



Christmas
Every Morning

A NOVEL BY

Lisa Tawn Bergren



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P R E S S

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*For Mom,
who has always been what I needed in a mother.
I love you.*





A C K N O W L E D G E M E N T S

I must acknowledge that it was my sister-in-law, Cara Berggren, who told me what she had heard about a Christmas room in a remarkable Alzheimer's unit. I took the story from there, but she planted that excellent seed. Without our conversation in the car that day, this tale would never have been told.

Many thanks to Kim Alinder, Debi Brown, and Heidi Endicott, women experienced in dealing with loved ones and patients afflicted with Alzheimer's disease. They checked my manuscript for inconsistencies and shared other ideas with me that would bring the "true" experience home.

Becky Albright, a friend and family counselor, helped me muddle through Krista's issues with Charlotte and make them more believable. And my uncle, Dr. Cecil Leitch, made sure I got the medical stuff right.

Cheryl Crawford, faithful friend and prayer warrior, helped me through this project with encouragement and kind words and

A c k n o w l e d g m e n t s

cards, while my editors, the incomparable Erin Healy and Traci DePree, never fail to help me produce the best book I have in me.

If you haven't been to Taos, New Mexico, try to do so. It's an amazing place to visit. Tim and I stayed at a lovely B&B (www.spiritandwind.com) and canvassed the city and environs. Smaller than Santa Fe, more mountainous than desertlike, still artsy. Wonderful!

We are all always beginners.

—THOMAS MERTON



Though outwardly we are wasting away,
yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.

—2 CORINTHIANS 4:16



P R O L O G U E

“She’s dying, Krista.”

I took a long, slow breath. “She died a long time ago, Dane.”

He paused, and I could picture him formulating his next words, something that would move me. Why was my relationship with my mother so important to him? I mean, other than the fact that she was a patient in his care. “There’s still time, Kristabelle.”

I sighed. Dane knew that his old nickname for me always got to me. “For what? For long, deep conversations?” I winced at the harsh slice of sarcasm in my tone.

“You never know,” he said quietly. “An aide found something you should see.”

“What?”

“Come. I’ll keep it here in my office until you arrive. Consider it a Christmas present.”

“It’s December ninth.”

“Okay, consider it an early present.”

It was typical of him to hold out a mysterious hook like that. “I don’t know, Dane. The school term isn’t over yet. It’s a hard time to get someone to cover for me.” It wasn’t the whole truth. I had an assistant professor who could handle things on her own. And I could get back for finals. Maybe. Unless Dane wasn’t overstating the facts.

“Krista. She’s *dying*. Her doctor tells me she has a few weeks, tops. Tell your department chair. He’ll let you go. This is the end.”

I stared out my cottage window to the old pines that covered my yard in shadows. The end. The end had always seemed so far away.

Too far away. In some ways I wanted an end to my relationship with my mother, the mother who had never loved me as I longed to be loved. When she started disappearing, with her went so many of my hopes for what could have been. The road to this place had been long and lonely. Except for Dane. He had always been there, had always waited. I owed it to him to show. “I’ll be there on Saturday.”

“I’ll be here. Come and find me.”

“Okay. I teach a Saturday morning class. I can get out of here after lunch and down there by five or six.”

“I’ll make you dinner.”

“Dane, I—”

“Dinner. At seven.”

I slowly let my mouth close and paused. I was in no mood to argue with him now. “I’ll meet you at Cimarron,” I said.

“Great. It will be good to see you, Kristabelle.” I closed my eyes, imagining him in his office at Cimarron Care Center. Brushing his

too-long hair out of his eyes as he looked through his own window.

“It will be good to see you, too, Dane. Good-bye.”

He hung up then without another word, and it left me feeling slightly bereft. I hung on to the telephone receiver as if I could catch one more word, one more breath, one more connection with the man who had stolen my heart at sixteen.

Dane McConnell remained on my mind as I wrapped up things at the college, prepped my assistant, Alissa, to handle my history classes for the following week, and then drove the scenic route down to Taos from Colorado Springs, about a five-hour trip. My old Honda Prelude hugged the roads along the magnificent San Luis Valley. The valley’s shoulders were still covered in late spring snow, her belly carpeted in a rich, verdant green. It was here that in 1862 Maggie O’Neil single-handedly led a wagon train to settle a town in western Colorado, and nearby Cecilia Gaines went so crazy one winter they named a waterway in her honor—“Woman Hollering Creek.”

