



BOOK ONE

FINDING  
CORNBREAD  
MESA



Judy McGrath

*This book is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.*

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# CHAPTER ONE



I don't usually think of myself as a clumsy person, though things tend to happen to me. Take my tenth birthday, nearly forty years ago, for example. Jimmy Duncan, an eight-year-old, bet me he could bike-race me to the end of the street and win, without even holding onto his handlebars.

"You'll lose, Janna." His mouth curved into a nasty grin as he explained that girls didn't know how to race.

That was the snare. Refusing to be put down by a younger kid, I was determined to "show him." A big mistake. I loved the great outdoors, though I had never been accused of being a natural athlete, and it crossed my mind that a lot of trouble might have been saved if I spent more time indoors. That momentary reflection, however, wasn't enough to stifle my annoyance.

Jimmy and I went barreling down our small town residential street, and I fell quickly behind, despite pedaling as fast as my legs would go. Intent on overtaking the horrible, insulting Jimmy Duncan, I didn't notice the rock in my path. Mom said she saw me fly past the window on the bike and suddenly take a dive over the handlebars. The bike went one way and I went the other, landing on my arm.

Back in the days before stylish casts in hot pink and neon blue were available, one had to make do with the clunky, white, permanent kind that wouldn't fit through the sleeves of many clothes. The doctor had no option but to cut a slit in the sleeve of

my favorite dress. Taken as a whole, that birthday was not one of my best. Memorable, but painful and embarrassing.

Both Mom and Grandma had hugged me sympathetically, but you could tell they were stunned that I had gone to such lengths to be unladylike, that I had actually broken a bone. Being ladylike was important for girls in those days.

The worst part was the scrape down the side of my brand new bike. My splendid birthday present already had a battle scar. Jody, my twin sister, and I had each received beautiful blue girl's bikes, with our names painted on the handlebars in Dad's precise hand. Jodi's bike was, of course, still in perfect condition.

Jody was the physically coordinated sister, who never had strange circumstances reaching out to trip her. Naturally graceful, and endowed with a practical perspective, she could envision in detail the consequences of certain dumb ideas, and didn't pursue them. For instance, Jody knew instinctively that picking up a wild barn kitten was hazardous, yet I bore scars from such an encounter for years. At the age of ten I entertained a suspicion that she had ESP keeping her out of trouble. Extra-sensory perception was a major topic of discussion back then. Obviously, nothing like that was working for me.

Nevertheless, curiosity about the outer limits of my own capabilities—"if I get a running start, I *know* I can clear that big puddle"—kept me in awkward situations all through childhood. My parents and grandparents were often heard to wonder if I'd live to grow up, and enjoy a normal adult life in our rural Ohio community. As one might expect, thoughts like that never crossed my young mind. The important thing was to investigate all those fascinating subjects people never really talked about to kids. That, and try to maintain a shaky self-confidence. The bike incident temporarily put a dent in that confidence.

Although, childhood was a long lesson in what not to do if you want to stay out of the emergency room, I eventually learned to recognize most potentially life threatening situations. Still, when in a

creative mode, awareness of my surroundings became quite narrow, sometimes making important peripheral indicators fuzzy. Many years later I continued to find myself in an occasional painful or ridiculous situation.

My present day vocation as a wildlife artist necessitated trips into wilderness areas to capture frameable scenes with camera or sketchpad. After a day of foraging in the wilds I would bring my results home to the studio to paint on canvas. In southern California—where I now lived—a rich choice of high and low desert, forest, mountains, and high chaparral were offered. Much of this landscape was many miles from towns and cities. A stupid miscalculation about physical safety out there could often be fatal.

Having survived a childhood and young adulthood full of miscalculation, I eventually learned to be ready for most emergencies. I now stowed water, blankets, flashlights, dried fruit and trail mix, first aid kit, and other stuff like that in my car. And I carried a backpack with basic life-sustaining equipment, along with my camera and sketching supplies.

The problem with that? *None* of it was helpful when you were unexpectedly hanging upside-down in a bush threaded with barbed wire, on the side of a cliff, miles from assistance, and unable to move. That was my sad condition one early autumn morning a few months ago.

My kids were in school, and I had driven out to Inaja, a wilderness park in San Diego County. The plan was to work on sketches that would result in paintings for a local art gallery. Positioning myself just off a trail in Inaja, I set my pack on the ground and stepped back to catch a quick photo of a ribbon snake skimming fluidly across the tops of the Manzanita bushes. It was about four feet long and slender. Beautiful red and yellow racing stripes rippled as it moved. It was an unusual sighting and I was excited, not thinking about where I was placing my feet. My right foot slipped on loose pebbles lining the cliff edge. Under, and on the side of this low cliff, were spiky scrub bushes. I did a Lucille Ball,

arms going like windmills trying to get my balance. But, my slide was relentless, and it was shocking how fast I became inextricably trapped upside-down in a bush with ancient barbed wire twisted through its branches, just a few feet below the cliff edge.

