

Good on Paper

BY
BODIE PARKHURST



Milton Freewater
OREGON

Good on Paper:

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Published by Magic Dog Press, 2009

PO Box 108

Milton Freewater, OR 97862

Printed by Createspace.com in the

United States of America

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NOTE:

This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to anyone, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Edited by Barbara Ardinger,
to whom I owe an enormous debt. She keeps me from, as she puts it,
“embarrassing myself in print.” If you’d like her to do the
same for you, visit her online at
www.barbaraardinger.com.

I should probably explain that she is an editor and a city girl, not a
dictator. Any errors in grammar, punctuation, syntax,
and farm stuff are mine alone.

Special thanks also to Jan, who read the proof with a pencil in her hand.

TO SIR

WHO SNEAKS INTO ALMOST
EVERYTHING I WRITE.
WE ALWAYS KNEW HE WAS
MORE THAN JUST A DOG.

CHAPTER 1

Sarah

Once upon a time, a king named David got the hots for a steamy little number named Bathsheba. Lucky for David, Mr. Bathsheba, or Uriah, was busy being one of David's best generals, so Bathsheba was home all by her lonesome. See where this is heading? David did the kingly thing—he set up a rendezvous and they went at it like crazed weasels. By morning, he was in love. Nobody knew what Bathsheba thought—David was king, so it didn't really matter. Bathsheba went home in the morning, no harm, no foul. Right? Wrong. Couple weeks later, David got a note. *I'm late.* And Mr. Bathsheba was still off fighting Philistines. David thought fast.

He sent a note. *Dear Uriah, Come on home. We need to talk.* 'Course, what he planned was that Uriah would sleep with the little woman and nobody'd be any the wiser about the bun David had cooked up in her oven.

"How's the battle?" David asked when Uriah showed up.

"Better before I left the guys unsupervised," said Uriah, a little testily.

"Okay," said David. "Just checkin'. Time for a quickie before you head back."

"Nope," said Uriah, "not while my men are dying. There'll be none of *that* until we all come home." He just couldn't take a hint.

David thought fast again. "Okay," he said. "I admire your grit. Can you take a note to your commanding officer?"

"Sure thing," said Uriah.

Put him where the fighting is hottest. David sealed the note. “See that it gets to your commanding officer,” he said again.

“Sure thing, King Dave,” said Uriah. He spent the night in the barracks and headed out in the morning. ‘Course, poor Bathsheba was just as knocked up as ever. Uriah delivered the note. “Looks like you’ve been reassigned, Uriah,” said his commanding officer. Shortly thereafter, Uriah was tragically, predictably, and oh so conveniently dead. “Too bad, so sad,” said David. “He was a good man. Get yourself a new dress, Bathie baby, and let’s get this done before you start looking like you ate watermelon seeds.”

They got married. David was happy. Bathsheba was, too, or at least smart enough to keep quiet. Then God’s Man in the Street, Nathan, showed up at the palace in full Ancient Mariner mode. He told David a story about a guy who loved his pet sheep.

As it turned out, he—the man in the story, not Nathan—loved this sheep so much he’d been sleeping with it, which seems like an odd arrangement unless we’re talking about Montana, here, where the men are men and the sheep are damned nervous. The man and his sheep were very happy together ... until some rich guy stole the sheep and cooked it for dinner. The sheep lover was pissed about this.

David was, too. “Put that rich guy to death,” he roared. “Give all his stuff to the poor guy who’s lost his sheep. And get the poor guy some counseling, or a match.com membership, or something.”

Then Nathan delivered his zinger. “You’re the rich guy, David. You stole Uriah’s one little sheep (I can just imagine Bathsheba’s face at this) and you’ve already got more wives and concubines than you can remember.” And then, probably jealous as hell, he went on to rip David a new one before telling him that this sin would doom his kingdom. Which it did. And just to be sure David got the point, God killed Bathsheba’s baby, too, and that baby had *nothing* to do with *anything*.

Oh yeah, I think it’s safe to say that God’s definitely against adultery.

