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*Still Waters* © 2000 by Gina Fields  
*Come Home to My Heart* © 2000 by JoAnn A. Grote  
*Eagles for Anna* © 1996 by Catherine Runyon

ISBN 1-59310-672-6

Cover art by Getty Images

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Published by Barbour Publishing, Inc., P.O. Box 719, Uhrichsville, Ohio 44683,  
[www.barbourbooks.com](http://www.barbourbooks.com)

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Printed in the United States of America.

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## Chapter 1

**T**horoughly frightened and without even taking time for a shower, Hester hurried into her garments and picked up her overnight bag. She opened the door and peered intently up and down the parking area. No one else seemed to be around. She pitched the door key onto the dresser, closed the door quietly, and ran to her car. She shoved some accumulated snow off the windshield and unlocked the door.

“Dear God, let this car start now.” She turned the key, and the engine hummed into action as if it had spent the night in the insulated garage at Detroit instead of this windswept motel lot. She breathed easier when she pulled out onto the highway and the Mercedes had not moved. Hester drove twenty miles before breakfasting, and after she had eaten and telephoned Belle of her whereabouts, and the Mercedes and its attractive driver had not appeared, her tense nerves relaxed. No doubt she would never see the man again, but it annoyed her that she was still harassed by the memory of his sparkling blue eyes; shiny white teeth; firm, straight mouth; and magnetic persona.

As she steered her compact Ford up the curving hollow, following the twists and turns of the river, Hester appreciated the wisdom of Belle’s insistence that she telephone for directions. Many unmarked roads led off from the narrow paved highway, and if she hadn’t had Belle’s instructions—“Don’t leave the main road. Afterglow is at the head of the hollow. When you get here, you can’t go any farther”—she would have gone astray more than once.

A few miles before she reached the town, the river veered to the left and her heavily loaded car slowly navigated a tortuous road up the side of a mountain. At the crest, she pulled into a lookout area for a bird’s-eye view of the town of Afterglow. Although a few hemlock and spruce trees dotted the hillsides, deciduous trees, now barren of leaves, dominated the forest. Snow flurries danced in the air, but Hester left the car to peer over the precipice, jumping back in alarm when she saw the sheer drop below her. Thankfully there was a waist-high retaining wall! A sharp blast of wind swept up the hollow, so she hurried to the car and made her descent to where the river had reappeared, hugging one side of the narrow valley.

She stopped abruptly when she came to a wooden covered bridge spanning the river at a narrow spot. Although the huge timbers and beams that made up the frame looked sturdy, she wondered if it was intended for automobile traffic. She

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glanced up and down the river and could see no other place to cross. While she hesitated, a pickup whizzed across the structure, so Hester warily steered her car up the incline and bumped along the uneven floorboards, emerged on the other side, and crossed a rumbling, seemingly abandoned railroad track. The buildings of Afterglow spread up the valley as far she could see until a curve in the river cut off the view. Dwellings perched in neat rows partway up the mountainside.

*Why, I've seen this valley before!* Since she knew she hadn't, Belle's description of the valley must have been more vivid than she had imagined.

"I'll meet you at the *Courier* office," Belle had said. "It's on Main Street and easily found. You might have trouble finding our house until you grow accustomed to the narrow, steep streets."

There was only one stoplight in the town and according to Belle, after passing the light, the *Courier* was on the right-hand side of the street next to the river. Hester saw the stoplight several blocks downstream as soon as she drove out of the covered bridge, but before she came to the light, she had to maneuver around a statue in the middle of the street. Hester had a brief glimpse of the inscription: CIVIL WAR VETERAN.

Before Hester had the car parked, Belle was on the sidewalk to greet her. Hester fondly appraised her friend's slanted blue eyes, fair complexion, and tawny hair, noting with amusement that Belle was chubbier than she used to be.

Hester was soon enveloped in Belle's arms. "I was beginning to worry. You're later than I'd expected you to be."

"I'm not used to these crooked roads and then, too, I stopped a few times to gaze at the fantastic scenery. No wonder you like it here."

"Wait until you see the trees with their leaves on. It's more beautiful then. Come in and meet my family."

