

Berksville

Series Epilogue

By

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Berkinsville Series Epilogue

Prologue

Prologue to the Epilogue? (Can one do that? Oh, well.)

Isn't that how all good romance stories should end? Steve and I had a wonderful honeymoon. That was back in 1967. I began putting this story together in 2000, 34 years after it all happened. I started writing the actual book in 2007. It wasn't long until I realized it wouldn't fit in one normal-sized book. However, eBooks weren't limited to normal print book sizes. I managed to publish the part up to 'Steve's Coming Home Party' as *Molly's Dream* Books One and Two. Then my world changed with Steve's illness and passing. Since I couldn't finish the series at that time for many complicated reasons, I withdrew the book before there were significant sales. I didn't want to publicize them until the ending, Book Three, was completed. With the development of print on demand, I decided to rework the series into normal-sized books. That way they could be published both as normal-sized eBooks and as paperbacks. So here we are at 2023 as I add this Epilogue to the Series that will be added to my webpage.

A lot has happened in the fifty or so years since I told John I should write a book. Assuming you have read the 16 book series up until our weddings in 1967, I could not possibly tell you all that has happened after that time. But I can give you some highlights. Wonderful, bittersweet, surprising and, at last, the mystery of the K Pool was solved by George Berkins. I have never laughed so hard and so long. Steve had mixed feelings about it. Janet refused to discuss it with me!

I want to share more with you. Some will be descriptive. However, it is easier for me to write in story form. So I'll be switching back and forth in chronological order as it happened. And you will learn how I could tell all of what was in the 16 books in such rich detail. Annie has worked with me during the whole project. She will write some parts.

After the wedding described in Book 16, Janet and John held off having kids until after they finished getting their college degrees and certificates. Steve and I had a fine time attending college in Paramount City. We held off the children thing, too, until after we graduated. With summer school and extra classes we got our degrees in three years. During that time our parents secured the old dairy property. John and Steve designed a wonderful home for us on the ridge above the airport. I had thought and hoped John and Janet would live in the old dairy farmhouse so we could be neighbors. However that never worked out. We refurbished the old farm house and we rented it out to a new-hire family at the mill. They became wonderful neighbors and our children grew up together. Not that John and Janet's children didn't spend a great deal of time with us, it was their escape and I suspect Janet and John encouraged them when they wanted time alone. But wait! I'm getting ahead of my story. You need to hear of John's next big surprise. This happened after they had achieved their college degrees and associated certifications.

It is far easier to tell most of this in story form, so I'll be switching back and forth. -- Diane

With my help! -- Annie

Chapter One

John's Next Big Surprise

John and Janet left the office to go home. In the car Janet said, "Can we take a little side trip on the way home, Mr. Richards?"

John, "Certainly, Mrs. Richards." They smiled at each other, never tiring of the married names. "Where to?"

Janet, "Go toward my parents' home, but turn up the street to the little park where the stream comes down from the lake."

John, "One of the guys said that big house across the street from the park just came on the market. It has a lot of property in the back down along the stream. They're asking a hundred twenty for it."

Janet, "That's what I wanted to see."

John, "We know what the front looks like. Wouldn't we have to call the realtor to see inside?"

Janet opened her purse and held out a set of keys where he could see them.

John thought, A hundred twenty thousand, she's dreaming! "I hope you're just curious to see inside."

Janet, "Of course. Aren't you curious about it?"

John, "Somewhat; I'm really curious about the property down by the stream. I had never thought about the lot bordering a running stream. I guess that's why it's so expensive."

Janet, "Probably so."

When they arrived John parked in front of the double garage. "From what I can see it looks sound and true. It could use some maintenance and sprucing up." They walked around back and the yard fell away to the right and then leveled out nicely by the stream. "This street must sit on a rock ledge. The stream cuts through over there, then comes back over this way."

Janet, "Would this be a great place to raise kids, or what?"

John looked at her, "You trying to tell me something?"

Janet smiled. "Not yet, just making observations."

John grinned at her, "The back porch is great. Needs work though." They walked on around the house and back up to the front door. Janet unlocked the door and they went in. Outside, the gray paint and large windows gave it a foreboding look. But inside it was bright and airy. The little foyer was set above the ground floor by

two steps. On the backside of the foyer a staircase with banister led upstairs. They went down into the living room which held no furniture. John said, "Can you imagine what it would cost to furnish this place?"

Janet, "A bunch!" They walked into a formal dining room area then into the kitchen. Janet said, "YES!" It was spacious with windows, beautiful cabinets and cupboards. Janet did a turn around the kitchen, glowing.

John, "Maybe we could afford a house with a kitchen like this."

Janet, "I think so. I love this." She grinned at John, "Mother would be so proud!"

John, "Yes, I know. It's genetic."

They went back through the living room and found two bedrooms with a bathroom in between. Janet said, "Guest rooms I would think."

John, "Maybe one could be a den, library, office sort of." I'm dreaming, he thought.

They went upstairs and found three bedrooms. The master had its own bath and there was another bathroom off the hallway. Janet said, "Pretty standard for five bedrooms, I guess. Oh look, here's a little room that could serve as a nursery or sewing room or office." They went back downstairs and Janet sat down on the foyer steps facing into the living room. John walked over and looked out the window where a rise of rock was between them and the stream. Janet said, "What would be the best way to check out the structure -- ask guys from the mill or bring a surveyor up from the city?"

John turned to face her, "You're not serious?"

Janet, "It came on the market three days ago. I had Ron check it out. The title's clear with no complications. They're only asking the appraised value. It's a great deal."

John thought, it's a great pipe dream! "Janet, it's a hundred twenty thousand. Even if we could swing that on a mortgage, we would be strapped forever. What about furniture and maintenance? We make good money but ... you know we promised each other we would never lean on your parents for money."

Janet, "I like it. If it checks out OK and you like it, I could use my nest egg to swing it."

John was careful to be polite, "We agreed we would always live within our income and we wouldn't lean on your parents. And don't you want to keep your nest egg for emergencies?"

Janet, "Of course, but we could do it off what it's earning." John looked at her puzzled. She continued, "We could do the whole thing including repairs, catching up the painting and maintenance, and furnishings. I wouldn't have to touch the principal. We could do it off what it's earning. That part is OUR income."

John was baffled, "Could we start over? -- I think I missed something. -- How much interest are we talking about?"

Janet smiled. "In round numbers, a hundred and four thousand."

John was trying to comprehend, "You're earning a hundred four thousand a year in interest on your nest egg. How much is the principal?"

Janet, "WE are earning." Janet paused, then said, "not per year, one hundred four thousand PER MONTH, again in round figures, roughly twenty-five million." She watched John struggle with the numbers and begin to turn white. "John! Sit down here."

He sat down on the steps with her. "Let me get these numbers straight -- you have twenty-five million dollars in your nest egg earning -- oh my God!"

Janet, "You said you were going to expect a big surprise every now and then. **REMEMBER?! I promised to make them pleasant.**"

John couldn't talk.

Janet, "I told you I was willing to live within our income. I thought you knew I wasn't concerned about it."

John looked at her in total disbelief. Janet gave him a perky smile. He shook his head 'no' but still couldn't find words. Janet said, "You think about it while I take another look at the kitchen. Don't try to get up!" In the kitchen she started going through the cabinets, planning how to set them up.

John felt like he had just fallen into a dream. She had turned his world upside down again. He felt like laughing, but knew he was on the verge of crying. All the struggle to make Supervisor so he could barely support her. Trying to leave her so one of the Privateers could give her the kind of life she deserved. None of that mattered to her. All she had done for him was spinning in this new light. Money was never a concern for her. Success, yes, but never money. His head was spinning.

She came back from the kitchen. John said, "When I tried to leave you, it was because the others would be able to support you so much better. I thought they could give you the nice home I would never be able to afford for you."

Janet said flatly, "Oh that. Maybe you should have asked."

John shook his head again. "How did you ever get that much money in your nest egg?"

Janet, "It was my college fund. Mom and Ward played the commodity market with it. They didn't tell Dad or me what they had done for a long time. All I knew was I would never have to be concerned about money, if I lived a modest life."

John shook his head again, then said abstractly, "I guess not."

Janet, "I do want to keep the principal growing though. When my parents retire and we take over the corporation, we may need some bucks to make stock maneuvers to maintain control."

John shook his head again, "A few extra bucks could come in handy, I suppose."

Janet, "So you're OK with the place if we don't find any problems?"

John, "Could you go over your nest egg numbers one more time?"

Janet, "**OUR** nest egg is roughly twenty-five million, earning about one hundred five thousand a month. I lose track. It compounds and goes up a bit each time."

John, "That's the numbers I thought I heard."

Janet, "So you're OK with the place if we don't find any problems?"

John was still stuck on the numbers and didn't hear.

Janet laughed. "Sir John!" He looked up at her. "So you're OK with the place if we don't find any problems?"

John, "More than OK. I love it!"

Janet pulled a Contract For Sale out of her purse. "This contract is contingent on the place passing inspection. Ron drew it up. I've already signed. All we need is your signature. I'll mail them a cashier's check for twenty-four thousand earnest money. You can look it over when we get home while I fix supper."

John was in a daze taking the contract from her, but said, "Let's check out that two-car garage before we leave."

When he was done exploring the garage, they got in the car. John was still distracted and hesitated to start the car. Janet said, "You OK to drive?"

John, "How do you handle this -- I mean being so rich?" He started the engine.

Janet, "I think about it as little as possible. It tends to pull me into daydreams about all we could do. But that's a trap. I don't want it to mess up my most precious possessions; our relationship, living like normal people in this town, our children having normal lives, working at the mill. Stuff like that."

John, "Why didn't you ever tell me about this?" The engine was running, but he didn't put the car in gear.

Janet smiled. "You never asked. You were always happy living within your income, so it didn't seem to matter."

John, "I mean, this is important. **YOU are a multi-millionaire!**"

Janet, "Remember that wedding ceremony, 'for better or worse', you accepted that. **So! -- WE are multi-millionaires and YOU'RE stuck with it.**" She gave him a perky smile.

John laughed nervously, "How many people know about this? Did the Three Privateers know about this? Did Steve Doyle know about this? Diane?"

Janet, "No, only Mom, Dad and Ward. Well, Ron is a special case because he witnessed some legal meetings I had with his father at the law office. I wanted him to be in on those so he would have the background to handle our legal work later on. He was there when we did some work on the fund after we were engaged, to give you access. He has no idea the fund holds millions of dollars." She looked at John's starry-eyed expression and laughed. "It wouldn't have mattered to him. He would never have mentioned it to anyone. And you mustn't either. We can't let anyone know, not if we want to live normal lives. The money is hidden in a trust fund that's pretty much untraceable. If you had read the papers you signed with Pastor Hodge and Ron after the wedding ceremony, you would have realized there were signature cards giving you access to a trust fund."

John, "Are you saying the papers I signed after the wedding ceremony included making me a party to the multi-million dollar trust fund?"

Janet, "If you had read the paperwork you would have learned you were becoming a party to a trust fund."

John stared at her.

Janet, "I've warned you to always read the fine print. Even at a wedding!" Janet grinned. "**Especially at your own wedding!**"

John sat with the engine running. "What else was in that paperwork?"

Janet grinned, "Wouldn't you like to know! It's all on file at the Webb Law Office. Maybe you should go there and review it."

John, "This is going to take some getting used to." They were sitting in the car and he was staring blankly at the garage door ahead of him.

Janet, "Think of it this way. If this gets out, our future children and I would be at risk of kidnapping for ransom. None of us could ever live normal lives. We would have to have security protection all the time. Not to mention our friends would never be comfortable considering us as equals."

John, "My God! Is that why you didn't tell me?"

Janet, "Not really. It just didn't seem important."

John sat staring at the garage door ahead of him, engine running. Janet waited him out. John said, "I always wondered why your parents would provide security for you when you flew off to that resort. And at the

wedding. And why you never showed any resentment after they burst into the pastor's home at the reception. It's because you're a multi-millionaire. They were just protecting you!"

Janet, "Remember that wedding ceremony? **WE are multi-millionaires.** They were protecting **US!**"

John stared at her, "Have I ever mentioned that you are a complex person?"

Janet grinned at him, "Just so I'm not boring. -- You want me to drive?"

Chapter Two

George and Molly's Retirement

It was beautiful Indian summer day at the Berkins Assisted Living facility at the mountain lake.

Molly came awake thinking she heard birds chirping, then they were gone. The porch was warmer. She looked over at George and found him napping. She looked out over the lake from the nursing home porch. Every hour, the sunlight produced a whole new beauty. She shifted in her chair and George came awake. Molly said, "How long did I sleep?" as she stood up and stretched.

George, "An hour or so. You were dreaming. You twitch. Your eyes move."

Molly, "I told you I was going to enjoy that dream again about Janet and John. It's so strange. I dream it more real than life, then when I wake up, it's gone. It feels like real time covering months and months, then I wake up and only an hour has gone by."

George, "Sounds like Catherine's work to me."

Molly, "I feel so good about this dream, it's hard to give Catherine credit for it."

George, "Maybe it's Catherine working off karma."

Molly laughed. "Now there's a funny thought. -- I feel good about it because I sense the courage it took for Janet and John's relationship to mature. Do you remember that time John broke off with Janet and we thought he was going to leave? Then we went away for a few days, over a weekend, and came back to find Janet had made up with him?"

George, "I remember that well. She said they took a walk and talked it out."

Molly, "Sure. Except he wasn't walking or talking with her. After a while we talked to Ward and realized he knew how she did it. After I got over his refusing to tell me about it, he convinced us to leave it alone."

George, "He convinced us we were chasing our own guilty conscience. Unless you've solved the mystery in your dreams, you never figured it out, did you?"

Molly, "I'm not so sure about what's in my dream. All I know is I feel so -- impressed with them after dreaming it."

George, "So you never solved the mystery of how they got back together?"

Molly hesitated to answer. "Why do you ask?"

George, "I have a confession to make."

Molly, "Oh really?"

George, "The electrician over at the warehouse had asked if he could try a new instrument on our electrical panel at the house. It was a chart recorder that measured power usage on a paper chart for a whole week. That chart was about twenty feet long when unrolled. They used it to find wasted power at the warehouse and shops. He wanted to see what power usage looked like on our house just for curiosity. The recorder was running the weekend we were gone, the weekend Janet and John went for a walk and talked out their problem."

Molly, "And you never told me about this?"

