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Illustration Credit: Misty Mawn

## The Accidental In-Law

As she celebrates a new life with her husband, Amy Paturel finds love and acceptance where she least expected it—in the memory of his first wife.

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I woke at 6 a.m. and started cooking: spinach and mushroom quiche, bacon-egg scramble, even chocolate-dipped strawberries. What if they don't like the food? What if they notice the poorly hidden clutter? What if our sons act like brats?

My husband, Brandon, stumbled into the kitchen a few hours later, as I was pulling out serving trays, his eyes still crusty with sleep. "Do you think Roger will recognize Noelle's\* serving trays?" I asked, concerned.

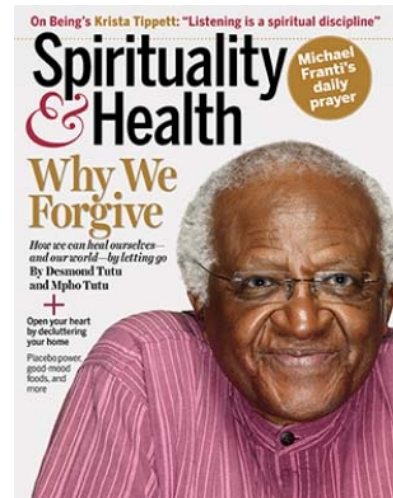
"I doubt it; and if he does, it won't bother him," said Brandon. "It's not like he's scouring our house for remnants of Noelle."

Roger is Brandon's former father-in-law. His daughter Noelle was only 33 when she died in a car accident six months after marrying Brandon. Now her serving trays, her loyal beagle, Charlie, even her amazing husband belong to me.

Despite my best efforts, those realities would be thrust in Roger's face during his first visit to our home.

I tried to put myself in Roger's shoes. How would it feel to spend an afternoon at his former son-in-law's house with his new family? A family that might have belonged to Noelle?

While I never strived to fill Noelle's shoes, I wanted Roger to see that Brandon is happy in his new life—that I'm cherishing him the way his daughter would have if she were still alive.



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The doorbell interrupted my thoughts. Brandon kissed me on the forehead and said, "Relax. Aim, it's going to be great."

At our front door, Roger held a bouquet of flowers in one hand and the hand of his second wife, Chris, in the other. Charlie went wild with excitement, running circles around him, and the two greeted each other like old friends. As they made their way into our home, I pulled out a tall, green vase—Noelle's, of course. Roger expertly arranged the flowers, beaming as Brandon and I brought him up to date on my pregnancy and our preparations for a third child.

From the moment I met Roger and Chris five years earlier, they were warm, welcoming, and kind. Even though I'd only seen pictures of Noelle, I could see that she had inherited her father's playful, blue-green eyes. The physical resemblance was striking.

After Noelle died, Brandon grieved with her family, dividing his time between her mom, her dad, and her sister—each living in a separate home. A native of Detroit, he barely knew anyone in California. He had moved here for Noelle, and he stayed close with her family.

Two years after Noelle's death, he was dating me, and Brandon found himself gushing about his new love to Noelle's dad. "If she makes you this happy," said Roger, "I want to meet her."

That first meeting could have been awkward, uncomfortable, even nerve-racking, but Roger and Chris made me feel at ease. We strolled on the beach, Brandon and Roger walking ahead while Chris and I lingered behind. Then we had dinner and drinks at a seaside restaurant, talking easily about travel, life, and love.

Noelle's name never came up.

As we were driving home after dinner, I asked Brandon how Roger felt about me—and how he felt about me dating his daughter's husband. "He loved you," Brandon assured me. "He said you were warm, intelligent, sweet, and he told me not to wait too long before snapping you up."

When Brandon and I married a year later, Roger and Chris gave us our most memorable wedding gift during a tour of their home. We meandered down a long hallway displaying artwork—everything from hand-painted oils to Disney caricatures. The crowning jewel at the end of the hallway: an original Batman lithograph.

Brandon was awe-struck. A die-hard fanboy with a garage full of Batman memorabilia, a piece like this was his Mona Lisa. I watched him studying every line, every detail of expression, every accouterment in the Dark Knight's tool belt.

As my mind started calculating how I could surprise Brandon with a similar masterpiece on our wedding day, Roger said, "Well, I'm glad you like it, because it's your wedding gift."

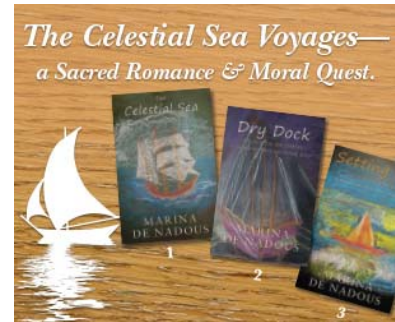
Our jaws dropped like characters in a Batman comic rendered speechless by a hero's act of kindness. In that moment, I chose to see Roger as an extension of Noelle. If he is happy for Brandon, well, maybe she would be, too.

Two years later, when Brandon and I were expecting twin boys, Roger and Chris sent a bouquet of daisies to our house. They shared our excitement, chatting with us about every detail—due dates, names, plans, and doctor's appointments. Like loving relatives, they celebrated every milestone in our lives as a new family, from our wedding day to our boys' baptisms.

When we're together, Roger delights in our children, lifting each of them to the sky while the other clambers for his attention, raising their arms and begging for a turn—the picture of a playful grandfather enjoying his progeny.

I think about Noelle. What would she give to have this experience with her dad, her husband, and the children she and Brandon might have brought into this world.

Sometimes, I feel her with us. During Roger's visits, Brandon might give him some of her old things, or the two of them will reminisce about a long-ago family event. But Roger never dwells in that place for long. He navigates the conversation matter-of-factly, while I silence my longing to ask a million questions about his daughter, and why he has chosen to love what she left behind.

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Whatever the reason, Roger has decided to face his loss by surrounding himself with people Noelle loved most in this life. He could have turned into his grief. He could have faded quietly into the background, leaving Brandon to navigate his new life on his own. Instead, Roger has been a pillar of support—embracing me and Brandon in our journey to become a family.

What a gift. To Brandon. To me. To our boys. Roger has become a shining example of finding joy in the present moment knowing how quickly it can all change. His continued presence in our lives reminds us to hold our children more closely, cherish daily challenges with grace and humility, and aspire to be more loving and forgiving with each other . . . honoring Noelle's memory.

After brunch, as they said their goodbyes and stepped into their car, Roger looked at my husband and said, "You have a beautiful family, Brandon."

My heart melted, knowing that Roger, Chris—and Noelle—are all part of that "beautiful family."

One day, our children will understand our relationship with "Uncle Roger" and "Aunt Chris." They'll know we have no blood ties. They'll know how Uncle Roger and Aunt Chris found love for us despite the gaping hole in their hearts. And they'll understand that's the real meaning of family. —**SeH**

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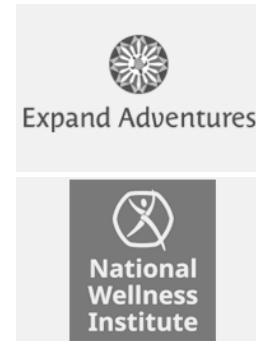
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