Tall, angular, slow-spoken Clint Noffsinger was a native of Afterglow, and he had met Belle when they both had worked in Washington, D.C. He greeted Hester with a warm handshake.

"And here's Ina," Belle said, lifting her three-year-old daughter from behind a chair where she had been peering timorously at Hester. "She's not normally so bashful, as you'll soon find out. You can see she's the spittin' image of her daddy, as the locals describe it." Belle looked fondly at her brown-haired, dark-eyed offspring.

"How was your trip?" Clint drawled. "Anything exciting happen on the way down?"

Although Hester had thought she would relish telling her friends about the encounter with the suspected stalker, she seemed reluctant to mention it. *Is it a memory I want to cherish for myself?* Strange how many times she had thought of that man today.

"I encountered about fifty miles of snow-covered roads yesterday. That wasn't exciting, but it was nerve-racking."

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Belle zipped Ina into a one-piece hooded suit. "We'll go home and have dinner ready when you finish work, Clint." To Hester, she said, "The centennial commission meets tonight, and the mayor wants you to attend."

Hester moved her purse and road maps from the front seat to make room for Belle and Ina in the car. She followed Belle's directions and turned left at the next street, but Hester gasped as she looked—straight up!

"How do you ever drive off that hill when there's snow?"

"We don't; we walk."

Hester gunned the engine, and her loaded car labored up the incline. "Walking wouldn't be much better," she muttered.

"We don't have many snows down in this valley. There can be a foot of snow on the mountain, and we'll have only a smattering. Our home is the last one on this street. You can park behind the house."

"Whew!" Hester breathed deeply when she turned into the driveway and switched off the engine.

"Bring in all your things," Belle said. "I'll help as soon as I take Ina inside."

Hester shook her head. "I have everything I'll need for a couple of days in these two small bags, and I don't intend to stay here longer than that." When Belle started to protest, Hester glanced at the bungalow. "Now, Belle, be realistic. You have only four rooms, and I'm going to be here for months. I'll need working space and privacy. I'll be in and out often, and I won't stay in your house all of the time."

With a sigh, Belle agreed. "I suppose you're right, but I feel so cut off from the outside world, and I would enjoy some stimulating conversation. About the most exciting thing that's happened in the past month was when old Mr. Byrd dropped his false teeth in the soup kettle at the boardinghouse."

"I'll try to liven things up," Hester promised. "And with that comment on the boardinghouse, I don't think I want to live there."

"Oh, Miss Eliza was on the alert, and she dumped the soup. You don't have to worry about her food. She's an excellent cook."

At dinner, when they discussed a place for Hester to stay, Clint suggested, "Why not try for the furnished apartment Miss Eliza has? Her nephew lived there at one time, and she refurbished it a few years ago for a schoolteacher who moved to Afterglow. It hasn't been rented since the teacher retired and left the county. It may not be what you're used to, but you won't do much better on rental property in Afterglow."

"How many rooms?"

"Three, I think. Miss Eliza will be at the meeting. We can ask her about it," Clint said.



Hester rode to the town hall with Clint, who was on the centennial commission.

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She eagerly looked forward to seeing the people she would work with on this project. Clint parked along Main Street and opened the door for her to enter a building two doors north of his newspaper office.

"We're meeting in the council chamber," he explained. When they entered the room, most of the chairs at the oval table were already occupied. A rotund man standing at the head of the table sped in their direction and extended a pudgy hand toward Hester.

"I'm Mayor Arthur Stepp," he stated. "Welcome to Afterglow."

Hester considered herself of only medium height, yet she looked down on Mayor Stepp, who resembled a compact barrel. What he lacked in size, though, he made up for in action, for his body appeared to be in perpetual motion.

"Sit beside me," he said, pulling Hester along by the hand. "I'll introduce you to the commission."

As soon as Hester settled into the chair, he said, "Starting to your left is the pastor of Brown Memorial Church, Ray Stanford." When Stanford started to rise, the mayor said, "Not necessary to stand on formalities, Reverend."

