**CHAPTER ONE: Looking Back**

It all began so innocently. Looking back, it causes great sadness to think of the person I was at that time. Young, full of promise; I thought of myself as beautiful, so superior to the others. Now, I realize just how foolish, off course I had become, even in college, from the young girl in Manhattan, New York. My parents were part of “The” Carnegies. Our heritage caused great pride in all of us, even though my family was considered “the bottom of the line”. Father and mother were labeled “rebels.” Plenty of money and prestige, they were easily accepted at family functions. Yet, they were considered different. Never did they put on airs as some of the more distant family members frequented. Socially, their friends were very diverse. Those friends would not have been accepted by the rest of the family. I, on the other hand, was a snob, just like the distant others. Pure and simple if people didn’t meet my standards for beauty or style, I wasn’t interested. I surrounded myself with shallow and contemptuous people. Easy to be happy when you are told only what is expected, never the truth. To my mind, they were true friends. Believing that they would always be just that, I wrapped myself in their lies. What a foolish and shallow person I also was. This reference is not to my circle of friends. True friends, I had six of them. They remain my family. The contemptuousness to which I refer was a group. Not any group but a hallowed governmental organization to which membership was indeed rare. My inclusion caused great pride in the beginning. Later, I would see the depths to which they condescended to achieve their warped objectives. Until I die, I shall regret my frivolous notion that affiliation with them ever achieved anything more than the greatest loss of my life.

Now, I am an older woman at the proud age of fifty but I am not proud. How I wish that I had taken a different course. If only I followed the principles of my grandfather. Faith was a cornerstone for him. I possessed that faith but as I matured, I thought it “uncool.” So, I allowed my friends to direct my choices even though that small voice inside tried to give me the right direction. Many mistakes over the course of my life until I suddenly figured out that I was a mess. Then, I needed much correction just as a sailboat which erred off course for a long time. Changing my life and cleaning up my mistakes proved difficult and costly. In fact, I find it impossible to remove the baggage which I created.

The big regret of my life was allowing my country to dictate actions which were despicable. For my country, I committed the unthinkable act. It happened so slowly, getting caught in the web of lies. My life seemed glamorous; more than I ever dreamed. My actions became more and more exciting. The thrill was like a drug, I required added doses. Mounting danger simply increased the rush which I experienced. Yet, I told myself that I was noble, doing the right thing. To this day, I am not sure of one act; that treacherous thing which rids me of sleep even now. Right or wrong, I know I have received forgiveness. God has forgiven me, this I know but I can’t forgive myself. I suffer daily. Sometimes, when I am lying alone in a cold bed; I remember the life that I once possessed. The love which I shared with a man whom I never really knew; or did I? They told me I misread him. He was not the man whom I loved. That is the saddest part of my life. The part which I still grieve; the loss I unwittingly created. That loss is sometimes still unbearable. I acted without regard to his love. Superiority never allowed me to question my actions.

“Just do what you are told; act, don’t react;” brain washing created a lifestyle, a way of thought. After my loss, when regret overcame me, it proved too late. Maybe I could never prove his innocence. No proof was ever given to me of the “terrorist actions” he supposedly committed. How could I know the truth about him? I couldn’t. For the rest of my days, I question if there was a chance that he was my love. Still, my mind was wired to believe them. Had he merely used me to fulfill his objectives? The beautiful life which I treasured, which I still miss; was it really a lie? Could he have been so devious and cunning?

The result of the life which I chose results in mistrust concerning everyone. My solitary life is necessary for self-preservation. Things could change in a split second. They might come to the door or approach me on the street. They are all powerful, irrefutable. Therefore, I try not to create any news. My quiet life is my only choice. Now, I live with fear each day. Afraid that there may be a knock on the door; several men in suits will look blankly at me. I will know what is happening but not what awaits. Anything could occur. Such is the life I created. My choices killed my chances of happiness. Fear and loss consume my life now. This is not what I once expected. If I don’t travel or call attention, maybe they will forget me. I know better but I live that way. Life remains sad and unfulfilled. To find myself becoming old is beyond my expectations. I never envisioned being such. To find myself older and filled with regrets is torture. Perhaps this is paranoia due to mental pain or old age, I am not sure. There is no one whom I can consult. Age has racked my mind prematurely due to the pain which I carried for so long. Physically, I suffer from arthritis. My beauty is gone.

Never did I try to replace him. There was no one who came close to winning my heart. After my loss, I silently suffered the pain and loneliness which I created. I didn’t deserve to love again; never would I know a life with a partner with whom I had grown old. There would be no grandchildren. No memories of travel in my golden years; just a void existence. The funny thing is although now I regret my choices; this is the very life of which I dreamed. All of this is before the knock on the door providing the evidence. The painting which set me free.

**CHAPTER TWO: My Childhood**

Catherine Carnegie, I loved my name. My parents travelled often. No matter to me. Nellie, our housekeeper and nanny, was more than loving enough for my brother Nathaniel and me. We loved her so much. She filled our days with laughter and fun. Such a magical person, like a big child. Never harsh or demanding, her behavior became the counter balance for our parents. They possessed high standards even though dad was the Harley riding “black sheep” of the illustrious family. He never changed from his college days but education was a priority to my parents. The best schools were required for children of their family. Thank goodness “Nat” and I were both good students. Intelligence was part of our DNA. We excelled at each subject without much study. Early childhood was idyllic.

Our teen years were also joyful times. Both of us were popular so the social scene in Manhattan allowed us to “come out” in style. My debutante days still make me smile. I was a good child which carried into my young teenage days. Filled with my grandfather’s guidance, I stayed on the path of moral integrity. Then college came. I fell from grace. No longer did the light appear in my grandfather’s eye. Instead, he looked pensive when I was around him.

“Oh, Cat, what are you doing? If only you could see where you are headed. I know, you see, I did the same thing. Knowing that you will not listen to me, I still can’t help but try to instruct you. If you are wise and I know that you are indeed, you will stay on the path you learned in Sunday school. Remember Miss Carol’s words? Please come back to us before it is too late.”

Smiling my most charming smile, I would laugh at him.

“Well, I’m following in your footsteps, I guess. Cut me some slack, Grandfather, I’m not very far away.” Then I would prance out of his presence because he created an uncomfortable feeling in my soul.

My college days, the portal to adulthood at last; the time for making choices of my own couldn’t arrive quickly enough. My family expected me to attend one of the Ivy League colleges as most before me had done. A university of which someone in the family was an alumnus contributing huge amounts of money to insure that the family children received preferential treatment. Secretly, I longed to be a southern girl. After I read Gone with the Wind, my dreams changed. Thoughts of smelling the honeysuckle while walking under the Magnolia trees filled my mind. Without a word to anyone, I applied to the University of Alabama. Well known for their sororities and party status, those young women would become the sisters whom I always craved. My parents shook their heads over years of dinners as a youngster when I answered their question with my best southern accent. That progressed to constant dialogue. Even my “yes” friends told me I was being silly. What good would this accomplish in my life? Born Northern and bred with a pedigree. None of it produced pride. I longed to be Scarlet.

No idea of my treacherous act graced my parents. They had seen the applications to the “approved universities” but not this one. The day that I found the official envelope lying on the foyer table as I ran inside from tennis, I looked in horror. Surely Nellie had been instructed numerous times that when it arrived, she was to deposit it inside my dresser drawer. Grabbing it as though it was a ransom, I ran up the stairs.

“Your Mama put it there. The one day that she picked up the mail. I’m sorry Miss Catherine.”

I was so excited that I didn’t answer. My heart pounded louder than the heavy footsteps on the marble stairs. Clutching the long overdue reply to my request for admission this fall, I fell onto the bed.

“Please Lord; please, let me get accepted there. I promise to do my best.” About the only time that I prayed anymore was when I needed something. True to his promise to love and delight his children, God answered my prayer. Carefully opening the letter with shaking hands, happiness flooded my heart. All of those southern dreams would be fulfilled. The gentile southern women in Alabama would surely find me different but charming. Thinking of myself as capable of charming a mule, I would fit right into the daily social clamor of my dream university. Scarlet would pale in comparison to my wiles and softness. Margaret Mitchell created a disappointment for my family but I would follow my own dream.

Dinner that night was the perfect occasion to explain my soon to be disappointed status, my fall from grace with my family. My brother was staying at Harvard. He was trying to gain acceptance into those sacred halls but we all knew that was a given for him. His annoying behavior lately of trying to impress our father became sickening to behold. He possessed a different vision; longing to step into father’s footsteps. A carbon copy of the generations past, he would delight as much as I was about to disappoint.

“Well, there is no easy way to say this; so, here goes: I have decided to go to the University of Alabama. Actually, the application was sent months ago. Finally I received acceptance. My plans are to leave the end of August. It is my wish to pledge. This is my dream. Please be happy for me.” Relaying this shocking announcement with great confidence even though my hands under the table were visibly shaking was a feat for me.

The looks of disdain told me no one was happy. I disappointed my entire family. Yet, it was grandfather that I dreaded to face. Mother and father would come around, they always did. Grandfather stood more difficult. My fickle southern accent never amused him. Silence prevailed as I waited with a smile, knowing they would understand. How many times had my father been in the “hot seat?” So, I waited for the longest time. Finally, they looked at each other. Nellie stood behind Dad with a casserole. She did not look pleased either. You really had to mess up to upset her.

“Catherine, you know this is not the path that we would have chosen for you. Still, you are a young lady now so I feel inclined to allow you mistakes. I certainly have made plenty.” His sadness was obvious, his displeasure certain.

“Your brother made us all proud by his worthy choice of Harvard. I guess one Ivy Leaguer is better than none. Right Margaret, do you agree?”

Looking at my mother, he then softly asked, “What do you think Margaret?”

Tears ran down my mother’s checks as she looked at me. Softness in her eyes told me that she understood the desire to be different maybe even to be shocking. She certainly shocked her family through the years.

“Yes, I agree. I’m surprised that you never shared the desire to go to a southern university with us, Cat. That might have prepared us for this event but I also understand your desire to be your own person. We can’t stop you. I just hope that you will not come to regret your choice.”

Running to my mother, I bumped into Nellie who spilled the over filled bowl of vegetables onto the floor. Tears also ran down Nellie’s eyes but for different reasons, now she was forced to deal with the reality that I would indeed be leaving soon. I would be much farther away than she planned. She smiled her courageous smile which I loved. Could it be this easy? Was I really about to embark on my seemingly impetuous dream? For a few more moments there was silence and lowered heads. Nellie, dear, faithful Nellie suddenly grabbed me hugging me so tightly that I almost choked on her sachet.

“I am proud of you, Miss Catherine. When you get to that dormitory, can I come to visit you? No one in my family ever went to college. At least, you are doing what everyone in my family only dreamed. Can’t tell you how proud I am.”

Still looking at my father, I mumbled, “Thanks, Nellie.”

Then, he looked me in the eyes. I saw his smile. The smile I reaped so many times when I thought that I was in serious trouble. His only daughter would not be labeled, renegade. He and mom hugged me with such love. Soon, I cried with them. For the rest of my days, I remembered that moment. It was a moment of passage. As though they were saying, finally I was an adult. Although I was responsible for my actions, they would be mine. In my head, I planned my drive down to Alabama. I had never even visited there. It didn’t matter to me that I reached a major decision with little research. It must be as I envisioned. Softness, manners, gentility, etiquette, surrounded by my “sisters.” I couldn’t wait to pack. My luggage waited in the attic for Nellie to bring it down. She would clean it. Then help me pack. Of course, I would need many new clothes. How would I decorate my room? Mom and I would have fun choosing those things. Now, how did I tell them that I wanted to drive myself? Last week was special. My parents bestowed on me a new BMW sedan for graduation. There would be plenty of room for all that I needed to take. Equipped with GPS, not to worry over getting lost. Of importance was the fact that I take this leap into adulthood alone. Would they understand how vital for me to cross the Mason Dixon Line alone as I found my new calling? How different would the southern states become as I drove to my fate? Of course, we visited Jekyll Island and Amelia as well as several others but in my childhood. Now, I was an adult. I needed to make this drive alone. It would be my passage into the person of my future. Excitement filled every pore of my being. Truly, this was adulthood. This was the new me.

**CHAPTER THREE: Nathaniel**

Summer days quickly passed. There were forms to complete then mail. Shopping sprees, one after another, filled with joyous laughter and plans. Mom kept referring to “our” drive to the university. I only smiled. Her look told me that she suspected something was not right but my newfound freedom kept her from inquiring. The only down side was my dear brother.

Nat changed into a real pain. Every time he entered the room, he was greeted with squeals of pride from mom about her “Harvard Man.” Give me a break, with all the money they poured into that university, of course he gained acceptance. At least I had gotten in on my own credentials. Never did I stress that I was one of THE Carnegies. The huge endowments were not given to the University of Alabama although plenty of funds were allotted. I was just an ordinary young woman who desired a higher education to the board there. Of course, I didn’t need to worry about graduation or what career would still be lucrative by graduation or how much money I would need. All of those perks came with my birth. The Fine Arts Degree was the only thing of interest to me. My love of painting, an obsession so it only made sense to open my own gallery. My desire of offering help to the real struggling artist had been my dream since I remembered.

