

Streams Of Terrible Beauty

First Edition (1.5)

C Clifton Jones

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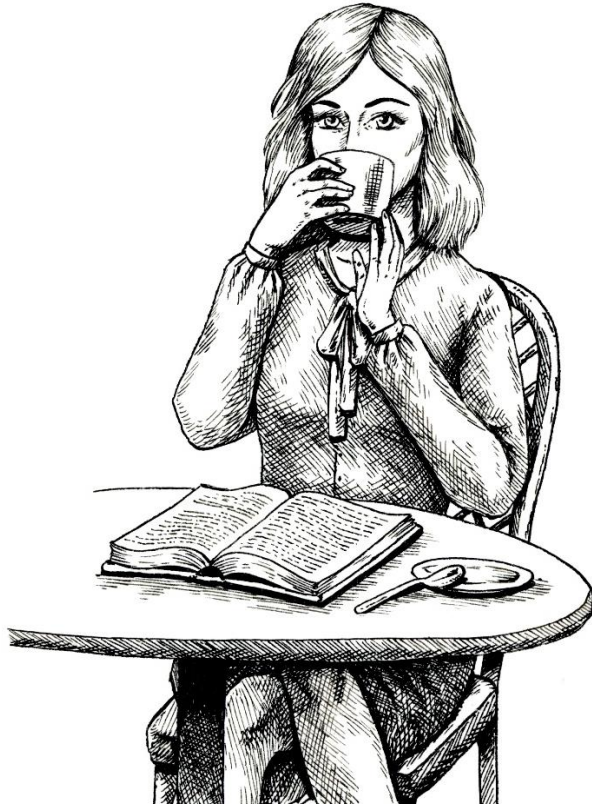


The Destination

C Clifton Jones

PART 1
UNEXPECTED
JOURNEY

The Coffee Shop



Monday, August 3, 1987

Chapter 1

Sipping her coffee, eyes perched over the rim of her cup, she saw him watching her while talking to his friends. His head moved side to side, but his eyes stayed focused on her. *Is he looking at me?* Scanning the room nonchalantly, she saw no other target of his gaze. Her eyes returned to her book, but her mind did not follow. Unable to resist, she glanced up. *Yep, still looking and still talking. Maybe he's looking through me, avoiding eye contact with his friends?* With greater resolve, she turned her attention once again to her book.

Carla's Coffee Shop was strategically centered in Oak Pines, a quaint California foothill town. The swinging glass door hung in such a way that the name appeared backward when entering. No one knew quite why, but the joke around town was, "You're always coming and going at Carla's." A high, open ceiling exposed round air ducts supported by metal straps. Housed in the corner stood a large, often noisy coffee roaster, exhausting flaky particles of soot that fell like brown snowflakes outside the front window. Occasionally, the attendant vacuumed up fallen beans from the floor that clickety-clanked through an overhead pipe running next to the air ducts. Someone usually yelled out, "They're making special blend again!" The joke got old, but it was all part of the charm at Carla's.

Ellie, a thirty-seven-year-old, never-married blonde sat by the front window where, ordinarily, she would lose herself in moments of daydreaming and watching small-town people meandering down the sidewalk with their kids and dogs. But on that day, she found herself desiring a front-row seat closer to the big, round lazy-susan-style table where Mr. *look-see* and his friends were seated.

She got up, grabbed her book and cup, headed for a refill, and clandestinely dropped her book off at a closer table as she passed by. She pressed down gently on the coffee carafe, bending her ear over toward the conversation where two voices reeked with intensity. She returned and sat in her new seat. No one seemed to notice.

Pretending to read her book again, she occasionally sipped her coffee, inconspicuously catching a glimpse to keep pace with her eavesdropping. Her attention began to focus more on his three friends. Listening, shifting, and sighing as their desire to speak grew, they avoided rude interruption with an occasional *yeah, sure, or okay*. But the talker hardly took a breath as his thoughts flew rapidly out of his mouth.

“Jobe, you are one stubborn guy,” blurted out one of the three friends, breaking the gaze of Ellie’s new admirer.

So, his name is Jobe, thought Ellie. Good looking too! But should I even think about going down that new-guy road again?

Jobe glanced at Ellie, then continued dominating the conversation. She noticed that his eyes were gorgeous but also mischievous – the kind of eyes a woman could get lost in. His hair was light brown, slightly messy on top, stretched long in the back, ears exposed, MacGyver-style.

The complaining friend sat with his back toward Ellie, his face hidden, his voice strong and confident; one of an older man. His name was Elliott Timmons, broad-shouldered with a wide build but not fat. He sat tall in his chair, a man of even more stature and presence when standing. His wife, Billie, sat next to

him, a big lady, a good match for Elliot when they were seen together. Her hair was brown but slightly grey, short but professionally styled. Together they presented a classy presence about them. A younger man named Zack, sat quietly, completing the trio of friends.

“You’ve changed, Jobe,” said Elliot, “and you’re headed for trouble – real trouble in your life...”

Interrupting Elliott, Billie added, “And at some point, you gotta let go of this thing about your sister. It's been over a year now; it owns you and it's killing you.”

Billie waited for Jobe to respond, hoping he would see the wisdom in her words and begin to find freedom in his soul.

Jobe looked at Billie for a moment, then said, “My sister is gone, Billie. I’ll never see her again!”

“I know, Jobe. We've all lost loved ones.”

“Yes, but she wasn’t *just* my sister – she was my twin! We did everything together as kids and as adults. She was my best friend. When she died a piece of me died, too. A big piece! It left a hole in my heart big enough to drive a bus through. And now, there’s more *hole* than there is *me*.”

Finishing her coffee, Ellie went to pay for her refill. Carla’s niece, Gina, who ran the shop since Carla’s death a few years ago, took her money and gave her change. As Ellie dropped it in the tip jar, Gina said, “How are you, Ellie?”

“I’m doing great. And you?”

Gina rolled her eyes. “It’s Monday. Life goes on. And this August heat – seems hotter than usual.”

“Seems like it, but probably not,” replied Ellie.

“Hey, ya still learning lots of good stuff from Charlie?” asked Gina.

“Sure am. He’s my ultimate source of wisdom and he calls me his legacy. I don’t think I’ve ever been anybody’s legacy before, not even to anyone in my own family.”

“I’ll have to meet him someday. Love to get his take on Reagan’s *Tear Down This Wall* speech he gave last June.”

“Oh... someday, you will!”

Ellie hurried back to sit down and pretend to read her book.

“God has a purpose, even in your sister’s death,” said Elliott, regaining control of the conversation. “Surely you know this.”

Oh, no. Religion! thought Ellie. She despised religion and learned from Charlie it was often the basis for war, hate, and division in the history of mankind. But Charlie also taught her that relationships bring unity – not just with people but also with God. *Religion Divides - Relationships Unite* was one of Charlie’s favorite sayings.

Jobe paused a moment, then said, “Yeah? And what purpose would that be, Elliott? What good comes from God taking her away from me? I’m not better off. She sure isn’t. And the world is a worse place without her. You know this; you knew her. If God had an ounce of wisdom, he wouldn’t have taken her; he would’ve taken me instead!”

“You can’t mean that,” said Billie.

“I do, indeed,” said Jobe. “And, frankly, I’d rather he’d taken both of us than just one of us, or else just leave us both alone. We were doing fine.”

Having heard enough religion, Ellie grabbed her book and began to leave. But then, three simultaneous thoughts filled her head: *Jobe’s a good-looking guy; he’s noticing me; and I’m curious where all this fighting is headed.* So, she gently set her book back down on the table and stayed.

“Why the heck did God make us in the first place?” Jobe continued. “Just to give me something good, then take it away? What kind of God does that?”

“Well, it is just who God is, and it's how life is,” said Elliott.
“You gotta come to grips with this, Jobe,”

“Why?”

“Because if you don't, you're opposing God!” replied Elliot, with authority in his voice.

“The way God is behaving, I think He *needs* a little opposition. Maybe a lot!” Jobe said, boldly.

“I don't think so,” said Elliot. “We're here today for you, Jobe – to help you get past this thing. You're stuck, my friend, and we're here to intervene.”

Chapter 2

Jobe and his sister were fraternal twins, but they looked nearly identical. When asked about this, they always replied with one word – Mom! They both looked a lot like her. And a good thing, too. Dad, a burly man's man, possessed pronounced masculine features. Mom was a pretty lady but not with dainty features. This gave Jobe's sister her beauty while allowing Jobe to not look too feminine. For sure, he was Momma's boy, but the features he inherited gave him a persistent look of kindness. A lot of this showed in his eyes – calm and reassuring. Jobe was thoroughly masculine, but his appearance also matched his demeanor; a kind person, which endeared him to everyone.

But sometimes his kindness irritated people. They knew his demeanor to be genuine and that Jobe was no fake. He overdid it, occasionally, causing *normal* people to shoo him away like an annoying gnat that flies in front of your face while walking. But, more often than not, everyone loved and adored Jobe. He became the kind of guy to have around when life became difficult.

Though life had delivered some terrible moments for Jobe over his forty-one years, he always landed on his feet, always found a silver lining in every challenge, and always exercised the voice of reason and encouragement when others went through their terrible times. But there was also a judgmental side of Jobe; not a result of his kindness but in spite of it. To some degree, his kind temperament and good life fed his judgment. When Jobe encountered a person being pulled under by a terrible situation in life, he couldn't help but conclude that they brought it on

themselves. He always felt happy that he had avoided such a fate. He judged with great kindness, but it was *judging* just the same. This became a huge blind spot for Jobe and his kindness only masked it from him. There were many times in life when Jobe remained unaware of how much he hurt others.

On a fateful day in the summer of 1986, Jobe met his own terrible stream of events. On that day, just like any other day, it never entered his mind how devastating the wrong chain of events could be. It happened on a Sunday, on a beautiful October day. Jobe loved October. Rich blue skies were in view without a cloud to disturb the endless spectrum of grand open space. The air, crisp and fresh, felt unlike the muggy air of summer or the brittle chill of winter that could penetrate three layers of clothes. Best of all – no pollen. Were it not for pollen, April would have been Jobe’s favorite month.

At mid-morning, Jobe had just finished the soy mocha he stopped and bought at Carla's Coffee Shop. He loved that last sip where sugar and chocolate collected at the bottom of the cup. But as he lowered his cup a feeling of unexpected sorrow came over him. He didn't like it and found himself surprised by it. *Where the heck did that come from*, he asked himself. *It's a gorgeous day; I'm about to take a beautiful drive in the mountains; I just had a productive week at work. And I'm feeling a great sense of accomplishment.* He caught himself staring at the ground, unsure of just how long. He snapped himself out of it with a quick shrug of his shoulders and a little back-and-forth shake of his head. He told himself it was probably just one of those chemical reactions he read about in a psychology magazine the last time he visited the dentist.

Jobe hopped into his cherished two-seat, top-down sports car, checked the rear-view mirror, and pulled out quickly into traffic. In just a few minutes he reached the edge of his sleepy foothill town and began to climb up the two-lane road into the

mountains. He loved navigating the twisting roads, getting into a rhythm, swerving left and right and back again, almost endlessly but occasionally slowing down for a hairpin turn. When he did, he would drop it down into second gear, take the turn as fast as he safely could, and then run it through the gears in the quick acceleration of the V-8 engine in his under-sized car. Breaking into a straight-away along a stretch of road running through the Tahoe National Forest, the road was lined with tall pines, leaving a long, narrow blue streak of sky ahead as he anticipated his destination.

His 1966 Sunbeam Tiger, with a 260 cubic-inch engine, made it one of the fastest production cars of its day. The horsepower-to-weight ratio of his little rocket was so extreme that Jobe had to carefully accelerate in the rain. He spun out several times when he first bought the car and learned some scary lessons. Best of all, though, no matter what gear he was in, he could burn a little rubber by flooring it!

To Jobe, there always seemed something special about getting out of town all by himself. When things got tense and overwhelming, come the weekend – he took off! He always sensed the tension release in his neck as he climbed up the same twisty mountain road. Climbing higher in altitude, the air got thinner and became chilled. He turned on the heater, grabbed his coat – somehow getting it on while navigating the turns – and hunkered down for a long self-reflective drive in the pure, beautiful bliss of the greater outdoors. Jobe sank into his bucket seat, wooed by the rhythmic swaying of his roaring Tiger as he navigated the sweeping road's dips, swells and hairpin turns.

Jobe heard an almost real voice, awakening him from his fog yet taking him deeper into it. *'Ever wonder why we are twins? Think there is anything to it?'* Jobe recalled his sister's question to him when they were in high school.

'Other than an accidental fertilization of two eggs simultaneously? What a cocky answer I gave her, Jobe thought to himself.

No, I mean it! he remembered her saying. Getting Jobe to be serious for a few precious moments always proved a challenge for his sister. *‘How different would our lives be, even if we had grown up just a year apart?’*

‘Well, then you’d be my annoying little sister!’

No way! He remembered her pushing him away playfully, saying. *‘Then you’d be my bratty little brother, destroying any fun I’d have with my friends.’*

‘Like crashing some fake tea party?’ Jobe remembered himself saying, feeling a little embarrassed after all these years.

‘Yes! But, as my twin, you never did that.’

‘And you never busted in on my ballgames with the guys.’

‘Actually, I did. But you let me. You stood up for me.’

‘That’s right I did!’ Jobe felt pleased, remembering himself saying something good.

‘Why did you?’ he remembered his sister asking.

‘Because you were a better bitter than me and getting you on our side allowed us to win.’

‘I think it was more than that.’ He remembered finally getting serious with her. It always took him a while. Jobe downshifted for a tighter-than-usual hairpin turn, breaking his thoughts momentarily. Coming out of the turn Jobe gently pressed the pedal to the floor, then shifted back up into third gear. His mind then settled back into the wonderful memories with his sister.

‘I think...’ Jobe remembered pausing and watching his sister gaze at him like a puppy waiting for a treat. *‘I think it’s because we are so well connected.’*

‘Why is that?’ his sister had replied with her voice gentle as a spring breeze. *‘Do you think all twins are like this?’*

‘What do you think, sis?’

Suddenly a squirrel appeared in a straight portion of the road. As Jobe approached, he did nothing. The squirrel went left, then right, left again, further left, then right again. Jobe let up on the

gas but did not press the brake. He held the wheel steady. *Whoosh!* Jobe watched in the rear-view mirror as the squirrel darted off to the left exercising its final choice. *Man, I'm glad I learned to do nothing and let them do their thing. Haven't hit a squirrel in years!*

Jobe settled his mind back into that special conversation with his sister. He remembered how long she pondered his question. But he remembered what she said.

'None of the twins I know have what we have!' He remembered her eyes sparkling. 'Not even identical twins! But I don't know why. What do you think, Jobe?'

Jobe enjoyed his memories as he raced through a long and open mountain meadow, equally separated by the two-lane road. *'Well,' he recalled telling his sister, 'I think you are the female version of me, and I'm the male version of you.'*

His sister smiled and simply said, *'I think you're right.'*

He had just reached the crest of the first summit of his drive which measured about 5000 feet in altitude. His ultimate destination, which offered one of the most awesome mountaintop views in the California Sierras, was Mt. Rose at a whopping 9000 feet. The pass over Mt. Rose was so high that portions of it kept snow on the ground year-round. As Jobe crossed over the first summit, his pager vibrated and beeped. He hated bringing it because it destroyed all sense of getting away. But he found the nearest payphone and called the displayed number. After a short pause, he said, "This is Jobe. What's up?" After another short pause, Jobe yelled, "What?" then, "Yeah, uh-huh, I know where it is. I'll get there as soon as I can. Bye."

Hanging up the phone and opening the folding phone booth doors, he ran to his car while fumbling for his keys. Starting his car and quickly looking both ways down the road, he did a screeching U-turn and hit the gas. His mind and heart were racing, striving to keep up with his speeding car. Jobe, nearly out of breath, felt as if he had been running down the highway instead

of driving. He felt his blood pressure rise and his breathing increase. All he could think was, *I gotta get there fast. Calm down*, he told himself. *Stress will not make the car go faster, and it puts me at greater risk. Focus on the road*, he thought as he took the turns, back and forth, in the reverse order from his leisurely drive up the hill earlier. *Funny, the same turns that were so soothing and enjoyable are now an annoying hindrance.*

The call came from his good friend Elliott, about fifteen years his senior. The two of them especially connected in the *intervention* group formed by Elliot a few years prior – a group that included his wife Billie and Zach, a younger fellow who brought youthful energy to the group. But Elliot had now become the source of bad news – the worst news Jobe could ever hear. Elliot’s words on the phone still rang in Jobe’s heart: *‘Jobe, this is Elliott, it’s about your sister. She was in a car wreck and is being rushed to emergency. It’s not looking good, Jobe. It was a really bad one. Get yourself to Oak Pines Memorial as soon as you can, but please drive safely. I will meet you there.’* Jobe’s mind panicked. *How could God let this happen?* he thought. *No time to sort that out now; gotta get to the hospital.*

When Jobe got to the hospital, it was too late. His sister had died. He went outside and wept bitterly – the kind of tears that come out of the very depths of a man’s soul, the kind you can’t help but spill. Jobe loved his sister. She was, by far, the closest and most important person in his life.

Chapter 3

Jobe, again, looked over at Ellie, happy to see her still there. Licking his wounds from his friends, an idea popped into his head.

“Would you like to join us?” said Jobe, when he saw Ellie looking at him.

“Who, me?” said Ellie, genuinely surprised.

“Sure! You must have noticed the disagreement we’re all having. We’ve certainly been loud enough.”

“I hadn’t really noticed,” lied Ellie. Jobe knew she was lying, but he didn’t mind. “OK, I’ll join you if you want.” Ellie grabbed her book and her coffee and moved to a seat near Billie. None of the three friends said a word, but Jobe and Ellie were enjoying the little game Jobe sprung on the group. They restrained their desire to chuckle.

Each of the three interveners eyed Ellie suspiciously before continuing their interrogation.

“Man, you’ve gone way off track,” said Zach, breaking the silence. “You’re a long way from where the four of us have been in the past, trying to help people who were thinking just as you are now.”

Jobe looked sternly at Zach. “That was before God took my sister from me.”

“He’s not the same God?” asked Zach, smugly.

“Maybe I’m just seeing Him more clearly now,” replied Jobe.

Zach was young, zealous, Jewish, and in his late twenties. He was more religious than most Jews his age and proud of it. He always provided youthful energy to the other three friends who

were all older. His zeal was often tempered by Elliott and Billie, and sometimes by Jobe. They were all good friends, and they made a good team of *interventionists*. They had, many times in the past, inserted themselves into other people's lives to help get them straightened out. But, their attention turned toward Jobe, much to his shock and surprise. The three of them turned on the fourth and intervened – for his sake, and for his own good.

“I think we've talked enough,” said Elliott, taking charge again. “We've certainly been loud enough,” he said looking at Ellie. “I'd like to suggest we meet in some private setting where we can talk this through and get Jobe some help.”

Jobe and Ellie glanced at each other, carefully holding in their smiles.

“Jobe? Are you good with that – meeting privately?” said Elliott, with even more authority.

“Sure,” said Jobe, glancing at Ellie who pretended not to notice. “But where?”

“We can meet at my family's cabin,” offered Zach. “It's about twenty miles up Interstate 50, just past Pollock Pines.”

Billie quickly turned her head toward Zach. “I didn't know you had a cabin!”

“Yep, we do.”

“And it's a beauty,” said Jobe. “Great place to meet. I've been there.”

“I'll send you all a map,” said Zach.

“When shall we meet?” asked Elliott, still in charge.

After a pause, Jobe said, “How about Saturday? Same time we came here – one o'clock.”

Everyone agreed and Zach got up to leave. Elliott and Billie also stood up, with Billie giving the official goodbye, “See you soon, Jobe.”

Elliott nodded. “And nice to meet you, young lady.”

Ellie replied with a soft and polite, “You too!”

When Jobe and Ellie were alone, she commented, “Wow, those are *some* friends you have.”

“Yep,” replied Jobe. “And you are?”

“I’m Ellie. Ellie Lou Bentley, to be exact.”

She extended her hand in a business-like fashion, only to be met by Jobe holding her hand gently. “So nice to meet you ... Ellie!” he said, with a bit of twinkle in his eye. Releasing her hand, he added, “And thanks for coming over to rescue me.”

“Happy to do so. You needed it. Clever move, inviting me,” Ellie said, unsure of his motives.

“I gotta confess, it was partly a clever way to meet you.” Jobe hoped for a positive response.

“What if I’d said no?” asked Ellie.

“Then I would’ve been in double trouble. No new girl to meet and stuck with my intervening friends!” They both laughed.

“Well, I’m here,” said Ellie, feeling charmed. “Tell me about your friends. They seem like a mixed bag.”

“They’re all longtime friends. We’ve done a lot together.”

“Interventions?” asked Ellie.

“Yeah, that’s been a big part of it,” said Jobe.

“In whose life did you intervene?”

“Whoever needed it!”

“Whether they wanted it or not?” asked Ellie, probing deeper.

“Sometimes – yes,” said Jobe.

“And now, *you* are one of those *sometimes* persons?”

“Yep. Surprise!” confessed Jobe.

Jobe shifted back in his chair, turning off his charm and feeling like a trial witness under examination.

“Do you think your friends care?” asked Ellie.

“Oh yeah. I just didn’t think this would happen to me. It’s different being on the receiving end of an intervention. Makes me wonder if people we targeted felt the same way.”

“What do you think?” asked Ellie.

“I think they did.”

“I think you're right.”

Wanting to change the subject, Jobe asked if she wanted more coffee, to which she answered, *no thanks*. Ellie sensed the conversation becoming personal. Grilling guys when she first met them was an old habit. She often wondered why she did it, ending many relationships before they even began. She pondered it again for a moment, then shrugged it off in her mind.

“By the way, I'm Jobe, spelled J-O-B-E.”

“That's unusual,” said Ellie.

“Well, my parents wanted to name me after Job in the Bible, but they were afraid everyone would see my name as J-O-B, like the place you work.”

“Makes sense. Have you ever met another J-O-B-E?”

“Nope. But I saw my name flash by, once, at the end of a movie.”

“Really? Which one?” asked Ellie

“Somewhere in Time.”

“Oh, I love that movie!”

Jobe felt his charm mode reemerge. “Well, anyway, for some reason I was watching the credits at the end – not really reading them, just staring at them, listening to the exit music, and pondering the time travel aspects of the movie.”

“Yeah, like trying to figure out all the crazy time twists in *Back to the Future*?”

“Yep. Just like that one. Then, all of a sudden, I saw my name fly by on the screen. I wasn't sure, but I was pretty sure. So, I rewound the tape and played it back. Sure enough, there it was. I paused it. It had a strange spelling: J-o-B-e, with a capital B, and the last name was Cerny. JoBe Cerney. It turns out he played the desk clerk when Richard Collier went back in time to 1912 in search of the twentieth-century actress Elise McKenna.”

“Please come back to me!” Ellie said, re-living a favorite moment in the movie.

“Yeah, Elsie as an old lady, pleaded with the young Richard to travel back in time.”

“Could it be that Mr. Cerny pronounces it Jo-bee, emphasizing the B?” asked Ellie.

“I’ve thought of that, but I still like to think I’m not alone in having my name.”

“Maybe *Jobe* is his surname,” offered Ellie, in a know-it-all tone of voice.

“OK, smarty-pants – what’s a sir-name?” “A name you call someone who is a sir?” Jobe hoped he sounded funny.

“Close,” said Ellie. “Actually, it’s a *last* name.”

“I’ll look into it,” said Jobe. “Funny thing, though. That movie was so sad, yet so happy.”

“Yes, I agree! It’s an example of *terrible beauty*,” said Ellie.

“How’s that?” inquired Jobe.

“Richard Collier, when he returned to the present and left Elise McKenna frantic as she watched him disappear.”

“That’s right!” remembered Jobe. “He looked at a modern-day penny that he had in his pocket – that reversed his time travel.”

“And then, it was back to good ol’ 1980,” added Ellie. “Well actually, it was bad ol’ 1980 for him where he died of a broken heart.”

“That was indeed terrible,” said Jobe. “But I think he died of a lack of food and water.”

“Don’t ruin my moment,” said Ellie, intensely.

“Oops, sorry.”

“Anyway, he died of a broken heart ... and an empty stomach. But in dying, he united with Elsie. That’s the *beautiful* part!”

“That’s right,” said Jobe. “She died an old lady in 1980, right after she invited him to go back in time to find her.”

“Yes,” said Ellie. “But she, once again, became a beautiful young lady when she rejoined Richard in death. And that’s the *beautiful* part.”

“Ah! *Terrible ... Beauty*,” Jobe concluded.

“You got it!”

“Do you think that is how we will look, young and beautiful, in the next life – assuming there is one?” Jobe asked.

“Oh, I’m sure of it,” exclaimed Ellie. “We will look our best.”

“Why do you think that?” asked Jobe. “Do you think everyone will get together again and have everything work out right, just like it did for Richard and Elsie?”

“I do indeed. And it’s because deep in the heart and soul of every person, no matter how good or bad, there is a longing for everything to eventually be made right.”

Jobe pondered a moment. “Maybe that is why the best movies – the ones that really touch us – always end up with things working out at the end.”

“Yep. It’s gotta be that way,” said Ellie. “Otherwise, if things end up wrong, or unresolved, then all of life and eternity is a big failure. And that can’t be!”

“That makes sense,” said Jobe “I kinda believe that. But are you sure?”

“I believe it as much as anything in life,” said Ellie.

“Where did you get such grand ideas?” asked Jobe.

“Charlie,” said Ellie.

“Who?”

“Charlie! He’s a long-time mentor. Um... it’s none of my business,” said Ellie, changing the subject, “but why do you let your friends treat you like that? They’re very condescending, don’t you think?” Looking down, Jobe said nothing. “Oh, forgive me. That was out of line,” confessed Ellie.

“No, that’s OK, I was just thinking,” Jobe said as he looked up at Ellie, seeing nothing but calmness and kindness in her eyes.

Ellie always had an irresistible poise about her that put guys at ease, but also made them nervous. “My three friends mean well. I know this. But I am seeing this whole *intervention thing* from a whole new perspective.”

“As a victim?” Ellie asked, quickly.

“More as a target. But they mean no harm.”

“Many who harm, never mean to do so,” said Ellie.

“I know, that’s what’s bothering me.” Jobe looked up. “More Charlie wisdom?”

“You got it!” said Ellie with a chuckle. “So, are you gonna meet with your friends at the cabin? Could be brutal.”

“You think I should?” asked Jobe.

“The question is: What happens inside you if you don’t?”

“Hmmm... I’ll ponder that,” said Jobe, stroking his jaw.

“Hey, I got an idea,” offered Ellie. “Wanna go on a day trip to San Francisco, on Wednesday? I have some important papers to pick up for the law firm where I work. It’ll take your mind off all this nonsense. It’s a long drive and I could use some company. And ... it will be fun!”

“Sure!” Jobe replied, enthusiastically. “I think I can get off. Pretty much flex hours where I work. And where do *you* work, Ellie?”

“Martin Tribby Associates.”

“Attorneys, right?” asked Jobe.

“Yep.”

“I’ve heard of them. You a lawyer?”

“Hardly. Just a legal assistant.”

“Still, it sounds impressive,” said Jobe, admiring her blonde hair tumbling over her shoulder, and her composed style.

Ellie just enjoyed the moment. “Meet you here at 8 a.m.?”

“OK,” said Jobe with an outer shell of calm, while jumping for joy inside.

When Ellie got home, she closed the door of her small apartment. She put her purse on the table and headed over to a bookcase. On one shelf stood a stack of diaries – some old, some new, some stained, some clean, some large, some small, some thick, some thin. She removed the top one, sat down at the table, and opened it to the next blank page.

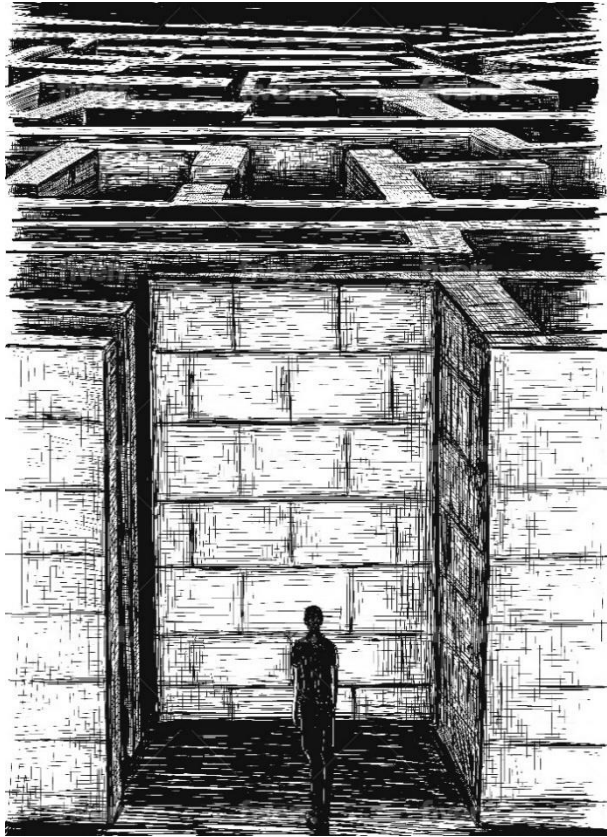
Dear Martha:

I love telling you about my life. So sorry you're not here to see it and help me think it all through. But I know you are, somehow, with me just the same. I know I've told you this many times, but I will be forever grateful that you took me into your home as a young, lost pre-teen, gave me a place to be safe and a place to learn how to love and care for others by experiencing your never-ending love and care for me. I'm a better girl today after almost thirty years of knowing you. I love and miss you so much!

Today I met an interesting guy. I know, I've told you this before. But perhaps this time will be different. I know, I've told you that before, too. But you taught me to always stay hopeful, so I am. And, 'interesting' is the right word for this guy. Don't get me wrong. He's good-looking, kind, and funny. It didn't take long – only a couple of hours to figure this out. But there is also something unusual about him. Can't put my finger on it, but I'd like to find out just what it is. He is, for sure, not the typical flirty-come-on kind of guy. He's got other stuff on his mind. But he did notice me sitting across the coffee shop. I'm sure of that. This could be a recipe for an amazing future or, yet another disaster. Time will tell. But there is only one way to find out. I'm seeing him again on Wednesday. I'll keep you posted.

Monday, August 10, 1987

The Labyrinth



Wednesday, August 5, 1987

Chapter 4

Walking into Carla's, seeing Jobe sipping his soy mocha, Ellie greeted him with a calm and confident, "Good morning!"

Jobe looked up, thrilled to see her. "And top of the morning to you," Jobe replied, trying to outdo her poise but embarrassing himself.

"Ready to go?" asked Ellie.

"For sure!"

"Let me get my coffee, and we'll be off," she said as she headed for the counter.

Jobe followed her, asking, "So, just where are we going today?"

"The papers I need to pick up are in the San Francisco business district on Market Street, near the Embarcadero. And, I have a surprise I think you might like."

"And, how about lunch?" asked Jobe. "I'm buying."

"Sure. We'll find an interesting place to eat."

Ellie paid for her coffee, dropped the change in the tip jar, and headed out the door setting the pace. Jobe followed her.

Catching up, he said, "Man, you're a woman on a mission!"

"Sure am," responded Ellie, as she unlocked her car door. "Get in. Let's go!"

"Yes Mam!"

Ellie pulled into traffic quickly and soon entered the freeway headed for The City. "So, you know what I do every day," said

Ellie, trying to get a conversation going. “What do you do? And, hey, I don’t even know your last name!”

“Martinez. Portfolio Manager at an investment firm.”

“Wow! Sounds more important than Legal Assistant.”

“No, not really. Just sounds that way. I advise people on how to lose their money – with style!”

“Very funny,” said Ellie. “Hey, you’re not one of those guys about the jump off a bridge when there’s a big Stock Market crash, are you?”

Jobe looked at Ellie with adventure in his eyes, and said, “Uh... I don't know! Let's go to a bridge and find out.”

“That can be arranged!” said Ellie, toying with Jobe.

Jobe played along. “Today?” he asked.

“Maybe!” said Ellie. “But there will be *bridges*.”

After some small talk and spells of silence, having passed Vacaville, Fairfield, and the I-680 junction they entered Lynch Canyon Open Space on Interstate 80. Ellie, noticing the beautiful, green rolling hills and open spaces as far as the eye can see, said, “These hills look to me like someone jumped on a big pillow. I call them *roly-poly hills*. What do they look like to you, Jobe?”

“Broccoli.”

“Broccoli?” asked Ellie.

“Yeah, it’s those wide, bushy, scattered oak trees. At this distance, they look like broccoli sticking up out of the ground.”

“I can see that,” said Ellie. “But now every time I drive through these hills, I won’t see pillows. Thanks a lot!”

“You’re welcome,” said Jobe. “But maybe you’ll think of me,” he said in a suggestive voice, slightly lifting his eyebrows.

“I’m sure I will,” responded Ellie, half joking and half serious.

Jobe then mused, “You’d think all these beautiful hills with awesome views would be built up and civilized – especially considering the location.”

Ellie informed Jobe, “In 1920, this whole area was purchased by the Matthew Lynch Family and their name has been linked with it ever since.”

“More *Charlie knowledge*, I suppose?”

“No, I researched this myself,” said Ellie. “I just hope someday it will become preserved as a State Park. So beautiful! Oh no!” Ellie shouted, startling Jobe. “We’re almost out of gas. I meant to get some in Oak Pines.” She took the next off-ramp and darted into a station. “You need anything?”

“No, thanks.”

Jobe could hear the rumble of gas flowing, as Ellie held down the pump handle. Jobe looked around, then noticed the glove box. *Wonder if it’s locked?* thought Jobe, noticing the keyhole inside the chrome button. He looked back and saw Ellie still standing at the rear of the car. As he reached to push the button he heard, *thump, thump* as Ellie topped off the tank. Jobe sat up straight and Ellie jumped back in.

“Ready to go?” she asked, looking over at him with determined eyes.

“On the Road Again...” sang Jobe.

“Ok, Willie Nelson – here we go.” Ellie pulled back onto the freeway. “Hey, listen to this, *Willy*.” She jammed a cassette tape into the player.

Jobe listened for a moment. “I like that part about trying to find a way to ascend up into the sky. Very poetic.”

“Yes,” said Ellie. “And did you hear that other part? He failed and couldn’t figure out why. More great poetry.”

“Wow, that’s a cool song. I like it. What is it? Sounds kinda religious,” said Jobe.

“Oh, please. I despise religion. Remember? Gotta think *relationships!*”

“Oh, Yeah – *Charlie thinking*, right? Hey, I like this part.” Jobe listened for a few more seconds. “Sounds like this singer guy

finally worked through something and quit all his dreaming. Man, I can relate to that. My sister's death is like a long nightmare that I can't seem to wake up from." Jobe choked up. Ellie kept her eyes on the road and hands on the wheel but said nothing. "Ahhh, I like this part... *until your love broke through.*"

"That's the title of his song," Ellie informed Jobe.

"Wow! What does that mean?" Jobe looked over at Ellie.

She took her eyes off the road momentarily and looked over at Jobe. "What does it mean to *you*?"

"Well, I guess, God broke through to him?" asked Jobe.

"Yep. Relationship – not religion," replied Ellie.

"Who is this guy? He's really good!"

"Keith Green," said Ellie.

"Never heard of him. Up-and-coming Rockstar?"

"He was!" said Ellie.

"Was?"

"He was one of those musical geniuses at a young age: ukulele at three; guitar at five; piano at seven. He made the LA Times at eight, calling him a 'roguish-looking eight-year-old' in his acting portrayal of the little Italian street urchin Mauro in *The Time of the Cuckoo* by Arthur Laurents. He did a bunch of TV commercials, too! A real go-getter at age 11! Then he signed a five-year contract with Decca Records in 1965, with 40 original songs ready to record."

Jobe's attention was fully engaged. "Wow. He was a busy boy! I can hear some stardom in his music. He's pretty good. In fact, he's *real* good!"

"Decca Records sure thought so and wanted to make him the next teen idol."

"What happened?" asked Jobe.

"Donny Osmond beat him to it. That made him drop out of music. He grew up religious – Jewish and Christian Scientist."

"Strange combo!" commented Jobe.

“Happens more than you think. Anyway, it made him open-minded, but confused and deeply unsatisfied. As a teen, with a failed music career, he ran away from home – literally – began smoking pot and used some psychedelics trying to find spiritual truth. He went the Eastern mysticism and free-love route but then had a really bad trip on drugs. Scared the hell out of him! So, he turned to philosophy and reconsidered God. Then he met his wife, Melody.” Ellie looked over at Jobe. She was starry-eyed and sighing. “He once wrote to her – and this is *so* romantic: ‘With our electricity and music, we can amplify the beautiful song of *us*. After all, you are a Melody and I am a minstrel. And we are becoming a fact!’”

“A poet, for sure!” replied Jobe.

“Together, they started helping people and recording spiritual songs. But there was no money in it.”

“That’s because he made a bad choice, financially, by dropping out,” said Jobe. “He could’ve made a killing doing secular Rock,”

“Worse than that,” said Ellie. “He gave his records away to anyone who couldn’t afford them. *Just send in what you can* was his motto.”

“Wow. Noble. Impressive. Must have believed what he sang. Where is he today?” asked Jobe.

“Dead,” said Ellie, with a sense of finality. “Died in a small plane crash in 1982. Took two of his young kids with him and eight others.”

“That’s awful!” Jobe sat up straighter in his seat and turned toward Ellie. “How’d it happen?”

“The small plane was overloaded at takeoff; couldn’t clear the trees!”

“No kidding? That’s horrible what a waste of talent.”

“Perhaps. But maybe it was his time,” said Ellie confidently.

“What do you mean? There’s a time to die?” asked Jobe.

“Quoting the Byrds, who quoted Ecclesiastes, are you? You know ... *A time to be born, a time to die?* I think everyone has a day. Can't keep it from coming; Can't make it happen. We just don't know when.”

“OK,” said Jobe, his wheels turning in his mind. “You could make it happen right now. Just go mow down those oleander bushes in the middle of the freeway and see what happens. Your choice!” Jobe said, sarcastically.

“Maybe,” admitted Ellie. “But we also might end up living. I would regret it and you would hate me.” They both laughed.

Ellie turned on her left blinker and glanced back into the fast lane next to her. “I hate following trucks,” she said as she pulled into the left lane and accelerated. Jobe watched as the long, dual-trailer truck sneaked by his passenger window. “Hey, I like good old secular music, too,” said Ellie.

“Now you’re talking,” replied Jobe. “Beatles, of course. They were pure genius. Did you know there were five Beatles?”

“No way! I've never heard that” responded Ellie, in disbelief.

“Ah! Now I have something you don't know. George Martin. He's the fifth Beatle. That's what some people called him, anyway.”

“Really. Why?”

“He was the production genius behind the Beatles. John, and especially Paul were the musical geniuses. But George Martin – he knew how to produce a great song. A lot of little details that made their songs great came from him.”

“Like what?” asked Ellie.

“Well, in the song *The Benefit of Mr. Kite*, Lennon wanted the track to have a ‘carnival atmosphere’ and told George Martin that ‘listeners need to smell the sawdust on the floor’. In the middle of the song, Martin achieved this by playing a Hammond organ and speeding it up. But for even greater effect, Martin instructed the recording engineer to chop the tape into pieces with scissors,

throw them up in the air, and reassemble them randomly. That's why it sounds so unusually choppy! Pure genius. Right?"

"For sure!" Ellie responded in amazement.

"And I learned all of this without any help from Charlie," Jobe said congratulating himself.

"I don't think this is in Charlie's data bank. But Frank Sinatra would be!" Ellie added, in defense of her mentor.

"With the Beatles, every album seemed like a new sound," continued Jobe. "Rubber Soul, Sgt. Pepper's, Abbey Road. Who else would, or even could, do such stuff?"

"Moody Blues?" offered Ellie, quickly.

"Ah... Very good. Another genius band," said Jobe. "You're catching on! Procol Harum is another. They mixed rock and classical."

"So, you like genius music."

"Yep. It's all head and shoulders above the rest." Jobe settled into his seat, contented to re-live all the nostalgia swirling around in his head.

As Ellie descended down a long hill, still driving in the fast lane, Jobe read a sign that flew by his window. "Vallejo! Did they mean Valley-Joe?" He looked over at Ellie, expecting a laugh.

She gave him a charitable smile. "Very funny."

"Hey, there's Marine World." Jobe pointed to a complex of trees, buildings, and some outdoor water venues. "Opened just last year. They have all kinds of dolphins doing tricks and spectacular feeding shows, with whales that jump out of the water. Man, I wanna go!"

Ellie kept her eyes on the road. "Next trip, mister."

"Hey. What kind of music do *you* like?" asked Jobe.

"Big-time harmonies," said Ellie, "Carpenters, Abba, Beach Boys, Four Seasons."

"I can see that. I like them too."

“Did you know the Beach Boys produced the most expensive song in history?” asked Ellie. “Brian Wilson was your kind of musical genius.”

“A little nutty, too!” Jobe added, quickly.

“Most geniuses are,” Ellie replied. “Anyway, Brian nit-picked every aspect of his songs, especially the harmonies. Had to have them all perfect.”

“So, what was this most expensive song?” asked Jobe.

“Good Vibrations. Took them four months to record it.”

“And what about the Carpenters?” asked Jobe.

“They had four-part harmonies, with just two singers,” boasted Ellie.

“Yeah, how’d they do that?”

“One word – Overdubbing. They kind of invented it. But ya know, Karen died so young.”

“Yeah, about four years ago,” added Jobe. “She was 32. Just about your age?”

“Good guess, mister!” Ellie glanced over at Jobe. “Always smart to guess young. We were born only about a week apart in 1950.”

“What month?”

“February. The 23rd for me; March 2nd for her. I out-rank her by a week.”

“But can you sing like her?”

“Ha! No way. She pulled rank on me there.”

“What a voice. What a shame,” said Jobe. “Why would anyone stop eating?”

“It’s more of a girl thing. I can understand it. Guys have other problems,” said Ellie.

“So, Ellie, why the religious stuff – this Keith Green guy?” Jobe asked, changing the subject.

“I like pop music – plenty. Often, when I hear a song, I can tell you what year, what month, and what I was doing when it came out.”

“Yeah. Me too, come to think of it,” added Jobe. “Music does that.”

“But pop songs only describe the *problems* in life,” Ellie said, turning her head while looking back and changing lanes.

“And they do it well,” added Jobe. “*My baby don't love me no mo,*” sang Jobe.

“You got it,” said Ellie. “But Keith, and many others – they, at least, took a shot at singing about *solutions* in life!”

“Makes sense,” said Jobe. “Y’gotta get God, or some higher-power in there once in a while. The *blues* get kinda old all by themselves.”

Chapter 5

Ellie and Jobe rode in silence for quite some time. Ellie always did her best thinking while driving. Something mesmerizing about the rugged hum of the road mixed with the tunnel vision of objects flying by at high speed, always took her into past and future contemplation.

Jobe slouched low in his seat staring out the window, himself in a bit of a trance. Then, without warning, Jobe blurted out, “I need to go see my mom sometime.” Ellie kept driving, waiting for clues. After more silence, Jobe said, softly, “I love her so very much. Always been there for me.” Ellie noticed Jobe looking out the window, not at her. She let him pause and think. “Once, when I was a little boy...” he turned and looked at Ellie, “that seems so long ago. It’s like I was a different person back then.”

“In many ways, you were,” said Ellie.

Jobe turned his attention back out the window. The Carquinez Strait flowed beneath the Benicia-Martinez bridge as they crossed it. “Once when I was just a little boy, I had been bad.”

“Only once?”

“Very funny. Anyway, I was in a bad mood, sulking, and nothing my mom said could snap me out of it.”

“Maybe you didn’t want to.”

“I’m sure I didn’t. Hey, how come we humans seem to like being miserable sometimes?”

“Ha! Figure that one out and you can make a million dollars!” Ellie said, looking over at him with her mouth twisted to the right.

“I’ll work on it. But, anyway, my mom did something very clever. She didn’t scold me or send me to my room. She just said, ‘I know, honey, why don’t you crawl behind the couch and see if you can find the *nice* Jobe? I so miss him.’ Well, I fell for it immediately. I smiled and looked at my mom while I headed over to the back of the couch. I got down on my hands and knees and she said, ‘Hope you find him. He must be behind there somewhere.’ I always loved the little games, like this one, that she would play with me.”

“And?” Ellie said with great anticipation.

“Sure enough. I found him. Couldn’t help it. I knew it was the goal of the game. And coming out the other end, seeing her face and hearing her say as she clapped her hands together, ‘Oh, you did find him, and here he is!’ I ran to her open arms, and I was a new kid ... for an hour or so.”

“Why is that so important?” asked Ellie.

“It’s one of the strongest and earliest memories I have as a child. And I remember exactly how I felt. Safe, secure, warm, loved. I’m sure it was before I even knew about such words, but the feelings were very real.”

“What’s stopping you from seeing your mom, now?” Ellie finally asked.

Snapping out of it, and changing the subject slightly, Jobe said, “Mom loves detective novels. She’s even trying to write one herself. Seems good for her. It keeps her busy, and it’s a good project. She’s learning a lot about writing. She got started by reading *The Maltese Falcon* and adored the author, Dashiell Hammett. Calls him her *heart throb*. He’s from her era.” Jobe looked over at Ellie. “Man, I miss seeing Mom. Gotta go see her. I just have to let her be who she is and just love her – which I do!” Not knowing Jobe very well, Ellie just allowed more silence.

As Ellie drove down a big hill, they descended into Berkeley, level with the Bay and only a hundred feet from the water. Jobe commented on all the crazy, outdoor, 3-D art that had been constructed by local artists. “It is amazing what these artsy people come up with. Hey, there’s some kind of large animal welded together using old car-body parts.”

“Most of that stuff doesn’t look like anything, to me,” commented Ellie. “But it sure is creative. Everyone needs a way to express themselves. It’s just in us.”

“Yeah, and those who don’t – they find some other outlet, and not always a good one,” added Jobe.

“That’s why it’s smart to encourage this kind of public art,” Ellie said as she chose one of about fifteen pay lanes to cross the Bay Bridge. When she reached the tollbooth, she dropped 75 cents into a basket and the gate arm rotated upward to let her through. “I sure like those toll baskets. So much faster.”

“Yeah, what’ll they think of next?” added Jobe. “But 75 cents? Are you kidding? Used to be a quarter!”

Coming out of the tunnel on Yerba Buena Island, Ellie said, “You ready for lunch?”

“Sure!” said Jobe.

“I’ll take you to a surprise lunch spot.”

“Is this the surprise you promised me?” asked Jobe.

“No, that comes later. This one is a spontaneous surprise.” As Ellie pulled off the bridge onto the freeway that hovered over downtown San Francisco, she said, “Help me watch for the Fifth Street exit.”

After several minutes, Jobe blurted out, “There it is, on the left!”

“Oh shoot. I gotta get over!” Ellie did some fancy maneuvering between vehicles, quickly traversing three lanes of traffic while Jobe grabbed the handle mounted above the passenger door. She scooted onto the off-ramp as the cement

divider with big water-filled crash tanks sailed past Jobe's window.

"We made it!" Ellie declared victoriously.

"Just barely," said Jobe, releasing his grip on the overhead handle. "You always drive this way?"

"Only when I have to. The next off-ramp is several miles ahead, and doubling back in traffic would add fifteen minutes." Ellie pulled up to the stoplight, waited for the green, then pulled onto Fifth Street. "The place where I need to pick up those papers is just a few blocks away. But they're probably at lunch, so we'll eat first."

"At the surprise lunch spot, right?" asked Jobe.

"Yep." Ellie drove several blocks past narrowly fronted houses, jammed together. Crossing Market Street she said, pointing right, "The pick-up place is down there a few blocks, but lunch is straight ahead and only a few jogs away." Following Cyril Magnin Street as it curved right, then left, Ellie turned right on Ellis Street, drove a few blocks, and quickly parallel parked.

"Wow. You're good at that!" remarked Jobe. He got out, stood on the sidewalk, looked up, and saw an old green neon light that had some wording with a few letters unlit. Jobe slowly read, "John's Grill. Steak and seafood. Cocktails."

"Yeah, this is it," said Ellie. "You're gonna like it."

As they walked in through the old wood-framed glass double doors, Jobe couldn't help but notice a long wall of photos on the right.

"Wow, look at all those pictures of famous people." As Jobe wandered down the long narrow room with old wood dining tables in front of him, he said, "There's Willie McCovey, Ronald Regan, and Mayor Mosconi."

At the end of the long room stretched a bar. Concerned that Jobe would spoil the surprise of their visit, Ellie distracted him from seeing the large, overhead tribute. "Hey Jobe," she said,

causing Jobe to turn around. “Do me a favor and go upstairs to the second-floor landing.”

“Why?” asked Jobe.

“Just do it. You’ll see.”

Jobe walked over to the narrow stairs at the end of the bar and began to climb. The stairs turned twice, slightly, then emerged into a landing. He noticed more old wooden dining tables to the left, more stairs straight ahead, and a showcase in the corner of the landing. Jobe stepped back to see the showcase contents. There, on the top shelf of the glass case was a black, foot-high statue of a bird perched in a stately position. The shelf below held a collection of signed books on display.

Jobe headed down the stairs to a waiting Ellie, his face smiling and his head nodding slightly. “The Maltese Falcon!” He said, enjoying the surprise. “And signed copies of Dashiell Hammett’s books. Wish my mom could be here. She would be thrilled.”

“Bring her here sometime,” said Ellie.

“I will, for sure,” replied Jobe.

“Check out the tribute over the bar.”

Jobe looked up and there was a large photo of Dashiell Hammett. “Mom would swoon. So, that’s why you rushed me up the stairs. I knew you were hiding something from me. I even sneaked a peek, but I didn’t see anything. Didn’t bother to look up. Shall we sit here at the bar?”

“Sure,” said Ellie.

Jobe pulled out the bar stool for her, then seated himself. The bartender, a big fellow with a small mustache, advanced in years, gave a big nod spreading his hands apart with open palms, and said, “I saw you admiring the photo of Mr. Hammett. He used to sit right about where the two of you are now – often. He would usually drink wine and work on his book. But on Tuesdays, it was a Vesper – Gin and Vodka – and lamb chops. His favorite meal.”

“Wasn’t Vesper a James Bond martini?” asked Ellie.

“Yes, the first martini described in detail by Bond was in one of the early Ian Fleming books,” said the bartender proud of his knowledge of the history of drinks. “I think that’s where Mr. Hammett got his drink of choice. We still get requests for it today!”

“I’ll take one!” said Ellie.

“Me too,” added Jobe. “You’ve worked here long?”

“Long enough to remember Mr. Hammett. A real gentleman; a class act.”

“Then, let’s try those lamb chops,” said Jobe, enthusiastically.

“Oh, sorry. Only on the dinner menu, and only on Tuesdays,” the bartender said, apologetically.

“Well, how about two hamburgers,” Jobe said, with a hint of sarcasm.

Unphased, the bartender replied, “Coming right up.”

“Wow, sitting in Dashiell Hammett’s seat,” said Jobe. “Wait till I tell Mom.”

“This will give you a good reason to visit her. Right?” prompted Ellie.

“Yeah. This is good. Thanks for bringing me here. I will take one of these Maltese Falcon cardboard drink coasters to give her.”

After lunch, Jobe and Ellie walked out of John’s Grill. Ellie stopped, put her hand out in front of Jobe, and said, “Oh no! I got a ticket. Forgot to feed the meter. Darn. Oh well,” she said as they both got in the car. “Let’s pick up those work papers, then we can go find the real surprise I have for you.”

Ellie pulled out into traffic in her usual girl-on-a-mission fashion, while Jobe fastened his seat belt. She turned left on Market Street, drove a few blocks, turned into a parking lot with

fancy-looking office buildings, parked in the yellow loading zone, and said, "I'll be right back."

Ellie got out and scurried up the steps where she entered through two ten-foot, double glass doors. Jobe noticed she left her purse. Untempted to peek, he stared out the window. Taking longer than expected, he saw the glovebox again. *Probably OK to look in there. It's not a purse*, Jobe rationalized. He noticed the keyhole in the push button. *If privacy is wanted, it will be locked.*

Jobe pushed the button. The door popped open. *That was easy!* Jobe looked over at the doorway. *No Ellie yet.* He thumbed through the contents of the glovebox. *Aspirin. Earplugs in a round case. Ear wax on them – yuck!* A small stack of papers caught his attention. *Looks like car registration on top. Hmmm... an envelope underneath.* Jobe looked over at the steps. Still no Ellie. He pulled the envelope out very carefully. Unsealed, inside he found a thick, threefold stack of fancy writing paper. *I shouldn't pull these papers out. Too dangerous.* Widening the opening of the envelope, Jobe peeked in and saw the first few words on the top paper. *'My Dearest Ellie.'* *Whoa, baby!* thought Jobe. He looked again at the doorway. Still no Ellie. The letter continued: *'I miss you so much! Can I please see you again?'* It was impossible to read past those lines without taking the pages out of the envelope. Jobe checked the doorway again. *Oh my gosh, it's Ellie. Gotta get this envelope back into the glovebox without leaning forward. She's getting close. Smiling at me!* Jobe smiled back. *Gotta get the envelope back in and my hand away from the glovebox.* As Ellie approached the car, Jobe slipped the envelope back in. *Gotta close the glovebox!* As Ellie walked in front of the car to get to the driver's side, Jobe bumped the box closed with his knee ... but it didn't catch. At the driver's door with her head above the car, Jobe reached down and pushed the glovebox door shut. *Click.* Jobe felt a rush of relief as he sat back in his seat and turned his head toward Ellie as she bounced in.