The mayor talked so fast his words ran together, and she could hardly understand him, making it difficult to put names and faces together. She did note that the only other female in the room was Eliza Byrd, a woman who appeared to be in her early seventies but straight as a ramrod and with snappy, big brown eyes. Deep wrinkles encircled Miss Eliza's large mouth, and her long, thin gray hair was braided around her head.

When the mayor had finished the introductions, he said, "Miss Lawson, we appreciate that you've taken time to help us celebrate the centennial of the fabulous town of Afterglow. By writing our glorious history, you will help us honor our ancestors who settled this rugged valley and brought the benefits of civilization to kith and kin."

The mayor rambled on in this vein for another five minutes, often interspersing his words with a hearty laugh and animated gestures, causing Hester to wonder if he could talk without waving his arms.

Clint Noffsinger sat directly across from Hester, and he lowered his left eyelid slightly, suggesting to her that not all of the town's citizens shared Stepp's exalted views. But Hester was hardly prepared for Miss Eliza's interruption.

"Oh, hush, Mayor. Let's get on with the business of the evening. Miss Lawson will soon learn enough about our town."

Hester smothered a gasp at this rudeness. The mayor's face flushed, and he threw an indignant glance in the speaker's direction, but he cleared his throat and forced a laugh.

"No need to be so hasty, Miss Eliza."

"There is a need for hurry," she retorted. "With all of the highfalutin ideas you've come up with, we should have started on this project five years ago. We

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don't have any time to spare. Let's fill Miss Lawson in on what we want her to do so she can start."

"I'd prefer all of you to call me Hester," she said. "From Mayor Stepp's letter, I assumed that my only assignment is to research and prepare a history of the town for publication."

Mayor Stepp cleared his throat again. "And incidentals connected with it."

Ray Stanford's bass voice sounded at her side. "We've planned a drama in October to feature highlights of our heritage. Perhaps you can find time to write that as you research the history."

"I suppose I could," Hester said slowly, "although I've never written a drama."

"And to direct it, too," Clint said with a grin. "The commission wants to be sure you earn your money."

"This promises to be an interesting year," Hester replied wryly. "May I hear about the rest of your plans?"

"Miss Eliza is looking for descendants of the first settlers to bring them in for our celebration," the mayor said.

"Hester," the old woman said crisply, "this town was founded by Hezekiah Brown, who started timbering here a hundred years ago. He had enough influence to bring in the railroad, which came up the valley and over the mountain to haul his product to market. Out of his vast holdings, he gave the land for this town. It's his memory we will be honoring."

Mayor Stepp motioned to the large man at her side. "Pastor Stanford will chair a committee to emphasize the coming of the gospel to our community. Would you tell Miss Hester what you're planning?"

A massive man in his midforties, Ray Stanford resembled a lumberjack more than a preacher. His frizzy black whiskers bristled with vitality.

"The first Christian witness here was a chapel car ministry. Soon after the first train arrived, a missionary couple, Ivan and Thelma Hartwell, came into the community in a specially built car that contained their living quarters and a chapel. They pulled the car off onto a siding and stayed in the community for the better part of a year until they had organized the nucleus of our church."

"And according to my grandfather, they had a rough time of it, too," Miss Eliza said. "The wood hicks weren't pleased to have preaching in the town."

"Wood hicks?" Hester asked.

"The Appalachian word for lumberjack," Clint explained.

"Pastor Hartwell," Miss Eliza continued, "braved the saloons with a gun in one hand and a Bible in the other before he finally gathered a congregation."

"At any rate," Ray Stanford said, "we've made arrangements to have a passenger car converted into an exact replica of the one the Hartwells used, and it will remain in the town as a permanent display. It will be delivered during centennial week."

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"I've wondered how the town received its unusual name," Hester said.

Bewilderment covered the faces of those around her as she looked from one to the other. Mayor Stepp stammered and cleared his throat a few times, and finally Clint said, "I guess no one has ever tried to figure that out, Hester. Maybe you can find that out for us, too."

Hester did not bat an eyelash, but by now she was convinced that she was going to earn every penny she made in Afterglow.

"And we're planning other events throughout the year," the mayor continued. "Belle Noffsinger is in charge of a big craft show in July. We're going to refurbish the covered bridge, which is almost as old as the town, and we'll reenact a bank robbery by the Benson gang."

