

# Changing Seasons

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To Bill,  
Who made it possible for me to follow my dream



## Chapter 1

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Billye Fowler stared at the plain pine casket suspended over the six-foot dark hole. Amos Fowler is dead, she thought. She looked around. This cemetery suits you. Overgrown weeds and dilapidated tombstones, like the life you lived. You took the life out of me, you cruel worthless scoundrel. Well, may the devil take you, because things will darn well be different now. I won't have to pretend anymore.

She inhaled a lungful of the crisp October mountain air and chuckled inwardly.

There are five people here to see you off, not exactly a testament of your beloved popularity. Three of them are our apple-picking immigrants, here out of sheer obligation to me.

She looked at the man standing across from her. Alvin, the mechanic and Amos's best friend, was dressed in a wrinkled white shirt, yellowed with age and jeans covered with stubborn oil stains. He looked somberly at the casket.

She gave him a half smile. Who're you going to drink with, now? She thought. At least you shaved for the occasion. I see you can't go half-an-hour without your cheek-full of tobacco chew. You want to spit some that on Amos's box? You just go ahead.

Everyone found his or her place around the casket. The workers gestured the sign of the cross over the casket as they moved closer to her. Manuel, Billye's lead-picker for the orchard stood on her right, his head lowered as if in silent prayer. Billye smiled. She'd never seen him in a suit. His pin-stripe black suit covered a white shirt starched and complimented with a black tie and gold tie pin. Billye's daughter Melissa stood on her left, shivering in the autumn wind. She pulled the black trench coat around her small frame to shield herself. She saw Melissa shift her weight and glance surreptitiously at her watch.

The preacher opened his Bible. His bony arthritic fingers wrestled with the wind to keep the pages down. He cleared his throat and smacked the pages one last time. He adjusted his bifocal glasses. His cloudy gray eyes squinted as he began to read.

“Lord, Matthew seven-one says, ‘Judge not that you be not judged.’ ‘Brother Fowler had his ways. He may not have been the best husband and father, but he tried Lord and he’s your child. I pray that you forgive him for all of his sins and accept him into your Kingdom.’”

A disturbance behind Billye made her look over her shoulder. She saw Dodie Postlewaite waddling fast her way.

“I need to get through,” Dodie said, pushing her way between the immigrants.

Billye’s anger rose from the pit of her stomach to heat her face. The cool weather did nothing to cool the sweat rolling down her cheek. She tugged the black dress Melissa bought her. The neck tag bearing a fancy name she couldn’t pronounce itched, but she refused to scratch. She wouldn’t give Dodie the satisfaction of knowing how much she irritated her.

Dodie held on to her wide brimmed hat with one pudgy hand and pushed one of the Mexicans aside with the other. The foot-long ostrich feather in her hat’s band stroked the face of the Mexican on the other side and he stepped back. The dozen gold bangle bracelets on her thick arms jangled with her every move.

Billye rolled her eyes upward. The preacher stopped talking long enough to allow Dodie to join them and then resumed. Billye didn’t care to listen. There is so much work to do. It’s apple-picking season and all of my workers were standing around waiting for a dead body to go in the ground. She rotated her neck slowly to scratch the itch the tag made, but it didn’t work. Ignore it, she thought. Think of the work you have to do. The list is getting longer by the second.

“Mother, are you okay?” Melissa whispered.

“I’m fine,” she whispered back and nodded in Dodie’s direction. “I just wish she’d quit jangling so we can finish this.”

She clutched Melissa’s hand and released it when Melissa eased her hand away. She can’t blame her for being angry. Her father’s behavior embarrassed her, and the rampant rumors that were in the community about him and Dodie alienated her more. Billye knew Melissa was angry with her for putting up with it for so long. When she left for college, she never returned except for an occasional holiday.

The preacher gave his final remarks and raised his hand, a signal to lower the casket.

“Please wait a minute,” Dodie shouted.

Billye folded her arms and balked at the urge to scream. I can’t believe that woman, she thought.

Dodie walked around the casket wailing into her lacey monogrammed handkerchief in one hand and caressing the pine with the other. Her black tent dress clung to every mound of skin on her body with each gust of wind. She waddled around until she brushed against Billye. She gave her a smug smile and continued to float around. Her perfume burned Billye’s nostrils with every move. Removing a yellow rose from her purse, she laid it on the casket and wailed again.

Billye could no longer contain her anger. Her white bobbed hair was now clinging to her scalp from perspiration.

“You’d think that there’d be at least one tear with that moose love call,” Billye muttered.

Dark clouds replaced the scattered white clouds and the sky turned from blue to black. The wind blew harder. Billye saw the changes as an omen. People want to go home and she had work to do. She knew every minute spent at that graveside was costing her money.

