

She knew he would leave her for beautiful and brilliant Suzanna Parker. When suspicions turned into reality, she fled to Elmwood with her children. Now she's being stalked by an old enemy. Tennille DeBeau will capture your heart with her humorous conversations with the woman in the mirror.

IF MIRRORS COULD TALK

by JOYCE WHEELER

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A woman with dark hair is shown in profile on the right side of the image, looking into a round mirror. The mirror reflects a woman with blonde hair. The scene is lit with warm, soft light, possibly from a window with sheer curtains. The mirror has a dark, ornate frame.

If Mirrors Could Talk

Joyce Wheeler

If Mirrors Could Talk

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Chapter One

“It’s hopeless. You can’t turn a prairie chicken into a peacock.”

“I didn’t think I looked that bad.” Her blue-grey eyes held no malice, probably because she was used to my frustrated insults.

“You look—nice. The white dress flatters, the heels make your legs look longer, long blond hair is always an eye-catcher. But you’re no match for Suzanna Parker.”

“Who?” She fluttered long eyelashes at me in feigned innocence.

“Suzanna Parker. Do you remember the woman who works with your husband, Charles, and is having an affair with him?”

Her sharp intake of air told me I had hit a nerve. “Bite your tongue, you wicked woman. You don’t know that for sure.”

For some time we stared at each other, and then I turned away from the mirror.

“You poor fool,” I whispered to me. “How much proof do you need?”

I don’t know when I started having conversations with myself. Sometimes I amused me, other times I hated the honesty that was exchanged.

I had spent the better part of the last two hours making myself as beautiful as was possible. In my case, the possibility had limits. I was to meet Charles at his parents’ mini-mansion for the jubilant acquisition party. An announcement would be made to the gathered friends and family that DeBeau & DeBeau Company had bought not only another small company, but also the coveted building next to the

headquarters. An expansion and remodel was being planned for the next several months.

I had repeatedly reassured myself that it was the acquisition and the remodel that kept Charles and his chief operating officer, Suzanna Parker, busy and together for the past year. My vulnerable heart wanted to believe it. My common sense told me otherwise. Heart and mind repeatedly argued on the subject until both were worn out in a frustrated impasse.

With a snort of disgust at myself, I gathered my keys, purse, and the large envelope that contained my latest home drawings. Charles's sister Doreen worked with her husband Max Dixon at an architect firm, and I often submitted my plans to them. Occasionally they accepted one, and my hobby actually made a modest income. Very modest, I might add.

Since Doreen was going to be at the party, I had decided to stop by the DeBeau offices and use their large printer to make copies to give her. That was plan B, which had developed after plan A fizzled. Plan A was for Charles to come home early from work and take his wife to the extravaganza in his new red corvette.

Instead, he had called and said he was going directly to his parents' home from the office (he was so busy, don't you know) and I was to meet him there. I didn't like the idea, but it didn't seem worth arguing about. Of late, Charles and I disagreed over everything.

One last goodbye to the kids and their sitter, and I was finally on the road, weaving in and out of Denver traffic as I headed for DeBeau & DeBeau headquarters.

It was past business hours when I pulled into the crowded parking lot that the company shared with a popular tavern. I edged the Suburban beside a service truck and barely had room to squeeze out the door. Once inside, I took the elevator to the third floor and winced as my heels clacked loudly on the marble tiled floor. The copy room was at the end of the hallway in a room that opened into Charles's

office and also the hallway. Because the west window was pouring in late June sunshine, I didn't need to turn on the light as I took the drawings from the envelope.

I took extra time to scrutinize them once again. Before I could start the copy machine, I heard a man's heavy tread and the staccato tap of a woman's heels on the same marble hallway I had walked just moments earlier.

"I'm sorry, Charles!" I heard the woman say. "I never forget my purse, but you distracted me, you naughty boy!"

My heart began to pound and I stood in frozen dismay completely hidden in the copy room. I heard him laugh at her, and then he unlocked and opened the door to his office.

"And there it is, Suzanna, on my desk."

His voice was caressing. I couldn't recall the last time he sounded so lover-like when he talked to me.

The door between the copy room and Charles's office had vents in it which meant I could easily hear what was said. A nightmare of truth washed over me. I hadn't counted on discovering their affair in this manner. I wanted to cover my ears and scream with anguish, and yet I wanted to hear every damning word they said to each other.

"I could have left it, but since we're leaving in the morning on our business trip, it would be embarrassing to have someone find it on your desk with our tickets to *Star Wars* there."

