



# *The Front Porch*

A magazine for fiction lovers



The Front Porch  
Vol. 1, No. 1  
Spring 2018  
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“Hemingway’s Sun Valley” © 2017 by Kellie Coates Gilbert

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## *Be Careful What You Wish For* a story by Emilie Richards



*I'll confess that as an adolescent I had a continuing fantasy in which in the blink of an eye I found myself living in someone else's body. Usually I worried about finding myself in the middle of an Olympics skating event, (I don't skate) or on stage singing an aria that would suddenly be completely unfamiliar because, let's face it, I would be unfamiliar, too.*

*Fantasies change, but the idea continued to intrigue me into adulthood. What would it be like for a woman to suddenly find herself living somebody else's life? What if the person she had become was somebody she had secretly envied? What if that person's life was less than perfect after all, and her former life suddenly seemed filled with possibilities she had never tapped?*

*Elisabeth Whitfield is having a doozy of a midlife crisis, but that midlife is about to take an extraordinary turn. Following a near-fatal car wreck, the Elisabeth who awakens in the hospital is a new woman, in someone else's younger, sexier body. Now she has a second chance at the exciting life she gave up to marry and be a full-time mother. But "be careful what you wish for" could be more than a cliché. Getting everything she wanted might cost her everything that matters.*

Sometime during the restless eternity of Thursday night, Elisabeth Whitfield dreamed that Owen, her husband of twenty-five years, was having an affair. She woke up Friday morning, as she had every morning for the past month, afraid it wasn't a dream at all. As Friday afternoon waned she completed preparations for the dinner party that might give her the proof she needed.

Elisabeth's parties were always elegant, tasteful, and ultimately forgettable, too much like their hostess to be truly memorable. She had learned to give a party from her mother Katherine Brookshire Vanderhoff, who had insisted that God and the American flag came in a poor third and fourth behind an eternally pleasant expression and a flair with canapés. She had learned to choose wines and menus, caterers and florists. She had learned how to set a congenial atmosphere.

But she had never learned to like any of it.

This afternoon Elisabeth was enjoying the fine art of hostessing even less than usual. Weeks before, when she had seen the party only as a chance to socialize with old friends, she had rashly decided to hire younger, fashionable, and totally unfamiliar staff. Now, with her enthusiasm at an historically low ebb, she was paying the price.

The new caterer, a sleek young redhead in Ralph Lauren khaki, had furtively examined every visible room of the Whitfield residence as she and her assistant marched in and out carrying platters and equipment—Elisabeth's own kitchen had not yielded the proper number of copper bowls and marble pastry slabs. She had carefully evaluated the neoclassical furniture, Owen's prized collection of Barbizon landscapes, the octagonal skylights and the white granite floor of the entrance hall.

"You have an absolutely spectacular home," the caterer pronounced at last, when Elisabeth's kitchen no longer looked as if it belonged to her.

Elisabeth acknowledged the compliment with the smile she had learned from her mother. "It's kind of you to say so."

"I've catered parties all over the Gold Coast, and I've never seen anything quite like this. Everything's . . . perfect." The young woman dragged out the last word like a feline with an exceptional vocabulary.

"My husband is the architect."

"I know."

Elisabeth suspected that the caterer also knew what clients Owen had designed for, the international competitions he had won, and his income to the nearest hundred thousand. She ob-



viously had her sights set on more than the kitchens of Long Island.

The florist was new, as well. The old man who had faithfully provided Elizabeth with pastel tulips in the spring and pastel chrysanthemums in the fall had died quietly at Christmas, knee deep in pink and white poinsettias. Rick With-No-Last Name, his ponytailed and fashionable replacement, was a different breed entirely.

Elizabeth found the young man in the first-floor powder room, assembling an arrangement of leafless twigs and excrement-hued cinnamon fern in three upturned rolls of toilet paper. As she watched he stood back to observe what he'd done, then leaned forward and artistically unwound a foot of one of the rolls and draped it over the edge of the counter.

It was good toilet paper. Elisabeth had to give him that much. A squeezable roll of ecological white. He turned and grinned infectiously. "Sm. . .oking!"

Blinded by white teeth and shining expectations, she lowered her eyes and found an arrangement of brightly colored bowl brushes in a stainless steel urinal on the floor beside the commode. The brushes were interspersed with long stems of bottlebrush buckeye.

"I can't wait to see what you'll do in the dining room." She added a gentle, vaguely regretful warning. "Just remember, there are going to be some terribly staid old fogies here tonight. And there are only so many Nassau County paramedics on call at any given moment."

He laughed conspiratorially. "I thought an aquatic theme since you're serving fish . . ."

She pictured mermaids impaled on skewers and belly-up dolphins with arugula and radicchio in what passed for their navels. "Remember the first arrangement you did as a very young man. That's what I want."

"Can't do it. I didn't bring my skulls today."

Elisabeth could see that this conversation, like too many aspects of her life, had spun out of control. Rick had quickly guessed the truth about the woman who had hired him. She was the eternal peacemaker, a doormat who would always back down rather than cause a fight. She was so nauseatingly gracious, so intrinsically diplomatic, that one time or another every charity on Long Island had asked her to oversee a fund-raiser.

She was a woman on whom a man could easily cheat, assured that she would be too dignified to call the matter to his attention.

She swept methodically through the rest of

the house to consult with the cleaning crew, examine the linens and reprimand Owen's bookend golden retrievers, who lolled on a Savonnerie carpet and refused to move as much as a tail for Georgina, the gray-haired matron in a fifties house-dress who was attempting to vacuum around them.

Today Elisabeth found no comfort in familiar rituals. She probably needed hormones. She definitely needed a drink.

Instead, upstairs in the master suite bath she fished aspirin from a plastic vial and swallowed it without water. In the mirror with a museum-quality gilded frame, she saw an ash-blond, forty-something woman with a serene expression and pale blue eyes that were as untroubled as the May sky.

Behind the eyes was a fishwife clawing her way to freedom.

She washed her hands and automatically massaged lotion over them. At thirty she had been able to pretend that she would age gracefully. She had dieted and exercised, and the flat plane of her abdomen had fueled the lie. But now, at forty-eight, the truth was always in view. Hands with prominent veins, hips that had blossomed to their full genetic potential, feet in shoes that were designed primarily for comfort.

The telephone rang, but she ignored it. It would be Owen's secretary Marsha, checking to see if Elisabeth needed any last-minute assistance before the party. If there were errands, Owen wouldn't do them himself, of course. His staff was motivated to help by personal loyalty and generous salaries. Owen would smile his warmest smile and extend his hands in a little-boy-lost gesture. They would respond with whatever was needed. Scottish salmon from Fraser Morris? Consider it done, Mr. Whitfield. Three bottles of Chateau Haut-Brion? I'll make the calls.

Owen could design and oversee every detail of the construction of award-winning houses or entire developments, but he could not locate a case of Bordeaux if he were standing in a Paris wine cellar. Everyone understood that.

She had understood it once upon a time.

Elisabeth had one blessed hour before she had to reassemble the worst of the florist's masterpieces, an hour before she had to give last-minute instructions to the caterer. She forced everything out of her mind: the fact that she was growing older with nothing substantial to show for it, the fact that she was married to a man who looked at her and didn't see her anymore, the fact that she was giving an intimate dinner party for her clos-



est friends and was no longer looking forward to being with any of them.

The fact that one of her guests might well be sleeping with her husband.

She did what she had been doing for more than a year to forget the shackles that bound her to her outwardly enviable life.

She turned on the television.

On her bed, snuggled against Irish lace pillows, she watched a familiar crystal globe materialize on the screen. Once she had counted the globe's facets by taping the opening of the show, then pausing frame by frame as the globe turned full circle. There were twenty-four, each with a different scene reflected on its surface. She knew each image, although the effect was meant to be subliminal. A soaring eagle, the convertible that had carried Jack and Jackie Kennedy on their final ride together, the mushroom cloud of a nuclear bomb, Hopi kachina dancers, Bill and Hillary.

That scene dissolved into the next. A gavel fell against a polished wood surface, once, twice, three times. And before the sound could die away, a man began to speak.

"What you are about to hear is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." Elisabeth mouthed the words in sync with the announcer. As the final truth was uttered, a woman appeared on the screen.

"Hello. This is The Whole Truth, and I'm Gypsy Dugan."

Before she had married Owen, in the days when she was still young and filled with confidence and spirit, Elisabeth had worked in television news, too. She had briefly tasted the joys that Gypsy probably took for granted, and she had relished them.

She didn't know when Gypsy Dugan had become her alter ego. She didn't know when the sexy news anchor had begun to represent all the things that were missing in her own life. She did know that no one suspected her fascination with the woman or the show, and that she intended to keep it that way.

She was Elisabeth Whitfield, scion of a family as old as the thirteen colonies, wife of the revered Owen Whitfield, mother of a grown, beloved son. She appeared to have everything, but she was only just discovering how little she had settled for.

On the screen Gypsy Dugan shook back her short dark hair. There was nothing warm or sympathetic about her smile. It was as erotic as an X-rated film and every bit as cynical. She was Scarlett O'Hara with a mission. No matter how

maudlin the subject matter, how shocking the feature story of the day, her dimples flirted dangerously with her ripe, full lips. She was every man's fantasy and every woman's nightmare. She was Gypsy Dugan.

And she was a living reminder that Elisabeth Whitfield might have been somebody, too, if she had just tried harder.

Emilie Richards is the author of seventy plus novels which have been published in more than twenty-one countries and sixteen languages. Her most recent novel is *The Swallow's Nest*, a June 2017 trade paperback and hardcover release. Emilie has won the RITA from Romance Writers of America and multiple awards from *RT Book Reviews*, including one for career achievement. She regularly appears on bestseller lists, and ten of her books have been made into television movies in Germany. Emilie lives in Sarasota, Florida with her husband in the winter and Chautauqua, New York in summer.

"Be Careful What You Wish For" was excerpted from the novel *Once More with Feeling*. You can read more about the novel [here](#).



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TANYA ANNE CROSBY



# REDEMPTION SONG

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THE  
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*Hook Them with Hope*  
by Kay Bratt

As writers, we've all heard that to keep a reader reading, we should hook them in the first pages. That much is true but something else I've learned over the years is that once you have their interest, you can also keep them hooked by giving them hope.



Some of the common themes throughout my books are difficult childhoods and tumultuous adult relationships, something that many of us have struggled with (or still are) at some period in our lives. I have probably had more than my share of hard times, but something I always held on to was the hope that I'd reach a better place—and a kinder life. Eventually, I was lucky enough to leave behind the hard times, and that gift has enabled me to use my own experiences within many of my novels to bring a sense of reality to the stories.

A recent review for my latest novel, *Wish Me Home*, reads, "I've never read a book with such wonderful character development. I came away feeling I'd been given the ability to deal with my own similar life situations. Thank you." Another reviewer stated, "I found so many opportunities to heal that hurt deep inside me."

*Something I always held on to was the hope that I'd reach a better place—and a kinder life.*

These reviews and others like them mean the world to me as the author because as I wrote the book, not only was I purging some of the bad emotions related to my own past, but I strove to include a glimmer of hope in every situation I put my characters through. In *Wish Me Home*, Cara, the main character, represents much of the current population who has felt discriminated against, downtrodden, or forgotten. I wanted to build a strong connection between her and you, the reader; a connection that included hope for a better future. Because of the majority of reviews after publication, I'm confident that I've met that goal not only in *Wish Me Home*, but also in my other titles.

