

Discovering Hope



Vila SpiderHawk

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Discovering Hope gallops. It is the most compelling, gripping of SpiderHawk's works yet. She has tapped into a devastating national experience and personalized it through deeply layered characters that are so real you will think you were just talking to one of them a couple of days ago and you're trying to remember exactly how they said something! The story takes place over a span of ten years of deeper drama and human connection than I've seen yet--and I read A LOT of books! Even if you've never read one of Vila's books before, read this one! Now! You will be so touched, and so glad you did.

Helen M. Collins, MSW
Founder, Editor, Publisher
Folk Music Ministry Magazine

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Discovering Hope

Chapter One

This is where it all began--the slow dismembering of my life--ten years, one month, and seventeen days ago. Jack was in the second tower on the ninety-seventh floor when

the plane swooped down and crashed into the building. Debra called me just before the first tower was hit to firm up our plans for our big day.

She'd just landed a new job, and I'd arranged a girls' day out. We'd start with lunch at Cafe Blossom then have facials at Maxine's and then go over to the gym for a massage. She'd have a day of pampering. She'd never do that for herself, and I had wanted her to have a special time before she left. Having led her to believe that I'd prepare a simple meal then take her out to Bloomingdale's then maybe tea, I was aquiver with delight that I'd succeeded with my ruse. I always blabbed. But this time I had done it right.

"Are we still on for today?" Her TV droned in the background trying to sell her something useless.

"Oh sure, you bet. Be here by ten. Then we can visit while I cook." I pinched myself so I could keep from giggling.

For a long moment she was mute and when she spoke her words were gasps. "Oh, Mom. Oh, God, Mom! Turn your television on."

"Why? What's the matter?" I had visions of an earthquake or a storm.

"Mom, turn on CNN right now! I'll be right over."

The line went dead. I groused at Jack as I searched for the remote. I didn't see it on the table to the right of his recliner. It wasn't on either one of our chairs. I yanked the sofa cushions up and found a nickel and a dime but no remote. I left the cushions on the floor. I opened drawers and slammed them shut. I shoved the draperies aside. I checked the bookshelves and the desk and *étagère*. "Putting things where they belong would be a pleasant change of pace," I complained as I stomped into the kitchen. I threw the cupboard doors open but found only crockery. The kitchen table, of course, held just a stubby vase of mums, a pepper mill, a salt shaker, and the paper. I don't know what made me think to push the door back from the bread box, but there it was--a plastic square of glossy black. It was nestled in among a dozen walnut raisin muffins. "Oh well, of course!" I grabbed the thing. "Where else would anybody put it?" I remarked punching numbers and waiting. "Oh, take your time," I stamped and scolded the stubbornly black screen. The set came on just as the second plane dove in. Horror squeezed me dry of breath. I crumpled into my chair, clapped my hands to my mouth and watched in horror.

I could not utter a sound as a handful of people threw themselves through flames and smoke to certain death. I could not weep with the others staring up from the street. I could not think. I could not move. I could not breathe.

"He can't be dead!" Deb erupted through the living room door, slamming it behind her in her rush to get to me. "He can't be dead!" my daughter wailed at the image of destruction mocking her prayers from the TV. "He can't be dead!" she demanded with the eyes of a child and then stumbled to her knees as the truth bashed her. She laid her head in my lap. "He can't be dead. He can't be dead."

Cinder block numb, I had no soothing words to offer, no capacity to heal her dreadful wound. My absent hand stroked her hair as I blankly watched the scene, as police and firefighters tried for order. That's when I knew that Jack was dead. If he had been among the living, rage or fear, love or compassion would have coursed from me to them. I could have held my child close. I could have dialed his cell. I could have sprung into a frantic search for him. But everything that confirmed life had gushed away from my soul. I was as solid yet as hollow as a church.

I pressed her head into my lap as tower two disintegrated, crumbling into itself and spewing clouds of dust and ash as tall as buildings and as wide as baseball fields. The white streets vomited people, throwing terrified folks into a race from death's thick plume toward hope and life. I should have wanted them to make it, but I simply could not care. My only thought was that it looked like a bad movie.

