

"Cottonwood Place is touching, moving and inspiring. Megan and Ian will remain in your heart long after the last page is read."
- Jules Bennett, author of Home Again from The Wild Rose Press.

Cottonwood PLACE

Sandy Wickersham-McWhorter

As the new guest came toward the desk, Megan saw his gray eyes, or were they blue? She'd decide the color when she could think again. Surely, his voice must match the power she saw in his arms as he set down his suitcase. "My parents put the sage and evergreen in the swag to help correct any imbalance in energies of people entering the inn. May I help you?"

Their eyes met. Ian's heart skipped a beat. Maybe her beauty had stopped it? He didn't care which it was. Only she mattered. Her eyes weren't one color. Brown, gold, and green mixed haphazardly in them. He'd never seen such fascinating eyes although he knew the mechanics of such coloration. "I'd like eyes, please."

"Pardon me, sir?" Megan laughed to herself.

Ian felt like he'd been hypnotized, and shook his head to clear it. "Sorry. I'd like a room if you have one. I came *on the spur of the moment*, so I don't have a reservation."

His voice sounded as deep as when she'd heard him call himself a murderer. *I've never heard someone's thoughts before. It's not normal. I have to ask Grandma about it.* His eyes were a definite blue-gray. A cold blue, but she liked it. At least they weren't brown. "That must be the longest *spur of the moment* on record, Ian."

Taken aback, he stammered, "It's uh...a long story that...that I'll bore you with someday. How did you know my thoughts about the swag?"

She smiled again. "I wouldn't be bored. I saw you looking at it. We've been expecting you. You shouldn't have driven across country without your AC on just to get here, though."

Ian's eyes bulged. "How could you be expecting me? How do you know I did that?"

Megan pointed to his sweaty spots. "Those and your license plate."

"You are observant *and* beautiful," Ian murmured, feeling stupid.

Cottonwood Place

by

Sandy Wickersham-
McWhorter

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

Cottonwood Place

COPYRIGHT © 2007 by Sandra K. McWhorter

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission of the author or The Wild Rose Press except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

Contact Information: info@thewildrosepress.com

Cover Art by *Kim Mendoza*

The Wild Rose Press
PO Box 708
Adams Basin, NY 14410-0706
Visit us at www.thewildrosepress.com

Publishing History
First White Rose Edition, 2007
Print ISBN 1-60154-114-7

Published in the United States of America

Dedication

To my daughter-in-law, Anita, without whose help I couldn't have finished Cottonwood Place as quickly. You're a welcome presence in a house too long dominated by males who don't understand the finer points of being a woman, or life!

To the grandmother who raised me, Lona (Telus) Resler. You were my childhood rock that I still love. Someday, I'll find out why Indians fascinated you at a time when only the Hollywood stereotypes existed. You've been gone many years, but remain a confusing, comforting part of me. With this book, I honor you.

To June Wickersham, who gave my father many years of life he wouldn't have had otherwise; thank you with all my heart.

Acknowledgements

I've always loved cottonwood trees, especially the eighty-foot girl in my backyard. The rustling sound and seeing the leaves move in the wind bring back happy childhood memories. I never realized they had so many myths associated with them. Some research for Cottonwood Place happened when I went to Boulder City, Nevada, and Bullhead City, Arizona, for my beloved father, Howard Wickersham's funeral in 2001. The exotic landscape assuaged our grief as my brothers and I explored the desert and Southwestern life and fell in love with both. Other information came from websites and phone calls. Below are the important sources:

Looking for Lost Bird-Yvette Melanson with Claire Safran
The workers at Hoover Dam who answered my many questions.