"Done with that," said Ellie. "Did you get bored?"

"Oh, no. Just pondering," said Jobe, innocently.

“Pondering what?”

“Stuff. Just stuff.”

Not knowing Jobe too well, she let it go and started the car.

“Where to now?” asked Jobe. “Another surprise?”

“Yep,” said Ellie. “The planned one. We still have some time before traffic leaving the City gets bad.”

“Okay. Onward. Let's go!”

Chapter 6

Ellie pulled into the Cliff House parking lot.

“Lunch again? We just ate,” complained Jobe.

“No, silly. Time to hike.”

“Where to?”

“Read the sign.” Ellie pointed to a spot ten feet in front of the car.

“Land’s - End - Trailhead.” Jobe read aloud, slowly. “What? Are we headed for the end of the world?”

“Yeah. Kinda. You’ll see.”

They got out of the car and Ellie lurched out ahead of Jobe to start the hike. Having to jump out of the way, Jobe said, with a hint of sarcasm, “Lead on, girl!” He followed her for ten minutes down the trail until they reached some stairs headed downhill toward the ocean.

“This is our turn-off,” said Ellie.

“Wow! Those are quite some stairs,” Jobe said as he looked down long, twisting, seemingly endless steps that vanished into nowhere. Overhanging trees covered their view; all they could see were more steps.

“Wanna count them?” asked Ellie.

“No way!” Jobe replied.

When they reached the bottom, there was a clearing and a small hill in front of them without any steps. The hill was too tall to see over it. They climbed the steep hill together, not quite on their knees but using their hands. Side-by-side, as they emerged over the top, there it was in all its beauty – the mighty Pacific

Ocean. They just clung there for a moment, perched at the top of the hill, saying nothing and taking it all in.

"It's beautiful," Jobe said, breaking the silence. They both watched and heard the waves breaking over the rocks in an out-of-sync, yet harmonized crescendo. Looking down at the bottom of the hill, Jobe saw a peninsula about 40 feet in diameter surrounded by water. He looked at Ellie, and said, "Looks like a dance floor."

"Want to dance?" asked Ellie.

"Sure!"

Like ants with their arms and legs sticking out, they crawled down to the peninsula on their backs. Reaching the bottom, Jobe was ready to dance. But he noticed Ellie picking up rocks and placing them in circular rows.

"What are you doing, Ellie?"

"I'm making a labyrinth. People who come down here might want something to do. Something fun. Kids will love it."

"OK," said Jobe. "Tell you what: I'll collect the rocks; you place them where they belong. But don't you think someone will come and mess it up after we're gone?"

"Probably," said Ellie. "But maybe it will give someone an idea to make a permanent labyrinth someday." After about forty minutes, Ellie finished and tested the labyrinth, starting at the outside entrance. Jobe followed her. When she got to the center, she bragged, "Made it here with no mistakes."

"That's 'cause you *made it*." Jobe teased, with a corny pun. Ellie gave him a charity laugh.

Ellie went over and sat on a big rock at the edge of the peninsula. "Come join me," she said, holding out her hand. Jobe felt a bit of a thrill at the invitation. She waited, looking back at him with her arm extended, her blonde hair dancing in the breeze. He loved that unaware look she so often possessed. There, stretched out in front of them was the Golden Gate Bridge, close

enough to see clearly, yet far enough to see all of it. “Majestic and beautiful,” said Ellie. “Just think – people come from all over the world to see it.”

“The symmetry of it with its long, sweeping curves makes it spectacular!” added Jobe. After a short pause, he noticed the asymmetric nature of the bridge, having one end farther from the shore. “Hey, wait a minute. What’s that ugly little bridge over on the right? That’s terrible! Ruins the beauty of the Golden Gate.”

Ellie waited a moment, then said, “Terrible beauty, is it?”

“Yes,” said Jobe. “Why’d they do that? I’ve never seen that before. Have you?”

“Actually, I have,” answered Ellie. “I was watching a 49ers game and they showed an aerial shot of the Golden Gate. Must have been from the other side because that ugly little bridge was on the left. I had the same thought – terrible. Then I thought about what purpose that little bridge serves. Can you think of any?”

“Not really,” answered Jobe.

“Looks like it is needed to get *to* the Golden Gate,” suggested Ellie.

“Why not just make the Golden Gate longer?” asked Jobe.

“Economics? Physics? Who knows.”

“What do you mean? I don’t get it,” asked Jobe

“Maybe the right side of the bay is shallow enough that a small, less expensive bridge can cover that space, allowing the Golden Gate to cost less to build.”

“Maybe,” said Jobe. “How ‘bout the physics?”

“Well...” Ellie thought for a moment, then said, “The Golden Gate’s a suspension bridge. Right?”

“Indeed, it is.”

“Perhaps there’s a limit to how far it can suspend using just two towers.”

“Hmmm,” mumbled Jobe. “Smartest thing you’ve said all day. You makin’ this stuff up?”

“Kinda,” admitted Ellie.

“Well, you’re good at it. I vote for physics,” said Jobe proudly.

“Thanks. But it really doesn’t matter. Does it? They built it the way they did for a reason, and the *terrible* little bridge serves its important purpose of providing access to the big *beautiful* one. No *terrible* results in ... no *beauty!*”

“I get it,” confessed Jobe. “There are probably a lot of things like this in life.”

“You’re catching on,” said Ellie, sitting back on the rock with a smile. “You ready to climb back up?”

“Let’s go,” said Jobe, taking her by the hand.

They climbed back over the small hill and stood together looking at the steps ascending upward into nowhere beneath the overhanging trees.

“That’s a lot of steps,” said Jobe, looking over at Ellie.

“Sure is. Got any idea how many?”

“No. Do you?” asked Jobe.

“Let’s each count them going up and compare at the top.”

“OK,” said Jobe as he began climbing. After ten steps, Jobe stopped, pulled out a business card and a pen, and made a check mark. Ellie climbed right past him. Jobe climbed another ten steps, made another checkmark, and continued his routine until he reached the top – and a waiting Ellie.

“You may have gotten here first, but I ensured my accuracy,” he told Ellie, confidently.

“I did both,” said Ellie, with greater confidence.

“No way you could count hundreds of steps and not miss one. I made a checkmark every ten steps. Pretty hard to miscount!”

“I saw what you did,” replied Ellie. “But I did the same thing – without a pen.”

“How?” asked Jobe, a little stunned.

“Fingers!” said Ellie. “One finger every ten steps...”

Jobe interrupted, “What happened when you ran out of fingers, smarty-pants?”

“When both hands were full, it was a hundred steps. I did that twice, plus five fingers, then seven more steps. So, the total was 257.”

“I gotta admit, that was clever. But your fingers failed you. It was 254.”

“Nope,” said Ellie, confidently. “257.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because I counted them on the way down,” said Ellie smiling, head cocked and eyebrows raised.

Jobe just looked at her, impressed and dazzled all the more. “Oh yeah. I remember. It was your idea to count steps going down.”

“I always plan ahead,” said Ellie.

“But how could I be off by three? I was very careful,” asked Jobe.

“Did you count the missing steps?” asked Ellie, unaware that she was starting her grilling routine again.

“You mean the big steps where a normal step got washed out? Of course not! Those missing steps no longer exist. Did you count them?”

“Sure. They were part of the original design. When I take one big step, I am actually taking two steps.”

“Oh, brother! I mean, sister.”

Ellie looked at Jobe and held in a smile. After a moment, they both laughed. As they started hiking back up the trail, Ellie led the way. She turned her head back toward Jobe and said. “Your kind of counting is *practically* correct, mine is *philosophically* correct.”

“Sounds like an age-old battle,” said Jobe, huffing.

“Yep, ever since Plato and Aristotle,” added Ellie.

“Yeah. And ever since Adam and Eve, too!”

They laughed together. Finishing the upward hike, they got in the car.

“Driving back, let's take the Golden Gate, go through Marin, then over to Vallejo on 37 and catch I-80,” said Ellie.

Jobe clicked his seat belt. “I will, forever, cross that bridge with new appreciation.”

Ellie and Jobe traveled back through the broccoli-laced, roly-poly hills they so enjoyed on the drive into The City. Passing the Nut Tree in Vacaville, Jobe commented on its small airstrip.

“I once dated a guy who owned a small plane,” said Ellie. “A two-seater, Piper Tomahawk. He rented a hanger there.”

“Rich guy?” asked Jobe, feeling a bit intimidated.

“Not really. Ex-military. Air Force pilot in Vietnam.”

“Did ya like him?” asked Jobe, probing for details.

“A little. But he liked himself a lot more!”

“Full of himself, was he?” Jobe asked, feeling a little more confident.

“Very!” answered Ellie, without hesitation. “Phil Rowman was his name. He would get himself into relationship difficulties with me, I'd break it off, then he'd bring flowers and beg me for one more chance. He played the *poor sweet baby* so well.”

“Mr. Romance, huh?”

“Sorta.”

“Let me guess – you gave him another chance.”

“Twice,” admitted Ellie, sheepishly. “This is when the *yucky* part of the relationship begins. I'm blonde, but not dumb. Never gave him a third shot at it. Fired him ... and his plane.”

“From what little I know of you I'm surprised he even got two shots.”

“I’ll never do two again,” replied Ellie, expressing resolve. Jobe swallowed hard.

“Hey, Milk Farm Road,” said Jobe. “Take it. We used to stop here when I was a kid.”

“OK,” said Ellie, as she navigated the off-ramp. “Sorry to disappoint you, but it closed last year. The roof blew off in a big windstorm. It was originally built around 1930.”

“More *Charlie data*?” asked Jobe.

“This time, yes. He has been a great source for many years. Told me he’s leaving me a legacy.”

“What’s that mean?” asked Jobe.

“I’m not sure. Must be all the wisdom he’s passed along to me over the years.”

“I’d like to meet Charlie someday.”

“Maybe you will,” said Ellie. “Look, there’s an A&W with outside tables. Ready to eat again?”

“Sure. But another hamburger?”

“They have other stuff,” said Ellie, pulling in and parking.

They ordered and sat at one of the outside tables. Seated near them was a young adult girl with Down Syndrome. The girl smiled and waved at Jobe, then turned toward her mother to hide her face. She couldn’t help but peek at Jobe again. Jobe gave her a few more smiles and a thumbs up.

The young girl wore gray pants with green and purple flowers, a black top, and a nose just like her mom’s. No doubt she belonged to her. The girl sat straddling the picnic table seat, her mom sitting behind her, holding her, and they looked at photos together. They were enjoying special memories, with the girl often covering her open mouth with her hands and squealing in delight.

Watching this, Ellie realized Jobe’s compassion despite his current troubles and hurts. She also realized such kind playfulness showed just who he was and that he couldn’t help it.

When the mom and daughter got up to leave, Jobe looked up at the mom and said, “She’s a very special girl, isn’t she.”

“She sure is,” responded the mom.

“And I’ll bet she’s a better person than most people alive today,” added Jobe.

“I have no doubt,” said the mom, moving her head in an upward arc and rolling her eyes. “Thank you for your special insight. Few people know of such things. And do you know why I am so blessed?”

“No. Why?” responded Jobe.

“Because, unlike most mothers, my little girl didn’t grow up too fast. I still have her today.” Ellie remained silent, wondering how her own mother could have given her up when she was just a baby. Her orphanage days loomed big in her mind – a subject she hardly ever spoke of.

Jobe and Ellie got back in the car to finish their long day drive. They crossed the Yolo Causeway, drove through Sacramento, and then began their climb into the foothills. Finally, back in Oak Pines, Ellie pulled into the parking lot at Carla’s next to Jobe’s sports car. “Thanks for coming,” said Ellie. “Without you, it would have been, well ... just go there, pick up papers, and come home. Instead, we had a lot of fun.”

“Indeed, we did,” said Jobe. He got out of the car but then stuck his head back into the open door. “And thanks for letting me tag along. Maybe I’ll see you at Carla’s sometime?”

“I’m sure of it,” said Ellie.

Jobe closed the door and headed to his car. Ellie looked in the rear-view mirror and started backing out. All of a sudden, the passenger door flew open. “Hey. I gotta ask you something.”

“Sure,” said Ellie, as she put the car into *Park*.

“Any way you could come with me on Saturday to the cabin?” asked Jobe, cringing slightly.

“Oh, I don’t know. Not sure it’s appropriate,” answered Ellie.

“Sure it is!” Jobe reassured her. “You were there for the discussion in the coffee shop. You can just tag along – like I did today with you. You don’t need to say anything; Just be there. I need a friend in the room.”

Ellie paused for a moment. Seeing his sincere pleading eyes, Ellie finally said, “OK. Happy to be there for you.”

“Terrific!” said Jobe, feeling relieved. “When I get the map to Zach’s cabin, I’ll leave a copy for you at Carla’s. Check with Gina later tomorrow.”

“I will. See ya!” said Ellie.

Jobe could not have been more pleased – with the day, and the future.

Ellie got her keys out of her purse and unlocked her apartment door. She walked in and headed for her stack of diaries. She grabbed her current diary, plopped herself down on the couch, and started writing.

Dear Martha:

I had quite a day with my interesting new guy. Can’t plan days like this. You can only make a plan and go see what happens. Didn’t you tell me this once? I only planned to have him ride with me to the City, pick up some papers, and maybe hike a little. Wow, I got more than I bargained for. We kinda made up the day as we went along. Something came up when talked in the car that made me think of where to eat lunch. He said his mom likes Dasbiell Hammett, so I took him to John’s Grill in SF and showed him the Maltese Falcon.

We picked up the papers and then I took him to Land’s End to view the Bridge. You remember – you took me there once. Some amazing things

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happened. Maybe I will write you more about the details someday, but Streams of Terrible Beauty just naturally emerged, almost magically. As you always told me, life is full of mysteries.

I still don't have this interesting guy figured out, and I don't even know how much I like him. But I'm willing to find out. He has asked me to accompany him to a weird thing at a cabin. I'll go. Might learn a lot. I'll tell you all about it, next time. Love you!

Wednesday, August 12, 1987

The Cabin



Saturday, August 8, 1987

Chapter 7

On Saturday, Elliot and Billie were the first guests to arrive at the cabin. They both held PhDs in philosophy with degrees from a religious university where they met thirty years before as grad students. Both could make more money than co-pastoring their church – a place where they had been appreciated and admired for over twenty years. But the church paid them quite well. They proudly pulled up in their new, 1987 Cadillac Seville – cream white with black leather seats. As they got out, Zach greeted them from outside the front door of the cabin.

Billie climbed out of the car. She looked around, up and down at the dense forest of majestic pines and cedars. “Wow, what a beautiful setting!”

“Gotta love that smell,” said Elliott, closing the car door and breathing deep, his belly jiggling slightly.

The cabin had a high steep roof, angled to handle large dumps of winter snow. The roof curved outward near the bottom giving the cabin a most charming appearance, very Chalet-like. The windows were crisscross-style. The rockwork of the walls contained a beautiful mix of brown, gray, blue, and green, fashioned skillfully ranging from small stones to giant boulders.

As they started to enter the cabin, Jobe drove up in his ‘66 Sunbeam Tiger. Though twenty years older than Eliot's Cadillac, the Tiger held nearly the same value. But neither of them would

trade vehicles. As Jobe got out, Zach called *hi* to him and they all entered the cabin together.

The entryway revealed a sunken living room with a wall of picture windows that displayed a lush mix of green cedars and pines.

“Oh my gosh!” gushed Billie. “That’s a spectacular view. Hey, I don’t care what we talk about today, I’ll just stare out the window.”

As the four of them stepped down among the circle of couches, Zach said, “My dad spent about a month camped outside on this property, imagining exactly where the cabin would be built and in what direction it would face.”

“Looks like he chose *sunset-ville* for the big windows,” said Elliott. They all took in the beauty of the sun peeking high through the array of evergreen trees.

“There’s a variety of drinks over there on the table. Help yourself,” said Zach.

When the doorbell rang, Jobe said, “That’s probably Ellie.”

Elliot turned toward Jobe and frowned. “The girl at the coffee shop?”

“You invited her?” Elliott and Billie said, almost in unison.

“Yep! Spent some quality time with her since our last meeting and found her to be a very interesting girl,” said Jobe.

“I don’t know, Jobe. It was supposed to be just the four of us.”

Billie turned toward Elliot. “Leave him alone,” she said in her motherly voice. “She might be the perfect person to get his mind off his troubles and help him understand what we’re telling him.”

“Well, I . . .”

Billie leaned in and whispered loudly, “It’s a girl, let’s see where this goes.”

Zack popped a peanut into the air and caught it in his mouth. “I have no problem with it. She might even bring a new perspective.”

“Sorry,” Jobe apologized. “I guess I should have asked you first, but she’s really special and I just thought . . .”

Billie interrupted. “You mean . . . you *like* her!”

“Yeah. That too!” Jobe said, without hesitation.

“OK. Bring whoever you need,” said Elliott, with a hint of sarcasm.

“I did!” said Jobe, ending the subtle protest.

Zach opened the door and said, “Welcome. Come on in.” Ellie stepped in. Her old, two-tone blue and white ’63 Rambler American could be seen parked near the door.

“Hey everyone! Remember Ellie from the coffee shop?” Jobe asked proudly. *Yeah, Sure, Uh-huh*, came from the three friends. “Since she *started* with us, I thought she might like to *continue* with us.” No one responded and Ellie felt chilled despite the warm day. She awkwardly found a seat on the nearest couch.

“There are snacks over there on the table, Ellie,” said Zach, giving her some relief.

Ellie was dressed casually, but not sloppy. She had on well-fitted powder blue Levi's and a brightly colored blouse with dainty flowers, a white collar, and slim white cuffs. Jobe thought she looked adorable. Her hair, just above her shoulders, flipped inward – blonde hair that danced slightly when she turned her head. The three friends noticed all the same features but without Jobe’s emotional attachment. Young Zach, however, felt secretly glad she came after seeing her for the first time at the coffee shop. He noticed that Ellie always brightened a room when she entered. It wasn’t so much her appearance that attracted attention, but her countenance. She always appeared poised and confident, never cocky. What added to her special persona was her speech and mannerisms, which perfectly matched her innocent look.

After everyone found a chair, snacks, and drinks in hand, Elliott said, “Thanks, everyone, for coming. As I said at the end of our last visit at Carla's, we needed to move somewhere more private. So, here we are today.” Elliott turned and nodded toward Zach and said, “And thank you, Zach, for offering your beautiful cabin. A bit of a drive to get here, but this is a great place to meet.”

“A beautiful drive,” chimed in Billie.

Jobe began to tense up a little, partly because he didn't know what to expect and partly because he did. He had been on the other end of these *interventions* many times along with his three friends. But now it was his turn. He didn't like it and he felt new compassion and comradery with all his victims of the past.

Ellie sat calm and ready to take it all in. Though she felt a little out of place, she planned to remain quiet and respectful, and just support Jobe. Her curiosity about what might soon happen flourished.

Elliott and Billie married young, at ages 19 and 18. They enjoyed an up-and-down, but very successful marriage. A couple of years before Jobe lost his sister, Elliott and Billie encountered a young couple having marital problems. Being neighbor acquaintances, they respected Elliott and Billie and knew them as a *ministering couple*. So, the couple came to them for counsel. As they talked, Elliott and Billie discovered that the guy was Jewish and the girl Catholic. Being charismatic evangelicals, far from the couple's beliefs, Elliot and Billie sought help from Zach and Jobe. Zach had a Jewish background; Jobe was Christian. After just a few evenings together, the troubled marriage began the long journey of turning around. The four friends had no plan or scheme, they just loved the young couple and shared what they knew about God and life.

Thereafter, Elliott and Billie called in Jobe and Zach for other *interventions*. Together the four of them had great success, far from

perfect but better than half – a very successful rate for any kind of counseling. Privately, they jokingly called themselves *Friends of Job Counseling Ministry*. They didn't agree with Job's friends in the Bible story, but they did identify with the boldness and convictions they exhibited. Plus – they had a *Jobe* among them! The great irony, this day at the cabin, was that Jobe ended up like the Job of the Bible, allowing his three friends to attack him.

Sitting tall in his chair, Elliott turned toward Jobe. “Please correct me if I'm wrong, but your life is not going all that well right now. Am I right?” Elliott paused and waited for Jobe to answer.

Billie, seeing Jobe's obvious discomfort, looked directly at Elliott. “You need to show Jobe more respect. He's one of us, ya know!”

Elliott stared back at Billie. “I think I understand exactly where Jobe is and what he needs.” He turned his focus back on Jobe. “Right, Jobe?”

Jobe shifted in his seat and looked briefly at Ellie out of the corner of his eye. He shrugged his shoulders and said, “I suppose so.”

“How's it going at work?” Elliott asked, without hesitation.

Jobe looked down at the floor. “Yeah, I've been distracted.”

“Family life?” Elliott said, grilling Jobe. “Ever check in on your mom? What's your relationship with her? Do you honor her? It's one of the Ten Commandments, you know.”

“Yes, I know. It's sometimes a struggle. We don't always see eye-to-eye.” Jobe looked up at Elliott. “But I love her very much!”

Ellie sighed ever so slightly. *I didn't come to watch this.* A big part of her felt like leaving but she remained seated.

“And how about your *other* relationships – your social life? Is it healthy, wholesome?”

Relieved somewhat by this last question, Jobe avoided looking at Ellie and said with a new, slightly elevated voice, “That's one area that seems to be going well!”

“Really?” Elliott said, looking around at the others. Ellie remained poised – outwardly.

Billie spoke up, as was her habit whenever Elliott did his take-charge thing, partly to keep things reasonable and partly because she loved her share of the limelight. “Now Jobe, honey,” she said in her big-lady, motherly voice, “you've been on our side of this conversation along with Zach, Elliott, and me, many times when we lovingly intervened in other people's lives. And you know, darling, that we never made it about ourselves. We always selflessly worked to bring some sanity and peace into the life of some poor lost soul – sometimes even a couple of lost souls.”

“Yes, I remember,” Jobe said, his voice flat and unexpressive. But then it perked up as he stiffened in his chair. “But it's different for me!”

“Different?” said, Billie. “It's only different, Honey because you are now the target of loving correction instead of the source.”

“Oh, you have no idea,” Jobe mumbled under his breath catching a glimpse of Ellie sitting poised, recognizing her oh-so-slight smile that he learned to admire over the past week.

“What's that?” asked, Billie. Jobe just smiled.

“I think what he's saying,” Elliott interrupted, “is that the consequences of his own doing, in thought and deed, somehow do not apply to him.” Elliott reared back in his seat as if he had just finished a good sermon. “You've seen this in others as much as we have, Jobe. When a person experiences trouble, it's a sure-telling sign that things are not right in their life. They are fighting God and all he stands for. Are you fighting God, son? Don't answer just yet. Do you spend time praying? I doubt it – not real prayer. And even if you do, it can't be sincere. Just look at your life and the kinds of people you have allowed into it.” Elliott

sneaked a peek at Ellie to see if she noticed. But she remained still.

“Yeah!” blurted out Zach, having waited his turn to speak and feeling entitled. “Do you think you can ignore all this and still have your life be okay? How many people have we all seen in your miserable condition, while trying desperately to help them? We can't help you, Jobe, if you don't help yourself. Your life's gotta change. If you keep living the way you do and expect things to ever improve, well – most people correctly define this as insanity!”

Zach paused. Everyone was silent. Jobe sat in his chair looking down, legs together, hands folded. Then he looked up and looked over at the majestic view in the huge cabin window facing west. “That's such a beautiful view,” Jobe said softly.

“Yes, it is,” said Billie. Everyone waited.

“You know,” Jobe finally said, “I agree with all of you.” Ellie's heart sank. “And yes, we have all seen this in others. I was always sure of the problem in each case and always sure of the solution, too. It always seemed so clear to me. But this is what I know about myself.” Jobe scanned around the room. “I've got plenty of struggles in life. Quite honestly, it's terrible. And I'm sure I've contributed plenty to all I experience.” Ellie began to lose her composure, but no one could tell. “But you know what? My life, with all its struggles, is a good thing and I know I'm doing the best that I can with the hand I've been dealt. I see some beauty in it, maybe for the first time.” Jobe turned his head back toward the big window, but his eyes moved ever so slightly in Ellie's direction. He watched as that subtle smile returned to her face.

The conversation then fell into an uncomfortably serene moment. Elliott broke the silence, blurting out, “You're fooling yourself if you believe that nonsense, Jobe!” Billie shifted in her chair. Ellie fixed her eyes on Elliott, her subtle smile gone but

remaining still. Jobe took in more of the majestic view of the Cedars outside with lush green ferns scattered beneath them.

“You listening, son? This is serious.” Elliott said, his voice becoming a slightly desperate screech. “Don't ignore the obvious. We've all seen this kind of denial in others, many times. You, of all people, know this.” Elliott reared back in his chair again, but this time as if he had finished a closing argument. “Well? Anything else you want to say, Jobe? Anything at all?”

Jobe smiled calmly and said, “Nope!” Ellie did a high-five in her heart, legs crossed, arms gently folded, sitting in oneness with the couch that cradled her.

Chapter 8

The intense discussion continued for quite some time. The three friends were taking shots at Jobe while spraying their words with a veneer of superficial love and kindness. This treatment became their habit in other interventions, and they became numb to the vicious nature of their attacks, believing they were helping people. Guilt became their weapon and spiritual power their intoxicating influence. Ellie sat horrified. She had never witnessed such intense cruelty by any so-called friends. *No wonder they wanted to move to a more private location. They could never get away with this in the coffee shop.*

“Let's take a break, folks,” Elliot finally said. Ellie looked at her dainty watch. It perfectly fit the look she so carefully put together that morning when she dressed. *Wow, it's been nearly an hour of talking – or should I say attacking. Time flies when you're not having fun. But it sure is interesting.* She wasn't sure she could help Jobe, but somehow she felt glad she came.

“Take a walk?” asked Jobe, as he extended his hand to Ellie who sat glued to the couch after taking in all that had happened. Together they scurried out the back door and headed down a trail that escaped into the forest. “Sometimes I came up here to hike, think, and take in the beauty of tall pines and lush underbrush. Zach's family property borders State Park land, so the trails here

are endless. In fact, we're probably walking on Park property now."

Ellie looked over at Jobe. "Zach is very generous with what he has, isn't he?"

"He is, indeed. One of the kindest and most willing-to-share people I know. But it's funny – he is also very legalistic and hard on people who do not live up to his high standard."

"I guess that's what makes him a good interventionist," Ellie said, in reaction to all she had seen and heard so far at the cabin.

"Yes, you're right," confessed Jobe. "I'm starting to see this, not just in Zach but in all four of us. We only mean to help people, but I'm beginning to see that sometimes we are just *mean*."

"We all have blind spots," Ellie offered, in an attempt to soothe Jobe's heart.

They journeyed down a twisty path, dodging limbs that had overgrown on the trail since the last time Zach did some trimming. The undergrowth of lush green ferns bordered the trail. Occasionally, beautiful wildflowers emerged from between the ferns. Ellie stopped, leaned over, and picked a deep red flower that had multiple, almost sharp petals sticking up. She gave it to Jobe. "Here hold this."

Jobe took the flower. "It's gorgeous. What kind is it?"

"Indian Paintbrush," Ellie said, running up ahead to pick another flower. This time she handed Jobe a bright yellow flower with a scrunched-up center surrounded by a circle of large, soft, almond-shaped petals. "Here, add this to your collection."

"Hey, I know this one. It's a California Goldfield. My mom loves these." Jobe stooped down and picked a purple flower. "How about this one?"

"Oh wow!" said Ellie, walking back toward Jobe. "Looks almost looks like a corn cob. You know what it is?"

"Yep. It's a Lupine."

"Don't tell me. Another one of Mom's favorites?"

“Yep. She liked them because they added a wild expression to her flower arrangements.”

“Well, you knew two flowers, I knew one. Let me find one more flower that I know.” Ellie walked quickly down the trail, looking side to side. “Here’s one!” she shouted. She held it up.

“No fair,” said, Jobe. “Everyone knows that one. California poppy!” Ellie handed it to Jobe, and he added it to the collection. “Here is a beautiful bouquet of colors: red, yellow, purple, and orange.” He held them out extending his hand. “And they are for you, my lady.” Ellie took the flowers and held them close. “We better start back.” They turned and headed back up the trail. “Hey, Ellie, I got something to tell you.”

“What is it?” Ellie asked, having no idea what to expect.

“When you were picking up the papers – when I was waiting in the car – well, I got bored.” Jobe paused.

“Go on,” said Ellie, looking at Jobe suspiciously.

“I wanted to see what an interesting person like you might have in your glovebox,” said Jobe, cringing and trying to soften the blow.

Ellie handed the flowers back to Jobe. “What? Did you rummage through my purse too? As I recall, I left it in the car.”

“No, mam! I would never do anything like that.”

“But a glovebox is OK?” she asked Jobe.

“It wasn’t locked.”

“Did it need to be?”

“No. For sure, not. I wasn’t looking for anything. Just looking, passing time.”

“Did you find anything?” asked Ellie.

“Just aspirin, waxy earplugs, and a vehicle registration.”

“Anything else?”

“Yes,” said Jobe, sheepishly.

“Ellie stopped walking and turned toward Jobe. Jobe just looked at the ground. “And what did you find?”

“Uh ... a letter? I only read the first line and then realized it was something I had no business reading,” said Jobe, telling a white lie. “It said, ‘Dearest Ellie: Can I please see you again?’”

Ellie grew silent. Shocked. She didn’t know what to think. *Why must every guy have some bad side to him? Why did I come up here to support this idiot?* But she kept calm and poised – a posture she learned to use as protection. It kept things from getting out of hand in most situations. “Well, that was a pretty stupid thing to do,” Ellie said sternly.

“Yes, it was. I’m sorry.” Jobe finally looked at Ellie. “But I had to tell you. I’m getting beat up badly by my friends, I want to be friends with you, and no friendship can be based on a lie, even a small one.” Jobe’s eyes pleaded.

Ellie paused and just looked at Jobe. He never flinched. “I gotta give you credit for one thing. You didn’t have to tell me, and I would never have known if you didn’t. So, there must be something good in there. That counts for a lot. And so ... I forgive you!” Jobe handed the bouquet back to Ellie. She grabbed Jobe’s hand and said, “Let’s go back to the cabin and see if you can get into some *real* trouble. Shall we?”

“Sure thing!” Jobe said with a smile.

“And I’ll bet you’d like to know what that letter is all about. Right?”

“No, not really.” Jobe lied.

“Well, maybe someday when the time is right, I’ll tell you about it.”

“Fair enough,” said Jobe.

Chapter 9

When they reached the cabin and walked in, everyone was seated.

“I said a *short* break!” barked Elliot.

“Sorry,” said Jobe. “The forest was so beautiful, and...”

Elliot interrupted. “Never mind. Let’s just keep going with this.”

Everyone felt exasperated by the impasse reached during the first session – except for Ellie. Not wanting to disrupt, and wanting to see how things might get resolved, she remained quiet and composed even though she felt like *the elephant in the room* – which she was!

Elliot, always taking the lead in quiet moments, turned to Ellie and said. “So, what do you think about all this, young lady? You’ve been very quiet.” He said this partly to break the silence, but also to punish Jobe for inviting Ellie.

Calm and confident, Ellie simply replied, “I don’t think there’s anything I could say that would be of much help. I just came to be here for Jobe.” She sat back, assuming this would end any entanglement.

“Oh, but surely you must have an opinion after listening to all of us in these two meetings,” said Elliot, unwilling to let her off so easily and looking at Jobe for his reaction. Jobe remained expressionless.

Elliot stared at Ellie demanding a response. So, Ellie finally said, “Well, I do have an opinion. But, like noses . . . everyone has one, and mine is no better.”

“Please, feel free to share,” said Elliot, leaning back on the couch, hands locked behind his head, elbows pointed outward.

Ellie sat up a little straighter, not wanting to look too casual. “I don’t know Jobe very well. We only met last week, but I do like him.” She gave Jobe a gentle smile out of the corner of her eyes. Jobe smiled back.

“I can’t help but conclude that you are all honest, genuine, and faithful friends. The amount of time you spend with Jobe speaks volumes. As for your concerns about how Jobe grieves his sister’s death, I can only speak from my own experience. I have found that different people grieve in different ways and take different lengths of time to work through it. So that’s something all of you must resolve with Jobe. I can only tell you that I found Jobe to be a very kind and empathetic person and that this comes from his heart.” Jobe wondered how she could possibly conclude such things after just one day together. “Would it be OK if I share opinions that are more general in nature, having to do with life and all its wonder?”

“By all means,” said Elliot.

“Sure” and “Great,” came from Billie and Zach.

“I have an older friend who taught me a principle – a way of viewing life, perhaps. I was much younger when I learned it. He showed me a passage in the Bible book of Job – coincidentally,” she said, looking over at Jobe. “It is near the end of Elihu’s speech. He was the last friend to talk before God came in a whirlwind. This passage seems to be the conclusion of his long speech. ‘As gold comes from the northern mountains, so also God brings streams of terrible beauty.’” Ellie looked out at a sea of confused faces. No one said anything, so Ellie continued. “I have found this to be the best explanation for life – which seems to be full of *terrible beauty*.”

Breaking the silence, Jobe said, very gently, “We saw evidence of this at the Golden Gate Bridge, just a few days ago.” Everyone’s eyes turned to Jobe, but he said no more.

“Indeed,” said Ellie, as all eyes turned back on her. None of the three friends were sure what this all meant, but they were content to let her continue. “Perhaps the first two Beatitudes of Jesus reveal this. He said the poor in spirit will possess the kingdom of heaven and those who mourn will be comforted. Both are about *terrible beauty*.”

“Please go on,” said Elliot, his eyes attentive to Ellie’s every word.

“Let me give you an example that may help,” she said, trying a new approach and hoping to find understanding minds and hearts. “Just last year I worked as a spiritual care volunteer at Oak Pines Hospital. I loved my job of visiting patients and encouraging them, and their loved ones, during times of suffering and loss. I learned that the best thing I could do was just be there for them and listen!”

“One day they called for all available nurses, doctors, and workers to stand along the side of a certain hallway and take part in what they call The Dignity Walk. I didn’t know what this meant, but I was happy to be part of something that sounded so good. There was a doctor who worked at the hospital, middle-aged, and died the night before in a car accident. He was a registered organ donor.” Ellie had everyone’s undivided attention at this point, much more so than when she first shared her concept of *Streams*. “There was also another man, who lives here in town,” she continued, “about the same age as the doctor. He needed a kidney and was in the surgery room at the end of the long hallway waiting for a transplant from the deceased doctor. At the other end of the hallway was a gurney. All we could see was the head of a man, his body covered with blue sterile drapes.”

Elliot leaned forward in his chair, elbows on his knees, hands folded, and his chin resting on his hands. Ellie took a deep breath. “Behind the gurney stood an orderly, stationed to push the cart down the hall. Alongside the gurney stood a middle-aged woman who was the deceased doctor's wife. In front of the gurney were two small girls, about age three, holding hands and wiggling somewhat.” Ellie brought her hands together, “The two girls were not sisters, but they were new friends. One was the daughter of the man about to receive the new kidney; the other was the daughter of the doctor who was the donor. The two girls continued to hold hands and giggle, not understanding what was about to take place.”

Ellie shifted in her sofa seat, looked down for a moment then looked up and continued. “At the other end of the hall, near the surgery door, was another lady standing alone. We all knew it had to be the wife of the man about to receive this gift of life. A man with a large video camera was partway down the hall from the gurney. Then someone said, ‘Okay, it's time.’ The girls were prompted to walk. They had, obviously, been coached on how slow to walk. They held hands and looked back at the lady who followed them, seeking approval. The lady looked down and with a reassuring smile and said, ‘You're doing fine.’ The girls giggled and continued leading the gurney.”

Jobe, relieved that the focus shifted off of him was stunned by the calm and confidence with which Ellie shared her experience. As she paused to take a breath, it became clear that she was almost re-living it. “The cameraman moved slowly backward, keeping his camera level to ensure a steady shot. He would occasionally look back over his shoulder to get his bearings. Complete silence prevailed as the gurney moved and started its journey. Aside from giggles by the two little girls, only the gurney wheels crunching an occasional piece of dirt on the floor could be heard. About one-third of the way down the hall, all of us spontaneously began to applaud. It was not a loud

applause like you hear at a ballgame or after a political speech, but a soft and reverent applause – one that not only seemed appropriate but wrong if missing. The applause continued soft and steady as the gurney moved toward its surgery room destination. The lady stood at the door with tears of hope and joy.”

Ellie turned her head, slowly, and made eye contact with each person in the room. “As the gurney passed by us, each head slowly turned, following its movement. It was like a wave traversing down the hall in slow motion. The gurney finally reached its destination with all heads now turned toward it – those farthest away stretching their necks so they could see. When the gurney stopped, a man got up to speak. I recognized him because he was the hospital chaplain who oversaw the spiritual care team. He said, with a reverent voice, ‘Please allow me to briefly say a few words to, and for, both of these precious families.’ The two little girls were still holding hands, still wiggling and occasionally giggling. The chaplain continued, ‘For one family this is a day of great hope. For the other...’ The Chaplain paused, pressed his lips together, and looked down. He then looked up. ‘For the other family, it is a day of meaningful sacrifice.’ His voice trembled. ‘This is why we call it The Dignity Walk.’”

Then, Ellie continued. “As the gurney escaped through the surgery doors, I quietly asked a worker standing next to me if the hospital had done this for very long and if other hospitals were doing it. The worker told me that it was a fairly new ritual and that she didn't know if any other hospitals were doing such a thing. I secretly hoped that someday every hospital would do this.”

Ellie reached up and wiped a small tear from the corner of her eye. She found it hard to look at the others and stay composed. So she looked up, just above their heads, and focused on the trusses that held up the cathedral-style ceiling that gave the

cabin its sense of grandeur. “I don’t know what happened with the two little girls, but I imagine that someday they will watch that video together, cry, hug, and perhaps realize that sometimes in life God does, indeed, bring *Streams of Terrible Beauty!*”

Ellie finished talking. She sat calmly on the couch and expected the discussion to continue. But dead silence ensued. No one said a word. *Was it something I said*, thought Ellie. She waited as she carefully gazed around the room. Jobe leaned forward, arms on knees, looking at the floor in a thoughtful gaze, oblivious to anyone around him. Elliott looked at Billie and Billie looked back. Elliott tilted his head slightly and raised his eyebrows, saying with his eyes, *Won!* Billie affirmed with a thin smile. Zach looked over at Elliott and Billie. Elliot's gaze turned to Zach who gave a slow nod.

Again, taking a lead role in the group, Elliott finally broke the silence and said, “Zach, thanks so much for hosting all of us here today. It was very kind of you. A most interesting discussion.” He stood up and extended his hand to help Billie up. “We need to take off. Thanks, everyone, for coming.”

“Yes. Thank you all so much.” Billie added, graciously, as they left the room. Ellie, who was not quite sure what just happened, got up and said, “Thanks for inviting me, Jobe.”

Jobe lifted his head, breaking his thoughtful gaze, and said, “Oh, yeah. So glad you came.”

“See you around,” said Ellie, as she began to leave.

“Yes. Of course. Count on it,” said Jobe, still half-dazed.

With just Zach and Jobe left in the room, Zach asked, “What do you think, Jobe?”

“I think I need to go think – that's what I think!”

“I think you’re right,” replied Zach. “I think I will do some thinking, too.”

Jobe got up, started to leave, then turned as if he had forgotten something. “Hey man, thanks for the use of your cabin. It's a beautiful location and just the right place for today. Take care.”

“You, too,” said Zach as Jobe left.

Chapter 10

Over the next few days, Jobe found himself thinking – a lot of thinking. He got his work done and continued with his life, even though he still missed his sister, terribly. But two things occupied his mind. First, Ellie. What a girl! His admiration, perhaps even love, had gone through the roof. *How was she able to stand up to my three friends, he thought, and do it in a way that appeared she wasn't even trying? So natural, so calm, so together. Why couldn't I do such a thing? Maybe it was her awesome message about life: Streams of Terrible Beauty.* And this *Streams* idea was the other thing that occupied Jobe's mind, something that would take a long time for him to think through. His desire to hang around Ellie – for his heart's sake as well as his head – seemed almost more than he could bear. But he doubted that a girl like her could ever like a guy like himself with all his flaws and weaknesses. Still, he dreamed of more days together with Ellie.

Come midweek, Jobe had a day to kill. He wanted to call Ellie, but he couldn't bear the thought of rejection. So, he just lived in the dream, and for now, that seemed enough. As he got into his Tiger sports car, with the top down on a beautiful summer day, he thought about where to go. Five roads led out of Oak Pines. Two were highways that passed through town, the other was a highway that originated there. He knew where he probably shouldn't go because it would most likely result in depression. But he just couldn't help himself, so he headed to

Land's End in the City, where he and Ellie spent the day just a week before. The bridge and the allusion of *Streams of Terrible Beauty* were calling him. Perhaps, there, he would find rest for his troubled soul.

Another week passed. Jobe sipped his morning coffee at Carla's. He had not heard a word from his three friends since the day at Zach's cabin. He wondered how they were doing and what impact Ellie's dramatic story had on them. *Perhaps a good one*, Jobe thought to himself. *At least they're leaving me alone now, and that is a big relief.*

With another sip, staring out the big picture window he thought about his sleepy foothill town and how lucky he was to live there. Oak Pines is located at an elevation where pine trees begin to flourish and Oak trees become sparse. The locals, mistakenly, call it *the Timberline*. There's no actual line, just a gradual change in trees. A roadside Vista Lookout just outside of town provides a long panoramic view. In one direction, looking east, pine trees thicken as your eye travels uphill. Downhill, to the west, the opposite is true – more oaks and fewer pines. Year-round, the view uphill is an evergreen forest of majestic pines pointing skyward. Downhill, the summer yields leafy oaks creating a sea of rustling green and brown. But in winter, the downhill trees display only a thicket of leafless stumps and branches.

Breaking his daydream, Ellie entered Carla's, in a hurry and greeted Jobe. "Hey, mister! How ya been? It's been a while. Huh?"

"Yeah." Jobe looked up. "I've done a lot of thinking."

"Hold that thought," said Ellie. "Let me get my coffee." Jobe watched her every move: walking up to the counter, pumping the carafe handle, and paying Gina. Her change clickity-clanked as

she dropped it into the big glass tip jar. She turned around and walked back toward Jobe.

“I so appreciated your amazing words to my friends – and me,” said Jobe.

“It was an unexpected journey for me,” said Ellie, sitting down across from Jobe. “I had no idea anyone would ask me to say anything. I just came to support you.”

“I know. And I appreciate that too. I’m so sorry Elliot pushed you into talking. I think I was his target, through you, to embarrass me. You were just a handy vehicle.”

“It wasn’t a problem. I’m glad he made clear what he wanted,” said Ellie after a quick sip of coffee.

“He was pushy!” said Jobe. “He’s like that sometimes.”

“No matter,” said Ellie. “What I shared surprised even me. All from my heart. None of it planned.”

“That was clear to everyone,” said Jobe.

“After I shared Charlie’s *Streams of Terrible Beauty* and Elliot asked for an explanation, I panicked a little but also sensed a genuine interest on his part. That’s when the Dignity Walk popped into my head. I don’t think I’ve ever thought of that as an example of *terrible beauty*.”

“But it is, for sure,” added Jobe. “It’s a perfect example that did more than just make me think. It helped me understand life a lot better.”

“That’s big,” said Ellie.

“It is, for sure.”

“Well, I gotta go, Jobe. Lots of things to do – as usual.”

Jobe began to fidget in his seat as she walked away. *Man, I really want to see her again.* Though tormented by the chance of being rejected, Jobe blurted out, “Call you sometime?”

Ellie kept on walking as Jobe’s heart sank. But when she got halfway to the door, she stopped, looked back over her shoulder causing her blonde hair to dance slightly, and said, “Yeah ... I’d like that,” and then walked out.

PART 2

DELIGHTFUL DEVASTATION

The Bail Out



Friday, August 21, 1987

Chapter 11

Opening the full glass door, Jobe greeted an unarmed security guard who hung a fair amount of belly over his belt. “Mornin’ Jobe. Happy Friday! You’re later than usual,” he said sipping his coffee, barely aware of his surroundings.

“Yep. No action so far today, Fred?” Jobe asked for about the hundredth time since he started work a year ago at Bennett-Hurley Financial Consultants.

“Never, in this sleepy town,” Fred responded after gulping another sip of coffee. He leaned into Jobe, and in a low voice said, “I’m not sure why they pay me to do this nothing job. I think I’m just for show – to make clients feel good. We don’t keep any money here; We ain’t no bank!”

“That’s true,” whispered Jobe. “But we discuss their money with them. It’s all about making them feel safe about their investments. Trust me, you earn every penny, you old relic!”

“That, I am,” said, Fred. “Happy to play the role and happy to have a job that I can do at my age. Hey Jobe, I gotta ask you something. None of my business, of course, but being an old guy with memories of being young, the scuttlebutt is that you’ve hooked up with Ellie over at the law firm.”

“Wow, word gets around fast in a small town!” said Jobe. “Yeah, we’ve connected. But too soon to know anything.” Jobe elbowed Fred. “You remember how it goes.”

“I sure do. Hope it goes well, Jobe. She’s a doll!”

Jobe headed for the stairs and ascended to his upper-floor office. He entered and nearly tripped over his chair. Dropped his briefcase on his desk. “Hey!” Jobe heard a voice, and there in the office doorway stood his associate Peter Kellogg. “We have a meeting with the Baldwin couple today. August twenty-first? Eleven a.m.? Remember? They’re on the verge of transferring their 401(k) our way. See ya in the conference room in three minutes. Grab some coffee, Bro. You look like you need it!”

As Jobe entered the conference room, Peter and the Baldwins were just getting seated. “Good morning,” Jobe said, forcing the words out of his mouth.

As he closed the door and sat down, Peter said, “Well folks, let's get right down to business.” The Baldwins focused on Peter. “This is our third meeting together and the Safeguard Retirement product that you selected is one of our very best.” They nodded as they looked at each other. Peter stiffened up, catching Jobe out of the corner of his eye. Jobe was staring forward with a distant, blank look. Fortunately, the Baldwins didn’t notice.

“What do *you* think, Jobe?” Peter asked, snapping Jobe back into reality and refocusing him on the Baldwins.

“Oh ... yeah,” said Jobe, jerking his head quickly toward the other three. “Not just *one* of our best – *the* best plan.” Peter relaxed into his chair, relieved that Jobe was listening.

“So!” Peter said, clapping his hands together and rubbing them slightly. “If you’ll just sign this release to transfer your 401(k) funds,” he paused and gently slid the forms across the table, “we’ll be done and you'll be on your way.”

The Baldwins each signed and dated the forms, sat back, looked at each other, smiled, and Mrs. Baldwin said, “We cannot thank you two young fellows enough for all you have done. And, goodness, the amount of time you spent – not just behind-the-scenes but with us, carefully explaining everything.”

Peter spoke quickly, not trusting Jobe's current state of mind. “It's been our pleasure, folks.”

“Yes, it was a privilege to be part of your planning,” Jobe added, his voice trailing off at the end.

As they all stood up, Peter and Jobe shook hands with each of the Baldwins. Peter escorted them to the door. “Take care, folks!” Peter said, as he closed the door and turned around. “What the hell is wrong with you? Up till today, we both handled this case very well. But today you could have blown it for both of us – and for the Baldwins! You know as well as I do that closing any deal is the trickiest part. It only takes a hint of doubt for things to fall apart. I'm just glad the Baldwins were seated next to you and couldn't see what I did. What's going on Jobe?”

“Last week was a tough week. Not a bad one, just full of distraction.”

“So? What kind?” asked Peter.

“I don't want to get into detail, but it's a new girl in my life.”

“Oh! That explains it. I don't mind and I don't care, but you gotta keep your personal life, good or bad, out of your work life. Affects me too, ya know!”

“Yes, I know. And I'm sorry.” Jobe raised his eyebrows. “But we pulled it off and I performed well enough. Right?”

Peter let out a big sigh. “Yes, we closed the deal and that's what counts! Hey, let's go grab some lunch. Okay?”

“Sure,” said Jobe. “I need a break even though I just got here.”

Peter and Jobe entered Subsational, a sandwich shop located three doors down from Carla's. The shop is located upstairs over a few tourist-attraction businesses. One shop sells elaborate bird paraphernalia; the other sells leather apparel with all kinds of jackets, vests, and hats made of fine quality leather, overpriced for most residents of Oak Pines. But on the weekends, Oak Pines provides a getaway for city folks. Everyone in town loves the revenue they bring to the local economy.

Peter stepped up to the counter under a hastily, hand-written sign, that read *Order Here*. “Hot pastrami for me, with no pickles and extra peppers.” Jobe ordered his favorite: turkey with Swiss cheese and extra mayo. They grabbed a seat along a wall of full-length windows. The view of majestic pine trees with scattered oaks made it a popular lunch spot.

The server brought their food and as Jobe took a bite Peter said, “Tell me more about your new love affair!”

“It’s hardly that,” Jobe mumbled, through a bite of his sandwich. “I’ve only gotten to know her these past three weeks, but it all happened in three very unusual circumstances.”

“Go on,” said Peter, diving into his pastrami and peppers.

“Met her at Carla’s, on Monday, the 3rd. I’ll never forget that day.”

“What’s her name?” asked Peter.

“Ellie.”

“Peter lowered his sandwich.” “The blonde at the law firm?”

“That’s the one.”

“Man, I’ve been schemin’ on her for a year. Let me know if it doesn’t work out. Maybe you can hook me up.”

“Peter, you’re too much! Anyway, some of my good friends – well I thought they were good – were on my case about not living and behaving as they thought I should.”

“You mean ... as *they* do.”

“Exactly!” said Jobe, after swallowing. “But while defending myself and trying to be kind ...”

“Which is certainly your way of doing things,” interrupted Peter.

“... I saw this beautiful blonde girl sitting by the window, sipping her coffee. Couldn’t take my eyes off her. Can’t believe, in this small town, I’d never seen her before – or not that I remember anyway. Perhaps it was just my mood, or maybe I wanted to escape my not-so-good friends. But she seemed so together, so poised, so confident.”

“You saw all that in her from a distance, without talking to her?”

“Yep! I don't know how, but I did.”

“And did she turn out that way?”

“Oh boy, did she ever – in spades. At one point she very subtly moved closer to our table, while getting herself a refill. So, at an opportune moment, I boldly asked her to join us.” Jobe took another bite.

“Your friends were okay with that?”

“Not really. But what could they do once she sat down? Quite a lady. She said nothing and just listened. I thanked her later for rescuing me.”

“So, you talked more with her?” asked Peter.

“Oh, did we! Like no one ever before. We seemed to just hit it off, almost like we'd known each other for a long time, yet still had a lot to learn about each other. Very weird.”

“There's more?”

“Yep. She invited me to go with her on a day trip to The City where she needed to pick up some urgent papers for her law firm. We had some great chats about music during our drive through what she called, roly-poly hills.”

“I've driven to SF many times. Never seen any hills like that.”

“Oh, but you have,” said Jobe. “That's just her girl way of describing them. They're in the hill country between Vacaville and Vallejo. It's nature at its best.”

“Oh yeah, I remember some open space in that area. But no roly-poly hills come to mind.”

“That's because ladies instinctively see things differently than we do. They can't help it. But I like it. I didn't notice them either till I saw them through her eyes.”

“You're just love-struck, bro.” Peter sat back in his chair. “What'd you do in the city?”

“Ate lunch at the café where Dashiell Hammett spent many hours writing his books.”

“Didn't he write the Maltese Falcon?”

“Bingo! And they have a statue of a black falcon in a glass case. Quite a place. We had a couple of burgers and drank Hammett's favorite drink.”

“Which was?”

“Vesper – Gin and Vodka”

“Wasn't that James Bond's martini?”

“You know your drinks.”

“Had a good time with her?” asked Peter.

“Really good!” Jobe said, with a big schoolboy grin.

“And then you came back.”

“Oh, no. There's more.”

“I figured so.”

“We stopped and picked up those work papers. While waiting in the car, I got bored. So, I rummaged through her glovebox.”

“You what?” Peter leaned forward in his chair.

“I know. I shouldn't have. Wasn't looking for anything. Just looking.”

Peter finished the last bite of his sandwich and leaned back in his seat. Jobe had hardly touched his food. “Something tells me you found what you *weren't* looking for.”

“Bingo again. A love letter to her from some guy.”

“And it said?”

“Only got to peek in the envelope and see the opening line. ‘My dearest Ellie. I've got to see you again.’”

“That's all?”

“It's all I had time for! Saw her coming out of the building at her usual woman-on-a-mission pace. I barely got the envelope back in the glovebox before she stepped into the car.”

“She couldn't tell?”

“This is what scares me about women. I don't think so, but the way she asked, ‘Did you get bored?’ made me think she had some womanly intuition going on. I've seen it before. Very scary stuff because you can't know for sure.”

“And did she ever find out?”

“Yes, I told her later, at the cabin.”

“What cabin? There's more?”

“Lots more!”

“This is all interesting but make it brief. We gotta get back to work.”

“OK. So, we hiked down to Lands End, a cool little peninsula down a trail from the Cliff House.”

“That would be the Pacific Coast Trail.”

“Yeah, but it's like a zillion steps off that trail. It's a place where the Golden Gate can be seen in all its glory – close enough, yet far enough away.”

“And there you kissed her?”

“Ha! No. Way too soon for a guy like me.”

“I'd have been all over her, by then!” said Peter.

“I'm sure you would. We're very different in that way.”

“Well, to each his own!” said Peter. “But I never miss an opportunity,”

“Yes, but lots of girls reject you!”

“Can't win ‘em all, bro, but I score often enough.”

“I'd rather wait,” said Jobe.

