

J BENNINGTON

SUICIDE  
TRAIL



# Suicide Trail

By: J Bennington

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## Chapter One

Determination sustained Nancy Martin to complete her coveted destiny. In radio and iPhone silence, she followed directions and counted phone poles on her left after the final turn on Nantucket Road. After utility pole number 27, she watched for the green bamboo guiding stake on the right shoulder. A quick glance at the rearview mirror revealed no one behind her, so she slowed and angled the car off the road. The second marker was 500 feet away, and the third and final one was not far beyond.

She parked before the thick wall of trees. There were no other cars, which pleased her and aroused her curiosity.

"I guess that makes sense. After the fact, who cares if their car is towed? Does anyone complain and pay the charges to have it back? Didn't think so."

She checked the time. "Six o'clock is a bit early, but so what? Will anyone check on my timing? Didn't think so. I can wait until the sun sets to go. I want to enjoy the forest a bit before departure."

She shut off the engine, removed the keys from the ignition, popped the trunk, dropped her phone in her shirt pocket, and stretched tired muscles.

"Sixteen miles from civilization and isolated from all interference. Excellent deal." She tossed her keys into the trunk and closed the lid. She locked the doors manually, slammed her door with finality, and turned to view the forest.

At first, they appeared intimidating, but they signaled approaching paradise with a profound statement to Nancy. She walked to the clearly defined entrance and its welcoming invitation. Next to the right side, a giant sign had been erected fastened to a sturdy metal post.

"PLEASE STOP HERE! THERE'S MORE TO LIFE THAN YOU CAN SEE. BEFORE YOU GO ON, CALL 999-123-9876, AND TALK TO US. LIFE DOESN'T HAVE TO END HERE. WE CAN HELP YOU."

"Aw, that's so sweet and caring, but F you. Life has exhausted all reasons for me to live."

She walked until the canopy of limbs dimmed the sky but allowed spotty stray beams to light the path with a brilliant display. Twenty minutes later, she paused to lean against a tree for a short break.

"Wow! Didn't think the drop was this far back. Wonder why my partner didn't tell me that? Well, I guess I should account for being out of shape, but soon even that won't matter."

She turned on her path, and a stray light beam caused a dazzling flash of red from somewhere on her left. She stopped again and leaned forward to investigate it. She located the flash source, frowned, took three steps from the trail, and squatted closer.

"A red fake ruby heart-shaped earring? What's that doing here in this wood? Wonder what poor soul dropped it here? Did she stop to take a break like me? Did she lose faith in the comfort of death and run back to the highway and restoration? Hmm."

She started to stand and saw the mate about 10 feet in front of her position.

"Really? Are you kidding me?"

Holding them in one hand, she touched her naked ear.

“You didn’t put yours back in today after you cleaned them. You’re getting lax, Nancy. Remember, only losers are lax. However, will it matter much when your body stops after a 227-foot fall with a dreadful splat noise? Didn’t think so. Still, these are kind of spiffy, and since I can’t do it hygienically, I’ll put them in and damn the consequences. Go ahead. Infect me. You’d best hurry.”

She shook her head to enjoy the tugging on the lobes.

“Cool.” She took out her phone and checked them in the quasi-mirror effect of the screen.

“Hey, sexy girlfriend. Bet you’ll be the most glittering corpse among the plain Jane and John Does. You rock!”

She started to retreat, and a glimpse of red cloth beyond where she stood caught her interest.

“Wait a minute. Earrings here, and now cloth there. Did she ditch them and run? Run where? Run from what? This is a couple thousand-acre forest, and running amok is not advisable. You might fall off a cliff.”

She grimaced and looked apologetic. “Sorry about the poor attempt at humor. Yes, I even failed at that over the years of my life. I’ll shut up now.”

She found a second fragment and began to feel uneasy. “This appears to be from a cotton skirt. At least I think so, and they match.”

She turned to view the trail, still lit with sunbeams piercing through the leaves and limbs, and added the white fragment to her collection.

“I wonder if we follow her trail, will we discover a pile of bones that was her? Or will we find this neat gingerbread house with a witch that looks like my mother?”

“Yes, this is from white blouse material. Did she know she ripped it? Hmm. I imagine she never thought about it. What chased her was hungry, and she was about to be a sandwich.”

She found another and another and a rusted watch with a cracked and frayed red leather band.

“You need to stop this and complete your mission, young lady.”

Panic gripped her when she turned because she could no longer see the trail.

“Way to go, dumbass curiosity seeker! Your mamma gives you a huge list of faults and failures, and you fail something simple like falling off a cliff. Whoever lost this is long gone, and she doesn’t matter. Your death does. Got that? Get back on the course and forget everything else. You came here to die, not lollygag and play games or detective.”

She discarded the rusty watch and cloth bits with more chastisement. A worse panic gripped her because she could see no sign of the trail, and the thickness of the trees and underbrush blocked finding where the sun was in the sky, so knowing any direction was impossible.

“And I never downloaded the GPS compass app to my phone. Nincompoop Nancy strikes again! Dammit!”

She turned on her phone, got zero bars, and shut it off with a heavy sigh.

“Well, we stand with our back to the watch and walk that way. It’s bound to lead us back to the trail. Please work with me, Fate. I’m tired of this losing and failing crap!”

Sometime later, she stopped and leaned against a tree to wipe the sweat from her forehead and catch her breath.

“Way to go. Did you walk about an hour, and in what direction? Where did we make a turn? I sure don’t remember any! Dammit! Well, if we’re lost, like the bitch who led us astray, we die of thirst and hunger versus a massive body modification. This isn’t what I wanted, but that’s par for me. I never receive what I want, only what others want to give me. Dammit! I want the 3 karat diamond earrings. Thanks. I’ll take the fake ruby pitted gold set. Dammit!”

“Yes, I said dammit! Are you going to make me stop saying it now?” she repeated as she walked on and hoped it was the correct direction to the cliff.

“And in that dammit, I’m pissed off that I can’t blame anyone for this predicament! Are you happy now, Self? This is so screwed up to be alone and mess up this bad.”

No sooner than she shut up, she entered a modest clearing about 50 feet across and somewhat a circle layout.

“What the F? I didn’t pass through any clearings on my way here.”

She leaned against a tree and focused on a small greenish-gray tree with smooth bark directly across from her.

“Now we have a worthy goal, lost self, we focus on that tree, go to it, and nowhere else. Then we’ll sit for a spell and think of what to do next. How do I complicate such simple things in life? Dammit! Starve to death while wandering aimlessly within ten feet of the trail. Nancy’s a winner, folks. Bet on her. Your fortune rests in her foolishness.”

She was over halfway across and feeling fine when her foot hit something hard in the rather tall grass and heard as well as felt the trap snap closed on her right ankle. She screamed, stumbled, and fell face down on the ground.

“No! Please, not this! Oh, damn, that hurts!”

She took a deep breath and yelled as loud as possible. “NO! I don’t want this, Fate, Karma, anyone, anything! Please don’t do this to me! Come on! Let me die swiftly instead of dragging it out for weeks, painfully, and alone!”

Birds, what seemed to her like 200 or more birds, made a noisy exit from the ground, bushes, and trees around the clearing as she screamed again.

She twisted to where she could see the steel bands on each side of her ankle and struggled until she sat and could touch it. Her heart, mind, and stomach seemed to implode when she gripped both sides and realized that she could never open them or remove the trap without help.

“NO! HELL NO! Help me, someone, anyone! Please help me! I don’t want to die like this!”

She let go of the steel jaws, lay back, and cried for the first time in five years. She pounded the grass with her fists as her right leg throbbed like a monstrous toothache and cried and shouted to exhaustion and bitter bouts of unconsciousness.

Harold Castleman moved outside the small but tidy cabin that grew too uncomfortable for him. He did not wish to open any windows until the heat became intolerable.

“Got to save the AC,” he chuckled and sat in his web chair. He picked up his block of carving wood, fished his knife from his pocket, and commenced to work on his latest project, an eight-inch beaver.

“I know you don’t look like it now, but be patient, and soon, you will look real enough. When you’re painted, beavers from all over the State will want to date you, stud. Stop laughing at me. I’m serious. I had to burn the raccoon to stop the parade of women after his tight butt.”

He made three passes with his knife and paused to look north as a massive cloud of birds took flight from the forest in a noisy frenzied pattern.

“What the dickens? What are you all up to? What put a bee in your bonnet or your tail feathers? You don’t make that wild commotion unless disturbed and frightened you.”

He lay the wood and knife aside and held up his right arm, and hand extended his forefinger. He took a deep breath, made a screeching noise, and waited. He repeated it three times before the red tail hawk moved away from the cloud and dropped like a bullet in the direction of the cabin and the extended landing arm.

“What’s up, Nathan? What’s got your gall bladder in an uproar?”

The hawk screeched, shook his head, and looked north.

“What is it? Another dumb ass walking the trail that got into trouble?”

Nathan squawked, and his head bobbed.

“Why do I still care?” He listened to the whine and felt the shifting of talons as Nathan repositioned on his arm.

“I guess you’re right, but I want to quit. That last one was gross. Bears are not something to be messed with. She got her suicide wish, but not quite the way she expected. So guide me, buddy, and we’ll see what we can do.”

Nathan crouched down on his legs in preparation.

Harold lowered his arm, stood, and snapped the arm up to launch the hawk.

Nathan perched on the woodshed crest and waited until his human friend grabbed his canteen and package of jerky and set off at a trot. Then, he flew in tight circles to be visible and guided Harold within 300 feet of the clearing.

