

# Montana

# Skyline

## Synopsis

After finally finding himself – a Montanan safely transplanted into New York City – advertising writer Kody Calhan hopes for a life with that special other. However, his misfortune with women is reaching epic proportions. After stumbling upon his wife-to-be and her “other fiancé” Calhan decides to reassess just what he expects from life, and what he thinks life expects from him. The death of his father draws him back to the family ranch in Montana, and comes at a time when Calhan decides he needs the open spaces, at least temporarily, for a break from big-city life. What he discovers when he helps unfold the complex financial turmoil that is his father’s estate, Calhan realizes you can return home again, only to a place he never really knew.

By Bob Schaller

## Chapter 1

“Hi, my name is Kody.”

“Hi, Kody,” comes the direct response, in an understanding tone.

I know that reply is coming - that is the format in these settings - but all the voices in such practiced uniformity, catches me off guard. Perhaps because I am a first-timer. I gather my thoughts, and notice every set of eyes in the room is willing to make contact with mine. “You are not alone,” they are reassuring me. “We have been there. That’s why we are all here.”

Still, a public speaker I am not, especially when it comes to my own biggest failing. So I look at the top of a balding man's scalp, and try not to think of the audience.

"Yes, well, my name is Kody," and all that is missing from this voice is a screen, with a priest on the other side, "and I know nothing about women."

Heads bob in agreement, so rhythmic that someone walking by the open door would pause and listen for music; we are all that in sync.

This group of men, every age, shape and size, lets me spill my guts without interruption. During what seems like an hour-long discourse on how I failed in love, several men near the front help me along. "Yep, been there," or "You tell it, brother Kody," as I segue way from one doomed relationship story to the next.

I notice eyes in the room start to look toward the ceiling. We are in a county building, one that houses a variety of social services. The homeless in the basement's shelter/soup kitchen, a slew of do-gooders on the first and second levels. Our group and the alcoholics share this room on weeknights, though we have it first.

Even as I continue on about Karen, I am eager to move on and finish my story with my most spectacular, most recent lament, Jana. I see the men's heads all turning upward, again. There must be something on the ceiling because it has everyone's attention. Then I realize, it is I who have their attention; I am levitating in front of these men. A couple of guys, who may be trying to beat an alcohol problem, as well as their demons with the fairer sex, reach for their flasks. They do not attempt to mask their nip, heads tilted back conveniently for more than just a swallow of hooch. My downward spiral with women is worth drinking to, I deduce.

And then, finally, I launch into the Jana saga. Five years of my life. I talk about courting her, and how fun it was in the beginning. Though the men are awed that I am floating near the ceiling, they still offer abbreviated head bobs of agreement, because we all know that love is easiest and is the most fun in the earliest stages. Bad habits are still under wraps and all other baggage is still stowed in our emotional closets.

We all know that the first few dates - usually - don't lead to sex, so we, as men, are still on our best behavior, which in itself is a turn-on to women. Don't quote me on that, of course, because there is not a single man on the face of this earth who knows as little as I do about women. So I could be wrong. Yet, to these men, I am a Messiah of failed

relationships. To give a complete picture of my situation and to add credibility to my claims of dating models – I’m an off-the-rack guy myself and such proof I would expect from another Average Joe dating Cinderella – I brought pictures of my last three girlfriends – two of whom had corresponding tear sheets from magazine ads. Yet my plan has gone awry, and I shouldn’t be surprised as the men are passing around the pictures and gawking as if they are pinups. One of the guys folded the ad tear-sheet with Jana on it into fours and put it in his back pocket. Oh, well, I think, probably better there than the front pocket.

Several of the men get up - six, I count - and go running out of the room. One runs back in with a fire extinguisher, one with a water gun that is actually a gonzo-sized supersquirter, and another has a bucket of water that, no matter how many times he dumps it, fills up again by itself. So he dumps bucket after bucket.

It is not a surprise that this is happening. I am starting to describe the final six months of my life with Jana. And every time I swing my arms or gesture with my hands, I throw fire. So, even though we are men, we know that fire on the third floor of a very old building is not a good thing. And the ones who are functional during crisis, about 10 percent (I am proud to be among this group usually, but on this day, I’m holding court, so I can’t very well be expected to fight fire) are doing their best to save the building, and possibly our lives. Of course, the three others who left the room got lost looking for fire-fighting devices. Being men, they didn’t ask for directions and now are roaming either the building or the parking lot. Perhaps they stumbled upon the free meal in the basement. I just don’t know. Besides, I am levitating and spreading fire, so I really can’t worry about them.

As I wind down to the end of my relationship with Jana - at this point I am telling them about Jana’s relationship with the OTHER man to whom she was engaged simultaneously - I feel heat. The fire is out of control. No one is moving. I notice the supersquirter melting and the bucket, though fully filled with water, is gathering ashes.

One man in the crowd looks at his watch and leans toward me, craning his neck - I am floating over him, so we have a privacy not often afforded in such an open, public setting - “SportsCenter’s on in five minutes, might want to push it along,” he discreetly whispers, because that is the only crisis he can see on the immediate horizon. And we are, after all, men. Another reaches his cigarette toward the ground to light it, but Rick, our “team

leader”, raises his voice, “Hey, there’s no smoking in here!” And the fellow puts the cigarette behind his ear, unlit. I realize that cigarettes don’t kill people - only lit cigarettes kill people. But at this point in my story, I have no room for observational humor. Not even if I can keep it to one sentence. The timing is off. So I stow the line for the future.

I am a storyteller by nature, by profession, so I know that my narrative has been strong, but can never top the flaming crescendo on which I find myself, three-foot high flames licking at my feet. I’m not aiming for hyperbole, just suspense, so rather than bring the house down, literally, I touch the peak of Mount Jana.