I knew, even without being able to see, that they were embracing. The sounds were convincing evidence of a passionate moment. I wanted to gag.

"Suzanna," he said thickly, "you are the woman of my dreams. The woman of my dreams."

The words were like a knife twisting into my back. They were painful and took my breath away. I leaned against the wall to keep from falling.

“What did your lawyer say when you talked to him?” Her voice was muffled as if she were talking into his chest.

He gave a heavy sigh. I suppose matters like leaving your wife and children are burdensome. “Jason is working on getting the divorce proceedings started. And the next step will be to tell Tennille. I dread that. She’ll be so devastated.”

“I know. She tries, poor dear. I think she suspects, but she doesn’t want to face reality. I feel sorry for her, but not sorry enough to back away from the man I’ve been looking for all my life.” Another passionate moment and then she said softly, “Here, darling. Wipe my lipstick off those gorgeous lips of yours, and we better go before we’re late.”

I heard the door close to his office, and the sound of their footsteps echoing down the empty hall. For several moments after all sounds died away, I stood as if I were welded to the floor. My breaths came in heavy gasps and my mind was blank. I was drained of energy and life.

Finally I started the copy machine, ran off the drawings and visited silently with myself as I put them into the envelope.

“I told you they were having an affair. Now what are you going to do?”

After several seconds of useless debate, the only decision was to think about the whole mess later. I would go to the party. I would—my mind stalled at this point. I would figure out how to behave after I got there. Lord have mercy on this poor thing who tried.

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Traffic was heavy as I made my way to Charles’s parents’ house. I didn’t check the time, but as I pulled into their back driveway it was

obvious from all the cars that lined the street around their home that it was later than I thought.

I usually tried to be on time, and I usually tried to be civil to Charles's parents. For some odd reason, no one in their family called them anything but Richard and Lisa. Not Dad and Mom, not Grandfather and Grandmother, nor Uncle or Aunt. I asked Charles about that when we were first dating. He looked puzzled and then shrugged. He couldn't remember the reason, but that was the way it was and he hoped I would try to understand. I tried. Suzanna's words rankled and pierced my very soul. They sounded condescending, as if they were directed at someone vastly inferior to the two of them.

One last check in the mirror confirmed my suspicion. I looked horrid. My eyes were dull, my complexion was pale beneath my tan, and I had a weird trembling sensation throughout my body. Plus I smelled smoke and had a fleeting moment of panic until I looked out the window and saw Doreen's daughter, Meredith, gazing at me with her usual cigarette in hand.

"I thought you were going to sit there all night," she said as I opened the door.

"You're just the one I wanted to see." I showed her the envelope with the drawings. "Could we put these in your mother's car?"

"Sure." She gestured vaguely toward the street. "It's over there."

Meredith always strolled at a snail's pace. Usually walking with her was an annoying process, but tonight moving slowly was all I was capable of doing.

She wore low-heeled sandals and a long skirt with a peasant top. It was her costume to irritate her relatives, especially her Uncle Charles. "I like your outfit, Meredith." It didn't ring true and it didn't fool her for a second.

She studied me carefully in the fading twilight. “Something has happened. I can always tell when you’re upset.” She paused and blew a smoke ring into the quiet air and with another piercing look she snapped her fingers. “You found out about Charles. Who told you?”

I shrugged. We had reached her mother’s car and she punched the code in the door. Neither of us spoke as I placed the drawings on the seat. Once the car was locked again, we began a slow walk to the house.

I finally stopped and touched her arm. “Does everyone know about Charles and Suzanna except me?” The thought of being the poor ignorant wife (who tried) was so embarrassing that I wanted to crawl into the flower beds that lined the sidewalk and disappear.

It was Meredith’s turn to shrug. “Probably not. My antennas have been vibrating for over a year but I don’t think their affair is common knowledge. For some odd reason, they seem to be quite discreet.”

Meredith and I had a strong bond of loyalty. I was in awe that her instinct of something amiss generally proved to be correct. We joked about her vibrating antennas, but in truth, I took her acute awareness seriously.

“I don’t know what to do at this party. I want to run and hide, and yet I think I should make an appearance.” I let out a shaky breath. “Any thoughts?”

Meredith leaned down and squashed her cigarette in the same flower bed I wanted to hide in. When she straightened, she dusted her hands off. “Tennille, are you positive about this, or is it hearsay?”

“Positive. He’s contacted a lawyer about a divorce.”

“Ouch. Does he know you know?”

I shook my head and muttered a miserable ‘no’.