I drove too fast but liked the way the speed made my scalp tingle when I rounded a corner and dipped, sending my stomach flying. Dane had never driven too fast. He was methodical in everything he did, quietly moving ever forward. He had done much in his years since grad school, establishing Cimarron and making it a national think tank for those involved in gerontology. After high school we had essentially ceased communication for years before Cimarron came about. Then when Mother finally got

to the point in her descent into Alzheimer's that she needed full-time institutionalized care, I gave him a call. I hadn't been able to find a facility that I was satisfied with for more than a year, when a college friend had shown me the magazine article on the opening of Cimarron and its patron saint, Dane McConnell.

"Good looking *and* nice to old people," she had moaned. "Why can't I meet a guy like that?"

"I know him," I said, staring at the black-and-white photograph.

"Get out."

"I do. Or did. We used to be...together."

"What happened?" she asked, her eyes dripping disbelief.

"I'm not sure."

I still wasn't sure. Things between us had simply faded over the years. But when I saw him again, it all seemed to come back. Or at least a part of what we had once had. There always seemed to be a submerged wall between us, something we couldn't quite bridge or blast through. So we had simply gone swimming toward different shores.

Mother's care had brought us back together over the last five years. With the congestive heart failure that was taking her body, I supposed the link between us would finally be severed. I would retreat to Colorado, and he would remain in our beloved Taos, the place of our youth, of our beginnings, of our hearts. And any lingering dream of living happily ever after with Dane McConnell could be buried forever with my unhappy memories of Mother.

I loosened my hands on the wheel, realizing that I was gripping

it so hard my knuckles were white. I glanced in the rearview mirror, knowing that my reverie was distracting me from paying attention to the road. It was just that Dane was a hard man to get over. His unique ancestry had gifted him with the looks of a Scottish Highlander and the sultry, earthy ways of the Taos Indians. A curious, inspiring mix that left him with both a leader's stance and a wise man's knowing eyes. Grounded but visionary. A driving force, yet empathetic at the same time. His employees loved working for him. Women routinely fell in love with him.

I didn't know why I could never get my act together so we could finally fall in love and stay in love. He'd certainly done his part. For some reason I'd always sensed that Dane was waiting for me, of all people. Why messed-up, confused me? Yet there he was. I'd found my reluctance easy to blame on my mother. She didn't love me as a mother should, yada-yada, but I'd had enough time with my counselor to know that there are reasons beyond her. Reasons that circle back to myself.

I'd always felt as if I was chasing after parental love, but the longer I chased it, the further it receded from my reach. It left a hole in my heart that I was hard-pressed to fill. God had come close to doing the job. Close. But there was still something there, another blockade I had yet to blast away. I would probably be working on my "issues" my whole life. But as my friend Michaela says, "Everyone's got issues." Supposedly I need to embrace them. I just want them to go away.

"Yeah," I muttered. Dane McConnell was better off without me. Who needed a woman still foundering in her past?

I had to focus on Mother. If this was indeed the end, I needed to wrap things up with her. Find closure. Some measure of peace. Even if she couldn't say the words I longed to hear.

I love you, Krista.

Why was it that she had never been able to force those four words from her lips?



1970

“Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright. ’Round yon virgin, Mother and Child, Holy infant so tender and mild, sleep in heavenly peace; sleep in heavenly peace.”

I left my hand on Oma’s shoulder as she played the old organ. Opa sang over my shoulder. It felt warm and cozy, singing Christmas carols with my grandparents. All that was missing was my mother’s high, clear voice joining in or Elena’s warm, lower voice.

I looked around Opa’s big belly and spotted Mother sitting beside the living room window. Mother had her fingers on her wedding band, slipping it on and off as she stared outside. She got it when she married my daddy. But I had never seen him. I sighed. I think Mother missed my daddy.

“Come sing with us, Charlotte,” Opa said.

She looked over at us, strange-like. Like she had heard Opa speak but didn’t hear him, all at the same time. Then she stared outside again. I was sad for her, the way she looked. I don’t even think she noticed it was snowing.

Oma started playing the organ again, and later we had a big

dinner, and then the best thing, we opened presents. I hoped that would make Mother happy. She smiled a little and seemed to like the rainbow socks I had got her. But she still looked faraway-like.

When Oma tucked me in that night—we always got to stay at Oma and Opa's on Christmas Eve—I asked her why Mother was acting so sad.

