

MOM, MANIA, and ME

Surviving and Changing Our Volatile Relationship

Prologue and Chapter 1

by

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Prologue

Now stay there and don't move," I whisper to Bitsy as she curls up next to me under the dining room table. Her brown and white tail is tickling my leg. I try not to giggle.

I like to play under the table. The long white tablecloth makes a safe cave. And there are two doorways. I can escape to the kitchen or the living room.

I pick up my doll Mary and start to pull on the pink dress she wants to wear today.

Bitsy's ears perk up. Footsteps. In the kitchen. I put my hand on her head, gently holding her down.

Louder steps. She's coming this way. Can I escape?

I see Scary Mom's white high heels coming through the doorway.

Too late. I freeze. I can't breathe. I gasp for air.

Did she hear me?

Don't find me. Don't find me.

She's coming toward my hiding place. My tummy hurts. I try to breathe quieter through my mouth. Too loud.

The shoes stop next to the table.

I stop breathing.

Chapter 1

Surviving Unexpected Loss

"Diane's here."

"She's here." The quiet message swept through the mass of mourners gathered in my parents' living room as I entered the front door. Their faces were familiar—some family, some old friends. A path silently opened as I passed through them, sensing their compassion, yet ignoring their existence as I searched among them for Mom, my stomach churning.

My steps slowed when I saw her framed in the doorway at the end of the hall, her slim figure silhouetted against the lights of the back bedroom. She stood still, expressionless, but then reached out with both arms as I drew near.

Our arms tentatively encircled each other. As her head came to rest on my shoulder, her arms tightened around my ribs—tighter and tighter—reducing my breaths to shallow pants. I could feel the rhythmic thump of my pounding heart against her cheek.

The lump in my throat blocked all words. Our breaths intermingled as we clung to each other in this unexpected embrace, silently sharing our grief.

The next morning Mom breezed into her sunny yellow kitchen, neatly groomed in a navy pant suit with a matching purse over her arm. "We need to go to the funeral home and make sure

everything is done properly.” She silently eyed each of the four of us sitting around the breakfast room table.

I glanced at Alex and Andrea, my two teenagers who had come with me from Vancouver. Both stared at me with alarm. Barely awake and still in pajamas, they obviously hoped I would not insist they go.

“We need to go.” Mom looked at my sister Gracie. “Now.”

Gracie, my only sibling, shook her head. “I’d rather not go. I want to remember Dad as he was alive.” Gracie’s family of five had driven the three hours to North Creek soon after Mom’s midnight call to each of us with the shocking news of Dad’s death. During my twelve-hour, multi-layover trip from Canada to Texas, my organized older sister had helped Mom choose the casket, select Dad’s burial clothes, plan the service, and greet the gathering family.

Turning my way, Mom asked, “What about you?”

“I’ll go,” I said. Maybe it would help me accept this tragedy. I slipped out of my chair and headed toward the garage. “I’ll drive,” I called out over my shoulder, trying to get to the car before she did.

“Okay, but put on some lipstick.”

Easing into the driver’s seat, I discovered Mom still left her car keys in the ignition in the unlocked garage. As she climbed into the passenger’s seat the syrupy scent of White Shoulders perfume filled the car. I cracked my window.

Maneuvering the heavy Buick down broad familiar streets, I observed what had once been a thriving Texas town. Shrugging, trying to shake off exhaustion, I turned left past the Dairy Queen and noticed how drought had ravaged the small town. Glaring sun beat down on tired houses; paint peeled off porches like a bad sunburn. Empty windows and bare yards spoke of years of hard times. Yet, here and there, patches of green grass added a touch of spring to the dun-colored terrain.

Mom uttered not a word for several minutes—no gossipy chatter about people I didn’t know or want to hear about.

Her silence didn’t last.

“I hope you like the casket color. We picked out a blue one. His favorite color. It costs too much. Too darn much. They get you in there and overwhelm you and you have to decide right then, and it’s too much. They make you feel guilty if you ask about a cheaper one. And a casket isn’t enough. You feel like you have to buy a vault too, and on and on. It shouldn’t cost so much. I told them we are not going to have an open casket funeral. Having people file by and look at Edward’s body is barbaric. Just barbaric. Besides, it would take too long.

“Oh look at Martha’s forsythia. I’ve never seen them so loaded with blooms. Mine almost didn’t make it through all the freezes this winter. Should have mulched them better. Did you notice Rebecca’s hair last night? It looked awful. What did you bring to wear to the funeral?

