

Chapter One

“Old Girl”

My life changed forever on a bright May morning, the year I turned sixty-five.

Steven and I had just begun our usual Saturday hike, with him in the lead, when he called out, “Hurry up, Old Girl.”

I gritted my teeth and straightened the straps on my backpack. “Right behind you,” I muttered as I sprinted after him, careless of the bumps and holes in the parking lot asphalt.

My husband had started calling me “Old Girl” back when we were dating, after he learned I was born four years before him. I laughed about it then, but lately it annoyed me, and he knew it. Over thirty-eight years of marriage, a lot of things about him had annoyed me, but most of them weren’t *personal*.

At the trailhead, he turned and smiled at me, and my irritation eased off. It was a glorious May morning, a perfect start for our hike to the top of Griffith Park. Much of Los Angeles was just waking up as we set out, early sunlight kissing the back of my neck.

I let my thoughts wander as I followed Steven, keeping part of my attention on the trail so I didn’t stumble. One of our sometime hiking companions had broken her seventy-year-old hip in a fall the summer before. My own left hip had been complaining, and my doctor had

hinted at a replacement. I hated the idea and put off deciding, but a fall would have decided for me.

We stopped at the water tower to rehydrate and catch our breath, and often I needed the break more than Steven. That morning, though—maybe it was the scent of spring in the air—I wasn't winded.

Then we tackled the aptly-named Cardiac Hill, the most challenging part of the climb where I knocked myself breathless every time.

Steven seemed to be going more slowly than usual, and where the trail made a sharp upward left, I overtook him. Before I realized it, I'd reached the level patch at the foot of the gentler grade up to the sixteen-hundred-foot Mt. Hollywood summit.

I heard Steven panting behind me, and my mean-spirited self couldn't help but relish the sound. *Who's the Old Girl now, Steven?*

I kept going, and when I couldn't hear him behind me anymore, I turned to see if he'd gotten his second wind. For an instant I couldn't make sense of what I saw: Steven, doubled over, hands on his knees, his faded jeans and red t-shirt the only color on the wide, dusty trail—except his face, which was an alarming shade of purple.

No! Nonononono! This can't be happening.

I blinked hard, but the scene didn't change. *What should I do?* I couldn't move, couldn't even think for a few agonizing seconds before I broke through the paralysis of shock and fumbled for my cell phone as I ran toward Steven. Who to call? *Do I dial 9-1-1? No—the park rangers! Where's their damned number? I know I put it in here!*

Steven snatched the phone away from me. "I'm okay," he gasped. "Just... let... me... breathe... for... a... minute."

Sweat dripped from his forehead, but his sides quit heaving. I throttled my panic as his color faded to its usual ruddy tone.

I yanked a water bottle from my backpack. "Good God, Steven. What the hell happened?" I handed it to him and grabbed my phone back while he gulped water.

"Go sit on that rock, Steven. I'm calling the rangers."

"No." He took another deep drink.

"Then we're going back."

"I'm fine," he panted. "Anyway, we're almost there."

Typical Steven. Now that my heartbeat had quit thundering in my ears, I could consider my options. Let him continue to the summit and risk another episode of whatever-it-had-been. Or start back down and pray he would follow.

“You are not *fine*. You scared me half to death. I thought you were having a heart attack.”

“No,” he said again, and then he glared at me. “Jesus, Diane. You were going so damned *fast*. What got into you?”

Oh, sure. Blame me. “Was I? It didn’t feel like I was.”

“You were. Believe me.”

He was breathing normally by then, and I couldn’t help a gentle jab to his arm. “Maybe you were going so damned *slow*.”

He didn’t reply but turned and trudged toward the summit, where a cluster of picnic tables waited. I hoped he’d sit down and rest, but he didn’t. He walked to the outer edge of the clearing and stood, hands on hips, taking in the view. I followed him, spread my arms and let the breeze dry my sweat, grateful our Saturday morning hadn’t turned tragic. Los Angeles fanned out below us, pristine and innocent in the morning light.

