



*The Morgan brothers settled Morgan's Bridge, Michigan in 1848. Amanda Stimpson arrives in Morgan's Bridge from Chicago in the 1990's to discover her secretly kept background.*

# MORGAN'S REDEMPTION

By Ann McAllister Clark

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A MORGAN'S BRIDGE MYSTERY

# MORGAN'S REDEMPTION

OLD GROWTH  
BOOKS

MACINTOSH-MOON MORGAN  
PROPRIETOR

ANN McALLISTER CLARK

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## Chapter 1

### *Blind Woman's Bluff*

Amanda heard Willa's distinction long before she met her.

The Michigan June morning was springtime glorious only occasionally interrupted by a high-flying jet headed for big cities and crowded lives. The air was crisp and the sky blue enough to match the Heavenly Blue morning glory vine climbing up the back steps. The breeze, gentle as a rocking crib hanging from an old maple limb, swept through the center of the little village, lifting the leftover leaves of winter with a whispered promise of pleasant, warm afternoons and summer garden abundance. The village beguiled in its masquerade of innocence.

Cement sidewalks and black asphalt streets completely surrounded the two-story, late-nineteenth-century, red brick building where Amanda Stimpson now lived and worked. She didn't know where she might dig and nurture a garden like she had left behind.

She was seated at the old and weary wooden desk in her used bookstore, making shelf markers for various book genres and thinking of the heirloom roses she had abandoned back in Chicago. With her Bic pen she deepened a fading star design in

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the desktop while she dreamed of the big overgrown Persian lilac bush that would be just coming into bloom with tiny blue wrapped points of buds about to unfurl. Amanda thought of all those dozens of tulip bulbs in reds and yellows and oranges that she had ordered direct from The Hague last year. They would be nearly ready to cut for someone else's dining table. She was thinking that maybe she had made a mistake in leaving Chicago so abruptly.

Daydreaming about the art institute's second floor and Van Gogh's startling gaze, she began to draw little circles in the soft pine wood of the desktop. And then something outside the bookshop attracted her attention.

The tap-tap-tapping was tentative, not consistent or even rhythmic, offering no predictions: tiny little noises breaking into her concentration like the sounds of a pecking sparrow cleaning an area of the cement sidewalk of seeds and sparse seedlings. She was soon compelled to leave her desk chair and stand on the pile of outdated maroon encyclopedias to gaze out the high window and search for whatever was the object of her curiosity.

Amanda had moved to this village only a week earlier and was still in that limbo of not knowing anyone and wondering how, as a recent big-city metropolitan dweller, she might be received in a small village.

She always thought her name was Amanda Willis Stimpson. She grew up in Chicago, Illinois, and all these years her name had suited her just fine. She thought her father had died in World War II. Now at the age of fifty she found that she was never Amanda Stimpson. Her legal name was MacIntosh-Moon Morgan. Many times she thought to herself, *what kind of a name is MacIntosh-Moon, anyway?*

Her father did die in that war, but was never married to her mother. His name and her name on the original birth certificate—kept secret by a law to protect the sensibilities and reputations of any little bastards born out of wedlock—is Morgan. And so that made her a member of the infamous Morgan clan that settled the village of Morgan's Bridge, Michigan, fifty miles east of the sandy Lake Michigan shoreline.

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1849

*Why did they stop fifty miles short, anyway? Why didn't the Morgan brothers keep going west at least until they reached the shores of Lake Michigan, where the water glistened in the evening sun and the shifting sand dunes never stopped moving, even in the dark of night?*

*Well, Harold L. Morgan's legs were bone tired and his spirit had long gone weary—and his younger brother, John Franklyn Morgan, was smitten with the dark depths of Mad Mary's eyes. And they didn't feel the verve it took to cross the freezing, dreary Rumble River. They simply dug a clearing in the snow for their deer hide hut, and trudged a path, stomping the snow hard beneath their rabbit pelt boots, down to the ice-crust-ed edge of the river. And that first night, under an inky, starry sky that captured every steamy cloud of breath, they built a good hot fire outside the open flap door of the small, mounded hut and waited for their lives to change.*

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*"Tken bear ut."* Harold Morgan spent as few words as possible, believing he had only so many and he wanted them to last until his last sour suck of life's breath. He sat awkwardly crossing his thick legs at the side of the hut's door flap. He pulled in a mouthful of whiskey from his tin flask until it billowed out his cheeks like a mating bullfrog and until the liquid could ease down his throat and heat up his belly. He tried to swallow down the belch that followed the gulp.

Franklyn unfolded his long wiry legs, easily got up from his heels, and brushed the dry snow from his butt. He walked around to the fading side of the fire where he dropped to his knees. In his quiet, graceful manner he bent down onto his hands, tipped his head sideways, and blew the sparks into flames, which wrapped themselves around the snapped twigs and melted the snow still clinging to the logs.

"What? What can you bear?" He was irritated that his brother, as usual, had drained the last of the warmth from their old battered flask.

"Listen." Harold's big tobacco-stained fingers squashed the few remaining dried leaves down into the bowl of his walnut pipe. Clumsy in his short, stocky body, he grunted against his braided leather belt as he bent forward to pull a smoldering twig from the edge of the fire. He lit his smoke as he looked across the glow of flames at the smudged and greasy face of his younger brother, his only kin left in the world.

For twenty-odd years he had been the father to his brother, when as young teenagers they were suddenly left at the gate of a burned-out



*homestead and a burned-out family. Now they only had each other, and he loved his younger brother like a good father would. He didn't suffer the vexations of the other—although they were far into adulthood, he believed them still to be the test of independence.*

*"Tkin hear the village forming around us just as if they's chillun come'n outta the woods to their maw."*

*Harold didn't know how right he was, for at that very moment Franklyn's first and only female contribution to the village was already gestating in Mad Mary's quickening womb.*

\*\*\*

Amanda had won a few SkyMiles on a radio talk show, having known the answer to the '50s Day question. It was Florence Ballard. Amanda had always been a Diana Ross fan. So, she was on a little vacation and, more out of curiosity than anything else, she decided to visit the salt flats, mountain streams, and the capital city of Utah. A bellboy at the Independence Hotel suggested that besides enjoying a magnificent performance of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, she might also have fun looking up relatives in the library across the street. While in a small, gray, Formica cubicle on the crowded second floor of the Mormon's Ancestral Library in Salt Lake City, Amanda Stimpson sat staring at the stark truth of her parentage lit up on the large microfilm screen in front of her. Frightened and frozen with the confusion and then the realization of it all, she hoped no one around her could see the truth of her birth. The records confirmed that Susanne Willis

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Stimpson was her mother, her unmarried mother. But who was this man, C. W. Morgan? And thus, who was she? And she couldn't begin to understand the strange choice of names—MacIntosh-Moon? Where did they come up with that?

The Mormons have records of almost everyone born in the United States and Europe. Thinking she was going to find out about her relatives back in Illinois, she was ticked off at the discovery and took the Delta red-eye flight home. She needed to find out just what happened to her all those years ago.

Amanda's mother was dead, and her two adult daughters were living at opposite ends of the country. Her mother's sister was still alive and might have known about her birth, but her Aunt was in the confused mystery of Alzheimer's and had a tough time relating anything at all.

Amanda was fifty years old, confused but accepting the subtle changes and general pilfering of youth her body was experiencing, contentedly divorced but miserably menopausal, and committed to all sorts of impulsive acts. It took her one hour to decide to up and leave the winds of Chicago and move to Morgan's Bridge, Michigan. Within a week she'd sold two thousand dollars' worth of junk, packed five boxes of personal belongings, a laundry basket of clothes, and six blue plastic milk bottle cases full of books she couldn't live without, shut down her savings and checking accounts, and waved good-bye to a few skeptical friends.

She stuffed her only predictable male friend, Shakespeare-the-Cat, in a plastic pet caddie lined with his favorite pillow and flannel throw. She headed her little American-made two-door south, out of Illinois, and then angled around the southern shoreline of Lake Michigan and the familiar stink of Gary, Indiana's steel mills. She didn't stop until she reached the

Michigan City Shell station so she could gas up the car and get a drink. She was thirsty for a cold beer—her mouth was dry for a frosty draft—but she was quitting alcohol, cigarettes, and ice cream. She hoped this move would help, but was feeling lonely and weak already. She ordered a double-dip of fudge ripple.

Ten miles past Michigan City she turned north into the state of Michigan fifty miles or so to Morgan's Bridge, a pleasant little Victorian town with buff-colored century-old commerce buildings interspersed with a few 1950s- and '60s-built structures. The streets are tree lined and active except for Sundays. On Sundays a kid could play marbles on Main Street and not worry his mother much. The houses are mostly the homes of turn-of-the-century pride, from the largest old pink-and-white "Painted Lady" down to the small one-and-a-half-story, pastel, gingerbread houses. Most of the homes were lovingly kept up and surrounded by ancient, languid lilacs, and a few dwellings were simply left to rot—lilacs, forsythia, and all—around their occupants.