George, "I'm telling you now. That Saturday, Saturday night, and Sunday until evening, not one light switch was operated." George waited for her reaction.

Molly, "Really?"

George, "I knew Janet wasn't at home that Saturday night. I checked to see if she might have stayed at Diane's and she hadn't. By then John and Janet had admitted going up to the first rest stop toward the lake. It was really bugging me so I had to do something. I first saw that chart at the warehouse. Before I left I called and requested the log for the fire watchtower."

Molly, "Didn't you know I would open it when it came in the mail?"

George, "I had intended to make the mail runs and pull it out before you saw it. Then I got busy and forgot about it. Then it showed up on my desk unopened. I put it aside and forgot it again until after the Christmas break."

Molly, "Why didn't you open it?"

George thought about it for awhile. "I guess I didn't really want to know."

Molly, "You didn't want to know what Janet had done?"

George took his time answering. "It wasn't so much that ..." He paused thinking about it. "I was afraid the information might change my relationship with John. After he got his promotion and the way he asked to sit with us again in church, I just didn't want to know. So I burned the envelope with the copy of the log unopened."

Molly, "I opened all incoming mail. Didn't you wonder why I didn't open it?"

George, "It was in a Forest Service envelope. I guess you must have presumed it was for me."

There was a pause and George looked hard at Molly. Molly said, "I have a confession to make. I read the logs in that envelope."

George, "How did you do that? I never opened the envelope. After John asked permission to court Janet and to sit with us again, I burned it unopened."

Molly, "I opened it and read it before I ever gave it to you. When I realized what it was, I put it in a new envelope, glued on the emblem from the original, and gave it to you."

George, "You know what it said?" He sat up, now getting interested.

Molly, "I told you I had a confession to make."

George, "Now I'm interested in what it said and why you never told me."

Molly, "Like Ward said, don't stir that pot. And I didn't want you stirring the pot either."

George, "Well, you can tell me now without fear of me stirring the pot."

Molly, "Roger Hunter was on duty that weekend. He wrote the log. It said John spent that Saturday night in the fire tower playing chess with Roger, a really good game."

George, "So where was Janet?"

Molly, "According to the log she arrived at the fire tower the next morning and she and John left together."

George, "So she stayed in the cabin that night. That explains a lot. They handled that very well, don't you think?"

Molly, "Roger faked the log."

George thought about that for awhile. "First, Roger has the highest integrity. Second, how could you know that?"

Molly, "Both Janet and John have been so careful to block me from knowing about that weekend. I wanted to solve the mystery about it. I've known they were at the cabin ever since you requested the log."

George, "Well, so what does it matter after our third grandchild?"

Molly, "It was an itch I had to scratch. After we retired I went and asked Roger about what happened that weekend. All I got was a boring description of every move in that chess game. He still knew every move after all those years. When I read him, I didn't see John at a chess board. I saw the moves on a piece of paper."

George, "Maybe he wrote them down after the game; you know how he's always been about chess."

Molly, "It was in Janet's handwriting."

George, "So he described the game to Janet and she wrote it down for him."

Molly, "Think about it. Janet has never been into chess. They use a special code to describe the game. If you don't play you wouldn't know how to write it from someone's verbal description. But you could copy it from a book."

George thought about it. "So he gave her the code and she wrote it down."

Molly gave him a look. "So that's why I see the paper with code on it, instead of John, when he tells me about the game?"

George thought about it. "OK, you're probably right about that -- so?"

Molly, "They never played chess. He gave me a description of a game Janet wrote down but he never played with John."

George, "Go on, Sherlock."

Molly, "After we retired I was bored and went to the forestry office to see if the originals of the log still existed. The lady said it should have been destroyed by then, but they were running way behind. She said if I was willing to dig through the boxes that were waiting to be burned, she would point me in that general direction. It took a couple of hours to find it, but I got the whole year. It wasn't all that much since that was a wet year and the tower was only manned in dry weather. I showed them to the clerk and she was puzzled why they were loose leaf rather than bound like all the others. That would prevent someone from removing a numbered page and rewriting the log. When I told her the tower was on Berkins' land and was manned intermittently that answered the question. They brought down the pages at the end of each man's tour. They used pages punched for a three-ring binder. She allowed me to set that year aside so I could go back a few days later to study it."

George, "Couldn't you just read those pages and be done with it?"

Molly, "I did but let me explain. I went to an auditor friend of mine, one of the 'old school' and told him I suspected manipulation of the log. He suggested several tests I could make. I won't bore you with the ones that didn't work. He gave me some spray that brings out impressions from writing on the above pages. When I looked at the page under where John arrived I found impressions of a log going all night until Sunday morning with John NOT arriving. Then a new page was written for that time and John arrived. That log was written Sunday morning showing John arrived the previous evening."

George, "I wouldn't have believed Roger would do that. I wonder how John convinced him to do it."

Molly, "John - my eye! I wonder how Janet convinced him to do it. So I checked something else just to be sure. Apparently it's windy up there. The loose leaf pages move around a lot in the ring binder. I checked thirty pages and by looking at the impressions underneath you could see that at each entry the page had moved from the previous entry. There was only one exception. The page showing John was at the tower, each entry

was perfectly aligned on the page below. It never moved. It was held in place while all the entries were made at once. It didn't move!"

George, "So you are saying ... ?"

Molly, "John wasn't playing chess with Roger that night."

George smiled. "Well, she's your daughter. -- Maybe they just fell asleep at the cabin and needed a cover story. -- Is there more to this?"

Molly, "I went to Roger and told him I knew he faked the log."

George, "What did he say?"

Molly, "He just smiled and asked about the grandchildren. I tried to get him to admit he faked the log and he just talked about what wonderful grandchildren we have. I think he was actually taking some credit for that!"

George laughed. "Not much guilt showing there."

Molly, "So I went to Janet and steered her into a conversation about when she and John got back together. She blocked me right out just like she always has. So I told her I had always thought they spent the night at the lake. -- You know the little safe she insisted on having for her room? She still has that thing. She took me to it and pulled out a package of photographs. She handed them to me, still blocking me out. There were 48 beautiful pictures of the lake area in fall colors. The last ones showed Janet with Roger, John and Roger sitting at the chess board, John and Janet together, all these were taken at the top of the tower. And the last one was of a crumpled sleeping bag on the iron grating with John standing beside it. I looked at the back of the photographs and it had the lab name and date, Nov 1966. She wouldn't say a word. She just kept smiling and blocking me out. -- From the sun angles, all those pictures were taken Sunday morning."

George, "Did you tell her you knew Roger faked the log?"

Molly took a long time to answer. "No, I really couldn't bring myself to do it. -- I did learn one thing though. I asked her what ISW meant."

"She smiled and thought about it for a moment. Then she said, 'Indian Summer Weekend.'"

George laughed. "So it was just a tag to confuse you."

Molly, "That had been bugging me for years. I never could figure out what ISW stood for. At least now I know. All it refers to is that weekend."

George, "So at last you are giving her some privacy."

Molly, "I just asked her for an update on the grandchildren."

George laughed. "So what do you think happened up there?"

Molly, "I can't remember. I think the whole story is in my dream but I can't remember it when I'm awake. I know they went through rough times like we did."

George, "May I suggest something? Have you ever noticed that little white ribbon in Janet's Bible? She uses it as a bookmark."

Molly, "Yes. I asked to look something up in her Bible one time and she took the ribbon out before she gave me the Bible. She put the ribbon in an envelope, sealed it, wrote something on the envelope then locked it in her desk drawer. I thought that a little extreme for a bookmark."

George, "Ask her to tell you the story of how that ribbon came to be used as a bookmark in her Bible."

Molly, "Do you know the story?"

George, "Not the whole story, but I'm the one she asked to add it to her Bible. You can ask her if she will allow me to tell you the part I know."

Molly, "Does it have something to do with that weekend?"

George, "I suspect it might, but I have no way of being sure."

Molly, "Perhaps if I continue napping I can find out."

George, "There you go again. I won't have anyone to talk with."

Molly, "You can go to the librarian and check on that book I told you about: WHAT TO SAY WHEN YOU TALK TO YOURSELF."

Molly settled back into her chair. It was warmer now. She settled in for another nap. She glanced at George and he was doing the same. He enjoyed napping as much as she did, but he didn't like to admit it. Molly thought, we earned this. Now Janet and John are carrying the load to keep us safe in this style that's so spoiling us. Thank you, Lord, that all this turned out better than we could have ever imagined. She looked down toward the far end of the lake where the cabin was nestled in the rock cliff, just out of sight. Then she smiled at the memory of George's retirement party.

George, "You're smiling with your eyes open. Are you seeing more of the dream?"

Molly, "I just remembered your retirement party, when you finally stepped down as CEO of the corporation."

George, "That day at the Green Meadows Inn?"

Molly, "All the county's businessmen were there; all the retired Supers and their wives; Ronald Webb and his father, Donald Vald and his father, Tom Hankins and Nathan Hankins; and all their wives."

George, "And Janet seated Tom and Joy Hankins directly across from her."

Molly, "After they got through glorifying you ..."

George interrupting, "Saying things to make sure I would never try to return."

Molly continued, "... they started making speeches and toasts to John about how fortunate they were to have someone like John to take over for you."

George, "And Janet sat there staring at Tom through the whole thing."

Molly laughed. "Tom would grin and look down, then look at Janet again, grin and look down. Joy was trying not to laugh."

George, "Nat said Tom grew up the day after Janet got her engagement ring from John. That morning they really talked father to son for the first time. That evening he and Tom stayed up all night talking about life and what was really important. Nat said that was the first time Tom ever really listened and considered what he had to say."

Molly, "Janet has never let him forget all the things he said about mill guy."

George, "John was fit to be tied about all the fine things that were said to him that day. He sat there so embarrassed, trying to hide it while Janet was glowing. Did you know, as we were leaving, John actually had tears running down his face? Janet had whispered something to him and he almost lost it right there in the Inn hallway."

Molly, "I was reading them. Would you like to know what Janet said to him?"

George, "You still remember that?"

Molly, "Sure, it was about that girl back in Atlanta. Janet whispered to him, 'Julie was wrong, don't you think?'"

George, "That girl sure did a job on him."

Molly, "And Janet undid it."

George, "And they're doing wonders with the business. I can't wait to see where they go with it now that the leases are renewed."

Molly, "Neither can I." She scanned around the rest of the pristine mountain lake. "That Christmas after they got back together, wasn't that a hoot?!"

George, "Oh, those were exciting times -- John at last feeling qualified to court the boss's daughter."

Molly, "And Janet trying to maintain the status quo and not be found out about writing to Steve."

George laughed. "While juggling Privateers for show."

Molly laughed, "And what a show it was, dragging us all into it!"

George, "We did well, don't you think?"

Molly, "All's well that ends well." Molly scanned the lake again. She thought, we should have the kids take us on the boat to visit the cabin soon. They always act so funny there, blocking like crazy, laughing, and serious, full of crazy emotions they are determined to hide.

Chapter Three

Steve's Assent

The is Annie telling this part. When Janet's parents decided to retire, John and Janet were fully prepared to take over the reins of the mill and the corporation. Slowly Janet's parents transferred more and more responsibility for Berkins Enterprises to them. John managed to obtain his Engineering Master's Degree with night classes and correspondence work.

They had children, giving George and Molly three grandsons and eventually great grandchildren. And they helped those who were interested prepare to take over the mill and the corporation. John and Janet were most proud that they were able to teach them to value the small town and maintain an excellent training program for new employees. Very few employees who lasted the first year ever left.

By the time Steve and Diane graduated with their degrees; Steve in History focused on Political Science and Diane in Social Science specializing in Human Services, Representative Rourke offered Steve a job in his local state office. Steve was able to do much of the work from home. In the process of coordinating with local state officials for the US Representative, he became well known in political circles. When the Statehouse representative for the Berksville area decided to retire, Steve was encouraged to run for the office. He refused offers from both parties but solicited support from both to run as an independent. He won on his reputation and the fact that no party candidate was well known in the area. And he had the support of Berkins Enterprises.

As an independent state representative, he often became the deciding independent vote in major battles in the Statehouse. Steve always drove a hard bargain, insisting on proper controls on political enterprises. Steve was often an irritation to both parties and became well known by the public. I'll let Diane describe this:

Diane: Steve was a real troublemaker. I think he only survived by learning to balance the corrupt factions against each other. What he described as confusing the spider. Representative Steve Doyle managed to establish a powerful ethics committee and, being from our remote district, no one could figure out how to unseat him given the Berkins corporate support.

Going back and forth to legislative sessions, we decided I would home school our children rather than be separated or bounce the kids between schools. And I did that until they were ready for high school. Speaking of children, perhaps I should explain. I had two girls and a boy. Janet had three boys, much to John's delight. Janet always felt she was denied a girl, a withheld blessing, because of her challenge to John at the lake cabin. She once mentioned a dream telling her that was her punishment for not going to our Lord for a solution to her problems. Never fear, she has pretty much treated my girls as if they were her own and they love her for it.

Now back to story form for another 'John surprise' long after Steve became a state representative.

Janet and John left the office to drive home. In the car Janet said, "Busy day, huh?"

John, "With all the reengineering I feel like a one-armed juggler."

Janet, "Let's take tomorrow off."

John, "You must be joking. You know my schedule for tomorrow."

Janet, "It's all cleared. I didn't want to distract you with that today, but we're all set. Dad and Ward will cover the engineering essentials. Robert will cover operations. Mom will take care of our kids. -- We're going out to lunch."

John was confused, "Give me a moment to catch up here. You totally rearranged my schedule so we can go out to lunch tomorrow. I hope there's something more to this?"

Janet said matter of factly, "Diane invited us."

John, "Now that she's only away when the legislature is in session, we can go have lunch with her almost anytime she's home. You know how she loves staying home and taking care of their kids. And why all day to have lunch?"

Janet smiled at him, "Travel time. We have an early morning flight out of Paramount City."

John gave her a look, "I feel another surprise coming on."

Janet, "Diane invited us to a political luncheon at the capitol. Steve's office is sponsoring it during their convention. Steve gets to invite guests."

John laughed. "That should be fun. That legislative committee on ethics he managed to establish has irritated every political faction in the state."

Janet, "Diane says that's the key to his success. Nobody likes what he's done but they all respect him."

John, "This coming election they're going to respect him right out of office, if they can."

Janet, "Both major party factions got together and figured out how to do it. That's what this dinner is about."