She tapped a long finger on her chin. “I think you should make an appearance. In truth, you look lovely and you should be seen. But if either Charles or Suzanna tries to connect with you, I would let them know without making a ruckus that you are aware of their affair. Then leave. Let them find an explanation to everyone else why you aren’t on the scene.” She nodded in satisfaction. “That’s what I’d do.”

I breathed a nervous breath and nodded. At least it was some sort of plan.

Chapter Two

Richard and Lisa DeBeau were president and vice president of DeBeau & DeBeau, the company Richard's parents founded. After the founding DeBeaus were tragically killed in an auto accident three years ago, Richard and Lisa wasted no time in proclaiming they were the logical heirs to the titles. Within a few short months, they rearranged the company personnel; pulling Charles away from the financial department, and placing Dawson, their oldest son, in that position. They persuaded Charles to be CEO of the company, over my vehement protests, and also to the frank dismay of Dennis DeBeau, Richard's only sibling.

It was only a matter of time before it became obvious that Charles was in a position that was complicated and demanding. He was overworked and in truth, overwhelmed. Richard and Lisa solved *that* problem by hiring a chief operating officer, the lovely and brilliant Suzanna Parker. According to most of the DeBeau men, she had turned their small and struggling company around to new acquisitions and expansions.

Besides being the vice president of the company, Lisa also dabbled in real estate and home decorating. She professed a false humility about her many achievements, and while I thought she and Richard were interesting people, I didn't find them likable. They had higher aspirations for their youngest son than to marry a country girl who was completely unknown to the professional Denver society circles.

As Meredith and I entered the house, the party was in full swing. Talk and laughter enveloped us, and Meredith whispered that she had my back before she disappeared. She was a staunch ally but she preferred lurking in the shadows to observe and not be seen.

I liked lurking in the shadows myself. As I stood unobserved beside a huge potted palm, I scanned the room carefully. It wasn't hard to find Suzanna Parker. She stood out like a poppy in a field of dandelions.

Her tangerine dress glowed and sizzled next to her olive skin, and her thick and silky hair was piled in careless disarray on top of her head. Well endowed, she was perfect in every detail. Even if I abhorred what she had done to my marriage, there was no denying she was amazingly beautiful. She was talking to my father-in-law, and her occasional glance beyond him confirmed where Charles was. As if there were a magnet between them, their eyes would meet and I could almost feel the electric current between them. My inner trembling increased until I feared it would become obvious to everyone.

Charles had been an average looking young man when we first met. His blue eyes and dark hair along with his trim physique intrigued me. But it was his personality that captivated my heart. He was considerate and friendly with a dry sense of humor. His moral and business ethics were on par with my own, and I soon discovered he inherited those traits from his grandparents.

As I studied him behind the shelter of the potted plant, I realized I had overlooked an obvious fact during the past year. Charles stood out in a crowd. He was well maintained. You might say he was impeccably groomed, and with that came an almost imperceptible arrogance. He was a young CEO with an expanding company, a lovely woman at his side, and those successes draped him with pride.

“There you are! We've been looking for you.”

Charles's uncle Dennis and his wife Mim had discovered my hiding place. While Richard DeBeau was a promoter and delighted in flare and flattery, Dennis DeBeau was the indispensable man behind the scene. It was Dennis's steady hand that kept the company solvent after his parents were killed, and it was Dennis and Charles who had

re-organized the financial department into a well-oiled and stable machine.

Besides those attributes, Dennis and Mim were likeable. They cared about people and were truly humble servants of the Lord they quietly loved and served.

“I hear you and the children are leaving for the lake house tomorrow. Is anyone else going with you?” Mim’s gentle hand on my arm was a solace and I placed my hand over hers and gave a slight squeeze. I’m sure she felt the trembling I couldn’t hide.

“Actually, yes. Judy Baxter’s family is already at the lake, but she said she would stay with the kids tonight and ride up there with me tomorrow.” I tried to sound confident.

We exchanged small talk until Richard joined us. After they complimented him on hosting a nice party, they drifted away to visit others. I felt like I had lost my anchor.

“We were looking for you, Tennille. Were you here for dinner? What a night, and what an occasion!”

He had the habit of patting my back when he spoke to me. I never understood why I was the lone recipient of his pats. Sometimes I felt like the family poodle that needed reassurance.

“We’ll be making our announcement in thirty minutes so stay close by for family pictures.”

“Where have you been? Doesn’t your phone work? We’ve been trying to call you.” Charles’s voice was both aggravated and accusing as he stood behind me.