A man across the table from Hester said, "There's still a mystery about that robbery. Lots of people at the time thought Benson stashed the gold somewhere. The law was hot on his trail, and the heavy gold was delaying him. Haven't you heard that, Miss Eliza?"

"Yes, but I think it's quite unlikely that he left the gold behind when he fled. Besides, my grandfather said that for twenty years after the robbery, there was somebody combing these mountains for the gold cache, and it was never found."

Mayor Stepp fidgeted during this exchange, and he said, "Let's not stray from the subject, please." Turning to Hester, he smiled widely. "It's going to be an exciting year. You'll be glad to be a part of it."

"Don't forget the log raft expedition in May," Clint said. "That's the way logs were transported before the railroad arrived," he explained.

"What we need now is a lot of publicity," the mayor said. "Clint, you'll have to give the centennial plans more coverage."

"I'll do what I can, but the *Courier* doesn't have a wide circulation."

"Would you like for me to run articles in my Detroit newspaper?" Hester asked.

"That would be a great idea, young lady," the mayor said. "We need all the publicity possible."

"I wonder how much leeway I'm going to have in writing this history. As a journalist I've been taught to publish the truth. How will the residents react if I uncover uncomplimentary information about the town?"

"I'm sure you'll not find anything derogatory about our citizens, but by all means, publish the truth. You have a free hand," the mayor assured her with a sweep of his arm.

"Any suggestions about where I should start?"

"There are boxes of old papers on the second floor of the *Courier*," Clint said, "left there by the former owners. I've never looked at them, but they should contain much pertinent information."

"You should check the records at the county seat, and we have several cabinets

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full of old church minutes,” Ray Stanford offered. “You would no doubt find those helpful.”

After the meeting adjourned, Clint made his way toward Miss Eliza, who had already taken her coat from the rack and was buttoning the fur collar around her neck. He motioned for Hester to join him.

“Miss Eliza, Hester wants to find a place to stay while she’s here. Would your apartment be available?”

“Certainly. But it’s been vacant a long time. I would need some time to have it cleaned.”

“Belle will bring Hester down tomorrow morning to look at it and see if it’s adequate for her needs.”

As they drove home, Clint said, “The mayor gets carried away, but he means well. He’s in his midfifties, and although he wasn’t born here, he’s become a regular chamber of commerce all by himself. He thinks Afterglow is a Garden of Eden, but we natives know plenty of flaws in our history.”

“How’s the mayor going to react if I do turn up some seamy stories?”

“He’ll be determined that you won’t publish them, that’s what.”

“And I’ll be just as determined that I will. Perhaps I should have a written agreement with the mayor before proceeding any further.”

“It’s advisable.”



The next morning, Belle and Hester drove through town with Belle pointing out landmarks and Ina chattering from her car seat behind them.

“The old hotel is on the left, two blocks west of the *Courier*. When it was built about seventy-five years ago, the springs flowing from the mountainside supposedly produced mineral water. That didn’t prove to be true, but the hotel enjoyed some success until the timber industry petered out about the time World War II started.”

“What about coal mining?”

“There isn’t much coal on this side of the mountains. A few mines were opened up in the county, but their supply of coal was meager. This area is in an economic slump; progress has bypassed us. Without a through road, the tourists haven’t found Afterglow. Rumors have it, however, that the old Brown acreage around the town is being considered for a state park. If that happens, Afterglow’s success would be assured; it would be the only town within the boundaries of the park, which should make it prosperous again. Mayor Stepp believes this centennial celebration will bring tourists to Afterglow, who will return often if the park becomes a reality.”

Belle stopped her car in front of the Byrd boardinghouse, a Victorian dwelling located on the south end of town, and Miss Eliza stepped out on the porch to greet them.

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“My grandfather built this house around the turn of the century,” Miss Eliza explained as she ushered them through a hallway overcrowded with heavy oak furniture popular a century ago and into the large room facing the street. The living room furniture was also Victorian, but newly upholstered, so that the room was inviting and comfortable.

“He started the furniture factory,” Miss Eliza added as she invited her guests to be seated.

