

## Emancipation Proclamation

By Darcy Alvey

A plate of meat loaf and mashed potatoes balanced on her knees, Lorene watched a National Geographic documentary about a fifty-something woman living utterly alone on the tundra north of the arctic circle, her home a compound of metal storage containers. An aerial shot showed open land in every direction, unmarred by roads or telephone poles or any life force other than the terns and puffins crossing overhead, the occasional white-tailed eagle, and alpha predators like polar bears, wolverines and musk ox.

Lorene scooted closer to hear better. If she adjusted the volume, Frank might come out of his den and spoil the moment. She forgot to eat as she watched the woman survive a white-out blizzard, tethering herself to a pole to reach supplies in another building. The storm, biblical in its ferocity, lasted three days and three nights. After it cleared, the woman walked outside to find her refueling outpost on the edge of nowhere all-but buried in drifted snow. Overturned oil drums had been scattered across the yard by the force of the wind. Her greenhouse, prepared days earlier for spring planting, lay in tatters, its door banging in the leftover breeze. Even the sky, the color of watered-down milk, looked spent by the mayhem.

“Mother Nature, you got me good this time,” the woman yelled to the heavens, “but I’m still here.”

That’s when Lorene decided to end her marriage. The idea of leaving Frank had been brewing for some time. Through the last years they had stopped sharing the small details of

everyday life, stopped eating meals together, even, he carting his plate to his workroom, she sitting in front of the television or reading at the kitchen table. They split the chores. He did the grocery shopping, she the cooking. He took out the trash, she mowed the small back lawn. Saturday nights, if both were home, they had sexual relations. It had all become very cordial.

Lorene knew they could continue their current path indefinitely. Maybe that was the problem, nothing to look forward to other than more of the same. A few weeks earlier their thirty-fourth wedding anniversary had come and gone. Getting ready for bed the night before, Lorene had suggested dinner at The Roundup to mark the occasion, but that turned out to be the night of Frank's monthly stamp club meeting. Neither suggested an alternate date.

Her mind filled with mushing huskies and sea planes skidding on frozen rivers as Lorene tidied the kitchen and headed for bed. On her way she grabbed "Call of the Wild" from the bookcase in Ruby's old room. She quickly lost herself in the story of Buck, the splendid St. Bernard, and the Klondike gold strike of the late eighteen-hundreds. How enticing it all sounded. Wasn't it Jack London who said something about living full-out versus merely existing?

At ten sharp Frank started his nightly rounds. Lorene heard him check that the outside doors were locked, the windows closed and latched. From there he headed to the hallway to set the thermostat at 65 before coming up the stairs. The banality of it all struck her when he walked into the room. Her husband had always liked his routine. When they were first married, she had thought it endearing, the way he organized everything down to the spice cupboard in the kitchen and the catch-all utensil drawer. He looked to see her there but didn't say anything. She watched him ready himself for bed, hang his shirt and pants in the closet, place his shoes side by side on the little rack, take his pajamas from the top dresser drawer. He was still trim, with only a slight bulge of the stomach from a taste for malt whiskey. His hair had thinned. She used to like

running her fingers through it. Now he kept it so short she could see his scalp. Like clockwork he headed to the bathroom to take his cholesterol pill and brush his teeth. Rinse and spit. Rinse and spit.

“I’m going grocery shopping tomorrow,” he called from the bathroom. Doubtless, he was combing his hair. “Is there anything you want?”

“Bananas.” She hated yelling from room to room.

“Bananas? That’s it?” He yelled back.

She didn’t answer.

“My legs have been cramping,” she said when he returned.

“Bananas have potassium, good for leg cramps,” he said.

“I know, Frank. That’s why I asked for bananas.”

“Just trying to help.” He squinched his mouth, indicating he was annoyed with her.

Frank never came out and said he was peeved. Instead, he made sarcastic remarks that scored tiny wounds. If she complained, he said she couldn’t take a joke.

Facing away from her, he started his calisthenics drill. Beginning at the top of his head he proceeded muscle by muscle down his body, twisting and stretching, groaning with pleasure or pain, she wasn’t sure which.

“I started rereading ‘Call of the Wild,’” she said as he lunged forward and then back to upright.

