

Resurrecting *His Love*

A DreamWynd Whispers Romance
Book Two

Neenah Davis-Wilson



www.DreamWyndPublishing.com

Publication Note

Originally published as *The Resurrection of Joleigh-Anna Kelmann*, re-released later as *Joleigh-Anna, or Resurrecting His Heart*.

This edition has been released with a new title, cover and moderate revisions to better reflect the story experience.

Copyright © 2025 by Neenah Davis-Wilson

All rights reserved.

No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the publisher or author, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law. Characters herein are fictitious. Any resemblance to anyone living or dead is unintentional.

Trademarks are the property of their respective owners.

Cover art by 100Covers.

Resurrecting His Love, Neenah Davis-Wilson
Paperback ISBN 9780971094116

DREAMWYND PUBLISHING
P.O. BOX 192
FAIR HAVEN VT 05743

Dedications & Acknowledgements

THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED in memory of my parents, Donald Leroy and Virginia Laura Wilson who died in March of 1998 just hours apart. She from a long illness and he from a broken heart. It is also dedicated to all of my other dear relatives and friends who are asleep in death now.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS GO OUT to Gabriel Zucker, one of my former NRI fiction instructors for suggesting the original short story would be better told as a novel. He was right. Too bad NRI is no longer in operation.

TO JOHN FOR TAKING the time to answer all my questions on rally racing even though I didn't use a good part of all he told me. He forgot to mention that rally racing doesn't actually pay much money for any but the top drivers who have sponsors. I decided to keep it in here anyway. Some race for the thrill of it. That was Matty.

Author's Note

This story is set in the same area in Rhode Island as *His Practically Perfect Plan B*. Joleigh and her family live on the fictional island called Quonotamaquot Isle, which is where Thomi, her sisters, and Stephan's family also reside. This story was at first, a stand-alone tale, but I realized that Storm Van Kirk's first love had been Joleigh's cousin, Lawron. So, I've rewritten it to reflect that fact. And, with Stormi's story, you'll get to meet them all before Matty's accident. Actually, you briefly meet Matt in Thomi's story.

In this book, as it is and will always be in others, there are some small children who do not talk like tiny adults, college professors or English teachers. They speak their versions of baby talk and have various speech patterns or problems. I find it adds to the humor of the story as well as the depth of character of the kids. Sometimes they get it right, but mostly not so much. I do not apologize for my use of the "toddler dialect." Just letting you know that it's here.

I had a lot of fun with this story despite its solemn topic. I hope you enjoy its humor and the message herein. If you love life—love those who live there in it with you. All too soon either they—or you—are gone.

At the time of passing, how hard are the regrets to live with. Because, yep, it's too late after we die . . .

Neenah Davis-Wilson

Some Reviews

(These reviews were given before the title changes.)

Maura Frankman ~ The Romance Studio Review

This story is told in breezy conversational style. I loved Joleigh and her determination to go on after fate and her fiancé blow her world apart. . . . little brother Jarrett is wonderful comic relief in this warm story about family, tragedy, and how we recover.

Melody Laramie ~ Reader Review

The Resurrection of Joleigh-Anna Kelmann is an amusing take on a serious subject. Actually, on more than one subject. How families get along . . . or not . . . how they perceive each other and each other's faults. And how they react to the death of loved ones. Sometimes not the way one would think . . .

Written in first person, Ms Davis-Wilson has an easy, breezy way of telling this story . . . I recommend this book to anyone and everyone who loves a good amusing tale of family, friends, forgiveness, and fun.

Goodbye, Matt

ONE

Matt's life ended unexpectedly—in a moment of reckless insanity.

Wednesday evening, we were a close-knit, fun-loving bunch—
Wednesday night . . .

Matt was gone.

It'd been one of the rare occasions we'd gone our separate ways. Generally, we were inseparable—my cousins, Matt and Lannette Kelmann, my twin brother, Jace-Anthony, my fiancé—Matt's closest friend—Dr. Irvyn Woodworth and I. Only, Matt had recently found a girl he cared about almost as much as cars and racing, and that night they'd parted from us in the parking lot of Overlook Manor, our favorite restaurant for special occasions. He had something to take care of, he said. Wouldn't take long, and they would meet us later at the house.

"Ours or yours?" Jace had asked.

"Whatever . . . if you're not at ours, we'll catch you at yours, okay?"

So, reluctantly, we'd split from him and Krysta.

For me, every night out with Irvy was a special occasion. Yeah, I was crazy in love with him and had been since I was a tiny tot. We were to be getting married this coming Sunday. I wanted to celebrate that every hour of every day! Now, our happy day would have to be postponed. For how long it would be hadn't been decided as yet. It was just too overwhelming to deal with right now. I was heartsick over it, but I was that over Matty's death as well.

If only we had insisted we stay together, Matt would be alive now. Irvy could have curbed Matty's rash impulse to answer a worthless challenge. Kept him from losing his common sense while he'd been egged on.

The situation had been a lose-lose one, Krysta told us later that night.

"They challenged him to race down-down Hennings Drive to the end. S-said his Subaru was j-junk, and they didn't see how he'd won *anything* with it. They s-said they wanted to s-see him in action . . . Bet him he couldn't beat their car . . . I-I don't know what it was . . . a *car*. He-he said he didn't have to p-prove anything to them. So, they said-they said he acted all big and brave when he was-was with all-all of *you* . . . but alone . . . alone . . . he was—he was—nothing but a c-chicken-hearted ass—" She burst into sobs then and wouldn't talk anymore.

Thing was, Krysta hadn't a clue how to handle Matt when he'd been goaded into doing something dumb. She hadn't been dating him long enough to have developed that skill. Although to be honest, few had it. So, yeah, had we all been together, Matt would've been with us now, and I'd be looking forward to my wedding. Irvy would've known how to make him see past a foolish challenge without hurting his pride. He'd been doing it for years.

Like the time Sal Cristiano and his idiot friends challenged Matt to tie a ribbon on the tail of Mr. Henning's bull, Fritz. Dashing through the narrow end of the field was one thing. Actually playing in the field where the beast grazed was another. The only humans he tolerated were the Hennings, and he did that grudgingly.

That never stopped us from crossing the field to get to where we wanted to go, but we *always* crossed it at that narrow part, so we could be fairly certain of rolling under the fence before we got gored.

Then one day we saw Fritz tear apart dogs with his vicious horns and his well-aimed kicks. These two probably deserved their fate. They'd been up to no good in that field, worrying the cattle and attacking a couple of Mr. Henning's best cows. Fritz wasn't satisfied until neither dog moved.

So, when Matt showed every determination to display the color of his courage, even the one who emulated his every move was alarmed. That'd be me. And for every reason I had for why he shouldn't do it, Matt had two for why he would do it. Not saying they were great reasons. But to the kids we were at the time, they *sounded* like good ones.

Except to Irvy. After we other three had made our attempts to talk sense into Matt, he took over.

"Matt, this oughta be a two-way street here! Challenge one of them back! Make 'em prove their own courage!" Irvy urged him. "Because, I think that when Fritz impales you on those horns leaving you bloody in the field, so will they! They'll deny they ever dared you to do it! Why give them the satisfaction of laughing at you like that?"

Matt could take a joke on himself and be the first to laugh. But to be laughed *at* in a *scornful* way, that was different. Then he became something close to Fritz's brother, and you better be booking it to the next county if you were the one mocking him. He'd looked Irvy in the eye, questioned softly, "Laughing *at* me?"

"Sure! That's the only reason they dared you! For a laugh! They probably said, 'Hey, we got nothing else to do today! Let's get the brave idiot, Matt Kelmann to tease Henning's bull and watch him bleed!' So where do they get off challenging you when they're as yellow as bananas themselves?"

"Yeah! Yeah, they talk big, don't they? Let's see if their bravery *is* as big as their mouths or as puny as their brains!"

At the appointed time, we all met at the upper end of the Henning's field. Matt challenged Sal. "I'll tie the ribbon on Fritz's tail, but you have to go with me and catch the tail so's I can do it!"

Sal protested, and his buddies started in on Matt. But Matt cut them off, saying, "You said I had to *tie the ribbon on the tail*, you didn't say anything about me having to *catch it* myself. Now—I'm willing! Got the ribbon right here in my hand. Show me *your* guts!"

Well, they all decided to keep their guts. We taunted and jeered them so bad they skulked away and left us alone for a long while after. Matt came off looking like Hercules without having to do anything. But if Irvy hadn't said anything to him, he'd've jumped right into that field and either have wound that ribbon on Fritz's tail or been killed trying.

Since he couldn't stand to have anyone think his courage was less than True Blue American, his funeral might have taken place long before now. So I know if we'd been with him Wednesday night . . . only *four* days ago . . . I know Irvy would've shown him that this new situation was just like the one with the bull.

Very much like it. Krysta said Matt had called one of the guys by name. Sal. But, so far, his tormentors were still free.

Truth is, Matt had always been a little hyper-crazy. If he didn't have something constructive to do, he'd find something else to do. Not necessarily always *destructive*, but often not within house rules either. Always interesting though! Maybe that's what I'd admired about him as a tot. Man, he could egg me on to anything, and I'd do it to win his approval, his admiring, "Whoa, you got guts, Little Jo! More than anyone else—even Irvy!"

By the time I'd turned nine, he'd settled into his role in a more companionable way, and we would plan things together instead of him simply daring me to follow.

Irvy and Jace always attempted to put a lid on some of our wilder notions. But other times they'd buckled under our taunts of *Chic-ken!* and *Scaredy cat!* to prove they had the same color guts we had. Lannette copied us with never a whimper. She'd eat worms first before she let anyone challenge *her* courage! Except for when it had anything to with Fritz.

We got our share of bumps and bruises, plus the occasional broken arm or leg, punctuated by disciplines of every sort. None of which pierced our armor. We'd be back at it soon's the dust settled, the redness was out of our seat, limbs were healed, and/or the grounding period lifted.

Amazingly, our parents had not only kept full heads of naturally hued hair plus their youthful looks, but also their sense of humor. Probably was what got them through it all. Luckily for us, they never demanded we pack our bags and leave! Really, no one could've asked for more understanding, loving parents!

The rest of our relatives bet against us ever reaching our eighteenth birthdays. Except maybe in a wheelchair. Or more likely as a complete vegetable on life support.

They all lost their bets for Jace, Lannette and I made it to our twenty-fourth in great shape, while Matt and Irvy had achieved their twenty-eighth a few months ago. So, Matt would be missing the big 3-0, (the magic year we were all supposed to grow real brains and settle down for good), by a year and some months. Now the bet was we'd *all* perish before we knew better.

Well, so we didn't all have the same sort of brains! Who does? Matt and Irvy'd gone to school together from kindergarten on—his father favoring sending him to public schools rather than private as his mother had wanted.

While Irvy excelled in everything he did, Matt hadn't taken school too seriously. Since he couldn't sit still for long, he'd considered studying a waste of time and was the class cut-up for all his school years. Pretty much graduated by the skin of his teeth.

Right along he'd hung around Dad and Uncle Mitch's auto repair shop, learning all he could about cars. Soon as he graduated, he began working as a member of a pit crew, going often to the races and betting on them too.

Then he discovered rally racing. Off to rally school he went, and did exceptionally well there. Entered the annual dash to the top of Mt. Washington in New Hampshire and was hooked after that.

Then became a co-driver for a few races. However, Matt being Matt, co-driving was far too tame to him. He wanted to be behind the wheel tooling along the mountainous passes, dirt roads, tracks and trails of the grueling courses. But rally racing doesn't pay much unless you're a top driver and have a sponsor willing to back you. Matt was determined to work his way to the top. At the moment, his best sponsors were his dad and Irvy.