I took hold of his arm and leaned into him. “Mr. Resilient,” I said. He chuckled and bumped his head gently against mine.

I broke out a bag of trail mix and offered it to him, but he waved it away. I took a few bites, then popped out a second water bottle, since he’d almost drained the first. He didn’t look at me when I offered it to him but kept his gaze on the distance.

What was he thinking? I was pretty sure I knew. Steven had more than his share of manly pride, and in his mind at least, it must have been breached.

My husband was intensely competitive, in sports, business, and life in general. He liked to win—a good trait in a lawyer. But he never won by cheating, and he rarely gloated. He coached our son Jeff’s Little League team to victory three years in a row, but not by intimidation. Playing cards with him could suck, though.

“Okay,” he said after a few minutes contemplating the urban sprawl below. “Let’s head back.”

No lollygagging for us today, but I already knew that. Steven had

brought home a thick folder of legal documents for review and commentary. As *the* Devlin in Jernigan, DeWitt, Royce and Devlin, he was lead counsel on a contentious copyright infringement case soon to go to trial, and the work had consumed him for weeks.

We went down Cardiac side by side, mindful of loose rocks coating the trail, and me mulling over my new take on that trail's name.

Steven nudged me. "Gonna share your new vitamins with me, Di?"

I let out a long exhale. "Same old stuff. I just felt extra peppy this morning. Maybe I took a double dose by mistake. You know us senior citizens can be forgetful."

He put his hand on the back of my neck and squeezed gently. "You do pretty good for an old broad."

Ouch. I pulled away from him. "Sure wish Elsa could still come with us."

Elsa, our twelve-year-old German shepherd, had accompanied us on our hikes until recently; arthritis was crippling her joints. My gallant girl never complained, but I *knew* she was suffering. We started her on Rimadyl, which eased the pain, but the vet discouraged strenuous walks. Instead, Steven and I took her on strolls around the neighborhood and gently tossed her favorite ball across the back yard to keep her exercised without injuring those worn-out legs.

"She did love her hikes," Steven said quietly, and maybe he was wondering the same thing I was. How did Elsa get so *old*, so *fast*?

Steven's breathing became audible despite our descent, so I deliberately slowed my pace, glancing at him occasionally. His color remained normal, but I was relieved when we reached the foot of the trail.

Only a few more yards to go. I hadn't realized how tense I was until I saw Steven's Lexus, sunlight bouncing off its silver hood.

The parking lot was filling up, and as we approached Steven's car, I noticed a young couple beside a dusty Chevy sedan, a few parking spaces away from us. She was crouched, lacing her hiking boots, and he was pulling a backpack from the trunk. *That was us a few decades ago.* An adorable Golden Retriever puppy sat with them, head cocked,

watching the activity around it. The puppy made me think of Elsa, because she had that same gangly, curious look when she was a pup.

Steven pressed the remote to unlock the Lexus's doors, and the car chirped in response. That got the dog's attention, and it stood.

No leash, I thought. Don't those kids know how dangerous that is?

The puppy loped toward us on those big clumsy paws, tongue flopping, ears flapping. Suddenly I saw a Range Rover between us and the dog, backup lights blazing white—but not the red glow of brakes. The Range Rover jerked backward, the puppy right in its path.

Time froze. My legs worked before my brain, and I sprinted toward the puppy and snatched it out of danger. The dog felt weightless in my arms. My momentum shot me forward, and I felt the Range Rover's fender whack my backpack. Brakes squealed, doors slammed, and someone yelled, "Lady, are you okay?"

And I was. The puppy and I were just fine, thank you. The dog squirmed in my arms, and I realized I was probably squeezing so hard it couldn't breathe, so I shoved it into the arms of the woman who had been tying her boots and now stood, mouth open, eyes wide.

"Oh my God, oh my God!" She held the quivering dog close, and it nuzzled her, unaware of its brush with death.

Her companion stepped up to me and seized my shaking hands. "Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

Then Steven was there, his arms around me. "Good grief, Diane—you could have been killed. And you moved so fast—I've never seen you like that!"