He didn’t turn around. “Jack London? I have a Jack London stamp, you know. Part of the Great American series. Sixty-four honorees, all head shots. I’m only missing Alice Paul and Hap Arnold.”

“Are you happy, Frank?”

He finished touching his toes and turned to look at her. "What kind of question is that? Am I happy? Find me a Hap Arnold and I'll be happy."

She shrugged. "I'm serious. Would you consider yourself happy? That's all I'm asking."

"I don't think about it."

"Well, I don't think I am, Frank. Happy. Not at this moment in time, anyway."

He looked bewildered. "What does that mean? Didn't you just get the new couch you wanted?"

"There's more to life than couches, Frank. We've got this one life and there's a whole world out there. Remember when we wanted to join the Peace Corps and head to Africa? What happened to that dream?"

"That was always your dream, not mine. I'm good right where I am." He climbed into bed and turned on the news. The sexy weatherwoman forecast a storm for the next few days.

Over the noise of the television, Lorene listened to the dull hum of traffic from the freeway a couple of blocks away. People were going places.

"Anything else for the grocery list? I'm not going twice."

"Leftover meatloaf for dinner tomorrow," she said. "Get something to go with that, if you want."

"We need catsup." Frank jotted catsup below bananas in a little binder he kept next to the bed. "The meat loaf was a little dry."

"Dry?" Lorene said. "Dry." She made meatloaf from scratch, the way her grandmother taught her, with minced onions, a raw egg, homemade breadcrumbs, a dash of milk, Worcestershire sauce--and catsup.

“Get something else for dinner tomorrow, if you want something else,” she said. The first time she’d made meatloaf all those years ago he’d said it was the best thing he ever ate.

“Leftover meatloaf is fine. Jesus.”

Yanking the sheet to her chin, she turned away and closed her eyes.

At the end of the news Frank switched off the television, laid his glasses on his nightstand, and reached to peck her on the cheek.

She pretended to be asleep.

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The following morning Lorene stayed in bed as Frank dressed for work. He kept the books for an insurance agency, adding and subtracting columns of numbers all day, making sure bills got paid on time. Frank could be counted on to keep things running smoothly. That was one of the things she had found attractive from the start. She’d needed that at the time. Before leaving the room, he snatched the shopping list off his nightstand with exaggerated vigor, glancing in her direction. Lorene made a face to his back. Pulling on her robe, she followed him to the kitchen.

“I’ll get coffee at the office.” He grabbed an apple and a granola bar and headed toward the back door. “I won’t forget your bananas.” His parting shot.

Lorene fired back, “Don’t forget your catsup.” Damn, she hated being petty.

She padded to the front window to watch him leave. When his car pulled away, she took a deep breath and glanced around the neighborhood. This had been home for, what, thirty-four years? Suddenly it looked unfamiliar, like she hadn’t seen it for a long time. Ruby had been little

more than a toddler when they moved in. The pepper trees, planted by the developers, had long ago reached full height. Age had come on the neighborhood without her noticing. Weeds sprouted from the cracks in the asphalt street like wiry chin hairs. Many of the lawns had patchy spots run through by crab grass. Some of the houses had been maintained, some retained only a nod to early dignity. Beyond the trees, the sky looked clear and wide, a good omen for new starts.

Enjoying the moment of quiet, she watched Old Man Bitters jog by, his rate of travel more in time with a walk than a run. His face red from the exertion, his arms pumped for all they were worth. Too heavy to be expending so much energy. Still, Lorene appreciated his effort. Frank would have thought him foolish. Maybe he was, but at least he wasn't giving up.

A night's sleep had done nothing to change her mind about the divorce. If anything, she was more certain with each passing moment. She would tell Frank right away. If she waited, she might lose her courage, the days slip away one by one in an agony of indecision. She would break the news before she told Ruby. She owed him that. Tonight, after dinner, she would call him from his den for the pow-wow that would change both their lives.

She grabbed a pad and pencil and sat at the kitchen table to plan her getaway, which was how she had come to think of it. Frank would approve--her making notes about something. Figuring out how to support herself would come first. What could she do? She'd never worked outside the home, focusing on raising Ruby, cooking meals, dusting and dusting and dusting. She had earned a degree in geology taking night classes at the local college; she'd done that for her dad, in gratitude for all the times he'd taken her camping. They'd collected rock specimens and slept under the stars, cooked over an open fire. She realized now it was the only entertainment he could afford, but she wouldn't have changed a moment of it. She wouldn't think about the other

times after her mother died, when her father disappeared for days without a word. Their neighbor, Sheila, would look in on her until he came home remorseful, promising to do better.