Boulder City/Hoover Dam Museum in the historic Boulder Dam Hotel and its helpful workers, especially Dennis McBride

An Introduction to the Navajo Culture-
waltonfeed.com/peoples/navajo/culture.html

Navajo Religion-A Sacred Way of Life-
xpressweb.com/zionpark/index3.html

Navajo Ceremonials-
hanksville.org/voyage/navajo/ceremonials.php3

Blessingway-angelfire.com/ca/Indian/BlessingWay.html

Native-American Sweat Lodge-
cyberbohemia.com/Pages/joiningrf.html

Hidden Treasure-Historical Truth: Native-American
Understanding of Nature-Katherine Bone

The Talking Leaves of the Sacred Trees-
windwolfwoman.com/newsletter_june.html

Coconino National Forest website and the campgrounds'
helpful hosts-especially Steve

Diabetes and Navajo Teaching-Johnson Dennison

Bob Larson Ministries-bobl Larson.org

Exorcism-hemystica.com/mystica/articles/e/exorcism.html

Chapter One

“Where do you go when there’s no place left to go? If you have been everywhere and done everything and still aren’t satisfied, come discover the many mysteries of Cottonwood Place Bed and Breakfast Inn, and the captivating Southwest.”

Sounds like a place for lost people like me, Ian Hunter thought sarcastically as he looked at the inn’s brochure. In his opinion, he’d done *several* things too many. The Boulder City, Nevada, inn would be far enough from New York that no one should know him. If he only had some money he’d go there now.

A picture’s caption read, *“Megan Dyan MacCloud, owner and her able assistants: Cassiopeia, the cat, and Orion, the dog.”* Cassiopeia had long white hair, and Orion was a black, tan, and white husky-shepherd mix dog. Megan had to be the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen.

She and her pets, one on either side of her, sat on a white swing on a spacious porch. A colorful gypsy outfit complimented her angelic face, made more so by flame-red curls that flowed past her shoulders.

The cat and dog seemed to know they were being photographed and reminded Ian more of mischievous children than animals.

The brochure listed attractions around Boulder City with Cottonwood Place B&B centrally located. Ian smiled. *She’s gorgeous and clever. Who could resist visiting the Hoover Dam, Vegas, or the Grand Canyon with such a cozy retreat to return to? Since it’s May, the temperature there must be in the nineties. That’s no hotter than the hell I’m going through right now.*

He sat on his bed, flipping through the channels because he didn't know what programs were on TV. He was usually leaning over an operating table this time of day. He stopped at a game show, but he couldn't concentrate on that. *A ticket to Vegas would cost a fortune unless I booked weeks ahead. Even through cheap-ticket websites, flights are expensive, unless I don't mind playing some Russian roulette with time and seats. Something tells me that seeing Megan would be worth any hassle in the universe.*

Staring at her picture, he mentally inventoried his assets. He'd put his valuable belongings in storage under a false name. He'd sold his apartment and less valuable things in a vain attempt to try to keep his malpractice insurance. Unfortunately, he owed rent on the storage, just as he did on this room in the dumpy brownstone he found himself existing in. His ringing cell phone jerked him out of his reverie. "Hello?"

"Ian, I'm glad you answered!"

"What's the matter, Mom?"

"Grandpa just fainted, so I called 911. Go to your hospital fast!"

"I'm on my way. I love you."

"I love you, too."

He looked longingly at Megan's picture and laid the brochure gently on the table.

At the hospital emergency room, the staff didn't care about Ian's malpractice suit. They let him and his mom in the room with his grandpa. An agonizing hour later, Dr. Hatfield stated, "It's time to pronounce him, Ian."

Grabbing the defibrillator paddles, Ian replied with tears streaming down his face, "No! I can save him!" He hit the defib charge button. While waiting, Ian cried out, "He's my grandpa. I have to save him!"

Knowing his dedication to his family, the doctor and nurses let Ian alone.

He moved automatically, forced by habits formed during his ten-year medical career. When Ian put the

charged paddles to his grandpa's chest, tears blurred his sight. His mother's soothing voice said, "Ian, son, stop."

Dr. Hatfield took the paddles from him, so Ian blindly began CPR on his grandfather.