John, "Great! A farewell luncheon?"

Janet, "Both of the factions are so involved with infighting, neither could agree on a candidate for Governor. Both have publicized Steve's ethics investigations against the other faction making Steve somewhat of a state hero in fighting corruption. Their polls show he's the only one with a chance to win."

John, "I thought you said they were pushing him out of the legislature. Win what?"

Janet said with a smile in her voice, "You're not listening." She leaned around as much as possible to face him while he drove through town. She gave him a perky smile, "Win the office of State Governor."

John, "GOVERNOR!!!"

Janet sat back in her seat and tightened the seat belt again. "Diane wants us there when they make the announcement. He's a bit nervous about it. Our being there will signal small town business support. His new campaign manager wants to introduce us as executives of Berkins Enterprises."

John was stunned.

Janet said, "It's going to be on TV state wide. Wear a nice tie."

John, "Steve Doyle running for Governor!"

Janet, "Don't expect too much of this lunch. They refer to these things as 'rubber chicken dinners'."

John, "Governor Steve Doyle!"

Janet, "It'll take a lot to win. But if he does, Diane will have to decide if she wants to raise their children in the Governor's Mansion."

John, "First Lady Diane!"

Janet, "I think they only do that title for the U. S. President's wife."

John, "Does Steve have to make a speech tomorrow?"

Janet, "A short one. He's going to emphasize the importance of small business in the state and the problems large corporations cause. That's why he wants us standing with him. Along with others. Remember to applaud."

John, "You introduce surprising complications into our life."

Janet gave him a perky smile, "Just so I'm not boring."

John, "Governor Steve Doyle. Those letters you wrote to get him back safely become more important all the time."

Janet smiled. "Still haven't gotten over that, have you?"

John grinned over at her, "And I never will. Steve's OK. But where you're concerned, I don't share well with others. -- **Governor?!**"

Chapter Four

Family Ties

Diane: Let me explain a little more about our family life. Steve and I socialized a lot with Janet and John as the children grew. The children got along sort of. They became extremely competitive, but respectful of each other. Their boys pretty much ignored our girls socially during high school. Then at college in Paramount City we sensed a subtle change between our middle girl and Janet's oldest boy. At family gatherings she and he avoided each other in the extreme, before, they were competitive and verbally combative.

Then they were both college seniors. I asked my daughter if they had classes together. 'Some' was the only answer. 'Is there a problem?' I asked.

Finally she said, 'I'm stuck on him and he figured it out.'

'Is that a problem?' I asked.

She answered, 'He started looking at me in a whole new way. Then he asked me to be his date for the senior prom. The girl expecting to be asked is very upset with me. I did nothing. He just asked. -- I explained to her that falling for someone sends out very strong signals which he obviously noticed and liked.'

So I asked my daughter, 'Did you answer him?'

She was very slow to tell me. Finally she said, 'We were pretty much alone. You know that special way you kiss Father when you think no one is watching -- you start with your hands on his chest? -- I kissed him that special way. -- He seemed to take that as a "Yes".'

I managed **NOT** to say to my daughter, "**I'll bet he did!**"

That led to wedding preparations for them that follow. Back to the story narrative.

Green Meadows Inn:

The wedding rehearsal had gone well. Now they were waiting to be seated at the rehearsal dinner. Steve went to Janet and whispered in her ear. Janet listened for a moment and looked at him, glowing with wonder.

He walked away and Diane walked to Janet.

Diane, "That look on your face! After all these years I have never seen that one. It's a mix of every wonderful expression, all combined together."

Janet, "Do you want to know what he said?"

Diane, "You always respect my privacy with John. I'll respect yours with Steve."

Janet, "Has Steve told you about his toast for tonight?"

Diane, "No, is that what he told you?"

Janet, "Yes."

Diane, "Well, I'll hear it when he gives it. I hope I feel what you just felt when he does it."

Janet, "I think you will."

At last all were around the large table, preparing to enjoy the rehearsal dinner together. Drinks had been served and John rose to give the first toast.

John, "I propose a toast to the bride and groom. May good fortune follow you all the days of your life."

All responded "Hear, Hear!" They toasted the bride and groom and drank the champagne.

When the noise subsided Steve rose to propose a toast. The table grew silent. "Ladies and gentlemen, I propose a toast. The love of John and Janet has produced a groom. My love of Diane has produced a bride. I toast the children of this marriage -- who -- will at last bring together -- the genetics of the four of us -- who have shared so much together!"

There was a silent pause as all considered the statement he had just made. Then a cheer erupted and all toasted the bride and groom again. The mood changed to profound sincerity as they considered Steve's toast.

George Berkins said, "Imagine children with Steve and John's strength and integrity. Then combine that with the great beauty of Diane, and Janet's intelligence. Can you imagine the intelligence and drive of these four all focused into one person?!"

Ward Handleman added, "Then consider that special spirit that challenges everything and everybody, and never gives up!"

Molly knew he was speaking of Janet and said, "I'm not sure the world is ready for this!"

Slowly one by one they all began to stare at Janet.

Janet, "Why are you all looking at me?!"

All began to laugh.

John said, "What's that new word they are using for children? **PRECOCIOUS!**"

Ward Handleman, "**PROVOCATIVE EXPOSTULATION!**"

This brought warm appreciative laughter, drawing Janet into it.

John, looking at Janet, said, "**DOESN'T SHE THOUGH!**"

Janet said, laughing and shaking her head 'no' with resignation, "**Oh, that!**"

After the dinner Diane approached John who was talking to others with his back to her. She waited a few steps away until they finished. He turned and came face to face with her. Startled, it took a moment while she stood smiling at him.

John, "After all these years you still have that effect on me."

Diane, "There's favorable lighting here. That rarely happens anymore. Time has taken its toll. What did you think of Steve's toast?"

John, "I didn't get it at first. Then **wow!** That was a profound thought. I guess some of the fire from his teenage romance with Janet will get satisfied after all."

Diane, "There was more to it than that."

John thought about it and she could see his embarrassment. "Yes, I guess maybe we added a little telephoning fire to the mix. I looked at Janet when I figured it out. She looked pleased but she didn't have the big reaction I would have expected."

Diane, "You didn't see her reaction. He told her his toast before dinner. I saw him tell her but couldn't hear. Janet lit up like a Christmas tree!"

John, "That week they spent together at the resort, they may not have been romancing but there was some powerful spiritual interplay taking place. Sometimes they look at each other and you can feel the energy and respect."

Diane, "I've seen that too. But when she looks at you it's twice that. You know after our son was born, Janet came by the house one day with a Little League baseball bat. She and Steve acted funny about it. I thought Janet might be playing some kind of joke."

John, "I remember the bat. It was Steve's Little League bat. Janet had it over at her parents. I took her over there so she could get it."

Diane, "They were trying to play it cool but I knew something was up. Finally she told him it was time to return his bat. She handed him the bat and they both burst into tears. It's the only time I've seen Steve break down and cry. They hugged each other, all embarrassed, and she left without another word. Later I asked Steve about it and he got all choked up. He said it was a personal thing with Janet and I should ask her about it."

When I got a chance to ask her, she got all choked up and said it was a very personal thing with Steve and I should ask him about it. -- It seemed like something best left alone."

John, "Probably so."

Diane, "After this wedding we'll all be related. That New Year's Eve at The Gossip, when you wore the blindfold for me, could you ever imagine we would all be linked together like this?"

John shook his head and smiled.

When the dinner ended Janet and John were walking toward their car. Janet thought John was quiet and emotional, something she seldom saw in public. When they were in the car she asked, "You seem to be taking all this very seriously."

John started the car. "All this is so incredible. What was it, over twenty years ago when I met Diane?" John took a moment to contain his emotions. "I could never have imagined someday we would be considering mutual grandchildren."

Janet gave him space, sensing there was more.

John, "All this is held together by so many tiny threads. But for a broken water pipe in a restaurant I would have never stopped in Berkinsville. A few words of encouragement from a waitress caused me to come to your office. That first day at the mill, I almost walked out to see where a lift was going. Robert would have sent me packing. My putting on the blindfold again and calling Diane back after she gave up on me. Your parents tolerating our dating. My attempt to leave and your incredible refusal. How close we came to disaster. Steve's miraculous survival when his unit was attacked. All those tiny threads held it together. There were so many ways this could have come apart. I'm overwhelmed by the ... "

Janet knew he couldn't say more and said with a perky smile, "Life is full of surprises, hey?"

John tried to hold in laughter and his tears. After a moment he let both the laughter and tears out but managed to say, "Isn't it though!"

Chapter Five

The Secret of the K Pool

Annie: Slowly Janet's parents transferred more and more responsibilities for Berkins Enterprises to her and John. One of Janet's new hires obtained his engineering degree with night classes and correspondence work. He eventually took over much of John's duties. Janet took over more and more of Molly's corporate financial work. George took more and more time off, leaving John in charge. When Janet's parents decided to retire, John and Janet were fully prepared to take over the reins of the mill and the corporation. There was a short Board of Directors battle when some members of the Berkins family wanted to resume control. It was short lived as they realized how well the transfer of power had been planned.

Janet and John had children, giving George and Molly three grandsons and eventually great grandchildren, one of whom is me, Annie. And they helped those who were interested prepare to take over the mill and the corporation. John and Janet were most proud that they were able to teach them to value the small town and maintain an excellent training program for new employees. Very few employees who lasted the first year ever left.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. When George and Molly finally turned Berkins Enterprises Inc. over to John and Janet, George already had his retirement project under way. Remember the secret cabin on the natural rock dam and lake? Remember that jeep trail to the upper end of the lake they used to get the equipment and furnishings to the cabin? George had that road improved and cleared the flat on the upper northeast end of the lake, the opposite end from the dam. There he designed and built a beautiful retirement center and assisted living facility that could be fully functional through the high-altitude winter. There he and Molly eventually settled in to enjoy the final years of their life together. Now back to story form. George is about to resolve the great mystery in his life.

November 2005

At the assisted living facility by the high mountain lake George and Molly Berkins are in their room getting ready for the evening meal. Molly said, "I'm so sad about Robert passing away yesterday."

George, "He was the last one of the old crew. Those were the days, weren't they?"

Molly, "He never told you about the K Pool, did he?"

George, "Never did. I knew everything about the place, how it worked, how the men worked together. I think it was good for them to have one secret. That went on for two or three years.

Molly, "And they were laughing about it long after that. Do you think they ever told Janet?"

Molly, "She says not. She tried to get it out of Ward before he passed, as a birthday present for you, nothing doing."

There was a knock on their door. George opened it. An attendant said, "It's not visiting time but you have a visitor. He says he's Robert's grandson. He says it will only take a moment; he has something to give you. It looks like an envelope."

George, "Sure. Send him in."

In a moment Robert's grandson George arrived.

George, "So sorry about your grandfather. He was a great friend to us."

Robert's grandson, George, "He thought very highly of you also. A couple of days ago, when he was sure he was ... he called me to do something for him. He had me get this out of his safe and instructed me to hold it until after Anyway, I was instructed to personally place this envelope in your hands. He said it was a very personal thing for you and Mrs. Berkins and your daughter. He told me there is another envelope inside this one wrapped in foil and then he laughed. There seemed to be some great fun about this. Then he told me there was a secret here beyond any known security level and I was to take great care with it. He seemed very pleased with himself. It was the last time I saw him laughing." Finishing sadly, he handed the envelope to George.

George, "Thank you, George. I have a feeling I might know what this is. And it will be a joy to solve the last great mystery of our lives. Thank you for bringing this to us."

Molly, "Thank you, George." Robert's grandson nodded and left.

George sat staring at the envelope.

Molly, "Well, are you going to open it?"

George, "Here, you open it. If there is another one inside, THAT's the one I want to open." He handed the envelope to Molly who opened it.

Molly, "He was correct. There's the aluminum foil -- and another envelope. It says:

SECRET OF THE K POOL

If possible, to be opened
in the presence of George,
Molly, and Janet Berkins Richardson.

George, "Well isn't this grand! At last we'll know what it was."

Molly, "He wanted Janet in on it. I'll bet it involves her."

George, "John said they were bringing Annie up tonight. They have her for the weekend. We can open this tonight." George took the inner envelope and wrapped the foil back around it. "Come on, let's go to dinner."

George and Molly walked into the dining room. The Orsteads and the Bidwells were already seated. They joined them at the table.

Mr. Bidwell, "Here come the porch twins."

Mrs. Orstead, "George designed that porch for his retirement."

George, "You got that right. And a fine porch it is." They seated themselves and settled in.

Mr. Orstead, "We were just talking about the day Janet hired Rhonda and Joy to work in your office."

Molly, "That's one day he'll never forget. The office had been running the same since Janet graduated high school. Then Janet turned George's world upside down in one day."

George, "Before that, John could liven things up a bit. But I could always keep that under control."

Molly, "He had a lot less control than he thought as far as Janet and John were concerned. But after Janet brought in reinforcements it was a whole new ballgame."

George, "The office was never the same. I was greatly outnumbered."

Mrs. Bidwell, "Joy was so excited to start working there. She considered Janet the fountain of all wisdom. Then Joy and Rhonda became great friends."

George, "Janet built a great team out of that. Janet and Rhonda were kind of laid back unless push came to shove. Joy was always ready to take on anything."

Mrs. Bidwell, "Yes, even Tom eventually." They all laughed.

Mr. Bidwell, "I wasn't thrilled about that. But it's worked out well enough."

Molly, "Have any of you ever heard of the K Pool?"

Mrs. Orstead, "I think Rhonda mentioned it once. Janet was trying to find out about it. It was some kind of game they played in the mill yard. I don't think she ever figured it out. Rhonda was surprised that anything like that could go on there, discipline being so strict."

Molly, "Well, George has the secret in an envelope in our room. Robert's grandson brought it up a few minutes ago. It has to be opened in Janet's presence. They're supposed to be driving up here tonight."

Mrs. Bidwell, "Joy was so saddened by Robert's passing. She enjoyed working with him. He and Ward treated her so well. They would always make time to teach her anything she wanted to know. And I think they went far beyond anything job-related."

George laughed. "One of the joys of running the place was letting things like that slip by unnoticed!"

Mr. Bidwell, "Have John and Janet gotten over the shock of having the long term-leases renewed?"

Molly, "That was hanging over us our whole lives. I'm not sure they've come to terms with it all being settled. Ron and Steve were prepared for it, though. Steve pushed through legislation to allow old land leases to be rewritten in modern legal language if three judges approved that the original intentions were carried through. Ron had the rewrite ready to present and the judges gave their approval yesterday. It's a done deal."

