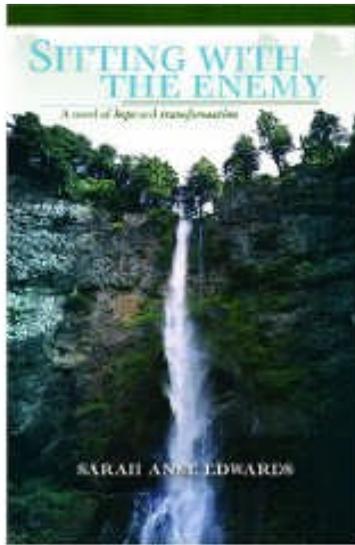


Sitting with the Enemy

A Novel

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“Our salvation seems to live in our awareness that the world ‘within’ and the world ‘without’ – the psyche and the universe – are one, and in our willingness to play our roles in this huge cosmic drama of which our consciousness is so much a part.”

Nancy Ryley

Prologue

May

Rose Whitman waited impatiently on the sidewalk of the Beverly Hill's café. A scorching gust of early Santa Ana wind tore at her stylish auburn hair. Turning to shield herself from its force, she strained to see around the traffic that was keeping the valet from taking her car and tried to shrug off the tinge of apprehension she felt about the prospect of seeing her friend Gloria for the first time in over a year.

What she couldn't have known was that, like an unnoticed snag in a favorite sweater, the seams of her carefully constructed life were about to unravel. Other than a little nagging sense of discontent she'd written off to fatigue, there was no warning of the changes that lay ahead. No traumatic, triggering event as is usually the case in such situations - no ugly divorce, no loss of a loved one or job, no life-threatening illness.

Oddly, as difficult as such a tragedy would be, Rose would probably have found it easier to handle than the path the impending reunion would soon take her down. Faced head-on with something she couldn't avoid, Rose could always summon the sheer force of will to overcome it. But faced with something not to her liking that she could avoid, Rose was her own worst enemy. Strong-willed, determined and clear down to minute detail about precisely what she wanted in life, little outside force could stop Rose because she was willing to push herself as hard as it took to attain whatever she aspired to.

Smart and successful, she was happily married with two precocious children; not wealthy but living comfortably in a spacious home in the tony south of Ventura Boulevard neighborhood of Sherman Oaks. Tall and slim with dancing hazel eyes that changed with her mood and the colors of her wardrobe, at thirty-six she was still young enough to feel attractive, yet old enough to feel heartened by the roving male eyes in passing cars that were drawn to her figure as the wind pressed her linen suit tight against her legs.

As she waited for the valet, Rose had to acknowledge it wasn't only compassion, but also a little guilt that brought her there today. She preferred not to remember the phone call from her closest friend Gloria Raynor and the shock of learning that Gloria had been diagnosed with breast cancer. But their conversation that past Spring replayed unwanted through her mind as if it had happened only yesterday.

Like Rose, Gloria was a professional speaker. They'd met at a speakers' society meeting and connected immediately. Both were ambitious, perfectionistic, and rising rapidly in a competitive field; Rose in the high-powered world of sales training and motivational speaking; Gloria in the ever-demanding specialty of customer service. They quickly became compatriots and had met for lunch once a month over several years, celebrating victories and supporting one another through their various career challenges.

But Rose hadn't seen Gloria since that fateful phone call. She sent cards and flowers after the mastectomy and they talked by phone several times during the months of radiation treatments that followed. Then, they'd lost touch until a week ago when, cancer free at last, Gloria had called to invite Rose to lunch, hoping to discuss ideas for how she might restart her speaking career which had all but disappeared in the wake of her recovery.

Determined to ignore the hot wind that continued to whip around her, Rose was perplexed. Why hadn't she made more of an effort to stay in touch with Gloria through what must have been a living nightmare? Where had the time gone, anyway? It had been over a year! Why hadn't she found the time to drop by or call for a friendly lunch before now?

Mother certainly wouldn't approve, Rose thought, but she refused to dwell on that. Her mother didn't understand her or her life and never had. Irritated that she was running more than ten minutes late now, Rose twisted the key ring nervously around her fingers before finally handing it over to the harried valet. Then, turning toward the restaurant, she smiled and walked quickly through the open leaded-glass door, thinking this was, after all, nothing more than a long-overdue lunch with an old friend.

Part I

A Day at the Parade

August



Chapter One

If Rose and the kids were home, Dr. Mark Whitman wouldn't have had time to dwell on his conversation that afternoon. It would have slipped from his mind just like all such things did since his father's death five years ago.

