



The Ride

A novel by

JANE KENNEDY SUTTON



ArcheBooks Publishing

The Ride

By

JANE KENNEDY SUTTON

Copyright © 2008 by Jane Kennedy Sutton
ISBN-10: 1-59507-194-6

ArcheBooks Publishing Incorporated

www.archebooks.com

9101 W. Sahara Ave.

Suite 105-112

Las Vegas, NV 89117

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book or portions thereof in any form whatsoever. For information about this book, please contact ArcheBooks at publisher@ArcheBooks.com.

This book is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents depicted herein are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

First Edition: 2008

Dedication

To my parents,
Jim and Coleta Kennedy.
How I wish you were still here
To share this special time with me.
I miss you both.

Acknowledgements:

An author writes a manuscript, but it takes the efforts of many people to mold that piece of work into a publishable novel. Thank you seems an inadequate term to express my gratitude to all those involved “behind the scenes” on *The Ride*, but I’m at a loss for a better expression. So thank you to my publisher, Robert Gelinas, for turning my dream into reality; to Rubén Colón, who taught me so much about novel writing; to Martha Jeffers, the Grammar Granny, for her superb copy-editing skills; to Cheryl Rushing, my first non-related “fan,” for offering to read and comment on the manuscript; and to my editor at ArcheBooks, Vickie Dubois for her insightful suggestions. Thanks to all the members of the Southwest Florida Region of the Florida Writer’s Association and the Gulf Coast Writers Association for your support, friendship and encouragement. My daughter, Heather Sutton-Lewis, and my sister, Terry Cromie, deserve a special thanks for the many times they read and commented on the evolving manuscript without complaint. And last but not least, thank you, Kim—my husband, best-friend, tech support, sounding board, web and blog designer, and the love of my life—for always being there for me.

The Ride

“Good judgment comes from experience. Experience comes from bad judgment.”

The Blind Assassin by Margaret Atwood

Chapter 1

C *hirrrrp, chirrrrp, chirrrrp*. There it went again. Like a prehistoric bird had flown into her bedroom. *Chirrrp, chirrrp, chirrrp*. Harsh sounds ending another night's restless sleep emanated from the small object barely visible among the Kleenex, books, and clutter that occupied the surface of her bedside table. Barbie's hand flailed wildly in an attempt to put an end to the noise. She resented the intrusion and yearned for the dignity of waking up naturally. Yet without it, she knew she might sleep for days or years or forever.

That thought soothed her.

She closed her eyes and pictured her petite, delicate body, clothed in crisp purple silk pajamas, lying on white satin sheets surrounded by fluffy pillows in a king-sized round bed.

The Ride

Bright sunlight filtered into the room creating rainbows upon the wall as it reflected off a Baccarat vase filled with two-dozen fresh white roses. A young, virile, gorgeous hunk slept soundlessly beside her. Stretching seductively, she smiled while slowly opening her eyes.

“Damn, damn, damn,” Barbie mumbled as reality dawned. She was in her dark and stuffy bedroom in an ordinary queen-sized bed with rumpled mismatched cotton sheets. A picture of a blue Smurf decorated one pillowcase, a half-embroidered flower the other. A plastic yellow vase held a bouquet of hairbrushes, pencils with broken points, and a dried-out ballpoint pen or two. If turned upside down, a collection of buttons, coins, paper clips and rubber bands would trickle out instead of water.

And her day started like every day did, with despair and melancholy vying for her attention.

She stared at the bed’s other occupant, who, as usual, dominated more than his share of the mattress and covers. Curled up in a fetal position, mouth agape, Ken sounded more like an idling motorcycle than a human, and it set her nerves on edge.

Neither young, virile, nor gorgeous, Ken had occupied the same spot every night for the last twenty-three years. His hairy midsection protruded from under the sheet. He wore his thinning gray hair long on top, in a futile effort to disguise a shiny bald spot that began to plague him a couple of years ago. Now the strands lay inert on the pillow like lifeless snakes.

Petite or delicate did not exactly describe Barbie’s 5 feet 9 inch, big-boned frame that carried more than its share of extra weight. Holey white cotton underwear mysteriously clung to her hips by one tiny elastic thread that managed to stay intact

Jane Kennedy Sutton

through endless wash cycles. Her twenty-year old “*St ill craz aft all these ye rs*” tee shirt provided a sad commentary about her wardrobe and her state of mind. Though some letters had worn off, the sentiment was accurate.

Like a virus, Barbie believed she caught a permanent case of the crazies soon after her marriage. For a few brief moments after the inhospitable alarm had jarred her awake, she believed she could be that sleek girl in bed with a gorgeous guy. That was definitely crazy.

She poked her index finger into Ken’s arm, hoping to quiet him. He snorted, rolled over pulling the sheet with him, and instantly resumed snoring.

“It’s a snooze button, Ken, not a command,” she said, pressing the alarm off again. “In twenty-three years, you haven’t once managed to roll out of bed to exercise before work. Did you really believe you’d do it today?”

The only response to her question was a whistling noise coming from his nose.

Resisting the urge to put her foot into his backside and send him rolling to the floor, she rose mumbling and grumbling on her way to the bathroom.

“The beauty fairy definitely didn’t visit you last night, Barbie Anderson,” she said to the creature in the mirror with the puffy red eyes. “You forgot to take off your Halloween mask.” The shape in the glass responded by sticking out its tongue.

Ignoring the ogre in the mirror, she brushed her teeth and splashed water on her face. Although in the last couple of years her hair had begun transforming from a mousy brown to more of a rat gray hue, its wildness had not lessened. Her hands worked to flatten it with little success. She put on Ken’s old navy-blue bathrobe, tied the belt, and shuffled

The Ride

downstairs to make coffee as she did every day.

