

CHAPTER SIX

The Oregon Journey by Judith Ingram

A new life awaited us in Oregon. It was our first big adventure and the girls were very excited. It didn't appear to affect them in a sad way, even though they were leaving their grandparents and father ... though he hadn't been much of one anyway. He, however, was angry that I was taking his kids far away, yet he never put up any kind of legal fight. He knew the reason I was leaving, as did everyone else. It was the only path I could see to take to save myself and my little girls. I truly felt it was the best and wisest decision – one given to me through the Holy Spirit. The path opened and I took it!

It was a moment I leaped with faith to face a freedom that many feared; the unknown and the uncertainty. Some said it was very brave of me, some said they thought I was a bit crazy to uproot my girls and take off to a place I had no idea where I'd land ... yet, few believed I was really going to go. When I did, many were quite surprised. For me, it was exciting and scary and wonderful all at once. The year was 1976. I was 23 years old. My girls were ages 7 and 3.

I knew in my heart, confirmed in my mind, that I was leaving, even before my brother had arrived. I wanted to see Rosie and say goodbye, to let her know I was moving to Oregon. She was staying in Nevada City, California, at her folks and it had been a long time since I'd spoken to her. I had never been to her folk's cabin in Nevada City, a town I had visited a few times before. Such a unique historical place that holds many memories. The cabin was a small two bedroom with a huge greenhouse tucked away off the road hidden by overgrowth. Rosie gave me her bed and she slept on the couch. I hadn't taken the girls because it didn't seem appropriate, and they were more than happy to stay at grandmas.

I arrived early afternoon and shared a meal with Rosie and her folks. Her mother was always fond of me. We always had a good laugh about the crawdads at Kings Beach, Lake Tahoe. Those crazy summer days of our youth. I didn't ever really know her dad, though I'd been around him many times before at their home in Roseville, where Rosie had still resided. Later on, we drove to the old town saloon for one last night of drinking and having fun together. There was loud music playing from the jukebox and the sound of pool balls clanging, along with a lot of drinking and talking going on. After a couple of hours of reminiscing of the 'good ol' days' we were heading out the door when a very good-looking man was coming in. The tall, dark, and handsome guy locked his stare into my eyes, and stood firmly right in front of me. I smiled at him, as he asked, "Where you going?" Rosie took one look at me and said, "Ah shit, I'm having another drink," and she went and sat back down at the bar. It was too loud and smoky inside and he invited me for chat outside.

He said his name was Stephen, telling me he lived in Nevada City part of the time, but that he was a fireman and moved around a lot. He explained his rough and rustic appearance telling me he had just returned from a fire in Placer County. His smokey, shaggy long dark hair and weathered attire revealed his well fit physical build. Everything about him was hard to resist. He said he was just dropping in to see some familiar faces and have a cold brew, though his mesmerizing brownish green deeply luring eyes were fully focused on me, and I was undeniably lured. He wanted to know everything – who I was, where I came from - and I shared a bit about myself, as

he shared a bit about himself, including that he was nearly a decade older ... and his maturity was evident of that. Then I informed him about my upcoming journey to Oregon, and a little of how that all came about. I let him know I had only come to see my friend and say goodbye. He was really bummed about that, but he gave me his address and asked me to write him, to let him know how the adventure went. He was quite funny and I was laughing like a school girl when about half hour later Rosie came out and said she was ready to go. I knew that look ... she was past her alcohol limit. Stephen walked us both to the car, saying he hoped to hear from me someday, flashing his adorable smile under his rather bushy mustache ... and like a gentleman he opened and closed the door, giving me a warm hug.

I had only stayed at Rosie's for the night. I picked up the girls at their grandparents and watched all the sad eyes watching them in the rear window as I drove away. For the next couple of days Rusty and I started to load the UHaul truck. Before we had left, my party friend Shari said a friend of hers had moved to Grants Pass, Oregon, a couple of years earlier. Although she hadn't spoken to her friend in a long time, she kindly offered to try and contact her friend to see if we could stay a night or two ... but she wasn't able to reach her before we left. Shari gave me her friend's phone number, and I was hopeful she would reach her before we arrived, but it wasn't something I counted on ... though it was something, which was better than nothing. It wasn't so much a place to crash, as it was to have a local contact. It was sad to leave all my friends, although I knew I would see them again, someday, yet hopeful for new friends in a new life.

