feel sad about what happened.”

“I should have let her win,” the young boy said.

“Oh, poppycock! That doesn’t sound like the Stewart Annie told me about,” Brian continued. “She said you were just like her; you hated losing more than you loved winning. It’s a noble trait. Cherish it. Build on it! Make it your mantra, and you will go far. Your grandma will approve.”

“Thanks, but...”

“No buts, son. She died happy. Hell’s bells, there was only one other thing she enjoyed more than playing ping-pong with you.”

“What was that, Brian,” Kelly asked.

“Um... Ah... I... Um... Walking the beach with me

and having breakfast at the Java Joint in Flagler Beach,” he said after stammering for an acceptable answer.

“She was an extraordinary woman and my best friend,” he added and lowered his own head in sorrow.

“It doesn’t surprise me she talked about Stewart all the time,” Chrissy said. “Kelly always was her favorite, and her side of the family could do no wrong.”

Her younger sister gasped and replied, “Chrissy, you know that’s not true. Shame on you.”

“Pffftt! Shame on you, sis!” she cackled and took a step toward the couch where Brian, Kelly and Stewart were seated. Again, her husband tried to restrain her but to no avail.

“Once she moved from Florida, where did she spend most of her time? It certainly wasn’t in this apartment. She was too busy running to Maryland to babysit you and your family. I was lucky to get a weekend of her time.”

Kelly rose to her feet, obviously taking offense to her sister’s accusations and challenged her. “I have no idea what you’re talking about. Mama loved us equally, and you’d be wise to remember that.”

“I remember plenty!” Crissy shouted, as her husband pulled on her arms to restrain her.

Two granddaughters in the kitchen giggled and said, “Catfight! Catfight!” under their breath but loud enough for everyone to hear.

The white cane Brian walked with had an ornate, ivory handle that resembled a piece of scrimshaw but signaled a bit of opulence, too. The foot of the cane was fitted with a piece of black lava rock, polished each

night before he went to bed. It was harder than most wood and had cracked a few skulls in its day.

When he tapped it against the leg of the coffee table it echoed above the din and got everyone's attention. When all looked his way, he put both hands on the ivory handle and rested his chin on top of them. He paused for a minute, shook his head and began talking very softly.

"I am sure the spirit of Ann Monroe-Smith-Coldwater is flummoxed right now over the way her children are acting. I thought this was to be a wake, a celebration of her life. If y'all want to have a 'catfight,' which those young'uns seem ready to take great joy in watching, save it for later.

"I, for one, know she loved every person in her bloodline equally. After the death of her second husband, she devoted her life to y'all. I know because every hour and day she spent in these parts were hours and days she wasn't with me. I am appalled the love she shared with each of you would be a matter of debate. You all were lucky to know her your entire lives. I only had a small piece of it. Your actions are an affront to all Annie cherished; it's shameful.

"Stewart, what do you think your grandma would do with these two if she were here right now?" Brian said as all eyes shifted to the twelve-yeer-old whose chin no longer rested on his chest.

"She'd take a ping-pong paddle to their backsides," he said, as if Brian had telecommunicated the words to the young boy. Everyone laughed. It broke the tension in the room

"You got any paddles with you, boy?"

“No, sir!”

“It’s up to me and this cane, then,” Brian said and tapped the shiny black base on the marble floor for emphasis. He made sure he tapped in the direction of the oldest daughter’s toe.

Chrissy took a step back and said, “You don’t scare me, old man.”

“I hope not because that wasn’t my intent. I came here to celebrate the loss of a person who was very dear to me and to everyone in this room. Let’s put our hostilities aside and make Annie proud of us.

“I think we can start by relating what we liked best about Coldwater. I think it would be appropriate to start with the two young ladies who were so eager to see a catfight. Tell me your names again and what you remember best about your great-grandma.”

Suddenly, anger turned to joy. Memories flowed from all directions. When Kelly reached over and squeezed his hand, Brian knew it wasn’t he who had made a difference. The spirit of his soul mate had intervened.

CHAPTER FIVE

Everyone had a funny story or a loving memory of Annie to share. Both daughters told tales of growing up in the single-parent household of an iron-fisted mother. Brian had heard most of the stories but from a maternal point of view.

Annie divorced her first husband, Chrissy's and Kelly's father, when they were both young. She didn't remarry until the girls were grown and out on their own. Fifteen years later, she buried Walter Coldwater and swore she was done with relationships until a chance encounter with a fledgling author in Central Florida forced her to alter her commitment to a celibate lifestyle that thrived around family.

It was Kelly who prodded Brian into telling a story none had heard before. Of course, they didn't know he even existed. He was Annie's biggest and most cherished secret. He never minded catering to her desire for secrecy; just spending time with her was more than he expected from the golden years of life.

Like Annie, he had married young, fathered two children and divorced when he was in his thirties. He buried a subsequent spouse around the same time Coldwater did. They met quite by chance and never looked back.

"Okay, your turn," Kelly said, turning to the smiling

man sitting next to her on the couch. “You must have a favorite story about Mama none of us have heard before. Would you mind sharing one?”

“I can’t wait to hear this,” Chrissy said sarcastically.

Brian was going to decline until she uttered her cynical viewpoint. He thought for a moment and began.

“Let me start by saying, Annie Coldwater and I have been friends for neigh onto twenty years.”

He paused to contemplate his words, and then said, “No, that’s an understatement. We were partners; soul mates who should have met when we were younger, but fate had other plans. Nonetheless, we had a relationship that was both loving and remarkable, and we supported each other when y’all were not around.”

“I don’t believe you,” Chrissy challenged. “Mama would have told us about you if your relationship was as meaningful as you describe.”

Brian bristled and fought to remain calm. He tapped the cane against his calf to quell his anger for Annie’s sake and began his story. One eyebrow arched and he tilted his head as he began.

“Just after the dawning of the millennium, a time when I didn’t need this cane to feel my way around, your Ma and I used to take long walks along the beach, nature trails and the Intracoastal Waterway. Palm Coast, where I have lived for the past thirty years, has lots of venues for those who prefer to be close to nature instead of hiding indoors in cool, conditioned air.”

“Mama did like to walk,” Kelly said, looking to her sister for affirmation. All she got was a smirk of indifference. “Sorry to interrupt you,” she added. “Please continue.”

“Well, we were walking along the Coastal Pathway. I can’t remember the exact year. We were still learning new things about each other.

“New lies, most likely,” Chrissy snarled.

Brian stopped and tapped the cane again before continuing.

“Wait, I remember now. It was just after you hurt your knee at work, and your employer terminated you unfairly,” he said, looking hard at his nemesis. “I gave your mother the name of an attorney friend of mine who took them to court and won you a sizeable reward of compensation.”

All eyes shifted to Chrissy and her husband, seated in a far corner. “Harumph!” was all she said.

“I think you walked away with a six-figure, nondisclosure settlement that allowed you to purchase the fine home you live in right now,” Brian revealed.

Chrissy suddenly fidgeted, looked at her husband with surprise and sat up a little straighter. “How do you know that?”

“Attorneys normally take their fees from the settlement in such cases, but Annie wanted you to have it all. Being Mr. Woodward and I were childhood friends, he allowed us to compensate him for his trouble.”

“Us?” Chrissy said as her face took on a considerable reddish tone.

“Yes, us. It’s a pronoun, the objective case of we, I believe. In this case it means Annie and me.”

“Mama didn’t have that kind of money!” Chrissy declared, still cynical but retracting her horns.

“No, she didn’t.” Brian said flatly. He rested his chin

on hands that squeezed the handle of the cane so tightly his fingers turned white. It was the only way he could keep from rising and slapping the brash woman. He stared at her with cold eyes that dared her to speak out of line again.

“I didn’t know,” was all she could say. The room grew silent. It only lasted for seconds, but it seemed like hours as everyone stared at Chrissy. Finally, her husband broke in and said, “Why don’t you finish your story, Brian?”

“Yes! Yes! I got sidetracked,” he said with a smile. “If Annie were here, she’d be elbowing me in the ribs and urging me to get on with it, too.”

He smiled and paused in reflection. Everyone watched as his mind drifted back in time to the Coastal Parkway.

“Well, we were walking our favorite trail. It ran adjacent to the Intracoastal Waterway. In those days, she was still living in Florida and we would meet... err date regularly. We’d take long nature walks and then find somewhere quaint for breakfast, lunch or dinner. Rain or shine. It didn’t matter. That’s what we enjoyed. Time together outdoors. In those days, my eyes were dependable, and I didn’t need this cane to guide my steps.” He tapped it again for emphasis, and added, “I always loved taking photos of Annie. I’ve probably got hundreds if not thousands stored away on my computer at home.

“We came upon an ancient Live Oak tree – the Coastal Pathway was lined with hundreds of them. In fact, it was there with Annie I got the inspiration for a small novel I wrote called *Tree of Wonders*.”

Kelly leaned into him and elbowed him gently in the ribs. Brian snickered and said, "I know; I'm getting sidetracked again."