George, "If the federal government doesn't come in and take the whole thing for a national forest -- then give special logging privileges to their friends. Having never clear-cut anywhere, the Spotted Owl nonsense worked in our favor."

Mr. Orstead, "Is that a possibility -- making it all a national forest?"

Molly, "We've heard rumors. The multinational corporations never give up. But I think they'll go to states where the state government is more cooperative. The Spotted Owl thing has them spooked. We're probably OK for a couple of decades. Another generation may have to fight that battle again."

Mrs. Orstead, "Will you share this K Pool mystery with us? I'm sure Rhonda and Joy would like to know."

George smiled. "Perhaps. First we have to see what it is. It may not be share-able."

Molly laughed. "And he's waited so long to solve the mystery, he may just want to drive everyone crazy keeping it to himself!"

They all laughed.

After dinner, George and Molly returned to their room. George said, "I think the evenings are getting too cool for more time on the porch."

Molly, "Not much light left -- it's still early. I doubt the kids will get here for at least an hour or so." Molly kicked off her shoes and sat down at her desk. She unlocked the deep side drawer and took out one of many diary books.

George, "There you go again. I keep telling you that you can't rewrite history."

Molly, "I'm not rewriting history. I'm filling in gaps."

George, "All right. I've always left you to your diaries. You've been working on them ever since we settled in here. There isn't that much going on here!"

Molly laughed, "Do you really want to know, George?"

George, "You're going to publish your memoirs, 'How to run an office with a grumpy old man and three brilliant young ladies.'"

Molly smiled, "I'm not going to publish anything. But Diane might. She and John have been kidding around about writing a book about Janet since day one. If she decides to do it, I'm working to give her the whole story, -- parts she couldn't possibly know any other way."

George, "I don't understand."

Molly, "You know I read people really well. I've kept a detailed diary, not only about us and the business, but about Janet and John. I started the Janet and John part when John first came to town."

George, "What about the Janet and Steve part, - their high school days?"

Molly, "I knew that wasn't going to last. I knew as soon as Steve blossomed into a full man she would have to let him go. However, I didn't count on their friendship surviving his enlistment. I kept encouraging Janet to break it off."

George Laughed, "The letter-writing complication. I remember those days! High drama!"

Molly, "She blocked me like crazy. I wonder if those mental exercises helped develop the incredible skills Ward taught her."

George, "So what does that have to do with those old diaries?"

Molly, "She doesn't block me anymore. When I get her focused back on those old days I can read it all now. Everything she remembers is open to me."

George, "Doesn't she know what you're doing?"

Molly, "She just smiles, watching my reactions. Especially when my mouth drops open!"

George, "What didn't we know?"

Molly, "You would be amazed!"

George, "So you add that to your diary for those days?"

Molly, "The first problem was finding space. By rearranging the books, I'm adding pages. Lots of pages! And I've been filling in gaps by talking with other people involved in those times."

George, "So what are you going to do with them?"

Molly, "When we pass on I want them to go to Janet. She can decide if Diane is really interested in writing a book about all the drama. I've arranged our wills with Ronald Webb to cover all that."

George, "That's quite a project. How much time are you covering?"

Molly, "Just the time from when John came to town and the wedding."

George, "when we thought they went to Hawaii!"

Molly, "I still laugh about that! Pastor Hodge was in on the whole thing! I read him real well, too."

George, "You think I might read through some of those diaries?"

Molly, "Sure, if you get Janet's permission -- IN WRITING!"

George laughed, "Never mind."

Molly, "Why don't you ask her? I'd love to hear her answer."

George, "Never mind. You know I asked the librarian about that book about talking to yourself. She laughed and said we could get all of Shad Helmstetter's books if I wanted them. You weren't kidding! That book about talking to yourself really exists."

Molly, "After all these years you still doubt me."

George, "After all these years I'm still learning how much there is of you to appreciate."

Molly, "That's nice. I'm glad."

George, "Very well. I got some new magazines from the library. I'll read them with the lamp by my chair."

Later that evening Janet, John, and their granddaughter Annie arrived. George and Molly greeted them in their room.

George went into his Grumpy Boss mode, "First Molly and I want a private word with John. Wait in the hall and close the door." Janet grinned at her dad's Grumpy Boss routine and started to guide their two-year-old granddaughter Annie to the door.

George, "Great granddaughter can stay. I don't get to see enough of her. Let her stay!" Janet exited to the hall, closing the door.

George, now fully into his old Grumpy Boss mode, "Now, John, you know Robert passed away?"

John, "Yes, Sir."

Annie had picked up the foil wrapped envelope off George's lap and was puzzled by it. She interrupted the conversation, "What's a K Pool?"

George and Molly looked at each other, puzzled, and George says, "Did you mention that to Janet when you called?"

Molly, "Nope!"

John, "Is there something wrong?"

George to John, "Has Annie exhibited any signs of the family curse?"

John, "No, none at all."

George grinning, "Well she has now! I think you are going to be in for some interesting times."

Annie, "Did I do something wrong?"

George "No honey, you did something right and surprised us. Your grandmother will explain about a K Pool to you later after we figure it out."

Annie, brightly, "OK!"

George to John, "Robert was the last of the old crew keeping the secret of the K Pool. And you worked with all those guys for many years." Back into the Grumpy Boss routine, "Did they EVER tell you about the K Pool?"

John laughed at George's Grumpy Boss routine, "No sir! And I tried everything I could think of to find out. Janet wanted to give the secret to you for a birthday present."

George became an overly-proud Grumpy Boss, "John, I want you to know that as of this moment I am..." He held up the foil-covered envelope. - "the only person in the whole world holding the secret of the K Pool. And I am going to disclose it, according to Robert's instructions, to my wife, my daughter and myself. Would you wait in the hall and send Janet in?"

Molly, "Take Annie with you. She is beginning to remind me of Catherine and I don't want her spoiling sir George's party."

John took Annie to the hall and, laughing, said to Janet, "Could you hear the Grumpy Boss routine again after all these years? Watch out now, he wants you."

Janet, "OK, that's great! Here I go."

Janet entered and George explained about receiving the foil-wrapped envelope. He read the outer instructions to them.

George, "Janet, do you know that, as of this moment, with Robert gone, I am the only person in the whole world holding the secret of the K Pool?"

Janet, "Well, are you going to open it?"

George, "I think I would just like to savor this moment for awhile."

Janet and Molly looked at each other for a moment. John, waiting in the hall, heard Janet and Molly yell in unison, "OPEN IT!!"

Then silence. He could not see that Janet and Molly were reading the contents over George's shoulder. The silence went on until Annie said, "I think someone's getting a really big surprise!"

More silence, then howls of laughter that went on and on.

Finally John heard Molly say in a very loud voice, "Tell me again how glad you were that your daughter let her romantic social life be an open book to you!" - followed by more howls of laughter.

In a while, Janet finally emerged, wiping away tears of laughter, "After all these years I got caught!" - laughing more.

John, "They didn't find out about us spending the night at the lake, did they?"

Janet, "Oh no. Nothing that serious." Janet handed him the contents of the envelope.

John, "He let you have this?"

Janet, "I asked him if I could show it to Steve. Read it. You will see why."

The typed contents said:

Secret of the K Pool

When Steve started driving Janet to the office after high school classes, they would disappear in the bushes beside the office every day. We could see this from several places in the yard. We started kidding about how many seconds they would be out of sight. As it

went on every day, week after week, some of the guys started friendly bets on how long they would be out of sight. Then we got the idea of setting up a Kissing Pool. We made up a pool chart with various numbers of seconds, zero to five on one side and one to nine on the other, giving us a range of zero to fifty nine seconds out of sight. Zero was to win if they didn't disappear from sight. It never won. If they were there more than a minute, we started over at zero again. The bet was one dime.

When things were running smooth, we ran the pool every day they came to the office, for two and a half years. You might remember someone casually asking every day if Janet was working after school. If so, one person each day would be tasked with being where they could check the time with a stopwatch. We called it the K Pool so no one would catch on to what it was about. After they graduated, anytime Janet was near a guy, someone would suggest a K Pool and everyone in the know would laugh. The last K Pool was run the night we knew John was going to ask Janet to marry him at the high school gym. It was a big night so we allowed quarter bets. I don't remember who won.

So there you have the secret of the Kissing Pool. You might let Janet decide if she wants to tell John the secret. Author of this note chooses to remain anonymous.

After reading it, John said, "So that's where you learned to kiss like that. You certainly got lots of practice."

Janet laughed. "Didn't I though! Secrets are like little rockets that eventually go shooting up in the air where everyone can see them."

After visiting more with George and Molly, they took Annie to the car and started home.

Janet said, indicating the paper with the K Pool secret, "That started in 10th grade when Steve got his car. Mom would pick me up after school and take me to the office. They had just started letting me help out in the office and I loved it. One day she said she wouldn't be able to pick me up after school and I should walk home. I really wanted to go to the office after school."

"Steve was really shy, I don't think he had had a real date or a real kiss. I asked him if he would drive me to the office after school. He said one of the rules about his car was his dad expected him to come straight home after school. He was so shy and I really wanted the ride. So, half teasing, I told him I would give him a kiss if he would take me. This seemed like an overwhelming idea to him and I didn't get an answer. A couple of hours later he finds me at lunchtime and asked me if I mean a kiss on the cheek or a real kiss. I told him a real kiss on the lips just like in the movies. He was so shy I still didn't get an answer. In the break before last class he finds me again and tells me to meet him at his car after school."

"When we got to the office I planned to kiss him in the car. But he parked right in front of the office in plain view of everyone. I remembered having dropped my purse by the steps to the office one day, and having to slip into that little space to retrieve it. So I told him to walk me up to the office so I could introduce him to my

parents. When we got to that space I guided him -- pushed him -- in there. He wasn't expecting it and it happened so fast he didn't have time to be shy. He really liked the kiss! I guided him out of there and ushered him quickly up into the office. I didn't realize how shook up he was. Dad went into his Grumpy Boss routine and said, 'Son! What are you doing with my daughter?!' Steve nearly fainted. I explained that he had been kind enough to drive me to the office and he should thank him for getting me there so I could help out. Dad got up and gave Steve a real hard look. 'Thank you. Now I want you to understand -- IF YOU EVER DO THIS AGAIN' ... then he paused for effect and I thought Steve was going to die right on the spot. 'Just escort her to the door! You see, this is a business office and we don't tolerate any dilly-dallying nonsense in here!' Steve finally managed a 'Yes, sir!' and practically ran for his life. I was mad at dad for a week!"

"It took me that week to convince Steve my dad was only kidding around and I'm not sure he ever fully believed me. By then my mother had talked to his parents and they had given permission for him to drive me to the office after school. They told Mom he was so shy they were pleased he was finally showing an interest in girls."

"After his first experience he was only too glad to leave me at the office door. But he also expected that kiss each time. He sure liked those kisses, and at the same time he was terrified my father would catch us. If dad had caught us, he would have laughed and I would have never heard the end of it -- Grumpy Boss material you know! -- Thinking back, I never considered the wire mesh fence might not give much cover for someone watching from the lumberyard side."

John, "Maybe you were too much enjoying the kisses."

Janet, "That was a long time ago."

They rode on in silence for awhile with Annie sleeping in the back.

John, "You know, Steve might have learned to control his fear right there during those kisses every day. You might be responsible for him getting that Silver Star."

Janet, "If it helped him save himself and some of his buddies that would be enough for me."

They rode on in silence, then Janet said, "I haven't mentioned it, but I had a dream about Catherine awhile back."

John, "Do you think Catherine is really watching over us? Or is that just your subconscious talking to you?"

Janet, "Maybe it is half and half. I really don't know. Ward told me it was best just to take the dreams at face value and not worry about the fine print. Pastor Hodge shared some advice that I should watch out for any evil spiritual tendencies - imposters, so to speak. I've come to think of her as a friend."

John, "So what was the dream about?"

Janet, "It was kind of a life review for the both of us. She was pleased with how our lives had played out."

They rode on in silence again. Annie, who had been sound asleep in the back seat, woke up. She sat up in the seat and watched as they traveled the roads home.

Janet wondered what John was thinking about the K Pool kisses with Steve. She was a little concerned. She had convinced him she had never kissed any of the Privateers seriously. But this was different. These had been serious passionate kisses and she was sure John understood that. Oh well, she thought, that was a long time ago.

John was amused thinking of Steve and Janet romancing in the bushes beside the office. He was surprised George and Molly had never caught them. He wished he had had a little more high school romance and not so much farm work. But life was good and he wouldn't change anything - scary and painful as some of it had been. He tried to imagine Steve being shy. That was the one thing he had never seen in Governor Doyle. What a great friendship they had with him, Diane, and their family. He went back to imagining Janet pushing Steve into the bushes and kissing him. It was a little annoying. He wondered how she felt about him learning about it.

Eventually they arrived home and pulled into the garage. John closed the garage door as they got out of the car. Janet walked around to his side and put her arms around his neck. "With all this talk about my kissing other men, I'm concerned you might not be remembering?"

John, "At this point I'm long past those fears and quite confident of your love. I think having grandchildren helps -- but what did you have in mind?"

Janet gave him a long slow loving kiss, trying to induce as much response from him as possible. Then she turned her head the other way and did it again, after saying softly, "Remember?"

John, "You know, every time you do that I get a picture in my mind. I may have caught the family curse. I see this wonderful, beautiful, twenty-one year old girl -- wearing nothing but very revealing white towels."

Janet, "It's not the curse. YOU just have a good memory!"

Janet turned to open the door to retrieve her granddaughter from the car seat. She realized Annie had been watching their kisses with great interest. She had never seen kisses like that. Janet opened the car door and started to remove Annie from the car seat. Annie said, "Is there a secret cabin on a lake?"

Janet, "John, did you hear that?" Then sternly to Annie, "Catherine, would you like some ice cream?"

Annie puzzled, "Who is Catherine? My name is Annie!"

Janet to John, "Just checking." Then, sweetly to Annie, "Annie, would YOU like some ice cream?"

Annie said brightly, "Yes, I love ice cream!"

Inside, John seated Annie in a high chair and Janet served her a dish of ice cream. Annie ate several bites slowly, then said, "Why did you call me Catherine?"

Janet, "You just reminded me of someone."

