

Alpha

The page corners of the magazine trembled slightly in rhythm to the hum of the engine as the bus cruised down the highway. I scanned page after page of houses. My eyes fell upon a grand old classic style brick house, circa 1912. It had two large white columns on each side of the porch rising up past the second floor to the roof. A wonderful white rail balcony came from the second floor making a roof for the porch on the first floor. In my former life I would have enjoyed decorating a house like this, but now...

Now what will I do with the rest of my broken life. I was on my own and going ...where? I did not even know that, because the decision was just too much for me to make. So, I just bought a ticket west and here I sat staring at this real estate book I had picked up at the bus station. It was not a huge house and it was just calling out to me. I was shocked! It was the first time for over a year that I had found anything that interested me. Maybe the fog is truly lifting from my mind. Dr. Morris told me that it would come and go, and now I drank in, like a fresh breath of air, the welcome movement of desire that had tugged at me.

This house had touched me. I looked and found it was in Alpha, California. A new start and new house... but could I? Dare I? Could I resurrect some of the old life to do this house without digging up the whole nightmare ordeal? I shoved the book deep into my purse and closed my eyes. Even the thought of it plunged me once again into the fog. I leaned my head back against the seat and closed out the memories that tried to crawl out, the world, and life.

“Ma’am,” the bus driver was shaking me from my place of safety in the arms of sleep. “We are at the station.”

“Thank you,” I managed and began to gather my things. Well... what would I do now? The depot was humming with activity, people going to and coming from their desired destination, and here I stood in the middle of it all, and had no idea where to go or what to do. The fog left me feeling numb and I am not sure how long I stood there, but I felt a presence near me. Like in slow motion I turned to see a man in his late twenties or early thirties standing there observing me. I must have blushed, for he said, “Hi, I’m Ryan Coulter. I didn’t mean to startle you, but you seem lost. May I help you?”

I didn’t even know how to answer him. “I... I guess... maybe I am.” I stammered. He was handsome in a strange kind of way behind his dark rimmed glasses. He had dark hair and a short beard. His eyes were nearly as green as the dress shirt he was wearing. Over his arm was a suit coat and in his hand a briefcase. While I pondered him, I wondered what to say, he just waited patiently as though he had all the time in the world. “I’m Nora Westerman,” I finally found some words. He smiled and his whole face brightened.

“Pleased to meet you, Nora. Where are you heading?”

That was the thing with people, always demanding an answer and I had none. It irritated me. “I am not sure yet!” I snapped and I am sure it showed my irritation. He raised one eyebrow so it could be seen above the top of his

glasses and his smile faded. He had a disturbed look on his face. I had no right to snap at him. "Forgive me," I pleaded. "I'm afraid I am very tired." And I was too. Even the nap on the bus had not revived me.

His smile returned and he nodded, "Traveling can be very tiring. There's a nice motel across the street."

"Thank you, I believe I'll check it out." It sounded good to me and it was a direction to go. I felt like a complete fool as I crossed the street a suitcase in both hands. I had to have a complete stranger to tell me what to do. What was I doing, anyway? I wished I had never started out.

Then Dr. Morris' warning came to mind. "Nora, this will be the hardest thing you have ever done," he had said to me. I assured him I was ready, but now I was having second thoughts.

The room was small with only a bed, and a nightstand. A hot bath and a good night sleep would help, and in the morning I would decided where to go from here.

The bath was so relaxing and I was in no hurry to end it. Finally I got out and dried. As I brushed my hair before the mirror over the sink I studied the woman looking at me. She was slim, almost thin. I search her face, not beautiful, but pleasing to look at. She had frosted brown hair that lay in soft curls at her shoulders. Her eyes were deep blue with long eyelashes that never needed to be curled.

I watched her run her fingers across what is called an aristocratic nose, and below a proud chin. Proud! Yes, once upon a time she was proud, but that was killed. It died along with her in a former life. I blinked at her and thought she was a fool to allow a man to destroy a successful and prosperous career and put her in a tomb for one whole year of her life.