Nathaniel, on the other hand, became consumed by long sessions with dad. Planning what course he should follow once he was finally stationed in his storied place at Harvard. Mother would beam each time he entered the room. My reduction to helping Nellie serve him increased my disdain. Knowing that if I had assumed my destined role at such a prestigious, hallowed place, I would have received the same “rock star” treatment did little at consoling me. No matter, telling myself, a few more months until I was free. So, I bore the laughter at our July 4th party when Mom announced my college dream. The jokes were rude and insensitive. Still, I held my head high. Just knowing my dream was close, allowed me to smile at their stupid banter. I was about to break out of their mold. My world would be so much more palatable soon, I told myself.

As time hastened to our exit from the family, Nat became exalted to a place of honor. I was tolerated as a silly girl who made poor choices. Soon, even I began to doubt myself. Yet, I knew I could make any necessary correction. It would not be difficult to enter Harvard, Yale or any of the other more “desirable” schools. My grades were better than Nat’s but my accomplishments no longer mattered to those whom I loved. Finally, the time of reckoning was upon us. To my surprise, my parents hosted a large party in honor of none other than Nathaniel William Carnegie. Everyone who was of any importance in New York was invited to attend. I just assumed that my party would be smaller, perhaps a week or so later. My party, however, never happened. The hurt was great. My parents didn’t mean to cause such harm; they never considered the pain. They must have assumed that I realized my grievous error, such behavior would not be celebrated. Those things may not seem like a “big deal” but they were to me.

My grandfather hurt me the most. The light left his eyes at that point, never to return. Nathaniel became the light. I would watch my beloved’s eyes follow Nat. When he looked at me, he lowered his eyes. He tried not to let me see the utter disappointment but I knew. Many times, I cried myself to sleep at my fall from grace. Was I really so off course? Perhaps, that is where I may have lost my way. If it was so easy to lose the love of my family, what did that say for the future? Was it necessary for me to play a game of plying them with promises as Nat did? I made a decision on what I believed to be right for me was that wrong? The pain which I incurred from that summer caused a callousness to cover my being. A false bravado seemed to follow me. After spending years planning this only to be rejected by those who always told me to “follow my heart.” Had they lied? I decided to always look out for myself doing what I thought best for me. Let them celebrate Nat. My decisions were based on what made me feel good. Those very thoughts produced actions which caused my additional fall from grace.

Grandfather never forgave me my impetuousness. Never would I see the light shine from those eyes which were becoming dimmer. Forever after, I would miss our time. Our walks in the gardens, coffee early on summer vacations, he didn’t invite me to join him any longer. Now, he and Nat walked down the beach, arm in arm. I sat alone with my plans. No longer did I speak with my southern drawl which incited good natured objections in the past. That now seemed silly and downright painful. Still, I maintained a stiff upper lip as I held my head high. A few more weeks, this would all be over. I was going to accomplish greatness. I longed to do more than obtain a major in Fine Arts. I would do something noble. I would make them all proud. Regrets for deeming me foolish would result soon enough.

**CHAPTER FOUR: Family Farewells**

Three days before my scheduled departure, I lowered the boom so to speak but that boom backfired. When I announced at breakfast I had decided to drive by myself, the heated discussion which I anticipated did not ensue. Instead, my father calmly announced they deducted that I intended to drive myself. All of this was understandable since I was now self-sufficient. So, they planned to go with Nat to Harvard and spend several days getting him settled. Dad scheduled many places to show him. He wanted to share some special moments from his time there. The excitement was penetrable. Nat looked at me with contempt. Now, he became the golden child; I the misfit just like dad before me. Yet, Dad showed no association of like feelings with me. His son was now his world. Mom wasn’t any more considerate. She still squealed with glee each time “her darling” entered the room. Deliberations filled my head about leaving earlier so that the three of them could start their celebrations.

The day before I was to leave, Mom announced she planned a special night for the four of us at the “club.” Well, that was something, at least. Finally, I looked forward to perhaps a mention of my achievements with great pride. They really should be proud of Nat after all. He followed the plan. I had chosen dissension. Now, I must reap the results. How many times in my future would I repeat that statement?

Finally, the day arrived for the family dinner. Usually, I didn’t primp but tonight was different. Mom recently purchased my first Chanel which I wore with great pleasure. The navy and white ensemble seemed perfect for this event. Nat looked like an Ivy League student in his navy Brooks Brothers jacket and khaki slacks. It surprised me when even with this choice; I was passed over for my brother. They glowed over their only son and how handsome he appeared. Dad winked at me, “You look nice also, Catherine.” Well, so much for fairness in this family. Nat glowed as the comment was delivered.

We arrived at the club to praise for both Nat and me from fellow members. There were several other family gatherings for the same purpose. We all gathered for refreshments together. Julie, one of my friends, yelled, “Catherine, you are the only southern ordinary student.” Everyone laughed well naturedly but it hurt. Again, I raised my eyes to see Nat smiling. What was going on here? The rest of the evening was calmer. Dad toasted each of us; feelings soothed. Again, it was the family that I loved. Even Nat hugged me as we left explaining to me how much he would miss me.

When we arrived home, I felt exhausted. Maybe I wanted to end it on a positive note so I excused myself with hugs and kisses. The excitement made it difficult to sleep. Disbelief plagued me that I was heading on such a long, uncertain drive alone. They must really trust me or was it just the perks of having a Harvard Man were overwhelming? It didn’t matter. Tomorrow was my swan song and I was ready to sing.

**CHAPTER FIVE: Leaving Home**

I barely slept the night before my departure for UA. All through the night, I felt racked with guilt for the disappointment I caused my family. No matter that “my” university ranked among one hundred public universities as one of the top. It just was the wrong location. Still, I reasoned I was fulfilling my dream; nothing could stop me. When the alarm clock finally sounded, I had been looking steadily at it for over an hour. Filled with excitement and longing, I bounded from bed. A quick shower helped invigorate me as quietly I pulled on the clothes lying on my chair. No makeup was needed; I would be driving all day with an occasional stop for gas. My goal was to take my time since leaving early, time was on my side so to speak.

The university facility took care of many details. Our attorney made some of the final arrangements as far as waving visitation. My arrival would be my first glimpse of my new home. Set for sorority visitation on Fall Formal Recruitment, plans were confirmed. The university sponsored eighteen of the national sororities. My family would not make the September Family Weekend yet I understood their desire to be with Nat at Harvard. No worries, there would be plenty of friends, I was sure.

Mom and Dad had always been early risers. When Dad rushed off for his commitments, Mom always was up with him. Together, they planned their day over coffee and funny comments from Nellie. Now they had retired, most days, they slept a little later. Because of that, I didn’t expect them to be up early for my send off. They surprised me by rising from their station at the dining table with their cups of coffee as I entered the room.

“This is surprising, seeing you both so early. You really didn’t have to get up for me. My plan was to grab a cup on the road. I am really anxious to get an early start.”

“That is nonsense. You sit yourself down and have a proper cup with your folks or you will be sorry. You are all going to miss each other.”

Nellie physically pushed me back into my chair and popped a cup of coffee in front of me. I wished my departure was earlier. Still, I smiled and picked up my cup from the saucer. Mom sadly returned my smile.

“Catherine, we are going to miss you so much. I know that we have made a fuss over Nathaniel but you know we are just as proud of you.” Having no such idea, I smiled and nodded just the same.

“Now, Cat, you must promise to drive carefully. You have plenty of time since leaving a little early.” I didn’t even realize that he was aware of my schedule.

He continued, “Please phone us along the way on our cell phone. We will be on pins and needles till you arrive.” I doubted if “pins and needles” described the way that they felt. More sheer delight at “the darling’s” Harvard bound destiny.

I longed to be away from their anxious gaze. Gulping my coffee loudly, I stood to leave. Silence shrouded the room. Tears dropped from Nellie’s large, brown eyes. Hugging each of them, no word was spoken. As I walked to the door, I turned to see them huddled together. At that moment, I realized this was not just a rite of passage for Nat and me but for our parents as well. First, retirement signaled their aging now watching their only two children leave the nest at the same time. Briefly, I envisioned the lonely rooms and quiet dinners with only each other and Nellie. The pangs of emotion pulled at my heart. Running back to them, I hugged each again. A stronger hug with profuse kisses and tears; walking quickly, I exited my home of eighteen years then closed the door of my new graduation gift quietly.

As I drove from the long, rambling driveway, out the gates, I stopped briefly. They were great parents. I had really been unfair in my constant criticism of them lately. I would miss them. I prayed at that moment God would keep them safe and be with me as I made my pilgrimage to UA. Yes, that was THE moment of passage. My parents would always be loved but I longed for a different sort of life. My desire was indeed strange. I desired a life of solitude. No one that I knew lived the life which was beckoning me. It wasn’t a noble calling; just a desire to be alone. That desire may have had a very strong influence over the choices which I was about to make. A strange life but mine; that was what mattered most to me.

**CHAPTER SIX: The Portal**

Today, I remember the two week drive from Manhattan to Alabama with as much fondness as my memories of all the years which I spent at the University of Alabama. It wasn’t that I didn’t love my time at Bama but in my mind, that drive was a rite of passage. A portal to the life which I always dreamed. The drive was the beginning of my new life. University life was never considered to be anything more than that experienced by every other student. The young age of eight started my obsession with all things southern. My father told me that maybe it had something to do with the fact that our founding family members arrived in Henrico, Virginia. There were rumors of relations with Thomas Jefferson. I wasn’t sure how true that was but decided that someday, when I owned my own art gallery with plenty of time on my hands, I would study my roots. How exciting to search through family records gleaning bits of history. Having some family member tell me about their research just wasn’t the same. I needed to see the accuracy of the search for myself.

At the age of thirteen, after completing Gone with the Wind, my obsession deepened into a pathological drive. I dreamed of someday being on my own with the ability of making choices for my future. In my mind, I referred to this time as “The Portal.” What I meant was the entrance not only into adulthood but the luxury of experiencing the Southern Way. Living in the south, wherever I chose to live in an old, lavish southern home surrounded by Magnolias and Crepe Myrtles which moved majestically in the soft, hot breezes each afternoon. That became a recurring dream. The beginning of this dream hinged on acceptance to THE academic institution which I chose; then the town and house where I would live. Never did I dream of marriage or children, those southern things were my dream for the future.

Now, I fulfilled two of the steps. Acceptance to UA and making the drive to my new home alone. The excitement which filled my heart was beyond words. I obtained permission to arrive early at the dorm but was now thinking about going to some of the places along the way which had only been dreams. If I tired, it would be easy enough to speed things up. There was no pressure now, just excitement.

Leaving Manhattan, I crossed the George Washington Bridge. Soon enough, on I-95 speeding happily along with the traffic. The thought formed it would be wonderful to visit Virginia. Oh, Virginia, the home of decades of old southern gentility. Once conducting a test on dialects in various areas of the south; I had decided that out of all the states, the Virginians possessed the most beautiful accent. Theirs was “highbrow.” Aristocracy oozed from their lilted speech. After years of practice, I was pretty good at it. To my professionally untrained ear, I sounded just as my beloved relations must have once sounded. That is before they left the south to live up north. What possessed them? Not me, maybe I would not have family but I would live in the south someday. Living alone in the south did not fright me but the ideas was a comfort. Actually I pictured my home frequently throughout my earlier years; sparkling white with large, dark green shutters. There would be a spacious wrap around porch. Shining porch floor of a glossy grey; antique, white wicker furniture scattered in small groups. The ceiling painted Sky Blue as many southern homes contained. My home must be old with an illustrious history. One where many families created lifetime memories. Perhaps a local home which was registered with the Historic Society. Memories of past families would sustain my solitary life. I could do as I pleased. Frequently I planned of arising early each morning to the finest coffee beans which I would grind. Fresh French croissants stocked my freezer with the freshest of French butters. After a delightful breakfast, I would enter a room set aside for my art. Painted a sunny, soft yellow, the room where I spent my time. The old, refinished floors protected with large rugs. My easel always up. Paints stored with all of the essentials sitting on antique tables. That room would face east and allow me to watch incredible sun rises each morning with a cup of coffee and my paints. No ties, I would be free to paint all day if I chose.

My art gallery would be staffed with competent people. Located close to my home, I would only visit a few times each week. I would devote my time to genealogy, painting and gardening. My small, intimate dinner parties would be the craze of my neighbors. Only the artistic, well-educated would be invited to those meals which I would cook myself with the help of my trusted house assistant. I hated the word “maid”. Never would that be the description of someone whom I treasured as I welcomed them to my small family. The food must come from the local market and be simple, artisanal treasures coveted in the summers. Yes, it was all clear in my mind. Many more details were covered in my plans as well. My thoughts were on all of those long awaited dreams as I drove out of New York. Maybe my vision was selfish but I planned on doing great acts of benevolence in the future.