“Your mother is lonely,” Oma said, rubbing my cheek.

“Why? She's got us.”

“Yes, she does,” Oma said, leaning down to kiss me on the forehead. “Sometimes, in the missing of people we don't have, we look right over those we do. We are all very blessed to have you, Krista. I love you, child.”

“I love you, too, Oma.” I would've told Opa I loved him, too, 'cept he was in his armchair in the living room, already snoring away. And Mother... Well, she said she needed some air after dinner, and she wasn't back yet from her drive.

I had seen Oma and Opa look at each other across the table when she said that, all concerned-like. But they didn't say anything, and I didn't either. I didn't want anything to ruin Christmas.



C H A P T E R O n e

December 12

On the feast day of Our Lady of Guadalupe—patroness of Mexico and the Americas—as Hispanic Catholics across the Southwest commemorated a vision of the Virgin Mary as an Aztec maiden by playing festive mariachi music, singing *Las mañanitas*, and praying, I pulled off the highway and drove down the long, winding dirt road to Cimarron, situated just north of Taos beneath the great mountain. I braked for a stray dog, maneuvered around washboard ruts from recent rains, and then drove on. Past tiny houses, some with folksy yard art in front—there must have been a thousand wannabe artisans in Taos—others with the native fencing of tiny red cedar saplings carefully woven in a straight line, their tops at varying heights, what I deemed *truly* artistic.

As I crested the last hill, able to see for miles again, I pulled to a stop. I rolled down my window to take in a deep breath of desert

sage and the faintest hint of pine. This part of New Mexico was covered with the silver green of sagebrush, and the mountains looked as if they had been steeped in the deep green of pine forest tea, the tops dusted with silver snow. There was sand and red clay, colors of the earth that dominated the range, from taupe to Copper River Salmon to Philippine mahogany. The people who lived here often painted their homes in the same earth tones.

I loved the sensory thrill of the region, the connection between earth and sky and people. It sang to me, as it always had through all my years. God surely wanted his sons and daughters to understand their ties to the land. Had he not formed Adam and Eve of clay? Here it was self-evident. New Mexico's people lived in homes made from the foundations of the earth with roofs made from her bounty. The bright sun awakened people slumbering softly in their beds; warm sunsets brought closure to their days.

Had my mother ever revered the same things I did? By the time I was cognizant, she fancied herself a cousin of the literati that "civilized" Taos, people who loved the unique light and air and history that dominated the New Mexican landscape but irrevocably changed it with their upscale tastes. At one time or another she tried to paint like Georgia O'Keeffe or write like D. H. Lawrence. She wore too much silver-and-turquoise jewelry, inspired as much by the Navajo Indians as the late film star Millicent Rogers. In the end it seemed to me that she had spent her life masquerading as others instead of simply being herself. I never understood her. And she never understood me.

I hungrily scanned the landscape, my eyes settling on the

adobe outside the grounds of Cimarron Care Center, one forever owned by my friend Elena Rodriguez. She was the only friend I ever had that Mother claimed as a friend too. Other than Dane, of course. It had been Elena who had sold the valuable ten acres of land to Dane for his Alzheimer's unit for a fraction of the price it was worth, because she believed in his cause. It was with her I would stay while in Taos; she'd have it no other way. Neither would I.

On the far side of Cimarron I could see another modest adobe home the color of wet sand—Dane's home. In my mind I could see him puttering about his kitchen making soup or sprawled out before a fire in the kiva reading a book. But I knew he was at Cimarron. Dane loved his work and was almost always on site, if not taking care of administration tasks, then simply keeping patients company or walking the halls or grounds.

After a moment I took a deep breath and drove on. Cimarron, situated directly between Elena's and Dane's homes, came into brief view between the hills, then disappeared. What Dane had done with Cimarron's design was ingenious in its ability to safely contain the wandering inhabitants while maintaining a traditional neo-Pueblo style, incorporating the stucco exterior, thick adobe walls, slightly pitched roofline, and rounded corners.