"I can not allow that to happen to me, I refuse." I said to her, turned and went to bed.

I awoke to the sun shining through the window and set about preparing for the next leg of my journey. Where do I go from here? I must set out a plan. This uncertainty

must stop. As I was putting my personal things back in my purse the real estate magazine was in the way. I pulled it out and tossed it on the bed, put everything in my purse and picked up my two suitcases.

I glanced around to see if I had collected all of my belongings and my eyes fell upon the book still turned to the page I had been looking at and there was that house... that lovely, stately old house. It had weathered the years and stood as an example of persevering. Could I persevere now and make a life for myself? I was determined to try and that house would be my inspiration. I took the book and put it back in my purse.

I purchased a ticket for Alpha, California and two days later I stepped off a bus in front of a quaint drugstore where tables and chairs could be seen through the curtains. I marveled at how reminiscent of the early sixties it was. Then as I looked up and down the main street I became aware that this town had not changed much since that time. It was all of three blocks long with sidewalks, stop lights and a row of streetlights in the middle of the street set in a narrow island of grass. The streetlights had four round globes hanging from them on carved-column poles.

At the end of Main Street was a large building with a flag in the front. The stores were no taller than two stories, some still even had false fronts, and the streets were narrow with cars parking at an angle against the sidewalks. It took me back in time to when I was just a young girl. There was a variety store, hardware store, two small barber shops with red and white rolling signs setting on the sidewalk and at the end of the second block on the corner I could see the sign that read "gas".

I caught my breath as I saw the "Alpha Theater" sign protruding out over the sidewalk. I use to go see movies in one just like that, and far down the street the other direction was a drive-in eating place. Across the street was a bank with a marble front, a clothing store next to a café and a dress shop with one manikin in the window. The clothes it wore were modern. A small bookstore sat on

the far side of The Alpha Herald Newspaper office, and near the other end of town there was a garage and a car lot.

What a perfect place for starting over. I became aware that the bus driver had set my two suitcases on the sidewalk beside me. I looked at him and he smiled at me, caught the brim of this cap and nodded. "Want me to take them in for you, ma'am?" he asked politely.

"Would you, please?" I returned and he answered by picking up the suitcases.

I followed him into the drugstore and drank in the ambiance of the place. To the right of the door were several small tables scatter around in front of the window. At one table a teenage couple sipped contently at their sodas looking dreamy eyed at each other. To the left was a counter with round stools where sodas and drinks were made. A young girl with long brown hair pulled back at the temples and held in place by combs at the back of her head smiled pleasantly at me. Beyond the soda counter were shelves with products on the left and the right making a walkway that led to the back of the room where there was a pharmacy window.

The young girl behind the soda counter said, "Can I make you something?" I was so captivated by the place that it took a minute for it to register that she was talking to me.

"Yes," I took a seat on one of the swivel barstools with a back on it and smiled to myself. "I will have a strawberry, fudge, mocha malt." It was my favorite from back when I was a teenager.

The girl grinned and tilted her head. "We don't have mocha, but I can handle the other."

"The other then," I nodded and she went to work.

I was almost finished with the malt when the little bell on the door rang and the girl said, "Hello, Tom."

"Hi Stephany!" He returned and I looked to see who Tom was. He was a nice looking man in a police uniform. He was in his thirties with chocolate brown hair and soft brown eyes. A well groomed mustache rested under his nose and his smile showed wrinkles at the corner

of his eyes. He seemed to be interested in me, too, and nodded when I looked at him. “Did you just arrive?” He asked taking the stool next to mine. He watched Stephany pour him a cup of coffee that he did not order.

“Yes,” I replied after I drew the last bit of the malt from the cup trying not to make a noise with it. “This is a beautiful town.”

He smiled and his eyes flashed with interest. “Sure is, and we try to keep it that way.”

“It’s like stepping back in time.” I looked out the door glass.