She watched Dodie circle the casket for the last time. The strong urge overwhelmed her and Billye stuck her foot out. Dodie’s high heels caught the tip of Billye’s foot and she lost her

balance. Trying to break the fall her hands grasped at the air and she fell onto the casket.

Billye's denim blue eyes sparkled and began to well up, and then she laughed. Dodie rocked and rolled trying to regain her balance to no avail. She was sprawled across the top holding on to the side handles.

"Help me," she screamed clinging to the coffin, trying not to fall completely onto the ground.

Alvin and two of the apple-pickers steadied the casket while the others tussled with Dodie. Billye reached down to grab her hand and gave her a slight shove. Dodie fell to the ground, rocking the coffin with her weight as she landed on the clay. The preacher's wife rushed to pull her dress down to cover the exposed girdle. Dodie brushed them away. She rolled over and got on her knees.

Billye released a triumphant smile. "Oh my goodness, Dodie are you okay?"

She stood and snatched her clay stained gloves off. "You tripped me!" She threw her purse on her shoulder and stomped to her car. "You'll pay for this," she screamed, spinning her tires.

"Senora Fowler, you're a very naughty lady," Manuel whispered to Billye.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Billye whispered back and smiled.

The pastor removed his wrinkled handkerchief from his inside coat pocket and wiped his face. He waved his hands to the men to lower the casket. "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. This concludes the service for our brother." He took his wife's hand. "Come on, Mother," he said. "This is the most excitement I've seen at a funeral in all my sixty years as a preacher."

Melissa gripped Billye's arm dragging her tall, lean body to the car.

"Mother, what did you do?" Melissa asked, her perfectly coiffed auburn hair now on her shoulders.

Billye smiled showing the deep wrinkles in her tanned face.

“Nothing that shouldn’t been done a long time ago. I should’ve opened the casket and stuffed her into it,” she protested before getting into the car.



## Chapter 2

---

The drive home was quiet. The rain had decreased to a small sprinkle. Billye looked ahead and listened to the thump of the wipers. She wanted to apologize to Melissa, but she couldn't. Dodie got what she deserved, she thought.

She admired the view surrounding her, something she didn't get a chance to do often. She marveled at the clouds descending over the tip of the mountains. She'd lived in Westminster all of her life, and never had the time to enjoy its beauty. She let her window down and stuck her hand out of the window.

"Mother, close that window. The seats will get wet," Melissa said.

"There's hardly a drizzle coming down," Billye said simply. Her arm danced in the air as the wind beat against it. "You should let that fancy top down so the wind can blow that city hair loose."

"The window, please mother," Melissa said.

Billye punched the button on the door with her index finger. "There. Are you happy, now?"

The tires seized the road with every movement, which made the ride very soothing. Billye leaned back and closed her eyes opening them occasionally to comment on Melissa's driving.

"Don't drive so fast by those deer. You'll scare them," she said.

"Mother, I see them."

Billye scrutinized every area on the winding road. She pointed to the new nursing home on the hill coming up on the right.

"That wasn't there when you left," Billye said.

"I haven't seen this side of the county in years. What happened to the old rest home the Parkers owned?" Melissa asked.

“Some big city company bought it from them. They wanted the land. They tore the old building down and replaced it with that,” she said, shooing her hand. “It’s called Lakeview Manor.”

“I can’t believe the Parkers sold it,” Melissa said. “They ran that place for years. Have you ever seen the inside?”

“No, but I called once. I thought about admitting Amos there when he had his stroke.”

“What changed your mind?”

“The administrator changed my mind. I didn’t like him. I only spoke to him on the phone, but there was a hint of arrogance in his voice. He reminded me of a greedy parasite.”

“Oh mother, that’s ridiculous. Why did the Parkers sell it?”

“Just like the rest of us, Melissa, They got old and tired.”

“Mother sixty isn’t old by today’s standards.”

“It is if you’ve worked hard all your life.”

Billye was glad to get back home. They drove down the rugged gravel driveway littered with old rusty truck parts. Melissa parked the car in front of the small log cabin.

“Come on in,” Billye said climbing out of the car. “I know it’s been awhile since you’ve been home. Your one night stay wasn’t enough to get reacquainted with your roots. So feel free to look around. I haven’t done much since you’ve been gone, but I intend to get busy.” She pointed to the cabin. “Your granddaddy put every one of those logs in by hand. He’d be mighty unhappy if he could see it now.”

The front steps creaked with each footstep approaching the front porch. She kicked some trash away from the door into the yard. “You have to excuse this mess, trying to run this orchard and take care of your father, didn’t leave much time for house-keeping. You were only here one night, but I hope you were comfortable.”

“I was fine, mother.”

Billye put a hand through the ripped screen and pushed the unlocked door open. She knew the cabin didn't look like much, but it was all she had left of her past. It was now time to make new memories.

