

Queenie the Cat & the Mysterious Stranger

Chapter One

Many years ago in a small village nestled in the hills of Upper Austria, lived a cat named Queenie. Just as her name suggests, she was a feline of regal stature with thick, black fur, shiny as silk and large green eyes that sparkled like emeralds. She moved, or rather glided, with graceful steps. Her ears were pointed and long and as she moved, her luxurious tail swung in perfect time, swaying from side to side as she placed one soft paw after the other. Her touch was light and she moved effortlessly and silently.

Queenie knew that she was a remarkable cat, not only for her sleek and stunning beauty but for her animal cunning and inbred wisdom. This set her apart from other felines, especially those cheeky,

upstart alley cats who sometimes crossed her path. These she regarded with the utmost contempt!

Queenie was the mistress of the house. She knew that for a certainty although she shared her accommodation with a family of four. The eldest, Grandpa Carl was quite a character himself and Queenie had a certain respect for him. Not that she paid him much notice as he sat in his rocking chair always waiting for an unsuspecting victim to pass his way.

Then he would sit bolt upright and grab their attention so he could discuss any of his new and often outlandish ideas, or repeat endlessly the stories of his youth. Queenie could always be sure if she stayed nearby when Grandpa Carl was having his meals, there would be plenty of tit-bits for her to eat, for he often fell asleep before his soup bowl

was empty or dropped a half-eaten sausage from his plate.

Martha was the lady of the house and Grandpa Carl's middle-aged daughter. A sturdy, hardworking woman bringing up two children by herself since her husband died a few years ago in a hunting accident. Queenie had always steered clear of Martha's husband. He didn't appreciate the intelligence of cats and preferred to give his undivided attention to a noisy, boisterous, stupid dog. The dog, named Fritz, and his master often went into the mountains to hunt for rabbits and deer. After one of these excursions, neither had returned home and although the household was in turmoil for months, there was now a calm acceptance that this was the way life would continue to be for the family.

Martha's eldest child, a boy named Max, had recently celebrated his twelfth birthday. Queenie was wary of Max who was known for his childish pranks which had often involved an unsuspecting Queenie having her tail pulled or ears twiggged while she lay asleep on the window ledge. Max had a sister, Anna who was three years younger. A bubbly, happy child – a free spirit who loved nothing better then to run barefoot through the fields of spring flowers and drop down exhausted to daydream of the big cities and towns on the other side of the mountains.

Queenie and Anna were firm friends and shared many adventures together. Even though Martha had strict house rules, Queenie was always able to find a warm and comfortable spot on Anna's bed on a cold winter's night. Queenie's home was large enough to have plenty of special places for her to explore

and to find quiet solitude to sleep undisturbed for as long as she wished.

Queenie's home had been a small working farm when the master was alive, with cows, goats, chickens and ducks living together in harmony. Now the family were struggling to make a living and had already sold off most of the milking cows. Many a night Queenie could hear Grandpa Carl and Martha discussing money matters long past Max and Anna's bedtime. Grandpa Carl wanted to live out his days in the place where he was born over 80 years ago. This had been his only home and he couldn't imagine living anywhere else. He knew every ditch, every rock and crevice and he loved the tall trees of the forest overshadowing the farm.

He had spent much of his boyhood in this forest exploring its mystic. Queenie agreed it did have its

own special magic as she too felt its powers. Many times Queenie had ventured into this shadowy world to hunt for mice and chase the numerous small creatures that called the forest home. Towering Oaks, Pines and Beech trees, some as tall as 20 meters lined the ridge and descended down the mountain to within 200 meters of the farmhouse.

Queenie loved the warmer months when she could leave the house and roam freely in the surrounding meadows. She would run through the forest chasing butterflies all day, as the shade provided by the trees kept the temperature quite pleasant, and there was always time for a nap on the soft ferns on the forest floor. Queenie shared this magical place with Max and Anna and occasionally Grandpa Carl and Martha would take a picnic basket into the forest to escape the summer heat.

They would spread a rug over the small, soft ferns under the green canopy of the trees. Then they would settle down to eat the cold chicken, the crusty bread from Martha's wood oven and her bottled pickles. There would be lots of laughter and story telling as the family enjoyed the relaxed environment as cool breezes rippled through the trees. When everyone had eaten and the food put away, it was time to lay back on the rug and soft cushions and look up at the blue sky through the foliage and let your mind wander to the land of dreams.

