



NUW ROADS TRAVELLED

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*"Two roads diverged in a yellow wood...
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference."*

From the poem The Road not Taken by Robert Frost

Introduction

Robert Frost has summed up NUW, Not the Usual Way very well. Not the Usual Way is an international online support group for independent authors, formed by Kristie Leigh Maguire almost two years ago.

All the writers there have taken alternate routes to publication. Some are published exclusively in ebook format, some are published with independent traditional publishers, more with POD (print on demand) and others totally self-published, where they have done everything themselves.

They all have one thing in common, their love of writing and determination to make a go of their career no matter which way their books get into the hands of readers.

Think of this book as your own personal browsable bookshop, where you can read about some of these talented NUW authors and read extracts from their books. Maybe you'll discover a favorite new writer, or new books to explore.

Come with us and take the road less travelled...



Lorie Ham has been singing gospel music and writing since she was a child. Her first song and poem were published when she was 13 and she has gone on to publish many articles, short stories and poems throughout the years. She has had two mystery novels published in the last 2 years by AmErica House. Both of these books, **MURDER IN FOUR PART HARMONY & THE TROUBLE WITH TENORS**, are mysteries set in the world of gospel music.

She is also the editor of an online mystery book review site for Suite101.com. Lorie lives in the San Joaquin Valley of California and is married to Larry Ham, who works for a Christian radio production company. They have two children, Jessica and Joseph, 4 cats and 2 dogs.

The Trouble with Tenors
by Lorie Ham

Alexandra Walters, a gospel singer, finds that tenors bring nothing but trouble to her life when she returns home to find her tenor singing ex-husband trying to take their daughter away. Things get even more complicated when she is asked to help out at a local gospel music convention and finds herself accused of murder and literally fighting for her own survival.

With the help of her boyfriend, private eye Stephen Carlucci, she digs up a multitude of secrets while searching for the real killer, and ends up accused of yet another murder. Further complicating her life is the new Sergeant of Detectives in town, William Wright, who is hot on her trail.

Will Alex lose her daughter? Will she find herself in jail for murder? Or will she be able to track down a killer behind the scenes of the intricate world of gospel music.

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Chapter One

Tenors are trouble. Those high, smooth, sensual notes should be outlawed. Tenors draw you in and wreak more havoc on your life than all the baritones and basses put together. At least that had been my experience after twenty-five years traveling the country singing gospel music.

The worst offender was my ex-husband Mike Evans who dumped me for a bimbo groupie right after our daughter Jessica was born. In four years the phone calls had been scarce and birthday presents and cards non-existent. Then out of the blue he had sent me an early thirtieth birthday card just before I left for a weekend of concerts in Phoenix.

It bothered me. Mike never did anything without an ulterior motive. And I found it even more suspicious that he had addressed it to Alexandra Walters. He had never before been willing to accept the fact I had taken back my maiden name.

Thoughts of Mike made me push my 57 Chevy Bel Air to the limit as I sped along Highway 99 from Fresno to my little town of Donlyn, California. Only the early morning fog slowed me down. It was so thick I could barely make out the grape vineyards and peach orchards that dotted the landscape, lying dormant as they awaited the return of spring to give them new life.

My heart ached to be home with my little girl. Recently I had started leaving her home on some trips to prepare us for the separation once she began school next fall. Jessica was in the good hands of my longtime friend and tenant Cassandra Gable, but I hated leaving her behind.

Unfortunately, this was how I made my living, such as it was. We'd never survive if I didn't rent out rooms in the big old house Mike left me to finish paying for, and I'd never had much luck at other jobs. There was a side benefit to renting out rooms; I'd become a part of a whole new family.

My tenants made this first Thanksgiving without my parents bearable. We shared a multicultural meal of German, Hispanic and Italian food. My Grandma Walters old recipes had provided the German touch, though I wasn't half the cook she had been. My parents recently moved across the country to North Carolina so the only family that had been present was my little brother Tommy.

I let up on the gas as I spotted a familiar sign. Donlyn City Limits. Population 10,000. It was a town made up mostly of farmers and Hispanic farm workers.

Turning onto Reed Avenue I smiled. Home. The Kings River flowed swiftly behind the old two story homes that lined Reed. Born and raised a Donlynite, I intended to raise Jessica here. My spirit was too restless to stay home for long periods of time, but I loved returning.

As I pulled into the driveway I spotted an unfamiliar car in front of my house. Probably my boyfriend, Stephen Carlucci, I thought. He rented different cars to suit his mood, vowing never to buy one until I'd sell him mine, which I'd never do. Stephen said he might have to marry me for my car.

I grabbed my suitcases from the trunk and rushed to the front door. Dropping my cases on the wooden entryway floor, I ran into the living room only to skid to a stop. What I saw made my stomach turn and my temperature hit boiling. Yes, tenors always brought trouble.

"Welcome home," said Mike, who sat on my blue couch next to Jessica. Mike stood and reached out a hand in greeting, I ignored it so he turned to the young redhead who sat next to him on one of my chairs.

"Alexandra, this is my bride, Leslie." I cringed. I always hated it when he called me Alexandra and he knew it.

"It's so nice to see y'all again," said Leslie, in an overly sweet southern drawl that made my teeth hurt. This was the groupie Mike had left us for and she had the nerve to offer a well-manicured hand in greeting like nothing had ever happened. She was dressed in a purple pantsuit that hugged every inch of her slender, curvy figure. I wondered how much child-support money it had taken to pay for it. Let's see her wear something like that after a kid or two, I thought.

I knew Mike's uncle always paid him in cash under the table or we would have gotten child-support all of these years. I was pretty certain Mike never even filed his income tax return. I had been tempted to turn him in, but it didn't seem the Christian thing to do. Besides, God always provided for us.

At that moment Cassandra Gable, an old schoolmate and friend who watched Jessica for me, walked in carrying a tray of iced tea. "Drinks, anyone?" She smiled apologetically, knowing well the problems of ex-husbands. Cass had moved here to escape hers.

Ignoring Leslie's greeting, I took the tray from Cassandra and set it on the oak coffee table. "Why don't you take Jess into the kitchen for cookies," I said between clenched teeth. I picked up Jess and gave her a big hug. "I missed you so much." She hugged me back and I wanted more than anything to ignore my uninvited guests and go to the kitchen with her.

"Honey, wouldn't you like a snack? Go with Cassandra to the kitchen and I'll join you in a few minutes."

Jess pouted. "But I missed you, Mommy." It tore at my heart, but I needed to get rid of Mike and his bimbo, and had no desire to make a scene in front of my daughter.

"I know, honey. But I need to talk to your daddy for a minute. Tell ya what, have Cassandra get Mommy's blue suitcase. There's a surprise in it for you."

"Oh goody, a surprise." Jess jumped down and pulled Cassandra into the entryway. Now I was past boiling, I had carefully picked out the stuffed black cat and looked forward to giving it to her.

As soon as Jess was out of the room I turned on Mike. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to see my daughter. No crime in that is there?" Mike started to pull out a cigarette, but my glare stopped him. This must be a new habit he had acquired along with his new wife. If he kept it up he could ruin the only thing I still admired about him, his voice.

"You haven't been to see her for the past four years, why now?"

"Have a seat, Alex. We need to talk."

Mike returned to the couch, but I remained standing. It was no longer his house and I wasn't his wife. I didn't have to obey his commands. He sighed, then bestowed upon me one of the same winning smiles that had first attracted me to him. Now I found nothing about him attractive.

Mike had changed very little; same sandy brown hair, hazel eyes, tall well-muscled build. No wonder the groupies went wild over him. At thirty-two he still looked like a college jock. When he sang in that perfect tenor voice, a girl could easily lose herself. The curse of the tenors. But living with him dulled the shine of his charms.

Mike was typical of too many Gospel quartet singers. They traveled the country without their wives and felt justified in enjoying the female companionship offered them in every town. After all they were lonely. Thankfully, there were still some good, moral people in the business. The bad ones were the reason I'd left the quartet circuit to go solo.

"Alex," he finally said. "Leslie and I just got back from our honeymoon."

Leslie smiled adoringly at Mike. "We went to the Caribbean," she said in a soft feathery voice.

Good for you I thought.

Mike nervously played with a book of matches. "I'll get to the point. We think it'd be better for Jessica to live with us since we could give her a real home now, with two parents."

"I've always wanted to be a mother," added Leslie.

So that's what he was after. After all this time why would he want Jessica? If Leslie was so hot to be a mother why didn't they have kids of their own? "GET OUT!"

Mike's eyes grew wide in astonishment. "But, Alex, it's the best thing for Jessica."

"How could living with you and your wife be good for Jess?"

Leslie looked offended. I was glad. I wasn't a mean person, but Mike always brought out my bad side. It was a miracle we hadn't killed each other when we were married.

He glared at me. No more charm and blarney. "Let me list a few reasons. You can barely afford to make ends meet. You can't even afford to have health insurance so you can get Jess proper treatment for her asthma. You hang around with unsavory people, you..."

"Unsavory people?" I interrupted.

"Your 'boyfriend' is connected to the Mafia. And ever since you were a reserve officer you've hung around with cops. You even keep a gun in your house."

"For your information Stephen is not connected, his father used to be. And cops are some of the finest people I've ever known, certainly miles above the character of some of the people you hang around with. And my gun is locked away in the safe in my office."

I couldn't take any more of this nonsense. I walked to the front door and swung it open wide only to find Stephen on my doorstep about to push my doorbell.

"Are you psychic?" he asked.

"If I was I would have found a way to avoid this." I snapped, stepping aside. "Mike, get out of here."

He and Leslie left as Stephen came in, but Mike grabbed the door before I could slam it in his face. "We're staying at the San Franciscan downtown. Call me when you cool off and we can talk about this like adults." He let go of the door and I slammed it shut in his face. Perhaps not a mature reaction, but I felt an appropriate one.

Stephen stood in the entryway with a puzzled look in his gray eyes.

"Wasn't that your ex?"

I merely nodded, not yet trusting myself to speak. Several minutes passed in silence, the look in Stephen's eyes changed to concern. He reached out and I collapsed against his strong slender frame, burying my face in his shoulder. Mike had said some things that hit home. Maybe I couldn't give Jess everything she wanted but she had everything she needed, and I gave her something Mike never could. Love.

Pulling myself together, I led Stephen into the living room where I collapsed onto the couch. "He wants Jess."

In the last three years Stephen had become very fond of Jess, and me.

"He can't do that, can he?"

I sighed. "I don't think so, unless he can convince a judge they'd give her a better home. He's married again and says she'd be better off in a real home."

Stephen began pacing the room. "That's stupid, she has a real home. Why'd he all of a sudden decide to be a father?"

"I don't know."

Suddenly he stopped and joined me on the couch. "Marry me, Alex."

My eyes widened in shock. Our relationship had only recently become more than friendship and with my track record I didn't feel ready for marriage, and yet if it would help me keep Jess. I shook my head. No, that wasn't right.

"I'm touched by the offer, but we can't get married just because of this. We have to wait until we're ready."

He brushed an unruly lock of blond hair from his eyes. "If you change your mind the offer still holds. You know how I feel about you, it wouldn't be a sacrifice on my part."

Yes, I knew how he felt and I loved him. But I didn't know if I was actually in love with him, and if I got married again I wanted it to be for the right reasons. When I fell for Mike I'd been on the rebound from a doomed relationship with a married man; one that ended before we went too far, except with our hearts. It had been the final straw. I left my family's singing group and the quartet circuit planning to start my own solo career, but I left a week too late. I stayed on the circuit long enough to meet Mike and let his charms soothe my broken heart. We kept in touch and the relationship developed. If I hadn't married Mike I wouldn't have Jess, the center of my world.

I took Stephen's hand and gave it an affectionate squeeze; I'd come to depend heavily on him. Despite his passion for cars and a cat allergy that sometimes drove me crazy when he forgot to take his pills, he was a good man and as gorgeous as a young Robert Redford.

"I should call Paul. He can recommend a good lawyer if it comes to that." I got up and headed to the kitchen, Stephen followed. Paul Unruh was my cousin, and an excellent criminal lawyer.

I went to the phone and Stephen took two Pepsi's out of the fridge, popped the top on one and handed it to me. He knew me too well; I was desperate for a Pepsi fix. A love for Pepsi was a Walters family trait, and I was a Walters, not an Evans. As I dialed my cousin's office I noticed that Jess was gone and the remnants of her jelly sandwich lay on the large oak table I'd inherited from Grandma Walters. Until she died, Grandma had been the rock of the Walters family. How I wished she were here now.

"Paul Unruh, Attorney at Law. May I help you?" asked a soft soprano voice.

"Peggy, this is Alex. Is Paul in?"

"Sure, honey. Let me buzz him for you."

Less than a minute later Paul came on the line. "What's up, Cuz?"

"I need the name of a good lawyer. Mike is back and he wants to take Jess from me."

"I'll talk to my new partner, Pete Krahn. He's handled tons of custody cases."

"Thanks, Paul."

"No problem, Cuz. I'll have Peggy dig up the records from your divorce case and we'll go from there. Sorry to rush this but I've got a meeting with a client in ten minutes. Don't worry, I'll take care of things."

Before I could respond I was conversing with a dial tone. I felt some better, but not a lot. I trusted Paul's assessment of his partner, but Mike was a smart creep, the worst kind.

I joined Stephen at the table. "Paul says he'll take care of it."

Stephen got up. "I think I'll check Mike out and see what he's been up to since he split." Against his father's objections, Stephen had become a private investigator, a fact I was very glad of at that moment. He pecked me on the cheek and headed for the door and I went to find Jess.

Jess was in front of the TV in our bedroom cuddling the stuffed black cat and our live one, Watson. When she saw me she jumped up and Watson scattered. She flung her arms around my neck, careful to hang on to the new toy. "Thank you, Mommy. I love it. I named it Trixie."

My baby, I loved her more than life and I wasn't going to let anyone take her from me.

Whatever the cost.

End of chapter one

Murder in Four Part Harmony
by Lorie Ham

Alexandra Walters has been singing gospel music since she was 12.

Disillusioned by the hypocrisy too common behind the scenes on the Gospel Quartet Circuit, she has opted for a quieter life of a small solo career.

Alex returns from a tour in Oregon to find, Jerry, a former love from her days on the circuit, suspected of murdering his low life cousin. She turns to Stephen Carlucci, a private investigator friend who would like to be more than just friends, for help in proving Jerry's innocence.

The investigation takes them into the underside of the gospel music world and briefly into the world of the Mafia. While trying to prove Jerry's innocence, Alex must face threats against herself and her child, a missing cat, Stephen's jealousy, and her lingering feelings for Jerry.

Will Alex find the killer? Could the man she once loved turn out to be a killer? Will Alex make the right choices or turn her back on everything she believes for the love of the wrong man?

Chapter One

I fiddled with the small heart-shaped locket that always hung around my neck, pacing nervously as I waited to go on stage. After twenty-four years of singing gospel music you'd think I wouldn't get nervous, but butterflies and church foyers go together in my world.

Nothing seemed right this trip. I missed my personal cheerleader. My daughter, Jessica, normally sat on the front bench, clapping after every song. This was the first time I'd left her at home, and I wasn't certain if I could bear to do it again. Jess would be starting school soon and needed to become accustomed to staying at home. I wondered if I should give some thought to home school. I'd been home schooled since the age of twelve because my family was on the road so much, but I'd missed so much of being a child.

If only Jess had a father to stay with instead of a live-in baby-sitter. But my husband, Mike Evans, had left us for a two bit floozy right after her birth.

I heard the pastor begin his introduction and quickly checked my appearance in a little mirror from my purse. Daddy told me my best features were my green eyes and long blonde hair that fell just past my shoulders, features I'd inherited from my Grandma Walters.

I powdered my forehead, moist from the brutal July heat. Portland, Oregon was almost as hot this weekend as my hometown of Donlyn, California, a quiet little town nestled in the heart of the San Joaquin Valley.

"Would you please welcome Alexandra Walters," boomed the pastor's deep voice over the sound system.

Once on stage, I grabbed the microphone from its stand and began to sing to the taped accompaniment music that filled the sanctuary. As soon as I sang the first word, my nervousness vanished.

With the ease that comes from repetition I went from song to song, worrying only a little about hitting all the right notes and remembering all of the words. I was on automatic pilot. I only forgot the words when I concentrated too hard. Between songs, I shared stories about my life, some to encourage, others just for a laugh.

The familiar words I'd spoken hundreds of times tumbled from my lips without effort. But tonight it was hard to concentrate on what I was doing. Thankfully this was my last concert before flying home. The audience was responsive and attentive, but I kept looking at the space on the front pew where Jess would normally be sitting. I was ashamed of giving less of myself than usual, but since her birth four years ago, Jess and I had been inseparable.

I searched the crowd for familiar faces and found many. A smile of recognition from a friend always boosted my spirits. It was good to return to the same places every year and renew old acquaintances, to see enjoyment and appreciation on their faces. I'd never liked my own voice, but had come to accept the fact that others did; though it never ceased to amaze me. After years of singing I was now confident in my talent even though I'd never listen to my own voice by choice.

As I heard the familiar strains of Amazing Grace, my closing song, my thoughts drifted back to the last time I'd sung that song on this stage. Eleven years ago, when I was traveling the gospel quartet circuit, I'd sung it as a duet with my first big crush, Jerry Web. By the last verse of the song, as the beauty of the words flowed over me, I brought my thoughts back into focus.

Afterward, the pastor joined me on stage. "Thank you, Miss Walters, for an inspirational evening," he said.

It had been a good night, despite my distraction. The crowd shuffled by my table. Some looking at the CDs and stuff I had for sale, others too busy talking with friends. I forced myself to smile and be polite, even though I was completely exhausted.

"You know dear, you sound just like Karen Carpenter," said one older lady in a dress covered with daisies.

"My daughter sings too," said a middle-aged woman who wanted to send me a tape of her daughter's singing, as if I could somehow guide her to her big break.

When I'd shaken my last hand and smiled my last smile, I put away the public me and took a deep breath. I put the things that hadn't sold into my worn brown suitcase and locked it. At last, I could go home.

Arms filled with four days worth of mail, I plopped down onto my old blue sofa and kicked off my sneakers. It was good to be home. When I'd left the Fresno airport, it'd taken everything in me not to head my '57 Chevy towards Jess' preschool and take her out early. But I didn't want to disrupt the class.

Whoever said life on the road was glamorous had never been on the road. One of the few things Mike had left me when he ran off was a beautiful, old-fashioned, two-story home in Donlyn. The Kings River flowed by my back yard, and two great big mulberry trees covered the entire place with shade in the summer. Though the house was a definite fixer-upper, I loved it and it was mine.

It made leaving home even harder. Maybe the single mother of a four year old had no business traveling across the country singing. But every time I'd tried to hold down a real job, I'd gone crazy within a week. My restless spirit kept me on the road. That, and a need to do something I felt was worthwhile. I was anxious to see Jessica, but it was only ten

a.m. I'd have to wait two more hours until Cassandra Gable, a tenant and friend, picked her up from preschool.

Cass and I had grown up together and seen one another through good times and bad. This was one of the bad times for her. She was starting over, having left an abusive husband and returned to college. Whenever she baby-sat for me I gave her a break in the rent. It benefited us both.

I sighed, knowing the pile of mail in my lap contained a depressing amount of bills. To pay for the renovations I'd rented out four of the upstairs bedrooms. The only people making money in the Christian music business were the Amy Grants and Michael W. Smiths; the rest of us were lucky to make enough to get by. Still, I couldn't imagine any other occupation.

I began to sort through: junk, bill, junk, bill. Wait, what was this? A bright red flier with bold black lettering caught my eye. It read: **BIG GOSPEL MUSIC SING MOVES TO BRANSON, MO. ORDER YOUR TICKETS NOW, YOU WILL NOT WANT TO MISS THE FIRST ONE TO BE HELD IN BRANSON.**

I had been part of the Walters Family Singers. After winning a recording contract in a contest at the annual Quartet Convention we toured with the famous Web Family Quartet. I was twelve years old at the time and continued on the circuit until I was eighteen.

During my seven years on the gospel quartet circuit I'd met a lot of sincere people who were in it for the right reasons. But there were also those who were just looking for a stepping stone to country music fame and fortune. They gave the rest of us a bad name.

Many singers started out with the right motives but couldn't cope with being away from their families three hundred days out of the year. They got lonely and gave in to temptation, which was plentiful. Gospel music attracted groupies just like any other form of music. A married person on the road alone was asking for trouble, and found it more often than their fans would like to believe.

