

RUTHANN REIM McCAFFREE



*Suddenly*  

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**SINGLE**

A Guide For Rediscovering  
Life After Tragic Loss

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LANGDON STREET PRESS

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Langdon Street Press  
212 3rd Avenue North, Suite 290  
Minneapolis, MN 55401  
612.455.2293  
[www.langdonstreetpress.com](http://www.langdonstreetpress.com)

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ISBN-13: 978-1-936183-67-8

Distributed by Itasca Books

Interior Design by Colleen Gray  
Editing by Doreen Marchionni  
Cover design by Tracey Reim Luckner ([TraceyLuckner.com](http://TraceyLuckner.com))  
Author photograph by Joseph Boyle

*Printed in the United States of America*



# Table of Contents

Introduction .....	ix
My Story: A Sudden Ending.....	1
The Ten Survival Steps: Step One: Let Life Carry You .....	7
Step Two: Say Goodbye.....	13
Step Three: Choose to Live .....	19
Step Four: Let Love In .....	23
Step Five: Learn to Answer the Question, “How <i>Are</i> You?” .....	29
Step Six: Accept the Truth.....	35
Step Seven: Want More!.....	41
Step Eight: Let Yourself Laugh .....	47
Step Nine: Face Forward and Take Back Your Power .....	51
Step Ten: Move Ahead With an Open Heart .....	57
A New Beginning.....	63
From Surviving to Thriving: A Postscript.....	73
Acknowledgments and Thanks .....	75
About the Author .....	78

Dedicated with love to Terry,  
who always was  
“one step ahead”

# Introduction

For more than twenty-five years, I have counseled and coached hundreds of clients as they faced some of life's biggest challenges. I've admired their individual and collective strengths. Their resiliency, courage, and willingness to keep on keeping on have inspired me. Little did I know how much their examples of courage would sustain me as I faced my own biggest challenge.

When my husband of nearly forty years suddenly died from a fall at our home, I was catapulted into an aching transformation. Terry had always been bigger than life, and we had planned on living to 105. He was sixty-one, and we both thought he still had a lot of life in him. Besides, because I had married him so young, I didn't have a clue who I was without him. We were a team, and without him I suddenly found myself on the same challenging path that many of my clients had traveled. In the dark hours of the night and through the short, lonely days of my first winter alone, I recorded the story that you are about to read. It is a very personal journey meant as a gift to you.

But first, a bit about Terry. He was born in the heartland, where ripe, golden wheat waved in the wind, eight-man football brought out the whole town to cheer, and life was about the earth, the church, and hard work. But his roots in the tiny community of Marshall, Oklahoma, couldn't hold him. He wanted more, even after a college stint in Chicago. So he bought a red '57 Chevy convertible and drove west to the Pacific. He used to say that he came west to find his fortune and, in a way, he did. He found me, a redhead from California.

His love letters captured my heart—what a writer he was. (It's ironic that I'm the writer now, yet I know he would be proud.) The army soon found him and brought us to the Pacific Northwest, where he ultimately built one-of-a-kind houses and we built a family. The kid

from Oklahoma loved boating in the salty waters of the Puget Sound, loved his family, and loved University Place, a wooded suburb near Tacoma, Washington, with sweeping, waterfront vistas. He picked this place to put down roots, dreamed the biggest dreams he could, and made them come true.

My story about losing him can't prescribe how you will go about the arduous task of putting your own life together after *your* sudden loss. Such a loss is huge because you have had no time to prepare. Mine is one person's experience. The rules for my life were suddenly new and the playing field different, but I found that many of the discoveries were parts of me I already knew. They were just waiting to be rediscovered. If my story restores your hope even a little, comforts you while you cry, makes you laugh, or gives you a new idea or two, I will feel that I have done my job. In my work I have always felt that the right people somehow find me, so if you have found me, I'm grateful to share this journey with you. I can tell you from my heart that even in the most difficult parts of this time, winter doesn't last forever, spring and even summer will come again, and your life will find its new beginning, too.



# My Story: A Sudden Ending

In the Northwest, days of bright sunshine and clear skies are rare, and April 15, 2003, was one of the most beautiful of rare days. We woke early with the sun already shining, ready to walk. Our hiking boots tugged on, we climbed into Terry's car to drive to the top of the hill where we would take off on our two-mile trek. We teased each other that driving up the hill to walk was like eating low-fat frozen yogurt covered in chocolate, but the trip starts straight up, so we drove there. As we walked, we talked about a dream Terry had that morning that I'm still trying to understand. In it he was in Oklahoma on the farm where he grew up. A beautiful, sleek silver airplane landed on the dirt road on the east side of the farm. He ran for the plane, believing he was supposed to get aboard, and I thought he was going to tell me what happened when he climbed inside. Instead, he said that just as he reached the plane, it took off without him. Then he woke up.