“Oh, is there a factory?”

Eliza shook her head. “Not anymore. Ownership passed from our family many years ago, and the last owner couldn’t make enough money to keep it open.”

“Do you have any information on the factory that should be included in the history?”

“I have several things in the attic. And you can interview my father. He’s ninety-five and still alert.”

*Oh, yes. . . the man with the loose false teeth.*

After she contributed more information about the town’s history, Miss Eliza directed them through the wide hall and out onto the back porch. She indicated a small house a few yards away.

“There it is,” she said. “It was originally built by my grandfather as a stable for his horses. He was like Mayor Stepp, always thinking on a large scale. Even though he never owned more than one horse at a time, he built a stable large enough for a cavalry herd. In my youth, we used it for vegetable storage, but my nephew remodeled it into an apartment.”

“I’d like to look inside.”

“It’s open. Help yourself.”

Miss Eliza reached out her arms to take Ina; then Hester and Belle crossed the small backyard to explore the building.

“I was in this apartment a few years ago,” Belle said as she opened the door.

A shivery sensation possessed Hester when she stepped into the room. Of course, the building was unheated, but it seemed that more than cold had caused the shiver. . . almost as if she were stepping back in time. *Is this centennial research getting to me?*

“There hasn’t been any heat in here for years, I’m sure,” Belle said, sniffing. “It will be difficult to remove the musty smell from everything.”

“Except for that, it isn’t so bad,” Hester said as she examined the tiny kitchen with an apartment-sized stove and refrigerator, a table, two chairs, and overhead and base cabinets surrounding the two-bowl sink.

“I’ve considered leaving my home for smaller quarters,” Hester said with a laugh, “so this should make me happy, but I won’t have room to entertain a great deal.”

A bed, nightstand, and a dresser crowded the bedroom, but because of its

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sparse furnishings—a couch, one chair, and two end tables—the living room seemed large. A garishly colored linoleum covered the floor in all the rooms.

“I’ll need a desk, but otherwise, this will do quite well for temporary housing.”

Surveying the sparsely furnished room, Belle said, “There’s plenty of space to move in a desk.”

Hester shivered and pulled her coat closer to her body. “Wonder how the place is heated?”

Belle pointed to a grill on the living room floor. “There’s a gas furnace underneath this room. Only one register, but it should be enough for this small space.”

“I should probably take it,” Hester said, “since you think it’s the best quarters available.” For some reason, she was reluctant to rent this house, but she had to have a place to live.

Belle must have sensed Hester’s hesitation, because she said, “There are other apartments for rent, but this one is the most convenient.”

Before making her decision, Hester asked Miss Eliza about the cost of renting.

“Nothing at all, my dear. You’re doing our town a favor to come here and write this history. You pay the utility bills, and we’ll call it a deal. Give me a couple of days to have the place cleaned and heated, and you can move in.”

With that done, Belle and Ina returned home after leaving Hester at the entrance to city hall. She entered the mayor’s office at his invitation and hearty welcome.

“And what can I do for you today, Miss Hester?” he said after he ushered her to a comfortable chair in front of his tidy desk.

“Before I start working, shouldn’t we have a contract citing my responsibilities as well as the obligations of the town?”

Stapp waved away the suggestion with a languid movement of his hand. “Is that necessary? A gentleman’s agreement is all we usually need in Afterglow.”

“But *I*’m not a gentleman, and I prefer to have a contract.”

“By all means then.” He hastened to please. “You write out what you think is necessary. I’ll have my secretary type it, and we can both sign the agreement. It won’t require much time to take care of the matter.”

Hester considered it preposterous that she be asked to write her own terms, but she took the yellow pad he pushed toward her. She found it difficult to concentrate on the content while the mayor expostulated on the glory of Afterglow and its heritage, but after several erasures and additions, she produced a simple document.