She had no reason to believe that this particular Thursday would be any different from any other of the approximately 8,395 days of her marriage.

While filling the coffee decanter with water, she looked at the withered African violets decomposing in colorful pots on the windowsill and sighed. *I used to care.*

As the coffee dripped, she peered out the window of their slightly rundown house on the outskirts of Los Angeles. *I never wanted to move here, Ken, but you insisted. Woods behind us, Mr. KinKaid's cornfield to our left and the Harrison's avocado garden to the right. This house never fit in and neither did I. But I tried. I put all my energy into this place, and when Jessica lived here, it actually felt like a home.*

She cracked eggs and dumped their contents into a bowl.

My dear Jessica, this is the time of day I always miss you the most. I'm so sorry. I wish I could change that day. I wish you would contact me.

While she cooked, she held her breath, listening, needing to hear Jessica's laugh. She heard only the sounds of sausage sizzling in the pan. *What I wouldn't give to see you smile and hear you call me Mom again.*

She placed the full plate of scrambled eggs and sausage on the table just as Ken walked into the room as though over the years he had honed his ability to know the precise moment cooking had ceased and eating could begin. He opened the paper, picked up his fork, and shoveled it into the eggs.

Too early to introduce food to her system, Barbie poured herself a cup of coffee and sat down across from him.

"Ken," she said with a cheerful lilt to her voice, "the backyard looks as if a colony of giant gophers has invaded. Can I ask what it is you're doing out there?"

Jane Kennedy Sutton

"I'm working on a," he said, spewing egg, "project."

Revolted, Barbie absently brushed a piece of egg onto the floor. "What sort of project?"

"Look, my work has nothing to do with you, so drop it, okay? Let me eat my breakfast in peace."

"It's my backyard, too, you know," she countered, unwilling to give up easily. "I worked hard putting in the garden you dug up." She had ignored the garden for more than two years, but now that it was gone, she yearned to work in it.

Burying his head in the newspaper as if some article about the nation's economy had captivated his attention, Ken didn't bother to reply.

Undaunted, Barbie said, "We've been in this house for over twenty years, and you have never lifted a finger—inside or out. I can't help but be curious, I'd like to—"

"Can I have more juice?" he interrupted, handing her his empty glass as if waiting on him made her life whole and worth living. Resisting the impulse to break the glass over his head, she stood and poured the juice. No good could come from pursuing the question when he had so effectively ended the conversation.

Once he left for work, the air in the house seemed lighter, easier to breath. Barbie, a compulsive list maker, grabbed her pad and pen, poured another cup of coffee, and started writing: *...Unload dishwasher, take a shower, get a divorce, go back to school, join a gym, find a job, and commit suicide.*

She thought about her best friend's birthday and wrote: *buy Lois a birthday gift.* The phone rang. She answered on the third ring.

"Hello, my name is Robert McCarthy. May I please speak to Barbara Jane Anderson?"

"This is Barbie speaking and I'm not going to buy any-

The Ride

thing,” she replied impatiently.

“No, Mrs. Anderson, you don’t understand. I am not selling anything. I’m an attorney representing the estate of Patricia Dough?”

“Who?”

“Patricia Dough, the person I believe you refer to as Aunt Pat.”

“I do have an Aunt Pat, however, her last name is Smith. You must have the wrong number,” she said, relieved.

“Actually,” he replied, “her legal name is Dough, not Smith.”

“What do you mean legal name? Why would Aunt Pat have two names? Are you saying Doe as in deer or Dough as in money? What do you want? And what do you mean by her estate?” she asked in one breath, troubled without knowing why.

Chapter 2

“**M**rs. Anderson,” he said in a no-nonsense manner, “I know this sounds confusing. It would be much better if we could speak in person. Can you come to my office this afternoon, say around two?”

“Will Aunt Pat be there?” she asked in a tiny voice she didn’t recognize as her own.

“No, Mrs. Anderson. I hate to be the bearer of sad news, especially when delivered by telephone. However, I must inform you that Miss Dough is dead.”

“Aunt Pat. Dead. Oh, my.”

She listened in a daze as Mr. McCarthy explained how Pat’s lifeless body had been discovered sprawled on the kitchen floor in her bungalow.

“Her hands,” he said, “were cradling a delicate china teacup.”

The Ride

She was so proud of that tea set. I bet she was trying to keep the cup from breaking as she fell.

He continued without pause, "According to the Coroner she died from a massive heart attack. Miss Dough had been dead for at least three days."

No one missed her for three days. Oh, Aunt Pat, I'm so sorry. I hope you didn't suffer.

Barbie took notes as he gave her directions to his law office.

It took three attempts before she successfully placed the phone receiver back on its base. The squiggles on her notepad left her wondering how she had managed to hold the pen in her palsied hand. *I hope I can decipher this mess and find the place.* Her rubbery legs kept her vertical long enough to reach the table, where she melted into a chair, wishing Mr. McCarthy had kept some of the details to himself.

With her stiff hugs and rare kisses barely grazing a cheek, Aunt Pat didn't exude love, but she had sacrificed a life of normalcy to raise her sister's baby, and Barbie loved her for it. Having good intentions, Barbie added 'visit Aunt Pat' to her lists all the time, but had not checked it off in close to a year. It made her nauseous to know she'd never have another opportunity to drop by and now had to live with the fact that she had been a horrible, selfish, ungrateful niece. So much guilt welled up inside her that she half-expected to inflate and float about the room.

Barbie swigged the last bit of cold bitter coffee and jotted *meet attorney at 2* on her list before heading for the shower.