Later, after our walk, I remember kissing him goodbye. We went on a romantic getaway over Valentine's Day and came home deciding to "put the bedroom through college" now that our children, Tracey and Brandon, were both grown and graduated. So on this day in April, our bedroom was a mess of construction, with no furniture or carpet, a new door, a new outside wall, and a soon-to-be new fireplace. We were sleeping in Tracey's room with Bogey and Katey, our two Norwegian forest cats, corralled to keep them from escaping through open construction doors. Terry slid Tracey's door open a crack and said, "I'm leaving. I'll see you tonight." He gave me a smack on the lips, I said "OK," and he was gone.

At about 1:30 that afternoon I had a few minutes before my next client. It seemed like the perfect time to slip out to the post office. In the parking lot sat Brandon's Honda Insight, which Terry had just driven back from Los Angeles for me to try out. I folded myself into its tiny

front seat and eased out onto the street. All the new dials and instruments had my attention until I caught sight of a truck behind me with its lights flashing and the driver waving for me to pull over. It looked like Terry's old farm truck, but I didn't recognize the driver. "What in the world could this be about?" I wondered as I pulled into a drugstore parking lot. It turned out to be Terry's new handyman, whom I didn't know, rushing over out of breath and yelling, "Terry fell! Terry fell! Do you want me to take you to the hospital?" At this point I had no idea who this fellow was nor any real indication of how seriously Terry had been injured. Nor was I about to get into a car with someone I didn't know. I'm independent, and I figured I could manage.

I drove back to the office, tried unsuccessfully to call my client, and then left him a note on the door. I climbed back into that little car and headed out. After three blocks, my accelerator foot lost its push. Again, I pulled into the drugstore parking lot. What in the world was happening? My body was beginning to tell me what my heart and spirit couldn't understand.

What I did know was that I needed help. There was only one person to call, Terry's best pal and soulmate, Dixie, who worked just up the street. As luck would have it, she had just walked in the door. I don't remember what I said, but her answer was, "Don't leave. I'm on my way."

I climbed into her car and we saw an ambulance go by. We knew immediately Terry was in it, so Dixie pulled out of the parking lot like a shot. Though we were right behind the ambulance for half a mile, I couldn't see what was happening inside. Mostly I was aware of the flashing red lights and the sound of the siren. At the first big intersection, the ambulance went through a red light, and we were tempted to do the same, but good sense prevailed. However, we lost sight of the ambulance. The handyman had told me where they were taking Terry, but I couldn't remember. "Call the city offices," Dixie said. She knew someone there could call the fire station and find out where the ambulance was going. I called the office, and I heard someone talking to the dispatcher at the fire station on another line. When it appeared they weren't going to give us the location, Dixie yelled, "Dammit, my

brother is a fireman, and I know they can contact that ambulance and find out where they're going!" That got results. The ambulance was heading to a Tacoma trauma center, and finally, so were we.

We rushed into the emergency room just as they were wheeling Terry off for either a CAT scan or an MRI, and I yelled, "That's my husband!" The trauma specialist introduced herself to me as they were moving Terry out of sight and said she'd be back as soon as possible to let us know what was going on. Someone in the ER gently took us to one side and introduced us to the on-call social worker, who led us to a small room off the larger waiting room. As we walked toward the smaller room, I looked back at the waiting room full of people. They didn't seem to have a social worker leading them to a private room. We were getting special treatment. This was not good. Usually my feelings rise to the surface easily and guide me through tough situations. About now they went into hiding with my heart, and my rational brain took over.

The handyman found us, and he handed me Terry's wallet and cell phone. As I stood clutching the wallet, I remembered it was April 15, tax day. We never got our taxes in early because money was always tight, and I guessed that maybe one reason Terry hadn't been careful going down that ladder was because he was thinking about getting to the bank. He had a big check to write to the IRS, and it had to go out that day. I looked in his wallet. There was my business check for half of the taxes and there was a blank check from his business account. I'm an honest person, but I wrote a check on his business account that I was pretty sure would be hot until I could make it right with the bank. My only thought was to get those checks in the mail. I called our accountant's office, and she sent a runner to the ER to pick up our checks to mail them out.