In my memoir titled, *A Journey of Hope in a Chinese Orphanage*, I take you through the gamut of emotions I felt while living in China including shock, revulsion, and pity. However, I also lead you along with the hope that I'll be able to make a difference in the lives of the orphaned children I am working with. While the book is a hard read that will challenge your belief in humanity, more than 100,000 readers have picked it up, sending it into the bestseller status and making its mark around the world.

In my upcoming novel, *Dancing With The Sun*, a grief-stricken mother discovers that getting lost might be just what is needed to find the hope to live in the light again. The book is one of the most

emotional I've written but the goal was to take the reader from heartbreak to happiness.

In closing, I firmly believe that every author has his or her own technique and style of writing, but one rule remains the same. We put our characters through trials and tribulations, but allow the reader to see an obvious transformation in them as they overcome each misfortune, allowing our readers to connect on an emotional level that brings a conclusion of satisfaction. We write our stories with hope and bring the characters to a change in perception that leads them to a better place filled with hope. I never forget that one of my stories just might be the key that unlocks the emotional prison a reader is in.



Kay Bratt is the author of more than a dozen novels. Her writing became her solace and support while she navigated a tumultuous childhood, followed by a decade of abuse as an adult. After working her way through the hard years, Kay came out a survivor and a pursuer of peace—and finally found the courage to share her stories.

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"A poignant journey of healing and hope."  
—KAY BRATT, bestselling author of *Wish Me Home*

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# One Last Hope

a story by Mary Campisi



*Welcome to the Reunion Gap series. I'm so glad you've decided to join me as we head to the small town of Reunion Gap, Pennsylvania. If you've read my work before, you know I love writing about hope and second chances in small towns where the residents have known their share of heartache and betrayal. I grew up in a small town in northwestern Pennsylvania, so it feels very natural for me to write about a place where everybody knows everybody and a handshake is your word.*

*And I know all about close families and sibling dynamics and that blasted pecking order! (Can you tell I'm a middle child?) But I also know about sticking together, and that while my brothers and sister and I live hundreds of miles away from that little town in Pennsylvania, it is still part of us—it will always be part of us—because that's where we learned the true meaning of family and friendship, and the importance of honoring your word.*

Rogan Donovan once believed in the power of possibility and the beauty of a dream. But that was before a stranger came to town and ripped a hole in his father's good name, shredded the man's self-respect, and left him with nothing but a mountain of debt and a guilt so deep it could only be relieved through a bottle. It was the bottle that became his constant companion and possibly, his ultimate demise.

Rogan poured a whiskey, tossed it back, and stared at the grayness of the pre-dusk sky. The May breeze lifted the edges of the financial reports he'd been reading. In another life, he would not be sitting in a rocker on the front porch of a rundown farmhouse at the edge of town. He'd be married with a child, living the dream life he and his fiancée had mapped out. They'd spent many a night enjoying the view from their penthouse as they sipped Chardonnay and talked about the magnificent future they'd share.

That future was gone, along with the dreams and the fiancée, strangled by the phone call from his mother two years ago. Oh, Rogan, something horrible's happened. She'd cried so hard she couldn't get the words out. But his sister could. That was one thing about Charlotte; she was never at a loss for words. Dad's gone and lost everything, Rogan. Everything that's ever mattered to him and Mom, including their reputation. Now what's going to happen? What are they going to do? Huh? They're almost broke. You have to help them. Somehow, you have to figure a way out of this mess. Please, Rogan, you're the only one who can.

"Two pennies for your thoughts."

He hadn't heard the screen door open or his uncle's six-foot-three frame slide into the rocker next to his. Rogan turned, shrugged. "No thoughts, just enjoying the quiet."

Oliver Donovan shook his head, his gray ponytail bobbing with the action. "You feed that BS to somebody who doesn't know you." He crossed a booted foot over his thigh, rubbed his jaw. "I know where that brain of yours is going. It must be downright exhausting to rescue people from their own mistakes, even if they don't want to be rescued. Don't you ever take time off?" His deep voice shifted. "Have a little fun with one of those young ladies who've been asking about you? Hallie or Leah?"

Hallie Richards wanted a commitment, and word had it, Leah Boardman wanted a baby, not necessarily, the man who went with it. "Uh, no thanks." Besides, after Deborah broke their en-



gagement, he'd decided the no-strings, casual approach was the way to go. Enter Alyssa. They met up every Thursday, discussed the latest stock trends, and then enjoyed each other's bodies and a bottle of Merlot. Nice and neat. No strings. No expectations. No chance to get hurt again.

Just the way he liked it.

"You ever going to get past that girl who dumped you?" Oliver's words grabbed him around the throat, squeezed. "The way I see it, you're hanging onto a dead end. If the woman you'd planned to spend the rest of your life with couldn't understand why you came home, maybe even admire you for it, she might have been the wrong one for you. Did you ever consider that?"

No, he hadn't considered the brilliant brunette with the long legs and witty sense of humor was wrong for him. In fact, she'd been exactly right up until he told her he had to take a leave of absence from his job and head back to Pennsylvania to help his family. Deborah hadn't liked the sound of that, especially the part about leaving Los Angeles and heading to a small town. But once she found out money was involved, as in a disastrous situation that had flattened his parents and left his father in a semi-stupor? Well, that was a little too much emotion for her, and worse, she wasn't ready to take on his family's debt or their time requirements. Too messy, she'd told him. Too complicated, and nothing personal, but I didn't sign up for life in the boonies and the parent bailout program. She'd returned his ring with a kiss on the cheek and a wistful smile. Call me if your situation changes, and maybe we can discuss things.

That was the last time he'd heard from his ex-fiancée, though one of his buddies told him that six months later she moved in with a stockbroker pulling down seven figures a year.

"Rogan? You still dreaming about the West Coast?" His uncle's voice gentled. "Maybe you should close that chapter and think about settling down, find a wife, have a kid."

Rogan tossed his uncle a look that, even without words, could be interpreted as not happening. He ignored the question and asked one of his own. "I could say the same to you. Did you ever think about finding a wife and having a kid?"

That made his uncle laugh. "Never entered my brain, not in fifty years." Another laugh. "Besides, I'm not about to start sharing a bathroom or the remote control with anybody."

The last laugh held a hint of what sounded an awful lot like regret. Did his uncle wish there had been a woman and a child in his life? If Oli-

ver Donovan wanted either, it was hard to believe he couldn't have had them. The man was a mix of mystery, musician, and philosopher, with a live-and-let-live attitude who played a mean keyboard. Women in their twenties all the way to their seventies stopped by his music shop to hear about the time he spent touring with his band, playing keyboard and writing music. He had a collection of vinyl records in a temperature-controlled room, and he played them every Wednesday and Friday from 3:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m. Passersby stopped to listen, no matter their age or music preference, and Oliver welcomed them into the shop, told them a story, made them feel like they belonged. Money had come and gone in his life, but Uncle Oliver, who preferred to be called "Oliver," was never owned by the gain or loss of it. Maybe that's why he didn't "disown" his oldest brother, when Jonathan miscalculated the sincerity of a stranger and lost a chunk of his money.

"You talked to your aunt lately?"

Camille Alexander, the aunt who'd once declared that not all Alexanders were lying, cheating connivers and married one to prove it, found out before her first anniversary that, while some might be trustworthy, her husband was not. The desire for money and power had blinded her to Carter Alexander's philandering ways and though she threatened divorce at least once a month, no one believed it would ever happen. Camille would rather be miserable than broke, broke being a relative term for someone who'd grown accustomed to caviar and private planes. "I heard she was in New York." Rogan paused, added, "Again."

"Of course she'd be flitting around instead of trying to figure out what she's going to do with the rest of her life." A long sigh, followed by an even longer one. "At some point, a person's got to stop hiding behind designer duds and past hurts and take responsibility for what happens next."

"Yup." Rogan reached for the bottle of whiskey, poured another glass.

"Better watch that stuff. It's taken down more than one Donovan."

Oliver meant his brother, Jonathan, Rogan's father, who'd died last year from an eighty-foot fall off Shadyside Rocks. Nobody needed to review a blood alcohol test to figure out he'd been drinking. The man had barely seen a sober day since the scam that ruined his life. The real question that had no answer was whether the fall was an accident or intentional. Rogan's father wasn't the only one who'd had his troubles with the bottle. Oliver had a scare a while back, but since the night he



refused to talk about, the former “sex-drugs-and-rock-n’-roller” had cut the drugs, including alcohol, from his go-to list. Now, he drank straight-up water, grew herbs and vegetables in his back yard, and advocated recycling, composting, and repurposing. The man still wore a ponytail and earring, sported tattoos from his younger days, and he’d never give up his rocker T-shirts, but life these days was more about compassion, clean living, and the environment. “You think Camille went to New York to hire a lawyer?”

“For what? To talk about the divorce she’s never going to get?”

Rogan sipped his drink, shrugged. “Maybe. I mean, why would you stay married to a serial cheater?”

“Why?” His uncle slid him a look that said he still had a lot to learn about human behavior. “The guy’s a doctor, and he’s an Alexander.”

“Yeah, well, not everybody wants to be an Alexander.” His father had always said that name was synonymous with liar and cheat. Rogan had gone to school with a few of them, and the description was dead on, except for Tate Alexander. He’d been a decent guy who got caught up in his family’s dysfunction. Rogan hadn’t heard about him since Tate left town six years ago, the same day as his mother’s funeral. Talk about strange and full of secrets...

“Your aunt’s messed up,” Oliver said.

“You think she still loves him?” Now that would be messed up.

Oliver nodded. “Sad but true. I’ve seen the way she talks about him, one part cussing him up and down, and the other hiding the hurt.” He rubbed his jaw, reached for his water. “Who needs that?”

“Exactly.”

“Hey, I’m not saying you shouldn’t try for the happily-ever-after. You might get it right, who knows? Your parents had it figured out—” he paused, his voice dipped “—for a while.”

Yeah, right up until Gordon T. Haywood walked into Reunion Gap with his promises to fill Jonathan Donovan’s empty building with men and machines to reopen the plant. This month marked the second anniversary of the disaster that ruined lives, including his father’s. But Gordon T. Haywood stole a hell of a lot more than money: he stole his father’s hope. A man without hope is no better than a ghost, afraid to breathe, determined not to trust again, bent on blaming somebody for his misery, usually himself. Curious that the Alexanders stepped in and bailed out a select number of families who’d invested in the

factory’s reopening by paying off their loans and making them “whole.” That caused its own pain, made the unchosen ones furious, and then it made them desperate.

“You’re thinking again, and it’s not about balance sheets or month-end analysis.” Oliver pierced his thoughts, pulled him back. “I know what this is about. You’ve got to let it go, Rogan. Two years is a long time to do penance for a sin you didn’t commit.”

Rogan sipped his whiskey, avoided his uncle’s too-knowing gaze. “No idea what you’re talking about.”

“Right. Then let me spell it out for you again, like I’ve been doing since you came home. What happened to this town isn’t your fault. It wasn’t your father’s fault either. The only sin he ever committed was trusting people too much. The one to blame is the bastard who came to our town and stole from us. Should we have made him take a lie detector test to prove his honesty? We were all ripe for the picking and he knew it. The guy probably homed in on towns like Reunion Gap, knew we were desperate for a chance to turn things around. He played all of us, with more skill than Donnie on vocals.”

