

Hopes,
Dreams
and
Reality

by
Karen GoatKeeper

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ISBN-13:

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Part

One

Storm

Warning

Day 1 How Big Is It?

“Hey, Mindy. What can I get you today?”

“Hi, Lee. Say, what have you heard about that storm?”

“It’s big and headed our way. A lot of flooding and damage comes with it.”

“It scares me. You know that creek bottom floods with six inches of rain. Let’s make it two sacks of egg crumbles, sunflower seeds, three scratch feed, three range cubes, five oats and two dog food.”

“Planning to be flooded in a while?”

“Might as well. Oh, add a mineral block and a goat block.” I take some bills out of the bank envelope I’d picked up earlier. A stab of guilt reminds me I cashed the September budget check a week early without asking Justin first. A slip comes out with an account balance on it. I’m close to overdrawn? Justin hadn’t transferred money into the checking account yet. Not like him. I’d ask him about it tonight.

“Maybe that storm will miss us,” comments Lee as he hands me my change.

“We can hope. Either way, I’ll use the feed.”

We go out to the room stacked with various feeds. Lee loads mine into the back of my pickup. “Stay safe out there.”

“Justin’s due in tonight. Maybe he’ll stay until after.”

“He’ll have to, if it floods. You shouldn’t be out there alone.”

“Suppose so. I like being out there. No nosy neighbors. See you in a few weeks.”

“Morning, Mindy,” calls the librarian.

“Morning, Carol,” I answer as I sign in to use the computers. Internet at the house stinks so I don’t have it and use the library computers.

“People Rescued From Rooftops” “Thousands Without Power” “Record Rainfalls!”

Flooding reports about the Category 5 hurricane turned tropical storm dominate the news. Rain amounts are unreal. I stare at pictures of roads filled with water half way up cars. Aerial shots show suburbs with house roofs like islands in a lake. My stomach knots.

After reading and answering a few emails, I type in the address for a weather service I like. Today’s weather is perfect August weather: hot, dry, scattered showers. Tomorrow is more of the same. It’s the ten day outlook that worries me.

That storm is due three days from now bringing lots of rain, ten inches and more for three days. The knot is now a cold lump in my stomach. I’ll, we’ll be stuck for a couple of weeks. If the storm comes in early, I’ll get Justin to myself for two weeks, maybe more, instead of just a day.

I’ll need some reading material. “Hey, Carol, can you renew a book for me, if I can’t make it in?”

“Sure, Mindy. I’ll put it on the calendar.”

Three weeks will be six books. I find four on the sale table and check out two feeling a bit guilty as I have a stash at home from a book sale to read. Maybe I’ll get a couple of them read too, if I’m stuck that long.

The pile of feed in the pickup bed is reassuring. Hungry, wet livestock is not good. Me being hungry and wet is not good either. On to the market.

Half the town must be in the parking lot. I end up parking way out at the far end. It’s not that I don’t usually park farther out, just not that far. The local paper lists accidents

in town and parking lot ones are common. Someone backs into someone else. No bumper car incidents for me.

Inside the store I dodge other shoppers loading their carts. Shelves look like locusts have been by. It's not that I don't have food at home. There's milk from my goats, eggs from my chickens and produce from my garden.

Well, I did have produce. The deer discovered my garden and a four-foot fence is a joke. I'd expected that in the orchard and put up a six-foot fence. Now I'm putting up a six-foot fence around the garden.

There's meat and produce in the freezer. That won't help me if the storm knocks the power out. I scour the store shelves for cans of corn, peas, spinach, fruit and beans. Fresh fruit and vegetables will last a week or so. Potatoes last longer. I snag the last bag of cat food and jug of litter. I definitely don't want to share the house with a hungry cat. It's a different brand from usual so I add some cans of cat food to disguise it. There aren't many of those to choose from either so Sassy will have to get over not having her favorites.

After packing the sacks of groceries in my truck, I head for the gas station glad I filled the tractor tank and brought the diesel can to fill plus an old, dented one. Justin doesn't let me use the tractor much while he's home. He doesn't think I'm big enough and I'm a woman. I do use it when he's off driving a rig cross country.

There's a line as people fill large gas containers, probably to use in generators. We'd talked about getting a generator after the first time the electricity went off. Justin decided not to get one.

The pickup has a full tank and I have the extra cans of diesel in the bed when I leave the station. I go down my mental list and stop at another store to add extra items like batteries, matches and another bag of cat food in case I'm stranded longer than usual. Everything seems covered so I head for home.

