

Apache Springs is the story of Annie McClaine, a young girl who believes she has been betrayed by her family and abandoned by her new husband, Cort Shannon. With no other alternative that she will accept, Annie sets out on a perilous journey from New Mexico to southwestern Florida.

Apache Springs

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APACHE SPRINGS

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Revised Edition Copyright 2003 Weslynn McCallister

ISBN# 1-59113-354-8

Published by Weslynn McCallister, USA

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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2003

APACHE SPRINGS

Weslynn McCallister

DEDICATION

Dedicated to my family, my friends and to those who share a fond remembrance of the late fifties and early sixties of the Twentieth Century.

Chapter 1

1957

Annie awoke to the sound of a babbling mountain brook and birds happily singing. A brisk chill was in the air. She shivered and pulled the patchwork quilt over her and tucked it around Cort's shoulder. As she put her arm around him, she snuggled closer.

They'd been married two days; well, almost married. Perhaps, the Mexican wedding wasn't legal in the United States, but it was valid in her heart and soul. Later, she hoped they'd have a real wedding in the church, with their family and friends in attendance.

She pressed her body against him, tucking her legs into his, spoon fashion.

"Annie, Annie, have you ever been so happy?" He whispered, turning to embrace her.

"No, never," she murmured. Kissing him lightly in the hollow of his neck, a warm glow flowed through her. She'd never felt happy or loved, until now.

"Let's stay in bed all day."

Annie giggled happily. "And do what?" she asked, in an innocent voice.

"I can think of some very pleasurable things."

"I can see that," she replied as he turned and began to slide his warm hand over her bare back.

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Annie shivered with desire as his lips traced a sensuous path from the hollow of her neck to the rosy tips of her breasts.

“Damn,” Cort cursed softly as the telephone jingled in their ears.

“Don't answer,” she said, running her long slim fingers through his sandy hair. “It's probably Marilyn. We'll call her later.”

“I think I'd better get it.” He pulled the blanket around his shoulders and reached for the phone.

“I'll make coffee,” she said, sliding out of bed and padding out to the kitchen. While she made the coffee, she sipped a small glass of orange juice and poured one for Cort. Setting them on a tray, she wondered who the phone call was from.

Padding back to the bedroom with the tray laden with a light breakfast, she set two steaming cups of coffee, warm sweet rolls, and orange juice on a tray.

When she saw Cort, a flood of uneasiness rushed through her. The tray shook in her hands. Coffee spilled, dribbling onto the floor, into a puddle. She set the tray down on the dresser and wiped it up.

Cort sat on the edge of the bed, clad in his jeans and a blue and white plaid flannel shirt. The worried expression he wore confirmed her fears.

He pulled on his black leather western style boots and glanced up at her. Concern filled his sea blue eyes. “We have to leave.”

“Why?” she asked, her stomach knotting.

“Barbara was injured pretty badly. She was brought into the hospital, unconscious, by neighbors. They heard screams and investigated. She'd suffered a terrible beating.”

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“Sweet Jesus,” Annie said.

“She’s all right now. She was released from the hospital last night. Your grandmother has been looking for you.”

“Does she know where I am?” She asked, her brows knitting together.

Cort nodded. “Marilyn’s mother told her you were in the mountains staying in Gene’s cabin. She’s furious you left town.”

“Barbara knows his wife. She’s in bridge club with her. It would be a cinch for her to find the cabin.”

Her hands trembled as she drew the sash to her robe tighter. “You don’t think she’d drive up in her condition, do you? If she did, wouldn’t she call first?”

“I don’t know. She has a brand new 1957 Chevy. If she suspects I’m here with you, she might drive up anyway. It’s only seventy miles,” Cort said.

“Maybe, you’d better call her, or better yet, I think we’d better drive back, talk to Barbara and to your grandmother. We need to tell them we’re married.”

“I don’t know.” *I don’t think so. Not yet.* A wave of anxiety swept over her.

“We have to tell them sometime. We can stay with my parents until I find a job to support us.”

“But, you’ll need to go to school, to college.”

She brushed her hair back from her face. “We should have talked about these things first, before we eloped.”

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“I can make enough money over the summer working on cars to pay for an apartment for us in Albuquerque next fall. Don't worry about it, sweetie. Everything will work out.”

Annie had a sinking feeling Cort was wrong. She tried her best not to let her feelings show. “I'd better shower and dress in my best, the dress I wore when we were married.”

Cort gazed at her lovingly. “I'll always remember you in that dress, more beautiful than ever as you said your vows. Now, hurry and get ready to leave. I've made up my mind about going.”

Annie stepped out of the cabin onto the front porch. She gasped, as her right hand flew to her heart. “I thought I just saw Barbara's car.”

Cort smiled as he shut the door of the cabin and placed his arm around her shoulder. “Have you forgotten, sweetie, she's just been released from the hospital. She's probably not driving yet.”

“You're right. I wasn't thinking, was I? I'm sure the doctor told her not to drive. But, if she has any idea we eloped, she just might do it anyway, bruises, bandages and all.”

“That's exactly why we need to speak with your family. We shouldn't have run off like we did, without permission, even if we *are* adults now.”

“I know. You're right.” But, she knew neither Grandmother nor Barbara would have given their permission. She dreaded the talk they'd soon have. Just thinking about it made her stomach ache. For now, she'd try to forget about it and enjoy the ride home. She had an awful feeling it just might be the last ride she'd ever take with her new husband.

During the hour-and-a-half ride back to Apache Springs, Annie snuggled next to Cort and gazed out the window. The beauty of the Hondo Valley never failed to stir her.

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Gently rolling hills with fragrant pine trees, regal poplars, and tall oak trees embraced the valley on each side of the winding road. A picturesque mountain stream, abundant with trout, snaked its way down the Sacramento Mountains.

Occasionally, a tiny church or a small adobe home beckoned invitingly. Poplars hugged their driveways while weeping willows, near the center of their lawns, offered shade. Annie sighed, promising herself, someday she'd paint the enchanted valley.

With one hand on the steering wheel and the other around Annie, Cort was silent while she admired the scenery. He wondered if eloping had been a mistake. He hoped he hadn't jeopardized their happiness. What if they'd not only hurt, but enraged her family? Would they be able to weather the storm? He didn't know if their Mexican wedding was legal in the United States.

They'd marry again soon, in a church. He sighed. Jeeze, where would they live? Even though he'd said they could stay with his parents, he wasn't so sure how they'd feel about their elopement.

He shuddered inwardly, thinking about the confrontation that was sure to come once they arrived Annie's Grandmother's. He began to wish he could speak to her alone, to assure her of his love for Annie.

Upon their arrival, he was unexpectedly granted his wish. He understood then what his mother had always warned him of. "Be careful of what you wish for, Cort. You just might get it."

When they pulled into a parking space across from the hotel Annie's grandmother lived in, she was still not prepared to face her with the news. She grasped Cort's hand tightly on the elevator ride up to her grandmother's room.

A dark fear crept over her from the tips of her toes to the top of her head. "Maybe, we shouldn't do this. Let's just leave for Albuquerque. I can

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support us with money from my trust fund for awhile. I have four hundred dollars a month.”

“No. Keep your trust fund. I don’t want to touch it. Ever.”

“I don’t like it, Cort. I have a bad feeling about this. I-I’m afraid I’ll never see you again.”

“Sweetie, we’re married.”

“But not in the church. I’m afraid they’ll talk you into leaving me,” she said, her voice trembling with emotion. Just the thought of him leaving her left her feeling miserable and empty.

Cort turned and took Annie into his arms. Smiling down at her, he said, “You must not know how much I love you.”

“Excuse me. Sir. Miss. This is the fifth floor. Aren’t you getting out here?”

Annie’s cheeks warmed as Cort slowly released her from his embrace. Maybe she’d feel better after they were in her grandmother’s room.

The moment they opened Mrs. McClaine’s door, Annie’s heart fell. She knew she’d been right.

Her grandmother, perched regally in a French Provincial chair, projected an image of royalty as she invited them in. Her beautiful silver hair was swept up in the charming eighteen hundred’s style she loved so much.

Bejeweled and impeccably dressed in her favorite sapphire blue dress, she portrayed wealth and elegance while her blue-gray eyes held a glint of steel in them warning Annie to tread lightly.

“How nice to see you, dear and you too, Cort. I’ve been terribly worried about you. I do wish you would have told me or

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Barbara you were going out of town.”

“I er-I’m sorry, Grandmother.”

“Yes, well you be a doll and run downstairs before we have our little talk. Order a nice lunch for us. Oh yes. Do stop by the gift shop too. Choose a new mystery novel for me to read and one for yourself,” she said, taking several dollar bills from her handbag.

“I’ll be happy to do that, Grandmother.” Annie nearly snatched the bills in her hurry to escape the tension she felt room.

She took a deep breath and rubbed her forehead as she turned to leave. *Surely, she won’t say anything to Cort about our trip to the mountains or our elopement while I’m downstairs. If only, we’d gone on to Albuquerque and called to tell them about our marriage. Maybe, that wouldn’t have been as courageous, but I’d have felt better.*

Just as soon as Annie had left the room, Grace said, “Do pull your chair closer, Cort. I have something to say to you.”

He ran his hand through his hair. *Here it comes.* He didn’t need to be a genius to figure out what she had on her mind. He gulped and drew his chair up.

“I understand you and Annie eloped.”

“We...”