As the enormity of my mishap registered, I heard movement above me. Standing carefully at the rim of the cliff was a character out of an old western movie. He was in his late twenties to early thirties, very tall, very brown, and very Indian. At least I assumed he was Native American. His black hair grew past his shoulders, held in place by a tan leather headband. He wore leather armbands above his biceps, a short leather open vest over a bare chest, and leather, Indian-style leggings. While I was gathering my wits to ask for assistance he looked down on me with an expression of disbelief, arms folded across his chest, and said, “Do you hang out here often?”

Very funny, ha ha. He didn’t sound anything at all like my imagined stereotypical Indian, but then I wasn’t insisting on authenticity. The first order of business was *rescue*.

“Help!” I said, as pathetically as I could manage. Not too difficult because I was feeling pretty pathetic at the time.

“Wait here,” said the jokester. Poorly positioned to challenge that sardonic smile, I waited, until my savior reappeared on the ledge with a rope just as the barbwire was making serious problems for my skin. He dropped one end down toward me, braced his feet, and said, “Wrap your arms around the rope, and hold tight with your hands. I’ll pull you up slowly.”

Easier said than done. But I clung securely to the rope as he began to pull me away from the bush. He was careful to allow me time to exchange one uncomfortable hold for another as my posture gradually corrected to a point where blood wasn’t pooling in my head. When I was safely dragged to the cliff top again, I humbly thanked him, and limped back to my car with bloody spots and little tears all over my clothes from wire jabs. After concluding that I wasn’t seriously injured, my rescuer drove off in a black F250

Ford truck. He left before I could even find out his name. Another one of my not great days.

Though life rarely continues reliably on a smooth track, since that Inaja mishap, my health and pride had suffered no new assaults of that magnitude.

On an early winter morning several miles from Inaja, I stood staring out my kitchen window musing about the past. Situated east of Ramona and west of Julian, in the mountain town of Coyote Canyon, our home enjoyed views of boulder-strewn peaks in every direction.

But, landscape got bumped from my thoughts that morning as my attention was caught by unusual activity at the vacant house behind ours. A moving van sat in the driveway and a horse trailer backed up to the horse corral that stood next to ours, divided by a twelve foot dirt drive. A boy in his late teens coaxed a chestnut horse out of the trailer.

To satisfy my curiosity, I joined my eighteen-year-old daughter, Rosalie, whose turn it was to feed the horses. My palomino gelding, named Lion, had his head in a feed bin munching as I strolled out to where Rosalie and our new neighbor were talking between the corrals.

“Hi, Mom.” Rosalie looked a little self-conscious. “This is Matt Johnson. His family is moving into the empty house.”

Matt Johnson shook my hand. “I’m the guy who delivers your hay and feed order every month from the Feed Store, Mrs. Gustaffeson. Usually Rosalie is in the corral when I come by.” He smiled down at me from under a precisely angled cowboy hat.

“Nice to meet you,” I said. “Welcome to the neighborhood.” I watched his horse stamp nervously in the new surroundings. I wasn’t a horse expert, and would never be called a knowledgeable rider. Yet, despite personal athletic limitations, I had gradually gained experience around a few Midwest farm horses, which had been mostly enjoyable. A year after the birth of the twins I’d become the proud owner of Lion. He’d been about three years old

at the time we met, and we'd become well acquainted with each other since then. Which meant I knew a lot about Lion, and maybe could guess a few things about other horses.

Matt volunteered, "Whirly's a little hyper right now, feeling his oats. His full name is El Nino Whirlwind." Quite a mouthful.

Rosalie's mare, Tache—French for "Spot"—stretched her neck over the rails to sniff the air. Her black coat sported a large white spot over the right shoulder. But, the new horse wasn't interested in socializing. He stood close to his feeder still stamping his feet.

Rosalie finished feeding, and after more neighborly conversation with Matt, we went into the house for breakfast.

"Seems like a nice boy. Good looking, too." I poured orange juice into two glasses.

"Yeah, but he never has a lot of time to talk when he delivers feed. Anyway, I think he's shy."

I read Matt Johnson somewhat differently. Glancing over at Rosalie's delicate bone structure and corn silk hair, I said, "A lot of guys are awkward around attractive girls."

Rosalie shrugged self-consciously. "I'd like to get to know him better, but I get nervous and talk too much. Liz never has that problem. She always knows what to say."

My daughter was referring to her cousin. My sister was Liz's mom, and I knew just what Rosalie meant. I'd had a similar situation with Jody. She never put her foot wrong with males. We were twins, but looks aren't everything. Jody had the personality and moves that appealed. My dates had tended to be with guys who shared my youthful lack of grace.

However, I thought Rosalie would lose her nervousness over Matt Johnson's new proximity. Awkwardness tends to disappear when both people are shoveling horse poop.