She sent Melissa to the kitchen to make tea while she scrambled to get out of her dress. She was never comfortable in anything but pants or overalls. Billye caught a glimpse of herself in the full-length mirror mounted on her closet door. She traced the deep wrinkles around the corners of her eyes and examined the rest of her face. She pulled the sagging skin back to her ears. Sun damaged skin replaced the soft supple skin she had when she was a young girl.

Where did the time go? She thought, while brushing her hair away from her face. Her amateur haircut smelled of Ivory soap and sweat, but it was beautiful to her.

She leaned against the bedroom window and watched the workers who'd started back to work. They were scattered throughout the orchard. Some stood on ladders picking the best apples from the top of the trees; others carried baskets to pick from the bottom. Manuel walked about supervising the workers. A dozen tourists walked through pulling wagons filled with apples and Manuel accommodated them. She watched him laugh and tease with them and it amused her. She was glad to see things getting back to normal and it was because of him that things had.

Billye couldn't run the orchard without Manuel. He'd worked in the orchard since he was twenty-four years old. She couldn't imagine what life would be like without him. During the worse times in her life, he'd become her only confidant. He'd worked in the orchard even when she couldn't afford to pay him. When Amos refused to help or was busy spending time with Dodie, she and Manuel worked side by side, just the two of them to harvest the apples.

Manuel made her U-pick sign much larger this year. She knew the crop would be better than the year before. She only had

ten acres, but she had a variety. The Galas, Golden Delicious, and Fuji apples were plentiful. This year should make a good profit, and Amos wouldn't be here to drink it away.

She'd never imagined that her life would end up this way. Her marriage to Amos was never happy, but it was necessary when her father found out she was pregnant. Amos blamed her for ruining his life and he'd never let her forget it.

Billye heard the teakettle whistle. She passed Melissa's bedroom and saw her packing. She removed the kettle, made a cup of tea and stopped by Melissa's room. She sat on the side of the bed and watched Melissa pack her bags. The small designer bag was hardly big enough to hold a dress or two, let alone, anything else.

Melissa stopped packing and sat next to her. "What're your plans now, mother?"

Billye folded her arms. "I don't know. Maybe I'll take a trip after the season is over; before I do that, I want to fix up this old house. That should keep me busy for a long time."

"You know, I'm only an hour away," Melissa said.

Billye took her hand. "I know, Melissa."

She would never impose on her daughter. Melissa had a busy career in Charlotte, and Billye wouldn't want to leave her home. She loved her daughter, but she belonged in the city and Billye belonged in the mountains. Even with Amos gone she could take care of herself. She had the money from his life insurance policy and she had the orchard. There'd been times money was scarce, but she never let the policy lapse. It wasn't much, but it would allow her live independently and recapture some of her dreams she'd thought were lost.

"You know, I may just take a train trip," Billye said. "When I was a teenager I used to sit at the train depot and watch the trains go by." She smiled. "I've always wondered where they were going." She'd wanted to travel and see what was on the other side of Westminster. The possibilities were endless, and her freedom was invigorating. It took years to drain the life out of

her, but only a split second for a casket to drop to bring the life back.

She patted Melissa's hand. "Living alone won't be so bad." She looped her hand through Melissa's arm and walked out with her.

Billye stood on the porch and watched her daughter pack her car. She blew her a kiss as she climbed in. She waved until the car disappeared into the dust beyond the old fence. She turned and studied the yard and porch. The rusty chains that once held the porch swing, the old beer cans spread throughout the yard and other debris was placed on her mental to-do list.

"Tomorrow, I'll clean," she said.

She went inside and stood in silence for a few minutes before walking through the house. The wood floors squeaked with her footsteps. The draft felt from lack of insulation gave the room a slight chill, and the house was cooler inside than the outside, right now. Every sound echoed through the small house. She'd never noticed it before. She walked through and made another mental note of everything she had to do on the inside. She started with her husband's clothes. She'll burn them with the trash in the back yard.

The knock at the door interrupted her thoughts. Dodie stood at the door wearing a red striped dress that draped around her and made her look much larger than her three-hundred pounds. Billye pulled the curtain back and pressed her face to the dirty side window.

"What in the world does she want?" She said aloud. She turned and looked at the clock on the mantle. "Four o'clock, she should be somewhere else spreading mayhem." She looked through the window again and studied Dodie's colossal frame as she knocked harder.

"Billye Fowler, I know you can hear me," Dodie said. The long string of black beads around her neck swung and rattled with every knock. "I can see your dirty curtain moving in the window."

Billye pulled the door open. “What do you want?” she asked with a mischievous grin.

Dodie, not waiting for an invitation, shoved her aside and stomped into the cabin. The couch springs sang as she plunged herself onto it.