Passing the village welcome sign, she first drove onto the town's namesake, a short, wide bridge over the muddy Rumble River, and then on and up into the village. She passed a lone woman with long silver tresses, a denim jacket with an embroidered orange-and-yellow sun reaching across her shoulders. Her well-worn jeans were tucked into a pair of knee-high, fringed moccasin boots. Across the street on the right, a man with a smudged white apron stood at a tavern door that was built like a silver rocket ship reaching vertically and ready to take off. He watched as she passed, before turning and nonchalantly pulling something from his mouth, throwing it aside, and reentering his establishment. Down alongside the river to the left was an old railroad station. A sign on the roof

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read: DEPOT CAFE. A young man backing out of the door as he swept a broom back and forth looked up and glanced her way. She saw that he was a slightly built but tall, very handsome, blond man. He walked back into the cafe.

A golden, long-haired dog walked slowly across the street in front of Amanda as if the dog was perhaps the town mayor and she had better show respect. The dog headed toward the cafe. Being used to the traffic on downtown Chicago's wide and hurried Michigan Avenue, Amanda was startled to realize she was driving so slowly that the dog knew it was safe.

She arrived on a Friday afternoon and it was not yet three thirty—the time the village comes alive for about two hours, when the factory workers are released from their lines and assemblies and desks and docks. There were cars lining the street but not much traffic.

Amanda felt a certain quiet satisfaction knowing that she might be able to fit into this place.

\*\*\*

*"Mad Mary!" Harold laughed, mocking his brother. "She's a half-breed, Frank. What'cha want with a damn half-breed bitch like that?"*

*And there it was. The first uttered sentence that would define so many of the people of Morgan's Bridge. The first tendentious statement that would top the list of all the narrow paths to follow, as if it were a dash of a birthmark mapping the hearts of the ancestors to come—a mark to influence the intolerances of all differences, making redemption nearly impossible.*

*In truth, Mary was not a Native American at all, yet she thought of herself as a woman of wisdom and lore, living with Mother Earth's bounty. The Morgan brothers accepted her deception. In fact, she was just a woman alone, determined to live a life inside the curled leaf of nature without the oily dust of the forming town, and acutely avoiding any conversation that might take up space in her brain with unwanted thoughts and accusations.*

*It was easier to let them think she was a mad woman—then the cruel ones avoided her, afraid of her unusual ways and odd dress. It helped that her Italian background gave her the long, dark hair with the intense shine of the hot peninsula of Italy, and that her Mediterranean grandmother gave her the dark olive skin that helped her sham of Native American heritage. Her grandfather had given her the mystery of Ireland. Her father had given her the meanness to survive.*

*Assuming she had the knowledge of powerful ancient medicine and transposing charms, the village women came to her at dusk after their household chores and before their evening marital duty. Mary knew they would come down her dusty path in secret, for her creams of contraception and liquids of energy. They found respite and calm in her abode of skins and wood and mud. With carefully formed and detailed prevarications, they told their men that they wanted one of her finely woven necklaces spaced with shells and stones from the river or they wanted a ring of filed, polished glass or even a smooth pebble to worry and rub their thumbs over until calm*

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*came to the chaos they carried within their small, undernourished, over-suckled breasts.*

*Mary was talented in many ways: her intricately designed clay pottery would soon find its way into every new kitchen in Morgan's Bridge; and her body adornments became the desire of those women who saw her accouterments swing and attract and catch the glints of the sporadic winter sun and the glimpse of a man's eye.*

*But her innate talent was in keeping the cloak of mystery about her like a swirl of impalpable spun webbing so that her clandestine night visitors, frightened but fascinated and determined, could believe in her power to take their troubles and throw them into the starry night like icy crystals, to dissipate forever—or at least until their possessors again found their way down Mary's path, which led to her snug, round, shanty alongside the river, for another leather pouch of colored dust to throw into the sparking fire or a handful of precious sugar to dissolve into an iron kettle steaming and ready to receive the hurts and hopes of the frightened ones of the village, not to mention the good flavoring it gave Mary's stews. She was generous with her dispensation of bravery. And she was held in high esteem and appreciation by many women and some men.*

*Yes, Mary had many talents; she could fish, she could hunt, and she could grow medicinal plants amongst her vegetables and flowers. She could barter and trade and cajole with gentle persistence. And she vowed to pass*

*those talents on down to the little one rolling and turning in embryonic fluid within her womb.*

*“What?” Frank was astonished at his brother’s crude words even now, after so many years of listening to the stupidity. He hated his older brother, though Harold couldn’t see it, and Frank hoped their decision to finally establish a trading post and village would lead them to pursue separate lives, for though he did not like his brother, he saw his mother’s eyes in Harold’s face and could not bring himself to desert his own kin.*

*Frank got up from the fire’s edge, his face golden from firelight, eyes glaring with anger, and said, louder, “What the hell did you say?”*

*“She’s justa lousy half-breed, Frank. Whatda ya want with somtin’ dirty like that? I’d rather rub up against a spraying skunk than that.”*

*Harold spit a wad of tobacco mixed with bacteria-laden spittle just as Frank flung himself over the fire landing on his older brother.*

*They struggled with years of built-up resentments and responsibilities, until Harold pulled his gun from his belt and a shot cracked the peace of night like a close-hitting bullwhip. The white-tailed, buck deer standing knee-deep in water downriver lifted his head—startled and still at the foreign sound. The forest owl high on a walnut tree branch that reached over the river at the bend, near Mary’s home, blinked twice over its yellow orbs but did not move a feather. Mary heard the shot and presumed who had*

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*done the shooting, but did not know who he shot the bullet at or why. She could only speculate why.*

*“Awb, Jesus!” Harold rolled from beneath his younger brother. “Awb, my Gand! I’ve kilt him! Sweet Christ in heaven, I’ve kilt my baby brother Franklyn.”*

\*\*\*

Amanda had managed a used bookstore in downtown Chicago for fifteen years. Books are what she knew and loved, so as soon as she had arrived at Morgan’s Bridge, she rented a storefront and the apartment above it in the village’s oldest building, and immediately began setting up her own used bookshop. After a trip to the True Value Hardware paint department and a tediously artistic afternoon hoping the paint fumes would lift her spirits, she hung her big, homemade, Hunter Green, wooden sign over the front door, announcing to everyone in hand-painted Snowflake White letters, the shop name: OLD GROWTH BOOKSHOP. She viewed the name as a positive and personal statement.

Scarred with 1970s attempts at heat conservation, the beautiful storefront windows that would have been fine for book displays had been replaced with two high windows that no one could see into and she barely could see out of without standing on an unsteady pile of books.

The windows were Thermopane thick and sturdy-looking, but they shattered in big, cutting shards when H. Madison Pickerd threw a hammer through one and his brother, Pole, picked up a red brick from the building’s deteriorating side wall



and threw it through the other window. She saved the brick. The building was historic, with one-hundred-year-old bricks. Amanda used the brick to prop open the door on hot afternoons. She still had the hammer, too. H. Madison Pickerd could have it back anytime he wanted to get it. He never would.

She'd been divorced a year and knew she would never again be married. Now she had a family mystery to clear up for herself and her daughters. She needed to dig up some history while at the same time make a midlife change to energize herself. She thought it would be a challenge to finally own her own business. She could debate herself now on that idea, but she was here for the long haul and so far, it had been interesting. She learned more than she ever wanted to know about the Morgans. Much too much. She wouldn't dare leave. She had an unsettling suspicion they wouldn't let her.