Of course, in spite of my effort to protect her from the sight, my daughter saw the towers fall many times. The news relentlessly repeated the scene for many days and several times at every anniversary.

"We have to look for him, Mom."

The expectation in her eyes drew my motherly love back and broke my heart.

"He wasn't there! He's somewhere safe! We have to find out where he is!"

"Oh, Deb, he's gone. I'm sorry, Honey, but he's gone."

She flinched as if I had slapped her and shot a toxic glance at me before she popped back to her feet and grabbed a photo. I didn't see her for five days. I didn't see anyone. I went to bed and there I stayed for a week.

Snuggling under the covers, I hugged my husband's pillow and greedily gobbled up his scent. I willed my widow's tears to come in great torrents of grief. I wished for anger at the people who could do such a thing, for moral outrage, for something I could point to as proof that I still lived, that I could feel as humans do.

But all I felt was emptiness and the terrible cold. I shivered so. Even my organs were aquiver. I thumbed the blanket's power on and turned the dial up to ten and tucked my head beneath the satin comforter. My skin was hot and yet my ice-blood froze each artery and vein. I could not stop my hands from trembling, could not clench my jaw enough to keep my teeth and all my bones from chattering.

I curled up like a starving cat, his pillow trapped between my legs and in the clutching claw-like grip of my fingers. Rolling side to side with it, I hummed the tune he sang to me on our first date. It was a song I'd always loved.

When you're weary, feeling small,
when tears are in your eyes, I will dry them all.
I'm on your side, oh, when times are rough, and friends just can't be found.
Like a bridge over troubled water, I will lay me down.

Jack had such a lovely voice. He sang that song as a promise at our wedding and each night for thirty years. His tenor voice around those words could salve the harshest stings of life. His hand on mine could warm the cruelest winter chill. How many times had he held me like a treasure in that bed and drowned my worries in a waterfall of song? "Where's my bride now?" I asked his pillow. "Where's my strength, my warmth, my love? Why can't I weep? Why can't I mourn you properly?"

I was suddenly exhausted, arms and legs limp with fatigue, the world retreating, sirens fading, daylight dimming down to dusk. I was adrift in a gray cloud, some woman's voice droning a song Simon and Garfunkel had made famous thirty-one years before.

I floated down into a stream whose current glinted sunlight sequins. Naked and young, my belly full of Debra Anne, my husband, blond and tall and slender, on the moss and fern-strewn bank and, squinting, laughing as I glided with the flow. I shooed him

off, and he was gone. I was immediately bereft. I woke up wretched that I'd chased his ghost away. I'd lost my bridge, my only love, my lifelong hero, and yet I could not find a single tear to weep for him.

I got up and padded blindly in the nightlight's semi-dark and turned the light on in the bathroom. Mismatched socks lay on the floor. Reflexively I picked them up. And then I put them down again. They were right where they belonged. They made our home normal and safe. I hiked my skirt up and sat cross-legged in front of the things. They were too sacred to touch, too dear for mortal hands to hold. And so I stared and willed my love into those simple cotton socks until the pressure in my bladder made me rise.

The phone rang. It was his voice on the answering machine announcing our number with a promise to call back. I had forgotten that he'd been the last to post the household greeting. He had done it in his own distinctive style. "Hi there!" His voice was so bright, so relentlessly alive. "You've reached 555-2786." He paused for Paul McCartney to sing a few notes of Hey Jude. "Don't make *your* life bad, Dude. Leave us a message. We'll call back." More Hey Jude. "Talk to ya later." Paul Mc Cartney went mute. My husband did too.

"Oh, Trina!" Susan's voice broke my husband's sweet spell. "Are you okay? Please pick up."

I found her an annoyance and wished that she would simply go away.

"Where was Jack? Is he okay?"

I loved Sue. I'd never heard her say a single spiteful word about a soul, not even Mike, her ex-husband. And he had earned a curse or two. "But he's the father of my children," she reminded when I'd say bad things about him.

Sue was sweet--too sweet, in fact. She felt everybody's pain far too keenly to speak nastily about them. She always claimed to be an empath. I didn't know what that was, but I was glad that I'd avoided the affliction.

