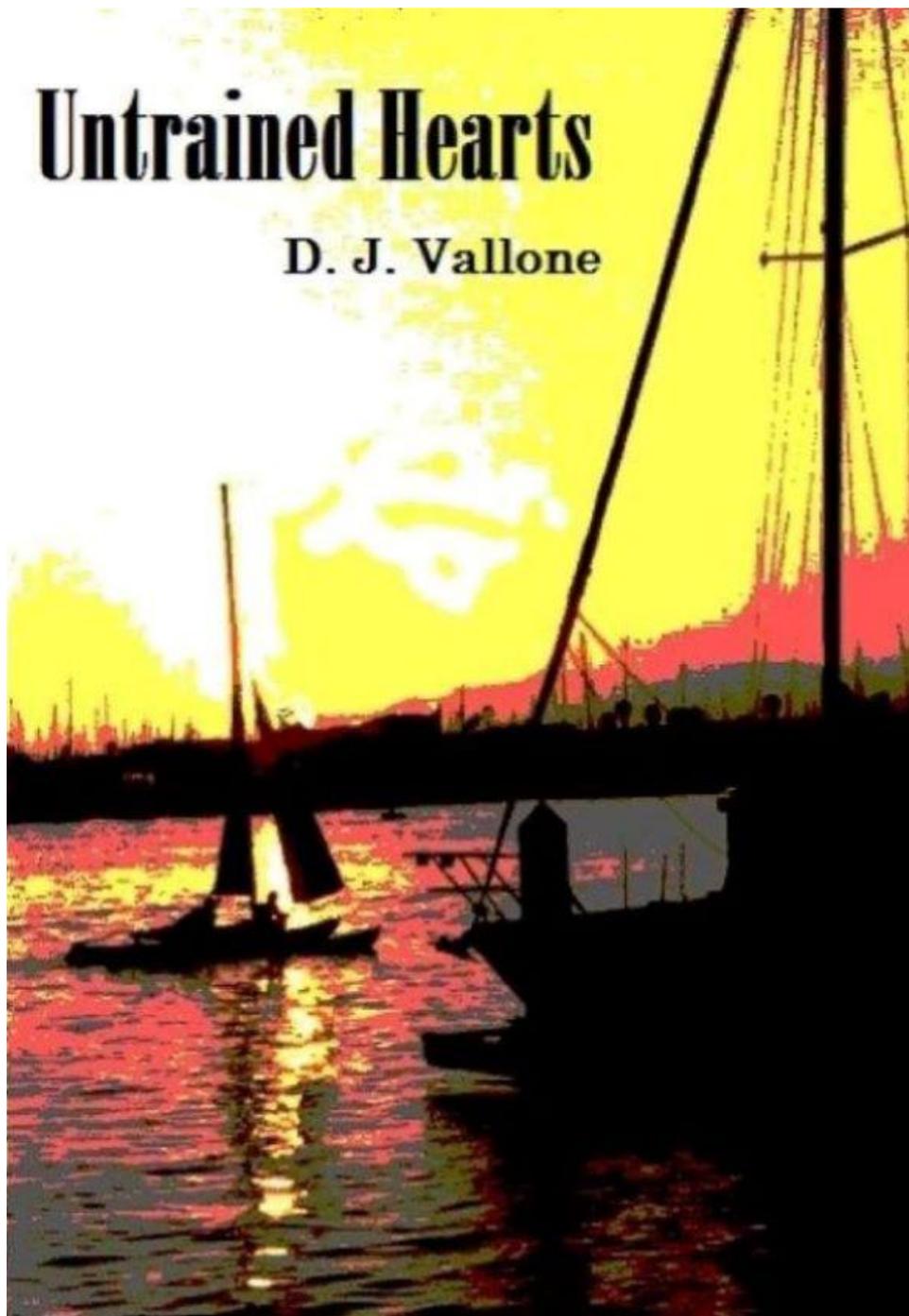


Untrained Hearts

D. J. Vallone



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by:

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“It is one of the mysteries that God has revealed through the years that He is able to sow the seeds of gain in loss itself. When you have been utterly stripped of everything, out of that poverty, weakness, tenderness, bruising and grief, He can turn the whole thing into gain, and the latter end is so much greater than the former.”