Harold could hear her crying and intermittently yelling for help. At last, he entered the visual space to her left and shook his head at her predicament. He stopped beside her, and she stared up at him.

“Got off the trail, huh? That’s not a wise thing to do.”

Nancy hastily evaluated his rough, unkempt appearance. “Tell me about it.”

He dropped to his knees and reached for the trap when she shouted at him.

“Stop! Don’t touch me!”

He paused and cast a dumbfounded look at her. “What? What do you mean, don’t touch you?”

“Just get me help, okay?”

“No, it’s not okay. From where you parked, it’s about fifteen miles from any professional help. And with your wandering, you added about four miles more to that. So simply getting help won’t work. I’ll take care of you.”

“No, I don’t trust you!”

“What the hell? Are you sane? Since you’re here and waking Suicide Trail to kill yourself, I guess not. And if you want to die, why does it matter if I touch, kiss, or rape you? When I’m done, I’ll drag you and fling your ravaged body to your coveted destination!”

He paused and enjoyed the perplexed look on her face. “Don’t touch you. Don’t help you. Do us both a favor and shut up until you can walk out of here, either way! Stupid ass girl! Display your intelligence with silence!”

She flashed him a mean stare and closed her eyes in surrender. “In that case, go ahead.”

He turned her ankle slowly as she grunted and yipped.

“Listen, mysterious girl, I’m going to pull the sides apart now. Try not to jerk your foot. It’s cut, but I need to check for any broken bones. That is my biggest concern.”

“Okay, man. I’m ready. Go for it.”

It hurt, and she yelped when the jaws released her and shed some tears as he moved the trap aside and caught her lower leg like it was crystal.

“This might hurt, but I need to check it now, not later. So suck it up and don’t faint on me.”

“I hear you. Go ahead.”

He squeezed the cut with his fingers and did his best to check the bones beneath. They appeared intact, and he told her so when he finished.

“You lucked out a bit there, lass. I don’t feel any broken bones, so I’ll treat it as a sprain. Two, this is one trap that I modified for a smaller game. I filed the teeth down to prevent more than a cut or broken bone. There’s no need to add extra torture to trap a meat meal on occasion. Sorry, you got caught in it, though.”

“Me too. Where am I from the trail?”

“About two miles due south. The cliff is about two miles farther from there to the west. What got you off course?”

“The sunshine lit up these earrings, and I got distracted by torn clothing pieces.”

“Huh, I wondered what had happened to them. They were ripped out of her ears when I found her.”

“Did she make it?”

He sadly shook his head. “No. She bled some when she cut herself someway. Then she chose to mess with a bear and lost the fight.”

“Yuck. Spare me the details.”



“I will.” He studied her body and face and looked south. He knew it was about a mile from his cabin and did not think he could carry her that far.

She felt sorry for the turmoil he displayed. “This isn’t good, is it?”

“It’s not the best situation. Did you happen to leave a note for anyone?”

“Nope, I disappeared without a trace or farewell.”

“Bummer. Well, I’ll make you a deal. I’ll make a litter, immobilize your ankle, and transport you to my cabin. I’ll treat you to keep it from getting infected and take care of you until you can walk normally again. Then you’re free to go.”

“Why won’t you drag me to the cliff and let me claw my way over?”

“No, I’m stupid when it comes to the cliff. You want to go, you go on your own. I refuse to help any bozo who becomes lost on the way to stupid land. Take it or leave it?”

“You’re a tough man. People told me stories about a maniac in the forest here.”

He snorted and stood. “I’m sure they did, and a lot of them came from the same witch. I’d like to take her broom and shove the handle up her tight ass until it goes through her petty little piss ant brain.”

“Ouch. I’m glad it’s not me, Tonto.”

He smiled and nodded. “Me too, Pale Face. Relax as much as you can, and we’ll have you out of here before the sun sets.”

He raised his right arm and whistled.

Nathan took flight and landed and hooted and whistled to him.

“Roundup. Do you understand? Roundup. Okay, buddy?”

Nathan hunkered, and Harold released him in a flurry of flapping wings and screeches. He made many circles around them, and the clearing returned to land before Harold’s feet and did a wild wing-flapping dance.

“Good boy,” said Harold and clapped. “I owe you one. I have no treats with me.”

Nathan nodded and took flight, headed in the direction of the cabin.

“What was that about?”

“That roundup means there are no carnivores around that can smell blood 100 miles away. However, I still want to leave swiftly. The woods are not all visitor-friendly after dark.”

“Do you two understand each other?”

“We do very well at communication. I saved his life by healing a wing when he was a youngster and taught him to fly. He loves me, and we help each other all we can. Relax now. I’ll be right back.”

## Chapter Two

True to his word, he had her in his cabin before nightfall, laying on his bed with her right leg propped up on pillows and cushions.

“This is rather a neat place,” she said to make conversation as he mashed leaves and some sweet-smelling liquid in a mortar. “I see no utilities, though. Doesn’t that bother you?”

“Not in the least. I live well without them. So, will you until you leave.”

“The bathroom?”

“Is outside and to the right.”

“Oh, brother. Looks like I’m in for some fun until I heal.”

“Possibly, but I’ll be the best doctor and nurse you need, trust me. You’ll survive and never remember this day when you’re 97.”

Her laugh surprised her. “You’re most likely right.”

“Why were you set on dying? Are you too rattled to jaw about it?”

“Because I’m tired of the pain and constantly told that I’m a failure. You can add that I’m the cause of all failures and problems in the family. After the trap snapped shut, I began to believe it. I mean, who flunks Suicide 101? It’s simple. Walk and keep walking until the ground disappears, and goodbye Nancy. Nope. Not me. I screwed that up also.”

He finished his mashing and got some gauze and tape from a first aid kit in a dingy plastic bag.

“This will sting like blazes, but that means it’s working and healing. Grip the sheets like steel rods and scream and curse if you want. What you don’t need is to go down from an infection. The cliff is better than that.”

“Thanks. I’ll remember that.”

“You don’t seem all that bad to me. Except for getting lost, and anyone can do that. Hell, I did that myself in the past. So what specifics annoyed you to that point?”

Nancy frowned, gripped the sheets, and inhaled sharply when the paste touched the cut skin.

“The consistency of the negatives. I consider it a low level of bullying. They don’t hit or tell you to die, but they pick on your every comment and move. So, after a few years of being told you’re worthless, you make mistakes, you’re the reason for our bad luck, and such, it sort of works its way into how you think and look at life and yourself. And suddenly, you’re finding many ways to prove them right without trying.”

She sighed and watched his fingers working with gauze.

“I guess the final blow came from my mother’s request on Brad, my current boyfriend. She dislikes him with a passion. He’s polite, kind, loving, and intelligent. He’s got a goal to obtain a degree in the field of satellite control and design. He’s got three colleges begging for him to say yes to them. They all want to give him a full ride where he only needs to worry about food and clothing. And mom doesn’t like him. The nerve of some women!”

He laughed and gently lowered the leg to an elevated position. "I understand what you mean."

"And if you take the time to argue with her, you'll find it all boils down to one thing: his family isn't wealthy and heavy into political intrigue in society. They're not in the news with all their accomplishments, and see what I did. How's that for a stupid idea?"

"About that stupid, and I'm lucky I'm still single. I don't need that heartache. So you sacrifice your life, look grand in the public eye, and they might name a street after you when you're dead. Big whoop!"

"Exactly. The ankle looks and feels comfortable. And your jerky filled my tummy, but I need to use the facilities before I sleep. So how do we arrange that? Sorry to bother you."

He picked her up and carried her to the outhouse door without a word. There he set her down on her left ankle, and she held onto the door with both her hands.

"Is that sufficient, or do you need more help?"

"Wow! Uh, I think I can manage with a few hops. Thanks, sir."

"You're welcome, and call me Harold. Take care of matters, and I'll give you a ride back."

\*

Morning arrived, and Nancy woke to the smell of bacon and eggs frying from somewhere outside. Her stomach rumbled in anticipation and hunger.

"Wow, what a great night's sleep. I haven't enjoyed that for a long time."

She checked her surroundings on each side of the bed. A sleeping bag lay on the right and away from the bed.

She stretched her arms and twisted her back to limber herself.

"What a gentleman. I guess some rumors are just that, rumors, like me. I'm not bad news; it's something other butt faces say about me."

She moved her right foot, and with a few twitches of pain, she shifted up and sat on the edge of the bed. She let her right foot touch the floor when the door opened.

"Hold it! Don't put weight on that foot yet. I don't think it's fractured, but don't press your luck. Even with a sprain, you need to give it some rest before putting stress on it."

"I wished to sit, not walk. Good morning, Harold. Sorry about confiscating your bed. I slept like a baby after you were done."

"I like that. That's what your body and mind needed."

"Breakfast smells delicious. Is eating permitted with a bunged ankle after a bungled suicide?"

"Yes, that's your next prescription. Do you have to visit the restroom?"

"Not now. Move me to the table?"

He obliged her and moved a chair with a cushion for her foot. Next, he placed a cup of coffee within reach along with fixings and went outside.

She prepared her coffee, took a few sips, and conducted a more intense eye tour of her environment. The interior made her feel relaxed and comfortable. Then the room temperature seemed to drop as she stopped on a stand between the sofa and the bed. A small portrait photo, 2” by 3” of a woman, sat in a wood frame that appeared to be carved and ornately decorated. Her heart skipped a beat, and she gripped the table to keep herself on the chair. She yearned to pick it up for a closer look but knew she could not reach it without walking and chose not to try.

She held her right hand to face-level, viewed the goosebumps and erect hairs, and shivered.

