

# The beginning of Green as a Garden Hose

## by Fran Stewart

### Part I: The Fall – (Mid-June 1996)

THERE WERE THREE Diane Marie's in Martinsville. One of them I liked. One of them I hardly knew. One of them I hated. And now one of them was dead.

Today started off in such an ordinary way. But now I, Bisque McKee (Biscuit to most people), Martinsville's librarian, was clinging to a cliff, staring at Diane Marie Ames' body forty feet below me. I married Bob Sheffield, the town cop, six weeks ago. I thought I was going to live a quiet life. For someone who likes gardening and staying home with her cat . . .

*My name is Marmalade.*

. . . I'd had more than enough of my fill of excitement.

Just before noon, my twenty-two-year-old son Scott, who had flown in from Alaska to attend my wedding and who had extended his visit indefinitely, drove down the valley from his grandmother's house and walked in my front door. "Hey, Mom," he said, "do you want to go on an adventure?"

*I like adventures.*

"An adventure?" I asked. Marmalade pranced around my ankles, rumbling her loud purr. Sometimes I almost think she understands what I'm saying . . .

*Mouse droppings!*

. . . because she purrs so endearingly at all the right times, as if we were talking to each other. It's very comforting.

"Yeah," Scott said. "An adventure. It'll be lots of fun."

"Like the time when you were nine and we went up into the high meadow and looked for snakes?"

"Oh Mom, they weren't poisonous." He grinned. "You learned a lot of new stuff."

Scott really believed in learning. In large part, I had to admit, because I'd taught him that people need to keep expanding their knowledge all their lives. Stretches those brain cells. Keeps them active and vibrant. Me and my big mouth.

Scott escorted me up the hill to the base of the cliff that overlooks Martinsville. Eventually I asked him, "Are you sure this thing will hold me? What if I fall?" I put my hands up against what, from a distance, had looked like a solid rock wall. This close, though, I could see the knobs and fissures and cracks and dents. Surely a cliff that had been standing here for thousands of years wouldn't collapse on me or break apart in my hands.

"Mom, just trust it, okay?" Scott leaned back against his end of the rope. "You're not even off the ground yet."

"That's easy for you to say. This is scary, Scott."

"Of course it is. So what?"

So what, indeed. I was, after all, the one who had agreed to try rock climbing. I just had not envisioned such a steep first attempt. Tightening my hold on a projection at about shoulder height, I looked down so I could place my feet, shod in an extra pair of Scott's climbing shoes, on a likely bump. As I pulled myself up a good three inches, Scott leaned back so the harness I was wearing snugged up, ready to support my weight.

"Great, Mom. Now try a real step, and don't try to pull yourself up with your arms like that. You'll get exhausted. Use your feet. Those shoes grip the rocks. Make them work for you."

Right.

"Go on, Mom. It'll be fun. You'll see."

Fun. Right.

"Mom?" He didn't sound worried as much as puzzled. Even as a baby he'd had no fear. He would climb up anything, over anything, into anything, and always came up laughing. Maybe laughter would help in this case.

"Tell me a joke, Scott, so I'll relax."

“Okay, why did the chicken cross the road?”

“I don’t know. Why *did* the chicken cross the road?”

“To get to the other side.”

“Scott, that’s not even funny.” But I laughed as I said it.

“See, Mom, it worked. A corny old joke and you laughed anyway. Here’s one more. What did the prosecuting attorney ask the defendant in Fairbanks?”

“I give up.”

“Where were you on the night of October to April?”

Before I had a chance to register that as an Alaska joke, Scott ordered me again. “Take a big step.”

I found a spot for my right foot. There was a crack, and if I wedged my foot into it sideways, I could . . . No, I couldn’t.

“Quit thinking about it, Mom, and just do it. Push with your left foot, and as you do that, shift your weight onto the right foot.”

“Oh! Hey, this works!”

“Sure does. Now you’re up about two feet. Only fifty or sixty to go.”