Turning the flier into a 727, I flew it across the room, then reluctantly left the comfort of my couch. Dragging myself into the kitchen, I snatched a Pepsi out of the fridge. Pepsi addiction was a Walters family trait and I was a Walters, not an Evans. To a Walters drinking anything but Pepsi was practically a sin.

Watson, the temperamental black cat my cousin had given me to chase away mice, purred a welcome. Not normally an affectionate animal, I knew he had an ulterior motive. This cat didn't need my love, just my ability to open a can of cat food. I scratched behind his ears and the drone of his purring increased. His bowl was full, so he could wait.

Cassandra was buying that cheap generic food again and he wasn't having any of it. For a former wild barn cat, he sure was finicky.

Pepsi in hand, I went into the room I shared with Jessica. Watson followed, still purring. Airports always wore me out and I was looking forward to a shower and a nap before Jess got home. Before I could strip off my airplane clothes, I noticed my answering machine light flashing.

The last time I'd picked up my messages was Sunday. When I was out of town I didn't like dealing with business. Anyone except Jess could wait four days. I called her everyday.

I sent up a silent prayer that the message wasn't from a bill collector, then pushed the button. Watson continued to protest so I picked him up and tried to calm him while I listened.

"Alex, this is Jerry Web." I dropped the cat, and was vaguely aware that my mouth was hanging open. Watson landed on the floor, giving me a reproachful look before retreating. This was worse than a bill collector. Better watch out what I prayed for.

The message continued. "I'm in trouble and didn't know who else to call. I'm at the Donlyn police station. There's been a murder and they've brought me in for questioning. I don't have a clue why and I don't know any lawyers here. Hope you get home soon. You're the only real friend I have in town. It's July 27, 9:30 a.m."

I closed my mouth and let out a long breath. Why hadn't I seen any of his posters in town before I left? Maybe the church didn't advertise, a common problem unfortunately. I wasn't surprised Jerry hadn't contacted me ahead of time. We hadn't seen each other in four years. But murder was a surprise.

When I was sixteen I had a terrible crush on Jerry. My first one, and the only time I'd ever fallen head over heels for anyone. We never did anything more than hold hands and talk for hours, except for that one time he'd kissed me. We were best friends. But I thought I was in love and that was wrong. He had a wife and kids back home in Tennessee.

I still wondered how such an innocent girl could have let herself feel like that about a married man, and I carried the guilt of those feelings. But he'd touched my heart in a way no one else ever had. I was grateful now that he'd been a decent guy and put a stop to things before they'd gotten out of hand. He set me straight, even though I would have sworn back then he felt something more than just friendship for me.

A schoolgirl's fantasy, perhaps, but I never completely got over it. I guess no one ever gets over their first big crush. If he'd been chasing after all the bimbos who threw themselves at him I could have labeled him a jerk and gotten over it.

At eighteen, for the sake of my sanity, I left the circuit and Jerry behind, and started a low-profile solo ministry that allowed me to avoid traveling in the same circles as the quartet circuit. He had also gone solo, for the sake of his marriage.

Jerry and I maintained a distant friendship. We sent each other Christmas cards and ran into each other on the road. Eleven years had passed since the last time I'd been alone with him. We'd never had the opportunity to talk things out. His choice, not mine. I longed to know how he really felt back then. Had I just been a silly kid who embarrassed herself over an older man? My hand went to my locket and I played with it nervously; I had put my feelings for Jerry in a tidy little place in my heart and left it there. I didn't look forward to dealing with those feelings now; I wasn't even certain what they were.

A nervous excitement rumbled inside my stomach, making me feel ill. I grabbed the receiver and punched in the familiar number of the Donlyn city police station.

My old friend, Max Lereau, was at the dispatch desk. His familiar gruff voice brought back a cascade of memories. After Mike left, I'd taken the required classes to become a reserve officer and had worked for the Donlyn P.D. for six months.

"Hi Max. It's Alex."

"Hey angel face, what's up? Haven't heard from you since the policemen's benefit basketball game."

"I'm calling about someone who was brought in for questioning. Jerry Web."

I heard a shuffling of papers. "Here it is. They're waiting on a young man to arrive from the public defenders office."

"Tell them to wait a little longer. I'm going to get Jerry the best lawyer in town."

I hung up and called my cousin, Paul Unruh, the only criminal lawyer in town. Paul was short and bald, and didn't look anything like a big city lawyer. His old brown suit was more Sears than Pierre Cardin. But he was very good at what he did.

It seemed like everyone in Donlyn was related in some way. I wasn't certain how Paul and I were cousins, I just remembered my mom telling me that we were. I thought it might be a German thing. Most Germans I'd known were obsessed with tracing their genealogy, and the population of Donlyn consisted mainly of Germans and Hispanics.

Paul answered his own phone. I bypassed the niceties and told him about Jerry.

"I heard about that murder. Is your friend being charged?"

"I don't think so, but I don't know much."

"I'll meet you at the station in fifteen minutes."

I looked in my bathroom mirror. Three hours on a plane from Portland, Oregon had left me a little worse for the wear. I took a brush to my hair and tied it back in a functional ponytail. I tugged at my jeans and T-shirt trying to pull out the wrinkles with little success. Oh, well, it would have to do.

My black '57 Chevy Bel Air convertible, my pride and joy, was waiting patiently in the driveway. It took most of my remaining ten minutes to get her going. Luckily, the station was just a few blocks away. I parked in front and got out. As I walked in I saw Max's familiar grayish blond head.

"Hey Alex, you're late. Unruh is already in there with Web, Detective Freeman and Chief Hofer. You'll have to wait out here."

I sat in one of the uncomfortable wooden chairs in the lobby, and squirmed nervously. My hand found its way to the silver locket. It had been a gift from Jerry on my eighteenth birthday; it was inscribed "My Special Girl". There had been many times I'd started to put that silly locket away, but what was it they said about first loves? You never really get over them.

After ten long minutes, Lereau buzzed Paul into the lobby. I stood and offered a hand. "So what's the scoop?"

Paul took my hand and shook it confidently, then gave it an affectionate squeeze. "Web'll be out here in a minute. They're not ready to charge him with anything yet, but it doesn't look good."

"Who was killed? And why do they suspect Jerry?"

"I think it would be better if Jerry filled you in. I left my cell phone in the car and I want to call Stephen. I'd like him to see what he can dig up on other suspects." Paul ducked out the door before I could stop him.

The idea of him hiring Stephen didn't thrill me, and I wasn't certain he'd take the case since he knew all about my past with Jerry. Stephen Carlucci, the best and only private investigator in town, had been a close friend ever since Mike'd left, but lately things had become more complicated. I knew he wanted a commitment, but I wasn't ready. I could see this wasn't going to be the homecoming I'd planned. My first love a suspect in a murder case and my current interest investigating it.

The door buzzed open again and I quickly slipped the locket down my T-shirt, not wanting to give him any ideas. The familiar scent of his English Leather cologne greeted me before he did, bringing back a flood of memories of sunny afternoons holding hands in the front seats of the Web Family bus.

Age hadn't changed Jerry much. At forty-four, only a few lines at the corners of his blue eyes and a touch of gray in the wavy brown hair betrayed his age. I'd always thought he looked like a young Sinatra. I loved Sinatra.

Instead of the expensive double breasted suit that graced his slender frame when he sang, he wore faded blue jeans and a red polo shirt. Jerry still looked good. He appeared tired and worried, but his face lit up with a smile when he saw me.

"Alex Walters, I've never seen a more welcome sight." His southern accent was slight. Though he lived in Memphis, he'd been born in California.

I slipped into those familiar strong arms for a hug. Southern people hugged everyone they knew. I liked the custom but this hug sent my heart racing. Could I still be in love with him after all this time? I couldn't even guess what he might be feeling.

He pulled back. I forced a smile and finally spoke. "Let's get you out of here, then you can tell me what's going on."

"Don't leave town, Mr. Web. We're not through with you yet." The gruff voice that bellowed behind us was familiar. I looked up into the face of Chief Hofer, who'd always reminded me of a bulldog. Douglas Hofer hadn't changed much in the last three years. Though now in his early fifties, he didn't look any older. He'd always looked old. His bald head didn't help, nor did the fact that his face seemed frozen in a frown.

"If it isn't our little singer." The big burly man towered over me, his oversized stomach the only thing between us. "I'm not surprised to see you here. This must be one of your gospel music pals."

"Nice to see you again too, Chief Hofer." He was one of the reasons I resigned from the police force. Hofer had it in for me from day one, I wasn't certain if it was because I was a woman or because I was a gospel singer. Though he was adequate at his job, he was impossible to work for.

Hofer's threat was an empty one. They would have charged Jerry if the evidence had been that strong. But it didn't matter. Jerry couldn't afford to leave town without clearing his name; such things could ruin a career. He wouldn't be going anywhere, threat or no threat.

"Don't get any ideas about getting involved in this, Ms. Walters. It's too complicated for a pretty little thing like you. Just busy yourself with your church work and leave the difficult stuff to us here at the Donlyn P.D." Hofer abruptly turned and went back to his office.

Jerry and I headed to my car without a word. I was dying with curiosity but didn't want to push him. The silence continued all the way to the No Name Cafe and Bookstore downtown. I was in serious need of a chocolate latte, despite the intense heat of the San

Joaquin Valley in late July. I suspected that Jerry could use a cup of coffee and some breakfast as well, so my curiosity would have to wait. At least until after his second cup.

End of chapter one

Find out more about Lorie Ham and her books at <http://www.lorieham.com>



Annette Gisby grew up in a small town in Northern Ireland, moving to London when she was seventeen. Even while still at school, she had articles published in the Mourne Observer newspaper and currently she is well known on the web as a writer, editor, and book reviewer. *Silent Screams* is her first novel.

She has a non-fiction e-book out, entitled *Writing the Dream*, detailing her writing and publishing experiences, the good, the bad and the downright ugly. It is available from <http://www.ebookad.com> and from her website below.

Her articles have been selected for such websites as zinos.com and fictionaddiction.net, while her short stories and poetry have appeared on authors den and various places on the web. Two of her short stories have been selected to appear in the science fiction anthology, *Alien Light*, edited by Carl Rafala and Paul Hughes, which is available now. She has also contributed another story to the anthology, *Romancing the Soul*, which is due out later in 2002.

As well as writing, Annette is the editor of the *Twisted Tales* webzine, which has stories, poetry, book reviews, and author features. She is also the assistant manager of NUW, Not the Usual Way, an online support group for independent writers and just recently, she has acquired the position of co-host/forum moderator for the novel writing and publishing forum at the writers' bbs.

When not writing, she enjoys wandering around ruined castles, deserted beaches and going to the cinema, some are great places for inspiration. She still lives in London with her husband, a selection of porcelain dolls, and enough books to fill a small library!

Silent Screams by Annette Gisby

Jessica is a young woman with secrets, dark secrets that she feels she can't tell and she is referred to a psychiatrist after a failed suicide attempt. At first she is reluctant to reveal why she tried to kill herself, but the truth emerges over several sessions.

It soon becomes clear that Jessica isn't the only one with secrets and some of them should have remained buried...

Prologue

The bedroom was dark. A shaft of light fell from the half-open doorway to illuminate the small figure on the bed. The little girl could hear the splash of water from downstairs as her mother washed up. She sat huddled on her bed, her knees drawn tight against her chest. The front of her dress was covered in food from the party. It was a multi-colored creation of birthday cake, jelly and orange juice. Her new dress was ruined. That was why she had been sent to bed early. She didn't mind about the stains on her dress. There were worse stains. Stains on her soul.

She was eight today. A big girl now, her parents had said. If she was such a big girl, why did she feel so frightened? Because *he* would come to her tonight. *He* had been at the party. She had been naughty and *he* would punish her. *He* liked to punish her, you could see it in *his* eyes. The alarm clock by her bed ticked louder and louder, in time with her heartbeat. How soon would *he* come? She hoped it would be soon. Then it would be over.

Footsteps. Footsteps on the stairs. She heard the last stair creaking. Any minute now. She jumped from the bed and dived underneath it. It was useless to hide, she knew *he* would find her, but she wasn't going to make it easy for *him*. As her bedroom door squeaked open, she held her breath and peeped out. First she saw the shiny black shoes and then the bottoms of black trousers. She had always wondered about the black. She had always assumed that the devil would wear red.

"I know you're in here! Come out this instant!" *He* seemed to be looking everywhere, everywhere except where she was hiding. The girl held her breath for as long as she could, but it was no use. She spluttered, trying to get some air into her straining lungs, and *he* heard her. *He* yanked her roughly from under the bed and she was thrown on top of it. "How dare you hide from me! That was very naughty! You know what happens to naughty girls, don't you? They get punished!"

She tried to scream, but no sound escaped from her locked throat.

Her screams, as always, were silent.

End of prologue

Read more about Annette Gisby and her books at <http://www.annettegisby.n3.net>



Karen Mueller Bryson is a produced and award winning playwright. Her one-act play ***THAZEL HOFFSTETTER LIVES HERE*** was produced at Unity Fest 2000 at the Bank Street Theatre in New York City. Her short play ***THE DOCTOR WILL SEE YOU NOW*** was produced by StageWorks in Tampa, Florida as a part of their "Briefs and LongJohns" series and by Potluck Productions in Kansas City, Kansas.

Her short play ***GOD'S GRACE*** was produced in "An Evening of One-Acts" at Carrollwood Players in Tampa, Florida and her play ***BUT DOES HE KNOW BOTTICELLI*** was produced at Cayuga Community College in Auburn, New York. It also received a staged reading at the Footsteps Theatre in Chicago and received an Honorable Mention in the 1999 McLaren Memorial Playwriting Contest.

Her play ***WHEN FAT CHICKS RULE THE WORLD*** was a winner of the Scriptwriters of South Carolina Playwriting Contest and received a staged reading. The play was also a semi-finalist in the 13th Annual Henrico Theatre Company One-Act Playwriting Competition. A monologue from the play is published in ***MONOLOGS FOR YOUNG ACTORS II*** published by Meriwether Publishing in Colorado Springs.

Karen Mueller Bryson earned a Master of Fine Arts (MFA) in Creative Writing from Warnborough University in England. Prior to becoming a playwright and novelist, Karen Mueller Bryson also earned a Master's Degree in Human Development Counseling and worked for a number of years as a counselor and educator.

Hey Dorothy, You're Not in Kansas Anymore is her first novel.

Hey Dorothy, You're Not in Kansas Anymore
By Karen Mueller Bryson

Dorothy Gale Robinson, an aspiring actress, is the daughter of hippie parents with a passion for old movies. When her father is killed suddenly while sipping a non-fat decaf mocha latte at a local coffee shop, Dorothy's life is turned upside down.

After an unconventional dispersing of her father's ashes at the Universal Studios' Psycho House, Dorothy's mother decides to sell all her worldly possessions and join a New Age cult headquartered in Banff, Canada. Of course, Dorothy's twin brother, Jude, is too busy with his law firm to help Dorothy save their mother from the clutches of the sinister cult, so she seeks the aid of her new boyfriend, Lahrs, and a cult-buster, Mervyn O'Roy, who just happens to look like Mickey Rooney.

The motley trio venture from Florida to Canada, and through a series of mishaps and misadventures, Dorothy and her fellow rescuers recover Dorothy's mother, and everyone finds a little romance in the Canadian Rockies.

In her fast-paced and funny first novel, Karen Mueller Bryson tells the story of a young woman's wild journey coming to terms with her father's sudden death. ***HEY DOROTHY YOU'RE NOT IN KANSAS ANYMORE*** is a delightful and engaging tale reminiscent of ***THE WIZARD OF OZ***.

Part One

There's a cyclone coming...

I was at my acting class the night it happened. It was the third God-awful week of this eight-week Stanislavski Strasberg Adler Meisner Hagen Method Acting group. I'm sure you've seen them - the sense memory classes where acting students pretend to be ice cream cones melting in the sun or trees blowing in the wind - crap like that. Why I even took the class, I still don't know. It was a gigantic waste of money - and it wasn't like I had any money to waste. Come to think of it, I still don't have much money, but at least I'm not wasting it on stupid acting classes anymore. The only reason I was even in the class at all was because my agent, Korkie Burke, suggested I needed something to boost my resume. This is what she said:

"Dorothy, dahling, your resume - it's weak. Flimsy, really. You need something to - ah - how can I say it - well, we want people to take you seriously. Why don't you go over to that Stanislavski Strasberg Adler Meisner Hagen Institute - you know the one, dahling - over there by the University. They'll help you. I know they will."

Of course, I expressed some hesitancy.

"I don't know. I heard they're kind of expensive and things are really tight right now."

"This is your future, dahling. You've got to invest in your future. Are you going to trust Korkie?"

"I guess I could give it a try."

"There is no try - only do. So, you'll call them tomorrow - here's the number."

And that's how I got talked into going to the ice-cream melting tree blowing in the wind acting class.

So, I was sitting in acting class and the teacher, Mr. Stinkmuffin, was blabbing on and on about sense memory or something like that. It was completely boring. I was ready for a snooze. (Oh - his name wasn't really Mr. Stinkmuffin - at least, I don't think it was. But that's what everybody called him because he always smelled like he had just farted.) I wasn't really paying attention to what Stinkmuffin was chattering about; I was more interested in checking out Luke, the fine-looking aspiring actor who sat behind me. I was in the midst of this incredible daydream with Luke and I in a hot tub and Luke was just about to kiss me when my cell rang. It was my mother.

"Hello - Dorothy?" she yelled into the phone.

Like who else would be answering my cell phone?

"Yeah"

"This is your mother."

"I know, Mom."

As if I didn't recognize her voice after twenty-six years.

"Something absolutely tragic has happened; you have to come home right away."

Normally, something tragic for my mother would be missing a big sale at JC Penny's. But this time - it really was tragic.

"What's going on, Mom?"

"I can't really discuss it on the phone. When can you be here?"

"Well, I'm in acting class right now."

"Can you leave?"

"I suppose so, but."

I didn't really want to leave class early because a bunch of us were supposed to go clubbing in Y'bor City after class and I really wanted to get to know Luke better. What could be that important, anyway?

"Dorothy, it's your father. Please come home - now."

Then she just hung up. I never heard my mom like that before. Her self-help induced cheerfulness had turned somber and dark - somehow foreboding. I knew something was very wrong.

So I told Mr. Stinkmuffin I had a family emergency I needed to attend to, made sure to smile at Luke on my way out, and drove to my parent's house.

When I got there, my grandmother opened the door. Now, in a so-called normal (dare I say all-American) family, this might not have been such an unusual occurrence, but in my family this spelled TROUBLE with a capital "T". You see, my grandmother, Frannie, is not really what you would call the grandmotherly type. Which leads me to believe she probably wasn't much of the motherly type, either. Which may explain, in part, why she and my own mother really don't get along very well. When Frannie opened my parent's door, I knew something was truly amiss.

Now, the living room of my parent's house could have been called a movie memorabilia museum of sorts, since both of my parents loved old films. Most of their furnishings had

some connection to an old movie. Even my twin brother and I were named after the main character in one of my mother's favorite movies of all time.

Growing up, we watched *The Wizard of Oz* five-hundred and seventeen times. Being named Dorothy Gales Robinson wouldn't be so bad if I didn't bare such a striking resemblance to Judy Garland herself. I often wonder if this is sheer coincidence or one of those incredibly strange twists of fate. I guess I feel kind of sorry for my brother, even though I hate him. He got stuck with Jude Garland Robinson for a moniker. But at least he doesn't look like Judy Garland. He's actually more of the Charlie Sheen type.

I could go on and on about the trials and tribulations of being a twin. It's bad enough having a twin brother - I could only imagine the stress of being an identical twin. I'm the oldest - if there really is such a thing in twindom. I'm not convinced. I was born first. My brother came three minutes later. I often wonder if the whole psychology-of-birth-order thing applies to twins. I've done a lot of reading on the subject. They say that fraternal twins are no more alike than other non-twin siblings. I'm happy to say that Jude and I are nothing alike. We have what is known as a love-hate relationship. We both love hating each other.

It must have come as quite a shock to my parents when my mom went into labor and twins popped out. They were living in a hippie commune at the time and rejected the whole prenatal care thing. There wasn't a doctor present at our birth - my parents preferred to have a midwife. I've never actually met a midwife - at least not since I was born. I imagine that they look all earth-motherly with long, flowing dresses and long, super straight hair. Probably a few crystal pendants dangling from their necks. And they smell of patchouli oil, no doubt.