“Don’t lose it, Nancy. Take a deep breath or two and let it go. There’s a logical explanation and reason for this. However, what have we gotten ourselves into, girl? I mean, what the F?”

She took a few calming breaths and followed with a sip of coffee.

“I guess we’ll be all right. But, still, you must admit that photo is eerie as all hell. Is that woman, my mother, the witch he’d like to do in with a broomstick? Sometimes I thought she was a witch. She’d be the perfect role model for that part. But, no way! How can mom’s photo be here in this remote area, sitting in the cabin of a rumored maniac? So, keep quiet and cool until we heal and haul ass out of here. Got that, pansy butt? Yes, I hear you.”

By the time he came in with two plates of food, she was calm and over the fright, panic, or whatever disturbed her. She ate with gusto and questioned him about the cabin, the lack of utilities, and who owned the property.

“So far as I’m concerned, it’s mine. I know most of the woods are State Forest, but I don’t trouble anybody, and I do a lot to help the Park Rangers with stray animals and such. So, they don’t worry me, and I respect them and their duties. I trap just to keep myself in meat and not to sell. They like that. Sometimes, they will leave a package of sulfa drugs, fixings, and canned foods on my front porch. We share a pretty healthy symbiotic relationship, despite the rumors.”

“Awesome for you, dude. I’m proud of you, and you can talk with animals. Is it like Tarzan or what?”

That comment got a grin from him. “It’s like or what. A few are friendly with me, but the rest avoid me as I avoid them. However, if they’re sick, they’ll come up on the porch and lay by the door, so I can take care of them. Then they’re gone as soon as possible. I don’t mind. I love helping them.”

She wanted to be quiet, but the oddity nettled her curiosity. She glanced over her shoulder at her mother’s picture. “So, who’s the woman in the photo? Is she someone special to you?”

He followed her gaze, and his voice grew melancholy. “She’s my Marsha, a lovely woman but the biggest mistake I ever made. She’s also the only woman I loved more than life itself. However, the damned woman is like a sponge. She knows how to suck up all she can from anyone around her and keep it for herself. Do you think she would return even one ounce of love to me? No way. Hell would freeze over before she opened her heart, at least for me. To her, I’m like the suicides at the bottom of the cliff. I’m worthless to her and her too-perfect world. Bitch! Ruthless love thief!”

She sighed and winced. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“You ask because you don’t know. It was like me asking you last night. Communication is important in life, like with Nathan and me. Marsha and I might still be together, but her communication concept was to do what she said and do it now. So my response was not important to her.”

“Cool, Harold. Any idea about the length of healing for my foot?”

“If your body is a good healer, maybe two weeks or less. Soon I’ll make a walker for you out of bark and wood slats. Another week and you can go. I want to be sure the cut is healed thoroughly before the walker. I want it to the point that you can barely see it, if at all.”

“That sounds great to me. What if I want to stay?”

“Don’t go there. You’ll heal. You’ll go. And life will press on for a few more cycles.”

She finished her plate and moved it aside. “So, what’s on for today?”

“Do you like reading?”

“I can take it or leave it. Are there any magazines around?”

“No, but I own a few books, some classics if you want to exercise your mind.”

“Hmm, I’ll give that a shot since I’m chair-bound. May I read outside in the fresh air?”

“Sure thing. I’ll hook you up with one of my favorites, Silas Marner. Did you ever hear of it?”

“No, but I guess I will soon. What are you going to do?”

“Check my traps and hope NOT to find another stray suicide wannabee. Instead, I’ll spend time making paints for my carvings and concentrate on finishing my latest one, my beaver. And I’ll try to get in a nap and some reading myself. The rangers occasionally bring me books from the library, and I enjoy that. It allows me to live and experience life somewhere else and not leave my armchair.”

“Cool. Hook me up with a book, plant me on the front porch, and press on with life. When I can walk around alone, I’ll wash dishes and help you out where I can.”

He regarded her and shook his head. “You don’t have to, but I won’t argue much about it when you do.”

\*

Marsha Martin was between ‘blow a fuse’ anxious and ‘rubbed raw’ fury when she was forced to admit that her daughter was missing. It hurt worse to know it might become public knowledge.

Her next step was to vigorously accost Brad Clark, Nancy’s taboo boyfriend, sure he had aided her escape or at least knew her whereabouts. Of course, he denied it, but that failed to register with Marsha.

She harassed him and his family for three days before accepting they were clueless. Her verbal harassment led them to get a restraining order against her. Only then did she turn to the police. She braced herself, and when it hit the media that the Governor’s daughter was missing, the Delaware State’s citizens and law enforcement teams launched into orbit to locate her.



The State Chief of Police, Daniel Coombs, and reporters from the local newspapers converged on the Governor's Mansion. During a press conference, Marsha made a tearful display about her missing daughter. However, behind the scenes, she worried more about privacy and keeping secrets. As a result, she refused to cooperate fully with authorities. It took four more days and a blistering lecture from Stanley before she stopped her resistance and let the detectives enter Nancy's bedroom and even remove her computer as part of their investigation.

The mansion settled to a strained quiet, and Stanley watched Marsha sternly until he cornered her and demanded conversation.

"What is your problem, honey?"

"I dislike having my personal life probed by anyone! You know that!"

"Oh, dear, what are you afraid of? Do you worry that someone might throw a rock through your rose-colored glass house and see the real you? How many years will you try to hide the cellulite that won't disappear?"

She flung a cushion at him. "What's that mean? Huh? Like you can afford that yourself? Like you devote your family life to being a trademark father? Like you only care about her when it benefits your political career or public standing! Ass hole!"

He cocked his head and shrugged. "I can't argue with you on that, honey. I learned that one from the best teacher in the world. It's a lesson from Marsha Martin's Two-Faced Life College."

"What are you talking about?"

"You taught me that lesson, even before you married and rode me until it became a part of my life and personality! If you don't like it now, you should never have taught me that it was necessary for us. Sometimes I think it only benefits you, but we both stand a chance to be hammered at times like this. Nancy's birth was a horrible mistake. I should have listened to my mother and ex-wife and told you to pack sand!"

"Oh, my! You wait 17 years to tell me that? If you'd told me then, you'd still be a Senator wannabee, and I wouldn't be distressed as I am now! She's my daughter! I carried her for 9 months! So sorry that only men are burdened when a child is created."

"You didn't have to do that."

"It's too bad the man can't carry half of it until delivery! And only now do you find the balls to tell me I was wrong to deliver her. She might have been a mistake for you, but she wasn't for me! I can admit my faults and correct them! What about you?"

His face turned red, and his voice raised. "If you live to be a hundred, you'll still have faults to correct. You're as big a loser as Nancy is. If you weren't born, none of this would happen now!"

"Then why have you stayed around so long? Huh? Many other women in Delaware want to crawl into bed with you the 1<sup>st</sup> or the 10<sup>th</sup> time! Why not replace me with one of them?"

He sat down on the edge of the sofa and swiped at his face before he looked at her face and held her attention.

“Because I loved you, and I still do, at some level. You fit into my life so easily that I didn’t realize that you were a black hole for love. You take, but you can’t open your heart and let any of it go to someone else. It might cause a tidbit of personal information to escape and become common knowledge. You’re easy to love, Marsha, and even in this crisis, you’re the best woman I ever encountered to be a part of my life. Therefore, you’re still here, and no one else shares my life. Still, Nancy was a mistake that an abortion would have prevented.”

“Drop dead, prick!”

\*

Two days later, the police called them in for a meeting and twisted their pants in a tighter knot for lack of knowledge about Nancy and what she did with her time.

“So, you didn’t know she was registered and an active member of the Suicide and Gone website?”

“No, we trusted her to be responsible, and that was pretty much that. As a result, we seldom checked on her Internet activities,” said Stanley.

Marsha paled and felt her heart skip a few beats. “Is there call or reason to believe that happened?”

She closed her eyes and waited for the worst.

“Quite possible. Nancy’s had many conversations with her partner there, Double Noose, about different methods, and though some are better than others, they’re all geared for success.”

Marsha’s mouth hung open. “What? Are you serious or joking? Is there a list from easy to difficult?”

“It’s actually from the swiftest to the longest. Like a shotgun blast through your head is swift and sure in about 30 seconds or less. If you want to hang yourself, you’re talking about 14 minutes or more before your strangulation agony ends.”

Marsha groaned and shut her eyes. “Sorry, I didn’t need to hear that. Is there any indication on how Nancy would if she did?”

“They discussed several, but the one most frequent was walking the Suicide Trail. That’s in Pennsylvania in Evansburg State Forest. From what I heard, it’s a marked trail you walk after dark, and somewhere along the line, you drop off a 227-foot cliff.”

“Oh, damn, and ouch! Do people really listen to their suicide partners and do it?”

“I guess some do, but it’s never been proven right or wrong. I know the Pennsylvania State Psychiatric Department put a huge Suicide Prevention sign up at the supposed entrance to the trail. However, there are no remains found in the vicinity of the cliff. Therefore, we can’t guarantee it’s chosen or used. My theory is wild animals; the carnivores hang out and use the cliff bottom as a dining hall.”

“Do any of the death walkers return alive, as is chickening out?”

“Some do, but the ones who don’t, well, we don’t know. Then, of course, they are never heard from again.”

“I think I’m going to be sick. Is there anything else we can do to help you?”

“No, ma’am. Since the trail is in Pennsylvania, we must go through them to continue the investigation. The FBI will take over from there if foul play is hinted.”

“I understand very well. It’s going to get worse before it gets better. What’s your personal prognosis for finding her?”