“You needn’t explain.” She held the palm of her hand up. “Just hear me out. I think you’re a fine young man and I admire your parents for their honesty and hard work. But, your marriage to my granddaughter was about six years premature. Perhaps, after you’ve completed college and are well on your way to establishing yourself, your marriage might work.”

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“But, Mrs. McClaine, Annie and I love each other very much. We might have some money problems at first. A lot of couples do. I won’t let her touch her trust fund her father left her. She won’t need to anyway. I’m a hard worker. You’ll see. You’ll be surprised how well I’ll do.”

“I’m sure you will, Cort. Thank God, you said you wouldn’t allow her to use her trust fund. I admire you for that. Many men in your position would take advantage of her. But, what will you do until you graduate? You’ll have some lean years, young man. Annie has never in her life experienced financial difficulties. Nor will she, if you abort this marriage.”

“You mean, get a divorce?” His voice rose in surprise.

“No. I mean an annulment, not a divorce. A divorce would mar Annie’s reputation. Her religion doesn’t permit divorce. Why, she’d never be able to re-marry.”

Cort’s sandy brows shot up. “I’m Catholic too, Mrs. McClaine. I’m planning to spend my life with your granddaughter. What if I don’t agree to an annulment?”

“If you don’t agree, I’ll be forced to alter my will.”

“You wouldn’t do that.”

“You wouldn’t know if I did, would you?”

“I guess not,” he said with a deep sigh of disappointment. “I’d hoped for your blessings, Mrs. McClaine, not this.”

“If you remarry after you’re successful and can support my granddaughter, you’ll receive my blessings.”

“At least you give me some credit. You do think I’ll achieve some success, even though my parents aren’t wealthy.”

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“If I thought you less of a man, I'd offer you money to back off.”

“Mrs. McClaine, surely, you don't think...”

“Of course not. I have a great deal of respect for your parents and their morals. I'm certain you wouldn't consider such a thing.”

“No. I wouldn't.”

“I know, if you truly consider my granddaughter's well being and her future, you'll agree with me. I've noticed many are marrying young, before they've completed their high school or college education. They did when I was a girl too, but times are changing.”

“People still have the same desires and needs.”

Grace shook her head. “Many will divorce while their children are still young. They'll be raised in single parent homes. Women will be driven into the work place, whether they want to be there or not. Mark my words, in time, you'll see I'm right.”

“Maybe. I'll admit we were hasty. We should have waited until we had both our families approval.” Cort drummed his fingers on the end table next to the bed. He sighed deeply. “The thing is, I'd rather die than leave Annie. I can't do it, Mrs. McClaine.”

“It will be best for both of you. I'll disinherit her if you don't file the annulment. She'll suffer more than you can imagine. I wish you had thought to speak with me, if not with your parents, before you married. I understand it was a Mexican wedding,” she said, not waiting for his reply. “My Lord, what were you two thinking?” Her normally calm, soft voice rose.

“Do you realize the mess you've created? You were married in a border town too, I suppose.”

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“We were married in Juarez.” Resting his elbow on the end table, he placed his index finger alongside his cheek. Marilyn was the only one that could have given their secret away.

“Your marriage can’t possibly be legal.”

Cort clenched his teeth together. When he spoke, his voice trembled with anger and uncertainty. “I think our marriage *is* legal. Anyway, we’re going to be married in the church as soon as possible. I’m going to see Father John later today.”

“Humph. Don’t waste his valuable time. What you mean is, you *may* be married in church later, as in six to ten years later, young man. I suppose it’s too much to hope that you and Annie didn’t well, didn’t consummate your union.” A narrow brow rose as she tilted her head.

“Ah, yes, that would be way too much to hope for.”

“My word, I could be a great grandmother in nine months, at sixty-two years of age.”

Cort bit his lip and gathered his sandy brows together.

“I see, young man, you hadn’t given that possibility much thought, if any. So, I’m right. You’re not ready for the responsibilities of marriage and all that the institution entails.”

“*Institution?* I hadn’t thought of marriage like that. And children... Wow. We couldn’t have kids yet. Neither of us has started college. Besides, we couldn’t afford a family. Damn. I hope she isn’t...”

“So, you do agree with me. I thought you would after you had the opportunity to consider the full implications of what you’ve done.”

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Cort rubbed his forehead in an effort to ward off the headache that had suddenly set in. “I want to be with Annie, but I couldn’t support a child yet. You know we’re both Catholics. Birth control’s forbidden, except for the rhythm method. I promise you, we’ll abide by it.”

Grace gave a un-lady like snort. “A little late, isn’t it? It doesn’t always work. No. I insist you file an annulment immediately. For God’s sake, don’t mention the consummation of the marriage. My attorney’s expecting you. You may leave now. We’re finished with our discussion.”

“You must have been fairly certain of yourself, Mrs. McClaine,” he said in a cool voice as he rose.

“Of myself and of you too although, I did think you would be more rational. Don’t worry about the attorney fees. I’ve already taken care of them.”

His anger bubbled to the surface, threatening to explode. Holding his breath a moment, he exhaled slowly. When he spoke, his tone was quiet. “You’ve wasted your money. Excuse me, Mrs. McClaine. I need to leave. I am going to talk to Annie.”

“Wait. What was the first thing you said? I don’t believe I heard you correctly. Well, never mind. Go on, but don’t bother looking for my granddaughter. It will be better if you don’t see her again. I’ll send her home in a cab when I’m ready for her to leave.”

“But...”

“You have no choice, young man.”

“Don’t be so sure of that. You know, Annie can’t be left with Barbara. She’s mean to her.”

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“I’ll have a talk with her. She’ll have to change her ways and do as I say. You see, Cort, there’s too much at stake for her if she doesn’t. She’d not like you.” She sighed. “I admire your determination and fortitude. Maybe, I’ll live long enough to see you marry my granddaughter when you’re well able to support her.”

“You’d make Annie and me very happy if you’d accept our marriage now.”

“For reasons I’ve already explained, that’s impossible. You’re an intelligent young man. Surely, you understand. Now. Go on. Don’t keep Mr. Hobson waiting.”

“All right, Mrs. McClaine. I’ll leave now. I hope our conversation hasn’t been too trying for you.” His tone was serious and respectful. He ran his hand through his sandy hair.

Maybe, they had made a mistake. If he filed the annulment, he probably wouldn’t see Annie again. She’d probably never speak to him again much less marry him later.

He knew he’d made a mistake by coaxing her into marrying him before they’d started college. Some of their friends had shacked up before graduating from high school. Others had married out of state before they’d graduated.

Most of the time, the girls had been pregnant. Knocked up, as some of his friends had so crudely put it. The guys worked any job they could and in most cases they could barely afford shelter for their families. He didn’t want that. He had high ambitions. He wanted a college degree and a career. So did Annie.

If he didn’t file the annulment or whatever it was, Annie would lose her inheritance. *Jeeze. Isn’t anyone on my side?*

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Annie stood in line at the counter, wondering what was going on upstairs in her grandmother's room. Glancing out the window, she frowned as she saw Cort dash across the street and get into the pick-up truck he'd borrowed from his older brother. She had a crazy impulse to run after him.

"May I help you, Miss?"

"Uh, in a minute." She tossed the books on the counter along with the money her grandmother had given her. The change rolled off onto the floor as she turned and ran out the front door.

"Cort. Wait," Annie hollered, running down the street. Too late. He'd was already turning the corner.

She sighed. *Had he run an errand for Grandmother?*

"Barbara," Grace said, speaking into receiver, "We needn't be concerned about young Cort Shannon any longer. He's an intelligent young man and did just as I expected he would. I'll be calling a cab for Annie now. Be especially nice to her, will you, dear? This is going to be hard for her."

Grace winced as she heard her daughter-in-law's abrupt reply. She knew Barbara had never been a kind woman, but other than herself, she was all Annie had.

If she hadn't had a bad heart, she would have taken care of Annie herself. She wished with all her heart, Annie's mother hadn't died, that her own son hadn't been killed. She thought she understood why Annie had eloped with the Shannon boy.

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She'd never had a loving home. Barbara was cold, and that awful man she'd married... well, he was simply an abomination. Annie had been raised in a cold home without love, a drunk's home for God's sake.

Barbara wasn't much better. She was well aware that she'd married twice for money. She'd adopted Annie simply to use as a security blanket. She knew Barbara wouldn't let Annie starve. She gave her a large allowance to feed and clothe Annie well. But, Barbara could never have enough.

Richard had left her \$50,000 in insurance. Barbara had spent it all by the time she'd met Daniel Jennings. Grace glanced at her expensive antique wristwatch with its diamond-studded band. She sighed and brushed a silver strand of hair back from her face. Cort should be walking into Mr. Hobson's office just about now.

Cort pulled out of the gravel drive. Bobby was gone. Everyone was gone. He rubbed his forehead. He had a splitting headache. He'd called Annie. Barbara told him she wasn't home. He didn't believe her.

He'd drive over and demand to see her. He wouldn't take no for an answer. Shifting the gear into first, he tore through the dusty streets, running a couple of stop signs, going the short way.

Pulling up to her house, he hopped out of the truck, leaving the door open. He stood on the porch, tapping his boot on the cement, as he rang the bell.

No answer. He knocked, knocked harder, louder. Too late. They were gone. He drove home slowly, the long way, thinking. When he pulled into his driveway, he heard the phone ringing before he got out of the truck.

Opening the door of the truck, he slammed it and ran to the front door and into the house.

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“Hello?” he answered, slightly out of breath.

“Cort Shannon, please.”

“This is Cort Shannon.”