Richard’s fake smile came and went, and with a final pat on my back and a nod at Charles, he quickly left. It was the moment I had been dreading, and I wondered if my heart could possibly beat right out of my chest.

Taking a deep breath, I turned and looked at him and noticed he was wearing an expensive suit and tie that was unfamiliar to me. Perhaps the woman he had dreamed about all his life had helped him pick it out.

“I don’t know why you can’t leave your darn phone on.” He smiled, but in my distraught state, I felt like the wolf was snarling at me.

Coldness seeped into my heart and spread to my backbone. In that moment, I believe I hated my beloved as much as I hated the wolf that killed Little Red Riding Hood’s grandmother.

“And I don’t know why you didn’t wipe Suzanna’s lipstick off your mouth.” My words were clipped and icy, and as I brushed past him I saw his shocked reaction as his hand made a swipe across his lips.

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It took awhile to leave the noisy crowded house. I spoke to several people as I edged toward the door. I managed to tell Doreen the drawings were in her car and though it was doubtful she heard me, she nodded and gave a thumbs up.

Finally I slipped out the back door and hastened to the Suburban as if there were, indeed, wolves circling. I hardly breathed until I was far away and then I had to constantly remind myself to keep within the speed limit.

We lived in a gated community, and after fumbling with the code, the gates slowly opened. Finally I was home, and the bitter taste of being there, knowing my family life would be shattered, was overwhelming. I wanted to bang my head against the steering wheel in protest against the unfairness of life.

Instead, I crawled out of the Suburban like a weary, old lady. Slowly I made my way into the quiet house and just as slowly crept upstairs. I checked on our three children and then glanced into the

room where Judy slept. Finally with faltering steps, I stepped into our room. The bed mocked me as I entered. What a farce this past year had been, what a joke to have been made love to by someone who loved another woman. I suppose he complimented himself on doing his husbandly duty.

I slipped out of the dress that I had spent hours shopping for. And, with common sense, I hung it in the closet rather than flinging it across the room like I wanted to.

I hardly know why a person feels dirty when they have done no dirty work, but suddenly I wanted to shower and wash away everything that reminded me of how hard I had struggled to prepare for the evening.

When I was laundered and dried and in my sweats, I stared at myself in the mirror. My frosted blond hair began to irritate me. Charles had wanted me to become blond. He wanted me to wear it long and straight. I never questioned it; I just tried to please him. Just like I tried to lose weight, and tighten up a belly that had been stretched to its limits giving him three children.

“Why are you such a wimp?” I demanded of the woman in the mirror.

“I must be a doormat,” was her sad response.

“Get a life, get some backbone. And remember this! If you’re going to be a doormat and just lie there, people are going to walk all over you.”

“Easy for you to say,” she sniffed and then her eyes widened in alarm. “What are you doing with those scissors?”

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Not quite an hour later, I swept long tendrils of blond hair from the bathroom floor and dumped them into the wastebasket. There are some

things in life that are easy to control. Cutting your own hair is one of them.

“What do you think?” I asked me, as I flipped the blow-dried short hair into a casual look.

“Well, it doesn’t look like a professional job, but on the other hand, it isn’t too bad.” She gave me a searching look and shook her head.

My rumbling stomach reminded me that I hadn’t eaten. I headed downstairs to the kitchen and found cold chicken and potato salad. And just because I wanted to, I made strong coffee at eleven p.m. and didn’t care what anybody might say about that.

I thought I was being quiet, but a whispered conversation beyond the kitchen told me the kids and Judy had heard me.

“Don’t shoot, kids—it’s just your mother!” There was giggling as my son Eric, daughter Francine, and Judy came into the room.

“We knew it was you, Mom, but just in case, Eric and Judy brought our baseball bat.” My sweet Francine was five, and her trusting nature worried me at times.

“Gregory must not have smelled the coffee,” I smiled at them as they settled in chairs beside me. Gregory was my youngest, and well known to sleep through hurricanes once he settled down.

Judy looked at me with undisguised intrigue. “Tennille, what happened to your hair?”

Francine’s quick intake of air confirmed her dismay. “You don’t look like Momma anymore!”

I tried to smile reassuringly. “I cut my hair tonight. All of a sudden I was more than tired of having long straight hair and wanted short curls. What do you think?”

Judy nodded her approval. “I think I like it, but it sure makes you look different.”

Francine wasn’t sure, and Eric, it turned out, was far more interested in other matters. “Why are you eating here?” He fingered a drumstick, uncertain if he really wanted it, or if he should be social and snack with the rest of us. At seven years of age, he was Mr. In-between; not quite a little lad, not quite a big boy.