"Trina please talk to me."

I let my clothes drop to the floor, lay back down under the covers, and ignored her.

"Trina please I'm feeling pain, and I know that it's from you."

Well, if she knew so much, she should have known I didn't want to talk.

"Okay, just call me when you can. You know I'm here for you, Hon."

The line clicked and I was blessedly alone. I reached over to the phone and pressed the message on again and listened to his voice until I wandered into sleep.

The phone's chirp woke me several times. Friends were calling to check in. I pulled Jack's pillow up and over my ears. While the sound of his bright greeting and the Beatles' hopeful song brought me something almost similar to peace, I could not talk to anyone. I didn't have a thing to say. And I didn't want to hear them stumbling over their words in an effort to say something comforting. There were no words to ease my--what? What exactly was I feeling? Not pain. Not grief. Not rage or guilt. Only the numbness of the dead.

"Numb nuts," Jack always said about a person who was stupid.

I'd never thought to ask what testicles and brain power had in common. "I guess I'll never know now." I pulled the phone's plug from the wall. "Does it mean that I'm stupid? No. I don't have any nuts. What does *that* mean? And does any of this matter?"

I went into the bathroom, though I didn't have to go, and sat down and squeezed some urine from my bladder. I glanced at my watch. It was only eight pm. "I should

eat." I padded into the kitchen. But I couldn't find the strength to microwave the chicken stew we'd enjoyed so much the evening before. "I know. A sandwich." But the muffins were the only bread we had, having used up all the rye bread with the stew. "Maybe a salad." But I couldn't force myself to chop and toss and serve and finally bite and chew and swallow it all.

I returned our dark bedroom. "I should turn on a light. Oh, why bother? I'm the only one who lives here. This is *my* bedroom now," I warned the mattress and the pillows. There'll be no love in this bed ever again." Lying down on my back, I stared up at the shadows the street lights molded on the room's gray ceiling. Fatigue forced my eyes closed. I opened them again. "No. There's wisdom in the shapes if I can figure them out." But I couldn't. They were merely blobs of dark. My eyelids eased down again. I allowed them to drop and simply drifted on the current of exhaustion.

In my dream Jack cuddled me. "I don't want to say goodbye," he whispered into my hair as he kissed me.

"You don't have to. I'm right here. I'll always be by your side."

"Not anymore. I have to do this thing alone."

Suddenly we stood on the porch of a small house, his hand resting on a rusted iron latch. Mist-hued hair gleaming gold in the afternoon sun sieving through the forest's red and orange leaves, his gray eyes silvered at the rims, Nassau blue near the pupils, sorrow tingeing the affection in his smile, he cupped my chin in his palm. We'd always stood eye to eye, but on the porch he was at least a head taller.

"I have to go inside now. Please know I'll always cherish you." He kissed my brow and nose and cheeks, raised the ancient orange latch, pushed the door, and went inside and disappeared. I tried the door. It would not budge. I went around to all the windows but, while they shone like dew on grass, I could not see beyond their panes.

The morning traffic shoved me into wakefulness.

"My first full day without Jack." I was surprised at my flat voice. "Why can't I wail, lash out and rail at the injustice?" In truth the only thing I felt was the usual annoyance at the noise of neighbors driving off to work. "Jack is gone, yet people sleep, wake up, take showers, go to work. The world still spins. The sun still shines. The birds still sing. How can that be?" I padded over to the wall of ecru drapes, pushed them aside, and stared out at the commuters.

When we first moved into the house, our town had been a quiet place of wide green lawns and newly planted oaks and maples. We'd liked the peace. It was a pleasant neighborhood for raising Deb. And yet, so close to the city, he could get to work with ease. Just a quick trip on the train, and he was there. But, just like Deb, our town grew up, became a city in its own right, though it lacked the philharmonic and museums.

I pulled the shielding drapes together but their silk was impotent against the din of slamming car doors and revving engines. "I should eat," I told myself but then went back to bed instead. And so it went day after day until Sue let herself in with the key I'd given her five years before.