“This is Mr. Hobson’s office. We were expecting you. You missed your appointment. At Mrs. McClaine’s request, we’ve set another appointment for tomorrow morning at ten AM. She’s arranged for a cab to pick you up at nine-forty-five AM.”

“That won’t be necessary. Tell Mr. Hobson I’ll be there. Oh, and I’d like a consultation before I sign anything.”

“That’s customary, sir. We’ll be expecting you.”

“Damn,” he swore as he hung up the phone. *I’ll reach Annie before morning if I have to call all night. But, what if Barbara won’t let me talk to her?*

CHAPTER 2

This has to be the worst day of my life. If only Annie's *home*. He reached into the pocket of his brother's slightly soiled trousers. He sighed. He wasn't going to like it that he'd worn his only pair of dress pants much less taken his change. *Ah, yes*. He pulled out a dime and a couple of nickels. Dropping them into a pay phone, he dialed Annie's number.

"Hello."

Perspiration broke out on his forehead. Barbara, of all the people he didn't want to talk to; she had answered the phone.

"May I speak to Annie, please?"

"Who is this?"

He cleared his throat "Cort," he said, wiping his clammy hands on his pants.

"Annie doesn't want to talk to you. She wants an annulment."

That was the last thing he heard Barbara Jennings say. She'd gone on talking, but he hadn't heard a word. He didn't remember if he'd said goodbye.

The next thing he knew, he was standing in front of Mr. Hobson's desk. His hand trembled as he signed the Annulment papers.

"You don't look well, Mr. Shannon."

"I think I'm gonna be sick."

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“The Men’s Room is straight down the hall, just past the elevators. You’ve signed the papers. You don’t need to come back. Where would you like your copy of the papers mailed?”

“I don’t want a copy.”

Mr. Hobson drew his brows together. “Very well, I’ll hold them for you.” He tapped his fingers on the papers.

“Okay.” Cort glanced at the white wall behind Mr. Hobson’s desk. Framed certificates of his degrees began to spin and blur. “I’m really sick.” He leaned on the desk. “May I go now?”

“You’re excused, young man.” He waved him away.

“Thanks.” Cort turned, making a hasty exit. Maybe, he’d made a mistake? What if he’d left Annie pregnant, living at home with Barbara? At least, Dr. Jennings has left. He won’t hurt Annie. He didn’t need to worry about that.

He remembered how ticked off he’d been when he’d found out Dr. Jennings had threatened her. She’d laughed and said she could protect herself. He shook his head. A girl of seventeen shouldn’t have to sleep with a knife under her pillow. He groaned, knowing he’d better find the men’s room fast.

Holding his hand over his mouth, he bolted down the hall past the elevator. Pushing the door of the men’s room open, he rushed in and vomited. Leaning against the wall, he wiped the perspiration from his forehead. Catching a glance of his reflection in mirror, he shook his head. No wonder Annie hadn’t wanted him. He looked like a giant green worm from the caverns.

He bent over the dirty sink, rinsing his mouth and splashing his face with cold water. Reaching for a paper towel, he cursed. *Damn. Empty. He*

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grabbed a handful of toilet paper and wiped his face. Bits of it stuck. *Oh, Man.* Shaking his head, he wiped his hands on his already soiled trousers. *Jeeze; what a day.*

He squinted against the bright sunlight as he stepped out of the four story yellow brick office building. Reaching into his shirt pocket for his sunglasses, he found it empty. He'd either left them in the men's room or in the attorney's office. He shrugged his shoulders. No way was he going back.

A half-block down lay his avenue for escape. With fake ID in hand, determined to put Annie out of his mind, he stepped into the El Coyote Bar. Several hours later, when he reeled out, he found his mind overflowing with memories of her.

He weaved down the street and reached out to steady himself on a parking meter. Uncle Sam pointed down at him from a sign directly across the street.

"We Want *You.*"

"Okay, okay. You're the only one that does. You don't have to twist my arm," he mumbled, stumbling on to the recruitment hall.

In his inebriated state, he filled out the necessary forms and went in for his physical, fully expecting to walk out a member of the United States Air Force.

"Damn," he shouted, slamming his fist into the wall of the men's room.

"Cool it, amigo. I didn't want to join either. Hey. Aren't you Bobby's little brother?"

"Yeah. What a bummer. I couldn't pass the physical. What the hell's a Mitrol Valve Prolapse?"

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“Beats me.”

“Me too. They said I had a heart murmur too. Guess the idiot must’ve read the wrong guy’s report.”

“Don’t worry about it. You’re better off. You must have mucho problemas with the señoritas if you made a trip down here to sign up voluntarily.”

“That’s not the half of it.”

“Have a cerveza or two, amigo. Things will look better.”

“Maybe.”

The last thing Cort wanted to do was hang out in Apache Springs, yet it seemed that was exactly what he was going to do unless he could think of something better.

By morning, he hadn’t thought of anything better. But he wasn’t staying around. Before he left, he wrote a note to his family, telling them he’d write, to tell anyone who asked he’d joined the service. With his bag strapped onto the back of his motorcycle, he rode out of town.

There was one branch of the service he hadn’t tried yet, the Border Patrol.

CHAPTER 3

“You see, I told you, he didn't love you. You didn't listen to me. All he wanted was your money.”

“What money? I only have a small trust fund.”

“I'm referring to the money you'll inherit when your grandmother dies. If I have anything to do with it, he's not going to get it. I wonder how much Grace bought him off for?”

“He's not that kind of person,” Annie said, biting her tongue to keep from saying worse. “Anyway, he loves me. He'll be back. Wait and see.”

“Don't hold your breath,” Barbara said in a mean spirited tone.

Annie turned her tear-stained face away as Barbara drove down Main Street. The familiar office buildings and shops passed by in a blur. She brushed her hair from her face and rolled up the window.

Maybe, Cort went home to talk to his family. Or maybe, he went home and is re-considering our marriage. She bit her lower lip and her eyes began to burn. *Cheer up, Annie,* she told herself. *Things usually work out for the best.* Usually. But, this time she didn't believe it though she desperately wanted to.

When they arrived home, Barbara suggested they go to the Country Club, swim and have dinner. Annie packed her two-piece red bathing suit, a towel, and a novel in a satchel.

They drove in silence to the Club. Once they were there, Annie made a dash for the dressing rooms and went to the pool. Ordering a coke, she

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relaxed on a recliner and closed her eyes. Within seconds, her thoughts turned to Cort.

The more she thought about him and their love for each other, the more she believed he'd come for her even if he had doubts. He wouldn't just leave without a word.

She grimaced. An unwanted thought crept into her mind, one she didn't want to acknowledge. She tried to ignore it, but it kept nagging her.

Josie had said, three people would betray her, two women and a man. Grandmother? Barbara? Had Marilyn told Grandmother she'd eloped? If she had, could Barbara be right? Had Grandmother paid Cort off?

Had he left her? She couldn't believe any of them would do such a thing, except maybe, Barbara. She took a sip of the coke she'd ordered. She'd simply let her imagination run wild. *Tomorrow, everything will be all right.*

She didn't hear from Cort the next day, or the next. The days drug on. Annie chewed her nails to the quick. Unable to take the silence any longer, she broke her unwritten law and drove by his home. No one was there. She'd never done that before, unless he'd asked her to, but, it was different now. She was his wife.

By the end of the week, she still hadn't talked to him. She'd telephoned over and over again. She was told he wasn't in. She didn't think his parents would lie to her. The following day, she telephoned again.

"Bobby, this is Annie. May I speak with Cort?"

"He's not here."

"Oh. Is he on his way over?" Her voice rose to a hopeful note.

"No."

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She waited for an explanation, but he offered none. "Please tell him to call when he comes home."

"That won't be anytime soon. Didn't he tell you?"

"Tell me what?" Her stomach rolled over. Alarm bells sounded in her mind.

"He's joined the service, Annie. I'm sorry I have to be the one to tell you."

"The army?" A soft gasp escaped her.

"He didn't say. I think so. Are you all right? I thought I heard you gasp."

"Um, I don't know," she muttered, uneasily.

"Didn't he say anything about it?"

"No. No, he didn't."

"I'm sorry. That was rotten of him. He didn't tell us either. He just wrote us a note and left."

"Do you know where he is? Where his boot camp is?"

"I don't know. We haven't heard from him, but, I'm sure he'll write to you."

Annie sniffed. "He hasn't. But, if you talk to him, tell him, I-I don't want to hear from him." Her voice broke as she gulped back her tears.

"You don't sound good, Annie. Do you want me to come over? I'll bring Marilyn with me."

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“No. Thanks. I’ll be okay,” she said, miserably, hanging up the receiver. She sat on her bed feeling the moisture behind her eyes forcing its way out. Taking a deep breath, she sniffed and moved into the bathroom. Blindly taking a towel from the rack, she sat on the edge of the bathtub and buried her face into the rough terry cloth.

What had she done? Why had he left her? He’d left without a word. He hadn’t mentioned their marriage to his family. If he had, Bobby would have said something.

She turned and tossed the towel on the floor. Grabbing a handful of toilet paper, she blew her nose.

Drawing her brows together, she reviewed every moment they’d spent together from the time they’d been married until now. Everything had been wonderful until they’d gone to see her grandmother.

Had Barbara been right? Annie washed and dried her face, then moved back into the bedroom. Wringing her hands, she paced back and forth over the thick blue carpet.