I hope you didn’t bring black. I can’t decide what to wear. Definitely not black. Not black.”

Not a tear. Not a word about Dad or his death. Obviously in denial, Mom acted like nothing tragic had occurred. Her fast talking was starting to scare me. Please, please don’t have a spell. I can’t cope with your problem right now.

Heat shimmered above the hot pavement as I turned the car into the parking lot in front of the white, sprawling, two-storied house that served as a funeral home. Mom hopped out and at a brisk pace headed for the cool interior. I hustled and followed her inside, blinking as my eyes adjusted to the subdued interior lighting. I recognized the faint strain of a familiar hymn, the words promising a life beyond the grave.

“Dixie. Diane.” The tall funeral director, one of my dad’s best friends, gestured to a side room. “Edward’s in here, Dixie. I’ll close the doors to give you privacy as long as you need it. I’ll be right here if you want anything.”

As Mom entered the room, he put his arm around my shoulders and whispered, “Diane, thank goodness you’re here. Dixie’s going to need you more than ever.”

I nodded, feeling shaky, unable to cope with this moment—much less Mom’s problem.

I looked up as we entered the viewing room, taking in the steel-blue casket and Dad’s body, but not his death. I felt light-headed. This is surreal. He’s too young. We need him here. Mom needs him. This wasn’t supposed to happen. Not yet. I felt much too young at thirty-six to be burying my dad.

Mom reached out and patted the arm of his blue suit as she looked at the body of the love-of-her-life, her husband of forty years. “Everything looks fine. Even his hands.”

I looked at Dad’s long tapered fingers, his always immaculate nails. So still now. Hands that had tossed me in the air. Hands that had delicately moved a surgeon’s scalpel to separate diseased tissue from healthy. Hands that had held many of the citizens in this town as they gasped their first breath of life.

Mom’s composure confused me.

She has not exhibited any sign of being upset, tearful or mournful. She must be in a state of shock or denial.

Mom’s attention strayed to the numerous floral tributes for a few moments, then with a last glance at Dad and a curt nod, she said, “Everything’s fine. Let’s go.” She headed for the door.

“Go?” I couldn’t breathe. I needed to sit down. I lingered, looking at the anchor of my life, the rock who held our family together. I felt my heart steady, a calmness settle over me as I realized that, yes, it is his body, but he isn’t in it anymore. His spirit is free.

I wanted to spend some quiet time saying my final goodbye, to begin accepting his death, but Mom had already disappeared and I knew better than to let her get in the driver’s seat.

I’ll grieve later, I thought. When I get back to Canada. With a quick last glance at Dad, I turned and left.

As I exited the funeral home, I caught sight of Mom talking to a tall, heavy-set man out on the sidewalk. She looked much younger than sixty-six, and still very attractive. Her natural dark brown hair held nary a sign of any gray. Approaching them, I heard her stern voice, “Twenty minutes. Not a minute longer or I’ll get up and walk out.” The man nodded assurance, said something, then passed me heading for the funeral home entrance.

“Hurry. Get in and turn on the air conditioner,” Mom demanded. “Cool off this car.”

“Who was that?” I asked, digging in my purse for the keys.

“Our new preacher. I told him not to talk more than twenty minutes. That church is going to be full and you get a Baptist preacher with the biggest congregation he’s ever had and he won’t know when to hush.”

I blinked and wondered: Does this new preacher know Mom really will get up and walk out of her own husband’s funeral if he talks too long?

Opening the car door, I heard a shout, “Yoo-hoo! Dixie, Diane.” Jessie, the undertaker’s wife and Mom’s good friend waved as she walked toward us across the lawn next door, apron flapping in the Texas wind. “Diane, we’re so glad you got here safely. This has been so sudden, such a shock to us all,” she said, enveloping me in a bear hug. “Are Rex and the children with you? We’d love to have your family stay here with us.”

“Alex and Andrea did come, but Rex needed to stay in Vancouver to take care of Shannon who is still recovering from scarlet fever. She is just three and we didn’t think it safe for her to travel yet.”

Turning, Jessie said, “Dixie, then we want some of your other family members to come and stay with us. And I have a large ham in the oven and some cornbread I’ll be bringing over shortly.”
Hmmm. Cornbread. I was definitely back in the South.