“First of all, I accept your apology for the fiasco you created at dear Amos’s funeral.” She snapped her wrist and opened her folded fan. “I know you must be overcome with grief.” She fanned herself faster giving her faded red hair wings. “I hate to be so blunt at such an emotional time for you, but Amos had something that belonged to me.” She stopped fanning and gave Billye a half smile. “I want it back.”

Billye sat in an overstuffed chair and lifted her long, lean legs to the coffee table. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I gave Amos my daddy’s tool box with his best tools in it.”

Billye sat up and massaged her throbbing temples. “What do you want me to do about it?”

“I want my daddy’s tool box. I only let Amos use them because he couldn’t possibly afford such good tools. I was just trying to be helpful.”

He was probably going to fix something for her, Billye thought. He never fixed anything around this house. Besides, she gave the tools to one of the workers over a month ago. Amos had no need for a toolbox after his stroke; especially one with someone else’s monogrammed initials. She smiled to herself at the thought.

Billye yawned and walked to the front door. “Tell you what I’ll do. I’ll gather all of his things and bring them to you this evening.” She opened the door.

Dodie rocked back and forth several times and then sprang from the couch. “I’ll be waiting,” she sang as she wobbled out the door.

Billye hadn't moved Amos's rusty pick-up truck in months. There wasn't much left of the forty year old body, but Amos kept it running. She left it parked in the yard to collect debris after he died. The only thing she knew how to do was start it up and let it run to keep the battery from dying.

She paced around it trying to muster up the nerves to get in. She'd never learned to drive, but she'd watched Amos and she could ride a tractor. She knew she could handle it.

She gathered all of her husband's clothes; including the dirty pile that she never had a chance to wash and put them in big trash bags. She threw them in the back of the truck and climbed in.

The 1970 Ford truck clanked and backfired a couple of times before it caught. She held her foot to the gas for a full three minutes, eased up and shifted into reverse. She found first gear and swung around onto the road. She went into second, and stayed there. The truck's tires bald as they were, fishtailed and kicked up gravel. She clipped her U-pick apple sign.

"Darn," she said. "That was a nice sign."

She concentrated on the gears again. "I'll shift to third when I get to the pavement. Highway 64, here I come."

Dodie's house was a mile away. Billye turned onto the highway, picked up speed, shifted to third and hit the gas. The truck bucked but shot into the descending dusk. She grinned at her accomplishment. When she passed BJ's Country store, she honked the horn. The two men in plaid jackets playing checkers out front waved without looking up.

Dodie's two-story home sat atop a rolling hill. It was white with pink shutters. Ruffled swag curtains hung in every window. Six white rocking chairs lined the wrap-around porch facing the mountains that peaked like cotton-topped castles against the darkening sky.

The truck shuddered up the long curving driveway. Billye gripped the vibrating steering wheel until her knuckles turned

white. She hit the brake, but the truck kept rolling and stopped in a bed of multicolored chrysanthemums near the porch.

“Oh, well,” she said assessing the damage. She jumped out, leaving the truck running, collected the two black garbage bags of clothes from the back, and dropped them on the porch. She stood looking at them a minute. “Nope,” she said. “Dodie deserves much better.” She grabbed the bottoms of the bags and dumped them. After kicking them into a good scatter, she surveyed the results with a glance, dusted her hands together and left.

Billye went home and settled in for the evening. Manuel had repaired her U-pick sign. She sat under the light at a small table on her front porch, going through the day’s tally-receipts left by Manuel. Her head pounded and she rubbed her temples. She never had headaches before, not even when she’d been subjected to Amos’s worst. She went inside and took two aspirin. She returned to the porch to wait for the pain to subside.

Twenty minutes later, she went back to the receipts, and a deputy’s car came down her driveway.

Billye gave it a glance and returned to work. The car stopped and sat while the motor rumbled. She looked up. The deputy was on his radio. The call ended and he got out leaving the cruiser running with the blue lights still flashing. He was five-six and stocky, barely twenty years old. He adjusted his wide-brimmed tan hat on his buzz cut hair and tugged the equipment at his waist.

Billye put the receipts aside and stood, her arms folded across her chest. She smiled inwardly at the young deputy.

Can’t hardly contain your excitement, can you? She thought. There’d never had a serious crime in Westminster, so any minor infraction got immediate attention from the only deputy.

“Afternoon, Miz. Fowler,” he said, spitting a large wad of tobacco on the ground.

“What can I do for you, Bobby?”

“Miz. Fowler, I don’t know what’s going on with you and Miz. Postlewaite, but she said you dumped a slew of old clothes all over her front porch.”

“I gave her what she asked for. She wanted my husband’s belongings, so she got them. They’re hers to do with whatever she pleases, and you can take that message back to her. Now, get.”

Bobby took off his hat and held it to his chest. “Miz. Fowler, I know losing your husband was hard, and you miss him.”

“You don’t know anything. Just so you know, though, him dying was the best thing that could’ve happened to me, but what would a kid know about anything?” She sat again and tapped the receipts. “I have work to do,” she said.