Donnie being the lead singer in Oliver’s old band.

“That’s not the point.”

“Sure it is, but you don’t care, do you? You’re hell-bent on trying to fix everyone’s misery, loading it on your back, or your computer, so they stop blaming your old man. Well, you know what? I lost money, too, and I don’t blame him. I never blamed him.”

“That’s because you’re his brother.”

“It’s because I’m an adult who made the decision on my own. Your dad didn’t force me to do anything, and since when did you ever know him to be the persuasive type? Huh?” His voice grew stronger, filled with conviction. “I’ll tell you. Never.”

“People trusted him. That’s why they invested their money in a business Haywood never intended to bring to this town. Didn’t matter the business didn’t exist; my father made people believe it did because he believed it did. And look what happened. I’m going to do everything I can to help the people who lost out because of it.”

“For how long? Ten years? Twenty?”

“I don’t know.” Pause. “I just don’t know.”

“Your father never wanted you to come back here. Neither did your mother. They wanted you to live your life and not worry about them.”



“I couldn’t do that.” After his sister’s near-hysterical phone call begging him to come home, he knew he had to find a way to help his parents. People blamed Jonathan Donovan for their misfortunes, but what they didn’t know was that Rogan was just as much to blame. If he’d listened to his father’s request to review Haywood’s proposal, maybe this could have all been prevented. Maybe his father would still be alive. But he’d ignored him, made ten different excuses why he didn’t have time to review the documents and give his opinion. And why was that? Oh, right. He and Deborah had been about to embark on an Alaskan cruise. It didn’t matter that Rogan was an accountant with a gift for finding inconsistencies, or that his father wouldn’t recognize an ill intention if it stood next to him. Deborah wanted to go to Alaska, see the glaciers...

So, they’d gone and his father made the biggest mistake of his life. But so had Rogan. He’d never told anyone what he’d done, or rather, what he hadn’t done, not even his uncle.

The pain was too deep.

If Rogan had looked at the documents and asked a few questions, he might have saved his father and the town from a lot of misery. But he hadn’t, and his selfishness had been his father’s undoing.

He would not be selfish again.

No matter what.

Mary Campisi is the author of more than 30 emotion-packed novels that center around hope, redemption, and second chances.

Mary should have known she’d become a writer when at age thirteen she began changing the ending to all the books she read. It took several years and a number of jobs, including registered nurse, receptionist in a swanky hair salon, accounts payable clerk, and practice manager in an OB/GYN office, for her to rediscover writing. Enter a mouse-less computer, a floppy disk, and a dream large enough to fill a zip drive. The rest of the story lives on in every book she writes.

Visit Mary’s website [here](#).

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“One Last Hope” is excerpted from *Strangers Like Us*, the first novel in the *Reunion Gap* series. You can learn more about it [here](#).

# THE *write* HOUSE

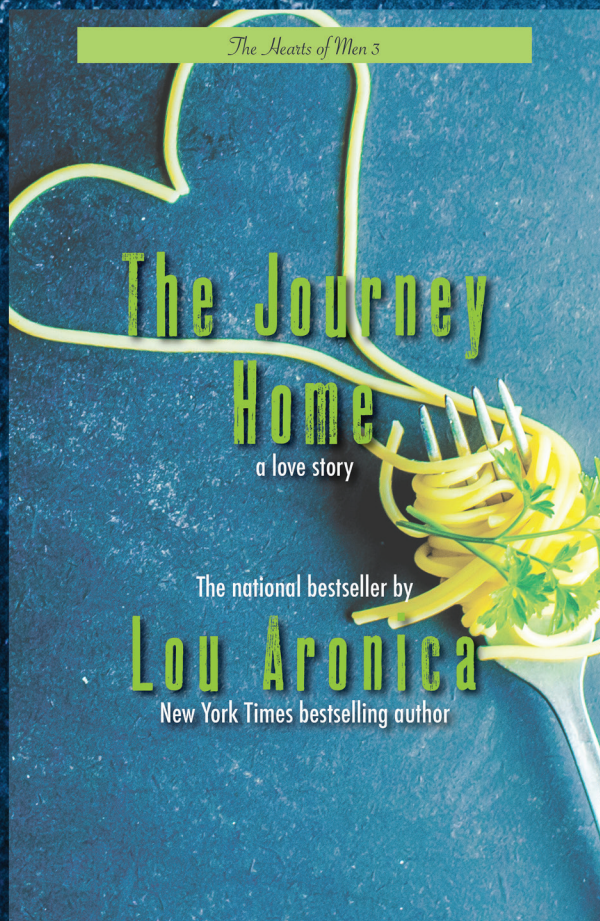
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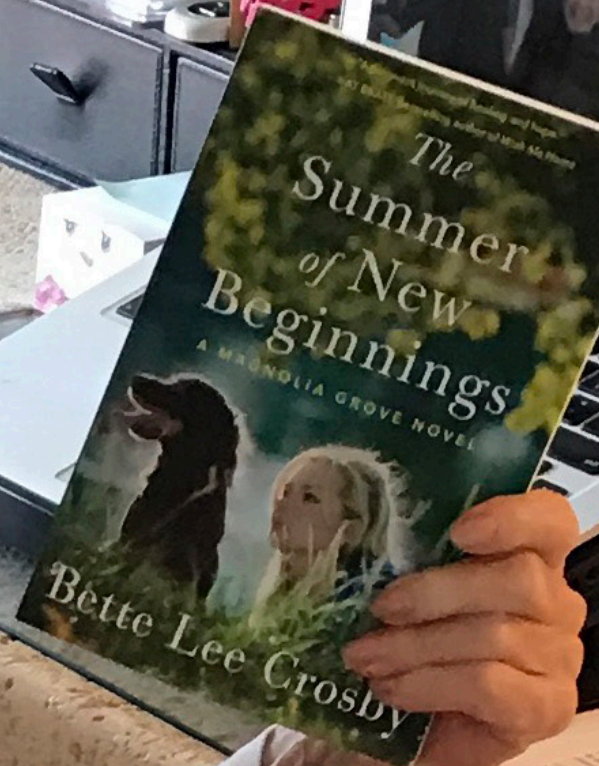


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THE  
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PLANT



*Never Say Never*  
by Bette Lee Crosby



Sometimes the thing you want least is the thing you need most.



After the sudden death of my husband and a company relocation that took me 150 miles away from my friends and the comfort of familiar surroundings, the only thing I wanted to do was come home from work and crawl into bed.

“What you need is a dog,” my sister suggested. “Dog? Me?”

An added responsibility was the last thing in the world I needed. But my sister is a person whose determination is on steroids. Once she decided that a dog would lift me out of the doldrums, she simply did not give up.

After two months and countless explanations of why I didn’t want or need a dog, she showed up at my house one Saturday morning.

“I think I’ve found the perfect dog!”

She explained that a breeder nearby had a litter of Bichon Frise pups that were 8 weeks old and ready for adoption.

“I’m not ready for a dog, and I really don’t think—”

She stood there, hands on hips. “I’ve already made the appointment!”

Sometimes it’s easier to give in than argue. She assured me there was no obligation to buy.

“We’ll take a look at the puppies, then go to lunch,” she said.

Lunch sounded good.

*Puppies are a lot like little kids; once they come at you with all that unabashed love, they are impossible to resist*

When we arrived at the breeder’s house, a little girl opened the door.

“Are you the lady for the puppy?” she asked.

My sister nodded.

The girl led us to the kitchen and pointed to a large cardboard box. Inside were six squeaking, squirming balls of white fluff. As they scrambled around for attention the pups stepped on top of one another, but it seemed to be an acceptable behavior. The girl’s mom joined us.

“There’s five males, one female,” she explained.

Snatching the opportunity to eliminate 5 dogs in one fell swoop, I said, “I’m not interested in a male dog.”

The girl scooped one bundle of fur from the lot and handed her to me.

“This is Betsy,” she said.

“Betsy?”

I suspected the dog having a name so similar

to my own was a sneaky tactic arranged by my well-intended sister.

The mother laughed. “The puppies were born on July 4th, so Sara named all of them after American patriots. The female’s name is Betsy Ross.”

Betsy burrowed deeper into my arms. I felt a smile taking hold of my face as this one-pound puppy covered me in kisses.

The thing is, puppies are a lot like little kids; once they come at you with all that unabashed love, they are impossible to resist.

My sister and I never did get to lunch that day; instead we stopped at the pet store and loaded up on supplies. Betsy was renamed Brandi, and we settled into a life of togetherness.

Instead of falling into bed after work, I took my furry friend for long walks. We met new friends and neighbors. Everywhere I went, she went. She rode in the car, tagged along on a leash or got carried in a tote. I pampered her, spoiled her and loved her to pieces.

Brandi was with me for almost 18 years. During that time, I met and married my second husband. We moved from my tiny town house to a three-acre ranch in the Watchung Mountains; then we moved again and again.

Brandi was fourteen when we moved to Florida and I began writing novels. Her hips were arthritic, so morning bike rides replaced the walks. She sat in the basket as I pedaled through the streets of our neighborhood. In the afternoon, she napped beneath my desk as I wrote, both of us happy with our lot in life.

Then came that awful day—the day I lost her.

She was almost 18 years old and I knew it was inevitable, but I still wasn’t ready. The loss was devastating. I cried for days on end, couldn’t work, didn’t want to eat and was inconsolable.

After a month of gut-wrenching heartache, my know-it-all sister said, “You need to get another dog.”

“Absolutely not,” I answered.

Replace Brandi? I thought. Unthinkable! Brandi wasn’t just a dog; she was a life partner who had been with me for 18 years.

“Get a rescue,” my sister said. “The shelters are overcrowded. A lot of those dogs will be put to sleep if they don’t find homes.”

While the thought of any puppy being put to sleep weighed heavily on my heart, I still wasn’t ready to love another dog.

Replacing Brandi was something I couldn’t



even consider. And I didn't. But after I thought enough about the homeless puppies, I came to the decision that even though I could never love another dog the way I'd loved Brandi, I could give a needy dog a home.

I began to search rescue sites like Small Paws, and before long I was looking at an 8-month-old Bichon who was underweight and as scraggly-looking as they come. The rescue farm was a three-hour drive from our house; we picked Katie up that weekend.

For months afterward I compared her to Brandi, never favorably. I went through all the motions of being a good dog mama, but my heart wasn't in it.

Whether or not I loved her didn't seem to matter to Katie; she was determined to love me. Everywhere I went she followed right at my heels. If I made it into the bathroom before she got there, she'd wait outside the door. When I sat down at the computer to write, she jumped up in my lap.

Although it took a few months, I came to love this little rescue every bit as much as I had Brandi.

Dogs seem to know something we humans are slow to learn: love begets love. It may take a long time but love someone unconditionally, and sooner or later they'll love you back.



Bette Lee Crosby is the *USA Today* bestselling author of eighteen novels, including *Spare Change* and the *Wyattsville* series. She has been the recipient of the Royal Palm Literary Award, Reviewer's Choice Award, FPA President's Book Award, International Book Award, and Next Generation Indie Award, among many others. Her 2016 novel, *Baby Girl*, was named Best Chick Lit of the Year by *The Huffington Post*. She laughingly admits to being a night owl and a workaholic, claiming that her guilty pleasure is late-night chats with fans and friends on Facebook and Goodreads.