“So I show up early, with steaks - to lay out a perfect dinner in the two hours I have before she’s home - and a bouquet of flowers, a dozen each, roses and carnations,” I explain, moving my hands animatedly so the men understand the extent of that evening’s preparation. Of course, flailing about so wildly has turned me into a human flamethrower, but frankly, no one seems to mind. Besides, I am speaking slowly and clearly because I can’t pause to repeat myself at this point in the story - or the fire. “This is going to be perfect, because I told her I was working out of town and wouldn’t be at her place until 8. Only problem is, her car is in the driveway, so she’s home at 3 p.m.?”

“Well, this will STILL be quite a surprise,” I continue. Everyone sees where this story is headed, toward precisely the kind of crash-and-burn ending that landed most of us here.

“So I fire up the grill - I set it on high because the propane flows unevenly in the old thing she’s got on her back patio – toss the steaks on and head inside to clean up and give her the flowers. I’ve had a key for only two weeks, receiving it when I popped the question, and though she joked about no pop-ins, I know what I’m doing is going to go a long way toward setting the course for our future. Or so I think. This is the Titanic floating gaily along with high spirits and expectations, until ... so, anyway, I think, we’ll eat, and get to celebrating the anniversary.”

The men know from my story’s introduction that Jana and I are not married, so to jump ahead and be celebrating a wedding anniversary right now would be just plain bad storytelling. Because we are men, they realize the anniversary marks the first time Jana and I had sex. Because we are men, we don’t honor first-date anniversaries. If God wanted men to remember the anniversary of first dates, He wouldn’t have given men orgasms EVERY time we have sex.

“So I’m going to surprise her, and I head down the hall toward the bedroom, where after an initial rustle, it goes completely silent,” I tell my group, who, I notice with some concern, is starting to burn up. But everyone keeps form, turning ashen, but still sporting understanding expressions.

“I open the bedroom door, see men’s socks that aren’t mine. And then I see a naked man’s backside on top of my fiancée. Well, that ruins dinner.”

The men chuckle because we can't cry. Besides, it would run the ash that their faces are becoming. We are men, after all, so it is a courtesy laugh, because what I am saying is not funny. I’ll admit some comedic timing, but as far as artistic license goes, I’m telling only the truth. Which hurts. Which isn't funny.

“As I see her head rise, she faces me,” my voice is only loud enough to be audible to everyone, because the fire, while beginning to rage, is burning silently. “She looks stunned - I imagine I do, too. At some point I feel the man, whom I don’t recognize, brush past me on a sprint out the door carrying pants, shirt and shoes, leaving behind his undergarments and. I’m focused on Jana. I feel a hole burning in my stomach. I see a fire behind her as the steaks on the grill go up in flames just as this guy dashes past, not even noticing.” I add the possible metaphor of burning meat, but it is lost upon the room, so I steer what momentum I’ve built toward the ending. Of the story. Of the relationship. And, as it turns out, of this building.

Because as I finish, the room explodes. All the men, even Rick who I can tell feels bad for either raising his voice or for the building’s destruction, have a look of sympathy on their faces as I float out the window to safety. At the same time, I’m wearing a smirk because I have been told in counseling that “getting rid of baggage” is important to move forward, so I’m guessing burning this baggage should move me closer around the game board to “GO”, closer to collecting myself and re-gathering my self-esteem and healing wounded pride. I escape, but no one judges me, because they know I am not escaping unscathed. In fact, I have just confessed how badly I’ve been burned, so they know. My burns aren’t fatal. But hey, I’ve conveyed a very real hurt.

I know less about women than all my male brethren, but I can levitate. And that saves me.

I wake up in a cold sweat. The same dream I've been having off and on for the past two months - sometimes once a week, sometimes twice - with just a few variations here and there. Though this is the first time the room went up in flames. Last time I had this dream, it was just a few coals on the floor that were put out by the guy with the supersquirt. I was glad, because that time, I hadn't added levitating to my list of skills. Even if my mind is taking the room up in smoke for effect, it still troubles me. Drama can be fatal only if the story is ending. And I want there to be another chapter in this torched love life of mine. Not just scorched earth.

I'm going to have to talk about this with someone - in real life, not just my dreams. See what I can make of it. Because I don't like what it's making me. Like a little bit crazy. Which is probably like being a little bit pregnant - a "little" goes a long way toward dictating what's next.

But I'll make sure the real group I join, or therapist I see, is in a single-story building. And no wood floors. Just to be safe.

## Chapter 2

Now I'm as afraid of sleeping as I am of women - and at the intersection of those two thoughts...well, the corner of Lonely and Gone is indeed a sad place to be.

I really am Kody Calhan, and the relationships that I recount in my dreams really did happen in real life, the steaks burning, and everything. Jana, I heard, broke up with her other fiancée - some things just should never come in pairs - about a month after I was out of the picture. ("She just didn't feel like he could completely commit to her," her friend e-mailed me.) Jana got me the worst, no question. Maybe I was the bad guy in my previous relationship with Karen. The fact is, I'm oh-for-forever with women. It goes back to college. Even my high school prom, now that I think about it. Oh, well.

The truth is, I like women. I'd like to love a woman. I'd like her to love me back, with the caveat that I be the only non-relative man she loves simultaneously.

I live in New York City, the world's capital of failed relationships, well, as long as I live here. Irony is, I'm from the land of "Real Men" - Montana. People want Montana stories from me at cocktail gatherings, ad campaign launches, book parties - whenever they find out I am from Montana. Since I can spin enough yarn to knit a nice sweater (like my

Grandma did once a year for each of us), I come up with some kind of story when they go, “Wow, Montana?” It is usually a true event, though I have to embellish my role in it because Montana never fit me as well as Grandma’s sweater in spite of having just as much spun yarn. I love to see their face when they start adding up that we drove 400 miles, each way – staying within the state – to play a championship game in high school. To these people, Brooklyn is a long drive. New Jersey, a day trip. Upstate New York, something that takes an entire weekend.

I grew up on a ranch, working with horses, and, occasionally, cattle - until my father learned better. I never really fit in well with most of the boys, and later young men, I grew up with.