I pulled to a stop outside a huge earthen berm, a man-made hill covered in native desert plants. The rise shielded patients from viewing the cars but not from seeing the outside. Dane had quickly discovered that Alzheimer's patients believed that their ride was arriving to take them home or leaving without them when vehicles

were within sight. *When are we going, Krista?* my mother, Charlotte, used to ask me even when we had no place to go. *We're late. You always make me late.*

And there were the times she would take the keys and just drive. It was nothing short of a miracle that she had not killed anyone while on one of her "Sunday drives." Nothing short of miraculous that she herself made it home in one piece. Some things, like driving, it seemed, would always stick in her cloudy brain. Except for her daughter and any semblance of love she had ever carried for her. That had disappeared into the mist.

"Let it go, Krista," I told myself for the thousandth time. Charlotte Mueller had given up trying to love me years before. What made a thirty-seven-year-old still yearn for it? I shook my head. It was nuts. I was here to say good-bye to my mother. Not coax from her some measure of reassurance that I was loved, always had been loved. It was too late for that.

"Dear God," I whispered, "help me let go of it. Help me find my way here."

I reluctantly opened the door of my car and stood groaning at the stiffness in my joints that told of hours on the road. It had been a long time since I had visited. A long time since I had had to face the shell of my mother and the man who now oversaw her care.

I heard a hint of music in the air and started walking toward the south. Taking the winding garden path that rounded the corner, I spied Dane on another berm that, from the top, offered a haunting view of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. He was lost in his music, and it threatened to draw me in too. I climbed halfway

up the hillside but then paused. Dane was a picture worthy of a portrait, sitting on a bench at the top of the slight hill. Behind him the mountains grew Venetian red in the setting sunlight peculiar to this region—truly appearing as “the Blood of Christ”—what the Spanish explorers had named them centuries before. I imagined the explorers seeing them as I was seeing them now, perhaps listening to the very same song Dane played. The snow at the higher elevations grew pink in the sunset light.

The way Dane played his *vihuela*, a half-size version of a twelve-string guitar, was beguiling. Soft in tone, it was perfect for the sad, sixteenth-century Spanish song he was playing, “Romance Antiguo.” I closed my eyes, picturing the dance steps that would accompany it and make it complete. He was an accomplished classical guitarist, and to hear him play the old Spanish folk tune was enough to make me pick up my skirts and do a gypsy dance the way my mother taught me as a girl. I would’ve been tempted, but fortunately I had jeans on.

When he ran his fingers over the last string, extracting the last note, I opened my eyes and pulled my hand to my lips.

He turned to me then, as if sensing my presence, and grinned. “Kristabelle! Had I known you were here, I would’ve demanded you dance. Only that would have made this evening any more perfect.”

I smiled, finding it impossible not to match his grin. “I don’t dance much anymore.” I wiped my sweaty hands on my jeans, preparing for a professional handshake, not wanting him to find my palms cold and clammy.

He was beside me then, enveloping me in his warm, familiar arms. A friendly hug, not a lover's embrace. "I'm sorry to hear that. When you danced, it was like...you were more alive for the sheer joy of it."

"Yes, well. Life..." I let the rest of my explanation drop. The words in my head sounded empty to me and certainly would to Dane, the man who had it all together. I tried to swallow and cast about for a change in subject. "Place is looking good."

"She is. The plants are maturing, and the walls haven't fallen in yet." He cast me a wry grin. "Come inside. I'll show you what's new." He glanced at me over his shoulder. "It's been awhile."

"It has," I admitted. He offered me a hand down the hillside, but I only smiled and said, "I'm all right."

"Suit yourself." He led the way around to the front entrance. With a swipe of the plastic card that hung from his neck, the door popped open. It was then that I noticed the new wing to Reminiscence Hall. "Is that...Christmas music?" I didn't remember hearing music playing through the hallway speakers the last time I'd visited.

He grinned at me, and I quickly looked away. The man only got better looking with age. Straight teeth, olive skin, and dark blond hair that always drifted into welcoming green eyes that seemed to see through me. "It's December, but it's going to be all Christmas all the time. Year-round. Welcome to our new Christmas room," he said as we entered the large hall, complete with a giant faux evergreen set in the corner and covered in chili pepper lights. The room was decked out for the season. There was even a baby

grand piano and a circle of chairs, as if ready for a round of “Joy to the World.” There were gift bags full of tissue. “We put small dime-store gifts in them for the residents to unwrap, then we wrap them up again,” Dane explained.

There was a miniature crèche set in another corner, complete with a shepherd and a wise man watching over the tiny baby Jesus. Fake candles with steady flames were dancing in each of the three windows. Outside, white Christmas lights hung from the eaves and glowed brightly against a dusky sky. I turned and caught a whiff of cinnamon and nutmeg and pine.