The first night, I arrived in Richmond, Virginia. It surprised me to find that I wasn’t at all tired. The drive, far from being draining, was exhilarating. It proved simple finding a room at one of the local hotels. Especially given the fact that the University of Richmond also welcomed hordes of students and family; finding a room so easily was a pleasant surprise. I only hoped that the remainder of the long drive would be so simple.

At one time, I considered seeking admission to this private university but declined that thought. Immediately leaving the solitude of my room to walk with other students, companionship was needed. When I saw the campus, I felt ill. Perhaps my choices were a terrible mistake. This was an acceptable university. Most students appeared extremely friendly. A group of just arrived freshmen girls invited me for a local Italian dinner. We walked carelessly to the cool, dark restaurant. The air inside was freezing after the scorching heat outside. Immediately we ordered ice tea. I knew enough about the south to order “sweet tea.” Any good southerner knew that to be the only way to drink it. Offering very little to their good natured bantering, I mostly listened. This evening was light hearted; filled with disbelief that they were finally on their own. Everyone was thrilled to be a part of this beautiful scene. Wishing desperately that I had conducted more research, confusion targeted my plans. To be a part of this “dream” only made sense. This was where my ancestors originally landed. The only reason that I failed to study on this possible school was I thought it too close to my New York home. Mom constantly would have visited. Once again, I was being selfish but I had not wanted that. I craved a solitary existence.

Whenever speaking that long ago evening, I used my best Virginian accent. It was important that I appear as a local. My plan seemed to work. Everyone assumed I was from the area. Several girls questioned me about the city. I just made things up. Now, I realize this was a way for me to maintain some control over a completely out of control period. Those memories always make me smile.

The next day, I drove to Monticello located in Charlottesville; the home of the third president of the U.S. The possibility that I may be related to him created longings to learn of this scholarly and innovative person. Monticello rates as the epitome of southern charm. The architecture was beguiling. The eleven thousand square foot home actually designed by Jefferson from Italian Renaissance Architect Andrea Palladio. Situated on a summit of eight hundred and fifty feet in the Southwest Mountains, everything about this home was designed for beauty and functionality. Monticello means “little mount” in Italian. The furnishings appeared simple but beautifully in tune with the dimensions and period. I loved everything about it. Each room was studied with a decorator’s eye. That would be my pattern for my home someday. The landscaped grounds were another example of quintessential good taste. The shrubs and flowers, I made note of each in a journal which I carried everywhere as I did my sojourn. That day passed much too quickly.

Exhaustion crept over me as I headed to find a hotel in the late day traffic. Things yesterday had been so easy. I hoped that I would not have a problem finding lodging in yet another college town. Charlottesville, the home of the University of Virginia, was one of the most beautiful places I ever visited. Even today, I am called to return there. The university designed by none other than Thomas Jefferson himself in 1819. It was beautiful beyond words. The initial Board of Visitors comprised of Jefferson, James Madison and James Monroe could not have been anymore stately. Beauty surrounded the site which was mostly farmland belonging to Monroe. My heart ached once again to think that I might have attended there. I would be “home” now instead of facing another exhausting drive.

The University of Virginia always ranked at the top of the National University Ratings. It would have been an honor to be a part of such a prestigious school. Again, I questioned my decision wondering if I may transfer there someday. Plagued by doubts as I drove in the hot, late day traffic, feelings of loneliness and fear overcame me. Fortunately, I was once again able to find a small, local hotel. Now, too tired to go out to dine, I ordered delivery from a local restaurant suggested by a young student working the front desk. After eating, I didn’t even shower instead falling into a deep and much needed sleep.

Arising early the next day, driving out of Charlottesville with a heavy heart, had I made a colossal mistake? Would choosing the wrong university wreck my college days? After a breakfast at a local IHOP, I felt rejuvenated, committed to my original plan. No, I couldn’t have made a mistake. My dream loomed so clear. Young, unsure of my ability to make choices; those were my faults. Yet that indecisiveness would be a trait following me throughout my life. Later, the doubts from inability to make up my mind would consume me.

“Just hold onto your original dream. Yes, Charlottesville would have been perfect but there must be a reason that Alabama was your goal.” I would not despair but resume my drive feeling somewhat confident. Much sooner than I thought, decision time about my driving route to Alabama confounded me. The idea formed that it would be delightful to take the Blue Ridge Parkway as far as North Carolina. Hours of my past had been filled with reading information about that scenic drive. A forty-five mile an hour route of some of the most beautiful scenes one could ever imagine. Yet, as much as I longed to experience the peace and beauty, was I up to traveling slowly for so long? My body made the decision for me. Turning off my planned faster route, I now found myself on the Blue Ridge Parkway. This turned out to be the correct choice. The peace which flooded my soul as I gazed upon the Blue Mountains bathed in white puffy clouds reinforced my thoughts that I was capable of making wise choices. A slow speed was not at all dull but allowed me to enjoy the beauty without an accident. I arrived in Blowing Rock, N.C. There I was treated to luxury by the staff of the Inn at Ragged Gardens. Delighted by a gourmet dinner, I felt at home. The elegance of the room buffeted by a rustic feel perfect for the mountain town. Although I never returned, I often remember with plans to revisit that part of “The Portal.”

Leaving Blowing Rock, I drove only minutes before assuming my route. The remainder of the drive seemed pleasant without event however those were the highlights. Soon enough, the fateful day arrived. I would enter my new home; my new southern life. Located in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, my arrival was eminent. Only hoping that I would not regret choosing the University of Virginia instead of UA, I put on my brightest smile. Watching for signs of the university, I was shaking. Following directions from my GPS, wet, trembling hands created difficulty. Then I saw it. Large red brick buildings as well as the President’s Mansion painted white. There were huge expanses of green, well maintained lawns. It was as I imagined. The books and photos over which I pondered did not do justice. Maybe it was not rated the most prestigious of universities but it worked for me. Immediately, I felt at home. Following the instructions which our attorney gave me, I arrived at my dorm.

The rest was pretty much as any other’s college days. My experiences were positive. I received a great education. Also, I developed many friendships. Three of those, remain cornerstones in my current life. Linda Hughson, Margie MacKay and Rhonda Wilson are still best friends. The kind of friend whom you don’t need to contact often to feel connected. Each time we are together, the connection is alive. They are my family even today; just as I planned so long ago. I chose them for my relations.

After graduation, we flew to Abaco, Bahamas. Margie’s family owned a gorgeous home on that magical Caribbean island. Two of my friends already had plans for the future. Rhonda and I were the slackers. My only plan remained finding that large, white house with green shutters. It was out there, I just had to locate it.

**CHAPTER SEVEN: My Dream Home**

The time in Abaco was truly a dream. My parents spent a great deal of time in St. Bart’s as well as most of the Caribbean. Hilarious times on yachts with friends delighted Nathaniel and me throughout the years over dinners. The MacKay home presented the same sort of light heartedness. A typical Nassau Colonial mansion graced by large white columns, the palatial home delivered a statement of refinement painted chocolate brown with sparkling white trim. The interior boasted all French slip covers with over-stuffed cushions. Mementos of travels filled the inside hiding treasures from all over the world. The design was not “beachy” but “shabby chic.” It worked well.

Each of my friends gathering to celebrate our graduation was a strong Christian. Margie and Linda had stayed devoted but Rhonda and I were a little off course. To my family, I was way off course. Realizing that I was denying my true convictions, I maintained my faith while living a little wildly. Keeping one foot founded in morality, I planted the other in the world. Yet, I knew that God was there and that my salvation was sealed years ago. I would clean up my act on “down life’s road,” I told myself. Rhonda and I would take time from the other “good” two and club hop.

Rhonda was a beauty. She loved beautiful clothes with an impeccable sense of style. Beautiful inside as well as out created someone very special. Margie remained moral and focused. Already engaged to the man of her dreams, she was so in love. John was getting the best of us; we all knew it. Linda appeared to hold tremendous talent. She would be the least critical of us; always able to help. Married already, she would never falter. Sam and she married the last semester of university in a simple wedding. Abiding love in their eyes was what most young women dreamed. While I was delighted for them, I maintained my dream for a solitary life of various studies.

Helping me find my dream home filled our daily conversations. Each of my friends thought they had the answer. As soon as we left the Bahamas, I visited Chapel Hill, N.C. with Rhonda. She was certain that I would find the third part of my southern dream. Then, I scheduled to arrive in Northwest Florida with Margie. Her family waited to greet us. There, she stressed that her fiancé’s family could convince me to make the coast home. Finally, Linda displayed confidence that Sam could show me the dream home in Alabama. That really made sense because I loved UA so deeply. Those honey suckled dreams waited for me; I just needed to make the choice.

Leaving the Bahamas presented problems. Now, we truly would embark on our adult lives. Our storied time at college magical but reality was waiting. Each of us obtained a great education, now time to put it into play. We caught Bahamas Air to Miami. Then we flew into Raleigh/Durham airport. Rhonda’s car was waiting. She had been correct on her descriptions. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill was regaled for providing a wonderful education as well as fun social life. Rhonda and I floundered a little unlike our other two friends. Their futures focused and planned. We reverted back to our college days where we spent most of our time in clubs having a great time. Rhonda attracted more boyfriends than the rest of us put together. She seemed to be a magnet; a really engaging one at that. Yet, nothing impressed me at the university. The beautiful, old white house in my mind never surfaced although we did not look with great zeal. When I left Chapel Hill, Rhonda had devised about as many plans for the future as I. Her father recently passed away so her mom seemed happy to have her company. I knew that she would marry soon; she already had received several proposals. Her life as a school counselor could wait.

When I arrived in Florida, I was hopeful. Living there would be the southern way of times past. The quiet daily flow as well as the gentile locals would appeal to any southern belle. Yet, to get the crowds to support my art gallery, I would need to live in Tallahassee or Panama City. Since, I wanted a small town this location would not work. My heart was on The Forgotten Coast but the town was not ready for my plans. I left Margie and John envious of their love and devotion. Their plans already underway for the wedding of the century in their small town.

Lastly, I visited Linda and Sam. I knew at once that the rural town would not support my little art gallery but Linda assured me that their idea rested on a place called Eufaula, Alabama. The name was appealing. I hoped the town would dazzle. Could my beautiful dream be close?

The day after my arrival, we set off. We allowed two days for a serious search. Sam’s family welcomed us but I felt more at home in a local B&B. My solitary longings did not bode well with family arrangements. The next morning as Linda and Sam arrived; I had a strong feeling that this would be the answer.

Eufaula was the answer to my prayers. Walking down one of the streets early the next morning delighted as a page from my vision. Many of the buildings were listed on the National Register of Historic Places, just as I dreamed. The historic town was typical of southern legends which told of land once owned by various tribes of Indians. Land which was confiscated and developed by rich southerners. The wealth of Eufaula was the result of being a major shipping and trading point for the surrounding counties in Georgia and Alabama. The location of Eufaula would bode well for my art gallery. Barbour County hosted all of this, the largest city in its jurisdiction. Strangely, to a northern girl, the town was originally started by an Act of the New Jersey Legislature on March 24, 1869. My parents would love the history of this dreamy town. Many remaining antebellum homes testified to the glorious past of this beautiful place. Located on Lake Chattahoochee, everything seemed perfect. Still, a beautiful town was not what I wanted; I needed THE house.

Sam and Linda arranged for us to meet with Seth Greene, a friend of the family. According to them, “Real estate agent extraordinaire” described him. Personally upon meeting him, I had my doubts. The town was definitely causing a yearning in my soul but would I locate my home? It happened easier than I ever dreamed.

Planning on a day of house hunting in the humid, exhausting weather of mid-August, we all carried bottles of water while looking at each other with resolve. What wonderful friends to support my search. Linda, I understood but Sam just met me. I was learning the true southern spirit. Mr. Greene was very southern. A long ago transplant of Charleston, S.C.; his lilting speech dauntingly reminiscent of Virginia, he was pure class

. Arriving in a neighborhood of new homes which were supposed to look like old ones, I was devastated.

“Mr. Greene, what is this? Remember the hour which we just spent in your office discussing my dream home? These homes are not historic. They are beautiful indeed but not MY dream.” I was almost in tears.

“Well, not so fast Missy; I am showing you these only to make you appreciate the difference in detail between the newer versions of older homes as compared to the real older homes. Money.”

“What? What in the world are you referring to, money?” I was beginning to think that Linda and Sam were very off in their praise of Mr. Greene’s extraordinary abilities.

“Yes, Ms. Carnegie, money. You had better have plenty if you plan on throwing money down a bottomless pit. Now, these beauties are good for years with an occasional paint job and just a little maintenance.”

“Dear, Mr. Greene, money is not my problem. I am more than prepared to spend my money on a bottomless pit rather than allow some historic, beautiful home to languish because the market has taken a hit. You see, I have the funds, I need the home.” I found myself yelling. To the horror of my manners laden friends; they would never allow such behavior. They all lowered their heads in shame for me.

After apologizing to all: I explained how important this home was to my future. Looking at me with a look of embarrassment for my meltdown as well as lack of manners, Mr. Greene smiled.