My nine year old son, John, entered the kitchen with breakfast on his mind, and Rosalie looked at the clock. "I'd better hurry or I'll be late for work. We have a sale on hats and jeans this week. I'm putting some jeans aside in my size. You want some, too?"

I shook my head no, as she walked toward her room to change. I liked shopping at the little western store that had hired Rosalie last summer, but, I wasn't all that happy with the recent tightness of my jeans. Buying a larger size didn't excite me.

I handed John his cocoa, and heated a bowl of oatmeal for him in the microwave. He and his twin sister, Gwen, had expanded our family shortly after my fortieth birthday. At the time, Theo and I were undergoing several big changes, and the unplanned addition of twins had seemed to be a nod of heavenly approval. At least, that was how we chose to look at it then, and life would now seem incomplete without them.

After breakfast, I took John with me on errands, promising to go by the Llama Ranch on the way back. We climbed into my ancient 1983 white, Toyota Landcruiser. A very old car by local standards, but with regular maintenance it had given me good service and surprisingly few complaints for years.

At the hardware store, Joe Bronson, the owner, waited on us. His son, Josh, bagged our purchases and handed John a licorice stick. Bronson's Hardware had been there for almost a hundred years. Hitching posts could still be seen in front, and occasionally a horse would stand waiting at the high carriage curb. While most people found it convenient to use a car to run errands, there were some who liked to exercise their horses while taking care of chores.

The Wild Oaks Home Owner's Association nestled right up against the town proper. Ten years ago, when Theo and I first moved in, the HOA had seemed the best place for our family with its maintained landscaping, club pools, tennis courts, and security patrolled streets. We had a young son and daughter, and I was pregnant with the twins. But, in the years since, the landscaping has seemed less spacious, and neighbors often too close for comfort or privacy. The access to the Club and pools was nice, but of late I wondered if the amenities made up for the restrictions.

Perhaps, I'd become more like the citizens of the town who preferred the old standards. Families running little stores. Public

school teachers who actually lived just down the street instead of in another town. A place where each house took on the character of the people who lived in and cared for it. Or didn't. There were trade-offs in this idea. Taking away regulations meant a teenager could park his junk car in the driveway, put it up on blocks and work on it for an undefined period. And then there were people who were too busy or disinclined to paint, or pull weeds, as normal maintenance required. Of course, in the West we had extra concerns about fires, so if the weeds became too big a problem, an owner could find himself at his front door talking to a fireman about a fine.

I was sympathetic to both sides of the question, but lately had begun to tilt toward freedom. Not anarchy, but a greater flexibility of life style than was available at Wild Oaks.

John rolled down his window and let the breeze ruffle his pale blond hair. It had been a long, rainy month. But this Saturday morning in mid-February, the sun was shining and we were going to see the llamas. Llamas had seized John's imagination ever since we had visited the petting zoo portion of the San Diego Safari Park a few years ago. Children were encouraged to get up close and touch the animals. The attendant on that occasion had picked John up, and—to his astonished delight—deposited him on the back of a wonderfully soft, fluffy llama. The llama looked around at him with her nearly two-inch long eyelashes, and for John, it was love from then on. He wanted a llama of his own.

Wild Oaks allowed horses and the usual pets, but llamas and other livestock were excluded in the regulations. John had temporarily settled for a snake, instead.

We drove out of town going past the HOA and turned right to travel east toward Coyote Mesa, a part of Coyote Canyon Township, as yet undeveloped. I loved to drive out there to sketch ideas for paintings. The land appeared newly fresh in the spring, as though God had just withdrawn his hand from its creation. One or

two houses could be seen, but wilderness and National Forest dominated the area.

After several twists and turns down dirt roads, we came to the Llama Ranch. I stopped the Landcruiser and John walked over to the fence to try to entice a llama near enough to pet. They were very woolly in their dense coats. Some sat on the ground like shaggy lumps, while others stretched out full on their sides soaking up rays. A few still had their heads lost in feeding bins. None came over to be petted by a stranger. John sadly gave up after a few minutes and climbed back in the car.

Pulling into our driveway at home a few minutes later, I could see the side gate of the backyard was open. A big tow-truck edged out through the opening and stopped. A few feet from the gate, Theo stood grinning at our oldest son, Christian.

“Mom! Check out what Dad got me. I can’t believe it!” Christian was so excited he didn’t even attempt to maintain teenager cool. “This is awesome!”

A man lowered a time-worn Ford pickup down the tow-truck’s ramp. Theo sidled up to me and put an arm around my shoulders. “What do you think?”

“Looks like Christian will be able to tinker to his heart’s content. Where did you get it?” I watched our son circle the sorry vehicle with reverence.

“One of my clients had it sitting on his property. He got tired of having to list it with the DMV and said I could have it for the price of hauling it away. It’s old, but the parts are all there. Needs a lot of work to get it running again. 1979 Ford. Looks like it used to be light blue.”