Throughout the afternoon she searched the Internet for job openings, starting as far from home as she could get. If she was going to go, go big. That would be her new philosophy. Although she had no actual experience, she had the degree. A position for a geologist at Parc National de l'Ankarana in Madagascar was surely far enough away. The underground rivers looked breathtaking in the photos, a hidden world just below the Earth's surface. Cal Orko in Bolivia needed a lab assistant. How amazing would it be to study the prehistoric dinosaur footprints that ran along the sides of the rock croppings? Or the Danakil Depression in Ethiopia, maybe something there. The thought of it all thrilled her like nothing had in a long time. She felt like a kid again.

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At 5:30 Lorene opened a can of peas as Frank pulled into the drive. Without a word he dropped the bananas and catsup on the counter and headed to his den. His snub shouldn't have hurt, but it did. When everything was heated through, she called him to dinner. He didn't come right away.

"The food's getting cold," she said when he finally strolled into the kitchen.

If he heard the pique in her voice, he ignored it. "I was in the middle of something."

"You're always in the middle of something."

He picked up his plate and snagged the bottle of catsup, ready to head back to his cave.

"Let's eat in the dining room," she said.

He turned back at the door. “But I’m halfway through cataloguing my American Philosophers series.”

“For once, let’s have dinner together.”

Did he roll his eyes?

“Does it have to be the dining room? Why not here in the kitchen?” He started to put his plate on the little table under the window.

“Yes, it has to be in the dining room. It’s all set up.”

Earlier, Lorene had laid out cloth placemats and coordinating napkins on their large walnut table, deciding her big announcement deserved a degree of formality--to underscore its importance. They took places at opposite ends of the table.

“Aren’t we fancy,” Frank said.

Lorene watched him drown his meatloaf in catsup after scraping his vegetables to the side. He started eating right away as if he didn’t plan on staying long. She sipped from her water goblet and moved her vegetables around the plate.

He looked up to see her staring at him. “What’s with the fancy setup?” he said. “Did I forget your birthday or something?”

“Ha-ha.” By some cosmic coincidence, she and Frank shared the same date of birth--August 5<sup>th</sup>.

She speared a pea. It was so clear he’d rather be elsewhere fiddling with his stamps, gloating over his latest find.

Frank filled the chilly silence. “When was the last time we ate in here, anyway?”

Although they didn’t use it often, the dining room was Lorene’s favorite part of the house. Growing up in a trailer with only her father, she had dreamed about a two-story home



populated with children, a place with a dining room large enough for everyone to gather and share their day. Ruby was a toddler when they moved in. Although she hadn't been able to have more children, Lorene covered the walls in paper with cheerful green vines on a white lattice background and hung an antique chandelier in the center of the ceiling. A large oval table found at Goodwill took up most of the floor space. Frank had always thought the room a waste, they used it so seldom. To her, it didn't matter how often they gathered there. It mattered that it existed.

"Our last meal here was Thanksgiving two years ago," she said, "right after my father died. Ruby flew in. Your parents brought a molded cranberry jello and hammered you throughout dinner about not going to church."

"It's all coming back." He scratched his nearly bald head.

Lorene waited to speak as Frank started in on his peas. He slouched in his chair, elbows on the table. All those meals alone in his den had cost him his table manners. Had he shrunk in the last few years? His skin seemed loose on his five-ten frame. She wanted to tell him to sit up straight, like his mother would have had she been there.

"We need to have a talk," she said.

The clock on the old oak sideboard sounded the half hour with a loud bong, startling them both.

"Ask not for whom the bell tolls, eh, Lorene? Let's have it. What have I done now?"

"Really, Frank. That's where you go first? 'What have I done now'? This isn't about you."

"Well, it feels like it's about me." He buttered a slice of bread like he was frosting a cake.

Maybe he was right. She took a deep breath. "I'm just going to say it. I'm not happy. I haven't been happy for a while."

"Is that what you were going on about last night?"