“Alive or dead, around zero percent. The last time she logged off her computer was 12 days ago, and that’s a long time to be incommunicado. She could be in a brothel in Turkey, or she could be a forced prostitute on drugs in Los Angeles, or she could be dead and buried somewhere and not discovered for 20 years, if ever. So sorry we can’t be more positive other than we will investigate as far and as long as we can.”

\*

Ten days after becoming a patient in Harold’s Cabin Hospital, Nancy felt much better about life and her world-class nurse. She listened to him tell her about his first encounter with Marsha and watched the life dance in his eyes and his voice warm with his heart.

“It was in the third grade and on the last recess of the day. Two boys had her trapped in a remote part of the playground that was off-limits to the students. I could see she struggled with them, but one held her, and the other tried his best to undress her. So, I chose to get involved in her life and save her. Before the school day ended, I was kicked out of school for three days for fighting. I got a whipping from the assistant school principal and another from my dad when I got home. I took them all and never worried about them. She was very appreciative of my standing up for her, and it made me dizzy. That was the first meeting with her and the kindest she ever treated me after that. It was wonderful for a short time, and she was back to ignoring me as usual.”

“Amazing that you remember that far back. You’re awesome.”

“And you’re healed enough to go with a walker that looks like Frankenstein designed, but it will work for a few days. Your faithfulness in doing the exercises I taught you paid off, so today, you’ll play Indian to start and spend the rest of the day without the pesto medicine, and we’ll see how well you do on the walking boot.”

“Play Indian? What’s up with that?”

He carried her outside to the porch, and on one end was an oval aluminum tub about 5 feet long and 3 feet wide.

“What’s up is a bath for the princess. Strip off your clothes, give them to me, bathe while I wash them, and hang them to dry. Then, when you’re done, you spend your reading time wrapped in the sheet on that chair, like an Indian or old grandmother might, until your clothes are dry.”

She laughed, handed her clothes to him one piece at a time, and stepped into the water with his support. Then, she sat and took the bar of soap from him.

“Enjoy yourself. I’ll be back soon, princess.”

When he returned, she was finished and wondering about rinsing since the water was dense with soap film, shampoo trails, and dead skin cells.

He did not answer but opened a drain fixture in the foot end of the tub, and the water drained while she splashed her legs and giggled. Without warning, fresh, clean water poured on her head, and she laughed as she removed the soap film. She had not seen him bring the water, but he used three buckets, and when she finished, she laughed. And then, for no apparent reason, she cried.

“What’s wrong? Is your ankle hurting?”

“It’s nothing you did. That’s the first time I can remember laughing so freely. It was grand to do so. I don’t remember many happy moments in my life with mom and dad. Thanks for treating me like a human being. You’re not wrong in what you’re doing. But, unfortunately, the world at large is.”

\*

The walking boot, with his carved signature, worked well. It unbalanced her at first, but it satisfied Harold’s expectations, and she enjoyed hobbled walking to take care of her needs the rest of the day.

He inspected the foot at bedtime, and his ‘doctoring’ results pleased him.

“Perfect! Got you, sucker. You’re not going to have much of a scar. The only thing to show will be this faint white line where the most pressure pinched your skin. Beautiful!”

## Chapter Three

Two weeks and five days after her incident with the trap, Nancy walked toward freedom and life in the reverse direction of the trail. However, that trip filled her with much more angst and stress. A comforting death awaited her on her way inside. Going out, she had no guarantee or promise of anything like the peace that settled on her from knowing Harold Castleman. The most important positive note was that she wanted to live and experience many decades more of life and love to honor the man.

She reached her car, now covered with a thick layer of dust and pollen, and with a heavy sigh, opened her iPhone and felt joy when four network bars were displayed on the screen. Then, with a deep breath and some hesitation, she pressed 911 and waited for the connection.

“Yes, this is Nancy Martin calling, and I have a problem. I need someone to unlock my car.

“I am? Well, I figured that might happen, but I’m here in Pennsylvania, lost and needing help. What? Can’t you just send help without all the questions?”

“Okay, I came to kill myself, but I changed my mind. So now I’m back at the car, but my keys are in the trunk. No, all the doors are locked. Why? That is the rule to show determination. You place the keys in the trunk, manually lock the doors, and walk away. I need someone to open my car. Thanks. My number is good; it’s the only number, but I have no clue how long the battery will last. It’s been about three weeks without a charge.

“No, my car’s not visible from the road. Oh, Nantucket Road. I could go to the road and make myself visible, but my ankle is still too stiff for a lot of walking. It will be around 27 phone poles after the turn from Chaucer Lane. Look for a green bamboo stake on the right side of the road. Turn there, and three more will bring you right to me.

“Once more, I don’t need an ambulance, just someone to get the driver’s door open. Again, I’m not seriously hurt, just a sprained ankle. Just get my car open, and I got it from there.”

She wiped an area on the trunk and took the walking boot from the backpack he insisted she take with her. Besides the boot, it had two sacks of jerky and three bottles of spring water he filled for her. She put the boot on to give her some relief and hopped onto the trunk lid. She waited for rescue while looking at the forest with mixed emotions.

“I’m going to miss you, Harold. I wish life had adjusted so you could be my dad.”

She felt goosebumps like she had so many times in the cabin with him. Then, she gasped and recalled one of his revealing sessions. He told about being in a private home with a midwife when Marsha had a baby. That was the last time he saw her and his daughter because instead of staying with him, she went with Stanley and married him right after he was elected State Senator.



“Son-of-a-gun! Wow! Hey, he might be my father. That was 17 years ago, and if she played both men simultaneously, he might be my father. But, of course, mom would take me and bolt with the Senator and not honest Harold. Damn! We must check that out.”

She started running several plans to find proof of that marvelous thought when the Park Rangers first arrived on the scene to help her.

George used a slim tool to unlock her front door.

“Did you come here to commit suicide? Why not kill yourself somewhere else?”

“This is a popular spot for suicides. I discussed several options with my suicide partner and counselor, and we chose this trail. You walk after darkness settles in, and you can’t see the cliff, and oops! Goodbye.”

“I reckon that will work, but never mind; I’m glad you failed. What saved you?”

“I got curious about a shiny red earring and got lost from the trail. I wandered around, got caught in a steel trap, and Harold Castleman rescued and healed me.”

“Really?” asked George.

“Yes, he’s a nice mand, and while I healed, he did a lot of talking and counseling to my restless and wasted life and triggered several reasons for me to live instead of dying. Love the man. Too bad he wants to live in the woods. The world could use his love of humanity out here. It would be a better place if he did.”

George frowned and glanced from her to John, his partner. “What? Are you telling me you met and interacted with Harold Castleman?”

“Yes, I did. If not for him, I might be dead now or close to it from being caught in the modified animal trap.”

She made her factual statement but soon realized they thought she was lying.

“Hey, I’m not making this up for a drama award. I can show you the clearing and where the trap was located. Do you want to see it? It has my blood on it.”

George’s radio crackled and beeped. He answered and ignored her a moment.

“Yeah, we’re here. No, it doesn’t appear that she’s hurt physically, but I think she’s disoriented. So, no, we don’t need an ambulance. After you get here, you can say yes or no, and we’ll take her to Chester Crozier for evaluation or not. Ten-four.”

Anger flashed inside her mind. “Hey, you’re not nice! I know what happened to me. I can show you the clearing and his cabin! I’m not some loon wandering lost in the forest. I was lost until he found me and saved my life!”

John intervened with his soothing voice and manner. “Okay, miss, please calm down, and when the State boys show up, I’ll go with you, and you can show me that.”

“Well, I can agree with your offer. On the other hand, it’s not nice for people from the outside to show up and determine I’m crazy for speaking the truth within two minutes or less.”

She stuck out her tongue at George.

“Whatever you say,” he said.

“What’s wrong with you? I was in there alone, and you can’t know what I’ve been through the last two weeks!”

John intervened again. “You’re right, Nancy. Just sit down and take some deep breaths, and we’ll continue when the State boys arrive.”

He turned to George with a scolding look and spoke with a low voice. “Let it go, man! Stop intimidating her. She’s not lying about her experiences, so let it ride.”

“I don’t like it much, but I’ll laugh at you when she exposes herself as crazy. She’s a bologna machine if you ask me.”

\*

The police arrived, and right behind them were two FBI agents sent to investigate the case of Suicide Trail and the missing Nancy Martin due to her father’s political status.

Jerome Knight, the Pennsylvania Commandant, approached Nancy, and the rangers, Sarah Johns and Aponi, trailed close behind to observe all transactions.

“How are you now, Nancy? I’m happy to see you on this side of the deadly forest and cliff. How do you feel?”

“Irritated by people who were somewhere else but clearly know that everything I say is a lie. Are you here to add to the list of nitwits, or are you here to make sense and listen to me?”

Aponi stood within audible range and stared at the trees with unblinking eyes.

Sarah moved behind her and rested hands on her shoulders.

“Hey, radar eyes, what do you see?”

“I see and feel a huge uproar of hurting souls pouring out of the forest in a whirlwind of anxiety. They’re all focused on the young woman on the trunk of her car. She’s innocent and doesn’t feel them or understand them. They want, need, and demand freedom and reconciliation.”

“In other words, we got our work cut out for us, huh?”

“Yep, we’re going to get our hands dirty on this one. Some of them are nasty and demand blood already from anyone. On the other hand, years of pent-up anger is reaching critical mass.”

“Okay. Are you ready to assert your authority and humble some brothers-in-the-law?”