– Ray Prinzing

PART I

DECISIONS

Chapter One

As soon as the green arrow lit, Danny hastily gunned the Regal GS into a left turn onto Big Beaver Road. At his wits' end from waiting for innumerable signal changes, now hurrying to avoid a late arrival to work, he foolishly disregarded the skin of fresh snow which had become dangerously slick under a steady stream of rush hour traffic. Suddenly, his back tires lost traction. The car pitched left and immediately began sliding uncontrollably to the right.

Adrenaline rushed to Danny's heart. He steered right, hoping it was the correct action. In the split-second he had to react, he couldn't remember if one was supposed to turn *into* or *away* from a spin, or for that matter, which way was which. An answer came almost instantaneously. His right rear wheel slammed into the curb and bounced up onto the easement where he could see a tree and a traffic sign rapidly approaching.

"Jesus," he said, out of both supplication and desperation.

Fortunately, the car began responding to his turn of the wheel. *Thank you*, he thought. But just as quickly, it careened off in the opposite direction, yet somehow managing to miss the stationary objects. Then, before Danny could catch his breath, the Regal dropped back onto the road with a *creak* and a *bump*.

In these few frightful seconds, Danny became a spectator in a docudrama of his own helplessness. But he wasn't about to give up; that wasn't his style. So, as the car spun around to face the oncoming traffic, he abandoned all conventional wisdom and slammed on the brakes.

The Regal shuddered catawampus to a stop.

Drivers with smiling faces overtook him on either side. “You think it’s funny,” he muttered. “Well, I’d like to see you try it one time.”

When a break occurred in the line of cars, Danny gently eased the car around and continued east on Big Beaver – only a couple more miles to his daily destination: Base Line Technologies, Inc., his employer for the past fifteen years.

How stupid of me, he thought. *What was I thinking? I could have totaled the car back there.*

Most days he’d have stuck to the freeway and would not have had to make that left turn off Adams Road at all. But with the least bit of snow in the morning, I-75 turns into a parking lot for miles approaching the Big Beaver exit. Considering the probable bottleneck this morning, Danny thought he’d outsmart everyone else by getting off at Adams and taking the two-lane south to Big Beaver. Big *mistake* was what it turned out to be. Adams was jammed up like the post office at five o’clock. He’d lurched along in stop-and-go fashion for nearly half an hour before getting to the intersection for his left turn at Big Beaver. Maddeningly, no more than a half dozen cars slid through with each cycle of the signals. He was going to be late again.

Now the specific hours the manager of recruiting kept should not matter, providing he put in a full day. But at Base Line, managers were expected in their offices at eight-thirty, barring natural disaster or death. And unfortunately, regardless of its near-calamitous effect on Danny’s car, today’s snowfall hardly qualified for disaster status. And, as far as death was concerned...well...Danny wasn’t desperate enough to wish for that.

These miserable drivers...I wish they would... It has been Danny’s long-held belief that most of them should pack up and move to Florida or some other Sunbelt destination. All they do is complain about winter anyway – *it’s too long, too cold, too gray.* And they certainly can’t drive in it.

Then again, today was not at all atypical for January, a month he considered the low point on the calendar by nearly every reckoning. Arriving in the wake of the high spirits of the holiday season, it is a time for extraordinary coping skills, made even worse by the short gloomy days and the awful weather. Moods in metro-Detroit sink deeper by the day, and the natives will soon need either psychotherapy or a vacation in the tropics.

Of course there were exceptions: snow-happy skiers, for example. They must possess a faulty chromosome or something – according to Danny Predmore anyway.

Still, after four decades in Michigan, Danny has learned to tolerate winter. Besides, winter is hockey season, and hockey is the sport of sports, a man's sport, the best thing to come out of Canada since Lafayette.

And there was one other bright spot: His birthday was fast approaching. Regardless of the fact that this Saturday would be his forty-second (another needless reminder that he is a little past his prime), and laying aside for the moment that he might not have anyone special to share it with, it will still be his special day. He couldn't allow a lack of companionship to spoil things for him. Besides, if he played his cards right later this morning, he just might end up with a date.