When I arrived at my parent's house on that ill-fated evening, my brother was sitting on my parent's *Gone with the Wind* couch. An authentic replica from the actual film - or so my dad always said. Jude was sitting there just staring into space. He didn't say a word when I entered the room. Now - if you knew Jude, you'd understand that this was the only time in his entire life that he didn't have an overabundance of discourse spewing forth from his pie-hole. Jude is an attorney. It's a profession he was born to pursue.

When I sat down next to my brother, he acted like I didn't even exist. This wasn't really any different than the way he usually treated me - except he didn't make any rude or nasty comments about my hair, clothing, or lack of gainful employment.

After a brief but seemingly eternal moment, my grandmother broke the silence, "Your mother should be out in a minute, Dorothy."

"What's going on, Frannie?" I asked.

Since I can remember, my grandmother has insisted that my brother and I call her by her first name. I didn't know this was so unusual until I realized that none of my friends ever

called their grandmothers anything but "Grandma". Luckily, Frannie sounds enough like Grannie that my brother and I don't stand out in a crowd.

"I think we should let your mother talk to you about it," she said.

"Talk to me about what? What's going on? Why is Jude looking like somebody died?"

I've always had this uncanny ability to say exactly the WRONG thing at the absolute worst possible moment.

Finally, Jude spoke, "Maybe it's because somebody did just die, you moron."

The realization hit me like a ton of bricks. No one had said anything about my dad.

Frannie didn't say, "Your mother and father are going to be talking to you." My mom didn't say, "Come home, your dad and I need to talk to you." Just where was he, anyway?

That's when I screamed - at the top of my lungs - like some wild woman of the jungle.

"Would somebody please tell me where my dad is?????????"

As soon as I exploded, my mom came running out of the kitchen. She was wearing the same somebody-just-died-look that my brother was wearing, "Maybe you'd better sit down, Pumpkin," she said.

My mom hadn't called me Pumpkin since I was in the sixth grade and started going through puberty.

"I don't want to sit down," I said. "I want one of you to tell me what's going on."

"Please sit down. Take the On Golden Pond rocker. It's your favorite chair."

"I really don't feel like sitting right now. Would you please just say whatever it is you have to say?"

I already knew what she was going to say. I just needed someone to say it out loud.

My mother took a deep breath and said, "Your father is - he's - gone."

"What do you mean he's gone?" I asked.

"He's dead," Jude said.

There it was. Out in the open. Now that the words were spoken - no one could take them back. But how could he be dead? My dad was only forty-eight - it didn't make any sense.

"What happened?" I asked.

It was another one of those brief eternal moments until someone spoke.

Finally, Frannie said, "The police said there was in a terrible accident. Apparently the brakes gave out on a city sanitation truck and it sped out of control, crashing into the Buckstar's Coffee Shop where your dad was having a non-fat decaf mocha latte."

"I always told him Buckstar's was evil," I said.

"You and Jude are going to have to be strong for your mother," said Frannie. "This is going to be a very difficult time for her."

That was the last thing I remember my grandmother saying before I passed out. I knew I should have listened to my mother and sat down on her On Golden Pond rocker.

A few hours later, I woke up in my old bedroom. It had been about eight years since I moved out, but my mom hadn't changed a thing. It was like being lost in the 80's. All of my old posters still covered the walls: Howard Jones from his One World Tour, a really cute Julian Lennon head shot, Corey Hart (wearing his 'sunglasses at night'), and a full cast poster of the Kids from Fame (the television series, not the movie). To this day, I still don't know how I got back to my room. When I opened my eyes, Jude was standing over me, holding a newspaper.

"Nice of you to join the family in our time of need," he said.

"What happened?" I asked.

"You passed out."

Then I remembered that my dad was dead and it wasn't just a bad dream.

"Here's the evening edition of the Tampa Times," Jude said, throwing the newspaper at me. The headline on the front page read:

Local Man Dies in Freak Accident As City Sanitation Truck Smashes into Area
Buckstar's

This is what the article said:

A Tampa resident was killed at the scene of a horrible accident when a city sanitation truck, driven by Mark Tempest, age 30, lost control of its brakes. The truck sped out of control and crashed into the Buckstar's Coffee Shop located on Dale Mabry Avenue and Kennedy Boulevard. Henry Robinson, age 48, was the only patron in the coffee shop at the time. He was reportedly drinking one of the company's famous non-fat decaf mocha

lattes when he was struck. Sources at the scene say Robinson may also have been eating a cheese danish, but the pastry has yet to be recovered.

I tossed the newspaper back at Jude.

"So, what happens now?" I asked.

"What do you mean?" he said.

"I mean - what do we do? I've never had a parent die before. I don't know the protocol."

"Since Dad died at the scene of the accident, there's going to be a police investigation. We have to wait to find out when they can release his body so we can make funeral arrangements. My law firm has a number of associates that deal with wrongful death claims - so we're covered there. I also have a few buddies that deal with wills and probate. Mom has to make a few calls to find out what kind of insurance coverage he had - stuff like that."

"What about us? What do we do?"

"I don't understand where you're coming from. We don't do anything."

It just didn't seem right. Your dad dies and you don't do anything.

"I don't feel so hot," I said. "I've got to get some rest."

I threw the blanket back over my head and slept for three days.

End of chapter one.

Find out more about Karen and her books at <http://www.homestead.com/heydorothy/>



Janet Elaine Smith began writing 25 years ago when she recorded her experiences in Venezuela, where she and her husband were missionaries for 9 years. She fell in love with writing, and she has had a long successful career in the magazine field.

She is the assoc. editor for *MEMORIES AND MYSTERIES* magazine and contributing editor for *HERITAGE QUEST*, and has several hundred magazine articles published in a variety of magazines.

But her real love was fiction writing, and with the advent of Print-on-Demand, she saw her dreams come true when her first book, *Dunnottar*, was published. In just a few weeks it became a No. 1 title on amazon.com, a position it held for over 2 weeks. She now has 8 books in print: *Dunnottar*, *In St. Patrick's Custody*, *A Christmas Dream*, *House Call to the Past*, *Marylebone*, *My Dear Phebe*, *Recipe For Murder* and *Monday Knight*.

She has recently also been appointed Vice-president of Marketing at PageFree Publishing, Inc. She conducts regular marketing chats for authors at her web site: <http://janetelainessmith.77th.com>

She and her husband live in Grand Forks, ND where they operate a "Helps" charitable organization.

They have 3 adult children.

In St. Patrick's Custody
by Janet Elaine Smith

Grace Johnson, elderly New York City widow, "ran away from home and at my age!" she says. Patrick O'Mally, retired New York cop, comes to her rescue by taking her to the homeless shelter where he volunteers. Grace quickly becomes their most valuable employee.

The fun begins when a priest from St. Patrick's Cathedral recruits them to help solve a mystery: the statue of St. Patrick has disappeared! They are led on a merry chase by a young girl, and along the way they just happen to solve the one murder case that has bugged Patrick for years, as well as get caught in the middle of an attempted poisoning.

In St. Patrick's Custody is a warm, delightful tale with lots of fun and wacky characters. Watch for *Recipe For Murder*, the next Patrick and Grace Mystery (now available at <http://www.thegreatamericanbookstore.com>)

Chapter One

Grace reached into her jacket pocket, took out a small bag of sunflower seeds and opened them. She carefully threw a few of them onto the sidewalk in front of her and watched the birds as they swooped down to grab them, one by one, in their beaks. They flew off, far enough to feel safe, cracked them open, dropping the shells to the ground and devoured only the insides.

It was cool this early in the morning. She pulled her scarf up around her neck, shivering slightly. She should have put her hat on, but it was March. The calendar said it was nearly spring. She didn't want to delay the coming of her favorite season by letting Mother Nature think she couldn't take the weather she was dishing out.

She loved sitting on the benches at the Promenade and Channel Gardens in Rockefeller Plaza. The flowers were just beginning to peek their heads up above ground, and it seemed that each day they got a little more daring as they reached for the warm sunshine. She had a clear view of St. Patrick's Cathedral, with its towers reaching up to the heavens, far above the mundane buildings of everyday.

Most of all, Grace loved watching the people as they hustled and bustled by, not stopping to notice her. They were on their way to work and the way they scurried along reminded her of James. They had spent their entire lives hurrying, and now they had nothing to hurry for.

James had been a good husband, but Grace felt guilty. Try as she might, she could not cry over losing him. He had been so ill, she hated to see him suffer. Now he was gone; he was at peace. Her whole life had been one of devotion to her family. She had waited on James hand and foot, as if he was incapable of tending his own needs. She had done her grieving early—while he was still alive.

Off in the distance Grace watched a little girl stoop over and draw the squares on the sidewalk for hopscotch. She hopped on one foot, trying to maintain her balance. She was so frail and thin looking, Grace's heart went out to her. In her arms she held a scruffy dog who seemed as undernourished as the child. As she tipped to one side, the dog took the opportunity to jump to his freedom. He scurried to the area where Grace was sitting, sniffing at the ground where the bird seed was scattered.

Grace's mind turned to her own three children. Missy was so near, living just over in Brooklyn, yet she hardly saw her anymore. Her girls were getting bigger, and Missy had them enrolled in just about everything there was for them. They were in dance class, drama class, ice skating, piano, art... The list went on and on. Missy had done well for herself, marrying a lawyer and all. She had her own life.

Grace's smile turned to a frown. She was sure, for the fourth or fifth time, that Betty Andrews, her neighbor, had been talking to Missy on the phone. There was some good to be said for the thin walls in the little apartment where she lived. Many were the times she

had been able to listen to the people on all sides of her apartment through the "rice paper" walls. The thought that they might have listened to her, too, never crossed her mind. Not even nosy Betty Andrews. But now, she wondered if Betty had called Missy or if it was the other way around.

No, she was sure Betty had called Missy. She would have heard the phone ring. She had seemed especially inquisitive lately about all three of her children, but especially Missy. Now Grace realized it was undoubtedly a mistake to have told her Missy's last name and where she lived.

Jerry popped into Grace's mind next. Logical, since he was the middle child. He had always been in the middle of everything. He and Wendy had a nice new home in Philadelphia. Their two boys were all wrapped up in football, baseball, hockey and basketball. This, too, was logical, since their dad was a coach at the high school.

"Strangers," Grace said out loud. "All except Bill." She knew, no matter what faced her, she could count on Bill to help bail her out. Not that she was looking for trouble, mind you, but you never know.

She tossed another handful of sunflower seeds to the birds, then glanced up only to see the face of the man who had been at the park every day. They had never spoken a word, but she wondered if he was stalking her.

Grace laughed. Why would anybody be interested in her? It wasn't like she was material for *Good Morning, America*.

"Top o' the mornin' to you, ma'am," the man said.

"And a good day to you, too, sir," Grace replied, breaking their weeks-long silence. He tipped his hat respectfully to Grace. She noticed that it was a policeman's cap, although he was not wearing a uniform and he appeared to be too old to be on the force. "A fine one it is, too. The sun will warm the air quickly and it will shine on the Irish soon for the Saint Paddy's parade."

"Might you be an Irish lassie?" he asked.

"By my mother and father, sure, but I was born in this country. Never could figure out if that makes me an Irish washerwoman or an American miss."

"I'd say, by lookin' at you, that a washerwoman you'll never be. Not a lovely lass the likes of you."

"And you're full of blarney, too," Grace said, a twinkle in her eye.

The man moved over to sit beside Grace. She emptied the bag of seeds into her hand and threw the last of them for the birds.

"You really shouldn't be feedin' the birds the likes of those seeds," the man said. "They leave an awful mess on the way, and the hulls are terrible to clean up."

"And you have a better idea?" Grace asked, suddenly irritated that this total stranger was telling her what to do with her life.

The man reached into his own coat pocket and took out a bag of tiny cubes of bread. He began to toss them out, and the birds took them as eagerly as they had attacked Grace's sunflower seeds.

"See?" he said, grinning. "They like it just as well and there is no mess left behind."

Just as he said that, one of the pigeons flew overhead and left a bird dropping on the bench directly between them.

"You were saying?" Grace asked, laughing at the mockery the bird made of the man's remark.

"I stand corrected," the man said, joining her in the laugh. "By the way, my name is Patrick. And yours?"

"Grace."

Grace did not elaborate. There was no reason to tell him that she was *Grace Johnson*. That made her seem so common—so ordinary. Somehow, "Grace" seemed more elegant, more impressive. Although she didn't know why she should try to worry about what this man thought about her. In a day, or two, or three, he would probably disappear and she would never see him again.

"Do you come here often?" Grace asked, wondering why she was pursuing any further contact with this man. Something in his eyes, she thought. They look kind.

"Every morning," Patrick answered. "And I know you do, too. Or at least you have for the past month or so."

This man knew too much about her, Grace reasoned. It made her uncomfortable, like she was being trailed by a private eye. Maybe it was his hat.

Her mind flashed back to Betty Andrews talking to Missy. Had Missy, for some unknown reason, hired a private eye to follow her? What did she think? She had lost her marbles just because she was getting old and her husband died?

"Since you know so much about everything," Grace said sarcastically, changing the subject, "have you noticed that little girl over there?"

Grace turned to look at the girl and her dog, but they had vanished into thin air.

"Which one?" Patrick asked, grinning at Grace, like he was about ready to agree with Missy.

"She was there just a minute ago," Grace said.

"Uh-huh!" Patrick said, nodding his head sympathetically.

"No!" Grace insisted. "She really was. I swear!"

"Anyway, I didn't see her," Patrick admitted. "I was too busy watching you."

Grace blushed like a teenager. She couldn't remember the last time anybody had made her turn red. Not even James.

"She was the most pathetic thing," Grace said, not giving Patrick a chance to say anything else that might embarrass her.

Suddenly Grace caught a glimpse of the little girl running away from them. The dog was once again in her arms.

"That one," Grace said, pointing to the girl.

Patrick stared at her. Grace was definitely right. She was the most pathetic-looking creature he had seen in a long time. She looked like she hadn't had anything to eat in weeks. But it was more than that. Something about her caused a chill to run up and down his spine. It wasn't something he could explain; it was something you learned to trust after years on the police force.

Daily Grace looked forward with more anticipation to her morning trips to the park. Patrick had joined here every day and their friendship was growing. She had learned that he had recently lost his life-long companion, just as she had. He had worked on the New York police force all his life. "One of New York's finest," he told her proudly. He was a detective when he retired. He had come over from Ireland as a young lad. He did not remember anything about the "old country" firsthand, but his memory had been kept alive by the tales he had heard from his parents. He loved sharing these tales with Grace.

"It's the luck o' the Irish I'm here today," he said as he walked up to Grace. "You know, don't you, what tomorrow is? I'll not be in the park tomorrow."

"I told you I'm Irish too. Just mine happens to be second generation."

"Second-hand Irish," he said, smiling warmly at Grace. "That's good enough for me."

"Of course I know what day tomorrow is. It's St. Patrick's Day. And that stops you from coming to the park?"

"Anyone who's lived in this burg for as long as you ought to know that every Irish officer marches in the parade on St. Paddy's Day—active or retired. Why, I remember one year poor old Regis O'Toole got right up off his sick bed and made his way down for the march. He lasted the whole route, then he hitched a ride back to the hospital and promptly died."

"That's terrible!" Grace exclaimed. "Someone should have stopped him."

"What? And deprive a man of his dyin' wish? Why, he died with a smile on his face. And the last words he spoke were 'I've done me part one final time, and now I bid you all a fond *adieu*.' With that he lifted his last mug of Irish whiskey to his lips, sipped it and lay back on his pillow, having stepped onto the other side. Two days later the whole force had a wake the likes of which you've never seen. Then they tossed his ashes into the river, just like he wanted."

"So, I won't see you tomorrow?" Grace asked.

"Now I didn't say that. But it won't be 'til after the parade. Then I'll meet you back here at the park and we'll do something special."

"I'll fix a picnic," Grace said, enthusiastically.

"Sounds OK by me," Patrick agreed. "And I'll pray for a sunny day."

And today, as had become their custom by now, Patrick walked Grace back to her apartment. He came inside and they had a cup of tea, then he was on his way, whistling "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling" as he went down the steps and out the door.

Grace left her door slightly ajar and listened as she heard Betty Andrews hurry to call Missy. She strained to hear, but even with the thin walls she realized that Betty was just barely speaking above a whisper.

"Policeman..." "Home again..." "I'll let you know..." That was all she could make out. Whatever was Missy up to?

Grace knew by now that Patrick was on the level. She had finally told him about the phone conversations between Betty and Missy. Patrick assured her that he had no part in it, and she found no reason to doubt him. Why, he even promised to protect her if she needed it! And she just knew that he was on the lookout to see if she was being followed.

That's why he had decided to walk her home from the park every day. More and more they were becoming almost inseparable.

The day was exactly as Patrick had ordered. The sun was shining and there wasn't a hint of a breeze anywhere.

Grace went to the spot on the parade route that they had agreed she would watch for Patrick. The parade passed by her as she waited and waited for a glimpse of him. She finally sat down on the curb. She wished she had thought to bring a portable chair, but in all the years she had been in New York she had never gone to see a St. Patrick's Day parade. Now she knew why.

Patrick let out a long, loud wolf whistle.

"Hi, ya, Gracie!" he shouted, throwing a kiss to her.

Grace turned her head, pretending he was calling to someone else. Not to be daunted, Patrick ran from his place and grabbed her by the hand.

"Come on, you can walk with me for a couple of blocks."

Grace tried to pull away, but Patrick was much too strong for her. Finally, finding no alternative, she walked along beside him, her head down, hoping no one she knew would recognize her.

In Brooklyn, Missy was busily chatting on the phone with Betty Andrews.

"Yes, I think it would be best," Betty said. "She's really become quite..." She hesitated, searching for the right word. "...odd," she concluded. "This morning she took to the street real early. I mean *real* early. Like six o'clock early."

Missy listened, frustrated that her mother's life had become such a maze of confusion. She hated the idea of putting her into a nursing home, but it just wasn't safe for her alone anymore. And none of the kids had time for her. Why did life have to be so unfair?

She dropped the phone, leaving Betty dangling on the other end with a blur of sound buzzing in her ear.

"Lee!" she shouted at her husband. "Come here! Quick! You'll never believe this! Never in a million years!"

Lee came in from the den, where he had been reading the morning paper.

"What's all the excitement about?" he asked.

"It's Mother! Can you believe it? Right there! Look!"

Missy pointed at the screen, but all Lee saw when he looked at it was a group of young girls dancing an Irish jig as they made their way down the streets of New York.

"That doesn't look like your mother to me," Lee said, laughing at Missy's over-active imagination. "She's looking younger every day. Hope it runs in the genes."

"You're making fun of me," Missy said, pouting. "She was there just a minute ago. I saw her with my own eyes. Go ahead, kids, tell your father you saw Grandma in the parade."

Michelle shrugged her shoulders. "I didn't see her," she said.

"Me either," Kim echoed. "I think you've been into the Irish whiskey, Mom. But then, I guess it is St. Patrick's Day."

"I don't know how," Missy said, "but someday I will prove that my mother has completely lost her sanity. She would never have done such a thing while Daddy was alive."

"Whatever you think, dear," Lee said as he returned to his newspaper.

From time to time the TV cameraman caught a glimpse of Grace on the tape. One little girl, bored with waiting for her mother in Tiffany's, watched the parade on the store TV monitor. She smiled as she spotted Grace in the middle of the policemen, thinking that she wished she had a grandmother like that. She had seen her in church at St. Patrick's Cathedral several times, but she didn't even know her name. All the other kids in school had grandmothers, but hers were both dead. *She looks so nice*, she thought. *If only I could give her a hug.*

As the parade was almost over, Grace blinked and rubbed her eyes. There, running to and fro among various bands, was the tiniest little man she had ever seen. He was dressed all in green from head to toe.

Grace thought about pointing him out to Patrick, but decided against it. She rubbed her eyes again. The long walk must be causing her to hallucinate. *There's no such thing as a leprechaun!* she told herself silently. *Get a grip on yourself!* And then she saw him wink at her and wave.

For some crazy, unknown reason, she thought he must be her good-luck charm.

Maybe Missy's right, she thought. *You have lost it, old lady.* And with that she squeezed Patrick's hand as hard as she could. Maybe she needed him to watch out for her.

At the end of the parade route Patrick and Grace went to Grace's apartment to get the picnic she had prepared earlier. Betty watched through the slit in the door, craning her neck to hear what they said. She simply shook her head as they left, laughing like a couple of young school kids, a basket in one of Patrick's hands and Grace's hand in his other one.

"Such foolishness!" she sputtered as she headed for the phone.