We returned to a house full of family and friends and a growing number of floral arrangements that saturated the air with sweet fragrance. Later, just as Gracie started to organize items for lunch, the back doorbell rang again. In trooped five church women loaded with platters of fried chicken, green beans, sweet potato casserole with marshmallows on the top, gelatin salads, biscuits and gravy. Where were they going to find space in the kitchen? Bedlam threatened, but within seconds, they had the kitchen well under control. When lunch was ready, more than twenty people, mostly out-of-town relatives, lined up for an extensive buffet in the dining area of the den.

Mom sat staring at her barely touched food, then said, “Diane, I want to go do something. Will you help me?” She rose from the table.

“Sure. What are we going to do?” I followed her into the crowded kitchen.

“Dixie, is everything all right?” a helper asked.

“Yes, it’s wonderful. Thank you. Thank you all for coming. The food is delicious. We have so much. Here Diane, help me wrap up the rest of Jessie’s ham. I want to take it to the Wordalls.”

“To Dr. Wordall’s? Why?”

“We’ve had a big loss, but so have they. Their daughter had a wreck last night and their precious three-year-old granddaughter was thrown from the car and killed. And I want to go see them.”

Daddy just died and she is thinking of how she can help someone else in their grief. How like her, always wanting to help others, to share what she has, even at this moment. Busy hands stilled. Silence settled over the kitchen as Mom wrapped the ham in tinfoil. First one of the helpers and then another reached for a tissue.

Life isn’t fair. Neither is death.

It was not the custom in the South in the 1970s to have a formal visitation time for a family to receive friends at the funeral home. As a result, after we returned from the Wordall’s an unending troupe of people continued to arrive at our house all day and all evening. Each chime of the doorbell brought another memory into the house: my third grade teacher, Dad’s golfing buddy, Garden Club ladies, doctors from the clinic and florists bearing more and more flowers. People and floral arrangements crowded the large den that we already called the jungle room due to Mom’s fifteen house plants scattered among the rattan chairs, love seats and tables. Additional arrangements now lined the chartreuse-colored walls and were clumped together in a corner on the brown Mexican tile floor.

A long-time friend of the family touched me on the arm. Gesturing to her husband, she asked, “Diane, could we talk to you privately for a moment?”

“Yes, of course.” We retreated to a quiet area next to the fireplace in the formal living room. I turned to face them, curious to know what they wanted to say in private.

“Diane, we want to know what we can do to help when Dixie has one of her spells,” she said. Stunned, I glanced from her to her husband.

Her husband added, “Edward talked to me many times about Dixie’s spells and that it was getting harder and harder to help her through them. What can we do to help now that he’s gone?”

I felt tears stinging my eyes. This was the first time anyone outside the family had acknowledged to me that they knew about Mom’s “little problem” as she described it. And they wanted to help.

If only they could.

“Oh how I wish I knew the answer,” I said, shaking my head. “Gracie and I don’t know what to do. The fear of what Mom may do now that Dad isn’t here to settle her down is keeping me awake nights. I live so far away and it takes Gracie three hours to get here.”

I stared into space, glimpsing the chaos that lay ahead. After thinking a moment, I said, “I guess the best thing you could do is to call one of us when you see any signs that she is starting to get hyper. Please call one of us if she starts calling you over and over, or talking incessantly or driving too fast. The sooner we know, the better. We might be able to stop her before it’s too late.”

I knew that if we weren’t notified soon enough, Mom would lose control of her impulses, have another wreck—possibly injuring herself or killing someone—or take off on another extravagant spending spree.

And when they call, what are we supposed to do? How are we going to stop the unstoppable Dixie? A feeling of hopefulness enveloped me.

By ten o’clock that evening, my eyelids were drooping as low as my spirits. Conversation among the group of relatives still seated in the den wafted over me, blurring into distant hums. My head tilted. I jerked awake, looking to see if anyone noticed.

Mom looked exhausted too. Gracie and her family had already gone to the motel. Finally, breaching southern hospitality, I stood up and reached out to help Mom up. Turning to the others, I said, “Please excuse us.”

Mom looked confused. “Where are we going?”

“To bed. You need to rest for the funeral tomorrow.” As we stood up, so did the guests, taking my hint, saying they needed to leave. After the front door closed, Mom headed to her bedroom and I to the kitchen to tidy it up.

“Please take one of those sleeping pills the doctor gave you,” I called out to her. “We all need to sleep good tonight.”

Twenty minutes later I peeked into Mom’s bedroom to check on her. She lifted her head up off the pillow, beckoned to me and patted the bed next to her. I stretched out beside her, not sure what she wanted.