Annie, "Is she one of our old relatives?"

Janet, "Why would you ask that?"

Annie, "I've heard my parents talk about her."

Janet, "What did they say?"

Annie, "They said she knew what people were thinking."

Janet, "Do you believe it?"

Annie, "Of course. I can do that. I've learned lots of things people didn't want me to know."

John, "Really? You can do that?"

Annie, "I've learned not to talk about it. It makes people act funny. I'm not sure they like me."

Janet, "You can talk about it with us. We might like you even more."

Annie, "All the way up here you were both thinking about you kissing another man."

Janet looked at John, "That was before I met your grandfather. It was an OK thing."

Annie considered for a moment then said, "If you say so."

Janet, "Don't you believe me?" John laughed.

Annie, "It's what you and Grandpa believe that's a little confusing."

John, "Would you just take our word for it -- for now?"

Annie, "OK."

Janet, "Maybe you just have a big imagination."

Annie, "What's imag-i-na-tion?"

Janet, "That's when you make something up that isn't real."

Annie, "Oh no, what people think is lots more fun than making things up!"

Chapter Six

John and Janet

At age seventy three, John's overworked heart gently slowed. Then it stopped! Janet went through the funeral with her sons and their grandchildren. Diane and Steve shared her grief. After the funeral Janet at last convinced them all she would like to be alone for the evening. She went across the street to the little park to watch the sunset, sunlight lighting the mountain on the far side of the valley. She remembered that sunset so many years ago at the lake cabin when she had tried to seduce him. What crazy times those were!

In the park that evening after John's passing, as she stared at the ridge, Janet realizing something was changing, she was slowly enveloped by sunlight more warm than possible! It was like a wonderful nebulous bubble was forming around her. She realized the warmth was not heat, nor light, but love, ten times stronger than the sun! She sat perfectly still, then realized she should look up. In her mind, John's incredible young face was impressed in the tree directly above her. He was happier than she had ever seen, beaming with a look she knew! He was holding within him the greatest secret of the universe and could NOT wait to share it with her! The intense love enveloping her cleansed her of all doubt, relieved her of all guilt, stunned her into a state of bliss. She knew John wanted to tell her, but could not. She sat trying to comprehend this most incredible moment of her life - one minute - two. John's face was beaming down at her. She sat perfectly still. Then slowly it began to fade, first his face, then the intense bubble of love. It was impossible to think. Slowly the intense warmth of the love began to diminish. She felt she had just witnessed a miracle that had removed all the stresses of her lifetime! Intense peace was infused into every part of her being. The spiritual realm was real! - ten times more real than this earthly existence! She had just experienced it. Although fading, some of the warmth of that love was staying with her. John was alive, more alive than ever! And he couldn't wait to share this reality with her!

She sat looking at the sunlight fade on the ridge overlooking the valley. All was still the same. But she knew she was changed. Now totally at peace. How could John have done this? He was only a man. Surely, Jesus Himself would have had to allow this! John was wonderful, but he was no angel. How could he have done this?! The intense love she had just experienced was not totally going away. But the sun was. She looked around. Everything was the same. But she wasn't. She waited as darkness was rapidly approaching. She decided there was nothing to do but walk back across the street to her home before it was dark. The intense love she had experienced was diminishing but at a slower and slower pace. When she reached her kitchen it was still with her. She had the feeling it was never going to totally leave her. And it didn't. The peace gained in this experience stayed with her until the end of her life.

After John's passing, Janet stopped pacing herself and worked herself to the max! Her doctor watched her walk down a hallway, did a few simple tests, and cancelled her driver's license. She was cautioned to slow down her research at the mill, but she ignored her doctor's advice. Realizing her situation, she began at daylight her last spring hike to the lake. It took two people to help her up the first steep part. She paced the hike to arrive at the lake cabin just before sunset. The grandchildren who accompanied her were thrilled at her accomplishment. As she approached her next birthday, she was reduced to writing from her assisted living room at the lake. Her doctor suggested she would do better at a lower altitude. She refused to leave the mountain lake and continued to push her studies to the max.

Then the day came when her body processes could no longer keep up. Most of her offspring were gathered at the lake nursing home waiting room. Annie waited off to the side, down a hallway. She had never learned how to turn off all she received from others, especially family. And there was a lot of emotion in the room where they waited for the doctor to speak to them. I, Diane, can't say much about my part in this. It's just too hard.

The doctor called all who were visiting into the hallway and said, "She's fading. She still has periods of consciousness. You can ask her to blink her eyes if she hears you. They are not open but if she is conscious you can see the eyelids flicker a bit. I doubt she will last another hour. If you want to be with her you can go in. I would suggest you not talk among yourselves. Just tell her who is there."

Annie was first to enter and went to the chair on the far side of the bed, where she had stood watch overnight. Everyone had great respect for Annie. But they always felt that when she looked in their eyes she saw much more than they ever wanted her to know. At various times each of them had asked for and received her gentle help, but at the price of having to let her hold their hands and look into their very soul. Annie's suggestions were always simple and weird. But her suggestions solved their problems. Annie was amused by their difficulties. Having someone look into their very soul and react with amusement did not bring closeness. And they did not understand that Annie's version of the family curse had no 'off switch'. (She's got that right! -- Annie) She could not be close to anyone other than Diane. Janet and Diane had been the only ones who really understood and accepted her.

The others followed Annie into Janet's room but stayed on the opposite side of the bed. They were always cautious about getting too close to Annie. The room became quite full. Annie told Janet if she could hear to blink her eyes. Janet's eyelids flickered. She nodded to the others, who stated their names and their love. The doctor slipped back into the room and stood out of the way against the wall back from the foot of the bed.

Annie took Janet's hand and, after a few moments, said, "She feels honored that each of you came to be with her at this special time. She is very proud of each and every one of you. As each of you spoke, she remembered some special moment she had spent with you."

One of the children asked Annie, "Can you still read her when she is so weak?"

Annie answered gently, "Honey, it's only her body that is weak. Her spirit is very strong. I read her loud and clear!"

The doctor thought, I've seen some strange deathbed scenes, but never a death reading. I wonder why the family tolerates this?

After awhile, Annie said, "She's in a very light sleep." They watched her breathing, regular but very slow."

Annie looked surprised as she held Janet's hand. "She's dreaming of Ward Handleman. She is surprised at how young he looks."

Annie seemed to be listening carefully, "Ward is asking her if she would like to meet his soulmate."

Annie, "Janet is recognizing Ward's wife, 'You are so much more beautiful than your pictures. You and Ward look so perfect together.'"

The doctor thought, it's not unusual for patients to hallucinate but this is weird.

Annie, "Ward just asked Janet if she was ready to go. Janet is thinking about it." After a few moments, she said, "Janet told him she is ready to leave. -- Ward is saying they brought someone along to help escort her." Janet's face took on a golden glow.

Annie looked very surprised and released Janet's hand, as if shocked.

Janet, with the last of her body's strength, tried to reach out to someone in front of her. Her hands only made it an inch off the bed. Somewhat like a flash of light, a flash of spiritual energy went through the room. Everyone felt it. Annie was reduced to tears. Janet's body relaxed back on the bed and took a long deep breath. For thirty seconds they waited. Then there was a more gentle intake of breath and release, then the body of Janet Catherine Berkins Richards began an eternal rest.

Annie could not stop her tears. No one had ever seen her cry before. After a few minutes, the doctor said, "The death certificate will show the time of death as 11:43."

Annie finally said, "That John Richards is one beautiful hunk. He told me once that heaven knows no greater love than the determination of a woman in love. I think I just got zapped by it."

The doctor wondered if he should do something about the granddaughter Annie. He had seen a lot of weird relative behavior at death scenes but this was extreme. Annie looked at him, and he suddenly found himself thinking about the three patients who had pressing medical needs. Maybe the granddaughter will be OK after she finishes grieving. I could ask someone in the family to have her checked out. Suddenly Annie's voice was loud inside his head, 'JUST TRY IT, BUSTER!' After a moment of forgetful confusion he decided to leave her problem, if there was one, to someone else.

The doctor thought, as he left the room, I wonder what that shock was just before the time of death. Everyone reacted to it. Maybe there is more going on at the moment of death than we understand.

For the viewing, Janet Catherine Berkins Richards was laid out in the Berksville Funeral Home. Only close friends and family were invited, but no one was refused entry. More attended than anyone would have expected.

Near the end of the time allotted, the funeral director approached Diane Doyle. "Are you ready?"

Diane, "No, but let's do it."

The funeral director called softly to Ronald Webb to join them. "As you both know, Mrs. Richards gave detailed instructions for her funeral. The casket has been open for this viewing, but will now be permanently

sealed for the funeral and burial. You have read what she asked of you. Here is a copy for you. She asks that you destroy this when we finish, as I will destroy mine."

Diane, "Was there anything about a book marker, a piece of white ribbon?"

Funeral director, "No, nothing about it."

Diane, "I wonder what she did with it. I thought Annie would know, but she doesn't know either."

The funeral director said gently to the room full of guests, "In a few minutes we will ask all but the family and close friends to leave. If you have not done so, please say your goodbye prayers now."

Diane, Ron and the funeral director watched as a few remaining friends made a final pass before the casket and others filed out. In a few moments only the family, Ron's wife, Diane and Steve Doyle were left in a silent group near the casket. The funeral director and Ron followed Diane to the casket. The director lifted a fold in the silk cloth on Janet's right side. He said softly, "You agree all the items she requested are here?" They both nodded approval. Then he lifted a fold of silk cloth on her left side revealing a wine bottle. "Please verify the label as she requested." Ron and Diane nodded approval, glanced at each other and tried not to laugh through their tears.

The funeral director turned to the others, "Is there anything further before the casket is closed and sealed?"

Steve said, "May my wife and I have a private moment?" The others moved away. Steve took a small felt box from his pocket and opened it. He and Diane observed the contents. Diane put her arm around him. Steve said to Janet's body in the the casket, "Jan, I have discussed this with my children and grandchildren. We all agree, you did more to earn this, worked harder, took more risks than I ever did for this medal. I want you to have this with you now." With that he closed the case on his Silver Star medal and placed it beside her in the casket under the folds of silk, his voice cracking. "Goodbye, Jan."

Diane tried to say goodbye and broke down in tears. Steve supported her and guided her away from the casket. The funeral director returned to the casket. He said to an assistant, "Bring in the grandchildren." A group of children of various ages approached, with the youngest carrying a folded white blanket. On the blanket had been printed by a special transfer process all the pictures of the descendants of John and Janet, including their spouses. Two assistants came and opened the bottom half of the casket lid. The two oldest children, assisted by the director, covered Janet with the blanket, feet to neck, tucking it around her on each side.

The funeral director and the assistants closed and locked the bottom half of the casket. Ron Webb turned away, and his wife had never seen so much despair in her husband. The funeral director and his assistants closed and locked the final top portion of the casket. Then they escorted the children out of the room. No one had anything to say. They stood around awhile with their heads bowed in silent prayer and thoughts. Then they slowly left the building. In the parking lot, Ron and his wife approached Diane and Steve.

Ron asked softly, "What was with that empty wine bottle?"

Diane spoke haltingly through her tears, "It had something to do with a fight she had with John -- before they were married. She had that bottle in their bedroom all those years. I ask her if she was keeping it because she won the fight. -- She said she lost the fight but won the war. -- I know John would never let her pour any wine. -- Other than that I have no idea."

Ron said to Diane, "I have something from the law office to give you." He opened the trunk of his car and removed a large white box. He opened the lid to show her the many white envelopes inside. Handing the box to Steve, he said to Diane, "The attorney for the corporation was holding this for you as Janet directed. I need a signature - it's an audit thing." Diane signed the tag on the box lid. Then Ron tore it off. They all hugged each other and got in their cars. Steve had placed the large white box in the seat between them.

Steve asked, "Are you going to look through that now?"

Diane said, "I think I need to." She carefully took out the front envelope and broke the seal. There was a letter in Janet's handwriting and other letters. She glanced through the letter then read it to Steve:

"Diane, John and I have decided to give you permission to publish your book after our passing. This letter gives you that permission to disclose all the secrets within this material.

That part of the story I promised to tell you after twenty years, I never got around to it. John and I want you to have it. We have both written our memories of our weekend at the lake cabin. We decided not to read each other's accounts. I think you will understand why. So they may vary somewhat. Sort out the story as you see fit. John started his account the Friday before the weekend at the office when we discussed hiking up there. (A gross understatement as you will see.) I started with all the preparations I made for that weekend, as best I can remember. We ended our accounts at the dinner date the next Friday after work. You will at last learn the mystery of the wine bottle. See, I promised I might tell you someday!

I have also included letters to everyone still living, asking them to tell you all they know, good, bad or indifferent. As for the rest of the box I have included all of Mom's diaries. Feel free to tell all. You will be amazed how much she knew.

I have one major concern about the book. The way I got John back. Please don't allow any other young lady to think that is an example of how to go about it. All that was a mistake. I can hear you saying, but it worked! Had I put my faith in God, had I put the same amount of energy into prayer, I have become more and more certain over the years that our Lord Jesus would have solved the problem for me. Everyone warned me, yet I had to go at it my own way. You will see how bad it got. You will see how close to disaster I came. You will know my sin. If God was using me as His instrument to help John, He was also using the event as a teachable moment for me. He allowed me to see how wrong I could be.

Even though John and I married and were able to carry out my plan to keep the mill and all that it supports going, over the years we found problems were better solved with faith and prayer than with my head-on assaults. I paid a heavy price for my sin. Even though God allowed my father his three sons as grandsons and, Lord knows -- John, Ward and my father reveled in helping raise and teach them -- I was denied the daughter I craved. I believe that was the price I paid for my sin. But you and the Lord

graciously allowed me to participate in raising and teaching your two daughters. And then He allowed the miracle of having one become my daughter-in-law. I have been richly blessed!

Good luck with the book. I think all us full-blooded Berkins have given God the opportunity for teachable moments.

Thank you for being a wonderful almost-sister, Janet

Diane cried for a few moments, "The sister who never stops loving, even in her passing."

Steve said, "They gave you permission to publish the story. You know what that means."

Diane was puzzled, "My mind isn't working."

Steve, "The other package she gave you -- if Janet ever gave you permission to publish, you now have permission to open and read her papers."

Diane, "Oh my God, I have it all now, the whole story! I can fill in so many missing pieces. And that weekend -- at last I'll know how she turned him around! This will take away some of the sting of losing her."

