

## Secret Chapter: The Night of Many Stars

The night my mother died, my father knew what was going to happen without anyone telling him.

That weekend in April, he'd come to my apartment in Colorado to visit my mother as usual, and on Sunday he'd returned home to Laramie. My mother was weaker than she had been and she had more trouble doing simple things, but none of us thought then that she was going to die so soon. My father returned to Wyoming so that he could teach his classes as usual, but Tuesday evening when he looked into the sky and saw the stars shining so brightly, with a new intensity that he had never observed before, he knew then that his wife would die that very evening. It was as though Heaven were welcoming her home, he said.

He went to his evening class, the same as every week, and when he looked out into the faces of his students, he couldn't see them, only the stars, calling to him.

"I'm very sorry but class is canceled tonight. My wife is very ill," he told them and then he turned around and went home.

Back at the house, he did not think to check the answering machine where my brother and I had left several frantic messages, calling from the emergency room where the EMT had taken my mother after I'd called 911 because her breathing had started to change. Instead my father went upstairs to the bedroom that he had shared with my mother all these years and packed a few items in his overnight bag: his pajamas, a toiletry kit, clean underwear and socks. Then he found the statue of Mary that my mother had purchased on a trip to Lourdes when I was studying in France. It

was filled with Holy Water from a grotto where the Madonna was said to have made a miraculous appearance. Although my father had never been able to commit in his heart to any single religion, he figured he had the Madonna to thank for his marriage; if not for the rose petal appearing in my mother's hand, he knew she would never have married him. So he picked up the statue and carefully tucked it into his suitcase. Then he went downstairs, made sure all the appliances were off in the kitchen, double checked that he'd turned off the burners on the stove, and finally put his coat and hat back on and went outside.

A car was pulling up into the driveway. It was two college friends of my brother: a young man and his wife. When my brother and I had been unable to reach our father, Jeff had called his friends and sent them combing the campus looking for him. Finally, they'd come to the house, hoping he'd be home.

"Did you get Jeff's message?" the young man asked my father anxiously.

"No," my father said calmly, climbing into the back of the car. "You're going to drive me to Colorado?"

"Yes."

"Good," my father said. And then they didn't talk for several hours until they reached Boulder and the couple began to argue because they couldn't find the way to the hospital. My father tried to remain calm and suggested that they pull into a service station to ask directions. Finally, they did pull over and the young man's wife took over at the wheel. My father glanced out his window, peering up at the sky. The stars were still so unusually bright and clear, a million pinpoints of light converging in the heavens. He relaxed a little. There was still time.

It took them another twenty minutes to find the hospital. They rushed inside, the young man's wife barking out questions for directions to every startled orderly

they passed in the halls. Finally, they found the oncology ward.

My brother and I were crying, seated around my mother's bed, as my sister-in-law and I clutched her hands, while my brother read aloud from his Bible. Two of my friends were seated in the back of the room, weeping. For a second, my father thought he was too late, and his heart shuddered beneath his ribs. But then he could hear my mother's breaths, labored and slow, and he rushed to her side. "I'm here!" he announced loudly so that my mother could hear him, no matter where her morphine-induced dreams were taking her. "I'm here, Carolyn! I'm here!"

My sister-in-law got up from her place beside my mother's bed and my father took her seat instead. He removed the statue of Mary from his suitcase and placed it in my mother's hand, wrapping her fingers tightly around its clear plastic base. He then put his hands around hers and waited for my mother, his one and only wife of thirty years, to leave him forever.