

CHAPTER 1

In The Beginning

*She considers a field and buys it;
From her profits she plants a vineyard.
She girds herself with strength,
And strengthens her arms.
She perceives that her merchandise is good,
And her lamp does not go out by night.
She stretches her hands to the distaff,
And her hand holds the spindle.
She extends her hand to the poor,
Yes, she reaches out her hands to the needy.
She is not afraid of snow for her household,
For all her household is clothed in scarlet.*

— *Proverbs 31:16*

I AM HOUSE

I am house

I am home

I was in my sixteenth
Winter the day she was
Born January the eighth
Away far where soil freezes

Not like here
Where the sun
Blesses burns punishes
Roofs and paint

She is on her way I
Said to the Spanish on
My right I feel her
The baby has no idea

That we houses know
Our owners years
Before they come
Up the walk

October 30, 1965 8 o'clock at nite

Dear Diary,

I did a secret thing. I put a message in a cocacola bottle inside the big hole in the kitchen. Then I plastered it up. Maybe someone will find my message in the little bottle in the wall, maybe a hundred years from now. Then they will know exactly what I was doing today.

This is my message.

My name is Kathy O'Brien. I am plastering a wall. I want to be playing football on our street with Peter and Terry. But I have to be here in this scary grey house on Clark Street. It stinks like cats and old people. The walls are a black stripe where the person touched the walls. I will have my own house one day. I will have a horse. In my backyard. He will be a black stallion with white feet and a star. I will be very happy. I will have my dog and a cat and maybe a turtle. And some fish. It is Halloween tomorrow. I hope I get a lot of Hershey bars for trick or treat. Thanks for reading my message.

Sincerely,

K. O.

November 1, 1968 7 o'clock at nite

Dear Diary,

It's kind of weird when it happens. Like today at the old house. I guess when I like a house I have to go to the bathroom right away. Empty houses usually do not have toilet paper. At least there was some newspaper

on the floor. I krumpled it up so it was soft.

When you're in an old house you do what you have to do.

My parents bought this house so they could fix it up and sell it. It smells like no one had the windows open for a long time. A blind lady lived here. It has oak cabinets in the dining room with mirrors behind them. We are going to refinish the cabinets. We are going to take the mirrors out. They are not original. My job is to take the knobs off and save them in a jar.

I really like this old house anyways. I don't know why. I know it is sick and it wants to get better. Every time we come here I have to go to the bathroom.

Maybe your stomach knows you like a house before your head does.

November 3, 1965 7 o'clock at night

Dear Diary,

Dad says if we fix up two houses in a year and sell them we will be rich. He says if we fix up three houses in a year we will be very rich. I want to be very rich.

Mom says if you sit real quiet for a long time in a house the house tells you what it needs. It's like the house is sick and you are the doctor. You sit there by yourself and you walk around and you watch the light through the windows. You watch the inside of the house like I watch my angelfish in the aquarium. Then you go home and think about the house and you go to sleep and then you go back there and you know what to do. A house is like a person or a dog. It has a job to do and it wants to do a good job. Mom says houses make you happy or sad it all depends. They should feel cozy

and open at the same time. She says there should be something alive in each room like a plant or flowers in a vase. She says if you take care of a house the house will take care of you.

When we bought this house my dad walked around hard in his boots to see if the floor kreaked. He crawled under in the basement. He lifted up a corner of linoleum in the kitchen to see if there was wood under it. He found mapal. He was very happy then. He said he struck gold.

I got to do the cutting in around the corners of the walls and ceiling tonight. My arms are sore. You half to cut in and then you can roll paint. Otherwize you have holes in the color by the edges. Painting is not as easy as you think.