"Yes, that's what I was going on about. I need to make a change in my life." The words came out in one puff of breath: "I want a divorce, Frank." There, she said it. It shocked her to verbalize the word, after only thinking it for so long. Saying it out loud made it real.

Her husband dropped the last bite of bread on his plate and stared at her across the length of table. "Divorce, Lorene? That's a little histrionic, don't you think?"

"Maybe histrionic. It's now or never, Frank. At fifty-two I'm not getting any younger."

Just last week she had discovered a streak of white hair over her right temple. And she tired more easily. While gardening, she had to pause every now and then to catch her breath. Even the mailman had remarked on her advancing age, calling her "ma'am" more than once. It added up. Clasp her hands in her lap, Lorene tried not to fidget. How was it he always made her feel like a child?"

"Let's be real here," he said. "You're a person of extremes." He had the nerve to chuckle. "Remember the time you decided to become a rock climber? You watched videos. You checked out books at the library. You bought the gear. Correct me if I'm wrong, but there's still a box of rope and metal crampons in the garage. Then, one class at the rec center and you realized you were afraid of heights."

"That's mean, Frank."

Warming to the subject, he made a pyramid with his hands. "And what about the time you decided to learn Russian? You wanted to take the train across Siberia, so you bought the learn-a-language-in-a-month video series. I haven't heard you conversing in Russian lately."

“Zho-pa. That’s one word I learned. It means ‘ass.’ At least I try things. I know this is going to sound dramatic and you hate that, but I want to set my own course for the first time in my life.”

“Uh-huh. How exactly do you plan to do that? I don’t see how a degree in geology is going to get you very far, especially without a scintilla of experience.”

“You’d be surprised. I’ve been searching the Internet and there are quite a few entry level openings for geologists, especially in Third World countries.”

“You want to head to a Third World country for your first real job.”

“Maybe I do. And it wouldn’t be my first real job. I’d call taking care of you and Ruby and the house a real job.”

“Come to think of it, I guess you could be a housekeeper. They probably need those in Third World countries.”

“Zho-pa, Frank. You can be a real zho-pa.”

“You’re right. That was uncalled for. But there must be something besides chucking it all and heading off into the wilds of Uganda or wherever. What about trying yoga? Or getting a dog? Why not take a trip to visit Ruby in New York? You can tell her what a lousy husband I am. Speaking of which, have you told Ruby of your plan?

“I wanted to tell you first. I felt like I owed you that.”

He dipped his head like a king to a vassal. “Thank you for the consideration.”

With a sigh, she stood and switched on the overhead light. They had been bickering so long it was getting dark. Through the dangling shards of the chandelier, rays filtered down to make a snowflake pattern on the table.

“So, what’s next? What’s the big plan?” There was a tightness to his face now.

“I haven’t figured out all the details, Frank. You’re the one who always preaches ‘one step at a time’.”

With that, he stood and dropped his napkin next to his plate. “When you decide, let me know. I’ll be in my den.”

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The next morning Lorene woke to rain. Frank was downstairs already, so she could revel in the downpour. The sound reminded her of her childhood when rain beat against the metal roof of their trailer, at times loud, at times slow and soft, according to the push of the wind. Smiling, she tapped her fingers on the bedsheet in accompaniment.

Buoyed enough to face Frank, she dressed in a sweatshirt and jeans and headed downstairs, grabbing her yellow slicker on the way. Like every other Saturday in living memory her husband sat at the kitchen table doing the crossword in the morning paper.

“There’s coffee,” he said without looking up.

He said it like the night before had never happened. She poured a cup and leaned against the cabinets, sipping, watching him scribble away at the puzzle without a care in the world.

“This should be right up your alley,” he muttered before she said anything. “Geological plates. Eight letters.”

She set her cup on the counter. “Do you even remember that I asked you for a divorce last night?”

He leaned back in his chair. “Of course I remember. I thought you were kidding or mad at me or something.”

“Or something,” she said, pulling on the slicker. “I’m going for a walk. I don’t suppose you’d like to join me.”

He glanced out the window. “It’s raining.”

“I realize. All the better.”

“I’ll pass,” he said. “Don’t blame me if you catch a cold. I speak with the wisdom of personal experience, if you recall.”

“The illness to which you refer happened while we were dating, some thirty-odd years ago. Maybe you could give it a second shot.”

