

White River Phoenix



By Leslee Breene

A JULY AFTERNOON sun followed her to the river's edge, searing the top of her head, her back. In her halter top and shorts, she waded in to her thighs, gasping at the water's frigid greeting, and felt smoothed rocks beneath her bare feet. Gritty riverbed soil oozed between her toes. The chilled liquid rose to her hips, invaded her navel.

Closing her eyes, she reveled. Like a granted wish, it came. The flute. In her and around her. Its music fluttered: light, lyrical, soothing.

She looked down, seeing to the bottom of the flowing river. Clear. Clean. Unlike her thoughts, cluttered with pain and the past.

She looked down, seeing to the bottom of the flowing river. Clear. Clean. Unlike her thoughts, cluttered with pain and the past.

She heard Brad plunge in behind her. "Ahh. The water's low, but it still feels good. We needed this," he said, referring to their decision to take a break from replacing the roof shingles on their log home. "No wonder we didn't tackle the job sooner. My poor back."

Without turning, she nodded. His presence, his laugh, large and spontaneous, came closer. On the opposite bank, wet and dripping, their four-year-old retriever chased a charged chipmunk. Together, they looked on. The dog, the one good thing they still shared.

Brad moved close enough that she could feel his breath on the back of her neck. His rough-padded fingers rested on her shoulders. Carefully, she willed her tenseness away.

"Remember the first day we moved in?"

She sighed. "I remember it." Three years ago, and the image was still vivid. They had

made love on a mattress in the front room.

His hands slid gently down beneath the water to her hips.

She leaned back into him, the crinkly hair on his solid chest tickling her back. "Has it been three years?" It had taken longer than she'd imagined to get pregnant.

"Yeah. We've put a lot of work into this place." Brad's hands trailed from her hips to her belly. Her empty belly.

A twinge came deep in her insides. A faint stirring of desire. Since losing the baby she'd been a dry, hollow twig, ready to incinerate at the least spark. Almost not worthy of life.

His fingers, cold and seeking, nudged under her halter top, upward to her breasts.

"Don't, Brad..." Pulling away, she broke the water's calm surface, ripples bursting around her.

"Will you ever get over it, Lynn?" Disappointment filled his voice.

Get over it, Lynn. Get past it, Lynn.

That's what they all said. Her counselor. Now Brad.

She swiveled to face him. "It's only been six months. Not that long..." Her answer trailed off. She averted her gaze, not wanting to see the familiar pain of rejection in his eyes.

"Guess it's time to get back at it." He scooped fistfuls of water over his broad shoulders and back. "Come on, Rusty!" he shouted to the dog on the far bank.

The retriever dove into the river, paddled valiantly to the other side to join him.

Shoulders hunched forward, Brad retreated up the bank. Rusty, his coat glistening in the sunlight, trotted along beside him. Her world.

Fear chilled her. How long would her husband wait?

She left the water's retreat. On the bank, parched grass crunched under her feet. *Long hot summer*, she thought. The driest summer Colorado had experienced in many years.

Pricking her nostrils, a hint of smoke wafted downriver from the mountainsides.

In their bedroom, Lynn changed into dry shorts and a tank top, pulled her hair back into a ponytail, while Brad continued work on the roof.

She walked past the computer room, the room which would have been the nursery.

She paused. From the window, the afternoon sun turned new paint on the walls the hue of a soft mountain sunset. The amniocentesis had revealed the baby was female, no abnormalities. Having her first child at age thirty-five, she'd been relieved. No one had told her how much could go wrong after that.

An ache gathered inside her.

Next to the window, her computer slumped on an empty desk, solitary and unused, a dust-gathering old warhorse. As if pulled by a magnet, she entered the room and stared at the ghostly monitor.

Once a writer, always a writer? How long had it been since she'd finished anything coherent, saleable?

Exasperated, her editor had thrown up her hands at Lynn's last missed deadline, over a month ago. It was painful to relive the humiliation. Before, she'd never missed a deadline. Lately the words just wouldn't come.

It had been a long dry spell. If a finished manuscript wasn't in the mail soon, the publisher could cancel her contract. She shook her head. What she wouldn't give for a fresh start.