Bobby fiddled with his hat a moment and put it back on his head. “Good day, Miz. Fowler.”

He got back into his cruiser looking like a whipped puppy, and Billye smiled.

She looked out over the field and saw Manuel running her way from the orchard.

“Senora Fowler, is everything okay,” he asked, panting.

“Manuel, what in the world are you doing? You’re too old to be running like that. You’re going to kill yourself.”

He sat on the step to catch his breath. “I saw the police and I thought there was trouble,” he said, wiping his face with a handkerchief.

“Oh, for pete sakes, Manuel. Everything’s fine. Get off of that step and sit in a chair. I’ll get you some water.”

Billye returned with his water, handed it him, and sat in the chair next to him. “And why are you still here? You should have gone home hours ago.”

Manuel drank some of the water. “I was worried about you. I saw you leave in the truck. Senora Fowler, you don’t know how to drive. Why were you in that truck?”

Billye folded her arms and smiled. "I did just fine. Besides, I had urgent business to tend to."

Manuel finished the last of the water. "I would've taken you where ever you needed to go. Why didn't you ask me?"

Billye picked up the receipts again and counted. "I didn't want you involved. There are some things a woman has to do on her own."

"It was Senora Postlewaite, wasn't it? She upset you, didn't she?"

Billye put the receipts down. "If you must know, yes, she did upset me. I gave her what she wanted and she had the nerve to call the police."

"What was in the bags, Senora?"

Billye laughed. "How do you manage to work and spy on me?" She laughed again. "If you must know, I put Amos's clothes on her porch."

"That wasn't very nice or lady-like," he said, and laughed.

"Tomorrow, Senora, you start your driving lessons. If you must drive, you must have a license. And I want you to know, it's been my pleasure to spy on you these last few years."

Billye stopped laughing. "So, how are you getting along since your wife died?"

Manuel looked out over the field. "I miss my Rita every day. It's been ten years and I still expect her to be waiting for me when I walk through the door after a long day."

"She was a wonderful person, Manuel. I miss her, too."

Manuel stood and wiped a tear from his eye. "Okay, tomorrow we drive," he said and walked back to the orchard for his truck.

The next day, the morning sun crept up slowly over the mountains. Billye sat on the front porch with her coffee and enjoyed the show. The soft wind teased the chimes hanging on the porch, giving music to the air. A cardinal stopped at the birdfeeder for his morning snack, as the squirrels chased one another from corn she'd put out for the deer.

Billye saw Manuel's truck turn onto the drive. She fussed with her hair a little and waited for him to reach the house.

"What am I doing?" She said aloud. "I'm being just down right silly. Why do I care how my hair looks?"

Manuel stopped his black F250 truck in front of the porch. Billye poured him a cup of coffee while she waited for him to get out. He wore a white cotton shirt tucked into his jeans. She knew he was a couple of years younger than her, but looked better than a man in his forties. She could tell he took pride in the way he looked. He climbed out of the truck with ease, his five-foot-eleven slim body moved with agility. He adjusted the big silver buckle belt around his waist and walked to the porch.

"Good morning, Senora Fowler," he said, sitting in the chair next to Billye. "Are you ready for your lesson?"

"Good morning, Manuel. Let's have coffee first," Billye said handing him the cup.

"Senora," he said, "Surely you're not trying to stall."

"What do you think?" She said sipping her coffee. "When I drove the truck the first time my adrenalin was moving. I didn't know what I was doing. It's going to be different now that someone's watching."

Manuel put his hand to his heart. "Oh, Senora, you hurt Manuel. I'm not just anybody. Yo estoy tu amigo."

"Lo se' pero tengo meido," she said.

He put his cup down and smiled at her. "So you still remember your Spanish?"

"I should," she said smiling. "You were a good teacher."

They sat in silence and finished their coffee.

"Okay, Senora," Manuel said. "It's time to go."

Billye slid onto the driver's side of the truck and waited for Manuel to get in. She wore jeans and a white turtle neck sweater, and the perfume Melissa gave her for Christmas, which she'd never bothered to use until now. She saw no need to use perfume to work in the orchards all day.

“Okay, Senora,” Manuel said, fastening his seat belt. “We need to go over a few things before you start the truck.”

“Manuel, there’s no need to start from the beginning, I have driven it before.”

“Senora, you need to be able to pass the driving test.”

Manuel talked her through the basics of driving the truck and then allowed her to start it.

Billye put her hand over the gear shift as instructed and Manuel placed his on top of hers. Billye smiled inwardly at the rugged hand resting on hers. The wave of butterflies in her stomach was foreign to her, and though it was a good feeling, she pulled her hand back.

Manuel pulled his back, too and stared straight ahead for a moment. Billye looked out the driver’s side window.