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In her newest release, *The Summer of New Beginnings*, sisters Meghan and Tracy Briggs are drawn back to their hometown to rediscover themselves. While Tracy does her best to adjust to being a single mother, Meghan will do everything she can to avoid getting attached to anyone or anything. As Meghan works to salvage the family business, she'll come across a lost dog and soon finds herself falling for him... and the hunky vet in town. Like many of Crosby's novels, this story is a heart-warming tale of family, friendships and trust.





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## The Wrong Side of Right

a story by Tanya Anne Crosby



*You know the feeling you get when you realize you might be on the wrong side of Right? It's like a whopper hangover after a night of wearing lampshades when you're sitting over morning coffee, reliving flashes of last night's drunkfest, and cringing over a thing you didn't mean to say. Anger is like alcohol—a drug that skews your perspective. And there's nothing quite like that flash of insight, that moment when you come down and remember that, no matter how right it seemed at the time, you're on the wrong side of Right. This is that moment for Caia Paine, and what comes next will determine who she becomes...*

*Happy reading my friends!*

Caía leaned against the old brick wall of the corner super mercado, where she meant to buy coffee—American coffee, not that Spanish variety. Every café in this city served java that was far stronger than she was accustomed to, and this was the only market she knew of that carried a brand she recognized. It also so happened to be across the street from N° 5 Calle Lealas.

Of course, Caía had a right to shop where she pleased. Simply because this shop faced that house didn't make one bit of difference. For the time being, this was her city as well.

On the other hand, what might be more inauspicious was the simple fact that she'd come forty-five minutes early, before the mercado was due to open its doors.

And perhaps more impugning, she was standing here puffing away on a nasty cigarette, because it gave her a reason to loiter. And she didn't even smoke. If that wasn't enough to make her rethink her motives, she didn't know what was.

It was one thing to wait at a public location, with the expectation that someone might walk by—or even if you knew they would walk by. It was yet another thing to case someone's house like a cat burglar. Private investigations aside, the act of doing so gave Caía a twisty knot in the pit of her gut. But here was her quandary: She was convinced Nick Kelly was a bad guy, and she wanted desperately for him to have to look her in the eyes and acknowledge what he'd done.

She wanted him to tell her that he hadn't been sending trade orders, or texting some bimbo as he ran over her son. So maybe that was all she was looking for? *Closure.*

Before leaving Chicago, Caía had asked around about him. She understood exactly what sort of man Nick was: He was a user. He accepted money from clients, promising returns on investments he couldn't guarantee. Then again, all those Merc traders were sharks, weren't they? One way or the other, whatever Nick Kelly was doing here, Caía couldn't believe it was anything good.

She eyed the house across the street. There was something surreal about the eighteenth-century house seated beneath the old maple's dappled light. Something timeless and lovely. Something that softened the edges of her anger, even as it roused her resentment.

The morning sky matched the salmon paint. The color contrasted nicely with the intense black ironwork on the upper balconies and windows—three upstairs, one below.

She already knew whose house it was.



*Marta Herrera Nuñez.*

Caía had deduced as much from the mailbox, a nicely engraved, permanent plaque. Presumably, Marta was the mystery child's mother, but that was merely conjecture as Caía didn't know. Unlike the impermanent layers of tape plastered over her own mailbox down the street, the name on Marta's box gave a clear indication that the house she lived in didn't often change hands—which only meant, to Caía, that the woman must have some money . . .

*Was she the reason Nick had come to Spain?*

*What was his connection to that woman and her child?*

All three resided here together. And though it was perfectly conceivable that he was renting space, as Caía was doing, she didn't think so. Why would anyone stir himself to escort some kid to school every day, unless he was invested? No, the task was too much for a mere tenant, even a saintly one, which Nick Kelly most assuredly was not.

*You're not the world's police, Caía.*

*Whatever.*

*Women have to look out for one another, don't they?*

The answer to that question was unequivocally "Yes."

Caía took another drag of the cigarette and her gut turned.

An image of Nick Kelly trolling around dating sites for unwary victims popped into her head. So, of course, that's what he'd done. Although . . . why would he abandon his life—a successful one by most standards—and come here to Spain to play nanny to a little girl?

*It doesn't make sense.*

Admittedly, none of the answers that came to mind suited Caía's narrative, save one. Unfortunately, as much as she hated the truth, he wasn't here to escape justice. Bottom line: To be criminally liable for her son's accident, the traffic homicide investigation would have had to prove that the driver had been reckless or criminally negligent—excessive speed, texting while driving, that sort of thing. From day one, Nick Kelly had been free to go wherever he pleased. But that didn't mean he was blameless. For fuck's sake, he ran over a kid—her kid.

*How did someone get to walk away from something like that?*

Caía inhaled another drag, and her throat seized. She peered down at the cigarette in her hand, and hurled it to the ground, grinding it into the sidewalk with the toe of her sandal.

She didn't even know how to smoke. It made her sick. For God's sake, she was at an all-time low. It was hard work hating someone full time, and it was taking a toll.

First, her mother. Then her son. Then her father. And if that wasn't enough, Gregg had left her when she'd needed him most, but fine. *Whatever.* There's your word again, Gregg. *I get it now. It feels good to say it.* Freeing. It was like divesting oneself of responsibility. *Whatever.*

They claimed divorce was difficult, but Caía's was easy. Her husband was there one day, the next he was gone. But unlike her son's, Gregg's absence was a relief.

For months and months after the accident, Caía had sat in her hospital room, staring out her window, hoping to see her son's face in the glass . . . and, of course, it was an impossibility.

Rather, what she saw, over and over, was her own reflection in the depths of that bathroom mirror, fine red cracks radiating from a center where her forehead had impacted with glass.

She lost herself in that memory for a moment, tasting nicotine in the back of her throat.

At some point, Gregg had discovered her there, standing in the upstairs bathroom—the one closest to Jack's room—her arms hanging limply at her sides, her blood draining onto the tile, staining the grout. Despair, black and ugly, had been simmering deep in her gut, like liquid hate boiling in a cauldron. She'd stood there, in that bathroom, looking into that mirror—so clean, not a speck of toothpaste anywhere on it—and fury rose up inside her, building to a terrifying climax . . . as it was doing again now.

Later, at the hospital, voices had filtered in from the hall. "Do you think she did it on purpose?"

To her husband's credit, there had been a bit of sorrow in his answer. "I don't know," he'd said. "I don't know."

And then a pause, followed by the same female voice. "Mr. Paine, let me rephrase the question. Do you believe your wife presents a danger to herself?"

For a long, long time, Gregg hadn't responded, and then he'd said, "Yes." And again, with much more certainty, "Yes."

And that was that.

Later, once they were alone, Dr. Hale explained, "Some degree of anger is normal, Caía. It's a natural part of the grieving process. Do you understand what I'm telling you?"

Caía's throat had felt too thick to speak. Some-



thing large was stationed there, swallowing words before they could form.

“Caía, are you listening to me?” There had been a note of impatience in the woman’s voice, enough to keep Caía from answering. “Often, with disordered anger, episodes can be more intense.” And more firmly, she asked, “Caía . . . do you understand what I’m saying?”

How the hell did they expect her to process so much? Losing her mom was difficult enough. But then her whole world had expired in the space of a year. Caía’s mother gave up her fight against cancer the year before Jack’s death. Afterward, her father went downhill fast. The two had been inseparable, and Jack’s death was the final straw. Caía buried her son on June 18, 2016, and her dad on August 5, 2016—*whap, whap, whap*—rapid-fire heartbreak. And then Gregg dumped her and something snapped.

*Whatever.*

“Caía?”

Caía had blinked in answer, her throat suffocating her. Her shoulders had tensed until they were made of pain itself.

No one needed to explain to her why she was feeling what she was feeling. “My son is dead,” she’d answered coldly.

Lowering her lashes, the doctor had peered down at the papers in her lap—documents that presumably declared Caía unfit to care for herself. “Yes, I know,” she’d said.

*I know.*

*I know. I know. I know.*

Well, did she also know it was Jack’s birthday the day he died? Did she know Caía had bought him a brand-new skateboard, along with another surprise?

Sleek and black with a white marbled moon, the skateboard had been one Jack had been eyeing online for weeks, but not even Caía knew what was inside the accompanying box. Whatever it held was worth more than twice what she’d paid for the skateboard. “Unknown treasures, all hand-picked for the avid skateboarder,” the description said.

Still, to this day, she didn’t know what was inside that fucking box. His old skateboard had been crushed beneath the wheels of Nick Kelly’s car, and after her son died, Caía had carried the unopened package to the Dumpster and taken an axe to the brand-new skateboard. And then she’d burned whatever remained in the fire pit in the backyard, wheels and all. She could still recall the smell of rubber, as distinct as the scent of her own blood.

Disordered anger, the doctor had explained, usually presented as a secondary symptom. It was not uncommon with grief, but since Caía had already harmed herself once, she would be better served to remain under expert supervision so they could help her “reconvene on a path to recovery”—reconvene, as though she were meeting someone on an actual path.

Really, what they were trying to say was this: Gregg didn’t want to be responsible for Caía or her grief. Her husband was too busy to mourn their son. He had things to do, places to go, people to see. Girlfriends to screw.

Caía, on the other hand, had nothing better to do than to experience all five stages of grief. Really, there were five stages. But who were these clever people who’d presumed to sum up what was essentially an existential implosion of the soul, going so far as to give each stage discernible names that you could check off, like a to-do list?

In the end, none of those stages, except anger, had been relevant to Caía. She neither had the capacity to deny her son’s death, nor had they allowed her the liberty to mourn him in peace. Even now, the absence of her duties as Jack’s mother were excruciating.

Every time she didn’t wake up to pack his lunch, or rush home to wash his soccer pants, she remembered. She also remembered every time she didn’t have to clean his bathroom mirror . . .

Caía swallowed a ball of grief.

Across the street, the front door of N° 5 Calle Lealas opened—a massive door surrounded by ornate baroque stonework. Just inside, beyond the foyer, was a second ironwork door, adding fortification. The only thing she’d ever glimpsed beyond those barriers was the soft glow of more salmon paint and the distant impression of a sunlit back door.

Out came a fiery-haired older woman, producing a set of keys. There was no knob on the outside, only a keyhole. She locked the door, then pushed the face of it before ambling away.

*A housekeeper? Maybe a grandmother?*

Caía thought perhaps she might be a housekeeper, because she preferred to think of those people as spoiled and privileged and a house that size was bound to employ servants. Although really, it was impossible to say how big the house could be.

*Judging by its depth along the alley, not very small.*

Out front grew a lovely maple, its ever-increasing circumference buckling the sidewalk around



its base—nature’s dogged and subversive threat to civil order.

Without constant care, people and places buckled to their nature. It couldn’t only be Caía who waged a perpetual war with her demons.

Proof of this came marching past as Caía stood waiting for the super mercado to open its doors. It came in the form of a drunken brunette, with thick black eye makeup that no longer complemented her Spanish eyes. Water soluble, the liner had smeared into dark streaks that stained her cheek bones, wearing into well-earned wrinkles. Heels off, brandishing them like weapons, the woman screamed at the top of her lungs, “¡Hijo de puta!” *Son of a whore*. “¡Asqueroso!” *Disgusting man*. “¡Boracho!” *Drunk*. And on and on she went, marching past, continuing her tirade, her voice echoing perversely down empty streets.