“I’m set. Take notes on what she says. She’s the hub here, whether the people around her understand it. I hope I can add a few Aponi converts to my repertoire on this case.”

Sarah laughed and gave her a slight shove. “Oh, gag me! Go for it. Add to your groupies. You deserve it.”

Aponi moved past the police and the rangers and stood beside Nancy, resting an elbow on the car.

“Hey, girlfriend, I’m glad you failed on that simple suicide maneuver. It makes my job easier when you’re living. It’s a bitch to work with dead people.”

“Huh? Who are you? Are you with the police or the rude ranger force?”

She handed her ID and credentials to Nancy.

“I’m Aponi from the FBI, and people say I’m brash, and some say I’m bold, and some think I’m a pain in the ass. I could care less what they say so long as they stay out of my way and pay me homage when I prove them wrong. Who are you?”

“Me? I’m Nancy Martin.”

“From where?”

“Delaware. My dad’s the Governor, and my mom’s his wife.”

“I noticed a small cringe there. Doesn’t that make you happy?”

“No, far from it.”

“Well, there used to be TV shows where they took average housewives and made them Queen for A Day. I’m sure I could find some teens who would love to be a governor’s daughter for a day.”

“I’m sure you could, but it’s most likely only me not loving the situation. There’s nothing I can do right to please them except breathe, and sometimes they frown on that simple reflex action.”

“Hmm. So that’s why you chose to suicide?”

“That was my driving reason.”

“Well, I commend you on whatever tiny thing led you astray. I commend you for not letting all the evil and unrest in that forest nightmare break you. Whether you know it or not, or your parents know it, you possess a rock-solid inner strength. That hidden strength saved you from the moment you entered until you returned unharmed.”

“Most of the credit has to go to Harold Castleman. He saved me and gave me hope for a better life.”

She patted Nancy on the back. “I respect you, girlfriend. You’re quite okay in my book.”

“Uh, thanks, I guess. I don’t feel that way most of the time.”

“Well, I’m going to put all my faith and trust in you. Together we’ll turn this whole park and county upside down and shake out what ails it. Then we’ll hang proofs on the clothesline for the skeptical world to see. I’ll do that for you. Will you do the same for me?”

Nancy’s right arm moved on its own, and it pleased her when Aponi shook it.

“Yes, I will, but why? Sometimes validation helps make me stronger.”

“Because I can feel what you and they can’t. There’s a great deal of turmoil, anger and some violence raging in there. And the anxious spirits are focusing on you because you experienced what you did with the freedom and joy of a child and walked away unscathed. They seek hope and salvation through you, but I don’t want them to break the beautiful woman you are. And I speak of what Harold Castleman saw in you as he boldly moved to help you instead of watching while you died. And not helping you was one of his choices. However, he did, and now it’s my turn.”

A smile broke out on her face. “It sounds great to me, so where do we start?”

“First, I want to inform you that you’re under arrest by me and in Federal custody. The reason is you crossed state lines to do yourself bodily harm. I’ll forego the handcuffs since your ankle hinders

your flight, but you're under arrest until I release you. When we depart the area, you will be handcuffed and in the back seat of our car and spend a few days in detention in Harrisburg. Do you have any questions?"

"None, madam. I promised to put my faith in you, and I will. I understand."

Aponi turned to view the Rangers and the Police present. "Gentlemen, please give me your attention. Nancy's under arrest and under my authority. Don't bother or question her unless my partner or I are present. Does anyone need clarification?"

Heads shook and throats cleared, and she turned back to Nancy. "We start this plan with you calling your mother and letting her know you're alive and well."

"I don't want to do that. Let her worry as if she will. She's a part of the problem, and my phone's charging. It ran down fast when I called 911."

"I'm serious, girlfriend. It doesn't matter that she's part of the problem because you're also a part of this, and you hold insider information. But, like you're alive and out of immediate danger, she's clueless about that. She's probably running many gruesome scenes of bears, serial murderers, rapists, and such through her mother's mind and anxious enough to puke from a small pat on her arm."

She handed Nancy her phone. "Here, use mine. It will display FBI Agent Aponi, and she'll poop, and people around her will say 'Yuck!' and move upwind, but she'll be happy to hear your voice. Trust me."

Nancy took it with a smile. "You make incredible sense. I like that."

\*

When her phone rang, Marsha and Stanley were in a ballroom in Dover Downs Hotel. It was an annual political luncheon with many of Delaware's wealthy supporters to raise awareness and money for the Delaware Special Olympics, a children's health benefit. She ignored Stanley's frown and felt faint at the FBI text on her display. Finally, however, she chose to answer.

"Hello, mom. I love you, and I'm okay. I didn't die. I got lost, but I'm alive."

She jumped from her chair and ignored the quieting room as all eyes turned toward her, critical or not.

"Yahoo! Oh, Nancy! Oh, my gosh, honey! This is great news! I began to think I never would hear from you again. So many people told me it was too long, and you were gone for good, never to be seen again, alive or dead."

"Well, I'm sorry about that, but I was in a lot of pain and had to run. I'm done now. Circumstances beyond my grasp changed my mind."

"Oh, child, I'm so fucking happy to hear your voice. Sorry, I'm crying, but there's been too much stress on me. Where are you? When are you coming home? Do you need help? Is there anything I can do? Please tell me, baby. I'm dying to see and touch you!"

"I'm still in Pennsylvania at the Suicide Trail in Evansburg State Forest. I just made it out and called for help. I'm out of immediate danger but under arrest by the FBI, and they're going to help me. Still, there are a million questions I have to answer. It's wonderful to hear you also, mom. I love you too, and I'll stay in touch now."

"That's fantastic, baby. I don't want to experience any more hellish weeks as I did. We're going to make some changes when you get home. Our life will not be as before."

"I agree, mom. We need to change our stale life and clear out some secrets and overstuffed closets before the next disaster destroys us."

"I agree, sweetheart. Thanks for this heartwarming call. Can I call you back at eight o'clock tonight? Would that be acceptable? I think my heart will be calm by then, baby. Yes. I love you too. Goodbye for the moment, sweetheart."

She kissed the phone, shut it off, and glanced around the room before taking her chair beside Stanley.

"Sorry, but that was my daughter who's been missing and assumed dead. She's alive and out of danger! Whew, what a relief that was to hear her."

She turned to Stanley. "I have to visit the restroom a moment and compose myself. So go ahead and start without me."

\*

Sabob

Aponi comforted the upset girl until she settled enough to continue. Then she started with the one who seemed most antagonistic toward Nancy.

"George, why are you being overly negative? Did you ever attempt suicide?"

"No, and I never will."

"I'm glad for you, Mr. Purity. So where are the lies she's told you that make you want to beat her and drag her five miles behind your truck?"

His finger snapped toward Nancy. "She said Harold Castleman helped her from a trap and healed her ankle. Bull shit! Harold Castleman died about ten years ago! That alone makes everything else a double-thick bologna sandwich! Dead men don't help anyone!"

Aponi faced the forest, sensed an enormous increase of rage, and jumped aside swiftly.

George yelled as he jerked two feet backward and struggled unsuccessfully to stay on his feet. He hit Nancy's car hard with his right ribcage, which rocked the whole vehicle. He screamed from the impact, twisted around, and crumpled to the ground like a rag doll.

He moaned and groaned as John helped him stand unsteady against the car. He doubled over as if hit in the stomach, his head stretched upward to its limit, and he made gagging noises until he fell forward and hit the ground again, face down.

"What the hell was that?" asked George as John helped right him the second time.



“Offhand, I would say that Harold is not dead yet. His body might be buried somewhere, but his spirit has loose ends that keep him tied to this world. His problem is people like you stand in his way of getting 100% free. And since you experienced his reaction, I will add this; it’s not a smart idea to piss off dead people for any reason. There’s zero defense against them.”

George gave her an indescribable stare, rubbed his ribs, and stretched his arms and back.

“I’ll remember that tidbit. I’m sorry, Harold. You’re in pretty good shape for a dead man. Come on back when you’re not so angry.”

Aponi moved back beside Nancy, who looked proud and pleased.

“That was awesome, and it felt so like Harold. So what do we do next? I’m more than interested now.”

“Well, the next thing I need to do is give some assignments, but first some information from you. You say you were at the cabin, and I trust you were. What about the people who were successful at committing suicide? Did he tell you about them?”

“He said he always knew the trail was being used. He told me he stopped them when he could and convinced them to leave. If he couldn’t, he left them alone. In his cabin, he had 27 plastic bags with their IDs and personal effects. He kept them, waiting and hoping someone would come and ask about them or show some concern. However, that never happened. It seemed to him that no one cared enough to even try a search for them.”

“We went through the cabin, madam, Aponi, and there was nothing like that there,” said George.

“He had them in his cellar. Did you check there?” said Nancy.

“There was no cellar in his house.”

Nancy countered insistently. “Aponi, he HAD a cellar for storing foods that needed some refrigeration. They’re there.”

“And no bodies are found at the base of the cliff.”

“Because he buried them in the cave north of the cliff, you obnoxious slug!”

“That’s another false statement. There is no cave north or south of the cliff. There’s nothing but dirt and rocks.”

“Man, you are frustrating for someone who pretends to be so intelligent and full of knowledge! How do you live with yourself? You make people want to puke, but you never do yourself. Damn, man!”

John felt dubious, and he added his comments. “He’s right on that cave part. There are no caves in this area. The closest one is about 35 miles northwest of here.”

Aponi sighed and took a calming breath.

“John, you seem calmer about this situation. Are there any ATVs or similar vehicles available at Ranger Office?”

“Yes, we have a few. That’s our primary transportation in the forest.”