“Well, don’t step too far or you’ll step right out of town.” He burst into laughter, Stephany and I joined him. Then it dawned on me that I had not laughed in nearly two years. It was a very strange feeling. I watched him drink some of his coffee.

“Is there a hotel or motel here?” I asked after a while.

“There is a motel just out of town, but if you’re looking for a place for the night I recommend the Bed and Breakfast.”

“That would be wonderful.” I crooned.

“I’ll give you a ride when you’re ready,” he returned.

“I’m in no hurry,” I informed.

“Okay then.” He quietly sipped his coffee for a while and then the walkie-talkie on his belt cut the air with some static and a few numbers. He ignored it and looked over at me smiling. “You about ready?”

I nodded, stood and he went over and picked up my suitcases. I went to the cashier to pay for my malt and there in a rack was a map of California. I bought that, too, and one of the local newspapers. On the top it read “The Alpha Herald,” Wednesday, April 10th 1990. I stuck them both in my purse.

He put my suitcases in the back seat and opened the passenger door for me. I slid in as he went around and took his seat. He picked up his microphone and said some numbers. Then someone replied with some more numbers.

“I’m Tom Wilson, Chief of Police,” he said, and backed the squad car out into the street.

“I’m Nora Westerman.”

“Pleased to meet you.” He drove for a few moments. “Did you just stop to site see or do you have business here?”

“Well that depends. I saw a house in a real estate magazine that I am interested in. It says it is in Alpha, so here I am.”

“You will want to talk to Wilma Struthers then. She has an agency here. Imma Bougburg runs the Bed and Breakfast. She can help you get in touch with her.”

“Great,” I returned and marveled at a small twinge of satisfaction. Finally, I felt as though my life was moving.

The Bed and Breakfast was a three-story turn-of-the-century style house that had been restored to its original glory. The wide porch wrapped around the corner and ran down the length of the house on one side. A wooden porch swing hung from the porch roof with a potted plant on each side.

Inside the house was an entry hall with mahogany stairs going up that had been meticulously furnished to reflect the early nineteen hundreds. A room near the door was a library used also as an office. It had two whole walls full of books and a grand old reading table with two chairs.

Near the door to the right was an antique desk where a woman sat looking at some papers. She was in her late forties or early fifties from her appearance, but well preserved and she looked like she just stepped out of the pages of a 1920 Montgomery Ward catalog. She and Tom exchanged pleasantries and then he introduced us. “Enjoy your stay in our little town,” he nodded at me, bid good evening and left us.

I paid for three nights and Imma took me up the stairs into a wonderful wide hall with a painting on the wall of young maidens dancing in a garden wearing silk dresses that hid very little. Under the painting sat a claw foot table and on it, a vase with two handles that held a bouquet of

flowers. Against the end wall of the hallway with several doors sat a grandfather clock near another door. To the left of the doorway it looked like another staircase disappeared into the left wall.

My room was the first door on the right at the head of the stairs and it was done in a typical turn-of-the-century style. It had a four poster bed with two nightstands, a dresser and chest of drawers. Under the window that looked out onto the street was a window seat and in the corner, a corner table with a vase of cut flowers.

“Breakfast is at seven,” Imma informed. Then she showed me the bath through the door beside the clock at the end of the hall complete with a claw foot bathtub, but it did have a shower over it. Well, some things have to change, I guess.

I went back to my room and stood looking out the window, and from there I could see many houses up and down the street with turn-of-the-century architecture. A car honked on the street and it was the only thing that spoke of the present time. What a marvelous town.

I opened the map I had bought and it took some time but I finally found Alpha, a tiny dot on the map. It was twenty miles west of Redding, the closest city, and less than one hundred miles from Eureka on the coast. It was a little less than two hundred miles up from Sacramento. I read the headlines of the newspaper. That was about all I ever read of one.

Then my thoughts drifted to the house. Oh, how I hoped the house had not sold. It’s strange how going back in time seemed to be the way to go forward with my life. After a nap I took the real estate book and went down stairs to look for Imma.