November 4, 1965 8 o'clock at nite

Dear Diary,

Mom says a house has to have gardens. Mom says a home without gardens is like a picture without a fram. Today we turned up the gardens. No one dug there in a lot of years. The dirt was as hard as a driveway. I jumped up and down on the shovle like a pogo stick. We made a pile of bulbs. They look like old ded potatos but Mom says they are irises. They are heavy so they are alive. Ded bulbs are lite. We found little ones she said they are krokusses. We put pork chop bones and dry leafs and more ded leafs and nitro-humus in each hole where we planted the bulbs. We broke the iris apart because they grew all over each other. We planted them in the back of the garden close to the house because they are tall. We put the krokus in the front because they are short. Tomorrow we will plant

baby evergreens right next to the house so there will be green even when there is snow. They will keep the house warmer in the winter and cooler in the summer. We dug up a lot of grass to make the gardens bigger. Most people make gardens too close to the house then it looks crowded like a person with too tight of clothes. We put even eggshells and ashes from the fireplace in there in the holes. Now the roots can have dinner whenever they are hungry. We took our gloves off. Mom says you have to touch the bulbs with your hands. When they feel your skin they know you mean business. We covered them with dirt but not too much. Iris want to be close to the top. Then you put wood chips on so the plants have a blanket when it gets cold. Then you water and water until the sweet smell of the dirt comes up. Every time we come here we will water. But we will not see the flowers in the spring. Someone else with more money than us will own this house by then. And we will be fixing up the next one.

CHAPTER 2

The Deal

I AM HOUSE

I am house

I am home

I was born of an
Idea when war was in
The air and fear of an invader and
His army of brown shirts drifted across the ocean

Huddled in normalcy
Crouched bent weak from
Surviving the Depression
They warned my first one

You could lose everything if
You build that house but
She drew plans
For me

Big
Windows
Corner Light high
Ceilings to defy anything small

February 4, 2005 5:00 a.m.

I dreamt I bought an old mansion. I didn't know how it happened. I'd bought it sight unseen. I should say, it became mine—sight unseen. I went there and no one knew that I was the owner. It had a big theatre in it and a vast open living room. The foyer was a lobby. Objects from my past were on tables, ready to mount in glass cases like a museum; an old iron that had been used to press costumes; a miniature car and toys; things that had been left, discarded.

People were milling around like the show would start soon but they didn't know when? I was unrecognized. Then one man's voice rang out, "Kathy?" He cornered me to share his ideas for the remodel. I was busy getting away from him and the others who wanted their questions answered about what I was going to do with the place? I needed to be anonymous, to take a day before I started solving problems; while I took it all in, wishing that they would leave.

There was a family living upstairs—an older man with a white beard and his two sons. I stood at an apron farm sink and finished washing dishes that had been left in cold grey water, looked out a window at a pond that needed water, was too shallow. It was full of baby koi fish. Other mansions surrounded this one. The grounds were vast, like a park.

"Those were the days when they built places like this," I mused as I walked the yard.

When another young man who reminded me of an angel appeared next to me, I confessed, "I can't believe I inherited this place, that this is all for me?"

February 4, 2005 8:30 p.m.

I hadn't been up to the mountain in a long time. With no dogs, well, it's different without dogs. They say when you go out in the desert or up on the mountain, you take a gun or a dog or both. Today I didn't have the gun, either. Weeds that were at my knees last time were staring me in the face. Anise seven feet tall waved as I walked by.

There was no plan to go that high. Today, for reasons I could not understand, I had no choice but to go into a wild place. Above the trail, grass invited, green as a pasture under live oaks. I crawled, pulled branches, slipped often scaling that hill, catching my breath under the oldest tree until I was scanning my neighborhood, the San Fernando Valley.

I had to get far away. I couldn't be around people, be on that moving map. I wanted direction, a sense of a shape of—what is to come. Something's been knocking on my door, telling me that things are about to change.

On soft new growth, in a place that only the deer know, what was revealed stopped me, cold. Not in words, but in a way intuitive, with events "mapped out," it went like this: I would only be in the second house another nine months or so. It was to be made ready to be a rental. I would be moving—not far—but it would be like traveling to another country. Things would shift—jobs, plans. This would put me to the ultimate test. I was being readied to walk into a bigger life, another world.