*Later, she would pull herself together. Maybe.*

Nº 5 Calle Lealas sat on a quiet corner. The super mercado occupied the space across the street, and directly opposite the house, on the southeast corner, sat a lovely church. Iglesia de la Victoria, the plaque read. A single turret overlooked the street—as though watching over the house—an ancient tower, with a blue-and-white tiled dome. Caía wasn’t the least bit religious anymore, but guilt and shame had no denomination.

In her periphery, she spied movement inside the market. Feeling sick to her stomach, she stood another moment, staring at the door across the street, and then peered after the shouting woman, feeling lost. How much further must she fall before she ended up like that?

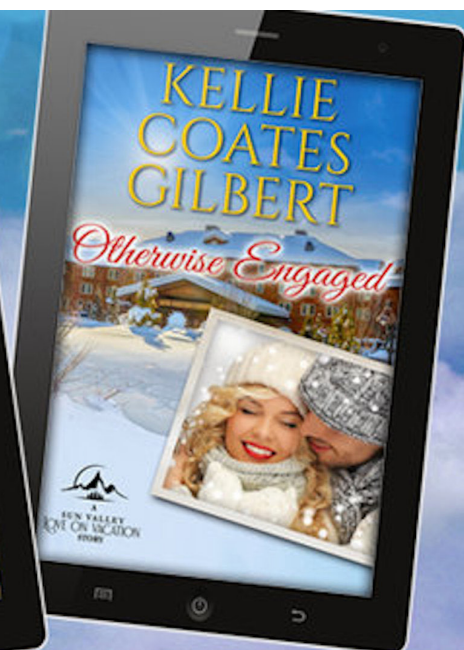
*Maybe you’ve gone too far already?*

The woman in the market unlocked the door, shoving it open to allow Caía entry. But Caía didn’t go inside. She didn’t even have a damned coffeemaker. Pretending suddenly felt unhinged. She smiled wanly at the women, and shook her head, then walked away.

Tanya Anne Crosby is the *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author of thirty novels. She has been featured in magazines such as *People*, *Romantic Times* and *Publishers’ Weekly*, and her books have been translated into eight languages. Her first novel was published in 1992 by Avon Books, where Tanya was hailed as “one of Avon’s fastest rising stars.” Her fourth book was chosen to launch the company’s Avon Romantic Treasure imprint. Known for stories charged with emotion and humor and filled with flawed characters Tanya is an award-winning author, journalist, and editor, and her novels have garnered reader praise and glowing critical reviews. In 2013, she penned her first romantic suspense novel, *Speak No Evil*, which appeared on the *USA Today* list. Tanya and her writer husband split their time between Charleston, SC, where she was raised, and northern Michigan, where the couple make their home.

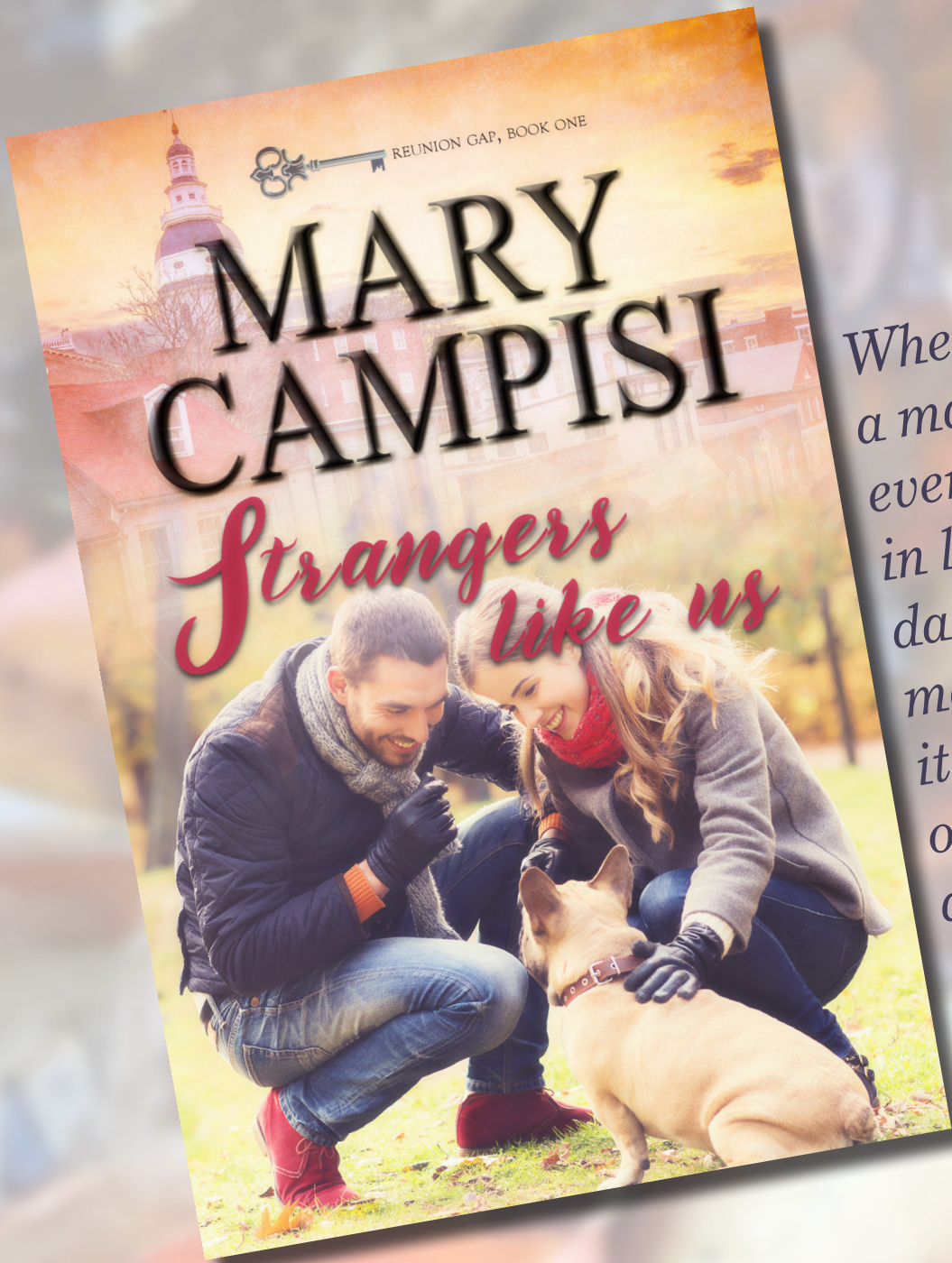
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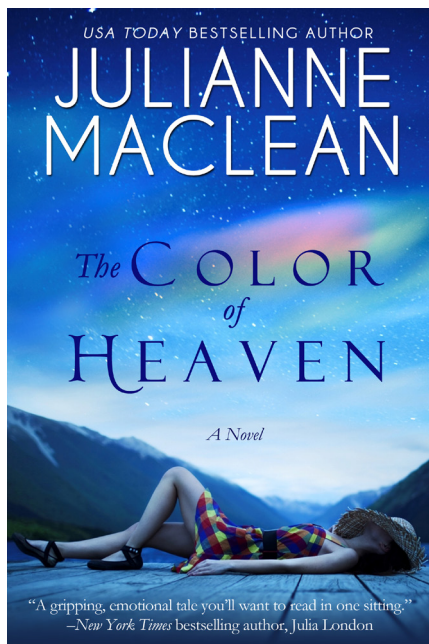
*An interview with*  
*Julianne MacLean*



**You published your first book in 1999. Back then did you think you would be as prolific a writer (with 37 books and counting) as you are now? What did you learn in writing that first book that brought you to where you are in your writing career now?**

I honestly hadn't thought that far ahead when I sold my first book. Back then, it was tough to break in and I was just trying to sell one book at a time. But once I started writing, I didn't want to do anything else, and I'm stubborn about not giving up, so I suppose the cards were laid out for a long-term career. I expect to be writing novels for the rest of my life.

You also ask what I learned from that first book. I think it's important to mention that my first published book was actually the fifth book I'd written; the first four didn't sell. So I suppose by then I had found my voice, and I'd learned how important it was to keep moving forward and start writing new books, applying what I'd learned previously if I wanted to keep growing as a writer. I've been doing that ever since, and I'm still learning and growing with every new book I write.



**There are thirteen books in your *Color of Heaven* series. They do not follow the same character or group of characters. What ties all the books together? What inspired you to write this series?**

The books in the *Color of Heaven* series are tied together by two things: First, they all explore the

theme of real-life magic—things like fate and destiny, the existence of soul mates, and the possibility of life after death; second, each book picks up where the previous book leaves off by continuing to tell the story of one of the secondary characters.

I was inspired to write the first book because I've always been fascinated by accounts of near-death experiences and I wanted to combine that element with a love story I had in mind. I originally wrote it as a stand-alone novel, but after I received a flood of letters from readers, asking for more books like it, I decided to continue by giving stories to other characters in that story world.

**Describe a typical writing day.**

It depends on where I am in the overall process. If I'm working on a first draft with a deadline, that's when I work the hardest. I aim to write forty pages per week, which boils down to a daily goal of about seven new pages. That might leave me with a day off during the week if everything goes well. But some days are better than others. Sometimes I can write ten or twelve pages; other days I might only complete three—or none, if I have family commitments or need to take care of something on the business side of writing. Generally, forty pages a week is achievable if I'm disciplined. Discipline, for me, means working all morning—usually in my pajamas with a bottomless cup of coffee. I start by going over what I wrote the previous day and then polishing that. Then I keep moving forward with one or two new pages until about noon, when I run out of gas, creatively, and get hungry. I take a break for lunch, get out of the house and run an errand or get some exercise, and then I return to the keyboard around 4pm. For some reason, the words come more easily in the evenings, so I write until 8 or 9, with a supper break in the middle. I don't turn on the television until at least 9pm.

I once heard that most people can only be creative for four hours at a time, and I've found that to be true for me, which is why I work four hours in the morning, take the afternoon off, and put in another four to five hours at night. The only time I can work straight through a whole day is when I'm revising or editing a finished book. I don't seem to run out of gas after four hours if the words are already there on the page and I just have to tweak them.

Once I turn in a book, I come out of the “cave”



and spend more time with friends and family, and I catch up on my pleasure reading. But I'm always thinking about what the next book will be about, and if I need to do research, I immerse myself in that until I have a plot laid out. Then the whole process begins again.

### **Do you ever get writer's block, or get stuck when you're writing a book?**

I don't really like the term writer's block, because it evokes an image of a writer who simply can't write, without any explanation for that inability, and I feel there's always a reason when a writer's engine is stalled. It could be something personal in the writer's life, like a family issue that needs to be taken care of before she can give herself over to her writing. Or sometimes it might be burnout and she just needs a vacation. Or maybe a plot element simply isn't working, and the writer needs to figure out why, and that can take time.

And yes, getting stuck in the middle of a book happens to me all the time. Suddenly, I can't move forward, and I don't necessarily know why. Usually, it's my subconscious telling me that something isn't working with the story, and I need to take a step back and figure out where I went wrong. Whenever I get stuck like that, I find it helpful to wait a few days, then go back to the beginning and read the whole manuscript from the start, with fresh eyes. I can then get a feel for what the story needs in order to move forward from the place where I became stuck.