Queenie shared the feast with the family who were always generous on these picnics even extending affection to her which wasn't always given except by Anna, her loyal admirer. Birds would soar and squawk overhead and every now and then, a

creature could be heard moving through the thicker part of the forest – maybe a deer. Queenie seldom saw these sleek animals up close as they were shy and kept their distance from humans – their hunters!

But these summer days were now over and the foliage was changing to the gold and rusty shades of autumn. Cooler breezes were rustling through the tree tops and soon they would pause and be silent as an eerie stillness would seep into the forest.

Queenie sensed a foreboding presence, like a dark cloud floating over the ridge, past the farm and down into the green valley below. She was a wise cat and totally trusted her instincts. Lately there seemed to be more electricity in the air and her coat felt prickly and her tail twitched and bristled.

Queenie was restless and couldn't settle comfortably for her long daytime naps. She paced up and down along the low window ledges of the house, and often found herself startled by a sudden noise or a bothersome insect. She tried to soothe herself by grooming her luxurious fur but try as she would, she couldn't ignore the growing sense of impending danger.

Chapter Two

A sudden rain squall caused Queenie to quickly seek shelter. Hopping through the open window from her favourite window ledge, she perched on the kitchen bench and surveyed the room through her sparkling emerald eyes. The room was quiet and even the crackling of Martha's wood stove was silent. Queenie sat on the bench with ears pricked and listened. Nothing moved, a strange silence seem to creep through the house. Where was Grandpa Carl? He rarely left his rocking chair during the day and the rockers always made a sound even when he slept, quietly squeaking in time to his deep breathing and occasional grunts.

Queenie stretched to full length and effortlessly glided to the floor. She checked the wood stove – cold! How could that be? Martha always had it stoked all year round. Queenie’s nose twitched seeking the familiar kitchen smells. A faint aroma of cold coffee was all she found. Martha’s kitchen was always full of delicious aromas – vegetable stock, bread or cookies baking in the oven and a brew of coffee always on the ready.

Max and Anna should also be home from school by now and out doing their farm chores, feeding the chickens and bringing the few remaining cows and goats into the barn for the night. Queenie continued her slow, inquisitive walk through the house, stopping every few steps to concentrate on listening for sounds.....any sound. The silence was heavy and the air seemed thick and stifling making Queenie quicken her breathing. She thought, “I

need to get out of here into the fresh air”. She bounded through the rooms to the kitchen up onto the bench and out through the window. “Much better! Let’s see what’s happening out here”.

A quick check of the barn. No Max or Anna and no animals. Next to the chicken coup. As Queenie approached, they started to set up a chorus of squawks and scrambled around flapping their wings as they became anxious of the feline intruder. Queenie had seldom taken any notice of the chickens, even though they belonged to the bird family and although she enjoyed toying with the smaller species, she gave the chickens a wide berth, thinking them noisy, ungainly and ugly.

Still no sign of Max or Anna! The sun was sinking further in the western sky and the forest was casting long shadows over the valley. Queenie gave a quick shrug of her body and scampered back to her

window ledge and there took up a position of watching and waiting. Time passed slowly but eventually the darkness of night closed in around the farm.

With the night came its own elements of life and mystery. In this part of the world, many stories were told about the creatures of the dark. Children knew from an early age about goblins, witches and fairies, both good and evil, from bedtime stories their parents shared with them. Nature itself added to the affect of these stories as the strong mountain winds would howl and echo down the chimneys, creating a mournful moaning sound and rattling the kitchen shelves.

The moon would cast eerie shadows through the tall trees, and their branches could easily be imagined as moving monsters with outstretched arms encroaching on the farm and reaching into the

windows. The window panes would rattle and screech as branches would brush against the glass, and wide-eyed children would clutch their doonas and pull them over their heads.

The creatures of the night held their own allure and mystery as well. As soon as daylight faded and the first stars appeared in the sky, the fields became a hive of activity. Tiny velvety-furred moles would dig their way out of their burrows, using their short, powerful limbs with large paws to reach the surface and scamper around looking for a meal. Then the badgers and foxes would be on the move, stalking their prey between the fallen tree trunks and the forest beyond.

Owls and cuckoos would perch on high tree branches watching and waiting for an opportunity to pounce on any unsuspecting creature. Whilst the mouse-eared bats would screech their warnings

from the treetops in a frenzy, feeding themselves on beetles and spiders. The forest would echo with each animal's specific call and the night became alive with movement and sound.