"Ian, stop. For me, please?" Katy Hunter tried to pull her son's hands from his grandpa's chest. "Let him go."

"No, Mom!"

Katy turned her son's face to hers. "No one can bring him back. He's in heaven with God."

Ian buried his face in his mom's shoulder to sob. Two nurses soon consoled Ian and Katy with hugs then guided them to a quiet conference room where Dr. Hatfield offered his own condolences before they handled the necessary paperwork.

The funeral of Ian Hunter the First three days later drew a large crowd of mourners. He'd been a well-respected man. Ian Hunter the Third sat in front with his mom, uncles, aunts, brother, and sister.

Even with them nearby, Ian could only look out the wide window above grandpa's coffin and watch the clouds roll by. Tears slid down Ian's cheeks unbidden when they played Grandpa's favorite song, *Go Rest High on That Mountain*.

Ian couldn't stop self-recrimination from flooding his mind. He didn't look at anyone, afraid they'd know his thoughts: *I can't do anything right anymore except drink. I'm the worst doctor in the world. I don't know how much more failure I can stand. God, why wouldn't You let me save Grandpa? What did I do to You to make You hate me so much?*

After everyone had left the graveside service, Ian kneeled and cried on the coffin. When he stood, his mother hugged him. "You have to stay with me a few days. We need each other."

"I can't argue with that."

His mother's cooking filled his stomach, and she filled Ian's heart with love again. He helped her with chores, and in the evening, they walked on the beach near

her Asbury Park, New Jersey, home. He enjoyed the salty air as they talked about everything except Megan MacCloud. If he mentioned her, he'd have to tell his mom about the drinking. He'd never do that.

When his mom returned to running her law firm, Ian was left alone in his childhood home for ten hours a day. He wanted to stay with her, but even as he told her he was leaving and lied to her about finding work, he thought, *If I could work, I wouldn't have time to think about things. What a laugh! I couldn't even get work as a janitor. Why should I keep trying?*

The first thing Ian saw when he opened his door was the Cottonwood Place brochure. He plucked it off the desk and fell wearily into his threadbare chair. Megan looked twice as beautiful although the picture hadn't changed.

"I've never been so attracted to a woman in my life, Megan. I couldn't wait to see you again. Is it possible to fall in love by just seeing a picture? How do your pets help run Cottonwood Place?—I'm talking to a picture!"

The visitors' bureau propaganda about Boulder City and surrounding cities and attractions made it sound like a fun place, but fun places were for the rich. Fishing in his pocket to see how rich he was, he found a five-dollar bill, ten quarters, three nickels, and four pennies. Only enough to get some cheap alcohol and drown himself into thoughtless unconsciousness for one more night.

The liquor-store owner knew Ian well. "The usual, Doc?"

"Yeah, Frank, the usual." He laid his money on the dark store's worn walnut counter.

"Are you sure you want to spend that here?" the old Italian asked.

"Don't you need the business? Your walls haven't been painted in years have they?"

Frank's expression changed to one of pity. "I need the business. I just hate seeing you destroy your life over one mistake."

“Three. Couldn’t save my grandfather. Give me the bottle.” Ian held out a shaking hand.

Back in his room, Ian sat staring out the dirty window at New York City. He drank alone, the worst way, but knowing that couldn’t change it.

All his friends had drifted away. At first, none of them believed the frivolous malpractice suit’s charges because he had always been the most conscientious doctor they knew. But, one by one, his friends left him, uncomfortable with who he’d turned into.

He gulped the cheap wine and remembered when he’d drank civilly, pouring sips into the proper glass, enjoying the finest vintages. Now, he just guzzled from the bottle like a common street lush. With a belch, he tossed the empty on an impressive pile of empties he’d collected on the coffee table. Some rolled off with loud clanks.

Peaceful sleep eluded him a bit later because he had to go to the bathroom. *I guess I’m still civil enough for that.* Halfway there, the room spun sideways and he went with it.