“I’m sorry, Senora,” Manuel said. He removed his hat, brushed his black hair back with his hand, and returned his hat to his head. “I didn’t mean to make you feel uncomfortable.”

Billye turned and looked at him. “Who said I was uncomfortable? Let’s drive.”

## Chapter 3

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Jonathan Reid walked down the hall at Lakeview Manor with disgust. After five years as vice-president at TSA Corporation, he'd been reduced to working as an administrator. He's now in charge of whining employees and senile old people. The sexual misconduct lawsuit was unfair, but the corporation didn't want the publicity. The attorneys suggested that they settle out of court and remove him.

He stopped at the secretary's desk.

"Good morning, Gloria," he said, picking up the messages.

"You don't have any messages," she said without looking up. She flipped through the Cosmopolitan magazine with one hand and whirled her long blonde hair with the other.

"How do you know?" He asked. "Maybe they're hidden in that magazine."

He leaned on her desk and took the magazine. "I know how important it is for you to keep abreast of the latest fashions, but can you at least pretend to be busy?"

Jonathan wanted, needed, power, and he lusted for money, all he could possibly get. Money was his driving force, and working as an administrator certainly didn't fit into his big plan. This had to be a temporary assignment. He had to be on top again. His pathetic administrator's salary they paid him couldn't support the lifestyle he was accustomed to before the lawsuit. They gave him this job as if they were doing him a favor. It would've been better to fire him and put him out of his misery.

Moving to Westminster was the worst of the two evils. If he saw another person in overalls, he wouldn't be able to keep himself from grabbing him by the throat. He could only take so many howdy do's in one day.

The civil lawsuit left him almost destitute. He'd lost everything in attorney's fees, his condominium in downtown Charlotte, his country club membership, and most of his friends. It was all gone overnight. At least he still had all of his clothes. Nothing made a man feel good like an Armani suit and a nice pair of imported Italian shoes.

The only thing he was glad to leave behind was an ex-wife who hounded him constantly and a girlfriend who blamed him for ruining her life. He couldn't take all of the blame for that; his ex-wife orchestrated everything. Who'd ever heard of an alienation of affection lawsuit anyway?

Jonathan arrived at the facility after the retirement of the last administrator. He strolled through the facility looking at the employees and residents as if he would catch a deadly disease, afraid to disturb his polished look. His black hair, slicked with gel to hold back the untamed curls, fit his tall, trim athletic body.

He knew how to turn on the charm when he needed it. His charismatic ways and good looks made an impression on the staff, especially the women, but he couldn't fool all of them.

Jonathan walked by a resident with a look of disdain. She and her perky attitude made him sick. What do they have to be so happy about? He thought. He gave a half smile and kept walking.

In stark contrast to his point of view, Avalina loved Lakeview Manor. She'd lived there since it opened eight years ago and was the official greeter for the facility. She even had a name badge that read Avalina Cortez, GREETER. She wore it with pride. She loved taking the new residents under her wing, introducing them to everyone, and showing them around. Despite her severe arthritis, which necessitated a cane, she managed to stay on the move.

Avalina could see much more behind Jonathan's deceiving smile. She liked to think of herself as the resident clairvoyant. She didn't trust him, and she expressed that feeling to her closest friend, Ilise, a retired bookkeeper.

Avalina had seen employees and residents come and go. She'd seen more than her share of staff terminations, resident deaths and heartaches, but still maintained a positive attitude. Employees and residents trusted and confided in her. She dispersed wisdom with the grace becoming of a woman that had been around a long time, although her smooth dark skin gave her a much more youthful appearance than her actual age of seventy. Avalina would say that God had given her a gift to understand people and feel what they felt. She felt a dark spirit around Jonathan and it frightened her.



## Chapter 4

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Six months had passed since Amos's death. Spring brought with it a new beginning for Billye. As the trees and shrubs burst with flowers, Billye's outlook on life bloomed. She adjusted well to the single and quiet life.

The cabin no longer looked like a dilapidated old shack. She had worked hard on the repairs with Manuel's help. The steps didn't creak, the old rusty porch chains now had a cedar swing attached, and flowers had been planted. She admired the flower garden by the porch while she swung and enjoyed the fresh air of spring.

In the orchard, the apple trees budded, while the first hummingbirds competed for space at the feeders in her yard.

Billye put her coffee mug down on the little porch table and stretched her arms above her head. There was a sign of life in everything that surrounded her, and that gave new meaning to her. Everything that had died was now reborn, except Amos, she thought.

Along with spring came the builders and developers. New houses sprang up everywhere. Billye cringed at how close they came to her homestead. High-salaried city folks had discovered Westminster's picturesque mountains and its serenity. Custom-home builders sold properties to overworked people looking for a weekend getaway. Young families wanted the ideal place to raise their children. They snatched up the new tract houses at an alarming rate.