As she started past Jessica's room, her hand, as if it possessed a mind of its own, reached out and pushed the door open. The room, stuck in time from happier days, acted as Barbie's sanctuary. She sat on the meticulously made bed,

Jane Kennedy Sutton

clutching one of Jessica's stuffed teddy bears, and cried, unsure if the tears were for Aunt Pat, Jessica, or herself.

When the tears quit flowing, Barbie dug a Kleenex from a pocket of the robe and blew her nose. She carefully smoothed out the wrinkles caused by sitting on the bed and placed the teddy bear lovingly on the pillow before dragging herself to the shower.

Wishing she could spend the rest of her life under the pelting water, washing away dirt, grime, stress, housework, husbands, missing daughters, and sad memories that now included the dead aunt who raised her, Barbie soaped up and rinsed off repeatedly until the water ran cold.

She dressed quickly, selecting black pants out of respect for the dead and pretended not to notice how the zipper strained across her stomach. One of Ken's old blue work shirts and her black Reeboks completed the ensemble. She took one last glimpse in the mirror, adjusted a strand of hair that immediately became unadjusted, shrugged, scurried downstairs, grabbed her list, purse, keys, and drove to the Fairview Mall.

Near the entrance, she glanced toward the sky and said aloud, "Aunt Pat, if you're watching, I'm not shopping to enjoy myself. I'm doing this for Lois." Then, looking straight ahead, mumbled, "You always did like her better than me."

Deciding on a lacy black Victoria's Secret thong, a blushing Barbie handed them to the cashier saying, "These aren't for me. They're a gift."

The cashier nodded and flashed a quick smile, but Barbie read a disgusted, 'Of course they're not for you,' expression in the woman's eyes. She hurried out of the store and back to the car.

After a few wrong turns, the attorney's office came into view. She had to circle a two-block area five times before a

The Ride

parking space opened up. After numerous attempts to maneuver the car into the spot, she shut off the motor, stranding the car at an angle and about three feet from the curb.

A rude driver passed by and yelled through his car window, "Next time take the fucking bus!"

Placing her forehead on the steering wheel, she took several deep breaths. *Don't cry. Not now. I don't have the time.*

She sat for a couple of minutes before leaving the car and approaching the meter. The only coins she could find in her wallet and purse bottom were pennies. *What else can go wrong?* Unable to hold back the tears any longer, she sobbed loudly while staring at the meter, as though the device may possibly reconsider its stance on the money requirement and grant free time.

An elderly woman stopped, placed several quarters in Barbie's hand, patted her shoulder, and walked away without uttering a single word. Thinking the kind stranger looked a bit like Aunt Pat, she had to suppress an irresistible urge to hug the woman and say, "I love you."

"Thank you," she shouted at the Good Samaritan's back and hurried to her appointment.

She found Mr. McCarthy's name on the directory and took the elevator to his twentieth floor office. Opening the door bearing his name and at least a dozen others, she entered a large, dark, and intimidating reception area.

"This place has all the ambience of a morgue," Barbie muttered.

The fruit in the ornately framed still-life paintings that adorned the walls reminded Barbie she had skipped breakfast and lunch. She stepped up to the desk, resisting the temptation to reach out to the paintings for one of the delicious-looking apples.

Jane Kennedy Sutton

I think I'm being ignored on purpose.

She contemplated leaving just as a young, svelte blonde with an unblemished complexion and long pink nails acknowledged her. The blonde asked, opening a perfect pink mouth full of perfect white teeth and enouncing each word slowly, as if talking to the village idiot, "What can we do for you today?"

In Barbie's mind, her own degree of dowdiness had increased tenfold as soon as her foot crossed the threshold. *You've done enough already by eliminating what little self-esteem I had left, thank you very much.* She smiled and said, "I'm here to see Mr. McCarthy."

Another flawlessly put together woman approached and said, "Follow me, please."

With shoulders hunched, eyes downcast, and her feet dragging, she obeyed.

Her guide stopped, opened a door, and indicated with her hand that Barbie should enter.

She stepped inside and surveyed the room. *No guillotine or other apparent means of torture. That's good.*

An elderly, slight man with thick wavy gray hair and horn-rimmed glasses covering half his face approached her with his hand extended. "Mrs. Anderson, I'm Mr. McCarthy."

She noted his impeccable dark suit, white shirt, and red tie. *Lawyer attire for sure. His deep booming voice sounds as if it should be coming from a large, intimidating sort of a creature. But he looks harmless enough. Even kind of nice.* She shook his hand.

"Please, call me Barbie." *My voice didn't even quiver.*

"Barbie, thank you for coming. I'm glad to meet you and wish it could be under happier circumstances. I'm sorry for your loss. Please have a seat." He pointed to one of the two black leather chairs in front of his desk and positioned himself

The Ride

in his chair on the opposite side.

Swallowed up by her seat, Barbie relaxed a little and stared across the desk. *His chair looks like a throne, and judging from the size of that desk, the world now has one less rain forest. I wonder if he's aware of how small and fragile the furniture makes him look, like a child playing at being a grown-up.* She took in the rest of the office. *Nice view of tall buildings. Has he read all those books or are they for display only?*

"I know you must have a lot of questions, and I'll try my best to answer them. First, however, please read this."

She turned her attention back to him as he slid an envelope across his desk.

"Take as much time as you need."

She accepted the envelope and removed the contents, unfolding several pages of three-holed notebook paper covered front and back in Aunt Pat's small but flowery script. Settling back in the chair, she began to read.

The salutation, "My darling daughter, Barbara," caused her to gasp. *Aunt Pat never called me darling and I'm certainly not her daughter. Either senility struck before she died or this Miss Dough and Aunt Pat are two completely different people.*

As she continued to read, her hands shook and her eyes filled with tears. After finishing the pages, she glanced up.