“It’s wonderful,” I said to Dane.

“I think so. It’s been remarkable for your mother.”

I shot him a curious look. “How so?”

“This Christmas room is part of the music therapy we do here at Cimarron. Some of the residents who come in here who no longer speak will sing entire Christmas carols from memory.”

I shook my head. “Amazing.”

“It is. Your mother sang ‘Silent Night’ by heart. Three whole verses before she stopped.”

“*My* mother?”

“Your mother.”

I ransacked my memory for when my mother would have last sung the song. We hadn’t routinely attended church since I was a kindergartner still content to sit on my grandmother’s lap. Mother had been with us at that time but then went on “hiatus from church,” as she referred to it, until I was about twelve. We attended on Christmas morning every year with Oma and Opa, when we

sang “Joy to the World” but not “Silent Night,” and there were never carols in our household after my grandparents died. She didn’t allow it, and it was okay with me since the songs reminded me of my loved ones and made me miss them all the more. Even after we started going back to church on occasion, there still wasn’t Christmas music in our household come December. That was when her spirits always seemed the lowest. But there were bigger issues on my mind. If she could sing, then... “What does this mean? Does it mean she’s...recovering?”

An arrow of sadness flashed across Dane’s eyes. “I’m sorry, Krista. You know there’s no recovery from Alzheimer’s.”

“Of course,” I said, silently berating myself for my surprising, confusing hope, wondering why I wanted her to recover when I’d been so adamant that I needed to be ready for the end. “It’s just that...”

Dane followed me closely with his piercing gaze. “This is just like our other music therapy. They tell me it reaches a different part of a patient’s brain, helps explore territory that hasn’t been charted and divvied up by the marauding forces of the disease.”

I turned away. What was I hoping for? A mother I had always longed for suddenly springing to life, reclaiming our relationship?

“What this does bring is the gift of lost memories. I take it you didn’t even know your mother knew the words to three verses of ‘Silent Night.’”

“That’s true.” I paused. I thought I knew everything there was to know about my mother.

“There’s more.” He led me out of the Christmas room and

down the hall to his office, greeting several patients as we walked. A man I knew as Wally went to lift his hat in greeting but then looked vaguely lost to discover he had no hat on.

“Good afternoon, Alberto,” Dane said to a stoop-shouldered Latin man. The gent ignored him and kept walking.

“My kitty’s on the roof!” a smallish woman with a tight gray perm said to Dane, a look of fear on her face.

“I’m sorry, Sally,” Dane consoled, putting a hand on her forearm. “We’ll get someone to fetch her right away.” The woman’s face relaxed into a smile, and she wandered off.

We stopped to talk with Juan, who seemed very agitated and angry. “That Anita. She doesn’t make my bed the way she should,” Juan said. “There are no hospital corners. No hospital corners!”

“I will speak to Anita. I am certain that she just forgot.”

“See that you do.” Seemingly pacified, the silver-haired man went on with his walk, a bit calmer.

“Agreement therapy,” Dane explained, moving me onward. “Whatever their complaint, you listen and agree. The aide he’s complaining about is nothing short of perfection. But what Mr. Muñoz needs most is to be heard and understood. We can do that for him.”

It was one of perhaps ten or more therapies that Dane incorporated into his care of Cimarron’s patients. There was an entire hall filled with “Main Street” stores along the way, places in which patients could shop for imitation fruit at the grocer’s or get haircuts at the barbershop—often by other patients working with plastic scissors—or find just the right “gift” at the stationery store or

flower shop. There were numerous halls with winding pathways—Alzheimer’s patients loved to wander—through indoor gardens and arboretums, past caged birds and planters full of real flowers.

There were four exits locked from the inside and a retired assistance dog who was too old to guide people across the street or fetch needed articles but was not too old to bark when a resident needed help or to offer friendly companionship. Often the dog would gently herd them back toward their rooms. It had been Dane’s idea to give the dog this “retired career.” In return, he got lots of attention, a warm bed by the nurses’ station, and plenty of treats. So much so that he was quite overweight.

