

introduction

London

September 21, 2009

“Faith means living with uncertainty - feeling your way through life, letting your heart guide you like a lantern in the dark” – Dan Millman

The first thing Marc Wilson saw as his plane descended through the clouds was a spectacular view of the historic Thames River. He immediately recognized Big Ben and the Parliament Building as London was now coming into view through the parting clouds. Everywhere he looked there were iconic images he had seen all of his life but now he was seeing them with his own eyes.

This spur-of-the-moment trip to England would be historic for Marc in ways he could not imagine. His life became a train wreck a few years ago. Since that time he had essentially disconnected from all of the parts of his life that he had previously loved.

In an effort to push the reset button on his tattered life, Marc had taken a chance. He was coming to London to clear his head and hopefully get his bearings again. Marc’s life had been ravaged by unexpected events. Uncertainty. Some “worst case” scenarios had become reality. Now something quite unexpected awaited him in London.

But this time the surprising turn of events would help heal him. Uncertainty can produce good things. Children generally get excited when you ask them if they would like a surprise. Innocent children expect a gift wrapped in a package, some candy or a birthday cake.

As adults, most dread “surprises.” Surprises in adult life don’t come wrapped in pretty paper. The uncertainty of life produces surprises for adults like sudden illnesses, wrecked automobiles, loss of employment and unwanted changes in relationships.

However, today Marc had no expectations at all as he touched down at Heathrow Airport. He grabbed his meager luggage and caught one of London’s iconic black taxis. He gave the cabbie the address of the hotel, which was in “English” but the address seemed very foreign. If the driver had any questions Marc had no answers.

“115 Templeton Place, Kensington. The Hotel George,” Marc said confidently. “Sure enough,” the cab driver said in a classic clipped English accent. Then the adventure began. Where ever the heck Marc was going the driver seemed to instantly understand his instructions.

Marc smiled to himself as the cab proceeded in traffic—on the “wrong” side of the road and with the driver on the “wrong” side of the car. He started seeing signs with familiar names like “Kensington,” “Notting Hill,” Paddington Station.”

“Excuse me,” Marc said leaning forward in the roomy back seat of the London taxi. “Is the Hotel George in the middle of the city or what part of London...” he stumbled along realizing that he didn’t actually know enough to even ask a good question.

The cabbie thought he was bailing him out saying, “Yes sir, it’s right by Earl’s Court, just off Kensington.”

He might as well tell Marc that his hotel was on the third moon of Neptune. He tried again.

“What is it near?”

“You’ll be in walking distance to Hyde Park actually. You’re American?”

Marc recognized Hyde Park but still was getting his bearings. “Yes, I’m an American coming to spend a week or so in London and surrounding areas.”

“Very good. I hope you enjoy it. London has wonderful weather this time of year. Where do you live in the states?”

“Washington.”

“Oh, so you live near Obama and the White House.”

“Oh, no, no, no...wrong Washington.”

“Sorry,” said the puzzled cabbie.

“My fault. I actually live in Seattle. At the other end of America from where Obama lives.”

“Oh yes, Seattle. Very good.”

“I had a cousin who moved to Arizona,” the cab driver said, “that’s in your direction in the western U.S. right?”

Marc smiled and nodded, “Yeah, kind of the same direction.” All of this miscommunication about geography made his sleep-deprived mind hurt, so he decided to try to change the subject.

“We are almost there, just over in that direction is Earl’s Court,” the cabbie offered trying to be helpful.

“Oh,” Marc said blankly. His thoughts now turned to what he should do when the cab stops. He had a wallet full of British pounds. He hoped the cab driver wouldn’t tell him some English thing like “that’ll be 8 and 3” or whatever they said in British movies. The driver helped him when he pulled in front of the Hotel George, to sort out the pounds he had crammed into his pocket.

Marc went to his room and instantly loved the hotel. It looked British. Whatever that means. It was now just before noon in London. His body certainly did not feel like 11 a.m. The long trans-Atlantic flight had really disoriented Marc. The strategy today was to stay awake and go to bed at London bedtime to get your body in synch with the UK clock.

Marc had no idea what he would do the rest of the week. Today he had his pass for the London Underground and tickets for the Tower of London. That would be how he jumped into his English adventure. Marc perused the map of the all the tube stations and lines. This was going to be his mode of getting around London for the next week. By this time next week he would be a confident user of the famed Underground subway system.

He discovered that there was an Earl’s Court underground station just blocks from the hotel. Marc would catch the “green line” there and take it to Westminster Station. If he continued on the green line he could get pretty close to Parliament and Big Ben. From there he could walk along the Thames near the London Eye until he got to the Tower of London and London Bridge. That’d be cool. Thus Marc’s solo adventure began.

It worked out just as he had outlined it with his finger on the map as he sat in the lobby. He was soaking up the great atmosphere. Marc couldn’t believe he was really here.

Marc took a “Beefeater” tour of the Tower of London from an historically dressed Yeoman Warders, who had guarded the tower for centuries. The Warders filled the visitors in on the grim history of the tower. Clearly, this was where you went when you screwed up or become overly ambitious. At least “overly ambitious” politically, as defined by the king or queen.

It was amazing. He also viewed the priceless Crown Jewels in another building on the complex. Marc felt himself fading a little. There was much more to see. He decided to take a break and sit on a bench on the cobblestone walkway for a bit and take in the view of the Thames. Then he saw her for the first time.