Pastor Jimmy Jay Rayburn, on the other hand, says taking off my panties is all part of God’s plan for him. He’s my boss, so his view is the one we’re

going with right now. What do I think about it? Doesn't really matter. My friend Janet said so when I asked her about it. Not that I gave her gory details or anything. I just said, "What happens if a secretary files a sexual abuse claim against her boss?"

"You can't," Janet said. "You'll lose your job. That's how it works. The minister they transfer. The secretary they fire. And they disfellowship her, too." I don't care about being disfellowshipped, but I know I don't dare lose this job. So Pastor Rayburn wins, not because he's right, but because I'm smart enough to keep quiet.

Pastor Rayburn's definite that screwing me is part of The Divine Plan, but he's not quite as clear on why. Sometimes he says the whole sorry mess is to teach him about sin, humility, compassion—shit like that. Sometimes he says it's God's way of rewarding him—you know—evening things out. "I'm so lonely," he used to say to me in the beginning. "The Old Battle Axe just don't understand me, an' ever since I saw you in that flowered dress at Lainie's graduation, I knew you would."

I wanted to smack him. Elaine hated that name. She always did. I had no idea why, just like I don't know why Daddy persisted in calling her that. Come to think of it, though, she never really said she hated it. It was just something I knew, something I had probably either been born knowing or learned before I could remember. Having Pastor Rayburn calling her Lainie felt like he was looking at her with her clothes off.

"Call her *Elaine*," I finally said one day.

"Huh?"

"Call her *Elaine*. Her name is *Elaine*," I said. Even as the words came out of my mouth I knew I was going too far.

Pastor Rayburn cracked me a good one. I felt my lip split.

"You watch your mouth, girlie," he said.

I grinned my biggest, shit-eatingest grin at him. I could feel the blood trickling down my chin.

"You think a little thing like that's gonna shut me up?" I asked. He cracked me another one, harder. I felt one of my teeth wiggle, but I just kept on grinning. "You call her Elaine," I said to him. "She deserves *that* much."

“Huh?” he asked.

I rolled off the bed, picked up my skirt, and started working it up over my hips. “Just call her Elaine,” I said past my puffed, bleeding lip.

“Aw, honey, don’t be mad,” he said. “You know I gotta keep you in line. That mouth a yours ...” and then he stopped and leered at me.

My mouth throbbed. I could feel my nose and lip puffing up already.

“Come on, just a quick one,” he said.



I wish I could say I bit it off. I wish I could say I walked out of there without saying a word. But I didn’t. I knelt down by the bed and gave him a quick one. Then I went into the bathroom and threw up blood and slime until I thought I’d turn inside out. When I came out of the bathroom, Pastor Rayburn was gone.

CHAPTER 2

Elaine

Dr. Eaves says I need to start a journal, so I am, for what it's worth. I don't know why she wants me to rake it all up again.

I know some people think counseling's helpful, but I think most people know what they need to do, they just don't want to do it, and counseling gives them an out. "They always blame the parents," Daddy says. I think there's some truth in that. Of course there are special cases, but overall I think it's a pretty useless exercise. What good does talking about the past do now? Done's done. That's what Daddy says.

Still, here I am. I haven't told Daddy that I'm going to a counselor. He'd hit the roof. And besides, it's nothing to do with him, just me and Joe and the boys. When a marriage breaks up, it's a good idea to get some counseling. I've said so myself. I just never thought it would apply to me. I suspect that in my case the counselor is a self-indulgence—a part of me looking for an excuse for my own failures.

My head knows I need a counselor. I would advise one for anyone else in my position. People in my position need professional help. But the idea of it scares me to death, and I don't really know why. Why should the very idea of talking to a counselor leave me feeling sick and ashamed, like I'm sticking my nose into things that are none of my business? When I was a kid, I used to do that a lot, until I figured out that every time I did it,

bad things happened. Still, though, Dr. Eaves wants me to write about my childhood, so here goes.

What shall I write about? The only time I really felt like a kid was when I was riding Harry. So Harry it is. I'll write about Harry.