### **Why are your *Color of Heaven* novels categorized as general women's fiction, but also as romance?**

All the books in the *Color of Heaven* series have romance in them, but they don't necessarily adhere to the usual romance genre conventions, so I think it's correct to categorize the books as general fiction. There are other plot elements or situations that sometimes become the primary focus—such as a character's near-death experience and her relationships with the other characters in the novel—not just the love interest. At the same time, I always make sure there is an uplifting ending that provides a happy sigh, so, no matter how it comes about, romance readers are usually pleased with the novels.

### **What's next for you? Are you working on a new book?**

My next release is a women's fiction novel called *A Curve in the Road*, and it comes out on August 14, 2018, with Lake Union Publishing. It's a stand-alone novel—not part of a series—and it's about a woman who gets into a car accident in the opening chapter, and as a result, she learns things about her husband that change what she always believed about her marriage. I don't want to say much more than that, because I hate spoilers, especially when it comes to unexpected plot twists—and this book has a few of those! You can find out more on my website at [www.juliannemaclean.com](http://www.juliannemaclean.com).

I'm also working on another new book that is tentatively scheduled for release in February 2019. I don't have a title for it yet because it's still in its early days. That will be a stand-alone women's fiction novel as well.

Julianne MacLean is a *USA Today* bestselling author who has written twenty historical romance novels.

She is a four-time RITA finalist with Romance Writers of America and has won numerous awards, including the Booksellers' Best Award, and a Reviewers' Choice Award from *Romantic Times*. She has a degree in English Literature from the University of King's College and lives in Nova Scotia, Canada, with her husband, daughter, and fluffy dog, Molly, and is a dedicated member of Romance Writers of Atlantic Canada. She is represented by Creative Media Agency in New York.

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Every dark journey has a light to guide you home.



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## Getting to Delicious a story by Lou Aronica



*Among the things I most love to write about are family, relationships, and food. All three of these come together in this story. A few years ago, I witnessed my mother's battle with Alzheimer's Disease. I'm sure you can guess which side emerged victorious. Throughout the process, though, there were times when she was extremely clear, and one of the things that seemed to bring her back to the surface was food, especially home-cooked food.*

*In this piece, my protagonist Warren is trying to come up with any way to slow down his mother's retreat. He gets the idea of cooking some of her best original recipes for her, believing that this might touch a part of her brain that has not been active for a while. All of this would be easier, of course, if Warren knew how to cook, but he's about to discover that the process of getting to delicious has its own rewards.*

Regardless of how much he'd read about his mother's disease, Warren continued to be mystified by the processes of the human brain. She looked at a town that she'd lived in for decades as though she'd never seen it before, but she could call up her cooking knowledge without a hitch. This had to have something to do with the way these things were imprinted on her mind, but Warren knew that the nuances of how this worked would always elude him. One thing was certain, though: his mother might have lost touch with most of the world around her, but she still felt some connection to food. Since taking her out to eat was probably too risky after a difficult episode at the diner, Warren decided he would bring food to her in a way she never could have anticipated. He would cook for her.

Warren had grown up loving food. It was impossible to live in his home and feel differently. Something always seemed to be on the stove or in the oven, and the aromas always seemed seductive. While he attached to the family passion for dining very early, he never connected with his mother's excitement for making meals. They'd spent some enjoyable times in the kitchen when he was younger, and even when he was older he'd help her chop vegetables from time to time, but the end product was always much more appealing to him than the work involved in getting there. When he moved out, he cooked at home maybe a dozen times a year, always keeping it as simple as he possibly could. His ex-wife Crystal enjoyed cooking a little, so she made the meals when they weren't eating out or taking in. Since he'd been living on his own again, he'd done little more than toss some pasta with olive oil on occasion.

Now, though, that was going to change. He'd stopped at a local supermarket on the way to Treetops to buy the ingredients necessary to make one of his mother's classic dishes. He'd eaten it so often growing up that he knew the components by heart. He'd seen his mother prepare it numerous times. What made the dish so delicious was its simplicity, a point that Mom had reinforced every time someone complimented her on it. How hard could it be for him to prepare this for her?

He could do this one on a stovetop, which was important, since her assisted-living apartment only had those two open-coil burners to work with. He bought the necessary groceries and drove out of the supermarket parking lot toward Treetops. That was when he remembered that his mother no longer owned any cooking tools. A quick stop at Bed, Bath & Beyond for a skillet, some tongs,



and an inexpensive chef's knife addressed that.

Laden with packages, he didn't even stop for a visitor's pass when he got to Treetops. The staff certainly knew who he was by now. Some of them probably even thought that he lived here, though of course he was at least twenty-five years younger than the youngest resident. He used a free knuckle to knock on the door of his mother's apartment, so caught up in his mission that he didn't anticipate the sudden dread he felt at wondering who she would be when she answered.

Fortunately, the woman that received him today was the gentle, smiling one. "Warren, honey, how are you? Do you want some tea? I was just about to make some."

Warren kissed his mother on the cheek and put the bags down on the floor near the cooktop. "Maybe later, Mom. Hey, I've decided to make us lunch. I thought I'd try my hand at making your Chicken Margaret. Sound good to you?"

"Chicken Margaret," Mom said wistfully. The expression on her face seemed a mix of confusion and melancholy. Warren had anticipated the former, but not the latter. He certainly hoped he wasn't going to wind up upsetting her with this. It was so difficult to know what her triggers were now.

"Do you think you could talk me through it?"

Mom moved to the couch and sat slowly. "I'm not sure I remember."

Warren started pulling groceries from one of the bags, placing them on the dinette table across from the cooktop. "Of course you do, Mom. You could probably make this thing blindfolded. I have chicken cutlets, rice flour, cake flour, lemons, olives, plum tomatoes." He reached for a smaller bag inside the Bed, Bath & Beyond bag. "I have vodka. You always said that Smirnoff was best for this, right?"

A tick of recognition showed in his mother's eyes. "Smirnoff is best. The expensive vodkas don't taste the same."

Warren toasted his mother with the vodka bottle, delighted that she'd engaged with this at least a little bit. Maybe he'd be able to pull her toward this gradually. He pulled out the rest of the ingredients before unpacking the skillet and utensils.

"You don't have to cook for me, honey. Don't you need to get back to work? Isn't your boss going to be upset that you're taking this much time away from the office?"

Warren stopped pulling items from the bags and closed his eyes. Did he really think that every

problem was going to go away instantly because he bought some food? "Mom, I don't . . . Don't worry about my boss. We're making Chicken Margaret now, and that's all we need to think about."

Mom always named her original dishes after friends and relatives. Warren had a chicken dish of his own in his name, as well as a rice dish and two desserts. All of those seemed a bit beyond his culinary reach at this point, though. According to family legend, Chicken Margaret was one of his mother's early inventions, created not long after she'd married his father, and named in honor of her beloved sister, who'd served as her maid of honor. It was essentially an amped-up version of Chicken Piccata. Mom always served it with potato croquettes and sautéed broccoli rabe. Rice was going to have to suffice today, though. This was going to be enough of a challenge without adding complicated side dishes.

Warren washed his hands and then mixed the rice flour and cake flour together in a dish. He realized as soon as he opened one of the few cupboards in the apartment that he'd failed to consider all the necessary implements. He found a couple of bowls and plates there, but he was going to have to use these to prep the meal and then wash them before serving the food. He opened the package of chicken.

"Season the egg rather than the flour," his mother said. She'd moved to the dinette table. Her eyes seemed brighter now than they had a few minutes ago.

Warren put down the cutlet he'd begun to remove from the package. "Egg, right." He hadn't remembered to buy any, forgetting that the chicken went from egg to flour twice before it went into the pan. He guessed he could go to the facility's kitchen to ask for a couple of eggs, though he really didn't want to draw attention to the fact that he was cooking in his mother's room. "I don't suppose I could use water, huh?"

His mother tipped her head to the side as she had when he was a kid. "No, honey. You can do without if you have to. Just dredge the chicken in the flour."

So much for replicating his mother's Chicken Margaret precisely. Warren added some salt and pepper to the flour and then dredged four cutlets, pressing them deep into the flour in hopes that this would fortify the coating in some way. Once he'd done that, he prepared the other ingredients. After he struggled to get the pit from an olive, his mother showed him how to do so with the flat side of his knife. Cutting tomatoes with a cheap chef's



knife turned out to be a bigger obstacle, and Mom could offer him no solution other than to suggest he seek out a serrated knife if he were going to do something like this in the future.

With everything prepped, he set out to start cooking. He took out the rice to get that started, only to realize that he hadn't bought a pot to cook it in. Hoping against hope, he examined the cupboards again and found nothing useful. Why hadn't he and Crystal brought any of Mom's cooking equipment here when they moved her into Treetops? They'd left her with a number of things from her kitchen for sentimental reasons – the ballerina egg timer, for instance – but they really should have thought to move a couple of pots and pans in with her simply for symbolic purposes. It wasn't an issue now. What *was* an issue was that the meal was getting simpler – and less like his mother's – by the second.

Mom called out to him as he took the chicken to the stove. "You want nice high heat for this. The cutlets are thin; they'll cook quickly."

Warren cranked the burner toward the high end and added some olive oil to the pan. Judging from how long it took to boil water in the teapot, he guessed that the stove was a low-efficiency model, but he figured he'd get some heat out of it if he waited long enough. Eventually, he added the chicken. It started to sizzle immediately, which he took as a good sign.

"You're doing great, honey."

"I haven't really done much yet, Mom."

"It smells delicious."

Warren wasn't sure about getting to delicious today. He really just wanted to do better than the diner, figuring he'd set the bar low for himself this first time. When he turned the cutlets and saw that the first side had browned well, he began to gain a bit of confidence.

All of which he lost quickly when he removed the chicken and added the vodka to the pan. The immediate vaporizing of the first drops caused him to flinch, which led to his spilling the vodka over the side of the pan.

Which led to the pan igniting.

Which led to his spilling more vodka.

Which led somehow to the handle on the teapot burning.

Which led to a surprising amount of smoke.

His mother screeched while at the same time repeating "It's okay. It's okay. It's okay" rapidly. The smoke died relatively quickly, but not before melting a sizeable portion of the teapot handle and stinking up the entire apartment.

The knock on the door came seconds later.

"Antoinette? Is everything okay in there?"

Warren, brandishing a towel to shoo away the smoke, answered the door to find Jan, one of the attendants, on the other side, looking alarmed. "We're fine."

Jan peered toward the stove. "What are you doing in here?"

Warren waved the towel in the direction of the pan, which had completely stopped sizzling. "I'm making my mother lunch."

"Here?"

"Yeah."

Jan leaned toward Warren conspiratorially. "You know, we don't really expect people to cook in their apartments."

Warren leaned toward her in the same fashion. "Then why do you put stoves in them?"

"I can't really answer that."

"You didn't call the fire department, did you?"

"I thought I'd check it out first." She smiled. "One of the attendants is coming with a really big bucket of water, though."

Warren looked back at the stove. "Is it okay if I finish this?"

Jan followed his eyes. "I think only you can answer that."

"I mean can we avoid having the authorities come down on us?"