When I was old enough to work on the ranch, I was able to execute only the simplest of jobs, mostly cleaning up in the barn. I didn’t have a lot of interest in the other ranch jobs, and as I grew older, so did my father’s, cousin’s and older brother’s frustration with me. I’d hurt either myself, or the animals when I’d rope; if I had to gut or clean an animal, expensive meat was wasted or destroyed. I didn’t see quartering the splayed legs of a dead animal – especially once rigor mortis set in – skinning it, removing its organs and draining its blood as “cleaning” it. There’s nothing “clean” about blood up to your elbows as you disembowel a deer or moose. The one-time I had to “clean” a pregnant deer, I felt like a serial killer, a mass murderer. Feel free to call me a hypocrite because I do eat meat – just don’t ask me to get involved unless it’s on my plate and I have a fork in my hand.

Granted, the argument over wording – “cleaning” – is all semantics, and my love of the English language was lost on my father. My mother finally hit that nail on the head when she said it was as painful to watch me perform such tasks as it was for me to do them. My father agreed with a frown and a curse word. So Dad and I found one of the few specks of common ground we ever shared, though, as it was in other cases, it wasn’t for the right reasons.

In my final three years on the ranch, I found, by default, the perfect job for me. Summers were the season for roundups and branding, preparing cattle for market. Neighbors helped each other. Since each ranch could be 15,000 to 50,000 acres, we camped most nights, because the drive back home would be late at night, through a mess of lousy roads and with enough equipment befitting a military maneuver. So, each night

we camped, I'd be put in charge of the horses, making sure they were watered and that they were secure. That was the extent of my cowboying.

That meant I had to stay awake the whole night, which was great, because it meant I was able to sleep nearly the entire day. Sometimes I slept within the shade of a canvas tent, soft music in my ears and an even softer breeze cooling me, while "they" worked. Or I'd take my own horse to a nearby creek or river, and sleep under a tree, my only alarm clock was the disappearing sun for its daily good-bye at the horizon to the west. I would get out of my bedroll almost always in time for supper - my breakfast - and breakfast the next morning then would be my supper.

I never had a beef with Montana - the animals or the people or, especially, the land. I just wanted to experience it on my own, on my own terms. For me, that meant alone. Land, like words, pictures or relationships, means different things to different people. I couldn't do a "group embrace" of Montana - the culture, the life - with my family and the roughnecks. I couldn't explore the vastness of the land with human voices in my ears. I embraced Montana through visiting the towns, reading books, learning about the land, the palatable parts of history, and the wildlife.

In Montana, the cackling of a stream, the violent yawns of breaking ice, the warm whispers of a Chinook, the melodic tunes of birds, the warning rattle of a too-close snake - all of that was music to me, poetry in its own, mostly beautiful, way. It wasn't that I couldn't gut a fish because I was stupid. It was because I didn't want to cut open a fish or steal what wasn't mine. I took all those Sundays in church too literally - the do-unto-others part - even when it came to animals. I couldn't rope a cow because it didn't want me to rope it - "That's why it runs away," I told my father, only to get a good cuff on the back of my neck. When, as a junior in high school, I temporarily quit eating meat my emancipation from family and community was as complete as it was unspoken.

And I didn't mind.

The thing is, the Montana skies spoke to me on those nights when I babysat those horses. Once I had watered the horses (and heard them release the first wave 45 minutes later) and staked them to grassy ground, I would stare at the stars and be taken somewhere else. Most nights I read by candlelight - maybe that's where the flames in the dream come from? Other nights, I'd write volumes of poetry, some of it to a girlfriend I hadn't yet met.

Once, when my cousin Jake found some of the sheets that had blown out of my notebook, he gave them to his older brother, Andy. That evening, after chow, as the men broke up to what men in that country do with their evenings, Andy stalked me out behind a barn as I rounded up a few strays. He finally grabbed me by the arm and pulled me out of sight of everyone.

“You some kind of queer - you like boys, do you?” he asked, twisting my arm. He shook the papers in my face. In my mind, anyone but an idiot could tell those poems were written for or about a woman. Well, this was Andy. He pointed his finger into my Walkman so hard that it left its outline on my hip and threatened, “I heard you were listening to Barry Manilow in that thing.”

Well, he was right about that - it was all I could do, alone, at night, not to sing aloud to Mandy or Weekend in New England. And listening to that I did feel gay – the happy sort of gay, that is. Like my father, Andy wasn’t into word games. Or words, for the most part.

At that time, Andy was 22 years old, married to a woman who didn’t just walk in his shadow, but was afraid of her own shadow. He and his young wife (she had just turned 17 – age of consent in Montana is still a suffrage-era 16) had a child on the way, and though wiry, very strong. Matthew Shepherd just had been gruesomely murdered in Laramie, Wyoming. In Wyoming, like Montana, the men were men, women were women and gays drifted down a social drain somewhere in between. Shepherd, according to conversations around here, got what he deserved: He picked his own sentence, and the rednecks who murdered him just were carrying it out. I had made a few comments, something along the lines of ignorance being bliss, and all it had gotten me was a warning from my father not to “rustle the help.” My father wasn’t big on taking social or political stances, unless it had to do with fewer taxes (except tariffs on beef imports), smaller government (except when it came to federal farm and ranch relief programs) and illegal aliens (except for cheap labor).

Andy’s mouth reeked of cheap chewing tobacco – this was the “snoose” of Copenhagen – some snorted it through their nose for the buzz and rush of a cigarette or a couple of cup of coffee. It was definitely not “chew” which if the common choice of Skoal would be a pine/tobacco hybrid; I felt like puking. If I did, it only would confirm Andy’s suspicions. If I called for help, I’d be judged and branded by the other ranch hands, none of them eager to have Andy question his manhood. If I didn’t call for help, I’d be

pummeled until I admitted Andy was right. Either way, the evening wasn't shaping up as I'd hoped. Andy's yellow teeth, flecked with black dots of Copenhagen, were glowering at me.