The truck rolls down a couple of residential streets with trimmed expanses of grass and some large yard trees trimmed away from the electric lines. Leaving town behind for a paved road lined by grassy, weedy ditches lined by yellow sunflower type flowers, I find I am humming, even singing a few lines of Justin's favorite song. He'll be home tonight.

My last turn takes the truck onto my gravel road. No matter how many times the grader comes by, the gravel is rough. It crunches under the tires. Vibrations jounce me slightly in the seat adding rhythm to my offkey humming. I pass a couple of houses and a road going off toward some hills.

A mile further on the road descends into the creek bottom. Hills line one side of the road. On the other side, flat expanses extend off toward the creek flowing in front of more hills. Where hills end ravines come down to the road and huge culverts run under the road to carry off rainwater. Big, old trees line the road making the road a green tunnel although a few yellow tints are sneaking in now it's mid-August.

The flat expanses were cleared for pasture. A couple of old houses and barns collapsing into the ground mark where families once lived. Some fields are rented out to ranchers wanting to run cattle. These have brush growing up as renters have little incentive to brush hog to keep it out and they stop leasing them when the brush gets too thick. A few are cut for hay and are still nice.

I roll over six culverts before coming to the first of the two by the house. I'm the only one living down here now, seven miles out near the end of the gravel road, ten miles

from town. There's a place beyond me, but no one lives there and I've never seen anyone go there. I turn into my driveway revving the engine so the truck pulls up the slope and into the yard, a flat expanse left when the top of a hill was bulldozed off.

Unloading feed comes first. I back up to the barn and turn off the engine. Letting the chickens out to forage on grass trumps even unloading.

"All right, everyone, I'm home. Gate's open." The flock tumbles out of the gate and spreads out across the yard. This bugs Justin, but makes for great eggs.

In the milk room a line of metal trash cans used as feed barrels to thwart the mice holds my weekly feed. Each barrel holds three sacks of feed, but only two oats and one each of the others fit in them now. I'm left with sacks of scratch, cubes, oats and dog food to set in a corner I hope will be out of the way.

Groceries are next. These too overload my storage capacity. Unlike feed sacks, cans are mouse proof. There seems to be a never-ending supply of mice moving into the house, faster than Sassy can catch them. They have too many hiding places.

After changing into work clothes, I head out to the barn to begin evening chores. "Beautiful evening," I tell myself as I pause to take a few deep breaths. "No diesel fumes. No traffic." The sky is clear. The air is cozily warm. A slight breeze is blowing from the southeast. "You'd never think a big storm is coming." I shrug, set down the milk pail and tote in the milk room and get a bucket of range cubes. Each steer gets half a scoop making four scoops.

My eight feeder steers don't need the cubes. They have good grass and put on plenty of weight over the summer. The cubes are an easy way to lure them into the barn and corral.

I walk down the driveway, then a dozen yards down the road and across to the cow pasture gate. By the time I'm in the pasture jog trotting toward the barn, the steers are running over to the barn except for one that targets me, really the bucket. "Don't you dare!" I warn the steer now following close behind me, nose reaching out toward the bucket.

The trick is to race into the open-faced barn at one end and behind the three troughs along the inner wall dribbling the cubes in and getting out the other side before the steers move in. When I buy the steers in the spring, this isn't much of a problem as they are only two hundred fifty to three hundred pounds each. By August they are close to six hundred pounds each with their backs almost to my five foot four height. I do have a stick to wave to keep them at bay, but it's hard to dribble cubes and wave the stick at the same time. I keep moving the troughs out enough to walk behind them, but the steers keep pushing them back.

These steers will be sold in October. I've done this for four years now and made some money at it. I might make more holding them over a year and selling them as meat. Then I would be feeding hay during cold weather and I'm not thrilled with that idea.

Once the steers are busy eating, I walk back into the barn. The steers lick up the last cubes as I look them over. All of them look great. Today I walk back out of the barn on the creek side. "This pasture is awfully low, only a couple of feet above the creek. Those low areas over there hold water in a big storm. And they say this one will be a lot bigger."

The steers are following me toward the creek. Cows are curious about anything new. Besides, I'm still carrying a bucket which must refill magically. I stand looking down into the creek bed toward the creek.

What would happen with ten inches of rain a day for three days? Six inches in one day brings the creek up and lapping at the edges of the pasture. The whole pasture might be underwater. Where would the steers go?

The bucket bangs into me. "Hey, you, it's empty. Back off."