“Wait for what? That religious thing kicking in again?”

“I guess so. It's just who I am and how I was raised. I'm not sad about it.”

“But you gotta be somewhat frustrated – always waiting?”

“True. Guess that's the price I pay for whatever it is I'm waiting for.”

Peter shrugged his shoulders. “Everybody's got to do what they gotta do... or not do!”

“Yep. But anyway, we drove back. Had a great time together. Then, I asked her to come to a cabin with me in a few days.”

“Alright, old sport, now you're cooking, taking her to a cabin. Did you score?”

“No, it wasn't like that. My friends – the not-so-good ones – challenged me to come to a cabin one of them owned, where they could straighten me out in a more private setting.”

“Sounds serious,” said Peter.

“It was, to them. It used to be to me, too. But that's another story.”

“I'll trust you on that one. So, why did you ask her to come to the cabin?”

“Security blanket, I suppose. I felt like if someone else was there – at least somebody neutral – I'd be okay.”

“And were you?”

“Well, yes and no. I got through it because she unknowingly rescued me from my not-so-good friends.”

“How so?”

“After a while, they got frustrated talking to me and turned to Ellie – who had been quiet the whole time – and asked if she had anything to say. I think they did this to embarrass me and get back at me for inviting her.”

“I don't blame them,” said Peter. “That's the second surprise you sprung on them – using the same girl! Ha!”

“Yeah, I guess so. But it turned out well. They pressed her to speak, and she finally said, ‘happy to give you my opinion.’ No time for detail right now, but the confident, poised, beautiful blonde girl handled herself marvelously. I don't think she had any idea how well. She was just being herself and trying to get out of the spotlight.”

“What did she say?”

“Actually... she stunned them, and they all got very quiet. They went from *attacking wolves* to *toothless poodles* in twenty minutes. She shared an idea she calls *Streams of Terrible Beauty* –

something she learned from some old-guy-mentor named Charlie.”

“Lost me, bro. Makes no sense,” said Peter.

“You’d need to be there. She told a riveting story of something sad that became something good.”

“Now it *really* makes no sense.”

“I know. But she told it as if she believed it – like something really important.”

“Sounds like quite a girl,” said Peter. “A little more than you can handle?”

“I’m sure she is. And that’s what’s so much on my mind. Saw her the other day for the first time in over a week – beautiful, and confident as ever.”

“Uh... you are love-struck, for sure, my friend!”

“Maybe so. But I got up the nerve, at Carla’s, to ask her if I could call.”

“And?”

“And ... she just kept walking while my heart sank into my stomach. But then she turned – and I’ll never forget her words. ‘Yeah, I’d like that.’ Then she walked out.”

“Wow. Classy girl! Call her!”

“I want to, but what if she regrets that she told me to call? What if she rejects me? Not sure if I can take that.”

“Do you like living without knowing?” asked Peter.

“No.”

“Here’s my guess, based on all you’ve told me. She wants you to call. She knows what she’s doing. Call her, bro. And don’t wait!”

Jobe hesitated. “Okay. I will. Thanks.”

Chapter 12

The next day, Jobe picked up the phone. He never realized how heavy it was. He jiggled it in his hand a moment, then dialed. Jobe cringed as it rang, held his breath, and hoped no one would answer. *I'll give it four rings.*

"Hello?"

"It's Jobe." He sat down and sunk far into the sofa.

"Oh, hi. How are you?" asked Ellie.

"Doin' great." Jobe realized he had not planned what to say.

"Hey..." he paused. Then he blurted out, "Let's go to the River."

"Sure!" Ellie answered without hesitation.

"Did you say, sure?"

"I sure did."

"Take some food? Get some sun?" asked Jobe.

"OK. I'll get my suit on and fix some sandwiches. Turkey OK?"

"My favorite. I'll bring some drinks."

"Hard task," said Ellie. "Got any chips?"

"Yep. Pick you up in twenty?"

"Sounds good. See ya."

Jobe nearly slid off the couch onto the floor.

Jobe pulled up at Ellie's apartment in his Sunbeam Tiger with the top down. Ellie waited out front wearing a sun visor, hair poking out, the back, and a short smock over her bikini. Jobe's

heart skipped a beat. He took a deep breath to get more air. This was the first time He'd seen her in so few clothes. *Yes*, he thought. *I knew going to the river would be a great idea.* "Get in," he said, reaching over to open the passenger door.

Ellie got in, gave him a big warm smile, and said, "Let's go!"

"Gonna be fun," said Jobe, as they drove off.

"Where we goin'?" asked Ellie.

"You'll see."

After some chit-chat, Jobe pulled onto the freeway, hit the gas to get ahead of traffic behind him, and fully engaged his 260 V-8 engine as Ellie's head thrust back against the headrest. She loved the sense of acceleration in Jobe's overpowered sports car, like nothing she'd experienced before.

Ellie looked over at Jobe and smiled. "Hey. I want to ask you something ..."

"Somebody's gonna die!" yelled Jobe, as he hit the brakes. Smoke streamed from the tires of the swerving cars in front of him. When they came to a stop, Jobe's car was angled slightly in the roadway. He took a deep breath, looked at a frightened Ellie, and said, "That's why I leave lots of room in front of me. The pileup will always end beyond the front of my car."

"What happened?" asked Ellie, sitting in the passenger seat with a slightly obstructed view.

"Looks like someone tried to get *on* the off-ramp," said Jobe. All traffic stopped. Jobe got out and Ellie followed. A crowd gathered around a car on the shoulder. It was the only car facing the wrong direction. People were yelling at an older woman still in the car, dazed and confused. "Are you crazy?" yelled someone in the crowd. "You could have killed me," yelled another. "Damn, you! What the hell are you doing?"

Jobe went up to the car window and said, "Are you okay?"

The woman opened the window slightly, still dazed, and said, "I think so."

“Would you like me to turn your car around?” asked Jobe, as Ellie looked on.

“Oh, would you? Thank you, young man.”

Jobe told Ellie he would turn the car around and get it back to the frontage road. “Can you follow and pick me up?”

“Sure,” she said, impressed with Jobe’s instinct to care for, and help, the confused old lady.

As the traffic began to clear, Jobe helped the lady walk around to the passenger door. She got in. Jobe walked back around and got behind the wheel. He jockeyed the car doing a three-point turn, then headed down the offramp. As he pulled away, sneers and angry gestures assaulted them. The insults seemed directed toward both of them, together, in the offending vehicle.

“What’s your name?” asked Jobe.

“Maud.”

“That’s my grandma’s name,” he said, as he thought how perfectly it fit the woman. The lady had short, gray thinning hair. She appeared frail and fragile, near 90, at least 80. Behind her dazed eyes, he saw a kind and settled face. They were beautiful eyes surrounded by wrinkles, which gave her a classy look. Jobe could tell she must have been quite a *looker* in her day. As he neared the end of the ramp, he noticed how much it looked like an *on-ramp* the way it curved and tied into the frontage road.

“Why did you turn onto this ramp, Maud?” asked Jobe.

“I was taking the freeway to my doctor’s appointment like I always do.”

“Not this way,” said Jobe, kindly. “You’ve never come this way before. This is an off-ramp, not an on-ramp.”

“Oh, my goodness!” exclaimed Maud. “I am so embarrassed.” She turned and looked at Jobe with horror in her eyes. “No one was hurt, were they?”

“No,” said Jobe. “Just scared and angry.”

“Well, I guess they had a right to be. That was crazy of me. Is that why they were yelling?”

“Yes,” answered Jobe. “But that’s a very confusing corner. Anyone could have made the same mistake.”

“Perhaps this codeine cough medicine had something to do with it,” offered Maud. “It said not to drive while taking it. I guess they were right.” She looked over at Jobe. “But I felt fine!”

“Yep. They were right,” replied Jobe holding back any criticism. “Just keep that in mind in the future.”

“Oh, I will. Trust me. And you, young man, are an *angel unaware*.”

“Uh ... OK. Thanks,” said Jobe, unsure of what he just agreed to. He got out and escorted Maud back into the driver’s side of the car. “Can you get yourself back home, okay?” asked Jobe.

“Oh yes. Thank you.”

“And no more getting *on* the off-ramps!” Jobe said, jokingly.

“Oh, I’ll be careful. You are a fine young man and today you are my angel.”

Jobe gently closed the car door and allowed Maud to pull away, making sure she drove steadily. He got back into his car, looked over at Ellie, and said, “What is an *angel unaware*? She called me that. I don’t think I’m an angel. But if I am, I’m sure not aware of it.”

“Silly man,” Ellie said chuckling. “That’s a passage in the New Testament that says angels can appear as humans and interact in people’s lives without them knowing it.”

“You believe that?” asked Jobe. “And even if true, she would be the one unaware, not me.”

“Yes, the way she said it sounded like you were the one unaware. I have found that many people quote Bible verses without understanding what they mean. But if it serves their purpose, they do it anyway.”

“You mean people don’t always know what they’re talking about?”

“Yep. And that includes you and me, sometimes.”

“Not me!” protested Jobe. “Speak for yourself.” Ellie just let it go – knowing better than to argue.

Jobe drove a mile or so then took an off-ramp, which quickly became an uphill road that paralleled the freeway. The road turned and then emerged into a cluster of low-hanging oak trees. The soothing mix of green leaves shimmered in the sunlight shining from behind them.

“It’s so beautiful, Jobe! Where we goin’?”

“Nice try. You can’t trick me into telling, that easily. You’ll see!”

“Shucks!” said Ellie.

“But, yes, it’s beautiful out there,” said Jobe. “One of my favorite drives.” The drive over the summit was always Jobe’s favorite until that fateful, worst day of his life over a year ago when he lost his sister. “Drives always make me think of my sister.”

“They probably always will,” said Ellie, so softly he could barely hear her through the rumbling breeze of the open air.

“Yeah, but mostly good memories.”

“Hey Jobe,” Ellie said, with her hair rustling over her eyes.

“Yes?”

“It’s time I told you about that letter.” Ellie watched Jobe, waiting for a response.

“Oh, man,” Jobe said, keeping his eyes fixed on the road, shaking his head, and taking in a deep breath. “I’m so sorry I did that. It’s not like me. I was so infatuated with you that I couldn’t...”

Ellie interrupted. “Not a problem, now. Don’t go there.” She looked over at Jobe. “Really!”

Jobe finally looked at Ellie. “Okay. Thanks.” His eyes returned to the road.

“You guessed right. It was Phil Rowman. ‘Mr. Romance,’ I think you called him.” Jobe glanced over at Ellie, as he downshifted in prep for a tight corner. They both laughed. Jobe hit the gas coming out of the turn pressing Ellie's head against the headrest and shifting back into third gear.

“He wasn't as bad a guy as I made him out to be,” Ellie confessed. “Oh, he was full of himself, all right. But he was also a charming Air Force jet pilot with money. Single. He knew all the wooing lines and how to deliver them. A lot for a girl to get lost in.”

“And did you?”

“Yeah, I guess so. And I suppose the pain and stress of getting out of it – well, that’s proof.”

Jobe kept his eyes on the road and hands on the wheel. Then, he turned his head and carefully said, “Must be that *yucky* part of the relationship, again?”

“Yep. You got it,” said Ellie. “Wanted it to go further, yet afraid of where it might go.” Jobe was afraid to respond. “He kept asking and begging to see me. Now, I'll never know.” Ellie kept her eyes on the road. Jobe waited.

“Do you know why you were afraid?” Jobe asked, carefully.

“Not really. But it's okay, now,” Ellie said snapping her gaze away from the mesmerizing road. She turned her head, slightly, and pressed it against the headrest. “But *we* are here, now, and this will be a fun day!”

“It will, indeed,” Jobe replied with a smile.

Jobe drove over a hill where the blue sky spread its immense deep color, offering only a few fluffy clouds in contrast. “Smell that air,” said Ellie. “Must be ten degrees cooler up here.”

“It will cool even more as we head downhill toward the river,” Jobe added.

Ellie looked over at Jobe, starry-eyed. “Ah ha! Downieville! That’s where we’re going.”

“Yep. It’s hard to keep a secret when you take one of only two roads in and out of a small burg on Highway 49.”

“I love Downieville,” confessed Ellie. “Haven’t been there since I was a kid. Wasn’t even sure what highway it was on. Charlie brought me up here a few times.”

“Oh, Charlie again. The old guy with a legacy for ya.”

“Yep. He’s got an RV. I just remember this trip as a long twisty road.”

“Well, now you’re on a quick-like-a-bunny trip, today with me.”

“Quick-like-a-bunny? Where’d you get that line?”

“Oops. From my mom.” Ellie laughed as Jobe floored it and pressed her back into the seat. Her hair scuffled above her shoulders in the wind.

Jobe pulled into a parking lot overlooking the river. Ellie pushed up from the seat with her hands, her head poking over the windshield. “I can see the fork in the river,” she said moving her head over toward Jobe and back. She strained her neck to improve her view. “I remember this place!” She jumped out of the car as Jobe opened his door and began walking to the edge of the bluff. He leaned back on the car hood.

“Yep. It’s quite a view,” Jobe said, arms folded.

“Come on,” said Ellie. “Let’s go down to the river.”

“Oh boy. More steps” said Jobe.

“Heck. This is nothing. Unlike Land’s End, we can see the bottom of these steps.” She laughed and grabbed Jobe’s hand. The mere touch of her hand, small and gentle, made Jobe slightly lightheaded. But it felt good.

“Shouldn’t we grab the lunch basket and towels?” asked Jobe, pulling back gently on Ellie.

“Oh, yeah. Forgot.”

“I’ll get them,” said Jobe, releasing her hand. Ellie, in her woman-on-a-mission mode, raced down the stairs. “You counting them?” called Jobe.

“Sure am!” she said without turning her head.

Jobe reached the bottom of the stairs. He placed the lunch basket and towels near a log that extended down into the water.

Ellie had her shoes and smock off, wading into the river. “Come on in, Jobe,” she yelled.

“Is it cold?”

“Come see.”

“Okay,” Jobe said, pulling his shirt off over his head. He used his toes to pull off his shoes. Jobe was fit but not buff, stomach flat, and his legs strong. His half-Mexican blood gave him a nice built-in tan that he enhanced in the sun each summer. Ellie liked what she saw from a distance. Jobe waded down into the water. Ellie was already in up to her waist. Jobe slogged through the rapidly flowing crystal-clear water, approaching Ellie. He leaned a little to the left to counter the pull of the river.

Ellie dipped her hands into the water, throwing it into the air. Some hit Jobe. He sliced the water with his right hand at a 45° angle, launching a narrow wall of water at Ellie. It drenched her hair. *My gosh. She's adorable!* thought Jobe as he moved closer to Ellie. She grabbed his hands, palm to palm, and raised them high over their heads. Ellie was every bit as tall as Jobe perhaps a little more so. Jobe slowly brought their hands down and placed his on her hips. She let go and put her hands around Jobe’s neck. She looked at Jobe and didn't say a word. Jobe looked around at slopes of pine trees ascending from the beach on both sides of the river.

Downieville is a small town on a river that flows through a steep canyon. There is always a feeling of being cradled, especially

in the winter when snow packs the mountains and trees poke through everywhere.

“I’m glad we’re together,” Jobe said, breaking the silence. “Especially after your spectacular imparting of wisdom at the cabin.”

“Are you kidding?” said Ellie. “I was just trying to get out of a pinch.”

“Yeah, the Elliott pinch!” said Jobe. “He knows how to squeeze people. He even makes Billie uneasy sometimes, and she is a tough old gal.”

“Oh, come on. Go easy. They’re your friends.”

“Yeah. Ha! Some friends.”

“Heard from them, lately?” asked Ellie.

“The silence is deafening,” said Jobe. “But it’s also a relief. I think you blew them away!”

“Perhaps. But if so, it wasn’t me – just what I believe.”

“Maybe so,” said Jobe. “But trust me, it was also about you.” Ellie just smiled.

Jobe kissed Ellie on the forehead. *That’s all I get?* She mused.

“Hey, let’s go eat something.” Jobe dropped his hands from Ellie, escaped her hold on him, turned around, and headed to the beach.

And, just when it was getting good, Ellie thought to herself as she followed Jobe onto the shore.

After they dried off, gazing at each other without saying a word, Jobe spread out the two towels on the sand. Ellie sat down cross-legged and opened the basket. “You can have any kind of sandwich you want... as long as it’s turkey.”

“Hey, that’s what Henry Ford said!” Jobe answered quickly.

“You sure?” Ellie turned her head and looked at Jobe out of the corner of her eyes. “He liked turkey?”

“Oh, not about sandwiches. About cars! He wanted everyone in America to be able to buy a Model-T. He said that people can have any color they want ... as long as it’s black.”

“Guess I'm in good company,” said Ellie, taking a bite.

Jobe lay sideways on his towel, head on his hand, elbow on the ground. “Great minds think alike!” Ellie remained cross-legged on her towel. The rushing sound of water exaggerated the two forks of the river flowing into one.

Jobe pointed out an old water cannon mounted up on the closest edge of the parking lot. “That cannon was used in the 1800s to hydraulically mine gold out of the hillside.”

“Sounds messy,” said Ellie.

“Oh, it was. It destroyed the landscape and encouraged more natural erosion.”

“Why'd they do it?”

“The goal was to separate gold nuggets and flakes embedded in the dirt.” Jobe sat up on his towel. “The hydraulics were amazing. The water cannons were fed by long pipes going uphill to a water source. They gradually narrowed, building up huge pressure on the exiting water. Tremendous water pressure eroded the mountainside, releasing the gold.”

“Seems selfish and lazy,” said Ellie.

“Oh, it was! Gold fever in the 1800s made people short-sighted with no respect for man or nature.”

“I think such water pressure would be the envy of any modern-day fireman,” said Ellie.

“There ya go!” said Jobe, still looking at the old water cannon. “But ya know what? The way they used that thing to extract gold from the ground is kinda like *Streams of Terrible Beauty* when gold was brought out of the northern mountains. That's what you told us at the cabin. Right?”

He looked at Ellie for approval. “You're an astute observer of life,” is all she said.

“Hey, tell me about Charlie,” said Jobe. “He's a mysterious guy.”

“Not really. Just my mentor.”

“What's that mean?” Jobe said, looking at Ellie.

“You know – mentor.” Ellie looked over at the river. “Someone who mentors you.”

“Hmmm,” murmured Jobe. He waited for more.

Ellie, finally said, “How about you, mister? You got a mentor?”

“No, not really. Wish I did. I got a lot of questions and they're increasing in number. At 41, the answers are not keeping up. Hey, maybe Charlie will mentor me, someday, and leave me a legacy!”

Ellie detected sarcasm in his voice. She looked out at the river again. “Yeah. Maybe.” She laid down on her back next to Jobe. “The sound of the river is so soothing,” she said, looking up at the blue sky. “Kinda washes away my cares.”

“Well, it ain't washing mine away all that much.” Jobe was also laying on his back and looking up. He turned his head toward Ellie. “But being here with you is twice as good as having answers. I don't even need a river!” Ellie wished Jobe would touch her again, but he just looked at her and smiled. His slightly hairy chest and fit masculine body made him her prize on the beach.

As the sun made its way west, they enjoyed each other's company, alone by the river. Then Jobe got up, extended his hand to Ellie, and said, “Let's do some more swimming.” Ellie grabbed his hand as he pulled her up. They trotted down into the water. Ellie allowed herself to be contented just being with Jobe.

Climbing back up the stairs, the afternoon sun warmed them up. “That's quite a climb when going up,” said Jobe.

“But it's nothing like Land's End, huh?”

“You're right. I feel better. But now I need to go jump into the river, again, to cool off.”

“Naw,” said Ellie. “You'd just have to climb back up and get hot, again. But what you could do is float downstream and I'll

pick you up at the bridge where the highway crosses the Yuba River. Give me your keys!"

"Ah-ha! You just wanna drive my hot car."

Ellie's eyes got big. "Sure do!" Jobe tossed her the keys. "Really?" Ellie said, like a kid with a new toy. Jobe cringed, but he knew she'd be impressed. Jobe got in as Ellie hopped into the driver's seat and pulled out of the parking lot onto the two-lane road. The car jerked as she let out the clutch a little too fast. "Oops!"

Jobe cringed, again. "Uh, ya gotta slowly engage those two-hundred and twenty-five horses, especially with the light weight of this little Tiger." Ellie shifted into second gear with a *grind*. Jobe reminded himself of the goodwill garnered from his little experiment.

"Sorry," said Ellie. "Haven't driven a stick in a while." Jobe just smiled, watching her eyes light up and her blonde hair dancing in the breeze. She stepped on the gas, pressing Jobe against the seat. "How do ya like that, mister?"

"I like it!" But what Jobe liked was watching her enjoy her time, with him, in his car.

"I think I'll take the long way back and avoid the freeway."

"OK with me," said Jobe. "It's longer and twistier, but at least we'll encounter a different kind of danger than when we came!" Jobe took a deep breath, holding it in, and grabbed the door handle with a false sense of security. Ellie navigated the curves like a pro. Jobe was impressed. "I'm sure glad you're better with the steering wheel than you are with the clutch."

"I got it where it counts!" Ellie said, navigating more turns until they came into a clearing where the road straightened and leveled out.

"We've reached the top," said Jobe.

"And all in one piece," Ellie replied. "I love that drive up through those majestic oaks."

“Yep. We’re entering the pines now. More beauty!”

Chapter 13

Jobe and Ellie were inseparable all the following week. They were together every evening after work and usually met for lunch. In a small town, at ages 37 and 41, that was a winning strategy for both.

On Saturday Jobe got up, grabbed a quick cup of coffee at Carla's, and went by work to get caught up on a few things. He loved the quiet of Saturday mornings at work with no one there.. So easy to focus and get things done. He figured that one Saturday morning at work would accomplish a whole day's work during the week. The quiet was so relaxing. Settling into his high-back swivel chair, hands behind his head, feet stretched out and ankles crossed, he enjoyed the moment. He looked up and discovered funny patterns on the painted stucco ceiling, remembering how he found animals and various toys while looking at ceilings as a kid. *How different this is*, he thought, *from the kind of quiet I experienced after the cabin two weeks ago. That was a disturbing kind of quiet, this is one is assuring.* Jobe felt glad that all the nonsense was over and believed he had advanced many levels in life through his bizarre experience. Jobe grabbed the phone, leaned back in his chair, and called Ellie.

"Hello?" Ellie said, answering her phone at work.

"It's me."

"Hello, you!"

“Hey, I’m going to the bar at Fryer Tuck’s tonight. I invited a few friends. Why don’t you come! Bring some friends.”

“Who’s playing there tonight?” asked Ellie.

“A guy named Bill Ruff.”

“I think I’ve heard of him. Isn’t he the one who does oldies?”

“Yeah. His claim-to-fame is *Oldies, for the Oldies, by an Oldie*. He’s only about fifty, but his idea of oldies is 60’s music.”

“No problem. I’m in!” said Ellie.

“OK. See ya there about 7 p.m.” Jobe sat up straight in his chair and wheeled his legs under the desk. *OK. Now, I gotta get this Monday morning report done!*

The owner of Fryer Tuck’s prided himself in the pun aspect of the restaurant name, though some people thought he had just misspelled it. It was located at the other end of Main Street from Carla’s in an old, historic-looking brick building on a corner. The restaurant entrance was deep-set from the sidewalk creating two glass wrap-around window seats that are always occupied. The restaurant, which was known for its cheese fondue made with wine, offered a bar entrance around the corner on the side street with a very old-looking sign above the door that read, *Ladies Entrance*, dating back to the gold mining era.

Entering the bar at 6:50, Jobe looked around. Bill Ruff, seated behind a microphone on a small, elevated stage tuned his guitar in preparation for the evening’s entertainment. Several people were seated at a counter surrounding the stage, sipping drinks and laughing. Bill leaned into his mic and said, “Check, Check. How’s that sound, Roy?”

Roy stood across the room at the end of the bar. He hovered over an audio mixer arrayed with sliders and knobs. “Sounds good to me, Bill.”

Jobe spotted Peter at a distant table waving his hands. As he approached, Peter asked, “Where’s your girl?”

“Oh, she’ll be here,” Jobe said, confidently as he sat down. “Gina, Marty, Sara! How ya all doing?” asked Jobe. *Good, fine, great* they responded.

Peter leaned into Jobe’s ear. “Got that report ready for Monday?”

“Finished it this morning. But, please, no shop talk tonight.” Standing up slightly out of his chair, Jobe reached out his hand to a person he’d never seen before. “I’m Jobe. Not sure I’ve met you.”

“I’m Phil,” the man said, shaking Jobe’s hand briefly. “I work with Ellie.”

Jobe slowly lowered himself into his seat, not wanting to ask him his last name. “Wouldn’t be Rowman, would it?”

“Nope. But that’s close. It’s Foreman, Phil Forman. Ellie invited me and said I gotta meet Jobe. Guess I’ve done that.”

“Indeed, you have. Glad to meet ya, Phil.” Jobe felt relieved.

Everyone at the table turned their attention toward the small stage as they heard a brief guitar intro. *Fly Me to the Moon* ... Bill Ruff began singing precisely at 7 p.m., as he started his first set of songs for the evening. Just past the stage, the bar door opened, and Ellie walked through, blonde hair, a cute summer dress, and waving to Bill Ruff as she passed the stage. Bill gave her a big nod without missing a beat.

Peter leaned over to Jobe and whispered, “She is such a babe. Have you scored, yet?” Jobe gave him a gentle elbow to settle him down.

“Is this seat for me?” asked Ellie.

“Sure is,” Jobe said, pulling the chair out from under the table.

Ellie sat down. Looking around, she asked, “What did I miss?”

“Just our presence!” Peter said, with a cocky smirk.

“Well, now you have mine,” Ellie said with a hint of *touché* in her voice. “Phil, did you meet Jobe?”

“I did. He made a close-but-no-cigar guess at my last name.” Jobe cringed.

“Oh?” asked Ellie, looking at Jobe and smiling. “What was it?” She kept her eyes fixed on Jobe.

“What was it, Jobe?” asked Phil. “Row-man? An amazingly close guess!”

“Not even close,” said Ellie, still looking at Jobe and smiling. Jobe just grinned back at her.

“I think you’re a little bit psychic, buddy!” said Phil.

Jobe kept looking at Ellie. “Yes, I think I’ve got some special insight.”

“Lucky you,” said Phil, noticing the connection between Ellie and Jobe.

“Can I take your order, folks?” said the waitress, breaking up the moment. “Ladies? What’ll it be?” Gina and Sara ordered a bottle of Malbec to split.

Jobe piped up. “Hey Gina, I guess you prefer drinking wine here to serving coffee at Carla’s?”

“I do indeed,” she replied, giving Jobe a thumbs up.

“Can I get in on that bottle of wine?” asked Phil.

“Sure!” said Gina. “But you buy the next bottle.”

“Will do.”

“I’ll take a Sierra Nevada Pale Ale,” said Ellie.

“Me too,” said Jobe. Peter and Marty followed suit. “How ‘bout this new *craft beer* craze?” asked Jobe.

“It all got started by Sierra Nevada around 1980,” said Ellie. “Their brewery is just down the hill in Chico.”

“Hey, you know your beers!” said Peter, as the waitress set the wine down on the table with three tall, long-stem wine glasses.

“I’ll be back with the ales in a sec.”

“Sam Adam’s Boston Lager came out in, um,” Jobe looked upward, “in ’84, I think. A guy named Jim Koch started it in his kitchen.” Jobe looked at Ellie to see if she noticed.

“I think Widmer Hefeweizen came out just a couple of years ago,” Marty said jumping in.

The waitress came back and served the ales. Jobe tapped his glass with a spoon. “Folks, I want to make a toast.” Everyone’s eyes transitioned to Jobe; all were ready to raise their glasses. Jobe raised his glass. “Here’s to a very special girl.” Ellie remained quiet, enjoying the attention. Looking at Ellie, Jobe’s voice got a little more serious. “I’ve learned a lot from her these past few weeks.” Jobe took a deep breath. “I’m a better man today because of you.” He moved his glass toward hers till they clinked. Ellie kept her eyes on Jobe. Then, Jobe went around the table clinking glasses with everyone, as did Ellie.

A final chord strummed on the guitar, then Bill Ruff said, “That was my Frank Sinatra song, and I sang it ... *My Way!*” The crowd clapped and laughed. “The jokes only get worse as the evening goes on. And that’s how I know when I’m done ... when there’s no one left in the room who can handle the bad jokes!”

Jobe leaned over and asked Ellie, “Where’s Charlie?”

“Oh, he’s out adventuring.”

“When am I going to meet this guy?”

“Soon enough,” Ellie said, adding no details.

Chapter 14

Jobe monitored the sound each Sunday at his church, called The Assembly. From his audio control desk, he called Ellie and asked her if she wanted to go down to Birdcage Mall in Sacramento after he completed his duties at church. She enthusiastically agreed to go.

Jobe picked up Ellie and they drove down to the Mall where they grabbed a bite to eat and strolled hand-in-hand past the array of indoor stores and shops.

“Look, there’s Pick-A-Dilly,” said Ellie. “Let’s go in. They have cute clothes.”

“Sure,” said Jobe. Ellie rushed into the shop. Jobe followed her thinking, *girl-on-a-mission again!* By the time Jobe caught up with Ellie she was already browsing through the rack of summer dresses. Her face glimmered like a kid in a candy store.

Ellie pulled out a dress and held it up in front of her. “How do I look?”

“Adorable!” Jobe said enthusiastically, loving the fun little girl she transformed into. She had escaped her analytical mode for the moment. At age 37, Ellie managed to keep her figure, partly from genetics, partly by never having kids, and partly because she worked at it by eating healthy and staying fit. She still wanted to catch a good guy – if any were left out there – and knew her looks were a big part of a winning strategy.

Ellie stacked dresses together as she quickly evaluated each one. “I attended a Clothing Colors Seminar last year.” Ellie maintained her focus on the dresses. “I learned how to choose

colors that match my skin tone, hair style ...” She paused and cocked her head, “and even my personality.”

Jobe said, “That’s terrific!” even though he didn’t quite get it.

Ellie found a cute yellow dress, nearly pale in color. Holding it up to her face, she asked Jobe, “Is it a match?”

A new sense of fear gripped him. He wanted to run out of the shop. He wondered how he got himself into such a no-win situation. Ellie continued to hold up the dress, waiting for an answer. In a flash, Jobe reasoned in his mind, *If I tell her what I really think, she will either appreciate it or hate me for disagreeing.* He remembered his glovebox snooping and how he had to come clean on it with Ellie. Also, his mom drilled into his head, *honesty is always the best policy.* “That color makes you look washed out,” Jobe said, bluntly.

Ellie slowly lowered the dress. Her countenance fell. She mechanically placed the dress back on the rack. “I suppose you’re right. Not a good color for me, anyway. You ready to go?” she said, still looking at the rack. Jobe knew he’d blown it. Ellie appreciated his honesty but desired his affirmation. What she wanted was for Jobe to agree with her and for that agreement to be genuine.

They remained quiet on the way home. Jobe, not sure what to say, said nothing. He pulled up in front of Ellie’s apartment. As she got out, she said, “That was a fun day. Let’s do it again sometime.” Ellie smiled and closed the car door. Jobe waited to make sure she got into her apartment. Her failure to look back at him left him confused.

Entering her apartment, Ellie felt so alone. *That’s the trouble with meeting a guy you like. As soon as anything goes wrong – and it always does – the loneliness sets in.* She stared out the corner window of her

breakfast nook. Then she walked over to the table and sat down. She continued her gaze.

Her apartment, uniquely positioned in the building was a corner unit that offered a glimpse of a beautiful greenbelt forest. With fall coming, she imagined the trees fumbling their colored leaves in the cool breeze, falling, and laying bare the prickly branches. She noticed overcast clouds setting in, dimming the green summer colors. The slight rocking of small branches hypnotized her.

Ellie put on one of her favorite records in the hope of some soul-soothing. *I love how Karen Carpenter's words make me feel*, she thought. *Here I am, again; talking to myself, again; feeling old, again.* Ellie glanced down at the spinning record. *Boy ain't that the truth!* "I really wanna quit." Ellie blurted out loud. "For me, nothing in life seems to ever fit." Ellie sat down at the nook table and took in more of the changing weather. "Guess I'll just have to hang around here and frown." Ellie looked back over at the record player, and shouted, "Yes, Karen, Rainy Days and Mondays ... they always get me down, too!"

She marveled at the negative words of the song, yet how good it made her feel. Strangely, it felt like a positive message. The song spoke *for* her. She identified with it, which made it her *theme* song. She chuckled as she thought about going back to work the next day – Monday. *I wonder if Karen Carpenter, dying at 33, felt the same way about that song when she sang it.*

Ellie's early thirties were her wandering years. She didn't accomplish a lot – just wandered through life, marking time, waiting. But for what? The right guy? The right job? The right life? She never had the motivation to go after any of it. She just waited for it to come to her – but, it never came. Life seemed only to come by and brush up against her. All too often a new guy didn't work out, or the almost-gotten job left her stuck in the one she had. She became convinced even more that a better life could never happen. *It went so well today*, she thought. *What happened?* She

sat in her breakfast nook seat and cried. *Why did his honesty put me in this mood? He's not obligated to like every dress I try on. What's wrong with me? Maybe I'm doing what I always do – running away from a good thing!*

Ellie jumped when the phone rang. “Hello?” said Ellie, awakened from her gloomy spell.

“It's Gina. How you doin', girl?”

“Melancholy,” she replied, her voice matching her words.

“I'm listening,” Gina said, patiently.

“Well, tomorrow's Monday, it'll be September, summer is over, and an overcast sky is rolling in.”

“Pretty gloomy!” said Gina. “You listening to Karen Carpenter again?”

“You know me.”

“Does that really help?” asked Gina, compassionately despite the distance.

“Actually, it does,” said Ellie.

“How? Doesn't it enhance your gloominess?”

“Yes, to some degree. But, somehow, I find comfort in knowing that someone – even if it's just a song – understands me. Once I get in this mood it needs to run its course and the right song, along with the right view out my favorite window, gets me through it.”

“Sittin' in the nook again, are ya?” asked Gina.

“Sure am. Love it here. It's where I regain my sanity.”

“So, you got it back, now?”

“Yes, thanks to you. Your call came at just the right time.”

“I had a feeling...” affirmed Gina.

“Funny how that works,” said Ellie. “Very mysterious.”

A few days later, Jobe stopped in at Carla's around the time Ellie usually got her coffee. As he entered through the backward

hanging door, he saw Ellie sitting by the big picture window, taking in the gorgeous view of the pine-covered hillside. He walked up to her without her noticing. “Hey, you!” said Jobe, his voice expressing his thrill to see her.

Breaking her gaze, she swung her head around with her blonde strands dancing and gave Jobe her magical smile. “Oh, Jobe. Hi.”

“You doin’ OK?” asked Jobe.

“Fine. Yeah, fine. Why did you ask?” said Ellie, slightly defensive.

“Well, you seemed a little bummed out after our trip to the Mall.”

“Oh, yeah. I was just tired. Kind of a long day,” she lied, hoping he would believe it.

“Seemed like something more,” pressed Jobe.

“Oh no. Just a girl thing,” she replied, conceding a small amount of ground.

“Let’s go out! Dinner or something?”

“Sure,” said Ellie with a bit of hesitation, lacking her usual enthusiasm.

“You sure you’re OK?”

“If you ask me one more time, I won’t be,” she said, then smiled to soften the blow.

“OK. If you say so. Pick you up tonight at six?”

“That works.”

“Gotta get my mocha and run,” said Jobe, walking toward the counter to pay.

“Take care, Jobe,” said Ellie, with an almost *good-bye* quality.

At 6 p.m. on the button, Jobe pulled up to the apartment. Ellie was outside waiting. “Ready to go? Get in.”

“I’m so sorry, Jobe. I should have called you. I need some space.”

“What does that mean? You don’t want to go out?”

“I do, but not tonight.”

“Maybe just not with me?” Jobe said, a little hurt.

“Oh, no. It’s not you. It’s me.”

“Well, get in! Let’s talk about it.”

Ellie was void of any motion. “Sometimes talking works, but not this time.”

“So. There *was* something wrong this morning.”

Ellie stood with her arms folded. “Yeah. I guess so.”

Both took a breath. Both just looked at each other.

“Well, listen. Whatever it is,” said Jobe, “I’m here for ya whenever you wanna talk.”

“That’s so sweet,” Ellie said, tearing up. “Makes me like you all the more.”

“Really?”

“Yes. I mean it. Take care, Jobe.”

As he drove away, her words sounded so final. Yet, he sensed a glimmer of hope. Jobe felt confused. It didn’t diminish his dazzle for her. But it did make her more real.

Jobe’s dad carpooled to work each day with four other men. They were a one-car family. His mom was without a car one day a week when it was his dad’s turn to drive. On the other days, Jobe’s dad would wait each morning, staring out the front window, bag lunch in hand, waiting for his ride. Jobe, usually up and watching Captain Kangaroo on TV, always hugged his dad before he left.

But there was one morning he never forgot. He wasn’t sure why, but it remained an emotional memory. On that day he woke up, heard his dad leaving, ran to the front window, and yelled, “Bye, Daddy!” His dad approached the waiting car, got in, and rode away. Jobe felt crushed. He cried for quite some time. When his mom saw him crying, she asked him why. “I yelled goodbye to Daddy, but he didn’t say anything. He didn’t even look at me!

Did he quit loving me?” She put him on her lap and wrapped her arms tight around him. “No, sweetie. He just didn’t hear you. Had he heard you, he would have turned and opened his big wide arms and yelled, ‘I love you, son. See you tonight!’”

“You sure?” Jobe asked, as his mom gently wiped the tears from his eyes and looked at him with her ever-present, reassuring smile.

“I’m sure, honey.”

“OK,” said Jobe, climbing down from her lap. He headed back to the TV and Mr. Green Jeans.

The next day, Jobe sat nearly motionless at work in his high-back, swivel chair. *Was it something I did, something I said – or didn’t say – or not really about me at all? Four days ago, everything was good at Fryer Tuck’s. It was all going so well with Ellie. Seemed like she was interested in me. Could she get tired of me that fast?*

His office door busted open. Peter emerged. “Got a meeting in about ten minutes. You ready with that Meyers proposal?” Jobe stared for a moment. “You OK, buddy?”

“Oh... yes,” Jobe said coming out of his confusion. “I got it ready.”

“How’s it going with your new girl, Ellie? Did you score, yet?” asked Peter, eyebrows lifted and smiling.

“Not even close. Well, a little bit close.”

“Woohoo! At-a-boy!”

“Still a long way off... if ever!” Jobe reentered his confused stupor.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” asked Peter.

Jobe turned serious. Looking at the floor, he said, “Already having trouble.”

“Aw, heck, Jobe. Happens to me every time. She’s just playing hard-to-get. Don’t give up. See ya in, well...” Peter looked at his wristwatch, “about five minutes.”

Peter closed the door and left. “She’s not hard to get. She’s impossible!” Jobe mumbled under his breath.

Friday rolled around and Ellie went in for her morning coffee at Carla’s. Part of her hoped she would not run into Jobe; the other part hoped she would. She liked Jobe a lot and didn’t want to hurt him. However, she knew she had things to sort out in her mind and heart.

“What you gonna do today?” asked Gina, sitting down across from Ellie at the table next to the picture window. “Have you resolved your Jobe dilemma, yet?”

“No, not really. And it’s bugging me. What the heck is the matter with me? He’s a great guy, good-looking, and treats me fine. He is so kind. I melt in his presence.”

“Maybe that’s the problem. You like him too much – can’t handle it.”

“Perhaps,” said Ellie. “But I think there’s more to it. He’s not the problem – I am.”

“Wanna tell me more?”

Ellie paused, then continued, “Why did I bail out on him? Things were going so well.”

“Why did you?” asked Gina.

“I don’t know. I surprised myself. Things were progressing with Jobe, then suddenly – I retreated. I felt scared.”

“Of him?” asked Gina.

“No. It wasn’t Jobe, personally. It was the *Jobe situation*. Frankly, it would’ve happened with any guy no matter how nice.”

“How do you know?”

“Because it’s happened before.” Gina remained silent. “Relationships seem to reach a *yucky* point. If one little thing gets uncomfortable – that’s when I tend to bail out.”

“Go on,” said Gina.

“Well, it's when you're not quite lovers and no longer friends.”

“After the thrill is gone?” asked Gina.

“What?”

“The Eagles song, from One of These Nights album in the mid-70s,” explained Gina.

Ellie threw her hands out, palms up. “And that’s the yucky part – after that thrill is gone!”

“Yeah, it’s kinda sad,” said Gina. “But that’s life!”

“Well, that song sure fits,” said Ellie. “Except, it’s about the *end* of a relationship. I’m at the beginning of one!”

“That’s OK,” said Gina. “Same basic emotions are in play.”

“I guess so,” confessed Ellie.

“Well, keep thinking about *why*. Eventually, you’ll figure it out, and you’ll work through it.”

“Think so?” asked Ellie.

“I’m sure of it. You always do!”

“But I’m gonna run out of guys, figuring it out. I’m already thirty-seven, Gina!”

“Oh, give me a break. You look younger and better than me, and I’m ten years behind you.”

“You’re a doll,” said Ellie. “I needed that – even if it’s not true.”

“You have so much goin’ for you. And you’ve learned so much from Charlie. He’s leaving you a legacy, no matter what that means. Right? Let that be good enough. Trust who you are, who God made you – one unique person in six billion on this planet!”

“Good perspective. Thanks, Gina. That helps a lot.”

“I haven't told you anything you didn't already know. Go think about it.”

“I will,” said Ellie.

“Love you, girl!”

“Take care, Gina. Love you too.”

Ellie spent her early years in an orphanage. Though never abused or mistreated, her experience had a huge impact on her life. The orphanage was benevolent, but it was also institutional and far from the experience of a normal family. She felt generally loved, but very little individual attention was given to her. Boys and girls lived separated, as did younger from older with the cut-off age at about twelve. Ellie went into foster care at seven, so she never experienced living in the older group.

All the children worked on a farm, occasionally, as part of their responsibilities and education. It gave Ellie a way to get outside the orphanage walls and learn new things. She enjoyed her farming chores. Unlike the boys, the girls didn't experience bullying. However, the girls experienced shunning by other girls and whisper campaigns. Ellie hated the shunning and avoided it as much as possible. As a kind and tenderhearted girl, she also hated the lack of privacy. Weekly bathing meant waiting in line and being checked for washing behind her ears when finished.

One thing she learned at the orphanage, which most other children do not learn until later in life, is that if she wanted to experience something she would have to go after it. No one was going to bring it to her and make life easy. But the one thing she didn't learn at the orphanage, that other kids learned earlier in life – what a cohesive family was. She didn't experience this until she left the orphanage and lived in a loving foster care family. But one thing bothered her the most; why her mother gave her up and didn't keep her? She could never shake the sense of insecurity and loss of identity.

The Call In



Sunday, September 6, 1987

Chapter 15

It was Sunday at The Assembly, the church that Jobe attended with his mom. He always got there early to set up the mics and prepare the live audio feed to the radio station. He flipped on the master switch by the door of the crowded sound booth. The lights came on while dials illuminated, meters momentarily peaked, and a few instruments in the tall 19-inch broadcast equipment rack beeped. Jobe sat down in a padded folding chair in front of a control panel that displayed a sea of knobs and sliders. He was almost ready to send music and speech over a phone line to the KOP radio station.

Jobe looked out the big glass window in front of the control desk that overlooked a mosaic of people talking, greeting, gesturing with their hands, and finding their favorite seat in prep for the service about to begin. The phone rang, right on time as it always did five minutes before the service.

“Hello,” said Jobe. He listened for a moment. “Yep, everything is ready. Left and right audio channels are set up and the compressor/limiter is on to prevent distortion. You guys ready for the test signal? Okay. Here it is.” Jobe leaned forward and pressed a large green button labeled *Radio Feed Test*. He held it down. “Everything good on your end?” He waited and then released the button. “Okay. Great. Talk to you next week.”

Jobe hung up the phone mounted on the wall, flipped on the *Live Broadcast* switch, sat back in his padded chair, and waited for

the end of the service. There wasn't much to do in his job. It was mostly about him being there in case something went wrong. But he didn't mind. He liked helping out. His mom was always proud of him for his 'service in the service.'

After the service, Jobe stood up, pushed his chair under the control desk, and was about to turn out the lights. A tall man stuck his head into the booth and said, "We need to talk." Jobe paused his hand just above the light switch. He recognized the man as one of the leaders of The Assembly. He wasn't only tall but also thin, which only exaggerated his height.

"Now?" asked Jobe.

"No, but soon," the man said, his voice void of expression. Jobe thought it odd because this particular fellow usually seemed quite friendly and often cracked jokes in any situation. Jobe waited, but the man just looked at him.

"We could grab some coffee sometime at Carla's," Jobe finally said, flipping off the lights, killing the glow of all the audio equipment with one downward strike of his hand.

The man didn't budge from the doorway. "No, you don't understand. The leaders have *charged* me with letting you know that they *all* want to talk with you."

Jobe's eyebrows lowered, and his eyes squinted, as he said, "Sounds serious."

"They think it is," the man said coldly.

"O... K," Jobe moaned slowly. "Where and when?"

"Upstairs. Conference room. 6:30 a.m. Tuesday morning."

Jobe eked out a half-smile. Looking out from the top of his eyes at the tall man, he said, "Can you tell me what it's all about?"

"They would rather wait and share everything with you, privately and thoroughly."

"Okay. I'll be there," Jobe said as they both began to move out into the hallway in a clumsy unified motion. Jobe followed the man to the stairwell leading down to the main floor. "Were all the mic levels okay? I'm sure I did a sound check."

“They were fine,” the man said, impatiently, without turning around and dropping his voice at the end of his sentence. At the bottom of the stairs, the man turned toward Jobe. “That's not the problem.”

Jobe walked past him toward the exit, waived his right hand slowly without turning around, and said, “I'll be there.” Then he pushed open the door and walked out.

Monday, Labor Day, Jobe had the day off and decided to play a round of golf.

“Fore!” Jobe flinched, prepared to duck, and looked around for a golf ball coming his way.

“You don't need to duck when you've barely left the clubhouse, son,” said a big burly man who just yelled.

“Then why did you yell *fore*?” asked Jobe.

Reaching down to pick up his tee after a beautiful drive straight down the fairway, the man said, “Because I never know which way the ball will go!”

“You yell *fore* every time you hit the ball?” asked Jobe.

“Yep. Playin' it safe,” said the man, extending his hand to Jobe. “I'm Mike. Mike Rose.”

“Glad to meet you, Mike,” said Jobe, hesitantly accepting the handshake. “I'm Jobe. Jobe Martinez.”

“Well, mister Jobe, you're welcome to play this round with me, or just let me play on ahead.”

“No, I'm happy to have a partner on a beautiful, holiday Monday morning,” said Jobe.

“Great! Step up and take your shot.”

Jobe reached over and planted a bright yellow tee in the ground, then placed a fluorescent orange ball on it.

“Flamboyant are you, son? Look at that color! You always play a bright orange ball?”

“Yep,” said Jobe, looking at Mike and pausing briefly. “Playin’ it safe! Don’t want to lose it.”

“Touché. Good one, Jobe,” said Mike, nodding his head. Jobe pulled the driver back over his head, pointed it toward the hole, right elbow up and left elbow down, left foot raised on its toe, then – *whack*. Jobe stood for a moment, his body in a mirror image of before his shot. He watched as his ball sailed straight down the fairway, bouncing and coming to a halt. “Nice shot,” said Mike.

“Thanks.”

“Throw your clubs in the back of my golf cart and we’ll make this a quick and easy nine holes.” Jobe loaded his clubs and hopped in the passenger seat. Mike pushed the pedal to the floor and Jobe’s head jerked back.

”Wow! Whatcha you got in this thing?” asked Jobe.

“I put a jet plane electric starter motor in it, last year.”

“Hey, I have a car kinda like that! It’s a real tiger.”

“So, young Jobe, what brings you out on this fine Monday morning? Shouldn’t you be at work?”

“It’s Labor Day!” exclaimed Jobe.

“Oops!” said Mike. “I’m retired. Never keep track. Uh, no one plays golf without a reason – be it a desire for better golf, or just better thinking.”

“Better thinking,” confessed Jobe.

“What’s on your mind, mister Jobe? You don’t have to tell me, but we gotta talk about something. And if you don’t talk, I will. Not sure you want that!”

“Why not?” asked Jobe

“I’m a radio guy.”

“Really?”

“Yep. Get me going and well... Here’s your ball, Jobe,” said Mike, pulling the cart up next to it. Jobe got out and whacked it straight down the fairway, again. “Another nice shot,” said Mike. “I think you’re on the green. You play well!”

“My dad made me take lessons when I was young,” said Jobe. “Unhappy back then; happy today.”

“Dads sometimes do that,” said Mike.

Mike walked over about twenty yards and hit his ball. “You play pretty good too,” said Jobe.

“No lessons. Just lots of playing,” confessed Mike.

As they got back in the cart, Jobe asked, “You have a radio show?”

“*Jesting in Jesus*, Sunday mornings at 8:30 on KOP,” said Mike, as he propelled the cart forward.

“Interesting name. Are you religious or anti-religious?”

“Neither ... and both,” said Mike “More spiritual than religious.”

“I’ve heard that idea before from a friend who has a friend named Charlie.”

“Charlie?” asked Mike.

“Yeah. You know him?”

“No,” said Mike. “But I may have heard about him. Can’t tell if he is real or imaginary. If he’s real, I sure would like to have him as a guest on our show!”

“*Our* show?” asked Jobe.

“Yeah, I have a cohort on the radio show. Bill Ruff.”

“Oh, wow. The guy who sings sometimes at Fryer Tuck’s?”

“That’s him. Love to have you meet him. Come join us on the show sometime. We love having guests.”

Jobe and Mike finished the other eight holes quickly in Mike's overpowered go-cart and began to part ways.

“Nice to meet you, Jobe. Maybe you'll tune in on Sunday.”

“I might. Thanks,” said Jobe.

Jobe removed his golf shoes, put on tennis shoes, and got into his car. *I never got to share why I came out to play golf today*, thought Jobe. *I like talking to Mike. He's genuine. Maybe I'll look him up. I think he would treat me fair and wouldn't mind if I told him what I was thinking.*

The next morning, Jobe walked into The Assembly building where he was summoned by the tall man on Sunday. The rising sun peeked over the two-story building from across the street. Since people stay in bed longer in a sleepy little town, the streets of Oak Pines were unpopulated that morning. But Jobe got up early. He set two alarms the night before, not wanting to miss the appointment imposed on him and go through all that anxious waiting again.

I wonder what the heck is serious enough to call me in, especially at this ungodly hour. After all, I'm just a soundman, a volunteer, bottom of the totem pole. Jobe opened the door and stepped into the dark, quiet building. *If they wanted a professional soundman, they should hire one!* Jobe searched his mind and could not find anything he'd done wrong over the past several months. He knew his proficiency when it came to sound technology.

He started up the stairs. He never noticed them creaking before. When he reached the top, he almost turned left toward the sound booth, but the conference room was to the right. He knew where it was, but he'd never actually been in it. As he approached the door, he looked through its narrow window. He could see some men seated and casually talking. When Jobe entered the room, all the talking stopped. Jobe stopped, too.

"Come on in. Grab a seat. Glad you could join us," said a big man with a husky voice. Jobe recognized him but couldn't remember his name. Seated next to the big man sat the tall man who summoned Jobe. He pulled out a chair and sat down opposite four men. An old man sat on the far left; He looked frail. His eyes drooped in protest of the early morning. On the far right sat a young man. His eyes, full of zeal, announced his pleasure at being included.

The room was quiet, as was the whole building. Jobe never knew that such a normally loud building could be so still and void of life. "Thanks for coming," said the big man. "Sorry to get you

up so early, but some of us have to go to work soon. Perhaps you do, too.”

“I do, indeed,” Jobe replied. He felt cold and clammy even though it was a beautiful fall day with temperatures expected in the mid-70s. The big man paused, gathering his thoughts.

“I’m sorry, guys, if I messed anything up,” offered Jobe. “I’m not aware of anything, but I’m always willing to learn, make corrections, and strive all the more to do better.” Jobe hoped his short, memorized speech would ward off any anger they might have.

The big man raised his hand, palm facing Jobe, his head looking down at the table. Then, he looked up. “You’re doing a fine job helping out with the sound, Jobe. You always have, and all of us...” The big man paused, looked left and right at the others, and moved his hand with his palm face up. “All of us appreciate your faithful and selfless effort providing good sound – and that very important radio feed.” Jobe felt perplexed. *What on earth have I done? This is the only job I do here at The Assembly.*

The big man continued. “We want to talk to you about something much more serious.” Jobe pulled his head back and stretched his neck slightly but did not move his body. “Everyone who attends this assembly – soundman or main speaker – affects all the others who attend in both image and influence.” *What the heck does that mean?* Jobe thought to himself. “We are an organism – one body if you will. We’re all connected. When one hurts, we all hurt. When one experiences joy, we all do.”

Jobe had heard this all his life, liked the idea, and believed it. “Yeah, sure. I believe this!” Jobe said enthusiastically.

“Good!” said the zealous young man on the right. “Then you’ll have no problem agreeing with us.”

The big man extended his hand to stop the young man who retreated into his chair. “If one person speaks or acts, publicly, in a way that is contrary to anything we believe and hold dear, it

reflects on everyone. People who are not part of our assembly – who may be considering joining us –could misunderstand who we are and what we believe. You wouldn't want that, would you, Jobe?”

“No sir. I certainly would not,” Jobe said respectfully, but wondering where this was all going.

“We all need to be careful who we keep company with,” said the tall man, “and who our friends are.”

“I'm with you on that!” said Jobe. “I try to pick my friends carefully.”