Harry was the first horse I ever had, and I loved him. Oh, I loved him. I got him when I was ten, because I had memorized all my memory verses for the year. It was a big thing. Pastor Rayburn had me go up in front of church and recite them all, and then he preached a sermon on the verse, "A little child shall lead them." Daddy was so proud. The next day he took me out to the barn and there was this little horse. He was soft gray all over, and his mane and tail were almost black. He looked over the stall door at me with the deepest, softest brown eyes. I reached up and stroked his black nose. I know it's a cliché, but it really did feel like velvet. I rubbed my fingers over that soft, soft skin, and I fell in love. Daddy put his hand on my shoulder and said, "He's yours. I'm so proud of you."

I whirled around and threw my arms around his waist. "I love you, Daddy," I said into his plaid shirt.

"Dinner's on," Momma said from the stable door. "What're you doing, Dan?"

"What does it look like?"

"That's why I'm asking."

I felt Daddy get stiff. He pulled away from me. "You have a filthy mind, Gwennie," he said. "I'm just giving her a horse."

"A horse?"

"Take a look."

Momma picked her way through the stable to the stall. She reached out and ran her thin, scarred hand gently over the horse's nose. He snuffled and pushed his nose at her palm. One corner of her mouth quirked up into an almost-smile. "He's good-looking little pony," she said. She cupped his jaw and lifted it. "Nice head." She rubbed her fingers briskly behind his ears, then peeled back his lips and looked at his teeth. "Young."

Daddy laughed. "What would you know about it, Gwennie?"

Momma stepped back and didn't say anything else.

“Go on, take a ride,” Daddy told me. He slipped a bridle onto the little horse’s head, opened the stall door, led him out, then lifted me onto his back. “You’ll have to learn to get on and off by yourself,” he said as I lifted the reins. He stepped back, and swatted the horse on the rump. The horse jumped. My head snapped backward and without meaning to, I jerked on the reins. The horse stopped. And then he turned his head around and nuzzled my bare foot. Warm moist air huffed over my toes. I jerked my foot and giggled. The horse snorted.

“Get going,” said Daddy. He lifted his hand and smacked the horse again. The horse flinched, but he didn’t move. And then something amazing happened. I felt him through the reins. It was like we could read each others’ minds, like we had become one thing. I knew why he hadn’t moved; he was waiting for me.

“Go on,” Daddy shouted, “Hyah!” and smacked him again. The little horse stood like a rock.

I leaned forward and lifted the reins. He took a step, then another, then another, and then we were clopping along. His head bobbed with every step.

“Don’t ride him on the gravel,” Momma called. “You’ll get rocks in his feet.”

“Shut up, Gwennie. Just let her enjoy him,” came Daddy’s voice. “Won’t hurt him to walk on gravel.”

I was so proud that he trusted me with this wonderful horse, that he knew how much I loved it. Momma never did like to see me just being happy. She always had to cut it short. All the same, though, I skirted the gravel until I reached the gate leading into the big plowed field behind the barn.

The horse lifted his head. I felt him quiver. I knew he wanted to run. I also knew he wouldn’t until I let him know it was all right. I made him walk for a few minutes, to show him who was boss, then I leaned forward just a little bit, lifted the reins a little higher, and said, “Hup,” like the girls did in the library books I read. He broke into a smooth, easy lope. I felt myself moving with him, rocking, rocking, rocking. His mane whipped in my face. The wind rushed past us. It felt like flying. It felt powerful. It felt

safe, and free, and happy. We loped out across the field, made a big loop, and then back to where Momma and Daddy stood.

When we got close I just settled down on his back and gathered the reins a bit. The horse eased to a stop. Daddy stepped forward and patted his neck. Momma stood back, hands jammed into her apron pockets, staring at the ground, darting quick glances at me when Daddy's back was turned.

"It's as easy as riding Harry," I rejoiced. Harry, or Harry the Hairless Horse, was a spring-mounted rocking horse we had. I had given him quite a workout until I got too big. Now Sarah and Bethie rode him sometimes, but mostly Harry just slouched in the corner on his stretched springs, dusty and sad.

"What will you name him?" Momma asked as I slid off.

I opened my mouth to say, "Stormy," after the horse in my favorite library book, but Daddy spoke first.