But the family wasn't there. Rose was out of town again, as she had been for part of every week that Summer, at another round of speaking engagements. The kids were at a sleepover. So, there was plenty of time to stew over his meeting with Dr. Irwin Belcher, the consulting psychiatrist he met with once a week to discuss difficult cases and issues that had come up in his own psychiatric practice.

The room was dark except for the glow from a small lamp above the large leather chair in his home office, where Mark had hoped to skim through the stack of clinical journals on the side table. He was always behind in his reading, it seemed. But tonight he was too distracted to make much progress. Momentarily he thought of simply picking up the whole stack and chucking it in the wastebasket. But instead, once again, his mind returned to his conversation with Belcher.

The issue he'd raised had a familiar theme; at least for him. He just hadn't admitted it to anyone else before. Now, he wished he hadn't brought it up, because ever since that afternoon he was having a hard time ignoring what he had ignored for so long.

He was lonely.

He'd half expected Dr. Belcher to laugh out loud. As heart felt as this admission was, it sounded so wimpy when put into words. He'd wanted to laugh it off, make a joke of it before Belcher could start rolling on the floor. But he resisted this temptation. He was truly lonely, and had been for a long time.

He wasn't sure exactly when he'd begun to feel the emptiness that he now could best describe as loneliness. He speculated it probably began after his father's death. While he and his father had lived half-a-continent away for most of Mark's adult life, somehow they'd always had a bond Mark found comforting. Although it was only from the other end of a phone, his father had been the voice of wisdom, consolation, humor, understanding and acceptance Mark could always turn to, although he rarely had.

Now, here he was a respected psychiatrist, father, husband and avid golfer. Who would imagine this personally and professionally successful man who was virtually never alone, could be so deeply lonely?

But, surprisingly, Dr. Belcher hadn't laughed at his revelation. "I hear this often, Mark," Belcher admitted, looking into the brooding green-gray eyes of the tall, slender man with a shock of boyish sandy hair that belied his thirty-eight years and whose kindly refined features and gentle voice endeared him so to his patients. "What do you think it means for you and your life?"

That was the question that kept troubling Mark. What did it mean? What did it say about his relationship with his wife? His friends? His colleagues? He could find no flaws in these relationships. Rose was everything a husband could expect in a wife. Warm and loving, outgoing, supportive, a great mom, a good lover, an interesting conversationalist, and when she was in town, always there if he should need her, which he rarely did. His friends and colleagues were good people, much like him, successful, affable, bright, intelligent, enjoyable to be with, and busy. Yes, most of all busy. They were all busy, as busy as he and Rose were.

They rushed through their golf games, when they got a chance to play one, rushed to the rare dinner party, rushed through the periodic lunch or dinner meetings, rushed through holiday and birthday celebrations and were generally willing, but usually unable, to spend much time simply relating.

This was true even with Rose. They rushed to get out in the morning, rushed through the workday, rushed the kids here and

there after school, and rushed through whatever evening events or chores there were to do. They even rushed through making love, so they could get to sleep early enough for him to make rounds at UCLA medical center or for her to get through security at LAX to catch yet another 7:00 AM flight.

Still, Mark loved his life. He loved his wife. He loved his work and his friends. But he sighed as he let the truth of the moment sink in, something was missing. What? He sighed again. He was too tired to think about it any longer. It was time to get some sleep. He had early rounds in the morning.



Rose closed her eyes and tried to relax despite the roar of the crowded Boeing 747. The seat was cramped. The cabin was stuffy. It was her second flight in as many days. Why hadn't her client agreed to a first class ticket? She hated getting tough about negotiating such perks, but now she wished she'd held the line on this little detail. The sales departments who hired her to motivate and train their personnel had ample training budgets, more than any other divisions of the mid-sized to *Fortune 1000* companies who comprised the bulk of her clients.

She'd chosen to specialize in sales training because it *was* the most lucrative and recession-proof niche for professional speakers. But it was also the most competitive. So, she reminded herself, she should be grateful to have steady bookings, but, for heaven's sake, more than a dozen years later she was still sitting in coach half the time!

Didn't these guys realize cross-country flights were exhausting? Couldn't they spare the cost of assuring that she'd arrive fresh and rested! If First Class hadn't been full, she'd have tried to use her frequent flyer miles for an upgrade.