"Would you like some time alone?" Mr. McCarthy asked.

That's the last thing I want. "No, that's not necessary. I'm fine. I...I just need to read this again."

"Please take your time." He passed her a box of tissues.

She accepted, turned her attention back to the letter, read it a second time, and then a third.

Placing the letter on the desk, she said, "I need to use your restroom."

"Down the hall on your right."

Jane Kennedy Sutton

She grabbed a handful of tissues and raced out of the room.

Relieved to see she was alone, she leaned against the sink, her mind racing.

You talked to Jessica, Aunt Pat, and never told me. In your letter, you say I need to forgive her. You have it all wrong. I was at fault. I'm her mother and I let her down. She must forgive me, not the other way around. And, after all this time, I know that is never going to happen, and I don't blame her one bit.

Barbie stared into the mirror above the sink as though watching the worst day of her life unfold again in the glass. That awful day was the last time she saw Jessica, the day Despair and Melancholy moved in and became permanent fixtures in her day-to-day existence. She was unaware of the tears streaming down her cheeks as her mind relived the past.

Jessica and her friend strolled up the driveway smiling and holding hands, stopping midway for a passionate and unselfconscious kiss, not noticing the shocked look on my face before hearing Ken scream, "Just turn around and get back in the car. I will not allow fucking Lesbos in my home. You and your fucking girlfriend are not welcome here. You are freaks. From now on, I have no goddamned daughter."

Shocked and angry at her father's tirade, Jessica turned to me for help. I had never considered the possibility of Vic being short for "Victoria" instead of "Victor," and I could not make my paralyzed body respond. I tried to speak, but only air crossed my lips. No sounds emerged. As Jessica turned back to the car, I saw the expression in her eyes change from one of bewilderment to one of hate. I wanted to run to her, to hug her, to tell her to stay, to tell her I loved her no matter what, but I couldn't overcome my paralysis. Instead, I simply stood rooted in place and watched my baby leave. You refused my calls and returned all my notes unopened. Then you simply vanished as though you'd only been a figment of my imagination. You didn't want to be found.

The Ride

If only you'd told me about your conversations, Aunt Pat, I would have known she was safe. I could have asked you to pass along the message that I love her and always have and always will. You could have told me whether or not she is happy.

Hearing the bathroom door open, Barbie hurried into a stall. When she heard the person leave, she came out, washed her hands, splashed water on her face, dried herself, and shuffled back to Mr. McCarthy's office.

"Have you read this?" she asked picking the letter up from his desk before collapsing in the chair.

"Yes, and I know the revelations must come as a shock."

"You can say that again. This woman...my Aunt Pat...allowed me to believe she was my aunt when all along she was my mother. How could anyone do that?"

"It was a different era. As her letter stated, her father was a Baptist preacher who disowned her and her mother stood by that decision."

A real stand by your man sort of woman, just like me.

"And your father wanted nothing to do with her or, sadly to say, with you."

"I was led to believe that my father was a war hero who died before learning my mother was pregnant. I've always pictured him as a strong, silent, wise, and caring man who would have called me Kitten. Now I find out he was a young, pimply faced, irresponsible kid with raging hormones and no sense of decency. I'm supposed to thank her for this revelation?"

"She was young, pregnant, alone, and scared."

She must have wagged her finger at me a gazillion times while saying, "A good reputation is your most valuable asset in this life, and don't you ever forget it, young lady." Obviously, she didn't practice what she preached.

"So she moved from Illinois to Indiana, had me and then moved to California, changed our name from Dough to Smith,

Jane Kennedy Sutton

found someone to forge my birth certificate, and told me my mother and my grandparents had died in a fire. The woman's insane. I mean was insane."

The person who lectured me endlessly on the importance of honesty and on being a good person by abiding by life's rules was a liar and a hypocrite. I always believed Aunt Pat lived her life as an audition for sainthood. Did I ever have that wrong.

"I know you don't believe it right now, but she did love you very much. She made some poor choices and became trapped by her own lies. As she said in her letter, she wanted to tell you the truth, but she was afraid of losing you completely."

Barbie felt the tears stream down her cheeks. "Why didn't she just keep all this to herself? Why did she have to tell me? Now *my* whole life's a lie. I'm not who I think I am. I'm not Barbara Jane Smith Anderson. I'm Barbara Jane Dough Anderson. Excuse me, but could I have a glass of water, please."

"Of course."

He pressed a button, said a few words, and a young woman with the grace of a model delivered a pitcher of ice water and two glasses before Barbie had time to dry her tears. He poured, handed her the glass, and she quickly drained half the contents.

"Thank you," she said placing the glass on the edge of the desk with a little more force than she intended. Water splashed over the rim. "Sorry." She grabbed tissues to mop up the spill, then leaned back in the chair, flipping through the pages of the letter.

"Aunt Pat wrote, 'Now that I've told you what you had the right to know years ago, I feel some relief, and I hope you do, too.' But how can I be relieved that she lied to me my whole life, that she wasn't who she pretended to be, or that I

The Ride

am not who I thought I was? I'm confused, hurt, angry, upset, and not remotely relieved. Why didn't she take this to her grave? Did she write this letter to make herself feel better, or did she do it for spite? And, if she lied all her life, how do I know all this is true now?"

Barbie flapped the letter in the air, then fearing complete loss of control, forced herself to take several deep breaths and waited for her heart rate to slow down. I'm sorry," she apologized, "I'm ranting. You must think I'm a raving lunatic." She folded the pages, now damp and smudged from her tears, and slid them back into the envelope.