He had a couple co-drivers who gave up after a while. I didn't need too much encouragement from him for me to go take a course at one of the rally schools. A few times a year, we were a team on those rally courses that only a mad man would consider navigating. We acquired an Audi and a Subaru for our meets and were slowly climbing up our levels. If I have to say it myself, we were a great team!

To do him credit, *anything* to do with cars and racing, Matt was great at. Once I became his co-driver, he and Dad initiated me under the hood and body of the cars too. When we ran into problems, was a great feeling to know I'd been able to help get it going again.

Lately, we'd begun to take my little brother Jarrett-Andrew with us. He loved chatting with the drivers and their co-drivers, enjoyed mingling with the racing crowd, watching the action from the safety of Dad's arms or Irvy's shoulder. Just a couple weeks ago, Jarrett announced his intention of becoming Matt's co-driver and assistant mechanic when he grew up.

"You bet! When you're big enough, you'll be driving these babies with me, buddy!" And Matt'd shaken hands with Jarrett just as if he'd been an adult. He hadn't just been pacifying a toddler either. Matt passed his enthusiasm onto anyone who'd stand still long enough to listen, whatever their age.

Road, rally, drag . . . I love it all. Matt even backed me to win the Powderpuff demolition derby at the fairgrounds a few times. Wearing my own colors, I recently astonished everyone by winning a couple drag racing competitions in his dragster. Mom took pictures of my big event and had them enlarged and framed for the living room to spite The Club—the exclusive clutch of aunts and older cousins who predicted the worst doom for us. I swear they met weekly to discuss the issue. Or, no, probably daily!

Their meddling and their strictures never dulled the twinkle in Matt's eyes and his good-humored grin had rarely faded. Moreover, anyone could count on him to listen to a sackful of troubles as well as celebrate good times. No matter how busy he was, he'd take time to let us spill our guts or cry our hearts out.

He might tell us what he thought about the situation but more often he'd get us to figure out the solution ourselves. He'd drape an arm about our shoulders, give us a quick hug, and he'd say, "Look, you gotta do what you gotta do! But, what is it you *want* to do? Maybe *that's* what you gotta do! Y' see? You figure that out and you'll be as happy as me!"

Strangely, we did see. Guess it made sense to Uncle Mitch too. He didn't ever once try to talk Matt out of his racing dreams. Talked to him about it with all the animation Matt himself displayed. Always came with us to meets and never held back from backing Matt when he needed it. Matt paid back the debt. Matt always paid back his debts.

Except for the last one.

Just ten days ago, Irvy'd gone in with him on a Porsche for some road races we'd hoped to enter. Wouldn't ever be tried out on any race now. I wanted to, but Mom cried when I said it, so I let it go. Was the first time she ever wished I'd just be a *girl*. So now, Irvy and Uncle Mitch would probably find a buyer for the car. Maybe for all the cars.

Not that Irvy seemed to care about the money. Could be he'd opt to just keep the Porsche himself. I sort of hoped he would. Of course, I'd gone with them the day they bought that car. The one I'd liked the best of the three we'd test driven that afternoon was the one Matt and I drove home in.

Somehow, I had to find a way around Mom's objections. She'd never had any before Matt's accident. As treacherous as the courses were, she'd never held me back.

Okay, sure, I'm impulsive, too. But just because I'm the tomboy type and can't always sit still for longer'n two minutes doesn't mean I'm totally brainless. Never had to kill myself to get awesome grades. Just read the material over, did a few exercises in whatever lesson it was to prove to my teachers and my parents I really knew what it was all about—that's it. Graduated at the top of my class.

Didn't follow Irvy into med school or go into law or anything like what was expected of me—by The Club's Standards. Instead, I'd chosen to squander my talents working at a recreation center with disadvantaged kids and spending time with the lonely elderly at Seaton Hall.

Of course, my most shocking mistake had been to join Matt in his dream of rally racing—whizzing down pea gravel roads, flying up and down hills and around hairpin turns, maybe ending up in a swamp because I hadn't read the route book quite accurately.

What really bugged me was that while it was reckoned that I was wasting my time at the Center—probably influencing these tender young lives to a spirit of rebelliousness—these same discriminating members of The Club judged Jace-Anthony to be a wholesome role model for the kids there! Their only lament about him was his lack of a teaching degree.

"He ought to become a *real* teacher! Since he likes to teach swimming and athletics to disadvantaged kids, he ought to become a coach or something of the sort! Someone should suggest it to him. He's a sensible lad, he'd listen!"

Well, the sensible lad still could be persuaded by a cry of, "*Chic-ken!*"

Just as Matt had.

So now here we were assembled at Franklin Funeral Hall with all the members of The Club and other family members and friends to weep his tragic passing. Except for my cousin Craig Stanley and his family, and my Uncle David Kelmann and his family. But they had a good reason not to be here. Well, David and Marsha did—one of their four girls has a serious heart condition. No clue what was up with Craig and Audra.

Jaimee's condition is such that extreme emotion can make her ill. Which is exactly what happened last Sunday. She collapsed and was now in the hospital, following surgery, making a slow recovery. We all were praying that she would suffer no relapses and start to make quicker progress. Because it would suck if we ended up burying both Matt *and* Jaimee.

Our family seemed to be experiencing more than our share of sad times. Just a month ago one of my cousins on my mother's side, Lawron Merriwether, had lost control of his truck during a heavy rainstorm and had ended up at the bottom of a steep drop off. His father, Mom's oldest brother, Kevin, exactly a month before that, had his tractor roll over on him.

So, three deaths in as many months was horrible enough. Didn't need it to become four.

Unlike The Club, though, David and Marsha had envied Matt's energy. Appreciated his genuine concern for little Jaimee. He used to take time to go with me to entertain her and her sisters. So, *them*, we could forgive for not being here with us. For my brothers and me and Lannette, they're our second favorite aunt and uncle.

In general, though, everyone's hectic life allowed for attendance at funerals. Occasionally, a wedding—rarely, a birth. But *always, always* a funeral. Nothing makes people regret hurtful words and actions—things left undone or unsaid—than does a funeral. Or recall all the words of wisdom they'd imparted to the deceased—which, of course, had gone unheeded for the most part and look what happened because of it!

What a field day they were having just now! Since Matty had been a sort of racing hero to quite a few in our little town, Uncle Mitch and Aunt Lynnore had spoken for two viewing times. So while, Lannette and I wished they'd all leave, there was yet another hour of this evening's session before we could kiss them all good bye. Some of them, we wanted to just plain kiss off!

Like Uncle Todd Merriwether—who didn't seem to me to be all that loaded with common sense himself. He'd dropped out of school at thirteen and at fifty-two was still trying to discover what he wanted to be when he grew up. But there he was, crying about Matt's shortcomings.

"Why hadn't that kid done *something better* with his life? Such a waste! Which is what he did with his time in school! We all knew this was bound to happen sometime! He was just too wild!"

"At his age—letting some idiots challenge him to a drag race down that godforsaken road! And taking his girlfriend along besides!" Uncle Buck, Dad's oldest brother, threw up a hand in bewilderment. "Out there on the other side of the island! No ambulance could've gotten to him in time even if Krysta had been able to call for one sooner!"

"Heard he staked that restored '67 Nova of his in the deal and not the Subaru he was driving at the time!" Cousin Teddy Merriwether informed. Teddy was Uncle Jedd and

Aunt Nedra's eldest. We'd long ago secretly bestowed the nickname 'Turdy' on him and used it still. He bored on, "Didn't he realize he couldn't drive the thing dead? Noble of him to show 'em all the true color of bravery!" He gave a derisive snicker. "Gushing Red!"

Lannette groaned and looked ready to puke. She sent him a black look which he caught since he was looking right over at us. I wouldn't give him the satisfaction of acknowledging I'd heard it. Turdy's a jerk.

How glad I was that Krysta wasn't there to hear all this. Maybe I'd need a counselor too if I'd had to witness anything so horrifying. Be left alone with a dying person . . . having to decide between staying with him and finding help. For her cell phone had quit on her well before that.

No one seemed to give a moment's consideration as to how Matty must have been feeling about then. Had he known he was dying? Had he thought of us? Or had he been in too much pain to think at all? Or just plain out of it—which seemed likely. While Krysta had been unable to tell us more precise details, she'd been coaxed into relating to the police one or two more, which had been headlines for the papers next day.

Like, the race hadn't been a fair one. It'd been a set up.

Guess talking about it again and again just wasn't in her—right now at any rate. I'm not sure if I hoped that one day she'd be able to or not. I'd like to think he hadn't suffered too horribly.

Didn't have any trouble wishing the guys who'd set him up could be found and thrown in jail for life!

"How could *anybody* let someone bleed to death practically all by himself in the dead of night?" Aunt Becky, Uncle Todd's wife, demanded wrathfully. "That poor girl! Scared to death, I'll bet!"

Actually, it'd been about eleven o'clock. But under the circumstances, it might as well have been the dead of night.

Answered Aunt Nedra, the Sweet and Gentle. "Well, you know *that* bunch! Matt's had trouble with them before. They were always trying to get him to do dangerous things of one sort or another. The police say they apparently began mocking his racing accomplishments and when they challenged him, he lost his head and accepted."

"Well, that was Matt!" observed my cousin Wendy. "Maybe if it'd happened in winter he wouldn't've bled to death."

"Maybe so, but he'd've been alive now if he could've curbed his impulsiveness!" put in Great Grandpa Kelmann, who carried a cane for appearances only—being in better shape than most of his great grandsons. "But you can't tell kids anything! They know it all! Ha! I did at his age! Yessir! I gave my old pop and my mother a scare every once a week! Still, I never thought he'd do anything like this! Not here on the Island, at any rate!"

"Well, then, no wonder Matty was a hellion, Poppa Louis! In any case, no one should hold anything against Mitch and Lynnore!" Aunt Nedra pointed out. "Matty *was* of age, after all!"

"One of us should've stepped in and took a hand with that kid! Slapped up Mitch and Lynnore and made them see the storm coming!" Aunt Dorene uttered with deep-seated conviction. "Probably isn't going to end with him!"

"Oh, lord, like she cares so deeply!" Lannette uttered disparagingly—but not so's anyone but I could hear her, of course.

Aunt Dorene, Mom's oldest sister and Crown Princess of The Club had the annoying habit of proclaiming, "Don't any of you call on *me* to baby-sit! I'm not single to be anybody's Mary Poppins!"

As if anyone would really want to leave their defenseless children in *her* care. That her world revolved solely around herself is the only thing all of us cousins agreed on. Even Turdy, even though, he's just like her.

Still, I was fair. "Well, she did take us to The Newport Creamery!"

Lannette gave me a sour look. "Yeah, right. *Once* when we were about ten! What about all those times she planned family outings but left *our* families out! Even now she does it!"

"That's why they're called family *outings*," I informed her.

She cracked an involuntary laugh despite her grief. "Don't, Joleigh! Don't get me started. I won't be able to stop!"

"Oh, heinous! Think what they'd say then! How dare you laugh like an idiot at your brother's wake?" I altered my voice. "But—it's *just like* Mitch and Lynnore to let her stick with Joleigh-Anna at a time like—"

"*Jo-leigh!*" Lannette cut off my imitation of Aunt Willa and bit her lips hard to keep from losing it altogether.