As she turned to leave the room, a bright-colored Indian ceremonial shield hanging on the opposite wall caught her eye. Its seven feathers, representing a sacred council of seven ancient spirits, dangled to-



ward the floor. On her birthday, the year before her grandfather had departed this earth, he'd given it to her for safekeeping. He had related the shield's hope for humanity. "It teaches us to walk into the future with no fear."

On top of a bookshelf, she saw the familiar photo of Soaring Eagle, his prominent nose and high brown cheekbones accented against autumn-gold aspen. *Grandfather, I miss you.*

Panic clutched her chest. Her heart beating rapidly, sweat beaded on her forehead and upper lip. She fought for control. *Don't let it win.* She went to the window overlooking the river. Breathed deeply. Exhaled. Slowly, her breathing eased.

If only the old man were here, she would sit on his lap like a child. Inhale the sweet chicory smoke from his ancient pipe. Lis-

If only the old man were here, she would sit on his lap like a child. Inhale the sweet chicory smoke from his ancient pipe. Listen once more to the lilting notes from his beloved flute.

ten once more to the lilting notes from his beloved flute. Let them carry her away to that place in the afterlife where he must now preside, revered among his peers.

Sudden moisture filled her eyes, spilled over her cheeks. *How do I release the pain, Grandfather?*

"Honey, would you bring me a cold drink," Brad hollered from above on the roof. "It's hot as Hades up here."

Brushing away the tears, she called back, "Sure. Just a minute..."

Bringing him an iced lemonade a few minutes later, Lynn glanced upriver at the hazy sky. "Do you think there's a fire up near Trader's Lake?"

Brad raised a hand to the brim of his baseball cap, shielding his sun-reddened face. "Could be. I don't like the looks of it."

She climbed the ladder and offered him the lemonade. "Maybe we should drive down to Big Bear's later and see if Joe's heard anything."

Brad took a long swallow of the drink. "Yeah. I think we should."

Two fire trucks whizzed past them on their way to Big Bear's, a combination fishing lodge and store several miles down the main road. The owner, Joe Big Bear, a half-

Ute, kept an ear tuned to the area's pulse and gave free advice with every purchase. "Whether you want it or not," Brad always joked.

"I think we know the answer to our question," Brad said now as he pushed open the big screen door to the store.

They picked up some supplies and met Joe at the front counter. He greeted them, his usual expression more intense, his black eyes narrowed. "Fire's comin'. I called the lodge up at Trader's Lake. They got a big one up there."

Lynn added two six-packs of bottled water to their supplies, inwardly attempting to downplay Joe's news.

"We saw the trucks headed up the road," Brad said as the Indian totaled the bill.

Joe's bulbous nose lifted a notch. "I smelled it this morning. Could come down the mountain."

"Could." Brad picked up the filled grocery bags. "I hope not."

"You folks gonna stay?"

Lynn stared at the Indian's nose, its pores large like the skin on an orange. "Of course, we'll stay." The fire was miles up the draw. Why should they think of leaving?

Brad prodded her toward the door. "Thanks. Bye, Joe."

Joe Big Bear held up a large paw of a hand. "Take it easy."

On the way home in the truck, the sky was overcast. The wind blew a gust of topsoil into the front seat, making her eyes dry and gritty. She rolled up the window.

"I might have to go up there," Brad said, a muscle in his jaw tensing.

Her stomach coiled tightly. She thought of the fire above Glenwood Springs just weeks ago. Brad was a volunteer firefighter and had driven over to help out. "You went last month."

"If it spreads fast, and they don't have enough men..."

Not you. Not again.

When she didn't answer, he glanced at her and gave a little smile. "I bet they'll get a handle on it."

After an early supper, Lynn climbed the slope behind the house. A persistent wind lifted her ponytail, stung her bare arms and legs. Local evening news had declared more fires in the mountains, with a prolonged report on the wild Hayman fire to the south

of Denver. The Trader's Lake fire was being fought against high winds. The weatherman predicted continued electrical storms.

Brad was glued to the TV, his interest piqued.