\*\*\*

*"Godblessittobell, Harold! Ya shot me! Ya shot a goddamn bullet right through my leg. Look here!"*

*Franklyn Morgan rolled around on the snow, holding his bleeding leg up to his chest while he shouted at his brother. "Go on now and git Mary! Shit! Do like I say, Harold! Goddammit to hell and back!"*

*"Mary! Mad Mary? Whatcha want with her?"*

*"Get her! Now!"*

*Harold struggled up to his feet and turned to go down the path to Mary's but, and then hesitated. "But Frank ..."*

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*"Harold, if you don't get going right now, I'm going to shoot you dead myself." He picked up the pistol, held it out, and aimed at the space between his brother's eyes.*

*"Awh, all right." Harold stumbled and slipped down the snowy hillside toward the river and Mary's hut.*

*Mary bent to dip her hands into the moonlit, shimmering water's edge of the not yet frozen river. She saw her mother's hands, the hands that had comforted her during her childhood and touched her fever-moistened forehead. Mary rubbed her slow-growing, gnarled left leg that ached with a ceaseless reminder of an angry, impatient father so many years ago. She thought of her mother and her young brother and wondered when they would escape from the place of her youth. Her flight had been easy; she just hobbled out the door and headed west. And as was her habit, she did not ever waste any part of her brain with thoughts of her father.*

*She lifted river water into the bowl formed by her palms and ceremoniously moistened her face—the corners of her dark violet eyes, across her wide forehead, and over her sun-dried, leathery cheeks. She impatiently flicked away the seldom-found tears. She sipped at the last of the water on her fingers. She looked to the moon and asked her nightly prayer of peace, her own formed prayer asking forgiveness. She saw the moon as feminine, the trees as sisters, and the water as a safe-place-mother where last autumn*

*she had hidden from the brother of the man she now painfully, hesitatingly loved.*

*Mary entered her deerskin house and carefully tied up the door flaps. She kept the top of the hut open with a long pole so that she could regulate the opening from inside her dwelling. The smoke and embers from her fire roiled and lifted out to the open sky. She was warm and comfortable. She pulled her small loom close, and added another thread to the growing design. The fire-lit shadows dancing on the soft walls of the dwelling comforted her with vision-inducing thoughts from deep within her spirit. She did not expect a visitor from outside and yet she had heard a shot and wondered.*

*“You! Half-breed! You there in the hut!” He was shouting at the glowing hut before he even got down the path.*

*She knew his attitude, but she also knew his brother. She opened the flap door with caution flavored by worry. She stood with a shabby, gray blanket wrapped around her shoulders and pushed the long, heavy hair up and away from her face. Her eyes were dark and wary, and she reminded herself not to trust this man who had shoved her once with a drunken force that knocked her off her feet and up against an old maple tree. She clutched the blanket with one hand and with the other she pulled her knife from its pocket on the back of her belt and kept it concealed but ready.*

*Harold wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. In his distaste for her he would not make eye contact. He looked beyond her, into the smoldering fire inside her home. “I need some help.”*

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*"What kind of help?"*

*"Frank's been shot. In the leg. The bullet gone right through his leg. You got any more of that bear grease you had last fall? Anything Iken bandage him up with?"*

*She thought of the legs that she had washed after their lovemaking: brown hair, silky and kind, over warm skin enclosing muscles tight and knobby. She thought of the pain he was in, and she asked, "Where is he?"*

*"Up at the edge of the hill. We made camp there yesterday. Up there by that clump of birch." He pointed childlike, as if she could see in the dark of night where the camp was, and then wiped his mouth with the back of his soiled sleeve.*

*"Go back," she said. "Go back up there. I'll be there soon."*

*Harold, relieved to have been dismissed, turned and ran heavy-footed back up the hill toward his and Frank's camp.*

*Frank had encased his leg in snow. As soon as the blood seeped through, he added another handful of the freezing stuff. He felt sick to his stomach and wanted the flask, but remembered its being empty and he again swore at his brother. The blood kept draining and he soon felt weak—until he finally fainted back onto the cold, tramped snow.*

\*\*\*

The apartment above the bookstore didn't need much fixing up. It can only be entered by going through the store and up a wide staircase. The front door at the top of the stairs is

heavy old oak. No one can bust it down once it's securely locked. She knew that as fact. It had been tried.

Amanda knew there was a small, empty apartment in the basement, but it had an outside entry and was locked up tight. The windows were boarded over, and she was glad she would not have to share the building with anyone else.

She had a good-sized bedroom, a very large living room, and a huge kitchen-dining area. The building used to belong to some now-forgotten men's fraternity group. They had held their meetings and parties up there, thus the large rooms. The old windows were full-length floor to ceiling, and she could look down on the main street of town from the living room.

Her bedroom windows opened onto and overlooked the Depot Cafe, the musty but pleasant-smelling river, and that infamous bridge, "The longest bridge in the southwestern quad of the county." The thing was only about one hundred feet long, yet it was also the only bridge in the southern part of the county and so it had no competition. She guessed the townspeople thought the distinction humorous. She couldn't see the humor, what with all that had gone under that bridge—physical and mystical and criminal.

The floors were beauties—all golden heartwood and in great shape. The kitchen was like a 1950s cafe: with a twenty-foot-long, red Formica countertop and ten spinnable red leather seats over bright chrome pedestals. She developed a habit of spinning one each time she passed them. It wobbled around and around still hoping for a teenager's butt.

Behind the counter stood two oversized industrial stoves. Nice stainless-steel restaurant ovens and stovetops. They sat side by side like two overstuffed grandmothers just waiting to bake, broil, or roast Thanksgiving dinner. Too bad she didn't

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care a whit about real gourmet cooking. She was the type that, when the kids were little, was infinitely grateful she could add hamburger to a box of dried noodles and spices and call it dinner. So here she was with a great setup and no one to cook. She could heat up a can of soup or water for tea, but that was about all. She ate dinner each night down at the Depot Cafe next door. At least her kitchen stayed clean.

The front door of the apartment opened down to a narrow stairway that turned halfway to the wider stairs of the bookstore. Someone had carpeted these stairs in a deep maroon, giving her the notion of being underdressed when she came down them each morning and a feeling of great expectations every night when she wearily climbed the plush stairway. But so far, no one has been waiting up there for her. No one waited with a large glass of wine and a crisp salad and a soft, welcoming kiss.

Amanda usually left the apartment door ajar during the day so dear old Shakespeare could go up to his bed when he wanted. The poor boy had been out of sorts since they left his bookstore and favored friends in Chicago.

Several times her new dwelling had been found by wandering patrons looking for first editions. Finally, she had been forced to string a heavy, red velvet rope across the stairway so that unsympathetic, curious readers searching for leathered Longfellows or massive Durants did not invade her sequestered area. She once found a lovely old first edition of *The History of Morgan's Bridge* sitting on her bed. She knew it was Willa Morgan who had left it there and she forgave her for snooping in her apartment.

\*\*\*

*Mary used a sledge made of tree branches and blankets to haul Franklyn down to her hut. She thought of him as her own, like some treasure she had found along the path or an animal she had captured to bring home as a pet. She would keep Franklyn, but had no use for his mean-spirited brother.*

*Harold stayed in his and Franklyn's camp for the rest of that winter, leaving only to travel back to Lansing for a wife and a rest. He brought the wife back to help him stay fed and clean. He did not know about love, except for how he felt about his younger brother.*

*The brothers managed to get along at least long enough to build a trading post between their camps. They named the post, Morgan's Landing, and the town Morgan's Bridge, when the growing village finally built a footbridge across the river.*

*The site of the trading post was convenient to the local Native American Ojibwa, and the silent, stoic river trappers were close enough to the growing town of Grand Rapids so that the Morgan brothers made a decent living for their families. Over the years their camps would turn into wood-frame houses built in a furious competition, until there were two identical houses flanking each side of the trading post.*

*For years and years Mary and her offspring would be called on to heal, protect, and educate the members of Morgan's Bridge. In all her offspring's names, her own was always remembered: Little Mad Mary, Bug Trout Mary, Mean Widow Mary, Willy Mary, and, finally, just Mad*

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*Mary, who did actually have a good dose of Native American blood running through her veins. She was the woman the growing town would call on to help redeem themselves as one unit, one village boiling their prejudices down until the truth of justice came to the top of the stew. And then, like a skim over milk, they collectively protected themselves with a silence unbroken.*

*And then the book woman came from Chicago.*

\*\*\*

Amanda's first customer—the very first person to come into her bookshop—turned out to be one of the most important people in her life and the beginning of her quest for answers.

On that early spring afternoon her interest in the odd tapping outside her store filled her with curiosity. While stretching to see out the window, she watched as the tapping was pushed forward from a white cane in the hands of an aged woman slowly following the stick with cautious assurance to seek her way. She wore a large, floppy, canvas hat the color of blue cornflowers found along dusty August Michigan roadsides, with a luscious pink peony dripping over the hat rim. The hat's wide brim shielded her so completely from the bright sun that her hair, eyes, and face could not be seen, thus adding to her invention of mystery.

Amanda stretched so as to see her pass, but the woman approached the steps of the store. Amanda hurried from the window to the heavy glass door to see where she sought to poke her guiding stick. She reached out and began to tap on the



door in a manner of insistence. Tap-tap, whack! Tap-tap, whack!

Amanda stood watching this curious woman in her audacious hat who deftly commanded her red-tipped, white cane. Tap-tap, whack! Amanda hesitated only a minute, but that minute offended the woman. She stomped her cane and turned her head to the sun, muttering, "Geezzzh."

Amanda pushed the door open and managed a cheery "Hello."

The woman responded with a weary drop of her head. "I wondered if you were ever going to allow me into this bookstore of yours."

She stepped up the first step and instinctively Amanda reached for her arm.

"No!" she said, and pushed Amanda's arm away. "Let me be. I do better if people don't guide me."

She pushed past Amanda and with her guiding cane she entered the store. Amanda marveled at the cane's importance. Its meaning to her, its essentiality must be great. The woman stopped just inside the doorway and drew in a long breath through her rather long nose. Amanda could at last see the clouds over her eyes.

