

## PREVAILING WINDS



# PREVAILING WINDS

---



*Hadley Hoover*

iUniverse, Inc.  
New York Lincoln Shanghai

## **Prevailing Winds**

All Rights Reserved © 2003 by Hadley Hoover

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, or by any information storage retrieval system, without the written permission of the publisher.

iUniverse, Inc.

For information address:

iUniverse, Inc.  
2021 Pine Lake Road, Suite 100  
Lincoln, NE 68512  
[www.iuniverse.com](http://www.iuniverse.com)

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, business establishments, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

ISBN: 0-595-28814-6 (pbk)

ISBN: 0-595-65877-6 (cloth)

Printed in the United States of America

First and always: To Kendall. Let the winds blow.

To the wonderful women who kept me on-keel during the longest 84 days of my life: Barb Young, Diane Bur, Donna Morgan, Donna Morris, Jill Hallman, Kimberly Van Brunt, Ruth Bakken, Sherri Tradup, and Sue Spelhaug.

Patrick and Joni: Bless you for friendship that endures.



# Acknowledgments



Yes, there really is a Little River Inn. Check it out at [www.littleriverinn.com](http://www.littleriverinn.com), or call 1-888-INN-LOVE, or best of all: plan a visit. The fine folks at Little River Inn graciously granted me permission to base *Prevailing Winds* there. However, references to the facilities and grounds, personnel and guests, situations and events reflect my overly active imagination.

Warren Arnold is the gifted sculptor of the actual marble gray whale totems. For more details, including pictures, log on to [www.thewhaleproject.org](http://www.thewhaleproject.org) or write to The Whale Project Inc, 5876 Lone Pine Road, Sebastopol CA 95472. Thank you, Warren, for allowing me to weave your sculptures into my story.

For further information about Compassionate Friends, contact them via their website at [www.compassionatefriends.org](http://www.compassionatefriends.org) or write to PO Box 3696 Oak Brook IL 60522-3696, or call 877-969-0010 (toll-free). Inquirers will find them to be all that Cory promised Laurel in *Prevailing Winds*.



## CHAPTER 1

---



The mix of tourists, loggers, bikers and locals on California Highway 1 provided few breaks for a faint-hearted driver, but I had left that classification in my dust miles ago. With a burst of confidence spawned by six days and two thousand miles of me versus the road, I zipped through a break in traffic and backed into place between a mud-spattered Jeep and a gleaming red convertible, both parked haphazardly in an L-shaped parking lot.

I unhooked my seatbelt and stretched, pushing against the dashboard. The ultimate destination of this trip filled my view. “Taa-dah! The one and only Little River Inn,” I trilled, gesturing across the road. My words faded in the bright lights of my accomplishment.

Five months ago, I never dreamed I would be anywhere near California, let alone a stone’s throw from the Pacific Ocean. Five months ago, a solitary drive halfway across the continent would have terrified me. It had been a trauma-free trip—with even the potentially dangerous mountain passes clear—but I was so glad to have the whole experience behind me I refused to dwell on my return to Minnesota in two months.

Bennett would have considered such a trip pure folly. If we made trips to either coast, whether business or personal, we flew. Our destinations were never as remote and rarely as romantic as Mendocino County’s enchanting coastline. I always suspected Bennett believed any place west of Boston really ought to require passports; he deemed such locations as foreign as Jupiter. Moving from the eastern seaboard to Minnesota had been wild enough for my Bennett, but such was the sacrifice he made thirty years ago for the opportunity to practice the career he loved in an institution he admired.

No, the only reason I sat with the nose of my trusty Volvo (*“Those stalwart Swedes build a fine automobile,”* being Bennett’s mantra) pointed squarely toward the picturesque Inn was because my husband of thirty-six years vacated my physical life four months, three weeks and five days ago.

I often sensed him somewhere in the house, and still felt his shadow brush my shoulder. But there was no one across the breakfast table to drink the second cup of coffee I automatically poured, and no one curled against me in bed at night, warming me body and soul. For the past fifty-five years, I have worn many titles: daughter and granddaughter, sister, wife—with all its accompanying relationships—and mother. But the newest tag weighs heavily: *widow*.

When my childhood friend and long-time California resident, Nancy Lincoln, reached across seven states to offer me a respite from grief, I brushed aside my family’s protests and started packing. I’m not proud of this, but it’s a fact: I was desperate to escape my stuffy thirty-five-year-old son, Benjamin, who, upon Bennett’s demise, turned scrutinizing my life into an art form. If that assessment sounds harsh and unmotherly, realize this: the man’s an accountant—an accountant who knows his way around the newspaper’s financial pages better than I know my spice rack.

Benjamin and his lovely-in-every-way wife, Jessie, and our only grandchild, the inimitable nine-year-old Halsey, are probably still huddled on the front porch back in Rochester calling after me, *“Are you sure this is the right thing to do, so soon?”* Benjamin inherited—and magnified—his father’s Bostonian genes, his almost-frightening intelligence, and his unshakeable diligence in doing the best thing for the greater good. All he lacked to be considered a perfect clone was the full measure of Bennett’s warmth and humor. Benjamin is a lot like a Volvo. The boxy version in dignified colors.

I like to think some of my genes infused my son’s hereditary pool, but I’m afraid those little fellows held back until Marley arrived five years later. She blew so much life into what Bennett claimed were my most endearing traits that they loomed like clowns on stilts over the rest of her family. While clowns on stilts *are* entertaining, one does wonder when they will topple and where they’ll land.

Marley could use a dose of her brother’s staidness. If her brother is a sensible sedan, Marley personifies the BMW roadster that passed me going 110 in Utah: lots of dents, perhaps in support of its bumper sticker proclaiming *As a matter of fact, I do own the road*—a bold assertion I read when I, plodding along at a lawful speed, passed that vehicle fifteen miles down the road, pulled over along the salt flats by an unamused patrolman.

College could never compete with ocean breezes and the tug of freedom, so Marley moved to San Francisco within two sunsets of high school graduation, much to her father's dismay and my thinly disguised relief. Guilt over such unmotherly sentiments rolled through my heart like the tides, but eventually even Bennett admitted life without Marley under our roof was easier than wondering when the phone would ring to inform us of her latest brushes with authority.

Six days ago, with engines—this car's and mine—idling at the snow-packed curb by my Rochester home, I had assured Benjamin, Jessie and Halsey I would dearly miss them, which I will. But they will never know how frantic I was for the *chance* to miss them. In taking care of Mom-Laurel-Grandma, each had been so in-my-face since Bennett's death that I finally invented a lingering case of diarrhea just to get some privacy. I haven't spent so much time in the bathroom since I was pregnant. To pull off a stunt of that magnitude when your son rubs shoulders daily with respected doctors in a world-renowned clinic—*"Please, Mom, make an appointment to see Phillip; you obviously need medical attention!"*—well, that's world-class acting, folks. The envelope, please!