"No. I mean sure," I backpedaled. "But, no, not like that. Andy, what or who I am has absolutely nothing to do with you. That we're blood relatives is an anomaly I can account for no more than you can."

Andy looked confused, though that's how I always remember him looking in any conversation. He needed a literal answer. Preferably one syllable. Attempting to clarify, I only had lost him.

Thankfully, my brother Tad came around the corner. Tad was about a half-foot shorter than Andy, but twice as strong.

"What in the heck," he stated, more than asked, grabbing Andy by the neck and throwing him off me. Andy held up the papers that proved I was "a fag." Tad was sure of my heterosexuality, and knew I liked to write poetry, though we never talked about it. Andy tried to explain his point. When he started to raise his voice, Tad quieted him down without a word, using just one hand to pick him up by the front of his shirt.

"Touch my little brother again, I knock out teeth," Tad explained nose to nose, "and while it might be an improvement, you won't like it a whole lot." He didn't wait for an answer, because he knew the answer. No one messed with Tad, not at school, not on the ranch, not in town. He never went looking for a fight, but when a fight found him, he never lost. I saw my brother fight five or six times, and I don't recall ever seeing him get hit. Tad gave me back the papers. I thanked him with a nod - entire conversations in Montana are conducted often without a word - folded the papers and slid them into my pocket.

I wrote more poetry that night and more. And when it was time to go to college, I turned down several academic scholarships in Montana so I could hit the road. I'm all for "completing circles," but the path I was to follow involved something outside of this state. I knew this wasn't home for me, not right now, and maybe never.

So I went to college in Chicago, graduated from Northwestern, wanted something smaller, took a job in Denver, wanted something bigger, and took a job in New York. Actually that's not entirely true, but what I do for a living, I can do anywhere, and New York is where I want to do what I do.

I write “advertorials” for various products, many of which are women’s products. Another irony, because I’m Kody, not Cody, something that got me beat up on several playgrounds growing up. Had I been a girl, my mother would have named me Katherine, after her aunt. But, since I was a boy, my father got to pick my name. He chose Cody, after a great uncle who had been sold to us as somewhat of a war hero. My mother was not fond of Uncle Cody from the one time she met him - something about the way he thought of or treated women - so she led the name with “K” when she filled out the birth certificate. There were a few discussions about changing it. One day my mother asked me how I felt about it.

“I guess the name suits me just fine,” I said. And that was that.

However, the anonymous asexuality of that “K” now helps me in my job, because some of my clients have thought me to be a woman – a lot of my business is done through email, fax and courier; I’ve not even heard the voice of several people who have written some of my biggest checks. The “K” has been even a lucrative initial for me for the people I’ve met who’ve hired me to write copy, as they seem to think I deliberately changed the “C” to a “K”, making me “sensitive” - a perfect fit for their feminine products. Through this work, I have been exposed, so to speak, to the feminine side of things more than ever in my life. I can tell you what a bitch spotting is between periods, that the pre-period days of cramping, bloating and the not-so-occasional blemish are worse than the period itself, and how men can’t understand, respect and even bow down to women during this time is beyond me. I have learned about endometriosis and other exclusively female diseases related to that region of a woman’s body – and yet I know frustratingly little, and understand even less, about their minds. All I have deduced is that a man’s life is guided around his penis, his goals and ambitions often driven by his genitals. While women can no doubt be sexual creatures, I’d likewise hypothesize that they are guided by their minds first and foremost.

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Like I said, I write advertorials; an advertorial is almost equal parts advertisement and editorial. It’s ad copy. I love it. I describe products, usually for print advertising in magazines but, occasionally, for the product’s box or label. More occasionally, for ads in radio or TV. Print allows the most freedom, TV is the most lucrative, and radio probably

demands the most creativity, though it is also the least paying. Sometimes the copy for a print ad is almost a short story, accompanied by the advertising photos, describing the life that awaits you when you purchase these jeans or wear this scent.

Usually, I have to tell a story in a sentence, a paragraph, or a few paragraphs at most. So a \$70 bottle of lotion might become “Pearl Body Massager” and I write, *“Your body must be maintained like a pearl to be treated like one. Spoil yourself so you’re properly valued by others, held high like the gem you are, down deep and on the surface.”*

Cryin’ Lightnin’ Shampoo’s marketing campaign was nominated for several advertising awards, won one of the lesser of that group, and sold a lot of bottles of a very marginal product; *“A storm only you can create ... don’t let split ends or a flat ’do dictate when you strike,”* the shampoo taking your hair *“out of the shadows and into the spotlight, because great hair deserves to be in the eye of the storm.”*

Those jobs are still my bread and butter. However, through referrals and contacts, I have started to write back-jacket copy for popular books, mostly of the romance genre. There’s something about turning a passionate phrase that takes me back to those Montana nights, imagining my dream girl. I’ve also written the back-jacket copy for a couple of mainstream bestsellers. One jacket was so solid it received mention in a New Yorker, which in a footnote mentioned my background was in ad writing. That earned me a phone call from Stephen King. In one of his upcoming books, he was including, “You know, one of you advertising-writing people.” We talked about an hour, about how I find work, how it finds me, and the process I use to do my job. He was either really interested, or pretended very well to be.

Eighteen months later, Stephen King’s next book was released and I was delighted to get an email from his publicist. He thanked me, she said, and added that “my” character “begins on page 388 – and ends on 435 ... SORRY!” I got the book, and was thrilled because King really had paid attention to what I said. Like a good character, he paraphrased, but no doubt he captured my voice though maintained his very own, unique narrative. I respect that. Of course, it was a bit disconcerting that, in order to gain his 7th life, the story’s possessed panther killed me and then disemboweled me – though I’d be remiss if I didn’t mention I was grateful that was the order of the mauling. Though it was

an incredibly horrid, graphic death, I was strangely flattered and thrilled to be victim number 7 - my lucky number.