Through the sparse pines, the "defensible area" Brad called it, she ascended to the tree line and climbed the flagstone steps. Not far beyond were the white concrete bench and the trellis in the xeriscape garden of wild roses and lavender sage. The bench, they had ordered from a statuary place in town; the trellis, Brad had built in his spare time away from his subcontracting jobs. On a warm spring day, they had painted the trellis white. Her plan was to have morning glories intertwined up and over the top, but the long drought had prevented her from keeping them alive.

She approached the bench, her gaze steadfast on the inscription carved gracefully across the oblong seat.

In loving memory of our daughter, Elizabeth Rose. The second line of the inscription, in smaller letters, gave her date of birth and death.

Such a short life it had been. Only as long as the baby's fatal slide down the birth canal, and from the doctor's arms to hers. Death by strangulation. From her own umbilical cord.

Panting for breath, Lynn crumpled onto the bench. *Elizabeth Rose. Not long was your sweet life. Taken from my arms before I knew the sparkle in your eyes, the wonder of your smile.*

Unbidden tears flowed down her face and dripped through her fingers. The stubborn wind dried them before she could pull a tissue from her pocket. Lynn hugged herself and rocked back and forth, willing away the pain.

The comfort she had sought was not here. Not tonight, with the threat of another loss lurking on the mountain only miles above them.

Yet, on some evenings, with the air so clear and pure, she could see all the way up the draw. Smell the piney woods around her and hear the ancient flute like a peaceful lullaby. Even if her beautiful dark-haired baby was not buried here, but in the town cemetery as the county law demanded, her *spirit* was near. On those nights, Lynn could feel her presence, the gentle aura of her love.

That awareness was enough to give her comfort.

The wind bit sharply. A jagged streak of lightning lit up the sky, accompanied by a bellowing thunderclap. One last time, she caressed the bench's carved words and retreated down the steps.

Below, the house stood, a lone beacon as shadows deepened. On the roof, stacks of new asphalt shingles awaited Brad's return.

The back door flew open and he bolted into the yard. "Lynn! I just got a call—"

Heartbeat kicking into high gear, she dashed downhill to meet him. "Who from?"

"Ray Jordan. The fire captain just advised him to pack up and get out. Trader's Lodge burned down and the fire's moving his way fast."

The Jordans were friends who lived below Trader's Lake, eight miles up the mountain. Ray and Brad had fought in the Gulf War together. "That's bad news for them," she said.

"Yeah, Ray's sending Shirley and the kids down to Big Bear's overnight." Brad held the screen door open and followed her inside.

"And Ray?"

"He's going to try to stave off the fire, long as he can. But he needs help getting his horses out..."

She could see it in his eyes—the glint of heroism rising to the challenge. "You're going, aren't you?" It was a statement more than a question.

He raised a hand as if to placate. "Hon, that home is all they've got. And every available firefighter is battling the worst of it up at Trader's Lodge."

She stomped into the kitchen, her temperature shooting skyward. "This house is all we've got. I don't see why you—"

Another thunderbolt overhead sent chills ratcheting down her spine.

Brad moved up behind her, placed his large hands on her arms. "Ray would do the same for us if we needed him. And I owe him for staying with me in that ditch after I got shot."

"I know." She pivoted to face him. "But what if the fire moves down here? And you're gone?"

"I promise you. If the fire spreads, and we can't handle it, Ray and I will head straight back here."

Arguing further was of no use. She knew

that stubborn look on his face. He'd made up his mind. "All right. Then, go."

She listened to him throwing his gear together in the mud room next to the kitchen. Never had she wanted more to beg him to stay, to cling to what little they had left together. Moisture brimmed in her eyes, a sadness sucking away her insides.

"I'm taking the Jeep," he said. "Here are the keys to the truck." Brad laid them on the kitchen counter.

He came to her, wrapped his big arms around her. "Give me some sugar." His hand cradled the back of her head.

She tilted her face upward as his lips covered hers, warm and enticing. A deep kiss like they used to share before.... A kiss that made her regret she hadn't given him more.

"Take the cell phone," she managed.

"You and Rusty will be fine. If they want you to evacuate, go down to Joe's."

"Be safe," she called after him.

The Jeep's red tail lights faded away in the dust as Brad drove down the dirt road then turned toward the short bridge that crossed the river.