The funny story I tell everyone is my entire life, everything I owned, my children, pets, plants, and even my car was all inside that UHaul truck. My mom had recently helped me buy a used car, when my old one died. I bought the cutest tiny Honda I had ever seen. It looked like a bright orange mini-car, which fit into the back of the UHaul truck perfectly. Honda only made a certain amount of them, and no one had ever seen anything like it. It was the craziest thing, but we managed to place runner boards so Rusty could drive it right into the back of the truck. I also took my 20-gallon fish tank, with enough water for my two fish and my bird cage with Birdie inside. Needless to say, the truck was loaded to the max.

Early in the morning we all got in the cab of the truck and rolled out of town. Away we went ... on our ten-hour drive. It was still daylight when we crossed the border, and as we came over the top of Ashland Mountain, it was absolutely breathtaking. I knew in that moment why people called Oregon "God's Country". I knew in that moment, we were blessed. The girls were very excited, with complete trust that they would have a home again. I had complete trust in the Lord, probably more than any other time in my life.

When we reached Grants Pass, I called Shari's friend, Lynette, from a pay phone. She had spoken to Shari and was very kind to let us stay at her home. Everything was going well upon our arrival. Rusty found a place to park the UHaul truck, and we visited for a while waiting for her husband get home from work. He was surprised by our presence, but polite, and we all sat down together and ate dinner. They had two little kids, and the girls got along good with them, sleeping in their bedroom curled up in blankets on the floor. I stayed on the couch, and Rusty made a bed on the living room rug. In the morning, after Lynette's husband left for work, she said her husband wasn't happy that we were there and it would be best if we found another place to stay. We were grateful for the night, all the same ... after a long tiring trip. I used her phone to

call my mom to let her know we made it safely, and that's when she told me she had just talked to my grandma (her mother), learning we had a cousin who lived in Rogue River. The news lifted our spirit as we set out to find her.

Rogue River was only a few miles away. A tiny little town. We figured it shouldn't be hard to find her, so we parked the truck and walked around asking people if they knew her. One lady said, try the tavern. At the tavern we learned she was living far out in the country, and after the long scenic drive past acres and acres of lush green fields, we learned upon arrival she had moved back into town. We were given a possible known address, but we were unsure of who would actually answer the door. To our delight it was our cousin, Vivian. When we told her who we were, she threw her arms around us and told us to come on in. Vivian was older than us, and she remembered who we were from our childhood family reunions. Vivian not only gave us a place to stay, she had a large shed to store all my stuff.

Her house was a very small 2 bedroom, so Rusty and the girls and I all shared her kid's bedroom, and her kids shared her bedroom. There were two twin beds, which Rusty and I slept in, and the girls slept on the floor. We had to return the UHaul truck a couple of days later, so she helped us unload it ... but first, we had to get the car out. Rusty wasn't sure it was a good idea to try and unload the car with the runner boards, so we decided not use them and instead try to find another solution. I left the girls at Vivian's while Rusty and I drove around in search of a good place get my car out of that truck. When we saw a house with a raised front yard, and its solid brick retaining wall, which was at the perfect height for the task, Rusty backed the truck right to it. He jumped out and opened the back of the truck and I jumped in and backed the car out. Thankfully no one saw us. I drove the car across the lawn and circled around to the driveway, while he shut the door and took off ... me following behind him. It was during this process I realized the fish tank had cracked and all the water was soaked into the floorboards, and sadly my fish were dead.

The next day I followed him in the car while he drove the truck to Eureka, CA. I had no idea until then that there was a massive flood of people pouring into Oregon ... in the likes no one had ever seen, and we were in the stream. We were told there was not one place in Oregon that had room to receive another 'out-of-state' truck on their lot, and Eureka, California was the closest place available to return the UHaul truck. The girls had stayed back as it was a long trip, and it was quite late in the evening when we returned. The first thing we did the next day was start to search for a place to rent. That's when the reality really set in that Oregon was overwhelmed with people flooding the area (though we would soon learn it wasn't just that area). For several early mornings we stood in line at the newspaper building in Grants Pass to get the first copy off the press in hopes of finding a place, though that proved futile. The line grew longer every day, stretching out for over a block. Finally, we decided to venture out further away, so every day we would pack up the girls and go for a drive ... 50 miles this way, 50 miles that way. It was the same everywhere, no rentals available.