“Well, then, let’s head over to the historic part of town. Your dream home waits to be shown. The owner passed away about eight months ago. None of the family is interested in moving here. All of the children reside in the New Jersey area so the house will be sold. It is a beauty.”

Once again, we all piled into our host’s car. He was not so happy with me; refusing to even look at me now. His gaze was always upon Linda and Sam since my earlier meltdown. Obviously, I committed the unforgivable error of southern etiquette, I raised my voice. I felt awful. Up north, yelling was a way of life. No one was offended or shocked. I still had a ways to go on being Margaret Mitchells’ protégé.

We drove just a few miles. He parked in one of the few remaining shady spots on the sunny street and we once again dove into the summer heat. It was one of those humid days without a spot of wind. Perspiration was running down my face. In fact, my entire body was wet from the assault. Thinking that I was about to cause heat stroke in these gentle folks, I decided to suggest that we call the search off until later. Since the house that he wanted to show me was unoccupied, what difference would it make when we viewed it?

“Um, Mr. Greene, should we wait until this evening to look at the property?” I asked in my softest southern drawl.

“Now, why would we do that?” His tone had changed. Forgiving and forgetting was not easy for this man.

“Well, why don’t we just visit some of the other homes which you have scheduled which have owners? That way, no one is put out.” Thinking myself to be showing kindness and compassion, I was shocked when he sternly stated, “I have not scheduled any others. I have the perfect home. You better make a speedy offer. It will not be around long.”

Now, I was not a real estate tycoon but the house had already been on the market for eight months. I strongly doubted if it would sell during this day. Mr. Greene may be more of a salesman than I had earlier given him credit.

“In fact, we have arrived at your new home. There it is.” Pointing to something behind me, he looked up with great pride. I realized that I had not been paying attention to our tour. Turning, there stood the home of my dreams! It was breath taking. Everything that I wanted and then some; it looked so large. The new paint was gleaming white. An “in your face sort of white” with large, workable dark green shutters; neatly arranged groupings of old wicker furniture which had also received a coat of paint waited for their future owner, me. Without planning, I grabbed poor Mr. Greene hugging and kissing him. Now, he did look at me.

“My goodness, maybe you should see the inside, no telling what sort of response I may receive. Should we go inside?” The gleam in his eye told me that all was forgiven. Maybe he smelled the heavy commission waiting for him.

As we entered the home, the coolness from the air conditioner wrapped us in a feeling all was right in the world. The large entry foyer contained highly polished dark mahogany floors. A large, round table held a crystal vase of Crepe Myrtle and Magnolia branches from the front yard. What more of a sign could I expect? This was just as I dreamed. I already knew this was my home. Linda’s small hand touched my sleeve. The smile on her face told me she knew that our mission was accomplished.

The shutters were slightly closed to keep the bright light from damaging the antiques as well as cool the home. The smell was fresh paint and heavenly freshness as flowers greeted us in each room. My home consisted of a formal living room which was a soft green color. The sofa and chairs as well as the tables were old southern classics. The less formal den painted a darker green which projected casualness. It gleamed with slip covered furniture. Most importantly, the kitchen maintained old attractiveness with new appliances. My master bedroom was a soft rose and reminded me how drained I was from all of this. There were four bedrooms and three baths upstairs. Each room was as I would have designed. When we entered a sunny yellow room facing east, I actually cried. It would be a shame to set up my easel but I planned on protecting the floor with rugs purchased from the local consignment shop. The room packed from floor to ceiling with large shelves, maybe it had once been a library but someone lightened the tone by adding satiny white shelves. It would be perfect for my studio. Providing plenty of room for books on art as well as tubes of paint and necessary supplies; I knew that I was destined to live here.

“I’ll take it. Can you draw up the contract? When can I move in?”

Mr. Greene, now used to my impetuousness, was totally rattled. “You must see the rest. I have never heard of anyone purchasing a home, especially an older home, without seeing the rest.”

“The gardens, I need to see the gardens. Then let’s return to your office and sign the contract. I’m ready for lunch; any takers?”

Mr. Greene looked at my friends with a slight shake of the head. “Who am I to advise such a wise lady? Let’s look at the gardens.” Was he being sarcastic? I could not care in the least.

The gardens were up to standards set by the rest of my property. Someone worked for years establishing a proper English garden. Large box woods surrounded my new home as a fence might. Inside of the dark green shrubs was planted row after row of Plumbago. The soft blue/purple was the desired color missing from most gardens but not mine. There were beds of old tea roses with fragrance which only they could provide. Beds of lilies, Purse Lane and many others of my favorites were now bobbing in the delightful breeze which suddenly arose breaking the misery of the humidity. I longed to sit on the front porch with a glass of sweet tea and study the beauty which someone else graciously spent planning and working. Now, some of my mornings would be spent in my garden with my gardener giving me advice. My family would love the splendor of this home as well as the history.

I did agree to complete the tour. We returned to my hero’s office writing the contract. The listing was fairly priced. I only offered a slightly lower amount. The four of us attended the area’s premier restaurant to celebrate my accomplishment, compliments of Mr. Greene. After returning to my room I received the expected call. Excitedly, Mr. Greene relayed the fact that I now owned, “the prettiest home in Eufaula.” As I rested the phone into the cradle, I realized that maybe I could get back on course now. How could I not after being blessed so richly? All of my dreams were now realized.

**CHAPTER EIGHT: Life in Eufaula**

Life in Eufaula proved slow and easy as did the moving process. I owned few possessions. Most of my college mementos were simply stored in the large attic. All I needed, I just purchased as a package. Constantly, finding myself walking around my new home lovingly touching several of the exquisite pieces of furniture, my heart over flowed. Surprisingly, my dream was realized easily and perfectly. To say that I loved my new life was an understatement. Each day greeted me with joy.

After moving into “Tara”, I phoned my parents to invite them for a visit. I wasn’t surprised when Nellie explained that they had gone for some time around the world on a cruise with friends. They did plan for return any time soon. That was my parents; free spirits to the chagrin of their family. Well, it was just as well. My call wasn’t out of loneliness but guilt. Truly, I did not feel anything approaching the need for visitation. In fact, I abhorred the idea of being responsible for entertaining them. No, I just wanted to extend the invitation.

Each morning, my routine was as I imagined for so many years. Bounding from bed, I headed for the Cuisinart which was programmed the night before. Pouring my coffee, I would smile at all that I accomplished. Never, did I think of giving God the praise. I had done this; without any help. How arrogant and stupid I was. Then, I would carry my bright yellow cup onto the front porch and rub the plague which announced that this home was registered with the National Register of Historic Places. Each morning, I selected a different chair in which to read the local newspaper. Eufaula was a busy place. I definitely selected the right small town to host my art gallery. This was a crossway for traffic from other counties and states.

That first morning, I posted my need for a house person and gardener both with the local paper as well as online. Why not take the rest of the week to rest and enjoy my new home? Next week, I would find my small house staff. After that, it would become necessary to locate the site for my art gallery. All of this would take months of hard work painting and decorating. Already, I collected plenty of art which I asked Nellie to begin sending me so my displays could be started. It shouldn’t be difficult attracting new artists to hang their art as well. Life was good and Eufaula was now my home.

The next morning delighted me when I noticed my ad for help at the top of the list. Checking my computer, I was again surprised that I already received five resumes for house person and one for gardener. Calling the first lady listed, Jean, I was pleased with the softness of her voice. Yes, she lived in town, not that far away and could come for an interview today. We made an appointment for eleven a.m. Great, things were progressing ahead of my schedule.

Right on time, the doorbell chimed later in the morning. Opening the door, I was pleased to find a lovely young woman in her mid-thirties. Her accent was heavy, not polished as I liked but she possessed the look of an honest woman. With pleasure, I welcomed Jean into my home. Her credentials were infallible. She recently moved back to Eufaula so that she could nurse her mother. Unfortunately, facing her now was settling the estate with the passing of her mom. Inheriting her childhood home improved her financial picture greatly but she now needed weekly income. Hiring her on the spot after calling her last employer who gave her glowing references seemed like the right thing. Her demeanor was peaceful. I liked the fact that she wasn’t a talker. She fit perfectly into my home. Before Jean left, I mentioned that now I needed a gardener. IHer husband, Albert, was also in need of employment after returning with his wife to care for her ailing mother. Immediately, I phoned his last place of employment. The rave reviews he was given were compelling. Jean explained that he studied landscaping and loved everything about working outside. He could arrive tomorrow with Jean. My staff would report for instructions. I couldn’t imagine giving instructions to anyone but I was about to become an employer. Life kept changing.

The next morning, the doorbell chimed at eight a.m. Before me stood the rest of my new family; they were perfect. Jean was pale with brown hair. She wore no makeup but had a scrubbed glow. Wearing a white dress, she must have been instructed to dress so for her last employer. I explained she did not need to wear a uniform but Jean insisted she felt more comfortable. She was lovely. Albert, a tall strapping young man entered beside his wife. He appeared a little younger than she. The years of hard work outside in the humid heat tanned his skin a deep brown. His eyes were amber, almost yellow. Together, they were indeed a handsome couple. I would be proud to have them working for me.

Showing them around the house with explanations of my likes was easy. I did not feel pretentious or odd. Outside, Albert really knew his stuff. Ably, he identified each shrub and flower. Wholeheartedly, he approved of my garden not making any changes. He thought as did I that we should just maintain and plant an occasional shrub. I had not even noticed the small green house located behind the main one when I purchased it. Hidden by very large English Hawthorne, Albert appeared delighted at the find. It was in great condition as was the entire house. We were both happy to find a large sink inside the greenhouse where Albert could wash his hands and water flowering pots of plants. For years, I would discover wonderful treasures in my home which I didn’t realize existed when I purchased it.

Soon, Jean began preparation of my dinner over which I had given her “carte blanche.” “Just cook anything you like for a while. I am not picky. Cook enough for yourself and Albert as well.” She was pleased.

Entering the yellow, sunny art studio, I gently closed the door turning on the stereo to one of my favorite operas. The soothing sound familiarly soothed me in this unfamiliar home. Yet, there was a feeling of comfort about the home. It had been my dream for such a long time. Gently depositing a large canvass onto a favored French easel, I collected a few brushes from an ample collection and mixed soft colors together on a small board. Instantly, I was lost in “my” world. For hours, I painted with delight to the wonderful smells entering as vapor under the door. Yes, life was good. I could spend the rest of my time here on earth doing just this. Indeed, I was clever.

Around three that afternoon, Jean and Albert headed home from their first day with me. They seemed as happy as I. Realizing nothing had been ingested since early morning, I raised the lid of the dark blue pot simmering happily away on the burner. Delicious pot roast surrounded with fresh vegetables teased me from a heavy sauce. Grabbing a bowl and ladle, I filled it with this delightful concoction.

Then I noticed the red light on the oven door. Opening it revealed flaky, homemade cornbread waiting peacefully. It was wrapped tightly in aluminum foil. Carrying my find onto the front porch, I returned to the kitchen pouring a glass of Cabernet. I turned up my favorite opera. This would remain my pattern for many months until my life changed once again. Learning that the carefree life of an adult was not so carefree.

**CHAPTER NINE: Life as I Had Always Desired**

All week, I pinched myself to be convinced that I wasn’t dreaming. Life could not have been more perfect. Time spent with my small house staff provided extremely satisfying. The solitude allowed me to paint some of my best work. Working in binges; I may not paint for a few days but suddenly be inspired. Then finding it impossible to drag myself from my easel, I painted obsessively. Jean expressed concern for my lack of appetite but I assured her that I had always been so. Many evenings before leaving, she would set dinner on a tray in front of my closed door. I suppose she reasoned that the delightful smells may entice me but they did not. Nothing could sway me from creating until suddenly, I would lose the desire. At those times, I would work on my genealogy or gardening with Albert. Both Jean and Albert worked out well. Jean was not exactly a gourmet cook. She wasn’t nearly as versatile as Nellie. Still her simple, rustic meals seemed the right thing in this southern town. Frequently each week, she would head out to the local farmer’s market returning with delectable treasures from local growers. All of this proved delightful. Albert transformed the gardens. They looked even more beautiful. I could not find a weed. How did he work his magic?

One week passed quietly as I settled into my new life. Friday evening, early in the twilight, I was startled by the door chimes. Not expecting company, this was a surprise. To my absolute delight, there stood Linda, Margie and Rhonda. They each carried a small bag and a large bag.

“We knew that you would never invite us once you embarked on your solitary retreat so here we are! It is a surprise but we hope that you don’t mind.” I was delighted. After a long tour which included the gardens and green house which Albert had made into a small apartment for himself, we entered from the hot, humid day into the quiet of my new home. We all were dehydrated so we each filled a large, crystal glass with ice water.

“Now, where do you want to go for dinner? This is our treat for ‘room and board.’” Rhonda asked with her sweetest voice.

“Don’t be silly. You girls go on upstairs. Get showered and settled. Report down here in one hour where I will have a simple meal with wine waiting.” The silence was profound.

“Are you well? What in heaven’s name has come over you? Cat Carn cooking?” Margie looked shocked.