The pure discomfort of the situation brought to mind her luncheon meeting with Gloria Raynor. But not for any of the reasons

one might think. The experience hadn't been unpleasant, quite the opposite, but somehow it had been disquieting. Although a couple of months had passed since that afternoon, Rose frequently found herself reflecting on their visit and how it hadn't gone at all like she'd expected.

At first, as Rose had looked around the restaurant that afternoon in search of her friend, she concluded Gloria must not have arrived yet. She glanced briefly at her watch. It wasn't like Gloria to be late. She scanned the room once more. There weren't that many tables in the small, quaint café. Then she realized the woman waving from a table over to her left was Gloria.

Gloria always wore her pale-blond hair in a stylishly trimmed, chin-length bob to blend right in with the corporate environment of her clients. Anyone, who hadn't known she was a professional speaker, might have guessed she was a television news anchor or maybe a real estate agent. Well put together, would have been a good way to describe how Gloria Raynor always looked. But not that day.

The woman with the vibrant, warm smile waving from across the room had wavy, long blond hair that fell wild and free well past her shoulders. She wore no makeup or jewelry and was dressed in a soft, casual blouse that looked more like something from a Coldwater Creek catalog than the Saks Fifth Avenue and Neiman Marcus stores where she and Rose usually shopped.

Rose was momentarily taken aback by the contrast, but quickly recovered and rushed over to meet her friend. The warmth and length of Gloria's hug was equally arresting. After all, this was Beverly Hills. Peck and bob country. But again, Rose adjusted to the change before her and sat down to look into her friend's smiling deep-set amber eyes. She looked radiant. Truly radiant.

"It's so good to see you," Rose exclaimed, still somewhat disoriented. "You look fabulous! Your hair's so long! And curly! Where did all that curl come from?"

"Oh, actually this is how my hair is naturally," Gloria said, still smiling. "You've just never seen me when I get out of the shower! Since we moved I rarely take the time to blow dry it out any

more.”

Rose was taken aback once again, but this time it left her speechless. Gloria had moved and Rose hadn't even known about it? She truly had been remiss in not keeping in touch. Noticing the shock on Rose's face, Gloria quickly jumped in to fill the void that seemed to be opening between them.

“Yes, we moved in January, right after the New Year, to a little village that's about two hours from here, up in the mountains. Wait 'til you see it. It's like right out of a travel magazine!” Her voice was animated with delight. “I tried to send out change of address cards but, believe it or not, they got lost in the mail and we've been so busy getting settled I haven't gotten around to sending them out again.”

Rose remembered scrambling for a response, trying to imagine Gloria living somewhere in the mountains. There were mountains around the outlying areas of Los Angeles, but off hand Rose couldn't remember where. “Is it a resort community?” she asked, grasping for some reference for what had happened.

“No, I'm sure you've never heard of it. Not many people have. It's not Aspen or Big Bear. It's called Katani Falls, named after the waterfalls up above the village where a tribe of Native Americans lived back before the Spaniards arrived in the area. It's pretty much off the beaten path.”

“So how did you find it and why did you decide to move away?” Rose's asked, her genuine curiosity finally kicking in.

Gloria paused for a moment. Her energy level seemed to drop. “I had to get away from the city, Rose. The illness. The radiation. The whole trauma of it all.” There was clearly more that went unspoken, but no words seemed to fit the feeling, so, she continued with the facts.

“I became friends with the woman who teaches cancer recovery classes at the hospital where I was having radiation treatments. Her name's Suzanne Reid. She's a minister from Lucadia down in the South Bay. You'd really like her, Rose.” Gloria's face lit up again. “She's living in Katani Falls while she's on a year's sabbatical, so she invited Ned and Carly and I up to her cabin for a

weekend ... and, well..." Gloria seemed caught up in her thoughts once more, but this time it was delight that spread over her face. "As soon as we got there I just knew that's where I was supposed to be!"

"What about Ned? Is he still practicing law?" Rose asked, not wanting to communicate how puzzled and unwittingly disapproving she felt. How could they have made such a radical change? What were they thinking? They were far too young to be retiring and just not the type of people to give up and drop out.

"Yes, he's still practicing," Gloria said, taking a deep breath. "That was the biggest challenge, convincing the law firm to let him telecommute. But you know he's in appellate law so with the Internet, there's really no need for him to be in the office all the time. He can file pleadings electronically and even make court appearances by phone, so he finally convinced the firm to let him go into the office about once a week and work from home the rest of the time.

"It's not bad, really," Gloria smiled lightly, in response to the astonishment that had crept into Rose's expression despite her best efforts to conceal it. "Suzanne drives in to the hospital twice a week!"