*This agreement is made between the centennial commission of the town of Afterglow and Hester Lawson. Hester Lawson agrees to research and compile a history of the town of Afterglow to be ready for printing within six months of this date, and also to write a centennial drama and direct its*

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*production during the month of October.*

*For her services, Hester Lawson will be paid approximately six thousand dollars, depending upon the cost of printing the book. If Lawson fails to meet the deadlines mentioned in this document, the centennial commission will be under no financial obligation for the unfinished work.*

*The commission also agrees that Miss Lawson will not be restricted in the publication of the true facts that she uncovers in her research.*

Hester handed the rough copy to Mayor Stepp. "I know we hadn't discussed my rate of pay, but I understood that I was to be given the amount of the grant not used for printing. Clint says that the printing costs shouldn't exceed four thousand dollars."

The mayor scanned the agreement, smiled approval, and hustled into his secretary's office. Two copies of the document were soon duly dated and signed, and Hester returned to the Noffsingers' home with her copy.

That night, Clint looked over the agreement. "Looks legal enough to me." Then with a laugh, he cautioned, "But don't underestimate the mayor. He's been known to wiggle out of a bargain if he's displeased with the results."

## Chapter 2

Hester awakened at four o'clock, her usual hour for arising in Detroit so she would be at the office in time to complete work on the early edition. Accustomed to the morning sounds of a city awakening—the delivery trucks, the garbage workers, the street sweepers—the quietness of this mountain village seemed even more thunderous than a city's clamor. After twisting and turning in bed for an hour, she heard a rooster announcing the break of day, and she decided that if it was time for him to be up, she could at least turn on the light.

The frigid room discouraged getting out of bed, so she propped two pillows behind her back and reached for a notebook on the nightstand. She studied the notes that she had made the night before, wondering if she hadn't been presumptuous in agreeing to this assignment and probably foolish to have agreed to be paid only if she completed the history on time. How could she possibly research one hundred years of Afterglow's history from an unreliable source of data, shape her findings into a manuscript suitable for a history, write a drama, and produce it in less than nine months' time? It could not be done. And how could she go about unraveling the mysterious letter addressed to her mother? It had all seemed so simple when she was in Detroit, but now she did not know in which direction to turn.

By the time she heard Clint and Belle stirring and noticed the smell of heat as the furnace warmed her room, she muttered, "I wish I'd never heard of Afterglow." But she had heard of it, and now she had to deal with the assignment she had accepted. Yet, knowing what she had to do did not make it any easier. The room seemed like a prison until Belle tapped on the door to say that Hester could take her turn in the bathroom.

After breakfast, Hester and the Noffsingers lingered over cups of coffee.

"You don't seem to be rested this morning," Belle said with concern. "Are you one of those persons who can't sleep unless you're in your own bed?"

"Usually I can sleep anywhere. But I may as well admit it: I'm terrified of what's before me, and I don't even know how to start."

"Why don't you start by taking a tour of the town?" Belle suggested. "Become acquainted with our fair city."

"That won't take long," Clint said with his one-sided grin. "Afterglow is laid out along the widest part of the river valley. You'll find most of the business district, both past and present, along the one main street, and a few of the businesses

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are on the side streets. The residential area is mainly spread out on the mountainside. Do you want a guide?”

“No, I got my bearings when Belle drove me around yesterday, so I’ll explore on my own.” But remembering her recent experience on the highway, she added, “That is, if it’s safe enough.”

The Noffsingers seemed not to understand until Hester said, “You know what I mean. . . what about muggers or stalkers?”

Clint and Belle laughed simultaneously, and Belle said, “Have you forgotten you’re in Afterglow. . . the place where nothing happens? The last crime we had in this town was when Mayor Stepp’s housekeeper took him for a burglar, hit him over the head with a skillet, and he was admitted to the hospital with a concussion. We don’t even lock our doors at night.”

Hester grinned wryly. “Remember I’m from the big city. How would I know?”

A wail from the bedroom indicated that Ina had awakened, and as Belle went to look after her, Hester said to Clint, “Do you know anyone in Afterglow by the name of Toby?”

Clint thought a moment. “No, I don’t believe so. In the newspaper office, I come across the names of about everyone in town. Is this someone who lives here now or in the past?”

Hester kept her eyes focused on the coffee mug she held in her hands. “I don’t really know. He’s probably a man in his fifties. I’m not sure that he ever lived here. I wonder if there are any other towns named Afterglow?”