She flashed Annie's crooked smile. It took his breath away for a moment before he continued.

"Well this old oak was near the end of its life due to erosion and stretched out over the Intracoastal as if the Almighty had intended it to be there just so people could climb it and enjoy the surrounding beauty. I coaxed Annie up into its branches so I could take a photo of her sitting over that sky-blue water as a big yacht passed."

He looked at Stewart and said, "Your gram was always agile. The only thing she liked better than playing ping pong was climbing Live Oak trees, I think."

Stewart smiled broadly and everyone laughed, even Chrissy.

"She crawled out on this perfect U-shaped branch, took a seat and smiled like only she could. She was proud she could do things women her age only dreamed about. Just as I snapped the photo, there was a loud cracking sound. When that branch gave away, she screamed and splashed into the Intracoastal

"When she got to her feet in about four feet of water, she was furious. She'd just gotten her hair done, and you girls know how she fussed about her hair. I was laughing at her but rushed to help. I leaned over the edge of the bank and extended a hand to assist. But what do you think she did, Stewart?"

"She pulled you in with her," her great-grandson said with another voluminous smile.

“I went in headfirst and was spitting water when I came up for air. It was her turn to laugh. Soon we were both chuckling and splashing when the fella in that yacht called out and asked if we needed help. We waved him off and climbed back ashore.

“We let the sun dry us off a bit and then dashed off to my place so we could clean up. I gave her one of my old dress shirts to wear while our clothing spun in the washing machine. We ordered dinner in, and that was the first time Annie spent the night at my place. I can still see her with sleeves rolled up and that shirt hanging below her knees. Your gram was quite the woman, or at least I thought so.”

He relaxed the grip on his cane and let it rest between his legs. He sighed deeply and said, “I sure miss those walks. Annie’s smile. The wonderful perfume she used to wear. Uh huh! And the way she looked in that old shirt of mine.”

Again, the room grew quiet. Brian looked across at Chrissy. Her demeanor had changed. She was smiling and whispering something in her husband’s ear. Brian leaned back, happy the tone of the wake had shifted to a positive note.

Then, there was a knock at the door.

CHAPTER SIX

It was Charlie Ross, the middle-aged son of Clarence, who owned the Ross Funeral Home and Crematorium. He arrived carrying a valise with three sealed containers inside. He placed them on the coffee table in front of Brian, Stewart and Kelly. He smiled and said, "I'd like for everyone to bow their heads so I could say a few final words as I remand the ashes of beloved Ann Coldwater to her family. "

Short but sweet, he said his piece and thanked everyone for allowing Ross Funeral Home to fulfill the final wishes of their mother and grandmother. He was making a quick exit when Chrissy spoke up and said, "Why are there three containers here? I thought there would be only two."

"All I can tell you is we did as her prearranged contract instructed," he said. "She most explicitly desired her ashes be divided into three parts and delivered to her family. We can only assume these are conditions she discussed with you."

"She didn't discuss it with me. What about you, Kelly?" Chrissy asked.

"I didn't know any of this was prearranged until her lawyer notified me. She took care of everything several years ago. As far as the distribution of her ashes is concerned, I haven't a clue," her sister said.

Brian sunk back onto the couch and coughed. He inched a little closer to Stewart. Kelly noticed immediately and asked, "Okay! What do you know about this, Mr. Warren?"

His cane tapped against the side of his leg as he considered how to reveal Annie's final wishes to her daughters. He had no idea how they would react. So, he just said it, plain and simple.

"She wanted the three people she loved most in the world to have her ashes," he said.

"That's ridiculous!" Chrissy spat. "What's a twelve-year-old like Stewart going to do with his great-grandmother's ashes?"

"Stewart?" everyone said as one.

The young man shook his head and raised his hands in the air to indicate it wasn't him.

He was right.

"One of the vases goes to me," Brian said, somewhat sheepishly.

"What?" Kelly said.

"You?" bellowed her sister. "I can't believe this."

Brian began nervously twisting the cane in his hand as every eye in the room fell to him. He tried to look down and away; he wished he could just disappear. Finally, he said, "Your mother and I outlined our final arrangements together," he said. "They are identical, and irrevocable.

"I have two children, too. My ashes also are to be split in thirds. At the time of my demise – and I hope it is not too soon – the executor of my will is to release our ashes – Annie's and mine – into that Florida waterway we loved so much. There is a fishing pier off

the Coastal Pathway I mentioned. We are to be reunited there.”

Kelly turned to face him, her mouth open in shock and her face flushed. Tears were welling in her eyes as he watched her hands begin to tremble. “It was you, wasn’t it?” Then, she jumped to her feet and raced to her mother’s bedroom.

Chrissy followed her, snarling at him as she passed. “Now, look what you’ve done, you miserable, old goat!”

Again, James Peebles, Chrissy’s husband, reached out to stop his fleeing wife, but he was too slow. Quick like her mother, Chrissy was off in a flash to her sister’s aid.

“Oh hell, Chrissy, that’s not fair,” James hissed. Then, he sat next to Brian and apologized for his wife’s remarks.

“I’m sorry, she just hasn’t been herself since Annie passed so suddenly. She sometimes says things she really doesn’t mean when she is upset,” he explained.

“You don’t have to apologize,” Brian said. “Annie predicted something like this would happen if her daughters found out about us. Why do you think she kept our relationship secret for all these years?”

“Well the three of them were like this,” James said, holding up three fingers that were locked against each other. “I don’t think they had many secrets, and you are one giant surprise no one saw coming.”

“I probably shouldn’t have come, but Annie...”

“Stop right there,” James interrupted. “Annie had a big heart, and I’ve got a feeling you owned a large piece of it. You belong here. Give them a few minutes and go

in and talk with them. They're both great gals."

"I don't know," Brian muttered, his chin again planted in his chest.

"Well, we're all leaving," James said as he stood and ordered everyone to gather their things and depart. "The three of you have some things to discuss, and you don't need an audience. Tell Chrissy, we're going to get something to eat and we'll see her back at the hotel."

He stood and extended a hand to Warren. "It was a pleasure to meet a man who could put my wife in her place when she gets her dander up," he said with a huge smile. "Just remember her bark is worse than her bite. I hope y'all work something out. Annie'd a wanted that."

When they were all gone, Brian stood and walked around the apartment. It brought back many fond memories. He could hear Chrissy and Kelly whispering in the master bedroom. So, he took a deep breath, strolled to the doorway and tapped his cane. When the two women looked his way, he asked, "May I join you? Everyone else seems to have left. I can, too, but I think we have some unfinished business."

Before the words escaped his lips, he noticed Annie's girls had dozens – no, hundreds – of cards sitting on the coverlet of his best friend's bed. He was shocked to realize Annie had saved every card he sent to her. Sometimes he sent them weekly and all were personal. They were busy opening and reading them.

Kelly was the first to see the worry on Brian's face. She chuckled and said, "I'm assuming all of these are from you. They are not conventional, store-bought

cards. This must have been a hobby.”

“It wasn’t really a hobby. Old people like us enjoy sending and receiving cards, especially when they contain photos of fond memories and sentimental verses or words inside. I didn’t know Annie saved them all.”

“There’s more in the night table,” Chrissy said. “Did you ever hear of the Internet or text messaging?”

“Of course, but I sent cards because Annie took such joy in receiving them. Frankly, most are quite personal. I don’t know if you should be reading them.”

“You’re a little late on the draw there, pard,” Chrissy said. “We’re seeing a side of our mother we didn’t know existed.”

“I think it’s sweet,” Kelly said. “Why don’t you join us. We have some questions.”

The two girls were sitting on the bed with stacks of envelopes between them. Brian chose to take a seat next to the bed in an armchair Annie used to read in before she retired for the night. He smiled as his backside came to rest in the soft satin cushion and wondered how many times she had glanced at the cards while sitting there. It wasn’t so long ago he sat there while Annie fooled with her hair before they headed out for dinner. The memory made him smile.

“Lord, I hate the way that woman cuts my hair,” she called out from the bathroom, where dissatisfaction marred her easy-going demeanor.

“Find someone new,” Brian replied, shaking his head because they had had this conversation before.

“But I like the way she colors it,” she said.

“Let her continue to color it and find someone new to cut it.”

“Maybe I will.”

“Stop fussing. You’ve never had a bad hair day in your life and I’m hungry.”

Chrissy interrupted his reverie, saying, “Earth to Brian. Come in please!”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I was lost in thought. What were you saying?”

“I don’t recognize this place,” she said, holding up one of the picture cards she guessed was ten years old. “You and Mama are standing in front of a horse-drawn carriage. Where was this photo taken?”

“Oh, that was in Savannah. I met her there after one of her trips back from seeing you girls. We spent the weekend and toured all the old homes and the seashore, of course. Annie loved Savannah. I loved the food.

“We always stopped to see Paula Deen at her restaurant. I helped Paula publish her first cookbook, long before she became a television icon. My word, could that woman cook. She and your mama hit it off big time. Paula teased her because Annie was so short. Called her “Short Stack” from the first day they met. We had some good times in Savannah.”