Maybe, Cort had had regrets. Maybe, he’d needed some space and had left town to think it over. She moaned aloud. Her heart ached. Hurt. She placed her hand over it. Would he tell her he wanted a divorce, that he didn’t love her? Her stomach knotted.

She needed to get out of the house. She took her bathing suit from the bottom drawer of the dresser and decided to go to the pool for awhile. Dozing on the bright blue and white-striped lounge by the pool, she opened her eyes and glanced at her shoulder. Her skin was beginning to sting, a sure sign she was burning. She reached down for the baby oil mixed with iodine.

“Annie. Don’t bother putting anymore of that God-awful stuff on. How many times do you need to be told it will burn you? I want you to come in and dress now. Be ready in a half-hour.”

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“But, Barbara...”

“Now, don’t sass me again today, young lady. Just do what I asked you to. Your Grandmother’s expecting you.”

“All right.” She wiped the perspiration from her forehead. “It’s too hot, anyway. I don’t feel so good this morning.”

Annie stood and grabbed onto the back of the lounge chair. Dizzy, her vision blurred as she swayed. Her stomach rolled.

“Don’t just stand there. Hurry up.”

“Yes mame,” she said, making her way into the house. She tossed the towel into the laundry room and hurried into the bathroom. *Maybe, it’s stomach flu.*

“Annie, wear your pastel blue sundress, the one I just bought for you. Oh. And wear your blue flats to match.”

Annie put her hand over her mouth. *Ugh. That dress. Why did she buy it for me? I told her I didn’t like it, but if I wear another one she’ll be mad and I’m too sick to argue.*

I’d feel better if I wore my lucky dress, my red and white checked sundress, the one I wore to Cort’s house the first time, well, almost the first time we ever made love.

If it hadn’t been for his brother’s interruption, we might have except that I was afraid to. Maybe the dress will bring me bring me luck. Nothing else has. Oh well, I don’t feel like arguing. The blue dress it is.

Annie peeled her bathing suit off and showered. As she dried off, she gazed at herself in the full-length mirror. Her breasts were sore. Her nipples were a different color than usual. They were brown. She didn’t

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think the sun had tanned her there, through her swimsuit. She shook her head. There was definitely something wrong with her.

She didn't want to go today. She was edgy. Something was bothering her besides feeling sick. She had a bad feeling something was terribly wrong. It was the same feeling she'd had when she and Cort had taken the elevator to see her Grandmother, after they'd been married.

"You look very nice in the dress I bought you, Annie, but you're so pale."

"I don't feel so well."

"Stop complaining, young lady. Get in the car. It's your own fault if you don't feel well," Barbara said, opening the car door. Sitting behind the steering wheel of her 1957 Chevrolet, she started it and backed out of the driveway. "You should eat more meat. You eat too many vegetables and too much fruit."

A horn honked. Barbara slammed on the brakes, automatically extending her right arm out in front of Annie as though her arm would stop Annie from flying through the windshield.

"That idiot. He should have known I was backing out, should have waited for me. What are you shaking your head for, Annie? Don't you believe me?" She shrugged her shoulders. "Back to what I was saying, you don't get enough iron in your diet, young lady."

"Maybe not. But, I don't like to think about eating cows and pigs. Ugh. Fish maybe. I don't want to talk about food now. That man almost hit us."

"He should have been watching where he was going."

Annie didn't reply. She rolled her eyes and turned on the radio.

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“Turn that thing off. It makes me nervous when I’m driving.”

“Okay,” Annie said. She sat back in her seat and closed her eyes. As soon as they pulled up to the hotel her grandmother lived in, she opened the car door and rushed out ahead of Barbara. At least, she would have a few moments of peace.

While she hugged her grandmother, a stack of papers on her desk caught her eye. She moved to the desk. “Where did you get this?” Annie gingerly examined a document on the desk. “It-it’s an Annulment of Marriage. My marriage.”

“My dear, it’s a copy. Surely, you received the original.”

“No,” she said, her voice was weak, her legs trembling. She reached for the desk to steady herself.

“Are you all right, dear?”

“No.” Tiny pinpoints of lights flickered at the edge of her vision and spiraled down into darkness.

Everything was silent now. It seemed as though she was suspended in time and space, in the darkness of a great universe. Maybe she was dead.

Then I was wrong. The church was wrong. There’s nothing. No afterlife. No pearly gates to welcome me into heaven, or fiery flames warning of an approach to hell’s gates. No God or Satan, only cold and darkness, and maybe a musty coffin and worms; millions of them devouring my body. But then, how would I know? I feel as though I’m suspended in endless darkness.

“Do you remember me, Annie?”

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A different voice, a slightly familiar one spoke. The fortune-teller she'd met at the county fair last fall... she'd warned her about the bad time ahead. She hadn't wanted to believe her. But now, the time was here.

Josie?

Josie laughed softly. "Yes. Thank God. There is a God, Annie. Don't pay any attention to that other voice you heard. That was the voice of doubt, a thought form."

It can't be you, Josie. You're a fortune-teller, and an astrologer. How could you have died so young? Why, you're just a little more than my age.

"I made a mistake. I didn't pay attention to my own intuition. I didn't look at my chart, a sin for an astrologer. I was killed while I was out in the fun zone on my way to Mexico. Oh, what a ball I was having, until the crash. I've never had so much fun. For awhile, I didn't know I was dead, until my life review. I've come to help you."

I must be dead too. It seems like it. But, it's not like I thought it was going to be. Am I in purgatory?

"No." Josie laughed. "You're not. Think of me as your special angel. Darling Annie, You've only fainted. You're unconscious. You'll live a long life. When you awaken, you'll have important decisions to make. Don't listen to the others. Do what your heart tells you is right, no matter how impossible it may seem. It will be worth it. Keep your faith. Our physical bodies die, but we don't. We're kind of like butterflies after we die, emerging from our cocoons. It's a beautiful transition."

"Ms. McClaine, you're awake now. You gave your grandmother quite a fright."

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“Where am I? Who are you?”

“You’re still in your grandmother’s suite. I’m Dr. McElroy. Have you ever fainted before?”

“Not like this. But, I’ve felt like I was going to. I’ve been dizzy and nauseous for awhile now. But, only in the mornings.”

“Oh, my dear,” she heard her grandmother murmur. “You simply can’t be...”

“What Grandmother?”

“Nothing, dear. Go with the doctor. He’ll take you to his office for an exam. Go to the hospital, if necessary, for more tests. I’ll feel better when I know there’s nothing seriously wrong with you.”

Annie hated doctor’s offices. “I’m not watching.” She said, grimacing and turning her head away while the nurse tied a rubber tube around her upper arm. “Your needle is sooo long.”

“You peeked. Make a fist for me. I can’t find your veins.”

“They never can. This time I promise, I won’t peek.”

“I’m sorry. I need to draw it from your hand.”

“They usually do,” Annie said with a moan.

“You must dread seeing the doctor.”

Annie nodded.

“It’s over with now.”

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“So quick? I barely felt it. You’re good. Is that all you need? A urinalysis and a blood test?”

“No. Come with me to the examination room. There’s a gown hanging on a hook on the back of the door. Take all of your clothes off and slip the gown on so that it opens in the front. You may leave your shoes on.”

“Do I have to take my panties off?”

“Of course. Haven’t you ever had a pelvic exam, dear?”

“No. My pelvis is all right. I’ve never had a broken bone.”

The nurse chuckled. “This is just part of being a woman. You’ll need a pelvic exam once a year from now on. It has nothing to do with broken bones. It’s preventative medicine. We’ll do a pap smear. Slip the gown on and I’ll be back in a few minutes. The doctor will be in soon. Oh, and after you have the gown on, sit up here on this table. I’ll position you for the exam when I come back.”

Annie sat on the strange table in the ugly blue and white print gown, the front gaping open. She wondered what the stirrups on each side of the table were for. They looked just like the ones she placed the toes of her boots in when she rode.

“Lay down and place your feet in the stirrups.”

Annie glanced up with an expression of puzzlement in her eyes.

“This is so uncomfortable,” she said, placing her feet into the stirrups.

“None of us like to have a pelvic, dear,” the nurse said, covering her with a sheet. “I’ll be right here with you. You can...”

“Well Annie, you’re ready for the exam, I see,” the doctor said, pulling on surgical gloves.

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Annie gasped as he slid the sheet up to her knees and pulled them apart. He took a tube from the table and smeared her private parts with cold gooeey stuff. Next, he took what appeared to be large Bar-B-Q tongs from a table.

“Wha-what are you doing?”

“Haven’t you ever had a pelvic examination, Miss McClaine?”

“No. I’ve never had a sap smear either. Do I have to?”

“I’m afraid so,” the doctor said with an amused chuckle. “It’s called a *pap* smear. Pelvic exams are done for several reasons. My wife hates these exams. In fact, I’ve never seen a woman who likes them. But, I’m afraid this is something that comes with being of the female gender. Just don’t think about it.”

Annie took his advice. While the doctor prodded and skewered her with the cold stainless steel instrument, her mind was a hundred miles away, almost.

She thought of the Hondo Valley and the beautiful streams she loved to wade in. And Cort.

“You may put your clothes back on now,” the nurse said, interrupting her reverie. “Go into the doctor’s office when you’re dressed.”

Annie slipped her dress on over her head. Smoothing her hair, she reached into her handbag and took her lipstick and compact out. She gazed into the mirror, powdered her nose and applied lipstick. She placed her hands on her still red cheeks. *I’ll never go through that again. That has to be the most humiliating experience I’ve ever had.* Thank God, the nurse was in the room.

