

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Whirlwind by Judith Ingram

Our journey to Oregon felt like a whirlwind. It took several months before I reached out to Rosie through long letters of despair as my situation grew more dim. She always wrote back and expressed that I was welcome to stay with her, harboring no bad feelings. Then the time came when I felt there was no other choice but to return home. I called Rosie to let her know I was on my way back. It was no surprise to her, and I believe she knew it was only a matter of time before we would return to Roseville, California. She was more than happy to return the favor. She had informed me that Shari and her little boy were renting out part of the house to help with the mortgage. I knew ahead of time the girls and I would be sleeping in the living room. I also knew I would only have the girls for a few days longer, since I made arrangements for them to live at their grandparents for a while.

We didn't have much to bring back, only what I could load in my car. I left most everything at Stephen's house. The entire trip was a big loss emotionally, physically, and materially, but at least we survived and could start over. I knew it was going to be a huge challenge and I knew I couldn't do it with the girls. Until then, I had been living on welfare assistance, ever since I left John. Now, it was time to get on my feet and start working for a living. The girls were old enough by then and this was my chance to make that difference in our lives.

As painful as it was, the girls went to live with their grandparents, and I knew not for how long. My mom was living far way out of the area with my step-father, and my dad was newly divorced and living on his own. I hadn't contacted Loren until much later, but I was saddened that she wasn't my step-mother any longer. She was, after all, my savior at one time, but we never did develop a close bond. She was more like an angel who came and went in a time of great need.

Rosie was very gracious upon our arrival. The car was packed with all we owned and I stored most of it in her garage. The girls stayed the first couple of nights with me before going to live at their grandparents. It felt like camping out in the living room but eventually I found a twin bed to escape the couch. It was good to see both Rosie and Shari and to catch up on life. Rosie made my 'booting her out' in Oregon into some kind of funny laughable story, like she had with my Lake Tahoe crawdads incident when we were younger. She did admit that it was a good thing because she needed to get herself together and that forced her to do so. I, of course, felt relieved. It seemed so strange that 'there we were, the three of us once again,' but our party days were long gone.

I felt comfortable there as I had spent a lot of time at Rosie's house during our school days, and there was plenty of room for me to stay there until I could get a place where my girls would be able to return home. In the meantime, the girls would come to visit me for a day or two. They seemed quite happy living at their grandparents, a stable home. They needed a stable home and it was worth the sacrifice to give them that, though it was hard, both because I missed them, and because I felt like a failure ... and that was humiliating to admit to their grandmother. Somehow, it seemed to prove her right, I was a bad mother, and I feared she would try to gain custody again. That fear drove me to do whatever it took to get them back.

When Rosie and Shari learned that I did stained glass they both talked me into unpacking all my glass and supplies. I had shown them some pictures I took of some the things I made, and when Shari saw the humming birds I created, she got excited, saying she could sell my stuff at work. Rosie told me to set up a work area in the kitchen and I went right to it. Shari took the first three humming birds to her workplace at Head Start, and returned with money, along with an order for 5 more. From there, word spread and soon I was spending my days making humming birds. Shari told me I had attained the name “the humming bird lady,” at her office and around the complex. People wanted specific colors for their humming birds, so I put together a list of options for custom orders. Although it kept me busy all day long, it wasn’t enough to support myself and my girls. It was barely enough to support myself so that Rosie didn’t have to.

One day Shari came home and told me of a job opening nearby where she worked, and encouraged me to put my application in. The large complex was a business center located in Auburn that housed State agencies, like Social Security, Health Department, Head Start, Legal Services and such. The job Shari told me about was at a school called, ‘Developmentally Disabled Adult Center’. I had no experience but she was very insistent I give it a shot, letting me know she had connections. The place was an adult center for mentally challenged students that ranged in ages 18 years and over - the oldest student was in his 80’s - though their mental level ranged from toddler to teen. The Center was pretty full with about 50 fulltime students ... as we referred to them, though they were more like patients.

There were two positions available, one for the Instructor, and one for the Instructor’s Assistant. I applied for the Instructor’s Assistant, as I figured there was no way I could be the Instructor ... I certainly didn’t have the credentials for that. I didn’t even have the confidence to apply for that position, but to my surprise that’s the position I was given. There was another lady there the same day I applied but she was seeking the Instructor’s position, and she had all the credentials, but was offered the assistance job. She was so offended she refused it – I only know because the Director told me. She also told me she had a lot of applicants. I asked her why she chose me. She said she felt a connection, but she couldn’t put it into words. She felt like she knew me and had a good feeling about me, and I too had a good feeling about her. She rarely invited anyone from work to her home, but she had invited me several times.