Was nerves, you know. She'd break into giggles if a tiger was about to rip her to shreds. Which pretty much described the members of The Club. This affliction had gotten her into trouble at school, oh, tons of times. She'd been blamed for things even when she'd been nowhere near the scene of the crime. Just because she laughed.

The worst was when she got blamed for a fire in the girls' restroom trash basket. Somebody had tossed a butt in there, and it burst into flames just after Lannette had left. So since it was she who'd been last seen coming out of there. Caused the whole school to have to be evacuated and everything.

Once we'd been allowed back to class, she'd been summoned to Mr. Logan's office. So, mortified she'd been about being accused, she just doubled over in guffaws, the tears streaming down her face. No one would believe her when she said she didn't smoke.

First time for everything, had been Mr. Logan's response to that. He'd called me down to the office, I'm really not sure why. Didn't believe me either. Even when I demanded they sniff her over. Nothing cigarette smoky about her! Then, one of the firemen walked in. I thought Lannette was going to die at that point.

Good thing Aunt Lynnore and Uncle Mitch came when they did. She'd needed the bathroom again by that time, and couldn't get anyone to let her go. She had fits of the giggles for three days after Mr. Logan suspended her. It all got sorted out—eventually.

I couldn't imagine that it'd be any prettier if she broke up like that tonight! But I couldn't help myself. The snide remarks just burst out without asking my permission.

"If that boy'd been *my* kid," boomed Aunt Willa, Dad's oldest sister and Empress of The Club, "*I'd've* curbed his wild ways! He'd be alive now!"

"Yes, chaining him to the cellar walls until he was sixty-five *would* keep him safe!"

"I'm gonna kill you!"

"No, no! If you kill me, you'll only start them on the theory that you did it so Irvy could be yours at last! *Shame* on you but—*perfectly* understandable!"

She sucked in a gasp not quite choking back the giggle, clasped her hand to her mouth, and turned to inspect the huge bouquet of peach roses right beside her. Noticing some of my uncles and one pair of our grandparents watching us, I swung around too, threw my arm around her.

Behind us, Aunt Wanda, the Grand Duchess of The Club and Aunt Willa's twin, declared self-righteously, "I hope JuliAnna and Jorden learn something from this experience!"

"Oh, I'm sure they have! I know *I* have—haven't you?"

"Because, you know," Aunt Wanda continued, "if they're not careful, that little Jarrett is going to be another Matthew Martin Kelmman!"

"What an *honor* that would be!" I chirped at the same instant my aunt charged, "What a *shame* that would be!"

"Joleigh! Quit!"

Recognizing she was in serious distress, I relented. "I'm sorry! Look, you want to move someplace else?"

"Where?" Lannette demanded with an expansive gesture that swept the whole room. "We're sardines in here already!" Then her eyes filled up again, and she ended, "I'm not moving! *We* cared about Matt; *they* didn't!"

We'd been standing close by Matt's casket since we'd first arrived for the second viewing. A little to the side though, so we could be as out of the way as possible when others came up to pay their respects. Every spare spot in the room was occupied. We could go outside, but that's where the smokers of the family were congregated. Didn't want to be out there. The air was bad enough right where we were.

Aunt Willa proceeded to sully it some more. "It's a wonder their hair isn't pure white! Mother's was at thirty-five because of Buck and Jorden and Mitchell! But then, nothing *these* kids have ever done has ever fazed *their* parents! Such monsters they were back then! Why, they were *always* hiding on Tina, picking on her, and making her cry!"

"She wasn't the only one, Aunt Willa!" piped up Wendy, one of Uncle Todd's daughters. "They spared none of us!"

"Well, that was the fun of it!" Lannette uttered darkly. "Besides—Tina *was* bad. Still is! Wendy . . ." She wiggled her hand. "Depends!"

"Personally," I opined, not able to let it alone, "I think our dads did Gram a favor! She looks much prettier with snow-white hair, don't you think? I think—"

A pair of hands settled, one upon Lannette's shoulder and one upon mine, at once startling us, yet making us stand very still. "You're going to give everyone the wrong impression, girls!" Gramma Kate Kelmman whispered in our ears.

Oh . . . *busted!* She's always been good about sneaking up on people—hearing what you didn't want her to! "Ah, Gram, they've already done that!"

"Then change it. You've the power to do that!"

"Oh, sure, how? Assuming we *did* do that, what good would it do? They don't have the power to see you're not bald!"

Lannette snickered, and Gramma Kate gave her a playful shove. Then she patted my shoulder, saying, "Well, someday I'll point that out to them! Although they are aware there were moments when I *had* wanted to rip my hair out! Some of this *is* true, you know! Behave, both of you! Remember where you are!"

She moved away, and I said to Lannette, "Like we can forget?"

"Jorden and Mitchell were just like them though—always teasing us to tears!" Aunt Willa bored on. She slapped a hand to her cheek and then made a gesture. "They weren't teasing when they ran off with Lynnore and JuliAnna—remember Wanda? I bet you my best sweater they'd have children from Hell! Allying themselves with that family, how could it be otherwise! Although, as I say, *Jace* has managed to turn out fairly well."

She gazed off to her left where our parents stood in a receiving line. "Lynnore looks positively near collapse! Poor dear, I'll be so glad when this is over for her!"

As if it'd be all better tomorrow. Like it all could be healed with just a hug, a kiss, and a bandage.

"What do you mean *that family*?" Aunt Dorene looked ready to do some battle over the issue. "You talking just Lynnore and JuliAnna, or are you saying if *I* were to get married, *my* kids would be Children from Hell—me being a Merriwether?"

"Don't you open those lips!" Lannette hurriedly warned me just as I began to. She was already in a fair way to busting a gut having an excellent idea of what I'd meant to say. Killed me to spare her but I did.

Aunt Willa reached out to lay a hand on Dorene's arm. "Oh, my dear, you're so unlike them both that I forget you're related!" in a tone that left one wondering how she really meant that. Then in altogether a different one, she said, "I can't imagine why you're taking offense. You agree with us!"

"Well, Auntie dear, you oughta recognize two faces when you see 'em—you wear more than one yourself!"

Lannette dug her fingers into my ribs making me jump and give a little startled cry. Out of the corner of my eye, I witnessed the look our aunts cast us. At once, we both swung around to face Matt's coffin again. Which cast us back into our sad despair. Like fingers of icy mountain air, it was. And it touched my brain, numbing it. My heart squeezed with pain and cried for mercy—but none was granted it.

Seeing him lying there . . . knowing he'd never be with us again . . .

For a minute, I thought I would faint, but I fought it, breathing in deeply, struggling to stay with it. That'd be the last thing Lannette needed. She'd go to pieces and collapse herself. Wasn't what our parents needed to deal with right now. And then, of course, there'd be The Club.

So, I clung to the corner edge of the coffin to keep myself upright. Fingering the frame of the photo of our last win up Mt. Washington, I tried to focus my mind on it and the events of that day.

From it, my gaze wandered to other mementos. Photos of his favorite cars were arranged on tables among the bouquets nearby, pictures of the two of us in the Super

Beetle after the Cherokee Trail race propped at his waist and a model of a 911 Porsche in his hands. The car he'd just bought with Irvy's help.

Krysta's parents had come earlier, and they'd tucked a picture of her and Matt down beside him. Such a waste! He and Krysta had seemed so right for each other.

When Lannette began dating Dante DiSilva, another friend of Matt and Irvy's, we joked about having a triple wedding. Only Jace remained unattached. I think that's another reason why The Club held him in such esteem. Such a chaste young man! Lannette and I, however, hadn't lost much sleep over knowing they believed we never had been. Although from time to time, we wondered if it was fair of us to be making liars of them all.

Lannette moved closer. Reaching out, she touched Matt. Her fingers suddenly grasped the fabric of his suit, and she gave him a rough little shake. Rough as if it would bring him back, little because she knew it wouldn't. Too, there was a good deal of resentment in her eyes—resentment that he'd done something so idiotically senseless. Something that'd left her brotherless.

I couldn't touch him. If I touched him, I'd lose it quicker than hipless Aunt Wanda loses her flowered bikini in the thundering waves at the beach every year! Which would start that chain reaction mentioned earlier.

As guests arrived, they trekked up to say goodbye in their individual manner, hugged us warmly, uttering a few words of condolence. They'd then made their way down the mourning line, commiserating with the family. Some stayed with them, others went off to join another group elsewhere.

Still others simply weren't very good at this sort of thing. After the obligatory hug and a mumbled "Sorry for your loss!" they fled the funeral home. I wished I could. My whole being felt as tense as a giant coiled spring. One that wanted to let loose and bounce all over the place. I just wanted this to be over. Wanted to be alone to sort it all out.

Or, no—no, I wanted Matt to get up out of there and laugh his face off, like it was all a big joke. Wanted him to tell everyone just what he thought of them. Shock 'em all worse than he'd ever shocked 'em before! We'd yak at him for having scared us so bad, but then we'd praise his awesome audacity and go celebrate it with a party and pizza.

It'd be the prank of the century! Totally worthy of him!

Ah, but his roguish laugh we'd only hear on family movies from now on. An echo in memory.

The Club's Lamentations

Two

I had just made that miserably sad observation to Lannette when jumbo arms separated us, clamping us in a smothering, perfumed embrace.

“Well, Joleigh-*Anna*, Lannette,” Aunt Willa said in her habitual disapproving, yet patronizing tone, “if you’ve learned *something* by this unfortunate incident, his death won’t be *completely* for nothing! He had his whole life ahead of him! So very sad! Such a pretty young lady he’d found for himself too!” Heaving one of her gusty sighs, she tightened her hold on us for an instant. About broke our ribs. “But he’s in a better place now, so I suppose we shouldn’t speak harshly of him.”

As if she’d ever actually stop!

I must’ve worn a look that revealed my feelings in a more comical way than I knew, for Lannette met my gaze across Aunt Willa’s ample bosom and immediately hid her face in it—succumbed to the giggles again. Aunt Willa clucked in her mock sympathetic way, begging her not to cry so hard.

Her clumsy consolations to Lannette finally got to be more than I could listen to without squirming. I was ready to scream, “Shut up! Will you *just* shut *up*! Yes, he’s dead, but nothing’s ever going to make us miss him less!”

I’d’ve liked to have said it and more, but I bit it all back—out of respect for my parents and Aunt Lynnore and Uncle Mitch—and Matt’s memory. Yapping off would only make them sigh all the more at how thoroughly Matt had corrupted me, and how badly my parents had failed in their duty in bringing me up better.

So, I extricated myself from her hold . . . only to be instantly embraced by Aunt Wanda’s bony arms. No bosom at all to cushion sorrows. And her prosaic utterances didn’t make up for it either. Logic doesn’t help at such an emotional time. Plenty of people don’t realize that . . . nor ever know how much salt they’ve rubbed into a wound because they don’t.

But . . . for all those reasons I hadn’t told Aunt Willa to shut up, I tolerated Aunt Wanda’s show of affection as well. Or whatever it was. They were family after all. Although, this blood is thicker than water stuff seemed like double talk to me. When I’m thirsty, give me a drink of water! I had friends who’d be there for me quicker than most of my relatives. No questions. No finger pointing.

At length, they released us and linking arms, they refocused on those in the receiving line. I glanced over at Aunt Lynnore and my mom, feeling exquisite pity for them to

have to endure a second round with those two. But then an acquaintance of theirs snagged my aunts' notice and engaged them in some chatter that presently had nothing to do with Matt or any of us, so Mom and Aunt Lynnore gained a decent break.