So I am a writer, though some might not view me as a “real writer.” Up yours, I say. I can and do make my living writing. Someday I might write that book that resides within me, who knows? After the new King book came out with me in it, I wrote frantically for about nine days straight on my own Great American Novel, 24 computer pages – 12,000 words. After going back and rewriting and finding holes in the plots, undone seams within my characters and their relationships to each other, I deleted about a quarter of it, then a full half. I was left with 3,000 words, and I whittled that down to 500. Finally, I deleted the file, rushed to my computer recycle bin, and send it into oblivion. All in all, it was a colossal waste of time, in hindsight.

Right now, I have so many assignments that the last advertising agency director I met, told me I basically was carrying in terms of workload what she would assign to three or four full-time employees. Working at home or at the library or a café - on my own - has taken away the office responsibilities (and politics) let me set my own boundaries and work at my own pace (this works for me, though I realize it doesn't for everyone).

Sometimes I will work late into the night, to the point that it becomes the next morning as I roll into bed. Other times, if I'm ahead of schedule, I work only weekends. I like being my own boss. I like writing alone. Though I come up with what I hope are original thoughts, I embrace feedback. Again, this arrangement works, for me.

I can't rule out writing “something else” at some point. I did some newspaper writing in college. I enjoyed the gratification of being immediately published (but wasn't crazy about the wage or the “inverted pyramid” style of reporting). And, for the one year I pursued my master's, I wrote three full-length pieces for regional magazines (slightly delayed gratification, but my first taste of free-lancing, and it paid a decent wage).

All that being said, in just over six years of the advertorial biz, I have made more money than my father, a ranch owner, has made in his entire life. And I have saved more than my father and mother combined to save all the way up to the time I departed for college – I discovered this by accident on a scholarship form where my parents had to list assets and savings. While I've invested quite conservatively, I have saved wisely - though probably too big a chunk is building quite slowly in a money-market account “back home”

- and, except for spending a little too lavishly on a few women who loved me too little, I could move back home to White Sulphur Springs, Montana, and live comfortably for the rest of my life, not working another minute.

But I enjoy the work. Because it rarely seems like work unless I've let a deadline creep up on me, violating the peace of mind I get from being "my own boss." Though I loosely enforce the schedule I sketch out for assignments, I do build in a cushion, as much for the extra re-write time as for the chance to make a good impression. Because when you freelance, one bad impression is a torpedo to your hopes of staying independently afloat.

While a part of me longs for Montana's open spaces – these thoughts engulf me only when I'm caught in traffic, a long store line where people are pissed and rude, or when I'm jogging and a large vehicle fills both of my lungs with putrid exhaust – I'm just not ready to face the closed and suspicious minds of Montana. That's not to indict everyone, but in my circle at least, it included a majority of the arc.

But something still pulls at me, in the direction of the origin of the wind. Though I work at assembling the exact right words (the fewer the better) in precise order to describe products I know little about and understand even less, I can't put my finger on what seems to draw me back home, especially since I can think of nothing awaiting me, nothing that would complete me, nothing that would make my life exponentially better than it is now.

I love my work. By that I mean I have actual, measurable affection for what I do. Admittedly, I work for big business. I am a conduit to the consumer – but I still do vote Democrat. A liaison. An enzyme. I tell you what THEY think YOU need to know – need to BELIEVE – about their product. Do I feel guilty? Hell no. Capitalism has to be sold, on a daily basis.

Oh, and one more thing, as if it matters - and I hope it doesn't – I'm not gay. That being said, if you are looking for a new perfume, or looking for a belt to match those shoes and that new pair of pants you bought without much forethought to the accessories, I am a guy you should be talking to. I know nothing about the souls and spirits of women, but when it comes to appearances and scent, I am Mr. Write, if not Mr. Right.

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Before anyone feels too sorry for me, keep in mind that I have dated mostly models since I've been in New York. I often get invited to the photo shoots for the products for

which I've scripted ad copy. I meet a lot of models. Too many. Of course, if it's the wrong one, then even one is "too many."

I never tell my friends about the models. They would think I was crazy to have any worries or problems with women - how could I if I was dating models, after all? And, I never tell other women about the models either. First, they might not believe me. Second, they might think me shallow. Third, they might find it intimidating. I could be wrong on all three counts. Even money says I am, in fact, once again, completely off the wall. I do this, a lot, when it comes to women - I throw so many balls at the wall hoping that, maybe, one will stick. Yet the wall is still spotless, balls piled high at its base.

### Chapter 3

I guess this is why it hurts so badly with Jana. Why it STILL hurts so much: Because I loved her with my all my heart. I'd never done that before. Maybe in past relationships I had held some back, not extended myself enough before, never let someone so close. It was no holds barred love, and I was pinned. With Jana, finally, I thought I had done everything right. Which baffles me as to why it went so wrong.

What I don't understand is the dishonesty aspect of it. What I can't comprehend is where such seeds are planted, and more than that even, harvested, in someone. What I can't live with, at least not yet, is understanding why she did what she did. To me.

Of course things didn't work out with her other fiancée, even after I was out of the picture. A relationship borne out of deceit is doomed, sooner or later. How could he be sure there wouldn't be unfamiliar socks and underwear in his/their bedroom some day? Or, for that matter, some other man's naked bottom on top of her?

Though I have my shortcomings – and I'd like to think I'm addressing them – I don't really see where I deserved this.

I finally figured out that the only way I could've felt worse than I did when she did this to me was if I'd have done what she did to someone who loved me as much as I loved her. I had no idea that in this world you could love someone so much – that I could love someone so much. With all of my heart. With all of my being. The hardest part is, what we had was never real. Turns out she had actually been seeing this guy before she and I even started dating. He was in another relationship (no surprise there) and in fact he was married

(that did surprise me) but the fact that he was married helped he and Jana make things worked, because she had me and he had his wife, so he and Jana really had to work to see each other. Now, the puzzle that was me has been dropped, and 1,000 pieces are everywhere. Only I can pick them up. And I asked myself, why should I pick them up? I had finally made myself whole, finally turned myself in the man I always wanted to be – and for the record, I should've been that man probably a decade earlier – and what did it get me? This. Nothing. Less than nothing. I could've dealt with nothing. In fact nothing would've been great. But this...this is terrible.