Dane and I reached the Eisenhower wing, the one farthest from the front entrance. These rooms had peekaboo views of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. Dane had always taken special care of my mother, including her placement in one of the choicest rooms. He paused at her doorway, letting me go first, giving me room to see Charlotte. My mother sat beside the window in a wheelchair, staring outside with blank, watery eyes that were half-opened. Her breath was labored, as if she were inhaling water, as if she needed to cough but lacked the strength. A thin oxygen tube ran from a tank beside her into her nostrils. On a small cassette recorder on the bookshelf, Christmas carols were playing. The only sign of mental activity was the quiet movement of one finger in time with the music.

I sat down on the hard hospital bed beside my mother, who

never looked in our direction, and reached for her hand, which was frail and cold. “Mother, it’s Krista. I’m here.”

She didn’t show any sign that she had heard a thing. She was still apparently lost in the notes of “O Tannenbaum.” Dane moved forward then and knelt in front of her. “Hey, old girl. Your daughter just drove all the way down from Colorado. I was telling her you’re into Christmas tunes again. May I show her what we found?”

Without waiting for a response, he gently pried Mother’s fingers from the weathered blue book in her other hand, *Christmas Carols of the World*. The binding was broken and the cloth covering frayed at the corners. He casually handed it over to me. “After that first day in the Christmas room, when she responded so well, I brought her back to her room. An aide with us spotted that on her shelf.”

“She’s had it for years,” I said, gazing down at the tattered cover. “I never paid much attention to it. One of the many anomalies in my mother’s life. A book of carols for a woman I seldom heard sing.” I looked over at the small shelf where twenty other old volumes and a collection of coffee table picture books were lodged. “She never even decorated for the holidays.”

“Did you ever open the book?”

“No. I guess I became somewhat of a grinch.” I could hear the defensiveness in my tone. “Why?”

“Check it out.” Dane rose and quickly kissed Charlotte’s brow. “Great view of the Sangres today, huh, Charlotte? Don’t wear your

daughter out with all your gabbing now, you hear me? Share one of your Christmas songs, and that would be enough for one day.

“Give it a chance,” Dane encouraged me, studying me a moment too long with those watchful eyes of his.

“I’m here, aren’t I?”

“Yes, you are,” he said, still lingering as if he wanted to say more. His eyes were alight with the old interest.

I turned away then, wanting to discourage him, and after another glance at the shell that used to be my mother, I opened the book that felt like a hymnal in my hands. Dane slipped out of the room as I began to read. On the first page was an inscription.

December 1932

Our dearest Charlotte,

*May you always see the wonder of Jesus’ birth in your life,
new every morning.*

Mama and Poppa

Oma and Opa. It had been a long time since I had thought about my grandparents, gone twenty-some years. They had been good people, making me wonder about the child they had produced. How had Charlotte been of their blood, their only child?

My eyes fell to the page again. New every morning. That was apropos. Wasn’t everything new to Charlotte Mueller now? Every

day? I edged away from my own harsh feelings to the words again. How long had it been since I myself had contemplated the wonder of Christmas, new every morning?

I turned the yellowed, thin page. In a childish scrawl, there was more to be read.

December 1932

My name is Charlotte Elizabeth Mueller. I live in Santa Fe, New Mexico. This is the first book I have ever owned. Mama said I could write notes in it from time to time since I do not have a diary like Lillian, and Poppa says we can't afford one. I think I shall write a note come Christmastime. Perhaps it will be more interesting than your average, everyday variety of journals.

I quickly flipped through the book, scanning for more handwritten text and seeing pages of it from time to time, as well as inserted cards and notes. I glanced from the faded script to my mother. It was the most I had heard from the woman in more than five years. No wonder Dane thought it important for me to see.

I took a deep breath and blew out my cheeks. Was I ready to enter? Did I, despite all my whining, really want to know anything more about my mother?

I was still thinking about that when Dane appeared in the doorway. "Ready for dinner? I don't know about you, but I'm starved."

“Listen, I haven’t settled in at Elena’s. She doesn’t even know I’m here yet.” Elena had never fully forgiven me for moving away. And it angered her that I had left my mother behind when Charlotte was so needy. But she knew too that I had to have some distance to preserve my sanity.

“So we’ll drop by Elena’s and say a quick hello, leave your stuff, then take off for dinner.”

“Listen, Dane. It’s all a bit much. Seeing Mother like this. Coming home at all. Give me a little time, all right?”

“Oh. Sure.” I could see the disappointment run across his face as clearly as a storm approaching over the valley floor.

“See you tomorrow?” I offered, hating to hurt him.

“Tomorrow.”

“Call me at Elena’s if anything changes with Mother, will you?”