"You stop this now! She stood above me in the glare of the light she'd just turned on at the night stand by the bed. "You look a mess! Get up right now! You're going to make yourself sick. If you're not already sick." She felt my head. "No fever. That's good. When was the last time you ate?"

Unable to recall the last time I had done anything, I simply shrugged. She clucked and scurried to the kitchen.

"I'll make some chicken noodle soup. Nice hot soup will do you good." The whirring can opener muffled her next words. "Come on, get out of that bed. You need a shower and some food. Some nice clean clothing wouldn't hurt your outlook either. Do you have any bread?" Her head popped around the door. "Oh, never mind. I'll look around. You take a shower."

I don't know why I obeyed, but I stumbled from the warmth of my bed to the cold of bathroom tiles. Turning on the water, quickly steaming up the mirrors, I stripped my week-old bra and panties off and mindlessly moved to take my wedding and engagement rings off too. But I could not slide them down. Instead I twisted all of them so that the little solitaire would stand up straight.

I felt terribly disloyal for the merest passing thought of taking off the rings he'd given me so many years before--the glistening diamond, half a carat (okay, forty-five points) in white gold prongs set on a honey-yellow band; the thin plain yellow wedding ring, the patina of marriage having softened its first optimistic gleam; and the eternity band, ten point diamonds all around, that he gave me on our anniversary. Was that our tenth? I think it was. He took me to *Manon Lescaut* and then to dinner where the ring was in my wine.

"Drink your champagne carefully," he'd advised as the waiter poured the glass and, with a flourish, gave it to me.

Gazing into his eyes, I'd raised my glass for a toast. "To us forever. We will always be in love."

"Forever and always." He had clinked his glass to mine, and we'd drunk, the bubbles fizzling up out noses. "Just be careful," he'd repeated, and at last I saw the gemstones sparkling in the champagne's effervescence.

"Oh, Jack!" I'd fished it out and licked it clean and slid it to my hand. "Oh goodness, Jack." I was too tongue-tied to speak. I couldn't tell him what it meant that he had sacrificed for me until much later when we finally went to bed. How could I ever take that ring off? How could I even think about it? It represented everything my husband was.

"I'd sell my soul to feel your hot breath on my neck, to hold you tight, to feel you sliding into me, making me whole." I stood beneath the steaming flow, shampooed my hair and rinsed it clean, and then I lathered from my forehead to my toes. The soap smelled light and flowery, its froth silky to the touch, a sweet indulgence he had bought to mark the fact that it was Wednesday.

"Come on, he wasn't a saint." I reminded myself, letting water rinse the fragrance and the memory away. I stepped out onto the mat, its plush white fibers comforting. I'd always liked its softness on my wet bare feet. I wrapped myself in a towel. "He couldn't cook worth a damn. Couldn't tell a frying pan from a toaster. And forget about ever putting anything away. He'd have to have a live in maid if I had died." But I hadn't. He had. I wrapped my hair in a towel. And with him gone my life would surely be diminished. "Diminished?" I scoffed. "How about pointless and flat?" I plucked the jar of moisturizer from the drawer. Daubing lilac-scented cream to my face, I went on. "He was a mess but I could trust him come what may. In all the years we've been married I always knew in my heart that whatever he told me was the truth. Or as much of the truth

as he knew at the time." How many women could say they never doubted their man? But I didn't, and I'm not a naive person. "No, I know he never cheated. Debra and I were his joy, his very reason for living, his everything." Rubbing my body with the oversized white towel, I thought of Sue. Her husband cheated constantly. I quickly slathered on the cream and wrapped myself up in my robe and went into the kitchen for my soup.

"Feeling better?" Her sad eye belied the smile she'd created. She ladled soup into the bowl and put it at my normal place.

I sat down. "A little better. Sue, however did you stand it when Mike left? That must have been just horrible."

"No, it was actually a relief. He'd been unhappy in our marriage, and I couldn't seem to do a thing about that. Oh, it was hard financially. At first I thought we'd have to move, maybe even declare chapter eleven. But we made out. And I've adjusted. And the kids both seem okay, although Andy holds a grudge he won't admit to. It was a tough age for him. He felt abandoned and betrayed. Celine's more adaptable, much more accepting. But they're both doing well in school. He graduates this coming June. Did I tell you Harvard Law accepted him? He wants to do family law. God help us all. You want some tea?"