“Because I knew Cookie was making chicken and potato salad for you kids and no one can make it better than she can.” There was general agreement on that. Judy rummaged in the cupboard for more plates, and as we chewed and chatted, life became almost bearable.

I don’t know whose idea it was to put our bags into the car and leave now rather than wait for morning. We were awake and not a bit sleepy with the exception of Gregory. It would be fun to meet Judy’s family for an early breakfast. We became more enthusiastic as we discussed it, and the three of them waited for me to make the final decision. If Charles were here he would say it was impractical and silly. I suppose that’s why I felt an urgency to leave. I wanted to be gone before he came and dashed cold water on our plan.

“Let’s go!” I grinned as they scattered to put our plan into action. In remarkably short time, a sleeping Gregory was in the Suburban, bags were loaded, and we were on our way.

Francine and Eric chattered excitedly for a number of miles, but gradually they quieted, and fell asleep. Judy also snuggled into the seat and dozed. The night was dark, without any moonlight, and as I drove the countless miles, my thoughts were almost as dark. I had loved and lost. I would be a single mom, raising kids in a home without a dad. There would be loneliness, but the true agony was that my children would suffer the most.

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The Sunrise Café along the lake nestled in the Rocky Mountains was a homespun little café managed by a congenial couple who believed in simple home cooking, and who thought a morning without seeing the sun rise was a sad affair indeed. Their log building had huge windows that faced the east, and they catered to the families who had summer cabins scattered around the deep and clear body of water.

As I pulled into the parking lot, the American flag was already waving in the breeze. It took awhile for the kids to leave their cozy sleeping nests in the car, but finally we were stretching cramped muscles and ready to enjoy nature's early morning show.

Judy had texted her family of our plans to have an early breakfast, and they were waiting for us at a big table close to the windows. I've often wondered if the Baxters knew that they themselves were like the sunrise we had come to watch. They warmed my soul with their friendly smiles and tender concern for the kids.

Pancakes, hot coffee, and good conversation made the next hour fly. The pale pink sky deepened into darker shades of colors, and with the dawning reflected in the lake, it was a sight that promised peace to my troubled mind. A general camaraderie among the breakfast crowd seemed to signal that the next two weeks at the cabin would be a tonic for my jangled nerves.

I wanted the kids to have good memories of this new beginning. Life without their dad wasn't ideal, but life with two parents constantly arguing wasn't pleasant either. The days ahead would be hard—I wondered if I was brave enough for the challenge.

Chapter Three

The DeBeau family cabin had been built generations ago. It was a rambling affair that had been added onto during the intervening years, and was spacious and comfortable. I enjoyed staying there; however the last couple of years Charles had been too busy to come. I hadn't wanted to make the trip by myself with a baby and two toddlers, but this year I had decided we were coming with or without Charles. Little did I know that 'without Charles' was going to be the new watchword of my life.

When we drove up to the cabin, a pathetic looking dog was sitting on the front porch. He was a thin and ungainly creature and he looked apologetically at us as we got out of the Suburban. Francine, who loved all creatures great and small, immediately started toward him crooning all sorts of endearments.

"Francine, leave him alone. We don't know if he's a nice dog or not."

She paused and shook her head sadly at me. I know. Mothers can be so overprotective at times.

The dog watched us as we made several trips back and forth between the house and vehicle. He neither barked or whined or moved.

Finally, after my one hundredth admonishment of never going in the water alone, never getting into a car or boat with strangers, never leaving the house without telling me, etc. etc. etc. Gregory started to cry.

"What's wrong?"

"I doesn't like it here one bit."

“It’s a wonderful place. There are just a few rules that have to be followed.”

“I scared!”

“What’s there to be scared of?”

“I get skinny like that dog!”

“Gregory,” I pulled him into my arms and gave him a quick kiss, “I’ll feed you real good. And I’ll go feed the dog right now. See, you can watch from the window.”

I mixed lunch meat and bread together in a large bowl. Francine thought I should butter the bread and painstakingly took it upon her five-year-old self to butter the pieces I had torn into small chunks.

I wondered if the dog would still be on the front step by the time she had that accomplished, but he sat waiting patiently. Three pairs of eyes watched me from the window as I took the food out to this emaciated looking creature. When I set the full dish before him, he gave me another apologetic look, and ran his tongue across my fingers.

His tail thumped on the porch in appreciation, but instead of gobbling the food, he sat with hunched apprehension.

“Listen dog, this is food. Eat it.” I smiled at him and patted his head. More tail thumping.