After nearly two weeks had passed, I was growing hopeless. It was depressing living at my cousins ... crowded and loud with kids playing and the TV blasting. Vivian wasn't married and didn't appear to have a boyfriend. She was single and drank a lot. One night I cried into my pillow with a deep gut wrenching, as I prayed in desperation. I pleaded with the Lord asking why

He had brought us there, and now I felt forsaken. I trusted and had faith, but in that moment I felt abandoned. I begged Him to show us the way. I pleaded in tears for help.

The next morning, Rusty was scratching like crazy. He had an itch or two in the weeks before, but in the past few days his whole body was on fire. He couldn't take it anymore and asked our cousin where the nearest Veteran's hospital was. She said Roseburg, which was about 70 miles up the mountain, north. The girls were tired of being in the car and wanted to stay and play with the kids, so that morning Rusty and I headed for Roseburg. Upon our arrival, I dropped Rusty off at the VA telling him I was going to get a newspaper and check out the rentals. There were only two. One was an apartment, one a house. I called the apartment first because it was cheaper, and it had already been rented. Typical response I assumed the same for the house, but was shocked when the man said it was still available ... though he said a lady had just come to look at it and went to get her husband. He said it could be gone any minute, indicating he already had received several calls. I panicked and asked where it was, willing to take the chance. The town was called Riddle, and was about 25 minutes from where I was, he said. I drove as fast as I could, praying all the way. It took longer than he said, only because I didn't know where I was going and got a little lost on the way.

As I drove along that long, winding, beautiful country road toward the house, admiring the sparkling river lined with huge shade trees, my heart leaped with both hope of finding our home and the fear of not arriving in time. I prayed evermore I would get there before anyone else. When I pulled into the driveway, I only saw one old pickup truck. As I turned to study the house, I was in awe of its large barn-style two-stories, with a giant size oak tree towering over the entire front yard. There was a carport and a small shed off to the side, with only a few houses sprawled about in the distance. It was too good to be true and I got excited, though nervous that any minute that lady would show up.

The old man came out to greet me, telling me I had made it before the other lady. Before he took me inside, he wanted to know more about who was going to be living there, jobs, and income stuff. We chatted a bit and I assured him we were good for the money, pulling out a stack of \$100.00 bills and offering him several months in advance without even seeing inside. He didn't want to take it until I walked completely through the house. I was nervous more than ever as time passed, fearful that the lady was going show up with her husband and claim she saw it first.

There wasn't a stick of furniture, or a picture on the wall, until I went upstairs. As I entered the first bedroom it was empty and fairly good size. I turned to enter the second bedroom and I nearly fell to my knees. The only thing in the room was a large framed painting of Jesus hanging on the wall, staring right at me ... and my heart sunk with relief ... this was home. It was the exact picture that sat by my mother's bed during my childhood church going days. It was a sign, and in that moment, I knew I had not been forsaken.

When I told the man my story, with happy tears in my eyes, he was more than pleased to take my money. We filled out the rental agreement, he gave me the keys, and I rushed back to get Rusty. Rusty was waiting outside the Veteran's hospital, sitting on the curb. He was very upset at me when he got into the car. "Where the fuck have you been?" He asked, "I've been waiting for over an hour." I handed him the rental agreement, telling him what happened. Instantly, he calmed

down. The first thing we did was get his medicine to cure his scabies, which was why he itched so badly, though we had no idea how he got them, but he said they were contagious ... thankfully the girls and I escaped them. On the way back to Rogue River I had him drive out to the house to see it. The old man was gone, so we took a look around. Rusty was totally blown away, as was I. I realized, when the old man told me he had just got the house ready that day, I knew then that it wasn't ready for us until that very moment. Had we gone to Roseburg a day earlier or a day later, or even an hour too late, we never would have got that house. Everything worked out perfect. The house, the location, everything was what I dreamed of, and my heart was ever-so grateful. My trust and faith in the power of God had been further strengthened ... and I couldn't wait to tell the girls!