It was eight thirty-four when Danny stepped out of the GS onto a crunchy layer of snow. A cold wind stung his face as he approached the glass-encased high rise where Base Line Technologies occupies the sixth and seventh floors. Gusts swirled furiously, whipping the falling snow into visible cyclones. Danny pulled his trench coat tightly around his neck. His eyeballs froze, and the bitter chill burned him down to the base of his spine. *Guess it's about time to put the lining in my coat*, he thought. *Looks like winter's here with a vengeance.*

Passing through the revolving doors, Danny Predmore joined a gathering of other road-weary commuters in line for the only functioning elevator.

Blue numbers glowed out into the pre-dawn darkness of Julie Baker Predmore's tastefully decorated bedroom. As the clock ticked over to 5:35, sounds of harpsichord and strings from Vivaldi's *Winter* gently emanated from the radio's tiny speakers. The early morning disc jockey from KCRW – Santa Monica evidently had a sense of humor. Today in the Los Angeles basin the mercury would probably reach 75 degrees under a golden sun.

Julie rolled over and hit the snooze bar – for the second time.

A couple of minutes later, however, she groaned a feminine groan and sat up, allowing her head to clear before standing and walking to the kitchen to brew coffee. She desired a taste of *French Roast* this morning, and she thanked God for such simple, sensory pleasures.

Next, she ran a toothbrush over her teeth and splashed her face with tepid water from the tap. Then, in preparation for her regular morning ritual, she snatched a pair of sweats from a shelf in her closet, along with a sports bra and white cotton socks.

She pulled off her nightshirt revealing a firm, graceful body to no one in particular, dressed, and started her stretching routine. First the back, then the arms and shoulders, the legs, and finally some floor exercises for the abdomen and buttocks.

Coffee aroma wafted into her bedroom, but Julie wouldn't allow herself the pleasure of anything beyond olfactory enjoyment until after her run.

At 5:45, she dashed out the back door into the awakening morning. She jogged east along a quiet West Balboa Boulevard. Streetlights glowed softly, illuminating the beach town concrete. Cars slept in their drives and in the metered spots within the roadway median. Light spilled over the horizon ahead of her, up into a colorless night sky. Chilly morning air enveloped her in

dampness but it wasn't cold enough to bother Julie. In a few moments she'd be sweating anyway. *Perfect running weather*, she thought.

She by-passed Cannery Village where the "Party Central" night people hang out; no one was stirring at this hour. Then she headed for the beach to follow the shoreline down toward Newport Pier.

No surfers were visible this morning as Julie ran along the hard sand below the tide line. It occurred to her that surfers always watched the tides. She, on the other hand, has never concerned herself with such things – like precisely when it would be low tide or when surf conditions might be at their optimum. Still, to Julie's eyes, the tide seemed pretty low this morning. She imagined at any instant some young studs might drive up in a sport/utility vehicle with *boards* on the roof, or a couple of bleach-blond guys in wet suits might jog onto the beach from a nearby apartment, *sticks* under their arms, ready to dive into the returning tide.

The mental mystery ended there for her though. Most beach boys wouldn't even give her a second look, old woman that she was, though she has worked arduously to keep her youthful figure, pulling it back from the effects of childbearing, gravity, and age. But then again, surfers weren't on *her* prospect list either, given their general lack of ambition and net worth. She'd much rather a guy with a house on Lido Isle.

A small gathering of gulls circled overhead as Julie passed one of the rocky groins running off the beach. She looked hard toward Catalina but there wasn't enough morning light for the island to be visible yet. Her breathing was deep and rhythmic now. The damp air refilled her lungs over and over again with oxygen and the sting of salt. She liked that sensation, the exhilaration of it.

Suddenly she detected the faint fish odor almost always present around Newport Bay in the morning. It reminded her of driving in from the desert, when the humid, coastal air first entered her lungs, bringing with it the fragrance of life and the aroma of

the sea. She would never forget that experience in June of last year, driving down from Riverside, and breathing Pacific air for the first time in over a quarter-century. Finally, she was home again.

After a little turn to the left, she slogged through the softer sand, heading for 28th Street and the idyllic Lido Isle. It was another grand and glorious morning for Julie Predmore, and she had it all to herself.