Early in their relationship, Lorene had cajoled Frank into a walk in the rain. It had been a warm summer evening and she’d thought it romantic. “We can skip through the puddles and dance like Gene Kelly in ‘Singing in the Rain’,” she’d offered as inducement. He gave in back then. The next day, as if decreed, he’d come down with a nasty head cold, keeping him in bed for days.

“Once was enough.” He shook his head. “You go. Dance your heart out.”

Back to his puzzle.

“Thank you, I will.” She snapped the words as she headed for the door.

“Geez, you’re in a mood. Don’t expect me to take care of you when you get sick.”

“My hero,” she said from the doorway.

“Before you go: geological plates?”

“Look it up, Frank.”

Lorene stood on the front porch for a long moment, slowing her breath. Everything about her husband irritated her these days. The way he ate his food, one item at a time to completion—meat, vegetables, starch, in that order. He hadn’t always been that way. Although less

adventurous than her, he'd been open to new things once upon a time, especially if they made her happy. What happened to that Frank? Was there an instant—a specific event—that made him so myopic now, or had the change come in small increments over time, like the gradual wearing away of sedimentary rock? In either case, he no longer resembled the man she married.

She stepped out onto the sidewalk. The air felt warm, the rain cleansing. Opening her mouth, she caught a drop on her tongue. Everything shimmered—the hawthorn bushes that hedged the side yard, the red bird feeder hanging in the pepper tree, the wet asphalt street gleaming like polished onyx. Even the cars parked along the curb shed the falling water like children under a lawn sprinkler. Heading off, Lorene stamped a puddle or two and relished the good splat. She followed a leaf as it flowed along the curb, walking at its pace until it disappeared down a storm drain. At the park where she had taken Ruby to swing as a child, she picked a yellow daisy to stick in her hair. She wasn't the only one enjoying the weather. Old Man Bitters jogged by as she paused at a corner. His step seemed springier than the last time, his face a rosy glow. The rain had taken ten years off his life. He waved and she waved back.

Frank was finishing a bowl of bran flakes when she returned home. “You look like a drowned rat,” he said.

“Thank you. I feel great.” She dropped her wet umbrella in the sink.

“For now.” He nodded sagely. “Tectonic, by the way--geological plates. I looked it up.” He tapped the paper with a knuckle.

“Good for you, Frank. You get the gold star.”

That night, in bed, Frank reached to rub her shoulder the way he did every Saturday, signaling his intention. It was the shorthand of a long marriage, the little two-step they had orchestrated over time. When he touched her in that way, Lorene would put down her book,

marking the page, pull her nightgown over her head and wait for him to crawl on top of her and pound away. It hadn't always been so clinical. In the early days, they couldn't get enough of each other. Public places had been especially thrilling, spots that offered the titillating prospect of getting caught in the act. Their first time had been on the miniscule patch of lawn behind the rec room of the trailer park. The next morning Lorene had discovered welts all over her backside from a small colony of red ants they'd been too busy to notice. Once, in the back seat of Frank's Volkswagen bug at the drive-in movie theater, they'd climaxed while "Pee-Wee's Big Adventure" played on the giant screen. Tonight, Lorene shrank from his touch as if it burned her skin.

"Really, Frank, do you even care that I asked you for a divorce, or is that inconsequential to your needs?"

Frank fell back to his side of the bed. For the first time since she made her announcement, he got angry. "Haven't you played this game long enough? It's getting old."

Lorene grabbed her pillow and a quilt she kept at the foot of the bed. She looked at her husband and realized something. Over the years he had winnowed his emotional and physical needs to the bare minimum necessary for survival. His days were filled with chores and obligations and his precious stamps. When was the last time she'd heard him laugh out loud? Did he ever sing when no one was listening or lay on the grass and make the clouds into dragons and sea monsters? He lived in a cocoon, warm and safe, but without wonder.

"You've lost your joy in life, Frank. That's the problem. We've both lost our joy."

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As the weeks went by, Lorene set her plan in motion. She applied for entry level positions in geology, environmental studies, archeology, anything that sounded remotely interesting. When not job hunting, she readied for her departure in other ways. She sorted cupboards, made trips to the Good Will, set aside things for Ruby. She gathered boxes from behind the liquor store and packed the possessions she wanted to take with her—presents and cards from Ruby through the years, rocks gathered with her father, the geode Frank gave her for their tenth anniversary. Frank watched it all, shaking his head, making little jokes about everything she did. When she pulled the suitcases down from the hall closet, that seemed to be the last straw.