"I don't know what came over me. I didn't think. I just moved!"

He stroked my hair. "Obviously."

"You *did* move fast," the woman said. "Are you a marathon runner or something?"

I shook my head. "Just an old woman who cares about dogs." I rubbed the puppy's ears. "And you should keep this one on a leash. Puppies can get into trouble in a flash."

The man crossed his heart. "We will!"

While they were still thanking us, I took Steven's arm and returned to the Lexus. I should have felt winded after all that, but I wasn't. I was

ready to climb Cardiac Hill again, only I didn't want to. All I wanted was to get Steven safely home, and to hug Elsa.

* * *

I expected an interrogation from Steven about my newfound bursts of energy, but he mostly kept silent on the ride home. I did catch him glancing at me with a mixture of bewilderment and something else I couldn't identify. Fear?

"Steven, that was just an adrenaline rush—nothing extraordinary. I saw that puppy and I knew what would happen if I didn't act. Fast."

His fingers tapped the steering wheel. "You certainly did *that*."

I patted his knee. "Drive through Starbucks, and you can treat me to a latte for rescuing the puppy."

He did.

* * *

Back at the house, Steven took a quick shower and headed for the downstairs bedroom, which we had converted into an office, mostly for him. Until three months earlier, I'd used part of the room for my own work, but then Gardner Engineering had outsourced its employee relocation department. Since I was the department's manager, I became superfluous, almost overnight. I was eligible for a generous retirement package along with the severance, but I wasn't prepared to leave the workforce that soon. My age hadn't troubled me much until then, but I had never felt as old and unwanted as I did the night I turned off my office lights for the last time. If I'd been my younger, prettier self, they'd have found a way to keep me. But I wasn't, and they didn't.

* * *

The rest of the day passed in tranquil semi-silence, with Steven immersed in his trial preparations and me doing laundry and planning the week's meals.

When I took down Elsa's leash, her ears went up. She pranced to me, whining softly, and thrust her wet nose into my hand. She was a good dog, loyal and smart, intensely aware of her surroundings and the moods of her humans.

The afternoon air was heavy with spring. My roses bobbed in a breeze, the Double Delights scattering their sweet fragrance. I stopped to sniff them—isn't that a benefit of retirement, being able to stop and smell the roses, guilt-free? Elsa tugged at her leash, however, so we took off down the sidewalk at a good clip, until she began lagging and throwing out her right hind leg. I patted her head.

"You okay, baby? Want to keep going?"

She did, but my pleasure dimmed at this reminder that Elsa was probably the equivalent of my age—and feeling every minute of it.

By the time we got back, and we didn't go far, Elsa's tongue was hanging out and dripping drool, her sides heaving. Guilt dug into me for letting her get so worked up; I hadn't meant to and had consciously slowed down after I noticed her struggle.

Steven was taking a break, and we found him in the dining room with the *Los Angeles Times* spread out in front of him. Elsa went to him and sat, tail thrashing, as he ruffled her fur and stroked her big pointy ears. If he noticed her panting, he didn't comment.

"Looks like I'll be free for the play Friday night," he said, stretching and cracking his knuckles.

We had season tickets to the Pantages, but we never knew for sure if Steven could make the performance. If he got stuck at work, I'd usually go with my friend Maura, who always gushed about our aisle seats in the Orchestra section.

"Great!" I said. "It sounds like a good one—and funny. I could use a laugh."

I kissed the top of his head and inhaled a whiff of Old Spice as I savored his sturdy maleness. Steven was my rock, my protector. Those terrifying moments on Cardiac Hill had shaken me. *I don't know what I'd do if anything happened to you, Steven.*

I grabbed a glass of water and joined him at the table while we worked out plans for the coming week. Our son Jeff had a book

signing Thursday afternoon, but Steven had back-to-back depositions and couldn't make it.

Jeff had become something of a celebrity as the author of a successful series of children's books featuring a character called "Defender Dog." His latest book had just been released, and he was on an author tour that included our local bookstore.