“I wouldn’t be surprised, but I don’t know of any.”

Hester had considered telling Clint and Belle about the Toby letter but decided not to because it seemed to cast a shadow on her mother’s character.

“Oh, well, it’s of no matter anyway.” She looked out the window, where the sun had finally peered over the mountain to shed a brilliant light around the Noffsinger home. “How cold is it? Do I need to bundle up?”

Belle entered with Ina in her arms and handed the child to Clint. She looked at the indoor/outdoor thermometer on the wall. “It’s thirty-five degrees now, and there’s a stiff breeze.”

“I had the television on for the early news, and the weatherman said the temperature will reach the midfifties today,” Clint added.

“Then I’ll dress as I would for a brisk walk in Detroit.”

After she helped Belle with the dishes, Hester put on a hooded parka over her sweats and donned heavy socks and fleece-lined boots. A pair of mittens completed her garb. Since it was ten o’clock by then, she said to Belle, “Don’t expect me back for lunch. I’ll find a snack downtown.”

“Have fun. Dinner at six o’clock.”

When Hester stepped out onto the sidewalk, a blast of cold mountain air swept over her, and she breathed deeply. But her lungs were not used to such fresh

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air, and she coughed lustily before she resumed her normal breathing pattern.

A downhill walk soon brought her to Main Street, where she turned left. Many buildings had empty storefronts, but she saw several restaurants, a department store, a couple of bars, some grocery stores, a pharmacy, and even a video shop, post office, and bank. She decided that Afterglow wasn't too far behind the times.

Everybody she met greeted her in some way, and she received many a hearty, "Welcome to Afterglow." Months later when Hester would ponder her sojourn in Afterglow, she would always remember this midday walk as the time when she saw small-town America at its best. Little did she know then that she was destined also to see a small town at its worst. But since she did not suspect that on her first day in Afterglow, she enjoyed her walk.

She looked with appreciation at the three-story Grand Hotel across the street from the abandoned train station. Built of red brick in the Renaissance Revival style, the hotel was by far the most pretentious building in town, and Hester thought what a pity to have it vacant but realized that the small motel she had seen down by the covered bridge could probably house Afterglow's few transients.

An elderly man passing by paused and said to her, "The hotel was built in 1915 to take care of train passengers. The ballroom on the second floor is unique, with fancy carvings, velvet draperies, and old-country murals painted by an Italian who came here to work in the woods. He wasn't any good at lumbering, but he sure had a talent with the brush. My father said the dances they used to have there were a sight to behold."

"I suppose the building would need a lot of repair now."

"Not too much, ma'am. Probably some cleaning and painting would do wonders. Good day to you," he said as he tipped his hat and went on his way.

The street ended abruptly as the valley narrowed, leaving only enough room for the railroad, long since abandoned. Hester's eyes followed the path of the ancient steel rails to a branch line that curved up the mountain about a mile down the valley before the main tracks entered a tunnel.

She turned and continued her walk on the opposite side of the street, and after she passed the city hall and the newspaper office, she wandered down a side street toward a set of low buildings on the riverbank. HARDWOOD FURNITURE FACTORY was written in faded letters over the door of one of the buildings. Hester peered through the windows, but she saw nothing, and abandoned further investigation when she stuck her face into a mass of cobwebs.

The brisk walk had warmed her, and Hester unzipped her parka and sauntered toward the statue in the middle of Main Street. She took a notebook from her pocket and copied the inscription, only part of which she had been able to read when she had entered town.

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## AFTERGLOW

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HEZEKIAH BROWN, 1835–1915  
 FOUNDER OF AFTERGLOW  
 ENTREPRENEUR, PHILANTHROPIST, CIVIL WAR VETERAN  
 ERECTED BY THE GRATEFUL CITIZENS OF AFTERGLOW

Nearby, the sun highlighted the spire of a buff-colored brick church facing the river. Hester walked up the six steps and pushed on the door, which opened at her touch. The sanctuary looked as if it would seat more than two hundred worshipers, which Afterglow may have had in its heyday. Stained-glass windows depicted famous episodes from the Bible, and the vaulted ceiling and the pipe organ were reminiscent of European cathedrals. Hester wondered how a small town could have financed this magnificent church until she saw the plaque in the foyer.