PART ONE

Portland, Oregon

“ The only thing that makes life possible is permanent, intolerable uncertainty; not knowing what comes next.”

Ursula K. LeGuin

1

silhouette in the shower

August 10, 2007

The naked woman stood motionless, leaning against the wall of the shower and letting the hot water strike the top of her head and cascade down her back. She placed her hands flat against the tiled shower wall and leaned forward and closed her eyes. The warm water soothed her exhausted body and she felt enveloped in its comforting caress.

She felt safe and was now pampering herself after a grueling night shift at the hospital where she was a nurse. A nurse with considerable responsibilities. Aimee Hunt-Wilson had enough experience and clout to avoid these awful shifts but as a supervisor she was on a mission this summer. She had been working nights most of the summer to try to rehabilitate the night shift, which was in disarray. Someone needed to repair the damage brought on by an incompetent supervisor who was now gone. Aimee was trying to shape things up. It's what Aimee did best; however, it was taking a toll on her.

Marc Wilson was having his first moments of consciousness on this Tuesday morning. He slept alone. That was happening more and more these days. From the bed he could see Aimee, his wife, through the clear glass box that was the shower in their master suite. The only light filtering into the bedroom and casting a soft light on Marc's bed was the light from Aimee's shower.

He leaned up on his elbow and gazed through the steam at the nude Aimee. He was getting aroused. Marc still loved his wife's body. Lately, when he saw her, she was always hidden in the baggy scrubs she wore at the hospital. Her long black hair was plastered to her wet bare back by the shower water. Aimee always tanned so well. At this point in the summer she had a perfect swimsuit tan. Her body had matured but it had actually gotten better since the college days when they first met.

Her breasts and hips were fuller now but the rest of Aimee's body was taunt and lean. She was about 5-5, probably in the best shape of her life. Aimee obsessively exercised and carefully monitored her diet. After her shower she would come to bed to rest and then be pounding the pavement this afternoon running, getting in her miles. Aimee had always been so meticulous about what she ate and she imposed the same standards on Marc.

Marc's favorite meal, a burger and fries, was considered in the same category as rat poison by Aimee. If Marc went through a fast food window to sneak a burger, he felt compelled to hide the evidence from Aimee.

But all of this vigilance certainly paid off in the way Aimee looked. This mother of two, with a manic schedule, looked terrific as she approached middle age. Her long dark hair, which was naturally curly, was a stunning combination with her bright blue eyes.

Marc now lay in the early morning light watching Aimee step from the shower, all pink and soft, as she began to towel off. She then plugged in her hair dryer, bent over and began to dry her long hair. As he observed her maneuvers to dry her hair, he was taking in the sight of her bouncing breasts and lovely body. Marc knew that when she finished, she would quickly throw on one of his oversized t-shirts and jump under the covers—just as it was time for Marc to get out of bed and begin his day.

Marc rolled out of bed and attempted to head her off before she dressed and made it to the bed. He was hoping that somehow he could have her, that he could enjoy the physical pleasures of his sexy wife. This had not been planned but the moment was presenting itself and he wanted her. Marc hoped Aimee would want the intimacy, too.

Aimee slipped on some bright blue bikini panties just as Marc stood in front of her and said, "Hey you're really looking sexy this morning."

"Oh Marc, I'm so exhausted, you seem to have the world's worst timing."

"Oh come on Aimee, wouldn't it be fun?"

"Trust me Marc, it wouldn't be fun right now. I just need some sleep."

"So when, in this whole summer, would you suggest I make love to you?"

"Marc," Aimee said with resignation, "I'm begging you to not start right now."

Marc's frustration was starting to finally boil over. "So tell me, I really want to know, when can we talk, when can we make love, when?"

Aimee ignored him, turned away and grabbed a forest green t-shirt from one of Marc's drawers and slipped it over her head. Marc saw this as a signal that the curtain was coming down on any hopes of a breakthrough this morning.

Marc waited for her answer and then wondered if she was just going to ignore him altogether.

Aimee sighed and said, "Marc, we'll talk later. You always want me to suddenly flip a switch and get all romantic at the worst possible times. I hate this conversation!"

"So do I Aimee. All I want is you. It's not just the sex and the physical stuff, I want to be loved by you," he said trying to soften his voice tones.

"I appreciate that..." Aimee began, but Marc cut her off.

"No you don't, you find me annoying. I have felt that all summer."

Aimee closed her eyes and let out an exhausted moan. "We knew what this summer would be like. You knew that before it began," Aimee retorted, "I'm tired of being the bad guy every time I can't give you everything you want." Then she opened her eyes and gave him one more intense stare and said "I don't want to fight with you as my day ends and yours begins. We'll talk later."

With that she collapsed into bed. Marc was left standing in the indirect light from the bathroom, again frustrated and again unfulfilled by Aimee. He decided to say nothing else. He would now take his shower and get dressed. Marc decided he wasn't even going to kiss her goodbye, as if she cared. In a pathetic way he felt this would be some type of punishment for Aimee. She would likely not even notice. Marc thought, she just wants me to go away.

Marc vowed that he would leave her alone, and then he heard her voice.

"Marc," she called. For just a moment he wondered if she was going to apologize or acknowledge his pain. "Marc," she said again.

“What is it Aimee?” he answered coldly from across the bedroom.