“Thank you for your encouragement, kind sir.” I looked for another foothold, moved my hands higher, grabbed a likely rock that jutted out from the cliff face, and pushed with my right foot. Yes! What fun! I was forty-nine years old and I was rock climbing!

Before he strapped me into the harness, Scott had free climbed—without any rope holding him from above—and tested the bolts already in this section of cliff. He knew the cliff well. He’d learned his craft here, starting when he was eleven, when we gave him rock-climbing lessons.

We weren’t very far out of town, since the huge L-shaped cliff paralleled Martinsville on the west and shut off the bottom of the little dead-end valley. The Metoochie River ran from north to south through a narrow gap in the short arm of the L, and our small town nestled between the river and the L’s long arm. Martinsville was at the bottom of what we called the Upper Valley of the Metoochie. That part of the valley contained six little towns, one of which was the county seat for Keagan County, the smallest county in the state of Georgia. In fact, it was so small, most Georgians didn’t even know it was here.

There was another town called Enders, just a short way down the river from Martinsville, but a good seventy miles away by road, at the top of what we call the Lower Valley of the Metoochie, tucked into the side of another one of these cliff-enclosed hills. The cliffs that surrounded it were even steeper and higher than the one here in Martinsville, and the only way to reach Enders was the long way around. As my Grandma Martelson always used to say, you can’t get there from here. These cliffs extended the whole length of the valley, so anyone who wanted to go anywhere had to drive twenty-five miles upriver to Russell Gap (where there was a big breach in the cliffs) before they could turn west, away from the river. There were a few places in this Upper Valley, between here and Russell Gap, where the cliffs gave way to gentle uplands with lovely meadows. Some of the families along the river maintained small farming fields there, mostly for growing kenaf, an annual crop used for making paper. Saved trees. I kind of liked the idea of saving forests, and using fewer chemicals in the paper production process. The kenaf stalks had glorious bright yellow flowers on them, but I had to give up on the idea of planting any in my garden. Those plants grew fifteen feet in a single season. When all the talk about growing kenaf first started a dozen or so years before, most of us in the Upper Valley were afraid it would turn out to be the newest version of kudzu. It took a lot of meetings and a lot of convincing before we came to see that the growing season simply wasn’t long enough for it to set seed. So our land was safe. Gradually the local farmers planted one field, then two, then more in kenaf. And within six years, Keagan County was one of the top producers of kenaf in the southeast. A great deal of the land above the valley-long cliff was dedicated to kenaf growing. The fields, tucked into the hollows of the land, stretched back a mile from the cliff edge. Surprisingly, though, there was no terrain up there near the cliffs that would allow for regular paved roads. The one road that meandered through the county giving access to the fields was more than a mile back from the cliffs. There were lots of places for hikers in these hills, since paths criss-crossed the forests that filled the uplands between the kenaf fields.

Rock climbing clubs from the area claimed their regular spots all along the cliffs of the Upper Valley, but this particular cliff was gentler than the others. It looked plenty steep to my novice eyes, though. And so

quiet today. We hadn't seen another soul. Just the two of us and Marmalade, who had walked here with us. She was prowling around at the base of the cliff. Her orange and white fur stood out against the gray of the cliff and the green of the weedy grass.

*I am investigating the smells.*

The bolts in the rock wall had been in place for years but were still holding strong. As Scott inched his way upwards, he hooked his rope onto the rings of the bolts using little doohickeys called carabiners. This meant his rope was always connected to a spot no more than eight or ten feet below him, which he seemed to think was safe. The logical part of me knew he was well-trained. He'd been doing this for years and had always been safety-conscious, but it still looked pretty scary to me. If he slipped, he could fall as much as twenty feet before the rope would grab. Of course, he had me strapped into a harness below him, paying out the rope. Fat chance I could stop him if he fell. He weighed a lot more than I did. Eventually, however, he attached the line all the way to the top of the cliff. Scott was lithe and muscular. He made it look easy.