Queenie took in all of this activity and seldom ventured to join this nightly celebration. Being now domesticated, she no longer needed to go hunting for a meal and she had plenty of daytime adventures to provide entertainment. So the night hours slipped by quickly, and as dawn approached the mountain deer's call sounded in the valleys as they headed for the protection of the forest. Queenie stirred almost falling off the window ledge.

As she yawned and stretched, shaking her head clear of sleep, all was silent within the house. What she was yet to discover was the reason why the farm

had been deserted and what had happened to Martha and her family?

Chapter Three

The day had started out as usual with Martha up and about at first light, getting the stove fired up and school lunches ready before preparing breakfast. Grandpa Carl arrived in the kitchen as the coffee had finished brewing – it was always his wake-up call. Martha had his mug already set out for him on the table by his rocking chair. A few grunts and mumbled words greeted Martha but she always smiled and gave her dad a pat on his shoulder as she busied herself with the chores. Queenie had observed this early morning ritual from her usual position on the window ledge, where the first of the

sun's rays warmed her fur and she purred in contentment.

The summer was unfortunately over and the autumn days becoming shorter and cooler as winter was fast approaching. The family had had a wonderful summer, laughter echoed through the house once again and even the nightly discussions Martha had with her father were less sombre. Queenie sensed the family had finally recovered from their grieving. Maybe their finances had even improved as they appeared relaxed and there were more special treats for Max and Anna as well.

After the children had finished their morning chores and left for school, Martha had busied herself in the kitchen making the last of the jams and preserves to put in the cellar to take the family through the long winter months ahead. Queenie loved these days,

being warm and cosy, comfortably curled up on the kitchen window ledge with the wonderful cooking aromas wafting around her. As usual, it didn't take long for sleep to overtake her and the last Queenie remembers is the ring of the telephone in the distance as she slipped into a deep, deep slumber. What happened next was a series of events that even Queenie in her wildest dreams could not have imagined!

Martha had answered the telephone grumbling to herself at being interrupted before she had finished her kitchen duties. The male voice on the other end of the line greeted her hesitantly and in an unusual accent, but the caller knew her name. This stirred Martha's curiosity, so she listened carefully as the caller continued to speak.

“It’s Johnnie here, Martha. I know it has been many years since I’ve been back home to Austria, but I’m now in Vienna on business and would like to meet with you and Carl in the next couple of days if that’s okay.”

Martha was stunned and momentarily speechless. Johnnie was her cousin. Her Uncle Willem’s only child, who had left Austria as a young man seeking adventure elsewhere. It was rumoured he had lived in many strange countries and some stories that had filtered back seemed totally unbelievable. One of the weirdest stories told of Johnnie, was that he had lived as a native in the jungles of South America and when his father died from a stroke two years ago, the authorities couldn’t find him for several months to give him the sad news.

Even then, Johnnie had not returned to Austria to settle his father's affairs or to visit family and friends. His actions gave rise to many more wild and elaborate stories about his life.

Martha wasn't given to listening to rumours; she had much more to do than pay attention to idle gossip. She had always liked Johnnie and remembered many enjoyable holidays spent together as children when Uncle Willem and Johnnie visited the farm for summer holidays. Even though Johnnie was five years younger than Martha, they enjoyed each other's company, probably because neither had any brothers or sisters. Then Johnnie had gone off to College in Switzerland when he was sixteen. He rarely visited after that. The very last time she saw him was at her wedding fifteen years ago and the following year, just after his eighteenth birthday, he had gone off travelling

the world. Now here he was speaking from Vienna and asking for a family meeting!

“Johnnie, you have caught me by surprise” replied Martha, her hand shaking as she held the telephone. “I didn’t recognise the voice and after all these years....” Martha’s voice trailed away as she stumbled for words to express the very mixed emotions she was feeling. “What business brings you back home now Johnnie?” she inquired.

“Well it would be best to discuss that in person Martha as it will affect your family. It is in relation to father’s estate which has just been finalised. I believe Uncle Carl will know of the family history and inheritance processes put in place by our grandfather, so it won’t be much of a surprise to him” responded Johnnie. “I will leave you my contact number for now and you can have a chat

with Uncle Carl and get back to me. I think it best if we can meet and discuss the situation as quickly as possible so we can all get on with our lives” Johnnie added.