“How can you tell?” I could see the pickup was patched in numerous places. Parts of it had been primed for future painting, and other sections had paint that didn’t match the original color.

“If you squint just right, you can visualize what it used to be like when it was new.” Theo laughed and squeezed my shoulders.

Theo was my soul mate. Though he had reservations about my tendency toward mishaps, he thought I was smart and beautiful, and he liked my creative ideas. When we first met, I couldn't believe that such a good-looking, intelligent man could be interested, let alone later want to marry me. But, having recently celebrated our twentieth wedding anniversary, I have long since come to appreciate the love and strength of our partnership. Probably the most central agreement between us was a stable, nurturing environment for our children. Though neither of us had lacked materially while growing up, we had both been deprived of our parents during childhood. Hands-on parenting was important to us.

Christian tried the starter, and as expected, the engine wouldn't turn over. He peered underneath the hood, already taking on the body language of ownership.

All of our children were blond, like their dad. The twins were both curly towheads and small for their age. Christian was a large teenager, and at sixteen, going on seventeen, he took after Theo in tall, sturdy bone structure and long, well-formed muscles. His was the easy strength of youth and an easy-going manner to match.

"This is great." Christian's face flushed with enthusiasm. "Did you know about this, Mom?"

"I had suspicions, but no certain knowledge." Theo's frequent reading of the Coyote Howl's used car section had made me wonder.

"It's a guy thing." My husband grinned, clearly pleased with himself. "I bought a canopy to put over it, and with the hedge it should be an effective screen so as not to offend the neighbors." He pushed hair out of his eyes with a muscular arm, and punched Christian's shoulder affectionately. "Give me a hand with the canopy."

I looked at my watch, saw it was lunchtime, and went in to make roast beef and tomato sandwiches. Rosalie came home as I was spreading mustard and mayo on rye. Usually she ate lunch at

home since her job at the Horse's Tale was only a block away on Main Street.

"I'm starved," she said. "Thought I'd never get out the door. We were swamped all morning with customers." She grabbed a sandwich as her eye was caught by the activity beyond the kitchen window. "Where'd that old truck come from?"

"Your dad got it for Christian. It doesn't run, but Christian sees it as a challenge."

Rosalie sauntered out into the yard, sandwich in hand. Conversation drifted through the open window, about starters and transmissions. As my stack of sandwiches grew higher, the talk diminished to a murmur. Curious, I caught the phrases, "What do you think she would like, Dad? It's hard to believe she's going to be *fifty*."

I didn't hear Theo's answer, because lightning had suddenly struck. There's a big difference between knowing the years are passing by, and *hearing* of one's advanced age on the lips of one's offspring. I left the sandwiches on a tray and staggered into my studio to think about the sudden, jolting passage of time.

Almost all important thinking was done in my garage studio, which had skylights cut into the roof. There was an area for laundry and storage, but no room for cars. Most of the space was taken by my easels, drawing table, art supply cabinets, and painting racks. One corner contained an old piece of soft carpeting under two easy chairs separated by a lamp table. I liked to sit there in an old, blue chair and reflect, not only on paintings in progress, but also about troubling questions of daily life.

About ten years ago, just before the twins were born, life was so hectic that I resorted to putting my thoughts on paper. From that emerged *The Journal*, pages where I released ideas and concerns that crowded my mind, sometimes making sleep difficult. The Journal had proved to be good medicine.

I sank into the blue chair and confronted the scary thought. Was I really turning fifty? Obviously, I had to know the big "five-O" was

imminent. My birthday coming up in July couldn't really take me by surprise. Apparently, a part of me hadn't fully believed it.

I looked back into the past and remembered that my mother's fiftieth birthday had been over-shadowed by cancer. Mom had looked old and strangely bloated then from medicines that were said to be extending her life. Not long after that birthday, Jody and I stood with Dad, to tell favorite memories of Mom to friends and family. Her memorial service was held by a lake in Michigan where my grandparents had lived for many years. Jody and I were fourteen when she died. She had been our safe harbor, and we were devastated.

My sister and I were fortunate that we had each other then, because Dad was sunk deeply into his loss and he'd been putting in extra hours at work to clear up some of the accumulation that had piled up during Mom's long illness. One rainy night while driving home, Dad's car skidded on a curve lined with trees. The crash proved to be fatal, and he, too, slipped away from us.

Although, I have since come to see the arrivals and departures from life as told in the book of Ecclesiastes, at that time our lives and affections were shaken in ways unimaginable a year before the discovery of Mom's illness. Granddad and Grandma, Mom's parents, took us to live with them beside Turtle Lake in Michigan. On top of their own loss, it must have been hard for our grandparents to have the responsibility of two young teenagers in a house comfortably set up for a retired couple.