"Good grief," I heard Turdy utter to Wendy and his clingy girlfriend, "Behold—The Whale and The Eel! *Those* two look more like twins!" Meaning Lannette and me.

"A whole lot prettier, too!" murmured Uncle Jedd, not censoring him for saying anything so disrespectful, nor Wendy for laughing.

"Ooo, a compliment!" I uttered to Lannette. "I'm gonna faint!"

But whatever they wanted to say about my aunts' physical looks, The Whale and the Eel were as identical as they could be on the *inside*! They saw things out of the same eyes—even though one pair's hazel and the other's mud brown! Had tongues as sharp as butcher knives too and hearts about as indifferent as a dreary November day! Okay, maybe not toward *everyone*, but those they particularly disapproved of.

I said so to Lannette and concluded, "Looks don't mean a thing! They're twins no question!"

"Joleigh—Gramma Kate's looking at you!"

"Ah, so what? Everyone tolerates them and each other just for appearances! Makes me nuts!"

My uncles, Ralph Stark and Aldo Stanley stood away from us all, not putting any limits on their busybody spouses. They weren't the ones wearing the pants in their families, that's for sure! Uncle Ralph, a tall beanpole type, claimed Aunt Willa as his, while Uncle Aldo, somewhat stouter, had married Wanda. We always joked about how they'd've made great cartoon characters, the four of 'em!

Uncle Aldo caught my eye, and he gave me a smile and a little wink. Uncle Ralph smiled too and might have come over to chat a second had not Frankie, Tina's husband, joined them. How nice Frankie got along with his in-laws—more or less. He even called Aunt Willa, *Ma*.

I'm sure I couldn't hear myself calling Mrs. Woodworth anything but Mrs. Woodworth. No warm feelings were ever likely to flow between us. Just a wary apprehension on my part and a cool tolerance on hers.

One of the smaller groups disbanded, giving me a better view of those who made up the receiving line. Aunt Lynnore's teal blue pantsuit emphasized her pallor. She seemed so very frail just then. Her gaze seemed to be intent on Jace and Irvy who remained apart from the rest of us.

Jace sat in stunned, angry silence, acting like the whole world was to blame for Matt's death. Irvy stood by Jace's seat not trying to engage him in any conversation—just being there for him. While Irvy didn't display quite the same attitude, he did give the impression of wanting to be left alone. Couldn't blame either one. Weren't many here who knew how to be tactful and truly comforting to us.

Aunt Lynnore abruptly swung around to grab my mother and weep upon the shoulder of Mom's lime green blouse. Mom spoke soothingly to her, letting her freely soak it. Catching my glance, she sent me an encouraging smile which I answered with a rueful one. Her gaze then searched out Jace and Irvy's corner. It appeared to me that

Mom's sadness seemed to deepen, get sort of wistful when she watched Irvy. Kind of the same way Aunt Lynnore's had just now.

I supposed they probably were recalling the very first time Irvy showed up at Aunt Lynnore's front door. Uncle Mitch told that story a lot.

Three years old he was when he wandered out of his yard and trotted cross lots over to Aunt Lynnore's and Uncle Mitch's back yard to play with Matty. When they asked him where he lived he'd answered matter of factly, "Over that way! I see a boy playing when we go by his house. I say, he's my friend! I go find him, that's all." As for how he'd known *how* to find him, well, that's still a mystery. Even if you asked him now, he'd just shrug and say, "Just did, that's all."

When Aunt Lynnore brought him home, Dr. Woodworth Sr. invited the whole family to dinner—not necessarily with Mrs. Woodworth's blessing. Irvy's dad ended up admiring Matt's spunk—was actually proud his own son had shown some. Thought Irvy should get dirty like a real boy ought to and that Matt was just the one he ought to do it with.

Moreover, he had been favorably impressed with Aunt Lynnore and Uncle Mitch. Figured if they could handle their hyper son at a stranger's house without losing their cool, they were quite worthy of watching over his son too. He arranged for the boys to get together so Irvy wouldn't be tempted to walk the streets and neighborhood backyards alone anymore.

Mrs. Woodworth hadn't wanted the hassle of looking out for Matt, so Irvy always went to Aunt Lynnore's. Or sometimes the two mothers would meet at the rec center playground so Mrs. Woodworth had some assurance her precious son wasn't being bullied or led into criminal mischief by Matty. Guess her attitude toward my aunt was pretty much the way it was toward me—cool but civil. Her wall of reserve never came down.

Mom would have the same memories as Aunt Lynnore for they've always been really close. They genuinely loved kids, and they'd often sat for each other—even for all the trouble we'd all cause sometimes. Both had stood up to Mrs. Woodworth in our defense—Matt's and mine—oh, countless times. Which was never an enviable task.

The Club's charges, allegations, accusations, and biased opinions you could ignore—more or less. Mrs. Woodworth's unnerving stare and cool hauteur was something else altogether.

Mom's glance came back to Matt lying as if he were napping in the casket. She bit trembling lips, but her tears flowed anyway, and she hugged Aunt Lynnore tighter.

Uncle Mitch and Dad maintained stoic fronts beside them, giving out tight smiles and firm handshakes. But I'd seen Uncle Mitch sob earlier at home. There was a lost kind of look in his eyes. And he couldn't gaze at the body in the coffin for longer than an instant or two. I guess that's how Dad would be if it were Jace or Jarrett or me.

My aunts' friend, finally through bending their ears, waved a general goodbye to all gathered there and left. Aunt Willa and Aunt Wanda converged upon the mourning line. My grandparents Merriwether left it and joined another group. Guess once was enough for them too!

“Ah, *Lynnore*, honey—*JuliAnna*, dear! How are you two holding up? Must be comforting for you, *Lynnore*, that so many of Matt’s friends have shown up tonight! He was well liked, wasn’t he, dear?” As if it were some kind of miracle.

However, as if their true feelings about Matt didn’t matter, Aunt *Lynnore* surrendered to their insincere embraces, accepting their further condolences at face value. Not only theirs, but anyone else’s besides whatever their opinion of Matt was. Pretty forgiving of her!

After a few minutes, Aunt *Willa* and Aunt *Wanda* made their way back to their pack. This hypocritical routine was pretty much the same at every funeral. Soon’s the last respects duty was performed and the line traversed, these meddling judges of the family assembled to begin their diatribes—or reassembled to take up where they left off. Wasn’t anything different about tonight.

Aunt *Becky* sighed, saying, “Oh, but I feel so sorry for *Lynnore* and *Mitch*! Their only boy!”

As if *Matty* had had a dozen sisters instead of just *Lannette*.

“Next it’s going to be *Jorden* and *JuliAnna*’s only *girl* ending up dead in some unfortunate manner! Well—unless something happens to poor little *Jaimee Shaine* first!” proclaimed Aunt *Willa*, edging back in between her and *Wendy*. “Lord A ’mighty, that *Joleigh-Anna* and *Matt* should’ve been brother and sister—and *Lannette* and *Jace*! Hard to think of *Jace* and *Joleigh* as twins!”

“Oh, please . . .!” *Lannette* moaned. “Listen to who’s making the comparison!”

Guess *Gramma Lylah Merriwether* felt the same way. I heard her mutter to someone in her group, “I’ve often been thankful for the miracle that made sure *my* children would be *Merriwether* blue eyed redheads! None of ‘em too fat nor bony—nor ill-tempered!”

I glanced back in time to see her sweep a telling glance the length of my imperfectly shaped, disagreeable *Kelmann* aunts. Somehow, she forgot that skinny Uncle *Todd* and chubby Aunt *Dorene* were the dark haired, disagreeable flaws in the *Merriwether* perfection.

“Well, I’ve a mind to tell *Irvyn* that he ought to listen to his mother—marry one of those nice girls *Valorah* has in mind for him! If he allies himself with *Joleigh-Anna*, well, I can only see disaster! Does she intend to keep racing without *Matt* now? *Irvyn* won’t have time to go with her to make sure she doesn’t injure herself!” Aunt *Wanda* paused a moment, then took up a new train of thought. “Although— I think I could have accepted *Matt*’s death better if he had died in one of his precious race cars! But a stupid dare, for God’s sakes! Did you ever—?”

“Look at it this way, thanks to *Matt*’s foolishness, *Irvyn*’s gotten a break!” *Tina* left the group she’d been in to come join the one her mother reigned at. “Maybe he will reconsider marriage with her!”

“Here we go,” uttered *Lannette*, her eyes glinting angrily through her tears. “Like broken records they are!”

“Not as if we weren’t expecting it,” I reminded her. She dismissed that thought with a sniff.

Aunt Willa replied with conviction to Tina, "He should! He's always given in to Joleigh! Whatever she wants, he gives her! He was as much a party to her crimes as Matt was! Did he ever tell her not to go off on these dangerous races with Matt? No! He gave her his blessing and that was that!

"Who'd trust a man like that with their health and welfare? I doubt I could! Although his father was a saint when he was alive, and his Uncle Lloyd is! But," on a sorrowful sigh, "that's a different generation! In any case, all this has put off their plans for tomorrow, hasn't it? Might be the best thing that's happened in that case!"

Tina poked her huge pregnant body even further into the center of things, stating confidently, "Well, *my* child will never grow up to be like any of them! We won't allow it! We're going right by the book! Aren't we, Frankie?"

Frankie glanced over from beside Uncle Ralph and shrugged. "If that's what you want to do."

"There's a baby to pity!" I muttered.

"Oh, she's just saying that because she's still holding grudges against us for all the pranks we pulled on her—and for Irvy telling her he'd never trade you for a pumpkin like her back then! Such a crybaby! She hasn't lost that whining pouty voice after all this time either, has she?"

"Nope, and now that she's pregnant, her pumpkin body is even more round and—well . . . pumpkiny!" I eyed Tina critically, and recited in a sing song tone, "Jelly, Jelly, Pumpkin Belly! Fell in cow flop, now she's *really* smelly!"

The old rhyme conjured up the hilarious events of that day.

Oh, God, so funny watching Tina try to impress Irvy! Picking him wildflowers in the Hennings meadow. Some of the cows were out in that field, and one of them looked just like Fritz being one of his daughters. She took an interest in Tina's flower gathering and ambled over to check it out. Well, we couldn't resist.

"Run! Run! Fritz is after you! *Run! Quick!*"

Tina turned as white as the daisy petals, and she took off without looking back. Didn't look where she was going either. She slipped and slid for five minutes in the biggest cow pie out there trying to keep her balance and get out of it. When she looked over her shoulder and saw the cow trotting up to her, she'd screamed, lost her footing altogether, and *plop!* Right into the putrid pile!

Covered in ripely fresh poo, she lay there petrified while the cow munched wildflowers right out of her hand. We'd rolled on the ground, sides splitting, tears streaming from laughter. Don't think she talked to us for six months after that!

Lannette, gasping on a guffaw, slapped her hand over her mouth again. Which attracted all kinds of embarrassing attention. Had to bite my own lips to keep from losing it myself.

"You idiot!" she flung at me. Sucking in her cheeks, she tried not to look as if she were in hysterics. Didn't appear to help much. "Oh, man, that was *sooo* funny! She was *sooo* mad! Such a killjoy she was then!"

"Gonna carry it into motherhood too!" Then, striking a pose, I mimicked Tina's signature statement. "*My* mother says *you* guys are going to end up in *jail* someday!"

Lannette doubled over in a fresh peal of laughter. I held her steady. "I'll go by the heart when I have kids. Forget the book!"

"M-me too!" she managed to get out between giggles. "But y-you're gonna p-pay for this, Joleigh-Anna!"