With that the conversation ended with the usual good-byes and Martha was left standing motionless and shaken. She had no idea what Johnnie was referring to, but she would soon find out as she moved woodenly to the back porch where her father was taking the morning sun.

Martha observed Queenie stretched out on the window ledge as she walked from the kitchen to her father. Normally she didn't pay too much attention to the cat, but for some strange reason she now felt drawn to give Queenie a gentle stroke and a caring smile as she passed. The gesture seemed to reassure both Martha and Queenie who gave a quiet meow,

in response to Martha's touch. Martha made a mental note to herself to be more patient and affectionate towards Queenie as she realised she had been rather cross with her lately.

The encounter with Queenie had a calming effect on Martha so when she sat down by Carl to tell him about the strange telephone call, she was reasonably at ease, but of course still curious as Johnnie's words rang in her ears....."Uncle Carl will know the family history....inheritance....grandfather put into place". Her father rarely spoke about his family and certainly had never mentioned an inheritance from his father.

Carl listened without interruption as Martha related Johnnie's message, looking intently at Martha as she spoke. He remained quiet for several minutes, nodding his head and his eyes now fixed on his

clasped hands as they rested in his lap. Martha was suddenly aware that the news had shocked her father and was about to speak when he made a grunting sound clearing his throat. In a voice that was barely audible, almost a whisper, he said “Well...it’s finally happened.....so long ago.....I had almost forgotten about it.....but always fearing.....the worst”. He took a deep breath and sighed. His body seemed to shrink into his chair and his face had turned ashen. He then told Martha the secret he had been keeping since his father had died all those years ago.

As Carl and Willem’s father’s health had deteriorated, he had left his farm and gone to live in a nursing home in Vienna some twenty years ago. He had told his sons that in his Will he was leaving the family farm entirely to his youngest son, Willem. Willem had a son, Johnnie but Carl had an

unmarried daughter Martha. He thought it was appropriate for the family inheritance to be passed down to the surviving male child.

At the time it caused a serious rift in family relationships – Carl was furious with his father as he was the one who had always worked on the farm. He was the elder son who always took more of the responsibilities as his father's health declined. Willem was also upset as he felt embarrassed and awkward – he didn't think it was fair just because he had a son that he should receive all the inheritance.

The issue was never resolved and Martha's grandfather had died before she had married. Willem had a good job in Vienna and had no wish to abandon his life there and return to the farm. He told Carl that he would not make any claim on the

farm while he was alive and it would be Johnnie's choice, when the time came, as to what would happen to Carl and his family. Well...that time had now arrived!! Johnnie was in Vienna settling his father's estate and looking to finalise the inheritance processes put in place by his grandfather. This was the day of reckoning Carl had been dreading for some twenty years, and all the old anger towards his father surfaced again.

Martha sat in stunned silence. A million thoughts raced through her head. Her home! Her father's home! What of the children? How would Max and Anna feel? Where would they go? What would they do? With one telephone call her whole life had become unstuck, her world went into free-fall.

Chapter Four

Carl and Martha's world had suddenly collapsed. They needed to get some answers as to their future and fast! A quick call to Johnnie to set up a meeting in Vienna; another one to Max and Anna's headmaster to explain they needed to collect them from school for an urgent trip, then a hurriedly packed overnight bag with a few essentials and they were on their way.

The trip was a sombre one, although Max and Anna were full of questions and very excited about seeing

their uncle. Martha and Carl had explained how Johnnie was in Vienna on business for a short time and wanted to see them, but that didn't stop the children from asking for every little detail of their uncle's life and what was his business in Vienna. A trip to the city was rare and always for a special occasion with lots of planning for weeks ahead, so Max and Anna felt some anxiety about this one as it was so uncharacteristic of their very practical mother, and even more so for grandpa Carl as he was always reluctant to leave his beloved home and animals.

The three hour journey was very tiring and Martha was relieved to pull into the parking station at Johnnie's hotel. Johnnie had arranged a room for them to freshen up and stay overnight if needed, so the family checked in and while the children explored the hotel, Martha phoned Johnnie to let

him know they had arrived. He was delighted and invited them for a late lunch in his suite. Martha then realised that in their haste she had not even thought of eating and breakfast had been many hours ago. In all their excitement even the children had not complained they were feeling hungry.

After a quick shower Martha felt a little less tense but she was worried about her father who had been very quiet and looked drawn and pale. Maybe they should have stopped somewhere to eat and now the thought of food was the last thing on Martha's mind – she needed to find out what Johnnie intended to do about his inheritance and how their lives would be affected!!