“Oh, go on. I can cook. Actually my new assistant, Jean, has taught me a few secrets. She didn’t officially teach me but I have been watching her. The southern way of cooking with fresh, simple ingredients is not difficult. Where else can we go and relax with such beautiful ambiance? Now, go on! Hurry back; we will have a wonderful time.”

They left the room mumbling about my sudden interest in cooking. Margie’s earlier reference to me as “Cat Carn” had begun almost immediately at UA. I was unable to remember who started it but one of my sisters shortened my name from Catherine Carnegie to Cat Carn which stuck. It seemed likely that would remain my name for the rest of my life.

Opening the fridge, fresh vegetables waited. Jean never disappointed. Preparing a simple salad with a few homemade sides would be easy even for a novice such as me. It was surprising my harboring a desire to cook. My mother never did such a thing. Maybe once or twice in my entire life at home I saw her grace the kitchen for such a task. Dad enjoyed cooking on the grill but Nellie had always done the rest of the meal for him.

By the time my three friends returned, the music was playing and the wine poured. Everyone except Margie grabbed a glass. Marvin Gaye was crooning on the stereo as I served my offerings for the evening. We enjoyed the best time. The rest of the evening filled with laughter as I prepared my first dinner party which had been merely a dream for many years. Feeling relaxed and happy; I could not believe my new life. Never had I even considered preparation of a meal but to pass on dinner out at a restaurant; something had changed. My enjoyment for such a simple pleasure was surprising. The indescribable warmth and comfort of my new home created a desire to remain close to it.

After dinner was completed, everyone helped clean up. In no time, we were outside on the front porch. Mesmerizingly, the soft hissing sound of the night insects relaxed us. I felt a million miles away. Gently a southern breeze blew our hair as we looked into the heavens covered with thousands of twinkling lights as diamonds. Nights in Eufaula were very dark which accentuated the heavenly bodies above us. Way in the background, I could hear the haunting “Hoot” from a barn owl.

“Cat, you have outdone yourself. This is just what you talked about all of the time we were at college. How did you know that this would happen just as you described?” Linda’s eyes glowed in the soft light from the streetlamps.

“I didn’t. It was simply a dream. Believe me, I know how blessed I am. I’m surprised that Sam allowed you time away. Everything o.k.?”

“Oh, sure, things are wonderful. Actually, he firmed up some plans with his dad so this weekend was the perfect time for me. He asked me to express his delight at your new home.”

“Well, if it hadn’t been for the two of you, this may not have worked out so perfectly. How can I ever thank you for enduring the heat that day?”

Looking at my friends, I realized how precious each of them was to me. They were my family now. Mom and dad were still on their cruise. I hadn’t heard a word from them or Nat but I that was not surprising.

It did surprise me when each lady left the porch without a word. As I sat alone, I wondered if I had offended them somehow. Just as I decided to check on them, they all returned carrying a large package.

“Well, we feel a little stupid but this is our house warming gift to you. Honestly, we never thought about you actually cooking so this is sort of a joke on us. Anyway, here it is.” Margie frowned.

Pushing the large box at me, I was surprised at the heaviness as well as the thoughtfulness of the gesture. As I ripped the elegant silver paper away, I knew that Linda had lovingly wrapped it. It was easy to spot her many talents. Nestled inside of the large box was the biggest, blackest frying pan that I had ever seen. It glistened with oil.

“Everyone in the south has one. This is my great grandmother’s pan. She left me two. It has been seasoned for years. I will explain the procedure later. You must have this pan. From this ugly pan, you will be able to prepare the best meats and sautéed veggies ever.” Linda looked so proud that I didn’t have the heart to mention that one just like hers came with the kitchen. In fact, that might have been the reason my dinner was so tasty. Not realizing that it was special or that it needed special handling, gratefully I listened to her disclosure.

“Not so fast, don’t throw the box away without looking inside again. Did you think that Rhonda and I were not contributing to your present?” Margie was looking sternly at me. Tearing away more paper, I noticed an envelope lying at the bottom of the box. Opening with care, I found an official statement. Rhonda and Margie had spent hundreds of dollars purchasing a month’s worth of dinners at the premiere restaurant in Eufaula. Their generosity was overwhelming.

“We didn’t realize that you would obtain a staff so quickly. Even more surprising is the fact that you now cook. We assumed that you would starve. Our bad.” Rhonda looked a little shocked.

“Don’t worry; these will come into good use. Jean and Albert plan to visit family soon. They are leaving at the end of next week. It will be wonderful having a few gourmet meals. This is perfect. You must possess E.S.P.” I said with a smile.

Quickly, our time passed. Rhonda and Margie travelled great lengths to visit me. As I hugged each one goodbye at the end of our weekend, I felt certain my life was on track and pleased with myself for all of the wonderful things that had occurred. Once again, I never thought to thank God for blessing me. I decided control of my life was mine. Credit for this wonderful life belonged to me. Having no idea how quickly my solitary life was about to change, I would regret the folly of my actions.

**CHAPTER TEN: My Art Gallery**

I painted like a woman possessed for days while Jean and Albert clucked over me like chickens. Already, they felt responsible for my wellbeing just as Nellie had for our family. That was a comforting feeling. Honestly, I hated to see them leave for their family visit. Since a child, I possessed an innate ability to tell when something was about to change. It wasn’t necessarily a bad thing. Sometimes, the event which was on the horizon proved a happy one. Still, I always hated it when that “creepy” feeling came over me. It seemed likely that my feeling must pertain to my house staff. Without causing alarm, I warned them over and over to be careful. They would be traveling to Nevada for the family visit. From what I observed of them, they were always in a hurry unless they worked at my house. There, they were focused and careful. Later, I would learn that my house staff possessed the same trait as me. The alarm bells going off for them were attributed to my wellbeing. We were all on edge. They were concerned for me and I was worried for their safety. At the end of the week, it was almost a relief that the time of departure arrived. At least, whatever was about to happen would soon occur. A few days later, I would remember my sense of relief at that time with tears. Yet there was nothing that I could do to prevent the inevitable.

After Jean and Albert left on Thursday evening, I felt so alone. Feeling pretty pleased with my abilities, I tried to tell myself that the anxious feelings which I experienced were from paranoia due to so many changes lately. The feelings would not abate however. At that point, I decided it was time to take on the challenge of locating an art gallery. Months of work getting the building just the way I envisioned would ensue. As well as locating artists which I found interesting and wanted to feature. Everything had been easy about buying my home. I felt pretty confident that locating my art gallery would be just as simple.

Sleeping in the next morning, I thought that these family trips which Jean and Albert would need to take occasionally were not so devastating. They would allow me to sleep- in and enjoy the peace of my new home. When they were present, I felt a need to withdraw which necessitated closing the door of my studio and painting. Now, I could take my time and enjoy my new home. After a late morning breakfast, I drove downtown to search out an empty building or lot on which to construct the building which I saw so plainly in my mind.

Driving around the small town, I located two possible sites. Then hunger overtook me. I stopped at a local diner for a sandwich. To my surprise, there sat Mr. Greene. As he turned the page of his newspaper, he looked up right into my face.

“Well, if it isn’t my favorite real estate buyer. How is the new house?”

Explaining that I was the happiest in my life, I thought for the first time about asking for his help. Even though it would involve a commission, I had not really seen anything which was suitable for my needs. After explaining my wishes, I saw “the” light which I had seen as he pointed to my house that day.

“Actually, I just listed the perfect property. Enjoying a bite of lunch before I return to put up the sign; looks like that won’t be necessary. This property is perfect for you.” He smiled his smile. I was elated. Mr. Greene sure made my life easy thanks to Linda and Sam. Mr. Greene left the room.

Enjoying time out alone at a restaurant before my search with Mr. Greene, it delighted me to have several locals introduce themselves as they welcomed me to Eufaula. Mr. and Mrs. Boyer even invited me to a small party the next night. They were expecting the Mayor and several other notable citizens of my fair town. All of the attention allowed me to experience a feeling of connection with my new home. Grateful for the invitation and looking forward to returning an invite, my induction into town seemed complete. Soon enough, Mr. Greene strolled leisurely into the dining room. It was apparent that he earned respect from the town. We left their presence as he excitedly told me about the property. It did not sound anything like what I described.

To my amazement, he pulled in front of a small warehouse. The outside covered with brick painted a pale grey with a dark grey canopy covering the door. Outside, it was fine but inside, it nothing like what I desired. The walls were all red brick, some of those had been white washed. The result was a rough look not the elegant ambiance of which I dreamed.

“Mr. Greene, this is not what I described earlier. We are not on the same page at all.” I frowned at his lack of connecting with me on my description. My earlier thoughts that he seemed to always know the best now seemed absurd. Yes, he had been right once but not now.

“Oh, I think that you are so wrong. This has the potential of appealing to everyone. Think about men looking for art. They do not want some pink, fancy room where French canapés are served at receptions. This room will make even the men feel like you considered their needs. It will encourage them to come to your events. The roughness of the walls which you see as a defect can in fact be used to great advantage. Think how easy to hang your art in the mortar and patch it easily when paintings are sold or added. The different dimensions will not cause all of the patching which sheet rock may need. Look up at the direct lighting which shines already onto the walls. At night, the hue will be dramatic. Light will be on the paintings not in faces. The women will love the fact that they glow instead of looking washed out. Now, inspect the floors, they are unbelievable.”

Suddenly, I saw his vision. Although it was not at all like mine, it was very appealing. Looking down at the floors, I wrinkled my nose in disgust. They were covered in old, deeply stained carpets.

“Mr. Greene, you may need to have your glasses changed. These floors are nothing if not shameful. The carpet will have to be removed since I hate it. This is not a possibility.”

“Lift up the corner there.” He smiled because he knew that I saw the vision.

“I am not touching that nasty carpet. You lift up the corner.”

He smiled. Once again he proved correct. He knew much more about real estate than I. As he took his time obviously enjoying my feeling of defeat; he walked to the edge, pulling back the smelly, nasty covering. To my great surprise and absolute delight, there laid old parquet flooring. The sort laid years ago; heavy, beautiful patterns of expensive dark parquet. It was exquisite. I could not believe my good fortune.

“I’ll take it. Draw up the contract. What is the price?”

“Victory” shone on his face as he shook his head. “Now, you know that I am not going to allow you to be so careless. We will go back to my office. We will discuss the price. You will think about a fair price then we will contact the seller. He is a friend of mine. Come on, I’ll buy you a cup of coffee. I need it each day about this time. It is difficult for me to get through the rest of the day without my caffeine charge.”

“Coffee, are you kidding? In this heat, I don’t think so.”

“Well now Missy, we are not going to sit outside. I do have air conditioning at my office, you know.” I was becoming very fond of this southern gentleman.

As we entered the coolness of his office with our coffee in hand, I thought of how quickly I became a part of this friendly, gracious town. He was right in the way that we studied the contract. He allowed me time to think about a fair price after showing me a few comps on the downtown area. Leaving me for a short time provided the ability to arrive at a fair offer. When he returned, he called his “old” friend. In no time, I was the proud of owner of not one piece of real estate but two in Eufaula. The feeling of pride was great as I hugged Mr. Greene. The owner said that we could close as soon as the inspection was completed.

Walking back to my car, I passed the restaurant where Margie and Rhonda presented me vouchers for a free dinners. In fact, they were still in my purse. What a nice way to celebrate. As I entered the dark, cool dining room, the soft music and delectable smells were enticing. The doors just opened. I was the first customer which suited me since I would be dining alone. The waiter seemed sensitive to my slight feeling of awkwardness so I was seated towards the back in a corner. Immediately ordering a glass of champagne, I felt ready to relax.

Glowing with happiness at how well things had gone for me, I felt such contentment. What a great spot with a gourmet chef. It would be a treat coming here occasionally although I appreciated Jean’s meals. The waiter asked me to join him for dinner later in the week but I declined. I loved my life and didn’t need a man to make me complete.

I drove back past my new art gallery knowing once again, I made a wise choice thanks to Mr. Greene and ultimately, Linda and Sam. Parking in the garage, I heard the unfamiliar sound of my phone ringing. No one had phoned me in such a long time. I was unaccustomed to the sound. Now running to reach the intrusive box, I slipped on the rug still able to answer it before I lost the call.

“Oh, good, Miss Carnegie, is that you? Cat Carnegie, I believe. Is this you?” The voice sounded gruff but official. My heart was pounding in my chest. This would not be good news. I thought of my premonition. Poor Jean and Albert, it must be related to them.

“Yes, this is Cat Carnegie. How may I help you?” The loud, beating of my heart was deafening. I had trouble understanding the caller.

“Miss, we have been trying to reach you all afternoon. We even came to your house. You need to sit down. Do you have family close?”

“No, I am fine. It is Jean and Albert, isn’t it? I knew this would happen.”

“Miss, I don’t know of a Jean or Albert; this concerns your parents. Your father asked me to call you. It seems that your mother sustained a pretty nasty cut while sailing. They tried to treat it but were miles from hospital. The cut became infected with some sort of super bug. They have taken her to hospital in New York. You need to call home. I think that you need to hurry. It sounds very dangerous. Your father is beside himself. So sorry-----“I dropped the phone and collapsed.