For the truth is, my life is still in tatters, and I know that's a weak-assed word and that I could do better – hell, I should do better, I'm a writer for Pete's sake. This is what I'm reduced to, rambling chunks and fragments, a train track that leads to nowhere so it really doesn't matter what kind of shape it is in any longer. The train ran me down in the tunnel months ago, and here I lay, on the tracks, wondering what hit me. And why.

Looking back, where was she that weekend she was going to see her family in Florida and never, despite wanting to know where I'd be at every moment, called me? There were other times on occasion when I couldn't reach her, either, on a Friday night/Saturday morning or Saturday night/Sunday morning – I didn't really give it a second thought. Grown up people trust each other, because they don't cheat. Did they steal away to a hotel that night? And even the simpler times, when I'd be at her house, and she'd ask for some “girl time” to shop for groceries or to go to Costco – she'd be gone for five or six hours. If I didn't fall off to a nap while she was gone, I'd be worried a couple of hours into it. Sometimes she'd come back a little distant. Were those times she was with him too? Then she'd warm up later and we'd make passionate love. Had she been with him earlier? Had she realized she was making a mistake with him and trying to convince herself to stay with me? Had he made her promises about leaving his wife, their baby girl? Hadn't Jana's conscience, for anyone or everyone involved, even herself, ever kicked in?

There's more, so much more, that I can only truly believe that there was less to us than I'd ever imagined. Not like three-quarters or one-half, but one of those fractions with a one on the top and a huge number on the bottom, like with three or four digits. I thought I was giving the space she needed. And it turns out I was, enough space for her to build another life into. Where did I go off course? Where did I let this happen, or maybe even encourage

it? What's my culpability in this? I have to know the answer, because I have to "fix" this deep within me, so this does not happen again. I can honestly say I can never imagine surviving something like this again without doing something drastic, along the lines of moving to the brush in Alaska and living off the land. Or maybe a high peak in a remote part of South America. And I'm not kidding.

Jana would go for walks, just a little two-mile "course" we'd walked and measured out together. Though we often went together, I can recall twice she went alone. Both times she was gone for more than three hours. Both times I ended up running around like a madman looking for her – I even walked or ran the "course" two or three times looking for her. She'd be at home eventually, and I'd be soaked in sweat and on the verge of tears. She told me the first time she had just gotten strangely and suddenly tired and stopped on a bench. I had traced the course so I knew this wasn't true. She improvised that she'd stopped in a coffee shop not far off the course. While I did check a few shops directly on the route searching for her, she could have probably gone farther away – but why wouldn't she call? Especially since I knew it was but a 40-minute walk at the most under any circumstance? The second time she had no answer. She just needed time to think. We hadn't been having any problems, so I was baffled. I asked her what I had done? Nothing. I asked her what I could do to help? Nothing. This, she told me, was about her, so I just had to understand that.

This is where I failed with her: I trusted her completely, absolutely. In past relationships, trust had been a hazy thing at times for me, both giving it and getting it back, though I can say with pride that I never lied to a woman I was dating.

I was lousy with women who played games – because I didn't play back. I've always had this theory that if you took out all the game playing and dishonesty and attempts to control the other, your chances for success in the relationship would increase exponentially.

With Jana, I gave trust freely and wholly; I felt that if I didn't I'd never have that "grownup" relationship I always wanted. I didn't want to run her off with insecurities or being overprotective, so I trusted her. If she said she went to a certain place, I believed her. If it took her five hours for the 40 minute round trip to Costco – when she didn't even end

up buying anything – I didn't question her, rather, I just took her in my arms and held her, choking back sobs that she was all right. She was here, with me, and I could love her.

So here's the deal now: I don't know what really happened, when she was mine, and when she wasn't. I don't know if she was gone with him all the time, some of the time, just once or never. I will never know the answers to any of these questions. Even if I were to ask her, what are the odds I'd get one honest answer, much less all? She could make herself look as good or as bad as she chose. What would I get out of that? More questions, I would think, than answers. More doubt, and I'm filled up on doubt, thank you very much.

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Finally, I have turned a corner. I know I have, so I don't even need to tell anyone about it.

Because it's all about forgiveness. I had to forgive Jana for what she did – for who she is, not so much what she's done. The latter is simply a product of the former.

And I had to forgive myself for loving her so unconditionally. I don't mean forgive her by telling her it's okay and we can move on – I'd never talk to her again under any circumstances. But in my heart, for me to get better, I had to forgive her if I was, myself, to move forward. I forgave myself for loving her so much, and for being an idiot – I should've seen signs, probably should've pulled chord earlier and let the chute drag me to a safe landing. But I didn't. I held her tighter and spoiled her more. I must've been some kind of pathetic to her, even though only she knew she was walking all over me. I do know, for a fact, that she never truly loved me. You can't love two people at once, not when the definition of love means giving all of yourself to one person, not to mention monogamy or any other qualifier that some use these days to justify extramarital relationships. It's all or nothing. I just wish she'd have told me. Let me know, "Hey, things aren't right, not right now. This is over." At least then I could've gone on, on my own, and her on her own. She could've straightened up her life, or taken it farther over the edge – at least she wouldn't have dragged me with her.

#### Chapter 4

"Do you want to know why you suck with women?"

I blink a few times to get my bearings, digest the question, and as my stomach turns as the disease called heartbreak continues to ravage me, though less and less each day, I looked at the set of crystal blue eyes staring at me. Any words ending in U-C-K that are being used as verbs immediately grab my attention.