“Eat!” He looked around the yard as if I were talking to someone other than him. Finally I took a little piece of meat and put it up to his mouth. He gave me another remorseful glance and very daintily took the meat and laid it on the porch floor.

“Well, I guess you’ll have to figure this out by yourself, thin dog. Eat or starve.” I walked back into the house and met condemning stares from three pairs of eyes.

“Sometimes dogs don’t like to eat in front of strangers,” I offered, feeling as apologetic as the dog looked. “Let’s check out your bedrooms and then we’ll see if he’s still here and if he’s eaten anything.”

They left their window vigilance grudgingly, and were silent as we trudged upstairs. Gregory had never stayed here before, but Eric and Francine seemed to have dim recollections of the rooms they once occupied. Finally, we were somewhat settled on who slept where. I chose a room that didn’t hold memories of my absent sleeping partner.

By the time we trailed back downstairs, the dog had his nose pressed against the screen door and his tail wagged furiously when he saw us. The food dish was empty, and against my better judgment, I kept quiet when Francine raced toward the door and opened it wide to coax her new friend inside.

He seemed to smile at her, and gave me his usual contrite look. His eyebrows danced up and down as he smelled each one of us, and for some reason, Gregory apparently appealed to him the most. He slurped his tongue over Gregory’s face, and flopped down beside him.

“He likes me!” Gregory beamed, completely forgetting that only minutes earlier he was worried about starving to death like this dog’s appearance seemed to portray.

“He doesn’t have any tags or collar, so we could keep him, don’t you think so, Mom?” Eric looked at me beseechingly. He had begged for a pet of some kind for quite awhile. With our hectic schedule of planned events for the kids, Charles insisted we didn’t have time for animals.

Maybe that was the reason I decided we needed this dog. Within the hour, I had contacted a veterinarian that was fairly close, loaded the kids and dog into the Suburban, and felt utterly foolish as we traipsed into the waiting room with a beat-up old belt around the dog’s neck.

“You say he was on your porch step?” The vet peered over his glasses at me as he examined a worried looking, extremely homely and thin dog.

“Isn’t he just the most beautiful dog you ever did see?” Francine beamed happily at the good doctor.

I shook my head in commiseration when he glanced at me with raised eyebrows. “For some reason, the kids want him. But I wanted to see what might be wrong with him, besides being—ah—very thin and quite—ah—plain.”

He shook his head and stifled a smile. “Well, let’s check him over. He doesn’t have lice, and I don’t think he has worms, but we’ll give him something to make sure of that.”

“Worms?” Francine took her hand away from the dog’s scrawny neck.

If dogs could cry in embarrassment, this one would have shed buckets of tears. His back was humped over in total forlornness, and he refused to look at any of us while he was being examined from head to tail.

When he was finished the vet asked the kids what the dog’s name was. Gregory had been quiet throughout the whole episode, but when neither Francine nor Eric answered, he piped up unexpectedly.

“Thin Dog. He wants to be called that.”

“Well kids, I guess Thin Dog checks out OK. I’m going to give him a rabies shot, and some other medicine just in case, and maybe it would be a good idea to get a leash.” The vet grinned at me with good humor. “And if I were you, I’d buy lots of dog food.”

I shook my head again. “Do you have any idea what kind of mixture he is?”

“I’d say it could be almost anything. I’ve never quite seen a combination like this, but he probably has some German shepherd, some Greyhound, maybe a little bit of Airedale—” he waved his hands and laughed. “I think it’s safe to say he’s not papered or registered.”

I had to agree with that statement, and laughed a little myself at his description of Thin Dog. When we headed back home, we had a fancy purple leash that attached to a fancy purple collar with ‘Thin Dog’ written on a jingling tag, plus the listed shots he had and the date for anyone who cared to read it all. We also had a huge stash of dog food, a couple of dog dishes, and a lovely purple dog bed.

“And,” I reminded them several times, “He will *not* be a house dog.”

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Our morning had been eventful and long. After lunch it wasn’t hard to convince Gregory and Francine to take a nap. Eric pattered around outside with the dog, and as I cleaned the kitchen, I saw him make several trips from the front porch to the back porch with all the new dog paraphernalia. When I checked later, Eric was snoozing on the dog bed and Thin Dog was flopped close beside him, making little whistling dog snores.

I slipped outside with a cup of coffee in one hand and my long neglected Bible in the other hand. As I settled into the wicker rocker, the lake shimmered in the afternoon sun; a peaceful scene that was as soothing as the sound of waves lapping softly against the shore.

