

## CHAPTER ONE

It was dawn when I headed down from our loft bedroom, down steep, narrow steps that wouldn't have been out of place in a submarine, except that these didn't have any banisters. As always, I mostly skipped down those steps. In the old days my husband, Larry, would take the steps one at a time, crab-like.

That's when he used to sleep with me. This was before he retired. One thing and another, and he started spending more and more nights downstairs on our Southwestern-hued sectional, which had become his bed. There was nowhere else to sleep in our tiny house. He made half-assed excuses about how it had become too hot upstairs, too crowded in bed with our dogs, Sweetpea and Jake, and how the staircase, all of a sudden, was too dangerous to negotiate in the middle of the night when he had to pee. He was the one who built it, along with my youngest son, Layne, and a couple of cases of beer—he was the one responsible for its rail-less state. This was no big deal in the beginning, and by the time it mattered to him, he was sick of working on the house.

I dressed quickly for work in the room below, a kind of dressing room cum office, using the closet light to see in case Larry had fallen back asleep next door on the sectional after letting

the dogs out to do their business. The light went on in the kitchen, followed by the thud of the refrigerator door. I grinned. I liked it when he got up with me in the morning. It didn't often happen. It usually meant fresh squeezed orange juice. And his company. Maybe an improvement in his attitude.

By the time I'd brushed my teeth and slapped on makeup, he was perched on the ratty footstool in the kitchen, the newspaper between his hands. He wore his usual shorts, surf sweatshirt, and flip-flops. Sweetpea and Jake, Staffordshire Bull Terriers—picture a cross between a pot-bellied pig and the cartoon warthog from *The Lion King*—were doing their rabid dog charge through the dining room and kitchen. An overturned dog food bowl and scattered kibble lay in their wake. Larry grinned at their antics. A glass of orange juice stood on the counter.

"Thanks," I said.

"You're welcome," he said in that warm drawl of his without looking up. I took a swig of orange juice, turned on the kettle, and then reached into the cupboard for my cup and threw in a tea bag.

Sweetpea ambled over and sat on my foot. I bent down, grabbed her ears and kissed her between the eyes. Jake charged over; I kissed the top of his head and straightened.

"Surfing, today?" I glanced at the clock. "Shit, I'm going to be late."

"You're always late."

Ten minutes later, my African straw bag crammed with an assortment of the must-have items I ferried to and from work—the Great African novel I was working on, my vitamin pill box, running shoes, a book, extra batteries for my music at work—I stopped in front of Larry. I knew better, but I hoped for a good-bye peck. He glanced up, his slate-blue eyes clear and open.

“Have a good day,” he said, pleasantly, making no move toward me.

Why did I keep setting myself up like that? I could bend down and kiss him, but his half-hearted response would remind me once again how distant he’d become and then I’d be pissed at myself for trying. Well, at least there was the orange juice. That had to mean something.

“You too,” I said, heading for the door with Sweetpea and Jake close behind.

Larry’s note lay on the kitchen counter when I got home from work: “Gone to Mexico. Adios.”

This couldn’t be happening again. I smoothed the small, hot pink notepaper meant for quickie grocery lists. My fingers shook. His neat little boy handwriting—letters so small and meticulous—so unlike his laid-back attitude—made the words seem ordinary, like he’d checked with me, like I’d agreed. Just like the other three notes he’d left on the kitchen counter over the past eight months, same cryptic message with a few changes in the wording, always Mexico, always on the same multicolored notepad. Those trips had lasted anywhere from a week to ten days. I’d thought that after his last escape two months earlier, that would be it; he’d get back on track, maybe finally let me know what had been bothering him.

It suddenly struck me that our 1988 white VW was missing from its usual spot beside his 1973 green Chevy van in the vacant lot next to the house. He’d been driving the smaller car ever since he started working on the van’s engine two months earlier. I hadn’t even noticed. So would he be sleeping in the VW?

Or had he finally taken that surfer pal’s offer to stay at his Ensenada beach house? The guy had been inviting him for years; surfers down at his favorite spot in San Clemente were

always inviting him on surf trips. They just wanted to hang with him. Everybody wanted to hang with him. He never went. He hated staying with other people, hated to be obligated to anyone.

After the shock of his first unexpected departure, I started thinking that maybe that's exactly what he needed, time alone on a surfboard down Mexico way. Out in the ocean, catching waves, with that occasional brush with a dolphin he treasured so much—this was where he found his spiritual center. Maybe he'd finally grieve the loss of his mother. She died right before he retired, which was when he planned on spending more time with her. I knew that was a big deal for him. He felt guilty. Not that he said anything about it. No signs of grief, even at the funeral—well, except for convulsively squeezing my hand. The shrink told me he was probably depressed and advised lots of loving understanding. As far as our seeking counseling together, Larry told me I had the problem, not him.

I thought back to our confrontation after his last defection, two months earlier. Not that much different from the other times.

“Okay, so are you finally going to tell me what's going on?”

“What do you mean?”

“Why do you keep doing this?”

“Doing what?”

We went back and forth like this for a bit, with me becoming more and more agitated because of his stonewalling. This, of course, just made him calmer and me crazier until I stormed off. This was how most of our confrontations went. But then he'd come through with a self-effacing sweetness and life would continue.