The living room was very large and must have been the site of much entertainment in the Roaring Twenties. The ceiling was sculptured around the edge of the room rising to the center where a magnificent crystal chandelier hung. Through double doors to the left was a large dining room with a huge table and many chairs. Imma was there

apparently going over the breakfast menu for the next day with a woman in an apron.

“Hello,” she smiled up at me. “Come meet Hatty,” she beckoned with her hand and introduces us. Hatty was in her late forties with curly brown hair sprinkled with gray. Her face was slender and she wore a little too much makeup, but she had nice features. “I’ll be right with you, Nora,” Imma said and then turned her attention back to the menu.

There was a large painting on the wall in here that depicted a grape harvest with workers cutting grapes and piling them high in a donkey-cart. The colors in the picture reflected in the wall paper. Whoever had decorated this house was excellent at it. I had not seen a thing yet that I would change.

“Would you like to have a cup of tea with me out on the veranda?” Imma brought me from my thoughts.

“Yes, I would love to.” I looked at her wide friendly face. I could like this woman. She turned and led the way through a music room with a piano and a round conversation seat with a statue in the middle of it surrounded with ferns. Against the wall was a couch with tables on each end where lamps added accent to the decorative peach wallpaper. At the end of the room was a marvelous fireplace with brass trim. We passed through one of two sets of French doors with a narrow glass window between them and out onto a wide veranda where she led me to a small wrought iron table with matching chairs.

The back yard was not large but had a flower bed with a walkway of flat stone around it and on the far side was a rock bench. A bird bath sat in the middle of the flower bed and I watch a sparrow drink his fill of the water before flitting away.

The veranda’s ceiling was part of the floor to the upper rooms and there were several potted plants scattered about. Near the table and slightly behind the chair Imma took was a tall miniature palm tree in a huge wooden half barrel planter.

I asked her if this was her house and she said it belonged to her and two friends. She laughed and said they were incorporated. One friend was Hatty, who I met in the dining room, she ran the café downtown and cooked breakfast here every morning. The other was Betty, a beautician who helped with the cleaning of the house in the evenings. They had been friends since high school.

Hatty soon appeared with a silver tray upon which sat two fine china teacups and a silver tea pot. She set the tray down and said, "I need to get to the Café. Nice to have met you, Nora."

"I'm glad I met you, too."

The tea was good and we sipped it a few minutes and then I enquired about Wilma Struthers, who Tom told me was the real estate agent for this area. She explained to me how to get to her house which was her office. I showed her the picture in the magazine of the house I was interested in and she smiled. "That is the old Worrener place." As far as she knew it was still for sale, but needed a lot of work because it had sat empty for several years. It seems that the owner had move away leaving no forwarding address and it was soon lost for taxes. Wilma purchased it through the state and had just now put it up on the market.

I looked at the picture and wondered why anyone would just abandon such a marvelous old house. Maybe, I could get it at a good price since it has a tax title deed. I knew that if the owner wanted to do so they could cause trouble for at least seven years.

"Will you restore it?" Imma asked.

"Most definitely," I assured her.

We chatted about the town and how it was the work of the Ladies Town Alliance that kept the town's heritage alive. However, she did confess that many of the town's men and merchants had joined and they were going to have to remove the "Ladies" from the name of the Alliance and just call it the "Alpha Town Alliance".

I managed to avoid many of Imma's personal questions by telling very little of my twenty seven years of

life. Even the questions I was forced to answer made me sick at the thoughts of it, and I soon retired to my room. I was hungry but could not face another question and in a new place there were always plenty of those. I found half of a candy bar in my purse and ate that, took a hot bath and went to bed.

The next morning I was starving and ate a hearty breakfast with Imma, her friend Hatty, Daniel, an elderly man who did odd jobs around the house, and Cladene and Butch, who were guests like me. I wondered how they could make any money as a Bed and Breakfast when the town was such an out of the way place, but I did not ask.