

Unforgiving
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Levi rested his hand head high on the left side of the window and gazed across the West fields at the base of the low rolling mountains bordering his property line. The flowers, in early bloom, announce spring as he had saw from this window for the past 32 years. Lena loved the sight of the spring bloom from this vantage point. It had been six months since Lena passed away. Without her, there was no life worth living out here on the ranch. The kids are now grown and pursuing other interests so to be closer to them, Levi sold the ranch and was packing to move from Wyoming to Southern California.

In his youth, Levi was a tall lanky, handsome fellow. He and Lena became high school sweethearts in the tenth grade and married a few months out of high school. That's what people did at the time. They moved into his parent's house at the first evidence that they were expanding the family. Levi's parents moved into the guesthouse, and bought a winter home in a small town south of Albuquerque, New Mexico. In time, their family grew to two boys and a girl. Not in that order. Levi, an only child, inherited the ranch sooner than he had anticipated.

As the nest emptied, Lena became despondent during the long isolated winters on the ranch and in time, they decided that she should spend February in Phoenix Arizona with her sister, leaving Levi and the hired hands behind to tend to cattle.

Levi shook off the forlorn spirits that too often captured him, took the screwdriver from his pocket and walked to the antique dressing table. He envisioned Lena sitting before the mirror doing her nightly 100 brush strokes through shoulder length auburn hair, something her mother taught her to keep her hair beautiful. And it was. This was the last room to pack before the move. He decided to remove the mirror so that it could be crated for safer transport.

As he moved the dressing table out to gain access to the screws attaching the mirror to the base, an envelope fell to the floor. Levi picked it up and examined the address. The letter was addressed to Lena Culver, Lena's maiden name, post office box 57, Cody, Wyoming. The post date was nearly two months before he found Lena.

Levi pulled the one page handwritten letter out of the envelope, unfolded it and began reading:

Dearest Lena,

It has been six months since we were last together. My heart aches for you because I have bad news to tell you. I was recently diagnosed with stage 4-lung cancer. The Doctor said it's an aggressive form of cancer and that I have possibly 3 to 4 more

months to live if I take a new, radical, chemotherapy. He said it will make me quite sick but might add a few extra months. I haven't made up my mind yet to take the meds. No matter what I do it will not get me to the time when you will be back.

I love you very much and leave with only one regret that it was impossible for us to be together forever. Both of our situations made it impractical.

Our time together over the past ten years, has been the most special times of my entire life. I thank you and love you for them. If it were possible for us to be together for an eternity, I wish for it but as we have talked endlessly about this, our relationship would need to end someday. Isn't it a funny irony that it has to end this way?

So, my love, this will be my last letter. The last time for me to tell you how much you have meant to me and how much I love you.

I wish you the happiness you deserve for the rest of your life and hope to meet you again in the hereafter. Think of my passing as going ahead to set up housekeeping for your arrival. (A tearstain marks the end of the sentence)

Your Forever Love,

Mel

Levi staggered backwards, reached for an arm then lowered himself into the rocking chair beside the window. Not yet believing what he had just read, Levi reread the letter. His mind whirred like a computer reassembling the time line leading up to Lena's death. It had been two months before she died that she came under a dark cloak of depression. Levi had taken her to three different doctors in his effort to help her. Each one diagnosed Lena as entering a woman's second great hormonal shift, menopause and prescribed estrogen to moderate the symptoms. Lena was a good patient, so he assumed, and

seemingly took the medicine Levi laid out for her every day. But as the weeks went on, she sunk ever deeper into the black hole, until that day.

The morning Levi left for the North field to brand calves Lena was in a chipper mood. It was a relief for him to see her smile again. She made him breakfast for a change. Promise was stirring that a normal life might soon return. He gave Lena a kiss on the cheek and promised to be home for lunch with her then rode off feeling hopeful.

When he returned home at 11:30, he heard the sound of a car running in the garage as he walked to the house. When he opened the door of the garage a plume of warm exhaust made him step back. He reached inside the door and hit the garage door opener button. Within seconds of the door opening, the air cleared enough for him to see Lena sitting behind the steering wheel slumped against the door.

Nearly every hour of every day since that day he had been guilt ridden and burdened by the questions every suicide survivor must have, *Why didn't I see it coming, could I have done more to help her?* As he sat staring at Mel's letter the yoke of that guilt lifted from his shoulders, replaced by the breathtaking realization of her betrayal. Levi thought he should be angry but with the resolute practicality of a Wyoming rancher he wasn't. Instead, he felt relief and spoke to the letter, "I don't know who you are Mel, but thanks."

Levi walked to the dressing table, grabbed Lena's and his wedding picture off the dressing table and sat back down in the rocking chair. He broke the glass in the frame over his knee, picked the glass away and pulled the picture out. Holding the picture over Mel's letter, he slowly traced the outline of her face with his finger then caressed her hair as he had done over the last thirty-two years. With the realization that they were more important than we were, a hollow emptiness replaced the undying love he had had for the only woman he'd ever known.

Levi pulled his old Schrader jackknife from his jeans pocket and carefully cut Lena out of the picture, tossing it into the trashcan. He struck a stick match, lit Mel's letter and tossed it on top of Lena, *she was a good mother, no need to trouble the kids with this.* Levi stared at the flames until the last flicker then got up from the rocking chair, walked out, leaving the furniture in the bedroom. He stepped out of the house, took one last look over the ranch, reflecting on what had been and what could have been. Then, Levi climbed into his pick up truck and drove to Southern California.

Levi never remarried but did enjoy the company of several lady friends during the last four decades of his life. Upon his death, he was buried in Southern California, a thousand miles from Lena.