“Will you arrange one for us? I want to see the cabin’s exterior, and I want to see the base of the cliff if you will accompany me. Please do that while I consider my next move?”

John went to the Ranger truck and called for an employee to bring an ATV to the site.

Aponi continued in private with Nancy. “Do you know if there’s any proof inside the cabin that only you could verify? I mean something that no one else would even consider?”

She snapped her fingers. “Yes. About a week ago, he arranged a bath on the front porch when he said I was healed enough. He washed my clothes while I bathed. Anyway, I didn’t put on my panties when I dressed that evening. I folded them and stuck them between the mattress and the box springs. I don’t have them on now. I left them there. They’re sky blue with thin white horizontal stripes running down the front side from the waist to the panel.”

“Did he have sex with you?”

Nancy’s face snapped up an indignant storm front. “I could slap you for that insinuation! I considered that happening, and that day I asked for it. He declined. He said he would never touch me so I could deliver a clear message to my mother. I always felt safe with him, dressed, half-naked, or all the way and bathing.”

Aponi nodded with a smile. “What message?”

“He never told me.”

Aponi faced the forest and waved a hand. “Panties, Nancy’s panties, remain where you are and don’t move even an inch. Got that?”

John came back to them with news of an ATV on the way.

“Thanks. When it arrives, will you drive and take Nancy and me with you to check out the rest of her story?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“George, I want you to do the most humbling work on this case because you keep speaking out of turn and being a general pest. Who is the best general contractor who would come here and dismantle the rest of Harold’s destroyed cabin?”

“Bishop’s Construct and Destruct Company is the easiest and the best. They do a wide variety of jobs. Anyway, they’re on contract with the State Government to clear major traffic accidents, tornado damage, and the demolition of unsafe buildings.”

“Call them and tell them that the FBI needs them here, and we’ll pay them. Tell them I want them here like last year, but I’ll settle for ASAP.”

“Yes, ma’am,” George said.

“Sarah, I’m going to go with John and Nancy to see the cabin, the cliff, and then the cave where the suicides are buried. Watch George, make sure he doesn’t overstep his boundaries, and contact Crystal to arrange a handpicked forensic team on standby to ID and remove any remains we find. Let them know it will be awful and in a harsh environment.”

“Rock on, partner. I’ll observe all they do, and I’ll separate any obviously personal type items and let Nancy have the chance to choose what happens with it.”

George raised his hand and frantically waved at Aponi.

She shook her head and sighed in frustration.

“Do you have a question or comment, George? What is it?”

“The cabin is crushed, but I’ll work with you on that. However, why would you call in a specialized team when you’ve not even seen a possible burial site? That makes no sense to me.”

“I’m doing it because she’s seen it, and I’ll believe her positives over your negatives. Why should she lie? Lying will not decrease her punishment. Is that all?”

Nancy enjoyed the win and watched him move away to call the contractor.

“You don’t like George, do you?”

“Just the opposite, dear. I like him, but I dislike his disbelief in what you say. I like his frustration because he wants to slap me, but he knows better than to even try. Some people fight harder at grasping the spirit world around them than others. He wants to believe you, but all his worldly knowledge says impossible and creates a lot of conflict inside him. So, he retaliates by lashing out at people and decrying them as liars. He’ll change before the day’s over.”

“I’m not sure I understand what you’re saying myself,” said Nancy.

“But you’re trying and demanding that people listen to your truth.”

Nancy shivered and closed her eyes. She opened her eyes as chilling waves danced through her body. “And so is George but in a different way.” She wavered, and Aponi held her solid to keep her from falling.

She gulped and had difficulty speaking the next words.

“We’ll find a demolished cabin, won’t we? We’re both telling the truth. He has seen it, and it’s wrecked. I know I left there and said goodbye to Harold this morning. Son-of-a-bitch! What happened in that forest, Aponi? That’s scary now!”

“Steady, girlfriend. I call it salvation. All the restless spirits in that forest call it the key to freedom. So relax. You’re okay, and you’ll be validated before nightfall. And George will be humbled; your mother will get the message, and Little Bo Peep will find her sheep. So, hold yourself together and keep pouring your trust into me like I am you.”

Nancy made a strange sound and nodded. “Got your back, girlfriend. Thanks for being here. If not, all would be lost to me. I’d die on the trunk of my car instead of the cliff.”

Sarah moved in to hug Aponi. “Are you okay? Looks like you’re stressing out a little.”

“You’re right. I feel it, but I’m still under control. I insist on a win here for Nancy and for me.”

\*

The ATV arrived, and John drove away with Aponi and Nancy for the guide. Seeing the crushed cabin hurt Nancy. Three large trees had been uprooted by the furious flash storm, and all three fell across the building. The work of the Rangers could be seen where the trees were cut to allow them to remove Harold’s body, and that was about all.

Nancy stood shocked at the scene, made the Sign of The Cross, and closed her eyes in prayer. Then she was on her knees crying and shaking her head no.

John coughed and got Aponi's attention. "What's wrong with her?"

"She's in shock, but that will change as proofs start to unfold on her side of the scoreboard. What happened to everything else in the house?"

"There was little for us to take. The only things we removed beside him were a photo of a woman in a carved frame and a carved beaver figure. He held the photo, and the beaver was close to the bed."

"I'd like to have them if I could. The photo was of my mother when she was younger. The beaver was in progress, and I asked for carving lessons. So he did, and I helped carve some of his tail."

"We'll give them to you before you leave us," said John.

They rode in silence until Nancy stopped them at the base of the cliff. Aponi shaded her eyes with her hand and looked up to the top. She lowered her gaze to the abundant large, jagged rocks at the bottom. Several had dark stains that Aponi figured were dried blood.

"My lands, that's evil and an unforgiving drop. The impact must hurt. Whew! Let's go. Whoever directs people here needs to experience a debilitating ass whipping."

Nancy directed them again and tapped John to slow him down as she pointed.

"The cave is between those two huge rock columns on our right. The columns are the entrance and help support the rest of the structure."

The absence of the roof was all that prevented the room from being a cave. Instead, adequate sunshine lit the interior. Along the left side lay 27 piles of bones, all with hands folded across their chests. All were covered with their clothing, but mostly it had deteriorated to dust like the flesh. At each one's head rested a wood cross with their name elegantly etched in the wood.

John took out his phone and paused as he looked at Nancy.

"Go ahead. I wanted to do that, but I couldn't. I have a list with their names from the bags in the cabin. It's fine to take photos. Harold said this room is sanctified; even Satan would not dare to enter. I'm not sure what he meant, but I felt at real peace here before, as I do now."

She looked to Aponi, who was quiet. "What do you feel, girlfriend?"

"I feel blessed and totally peaceful, like the bones there. They might have suffered a short time before death, but no longer. The greatest problem is, they're still here."

She viewed the bones silently and promised to work hard to release them from prison.

John finished his task and pondered why it happened.

"Wonder why Harold did this? That had to take a lot of time and patience to transport their crushed bodies here and then carve crosses. I mean, it's an awesome accomplishment, but why?"

"He told me it was because he didn't want their bodies to be desecrated by wild animals and other carrion. He said the human body should be treated with respect in life and death when the soul

departs. He told me the respect thing when he turned me down for sex. I felt small with his reason and never asked or suggested again.”

John nodded and looked at Aponi. “Are we done here?”

She gave a thumb up. “We’re done, so let’s go back to the cabin and see what action is going on.”

\*

Sabob

They stopped at the cabin where a dozen or more workers engaged in their task and carried items from the house under Sarah’s watchful eye. Then, after her clearance, they loaded them into one of two dump trucks or left them on the porch.

“Welcome back, partner. Nothing too significant so far. They uncovered several carved wood figures, and we’ve set those aside for Nancy to go through. There is no sign of plastic bags, Nancy. Where was the cellar inside the house, like from the door?”

“It was in the kitchen, beside the sink, on the left, next to the wall. The entrance is a door of sorts on the floor that lifts. It’s not too deep but very cool, and the bags are on the top two shelves on the right side of the stairs.”

“Well, that section is almost cleared. Let me tell the workers and see what happens. You want to come inside?”

“I thought about it, but I think I’ll stay here unless it’s necessary. I don’t want to freak out.”

Ten minutes later, workers began to stack plastic bags with wallets, purses, watches, rings, and such on the porch swing. When they finished, there were 27 bags to match the remains in the cave.

Then two workers carried out the bedding, and another followed, holding a pair of blue panties with white horizontal stripes across the front.

He grinned like he displayed a treasure. ‘I found these under the mattress. I don’t think Harold wore this style.”

“Those would be mine,” Nancy said. “I folded them and put them there after taking a bath, and Harold washed and dried my clothes. I thought I might get lucky after showing so much skin, but it didn’t happen.”

“What do you say about that, George? And did John tell you about the 27 bodies and cave that don’t exist?”

“I heard. I see. I’ll shut up about it for real now. This whole day is weird, but the frigging trail and people dropping off the cliff to die don’t make sense. What else do you want me to do?”

“Relax a bit until the forensic team arrives, and I’ll let you go with Nancy to take them there. It will benefit you to see the remains and understand the depth of Harold Castleman’s love for humankind.”

She turned her face to the sky and watched huge white clouds floating carefree but mixed with an occasional, black and ominous one.



She felt Sarah's hands touch her shoulders.

"Is a storm coming?" Sarah whispered into her ear.

"A bad one is coming from both directions. I don't know which one I prefer in this case."

"What? Nancy's mom is coming. For real? If that's a yes, I'll deal with her while you deal with the forest gnomes. We should work fast because the full moon is two nights away."