Steve, "I have a small piece to add also. I think she would want you to know the story around that little league bat. It's a very personal thing I've never felt comfortable sharing. It may help you to understand the importance of the letters she wrote me."

Diane, "I remember the day she returned the bat to you. Hardly a word was spoken. But you two were so full of emotion I dared not ask."

Steve, "When I tell you the story I think you will understand."

Diane, "I have to maintain my health long enough to finish this book. I think Annie will help me."

Steve, "Now you have more reason to live. Another gift from Janet."

The next day the closed casket of Janet Catherine Berkins Richards was surrounded with flowers before the altar of the Berkinsville Church. The church was full and speakers had been arranged for the overflow in the recreation area outside. Jerry Hodge knelt in the cloak room and finished praying. The choir finished the last of the hymns she had requested.

Jerry Hodge entered the church and went to the lectern. "You all know the lady before you. There is nothing I can add to her life or death. But funerals are for the living so I will do my best for you."

"No one ever felt more inadequate to this task than I. One week ago I was ordained a minister. Thursday evening I was called to the association office and asked to fill in until your pastor returns. I am told his

operation went well but his long-term status won't be known for several weeks. I'm sure his friends can give you the details. I was asked to come here and handle the paperwork until he returns. As I was going out the door they said, "You'll be doing all the services too. That was a shock. When I arrived here Friday morning your committee chairman mentioned there would also be a funeral for Mrs. Richards today. I prepared for a standard funeral. Studying the file, I realized this was Janet BERKINS Richards. -- I called the association office and told them there was no way I should conduct a funeral for such an important local legend. I told them I wasn't qualified. They told me God had qualified me at the ordination and no one else was available. They told me to do the funeral." He studied the faces before him, sad and attentive.

"Let us pray. Father, before you we have the body of a faithful servant whose spirit is already with you. Please help us to lay her body to rest with the dignity and the love she deserves. Please ease the feeling of loss in her family and friends. Thank you for the blessed years she gave to this community. Amen."

"Faced with the prospect of doing this funeral I sought out members of the church to learn about Mrs. Richards. They told me I should visit with Steve and Diane Doyle, her best and oldest friends. Steve Doyle -- I thought I'd heard that name before." There was muted laughter. "Retired Governor Steve Doyle. Great! Not only would I be doing the funeral for a local legend, it would also involve a retired state governor!"

"Perhaps those who have been around for awhile remember a former pastor, Mark Hodge. That was my great uncle. When I became interested in the ministry, I visited with him for several weeks and we spent a lot of time talking about my becoming a minister before he passed away. He told me a lot about the people of Berksville. There were no names - he greatly respected your privacy. All that he told me was in terms of what people here had taught him about Christianity - never about what he had done for you. There were stories about a lady, where he would get this attitude of awe. He never said they were about the same lady, but he gave it away by the respect he had for her. That was years ago, but I never forgot. More about that in a moment."

"I got up my nerve and called retired Governor Doyle's home. Governor and Mrs. Doyle, given their grief, could not have been more gracious. I explained my problem and asked them to tell me about Mrs. Richards. They started telling stories and we laughed and cried together. Mrs. Doyle mentioned that she and Janet often got into trouble for talking during church services. She explained how Pastor Hodge would put them on the spot about it. Suddenly I got the connection. The stories they told merged with what my uncle had told me in awe. Suddenly I was given a perspective of this lady's life. I find it hard to believe this all happened by coincidence. -- In a sense former Pastor Hodge has given me the sermon for the funeral and I think that is fitting."

"Funerals are for the living and this lady knew how to live. Her life was an example of living life to the fullest. Pastor Hodge said she challenged God to accept her loving right out to the edge. She loved this community beyond all reasonable limits and challenged God to accept and support it. She loved John Richards beyond all reasonable limits. Steve Doyle credits her letters with saving his life and earning him a Silver Star. Mrs. Doyle credited her with all of Steve's good works that came after that. The message of Janet Catherine Berks Richards is to live life to the fullest. Love life to the fullest. Pray to understand God's plan. Pray to God that you will be obedient and your life will be pleasing in His eyes. Then love everyone and every positive thing to the limit, to the very ragged edge. Challenge God in faith to support that love. Challenge God in faith to sustain that love. Challenge God in faith to protect that love. GOD IS LOVE. Her life's challenge to you is have the faith to MAKE GOD PROVE IT! I'm sure she felt fear. But her life's challenge to you is NEVER

FEAR TO HAVE THE FAITH TO MAKE GOD PROVE HIS LOVE. She made God prove it in this community and today -- with me -- in this service."

"Now it is customary in this church to allow anyone to speak who has something positive to say. Please hold up your hand." He waited. There were no hands and a long silence.

Finally the chairman of the church committee rose and looked around, "There were many who planned to speak, including myself. But you have summed it up so well I don't think any of us have more to add, Pastor Hodge."

Jerry Hodge felt a lump in his throat. It was the first time he had been publicly addressed as Pastor Hodge. He nodded to the chairman and the man seated himself. Pastor Jerry Hodge found his notes on the standard form funeral and began with a strong clear voice quoting the appropriate scriptures.

After the service, he watched from the lectern as the funeral procession and guests left the church. Then he opened the envelope the funeral director had handed him. Inside he found a length of white ribbon in a protective plastic shield along with a typed note.

'Please find on the cross at the back of the altar a small slot. It is located about 48 inches from the bottom on the back side. There is a small cover which is open. When closed it will permanently lock. Please place the ribbon inside the slot and close the cover.'

Below that on the note was a prayer. Pastor Jerry Hodge walked to the back of the altar. There was a small space between the cross and the back wall. He put his hand behind the cross and felt for the slot. It was there. He took the ribbon from its protective cover and carefully slipped it into the slot. It fit perfectly. He carefully closed the cover and heard a snap as it closed. Now the back of the cross was smooth. There was no way to reopen the cover. He looked around and the church was nearly empty. He was thankful the pastor who served the nursing home would be handling the burial.

He looked at the prayer on the note. He turned back to the cross. "Lord, I have a prayer for you from your loving servant Janet."

"Dear Lord, this day I have returned to your church the ribbon you blessed. In the hills above the Sea of Galilee you fed the crowd of four thousand with seven loaves of bread and a few fish. I wonder what you might do with this ribbon if You set Your love to it. Your loving servant, Janet."

Chapter Seven

Julie

One week later, Ron Webb and his wife had finished dinner. Ron said, "I can't believe she's really gone. I start to think of her and then it hits me again."

Mrs. Webb, "You mean Janet."

Ron, "Yes." Ron took a deep breath and sat remembering.

Mrs. Webb, "I've always wanted to ask, but never thought it proper. I know you ran a check to find out about the girl Julie in Atlanta when John and Janet were engaged."

Ron, "Janet was afraid something about her might cause problems for John. So I asked our research people to check it out. It wasn't difficult. They gave me a full report. It's still locked in my private safe. I should destroy it now."

Mrs. Webb, "You mean private detectives in Atlanta?"

Ron, "Yes, I guess it wouldn't hurt to tell you now if you really want to know the gruesome story."

Mrs. Webb, "I think I would like to know."

Ron, "John had fallen in love with this Julie girl who was really just marking time until her fiancé graduated law school. John got serious, and she dropped John without any explanation. John confronted her in some public place and she embarrassed him in front of a lot of people. Eventually he left Atlanta and drifted west until he stopped here by happenstance. Late that summer, Julie's guy graduated law school and had a job with a top law firm. A big social wedding was planned. What Julie didn't know was her guy had a honey on the side at law school. The law school girl must have had her hooks in him pretty good and didn't want to let go. The morning of the wedding this honey convinced Julie's guy to duck the wedding and use the honeymoon tickets to fly to the Caribbean **with her**. Julie got stood up at the altar in front of a big social gathering. Now it starts to get ugly. You want to hear more?"

Mrs. Webb, "That's pretty ugly already, but go ahead."

Ron, "Julie ran from the church and disappeared. No one could find her. She had a key to her fiancé's apartment, where they were going to live after their honeymoon. No one thought to look there. She went in and used her guy's pistol to commit suicide on the bed in her wedding dress. Her guy and his honey opened the apartment three weeks later when they returned from the Caribbean. Don't even try to imagine the horror of that scene. It turned into a big newspaper story. That's why I have a full account of what happened. The law firm offering the job dropped Julie's guy because of the publicity. He never practiced law in Georgia. He hasn't shown up anywhere that I know about. The honey who convinced him to duck the wedding went nuts when they walked in the apartment and found Julie's body. At the time I received the last report she was still in a mental institution."

Mrs. Webb, "You never told John or Janet?"

Ron, "I told Janet I was sure Julie was out of the picture and would never cause any problems. Nothing more. Can you imagine how many lives were harmed over all that? Janet told me John was so close to the edge when he came here it nearly destroyed both of them. She never told me any more."

Mrs. Webb, "Well, things have a way of evening out. If Julie hadn't insulted and embarrassed John he would have never ended up here to work with Janet. If they hadn't kept the mill going and renewed those timber leases, this whole community could have been destroyed. Perhaps Julie is responsible for a lot of good in that respect.

Ron smiled. "Leave it to you to put a positive spin on it! That's just one of the things I love about you. -- You know, before I met you, Janet would go to college social functions with me. I kept telling her I wanted a social wife who wouldn't distract me with passion. After I met you she had great fun reminding me of that at every opportunity."

Mrs. Webb, "I know. She warned me. And I've had great fun making you eat those words!"

Chapter Eight

Donald

Two weeks later, the executor of Mrs. Richards' will and a representative of the nursing home cemetery were at the front door of the home of Mr. Donald Vald. The elderly Mr. Vald answered the door. They introduced themselves and were invited in.

Executor, "Mr. Vald, in Mrs. Richards' final arrangements she made a written request concerning you. She requested that you be asked if you would do her the honor of writing short poems for their grave marker?"

Mr. Vald, "Well, it is an honor that she should ask. I've always kept my interest in writing poetry very private. My wife is the published poet. But Janet knew all that."

Cemetery representative, "They would be placed under names and dates on the granite marker currently present on her and Mr. Richard's graves. It will be cut into the granite so it must be short or it will be too small to read and difficult to cut."

Mr. Vald, "I would be honored to do a very short poem for them."

Executor, "She wrote specific instructions on what she wanted. I told her an artist would not like to be limited by instructions. She said you would just have to live with it if you wanted to do the poems. I have no idea what she wrote in this envelope." He handed a sealed envelope to Mr. Vald.

Mr. Vald opened the envelope and found a two-word instruction: SURPRISE ME! He showed it to them and they all laughed.

Mr. Vald, "Do you have a business card?"

Cemetery Representative, "Certainly, you can mail the work to us when you have it done. Here is a copy of the form the engraver uses. It shows what is already there and gives an idea of the space available. There is no great rush." He handed Mr. Vald the form and a business card, then rose to leave.

Mr. Vald, "No, please wait. Please sit for a moment."

Mr. Vald wrote on the form, handed the form to the Executor, and asked, "Will this do?"

John Philip Richards
{Dates}

Janet Berkins Richards
{Dates}

Spirits So Bold
Soulmates to Behold
Infinity Growing Old
The Full Story Untold

With Integrity to Behold
In Infinity - Never Growing Old

The Executor studied the form, "Yes, you have it. Soulmates through eternity. You knew them well."

Cemetery representative, "You have the option of having your name as author underneath the poem in small letters."

Mr. Vald, "Oh no! You didn't know Mrs. Richards very well. If you tried to put any man's name on that stone with John Richards, lightning would strike you, me, and the engraver dead before the tool touched the stone. You leave off my name! I'm hoping for a few more good years."

The Executor laughed. "He could be right about that."

Two days later Donald Vald called the cemetery representative. After exchanging greetings, Donald said, "About that space where you might put my name under the poetry on the tombstone"

Representative, "Have you changed your mind? There's still time to add your name."

Donald, "No, no. Not my name. But in that space could you put something much more appropriate?"

Representative, "Of course. I'm sure that's within the scope of her request."

Donald, "Then place there, 'Empathy Defines Humanity.'"

Chapter Nine

Recovering Dr. Wells Teaching

Annie: When the matter of Dr. Wells came up, Diane described what happened in general. At first we thought somehow Diane would have described to her parents what happened. I couldn't read much more from her memories. I encouraged Diane to find out if Dr. Wells' daughter and son-in-law were still living. Amazingly, they were still there in the same house. So we made arrangements to go see the woman. Diane wants to tell that story. She is much better if she tells it in story form. So here is what happened.

Diane rang the doorbell and an elderly woman answered the door: She said, "Well, I wondered what a few decades would do to all that beauty. I'd still recognize you in a crowd."

Diane, "Thank you. All that was a long time ago. Men rarely notice me now. This is my granddaughter, Annie."

Serena, "It's good to meet you. Please come into the living room and make yourselves comfortable. -- So you are writing a book?"

Annie, "A series actually. Dr. Wells had a big influence on my grandparents. We're trying to find a way to explain all that in the book."

Diane, "He was incredible and so full of energy, even though he was failing!"

Annie, "We were trying to reconstruct as much as we could of that, but I think the best we can do is a general explanation of how it affected my grandparents."

Serena, "My grandfather was hiding out here. At the time you didn't know the whole story. His attorney back at the university was protecting him. It was a touchy situation."

Serena's husband entered the room, "You can say that again! -- You don't know the half of it."

Serena, "You remember my husband, Anthony, don't you?"

Anthony, "We only met once, but you were a difficult couple to forget!"

Diane, "Pleased to see you again. What more didn't we know?"

Anthony, "You think it's OK to tell them now, Serena? I think everyone who would be concerned must be dead by now. I know the attorney is."

Serena, "Now that Governor Doyle has passed on, I don't see how anyone could be harmed now."

Diane, "Why would you be concerned about Steve?"

Anthony, "Let us tell you the part you didn't know, then you'll understand.

Serena, "My grandfather's attorney arranged his transportation here. We were instructed to never call his office. He would call us from a pay phone -- maybe a different one each time. I could hear street noises. Each call sounded different."

Anthony, "His attorney said he was sending a man up here to keep an eye on things. He gave us passwords to verify who he was. This was before you came here the first time."