Kelly looked at her sister and asked, “Did Mama ever tell you she knew Paula Deen?”

“No, but she watched her when she was still on TV. I can’t imagine they were friends.”

“Annie wasn’t one to brag,” Brian deadpanned. “But, as you’ve found out, she also could keep a secret. If she told you about Paula, she would have had to

explain about us.”

“I reckon so. How long were the two of you an item?” Chrissy inquired.

Brian laughed and said, “I can assure you, we were many things, but we never were an item. ‘An item’ is a couple others talk about. Over the last twenty years, we were careful to keep our relationship under wraps. We held hands, hugged and kissed whenever we wanted, but we weren’t ‘an item.’ We were two old farts nobody seemed to notice. That’s the way we liked it.

“Nonetheless, we were best friends – hell, soul mates – and lovers, as you obviously have discovered from those cards. No, Annie took great pains to keep our relationship under lock and key.”

“Why?”

“In my opinion, she didn’t want to ruin the image you girls had of her. You placed her on a lofty pedestal. She loved you very much, as well as your children and her great-grandchildren. She would do anything for you and nothing to hurt you or your families.

“Knowing she was catting around with an ornery SOB like me might have allowed you to think less of her. She wouldn’t stand for that.”

“I don’t believe that.” Kelly said.

“Why didn’t you make an honest woman out of her, Mr. SOB?” Chrissy asked in a joking way.

“Marriage, you mean?” Brian asked. The very question made him laugh.

“Yeah, that’s what people do when they love each other,” Chrissy explained.

“Not these people.”

“Why?” the girls asked simultaneously, clinging to

every word he spoke.

“We both had divorced and buried a spouse. Neither one of us wanted to be a three-time loser, I suppose. While we were raised in conservative surroundings in the Sixties, we were the teens and young adults of the Sexual Revolution. Living together was appealing but complicated. So, we maintained separate homes, enjoyed our independence and visited each other frequently.

“The fact we weren’t married didn’t keep us from loving each other. Why we could waltz with the best of them, if you know what I mean. And yes, your mother was a fabulous lover.”

“O-o-o-o! Gross!” Chrissy warbled.

It was at that moment Kelly opened an envelope and screeched. She pulled the card to her chest and gasped, her eyes blazing with both surprise and alarm.

Chrissy and Brian looked at her in disbelief. They had no idea what caused her eruption.

“What in the blazes?” the old man asked.

“Let me see it,” Chrissy said, snatching the card from her sister’s hand. Her mouth dropped open when she saw what was printed on the cover of the card, and then she started to giggle. Her giggle quickly turned to laughter and then uproarious joy.

Soon, Kelly was laughing, too, and Brian had no idea what was happening.

“That must have been one of the cards I sent her as a joke to pick up her spirits. I did that occasionally when she was sick or tired.”

“She doesn’t look tired at all to me,” Chrissy said, and the girls began laughing all over again.

His patience wearing thin, finally Brian said, “Let me see it.” And he snatched it from Chrissy’s hand.

His mouth dropped open, too. But then he smiled and said, “Aye, she was a beauty, wasn’t she? And you girls weren’t supposed to see that. I think it’s time we stop going through these cards.”

Kelly snatched the card from his hand and asked, “When was this taken?”

“What does it matter?” Brian said. “It was an impulse thing. We had had an exceptionally fine morning, as I recall.”

“I bet,” Chrissy said. “You and Mama are both naked from the waist up. What had you two been up to?”

“Christsakes! What do you think?” Brian replied.

“Not my Mama?” Kelly said.

“We were both proud we had winter in our hair and summer in our hearts. And the good Lord kept us physically capable of exploring the depths of our affection whenever we wanted. That’s another secret your mother didn’t want to share with you, I presume.”

“A scandalous secret, I’d say,” Kelly said, but not in a malicious way.

“Scandalous? I think not!” Brian replied.

“What would you call it?” Chrissy asked smartly.

“Sensuous and loving. Look at the twinkle in your mother’s eye. Does she look like a woman who was engaged in scandalous behavior? By God, we loved each other, and that’s all there is to it.”

“Frankly, I didn’t notice her eyes,” Chrissy said. “Look how perfectly shaped Mama’s breasts were. How old was she when you took this picture?”

Brian giggled and said, “Well into her seventies. It was sometime before she sold her house and moved up here to be closer to you girls.”

“Seventies? Damn! I didn’t get those genes. What about you Kelly?” Chrissy said, pushing on her sister’s shoulder for a response.

Kelly shook her head, rolled her eyes and turned to Brian, who was laughing quietly. “What’s so funny?” she asked.

“Your mother hid her figure in baggy clothing, but she was nonetheless proud of it. Do you remember when she had the plastic surgery, tummy tuck, or whatever you call it?”

“Yes, that was shortly after Walter died. She had lost some weight.”

“While the surgeon was doing his work, he did a tuck or pull to center the nipple of her left breast. I couldn’t believe it. There was nothing out of symmetry when it came to your mother’s breasts. Mmmm! Mmmm! Not a thing.”

Kelly slapped at him playfully and said, “Some secrets are best not revealed.”

“I can’t believe my mother would let you take her picture like that. I never gave it a thought she might be promiscuous,” Chrissy chimed.

“Give me that!” Brian said and again snatched the photo. “I won’t have you ogling us and making false assumptions. Uninhibited and spontaneous are better descriptions. Your mother didn’t have a promiscuous bone in her body. And I’d advise you to keep such thoughts to yourself.”

His cane began clicking on the floor as he made his

way to the door and prepared to leave.

“Please don’t leave,” Kelly begged. “We want to learn more about a side of mother we didn’t know existed.”

He stopped, turned and stared at the two of them. His mind raced.

What would Annie want?

Suddenly, as clear as day, Annie spoke to him from the Great Beyond. Or he thought she did. The words echoed clearly through his brain.

“You damn well better not leave with them thinking I was promiscuous. Finish what you started. Tell them the truth. They can handle it.”

“Easy for you to say,” he muttered.

“What was that?” Kelly asked.

“Oh, nothing!” he replied. Then he walked back to the chair and took a seat.

CHAPTER SEVEN

He apologized immediately. "I'm sorry all of this had to come out now. I wish Annie were here to tell you about what a great relationship we had. As I said, though, she didn't want you to know. I agreed because I couldn't tolerate you girls thinking less of her then or now. Are we understood?"

"I understand," Kelly replied with a big smile and looked to her sister for collaboration.

"Okay, I'm sorry, too," Chrissy said. "I've been a wreck since Mom died, and it's not fair to take it out on you. I reckon if you knew my mother well enough to be aware of the position of her nipples, I should listen and keep my mouth shut. It's just against my nature."

"I know that," he said.

"At the same time, there is nothing you can say that will make me love my mother less. She was my best friend and always there for me and my family. Her passing leaves a big whole in our lives," she added.

He sighed with the realization Chrissy was warming up to him.

"That, too, I am aware of, Chrissy. Keep in mind, you're not as tough as you want people to think. Your mother knew that and so do I."

"Harumph!"

"When was the last time you saw Mama," Kelly

asked.

“We spent a weekend together just last month,” Brian admitted. “I took the train to Rocky Mount and she met me there.”

“Rocky Mount? What’s there to do or see in that tiny place?”

“They have some beautiful trails and gardens. Basically, we just spent time together, as always.”

“And you spent the whole weekend there?”

“Yep! We were simply happy to see each other. After she moved north, we didn’t get together but maybe five or six times a year. Our love never waned, though. You know what they say about absence makes the heart grow fonder. I can attest to it.”

“I remember Mama saying she was going shopping with one of her friends in Rocky Mount. She spent half her life driving here and there in that car of hers. I was proud of her. She refused to grow old.”

That made Brian smile. His mind drifted back to April 15, a date they both held special. For most Americans, it was Tax Day. For him, it marked the day they consummated their relationship. It seemed like it happened just yesterday:

On a warm spring day, they were touring Scenic A1A in Flagler Beach. As usual, Annie was driving and asked, “Where are we going? Aren’t we going to have breakfast at the Java Joint?”

“Not this morning, hon.”

“Turn into the parking lot of the Topaz Hotel. It’s just ahead on the right. I want you to see the lobby; it must be one hundred years old and remarkably

preserved.”

“Park over there,” he said and pointed.

Only a handful of cars dotted the lot. Business was slow. It was too early in the year for the tourist traffic to converge on the tiny motel and eatery.

When they got out of the car, Brian grabbed Annie’s hand and led her to a nearby staircase that provided access to the second-story rooms.

His friend and lover balked. “I think the lobby is this way,” she said.

“We’ll tour it later,” he said. “I want to show you the wonderful view of the Atlantic they have in one of these second-story rooms.”

She gave him one of her crooked smiles when he dangled a green key fob in front of her face and grinned.

“Oh, you’ve devious but wonderful man. You plan on taking advantage of me once you show me the view, don’t you?”

“There you go reading my mind again, darling,” he replied.

“You’ve got a dirty mind, and I just love it,” she said, grabbing a firm grip on his arm and following him up the stairs.