“Make sure Maddy is up before you go.”

The only thing on her mind after the latest battle in their dirty little war was keeping their daughter Madison on schedule, Marc thought. That comment heightened his frustration and he felt his earlier words were already forgotten by Aimee.

Marc quickly showered and dressed, clicked off the bedroom light and he headed for Maddy’s room.

“Hey Maddy, are you awake?”

“Yeah Dad,” she responded groggily but she didn’t move.

“Maddy, don’t go back to sleep, okay? I have to go now.”

No response.

“Maddy, please.”

“Okay Dad, I’m awake I promise.”

“Have a good day at work honey.”

Another satisfied customer Marc thought. There’s just nothing like starting your day by annoying your wife and daughter. Out the door he went. Marc would just catch a muffin and coffee through the Starbucks’ drive-through window this morning before the commute.

Marc got behind the wheel of his aging BMW 3-series sedan and headed for Highway 26 to begin the slow crawl into downtown Portland, Oregon where he worked.

Marc was the Chief Financial Officer of a very successful athletic shoe and equipment company headquartered in Portland. There was another company founded in Portland that made a few shoes also—Nike. Marc’s company wasn’t Nike, but PrimeFit was doing very well. Marc had risen in the ranks and was now CFO. He loved his job.

It was the perfect complement to his favorite pastime that he shared with his wife—running. He had free running shoes for life as the CFO of the company. Aimee and Marc ran together regularly. This summer when Aimee started working the night shift, they started doing their running independent of one another. Now it wasn’t just their running. Marc and Aimee seemed to do separately. As August began, he couldn’t remember what things were like before Aimee started working all night at the hospital.

As he left his home in the upscale suburb of Lake Oswego, he was still hurting and seething about his latest encounter with Aimee. It wasn’t just that he was horny and wanted sex. He wanted her. He wanted Aimee to pay some attention to him. He wanted her to show some interest and affection. Marc conceded that she was under a lot of pressure. So was he. Things were tough all over. It was something they needed to work through, but Aimee didn’t seem motivated to do so.

Her words still rang in his ears—“I’m tired of being the bad guy every time I can’t give you everything you want.” Everything he wants? Marc wondered why she wouldn’t give him anything he wanted. Certainly “everything,” as Aimee put it, was shooting way too high right now. Marc longed for any acknowledgement from Aimee—to say nothing of tenderness.

Marc continued to replay their latest argument in his mind. It wasn’t exactly like he was being unreasonable. Generally he would be happy, given their busy schedules, to make love to Aimee a couple of times a week. How about a couple of times this summer! Marc began to try to tally how long it had been and how many times they had sex this summer. She not only wasn’t interested, but seemed annoyed if he touched or fondled her. Aimee had never been like that before. That’s what made this worse.

Then he was distracted by another annoyance. Damn, it is hot already, Marc thought. Portland generally has mild summers and is moist and green. However, a few times each summer there is a mini heat wave and the temperature climbs into the high 90s and may even hit 100. Marc and most Portland natives hated their hometown when the weather was like this. Many people in the city didn’t even have central air conditioning. Generally they didn’t need it. When the heat was on in Portland, it was muggy and miserable. Today would be one of those days. It added to the unpleasantness he had already experienced and it wasn’t even 7 a.m. yet.

When will this summer end? Marc mused it would be nice to get Aimee and the 70 degree days back.

He wondered what he could do. He was tired of trying to be understanding. Marc felt he had cut Aimee a lot of slack. He knew she was in a mess at work, trying to get the night shift back on track. He had his own set of problems. Marc's company was installing a new integrated accounting system at work. As CFO he was the team leader. There was no peace waiting for him at work. The place was crawling with high-priced consultants. They needed to make the cut-over to the new accounting system soon so the financial statements could be verified as the books closed for the calendar year. That was all on Marc. There was no margin for error.

There also was the added pressure of big changes to the family coming at the end of the summer.

One of his two children would be leaving home in a couple of weeks. Josh was headed to UCLA to begin his college career. His son was so excited, but he would be far away and it would change things at home. Josh was taller than Marc now and had his mother's dark hair and blue eyes. Both Marc and Aimee, who had attended the University of Oregon, somehow took for granted that their children would follow suit and be close to home down in Eugene. Josh charted another course and was headed to Los Angeles with his best buddy. They were excited about their new adventure. Even though he would miss Josh, he secretly thought that if he were his son, he would head to LA also.

Madison would begin her sophomore year of high school in a few weeks and be the only one home with Marc and Aimee. Maddy was shorter and had Aimee's vivid blue eyes but Marc's light brown hair. Madison was finishing up her summer job at the mall. The thought of his sleepy daughter made him hope that she had taken his last wake-up call seriously and was now actually up, preparing to go to work.

Aimee would freak out if Madison didn't, and it would be on Marc's head.

Aimee was the most organized person Marc had ever known. She may have been the most organized person anyone had ever known. Aimee ran a tight-ship and monitored the lives of her husband and two children via her Blackberry. She was always on-task and kept everyone else there, too.

She was very intense, but usually not in an unkind or bitchy way. Aimee resented any suggestion, however subtle, that she was a control freak. She just wanted things to happen the way she thought they should happen, that was all, she would say. Most of the time Marc appreciated this attribute in his mate. Sometimes it made him feel like a 12 year old who needed supervision.