"Harry's a good name for him," Daddy said, and squeezed my shoulder. I was a little disappointed, but Harry was okay. Stormy would have been better, but Daddy wanted Harry. Harry was fine.



"Tell me more about Harry," Dr. Eaves said.

I shrugged. "There's not really that much more to tell."

"But it sounds like he was really important to you."

"He was," I said. "He was all the world to me."

"But there's nothing more to tell?"

"I didn't have him very long."

"No?"

I shook my head. "Not long at all."

"Why not?"

"I lost him." I thought my throat would seal itself.

"How?"

I laughed through my aching throat. "I was sticking my nose in where it didn't belong."

"Oh?"

"Yes. Daddy was always calling me down for it."

"So how did that lead to you losing Harry?"

I opened my mouth to answer, but the little chime went off and she said, "Write about it, okay?"

"Okay." I could hear my anger in my voice. I stopped, and got myself under control.

"You don't want to write about losing Harry?"

"It's painful," I said stiffly. "And there's nothing to be gained by dredging things up."

"What would you like to write about?"

"I just don't think this is helping," I said. "It's nothing personal."

Dr. Eaves sat back in her chair and crossed her legs. "Would you like me to refer you to someone else?"

"No, that won't be necessary," I said. I smiled my polite, professional smile. Then I stood, picked up my journal and my purse, and walked out, tall, straight, and cool, like Daddy had taught me. I didn't make an appointment on the way out.

Dr. Eaves is useless. How dare she pry into our family business like that? She's probably writing a paper or something. We'll turn up, distorted, twisted, and exaggerated, as a horrible warning. Counselors always place the blackest possible interpretation on events. Daddy was strict, but that was only because Momma was such a nonentity, and he wanted us to be fit for heaven. Our lives were hard, but they made us strong. There's nothing sick and twisted about Daddy. For Joe to say such things....

And I was there, back in the time and place where everything broke.



I'm not going back to Dr. Eaves. The woman's a fool. But I kind of like keeping this journal. It's good to have a place to write my thoughts. And it's not like I have to worry about anybody reading it. I'm alone in the house. And maybe, maybe if I write about some of the hard times, it'll help me. Might as well give it a try.

Life wasn't easy. Momma was always sick, and it took me a while to learn to live up to my responsibilities. Sometimes the little ones suffered for my mistakes. There was one time ... but that doesn't make sense. Daddy was

strict. He made us toe the line. Heaven knows, it wasn't easy, but the hard time I remember more clearly was losing Harry. So here I am, full circle, doing what Dr. Eaves suggested. I'll write about losing Harry, but no way will I show her this. Daddy would never forgive me.

Losing Harry started in a prideful moment. Momma had been sick, as usual. I had been taking care of Sarah, Elaine, and DJ and doing the laundry and sewing buttons back on Daddy's shirts and in between it all sneaking in rides on Harry. I thought nobody noticed, but then, one Sabbath afternoon, Daddy followed me when I went in to pick up Bethie's bedroom. As I was straightening the things on her dresser, he said, "I'm so proud of you. You've been running this house better than Momma does. You should know that."

My heart swelled with joy. He wrapped his arms around me and kissed me on the lips, and the next thing I knew Momma had me by my right arm and was hauling me out of Daddy's arms and into the hallway. "What do you think you're doing?" Daddy called. He laughed an angry laugh. "You have a filthy mind, Gwennie."

Momma pushed me into my room, and slapped my face when I scornfully repeated Daddy's question. "What do you think you're doing, Momma?"

"Don't let me ever catch the two of you alone again," Momma hissed.

I was eleven by then. I understood. "You're just mad because he likes me better than you," I said coolly, tossing my shimmering white-blond hair. It went down to my waist. "I'll kiss Daddy whenever I want to."

Momma stood there, faded and old, her hair cropped so short the bald patch in the back showed, and all the scars. I lifted my chin and shook my shining hair again. Something shifted behind Momma's eyes. I turned to run. Too late.