“I’ll tell the staff.”

“Thanks, Dane.” I turned then, away from him, and stifled a sigh as I walked down the hall toward the front door. Everything in my heart wanted to go share a meal at some intimate restaurant; everything in my head told me to do anything but that.

I pulled up to Elena’s house five minutes later. A mongrel of a dog came out to bark at me but was wagging his tail. Elena had always adopted strays over the years. I stooped to let him sniff my hand, saying softly, “Hey, pooch, what’s your name?”

“Samson,” Elena said, suddenly on the other side of the fence. “He came by and fell in love with my Delilah. Never strayed

again.” I swore her method of silent approach was inborn, a gift from her Pueblo Indian ancestors. The Spanish influence was woven in well too, from her father. She was the quintessential *Taoseño*. “I suppose you’ve forgotten my name; it’s been so long since you’ve visited.”

“Uh, yeah. Tell me what it is again?” I cajoled.

Even as she chastised me, the smaller woman pulled me close for a warm embrace. “He called you then about Charlotte.”

“Yes,” I said, “he did.”

“Come inside. You can tell me about her today. I saw her yesterday. She wasn’t well.”

I obediently followed her past her shop, a small wing of the house just off the kitchen, where she made silver jewelry, wove blankets on a century-old loom, dyed her own yarns, and occasionally tried her hand at ceramics. The scent of corn muffins wafted throughout the house.

She looked well for her seventy-odd years. A little more gray, a little more stiff in her pace, but well. After the sale to Dane of the land for Cimarron, she was financially set. Even though she sold the acreage for a portion of its worth, it had been incredibly valuable, and Dane had wanted to be sure that our adopted “aunt” was taken care of forever. Her own family, other than one son, had moved away long ago to Albuquerque. Not that one would know she was alone. *Doña* Elena always lived life as though she was surrounded by love.

We entered the sitting room to the side. It got the morning sun and was a cheery place to settle. Elena often took her breakfast and

entertained guests there. She motioned to a covered wicker chair and immediately poured me a cup of tea from a thermos sitting on the table. She was like that—always ready for a visitor. Then she was gone, presumably to retrieve a batch of fresh-baked corn muffins from the oven.

She had made me feel welcome as a child, never like an intruder. From the first time I met her, when my grandfather took me out to introduce himself and ask if he could run his sheep across her land—in those years when he was still trying to make the ranch work—I had been drawn. She had even accepted my mother, even though I could never comprehend their pairing in my head. Total opposites, they were. Later, in high school, when Dane and I had dated, I had introduced him to her, and he had felt the same way as I. It was just one of many things that Dane and I had shared over the years, this love for Doña Elena.

She returned with a bowl of chicken chili and two muffins. I gratefully accepted them, suddenly ravenous when, at Cimarron, I had thought I wouldn't eat at all that night. I asked her about her arthritis, which I knew bothered her in the winter, and about what she'd sold at the local shops. She asked me about the college, my classes, my students. About my cottage among the old trees of downtown Colorado Springs, which made me suddenly miss its quiet sanctuary. And of course she asked about men. When I shook my head no, responding to whether there were any eligible bachelors in my life, she said, "Still pining for my neighbor then?"

I felt my eyebrows rise in warning. "I just...haven't met anyone."

“That’s because you passed up the right one years ago.”

“Doña Elena,” I said with a sigh.

“All right,” she said, holding up her hands in surrender. “I must only speak the truth. Our Lord would accept no less of me. If you felt the same, you’d be agreeing with me, not ducking what is right in front of your face.” She raised a basket of more warm muffins to me, as if she had just asked the time of day, not shot an opening salvo at my unprotected chest.

This was the part of Doña Elena that I found less enjoyable—her penchant for saying exactly what she thought. And saying the Lord made her do it. I’d found over the years that if I just said something noncommittal and changed the subject, it was easier than trying to argue with her. But she changed the subject first.

“Eat some butter on that muffin. You are too skinny. Do they not have food in Colorado?”

I laughed and quietly accepted the butter from her. I was ten pounds overweight, but she would always feel the need to feed me and proclaim me “too skinny.” Just another of the thousand things that I loved about her.

All in all, it was good to be home.



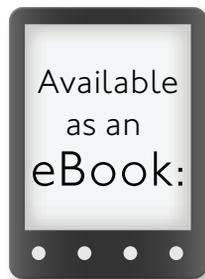
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