But Nancy, in a call that sparked hope in my heart on an otherwise grim Christmas night, bridged our many years of friendship and dangled a tantalizing offer before me: a legitimate opportunity to escape my solicitous relatives before I alienated my son as thoroughly as I had offended my daughter all those many years ago.

Even Marley's grief over her father's death didn't soften her long-term resentment of the countless offenses I, the meddling mother in this long-playing drama, apparently committed against an adolescent daughter and, based on her cool reception of me just hours earlier, apparently continue to inflict. I admire Marley's doggedness in keeping such a tenuous list of grievances alive all these years. Surely, she could have applied that same diligence toward furthering her education. But I digress. As Marley has informed me countless times, it's her life.

Our phone conversations—instigated either by an entry on my To-Do List or by her financial dilemmas—consist of awkward pauses, loaded silences and mutual sighs of relief when we can end the farce and hang up. The call in which I told Marley of her father's death was memorable in that it was neither awkward nor loaded. Marley cried; I cried. She said she would catch a plane home the next day; I said I would make arrangements through our travel agent. I told her I loved her, and meant it; she said, "I know" and didn't snort.

But this morning, long after the funeral and tearful farewells, when I came to her San Francisco wharf-side store (if the converted hot-dog stand she secures each night with two Master locks and a bungee cord can be called a *business*) the old Marley was back. Gone was the grief-stricken daughter who sobbed through the funeral. Gone was the flash-in-the-pan Marley who curled up on our sofa and talked long into the night, sharing my tissue box.

No, this morning larger-than-life Marley glared across her rainbow-hued handcrafted candles with their heady aromas, and eyed me belligerently while she arranged Mango-Melon-Madness tapers next to Blueberry-Buttermilk-Blast votives. The hostility evident in her hooded eyes and clipped words chilled me more than the gusts spiraling up from the bay. Candles must require *lighting* to induce peace and serenity; just *working* with them day-in-day-out doesn't do diddlyquat for my daughter.

Despite my earlier explicit explanations, she had worked herself into a funk, convinced my ulterior motive in coming to California was to wreck her life all over again. Granted, seeing your mother pull up in a car so loaded that its springs are moaning must be unsettling, but I would have appreciated a tad more benevolence on her part. I suggested brunch together; Marley refused the offer and I didn't argue. It was a very short mother-daughter reunion, which is why I arrived in Little River several hours earlier than anticipated.

I do not entertain the slightest hope Marley is the offspring who will give me safe harbor in my golden years. I envision a very restless future for myself with Bennett gone. I spawned a son who wants me glued to his nest (his unshakable litany being I will live out the remaining portion of my four-score-and-ten tucked safely under his wing in the studio apartment above his three-car garage) and a daughter who wants me nowhere near her tree, let alone her nest. If each child proves true to form, I'll be an exhausted mother bird in constant motion just to escape Benjamin's sheltering wing and avoid Marley's retaliatory beak.

This was why I embarked on my first solitary venture in over three decades. My destination was the captivating Little River Inn, just yards away from where I mused on the northern California coast. Tears blurred my vision. Other happier visitors to the coast sped by the parking lot. I sat numbly in my car while the gaping chasm within me threatened to suck up all my hard-won composure and bravery, much like the sinkholes Minnesota farmers dread finding in their fields.

If I gave way to crying, there would be no salvaging my face—I am not a pretty crier; I can retain blotchiness for hours after sobbing over a human-

interest story on the six o'clock news. "Nancy is expecting you, so get a grip, Laurel McPherson," I scolded myself firmly, "or you'll arrive at your new job looking like a scarecrow."

A shard of sunlight danced off another vehicle's chrome trim and diverted my thoughts. Thanks to regular correspondence with Nancy over the years, I knew that for the 412 souls the highway sign touted as Little River's population, the compact building beside me was Main Street, the mall, the whole shebang.

Those claiming 95456 as their Zip Code fell into three groups: first, residents of a mixed-bag of homes hidden along winding roads; second, Little River Market—housing Post Office, deli-grocery, gas station and restaurant under one roof; and third, assorted lodging establishments where pilgrims to the coast may rest their weary heads or find entertainment.

Entertainment was low on my list, but resting my weary head in a quiet place sounded appealing. That luxury was hours away, however. I allowed myself one self-pitying sigh and willed my fingers to loosen their grip on the steering wheel.

The reality of Little River Inn perfectly matched its Website. Victorian structures crowned the rolling hills, promising every balcony a front-row seat for the drama of the Pacific's moods and magic. The lawns and gardens were as lush as the brochures from Nancy depicted, the picket fence as white and beguiling. A seagull perched briefly on the Inn's roadside sign and glided gracefully towards a wisteria-covered arbor as if beckoning me to follow.

I turned my head in automatic response to movement on my right. A young woman exited the Post Office, walking with a light-hearted lilt in her gait to the road's edge, and shifted a canvas bag to her hip while she checked traffic. Confidently, she crossed over to the curving drive leading up to the Inn.

I parked my sunglasses in my hair and followed her progress. A puff of air fluttered the scarf that secured her long shiny hair into a graceful ponytail. I used to be that girl. She reminded me of the *me* Bennett fell in love with in college. I was capable, vivacious and carefree to his confidence, solidness and pensiveness—we were such a good blend. I sighed. Thoughts can be as undisciplined as a puppy; just when you think they're under control, they piddle on your feet.

The young woman must be Mindy. The dashboard clock read 3:04 PM. I had carefully adjusted it across two time zones so I knew it was correct. "*Collecting and sorting the mail is the assistant's last job on the day shift,*" according to

Nancy. I found lipstick and traced my lips with Mauve Moment, ending with a kiss pressed against a tissue.

Running my tongue across my teeth to remove vagrant mauve streaks, I murmured. “I’ll be fine. Better than fine—dandy-swell-fine.” Just being across the road from Nancy made me revert to our old Junior-High lingo.

That little pep talk didn’t cut it. In my search for a comb, I brushed against my journal, a trusted refuge in uncertain times. It opened to a page written just days before Nancy’s call had come. Yes, it’s a good thing I’m where I am, even with all the unknowns, because the lines I had penned then sounded nothing like Life-of-the-Party-Laurel would feel, let alone put to paper. But I hadn’t felt much like partying lately.

*Words not in me that must be said;  
voices there, but not speaking, that must be heard.  
Dusty dictionaries, telling grief and passion.  
Go away, world! Shake my hand and slam the door softly.*

Today had been disquieting...to be honest, the week hadn’t been all that great...no, make that five unsettling months. Leaning back against the headrest, I listened to the timeless slap of waves on unseen rocks behind me. I sensed this could be a place of healing—Lord knows I needed it. Even escaping winter’s prison was a mood-booster; I love Minnesota, but facing winter’s onslaught alone this year had put my nerves on edge. I tossed nights worrying about ice-jams destroying the roof, or wondering where Bennett had put the salt or sand or whatever it was he sprinkled liberally on the driveway on slick mornings. I steeled myself against calling Benjamin when the furnace ran continuously, or the water softener gurgled strangely.