“Do you, really, Jobe?” The big man stared at Jobe waiting for his words to sink in.

“Yes,” Jobe said, hesitatingly.

“Well, it's been called to our attention that you now have some friends that are, perhaps, leading you astray.”

“Oh, them,” Jobe said, relieved. “I haven't seen Elliott, Billie, or Zach for quite some time. And I probably won't again anytime soon.” Jobe sat back in his chair. He began thinking about what needed to get done at work that day. “Man, if that's all it is, we're good to go. Right?”

“Not quite,” said the old man, his hands folded on the table, shoulders bunched up below his ears, looking to his left at the others. “This new girlfriend of yours, the lady that works at the law firm, and some old guy that she follows religiously – aren't these your friends?”

Jobe couldn't believe what he was hearing. *Who cares?* he thought. *You called me in for this?* He decided, at that moment, to quit his soundman job. “Her name is Ellie and she already broke up with me. As for the old guy, his name, supposedly, is Charlie. But, quite honestly, I'm not sure if he even exists.”

The young man piped up and said, “Well, then you seem to be fresh out of friends.” Jobe felt a dagger through his heart. He was just beginning to get over being dumped by Ellie. But this brought it all back. Now, he didn't even want to go to work.

“If she came back, would you hang around with her again?” asked the tall man.

Jobe thought for a moment. “Yes, I suppose I would. Depends on why she came back.”

“Well, there you go,” said the big man, rolling his eyes. “If you still want to hang around a girl like that, you've got a big problem, my friend.”

Oh, now I'm your friend, thought Jobe. “A girl like what?” asked Jobe. “I thought she was pretty cool.”

“And, pretty, too!” added the young man.

“You better believe it!” said Jobe, defending Ellie, instinctively.

“Looks are not the issue,” said the big man.

“What is?” asked Jobe.

“What she believes, what she claims, what she tells people. That's the issue.”

Jobe became suspicious. “Who've you been talking to?” he asked.

“We have our sources,” said the tall man. “But that doesn't matter. Heresy and false teaching do!”

“What?” protested Jobe. “What are you talking about?”

“We're talking about some crazy idea called *Streams of Terrible Beauty*. Isn't that it?”

“Oh, that. Yes, Ellie shared that with me. It's not crazy. In fact, it's been quite helpful.”

The old man spoke out slowly and deliberately. “If something like that is helpful to you, then you're deceived.”

“Deceived? I don't think so,” said Jobe.

“Well, we do,” said the big man. “Especially when you succumb to following a woman for any kind of spiritual leading.”

Oh, please, thought Jobe. “Can you tell me why you think *Streams* is so wrong?” asked Jobe, genuinely curious.

“Not today,” said the tall man. “Not enough time. That will be difficult to explain. Can you come back, next Tuesday? Same time?”

“Sure,” Jobe said, sitting back in his chair, stunned by the morning's strange turn of events. *I thought I knew these guys. I thought they could be trusted.* Then Jobe realized, *that's what my mom believed about these guys. I inherited it from her, unquestioned.* “Can I go now?”

“Sure,” said the big man. “We’ll see you next week.”

Jobe politely stood up, scooted his chair under the table, and walked out. As he descended the stairs, he wanted to never work the sound booth for them again. But then his cooler head prevailed. *The folks in The Assembly still need good sound, and I should give these guys a chance to voice their concerns. Who knows. Maybe we will be able to work things out and ‘agree to disagree.’* Jobe exited the front door and headed to work.

Chapter 16

The next day, Jobe decided it was finally time to go see his mom. He knew he should have gone long ago. He wanted to tell her about his visit to John's Grill with Ellie, but there seemed to be no reason with Ellie out of the picture. But, more importantly, he needed to talk to her about the call-in by the church leaders. She was bound to catch wind of it – if she had not already – and he would rather be the one to tell her. He knew it would probably be difficult, but he had to try.

He used his key to unlock the front door and walked in. “Mom? You here? It's Jobe.” Hearing no response, he closed the door and meandered around the house. He walked past the big sliding door in the back of the family room that led to the deck. He saw her planting some petunias into a long, clay-red planter mounted along the deck railing. He slid open the patio door. “Hi, Mom!” he said as he stepped out onto the deck.

She turned and said, “Oh, Jobe, so good to see you. Glad you stopped by.” She dusted the dirt off her hands, gave him a big hug, stepped back, and said, “What's new?”

“I was afraid you might ask that.”

His mom sat down on one of the four lawn chairs that circled a patio table. The table supported a big yellow and green, striped umbrella that poked up through the middle. Jobe sat down. He leaned his forearms on his knees with his hands clasped together and looked down. “You look like you're about to pray.”

“Not quite.” He looked up for a moment. “But maybe that’s not a bad idea.”

“What’s wrong, Honey? Oh. I know. A new girl?”

Jobe chuckled. “Not anymore!”

“Oh, I’m so sorry, honey. Was she pretty?”

Jobe looked up. “Gorgeous! Inside and out. Not sure what happened.”

“Well, give it some time.”

“I think it’ll take more than that.”

“Well, you’ve been through this before.”

“But this time is different – in how *good* it was and how *bad* it is now.” His mom just looked at him with loving eyes. “I’ll tell you all about it someday. But I got something else on my mind.”

“What is it?” She sat back in her chair.

“Church, Mom. The leaders at church are really mad at me.”

“Why on earth would they be?” She sat up straight in her lawn chair. “You do your sound thing well, don’t you?”

“That’s not it.”

“What then?”

“This girl I met – the one now out of the picture – she taught me something about life that really helped me.”

“Go on,” she said.

“It’s called *Streams of Terrible Beauty*.”

“Excuse me?”

“That’s what she calls it. Says she got the idea from a wise old man who she calls her mentor. I don’t even know if he exists. But there’s something to this *Streams* idea.”

“What is it? Sounds contradictory to me.”

“Well, it kinda is. But isn’t life?”

His mom squirmed in her chair. “Yes. But this still sounds a bit strange.”

“The idea is that terrible things happen in life...”

“They sure do!” she interjected.

“But eventually, God makes beautiful things come out of them.”

His mom thought for a moment. “I’d like to believe that’s true. But it seems like pie in the sky, Honey. What do the church leaders have to do with it?”

“Well, from what I’ve gathered, they believe it's not true. It’s based on a passage from the book of Job.” Jobe cocked his head to the side and pointed to himself. “And, according to the leaders, such truth can’t come from a woman who doesn’t even go to church.”

“That would be this girl?” asked his mom.

“Yep.”

“Well, honey, these guys should know. They’re all professionally trained in spiritual things. Plus, God has gifted them so they can guide people in the way they should go. Sometimes we just gotta trust them.”

“Blindly?” asked Jobe.

“Well, no. Not exactly. Maybe just give them the benefit of the doubt.”

“What if they’re wrong?” asked Jobe.

“That’s probably not the case, Jobe. They’ve been at this quite some time – some of them, their whole lives! They seek God’s will for themselves and others. We are very fortunate to have them. Can we be right when differing with a group of good men who all agree? That can’t be, Honey.”

“But what if I’ve experienced something that has changed my life? Doesn’t this count for something?”

“I suppose it does – a little bit. But I wouldn’t put your reasoning and experience above theirs. That would be foolish.” Jobe grew quiet. He stared out at his mom’s flowers. “Maybe you’re just infatuated with this girl.”

“Nope.” Jobe shook his head. “She’s gone, now.” He looked up at her. “This is something a lot bigger than just her.” Jobe

intentionally changed the subject. “Hey, Mom. I got something cool to tell you!”

“What is it?” She sat back in her chair, again. She loved surprises – especially good ones.

“I had lunch a few weeks ago at John’s Grill in San Francisco.”

“No. Really? Bet you went with that girl.”

“I did. You know about this place?”

“Of course, I do. It’s where my heartthrob, Dashiell Hammett, wrote *The Maltese Falcon*.”

“Guess I should have known. You would’ve loved it. I should take you there sometime.”

“Tell me more!” said his mom clapping her hands together.

“Well, there is a long wall of photos – of famous people who have eaten there.”

“Ooo. That’d be fun to see.”

“Yep. And upstairs there is a glass case with a big black Maltese falcon statue.”

“No kidding!”

“And a signed copy of Hammett’s first edition of his book.”

“Oh, we gotta go there,” she said with glee.

“But we couldn’t eat his favorite meal, lamb chops. Only served on Tuesday nights. But we had his favorite drink, Vesper – Gin and Vodka.”

“Oh, to die for! When can we go?”

“Soon, I think. Keep bugging me.”

“I will.”

“Gotta go, Mom. Back to work. It’s my lunch break.”

“OK, my boy. Love you! And, I think if you’re smart you’ll stick with what the church leaders tell you. So far, I’ve found them to always be right when they pray about something, and all agree.” Jobe said nothing. “And this girl? Be a little cautious. We, ladies, need to take our lead in spiritual things from the men. It’s in the Bible you know.” Jobe still didn’t say anything. He just let his

mom be who she is. He hugged her and slipped out the door. “Don’t forget to plan our lunch at John’s,” she yelled.

“I won’t,” Jobe said, doing a full-circle turn-around while walking toward his car.

On the following Sunday morning, Jobe got into his car and headed to The Assembly where he decided to keep serving as the sound man until things with the leaders became resolved. He remembered Mike’s *Jesting in Jesus* show and turned on the radio. Just past 8:30, some light jazz-style guitar music played as an intro for Mike’s show.

As the music faded out, a voice rang out, “Good morning, folks. I’m Mike Rose,” Jobe recognized the voice. “And here with me is my co-conspirator in confusion, Bill Ruff.”

“Hey, Mike. Good *moaning*,” responded Bill.

“Moaning? Are you in pain?” asked Mike.

“Yeah. I went hiking yesterday and I’m hurting today.”

“Then why is it a *good* moaning?”

“Because we’re here to do some *Jesting in Jesus* and that’s going to make it all OK,” said Bill, enthusiastically. Mike and Bill both chuckled.

“Well, you’re right, Bill. That’s why we’re here. And although we do some irreverent humor, we are very serious in our hearts about God and his unconditional love for everyone.”

“That’s what counts,” said Bill. “The rest of the time we are just a little crazy. We try to keep things somewhat light as we deal with some pretty serious matters in life. Some humor helps.”

“Sure does!” added Mike. “And many listeners out there in radio land think we cross some serious lines when we poke fun at ourselves, religious people, and even God!”

“Yes, and that’s what bugs them. You can’t make fun of God or he will get angry,” said Bill.

“That's what they think,” continued Mike. “And it makes them all scared of God as if our restraint is required to win God's approval. As I have said many times on this program, ‘If you can't tell God to F-off, you don't really trust him!’ Heck, I am more afraid of a mosquito than I am of God. Not because he's not big, powerful, awesome, and sovereign; but simply because he *is* love. All that power and bigness is always directed our way, for our good.”

Bill quickly added, “And that's because God is good, only good, and always wants the best for everyone who he created in his very own image.”

“How could he *not* be loving and caring, all the time ... and still be God?” Mike asked.

“Yeah. And that's why we're free to have fun, be ourselves, and still respect our Creator who loves us. Ya know, he doesn't need *anger management classes*, as we do.”

“That's right. He's not that puny or petty! OK, whatcha got for us today, Billy?”

As he pulled into The Assembly parking lot, Jobe turned off the radio and got out of his car. Approaching the building, it seemed so much smaller. Jobe entered, made his way up the stairs, and looked to the right toward the conference room. His stomach jumped. He turned left, entered the sound booth, and flipped on the wall switch by the door. Lights, meters, and equipment fans all came on in unison. He sat down, did a mic check, ran the radio feed test, and briefly watched the people below finding their seats.

The rumble of voices quieted. As the service started, he stared out a small window on the outer wall that hovered over the street below. Many times, he caught himself daydreaming out the window, watching the people and cars. Jobe heard the speaker of the day announced, but he kept looking out the window undistracted. For a moment, Jobe felt a funny little thrill of power

knowing that hundreds of people in town could hear the live broadcast – and he made it happen. But the downside of the job is that people only really noticed his efforts when something went wrong.

The speaker began with his usual. “Good morning! So glad you could be here with us today.” Jobe often wondered if the speakers really meant what they said. He also wondered who the ‘us’ is supposed to be. *Does it include me?* he thought. Quite some time into the speaker’s presentation, Jobe found himself daydreaming again but was called back into focus when the speaker said, “If you’re not trusting God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength ... you’re missing out. It’s up to you – your choice – only you can do it.” *Such passion in his words! Such confidence* thought Jobe. *But how does he know if he’s right?*

Jobe looked again out the window. The motionless oak tree limbs displayed scattered green moss while arching and dangling over the unaware heads of people below in no hurry, meandering aimlessly on a beautiful Fall morning.

Do those people below not realize there is a fiery message in here that they should hear? Or should they? Is it possible they are doing what they should do out there, just as the folks in here are doing what they should? Which group of people is happier? Which group experiences more freedom? Probably, both groups think they have the advantage, Jobe chuckled to himself. Then he felt a surge of guilt for thinking such thoughts. He wondered if anyone walking down the street experienced such guilt for not being inside.

The speaker ended the service and Jobe pressed the big red *STOP* button. This time, he felt a surge of relief come over him. Duties fulfilled. Jobe turned off all the equipment, headed downstairs, greeted a few friends, and went home.

On Tuesday, Jobe rolled over and turned off the first alarm. *I can wait for the second one if I want to*, he thought despite the sleepy fog that clouded his mind. He lay there and almost drifted off to sleep again. But he suddenly opened his eyes. *Maybe the other alarm had already gone off, and I didn't hear it.* The last thing Jobe wanted this morning was to miss the second meeting that had been so seriously imposed upon him by the leaders at The Assembly. *No way I want to go through another agonizing week anticipating one more call-in session. Besides, I'm dying to know what's so bad about Ellie's Streams of Terrible Beauty idea.*

Jobe dressed and headed out the door. The Assembly building was only a few blocks away from where he lived. Stepping out into the pale morning light, he breathed in the cool mountain air and walked past all the closed downtown shops, including Carla's, which had only a dim light shining through from the back. "I'll see you in just a little while," he said out loud, making a sacred caffeine commitment to himself.

Jobe walked up to the dark, quiet building. He opened the front door, just as he had done the previous Tuesday. He felt a bit of déjà vu as he headed toward the stairs. Climbing and hearing the stairs creak, he turned right and headed for the conference room. Images of his negative thinking in the sound booth, just a few days ago, lingered in his head. But he felt a little more confident entering the conference room with his new perspective about what he believes. *I wonder if these guys have ever questioned their own actions and motives, as I did when I watched and pondered those people on the street below.*

He saw the four men through the window in the door, seated exactly as they were the week before. Jobe pulled open the door, walked in, pulled out a chair, and sat down.

"Thanks for coming, Jobe." Jobe didn't respond. Then the big man said, "Let's get right down to it. Sorry that we couldn't give you a quick answer last week. We'd rather give you a complete answer than a quick one." Jobe waited patiently, his

hands folded on the table. Turning toward the old man on the left, the big man said, “You want to take a shot at explaining this?”

“Sure,” he replied. “Jobe, I’ve been at this place as long as anyone.” *Yeah, and you sure as heck look like it!* thought Jobe. “I’ve known you since you were a teen. And your mom – longer than that. I remember her as a young woman, attending with your dad before he tragically died when you were just a kid.” *What’s that got to do with it?* thought Jobe, as he sat calmly, his hands still folded. “We pretty much respect people’s opinions and beliefs around here. But when something comes up – something as dangerous as this *Streams of Terrible Beauty* notion, we gotta say something. In fact, we need to *do* something, and that’s why we’re here today.” *That’s not why I’m here,* thought Jobe.

The tall man then spoke up and said, “The most dangerous ideas are half-truths. God is full of love, grace, and mercy, but he is also holy and just. Don’t forget that, son. Both are true. Pure *beauty* can’t win out in the end and do away with all accountability. We are all accountable to God. Do you believe that, Jobe?”

“Yes, sir, I do,” Jobe answered, quickly and respectfully.

“Furthermore, it’s not just what we claim – it’s the basis of that claim. Take your *Streams* idea, for example. Do you know what the basis is for this unusual, contradictory idea?”

“Well...” Jobe paused. “According to Ellie ...”

The tall man interrupted. “You should never have listened to her, son,”

Jobe sighed and looked down. Then, looking back up at the tall man, he continued. “According to Ellie, she got it from Charlie, her mentor, who got it from a passage at the end of the book of Job.”

“Yes, we caught wind of that,” said the big man. *Yeah, I’ll bet you did,* thought Jobe. *Gee, I wonder who told you?*

The old man leaned forward, shook his head, and said with a slight chuckle, “I looked it up and it just doesn’t say what you

claim. I don't know who this Charlie guy is, but he's misinformed.”

“What does it say?” asked Jobe.

“I've got it here in front of me,” said the young man. “Fair weather cometh out of the North: with God, there is terrible beauty.’ Straight from King James Bible!” The young man said, proudly.

“Sure enough, the old man agreed. Your old friend lifted the words ‘terrible beauty’ right out of the Bible. But, does this seem like a good basis for what you claim to be true?”

“Actually, in all due respect...” Jobe chose his words carefully, “it does!”

“How so?” asked the old man, leaning back into his chair. “You, your Ellie, and this Charlie fellow are all just reading *into* the Bible whatever you want to see, instead of accepting what it says.”

Jobe could see his point. He sighed. “I suppose you could be right,” Jobe finally admitted.

“I *know* I'm right,” said the old man, leaning forward in his chair, confidence oozing from his words. “We can't just go around picking out passages, willy-nilly, and attach to them our own desired meaning. Can we?”

Jobe thought for a moment. He couldn't think of anything to say. Plus, he wanted to get out of there – and the sooner the better. All four men waited and just looked at Jobe.

“Does this make sense, son?” the big man finally asked.

“I guess so.” Jobe's mouth was slightly open. He stroked his lower teeth with his tongue.

“Let's give you a week to think about it. I suggest you stay away from this girl who seems to have led you astray – and from the old guy. What's his name?”

“Charlie,” said the young man.

“Yes, this Charlie character – you’d be smart to stay clear of him. Anyone who can so easily mishandle important passages about God needs to be avoided. Does all this make sense, Jobe?”

Jobe answered coldly. “Sure. But like I said, Ellie is out of the picture, and Charlie – I don't even know if he exists – I’ve never met him.”

“You’ll be smart to keep it that way,” said the big man. “So, let's have one more meeting, a week from today. Same time. We hope that you’ll free yourself from all this *Streams of Terrible Beauty* nonsense and will get back on the narrow path of striving daily to do what's right.”

Jobe, once again, got up, gently slid his chair in under the table, and walked out.

Chapter 17

As Jobe walked back home, the shops downtown were coming alive and opening for business. All the lights were on at Carla's, so he grabbed a double-shot latte – keeping his sacred caffeine commitment – and walked on home. He started up his Tiger, let it idle for a moment, and then took off for work. On the way, he noticed a telephone booth. He quickly pulled over and parked in a yellow-painted loading zone. Jobe opened the folding door and stepped in. He noticed the '25 Cents' engraving above the coin slot. *Man, it's twenty-five cents, now. It used to be just 10. Doesn't matter. I just need to use the phone book.* He lifted a big fat book that swiveled on a steel arm. Most of the pages were yellow. He turned to the white pages near the front. Turning pages, he mumbled to himself. "H... I... J... Johnson." He ran his finger down the page. "Here it is – Charlie Johnson. It's the only one." He stared out the window of the cramped booth for a moment. "Maybe he exists! Hope so. Sure would like to talk to him." Jobe looked down again and memorized the address. "Hmmm... Richardson Street. That's only a few blocks from here. Time to meet this Charlie."

Jobe drove slowly down Richardson, reading the house addresses. Some houses didn't display any address. He pressed the brake. "Here it is," Jobe mumbled. He pulled over, got out, and began walking up the driveway. *Man, I hope he's home. I've got a ton of questions, and I just want to know if this guy is real.* Old newspapers were scattered on and around the porch. "You're a pretty bad shot, paperboy – whoever you are," Jobe blurted out,

talking to the dormant newspapers. “I nailed all the porches when I delivered papers on my bike in Jr High!” Jobe stopped. *Wow. That was a long time ago!* He stepped onto the porch and rang the doorbell. Looking around he didn’t see an RV. He pressed the doorbell again. He could hear it ringing inside, so he knew it worked. He walked around to the side gate and looked over the top. There was nothing to see or hear. *Shoot. There’s no one home. This might not even be the real Charlie Johnson’s place. Too common of a name. He still might not exist!* “I used to have an imaginary friend when I was a little kid,” Jobe mumbled to himself. “But I got over it by the time I was five! If Ellie still entertains imaginary friends, then maybe those guys at The Assembly are right and I should stay clear of her.” Jobe got back in his car and drove away, disappointed.

As soon as Jobe got home, he began dialing the phone. “Mike? This is Jobe Martinez. Hope you remember me.”

“Fore!” Mike yelled into the phone.

“Ha! You do remember!”

“Of course, I do. Hey, what day is it? Being retired is a tough life.”

“Tuesday,” answered Jobe.

“OK. Thanks. Hey, I never did hear what was on your mind that day on the golf course.”

“Well, after what happened to me today, I’ve got even more on my mind. Anyway, can we talk?”

“Sure. Want me to bring Bill?”

“Oh, for sure.”

“We’re a team,” said Mike. “I think better when Bill’s around. And I think I listen a little better, too. He’s also a good listener.”

“Carla’s is my hangout for this kind of thing,” said Jobe.

“We can do that,” said Mike. “When ya wanna meet?”

“Sooner the better. I’m really frustrated.”

“I think Bill can get away late this afternoon.”

“Oh, man, that would be great,” said Jobe.

“How about 4 pm,” suggested Mike.

“Sounds good to me.”

“OK. I will call you *only* if Bill can’t make it. But I don’t think that’ll happen. So, we’ll see you then. Fore!”

“Ha! OK.”

Jobe ordered a latte and sat down at the big, lazy-susan table in the corner at Carla’s. He realized he sat in the same seat when he met with Elliot, Billie, and Zach about six weeks before. He looked over at the empty chair by the big picture window where he first noticed Ellie reading her book. “Large vanilla latte, extra shot, extra hot, for Jobe,” a voice shouted out from behind the counter. Jobe got up, walked up to the counter, dropped a tip into the glass jar, grabbed the latte, and returned to his seat.

Through the backward-hanging front door came Mike, dressed in black pants and a black shirt, followed by a slimmer man that Jobe recognized as Bill. “Well, here we are.” Mike sat in what had been Elliot’s seat. Like Elliot, Mike was a pretty big man, but a bit shorter. “And this is Bill.”

Bill extended his hand and said, “Nice to meet you, Jobe.”

“I remember you playing at Tuck’s a few weeks ago.”

“Oh, Yeah. I remember you, too. You were with a blonde girl. Couldn't forget her!”

“Yep. She’s a beauty. Coffee, guys?” asked Jobe, changing the subject.

“No, I’m already maxed out for the day,” said Mike.

“Me, too,” added, Bill.

“So, Jobe. Tell us what's on your mind. What's bothering you, my friend?” Mike reared back in his chair, reminding Jobe of Elliot. However, Mike was much kinder and more engaging. *Must*

be his big personality and radio show host coming through. Bill remained quiet.

“Well... it started with this girl.”

Bill looked at Mike. “He’s already told us most of the story in one sentence.”

“He sure did,” responded Mike.

“It’s the blonde, I assume,” added Bill.

“Yep,” Jobe said, looking at the window seat, where Ellie once sat. “She bailed out on me.”

“That’s OK,” said Mike. “We’ll stick around to hear the juicy details.”

“Very funny, you guys,” said Jobe. “But this is serious!”

“It always is!” said Mike, looking at Bill out of the corner of his eyes.

“OK,” said Bill. “We’re with ya, now. Just hard to take off our Jesting In Jesus radio show hats.”

“All joking aside, we’re listening, Jobe,” added Mike. “Carry on.”

“Anyway, this girl taught me something that I believe to be true. But I can't prove it, and the leaders at my church are mad at me for believing it. They told me it’s wrong.”

Bill looked at Mike. “You see anything unusual about that?”

“Nope,” responded Mike. “Happens to us all the time. That’s where we live, each week, in radio land.”

“Don’t get me wrong,” said Jobe. “I love and respect these guys. I’ve known them my whole life. I know they love God and people. And I think they are doing what they honestly believe is right.”

“Then, what's the problem? They might be right,” offered Mike.

“I know that. I'm trying to listen to them and consider what they have to say.”

“But?” asked Bill.

“But, they seem so rigid and uninterested in considering anything different from what they already believe to be true. It’s like talking to a fence post.”

“I think we got a *thinker*, here, Bill!”

“Yep. Thinking for yourself can be very dangerous – but in a good way,” added Bill.

“I’m not trying to oppose them. But my new view of life is real. It works. My life seems to have changed!”

“Even without the girl?” asked Mike.

“Yes, even without her. Because it is bigger than her.”

“Hmmm.” Bill looked at Mike. “This is more serious than we thought.”

“Sure is,” said Mike. “Well, Jobe, tell us about this new view of life.”

“You won’t get it. I didn’t either at first. But here it is. *Streams of Terrible Beauty!*” Jobe waited for a response.

Mike looked at Bill. “You see any problem with that, Bill?”

“Nope. Do you?”

“Neither do I,” said Mike.

“You mean you guys get it?” Jobe asked, his voice a bit higher in pitch.

“Well, I’ve never heard of it,” said Mike, “but, my guess is that life has *terrible* things in it, yet God eventually makes them *beautiful*.”

Jobe sat astonished. “How’d you guess? Nobody has guessed it right!”

“Kinda obvious to us,” said Bill, looking over at Mike “It’s what we believe, and what we share each week on our radio show.”

“I thought you just did a lot of jesting,” said Jobe.

“Oh, we do. But we have *meaningful* fun,” said Mike. “We just call the show *Jesting In Jesus* to get people curious and listening. We are, actually, very serious about what you believe.”

“No kidding. Then it’s real?”

“You bet it's real,” said Bill.

“Even if it's based on some passage in the book of Job without clear proof of its meaning?”

“If it's true, it's true!” exclaimed Mike. “Just live it, Job. Ultimate truth comes from God. It's between you and him, uniquely – not between you and him and someone else. This doesn't mean you never listen to others. You should, indeed.”

“Yes. And Paul said to ‘examine everything carefully,’” added Bill. “That's about the best advice you can get.”

“So, ultimately, take it to God,” said Mike. “He is the only one who can validate for you what is true. But keep on asking, seeking, and knocking. Make it a lifestyle, and you will do well.”

Jobe perked up. “Hey, I've heard that *ask, seek, knock* thing somewhere before.”

Mike looked at Bill. “We have, too! So, whatcha gonna do about those leaders?”

“What do you think I should do? They've already called me in twice. The first time they warned me about Ellie...”

“Your ex-girlfriend?” asked Bill.

“Yep. Told me not to see her anymore. They don't think a woman should be teaching spiritual stuff to men. Plus, she doesn't attend any church.”

“Oh my,” said Mike. “Can't have that! Well, Bill and I would disagree with them on both issues. But we try to respect the genuine beliefs of others, knowing we are all equal before God. Besides, all these things are a matter of faith that cannot be proven objectively.”

“Hey, that's my attitude toward these guys. But I don't think the feeling is mutual.”

“It usually isn't,” said Mike. “But don't worry about it. Just love them to death and let them be who they are.”

“Hey, that's what I gotta do with my mom.”

“Smart choice,” added Bill. “Keep the relationship with her open and alive!”

“I go see the leaders again next Tuesday,” said Jobe. “And I hope it’s for the last time.”

“Well,” said Mike. “I would stand my ground, tell them what I believe, and why, and never give in.”

“I get what you’re saying, Mike. And I’ve thought of that. But somehow fighting them does not seem right.”

“Being a doormat is not right, either,” replied Mike.

“Good point,” said Jobe. He turned his attention to Bill. “What do you think?”

“Well, if it were me, I would just boogie out of there, go live my life, and never go back. They’re never going to listen to you. You’re wasting your time.”

“I’ve thought of that too, Bill. But that doesn’t seem right, either.”

“So, what’s left to do, Jobe?” asked Bill. Mike stayed silent.

After a few moments, Jobe said, “I don’t know. I just don’t know.”

“Well, my faith in God is big,” said Mike. “I think he will show you the way. What do you think, Bill?”

“Yes. I agree. He will. But if you’re like me, it might be a long time after all is said and done. Way too late. Lessons learned. Sometimes that’s the best we can get.”

“OK. Thanks, guys. You have been a great encouragement to me. I don’t expect you to know what I should do. No one can know that. But just the fact that you already understood *Streams* – man that is worth its weight in gold. I’m not sure what I will do. Maybe I’ll just fail. But I guess that’s just how life is, sometimes.”

“You never fail, when it’s *your* journey,” Mike interjected.

Jobe pondered this as the two men stood up. “Wow, thanks for the encouragement.”

“Happy to be of some help to you, Jobe. And so glad to meet you,” said Bill.

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“Maybe see ya on the golf course sometime. Fore!” Mike chuckled.

Chapter 18

The remainder of Jobe's week, and his weekend, were uneventful. After a long Monday at work, Jobe stayed home resting in his Lazy-Boy recliner. He contemplated the previous two meetings with the church leaders, his recent meeting with Mike and Bill, and of course all that had transpired with Ellie. *Ellie, oh, Ellie. Where did I go wrong? Can't think of anything – not anything big. Maybe it wasn't me! But it's never just one person's fault. I must have contributed in some way. Perhaps, I just responded wrong to her. Did I really offend her by not liking her dress choice? Naw, it must go deeper than that.* He fully reclined his chair – almost flat. It reminded him of the dentist, where he once fell asleep. This recliner is where he spent many nights, fighting bronchial colds, and keeping his head elevated so he could sleep.

Jobe began talking to himself. "Ellie is history. But that's OK. Many fond memories." Jobe fully relaxed his body. He felt as if he were floating. The euphoria of sleep began to set in. He loved that feeling. "And I gained a whole new perspective on life," he slowly mumbled. "This *Streams* idea fits life well, it brings peace, and removes a ton of stress – once it's understood." Jobe chuckled out loud. He began thinking again. *What to do about the leaders at church? One more meeting! Should I do the fight-thing as Mike suggested? Or should I do the flight-thing as Bill would do? Don't know. This is the worst thing I've ever been through – well, except for losing Sis. Oh, Sis, how I miss you!* Jobe's eyes began to move upward in his head – a sure sign of sleep coming on.

Suddenly, Jobe heard four words. He pulled up the side handle and moved his recliner to an elevated position. “What was that?” he said out loud in his empty room. *I know that wasn't a voice, and it didn't come through my ears!* He brought his recliner to a full, upright position. “That was very weird. Let...them...slay...you?” he said out loud, repeating the four words he heard. *Is this from God, or just my subconscious? I really don't know.* He looked around in his empty, quiet, dimly lit room. He reclined back to a semi-elevated position and tried to find the euphoria that so quickly departed. *Let them slay you. Let them slay you.* He couldn't get those words out of his mind. He quickly sat up again. “I know!” he shouted out in his empty room. “It's the answer to my dilemma!” He got up and paced. “I don't need to fight, like Mike. I don't even need to flee, like Bill. I only need to... let them slay me! That's what they've been doing with their words these last two weeks, anyway. Don't fight, don't flee, just let it be. I don't need to do anything! I'll just shut up and love these guys – which I have already done, despite their harshness. They're just doing what they honestly believe is right. But even if it's not right, it doesn't matter. It's not my problem. I'll just let them be who they gotta be, and I'll be free!” *But will this work?* Jobe thought as he sat back down in his recliner. *I don't know. But I'll find out – tomorrow. Just seems like the right thing to do.* He fully reclined, again, and soon fell fast asleep.

Oh boy, another Tuesday meeting, Jobe thought, with a bit of sarcasm. *Meeting number three! Hope this is the last one.* He finished the last bite of his early breakfast and headed over to The Assembly to try out his new *let-them-slay-you* strategy.

He entered the door of the quiet church building. As he headed up the stairs, a wave of peace came over him. *Where did that come from? This is about as weird as last night.* He climbed the

stairs, turned right, and headed to the conference room. The door was ajar, and he could see inside as he approached. *Yep, the same four men in the same four seats: old man, big man, tall man, and the young man.* But Jobe sensed no fear, unlike the other two times he entered this room. He only felt a calm assurance. *I think I'm at peace because I have a strategy, not because I know it will work. No matter what happens, I believe just loving them is the right thing to do.*

“Welcome,” said the big man. Jobe pulled out his chair and sat down across the table from the four men. He sat up straight, folded his hands on the table, and fully relaxed his body. It was almost like reclining in his easy chair at home. “Hope you had a good week.”

“Good enough,” answered Jobe. “But it's been a struggle. I gotta be honest with you, this whole ordeal has been really hard for me.” Jobe’s gaze was genuine.

“Well, to be honest with you, Jobe, we're glad you're struggling!” said the tall man. “Our sincere hope is that in your struggle you will repent of all this nonsense and get yourself back on the straight and narrow path that pleases God.” Jobe remained calm but wondered to himself, *How do they know what will please God?* He remembered the strange words that came to him the night before, ‘let them slay you’. *I guess this is the first wave of their verbal sword. And that's OK!*

“We want to spend this morning focusing on you, Jobe,” the big man continued. “We love you; we’ve known you for a long time – and your mom. We appreciate all the sound room help you have given us over the past several years. But we are also very concerned.”

“Yes. All of us” added the tall man. The other two men also added their *yes*.

“False teaching, especially when it comes from an unofficial source – this girl you have chosen to follow – is a very serious matter.” The big man leaned forward in his chair. “We are *required* by God to root out any, and all, heresy in this assembly. God has

clearly called us,” the big man motioned, stretching his hands toward the other leaders, “making each one of us overseers who possess the *keys* to this small part of God’s kingdom. We all take our responsibility seriously.”

“I appreciate that, and I am glad that you do,” said Jobe, respectfully.

“But do you really, Jobe?” said the frail old man sitting on the far left. “It doesn’t seem like it when you insist on believing things that we know can’t be true and encouraging others to do the same. Do you understand?”

“Yes, I think I do.” Jobe had determined before he came to respond respectfully, answer their questions briefly and genuinely, and demonstrate his love for these men who had been so influential in his upbringing.

“It sure doesn’t seem like it!” said the young man. Jobe turned his head to the far-right end of the table giving him his full attention. “Do you understand that we, as the official God-appointed spiritual leaders, have been granted authority over all your actions and beliefs as long as you are a part of this assembly? Certainly, this should give you pause!” The young man sat back in his chair and folded his arms.

“I’ve given a lot of thought to all you have told me over the last two weeks. I value your opinion.”

“And?” asked the tall man leaning forward toward Jobe.

Jobe calmly looked at the tall man. “I believe you all have my best interest in mind, and that you are protecting this assembly in a way that seems right to you.”

“Alright!” said the big man, smiling. “I think we are finally making some progress.”

“But...” Jobe paused. The big man’s smile left his face. “I believe that *Streams of Terrible Beauty* is an accurate view of life and of God. It’s quite simple. Believing this has changed my life and I know I am a better man because of it.”

“Are you saying that we are the false teachers?” asked the tall man.

“No, sir. I am not,” said Jobe. “I am only telling you what I honestly believe to be true. What you believe is between you and God.”

“But you have no defense for what you believe, no proof texts, no mantle of authority you can claim for yourself?” added the frail old man on the left.

“Nope. Just what I know to be true for myself – and a changed heart, mind, and life.”

“That’s no defense, Jobe,” said the big man pounding his fist on the table. “That’s a cop-out. You need to bring your arguments against us – if you have any. Quit falling on your sword and take a stand!”

“I have no desire or reason to bring anything against any of you.” Jobe was surprised at what came out of his mouth. But he knew it was genuine and from his heart. “I love and respect you guys – all of you. And I know you want the best for me. I do not claim to be right, nor any of you wrong. I just know what I believe for myself.” Jobe could see the anger growing on their faces. It was more than just frustration. But it made Jobe want to love them all the more. He realized that they were not at peace, and he wanted them to experience the freedom and peace he had so recently discovered.

“It’s not about what you believe,” said the young man. “It’s about what is true and false. And we know that this *Streams* nonsense is false.”

“Let me get this straight,” said the big man looking directly at Jobe. Jobe sat quietly in his chair. His calm was matched only by his amazing experience the night before. “It seems you have no desire to repent of this false and dangerous teaching. Is that right?”

“True!” answered Jobe. “I have no desire to change what I honestly believe to be true. I don’t even think I can! But I still love and respect you guys.”

“Oh, knock off the lovey-dovey talk! It's pretty clear where your heart is. And I suspect it has a lot to do with that teacher-girl who never attends any church. Am I right?” The big man waited for a response. Jobe said nothing, nor did he provide any body language. No need. He was at peace, and he knew it. No one could take that from him. He had ... let them slay him!

“You have nothing to say, Jobe?” asked the tall man. Jobe just smiled calmly and genuinely.

“Well ... then we have no choice, gentlemen,” the big man said, looking at the others on the left and right. He looked at Jobe. “And it pains me to say this, Jobe. We’ll have to make an announcement on Sunday as a warning to all who attend here. But we do this also for you, Jobe, in hope that you will soon repent, get right with God, and abandon your false beliefs and heresy. We have no choice.”

“And, sadly,” said the tall man, “you will not be allowed to participate in any leadership activity – including your sound-man job. We cannot have people in leadership holding to any heresy. And we consider what you believe to be heresy!”

“Do you have any questions for us, Jobe?” asked the old man.

“Just one,” answered Jobe. “What will you say in your announcement?”

The big man spoke up. “Oh, I'm sorry, Jobe. We cannot give you that information. It is against our policy in this kind of disciplinary action.”

“OK. You're in charge,” Jobe said, respectfully as he got up and slid his chair back under the table. “Guess I'll just have to find out on Sunday.”

“I don’t think you understand,” said the big man firmly. “We do not want you to come on Sunday. It could be very disruptive to have you here.”

“I promise I won’t say anything,” replied Jobe. “I’ll just respectfully listen.”

“Sorry. This is a matter of policy, too.”

“Can you just give me a copy of what you will say?” asked Jobe.

“No. Sorry, Jobe. These matters must be dealt with very carefully. It is, overall, for the best.”

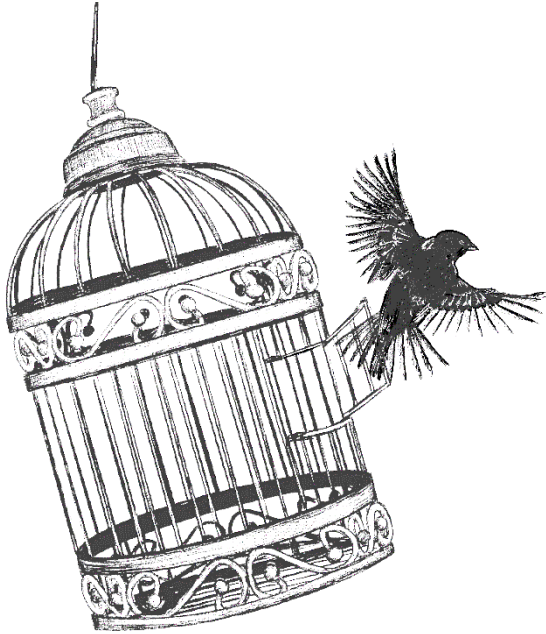
“Remember,” added the young man. “You put yourself in this position. We’re just trying to do the will of God. You’ve got no one to blame but yourself.”

Hmmmm. The will of God? Jobe thought to himself.

The old man spoke out. “Maybe, go home, pray, and consider repenting – but it’s got to be *real* repentance – a willingness to forsake the erroneous path you have chosen.”

They all thanked Jobe for coming and wished him a good day.

The Resolution



Wednesday, September 23, 1987

Chapter 19

The next morning, Jobe stepped outside his apartment and locked the door. He felt relieved. *Ab. It's Wednesday and I'm done with Tuesdays!* He heard the phone ringing inside, hurried to unlock the door, and rushed in. "Hello?"

"Jobe?" There was a pause. "It's Elliot."

"Elliot!" Jobe hesitated a moment, trying to make sense of the call. "What's up, bro?" was all Jobe could think of saying.

"I need to talk to you."

"Uh," Jobe paused, still trying to make sense of the call. "Haven't we talked enough?" Jobe said, wanting to ward off any more confrontations with anyone. Visions of the coffee shop, the cabin, Ellie's bail-out, and his inquisition with The Assembly leaders all crowded inside his head.

"No, you don't understand. I've been doing a lot of thinking, praying, and soul-searching ever since the cabin."

"Really?" Jobe said as he sat down at the kitchen table where the phone was stationed.

After a pause, Jobe said, "Please continue."

"This is not something I want to do on the phone. Can we meet? Uh, if you have time, that is."

"Oh ... sure. Of course," said Jobe, still a bit shocked but pleasantly surprised. "Always got time for an old friend."

"Thanks so much. I have some wonderful things to tell you. Can we meet at Memorial Park, across from Carla's?"

"Sure!"

“There’s a picnic table by that old World War II cannon. What time works for you?”

“I can take my lunch break at about twelve-thirty?”

“Sounds good. Can I bring you something to eat?” asked Elliot.

“Yes. Burger and a Coke. Thanks.”

“You got it. See you then!”

At noon, Jobe drove from work to Memorial Park and pulled into one of the parking spaces. He got out, walked past the World War II canon, and sat on top of one of the picnic tables with his feet resting on the seat. He looked around for Elliot. *Hope he didn't chicken out. He's made me curious.* Jobe sat and watched people go in and out at Carla's across the street for about fifteen minutes.

“Burgers!” said a voice coming from behind. Jobe turned to see Elliot smiling and holding up two McDonald's bags.

Jobe got off the table and sat down on the bench. “I'm starving.”

“Me too!” said Elliot, as he opened both bags spreading the food and drinks out on the table.

“Surprised to hear from you, bro,” Jobe said, taking a bite of his Big Mac.

“Actually, I was a little surprised to be calling you.” Elliot just held his burger in his hands. “It all happened quite quickly.” Jobe stuffed a few French fries in his mouth. Elliot blew out a breath through his teeth and shifted uncomfortably. “I wanted to tell you that when we met at the cabin, I was insensitive about all you were going through.” Elliot looked down at his feet nodding his head in agreement with himself. “I don't have a clue how hard it must be to lose your sister.” He looked up at Jobe. “I was putting a time limit on your grief.” He paused. “I've been considering the Dignity Walk story by your friend, Ellie. At the time I was stunned

and didn't know what to say." Elliot finally took a bite of his burger.

Jobe swallowed his fries. "I think everyone was stunned ... except, Ellie. She told me she thought of her Dignity Walk event under the pressure of you pushing her into speaking."

Elliot looked down and grabbed a fry. He waved it slightly. "I shouldn't have done that. But it seemed right at the time." He popped the fry into his mouth. "But her story got me thinking, and I've been thinking a lot this past month." Jobe remained silent, except for sipping his Coke. "Not sure what the connection is, but I cried when I realized I could never be that special to my precious, lifelong bride, Billie. You know ... having all the right words, strong but tender, a velvet-covered brick?"

"That's asking a lot of anyone!" said Jobe.

"God asks a lot, and I failed. Too many years of destroying her confidence in me. I realized I didn't earn much credibility, and she couldn't see my love the few times expressed it. I've failed so much that I'm afraid to try again. I figure if I do nothing, at this point in life, at least I won't make things any worse."

"That's pretty dismal," said Jobe. "You got all that from Ellie's story?"

"No, I think the emotion of it caused me to realize some things that lingered deep within me."

"Well, isn't that a good thing? Isn't admitting you have a problem the first step in solving it? Haven't we told people this countless times during our interventions?"

Elliot just looked at Jobe, as if he had heard it for the first time. "I guess so. Never thought of taking the same medicine I handed out."

"That's OK, bro. I didn't either until the three of you confronted me at the coffee shop and made me walk in the shoes of all those I thought I was helping."

"I think we helped them, some," Elliot said trying to salvage a scrap of dignity.

“I’m sure we did, but we may have done more harm than good in our blind zeal.”

“I think you’re right,” Elliot said, shaking his head up and down and taking another bite of his burger. Elliot chewed and swallowed hard. “Some men only need to fix one mistake, reversing one bad decision, and then their wife melts into their arms as a hero. But there’s nothing I can do after 35 years of mistakes. All very human. All were lessons. And they may be no worse than my wife’s mistakes. But mine were many, and there are more coming.”

“Still dismal,” said Jobe. “Why this sudden lack of confidence?”

“It’s been slowly coming. And now, no single action or sequence of words can wipe out all my years of failures. They were small and unintentional but added up to one big mistake. It’s better to make one big mistake in a short-term relationship than many small ones in a life-long relationship!”

“That may be true,” Jobe said, not knowing what else to say.

“Ha!” laughed Elliot. “I am the worst husband my wife has ever been married to.”

Jobe threw his arms up in the air. “But you’re the *only* one she’s been married to!”

“That’s the problem. There is no way for me, or her, to know how good or bad a husband I am. Perhaps this is the curse of a long and successful marriage.” Though his face was laughing, tears rolled down his big, old-man cheeks.

Jobe sat in silence, trying to quietly finish his lunch. “Well, consider this, Elliot. Maybe Ellie’s story wasn’t all that connected to your problems. But maybe it holds the solution!” Jobe looked at Elliot.

Elliot looked up. “What do you mean?”

“Well, what did *you* get out of her story?” Elliot took the last bite of his burger and stared at the old rusty cannon for a few

minutes. “What was it, in Ellie’s Dignity Walk story, that got to you the most?” Jobe waited. He stared at the cannon with Elliot.

Elliot folded his arms and sat up straight on the bench. “I think it was the part about how the two little girls would someday watch the video together and experience the greatest kind of bonding in life.”

“And what was the basis of that bonding, for those two little girls?” asked Jobe.

Elliot thought for a moment, then said, “It was the fact that one dad’s tragedy was the other dad’s salvation.” His voice dropped with a sense of finality.

“You sure?”

“Yep!”

“I think you’re right,” said Jobe. “It was *terrible* that one dad died, but it was *beautiful* that the other dad lived. Right?”

“Yeah. It was one, single, *stream of terrible beauty*,” Elliot said calmly and seemingly at peace with himself.

“So, the only question is... what is *your* steam of terrible beauty?”

Elliot pondered for a moment. “My failure is the *terrible* part.” Elliot paused and looked at the cannon again. Then he looked at Jobe. “And my future self ... it possesses the *beautiful* part.”

“Bingo!” said Jobe. “Now ... go bring about that beauty for Billie!”

Elliot stared at Jobe for a moment, then said, “Thank you.” As they both stood up, Elliot placed his hand on Jobe’s shoulder. “You are a dearer friend than ever.” Twice the size of Jobe, Elliot initiated a big bear hug.

“You, too,” said Jobe, barely finding enough breath to get it out.

“Hey. One more thing, Jobe.”

“Yes?”

“I don’t repeat gossip ... so listen carefully!”

“Very funny,” responded Jobe.

“The tall guy at the Assembly – can’t remember his name.”

“I know who he is,” Jobe said, wondering where this new conversation was headed.

“Turns out he’s been living a double life for years.”

Jobe, looked at Elliot, out of the corners of his eyes. “What kind?”

“Hooking up with prostitutes, while serving as a leader and telling people how important it is to trust God and live for him.”

“Whoa! I hate to admit it, but I needed to hear that news today. It explains a lot.” Jobe’s mind raced back to the three meetings he recently endured. *How could he possibly tell me he was glad I was struggling and that he had authority over my life?* “Well, that should make you feel better about your long string of puny failings with Billie!”

“Maybe it should. But I’ve learned not to view myself as better than those who seem worse than me; nor view myself as worse than those who seem better than me. I just compare who I am today with who I was in the past.”

“Jobe shook his head in agreement.” “That’s good advice, Elliot. I’m really glad we got together.”

“Me, too!”

Despite all that had happened over the past several weeks, Jobe felt at peace. Because of his better understanding of *Streams*, and learning what it means to genuinely love others – especially those who had angrily mistreated him, even letting them *slay* him – he experienced a new sense of quiet in his soul. He wasn’t sure he’d ever felt this way before, but he liked it and embraced it. This seemed strange to him, considering the trouble he had gotten into with The Assembly leaders and Ellie. Still, he harbored some doubts about the whole *Streams of Terrible Beauty* idea.

Jobe finished his work week and enjoyed a quiet and peaceful weekend. On Monday morning he sat at work in his big, high-back, rocking and rolling desk chair. *It's Monday afternoon*, he thought. *Done all I can today and it's only 2 p.m. What a lonely weekend I had. What to do now? I feel at peace ... yet restless. Why? Guess that's just life.* Jobe grabbed his keys off the desk and headed down the stairs of his office building. "Have a great afternoon, mister Jobe," said Fred the security guard as Jobe passed by him.

"I will. Trust me!" Jobe pushed open the front door and exited. He got in his Tiger, put the top down, and breathed in the refreshing fall air. *Open spaces. I love it.* He put it in gear, popped the clutch, and with a slight squeal of the tires headed for nowhere. *Think I'll drive down to Birdcage Mall and do some wandering around. Maybe even buy something.*

When he got there it was mostly vacant of people. *Ah. My kind of place on a Monday afternoon. Room to wander and ponder, and no one around.* It was the same kind of freedom he felt when he drove, top-down, in the mountains. As he walked past a Radio Shack store, he saw a young woman leading a small child by the hand. She was also pushing a double stroller carrying two infants that looked the same age. He thought of his twin sister and how they both must have been quite a handful for his mom when she was young. "She sure loved us," he said, out loud, "even though she was strict."

"What's that?" a passing man asked.

"Oh, nothing," Jobe said, quickly clearing his throat. "Sorry."

A song then played over the speaker system. Jobe slowed his walk slightly to hear a little better. Jobe stopped. *What is that song?* He asked himself. The song played on. "What *is* that song?" he asked out loud. "That song is me! I got a magic feeling and I got nowhere to go!" His spirit lifted. He started walking again, but now with a spring in his step. "It's that euphoric feeling you get when your mind is clear of clutter and all you know is that it's all okay – okay to not hurry, no hurry at all." His voice increased as

he spoke. He looked around to see if anyone heard him. He remembered feeling like this as a kid, long before he had any real responsibilities that came with adolescence – responsibilities that only increased in adulthood. Bills, deadlines, appointments, mistakes to recover from, etc.

But this song – who sings it? He kept walking. About the time his mind started to wander elsewhere, he blurted out, “The Beatles, Abbey Road, side two! How could I forget?” This time a couple of teenagers passed by and snickered. Jobe didn’t care. *One of the all-time best albums, ever, with those great four-part harmonies in the opening song on that side of the album.* He felt so happy, like being a kid again. He thoroughly enjoyed his no-place-to-go moment.

Then he thought about Ellie and how much she loved the harmonies of the Carpenters, Abba, and the Beach Boys. *She would love this moment if she were here.* He wished she were, and he missed her. His euphoria left as he again mused, *Why did she have to bail out, and with no explanation? Did she really take offense at the comment about the clothes? Was it thoughtless of me to be totally honest with her? Next time – I’ll keep my mouth shut and smile.*

Jobe’s thoughts then turned into mumbling. “Will there be a next time? Then again if she’s that sensitive – do I want there to be a next time?” After a moment, he answered himself. “Yes! I like her and will take her as she is.” Then his thoughts took over. *Perhaps her struggle is something else, something deeper on her mind.*

To escape his never-ending questions, he rushed to the exit and walked outside towards his car. His nowhere-to-go moment slipped away like a short-lived vapor over a cup of tea. All the way home, Jobe couldn’t shake his strange, combined feeling of peace and broken heartedness. But his peace surpassed his understanding. He realized that this was his *Delightful Devastation*.

Chapter 20

The next day, Ellie reheated two leftover tacos and sat down at her breakfast nook by the window. *Tuesday! At least I got through another Monday.* She looked down at her tacos. *What's missing?* She kept staring at her tacos. *Tomato, avocado, olives, lettuce, cheese. Hmmm ... salsa! Gotta have salsa.* She got up, went to the fridge, opened it, inspected every shelf, stood up, and put her hands on her hips. *Dang! No salsa.* She grabbed her keys, locked her apartment door, and headed down the sidewalk to the Seven-Eleven. Woman on a mission. She pushed open the door of the small, brightly lit store that was part of the gas station. She marched down the back aisle and found the salsa. "Gotcha!" she said under her breath grabbing a jar of Pace Picante Sauce. She headed for the checkout counter anticipating a quick purchase and brisk walk home. But then, she heard a familiar voice in the adjacent aisle. *Oh my gosh. It's Jobe.* She froze ... and listened.

"Hi, Mark. Yep, it's all going great," was Jobe's answer to the man behind the counter.

"Anything new?" Mark said, ringing up Jobe's purchase.

"Life is good," said Jobe, pulling a ten-dollar bill out of his wallet.

"Glad it is for someone," said Mark. He gave Jobe his change and pushed in the cash register drawer with a *clunk*. "What's so good about it?"

Jobe wasn't sure if Mark was serious or just making conversation. He looked at Mark, and Mark just looked back.

“Well ... I’ve been through some really tough stuff this past month or so.” Ellie couldn’t move.

“Ha! Tell me about it!” said Mark, sitting back on his stool behind the counter, ready to listen.

“Went through about the hardest thing ever,” said Jobe.

“Yeah? What was it?” asked Mark. Ellie put the jar down on the closest shelf and leaned against the post next to the potato chips display.

“Got verbally and spiritually body slammed by some people I love and trusted.”

“Ooh. Sounds bad. Not sure I want any details.”

“I won’t bore you with them. Just ugly,” said Jobe.

“Seems like you survived. You’re smiling!”