"Books. Many books. I can smell 'em. I love books. I love to read." She turned to Amanda with a challenge. "I do read, you know. Every night. Well, my grandson reads. I listen."

She moved forward to the first stack of books, where her cane stopped her short. Her back stiffened with insolence, a defiance that dared anything attempting to stop her forward movement. She had come to the middle of an eight-foot bookcase and, poking the cane right or left, she could not go

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forward and did not know which way to turn. She stomped the cane angrily like a child's demanding foot.

"Well, are you going to direct me, or are you going to just stand there gawking at me?"

Amanda stepped over to her side and, not wanting to risk touching her again, she stood close enough for her at least to know she was there. Amanda could smell the clean, pastel, patterned dress she wore and the fresh, outdoor scent of her flower-laden hat.

"Take me to the fiction section. The classics. I want to read something by Charles Dickens."

They slowly made their way back to the classical fiction area. Amanda worried about the woman's thick rubber-soled shoes—would they trip her on the old carpeting? The woman placed her small hand on Amanda's sleeve, barely touching her. Amanda thought of the pair of hummingbirds in her garden back home and the way they hovered above the flowers without actually touching, yet causing the light petals to move with the delicate attention. She could feel her arm relaxing as they walked along the rows.

"I sometimes get in the mood for Dickens and those characters of his. I like to think of the ragtag clothes of some of them and the top hats on the men. I can see all the colors in my mind. I like that." She ran her fingers over the books in a gentle manner, like someone might touch fine china. "I don't like that one about Scrooge, though. I am sick to death of that one—every Christmas. Geezzzh."

"I never got to England. My husband Billy did. During the war. Billy came home dead. I'll introduce you to him at the Redemption Day Parade. To Billy. I'll tell you all about him. You can walk in the parade with me. I need someone to walk

me up the hill. It's too far for me alone." She spoke in spurts, as if out of breath.

"I thought I should keep the store open." Amanda didn't know this woman and sure didn't want to walk in a parade. "With all the folks in town, I thought—"

"Nonsense," she said, cutting in. "My daughter will mind the store for you if you insist on staying open. She was going to walk me, but I just can't hardly bear her company. We'll be here at eleven sharp on the morning of the parade. Be ready. I'm part of the entertainment. They like to see me walk in the parade. I might see ya before that. I got something I want to show ya."

Amanda doubted she would leave the shop in the hands of a perfect stranger in order to walk in some parade with the perfect stranger's mother.

The old woman turned back to the books. "I do love to read the stories by Charles Dickens. His tales about England. I can see England if I can get to one of his books. It doesn't even matter which book. Do you know what I mean? As long as it's not Scrooge." She breathed in an exaggerated way. "Wait!"

She grasped Amanda's arm and turned her face up to her. Her skin had that soft look among the deep wrinkles of time that older women get. Her breath smelled clean and good, like baby's breath just after a bottle of warm milk. "What I really want to read tonight, though, is horror."

"Horror? You mean ...?"

"Yes, I want to read a good horror book tonight. Maybe something by Stephen King or someone else you recommend, as long as it's a fright."

Amanda couldn't believe this sweet old thing no bigger than a skinny preteen girl wanted to assault herself with the blood and guts and the sheer terror of the horror books.

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“Are you sure? You know some of these can be pretty gory.”

The woman grinned with a mouthful of her own teeth and whispered stealthily, “I love ’em. I just love ’em.”

“But ...” Was she teasing? Putting Amanda on?

She stomped her cane and demanded, “Get me one.”

Amanda did like the lady wanted. She pulled a Stephen King off a shelf and helped her back to the sales counter, where she produced three wrinkled one-dollar bills from inside a small, old-fashioned, black-beaded bag she had hanging from her wrist.

“I suppose that’s enough for a used paperback. It’s all I got, so it’d better be.”

Amanda took the money and put the book in a plastic bag, wondering how she would get home.

“Look out that door and tell me if my daughter is out there yet.”

Her demands, rather than irritating Amanda, were amusing. She was projecting strength in the face of old age and disability.

“There’s a white minivan out there,” Amanda answered.

“That’s her. Snip. She’s my snip. And she grew up two bratty kids, my grandsons.” She shook her head as if trying to rid herself of bad thoughts. “Well, they do read to me at night. That’s the least they can do for their old granny.”

Amanda decided she had better reserve her judgment. She suspected this woman was an anomaly, a complex woman she was curious to know better. She moved to open the door for her.

“No! Let me be. I want to get out myself.”

She struggled with the heavy glass door, her book purchase, and the little, swinging purse on her wrist. The white

cane was now awkward and catching under the door. Amanda held the door open wider and waited for her reprimand. The old woman yanked at the cane, pulling it loose, and proceeded cautiously down the steps like a child going one step at a time until she got to the bottom step.

She called back over her shoulder, "By the way, my name's Willa. Willa Morgan. The whole towns made up of Morgans."

A good-looking blond teenage boy shoved the van's side door open for her. As she stepped into the van she again looked back in Amanda's direction and grinned in a way that somehow made her feel conspiratorial.

"I was just thinking that it's about time you showed up," she called back to Amanda. "You're Moon, ain't 'cha. MacIntosh-Moon Morgan." She sniffed arrogantly, not really wanting an answer, and pointed her chin forward to the road ahead.

The teenager slid the door shut with a solid "whomp" and the minivan was gone before Amanda could even gather her wits enough to ask aloud to no one at all, "How could she possibly have known that?"

## Chapter 2

### *Pole Pickerd's Warning*

The boldness of it surprised her.

Many visitors came into the bookshop in those first few days—some genuine customers, but mostly just curious villagers wondering about the new woman in town. Amanda was anxious that the piles of books on the floor and papers scattered across her desk might discourage return visits. But the most unnerving visits came from Pole Pickerd, H. Madison Pickerd's younger brother. Pole was a had-never-been. He seemed harmless, but was one of those personalities that could not get along with even the most benign people. He sure was not getting along with Amanda.

"I'm saying to you that you made a mistake choosing this town," he announced one late Monday afternoon.

Amanda was folding plastic Brodart covers over paper book jackets while sarcastically wondering if closing on Mondays would upset the cash flow.

Pole was a pudgy little man with eyes rounded in perpetual excitement. His skin was pale and doughy and he bragged that

he knew the complete lineup for the afternoon television shows.

“Well, thanks for the friendly greeting.” She needed a cup of coffee.

She walked to the desk and looked over the day’s receipts. The bookshop had four pitiful sales amounting to twenty dollars—not enough to pay for the electric bill lying on top of the pile of mail. She wasn’t feeling very friendly. Pole had come at the wrong time.

“No. Really,” he went on. He shoved a few sprigs of thin blondish hair up from his forehead. “I’m warning ya to watch this place carefully.”

“OK, Pole. I’ll bite. Just what the hell are you talking about?” She knew she had to quit falling into that easy wordage and find new, interesting ways to express herself. She read once that the satisfaction of a word didn’t come from the word itself but from the sound being expelled from the mouth. Blaah! Splat! It didn’t have to have a meaning as long as it had a good strong sound. Zeek!

She placed the first edition of John Grisham’s *The Client* in the glass case, hoping a collector would pay the forty bucks needed for the phone bill. She needed to log on to the Internet in order to upload her inventory so she could sell books online.

“Fire! That’s what I’m talkin’ about. This town seen more fires than any other armpit town like it in the state.” He raised one eyebrow and his mouth hung open, waiting for her reaction.

Pole had been a volunteer fireman in Morgan’s Bridge; for some reason he was no longer a part of that team. Amanda had the feeling he didn’t want to say he had been fired, but she distinctly got that idea by the way he trashed the fire chief and

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the volunteers. She could ask Willa, but she really didn't want to know. It was his business and she suspected that small-town living would be easier if she didn't know all the personal details of everyone right away. She had a few details of her own to keep private. She was not yet ready to reveal her true identity or her actual quest. She wanted to find her family carefully and she wanted to ease into the information.

She cleared her throat and spat out, "Fffitttstrom!"

"What? What'd ya say?"

"Googkamm!" Translation: Go home. She sighed. Did she have to put up with this? "What fires?" If she didn't want to know, why did she ask?

"Well ..." His eyes were closing a little now, falling over the milky blue iris.

Was he focusing or was this his way of affecting importance—like he knew something she didn't and he was going to inform her of something significant enough to prove his prominence in town? If it was about the fire department, Amanda figured it was going to be mean-spirited. Gossip can be enticing even when our better selves warn us not to get involved. So, she listened.

"There used to be a hotel right there in that lot across the street."

"Oh, yah?" She peeked out the high window to look across at the empty lot next to the Sky Rocket Saloon. "I didn't know that. Was it a nice place?"

A large, white, bread truck was backing up into the lot at the Saloon's side service entrance. The clouds had darkened and threatened rain.