Momma's claw-like hand dug into my arm. She towed me into the bedroom she shared with Daddy. Still clutching my arm, she bent and fished under the sagging mattress on her side of the bed, then emerged triumphant with a pair of sewing shears. Her grip shifted to my long, pale hair. The shears went *snick, snick, snick*.

My white-gold hair whispered down my neck and settled on my shoulders, caught on my T-shirt, on my delicate new breasts, on my jeans. Daddy was going to be furious. He was always quoting St. Paul about how a woman's hair was her glory. He looked at Momma's bald head when he said that. Even dark, ugly, little Bethie and fat blonde Sarah's hair had never been cut, and theirs was nowhere near as pretty as mine. My hair and helping were what I had, what I was. I stood stiff and shaking as Momma stripped me of my glory.

The shears dropped. I turned and looked at Momma. She looked back steadily, her jaw set. Then suddenly her shoulders sagged, her eyes softened, and her hands came up in entreaty. Power filled me like poison. "Are you going to cut Bethie and Sarah's hair, too?"

"Bethie and Sarah? Why?"

"So we'll all look uglier than you do." I lifted my chin again, light-headed with the salty, cruel truth of my words.

Momma crumpled to the edge of the bed, head bowed, hands dangling between her knees. "You have no idea," she said to her loose hands. "Someday you'll thank me."

"No, I won't," I said. I turned on my heel and walked out, watching myself, proud, strong, and tall. I had spoken nothing but the truth. I pulled the door shut gently, finally, behind me on the way out, the way a good Christian should.

Once out of Momma's sight, I hurried past the dark streaks that had trailed along the hall ever since I could remember. I slammed into my room and ran up to the mirror. It was better than I had expected. Instead of the hacked and gouged mess I'd feared, my hair lay in neat waves over my head. Short, too short, but with a little trimming—perky and cute. I looked new, different. Grown-up and younger, all at once. It suited me, I decided. But Daddy was still going to be furious, just as he was every time Momma came out of the bathroom with her hair shorn nearly to her scalp. I couldn't figure out why she kept it that way. Daddy hated it. *Daddy will be furious, but not at me*, I vowed. When Daddy asked, I would tell him the truth, the way a good Christian should. "Momma did it," I would say

quietly, hands neatly folded, eyes downcast. "I didn't want her to, but she did anyway." And Momma, not I, would pay.

She pushed opened my door without knocking. "Why did you do it? Just tell me that."

I looked at her in the mirror. "What?"

"You know what. And just before our vacation. Why?"

I turned around so I could look straight at her. "Momma? Don't you remember? You did it." I was both confused and affronted.

"Don't you lie to me." Momma's voice wavered. "It's all over my room."

"Momma, I didn't do it." My voice rose, light and panicky in the sweet spring air.

"Stop crying, or I'll give you something to cry about," Daddy's voice said faintly from down the hall, and then the sound of a slap, and then more screams, soon mercifully muted. "You should be ashamed of yourself, a great big girl like you," he said, so I knew he must be in Bethie's room.

I sniffed tiredly. Bethie had peed herself again. Honestly, she was seven now. She should have learned after all these years. Daddy was right; she was disgusting. I remembered guiltily that Bethie was retarded. You couldn't expect any better of her, though you could never let her know it. She had to strive for perfection along with the rest of us. "I can't take this anymore," Momma said abruptly. She turned and was gone. A moment later I heard her bedroom door slam shut. *Great, another fight*, I thought grimly. *And on Sabbath, too.* I found my Bible, opened it, and tried to read. My stomach was in knots. A little later Daddy pushed my door open. He never knocked, either. "It's my house," he always said. "I shouldn't have to ask permission before I go anywhere in it." He was right, but sometimes when I was changing clothes it was embarrassing.

"Why did you cut your hair?" he asked me, so I knew Momma had gotten to him first.

"I didn't do it. Momma did."

"She says you did. Are you calling her a liar?"

"I didn't cut my hair." My voice was high and tight. "She pulled me into your room and used the scissors."

"What scissors?"

"The ones under her mattress."

Daddy stared at me, then he turned and strode down the hall. I followed. *Daddy will see I am telling the truth, and then he will know I am a good girl, and say he is sorry.* He opened the door. Past his arm, I saw Momma, bending, then jerking upright, her face ashen.