The next day we rented a smaller UHaul truck and I followed Rusty in the car with the girls. Fortunately, Roseburg was accepting 'in-state' trucks. The girls were so excited when we arrived, running all through the house and then around the yard. We all walked across the road and sat along the riverbank, basking in the glory of our blessing. It was a new beginning, not only for the girls and I, but my brother too. It took a couple of months before my state assistance began to support us, as I had no education or skills to hold a job. Until then, Rusty paid for everything. It was about four months later when he met a lady in town. It wasn't long after that when he moved out, and moved in with Sharon. Sharon became my sister-in-law. She had come to Oregon years before us and knew a lot of people, really cool people. When they moved to Tiller, a very remote area in the back mountains, the girls and I had the pleasure of seeing people who lived off the land, in teepees and tents. We even saw a mid-wife give birth to a newborn. It was a very spiritual experience. Oregon was an answered prayer, a gift, a vision come true, and it's been my home ever since. The odd thing was, we landed in a town called Riddle, and that certainly summed up my life ... a real riddle!

One day I decided to write Stephen, and in that letter, I invited him to come to Oregon. That letter never saw a returned response until one day about a month later I was outside working in the yard when I saw him walking down the quiet country road, coming straight toward me. I couldn't believe my eyes. He was the most charming man I had ever met, and the sexiest man I had ever known. I was a bit shy, and he was a bit funny. I gave him my brothers room to stay in while we got to know each other. Things seemed pleasantly easy around him. He took to the girls as if they were his own, and they enjoyed his company ... making them laugh a lot. He really was a joker and loved the attention. His impression of Donald Duck was a favorite.

When he arrived, he only had a backpack with few personal belongings. He said he left everything behind, telling me that after receiving my letter - when his last fire-fighting job had ended - he felt a strong yearning to buy a bus ticket and head to Oregon on faith. The strong bond we both had felt in Nevada City was still very much present, and that bond only grew deeper. As time went by, it felt like we were truly a family. It was a wonderful time ... for a while.

Stephen went right to work at the local lumber mill. His shift was in the evening and I used to wait up for him every night, with a home cooked meal waiting. He was very handy around the house and yard, and spent much time paying attention to the girls. On the weekends we spent the evenings watching TV together. It seemed so natural, the two of us curled up on the sofa while

the girls sat bundled up in warm blankets on the floor. Winter seemed rather long and we all couldn't wait for Spring. One day, on a trip to town, my car broke down on the road. We walked the rest of the way and located a tow truck to haul the car back to the house. Without a car Stephen was getting a ride to work from another employee. Then one day Stephen came home in a faded red classic 1950s Ford pickup truck. It wasn't the most comfortable ride but it was the most attention grabber. Everywhere we went folks were taking notice. I discovered Oregon is big on antique cars and trucks, holding parades just for their showcasing.

Stephen seemed to be getting more attention than I liked, especially from the women. My jealousy was one of my weaknesses and it caused a problem for us. It didn't matter where we went, women were always staring at him, flirting with him, and he seemed to enjoy it too much ... telling his jokes and getting laughs. When he started spending a lot of time at the tavern in town, things got more distant between us. I suspected something was going on with one lady who worked at the grocery store. I sensed it every time we went shopping and ended up at her register. She seemed much too friendly, and wooed over my girls while flashing her big smile at him. It must have been a long time coming when my suspicion was confirmed. One night he didn't come home from work and I felt emotionally ill knowing he had slept with her. That next morning, I got Lea Ann off to school on the bus and while Karey was quietly watching TV, I saw his pickup pull into the carport. I dashed outside before he could enter the house and accused him of having an affair. It was the only thing I could ration in my state of deep hurt and fury angry. He had never seen me that distraught as I demanded he tell me where he stayed the night. I suppose he had no way to hide the truth, I'd find out one way or another ... it was a small town and everyone knew each other's business. He admitted what I really didn't want to hear ... an admittance of more than I ever imagined, and it left a huge void in my heart.