"I know we usually walk to the park," Grace said, "but if you don't mind, I'd like to take the bus today. I think I'm about walked out."

"No problem," Patrick said as he steered her to the bus stop, even though she knew its every station. Truth was, his feet hurt, too. It had been a long time since he'd been on the beat, but today he felt like he was back there.

Patrick helped her onto the bus to Central Park. It was not their usual spot, but they decided it was a better choice for today as the park was always filled with theater players, bands and all sorts of activities.

As they stepped from the bus, Grace pointed to a small empty picnic table. She started towards it when she was bombarded by a little girl, wrapping her arms around Grace's waist so tightly Grace thought she might quit breathing.

"I know you," she exclaimed excitedly. "I saw you on TV. You're famous, aren't you?"

"Jessica!" the little girl's mother called to her. "Whatever are you doing? Get over here! Right now!"

The little girl whispered to Grace, "I've seen you at church, and then I saw you on TV. I like you. I'd like you to be my grandma."

"Let's just pretend I am," Grace said, kissing her lightly on the top of her head and giving her a big squeeze.

"What was that all about?" Patrick asked.

Grace shrugged her shoulders. "Beats me," she said.

Safely tucked away in the middle of a clump of bushes, the little girl who had been playing hopscotch several days earlier watched, wishing with all her heart that she could go give Grace a hug, too. She wasn't so sure about the man, but she thought she liked the lady. In fact, she *knew* she did.

When they finished eating their picnic lunch, Patrick reached across the table and took Grace's hand tenderly in his.

"Bet James never gave you a St. Paddy's Day like this, did he?"

Grace laughed. "No, but then he was Swedish!"

End of Chapter One

You can read more about Janet and her books on her website at:
<http://janetelainesmith.77th.com>

House Call to the Past
by Janet Elaine Smith

Maria Hallett has been captivated by the dashing pirate, Black Sam Bellamy, but he leaves her—alone and pregnant in 1713. The baby nearly dies at birth, but Maria Hallett's father, John, goes across a field to entice modern OB-GYN doctor, Angus McPherson, to come to her rescue.

Dr. Angus saves the baby's life, using modern means, but is shocked when he learns he has made the ultimate *HOUSE CALL TO THE PAST*. When Maria is accused of witchcraft, he opts to stay with her in the past, offering to marry her to save her from a lifetime in prison. Maria agrees, but vows she will never love anyone but Black Sam.

Can Dr. Angus win her love? And can he protect her from Black Sam, if he returns? A page-turning challenge ensues, proving that hopefully good once again triumphs over evil.

Watch for the sequel, *PORT CALL TO THE FUTURE*, to learn the other half of the story: what really happened to Black Sam Bellamy?

Chapter One

Maria Hallett shivered as another gust of wind forced its way through the cracks in the house.

"Has the makings of a really nasty one tonight," her mother, Mary, said. "Hope your father makes it back before it's so bad he can't."

It didn't matter how many storms she lived through, Maria would never get used to them. There was something so eerie, so haunting about the Cape Cod winds.

"It's blowin' up a foul night out there," John Hallett said as he nearly fell through the door. He hurried to secure the iron rod across it, lest it blow open.

"Don't make no sense to me!" Mary Hallett growled. "Here you are over buildin' a new house for the Thatcher girl and you can't even set our own place in order. Might as well as not be sittin' outside for all the good these walls do us. You can look outside and see the sun by day and the moon by night, the cracks are so big."

"It was good enough for Grampa Andrew this way. I reckon it's good enough for us," John told his wife. "He never set a lick of paint or a dab of mud to these walls all the years he lived here. Don't know why we need to do no better than him."

John leaned back on his wobbly chair, his hands held tight behind his full head of black, shiny hair, and laughed.

"Makes less work for the women, he used to say," John said. "Claimed the wind blew the dust right out the other side of the house so Grandma didn't have to waste her time on such silly matters as dusting the furniture."

"As if she had any furniture to dust!" Mary said. "I remember their house all too well. A disgrace, it was! Course not that ours is any better. And you a carpenter!"

A new gust of wind blew through and little Hope hurried up into her father's lap.

"I'm scared, Papa!" she exclaimed.

"Now, my little one," he said, running his hand over her long, brown locks. "I won't let anything happen to you. And that is one thing you can count on."

Off in the distance the long, low moan of a ship's horn echoed through the fog and the rain. Maria sat up quickly and listened for the sound again. Twice more it blew, warning any other vessels in the harbor that it was heading for shore.

"There's sure to be a lot of drunken sailors in town tonight," John said. "Best all the young maidens stay clear of Crosby Tavern."

He cast a threatening eye at his daughter. Maria had always had a wild streak in her, and she was as apt as not to wander off, regardless of the storm outside.

"Leave the girl alone," Mary warned John. "Tisn't any wonder she takes to wandering alone. You've not trusted her since the day she was born."

The family turned in soon after the evening meal was finished. When the small children were all tucked in and the fires had been tended to offer what warmth they could, the older ones followed suit and went off, muttering about the weather.

"No sense in sittin' up around here," young Joseph said. "Like as not the wind'll blow out the candles again as soon as I get 'em lit."

Maria lay quietly on her straw bed. She waited until she was sure all the others in the house were asleep, then she quietly climbed out and began to dress.

In her relatively short years of life, Maria had found more ways to get into trouble than any other resident in all of Yarmouth. Tonight would be no different. The call of the wild storm raging outside enticed her to join it.

Maria made her way down the lane to Crosby Tavern. She knew if she was going to find excitement, that was the one place to look for action.

She cringed, pulling her bright red ape up over her head to try to keep the rain from saturating her. She ran as fast as she dared, given how slippery the boardwalk was.

The door to the tavern swung open as she reached her hand out to run inside, as if the crowd was expecting her. She hurried through it, pulled off her cape and swung it around. The water splashed to and fro, sending the men inside away from her to avoid getting wet.

"Bad one tonight," the tavern owner said to Maria. "I figured you'd be here 'fore long."

"Hope I didn't keep you waiting," Maria said, winking at Mr. Crosby, "had to be sure the rest of them had nodded off 'ere I left."

"Rounds for everyone!" Crosby called out cheerfully. "Maria's here!"

The sailors who had pulled into the harbor before knew Maria by reputation. She knew how to lead the men on just far enough to drive them mad, then she would disappear into the night, climb into her cold clammy bed at home and wait for the dawn. This night was destined to be the same as any other when the sailors set in until the weather cleared.

The men, young and old alike, made their way to the table where Maria sat. She talked with each and every one, some alone and some in groups, blinking her huge brown eyes at them and shaking her long, brown curls from side to side.

One young sailor, Maria noticed, stayed by the bar and watched her as all the other men made their way to Maria's table. Even when she was alone for a few minutes he kept his distance.

Maria summoned Crosby to her.

"Who's the new one by the bar?" she asked him, motioning towards the stranger with a tip of her head.

"Heard him called Sam," Crosby said. "Guess if you want to know any more than that, you'll have to ask him yourself."

"Send him over!" Maria commanded.

The tall dark stranger ambled slowly over to Maria, pulled a chair out, turned it around and sat down, folding his huge muscle-bound arms across the back of the chair.

Maria gasped as she watched him. The men at the tavern had always been just plain men to her - something to toy with. This one was different. He was a MAN! She loved a challenge, and Sam was definitely that. She had never really loved a man before, but she was determined that she would win this one over before the men set sail.

"Sure hope it's a long storm," she said absent-mindedly.

"Why's that?" Sam asked.

"Hate to see you set sail before your time," Maria answered.

Sam laughed heartily at the young girl, his long black hair trailing behind him. He wondered if the other men had been successful in enticing Maria to have their way with them. He hoped not, as he was determined that he would win her over before he left the shores of Cape Cod, and he wanted to be the first who had loved her.

"Name's Sam," he said, smiling at her. There was a gleam in his eye as he spoke. "Sam Bellamy."

"Mine's Maria," she said. "Maria Hallett."

The other men drifted to and from the table, but Sam kept his place, studying her every move. He had never seen a girl like this. So young. So beautiful. So sure of herself.

Suddenly, Maria jumped up and grabbed her cape. She wrapped it about herself and headed for the door. The wind was still fierce and the rain hit her in the face as she ran to the house. She knew she had to get there before her father was up, or she would be severely punished. He still thought of her as a child, but she felt like a woman. Especially tonight. What had Sam done to her?

"Stop!" a voice from behind her called out.

Maria ran faster. The men all knew her limits, and none had ever dared to follow her before. Instinct told her it was Sam. She was tempted to stop, but she wouldn't give him the satisfaction of thinking he had won.

"Stop!" the voice commanded again.

Such force and power in that voice, Maria thought. It would be so easy to stop and let him do whatever he wanted to with her, but that was not the way she played the game. She continued running until she reached the safety of the house. She ran around to the back of it and entered. She lifted the rod, which she had left ajar to insure her entry when she returned, and set it in place, securing the door against Sam Bellamy.

Sam pounded loudly on the door.

"Go away!" Maria hissed at him.

The pounding continued.

Maria's heart began to race. Her excursions to the tavern had never been found out by her father, and she didn't want that to change. Carefully, slowly, she moved the rod just enough to open the door a tiny crack. She knew that with one good push it would open, sending the iron bar crashing to the floor.

"Maria," Sam said. "I just want to talk to you."

"Tonight at Crosby's," she said. "Now, get out of here! I don't want my father to wake up!"

Understanding the situation, Sam turned and walked away, vowing to hold her to her word later or he would return to her home, even if it meant facing her father. In the meantime, he would ask around town and learn all he could about the lovely Maria Hallett. He had known many women in his time, but none who had infuriated him like she did.

"She is a witch! And she has me under her spell!" he muttered to himself as he walked to the inn to get at least a few hours sleep before morning came. Like Maria, he hoped the storm would be a long one.

Maria slipped her cape off and threw it on a chair in the corner of the room to let it dry out. Then she hurried upstairs to her bed. She piled her clothes on the end of the bed and pulled her nightdress over her head. She crawled into the bed, which was cold, and lay there for a long time, wondering what it would be like to have a man there to keep her warm. Sam Bellamy, she thought, would do quite nicely.

The image of the newcomer kept marching back and forth in her mind's eye. She pictured his long, curly black hair. She imagined she was running her fingers through it, pushing it back from his forehead. His dark, piercing eyes seemed to stare right through her. His fingers, so graceful and strong, fondled her warmly, causing her to blush, even in the darkness.

With such thoughts as these, she finally drifted off to sleep. She was unaware of the movements around her; it had been a long night.

Mary Hallett was the first to get up in the morning. It was still blowing and raining outside. She hurried to dress in the cold, shivering as she did, and then went to the huge walk-in fireplace. She took the poker and jabbed at the few live coals until the logs leapt into flames. That would last, she thought, until John was there to put more wood on the fire.

Mary went out into the kitchen and began preparing breakfast for the brood. Soon she was joined by John. One by one the children began to descend and gather around the fireplace. First came Thankful, then John, followed by Joseph, Samuel, Seth, Hannah, Mercy and finally young Hope. Only Andrew, who had recently moved to his own home with Mehitable, his new bride, and Maria were missing.

John walked in and surveyed the group, much as if he were inspecting them for the day.

"Where's Maria?" he asked. "I swear, that girl would sleep the entire day away if we'd let her."

"It's no wonder," Hope said. "I heard her talking to somebody at the door real early this morning. I don't know if she was comin' or goin'."

"Who would she be talkin' to?" John asked, knowing he would not get an answer from anyone but Maria herself.

"I don't know," Hope said, "but when she got upstairs she was all full dressed. I watched her put on her nightdress and climb into bed."

John went over to the cape he saw on the chair and felt of it.

"It's still damp," he said. "Hannah, go fetch your sister. Now! Tell her I want to speak to her immediately."

Hannah hurried to obey her father, tripping over the huge timber at the bottom of the stairway and mumbling about the condition of the house, much as she had heard her mother do day after day.

"Maria!" Hannah said, shaking her sister to awaken her. "Maria! You better get up, and you better be fast about it. Hope went and told Pa about you comin' in this morning, and Pa's *real* mad."

Maria rolled over and pulled the covers up over her head, groaning.

"Maria!" Hannah hollered, shaking her even harder than before and pulling the quilts back to let the cold air have its full impact on her sister. "Did you hear me? Pa knows you were out late last night, and he's mad!"

Maria jumped up and looked accusingly at Hannah.

"And how did he know I was out?" she asked. Hannah was the only one Maria had ever told about her excursions to Crosby's Tavern.

"It was Hope," Hannah explained. "She heard you come in and saw you come get undressed for bed. She went and told Pa."

"I'll have that girl's hide!" Maria said as she pulled her clothes on. She was in such a hurry she did not notice that the hand-stitched embroidery trim of her petticoat was on her backside, rather than on the front where it would be seen by all when her jumper was unbuttoned.

As Maria got downstairs, she realized that all the members of the family were in the kitchen with their mother. All, that is, except John. He sat on a stool in front of the fireplace waiting for his daughter. Fury burned in his eyes as he looked at her.

"I'd like an explanation," he said, trying not to yell. "And it better be a good one!"

"Explanation of what?" Maria asked innocently.

"Of your actions, that's what. I hear tell you were up talkin' to someone long before light set in. Now, suppose you tell me who he was and what you were doin' with him."

Maria wondered why her father automatically assumed it was a *him*. It could just as easily have been a woman. Still, there was nothing to be gained by arguing such a point with him.

"It was a stranger, Pa," she said. "He was caught in the storm and he set his boat in to dock. He went to the inn, but they were full up, what with the storm and all, so he began to wander the streets, trying to find a place to get in out of the rain."

"And you invited him in?" John asked.

"Pa!" Maria snapped. "What do you take me for? You and Ma ain't raised no fool! Of course I didn't let him in! Why, I sent him off packin' to the Widow Clark's house. Everyone knows her place is more of an inn than the inn itself."

"Sounds logical enough," John agreed. "But tell me, how is it you happened to be dressed for this meeting? Hope said you had your clothes on when you came back upstairs."

"Why, Pa, surely you wouldn't want me to entertain a stranger in my night clothes. Why, that's positively indecent! The very idea!"

John was so taken aback by her quick responses, he completely forgot about the damp cape which sat behind him. If he had questioned Maria about that, she might have been hard put to explain it away.

"Go help your ma with breakfast!" he ordered, shaking his head as he watched her go. "I'll never figure that one out," he said to himself.

The girls had finished clearing the breakfast table, set the food to cooking for the dinner and were busy at their looms. Maria, of all the Hallett girls, was the most talented when it came to weaving beautiful fabrics. People had been known to come from Boston to purchase them.

Mary came over to the corner of the rear room to inspect each of the girl's work. She smiled at each of them, then went to Maria and felt the fine finish she had on her goods.

"It is even better than usual, Maria," her mother commented. "Is there a special reason for an added touch today?"

"I can't imagine what it would be," Maria said, smiling back at her mother. *It's the presence of Sam Bellamy*, she thought to herself. He weaves magic over me. Never have I felt like this. If only I could see him again.

"I hate to send anyone out in this weather," Mary said, "but you know it is almost time for Mehitable to deliver. I am worried about her. You know how she hates a storm."

Hope began skipping about the room. "Mehitable Annable of Barnstable," she sang as she skipped. "Mehitable Annable of Barnstable."

"Hope! Enough!" Mary said. "How many times have I told you it is not polite to poke fun at someone else? Not even their name."

"But Mama," Hope protested, "I'm not makin' fun at her. It's pretty, Mama. I like the way it sounds." Hope resumed skipping and singing "Mehitable Annable of Barnstable. Mehitable Annable of Barnstable."

Mary knew it was useless. Besides, Mehitable would certainly not be out and about on such a day as this, so she would not hear Hope. She would try to break her of the habit another time.

"I'll go, Ma," Maria volunteered quickly. "I don't mind the weather. It will clear my head out."

"Are you sure?" Mary asked.

"Yes, Ma," Maria insisted. "Besides, I helped her last year when Desire was born. I'll know just what to do if she needs help."

"Be careful," Mary warned. "And if you decide to stay to help them, be sure to send Andrew back home to let us know."

"I'll be sure, Ma. Lest he's needed, too. You know how Mehitable sticks to him. She's scared silly to let him out of her sight. Specially with the storm and all. It'll be even worse."

"I suppose you're right," Mary said. "I'll leave the back door ajar a wee bit, case you need to get in late."

Maria had her cape on, the hood pulled up securely over her head. She dutifully hugged her mother, fretful for each minute's delay.

Maria ran out of the house. She would go help Mehitable, but she had some other business to tend to first. She headed for Crosby's Tavern, hoping she would find Sam Bellamy there, even though it was early in the day.

"Well, Maria," Crosby said when she came in, "you're out and about early in the day. I didn't figure the storm would scare you away. Somethin' I can do for you?"

"Yes," Maria replied, seeing that Sam was nowhere in sight. "That newcomer, Sam Bellamy. Any idea where he might be?"

"Last I heard, he was askin' all over town about a certain young miss, name o' Maria Hallett."

Crosby grinned at Maria, the wide spaces in between what few teeth he had left, evident.

"Don't rightly know just how far he's got," Crosby continued, "but last report I heard he was headed down to your Uncle Jonathan's place. Course I don't know if he's apt to like what he hears there."

Maria ran from the tavern. She had to get to Sam before Uncle Jonathan filled his head with tales that weren't true. Or even if they were true, she didn't want Sam to hear them.

Sam heard footsteps behind him. His black wool jacket was pulled up around his neck and the seaman's cap did little to protect his face from the wind and rain. The rain sparkled on his face.

He turned to see who was following him, and was not surprised at all to find that it was Maria. Somehow he had known she would come looking for him.

"Sam! Come with me!" Maria begged. "It is far too horrible for either of us to be out here in this mess. Let's head over to the inn. We can get a good meal and besides, we'll be in where it is nice and warm."

Maria winked at him through the rain. "Anyhow, I heard tell you were askin' questions about me. Well, if anyone can answer them, whatever they are, I guess it could as well be me as the next one."

"Your wish is my command," Sam said teasingly. "Lead the way."

Together they ran through the storm until they reached the inn. Sam hurried to open the door and they entered, both laughing and panting for breath.

Sam took Maria's cape and shook it out at the doorway. He hung it on the row of hooks, then did likewise with his own jacket. He stood back and studied Maria. His eyes rolled back in his head at the sheer joy he felt from her beauty. Suddenly he began to laugh.

"I know I'm all wet, and I probably look a real sorry sight," Maria said, "but it ain't nice to laugh at a lady!"

"I didn't think you'd be one to mince words," Sam said. "I wasn't laughing at you. Well, not exactly."

"Would you come to explain yourself, Mr. Sam Bellamy?"

"It's just that last night, over at the tavern, I couldn't help but notice the lovely handwork there was on your petticoat."

Maria turned crimson.

"Today when I asked about town, one of the main things I heard was the beautiful stitching and weaving you do. So, I was sure you had done the work yourself."

"What's so funny about that?" Maria asked.

"Well, I expected to see it today. I had a mind to pay you a fine compliment about it. But, well, I can see you don't have it on."

Maria looked at him in embarrassment. She could have left well enough alone, saying that she had opted for a plain one today. But no, she was not one to take the easy route on anything. To make matters worse, she said, "But I've donned the same one today."

Maria looked down towards the floor. To her surprise, the stitching was missing. It was then she realized in her hurry to answer to pa, she must have put it on backwards.

To Sam's surprise, Maria hoisted her loose gown, which she always wore on top of the petticoat, revealing the intricate embroidery on the back of her petticoat.

"Does it meet your approval?" she asked, dropping her loose gown with the slightest teasing flip, showing no more to this near stranger.

Sam thought of the tales he had heard about Maria as he had inquired about her. With all he had learned, he knew she was a delightful flirt and a big tease, but he was not prepared for such forward actions as these. It made him furious that she stopped with this simple action. He longed to see what other treasures lay beneath the hidden gown she sported.

Midway through the meal Mrs. Howe had served them, Maria gasped.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "I have to get to my brother Andrew's house. That's where Ma sent me. His wife, Mehitable, is due for birthin' anytime now. I've gotta be there in case they need me, with the storm. Mehitable, she's deathly scared of storms."

Maria put her cape on as she made her escape.

"Wait!" Sam called after her.

"Tonight, at Crosby's Tavern," she called back to him. "I'll meet you there."

Sam stood and watched her disappear into the sheets of swirling rain. He returned to his meal. As he ate, he thought how utterly frustrating this young tart was. Never had he known a woman who could infuriate him the way Maria Hallett did.