The door to Johnnie's suite was open. He was speaking on the telephone and he stood with his back to the door looking out the window. He heard Martha's gentle knock and turned as he beckoned

them to come in. Martha hardly recognised the young man she saw there – he seemed taller, broader across the shoulders, his blond hair curled around his ears and he wore a short beard. However, those piercing blue/grey eyes were still the same. The children hesitated, tightening their grip on their mother's hands, anxious and excited at the same time. Martha smiled and entered the room. She headed towards the sofa, and once the children were seated turned back to assist her father into one of the comfortable armchairs that filled the room.

Martha gasped as she looked at her father. He stood slumped in the doorway – all the blood was drained from his face, his eyes wide and terrified as he stared at his nephew. He looked as if he had seen a ghost!! In fact, Carl was thinking exactly that. Before him stood, not his nephew but his long dead

father as a young man. There was no mistaking those piercing eyes that seem to bore their way into your very essence. He felt in a time-warp and as the years slipped away all the bad memories, anger and bitterness came crashing back. His body went rigid, he couldn't breathe, his mouth was dry, his ears pounded and the icy grip of pain circled his heart. He half stumbled to reach out to Martha as she rushed forward to help him. Then everything went black.

The next hour was a blur to Martha, Max and Anna as they watched Johnnie take charge of the situation. A doctor and ambulance arrived within minutes and Carl regained consciousness before being moved to a nearby hospital. Martha was very thankful the hotel staff were very caring and helpful as she felt exhausted and totally befuddled.

At the hospital, the doctor confirmed that Carl had suffered a mild stroke brought on by a sudden trauma. He would remain in hospital for a few days while they ran a series of tests to make sure there were no permanent health problems. The doctor assured Martha and Johnnie that Carl's condition was stabilised and he was sleeping comfortably. He urged them not to worry as there was little they could do and suggested they visit in the morning.

Back at the hotel the staff had given Max and Anna a meal, reassured them their grandfather was not in any danger and eventually had settled them down to bed. Over dinner in the hotel's dining room Johnnie explained to Martha what he intended to do with his inheritance. This was the moment Martha had been dreading, however after the shock of her father's sudden stroke, she felt both numb and calm at the same time as if in a dream-like trance. Today didn't

seem real and her father's health was more important than a house and as long as they all stayed together, they would manage. They had been through tough times before and they could do it again.

Martha listened to Johnnie as he spoke, barely able to absorb what he was saying.....”my life is full.....enjoy living in my adopted country.....family, friends, business.....no intention of returning to live in Austria.....growing up.....close to you.....anger and bitterness.....family feuds.....act as caretakers.....rent free.....as long as you want.....
.....pay the bills for upkeep.....legal and tax purposes.....take life easier.....holidays.....Max and Anna for visits.....extended

family.....keep the farm in the
family.....grandfather's
wishes.....” Suddenly Martha came
out of her daze. What did Johnnie say? “Live on
the farm; rent free, no bills for as long as we
want!!!!”

Chapter Five

Meanwhile back at the farm, the day was not without its mystery to Queenie. It started out with the normal morning activities but then strange events had occurred. She had been sunning herself on her favourite spot, the kitchen window ledge, and in a half-awake state when she heard the telephone ring and soon after she was aware that Martha had reached out and stroked her.....that in itself was very rare.

Queenie had roused herself from her dreaming waiting to see what Martha would do next, alert for a quick getaway if the mistress of the house deemed Queenie was in trouble yet again. This time though,

it appeared all was well as she heard Martha's voice speaking to Carl and so Queenie relaxed, had a long stretch, yawned and then repositioned herself on the window ledge and settled into a deep sleep.

Now it was the following morning and the farm was still cold, quiet and empty! She ventured into the kitchen to check her food bowls. Luckily there was water in one bowl and some dry food in the other so Queenie didn't need to go hunting just yet. She had missed Anna and Max coming home from school yesterday as she was usually roused by their excitement as they chatted to their mother with the happenings of their day. Anna never failed to spend some time with Queenie every afternoon stroking and patting her and whispering her latest secret.

Queenie realised she needed to solve the mystery of why the farm was empty and where the family had

gone. She had explored every inch of the house and nothing had given her a clue of what had happened yesterday. So she decided to check the farm buildings again and that is when she discovered Martha's car was gone.