When I awoke, the phone was beside me. My face was covered in tears. With trembling hands, I phoned home. Nathaniel answered. I knew as soon as I heard his voice that it was too late. Mom was gone. Nathaniel told me to pack some clothes then drive to the local airport. He would make all of the arrangements. I should be home as soon as possible. Dad remained at the hospital.

“You need to hurry, Cat. He is really bad off. I don’t think that he can handle this.” Gently, the line went quiet.

**CHAPTER ELEVEN: In the Wink of an Eye**

It amazed me that I slept on the plane. I guess knowing what awaited me was not going to be pleasant contributed to my depression. Father was always in control. I had no idea what it would be like to watch him struggling. Although my family never appeared close, they were my family. I loved them in my own way.

When I arrived in New York, our driver was waiting. He whisked me as quickly as one can be “whisked” in New York traffic. The ride provided no conversation. Mom and Dad always emphasized the staff were employees not friends. That was with the exception of Nellie. Nellie was different. In our minds, she was part of the family. We all unloaded on that dear, gentle woman.

Upon arrival, I realized that I had not brought the key. This resulted in my waking the entire house; not what I planned. Of course, Nellie came to the door but lights came on all over the house. Thank goodness that Nat did not come downstairs which seemed a little strange.

“You had better get a good night’s sleep, Miss Catherine. There is more going on here than you know.” Nellie looked very tired.

“What does that mean, Nellie? What are you not telling me?” Now, I was wide awake even more worried.

“Please, Miss Catherine, I am tired and just don’t feel that I should discuss this. You will see for yourself soon enough. Don’t worry; it is nothing to do with your dad.”

“Well then, this obviously concerns Nat? Nellie, don’t keep me hanging.”

Nellie just shook her head as she picked up my small bag. She walked me to my room but refused to comment further. Suddenly, I felt exhausted again. Appreciative that she did not want to talk.

My room was just as I left it. The faux paint in shades of deep gold and burnt amber caused me to remember long ago when mom and I changed my room to that of an adult. I was sixteen years old and delighted mom considered me old enough to make choices for colors. The dark mahogany wood of the furniture glowed next to those rich, bold colors. Nellie purchased fresh flowers, my favorites of Paper Whites, in a pot to match the colors of my room. By my bed was a picture of mom and dad with Nat and me on our last cruise. They chartered a yacht in Mustique. We spent the entire summer on that boat and in the Cotton House Inn and dining room. That was the most wonderful time I ever experienced. Nights at Basils’ Bar where we rubbed shoulders with rock stars and celebrities. The island was more interesting to me than St. Barth’s. My parents glowed in that photo. They were in their element, so to speak, because they loved the islands. I don’t think there was an island left in the Caribbean which they had not cruised. I wondered where mom had sustained the injury which claimed her life. Had she suffered? I guessed it didn’t really matter now, she was at peace. It was as though I could feel her presence in the quiet of my room.

Standing there, holding that dear photo, I realized the fleeting element of time for all of us. The daily cycles of birth, aging and death with the occasional loss of a child before a parent; that must be the hardest to bear especially a very young child. Yet the loss of a loved one to death is never easy. Sure, my mother enjoyed a long and very happy life but to lose her, I was not prepared. My faith gave me comfort. I believed in an afterlife. Just knowing that someday, I would see her and know her, made this entire process bearable. I Maybe I had fallen from grace and maybe I was not where I should have been but my God already sealed my eternity. I couldn’t do anything to change it. How did atheists live? Handling the loss of a love one without knowing you would see them again, that would be unfathomable for me.

As I walked around the room, a sense of comfort overcame me. I found myself kneeling by my bed as I did so long ago. As I prayed, that old familiarity came rushing into my soul, “Dear Father, forgive me for not talking with you in such a long time. Please know that I love you and really need your presence. My mother lived a long and blessed time, thank you. Father, would you please tell her that I love her and will always remember her. Thank you. Amen.”

Now, I felt in touch with the spiritual side which is in each of us. We may deem it “uncool” or even become so arrogant that we think we have accomplished greatness on our own; a sign of an unknowing person. The tiredness which washed over me was a blessing. I stumbled into bed without a shower and slept the sleep of an innocent child. Little did I know the challenges waiting for me tomorrow.

The next morning, I knew that God answered my prayer. I was overcome with a sense of his presence. I knew that I could handle whatever lie ahead. After my shower, I walked slowly downstairs to find Nellie holding a cup of coffee staring outside.

“Good morning, Nellie, how are you?”

As she turned toward me, I noticed the large circles and swollen areas under her eyes which were not apparent last night. Sure signs of sleep loss for anyone. Her smile was slow and sad.

“Good morning, Miss Catherine. Hope that you slept well.” Just as I reached for a cup of coffee, a young woman walked into the room; dressed in a bathrobe. As I looked at her, I realized that robe was one of mine. Now, I felt totally confused. Was this a friend of Nellie’s? She did not appear to be one of my mothers.

Walking toward me with a gnarly snare, she quickly changed to a fake smile. Holding out her hand to me, she loudly said, “You must be Catherine. How nice to finally meet you. I hope that you and I don’t have any problems. It is wonderful that you own your home in that little country, southern town of, what is the name of that God forsaken place?”

As she stood smiling at me, I felt repulsed. Who in the world was this? Why would she come to our home at the worst possible time? With great resolve, I looked at her but did not return her smile or handshake.

“Excuse me but who are you and why are you wearing my robe?” I was distressed by her lack of manners.

“What? This old thing? I thought that it must belong to Nellie here except that her rather large rear would never fit it.” With that she laughed.

Nellie turned to leave but this character wasn’t finished with her onslaught of insults.

“Nellie, I want my regular breakfast. Yesterday morning, I sat here for over fifteen minutes before you came to check on me. I expect your inquiry as to my desires as soon as I enter the room. You may have the rest of this family fooled but not me. That will soon change once Nathaniel and I are married. When our child is born, you may be replaced. My reason for telling you now before I move here is because Catherine can duly note our conversation. She probably feels the same but just didn’t have the nerve to tell you. Now, hurry on and bring me my breakfast. I am feeling a little nauseated this morning. I need to lie down for a while.” Then she smiled as she walked down the hall to the powder room.

Nellie and I looked at each other for several minutes. Her hands were shaking, she looked very pale.

“Miss Catherine, I don’t think that I can continue on another minute. After the funeral today, I will turn in my notice. I hate to leave your father in this mess but my nerves can’t take anymore. I hope that you understand.”

“Nellie, you are not going anywhere. Dad needs you more than ever. Who is that ridiculous person?”

“Her name is Ginger Smith. She is Nat’s fiancée. They are expecting a child in six months. Two weeks ago, she showed up with him. It seems that he has taken over the company with your father’s blessing. He was doing a great job until she showed. Now he gets drunk each night. It is a mess. Your father did not realize all of this was going on. I overheard Nat and her talking a few nights ago; he plans on buying your share of this house in order to raise his family here. Miss Ginger is bringing one of her friends in to decorate. If only you could see what she has chosen. Your mother would never allow such a cheap, hideous ensemble in this home. Miss Catherine, I can’t stay here. I am old. This is my time to exit. She hates me. She refuses to be kind to me.”

“Has Nat seen how she treats you? I can’t believe that she would dare do so in front of him.”

“You are right. I was surprised that she was rude to me with your being here. I don’t know what that was about.”

“Nellie, I do know. She was staking her territory. If she and Nat think that I will walk away from here leaving you with that predator, they are very wrong. Maybe I will buy him out.”

It took much convincing to assure Nellie and get her agreement to remain until dad returned home. Out of love for him, she did agree to remain until after the funeral when dad was settled. My heart broke to see her endure such tragic treatment. We always treated her with love and respect. She quietly left the room to prepare the monster’s breakfast.

As she was almost to the door, Ginger came prancing back into the room. “What, still no breakfast? Maybe you should pack your things. Why not leave now?” She smiled sweetly at me.

“Nellie, you go on. Prepare Miss Smith’s breakfast. We need to have a few words.” Ginger now looked a little nervous.

“You know how you have to treat hired help. I’m just letting her know who is in charge.” Ginger held her head high but would not look at me.

“Yes, I do know how to treat our staff. I’m afraid that you have no idea. Just where are you from Miss Smith? Tell me about your household staff. I can find out anything I need in about five minutes on the internet so don’t lie to me.”

Ginger walked toward me and smiled. “You want the truth? That is fine. I am from the mountains of Georgia. My parents had one child, me, because they were so strung out on drugs. They couldn’t have anymore. We lived in a mobile home where I was unkempt and filthy. I barely graduated from high school but I did. Nat and I met in a bar where his friends came looking for a good time. My job involved making sure those rich boys came back. They were good for business. Unfortunately, the timing stacked against your brother. He was the one who got me pregnant. Don’t worry all of the paternity tests have been done. Darling Nathaniel is the father of my, our, child. I will soon be his wife because he has such high standards that it was unimaginable this child remain with the likes of me. I threatened to abort it but he would not allow it. So, here I am. Love me or hate me, I’m not going away. At least not until I give birth. In the meantime, I thought that I would leave my mark on this sad place.” With that, she looked contemptuously around my home.

Just at that moment, Nellie entered the room with a breakfast large enough for a lumber jack. Ginger sat stuffing her mouth so full that she could barely swallow. After Nellie left the room, I grabbed Ginger by the sleeve and pulled her up to my face.

“Now, you listen for a moment. In this house, you do not give orders. For as long as this charade continues, you will show respect to Nellie. I may buy this house right out from you and Nat. Life can become a living hell because of me. Get it? Your behavior will be exemplary until after the funeral. When my dad comes home, you are out of here. Nothing about you interests me except the child that you carry. Do you understand?”

She sat back down continuing stuffing her mouth without comment. Just as I turned to leave the room, Nat entered.

“Oh, good, Catherine, you have met Ginger. I’m sure the two of you will be great friends.” He looked so innocent. I felt sorry for him.

“Nat, what have you done? I know the entire story. At least your friend did not lie. I want her out of this house. You don’t know it but she has been rude to Nellie. There will be absolutely no changes done to the décor of our home. Do you understand? Now, leave quietly or I will be forced to have a little talk with our father. You know that he can’t deal with this now.”

Nathaniel looked shocked but he nodded his head in agreement. The look he gave Ginger told me he was beginning to understand. He left the room in a hurry. She continued to stuff food into her mouth until her plate was cleaned. She smiled again running behind him.

They did not attend the funeral. Dad remained in such a state that he didn’t seem to notice. I held his hand and brought him home. He instantly went to bed. Nellie slept in his room. Two weeks later, he died.

Again, we attended a funeral. By now, I was numb. Nellie left our family’s employment with my blessing. I returned to Eufaula. Three weeks later, I papers from the family attorney. Nathaniel desired to purchase my share in the family home. The proposal was more than fair. I agreed. The arrangements were made. I returned to New York in one month where I would sign the necessary forms.

**CHAPTER TWELVE: Him**

For the entire next month, I thought of Nathaniel. Why had he married Ginger? He was a very smart man. Not just book smart but there always had been a street smartness about him as well. During the month, my heart softened in regard to Ginger. Even though she appeared rough and mean spirited, there was something about her. At the appointed time, I returned to New York with a bit of excitement and intrigue about seeing the two of them again.

When I arrived in New York, there was no driver waiting. How quickly things changed with the death of our father. I hailed a taxi. Actually, I enjoyed the feeling of normalcy. My arrival at the family attorney’s office found Ginger and Nathaniel waiting patiently in the lobby.

“So sorry that we were unable to send the family car, Cat. Ginger experienced a close call with the baby. All is well now.” Turning to Ginger, her appearance seemed so different than the morning of our meeting. Her hair was brushed off her face. She removed the hideous makeup which she wore early in the morning at our home. Now, she appeared fresh, almost childlike. Her faint smile seemed unsure. Where had the cockiness of earlier gone? She shyly held out her small hand which I took. It was moist. I smiled.

The attorney, Mr. Williams, ushered us inside his spacious office. I had forgotten the incredible view of the city from his bright office so high in the sky. He shook all of her hands then proceeded to business. He was well known and busy. All of the documents were as we agreed. Everyone signed. The entire transaction was over in about fifteen minutes. Now, I felt a little awkward.

“Catherine, would you like to have lunch with Ginger and me?” Nat looked tired and unsure of himself as well.

“Sure, I would love that.” I smiled at both of them.

As we walked on the street, out of nowhere, the family car appeared. Charles drove us a few blocks. Quickly, we arrived at Nat’s favorite lunch spot. The famous Monkey Bar was abuzz with diners always in a hurry. Truly this was the place of legends. If only the walls could talk. An old New York haunt which Nat and I loved since we became of age. Dad and Mom frequented here so often that everyone knew them. Looking around the room, I remembered when I had been a part of the “New York Scene.” I did not miss the fast paced life at all. In fact, I longed to return to my safe haven in Eufaula.