"No apologies needed," he said kindly. "Do you need some time to yourself before I discuss Miss Dough's estate? Or would you prefer to come back another day?"

I'd prefer not to be here at all. She replied in a flat voice, "No, I'm fine. Go ahead." *Nothing can be as shocking as that letter.*

Robert cleared his throat. "Miss Dough," he said.

Barbie interrupted. "Can you refer to her as Pat? I haven't been able to come to terms with the Miss Dough reference yet. Sorry."

"Of course, no problem. Anyway, Pat made some wise investments. Plus, her bungalow in Los Angeles will sell for a pretty penny if that is what you decide to do with it. She inherited her parents' estate. They may have disowned her verbally, but they didn't take her out of their will. Whether that was by intent or oversight, we don't know. But, Pat never touched that money. It increased substantially as the interest accumulated. A condominium in a high rise on Lakeshore Drive in Chicago is also part of the estate. It's up to you whether to keep it or sell it. Pat used it as rental property. Currently, it's vacant. The property value of both homes is

Jane Kennedy Sutton

probably somewhere in the vicinity of two to three million dollars. The money in the various accounts also totals more than one and a half million. That doesn't take into account the possessions in the fully furnished households, which you are free to keep or sell. In all, Pat left you an inheritance worth close to five million dollars."

Her mouth dropped open. *Aunt Pat, a millionaire?*

"Do you have any questions?"

I didn't think anything could shock me more than the letter I just read.

She nodded, shook her head, nodded again. When she could speak, she said, "I don't think I have any questions, but can you repeat all that? I'm sure I didn't hear you correctly."

He smiled and once more patiently summarized the information.

"Wow," she said. Feeling the need to say something a little more substantial, she asked, "Where is Aunt Pat now? I mean her body, not like her soul or anything like that, and what do I do about a funeral and those sorts of arrangements?"

"Pat took care of those decisions for you. She was, in fact, cremated yesterday."

"Cremated? Yesterday? Why wasn't I notified?"

"Ms. Dough...excuse me, Pat, specifically instructed me not to contact you until after the fact. She wasn't sure how you would feel about cremation over burial. She thought it was better not to have you make that decision under stress."

Smart move, Aunt Pat. "Then Aunt Pat is in a vase somewhere?"

"Well, it's called an urn. But, yes, she's right here." He pointed to a shiny brass object on his desk.

"That's Aunt Pat?" Barbie said, aghast to think she'd had been there all along.

The Ride

“Yes, and what she wants is for you to take her ashes to the family mausoleum in Chicago. She thought it was about time to reunite with her parents.”

Barbie grimaced.

Robert continued speaking as if he hadn't noticed. “It's not a condition of her will...it's merely her wish. If you prefer, you can have the urn shipped. She also stated that if you wanted, you could scatter her ashes at the bungalow or over the ocean or another place of your choosing.”

“She wants me to take her to Chicago? I've never been out of California, well, except for a quick trip to Las Vegas, and that big mistake was more than twenty years ago,” Barbie said, referring to her elopement.

“Perhaps she wanted to give you an excuse to travel again.”

Taking Aunt Pat anywhere outside this office held no appeal to Barbie. Angered by all the lies, she had a strong inclination to open the urn and dump Aunt Pat into Mr. McCarthy's rubbish bin. *Afterward, I could dust my hands off and be done with this crazy lady forever.* She looked at the urn and immediately felt guilty.

“Is it even legal to dump someone's ashes? Not that I'm going to,” she added quickly.

“There are some restrictions,” he replied, “but for the most part, people ignore them.”

After deliberating a few minutes, Barbie said, “Well, she did leave me a lot of money. Maybe by granting her wish I can at least feel I was earning that inheritance. When does it have to be done?”

“There's no timetable. You can do it tomorrow, next year, or in twenty years, whenever it suits your schedule.”

That would be never. “What do I do with her until then?”

Jane Kennedy Sutton

“You can simply keep her at your house, on a mantel or in a closet. Whatever you’re comfortable with.”

I’d be most comfortable with her in the ground where dead people belong. “So that’s it. We’re done here?”

“Yes, unless you have more questions. When Pat knew she was dying, she had me add your name to all her holdings, and she took care of setting aside a lump sum for taxes. She wanted to be sure you had immediate access to anything that was hers. The funds are available anytime. Banking information, titles, and other relevant information is all in here.” He pointed to the envelope. “By the way, she used your real name of Barbara Jane Dough Anderson.” He handed her the large envelope. “Take this home. You can go through it and give yourself some time to absorb everything. You don’t need to make any decisions until you feel ready. Please call if you have any questions.”

She stood and they shook hands again. Taking the large envelope of papers, she turned to leave.

“Barbie,” he called gently, “don’t forget the urn.”

“No, can’t do that, can I?” she giggled nervously, tucking the envelope under her arm. Rigidly, with her elbows tucked in on each side of her body, she held the urn chest high between her two stiff hands. She walked out of the office picturing Aunt Pat’s two big eyeballs on top the ashes staring through the brass urn and straight into her heart.

Chapter 3

“There you go, Aunt Pat,” Barbie said as she fastened the seat belt around the urn. “Hope you aren’t going to be one of those backseat drivers.”

On the drive home, Barbie glanced in the rearview mirror so often her eyes began to hurt. “That’s my mother,” she said at least three dozen times. “How can that be?”

She punched the radio selection button several times, briefly pausing to sing along to *Big Girls Don’t Cry*, before her own tears reminded her they did.

Turning the radio off in disgust, she spoke to the rearview mirror. “Here we are, finally spending time together, Aunt Pat, Mom, whoever you are. Isn’t it a pity that you had to die for us to have a reunion?”