Hearing him tell me how he had a sexual problem, a weakness he had not ever been able to control, brought tears to my eyes. The man I loved didn't feel I was enough to satisfy him. I wasn't enough to make him happy. I was crushed. He tried to comfort me, saying that he loved me but that he needed the variety ... saying how much he appreciates the beauty of women, all kinds of women, but that he didn't mean he didn't love me, and it didn't mean he loved them. It was just sex. I tried to find some acceptance to his needs but I began to pull away from him. I knew his temptation would never end and I just couldn't find happiness in that kind of relationship, yet, I couldn't let him go. Instead, I tried to be more for him. I surrendered myself for his fantasies in hopes of fulfilling his needs, and he promised me he would refrain from his temptation. I gave him a chance to prove he could be faithful and he never stayed the night out again, and his trips to the tavern became less as he spent more time at home.

When summer break had arrived, and Lea Ann was out of school, the girls wanted to spend their summer with their dad and grandparents in California. Stephen drove us in his pickup truck. My broken-down Honda sat useless in the driveway for months, and I wondered if it was ever going to get fixed. The drive in the pickup was terribly uncomfortable, bouncing up and down at every crack in the road for over 8 hours, all four of us crunched together. We dropped the girls off at their grandparents on our way to see a friend of Stephen's, where we planned to stay the night. While driving through Sacramento a policeman pulled us over for a tail light being out. Stephen had never informed me that there was a warrant for his arrest on an unpaid ticket. I found out that night when they took him right off to jail. I checked into a cheap motel as all my friends lived

too far to travel, and I hadn't notified anyone I was coming. It was supposed to be a quick turnaround, so he didn't miss any work. The next morning, I went to bail him out and paid the fine with the money he had given me. It was early afternoon before he was released. It took nearly every cent we had, and we barely had enough money for gas to get back to Oregon.

Later that day we finally drove out of California and returned home in the middle of the night. With the girls gone, things began to drift back to the place they were before. I felt his affection slipping away and feared he was having another affair. One night he didn't come home from work again. I went crazy about then, and when he had returned home the next day, I unleashed my wrath. I threw all his clothes and stuff out into the dirt driveway and told him to leave ... in not a very nice way. He didn't even try to explain himself, nor ease my pain, he just gathered his things and left. I learned a few days later he moved in with the lady from the grocery store. A year had past since Stephen walked into my life that day, and when he left, I fell apart, hard.

With my car broke down - and I had no money to fix it - I would hitch rides to town to get groceries. I became very depressed. About then, I started writing my friends in California. Everyday I would write a long letter to Shari and Rosie, and even my mom, among others. And they wrote me back. Toward the middle of summer Shari and Rosie came to visit me, but Rosie came prepared to stay. I was more than happy to have her, as I was in need of a friend and she was in need of a new life. The girls hadn't returned home yet, and wouldn't for another month, in which they returned on a plane at the Eugene airport – their first plane ride.

Rosie could tell right away that I was deeply depressed, and one day while taking a walk along the road and river, she saved my life. I was in a dark place, spiraling down a tunnel, and she knew it. My heart was so full of pain from Stephen that I wanted to die. On our walk down the quiet country road one morning, it was a route the logging trucks used. Only a few a day would pass by, and one happened to be passing by while we were walking on the side of the road. In my mind all I could think about was jumping in front of it, as it approached going quite fast. Sadly, I had no thought of my children, and I'm ashamed about that truth, but I had never been so hurt in my life. Stephen was the first man that drove me to the ends of my strength, and Rosie was there to bring me back. As the truck approached closer, I tried to move closer to the edge of the road. Rosie must have known what I was going to do because just as I began to leap in front of the fully loaded logging truck, she grabbed my arm and swung me back. The truck flew by, the gush of wind swept across our face. Rosie was very upset at me and shook me, yelling madly. I began to cry and it was at that point I came to my senses and was able to move on.

While my little orange Honda sat broken down in the carport our trips to town were partly walking and taking rides from strangers. Rosie started hitch hiking to town and hanging out at the tavern. One late afternoon I went out with her to the tavern and I met a man named Gene. While talking to him, I discovered he was the man driving the logging truck. He remembered me from that day, saying he was thankful I didn't jump in front of him, as that would be something he couldn't live with. Gene and became close. Soon thereafter the girls arrived and he took me to the airport to pick them up. Gene had his own house, but he spent a lot of time at mine. He also had two kids, a girl and a boy, both close to my girl's age. I had met his former wife, Julie, when we would pick up his kids on their weekend visits. She was very nice to me, and well settled into a new marriage with a comfortable life.