Justin is due in any time, first time in three weeks. I half trot back over to the goat barn for a scoop of scratch feed to entice the chickens back into their coop. It doesn't work on a late town day like today, but it's habit. A few run over to peck up the grain. I will have to come out later to lock their door and yard gate.

My six goats are crossing the bridge into the barn lot when I get back to the barn. I close the barn lot gate behind them. They mob the door to the milk room eager to eat. "Move over," I insist while shoving them aside. "You can't get in until I'm through the door." I squeeze between them and back into the milk room closing the door in their faces.

Glancing around the milk room, everything is in order. I let the first two goats in to run over and jump on their milkstands. It doesn't take long to milk the six, put out some hay and get back in the house.

Justin should be here soon now. I put up the milk, then get out a couple of steaks, his favorite meal. Some fried potatoes and a vegetable will finish out the menu. I baked his favorite cake yesterday. Everything's ready to cook so I sit down and open a book to wait until he gets home.

A couple of chapters later I'm still waiting. Maybe he called when I was at the barn. No message on the answering machine. Maybe he had problems, traffic, a flat tire? I flip on the outside lights as dusk is darkening the yard, race out to lock the chicken's door and gate and back in. I sit down with my book trying to ignore my stomach.

The phone rings when I'm half through the next chapter. Jamming the bookmark in, I drop the book on the table and pounce on the phone. "Hello, Justin? What happened? Where are you?"

"I'm still in St. Louis and won't be coming this time. I guess I should've called earlier. Sorry."

"Nothing happened to you. That's a relief."

"You know about the storm? You should get out of there before it hits."

"I'm staying here. I brought in three weeks worth of feed, groceries. The livestock needs tending. We'll be fine. Oh, I took out the money for September early as I was getting the extra feed and the account is pretty low."

"That place and the livestock are too expensive. All it's good for is work and spending money with no return. And it's a trap in a big storm. Have you seen the forecasts?"

"I saw them today. I'll be safe up on this hill. So will the livestock."

"That place is a real dud, a disaster. The road floods. The electric goes out. No cell service. It's a trap. I want to sell it."

"I don't."

"You could come back on the road with me. I miss my partner. The company pays plenty for team drivers. We could afford a really nice place in four or five years."

"This is a nice place."

"It's a dud. Isolated. Lousy road. I miss you."

"I'm done driving."

"You loved driving. All you need is to get back on the road again."

“No. I want a home and a family. We can’t have that if I’m driving.”

“There’s time for a family in a few years, after we have money. I grew up with hand-me-downs, wondering if I’d eat at night. No child of mine will grow up like that.”

“Justin, I’m pushing thirty. A few years from now might be too late.”

“That isn’t the place. We need to sell it, try again somewhere else. Think about it. We can do a lot better. I’ll call tomorrow night about this time. Bye.”

“Bye.” The phone goes dead. I put it down and sink back into the chair. Sell the place? My body goes numb.

We bought the place five years ago to raise a family, retire from driving. I was tired of driving, always being on the move. It wasn’t the first place or even the sixth or seventh we looked at. The pastures were overgrown. The house and barn needed repair. It was old Mrs. Watson’s pictures of the place when her husband was alive and able to care for it that got us to buy it, me really.

Fixing the place up took lots of work and money. Justin missed driving and hated being tied down. A family could wait. He went back to driving.

I do get lonely with him on the road so much. No cell service is a bother, but the cordless helps. Sassy and the goats are company. I miss him.

Wiping away some tears, I get up and cook a steak with potatoes and veggies for me. The rest will make dinner tomorrow night. Sassy appears sniffing the aroma of steak.

“You appreciate my cooking. We’re on our own for now.”

If Justin forces the sale of the place, what will happen to Sassy? My gray cat is my best friend here. He won’t allow pets in the cab. That will send her to the shelter and she’s not a cute kitten. I shake my head to throw such thoughts away for now and open my book to read over dinner. Sassy lays on my lap accepting small nuggets of steak.

My plate is empty of food and in the way of my book. My knees are stiff from the weight of cat on them. Sassy protests as I push her onto the floor to get up and clean up. That leaves my mind playing over Justin’s call.

He said he missed me. I miss him too. He had wanted a family too. Or had he? I wanted to believe he did. He did say to wait. I definitely don’t want to go back to driving. What can I do, if the place is sold?