I glanced at the note. “Adios.” I felt my jaw tighten.

Sweetpea and Jake slammed against the back of my legs, vying for my attention. I glanced down. Almond-shaped eyes with white half-moons stared up at me with devoted Staffie intensity. I dropped to my knees, grabbed them both around the neck and squeezed hard.

They yelped and wriggled free then spun back around and licked my face, all the while bumping and grinding against each other. In a wild Tasmanian devil whirl of scrapping, they disappeared around the corner. I flopped on the floor, let my head fall back against the kitchen cabinets, and glanced around at the house I'd shared for twenty-seven years with a man I thought I knew. So much for that.

"Hobbit House" is what my mother-in-law called our one-bedroom beach cottage. It had been cobbled together sometime around 1915. Larry had been the one to see its potential when we first looked at it. I didn't voice my doubts. All I'd ever known were the soulless, company-owned brick houses with corrugated tin roofs back in Nkana, Zambia, the dinky copper mining town in the middle of the African bush where I was raised, and the soulless tract house in Huntington Beach where I lived with my first husband.

It didn't take long for me to love our Hobbit house, especially since it was only a mile from the center of Laguna Beach, a quaint artists' colony. Its river rock fireplace and claw-foot bathtub were also part of its charm. Over the years we replaced the louvered windows with handcrafted leaded glass, added oak floors, and cultivated a bamboo-enclosed paradise filled with begonias, staghorn ferns, bromeliads, succulents, and papyrus, along with a rock-encircled Koi pond.

"Winchester House" is what Larry's three sisters called the place, referring to the world-famous Winchester Mystery House in San Jose, an extravagant maze of Victorian craftsmanship continuously under construction for thirty-eight years, from 1884 until 1922. Larry had only

been at it for twenty-five years, adding the loft and staircase, a dining room and studio. He'd had some help along the way from my youngest son, Layne. Unfortunately, their faulty measuring left inch-high ledges between the rooms, which became the cause of many a stubbed toe. Larry had also refurbished the bathroom, but seventeen years later had yet to re-hang the doors. This made for much teasing and speculation from family and friends as to our modesty, not to mention our sanity. I loved it. This was who I'd always secretly been, who we were together. A good fit.

I rose to my feet and headed for my office cum dressing room. I had to get out of here. Dressed in shorts, T-shirt, and running shoes, I headed for the utility room where I kept the dogs' collars and leashes. They trotted after me. They knew the drill.

Within minutes the three of us were walking down our rustic dead-end street toward Laguna Canyon Road and the beach, the dogs trailing their leashes. I had to pass Larry's green van, dubbed the "Love Cage," parked in the vacant lot next door, a forlorn sight without the battered VW beside it. That van was where we first made love. It was our motel on wheels for a trip up to Northern California ten years earlier to reunite with his two youngest adult daughters, missing for seventeen years after his ex-wife kidnapped them. She'd taken off with the guy they'd hired to do construction on their house.

I started to jog. Jake shot past me, dragging Sweetpea along by her leash for the first fifty yards like he usually did before dropping it to pee against the fire hydrant at the corner of Canyon Acres and Laguna Canyon Road. I bent down to retrieve her leash and let Jake lead the way.

When I looked up again, I was halfway down the side street that ran parallel to Laguna Canyon Road, in front of a mobile home park that had seen the likes of Timothy Leary: twenty

hodgepodge trailers nestled in a horseshoe-shaped lot sprinkled with trees. High above the park, multimillion-dollar homes gazed out to sea, as if trying to ignore the odd little enclave below. Lodged sideways in front of the park was that weird little trailer that looked more like a kid's playhouse.

This had been my first taste of Laguna Beach, back when the famous Sawdust Festival, a hundred yards further down, was a hippie artists' venue. I'd been in America for nine years by then, still married to my South African husband and with nine- and eleven-year-old sons. I'd ventured from my embattled marriage in Huntington Beach to this very trailer with a girlfriend to visit a man who taught meditation. Oh, how appealing that whole world of hippies, free love, and consciousness-raising had been to me. How open and accepting.

In those days, the trailer's yard consisted of a small, unadorned wedge of grass edged with brick on the trailer park side and a fence along the street. Now, Golden Angel's Trumpet blooms dangled over the weathered fence and white daisies filled a pink polka-dotted planter below the front window. In the middle of the yard, a single pumpkin the size of Venus blossomed between two battered Adirondack chairs. Behind them on the fence, a carved wooden sign, the kind seen outside some seaside restaurants, issued an invitation for Sunday Brunch: below, a smaller one spelled out the words "Horn Dog." So Laguna Beach.

I still couldn't get over the sideways thinking that went on in Laguna. So unlike Nkana, where Rhokana Corporation provided workers with housing, medical care, schooling, and a recreational club. Everything in Nkana was painted either white or green, and whitewashed rocks edged the driveways, lawns, and trees. So predictable. So contained. So boring. Lately, though, I found myself missing those rocks; I could rely on them to define things.

After a quick walk on the beach, I returned home. Jake trotted beside me; Sweetpea lagged along behind. I turned and eyed her anxiously for signs of distress, for evidence that her one kidney was failing. A habit. My baby girl. The dog who was supposed to save my marriage.