"Oh, yes." He slowly nodded his head, showing both sincerity and authority. "It was an uppity place run by a good



woman named Hilda.” He hesitated while picking at a thumbnail. “She was good to some of us. Not to all of us.”

“What do you mean?” This was beginning to be a game and Amanda was impatient with herself for wanting to participate. Yet she kept moving the pawns across the board, justifying herself by thinking that surely this was fiction and thus not really important. “What happened to Hilda? Is she still around?”

“Nope. She ain’t here no more.” He cockily tilted his head back and to the side. “I guess a body can only take so much. See, she put all her money into building that hotel over there and it burnt to the ground, right down to the dirt it squatted on, and then when she tried to build it back up again with the insurance money and all, it just got burned down again—and then again. She couldn’t even get past the stud walls before it burnt down.”

“You saying someone burned it on purpose, Pole? Arson?”

“I ain’t saying nothin’ and you didn’t hear me say nothin’ at all. Just you remember that people don’t take well to outsiders coming into our town and changing everything.” He picked a bit of earwax from his ear and studied it before rubbing it between his fingers. “Remember you didn’t hear it from me.”

“You trying to tell me something, Pole? I’m an outsider and I’m changing this old building into a bookshop.”

“Oh, no! I don’t mean you. Yer all right so far. Yer not a pervert, as far as I know.”

“Well, you better watch me closely because you never know. I came from that big city of Chicago and you know how many weirdoes there are in big cities. You don’t know what I might be cooking up in the back room or who I might be keeping upstairs in my apartment.”

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“Aw, no. Yer all right. As long as ya don’t piss certain people off, you’ll be OK.”

This was going nowhere she wanted to go. “Pole, I have to make some phone calls. I’d like to stand here and talk, but you know, I gotta get to work.”

“OK, I’m going.” He turned to leave, pushing the heavy glass door open, then calling over his shoulder, “I’m warning ya, though—you’d better stay outta that faggot Depot Cafe.” His grin held a sinister curl, and before she could ask anything more, he stepped down the front steps and walked up the sidewalk to bother someone else on Main.

The faggot Depot Cafe. When Amanda thought of the friendly people that came into the Chicago bookstore—the caring people who bought books and magazines when the bookstore was struggling and the good people who knew instinctively when she needed a spirit booster or some humor in her day—she was furious. Remembering all those people who were openly gay and wonderful and good caused her to wonder again if she had made a mistake coming to Morgan’s Bridge.

Amanda would stay long enough to find out about her family background and then she thought she might pack up and go back to the insane sanity of the big city. Of course, ignorance could be found everywhere, but she had hoped this small town would reveal more acceptance—or at least, tolerance. She sat for a while and mulled over the whole move.

Perhaps she had made a very big error moving away from all that was familiar and people she understood. She looked around and saw the rows and rows of cases and boxes filled with books from all over the country and wondered what it would cost to pack it all up and go back to Illinois. Maybe one of the suburbs of Chicago—one of the strip malls—would be a

satisfying place to locate. Or maybe even Evanston, near the university. That area was cosmopolitan and accepting. She had just about decided that she had made the biggest blunder in her life. How could she have been so impulsive?

She'd give this place a little time to reveal its true core and then she'd pack up the wagons and head back west.

By seven that evening, the day had turned into a rainy night and Amanda was dangerously lonely. She had been in this village for nearly a week and had not met one person she thought close enough to call. The windows held spatters of chilly rain—not enough to wash the dust down, yet plenty to encourage the depression that was steadily filling her brain. Panic seeped in when those dark clouds invaded her head. She did everything to stifle her ability to engulf herself with self-loathing ideas. It would become a battle of hateful thoughts and then self-affirming statements. They fought back and forth like two pugilists in the boxing ring of her brain. She imagined them bouncing off the ropes and smashing the other in the gut. But those thoughts were getting fewer and fewer. Only on a bad night—at 2:00 a.m.—when it was raining—and she was in bed—alone. And then she might as well get up and read a book because the match was not going to be called until the twelfth round, for sure.

She took a deep breath and thought through the 12 Steps she had read in a Blue Book a year ago hoping she wasn't heading for a relapse. It was time to get out of the shop and eat some dinner and maybe get into a conversation or two.

Every morning another ten or twelve cases of books arrived from shops around the country. She had been piling boxes up in the corners while she tried to unpack, price, and inventory them into her computer base as fast as she could. But

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she was getting behind. She had volumes of classical fiction stacked on the steps up to the apartment, business tomes on top of the counters and along any wall space she could find, piles and piles of books of all kinds everywhere. Every night she had been too tired to do anything but open a can of soup. She wanted something more than the canned soup she had been eating all week ... she didn't want another cup of soup for the rest of her life.

She put six old paperback copies of French's *The Women's Room* in the bathroom, hoping someone might steal them. She still had a few thousand dollars left of her small business loan, and she had purchased over a hundred dark-stained shelf units from a store in Grand Rapids that was going out of business. They were old and slightly battered; she got a terrific price on the deal and nearly felt guilty. The owner and his sons delivered the cases and had them set up in two hours in areas so that each genre had its own little three-walled cubical. She hung old wall lamps from the Salvation Army in each of the areas and planned to add appropriate memorabilia to each section. She unpacked an old Theodore Roosevelt teddy bear and a cast-iron toy fire engine for the children's collector books area and a few small cast-iron warships from the forties for the history section.

She was steadily filling the shelves with books, but her body was tired; her fingers ached, her knees were throbbing with mysterious pain beneath her kneecaps, and her back felt near collapse. She was at least twenty pounds overweight and out of any semblance of shape. The loneliness was far more painful than anything else, though.

She could hear music and laughter coming from the Sky Rocket Saloon across the street and people slamming car doors as that place packed up with revelries. The street was filling with

parked cars. She smelled the luscious odors of food coming from the restaurant next to the river, and decided that tonight she would go on down to that little place, the Depot Cafe, and see what they had to offer.

She began to count up the measly receipts of the day, swiping angrily at her cowardly tears of regret. A thought or a feeling—she didn't know what—made her aware of someone at the glass door. The day had become dark and Amanda couldn't see her in the dim porch light. She only caught a glimpse of the woman before she quickly turned—her shoulder-length fluff of silver hair twirling across her face—and left the small bit of glow on the porch step. And then she was gone. Amanda thought she had seen her before. It was the same woman she had seen when she first drove into town—the woman with jeans tucked into her leather boots and the worn denim jacket with the bright sun painted over her shoulder. Amanda went around the desk and the display case and hurried to the door. The music from the saloon was loud, with too much bass. The rain had stopped, leaving the sidewalks and street wet and dark. The few streetlamps were inadequate. The woman was not running away. She was walking swiftly, like someone might who had business somewhere else.

Amanda called after her. Did she want to come into the bookstore? Could she help her? The woman stopped and turned. A piece of jewelry pinned to her shoulder caught a glint from the streetlamp. She now stood below the light several yards away, and Amanda saw that it was indeed the same woman she had seen that first day she had come into town. The woman now wore a denim skirt brushing the tops of the same sort of soft boots. Her shoulders were covered with a maroon shawl bordered with wispy fringe. Her white hair was full and

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hung to her shoulders and glimmered luminescent in the dim light of the old streetlamp, as if full of raindrops cast in her hair like tiny lights. A moth, benign in the cool air, circled her head and Amanda thought she saw the flick of a bat pass by. The woman's back was straight and her footing secure. When she turned, her lips betrayed a small smile and her eyes narrowed over full, rounded cheeks.

“No. You cannot help me,” she said in a low, confident voice not at all unfriendly. “But I will be able to help you.” She laughed a deep, throaty laugh and then turned and hurried away.

Amanda stood and watched her go, wondering if she had really seen her or merely imagined her. The thought of the nearby bat made her shiver and go back into the shop. She locked the door and turned off the six switches of lights, leaving only the stair landing light which gave a rosy glow to the stairway. She went up to her apartment to change out of her slacks into a loose pair of jeans, a T-shirt, and a baggy denim shirt.

The streetlight, the bar signs, and the soft radiance from the other storefronts lighted her bedroom. Wondering about some of the shops, she promised herself she would get to each one of them in the next few days. There was an antiques shop up the street a bit and a hair salon next to it. The rooms above the stores looked occupied, with curtains across lit windows—apartments like hers. Moving to the side window overlooking the Depot Cafe and the dark river beyond, she could see the bridge and the short road across it leading up the hill on the other side.

For the first time she noticed a long, low building to the north of the cafe. It was dark, but she thought she saw a person disappear around a corner, even thinking it might be the woman

who had just left the bookshop's doorway. The street on the other side of the bridge was lined with small clapboard houses fronted with porches in various stages of sag or repair.