Being in a place where ice was found only in freezers, and sweaters were adequate against an evening breeze—this, I would enjoy. I turned journal pages. The fresh whiteness of a new sheet gave free rein to the wistfulness that so often rode the same saddle with Marley-generated frustrations:

*I wish when I take my restlessness for a walk  
I could leave it down by the shore.  
We go our separate ways and I reach home alone  
only to find it waiting on my doorstep.*

Since Bennett's death, I often retreat to poetry, finding solace in writing, reworking, and eventually rereading each line. I capped the pen, flexing my fingers as I took control of my breathing, and focused on each segment of my body from toes to neck. Tension slipped away and gradually, nature's soothing sounds nudged my troubled thoughts aside.

A portion of my mind imagined floating on a serene cloud above the undulating billows behind me, leaving my remaining brain cells to ponder just how long a car with Minnesota license plates would be allowed to camp in this peaceful place. Had a revving engine not sliced through the quiet, I may have learned the answer. Frowning at the oblivious driver, I started the engine and belatedly accepted the seagull's invitation.

Minutes later, I walked up the broad steps to the Little River Inn office feeling more like a kid venturing out on her bike without training wheels for the first time than a mature woman about to reunite with a dear friend. Fear, rather than exertion, exposed itself in each ragged inhale-exhale cycle.

I paused on the veranda for a deep and calming breath, reached for the door handle and stepped inside. Though Nancy has worked here her entire adult life, I had not visited Little River Inn since my children were young. My instantaneous impression was one of restful elegance and a sense of *Ahhhhh* stilled my racing mind. Before I could do more than caress the curved railing leading up a carpeted stairway, I heard two voices. "Oh, Belvedere!" *That's Nancy.*

"Good thing he's declawed!" *That could be Mindy.*

Their light-hearted enjoyment of an unseen activity tugged my tight jaw into a relaxed smile. I stepped around the corner and approached the ornate chest-high counter. A very large cat first drew my attention. A cat with attitude. Sprawled across a desktop combination copier/fax machine, he dangled furry front legs over the edge to bat at pages steadily entering the tray. The flurry of papers on the carpet revealed who was winning this game.

Nancy saw me and squealed, "Laurel!" Another paper hit the floor. "Oops, pardon our crisis-mode!"

"I assume this is Belvedere?" I stretched across the counter and ran my hand along the gray-and-white feline's silken spine just as he flipped another page to the floor. I laughed outright. "Oh kitty-cat, are you ever in trouble!"

"Laurel, this is Mindy Franklin. Mindy, Laurel McPherson." Nancy made quick work of social convention as she waved vaguely between the two humans in the room. Mindy's genial welcome erased the last traces of my uneasiness. "Belvedere hates when his favorite perch behaves like an office machine! Unfortunately, he gained a head start in our daily Cat versus Fax race."

“He’s majestic. Belvedere is the perfect name for such a proud fellow,” I said.

“We suspect he believes he owns the place!” Mindy’s infectious grin rivaled any movie star’s famous smile.

“I don’t mean to interrupt; just wanted to touch base. I’ll soak up the view from the veranda since I’m early.”

“I have a better idea,” Nancy said. “You catch the rest of this fax and we’ll head out together. It’s a detailed bid for landscaping, so we really need every page intact, but I’m not about to argue with Belvedere about his choice of sleeping quarters. Been there, done that!” She continued her competition with the cat while Mindy guided me into their office area.

Nancy turned and hugged me, clutching her sheath of papers behind my back until the phone rang. Pulling away with an exaggerated sigh, she thrust the jumble of pages into my hands. “Have at it!” She reconnected her headphone and brought the computer screen back to life with one mouse-click. “Good afternoon! This is Nancy at Little River Inn. How may I help you?” Meanwhile, two more faxed sheets landed on the floor, courtesy of Belvedere. Then, the front door opened.

With Nancy’s pleasant voice conducting business in the background and Mindy registering the walk-in guest, I stroked Belvedere’s proud head and caught pages the machine spat out. The cat blinked a dismissive glance and extended one round foot to swat the latest page.

“Someone’s having fun!” the new guest said as my contest to salvage a sheet before Belvedere branded it picked up speed.

“This four-legged office assistant is up against stiff competition, but he’s in denial!” I responded. After the last page purred into view, the cat stretched across the machine’s renewed warmth and curled into nap-position.

I quickly reassembled the forty-plus sheets into numerical order. Belvedere had left his mark on several, but the wrinkles were easily smoothed and I mended a few rips with tape. Securing the stack with a spring-clip from the desktop, I surveyed my surroundings with interest. I would spend eight hours a day, five days a week in this busy compact office for the next two months, filling in as front-desk manager. The day’s calendar square read *Laurel arrives!* in Nancy’s neat lettering.

Nancy worked in hands-free mode, smiling as she spoke. “Yes, Mister Cruzen, I have added these notes to your reservation and we will do everything possible to make your stay with us pleasurable. We look forward to seeing you again.” After a moment’s pause, she added, “You’re very welcome. Goodbye.”

She disconnected the call; sputters of laughter accompanied her flurry of keystrokes.

Mindy quickly verified we were alone in the office and then explained, “Mister Cruzen is a frequent guest at the Inn. Everyone adores him! He always calls ahead with a zillion suggestions—we call them ‘Cruzestions’—which change every visit.”

Nancy tapped her computer screen. “Here’s the latest list: first, could we put him in a room where the ocean will be a little bluer? The pictures he took last time didn’t turn out at all well! Second, could we provide a birdhouse—complete with colorfully feathered occupants and several babies in the nest—close to his room so he can capture their songs on a tape recorder?”

Mindy hooted, “At least it’s a shorter list than usual!”

“The best is yet to come.” Nancy turned her dancing eyes back to the screen. “Third, he has read ostrich meat is very healthy,” she raised her voice above Mindy’s spontaneous giggles, “and he’d like to see some on our menu. He suggests we start a herd not only to supply our needs, but also to attract guests who may not be interested in golf or tennis. He called it ‘a petting zoo for adults.’ He’s not quite sure if *herd* is the correct term for ostriches, but he’ll get back to us before we advertise.”

Their merriment was contagious. “I see why you were smiling on the phone, Nancy!” I said.

“It helps to be hearing something amusing, but a smile on my face puts a smile in my voice.”

“Ahhh, trade secrets! Should I be taking notes?” I teased.