The year following that huge change in our lives, my mind had seemed to remain in an *off* position. I was numb and more than usually accident-prone. But, gradually, I became aware of the beautiful lake setting, and started painting again. As the worst of the sadness receded, greater calm brought fewer mishaps. Jody and I sometimes talked late at night about Mom and Dad and the old days at home in Ohio. Thinking about the future, we vowed to finish our educations and make our parents proud of us. Just in case

they could see us, and what we were doing. We weren't sure how that worked.

When we graduated from high school, Jody went on to study structural engineering at the state university where she met her husband, Kurt McKenzie. He was working toward a degree in civil engineering. They graduated college, got jobs, married, and raised three kids. Then a few years ago, decided to move to the town of Ramona, in the San Diego area, to be near the rest of the family. That move rounded off a series of excellent decisions Jody and Kurt had made over the years.

I travelled a somewhat different route to my present circumstances. It took me an extra year and a half to get my degree at Ashgrove School of Art in Michigan. Our parents' estate had supplied funds for our education, enabling Jody and I to concentrate on school without having to worry overly about living expenses. But, art college was such a new experience, politically rife with "causes," and intense, arty friendships, that it took me awhile to focus sufficiently to graduate.

The 1970s was a decade of breaking rules and trying out new directions. So, after college I lived in an Ann Arbor art commune, contributing my share of house expenses by teaching art at a local high school. Unfortunately, most commune residents were more fascinated by endless art dialogue and relationship exploration than in paying the rent. The obvious disadvantages began to outweigh the artistic interaction and companionship.

When my friend, Tish Halloran, talked me into sharing a tiny apartment with her in the "Village" of New York City, I was more than ready to leave Ann Arbor behind. However, the Big Apple was a very soiled and gritty place in those days. While it was exciting to live in the art Mecca of that day, my small town soul did not jive with big, noisy New York City, no matter how many emerging artists hung out there.

In the autumn a couple years later, I fled to Vermont for a water color seminar, intending to go back to New York with new

inspiration. The Vermont countryside with its yearly woodland spectacle of fall colors cleared my mind. I could breathe again, and look around me without being offended by chaotic metropolis. It was so euphoric to walk in the forest, and shop at farm stands, that I looked for reasons at the end of the seminar to delay my return to the City.

One day, while sightseeing around the picturesque town of Greenwood, I casually checked into local teaching positions. I told myself I was merely interested in how the Vermont school system was set up. Coincidentally, an art teacher just retiring, had created an open slot. I immediately interviewed for the job, and after a few formalities, was hired.

Astonished with myself, it took a few days for me to think about where I would live. Obviously, I wasn't going back to New York. Getting my act together, finally, I rented a small house, and then drove back to the City to collect my belongings. Although concerned about leaving my friend without a roommate to share expenses, it turned out that my timing was good. Change was happening back in the small Village apartment, as well. Tish wanted her boyfriend to move in, and since the space wouldn't hold all three of us, my move was seen as a brilliant solution. So we parted good friends, promising to keep in touch. As can happen when people's lives go separate ways, I never heard from her again.

After three lovely years teaching art in Vermont, I met my husband staying temporarily with his grandmother in her Greenwood manse. Theo had just concluded work on a geological study funded by government grant, and was evaluating options for further experience in his specialty of hydrology. He was into normal guy things, like sports, and a nature freak with a comforting practical side. He recognized me as a questing spirit and an art nut, saved by good childhood role models. Spending time together over a period of months, we laughed and talked for hours, falling into a close, passionate relationship, which developed into steadfast

romance. And one day we walked into a nearby chapel with a couple of good friends, and became Theo and Janna Gustaffeson.

Returning to the present, I took stock of myself. Like my mother at the age of fifty, I now had a husband and children of my own. But, unlike Mom, I was healthy. My joints were a bit painful sometimes, but otherwise, I was okay. Probably needed to lose weight and do something about my arthritis.

I picked up a pen and wrote in my Journal: *Lose weight. Research arthritis cures.*

At fifty, Mom was a woman prematurely aged by cancer and by the methods that had been used to thwart it. That wasn't me.

I thought of Grandmother Jennings—Dad's mom—when she was fifty. That was better. She had lived into her nineties. A plump, red-cheeked, countrywoman in a housedress, and apron. Hmm. Plump. I looked down at the generous proportions of my hips and decided I had to do something about the "plump" part. I underlined *lose weight.*

Grandma Jennings had worn old lady shoes, and complained about her bunions. I looked at my feet. So far so good. No bunions. No parallels there. But, she had often complained about her "rheumatism pain." I wondered what my sister was doing for her arthritis. One of the mixed blessings of being a twin was that you usually didn't have to suffer alone. Identical twins' bodies were similar enough that they often experienced many of the same health problems.

Grandma Jennings' hair was thin, salt and pepper, at age fifty. I had lucked out there. Jody and I had thick, healthy hair in a shade that used to be called auburn, easily our best feature. We took after Mom's side of the family in that regard. Running my fingers through my hair, I loosened the thick coil on my neck seeking reassurance.