"Roger that. It sounds like a solid plan. What did Crystal say?"

"She said she'd have the team airborne within the hour, which means they're on the way now, and you will have everything you ask for, except her body."

## Chapter Four

The 27 piles of bones were silent and at peace in a morgue, but in Dover, Delaware, Marsha Martin was the total opposite. She paced her bedroom, down the hallway to Nancy's empty room, back to the bedroom, down the stairs to the living room, the dining room, and the family room. She mumbled to herself and sometimes slapped a wall, table, stand, or chair in passing. In the end, she stopped in the living room and jerked the coffee table cover that sent all the contents tumbling to the floor. She flipped the table over with a loud scream and stomped to the dining room to sit at the elegant, oversized table and hold her face as she cried for a spell.

She wiped her eyes with trembling hands, blew her nose on the edge of the tablecloth, and wiped her whole face with a napkin after flinging the silverware and dishes across the room.

"You're screwed up, Marsha. If anyone needed to walk a suicide trail, it's you, not Nancy."

She grabbed another napkin and held it after clearing her nose again.

"Seventeen years, and now she's a mistake? You ass hole! How dense of you to hold that inside and wait until now to let it out! She's missing! She wanted to die from lack of love! So now she's found, and you don't care? Well, royal supreme butt face, we'll see if you care about my next move. You can downplay my love for her as a political scam or foible, but you're wrong. It took a heartache to wake me up while you're still locked on snooze. Stupid dense prick!"

She took out her iPhone and turned it to speaker function. Next, she dialed a preset number, lay it on the tabletop, and waited for the connection.

Estelle, the mansion maid, entered through the exterior door to the kitchen and stopped short at the dining room door, shocked by the terrible look on Marsha's face and the strewn tableware.

Marsha stopped her with a wave and a finger on her lips.

"Hello, Mr. Schwartz. This is Marsha Martin. How are you today?"

"I'm fine, ma'am. What can I do for you?"

"What you can do for me is send someone by the mansion to pick up a check for your retainer. I want to file for divorce, and I want it done as soon as possible. I'm not sure if I'll be here, but I'll leave it with Estelle if I'm gone. Is \$4000 enough for a start?"

"Whew! That's fine, Marsha, but wow! Are you sure of that? I mean, you've been with him for 17 years and...."

"And that has nothing to do with it! If you don't want to work with me, give me a recommendation for another lawyer and hang up! I'm serious and not in the mood for playing games!"

"Yes, ma'am. I'll send someone, even though it's not necessary. Will you remain in contact via cell phone when I need your signature?"

"Yes, sir, I will do that for you and me."

"What is or is the reason for the divorce?"

“You can put down Irreconcilable Differences. That will be sufficient.”

“And the real reason, due to your position and my personal interest in your lives?”

“From my missionary position in the bed, while being penetrated, degraded, and violated, he’s told me twice recently that having Nancy was a huge mistake, and he’s sorry he didn’t insist on aborting her to make it better for us and the world. I don’t think so, and he hurt me too greatly. The hurt she’s caused me now is forgivable; his is not. I’m awake now, and I’m not backing up. If I do, we’re both dead, and I don’t want to end my life in this world as blazing headlines for the first-ever murder/suicide in the governor’s mansion! Do it and call me when you need me!”

“Yes, Marsha, I’ll take care of that for you. Talk with you later.”

Marsha disconnected and turned to a pale Estelle. “Sorry to disturb you. Where is my weekender bag? I checked the bedroom closet and the basement and can’t find it.”

She made a strange sound when she tried to speak, then cleared her throat and gripped her chest when she found her voice.

“Mercy! Sorry, ma’am. It’s in the spare bedroom closet. Are you really doing that?”

“Could I trouble you to put it in the bedroom for me? I need to make a few more calls, and I’ll write the check for you to hold and then pack and disappear.”

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll do that for you. Did he really say that?”

“He did for the second time this morning, after breakfast, so I’m done. I might not be the finest mother to Nancy or the optimal wife for him, and I might be a bitch, but this bitch can and will change. However, I don’t think he’ll like the new version of Marsha Uncontrolled and no longer under his influence. Screw him.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am. I know there’s been a lot of tension after Nancy disappeared, but I never considered that.”

“Nor did I, and please stop the ma’am crap. I’m a plain ordinary citizen now. Call me Marsha.”

Estelle offered a faint smile. “If you’ll allow me, Marsha, please let me pack the bag for you. That’s been my task so many times during your wonderful stay here. So allow me to do that as my last act of service to you. Please? I know what to pack for you.”

Marsha smiled and waved her hand. “Please do that, and thank you, Estelle. I think I’ll miss you, but I won’t miss him or this too large for a small family mansion. Now, I must get busy.”

“I suggest you start with a shower. After that, I’ll lay out your clothes and help you prepare before I cook anything for him.”

\*

Two hours later, Marsha had activated the Family Locator option on her phone. She paused to gas up at a station south of Wilmington, Delaware. She viewed the blinking green dot on her screen and blew it a kiss.

“Hang in there, Nancy. I’m coming to rescue you. I made a huge mistake choosing Stanley 17 years ago but was too sidetracked by pride. All that bull shit is gone now, so I hope you can learn to love me like I’m becoming.”

When she drove across the line into Pennsylvania, she flipped off Delaware with her right hand. “Stanley likes big things, so screw him big if you can, Delaware. Better yet, watch him screw himself.”

An hour later, she pulled from the road in an empty field and viewed the unlikely place with trepidation. She slipped into a spot behind the last car, walked toward Nancy’s car, and encountered Jerome Knight.

He challenged her with a hand resting on the butt of his service revolver.

“Who are you, madam? Can I help you? This is a restricted area.”

“I hope so. I’m Marsha Martin from Delaware. I’m here for my daughter, Nancy. She called me and said she was alive but under arrest by the FBI. Is that true? Is she close to me? I’m dying to see her and hold her for a moment.”

“Yes, madam. This is the place, but the FBI took her elsewhere. They’re clearing a cabin and searching for remains and personal effects of 27 successful dead suicides. The FBI is flying in a special forensic team from Buffalo, New York for body extraction from a cave.”

“Well, will you please let them know I’m here? Sorry to be a pain, but I’m a mother first and a patient mole second.”

“I’ll do that, madam. Choose any spot and have a seat while I contact them.”

She chose a place beside a pickup truck but got distracted by the sign beside the trail. She read it before sitting in disbelief to stare at the ground and listen to Jerome and Aponi talk over the radio.

“Yes, I know you’re busy, but you have a visitor, or Nancy does. Marsha, her mother, is here from Delaware and wants to see her or you soon. To my observation, she looks close to a breakdown. What do I do?”

“Have her sit a spell, and Nancy will be with her soon. We’re almost done at the cabin, and we’ll all be back. I’ll try to have Nancy back sooner, but I don’t want to leave anyone waiting here alone. There’s too much anger and pending violence here.”

“Tell me about it. I’ve watched my back since the contractors went inside the forest. This is too damned eerie. Did you order Ghost Busters also?”

“No, Sarah and I are all we need.”

“How’s Nancy holding up?”

“Rather well for what she’s been through. She’s cried a lot over many items that they removed. She fainted when they opened a wall by the bed and again when they got the contents outside. I’ll let her explain that one when she gets out of here. The best thing of all is George shut up and stopped bugging her. He hasn’t even looked at her for over an hour. So tell her mom to wait a bit more, and we’ll reunite them soon.”

“Is she really under arrest?”

“I needed to do that to keep her tense and focused. I don’t want to sacrifice her by becoming too relaxed. I don’t want to overlook something dangerous that you can’t see. You saw what happened to George before. They’d do worse than that to her simply trying to help themselves. It’s for her protection. My presence and her arrest will hold them at bay until this is over.”

“Thanks, and my hat’s off to you. Don’t be offended, but better you than me on this one.”

\*

Sabob

Marsha sat, paced, mumbled, pleaded, prayed to the sky, then repeated the cycle under Jerome’s watchful eye. Finally, she sat with a sigh of relief when Aponi contacted him by radio.

“Commandant Knight, the first dump truck is loaded and coming out. Nancy is situated in the passenger seat by the driver. She’s weak and fading in and out of sleep. Can you put Marsha on the radio, please? I need to talk with her.”

When he turned, she was beside him with her hand out.

“I know how to work it,” she said.

“Aponi, this is Marsha Martin. Please talk to me.”

“Marsha, it’s nice to have you here. Nancy’s on the way with the first truck. We should all be out in about a half-hour. Hold and comfort her without pressing for any information. Be gentle and know that what she does say is factual. However, don’t press too hard until I get there with her. She’s fainted twice over the one item we uncovered as solid, irrefutable proof that she was here. Her constitution is not strong enough to handle the stress. I’d prefer not transporting her to a hospital situation when you can handle it.”

“I understand that one. I can’t wait to hold her and feel her alive. I think I died a few times this past week or so.”

“Well, neither of you did, and for you, be strong and prepare yourself for some confrontation at some level. This forest area is a powder keg of spiritual anxiety waiting for a spark.”

“I don’t understand that one, but I’ll do my damndest to resist fainting or worse. So hurry on down and join us, Agent Aponi.”

\*

Marsha sat with Nancy’s head on her lap, and sometimes the girl’s eyes would open but did not seem to focus on anything. She stroked her forehead, ran fingers through her hair, and often prayed for her ordeal to end and return from the limbo world.

Suddenly a group of birds made an extremely hasty flight from the forest and screeched their fear and displeasure at being disturbed. Several deer, squirrels, and rabbits followed and ran around the three people, across the field and out of sight.