Aunt Nedra sent us a look of mild reproof mingled with deep sympathy. In her soft-spoken way, she took it upon herself to explain our behavior to anyone interested—or not.

"It's nerves, you know! They don't mean anything disrespectful! This is just so hard for everyone, and it's not the time to be talking like this, Willa! Matty's gone, and it's a loss to all of us! Maybe if we'd just been a little more understanding! You know, we never asked him to stay with us, Jedd. Tedd and Freddy got along with him rather well. If we'd just put ourselves out more . . ."

Uncle Jedd agreed. "We ought to get together more with everyone. Have a picnic or something once a year. Do something to keep in touch!"

"Dad—we *have* been getting together once a year. Someone's accommodated us for the past eight! Actually, Matt makes the second—no, *third*—for *this* year! Good enough for me!" proclaimed Turdy, half in jest, half not.

"Theodore!" Aunt Nedra reproved as if he were ten. "Now that's just plain rude! A family get together on a happier occasion would be a wonderful idea!"

Turdy, contrary to his mother's belief, had never liked Matt and had merely tolerated the rest of us. "What would we do at it? Sit around gabbing about the good old days? I've got a life, Ma! Why should I spend it at a dull boring family reunion or whatever? Got other things I'd rather be doing!"

He pulled his latest love closer to his side and waggled his brows at her suggestively. She giggled and snuggled even closer to him. Can't imagine what she saw in him. Such a self-centered sleazeball! The type who'd offer to trade five pennies for a quarter with a toddler—like Jarrett—convincing the kid he had the better deal since he had more coins. Plus, this girl was much younger than he was. Younger than me, even! Must've gotten hooked on his looks. Was the only thing he had going for him.

"We all have a life, Tedd," retorted Freddy curtly. "Unlike you and dear Aunt Dorene, some of us want more people in it than just ourselves! Matt had a life! I should have put myself more into it when I had the chance! Too late now, huh? Too late for Lawron too! You know, we really never knew much of anything that was going on in *his* life. We didn't even know he was going to get married last month—until we went down for his funeral!"

Thinking of someone else whose life he hadn't paid much attention to, he added, "Wish it wasn't so late. I'd drive up to Providence . . . see Jaimee."

Freddy walked away from them before anyone could reply to any of it. He flung a glance Jace's way, went over to grasp his hand, then Irvy's, said a few words of sympathy and regret, and then came to hug us girls and gruffly say, "I'm really sorry, guys! I wish—" He couldn't finish. He let us go and without another glance at Matt or anyone else, he strode out of the building.

I've always liked Freddy okay. He'd never been anything like Tina or Turdy—always wanted to join in whenever he and his family came to visit. But his mother's

overprotective ways nearly always put a damper on things. Aunt Nedra rarely said no outright. But she'd take time to bang it into his head on how to look out for dangers and not to do this, that, or the other thing, or to *do* this, that, or the other—until we got sick of waiting for him and went off without him.

If her lectures hadn't ripped the heart from him, he'd try to find us. More often though, we'd come back and find him bored to tears, kicking rocks around the driveway or sitting on the porch steps, his chin in his hands, looking sadly glum.

Guess we should've just snuck him off with us without asking anyone's permission for it. So what if Turdy or Tina told on us. They'd done that all the time anyway. For all her stupid lectures, though, Aunt Nedra'd never been as disapproving as most of our other aunts had been. Just too darned careful! Come to think of it, she hadn't been as critical as much as Mrs. Woodworth had been on the occasions she'd happened to find out what we'd been up to.

But Dr. Woodworth hadn't ever lost sleep over our antics nor had he believed we kids would turn to a life of crime because of a few pranks or risky ventures. Said it was just plain youthful silliness that growing up would cure. He'd bound up our cuts and set our broken bones, and then sent us out into the world for more.

He'd been a totally cool guy! Course, I would think that . . . he'd been looking forward to the day Irvy'd propose to me. To his wife's despair, I *was* his dream for his only son. Made me promise him the second dance at our wedding. But he'd died, unexpectedly, just after Irvy graduated medical school. That'd been hard, and thinking of him made me miss him suddenly as much as I did Matty. The lump in my throat grew bigger. A few more tears of regret trickled down.

Mrs. Woodworth had come earlier to pay her respects but hadn't stayed beyond the time it took to do it. Seeing me in the same room with Irvy simply stabbed her with many regrets. Maybe she didn't exactly show it, but I imagine she was relieved Matt would no longer be an influence in Irvy's life.

One of her dreams come true.

Friends to Help Us Through

THREE

Most of Matt's buddies didn't linger. They felt uncomfortable in the presence of so much disapproval. Except Tippy Waldron and his new wife, Colleen. Tippy didn't listen to anyone's drivel. As a matter of fact, he treated them as if they weren't even there.

"Such a stinkin' shock!" uttered Tippy in his dramatic manner. "Man, I was sure he was on his way to making it big, him and Jo! Can't think of anyone else I'd want to team with besides him! Except Joleigh!" He put one long muscular arm across our shoulders, and his other about Colleen.

Tippy helped us keep the cars in the best racing form, being a part of Matty's pit crew. Plus, he'd co-drive on the occasions I couldn't. He was a dependable, friendly guy.

"Where's Dante? He should be here with you! I mean, if he says he loves you, Lannette, he should be here with you! Where's Krysta?"

"Tippy, Krysta's a wreck and couldn't face it. And as for Dante, he's with Stephan Deverill on an emergency call." Lannette told him. "Someone's goat was badly mauled. He said he'd be here if he could be. I've got Joleigh—and now that you and Colleen are here, I'm fine. Oh, and look! Thomi and her sisters are just coming in! So, yeah, we're fine!"

We've been friends with the Tollefsons from the time they moved to Kingsdale and opened up their riding center there. Mom loved to ride, so as soon as it opened, she'd brought us over to check it out. So impressed had she been by everything about DreamWynd Equestrian Center and Nick and Anetra, the owners, we never went anywhere else. Became friends and eventually bought our own horses which we board there.

Mrs. Woodworth had had a conniption fit when she'd found out her precious son was hanging around a family that once had been a part of a small circus. Only God knew what dangerous practices Irvy would learn from *them*! Like riding a galloping horse bareback—standing up and jumping through a ring of fire! Actually, Irvy got pretty good at it and a lot of other tricks.

"Well, I guess they couldn't let the animal die!" Tippy shot a sharp accusing glance over at Thomi who had just left the receiving line—as if she ought to have made sure he had done his job more quickly. "Stephan's family's a rich snooty bunch, ain't they?"

How'd *they* take the news he'd hired a nobody like Dante to partner with him? They pass out with mortification?"

"They haven't a clue yet." said Thomi, coming up to us then. "And no one cares what they think!"

Tippy gave a derisive snort, "Can't figure out why you want to become part of that circle, Thomasyna. Loved the surprise ending of that play last night, by the way! We were in the third row center. Great seats! Will you edit that part out of it before Jaimee sees it?"

"Probably! Glad you enjoyed it, Tiptoes!" Her audacious use of a nickname few got away with calling him got a warning scowl from him.

She just grinned and drew us away from him, giving us each a hug. "Dante told us to give his love to you and Joleigh. Stephan sends his as well."

Lannette received that news with seeming indifference, making Thomi shake her and say, "What? You're not believing him?"

"Yes, listen to who's talking!" Halleigh advised feelingly. "I don't know how it is between you and him, Lannette, but don't be like Thomi! He could finally decide to check out the menu again!"

Lannette bit her lip. She didn't want that, but didn't want to admit it.

Halleigh shook her head slightly and reached out to tap Lannette's arm. "I hope you've enjoyed all those custom-made cards he's given you! He's been my best customer lately! I can draw you in my sleep!"

"He's asked for Rikki to come up with a love song for you two, just so you know!" Lyndsay disclosed. "Bet he's getting ready to ask you!"

"Oh, God! A *love* song? She didn't say she would, did she?" Lannette clasped Lyndsay's arm, her gaze begging her to say she hadn't.

The amused gleam in Lyndsay's emerald eyes said Rikki had indeed agreed.

While Lannette cared about Dante, she wasn't quite sure she felt the same way he did. In high school, he'd promised to team up with Matty and learn mechanics as Tippy had. But once he graduated, he'd decided he'd rather doctor animals than cars and had gone to Cornell for that instead. Don't think Lannette ever forgave him for it—don't think she was forgiving him now even.

They'd been casually dating for some time now. Dante patiently giving her time to either fall madly in love with him or tell him to hit the road. Seemed like she didn't want to do either one.

Me, I'd be thrilled if Irvy asked Rikki Tollefson to compose a love song for me. That'd be so cool and *soooooo* romantic. He had commissioned Halleigh to create one of her exclusive cards for me from time to time, and we'd been to the Littleton Little Theater to see Thomi perform in plays—when she wasn't off making a film someplace. Of course, then we'd go see her latest movie.

A song especially composed for us would be the ultimate prize—next to him actually saying "I love you!" that is! I mean, I knew he did—but it'd be the whipped cream and cherry on a hot fudge sundae if he would *say* the words too!

Tippy let go Colleen's hand to rap my cheek smartly. "Come on, Little Jo! Puffy eyes do not become you! All of you, c'mon, let's remember the *good* times!"

Colleen slipped her hand back into Tippy's. "How can they, Tippy? Joleigh and Irvy were supposed to get married tomorrow, remember? Matt was supposed to be Irvy's best man!"

Tippy smacked his forehead with the palm of his hand. "Aaah! That's *right*! That is harsh!" And he hugged me, kissing the top of my red hair. "Know what? I'm gonna get Irvy over here. You need him! I'd never let Colleen go through something like this alone! Not that I feel Jace should be deserted—but you know . . . you're a *woman*! They should *both* be with you girls!"

And with Colleen clasped to his side, he went off to tell my brother and my fiancé what he thought of their thoughtlessness in leaving us all alone. Guess he felt our friends weren't strong enough to help bear our sorrows.

I knew that Colleen hadn't meant to stir up any hurt as Aunt Willa had earlier. Not sure how I let Aunt Willa's dig get by me. Hadn't wanted to think about it, I guess. I'd spent the last three days trying not to think about tomorrow. So close to being with Irvy forever. This was something else that no doubt his mother was thanking her lucky stars for—the postponement of our wedding!

Whoa! Wouldn't she hate it if Irvy did ever ask Rikki for a love song for me!

In any case, instead of Matt standing at Irvy's side as his best man, Irvy would make up one of the pallbearers at Matt's funeral tomorrow afternoon. Discussing new plans just hadn't fit into any conversation. It was all pretty much left up in the air.

Tippy had a slight problem dislodging Irvy from Jace's side but he hit an even bigger wall with Jace, who scowled and hunched away from him. Irvy glanced across, gave in to my imploring gaze, and came over. Thomi, Halleigh, and Lyndsay moved to make room for him.

Taking me into a light embrace, he explained, "It's not that he doesn't want to be with you, it's just he doesn't know how to handle his grief. He really needs to let it out, but he can't. Not yet. He just needs someone to stay with him without expecting anything from him. I don't know—maybe I do, too." Irvy took one arm away and included Lannette in our comfort hug.

Which really didn't feel all that much of a comfort really. I saw my friends exchange a glance among themselves but whatever they were thinking, they kept it to themselves. Tippy and Colleen stayed with Jace. Not speaking, just providing a silent solace for him as Irvy had.

Okay, I understood Jace's trouble. I did, really. But *I* needed the warmth of a hug to console me and someone's ear to listen to the memories I wanted to live on forever. Thought that's what brothers, especially twin brothers—and fiancés—were for. Thought that's what they'd need from me too.