Rose tried to imagine Ned commuting two hours each way into downtown Los Angeles and buried that thought. "So, what about you? I'm so glad you're well and healthy. What have you been doing?"

"Well, that's why I wanted to talk to you," Gloria responded, sitting back and reflecting for a moment on something that seemed to excite her. "I've been home schooling Carly since we've been in Katani Falls. She's working at the second-grade level now, but the bus ride to the nearest school is so long that in the Winter the busses can't get up the mountain. So, several of us parents are home schooling, and now we want to start a charter school! But that takes a lot of fund raising, so, since I'm well now, I'm thinking I might get back into doing a few speeches every now and then to bring in some extra income I could contribute to the school."

The silence that followed didn't dim Gloria's enthusiasm one bit. It leapt right across the table where it hung in the air for what seemed like forever. "Soooo, Rose, what do you think? I want your ideas for how I could get back on the circuit."

Rose couldn't recall much more about the rest of conversation that stretched through their visit that day. The details didn't really matter. They brainstormed some ideas for Gloria and parted expressing the desire to see each other again soon.

"You've got to come up and visit us, Rose. You and Mark get away for a weekend together. Or bring the kids. They'd love it! Promise me you'll come sometime soon," Gloria urged as they waited for the valet to bring up their cars.

"Of course. That sounds great," Rose remembered saying as she hugged her friend goodbye, noting as Gloria's car pulled up that she must have traded in her Lexus for a Land Rover and knowing the chances of their getting up to Katani Falls were slim to none. She and Mark hadn't been away together for anything other than extended business trips in years. Sometimes they would piggyback a long weekend onto one of Rose's speaking engagements. In the Summer, sometimes they'd take the kids along. Mark would show them the sites until Rose's work was done and then they would spend the weekend site seeing as a family.

So, Rose wondered as she squirmed in her seat on the airplane, unable to find a comfortable position, why did she keep thinking about that lunch? Probably because it was just so odd and so unexpected. She and Gloria had been so much alike. They loved the excitement of speaking before a crowd. The applause. The standing ovations. The pride of knowing the ideas and methods they'd honed from years of listening to what their audiences needed were making a difference in people's success; seeing the positive effects of that difference written on a sea of appreciative faces. And yes, the money too, knowing they were getting paid well to do something they loved.

It was worth all the endless lines at airports, wheeling her carry-on luggage down one more narrow aisle, packing and unpacking, sleeping in yet another hotel room that looked like every other hotel room, even all those rubber chicken meals. And the hours in her home office on the phone, marketing, to be sure that her calendar was filled months in advance as her clients demanded.

But there was something about the look on Gloria's face that Rose couldn't get out of her mind. Something about the sound of her

voice. Something about the warmth of her hug. A peacefulness. A quiet happiness.

The cabin of the plane was dark now. The light above Rose's seat cast a small circle around her. There were few other lights on. And there it was again. That little nagging sense of discontent she'd been feeling about her life even before her lunch with Gloria. It seemed this generalized sense of uneasiness had been heightened by their visit. Rose was doing exactly what she wanted to be doing, but something was missing. Something more than not having the comforts of a first class ticket. What was it? She shifted the paper-covered pillow behind her neck. Best get some sleep, she thought, glancing at her silver and gold Movado watch before punching off the light overhead. She would need plenty of energy in the morning for her speech.

But, as usual, she wasn't able to sleep on the plane. So she punched the light back on, wrenched her laptop from the carry-on bag pressing against her toes under the seat in front of her and opened her PowerPoint presentation on the tray table. Screen by screen, she flipped through the visuals she'd be using tomorrow. Selling to Major Accounts ... Discovering Your Sales Style ... Collaborative Selling ... Technical Selling ... Educational Selling...

They were part of her core sales course, tailored this time for a janitorial supply company where she'd conducted training several times before. After a dozen years, she could cover the content while sleepwalking. That wasn't the challenge. The challenge was that except for the most novice recruits, her audiences, this one included, were convinced they'd heard it all and tended to be a cynical bunch. She shook her head fondly and pursed her lips into a wry smile as she thought of just how cynical they could be.

So, her job – if she chose to accept it – she joked inwardly with a line from popular TV reruns of her childhood – was to stay one step ahead of them. Make the familiar fresh. Show them something they hadn't seen before about themselves and their work. Convince them that on any given day they could push through self-doubt and burnout and believe what they were doing was worth bounding out of bed for, plugging through lead after lead and calling on yet one

more account. And, then, to leave them with the confidence that, regardless of whatever resistances they encountered, they had what it took to persuade those who needed to be persuaded to believe it too.