When I was told I had the job, I was both overjoyed and nervous knowing what lied ahead. I was given pretty much free rein to create my own subject criteria for the 4 classes I was to teach, as long as the other Instructors weren’t already teaching those courses. I chose to do a pottery class; a cooking class; a nature class; and an art class. I was given a mixture of students where some did nothing but stare out the window in space, to those who took interests and wanted to participate and help. Usually, all the class time was spent at the school, but upon receiving my Class B license I was able to drive the passenger van and take my entire cooking class grocery shopping. There were also around 10 students per classroom, sometimes a few more. On our trips to the store, it was quite interesting to have such a group following me around while gathering items for the next cooking class. There were always people that would stare in amazement, or perhaps it was wonder, but all the students paid no attention – they just had so much fun. Sometimes our outings were quite humorous, sometimes stressful when they would bicker like children back and forth.

There was a large kitchen in the dining area and many of the students enjoyed doing the preparation work, though I handled the dangerous job of chopping and cooking so as to not cause anyone harm. They all enjoyed devouring whatever we cooked and were so proud of themselves. Part of my responsibility was to teach the ones who had the ability to become self-sufficient for possible independent living – though I'd have to say there really was only one in my class. Some students lived in private care homes or were an adult-child living at home, but most lived in state group homes. I was required to attend educational seminars that dealt with various situations that arise in such environments, and one thing we were to be aware of was abuse. There was one incident where I had to make a report and which was investigated.

Mary had the mental level of a two-to three-year-old, though she was in her late 60's. I watched as her state-of-mind grew deeper into withdraw. She went from a happy spirit to a dark spirit. Upon examination, she showed signs of physical and mental abuse after she had been moved into a new care home.

My job was a much bigger responsibility than I had imagined. It was a huge challenge and a highly emotional draining position, and at times I wished I had got the assistance job ... but it was also very rewarding and fulfilling in a spiritually personal manner. I really enjoyed our nature class, taking walks and gathering leaves and flowers and rocks and whatever they found and were proud of. Occasionally I would take the class to the park. Many of them were also in my art class and we would make artwork from the items they gathered. In my pottery class we had a potter's wheel, but most of them just played with the clay. The ones who had the ability could use the wheel and together we made a lot of different things. We didn't have a kiln but we were able to paint the dried clay.

They were like little children who fought almost daily over this and that. There was jealousy at times. Some had coupled up and held hands, sometimes even kissing. Others enjoyed rambling and telling stories – most just loved to chatter. One man, who was in his 30's, had down syndrome. He believed he was Elvis Presley. Robbie lived at home with his family and was probably better off than most. He was different than the others, although not the only down syndrome student at the Center. His parents bought him a guitar and at the dance parties the Center occasionally hosted, Robbie would get on stage singing while playing Elvis songs. He was quite entertaining, quite fun to watch that short, chubby little man with dark shades and curly locks rockin' to his own tunes. It was fun to watch them all dancing and having a time of their life. They all had such great souls.

Every morning, Monday through Friday, the mini bus would drop off the students, and every morning a large group would swarm around me, all chattering at the same time, all wanting attention. All the other Instructors had been there for years, and the newness had long worn off. I was like a source of new energy that drew them to me. Their need for attention seemed to ease a little with time, but the needs of the few continued to drain me.

I became close to the bus driver, who also was the fulltime maintenance man. Earl had worked there for 5 years. We were about the same age and struck up a friendship during our lunch hour together in the staff dining area. He told me stories about the complex and all the adjoining and scattered buildings. Connected to our building was what once held people with severe mental

disorder, but it remained vacant after having been shut down decades before. It was once an asylum for the insane. Apparently, the building our Center housed was part of that asylum. He told me in all the years he had worked there some people had seen ghosts, and heard strange sounds. I found his stories interesting, though I really gave no deep thought about it after that. The job was too time consuming and mentally exhausting to focus on much else, but occasionally I did wonder if I would ever see a ghost, but I never did.