When they got to room 223, the view was all Brian had promised.

She was breathless as he helped her out of her clothing, kissing and caressing her curves so lovingly she had no thoughts of resisting.

She gasped when he unhooked her bra with one quick tweak of his fingers.

“Damn! You did that quicker with one hand than I

can do with two. Where have you been all my life?"

"I've spent a lifetime looking for you, sweetie, and I'm about to show you how us Yankees appreciate their women."

She pulled him down onto the king-sized bed and their bodies came alive with passion. He marveled at how supple and accommodating she was.

Two hours later, she lay panting in his sweaty embrace and whispered in his ear.

"Thank you for this wonderful Tax Day diversion," she said. "Nobody has ever made love to me quite like you just did. You turned me into a hungry tigress."

"I love you more than you know, Annie. It's the best way I can show you. Given I was able to satisfy that tigress, I'm guessing you won't mind we do this again."

"If you make me climax again, I don't know if I'll be able to walk down the stairs or drive my car," she said, giggling and slapping at his chest.

"I didn't mean right now, baby. You are a magnificent lover, but I'm a bit exhausted. Let's go walk the beach and see if an encore is in the making,"

"Okay!" she said. She popped upright and threw her legs over the side of the bed.

He pulled her back, suckled one of her nipples and said, "You are so beautiful. From this day on, I promise to be your devoted sex slave."

"I wouldn't know how to act with a man cowering to my every need."

"At your service, ma'am."

They both laughed. She kissed him on the lips and started putting on her clothes. He did too, though reluctantly.

They walked and swam in the ocean, had lunch and retired for an encore. More familiar with each other's bodies, the encore was better than the first and second acts. They left behind a bed soaked with perspiration and lovers' excitement. Both strolled to her car on weak legs.

"I think I'm going to be sore tomorrow," she said with a loving smile.

"Sorry!"

"I'm not!" she said and squeezed his backside.

It was the first of many Tax Days spent at the Topaz.

"Brian! Brian!"

Kelly's voice brought him back to reality. He smiled and said, "Yes! Yes!"

"Where did you go? Chrissy had a question for you."

"Sorry, I just took a stroll down memory lane. Your mother really was a magnificent woman."

"Well, clearly she thought you were No. 1," Chrissy said with a smile. Then, she held a card out to Brian that had a picture of her mother with a mischievous grin on her face. She was flipping him the bird.

All three of them laughed as Brian explained it was a windy day at the beach and Annie didn't want her picture taken because her hair was a mess.

"Of course, that just encouraged me to take it," Brian explained. "She was beautiful even when she was ornery and combative. I had forgotten all about that picture. It's one of my favorites."

"You're an interesting guy, Brian Warren," Chrissy said. "I think I'm starting to understand what Mama

saw in you. You were so many things, author, friend, lover and personal physician.”

“I’m not a physician. Who told you that?”

“On this card you present yourself as Dr. Warren,” Chrissy said, trying to keep a straight face. Then, Annie’s daughter held up a photo of Brian leaning in with a stethoscope to listen to a patient’s heart rhythm. The only problem was the doctor was completely naked.

Kelly again screeched.

Brian gasped and said, “Give me that!”

When Chrissy hesitated, he tried to snatch it from her hand. His eyesight failed him as she hid it behind her back and out of his reach.

She glanced behind her back to look at the picture again and, with a playful giggle, said, “I think I’m beginning to understand what mother saw in you, Brian. How old were you when this photo was taken?”

“Well, the virus struck in 2020. I was 80. What’s that got to do with anything?”

Kelly belly-flopped next to her sister so she could get a closer look at the photo card that remained hidden behind her sister’s back. She sat back up with a grin that would make the Cheshire cat proud.

“You were a healthy young man at 80. How old are you now?”

“What? Didn’t they teach mathematics in that nursing school you attended?” He shook his head and added, “It was five years ago. I’m 85. What’s it to you?”

“Watch your tone there, Gramps!” Chrissy said.

“Don’t call me Gramps!”

“Whatever you say, Dr. Warren,” Kelly said and all three of them laughed.

“Let me explain to you why I made that card. I don’t want you to think I’m some kind of pervert.”

“Go ahead, Tiger. I’ll bet this is a good one, Kelly,” Chrissy said.

The cane started tapping the marble floor again. and a guttural growl emerged from deep inside Warren. He took a deep breath to compose himself and continued.

“Your mother had been sick for a week and I wanted to lift her spirits. She was worried she might have that Covid-19 virus. That card was delivered to her along with a dozen daisies. She got a kick out of it, and I told her to make sure she shredded it. Obviously, she ignored my wishes. Could I please have it back?”

The girls continued to laugh at his expense. Kelly handed him the card and said, “I think it’s sweet, I’m glad you and mom had a thing. I’d suggest you invest in a better stethoscope, though. That one looks like a kid’s toy.”

“And I bet it wasn’t the stethoscope Mama was looking at all these years,” Chrissy said. The girls broke into uproarious laughter again while Brian tried desperately to shrink from their sight. It was no use, though, they still had unfinished business.

He suggested they put the cards away and just talk about the woman they loved.

As they collected the cards, Kelly said. “I’m baffled. If Mama didn’t want us to know about your relationship, why’d she keep all these cards? She must have known we would find them if anything happened to her.”

“You must remember, Annie was in perfect health,” Brian explained. “So am I, except for these eyes. Neither of us expected to die any time soon. We used to joke about dancing naked... ah... at our one-hundredth birthday parties. Did you know your mother loved music and sometimes would just dance around this apartment like she was a teenager?”

“Is that why you sent her music every morning on her cell phone?” Kelly asked.

“You know about that?” Brian queried.

“Well, I took possession of her cell phone after she passed. I needed to inform her friends of her passing. In the process, I found hundreds of YouTube links sent from your phone. They were always followed with the numbers 1-4-3.”

“One. Four. Three. What’s that?” Chrissy asked.

“It was a code, another way of us keeping our relationship a secret from you two. The numbers represent the three words we could never hear often enough -- I LOVE YOU.”

“Clever! But I don’t understand the need for secrecy. I’ve known you for less than twenty-four hours and I already like you better than Walter. I never thought he treated Mama the way she deserved. He was a mean bastard.”

“Chrissy!” her sister admonished.

“It’s true. We would have had a lot more fun getting to know Brian here than that thug. Hell, he was chastising her the day he died. She could never do anything right in his eyes. I don’t know why she ever married him.”

The room suddenly went silent and both girls looked

at Brian, as if he had an answer. Finally, he broke the silence by saying, "What? I never met the man."

"What did she say about him," Chrissy asked.

"Obviously, you were the first man she turned to after he passed away," Kelly added.

"I believe you are letting your imaginations run away with you, girls. I never knew your mother before Walter died. I don't think there was a bone in her body that would allow her to commit an act of infidelity. She was a saint, regardless of what you might think now that you've learned about our relationship."

"I think your relationship was wonderful," Kelly said.

"Me too," said Chrissy. "Why didn't you just fall on your knees and beg her to marry you? She would have given in happily. I know it."

Brian hung his head and didn't answer for a while. Another memory rampaged through his brain:

"Annie, I've decided to sell my house and move in with you," he said one warm afternoon on the shores of the Atlantic Ocean.

"No, you're not!" she said flatly.

"Why?"

"What would my girls think? I've raised them to believe marriage is a holy blessing from above. They would think horrible things of me if I suddenly decided to live my life in sin."

"Marry me then," Brian begged.

"We've talked about this, Bri. Financially, marriage would be the stupidest thing we could do. I'd have to give up Walter's railroad pension and with it

my independence. I refuse to be dependent on another man's earnings.

"I like things just the way they are. We can come and go as we please. You can visit your children whenever you want and -- if I want to visit my family up north -- I can go north without asking permission."

"Permission? What are you talking about? I'd go with you. I'd love to meet Chrissy and Kelly."

"No, I've been divorced and widowed. I'm done with marriage. I'll love you until the day I die, but I won't marry you."

"It kills me when we are apart," Brian begged.

"Me, too, honey, but it makes loving you so much better when we are reunited. A man has never loved me the way you do, and I cherish every minute we spend together."

She pulled him close. He fought off tears of disappointment while letting her perfume mesmerize him. He knew then the die was cast. They would remain apart but forever together. It broke his heart, but brought him great joy, too.

"I wish we could have met under different circumstances, girls, but this is the way your mother wanted it. Of course, I was incapable of denying her anything."

"Did you ask her to marry you?"

"Of course, several times."

"And she refused?" Chrissy said.

"Obviously, Sherlock," Kelly said, jabbing an elbow toward her sister's ribs. "Did she give you a reason?"

“Yes!”

There was another long silence.

“Well, are you going to tell us?” Chrissy probed.

“I don’t know. It’s kind of hard to explain,” Brian said.

“Can you try, Dr. Warren?” Kelly said with a quick snicker. He looked at her and smiled. She was just like her mother. You wouldn’t suspect they were related by looking at them. Below the skin, their minds were lightning quick and their hearts as big as the Atlantic.