One house was lit up like a parchment lamp. It had two lit porches, one over the other. Amanda watched a woman walk out on the lower porch, turn, and lock her door, and then lightly run down the steps and sort of jog down the street toward the bridge. She slowed to a walk at the bridge until halfway across, when she stopped, leaned over, and spit into the river. She waited a minute as if watching her deposit float off. She continued across and then turned toward the cafe. Amanda could see through the misty evening that she wore a poncho of what looked like wool and a pair of worn jeans. The lady ran to the door of the cafe and walked into, what appeared from Amanda's vantage point, to be a friendly atmosphere. The windows had red-and-white-checked cafe curtains. She could barely see the woman through the window as she slipped the poncho over her head and shook the rain from her short, fluffy, bronze hair.

Amanda took a brief look in the mirror at her own stringy, mousy locks, and grabbed the hairbrush. She swiped some pink over her lips for moisture, and left the apartment to Shakespeare-the-Cat.

Amanda hurried down to the Depot Cafe. She was met with a warm glow and aromas that could melt a cold heart. She chose a small window table covered by a red-checked tablecloth. The bright pattern perfectly balanced the dark woodwork around the windows, on the floor, and the ceiling. There were about ten small tables scattered around the room and one large, round table in the far corner.

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A beautiful old Aladdin lantern with a tall glass chimney hung over that table where three people, the woman who had just come over the bridge and two men, sat talking. Amanda could not hear what they were talking about except that it was a soft, pleasant exchanging of thoughts and ideas. One of the men, who looked, because of his white apron, to be the chef, got up from the table and walked back into the kitchen.

Amanda felt a slice of loneliness cut into her like a dull knife. She wanted to be at that table, no matter what they were talking about. It would just be too awkward for her to go over and ask to sit with them. There were no other diners in the cafe. She could hear the chef working in the kitchen, swishing water in the sink and whistling “Dixie” in a slow, beautifully trilling melody. Amanda looked out her window at the raindrops plunking in dark puddles.

The other man at the round table got up, and as he walked past, he smiled perfect “movie star teeth” and said, “I’ll be right with you,” before going into the kitchen.

He was young, by her standards—in his early thirties. He was slim and handsome as a model, his brown hair perfectly groomed and his smile confident and pearly. He wore creased chinos and a blue oxford shirt rolled up at the sleeves. Within seconds he was back beside her table with a glass of ice water with a floating lemon slice. Then, with the expertise and care of an artist, his movements sparse and silent, he slipped a large, white, china bowl in front of her.

“Soup?” she asked.

“Asparagus butter cream.”

“Soup?”



“Our specialty.” He smiled. “Enjoy.” He turned and went back into the kitchen, where she could hear him talking agreeably with the chef.

Feeling uncomfortable, Amanda draped the linen napkin across her lap. She had not asked for anything yet and she sure didn’t feel much like soup. She picked up the silver soup spoon and stared at the creamy purée. She dipped the spoon’s bowl in the thick broth and lifted a tiny portion to her mouth. It was delicious: warm and delicate asparagus with a taste so discreet of herbs and garlic that she admired the restraint of the cook.

After a few spoonfuls she relaxed a bit and looked around the room. The restaurant was decorated to the hilt with train memorabilia. Black and navy-blue conductors’ and engineers’ hats hung from the room’s center beam. Old railroad signs, and white crossing signs looking like white sleeves crossed in caution, hung on each side of the door. In muted hues, many advertising signs of the fifties hung from the walls, showing the dome cars and familiar routes traversing the country east to west through the Colorado mountain ranges. Framed schedules and fading charts hung from the walls.

An art deco poster depicted a Zephyr Special pulling double-decker cars with passengers gazing out at the wondrous Rocky Mountain range as they curved down into Denver, and the famous Denver train station. The depot’s original fading slate board with ARRIVALS AND DEPARTURES hung on one wall, with entrees under ARRIVALS and desserts under DEPARTURES, all written haphazardly in pink and yellow chalk. A small, beautifully handmade sign hanging on the back of the register proclaimed in neat calligraphy: *MANY OF OUR ITEMS HAVE BEEN GRACIOUSLY LOANED BY THE PROPRIETORS OF THE UNIQUE ANTIQUE SHOPPE.*

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As soon as Amanda had finished the soup, the waiter was again at her side.

"My name is Lyle." His voice was friendly and his face and eyes so open she felt she had known him before.

"Is this your cafe?" she asked. "Have we met before?"

"Yes, this place is mine, along with Bubba back there." He tipped his head toward the kitchen. "And no, I don't think we've met—unless you lived in San Francisco in the sixties."

"No," she said. She obviously had underestimated his age. "But that would have been nice. I've never been to San Francisco."

She ordered roast chicken with lemon-asparagus and wild rice. The dinner was served on white ironstone dishes rimmed with thin, blue lines and the name "Pennsylvania Railroad." A barely audible CD of a lilting Celtic group and the soft rhythmic click-clacking of a fifteen-car Lionel toy train circling high above the room on elevated tracks accompanied dinner. The Lionel passenger cars blinked with tiny, lit, translucent windows. The miniature engine beamed a strong light as if it were traveling the Pennsylvania-Albuquerque route, swaying and click-clacking along in a hurry to keep its schedule. The effect was at once a cheery caution of passing time and a lonely reminder of long-ago places.

The cafe lights were dimmed low, giving a peaceful aura to the room. On the walls at each table hung old conductors' lamps, now fitted with electric lights glowing through their red glass.

When Amanda finished her meal, Lyle called over from the round table and asked her if she would like to join them for a while. Relieved, she eagerly did and introduced herself. A fattened golden retriever unfolded herself from under the table,

placed her muzzle in Amanda's lap, wagged her tail, and looked up at her with dark brown eyes.

"That's the depot diva, Katy-girl," Lyle said.

Amanda loved her immediately. The dog must have smelled Shakespeare's fur on her pants because she made an important business of sniffing her jeans. Amanda rubbed her back and fondled her huge silky ears. She smelled clean and velvety, as if she had been bathed recently. She was easy to fall for; Katy-girl was totally without judgment.

Amanda would spend many evenings there, sipping a glass of red nonalcoholic Michigan wine that Lyle ordered specially for her from Traverse Bay, where northern breezes over cold Lake Michigan's water cooled the orchards of green muscadine purple concords. She whiled away long, late evenings spinning and swapping stories with Lyle Goodspeed and his chef, Bubba Wilson—partners in business as well as life—and their friend Jessica Launier. Lyle told Amanda about the villagers not quite accepting them as members of the community.

"We know there could be more customers coming into the restaurant," Lyle said. "The cafe is mostly supported by out-of-towners that have heard about Bubba's cooking. But even the local volunteer firemen—"

Bubba called out from the kitchen, "I'm gonna win over their bellies, Lyle. Just give me a chance."

"I swear," said Jessica, "if you'd get some of those fabulous box lunches to them—maybe at the next fire?"

"Maybe." Lyle was interested. "We might try that. Hunger can prevail over prejudice any day. Good idea, Jess."

"Homophobia is on its way out of style, darlings," she said. "It's old and ignorant and it is purely boring." She picked at one

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of her freshly lacquered dark brick nails as if weary and bored. Both men hooted and laughed with sarcastic but good humor.

"Don't hold yo' pee, baby. Just don't hold yo' pee," Bubba called from the kitchen.

Over time, Amanda has listened to wonderful stories in that little train station, some of it fact and a lot of it fiction. And during that first visit on a rainy night when shards of lonely depression had threatened her strength, she made some of the best friends she would ever know.

"Bubba? Come on out here and join us, will ya?" called Jessica.

"All right. Lemme put the grill to bed first."

Scraping and washing and cleaning up in general could be heard from the kitchen. "You better lock up and pull the shade over the door window, Lyle, or else the crowds won't leave us a bit o' time to story tell."

"I can't believe you call him Bubba," I said.

Lyle's eyes widened as if insulted. "And why not? His mama calls him that. He claims it's on his birth certificate."

"Yep." Bubba Wilson walked out of the kitchen, wiping his hands on a red-and-white-checked kitchen towel and sat with them. Katy-girl immediately wrapped herself around Bubba's feet in devotion. He leaned down and affectionately held the dog's nose and murmured affections. She raised her head to him with adoration. He lightly kissed each eye.

"Everyone loves Katy-girl," Lyle said. "But her heart belongs to Bubba."

Bubba had an ample belly beneath a white, full-length chef's apron. "My mama called me Bubba when I was nothing but a pip-squeak." He pushed his thick glasses up on the bridge of his nose with the knuckle of his finger. "It doesn't have as

much of a bad connotation down South as it does up here in the North.”

Amanda wanted to be sure. “So, you don’t mind when people call you Bubba?”

“Naw. I like it. I don’t have a shotgun in the back window of my pickup truck, if that’s what you mean. Hell, I don’t even have a truck. And I even graduated from the Pride of the South, the University of Alabama. At Tuscaloosa, to boot. Go BAMA! Yes, I did. And yes,”—he lifted Amanda’s hand gently in his own— “you have my permission to call me Bubba. And what may I call you, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Geez,” breathed Jessica while patting Amanda on her sleeve. “I’m sorry, honey.” Then to Bubba: “This is our new neighbor and the owner of the bookstore, Amanda Stimpson. She’s moved over here from Chicago and we’re expecting some great stories at the Round Table about the big city.”