“Like I could teach you anything you don’t know! Come here,” Nancy ordered. “Time for a decent hug! You look great, kid.”

“It’s so good to be here,” I said with true passion, soaking up all the loving in her embrace.

She squeezed me hard and released me. “Mindy adjusted her schedule today and tomorrow to give us extra orientation time. First, I’ll show you your room. Then, we’ll eat in the restaurant here. After dinner, we’ll have a bellhop help unload your car and we can relax. Tomorrow is job-training for you and, as Mindy will tell you, I’m a rough-and-tough taskmistress!”

“That’s for sure!” The young woman faked a moan. “Why don’t you sit out on the veranda now? It’s such a pretty time of day. I’ll cover,” she offered.

“A marvelous idea, Mindy. If you’d ask Dante to deliver iced tea to us, I’ll name you employee of the month.”

“Consider it done. Shall I order the plaque with a little gold plate to inscribe my name on, too?” Mindy asked impishly, her hand already on the house phone.

Nancy shook her head in mock dismay. “See what you have to look forward to, Laurel? Such impertinence!”

Out on the veranda, Nancy moved toward two wicker chairs and sank into the soft cushions with a dramatic sigh. “You’re probably sick of sitting after six days on the road, but I’m tired. I hope you left all those silly high heels of yours at home and brought only sensible shoes because this job involves lots of on-your-feet time.”

I smiled to myself. I own nothing that qualifies as silly footwear by anyone but Nancy’s standards, but took no offense. “Actually, I pulled off at Boonville and walked for a while, but sitting is fine, especially with this view and the glorious weather. It’s hard to believe my driveway at home is one icy mess!” I held out my arm. “Look—no goosebumps, even with only shirt-sleeves in winter!”

Never one to skirt touchy subjects, Nancy peered from beneath half-closed eyelids and cut to the chase: “Did you see Marley?”

“Yes.” I avoided her penetrating gaze. “She’s a bit concerned about having me within the same state borders, but we talked while she worked.” I shrugged. “She’s just being Marley. I know I’m not her favorite person and, I admit, not every mother-daughter combination works well from the mother’s side, either.”

“Figured you’d seen her and hadn’t received much of a welcome.” Nancy frowned. “Otherwise, you wouldn’t have shown up here early or had time to pull over for a walk.”

“Brunch with Marley didn’t work out because her assistant wasn’t there today. I wouldn’t think she needs an assistant. There can’t be enough demand for candles to support two people, can there?”

Nancy shrugged. “You’re asking the wrong person. By my book, candles are strictly for power outages, but what do I know? So, how are the folks?”

I correctly interpreted her terse query to include both her parents and mine. Though unrelated, the four octogenarians who form the trunks of our respective family trees—Stewart and Myrtle being Nancy’s parents, Oscar and Florence being mine—spend considerable time together. Whether scouring used bookstores for what they call “real finds,” or emptying their coin purses at rummage sales and bake sales, or playing pinochle into the wee hours, or attending Minnesota Gopher games, they keep occupied. “Fine, as always. Did you hear our Dads’ latest escapades?”

“If you mean trapping the skunk under your folk’s back porch,” she wrinkled her nose, “yes, I heard. Do you believe those two?”

“When I called Mom and Dad before I left for this trip, they mentioned their Fearsome Foursome is planning an Alaskan cruise.”

“Good grief, Mom will never finish the afghan she promised me two years ago! Their lifestyle doesn’t have much crochet-time built into it. But more power to ’em. So, how’re Benjamin and company?”

An unacclimated listener would have found Nancy’s conversational lane-shifts unnerving, but it was just part of Nancy to me; she wasn’t big on segues. “All three doing just fine. Once I turn my cell phone back on, I’ll probably have a half-dozen messages from Benjamin despite talking with him every evening.”

“Oops,” Nancy grimaced, “I bet I failed to mention you won’t have much luck with a cell phone around here. You can retrieve messages via a land-based line, but for incoming and out-going calls, we’re missing the crucial cell towers. It’s a Mendocino thing—as practical as cell phones are, historical, they ain’t, so the powers-that-be nixed ’em.”

I frowned. “Great; one more thing to upset Benjamin.”

“Some people report there’s marginal reception on the hill by St Anthony Catholic Church in Mendocino but that’s more trouble than it’s worth in my book.”

“Oh, well; I brought a stash of phone cards. As I was saying, my son and daughter are equally frantic about this trip of mine, though their reasons veer off in totally opposite directions.”

“If I had not seen you pregnant all those years ago, I would never believe those two are your natural-born children,” Nancy said with characteristic bluntness.

Having hosted similar judgments myself in the past hour, I refashioned my thoughts into cautious admissions. “Benjamin magnified Bennett’s good qualities into stultifying, or at least annoying, behaviors, and Marley exploded my best parts into unrecognizable and unpredictable creations. Bennett is...*was* cautious, Benjamin is stifling. If I’m easy-going, Marley is a blithe and restless spirit.”

Nancy looked at me shrewdly. “You’re far too generous—they don’t know how lucky they are you’re their mother, not me. Given half a chance, I’d warn Benjamin to mind his own beeswax more and yours less, and I’d tell Marley just the opposite. How are you doing, kid?” she asked brusquely. “I wish I could have stayed longer after Bennett’s funeral.”

“I’m glad you could even come back. I know August is a busy time for you at work.”

Nancy dismissed my concerns with a wave. “The owners are aware time-off can’t always be planned. I’m a dependable employee, so they accepted that request with the same good grace as my medical leave now. They were glad I could suggest you to fill in for me.” A long, thin shadow fell across us. “Oh, thanks, Dante!” Ice cubes clinked in two frosty glasses when the young man positioned a tray on the low table between us.

“Are *you* doing okay?” I asked when we were alone again, studying her face for hidden symptoms even as she toasted me with upraised glass.

“Better than okay—I’m positively giddy! For someone who has had it up to here...” she waved her hand above her head, “...with female ailments, this surgery is like winning the lottery. I have stacks of books to read while I recuperate, my freezer is loaded with heat-and-eat meals, and here you are! What could be better?” she crowed. “If I had more than a sofa bed to offer in that shack of mine, I’d expect you to stay with me. But you deserve the room here at the Inn the owners threw in to sweeten your deal. After all, you’re here to hold my job for me, not play nursemaid.”

“I’ve seen what you call a *shack* and beg to differ, but we’ll both be glad to have our own space, I’m sure!” I chuckled and Nancy knew why. We have been devoted friends since first grade but have rarely been able to sustain physical *togetherness* for extended periods of time. Once we realized as youngsters that sleepovers weren’t for us, we settled into a relationship that has weathered fifty years.

“You’ll make gobs of friends around here, I know. It will soon be pick-a-number-stand-in-line to claim a spot on your social calendar,” Nancy predicted.