“Yes. And it’s not delirium!” joked Jobe.

“Ha! What is it, then?”

“Peace, bro. I am at peace. Maybe for the first time in my life.”

“Wow! I want some!” exclaimed Mark.

“Maybe we’ll talk sometime,” said Jobe. “I got quite a story. I call it my Delightful Devastation.”

“How’d you get this peace, Jobe?”

Jobe put his bag down on the counter. “Well... I discovered that terrible things have a beautiful purpose.” Ellie’s ears burned.

“You’re kidding, right? Sounds like a contradiction.”

“Actually ... it is!” said Jobe. “But it is also true. You never see it till you go through it.” Ellie’s legs felt weak. She grabbed the post that ran up through the ceiling.

“Get through it?” asked Mark.

“Yes. Not just endure it but learn something new about yourself – *because* of the terrible experience.”

“How’d you figure this out?”

“Learned it from a girl.”

“Ah ha!” exclaimed Mark. “I knew there had to be a girl in there, somewhere. There always is.” Ellie just smiled. “You’ll have to tell me more someday.”

“Oh, I will. Take care, Mark.” Jobe grabbed his bag and exited the store. Ellie wanted to shout, *Hey Jobe!* But the words just didn’t come.

Ellie paid for her salsa and walked back home, much slower than when she left. She ate her two tacos but tasted nothing. Jobe’s words rang in her heart. *I am so glad he is doing well. But why can’t I do well with him? ‘Cause I screwed up! That’s why. But why did I?* She considered putting on some good music in harmony with her heart, but she didn’t. She wandered around the apartment, thinking about Jobe’s words – but mostly considering her past actions.

She ventured outside deep in thought. The woods behind the apartment building appeared inviting. Wandering in the woods, as she often did, she noticed two squirrels, chattering, chasing each other around the tree. They took turns chasing. *I wonder which one is like me?* She kept watching till they ascended to higher limbs, jumped over to another tree, and disappeared into the dusk of the evening. “Good luck, you two!” She looked around to see if anyone heard her. But all she saw was woods, quiet and lonely with a slight roar of cars from the street in front of her apartment a quarter mile away.

She found a log and sat down, knees together, feet spread wider. Her hands made two fists with her elbows on her knees. *What’s wrong with me, God? I know life is full of terrible things – but not everything! Thank you so much. I know that, eventually, things become beautiful in your time. But I don’t like waiting and I still have a lot of questions. Are you listening?*

Staring off into the thickness of the woods, she imagined herself as a girl stranded on a desert island. She saw herself talking

to faces made from coconuts to ward off her loneliness. But they never talked back. They just stared. *God, you seem the same way sometimes – just staring at me, saying nothing.* Ellie stood up, grabbed an old dead limb off the ground, and took a big baseball swing at the nearest tree. “Ouch!” she yelled as she dropped the limb. *Just what do you want of me, God? I’m not mad at you, but I’m damn frustrated! Jobe has moved on, I can’t handle a relationship with a good guy, and I’m 37! I always seem to sabotage it when it’s going well. What is all this terrible stuff supposed to be telling me?* She waited. No answer came – not even in her heart or mind.

She marched back to her apartment. “Wandering is over!” she said out loud, not caring if anyone heard her rant. Entering her apartment she locked the door, turned on the TV, and plopped down on the couch.

“Oh good. Parent Trap! I love this movie.” Her frustration slipped back beneath the surface of her mind. “Hey, this is the part where they find out they are twins, separated by a divorce as infants, and start comparing stories!” Ellie watched as the twins compared experiences – one growing up with just their mom and the other only with their dad. Then she heard one of the twins compare their separated parents to some famous lovers in history, calling such love *beautiful agony*.

Ellie jumped up and turned off the TV. “That’s it!” She shouted. “That-is-it. True love generates *beautiful agony* – terrible beauty, in my case!” Ellie kept talking to herself, scolding herself, but also encouraging herself.

She sat back down on the sofa. “It’s OK that I messed up,” she said in a soft voice. “Everyone does. No one’s perfect. I knew this, but I never really applied it to myself. And I gotta just let my real Mom mess up, no matter her reason. There had to be some kind of eventual *beauty* in it, even for her. And the beauty from my mess-up is still coming. It’s gotta be!” She let herself sink deep into the couch. There she felt secure in its embrace.

Then, she sat up straight. She grabbed her diary off the bookcase shelf and began writing.

Dear Martha

Sorry, I haven't been keeping you up to date. I've been so lonely and discouraged ever since I bailed out on Jobe. How stupid of me. But I couldn't help it. Honest! The good news is that I think I figured out why. It actually has nothing to do with Jobe ... and yet, it has everything to do with him. Comes down to my orphanage days and my bad experience with Phil Rowman. I should've figured this out a long time ago. Things always seem simpler when looking back. 'Coulda, shoulda, woulda!' Thanks for giving me that gem as a pre-teen girl.

Ab-ha moments come at the strangest times and in the strangest places. Turned on the TV and watched Parent Trap – for about the tenth time. I see you nodding in agreement. Ha! Anyway, it confirmed what you and I believe about life – you know, Streams of Terrible Beauty? And there it was, same idea, right there in the middle of Parent Trap. Amazing. I don't know why, but it all clicked for me: why my real mom gave me up, the Phil Rowman break-up, and even my blunder with Jobe. It is so cool when things fall into place. It just has to happen when it happens – can't force it. And maybe, just maybe, all that we go through when seeking the solution is part of the solution! Wow, I'm starting to sound like you now.

Not sure what will happen with Jobe. He's doing great. Happy to know I helped him and didn't only hurt him. If he's done with me, that's OK. Can't blame him. My beautiful future could include him, but it doesn't have to. Such freedom! But I secretly hope he will be in it. I'll let you know what happens.

Tuesday, Sept 29, 1987

Ellie closed her diary and gently placed it back on the bookcase shelf. *So ... what about Jobe?* she asked herself. *How does he fit into all this?* She let her mind wander into the future. *Maybe he doesn't!* The thought horrified her. But then she sank back down into the embrace of the couch. *It really doesn't matter. Does it? My*

beautiful time will come ... with or without Job! She got up, turned the TV back on, and finished watching what was left of the movie.

Ellie slept well. She yawned, got up, fixed her hair, threw on minimal makeup, and headed out for her morning coffee. When she got to Carla's, she sat in her favorite spot – a small table with a chair on each side next to a large life-size picture window that spied on the short, downtown Main Street. The view was spectacular. Across the street, a short distance down the narrow two-lane avenue stood two tall brick buildings that blocked her view from everything except the blue sky. The buildings were old, purposely preserved, dating back to the late 1800s when Oak Pines was a foothill mining town during the gold rush days. One building had white painted bricks with long narrow deep-set windows and trapezoidal-shaped openings at the top and bottom. In front of the windows stretched a second-story balcony made of wood – clearly a danger to any unsuspecting leaner. The next-door building, which butted up against the first one, had unpainted red bricks. The top several feet of bricks, unmatched in color and shape, made it obvious they had been replaced sometime in the past.

Just past the red brick building another street made a tee into Main Street where the coffee shop was located. On the other side of this street stood yet another building, a modern one with only a single story. Since the coffee shop stood slightly uphill from the modern building, Ellie could see the rooftop air conditioners peeking over the edge. But beyond the roof was the most fantastic view in town. A whole mountainside of pine trees, flourishing so close together it created a sea of prickly green. The tops of the trees followed the ridgeline of the sweeping hill, up and down they flowed as her eyes scanned the horizon.

Behind the trees floated fluffy white clouds migrating slowly in the wind, slightly changing form as they traveled south. These clouds were big and puffy, triangle-shaped with extra puffs in the middle. Some had a 3-D appearance due to the dark portions that held the rain. A few scattered pine trees, positioned much closer, poked above the horizon of the hillside trees as if to say, *look at me*. Below, an occasional car passed slowly on the street. Lively kids bounced, accompanied by hand-grabs to keep them safe from the danger of passing cars.

Ellie sipped her coffee as she thought, once again, how much she loved her slow-paced little town and the beauty of her favorite view. But she jolted awake from her short daydream as Jobe walked through the front door, confident and in a hurry. Seeing Ellie, he said, “Oh Ellie. So glad to see you. Can I sit for a bit after I grab some coffee?”

“Sure,” Elle said slowly, half stunned.

Jobe grabbed a cup at the counter, pumped the carafe three times, poured in some cream, and headed over to see Ellie. “How are you? It's been a while,” Jobe said, eagerly and confidently, seemingly unphased by all that had transpired between them. Ellie couldn't take her eyes off Jobe. He seemed like a different person, and it seemed like a year since she had seen him. *Maybe he is different*, she thought to herself. *I wonder what he's been doing. Oh, I so want to tell him what I've learned.* But Ellie just put on her poised-girl defense and waited to see what might happen.

“I've been doing well,” said Ellie. “It was tough for a while, but I figured some things out.”

“I think I know what you mean,” Jobe said, having settled into his chair, more introspective. He sipped his coffee slowly. Her words made him want to tell her all he'd been through. But he didn't, and he knew he didn't need to. The Ellie-hurt, along with the Assembly-hurt, seemed to no longer exist. Now all that

remained was an experiential knowledge about *Streams of Terrible Beauty*, a concept he once got from a pretty girl, then lost it temporarily in doubt, but then made it his own by rising up in his devastation. Ellie, unable to speak, froze in her chair.

After an awkward moment of silence, Jobe said, “Well, gotta go.” He drank his coffee faster. “October tomorrow! My favorite month. Beautiful weather and no pollen!” Ellie’s heart sank, but as always, she maintained that poise that always protected her so well in the past.

Jobe got up, tipped his cup toward Ellie, and said, “Take care.” Then he turned and headed toward the door. Ellie so wanted to say something, but fear restrained her. “Call you sometime?” the surprising words flew out of her mouth. Jobe kept walking and opened the door. He paused, looking down. Then he looked over his shoulder at Ellie and said, “Yeah, I’d like that,” and walked out.

PART 3

ALL THINGS
RECONCILED

The Plan



Thursday, October 1, 1987

Chapter 21

Ellie opened her eyes, lay there for a moment, then in a panic turned over in her bed and stared at her alarm clock. *Oh crap! Forgot to set the alarm.* She threw off her fluffy, pinkish, custom embroidered down-comforter and leaped out of bed. Twelve large, plastic, tube-shaped curlers hung from her head, some only loosely tied to her hair with angled hairpins. She began removing the tubes and pins while looking down at her comforter on the floor, making sure her embroidery of dainty flowers around the edges was unharmed. Having removed the last tube, she hustled into the bathroom and gazed into the mirror. She turned her head right and left, quickly brushed her hair in downward strokes, and pulled her golden locks inward to capture the look that helped her navigate through the day.

Oh heck! She tossed the brush on top of the toilet tank. *Good enough.* She turned her head left and right one last time in the mirror. *Looks like it's gonna be a no-makeup day!* Not fond of occasionally required days, Ellie could get away with it. She exhibited a fair and clear complexion, petite features, slightly brown eyebrows, and adorable blue eyes that needed little touching up. She dressed quickly, tied her multi-pastel-colored tennis shoes, and whisked out the door.

At the law firm, she scurried through the front door as the receptionist said, “Mornin’ Ellie. Where’s your coffee?”

“No time today! Bad way to start,” said Ellie hurrying by and talking as she looked back. *Bam.*

“Ouch! Why do they place desks in the path where I'm walking?” The receptionist chuckled as Ellie disappeared into her work area.

She sat down at her desk and looked around. Everyone appeared busy on computers or shuffling papers. No one noticed her entry. She thought for a moment, then pulled a file from her desk drawer marked ‘Olson Case.’ She planned to do research on installations of fencing by a local hardware store to support a lawsuit by the parents of a young boy who scaled the fence and drowned last year. She ran her finger down the list of names finding the next number in a stack of scratched-out entries. She started to dial. 2-6-3-8-0.... Then she stopped. *I gotta get some coffee!* She placed the receiver back on the phone and headed to Carla's.

After a three-minute walk, Ellie pulled open the backward-hanging door and walked up to the counter. The sound of coffee beans clattered through the vacuum pipes overhead, as Ellie said, “Give me some special blend, Gina.”

Gina laughed and said, “You don't want that. We save it for unsuspecting customers.”

Ellie grabbed a cup, pressed twice on the coffee carafe, and headed for her window seat. She sipped her cup of Java and stared out at her sleepy little town, but her thoughts were much farther away.

“Hello?” Ellie looked up and Gina stood, perched over her. “Anybody home?”

“Oh, yeah. Not really.”

“I'm on break. Sit for a while?”

“Sure, that would be great.”

“What's going on, girl?” Gina slouched low in her chair, hands folded, chin resting on them. “You like this Jobe guy, huh?”

“Sure do. A lot!”

“I thought he was enamored with you?”

“He was! But I blew it.”

“You mean ... when you bailed out on him?”

“Yep.”

“How’d it turn out?”

“Okay,” Ellie admitted, shaking her head up and down, slightly. “I learned a lot. But Jobe learned a lot more! It seems he came out better.”

“Really? How so?” Gina maintained her calm posture.

“When I bailed on Jobe, I surprised myself. I even disappointed myself!”

“Did you figure out why?”

“I did, but it took a while.”

“Tell me about it?” Gina sat up a little straighter in her chair.

“I became afraid, Gina, and at the strangest time when all was going well with Jobe.”

“Sometimes that’s the hardest time in a relationship.”

Ellie put her cup down on the table. “Why is that?”

“I think it’s because we lower our guard, become more vulnerable, and do not realize it – lost in love!”

“Makes sense. But why don’t we let it be a good thing?”

“Why do *you* think, girl? Isn’t that what you’ve already figured out?”

“You know, you’re right. When I start a relationship, it’s all new, so full of hope. I’m safe, but only because it’s new. Nothing can go wrong. Then, as things develop, things also get more complicated as we learn more about each other.”

“Isn’t that what you want?” asked Gina. “Grow together more?”

“Yes. But the risk of something going wrong also grows.”

“That’s life. Isn’t it?”

“Yep. And that’s why I call it the *yucky* part of a relationship.”

“Well said, and very insightful,” said Gina. “Hey, at least it no longer sneaks up on you.”

“True. It can't anymore. I'm safe, in that way. But it also hinders me.”

“You got to get past it, or else it will forever own you,” said Gina. “Do you want that?”

“Of course not. But how do I get past it?”

“That's for you to figure out, Ellie.”

“Did you ever have to get past it, Gina?”

“Oh, yeah. Sure did. Almost didn't once. But I'm glad I did.”

“How'd ya do it?” asked Ellie.

“What worked for me probably won't work for you. Everyone is different. You have to figure out your own journey. Mine might only clog yours up!”

“You're not much help,” complained Ellie.

“Oh, yes, I am. You know what to do!”

“No, I don't!”

“Yes ... you do!”

“What?” Ellie's voice peaked and stretched.

“What you do is go figure it out. And only you can figure out what *figuring it out* means.”

“That's the only way?” asked Ellie.

“Yep. That's the only way.”

Gina changed the subject. “Seen Jobe recently?”

“Yes. But I also overheard him telling someone about what he calls his *Delightful Devastation*.”

“Delightful devastation?”

“That's what he calls his experience since we broke up. *Devastating*, because of me and other trouble that came his way. But, *delightful*, because he emerged a better man based on what he learned from me.”

“What did he learn from you besides heartbreak?”

“No, before that. The cabin thing, when I shared *Streams of Terrible Beauty* that I learned from Charlie.”

“Oh yeah, that,” said Gina.

“That’s all I know. Makes me enamored with him all the more.”

“That’s *all* you know?” asked Gina.

“Well, yesterday at Carla’s when Jobe was leaving, I somehow drummed up enough courage to ask if I could call him sometime,”

“What’d he say?”

“He said what I once said to him.”

“What was that?” asked Gina.

“When he asked if he could call me, I said, ‘Yeah, I’d like that.’”

“Hey, I remember that! It was about a month ago, here at Carla’s. I was working that day.”

Gina switched to her motherly voice. “Listen, girl. It’s not for me to decide, but I say – give him a call. Somehow, despite his new-found love for *Streams*, he wants you to call him. He told you, ‘Yeah, I’d like that,’ didn’t he?”

“He sure did,” Ellie said, staring off into some distant, remote, pleasant place.

“Then call him! Never forget, you were the source of his newfound love of *Streams*!”

Ellie looked at Gina. “Okay. You’re right. I’ll call him!”

Later that afternoon, Ellie spent time fidgeting around her apartment totally out of character. She grabbed a dish out of the draining rack mounted on a gray rubber mat. The lip curled down into the sink causing a continual drip. Drying the dish, she quickly stacked it in the cupboard and grabbed another. She wiped the new dish in a circular motion, both sides, then did it again, her mind racing, turning, jerking back and forth in rhythm with her

overly dry dish. She added the dish to the stack, but then magically found herself making her bed. *What am I doing? I never make my bed unless someone's coming over. Waste of time. I'm just gonna mess it up again at night. And no one's coming over!* Then, she blurted out, "I just gotta make that call!"

Ellie picked up her slim, pastel blue Princess Phone that she bought at Kmart just a week earlier. Her fingers entered a hole in the clear plastic rotary dial. She pulled it down hard and fast. She pulled down another, then another, harder and faster. After seven strokes she placed the receiver to her ear. Before it could ring, she pulled it away and slammed it down into the matching blue cradle. *What the heck am I doing?* She stared into space, then looked down at the phone. *Why did I hang up? 'Make up your mind, girl.' That's what Gina would say.*

Ellie took a deep breath and calmly picked up the receiver. She carefully dialed the same seven digits, placed the receiver to her ear, and waited. She could feel her pulse throbbing in her neck. 'Hello?' said the voice on the other end. Ellie hesitated. 'Hello?' the voice repeated.

"Oh, Jobe. It's me, Ellie. I was just getting down my last sip of coffee," she lied.

"You at Carla's?" Jobe asked.

"No, I'm at home." Ellie waited.

"How you doin'?" Jobe finally asked, his voice steady and clear. "So glad you called!"

"You are?" Ellie's heart floated.

"You asked permission to call, and I granted it." Jobe sounded a bit smug.

"You sure did. Looks like the shoe is on the other foot, now."

"And just how does it feel?" asked Jobe.

"Actually ... pretty darn good!"

"It did for me, too, way back when."

Ellie felt poised again – for the first time in a long time. “Wanna come over sometime?” she asked.

“Sure! When? I'd love to see you.”

“Today?” Ellie cringed.

“I can't,” said Jobe. “How ‘bout tomorrow? I’m off. Not much happening then.” Ellie felt prioritized.

“That would be great. Come for lunch?”

“Hey, I'll *bring* lunch!”

“Nope. I'm fixing turkey sands.”

“Ooh! My favorite.”

“I know. Extra mayo. Right?”

“Yep. See you about 12:30?”

“Sure. And Jobe?” Ellie paused.

“Yes?”

“I'd love to see you, too!”

The next morning, Jobe got up and grabbed a quick cup of coffee at Carla's. He walked around town for a while, looking in shop windows and enjoying the cloudless fall day with endless deep blue sky. Entering the park with the old cannon where he and Eliot reconnected, he sat on a bench that faced the street. Watching people scurrying down the sidewalks, entering and exiting the shops, he leaned back and put his hands behind his head. *So glad Ellie called. She's quite a girl, but also quite human.* Jobe leaned forward and began mumbling to himself. “But, actually, I think I like that! If she's too perfect, we could never match up.” Jobe leaned back, again, against the bench. *But I also don't need her,* he thought to himself, *and I like that, too. She gave me a great gift – Streams of Terrible Beauty. And that's enough to last me a lifetime.*

Jobe got up, walked across the street to Carla's, got a refill, and returned to the bench where he thought more about the past and the future. An hour later he headed to Ellie's. He had barely gotten inside Ellie's front door when she grabbed him by the hand and led him to the sofa. “Let's go somewhere!”

“To the river, again?” asked Jobe.

“No. Some bigger journey.”

“Uh... back to the City?” Jobe continued the game.

“No, silly. Bigger than that.

“OK. Where?”

Ellie sat sideways on the couch, one foot on the floor, the other folded under her leg still holding Jobe's hand. “Let's tour!” she said, her excitement unrestrained.

“Tour? Where?”

“Everywhere! A big loop around the States.”

Jobe stuck his tongue inside his left cheek. “Uh... just how big?”

“The whole country!”

“Whoa, slow down. Are you crazy? That would take weeks.” He wasn't sure he wanted to jump back into this relationship so fast and furious. Her enthusiasm ignored her tendency to be cautious. Jobe began thinking she wasn't making sense.

“I know, but I have lots of vacation time saved up at work. How about you?”

“Yes. Several weeks,” Jobe said hesitatingly, not wanting to commit and at the same time not wanting to rob Ellie of her joy.

“Hey. You can take a well-deserved break from your soundman job at The Assembly on Sundays, can't you?” she said thinking of reasons to persuade him to go.

“I'm not doing that job, anymore.” Feeling relieved with his newfound freedom from the bonds of religion, Jobe began to seriously consider the trip. “You're usually very cautious. How'd you come up with this crazy scheme?”

“Well, the other day I was reading a book called *Travels With Charlie*.”

“Charlie again?”

“No. A different Charlie. This one's a dog.”

“Sorry,” said Jobe. “Never heard of that book.”

“It’s a Steinbeck book. You’ve heard of him, haven’t you?”

“Of course,” Jobe said, defensively. “*Grapes of wrath, East of Eden, Cannery Row.*”

“Good. You know your Steinbeck.”

“I read him when I was younger,” explained Jobe. “I was taken in by his realism. He seemed to present life as it is, in all its glory and tragedy. But I don’t remember any book about a dog.”

Ellie handed Jobe a paperback copy. “It was *not* one of his most famous books.”

Jobe took the book and turned it over. “Not very big.”

“Steinbeck wrote it near the end of his life. He wanted to see America and write about it. So, he packed up his green pickup truck with a camper shell, and took his wife’s poodle named Charlie as a companion.”

“Wow. Where’d they go?” asked Jobe.

“Made about thirty stops. He started in Sag Harbor on the eastern end of Long Island, then he headed north: Providence, Bangor Maine, and Niagara. Then he headed East to Chicago, Fargo, and Billings. Took a detour south to visit Yellowstone, then back up and over to Seattle.”

“He must have gone south from there,” added Jobe.

“Yep. Redwoods, San Francisco, then Salinas, where he grew up.”

“He must have visited Canary Row!” said Jobe.

“Sure did. Then he went east to Bakersfield, Flagstaff, Austin, then down to New Orleans.”

“Hey, I’ve always wanted to go there!” Jobe said finally allowing his enthusiasm to take hold.

“And you will, too, if we make this trip. Steinbeck also went through Montgomery, up the coast through DC, and then back to New York.

“Wow, that’s quite a loop. How long did it take him?”

“About 75 days.”

“Whoa! I only get four weeks of vacation per year.”

“Well, I only get three,” said Ellie. “We’ll skip some stops.”

“We better cut some corners, too,” added Jobe.

Ellie eyed him curiously, “So you’re in?”

Jobe, not wanting to totally give in, countered, “No detours!”

“Agreed,” said Ellie. “We’ll just see half the country. In his book, Steinbeck chronicled his adventures. Met many interesting people. No one is sure how many of his tales were true. But, after all, he *was* a fiction writer. And a good one.”

“Betcha they were mostly true,” said Jobe. “Or, at least, based on real events,”

“Yep. I think you’re right. That’s what fiction writers do.”

“Okay. I’m inspired,” said Jobe. “Where will we go?”

“Same route he took.”

“Uh, Ellie, hate to tell you this but we’re a long way from Long Island.”

“I know. But that’s no problem. We’ll start in the middle of his loop – right here on the West Coast.”

“Hmmm. I guess that works. Go the same direction he did?”

“Yep. Southern route.”

“How long do you think it will take us?” asked Jobe.

“I don’t know. Who cares? Gotta be less than three weeks!”

“Man, that would be a lot of motels – unless we camp out. Could add up.”

Ellie’s eyes got big. “Oh ... I got a plan. We’ll take Charlie!”

“Take a dog?”

“No. The *real* Charlie. *My* Charlie.”

“Yeah, sure. The Charlie I’m always supposed to meet someday?”

“That’s the one! He’s got an RV.”

“Yes. You mentioned that once.” Jobe started to think Charlie might be real. *But what if he’s not?* thought Jobe. *It means Ellie’s a nutcase.*

“So. When do I meet him?” Jobe said suspiciously.

“Soon!” Ellie said, evasively.

“Yeah, that's what you always say. Have him bring his RV,”
Jobe said sarcastically.

“Oh...” Ellie paused. “He only takes it on road trips.”

Jobe played along. “Oh, of course. Well, tell you what. You produce Charlie in the flesh, with an RV, and I'm in.”

“OK. I'll get him over here tomorrow.”

Jobe was taken aback. This was the first time Ellie threatened to produce a real Charlie. “What time?” asked Jobe.

“Oh, around noon.”

“OK. I'll be here!” Jobe left wondering what he had agreed to.

Chapter 22

The next day, Jobe and Ellie sat on her small front porch outside the door of her first-floor apartment. The porch faced the street. They sat close together on a loveseat swing, rocking back and forth in some kind of subconscious rhythm.

Jobe looked at his watch. He looked over at Ellie. "It's already 12:50."

"He'll be here," Ellie said, looking out at the street.

"You sure?"

Ellie looked over at Jobe, intently. "He'll come!"

"Okay." Jobe watched the cars pass by. None of them stopped.

Ellie stood up. "Let's eat lunch while we wait for Charlie to come. I'll go make a couple of sandwiches." Ellie disappeared into the house.

Jobe continued to watch the cars pass by. He looked at his watch again. "1 p.m.," he said out loud. *This is ridiculous. Man, I'm starting to doubt Ellie's stability. I don't want to, but I gotta be real about life. And this trip sounds a little preposterous.* He shrugged his shoulders. *I guess we're all a little weird!* But Ellie seemed so stable to Jobe, so together – except for her crazy, unannounced bailout. And now this impromptu, made up on-the-spot trip. However, it seemed like she learned a lot and was a better person as a result. Plus, Jobe could never forget her unplanned, spontaneous

performance at the cabin. *Crazy people can't do that, can they?* He thought. *But then again, maybe we're all a little crazy.*

At that moment, an older man came into Jobe's view on the sidewalk near the street. He paused briefly. Jobe stopped the swing and leaned forward. *Could it be? I certainly hope so. Don't want to be dating a nut case.* But the man continued down the sidewalk, away from the apartments. *Oh, shoot. This ain't no Charlie!* But after a few steps, the old man bent over and picked up a coin. He turned and looked at Jobe. Holding up the coin, he called out, "I always look for lucky pennies!" The old man started walking toward Jobe still holding the coin up high over his head. Walking up the sidewalk leading to the porch, he said, "Found a rare Denver-minted penny once. Turned out to be worth a fortune. Worth enough to buy my '68 Winnebago! Never stopped looking since then." Then, the old man stepped up on the porch and said, "Here, young fellow. This one's for you. Haven't even looked to see if it's worth anything."

Jobe took the coin. "Charlie?" he asked.

"Yep. Charlie Johnson – the one and only."

Jobe grabbed Charlie's hand and shook it vigorously. "You have no idea how glad I am to see you."

"Ellie has mentioned me, has she?" asked Charlie.

"Oh, yeah. You have no idea. A whole lot over the last month or so."

Ellie came out the front door, put the sandwiches down, and screamed, "Charlie!" She gave him a big hug – as big as any hug Jobe ever got, but a different kind.

"So good to see you, my little chickie."

"Oh, I so miss you. You've been off on another adventure?"

"Of course. It's what I do. Got nothing else to do."

"Where are you parked?" asked Ellie.

"Up the street. Didn't see any open spots when I drove by."

"I'll get another sandwich. Don't go anywhere."

“I won't. And you, young man. You're this mysterious Jobe that Ellie told me about before I left a few weeks ago. I kinda wondered if you really existed, or just more of her wishful thinking.”

“I know the feeling,” Jobe said, without explanation.

Charlie leaned over toward Jobe and said in a low voice, “She's been looking for a guy like you for a long time.” Jobe just smiled.

“Okay, here they are,” said Ellie. “Turkey sandwiches, one with extra mayo.”

Charlie sat down in a wicker chair on the porch and took a bite. “Oh yuck. Too much mayo!”

“Oh no. Did I get 'em wrong?” asked Ellie.

“Mine has plenty of mayo,” said Jobe.

“Just yanking your chain,” said Charlie.

“You do that a lot,” Ellie said, affectionately. “And I always fall for it.”

“Part of the fun we've had all our lives together. Right?”

“You got it.”

“So, mister,” Ellie said to Jobe, “you finally met Charlie.”

“I sure did,” Jobe said, shaking his head up and down. “And so glad I did.”

“So, what's going on, little angel?” asked Charlie.

“Well...” Ellie looked over at Jobe. “We wanna go on an adventure and take you with us.”

“Adventure? I just got back from one.”

“Well, it's time to go again,” Ellie said, scolding Charlie. “You're always up for it. Right? Besides, we need your RV.”

“Take it,” Charlie said, waving his hand toward Ellie and looking down. “You know it's yours whenever you want it.”

“I know that,” said Ellie, “but you gotta come with us!”

Charlie looked up and his eyes glowed with intrigue. “Where we goin’?” he asked.

Jobe piped in. “We’re gonna loop around America, following Steinbeck’s book *Travels with Charlie*. Well, at least part of it.”

“And that’s why you gotta come,” Ellie said, fidgeting with her hair.

“Am I a dog?” Charlie barked out. “That’s a big loop! Even just part of it.”

“We can handle it,” said Ellie. “Jobe and I both have plenty of time off, and you’re retired. Come on, Charlie. It’ll be fun.”

Charlie was not about to pass up a new adventure, especially one with Ellie. “Oh, okay. If you insist. I suppose I can go.” Ellie knew he was faking his reluctance. “When do we leave?”

“Let’s plan on leaving Tuesday,” said Ellie.

“That soon?” Charlie said, taking a bite of his sandwich.

“Yep. We’d go today, but we both need to request time off from work. And we need to pack.”

“You’re still that impetuous teenager that once came and graced our home,” Charlie said, finding it a bit harder to swallow.

“That’s me!” exclaimed Ellie. She knew how much Charlie and Martha had loved her. “But Tuesday is our departure day.”

“Let’s stage the trip at my house,” said Charlie. “We’ll pack up the Winnebago and be ready to go by Tuesday morning.”

“Sounds good to me,” said Jobe.

“Me too,” Ellie added.

Charlie finished his sandwich, put his hands on his knees, and pushed himself up. “Guess I better go check the RV oil, tires, and propane tanks.” Charlie stepped off the porch and headed toward the sidewalk along the street. “Hey, if you kids want to come over tomorrow afternoon – if you got nothing else to do on Sunday – we can do our own *church thing*, and make sure we are ready for the trip.” Jobe and Ellie looked at each other.

“Church is people, not a building,” said Ellie.

Charlie looked at her and nodded. “Well said, girl.”

“Where two or three are gathered...” added Jobe. “We have a quorum!”

“Indeed, we do!” said Charlie. “See you kids tomorrow. Bring over anything you want to take. We could be on the road a while, so bring whatever you need.” He mumbled something else, but they couldn’t hear it. Then he headed back down the sidewalk, the way he came.

Chapter 23

“**G**ood morning,” Charlie said as Ellie and Jobe walked up Charlie’s driveway toward a 1968 Winnebago F17. “No church to attend today?”

Ellie and Jobe looked at each other, shrugged, and said *Nope* and *Not really*, almost in unison.

“How ‘bout you, Charlie?” Jobe asked, quickly.

“Who, me? I’ve been known to go from time to time. Don’t mind it. Lots of nice folks... well, mostly. But they seem to always have a strong agenda. I’m not opposed to that. Their choice. They tend to indoctrinate folks into one perspective and never seem to be willing to investigate other possibilities. Plus, they overly control the flow of information within the group. Kind of self-inflicted censorship. I don’t think it’s healthy. At least, not for me anyway. But Martha and I used to go together when she was alive. You remember, Ellie?” Charlie took a tire pressure gauge out of his pocket and pressed it down on an RV tire stem.

”Went with you and Martha when I lived here as a kid,” said Ellie.

Charlie moved to check the rear tires. “Martha really liked it. All of it. Singing, the message, and even the various rituals. I liked going because she did.” Charlie stood up, lowered his voice a bit, and looked around. “I often took something to do. But I listened ... some!”

“Hey, Martha always brought something for me to do, too,” Ellie added. “But you would never let me do it until the preaching started.”

“That was Martha’s idea. She always said it kept a restless young lady busy.”

“And it did. But I was also listening ... some.”

An old wooden whisky crate with rope handles sat on the driveway. Charlie grabbed it and scurried up the short narrow steps leading inside the RV.

“Plan to do a little drinking, Charlie?” called Jobe, cupping his hands around his mouth.

Charlie disappeared into the RV, then poked his head out and said, “Things aren’t always as they appear. But, sometimes they are!”

“So, whatcha got in there?” asked Ellie.

“Well... poker chips, for one thing.”

Ellie cocked her head to the side. “And...?”

“We’ll just have to see, won’t we,” answered Charlie.

“Deal me in!” said Jobe. “Sounds like a good time.”

“Good enough,” said Charlie as he stepped down onto the driveway to grab another load. “Hand me that box of canned goods over there, will you, Jobe?”

“Sure.”

Charlie groaned as he took on the load, carried it up the narrow steps, and entered the RV. He stuck his head out, again, and said, “Come on up, kids. I’ll show you around.”

“I’ve seen it all, Charlie,” said Ellie.

“But Jobe hasn’t. Got a few gadgets and adjustments I want him to see.”

Jobe looked at Ellie. “Be prepared for the unusual,” she whispered.

Jobe entered the RV. It seemed bigger inside than it did from the outside. He wasn’t sure how this was possible. Perhaps it was how things were arranged. Next to the door were two narrow,

armless recliners so close to each other they looked like a reclining loveseat. Above the recliners were two slide-open windows with screens. In the middle of the RV, a short wall stuck out with an FM radio and a small TV mounted. Past the wall, an aisle led to a small bedroom. Past the aisle, on the other side of the RV, was a narrow nook table that could snugly seat four people. Jobe's gaze continued over to a small sofa that pulled out into a bed. Past the sofa was the driver's seat, a space to access it, then the passenger seat. Behind the passenger seat was a tiny sink and countertop that ran back over to the side door where Jobe came in. On the counter sat a coffee maker and a hot plate.

"Pretty nice," said Jobe. "Looks like it's got everything I need."

"It's got everything we *all* need," said Ellie. "We just gotta share it. That's the trick."

"Oh, we'll do fine," said Charlie. "I tied a stack of lawn furniture to the back of the RV. The best RV room is outside! Bring your stuff in, kids, and find a place to stuff it. Use those cupboards along the wall, and there are more in the bedroom. Check out the big, pull-out drawers under the bed. Also, there are compartments outside, behind the wheel wells, for any overflow."

Ellie and Jobe brought in their belongings and found a place for them. Charlie was reclining in one of the recliners. Ellie sat down on one of the table seats with her legs stretched out in the direction of the room. Jobe grabbed the sofa. "So, I think we are ready to go," said Charlie.

"I wish we could go now," said Ellie anxiously.

"Just one more day at work to secure our vacation time, and we'll be on our way Tuesday morning," said Jobe.

"What time?" asked Ellie.

"Is nine a.m. OK?" offered Charlie. *Yep, Sounds good* were the responses from Ellie and Jobe.

"Hey, Charlie. I noticed a trailer hitch on the back of the RV. OK if we tow the Tiger? We might want to do a little sightseeing."

“Sure! I’ve towed many boats in my travels. You got a tow bar?”

“I sure do – brake lights, safety chain – everything we need.”

“Perfect. And I have two car phones; One phone for the RV and one for your car. It’s a great way to stay in touch in case you kids go on a getaway at one of our stops.” Charlie disappeared into the bedroom and then appeared with two, long, boxy-looking car phones. He handed one to Jobe. “All you gotta do is plug it into the cigarette lighter socket and turn it on here.” Charlie pointed to a slide switch on the side. “Then, you pull out this antenna. You gotta have it sticking up to send and receive calls.”

Jobe looked up at Charlie. “Wow. It’s so small. It’s no bigger than a shoe box. What will they think of next?”

“Oh, they’ll have Dick-Tracy-style watch phones, someday in your lifetime.”

“Think so?” Jobe asked while turning the car phone over, examining it carefully.

Jobe watched Charlie as he sat and relaxed in one of the two recliners. He seemed totally at peace, looking like he might even fall asleep. He was a big man, but not fat. He liked to wear suspenders, which were not out of place for his generation, and they seemed to match Charlie’s eccentric personality. Baby boomers, like Jobe, would never wear such a thing, even if they were needed. Charlie collected many pairs over the years. Some were boringly simple and practical, but others were flamboyant and a bit wild. The suspenders he wore were Rainbow Suspenders from the ’60s when Charlie was middle-aged. They had seven colored stripes that ran parallel along the length of each suspender strap. Green, pink, blue, yellow, purple, brown, and orange. Each strap had a silver clip at the bottom that clamped to his pants,

front and back. The straps crossed in the back but were straight up and down in the front.

“Hey, Charlie.”

“Yes, Jobe?” he said, waking from his semi-snooze.

“Those are quite some suspenders you have there.”

“You like ‘em?” asked Charlie, raising his head, slightly.

“Yes, but not on me! And why rainbow?”

“Well, no matter what color shirt I wear – they match!”

“Actually,” added Ellie, “they’re guaranteed to never match anything.”

“Uh, Charlie.” Jobe’s voice got a little more serious, “I’m dying to know how you came up with *Streams of Terrible Beauty*. It’s such a cool concept.”

“Good question, my boy.” Charlie sat up a little straighter. “I enjoy telling the story. It’s a special one.” Jobe was on the edge of his seat, even though leaning back on the sofa. “Well, I was reading through the book of Job one day – a book I find super-philosophical. It covers a lot of ground in three rounds of dialogues with Job’s so-called friends.”

“I can relate to that!” Jobe said, sarcastically, looking at Ellie who giggled.

Charlie cleared his throat. “I was nearing the end and wanted to find the key to the book. *There had to be one*, I told myself after reading about Job arguing with his friends for thirty-some chapters. I wanted to know what tied it all together. Well, it turned out, there was a fifth person in the Job story. Elihu was his name.”

“Ellie who?” asked Jobe. Ellie grinned again.

Charlie cleared his throat, again. “Anyway, this Elihu was a young guy, listening all along and waiting for his turn to speak.”

“Hey, like Ellie at the cabin!” Jobe looked at Ellie. She smiled.

“You wanna hear this, or not?” Charlie joked.

“OK. No more wisecracks” promised Jobe.

“So, this young guy brings a big, long speech full of wisdom. It silenced Job’s three friends.” Jobe looked at Ellie, his face

expressing *Wow*. She raised her eyebrows. “Then,” Charlie continued, “in the very last chapter of Elihu’s speech, I came across this verse: ‘Out of the north comes golden splendor; God is clothed with terrible majesty.’” Jobe and Ellie were both intrigued. “Not sure you kids know this, but I dabble in the ancient Hebrew and Greek languages. But I consider myself only a talented amateur.”

“Yes, I knew this,” said Ellie.

“News to me,” said Jobe.

“Old Testament is in Hebrew and New Testament in Greek?” asked Ellie.

“You got it.” Charlie continued. “Anyway, I did some research into the Hebrew of that verse and into the historical and cultural setting of that day and age.”

“And what did you find?” Jobe asked, wanting to know more.

“Well, it turns out it was common for gold to be mined out of the hills, north of Ur where Job supposedly lived, then brought down using horses – maybe even mules. At one time there was a constant stream of transport.”

Jobe leaned forward in his seat. “Oh, I get it, now. *Streams of Terrible Beauty* is like transporting gold.”

“Exactly,” said Charlie. “And so my own translation of that verse became, *As gold is brought out of the north country, so God brings streams of terrible beauty.*”

“That is so cool!” said Jobe. “Man, this gives it new meaning.”

“Where, exactly, is that verse found?” asked Ellie.

“Job chapter 37, verse 22. And that, Jobe, is how *Streams of Terrible Beauty* came about.”

“Is this part of the legacy you’re leaving Ellie?” asked Jobe.

“We all gain and leave legacies, my son. You’ll get yours and she’ll get hers. That’s the way life works.”

“Mind if I ask another question?” asked Jobe.

“Fire away!” said Charlie, leaning back into his recliner.

“How can there be a loving God in a world that has so much pain and evil?”

Charlie brought his recliner to a fully upright position, pointed at Jobe, and said, “Now *that’s* a great question. Perhaps the greatest question ever.” Jobe felt empowered. But then Charlie reclined again and said, “The problem is – no one knows for sure.”

“Oh, great,” complained Jobe. “But what do *you* think, Charlie?”

Charlie thought for a moment. “Well, it’s one thing for God to be the direct cause of evil, pain, and suffering. But it’s quite another thing if he *allows* it as a consequence of nature, or the will of humans, and has some ultimately good purpose in allowing it.”

“Hmmm. That makes sense,” said Jobe.

“And, keep in mind Jobe, we have no way of knowing just how much bad stuff God stops. Perhaps, he allows very little evil in comparison to all that would happen if he stopped none of it.”

“Never thought of it that way,” said Jobe. “But why would God allow any bad stuff at all?”

“Well, maybe to teach humanity, guiding us toward some ultimate good.”

“Seems like a high price to pay for ultimate good,” said Jobe.

“Indeed, it would be,” answered Charlie. “But if the result was extraordinary, and something unachievable any other way, it might be well worth it.”

“So, is it worth it?” asked Jobe.

“I’m afraid that’s another question no one can answer. The answer lies somewhere in the realm of faith,” offered Charlie.

Jobe shifted in his seat on the couch. “I don’t like that.”

“Most people don’t. But it is the only answer that provides any optimism.”

“Indeed,” interrupted Ellie. “The only alternatives are either a god who’s not there; a god who doesn’t care; or a god who never gets it right.”

“You got it, girl. Those are, indeed, worthless alternatives.” Charlie cocked his head and looked at Ellie. “Where on earth did you get such insight?” Ellie just smiled back at him.

“But what if,” Jobe asked, “one of those worthless options *is* true, and God is not all-powerful, all-loving, and has no good purpose?”

“What if, indeed!” said Charlie. “We can't do anything about it. No matter what the truth is ... it is what it is. We don't make something true by believing it, nor can we keep something from being true by denying it.”

“Then it doesn't matter what we believe,” Jobe blurted out.

“True, it will not change reality, but it *can* change us!” said, Charlie. “And that is the beautiful part. Philosopher Immanuel Kant said we need to believe in God, even if there isn't one. Otherwise, we have no hope and no morals!”

“Wow. I gotta think about that,” blurted Jobe.

“Take your time, young man,” Charlie assured Jobe. “I'm still working on it, myself! But, this faith thing is why it is hard for people to let other people be who they are. Everyone believes they're right and others are wrong. It's very easy to impose our pet beliefs on people. It's easy to turn our opinions into requirements, values, or creeds for everyone else. And the reason people do this is that they're not all that sure, themselves. Oh yes, sure we're sure enough to believe and promote our faith. But we never have the kind of *sureness* we crave – the kind with no doubt whatsoever. That would be absolute knowledge, and that belongs to God alone. No one possesses such absolute ability or power. And so, we're all people of faith. Even atheists!”

“What?” protested Jobe. “Atheists are people completely void of faith! Aren't they?”

“Oh no, my son. They are people of great faith. They believe there’s no God. Yet, it is impossible to prove anything to not exist.”

“Really?” asked Jobe.

“Yep. What evidence could you ever bring to prove that something doesn’t exist?”

Jobe paused and thought. Charlie waited. “Then no one can prove that unicorns, Bigfoot, and aliens don’t exist,” Jobe said, confidently.

“That’s right!” said Charlie. “But, so far, no one has proven that they *do* exist, either. People think if they can convince others, it will validate their own beliefs. But it doesn’t. Every person must be convinced in his or her own mind.”

“Let me ask *you* something, young Jobe.”

“OK. Shoot.”

“Was Jesus a Christian?”

“Duh!” answered Jobe. “Dumb question from such a wise man. Or, maybe you’re just being a wise guy!”

“Probably, neither,” said Charlie. “Modern-day Christianity is mostly the result of turning what Jesus taught and did into a religion. And they’ve done a pretty good job of it – if you can call it good. The church of the middle ages was monstrous, brutal, and took undue advantage of people’s ignorance. The Reformation was an attempt to reform a church steeped in tradition that lost its way from the purity and simplicity of Jesus. But they only reformed back to the fourth-century Augustine, pretty much ignoring the earlier church.”

“You sure? Sounds like a bunch of history,” asked Jobe.

“It is. But where our beliefs come from, and how they came about, matters!”

“That makes sense. But Jesus was the founder of Christianity. Right?” asked Jobe.

“Yes, and no. Jesus did not start a religion, nor did he want his followers to start one. But they did anyway. In fact, Jesus was trying to free them from religion, but they instinctively went back into bondage and the age-old idea of *trying to appease the Gods*. Jesus freed people from religion. They just didn’t realize it. Religion divides – relationships unite!”

Chapter 24

The next afternoon, Jobe pulled into Charlie's driveway. His V8 rumbled momentarily until he shut it off. When he got out of his car, Ellie pulled up behind him. As she got out, Jobe called out, "Perfect timing!"

She walked close to Jobe. "Great minds think alike, mister." She gave him a quick kiss. *Gonna be an interesting trip*, thought Jobe.

Jobe grabbed Ellie's hand and headed to Charlie's front door. "I got a few more questions for Charlie. I was awake all night, thinking."

"Yes, he can cause that." Ellie unlocked the front door and let her and Jobe in. "Sometimes Charlie sleeps in, especially if he's had a tough night," she said, whispering. "I think it is normal for older folks to struggle with their sleep."

"Oh, boy. Can't wait," said Jobe, sarcastically.

"Let's go in the living room, it's farther from Charlie's bedroom. I'll go fix some coffee."

"OK," said Jobe.

In a few minutes, Ellie came out of the kitchen holding two hot mugs by the handles. When she entered the living room, Jobe was nowhere to be found. She set the mugs down on the coffee table in front of the sofa and began searching. She found him downstairs, wandering aimlessly. "What's wrong, Jobe? You seem distant this morning."

"Oh, I'm fine. No problem" said Jobe, not looking at Ellie. She knew it was a lie.

“Oh, really? Come on, tell me what's wrong. It's obvious that something's bugging you.”

“No!” Jobe protested. “There's nothing wrong.”

“You remember what I told you when you asked me why I bailed out on you?”

“Yes,” Jobe answered sheepishly. “You said there was no problem.”

“That's right.” Ellie nearly sang her words. “And, I was not being honest with you.” Ellie allowed her words to linger in silence.

Jobe finally looked at her. “I'm sorry. It's just that it's so weird.”

“What is?” asked Ellie.

“A dream I had last night.”

“Wanna tell me about it?”

“I guess so.”

“Let's go back upstairs,” said Ellie. “A couple of hot mugs of coffee are waiting.”

“Oh, good. Thanks. I need some.” When they came upstairs, Jobe sat down on the sofa and took a big sip of coffee.

“Tastes OK?” asked Ellie.

“Yes. Perfect! Well... here's my dream. I was on a train. I could walk up and down the aisle and talk to any passenger. Looking at them, I knew all of them, but I didn't know their names. The train traveled in a big circle and took a whole week to complete one loop. Each week it would stop at a station where I was allowed to get off briefly, but then I had to get back on the train before it departed. Other people were waiting in the station when the train pulled in. They were allowed to get *on* the train, briefly, while it was in the station. But they were required to get off the train before it left to do another seven-day loop.”

“Yep. That's weird,” said Ellie.

“One time,” Jobe continued, “When the train pulled into the station, I got off briefly and the people waiting in the station got on. When it was time for me to get back on, and the other people to get back off, a man came up to me with six others behind him and told me to stay off the train. No explanation was given. As the train pulled out of the station, I felt a deep sense of loneliness and loss. I began to cry. I cried in a way a person cries when they have not cried for a long time – when a great deal of emotion builds up inside. I felt sad because I realized that I could no longer walk up and down the aisle and see all the people I knew who had no names.”

“That’s very sad,” said Ellie.

“But after a while, when the train was gone and I could hear it no more, I looked around and realized I was free to move around in any direction – not just up and down the aisle of the train. My newfound sense of freedom felt overwhelming. The joy I experienced was greater than anything I had ever felt before. In fact, there was no way I could ever have known or appreciated such joy and freedom had I not spent all those years traveling on the train in the seven-day loop, walking up and down the aisle.”

“Wow!” exclaimed Ellie. “That’s quite a dream.”

“But what does it mean?” asked Jobe.

“I don’t know,” answered Ellie. “Maybe it doesn’t mean anything?” Ellie said, quite coyly.

“Perhaps,” said, Jobe. “Someone once told me that there’s a little man in our head who writes down everything that happens each day on three-by-five cards. Then at night, he throws ‘em all up in the air, picks them up in random order, and starts reading them back to us!”

Ellie started to laugh. “Well, that’s one explanation. Could be true. Good as any I’ve heard.”

“I don’t think that’s what happened this time,” said Jobe. “I’m sure it means something. And this only adds to my sense of weirdness about the dream. It’s ridiculous! It’s a ridiculous dream,

yet I know it must mean something. How can I know this? Certainly, not based on the dream itself?" Ellie grew quiet. She had become contemplative, herself, after hearing about the dream and Jobe's conflicted feelings.

"Hello?" said Jobe, waking Ellie out of her gaze. "Now, look who's not all there!"

Ellie snapped out of it. "I was just imagining your dream and thinking about all that has happened to you recently." Ellie paused for a moment. Then she looked at Jobe and said, "I think I know what your dream means."

"You do? How?"

"I don't know how. I guess it's like how you know that it means something." She kept looking at Jobe. Jobe waited.

"So," Jobe replied slowly, "I know my dream means something, but I don't know how, and you know what the dream means but you don't know why?"

"Yeah. Something like that," said Ellie. "But it's cool that we each have a part in this, and that the two parts fit together!"

"Pretty cool," agreed Jobe.

"But let's just deal with one thing at a time," said Ellie, keeping things on track.

"Okay. So, what's your take on it?" asked Jobe.

"Well, I don't think my perspective is from God. Might just be my fertile thinking. But maybe the card idea isn't so ridiculous. Maybe your mind took all that has happened over the past few weeks and tried to make sense of it."

"It's not doing a very good job!"

"Oh, but maybe it did a marvelous job!" said Ellie.

"But I haven't been on a train in years!"

Ellie waived her hands, side to side. "Ignore that part. The train is just a vehicle for the dream to tell a story."

"Hmmm. OK. Maybe."

“Hey, you said that you know it means something. Right?” asked Ellie.

“Yep. I’m with ya.”

Ellie continued. “The train is on a seven-day loop. Right?”

“Yep.”

“What’s that mean? What do you do every week?”

“Go to work.”

“What else?”

“I used to do my *soundman* thing at The Assembly.”

“Very good. And what does walking up and down the aisles mean?” asked Ellie.

“I never walked up and down the aisles at church. I was the soundman.”

“No, no, no. You got it backward. Walking up and down the train aisle is what you do all week. It’s the institutional influence of The Assembly on your life that restricts you to *aisle walking*.”

“Hmmm.” Jobe rubbed his chin. “You might be right.”

“Although you went to the institution only once a week, it dominated your life. And your real freedom each week was only a brief moment when you could escape it, represented by your brief time off the train.”

“Hey, maybe you’re on to something!” Jobe stood up and started to walk around Charlie’s living room. He turned toward Ellie and said, “And, I always had to get back on the train, give up my freedom, and walk the isles that confined me.”

“I think you’re getting it!” said, Ellie. “But what was that confining aisle walking?”

“Work?” asked Jobe.

“No, silly. We all have to work,” said Ellie. “Works’s not a confinement from freedom, it’s a requirement for survival. Besides, you like your work. Don’t you?”

“I do,” Jobe said, nodding his head and walking around again.

“So, what must the confining aisle walking be?” asked Ellie.

Jobe thought for a moment. “What did I do with my free time?” he thought out loud. He rubbed his chin, again, and moved his head, side to side. “I know! It was stuff like the interventions in other people's lives. We thought it was required of us!”

“Yes. And that took a lot of your time. Right?”

“Most of it.”

Ellie summed it up. “Aisle-walking is your lack of freedom?”

“Yes!” Jobe looked straight ahead as if there were some distant object in view. “I was kinda owned by it. Had to do it. Thought I was doing something good.”

“Oh, there may have been plenty of good in it,” said Ellie. “At least, good intentions.”

“Yes, we did help some people.” Jobe looked over at Ellie. “Or at least, I think we did. Never really asked any of them. Just assumed.”

“But the key is that it *owned* you!” said Ellie. “You were not really free.”

“Ah-ha. And that’s why, when I got kicked off the train, I experienced overwhelming freedom!”

“And, who kicked you off the train?” asked Ellie.

Jobe thought a moment. Then he said, “The Assembly leaders!” A light came on in his eyes.

“Yes, again,” affirmed Ellie.

“My mind was telling me all of that in a dream?” asked Jobe.

“I think so. But you have to decide. It's your mind.”

“Why didn’t it just say so during the day when I was awake?”

“Maybe you’re not listening when you’re awake. Too busy?”

“Good point,” admitted Jobe. He sat down again and took a sip of coffee. “Ooo, cold!”

“Guess that little guy in your head did something about you not listening,” suggested Ellie.

“Um... maybe he was breaking it easy to me. Ya think I’d ever figured this out by myself?”