Moving? But not far? Another world? What did this mean? I'm home now at the kitchen table, making a list of things to do around here before whatever-it-is happens. I still have some boxes, unpacked. Maybe I should leave them that way?

My jeans are stained green and brown from the climb. There's dirt under my nails. I kind of like that, having some of the mountain still on me.

July 29, 2005 7:00 p.m.

Was it vacant? I'd never seen it before. I'd patrolled those streets for decades. Why had I never noticed that house? Veiled behind trees and bushes, it looked abandoned. The walls hadn't seen paint in forty years. The roof was missing wood shingles. I made my way up the curving stone walk, wedged my business card in the door.

"Feel free to call me any time with real estate questions," I scribbled on the back. What I really wanted to say was, "Are you alive in there? Do you need help?"

I knocked. No answer. Either no one lived there or the person who did was struggling. One of the living room windows was cracked, with an opening big enough for a cat to walk through. Inside, a grand piano squatted, its ebony lid raised like a car's hood. Small house, I guessed. Two bedrooms, one bath, sandwiched on an odd, triangular shaped lot.

If a house can look homeless, this one did.

August 13, 2005 10:00 p.m.

I went to look at another house today, the third this week. I think it's the one. Oh, my gosh. I can't believe I'm going to do this. It's in the same neighborhood where I saw that really old one, where people keep horses in their yards, near the bridle trails that go up into the mountains.

I'm going to write an offer on it. It's really beautiful, with two stories, three bedrooms, two and a half baths, 1850 square feet, on a 6750 lot. The address? 619 South Spring Street. I could lie in bed and see my stallion down in his corral in the back yard. I could sit at the top of the stairs and admire black granite kitchen counters. It's an adult-all-dressed-up and ready-to-go-party-house.

August 15, 2005 9:00 p.m.

The son of a bitch seller refused my offer. It was \$9,000 under asking, contingent on the sale of my two houses, which I know I could move very fast. I'm writing another offer—full price.

August 16, 2005 10:00 p.m.

That seller wrote "REJECTED" in red ink on page one—across all the numbers. I drove by the place three times today. My car gets sucked over there. I'm cruising it! I don't stalk men, but I'm all over 619 South Spring Street. I totally saw my friends and me partying over there. I wrote full price and he said, "No." Shit.

August 17, 2005 9:00 p.m.

Someone told me once that God has three answers when you don't get something you want:

1. "Yes."
2. "Not now, I'm working on it."
3. "I have something better."

I can't imagine anything better than 619 South Spring Street.

September 9, 2005 11:58 p.m.

I think I have a cricket in the house. Maybe I have two or three here in the family room. They're playing shrill songs on strange violins—Their salute to fall, cooler weather, change—and risks.

First risk: Showing up at Harry Winston's in Beverly Hills. I was on the hunt to try on my dream ring. Sometimes your

subconscious needs a shot in the arm, proof that the thing—whatever it is—exists. I was sure they wouldn't have it. The surprise? They actually let me inside. A burly Latin man in a navy sports jacket that stretched tight over his arms fumbled with the lock. An even bigger man stood up next. Two gorgeous women with perfect long hair were sitting behind identical desks like Afghan hounds.

This was an act of courage. I was in old jeans and a T-shirt. Even worse, the mortal sin, my nails weren't done.

"It has three ovals," I described to the brunette on the left, feeling as small as Dorothy talking to the wizard.¹ "I saw it on a billboard at Christmastime a few years ago." They nodded in unison. When one woman disappeared, I asked the first door man, "So, how's your day going?"

He seemed pleased that anyone was interested. "Really good. Yours?"

Yes, they did have it. My diamond ring came out in a flat black satin box. The three stones fought each other for light and position. It slid easily on my right hand, thank you very much. Whoever said that seven karats is too much should be shot? I'd need a size 5.5. The ring was a six.