“I’ll give it a shot for Annie’s sake.” He paused for another long moment to gather his thoughts, and then explained to the best of his ability.

“Something happens to people like your mother and me when we reach middle age and the people with whom we thought we would spend the remainder of our days with are missing. We gravitate to others our own age but discover most are overweight, alcoholic, senile or glued to a rocking chair. Instead, they should be making new and interesting friends, embracing fresh ideas and leading active and loving lives.

“So, when you meet someone of like mind and body, it seems rather miraculous. And that is how it was with Annie and me. I swear, I don’t know why she chose to love me, but a day does not go by I don’t thank the Almighty for the opportunity.

“Walter was a curmudgeon, to put it nicely, from what I’ve heard. My late wife suffered from depression, brought on by alcoholism. It didn’t matter. We loved them without question. Regardless of their faults, they were the anchors in our lives.

“Like so many words in the English language,

anchor has dual meaning. It can pull you down if you are not careful or it can give you solid foundation amidst the tempests of life. Left anchorless, I think we both wandered a bit; we didn't know where we fit or where we wanted to be

“We weren't so much different from other anchorless widows and widowers who face the Golden Years alone. What set us apart from the rocking chair generation is we weren't satisfied with the lot fate cast for us. We both desperately wanted to love again. More importantly, we wanted *to be loved*.”

“Your mother and I were Baby Boomers, as you know. We grew up watching the Greatest Generation love with no regard for war, poverty, affliction or separation. They endured for each other. I think we both tried to copy that ideal in both of our marriages, but we never found anything like the love our parents shared.

“Well, I didn't. Not until that day I looked up from a table filled with books with my name on the covers and saw a blonde bombshell staring down at me with the most beautiful smile I'd ever seen. People today laugh and scoff at the concept of love at first sight. I once did, too, until Ann Monroe-Smith-Coldwater stepped up and asked me about one of my books.

“This wasn't *any* love, mind you. This was the love we saw when we were children. People search their entire lifetimes and never find what we had.

“We both readily admitted if we had met when we were younger, two things might have happened. We might have clawed each other's eyes out or authored the greatest American love story of all time. We would

have been the beaming parents of judges, presidents and social reformers.”

“Are you saying Mama wasn’t proud of us?” Chrissy asked.

“Of course not. We spent hours talking about the achievements and successes of our children. I’m proud to say you all turned out fine. We couldn’t have been prouder of each of you.”

“Well, go on. I’m sorry I interrupted,” she said.

“Don’t do it again,” Kelly said with a sparkle in her eye. “This is interesting.”

“Where was I,” Brian said, tapping his cane against his calf and scratching his head.

“Oh, I remember now. I was going to tell you about fate.”

“Please, do.”

“Fate decided your mother and I were not to meet until we were well into our Sensational Sixties and, although we were healthy and active, we had kissed our reproductive years goodbye.”

“Hallelujah!” Chrissy interjected.

“I agree, as did your mother. But what we found within each other’s arms was almost too incredible to describe. It was love like we had never experienced. It was give and take without question. Happiness beyond either of our imaginations. Fulfilling. Consuming. Gratifying. Wholesome. Without barrier or doubt.

“We lived a good distance apart. So, we didn’t see each other every day. In fact, we never saw each other beyond a weekend away or once or twice a week. We talked daily and texted constantly. The only times we didn’t communicate was when she was with you girls.

We had to preserve the secret.

“That’s too bad. I wish she would have introduced us years ago,” Kelly repeated.

“You didn’t know me, but I knew you. Your mother told me everything about both of you. That’s how I knew you needed help when you injured your knee on the job, Chrissy. And when your charity was experiencing hard times, Kelly. I gathered support from some influential friends to make an anonymous contribution to keep you afloat.”

“That was you?” Kelly said in astonishment.

“Did Mama know?” Chrissy asked.

“Of course not. That would have been grounds to dump my ass in the Intracoastal for good,” Brian said. They all laughed.

“I didn’t do it for either of you, I did it for Annie. Because she couldn’t. And if somebody did, she would rest a little easier. And I loved it when she came to me well rested and happy. She could be a tiger at times and as gentle as a lamb the next. She was the love of my life. My last love. There will be no other.”

“I still don’t understand why you two never married,” Chrissy said.

“It’s hard for me to explain. We didn’t need a marriage license to validate our relationship or to create limitations. We were happy, and neither of us wanted to do a thing that might interfere with the joy we shared when we were together.

“Let me end this long dissertation by paraphrasing one of my favorite authors, Mark Twain. And bear with me, I hope I can get this right.”

Brian paused for a moment to collect his thoughts

and then continued:

“There are two groups of lovers. There are those who love each other and those who are hopelessly in love. You mother and I were in the latter group and, when we looked around, it wasn’t a very crowded gathering. Few people are fortunate to share what we did. So, we simply hung on tight.”

“You’ve told us how your beautiful relationship began, what happened after Mama moved up north?” Kelly asked.

There was another long pause. Brian’s memory pulled him away from the conversation for a moment as he flashed back to the day she left her Florida home for good.

They were both tearful because they knew the move would limit their ability to see each other and create a chasm in their lives. He was happy for her because the monthly house payment handcuffed her happiness and prevented her from achieving the quality of life she deserved.

“I don’t want to go,” she said. “I can’t bear to leave you behind.”

For Brian, the solution was simple: “Okay, I’ll come with you,” he said with tongue in cheek. He knew, though, she wouldn’t permit it. But on the slim chance she might agree, he had a bag packed and ready.

“I wish, but you know that isn’t possible,” Annie said. “My girls...”

“I know,” he said and pulled her close. “But this isn’t goodbye; it’s only farewell until we meet again. I’ll give you thirty days to get settled in your new place

and I'll come visit. We'll have a new beach to walk."

"Do you promise?"

"Cross my heart and hope to die, Annie," he said making the sign of a big X on his chest. "If you need me sooner, just call. I'll jump on the train and be there in twenty-four hours. You will pick me up at the train station, won't you? If you stood me up, I might never forgive you." He chuckled trying to lighten her mood.

"You won't stop loving me will you?"

"Of course not. The best I can do is promise my love is forever and one day. You own my heart, and it only desires you."

"My heart is yours, too. You know that."

"That's what makes our love so easy," he added. "We've never questioned its depth, its will or its reach.

"Now before you go, I've gotten you another trinket for your key ring. Give me your keys."

She handed him her keys, and he slid it in place next to a tiny Irish bell he had given her for luck years ago. It was half of a platinum disk. On one side, the letters M-I-Z were engraved. On the reverse was P-A-H. He had a matching disk attached to his key ring. When the two discs were placed side by side, they spelled M-I-Z-P-A-H.

When he handed her back the keys, she looked at medallion oddly and asked, "What's that mean?"

"A little something to protect you while you are way up north and I'm way down here. I've got one just like it. Google it when you stop for lunch," he explained

She got teary-eyed again. They kissed passionately and he pushed her into the driver's seat because his heart was breaking.

“Get going. Call me when you’re on the freeway.”

His heart sank as she pulled away slowly. He couldn’t believe she was leaving. Then he noticed the tiny light of her cell phone illuminate the front seat of her automobile. He knew immediately she was asking her phone assistant the meaning of Mizpah. Then, halfway down the road, she hit the brakes and shifted the car into reverse. When she got alongside him, she stopped, jumped out and threw her arms around his neck.

“Thank you, I’m going to need the Lord’s help to stay away from you for too long. You’ve turned me into a blessed tigress.”

“And you’ve tamed my lion’s heart, darling,” he whispered and pinched her surgically adjusted nipple.

“Ouch!” she said. “What was that for?”

“A little something to keep you company on your long drive. Be safe!”

“Mmmm! You’re one of a kind, Mr. Warren,” she said. Then, she jumped into her car and drove off for good, her hand waving from the side window and her emergency flashers blinking farewell for now.

That’s another long story, and it’s getting late. Aren’t you girls getting tired?

“No, we’re not ready for this to end.”

“Well, we must get something to eat. All this jabbering has worked up my appetite.”

“Where do you want to go eat?” Chrissy asked.

“We’ll get delivery. There is a great little place around the corner that will deliver. Do you want sandwiches or meals?”

“Sandwiches!” both girls replied.

“And how do you know that?” Kelly asked.

“This isn’t my first visit. We ate in all the time.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Brian ordered without asking what each of the girls wanted. Annie had discussed their likes and dislike so many times he knew without asking. They gobbled down their sandwiches and made small talk.

Their meals came with three of those oversized chocolate chip cookies, Brian knew the girls loved. Immediately they launched into a discussion about their mother's baking skills.

"You know why she always made double batches of cookies, don't you?" Kelly asked.

"Yeah! She'd eat half of the first batch while the second was in the oven."

While the girls chuckled, Brian's mind wandered to happier times, too.

After a tiring trip from Florida to Myrtle Beach and a passionate reunion between the sheets of Annie's bed, Brian had fallen asleep on the eve of his seventy-fifth birthday.