Charles and I had come often to the DeBeau cabin on the lake when we were first married. We would hike to the Sunrise Café early in the morning where we could catch up on the local talk as well as start our day with a good breakfast and fantastic view.

After Eric was born, it became a special retreat and Charles enjoyed the bonding time with his son. Even after Francine came along, we managed to slip away for a family vacation. That was when

DeBeau & DeBeau was still a small company, and there was time for both work and family.

But when I was expecting Gregory and after Charles's grandparents had been killed and he had been promoted to CEO, his work load increased. The timing for our new baby was complicated. It was a difficult pregnancy, a difficult delivery, and Gregory was an unhappy and difficult baby.

To make matters more complicated, Richard and Lisa 'discovered' their version of a perfect house for us, and insisted we move before Gregory was born. The conventional DeBeau wisdom proclaimed a move before the baby was born would be simpler than a move after the baby was born. Lisa promised she would help decorate—and she did. Whenever the two toddlers took a nap and I tried to rest I could count on her coming to show me curtain material, carpet samples, or bedspreads and matching pillows. She would insist she could only stay a minute, and usually stayed an hour.

It was an aggravation that I still resented. I took a drink of coffee and watched some pelicans land on the water. They paddled gracefully, seemingly going nowhere. I wondered if that was where my memories were taking me—nowhere. But once the door had opened to reminiscing, it became impossible to close. Maybe a look back would help to understand why I was now at the lake alone with the three kids, and Charles was with Suzanna, and planning on a divorce.

“Divorce is an ugly word.” I wasn't aware I had spoken out loud until Thin Dog raised his head and gave me a startled look.

There had been many ugly scenes. Probably the worst was when Charles brought Gregory and me home from the hospital, and I discovered Lisa had moved the nursery from the small room close to the master bedroom to a room farther down the hall. She had decorated it with different shades of blues, with cartoon pictures hanging everywhere and my favorite rocking chair was nowhere to be seen.

I went into a hysterical tirade. I cried and yelled and said ugly things about the DeBeaus, and especially my too helpful mother-in-law. Charles became angry and said several times they were only trying to help, and accused me of being ungrateful.

I made him move everything back into the original room, and when I found my rocking chair in the garage, I insisted he move that to the room also. I carried a chip on my shoulder for months over that episode.

I was happy to hear that Richard and Lisa were looking for someone to ease Charles's workload. However I was not at all happy when Suzanna Parker arrived to fill the esteemed position of chief operating officer.

She was, as I mentioned before, smart, calculating, ambitious and beautiful. In no time, she had pinpointed problems, simplified the complicated family business, streamlined it into a bigger market, and became indispensable to the DeBeau men, especially my DeBeau man.

I was jealous. I was catty. I became clingy and whiney. I dieted, exercised, and spent hours trying to look beautiful. I definitely was not the loving and intelligent Proverbs woman whose husband and children praised her and called her blessed.

I fingered my Bible that lay unopened on my lap. I didn't want to read about this woman of Proverbs 31 who was a paragon of virtue. After all, it's too late to close the barn door after the horse escapes. It's too late to become a model wife after your husband divorces you. It's too late to find another husband when you have three children to raise by yourself. It's too late to find love again when you had the man you loved passionately.

"Oh just read it," I muttered to myself. After I finished the chapter, I had to admit with a great deal of guilt and shame that the verses didn't describe me. Because I like the pithy words of Proverbs, I read several other chapters. I read that an adulterous woman sins and doesn't care. I read that a man who takes part in adultery doesn't have

any sense. I also read that a man should be happy with the wife he married when he was young.

“So there, Charles and Suzanna. We are all guilty of being sinners.” Thin Dog arose at my words and wandered closer to see if I was talking to him. He put his cold nose on my arm and belched indelicately. An aroma of dog food was prevalent.

“Wow! You need a breath mint.” I patted his head to reassure him I wasn’t going to kick him out of house and home for having bad breath. He truly was a homely mutt, but there was something in his manner that appealed to me. Maybe it was because at the moment I felt decidedly inferior to a beautiful woman. For that matter, I might be homeless if Charles and the woman of his dreams decided to live in the house that I had proclaimed many times that I hated.

A shouted greeting caused me to glance up and I saw a boat drifting slowly toward the pier. A closer look revealed it was Judy Baxter and her parents. They were smiling and waving, and their arrival ended my unhappy walk in past memories.

XXXXX

The sun’s setting rays reflected in the still waters of the lake and made boating seem like a glide through rainbow colors. The kids were fascinated with the unexpected pleasure of a late afternoon boat ride, and I expressed my gratitude to the Baxters as we edged toward our pier.