I shook my head but she poured two cups just the same.

"Anyway, I did my mourning through the years we were together," she continued, sitting down in Jack's chair. "It wasn't a shock when he told me he was leaving. I just wish he hadn't done it on my birthday." She subtly flinched as if twelve years hadn't passed since he'd packed up what he wanted and left. "Well, I guess if your point is that you want someone younger, that's the perfect day to do it, but it hurt. But I came over to help you. Debbie said you were in bed. And the pain I felt from you was overwhelming."

I thought it odd that I couldn't feel the pain for myself. Or had I simply slammed my heart's door in its face? I did that sometimes--refused to let emotions penetrate--as if in feeling them I'd somehow fade away, as if I'd dissipate myself into such a fragile state that I wouldn't be able to do what was needed to look after Jack and Debra and myself. I sat up straight. But wasn't that exactly what had just occurred?

Had I been in misery without knowing about it or at least without accepting it for what it really was? And in denying my loss was I trying to pretend that my husband would come walking through our door? No. No, Deb had denied, but I had known from the start that he was never coming back. It was my numbness that told me. "Debra said I was in bed?"

"Oh, yes, she's been here every day but she's been working at ground zero. Did you know that's what they're calling it now? Such an ugly thing to call it. She's been cooking for the workers. She figures if she's there, she'll know if anyone finds Jack. She's a determined young woman. Boy you sure did something right. She's a daughter any mother could be proud of."

"But her job."

"She cancelled out. Eat your food." Her voice was stern. "Trina, look. She's doing what she needs to do."

Once again I complied and, though I couldn't taste a thing, told her that the soup was very good.

"It's just Progresso." She shrugged. "I just found it in your pantry."

"You're not eating?"

"No, I'm good. I turned your heat down, by the way. It was eighty-five in here. What were you thinking?"

"I was cold." *My soul was frozen*, I thought but did not say.

"You were in shock." She sipped her tea. I sniffed at mine. "Oh, no, don't scoff." Had I scoffed? I guess I had in my heart.

"This kind of thing can do more damage than a physical wound." She leaned forward on her elbows. "You know how when you cut yourself it doesn't hurt but you feel woozy and cold?"

I nodded and ate a few more spoonfuls of the soup. "Did you go through that when Mike, well, you know, left you?"

She shook her head. "I was too scared. In any case, it's not the same. I didn't love him half as much as you loved Jack. So what's your plan? What will you do?" She leaned back in her chair and waited as if I might have something wise to say.

"Get through one hour then the next until I've gotten through the day and then get through the nights the same way, I suppose."

"Yeah, that's pretty much what I did." She took a trembling breath. "I forced myself to get up every morning at five and go for my weekday morning work-out. I ran a mile on the track and then went to yoga class, had a swim and took a shower, and came home. I had my breakfast at seven, left for school at seven-thirty, taught my classes, and had lunch at one-fifteen. I did my chores when I got home and then cooked dinner for the kids. I graded papers and helped Cellie with her math. And then I fell into bed and hugged his pillow every night and, telling him how much I loved him, pretended that he still loved me. My life was boring and flat, but at least it was routine, and I took comfort in its regularity.

I didn't think I could take comfort in habit.

Deb came while Susan was still there, exhaustion smudging her eyes, her steps labored and slow, her manner hopeless. "Oh, you're awake," she remarked as if discussing the time. "I'm so glad." She was too tired to be glad for anything.

"Have you eaten?" Susan found another soup can in the pantry.

"I grabbed a bite."

Sue put the can back on the shelf.

"You look like you could use some sleep." I frowned and stroked Deb's dirty cheek. "And a shower." *And hug from your dad*, I did not say.

"Don't fuss. I'm fine." She shoved my hand away as if it were a spider. "I just dropped by to check on you. I should get back. See you, Sue." She turned away then tossed a promise as she walked out the door. "Be back tomorrow. Or the next day." But she wasn't.