But that was just Aimee, and the good far outweighed the bad. However this summer, with her working nights, their well-ordered lives had hit the rocks. At first Marc thought it would pass. Now as August wore on, he was starting to wonder. He was really questioning if Aimee even loved him anymore. Signs of her sudden indifference seemed, to his perception, to be everywhere—not just in the bedroom. Marc turned into the attached parking garage to his company's chic office tower in Portland's Pearl District. He had to not only park his car, but also park his churning thoughts about Aimee now. Who knows what was waiting for him inside today.

As for Aimee, he would take a new approach. If she wanted him to leave her alone, then he would. Literally. Marc was tired of the rejection and annoyance in her voice. He would wait to see if she came back to him. The tension was mounting.

6

the beach house

September 15, 2007

Cannon Beach is 80 miles west of Portland and is a postcard perfect beach town that is a primary playground for city dwellers who head to the ocean beaches. Cannon Beach is where most Portlanders are going when they say, “they are going to the coast” for the weekend.

Cannon Beach is just ten miles south of Seaside, which was the finish line for the Hood to Coast Race. Cannon Beach got its name at the end of the 19th century because apparently someone found a cannon on the beach. The community is a little higher end than Seaside. Generally beach houses on Cannon Beach will cost \$100,000 more than at Seaside, give or take.

The Robertsons bought a spectacular beach house several years ago. Tina got wind of its availability through her real estate connections. It has four bedrooms and is perched on top of a cliff overlooking the narrow beach, with a great view of the iconic Haystack Rock, which is the distinctive landmark at Cannon Beach.

Haystack Rock is a huge chunk of black rock rising out of the sandy beach. At high tide there are spectacular waves pounding against its craggy surface. At low tide a series of spectacular tide pools are revealed. No one climbs on the rock since the monolith and the tide pools are part of a protected marine sanctuary.

From the deck of the Robertson’s beach house, there was a fabulous view of Haystack Rock, which dramatically increased the value of this piece of property. A long, wooden staircase went from the deck, down the side of the cliff to the beach below.

Last winter a violent winter storm had thrown a large log into the stairs smashing the bottom ten steps. The four friends traveled to the beach house the next weekend and John and Marc repaired the steps. They were now the weathered gray wood of the beach properties and the new steps no longer had the look of new lumber.

Marc hoped the beach trip would be the perfect anecdote for whatever was ailing Aimee, and whatever had gone wrong during the summer with their relationship. John and Tina and Marc and Aimee had used the beach house as a retreat over the years. It was a great place to go when you needed to escape life’s stresses. The four of them loved to chill-out there.

At times, it was a place of summer fun when the Robertsons’ kids and Madison and Josh were younger. For the last couple of years, as the four kids got older and more involved in their own lives, it had become a retreat for the weary adults. Life was significantly more complicated for all four adults as their careers evolved.

Now on this overcast fall weekend, they were all looking for some needed R&R. Two figurative clouds hung over the weekend as an intrusion of the real world. Tina was working feverishly to try to close a major real estate deal with a family looking for a home in Lake Oswego. It would mean a handsome commission for her. She was starting to wonder if a house had been built which would please this picky couple. But Tina finally found one and the momentum was all headed the right way. She would have to monitor her cell phone and keep the deal moving along.

Meanwhile, there was a “go live” milestone for Marc’s new accounting system installation back at PrimeFit. The “go live” consisted of the IT techies working all weekend installing and testing the new software. At some point on Saturday they would have a conference call with Marc to report their progress or any problems, and then Marc would make the decision if they were to proceed. Marc probably should have been in the office all weekend but he had to get away with Aimee and the Robertsons. Being available for the conference call was the compromise he had reached with the consultants for the weekend.

The four friends decided to drive together to Cannon Beach on Friday night. John, Tina and Marc began reporting on their week at work and talking shop. They also speculated about what the weather

might be like this weekend. It was always tough to tell what it would be like on an autumn weekend at the Oregon Coast.

Meanwhile, Aimee still seemed sleep deprived, and after initially engaging in the conversation, she rolled up Marc's fleece jacket and laid her head on it to snooze. Aimee awoke as John slowed down his Range Rover to enter the beach town. After stirring and stretching, she apologized for being anti-social and announced she felt better after her nap.

"I promise I'll be better company this weekend than I've been for a while. I'm sorry," Aimee said.

"You've nothing to be sorry for you poor woman. It's been quite a summer. I don't know how you work those awful schedules and stay sane," Tina offered.

"Yeah, well I'm ready to start reclaiming my life, starting with this weekend," Aimee said. Marc smiled at her and was pleased to hear some a positive affirmation from his wife. Marc was hoping to reclaim his life too, including his relationship with his wife.

It was dark when they pulled into the driveway at the Robertsons' beach house. The four of them planned to throw their luggage inside and head for a late dinner at one of Cannon Beach's restaurants.

Aimee said, "I feel gross, I want to freshen up before we go to the restaurant."

"Okay but don't take too long," John pleaded.

"I just want to change clothes, I'm starving too," Aimee reassured him.

John and Marc circulated through the beach house, turning on lights, adjusting thermostats and making it habitable. Both men were talking about how much fun it was for the four of them to be back here.

"It's been too long," John said.

"Where did this summer go?" Marc asked rhetorically. "It's been a pretty ugly summer."