“We knew you’d enjoy it,” Judy said, “And besides, they’re predicting rain for the next couple of days so we thought we’d better take you today.”

“It was a perfect way to end our first day at the lake. Thanks again.”

“Tennille, have you slept at all?” Mrs. Baxter looked at me with concern.

“No, but I’ll make up for it tonight.” Actually, I wasn’t as tired as I thought I should be after a tumultuous thirty-six hours or more of wakefulness.

Mr. Baxter expertly placed his boat beside the pier and held it steady while I helped the kids onto the wooden dock. They remembered to thank everyone, which pleased the Baxters, and astonished me.

A distraught Thin Dog waited for us on the porch as we made our way to the cabin. He slobbered over Francine’s hand, licked Gregory’s face, and whimpered pathetically when Eric fed him. I guess he thought we had abandoned him.

It was completely dark by the time we had finished our own meal and the kids had pajamas on to end the long day. A rumble of thunder surprised me. I thought the rains were forecasted for tomorrow.

While I listened to nighttime prayers from Gregory and Francine, Eric had business of his own to attend to. I discovered Thin Dog and his purple bed were ensconced in Eric’s room as I slipped in to hear his prayers.

“He doesn’t like the thunder,” Eric explained when I protested that a stray dog we just acquired shouldn’t be in the house overnight.

“Let me think about this.” Actually, the longest day of my life was beginning to catch up with me, and I didn’t have energy to argue. Besides, Thin Dog looked so apologetically comfortable that I didn’t have the heart to boot him back outside.

“What are you going to pray about tonight, Eric?” I asked as I tucked his covers around him.

“I’m gonna thank God for the boat ride! That was great and we even got to fish a little.”

Eric’s prayer drifted from the Baxters and the boat ride to different blessings for different family members. Strangely, like his brother and

sister, he neglected to mention his father. In fact, none of the kids had said anything about Charles the whole day.

I would take up that issue tomorrow. As for today, I'd had enough thoughts about their father and his new love.

Eric yawned as he said amen. I yawned and said goodnight and slowly made my way to my room. I finally checked my phone, and saw a number of messages, both text and voicemail. Charles's last message was terse.

"Turn on your phone! I finally had to call the Baxters to see if you made it to the lake. They said you'd been boating with them. Didn't it occur to you that I'd be worried?"

My message was equally as terse. "Worried? I think not. How was *Star Wars*?"

You might enjoy the following books that Joyce Wheeler wrote:

My Lady

Laughter in the Wind

Goodbye, Belvidere (A hundred and sixty acres) Book One

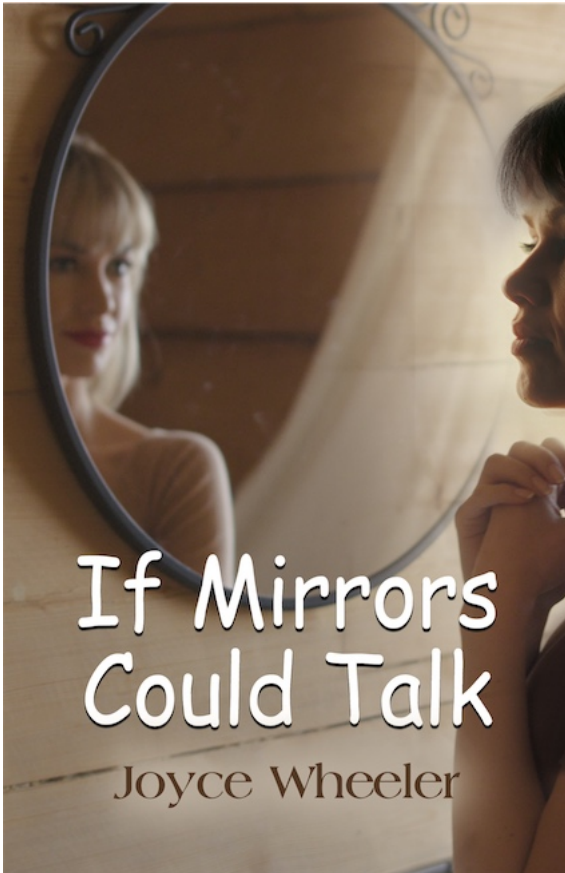
Goodbye, Belvidere (His Eye is on the Sparrow) Book Two

Goodbye, Belvidere (I much love you) Book Three

The Countries of Whine and Roses (Juvenile Book)

Available on her website www.prairieflowerbooks.com

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