Lynn watched from the front room. Rusty whined at the door, like he always did when Brad left him behind. She went over and stroked his silky ears. "It's okay, boy," she said, attempting to assure the dog and herself. "He'll be back soon."

A plane rumbled overhead, ascending the mountain, giving her hope that an air tanker was on its way to drop chemical retardants on the main fire.

How long would it take Brad to reach the Jordans, help Ray load up his horses and drive back down Trader's Lake Road? Hands on the kitchen wall clock read eight fifteen. Ten minutes later, she looked at her watch.

It was ironic. She'd taken Brad's comfortable presence for granted, his large frame filling whatever room he entered. Now he was gone and the house felt so empty.

It was ironic. She'd taken Brad's comfortable presence for granted, his large frame filling whatever room he entered. Now he was gone and the house felt so empty.

Seeking the latest fire news, she turned on the local TV channel. Several fires burned in the county. Homes in the upper

Trader's Lake area were on 'fire alert' status and residents urged to evacuate. Residents in lower areas should remain watchful and prepared to leave if fire conditions worsened.

A slight queasiness slid through her belly. Yes, she must be prepared. Pack an overnight bag. What else? She went to the bedroom and pulled out the side desk drawer. Photo albums. Grabbing two large pillow cases from the hall linen closet, she stuffed them with the most recent albums and their wedding album.

On her way down the hall, she passed the computer room. Her work! She grabbed several boxes of back-up disks, grandfather's photo off the bookshelf, and dropped them into a case. Rusty at her heels, she lugged her treasures outside to the truck and pitched them in behind the seat.

A strong smell of ashes invaded her nostrils. All those trees...gone. But she could see no evidence of fire in the distance. Maybe the winds had changed in another direction. Maybe the fire crews had gotten the upper hand.

Still, she wished Brad was here. Safe. Where he belonged, not out there chasing fires. Tempting fate. A shudder rippled through her. She couldn't bear to lose someone dear again.

The ten-o'clock news reported nothing new. Disgruntled, she flicked the television off. A packed overnight bag and extra dog provisions stood waiting by the front door. What if all the hubbub about the fire was overblown. Probably by tomorrow, they would wake up to a fire that was history. She licked dry lips, wanting to believe it.

The kitchen phone rang. She raced to answer it. "Hello."

"Lynn?" Brad's raspy voice came over the wire.

"Hi." Her pulse hummed. "Are you all right?"

"I'm okay, but things aren't good up here." Static crackled in the background.

"What about Ray? His house..."

"The house is gone." Brad's voice held despair.

"Oh no!" Her knees went weak. "Where are you now?"

"We—" He coughed. "We loaded up the horses." More static came on the line. "So much smoke. They closed the road."

"How long do you think it will take to

get down?" She knew the question was unanswerable even as she asked it.

"Don't know. The wind is—crazy." Abruptly, their connection was lost.

Exhaling a frustrated sigh, Lynn clapped the phone back on the wall hook and slammed out the back door. *Damn fire!*

She grabbed the hose and turned it on. *Got to keep the house wetted down.* Climbing the metal ladder propped next to the house, she sprayed across the roof, then the rear of the house.

Dry, smoky air burned her sinus membranes, stung her eyes. *Should I stay, or should I go?*

How could she leave without knowing Brad was safe? This place was all they had left between them.

Back inside, she slipped off her sandals and lay down across the bed. Rusty had already stretched out on the Navajo throw rug. Her heavy eyelids closed. If she could just rest for a few minutes.

The jarring ring of the bedside telephone jolted Lynn's senses. Where was she? What time was it? She struggled to sit up. Fumbling in the dark for the receiver, she answered, her tongue thick from sleep. "Brad?"

"This is the White River Fire Department," a male voice stated. "We're notifying residents along Trader Lake Road to evacuate within twenty minutes." The voice continued with urgency. "Take only what you absolutely need."

"Twenty minutes?" she croaked.

"Yes, ma'am. The fire is imminent."

"Oh, my God." Blood pounding at her temples, she hung up the phone. The red digital numbers on the clock/radio read five ten. She pushed herself off the bed and stumbled over Rusty. The dog scrambled to his feet as she swayed in the middle of the room, the full impact of the telephone call sinking into her brain.