“I think so,” suggested Ellie. “You’re a smart guy. Even if you didn’t get it from the dream, you would’ve figured it out some other way. There are many ways in which we learn!”

Jobe leaned back on the couch. “Now that I think about it, I already did – when I experienced my *delightful devastation*. This dream is only confirmation.”

Chapter 25

Just then, Charlie came into the living room, lifting his second suspender strap onto his shoulder, his hair a bit disheveled, eyes drooping, and a bit bloodshot. “Sleep, OK?” asked Ellie.

“Not great, but good enough. I smell coffee,” he said, hoping to get served. “That’ll wake me up.”

“I’ll get you a cup, and Jobe can wake you up with more questions.”

“Been thinking, have you?” asked Charlie. He looked over at Jobe and was already rejuvenated – without his coffee.

“OK, Charlie. Here’s one for ya,” said Jobe. “Hard as I try, I never seem to get life right. Oh sure, it’s got a lot of good things; but it’s also got lots of problems.”

“It’s a troubled world, my boy,” said Charlie. He looked over at Ellie as she handed him a cup. “As I’ve always said, life is a stream of terrible beauty from God. It’s like wearing clothes that never fit right. They keep you warm and they may even look great, but when you reach for something, they encumber you; when you walk they seem to bind and bunch up.”

“We could all walk around naked, but we might be a bit cold,” offered Jobe.

“Don’t think I’d want to see everyone like that!” said Ellie.

“Yep, bad solution. We’re stuck with awkward clothing,” said Charlie. “Life’s like that. We never quite get it right. And so,

logically, our only real hope is some eternal solution – if there is such a thing. This seems to be the only way things can ever be made right.”

“It’s our only hope,” added Ellie, “even if it’s a long shot. The only alternative is having everything stay wrong, forever!”

“Man, if that’s the best God can do ... we’re all in trouble,” said Jobe, in a sad voice. “Seems a little discouraging.”

“Well, we can’t stay here on earth forever,” Ellie added. “So, it makes sense to live our lives, help others, accomplish good things, and try to *finish well*.”

“You got it, girl,” said Charlie. “It makes life quite simple when you give into what’s obvious and don’t fight the inevitable. We need only look forward to what’s bigger and better. There’s gotta be something better than a life with *clothes* that don’t fit!”

“But, Charlie, we’re in the prime of life!” said Jobe, realizing the gravity of all that had just been said. “We don’t want to dwell on negative stuff. We’ve got a lot of livin’ to do!”

“Absolutely!” said Charlie. “You and Ellie, and all the other young kids like you out there, need to go make something of your life. But take these ideas with you as you go. Store them safely in the back of your mind and heart. Someday, you’ll need them. Someday they’ll be precious to you.”

“OK,” said Jobe. “I’ll store them away and start living for today – by fixing myself a turkey sandwich with extra mayo.” Ellie and Charlie looked at each other, stuck their tongues out, and then mouthed the word *yuk*. “Anybody wants one?”

“Sure,” said Ellie. “But, easy on the mayo.”

“Me too,” added Charlie.

After a short time, Jobe came out with three hastily thrown-together sandwiches, one with mayo oozing out of the sides. “Pretty fast, huh?”

“Very fast. And the sandwiches are proof!” said Ellie.

Jobe looked down at the sandwiches for a moment. “Hmmm.” He looked up. “They are a bit shabby. Hey, does

anybody want a Coke or an Ale? I saw both in the fridge.” Jobe looked at Ellie, then at Charlie.

“An Ale, for what ales me,” said Charlie.

“Coke for me,” said Ellie. “You got diet?” she yelled to Jobe who was already in the kitchen. Jobe came back and delivered the drinks.

“I got just one more question, Charlie. What does God want?”

“Oh, brother!” exclaimed Ellie. “You guys gonna talk each other to death? Can't we just get going on our trip? I'm ready!”

“Still that impetuous little girl,” said Charlie. “But this is good. We need someone to keep us from straying off course on our trip.”

Ellie stood with fists on her hips. “I sure will!”

“So sorry we can't leave today, honey.” Ellie saw the kindness in Charlie's eyes. “I've learned the hard way to get a full day of driving in before pulling into any RV park. Lots of work registering and hooking up the RV.”

Ellie sighed. “OK, you guys keep on talking. I've already heard it all. I'm gonna go do some wandering.”

“Have fun, darling,” said Charlie. “Now, where were we, Jobe?”

Jobe reared back deep into the sofa with his hands behind his head. “Does God want us in a God-is-great mode? We feel like we should, but why? Is it what God *really* wants? What kind of a God is glory-seeking, always putting himself first?”

Ellie slipped on her sweater. “I'm glad The Assembly leaders are not here to govern your questioning.”

“Me too,” said Jobe. “I don't think they could handle this conversation,”

“For sure,” said Ellie. “See you guys later.” Ellie exited through the front door.

“And that’s too bad,” said Charlie. “All conversations are important. I believe God is okay with us questioning things – even questioning him! It’s how he made us.”

“But what happens if we fail to give glory to God?” asked Jobe. “If that’s all he’s about – self-centered and self-serving – it makes him seem puny.” Jobe ducked and looked up at the ceiling. “It’s an honest question, God. Honest!”

“I think you’re on to something, young Jobe. I have pondered this very thing many times. This focus on glorifying God seems more about puny, self-centered humans. Could be that we project this self-oriented view back onto God. We think it’s what he wants – that he’s always trying to meet his own needs. But this might be only what *we* would want ... if *we* were God.”

“Oh, boy. Good thing none of us are God,” said Jobe, still deep-seated in the sofa.

“Yep.” Charlie’s suspenders shifted slightly as he spoke. “It would be a disaster. None of us are up to it. When I observe religious folks, it seems like it’s *all about them making it all about God!*”

“Huh? I don’t get it,” said Jobe.

“They *think* they’re making it all about God when they focus on him – singing, praying, doing rituals, and listening to sermons. These are all good things, but maybe – just maybe – they’re really making it all about themselves while *trying* to make it all about God! Seems to me God must be self-sufficient and not hungry to have someone glorify him.”

“But doesn’t it say somewhere that ‘the chief end of man is to glorify God?’”

“Yes. It does. That’s in one of the great historic religious confessions. But what would God’s purpose be in wanting people to glorify him – assuming he does not need it?”

“I have no idea,” confessed Jobe.

“Well, try this out,” offered Charlie. “He wants us to focus on him – glorify him if you will – for *our* benefit, not his.”

“Hmmm. That makes more sense.,” said Jobe. “But what would our benefit be?”

Charlie paused for a moment. “The way we are made, we will instinctively glorify something or someone.”

“Yeah, it could be a car ...” then Ellie popped into Jobe’s mind, “or a person.”

“Or money, or power, or sex,” said Charlie. “All these things and more. And do they ever make us happy – truly happy – for any length of time?”

“No, not really,” replied Jobe. “Everything eventually gets old.”

“Yes!” said Charlie. “And once we see how shallow things are, we lose interest and seek something else.”

“It’s a never-ending chase,” said Jobe.

“Sure is,” said Charlie. “But perhaps, if we focus on God and glorify him – not because he needs it, but because *we* need it – other things will never get old. They will only get better because we will, forever, learn more about a good and infinite being. This is, perhaps, the only path to real peace and freedom.”

“Wow. I’ll be up all night again, pondering.” Jobe took a bite. Mayonnaise oozed out of the back of his sandwich.

“Take a sleeping pill,” said Charlie. “We have a lot of driving to do tomorrow. But we’ll take turns. Hey, one more thing, Jobe. Someone once said, ‘God created man in his own image ... then man returned the favor!’ This is what happens when people make God into someone like themselves. We think He would do what we would do. But quite the opposite is true. God is not like us, We’re like him! We’re just a limited version of God.”

“Wow. That is a mindblower. Seems like a high honor.”

“Calling God *great* is very common,” Charlie continued. “It is the hallmark of all religions that believe in God: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. But maybe we missed something wonderful, something right under our noses, something God

wants for us ... the joy of relationship, instead of fearful worship!”

Jobe sat forward in his sofa seat. “Maybe it’s like Jesus putting little kids on his knee, while others tried to keep them away. He hugged them, made them feel loved, and assured them of his presence.”

“That’s right,” said Charlie. “This is what God wants. It’s different from what we think he requires.”

Just then, Ellie came through the front door. “You guys done yet?”

“Enough heavy stuff,” said Charlie. “Let’s play poker!”

“Charlie, you’re amazing. From God to poker without skipping a beat,” said Ellie.

“It’s all connected!” said Charlie. “Where did Jobe go?”

“I don’t know,” said Ellie. “I better check the basement. Maybe he’s wandering, again.”

In a few moments, Jobe entered through the back door. He held up a round rack of poker chips. “Got ‘em out of the wood crate in the RV.”

“Good thinking,” said Charlie. They all sat down at the dining room table. Charlie gave everyone a stack of chips and started dealing out the cards. Jobe’s eyes followed Charlie’s dealing – twice around. “Man, you’re a pro!”

“Played lots of home poker games with the guys. So...” Charlie leaned forward with the cards still in his hands. “Everyone gets two cards face-down, then I’ll place five cards face-up in the middle. Those are the cards we all have in common.”

“OK. So put ‘em out there,” said Ellie.

“Not yet. First, we bet, based on our two cards, and then I will display three cards. After that we bet more, then two more cards face up.”

“Don’t tell me,” said Jobe. “More betting.”

“Yes, between cards,” said Charlie, “and one last big bet at the end.”

“Seems simple enough,” said Jobe. “What’s it called?”

“Texas hold ‘em.”

“I won’t ask why,” offered Ellie. “You sure this game works?”

“Oh Yeah. Quite well,” said Charlie. “People have made and lost fortunes playing it.”

Ellie looked at her cards. Then, she looked up. “How’s that?”

“It’s like life,” said Charlie. “We are all dealt two cards in life. They are uniquely ours. Some hands are better than others. And, some people have the same hand as ours.”

“How many possible starting hands are there, Charlie?” asked Jobe.

“What do you think?”

Jobe did some mental math. *Five times five is twenty-five, and ten times ten is a hundred.* “Wow, at least twenty-five hundred hands!” He blurted out.

“Actually, about half that. 1,326 to be exact. Half of them are the same match starting with the other card.”

“Huh?” said Jobe.

“Something else to keep you thinking at night!” said Charlie. “But, more importantly, the number of hands dealt out in life is infinitely greater!”

“No wonder life’s so complicated,” added Ellie.

“But it’s *how* you play your hand in life that counts, just like in poker,” said Charlie.

Jobe started singing about winning vs. losing hands.

“Thank you, Kenny Rogers,” said Ellie, sarcastically.

“But that’s the bottom line,” Charlie said, finally looking at his cards. “True in poker, and true in life. It’s your bet, Jobe.”

“OK,” Jobe said, picking up some chips. “Three red ones.” He tossed them into the middle of the table. Charlie and Ellie matched it.

“Now, it’s about to get interesting.” Charlie placed three cards, face up, in the middle of the table. “We all have these three cards in common.”

“Oh, I get it,” said Ellie. “The cards out in front represent all the things we have in common in life.”

“Yep!” said, Charlie.

“And in life, we combine our unique private hand with the common public hand,” said Jobe.

“Very good, my boy. And this is what determines our journey. How we play our *hand* in life.” Jobe and Ellie looked at each other. The events of the past many weeks were playing out in their heads.

They watched as Charlie placed the other two cards, one at a time, face-up on the table. After all the betting had finished, and a heap of multi-colored chips lay on the table, Charlie laid down his two cards and raked in all the chips. “Sorry, kids. I got the best hand.”

“I like this,” said Jobe. “Let’s play again!” Ellie nodded and Charlie dealt another round. They played for two hours, parted, and shared excitement for the trip that would begin the next morning.

The Trip



Tuesday, October 6, 1987

Chapter 26

Tuesday finally came and the trio met at Charlie's, ready to go. Jobe hooked his Tiger to the Winnebago: trailer hitch, safety chains, brake lights cable. He tugged on the folded lawn furniture strapped to the back of the RV. "Did I tie 'em down good enough?" called Charlie, walking out of the house and approaching Jobe.

"Feels good to me. If it comes loose, it'll probably just land on my car hood."

Ellie walked up. She could not contain her excitement. "Let's go! We can talk and fix coffee in the RV on the way."

"OK," said Charlie. "Who wants to drive first?"

"I think Ellie should," said Jobe. "She's hot to trot! I'll fix the coffee."

"And I'll grab a recliner," Charlie said, as the trio filed into the Winnebago through the narrow side door.

Ellie buckled up and started the engine. Jobe started fixing coffee as Ellie slowly pulled away from the curb in front of Charlie's house. "I've driven the RV many times but towing a car... ugh."

"Just avoid stopping fast and leave lots of room," said Charlie.

"What if a deer jumps out in front of me?"

"Hit it!" said Jobe. "Better to mess up the front of the RV than to jackknife my car."

Charlie lifted his head from the recliner. "Hey, I heard that." Jobe handed Charlie a hot cup of coffee. "Thank you, my boy."

He then placed two steaming cups in the cup holders below the dash in the cab. Ellie thanked him as he settled into the passenger seat.

After about two hours of driving in the slow lane, Ellie pulled up to the automatic tollbooth at the Bay Bridge entrance, rolled down her window, and tossed three-quarters into the basket. “I still can’t believe they’re getting seventy-five cents just to cross a bridge.”

“Maintenance!” said, Jobe. “Did you know they never finish painting these bridges?”

“Really?” Ellie asked, pulling away from the toll booth.

“They start at one end,” said Jobe, “and by the time they reach the other end ... they need to start over!”

“Very funny,” said Ellie sarcastically.

“No, really,” said Jobe. “The sun, wind, weather, and salty air corrodes the paint quickly.”

“Now, that’s job security,” said a voice from the recliner.

Ellie slowly drove the Winnebago up the gradual incline on the bridge. “Hey, you guys, it’s clear enough to see the Golden Gate!”

Jobe looked out the passenger window. Charlie got up out of his chair and peeked out the side window. All three watched for a few moments. Except for the thump, thump sound of the tires crossing the expansion dividers, no other sound was heard.

Jobe looked over at Ellie. “All fond memories, for me.”

“Me too,” she said, alternating glances between the road and the reddish-colored bridge.

“Seems so long ago,” Jobe said, his voice expressionless, staring out the window.

“Almost nine weeks ago!” exclaimed Ellie.

“That long ago?” Jobe said, turning his head toward Ellie. Charlie just let them have their moment.

“It was my first hint of what *Streams of Terrible Beauty* is all about,” said, Jobe.

“Actually,” Ellie glanced over at Jobe, “I gave you a hint when we met at the coffee shop.”

“Really? Like what?”

“We talked about the *terrible* parting of Richard and Elise in the movie *Somewhere in Time*, and how *beautifully* it ended.”

“That’s right! Now that I think about it, it does fit. I just didn’t see it at the time because I knew nothing about life from this perspective. That’s amazing.”

“That’s what growing is all about,” said Ellie. “We don’t just grow older, we grow better.”

“Hopefully!” added Jobe.

“Amen!” said Charlie popping his head up from the recliner.

Ellie exited the Bay Bridge and entered the elevated freeway over San Francisco displaying a sea of buildings and houses. “Next off-ramp goes to John’s Grill” shouted Ellie.

“No time to get over in the left lane, in this rig,” joked Jobe.

“You’re right. Besides, we’ve already done that. So, help me watch for the Highway 101 exit.”

Jobe pointed. “There it is on the right.”

Ellie took the off-ramp, followed the high sweeping curve over the freeway, and pulled onto 101. “Settle in for a long drive to Salinas, everybody.”

“When we get there, we’ll be in Steinbeck country,” said Jobe.

“True. But I’m gonna take the next off-ramp, find a safe place to pull over, and let someone else drive.”

“Guess that would be me?” asked Jobe, looking back at Charlie in the recliner.

“OK with me.”

Traveling through San Jose, Jobe noticed the off-ramp for Highway 17 to Santa Cruz. He turned his head partway around, still watching the road, and said, “Anybody wanna take the scenic route through Santa Cruz?”

“Love to!” said Ellie, shifting with excitement in the passenger’s seat.

“We’ll miss going through Salinas,” offered Charlie.

“But don’t we still go through it after we visit Monterey,” Ellie asked, looking back at Charlie. “That’s Steinback’s route, through Las Banos over to Bakersfield.”

“It is, indeed. Good thinking,” said Charlie. “Santa Cruz, here we come!”

Jobe, exited 101 and entered Highway 17. They drove through Campbell where scattered pine trees began to emerge along the freeway. As they passed over Los Gatos, Ellie watched the town pass by. “Wish we had time to go through those cute shops in Mote Sereno.”

“More wrong-colored, cute dresses?” asked Jobe.

“Just cute dresses,” said Ellie, not laughing.

“No time, anyway,” said Jobe. “Santa Cruz awaits us.”

“Surf’s up!” a voice said, coming from the recliner.

They traveled up the sweeping, twisty mountain road with pine trees flying by both sides of the RV. “Hey, can you straighten out the road a little?” Charlie complained while rolling side to side in the recliner.

They reached the summit and passed Santa’s Workshop. Jobe pointed and said, “They have a year-round Christmas store in there and a pretty good restaurant.” The Winnebago tilted forward slightly as Jobe navigated downhill. They passed Scotts

Valley where Jobe attended meetings as a kid at a beautiful conference ground called Mt Herman.

After about ten more minutes, Jobe called out, "Santa Cruz!"

"Yeah!" yelled Ellie.

Charlie brought his recliner forward, got up, and entered the cab area. "Where shall we stop for lunch?" asked Jobe.

"Oh, we gotta see the Boardwalk and the ocean!" Ellie pleaded.

"We will," said Charlie. He ducked down slightly so he could see the road. "Take the Highway 1 north exit."

"To Half Moon Bay?" asked Jobe.

"Yes, but only for a short way. I'm taking you on a long cut that avoids the traffic lights on Ocean Street. Never forget we're dragging around an extra load."

"Yes. And, I gotta make sure I don't cut corners and ditch my Tiger."

"Ooh, that would be ugly," said Ellie.

"Turn left at the next light," Charlie commanded. "This street will take you straight to the ocean. Then, we can just double back and parallel park in front of the Boardwalk."

"Yippee!" Ellie said, clapping her hands.

"Man, you're wound up!" said Jobe.

"You bet I am. Can't wait."

Jobe reached the two-lane coastal highway. As he pulled up to the stop sign, the ocean was in full view in front of them. "Wow, what a view!"

As Jobe turned left, carefully watching the Tiger in tow, Ellie looked down over the bluff. "We're pretty high up. We can see everything."

"I see surfers below in the bay," Jobe commented.

"They look so small," said Ellie.

"So do the waves. They're just ripples from up here." Jobe carefully descended downhill. "Straight ahead is the Boardwalk and beach."

“That rollercoaster doesn't look small!” said Ellie.

“That’s why they call it the Big Dipper,” said Charlie. “We took you on it a few times, as a kid. Remember?”

“Oh yes! But it seemed even bigger then.”

“So were your eyes when you got on it.”

“Can I park here in front of these Volleyball Courts?” asked Jobe.

“Yep. Perfect. Right across from the Casa Blanca. You remember staying there, Ellie?”

“Sure do. Those third-story rooms have a spectacular view.”

They all got out, walked the Boardwalk, and rode the big dipper – except Charlie who claimed to be too old.

“Let’s grab some lunch,” suggested Charlie.

“I’m starving,” said Jobe. “The wharf is just past where we parked.” Jobe grabbed Ellie’s hand and Charlie followed.

Halfway down the wharf, the stern of a ship protruded out the front of a building. “Looks like they came in a little too fast,” said Jobe.

Ellie jabbed him with her elbow. “I wanna eat here.”

“I’ve eaten here before,” said Charlie, following them inside. “Flesh lobsters!”

Jobe turned his head around. “Uh, how fresh?”

“Take a look,” answered Charlie.

Jobe stared into a big glass case with lobsters crawling all over each other. “Pick one out, young man,” offered the man behind the counter, “and we’ll cook it up for you.”

Jobe looked over at Charlie. “Dang. That *is* fresh!”

“You can watch ‘em cook right over here.” The man pointed to a glassed-in kitchen area.

“Oh yuk,” said Ellie.

“I’ll take that one on top,” said Jobe, then headed to the big window to watch. Ellie and Charlie grabbed a table. Jobe watched the cook lower his selection into a pot of boiling water. The

lobster shook violently for a few seconds, then stopped. Jobe was like a young boy watching big trucks move rocks.

After lunch, Charlie took a turn driving. Jobe grabbed the recliner and Ellie remained in the passenger seat. They followed the coastal highway through Capitola, Aptos, and into Watsonville. “Hey,” said Ellie, “this is your friend Dan Watson’s town.”

“Yes, along with Danville,” said Jobe. “But we’ll never get that far north on this trip.”

“Hey, Charlie,” asked Ellie. “Did you ever know a Dr. Carl Jones in Oak Pines?”

“Sure. In the old days, he was the only one delivering babies in our sleepy little town – and it was a lot sleepier in those days. Why do you ask?”

“When Jobe and I went to the river in August we passed Carlton Camp Ground, and then Jones Bar along the river.”

“So?” Charlie paused. “Oh ... I get it. Carl ... Jones. Ha! Your travel conversations got that boring?”

“We were still getting to know each other,” Ellie said, looking at Jobe, coyly.

The trio fell into a travel humdrum with very little talk and a lot of gazing out the windows at the upper Salinas Valley. They crossed Salinas Road where seas of low green crops flowed outside. Giant-wheeled tractors plowed the dry ground, stirring up dust that lingered in the air, void of any breeze. Rows of plants awaiting harvest, swept by in flashes of columns that hypnotized Ellie. The highway changed direction and headed for the coast. They crossed Elkhorn Slough. Fishing boats filled the small bay. At Moss Landing, Ellie pointed out two, stunning, 500-foot-tall towers. Charlie gave her the history of the electrical power plant that was built in 1950, the same year Ellie was born, powered by natural gas and producing 1500 megawatts of power.

About five minutes later Jobe blurted out, “Castroville! Artichoke capital of the world.”

“I guess every place needs to be known for something,” said, Ellie. “Wow, look at all the fresh artichoke stands.” She turned her head and followed one of the stands flying by. Then she looked down at the map. “Make sure you stay on Highway 1 to Monterey. It’s a right turn at the next corner.”

“Got it,” said Charlie as he pushed down on the turn indicator and navigated the turn. “Looks like Monterey is just another twenty miles.”

After a half-hour more of driving, silence, and travel fatigue, Charlie said, “Here’s our turn for Monterey.”

Ellie clapped her hands. “Yeah! Finally.”

Jobe sat up from the recliner and looked out the window. “I think I see a little bit of the Bay.”

Charlie pulled onto Del Monte Avenue, navigated a few turns in the road, slowed down, and turned into an RV park not too far from Cannery Row. “This is a great park. It’s in walking distance to The Row.”

They registered, found their assigned spot, and pulled in. Jobe unhitched the Tiger and climbed the steps into the RV where Charlie and Ellie were relaxing. “You want a beer, Charlie?” Jobe said as he grabbed several out of the small RV fridge.

“Sure. Thanks.” Charlie grabbed a can.

“How about you Ellie?”

“No thanks.”

Jobe and Charlie popped open their beers at about the same time. “To you, Charlie, to your Winnebago, and to our trip.” Jobe held his can up high, Charlie did the same. Ellie held up her empty, cupped hand. “Hey. You guys remember the old pull-tabs that came off the can?”

“Yes. They quit making those just a few years ago,” said Ellie. “Kids kept cutting their feet on them at the beaches.”

“All I remember were the necklaces people made out of them by linking them together,” said Charlie.

Jobe sipped his beer. “Cheap man’s hippy beads! Hey, Charlie. Ellie and I are going to drive down the coast in the Tiger and hang out at some cool place along the ocean.”

“Terrific!” Charlie said, waving his hand in their direction. “Have fun. I’ll just hang out here and maybe wander down to Cannery Row this afternoon.”

“Read Steinbeck’s Cannery Row book before you go,” joked Ellie.

“Oh, I will. Already started. It’s not a big book. Found some landmarks I want to check out. Hey, Jobe, make sure the car phone is working before you go.”

“Will do,” said Jobe. As Ellie walked out the side door, Jobe leaned toward Charlie and whispered, “Don’t wait up for us.” Charlie winked.

Chapter 27

Jobe and Ellie left Monterey and drove past Carmel. “Hey, let's stop in and see Clint Eastwood,” said Jobe. “He’s the mayor, ya know?”

“Yes, I know. And he makes a whopping two hundred dollars a month doing it.”

Jobe looked over at Ellie. “I don’t think he's in it for the money.”

“Nope. But it makes him a double star at the cocktail parties. I don’t think he has time for us.”

“You’re right,” said Jobe. “We’ll keep on driving. Hey, El, do you know why it is best to drive *down* the coast rather than *up*?”

“Nope. Got me on that one.”

“It’s because we are on the coast side of the highway, which gives us a better view with no passing cars to block it.”

“That makes sense. How’d you figure that out?”

“Went the wrong way once. It’s also easier to pull over to do sightseeing. No road to cross.”

Jobe navigated the turns, just as he always did on mountain roads, upshifting, downshifting, rocking back and forth with the rhythm of the road. He pulled behind a big RV, a Winnebago F17 just like Charlie's. “Next straight-away I'm passing this sucker. I don’t need much room. That’s the joy of a V8 in a small car. Here we go!” Jobe pulled out into the left lane and floored it. His tires squealed. Ellie’s head pressed back into the headrest.

As they passed the RV they both glanced up at the driver. But at the speed Jobe was traveling, they only caught a glimpse. Jobe and Ellie stared at each other. “Looked like Charlie!” exclaimed Jobe through the surrounding wind.

“Can't be,” said Ellie shaking her head. “But it did look like him and it looked like his Winnebago.”

“There's a lot of F17s out there, a very popular model in the 60s. Plus, how could he possibly get ahead of us!”

“I don't know. But I think I saw some suspenders!” Ellie grabbed the car phone. “I'm calling Charlie.” She dialed and paused. “Hello? Charlie? Where are you?”

“Where do you think I am, darlin'?”

“Don't play games, Charlie. Was that you that we just passed?”

“Sure was!”

Ellie dropped her jaw, took the phone down from her ear, looked at Jobe, and whispered, “It was him!”

She put the phone back up to her ear. “How did you get ahead of us? Why aren't you in Monterey?”

“Well ... actually ... I am in Monterey. I was just teasing you. I sensed a juicy opportunity. Did you see a big RV like mine?”

“Yes. And the driver looked like you, suspenders, and all.”

“Well, there are a few of us out there. Old guys look a lot alike to you young folks. It's just like every time I see a blonde with shoulder-length hair, I think it's you! Hey, Steinbeck is quite a writer. I am finishing Cannery Row and about to head down there to look around.”

“You've never read any Steinbeck, before, with all the reading you have done?” asked Ellie.

“Nope. Too much philosophy: Descartes, David Hume, Immanuel Kant.”

“Well, you'll find Steinbeck plenty philosophical. He's just a lot more practical. Tells life the way it is. Grapes of Wrath, East of Eden. Put 'em on your list.”

“Okay. Will do. See ya later.”

“Yep. Love ya. Bye.”

“That jokester!” said Jobe.

“Yep, he sure is. Never a dull moment,” added Ellie.

After driving two hours from Monterey, Jobe pulled off the two-lane Pacific Coast Highway into a parking lot. “Where are we?” asked Ellie.

“Ragged Point Inn. Spend the night here?”

“Sure!” Ellie replied, turning her head quickly toward Jobe, her jaw slightly dropped. “Day drive becomes an over-nighter?” Her voice was slightly elevated; her eyes sparkling.

“Why not?” Jobe shrugged.

Wow! She thought to herself. *Mr. play-it-slow has become a tiger ... like his car.*

Jobe quickly pulled into a parking spot near the registration office. Ellie got out, stretched, arched her back, eyes closed, arms lifted high, her gorgeous feminine figure on full display for Jobe who watched with intrigue until she opened her eyes and relaxed her body. She looked at Jobe. “What?”

Jobe just smiled and said, “Let's go in and register.”

“Yes, let's.”

Ragged Point, located on a bluff overlooking the Pacific Ocean, offered breathtaking views with waves crashing below – the most isolated place to lodge anywhere between Big Sur and Morrow Bay.

Jobe opened the office door and Ellie stepped in. She paused and took in the rustic surroundings with rough-cut beams and knotty pine planks in the ceiling. “This place is charming!” Ellie blurted out with Jobe standing close behind her.

Jobe stepped up to the counter. An older lady behind it said, “How can I help you young folks, today?”

“We want two rooms with an ocean view.”

Ellie looked over at Jobe, her jaw slightly dropped again. “What? Are we brother and sister, now?”

Jobe just smiled, took the keys from the lady, and said, “Let’s go find our rooms!”

As they left the office, Ellie looked around, again, but the charm of the room had slipped away.

“Here’s your room, right next to mine.” Jobe handed her a key.

“How charming,” she said in a steady voice.

“Get yourself settled and we’ll go eat in twenty minutes.”

“Okay.” Ellie closed the door and immediately pulled her diary out of her purse.

Dear Martha:

What kind of a guy have you sent me? I think I love him, but he is sooo slow! What’s worse is that one minute he’s a roaring tiger and the next a fearful puppy dog. Guess I’ll just have to wait and see what happens. But I believe he’s worth waiting for. Time will tell. My big fear is that he loves what I taught him about ‘Streams’ more than our friendship. He’s, for sure, a better guy than he was. But he sure ain’t my guy! Not yet anyway.

Tuesday, Oct 6, 1987

Jobe opened the restaurant door for Ellie. They entered the restaurant and sat at a candle-lit table for two. Rustic open beams and husky redwood walls glowed softly in the flickering light.

The waitress brought two glasses of water and two salads. “Everyone gets a salad here. We only have one kind. I’ll be back to take your order in a few minutes.”

Ellie shifted in her chair. “Jobe?”

“Yes?” Jobe replied, reading the menu.

Ellie placed her chin on her folded hands, with her elbows mounted on the table. She looked at Jobe with soft admiring eyes. “How do you feel about me?”

Jobe looked up, lowered his menu, and placed it on the table “Well...” Jobe fidgeted with his napkin and fork. “I think very highly of you. You have been a wonderful influence on me, and I cannot thank you enough.”

“That's all well and good,” Ellie said, still leaning on her folded hands. “That’s what you *think* about me. But I want to know how you *feel* about me.”

“Oh, that,” Jobe said, smiling and cocking his head a little to the right. “Guess I can't escape what you once called the *yucky* part of a relationship, can I?”

“Nope! Did you want to?”

“No. I don't mind. But are you sure you're ready for this?”

Ellie sat back in her chair. “Sure,” she said with less confidence than with the question she just posed. Jobe placed his elbow on the arm of his chair, his index finger stretched between his lips, pinching his lower lip with his thumb. He looked beneath her, at her salad. “Well?” she said, still sitting back in her chair.

Jobe remained still, except for pinching his lip. Ellie shifted her posture, anticipating what she may have unleashed in her on-and-off tiger of a guy. “I think...” Jobe's eyes slowly moved up. He fixed them on Ellie's. “I think I'm in love with you!” Ellie didn't say a word; Ellie couldn't say a word. “I'm still figuring out what love is, Ellie,” he said softly. “But if I've ever been in love, it is now.” Ellie waited. “Do you know what love is?” asked Jobe. “Were you in love in that past relationship with Mr. Romance?”

“His name was Phil Roman.” Ellie knew that he knew this.

“Oh, yeah,” Jobe replied.

Ellie sat forward again in her chair. “One thing I'm sure of is that it was *not* love.”

“But he sure dazzled you!” Jobe replied quickly.

“He sure did. But it wasn't love.”

“I believe you.” Jobe took Ellie’s hand and held it gently. “It’s your turn now. Do you love me?” She hesitated briefly, realizing she had just been checkmated. But she didn’t mind.

Ellie looked at Jobe. She had been waiting for this opportunity ever since she sensed that he loved *Streams* more than her. “I sure do, mister!” she said without hesitation.

Jobe sat back in his chair, both hands clutching its arms. He was surprised, but pleasantly so. “Wow?” he said, with his hands now folded on his lap. “And just when did this all come about?”

“When we first got back together, after the big blowout. I learned a lot about myself in those dark weeks.”

Jobe’s eyebrows crunched slightly together. “Did you also figure out why you bailed on me? I never understood it!”

“Yes.” Ellie sat back in her chair, now looking beneath Jobe, at his salad.

“Do you want to tell me about it?” he asked.

“Someday I will. And it’s a good story,” Ellie looked up at Jobe, “And it’s one that ended good, for me!”

Jobe smiled and said, “You are, for sure, a better Ellie. But, there was a time, early on, when I didn’t think that was even possible.”

“Guess you got real about me,” said Ellie.

“I did, indeed. However, it was more about life than just you. But it included you!”

“I’m so glad,” Ellie confessed.

The waitress came, took their salad plates, and then placed the Chicken Marcella they both ordered in front of each of them.

“Dig in!” said Jobe. “This should be good!”

“Bon appétit,” said Ellie.

After paying the bill, Jobe followed Ellie out of the restaurant and Ellie headed for the bluff rather than back to the motel rooms. The evening air felt cool. The sun had just gone down, no

longer peeking over the huge expanse of blue ocean before them. As they neared the edge of the bluff, they watched as the waves crashed below before they heard them.

Jobe slipped his arm around Ellie's waist. Felt so good – for both of them. “They say,” Jobe said, staring off into the ocean, “that every seventh wave is the largest.”

Ellie pushed away from Jobe, turned toward him, and placed her fists on her hips. “Who says so?”

“Them! Those who know such things.”

“OK, let's count the waves and see if it's true,” suggested Ellie.

“But we gotta wait for a big one before we start counting.”

“Makes sense.”

Though they could only see the waves dimly in the evening dusk, the sound of each wave was crystal clear. “Okay,” said Ellie. “I think that was a big one.”

“I think you're right.” After a couple of seconds, Jobe counted, “One.”

A few seconds passed. “Two,” Ellie added.

When they got to six, Jobe said, “So far, so good.”

“Yep. Seven,” Ellie said, with glee. “That wave was about the same,” she said smugly. They waited.

“Did you hear *that* one?” asked Jobe.

“Yes.” Ellie's voice dropped. “Big one. But it wasn't the seventh wave!”

“Close enough,” said Jobe. “The next big one might come in six waves.”

“Could be,” Ellie admitted. “Hey, you are pulling another Plato and Aristotle thing, again?”

“No way,” said Jobe. “Those were steps; these are waves. Plato and Aristotle both knew the difference.”

“Very funny.” Ellie laughed, pulling close to Jobe. She wrapped her arms around his waist and placed her head on his

shoulder. "I'm yours, you know." She looked at him with a hopeful sparkle in her eyes. "Tonight!"

"I know," Jobe said without a trace of enthusiasm.

Ellie pulled away. "Is that a problem?" Her face was stern and a bit inquisitive.

"Yes," said Jobe. Ellie's heart sank. "But it's not you, it's me." Ellie's countenance softened. She waited.

"You know I want you," Jobe said.

"I was beginning to wonder?"

"You're gorgeous. I wanted you from the first time I laid eyes on you at Carla's – all of you!" Ellie blushed. "Why do you think I called you over?"

"To rescue you!"

"And you did," said Jobe. "That was part of it. But oh, I was taken in by *you*. Just wanted you closer. Why did you move closer?" asked Jobe. Ellie didn't answer.

"I'm not too tall?" she asked fishing for an explanation of his reluctance.

"You're at eye level." Jobe stared into her eyes. "Love your eyes. Plus, beautiful long legs come with height. I figured that out at the river." Ellie blushed again. Jobe placed his hands on Ellie's hips and rubbed them up and down slightly. "You got a body, girl. And I think you know it."

"I'm happy with what I've got at 37. So ... what's the problem, Jobe?"

Jobe paused. "I've never done it!"

"Oh my!" Ellie said, almost giggling. "You're kidding."

"Nope," said Jobe. "At best, you're about as inexperienced as me. And, at worst..."

Ellie placed her hand over Jobe's mouth. "I don't have much experience either, mister."

"Seems like you got past that *yucky* part, at least once in your life."

Ellie looked out over the bluff. “Yeah, once.” She looked back again at Jobe. “I think that's partly why I bailed out when I did. I learned that the *yucky* part can continue.”

“We all learn what to avoid,” said Jobe.

“I sure did. But I don't want to avoid it now!” Ellie said, her hopes skyrocketing. “I can show you what I know.” Now, Jobe's passion was skyrocketing.

“I can't,” said Jobe. Ellie stood there confused.

“What's wrong, Jobe?” Ellie's voice was full of compassion. She was frustrated, but somehow this made her love Jobe all the more.

“Nothing is wrong. It's all quite right ... but I wish it weren't. What I want, and what is right, aren't always the same thing. I learned this a long time ago. Kinda wish I hadn't. But I did and I can't unlearn it.”

“What you want is me?”

“Yep.”

“I'm flattered. Yet, you also don't? What's so right about that?”

“For me,” Jobe cleared his throat. “For me, it means ... and this is just me, I'm not putting this on you. It means that it's gotta mean something. It's gotta mean that I genuinely love you and that I'll never leave or forsake you.” Ellie just looked into his eyes. They were sincere. “I know it's corny and old-fashioned, but it's who I am. I'm not sure I even chose it. It's just the way I was raised.”

Ellie, for the first time in her life, felt her whole history of *yuckiness* melt away. “No, Jobe,” she said softly. “It's not just how you were raised. It's who you are and I love you for it. It makes me feel safe.” Jobe was not sure exactly what that meant, but he liked the sound of it.

Jobe kissed Ellie. *Finally!* She thought as she laid into the kiss. *Sexiest kiss I've ever had.* She grabbed Jobe's hand and walked him

to the motel door. She leaned toward him, kissed him on the cheek, and whispered in his ear, “Go take a cold shower.” She then disappeared through her motel door.

Chapter 28

That same day, after Jobe and Ellie's car phone call to Charlie, he decided to visit Cannery Row. The ocean was only a quarter mile from the RV park. So, Charlie headed out, crossed the street, walked a block downhill, followed the road that turned a sharp left, and there it was: Canary Row in all its historic beauty. The street used to be called Oceanside Avenue but was renamed in 1958 to commemorate Steinbeck's book. Charlie could barely see the covered sky bridge that stretched across the street. But what he could see were big bold capital letters saying MONTEREY CANNING CO, mounted directly below three equally spaced sets of triple windows. When he reached the sky bridge, he noticed that one end was connected to the upper story of a building painted the same reddish-brown color as the bridge. It had the same capital words mounted on the side. "Ah ha," Charlie said, out loud. "This is one of a dozen crossovers they used to transport empty cans from the warehouse to the cannery on the waterfront." His head scanned along the sky bridge toward the cannery. "And that's where they canned the fish and sent them back to the warehouse. Quite an operation in the '40s. They canned over 25,000 tons of fish in those days." He looked around to see if anyone appreciated his verbal revelations.

He walked a little further and noticed a break between the buildings. There, he saw and felt the ocean. He walked a little further, found a bench facing the ocean, and sat down. He closed

his tired old eyes. The afternoon sun beat on the top of his head while the ocean breeze sprayed an occasional mist across his face. The bench moved ever so slightly. He opened one eye and looked out of the corner. There sat a young girl. Out of caution, he ignored her taking in more sun and mist. The girl had one knee up, her hands and chin resting on her knee and staring at the ocean. After a few minutes, she turned her head toward Charlie and said, “Do you believe in God?” Charlie opened his eyes and looked at the girl. He saw some girlish features, but her physique was more like that of an adolescent boy. Her hair was short, and she had only one earring. Charlie remembered a celebrity, a few years back, named George Michael who wore a small cross dangling from one ear.

Taken back by her question, Charlie only said, “Sure!” He sensed in her a sincere but distant disposition and wondered if it was an honest question or just thinking out loud. So, he let the silence linger. Charlie reclined his head again. The bench cradled his neck, eyes shut, surf rumbling, the morning sun poured down from behind him along the top of his face.

After a few minutes, the young voice said, “Why do you think God made me this way?”

Charlie lifted his head and sat up. “In what way, darlin?”

“I’m a girl, but sometimes I feel like a boy. And it’s easier for me to look like one, too.” She looked over at Charlie, genuinely perplexed. “My older sister is beautiful. She always loved playing with dolls. I like to do something more fun.”

“Like what?” asked Charlie.

“Like baseball!”

“Nothing wrong with that.”

“But the boys in the neighborhood don’t like it when I play. But ya know what?”

“What, darlin?”

“I think it’s because I can hit, run, and catch better than any of them.”

“I’ll bet you can, child,” Charlie said, with a bit of a chuckle.

“I don’t know why I can. I just can,” said the girl.

“Well, God made you that way, so that’s what you’re supposed to do. To *not* do it would deprive him of some of his pleasure in you.”

“You really think so?”

“Of course!” Charlie said, enthusiastically, slamming his hand down on the bench wanting to encourage her.

“Hey, that’s good to know,” she said, beginning to move around in her seat and smiling. “But why would God make me a combo?”

“Combo? What do you mean?”

“You know – part boy, part girl. Seems like it would be a lot easier just being one or the other, like my sister, or like the baseball boys. When I was little, I liked to pretend I was fighting cowboys and Indians. I would even be an army girl sometimes. And now, I crave competition – not the girl-backstabbing kind – but sports. I love to win but I love, even more, just playing.”

“Hmmm. I see your point,” Charlie said, his face frozen with a serious look.

“Seems like you care, mister,” said the girl.

“That’s because I do. I do, indeed.”

“Why?”

“Well... though I don’t even know you, I love you. That’s what caring is all about.”

“Why?”

“I guess because I know God loves me, and I know he loves you, and so I can’t help but love you, too.”

“Wow. That’s so cool,” the girl said, grinning ear to ear. “Never really thought of it that way. But that’s how I live. Well, it's how I *want* to live. I know what it's like to be hurt, and when I see someone hurting... well, I want to help them and care for them.”

“And do you?” asked Charlie.

“I try to. I really do!”

Charlie reassured her. “I believe you. And this is what true love is all about.”

“It’s not just about some guy liking me?” asked the girl. “Sometimes, even other girls like me. I get a little confused. I’m not trying to get anyone to like me. I just wanna have friends.”

“You’re doing well, child. Keep being the kind person you are, and you’ll be fine,” said Charlie.

“But I still don’t know why God made me like this,” the girl said, with a tear rolling down her cheek.

Charlie moved closer and put his big old-guy arm around her. “I can’t tell you why, either. I just know God loves you just the way you are.”

“I know that,” she said. “I know it deep in my heart. But it doesn’t always seem like it’s true the way people sometimes treat me. If they’d just let me be who I am, and quit trying to make me different, I could have a pretty happy life.”

“Oh, but you *can* have a happy life, now, in spite of them. It’s something you have to decide. No matter what you do in life, no matter who you are, somebody won’t like it. Even Jesus had people who didn’t like him or anything he did.”

“I like what I’ve heard about Jesus,” said the girl. “He was someone special. What do you think he thought about my situation?”

“Well, to tell you the truth, he didn’t say anything at all about it!”

“Really?”

“Not one word. At least, none that we know of.”

“Does that mean I’m good or bad?” asked the girl.

“Perhaps, neither,” Charlie reassured her. “Apparently, it was not high on his list of concerns.”

“You think he knew about people like me?”

“Of course, he did,” said Charlie. “It was fairly common in his day. Always has been. But, as I said, it was not high on his list of issues. He seemed to care more about *how* people treat each other than *who* they are.”

“But how they treat others *is* who they are!” said the girl, quite loudly.

“That’s very insightful of you, honey,” said Charlie.

“Why do some people treat others unkindly, anyway?” asked the girl.

“Perhaps it's because they don't really know who they, themselves, are,” offered Charlie. “And, by calling attention to the peculiarities in others, they find a false sense of security in themselves.”

“Doesn't seem like a good solution to me,” said the girl.

“That’s because it's not a solution at all,” said Charlie. “But maybe it's all they’ve got. And maybe they don't realize what they're doing.”

“Yeah, some of them don't,” said the girl. “I’ll try to keep that in mind. I try to forgive other people. I find that when I forgive people, I feel better about myself.”

“Good girl,” said Charlie. “Keep that forgiveness in your heart and mind, even if you don’t know why people do what they do. It’s not your problem, is it?”

“No, I guess not. But it sure *feels* like my problem sometimes.”

“It’s only as much a problem as you let it be.”

She stared at Charlie for a moment with the morning sun shining on her cheek. “You know... I think you’re right. Thanks, mister. I feel a whole lot better now.”

“Remember, child, God loves you for who you are. And, you can always count on that.”

“What's your name, mister?”

“Charlie.”

“You live around here?”

“Nope. Just passing through, traveling with some friends. What’s your name, honey?”

“Shelby. Maybe I could meet your friends sometime. Getting to know you, tells me that I would like them.”

Charlie tilted his head back and raised his eyebrows. “Oh, you would. Tell ya what. Be here same time tomorrow and you *will* meet them.”

“OK. What’re their names?”

“Ellie and Jobe,” Charlie said, proudly.

“Job? Like Job in the Bible?”

“Well, sorta,” said Charlie.

“I like the name, Ellie. She sounds nice,” said the girl.

“She is. You’ll like her.”

“OK,” said the girl, jumping up off the bench. “See ya tomorrow, Mister Charlie.”

“G’bye, darlin’”

Charlie walked back to the RV Park. It was uphill all the way, so it took him longer than when he came down.

Late, the next morning, Charlie took a stroll. He didn’t venture again downhill to the Row, just up and down some Monterey side streets admiring the quaint houses. When he got back to the RV Park, the Tiger was parked in the short dirt driveway. Jobe and Ellie were unpacking the car. “You kids had a good time?”

Ellie and Jobe looked at each other briefly, and Ellie said, “You have no idea, Charlie.”

“That good, huh? Oh, to be young again!”

“What did you do while we were gone, Charlie,” asked Jobe.

“Oh, I lounged around yesterday, finished reading Steinbeck’s Cannery Row, then hiked down to The Row to see if I could spot any landmarks.”

“Find any?” asked Ellie.

“Oh, a few. But, better than that, I met a young girl while sitting on a bench taking in the ocean sights, sounds, and smells.”

“Did you talk to her?” asked Ellie.

“She mostly talked to me. Had a lot on her mind.”

“Bet you had a few gems for her,” said Jobe.

“I hope so,” said Charlie. His face became serious. “I know she left happier than when she came!”

“I’d be shocked if she didn’t,” said Ellie. She knew Charlie’s kind, mentoring instincts.

“Hey, you both gotta meet this girl. I promised her.”

Jobe and Ellie looked at each other. “OK,” they both said, almost in unison. “When?” asked Ellie.

“Today. Same time I met her yesterday, 1 p.m., about an hour from now.”

“Time enough to eat, then go see her,” Jobe said, officially confirming it. “Did you share *Streams* with her?”

“Yes, but only indirectly,” said Charlie.

“Sometimes that’s the best way,” said Ellie.

The three of them ate lunch and talked about Jobe and Ellie’s trip down the coast.

“OK, time to go,” said Jobe. “Shall we walk?”

“Yes. It’s not far... and it’s all downhill!” exclaimed Charlie. “When we get down there, I’ll show you my scenic spot.”

They followed the road downhill following the sweeping left curve. Before them, a clear view of Cannery Row spanned the distance. Charlie gave them a quick verbal tour of the sky bridges and the history behind them. “OK,” said Charlie. “Here’s my spot.” He led them between two buildings and down a narrow sidewalk that opened into a panoramic view of the ocean.

“Wow. This is spectacular,” said Ellie. Her eyes lit up with delight. “I love to hear those waves crashing in.”

“And, the wind’s blowing in,” added Jobe. “Feel that mist of the surf splashing your face?”

“Sure do,” answered Ellie. “Could result in a bad makeup day.”

“I don’t think so.” Jobe protested. “You don’t wear much. Don’t need much!”

“Glad I got you fooled,” said Ellie.

“Hey, there’s my girl,” said Charlie, delighted that she remembered to come.

“Where?” asked Ellie.

“Down there on the right. See the bench facing the ocean. She’s on the end. She’s in the same spot where I met her yesterday.”

“Well, let’s go down and say hi,” said Jobe. “What’s her name?”

“Shelby.”

They descended some steps that began at the end of the sidewalk, single file, Charlie leading the way. He approached the bench from the rear side. The girl was in her favorite perch – one leg down, one leg up, hands on knee, and chin on hands. “Taking in all the powerful beauty of the sea?” asked Charlie.

“Oh, Mister Charlie!” the girl said, dropping her leg down and turning toward him. “So glad you came. Wasn’t sure if you would.”

“No way I’d miss it, honey. Meet my friends. This is Ellie and Jobe,” he said ushering them around him.

Ellie stepped forward and extended her hand. “So good to meet you, Shelby!”

“I guess you’re Ellie.”

“And I’m Jobe,” he said, moving a bit closer and nodding.

“Charlie was such a big help to me yesterday. I was totally bummed out. But after a short chat,” she looked over at Charlie, “I felt a whole lot better!”

“You did most of the talking, honey,” said Charlie.

“Yes, but you helped me figure out what to say.”

“Well, I'm just glad you were listening to your better self.”

“Did Charlie tell you about our *Streams* idea of life?” asked Jobe. Ever since Jobe's big ah-ha moment revisiting the bridge, alone, he decided he would tell anyone, anywhere how great this idea is.

“Streams?” asked the girl. Charlie let the conversation play out.

“It's how we view life.” Jobe looked over at Charlie. “Charlie must have mentioned it. It's a key part of all our lives.”

“No, I don't think so.” The girl looked at Charlie.

“Well, actually, I did. I just didn't call it that. Remember what I said when I put my arm around you?”

“I'll never forget,” said Shelby. “You told me that God loves me just the way he made me, despite my struggles.”

“That's right. And do you see something terrible and something beautiful in it?”

Shelby brought her knee back up under her chin. “The *terrible* part is my problems. The *beautiful* part is God loves me.” She looked at Charlie for approval. Jobe and Ellie watched, quietly.

“Very good, my little chickie,” said Charlie. “And God streams this kind of beauty to people everywhere, all the time!”

“But only after something terrible happens?” asked Shelby.

“Usually,” said, Charlie. “But isn't that when we need it the most?” Shelby just smiled.

“But it's the beautiful part that matters,” added Jobe, breaking the silence. “This is what makes life meaningful and worth living. The hard part is that sometimes we gotta just wait and get through all the terrible stuff until the beauty comes.”

“And sometimes,” said Ellie, “it can take a long time. But it always comes.”

“It's just never soon enough for any of us,” said Charlie.

“I think I get it,” said Shelby. “But that waiting thing... that’s the hard part. Will it take my whole life?”

“Some of it will, but not all of it,” Ellie said, reassuring the girl. “Plus... you got your whole life ahead of you!” Ellie held her hand gently. “Just let it all happen, learn from it, and know it will eventually be good.” Ellie looked at the girl and smiled, releasing her hand.

“OK. I’ll try,” said Shelby. “I guess you guys gotta move along on your trip.”

“Yep,” Jobe spoke up. “Places to go, people to see.”

“Who and where?” asked Shelby.

Charlie butted in. “The places are pretty much charted out, but the people ... well we never know who. And you are one of them, child. We didn’t plan this, did we?”

Shelby stood up. “For sure, not! Maybe the best things are not planned.”

“Well said,” added Jobe.

Ellie handed Shelby a card. “Hey, if you ever wanna talk or anything, just give me a call or write. Really!”

Shelby took the card. “Oh, I like what it says under your name, ‘Encourager, friend, lover of good’. Can I steal that from you?” Shelby squinted as the mid-morning sun illuminated her face.

“Consider it yours,” said Ellie.

“We gotta go,” said Charlie.

After hugs all around, they walked up the steps and marched along the narrow sidewalk. “I’ll never forget you!” a distant voice yelled out. “Thanks so much.”

Charlie stopped, turned back, and said, “Take care, darlin’!” Then the three of them disappeared between the buildings.

Chapter 29

Walking back uphill to the RV Park, Charlie complained all the way. “Should have just had you come pick me up on the way.” He huffed and puffed.

“You OK, Charlie?” asked Ellie.

“You’ll make it,” Jobe said, turning his head around.

“Oh, Yeah.” Charlie huffed one more puff. “Just don’t make me drive the first leg,” he said, as they approached the Winnebago.

“I got it covered,” Jobe said as the three of them entered the RV through the narrow side door. Jobe sat in the driver's seat, buckled up, and started the engine. While it warmed, Ellie buckled up in the passenger seat and Charlie stretched out in one of the recliners. “Here we go,” announced Jobe. “Next stop – Salinas.”

“Salinas? Steinbeck would be proud of us,” joked Ellie.

Jobe pulled out of the RV Park and headed back out of town, on Del Monte Avenue, the same way Charlie drove in the day before. When Jobe reached Highway 1, he traveled south, then went onto Highway 68 and headed east to Salinas. Soon they were on a two-lane road, away from everything, surrounded by low hills of short dry grass with scattered oak trees.

As they entered Salinas, Jobe slowed down. “Here it is. Home of John Steinbeck.”

“Born and raised here,” said Ellie. “This valley is the setting for East of Eden.”

“That book’s next on my list,” said Charlie.

“Can we drive by his home? Please, please!” pleaded Ellie.

“Sure,” said Jobe. “I’ll pull into a gas station and ask someone.” Jobe parked, got out, and came back a few minutes later. Climbing into the driver’s seat, he said, “We’re close. 132 Central. Just a couple of blocks over.” Jobe released the hand brake and pulled back onto the road.

“The Valley Guild, a group of women who loved gourmet cooking, turned Steinbeck’s house into a restaurant in the ’70s,” reported Ellie.