It wasn't long after when I met Gene that Rosie returned to California. She had become a regular drunk that slept all day and hit the tavern all night, bringing strange men into my home. With my girls and myself at risk of her recklessness, I had no other choice but tell her she had to go. We didn't part on the best of terms as I put her on bus headed back to California. It wasn't long into my relationship with Gene when he asked me to marry him, and things seemed to be going very well merging our families together, until things changed and my dream of a happy life once again faded. Gene had bought me a used car during that time as he didn't want me to hitch hike anymore. I thought things were going good between us, but time proved it was just hopeful thinking.

When one of Gene's best friends had passed away, his closeness to his wife caused him to console her grieving loss. What appeared as an innocent caring grew into something much closer than just friendship. He was spending a lot of time with his friend's widow, telling me she wasn't handling her husband's death well. Gene was sincerely concerned about her and as time went by, I became sincerely concerned about him. He was spending so much time with her that in time they fell in love. I had a terrible feeling inside something like that was taking place as the weeks passed by.

My friendship with Julie (his former wife) had grown to where we spent many times having long conversations. She confided in me that something felt off about Gene and I. I confessed to her that I felt Gene's affection slipping away. Soon after, he told me the painful truth and broke our engagement off, eventually marrying his best friend's widow. At the time, Julie was my only friend and she gave me a lot of comfort and support. She had grown close to my girls and welcomed them to visits, even sleep overs. One night she offered to have the girls stay the night, encouraging me to go out and have some fun. The pain I felt for the loss of Gene did not compare to the pain I suffered with Stephen. I was more understanding, I suppose, to his situation, which was honest in a sense, far from the deception and lies from Stephen.

I went out that night to try and have some fun, perhaps even meet someone new. Rebounding had always worked in the past during my years after John's divorce. While at the tavern, having a fairly good time, Gene walked in with his widow lady, in which I heard he was engaged to her. I had quite a bit to drink and my emotions were very frail. Before I said or did something stupid, I decided it best to get out of there. As I drove toward home in the dark on that quiet country road, all the hurt and betrayal from my past began to consume every ounce of my being. My eyes teared up and everything was blurry. I wanted to go faster and faster as my foot pressed the gas pedal to the floor, and on that long straight stretch I was going so fast I missed the turn to the left which would take me home. With a deep inhale I spun the wheel and dove straight into a roadside ditch with little care of life. But thankfully I wasn't physically hurt, yet, all I could do was sit there and cry.

A truck came by with a very nice man who pulled me out and followed me home to safety. The next morning, I felt sick inside of what I done. It was a wonder I didn't end up in the hospital, or dead, or even my car totaled out. I thought about my girls and how horrible a mother I was. I knew evermore in that moment that they were the only thing that gave me something to live for. I felt I had nothing else. They were all that I cared about, giving me all that I needed to remain

sane. I truly don't know how I would have made it through life without them. They were my anchor, my purpose, and my true love. From then on, I had no desire to meet anyone new. I isolated myself and gave all my energy to my girls. About then, Rusty and Sharon had moved back from the wilderness, and we spent a lot of time together. Sharon had an older boy and got along well with the girls, and she had a much older daughter who had moved out and was living with her boyfriend.

One night her daughter went to Roseburg on a night out with her boyfriend. She was under age but the bar served her anyway. They both were so drunk that he took the wheel and opened up at full speed going down a residential street. He lost control of the car and hit a telephone poll. Sharon's daughter flew through the window and was flung threw a tree. Her body parts were torn and scattered through the limbs. It was the most horrifying thing that could ever happen to a mother. She shut down for a long time. Rusty managed to get her back to living, but she never was the same after that. Something died inside her, as it would anyone. She did sue the bar for serving her daughter under age and won a large amount of money, enough to buy them five acres in Camas Valley, where they started a new life.