"What are you doing?"

"Nothing. Just sitting here." She sat down hurriedly on the edge of the bed and laced her fingers together. Her upturned palms made an empty cup between her thighs.

He was beside her with two long strides, pushing her aside, reaching between the mattresses, straightening triumphantly. The stainless steel sewing shears glittered like a dagger in his thick, callused fingers. "What is this?" he asked Momma.

"Nothing."

Momma was lying! I must have made a sound, because Daddy whipped around and saw me. "Get out and close the door. This is between your momma and me." His face was square, hard, and tight. I fled, ashamed to be caught snooping. A few minutes later he pushed open my door. "You better start being nicer to your Momma. She's not strong. Do you want to put her in an insane asylum?"

"No." I felt angry and hurt at his defection.

"Now you go in there and say you're sorry."

Reluctantly I stood up and shuffled down the hall, trailing my hand along the streaks. When I was little, they had been dark red, like dried blood. Now they just looked like dirt. I knocked.

"Come in."

I pushed open the door. Momma was lying face down on the bed. She lifted her head to look at me through red-rimmed eyes. "What do you want?"

"I'm sorry," I muttered.

"For what?"

"Cutting my hair."

Momma sat up. "Why did you lie about it?"

"I was scared," I whispered.

"Elaine, you don't ever have to be afraid to tell me the truth," Momma said. "It's the lies I can't stand. I understand that you want to look more grown-up, but Daddy and I are still your parents, and we know what's best for you."

"I know," I whispered again.

"Let's ask the Lord's forgiveness." Momma slid to her knees next to her bed. I sank reluctantly down beside her.

"Dear Jesus, please forgive me for cutting my hair and then lying about it," I prayed dutifully, careful to get my tone just right. If I didn't Momma would say I wasn't really sorry and I'd have to do it again. "Amen." Momma hugged me and I fled back to my room to sit on my bed and wonder if maybe I really *had* cut my hair. *Maybe I forgot. I don't remember forgetting, but maybe I did. I must have, or why would Momma and Daddy say I did?* The guilt rose in me. I dropped to my knees and prayed again for forgiveness, this time in earnest.

I lay in bed that night, the undefined—and therefore unforgivable—guilt like a stone in my belly. My bedroom door opened, and the sheer curtains at my window belled in the cool draft.

Momma stood framed against the lighted hall. "Good night, Lainie," she whispered. "I love you, sweetheart."

My heart wrenched at the sound of my baby name. She hadn't used it for years. The door began to close. "Momma?"

"What?"

I sat up. "I'm so sorry, Momma."

Momma closed the door and crossed the diamond-shaped patch of moonlight lying on my floor like a glowing rug. She eased down on the side of the bed, hissing her breath between her teeth, and gathered me into her arms slowly, carefully. Love for my clumsy, broken, angry mother welled up in me. I laid my head on Momma's shoulder and began to cry. "Shhh," Momma soothed, stroking my hair. "Hush, now. I know, I know."

"Momma, I just don't understand why I say these things," I gulped. "I love you."

"I know, sweetheart. Sometimes we all do things we wish we hadn't." Momma drew back, her hands on my shoulders, her eyes glittering with unshed tears. "But this is our life. We don't get another one no matter how much we may want it. We just have to make the best of what we have."

"But there's heaven," I reminded her.

Momma smiled wryly. "Yeah," was all she said.

I found myself wondering for the first time if Momma really believed in heaven like Daddy and I did. I almost asked, but the peace between us was too tender to risk. Down the hall Sarah was weeping, hopelessly, monotonously. I knew who it was because when Bethie cried she never made a sound. Momma sighed. "I'd better go see to her." She straightened reluctantly, painfully, her arms dropping away before I was ready. Daddy's heavy footsteps passed my door and went into his and Momma's room. The door clicked shut. "Good night, sweetheart," Momma whispered. Her hand stroked my cheek. I could feel her slender, knobby fingers, cool and trembling, and for just a second, I was Lainie again. The fingers cupped my cheek, then slid away. The door closed quietly, and Momma was gone. I lay back down, closed my eyes, and slept in the cool night breeze, clean and purged.