“Rest assured, you’ll be the one I call when Mister Cruzen wonders why Little River Inn didn’t change the ocean’s color or dictate when birds’ eggs hatch! Tell me, what do I do when the chef doesn’t produce an ostrich entrée?”

“Our chef loves him, so leave the ostrich dilemma to the pros. Mister Cruzen is a retired businessman from Los Angeles, and richer than God. He has come to Little River Inn twice a year for the past twenty years. His visits usually coincide with his wife’s plans for an extended cruise.”

“He doesn’t vacation with her?”

“Cruises have all the appeal of a root canal for him. But his Little Buttercup—if you ever saw his wife, you’d crack up over *that* pet name—anyway,

Madame Cruzen thinks looking at the ocean any other way than from the deck of a cruise ship is a waste of time.”

“Whatever makes ’em happy,” I drawled.

“You and Bennett were unusual, you know.” It was refreshing to hear someone come right out and say Bennett’s name without funeral tones. “You enjoyed each other’s company more than any other couple I know.”

“Plain and simple reason: we were soul mates. We liked spending time together, even if it was just sitting on the back porch, or going grocery shopping late at night.” I huddled briefly beneath a melancholy mantle of memories. “Tell me about the typical Little River Inn guest.”

“A veritable plethora of humanity—hey, two good crossword puzzle words!” she teased, knowing my fondness for that distraction. “The variety of people we see is intriguing. You’ve moved in medical circles for many years—kinda goes with the territory when you marry a physician—but you’ll find a whole new world on your doorstep here. Sophisticated, but friendly. Used to fine things, but not snooty. Artists and athletic types. Activists and pacifists. A range of ages and interests.”

“Sounds interesting.”

She turned to me with a look I could only term odd. “Tell me, what do you know about civil engineers?”

“Assuming you don’t mean exceptionally *polite* engineers, you could fit what I know about such critters in your ear! Why? Is that a problem?”

She let my pathetic play-on-words slide without comment, obviously having other things on her mind. “Not if we can fix it. Little River is geographically smack-dab in the midst of several bridge projects. That’s a job for civil engineers. Several of ’em regularly play golf or tennis here, or they favor our restaurant and bar. Anyway, you can count on crossing paths, so listen up.”

“Yes, Ms Lincoln!” I saluted her crisply.

She paused long enough to stick out her tongue, and then gazed vaguely into space and recited, “Civil engineers plan, design, construct, maintain or recycle buildings, roads, bridges, railways, tunnels and—hmm, what am I forgetting? Oh, yeah—power stations, airports, dams, and harbors. They combine technical, managerial, organizational, financial, environmental and problem-solving skills.” Exhaling dramatically, she reached for her glass and quaffed her tea.

I stared, dumbfounded, across the top of my sunglasses. “Who are you, and what have you done with my friend?”

Nancy chortled. “Pretty good, huh, for a person with the memory of a gnat? After trying to figure these folks out, I got tired of asking dumb questions, so I checked the Internet and struck gold.”

“Is memorizing that list part of my job description?” I asked drolly. “Because if it is, I’m going to need a minute.”

“Only if you want to know what they’re talking about.” She winked and stage-whispered, “Pssst! Wanna borrow my cheat-sheet?”

“Yeah, right; that’s destined to be a booming success.” We grinned, remembering our cheating episode involving a third grade test question: *Name the capital of Minnesota*. Our answer, *Minneapolis*, was wrong on two levels, and we were in trouble both at school and at home when our wickedness was exposed. “Besides, I challenge any civil engineer to hold a candle to doctors when it comes to technical talk.”

“Don’t bank on it. Are you hungry?” she asked, checking her watch.

“Not particularly; I had a late lunch.”

“Okay, let’s make sure your room suits your fancy. On our way, I’ll give you the ten-cent tour.”

“Hey, seeing all this green in winter, I’ll pay double!”

We strolled the beautifully maintained grassy slopes; Nancy rolled her eyes each time I exclaimed about the lushness underfoot. “You should move here; this is pretty much what it’s like, year-round.” Meandering along the asphalt separating the main building from the other structures, I gave myself a mental quiz based on the literature Nancy had sent. I felt confident I knew which buildings offered a variety of rooms and suites, and which were nonresidential.

“Every guest room has an ocean view, but the best ones are on the second level. I hope you don’t mind steps.”

“I can’t imagine life without steps—you’ve seen our house.”

Nancy shot me a quick glance as she selected the master key on her key ring. I knew she had zeroed in on the *our* I unconsciously used; old habits cling like moss to river-rocks. I blinked fast and focused on the brass numbers for the room I would call home for two months: 239. It scared me how close to the surface tears still lingered.

Nancy swung open the door and stepped aside to let me enter. I gasped an involuntary but entirely appropriate “Oh!” I have stayed in a number of very nice rooms, but few have instantly hooked me like this one did. The ocean, framed by the sliding glass door opposite the entrance, shimmered like scenery on a travelogue. We had just seen the same panorama from the veranda, but Nancy was right—this height added a special dimension.

“Too bad Little Miss Buttercup can’t see this,” I said passionately. “I challenge any cruise ship to top this.”

Nancy grinned. “If you like the view, you’ll love the sound effects.” She slipped the lock to open the balcony’s door and, instantly, the picture-perfect view added the ocean’s hum in a mesmerizing cadence. Like a tugboat, she guided me out to the balcony and I crossed into paradise. In exchange for the tempo of ocean music, I would gladly live in a tent—but this was no camp-out. My room was spacious, immaculate, soothing, and inviting. “Did you pull strings for me, or are all the rooms like this?”

“No strings required. Our rooms are very nice—some are just *very nicer* than others! I did have a little refrigerator and microwave brought in since you’re staying longer than our usual guests in this unit. If there’s anything else you need, just let someone know. When you want a meal alone, you can eat at the table in your room or come out here. I want you to have *alone* times, but not *lonely* times, Laurel. The ocean is a great companion for *alone* times.”

I squeezed her hand. “And there’s you to conquer the lonely times—the best friend a kid could want.”

“Don’t you forget it,” she said gruffly. “Okay, time to introduce you to our Garden-View Dining Room. Or we could eat in Ole’s Whale Watch Bar,” she waffled before saying firmly, “No, tonight it’s the Garden.”

Ten minutes later, I had to agree—the dining room was perfect. I scanned the menu and my saliva glands kicked in. “Wow. How do you choose with such tempting options?”

“Start at the top and work your way through the menu. That’s what I do. Tonight I’m back in the salad zone. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve done the top-to-bottom thing over the years. I break out of the pattern only to try new items added to the menu.”

“A salad sounds good, especially whatever the woman seated nearest the door is eating—which one is that?”

Nancy craned her neck to check it out and nodded approvingly. “Silver’s Coastal Salad. Go for it.”