The doctor came in and the social worker stood near me as the doctor explained, "Terry had a very bad fall. It might not be survivable." Then the doctor left, and I turned to the social worker, saying, "My life is never going to be the same, is it?" "No," she said, "it's not." Then she said, "Call the kids. They have to come right away."

So I started making phone calls to alert the world that Terry—husband, son, dad, grandpa, best friend, community leader, leader of us all—was in trouble. Things were starting to happen and we still hadn't seen him. He was in the intensive-care unit in the last room, hooked up to all kinds of monitors and machines. Dixie and I had to walk the length of that unit to reach him, and my first thought when I saw him was, "He's already gone." Even though his hand was warm when I took it in mine and his chest was going up and down with breath, the essential "him" was just not there. I believe his spirit had left when he hit the ground at home and the rest of this was just to buy us a little time to get used to the shock. I leaned over to his right ear and whispered, "Honey, it's OK if you need to go. I'll be all right." The words came out of my mouth, but I didn't have a clue if they were true or what they were going to really mean. I just knew that if he needed to go, I needed to let him.

I remember Dixie and myself sitting, standing, sitting, standing, and asking the ICU nurses questions, all the time knowing in my heart that there was nothing for me to do in this room. What needed to be done was to go home and create a little order out of the chaos of the construction mess, because people would be coming. We needed beds with sheets and towels for bathing, and someone needed to vacuum up the cat hair. I wasn't surprised to be thinking about getting organized. When stress overwhelms me, my hands get busy cleaning. Terry used to tease me that we had the cleanest countertops in the county.

How could I return to that house where Terry was hurt? It was my home, and yet it hadn't kept my best friend safe. Going home was my first act of courage. "Oh my God, look at the gutter!" I cried when I rounded the corner by the garage. "It's been pulled loose from the house. Oh no, that's where he fell." He'd been up and down that same ladder in that same place hundreds of times. It wasn't raining. How could he have fallen? The handyman was on the roof with Terry at the time. Apparently they were talking about cleaning the gutters, and Terry was showing him what needed to be done. As the fellow turned back to grab a broom, Terry started down the ladder. He was always in too much of a hurry and distracted. It looked as though he grabbed

the gutter to keep the ladder from falling, but the nails didn't hold, and he fell straight back onto the concrete walkway. If he had fallen just a foot to either side, he would have gone into flowerbeds. Apparently the handyman jumped down from the roof, gave Terry CPR, called 911, and watched the paramedics work on him until they were able to get him breathing again. Then he came looking for me. Much later I reflected on how much of a gift it was to know that Terry didn't fall alone, and that I didn't have to come home and find him on the concrete.

Once back in the house that day, I looked at the south wall of the bedroom and saw the new fireplace the work crew had just put in. I don't think Terry got to see it, but he would have been pleased. It was perfect, and yet it was so disconnected from what was really happening. We had a new, romantic fireplace, but my lover would never get to enjoy it.

By 10 p.m. the house was somewhat in order, so Dixie and I headed back to the hospital. Had we remembered to eat? It hadn't even crossed our minds. So we stopped in at a restaurant and found a quiet booth in a corner. I couldn't say what we ate, but I remember having a beer and how cold it felt going down. Trauma does strange things to memory. Some parts of that day will be with me until I die, while other parts disappeared as soon as they happened.

Back at the hospital Terry's situation hadn't changed. I still believed he was gone and that now we were just waiting for people to see him one last time. But before we could let him go, doctors needed to perform two tests to measure his brain pressure. Someone told me that if by some miracle he lived, he'd be in a nursing home for the rest of his life, because the swelling in his brain was creating pressure 300 percent above normal. "Oh no, Terry would hate that!" I said. The tests were conclusive, and we now had official word that our leader was gone.

Tracey was flying in from New Jersey, and I was waiting for a phone call from Brandon. The hard part of telling people was about to begin. Word was getting out, though. The flag by our town hall would be

lowered to half-mast later that day, and a newspaper reporter would call. We were still at the hospital when someone asked if Terry had wanted to be an organ donor. He and I never talked about that. Because he was an accident victim, he was a donor candidate, but what were his wishes? Fortunately, the answer was on his driver's license, and I'll be forever grateful for that. So, we began to talk about what to donate. Organs, yes. Bones, yes. Eyes, yes. But not skin, I said, and I don't want his body going to science. There has to be something left to love.