Lunch was the moment Ginger and I became friends. Tremendous change occurred in this young girl. Now she was soft and gracious. Her manners were impeccable as I remembered the day when she stuffed her mouth with no regard to her rudeness. Smiling often, she would place her hand lovingly on her stomach. She told me how excited she was at the birth of their first child. It would be a boy. With excitement, I contemplated the fun ahead for all of us. My nephew, never had I given the baby much thought. Ginger described the new nursery. She carefully explained only that room would be changed. Now, she loved the house appreciating the beautiful decorations my mother thoughtfully placed there. What a change. Had Nat sent her to “manners school? I longed to spend time with them.

While laughing and enjoying ourselves, Rhonda phoned me on my cell. I forgot to turn it off. I excused myself walking to the front entrance. Excitedly, she rambled. Apparently, she was in Washington. My presence was desired at once. She had phoned Nat and knew that I was scheduled to be in New York at this time. I agreed to fly as soon as possible meeting her that night. Hugging Nat and Ginger, I excused myself as lunch ended. Still carrying my small bag with me because Nat had not invited me to stay with them, I planned to stay at the Hotel Elysee for one night. Since no reservations were made, things were simple to change. Instead, I caught the first plane to Washington hoping to find the cause for such excitement.

Once I landed, I remembered my last visit with my father to this city of excitement and history. My trips to Washington always proved exciting. The taxi took me to the Willard Hotel located just one block from the White House. Without a reservation I booked a room. I phoned Rhonda. All the plans were confirmed for our meeting at seven pm. Rhonda had a new friend. Dining was planned at his favorite restaurant the Siroc Restaurant. We hoped to enjoy great Italian cuisine. Relatively new, I had read some reviews. Rave reviews indicated a great place. Rhonda claimed it as her favorite also. I couldn’t wait for the evening.

I came prepared. One of my little black dresses and Jimmy Choo heels were neatly folded and lovingly packed by Jean in my bag. All of this was too much for me, I questioned why I was needed.

Sleep descended on me. Several hours later, I awakened from a nap. How had I slept so long? I hurried to our designated meeting spot. Upon entrance to the popular room, noise reverberated from each table. Rhonda’s restaurant was abuzz with Washington’s finest. Quickly, the hostess escorted me to our table. There she sat absolutely glowing. Seated beside her was a very handsome man, Barrington Bourge. He introduced himself with a kind smile. Rhonda was up to something, I knew that look. Almost as soon as I was seated, she held up her hand. Shining in the candle light glowed a large, platinum diamond.

“Can you believe it, Cat?” She hugged Barrington who smiled again. They both looked happy which made me think of Margie, John, Linda and Sam. Suddenly, I was the only one of my small group without plans to wed. That did not bother me in the least. I loved my life. Now I delighted at a chance of closeness with my brother and family. Their son, my nephew, would fill any void.

It seemed that Rhonda and Barrington planned to wed in Paris. I listened with joy to their plans. As she and I shared moments from the past with Barrington, he impressed me with his ability to listen and ask questions over the smallest detail. Rhonda had a keeper. No doubt they were perfect for each other. This prominent attorney in Washington allowed her the life of which she dreamed. Rhonda appeared elated at the chance of becoming part of that social scene in a difficult city to find acceptance. At one point during their dialogue, I happened to look over at the bar. There sat a very handsome man, watching our table intently. There was familiarity about him. Somehow, I knew I had met him but could not imagine where. Smiling, he walked over to our table. As he approached, he apologized for any interruptions. His smile seemed directed at me as he questioned, “Cat Carn, how long has it been? You probably don’t remember me but I attended UA with you. We actually went on a double date one time.” As he refreshed me on the details, I did remember vaguely the evening he now described. A casual friend insisted I have dinner with him friends. Even then, it all seemed so strange. I barely knew Michael. The evening went well. His friends had been this man, Frank Adams and a woman whose name I could not now recall. After all of those years, that evening remained in my mind as a strange event which made little sense. Frank had asked me many questions about my personal life. He seemed almost obsessed with me. After that, I spotted him around campus often. Frequently appearing at meetings which he was not a member. Everything about him seemed peculiar. Nothing came of his actions so I forgot about him. Now, he excitedly told me he lived in Washington. He saw Rhonda and Barrington on their arrival. He inquired as to how I enjoyed Eufaula. I wondered how he even knew where I lived or why he would care.

“Frank insisted that I phone you to share in our happy news. Weren’t the two of you involved?” She smiled at me with a suspicious look.

“No, Rhonda, we barely knew each other, but were friends.” I had added the last remark when I saw the disappointed look in Frank’s eyes. What was going on, I wondered. After he was invited to join us, he spent the rest of the evening barely speaking. Instead he watched me with such intenseness that I soon became tired of his stares. Eventually, I excused myself after thanking my friends for a wonderful evening. The Siroc had not disappointed; our meal was indeed wonderful. Returning to my hotel, I dreamed terrible dreams all night about Frank. Once again, I experienced an uneasy feeling. Something important was about to happen. What happened was important. It changed my life forever.

**CHAPTER THIRTEEN: Jill**

The next morning, I booked an early flight. Longing filled my heart to return to the safety of Jean, Albert and Eufaula. The taxi delivered me to the front door where Albert met me. Lovingly, he carried my small bag inside over my objections. He and Jean babied me but I loved all of their attention. Jean excitedly told me several people inquired about my recent posts for employees at the art gallery. I named it, Carnegie Hall. I thought that humorous. Perhaps it would inspire some interest in my small town. Immediately, I felt rejuvenated, ready to work. It was good to be home.

Upon entering my sunny art studio, I felt deep joy. My current painting of a street scene in downtown Eufaula awaited me. It was good. Now, I couldn’t wait to begin hanging my treasures on the old walls of my gallery. The floors shinned after a deep buff and polish. In fact a crew cleaned it from bow to stern. Before leaving for New York, I assembled what I considered my best works from all of my stash of art. They were wrapped by Albert while I was gone. Now they waited, ready to be transported downtown. Deciding to phone a few of the contacts awaiting response to my post for an assistant in Carnegie Hall, I called each one with excitement. After phoning several, then pulling up their resumes, one was so highly qualified. I could not believe she resided in my small town.

Answering on the third ring, Jill excitedly reiterated her qualifications. Recently, she had lost her husband to cancer. Stating her need to be busy. She had never worked outside her home. Due to the change in her life, she longed to use her college education in the Arts working at my gallery. Sharing excitement at the name of Carnegie Hall, we agreed it should spark interest. Salary and hours needed to be discussed but I had the feeling she would work for free. However, my offer was generous. She accepted immediately. Once again, in my impetuousness, I hired on the spot. That decision eventually impowered my life. An appointment was arranged to walk through the gallery. After explaining that one hour was not rushing her, the call ended. I quickly showered. Albert loaded his truck with my paintings. We were off to hang paintings before Jill arrived.

Albert and I only hung two of the paintings. Typically, we disagreed on location. I relished the fact that he and Jean spoke their minds. Never telling me what I wanted to hear; truth at least from their perspective. The chime on the door reminded me I had not locked it. I turned with irritation, Albert and I had accomplished so little. Before me stood the perfect assistant. She was well coiffed. Extremely beautiful, her long auburn hair expertly pulled off her face into a sweeping style with diamond hair comb. Her mauve dress and pearls would have been perfect in New York but she looked even more impressive in Eufaula. The residents would appreciate her sense of style. The smile she presented beamed warm and friendly.

“Well, Jill, welcome to Carnegie Hall. I hope that we are able to help many local artists. In the meantime, Albert here, my handyman and I are hanging some of my art so we can open our doors. Albert just explained that many crates have arrived from various towns. I can’t wait to open them so that we see what sort of talent awaits us.” The two shook hands as they smiled.

Jill looked around the warehouse which had been transformed into a most impressive gallery. “It is beautiful. Where did you come up with the idea in this little town? I can’t tell you how much I need to work. Can’t think of anything that I would rather do except see my husband again?” She lowered her head. I thought that I saw a tear slide down her cheek.

I squeezed her shoulder and waited for her to compose herself. Soon she did. We walked around the room as I described my plans. She surprised me by adding many excellent ideas which I never considered. Our union would be successful, I could feel it.

“Cat, why don’t you go back home? Allow Albert and me to open the crates. We can hang all of the art. I bought a pair of jeans and shirt in the car; just in case. I must work. You go home. Complete more paintings to help us fill all of the space.” Yes, this was what I hoped to find. With that, I departed my gallery; confidently feeling that it rested in capable hands.

**CHAPTER FOURTEEN: Reception at Carnegie Hall**

Two months, I worked with incredible zeal. Days were spent opening crates. Beautiful paintings suspended on the once bare walls. Carnegie Hall appeared alive. Evenings were spent alone in my studio. Jean’s meals kept me packed with energy. The creativity which I possessed was staggering. Painting after painting tenderly completed. Albert retained a unique ability. How could one man own so many skills? His ability to frame each work of art so professionally deeply impressed me. Carefully he hauled each framed masterpiece to my gallery. There he and Jill squabbled over location. At the end of those two months, the walls shimmered with exquisite paintings. It really looked like a gallery. Jill and I decided on little black dresses with black hills and pearls for the opening evening. Local caterers would serve champagne or sparkling water as well as canapés. I couldn’t help but remember Mr. Greene’s earlier warning. Would our event be interesting enough to attract male residents of this fair area? I wasn’t sure. Jill insisted that I needn’t worry. We advertised our opening two months in advance.

Excitement crowded the air as I dressed for my big gala. Waiting at Carnegie Hall, I delighted to find Jill looking radiant as well as Albert and Jean polished as I had never seen them. Pride of my staff enforced my confidence. We toasted our adventure with a glass of champagne. My hands shook but Jill glowed, poised and controlled.

One hour later, the lights dimmed as the four of us stood proudly looking at the walls. Perfect lighting gently streamed on polished frames. It was beautiful. Our first customer was none other than Mr. Greene. He instantly picked out four of our paintings. Then headed back to the champagne. Jill wrote the invoice as I giggled with Jean over his decisions. Each painting was painted by me. I felt so proud but admittedly dear Mr. Greene appeared to have consumed several glasses of something. It didn’t matter. I would gladly refund any monies tomorrow if he wasn’t happy.

Shortly, the Mayor arrived with his wife. They chose two paintings by local artisans. Things were going better than planned. Couple after couple arrived not just to see the new addition to our town but with serious desires for locating new, local talent. Jill was busy writing invoices. A small line formed. Jean was soon assisting her. Albert entertained the patrons with his gardening stories as he helped remove and wrap art before carrying it to waiting cars. I realized our next reception would require more employees. Easily, two more sets of hand were needed. Even the caterers made purchases with relish. Maybe I underpriced some of the pieces but it seemed fair earlier.

Classical music softly played as I circulated around the room. Finally, I relaxed, loving my exalted status as “Art Expert.” Linda, Sam, Margie and John all attended leaving with several invoices each. Albert would stay busy for a long time delivering local paintings as well as packing some to be mailed. I definitely needed more help. What a wonderful situation. Filled with anticipation at the prospect of helping more people discover employment in Eufaula, contentment flowed. Then I saw him. Standing alone with his eyes glued to my every movement, Frank. He waved and smiled. I wanted to run the other way. Instead, I walked slowly returning a smile. Softly he kissed a double kiss squeezing my arm a little too familiarly.

“Cat Carn, you never disappoint. What an amazingly talented woman. Frequently, I recall the way you kept us all laughing with your different southern accents back in college. You sounded so real. Hard to believe that you were not born here, Virginia or wherever you decided at that moment. Honor student as well as in just about every club, how did you do it all? Now, what a coincidence that you are here in Eufaula. This happens to be one of my favorite places to retreat, really uncanny, don’t you think?” He smiled at me again as I had THAT feeling, something was about to happen. The moment did not feel threatening or scary, just strange. Frank reached for another glass of champagne from the silver tray carried expertly by a young caterer. She smiled at him with a flirting look which he ignored. He seemed only to have eyes for me or was I being silly? Maybe the success of the evening had swollen my head. He did not try to hide the gold band shining from his right hand.

“What a shame that you didn’t bring your wife. She may have enjoyed this evening.” Now, I smiled smugly at him.

“What? Jenny? Oh, she refuses to leave our new baby. Robert Alexander is five months old today. You know how new mothers are hesitant to leave that first time.” I had no idea but nodded.

“Anyway, I will bring her soon. You will love her. Everyone loves Jenny. You remind me of her. Maybe I should say that she reminded me of you when I first met her. I must tell you that I have always found you to be a most attractive woman, Cat. Please tell me that you are not offended at my admiration. You, Jenny and I will be great friends. I understand that you enjoy the local gourmet restaurant? A friend of mine owns it. He says that Rhonda and her crew purchased several nights of meals for you. Isn’t that a great place?”

Once again, something just wasn’t right about him. I turned to see Albert wrapping a painting. He was watching me. Nodding as if to let me know he was close. What was it with Frank? I wanted to like him because Rhonda said he was a close friend of Barrington’s. Yet, his demeanor always caused such an uneasy feeling. It was almost as though he did it on purpose. Still, I lightly touched Frank’s arm.