I stepped back far enough from the cliff that I could watch his ascent without putting too much of a crick in my neck. I heard a "whoopee!" from my ever-enthusiastic son and saw him haul himself over the rim of the cliff onto the flat rocks at the top. He stood up and looked around. I knew he could see all the way west across the kenaf field and north along the path that winds around it. The plants were still pretty short that time of year, maybe twelve inches or so. Kenaf reminded me of bamboo, but without bamboo's invasive habits. That meant that by July they would be twice my height. Scott turned and waved down at me. After a moment he started back down—an act of sheer guts as far as his mother was concerned. He was letting out the rope somehow or other so that he had control over the rate of his descent. He obviously didn't trust me to know what I was doing. He was being smart. His instructions had made sense when we were both standing on firm ground, but once he was up there, I hadn't a clue. His descent looked terrifying and terrific at the same time. How I longed to do that. Heck, I wanted to learn how to skydive, too, but I knew it would take me a long time to get my courage up to try that. It was one thing to think of jumping out of an airplane. Another thing to *do* it.

NOW, I DANGLED from the rope he'd threaded through the rings, and he was attached to the other end, counterbalancing my weight. I was medium-weight, and at five-foot-ten Scott was a good three inches taller than I, so I knew I shouldn't worry. I worried anyway.

"Mom, you're thinking again. Stop it and climb."

"Scott, what if . . ."

"Mom, let go of the rock right now and lean backwards."

"What!?"

"I mean it. Let go and lean out and see what happens."

So I did. To my surprise, the harness supported me. It felt kind of like flying, so I spread my wings.

*Your arms.*

As I leaned back in enjoyment, I glanced up toward the top of the cliff. I could see Marmalade peering over the edge at me. How had she gotten up there?

*There is a steep trail nearby. It is not often traveled.*

. . . Just a few minutes ago she was down here with us, watching me get harnessed up. I knew she was a remarkable cat, at least *I* thought so, but I didn't know cliff-climbing was in her repertoire.

*I have many talents of which you are not aware. One of them is that I do things the easy way.*

AFTER I PASSED the half-way mark, I saw a little ledge off to my right. It was two or three feet deep and five or six feet long. I edged over that way and stepped onto the end of it. I briefly considered lying down and taking a nap, but Scott would never have understood. Instead, I paused for a long breath and looked over my shoulder, across the trees that lined Fifth Street and hid the houses there from my sight. The scenery was a spectacular view of the steep cave-riddled hillside across the Metoochie River. I looked upward once more. Marmalade was still there. I could see her little head craning over the edge. I felt exhilarated. Energized. Exhausted. It seemed a shame not to keep going, though.

It had been quite a while since I'd hollered anything to Scott. I needed my breath for the climbing. These legs and shoulders of mine would be pooped tomorrow. To say nothing of my butt muscles. After the first twenty feet or so, Scott had stopped calling up encouragement to me since he seemed to understand that I'd gotten the hang of it, although I was climbing very slowly. I had to look at my feet to guide them to the available fissures and bumps, and I still had to watch my hands. But I was beginning to rely more on touch than sight, beginning to feel the rock.

I placed my feet and took another few steps upwards off the ledge, but stopped when I heard Marmalade above me, hissing and spitting and shrieking. I'd never heard her do that before. I couldn't see her anymore. Instead, I saw something very big and very dark against the bright sky, something that appeared to jump out over the edge of the cliff and then hurtle toward me. I saw a blur of green. Instinctively, and that instinct probably saved my life, I threw myself flat against the rock, banging my nose in the process. The harness pulled me up tight and then dropped me a sickening foot or two back toward the ledge. Scott must have been scrambling to get out of the way himself. Something heavy slammed against my shoulder, and the afternoon went into slow motion. I will have a bruise there tomorrow, I thought. Then I thought, I'm glad I saw it coming so I could get mostly out of the way. Then I wondered where the awful screaming was coming from. It sounded very close.

It was me.