So, I wasn't exactly like Grandma Jennings at fifty, either. But what lay ahead? Did I just go downhill on a swift slide after hitting the half century mark?

I wrote: *Talk to Jody about her take on our fiftieth.* She was probably already celebrating, prepared with efficient plans for beating the aging process.



Later that day, after supper, Rosalie cleared away the remains of chicken enchiladas, while I sat at the dining room table with an inventory of my paintings. At the other end of the table, John and Gwen were reading aloud. Gwen had decided a couple years ago that she could help John's reading skills by letting him read aloud to her. He had trouble recognizing words, sounding them out, and seeing them in the right sequence. Consistent practice had caused so much improvement that his abilities were approaching near normal. Reading was probably never going to be effortless for John, but he was keeping up with his school work. Thanks in large part to Gwen.

John read from a book about llama facts. "*The llama is sometimes called the South American humpless camel.* Cool! Does that mean they carry water like camels, but don't have a hump?"

Gwen read silently down the page. "It doesn't say. I think it means they are from the same family of animals. Camelidae."

"*Llamas mate at the end of summer. Almost a year later a single baby, called a cria will be born,*" read John. "I'll bet they have twins sometimes."

Gwen nodded her agreement. She had made a study of twins due to her personal interest. From the other end of the table I listened to John's smooth handling of text.

"*Babies run swiftly soon after birth and are weaned in ten to twelve weeks.*" He paused, "What does 'weaned' mean?"

"Means they don't need any more milk after that and eat what their mom eats. I suppose grass and stuff like that," said Gwen.

"I wonder if they eat hay like horses."

"Might." Gwen covered a yawn, and I looked at the clock. Bedtime.

As soon as they were tucked in for the night, I looked out at the weather. A clear winter sky in the southern California mountains guarantees a cold night. With the full moon, conditions were perfect to use my night vision camera. I snuggled into fleece boots, flannel-lined jeans, pink chamois shirt, sheepskin-lined denim jacket, a black knitted cap that fit close to my head, and lined deerskin gloves.

Leaving Rosalie in charge at home, I grabbed my back pack, jumped into the Landcruiser, and headed for Lake Mirage. I wanted to catch the deep contrasts of light cast by the late night moon over water and nearby countryside. I'd meet Theo at home later.

Granddad and Grandma had moved from Michigan to Lake Mirage, California soon after Jody and I graduated from college. The local resort town was located in the high desert about a thousand feet above sea level, east of Julian. The warm, snowless climate of Lake Mirage had appealed to my grandparents as they grew older. Their lakeshore house was near the highway turn off. A small park and public beach bordered their property. I parked a little way down the road from my grandparents' house, to avoid disturbing them so late in the evening. The idea was to quietly slip into the park, take my photos, maybe do some quick sketches as part of a series of flora and fauna after dark, and then leave.

Unfortunately, Dillon Cody, one of my least favorite people, was sitting in his car in the parking lot drinking beer with a buddy. He actually lived next door to my grandparents' house, on the other side. Dillon styled himself as a ladies' man, and I suppose he thought the little park after dark could be a good place for romantic connections.

Knowing I didn't want to spend time socializing with Dillon, or trying to dodge his hands, I stopped just outside the park. Then I crept along the fence line bordering the park next to Granddad's lakeside lawn. When I reached the water, I saw that Granddad had two row boats chained, resting half on the bank, half in the water. Planning to sneak around the property fence, taking care not to get

my feet wet, I could sit comfortably in one of the boats to take my photos, invisible to anyone up in the parking lot.

As I warily moved around the fence post, a rank dog poo smell hung in the air, as though someone had recently walked his Great Dane by the lake. Squinting to detect the exact position of the pile, I realized the deep shadows were working against me. I would just have to take my chances.

Cautiously, stepping forward with my right foot, I put the left in the nearest rowboat. But, the boot still on the ground slipped on something squishy and simultaneously, the doggy doo aroma became overwhelming. The sliding, undermined my balance causing me to fall facedown into the shallows of the lake with a huge splash, and an involuntary scream.

As I flailed around trying to get upright and out of the frigid water, Dillon appeared on the bank. “What’s going on here? Who are you? Why are you sneaking around on private property?” Dillon officiously shined a flashlight in my eyes. He enjoyed playing the role of volunteer night time security guard to properties on this side of the lake, even though I’d heard that owners weren’t in favor of this.

“Please, move that light away from my face, Dillon,” I said, as my teeth began to chatter. “Give me a hand up so I can stand.”

Dillon reached out pulling me to my feet. His face had a pinched expression. “Is that you, Janna?” He shined his light on the ground and saw the skewed pile. “Ugh. People should be more considerate with their animals.”