"Goody," he mumbled. "The townspeople say they call both Maria and her mother 'Goody.' Now if that isn't the strangest thought I've ever heard. Her mother, perhaps, but Maria Hallett is no *Goody* - not to me, nor to anybody else, I suspect."

He went up to the room he had taken for the duration of the storm and lay on his bed, staring at the rough-hewn timbers above him, pondering the strange witch Maria. It was like, he thought, she had cast her spell over him, causing him to come at her every beck and call.

The sixth day after he had set foot on the land at Yarmouth, the sky looked like it might begin to clear. Sam Bellamy knew that he was going to claim Maria as his own, he would have to move fast or he would be gone. The thought of Maria being possessed by another sent shivers up and down his spine.

Sam made his way through the lanes, asking where he might find Maria. Finally, John Dexter informed him he had just seen her toting some of her fabrics to the Thacher home.

"Probably for the upcoming bride," he said. "Thankful is soon to become the wife of young John Hallett."

After getting directions to the house, Sam made his way to the Thacher house and asked if Maria Hallett might be there.

Maria, hearing his voice, dashed out the back way and ran down the hillside towards the Hallett house. Sam, however, saw her and chased after her.

Sam grabbed her, and in the midst of the rain, which was by now no more than a heavy mist, he pulled her to himself, clutching her tightly and kissing her passionately.

Maria swallowed hard to catch her breath. True, there had been other sailors who had tried to take liberty with her, but she had always fought them off. With Sam, it was different. She longed to defend herself against his attack, but she did not have the strength - nor the desire - to push him off. She knew, as Sam did, that in a few hours he would undoubtedly be gone. Gone from Yarmouth. Gone from Maria. Perhaps gone forever.

"Come with me to the inn," Sam begged. "I need you."

Maria could hardly believe her actions. She followed him willingly, even anxiously. While she was afraid of what might await her when they got to the inn, she did not possess any way in which to deny his request.

Sam and Maria quietly made their way up the back stairway to Sam's room. Once inside, Sam shed his jacket and waited for Maria to rid herself of her heavy red cape.

"Red suits you well," he said to her. "Red is the color of danger to a sailor. A red sky is a warning of bad weather to a sailor. A red flag means trouble on a ship. Red on you means you are the worst enemy man can know."

"You see me as an enemy?" Maria asked, hurt in her voice.

"No, not exactly as an enemy. As a dare. A challenge. Never have I known another woman equal to you. You drive me mad. When I am near you, I cannot control what I think or do. When you are away from me, you are all I can see. My head is filled with your image both by day and by night."

"And just what do you intend to do with me?" Maria asked. She knew the answer, even before he spoke. She knew she should run for the door, for the protection of her home and her family, but she wanted Sam as desperately as he wanted her.

Sam walked to her, taking her once again in his arms. They were so big and so strong, yet they were full of tenderness, love and compassion. He began unbuttoning her loose gown, then slipped it from her shoulders, allowing it to fall to the floor at her feet. He looked down at her shoes. While all the other women he had seen in Yarmouth wore leather Indian moccasins, Maria sported shiny red fabric slippers, which he assumed she had made herself.

Sam knelt down in front of Maria and gently lifted her foot. He removed one of the slippers, then the other. He traced the outline of her toes with his long, slender finger.

Maria began to giggle. She had always been ticklish, especially on her feet. Her reaction caused Sam's excitement all the more. He began to run his fingers up her soft, smooth legs.

Maria pulled away from him, retreating to the corner of the room. She was in no position to leave, not half dressed, but at least she would make him play games with her before he could claim her as his conquest.

Sam chased after her, placing both hands on the wall around her. Maria ducked, escaping from him, and jumped helter-skelter onto the bed.

"Come and get me!" she challenged.

Sam jumped onto the bed, but she moved just in time for him to land on the feather mattress, sinking into it like an angel lost in a cloud.

"Try again!" Maria teased.

This time Sam was successful. He grabbed Maria and hurled her onto the bed. He placed his leg over hers to prevent her from getting away again. He leaned over her, kissing her and tenderly fondling her taut, bulging young breasts. She was as well-formed beneath the loose gown as he had imagined.

Maria lay still, her breath coming in short gasps from the desire which was building within her. She wanted to tell Sam that she had never known a man before, but she was afraid of scaring him off.

Sam loosened the camisole ties and the string which held her petticoat in place. He carefully removed her garments and made love to her. Long, hard, passionate love.

It was only as their passions consumed each other and Maria screamed from the momentary pain that Sam realized what he had done.

"I am your first?" he asked, shocked.

"Yes," Maria replied. "My first. And my only. Oh, Sam, please say you won't leave me. Do you have to go back out on the ships?"

"Yes," Sam said, rolling over beside Maria. "But I will find a way to seek a fortune on the seas, then I will return to you. Please say you will wait for me."

"I will wait. And I will watch every day until you return."

Maria soon made her way back to the Hallett home, hoping no one had missed her. She went to Hannah, the only one she had confided in about her innermost feelings about Sam, and told her what had happened.

An hour later, Maria wept alone as she heard the mournful whistle on the ship. She knew it meant that Sam was gone. She would wait for him, just as she had promised. Still, she could not help wondering if he would be as true to her as she intended to be to him. And she wondered if he would *ever* come back to her.

End of chapter one.

Read more about Janet and her books on her website at <http://janetelainesmith.77th.com>



Lori Enos, from Chicago, is an award-winning screenwriter and a best-selling e-book author. Her philosophy is that a good writer can write about anything. She's written about e-commerce, local events, pets, and a host of other subjects. Despite her initial hesitations about an accounting degree, she put it to good use in applying analytical methods to self-help in *The Portable Coach* (Hard Shell Word Factory). Her current work in progress, *Whisper Alley*, is based on events experienced during her three years at Kadena Air Base, Okinawa, Japan.

Lori is also the editor of ePubbed.com.

**The Portable Coach:
A Do-It-Yourself Approach to Personal Coaching
by Lorraine C. Enos**

About the book: The Portable Coach is a workbook. It is designed to help you ask the hard questions and come up with some answers. I don't have the answers for your life but I can help you ask the right questions.

What possessed me to write this book?

Like many people who are unsatisfied with their lives and want to change, I've always had the nagging feeling that I wasn't living the life I was meant to live. There have been times in my life when I've made great money, other times when I made barely enough to pay the bills, but regardless of my financial situation, I've never felt as if I was fulfilling my life's purpose.

In my search for self I turned to self-help books and new age techniques, and then spent hours berating myself because these techniques didn't provide me with instant gratification. I thought about consulting a personal coach to walk me through life changes, but I couldn't afford their fees, which can range from \$75.00 to \$200.00 an hour. I had to go it alone and figure out how to get what I wanted. Over the next several years, I spent long nights and teary days crying over the prototypes of these exercises. My biggest breakthrough was when I realized that before I could figure out who I wanted to become, I had to figure out who I was. I did some deep soul searching to find out what my strengths and weaknesses were, what I felt was important, and what I was willing to do to change my life.

Most of the "How to Change Your Life" books I've read make it sound easy: Meditation, positive thinking, or visualization alone were supposed to be enough to make real and lasting changes. One book I read in particular stands out because the author was able to completely transform his life in two years. However, after finishing the book, I became disillusioned because I realized that the only reason this author was able to transform himself was because he didn't work for the entire two years but had someone else pay the bills while he worked on improving himself. Unfortunately, the rest of us aren't that lucky: we still have families to support and bills to pay and can't afford to take a year off from our responsibilities. The Portable Coach was written to help you bridge that gap and make real and lasting changes while you support your family and pay your bills.

To convince you I've been there and know what you are going through let me tell you my story. I grew up in a middle class family. My parents made sacrifices to put me through college. I got an accounting degree because it was practical and I'd always be able to support myself. The only problem was I hated accounting. Through dumb luck I landed a well paying job as an auditor for the U.S. Government. About the same time, I drifted into marriage. We'd only been married a year when I found myself drifting into motherhood. Because my job paid better, we decided I would continue working and John would stay home with the baby. Shortly after Sean was born, I was offered a position in

Okinawa and we traveled overseas. Three years and another baby later, I gave up my well paying job and we returned to the States. Upon returning to the States we spent more time drifting. We moved constantly and I never found a job I loved. I kept thinking that my ship was just a little late arriving at the dock but eventually everything would fall into place like it always had. It never occurred to me to swim out and meet the ship.

I finally gave up on waiting for my ship to come in and sat down and charted the difference between where I was and where I wanted to be. I realized it would take some work and sacrifice to become a self-employed writer but it was possible. This was when I developed my seed theory of self-improvement, which is based upon the Tao principle of detachment. Instead of planting one seed and devoting all of my time and energy nurturing that one seed and being disappointed when it fails to blossom, I plant as many seeds as I can and then nurture the ones that grow. For instance, if I'm looking for a job, I send out resumes for jobs I think would be interesting. Instead of getting my heart set on one job and being heartbroken when it falls through, I blanket the market with resumes and wait until I start getting results. Once I get interviews, I give it my all but still keep my options open until I get a job offer. I've been saved a lot of heartache and false hope by practicing detachment.

Another insight that came to me was the realization that I didn't want a "real" job. I hated the thought of being tied to one job for an undetermined amount of time. What I really wanted to do was share these insights and help other people change their lives. I decided to take jobs that required little emotional investment to pay the bills and put my energy into writing The Portable Coach. I owed it to myself to give my dreams the best chance possible. I started working for temp agencies and learned a surprising lesson: a lot of temp jobs just required a presence to answer phones, etc. As long as I did what was asked of me, I had free time to work on writing my book.

You hold in your hands the finished product of my heartache and struggle. I hope that the lessons I've learned will help you make the changes you need or want to make in your life.

How to Use this Book

This book is your Personal Life Coach and with a little bit of time and effort, it can help you change your life. The Portable Coach is written in a workbook format to give you a place to record your hopes, your dreams, your problems, your false starts, and your accomplishments. There are several ways you can use this book.

You can record all of your answers in the book and refer back to it when you face your next challenge.

You can use a three-ring binder to record your progress and rearrange the pages as required.

You can record your answers in the book and rip out the pages you want to keep with you. If you need more copies of a particular work sheet, feel free to make them.

Several times throughout the book, you'll be asked to use a highlighter to track your answers. I'd suggest using several colors of highlighters and assigning each a particular meaning.

I'm not arrogant or pompous enough to claim to have all the answers. The true answers to your life lie in your heart. My job is to help you find your own truth. Making changes in your life is hard, and the answers are different for each person. To get to the right answers you need to ask the right questions. This could be a long process, because each answer generally uncovers another question.

The most important thing to remember is:

YOU CAN DO THIS!!

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Living Off the Employment Grid

By Lori and John Enos

Introduction

More and more Americans are learning a basic fact of life that we learned a long time ago: the belief that an employer is responsible for your economic security is dangerous.

Your employer is obligated to compensate you for the work you do, but that is the extent of the company's obligation. The company is not responsible for making sure your bills are paid, it is not responsible for providing your children with a college education, it is not responsible for your well-being. Most employers can fire employees with a minimal amount of notice and, unless you have an employment contract, they are not obligated to provide severance pay.

It is not that employers are cold-hearted monsters that don't care about people; it is that in today's economic climate they cannot afford to be loyal to their employees. When it comes right down to it, companies are responsible for making money for their stockholders and that responsibility takes precedence over any responsibility they may feel to employees.

The sooner you realize that fact of life and start taking responsibility for your own financial well-being, the better off you will be. Living Off the Employment Grid does not advocate firing your boss and moving off to live in a mountain cabin. What it does advocate is living within your means and developing alternative sources of revenue, so that if you do find yourself suddenly without a job, you'll be prepared to meet your obligations and provide for your family.

Not every strategy included in this book will work for every person; however, everybody can benefit from learning to rely on themselves for their own financial well being.

We've broken Living Off the Employment Grid into two parts. The first part provides tips and techniques for saving money and the second part includes strategies for developing alternative sources of revenue that are not employer-dependent.

Please enjoy the book and if you've found any tip particularly helpful, please let us know. You can visit us in cyberspace at <http://www.offtheemploymentgrid.com>.

Saving Money

In today's tough economic times, saving money has become a priority for millions of people who once spent like there was no tomorrow. Unfortunately, many people have no idea how to truly save money on the basics of life. And many people believe that saving money means deprivation. It doesn't.

Living frugally and saving money doesn't have to mean doing without life's pleasures and it doesn't mean recycling used dryer lint to make doggie sweaters. What it does mean is carefully evaluating your purchases and saving money where you can.

Now, we realize that many of these tips will be pretty obvious. We're not trying to insult your intelligence, we're trying to talk to a wider audience. For every person that says, "Well, duh," another person will say, "Hey, I never thought of that!" Although many of these things will only save you a few dollars, those dollars will add up!

We've provided dozens of tips on saving money, but what it all comes down to is four simple words:

THINK BEFORE YOU SPEND!

About the Authors:

Husband and wife writing duo John and Lori Enos know what it's like to be broke and worried about where the next batch of groceries is coming from. As a result, they've both become experts about saving and making money without a real job. Living Off the Employment Grid shares what they've learned with you in the hopes that you won't have to learn all these lessons the hard way.

Lori is the author of [The Portable Coach: A Do-It-Yourself Approach to Personal Coaching](#) (Hard Shell Word Factory) and the duo have co-authored three screenplays together. They're currently working on a fictionalized book based on their experiences living on Okinawa, Japan.

Living Off the Employment Grid is currently available through ePubbed.com
<http://www.epubbed.com>.

Or visit the official Off the Employment Grid site at
<http://www.offtheemploymentgrid.com>.



Originally born in New York, Dehanna Bailee grew up in New Orleans, Louisiana, which to her, will always be home. She graduated from Slidell High and later attended college in North Carolina to obtain her General Contracting and Real Estate licensing. She has had several different careers, mainly in the construction fields, but also in veterinary services and textile screen-printing professions.

She is married to a wonderful man that she has been with for over fifteen years and has one child. Dehanna currently has one full-length novel available, *True Nature* , and is a contributing author in *Barn and Snow* - A Holiday Poetry Anthology, *To Wound the Autumnal City* - a dyingdays.com 9-11 anthology, and *Cooking by the Book* - a collection of recipes from over two dozen authors. She is also the Editor for the e-zine, *The Notebook and Pen*.

True Nature
by Dehanna Bailee

Kailen James, orphaned as a young child, the only survivor of a fatal plane crash, fostered by a loving couple high in the Appalachia, begins her journey to find a cure. Suffering from horrible seizures, she begins to follow leads that she discovered during her months of research, her personal quest to diagnose a disease which doctors refused to admit existed.

She journeys alone, to the charming city of New Orleans, quickly becoming entranced by her first experiences away from her small hometown. In the romantic city, Kailen soon encounters a dark haired stranger, Marc Foteneau. With deep blue eyes and lithe body, he awakens buried feelings that she knows she is not ready to accept.

Kailen, refusing to concede to defeat, no matter what stands in her way, remains determined to finish her quest. Her self-appointed guide, Marc, escorts Kailen into the remote back-country, in search of the one woman who may hold the key to her salvation, where she suddenly is led astray, into the waiting arms of another man. Kailen soon finds she must battle with her own destiny, and a reality without reason, fighting for both her freedom and her own life.

As Kailen finds her answers, which lay hidden deep within her own soul, will she be ready to accept the existence of her True Nature?

Chapter Two

Tips were always great on a Saturday night; the crowd rolling in steadily, enjoying the rare cool summer evening. The band had just finished their third set of the evening and Big Mama was yelling at everyone from the bartender to the cook about one thing or another, joking and having fun. A party of young men celebrating their companion's wedding with a night on the town had been Kailen's best table, ordering constant rounds of drinks and plenty of food, their gratuities and pockets were deep and loose.

All of the activities help keep her fears at bay, and she relaxed in the active environment, letting the flow of sensations carry her through the long evening. This was not work to her, it was a constant social experience of sounds and smells, movement and color, and she felt so happy here. She did not have to worry about her problems while she was working. It was as if she was in a dance, the rhythm of the night embracing her with every move. She had never felt as she did now in this place, with these people, as if she had been asleep, and was only just awakening, as if she beginning to understand who she truly was.

Kailen bumped into a customer behind her, almost spilling her tray of empty beer bottles and glasses that she had just picked up off an empty table, and turned to face the person to apologize. She gasped. He had to be the darkest man she had ever seen, reminding her of a richly sculptured ebony statue. She believed that she probably would not have noticed him outright, until she had seen his eyes. They were a shade of ice blue, almost glacial, a color she had never seen before, and she could see he was not looking at her, but through her, to her very soul. Time felt as if it had stopped, and she no longer heard the crowds of people moving around her, the colors fading into the light as her vision became disturbed. She felt numb as she stood frozen before him as if she had been bewitched by him. He broke the spell as he spoke to her, his unblinking eyes cold.

"Mona say she lookin' for you lass," his rich voice sent waves of sensations through her chest. "You no lookin' where you need. She will send him fo' you, to show the way, you jus' wait."

The man suddenly turned away from her, fading silently into the crowd, and was instantly gone, as if he had never been there, leaving her with a tingling in her fingers and the faint odor of honeysuckle and magnolias surrounding her.

"Hey honey," Big Mama came over to her, her eyes dark as she studied the pale young woman. "You look like you have seen a ghost." She moved closer, sensing something was wrong, as she asked, putting her arm around her shoulders. "Do you need a break? Why don't you go, Ricky will cover for you."

Mama gave her a push towards the back door, deftly removing the tray from her hands, and leaving with an array of calls and motion.

Kailen stepped out the back door into the cool night air, appreciating the quiet of the small courtyard behind the club. The faint odor of the breeze off the river was clean, somewhat, over the pungent smell of trash. She closed her eyes a moment, trying to find any peace within herself, but she only felt cold and alone, not only because of the dark, but also because she was afraid of the man who had approached her. She began to question her sanity, wondering if he had actually been there before her, or merely only another delusion.

No one else seemed to have noticed his presence, and I am sure if anyone had seen him, there would have been some reaction, she thought to herself, remembering his eyes. She felt so tired again; worried that maybe, somehow, this was a new side effect of her seizures. It would figure. I was finally feeling happy for once in my life, and now I might have another new symptom of a disease that everyone insists does not exist. What did my birth parents ever do to have me punished with such tragedy? How will I ever have a real life if this stuff keeps getting worse?

She sat down hard on one of the worn out chairs left in the courtyard for the employees' use, laying her head on her forearms, crumpling on the table in utter desolation. She had always felt somewhat alone, but now the feeling was almost overwhelming her, and she was beginning to feel as if there was no fight left in her. She began to believe the whole trip had only been a cruel joke, a search for a Holy Grail that did not exist, a cure for a disease that was not curable. The reality of the decision she had made suddenly came home to rest in her heart, trying to deplete what little spirit she had left.

"Sugar," Mama spoke softly, quietly coming through the back door to check on her. The woman paused a moment, tilted her head, silently watching Kailen. "I think you need to go on home, get some rest. Don't worry, we can finish up the night, it about done anyhow, what you think?"

Mama moved closer, placing her hand on Kailen's shoulder, patting her softly, offering what comfort she could. She had no idea what was wrong with the girl, but understood she needed to relax for the rest of the evening.

"I knows it can be hard on young ladies to come here to this city. Sometimes you get overwhelmed by it all." She paused, waiting for Kailen to reply. She continued, leaning in close and giving her a slight squeeze, letting Kailen know she really did care. "I was young once too, there is sometimes too much for one to deal with in such a short time. You go on home now."

"Thank you," Kailen replied softly, deeply touched by the woman's compassion. She stood slowly, a small smile curling the corners of her mouth. "I will make it up, I promise, and please don't think I am not able to do my job, I..."

"No dear, I know how it is, don't fret yourself none about it." The woman helped her up, putting her arm around Kailen, smiling at her as she winked. "You just be ready for next week darlin' okay?"

"Thanks Mama, I will be."

Kailen picked up her few things from behind the bar, and headed out the door, almost reluctant to go home alone, but relieved that she could have some time to think and recover from the day. On the walk home, she decided to grab a cup of coffee and walk down to the riverfront to watch the ships. She felt she could always relax by the river, the soothing motion of the water helping her calm herself, and she knew she would not be able to sleep, no matter how tired she was, at least for a while.

The heavysset man at the coffee shop was friendly, his eyes filled with mischief, and she was glad she stopped by to grab a cup of coffee. In the course of their discussion, he finally talked her into a pastry, commenting how she looked famished, and needed to eat something. She had to admit his pastries were fabulous, and she could not remember last time that she had stopped to eat.