Momma was already in the kitchen when I came downstairs the next morning. "Go exercise Harry," she said.

"Are you sure, Momma? I can help with breakfast first."

"No, I've got it today." Momma gave me her lopsided smile. "Go now, quick, before Daddy comes in."

I smiled at the love in her eyes, then hurried out to the barn, brushed Harry down, slid on a bridle, gave him a cupped handful of grain, and vaulted onto his bare back. Harry wheeled out of the barnyard gate, and I kicked him into a long slow canter. The wind pulled at my new short hair. I rocked easily to the pony's rhythm. I reached the other end of the field, turned onto the section Daddy had plowed just for me, and began doing

figure eights. I kept it up until sweat rose under my thighs, then turned and cantered Harry back across the field. When I approached the scrubby sagebrush signaling the drop-off into the creek bed behind the barn, I pulled up with a flourish, wheeled Harry around and touched him with the long reins and a bare heel. He surged ahead—and then I heard it: A little cry. It sounded like a baby down by the creek. I thought of Moses in the bulrushes, reined up and slid off Harry's round, shiny back, dropping my reins to ground hitch him.

The cry came again, and then a sharp report. *Nobody's supposed to be down there. This is Conrad land. I squared my shoulders. I'm a Conrad. I belong here. Whoever is down by the creek doesn't, or they wouldn't have sneaked in.* I started to stalk to the path, then another thought struck me. *What if they were outlaws?* It almost sounded like somebody was being hurt down there. Maybe I'd better just see what was up, then go get Daddy. I slipped quietly into the brush, crept to the lip of the wash, parted the thick grass, and looked down. *Momma and Daddy? What was Momma doing here? Momma was making breakfast.* Daddy's hand flew out and there was a sharp crack. Momma's head snapped sideways. Daddy muttered something that ended "—hair." His hand flew out again.

I stared. He was hitting Momma because she had cut my hair? He knew! But then why did he blame me yesterday? His hand flew out again. Momma staggered and blood, bright and shocking, burst out of her nose. My gasp echoed loud in the cool morning air. Daddy looked up and saw me peering through the tall grass. "You know better than to spy on Momma and Daddy," he panted. "I told you about that yesterday. You go straight to your room and stay there. I'll deal with you later."

"But Momma's bleeding," I burst out.

"It's okay, honey." Momma smiled shakily through the blood. "I'm fine. Go on in, like Daddy said. I'll be right there."

"You stay out of it when I'm correcting Elaine," Daddy snarled. Then he turned back to me. "You heard me. Go to your room," he said. His voice was hard and mean.

I went. My stomach churned as I turned Harry into his stall, rubbed him down, fed and watered him, and then hurried into the house. Momma was

hurt, and Daddy had done it. He must have had a reason. Daddy always had reasons for the things he did. Momma was the crazy one. Daddy said so. "Momma's not strong," he always said. "Do you want to put her in an insane asylum? You better be nicer to her."

I needed to go to the bathroom, and I wanted a drink, but Daddy had told me to go straight to my room. I sat on my bed, thighs squeezed tight together, thirsty, sick with guilt. The smell of Harry's sweat rose around me.

Daddy's feet thudded up the stairs. My hands fisted in my lap. He opened my door, came in, closed it, and sat down beside me on my bed. It gave under his weight. I darted a quick look at him out of the corner of my eye. His head drooped. The silence stretched.

"I'm sorry, Daddy," I blurted out.

"Sorry doesn't fix it," he said sadly. "Momma still got hurt because of what you did. If I've told you once I've told you a thousand times, Momma's not strong. She's not smart like we are. She's like Bethie. She doesn't understand things, and she won't listen when I try to explain them to her unless I get her attention first. I don't know why you insist on poking your nose into things that are none of your business, but I sure hope you enjoyed it, because you caused your Momma a lot of pain. I just don't know what I can do to get through to you."

"I'm sorry," I whispered, drowning in guilt. "Where is she?"