“I slipped in it, which is why I fell in the water,” I said, shivering. My backpack fell into the boat, but the camera hanging around my neck hadn’t been as fortunate. I held up the camera as water dripped from it into the lake. I didn’t know much about what was fatal to cameras, but a drenching didn’t seem good.

“You’re a mess.” Dillon’s tone was critical, but, I could see a crafty expression on his face. “You could come by my place and take a hot shower,” he offered magnanimously. Evidently, his mood had shifted away from security snooping to romance.

One would think that a woman of nearly fifty years wouldn't have to deal with doubtful offers of that sort. Being somewhat accident prone didn't make me completely stupid. "I don't think so, Dillon. I'll just walk up to Grandma's house and knock on the door. Looks like they still have their lights on."

Disappointed, Dillon asked, "What were you doing out here, anyway?"

"The idea was to find a quiet place to do some night photography for a series of paintings."

"Next time knock on my door and I'll keep you company. It can get mighty cold out here on a winter night." He smirked, and said, "Want a beer?"

"No thanks. I'll just be moseying along." I was well aware that only my soggy, odorous, condition caused the man to keep his distance. Even now he was checking his hands with the flashlight to see if any nastiness had gotten on them.

"There are folks who wouldn't *like* that you're taking photos at night, Janna. They could think you're sneaking around in the outback to make photos that could cause trouble." His voice took on an uncomfortable threatening tone. "You could probably convince me to keep quiet about your activities if you come to my house and discuss it with me for a while." His mouth formed into an oily smile.

That made me angry. "There's nothing to discuss, Dillon." By this time I was shaking with cold, in no mood to be patient with Dillon. I left him, and took my wet belongings with me.

Grandma must have heard something because she had her head out the door by the time I reached it. The porch light was on. "Janna, for heaven's sake! What in the world are you doing here at this time of night? And what is that awful smell?"

From behind Grandma I could see Aunt Myrtle in her pink robe and hair curlers. She must have joined the grandparents in a nightcap before going to bed in the little guest cottage on the

property. “Let Janna come in and get warm, Naomi. It looks like she’s soaking wet. How did you get wet, dear?”

My Great Aunt Myrtle was both a sweetheart and a caution sign posted on the road of life. The elderly spinster had been engaged to marry several times, but it hadn’t worked out for her. Through domestic and other disasters, she had scared off all suitors. Without a doubt, any accident-prone genes I possessed had come through Aunt Myrtle.

Granddad appeared with a glass of amber liquid in his hand. “Something smells worse than dead in here. Janna are you okay? Myrtle, step aside so Janna can get in the door.”

Grandma, speaking for me, said, “Of course she’s not okay, Sven. She’s soaking wet.” Grandma and Aunt Myrtle began to relieve me of clothes and boots, causing Granddad to hurriedly leave the kitchen. “I’ll fetch you a robe, Janna. You just go along into the bathroom and have yourself a nice hot shower.”

“Sorry to be so much trouble.” I looked down at the tile floor where I had been standing.

“Don’t worry about the mess,” said Grandma. “I’ll just get the mop and some disinfectant.”

I went into the bathroom and steamed myself in the shower, then dressed in old sweatpants and a pullover sweater that had been left at the lake for emergencies. Evenings in the semi-arid conditions around Lake Mirage can be bone chilling. And since we occasionally spent long family days at the lake swimming, fishing, picnicking, and watching the sun go down over the water, Theo and I kept a small suitcase there with warm jackets and sweaters, for ourselves and the kids.

When I came out of the bathroom, Grandma handed me a hot cup of cocoa and asked, “What were you doing by the water so late at night?”

I told her about coming into the park to do night photography and of my ill-fated attempt to avoid Dillon.

“That man causes more trouble,” Grandma sputtered. “He says he’s protecting the lake properties snooping around at night. But, I think he likes to stick his nose in other people’s business.”

I understood her meaning. Dillon often turned up in places he had no business to be. His perpetual excuse was that he was “making sure the area was *secure*.”

Granddad came into the kitchen, his gray thatch of hair hung over grizzled eyebrows, now drawn together in a frown of concern. “You might call me the next time you want to make one of these nighttime photo forays. I’ll come along and check for problems, while you get the shot you want.” I gave him a hug, promising I’d call in a couple days to conspire with him about a night photo session.

“Great heavens,” Grandma said, looking at the wall clock. “You’d better be getting home.”

I called Theo to tell him where I was and then drove back down the road toward Coyote Canyon. At home, I slid into bed beside Theo as he closed the book he was reading, and gave him the facts of my delay without dwelling on Dillon’s annoying behavior. I preferred to talk about the Llama Ranch and John’s continuing fascination with llamas. “And there’s a lot of land for sale out there, Theo. I’d love to be able to buy it all up to preserve its beautiful, primitive state, so green and wild flowers everywhere.”