The constant sound of a woodpecker reverberating in Ian’s head woke him some time later. Why was he sprawled on the floor? He soon realized someone was pounding on the door. He stumbled to the door, and a look through the peephole revealed the landlord’s Gothic-teenage helper. Rubbing his head, Ian opened the door.

“Georgie, what can I do for you?”

“You haven’t been out of this room for two days. The landlord’s pressing me to collect your rent. You have some mail that looks like a fat check.”

Ian ran his hands through his tousled hair to help clear his mind, then took the mail from Georgie. One envelope showed a check through the clear address pane.

“Well, open it.” She prodded the envelope with a long black fingernail.

One check came from the hospital for his unused vacation and sick pay. Attached to a personal check was a

note: *"Because you were the best Christian and head of surgery we've ever had, we took up a collection at the hospital and my church. We're all praying that you come back. Your friend in payroll, Mrs. Sims."*

Georgie put her hands on her hips. "Well? How much are they for already?"

Ian showed her. "Wow, \$1,850. That's a whopper!"

"I thought they'd paid me everything. This is a godsend."

"Pay the landlord and don't drink it up, okay? Get your life going again, huh?" She blew a bubble and popped it to emphasize her point.

"Why do you care anyway?" Ian asked as he sat on the bed to stave off dizziness.

"Soft spot for basket cases, I guess." She flounced herself and her many-layered black skirt out of the room.

Ian thought about Megan MacCloud as he walked to the bank. This newfound wealth made going to her tempting. Next, he paid his storage rent ahead for several months. Locked in there was every valuable bit of himself that for some reason he wouldn't give up. Could it be a subconscious hope to return to his old life someday?

On the way back to his room, Ian realized he could drive to Megan. His SUV had been at his mom's so long that he'd forgotten about it. Nothing held him here, and the drive could be a vacation. If he didn't eat much, he'd get there with money to spare.

Georgie followed him to his room from the lobby, quizzing him on what he would do with the money.

"I'm packing to visit here." He waved the brochure under her nose.

She snatched the brochure from him and scanned it. "Oooo! Nice looking lady. Is she why you're going?"

He grinned indulgently. "Scram. I need to pack."

Ian stopped at the desk to say goodbye to Georgie and her dad. As he counted the money to pay them, Georgie said, "Take care of yourself. Find a church out there, huh?"

“Why? God doesn’t like me, or He wouldn’t have ruined my life. Why am I being punished?”

“It might be ages before you know why everything happened, but you will.”

“Yeah, sure, Georgie.” What did a teenager know about life anyway? Ian shook hands with his friends and left them behind.

After retrieving the SUV from his mom’s house, he went to the Holland tunnel. Getting through it seemed to take forever, as did getting on I-80W. He drove a hundred miles before he stopped at a Burger King and bought a Whopper Combo with a Coke. “A cheap meal for a man on the run with \$870 to last indefinitely,” he said to Megan’s picture.

Ian soon realized that I-80W limited his sightseeing fun, so he bought a map and found a route to Columbus, Ohio, to get on I-70W. The change could cost him money, but he’d see more.

In Indiana, gigantic fields of soybeans and corn separated the farms and homes. He’d never seen such vastness. Tiny pink blossoms covered oriental-looking trees that covered the countryside. A gas-station clerk said they were redbud trees, popular with Hoosiers.

I-70 traversed many creeks and rivers in Indiana. Some were wide and shallow, others were deep and narrow. He could see back into the thick forests the creeks ran into and wondered what creatures lived in those mysterious depths. Being raised by lawyers in a big city hadn’t let him explore *magical* forests. Ian felt like a kid when he glimpsed animals he’d only seen in books or on TV.

He spent the first night in Indiana, stopping to sleep in a dark area. The wine he drank had failed in making him sleepy because he was still awake after an hour. He held the brochure up so the full moon could illuminate Megan’s picture.

I'm drunker than I thought! She's even more beautiful, and she's glowing. I can see her lips moving. She's saying I should come to see her and her pets.