There were places on the lush mountains that looked like someone had shaved them with a giant razor, and the big companies cleared land for the pricey log cabin enclaves. There was even talk about making the two-lane Highway 64 into a four-lane.

The younger generation had no desire to move back to the mountains after their parents had passed on. Properties listed by the families sold fast.

Dodie's property was now for sale. Dodie, had died a month ago, in March, and her death created a stir. No one had seen her for a week, and that was unusual. The sheriff went to her home, and when she didn't answer the door, he went in and found her slumped over her dining room table, a fork clenched in her fist.

The autopsy revealed a massive heart attack. Billye cried a little at the news. It was only for a brief moment because, while she never liked Dodie, she'd never wished her dead.

The stir came about because, if Dodie hadn't died, no one would have known she still had family.

Miranda Ferguson arrived on the first Saturday after Dodie's attorney notified her of Dodie's passing, two weeks after the sheriff found her. The petite woman in her thirties, walked around Dodie's property in three-inch heels, which gave the illusion of a woman much taller than her five-foot-two frame.

Miranda's stylish rimless glasses enhanced her big hazel eyes. Her wavy red hair, cropped to flirt with her ears, gleamed. She moved with grace as she walked around the property. She was wearing a tan suit, which matched her shoes.

Dodie's funeral took place Monday at ten o'clock. Miranda Ferguson sat alone on the front pew and afterwards, spoke to no one. Immediately following the gravesite service, she excused herself and launched into tending Dodie's estate.

Tongues wagged at BJ's Country store that afternoon. Everyone was curious about the well-dressed woman who'd snooped around Dodie's property. Because BJ's was where everyone shopped, it was also where people indulged themselves in the latest gossip.

Billye stopped by for her weekly groceries and browsed the aisles. She'd passed Dorothy Ladd and Eloise Mincy on her way to the beef counter. They were wedged between the aisles with their heads together. Billye passed and stopped a short distance at the end of the aisle. She picked up a pack of old stew meat to examine.

"Did you know she had relatives?" Dorothy asked.

"No, I didn't think she had family left," Eloise said. "She never mentioned any one, and I'm surprised she never told me. We were friends, you know."

Billye watched as Eloise leaned closer to Dorothy.

"I heard the woman is her mother's sister's granddaughter," Eloise said.

"Where'd you hear that?" Dorothy asked.

"Old man Percy. He told Buddy Murdock that Dodie's mother had a sister who left Westminster before Dodie was born. She eloped with that stranger passing through here the year Dodie was born."

Mary huffed. "Well, that explains a lot. Might've been afraid she'd end up a spinster if she didn't grab the guy."

"It's sad," Eloise said shaking her head. "Percy said she never came home again. You notice how young the woman is?" Eloise asked. "Her mother must have had her right before the change."

"Poor Dodie," Dorothy said. "She died all alone in that big house."

Billye picked up another package of stew meat to compare it with the first. A farmer stood at the end of the meat aisle and called to his friend standing inside the wide doorway leading to the back.

"Okay, I'll pay for the fertilizer and you bring the truck round to load it," he yelled.

"You know about the clothing incident between her and Billye Fowler, of course?" Dorothy continued.

“Yes, I heard, but I don’t know any details. What do you think happened?” Eloise asked.

“I don’t know. You certainly can’t blame it on grief. I mean, the way Amos treated Billye all those years.”

“You know why, don’t you?” Eloise said. “All his affection went to Dodie.”

Billye shook her head, put the first package of stew meat in her cart and turned toward the aisle where Dorothy and Eloise stood. She saw Dorothy push her cart a few inches and pause to hear more gossip.

“Who are you ladies ripping up today?” Billye said after turning the corner. She pushed her cart between them.

Eloise smiled. “Well, how are you, Billye?”

Billye returned the smile. “I’m doing much better, thank you, Eloise. Now that Amos is dead and Dodie has joined him.”

Billye moved toward the checkout counter.

“You know, that was a terrible thing to say,” Dorothy said, trailing Billye.

Billye stopped and turned. “Of course it was. Forgive me.”

“So, have you seen the lady?” Dorothy asked.

Billye waved a hand and moved forward again. “I don’t have time for this,” she said. “Have a good day, Dorothy.”

Driving Amos’s truck was now easy for Billye, thanks to Manuel. She drove everywhere after receiving her first driver’s license. Billye felt a sense of pride each time she drove to the store. She didn’t have to depend on her neighbors or Manuel anymore. She could do it herself.

Billye passed Dodie’s house on her way home. Approaching it, she marveled at the rolling, magnificently green land that seemed to go on forever. There were two cars parked in the circular driveway. She shifted the rattling pickup into second, took her foot off the gas and dropped her speed.

The first car was a shiny black Lexus. The one behind it had a magnetic sign on its driver's door. Two women stood talking beside the house toward the back, their backs mostly to the road. Billye couldn't get a look at either of them.