Just then Aimee emerged from the guest room wearing khaki pants and a bright blue sweater, which made her eyes look even more intensely blue.

Marc smiled at the sight of her. She looked great.

The four of them basked in the relaxed atmosphere of the restaurant enjoying great seafood and a favorite wine. It was the best talk the four of them had had since early in the summer. Everything seemed to be getting back to normal as Marc had hoped.

Aimee was like her old gregarious self, laughing, chattering and freely downing glasses of wine. She seemed to be cutting loose. Finally. It started when she groaned and chided John for ordering an appetizer of onion rings. John gave a wink in Marc and Tina's direction. Marc half suspected that John did it just to yank Aimee's chain.

The dinner progressed as old friends caught up. It felt good to all of them to talk about things besides work. No one mentioned anything about their jobs the whole meal. After they finished their food, they continued to leisurely chat over wine.

Upon returning to the beach house about 10 p.m. everyone seemed ready to call it a night. All four shared the unspoken joy of realizing they could sleep-in tomorrow and when they awoke, they would be at the beach house.

As Marc and Aimee closed their bedroom door, Aimee flopped on her back with her arms and legs spread-eagled across the bed.

She groaned and said, "I think I drank too much wine tonight, but it was great."

Marc approached her on the bed and stood near her head. He decided to try.

Marc reached down and pulled her blue sweater up over her head. She said nothing and just raised her head to accommodate Marc's removal of her sweater. It was then that Marc discovered she was only wearing a long-sleeved t-shirt under the sweater and no bra. Marc continued by removing her undershirt. Aimee said nothing but did not resist. She was now lying across the bed in her pants and shoes, but was bare from the waist up.

She looked so beautiful in the dim light. Marc walked around the bed and tenderly removed her shoes, then her socks, then her khaki cargo pants. Aimee continued to lie quietly and passively on the bed wearing only her panties. Marc quickly peeled off his clothes, turned back the covers and lifted Aimee

into the bed. They began to kiss as he pulled some covers over them to shield them from the cool, damp air in the beach house.

“I’m sorry how things have been, Marc. It’s going to be different, I promise.”

Marc said softly, “I love you Aimee, I’ve really missed you.”

They said nothing else as they tenderly made love.

In the morning, the soft light was coming through the blinds in the guest bedroom windows. Marc realized that he had slept like a log but that Aimee was gone. He stumbled to the bathroom and pulled on his pants and a hooded sweatshirt.

He found Aimee sitting in a lounge chair on the deck talking to John. She had her sunglasses on shielding her eyes from the non-existent sun. Nevertheless, there was a glare off of the overcast sky, gray water and mostly deserted beach. They both were cradling cups of coffee in their hands to keep warm. John and Aimee were looking out towards the sea and the beach, which were softly lit by the sun trying to break through the morning overcast. There was no wind and it looked like it might be a decent day.

Marc approach Aimee and kissed her on the cheek. “Good morning. Hey, big John, how’s everyone this morning?”

“Any morning I wake up at the beach house is a good one,” John retorted.

“I agree. It’s glorious this morning, don’t you think?” Aimee said to Marc.

“It is. Anyone want a refill? I’m going to go get my morning coffee.”

Aimee said nothing but simply handed her half empty cup to Marc. When he returned to the deck Marc asked, “Where’s Tina?”

“Showering,” John said.

“So what are you two conspiring about?” Marc asked

“Nothing,” Aimee said, “we’re still waking up and hardly talking. We’re just absorbing this fabulous sight.”

Suddenly John said, “Aimee, come and help me make breakfast.”

She got up and trailed John leaving Marc sitting alone on the deck. He decided it wasn’t so bad and he just quietly sat staring at the Haystack Rock and the gorgeous scene. In the background was the banging of pans as John and Aimee began their preparations.

The four of them picked up where they left off the night before. They chatted leisurely over the omelets John and Aimee had produced. The conversation was interrupted when the sun broke through the clouds and flooded in the window.

“Ooooh, let’s take a walk,” Aimee said, “it looks beautiful out there.”

“I’m for that,” John added.

“I hate to be a party pooper but I need to make a quick call in to the office and get a status report,” Marc reminded the group.

“I don’t want to miss the sunbreak,” Aimee pleaded.

“I should probably call the nitwits I’m trying to sell a house to. Those people are so high maintenance,” Tina said.

“What happened to the ‘customer’s always right?’” John teased.

“Oh, I can see you putting up with these people,” Tina retorted, “they like this house except they want the kitchen cabinets on the other side of the room; they like the two-story house but wish it was ranch-style. They like the house in Tigard but they wished it had a view of the water. It’s in Tigard, there isn’t any water!”

John, Aimee and Marc began laughing as Tina blew off steam about her unreasonable clients.

Finally Aimee protested, “Come on it’s Saturday.”

“I told you I had this one little problem to deal with today,” Marc countered. “You and John go walk, Tina and I will make our calls and catch up with you.”

“Let’s go Aimee,” John offered.

They both began to descend the stairway to the beach and Tina and Marc retreated to rooms in the house to make their phone calls. After about five minutes they emerged. Both Tina and Marc were

successful. It looked like Tina was going to sell a house on Monday and Marc gave the green light to his implementation team to proceed to the next steps.

As Tina and Marc descended the stairs to the beach the sun was beginning to emerge from behind the clouds bathing the beach in golden light. They spotted John and Aimee walking together on the beach well ahead of them. The pair was walking quickly, not strolling.