Once inside his office, Danny shut the door before shedding his trench coat and rubbers. He glanced out the window onto the winter scene below. Everything looked white. The roads had yet to be cleaned and salted. Snow was being blown about to the degree that some of it actually appeared to be going back up again. This effect was, however, only a temporary diversion in the ultimate journey of the finely-crafted flakes. Regardless, the day looked beautiful and serene, especially when viewed from the warm confines of Danny's sixth-story perch.

This private office with the view of the freeway, Big Beaver Road and points north was given to Danny a year ago, along with his promotion to Manager of Recruiting. He deserved it. Five years of performing as the top recruiter for the firm definitely qualified him for the position and its accompanying perks. During that period, he clocked the sixty- to seventy-hour weeks which eventually cost him his marriage – a heavy price to pay for entrance into middle management.

But Danny only occasionally allowed himself the luxury of regret. He couldn't live those years over again anyway, though it wasn't the years *or* his career that finally sent Julie packing. Sure, their love had waned early, and the excitement and passion were long gone. And then there were the kids, the job responsibilities, the mortgage and car payments. Yet they remained in the marriage twenty years without once discussing the alternatives – until two years ago, anyway, when Danny became convinced that their long, unhappy trip on the treadmill of life had gotten him

nowhere in particular, and he decided to have a little fling. And now, if he had any regrets at all, they would be over his decision to fool around in the first place. That was his only real mistake.

The door opened, and a rotund balding man of about fifty wearing a pinstriped navy suit filled the entrance to Danny's office. "Predmore, you were late again. You need a wake-up service or something?" It was Vic DeSalvo, Vice President of Operations, in his dyed-black mustache, looking suspiciously like a gangster. "Something worth your attention out there?"

Danny stepped away from the window and smiled. "Nothing in particular, Vic. Just looks like one of those little knickknacks we had when we were kids. You know, you shook it up, and it snowed inside."

"Yeah, yeah. So it does," Vic said through a smirk. "But staring out the window dreaming about your childhood isn't going to fatten the bulldog."

Vic would know about such things, Danny realized.

"What's going on with those two senior designer positions? Bill Cook is all over me to get those filled."

The "Cookster," so-named by his colleagues, is the top sales representative for Base Line's Engineering Services Group – the lead *pimp*. At least that's the unofficial industry classification for salespeople who do what Bill does – the selling of bodies.

Danny grabbed a sheet of paper off his desk and held it out for Vic to read. "This job order is crap, Vic. It describes everybody and nobody. The best recruiter on earth couldn't find these resources, and if he did, they probably wouldn't be what the customer wanted anyway."

"Excuses, excuses. We didn't move you up to management so you could feed us excuses, Danny."

"It's not an excuse, Vic. It's a fact. Cook and the other reps keep bringing in these half-baked job requirements expecting my staff to recruit solid citizens for their clients. And it's not bad enough that eighty percent of our candidate pool only speaks

English as a poor second language. Now we have to guess which technologies and skills the customer really needs.” Danny dropped the job order back onto his desk. “Is it too much to ask for Cook to get his client to give us a finite list of skills?”

“Maybe you should ask *him* that question.”

“I have. He doesn’t want to go to the trouble. I think he’d rather just keep up the blame game. He claims the other firms don’t seem to have trouble coming up with the right candidates. But he forgets that most of them have direct pipelines to India and China. We don’t.”

“Come off it, Danny. Just tell your people to get out there and beat the bushes. In case you haven’t been paying attention, it’s not a beauty contest anymore, and they don’t line up in the hallway waiting for us to pass out job applications. Recruiters have to get out there and make things happen.”

Danny sat down, hoping that his gesture might mitigate the confrontational atmosphere in the room. “I think we need to come up with a better process of communicating and working together around here, or we’re not going to succeed in today’s market.”

“Sounds like another excuse to me. Just find those engineers for Cook. It can’t be that difficult.”

“Sure, Vic, we’ll find them.”

“That’s what I like to hear. Now have a good day.”

He left.