Jan touched him lightly on the arm and smiled again. She had a great smile. "I'm not going to rat you out, if that's what you're asking."

Warren's blood pressure was slowly dropping below cardiac arrest levels. "Thanks. Want to join us?"

"That's nice of you to ask, but I just had lunch."

Warren glanced back at the pan. The chicken just looked soggy and abused now. "You would have said that even if you hadn't eaten in a month, wouldn't you?"

"Not a month, no." She backed toward the door. "Have a nice meal. Maybe a salad next time."

Jan left and Warren turned back toward the stove, catching his mother's eye as he did. "I'll be ready with this in a few minutes, Mom."

"That sounds good, honey. I'm just going to put on the TV for a little while. Let me know if you need me for anything."

The rest of the dish came together without the intervention of any first responders. In the end it didn't taste much like Warren's memory of Chicken Margaret. He'd forgotten the butter to finish the sauce as well. Mom seemed to appreciate it, but this might have simply been a case of



maternal instinct kicking in.

What was undeniable, though, was that for at least a few minutes, she had seemed genuinely engaged. This adventure in cooking had been, at best, a flawed experiment. But it was an experiment worth repeating.

Lou Aronica is the coauthor of the *New York Times* bestsellers *The Element* and *Finding Your Element* (both with Sir Ken Robinson) and the national bestseller *The Culture Code* (with Clotaire Rapaille) and the author of the *USA Today* best-selling novel *The Forever Year* and the national bestselling novels *Blue*, *When You Went Away*, *The Journey Home* and *Leaves*, among others. He lives in Southern Connecticut with his wife and four children. A long-term book industry veteran, he is the President and Publisher of the independent publishing house The Story Plant and a past president of Novelists Inc.

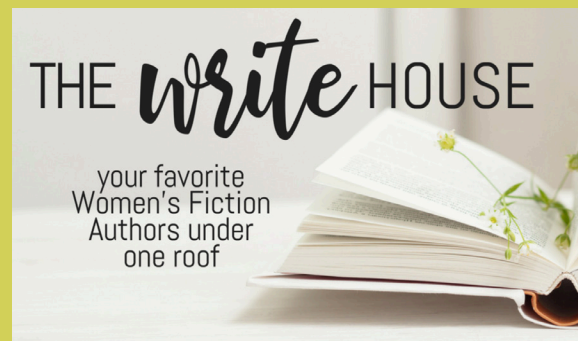
Learn more at Lou's [website](#).

You can get more of Lou's writing as well as his music on his [blog](#).

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"Getting to Delicious" was excerpted from the novel *The Journey Home*. You can learn more about the novel [here](#).

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**STEENA HOLMES**  
NY TIMES & USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR





*Southern Sayings*  
by Curtiss Ann Matlock

Today in conversation with a friend, another good ole' Southern girl,



I went into a long-winded description of my mother's condition. One thing about Southerners, we follow the idea of why use three words when you can use ten. I said, "Mama is mostly sleeping, and can't talk, but she does wake and sort of mumbles, but doesn't really."

"She's in a state," my friend said.

"Yes, that's it," I said, gratified for the word that I totally understood.

Now, many people might have described my mother's condition as "She is still cognizant," but to my girlfriend and I, the perfect description was, "In a state." It is a phrase sometimes said, "in a dire state," just for emphasis. I prefer the addition of dire. I like the sound and drama of it. Being in a state can cover everything from emotions to physical condition to financial or just plain poor housekeeping.

Once I entered the house of a woman who had just lost a family member—by lost, I don't mean she misplace him, but he died. The woman was in a state, and so was her house. In fact, what I thought when I saw the windowsill above her kitchen sink was: "This house hasn't been cleaned in a month of Sundays."

*"God love your bones." It is gratitude that runs so deep it includes a blessing. I can still hear my mother's ardent voice when she said it.*

One word my grandmother said that I've never heard anyone else say, until I read it in a Kaye Gibbons' novel: "Haywire-flooeey." This was the grandmother who had at one time been as beautiful as a Gibson Girl, and then raised four boys and at middle-age was spitting peach snuff out the back screen door. Since Gibbons and my grandmother both came from North Carolina, I wonder if the word didn't come from there. It means the same as being in a state, one of a very high nature, and is so much more fun to say. Let me tell you, I've had some haywire-flooeey moments in my life, a few I definitely regret.

My mother was good for sayings such as, "If you don't vacuum up that room, you'll be able to plant potatoes under the bed." And, "To each his own," meaning freedom that each of us have to live as we wish.

For when she was going to go to the bathroom, she would say, "Please excuse me, I have to go see Miz Jones." She later told me that she got this saying from her mother. She did not know where

her mother got it, but when a family of Joneses moved next door the saying had to be more or less given up.

And then there is the dear, "God love your bones." It is gratitude that runs so deep it includes a blessing. I can still hear my mother's ardent voice when she said it, and I was glad just yesterday to have the phrase to say to someone who did me a good deed.

My mother told me this story: She was having supper with her father, my grandfather, a dapper man, at one of the small town's better restaurants. He looked up and saw a woman passing. He said flatly, "That woman needs to stay home."

This was his way of saying he judged her extremely bad looking. I enjoy employing this saying (at least to myself) toward the so-called experts, personalities, or celebrities being rude and 'ugly' on television.

And therein is another word often used in the South that others might not understand. "Don't be ugly." This does not have to do with attributes of physical beauty, but with manners and attitude. It is the other side of the saying, "Pretty is as pretty does." Don't be rude, don't "get in a hissy," and let your anger get out of hand. Don't use foul language or yell or get in a fight or be rude in any way, because to do so is unacceptable or, "Now that is uncalled for."

My mother-in-law, Big Mama, as she was called, not for physical size but for honor when she became a great-grandmother, was from southeast Missouri, and her ancestors from the Tennessee hills. She was probably the most colorful with her verbiage. I often heard her say, "You better look out or we are goin' to fist city." Or, "I'm gonna jerk a knot in your tail." Either statement was a warning of what was going to happen should one act up and be ugly.

Big Mama was known to say, "Well, don't just stand there like dead lice are fallin' off of you." I asked her what this meant, and she confessed to not being quite sure, but that her mother had often used it. I like it so much that I often look for a time to say it.

There is, "gracious plenty," which means more than enough, and "smack dab," meaning right in the middle or on target, and "this country," not meaning the U.S. but the county or even square mile area where the speaker lives.

The term for a glass of tea in the South used to be cold tea, but the more modern term is 'ice' tea. You might see it written on menus or in some places 'iced', but the correct way to say it is 'ice'.



without the d.

Then there are the polite words of address. “Yes, sir,” and “Yes, Ma’am,” are stressed. We say it to each other, all ages. And down here every woman, married or single, young or old, is called “Miss.” This goes back to politeness. My mother is Miss Anna, and oftentimes I call my granddaughter, “Miss P.”

I particularly like the tradition of the sweet addresses: “Honey,” and “Darlin’” (meaning darling but never said that way), and “Sugar” and “Sweetie.” We all use these sweet words to each other.

There was a woman clerk in a quick stop who perpetually handed me my change with, “Have a good day, sweetie.”

“Thank you for saying sweetie so sweetly,” I said one day.

And she said, “I said that to some woman the other day and she had a fit and said she wasn’t my sweetie.”

“Well, don’t stop saying it,” I told her. “The world needs all the sweetness it can get.”

The great writer James A. Michener is quoted as saying, “I love writing. I love the swirl and swing of words as they tangle with human emotions.”

I agree. I love the warmth and vibrancy of the Southern words and phrases. Keeping them alive is one thing I enjoy about writing and setting my stories in the South, my “home country.”

A question that used to be asked all the time down here in the South was: “Who are your people?” It was asked because people used to know someone in your family, or someone who knew your family, and by this they could feel they knew you. My answer today is, “My people are ones who say the funniest and wisest and most delightful things I’ve ever heard.”



Curtiss Ann Matlock is the author of nearly forty novels, including the popular Valentine series of books set in the fictional town of Valentine, Oklahoma. Born in North Carolina, into a family of avid readers, Curtiss Ann draws on the family stories and humor to portray the extraordinary valor of quite ordinary people, all set in small towns of the South. Her books are published world-wide in twenty languages. They have earned rave reviews, spots on the *USA Today* bestseller list and numerous awards, including three prestigious RITA Finalists nominations from The Romance Writers of America.

At present Curtiss Ann is busy with family life in south Alabama, writing essays on the writing life on her blog, and republishing her early novels, as well as writing a new project planned for release in 2018. You can learn more about her at her [website](#).



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*Love Fourfold: Why I  
Adopted an Entire Brood  
by Christine Nolfi*



Does anyone prepare for motherhood thinking, “Why don’t I skip common sense and adopt four children at once?”



I certainly didn't. Yet that's exactly what I did. In 1996, I closed my PR firm and became the mother of four virtually overnight.

My children were a sibling group abandoned in the jungle near the city of Cebu in the Philippines. One sweet little boy and his three sisters, they were clinging to life when a group of missionaries found them.

Two weeks after their rescue, I received the case study in a stack of similar documents about other Filipino children waiting for a forever home. The adoption agency knew my husband and I were interested in adopting siblings—two boys, two girls, or one of each—we didn't care. We were painfully aware that older children, especially siblings, often waited longer for parents.

But we'd only discussed two children. That decision flew out the window the minute I drew the paperwork on the abandoned siblings from the stack.

In the photo attached to the case study, the twin girls, weighing 22 pounds each at age three, were unable to stand on their own. They leaned against their older sister's legs as their five-year-old brother cowered behind her. These were children who'd undergone terrible ordeals. Such an example of suffering would upset any adult.

Yet what drew me up short was the expression on the oldest girl's face.

Christian was just as malnourished as her younger siblings, standing arrow-straight in a threadbare cotton dress and oversized sandals. Her eyes were just as red-rimmed, her deep brown hair tangled and unwashed. But a fierce defiance lit her eyes. She'd spent weeks in the jungle, doing her best to keep her younger siblings alive on a hellish journey I couldn't imagine. Even so, her eyes burned with pride and anger and life.

She's remarkable, I thought. This little girl has been through impossible trials but they haven't broken her.

Soon I would soon learn that those trials hadn't broken the other children either. One week after we arrived home, I found Marlie—now age four but so tiny, she wore 18-month baby clothes—yanking open the dryer in the laundry room. Covered with scabies and still exhausted from a flight halfway around the world, she was doing her best to pitch in.

During the following years, as we roamed the corridors of The Cleveland Clinic seeing specialists to mend their young bodies, my kids displayed courage and optimism. The smallest kindness spread delight across their faces; simple joys, like owning a pair of shoes, sent them into bursts of giggling. They marveled at the refrigerator brimming with food, and warm beds that they eagerly crawled into each night to wait for their mother to read another fairytale.

Today, Christian speaks to adoption groups when she isn't busy with her job in Dick's Sporting Goods corporate offices. My son Jameson is no longer the frightened little boy from long ago—he's the most outgoing of the bunch. My daughter Marlie? She works a few steps away from my office on the second floor of my house, as my author assistant.

And Marguerite? Two years after we moved from Ohio to South Carolina, we learned of another family in the area that had, incredibly, adopted a sibling group from the same shelter in Cebu. One year after they met, Marguerite married their son Robert.

Next summer, the kids will celebrate their third wedding anniversary.