I needed Irvy's solid protection enveloping me. Wanted to feel his love for me. I felt lost without Matt but without Jace, and definitely without Irvy, I'd be missing without a trace! I'd loved Irvyn since before I blurted my first word. "*Irby*!"

We'd shared peanut butter and jelly sandwiches with him, and he'd shared the cookies his mother would bake—or rather had her chef bake. You know, so she wouldn't appear to be slighting us. Irvy'd known best—thanks to his Dad—how to care for cuts and broken limbs until help arrived. How and when to treat us both like

the girls we were—which Matt and Jace never seemed to learn. Seemed totally natural to me now that he'd drape an arm about my cousin and talk as gently to her as he would to me.

"I can't take any more of this!" uttered Lannette suddenly, ignoring everything Irvy had just said to her. "I can't listen to them yak about Matt and us anymore! Although it'd make me sicker if they were crying over him the way they did over Uncle Kevin back in May and then over Lawron last month. Like they were their best buddies! No one even liked Uncle Kevin! I mean, *Turdy* should've been *his* son!"

She swept a disgusted gesture at The Club and those who'd since joined their group. "No one's going to want to follow through on any plan to keep in touch! It's all talk! They say all this at everyone's funeral! You have to wonder why they bothered to travel to West Virginia for Uncle Kevin and Lawron! Why are they here now? Irvy, tell my parents I want to go home!"

He didn't, but instead led our select little group away to a small alcove closed off from the left side of the room by a lattice partition by which potted trees and great vases of flowers had been placed.

Lannette dropped onto the sofa, propped her head in her hands, and let her grief spill yet again. I'm not sure what Tippy said but Jace came over and sat with her. But unlike the rest of us including our friends, his own tears he kept inside.

Aunt Nedra slipped into our group to offer some of her gentle, coaxing words of comfort which only grated our nerves and set Jace's jaw in a grimmer line. Frankly, we were tired of hearing that Matt was now in a better place in any tone of voice.

Why would God need to call people of any age to become angels? How many did he need after all if he already had myriads? Besides—how could she be so sure that's where he was when the rest of The Club felt positive he was rotting and burning in Hell! Or was he the first person to be residing in two places at once? I think it's just something people say to make themselves feel better about losing someone.

I didn't think he was in either place, frankly. Dead is dead. No roses in winter.

Not many of our relatives had planned to show up for our wedding tomorrow. At the time, I hadn't cared. Simply and only cared about being Irvy's forever and sharing that day with what family did come and with our friends—all of which I knew would be there for us.

Now, however, a burning desire to celebrate the duo anniversary of my parents and of my favorite aunt and uncle in a huge way swelled within me—okay, yeah, and *now* my wedding . . . whenever it finally took place.

How any of it would come about actually, I had no more a clue than I had three months ago. I only knew a profound determination to get everyone together to celebrate something positive and happy!

You know—like *LIFE*.

This keen notion suddenly got cut off when a small body hurled itself at my knees. Irvy kept me standing. I'd've fallen for sure, otherwise! "Jarrett! Where'd you come from? You're supposed to be with the Marshals! How'd you get here?"

"I sneaked out," he declared stoutly. "And I d' wanna go back. Why's Matty sleepin' in that funny bed, Joleigh? How come he sleepin' when all the other buddies are here?"

All the other buddies was his four year-old way of saying *everybody*. “How come he d’ wanna play with me? Make him get up, Joleigh! Make him!”

Oh, geez! We’d already tried to explain to him that Matt wouldn’t be playing with any of us anymore. But he hadn’t gotten the message very well. Or at all. I picked him up, hugging him tightly, and tried again to make him understand.

“Jarrett, look—everybody’s here because Matty’s not ever getting out of that funny looking bed. They’re here to say good-bye to him even though he can’t hear any of us. Remember when Nikki died last month—you remember? The car hit her, and we all said good-bye to her when we buried her under the tree behind our house?”

Thomi ruffled his red curls. “We all came for that, remember, bud? You had us sing doggy songs for her.”

He pouted, he remembered. And it set off his mourning in great shape. He yanked the collar of my blouse, his tears breaking like a sudden cloudburst. “I didn’t *want* her to die! She was *my* dog! I got *no* dog now! I got no *Matty* now! Make him get up! *Make him!*”

“Ah, Jarrett . . .” I hugged him closer, tried to calm him with soft words and kisses. It didn’t work, and in the end, I just cried with him.

“Yup, this is how Jaimee would be if she were here,” Lannette uttered, her own tears gathering again. “How she *is* going to be when she finds out. Well, it how Ceralyn, Molly Michelle and Tavia will be too. But, with Jaimee . . .”

No one had told her yet. She’d thrown way too horrible a fit when she’d thought Thomi had broken her promise to her to perform in the benefit play that, this year, was for her. That’s what had put her in the hospital, in fact. Didn’t matter to a seven-year-old that Thomi had had medical reasons of her own for having to give up the play. All she knew or cared about was her favorite had bailed on her. So, we were all certain she’d be that emotional, or possibly worse, when she finally learned of Matty’s death.

Thomi, reading my thoughts, put an arm around me. “They’ll tell her when they feel they can. But just as they said to me, it might not matter how she finds it out. We’ll all help her through it, okay? Don’t think about it now.”

She held out a hand to Lannette who left her spot on the sofa to come receive her hug. In a second, Halleigh and Lyndsay moved to make it a group hug. Feeling the love, Jarrett wrapped one arm about Thomi’s neck. Laid his head against hers.

“I’m so sad, Thom’syna! I got no Matty now!”

“I’m sad, too, Jarrett. We can be sad together, okay?”

“Okay . . .”

Made me doubly grateful that they’d come when they had.

In my shocked and inconsolable state, Wednesday night—or, really Thursday morning in the wee hours, I’d called over to Cliff Top to give them the news. Woke them up. Even so, Thomi and Halleigh insisted on coming right over to the house to share our grief. Stayed for hours with us. I hoped they would stay right up to the last second of *this* ordeal with us. We needed this kind of support badly at this moment!

"You know you can call us anytime, doesn't matter when. Don't stay home either! All of us are here for you both. For Jace and your parents too." Thomi glanced over at Irvy, saying, "And you, Irvy! You too!"

He smiled at that but made no reply. Was really beginning to bother me—his quiet sadness . . . his unnatural silence.

"M-meee, tooo, Thomi?"

"Of course, Jarrett Bud. You too! We'd never leave you out!"

"O-ookay!" He hugged her again and kissed her cheek. Then, tucking his hands down between himself and me, he sobbed into my neck some more.

Uncle Ralph, on his way to his first attempt at dragging Aunt Willa away, saw Jarrett's misery and came over to us. "What's the trouble, little man?"

"I want my Matty," declared Jarrett-Andrew, defiant through his tears. He raised his head with new hope. "Get him up, Uncle Ralph! Make him laugh! I wanna ride in the Soup Beetle!"

"Little man, if I could, I would. But listen, how would it be if I took you out on my boat sometime, eh? We could do a little fishing."

Jarrett brightened a little. Until he remembered that Matt couldn't go with him. It set off his howls afresh. Looked like one of us would have to take him out of here. He'd probably only get worse.

Was a nice gesture on Uncle Ralph's part to offer to take him fishing though. Trouble was *sometime* could be *anytime*. Generally, like tomorrow, it never came.

Be wonderful if I could change that for once . . . somehow . . .

Abandoned at the Gravesite

FOUR

Black clouds spread ominously over the skies that Sunday afternoon. By the time we were all gathered at the gravesite, it was pouring heavily. On the one hand, it was a letdown although it certainly mirrored our outlook for the occasion. On the other, it cut short the sermons of The Club—at least right then. No one wanted to be out in that soaking weather for any longer than necessary!

When Uncle Mitch tossed a shovelful of dirt onto Matt's coffin, I sensed a change in Irvyn. Something in the way he held me wasn't the same as even five minutes ago. Although, to be truthful, he hadn't been himself since it happened. But today, when he arrived at the funeral home to help carry Matt out to the hearse and then to the gravesite, I could almost feel the invisible wall between us. Seemed like it got suddenly quite a bit thicker and taller.

Not used to this feeling of uncertainty with him, I looked up. "You're coming to Aunt Lynnore's with us, aren't you?"

Didn't seem as if he'd heard me, so I asked it again. He glanced down, a closed look in his face. "I'll come around later, Jo."

My heart dropped to my soggy Hush Puppies. "But I thought—"

He put the handle of the big black umbrella into my hand. "I'll come around later, Joleigh."

Without any explanations, kisses or hugs, he left me in the midst of my keenly observant friends, family, and relatives. Left me feeling as deserted as an abandoned puppy in a snowstorm amongst a pack of hungry wolves!

"I figured *that* was coming!" uttered Aunt Willa smugly. "With Matt gone, he probably doesn't feel he needs to go through life tied to her! Too bad it took Matt's dying to make him see it!"

"Well, did you notice that Dante DiSilva didn't even bother showing up yesterday *or* today?" Aunt Wanda added in much the same tone. "Makes you wonder, doesn't it? Of course, I understand why *Krysta* didn't! Wouldn't doubt, though, that David and Marsha are using Jaimee's illness as an excuse to stay away!"

"And what is *your* son's excuse?" I uttered under my breath. "I don't see Craigie boy and his dear family!"

Lannette rolled her eyes and shook her head. They just didn't get that she wasn't as "in love" with Dante as I was with Irvyn. Dante'd just landed this assistant veterinarian position with Stephan Deverill only a day or so ago.

Stephan's new practice hadn't yet officially opened. However, his reputation of being an excellent veterinarian was already spreading; thanks, in part, to the boarders at DreamWynd—all of whom had abandoned Dr. Ayer in favor of Stephan. So he was already getting emergency calls and some for the routine reasons. Dante had promised he'd make it if he could, but there were a couple of emergencies that couldn't be ignored.

Lannette had received the news as she'd received it yesterday. As if it didn't matter. I hoped he'd be able to get the chance to melt her doubts before they became granite hard. No telling how much time he had for that. My guess was not long.

Muttering, "I wish I had a sick kid *I* could use as an excuse!" she left the protection of Aunt Lynnore's umbrella to come under mine. Putting an arm around my shoulders, she instructed me not to listen to one idiotic thing they said about me.

At the same time, Mom deserted Dad to duck under with us. She, too, gave me the hug Irvy hadn't. She said in soft low tones, "He's just feeling lost, Joleigh. It's not you or anything to do with you. They haven't got a clue as to what's going on! Lannette's right—don't listen to them!"

She poked Lannette. "Don't *you* listen to 'em either! Dante's a sweetheart! Don't throw him away because his life happens to be a bit hectic just now. Or because he chose a different path from Matt's. Irvy did, too, remember!"

Neither of us was totally convinced on either issue. Which was evident in the slight hunch of Lannette's shoulder after Mom said this. The way she didn't reply. As for me, with that look of Irvy's vividly in my memory, it was impossible not to feel any other way than I did feel. Like that lost deserted puppy tossed to the wolves.

I couldn't help the new tears that rolled down my cheeks. The fears of losing Irvy mingled and came together with the tears of Matt's loss.

Was going to be a long, long, sad day.



At the gathering at Aunt Lynnore's, Jace shut himself away from everyone—going upstairs to Matt's room and refusing to come out. He let Jarrett in with him but no one else was welcome—not even Lannette or me. Which hurt almost as much as Irvy's walking away from me. But in his grief, I don't think Jace even knew about that or wondered at it if he had paid attention to it.