She explained why it was set in platinum. "E' quality diamonds absorb what they're around."

"I can relate."

"Now, yellow diamonds, they set in gold."

"The price?"

"Twenty-seven thousand dollars."

"Okay, fine."

"Yellow diamonds, a bit more. They are rare."

"Of course. I'll keep that in mind."

"If not now, maybe later?" My helper, my accomplice, surmised as I relinquished the ring to its velvet cushion.

1. *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, Frank L. Baum.

Crossing the intersection I spotted a silver haired man in an opalescent blue Mercedes roadster. Once upon a time, his \$100,000 car was shapeless metal. Once upon a time, way before that, my diamond ring was black coal.

September 11, 2005 3:30 p.m.

Second risk: Pruning the live oak. It was ceremonial, like trimming the first curls off a baby's hair. It takes vision to prune a tree. You have to see it hundreds of years from now. The deal is you have to not screw it up. After this I have an even greater respect for what The Creator does. It's not what's added that matters, it's what's removed. Think about it. He never says, "Whoops! 'Cut too much over there!"

One day when I was I was eight or nine, Uncle Horace and I walked up to a fruit tree.

"You have to prune it so a bird could fly through it." He pointed, frowning at tiny branches growing up through the center. "These are called 'suckers,'" he said. "They 'suck' the life out of a plant. If you want a lot of fruit, these have to go."

Today I got rid of the live oak's suckers. Now the grey skin is wrinkly and exposed, open to light. I stepped back, grateful that I'd been allowed to practice on common apple, persimmon, and nectarine, so that one day when I was in front of the Rolls Royce of trees, holding branch clippers, I would know what to do.

After I dropped the shears I lay on my back, looking up through her branches into open sky. I swear I heard the tree sigh. This opened the door to a vision: I let myself see the perfect house. I let myself think bigger, better than 619 South Spring Street. *Better* than Spring Street?

Out loud, I described my imaginary place to Him:

"It's a big, double-sized lot, with old trees or room enough to plant big boxed ones. I see hardwood floors, doors opening to the yard—pool, pond, stables with turnout corrals. There

might be a guest house that I rent out to help pay the mortgage. Gracious, grand, open as a loft, cozy as a cottage, I will dance there, fantasize, sit by the fireplace. Friends and I will play croquet on the lawn, dine around a table under an umbrella, eat and laugh, raise glasses.

“I want to be able to fix it up just that way I want it,” I added, to the One who hears all, wondering if He was listening? “I dare You to bring this to me. I don’t think You can do it. I fucking dare You!”

September 15, 2005 8:00 p.m.

I was early at the Board of Realtors meeting. This is a rare occurrence. I was only there to sniff out the new listings, to see if my future house might be on the roster? Today the buyer I was looking for—was me. I claimed a seat next to Jack Whiting, who used to be my partner, until he went “corporate” with Keller Williams.

“Morning,” he said, handing over a copy of the morning’s caravan. Around us other brokers were grabbing hot coffee in paper cups, fondling donuts on napkins.

“Morning,” I said, laying my wish out, front and center.

Third risk: Going public with a vision:

“We need to be on the lookout for a character ‘fixer’ big lot, equestrian zoned, near the horse trails.”

Jack’s eyes zoomed in on me over his readers.

“For a buyer?”

“For me. I want to bring my horse home.”

“What price?”

“Eight.”

“Hundred?”

“Right. Like I’m going to get into an estate for eight hundred dollars?”

September 16, 2005 4:45 p.m.

I don't know why I made a left on Birchwood. Long week, tired, not thinking, I drove past that contemporary two story for sale at a million three, past the Old Spanish that faces the park, the one that I used to sit in front of and pine over like an unavailable man. Another right, and there it was—the old house, the same brown house where I'd left my business card in the door a few weeks before. *I'd forgotten all about it.* Today it had a long green Dumpster in the driveway. A man wearing a surgical mask and an orange poncho was carrying things out of the front door. Lamps bristled stiffly above the debris.