It required no urging to dig in when our meals arrived. I mentally checked off the ingredients remembered from the menu: organic butter lettuce, baby spinach, julienne carrots, jicama, cucumber mingled with what Nancy informed me were oven-roasted beets, lemon and cumin vinaigrette drizzled throughout and feta cheese sprinkled like croutons. The first bite plopped me body-and-soul into the essence of California. Nancy had requested a window seat and our view of the brick stairway leading to perfectly terraced gardens

just inches beyond pristine glass made me forget about Minnesota by the time our Crème Brulée arrived. Finally, I wiped my lips on the linen napkin and groaned.

“Good huh? I hope you’ll eat here often; or grab an early supper in the bar—they serve meal-sized appetizers and great sandwiches. And our bartenders’ conversational gambits are legendary...*Oooo*, don’t be too obvious, but take a look over your left shoulder at the guy three tables away.”

A smile tugged at my lips. The *take-a-look* comment was so typically Nancy it was as if we’d been dropped back into high school. Just as I had done a thousand times at her bidding in the pizza parlor, or at football games, or from the front seat of her fin-tailed Chevy cruising Main Street, I casually scanned the room using our time-tested technique and included *The Guy* in my sweeping glance.

Nancy knew the instant my eyes landed on him and pressed her foot against my instep to apply brakes to my visual journey. She leaned forward and said in a low voice, “He’s one of them.”

I allowed myself another peek. Gray hair formed a shoulder-length ponytail in which whorls of near-ringlet intensity threatened to burst free from the tie-back resting above his collar. His equally curly full beard and mustache sported wisps of gray that flirted with a rich brown matched by his eyebrows. This was one hairy dude compared to my whisker-free, barber-maintained Bennett.

“One of them *whats?*” I tried to remember Nancy’s list: *Pacifist? Artist?* I could easily imagine this guy hoisting a placard in support of some cause or approaching a canvas with paintbrush in hand.

“Civil engineers. His name is Cory Whipple and he’s a regular here.”

“He’s a guest at the Inn?” I glanced back for another look at this specimen of the breed Nancy predicted would soon populate my world. Despite his excessive hairiness, what I saw intrigued me: beige shirt open at the collar, sleeves rolled up neatly to mid-forearm. A clean, good-quality hooded sweat-shirt was slung across the chair to his left. His long squared-off fingers wrapped confidently around the restaurant’s solid silverware. When he shifted, I glimpsed a well-shined boot and tan cuffed slacks beneath the tablecloth. But my eyes kept returning to his head; male-pattern baldness certainly wasn’t a problem in his family.

“He lives at The Woods,” Nancy informed me in an undertone.

“In a tree?” I teased, unable to resist even knowing this would set Nancy off. It did, and her low-throated laughter drew smiles from around the room.

Even civil engineers respond when Nancy laughs. At least, Cory Whipple smiled engagingly at his table-for-one with his knife and fork positioned over a fillet mignon. He had no vegetarian instincts—this was a steak-loving man. From the strength evident in his shoulders and the set of his jaw, I suspected he could wrestle a steer to the ground if vittles ran short out on the trail. But I was gratified to see he had nearly finished a healthy salad, as well. Like Bennett, he was a man who worked his way through the food groups without balking.

“In his house, Goofus,” Nancy was saying, and it took me a second to reconnect. “Pay attention: I said *at* The Woods, not *in* the woods. When someone mentions The Woods around here, they’re usually referring to an adults-only community just outside of town.”

“From what I’ve seen of Little River, *everything* is outside of town!” I said wryly, turning away physically and mentally from the civil engineer’s table.

“Hey now, don’t get all big-city on us—we like the fact Little River is, well, *little*,” Nancy cautioned, wagging her index finger in my direction. “You’ll get people’s dander up if you...”

“Hey, yourself! Calm down. I like *little*. Remember me? We grew up in *little*. Even Rochester feels too big sometimes. This foray back to genuine *little* is a treat for me.”

Nancy turned serious, leaning forward across her dessert plate. “Are you going to be okay here, Laurel? Everything I’ve read says grieving people should avoid isolation. You’ve had family nearby, and neighbors, friends, the works.” She frowned. “There’s a steady flow of people around here, but it’s not the same.”

The fact my friend had read about grief touched and surprised me. “I’ll be fine,” I said as much to reassure her as to bolster my own confidence. “Benjamin and his attentive harem of two haven’t given me enough room lately to entertain a private thought. I’m not only ready for *little*; I’m also desperate for *space*. Your invitation has given it to me, Nancy, and I’m grateful.”

“You’re welcome,” Nancy acknowledged in a worried tone.

“This may sound callous, so I hope you understand what I mean, but it’s going to be good to be someplace I *didn’t* share with Bennett.” I paused to shuffle my thoughts into words. “Back home, so much reminds me of him. I drive to the Mall and hear him saying, ‘This is the worst intersection in the world.’ Every inch of our house shouts *Bennett!* and I can’t sit down to a meal without missing him. We did so many things together. It was great at the time, but now I’m paying the price for having few memories that don’t involve him. Sorry; didn’t mean to put a damper on our dinner.”

She made great ceremony of folding her napkin. “Not to worry. Are you ready to go?” she asked with a gruffness I recognized as a standard defense against an emotional landslide. I nodded and we left the table.

Three steps away, she veered off-course and halted beside Cory Whipple’s table. “Hello! I’d like to introduce you to the friend I mentioned who’ll be holding down the fort while I’m away. Laurel McPherson, this is Cory Whipple. He frequently massacres little white balls on the Little River Inn golf course and calls it sport.”

The man faked a cringe, accompanied by a resonating laugh, “Cruel, cruel woman!” His voice was like late-night radio—those stations with an easy-listening music DJ, not the ranting all-night talk-show hosts. I pegged him as a baritone. “Hello, Laurel,” he said amiably.

Nancy’s laugh rippled again. “Cory, Laurel just arrived from Minnesota—you know, the state where little white balls on the ground are more likely made of snow.”

Cory smiled winsomely and pushed back his chair to shake hands with me. Doing so positioned his napkin precariously close to a puddle of steak sauce on his plate. Automatically, I reached for the linen with my left hand while Cory’s grip on my right hand held firm. He lifted our joined hands to see what had distracted me and rescued the napkin with his left hand. Our entwined appendages looked like a game of Twister.

We disentangled ourselves as he said with a rich chuckle, “Thanks—what a mess that could have been! It’s nice to meet you, Laurel. I hope you enjoy your time here. Are you a golfer?”

“Not by a long shot—hey, not bad, huh?” We all laughed.

“Don’t try to top this gal with words, Cory,” Nancy cautioned. “She’s a regular whiz with ’em. Writes poetry like a true bard and how-to manuals with equal ease.”