For a brief moment Danny considered calling an impromptu meeting of his staff and reading them the riot act – standard operating procedure for any other Base Line manager under similar circumstances. It’s the way this company has operated for twenty years. But Danny has never used such methods to get results. On the contrary, he has worked for the past twelve months to elicit confidence and trust from his recruiters, all four of them. Beating them up over something like this would be totally out of character for him and, therefore, completely out of the question. No, he’d just send Randy Sloan a voice mail asking to

meet with him as soon as possible. Then, he'd work with Randy to come up with an action plan for finding and hiring two design engineers for Chrysler. *They're out there somewhere; we've just got to locate them.* This has been his rallying cry for six years, since he moved into recruiting from the accounting department.

He looked at the decorative ship's clock on his desk. It read ten past nine in analogue fashion, and Danny realized he hadn't had his first cup of coffee yet. Grabbing his red mug with the white Detroit Red Wings logo, he headed off toward the office break room.

Julie walked the last block along the boulevard and turned the corner to her house. The morning had lightened considerably since she began her run, and traffic was now humming along on Balboa, the peninsula's main east / west thoroughfare. The chilly morning air had kept her from overheating, but she'd worked up a reasonable sweat nonetheless. Reaching into her pocket, she unsnapped her key ring from its hand-sewn protective loop and placed one key into the jailhouse-style iron door of her duplex villa. The heavy gate unlocked with a clank and squeaked as she pulled it open. She took one last deep breath of the fresh sea air before stepping inside and shutting the gate behind her. After proceeding through the sun porch and the main door to the living room of her small house, she was immediately bathed in the aroma of morning coffee.

She gulped down two glasses of water from her cooler and stretched again. Under the warm spray of the shower, she began to think earnestly about her day – Thursday. She'd walk to the office. No chance of rain today with the unusual high pressure and the heat wave promising to stay around for a few more days. Once at work, her first priority would be to finish typing a report that her boss, Spence, needed by noon. Next, she'd catch up on some filing and do the background checks on a couple of prospect companies. Running the D&Bs and credit reports has

been one of her responsibilities since she took the position over a year ago.

Spence Eastman co-founded SunBurst, Inc., a small but successful Management Consulting firm in Newport Beach. The company helps small businesses get productive through the implementation of proven management techniques which he and his partner Mike Tattersall have developed – formulas for sure-fire success.

A highly organized person in her own right, Julie has put together her own formula for success as well, one that includes the attainment of her college degree. To that end, tonight, she will attend the first meeting of a sociology class at Cal State, Fullerton (where she also began a business ethics course for the semester two nights ago). But it was exactly a year ago when she started back to school with a goal to get her BA through three years of night classes – an aggressive plan, but Julie has convinced herself to stick with it. So far, so good, she's been pulling a *four point*.

Danny never gave her much credit for brain power, but all along she knew that if she had been able to stay in school and get her degree, she'd have been the one making the big bucks. The economic boom of the eighties would not have come and gone with her and Danny just scraping along, dangling, as it were, from the dark and seamy undercarriage of the middle class.

Things might have been different for their marriage too, much different.

Nah, Danny could never have handled it if I were the major breadwinner. His pride would have suffered, and our marriage would've come unraveled even sooner than it did. Or so she thought this morning, anyway, while toweling herself dry in the small, sixties-retro bathroom with its yellow and orange decor.

After wiping off a layer of fog, she studied herself in the mirror. I'm not so bad. Hardly a wrinkle. Hair's always been a little mousy, but nothing a trip to the salon couldn't fix. Even so, I'm not ready

for the peroxide look. The old neck is starting to bag a little, though – better look for some more good exercises. These breasts have always been good, not too big; otherwise they'd just be hanging like a couple of old socks. As it is, they're probably my best feature, along with my legs, that is. Never did have any hips. Even two natural deliveries couldn't fix that.

In reality, Julie Baker Predmore was a fine specimen for a forty-year-old woman, still able to turn heads. And she had no real shortage of suitors. Unfortunately, they tended to be lonely divorcees with alimony and child support – a veritable truckload of obligations – and only one thing on their minds. Consequently, at times she has wondered where all the good men have gone, those with depth who might appreciate her for “her.” And, if truth were told, she has been finding it harder and harder to remain unflagging in her belief that the right guy might be waiting around the next corner, ready to knock her off her feet with abounding love.