Lannette and I sat on the carpeted stairs where we could be out of the way of the press of people that'd squeezed into the house, but yet, where we could hear the various conversations taking place.

We should've done what Jace had—just shut ourselves away in Lannette's room, but we didn't. Her room was directly across from Matt's, and she hadn't spent any more time in it than it took to grab some clothes. Hadn't slept in there since Matt died.

Aunt Lynnore had opened the couch for her and me to crash on. But now, the living room and the dining room, not to mention the kitchen and the family room in the basement, were full of friends and relatives bent on ‘cheering up’ my aunt and uncle. And Lannette—when they could find her.

With Matt gone, they evidently felt they could attempt to break the bond between us. They’d’ve had better luck separating Siamese twins sharing crucial organs. She wasn’t impolite about it—but Lannette made it clear they were wasting their time.

We went through the whole afternoon with our arms linked about each other, only letting go when it was absolutely necessary. Pretty much Mom and Aunt Lynnore did the same. Occasionally, they sought out Dad and Uncle Mitch, looking to be wrapped in their comforting arms but for the most part, they were each other’s consolers.

Most of our particular friends had already put in a lengthy appearance and were gone by the time Tippy, Colleen, and Dante showed up in the early evening. I think they’d hoped to avoid the mob of relatives by coming later. Doesn’t work that way with ours. Funerals only make them want to stay longer. They’d probably stay until midnight—or until they were thrown out.

That’s what happened when Uncle Kevin and Lawron died. Everyone stayed down at Aunt Ruthe’s for three days. She never showed her exasperation at anything said or done then. I guess, since she’d learned to deal with Uncle Kevin’s disposition, she could more easily put up with his family.

Lawron probably would’ve been one of my favorite cousins if we’d had a chance to get to know him better. Lawron loved his cars too. But he’d never chosen to team up with Matty. Had worked exclusively for a wealthy family in Newport until he got fired for trying to elope with one of their granddaughters.

The Club had had a field day with that at the time. Imagine a lowly auto mechanic thinking he had a chance with a multimillionaire’s granddaughter!

About then, Aunt Ruthe decided she wanted to go back to her home state, and Uncle Kevin gave in to her wishes. Lawron followed them after a while. Guess his present fiancée had been at the house the same time we’d been there. But, she’d not made an appearance even once. Auntie Ruthe said it was just as well. The Club would’ve torn her to shreds. Or—more likely, *she* would’ve done *them*!

I’d’ve paid real money to have seen that!

My thoughts came back to the miserable present when Dante arrived just then, and straightway apologized to Lannette for having missed Matty’s wake and funeral.

No one blamed him—not anyone who mattered, that is. After all, if you’re a vet, and someone’s pet needs you, you have to do what you have to do. That’s what Matt would’ve told him. Of course, opinions about pets varied. Some of my relatives rated animals levels higher than most humans; others felt pets were lower life forms that ought to be kept outdoors at all times.

The French Alpine goats that’d gotten horribly chewed up yesterday, Stephan and Dante’d had to put down. Guess the dogs that’d done the chewing had gone the same route, too. Then this morning, Stephan had gotten no less than four new emergency calls. While Dante had taken three of them, Stephan hadn’t yet returned from his call which had involved someone’s llamas, a bear and a tiger. Apparently, the people hadn’t

a license to keep the bear and the tiger, so Stephan was hung up there, not only treating the animals, but trying to find someplace for them to go.

"He sends his condolences to all of you again," Dante told us. "He's sorry to have caused me to miss saying goodbye to Matt for the last time. But I did get to do that last night. They let me in the funeral home after I explained what'd happened."

I was glad he'd had a chance to do that, and I said, "Was probably a better goodbye that way. Nobody to bother you or tell you things you didn't want to hear!"

"Yeah, maybe. Not that I was totally alone . . ." Before either Lannette or I could ask him to expand on that, he put a hand to Lannette's arm. "Look, can we talk? You know—someplace where there's less confusion!" He passed a hand through his dark hair as he cast another glance about, hoping to search out a likely spot.

"Ah, you mean the bathrooms—or her bedroom," I quipped. "Turdy and some of the others are in the basement playing pool."

"*He's* here? Never met such an—" Dante broke off, realizing Aunt Nedra was right close by. "Well, anyway . . . the porches are taken up with the smokers among you! I'd ask you out to my car but then they'd be gawping at us, wondering what we're up to."

"Oh, don't worry! If I'm not with her, they might not think a thing of it!"

Lannette giggled, but said, "Well, yes, they will! I've been influenced too much by you!" She looked up at him. "What do you want to talk about? The stuff I said you could have of Matt's?"

Dante's blank stare suggested he'd forgotten about that. He shook his head and told her, "No. I want to talk to you about *us*!"

"Ah!" uttered Lannette, totally taken off guard.

"Bathroom's open!"

Lannette cast me an unappreciative glance. She appeared to be of two minds about this deal—not ready to talk about "us" with him yet unwilling to repulse him. "Will you be okay for a few minutes?" she finally asked me.

"Sure! How long can you be in there? Someone's bound to need the facilities!"

"You're sure?"

I moved apart from her, pushing her toward him. "Go! I'm fine!"

"We'll protect her!" Colleen promised, then amended, "*I'll* protect her! Tippy'll be stuffing his face with all this food!"

Tippy, who'd been eyeing the feast upon the dining room table during our exchange, turned his head to grin at her. "Alas—I've no willpower!" And off he went.

Dante put a hand out to Lannette. "Please!"

Guess she couldn't resist the imploration in his earnest eyes. She put her hand in his and went.

Seeing them go off together like that only reminded me that Irvy wasn't here with me—or for me. And I was totally unused to being without him.

"My goodness, but they brought a lot of food, didn't they? My relatives never feel as though they're obligated!" Colleen remarked as she watched Tippy pile a plate high with every variety of casserole, salad, and dessert there.

"Well," I replied, "some of this feast is from the Tollefsons. Brett and Thomi made the seafood salad and those tasty meatballs there. Their mom made the chili which is

just about gone now. And one of Stephan's cousins sent a pound of the best popcorn I've ever had! But, as for *my* family—heh! Most of 'em have only the thought of outdoing each other in mind when they do their part! Guess that's good in one way. There's food for days afterward, and you can actually eat everything they bring. They've had lots of practice for this sort of thing!"

"Well, you come from big families," Colleen pointed out. "Not like this when you're from a smaller one!"

"Lucky you!"

Colleen laughed. "Crazy, isn't it? I'd've loved for such a press of people to have been assembled when my grandfather died! But Tippy was there, so I got through it!"

Which remark just served as a *further* reminder that I was going through this ordeal minus Irvy. If he didn't show up pretty soon, I'd brave the miserable weather and go look for him. Course, I'd have to brave facing his mother too. But I'd do it if it would get his comforting arms about me again! I was missing those, big time, right about then!

I guess Mom hadn't minded that my first word hadn't been Momma or Dada. Yes, for sure, *before* ever I'd uttered his name, I'd fallen in love with Irvyn Woodworth, with his sea green eyes, curly golden blonde hair, and sweet smile. Tiny, slender Irvyn who'd grown up even taller than Matt's six foot two.

If you listened to Aunt Willa and Aunt Wanda, and dear Aunt Dorene, however, I'd taken advantage of him, seducing him with my wicked feminine wiles by the time I was three—and therefore, condemned as a brazen little hussy. Which totally ticked off my mother for when Turdy kissed the little girls, he was christened a young "Don Juan", and they all sighed over what a Heartbreaker *he'd* be someday.

Dad only laughed at their double standards. As I got older, he'd tell me not to pay them any attention. That he had faith in me following the few rules he and Mom expected us to follow.

"We've never burdened you kids with a bunch of you *can'ts*, *shouldn'ts* and *don'ts*," he'd said, "You keep your rooms clean, treat others with respect, and do the same for yourself, we shouldn't have to worry about you!"

Doubtful that any values had been instilled in my heart in the first place and dubious that I'd ever embrace them if they had been, the nucleus of The Club became exasperated with my father's lax attitude. Wagging sage heads, they predicted for me next, three children by the time I was eighteen. (But no one would be surprised if it happened to me at fifteen!)

The circumstances for the whole sordid mess would, predictably, be all my fault—Irvy after all, being merely male . . . and all my respect going only for my little pleasures. It went without saying that all three infants would be taken from me and put up for adoption to be cared for by a more responsible couple. Naturally, that left my parents out.

Irvy'd borne all this nonsense well. Showed his devotion to me by remaining a one girl boy all through our school years. For a very short time, Tina had a crush on Irvy—I mean talk about *brazen hussy*! She was all over him, thinking she could take him away from me, since she was *the same age he was* and not a *baby like I was* at the time, being about fourteen then.

I was getting ready to stick snakes into her pretty tote bag, one day, when he bluntly told her, “Look, you haven’t got the guts and courage Joleigh-Anna has. You haven’t got as much as *Lannette* has! And you definitely haven’t got the same *curves*! In fact, you look like a *pumpkin*!”

Which started the Jelly-Jelly Pumpkin Belly thing anew. Don’t think she looked at him quite the same way again!

Since he’d spurned her darling daughter back then, Aunt Willa’s attacks upon my relationship with Irvy increased five-fold. Started the *such a burden to him, I’d be, should he ever actually marry me* business.

“Be impossible for him to keep his mind on his patients’ worries if he’s neck deep in his own with her! Girls who scramble to the tops of trees quicker than any boy or monkey and who insist on learning how to race cars on dangerous tracks are bound to bring heart failure and disgrace to him—and everyone else who knows her!”

Yes, ma’am, sir! I was fated to become a permanent resident of the ER, my space divided from Matt’s only by a striped curtain. Of course, there’d be just one trip to the morgue for either of us. Irvy had to be a sad fool to waste his love on me, pure and simple!

Mrs. Woodworth termed my feelings for her son plain old Puppy Love and prayed that by the end of my high school days I’d forget about him. That didn’t happen, so she prayed harder that Irvy would meet a more sophisticated young woman while away at med school, and his childhood fancy would fade into his past.

That didn’t happen either. The summer I was seventeen and Irvy had just turned twenty-one, I told him I loved him—seriously, passionately, *let’s get married* loved him. Told him so out there upon the cliffs just before we leaped into the sea. He’d just smiled and kissed me in a way he hadn’t before. When he kisses me like that, he doesn’t have to say anything else!

My parents took it in their usual stride. Wasn’t really news to them—only that I’d finally outright told him so was. We weren’t going to say a thing to Irvy’s parents. I mean it wasn’t like he’d *asked* me to marry him, after all. While we were sure his dad would be pleased, why wake the storm in his mother?

Matt, however, had thought that stupid, even chicken-hearted, and made sure they found out I’d declared myself, and that Irvy hadn’t put me off. While he cautioned us that we needn’t rush into anything right off, Dr. Woodworth gave us his official blessing. “And when you finally set the date, you be sure you save me the second dance.”

As for Mrs. Woodworth—instead of becoming angry as we’d feared, she treated the whole deal as if I were a five-year-old asking her son to play a game of House. After all, I actually was just a kid and Irvy had five more years of medical school ahead of him. Anything could happen. Plenty of time for him to find himself the girl of her dreams.

Which patronizing attitude seemed worse than any burst of anger. Was just another phase we were going through. Certainly nothing she had to take seriously! She didn’t, either. Irvy often showed me her current list of *Eligible Women For My Beloved Son*. Women with whom she tried desperately to pique his interest. We’d chuckle over her choices, making fun of them. As these girls took on careers and/or husbands, she revised the list and her hopes for her only son.