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Annie entered the doctor's office and sat in the chair opposite his massive mahogany desk. Shifting in the chair, she watched Dr. McElroy study her chart.

Her stomach rolled. *There must be something terribly wrong with me.* It's taking him so long. She gulped and cleared her throat. Placing her hands on his desk, she folded them together.

"Mrs. McClaine, I'm happy to tell you there isn't anything seriously wrong with you. You're simply having morning sickness. I expect your husband will be very happy to learn that he's going to be a father. You're pregnant." He smiled and patted her hands.

"But, I can't be. I've just found out that I'm not married. Besides, we only, I mean, it wasn't so many times. Dr. McElroy, I was only with my husband one night, that is, in just that way. Please don't tell anyone what you told me. My family will be furious. I... I didn't want the annulment." Blinking her tears back, she said, her voice trembling, "I'm not sure why my husband annulled our marriage."

"Ms. McClaine," Dr. McElroy said gently, "perhaps it might be better, at this point, if your marriage and annulment became public. Your child will be born close to the middle of March." Arching a bushy ebony brow, he said, "I don't think you should have had an annulment. Obviously, your marriage was consummated."

Annie's cheeks burned crimson. "I never thought I might be pregnant. Is that why I've been feeling sick in the mornings? I haven't been able to get out of bed. I'm dizzy and sick to my stomach nearly every morning."

"That's precisely why, Ms. McClaine."

"But, I can't have a baby." She shook her head, refusing to believe him.

"There's no stopping this child. Abortions aren't legal, nor would one be desirable to a Catholic girl."

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“I wouldn't consider one. But, aren't there pills?”

Doctor McElroy laughed. “Annie, having a baby isn't the same as having the flu. Pills won't stop the child. Perhaps, you could get in touch with your former husband. I'm sure, if he knew...”

“No. I never want to see him again. I'll manage somehow.” An unmistakable note of obstinacy crept into her voice. What was she going to tell her grandmother? And what would she think? The next time she saw her she would need to have the courage to tell her.

“Grandmother, I won't have an abortion,” Annie said, slamming her fist on top of the French provincial desk.

“And why not? It seems to me that's the only answer.”

“It can't be. For one, my religious beliefs are against it. If I'd been raped, I might consider going to Switzerland for an abortion as you've suggested. Maybe, the church would go along with that. But, I wasn't raped. I loved Cort with all my heart. I still do. This child was conceived in a love union, a legal one, I might remind you.”

Grace flinched. “Legal? I doubt it. Perhaps, if I hadn't interfered, but, I did what I thought was right. I only wanted the best for you. I didn't think, couldn't think, you might be pregnant.” Her voice fell to a near whisper. “Perhaps, the marriage would have worked.”

“What did you say? You did interfere. Did you pay him to leave town as Barbara's hinted?” Annie's anger rose. She felt her face flush.

“Surely you think more of him than that. He would never have accepted money from me. He loved you, Annie, so much, that he only wanted to do what was best for you, for your future happiness.”

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“You mean what you thought was best for me, don't you Grandmother?”

“Yes. I suppose that is what I mean.” Her voice was soft, barely above a whisper.

“You told him, you would disinherit me if he didn't comply with your wishes, didn't you?”

Grace cast her gaze down and nodded.

Annie closed her eyes a moment and sighed. “Well, at least, I know the truth. He didn't abandon me because he didn't love me.” She sighed, more upset with her grandmother than she'd ever been with anyone in her life. She'd betrayed her. Yet, she knew her grandmother loved her dearly. She was the only one who'd ever loved her.

The room was silent with the exception of the loud ticking of the Grandfather clock. Annie thought for a moment. She knew if she didn't forgive her, the anger she felt would eventually destroy her. She struggled to compose herself, to somehow forgive her.

“You know, don't you, this has broken my heart? I know you did what you thought was best, Grandmother. You've always been so good to me and I've always known you love me.”

“I'm truly sorry, Annie. You're very precious to me, but we must consider the problem at hand. You're just not thinking properly. Won't you, at least, consider having this child and giving it up for adoption? No one ever need know. It would be close to impossible for you to raise a child yourself. I'll send you to Europe, wherever you like, until the child is born.”

Annie clenched her fists together. She couldn't believe her grandmother was carrying on this way. In spite of her nearly super human efforts to

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forgive her, a fire rose within her. She set her teeth and struggled to contain her temper.

“I’ll never consider having an abortion or giving my child up for adoption. After what you’ve just told me, I know Cort still loves me or at least he did. I’m raising my child myself.”

“My word, Annie. What will you do?”

“I won’t humiliate you.” Her face darkened, her voice trembled with anger. “I have a small amount of money from my trust fund, enough to support myself. I’ll leave Apache Springs for good.”

“Oh, my dear. I wasn’t thinking of myself. Perhaps, we can locate Cort. Hire a detective if need be.”

Annie’s eyes filled with water. Straightening with dignity, she said, “I don’t want to do that. He left without seeing me; without even talking to me. He should have, at least, done that. After my baby’s born, I’m going to art school. I’ll find a way. I’m good. Good enough, with proper training, to make a living as an artist. Someday, maybe, I’ll open my own gallery.” As a sense of strength returned, her anger and despair subsided.

“You’re a strong, determined and courageous young woman. I admire that quality in you. You remind me of myself when I was a young girl. Very well, I can see your mind’s made up though perhaps you have too much pride. I’ll take care of your medical bills and your tuition to art school providing you take business classes at a community college. When I pass on, after you inherit my estate, you’ll need a business background. You’ll need it to manage your gallery, too.” She met Annie’s troubled eyes and smiled fondly.

It was obvious to Grace she didn’t want to accept help, but there was the baby to consider. *Surely, Annie must see now is not the time to be*

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stubborn. With the Straightening of Annie's shoulders, she knew her Granddaughter had come to a decision. She hoped it was the right one.

"That's very generous of you, Grandmother. I'll pay you back when I can."

"No, no need for that." She paused a moment and sat straight up in bed. "There's something else I believe will make you very happy. Ringling School of Art is located in Sarasota, Florida, where your aunt, Jeanne Arabeau, lives. She's a lot like Desiree'; your real mother. She's written often, asking about you. You'll like her very much, dear. I know she'd love to have you stay with her, if you'd like to do that. I'll feel so much better knowing you're not alone."

"I don't know. She's never written to me, or called. If she's asked about me, why haven't I ever heard from her?"

Grace sucked in her breath. "I happen to know she's written to you at least twice a year, on your birthday and at Christmas. She's even sent gifts. She sighed and said, "Barbara didn't give them to you, did she?"

"No. I *would* like to have heard from her. All this time, I've thought I had only one living person who was related to me by blood... *you*, Grandmother. Maybe, it's not too late to meet my aunt though."

"Of course it isn't. Jeanne will open new doors for you." She smiled to herself. *She will love Annie and the child. Finally, Annie will have the love she needs, besides my own.*

"Thank you, for thinking of her, Grandmother. I'll look forward to meeting her. As for attending Ringling, if they will accept me, I would be delighted."

"Then, I'll call Jeanne this afternoon. I'll try to see that your future is happier than your past has been. I'm so sorry for the part I played in your sorrow."

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Annie bent to bestow a kiss upon her grandmother's forehead.

“I was in love once, my dear. There’s been an enormous void in my heart since your grandfather passed on. I’ve always believed in one love for a lifetime. Had I been in our place, I’d feel the same. Nothing could have stopped me from having his child. I suppose I’d forgotten. I hope you’ll forgive me.”

Barbara sat at the kitchen table, facing the picture window. She drew on her cigarette while she gazed out at the gardener who was mowing the lawn.

Annie poured a cup of coffee and sat across from her. “Barbara, have I received any letters from Cort you haven't given me?”

“No.”

“Your lying. You hid them or destroyed them, just like you did the annulment papers.” Annie slapped her hand on the table. Coffee spilled over onto the saucer.

“Believe me Annie, if I’d seen the annulment papers, I’d have told you. As far as letters from that Shannon boy are concerned, what difference would it make to you if I had intercepted them? He left you. He doesn't love you,” she snarled, turning to face Annie.

“You don’t need him in your life, pregnant or not.”

“You're wrong. He does love me and need him or not, I want him in my life. Where are the letters?” She leaned towards Barbara. Annie’s eyes pierced hers, willing her to tell the truth.

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“I tore them up. You’re a fool if you think he cares about you. If I’ve told you once, I’ve told you a thousand times, he just wants your money.”

“What money?” She threw her arms out to her sides, palms out. “I don’t have that much in my trust.”

“I’m not talking about the money in your trust fund. I’m talking about the vast McClaine petroleum estate you’ll inherit from your grandmother. Humph. God knows, some of that should be mine. After all, I was married to your father for a little over a year. I hope you’ll remember that when you do inherit it. Remember, I did adopt you. I spent a great deal of money raising you.” Barbara nodded.

Annie rolled her eyes. She knew her grandmother had given Barbara every penny she’d ever spent on her. “I won’t forget what you’ve said. After all, you’ve told me about this before. However, my father didn’t leave you penniless. You did receive money from a large life insurance policy.”

“Large? Humph!”

“Let’s get back to the point. Did you open my letters? The letters Cort sent. Did you read them?” Annie asked, her anger bubbling to the surface.

“No. I didn’t read his silly letters. You’re going to have an abortion, aren’t you? You’re not going to try to find him to tell him about the baby, are you?” Barbara arched her brow and stabbed the cigarette out in the saucer. “That would be foolish. You both too young to consider having a child.”