“How’d do, Miss—may I call you Manda?”

“Don’t you mind if it comes out familiar-like, Amanda,” Lyle warned. “He’s a Southerner. Everybody’s a cousin.”

Jessica batted Lyle’s shoulder affectionately. “Now, don’t start something off right away, Lyle. Let the woman find out for herself.”

“What are you talking about?”

Bubba took Amanda’s hand again in his. “Don’t you no nevermind them, darlin’. They’re always after me about my southern roots. They say I talk funny, but I say they talk hollow like something coming out the wet end of a corn cob pipe.” His hands were huge and soft as dough and gentle as petals. He kissed her hand and then sat back. “Don’t you mind these cretins, Miss Manda. They don’t understand the ways of a true southern gentleman.”

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Lyle snorted sarcastically and Jessica giggled like a set of crystals shaking from the old gas lamp at the door. Her hair was the color of spun copper and swirled around her face, soft and lovely. She blinked her green eyes, which were occasionally squinty with an affect of holding secrets and mystery.

“Bubba is a storyteller,” Lyle said. “He tells stories all over the state. He’s won titles with his storytelling.”

“If they only paid me money for it, maybe I wouldn’t have to make a living back there in the kitchen shoving grease around. It gets hotter’n a goat’s butt in a pepper patch.”

“Awh, you love to cook,” Jessica said. “Don’t give us that.”

Bubba looked at Amanda and grinned. “I do love to cook. Ever since I was a kid. I get a kick out of it all, really, and this restaurant is the best thing I ever put together. I’ve been trying to introduce these two to greens and grits, but it’s a lost cause. Ain’t nothin’ gooder’n grits, ’cept maybe cheese grits. I think Jessica would like chitlins, but I’m afraid she’d ask what they were and I can’t tell her that. I’d love to go on over to Le Cordon Bleu and study with the masters.”

“Just wait. Just wait,” said Lyle, holding up his right hand. “We’re going to send you to New York.” He leaned forward and said, “You don’t have to go all the way to *Europe*, do you?” He pronounced “Europe” with what could only be scorn.

Amanda felt surrounded by positive energy and humor. She hoped they would allow her to join their circle of companionship. They obviously loved and respected each other, exactly what makes a strong bonding, exactly what she was yearning for when she left Chicago.

“Just tell us a story, Bubba, honey.” Jessica leaned sideways and reached for her purse. “Lyle, did you lock up carefully? Let’s pull the rest of the shades over the windows.”

She got up and helped finish the job of closing the cafe. They pulled the shades and turned off all the lights but a small light over the stove and the oil lamp over their table. Lyle leaned down behind the register and switched off the train and CD player.

Before sitting down again Jessica opened her purse and without looking at anyone, asked, "Anybody need a smoke?"

"No. Dammit, Jess!" Lyle was actually harmless in his protest. "One. All you get is one. OK? I can't stand the smoke."

Jessica smiled and leaned toward the oil lamp to light her cigarette. Amanda noticed it was not a cigarette at all, but a finely twisted joint. She took a hit, sucking the smoke into her lungs slow and easy. Her eyes closed and she hummed out her pleasure.

Lyle said in a soft voice, "Please, Jess. Put it out."

"All right, Lyle."

Turning to Bubba, she cooed, "Go on, honey. Tell us that story about the train and the quilts and the ..."—she nodded at her friend to get on with the story while she savored the last of the smoke in her lungs—"go on, Bubbly, darlin'."

"Ha!" He arched one eyebrow at her, feigning a stern attitude, and then took a drink of white wine from his long-stemmed bubble glass and relaxed in his chair.

Lyle and Amanda drank dark coffee with a decadent swirl of whipped cream on top.

"All right, now." Bubba began by taking off his apron, wiping the perspiration from his forehead and neck, and settling his bulk into the old Windsor chair. "Everbody git comfy and relaxed." His voice grew soft and low. His skin was smooth and clear, with ruddy cheeks and eyes pale tropical blue. Amanda couldn't help but be reminded of the Pillsbury Dough Boy and

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thought he would make a wonderful Santa for the bookstore at Christmas.

"I don't want no-body," he leaned forward, exaggerating the words and looking beady-eyed at Jessica— "no beautiful being interrupting me."

She nodded in agreement and the carved sterling silver disks hanging from her earlobes flickered in the flame light. Jessica used her first finger and thumb to squash out the last tiny bit of her smoldering joint.

Bubba sat back again and began with a slow cadence of a boy born of the South, where stories have been told on jasmine-scented front porches for generations. "You know that these old small towns, north and south, just fester with stories. Some fine and funny and some dark and murky, like that ol' river out there." He cocked his head toward the river. "Well. This old depot has been here over a hundred years. It's reeking with voices from the past. If you're real quiet late at night you can barely hear it, like they's talking in tongues. Look up there and see the original beams."

They all tilted their heads back to view the beams.

"Those are the very ones they used to build this place more than a hundred years ago. Imagine the builders hacking away at them, hewing them smooth, and then five or six men struggling to get them up there. And Lyle thinks that one window over there might have original glass because of the ripples. The lady up at the antiques shop agrees with him."

"She's got a great place," commented Jessica. "You've got to get up there real soon. Old jewelry. Hats. She's got the most wonderful old hats out of the twenties. And undergarments that Madonna would cry for—pink satin camisoles with delicate embroidered flowers."



“OK, OK,” Lyle complained. “Get to it, Bubba. Start the story.”

“Hush up. I’m trying to set the scene, build the ambiance, and project the tone.”

“Honey,” Jessica asked me from under drooping lids, “do you have to use the toddy? Potty? He might be building up for a while.”

“All right now,” Bubba said, his voice turning soft and low. “This is one of the most famous and oldest stories about Morgan’s Bridge. It’s called ‘The Broken Stitches of the Bear Claw Quilt.’”

Jessica whispered, “Bubba is sometimes given over to hyperbole.”

Bubba’s voice, quiet and intimate, caused them to lean back, get comfortable, and listen intently to the tale.

“This story is one of twelve that my mother recorded as a young woman. She grew up here before moving south with my father. When my little sister and I were teenagers, she moved us back up here after Daddy drowned in the Gulf of Mexico trying to catch his limit of mullet.

“When she moved back here, she was haunted by her youth and I suppose she felt guilt by association or relation. I think she thought that writing the whole bunch of stories down on paper would somehow relieve her of that guilt. She thought her silence was nearly as bad as the action itself and that to remain silent when she knew a crime had taken place—”

“Now wait a minute, Bubba,” Lyle said, interrupting. “You don’t want to tell everything you know. Some of that stuff is dangerous and I don’t want to see you end up in the police chief’s cage over there.”

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“Don’t worry.” Bubba held a hand up to Lyle. “I ain’t gonna tell *that* story.”

“What story?” Jessica asked.

“Who hid you-know-who from the government,” Lyle said.

“Oh, *that* story. Well, go on and tell something, Bubba. I’m about to fall asleep,” Jessica said.

Bubba got up from the table and took an old, framed photo from the darkness of one of the walls and brought it back to the table. He turned to Amanda. “Miss Manda, there are some stories that must wait for a while. First things first, OK?”

“Sure. I want to hear about this Bear Claw quilt.”

“Anyway, Momma knew a crime had taken place—that particular story really belongs to her friend, Willa Morgan. Momma and Willa were girlfriends all the time they were growing up. Knowing what those Morgan women did during the war and not telling made my mama think she was as guilty as the perpetrators. It didn’t matter that most of this had happened many years ago or that no one remembered. Mama still carried her guilt around like a tear-dampened hankie balled up in her apron pocket.

“And yet, Mama’s loyalty to her friends was stronger than her guilt and so she never told her secrets. I remember Daddy telling me not to ask again about that gang of misfit women. He said she was lucky he had rescued her when he did. I knew this hurt Mama.”

Bubba held the photo so they could see it better. “She loved Willa and Willa’s sister-in-law and mother-in-law like they were her own family. She kept this little picture in her middle desk drawer for as long as I can remember.”

Three women stood in front of a brand-new, open-topped, 1939 black Buick. The oldest was gussied up in a wide-

brimmed, black straw hat partially hiding a twisted-up bun and graying hair. A dark dress barely fitted her large-boned figure and the hem was just at the bottom of her knees. She wore black walking shoes. She was not fat, but strong-looking.

“Mother MaryNell, they called her,” Bubba said as he wiped a speck of dust from the picture. “She kept an immaculate house and a two-acre garden that contributed to half the town’s dinner tables. When many folks didn’t have a potato or even a snip of celery to eat, she left food by the bagful on their steps. And flowers. She grew an acre of flowers back behind her house and left bunches of ’em tied up in ribbons on folks’ porches. I think she did things for people even I don’t know about.”