Jobe turned to Ellie, “How do you know all this stuff?”

“I read a lot.”

“Man, I guess so.” After a few turns, he said, “There it is, on the left at the corner.” Jobe found a long stretch of curb and pulled over.

“Wow. It is so Victorian!” exclaimed Ellie. “I like the high-pitched roof on the left and the cone-shaped roof over the round room on the right. And, oh, the archway over the bold steps going up to the front door. How elegant and inviting.”

“I doubt it looked all that decked-out when Steinbeck lived there,” added Jobe. “Probably just another house on the block.”

Ellie’s eyes stayed glued on the house. “But it’s so cool looking today.”

“Next trip, well eat there,” said Charlie.

“Sounds good.” Jobe released the brake and pulled out into traffic. After a few jogs, he was on Highway 101 headed north, just as Steinbeck did in *Travels With Charlie*.

At Gilroy, Ellie took a turn driving. They traveled in silence east on Highway 152 and followed it past the San Luis Reservoir.

Breaking the silence, Charlie said, “Great people, like Steinbeck, are not actually greater than most other people. They were just in the right place at the right time and became the

representative of a particular philosophy, religion, set of ideas, or way of thinking. Buddha, for example, was not the first person to imagine Nirvana. He just happened to be sitting under the right tree.” Jobe chuckled. “And Jesus – he was born in the ‘fullness of time,’ yet Paul claimed to be born too late, at the wrong time. But, it was the right time for him to do and write what he did. Mohamad was standing in the right spot when Gabriel verbally revealed the Koran to him, even though it took 23 years to complete. Joseph Smith dug up some gold plates buried in Palmyra New York that became the Book Of Mormon.”

“Not sure about that last one,” said Jobe. “Didn’t he use a peepstone to find buried treasures for folks before he was a prophet?”

“You know your Mormon history!” said Charlie. “Yes, he did ... and got fined for it. The court record of his conviction as an imposter is a historical fact. But Mormons believe he changed his ways and became a true prophet.”

“Didn’t he use that samepeep stone to translate the gold plates into the Book of Mormon?” asked Jobe.

“Yep. He did. And many of the ancient dialogs, supposedly between people in America right after the days of Jesus, came out as exact quotes from the King James Bible of 1611!”

Jobe tilted his head and looked out of the top of his eyes. “Seems a little fishy.”

“For sure it does,” said Charlie. “But all faiths have some degree of fishiness. Easy to overlook it in your own faith, and easy to criticize it in others.”

“You mean talking snakes, apples laced with DNA-changing poison, and a sun that stands still for a whole day in the Old Testament?” asked Jobe.

“Yep. Those and other things,” said Charlie. “I suppose it is a matter of degree, and whether or not those who claim such things have any demonstrable authority.”

Jobe took a sip of coffee. “Looking at the life and teachings of Jesus, he seems to be high on the list of believable people.”

“Yes. And I believe he was at the *top* of the list!” answered Charlie. “The world has not been the same since he came. However, I do not care for judging others about their faith. Judging is way above my pay grade. So, I just tell people what I believe, and why, then trust others *alone with God* to figure it out between the two of them.”

“I like that. I’ll keep that in mind.”

“You will do well in life, young Jobe, to possess such genuine, hands-off humility. All your relationships and experiences in life will be better.”

“Hey,” Jobe said looking over at Ellie. “*Religion divides – Relationships unite*. Right?”

“You got it!” she answered.

Charlie changed subjects and continued. “When little kids grow up into adults, those who are raised religious –and most are – struggle with it to some degree or get away from it altogether. But there are a few that stay compliant all their life. And those who are not raised religious – more secular, or in some cases atheist – many of them grow up and struggle, readjust, or get pulled into some form of religion or spirituality.”

“So, no matter where we start in life, we might not stay there,” concluded Jobe.

“That’s right.” Charlie took a sip of his lukewarm coffee. “We’re all dealt a hand we did not ask for. And, it never fits our temperament and personality perfectly. Then, we must learn from it and figure out who we are.”

“Everyone is on a journey,” said Ellie.

“For sure,” said Charlie. “I think there are four basic journeys that people travel in life: Prodigals, Good Sons, Early Bloomers, and Late Bloomers.”

“Uh... can you explain these a little?” asked Jobe.

“Sure. *Prodigals* are those who grow up believing one thing, then at some point – sometimes at a young age – they forsake it and live a different life. But then, later in life, they come back. *Good Sons* are those who never forsake their upbringing.”

“I’ve known both types,” said Ellie.

“I have too,” added Jobe. “But does this just apply to religious people?”

“Oh, no. Everyone!” answered Charlie. “It doesn’t matter how you were raised; the question is: What will you do with it? What journey do you take? Many people forsake their upbringing – religious people and secular. Those who are not prodigals, never come back. Some leave early in life; I call them *Early Bloomers*. Some leave late – these are the *Late Bloomers*. These are the other two kinds of journeys people take.”

“Interesting! I can’t think of any journey in life, other than one of these four, that people take,” Ellie concluded.

“Except for a few minor details, Yes, everyone chooses one of these four paths,” said Charlie.

“Interesting,” said Jobe, nodding and musing. “I’ll have to think about it. Might be up all night again, thinking!” Everyone chuckled. “Hey, so which one are you, Charlie?”

“Late Bloomer! Took me about fifty years to break away from my legalistic background. It’s not that it was all bad, nor am I unthankful for it. But it robbed me of a lot of freedom, true freedom. Freedom was available all those years, I just couldn’t see it. I learned the hard way that some things we feel strongly about are a result of hearing them over and over, all our lives. But that does not make them true. I also learned to take to heart something Paul wrote, ‘Examine everything carefully.’ This means not blindly trusting what other people *claim* to be true. Dare to think for yourself!”

“I think I’m learning that!” Jobe said, enthusiastically. He looked at Ellie who smiled in agreement.

“How ‘bout you, Jobe? Which journey are you on?” asked Ellie.

“I think I’m becoming a *Late Bloomer*, like you, Charlie.”

“Hang in there, my young friend. It can take time. But it’s a good journey. Very satisfying in later years.” Charlie turned to Ellie. “How about you, honey? I could guess, but I won’t.”

“Prodigal!” said Ellie. “Kinda lost my way. But I’m back, and I have been for years.” She looked over at Charlie with loving eyes, almost in tears. “Thanks to you, my dear sweet mentor.”

“I only put ideas in your head. You did the rest.”

“I think God was in there, too, big time,” said Ellie.

“For sure, honey!” said Charlie. “Never forget that.”

They traveled on through Los Banos and over to Highway 99. At the 99 junction, they gassed up and ate lunch. Charlie took over driving and headed south to Bakersfield.

At dusk, Charlie pulled into an RV park conveniently located on Highway 99. Ellie sat up in the recliner. “Where are we?”

“Bakersfield,” answered Charlie.

“Yuk!” Ellie sat back down.

“Looks like a rough neighborhood,” said Jobe, looking out the window as Charlie pulled in.

“Naw. It’ll be fine. Just an overnight pitstop.”

“Not exactly the beauty spot of California,” said Ellie.

They got registered and hooked up the RV. Jobe did not unhitch the Tiger. “I’m bushed,” said Charlie. “Turning in early tonight,” *Me too*, said Ellie and Jobe in sequence.

Around 2 a.m., Jobe woke up. “What’s that noise?” he uttered quietly. He walked out into the small RV living room

where Charlie was asleep on the foldout sofa. He peeked out one of the two windows that hovered above the recliners but couldn't see much in the dimly lit park. He opened the door carefully, but it squeaked. Charlie sat up and grumbled, "We have an inside toilet, ya know."

"Very funny" Jobe whispered, looking back at Charlie. "I'm trying to see what that noise is."

"Well?"

"I don't see anything," Jobe said, looking out the partly-open door. "But I can hear what sounds like fighting and yelling just past the RV park fence."

"Probably just gangs," said Charlie, settling back down into the sofa bed.

Jobe closed the door and locked it. "Man, I sure am glad we're spending only one night here." Charlie was already snoring. Jobe went back to bed.

Startled by a noise, again, Jobe woke up and sat up in bed. He looked over at the red digital display on his alarm clock that read *2:13 a.m. What, now? I just got back to sleep.* But he recognized the alarm clock as the one in his apartment. To his utter amazement, he realized that Ellie, the mythical Charlie, and *Streams of Terrible Beauty* were all just a dream. "It all seemed so real. Such detail and so much of it" mumbled Jobe. He never dreamed like this before. Jobe felt quite disturbed.

Jobe looked up. The noise that awoke him turned out to be a girl standing in the doorway of his room. It was Ellie, the girl in his dream. *But how could this be, if she was only part of a crazy dream?* Jobe was now confused. She said, "Jobe, are you alright?"

Then Jobe woke up – for real – and found he had fallen asleep in one of the small recliners in the RV. Ellie repeated, "Jobe, are you okay?"

“Oh, Ellie. I just had a crazy dream.”

Ellie sat next to him in the other recliner. Charlie remained asleep. “What was it?” she asked.

“I was dreaming that I woke up from a dream and you and Charlie and *Streams* were all part of that dream. Then you came into the doorway, called my name, and I woke up for real. What does this all mean?”

“It means you had a crazy dream,” answered Ellie.

“Well ... aren't you going to explain it like you did the train dream?”

“Sorry, mister. You only get one dream interpretation per lifetime, from me. You're on your own with this one.”

Chapter 30

Jobe got up the next morning and staggered out into the small living room where Charlie sat reclining with Ellie fixing breakfast in the corner kitchenette. “Here’s a waffle for ya,” she said as she placed it on the small nook table.

Jobe sat down. “It’s kinda cold.”

“Tough,” said Ellie placing some bacon on the table.

“I prefer it a little crispier,” Jobe said looking up at Ellie. She set the syrup down hard.

“Oops,” Jobe mumbled under his breath.

Ellie sat down across from him. “Ya wanna know why the waffle is cold?” Ellie’s voice was about as cold as the waffle.

Jobe took a bite. “Yeah. Why? Pancakes stay hot.”

Ellie turned on her legal assistant voice. “Because the pattern on the waffle iron results in maximum surface area.”

“So?” Jobe took another bite.

“The heat dissipates quicker. Pancakes hold it in.”

“Very interesting.” Jobe popped a half-strip of bacon into his mouth.

“Dontcha wanna know why they do that?” asked Ellie, her voice running low on patience.

“Sure.” Jobe took a sip of coffee.

“Waffle irons are designed to produce waffles that are cooked evenly and thoroughly.”

“OK, miss smarty pants, you know more than me. You always do.”

Charlie slipped out the side door, largely undetected. He noticed a big, long fifth wheel in the adjacent space. *What a beauty*, he thought to himself.

“You used to be impressed,” said Ellie.

“How do you know? Maybe this is the first time I’ve noticed.”

“I doubt it. Girls know what guys are thinking.”

Charlie slipped back in and stretched out on one of the recliners.

“You ought to be more careful about what you *assume*,” said Jobe. “You know what it can turn us both into.”

A voice emerged from the recliner. “That’s a big word.”

Jobe turned around. “Which one?”

“Ought!” announced Charlie. Jobe and Ellie just stared at Charlie. “It’s one of those words that has caused more trouble and sadness in the world than, perhaps, any other. That’s what makes it big. And, it’s even bigger when we use it ourselves.”

Jobe exited the RV in a huff. He checked the tow hitch and safety chains, then he checked the brake lights cable. *Why does she make a big deal when I do something wrong, especially when I haven’t done anything wrong?* He checked the hitch, chains, and cable again. Then, he looked up. Shouting came from the adjacent RV. Suddenly a young man stormed out, slamming the door behind him. He paused when he saw Jobe. *Well, at least I’m not alone*, thought Jobe. After an awkward bit of silence, Jobe smiled and fiddled with the chains, pretending not to notice.

“We’re just having a little disagreement,” the young man said, apologetically, in a calm voice.

Jobe looked up, smiled, and said, “Been there and done that, bro.” Then he looked down at the hitch that he’d already checked.

“You married?” asked the young man.

“No,” answered Jobe. “Just traveling with my girlfriend and her dad. It's his RV.”

“I'm Ray, Ray Corbin.”

“Jobe Martinez,” said Jobe extending his hand. The young man shook it firmly.

“If you're not married, I'm not sure you can understand.”

Jobe straightened up. “Understand what?”

“How everything changes,” said Ray. “I miss my girlfriend.”

“Shoulda married her.”

Ray chuckled. “No. I miss the girlfriend that *became* my wife.”

“Ooh!” Jobe replied. “I'm still in the girlfriend stage. How long ya been married?”

“Five months.”

Jobe cringed. His argument with Ellie danced in his head. He leaned against the car. “She changed that fast?”

“Been like this for the last two months.”

Jobe looked at Ray for a moment. “Sure, it's not you?”

“I don't think so. My love for her is the same.”

“I have a friend,” said Jobe, “and one of his favorite sayings is, ‘When you meet someone, you don't meet them ... you meet their representative!’”

Ray thought for a moment. “I like that. It's funny, but it makes sense, too.”

“Most humor has to have an element of truth in it, or it's not funny,” said Jobe.

“You're full of wisdom for an unmarried guy,” said Ray.

“Maybe that's why!” joked Jobe. Both men laughed.

“Hey, here's one for you, Jobe. Got this one from my dad. ‘Everyone is normal, till ya get to know them.’”

“Ha, ha,” Jobe laughed. “That's a good one. I'll add it to my list. I know how difficult relationships can be – even good ones.”

Ray looked around. He leaned in toward Jobe. “Any chance you and your girlfriend could come over and talk with us? Might help a little – if my wife will allow it.”

“What’s her name?” asked Jobe.

“Trish.”

“Well, tell Trish you met us and want to have us over for a cup of coffee and see how it goes. Oh, you better meet Ellie, first, and make it a legit offer. I’ll go get her.” In a few moments, Jobe and Ellie emerged down the narrow steps from the RV side door. “Ellie, this is Ray. His wife is Trish. He’s gonna go see if she would like to have coffee with us.”

Ray gained a spring of hope in his step, walked toward his RV, and said, “I’ll go check and see.” He disappeared into a big forty-foot, 1985, London Aire fifth-wheel. It was mostly white with a big stylish brown stripe running diagonally, from top to bottom, stretching the full length of the trailer. There were two side doors; one in the middle and one near the end. Three sequential side wheels bore the weight of the behemoth. In the front, a six-foot sleeping area extended over the long bed of their 1985 Ford F-350 diesel truck.

“Look at the size of that thing,” exclaimed Ellie. “And all those curved corners. So cool. Makes our Winnebago look like a boxy little outhouse.”

“Yes, but it’s what’s inside that counts,” responded Jobe. “They got trouble inside.” He looked at Ellie and pulled her close. “We got love, real love, in our little outhouse.”

“We do, indeed,” she said, snuggling up to Jobe. “What kind of trouble are they having?”

“Not sure. But he invited us over – maybe just to be of some encouragement.”

“OK. I’m game,” said Ellie. “But we need to just play it by ear and let things develop naturally. And no interventions!” she teased.

“I agree. I’ve had enough of being on both sides of that!”

Ray came out the side door and climbed down the steps. Approaching Jobe and Ellie, he said, in a near whisper, “She would love to have some company. Come on in,” he said climbing the steps, opening the door, and getting out of the way for Jobe and Ellie to enter.

“Wow!” said Ellie, as she entered the main living area. “This is quite a place.”

“Hi. I’m Trish. Welcome to our humble abode.”

“You *live* here?” asked Jobe.

“Yes. For now. No kids,” she said looking over at Ray. “So, it works OK.”

“Well, if you ever feel cramped come on over to our little Winnebago and you’ll feel like a king and queen over here!” said Ellie, trying to encourage them.

“Have a seat,” said Ray, already in the small kitchen area fixing coffee.

Jobe leaned back on the full-size couch. “I could travel like this. I’m getting spoiled over here.”

“We like it,” said Trish.

Ray, brought in a tray of cups, sugar, and cream. He shuffled back into the small kitchen and returned with a short, squatty Mr. Coffee flask filled to the brim. He set it down on the small coffee table and said, “Serve yourself.”

Ellie grabbed a cup, poured and sipped. “Mmmm... that’s good!” She held the flask up. “Anybody wants some?” The other three held their cups as Ellie poured.

“Did you hear us fighting?” asked Trish.

Jobe and Ellie looked at each other. At the same time, Jobe said *yes*, and Ellie said *no*. Ellie explained, “I was inside.”

Trish continued. “I saw Ray talking to Jobe right after he stormed out of the trailer. Figured he was up to something, wanting me to meet strangers.”

Ray looked at the floor. His hands were folded, resting on his knees. He looked over at Trish through the top of his eyes. "Sorry, honey. I thought it might lighten things up." Jobe and Ellie both put their cups down, not wanting to appear too casual.

"Well, it didn't. And now I suppose you want to talk to these strangers about our disagreement." Trish looked over at Jobe and Ellie.

"Uh, we don't need to stay if you two need to work things out," offered Jobe.

"That's the problem," said Ray, "we're not working it out. We just go round and round."

"You're the one goin' round," said Trish. "I know what I want and why." Ray remained quiet, looking again at the floor.

"I suppose you two never fight," Trish said looking over at Ellie.

Ellie sat relaxed on the couch. "Actually ... we just had one." She looked over at Jobe seated next to her. "It must have overlapped with yours."

Trish felt a little less aggressive. "Did you resolve it?" she asked.

"Not really," said Ellie looking at Jobe. "Too soon. But I'm sure we'll work it out." She grabbed Jobe's hand and squeezed it slightly.

"How long ya been married?" asked Trish.

"We're not," answered Jobe.

"Oh!" said Trish. "Then you still have a chance!"

Ray rocked side to side slightly. "Come on, Trish. We can solve this!"

"How? Ray. I can't get un-pregnant."

Jobe swallowed hard. Ellie took in a breath.

"Abortion is not the answer," said Ray. "It's my baby, too."

"Not really. You don't have to carry it."

"I'd take turns if I could," Ray said softly.

Trish relaxed. “What do the two of you think?” she said looking at Jobe and then Ellie. Jobe wanted to run out of the room just as he did in the dress shop at the mall.

Ellie stayed calm. “I think you both have a point.”

“Yeah? Well, *his* point is puny.” Trish pointed at Ray. “He doesn’t have to give birth.”

“True!” said Ellie. “I’ll give you 51 to 49 on who’s more invested.”

“Thank you,” said Trish, looking over at Ray. Ray hung his head. “How ‘bout you?” she said looking at Jobe.

Jobe held his hands up like he was being arrested. “Hey, I’m a man. We don’t have babies. Plus, it’s not *my* baby, so I need to stay out of it.”

“Thank you for that,” said Trish. “But that seems like a bit of a cop-out. Surely you have an opinion? The rest of us sure do!”

Oh great. Another truth-or-consequences moment thought Jobe. “OK. Here’s what I think. You should at least consider how Ray feels. He *is* the dad!”

“Yes, I know,” said Trish. “I’ve considered that.”

“Are you just saying that? Have you put yourself in his shoes?” Jobe asked as he cringed inside.

“Well, has he put himself in *my* shoes?” asked Trish.

“I have!” said Ray, quickly.

Trish studied Ray for a moment. “I suppose you have. And I have too. But ...” Trish squinted. Her mouth tightened. “It’s my decision and I’ve made it!” Everyone was quiet.

Looking down, Jobe leaned forward, put his arms on his knees, and folded his hands. He looked up. “Can I share something with both of you?”

Ray sat up straight. “Sure!”

Trish leaned back in her chair. “Ok.”

Ellie tensed up inside. She knew what was coming and she learned from Charlie, and from her orphanage days, to be careful with her words.

“I’ve learned something, recently, that has helped me a lot.”

“How recent?” asked Trish. Ellie sensed that Trish was moving her bishop to attack Jobe’s king.

“Only a month ago,” responded Jobe.

Trish turned her head as she talked. “Not enough time to help you very much, is it?” Jobe sat stunned. He had never thought about that. All he knew was that *Streams of Terrible Beauty* got him through two ugly messes. “Well?” Trish waited.

Jobe paused, and he knew he was past the point of no return. “It’s called *Streams of Terrible Beauty*.”

“Are you trying to sell something,” shouted Trish. “This isn’t one of those multi-marketing pyramid schemes, is it?”

Jobe’s heart sank. Yet, it stuck in his throat. He felt checkmated in a game he didn’t know he was playing. “No Mam. I would never do that. Ray thought we could come over and encourage both of you in some way.”

“Well, ya failed!” said Trish. “All three of ya failed. I know what I want to do with my body, and I know it’s my right to do so.” She turned her attention toward Ray. “I’m honestly sorry, Ray, but I don’t want to have this baby and I’m the one who has to have it.”

Ray looked at Jobe and Ellie. His eyes said *I give up*. “Well, you heard the lady. No baby this time around.”

Jobe and Ellie stood up together. “Sorry we couldn’t be of any help,” said Jobe.

“So nice to meet you,” said Ellie. “And we wish the best for both of you.”

“Thanks,” Ray and Trish said together as Jobe and Ellie headed to the door. They let themselves out and walked down the short stairs. They both waited to get into the RV before saying anything.

Charlie was in the recliner, snoozing again. He woke when they came in. Jobe and Ellie sat on the couch. “Man, I sure blew it,” said Jobe.

“Blew what?” said Charlie, a little groggy.

“We tried to encourage the young couple next to us in the big fifth wheel,” said Ellie.

“Oh, that thing!” Charlie was fully awake. “It’s a beauty! Noticed it this morning while you two were skirmishing.” Jobe and Ellie looked at each other with *no big deal* in their eyes. “But I’d hate to haul it around,” said Charlie.

“It’s no longer than the Winnebago towing the Tiger,” protested Jobe.

“I know,” admitted Charlie. “I’m just a little jealous. Well, anyway, how’d you blow it?”

“I was outside when the guy stormed out,” said Jobe.

“Takes one to know one?” asked Charlie.

“Uh, I suppose. Anyway, he invited us over to meet his sparring partner wife.”

“And?”

“Turned out she wants an abortion, and he doesn’t.”

Charlie stroked his chin and looked up at Jobe. “Ooh, that’s serious. L’me guess. You laid *Streams* on them in an attempt to solve their problem.”

“How’d you know?” asked Jobe.

“Done it a hundred times, myself. Never works. People gotta be ready. If they’re not, it just makes things worse.”

“Is that why you didn’t tell Shelby about *Streams*, directly?” asked Jobe.

Charlie pointed at Jobe. “You got it! There are two things I’ve learned from every encounter in life.”

“And these are?” asked Ellie.

“Always let things come about naturally. Don’t force them. We don’t need to; we just think we do. Let someone else,

especially a troubled person, carry the conversation. Just tag along and see where they want to go. This is what love does.”

“That’s hard to remember when I want to help someone,” confessed Jobe.

“Well, sometimes we help them best by not trying so hard to help them.”

“Just be there and listen?” asked Ellie.

“You’ve learned well, chickie.”

“So, what’s the other thing,” asked Jobe.

“Show – don’t tell,” said Charlie.

“Huh?”

“Demonstrate *Streams* by your actions. And this applies to anything in life you feel passionate about,” advised Charlie.

“That’s pretty hard to do with someone you just met.”

“That’s right. And, quite honestly, we can have little influence over people we don’t know. Real loving and caring take time. It’s an investment ya gotta be willing to make.”

“Shall we hit the road or is it too late today?” asked Ellie.

“I think you know the answer,” said Charlie.

That evening, after Ellie had turned in, Jobe nudged Charlie who was half asleep in a recliner. Charlie jerked, then sat up. “What’s up, my boy – except for me staying up too late?”

“Got some questions about Ellie.”

“I’m no expert on Ellie, and even less so about women. But I know her pretty well.”

“That’s why I need to talk to you. Except for that crazy bailout, this is the first real trouble we’ve had. But, somehow, I think we both have issues beneath the surface.”

“You mean it’s not really about the waffle?” asked Charlie.

“Ha! No, there’s got to be more.”

“There always is, my son. And what do you think is beneath the waffle for you and Ellie.”

“I have no idea,” Jobe said with a blank stare.

“How about, ‘OK, miss smarty pants?’ Which part of the waffle does that crawl out from?”

“Hmmm. I see your point. It does bug me that she knows so much.”

“You don’t like it?” asked Charlie.

“Sometimes I don’t. But I deeply admire it. She’s a classy girl.”

“Too classy for you?” asked Charlie.

“I used to think so. But not so much now.”

“Why not? What happened?”

Jobe thought for a minute. “*Streams?*”

“You tell me,” said Charlie.

“Yep. That’s it. But I got it from her! How can she be mad about that? I’m a better man!”

“Oh, she sees it. Quite clearly. She sees it as her competition for your heart.”

“What? It’s not another woman!”

“Doesn’t need to be,” said Charlie. “Ellie doesn’t want to be your *first* love; she wants to be your *only* love.”

Jobe sunk back into the couch. “I’ll have to chew on that a while.”

“Well ... it’ll be tougher chewing than a cold waffle!” They both laughed.

Chapter 31

The next day, Ellie got up first and sneaked past Charlie who was still asleep on the compact foldout bed. She fixed some coffee in the Mr. Coffee countertop brewer that she bought for Charlie the previous year. It replaced the old percolator he still used when he traveled. The smell of coffee permeated the Winnebago. A voice came from the foldout bed, “I smell coffee. Or I think that’s what it is. It’s not perked coffee, that’s for sure.” Charlie sat on the side of the foldout bed. He slipped on his baggy pants and pushed his arms through his suspenders one at a time. He stood up, then he ran his thumbs up and down inside his suspenders to straighten them out. “There,” he said. “Now... where was I? Oh, yeah. Are you making coffee in that confounded, new-fangled automatic thing, again? *Coffee Miser*, you call it?”

Ellie turned toward Charlie, hands on hips, “And happy Friday to you, too! It’s called *Mr. Coffee*. And it’s easier and faster than your old percolator. Plus – no coffee grounds to chew on!”

“And that’s the problem, young lady,” Charlie said, shaking his finger at her. “Nothing to chew on!”

“Ok, I’ll add a spoonful of grounds to your cup.”

“Naw. Don’t bother. No good if they don’t linger at the bottom of the pot while brewing.” Ellie laughed and handed him a mug.

“Not bad,” Charlie said, taking a sip. “I take it all back.”

“Coffee? Did someone say coffee?” Jobe mumbled, yawning, and emerging from the tiny bedroom in the back of the RV.

“Good morning, sleepy head,” said Ellie, affectionately.

“Yeah, Yeah. Just give me a Latte.”

“All I got is coffee. Grounds are optional,” she said looking over at Charlie. Charlie smiled and took another sip.

“Which way we going today?” asked Jobe.

“We’ll be heading east on Highway 58,” said Charlie. “It connects with Highway 40, which is the old Route 66. That’ll take us to Flagstaff which was Steinbeck’s next stop.”

“Hey, I used to watch that Route 66 TV show when I was a kid!” said Jobe.

“Me too,” said Ellie. “I remember two guys in a sports car. No wonder you liked it.”

“And not just any sports car,” said Jobe. “A 1956 Corvette. My second favorite car.”

“Good ol’ Route 66,” added Charlie. “Spanned from LA to Chicago. They officially retired it a couple of years ago. Well, we gotta big driving day ahead. You kids ready to go? We’ll stop for breakfast down the road.”

“Sure,” Ellie and Jobe said, together, shaking their heads in approval.

“OK. Buckle up,” said Charlie, as he started up the Winnebago engine. He let it idle a few minutes and then slowly pulled out. In the side mirror, he watched Jobe’s Sunbeam Tiger dutifully following.

After about 30 minutes, Charlie said, “We’ll stop here in Keene. Keene Café, to be exact. Great pancakes.”

“Yum. I’m starving,” said Jobe.

Ellie unbuckled her seat belt. “Me too!”

Charlie found a space alongside the road across from the Café. He pulled over with the Tiger safely off the road. They got out, Charlie locked the cab door, they crossed the highway, and entered the café. It was a typical truck-stop. The tables were covered with red and white, checkered tablecloths. The counter was jammed with men scarfing down breakfasts and guzzling

coffee, all desiring to hit the road and make good time before their next stop.

“Let’s sit here,” said Ellie. They sat down. “I’ll have the pancakes,” she said when the waitress took their order.

“Me too,” said Jobe.

Charlie handed his menu to the waitress. “Make that three.”

They sat, hands folded on the table. Charlie broke the silence. “We’re at about 2700-foot elevation. Gotta go up and over the 4000-foot summit at Tehachapi, then down through Mojave, and on to Barstow. It’ll be lunchtime by then, travelin’ at RV speed.”

“We’re in no hurry,” said Jobe, hands still folded on the table. “Hey, I’ve never figured out how to pronounce Tehachapi. Is it TE-hachapi?”

“Maybe it is Te-HA-chapi,” offered Ellie.

“Or, how ‘bout Teha-CHAPI!” added Jobe.

“You’re both wrong,” said Charlie. “It’s Tehacha-PEE. It all depends on which syl-LAB-le you em-PHA-size.”

“Hey, Charlie,” Ellie interrupted. “Did you ever want to get rich? I’m pretty sure you could’ve if you really wanted to.”

“You answered it, Ellie,” said Charlie. “I didn’t *really* want to – not bad enough anyway. Don’t know if I could have. Maybe! Doesn’t matter now. Does it?”

“I guess not,” admitted Ellie.

“Not everyone, but most people already have all they need,” said Charlie. “What they seek is only what they want. And this is normal. We all do it.”

“I sure do!” Jobe blurted out. “And, at work, I advise people how to do this!”

Ellie chuckled. “And I . . . I help them get out of legal trouble when what you do doesn’t work.”

Jobe shook his head up and down. “Got me on that one.”

“There certainly is a place for making money,” said Charlie. “I planned for retirement, and it worked out OK. But some people *always* seek more money. They chase it, and it absorbs an enormous amount of their time and emotion. Most of those who get more money don't even know what to do with it. Oh, sure, they have better stuff and people notice. But inside they know it's not what they need. At some point, there's a sinking feeling that settles in after the thrill of acquiring wealth is gone. What did gaining all this money cost them? Everything has a price, you know. Even gaining money.”

“I've seen people like this,” said Ellie. “They're driven, but never seem happy. Seems like it owns them.”

“It usually does,” said Charlie. “Some of them realize they lost opportunities and things that matter, like helping others and getting good at some fun or artistic skill. Some, eventually, realize the cost of failed relationships, especially true love, with one's child, or with friends that have long ago moved on. Many realize they did not need the money they wanted so badly, because what they needed the most they already had, and some lost even that!”

“Here is a good, J Paul Getty quote,” said Jobe. “He was once asked, ‘How much money is enough?’ His answer was, ‘Just a little more.’ Just a little more? What a worthless goal.”

“Well, I'm glad we have enough to go on this trip!” said Ellie.

They downed the pancakes, and Charlie took his last sip of coffee. “You kids ready to hit the road?”

“On the road, again...” Jobe sang as he got up from the table.

“Thanks, again... Willie!”

It was Ellie's turn to drive. The Winnebago slowly climbed up a long sweeping road with scrubby sagebrush scattered along both sides as far as the eye could see. “It sure looks dry out there,”

said Ellie. No one responded. Reaching the Tehachapi summit, about an hour after breakfast, Ellie announced, “Down we go!”

“It’ll go faster now,” said Charlie.

“That was a long steep climb,” said Ellie. Jobe was asleep in one of the small recliners.

When they reached Mojave, Jobe woke up and looked out the window. “Wow. The desert.”

“Good morning, again, sleepy head. Wanna Drive?”

“Sure!”

Ellie pulled over into a long clear stretch, on the side of the highway. Getting out of the driver's seat she said, “Here ya go, Jobe.”

Let me check the tiger hookup, really quick.” Jobe disappeared out the narrow side door, and back in after only a minute. He sat down at the wheel, released the brake, pulled the automatic transmission arm down into drive, took a quick look through the side mirror, and then pulled onto the pavement. “Man, this thing is gutless. It’d be faster to let the Tiger pull the RV, right?” He gave a quick look over at Charlie in the passenger seat.

“With the absurd amount of horsepower it's got, I have to agree with you,” said Charlie.

“OK. Next stop, we’ll swap ‘em,” said Jobe. Charlie laughed. “Hey look. It’s the Highway 14 junction.”

“Yep,” said Charlie. “Connects with 395 which goes up the back side of Yosemite, then to Reno and Lake Tahoe.”

“I love Yosemite and Lake Tahoe,” said Ellie.

“Both beauty spots,” said Charlie. “Next adventure trip, honey.”

The Destination



Friday, October 9, 1987

Chapter 32

After a couple of hours, they reached another junction. “Looks like we’re getting on Highway 40,” Jobe said, as he navigated the RV through a sweeping turn in the road. “This is the old Route 66. Right?”

“That’s right,” said Charlie. “And just a few miles ahead is the highway 15 junction, going north.”

“Where’s it go?” asked Jobe.

“Vegas!” said Charlie, with gusto.

“Glad we’re not going there,” said Ellie. “Armpit of America.”

But, after a few minutes, Charlie blurted out, “Why don’t we go through Vegas?”

“Very funny,” said Ellie.

“No, I mean it!” insisted Charlie.

Jobe glanced back at Ellie. She was now sitting straight up in the recliner. “Please tell me you’re not serious,” she said.

“No. I am!” said Charlie. “We can go up I-15 and then back down Highway 93 from Vegas, tomorrow. It comes out at Kingman, and back onto Highway 40.”

Ellie protested. “What on earth for? There’s nothing there. Steinbeck didn’t stop there!”

“True,” said Charlie. “But Steinbeck did a detour from Billings down into Yellowstone. Why can’t we do one?”

Ellie looked at Jobe and sighed. “Well, I guess we could. But why Vegas?”

“Oh, come on. It’ll be part of our adventure,” said Charlie.

Jobe looked around at Ellie again and shrugged. So did she. Ellie finally said, “OK, Charlie. If you want Vegas ... we’ll do Vegas!”

“Sure. Why not,” said Jobe.

“Woohoo,” said Charlie. “Vegas, here we come!”

A few minutes later they reached the I-15 junction. Jobe pulled into the left turn lane and waited for a break in the on-coming traffic. He pulled forward, cranked the big RV steering wheel to the left, and entered the highway heading north. “Who knows what adventure awaits us?” He accelerated and felt the Winnebago finally shift into fourth gear.

After about ten minutes of driving, Jobe pulled into a truck stop in Yermo. “Your turn to drive, Charlie.” Charlie got behind the wheel, Jobe grabbed the passenger seat while Ellie remained in one of the small recliners, half asleep.

As Charlie pulled back onto the highway heading north, Jobe said, “Pretty interesting that Steinbeck wanted to tour America before he died. Don’t you think?”

“I think everyone has a bucket list when they get older,” answered Charlie.

“A what?” asked Jobe.

“Bucket list. You know, things you want to do before you die – before you kick the bucket.”

“Oh, like Jimmy Durante at the beginning of the movie *Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World*. He kicked a bucket down a hill when he died after a crazy car crash.”

“You got it,” said Charlie. “One of my all-time favorite comedies.”

“When was that?” asked Jobe. “Seems like I was in high school.”

“Nineteen sixty-three.”

“Yep. I was a senior in high school. All I remember is a big W and every comedian on the planet racing to find it. A really long movie, too.”

“Two and a half hours,” said Charlie. “It had Milton Berle, Sid Caesar, Buddy Hackett, Ethel Murman, Mickey Rooney.”

“Hey, didn’t Micky have like a dozen wives and died a broke man after making hundreds of movies?” asked Jobe.

“Eight wives and 300 movies. Spent all the money. Let’s see, there was also Phil Silvers, Johnathan Winters, Buster Keaton, and Jerry Lewis.... hmmm, who am I forgetting?”

“Don Knotts and the three stooges: Larry, Moe, and Curly,” added Jobe.

“Ha, yes. How could I forget?” said Charlie.

“Don’t forget Jim Backus. He was Gilligan’s Island’s, Mr. Howell. Did you know he did the voice in the Mr. Magoo cartoons?”

“I did not!” said, Charlie. “But ya can’t leave out Spencer Tracy. He was the cop chasing everyone throughout the whole movie and tried to trick them out of all of the money at the end.”

“Yeah, what a grand finale,” said Jobe. “I gotta watch it again, sometime. It’s probably out on VHS. It’s so cool to be able to rent movies and watch them whenever we want. What will they think of next?”

“Gotta tell ya, Jobe.” Charlie’s voice turned serious. “I often wonder why God created this mad, mad world – assuming he really exists – and if so, why he made it such a test?” Charlie glanced over at Jobe. “Everyone is tested, either a little or a lot. But why not just let us live, do things, see things, experience things, and die? Why all the trouble – some of it is very severe?”

“I have no idea, Charlie. I’m a lot younger than you. If you don’t have it figured out, there is no way I can.”

“I’m still working on it. But, either way, someday all of it will be done. I’m already getting there, at 67, but it could be another 30 years. Or, then again, it could be 30 minutes.”

“Ha! Not the way you drive,” said Jobe.

“Hey, we're going uphill,” said Charlie. And, this Winnebago's getting old, like me. But I can tell you this, young fellow. You'll think differently at my age. I've got more to explore about life but can't help but wonder when, and how, I will die. Will it be an illness, an accident, or old age?” Charlie glanced over at Jobe who was staring out the passenger window. “Those are the three main ways people check out of here – with plenty of subcategories, of course.”

“Some choice,” said Jobe, still staring out the window.

Charlie continued, now looking straight ahead. “It seems wrong to die because I'm living. Yet, it seems wrong to live, simply because I'm dying. I think the only way to solve this is to realize that the only way to live is to know that I need to die.”

“Why is that?” asked Jobe, looking over at Charlie.

“Because we can't live like this forever. Too much trouble. But we can live for a season. It has a purpose.”

“Well, dying ain't gonna be the purpose of this trip,” said Jobe, trying to reassure Charlie and lift him out of his stupor and hoping to change the subject.

Charlie perked up. “I suppose not. Besides, – you need a third driver! We got a long trip and lots of sights to see.”

“Yes. But it is even longer thanks to your little detour,” called Ellie from the back. They all laughed together.

A few hours later, Charlie pulled off the highway and followed a frontage road that led into a small burg called Primm. He took a wide right turn onto another street, making sure the Tiger didn't clip the corner. Jobe and Ellie, who had both been snoozing, awoke.

Jobe looked out the window and saw a street sign. *Las Vegas Ave!* “We're here?”

“No, sorry. We’re in Primm, Nevada. We just crossed over from California.”

“Doesn’t look prim or proper to me,” Ellie said, gazing out the window at the small, ragged town with unkept yards and scattered trash along the roadside.

“Oh, it’ll do for a gas stop.” Charlie carefully pulled up to a gas pump, making sure the Tiger was not sticking out. “We only have about fifty miles to go. All downhill. Ellie? You up to diving?”

“Sure. Just got a nice long nap.”

“Good. I’m pooped. I’ll take over the recliner if you don’t mind.”

“It’s all yours,” said Ellie, as she buckled up in the driver’s seat.

Jobe entered the RV. “All gassed-up and ready to go.”

Ellie started up the Winnebago, released the hand brake, looked in the side mirror, and pulled out into traffic.

A short distance down the road, Charlie stood up and entered the cab with Ellie and Jobe. “Gotta show you something. On the left is Whisky Pete’s Hotel and Casino. We don’t have time to stop, but if you ever pass through here again, Bonnie and Clyde’s Death Car is on display inside, with bullet holes galore.”

“Hey, I heard that was a really fast car. It could even out-run the police,” said Jobe.

“You heard right,” said Charlie. “It was a 1934 Ford with a V8 engine. It had over 85 horsepower. Topped out at 65 mph. Nothing like your Tiger, Jobe, but a real tiger in its day.”

“That’s the car they died in, right?” asked Ellie.

“Yep,” said Charlie. “167 bullet holes in it. Some were armor-piercing. Took the feds only 20 seconds.”

“Man, they wanted them dead,” said Jobe.

“Sure did. Especially after thirteen murders and robbing more than fifteen banks.”

Chapter 33

After about forty minutes, they crossed I-215 and Ellie announced, “We’re in Paradise!”

“Sure doesn’t look like it,” said Jobe. “Besides, we’re all still alive.” He looked over at Charlie.

Charlie smiled. “It’s not that kind of a paradise.”

“It sure ain’t!” said Ellie, still resenting the detour.

“It’s a pair-of-dice and not far from The Strip,” joked Charlie. Ellie and Jobe groaned.

“How about that RV Park up on the right, Charlie?” asked Ellie, turning her head back around toward the recliner where Charlie was stretched out.

Charlie jumped up, rushed to the cab, and looked. “Yep. Looks good. Take it.” Ellie pulled in.

“Take it wide,” said Jobe. “The Tiger needs lots of room.” Ellie sneered over at Jobe and kept turning in the arc she had chosen.

“Oops!” Jobe mumbled.

Ellie pulled up in front of the registration office. Charlie opened the narrow side door. “I’ll get us registered.”

Jobe and Ellie looked at each other. “Well, here we are!” said Ellie, shaking her head.

Jobe chuckled. “Not sure why, but we’re here. We’ll look around, have dinner, get some rest, and be on our way tomorrow.”

“Not much to see, really,” said Ellie.

“True, but this is Charlie’s detour. Who knows, maybe we’ll want our *own* detour later on the trip.”

“Well, Steinbeck only got one, and Charlie’s used up his allotment.”

Charlie emerged through the side door. “We’re in space 43. The road is a big loop around the park. We’re just up there on the right.” Ellie drove about 200 feet, counting, “41, 42, 43,” under her breath. “Here it is.” Ellie pulled into the well-marked RV pad.

Jobe got out and unhooked the Tiger. He lifted the triangle-shaped tow arm and attached it to the bumper. “I think we’re close enough to establishments that we can walk,” said Charlie.

“Now ya tell me,” laughed Jobe. “I just got unhitched.”

“I’m kinda hungry,” said Ellie. “Anybody wanna go eat?”

“I do,” said Jobe.

“I think I’ll just wander around,” said Charlie. “You kids go have some fun.”

“OK,” said Ellie. “I’ll go freshen up.”

“See ya in ten minutes,” said Jobe.

Charlie escaped out the side door while Jobe plopped into one of the recliners.

Soon, Ellie came out. “Ready to go?”

“Yes. Let’s find one of those good, but cheap, meals at a casino.”

Jobe and Ellie walked up to the Vegas Strip. Neon lights were already on even though it was barely dusk. All the lights were bright, most of them moving in some way, capturing attention, directing viewers to gambling floors, luscious meals, and luxurious settings. They entered a casino with flashing lights, saying, *Huge Buffet*. “That’s what I want,” said Ellie. “A big buffet with lots of choices.”

As soon as they stepped in, rows of slot machines lined the floor. Little old ladies fed in coins and pulled the levers. Occasionally, they saw a man or a middle-aged woman.

Jobe grabbed Ellie's hand. "There it is – the buffet."

Ellie saw three long tables, almost u-shaped, heaping with bowls of fruits and salads of all kinds. She eyeballed a Caesar salad. "I know what I want." Silver trays of ham, thinly sliced roast beef, and freshly carved turkey filled the center table. The mixed aroma was intoxicating. Next to the trays were heaps of mashed potatoes. At the end of the table were two bowls of gravy, dark and light brown with large ladles sticking out, begging to be dipped. "Ooo, I can't wait."

"Let's sit at that table for two against the wall," said Jobe.

"OK," she said as she followed Jobe with her eyes still fixed on the spread of food disappearing from her sight. They sat down together.

"Why did we bother to sit down?" asked Ellie. "We just have to get up and go serve ourselves."

Jobe stood up, took his light coat off, put it around the back of his chair, and said, "To secure this romantic little table. Let's go make some hard choices."

"OK, I'm ready."

Jobe finished loading up his plate and got back to the table first. Though he wanted to dig in, he waited for Ellie to arrive. He grabbed a couple of olives off his plate and quickly popped them into his mouth.

Ellie sat down. "Oh, you waited for me. How sweet."

Jobe carefully swallowed his half-chewed olives. He cleared his throat and said, "Of course!"

He let Ellie dig in first. "You only got a Caesar salad?"

"I'm just getting started," said Ellie, taking a big bite of lettuce dripping with creamy dressing.

"Man, ya know you're in a casino when ya first walk in," commented Jobe. "All the clanking of coins, ringing of bells, and even sirens."

“Sirens are for jackpots,” said Ellie. “Did you know they don’t connect the coin catch plate in the back?”

“No. I didn’t.” Jobe took a big bite of turkey and mashed potatoes covered with gravy.

“Makes more noise. They’re full of tricks, here,” said Ellie.

Jobe swallowed. “Like what?”

“They put slot machines with higher pay-outs by the door. It draws people in.”

“How do they know which machines pay out more?” asked Jobe.

“They set ‘em up that way.” Ellie gunked butter on a fresh slice of sourdough bread and took a bite.

“The slot machines are rigged?”

“Well... kinda. But it’s not illegal. They can’t change the randomness of the machines, but they can change the percentage of payout by how many higher-paying pictures they put on each spinning reel.”

“You mean how many cherries, how many big sevens, and how many jackpot pictures?” asked Jobe.

“Yep. More cherries mean less payout. More Jackpot pictures mean a better chance of hitting three in a row. They can set a machine anywhere from 80 to 99 percent payout.”

“No other?”

“Well, they sure don’t want machines that pay out 100 percent or higher! And if the payout is too low, players don’t get enough payback to keep them playing. The goal is to pay out just enough to help people slowly lose their money. This salad is really good. Wanna try it?”

“No thanks. Then why would they ever set a machine at 99 percent payout?”

“Oh, they only do that on the dollar machines. They’re happy to give you most of your money back as long as you keep feeding the slots at a dollar a pop.”

“Guess that means the penny machines are low payout.”

“You got it,” said Ellie. “But they want to make money on poor people too!”

“Equal opportunity bandits!” Jobe said, making Ellie laugh. “How’d you learn all this stuff?” asked Jobe.

“I dated a guy once who worked at IGT in Reno.”

“IGT?”

“International Game Technology. One of the biggest slot machine makers in the world. They have a hundred-thousand-square-foot manufacturing plant. Half the slots in the world are made there. They sell about twenty thousand machines per year at four-thousand dollars each.”

“Wait a minute,” Jobe said, as he did come calculating in his head. “That’s like 80 million dollars!”

“Yep!”

“Uh,” Jobe paused. “And who was this boyfriend? Mr. Romance, again?”

“Ha! No. That was Phil Rowman. Remember? Only dated this guy once. Don’t even remember his name. I just remember that gambling was all he talked about. Some people get addicted to it.”

“No kidding. Look around,” Jobe said, seeing a sea of slot machines. “Hey! That looked like Charlie!”

“Where?” Ellie asked, standing partially out of her chair.

“He just walked past.” Jobe wiped his mouth with the cloth napkin. “I’ll go see if I can catch him.”

“Find out if he wants to eat with us,” called Ellie, as Jobe hurried past the buffet serving tables.

In a few minutes, Jobe returned. “Didn’t see him. Pretty crowded out there.”

“You sure it was him?”

“No. I only saw him from the side, and only for a moment. Could have been someone else. These old guys kinda all look alike.”

“That’s what he says about us *kids*,” said Ellie.

“He probably runs into *our* doubles all over the place. We will ask him about it when we get back.”

After they both made several trips to the buffet, Jobe asked, “You ready to go?”

Ellie got up out of her chair. “Yep. I’ve had enough. Enough food ... and enough smoke! Maybe they’ll outlaw it someday.”

When they got back to the RV, Charlie was nowhere to be found. “It’s still early,” said Jobe. “He’s probably wandering and pondering.”

Ellie rummaged through Charlie’s VHS cassette collection in one of the cupboards. “Hey, here’s a movie we can watch.”

“What is it?” asked Jobe.

“Camelot!” Ellie said, with a big grin.

“Oh, it’s my favorite,” said Jobe.

“Camelot? Are you sure?”

“Yes. It’s got it all. Great music, romance, comedy, and tragedy.”

“As I recall, it ends very sadly,” added Ellie.

“Oh, mostly. But there is a small glimmer of hope at the very end.”

“I don’t remember that,” said Ellie.

“Yep. Eventually, *beauty* comes on the heels of something *terrible*.”

“Let’s watch it and see,” suggested Ellie.

After three hours of watching and four snack breaks, Ellie turned off the VHS player. “Yep. A glimmer of hope in that kid at the end, running back into safety at the command of King Arthur. Good movie.”

“See, I told ya. ‘Run, boy, run!’”

Ellie sighed. “That was a beautiful ending.”

“Man, Charlie ought to be back by now,” said Jobe.

“Yes. I’m a little worried.”

“Don’t be. He’s a big boy. Let’s turn in. Maybe he’ll wake us up when he returns.”

“You’re probably right,” said Ellie. “I’m beat after all that driving.”

“Me too.”

The next morning, a beam of light shined through the slightly parted curtains and woke Ellie up. She sat up in bed quickly. *Charlie!* She thought. She got out of bed and peeked in the living room. Charlie was snuggled under a cover in his pulled-out hide-a-bed. Ellie felt relieved.

She started fixing some coffee as quietly as she could in the kitchen nook. Charlie stirred. She stopped for a moment. Then Charlie turned and said, “Is it ready yet?”

“Almost.” Ellie continued her work. “Got some bacon and waffles going too.”

“I can smell ‘em,” said Charlie.

“Me too,” said Jobe, sticking his head out of the bedroom.

As the three ate breakfast, Ellie asked Charlie, “What time did you get in?”

“Oh, are you my *mother*, now?” he joked.

“You’re too old to have a mother. I’m just curious.”

“Well.” Charlie paused. “I know it was *today* when I came in, not yesterday.” Ellie looked at Jobe.

“I ain’t his pappy!” said Jobe.

“Well, it doesn’t matter. What matters is that we’re taking off today and getting back on our Steinbeck loop.”

“Yes, that’ll be nice,” added Jobe.

“Uh, kids,” Charlie paused, again. “I want to stay just one more day. We’ll go tomorrow. I promise.”

“What on earth for, Charlie?” Ellie asked, a little exasperated.

“I got a little more looking around to do.”

“At what?” asked Jobe.

“Yes, at what?” added Ellie. “There's nothing to see here.”

“I know. But this is probably my last chance to be here.” Ellie looked at Jobe, again. They both repeated the same shrug they gave when Charlie requested the detour.

“OK.” Ellie finally said. “One more day with the frogs.”

“Hey, you got that from me,” said Charlie. “I used to say it based on that Bible story with all the Egyptian plagues.”

“I know,” said Ellie. “And it fits, here and now!”

“We’ll just hang out here today, and off we go tomorrow,” Jobe said, trying to put a positive spin on things.

After breakfast, Ellie started reading an Agatha Christy mystery she found on the shelf next to the VHS tape collection. Jobe got the playing cards out of the wooden crate and started playing solitaire on the small kitchen table. “How about you, Charlie? What ya gonna do today?” asked Ellie.

“Oh, just some wandering and observing people,” said Charlie. “People are stranger than anyone! Especially when they gamble. It owns many of them, ya know. It’s a great reminder of how foolish it is. Seeing them kissing their money away keeps me focused on what’s important in life.”

“I don’t think I need that as a reminder,” said Ellie. “But go have a good time.” Charlie exited through the side door of the RV. Ellie rushed over, opened the door, and yelled, “Well see you tonight. And don’t stay out too late.”

“I’ll be back before dark, *Mom*. Count on it. We have another long day tomorrow.”

Ellie closed the door. She looked at Jobe. “I think we’re back on track! But now we have an entire day to kill and nowhere to go.”

Jobe and Ellie spent the whole day wishing they were on the road and not stuck in Vegas. It was a very long day. In the late afternoon, Jobe said, "I'm ready for a good meal. How about you?"

"Can we find a steak house and avoid the Casinos," asked Ellie.

"Sure. Think I saw a Black Angus restaurant when we walked back last night."

"Can we drive this time?" asked Ellie. "I'm worn out."

"Sure. Good thing I unhitched the car yesterday."

"I'll get a sweater and meet you at the car."

After spending the day in various casinos, Charlie found himself wandering rather aimlessly. He walked into the Sands Hotel-Casino. In the lobby was a sign announcing a 29-date tour of the Rat Pack. *Are they back together?* thought Charlie. *Man, I haven't seen Sinatra, Sammy Davis, and Dean Martin since the '60s. How time flies!* He walked down an aisle lined with slot machines on one side, and Blackjack tables on the other. Looking ahead, he saw someone he recognized. He quickly darted between two Blackjack tables and sat down at a table away from the aisle. Charlie put a twenty-dollar bill on the table. The dealer pushed a stack of chips his way. Charlie placed three chips on the betting spot. The dealer dealt two cards to each player at the table. Charlie kept his head down with his chin on his neck, and said, "Hit me." *I hope he didn't see me,* he thought. *I don't need any trouble.*

"You want another card, mister?" said the dealer.

"Uh, no. I'll stand." Charlie kept his head down.

"Dealer has twenty," he heard the voice say. Then a hand reached out and pulled Charlie's cards and chips away. "Place your next bet, folks." Charlie finally looked up. *All clear.* Leaving his chips on the table, he headed for an exit on his left. When

Charlie got outside, he headed for the next casino to get some dinner.

Chapter 34

Just after dark, Jobe and Ellie returned from eating out and pulled into the RV park – when they heard a shot. “What the heck was that Jobe?” screeched Ellie.

Jobe hit the brakes and came to a halt. He looked at Ellie. “I don’t know. In this sleepy RV park with mostly older folks? Probably a car backfire. Might be this one coming our way.”

“Watch out Jobe, he’s moving kinda fast,” said Ellie.

“He sure is.” Jobe pulled off the pavement as the car whisked past them far exceeding the 15-mph speed limit.