Kailen was carefully holding her steaming coffee as she sat on one of the many benches on the side of the river. One by one, she slowly licked her fingers, trying to remove the last delicious trace of the sticky sugar from the pastry, absently watching a small tugboat struggling against the current, trying to maneuver a heavily loaded barge.

It was amazing, to her, how that one little boat could move such a load. It seemed impossible in theory, with the current and all, but the boats always were able to move those barges no matter what the obstacle. She set her coffee down beside her; the napkin crushed in between her sticky palms, and lay back her head, breathing deeply. She could smell the scents combining in the air; the dirt of the river, the diesel fuel, odors of wet moss and coffee, and faint perfume of the women, who were slowly strolling by, holding their beaus close. She tried to ignore the soft conversations and laughter from the couples who passed, her own heart being so utterly alone, still vacant and waiting for the one man who would accept her, even with her affliction.

"Nice evening."

Kailen jumped, almost knocking her coffee over, and dropping her napkin, which the breeze quickly claimed. She spun around slowly to see the person who had come up so silently behind her.

He was average height, with brown eyes, short-cropped sandy hair, somewhat attractive, but there was nothing remarkable about his looks, reminding her of a clean-cut college boy. What drew her attention though, was the vibration in the air that seemed to surround him.

"I guess," she replied slowly, hesitantly, her green eyes watching him closely as he approached. She added quickly, "I was just leaving. You can have the bench."

"No, no, of course not." He came around the bench, sitting next to her, casually sliding his hand behind her, along the top rail of the bench, as he crossed his legs and regarded her silently for a moment. "I would never ask such a lovely lady to remove herself from here for my benefit. Please stay." He gestured with his hand with a mock bow as he looked at her, smiling broadly.

Kailen heard a faint buzzing, as if insects were flying around her head, and waved her hand thinking it may be a mosquito. The little bugs were usually kept from the riverfront by the breeze, but occasionally one would be strong enough to stay close enough to bite.

"I really must go, I appreciate the complement, but..." She looked around, distracted, then shook her head thinking the insect was stuck in her hair. No matter what she did, the buzzing was only getting louder, and on top of that, now she was beginning to feel nauseous. She stood up.

"I have to go," she repeated as the world spun violently at her attempts to move away.

Her long dark hair fell loose from its bindings, and whipped around her face like snakes, blocking her vision. She had to get away from here, this was so unreal, and she was beginning to panic, desperately worried she was getting ready to have another seizure. The thought of having another attack terrified her, even more so her being out in public and in front of a total stranger.

As she turned to walk away, he jumped up quickly, reaching out, touching her arm. "No, please stay," he spoke quietly, "I would like to talk to you more."

She now felt as if the buzzing was going to eat through her skull into her head, and she could not concentrate. Her vision was clouding and his hand on her arm felt like a vise, even in spite of the fact that he barely touched her. She had to go now, the turmoil inside her almost out of control.

Run! her inner voice screamed at her, *Go! Go now!* She stumbled back away from the bench, holding her hand in front of her, trying to push the man away, her eyes clenched shut from the torment of the buzzing, fighting the urge to vomit.

"Are you okay?" the man asked, as he moved calmly alongside her, watching intently. Kailen shook her head again; steadily backing away until her back hit the rail behind her. She briefly opened her eyes to get her bearings, and it was long enough for her to notice from the corner of her eye as a dark figure moved around from around her. The sandy haired man suddenly dropped his hold on her, whirled and stalked off, his head hung down, not looking behind him. Kailen had the impression that the buzzing sound seemed to leave with him, following his retreating form as he walked away.

She stood bent over, holding onto the solid rail for support, her hair falling around her, the dark locks swaying, as she took deep breaths, trying to sort out her clouded mind. The

pain in her head was fading, but her arm still tingled where the man had only barely touched her. As her vision slowly cleared, the tears running from her eyes, she suddenly remembered what had made him leave, and realized she was still not alone.

Kailen glanced towards the bench and groaned. Without moving her head, she could just see a pair of large black boots with much worn soles, sticking out from the bottom of a pair of faded jeans. She rolled her eyes, as she thought to herself, Great what now.

She stood up, running her hands through her hair, trying to get the long dark tresses under some sort of control, as she turned and faced the man. Keeping one hand on top of her head to keep her hair from falling back in her face, she searched around with her eyes on the ground for her tie.

"Well?" she inquired to the silent form seated on the bench, as she picked up the ribbon and tied her hair up.

The man looked out from under his hat, his face unreadable in the shadow it provided. "No thanks? No, I appreciate the rescue?"

Oh, wonderful, a smart-ass, she sighed to herself.

With her eyesight finally clearing, she studied him closer. She assumed he was tall, but it was hard to say how tall with his reclined seating, broad in the shoulder, slight in the waist, with a physique that suggested strength under a tight rein. He looked to her like he should be out on the range, not hanging out in the city, reminding her somewhat of a cowboy. His voice was smooth, the image of whiskey came to her, and he smelled like clean country air, and rain. She instantly wondered if he always smelled that good, but quickly pushed the question from her mind.

"What do you expect mister?" she replied sarcastically. "I came here to sit by myself and relax, hopefully get a moment of peace, and some weirdo comes along and scares the crap out of me."

She began to pace as she continued, "I feel as if I was beaten with a bat. Now, I am here with some cowboy, who apparently chased off the bad guy, and who now wants a hero's glory. What the hell do you expect?"

Kailen paused a moment, her green eyes afire in the dim streetlight, waiting for him to say something. She began to get even more irritated as he just passively watched her, the corner of his mouth turning up slightly, as if he was amused by her behavior. She was getting more paranoid as several moments passed, and finally spoke up, breaking the tense silence.

"Was this some joke, for a reward or something? Are you two working together? Well the joke's on you buster for I don't have a dime to my name."

She stood there staring at him waiting, hoping her ranting would make him leave, and she could go home. He sat as still as a rock, except for the slow smile sliding across his face, and still he would not answer her. She was becoming extremely infuriated with his lack of response.

"Well, fine, whatever, I am going home. Thanks for the memories, hasta la vista, adios, whatever."

Kailen turned sharply, and began to head back to her apartment, hoping he would not follow, and praying that if he did she could find someone would help her. She planned to stop by the coffee shop again, and hopefully if by chance he did follow, at least she could get help if she needed to. She was still weak, and unsure of her balance, but she attempted to put on a show of strength so he would not notice her vulnerability.

"I know why you are here," he spoke quietly.

It was barely a whisper, his smooth voice caressing her ears, but she heard it as if he had yelled. She stopped in her tracks and slowly turned to face him; her eyes tightening with suspicion as she studied him. She could read nothing in his posture to let her know what he was thinking, his relaxed bearing giving her no clues about his true intentions.

"What?" she replied in a harsh whisper, crossing her arms in front of her.

"I know why you came here, and I know who you need to find."

Kailen's mind raced, trying to find a logical solution to his statement. *Who did this guy think he was? This has to be a con artist, who is trying to sucker me, next he will tell me he knows where I got my shoes.*

"Well, okay Mister, play psychic. Tell me my thoughts."

He sat quietly, drawing out the moment, slowly leaning forward as he placed his elbow on his knee as his hand hung limply. He slowly tilted his hat back with his thumb, and looked directly at her. His eyes were deep blue, like the night sky in summer during a full moon, framed by thick black lashes, set in a face tanned dark by the warm rays of the sun. She had the sensation as if that warm heavenly orb was shining on her that exact moment, as the heat in her body rose, her guard slipping as he spoke.

"You believe that you are here to find an answer," he replied, the words caressing her ears, causing a tingling sensation to run through her body again.

Kailen was shocked, and nervous, but tried not to appear to be. *This is a joke, she thought, this is only a cruel guess, he is just trying to bait me, he does not know anything. How could he know?*

"Oh, really?" she replied, trying to sound tough, keeping a tinge of anger in her voice. "And how, per se, deep do these psychic abilities of yours run, oh wise one? How do you know why I am here?"

He settled back, stretched his legs out before him, and placed his hands behind his head in relaxed position. She could not help but to notice the movement of his lean body beneath the close fitting clothes he wore. She turned away looking at the river, trying to ignore the way his white cotton shirt clung to his hard body, hinting at the wide expanse of muscles across his chest. The bees were back again, but this time, softer and deeper in her own stomach. She shifted to her weight to one side, leaning against the rail, and attempted to relax enough to draw an answer from him that made some sense. He followed her gaze out across the river, watching as another oil tanker passed.

"Well, I know you aren't from around here, for one," he quietly replied.

No duh, anyone could know that, she thought to herself. Just as I thought, a local trying to scam me.

"Oh, that was hard, any idiot could tell me that," she rudely replied, feeling vindicated that she believed she knew what he was up to.

His gaze turned quickly towards her and hardened. She suddenly began to question the intelligence of her making him mad. He seemed to intensify his presence without even moving, and she stepped back slightly. He read the move and looked back out at the river, seemingly again lost in thought.

After a brief moment he turned back to her, and sighed softly. "Look lady, I am not here to tell you anything, I was just asked by someone to come find you, let you know where you needed to go. Whether you want to use the information I have or not is your choice, but I don't have the time or patience to spar with you." He leaned forward again, his gaze softening, deepening his blue eyes. "Don't get me wrong, I can understand. You've had a hard night, you are really not ready. I was told you wouldn't be."

He stood up and pulled a card out of his back pocket and she could not help but notice his height, his long legs, well defined by the tight denim jeans. He looked at the card and flipped it over read the front, shrugged his shoulders and looked back at her.

"Here." His blue eyes watched her closely, as he handed her the card. "Take this. It has a number on the front where you can leave a message to get a hold of me. The note on the back is nothing, a liaison nothing else, wouldn't be of no use to you. When you feel like you are ready to talk, call me. I will meet with you, on your terms."

He stepped forwards holding out the card, but did not come too close, making her move near to him in order to take it from his hand, his eyes traveling down her body as she stood silently. The way he looked at her was making her feel as if there were thousands of butterflies fluttering around inside of her. No matter how she tried, she could not

ignore the sensation. She hesitantly took the card from his hand and read the front that had the name of a local bar imprinted on it, White Tavern. As she looked up he had already turned and was walking away from her, his body a silhouette in the lamplight.

"Wait," she called, resisting the urge to chase after him, and he paused, turning slightly to face her. "Who do I ask for?"

Kailen felt so stupid for even asking, but she did not know if she needed him or not, and she felt any lead was better than none.

He spoke softly, but loud enough so he could be heard, "Marc Foteneau. Just ask for Marc."

Marc began slowly walking away from her again, leaving her with the morning mist rising off the river, the first stray bands of the sun coming over the horizon, painting the sky in pale blues and pinks. Behind her she could hear the steady sounds of ships, churning in the mighty river, the birds of the dawn as they awakened around her, and the faint scent of honeysuckle in the wind.

End of chapter

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Carolyn Howard Johnson

I was born writing and talking-or very nearly.

When I was accepted as a writer for the Olympus High School Thunderbolt in Salt Lake City, I thought of it as my first professional job. In art class I made myself a wallet with an inkpot and quill carefully incised into cowhide, kept scrapbooks of everything I wrote and everything that was published whether it was good bad or indifferent. I dreamed writing and lived writing.

I was the youngest person ever hired as a staff writer for the Salt Lake Tribune--"A Great Pulitzer Prize Winning Newspaper." After that my infatuation only became more intense.

In New York I was an editorial assistant at Good Housekeeping Magazine at the age of 19. I also was a publicity writer for Eleanor Lambert Agency (fashion) in that city. I wrote releases for celebrity designers of the time including Pauline Trigere, Rudy Gernreich, and Christian Dior.

I write a regular freelance fashion column and occasional society pieces for the Pasadena Star News and movie reviews for The Glendale News-Press-an LA Times affiliate. I also do profiles and a regular column for Home Décor Buyer.

My first novel, *This Is The Place*, was published this year and I wrote my first screenplay, *The Killing Ground*. A chapter from the novel has been selected as a finalist for the prestigious Masters Literary Award and the novel won the Sime-Gen Reviewers' Choice Award in the mainstream category. My work was selected for two anthologies in 2001. *Harkening: A Collection of Stories Remembered* will be released in 2002, and I'm writing my first book of poetry, *SkyScapes: A Woman's Memoir in Poetry*.

This is the Place has received national attention because it is set at the venue of the 2002 Winter Olympics. It has been reviewed by the likes of *Library Journal* and featured in media as varied the Los Angeles Daily News and UCLA's *Writers' Quarterly*, and I have been interviewed on more than 400 radio and TV stations (including syndication). Visit my site at The Literary Times: <http://www.tlt.com/authors/carolynhowardjohnson.htm>

This is the Place
by Carolyn Howard Johnson

Skylar Eccles is a half-breed, which in Utah where she was born and raised, means she is one-half Mormon and one-half any other religion. She is hell-bent on marrying a Mormon man in spite of her own internal longing to have a career and to travel. By confronting her own history--several generations of women who entered into mixed marriages--and by experiencing a series of devastating events, she finds love is more meaningful when she listens to its secrets.

This novel is about how prejudice can be disguised by love, family and religion and how it can attack its own and how unselfish love of others and love for oneself can triumph.

Prologue -Sky Eccles History

There is a family story. It is told that when my Gram Harriet left her career and piano behind at her grandparent's house in Salt Lake City to come to Holladay to live with her mother, she left the breadth and breath of her life. Brock, her husband, had been determined to do what was impossible--to replace that life piece by piece. He finally settled on replacing the piano; perhaps he saw that he couldn't do all the rest for her, or perhaps he saw that the piano was, after all, the key segment of her soul's puzzle.

"Everyone knows Harriet's stubborn as an ox and blue-blooded and high strung as a thoroughbred," Brock said, "So it's no onus on me if I happen to say so." That's the way the first entry in Brock Eccles' diary read and that's the way, I, Skylar Eccles, recorded it on the day my cousin Rachel and I read it. We were in the fourth and fifth grades respectively and knew better but did it anyway.

The diary was lying next to one written by Brock's father, Hart, but that reading waited for another time that never came for Hart's diary has been lost. Only snippets survive, handed down verbally, father to son, like the tales of Odysseus. I don't have my original copy of the notes I took on that day either, flushed with the thrill of being sneaky. I memorized that first line so Rachel and I could quote it and laugh when Gram Harriet was on a tirade. It was apparent Grandpa Brock was right; everyone-- even a couple of giggling grade schoolers--knew Grandpa Brock spoke God's truth when he said that. The rest of the story I have to remember the way my imagination recorded it and tell it much like the bards of Homer's day, with as much care with the truths of legend as possible:

Gram Harriet had been teaching piano to the neighborhood children at the old upright in the old Cottonwood Ward. It was the same piano she had played when she first came to Brock's attention. All the brothers and sisters at the ward had agreed that Wednesdays the piano would not be scheduled for any church activity so that Harriet could teach their children. The very young children--some were as young as three-- brought small change for their lessons. Everyone knew that Gram Harriet could teach more children if she had a piano in her home and everyone knew there was one she loved and had left behind at the Cavewell home.

Grandmother Cavewell died of an attack of emphysema just seven days after Thanksgiving the year that piano appeared in Gram Harriet's living room. She had done a fine job of planning how to break through the wall of bitter pride that Harriet had built around herself. She had done it with trepidation, and without a notion that it would be her last gift to her stubborn, redheaded granddaughter or that her own death would somehow tie the whole package into a presentation Harriet would not be able to refuse.

After her grandmother's death Harriet let herself into the ward chapel with a quiet key. She played Morning Song, very softly, with no crescendos, trills, or flourishes, until her fingers felt tired and her body was so numb she wasn't sure she could make the walk back home under the cloud tainted moon. It was too late for any other amends and if music

couldn't reach out to souls removed from earth then, in Harriet's view, prayer could do no better.

Not long after that Brock, along with his younger brother, Joseph, and his cousin, Stue, brought Harriet's piano from Salt Lake City. Brock had asked Stue, whose daughter took lessons from Harriet, because he had a vested interest and because, in Brock's words, he was as "big as a mastodon." All three believed that Franklin's old model A truck, one of the few engined vehicles in Holladay at the time, wouldn't be large enough to lay the piano flat; they considered a prone position essential to getting the instrument to Holladay--a small farming community outside the city-- in one piece so they used the old family buckboard. It was this process of getting the instrument up from the Cavewell home on the floor of the valley to the Eccles property on the foothills that most concerned Brock.

There was a wariness among the perpetrators of this piano scam. Joseph, Brock's youngest sibling, was sure Harriet would dig in her heels and not accept it. He wasn't crazy about turning the buckboard around and hauling it back; it wasn't, after all, a bag of coal or a bushel of apples.

"What can she do once the thing is in the parlor?"

"Well, she kin chop it to smithereens like she did the parlor wall." Stue said.

"Or she c-can refuse to play until her temper f-flares down--it may take a couple of decades," Joseph projected.

"Well, its all been fixed so it will work" Brock said handing up blankets and quilts and ropes that would keep the piano intact on the way home.

"Sure you have...You've got her r-r-right under your thumb." Joseph held up his pinkie with a grin that reflected his brother's own.

"Nope, you watch. Crystal got instructions from Grandmother Cavewell before she died. You just wait!"

When the buckboard came lumbering down the driveway Crystal, Brock's mother, was in the yard. "Did you remember Grandpa's note? For heaven's sake, be careful! She'll notice if there's a scratch. Be careful of the top. It'll fly open and spring its hinges. Goodness, you men. It's an instrument, remember?"

"Okay, Ma. We brought it all the way from the Avenues. I think we can get it through the yard. If you'll quit fussing, we can do the last twenty feet before Harriet gets home from teaching!"

"Yeah, you should be herding that chorus of kids. Are they going to be here before Harriet?"

When Harriet walked up the front path ten children tugged at her skirts.

"We're having a party."

"Garret has cookies for us."

"Come, look what we have to do our lessons on."

The young musicians' parents stood proudly by with baked goods they had brought for the surprise.

There stood the piano, burnished wood, with sheets of music piled near the little circular piano seat. Harley had polished the front part--all he could get to before the guests started to arrive--with almond oil. One child at a time came forward as Garret called them and played their week's lesson "with feeling, Mrs. Eccles, just like you want me to!" Stue's daughter, Olivia, said, as a formal introduction, when it was her turn.

Harriet didn't speak. It was quiet even with the music and the children milling about. One child at a time climbed up on the adjustable stool that was twirled by Crystal to the proper height for each, with no applause in between.

Olivia played "The Birthday Party" a three note extravaganza, right hand only, from John Thompson's Beginning Primer and then went back to her milk and cookies. Todd, Harriet and Brock's younger son, did a minuet. He was so young he was pudgy but it was still apparent that he had inherited his mother's skeletal fingers and her innate rhythm. Afterwards he hung on his father's pant leg and watched his father reloop the rope that had held the piano as the next child played.

When everyone had performed, including Bernice who was showing some promise for classical music, Harriet had been given a long, long time to think. "Well, I just think we'll have to have these busy-body men make a proper piano bench," she sniffed, "one that will hold a teacher and a student."

"I guess that's one job I'd better not put off." Brock said. As he walked into the kitchen to get more ginger snaps for the children he leaned toward Joseph and whispered, "Notice that even when we win, we lose?"

When the guests left, Brock said, "Harriet, there's a note from Grandfather Cavewell down near the pedals. Sometimes the best part of a gift is the card."

The note was rolled tightly, lodged between the left pedal and the piano front panel.

"Dear Harriet,

Your grandmother and I kept your piano as long as we could to give your anger time to fester down.

Remember, this was a gift to you from your grandmother when you were a child. I can't give it to you again for it is already yours. Your grandmother always said, 'Love lasts about as long as you'll let it.' I guess that has special meaning now that she's gone.

Grandpa Cavewell"

End of prologue.

For more information, please visit Carolyn's website:
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**Margie K. Tovrea writing as
Kristie Leigh Maguire**

Kristie Leigh Maguire and her husband have lived all over the United States and many foreign countries while following his career. While living in Japan, she found it very difficult to find books to read that were written in English. This situation was intolerable as she was an avid reader and had been known to resort to reading cereal boxes if nothing else was available. Have you ever tried to read a cereal box written in Japanese? It was not a pretty picture. Ms. Maguire began writing her own books just to have something to read. She discovered a new passion in writing; thus her career as a romance novelist was born.