Quickly she whipped through a chart reviewing recent industry statistics – sales figures for the past year, projections for the next – showing where and why janitorial sales were up across the board. She ran through the stories she planned to tell to illustrate key points – reminding herself of the places where she should pause and where to engage the audience in self-analysis and group feedback.

She did this until her eyes grew bleary and then she switched off the computer once again, closed it and folded up the tray table. Leaving the computer resting on her lap, Rose shut her eyes and let herself sink into a mental fog, neither awake nor asleep.



The house was quiet when Rose returned home late the next evening. Mark had left the hall light on for her after he'd put the kids to bed, but he didn't come down to greet her at the door. He must be tired, she thought, picking up the carry-on and heading up the stairs to their bedroom.

The light was still on beside the bed and Mark was sitting at one end in his shorts and t-shirt, his elbows resting on his knees and his head cradled in the palms of his hands. He smiled as he glanced up. He loved how the sight of her always made his heart jump, and as a doctor, he'd often wondered if his reaction to her would show up on an EKG. With her long thin legs, shell-white skin, full lips and rich auburn hair, she looked so delicate and soft, yet so strong and exquisitely defined, not unlike the flower after which she was named. A beauty you wanted to possess, but knew you never could.

Tonight, though, he couldn't help but noticed she also looked a bit wilted, like a rose too long without water. He wanted to take her in his arms and comfort her, but she was already swinging the suitcase onto the bed eager to get unpacked.

“Hi, darling,” she said. “It’s so good to be home. You OK? You look beat.” She was about to open the suitcase, but stopped and came over to sit by him.

“How was the speech?” he asked.

“Actually, it was a training session, six-hours,” she said, as a whisper of satisfaction broke through her fatigue, “and it was good. They loved me!” With that, she reached over to kiss him and they held each other briefly. “How’s everything with the kids?”

“Fine,” Mark answered, enjoying the moment before she pulled away to finish unpacking.

They chatted about this and that as Rose got ready for bed. Chelsea’s rehearsal for the musical at day camp, Jason’s soccer practice. The delay at the airport. The speech someone in the audience had asked Rose if she could do next year. Finally they lay together in the dark, quiet and warm under the comforter.

He thought of telling her about his conversation with Dr. Belcher.

She thought of telling him about her lingering feelings about the conversation with Gloria.

But it was late and they were tired. Who knows where or how long talking about such things would take them?

Anyway, Rose thought, as she lay there with her eyes closed, hoping she wasn’t too tired to fall asleep, she had to be one of the luckiest people in the world. What did she have to complain about? She couldn’t muster much sympathy for her passing spells of ennui. There were far too many people with real problems to deal with, serious problems. Rose thought briefly of Rachael, an artist whose husband was one of Mark’s golf buddies. Rachael’s sculptures had been accepted in a growing number of juried art shows throughout the Southwest until only a few months ago, when her husband left her with three children under ten and no money.

Cocaine had destroyed his career, his health and their lives. No one at the golf club had known there was a problem until the bank foreclosed on the family’s four thousand square foot home in the foothills near Mulholland Drive. Rachael and the kids had moved into a tiny two-bedroom apartment in Studio City. To support them,

Rachael had returned to her pre-marriage career of nursing and was working the swing shift at an ER in Glendale while the kids slept over at her mother's twenty miles away in Canoga Park.

Although Rose didn't know Rachael very well, she could imagine how stressful her life must be now and how little hope there was that it could improve anytime soon. Her children were still in grade school. Rachael had to take them out of the private school they'd planned so long and hard to get them into, the school they'd been in since kindergarten.

Yes, Rose thought, as she snuggled closer to Mark. I am a lucky person. I have nothing to complain about.

Mark too lay quietly, hoping to drift off to sleep. As he nuzzled next to Rose, he almost had to chuckle. Me lonely? Spoiled, would be a more like it!

But sleep eluded them. Eyes wide open, Mark stared into the darkness, distracted by concerns from the day. Rose, hoping to find a way to relax, shifted positions slightly, but her mind churned with the responsibilities of tomorrow. It would be her day to get the kids to the drop off for the day camp van. She would have piles of mail to sort. Phone calls to return. Shifting again, she turned away from Mark onto her side facing the bedroom wall, lost, as on so many nights, in thoughts of the many things she had to do.