"I suppose you're taking Maddie?" asked Steven.

"I am. Nancy has a faculty meeting."

He peered at me over his reading glasses but didn't say anything.

Our daughter Nancy had resumed her teaching career after a five-year break that started when Maddie was born. Back in the workforce, Nancy had hired part-time childcare, but still she had to juggle schedules, and her husband Nick wasn't much help. Steven and I filled in when we could, but back then we both had demanding careers. When things went haywire, however, I was usually the one who stepped in. What mother could refuse her daughter's tearful call for help with a last-minute emergency when the caregiver took sick and couldn't fetch Maddie after school?

"If she'd married someone with a real job," Steven muttered as he turned back to his paper, "she wouldn't have to lean on you so much."

"Someone like a lawyer?"

Steven had been on partner track when Nancy was born, earning enough to support all of us without my needing to work, which gave me the luxury of being a full-time mom during the kids' early childhoods.

"Nick makes good money," I added, aware I was poking a beast.

Steven scowled. "When he's working."

After Gardner and I parted company, and with a lot of free time, I began picking Maddie up after school, chauffeuring her to ballet class, soccer practice, and piano lessons, and hanging out with her until one of her parents got home from work. She was a delightful child, and I loved her with all my heart. Being with her, I almost forgot my yearning for the fast-paced business world I'd left behind—or, more accurately, had left me behind.

Steven had not been enthusiastic when I told him I'd signed on as Maddie's part-time nanny, and at first I didn't understand why. I

enjoyed Maddie's company, and I was glad to help Nancy. If it wasn't the life I had chosen for myself, at least I was doing something useful again.

"She takes you for granted," he said, not looking up from his paper.

"She always has. And who taught her to do that?" I had to chuckle. "Who treated her like his little princess who could do no wrong?"

That got his attention. It always did.

He snapped the paper shut. "I admit it—I spoiled her. But what can I do about it now? Forbid you to short-stop for her?"

"Like you could do that! Since when do you—"

He held up his hands. "I didn't mean it literally, and you know it. But I don't like the way she takes advantage of you."

"And what would you have me be doing instead? Taking a pottery class? Working the crossword puzzle half the day? Sitting in a rocking chair on the porch and spying on the neighbors?"

He tapped the paper on the table top. "I was thinking more of that astronomy course you talked about taking. Or the Italian class. Or the—"

My God, we're bickering just like my parents.

I stood. "Don't you ever get tired of being right?"

I didn't wait for an answer.

* * *

We managed not to quarrel any more for the rest of the day, and Steven praised the chicken and pasta I made for dinner, like it was something special—even though it wasn't, really. That was one of his endearing traits; if he felt responsible for causing friction between us, he didn't apologize but went out of his way to be complimentary for any little thing I did.

That night as I was brushing my teeth before bed, I thought back on those surges of energy I'd felt in the park. My legs had felt as light as bird wings—as if I'd been visited by my younger self. Wouldn't it be nice if she stuck around?

“Be grateful for what you’ve got, Diane. Don’t go wishing for more,” I told my toothpaste-spattered reflection.

But I couldn’t help wishing for more. Elsa wasn’t the only one showing her age. My body had begun to let me know I was sixty-five, and I hated every reminder.

I usually avoided the mirror; firm skin is one of the first casualties of age. Yes, I was—or had been—vain, but my looks had opened a lot of doors when I was younger. I even suspected Steven Devlin would never have asked me out if I hadn’t been pretty. Not movie-star gorgeous, but better than average, and I knew it. Feeling pretty gave me confidence, and I used it. But those days were gone, and I missed them.

The changes in my body were even harder to accept. I fought back, joined the Y and took exercise classes, worked the elliptical and weight machines. Most of the time, though, I barely held my own, and I had never—even in my thirties—been able to keep up with Steven.

Until that morning. What *had* happened?

My mirror image had no answer, but she looked mighty pleased with herself, and, I imagined, a tiny bit less wrinkled and worn than she had the day before.