Ms. Maguire had read romance novels since her early years. When she first began her writing career, she tried to pattern her writing after some of her favorite romance authors. This did not work for her. She soon discovered that she had her own voice and style of writing. She wanted to take romance 'beyond the kiss without crossing that shadowy line of taboo into pornography'. She wanted to tell a good love story which included sex but told sensuously and with emotion. She wanted the characters to be everyday ordinary people and not some impossible hero or heroine who could only be real in the pages of a romance novel. The result? *Desert Triangle* - the first novel in the ultra-sensual trilogy, The Marcie Series. Ms. Maguire is currently working on *Cabin Fever*, the second book in the series. Southern Charm Press schedules *Desert Triangle* for release in July 2002 and will also be publishing the rest of the books in The Marcie Series.

Although the romance genre is Ms. Maguire's first love, she also writes in other genres. Her first entry into Mainstream Fiction is her novel *Emails from the Edge (The Life of an Expatriate Wife)* published by PageFree Publishing and released in December 2001. Another of her novels in the Mainstream Fiction category is *No Lady and Her Tramp* co-authored with Mark Haeuser and scheduled for release with Southern Charm Press in January 2004.

Ms. Maguire's stories *The Land of the Rising Sun* and *Christmas in a Foreign Land* are included in the anthology *Calliope's Mousepad: Women Writers Online* edited by Sarah Mankowski of WordThunder.com and released by iUniverse in December 2001. Her story *Soul Mates and Lovers* is included in the anthology *Romancing the Soul: True Soul Mate Stories From Around the World and Beyond* edited by Dorothy Thompson of A Writers Life.com and scheduled for release in the spring of 2002.

Ms. Maguire is the founder of NUW (Not the Usual Way) Independent Authors Community, an online international community. She began NUW in January 2001 as a

place of networking and support for authors who are published by Print on Demand, E-Book, self published or published by small press traditional publishers. Ms. Maguire is also the Romance Editor and co-columnist for 'Have You Heard' at MyShelf.com and Staff Reviewer for Bridges Magazine.

Although Ms. Maguire is originally from the South and will always remain Southern at heart, she now resides in a small town in Nevada in between international assignments with her husband. During her expatriate years, she has lived in St. Croix in the U.S. Virgin Islands, Aruba, Thailand, Japan and three times in Saudi Arabia.

Emails from the Edge (The Life of an Expatriate Wife)

By Kristie Leigh Maguire

In collaboration with Adrianna Larson

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When friendship spans the oceans - it seemed a fair exchange to share the exotic experiences in the Land of the Rising Sun in exchange for hearing of life in the real world. A rare glimpse into the life of an American woman in a foreign and alien land - read her journal.

Excerpt from Emails from the Edge (The Life of an Expatriate Wife)

Early June 1997

We got the *call*, my husband and I, when we were visiting with my Mother and my family in Louisiana. We had only been back from Saudi Arabia for a short time and we were really enjoying being back in the *real world*. Our plans were to visit with family and friends on an extended vacation trip through the South and the Midwest.

The *call* put an end to those plans. My husband was being offered a job in Japan and the company wanted us to leave *last week*, if you know what I mean. *Japan!!!!* Oh, wow! Somehow I had never thought that we might get to Japan, of all places. We had lived in St. Croix in the U.S. Virgin Islands, Aruba, Panama, Thailand and Saudi Arabia in our overseas work but *Japan!* The exotic land of the *Far East!* Pictures flashed into my mind of Buddha statues and Oriental castles and cherry blossoms and the things that you see on the screen in the movie theaters. *A grand new adventure! Let's go, honey!*

Things began to get hectic. We rushed through the rest of our trip. We were determined to see our family. I had not seen my family in a year and it had been two years since my husband had seen his family. We knew that it would be at least another year before we had another chance to see them. Finally, exhausted, we arrived back home in Nevada.

Mid June 1997

Throw that stuff into the suitcases. Come on moving company and pack that stuff up in boxes and get it on the plane to Japan. We have a deadline to meet and a plane to catch! Call those friends and let them know we're going to be leaving in a couple of days for Japan! *You're going where? Oh, can you put me in a suitcase and take me with you?* Called my friend Sandy to tell her the good news. *Sandy, is that you?* No, it's an answering machine. Oh well, leave a message, I'm going to Japan, Sandy! I'll write to you with a phone number when I know what it is, OK? We've got to go!

Rush, rush, rush, no time to think! We've got to go!

What do you mean we've got to fly to the office for two days of meetings before leaving for Japan? That means we will have to fly all the way across the United States from Las Vegas to the East coast and then turn right around and fly back to the West coast for departure from San Francisco to Japan! Oh well, I guess that's why they make planes.

Hurry, hurry! We're going to miss the plane to Boston!

Brain overload! Lots of information to cover in two days. Sign this form, sign that form! Wait, honey, I've got to call my Mama and daughter one last time.

Let's go, we're going to miss the plane to San Francisco!!

Finally! The plane is leaving San Francisco. Wave bye to the Pacific coast of the United States, honey! See you next year, good old U.S. of A! I am exhausted, how about you, honey? I would kill for a cigarette!! Business class is good. Room to stretch out. Think I'll go to sleep. Can't think. Wake me up in 14 hours, dear, or when they bring food, whichever comes first!

The plane is coming in to Narita International in Tokyo, Japan. Can't tell from the air what our new country looks like. We're on the ground. Another maze of immigrations and customs and a new language and each country is different we know, so lets not panic. Can you speak *English*? No. Can *you* speak English? *No!*

OK, so we missed the bus to the hotel in Yokohama. We'll catch the next one. When is the next one? Two hours!? I'm tired! I'm hungry! Well, lets go see if we can at least find a sandwich somewhere and maybe a cup of coffee. I would die for a cup of coffee. What do you *mean*, no *sandwich*? Do you want some *sushi*? No? How about a delicious bowl of *noodles*? OK, then we'll wait till we get to the hotel and see if we can find *something* Western. Lets just get a cup of coffee for now. *NO, I do not want TEA! I WANT COFFEE!!!*

Honey, do you think *all* the people in Japan are here at the airport? I have never seen so many people in one place in my life! We sit on our suitcases in front of the airport trying not to get run over in the crush. Here comes the bus! No, wrong bus I think. I can't read Japanese. Wait, it is the bus! OK, lets get on. Won't be long now till we get to the hotel. We ride and ride and God, look at those crazy drivers! We are on the wrong side of the road; we're going to be killed! *What!* They drive on the wrong side of the road over here?! Well, it *is* the wrong side of the road to me, honey, I don't care if they do think it's the right way to drive. It's been hours, are we almost to the hotel? It's only been two hours? Are you sure?

It's now dark and all I can see is lights. Still can't tell much about my new country.

Finally! The hotel. We pile off the bus and they throw our luggage out at us. We go in. *Do you speak English!?* Yes! Oh, good, we have reservations. They say something to us. I thought you said you could speak *English!* You said that *was* English? Could have fooled me! OK, we'll say it again *real slow*. We have reservations!

Finally, we get to our room. We are overwhelmed at this point but we are still hungry so lets go see if we can find the restaurant and some FOOD. I am almost in tears. *I DO NOT WANT NOODLES! I WANT SOMETHING WESTERN!* OK, do you have coffee? I said *COFFEE!*

Maybe tomorrow will be better, honey. Let's get some sleep.

It's daylight at last. I look out the hotel window at the scene laid out before me. Our hotel seems to be on a mountain and we are on the 17th floor. Way down below I see high rise buildings and cars and buses and people and more people. The people are walking. No, they aren't walking, they are practically running. Wonder where they all are going in such a hurry? The tall buildings seem to close in on one another and there are other little buildings thrown in amongst them like children's play houses. I see big signs on some of the buildings. Can't read a word of it. Funny looking Japanese picture letters. Looks like little drawings instead of writing to me. People are scurrying around like little ants carrying all different colors of umbrellas. It's raining. The gray fog swirls around and I can barely see the harbor and the big ships in the distance. My husband's new place of work is there on the waterfront somewhere.

Lets go see if we can find some kind of recognizable food for breakfast, honey, and some coffee.

We go out into the hall and hunt the elevator. I look out the window on the opposite side of the hotel. *All right!* That's more like it! A Japanese type building at last down there. The type that you see on picture post cards of Japan. Wonder what that is?

We find the restaurant. We have a breakfast coupon. Good for the buffet, is that what you said? OK with me, maybe we can find something on the breakfast buffet, honey. I see croissants, I like that. Maybe a little butter and some strawberry jam to go with it. Good, I see that. Things are looking up. Scrambled eggs, a little runny but definitely scrambled eggs. Sausage. Good. Wonder what's under that cover? Oh, my God, what *is* that? Never mind, I don't want any. I don't think I'll lift any more covers.

Lets see if they have coffee now. There's a coffee urn. Nope, that's tea. Don't *want* any *tea!* Oh, here it is, *coffee* at last! Maybe I should get two cups now in case it's all gone later. No, don't want to appear the crazy American. Now just how is one supposed to eat sausage and scrambled eggs with chopsticks? Waiter! *Waiter!* Could I have a *fork?* *I said could I have a FORK!* OK, I'll try to eat with chopsticks then. Hell, maybe I'll just pick it up with my fingers!

Are you sure you have to go to work now, honey? *Please* don't leave me here alone just yet. OK then, if you have to go. I'll just wait right here in the hotel lobby so I'll be sure I see you when you come back if it's only going to be for an hour or so. Then they are coming to get us and take us to see what our apartment looks like, right? From the way they described it to us, it sounds really nice. Set on the side of a mountain with a fantastic view of the harbor. Oh, I can't wait to see it! I'm so excited! A new country to explore! We'll get used to everything soon. We've lived abroad before and it just takes a little time. It'll be all right. Right, honey?

Surely it's been an hour already. What if something happened to him and he doesn't come back? What would I do? I can't speak Japanese, they can't speak English, and I don't even have a phone number to call him and what was the office phone number back in the States? Do I have that written down anywhere? No, I don't. I think I'm going to cry. I think I'll go back up to the room.

A knock on the door. I peek out. I open the door. *Where have you been?! I thought something had happened to you!! Don't tell me to calm down!* Oh, are they waiting on us down in the lobby? Well, why didn't you say so? Let's go then.

I have never seen such crooked little twisting streets in my life. Are you *sure* this isn't a one way street? It can't be a two way street! It's not wide enough. Everybody in Japan must have at least three cars per family. No? Then there must be a lot of Japanese families!

That's our apartment complex?! Well, maybe it will be better inside then. I can't wait to see that view of the harbor. Where's my *view*?! I *told* them that a view was very important to me. *No, I do NOT consider the side of the building next door a good view!!* You have to stand sideways on the patio it's so small! Where will I put a patio chair? Oh, all right then. Maybe I can find a *small* patio chair. Can we just go look at something else? Maybe we can find something somewhere else with a view and a patio big enough to go out on. What do you *mean*, we're locked into this? Says who?! Oh, OK. I'll just have to make the best of it, I guess, if there is nothing we can do about it now.

This is the third bank we've been to, honey, why won't they let us open up an account? We have travelers checks. Aren't they supposed to be as good as cash? What *alien registration* number are they talking about? The Company has us in here on 90 day tourist visas and we don't have to get an alien registration number, do we? I wish the Company had an office here that we could turn to for help. They just threw us over here with no one to turn to. We are totally *alone* here, aren't we, honey?

Four Days Later

The furniture is in the apartment. We are in the apartment. What we have in our suitcases is in the apartment. Our stuff shipped from the States is NOT in the apartment. No problem. I can make do till it gets here. I would wash the clothes we have if I could figure out the writing on the washer. But I'm hungry and there is no food in the house.

Stan caught the train to work this morning. That's going to be a trip, having to ride that train. I've never done that before. Wonder if I can find the grocery store? I have no idea where it is. I know we walked down that way when they showed us the apartment but I can't remember where it is. Think I'll go see if I can find it.

I'm back inside. I'm scared. I couldn't find the store and I got lost. The store is down the mountain somewhere but there are too many little paths down the mountain and I can't remember the way down to it. I thought I wasn't going to find the way back to the apartment. I walked and walked and got turned around. No one to ask. Finally found my way back to the apartment. I'm still hungry. Maybe I have some peanuts in my purse from the plane. Wonder what time Stan will get back from work? I think I'm going to cry again. I'm scared to go back out by myself.

I'm so glad to see you, honey! Lets go see if we can find the grocery store. I'm hungry! Maybe we can find a little restaurant down the mountain and get something to EAT before we go to the grocery store. I'm *starved!!* Don't *ask* me why I didn't go to the grocery store today! I DID try to find it and I got LOST and I was SCARED!

There's a little restaurant, lets go in. Even *noodles* sound good to me now, I'm starved! Can you figure out this menu, honey? It's got those little picture characters on it and I can't figure out a thing on it! Do you see any pictures of food? We can at least point at the pictures, right? No pictures. Get out the Japanese phrase book. What's the word for FOOD! OK, narrow that down a bit. SANDWICH! There's that word, no I don't care what kind as long as its not *raw fish!* Why can't they understand us? Maybe we aren't pronouncing it right. Let them look at the phrase book. Wonder why they can't read it? It's not the little picture words but it's Japanese, right? Evidently not. Finally they understand salad and finally make them understand water. Good. Lets try for some soup then. I don't care what kind of soup.

OK, I think they got the meaning of soup. Let's wait and see what we get. They bring us the salad. OK, we eat the salad. They bring us some soup. I still don't know what kind of soup but I'm going to eat it anyway. Water tastes good. Wish they understood the word *coffee*. Oh well, water's not bad. Well, that wasn't so bad. I think I'll live now. Here's the check. *Three thousand yen?!!* For soup and salad and water for two?! That's about US\$30 isn't it, honey? Let's get out of here and go to the grocery store.

I can't figure out what any of the food is. Nothing written in English. I'll have to go by the pictures on the items and hope for the best. I wonder is that dishwashing liquid or some type of floor cleaner? *These people are so rude!* I was standing here looking at whatever that is on the shelf and they just *have* to come stand in front of me till I walk on. That looks like it may be a carton of milk, I'll grab that. These aisles are sure narrow. There's bread, I recognize that. *Honey, what is that?* It looks like a bag of dried minnows like what we use for fish bait back home. Do they *eat* that? I am totally overwhelmed. Sensory overload. I am standing in the aisle in the middle of the store and tears are rolling down my face. Let's get out of here. I will starve. I can't take it any more right now.

We start walking back up the mountain. We might as well get used to this walking and climbing. It seems to be the way to get around. It's raining again. We don't have our umbrellas with us. I haven't seen a Westerner in days now. My blonde hair and blue eyes stick out like a sore thumb. We look like giants among all the little short people.

I want somebody to *talk* to! I want to go *home*! No, I mean *home* not the *apartment*.

Next Day

OK, I will try the grocery store again today. Let's see, Stan said to walk 2 blocks down the street and turn left at the building that has pictures of seagulls on it. Walk down that alley, cross the street and turn right. Walk about half a block and then go down the steps to the bottom of the mountain. OK, I see the steps. Think I'll count them as I go down, 1, 2, 3 -----274, 275. Can't count any more, not enough breath left. I just know it's a lot of steps. Not really that bad going down though. Here I am at the bottom of the mountain, now what did he say do? Don't remember. I think I'll go this way. Back track, must be the wrong way. Go the other way then. OK, here is the train station, I recognize that. Turn right. *There's the store!* Made it! Now the fun begins.

I see washing powder, I guess that's what it is; I'll buy it anyway. Now just have to figure out how to use the washing machine. Worry about that later. Got to get some type of food. There are some cups of instant noodles; I can just add hot water to that. Can't read directions on how to prepare anything even if I could tell what it was. That picture looks good on that. I'll buy that. There, that's chicken, I'll get two packages of that. Is that hamburger meat or horse meat? One of the Japanese guys at work told Stan they eat horse over here. Think I'll pass on that, don't eat horse myself. *Wonder what that is?* Enough, that's all I can carry back up the mountain. OK, to the cash register then. *What?!* It's 8,592 yen?! Wonder how much that is in US dollars? All right then, here's some of the bills that have 1000 written in the corner. How many of these coins that have the hole in the middle, how many that are the little coins and how many that are the big coins? *Here, just take what you need!* I have to bag my own groceries? Right.

Back up the mountain now. Man, those steps look a lot steeper going up. These bags sure are heavy. I think I'm going to die. I've got to stop and sit down. *Just go around me!* *Can't you see I'm dying here!* Whew! I'm home again. Well, not exactly *home* but back to the apartment anyway. What a trip! Sure is a bitch!! Are you *sure* you have to eat, honey?
Margie Tovrea

The Land of the Rising Sun

August 1997 Yokohama, Japan

For more information about Kristie and her books, please visit her website:

<http://www.geocities.com/kristieleighmaguire/authorspage.html>



Tim Miller has worked in law enforcement and corrections for several years. A native of Indiana, he served four years in the U.S. Marines. He currently lives in Elkhart Indiana with his wife and daughter.

Without a Trace
by Tim Miller

Young women are disappearing in a small Indiana town. Drew Kane is a jail officer in that town, with the help of his mentor, Detective Rex Thomas; they search for the girls, but find the truth is more terrifying than anything they could have imagined.

Prologue

July 1975

He huddled in the corner of the dark cellar, wondering what he had done wrong this time. Today was his birthday after all. Was this how all twelve-year olds celebrated their birthdays? He already knew the answer to that question. Not all boys spent their birthdays in the cellar, only him. That's how much his mother loved him. She always did what was best, no matter how much it hurt. Unlike his previous birthdays however, he would not be alone today.

He felt around in the darkness, looking for his book bag. He patted the dirt floor as he crawled around. Something brushed against his leg, probably a rat. The rats didn't scare him the way they used to. He and the rats had learned to respect each other's space.

Sweat ran down his forehead as he crawled in the darkness, clumps of dirt sticking to his arms, making them itch. He tried to brush it off with his hands, but the gritty paste smeared across his skin. Wiping his face with his forearm, he crawled further into the cellar. As much as he hated in here, it had become his second home. There were parts of the cellar his mother didn't know existed. No one did, except for him and the rats.

When he found the bag, he reached into it and pulled out the coffee can. He ran his fingertips across the holes in the lid and once he was sure the airflow was okay, he pulled out the small garden shovel and began digging into the floor. The boy dug until the hole was a little over a foot deep, smooth and even all around. Digging holes was something he'd gotten good at. He opened the coffee can and removed the bird, careful not to crush it as it wiggled in his fingers. The bird escaped his grip and skipped away from him, but the boy had broken its foot before he put it in the can, so he knew it couldn't get away.

"Come here," he whispered as he recaptured it and placed it into the hole.

Squinting in the low light, he studied the bird's movements as it flapped its wings, and stumbled around in its shallow grave. For a moment, he felt bad for the bird. The bird was like him right now, small, helpless, and at the mercy of someone else.

With that in mind, he knew he would not make the mistake his mother was making. He would not torture the bird, and then allow it find a way to retaliate. Though it was only a bird, it was still a living thing, and not to be underestimated.

He filled the hole with dirt until the bird's beak barely showed. He waited a few more minutes and finished filling it. Carefully, he smoothed the small mound over with his shovel. Drops of sweat dripped from his forehead onto the mound, but he didn't mind anymore. As he tossed the shovel aside, he listened closely, lowering his ear to the mound.

In his mind, he could still hear the bird beneath the earth crying to be free, fighting for one more breath. A sense of power swept over him from having taken total control over another life. Is that how his mother felt? He imagined her listening to him at the cellar door the way he listened to the bird now.

One day, he thought, she would join the bird in the earth. On that day, he would listen to her fighting for her last breath.

End of prologue

For more on Tim Miller and his writing, visit his website at <http://www.timmiller.biz>



Mark Haeuser was born and raised in the beautiful farm country surrounding Fountain City Wisconsin.

A graduate from C-FC High School in 1983, he attended WWTC in La Crosse and graduated with a two-year associate degree in Police Science.

After working ten years in law enforcement he decided to pursue other interests. Mark began writing in 1997 when he grew frustrated with what he felt was a lack of realistic action books available. As a former police officer, SWAT team member, SWAT sniper, and a recognized expert in tactics and firearms he decided he would try to write his own stories. Using over twenty years of martial arts training and his police experience he set out to write the first book, which grew into Battleground USA *The Beginning*.

Mark intends to write twelve to fifteen books in this exciting action packed series. He has currently published two of the books with Iuniverse and plans another for the spring of 2002. He has five of the books completed and plans for number six is in the works. He also writes fantasy and his current book with Iuniverse is *The Second Coming Trilogy*. This is the first book in the trilogy titled *The Protectors*.