I met Justin when I was a sophomore in college studying ecology. He was the tall, dark and handsome guy: dark brown hair with blue eyes; a big laugh; love of going places and seeing things like parks and museums; a good, exciting job taking him all over the country. We hit it off. I dropped out of college and we got married. I went to driving school and joined him on the road for five years. So now the only skill I have is driving and I don’t enjoy it anymore.

Now my home is here. I love it here. I know some people here. I’m happy here.

The dishes done, I want my mind to stop worrying at this mess. I rummage through the shelf of DVDs to pick out a thriller. It starts as I settle into my recliner trying to ignore the empty one beside mine. Sassy makes a beeline for me and is up before I am quite settled. I hug her and let her settle onto my lap. Even the thriller doesn’t hide the empty feeling inside.

Day 2 Sell?

“Staying up so late was stupid. Sassy, you slept well, didn’t have any worries about being homeless, did you? I need coffee.”

I crawl out of bed and get dressed. Time to start the day.

The radio blares: “Storm warnings are in effect for all of central Missouri starting tomorrow night. Anyone in a low-lying area should evacuate. This storm has high winds, dangerous lightning, large amounts of rain. This warning runs for four days. Expect flooding and power outages.”

“Tomorrow night? That gives me two days. Milking time.”

A few puffy clouds are tinged with pink over the hills behind the creek as I walk toward the barn. Standing on the steps to the milkroom door I turn to look over at them again. Now they are a bright pink against a deep blue sky.

Off in the distance a barred owl calls *Who cooks for you, who cooks for you all?* I smile finding the saying fits the call in syllables, if not in sounds. The air is cool with a hint of autumn. My smile fades as memory kicks in. Can I leave this? Should I leave this? I don’t want to.

“All you want to do now is sell. What if I refuse? Is this a choice between the place and you? Please don’t make it a choice. There must be a way to keep on as we have been.”

Inside the milkroom, I flip on the lights, set the milk pail and tote on the counter and open the oat barrel. Through the door to the barn comes the grunting and moaning sounds Nubian goats make as they sleep. These disappear when the door is opened and two scramble to their feet to charge the door.

Precious and Priscilla are always eager to be first to the grain. They leap onto the milkstands and I put out their food. Fastening the stanchion isn’t necessary most of the time, but I do it anyway, just in case. Goats startle easily.

“I know he thinks you are a waste of time and money,” I tell Priscilla as I milk her. “I don’t. I guess you won’t have to worry as he won’t be coming back here again. Maybe you should worry. What will happen to you, if he sells the place?”

Precious is half through her feed as I start milking her. “I’m glad to be here. I wanted a home, a family and bugged him until he said he did too. Did he say that just to shut me up? We did save up to buy the place.”

I pour the milk into the tote. As the goats are finishing their grain, I run my hands over their sleek backs. Their brown fur is so soft. Precious is a golden brown like my hair. Priscilla is almost blond.

When I open the door to let these two out, four heads vie to get in. Precious shoves these eager goats out of her way and goes out closely followed by Priscilla. That lets Gem and Topaz slide in before the traffic jam locks in again. I put feed in front of them and start milking making sure to start with Gem as she is a vacuum cleaner inhaling her grain.

“Why did I want a place so badly? I guess it’s because girls are supposed to want marriage and family. That’s what my father told me.”

I switch goats. Topaz savors her oats. “Do I really want a family? I do want to stay here. It’s so nice to hear the birds instead of engines all the time. You know, Justin loves driving, loves the engines, the roads. He gave them up for this place for two years.”

After pouring the milk in the tote, I run my hand down the backs of these goats. Gem is a smoky gray with tiny white diamonds scattered on her sides. Topaz is deep red. As I let them out, I wonder if I could find material or blouses colored like them.

Only two heads crowd the door now. Gem and Topaz slither out between my two black goats. I had a hard time telling Hope and Jewel apart at first. Hope has long black ears edged in brown and Jewel has frosted or white ears and nose and a white cap on her head. These two are slow eaters.

“Morning, Hope. Wish you could tell me what to do. I know what my father would tell me. Give the place up. A good wife stays with her husband doing what he tells her to do.”

I switch goats. “Well, Jewel, I don’t know if I believe a wife’s dreams don’t count. My college friends thought that was nuts. I want to be a good wife. I love my husband. But I love it here and you too.”

I’d believed animals were just animals until I got the goats and chickens. Each goat has her own personality. They show affection to each other sometimes and to me, especially if I have food.

Milking is done. Chickens are next. “The place is kind of far out. But not that far. And the town’s nice. True, there’s no cell service and the road floods and it can be a week until it’s fixed and the power goes out. I guess you do have a point.”