“We’re keeping a hungry man from his dinner, Nancy,” I gently interrupted her. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Cory.”

My smile lingered as we left the restaurant and passed through the bar. After a quick introduction to the bartender who cracked jokes with customers, all the while giving service-extraordinaire in Ole’s Whale Watch Bar, I said, “He seems pleasant enough,” and caught Nancy’s curious glance as we ambled along the veranda.

“Who?” Her confusion over my pronouns was understandable since our most recent encounter was the female bartender. “Oh, you mean Cory! No

argument from me. He's quite the hot shot in high-level management for the Albion Bridge project that's just in the initial phase."

"I thought Fort Bragg had a bridge project."

She whistled. "I forget what a steel trap your mind is. We're both right; Cory's the main consultant for the Noyo River Bridge up in Fort Bragg, but after the wreck, the Albion Bridge needed emergency help. Since he was already here, guess who got called in?"

"Okay, I'm up to speed; I remember you telling me about the accident on the Albion Bridge. In August, wasn't it?" The summer was a blur to me; Bennett's death loomed over everything.

She nodded. "The bridge was repaired enough for traffic to resume after a few days but will require major work in the future, and Cory's one of the best to make it happen. When he comes to the Inn, he usually seems very tired, but he's always friendly. Don't you just love his smile?"

My eyebrows did a mental leap. Nancy was the last person I expected to comment on, let alone gush over, a guy's smile, but since I had witnessed how Cory's from-the-heart beam lit a path from his lips to his eyes, I couldn't disagree.

"Little River Inn is only a hop-skip-and-jump from The Woods so we're an easy dinner choice for him. Don't let his California looks fool you. I know you're used to high-gloss doctor-types, but these engineers are major brainiacs."

Her juvenile choice of descriptors told me I wasn't alone in my mental lurches backward in time when we got together. "Point well-taken. His astuteness shines through his eyes and his confidence level is evident. I imagine he's very good at what he does and comfortable with his own success. I'll bet he still knows his way around a slide rule, as well as whatever computer programs a fresh-out-of-college civil engineer uses now."

Nancy's lips formed an exaggerated oval. "Wow. Being married to Bennett all these years turned you into something of a brainiac yourself. At least in terms of on-the-spot character assessment."

I shifted my features into mock disdain. "I'll have you know, Nancy Lincoln, Bennett McPherson was one lucky dude to land a woman of my caliber. What are you talking about, *turned into*? A pox on you and your village for such disrespectful remarks!"

Our verbal jousting was lame, but it felt so good to be together we were easily amused. We linked arms like we used to way-back-when and stepped into the front office. Mindy greeted us, "Sounds like you enjoyed your meal."

“You’ll have to excuse us,” I explained, “we get goofy whenever we see each other. Our meal was fabulous. I hadn’t really thought much about where I’d eat, but now I know where I’ll end up most often.” Mindy’s open friendliness after my own daughter’s stony reception was refreshing.

Nancy introduced me to Sandy Harrison, a woman in her late forties, just coming on duty. Mindy signed out and waved goodbye. “Sweet kid,” Nancy said when the door swung shut behind the young woman; Sandy agreed readily as Nancy continued, “Mindy grew up in Caspar, just a couple of miles away, and has worked here for the past five summers; this year she stayed on for a college internship. She may ask for a recommendation from you, so keep that in mind.”

“Sounds like Mindy easily could have taken over for you, Nancy. Did you snatch the job out from under her to accommodate me?”

“Not at all. I asked her first, but she wants to learn about totally different aspects of the hospitality industry—that’s her major in college—during the extra hours required to satisfy her internship. She’ll still work with you, but she’s adding on other responsibilities. Now, let’s call the evening bellhop and get you moved into your room.” She punched a two-digit code on the phone pad. “I’ll show you a few things while we wait. Here’s where we put our personal things during a shift...”

By the time Weston arrived, I possessed an impressive master key, the password to the registration desk computer, the code needed to retrieve voice mail, a week’s worth of black blouses with LITTLE RIVER INN embroidered on the breast pockets, and my very own name tag. We bid Sandy good night and I led the way to my car. Weston offered to park it closer to my room, so Nancy and I followed the taillights and met him at the steps leading to the second floor.

Weston gave me the courtesy I sensed he offered each guest, despite the fact I came with six times as much luggage. He carefully positioned my trunk beneath the window, lined up my suitcases along one wall, carried in two boxes of books and puzzles, placed my hanging-clothes carefully in the closet, and refused my proffered tip. “No, Ma’am. You’re staff, and staff doesn’t tip each other.”

“I’m not officially staff until tomorrow,” I countered with a smile.

Shaking his head adamantly, he backed out the door. “Treat me to a Coke someday, and we’ll call it even.” His two-finger salute bounced off his hat brim.

Nancy beamed. “What a guy! And he had a grand idea; entice him out to the veranda some evening and ask him to sing for you.” A dreamy smile shaped her lips. “He croons like Andy Williams.”

“I’m sure *that* compliment thrills a young man his age, to be told he sings like someone old enough to be his grandfather!”

Nancy opened one eye and aimed a pointed look at me. “No need to *mention* Andy Williams. Just get Weston to sing.”

I was as drawn to the ocean as any landlubber and Nancy willingly joined a friendly seagull and me on the balcony. Looking to where the horizon swallowed the sea, we settled into Adirondack chairs and let our conversation drift. Nancy’s fierce loyalty to me was legendary, and either of us would leap tall buildings in a single bound to save the other’s life. But she was powerless to protect my heart from the ravages of grief.

Nancy had never married—in fact, Nancy had rarely dated, but somehow she understood my hollowness without Bennett. She had borne no children, yet she knew how to listen to a mother’s woes without mouthing platitudes in return. Though we didn’t share many life experiences, we cherished a bond that spanned the years.

Our acquaintance began when we each lost a tooth in a hullabaloo with Freddy Plitzer in first grade. At best, bloody blouses are a weak foundation for an enduring friendship, but we were victors in a shared battle and instantly formed rock-solid footings.

What I needed now at this hard spot in my life’s journey, Nancy was—and more. In one evening, she did more good than all the support groups in the world and offered better consolation than a shelf of how-to-deal-with-tragedy tomes.

Nancy sensed precisely what I needed: laughter without rebuke for letting sorrow slide, even if only for a few hours. We laughed over silly things until our sides ached. Several times we got so boisterous, we stumbled back into my room until our raucous laughter subsided. We conducted cheeky *What I should have said*...conversations coming nowhere near what either of us would have told the oblivious waiter I encountered in Nebraska.