Receiving no answer, Barbie’s mind drifted back to the

letter as she tried to make sense of Aunt Pat's confession. She continued her one-sided conversation.

"You know, I thought I named Jessica after my mother, not my grandmother. Would it have been so difficult to tell me the truth? In your letter you wrote that your family never discussed feelings. Isn't it rather uncanny that we didn't either? You also said you realized you had made some of the same mistakes with me that your parents made. Know what, Aunt Pat? I've carried on the same family tradition with Jessica. Am I going to have to die in order for her to know my true feelings?"

"Damn, Aunt Pat, I was so busy talking to you that now I'm stuck in a turn only lane. I'm afraid I can't handle getting lost today. Hmmm, but I could handle some food," she said noticing an enticing sign for Burgers and Beer at a place called Lonesome Joe's.

She pulled into the parking lot. "You'll have to wait here, Aunt Pat. I won't be long, I promise," she said before locking the car door.

After a quick survey of the smoke-filled, dimly lit room, Barbie almost turned around and left before convincing herself there was nothing wrong with eating alone in a bar. *Besides, if I tried to find a drive-thru fast food restaurant, I'd become lost for sure.* She opted for a seat at the bar rather than a booth.

The bartender, his dark hair pulled into a stringy ponytail, a barbed-wire tattoo around his muscled right bicep, and a stomach that attested to the sign 'Best chili-cheeseburger in town,' sidled over and wiped off the bar in front of her. When satisfied with the gleam his rag produced, he smiled and asked, "What'll it be?"

The words, "Jack Daniels on the rocks," glided off her tongue as if she had perched on that stool and ordered the

The Ride

same drink from the same bartender everyday of her life. “Oh, and some fries too, please,” she added, remembering she stopped for food and not alcohol.

“Here you go, little lady,” he said placing a coaster and then the drink in front of her. “Fries will be up pronto.”

“Thanks,” Barbie replied. She took a big drink and had to work hard to swallow the liquid without spewing it across the bar. The effort caused her eyes to tear. *I’ve gone mad. I don’t drink this stuff. I must be in the Twilight Zone.* She took another drink, a sip this time, and savored the slight burn before swallowing.

The music in the bar changed from Willie Nelson’s *On the Road Again* to Tammy Wynette’s *Stand by your Man*.

“Hey,” Barbie whispered, “Grandma they’re playing our song.”

I’ve had a living-breathing Grandmother until the 1990s but was never given the opportunity to meet her.

“Thanks for fucking nothing, Aunt Pat,” she said. Mortified she had spoken out loud in a public place, she put her head on the bar and burst into tears, humiliating herself even further.

Barbie felt a light touch on her shoulder and glanced up to see a handsome man with kind blue eyes sitting on the next stool.

“I hate to see a damsel in distress,” he said, offering a handkerchief. “I’m guessing here so correct me if I’m wrong, but I’d say...bad day?” He smiled.

What an understatement. Who uses words like damsel or carries handkerchiefs anymore? Nice smile. She intended to nod in agreement and leave. *I don’t really need the fries.*

Instead, she blew her nose noisily in his handkerchief and blurted out, “My Aunt Pat’s dead and she’s in the car.”

Jane Kennedy Sutton

“You have a dead aunt in your car?” he asked, his brows rising and his blue eyes opening wider.

“No. I mean I thought she was my aunt, but she’s my mother.”

He cocked his head, “Okay, see if I have this right, your aunt is not dead but your mother is and she’s in your car. Should we call 911?”

Barbie knew this poor man must be thinking, *‘Nut case, how can I get out of here?’* She managed to shake her head “no” before bursting into tears again.

Instead of running away, he said, “Your fries are here. Why don’t you let me buy you another drink to go with them and we can go over to one of the tables. It appears you could use someone to talk to, and I’m intrigued about this dead aunt or mother or whoever it is in your car. I mean, it’s none of my business, but if you feel like talking, I have the time and a couple of ears that are adept at listening. What do you say?”

She meant to say, “Thanks, but I have to go now.” Somehow, the words her mouth formed were, “I’m drinking Jack Daniels.”

Barbie followed the stranger to a table while picturing Aunt Pat gathering up enough cosmic energy to levitate her urn, bash out a car window, fly out of the car, float into the bar, and knock her upside the head. As if waiting for the impact, Barbie hunched, tucking her chin, silently promising Aunt Pat she would eat her fries quickly and go home.

They sat across from each other in the booth. Once situated, he said, “I’m curious. Is it a body or bodies in your car?”

Barbie poured some ketchup on the side of her plate, dipped a fry, and took a bite before responding. “Oh, no, not a body, only Aunt Pat’s ashes.”

The Ride

“You don’t know how relieved I am to hear you say that.” He smiled again. “I guess you’ve come from a funeral, then. No wonder you’re so sad.”

She liked his smile and took another swallow of her drink to keep from staring at him. The relaxing effects of the alcohol reduced her inhibitions and anxieties. Knowing it wasn’t smart to drink on an empty stomach, she ate a few more fries and pushed her plate toward the stranger. “Please, help yourself,” she offered. “I wasn’t at a funeral. I picked up her ashes at an attorney’s office.”

“Thanks, but I’ve already eaten. Were you and your aunt close?”

“Ha,” Barbie laughed, “you see I only thought she was my aunt. Today, I found out she was really my mother. That’s why I’m so, I don’t know...ditzzy...Well, that and this,” she said holding up her glass. “I don’t usually sit in bars talking to handsome strangers.” Embarrassed by her remark, Barbie knew her face must be fire-engine-red.