So the whole family had gone somewhere - that was reassuring even though it was very unusual. Queenie had long ago given up on trying understanding the behaviour of humans as she thought most of their habits strange and unpredictable. She hoped they would soon be home and everything would once again be back to normal. There was nothing Queenie could do but to curl up and wait for the family to return.

Queenie woke with a start! Immediately the hairs on her neck stood straight and rigid, her ears pricked to take in any unusual noise. The room

was colder than before and now it was also quite dark and it took several seconds for her eyes to become accustomed to the darkness. She listened intently and slowed her breathing down so as to concentrate on listening for the smallest of sounds. Nothing! All was quiet and still. But something had woken her from her deep sleep!

Suddenly Queenie was anxious and wary, unsure what to do. This feeling was totally foreign to her as she always felt safe and secure in this house. Once again the uneasiness of the day swept over her and a small shudder run through her body.

After several minutes of intent listening and hearing no strange sounds, her breathing returned to normal. She started to relax a little, even having a stretch and giving her body a shake. Now, mused Queenie I need to gather my thoughts together and focus on

what to do next. It was obvious the family had abandoned her for some obscure reason and she was on her own, so she should start thinking about how to manage her current situation.

What was that? A sudden noise had Queenie on full alert. Was it the same sound that had awakened her not so long ago? There it was again! It was coming from the direction of the shed where Martha's car was usually garaged. What should she do? A car door closing perhaps, or the trunk of the car being shut? Footsteps sounded on the gravel path leading from the shed to the kitchen door. Faintly at first then gradually getting louder as whoever it was out there was almost at the door.

Queenie scampered out the kitchen and quickly took up a hiding place from behind the old sideboard in the dining room. From there she had a

good view of the kitchen but knew she was well out of sight of any intruder. Whoever it was had arrived at the kitchen door and was now fumbling in the dark with the lock. She could hear the rattling of keys and then came a voice she didn't recognise....."Dash, it's difficult to find the right key for this lock when there is no light available". Then some more rattling in the lock and the person mumbling under their breath as they struggled to open the door.

"Got it! Now to find the light switch". Queenie tried to shrink her body to the smallest size possible, hoping she would become invisible. Whoever this stranger was, Queenie was not taking any chances that they would be friendly and so she would keep well out of sight until she could discover why this person was here. The kitchen suddenly become full of light. Obviously the person had found the

switch. Queenie took a few seconds for her eyes to become accustomed to the brightness. She waited patiently as she listened intently trying to picture what the stranger was doing by the sounds she heard coming from the kitchen.

The refrigerator door opened.....noises of containers being moved around....then the door closing. Cupboard doors being opened...then drawers and the metallic sounds of cutlery being moved around. What on earth was going on? All Queenie could see from her vantage point was a pair of legs, in trousers with long leather boots reaching up almost to the person's knees. The stranger had his back to Queenie and was leaning over the kitchen sink. Queenie sniffed the air to sense anything that would identify the stranger or what he was doing in Martha's house. There was a

faint smell quite similar to the pine cones in the forest but that didn't help her at all.

Queenie blinked her eyes rapidly, then slowly, inch by inch, moved around the edge of the sideboard, all the time on high alert. Her movements were like those she made when stalking a small animal out in the paddock. Queenie's breathing slowed and ever so slowly she gained confidence in that *she* was in control of the situation. In her mind her body grew to the size of one of the cats of the African plains.....a lioness maybe or a cheetah. She was the protector of the household and defend it she would!

Chapter Six

Sitting in Johnnie's hotel room Martha slowly regained her composure. She realised she had been rigidly staring at her cousin, listening intently as he spoke. The impact of Johnnie's words left her stunned but her mind was racing a million miles an hour as she took in the implications Johnnie's proposal would have on all their lives.

She could tell by the look on Johnnie's face that he was also watching for her reaction to his story. Martha's mind was in over-drive and her emotions were jumping all over the place. Her stomach was in knots worrying about her father's health and concerned about his recovery. Her whole body felt heavy and exhausted and all she really wanted was

to wipe the day's experiences from her mind, and be back in the comfort and security of her kitchen.

There was a long silence in the room. It seemed that both Johnnie and Martha were waiting for each other to speak first. Martha sat very still in her chair with her hands clasped on her lap. She took several deep breaths and then in a very quiet voice that was barely audible, she looked directly into Johnnie's eyes and said.....