Serena, "A couple of days later, just after Anthony left for work, an old plumbing truck stops in front of the house. He comes to the door and starts asking directions, like he's looking for an address he can't find. In the course of the conversation, he mentions all three of the passwords, looking directly in my eyes. He mentions that most of these houses are pretty much alike. He says he thinks the problem he needs to solve might be in a basement like ours. I nod I understand. He said if you hear noises down there don't be concerned. Just ignore them. Then he said loudly, 'I know how to find that address now' and he drove off. I never saw the truck again."

Anthony, "That night when we both get home, she tells me the story. The only way into the basement is a lift door on the back side of the house. When it gets dark, I go for a walk around the house with a flashlight. Everything looks normal except when I glance at the hinges. They had been oiled!"

Serena, "The only electric down there was a light with a pull string hanging from the ceiling."

Annie, "He was living down there?"

Anthony, "More than that! He used the electric off that wire for heat and monitoring what was going on in Dr. Wells' room."

Diane, "Monitoring how?"

Serena, "He had a microphone secreted in the wall near the head of my grandfather's bed."

Anthony, "He did all that from the basement, up through the floor into the wall. He could monitor everything being said in that room!"

Diane, "He heard all that we said with Dr. Wells?"

Serena, "He did more than that! After my grandfather's body was sent back to the university center for burial, we went down into the basement."

Anthony, "Well, before that, Dr. Wells' attorney called and told us if Dr. Wells left any documents here, we should keep them secure in our basement. We told him all he left was his Bible, thinking maybe the attorney was telling us to look in the basement."

Serena, “When we went down there we found a neat little office boxed in, with a sleeping sofa and a small electric heater. A little shielded cable had been cut off just a little out of the wall. We later found the microphone imbedded in the wall upstairs where the head of Dr. Wells’ bed had been.”

Anthony, “It’s been painted over several times now, so you can no longer see where it was. But I could show you. Anyway, there was also a two drawer metal file cabinet -- more sturdy than I’d ever seen. It was sealed in plastic and had a tarp covering it.”

Serena, “The last time the attorney called I told him, concerning the documents, we had a 2 drawer file cabinet in the basement. He told us that if they ever needed it, they would come for it.”

Diane, “So what was in it? What ever happened to it?”

Anthony, “It’s still there -- just the way the man left it!”

Annie, “After almost 50 years, it’s still there?! -- Maybe it’s time someone opened it!”

They all laughed at her exuberance.

Diane, “It’s not ours to open, Annie.”

Anthony said to Serena, “Could we discuss this privately in the other room?”

They went out. Diane asked Annie, “What do they think is in the cabinet?”

Annie, “They don’t know. Their concern seems to be for Gramps.”

Anthony and Serena returned. Anthony said, “Dr. Wells interacted with Sgt. Doyle more than anyone else during that time. Once he became a public figure and eventually governor, we didn’t want anything found there to be a problem for him. -- Now it seems you would be a better judge of what to do with whatever is in that storage than anyone else. -- We still have the name and information about his attorney. We would suggest you contact his office, if it still exists, and discuss it with them. It’s our property here. I wouldn’t just let them have it unopened. Whatever is in there is ours to decide. -- Since it is more likely to affect you more than us, you are free to pursue it if you want.”

Annie, “Could we go see the cabinet?”

Anthony said sternly, “Look, but not open! -- Yes, we could do that.”

They stood and went out through the kitchen and down off the porch steps. Anthony raised up and opened the slanted doors, revealing steps down into the basement. Anthony entered first and turned on lights. “I’ve added lights out here but left the little office as it was.” He opened a closet-like door into a small office-like room. “I’ve never changed anything. It’s just as he left it decades ago.”

There was a small simple sofa-bed and a small writing desk with a folding chair. Beside it was a square like a two drawer file cabinet with a tarp over it. Annie, "Would you be willing to lift up the tarp so we can see underneath?"

Anthony carefully worked with the tarp and it resisted unfolding. "Annie, lift the other side and maybe we can set it off without changing its shape." They gently wiggled the tarp off and laid it on the sofa just as it was shaped. They could now see a two drawer file cabinet sealed in heavy plastic, yellow with age but still intact. The fabric tape sealing the seams was very dry but still holding. They were all amazed. "Well, there you have it. The mystery is still intact after all these years."

Anthony said, "I don't know about putting the tarp back over it. I don't want to break open the plastic seal. -- Annie, let's see if we can lower it back on. If we catch on the plastic, let's just leave it off." They gently lined up the tarp above the cabinet. It gently floated back down over the cabinet as the air escaped. "Well done!"

Serena, "Well, Diane, the ball is in your court. Let us know what you learn."

When Diane and Annie got home it was evening. Annie said, "Why don't I try the number on the attorney's card and see if it rings through?" She dialed the number and it reported, 'Disconnected.'

Diane, "Try the internet and see if you find a business listing under his last name.

Annie, "There it is. First names listed are different. Address is different."

Diane, "Why don't we drive down there tomorrow and ask for the name we have?"

Annie, "Sounds like an adventure!"

The next day they found the office in a modern glass building high up. Off the elevator they found a young lady guarding the office entrance. Diane asked for the attorney on the business card they had. The young lady was polite but firm, "We no longer have an attorney here by that name. If you would like to take a seat, I'll check and see if we have someone free to discuss this with you."

An older lady came briskly out of a glass office saying, "Mrs Doyle! We are always happy to have a Governor's Wife visit our offices! Please! Both of you come have some coffee and refreshments with us." As she passed the polite but firm young lady, Annie was amused to see her turning red with embarrassment.

After they were seated and attended to in a well furnished lounge, Mrs. Long seated herself and asked, "You were asking about one of our attorneys?"

Diane handed her the business card.

Mrs. Long, "This is a very old card. He passed away some years ago. Is this about one of his cases?"

Diane, "He was attending to the final matters of a retired professor from the university."

Mrs. Long, "You haven't mentioned the name of the professor." She paused. Diane said nothing. "I assume this might be a sensitive matter?"

Diane, "Possibly."

Mrs. Long, "I'll have to explore this backward through our organization. Would you be comfortable waiting here while I make some calls?"

Diane, "Not at all. Thank you for helping us."

Mrs. Long left. Annie was smiling. "You have no idea the possible horrors that were flashing through her mind."

Diane, "I guess there could be lots of horrors buried in a law office."

They enjoyed the coffee and treats.

Eventually Mrs. Long returned. "The gentleman you are inquiring about has a retired son who's coming to the office to meet with you. I understand he is in charge of all the old cases. If there is anything to be done he will transfer the matter to one of our current attorneys. -- Are you OK here? There is also a conference room free."

Diane, "Waiting here will be fine." She had the feeling everyone had been warned away from the lounge.

Annie, "She was relieved to pass the buck!"

Diane, "That's understandable."

After a while, an elderly gentleman entered, "Mrs Doyle, so glad to see you! I'm sure we have met somewhere before. I have many fond memories of your husband. He made this state better than it deserves to be. -- You can please call me Roger, like he did."

Diane, "Thank you."

Roger, "I'm going to see if I can find us an empty office or steal one from a young whippersnapper!"

When they were settled into a spacious office, Diane introduced Annie. Then she handed the attorney the old business card.

Roger, "They mentioned a retired university professor who has passed away."

Diane, "Forty-eight years ago, approximately. Your father handled some matters of importance for a Dr. Wells as he was passing."

Roger, "I see. I have a list of sensitive case files. I believe that name is on there." He opened his briefcase and opened a secure binder. "Yes, that is one of the sensitive case files he left to me. I'm surprised at your interest, given the nature of the coding he has on the file."

Diane, "Steve and I were with Dr. Wells a considerable amount of time shortly before he passed."

Roger, "If I remember correctly Lake Charlotte is near your and the Governor's home town - Berksville, isn't it?"

Diane, "That's how we met Dr. Wells, being in a nearby town."

Roger, "You want to ask something about this case? -- Is it a serious legal matter or any legal matter at all?"

Diane, "Nothing that we ever believe would involve going to court. -- A social decision needs to be made about some stored materials. Nothing is in dispute. I am looking for guidance on the best way to go forward."

Roger, "Go forward for what purpose?"

Diane, "To gain information for a book I am writing about Steve's life. He was greatly influenced by Dr. Wells before he passed. I would like to describe that as accurately as possible."

Roger, "You know the location of a can of worms?!"

Diane smiled, "And your father packed the can. I want to know what might be in the files he left, before I - we - or they pop the lid."

Roger, "I know of the file. I have access to it. I have never looked in it or several others that are sealed with bright red tape."

Diane, "I am not surprised that it is sealed with red tape as a warning."

Roger, "Are you wanting to read it?"

Diane, "Not necessarily. I would prefer you read it and offer me guidance as to what dangers might be involved in popping the lid off the can we discussed. -- I know what Steve and my parts might be. There may be other matters there in addition to ours. I - or others involved - don't know what might have happened after we left, until he passed."

Roger, "My son told me -- and I'm being careful here -- there were things in some of those red taped files it would be safer if I never learned. -- When I pass, they are to be destroyed unread."

Diane, “Dr. Wells told me things he never told Steve. He told me so I could guide Steve away from those areas for his own protection. I understand why the files need to be destroyed. However, much of what Dr. Wells taught us was extremely valuable guidance. -- If I can better document that, it might be of great value to many others.”

Roger thought about it, then said, “OK, I respect that. What if there are other cans of worms that I’m safer not knowing about?”

Diane, “And I respect that. Your father put a man in the basement of the house where Dr. Wells was dying. That man put a microphone in the wall near the head of Dr. Wells. He could have heard everything Dr. Wells said until he passed. That man left a two drawer file cabinet behind 48 years ago. Your son instructed the family to leave it there and it would be called for if ever needed. The only information left about that is in your file.”

Roger, “Let’s go about this in a different way. Suppose the file doesn’t exist. What would you do?”

Diane looked at Annie, “We would open the cabinet and see what’s there.”

Roger, “When the law firm moved to this building, the family partners decided to reorganize the firm. Essentially, the law firm you are talking about doesn’t exist any longer. This law firm was organized and chartered long after the matter we are discussing. If something exists in that material that reflects back on the old law firm, it would be of no concern to us. Only if something were found that reflected poorly on the family, would that be of concern. -- Naturally, we would prefer that be destroyed.”

Annie, “Suppose we open the cabinet and give you an ‘all clear’ if that were possible?”

Roger, “Suppose I took a little vacation trip to Lake Charlotte. I think I have an old acquaintance living on the hill there, overlooking the lake.”

Diane, “You would do that?”

Roger, “Sure. -- I’m retired and a little bored. A little vacation might do me good.”

Diane, “Say this next Saturday?”

Roger, “I don’t drive much anymore. I’ll make arrangements and confirm with you.”

This is Annie again. That’s how Roger came to be present the next Saturday when Dr. Wells’ daughter Serena and Anthony, Diane, and myself were in the basement to open the cabinet. Anthony had setup a big floodlight in the area.

Anthony and I removed the tarp as before. He used a razor knife and cut through brittle plastic and stripped it away. We cleaned the mess away and looked at each other. Serena said, "Diane, will you open the top drawer, please?"

It screeched a little as it came open. It was filled with thin square boxes stacked together. Roger said, "Those are seven inch magnetic tapes. I used to have one of those tape machines. He must have made recordings!"

Diane, "Could they still be good after all these years?"

Annie said, "Let's see what's in the bottom drawer."

When they opened it, Roger said, "That's the tape machine - not exactly like the one I had but similar."

Serena, "Look at that power cord. The rubber coating is flaking off the wires!"

Annie, "Let's go back to the tapes and open one to see how they look." They opened the other drawer again and took out one of the boxes. "The box looks OK." It was sealed shut with a small piece of tape. Anthony took out his knife and cut the seal. Annie carefully opened the box.

Roger, "As far as I can tell, it looks OK. The tape is mylar with iron-oxide coated on it. -- Let it unroll a bit, Annie; let's see what it looks like."

Annie carefully rotated the reel so the tape could hang down a couple of feet.

Roger said, "Looks good to me. Diane, you might have a recording of your conversations with Dr. Wells!"

Diane, "If we can find some way to play them."

Annie, "I'll bet one of the techies at Berks Mill could find a way to do it!"

Roger, "There are no signed documents as far as I can see. I think I'll go home and see if I might tidy up an old file cabinet of my own."

Annie again: And that is what we did. One of the technical guys at the mill took the old recorder and checked it out. All the little plastic drive wheels had disintegrated and it was easier to find another machine that was capable of playing the old tapes. It was great to hear my grandparents the way they were back then, arguing with Dr. Wells and each other. On the other hand, it was difficult learning how to spell all the things Dr. Wells talked about. That I didn't enjoy! -- So there you have it - how we reconstructed all that Dr. Wells taught my grandparents way back then.

Chapter Ten

Berksville

Berksville Enterprises is still the financial heart of the county. Logging trucks are less frequent as the mill now produces more specialized fabricated products. They allow some outsiders to harvest from their leased land forests but under very strict conditions.

The church still has good attendance as Berksville is still a strong Christian community. Tom and Joy's son are managing the Berksville bank. The Ford Dealership is in Donald's family control and sells most of the cars in the Berksville area because of their excellent maintenance service. The Webb Law Offices operate as usual with Ron's offspring in charge now. The bank is still a financial anchor after being well managed by Tom until he retired.

But Berksville is not the same. It seems sterile somehow and aging. But it is still a good place to live. The little glider airport moved operations to the Charlottesville airport. Berksville made the airport property into a public park with a nine-hole golf course, sports fields, a boat ramp, small fishing pier, and public swap shop. The restaurant is still there as it was in our story. When the airport closed, Joe retired to Florida. The city received ownership of the restaurant along with the airport property. They lease the building out to a family that now operates the restaurant. It was offered to the owners of the No Gossip but they chose not to operate two restaurants. The Park Restaurant has become the young peoples' hangout, mostly due to the park facilities.

The town spirit is much subdued. I think the main change began about 1995. Berksville had never accepted cable television. Normal reception was blocked by the mountain valley location. Then came satellite TV with the small dish. Slowly the entertainment of evening TV seemed to refocus attention away from local civic matters. Things slowly faded into a much more conventional society. National and international news was more easily received and discussed at home rather than at The Gossip, the beauty shop, or the barbershop. The movie theater is gone. The Berksville Cafe is still a good place to eat operated by Sam's family. Gossip on the chalkboards faded fast, eventually replaced by email and FaceBook. The excitement and tension isn't there anymore. Most of the chalk boards have been removed with only one still remaining for announcements, But the exciting news and gossipy notices are no longer there. No longer do the mayor and church pastor bring in the New Year. It's just a normal good restaurant in a small town.