“Well, this must be my lucky day then. But, tell me, how can she be your aunt and your mother, too?”

Before she had a chance to reply, he ordered another round of drinks.

“No,” she protested. “I mean, thanks, but make mine a coffee this time. I really have to go soon.”

Between sips, Barbie tried to explain her relationship with her aunt by telling the stranger about the letter she’d read in the attorney’s office.

Leaning towards her with his arms folded on the table, he listened politely.

“That revelation must have come as quite a shock,” the man said when Barbie quit speaking and leaned back against the booth.

“Absolutely, and it really hasn’t soaked in yet. I’m still very confused. You think you know someone so well and then ‘poof’—it all flies out the window. Aunt Pat thought she could make everything okay by leaving me a lot of money and some properties, but it’s not as simple as that. Forgiveness can’t be bought, can it?”

The stranger sat back and took a swallow of beer. “I suppose not,” he said, “but perhaps she simply hoped to cushion the blow. She could have told you all that stuff and then left all her estate to a cat or something.”

“She was allergic to animals. But, you’re right, she didn’t have to leave me a dime. I would have never known. I never dreamed my aunt, I mean my mother, was a multi-millionaire. She lived as though buying a new pair of shoes when the old ones were still wearable was a mortal sin.”

The caffeine cleared Barbie’s head, allowing the return of some common sense. “I’m sorry to have rattled on for so long. I know I must have bored you to death. But, I really feel much better. Thanks for listening. Please,” she said digging in her purse, “let me pick up the check.”

“Absolutely not,” he said, refusing her money. “I’m glad if I helped. You are an interesting lady. It’s been a most pleasant afternoon—for me at least.”

“Thanks.” Suddenly feeling shy, she started to hand him his handkerchief and then drew her hand back in dismay, realizing her mistake. “I’m sorry about the handkerchief. I’d like to return it to you—after I wash it, that is. Where can I send it?”

“Why don’t you bring it back here,” he suggested. “I work a seven to three shift, and I drop in for a cool one nearly everyday afterwards.”

“Okay,” Barbie said, hesitantly. “But, I don’t know when

The Ride

that'll be. *After all my idiotic blathering today, I'm too embarrassed to see you again.* Are you sure I shouldn't send it to you?"

"I have plenty to use in the meantime," he said, grinning. Barbie found herself smiling back at him.

Chapter 4

Hoping the coffee countered the effects of the drinks, Barbie drove home thinking more about the handsome stranger than Aunt Pat.

Slamming her palm on the steering wheel, she said, “Idiot, you didn’t even ask the man his name.”

An inner voice sounding like Aunt Pat responded by saying, “*What does it matter. You’ll never see him again anyway.*”

“I know,” she sighed, “I know.”

Why was that man so easy to confide in? Maybe that’s what it’s like to talk to a psychiatrist.

“Hey, Aunt Pat, should I use some of my inheritance to begin seeing a shrink? Perhaps Ken and I can go to couples’ counseling. Yeah, I’m joking. The odds of enticing Ken to see someone about his head are probably about a zillion to one.”

The Ride

She spotted Ken's car in the driveway. "Damn, why is he home early, today of all days?"

She imagined Aunt Pat replying, "*What did you expect to happen when you spent the afternoon drinking with another man.*"

Barbie pulled in the drive next to Ken's car and tucked the large envelope under the front seat, leaving Aunt Pat buckled-up in the back.

"Don't you go anywhere," she said to the urn. She took two steps and then did a double take. A flatbed truck, filled with steel beams and other materials, sat along the side of the house. "Now what?" she murmured.

"Just once I'd like to be consulted," she said, carrying on a conversation with herself as she walked to the door. "If Ken's planning on adding a room, it means more work for me. But, does he care? Of course not. Maybe I'll hire a maid. While I'm at it, I may as well hire a cook, too."

A tiny voice she assumed to be a spokesman for her conscience asked, *Then what would you do all day?*

"That," Barbie admitted as she unlocked the door, "could be a problem."

The house was quiet. She knocked lightly on the door to the room that Ken used as his office. No answer. She turned the knob. It wouldn't budge. She and Ken didn't have a close relationship, but neither of them had ever locked doors before.

Is he hiding something or someone in there with him, perhaps a female truck driver? She yo-yoed between pangs of jealousy and tinges of guilt before rapping harder on the door. In her sweetest voice she asked, "Ken, are you in there? Why is the door locked?"

He didn't bother to open the door, but his curt reply came through loud and clear. "I don't have time to talk to you right now," he said, sounding mean, breathless, and jumpy. "I have

lots of work to do, so don't interrupt me again. Leave my dinner in the oven. I'll eat when I can. And don't wait up for me. In other words, pretend I'm not here."

"That won't be hard to do," she mumbled, hurt by his gruffness. Putting her ear to the door, she listened for the sounds of a female voice while wondering why Ken bothered to come home in the first place.

Damn him, she thought, turning away, *would it kill him to take five minutes to acknowledge me or to ask about my day?*

Returning to the car, she retrieved the envelope. She un-snapped the seatbelt from around the urn and carried Aunt Pat and the envelope upstairs.

"Here," she said placing Aunt Pat's urn on the dresser in Jessica's room. "With your arrival, maybe I won't feel as inclined to sit in here crying over Jessica. Oops, that didn't sound right. Sorry, Aunt Pat. I'm trying to keep you out of Ken's sight and he never comes in here. Of course, the word 'never' is losing its meaning around here, isn't it. I need to find the right time to tell him about you. And then I can tell him how we need to take a trip to Chicago. We haven't been away together since our pathetic honeymoon in Las Vegas. Maybe a trip is exactly what we need. What do you think?" *God, here I am talking to a brass container full of ashes as if it could respond. I'm pathetic.* She closed the door and shuffled to her bedroom.