The scent of roses suddenly filled the car. What was making him hallucinate? He shook his head to clear his mind. A wasted effort. He imagined his first date with Megan. They'd go to a posh Vegas club where her beauty would outshine the showgirls'.

After six months, they'd announce their wedding date. He could see Orion and Cassie wearing flowered collars as they walked down the aisle behind Megan and her father. Her new name would be Megan Dyan Hunter unless she wanted to hyphenate. Either way sounded wonderful.

Megan's alarm went off as the sun peeked above the mountainous horizon. She looked out the east window for a moment then went to start breakfast.

Cassie and Orion yawned and stretched slowly then jumped off the bed to head to the kitchen's pet-door to go outside. She was still dressing when they came in and sat in her bedroom's doorway, eyeing her impatiently. "Sorry, girls. I had to carefully choose what to wear to impress my newest targets for help, the Jacksons."

Dressed in a skirt in New England's fall colors with a muted-orange velveteen Navajo blouse, Megan fed her pets, then put coffee on to drip and tea water to boil. Drumming a finger on her cheek, she said, "Girls, what can I make especially for the Jacksons?"

Orion pawed on the cupboard where Megan stored the dry mixes she pre-packaged for all her homemade specialties. She opened the door, and Orion touched an ivory paw on a bucket marked *cranberry-nut muffin*. Her paw next touched a *blueberry pancake* container, then Orion looked up.

"Perfect choices, sweetie! Along with maple bacon, these will make Sherry think of Vermont." Megan kissed Orion's head and ruffed up the silky black ears.

Orion took the plastic buckets' handles between her teeth one at a time and held them up for Megan. "Thanks, pretty girl, go play." Megan smiled lovingly at the fluffy white-and-black tail wagging furiously as Orion and Cassie headed to parts unknown. *They're so much like the trusting child I never had.*

She washed her hands and started cooking. The Jacksons were working out a marriage problem. Bruce came from Vermont; Sherry from California. Bi-coastal marriages worked for few couples. Financially-secure young executives, they were painfully, madly in love, yet couldn't compromise on how to unite themselves permanently. Four years of air-born commuting had shown their situation's folly.

This vacation could make or break the unpretentious couple's marriage. They'd be the last guests down. She'd heard them giggling and whispering like teenagers the last two mornings, and was almost jealous of their love.

After Cassie warned her they were coming, Megan sat at her Victorian dining table set with rose-covered dishes. She fanned the steam from the cranberry tea to disperse its fragrance. With a wise expression, she cheerily said, "Good morning," when the couple seated themselves.

"Good morning, Megan!" Sherry smiled widely, as did Bruce.

Megan started to pour some tea for them all then asked, "Sherry, will you serve? I need to get something for you." She found excuses to have Sherry serve at almost every meal they'd had at the inn. This simple act many married couples did every day had to draw them closer.

Sherry nodded and poured their tea. Bruce fed her a bite of muffin. Megan watched from a distance as they chatted and held hands. When she figured she'd waited long enough, she breezed in. "How's breakfast?"

After washing down a mouthful of muffin with some tea, Bruce exclaimed, "This is my mother's secret muffin recipe! Where did you get it?"

"It's my grandma's recipe. Maybe they know each other?" Megan asked, winking.

Bruce laughed. "Anything's possible!"

"How are your pancakes, Sherry?" Megan asked while filling her teacup then sipping nonchalantly.

"Where do you get fresh blueberries in the Nevada desert?" Sherry asked, pointing to a whole berry in her pancake.

"It's a secret," Megan said with a silent thanks to her California fruit supplier and her secret cold-storage area.

"Where should we go today?" Bruce asked through a mouthful of pancake.

"How about this place, along with whatever you've planned?" Megan gave each an art gallery brochure. "Their current exhibit is an emotional body of work by a famous Boulder City multi-media artist. The ticket money helps Indian children with chronic illnesses." She leaned close. "How's the decision-making going?"