A horn startled her. She looked its way and gasped. She had driven into the oncoming lane. Billye gave the steering wheel a hard left.

"Crazy lady!" the man yelled through his open driver's window, shaking his clenched fist at her.

"Bozo!" Billye yelled back and hit the gas.

Billye dropped her two bags of groceries on the dining room table. The table wobbled under the weight. Her head was throbbing again. She went to the bathroom's medicine cabinet for aspirin, and filled a glass. The old pipes clanged and the rust colored water spewed out to fill her glass.

Billye tossed the aspirin back, gulped the water, and snapped her head back to make sure they'd gone down. She grabbed the sink. The dizziness was something new. Hands on the walls, she staggered to the living room.

Billye kicked her shoes off and slapped the sofa cushions. The stink of Amos's cigarettes rose with the dust; she jerked her head away from it. When the smell diminished, she rested her head on the pillow and stared at the water-stained ceiling. Probably need to take care of the roof, she thought before she drifted to sleep.

Close-by thunder woke Billye, and she bolted to her seat, everything around her a blur. She rubbed her eyes and blinked them to focus. The blur cleared, but when she stood, she gasped.

"Where am I?" She turned, leaning to put a hand on the sofa's arm to steady herself against the dizziness. "What in the world is happening?" She was panting; her hand went to her chest. Her vision had cleared, but confusion overwhelmed her. She breathed heavily, holding onto her chest. Her heart pounded as though it were beating to get out. Perspiration rolled down her

face. She staggered through the living room. The toe of her shoe caught the edge of the braided rug and she fell.

Billye pushed herself up on her palms and kneeled a moment. There was no pain, so nothing was broken. She eased herself up to stand and moved to the nearest chair until the confusion subsided.

The wind howled and the sideways slanted rain assaulted the windows. The tin pots on the floor pinged with the water drops from the leaking roof. Billye hurled a glass ashtray at the ceiling. It bounced off, dropped to the linoleum floor, and shattered.

“We’re both old and worn out,” she yelled.

The dark rain-laden clouds made it look later than six o’ clock. She closed her eyes and listened to the storm. The rain soothed her. There’s so much work to do, but I have to rest, she thought. I need rest more than I need a doctor. I’ll go to bed and start again tomorrow.

The next morning, the sun seeped through the frayed white curtains, now yellowed with age. The ceiling fan vibrated with each lopsided turn of the blades above her. Billye rolled onto her side and pulled the sheet tighter around her. What if I have another episode like yesterday? She thought about that, and then about her garden. Billye eased herself out of bed. “Well, I can’t, that’s all,” she said aloud.

The garden was overtaken with weeds that seemed to multiply after a hard rain. Billye donned her gardening gloves and overalls, went out the front door, and prepared to do battle. She dismissed last night’s episode as old age that was catching up to her. She reminded herself of Melissa’s words, sixty’s not old by today’s standards. She laughed. “Whose standards?” she said aloud.

Billye parked her low stool in front of her lavender plant flowers and went to work. Garden labor always made her feel better. She fussed over the butterfly bushes and the roses, inhaling the soft lavender fragrance that traveled the air. Billye

snatched at the weeds vigorously, making sure she got their roots. The stool hindered her progress. She knocked it aside and crawled through the flowers on her knees like a bobcat on the prowl.

Shears in hand, Billye deadheaded flowers with precision. In her mind, each cut represented the years of abuse with Amos, his affair with Dodie, her wasted life, and the hard work it took to keep the orchard running. She felt an unexpected tear roll down her cheek. Billye wiped her cheek with the back of her hand, gathered her equipment and retreated to the porch.

The sun showed no mercy as it beamed overhead, sending a wave of the earthy scents to the front porch. Billye rocked in the chair to the rhythm of its squeak. She looked around. August was the beginning of apple season, but she'd already seen some of the immigrants coming in early, looking for work. She saw the trucks passing on the road, hauling bags filled with their belongings, stacked high and tied down.

Billye leaned her head back. Should be another prosperous apple year, she thought to herself. This was her first year without Amos or Dodie. A celebration was in order, she thought. "This will be called my Independence year," she said. Billye chuckled in spite of the dull ache that had started to develop in her temples. The rumbling sound in her stomach reminded her that she had not eaten since breakfast.

Water splashed beneath her feet in her kitchen. She grabbed a kitchen towel and threw it on the floor in front of the refrigerator. Water from the refrigerator had leaked over the kitchen floor. She wrung the towel out into the sink and threw down a dry one. She then whacked the thick ice in the freezer to release the frozen dinner wedged in it. Billye slid the dinner in the oven and turned it on before she rested on the couch. She never thought about it again.



## Changing Seasons Sample Reading

Hope you enjoyed the sample.

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