"Rose, are you awake?" Mark whispered faintly as she moved. When she didn't answer, he turned toward the window and drifted into a fitful sleep.

Chapter Two

In the calm of the crisp moist mountain air, Gloria Raynor would never have imagined that the future of the tranquility that surrounded her was actually very much in question.

Even though it had been over six months since she and Ned had moved to Katani Falls, she still got the feeling from time to time that any minute she would wake up and discover the idyllic scene before her was just a pleasant dream. That's how she felt this morning as she sat on the shady side of her front porch with her friend, the Reverend Suzanne Reid. Suzanne often came over to visit on Thursday mornings after Ned had left for the city and Carly was off to riding lessons at the stables with neighbors. Usually the two women would have tea and chat, or just sit for awhile watching the blue jays play around the birdfeeder that hung from the eaves.

This morning there was a slight chill in the air and a light breeze, so they each had slipped on a plaid flannel shirt over their sleeveless cotton tees. They wouldn't need them for long. It promised to be another warm day. The porch was ringed by a cove of ancient pines beyond which lay a small meadow, golden now from the Summer sun. Along the walk the hollyhocks were in bloom and the raspberries on the vines along the porch railing were turning red. Beyond the meadow, silver-green Poplars bobbed and danced softly in the wind. The pines were filled with tight, bright green cones that would soon be falling to the ground, open and brown.

Suzanne Reid was quite a bit older than Gloria. But age had never made a difference to the two women. To Gloria, who looked younger than her thirty-four years, Suzanne was one of those people who seemed ageless. Energetic and upbeat, only the depth and wis-

dom of her counsel betrayed her senior status - that and her silver gray hair, which was pulled back at the nape of her neck and held by a hand-carved wooden clip. Wisps of silver had slipped free from the clip and fell softly around her unlined face. She had delicate, porcelain-like features and the palest of blue eyes. Tall and slim, she carried herself with a regal countenance that commanded instant

respect, but Suzanne was far too quick with a warm smile and child-like giggle to be intimidating for long.

“I hope I never take this sky for granted,” Gloria said, gazing at the neon blue backdrop behind the trees. “I still want to pinch myself sometimes. I can’t believe this is where I live.”

“I don’t think this place will ever let you take it for granted,” Suzanne assured her. “I’m glad you and Ned decided to move up here.”

“You know, Suzanne, if I hadn’t met you at the hospital, if I hadn’t gotten ill and come to your recovery classes, I wouldn’t be here. It’s almost like it all happened for a reason that I don’t know yet. It’s odd.”

“You’re right, but it’s not so odd,” Suzanne said placing her hand on Gloria’s. Suzanne had been helping people cope with life-threatening illness throughout her thirty-year career in the ministry. Her decision to continue teaching cancer recovery classes at the hospital even during her sabbatical had been fortuitous, because there was something especially healing about Katani Falls. She’d sensed it from the first time she came to visit nearly a year ago. It was something she needed personally and something her cancer patients needed even more. Since taking a lease option on her cabin, she’d invited many of them to come up for a weekend visit. A few had come and found it profoundly healing in ways she was just beginning to understand.

So far only Gloria had come to stay, but, for better or worse, Suzanne believed that would change. “I suspect in time more people will be coming here just as you have,” she said.

Gloria looked at Suzanne for a moment. “Yes, I think so too.” She didn’t pick up on how concerned Suzanne was about that very issue.

There would most certainly be more people coming to Katani Falls, for a wealth of reasons but, Suzanne wondered, would they find what they were looking for? Or would they simply turn all they were seeking here into a carbon copy of what they were escaping from? The possibility that she could influence the ultimate answer to such questions had played a large part in her decision to leave the interfaith church she’d founded ten years ago in the Orange County suburb of Lucadia and to live for a year in Katani Falls. Now, with the year almost up, those same questions remained central to whether she would stay.

“It’s hard to imagine your leaving us come September,” Gloria ventured, noticing now that something was weighing on Suzanne’s

mind and wondering if the upcoming end to her sabbatical could be the cause. "Is there any chance you might stay?"

"Anything's possible," Suzanne replied with a friendly, but enigmatic, smile that said there was nothing more to say about that today.

They sat there together for a while longer, enjoying their silence and watching the sun creep slowly toward the porch, until Carly came skipping across the meadow, eager to tell her mom all about her riding lesson. Suzanne hugged Gloria a warm goodbye. "See ya soon," she said on her way down the stairs. And Gloria knew that, in fact, she would see her soon. You saw everyone here soon. You couldn't help but run into them all the time.

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