Earl was a simple man. I wouldn't describe him as a country boy but more like a hillbilly. I wasn't much attracted to him but I felt comfortable around him. He certainly didn't weaken my knees nor cause my heart to pound like Stephen did. I surely didn't melt to his touch, but I felt a contentment around Earl. It was a feeling of security, I suppose, thinking I wouldn't have to feel jealousy. If anything, he was a little insecure around me, but the more we got to know each other the closer we grew. Life finally began to look hopeful again.

The girls enjoyed coming to see me at Rosie's and they liked playing with Shari's boy, Dean. Dean was Lea Ann's age, about 10 years old. One day Lea Ann, Karey, and Dean were in his bedroom playing, as they often did, when it got very quiet and Shari and I got very suspicious. We snuck down the hall and carefully opened the door to see what they were doing. What we found was Dean and Lea Ann under the blanket with half their clothes off. Karey was sitting on the floor playing with a toy, unaware of what her sister was doing. But we knew, and we were both shocked, although, it was really funny and we tried not to laugh. They were so embarrassed and afraid they were going get in trouble. Instead, we had a little talk with them about boys and girl stuff. As soon as we went into the living room, Shari and I cracked up laughing. From then on, we took precautions to make sure that never happened again.

It had only been a few months living at Rosie's when Shari announced she was moving out. A place came available in Rocklin, closer to her work. I think the real reason was she wasn't getting along well with Rosie and her drinking. After Shari moved out, I was able to move into her bedroom, and when the girls came to stay, they took Dean's room. I had packed away my stained-glass stuff shortly after going to work ... my humming bird days had been laid to rest, for now. Orders had pretty much slowed down to nothing by then. Rosie got much worse in her drinking after Shari left. She started bringing men home from the bar and sleeping all day (apparently Shari would never allow her to bring men to the house, especially with Dean there). It reminded me of her when she lived with me in Oregon, and that didn't end well. I felt things heading in that direction once again.

About a month after Shari moved out, she invited me to move in with her. As things got worse at Rosie's, I decided to make the move. Her duplex had plenty of room for me, but no room for the girls. Rosie seemed fine with me leaving, perhaps even relieved. Now, she'd have no shame for her drinking and she'd have her house all to herself. After moving in with Shari, Earl started coming around. We went out on a few dates and became romantically involved. It was something we had to keep a secret since the Center forbid employees personal relationships. Everything was going good between us until the day Stephen walked into the Center and turned my world upside down.

Stephen had sold his house in Oregon and came looking for me. Apparently, his kids went back to Nevada City to live with their mother. The moment my eyes laid upon his presence, my heart pounded in a panic. I quickly rushed toward him and lead him back outside. I stood at a distance, guarded, asking why he came. He said he needed to talk to me. I asked him how he found me. He said Rosie told him. I decided to hear what he had to say so we made arrangements for him to meet me at Shari's place after I got off work. I was scared of showing my weakness around him, that still possessed me. I told him immediately I was involved with someone. I told him he shouldn't have come, but he insisted he couldn't get me out of his head and heart. I was surprised he sold his house, the historical home we both started to restore. He said he finished the work, but it wasn't a home anymore after I left.

Stephen left that day giving me the address where he'd be staying for a while. He said if I change my mind, to come see him. Seeing Stephen really messed up my head. There was no denying I still had strong feelings for him, but I didn't want to go down that road again. Seeing Stephen pushed into deeper into Earl's life. He felt like my escape and it was successful.

Things were going good between Earl and myself. We had a lot of fun working together with the students. They loved him and loved hanging out with him. He was patient, and kind. I put Stephen behind me and moved on, feeling good about that decision. At the Center I asked the Director about Earl and taking some of the students on a trip to China Town in San Francisco. I was excited when she approved. We had a lot of fun that day. The students were in awe.

Things quickly escalated and before long we made the decision to announce our relationship at work. We knew at that point one of us had to resign, and of course the obvious choice was myself. It had been a year and I was ready to resign. I think I was so drained from the student's needs that it felt more like a needed recovery period. I did receive an impressive letter of recommendation from the Director, though I never needed it nor did I ever use it.

Earl was good man. I came to trust him. He seemed to get along with my girls, and my girls seemed to like him. I trusted his faithfulness and that was something very important to me. I felt happy I was finally going to bring my girls home. At the time he told me he had been married before and had children of his own, but he hadn't seen them in years as they moved out of state. He didn't really talk about himself that much, I really knew little about his past, and I suppose he really knew little about mine. Most of our time spent together had been at work.