“Well,” Lyle said, “people didn’t tell you things because what you don’t know, you can’t testify to.”

“Yes, Grandma MaryNell was a strong woman in many ways. And that daughter of hers, well, she’s helped many folks in this little village.”

“And the whole town honored her,” said Jessica. “Enough to do what they did. The whole town loved that woman and still does.”

Lyle glared at Jessica and said, “Hush now.”

Bubba continued. “The two younger women—girls, really—are her daughter and her daughter-in-law. That one’s Willa.”

“Willa Morgan?” Amanda looked closer at a young Willa Morgan with blond curls around her face.

“Yup, right next to Caroline.” He pointed to the smiling and deceptively happy women in small, straw Easter hats matching colors in their slender, cotton dresses.

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Jessica leaned forward to better see the black-and-white photo. "Those brown-and-white, chunky Spectator heels surely were not sensible enough for Grandma."

Bubba resumed his story. "Sitting up in the car behind them is Mama's uncle Arthur, with his grim face under that sunshading, felt hat. Overweight, impatient, he seems to be receding into the background; the interest point of the picture being Willa and Caroline, of course.

"I wondered all my life about these people, and when Mama was dying up on the fourth floor of the hospital, she finally opened the way for me ask. She said if I still had any curiosity about her friends, I just as well might ask now and get it over with. Daddy was dead by then, and all her relatives but me were gone. She said it didn't matter anymore. So, I asked her about everything I wanted to know. And there she laid it all out as honest as can be, as if she was spreading a many-pieced dress pattern out on the hospital bed coverlet, each part contributing to the whole.

"She told me where she had hidden the stories, way up behind the box of old cookbooks in the pantry cupboard. She directed me to get the ladder out of the garage to be able to reach all the way to the back of the shelves."

Amanda looked over at Jessica. She was smiling, enjoying the flow and mounting tension in Bubba's story.

"I was relieved the night Mamma died; her suffering finally quieted," Bubba said. "I went back to her house, built a nice, quiet fire in the old fireplace, spooned out some of Mama's homemade, comfort-laden herbal tea, and started reading the crinkly, aged sheets of paper.

"She was barely impressionable and sticky with pure childhood exuberance in 1949 when they laid the guilt on her

not to tell, and it's been a burr in her hair ever since. She wrote it all down on onionskin paper with her quaint old typewriter. She used the onionskin paper so she could erase the misspells. I thought she only used the typewriter to write out recipes on three by five cards. She had a huge collection. And she did know how to cook up some mysterious things. MaryNell taught her that, and I say that with some reservation. After all I don't want just anybody to know what that woman, MaryNell Morgan, did in her kitchen that night so long ago.

"So now I have these stories and I like to tell them. All of them. They are interesting and I don't feel any need to keep them boxed up any longer. And what an amazing accomplishment for a town—a whole village—to keep such a secret for all these years."

"Honey, you mean two secrets, don't ya?" asked Jessica.

"Yah, Bubba. You're getting them mixed up. Tell the one about that kid named Carlton. The train story. Leave the murder and the one about MaryNell and the feds for later."

"Murder?" Amanda was engrossed. "What murder?"

"No, you are absolutely right, Lyle. I'm leaving the last one for Willa or Caroline to tell. It's their story," Bubba said. "I suppose the police chief has his version too. But this story is my mama's and it's my favorite.

"This small village of Morgan's Bridge was established around 1834. As a pioneer village it nestled on both sides of the swift and deep muddy river out here, whose slippery banks were early on connected by its namesake bridge. The first schoolhouse sat up there across the river by the road."

"Up there where Vee Edwards' house is," said Jessica. "The yellow house with all the white trim."

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Bubba nodded in agreement. “The little schoolhouse is gone now. All that’s left is a boulder with a plaque on it telling about it burning down in 1896. A little one-room school built with logs by the town fathers. The students were taught by a husband and wife team. At first the bridge was a log and board expansion, but every ten years or so and with each growing generation the bridge was updated and renewed, until its present cement and cable construction. And now, after years of angry words and stingin’ prejudices, the cement fixture serves to ‘bridge the gaps’ of the village.”

“Honey,” murmured Jessica, “there are still plenty of gaps to be mended.”

“Ain’t that the truth,” Lyle agreed.

“The bridge now safely expands over a tamed river,” Bubba said. “Sometimes it dwindles down to a trickle by autumn. Usually by November. But for many years the bridge was a physical and mental challenge to the bravery of any passerby, whether on foot, horse and buggy, or wagon. At one point the current is so swift around the footings and under the bridge that it could suck a good-sized dog or even a large man right underwater without spitting the body up again for twenty yards downriver.”

Lyle went to the kitchen and brought back a large basket of popcorn he put in the center of the table, and then he leaned up and turned the lamp’s wick down, making the room dark and glowing. Jessica and Bubba continued to sip their wine.

“Over the years,” Bubba said, “the bridge served the villagers as a connector and often as a divider, depending on how you looked at it—uptown and downtown—the impoverished small log cabins or the wealthy large clapboard house sections. The happiness and well-being of anyone rich or

poor depended entirely on the spirits and attitudes of those living—and dead—within each dwelling.”

He looked at Amanda. “Have you seen that large three-storied Victorian built up on the corner of Main Street and Michiwana Avenue, Manda? The one with gaudy white gingerbread along the eaves? That huge salmon-pink monster with all the many-paned, beveled windows?”

She thought how she liked the house and how it reminded her of some old movie with Judy Garland.

Bubba sipped his wine, and then carefully placed the glass on the table. Turning the thin glass stem around between his thumb and forefinger, he continued. “Well, that house held far less interest than Mary Morgan’s tattered shacks down next to the river.”

“You don’t mean Mad Mary, do you?” Lyle laughed.

“I mean Mary Morgan and her tattered shack alongside the river’s bank. At Christmastime the seven confused souls living up there on the other side of town, in the big Victorian with the beribboned, wreathed door and windows brightly lit with candles, felt only sadness. They could not possibly feel the same gaiety Mary’s house had or the love and affection flowing freely in Johnny Nelson’s tiny, gray, clapboard house across the bridge and up the road near the railroad tracks. It’s the attitude within the dwelling that shapes lives. It has nothing to do with riches or acquisitions.”

Jessica sipped her wine and said, “You see, Amanda, he’s setting us up for a whole platter full of stories. I think he could go on for weeks, with a new character each night, without stopping.”

Bubba talked on in that charming southern drawl. “In 1834 there were no railroad tracks in Morgan’s Bridge and the only

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bridge was the crude log and leather contrivance put together by the few Native Americans living along the west side of the river. The tracks, all-important to the village and to this particular story, would not be built for many years. Brothers Frank and Harold Morgan had grown tired of their long river trips up and down the Rumble River and up into Mayhaw Creek in Bentley County, buying, selling, and trading. The brothers respected the other men's knowledge of the river and surrounding wildlife, and wanted to learn the medicinal theories and good medicine practices of the women. Because of this respect they built a good relationship with the men and women of the little campground, and decided to settle down and build a trading post. The Native Americans reserved their judgment. But they did welcome the convenience of a trading post nearby.

"The brothers Morgan believed that there could be good trading opportunities along the river, south of the logging town of Grand Rapids. They built a couple of good pine board houses and a trading post so that the Pottawatomie tribe could bring their furs to the post rather than wait for the Morgans to visit their camps. Harold loved the area and remarked that this spot along the river "felt fertile as Frieda Hampton's daughters."

And sure enough, by the 1800s a railroad was built on the other side of the river. It was the beginning of slow but steady growth for Morgan's Bridge.

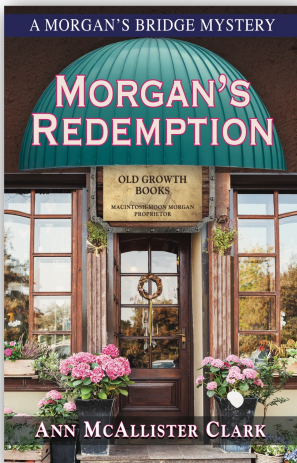
"Neither of the brothers could have known how many wonderful, humorous, sad, and tragic tales would be lived in and around their small village of Morgan's Bridge. But the myths and legends began to grow almost as soon as they settled their families into the loamy fertile hillsides."



“Um-hum. And how many of these stories are your own inventions, Bub?” Lyle asked, intending no rancor.

“There are those that say the stories aren’t legends at all,” Bubba said with dignity. “They say it’s history—Morgan’s Bridge history.”

Bubba finally began his story.



*The Morgan brothers settled Morgan's Bridge, Michigan in 1848. Amanda Stimpson arrives in Morgan's Bridge from Chicago in the 1990's to discover her secretly kept background.*

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By Ann McAllister Clark

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