Observing their spouses Marc noticed Aimee was being very animated in her discussion with John. He could see the outline of her waving her arms and talking to John. Their silhouettes were unmistakable. John was about a foot taller than Aimee.

“What do you think those two are talking about?” Tina queried.

“Probably solving all of the problems of the hospital and health care in the United States. You know Aimee; she gets cranked up and starts waving her arms. I can always tell when she is getting fired-up, she begins to get very demonstrative.”

Tina chuckled. “Do you think we can catch them as fast as they’re walking?”

“Eventually, they’ll run out of beach,” Marc joked. “I’m in no hurry.”

Tina and Marc quickened their pace and noticed that John and Aimee had stopped walking and were facing one another talking. In a few minutes they caught up with their spouses. John and Aimee had stopped talking. Aimee reached in her pocket and pulled out her sunglasses.

“Gorgeous isn’t it?” Tina said cheerily.

“Yeah, we’re going to luck out. No rain and now it’s sunny,” John responded.

They turned and headed back down the beach towards the Haystack Rock and the house. John and Tina walked slightly ahead of Marc and Aimee.

“How are you doing Aimee?” Marc began.

“I’m fine. Last night was nice,” Aimee said lowering her voice so only Marc could hear her. Marc put his arm around her shoulder and gave her a hug. They walked on without speaking with only the white noise of the waves hitting the beach. As the foursome neared the Haystack Rock, they noticed it was low tide.

“This is perfect for tide pooling,” Marc announced. “Let’s go check it out.”

The foursome began climbing gingerly on the rocks to check out the purple and orange-colored starfish and the slimy, closed anemones. They also saw some small red crabs scramble for crevices in the rocks. Below them in the tide pools were submerged flower-like anemones open and waving in the current.

“I haven’t done this for a long time,” Marc said. “I remember John and me going tide pooling as kids. He kept jumping from rock to rock. I tried to follow him and kept falling into the water. It took a while, but I eventually realized that John’s legs were about three or four inches longer than mine. He could make it to the rock and I ‘almost’ made it to the next rock.”

“Size does matter,” John teased.

“You two are so funny,” Tina said. “You’re like an old married couple.”

“You mean John and me?” Marc asked. “He’s definitely not my type.” Tina cackled and Aimee smiled, and then walked out alone towards another tide pool.

“What you two have is really rare,” Tina said. “Just think you two have been friends for over 30 years. How many people get to share that much of life together? I’ve always thought that was something special about your relationship.”

“Somebody has to look out for him,” Marc chided, then turned more serious, “we’ve been looking out for one another for a long time.”

John just smiled at Marc and said, “That we have, that we have.”

The weekend progressed as Marc had hoped. It was extremely relaxing and they even got to see a great sunset Saturday night. When they headed back to Portland Sunday evening, Marc felt very satisfied—on many levels. He felt he had his Aimee back.

11

the rescue

October 4, 2007

On that same autumn day in another part of Portland, a drama of a different kind was about to occur.

Alexandra Mattson, a young attorney, had just bought her first house. Everyone called her “Alex” much to her father’s dismay. The only people who called her Alexandra were her parents. She grew up in Eugene, Oregon, the oldest daughter of her mother, Loretta, a high school drama teacher, and her father, a professor at the University of Oregon.

Paul Mattson was a professor of English and Classical Literature. He chose Alexandra as his first child’s name with the grandest of intentions. Alexandra was the feminine form of Alexander and was interrupted from the Greek as “protector of man,” a name given to the Greek goddess Hera. Paul always told his daughter she was named for a Goddess. Alexandra was neither a Greek nor a goddess. However, she was a daughter who would make any parent proud. Alex had just moved out of the Pearl District where she had shared an apartment with her college friend, Monica Lee. Alex was thrilled to have just purchased a charming home on Peacock Lane.

Peacock Lane is a quaint street in southeast Portland, best known as “the Christmas Street.” Each December hordes of people, who come from miles around, clog Peacock Lane to see a street where nearly every house is brightly decorated for Christmas with elaborate displays and large snowmen and Santas everywhere. To live on Peacock Lane is to live in a tourist attraction during the month of December.

The rest of the year, the street is a series of charming English Tudor-style houses dating back to the 1920s. It is one of Portland’s great neighborhoods.

Alex was so excited when the perfect house became available for her to buy on Peacock Lane. An opportunity like this doesn’t come along very often. It is a street of only four short blocks. Alex found the ideal Tudor-style house, which she instantly fell in love with.

Her friend Monica had gone house shopping with her and they were both so excited that everything worked out for Alex. It was just two weeks ago that there was a move-in party with some relatives and friends helping Alex get set up in her new house. Monica and Alex had spent a lot of time talking about how much fun it could be to have social events in this house...and then there was Christmas.

Decorating your house for Christmas on Peacock Lane was pretty much mandatory, unless you wanted to be known to neighbors and holiday visitors as the house where a Grinch lives. Monica and Alex had discovered all of the Christmas decorations in the basement of the new house. The boxes of lights, large snowmen and a sleigh and reindeer came with the house.

Last week they had spent one evening exploring the decorations Alex had inherited. Some they liked some they didn't. As October began, Alex was already feeling some pressure about decorating her house. All eyes would be watching her. She would need some help. But it was going to be a blast to fix up her new vintage house and be part of the Peacock Lane festivities at Christmastime.