He was awakened by the sweet aroma of cakes baking in the oven and a mixer whipping up butter-cream frosting.

She smiled at him when he emerged from the bedroom wearing his birthday suit. Only a thin apron covered Annie's nakedness. She had powdered sugar

on her nose and chocolate crusted the corner of her mouth.

“What are you up to, beautiful?” he asked.

“Tomorrow’s your birthday. I’m making you a cake, Mr. Warren. You deserve one of my specialties on the occasion of your ancient achievement.”

“Let me guess. Chocolate with vanilla frosting,” he said.

“Nope!”

He strolled up to her, wrapped his arms around her and kissed her cheek before tasting the chocolate that was crusted to the corner of her lips.

“Tastes like chocolate to me,” he said as he spun her around and kissed the vanilla frosting from her nose. “What flavor is it then?”

“Double chocolate!” she declared.

She pushed him away so she could take cake pans from the oven, but not without noticing his lean and erect physique.

She tickled his privates and said, “Keep that thought. I’ll be right back.”

Once the cakes were placed on cooling racks, she returned to his arms and said, “I’m so happy we’ll get to spend your birthday together. I’ve missed you.”

They kissed passionately. Brian could tell from her heavy breathing Annie was eager to reaffirm their love.

“I don’t know if I’ve ever seen you look more beautiful in an apron, Mrs. Coldwater,” Brian said. It was white lace and tied behind her neck and waist. The top portion barely covered her heaving breasts. The bottom fell just below her womanhood.

Without hesitation, he hoisted her onto the kitchen

table and untied the apron. She tossed it aside as he entered her, then wrapped her legs around his torso and made love to him in a way they had never done before.

By the time they were both sated, the cakes had cooled, and they iced them together. Of course, some of the tasty frosting landed on their bodies in the most delightful locations. They licked each other clean and thanked their lucky stars for youthful exuberance.

Kelly brought him back to the present.

“I know Mama must have made you cookies, Brian. Which was your favorite?” she inquired.

He wanted to tell them about the double chocolate birthday cake but decided against it.

“I loved her Snicker Doodles,” he said. “But she made me a double chocolate cake in this very kitchen one time. I’ll never forget how yummy the homemade icing was.”

“So, you came here often?” Chrissy asked.

“Whenever things slowed down, and she could fit me into her busy schedule. I have a condo like this in Florida. As you know, she kept her Florida doctors over the years. When she came down for those appointments, she stayed with me.

“That was another secret she did not share with you. We’ve outlived most of our doctors. All of Annie’s Florida physicians have retired or passed away. Nonetheless it gave her a viable reason to come south or meet me somewhere in between and away from your prying and critical eyes.

“Our visits always were too short, but you girls and

your families kept her busy. There were school functions and ball games with the great-grandchildren and, of course, regular visits to your homes. That's why she moved here. She wanted to be part of your lives again.

"I rejoiced every time I heard her voice on the phone. When she was close enough to whisper in my ear, I was on Cloud Nine.

"If life is a jigsaw puzzle, she was the missing piece to mine. Similarly, I never doubted I filled a void in her life. I'm going to be kind of lost without our secret rendezvous."

There was a long pause as everyone considered the finality of Brian's statement. Annie Coldwater was such a large part of each of their lives. A vacuum of memories was all that remained.

Finally, Kelly broke the silence and said, "Chrissy and I will begin the task of clearing out this apartment so the owners can reclaim it at the end of the month."

"I'll go get the cards for you. I assume you want those back," Chrissy said and disappeared into the bedroom.

"Yes. Thank you. Some of them should have been shredded years ago. I'll make sure they are when I get home."

Seconds later, Chrissy returned in the doorway, flaunting the mask and silk bodysuit on her fingertips. "Would you like these, too, Don Juan?" she added jokingly.

Brian's mouth dropped open and he walked to Chrissy without his cane. He reached out and took the items from her without saying a word. He walked back

to his chair, his eyes glued to the silky lingerie. He sunk deep into the cushion and brought the garment to his nose.

“She wore this the last night we were together,” he said, tears flowing down his cheeks.

“What were you doing?” Chrissy naively asked.

“Chrissy?” Kelly chastised.

“It’s okay,” Brian said. “It’s a fair question, considering all that has been seen and spoken today. Among other things, we danced.”

“Mama danced in this? She was eighty-nine years old!” Chrissy barked.

“Yes, but she was as beautiful as the day we met. And she only wore it for a short time,” he added with a twinkle in his eye.

“You, old devil,” Kelly said. “When did you buy it for her?”

Startled, Brian asked, “How did you know?”

“I know these things can be pricey, and Mama wouldn’t waste her money on one. If she wanted to entice you, an apron or nightgown would do just as well.”

“You are assuming she wore this for me; that’s not the case,” Brian added.

“What do you mean?” Kelly asked, her eyebrows narrowing.

“The minute she put this outfit on, she told me she realized it was more about her self-esteem than pleasing me.”

“What?” Chrissy asked.

Brian’s mind drifted back to the time she let vanity lead her to a plastic surgeon for a “little

reconstruction,” as she liked to call it.

They were engaged in a video call when his gift arrived at her doorstep. When Annie returned with it in her hands, she was beaming.

“Brian, I’ve always looked at these and wondered what it would feel like to wear one,” she said as she held it up in front of the video camera for him to see.

“Well, go try it on. I bet you will look beautiful in it now that your nipples have been realigned.”

“Oh hush!” she admonished and rushed out of camera view.

He watched as a t-shirt, leggings, panties and bra flew in front of the camera lens. When she stepped back into view, she was breathtaking. Not because of the way the silk fabric clung to her shape, but for the way it made her feel and the smile it produced.

“It’s wonderful,” she said to the camera. “I love it.”

“Think of it as an early birthday present for me,” he said, coyly.

“For you?”

“Yes, me! By wearing it, you are a feast for an old man’s eyes, sweetie. I can’t wait to see you walking toward me in it.”

“You can’t imagine how it makes me feel,” she said. Then, she leaned over, blew him a kiss and added, “I’m on my way.”

“It’s almost midnight,” he stated.

“The bewitching hour! Time to feed the tigress!”

She growled playfully and terminated the video call. An hour later, she walked into his house wearing only the lingerie, covered by one of his long-sleeve white

shirts that hung below her knees.

She was ravenous that night, exhausting her sex slave before her appetite was totally sated. When they awoke the next morning, she removed the lingerie and resumed their lovemaking as amorously as she had the night before.

It was a memory Brian always would cherish, along with the lingerie that still smelled of her perfume.

“She thanked me for buying it for her because it empowered her sexuality. It made her feel young and vibrant. Of course, I always thought she was vibrant in a tee and cutoffs.

“I’m sure she never spoke of such things with either of you because it would have meant revealing our even darker secret. But it might be something for you to keep in mind as the years creep up and the reflection in the mirror doesn’t please you as much as it once did.”

Chrissy rushed to him, kissed him on the cheek and said, “Thank you. You’ve revealed a whole side of our mother we never knew existed. In a way, it opens a Pandora’s Box of understanding. It will help me with my own self-image. God bless you, Brian Warren.”

“By the way, you should know the last time she wore it, we played Leo Sayers’ “I Feel Like Dancing” over and over. Your mother danced until she collapsed on that very couch and me with her.”

“O-o-o-o!” her daughters echoed.

CHAPTER NINE

“Speaking of couches, what are we going to do with all of this furniture? Do any of the kids need it?” Kelly asked.

“We’ll have to inquire,” Chrissy said. “I have no idea.”

“Why don’t you just leave it,” Brian suggested, switching his tone from melancholy to business.

“I’m sure the owner is going to want to remodel and rent the apartment as soon as possible. I’m assuming mother’s rent is paid until the end of the month. So, we have a couple of weeks to get it cleared out. It is going to be a daunting task.”

“I repeat, I wouldn’t worry about it,” Brian said.

“But we must,” Chrissy said.

“No, you must not,” he repeated, reaching into the breast pocket of his jacket and pulling out two pieces of paper, folded neatly. He handed one to each of them, urging them to examine the documents carefully.

“What is this?” Chrissy asked.

“It’s self-explanatory,” he said.

“Oh, my word!” Kelly muttered.

“This can’t be right,” her sister said, her eyes as big as silver dollars.

“Oh, it is correct. You two share ownership of this fabulous condo, and you can do with it as you wish.”

“But... How? Why?”

“Mama didn’t have this kind of money. This condo must be work hundreds of thousands of dollars,” Kelly said.

“You are right. Your mother lived off a very modest income. She couldn’t afford a place like this, but I could,” Brian explained.

“You? How?” Chrissy said as her eyes began to shed tears again.

“It was a secret I kept hidden for many years. Not even your mother knew I had hit one of the largest lottery jackpots in American history in the 1990s. I own condos in several of the cities your mother and I used to visit regularly.

“I bought this one when your mother moved from Florida and arranged for her to pay a manageable sum for rent, in exchange for her overseeing upkeep on the swimming pool. It was a sham, for which I pray she will forgive me. Everything was done through a holding company so she would suspect nothing.