Kami is a gem. Though she doesn't always talk like "a woman," she is all woman, from the top of her head at 5-foot-8-inches off the ground to her toes 125 pounds later. She is beautiful – I watched as at least three male heads and another female set of eyes followed her through the crowd to our table where I waited – and she is in good shape. And she knows it. She has the curves of a mountain road and is just as dangerous to men who think their egos can negotiate the tight turns. She has already folded our waiter into fours after he tried to be a little too cute for her. Kami doesn't mind being hit on, as long as the guys "meets my SPECS." This, I've concluded from a couple of years of occasional friendship with Kami (though frequent contact through email – she sells ad space in a fashion magazine), includes a lot of money (I've deduced that from her shopping recaps), a lot of time (when Kami wants it), a lot of space (see "time," only reverse it) and anything else that would be among the things you'd give to the girl who wants everything and will only "settle" for more than that.

But she is funny beyond belief, confident like I can't understand (though this might be a façade, I have never thought to probe – or just never had the guts – to find out what lurks underneath this woman). This waiter is not the first guy she has left either speechless or tongue-tied. Thing is, she enjoys it. She'll adjust and cross her long legs, forcing a normal man to either stare, at which point he's taken the bait, or force himself to look away – and at that point she's got to make eye contact or lean back in her chair, fold her arms under her breasts (more on those two later), and give the guy another chance to get ready for a fall. Either way, she usually gets their attention the way she wants it. Then she spins it, makes the guy trip all over himself – especially if he's not "legit guy material for me" – and sends him on his way. When she did this the first few times, I was amazed – and a little ashamed that these guys didn't pick up on the fact that she was me, though we've always ever only been friends. Still, it's an impressive routine, even though I know the ending before the first word is spoken.

For as good as she can torture men and wrap them around her finger, Kami has a hard time holding on to them. Kami been in at least four or five serious relationships since I have known her, one of whom she was engaged to (but didn't live with) and one that she lived with (but was never engaged to). The latter was given the boot for flirting with her sweet-as-sugar best-friend Hayley (the maybe 25-year-old online coordinator at the magazine) on the phone once – the guy might've just been playing, but it was clear (to Kami) that he could be the kind who played around. So after hanging up – she had picked the phone up shortly after it rang and caught his comment about “maybe I'm tied up – or would be – is that an offer?” and took all of his stuff (clothes, electric razor, pillow, comforter) and threw it off the balcony of her apartment. Four stories down to the street. I was baffled by the breadth of the emotional response. The razor, I told her, “could've killed someone walking by.”

“He's lucky he escaped alive,” she opined, her lips open barely enough to kick the words out. And I believe her.

I have no illusions about Kami: She is just too much woman for me – I'm serious. I have done the math on this. I'm muddling through the basics of “love arithmetic” – adding feelings and subtracting idiosyncrasies, but Kami is all geometry (stunning angles to look at, confusing theorems to listen to and terse postulates that she lives her life by – just too much for me to compute and understand) or maybe it's way more simple than that and she's just Calculus (altogether just way over my head).

So I enjoy what we do have: The friendship. The entertainment. And quite frankly, being seen with her is pretty cool – I like the way it makes me feel, especially since she can't see me without a hug that reminds me I still have it within me to love, at least physically, again at some point.

I get such good hugs, she tells me, because “you don't have those disgusting love handles” and also “because you always smell so damn good” and “well damn it, you are always clean shaven – why? You work at home, remember!” When Kami asks a question that is either rhetorical or obvious, her voice doesn't rise at the end of the sentence in the traditional way that questions are asked. It rises with irritation, and volume. God, her volume. No matter what Kami does, she turns heads.

Since she's not my girlfriend, I think it's cute. Funny, even. If I was her boyfriend, such intellectual bullying would probably lead me to flirt with Hayley – who really is just as cute as a button, and as much on the kind-and-gentle side as Kami is on the...other side – Kami is leather, Hayley is lace. So my only hope would be that I'd have packed my good suits before Kami offered to help get my stuff out of her apartment. I also have cowboy boots, several pairs, which would leave bruises. Besides, I use one of those old-fashioned straight razors, which went out of style half a century ago. If she throws that thing off a balcony, I'm sure I'm looking at perhaps at least some liability if it catches someone on the way down. While I've never heard of such gore in the ending of one of Kami's relationships, bloodshed does not seem implausible. So we are friends. And that's best, for both of us. Maybe even for sweet little Hayley, too.

“Do you want to know why you suck?” she intones again. I nod, and try not to convey the doubt I'm feeling. Don't get me wrong, I have no doubt whatsoever that I am not great with women – “suck” I take to be artistic license on Kami's part. Rather than answer her question, I lift a bag holding some shampoo and soap that was sent to me after another very successful product launch – Kami loves this part of our relationship (though she must get free stuff at work day in and out, unless the publication she works for has some policy against it), and the second hug she gives today she adds a kiss to, and that leaves lipstick on my cheek (she struggles as she removes it, not thinking it's gone because I am blushing, holding the red tone as if she'd kissed me again) and makes me feel pretty darn good about being me. For a fleeting moment I imagine Kami climbing on top of me in bed, but in the next minute I shiver back to the present as the straight razor takes out a postal carrier.

One thing one has to remember about being Kami's friend: All of her former boyfriends are, as she says, “assholes.” There is no wriggle room on this one. You can't claim to not want to be in the middle – even if you knew him and thought him a good guy – and you can't defend him at all. They are jerks. This works for me, because my circle of friends is very small, and I have known none of her boyfriends except through her.

And any woman I've had bad luck with is a “bitch” to Kami. I have a problem in that I don't know what Kami's role was in her relationships heading south, just as she can't know my culpability in the disintegration of my relationships. But with Kami, just like anything in life, there are ground rules. So I quietly abide by them.

## Chapter 5

I enjoy it when people finally get around to asking where I'm from, if I've lived in the "City" my whole life or if I'm from some far away place, like Brooklyn. Irony is - and I cannot explain this to any one who views 30 miles as an ungodly "long" trip - Montana is a great place for a wordsmith. While New York is the hotbed of literary business activity, Montana is the hotbed of things to describe. Of course, any place can inspire writers. You can turn a phrase anywhere. Geography is only a stage setter, a place for your characters to reside. It isn't rocket science. After all, elevator interiors and toilet stalls have given life to some memorable novels or short stories.