“Sure, that would be lovely. If you are ever able to convince your wife to leave that new baby, just let me know. I would enjoy your company.” I smiled my sweetest smile as I walked to Albert.

Loudly stating, “Albert, you are my body guard. You are always watching me.” Albert looked slightly confused but raised his thumb in agreement. Feeling a little paranoid, I turned to see Frank smile. With a look of amusement, it was as though he enjoyed seeing me squirm. My little performance had not been taken seriously. The champagne created sleepiness. Jill sweetly hugged me.

“Cat, go on home, everyone is almost gone. Albert and I will close after the rest leave. I don’t think anyone more will purchase this evening. Besides, the refreshments are almost gone. That will be the kiss of death.” She laughed as I thought gratefully how important she became to the success of my venture.

When I arrived home, the ringing of the phone greeted me. “Guess who just phoned us to tell us of your huge success this evening. Cat, I’m sorry we missed your opening. We will attend the next one. Barrington and I need massive art to fill these big old walls. Anyway, Frank says you are a big success in Eufaula. We didn’t know he loved that old town so much. That is great. It will definitely make the two of you close. You will love Jenny. Everyone loves Jenny. You must be tired. Go on to bed. Call you later. Bye now.”

The line went dead as I thought how strange all of this was becoming. I didn’t want anything to threaten my happy home but this Frank character seemed weirder by the day. I would probably never see him or his wife. He just needed to get away from that new, crying baby occasionally. None of that rang true but I refused to think about it anymore.

**CHAPTER FIFTEEN: Change of Address**

After our successful gala, I enjoyed the status which I now obtained. When I walked into the local coffee shop another patron would recognize me and purchase coffee or scone for me. There were other such examples. After feeling swallowed into the mass in N.Y.C., this new fame felt welcomed. Life settled into a peaceful pattern. The heat started dissipating. All of us looked forward to fall. Sweet fall in the south, at last I could resume my work with Albert in the gardens. I could learn a great deal from him.

Now, I collected enough art from local potters as well as artists. Their work resulted in Jill and me planning our next big event. We slated our featured guest artists. I could envision the income which they may produce. How wonderful imagining these tireless artists receiving payment after hours of creating beautiful works of Eufaula or garden scenes. Talent in the area was surprising. I could picture Jill and me dressed in long Jersey mauve dresses with low heels. The heat softly humming behind the chilled guests. We would add hot chocolate to our menu with the chilled champagne as served before from silver trays. Much culture resided in this small southern town. Our contribution seemed warmly welcomed.

Albert began checking the fireplaces at home. On the first frosty morning fires would glow throughout our peaceful abode. There stood a fireplace in almost each room. Looking forward, I pictured large Christmas trees in my home and gallery. Soft Christmas hymns and holiday tunes playing in the background as I painted at home or sold art in the gallery. All of my friends were happy. Nathaniel and Ginger expected their baby boy in January. Next Christmas, I would have a nephew for whom I could make exciting Christmas plans.

Jean really blossomed in the kitchen. Planning large pots of homemade soups, she asked if she may be allowed to serve soup at our next art event. That couple were trusted members of my family. I missed my parents. I knew this Christmas in spite of all of the joy would contain moments of sadness remembering a wonderful mom and dad. Yet, never did I feel lonely or melancholy. There just wasn’t enough time for such thoughts.

One morning, weeks later, as I enjoyed my morning coffee, the phone rang. I never remembered to carry it to the outside table so once again, I was running toward that hideous box. Rhonda’s ramblings were difficult to understand. I caught enough to know she was in a panic. She needed me to fly to Washington as soon as possible. That was about all that I could understand with her hysteria. I booked the next flight, packed some clothes then left a note for Jean and Albert who had not yet arrived.

When I reached D.C., miraculously, there stood Frank at my gate. He looked alarmed. Now, I was concerned. As he drove me to their Georgetown residence, he explained the situation which was not as dramatic as I expected. Last night, Rhonda and Barrington attended a state dinner. On their return, they discovered someone had broken into their home. Strangely, nothing had been taken as far as they could tell.

“Just wait till you see their new home, lavish. It would take forever to tell if anything is missing. There is so much of everything. Her jewelry is extensive. They keep saying that nothing is missing but they don’t know. The police think that the break-in had just occurred as they returned. Thank goodness the perpetrator left at once.”

We turned into a driveway lined with pavers. Boxwoods surrounded the large lot. He was correct in his description. The driveway meandered gently. Soon enough; a stately red brick home with large white columns came into view. It was dramatic. Frank parked in front. His familiarity with their home stuck me as a little uncanny. When we entered, he even turned the alarm off. Rhonda was in such a state. She demanded the alarm be set each time someone entered. I looked at Frank questioningly, he only smiled and shrugged. He must be a really close friend, I thought. Soon Rhonda came running down the stairs.

“Have you heard of the dreadful thing that happened? You are a life saver, Cat. Where are your bags?” She stood staring at my small brown, leather bag which Frank sat on the old wooden plank floors.

“What bags? I only bought enough for one night.”

“One night, weren’t you listening to me during our conversation? Cat, we are scheduled to visit Barrington’s parents in Martha’s Vineyard. We must go. They would be devastated. We will be gone for one month. We need you to house sit. I can’t leave my home without someone being here. What if the burglars return? Barrington keeps a registered gun by the bed, don’t worry you’ll be fine. Oh well, you can use my clothes. I guess I have plenty.” She looked uncertain of her last statement.

“Gee, Rhonda, I don’t know. The house has just been burglarized. I know nothing about this area as well as never having stepped into your home. That is a pretty tall order. The gun thing doesn’t really help me relax.”

“Oh poo, you know Frank and Jenny. They aren’t that far away and have already volunteered to look after you. You will be just fine. Well, Barrington and I must go. Our plane leaves soon. Frank can answer any questions. Love you, thank you for doing this. You’ll have a great time.” With that she kissed me lightly on the cheek.

“Now, you look after her Frank. Come on Barrington. Let’s run before she changes her mind.”

Barrington came running down the stairs; he gave me a look of sadness but continued to rush pass me. He turned at the door, smiled and they were gone.

“I don’t believe this. I planned another art reception soon. There are many things for me to do. I could not understand her on the phone. Nothing was ever discussed about me staying here for one month. I have my own home to watch over.”

Frank just shrugged. “Well, I’m sure you will work it all out. You’ll be fine, Jenny isn’t that far away. Actually, we will take you out to dinner tonight. Then I’m away for an undisclosed time on my job. Sorry, I think Rhonda spoke out of line making you feel like I would be here. I won’t but Jenny is close although she has her hands full with the new baby. Well, got to run. We’ll pick you up at 7 tonight. Be ready for a great meal. It’s the least that I can do.” He ran out the door as I stood in the grandiose home feeling very much alone.

Looking around at my grand surroundings, I could not picture Rhonda here. As I walked around, it was sad to realize that there were no mementoes of her past nor did I see anything personal of Barrington’s. It was a little sad as though she was trying hard to fit into a social scene which she would never understand. Everything was indeed splendid. Finally, I found a guest bedroom which would do nicely. I entertained the idea of checking into a hotel. I would have felt more comfortable. This would be a long month. Already, I fought such anxiousness that I felt tears in my eyes. I wanted to return home. With that thought, I phoned Jean. When I heard her voice, I softly began to cry. Jean listened patiently to my plight. Then she suggested that she and Albert fly up to stay with me. That seemed absurd. At least he could help Jill prepare at the gallery as well as get the house ready for fall. All of the drama lately of losing my parents and in a way my brother, filled me with loneliness. I explained all of the things that I wanted them to accomplish at home; Jean made a list while promising to phone each evening.

After washing my face, I continued to walk around the house. The master bedroom and bath were posh. I was surprised that they would choose this home but it was beautiful in a showy way. Unable to resist, I entered their closet which was a large room. As I lovingly touched her designer clothes, I noticed a small picture, the only personal item I noticed. It was sitting with her shoes. I realized that she must see it a few times each day. Beaming with smiles larger than life were Rhonda, Margie, Linda and me. I held the photo and cried. Having always dreamed of being in charge of my life, my wish now seemed like a mistake. I never dreamed that becoming an adult which carry so much weight. I cried just looking at the carefree, happy faces. In just a short time, everything changed. Before arriving here, I felt proud of my life. I longed to go to my childhood home but it was no longer mine. The home in Eufaula now seemed like it belonged to someone else. This home was not my friend’s taste. Only Margie and Linda remained stable. Sitting down on the old, worn floors, I lovingly thought of generations who lived here. Had there been other tears of loss shed on these floors? Although the rest of the home was over decorated, whoever finished these floors maintained the beauty of the wood. Scratches and scars from the past only made them more beautiful. The rest of the décor seemed garish compared to these beautifully refinished floors. All at once, I thought of Ginger. Once having felt so critical of her, now I respected the changes she had made. I longed to spend time at my home again. Confusion ebbed through my mind. Where was home? Even my beloved Jean and Albert suddenly seemed unknown, surreal. As I held the photo, I cried again.

Finally, no more tears arose. I returned to the room I chose. Was this the room that Rhonda meant for me to use? I didn’t want to do anything to cause her more pain. She also experienced great change. Making my way back to the room, it dawned on me, I had not seen the kitchen. Returning back downstairs, I eventually found the bright yellow room. Yellow and blue tiles decorated the back splash. This room maintained a French ambience. Walking to the appliances, I was unable to turn them on. After all, my cooking abilities were novice. I would not be able to cook my breakfast without possibly causing Rhonda further problems. I sat down on the floor. As I stood, wiping my tears, I observed a note with my name on the front. Rhonda informed me she did have a staff but they were given the entire month off. Everyone worked hard helping her move into the house quickly. Since they planned their holiday, it seemed a good idea to give the staff the same time away. She had no idea that she would be confronted with a break-in. Now, she regretted that decision but couldn’t change it. I was not to worry though because they hired a guard who walked the property several times each night. Again, she informed me that “You will be just fine. I have purchased an entire month’s coupons from the local Starbucks. Your breakfast and coffee will be waiting each morning. There are plenty of salad fixings in the fridge. The restaurant where you, Frank and Jenny are dining will also host you for dinner every evening. You can expect a driver to pick you up each evening at 6 pm; early the way you like it. Get some rest and have fun. Love, R.”

I clutched the note to my chest as I made my way back to my room. It would be a long month but I would survive. Entering the room, I noticed shelves of books on the side by large windows which looked onto the street. I selected The Great Gatsby. I wanted to read it again. Settling into an overstuffed chair in beautiful Scalamondre fabric, I began to hungrily read. Such a long time since I curled up with a good book. As I started to relax, the gentle sound of large raindrops began to hit the roof. Maybe this would not be so awful. The only thing that I could do here would be to relax.

Hours later, the soft rain had become a deluge. I wished that I could remain here this evening. Jenny and Frank would arrive soon. Rhonda purchased a basket of my favorite soaps and perfumes even my hard to find shampoo peeked at me from the large white basket topped with a pink bow. A wonderful shower head provided rejuvenation. I searched through her clothes, pleased that at least during my stay, I would be the best dressed woman in this well dressed town. Exactly at seven, the doorbell chimed. Frank and Jenny rushed inside as they kissed me twice each. Jenny shinned radiantly. She was beautiful. Frank looked better than I recalled. Pushing a bottle of Cabernet, in my face, he quickly walked to the kitchen.

“Let’s have a glass of wine and relax.” Sounded like a great idea to me. Things were going well until I casually asked, “Frank, what do you do for a living?” He looked as if I threatened him.

“Why do you ask? What business is it to you?” He no longer seemed so charming but abrasive.

“I didn’t mean anything. You seem to have so much time on your hands. I just wondered. Never mind, it is not important.”

“It may appear that I have excess time but I am always working. My position is the most interesting job anyone could ever want. Since graduation, I have worked for the State Department.”

Without meaning to meddle, I couldn’t help myself, “Which branch is it?”

He looked at Jenny as he smiled but I could see the irritation on his face. “Well, if I tell you, I may have to kill you.” They both laughed. I did recall some old joke with that punch line. I felt uncomfortable grasping I was alone with a group of strangers.

Standing, he pulled Jenny gently up to his side, “We need to be going to the restaurant. I can’t be late for reservations there. They are extremely difficult to obtain.”

Pulling in front of a bright, large building, we waited in the valet line for a short time. Everyone seemed to know Frank, catering to him. The table we were given was “his” table. Once again, things seemed weird to me yet I was determined not to be on edge. This was going to be my evening. Thoughts of returning home to a place I didn’t know in a town where I knew no one was frightening enough.

The food was wonderful then Frank managed to ruin everything. Each time I looked up, he watched me with keen interest. Jenny seemed oblivious as though this was typical behavior for him. The lack of conversation quickly hastened the end of the evening. My host became pensive. I was driven home. Escorted to the door as I turned, they were gone. I stood alone, really alone.