“Ownership now reverts to her next of kin because I have no need to travel to Myrtle Beach any longer. I would love for your families to use it as a source of pleasure or income. The money she paid in rent has been held in an escrow account and can be used for upkeep and miscellaneous expenses as they come up.

“It is all legal, free of liens and tax. All that is required are your signatures on documents that will be delivered to your homes by courier next week.”

“The words thank you seem to fall short of conveying my feelings right now,” Kelly said, tears flowing from her blue eyes. “I’m stunned. This is all

too much to comprehend.”

“And I feel like a stupid oaf,” Chrissy said. “Twenty-four hours ago. I was ready to kick your butt to the street for suggesting my mother was involved in an illicit affair I knew nothing about. I am so sorry for treating you so poorly.”

“Don’t be,” Brian said warmly. “I don’t see as well as I once did, but I came here with my eyes open. Based on everything your mother told me of you girls, I knew what to expect. One would be warm and the other confrontational.”

“You had me fooled,” Chrissy admitted. “And I forgot all about whatever it was you placed in her hand. I never removed it, I’m happy to say.”

“The funeral director was instructed to place it in the vase with my name on it.”

“What was it, if you don’t mind me asking?” Kelly said.

Brian revealed a medallion that dangled from a necklace he wore. “It was the partner to this. They were both engraved with the word M-I-Z-P-A-H.”

“What does that mean?” Chrissy asked.

“It’s a Hebrew word that translates to: ‘Lord, watch over me and thee when we are apart from one another.’ I think it’s a solid representation of the relationship I shared with your mother.

“To that end, my intentions were not to mislead you but to celebrate the life of an incredibly special woman, my secret love. It also was time to unveil secrets that were withheld for too long. My only wish is for your forgiveness. Your mother and I deceived you for too many years.”

“Forgive? I don’t know if that is possible,” Kelly said.

“Why is that?”

“I feel cheated. You are a wonderful and kind man. Mama should have shared you with us long ago. This whole charade was senseless. What did it accomplish?”

“It accomplished many things, the most important of which was guaranteeing your mother’s happiness. When she was happy; I was content. I was just lucky our paths crossed, and I got to share your mother’s best years.”

“I don’t understand the need for all the secrecy,” Chrissy said. “You were cutting deals behind her back, deceiving the woman you say you loved.”

“In the *Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, Mark Twain wrote: ‘Being rich ain’t what it’s cracked up to be. It’s just worry and worry, and sweat and sweat, and wishing you was dead all the time.’”

“Being rich in Florida, the land of countless widows, isn’t what it is cracked up to be. Few people knew of my wealth and that’s the way I preferred it. I didn’t want to be treated differently or to become anyone’s sugar daddy..”

“When I arranged for the quick sale of your mother’s house in Florida – yes, behind her back – I offered to buy her a place in Myrtle Beach. I was on the verge of telling her I had more money than we could spend in whatever was left of our lives. But do you know what she said?”

Both girls, listening intently, shook their

heads.

“She said flatly, ‘You may be my lover or my benefactor! Not both!’ It was then I resolved what she didn’t know would never hurt her or impact our relationship negatively. While she allowed me to buy her countless gifts and such, one major secret remained untold.”

Wiping at his eyes, Brian looked to the ceiling and whispered, “Forgive me, Annie.”

The girls comforted him, taking seats on the arms of the huge chair in which he sat.

Kelly summed up their feelings: “Forgive us all, Mama. Such great love should never be kept secret.”

EPILOGUE

Brian Warren lived to be 104 years old. He had transferred Annie's ashes to a sealed container and stored it in a safety deposit box with his last will and testament. Fresh daisies populated the vase her ashes originally arrived in each week.

He lived independently until he was 99, and then begrudgingly moved to assisted living quarters in Flagler Beach. Over the last years of his life he lived modestly, allowing his lottery earnings to double.

He made a sizeable donation to the Parks and Recreation Fund so the fishing pier at the Coastal Pathway could be rebuilt and enhanced. He spent the first Friday of every month there, seated on a sheltered bench and discussing fishing tactics with anglers young and old.

He especially liked to tell the young fisherman about the giant manatees that once called the Intracoastal Waterway home. They were almost extinct.

"My friend, Annie Coldwater, and I used to come here and fish back in the day," the old-timer told anyone who would listen. "Back then we would see a manatee three or four times a year."

"Did you ever catch one," young, excited anglers always asked.

Warren would set them straight.

“No, the manatee is a mammal, not a fish. The only mammal larger than a manatee is an elephant. They could grow to a length of ten feet and weigh anywhere from 800 to 1,200 pounds, and they were herbivores, marine vegetarians with no natural enemies other than humankind. We injured and killed them with the blades of our boat motors, allowed them to become entangled in our fishing nets and poisoned the vegetation they needed for survival.

“Anytime we spotted one, Annie would race off and buy a bag of lettuce and dump it off this pier just in case they were hungry. It didn’t matter to her they fed on water lettuce and water celery.”

Sometimes, the old man would go silent for long periods of time, culling through memories he and Annie created at the park and pier. As the sun began to sink, he promised her he would return the following month, and pressed a button on his cell phone. It signaled his driver he was ready to go back to the retirement center he called home.

Reggie Warren, Brian’s 54-year-old grandson carried a leather valise to the pier on April 15, 2039. Inside was a case, about the size of a small tackle box. Within the case were the ashes of Ann Coldwater and his grandfather. It was nine o’clock at night and only a single Crystaline lamp lit the pier and surrounding area. Stars were out in an abundance, even though the moon was covered by a cloud. A slight breeze blew in from the west.

“Now that we’re here, what does Grandpa’s instructions say we are to do next?” he asked his wife, Polly.

She held a tiny flashlight in her hand and read the instructions to her husband: “Within the case you will find two small boxes that contain my ashes and those of my beloved Ann Coldwater. Her box is marked with a medallion with the letters M-I-Z on it. Mine is marked with the letters P-A-H.

“The medallions have a sentimental significance and you may keep them if you wish. If not, toss them in the drink along with Annie and me. My most ardent wish is that you dispense with our ashes simultaneously so Annie and I will be reunited one final time.

“Most likely, you are wondering what my whimsical mind was doing when I thought up this scheme. All I can tell you is this is as it should be, and you might find the answer in a short novel that sits at the very bottom of the case. It will explain everything.

“Polly, make sure your husband deals with my ashes before he begins thumbing through the pages. I need this to be done correctly.

“Finally, I thank you and wish you a long and loving life. ‘May the Lord watch over you when you are apart from one another.’ – Brian Warren, Sr.”

“That was an odd farewell, wasn’t it?” Reggie said as he opened the case and took out the vessels one at a time and placed them carefully on the bench between them. He handed the medallions to Polly, removed the lids and stood with his arms outstretched over the railing of the pier.

As he turned them upside down, the moon suddenly peeked through the clouds and shined brightly onto the pier. The ashes seemed to sparkle as they floated over the water of the Intracoastal on a soft breeze.

“Wow!” Polly said as she watched. “You timed that perfectly. That was amazing!”

“I think it was Grandpa’s way of saying goodbye. It sent chills up my spine,” he said as he watched. “I think he is happy now.”

“Your grandfather was always full of surprises. I’m most interested in reading this book. It’s called *Secrets of the Heart*. Is it one he spoke of before?”

“No, but it sounds like a great way to spend an evening. I’ll have the woman I love more than anything in the world at my side, moonlight supplied by the best grandfather anyone could wish for and a mysterious novel to boot. Come, I’ll race you to the hovercraft.

THE END

NOTES FROM THE AUTHOR

THIS IS MY first foray into the romance genre, and I do it with some trepidation. It was an idea that had been knocking around in my brain for some time. While social distancing during the Covid-19 hullabaloo, it came to fictional reality.

Maybe it was the virus scare that goaded me into this because, during the height of the pandemic, it was the people closest to us we suddenly cherished more. Relationship tightened and became keenly important. Or they ended in separation and divorce.

I'VE BEEN ASKED why, after a dozen published novels, would I lend my talents to the romance genre. My best answer is I recently edited a couple of romance manuscripts for friends. After long hours of such loving prose, the seed was planted. As I tried to imagine the torment and joy secrets can create in a relationship, I found traction for Annie Coldwater and Brian Warren. They were one of a kind. Like me, they were unconventional seniors. I hope you liked them.

IF SECRETS OF the Heart rings familiar, it is with good cause. There have been scores of novels with the exact title, and I have read none of them. The revelation of secret love also is nothing new. Robert James Waller created a similar plot with "Bridges of Madison County," which became a raging success when Clint Eastwood and Meryl Streep brought it to the silver screen in 1995. It has long been one of my favorites.

FOR THOSE OF YOU who think I've abandoned my fantasy roots, I hope you smiled with the treats I left you in the Epilogue. Energy-efficient Crystalline lamps and hovercrafts are things I predict will be common in the year 2044.