One day I was contacted by another friend of mine who said her and her family were moving to Oregon and asked if they could stay with me while they found a place. I was so excited knowing Lydia was coming. She was a school friend from way back and although our paths went in different directions, we had stayed in touch. My girls were very fond of her kids as they played together many times over their earlier years.

When Lydia and Jim arrived, they stayed a few weeks before finding their own place. While there, Jim offered to fix my orange Honda but after he tore it apart, I learned the cost was more than I could afford to fix it. It sat under the carport with a box full of all the parts. Eventually, after months knowing it was never going to get fixed, I had to pay the wrecking yard to come tow the car away as it seemed worthless to keep it any longer. Thankfully, the car Gene bought me was still running, despite crashing it. The girls and I spent a lot of time at Lydia's place. They found a nice house to rent in the country and started raising rabbits and chickens, and tilling a vegetable garden. One early evening, just before dawn, the girls and I had left Lydia's house for home. While driving down the back country road a deer leaped from out of nowhere into the road, and although I hit the car breaks hard, I hit a deer. In all the time I had driven those back roads I had never encounter a deer on the road - but once you have hit one, you're ever so cautious. It was a frightening experience. The poor deer stumbled off and I had no idea how hurt it was. Though judging from the dent in the car, I suspected it was hurt badly, and my girls were very sad.

One day Stephen showed up at my door. I hadn't seen him in a very long time. All the pain was gone by then, and he apologized to me for what he had done. He said he still loved me, and wanted to try again, having failed in his relationship with the grocery lady. He had bought an old historic two-story house in town and was restoring it from the foundation and up, inside and out. As I stared into his puppy dog eyes, all my feelings came rushing back, as if they had never died. Although I took things slowly and cautiously, eventually I was happy again. It wasn't long before the girls and I moved into his house, leaving our country rental home of two years and

living in town. It was fun and rewarding and the girls were happier than ever having friends to play with.

Stephen had changed, giving up on his desires for other women, saying he realized I was the only one he wanted. He paid for me to take a stained-glass course so I could make windows for the house. He turned one room into a stained-glass shop, where I spend many hours ... as well as the beautiful greenhouse he built in the backyard. The house was coming together most amazingly. It had so much character from that era in the late 1800s.

It had been several months since the girls and I moved in and things were going well. Stephen hadn't talked much about his own kids. All I knew was they were teenagers and lived with their mother, until the day came when she showed up with the two of them. When I met his former wife, I felt very insecure. She was absolutely beautiful, like a model, and very classy. She was also Stephen's age, nearly a decade older than myself, and she was very nice. Their two kids were much older than my girls and I was quite surprised by the unexpected visit. Stephen had hardly spoken about them, but welcomed them to stay. Apparently, he had invited them to come live with us, yet I knew nothing about it until that moment. Of course. I welcomed them and made room for them to share a bedroom, doubling up my girls in another. His former wife only stayed a few days, and she had got a motel.

The house was very full then, and it felt things were finally coming together, until I discovered he was having another affair. It was too much for me to take the day I drove to a woman's house that I suspected, and caught him in bed with a lady who worked at the tavern. I began to sense something was going on when him and I were at the tavern, and she was much too focus on him. Though he denied it, I was determined to prove it, in which I did. I was so angry when I left her house and returned home. I packed up the girls and my stuff and loaded my car. Before I could get out of there he returned. My girls were playing outside and his were at friends when he came upstairs and entered our bedroom, seeing me packing. He tried to apologize but his words only made me angrier and all I could do to keep from going insane was to pick up stuff within reach and started throwing things out the window – a lamp, a book, pillows, a mirror, a telephone - after shattering glass everywhere. He tried to hold me down, to calm me down, but I broke way and grabbed my last box and ran to the car. I ordered the girls to get in and we drove away.

I went straight to Julie's house where she so kindly took us in. They had a camp trailer sitting empty in the driveway and the girls and I lived in that for a little over a month. One day Julie told me about a friend of theirs who offered to give the girls and I a place to stay. After moving into Robert's house on the hill, overlooking the stunning wooded surroundings, he started to have feelings for me, that I could not return. Eventually, a few months later, he asked me to leave because it was uncomfortable for him. At that point, after more than three years of living in Oregon, I decided to return to California, feeling like a big failure. I knew not if I would ever return ... life felt like a whirlwind.