Mark can be seen on such web sites as *Zinos.com* and *Authorsden.com*. His new series of short stories "Memoirs of a Rogue" was highly popular on the Authorsden site and is now being turned into a book. He is also involved in co-authoring a book, *No Lady and Her Tramp* with the romance novelist Kristie Leigh Maguire.

Mark currently lives in La Crosse and is working on more Battleground USA books as well as a western titled *Deacon Cade*, and a crime story titled *Black OPS*. His most recent novel, *Hunters of the Shadows* is now available.

For more on Mark and his books, please visit his website:

<http://markhaeuser.tripod.com/markhaeuser>

Hunters of the Shadows
by Mark Haeuser

What creature lurks beyond the shadow-rim of imagination, beyond known wickedness?
What unspeakable dark force could be so powerful as to unite old foes, one good and one
evil, in a quest to subdue it and save a world.

Come closer my friend- step in. Traverse the boundaries of time and space to glimpse one
possible fantastic future.

A future of staggering proportions! Contemplate, as prophesy of old unfolds to wreak
havoc on the unsuspecting, the unwary, us!

The seconds tick by..... Reader beware!

The time has come..... His time!

Chapter One

Sarande, Albania 1624:

Creed snapped awake finding himself stripped from the waist up and lying in a pentagram drawn with chalk on a polished oak table. He glanced from side to side seeing no one; he was alone except for hundreds of burning candles that flickered in the breeze from the open window. He felt the cool caress of the Adriatic Sea and it refreshed him, cooling the sweat from his face. Blinking, he realized that it was night and he tried to recall the events that had brought him here to this room lying in a witch's circle of power.

It came back to him slowly and he reached for his neck; feeling along the artery, he let out a sigh of relief, realizing that he had not been bitten!

Sitting up, his head swam as the last effects of the drug he had been given began to fade and he focused around the room, looking for enemies in the candlelight.

His eyes locked onto his weapons; still sheathed in his thick leather belt, they hung from the back of a heavy chair, draped over his leather coat-the coat made from the skins of two werewolves he had killed over two hundred years ago in Hungary. He felt relief as he saw the two enchanted silver tipped knives of his people, but why would they leave them where he could get to them? It didn't make sense but it also did not make sense that he still lived.

It came back now in flashes. Minions of Rasmere, a vampire by birth and head of a growing empire, had attacked him.

He dropped from the table feeling weak as the drug fled his system; they had attacked him as he left the inn descending upon him in the alley like locusts. He had put up a brief fight, almost escaping, before they held him down and the white-haired witch blew magic dust into his face.

Rasmere himself had not been there but Creed knew his people. Rasmere was Nosferatu, a blood vampire, and he was building a great army of the undead.

Slowly, using the edge of the table on which they had intended to kill him, he stood and stumbled across the room to the chair where his blades waited in the tooled leather sheaths. He swiped his long hair away from his face, retying it in the topknot style he was accustomed to. His cotton shirt was lying in a heap on the floor and he slipped it on tying the thong that held it together in a loose knot as he tucked it into his thick leather pants. With swift deft movements, he removed the belt from the chair quickly cinching it around his narrow waist.

He tried to hurry, remembering that Takada was out there alone, but his fingers still trembled as he belted his sword and tossed his jacket over his broad shoulders.

He padded to the door, thrust it open quickly and stepped into the hallway, his boot heels tapping a rhythm on the wooden floor.

Drawing his Toledo rapier, he started down the stairs keeping a watchful eye on his surroundings. He didn't need the vampire's minions jumping him again, especially in his weakened condition. He reached the bottom of the staircase and saw the curtains full of night air as they quivered from the sea breezes.

From the table in the dining room, light glinted on steel-his pistols!

He moved quickly giving up stealth for speed. He picked up and checked each double-barreled flintlock seeing they were still loaded. As he thrust them into his belt, he spied the leather case on the table, his powder and shot next to the spot the pistols had laid. Hefting it he could tell it was still laden with silver ball and powder and he placed it over his right shoulder opposite the rapier.

Creed frowned. He had to find Takada as soon as he could. The Japanese warrior was not ready to face someone as strong as Rasmere alone. He bolted from the house noting how the clouds obscured the moonlight only allowing it to peek through from time to time.

"Magic!" He spat as he sprinted down the hill overlooking the town.

Someone had gone to a lot of work to bring him here from the alley and he wanted to know why.

As he ran, side-stepping the rocks and bushes that littered the dark hillside, he remembered the silver haired witch who had used her magic powder on him and realized he had never seen her before. That fact didn't bother him; it was the fact that he had never known a blood vampire to associate with a witch and that did send shivers up his spine!

He pushed the thought aside in his worry about Takada, his Japanese Ronin, who had traveled at his side these last fifty years battling the undead.

He had met the stalwart Japanese warrior by accident as he trailed a bloodthirsty follower of the vampire Ergoth into the mountains of Tibet.

He stopped for something to eat and to warm up in a small inn before climbing higher up the mountain trail. There, while he ate, Takada had walked in. Creed and the warrior locked eyes immediately. The Hunters of the undead could sense each other as well as they could sense their enemies. Takada sat down slowly, regarding the European Gypsy, who obviously did not belong in this part of the world. Not that a Japanese Samurai did either. At once they recognized each other for what they were, Hunters of the Shadows, pursuers of the undead.

They joined as partners climbing the mountain and finding the follower of Ergoth, a vampire who had once been human. He was not like his master, a trueborn; instead, he

had been turned from his human form to the world of the Vampire. They had cornered him in a cave as he sought food, any animal with the blood he needed to recover his strength. When they dropped upon him, he was ill from the pains of hunger. The kill had been swift and, for the vampire, merciful as the razor sharp sword of Takada had separated the demon's head from his body.

Later, Creed questioned Takada about the enchantment of the Japanese blade, which killed the undead as easy as his own blades that were blessed of Gypsy magic. Takada had explained that a smith, who had claimed the Gods guided his hand instructing him in the design, had made the blade. He had told the Gypsy that the sword was covered in symbols of great power whispered to him by the gods of Earth, Wind and Fire. For Creed, it was not the strange designs in the sword that meant anything to him but the ease with which the sword had driven through the vampire's body.

The two men had formed a strong partnership as they traveled, following the trails of the undead as they came upon them. The hunt never slowed as the numbers of the vampire continued to grow spreading their sickness across the world.

It had been Rasmere, one of the most powerful True Bloods, who they had trailed here to this small country across the Adriatic Sea.

Creed sprinted into town passing down the almost deserted streets filled this time of night with drunks, whores, thieves and the undead!

Darting into an alley someone stepped from a doorway in front of him demanding money. Creed lowered a shoulder and plowed through the stranger. He heard the man's grunt as he struck the stone wall but he didn't stop long enough to look. His first concern was Takada not some street thief. He exited the alley and saw the lights of the Dark Raven tavern ahead.

Several drunken soldiers stood outside the front door. They were arguing with an equal number of drunken sailors while the tavern whores tried to keep them apart. Creed pushed through them knocking a sailor on his back as he slipped into the brightly lit tavern. It too was full of drunken men fighting, singing or puking as they drank the cheap liquor.

The dark haired bartender nodded as he saw the face of the Gypsy shouldering to the bar.

"Is Miranda here?" Creed asked tossing the man a gold coin.

He looked about the bar and then motioned with his head upstairs.

"She's busy," he explained.

Creed nodded. He understood that but this afternoon, she had been with Takada and he hoped she would know where he had gone. He pushed through the crowd heading for the stairs. The large Greek, Olus, blocked his way.

"Sorry Creed no one goes upstairs," he said shaking his head.

Creed smiled back as he looked up into the giant's eyes.

"I have to, Olus, Takada is missing and, I believe, in danger. Miranda, well you know how it is with them, I am sure she knows where he went." Creed held out his open hand.

Olus glanced over the Gypsy's shoulder at the bartender who shook his head no. He looked at Creed with an understanding gesture.

"Are you sure Takada is in danger?" he whispered as he leaned forward.

Creed nodded. "Yes I must find him or he may be killed."

The giant glanced from the watching bartender to the Gypsy who had become his friend; he leaned down so the barkeep couldn't see his face.

"If I allow you up there I will be fired," he explained. "So you must knock me out." His eyes met Creed's as he added. "You must."

Creed closed his eyes and nodded.

Suddenly his hands shot up reaching around the Greek's neck pulling it down as his knee shot up into the giant's chin. Olus' head snapped back and he fell against the wall, unmoving.

"Sorry." Creed whispered as he stepped over his friend's body and bolted up the stairs to the second level.

He hurried down the dimly lit hallway stopping at door number 4, Miranda's room. He knocked lightly and stepped back his hands resting on his pistols as he heard movement from inside the room.

"Who is it?" It was Miranda's voice through the door.

"Creed," he answered.

The bolt was thrown and the whore poked her head out as she held the door closed behind her.

Her dark hair was messed and her makeup smeared as she shot him a nasty look.

"I am with someone," she whispered. "How did you get up here anyway?"

She peered down the hall behind him.

He shook his head. "Don't worry," he started as the smell from inside the room assaulted his senses. It was the familiar aroma of decay and charred flesh.

"Step aside!" The Gypsy ordered as he forced his way past her and into the room, drawing his right-hand blade.

There in the corner he stood, dressed only in his undergarments, trying to hide the sacred knife he had been given. Creed was across the room in a flash, faster than a normal human as he gripped the man's throat in a squeeze and pinned him to the wall.

"Creed!" Miranda yelled as she hurried across to him. "What are you doing?" She screamed, her large breasts toppling from her robe as she tried to pull his arms away.

Her attempts were futile. Creed's muscles felt like they had turned to iron under the coat. He looked down at her through eyes filled with hate as he asked through tight lips.

"Do you know who he is, *what* he is?"

The Gypsy's eyes frightened her. "No," she admitted backing away a few steps, shaking her head, as the usually gentle Creed had become some kind of a crazed animal.

He looked up at the pale young man. "Tell her."

"I don't know what you are talking about," the man begged as he tried to breathe.

Creed released the man's throat grabbed the hand holding the knife and twisted back the white wrist at a very unusual angle.

"Let it go," Creed snarled. "I will break your arm and there is nothing your master can do about it."

Miranda looked from the knife to the Gypsy, her eyes wide in horror.

"What are you talking about Creed? He is a customer, nothing else."

The man attempted to explain his actions. "I was afraid. I grabbed the knife to protect myself," he begged, as he was bent almost over backward trying to relieve the pressure of the hold. Desperate, he reached outward sending his mind into Creed's to use his power. To his surprise, he found the Gypsy's mind closed like a steel door.

"Do not use your feeble powers on me," Creed warned as he completed the hold snapping the limb at the joint.

With a scream of pain, the man slumped against the wall dropping the knife from his lifeless fingers. Creed stepped forward slapping the man hard enough to knock him to the rug.

"No!" Miranda cried out as Creed stepped forward kicking the man in the stomach.

With a groan her customer rolled to the floor, face down and Creed stepped over him.

"Tell her the damn truth!" He ordered as he grabbed the man dragging him up from the floor by his hair. Wrapping his powerful arm around the man's neck, he placed his enchanted blade in the stranger's ear.

"One last time," he whispered. "Tell her!"

"Okay, okay!" The man yelled in defeat trying to break away from the Gypsy who should not have been able to restrain one as he so easily. "I am a Vampire, a disciple of Rasmere," he confessed.

Miranda stepped back, gasping as she crossed herself. "Oh my God." she whispered trying to find her voice.

In Creed's grasp, the stranger shot her a hate filled look. "You are lucky the Hunter showed up, whore, because God could not have helped you!" he spat.

Creed chuckled as he shoved the knife deep into the vampire's brain sending the undead back to Satan. He shoved the body away from him as it began to decay in seconds while they watched.

"Oh, God help me I did not know." Miranda whispered, unable to tear her eyes from the corpse that soon was no more than a rotten skeleton.

Creed walked over to where the vampire had dropped the jewel-handled knife. "He was a young vampire," Creed explained as he poured wine into a cup.

"He was human once but his master turned him, within the last twenty years I would say." He drank, trying to get the odor of the undead from his senses.

Miranda looked at him as he re-sheathed his blade and placed the vampire weapon into a coat pocket.

"I do not know what to say." She whimpered as her mouth twitched and her hands began to shake.

"Here sit down," he directed handing her some wine.

"How did you know?" she asked looking at him.

He shook his head. "I didn't. I came here because I believe his master, Rasmere, may try to kill Takada. I need to know where he went tonight."

Her eyes narrowed and then spread wide in fear as her hand shot to her mouth. "He was going to the docks, to meet you," she gasped, her voice filling with fear.

Placing the wine cup on the table he nodded. "I must go there. Did he say which dock?"

"The one with the ship sailing for Spain," she answered, and fearfully she asked. "Is it a trap?"

Double-checking the charges in his pistols he nodded.

"Yes, as I am sure was this," he pointed to the dry skeleton on the floor. "I must go."

He headed for the door but she caught his shoulder before he left the room.

"Thank you," she said. "Please save him; we are in love."

Creed answered her with a nod as he hurried along the hallway. Running down the staircase, he tossed several coins to Olus who was icing his cheek at the bar.

"Here have a few drinks on me," he yelled as he passed.

The big Greek smiled. "I will, Creed. Thanks."

The bartender however, yelled something ugly as the Gypsy ran from the front door past the soldiers who still argued with the sailors.



He sprinted down the spray-covered docks smelling the fish guts that the fishermen had not removed today as they cleaned their catch.

"Where are you Takada?" he whispered, sprinting as fast as the conditions would allow.

Down at the end of dock five sat the ship waiting the morning tides to set sail for Spain. Slowing, he sensed them in the dark around him watching.

"Humans," he told himself, knowing they would be Rasmere's minions, human scum eaters who lived to serve their master's every wish. They knew that if the master favored them, they would become vampires themselves.

Creed slowed to a walk drawing his rapier. He didn't need the enchanted knives to kill human minions.

With a soft ruffle of air, they rushed him coming from every dark corner. He spun the steel of his blade. It flashed in the moonlight as it ripped through the guts of his first attacker!

Ducking, he felt the feathered end of an arrow as it passed by his head whistling into the dock's planks. He crouched as he jerked free his left pistol, firing under his arm just as the bowman aimed a second arrow at him. The flash from the flintlock was blinding in the shadows of the dock but the silver ball hit its mark, burrowing deeply into the bowman's chest. Cocking the pistol's second barrel, he fired again, striking a woman who swung an ax at him.

From his side a sword wielding man screamed as he rushed in, swinging wildly. Creed slapped aside the man's strike and then blocked a second downward blow. He spun slashing the attacker's thigh deeply sending the man to the ground with a shriek of agony.

Hurling past the swordsman, he delivered the killing blow as he stepped back into the shadow of the warehouse. That was the last of them for now and he took a deep breath trying to steady his nerves.

Quickly he retrieved his pistol, reloading the barrels as he watched around the dock for another attack. When none came, he cocked the weapon keeping it and the sword out as he slid open the warehouse door.

Birds flew from the rafters' overhead as he stepped in seeing nothing as the sparse moonlight from the windows provided the only illumination.

The familiar smell of the undead found its way to his nose and he knew he had found them, somewhere here in this dark building. On his toes he crept through the warehouse coming to a set of stairs, he stopped, debating if he wanted to climb them, as a pain filled scream filled the air!

"Upstairs." He decided quickly.

He pushed himself as he hurried up the staircase two and three steps at a time until he reached the second floor. He stopped. His eyes focused on a door across the floor. Through the linen drapes, he could see shadows and flickering lights. Again, a scream rang out into the warehouse and now Creed was sure; it was Takada!

Slipping his rapier off he placed it against the railing of the stairs as he pulled both pistols, cocking them. He crept forward, tensing his powerful legs and kicking open the door. The door shattered into pieces as Creed stepped through into a nightmare!

Takada lay on a large wooden table in the center of the room. He was covered in blood and four pale white vampires in black cloaks huddled over him, bathing in his blood.

The valiant warrior tried to raise his head. He looked through glazed eyes while out from the shadows a fifth vampire appeared.

Creed saw the red robe stained in Takada's blood as it ran from the monster's incisor teeth.

"Darius Creed." The thing hissed, stepping around the table as it wiped blood from its chin and licked it with a dark red tongue. "It hasss been a long time Creeeed."

Creed glanced at Takada. He had been ripped from his waist to his throat. Creed's nostrils flared as he met Rasmere's glazed eyes. The Nosferatu was drunk with blood, and the Gypsy knew now was when he would be the most powerful.

"Not long enough Rasmere." Creed answered, as hate filled his voice.

The Vampire Lord stepped closer bringing his face into the candlelight; he had changed over the years, his face becoming more canine like. Creed also noticed the Lord's skin; it was so milky white it appeared translucent and the eyes, Rasmere's eyes, had become a pale bluish white.

They did not reflect the light in the room as the Lord stood smiling at his most hated enemy.

"You have grown more powerful." Creed admitted with a nod, seeing the signs. Pure Blood or not only a very powerful vampire had that milky skin and telltale unusual eye coloring.

Rasmere shrugged slightly. "The hunting has been good, Creed." He answered, removing the cowl of his robe flipping it back onto his shoulders.

Creed saw the final sign of power, the heavy white streaked hair.

He looked past the Lord to the lesser vampires who now satisfied their own hungers from the opened body of his friend.

"What do you look for Creed? This?" Rasmere held Takada's sword in his clawed fingers.

The Gypsy felt the bile rising in his throat as his grip tightened on the pistols.

"Return it to me." He ordered but Rasmere shook his head.

"No, Gypssy. It iss a tool for killing my kinnnd. I willl see it gets a good home."

His smile widened allowing more blood to drip from his open mouth.

Creed shoved the pistols forward. "You will die then!" He promised as he fired one barrel from the weapon in his right hand.

The vampire moved his head as the silver ball sped at him; it missed crashing into the far wall instead. With a look of contempt, Rasmere turned back to Creed.

"I will be going now, Gypsy. If you survive, which I believe is possible, I will see you again."

He disappeared back into the shadows motioning to his underlings who climbed from the table.

Creed tensed as they flashed their blood-covered fangs, dead eyes staring at him as they crept forward swinging their claws. He raised the pistol firing the second barrel into the closest demon knocking it backward with a flutter of black robes.

He twisted and dropped the useless weapon as another vampire dove at him clawed hands slashing. Loud screeching sounds erupted, chilling his insides, as the demon's iron like claws raked down his coat unable to penetrate the enchanted werewolf hide.

Stunned the demon stepped away unbelieving that his claws had no effect. Creed spun kicking the attacker in the chest knocking it back into the other two. He switched his second gun to his right hand firing both barrels into the rolling flopping vampire on top of the pile. Discarding that weapon, he pulled his long bladed knives weaving an arc of death as he closed in on the two rolling survivors.

One jumped to its feet showing sharp incisor teeth as it crouched to spring. Creed was too fast, though as he kicked straight into the demon's chest. The strike rocked the creature knocking the robed figure back over the table where Takada's body rested.

Creed avoided the clawed hand of the vampire at his feet sweeping the blow past with one knife as he sliced back with the other. The silver tipped weapon bit across the creature's throat, the precious metal reacting to the vampire's system; it fell shaking to the floor as the smoke of death began to flame from the wound.

The last vampire sprang from behind the table trying for the door of the room. Creed flipped the blade in his right hand exchanging the handle for the tip. He tossed it at the retreating demon catching the vampire square between the shoulders as it reached the doorway. The demon fell backwards into the room as it also began to decay in the smoke of a demon's death.

Creed looked about, Rasmere was gone and only four smoking skeletons remained in the room. The smell choked and gagged him as it filled the small room.

Creed picked up his pistols, reloading them while he looked over the dead Samurai. He had not been bitten; they had simply opened him up and drank his blood as he died slowly. It was a cruel death for such a warrior. It pained the Gypsy that there was nothing he could do for his friend; it would be too hard to explain later.

He took some of his powder from the loading flask dumping it over a pile of debris in the corner.

"Fire will cleanse this place of terror." He whispered taking a candle from the table and tossing it into the powder.

By the time Creed walked from the warehouse, fire was already engulfing the upper room where Takada lay among the remains of the undead!

End of chapter one

For more on Mark and his books, please visit his website at <http://markhaeuser.tripod.com/markhaeuser>

**The End of
NUW Roads Traveled**

The nuw authors hope you have enjoyed traveling with them.

"Aim for the moon, even if you miss you'll land among stars." - Oscar Wilde