REVIEWS: IF YOU liked or disliked my latest work, please leave a review at Amazon, Goodreads, Facebook, Twitter or wherever you might assist others in making reading choices. A review can be two words or one hundred sentences. Be advised, though, they are the fodder that keep independent authors pounding their keyboards day after day and late into the night.

FINALLY, IF YOU haven't heard the Oak Ridge Boys' ballad, "Old Hearts," call it up on YouTube and listen to the words. I think it was written with Warren and Coldwater in mind.

OLD HEARTS

The Oak Ridge Boys, 1999

(Words and music by Ron Reynolds and Danny Darst)

I'd seen him there a hundred times,
Everybody called him Pop.
He'd sit there on that barstool
And never say a lot.

But he had an eye for the ladies,

We'd tease him and he'd go with the flow.
I said, "There ain't no fool like an old fool."
He said, "There's something that you ought to know."

Old hearts still fall just as hard;
Old dreams still go just as far;
And it's true that time diminishes what your chances
are,
But there's still a lot of love left in old hearts.

He said, "You don't know about being old,
But I know about being young.
I haven't forgot the words to use;
They're still on the tip of my tongue.

And romance ain't some passing phase,
That only the young go through.
Now if you think that I'm just wasting time,
I've got news for you.

Old hearts still fall just as hard.
Old dreams still go just as far.
And it's true that time diminishes what your chances
are,
But there's still a lot of love left in old hearts.

Then, one night it happened.
I knew when she walked in.
His eyes lit up, and he tipped his hat

As she looked at him and grinned.

Now every time you see them out,
They're always holding hands.
Side by side, arm and arm,
I guess it's in God's plans.

Old hearts still fall just as hard.
Old dreams still go just as far.
And it's true that time diminishes what your chances
are,
But there's still a lot of love left in old hearts.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Gerald L. Guy is a retired newspaper editor who lives in Palm Coast, FL with his wife, Joanne. He was the recipient of numerous state, regional and national writing awards during his long journalism career. His pursuit of words began as a sportswriter in his hometown of Warren, Ohio. Guy eventually edited daily newspapers in Ohio, Georgia and Wisconsin.

He retired in 2004 and moved to Florida the following year. When he's not writing or editing short stories and novels, he's walking the scenic trails and sunny beaches of Flagler County.

“Secrets of the Heart” is his first foray into the romance genre, although romance has played pivotal roles in much of his work.

He is the author of a dozen novels that include three trilogies and several novellas and stand-alone titles.

In 2019, he published “Act of Mercy” and “Act of Recall” to go along with “Act of Kindness” and

complete his Coastal Capers trilogy. All three capture the spirit of a mysteriously active, retirement home resident who thrives on helping others.

The Gus McIntyre Adventure Series includes four titles and a fifth is in the works. “Run to Danger” and “Run Like the Wind” were the first two and re-packaged into “PAYBACK: Eye for an Eye” for marketing purposes. In them, an orphaned teen tries to find his way in the often-lawless West of the 1870s. “Chasing Gold,” a semifinalist in the prestigious Laramie Awards for western writing, and “Chasing the Past” complete the series.

The Wolf Pact Saga, a fantasy about a shapeshifting people who live in secrecy in rural Wisconsin, began in 2011 with “The New Order” and was followed by “Escape from Captivity” and “Dream Catchers.”

An independent author, Guy published “Tree of Wonders” in 2018. In 2016 he released “SARA: A Hero’s Story,” historical fiction that traces the actions of the crew of the *U.S.S. Saratoga CV-3*, an aircraft carrier that helped win World War II. The author’s late father, Ralph G. Guy, served aboard the Sara and remains his hero today.

The author currently is brainstorming sequels, a murder mystery entitled “Altered Lives” and the next adventures for his industrious teen, Gus McIntyre. He expects to publish “New Paths,” Book #5 in the western saga in 2020.

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COASTAL CAPERS

Act of Kindness -- Nobody at Crater Lake Retirement Center could believe Jerome Browning was 92 years old. He looked and acted much younger. Still, he devoted his life to helping residents restart their lives. Fighting a dysfunctional director every step of the way, Jerome and a wealthy benefactor find innovative ways to bring joy into shattered lives in innovative ways. Browning had no idea a 210-year-old curse and a simple act of kindness would turn his own world upside down.

Act of Mercy – A simple act of kindness led Jerome Browning to prosperity he never imagined possible. When a root he finds washed up on the Atlantic shoreline grows into a modern day “beanstalk,” his world is turned upside down. Accompanied by a blind, one-armed teenager, Browning is required to travel through strange new lands, negotiate with otherworldly creatures and avoid disrupting history to outsmart a corporate behemoth and save the world’s oceans. It might be beyond one man’s capability.

Act of Recall -- Who is John Doe VI? Can a pair of binoculars, his friendship with Jerome Browning and months of therapy unlock the past for the newcomer at Crater Lake Retirement Center? When his memory returns, will it bring horror or happiness?

THE WOLF PACT SAGA

Wolf Pact: The New Order -- When W. Jefferson Prescott III is introduced to a species of wolf that can alter its genetic makeup in order to walk as humans, he discovers a magical world and a second chance at life. His predestined rise to power creates chaos and unity. While Jefferson must learn the ways of the four-legged Cossibye, his three companions — Aponi, Shideezhi and Skilah — struggle to embrace life in Jefferson's human world. This cultural collision, combined with the discovery of amazing physical and sensual powers, takes readers on a journey of fantasy, romance and mystery.

Wolf Pact: Escape from Captivity -- After rescuing abused siblings on a dark Wisconsin night, the Cossibye clan is catapulted into a search for the orphans' relatives and face off with a madman who is leaving dead bodies and shattered lives wherever he travels. With the help of the children's father -- Michael Mangus Walker -- Jefferson, Sebby, Sherry and Reeny must rely on cunning and all their special powers to preserve the children's safety and return peace to the plush Wisconsin countryside.

Wolf Pact: Dream Catchers -- A 600-year-old shaman of the Osage Nation is wreaking havoc in Wisconsin. As the body count grows, the press thinks a werewolf might be stalking students at Marquette University. The Cossibye have no other choice but to

join the investigation and end the senseless murders before one of their own is harmed or killed? New friends, Carl Birdsong and Cheyenne Konti, help the blend ancient potions with modern technology to preserve peace.

THE MCINTYRE ADVENTURES

Run like the Wind -- Fourteen-year-old Eongus "Gus" McIntyre suddenly is orphaned and abandoned in the Black Hills, the wildest and most untamed territory in 1876 America. Luckily, he is befriended by a group of cattlemen who are driving 100 head of Texas Longhorns north to feed hungry gold miners in lawless Deadwood. An ornery trail cook, named Toots, and the boss' son, Junior Hamilton, take young McIntyre under their wing. With the help of irascible Calamity Jane, the youngster earns respect, avenges his father's murder and starts a new life.

Run to Danger -- Rustlers and Mexican vaqueros threaten the livelihood of the Circle H Ranch in 1877, making young Gus McIntyre's job of rounding up stray Longhorns more than challenging. An aging Apache chief comes to Gus' rescue, and together they plot revenge and secure the Hamilton assets. In the process, long-standing animosities between their white and native cultures begin the healing process.

Chasing Gold – When a dying stranger slips a mysterious map into the hands of young Gus McIntyre, it sets he and his friends on an incredible journey to find

the hidden wealth of Mexican Emperor Ferdinand Maximilian. Government agents and ruthless vigilantes from the Ku Klux Klan want the gold, too. When his life and the lives of those he cares most for are threatened, where will Gus run to avoid danger? Will his race to find the treasure end in hardship or happiness?

Chasing the Past – Gus McIntyre’s great-great-great grandfather, James Oliver McIntyre, fled Scotland to find adventure and romance in the New World. He also found hardship and friendship while blazing trails west with none other than Daniel Boone. Gus tells his story as he searches for a new beginning in nineteenth century Texas.

PAYBACK: Eye for an Eye – A boxed set of the first two Gus McIntyre Adventures that was released in October of 2019 for Kindle and Kindle Unlimited readers.

OTHER TITLES

SARA: A Hero’s Story -- When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor in 1941, the men of the U.S.S. Saratoga CV-3 fought back. This work of historical fiction chronicles the role "The Mighty Lady" and her crew played in bringing about an end to Japanese terrorism and World War II. The historical tale is based on the memoirs of dozens of veterans who served valiantly aboard the venerable aircraft carrier. One of those brave men was the author's late father, Ralph G.

Guy. Most of his shipmates have passed away or are in their twilight years. All remain heroes from a time too often forgotten.

Tree of Wonders -- Have you ever looked at one of Florida's majestic Live Oak trees and wondered what they might reveal if they could talk? Young Willie Brown found the Tree of Wonders on the banks of the Intracoastal Waterway, and it had lots of stories to share.

Learn about the native tribes that inhabited Flagler County, how sugar turned sour for early plantation owners and how transportation played an important role in the region's depopulation and rebirth.

(Autographed copies of all the author's novels can be purchased at his website: www.storiesbyguy.com.)