Cue the realtor. I parked, smoothed my jacket, adjusted my pearls; spoke into the rear view mirror like it was a camera.

“This is my guy,” I murmured, strapping holster to hip.

“You're working too hard!” I grinned, as we met on the walk.

He'd just placed his dad in a home. Mom was inside, wavering, not healthy.

“Finally I can throw out what my ‘packrat’ parents have accumulated! ‘Finally!’”

Salt and pepper, well-heeled forty plus, he didn't look away from my eyes. This was a lot to do and he was tackling it. As he spoke the mask slid down to his neck. It made him look like a doctor.

I said I'd stopped a few weeks ago for a few reasons: 1.) I wanted to know if whoever was in there was okay? 2.) I was wondering if they needed real estate help? 3.) I was interested in it for myself?

“The house needs everything, that's obvious,” he sighed. “The back of the roof is ‘thatch,’ six inches deep with tree droppings from the past twenty years.”

“Hardwood?”

“No, ‘cement. My Dad lived for the past thirty years on

cement because he didn't want to spend money on carpet. 'Depression mentality.'

"I get it."

We made our way to his car so he could give me a business card. Butch Connolly was a commercial realtor in San Diego. Yes, he would like a current market analysis.

Then I set sight on the man and fired.

Because in that second—in the loudest silence I ever experienced—*I knew that nothing was going to come between me and that house.*

"I can market it for you, but frankly—I'd rather buy it—myself."

"You've never been in this house."

"...That's correct."

Across the street, almost to my car, he tossed this, spiraling, arching high as a football.

"The best thing about the house is the lot." He waved up, past the roofline. "It goes all the way back to the horse trails."

Heart be still.

September 18, 2005 12:45 a.m.

This is one hell of a full moon. I hayed all the horses in the dark while the wedding reception was in full swing. Sixty people were dancing under a tent, glued around tables with yellow plastic tablecloths, under at least a trillion desert stars.

Everyone was busy partying and feeding time on the ranch had come and gone.

I drifted out of the crowd, tied up my long skirt, and used almost all of what was left of the hay. Horses nickered, inviting, standing near empty feed bins to show me, the feeble human, where to toss the flakes. Even in the moonlight I could see ribs.

Last was my horse. I filled Tyson's manger, hugged his neck, felt too much bone for winter coming on. His coat was dry and dull. He looked at me like he had something to tell me

that he knew I couldn't understand. Something wasn't right. Mary and John always feed him well. What was going on?

"Do you want to come home?" I asked Tyson while he ate hay and the DJ played disco and glasses clinked and people laughed, loud and often. I leaned on the stallion and vowed, "I'm going to do something. I'm going to do something about this."

Two hours and one hundred miles later, when I was back in the city checking messages, I heard one from Butch.

"We're placing both my parents in a home. Yes, we're going to want to sell."

September 19, 2005 9:00 a.m.

I called Cooper today. Every girl needs a tall, dark, handsome mortgage broker. Boyfriends come and go in L.A., but a good lender, now that's hard to find. I leaked my secret. Unbelievably, the little two plus one on the tiny lot turned out to be a four plus three, 2750 square feet, on over a quarter of an acre, zoned for three horses.

"I want this house," I confessed, like Cooper was a priest. "I'm going to write 'no contingencies.' If I have to sell the other two later, I will."

For a time all I heard was silence while his fingers worked a calculator.

"We'll pull equity out of the others—it's going to be around four K a month."

"Iwanthishouse."

"I'll fax pre-approval over to you in five minutes."

"Cooper, do you think it's a good idea to buy a third house?"

"It's always a good idea to buy a third house, Kathy."

With Cooper's blessing I mounted up, signaling the troops to follow. This Queen was about to claim her kingdom. And she was going to need all the help she could get.