“You’re a bitter woman, Barbara. You’ve done enough damage. You’re not going to have an opportunity to ruin my life any longer.” Her voice trembled with her barely contained anger. “I’m leaving.” She pushed back from the table and rose.

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“Don't raise your voice to me, young lady,” Barbara said, wagging her finger in Annie's face. “Just where do you think you're going? Who would hire an unwed mother-to-be? You won't be able to get a decent job.”

“You don't know that. You don't need to know where I'm going. You'd be very surprised. Don't think you're going to upset Grandmother. She knows precisely what my plans are,” Annie said, turning on her heel and rushing from the room.

Barbara knocked on Annie's door. It was going to be hard to apologize to her for being so angry yesterday, but, she was going to have to do it. She'd promised Grace she would try to be kind to her. Barbara shook her head. Annie had always looked much like her mother, the woman her husband had never forgotten.

Desiree's picture had sat on their dresser until the day he'd been killed. If Annie hadn't looked so much like her mother, maybe she might have come to love her, but, she'd been a difficult child, stubborn and willful.

Barbara set her teeth. *Damn, I've never been able to apologize to that girl. She's been so stupid not to agree to an abortion. She was right about one thing though. I didn't get the man I wanted. But, I'm going to look him up after my divorce is over, especially now that I know he's living in Beverly Hills, California. He's going to be my next husband, and this time, it will be for love.*

“Annie? Wake up. I want to talk to you,” she said, opening the bedroom door. The bed was made. Everything was perfect. She marched in, opened Annie's closets and drawers. They were empty. Dashing to the garage, she looked to see if the new black and gold Fairlane 500 Grace had given Annie for her birthday was there. It was gone. She hurried back into the kitchen and dialed Grace's telephone number.

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“Annie’s gone, Grace. She’s taken the new car you gave her. God knows, I tried to be a good mother to her. Should I call the police? They could find her and bring her back.”

“No. Annie will be fine. I knew she was leaving. I’d hoped she would tell you her plans.”

“Where has she gone?”

“I can’t tell you that. I’ve interfered enough in her life. I’m sure you’ll hear from her. It’s really up to her to tell you where she is, dear.”

Barbara sighed and pursed her ruby red lips. “If that’s the way you feel, Grace, I won’t worry about her. Is there anything you need? Shall I visit you this afternoon?”

“No, dear. My accountant will be in today and I’ll be busy.”

“All right then, Grace. Have a nice day.” She smirked, hanging up the phone. She was certain Grace had been having an affair with the good-looking, young accountant. What she couldn’t understand was why she hadn’t married him years ago, when he’d asked, unless she hadn’t wanted to share her money. New Mexico was a community property state. She was thankful Grace had used her head and not her heart. It meant more money for her.

CHAPTER 4

Nearly three thousand miles lie in front of Annie as she set out for a tropical land she'd never seen. She'd never driven anywhere alone, not even to Carlsbad. But, she wasn't afraid. The thrill of meeting new people and seeing new places filled her spirit with a joy she hadn't felt since Cort had left.

She was certain she could tackle anything she might encounter along the way. Cort had taught her to change a flat and to check oil and water levels. Armed with that knowledge, and the tiny derringer her grandmother had given her for the trip, Annie felt she was prepared for anything.

She wasn't the only woman to travel long distances alone in the McClaine family. Her grandmother had told her stories of her trips alone to Mexico City and Hot Springs, Arkansas in the 1920's.

Surely, I'm capable of driving my new car from Apache Springs, New Mexico to Sarasota, Florida. She glanced into her rear view mirror six miles out of town, at the top of the rise of hills surrounding the valley.

Tears welled in her eyes as she began her decent. As Apache Springs slipped below the hills, she feared she'd broken all ties with Cort. No matter how angry she was with him, she still loved him. In a futile attempt, she turned on the radio to forget him. The voice of her favorite singer, Elvis Presley, filled the car with a tune that tugged at her heart. She felt as though she'd already joined him in "Heartbreak Hotel."

Through her tears she smiled, remembering her late night adventure with Marilyn and the girls. They'd all told their mothers they were going to a double feature John Wayne movie. Instead, they'd gotten fake ID's from

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their older friends and driven to a country western bar in a nearby town to hear the new singer, Elvis Presley.

She'd been caught, of course. Annie had never gotten away with anything in her life. She hadn't seen him, but Daniel Jennings had been there too. She'd never understood why he'd been there, in a bar out of town.

She'd thought maybe he'd had a case to handle. He made many house calls. She'd found out later, he'd been seeing a woman there. They'd been at the bar together. She hadn't seen him, but Marilyn had. He'd seen both of them.

That escapade had angered Barbara to the point of sending her to St. Jude's High School. She hadn't wanted to go, but it had ultimately led to re-uniting with Cort, her first and only love.

Annie snapped out of her reverie, slowed and braked hard. The car slid to the right. Her hand flew to her heart as she skidded to a stop. She'd almost hit the Hereford crossing the road in front of her.

She straightened the car, making certain it was safely out of the flow of oncoming traffic. Reaching for the thermos, she poured a cup of strong coffee. Taking a sip, she stretched and groaned. Her back and legs ached already.

She set the cup on the dash and reached over to open the glove compartment to get the map of the United States she'd bought yesterday. She hadn't made reservations before she'd left. Glancing at the map, she decided her first stop would be San Angelo.

When she'd finished her coffee, she drove on in agonizing monotony through southeastern New Mexico and west Texas. She wrinkled her nose at the smell of oil wells and the sight of the flat, dusty, brown land dotted with mesquite bushes and oilrigs. She should like the smell of oil and the sight of the pumps.

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The oil industry, particularly in Eastern New Mexico and West Texas, was one of the McClaine's primary sources of income. Someday, as she'd been told many times, it would all be hers. She'd been taught all of the terminology and instructed how to negotiate oil and gas leases. *Ick.* Annie rolled the windows up, deciding to suffer the heat instead of the disgusting smell.

She was achingly tired when she rolled into San Angelo. Her eyes were heavy and she knew she might fall asleep at the wheel if she didn't stop. As she turned into the first motel's parking lot, she crossed her fingers and hoped they'd have a room available.

Her heart plummeted when she learned they'd just rented their last room. Sighing, she turned and left, admonishing herself for not stopping at a pay phone to make reservations.

Exhausted, nearly seeing double, she drove on, angry with herself. She should have stopped earlier. But where would she have stopped? There hadn't been much between Big Springs and San Angelo. She began to pray in earnest that she'd find a motel soon, before she had to pull off and sleep in the car by the side of the road.

Thank you, God. She wiped the back of her hand across her forehead. A vacancy sign hung on the new motel she was approaching.

She awoke to strange surroundings. Puzzled, her gaze traveled around the hotel room. For a moment, she didn't know where she was. Disoriented, she rose and padded to the window. She drew aside the heavy blue and yellow striped curtains that matched the bedspread. The sight of her car parked in front of the motel room reminded her she was on her way to Florida.

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She had a long way to go. She hurried through her shower and dressed in faded levis, an oversized white shirt and moccasins.

Thankful the dreaded morning sickness had eased; she'd planned to begin driving just before daybreak, catching breakfast on the way. But, she'd overslept. Her stomach growled, reminding her she was hungry. The first thing she needed to do was gas up at the service station across the street.

Afterwards, she could eat breakfast. As she carried her overnight bag to the car, a wave of excitement flooded her. By the time she pulled into the gas station, butterflies danced in her stomach. Chills ran up her arms. She knew something important was about to happen.

Since she was three years old, she'd had paranormal experiences and had once seen beyond the veil. Barbara had told her she'd had a vision of her father just after he'd died in a plane crash. She didn't remember it.

Evidently, she'd told Barbara he'd come in to visit with her and told her he'd look after her, but it would be a long time before he'd see her again. Then, he'd faded away. Barbara said she'd spanked her, thinking she'd made it all up. Later, after the authorities had come to the house to tell her of his death, Barbara had believed her.

"Mame? Regular or ethyl?"

"Oh. I'm sorry. I guess I was daydreaming. Ethyl, please. Could you please check my tires and brakes, too?"

"I'll check your tires, but I can't do a thing about your brakes. My mechanic's not here yet."

Annie wondered if she should wait, but her hungry stomach urged her to leave.

"How long do you think it'll be before he gets here?"

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“He should be here any minute, if you’d like to wait.”

“I have a long way to go. My car’s new. I expect my brakes are fine. I don’t know why I asked.”

“Have a safe trip, mame,” he nodded.

A motorcycle in her rear view mirror caught her eye as she pulled out. Her heart pounded in her ears as a warm sensation flowed through her.

Cort. Why would he be here? Is there a base here? She shook her head, dispelling the thought. I must be going crazy. That, or I’m too hungry and maybe, seeing things.

Her stomach rumbled. She ran her tongue over her bottom lip. She drove down the road looking for a place to stop for breakfast or pick up donuts.

Cort awoke late. Groaning, he rose from the cot he’d slept on in the tiny efficiency he’d rented in San Angelo. His body felt like he’d been crushed by a herd of Texas Long Horns stampeding over the plains.

He stretched and stumbled into the bathroom. Not bothering to look into the mirror, he squeezed the last of the toothpaste upon his toothbrush and brushed until the sour taste of cheap whiskey had faded. After he’d taken a hot shower, he felt nearly human again, but, not enough to shave. Who did he have to shave for anyway?