I didn't know when we put him on life support that the medication affected his heart, lungs, and pancreas in such a way that they could not be transplanted. I am sad that his heart couldn't go to someone, because he had such a kind and generous one. I guess it was meant to stay with our family. And I wish the best for the people who got his eyes. He wore glasses from the time he was eight, and they were as thick as Coke bottles. But they saw beauty and possibility in the world, so that has to count for a lot.

He was gone, just like that. In the morning we were a couple, getting ready for a hectic, full day. By nightfall I was—what was I? Numb, in a daze, grateful for things to do, alone.

# “The Ten Survival Steps”

## Step One: Let Life Carry You

Going home from the hospital again was so weird. It was a day of stunning sunshine, and all the people Terry loved were starting to arrive. Our neighbor picked up Tracey at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport, and Brandon arrived a little later. Normally Terry was the one who made a gathering happen. He planned the food, shopped, and cooked, while I got the house ready. Well, the house was mostly ready, but none of us knew how we would make it without him. Who would organize the food, delegate the jobs, and keep things moving? Somehow food came and was served and eaten, and I don't have a clue how. All I knew was that people were unbelievably kind and generous. Over and over it left me stunned. Some say that when life is at its worst, human beings are at their best, and now I know that's true. For me it was like taking in night and day all at once, and it was only beginning. But loved ones, and I suppose life, carried me onward. Two especially close friends had left to go biking in Spain just days before Terry died. I remember asking them shortly before they left if they had a way to check e-mail, and they said they didn't. Somehow we found out how to reach them, and I told them what happened.

But before I could breathe normally, I was waiting for Bill, one of Terry's best friends, to arrive. He lives on the big island of Hawaii, and because it was both spring break and Easter, it was almost impossible for him and his wife to get a flight out. But I knew when they finally arrived everything would be OK. They're family of our hearts and knew what needed to be done and what Terry would have wanted. When they arrived three days later, I started to breathe more easily and move forward. The first thing Bill did was go through Terry's CDs, compiling thirty-five songs onto two CDs that gave us a collection of Terry's favorites. We ended up using the CDs for Terry's memorial, and I have listened to them hundreds of times. At first I

cried every time I played them. Now, I mostly enjoy them because they are my favorites, too.

## **The arrangements**

Eight of us went to the funeral home to make the arrangements for Terry's cremation. I'm a believer in inclusion, so everyone who wanted to come was invited. We walked in en masse and had to use a conference room because there were so many of us. On the way to the room, we walked by the business offices, and I swear I looked up and saw the words "sell, sell, sell" on the wall. It struck me as funny and I started to laugh. It reminded me of the embarrassing time Terry had said, "Here comes the body," during communion at a new church, and I burst out laughing. We bought everything we needed, and no one pressured us. I've since wondered if I really saw those words or if Terry just wanted us to laugh a little on such a sad mission.

We put on just the kind of celebration Terry would have loved. We used the CDs Bill assembled. Terry's mom and my mom searched through hundreds of pictures, which relatives scanned into the computer. Bless them, too. It took hours to put the PowerPoint presentation together, but everyone pitched in. Tracey wrote the obituary, and she and Brandon wrote the text for the memorial service. Our cousin arranged for the celebration to be filmed for Terry's dad because he was too ill to travel. Because Terry embraced the motto "shop local," we held the gathering at an almost local golf club. He didn't like golf, but we figured he could be a little flexible, and the place was wonderful.

### **SURVIVAL TIP**

**Look for opportunities to say yes to things that bring you joy.**

About four hundred people came: family, friends old and new, business associates, city employees and council members, friends from our Rotary Club, former employees, and people who knew Terry through his many interests. When it was time to share memories and thoughts, dozens of people spoke, and we laughed and cried at the stories. Then we ate, just as we'd do at any great party. Terry had to feel loved and celebrated because that's what we were



doing: loving and celebrating him.

Looking back, I'm amazed at how many people Terry saw the last few months of his life. He visited with both Tracey and Brandon, even though they live on opposite corners of the country from us. We had one grandchild at the time, Ben, who is Tracey and Steve's son and was born just seven months before Terry died. A week before the accident, Terry saw Ben because we heard he was eating bananas, and "Grandpa T" didn't want to miss a thing. Terry was proud that he had gotten to feed Ben and had even changed a poopy diaper. It was one more of those things he did in the last few months of his life that makes me believe somehow a person's spirit knows life is nearing an end, even if it doesn't make sense any other way. Terry loved Ben so much, and surely that love continues to this day.