“Lorene, I just tripped over one of your suitcases at the foot of the bed.”

She was watching television in the living room when he walked up behind her. The arctic woman was skinning a bear that had ventured too close to her compound. “I’ve been telling you I’m serious, Frank.”

“This is ridiculous. Use your head. You do realize you’ll be competing with people half your age.”

“Thanks for the reminder,” she said. “Neither of us are getting any younger. Besides, I have wisdom that comes with age. That should count for something.”

She could sense his breath on her neck. “Quit hovering behind me. If you want to talk, come sit down.”

He rounded the couch and perched on the edge of a chair. “Let’s get real, Lorene. Exactly how are you planning to finance this little adventure?”



“Last I checked, we live in a community-property state. Our assets get divided down the middle. My half of our savings will hold me over until everything is worked out.”

That brought him up short. “You won’t get half of my stamp collection, I’ll tell you right now.”

She almost laughed. A few days earlier he bought a Hap Arnold in good condition from a collector in New Mexico and had been quietly gloating ever since. “Don’t worry, you can have your stamps all to yourself.”

“What does Ruby say? Have you told her of your big plan?”

“I did.”

“And?”

“She said she’d support whatever decision I made.”

“Did she say anything about what this would mean to me?”

“She said you’re a big boy and will figure it out.”

Unconsciously, he twisted his gold wedding band around on his finger. “I still don’t get it. What happened to ‘til death do us part’ anyway? Didn’t that mean anything?”

“You realize I was eighteen when I said those words. I still lived with my father. I’d barely gotten my braces off, for God’s sake. How could I possibly know then what I was going to want for the rest of my life?”

She searched for the right words to explain something that even she didn’t fully understand. “I need to live without a safety net, Frank. Corny as it sounds, I need to depend on only myself for the first time in my life, to see what I’m made of. And what’s so bad, since you ask, is the fun has gone out of everything. I can’t remember the last time I got up in the morning excited about the day.”

“And that’s my fault?”

“No, it’s my fault, and I’m the one that has to do something about it.”

They sat in silence, each waiting for the other to speak. Lorene snuck a peek at the television. The arctic woman was gone, replaced by someone giving step-by-step instructions on how to cook a pasta dish.

When Frank spoke, he sounded sad. “I’ve tried to be a good husband, a good provider. I’ve been there for you, through your emotional ups and downs. Have I abused you in any way? Have I ever stopped you from doing anything? Didn’t I babysit Ruby while you took night classes at the college?”

“You don’t babysit your own child, Frank. No, it’s more than that. You’re not the man I married. What happened to the guy who brought me flowers and surprised me with tickets to the opera even knowing you’d hate every minute of it? You’ve become negative. Your response to everything I suggest is a knee-jerk reaction--‘no, no, no,’ before you even let me finish. Do you know how disheartening that is? I have to give myself a pep talk before I ask you to do anything. Even if you change your mind later, by then the excitement is gone, punctured like a party balloon. You wouldn’t so much as walk with me in the rain. It’s the little things, Frank, the small moments that make life worth living. I want to experience those full out. I can’t do that staying here.”

“Even if you didn’t get sick, walking in the rain was plain ludicrous. You can’t blame me for not going. No sane person would do that.”

“So now I’m insane?”

“You know what I mean.”

She sensed his pain but stopped herself from reaching for his hand. “I’ve accepted a position as field crew on a fossil dig in Bynum, Montana. Not much money, but it’s a start.” She exhaled slowly, giving her announcement time to sink in. “I’m leaving on Friday, that’s why the suitcases. When I get settled, I’ll tell you where to send the boxes.”

She pulled a manila envelope from a drawer in the end table and handed it to him.

“What’s this?”

“The divorce papers.”

He set his glass on the coffee table, ignoring the coaster bought years earlier on a tour of Taos Pueblo. He stood with the envelope but didn’t open it. “Even if you get your divorce, Lorene, I’ll be here in case you want to come back. Married or not, I’ll be here. That’s what our vows meant to me.”

“Oh, Frank. It’s time to let go. Let me go, Frank.”

Stet