Most stores are still open, but people have migrated to doing their serious shopping in Paramount City. The library is still as it was, with a young librarian -- closed on Sundays now that people have satellite TV. The news teletype and printed news briefs for The Gossip are gone. The little movie theater in the library is still operational with a DVD player and digital projector.

Now about that dairy property overlooking the valley.

Annie: It is left up to me to tell this story learned from questioning everyone involved. The retired attorney Mr. Learner eventually, through quick claim deeds and court rulings, managed to obtain a clear title to the property. Steve and Diane were able to purchase the property while they were attending the university in Paramount City. Steve and John worked together to understand the unique topography of the hillside overlooking the valley.

Then they designed a house to take advantage of the unique location. Their property improvements included two strong fences preventing anyone from approaching the sheer cliff above the river.

They designed a two-story home with a wide porch, giving a great view of the valley and airport. The upstairs bedrooms had balconies, also giving wonderful views. Their great challenge was providing water -- frustrating since there was plenty of water in the river below. The old well used for the dairy had collapsed. Everywhere they considered drilling seemed to be solid rock. There was a great well at the airport. So Steve and John finally engineered a pipeline from the airport up the valley and underneath the bridge, and across to the old dairy property. They had great fun working out how to prevent the pipe hung under the bridge from freezing in winter. The home was completed by the time Steve and Diane graduated from college, and they moved in. They never moved to another permanent home.

The old dairy home was in good condition and only required a maintenance update to make it livable. Once water was made available again, they rented out the home over the years, mostly to Berkins' employees. Steve and Diane had hoped John and Janet would live there, but they fell in love with the home up the street from Janet's parents, across from the little park at the top of the hill. They continued to live there throughout their lives. One part of their family now lives in the modernized dairy farmhouse. Steve and Diane's grandson and his wife live in the house John and Steve designed, overlooking the park. Diane lives with them about eight months of the year. Her doctor insists the winters are too damp and cold for her during the winter months. She spends that time with me, Annie, in Florida, where I am writing this now. This is the Annie who has been helping her with the writing. Those glowing descriptions of the beautiful Diane were mostly written by her - and restored after she crossed them out. And I wrote the 'forwards' and 'afterwards' of the chapters of Steve romancing Diane. Diane said it was just too weird writing those about herself! -- Now back to Diane.

Diane: My home overlooking the valley is still my favorite place in the world -- so full of memories. But my doctors say I can't spend the winters there any longer. The airport is now a popular park as I described before. And I enjoy looking down on the distant activities there. Ron Webb is mostly retired but still supervises my legal affairs. I started putting our story together about 2005. As I write this now it is 2020 and I am 76 years old. I am sad to tell you they are all gone: George and Molly, Janet and John, all the old crew that trained John when he came to town. And my husband, Steve, passed quietly June 19th, 2016. I'm the only survivor of our time. This is difficult to write. It is a shock when I sometimes wake up in the morning and realize I have outlived them all!

I should explain how I was able to write our story in such great detail, knowing even many personal thoughts. Molly was not only able to know much of what people were thinking. Much to Janet's surprise, Molly spent her evenings keeping very detailed diaries. At Molly's passing, Janet received all the diaries as an inheritance from Ronald Webb's law office. I described earlier how I later got the diaries. Janet was absolutely dumbfounded at how much her mother knew and never let on.

Some of you may be concerned about the psychic abilities of Molly's family. Even though Janet didn't inherit anything like her mother's ability, Janet was concerned about what they called the "family curse." Janet's Aunt Catherine, who died while Janet was growing up, was the one who apparently had the full blown psychic abilities. Janet often dreamed about Catherine and was never sure about the dreams being her own or Catherine communicating with her. Janet told me that several times she talked with Pastor Hodge about it. He assured her that he was fully aware of the psychic abilities in Molly's family. He explained that some people were gifted in

unusual ways. What was important was they never opened their gifts to the influence of evil spiritual powers. Pastor Hodge assured Janet that he had discussed the issue with Molly and some other members of the family. This was when she first became serious with George before they were married. This aspect of our story is simply not fully understood and I have tried to represent it at face value.

I'm pleased to have survived to finish our story, with Annie's help. As I put the finishing touches on these manuscripts everyone, and the old Berkinsville, are so real. Then I come out of my trance.

There is only one more thing to tell - out of sequence. A crazy, wonderful thing happened with Janet's funeral procession. It was from Berkinsville to the beautiful cemetery George Berkins had established near the lake assisted living facility. Steve was amused about what happened and refused Ron's offer to lead his young sharks in a suit against the newspapers. Donald Vald and Thomas Hankins have both recently passed. Even though Tom has passed on now, it somehow seems poetic to give him his last word on Janet. So I want to end this with a description of Janet's funeral possession. It concerns a newspaper article and a letter Tom wrote to the governor.

Chapter Eleven

Tom

From the Capitol Reporter Newspaper front page two weeks after Janet's funeral.

RETIRED GOVERNOR STEVE DOYLE CLEARED OF MISCONDUCT CHARGES

Just when you thought retired Governor Steve Doyle had faded into history he is again front page news. The state comptroller Frederick Jones today issued a report of an investigation requested by the governor and state's attorney. (Full report printed on page 9.) Ten days ago the capitol was a buzz as old and new political enemies demanded an investigation of how over one hundred retired highway patrol officers showed up at the funeral procession of the retired governor's high school sweetheart and long time friend Janet Berkins Richards. Mrs. Richards and her deceased husband were the executive officers of Berkins Enterprises in Berksville for over thirty years. Berksville is retired Governor Doyle's birthplace and where he has maintained his residence throughout his life.

The comptroller's report acknowledged that an unprecedented number of coincidences had produced a situation where suspicions of wrongdoing were justified. However he was very critical of politicians and newspapers for assuming the worst and slandering the retired governor without checking the facts. He recommended the current governor issue a strong condemnation of newspapers that printed the story without verification of wrongdoing. He also recommended that the state offer retired Governor Doyle state funds and legal aid if he wished to pursue slander charges against the newspapers and politicians who made accusations. There is a legal question of whether the retired governor is still considered a public person after his years of retirement from politics and no participation in political activities.

Political enemies of retired Governor Doyle are still rubbed raw by the interlocking laws protecting small and medium sized businesses from large corporations. The politicians receiving huge contributions from large corporations have tried for years to destroy the citizen watchdog committees and legal protections established during Governor Doyle's terms of office. Ten days ago rumors abounded that at last they could turn the retired governor's watchdog committees back on his own activities. However, it is now clear the most independent political governor ever to hold office in this state has pulled off another magic trick and those wishing to attack him may now be sued for slander. Students of political science still study how Governor Doyle accomplished popular political tasks as an independent while being opposed by both political parties. (Comptrollers report continued on page 9.)

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COMPTROLLER'S REPORT TO GOVERNOR CRUISE AND ATTORNEY GENERAL LONSON

CONCERNING THE FUNERAL PROCESSION INCIDENT AT BERKINSVILLE

This is a legal report requested by Governor Cruise and States Attorney Lanson pursuant to S.R. 183.7.4.

On March 13, 2009 the funeral procession of Janet Berkins Richards left Berksville at 11:30 A.M. It proceeded to a mountain lake area within the leased property of Berkins Enterprises to a cemetery associated with the Berkins Assisted Living Facility. The distance by road is approximately 35 miles. On March 16, 2009 a formal request was received by this office to investigate how over 100 state highway patrol cars were at the route traveled by the funeral procession, and to report on any misconduct related to state funding and use of state property.

FINDINGS:

1. The highway patrol cars were in the vicinity of Berksville as part of a maintenance study requested by the chief of maintenance for the facilities charged with maintaining and replacing state highway patrol cars. This study was requested six weeks prior to the funeral and no one could have anticipated Mrs. Richards' death.
2. The study was approved by Governor Cruise on March 8th as a normal progression of state business.
3. On March 10 retired Governor Doyle was visiting the Governor's office. They admit discussing Mrs. Richards' death, as she was a business person well known throughout the state. Both insist the retired governor asked no special favors and was granted none.
4. The approved maintenance study listed three possible locations for the study. The facility in Paramount City was selected because it was centrally located within the state and had various mountain roads north of the city, necessary for the required tests. These roads near Berksville were selected in the original proposal and the selection could not have anticipated Mrs Richards' death.
5. The approved proposal stated that volunteer retired highway patrol officers were to take any available out-of-service vehicles to the facility for inspection, seeking evidence of systematic undetected pending failures in the vehicles. This is a safety study conducted under approved funding to the department. Inspections were conducted by the vehicle manufacturer's engineers flown in for the day. This was what necessitated the movement of all the vehicles to one central location. Although the actual date for this inspection was set March 10, prior arrangements had been made which could not have anticipated Mrs. Richards' death.
6. The approved proposal contained a long list of retired highway patrol officers who had volunteered their time to drive the available vehicles to the maintenance facility at Paramount City. This list was compiled far in advance of any recognition of Mrs. Richards' pending death.
7. One part of the test involved the retired officers taking the vehicles on a road test of approximately 100 miles and to report any deficiencies in operation or equipment. They were specifically requested to do some testing on the nearby mountain roads, such as those used by the funeral procession. It was therefore proper that these cars might be in the area where the funeral procession was traveling.
8. One of the local retired officers became aware of the funeral and brought it to their attention that there would be a substantial funeral procession from Berksville to the mountain lake. Several officers interviewed stated it was brought up as a safety matter since they would be driving in that area.

9. Someone in the group suggested that the procession was for retired Governor Doyle's long-time friend, and wouldn't it be nice to honor the funeral procession, since they were there.

10. Intense scrutiny was given to whether any of the patrol cars were actually used in the procession to block intersections, or in any other way an improper part of the procession. All findings were negative. The patrol cars were simply parked beside the road and the officers then stood beside the road to provide the honors. Some officers did control traffic at intersections, but the patrol cars were off the road and not used. One might question what sort of coordination resulted in the officers being equally spaced along the 35 mile route of the funeral procession. One might also question how each officer happened to be wearing a full dress uniform on a vehicle road test. Neither are violations of funding nor violations of the terms of the vehicle test.

11. All terms of the vehicle tests were performed to the stated authorization.

12. All cars were properly returned to their normal locations, washed, and gas tanks full. When questioned, the maintenance personnel stated that many of the cars had just come off duty and had not been washed or refueled when taken for the inspection. No record was found of the state being charged for fuel or car washing. It appears that the state benefited by several thousand dollars in fuel and washing of the cars apparently paid for by the retired highway patrol officers.

SUMMARY:

No violation of state funding or usage of the vehicles was found. It is obvious that in general the retired highway patrol officers coordinated an honors presentation to the retired governor's friend. This was of their own accord within the terms of voluntary service they were providing for the safety tests.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Inasmuch as the state benefitted from refueling and washing of state vehicles, the state might want to consider reimbursing the retired officers for their expenditures. However, calculating such monies and cutting such checks would be an expensive proposition. No reimbursements have been requested by any of the officers. It is recommended that the governor issue a letter of thanks to the officers who participated in the maintenance tests.

2. It is recommended in the strongest possible terms that Governor Cruise issue a letter of condemnation to the newspapers who misused their first amendment rights to slander an elder statesman of this state. Anyone who had made a simple phone call to the State Maintenance Supervisor would have been informed how all the highway patrol cars came to be in the area.

3. It is recommended that the governor make available funds and state legal services to retired Governor Doyle should he wish to pursue slander suits against those who made false accusations against him.

State Comptroller Frederick Jones

(Signature:) Frederick Jones.

Appendage: A letter to Governor's office concerning the funeral procession. This will give an eyewitness description of the activities.

APPENDAGE LETTER:

Governor Cruise;

I would like to thank you for the great honor the state paid to the funeral procession of Mrs. Janet Berkins Richards on March 10. I don't know how you managed to do this. It makes those of us who live in small towns and work in smaller businesses feel recognized for the contributions we make to society.

When I came out of the church in Berksville, I was not surprised to see the city police honoring Mrs. Richards. However, as we left town, I noticed we only had one State Highway Patrol vehicle escorting the funeral procession. I was concerned, as we would be crossing several busy intersections. However, shortly we approached a State Highway Patrolman standing at military parade rest just off the road. A highway patrol car was parked well off the highway. As the first car approached him, he slowly came to attention, removed his hat and slowly placed it over his heart as we passed. I thought this a beautiful gesture and that he would follow along as the second patrol car in the procession. But a short distance down the road we encountered another officer who came to attention and did the same gesture. I was struck by the beauty and respect of the officer's manner. As we traveled, I was astounded that every quarter mile or so, another senior officer did the same gesture. These officers seemed older and I noticed they were wearing service ribbons -- a great number of service ribbons!

At the intersections, more state patrolmen had traffic stopped for the procession to pass. As we approached they came to attention, executed a military about face, and slowly placed their hat over their heart as we passed. I don't mind telling you that after ten miles of this, everyone in our car was in tears. Mrs. Richards was being given an incredible honor. The family was being given an incredible honor. And our town was being given an incredible honor. This continued intermittently for the whole thirty miles to the entrance of the Berkins leased forest.

At the gate to the assisted living complex an antique logging tractor and trailer were waiting. The trailer had been totally covered with flowers like a parade float. Hundreds of loggers were waiting. The funeral director opened the hearse and Mrs. Richards' casket was removed and presented to the loggers. They gently placed the casket in the soft bed of flowers on the logging trailer. Then the tractor was started with an incredible roar, the muffler bypasses open. The hearse turned away. The procession proceeded with the tractor's loud wailing, expressing the deep feelings of us all. The loggers walked alongside the procession all the way to the cemetery overlooking the lake.

I don't understand how you caused highway patrolmen to present this honor, but it could not have been given to a more deserving person!

Thank you,
(signature:)

Thomas Hankins, Retired President, Berksville Bank

So now I've told it all. Janet, my friend like a sister! To what end? It is my struggle to understand the human Spirit of God in man. I have come to believe the core of this spirit is EMPATHY. All of my compatriots have expressed empathy in various ways, caring and risking for each other. We failed at times and struggled to recover. This life is a test of integrity, a test of **OUR** integrity! Will we accept that only by understanding, and helping, and loving each other, will we survive? Will we accept that **God threw us a lifeline**? Will we allow the **EMPATHY** of God's gift of Jesus Christ to carry us beyond this imperfect world?"

Diane Williams Doyle