“Are you sure this is what you want? You may change your mind once you marry and have a family of your own. Your circumstances could also change at any time and you may need to consider selling to gain financial stability. Your work situation may change, or you may get tired of living in the tropics. There are a million reasons why you could change your mind about the decision you

have just outlined.and then where does that leave Papa and my family?"

Johnnie patiently listened to all of Martha's concerns, looking directly into her eyes as she put her questions to him and occasionally nodding. He felt a warm glow slowly taking over his body and there was a lump in his throat as he realised his emotions were bubbling to the surface. He hadn't experienced these feelings for many years and thoughts of his childhood at the farm with Martha came rushing back.

Wonderful memories of happy times, carefree days playing in the fields and nights sitting around the fire listening to stories with lots of laughter andand.....yes, love in the air. Families! The close relationships within families, Johnnie thought. Something he had not given a thought to in many

years. It was so special and yet he had somehow lost that feeling. Little by little over the years it had gradually seeped away and disappeared. Listening to Martha and hearing her concerns for her family had stirred some deep emotions within him.

Martha was becoming anxious as she took Johnnie's silence as an ominous foreboding of bad news. Then she saw a wide smile reaching from his mouth to the corners of his eyes and then he let out a huge laugh. His body shook with the hardiness of it and his shoulders were shaking as he let out so much pent-up emotions that had been weighing him down for years and years.

Tears began to stream down his cheeks as he bent over double holding his rib cage for fear it would crack as his raucous laughter filled the room. "Martha, Martha.....you just don't realise how good

it is to be with family again....how many wonderful memories you have brought back for me. What a relief it is to feel safe and allow emotions to take over. I feel totally reborn. Thank you, thank you.”

Johnnie and Martha embraced warmly. Then Johnnie whirled Martha around in a big bear hug and the room filled with their joyful celebration. Half laughing and half crying with so many mixed emotions, they eventually sat on the sofa holding hands and discussed the immediate future.

Johnnie suggested Martha and the children stay a few days in Vienna until Carl had recovered and then make their way back to the farm. In the morning he would commence all the legal details involved with his inheritance and then he would drive up to the farm and stay until Martha and her family arrived. He was excited to be seeing the

place after so many years and he hoped it would be the first of many visits he would make in the years to come.

The next morning after a nourishing breakfast at the hotel, Johnnie and Martha visited Carl in the hospital. Max and Anna were happy enough to enjoy the hotel grounds and especially the supervised children's art and play area. They would visit their Grandpa later that day and were anxious to see him as they had been frightened by his collapse, fearing the worst. They realised they hadn't given their grandfather much attention lately even though they loved him dearly. They were now determined this would change and they would take time to listen to his stories and share his jokes.

Martha was surprised and delighted to see Carl sitting up in bed chatting away as a nurse

straightened the bedclothes. The colour was back in his cheeks and he looked relaxed and rested. Johnnie took a chair beside the bed and after giving her father a kiss on his cheek, Martha held his hand as she and Johnnie spoke about the reason for his nephew's visit.

As he listened to Johnnie's intentions for the farm, he realised his brother Willem had carried the guilt and burden of their father's cruel and insensitive inheritance decision to his grave. Silent tears rolled down his face. He looked at his daughter and saw the love and joy in her eyes and a great sense of relief suddenly lifted from his body. He finally felt a peace that had long evaded him. Carl knew that Willem had always tried to make amends for their father's decision, and now here was his nephew extending a generosity beyond his wildest dreams. "Just like his father", thought Carl. "Families!!

You can never underestimate the importance and the power they have on your life.”

Chapter Seven

After visiting the hospital with Martha, Johnnie headed off to the city to arrange for all the legal documents to be drawn up to give Carl's family permanent residence for as long as they wished. He felt a happiness he had not experienced for many years, and there was a lightness in his movements as he stepped off the strassenbahn and walked along Mariahilfer Strasse to Vienna's central business district and his attorney's office. As he passed by the towering St Stefan's Dome cathedral, he paused a moment and offered a silent prayer in gratitude to his father.

Later that afternoon Johnnie set out for the three hour drive to the mountains, taking his time so he could enjoy soaking up the pleasure of the countryside. Many changes had taken place since his last visit but he felt reconnected and very much

“at home” as he passed the city limits and speed along the autobahn, then through small towns and villages nestled along swift running streams. The road began to snake up into the hills, through the tall trees touched with autumn tones and the air cooled considerably. The last rays of the sun had long gone when Johnnie eventually drove through the farm gates and up the winding road leading to the house.