Sherry spoke first, "Since we've been here, we've realized that we love each other too much to continue our life as it is."

Bruce took Sherry's hand in his and kissed it. "Our bosses are the stumbling block. They pressure us to stay where we are and keep giving us big incentives."

"Your jobs *are* vitally important. Having to decide between the person you love and the nation's security is scary. You're stronger than I am." Megan laughed to herself at how well she feigned weakness.

"How did you know we liked multi-media art?" Sherry asked.

"I heard you talking with the Turners yesterday." Megan stayed always alert to everything around her. Part of that observant nature came from being a registered nurse. She didn't like to think about the other part's source.

"We have a lot in common with them. Would they go with us?"

"They're in the pool. You should go ask them."

They finished eating and went outside. The looks on the couples' faces when they came in told Megan what to do next. "I'll call the museum and tell them four are coming."

When the couples left, Megan cleaned the kitchen and decided to serve a New-England boiled dinner because the Jacksons were eating in tonight. Although Cottonwood Place was a bed-and-breakfast, she bent the rules for many guests, especially those needing help.

Finished in the kitchen, she went out to the pool. Her pets followed her to chase each other in the cottonwood trees' shade. She checked the pool to see if its doors needed closing. They didn't. It was only eighty degrees because of the pool house her father had built over it. The adobe walls and tile roof had shaded the pool so well that many couples married there.

She'd bring the troubled guest out here after he settled in his room. She knew from experience that people talked more freely when they relaxed by water. She thought, *Is he married? Does he have children? I hope his hair and eyes aren't brown. I have a funny feeling about him.*

She also thought about her child that never lived. *What would Janet look like? Would she have red hair or brown like her father? How tall would she be? Would she be reading the classical literature I love? Or, would she be a Harry Potter fan? Would she even read at all?*

After a few hard laps in the pool, Megan swam to the rock waterfall for a massage of her tired shoulders. Alone like this, she sometimes regretted leaving her life as an Air Force nurse. Circumstances had forced her to resign her commission, but she'd grown to love running the inn just as much as she had loved the Air Force.

"Woof. Woof. Woof."

"What, Orie? I was busy feeling sorry for myself."

The dog licked tears from Megan's cheek before barking again three times.

"Oh! I'm coming. Room Three is checking out."

While getting Room #3's bill ready, she suddenly looked at Orion. "Our troubled man is near. Should we put him in Room Five?"

Orion pawed the oak floor five times as if to agree. She patted the dog's head and back. "Good girl! Yes, it's restful and masculine."

Ian had been showering and sleeping in truck stops, and had bought peanut butter, bread, cheese, and an ice chest to drastically cut his spending. He splurged only for what he needed most; alcohol to make himself unconscious at night.

Nearing St. Louis, the Gateway to the West, he saw the Gateway Arch. He decided to indulge in a trip up inside it. Under the Arch minutes later, Ian looked up. The 630-foot silver giant left him awestruck. Just as awesome was the line for the tram to the top. He watched people and a colorful paddleboat churn down the muddy Mississippi River as he waited in line.

Inside the arch's viewing area, he had to wait again to look out one of the thirty-two windows. When one became available, he felt like a kid as he leaned on the shelf to look out. The view surprised him: trees, the river and its boat traffic, fields of green crops, and Illinois unfolding before him.

When a western window became available, he peered as far as he could into the distance. He saw St. Louis and miles of trees. He watched a train heading west across an ancient iron bridge, and wondered if he'd made a mistake in leaving home and going west like the train. He'd made so many mistakes since 2001.

Seeing Megan MacCloud could never be a mistake!

A rumbling stomach made him reluctantly return to the ground to eat. Once on the road again, Missouri became hilly then mountainous. Ian hugged the side of the road nearest the mountain as he drove, thanking God he wasn't drunk now. When he looked over the edge, valleys hundreds of feet below waited to swallow him. He