Jobe and Ellie both looked back, getting a good view of the fleeing car. “Wonder what’s the hurry?” asked Jobe.

“Did you get a license number?” asked Ellie. “He should be reported.”

“Nope. But it looked like two guys.” Jobe pulled back onto the pavement and headed for the RV.

“Looks like a crowd gathering,” said Ellie.

“Yes, and in front of our RV!” Jobe said, pulling in behind the bystanders.

“The side door’s open, Jobe!” Jobe jumped out and ran up to the RV. He ascended the steps and went inside. Ellie followed close behind. Some of the people began to crowd the steps. A few of them managed to get inside. Ellie gasped, then let out a scream! “Charlie!” Charlie was lying on the rug in the small living area. Blood was throbbing out of his chest, spilling over onto the

floor, staining the rug in bright crimson. The blood on the outer part of the pool turned darker red.

Jobe held Charlie up slightly while Ellie frantically called 9-1-1. “Police and paramedics are on their way,” Ellie said in a panic. She knelt down by Jobe’s side. Charlie was barely conscious, wrenching his teeth, eyes barely open. He kept repeating, “I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry.” His eyes were stricken with pain.

“Sorry about, what?” asked Ellie. “What? Tell me!”

Charlie seemed to not hear her and continued, “I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry.” Jobe held Charlie slightly elevated, his arm under his shoulders, his hand embracing his head.

Charlie looked at Ellie, and between gasping breaths moaned, “Under – the – sea...” Charlie’s head immediately turned to the side and went limp in Jobe’s hand.

Jobe looked up at Ellie in shock. “I think he’s gone.” Ellie reached out to touch Charlie, “Charlie? Charlie.” She took his hand in hers and shook it slightly. “Charlie. Charlie!” Ellie covered her face and began to weep.

Jobe laid Charlie all the way down on the floor and pressed two fingers against his neck. “No pulse,” he said, looking up at Ellie. “Why couldn’t we have gotten here earlier?” Jobe said out loud, angrily.

“If you were, you could have been a victim,” said a police officer who just entered the crowded RV. “OK, folks.” He spread out his arms to usher back the onlookers, herding them out the door. “I need you all to step out and make room for the emergency folks.” The room cleared as paramedics confirmed Jobe’s claim of Charlie’s death. “I take it, you two know the victim?” the officer asked.

“We do,” said Jobe. Ellie stood in shock.

“I know how hard this is for you, but can we step outside? I need to get a statement from each of you.” Ellie, Jobe, and the officer all stepped out of the RV and stood on the short gravel driveway.

“I need a few of you people who got here first to stick around so we can get your statement,” he called into the small crowd.

The officer turned toward Ellie and Jobe. “I’ll get some quick info from the two of you so we can get on this case immediately.”

Another officer emerged from the crowd. “Fortunately, we got a description of the vehicle and a partial plate number from one of the park residents.”

“Good work.” The officer took down Jobe and Ellie’s full names, information about Charlie, and their relationship with him. “I’d like you to come down to the station sometime tomorrow morning.” He handed them a business card. “The address is on my card.”

“You’re open on Sunday?” asked Jobe.

“We are for stuff like this. We’ll get a full statement from each of you then. And, we should have more information about what happened. Maybe even why!”

The coroner placed Charlie's lifeless old body on a portable steel cart, covered him up, and wheeled him down the narrow stairs of the RV. With help from an assistant, they loaded Charlie into the back of a long, hurst-looking vehicle. The cart legs automatically collapsed when pushed through the rear door. The door shut with a thud. Ellie jumped slightly, breaking her stare, and causing her to realize Charlie's departure was final. Jobe put his arm around Ellie as she continued to sob and shiver from the cool Vegas night – and from shock. The coroner’s wagon pulled away into the night.

After the crowd cleared and the police left, Ellie and Jobe stepped into the RV. Neither could ignore the hastily cleaned-up bloodstain on the carpet. “I don’t think I can stay here tonight, Jobe,” said Ellie, still wiping tears from her eyes.

“Don’t blame you. We’ll grab a motel. Plenty of them are vacant this time of year. It’s off-season.” Jobe said, nervously.

Jobe locked the RV, steered Ellie past the yellow tape surrounding it, and helped her into the car. Ellie didn’t seem cognizant of anything, she just stared off into the night.

Jobe pulled out of the short gravel driveway onto the single-lane, paved, one-way road that circled the RV park.

Ellie’s sobs returned every few minutes, some loud and uncontrollable, intermittent then a sudden burst with one loud wail. After a long silence, in a soft voice, she said, “I just can’t believe he’s gone, Jobe. Charlie’s gone,” which produced another bout of tears and sobs.

The next morning, Sunday, Ellie woke up blinking, trying to orient herself to the unfamiliar surroundings. She turned her head to see Jobe sitting at the desk chair and then remembered checking into the motel the night before. Her memory about Charlie came flooding back. *Charlie! Why did all of this have to happen?*

“You look groggy,” said Jobe.

“I didn’t sleep well.”

“No surprise. I didn’t either. It was a shock, we’ve both been through a tough ordeal,” replied Jobe.

“It was horrible! Can’t believe Charlie is gone. It all happened so fast.”

Jobe moved close to Ellie and hugged her for a long time. “I’m so sorry,” he whispered.

Ellie clung to him. “What little sleep I got was full of bad dreams.”

“Want some coffee? Just made it,” asked Jobe.

“What I need is an anti-depressant. This is really tough, Jobe,” Ellie said, looking at him about to cry again.

“I know, El. I’m so sorry.”

Ellie sobbed. Then trying to catch her breath, she said.

“I don't understand any of this. This is crazy!”

“It is, indeed,” said Jobe, as he handed her a mug. “Maybe we'll get some answers today at the police station.”

“Who would want to kill Charlie?” Ellie asked, tears streaming down her cheeks.

“I don't know. Maybe it was a random robbery or a mistaken identity.”

“In an RV park?” asked Ellie. “And why our RV? Nothing seems to be taken.”

“There's nothing to take. The most valuable looking item is that crate of whisky, and it's covered with stuff.”

“Somehow I think they'd be disappointed,” Ellie said sarcastically as she pulled away.

Ellie sat down. She looked up at Jobe. “I still don't know what he was sorry about. And what the hell does *bottom of the sea* mean?”

“I don't know,” said Jobe. “Sometimes people see and say crazy things when they're dying. He lost a lot of blood, fast.”

“Maybe dying feels like drowning,” offered Ellie.

“Could be. But I think we'll never really know for sure. Finish your coffee or bring it with you. Let's get down to the police station and find out what's going on.” Ellie grabbed her coffee.

When they got to the police station, the front door was locked. “No one inside,” said Jobe, looking in with his hand cupped on the glass. “Oh, here comes someone.”

As Jobe stepped away from the door, the officer who they met at the RV park unlocked the door, greeted them, and said, “Come on in. I'm going to turn you over to Detective Dana Armstrong. She's upstairs.” They followed him to the stairwell where they began to climb. Single file. The building was eerily quiet. No one said a word. At the top of the stairs, the officer

headed left, turned his head partly around, and said, “She’s just down the hall.”

Jobe and Ellie followed. The only sound was three pairs of shoes clunking against the hard wooden floor. Except for an occasional photo of a uniformed person with a plaque mounted below, sterile, off-white, undecorated walls surrounded them. The officer opened the door and introduced them to a woman in her mid-fifties who sat behind a desk. “This is Dana Armstong,” said the officer. She stood up, came around, and extended her hand to greet them. “She is one of our specialists who works on particular kinds of difficult cases.” Jobe and Ellie looked at him inquisitively without saying a word. “She will answer all your questions.”

“Welcome,” said the detective. “Please sit down?” Jobe and Ellie carefully sat down together in two high-back, brown, leather chairs strategically placed in front of the desk. “You are, um,” she glanced down at an open file folder on the desk, “Ellie Bentley.”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“And you, sir,” she moved her gaze to Jobe, “are Jobe Martinez. Is that right?”

“Yes, Mam. That’s correct.”

“And both of you were friends with Charles Edward Johnson?” she asked as she glanced down, again, at the folder.

“Yes,” said Ellie, still somewhat in shock. “We know him as Charlie.” Her voice trembled.

“How long have you known Mr. Johnson?”

“Since I was seven,” Ellie told her. “Charlie and his wife, Martha, took me in under a foster care program.” The detective looked over at Jobe offering him an opportunity to respond.

“Oh. I’ve only known him for a short time. But he has become a trusted, wise friend.”

The detective looked back at Ellie. “By the looks of your age, you’ve known him ... maybe 30 years?”

“That’s about right. I’m 37.”

“And, over those years did you ever notice anything strange about Mr. Johnson – Charlie?”

“Strange?” asked Ellie. “He had his quirks.” She looked over at Jobe. “But he was the most honest, reliable, kind, wise person I have ever known,” Ellie added. “Why? What’s this all about?”

“Well...” the detective said, her hands folded on the desk and looking at Ellie. “That may very well be true.” She looked over at Jobe to include him in what she was about to say. “But sometimes there’s more to a person than just what we see and know about them.”

Ellie looked at Jobe. She tensed up as she quickly assessed the possible meaning of what she was about to hear. Ellie simply said, “Yes?”

“It appears that your friend, Charlie, had a gambling problem and not a small one. From what we can tell it goes back many years, perhaps 20 or 30.”

Ellie leaned forward. Her jaw dropped. “This can’t be.” Ellie was nearly in tears. Jobe sat looking down. “I have known, loved, and respected Charlie most of my life.”

“I specialize in gaming crimes, here in Las Vegas,” said Detective Armstrong. “It’s a lot more common than you might think. And you are not the first loved one to be surprised.” Ellie sank into her chair, releasing some of her tension, her mouth partly open and her eyes somewhat glazed. Jobe appeared to be shocked too, but nothing like Ellie. He hurt more for *her* than anything in himself.

“What happened? Why was Charlie shot?” asked Jobe.

“We caught the two guys that were seen fleeing,” said Dana.

“Yeah, we saw them speed past us last night when we drove back into the park,” added Ellie.

“Well, they were not too smart, using a vehicle that could be traced to one of them. One of your neighbors in the RV park got a partial license plate number and a description of the car. Turned

out to be typical young hoodlums trying to work their way up in organized crime, willing to do pretty much anything to prove themselves to some crime boss. They were tasked with taking Charlie out.”

Ellie burst into tears. Jobe tried to steady her by putting a firm hand on her shoulder. “It's bad enough just to lose Charlie. But this, all this crazy stuff,” she forced out between sobs, “just doesn't make sense.”

“I'm so sorry, El,” said Jobe, as he pulled her close with both arms wrapped around her.

After giving Ellie a few minutes of grieving, Dana said, “If it is of any comfort, it looks like it has been many years since Charlie has been to Vegas – at least five, maybe more.”

Ellie looked up, tears running down her face. “How do you know that?”

“According to the young thugs we arrested, Charlie has been on the crime boss's watch list for the past five years. That's why he was spotted. There's a kind of unofficial bounty on big debtors who live out of state.”

“Then, why on earth did Charlie want to visit Vegas?” Ellie glanced over at Jobe.

“Old habits?” offered Detective Armstrong. “Something calling him back? Old memories? Who knows!” Dana waited. Ellie didn't respond. “I know this is hard for you and these surprise cases are indeed the hardest for me. I get them far too often in my line of work. But I wanted you to know all the details so you can process it as needed.”

Ellie began to feel angry. “How could this be true of Charlie?”

Dana waited. “I'm not only a cop; I'm a licensed psychiatrist. Addictions – gambling, sex, substance abuse – can be a problem for anyone. It doesn't necessarily make them a bad person. It just means they struggle in an area of personal weakness. Most of them hide it as much as they can.”

Looking down, Ellie moved her head slowly from side to side. “So, that’s why he wanted to take a detour through Vegas.” She looked up at Jobe. “If only we had known. We would have said *no!*”

Dana continued. “Addicts are often ashamed of it. It’s usually bigger than they are, and they are often owned by it, affecting all those close to them.” She paused again. “I am so sorry I had to tell you all of this.” Officer Armstrong sat quietly. “Take as long as you need.”

Jobe, thinking to himself, then asked, “Now that the killers are behind bars, are we in any danger?”

“No, I don’t think so. It appears they were after one thing – eliminating your friend, Charlie.” After a few more moments of silence, she asked, “Is there anything else I can do for either of you?”

“No. And, thanks,” Ellie said softly through her tears. She got up, turned, and headed for the door. Jobe carefully followed her. He turned his head back toward the detective and mouthed the words *Thank you*. The detective, now standing behind her desk, gave Jobe a slight nod. “Don’t hesitate to call me if you need anything.”

Jobe and Ellie walked out of the police station and headed to the car. She grabbed Jobe’s hand and looked at him with red eyes. He couldn’t imagine what was going through her mind just then, the pain, the confusion, losing Charlie, and the realization that Charlie had a secret life that got him killed. Jobe hurt right along with her. He opened the passenger door. As she got in, he asked her if she wanted him to put the top up. “No,” she replied. “The wind might be soothing.”

Jobe went around the car and got in. Ellie looked at Jobe. She smiled the best that she could. “It’s gonna just take some time,” he said.

“I know.” She squeezed his hand. Jobe put the car in first gear and slowly drove away.

Chapter 35

Jobe pulled up in front of the RV. By the time he got out of the car, Ellie was already up the steps and through the narrow side door. As he entered the RV Ellie said, looking around, “Seems so big, now.”

“It will be for a while,” said Jobe. “Let it be.” Ellie looked at Jobe and gave him a sad smile.

Exhausted, Ellie plopped herself down into one of the small recliners. “Can I get you anything?” asked Jobe.

“No.” Ellie paused. “Nothing.”

“I’m gonna take a quick walk and clear my head if I can. I won’t be far away.”

“OK,” said Ellie, not looking at him.

After Jobe exited the RV, Ellie went into the tiny bedroom and soon returned with her diary in hand. She sat back down on the recliner and began to write.

Dear Martha:

Charlie is gone. I just can't believe it. Happened so fast. I suppose he's with you, now. Please tell him I love him! It's all like a crazy dream I can't wake up from. I do sleep some, but when I wake up, my sad reality about Charlie sets in. I'm so discouraged. I'm lost without Charlie. He and I only got together once every week or so (except for this trip). But I always knew

he was there and I could call or go see him anytime. He's always been my rock – ever since you left us so many years ago.

What will I do now? I love this guy, Jobe, that you sent me. He's a gem. But I can't tell if he loves me. Says he does, but he's become so spiritually oriented, his feet are seldom on the ground where I stand. I'm a little scared. But I still have Gina, too. What a wonderful friend she is. Not sure where this will all go with Jobe. Since we're cutting our trip short, we'll be home in a day or so and our ordinary lives will start up again. Yet ... they will be very different. I'll let you know how it goes. I miss you all the more, now that Charlie's gone!

Sunday, Oct 11, 1987

Ellie just laid there, fully reclined for about twenty minutes. Jobe returned from his walk. The door creaked as he entered the RV, causing Ellie to flinch. She sat upright. Jobe sat down next to her in the other recliner. “Good walk?” she asked.

“Good enough. Did you rest?”

“A wink or two,” answered Ellie. “My head’s still groggy.”

Jobe placed his hand on hers. “That’s OK.”

She looked over at Jobe. “Some legacy, huh? So much for *Streams of Terrible Beauty*. Way too much terrible; Not enough beauty.” Jobe didn’t dare say a word. He remained reclined with his hands behind his head. They both remained silent for about forty minutes.

Ellie finally looked over at Jobe. “What do we do, now?” Jobe had many thoughts, and he was sure they were more positive than Ellie’s. He thought about the times he’d been honest with her – and dishonest.

Finally, he took his hands from behind his head and folded them on his chest. He looked over at Ellie. “What we do now is – nothing.” Ellie just watched him. “But we also need to do – everything!” Jobe brought his recliner forward and turned his whole body toward Ellie. Her eyes followed his every move. Jobe waited.

Ellie finally responded. “Well said. I think I know what you mean. There is nothing we can do about Charlie,” she said between sobs, “but there is plenty we can do about everything else that lies ahead.”

“So true,” said Jobe. He reclined back in his chair.

Ellie got up. “I’m gonna take a walk. You don’t mind, do you?”

“Of course not. Go ahead. Might take another one later, myself.”

Ellie slipped out the side door. Jobe turned on the old FM radio next to his recliner, that Charlie installed on the wall. He turned the dial until he found a station playing oldies from the 60s. He closed his eyes and pondered the events of the past two days ... and the future.

Late that afternoon, Ellie came back. As she walked in, she held up a bag. “Tacos!” she said with a half-smile. Tearing open the bag, she placed it on the table in the small booth-style cubbyhole.

“Yum,” said Jobe, getting up and moving over to the table. “Good walk?” he asked, taking a bite.

“Yes. It was.” Ellie was somber. “Cleared my head a bit. But I know I’ve got more clearing to do.”

“Take your time.” Jobe took a bite. “Needs taco sauce.”

Ellie handed him two soft plastic packets. “You never responded to my rejection of *Streams* earlier today.”

“I respect your opinion. You know that” responded Jobe.

“Yes, I know. But I want to know what you *think*. It matters to me.”

“Why?” asked Jobe.

“Because I know how important *Streams* has become to you these past few months.”

Jobe slowly brought his taco down away from his mouth. “You’re right. It does mean a lot to me. My experience at The Assembly showed me that it’s more than just a passage in a book, or something that someone I love believes and taught me.” He looked at Ellie with loving and grateful eyes. “It became real to me, almost bigger than life because it seemed to be what life is all about. No matter what happens, that will never change for me.” Ellie frowned, slightly. “Oh, don’t get me wrong,” Jobe continued, “I’m not minimizing what just happened with Charlie. And I don’t pretend to know how you feel.”

Ellie responded, quickly. “Actually... I think you do know. You lost your twin sister. And I can’t possibly know how that feels, either.” Ellie waited for Jobe to say something.

“Ya know... I suspect, if we could trade places for five minutes, we’d discover that we’re pretty darn close in how we feel.” Ellie got up, leaned over, and hugged Jobe. It was a long hug. Jobe could tell it was more than just affection for him. It was a safe place for her to flee. As he wrapped his arms around her, he thought about Ragged Point and the time when she told him that he made her feel safe. Jobe stood up, They clung to each other until they both felt safe.

Jobe went for his second walk, which turned out to be one of the best walks he had taken in a long time. It was good despite all that had just happened and maybe partly because of it. When he got back, the sun was just going down. He climbed up the steps and opened the narrow door of the Winnebago. Ellie was going through a stack of videotapes that Charlie had collected. They were jammed into two shelves, alongside the built-in TV that was next to the FM radio. “Finding anything good?”

“Not really,” Ellie said, giving up. They both sat down in their recliners. “I know!” Ellie said, jumping up and flipping through the videotapes, again. She held one up with an ugly-looking, green

cartoon character on the front. “Let's watch How the Grinch Stole Christmas!”

“Ha! It's October,” protested Jobe. “Shoot, it's not even Thanksgiving.”

“Yeah, but that's right around the corner, and Christmas is right around the corner from that.” She waited for Jobe's response. She was not about to take *no* for an answer.

“That's two corners to look around.”

“Oh, come on. Please? It might put me in a better mood.”

“Looks like you're already in one.”

“Sorta,” said Ellie. “It will keep me there.”

“Sold! Run the tape.”

Ellie inserted the VHS tape into the video cassette player and pushed play. The introduction music began playing. “Oh, I love this story. It works for me any time of the year.”

“Shhhh... I'm trying to listen,” said Jobe. The armless recliners were narrow and so close, acting more like a reclining loveseat. Ellie turned and snuggled close to Jobe. He put his arm over the top of her head with his hand on her back.

Ellie began to sing in a low voice, right along with Boris Karloff. Jobe was thoroughly amused and happy she was a little of her old self again – at least for this special moment. After about ten minutes, Ellie got up. “I need to pause it.”

“Ladies room break?” asked Jobe.

“Nope. Popcorn.” She disappeared around the short partition into the small kitchenette. But then she stuck her head back around and said, “Yeah, that too.”

Jobe listened to a pan shuffle back and forth across a burner while he looked at diagonal lines on the TV screen that had slight granular flickering along the bottom. “Hurry up. This thing is about to un-pause itself.” He heard rapid popping that began to slow down to an occasional pop.

“OK. Almost done. Just needs butter.” Ellie came back with a heaping bowl of yellow kernels and steam rising. “Here, have some.” She handed Jobe the bowl and un-paused the tape. They both munched on popcorn, keeping their eyes on the TV.

“We’re getting to the part I like best,” said Ellie. “But I always hated it when they showed a commercial just as the Grinch was about to dump his load off the mountain peak.”

“Well, that’s the magic of videotapes – no ads!”

“OK, here it is.”

They watched as the Grinch whipped his little dog pulling the load up the mountain. “This is where it gets intense – at the top of the mountain,” said Ellie. Suddenly, the TV screen went blank. “Oh, no!” she exclaimed. “What happened?”

Jobe got up and checked the VHS recorder. He turned around. “Sorry, Ellie. The tape jammed. Won’t even eject!”

What little joy Ellie had conjured up was fading fast. “What a bummer,” Ellie mused as if standing at a crossroads deciding which way to go. She looked at Jobe and said, “Ya know what? I’ve almost got it memorized. And I gotta tell you about this great part.” Ellie got up out of her chair. Jobe sat back anticipating a fine, live performance. Ellie flipped back her hair and cupped her ear. “The Grinch put his hand to his ear expecting to hear cries of boohoo in the town below.” She put her fists on her hips. “But happy sounds were all he heard.”

“Yes. I remember that part,” said Jobe, enjoying Ellie’s performance.

Ellie rocked back and forth slightly. “He couldn’t stop Christmas from coming. It came anyway!”

“No ribbons or boxes,” Jobe shouted out in cadence.

“That’s right.” Ellie pressed her index finger against her lips and looked upward. “Then the Grinch thought of something new. He realized Christmas can’t come from a store.”

“He had to climb a mountain to figure that out?” asked Jobe.

“Don’t ruin my story,” Ellie protested. “This is how blind he was to the obvious. It was the only way he could find out that Christmas is about something more.” Jobe jumped up out of his seat causing Ellie to jump slightly. “What?” she asked.

Jobe raised his hands with his palms up, then smacked his forehead. “What if... what if there’s something *we* haven't thought of before, just like the Grinch?”

“What are you talking about?” asked Ellie.

“What if *Streams* is about something more?” said Jobe.

Ellie paused. “Hey, wait a minute,” Ellie bobbed her head. Her mind was churning and expanding. “What if *Streams* is about something *less*?”

Jobe sat down. “I don’t follow you.”

“The Grinch! He realized that Christmas was about something *more*. But he really meant it's about something *less*!”

“Go on,” said Jobe.

“Christmas is not really about packages and ribbons. It's about something less than that. And it's the *less* that is actually *more*! Christmas is about love that you can’t hold in your hand. But you can give it as a gift, just the same.”

“Then, maybe that means *Streams* is also about a lot less than all the stuff we've been making it out to be,” Jobe concluded.

“Yes!” said Ellie. “Less than all we’ve been doing and striving for. We're trying too hard. We are trying to force it to work in ourselves and others.”

“You mean, all we gotta do is just let it happen?” asked Jobe.

“I think so. I think it’s that big. Bigger than us. Bigger than life by being about something less visible.”

“Wow. This is blowing my mind,” said Jobe. “Let me get this straight. *Streams of Terrible Beauty* is more, infinitely more when we make it *less* by not trying so hard to make it happen?”

“Exactly!” said Ellie.

“Then this means that Charlie’s flaws cannot take *Streams of Terrible Beauty* away from us.”

“That’s right,” said Ellie. “*Streams of Terrible Beauty* stands on its own because it is what life is all about. Bad things are ultimately made right.”

“If *Streams of Terrible Beauty* is about love you can’t see, then I can only hold it in the arms of a person I love.” Jobe moved close to Ellie. She felt that safe feeling coming on again. He put his hands around her waist; she slipped her hands around his neck. “And... I love you!” Jobe kissed her, gently. She felt his embrace strengthen as he pulled her close.

She rested in his arms, looked into his eyes, and said, “I love you too.” With her head on his shoulder, she looked down at the bloodstained carpet, then shut her eyes and tried to shut out the ordeal she had just gone through.

Chapter 36

The next day, Ellie got up early and fixed a breakfast of grilled frozen waffles, bacon, and coffee. She placed them carefully on the small breakfast nook table. “It’s ready, sleepy head. Come get it before your waffle gets cold. We don’t have a toaster to reheat ‘em.”

Jobe staggered out of the small bedroom yawning and stretching. “Oh good. Coffee.” He took a sip. “Sleep, OK?” he asked.

“Not bad.” Ellie wiggled in her chair, slightly. She picked up a crisp strip of bacon and bit off the end. “I’m so glad we had such an *ab-ba* moment last night. It helped me a lot.” She chewed her bacon and waited for Jobe to respond.

Jobe swallowed a bite of cool waffle. “Yes, Mam. It was extraordinary. Came about so unexpectedly.”

“Some of the best revelations in life, do!” said Ellie. “I like how we ping-ponged back and forth with ideas.”

“Synergy!” said Jobe.

“For sure. And it very naturally grew into something wonderful.”

“It did indeed,” said Jobe. “Terrible things eventually become beautiful. What a marvelous way to live life.”

“Totally optimistic, too,” added Ellie.

“Yes, but we still gotta go through some terrible things,” said Jobe.

Ellie became somber and glanced down at the stained rug. “Things like Charlie.”

“I’m afraid so,” said Jobe.

Ellie dropped her head. “Not sure I will ever get over his death and how it came about.”

“But it also means we each have a great future ahead – everyone does.”

Ellie wanted to say, *You mean... we have!* But she didn’t. She was too afraid. Her rejection of Jobe haunted her. “Amen!” she said with a smile.

“Was that for the food, or for what I just said?”

“Both.”

Jobe downed his last sip of coffee and got up from the table. “I gotta hook up the Tiger and strap on the lawn furniture.”

“OK. I gotta put some things away and get ready for the trip home. We sure didn’t make it all the way around Steinbeck’s loop.”

“Not even close,” said Jobe. “Maybe next time.”

“But maybe we got something much better,” said Ellie, “even though I lost Charlie.”

Jobe was quiet. “So sorry, El.”

She looked up at Jobe and smiled. “It’s ok, now.”

“You sure?”

“Enough so, yes,” she said with nearly no expression.

“O...K,” he said, concerned about her emotional state. Then he remembered how he felt right after his sister died, how long it took to fully recover – if he ever really did – and how critical Eliot, Billie, and Zach were concerning his lack of faith. “I’ll go hook up the Tiger. It’s the last thing to do before we leave.” Ellie didn’t respond. Jobe exited the RV.

Jobe moved the Tiger close behind the RV. He got out of the car and released the folded-up trailer hitch. *I need to move the car*

forward about a foot. He got out, folded the hitch back to its upright position, got in the car, and slowly edged it forward. *That should do it.* He left the car in neutral and got out to see how close he was. *Hmmm, not bad.* He folded down the trailer hitch, but it missed the connection ball by a couple of inches. *Man, I'm getting good at this.* He went around to the back of the Tiger and leaned against the trunk, arms stretched out, feet dug in, and his body nearly parallel to the ground. He pushed hard. He heard a clunk. *Yes! The hitch is attached!* He went around to the front of the car to admire his work.

“Jobe! Come in here!” Ellie cried from inside the RV.

Jobe rushed up the stairs and through the narrow side door. “What? You, OK?”

“Look!” Ellie said, sitting cross-legged on the floor. “Look at the crate.”

“Yes, it's Charlie's whisky crate. So what?”

“Look what it says.”

Jobe stared for a moment at the wooden crate poking out from under the hide-a-bed couch. Then, he started to read slowly, “*Seagram's V.O. Canadian Whisky.* So? Charlie liked Seagram's!”

“Don't you see?” said Ellie. “Seagram's? ‘Bottom of the Sea?’ Charlie's last words!”

“Oh, Ellie. Be careful, Honey.” Jobe sat down next to her. “That's a big stretch. Don't assume anything.”

“But he had to mean something when he said, ‘bottom of the sea!’” Ellie looked at Jobe and waited.

Jobe let out a big breath of air. He hesitated. “When I felt Charlie's head turn in my hand, it did seem like he was in the middle of saying something.”

“Yes! You, see? He meant to say, ‘bottom of the Seagram's crate.’”

Jobe sighed. "I guess it could be. But, Ellie, don't get your hopes up. We talked about this. He could have been delirious from loss of blood."

"I know. But maybe not."

"OK. Pull it out. Let's see what we got." Ellie slid the crate out from under the hide-a-bed. The old wooden shipping crate was about 18 inches long, a foot high, and a foot deep. It looked like a small treasure chest.

"You know," she said, looking at Jobe, "I've seen this crate before at Charlie's house when I was a kid. He told me it was an antique from the 1930s. Some distant relative gave it to him when he was a teen. He said he always thought it was so cool and kept his most important stuff in it as he grew up."

"What kind of stuff?"

"I don't know. I never asked him, but he hardly ever left home without it."

"Well, let's find out," Jobe said, rubbing his hands together. Ellie lifted off the wooden lid and set it aside. They leaned forward and peeked in. "The poker chips are still there." Jobe grabbed the round plastic dispenser with stacks of chips going all around it. He set it on top of the wooden lid.

They looked in, again. "It's a stack of notebooks," Ellie said with a bit of disappointment in her voice. She pulled out a short stack of spiral notebooks. "These must be some of Charlie's writings."

"Might be fun to read them sometime," said Jobe.

"And, educational," said Ellie. "He was always writing in notebooks like these. He would write so fast, and be so absorbed, I had to yell to get his attention. Then, he would look up, dazed. Whatever he was writing, it was intense." She handed half the stack to Jobe. They thumbed through the notebooks finding nothing of any great interest.

"All I see is a bunch of hand-written ramblings. Looks philosophical," said Jobe.

“Yep. That's Charlie. Quite a thinker. Sometimes it seemed like that's all he did. Not sure where he found time to do things that he wrote about!” They both chuckled.

“OK, El,” said Jobe. “What's next.” Ellie pulled out several books. One was a copy of the Koran. Jobe grabbed it from her. “Hey, I worked for a Muslim guy once. Nicest guy I've ever known. It was during the Hostage Crisis under President Carter. With the economy bad, people were getting laid off. But you know what he did?”

“No. What?” asked Ellie.

“As the owner of the business, he cut his own pay to keep anyone from being laid off. Said he was concerned about the families of those who worked for him.”

“Wow. That's amazing,” said Ellie.

“And he seemed more Christian-like than a lot of Christians I knew.”

“That can happen.”

“What else is in there?” asked Jobe.

Ellie pulled out another book. Ellie read from the green front cover, “BDK English Tripitaka. Book of Buddha's Lengthy Discourses.” She turned it around to show Jobe. “It has some kind of eight-point star on it.”

“Looks mystical,” said Jobe, as she held it closer for him to see.

“Charlie once told me he thought Buddha got a lot of things right. Buddha believed there was some great reality out there that we should embrace and just go with the flow of life. And he taught we should love people, help people, and never hurt them.”

“Sounds kinda like Jesus!” said Jobe.

“Yes, but this was 500 years *before* him!”

“I guess some things are just true, no matter who says them or when,” Jobe commented. “And that's how I feel about *Streams of Terrible Beauty*. It seems universal and timeless.”

“I agree,” said, Ellie.

“What’s next,” asked Jobe.

Ellie held up another book. “Looks like a Jewish Torah.”

“That’s important,” said Jobe. “Essential for the Jews and the sourcebook for the Christian New Testament.”

“I always wondered about that,” said Ellie. “Jews and Christians share the Old Testament writings, yet they so strongly disagree.”

“Guess they just interpret them differently,” said Jobe. “I sure wish Charlie were here to ask.”

“Me too.” Ellie stared off into space. “Charlie looked into everything.”

Suddenly, Jobe said, “Look!” His eyes got big as he held the Koran open in his hand.

Ellie stared at the book, stunned as Jobe flipped the pages revealing green bills.

“Money?” gasped Ellie, trying to process what she was seeing. “Charlie hid money in his books?” She flipped through the Torah in her hands. She looked at Jobe. “There are bills tucked in every few pages.” Her jaw dropped open.

Jobe began pulling bills out of the pages as he turned them. “These are not small bills, El. They’re big – very big!”

“I can see that,” she said, as she turned pages and removed more bills. “Oh my gosh. This is a lot of money, Jobe.”

“I know,” he said, as he began stacking the bills on the floor. “These are mostly one-thousand and five-hundred-dollar bills. They don’t circulate these anymore.” He leaned back for a moment. “Do ya think this is what the hitmen were looking for?”

Fear came over Ellie. “I hope not! Think they could come back?”

Jobe thought for a moment. Then he calmly said, “I don’t think so. They didn’t even search the RV!” He let his words sink in. “They came here to take Charlie out. Remember what

Detective Armstong said? I'll bet they threatened him over the years – maybe even checked his bank accounts.”

“They can do that?” asked Ellie.

“People that powerful? For sure. So, they may have given up and decided to make Charlie an example.”

“Why on earth didn't Charlie give them this money?” Ellie asked angrily. “If he had, he'd probably still be alive!” They both remained silent for several minutes.

“Oh no!” Ellie finally said.

“What?” asked Jobe.

“Oh, no, no no! Charlie ... you should have given the money to them!”

“What are you talking about, El?”

She looked at Jobe, and in a soft voice, she said, “My legacy. He always told me he would leave me a legacy. I never knew what he meant. I figured it was all the wisdom that he imparted to me.”

“I'm sure that was part of it,” added Jobe.

“But it had to include this. Remember, he repeated, ‘I'm so sorry,’ before he tried to tell us ‘bottom of the Seagram's crate.’”

“I think you're right,” said Jobe.

“But I want Charlie, not a bunch of damn money! I don't care how much there is.”

“I understand,” said Jobe. “But Charlie wanted you to have all this. He saved and collected it for you.” Ellie began to cry, uncontrollably. Jobe waited. He started flipping through all the books, slowly, stacking the large bills on the floor. There were a few hundred-dollar bills, but most were big ones. “Ellie...”

“Yes?” she answered through her tears, “he did.”

“I've counted over a hundred-thousand dollars. That's quite some *legacy*, and we're not done counting.”

She smiled, affectionately, as she thought about how kind and selfless Charlie always was. “Crazy old fool! But I so loved him. He has always watched out for me since I came into his and

Martha's home." Ellie sighed. Then she jerked up in realization. "Don't take out any more bills! We need to keep them hidden for now and they have been safely tucked away in these books for decades. So, let's leave them there for now."

"Good thinking." Jobe began putting the bills back into the books.

"Can we sit at the table for a bit?"

"Sure," said Jobe. "Want some coffee?"

Ellie looked at Jobe, eyes red, makeup smeared, hair messy. "I think I need something stronger. There's a bottle of Seagram's in the back cupboard over the sink."

"On the rocks?" asked Jobe.

"Yes, please!"

Ellie slowly got up off the floor and sat at the small nook table. Within a minute Jobe set two low-profile glasses down. The ice clinked against the sides. Ellie took a sip. "Wow! I forgot how much this stuff burns on the way down."

"The ice will dilute it soon." Jobe downed his drink. "Think I'll take a short walk. Beautiful day!"

Ellie just stared at the books on the floor full of money, thinking about Charlie. "Don't leave me alone, here. Not now. Please?"

So, Jobe sat at the table next to Ellie, put his arms around her, and held her close.

Chapter 37

Jobe got up to finish putting the money and books back into the crate. Ellie remained seated at the table with some of the money stacked in front of her. She had just finished sipping her Seagram's and felt calm.

Jobe picked up some books and started to put them back into the crate. "Hey, El. There's one more book at the bottom of the crate. Guess we missed it in our zeal over the money."

"Any money in it?" asked Ellie, snapping out of her daze.

"Nope," said Jobe flipping through the pages.

"What is it? How to win at Roulette?" They both laughed.

Jobe handed Ellie the book and sat down again at the table. It was a little smaller than the other books and had a purple, flexible-plastic cover. She thumbed through it, then sat up a little straighter and said, "Hey, this book is written in a foreign language."

Jobe poured himself a little more Seagram's, took a sip, and looked across the table at the book. "Oh, great," he said, sarcastically. "Our treasure at the bottom of the sea is a book we can't read."

"No, this is Greek," said Ellie. "I recognize some of the characters. Haven't you ever taken science and math classes?"

"Yeah, but I wasn't paying attention."

"There's an alpha," Ellie said, pointing at one of the characters.

“Looks kinda like the letter *a*,” added Jobe.

“It does indeed. And there’s a beta; a gamma; a delta.” Ellie started going through the Greek alphabet. Then, she thumbed over to the front of the book. “Hey, the front page is in English.” “Looks like it’s a New Testament, written in Greek.”

“I take it Charlie was some kind of scholar?”

“He would never claim that. I know he got some kind of formal training when he was young, but he always referred to himself as a ‘talented amateur.’ However, I know he was a lot more than that.”

“What I liked most about Charlie,” Jobe added, “was that he seemed immensely practical, but also a very deep thinker. Somehow, I think he always did his homework.”

“Oh, trust me ... that he did. Left no stone unturned.” Ellie assured him.

“I’ll bet he turned over a few *unwanted* stones, just to see what might crawl out.”

“Oh, boy, did he! He and Martha attended church together and Charlie was always questioning everything. It embarrassed Martha and got him in a lot of trouble.”

“Betcha he didn’t mean anything bad by it,” said Jobe.

“Of course not. Charlie was just naturally curious. He wanted to know how things worked, and why. He often quoted – from somewhere, I don’t know where – ‘Examine everything carefully.’ And, man oh man, he did that!”

“Looking into everything was his source of wisdom?” asked Jobe.

“Big part of it.” Ellie thumbed through Charlie’s purple book. “Hey, here’s a page with a post-it that says, ‘see list.’”

“Hmmm. What list?” asked Jobe.

Ellie fanned through the pages. “Here’s a folded paper in the back.” She opened it and held it up for Jobe to see. “Bingo!”

“Looks like a list.” said Jobe “And, it’s in English!”

Ellie looked up at Jobe. “Do you think it’s what he wanted us to find?”

“Maybe,” said Jobe.

“It better be. We’re at the bottom of the sea and out of possibilities,” Ellie said, looking at Jobe a bit exasperated.

“Let me see that.” Jobe grabbed the list out of Ellie’s hand. “Looks like a list of abbreviations, reference numbers, and brief comments.”

“Let me see that.” Ellie grabbed the list out of Jobe’s hand. “Ah. I know. The abbreviations are New Testament books, and the numbers are chapter and verse references.”

“Now we’re getting somewhere,” said Jobe. “But we can’t look them up in this purple Greek thing.”

“Look around,” said Ellie. “Gotta be an English Bible here somewhere.”

Jobe called out from the bedroom. “Don’t see one in here.”

Ellie searched through all the small living area cupboards. “Don’t see one in here, either.”

Jobe came back into the living room. “You’d think Charlie would have a Bible lying around somewhere.”

“That’s OK,” said Ellie. “How many items are on the list?”

Jobe looked down and counted. He looked up. “Thirteen.”

“Lucky us,” said Ellie. “Well, let’s just read Charlie’s comments on the list. Maybe that’s all we need.”

“OK. Here it goes. *Christ is above everything and fills all things everywhere with himself.*”

“Above everything? Fills all? Everywhere?” asked Ellie.

“That’s what it says.”

“Ok, go on.”

“*Christ will stay in heaven until the time when everything is restored.*”

“Same idea,” said Ellie. “Kinda universal and ultimate.”

“Maybe that’s who God is!”

“Maybe so. Keep going.”

Jobe read slowly. “*Christ will submit to God's authority and reign supreme over everything everywhere. More everything stuff.*”

“How ‘bout that,” said Ellie. “What’s next?”

“*God sent his Son into the world not to judge it, but to save it.*”

“Hey, that rings a bell in my head,” said Ellie. “What’s the reference?”

“Um, let me look. John 3:17.”

“Ah-ha! I knew it. The verse no one quotes, right after John 3:16 which everyone *does* quote.”

Jobe looked up. “Why don’t they?”

“Maybe it ruins their preconceived pessimistic narrative,” said, Ellie. “Four down, nine to go.”

“*Christ came into the world to save even the worst sinners.*”

“The worst?” asked Ellie.

“That’s what it says.”

“Guess that would include everyone – you and me and Charlie! So good to know!”

Jobe looked down again at the list. “This one’s kinda the same. *The Son of Man came to seek and to save that which is lost.*” Jobe looked up. “Who’s this *Son of Man*?”

“I think that’s supposed to be Jesus,” said Ellie.

“OK. Here’s another one of those *everyone* passages. *God desires everyone to be saved. He purchased freedom for everyone.* Ya think maybe he’s that big and successful?” asked Jobe.

“I certainly hope so,” said Ellie. “If he’s not, we’re fresh out of saviors who can save. Six more to go, by my count.”

“Yep. Six more. Here’s the next one. *God is patient and doesn't want anyone to perish.*”

“That’s kinda like the previous one,” said Ellie. “Do you think God could ever give up his heart’s desire for all to be saved?”

“I don’t see how,” said Jobe. “I heard at church that God never changes. Besides, what kind of God can't pull off saving the world he creates?”

“A puny one?” answered Ellie. “Keep a-going.”

“OK. Next one is, *God sent his Son to be the Savior of the world.*” Jobe looked up. “Seems like if you’re Savior of the world, ya gotta save the world! Don’t ya?”

“That makes sense,” replied Ellie.

“This one is interesting,” said Jobe. “*Jesus atones for the sins of the whole world, not just some.* Wow. That seems to include everyone.”

“Yes, it seems to,” responded Ellie.

Oh, this is good. “*God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself.*” Jobe looked up from reading the list. “Hey, ya know what? I heard Mike Rose, the guy on the radio, once say this was his favorite verse. He said it changed his life.”

“It’s an amazing statement,” commented Ellie. “I can see why. Looks like God has gotten himself good with everyone.”

“But what about all those passages about judgment in the New Testament?” asked Jobe.

“I don’t know,” said Ellie. “We’ll have to look them up when we get home.”

“We’ll do our own Charlie thing?” asked Jobe.

“Yep. For sure,” said Ellie. “But I remember Charlie telling me, once, that there was not one word in the Greek New Testament...”

Jobe interrupted, “That’s the language it was written in. Right?”

“Yep.” Ellie held up the purple book. “Like this one. He told me he couldn’t find one word that meant *never-ending torment*. He said people can make words mean that if they want, but they’re imposing their will on the text.”

“Wow. That’s pretty powerful, if true,” said Jobe. “We’ll look into it someday. OK. Two more, and these are doozies! *Someday God will bring everything in heaven and earth under Christ’s control.*”

“Wow!” exclaimed Ellie.

“And...” Jobe continued, “This last one says, *God made peace with everything in heaven and on earth through Jesus on the cross.*”

“Wow, again!” said Ellie. “If these are all true, then God is a completely successful savior. I guess love never fails!”

“Well,” Jobe paused, “That’s what we need. Isn’t it? Hey, ya think all this stuff is what Charlie was referring to when he said, *bottom of the sea?*”

“Had to be!” answered Ellie. “It was at the bottom, wasn’t it?”

“I think this was all part of the legacy he left for you – spiritual and material.”

“I think you’re right. I always knew it was spiritual. I never dreamed it could be monetary!” Ellie felt some peace. “And, wow, what a great list. So glad we found it.”

“Hey, El. Ya know this list fits *Streams of Terrible Beauty* quite well.”

“Yes, it does!” she nodded her head. “It does, indeed. These are all ultimately *beautiful* ideas that will eventually make all the *terrible* things in life OK!”

“Yep,” said Jobe. “Save that list. We’ll do some Charlie-style digging when we get home.”

“I’m sure we will,” said, Ellie. “Hey, let’s get out of here. This town gives me the creeps.”

“I’m with ya on that.”

Ellie stuffed everything into the crate, threw some dirty laundry on top, and placed it under the hide-a-bed. But first, she stuffed a few bills into her pocket. Jobe went outside to the front of the car, pressed down the hitch lock, then connected the safety chains and the brake-light cable. He called to Ellie. “We’re ready to hit the road.” Jobe got in the driver’s side of the Winnebago and Ellie stepped up into the passenger seat. “Buckle up. Here we go!” commanded Jobe. Ellie looked at Jobe with new hope

beaming in her eyes. Jobe pulled out of the RV park onto the street and pressed the accelerator. They both watched out the window as the Vegas Strip diminished and the desert emerged with all its bareness and sagebrush.

“Hail to the Grinch!” Jobe exclaimed.

“Amen!” Ellie yelled, feeling a sense of renewal. “Less is more! You think we learned that these past few days?”

“I think so,” Jobe said, calmly, looking over at Ellie. “I think maybe we’ve just been trying too hard to make *Streams of Terrible Beauty* real to ourselves and others.”

“Yep.” Ellie quickly agreed. “You got it right. We don't need to *make* it true, or even *prove* it true. If it's true, that's what it is, without our help!”

“And we believe it is!” said Jobe. “Life, itself, has proven it to us. That’s the best teacher.”

“You’re starting to talk like Charlie, now.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“It was!” said Ellie.

“Here is a Charlicism for you,” said Jobe. “We've seen it, we've lived it, and others are free because of it.”

“Very good! You’re hired as the new Charlie! Is there any better way to explain life than *Streams of Terrible Beauty*?” asked Ellie.

“I don't think so,” said Jobe.

“Neither do I.”

“Hey. You know what today is?” asked Jobe, looking over at Ellie.

“Monday,” answered Ellie. “Why?”

“Oh, it’s more than *just* Monday. Ten weeks ago, also on a Monday,” Jobe paused, “we first met!” Ellie wished she had thought of it.

“Wow! That long ago?” she asked Jobe, who had his eyes back on the road.

“That *short* ago!” he answered. They both laughed.

A tiny, ornate building flew by the passenger window. “Hey look!” said Ellie. “A Chapel of Love.”

“Yes, they got a lot of those here,” said Jobe. “And every one of them includes a singing Elvis clone!” They both turned their heads as the chapel disappeared. Neither said a word.

For Ellie, it was a very long moment. Her mind and heart were racing in multiple directions with dozens of thoughts and feelings surging inside. *Should I say anything?* she asked herself. *I want to, but will he think I'm just kidding? Is he ready for this? Will he ever be? What if he says no? Will I be crushed? Will I feel like a fool? Does he love Streams more than me?* Ellie could feel her heart pounding, rapidly. But after only a few short seconds, she burst out, even to her surprise, “Let's get married!”

She waited. It seemed like an eternity. Jobe just looked out the front window concentrating on his driving. Ellie couldn't tell if he was stunned or just toying with her. After a brief moment, Jobe looked at her. Then the corners of his mouth slowly began to rise, and he said in a soft voice, “Yeah, I'd like that!”

Epilogue

“Come on,” she said, grabbing his hand. “Let’s go see it.” They began descending down the long trail of stairs that seemed to stretch endlessly under the low-hanging branches.

“Shall we count them?” she asked.

“No thanks,” he said. “Too many. We’d probably just argue about how many there were when we got done.”

“You’re probably right,” she said. “Man, oh man, do these stairs ever end?”

“I am sure they do. But what’s worse is that we gotta come all the way back up.”

“We’ll count them on the way up and see if our numbers are the same.”

When they finally reached the bottom, they followed the trail where a sign said, Land’s End. “Hey, sis. I want to wish you a happy birthday, a week ahead of time. I might not be in town next weekend. Wow, 18! But you’ll never catch up with me, I’m always a year ahead.”

“Yeah, but 1989 was a better year to be born,” she said.

They came upon a small hill and climbed up together. Peeking over the top. “There it is, Jeff!”

“I can’t believe it,” he answered. “It actually exists.”

“I told you I saw a photo of it on the internet!”

“I believe you now. Let's go down and try it out.” They climbed down the hill toward the peninsula like a couple of ants with their backs downward, arms and legs moving.

“Let's see who can get to the middle first,” said Janelle.

“It's a pretty big labyrinth,” answered Jeff. “Might take a while.”

“Not if you don't take wrong turns, and I plan to do it right.” At the first choice in the rock-laid labyrinth, Janelle went left and Jeff went right.

“How did you know to go left?” asked Jeff.

“I didn't. How did you know to go right?”

“I just didn't want to follow you, little sister! Ha!”

“You've been like that your whole life, just because you're older – big brother,” she said, sarcastically. She then yelled across the rock formation. “Sometimes I've been right, ya know. And, following me would have been wise.”

“I know,” said Jeff. “Don't remind me. You're a good sister.”

“How you doing over there?” asked Janelle.

“Well, I made it through five of the seven rock rings, but then I hit a dead end and had to go back. How about you?”

“Looks like I'm coming your way,” said Janelle. “Wow, we're almost on the same path. Whoops. Just one stubborn rock lies between us.”

“Yep. But your path goes outward, mine goes inward. I think I'm gonna win,” said Jeff.

“Don't count on it. Labyrinths are designed to fool you.”

After a few minutes of looking down and trying different paths, “Ta-da!” said Janelle, celebrating.

“What? How'd you get to the center so fast?”

“I guess *left* turned out to be the *right* choice.”

“But it seems like a right turn should lead the right way,” said Jeff, “and a left should leave you *left behind*.”

“Very funny. But not this time.” They both laughed.

Jeff got serious. "It all seems kinda prophetic, don't you think? Mom placing stones in a circle here, twenty years ago?"

"Yes, and she imagined someone building a rock labyrinth, like this one, someday in this very spot!"

"Yeah, it's a little spooky!" said Jeff.

"Life is sometimes spooky," said Janelle. "I like to call it mysterious."

"Yep. That's a better word. Maybe just a coincidence. Do you think?"

Janelle looked at Jeff. "Maybe. But maybe not."

Jeff grabbed Janelle's hand and led her over the top of the circles of stones to a place where they could sit and see the Golden Gate Bridge. "You think this might be where they sat?" he asked.

"Could be. They had to be facing this way, looking at the Golden Gate."

"Look!" said Jeff. "There's that ugly little arch bridge on the right side."

"Yep. Terrible, isn't it?" They laughed together.

"Man, we heard that story of how Mom and Dad met, oh I don't know, maybe a million times?"

"Hey," scolded Janelle. "They've told you a million times not to exaggerate! But it's a great story and they love to tell it. Gotta admit it's pretty amazing."

"It is indeed," said Jeff. "You think it all happened the way they said?"

"Something sure as heck happened. We're here, aren't we?"

"Ha! Yeah. Good point," said Jeff. "But some of it just seems too good to be true,"

"Oh, I don't know. A lot of it wasn't good at all. And, if they were going to make something up, you'd think they'd leave out all the bad stuff."

“Another good point. Like mom dumping dad and not knowing why?”

“Right. And, just when everything was going so well,” added Janelle. “How about Dad’s scuffle with Grama’s church – The Assembly? That was brutal.”

“Sure was,” said Jeff. “And that was on top of getting dumped by Mom!”

“But Dad learned a lot,” added Janelle.

“So did Mom.”

“I’m glad they got all that out of the way before we came along,” said Janelle.

“Well, we taught them a thing or two.”

“We sure did,” Janelle agreed. “But you know ... they were good parents!”

“Yep, still are, and I love them so much,” added Jeff.

“I do too – now that I survived my teen years!”

“Ha! Me too! You know, I was thinking,” said Jeff, “we know the story so well – fact or fiction...”

“Or both,” Janelle interrupted.

“Yes ... or both. But we know the story so well that we could probably write a book about it.”

“Think so?” asked Janelle.

“I sure do.”

“Seems like a lot of work. But somehow, I think they’d help us. They’ll sure never do it alone!”

“True,” Jeff agreed. “Seems to me like the book would naturally fall into three parts.”

“I see that,” said Janelle. “Part one would have Mom and Dad meeting, plus that famous trip to the Bay Area.”

“And” added Jeff, “don’t forget the cabin thing where Mom told everyone, including Dad, about her *Streams of Terrible Beauty* idea that she got from Grampa Charlie.”

“Yes, that too. I sure wish we could have met him.”

“Me too,” said Jeff. “I suspect we will, someday.”

“Hope so,” said Janelle. “OK. What should we call part one?”

“Unexpected Journey?” offered Jeff.

“I like that. It was, indeed, an unexpected journey for both of them,” said Janelle. “What about part two?”

“No-brainer,” said Jeff. “The Bail-Out.”

“Oh, Mom’s gonna love that!” Janelle said, sarcastically. “But that’s what happened. However, she owned it. She laughs about it now.”

“Hey, and it got her liking Dad more than he liked her,” said Jeff.

“And, what a big reversal from part one where Dad liked her more than she liked him,” added Janelle. “Wait a minute. Part two is really more about what Dad learned, not what Mom caused.”

“Hmmm. I think you’re right. He called it his *delightful devastation*.”

“That’s it, then,” concluded Janelle. “Part two will be called Delightful Devastation. Two down, one to go. What should we call part three?”

“That’s a tough one,” confessed, Jeff. They both sat on the log staring at the Golden Gate. “I don’t know. Nothing’s coming to mind.” Jeff got up and walked around. “I think better when I walk.”

“I think better when I sit,” said Janelle.

Jeff paced, then he went over to the labyrinth and cheated his way to the center. “I’ve got it!” He yelled out.

“What?” said Janelle, turning around on the log.

“*All things reconciled*,” said Jeff.

“Why?”

“Because on that Steinbeck trip, they reconciled their understanding of *Streams*, despite Grampa’s terrible murder. And Mom got reconciled to Dad, in spite of dumping him.”

“That’s perfect!” said Janelle. “But now, what should we name the book?”

Jeff looked at Janelle. “You thinking what I'm thinking?”

“I think so.”

“Then, *Streams of Terrible Beauty*, it shall be!”

“Gimme a hug, big brother.”