I probably rushed things too quickly, but so much time had passed since returning to California, and not having my girls was weighing heavy on me, especially since they were eager to come back. We decided to get married in Nevada. It was a spare of the moment decision one weekend when we drove up the mountain to Carson City. We didn't have a ring, or much money, so we stopped at a variety store to buy a cheapie. It wasn't much but I didn't much care. I just wanted to do it, get it over kind of thing, neither one of us wanted to have wedding and all that. We found a nice Chapel and had the ceremony. We stayed the night at a cheap motel and enjoyed the evening together getting high on pot and watching TV.

I moved out of Shari's and moved in with Earl after he vacated his small apartment in Colfax and cleaned up an old camp trailer on his dad's property in Alta, located in the Sierra Nevada

foothills. It was quite a way up the mountain from Auburn, but he was used to the long drive to work. Alta is a remote and charming little town where Earl had spent much of his youth. His dad owned a beautiful piece of land surrounded by towering old-growth pine trees. After Earl cleaned up the old camp trailer he managed to connect his old broken-down panel truck to the trailer and make a place for the girls to sleep. He sealed it up as tight as he could to one of the doors. It worked out good since the trailer had two doors.

The girls slept together in a mattress that fit perfect inside. He also sealed up the cab for the cold winter ahead, though the girls complained they were always cold. He also built shelves to place their folded clothes, and later we discovered them molding. Earl found a very small pot belly stove and somehow was able to tuck it in between the kitchen and sitting area. It really was a true scene of a hillbilly's life.

I loved the quiet county, the scent of pine, and the various wildlife, and so did the girls, though they didn't much like the living condition – it certainly was not cozy but rather very cramped – but at that point, they didn't care where they lived as long as they were with me. At first, it felt like an adventure, an adventure that grew more like torture. As the cold winter got harder with snow, the girls were cooped up and bored. Every morning when Earl left for work, I got the girls ready for school and walked them back and forth to the bus stop just up the road. After a while, they told me they wanted to go by themselves with the other kids who flocked together in the cold. So, I finally let them go on their own.

When the winter was passing and the days becoming warmer, Lea Ann decided she wanted to join the small county Church in town. Some of the girls at school attended there and she wanted to see what it was all about. Christianity and the Bible were not new to her, she grew up being taught that way, the way I was brought up. But we never attended a Church, and she was curious. She seemed to enjoy it so much she went by herself every Sunday, and she decided one day she wanted to be baptized. We all attended her baptism.

Town consisted of the Church, a small grocery market, a tiny post office about the size of a large walk-in closet, an old-fashioned café, a one pump gas station, a two-truck fire station, a small animal feed store, and one school for all ages. It was a picturesque surrounding deep in the forest, nestled among the mountains, among a community of some very friendly folks.

His father's house had a large basement so I could finally get all my belongings back - the few things I still owned - out of Rosie's garage. It also had a woodstove and work benches. I was excited to be able to set up my stained-glass shop and start cutting again. Every day I would go to the basement and fire up the woodstove, working away for countless hours. I managed to make enough items to take part in the local arts and crafts fair that next spring. I met a very nice lady who we had a very nice chat. She asked me if I would be interested in working at her restaurant. She told me if I was interested to come in and see if I would like it, telling me it was five or so miles up the highway. An off-road place where tour buses stopped off for lunch on their way to Lake Tahoe and Reno, she said, as did travelers pulling off the freeway to grab a bite to eat.

I talked it over with Earl and he thought it was a good idea to go back to work. Earl and I took a drive up the mountain and checked it the next weekend. It was a really nice restaurant hidden off the highway, very rustic and inviting. I met with the lady and took the job. I ended up working by myself most of the time, practically running the place. She knew when the buses usually showed up, so most of the time she was there to help with the lunch crowd. We made the best hamburger I had ever tasted! She had a secret spice mix that she wouldn't tell a soul, not even me.

I worked there until the following winter when I could no longer travel through the snow. We made it through the winter, barely, it seemed, when things were not going so well in our confined living situation. Lea Ann discovered her clothes were getting mildew and she became very upset. Earl and I seemed to be fighting a lot and one night when the girls were sound to sleep, we got into another argument that escalated into a physical attack. We were lying in bed where I was trapped against the wall. Earl had the look of a crazed man and he kept threatening me to shut up. I kept yelling at him to get off of me but he wouldn't let up, when suddenly he grabbed my head and started slamming it against the wall. I screamed 'Help' over and over, and just then Lea Ann came running into the room and leaped on Earls back, screaming and kicking, "Stop hurting my mom!" Earl flung her off as she hit the wall and fell to the floor. Suddenly he snapped out of it. He abruptly got up and went into the living room area and sat down, hanging his head low. I was shocked, but I was more concerned for my daughter. It was a horrible thing to experience.