I remember a road trip taken when I was fifteen. We were headed, this particular mid-July Sunday, to Helena, the huge state's diminutive capitol. As we rolled along, I watched my father's hands. Driving the pickup - it was always a pickup, not a truck or pickup truck - was like second nature to him. This wasn't a work pickup, this was the one my mother drove to town. When his hands started shaking, we all knew it was a flat.

My mother insisted I get out and help, something I've never done to my father's satisfaction under any circumstance, but I opened my door and stepped out. I was just a boot length - yet a world away - from my father, who was in the process of changing the flat left rear. Of all the mysteries of the universe, my mother's insistence on placing me in the crosshairs of my father's scowls and rage still most confounds me. I do not know if her intent was to soften him (which I suspect) or harden me (which I suspect less). He was who he was, a man's man. I was his son and would never be the man he was. At the time, only I was good with that. Hell, maybe I'm the only one good with that to this day.

As I watched him loosen the lug nuts counterclockwise, my father looked up at me, without recognition on his face. A hitchhiker would've been as welcomed. My father pointed out - not maliciously, just honestly - "It's fitting that it was 'your tire' that went flat." As he held the flat tire cupped over his left wrist, the irony wasn't lost upon me; he meant I was the fifth wheel - the flat that slowed us down - in this family of otherwise true Montanans, an intellectual misfit better served by city life, be it Billings, Great Falls or points (and states) beyond. By now, my father had the jack in his hand, and he didn't need my help, in spite of my mother-driven marching orders.

“Just stay the hell out of the way, that’d be help enough,” he directed with a smile. Poof. No problem. I became the invisible boy.

As my father dug out the spare – this was in the day of the full-sized spare tires, none of the 5-pound “temporary” donut spares you see today – from underneath the pickup’s towing hitch, I took inventory of just where I was. I was invisible, but I was among the most beautifully discovered scenery in the country, or at least that’s what I believed then, and believe to this day.

To the west were the slopes of the Rocky Mountains, covered in trees whose angled stance defied gravity – I smiled and thought I wasn’t the only thing that didn’t quite fit in right here in this Montana. To the south was nothing but bluffs, rock formations that looked like mazes, paths, castles, forts – wherever one’s imagination could run on a hot summer day. To the immediate north - just below our perch on the interstate - was the Missouri River, the Mighty Mo’ which, at that point, looked as peaceful as the Sunday morning we were all sharing. Several trailers, called mobile homes, and log cabins dotted the bend in the river just below us, sod planted out front as if this paradise needed the comforts of a neighborhood.

To the east, as remarkable as it was unmistakable, was prairie grass, waist high because we weren't in a season of drought, living grass that in its own death would give life to cows, sheep or bison as the fall snuck up on summer and prepares to summon it away for nearly a year. Though these are my words, Montana remains a thesaurus all its own, an Eden in a country built around cities, something primarily rural that draws 90-plus percent of its taxes from those chosen few who establish urban somehow, some way, among the rolling hills, mountains, prairies and rivers that constitute Montana. My only regret was that I had no one with whom to share this grandeur, at least not in the terms it registered with, for me.

For some reason, as my father lowered the pickup along with his youngest son - I had been sitting on the lower fender when the jack came down in the form of a wake-up call - he looked at me. I had tears in my eyes, though with allergies it easily was reasoned away. If he had known the real reason I was welling up he would believe, correctly, that the “toughness” gene had skipped a generation.

“Hey, Cinderella,” he tossed toward me sarcastically, “you’re not going to make the ball if you pussyfoot around here much longer.”

Trout literally were jumping out of the Missouri below us, as if they could fly. A pair of fishermen, clumsy in their waders, leaped from the shore to a deeper part of the river. From their squeals, you would have thought they’d won the sweepstakes. We could not hear their words, only their euphoria. What sounded like Christmas morning looked like the morning after Christmas on my father’s face.

“Probably already have TV dinners thawing, shame they might get something good instead,” my father shrugged, as if his favorite pastime of fishing was his own, not to be shared or enjoyed by others.

Fishing is another undeniable, non-erasable part of my life. I sobbed the first time I gutted a fish, pregnant with fishy-egg babies. My father shook his head and instructed that I could “catch and release.” But that was worse. How much fun was ripping a barbed hook out of the mouth of a creature that had been looking for sustenance when I dangled a store-bought salmon egg in front of his face? Catch and release?

To hell with catch and release. How about maim and turn loose, with ripped tissue and deformities? I couldn’t remove the hook so my father did that for me as well. His eyes rolled as he tore the hook deep out of the fish’s mouth, “See, he even got a free meal out of it. What are we, fish welfare?”

Spear and send the wounded on its way. My imagination ran wild; had I hurt this fish’s ability to catch a rightful meal? Perhaps damaged sensors that allowed him to track his underwater prey? Or gave him a man-made lisp that his schoolmates would never let him live down?

Well, add one more tradition to the “no” column of Montana traditions into which I did not fit. I couldn’t gut a deer, which were hung out in our shop to clean after they’d been stalked and murdered, probably in front of family members. I was crap with cows. Hunting was the most square hole that my father tried to jam me into. I couldn’t find the proverbial broad side of our barn with my 12-gauge. And, I couldn’t be responsible for stopping the heartbeat of a living creature.

“Well, hell, you eat meat, right?”

I did. Until then.

I began, for just a few years, a vegetarian lifestyle that made my mother smile, my brother laugh, and my father climb the walls. There would be no blood on my hands because there was no longer flesh on my plate. In addition to dropping whatever baby fat I still had, “quitting meat” made me a social outcast. Never more so than on those roundup days, when freshly butchered beef wasn’t just the staple, but the highlight, of the evening meal, then savored again at breakfast and lunch the next day. Not me. Potatoes and bread were fine, and if we had some fruit and more veggies, it was a feast.