Cold water splashed on her face from the bathroom sink. A pair of jeans. Lightweight sweatshirt pulled over her head. Her feet jammed into a pair of Reeboks. *Hurry! Hurry!*

Cramming a bandanna into her back jean pocket, she tore out of the bedroom. In the kitchen, Rusty lapped up leftover water in his bowl. She refilled it. The six-pack of bottled water she stuffed into her

bag by the door.

Take what you absolutely need.

Grandfather's shield. He had said it carried ancient secrets. Taught one to "go forward without fear." She slipped the shield off the office wall and tucked it under her arm.

Outside, the air was clogged with smoke and ashes. Choking, she ran to the truck parked in the side yard. She loaded her belongings behind the seat and Rusty in the front.

Before going around to the driver's side, she looked up to the ridge north of the house. A cauldron of red-orange flame roiled just to its crest, black smoke clouds billowing skyward. Fear, like a snake, spiraled behind her rib cage.

Get out now!

Then shimmering cinders alighted on the rooftop and she saw several fire sparks. The old wooden shingles were easy prey. An ember sparked within her. *Not our house. You can't have it.*

Her gaze swept from the roof to the burning ridge. There was still time. Ten minutes... maybe. Her jaw set, she ran to the back of the house.

The hose lay near the metal ladder. She turned the water on full force. Sooty wind choked her again, and she tied the bandanna like a half-mask over her face. Dragging the hose up the ladder, she sprayed the nozzle wide over the old shingles. On top of the roof, she edged the hose further.

The stacked shingles impeded her progress. The hose twisted and she yanked it, knocking several shingles loose. Her foot slipped and she fell to one knee. Pain shot up her thigh.

Regaining her footing, she wetted the roof's surface as far as the spray would reach. Her mouth and throat parched, she saw the fire blowing quickly over the saddle to the ridge behind their house.

Go with no fear. Go with no fear, her mind chanted.

Embers stung her back. Would her shirt catch on fire? A gust of hot wind blew her toward the roof's edge. Her ponytail loosened and she dropped the hose to tighten her hair band. It snapped apart. Her long auburn hair furred around her head, veiling her face. "No!" She caught the bandanna before it blew away.

Her eyes burning and watering, she clambered off the roof and down the lad-

der. Like fireflies, cinders showered around her. Loose strands of hair glowed. She clamped the bandanna over her head to smother them.

Behind her, she heard a loud *whoosh* and turned to see seventy foot flames leaping over the mountainside. A mighty Goliath rushed downhill. Swallowing tall pines in one fiery breath. "Oh, God."

Holding the bandanna over her nose and mouth, she hurried blindly to the truck. From inside the cab, Rusty's bark was frantic. She pushed her ragged hair from her face and reached for the door handle.

Halfway down the mountain, flames sped forward, licking at the delicate white trellis. In a second, it disappeared into ghostly ash.

Tears blurred with smoke, gagging her. She yanked open the truck door. Was there time to get away?

A sound broke through her panic. Lilt-ing. Hypnotic. A flute! Its crystal clear notes rising.

She froze. Listening. Tears brimmed, glistened on her lashes. Sweet and steady, the notes flowed through her. Her heart one with them.

A strong wind blew up from the valley. A powerful Chinook wave, it met the fire's satanic jaws, chasing it swiftly back up the mountain.

One foot halfway into the truck, Lynn stared in awe. Tiny hairs raised on the back of her neck. She closed her eyes in a prayer of thanks. Rusty quieted, came to her, tail wagging. Embers still smoldering on her shirt, she petted his smooth head, backed out of the truck and closed the door.

Sirens screamed in the distance.

She dropped to her knees on the ground, as Brad had instructed, rolled over on her back, swished her hair in the dirt.

A horn honking from the lake road made her look across the river. She stood and squinted. In the hazy dawn, someone waved from a Jeep.

She waved back crazily. "Brad!"

It took seconds to race to the river bank and plunge forward into cool flowing water. Let herself sink down beneath its surface, feel its healing powers enter every crevice of her body. Moving over time-worn rocks, she emerged on the other side, a phoenix, singed but triumphant.