Still, she has not succumbed to self-pity, nor allowed herself to slip into melancholia over her inactive love life. Rather, she has consciously remained upbeat and hopeful, and in so doing, proved all over again something Danny never seemed to appreciate: that optimism is one of her seminal virtues.

Except for that day when Danny admitted to seeing someone else. No room for optimism in that state of affairs, she figured. So wounded by the implicit rejection, and angry with him for sneaking around, she simply asked for a divorce on the spot.

And he agreed.

Everything happened so fast; neither of them had a chance to change their minds. Still, in the year-and-a-half since, Julie has had few regrets. Except for a lingering sense of loss, she has managed to leave the years of her marriage behind and remain convinced that she is better off than she would have been had she stayed with Danny and attempted to work things out.

Danny got to keep the house. Not a huge loss for her since it had been recently refinanced to pay college tuition bills for Daniel and Clarrie. Too proud to accept alimony (a decision she has since questioned repeatedly), Julie settled for half of their liquid assets, some household furnishings, and the cottage up north which had been a gift from *her* mom and step-dad anyway. At least that was “free and clear.” So she put it up for sale immediately. And given the timeliness of the offering – it was spring – a full-price deal was written and closed before Memorial Day. Then, she packed up her share of the furniture and china, and moved to the west coast, the source of fond and enduring memories from her childhood as a “California girl” in the sixties.

Coincidentally, her dad, now retired after thirty years with Hughes, made his present home a few miles away. He and his second wife, Lora, an Amerasian and ten years his junior, had an elegant little condo in Laguna Hills. Over the past eighteen months, Julie has visited with them a half-dozen times, twice more than she had in the eighteen years previous. And, though she couldn’t exactly say that they’ve all become close, having family nearby has lent an element of cohesion to her life.

But she would have moved out west regardless. The Southland was where she’d been born and raised as a young girl, the place where she always believed she belonged. It has long mystified her why people would leave southern California voluntarily. As a young teenager, she’d had no choice in the matter; her mom dragged her to Michigan when her step-dad got a job at the GM Tech Center. Julie later blamed the two of them for doing so out of spite, and especially because her mother couldn’t stand the sight of that “slant-eyed chippy,” as she maliciously preferred to call Lora.

Julie had cried for weeks. She was fourteen with her entire life ahead of her. She didn’t want to spend it in the murder capital of the world. Clearly, the move was a bad decision. Anyone with a brain could see that. Even Motown Records had left Detroit for

L.A.. But her emotional display did not change anything. She was still a stuck pig, two thousand miles away from the home she loved and the ocean she desperately missed.

But now she was back. And this morning, after dressing in a smart-looking, plaid, wrap-around skirt and white knit top, she went to the kitchen and poured her first cup of coffee. She sawed off a couple thick slices of whole-wheat bread from a bakery loaf purchased last evening and popped them into the toaster. She clicked on the small TV, her only set, perched on the bar between the kitchen and living room. The local news crew could keep her company while she ate breakfast. There wasn't anyone else around to do the job—at least not today.

Finally, when Clarrie went off to school at MSU, and Danny and Julie were left alone, with nothing much left of their relationship, he had to make a decision. Keeping up a double life was killing him on the inside, painfully, like a cancer. And with Clarrie out of the house, there was no longer a justifiable reason for living the lie. So, one night after dinner, he just came out with it.

“Julie, I don't know how to put this, except to tell you the truth. I've been seeing someone else. It's not that I don't love you anymore. I do. I've just been terribly confused and, well...this...this...happened. I'm sorry. But we haven't been very romantic for years and...well...I doubt we can ever get back the feelings we had in the beginning.”

Things went worse than he had expected. To his great dismay, Danny found himself hurt when Julie didn't put up a fight to keep him. She actually seemed more anxious to end their relationship than he was at the time. In point of fact, he hadn't been absolutely certain a divorce was called for. And sure enough, he soon found himself regretting his decision to confess. He had simply wanted to admit to the truth of how he felt, to get his innermost, private thoughts out into the open because it seemed so wrong to continue concealing them. And, somewhere in the inner recesses

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