Award-winning author Christine Nolfi provides readers with heartwarming and inspiring fiction. Her debut *Treasure Me* is a Next Generation Indie Awards finalist. The Midwest Book Review lists the books in the Liberty Series as "highly recommended" and her novels have enjoyed bestseller status. Look for *Sweet Lake*, *The Comfort of Secrets*, and *The Season of Silver Linings*, her new series with Lake Union Publishing. Join her mailing list at her [website](#).



# Some children are gifts, and some are possessions.



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# Hemingway's Sun Valley

a story by Kellie Coates Gilbert



*I've been asked multiple times why I chose Sun Valley as the setting for my new series about three sisters. The answer is simple . . . it's where I grew up. That, and I continue to be fascinated with the colorful history of the first ski resort in America.*

*In the early thirties, Averell Harriman, the chairman of the Union Pacific Railroad and a lifelong skier, determined America needed a resort like the ones he'd once visited in the Swiss Alps. He launched an extended national search for the perfect location, finally purchasing the nearly four-thousand-acre Brass Ranch bordering the tiny mountain town of Ketchum, Idaho and commenced construction. Seven months later, he dubbed his new resort Sun Valley and people from across America packed up their ski equipment and rushed to ride state-of-the-art chair lifts up Baldy Mountain. Celebrities soon flocked to the area—Gary Cooper, Clark Gable and Errol Flynn. Lucille Ball, Marilyn Monroe and later, the Kennedys. In fact, Marilyn Monroe ate at the Ram restaurant back in 1956 when she was in the area filming Bus Stop.*

*When Ernest Hemingway first came to Idaho—on September 19, 1939, to be exact—home was Suite 206 at the Sun Valley Lodge. Here, the famous novelist wrote a portion of For Whom the Bell Tolls.*

*Hemingway later became a full-time resident and on the morning of July 2, 1961, he woke to a glorious sunrise. In pajamas and bathrobe, Hemingway descended a red-carpeted staircase to the living room. It is reported he breached the shotgun, loaded two shells in the chambers, and in the entryway vestibule, placed the barrels in his mouth. He pulled two triggers and fired two cartridges. Hemingway was weeks shy of his 62nd birthday.*

*My cousins were his pall bearers.*

*Today, visitors can spend time reflecting on his life and work at the local Hemingway Memorial located a short drive from the Sun Valley Lodge (featured in the above scene excerpted from my book, SISTERS). The bust of "Papa" Hemingway sits in a quiet alcove above a creek bed, and at its base is an inscription:*

*Best of all he loved the fall  
the leaves yellow on cottonwoods  
leaves floating on trout streams  
and above the hills  
the high blue windless skies  
... Now he will be a part of them forever.*

Karyn Macadam slowed her car as the sign to the Hemingway Memorial came into view. She turned off Sun Valley Road into the parking area, not bothering to signal. There was no need, not at this early hour.

Cutting the engine, she sat quietly for a few moments, the radio blaring in the background.

And we expect another warm summer day here in the Wood River Valley as residents in this popular resort area prepare to commemorate one of its own, nearly a year and a half after the tragic accident that took the life of—

Karyn shut off the radio, her heart thudding painfully.

Squeezing the steering wheel, she refused to look at the seat next to her—at the small wooden box intricately carved with falling snowflakes over a set of crossed skis.

Deep breath in. Deep breath out.

Five more minutes she sat there, putting off what was ahead.

Finally, she scooped the box into her hands and climbed out of the car.



She'd made a promise. One she fully intended to keep, even if she'd made it a bit tongue-in-cheek at the time.

Gravel crunched beneath her feet as she traversed the walkway toward the memorial. Even in the faint morning light she could make out wild poppies and blue flax, delicate against the pungent skunk cabbage jutting from the pebbled ground lining the trail.

The sound of water bubbling across a rocky streambed pulled her toward the monument nestled against a stand of aspen trees, their tiny dollar-shaped leaves barely moving in the still air.

It was understandable why the famous novelist had loved Idaho, why he'd spent his last days living here. Ernest Hemingway was only one of many celebrities who had traded big city tangled traffic for cool mountain mornings and alpine vistas and made Sun Valley their residence.

Olympic hopeful Dean Macadam was another.

Karyn stood at the water's edge and looked past the pile of flat stones with its stately column rising from the middle, beyond the trees to the golf course in the distance. A deer standing in the middle of one of the greens lifted its head and stared back at her in mutual regard.

A voice in her head rang out as clear as if Dean were standing next to her.

"What is your fascination with Hemingway anyway?"

She closed her eyes, remembered gazing up from the pages of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. "Are you crazy? He was only the best American novelist of all time," she'd so flippantly reminded her husband.

Dean playfully tugged at the sheet tucked around her bare waist. "Is that so?"

She quickly snatched the covering from his hands and secured it more tightly. "Yes, that's so. In fact, Ernest Hemingway is known for his mastery of theme and imagery. Take this story for example." She held up the heavy volume borrowed from her dad, its cover worn from repeated readings. "The entire narrative is punctuated with a preoccupation with death and dying, which is so poignant given his eventual suicide."

Dean ran broad fingers through his sleep-tousled hair. "Yeah, you see—that's what I don't get. Why is so many people's imagination captured with a guy who spent an inordinate amount of time writing about life instead of living it? I mean, in my view, that's likely what led to him offing himself in the end."

She raised her gaze in horror and slammed the book against her new husband's chest. "Don't say that."

He laughed. "Okay, okay—look, I get it. Ernest Hemingway is your book boyfriend. I'm not jealous. Really I'm not." His eyes nearly sparkled when he'd said that. "Tell you what. When I die, you just take my ashes and toss them in that little creek that runs in front of his memorial. That way, when I'm gone, you can visit both of us at the same time."

Before she could protest the macabre suggestion, he pulled the novel from her and tossed it to the floor, while at the same time lifting the sheet with his other hand.

She'd giggled as he buried his head against her skin. "Promise me. Even if my mother protests and wants otherwise," he said, in a muffled voice. "Now. Promise. Or, I'll—" His fingers dug into her sides and he tickled, sending her entire torso into a fit of squirming. "Promise," he repeated.

"I promise. I promise," she shouted, laughing uncontrollably.

He immediately stopped tickling. "Okay, that's better." Her new husband looked at her then, his eyes boring into her soul. "And promise you'll always remember I love you."

The sound of his voice still seemed so real, even after all these months. She sunk to the curved stone bench. Tears collected in her eyes and spilled over, making their way down her cheeks. She fingered the familiar lid on the box.

I'm sorry, Dean. I can't do it.

No matter that she'd gotten out of her bed while it was still dark outside with the best intentions. She still wasn't ready to let him go.

Not now—and maybe never.

[Kellie Coates Gilbert](#) has won readers' hearts with her compelling and highly emotional stories about women and the relationships that define their lives. A former legal investigator, she is especially known for keeping readers turning pages and creating nuanced characters who seem real.

In addition to garnering hundreds of five-star reader reviews, Kellie has been described by RT Book Reviews as a "deft, crisp storyteller." Her books have been featured as Barnes & Noble Top Shelf Picks and were included on Library Journal's Best Book List of 2014.



Born and raised near Sun Valley, Idaho, Kellie now lives with her husband of over thirty-five years in Dallas, where she spends most days by her pool drinking sweet tea and writing the stories of her heart.

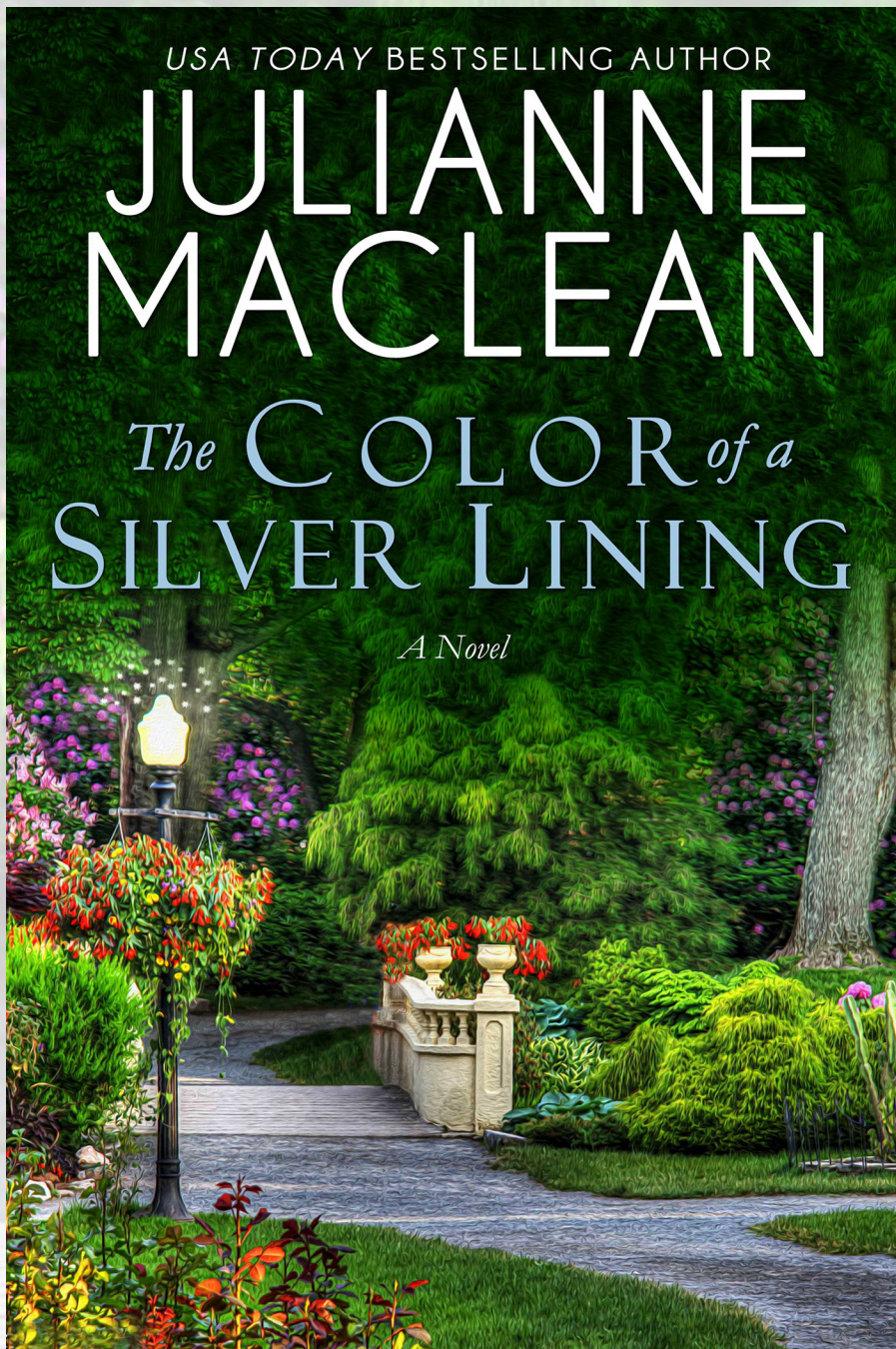
“Hemingay’s Sun Valley” was excerpted from Kellie’s novel *Sisters*. You can learn more about it [here](#).

We hope you enjoyed this first issue of

# *The Front Porch*

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