He took his jeans and tee shirt from the chair and put them on without paying attention. Jeeze. He’d put the tee on inside out. Grumbling, he pulled it off and put it on again, right side out. After he’d put his socks and boots on, he ran out the door, and left for work.

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Turning left at the corner, he hit the right handlebar of his Harley with the flat of his right palm. He'd done it again. He'd turned out onto the highway and headed for New Mexico, toward Annie.

Damn. I have to stop thinking of what might have been and get on with my life.

He hadn't been able to stop thinking of Annie. Twice, in the past month, he'd headed back to Apache Springs. Each time, he'd thought of what Mrs. McClaine had said about disinherit her, of ruining her life.

He'd turned back to San Angelo and his job at the service station across the street from the new motel. The mechanic's job paid well enough for now, he supposed. It was the only job he could find. He'd be damn lucky if he didn't lose it at the rate he was going.

He approached the station, squinted. The glare of the sun rising in the East blinded him. He shaded his eyes with his hand.

Damned, if that doesn't look like Annie's new Fairlane pulling out of the station. No. There's no way her family would *allow her out here alone*.

I'm going nuts, losing my mind. Pretty soon, I'll be talking to myself. I've gotta move on, go to school, make a life for myself. So, the Border Patrol didn't work out. I couldn't pass that physical either. Pretty soon, I'll end up a crazy drunk, living in the streets mumbling about the girl I left behind.

Cort went into the station and quit. Just like that. Then, he went home, packed up his belongings and headed out.

Annie left San Angelo behind with a bag of donuts beside her and a cup of coffee in her hand. Her mind wandered back to Cort. *Maybe, there is a base here.* She pulled over to the side of the road and made a U turn. Maybe, that had been Cort. She had to find out.

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Leaning heavily on the accelerator, she returned to the station and pulled in. Getting out of the car, she looked for the motorcycle and the man that had been on it.

It wasn't there. She was certain he'd pulled into the station. If he had, he was gone now. Maybe, if she hadn't stopped for the donuts, he would have still been there.

"Change your mind about waiting for the mechanic lady?"

"Er-no. Ah-I just wanted to buy a coke before I left town."

"Good, because, I won't have a mechanic today. I think you'll be okay though."

"Thanks." She paid for the coke and left San Angelo for the second time that day feeling something was amiss.

She drove down the road in a daze. A rabbit ran in front of the car. Annie snapped back to reality, steering the car sharply to her right to avoid hitting it.

She took notice of her surroundings. The scenery ahead was so lovely, she pulled over to the side of the road and reached for her camera. Stepping out of the car, the lovely scenery transformed her mood into one as pleasant as the panoramic landscape.

Lemon yellow wildflowers and blue bonnets blanketed rolling hills. The sheer beauty of the Texas hill country raised her spirits.

After she'd snapped a few pictures, she got back into the car and told herself her thoughts of Cort were only wishful thinking, nothing more. She turned on the radio and drove on, enjoying every moment of the picturesque land. Gazing off into the distance, she didn't see the twisted metal lying on the road ahead.

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The car rocked upon impact. Annie's heart leapt to her throat as she grasped the steering wheel tight. Perspiration beaded on her forehead. The Fairlane bucked and swerved. Raising her right foot from the accelerator, she placed it over the brake. *Hail Mary.*

Remembering not to step on the brakes, she rolled to a stop and guided it onto the rocky shoulder. She breathed a sigh of relief as she shoved up her sleeves and got out of the car. She began unloading the trunk, searching for the jack she was certain was under the luggage. With her suitcases setting alongside the road, she began jacking the car up. She didn't hear the motorcycle approach.

"Need any help, mame?"

"Uh, no thanks. I can change my tire," she said, not glancing up from her work.

"Traveling' alone?"

"Yes, sir."

"You're mighty brave mame. It's not safe travelin' out here all by yourself."

Annie grinned and said, "I'll be all right."

"I'll keep an eye out for you while you're in my county. Too bad more people don't know how to change a tire. You can't imagine how many tires I change in one week."

She peeked out from under the car and laughed. "Well, Officer, my boyfriend taught me how to change a tire before I got this car."

"Sounds like a smart man. I'd hang onto him, mame."

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Annie's face clouded and she went back to the business of changing her tire in silence. Finally, she rose. With his help, she began loading the trunk.

“Thanks again for stopping, Officer.”

“Anytime mame.”

Her encounter with the tall officer had been pleasant enough, yet he'd reminded her of Cort. That had been enough to spoil her morning. Depressed, she breezed on through Texas, her foot heavy on the accelerator.

One hundred and fifteen miles west of Houston, a dark, threatening indigo sky loomed ahead. Annie drew her brows together. All of the cars coming toward her had their lights on. *There must be a rainstorm ahead, maybe even hail.* Her stomach knotted in apprehension.

Raindrops splashed her windshield. Turning on her wipers, she frowned and bit her lip as the sky ahead became darker. It was raining heavier now, covering the windshield in a river of water.

She squinted to see through the inky stream of rain. She could barely see the road in front of her. Her headlights were on. She hoped the car in back could see her. Lights of cars that had pulled off to the right shoulder of the road shown brightly. Ahead were two points of red lights, tail lights of the car or truck ahead.

Hailstones, small ones, beat down upon the windshield, bouncing off like little golf balls. Another mile, they were the size of ice cubes. The wind pushed the car backwards. *Ah. Hail Mary, what do I do? Keep on going... I can hardly see. Or, pull over? Will the wind push me into another car if I pull over?* Her stomach knotted.

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Sweet Jesus. She rubbed her neck and silently finished the prayer as she pulled off onto the shoulder of the road. She'd have to wait out the storm.

Leaving her lights on, she turned off the ignition. Hailstones the size of baseballs beat down upon the windshield. Satanic winds shook the car. Annie huddled down in the seat. Shivering, she covered herself with a light windbreaker that had been lying on her overnight bag. What would she do if the storm got worse? If hail stones broke the windshield? She'd have to get down on the floor. She turned the radio up. She couldn't hear it. The wind and hail drowned out the music.

Debris smashed into the windshield. Part of a barbed wire fence flew by, scraping the side of the car. Unconsciously, she ducked, crossing her arms and hugging herself. She was shaking. Or was it the car? She squeezed her eyes shut. She didn't know how long she'd had them shut, but the storm had spent its energy. Rain fell lightly on the windshield as the storm moved on.

Sighing with relief, she turned on the ignition and drove on. Glancing in the rear view mirror, she saw two funnel clouds retreating into a deep purple sky. *Jesus Lord, that was a close call. Thank you.*

Nearing Houston, she sucked in her breath, aghast at the destruction. The Fairlane crawled behind traffic, stopping while officers cleared the roads of debris. By the time she reached Beaumont, she was exhausted and stopped at the first motel she could find. When she stepped out of the car, she saw the pockmarks and dents from the storm. Shaking her head in disgust, she was thankful she had insurance.

Annie's spirits soared as she entered a bewitching land filled with mysterious bayous and tall pines adorned with lacy Spanish moss. Tales of Jean Lafitte crept into her mind as she wondered what secrets the bayous held. Soon she'd be in the city she'd heard so much about.

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Strolling down Bourbon Street through the narrow streets of the French Quarter. She looked for Rachael's Antique's. What was the corner Jeanne had said it was on? Bourbon or Royal? She was looking forward to meeting Rachael. Jeanne had said she was an old friend of hers and had known her mother.

She paused to gaze into a tiny shop with antique jewelry displayed in the window. When she glanced up, she was surprised to see the name of the shop, "Rachael's Antiques". She'd stumbled upon it by accident. She smiled to herself as she entered the shop, knowing her mother and aunt had once been here.

No one was about, so she browsed awhile and found herself standing in an elegant tearoom. The antique store was long and narrow, not nearly as small as she'd imagined. Annie sat on a burgundy velvet love seat that matched the dark burgundy in the brocade wallpaper.

Vogue, Harpers Bazaar, and "Peyton Place", by Grace Metalious rested upon the coffee table. She picked up the novel and began reading the synopsis on the dust jacket.

"May I help you?" A tall elegant woman gazed down upon her, a gentle smile upon her handsome face.

Could this be Rachael? She would be in her late forties or early fifties, older than this woman. The woman's sparkling ebony eyes wore a puzzled expression.

"You look familiar. Do I know you?"

"We haven't met before," Annie said smiling, "but you may have known my mother, and my aunt, Jeanne Arabeau."

"Desiree's daughter. You must be Annie. I've waited a long time to meet you, my dear. Stand up, and let me look at you."

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Annie stood, becoming self-conscious as Rachael observed her. She shifted and fidgeted.

“You’re the image of your mother. A pity she didn't listen to me.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s a long story, dear. But, if she’d listened to my warnings, both of your parents and your Grandparents might be alive today.”

A cloud fell upon Annie’s face. “I wish she would have listened to you. Can you tell me about it? I know you must be busy, but I know very little about my family. Only what my grandmother has told me.”

“Sit back down and we’ll talk. We’ll have some tea while I tell you some of what I know.” She set two china cups on a tray. Pouring tea, she said, “Your mother died of pneumonia in Santa Fe, New Mexico. You probably know that. Your father, Oh, he was a wonderful man, handsome too. He died in a plane crash over Vernon, Texas, during World War 11. He was a flight instructor. If your parents would have stayed in New Orleans, they’d both still be alive.”

“What about my grandparents?”