Barbie opened the envelope and took out the letter before putting the remainder of the contents in her special lingerie drawer under the scented liner.

Back downstairs, she sat on the couch and reread the letter, becoming angry and resentful one minute, yet sympathetic and understanding the next. She whispered the words, 'Mother' and 'Aunt Pat,' but they sounded like she

The Ride

felt: inadequate, incongruous, and hollow.

She read aloud, "First let me say, I am sorry that I couldn't confess while I held you in my arms. That is how I envisioned handling this time and time again, but I am a coward. Besides, I know you never thought much of me as a person (not that I can blame you) and I feared after hearing my confession, I'd lose you forever. You probably weren't aware of it, but I cherished those times we spent together. I enjoyed our talks. I didn't want to risk losing the little bit of you I had left. Your apathy was easier for me to live with than your hate would have been. I have lied for so many years, I actually had myself believing in the fables I created."

She looked up and wiped a tear off her cheek with the back of her hand. "If I had visited you more often, would I feel so awful now? Why did you go and die, Aunt Pat. Why?" she asked, tucking the letter under the seat cushion. *I can't think about this any longer.*

Famished, she prepared a quick and easy tuna casserole along with a salad. When it was ready, she again put her ear to the office door and heard nothing. Going against his instructions but needing to talk, Barbie knocked on the door.

"Dinner's ready," she said cheerfully. When Ken didn't acknowledge her she added, "And something happened today I think you ought to know about."

Silence.

Maybe he dropped dead. Feeling guilty for her thoughts and at the same time, halfway wishing it so, she dished herself up a heaping plate of the casserole and turned on the tube.

Eating alone in front of the TV, grateful for the distraction and the sound of human voices, Barbie was surprised to notice that she'd eaten most of the casserole. *It serves Ken right.* Back in the kitchen, she scraped the pitiful remainder of the

casserole onto a plate and placed it in the oven for Ken.

She opened her purse to retrieve the small Victoria's Secret bag to wrap the gift, but the handkerchief distracted her. She pulled it out. It was a perfectly plain, generic square of soft white cotton with no initials or other clues to help identify the man who handed it to her. *I don't even know his name, and yet he has done more to comfort me than my own husband.*

Thinking about the stranger's smile triggered a quicker heartbeat. A warm sensation enveloped her body from head to toe. Tingling all over, she imagined in her distraught state this afternoon that if he had suggested having sex right there in the booth, she would have replied, "What a terrific idea."

Deluged by guilt, she asked aloud, "What's happening to me?"

Forcing herself to think of other things, she wrapped Lois' gift, threw some clothes in the washer along with the handkerchief, and tidied up the kitchen. Still no sign of Ken.

Feeling lonelier than ever, Barbie called Lois and almost cried when she heard Jack's unemotional voice tell her to leave her name and number after the beep. Disheartened, she left a message confirming her lunch with Lois the following day.

"And no need to call back. I'm tired and I think I'll turn in early," Barbie added before disconnecting.

Retrieving the letter from under the sofa cushion, Barbie turned off the TV and stopped by the laundry room for the handkerchief.

"Damn you, Ken," she murmured as she climbed the stairs, "I need some human interaction here. Are you locking me out of a room or out of your life?" She thought she knew the answer and it scared her.

Pretending Aunt Pat was with her, staring into her eyes while calling her "daughter," she sat on the bed and reread the

The Ride

letter out loud imitating Pat's voice, "I've waited until my death to try to rectify my many wrongs. As I said, I would have liked to see my parents one last time. And, maybe that is how you will feel about me. I don't know. If that is the case, I am sorry I didn't give you the option. Try understanding how my fear at being reviled and rejected left me powerless to do the right thing. I can't imagine looking into your eyes, my lovely daughter, hoping for forgiveness and seeing nothing but hate. I couldn't risk it."

I know exactly what you mean, Aunt Pat. I am still haunted by the expression of disgust in Jessica's eyes.

Unable to read any further, she folded the letter and placed it in the drawer with the other papers.

Stretching out on the bed, she let her thoughts wander to what she wanted in a man. She wasn't surprised to discover her perfect mate was the total opposite of Ken and closely resembled the stranger at Lonesome Joe's, right down to his sense of humor and brilliant blue eyes. She thought about how wonderful it would be to have someone smile at her or laugh at her stories or tell her she's beautiful or hold her and say, "Sorry about Aunt Pat." *At this very moment, just having someone acknowledge my presence would thrill me. Maybe I should simply buy myself a dog.*

Barbie prepared herself for bed, crawled in, and turned out the light. The darkness acted as a signal for her mind to go into overdrive as she realized that in approximately twelve short hours, her normal boring life had changed completely. She tried, but could not shut off her brain.

How could Aunt Pat live a lie for so long, she's not my Aunt, she's dead so I can't tell her how I feel about her lies, how do I feel, what should I wear to lunch tomorrow, my maiden name is Dough, God, I miss Jessica so much, I can't believe that a handsome man

Jane Kennedy Sutton

bought me a drink this afternoon, I can't believe that I talked to him as if he was a lifelong friend, wish he was here now, I need to put 'tuna' on my shopping list, I'm a millionaire, why don't I feel like one, will I change, maybe I'll keep the handkerchief, why is a truck full of steel parked by the house, did Ken just have a bad day or is he metamorphosing from a predictable, albeit boring, husband into a non-communicative madman, that blonde stranger—and at last sleep claimed her.

If you enjoyed this sample, it can also be purchased in hard-cover or the full eBook. Please visit www.archebooks.com for more information.