“Mr. Knight, is that normal?”

“No, there’s been little that’s normal since Nancy came here to die.” He adjusted his hat and looked at her inert form.

“Do you receive many problems or alerts with the Suicide Trail?”

“No, ma’am. We rarely get calls anymore. It got less after the psychiatrists put that sign up. I thought it was a waste of time, but it works well. However, a few bypass the signal sensors we set up on the trail initially.”

He stopped talking when the air around him chilled and watched a strange transformation happen in Marsha.

She moaned and closed her eyes, and to him, it appeared as if she would reach orgasm from the extreme pleasure imprinted on her face. She lowered Nancy’s head to the ground, stood, and opened her arms as the cold wind gusts increased and blew leaves, dust, and debris from the area in small whirling funnels. She became oblivious to everything as she faced the forest like an enraptured, loving statue.

“Harold,” she breathed out, and her arms closed like she held a living person.

Jerome had difficulty breathing, but he saw her face move forward with lips parted, and they appeared to have contacted a solid person.

Nancy stirred and raised up on her elbows to view her mother with a serene smile and collapsed again on the blanket.

“I love you, darling. I will,” Marsha sighed.

Jerome saw a flash of pale orange light inside her arms and watched her stumble and collapse when it disappeared.

“Mom!” Nancy struggled to reach her. “Mom! Are you okay? Speak to me!”

Jerome reached her first and felt her neck. “She’s fine, Nancy. She fainted, but I think a ghost was here, and she knew them.”

“You’re right about that. It was Harold Castleman. He loved her for his whole life. Seeing her picture in his cabin started me on a trip of understanding her and him.”

\*

The second dump truck appeared on the scene with two pickup trucks of workers and the ATV with John, Aponi, and George.

Aponi scrambled off before it stopped and ran to Nancy.

“Are you okay, girlfriend?”

“Yes, I recovered, and mom fainted in my place this time. Did you see the birds and animals haul ass?”

“Saw heard and felt them. Man, what a demonstration of raw fear. Did he visit you?”

“Only mom this time. I think he confessed his love and said goodbye. It looked like she kissed him and then hit the ground like a clump. All I felt was massive peace, joy, happiness, and closure to a lifetime of suffering and love.”

Sarah joined them. “Hey, Aponi. Is Nancy okay?”

“Seems to be the standard question, and she is. I think it’s time to bring her back so we can close out this case. Assemble those who are interested, Sarah.”

She chanted a prayer and lay a hand on Marsha’s forehead.

Her eyes flickered behind closed lids, and she moaned. “Yes, darling Harold. I’ll change and take care of her and tell her anything she wants to know.”

“Mom, snap out of it.”

“I’m so sorry, my darling man. I wish you had waited before you disappeared on me.”

She opened her eyes and seeing Aponi holding her instead of him startled her.

“Where did he go?”

“He was released to go on for his reward, Marsha. So now you both have peace in your lives.”

“It’s about time for that, mom.”

“Oh, Nancy, honey. It’s so good to see and hear you. Give me a hug, please.”

Aponi stood and took Nancy’s backpack from John. “Okay, listen up, everybody. May I have your attention, please? This ghostly visitation, which concerned two lifelong lovers, waited for a long time to happen. Harold Castleman and Marsha Westfall have loved each other since the third grade. Eventually, they became intimate lovers for a short period before Stanley Martin entered the picture and turned her head for a spell.”

She winked at Marsha. “Do you want to take over now?”

“I knew Harold disbelieved that I was faithful to him, but I was already pregnant with Nancy before I ever dated Stanley, and no amount of talking would convince him otherwise. I intended to suck it up and have a paternity test to prove my loyalty when he disappeared. While I dated, I searched for him as best I could and helped Stanley with his political career. About two years later, I quit and married Stanley. It wasn’t long before problems arose with him. He was uncertain of her being his child, which was stupid because I told him she was Harold’s and would have to accept or leave us. He said he could and would live with it, and I was so busy helping him that I didn’t realize he had lied to me. It annoyed him not to be her biological father. We argued and fought, and he surrendered in words only. It took her disappearing and finding her contacts with a suicide partner to wake me up.

“So, Nancy, honey. I filed for divorce, and I’m not going to back down. We’ll find our niche in life and help and love each other for the rest of our lives, but it won’t be burdened with Stanley’s negatives. Is that a fair deal or what?”

“That’s an awesome deal. Was Harold’s ghost or spirit here with you?”

“He came to tell me to care for you and kiss me goodbye. He’s gone now.”

Aponi clapped and said, “Amen, amen, so are many other ghosts and spirits from the 27 successful suicides.”

“Now, I can tell you we’ll never know everything that happened between Harold and Nancy, but we’ve had too many proofs to say her story is false; it happened. We have the rusty trap, and it has her blood on it. We have the panties that she left under the mattress on the bed. We have 27 suicides identified from their personal belongings and pending kin notification. We have a team on the way to extract the bones and return them to the proper families. All of that happened because Nancy attempted suicide.

She shrugged off her backpack and held it with both hands.

“The final proof will remain a mystery, but you need to seek professional counseling if anyone sees this and disbelieves. Gather where you can see because this put Nancy on the ground twice in a dead faint. Are you going to be fine with it now, sweetie?”

“Yeah, I got my mom holding me, and the pain I suffered was worth it. Please continue.”

“After we began searching for the 27 bags of IDs, we found many carvings. Therefore, I decided to take the cabin down completely. And behind some of the walls were many carved animals and figurines. However, beside the bed, there was this.”

She pulled out a life-size carving of Nancy’s face on a piece of oak and mounted on a background of shiny maple wood. It had her name, carved with the same meticulous strokes as the figurines and the boot for her ankle. The date was a shocker and a stress point for her because it was 14 years earlier than the current date.

“The man moved twice in his life. The first was from Dover, Delaware, to Atlanta, Georgia. The second move was from Atlanta to the cabin, where he isolated himself from almost all human contact and waited until he died. And after death, he lingered to intervene and save his daughter’s life.”

She held up a diary to show them. “He recorded it here, in his handwriting. It tells how he found her, healed her, and set her free. He knew Marsha and Nancy had problems. He waited to die. He remained again until he had the chance to reunite them, and now, he’s finally free to go to his rewards, along with 27 other lost souls.”

She turned the last time and spoke to Marsha.

“In the diary, he also talks about a will he left after settling here. The land is yours now. Please use it well.”

“This must be State Park property,” said Marsha.

George was hasty to counter that. “Wrong, madam, the area of the cabin is not part of the State Forest Parcel. The land is private property and abuts the State’s property line. John and I can help you prove that. We knew and talked with him before, but we thought the wife and daughter he talked about were his make-believe family since we never saw a visit or letter or nothing.”

Nancy felt a surge of energy and scrambled up.



“He isolated himself from humanity, but he cared for the animals. He did that, didn’t he, George?”

“Yes, they had a good quality bond. They respected each other, but if an animal got sick or wounded, it would go to Harold for help. That was a darned strange thing. They would lay beside his door as if it were the Emergency Room. But the hawk was the strangest of all. It often acted like it was his pet.”

Nancy clapped and danced. “Yes. Nathan! How many years do hawks live? How long was I there, or when? Oh, please let this work. I loved doing this after he taught me.”

She whistled with fingers hooked in her mouth, held up her right arm, and called for Nathan. She grew anxious, but soon she heard his faint screeching, and he became visible. He was more noticeable, and his feathers pale and some gray or white, but he dropped as he had before with a massive flurry of wings and wrapped his talons gently around her arm. However, his weight pulled her to her knees, and she thought she would lose her arm before the motion stopped, and she felt three sets of hands pull her back to her feet.

“Hey, Nathan, my buddy. Man, I love you. How’s it going today? My, you’re looking great. Do you still have women hawks chasing you, you handsome devil?”

He screeched and moved forward and rubbed his head against her cheek. He cried again, opened his bill, and closed it gently on the tip of her nose. Then he shifted his legs and settled to look at the audience as if he were born on her arm.

The action shocked George. “Dang and double dang! I watched Harold do that often. However, I never knew that a hawk could cry like that.”

Marsha dug a tissue from her purse. “He’s crying like I am. Nancy, honey, I don’t know about you, but I think we’ve both been invited to use this place and time to establish our own niche. What about you?”

“I know I could live and grow here, mom. The peacefulness is surreal and heavenly.”

“Well, my heart has grown a few larger sizes, darling. Brad is fine to be in your life now. That is if you can sweet talk him and his family into wiping out the restraining order.”

# # #

## About the Author

**J Bennington:** Fresh out of High School, I spent 21 years in the Air Force, serving in Viet Nam, Thailand, the United States, and Germany. After retiring from the Air Force, I drove a limousine under contract for Conrail, moving train crews from stations to trains and anywhere needed. I wrote 5 books, longhand while waiting in rail stations, State Prison fields at 2 a.m., and any forlorn rail crossings right out of Stephen King novels with all the demons and terror. Following that exciting but tiring job, I tackled a few independent businesses that failed. I worked for two years in a restaurant as the salad bar manager. Next, worked for 1 year as an Electric Meter Reader for the City of Dover, DE. Then a friend arranged a part-time clerical position in the State Probation Office. From there, I applied for full-time jobs. I worked 20 years for the Department of Transportation, selling Hauling Permits to truckers or trucking companies, billing companies for Outdoor Advertising, and later I paid the bills to State Contractors. I retired in February 2014, and now I'm doing what I love, writing and working on publishing the books collecting electronic dust over the years.

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