I watch my flock pop out of their door and into their yard. The hens attack the scattered grain. The rooster struts out and crows before calling hens over to where he has found grain for them to eat.

“You show off. Chickens aren’t hard to sell, I suppose. I’d be stuck using those pale things from the market. Or I would when I got to cook. I’d have to put all my things back in storage.”

Walking back to the barn I see the clouds are blazing white against a pale blue summer sky. The sun has topped the trees over the eastern hills. Sunlight highlights trees on the western hills as it creeps down toward the yard.

Gathering up several flakes of hay, I go out into the main barn to stuff it into the hay trough. The goats run over to check it out. “If Justin makes me sell, where will you go? He’ll send you to the sale barn for the meat buyers. How do I send my friends to be goatburger?”

Arlo, my livestock guardian dog, comes over for attention. Together we walk out of the barn and across to the gate leading to the bridge. We walk part way across and I stare down into the ravine.

There are two ravines, one on each side of the house hill. Their deep vee shape goes down at least ten feet. Right now, the ravine is dry. A six-inch rain puts a torrent two or so feet deep pouring down it toward the road culvert. “How much rain would it take to fill this thing up? Arlo, I don’t really want to know the answer to that.”

We walk back to the barn. The goats are done eating hay. Half is left for later as they head for the door. Browse up in the hill pasture is so much better than hay in their opinion.

I close up the feed barrels and gather up the pail and tote. Milking times can be hectic. Usually, they are a quiet time with a regular routine. I look forward to being with the goats either planning out my day or relaxing at the end of it, the bookends of my day. The milk is an added delicious bonus.

Town is a trip I won't be making until after the storm. There are a couple of people who get milk from me, but not until then. This milk gets strained and refrigerated for cheese in a day or two. After the rain starts and I can't go out.

Justin is right about one thing. There's always something to be built or repaired around the place. "Today's project is finishing the garden fence," I tell myself as I put a handful of oatmeal, some raisins and milk in a bowl. The bowl goes in the microwave for a minute.

My college roommate clued me in on microwave oatmeal. The fancy stuff in the market costs a fortune. This is as good, well, a bit crunchier and a lot cheaper.

The radio news is winding up. "Parts of central Arkansas have broken all time rainfall records with areas receiving twelve inches in the last twenty-four hours. The Arkansas River is approaching flood stage. Flooding and power outages are widespread. The storm continues to move north."

Two days. I have two days to get ready. Justin wants me to leave. Where would I go? There is no place to go. I have feed and food. The house and barn are on a hill. "I'm staying."

After breakfast, I walk out to the garden. Two rolls each a hundred feet long of six foot tall one by two inch welded wire fence lie there. These are heavy, difficult to put up. I stare at them.

"What's the point? If we sell the place, the garden will become a weed patch. All my work on it will be a waste of time."

The orchard next to the garden is surrounded by the same six foot wire. The trees look good. They're several years old and my first crop of Red Delicious are just getting ripe.

"I'm not leaving." I open the first roll of wire and unroll enough to start putting it up. Justin helped with the other fencing and it went up quickly. This will not be fast.

One thing about this wire, it is stiff. Once I get the end of it fastened on the new, tall posts I put in last week, the rest of the wire flips up into place across the front of the garden with little effort on my part.

Getting around the corner is another story. Even with half the roll unrolled, the remainder is heavy, clumsy, infuriating to move around the bend. And the roll is used up half way down the side of the garden.

The second roll is maneuvered into place and unrolled part way. I stand the end up and fasten it to the post where the last roll ended. I use a foot to shove the roll to unroll a little more. Except the ground is sloping down. The roll gathers speed and goes off the edge of the ravine. "Drat. Now what do I do?"

I put up the fencing to almost complete that side of the garden leaving the back not done. And the fencing is down in the ravine tangled in brambles with their multitudes of thorns, curved and sharp, waiting for anything or anyone to go by. "It's lunch time." I walk back to the house.

After lunch, I stare down at the wire. An experimental tug had the expected result. The wire didn't move. There is no way I can roll it back up the slope even if I wanted to brave all those thorns. "Tractor time. I walk over to the tractor shed and back it out.

Backing the tractor down the six foot wide runway behind the orchard and garden, I stop a short way from where the fence goes down into the ravine. We'd left this strip in case the edges eroded in some flood and so we had room to work on the fence without balancing on the ravine edge.