Lea Ann crawled into the bed and held me in tears. She was scared to death, and I knew then that our situation was not working. After that I had a talk with Earl and he admitted that sometimes he snaps and loses control when he's pushed over the edge, telling me how he once killed a man once in a fight. It was self-defense, but all the same it left me feeling unsafe, unsure of what he could do if I pushed him too far again. After that I never let our arguments reach that level, and he seemed to keep better control of his anger. But after that I saw Lea Ann grow more distant from her step-father, and in turn I saw his attitude change with her as well. That experience was the turning point of our failure, but I wasn't going to give up yet. It was one incident that never happened again.

Then something horrible happened one early morning. The girls had just left for school, and I was preparing a cup of coffee when a jeep came flying into the driveway. A man jumped out and ran for the door, but before he knocked, I opened it up, my heart already pounding. He said something had happen to my daughter and I needed to come quickly. I threw on some clothes and grabbed my purse. As we were driving away, I fearfully asked what happened. He said she had been bit by a dog. He sped as fast as he could down the road when I saw a group of people huddled in a circle off to the side. When the jeep stopped, I jumped out and ran toward them. As I approached, they opened a path for me to see Lea Ann's face wrapped in a bloody towel. In a frantic state, shaking, the lady holding the towel pulled it away, and the sight of it totally freaked me out. Her bottom lip had been bitten off, it was mangled and bleeding. I quickly took her into my arms and jumped into emergency mode.

One of the neighbor ladies offered to take Karey while I swooped Lea Ann up and the kind man, who I had never seen before, took us to the hospital. It was a long way to the hospital. All I could do is comfort her, holding her closely, keeping the towel across her mouth. She didn't, couldn't

speak, she just cried in excruciating pain. Her body was shivering and shaking. It felt like the longest ride I had ever had.

When we got to the ER, I rushed in holding her in my arms, screaming, help. A doctor came running over, took one look at her and said there wasn't anything they could do there, and I needed to take her to the office of reconstructive doctor and they would call ahead. We hurried back to the jeep and quickly drove to the address they gave us. Again, I rushed in with my daughter in my arms, straight to the check in window. No one was there, I yelled "Help," and a woman came walking in. No one had called ahead. I explained the situation, and showed her the horrible damage the dog did, and woman gasped. Quickly she took us into a room where the doctor came right in.

When the doctor saw the damage, he immediately called the hospital and set up a reconstructive surgery. He was able to give her pain medicine, and she finally calmed down. She held onto me for life. She was scared, and I was sick to my stomach. We ended up taking her back to the hospital, not the ER, and she was taken right in to prep for the procedure. The man and I went to the cafeteria and sat down after got all the paperwork done. That's when I felt the shock hit me. It felt like a nightmare, and I just wanted to wake up.

Finally, after hours, someone came and told us she did fine and I could go see her. Although she and I survived the ordeal, her story didn't end there as she had to go through several more reconstructive procedures. The people who owned the dog had to put it down. I wasn't going to sue them, until several people in the area said that dog had bit kids before and was warned to keep it inside their fence. That morning, for some reason, they left the gate open, and my daughter - loving animals - thought it was so cute. When she bent over to pet its head, it lurched out and chomped her lip. I decided then to sue the people, and their insurance paid a hefty price, nearly seven years later, and, in which the attorney took a huge amount. By then I had left that life behind was living in Oregon.

Following that terrible day, summer had arrived. Earl and I decided it was time we bought a much bigger, far nicer, newer RV, and we set it up in a different space on the property, as moving the old camp trailer was not an option. The old tires were shot. In the new trailer, the girls had their own little private bedroom with bunkbeds. Just having the little bit of extra space made a huge difference. And the beautiful spring and summer months gave us all breathing space. That summer, Earl had his daughter for a few weeks ... the daughter he had never mentioned, only because he hadn't seen her in years, he confessed. Apparently, a former girlfriend had recently reappeared one day at his work, wanting him to take his daughter for a while. He thought it wasn't important to share that with me because he didn't know if he would ever see her again. The entire thing was a bit disturbing to find out he had another child, but I tried to make the best of it. She took the girl to his work and dropped her off there, just as she picked her back up there too.