Terry also untangled half a dozen nasty situations that would have left me reeling, including the taxes. And we had many chance conversations that continued to give guidance as we all struggled to figure out how to move forward. I remembered telling Terry, "I get to die first. How in the world would I ever deal with all of your business properties and clients?" His answer liberated me when I recalled it days after he died: "You'd be just fine. You won't do things the same way I do them and that's OK." Bill also recalled Terry had told him in February that he was going to Hanalei Bay in the summer to see the boats near the island of Kauai. It had long been the place we thought of as the most beautiful and sacred on earth, so it was natural to think of Terry wanting to go there. But we had mostly gone around Christmas to escape the dismal Northwest weather. When Bill remembered that conversation, it was clear that some of Terry's ashes would be going to Hanalei that summer.

Terry was cremated on the same day as his memorial service. His ashes came to me in a copper urn in honor of the copper cooking pots he used to create his famous meals. The funeral home had placed his urn in a small blue plastic carrying case with a handle, because I had explained we would eventually be traveling to Kauai. Again, it seemed unreal to be bringing my husband home in a suitcase when just days before we were tearing out the walls of our bedroom. I

opened the case when I got home and carefully lifted out the urn. Then I placed it on the fireplace hearth by his photo and a basket that would eventually overflow with sympathy cards and memory letters. Later we would travel, but for awhile, he was home again with me.

## **Back to reality**

Reality set in when I trekked to our attorney's office to read the will Terry and I wrote less than two years before. I faced a mountain of decisions, with a timeline and protections to follow that our complicated world made necessary. It was my first jump into the deep end of the pool. Fortunately, I had a team of loyal, professional advisers who were willing to jump in with me.

### **SURVIVAL TIP**

**Find skilled people you trust who will help you.**

Work, as it turned out, was a haven, a place to go with real purpose and an opportunity to get out of the new life and back to something familiar. I returned to work three weeks after Terry died, and I'm still not sure how I rescheduled my missed clients' visits. But they welcomed me back, and we started rebuilding lives, theirs and mine. Another reality check was the realization that my two children were all grown up. When Tracey and Brandon were in college, I remember one of them protesting whenever I slipped and called them "the kids." Sometime later they relented and no longer resisted when I called them that. Now Tracey is married and has a son and daughter. Brandon is happy supporting the movie industry with his time and talent. These grown-up kids are strong and brave. Brandon was able to stay with me for two weeks after everyone else left, and I don't know what I would have done without his quiet courage and willingness to help me manage the stuff of life—cooking, eating, answering the telephone, bringing in the mail.

One of the sturdiest gifts he gave me was help with a three-year-long project due to culminate in May, just two weeks after Terry died. I called it "In Celebration of Women 2003," and *it* carried me because I certainly wasn't in any shape to carry *it*. Later, Brandon said it was my first act of courage, but I think it was life's willingness to show me

**SURVIVAL TIP**

What and who gives you energy? Get more of it and them.

even in those dark early days that I was still alive and had something to offer.

The celebration started with a visit to the Annie Leibovitz photography exhibit *Women*, which toured the Pacific Northwest. Terry walked through the exhibit with me and held my hand as I cried at the strength of the women and the beauty of the ten-by-ten-foot photographs. Later, over several glasses of wine at a small café, I asked Terry, “Why can’t I photograph the women in our small town who aren’t famous but who are making a difference just because of who they are?” “Well, why can’t you? What’s stopping you?” he countered. “I’m a career counselor, not a photographer,” I threw back. Nothing happened for two years, but like all good ideas, it patiently waited for me to bring it to life as a requirement for my professional coaching certification.

**SURVIVAL TIP**

Surround yourself with beauty in whatever form you choose.

Terry was excited about what I was doing, and I was depending on him to help me pull the final event together. He was always so good about making things happen. This time it would have to happen without him, and frankly, I thought about just not doing it. But that just wasn’t the answer. It was my first opportunity to say “yes” to life, so Brandon and I went ahead. Without him and good friends pitching in, there wouldn’t have been a celebration. But on May 2, 2003, more than one hundred friends, family members, and community and business leaders gathered to honor fourteen women who make our small town better just because of who they are. My tears waited to fall until it was over.

## Questions to ask yourself as you let life carry you:

1. What plans might you be tempted to put on hold that you could still carry out?
2. Who are the people you want to be around?
3. What is the best use of your energy?
4. What kind of physical movement can you engage in?