However, today as Alex left the house she was concentrating on the week ahead in her law practice. Alex was a corporate lawyer and part of a large firm. She had worked really hard the last two years and was beginning to establish herself in a niche in the firm of Simpson, Harper and Associates. Her office was in downtown Portland and her new house was just about ten minutes away from her office.

Alex was tall and slender with beautiful red hair that she wore in a loose, straight style that just grazed her shoulders. When she was in her official "lawyer mode," Alex pulled her hair back into a ponytail. Alex had many of the hang-ups of a red-haired girl with freckles as she was growing up. Many redheads wish their hair was any other color and that they didn't have so many freckles. In adulthood her hair and white skin, combined with her light green eyes were a striking combination.

As Alex left the house on this cool October morning, she was wearing a tan raincoat over a blue silk blouse and a wool plaid skirt hitting her long legs just above her kneecap. It would be the last time Alex would ever wear those clothes.

Her new house had a detached garage with a driveway running along the side of the house. Alex had been thinking she was going to have to get a lot better at backing up to get out of her driveway each morning without hitting trees or garbage cans.

Alex maneuvered her Subaru backwards onto the street and turned to begin her journey. About two houses down, on the opposite side of the street, she noticed some commotion. She slowed down her car and saw a Hispanic man screaming and waving his arms.

"Help me, I've hit my baby! Help me please," he cried in a wailing, hysterical scream. Alex quickly stopped her car, slamming it into park and jumped out. It was then that she saw a small bundle under the man's car. It confused Alex at first, and then to her horror she saw a purple rain slicker and two small rain boots. A backpack was on the grass by the side of the car.

A small child had been hit by the car. Alex ran to assist just as Frank Ruiz was pulling the small dark haired girl out from under his car. Frank had apparently backed over the little girl as he was pulling out of his driveway.

Alex could now see the child's face and noticed a considerable amount of blood oozing out from under the purple rain slicker. Frank was now becoming hysterical. "I've killed my daughter! I didn't see her. I thought she was still in the house! I've killed my child," he was screaming.

Alex quickly removed her own raincoat and tossed it aside. Alex removed her own scarf that was around her neck and opened the child's raincoat. Blood was staining the child's long-sleeved top that had a picture of ducks on it. Alex screamed at Frank to call 911 and get her a towel. Frank seemed frozen in place.

Alex then screamed as loud as she could, "Do it! Do it now! Go in the house, call 911 and bring me a towel! Now!"

Alex gently lifted the child's shirt and saw blood coming from a wound on the little girl's side. Alex quickly put the scarf on the wound and held it firmly to try to stop the bleeding. By this time

neighbors were beginning to pop out of their houses to see what had gone wrong. Another man stopped his car behind Alex's Subaru and jumped out to help.

"Please call 911. I don't know if the father has yet. I also need a towel or something. This scarf is not going to be enough."

"You got it," the man said as he quickly dialed 911 on his cell phone. Alex could hear the man, who was obviously a Peacock Lane resident, giving instructions to the 911 operator. Frank soon arrived with a towel.

Alex gently but firmly replaced her blood-drenched scarf with the folded towel. She continued applying firm pressure to the child's wound. A crowd was gathering.

It was then, for the first time, that Alex looked at the child's face. The little girl was still conscious. She was surprisingly quiet as she lay on the ground slowly blinking her big brown eyes.

"Don't worry sweetie, you're going to be okay," Alex said repeatedly.

Frank Ruiz was now collapsed over the hood of his car weeping uncontrollably. He was too distraught to be of any assistance. Alex could hear the faint sound of an approaching siren. Help was on the way.

Alex was acting on total adrenaline and instincts. She had not analyzed the situation. She was just concentrating on stopping the blood. The little girl was breathing and still conscious. Alex knew that was probably good. After a car had backed over this small child, it was unimaginable to contemplate what had done to this tiny body.

A Portland Police car and an ambulance came onto Peacock Lane with sirens blaring. Alex was determined not to abandon the little girl and she continued to apply pressure to stop the bleeding. The blood wasn't pouring out any longer but Alex had no idea where it was going.

Alex was only vaguely aware of the chaos around her. It was a surreal moment that was broken when an EMT gently grabbed Alex's shoulders and said, "We've got it ma'am, we'll take it from here." Alex still wouldn't let go. She was not sure how to let go of the compression on the wound. While one EMT gently grabbed Alex's shoulders, a second EMT put his hands on the bloody towel.

"We've got it, we'll take it from here," the EMT said gently but firmly.

Alex finally let go and tumbled backwards to get out of the way of the emergency workers. Alex was somewhat stunned as she began to slowly lower herself backwards on the wet grass. The small child was whisked away in seconds and was loaded into the back of the ambulance. As Alex leaned back onto the grass someone caught her in his arms.

She looked up and saw the face of a handsome, dark-haired policeman. He was young, maybe about the same age as Alex. He was trim, muscular and had strong arms. Alex relaxed and fell into his arms.

"Let me help you," the policeman said. Alex relaxed and gently settled into his arms. For the first time she noticed her hands, blouse and skirt were covered with blood. The policeman cradled her head gently in his arms.

Another EMT came up from somewhere and looked at Alex. He asked her some questions, which made no sense to her, but she answered as best she could. A blanket suddenly appeared and was put over Alex. She looked up into the blue eyes of the policeman.