We took a family camping trip to Idaho that summer ... the worse trip ever. I think it was that trip when I felt my feelings change for Earl. Things didn't seem the same after that. My girls didn't act like they cared for his daughter, who was the same age as Lea Ann ... and to be honest, I felt something very weird about her myself. Earl was not very affectionate to her either,

but she was constantly hanging all over him. I was rather glad when she left, and I know my girls were relieved. The summer went by way too quick and autumn was upon us.

When winter had returned, life was so much nicer in the warm trailer. The girls were - I wouldn't say content - were keeping themselves occupied. School was a good outside escape for them, and Lea Ann was still going to Church. One of the neighbors would take her. For myself, I had the basement to where I continued to do my glass work, getting ready for the next arts and crafts fair.

We got through another winter with less stress, but like myself, I sensed the girls weren't happy. Things got worse with Lea Ann and Earl, attitudes that caused him to treat her mean at times. Karey, as always, was quiet and kept to herself.

When spring and summer had arrived, I opened the awning and set up a table and chairs outside, along with lots of potted plants. I missed my plants so much that it gave me comfort to have some again. Things were doing pretty well. We got a dog and the girls just loved him. He was just a mut, but he resembled a golden retriever. They girls named him Ralph. Then one day Earl and his dad had a big falling out and Earl said we had to move. We rented an RV space in a nearby area where a small group of folks lived, some in small camp trailers, some in larger RVs, some in tents and some in teepees. The girls made friends quickly and had fun playing. We had been there a couple of months when one day the girls were playing with their friends, screaming and running and chasing each other, as kids do, and our dog somehow thought they were in danger. He had never done such a horrid thing before, but he suddenly went after one of the kids and attacked her ... bit her on the leg and back. It was scarier than anything, although the dog did break skin, a little bit. I was able to call him back immediately, as the girl ran home crying. It was an awful fright, and we didn't hesitate, sadly, to put our dog to sleep, rather than face charges.

Earl patched things up with his dad and we moved back to his property. I really don't know what happened, but after that, things with Earl changed. He stopped being affectionate. He was irritated with the girls all the time, moody and disconnected. Our communication died, and I found myself getting depressed. I felt that old familiar feeling of being trapped, suffocated, wilting away. Earl never said anything, but it felt like he wasn't happy with having his little family anymore. I felt he felt the same as I, but neither one of us could admit it. One day I called my brother Rusty in Oregon and told him I wanted out, I needed help, again.

I didn't tell Earl that my brother was coming, and I hadn't packed a thing to give him a clue. My brother arrived nearly at midnight, and surprised him. I had been waiting up for their arrival, nervous about the entire escape plan. I was afraid to tell to him because I feared how his reaction might be. I knew if my brother was there, he could protect me if he blew up. I just wasn't sure of his state of mind then. My sister-in-law was also with my brother and they brought a bunch of boxes with them. The girls and I and my sister-in-law started packing our clothes, and personal items, while my brother sat on the sofa with Earl. Earl just sat there, quiet, not moving an inch. He just watched us pack up and drive away. He never even tried to contact me after that.

We left California that cold dark night and by morning we were back in Oregon, again. This time we were living way up in the mountains on my brothers five-acre property. A new life had begun.

My mom helped me buy a small RV and my brother set it up. The girls started school and I got a job as a special ed teachers assistant. For a while it was just the girls and me. It felt wonderful to be free again. I was able to file the divorce papers and put that life behind me. I was sad that another hopeful relationship turned dark and ugly, as they all seemed to do.

I used to have lunch at the only restaurant in town up in Camas Valley. I got to know the owner pretty well from chit chat. When school was out he hired me to waitress and we started spending more time together. Then he asked me I would like to help him with his bookkeeping. He taught me how to run a business. He would take me on his runs to town for supplies, a very long drive down the mountain. We talked a lot and he talked about selling his place, which included his house behind the restaurant, and looking for employment elsewhere. The idea sound intriguing and he asked me if I wanted to go on a road trip.

That road trip ended up moving to Vail, Colorado into the penthouse of a ski lodge where he was hired as the General Manager, and I agreed to move there with him, with my girls. It was unbelievable. Life was one big whirlwind ... and it didn't stop there.

That was the beginning of the worst decision I had ever made, that turned out to be a true blessing ... it just took going through a nightmare to get there.