THIS HOUSE OF WORSHIP IS DEDICATED TO ITS BENEFACTOR,  
 HEZEKIAH BROWN,  
 WHO BEQUEATHED A HALF-MILLION DOLLARS  
 TO THE CONGREGATION

Hester whistled. “Let’s see,” she calculated, “when did Brown die?” She checked her notebook: 1915. That had been quite a large bequest in that day, so it was little wonder that Afterglow revered its founder.

She eased down onto a pew. She had missed her daily devotional period this morning, so she sat in the quiet of the sanctuary for several minutes to allow her spiritual life to catch up with the rest of her body. She focused on the window depicting Jesus calming the angry waves, and the words below the scene, “Peace, be still,” helped to dispel her frustrations over the writing projects she had accepted.

Leaving the building more spiritually alert than she had been for months, Hester passed by Miss Eliza’s boardinghouse, and she waved to a cane-supported elderly gentleman on the porch. Wind-wafted streams of condensation escaped from the vent pipe of the small house she had rented, and she assumed the place was being readied for her. *Maybe my stint in Afterglow won’t be so bad, after all.*

When her stomach and watch reminded Hester that it was past one o’clock, she entered the first restaurant she found and sat in a booth.

Menus were not available, but a middle-aged waitress called to her from behind the counter. “Chili with corn bread is today’s special, but I can fix you a hot dog or a hamburger if you’d rather.”

“The chili and corn bread sounds good, and I’ll take a large cola, too.”

Two men sat at the counter with coffee cups before them. They looked at Hester curiously and spoke in friendly fashion. The door opened to admit a man she had seen at the centennial commission meeting, and he headed her way.

“Mind if I join you, Hester?”

## APPALACHIA

Hester smiled and indicated the bench opposite her while her mind floundered. *Which one was he?*

"I've been on a tour of the town this morning to get my bearings."

"I saw you leave the church. Sorry I wasn't there to greet you."

*Oh, yes, the pastor of the church, Ray Stanford.*

"A beautiful building. I was amazed to find such grandeur in Afterglow until I noted the dedication plaque."

"After Brown remembered the church in his will, the congregation tore down the original log building and built the present structure."

"How long have you been the pastor?"

"Ten years. I'm a native of Afterglow. My family moved away when I was a teenager, but when I graduated from seminary, I applied for the position and was accepted. I'd missed the mountains."

The waitress hadn't even asked Ray what he wanted, but when she brought Hester's order, she set a bowl of chili, corn bread, and coffee in front on him.

When he noted Hester's questioning look, he smiled. "I'm here every day at noon, and I let Sadie choose my lunch. She knows what I like by now, anyway. I've been a widower for a couple of years, and while I can rustle up a pretty good meal, I'm usually too busy to cook. We don't have many ministers in the area, and I always have plenty to do."

"You know everyone in town, I suppose?"

"Just about. We don't have many newcomers."

"Do you know anyone by the name of Toby?"

"I don't believe so. Tommy Byrd used to live here, and I've known some Tonys and at least one Troy, but no Tobys. A friend of yours?"

"No, a friend of my mother's." His glance was speculative, but Hester changed the subject hurriedly to forestall further queries. "I'm full of questions after my morning's tour. Which house belonged to Hezekiah Brown?"

"Brown had a residence on the mountain close to his timbering industry. His heirs didn't choose to live there, so the building is in ruins now. But back to your question about a Toby. Could it be a Tubby you're looking for? That's Mayor Stepp's nickname. Of course, now that he's our eminent mayor, we try not to use that name in connection with him."

Hester lifted a hand to her burning face and sipped hurriedly on her cola. *Just my luck to have Mayor Stepp turn out to be my father.* She would have to check that signature again.

Clint Noffsinger entered the restaurant and moved toward them. Ray scooted over in the seat, and Clint sat beside him.

"Through for the day?" Ray asked.

"Yes. The presses are rolling, so I've done all I can do."

The waitress brought Clint a cup of coffee, and he smiled his thanks at her.