She mumbled something as she turned on her side toward me. I didn’t answer. Her eyes closed. Minutes ticked by.

“Mumble, mumble. Jack . . . came . . . interested in me.”

What’s she talking about? I wondered.

She paused, then continued, “look . . . like wife . . . died.”

What is she thinking? Dad’s not even buried and she thinks some man is hot for her?

“Jack . . . nice looking,” she murmured.

Good grief. I can’t stay here listening to this.

I slipped out of her bed and headed for the guest room. Too weary to even brush my teeth, I undressed and crawled into bed, only to toss for hours wondering what Gracie and I could do to stop Mom’s next spell.

I awakened to sunshine streaming through the sheer curtains. I held one aside and peered out. It was not a funeral-type of day. Puffy clouds dotted the cerulean sky. Birds of all types were calling for mates, mockingbirds trilling their musical score of stolen melodies. Leaves were budding on the bare mesquite tree limbs and yellow daffodils swayed in the wind, signaling a time for life to awaken, not end.

By mid-morning we were all dressed in our funeral clothes. I had on my navy suit and high heels making me even taller than Gracie. We did look like sisters, sharing deep-set hazel eyes and high

cheekbones, but our coloring differed. Gracie had thick, wavy dark-auburn hair. A few pale freckles dotted her fair cheeks. I had sun-streaked light brown hair and a tan that deepened every day.

I heard the jingle of the charm bracelet Dad had given Mom before I entered the breakfast room where our immediate family had gathered. Mom had decided on a light blue dress. She looked fretful, agitated.

The black limos arrived to collect the family. The main driver announced it was time to go.

“Gracie,” Mom turned, her arms fluttering in the air, alarm in her voice, “Where is that big photograph of Edward that hung in the hospital lobby that you brought home? I wanted that placed in front of the casket.”

The driver from the funeral home looking at his watch. He raised his eyebrows at me.

“Mom, we need to leave,” I said. “The service will be fine without the picture.”

“No, we are going to take it. Find it. NOW.”

Several of us scattered, frantically looking. “Here it is,” Gracie called from the laundry room.

“Take it to the church,” Mom demanded, looking at the driver. “I want it right next to the casket so everybody can see him.”

“Mrs. Dweller, we can take it with us when you go,” the driver suggested.

“No. Take it now,” she said in her don’t-mess-with-me-voice. “Come back for us. They won’t start without us there.”

He left with the picture.

Twenty minutes later the extended family crowded into three limousines for the short ride to the First Baptist Church. Police were still waving cars into the crowded parking lots. The American, Texas and Christian flags flew at half-mast in Dad’s honor.

As we waited in the foyer, a kaleidoscope of memories clicked through my mind. For forty years my dad had been a beloved physician and civic leader in this small town. Patients loved Dad’s pragmatic style of country doctoring. He believed in treating the whole patient including emotional issues, often finding clues to physical illnesses in this area. Sympathy cards and letters were filled with wonderful personal stories of how he had birthed them, healed them, operated on them—when no one else would take the chance—saved their lives, and sometimes their marriages.

Organ music swelled and ebbed as we entered the sanctuary. Not funeral dirges. Mom had insisted on robust hymns like “Shall We Gather at the River” and “When We All Get to Heaven.” With Mom leading, head held high, the extended family walked down the long aisle toward the reserved front pews. In the two-story church nave, banks of floral arrangements surrounded the closed casket. People filled every pew on the huge main floor. Glancing up at the balcony, I saw people still in the aisles, looking for a seat. Hundreds had come to pay their respects.

Walking behind Mom, trying to deny the reality of the moment, I felt tears I’d choked down for days, threatening to spill over. Keep yourself together a little longer Diane, I chided myself, biting my cheek. Mom will be upset if you break down or embarrass her.

What is so shameful about showing that my heart is broken? I felt a wail building inside of me. I wanted to throw myself on the casket keening to release my anguish, to wail like mourners in other cultures. I struggled to keep from breaking into uncontrollable sobs as Mom’s mantra echoed in my head. What will people say?

Manners prevailed. I sat down, outwardly composed. Inside I raged, angry not only at death, but also at the stiff-upper-lip behavior our society and my mother expected. I longed for my husband’s presence and comfort. I needed him, but knew our sick three year old did too.

I tried focusing on Dad’s large photograph taken a year earlier, now displayed next to the casket. It showed how young he still looked at age sixty-six. How vital. It belied the damage to his heart that caused this unexpected funeral.