Theo yawned, turned out the light, and pulled me closer under the covers. “I haven’t been out that way in a while. We should take a rambling drive over those roads some weekend. Rocky, mountainous, high chaparral wilderness, is what I remember.”

I rested my head against his shoulder. “I wonder what it would be like to have a large piece of land that could be left mostly in its natural state. One’s own personal camping spot, maybe.”

“A little research into property values, would have my grandmother smiling down from heaven,” said Theo, his eyes closed. “That’s something she could have sunk her teeth into, even with current economic fluctuations.”

I recalled his grandmother's last year before she cast off earthy limitations. We had been newly married at the time, and nothing in my past had prepared me for personality and drive on the grand scale of Grandmother Althea. Arriving from northern Europe as a young woman, Althea had married Tyler Gustaffeson in New York and together they had produced a family of six children. When Grandfather Gustaffeson passed on at age sixty, leaving Althea reasonably comfortable, she was merely in her forties. Being an intensely energetic person, and wanting greater security for her family, she began an east coast grocery store delivery business, which originated in New York, but later branched out. As the business grew, she plowed part of the profits back into the business, and part went into shrewd New England property investment. As time went on, the investments prospered and her holdings grew. Before she was seventy, Althea was a wealthy woman, reckoned in some circles to be one of the bigger landowners in Vermont.

In the last few months of her life, Theo and I had tea with Althea a couple afternoons each week in her Greenwood parlor. She expounded powerfully on the many virtues of land ownership and the responsibilities she believed came with citizenship. These ideas were so important to her that she had established a substantial trust in Theo's name for the purpose of acquiring and improving property.

However, property ownership involved commitment to a place, and time spent in managing its maintenance. We had married later than many people and considered time a precious commodity. Our first choice was to spend our energies on our marriage, children and careers. Furthermore, while Althea had a love affair with New England, Theo and I weren't sure where we would ultimately set down personal roots. With this in mind, we held off buying property, preferring to lease.

After Althea passed on, we moved to the mid-west where Theo could take a position furthering his experience with water purification. He was particularly interested in the plight of Lake Erie during its years of high level water pollution and fish death.

A few years later, when Rosalie and Christian were in grade school, we moved on to the arid southwest. Although, Theo was drawn by the geology and water shortage challenges of the dry west, it was almost happenstance that initially caused our change of residence.

Driving on a virgin journey through the magnificent mountain ranges, deserts, and high plateaus of the southwestern U.S. one vacation, we felt an instant rapport with the land. Previously, we had taken flights over the same territory, but there is nothing quite like moving through the majestic western landscape along winding roads bordered on either side by bizarre, beautiful trees never seen in the more eastern parts of the country, and mysterious, deeply colorful rock formations. Each day another segment of the west rolled past the car windows and our connection deepened. I could sense Theo's and the children's excitement as they breathed in the smell of sagebrush and decomposed granite. Qualities of the air caused us all to sleep better than usual while travelling.

We leased a house in Prescott, Arizona to examine the area in depth. After a relatively short trip back east to wind up affairs, we found ourselves living five thousand feet above sea level, surrounded by Ponderosa Pine forest and high chaparral. Theo studied the local water issues, while I reveled in painting the glorious and intriguing colors of southwestern landscape and wildlife.

Several years prior to this adventure, my grandparents had settled in Lake Mirage, forty-five minutes from Coyote Canyon, down altitude in the high desert, and only a few hours' drive from our rental home in Prescott, Arizona. In previous, short, flying visits to them from the east, we hadn't taken the time to explore all of San Diego County, preferring to enjoy Lake Mirage, or to drive directly to tourist attractions on the coast.

On a driving visit to Gram and Granddad from Arizona, we began to notice pleasant communities sprinkled along the highway. San Diego County was situated between high snowy mountains in winter and a warm summer ocean; between coastal greenery and

farm belt, and inland desert and mountain ranges. We took the time on that occasion to examine the whole area, enjoying the great variety and attractiveness of the region. Eventually, after a few more such trips, we bought a family home in the rural, mountain town of Coyote Canyon.

Our first year in Coyote Canyon was challenging. I was pregnant with the twins. Theo was busy setting up his groundwater consulting business, which he ultimately located in Rancho Bernardo. With lots of stops and starts, and the birth of the twins, we got through the first year, and then the next. As time went on, we made friends, spent idle days at Lake Mirage with the grandparents, developed our businesses, and volunteered in the community. Also, during this period, my sister and her family moved to the nearby town of Ramona, causing me to reflect on how families sometimes consciously, or maybe unconsciously, flock together.

Coming back to the present, I stretched on the mattress and saw that Theo had fallen asleep. Changing my position to get more comfortable, it ran through my mind that a woman rapidly closing in on fifty could benefit from a recap of past experience and what it might mean on the road ahead. More to the point, where was that road going? But, that kind of thinking took a lot of energy, and I was tired. I drifted off listening to Theo's soft breathing.