Rachael sighed. “More than likely, you haven’t had contact with the Arabeau’s. You probably don’t know your grandparents died in a fire, one I warned Desiree’ and Jeanne about. Unfortunately, since they’d been forbidden to see me, they didn’t issue the warning. Jeanne and Desiree’ were away at school when the fire broke out.”

“I didn’t know.”

“I’m sorry, dear. You’re going to have a chance to catch up on your mother’s side of the family though. You’re on your way to Jeanne’s, aren’t you? Not just to visit, but to live with her.”

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“Why, yes. How did you know?”

“Didn’t she tell you?”

“Tell me what?”

“I have some time before my husband returns. Follow me.” She rose, took Annie by her hand and led her to a small room in the rear of the shop.

Annie smiled as she entered the mystical room. Antique lantern lights, strategically fastened to gleaming paneled walls, lit the cozy room. A white candle placed in a silver holder flickered in the center of the table.

“This is a charming room,” Annie said, perusing the bookcases and running her fingers over the titles. “Do you know numerology and astrology?”

“Yes. Would you like me to construct your chart, maybe do a combination reading of your future?”

“So that’s how you knew to warn my mother and Jeanne. Aunt Jeanne didn’t tell me you were a psychic.”

Rachael smiled as she sat opposite Annie. “This is exactly how I met your mother and your aunt. They’d come to me for a reading, against their mother’s wishes as I said earlier.”

“You needn’t worry about parental permission as far as I’m concerned. I’m on my own now. I’d love a reading. In fact, your timing is perfect. So is this room.”

“It hasn’t been changed since Jeanne and Desiree’ were here. I like it this way and so do the spirits.”

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“Are you a spiritualist too?”

“Most of my readings are psychic with the help of astrology, cards or palmistry. Sometimes, the spirits assist me.”

“I wonder if...”

“I believe your mother will be here today. I need your birth date, the location and time of birth, if you know it. I remember the year you were born.”

“I was born May 17th, in Santa Fe, New Mexico. I’m not sure of the time, but I think it was early morning, around two.”

Rachael's eyes lost their sparkle. “Your mother died of pneumonia shortly after your birth.”

Annie’s voice dropped, her tone betraying her sadness. “That’s what I’ve been told.”

“I’m so sorry. I’d hoped Desiree’ had had some time to enjoy her daughter. Jeanne told me about Barbara. You've had a difficult childhood.”

“I guess I have.” She cast her eyes down to her hands which were clasped tightly together, resting on the table.

“I’m going to tell you is what I sense, or what I'm being told from beyond the veil.”

The room, filled with a spicy aroma of incense, was quite and warm.

“Your suffering from an unbearable heartbreak. You believe you've been abandoned. You were. But, in his mind, he saw no other choice. He did it for you, for your ultimate benefit. He still loves you. You will see him again.”

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“When?”

Rachael flipped through the Ephemeris she'd taken from a bookcase next to her. “Oh, my dear,” she said with a gasp. “You’ve missed him. Two days ago, you should have met again.”

“Then it *was* him. I have to go back to San Angelo.”

“It’s too late.”

“Will I see him again?” Annie asked, drawing her brows together.

“Not for six or seven years... after two deaths, at the crossroads of your life. You’ll have an important choice to make.”

“Six or seven years is a long time.”

“Maybe, it’s meant to be. You’ll need time to prepare for your life’s work. You will follow in your mother and your aunt's footsteps. You will be a well known artist, known for your lovely landscapes.”

The temperature in the room dropped by degrees. A fragrant rose scent overpowered the spicy incense as the candlelight flickered and rose.

Annie glanced up, meeting Rachael's glazed eyes.

“Desiree’. I’m so glad you’ve come,” Rachael murmured, glancing up at Annie. “Your mother sends her love. Why, your pregnant aren't you, Annie?”

“Yes.”

“You didn't tell him. He doesn't know.”

“No. I didn't have a chance.”

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Rachael's musical laughter filled the quiet room. "He will be so pleased when he discovers he has a beautiful daughter, one that resembles him so."

"I'm going to have a baby girl?"

Rachael nodded. "I'm being told you're on the right path too."

The room shifted again. Warming, the rose fragrance vanished. The candle flickered, the flame returning to normal. Fascinated, Annie was silent as a gentle cool breeze caressed her.

"I see, you have Neptune in transit, casting a favorable aspect to your natal Jupiter. Your grandmother and those beyond are helping you. When she crosses, you will receive a considerable inheritance."

Annie chewed on her bottom lip. "When will that be?"

"That's not for me to say. Only God knows. There will be another death, soon, after hers."

"The two deaths," Annie murmured. "So Grandmother's is the first. Josie said there would be two."

"Who?"

"Josie. Madame Josephine, a fortuneteller I went to at the fair in Apache Springs. She was a psychic and an astrologer, like you. She was from New Orleans."

"I knew Josie." Rachael's voice held a note of sadness. "She was killed in an automobile accident last November."

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“Hail Mary. Then, she is dead, just like she said she was. Er, she appeared to me while I was unconscious. Why would she do that? Appear to me?”

“Did she give you advice when you most needed it?”

Annie nodded. “Just before I found out I was pregnant, before I had the terrible arguments with Grandmother and Barbara.”

“Then, Josie is helping others in the afterlife, just as she did here. In this case, you might consider her one of your guardian angels.”

“But, why me? Why my guardian angel?”

“Why not you? Josie and I were close friends when she lived here in New Orleans with her first husband. I was a friend of your mothers and your aunt Jeanne’s. Don’t you see the connection?”

“I suppose so.”

“Let’s see what else your chart has to say about the future. You have Mercury, Venus conjunct natively in your astrological chart along with Neptune in favorable aspect to Jupiter.”

“What does that mean?”

“It’s an aspect of creativity, and of humor. It’s also a guardian angel aspect though few astrologers are aware of that. Your angels work overtime, Annie,” Rachael said with a soft laugh. “No doubt Josie filled in when your special angel was exhausted.”

“Maybe so.”

“I’m so glad you told me about your experience with Josie. I’ve missed her. Enough of this for now, for now, my dear, though I could go on and on. I have a surprise for you. I don’t think I can wait any longer to give

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it to you. I've been keeping it for a long time. Come with me, back to the tea room."

"But, you've already surprised me."

"I know, my dear. But, this is special. Have some tea and wait just a few minutes while I get it for you. I'd offer you sherry, but since you're expecting, you shouldn't drink alcohol. Remember that. I won't be long."

Annie glanced at the front page of the newspaper; thankful she'd taken the southern route. Little Rock was in turmoil. Integration was inevitable in the fall. There were certain to be riots. She couldn't understand why people couldn't be accepting of each other, regardless of race.

"So, you're reading about Little Rock. I'm glad you're not there, Annie. It's not going to be safe this fall."

"I don't think so either."

"You didn't pour a cup of tea. Would you like some? Herb, or regular?"

"Herb. Thank you." Annie folded the paper, setting it back down.

Rachael poured two steaming cups of tea and set them on the coffee table. Sitting next to Annie, she took a tiny box wrapped in silver from her pocket. "Your mother forgot these things years ago when she and Jeanne moved out of the apartment in back of the shop. I don't believe in accidents or co-incidences, Annie. I think she unconsciously left them with me, in safe keeping, until I could give them to you."

Annie slowly unwrapped the tiny package wrapped in silver paper. Lifting the top off the small box, tears welled in her eyes as she gazed at a coral and pearl ring, delicately carved in the shape of a hibiscus.

"This is lovely. I've never seen anything like it." Glancing up at Rachael, she felt her throat tighten and the moisture behind her eyes threatening to

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spill over. She gulped her tears back and said in a voice that was no more than a whisper, "Thank you."

"Your welcome. Don't forget there's another package."

Annie smiled, unwrapping the second package. "Oh, Rachael. These are priceless. Thank you so much. I've never had a photo of my mother and father."

"I'm so glad I had them for you. The photos were mixed up with mine. I didn't find them until long after Desiree' and Jeanne had moved out. By that time, it was too late to return them. Jeanne asked me to save them for you, insisting I'd see you before she did."

Annie laughed softly through her tears. "You did. I guess Jeanne's inherited the Arabeau's second sight. Mother was beautiful, wasn't she? What an attractive couple they made. I wish I could have known them."

"So do I, dear. You don't know how much I wish that. Your mother was a darling, so very talented. She was a wonderful student and friend. You're a lucky girl to be going to Jeanne's."

"I look forward to meeting her. I'm so happy to have met you. I just can't believe it. A friend of both my mother's and Jeanne's as well as a psychic and a friend of Josie's too. Maybe you're right. Maybe there are no co-incidences." Annie sipped the tea and set the china cup down.

"I hope you'll think of me as your friend. If you don't have plans for this evening, I'd love to have you stay with us."

"Oh. Thank you very much. But, I really should be going. I've already made reservations for tonight." She rose, her petticoats rustling beneath the full red and white Lantz dress she wore.

"It's been a pleasure meeting you, my dear. Come again soon."

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Annie stepped out of Rachael's Antique store into the long lacy shadows that fell across the sidewalks of the French Quarter. The aroma of garlic, roasted coffee, and fragrant spices wafted through the damp, humid air as nearby residents prepared their supper. The narrow streets hummed with music as the sun began to set.

Apache Springs is the story of Annie McClaine, a young girl who believes she has been betrayed by her family and abandoned by her new husband, Cort Shannon. With no other alternative that she will accept, Annie sets out on a perilous journey from New Mexico to southwestern Florida.

Apache Springs

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