The music crested. A hush descended over the sanctuary. The pastor began the eulogy revealing many anecdotes of how frequently my father had helped others, often without anyone else being aware of it, including Mom.

He kept it short. Nineteen minutes short. Somebody must have clued him in.

A final prayer and we were ushered out, back into the limos to be driven to the cemetery at the slowest pace that wide-open Texas highway had ever seen. By the time we arrived and gathered under the tent, the casket and flowers had been placed beside the open grave.

Mom motioned to the preacher. "Start the service."

"Dixie, shouldn't we wait for the other people to arrive?" he asked. I glanced back across the valley and saw miles of cars heading our way, as far as the eye could see.

"No. That will take too long. Start now."

Why is she in such a hurry? What's the rush? These people loved dad and want to show their respect. Stunned, I wondered how she could ignore all these people or social protocol. *What will people say?*

A lifetime of knowing how futile it was to countermand Mom's orders cemented my silence—and Gracie's.

The pastor, with a perplexed expression, stared at Mom.

"Start." She glared at him.

He started. He kept it short there too. As soon as the last "Amen" faded in the air, she announced, "Let's go." I hurried to catch up with her as she headed toward the limousine. Cars were still pouring into the cemetery. As our limousine started to move forward, I heard a rapping on the car window. It was Tom, a medical intern in Dallas and the son of close family friends. My dad had a great deal to do with his decision to become a doctor.

"Stop," I called out to the driver as I rolled the window down.

"Don't stop," Mom countered.

"Dixie, Diane, Gracie," Tom gasped, obviously out of breath as he jogged to keep up with the car, "I want to tell you how sorry I am. I've driven five hours to be here and I have to go right back." We left him standing there, exhaustion and sadness etched on his face.

I lost count of the cars headed into the cemetery as we left.

The next day Gracie and I slipped back into the guestroom to try to make some logical plans. I stretched out on the aqua bedspread, and rubbed my forehead, trying to smooth the lines of exhaustion. Gracie stretched out beside me with a deep sigh.

"What," I asked, "are we going to do about Mom? I can't hop back down here with twelve-hour flights each time she launches into one of her frantic alienate-everyone capers."

"I don't know," Gracie said, "Daddy never discussed what he did to get her to settle down—if she ever did. I think he just had to wait it out until her spell tapered off several weeks later. Let's hope she doesn't start a spell for a long time."

When Mom's next spell would start was always an unknown, but that another one would happen was a given.

We decided I would stay for a month to help Mom while Gracie returned home, both of us knowing she would be the one stuck with most of Mom's care in the future. I accepted my role with mixed emotions. The urge to flee from Mom, ingrained since early childhood, all but overwhelmed me.

I had been able to keep my grief at bay when surrounded by people and actions that needed to be done, but grief is a sneak. It hits hard. Without warning. When one least expects it. Like when I

went alone to the grocery store. Pushing a cart down an aisle, I felt it strike with a sucking in of air and a feeling of panic, like the air couldn't get in. Despair spilled over me, sweeping down my torso, making my legs quiver with weakness. I leaned on the cart. Unbidden tears began to flow down my cheeks. I struggled to gain the upper hand and push the pain back into my "I'll grieve-later box." I failed. Gasping for air, I noticed a little girl staring at me, her eyes wide. I forced the box open, took a deep breath, wiped my wet cheeks with the back of my hand and gave her a shaky smile.

I sniffed hard.

Tissues. Which aisle has tissues?

After Gracie left, I thought Mom and I would begin to adjust to our new roles, me as helper, she as grieving widow. I started on a long list of things to do, but she slipped further into denial, acting like nothing had changed. Actually perky, she started chattering rapidly and constantly about people, events, new restaurants, about anything but the sad gap in our lives. Then I realized she was sleeping only about four hours at night. I knew what that meant—a dreaded spell had started.

I called Gracie from Dad's office, hopeful that she could think of something.

"She is definitely starting a spell. What do you think I should do?" I asked.

"Try to get her to slow down." Gracie responded.

"How?"

"Is she still taking a nap?"

"Yeah, for all of five minutes," I said, exasperated.

"Tell her you'll wake her in half-an-hour, and to stay in bed that long and rest."

That didn't work.

When it came to Mom's spells, even Dad hadn't been able to stop her when her thoughts and actions swirled into frenzied mode. How were Gracie and I supposed to?

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