I toss the hooked end of a log chain down over the wire and pull. It pulls up. I try again. And again. It finally catches. Fastening this to the tractor, I chug down the way. The wire comes up dragging brambles with it.

Turning the tractor off and leaving it sitting there, I walk around the orchard fence, around into the yard and back to where I can push up and fasten the new garden fence. The bramble branches catch my hands as I pull them out of the wire and toss them back into the ravine.

It's late and nearly time for chores before I get done. I leave the wire, release the chain and drive the tractor back to its shed. Next stop is the house to clean up and gather my milking equipment.

For some reason I will never understand, the goats come bouncing in ready to eat their grain without my calling them. Milking goes fast. Even the chickens run back in their pen when I call. I still have daylight left. I put up the rest of the fence. It comes out a few inches short of the orchard fence. I'll tie it together with wire another day.

Sassy hangs around the kitchen as I cook up the second steak. The phone rings as I am putting food on my plate. I pick it up and sit down in my chair. "Justin?"

"Hi, Mindy. I'm headed for L.A. tomorrow, taking I-70 ahead of the storm. Have you seen the reports?"

"They were on the news. Central Arkansas is flooded. It's moving into northern Arkansas."

"I watched it on the motel TV. No clouds there?"

"The sky's clear, the clouds pink tonight. Lovely day."

"You need to get away from that place before it gets there. We need to sell it. Too isolated. Storms strand you. No electricity. No water. Horrible place."

"I have plenty of feed and groceries to last me several weeks. The buildings are up on a hill. I'll be fine. The animals will be fine."

"Reports say cities will be weeks getting power on. That's a small town. You'll be stranded, alone, for who knows how long. We need to sell. I need you with me again."

"I don't want to drive again."

"Why not? You were good. We had lots of fun on layovers. Remember Yellowstone? And Grand Canyon?"

"We did have fun sightseeing."

"You were the one who found the interesting places to go."

"Those are good memories."

"Let's do it again. Get rid of that place. All it does is eat money, time and work. It will never pay for itself. The company needs drivers. We can make lots of money in a couple of years. Find a better place then."

"I like this place. It has lots of possibilities like the feeder cattle."

"And, if you lose one, you lose any profit. If you lose two, you're in the hole. And the house is old and needs repairs. It all takes money. Money you take from me and my driving."

"The place can bring in some money."

"Not enough."

"I suppose not."

"You stay there playing homesteader while I go out working. And you expect me to pay for it? I'm tired of paying for you to stay there playing."

"I'm not playing. You know how much work it takes here."

“Too much. We need to sell. We can see more places, find a better place to buy, a place we both like.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“All we need, really, is a place to crash for a few days. Forget the livestock. It ties you down. We wanted to go places, see things.”

“I was tired of always being on the move. I like staying here, the livestock, the routine.”

“I’ve got to go. I’ll call you tomorrow night. Bye.”

“Bye.” The phone is dead in my hand. I set it down on the table. My meal is cold so I reheat it in the microwave and sit down to eat. Sassy gets more than her share of the steak.

Justin is right. I’ve been using money from his driving to pay for everything on the place. So many things needed fixing, replacing or building after years of neglect. It took money. Money I wasn’t earning and didn’t have. Well, I did have money stashed from when I drove. I’m using that too, but it won’t last forever. Justin keeps the finances and he would know.

If I did start driving again and we kept the place, no one would be here. Things would fall apart again. The animals would have to be sold. What am I to do? If I don’t agree to sell, what happens to us? Do I lose Justin? I bury my head in my arms and let the tears fall.

It’s the middle of the night when I wake up. My shoulders are stiff. My feet and legs are cold. I stand up teetering, holding onto the edge of the table as I take tentative steps toward the bathroom blinking sleep from my eyes.

I get ready for bed and crawl in under a blanket. August nights are too warm for a blanket, but I’m cold. It’s not long before I’m too hot and fling the blanket off. Sleep has fled. My mind is racing: Sell the place. Go back to driving. I don’t want to. I need money. Sell the place. Start driving. Don’t want to. How do I pay the bills? Sell the place or lose Justin. I love him. Sell the place. What about Sassy? Where will the goats go? Be sensible. Sell the place. I love it here.

To Sassy’s disgust, the sheet follows the blanket and I get up. The dinner dishes need washing. What’s on the radio? Nothing I want to listen to. Something to turn the mind off.

The dishes done, I grab the blanket, wrap up and settle into my recliner to watch a favorite romantic comedy. My mind relaxes. I wake to the opening music behind the main menu. I crawl back in bed and close my eyes.