Well, once we left Irvy's house that day, Irvy grabbed Matt aside and told him that from now on, he'd better mind his own business. Matt said he *was* minding his business. What happened to me—and to Lannette and Jace—*was* his business no matter what *anyone* thought. If he felt we weren't being treated fairly by somebody, he'd be right there to put it right!

"So if you really care about her, you better yell it from the moon! Otherwise, you just walk away!"

"You don't know how lucky you are that I am going to walk away right now without flooring you! Don't you ever do anything like this again! Unless you're ready to have me run to your mother and tell her some tales *you* don't want told!"

He'd held Matt's gaze for a long moment, and for once Matt had kept silent. Guess he realized, then, that he'd been overzealous in his protection of me. Plus, there were several things Matt *was* keeping secret from Aunt Lynnore. It was the only time I remember them having a serious disagreement. After two days of enduring Irvy's cool formality, Matt begged his forgiveness and swore he'd never interfere again. And he never did. Good thing. For then his secrets could be forever safe with Irvy.

I've no idea if Irvy ever dated anyone while he was away at college. Never crossed my mind that he might, so I never asked him when he came home for vacations. As he had all through elementary and high school, he won high grades in medical school. His brilliance and determination allowed him to graduate early. Broke his mother's heart when, in front of everyone at his graduation party, he kissed me deeply and officially asked me to marry him!

Matt had whooped his joy for us, shaking Irvy's hand until it about fell off. Then he hugged me, squishing me like an Anaconda while he wished me all his best. *Then*, he'd hugged tiny Mrs. Woodworth, picking her right up off the ground and whirling once around with her! He promised her she wouldn't regret me in her family but you'd've had to've been dead not to have seen how she felt about that prediction! And deaf not to hear the opinions of my aunts. They'd insisted they'd been invited to Irvy's party by Mrs. Woodworth herself.

Pretty likely, though, they'd invited themselves. The only reason Mrs. Woodworth tolerated them within her exclusive circle of friends then, or anytime else, was because they shared her feelings about the whole deal. I think Aunt Willa knew that, so she made sure to discover Valarah Woodworth's opinion on everything else so she could kiss up to her whenever the occasion arose.

While she swallowed her disappointment and resigned herself to the inevitable, her arms were never outstretched to me when I visited there nor did she display anything but cool civility if I encountered her out and about some place. Irvy's mom sure wasn't one to pretend all was right in her world if it really wasn't. Not like Aunt Nedra would!

Lannette and Dante had been in the bathroom quite a while when Jarrett-Andrew dashed downstairs to use it. Finding it locked, he beat on the door. "I gotta go! I gotta go!" and danced around like a crazy person. "*Pleeeeeeease!* I gotta go!"

"Someone's in there, Jarrett," Mom called to him. "You'll have to wait."

"Use the bathroom upstairs," Uncle Mitch told him. "You were just up there—"

"Uncle Buck's up there, and he ain't gonna come out soon, he said, and I gotta go *now!*"

"Well, who's in there?" Aunt Dorene wondered. "I didn't see anyone go in!"

This, of course, started some speculative murmuring, which suggested that no one had paid any attention to Lannette going in there with Dante. I held my breath, waiting to see everyone's reaction when they slunk out. Lannette bought herself some time though. Yanking Jarrett in through a partly opened door, she told him, "Hurry up, Squirt! I just got in here, you know!"

Colleen and I exchanged a look and bit our lips to keep from laughing aloud. Just got in there more than a half hour ago! Thought maybe she had a chance of pulling it off, when Jarrett, finished with his business, ran out, heralding, "Hey! Hey, Joleigh! Lannette's in the baffroom with Dante, and they're kissing cause they're gonna get *married!*"

This, naturally, evoked a number of various responses from everyone assembled. But the one that bothered me the most was my own when Jarrett threw himself into my arms so happily blurting, "Now you and her can get married togedder, huh? 'Cause Irby lubs you so much, huh, Joleigh! And you lub him!"

I laughed . . . and hugged him hard to me, burying my face in the crook of his little neck. So no one would know more tears than laughter lived in me just now.

Right about then, Irvyn showed up at the side door which opened into the dining room. I could tell by the looks on their faces, that The Club hadn't thought they'd be seeing him at all today. He greeted everyone in his usual fashion, taking his time in making his way to me. Jarrett squirmed out of my hold and ran to toss himself into Irvy's arms.

"Know what, Irby? Dante and Lannette are in the baffroom and they're gonna get married!"

"They're getting married in the bathroom?" Irvy repeated, amused. "That's a first!"

Realizing they weren't going to get out of there undetected now, Lannette and Dante emerged from their unlikely haven. She wore his ring which everyone had to inspect. They chided her for becoming engaged in the bathroom and wondered about Dante's timing.

"Hey! I've been reminded that Life is Short—and full of Sorrowful Regret! I'm not willing to wait years for this, and then have something happen that keeps us apart forever—like with Matt and Krysta! Or Lawron, for that matter! I love Lannette, and if she loves me, we don't need anyone else's approval for this! Except *yours*, of course!" he said to Aunt Lynnore and Uncle Mitch.

"Dante," said Uncle Mitch, stepping over to shake Dante's hand and to hug Lannette, "you've always had it. We've been saying all along that we'd be happy if you joined the family, and we mean it!"

"Yes," agreed Aunt Lynnore, slipping in on the other side of the group to hug them both. "I'm so glad for you both!" She took a half step back so's to include me in her glance. "Maybe you will decide to make it a double ceremony!"

"We've always planned we would!" I answered at once. Then to tick off The Club, I added, "Might even happen for us the same way it did for you!" Although frankly,

I hadn't all of the details surrounding my parents and Lannette's parents' double wedding. Some of those who did didn't seem to take my announcement too kindly.

Mom and Aunt Lynnore just laughed and said they doubted it would happen exactly like theirs. If they realized it was a hint for them to relate that story, they didn't take it.

I glanced at Irvy to check out his reaction to all this. Not sure he heard it. Freddy was bending his ear just then. Jarrett jiggled in his hold, trying to get his attention again. Irvy set him down. But that's not what Jarrett wanted.

"Hey, Irby! You gotta kiss Joleigh like Dante kissed Lannette! But you don't gotta kiss all the buddies like that! On'y Joleigh, okay? Not Aunt Wi—"

"Jarrett!" Mom called out quickly. "How about some ice cream now! I think it's time for that!"

Kisses owed only to me forgotten, my little brother sped to my mother's side, and he dragged her out into the kitchen in case she suddenly changed her mind.

Waking up to the fact he was center of attention, Irvy excused himself to Freddy and moved to my side. He dropped a brief salute onto my lips. Wasn't quite what Jarrett had demanded—nor what I wanted—but it did shut people up for the moment. Gradually, they drifted back to whatever discussions they'd been involved in before Jarrett had made his momentous announcement.

"Wouldn't that kill everyone," Lannette remarked, slipping in to join us and pulling Dante after her. "Of course, we'd have to share Jarrett as ring bearer—there's no one else I'd rather have—unless it was Thomi's little brother Daine! We'd have to have all of Uncle David's girls as flower girls, though! Hard to choose just one!"

"If we eloped like our parents did, we won't need any ring bearer or flower girls!"

"True. This is hard. Should we continue in family tradition and elope—or break it so we can have Jarrett and the girls—Jaimee, if she's able—in our ceremony! *And* Jace! He'll probably be the choice for best man now, won't he, Irv?"

"We've got time to decide," Irvy responded in a tone that plainly stated *So, we're not going to decide it today!* "Where is Jace?"

"Upstairs in Matt's room," answered Lannette. "He hasn't come out since he got here. Only lets Jarrett go in. Uncle Jorden's tried to get him to come out, but he's given it up. Says he'll come out when he's ready."

"Well, why don't I go up and see what I can do?" suggested Irvy, and he left us on the words.

"Now you're not going to be able to get either one out of there," prophesied Dante. "He's not taking this so easy himself! It's like he's lost his right arm and can't adjust to it. Although, I know it's too early to expect him to have figured that out already! Be a while before any of us can do that!" He poked me. "I'd hate to see how he'd act if it was *you* we were mourning!"

"Man," uttered Lannette, her glance flickering to the staircase, then coming back to survey me worriedly, "I hope it doesn't take him forever to figure out what's what with him!"

Well, once, I'd been sure he'd have been practically face down in the dirt in inconsolable grief if something horrible happened to me. Now, I just hoped he wasn't

figuring his life would be better off without me in it. Sure felt like I was getting those kinds of vibes from him today!

About the Author



Neenah began writing fantasy and mysteries in the fifth grade, fan fiction and westerns in her teens, and romances after her mother introduced her to Harlequin Romances in her twenties.

She's had the pleasure of speaking in classrooms and at workshops about writing in general, self-publishing, and writing as a career.

Neenah's a lefty, so many of her characters are also left-handed. She has never held the opinion that it's a curse or a disability to be left-handed. Nor is it something to be ashamed of. Besides her two sisters, she has quite a few other relatives and friends who are also left handed.

Currently, she's working on the third in her romance series entitled *A Storm In My Heart* which should be out sometime this year, and is planning the fourth as yet untitled book in the series, plus several short stories.

Vermont is now home to Neenah, hubby, Andy and three of their four sons. They have two granddaughters, Mia and Keira, and a cute granddoggie, Tobi.

Some of her interests besides writing are reading, biking, hiking, horseback riding, bowling, faith, family and friends.

With Sincere Thanks!

Thank you so much for reading *Resurrecting His Love*.

I hope you enjoyed your time with Joleigh-Anna and Irvy, and their families. And that you haven't judged Joleigh too harshly for her rash plan to bring her family together. Which actually is the title of the short story version – *Bring 'Em Together, Joleigh*. In that version, she never lost Irvy's love. it was all about the family issues which I struggled with at every wake and funeral I attended.

These characters have been in my head and heart for so long they are like literal family to me. They appear as secondary characters in *His Practically Perfect Plan B Book One* and will appear as such in future books. In Stormi's story – *A Storm in My Heart* Book Three - you will meet Matt before his death and know more of that story.

Please check for updates on when those new stories will become available.

If you have the time and inclination, I'd so much appreciate it if you could give some feedback on whichever online store you purchased your copy when you have a moment to spare.

As always, you can find out about other books and stories I've written and those I'm working on by visiting my website.

Thanks again for reading *Resurrecting His Love* and for spending time with me!

With Gratitude,
Neenah

NovelsByNeenah.com
Facebook.com/NeenahDavisWilson/

More by Neenah

DreamWynd Whispers Romances *His Practically Perfect Plan B – Book One*

Stephan needs a wife immediately. Thomi needs a reason to trust. He fell for her at first sight. She, not so much.

Will trust come before his time runs out?

A Storm in My Heart – Book Three

Stormi's survived cruel obsession from her ex-husband, Dean, recently buried her true love, Lawron, and now is risking her heart again with Geoffrey. But will her past with Dean haunt this dream as well?

Ride 'Em Tough - A Short Story

One determined cowboy. One infamously ornery bronc. Which one will win today?

Thanks to Eustace – A Short Story

One chaotic day . . . One heart wrenching revelation.

Tiers of Trouble – A Short Story

What could go wrong when your twin sister's wedding is in your hands? For me . . . *EVERYTHING!*

My New York Decision – A Short Story

What's a girl to do when life leads to two completely different roads—with no map?

Hot Pepper Madness:

40+ Zesty Chili Pepper Recipes – Comfort food with a kick!