Queenie was completely unaware of Johnnie’s approaching visit and we now rejoin her as she is appraising the stranger in the kitchen. She noted that the man was wearing a thick sweater over his dark slacks even though the autumn night was reasonably mild by local standards. Queenie’s gaze took in the tanned skin on his hands and neck. She couldn’t see much of his face as he looked like he hadn’t shaved for a week or more and he wore his

blond hair longer than she had ever seen – it was so long she couldn't even see his ears!! “Certainly not a local” thought Queenie.

The stranger was by the kitchen stove loading it with the firewood from the basket that Martha had always insisted Max keep full. He soon had a fire going and he stood in front of the fire-box rubbing his hands together over the crackling flames. “He must be from somewhere with a warmer climate” mused Queenie as surely with the clothing he was wearing he should not be cold. Queenie was confused and concerned at the same time but decided to stay hidden for fear of her own safety. She would monitor his movements carefully and listen acutely for any unusual sounds – maybe something would happen to throw some light on these mysterious goings-on.

The blond stranger filled the kettle with water and put it on the hot stove. He then moved around the kitchen opening cupboards, peering into each until he found what he was looking for – the coffee jar and a mug. He was certainly making himself right at home thought Queenie, and she was surprised to find she had actually relaxed and was warming to this total stranger. He moved around the room quite effortlessly even though he seemed a giant to Queenie – she doubted if she had seen anyone quite as tall or broad as this man.

However, she had a good feeling that the stranger wasn't a threat either to her or the family. But why was he here? And where were the others? Should she emerge from her shadowy hideaway and confront him? These and a million other questions raced through Queenie's mind.

While she was pondering these questions and deciding whether to approach, the sudden strident shrill of a ringing telephone made her jump and she once again crouched on all fours waiting and listening to what might happen next. The stranger answered the urgent ringing and spoke to the caller. Queenie pricked her ears and listened intently, maybe the secrets would be revealed in the man's conversation. He spoke with a slight accent, although in a language not unfamiliar to her. His voice was deep and loud enough for Queenie to follow what he said.

“Hello, this is Johnnie” said the stranger. “I’ve just arrived and am having a coffee to warm myself; I’d forgotten how cold it can get up here on the mountain.” “Aha” thought Queenie “my suspicions were right, he has been here before and he seems friendly.”

The stranger continued “Martha and the children are at the hotel in Vienna staying close to Carl. I’ll do what needs to be done here and wait for the family to return before I head back to the city.” Queenie was absorbing every piece of information and was relieved to know the stranger was somehow connected to the family and not an intruder as she had originally thought. But why were Martha and the children in the city and where was Grandpa Carl? Obviously he was not with them at the hotel the blond man had mentioned.

Queenie heard the stranger continue the conversation “Carl is now out of danger and the doctor wants him to remain in hospital so he can run more tests. If all goes well he should be up and about in a few days. He’s a tough old bloke but he has aged since I saw him some eight years ago.”

“So” thought Queenie “this blond man was part of the family circle.” That was comforting although she was alarmed that Grandpa Carl was in hospital. How could that be? When did all this happen?

“So this blond man, Johnnie, would be staying until Martha and her family returned”, mused Queenie. This might be a good time to introduce herself to him and also let him know in no uncertain terms, she needed some food. Queenie’s meow was very low and hesitant as she moved slowly into the kitchen. She saw the man turn slightly towards her with a smile spreading across his face.

“So there you are Queenie. I’ve been told all about you and Anna gave me strict instructions to look after you until she gets home. Firstly let’s get you some food as I guess you have forgotten how to forage for your own dinner eh?”

“Well I don’t know about that” thought Queenie! She still had all her hunting instincts intact and would certainly be able to find a supper elsewhere. However she had soon eaten all the food Johnnie had placed in her bowl and was licking her whiskers as he bent down and tickled his fingers behind her ears.

Queenie purred and rubbed herself along Johnnie’s legs as he stood looking down at her with a wide grin. He then bent down and stroked her back and rubbed his hand over her face whilst Queenie leant into his hand enjoying the attention. “Well Queenie it looks like you and I are going to get on just fine” said Johnnie.

Queenie thought so too as she curled up in front of the warm stove and was instantly asleep.