When I reported on the rude gas-station clerk I endured in Wyoming, Nancy dredged up her long-forgotten high-school drama role of Scarlet and struck a pose against the balcony rail as she created that young man out of thin air and jabbed his invisible chest with her finger. “Sugah, yoah actions have precipitated a most unfortunate event. Ah feel a case of vapahs comin’ on, and you surah don’a wanna be ’round if vapahs ovahcome me. It ain’t prit-tay.” She fanned her face languidly while I hooted and held my sides.

“An’ don’t be givin’ me that wounded soulful look. It don’t work on southern women. We *own* soulful and we positively *embody* wounded. You would be

wise to remembah that, Sugah. And remembah it for a *very* long time, because Ah'm gonna remembah yoah disregawd of service to me for a very, *verrry* long time." Batting her eyelashes, Nancy cooed, "Now, be a nice lil genna-man an' come 'round from behind tha' coun'er. I'm askin' you evah so sweetly to pick up the restroom key you flung at mah feet. Come along, or Ah'll be obliged to inflict serious damage to a part of yoah anatomy you no doubt consider highly important. Do Ah make mahself cleah? Ah thought so."

If anyone occupied the nearby rooms, they would have joined in my unstoppable laughter. When Nancy gets revved up, she mows a wide path. Sometimes Bennett would answer what I assumed was a work-related call. Minutes later, I would pass by him and realize he was a limp pile of bones, gasping with silent laughter. He would pull me down in his lap so we could listen cheek-to-cheek to Nancy's account of dragging fallen limbs to the fire barrel, or a kitchen disaster—which, for Nancy, was a weekly event—and laugh for hours after hanging up.

In the months since Bennett's death, I had clung to Nancy's *Nancyness* even across the miles. Her gruffness in the face of mourning had formed a fortress around me just as her unbridled absurdities did now.

She may not have said all the right things according to those grief-books she'd been reading, but she knew what to do five months ago: she came when I needed her, like an awaited carrier pigeon bringing a survival kit. Even after she returned home, she called regularly—unerringly knowing when I direly needed a lifeline.

Looking up from the bottom of my life's deepest pit five months ago, I welcomed her irreverent "*Hey, kid; don't worry about attracting moths; just leave the light on. Ol' Nancy's coming home!*" even more than the dozens of post-funeral cakes and casseroles. Nancy never once sat and cried with me, but she pulled me through each time I succumbed. What she lacked in platitudes she compensated for in practical help and a steadiness to balance my faltering.

Solid, stable Benjamin made funeral arrangements and translated the legalese of insurance papers and sorted through innumerable financial records. But *Nancy* thought to cancel Bennett's dentist appointment when she found the reminder postcard wedged in the bathroom mirror frame. *Nancy* intervened when a well-meaning neighbor inquired a mere two days after the funeral about buying our mammoth snow-thrower which, according to him, "...was far too much machine for a woman to handle."

Sweet, serene Jessie tracked the myriad gifts and memorials, delivered vase after vase of flowers to local nursing homes, and wrote personalized thank-you

notes for hours, but *Nancy* thought to retrieve the dry-cleaning Bennett had dropped off the morning of his death. *Nancy* silently made a pot of tea and laced it with a spot of brandy the day Bennett's weeping secretary delivered the box of personal things from his desk—including an in-process cartoon he was drawing for my fifty-sixth birthday.

Halsey bestowed tender hugs and healing kisses and filled my refrigerator door with her special crayon-scripted comforts, but *Nancy* scrubbed toilets until they gleamed. She remembered that lowly task had been Bennett's traditional Saturday-morning love gift over the years of our marriage. Had the job been left to me, the toilets in our house would have crusted over before I could have knelt beside them without succumbing to torrents of grief.

And now midst unfamiliar surroundings of my temporary home, though she had nothing profound to say to ease the pain that had taken up residence in my heart, she helped me laugh again. We howled through goofy plans to create an animated birds' nest for Mister Cruze; we concocted commercials complete with jingles about ostriches that dissolved us with giggles; we even invented knock-knock jokes involving birds and laughed so hard we scared our seagull off the railing.

"If I could bottle you up, I'd make a million, kid," I told her when I walked her out to her car hours later.

"And just who would be giving you that million?"

"Other women who have lost the love of their life, and have a son who wants to help too much and a daughter who hopes she won't be called on to help at all, and..." I choked, unable to go on.

The nearly full moon illuminated *Nancy's* face like a billboard as she finished for me, "...women who wonder if just maybe the precious daughter who died thirty years ago tomorrow might have become the person they need now. *Those women?*"

I sucked in my breath, stunned anew by *Nancy's* unerring perception. "Those very ones," I whispered.

*Nancy* hugged me fiercely. "Get some rest, kid—tomorrow's a big day and it will be a good day; you'll see. Ya just gotta trust ol' *Nancy*."

A thought whizzed through my brain like a New York subway train, leaving sparks in its wake. I pulled back and held her at arm's length. "I can't believe how dense I am. You planned it this way, didn't you? My arrival *today*, our being together *tomorrow* in honor of a special new start for me—on the *very day* you know is one of the year's worst. You're a wonder...but how did you

finagle surgery with such precise timing?” Her eyes widened innocently above clamped lips. “What did I do to deserve a friend like you?”

“Hey, you didn’t tell me my new glasses looked ugly the first day I wore them in second grade. That goes a long way for me.” Beneath her flippancy I heard, “*I love you, kid.*”

My heart was in my throat, but I knew how to play the game with this partner. “I’m telling you now: those were particularly disgusting glasses with those little rhinestone wing-things. But without them, you couldn’t even see across the room and since Miss Placer never let us sit together, you had to see my signals if we hoped to survive.”

“Haven’t thought about Miss Placer for years! Remember her green plaid kilt with the yarn tassels?” She rolled her eyes and fastened her seatbelt. “Glad you’re here, Laurel. See you at the desk in the morning. Eight o’clock sharp.”

I mimicked Weston’s earlier salute. “G’night, boss-lady!” When her tail-lights faded from view, I amended my farewell to “G’night, dear friend” and walked slowly back to my room beneath a peek-a-boo moon. For the second time in eight hours, I cracked open my journal and curled up against the bed’s headboard:

*Sometimes I need to be the first to taste the falling glistening flakes  
and make a string of prints to nowhere on a covered hill  
and send a ball of clinging snow to sail and startle a sleeping stump.  
Sometimes I want to be the one to race with no one along the beach,  
letting ants and sand sneak through my toes  
as I hide them from the sun that teases me  
while racy clouds chase it across the naked field of the sky.  
I like to have the waves gallop in and sweep up my castles—  
for once they’re with the sea, no one can steal them.*

“Goodnight, Bennett, my treasured love,” I murmured, sliding my journal into its temporary home—a nightstand drawer two thousand miles from everything familiar. “Our love is safe within the castle of my heart.” As so often happened, my conversation with Bennett eased into a prayer: “Please, God, don’t let me ever forget Bennett’s face...or his voice...or his loving.”