The EMT declared to the policeman that Alex appeared to be okay, but cautioned "keep an eye on her." "Are you okay? Are you hurt?" the cop asked.

Alex fumbled for an answer. She shook her head and said, "No, I'm...oh is the little girl going to be alright? Is she okay?"

"I don't know yet," the policeman said, "but she's in good hands now. You did a great job."

"Please help me up," Alex asked quietly.

The policeman brought her up to a sitting position with the blanket over her legs to protect her modesty but also to keep her warm. It was then that Alex took note of her surroundings. Her Subaru, which she had left running with the keys in it, was now in another driveway. Alex saw several policemen making notes on clipboards. Others cops were taking measurements around Frank Ruiz's car.

The backpack was still lying on the grass. Frank and the rest of his family had disappeared. They had obviously followed their daughter to the hospital. In her confusion, Alex even wondered if she had blacked out for a minute. She was apparently so focused on the critically injured child that she was oblivious to everything else around her.

Several neighbors were coming forward praising Alex for her heroic efforts. Alex sat on the grass cleaning blood off of her hands with wipes provided by the policeman. Someone else brought out a wet towel. The policeman handed it to Alex. She seemed momentarily confused about what to do with it. The policeman said, "Here let me help" when he suddenly became aware that Alex did not know she had blood on her face and some in her hair. Her clothes were pretty much a lost cause.

While the policeman gently wiped up the blood, Alex noticed his handsome face and his blue eyes. She also noticed his name tag said, "Officer Sean Wallace."

As Sean helped Alex to her feet he asked where she lived. She pointed to her house just across the street.

Alex was steady on her feet and feeling fine despite the traumatic event.

Sean walked beside her towards her house and said, "I'll stay with you. I'll need to get some information from you anyway."

"Sure."

As Alex arose and began walking toward her house there was applause from the gathered neighbors. Alex was somewhat embarrassed and surprised by the response. She gave a weak smile and wave to acknowledge them.

She said to Sean, "I just did what anyone would do in those circumstances. Oh, that poor little thing."

Sean said, "Well, not everyone would do that. You were awesome."

Alex shook her head and said, "I hope she is alright, but when I think of that car backing over her...then the poor father. I don't see how that little girl will not be..."

Sean interrupted and said, "You never know."

Alex reached her front door, and then realized her keys were in her car. Sean jogged over to the Subaru, two doors down, to retrieve the keys for her.

As they entered the house, Sean asked, "Do you have someone who could stay with you?"

"Actually, I'm fine. I'm an attorney downtown and was on my way to work. I need to call in; I have an important meeting with some clients this afternoon."

"Glad you're okay, but be careful with yourself today. Don't push too hard. Sometimes there can be delayed reactions to things like this. Okay?"

"Okay. Excuse me while I change clothes," she said extending her arms to show her bloody blouse and skirt to Sean, as if he hadn't noticed.

"Sure. Mind if I stay to get some information from you after you change?"

"No problem," she said heading for the bedroom.

"I'll call in," Sean said as Alex left the room.

When she re-emerged, she was wearing a gray business suit and black blouse. You would never know what she had gone through in the last hour or so. That was the idea.

Sean really now appreciated how gorgeous this woman was. Something else impressed him. She was one cool customer. Within the hour, she immediately jumped into a crisis and tried to save a little girl's life. She was covered in blood when he first saw her.

Now she did a reset and was ready to go take on the world as a corporate attorney.

"So how are you feeling?" Sean asked, checking again.

"As fine as I can be," Alex responded. "I'm still worried sick about that little girl. I'm just so afraid she might not make it. Such a frail little thing. Just a baby."

"Just take it easy on yourself today," Sean reiterated. "This was a pretty traumatic event. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Do you do laundry?" Alex joked. "My blouse and skirt are probably toast."

Then she immediately shifted gears turning serious and covering her face with her hands. “There was so much blood...it was everywhere. But I’m going to be fine, really. Thanks for your help and support. Was there was some information you needed?”

“Oh, yeah,” and Sean quickly began getting some basic information about the incident on Peacock Lane. When he had finished he asked, “So what’s it like to live on Peacock Lane? I’ve always wondered that. I come here every Christmas. It’s been one of our traditions since I was a kid.”

“Well, I’ve lived here about two weeks. I’m excited to be here. Christmas will be a real experience. Come by and see me when you come to Peacock Lane this year with your wife, girlfriend or whatever.”

Alex thought that was a pretty skillful inquiry about this cute policeman’s status.

“I don’t have either one of those right now, but I’ll definitely stop and see you.”

“Seriously, do that.”

“I promise,” Sean said as Alex walked him to the door.

“Oh Sean... oops, is it okay if I call you by your first name?”

“Of course.”

“Is there any way you could find out how the little girl is doing? I’d really like to know as soon as I could. I’ll watch the house across the street when I get home and try to stop by.”

Sean smiled and said, “Sure I’ll find out for you. Can I use your cell phone number to let you know when I find out something?”

“That would be great.”

That was not a usual service provided by the Portland Police, but he would make an exception in her case.

“You take care, Alex. Here’s my card.”

“Thanks for everything Sean.”

The door closed. Sean smiled to himself as he went down the walk. Alex looked at his business card and a sly smile crept across her face.