"That's none of your business. You've got to learn to keep your nose out of things that don't concern you."

"But I didn't mean to spy. I was just riding Harry and I heard—"

"—and so you just had to go bulling your way into something that didn't concern you. And Momma got hurt because of you."

Something was wrong with that, but I was too sick with guilt to figure it out. "I'm sorry."

"It's too late now, little girl. The damage is done. If riding Harry makes you hurt your mother, what do you think we should do?"

"Get rid of him," I forced out past the lump of guilt. Knowing the right answer was easy. It was always the one that hurt.

“Good girl.” Daddy hugged me. “I’m proud of you for being willing to make it right.”

“Can I tell him good-bye?” I whispered.

“Do you think you deserve to?”

I hung my head. I knew that answer, too. “No.” Harry was gone.



Or not. Momma and Daddy had been planning to drive us to Chicago to visit Daddy’s parents. Now they put off the vacation while Daddy advertised for a buyer. No one responded. After two weeks I dared to hope. Maybe he’d forget. Maybe if I was extra good the Lord would perform a miracle. Daddy’d see that I’d learned my lesson, and Harry could stay. Even if I couldn’t ride him, just to see him running free in the pasture, his long mane and tail blowing in the wind created by his passing....

The days stretched. Suitcases were unpacked. And then, one August morning, for no reason I could see, Daddy told Momma, “Get the suitcases packed again.”

“But we haven’t sold Harry yet,” she objected.

“It’s all taken care of,” he said. “I’ve called somebody.”

I was jubilant. Daddy had gotten someone to watch him while we were gone! I had another two weeks to show him that I could be trusted, that he had gotten through to me!

The next morning I was folding clothes into my suitcase when I heard a truck pull in. I ran to the window, thinking it was the man who was going to take care of Harry.

“Allen’s Pet Products,” said the peeling sign on the truck’s covered back. Daddy came out of the shop, walked over to the truck with his long strides, shook the man’s hand, and stood back while the man jumped out—and then reached back in for the dark, shiny rifle racked in the cab’s back window. At last I understood. All thoughts of proving how good I could be evaporated. I ran outside.

“Please, Daddy, I’ll be good, I’ll be so good,” I cried out. “I’ll never do it again.”

The man stopped. "This her pony?" he asked.

"Yep," Daddy said. "Get back in the house, Lainie."

"Please, I'll be so good!" I was crying so hard I could hardly form the words. "Please don't hurt him."

"I said go back to the house. And stop crying, or I'll give you something to cry about. You should have thought of this before."

"Please, Daddy," I begged. "Please." I threw my arms around his waist and tried to hug him.

He pushed me away.

"Kids," he said to the man, and they both laughed. "Get back in the house," he said to me. "Don't make me ask you again."

"Please, Daddy," I whispered, reckless in my grief.

The man stopped laughing. He looked at me, looked at Daddy, opened his mouth, then shut it. I turned and trudged back to the house, rubbing my eyes with the heels of my hands, trying to swallow my sobs. Daddy and the man went into the barn. I climbed the stairs to my room, sat on the bed beside my open suitcase, and waited. Silence.

Feet crunched on gravel. I looked out my window. The man was striding back to his truck, jaw clenched, arms swinging the gun. "I don't kill healthy animals just to teach kids a lesson," he shouted. "You find somebody else."

Daddy appeared in the barn door. "—plenty who will," he shouted. "We gotta get this taken care of. We're going *on vacation!*"

The man slammed into his truck and roared out of the driveway.

"Thank you, Jesus," I prayed. Harry was safe, at least for the moment.

But then Daddy looked up and saw me. His jaw set. I jerked back. I was doing it again—sticking my nose into something that was none of my business! And Daddy had seen me. I heard him come into the house, go into his bedroom, come back out again, then go down the stairs. I wanted more than anything to know what was happening, but obedience was my only hope of saving Harry—I had to prove to Daddy that I had learned my lesson. Resolutely I sat on my bed, reciting the Bible verses that had won me Harry. I didn't look out the window, even when I heard Harry's feet crunching on the gravel, then thudding on dirt, then fading into silence.

I didn't look even when I heard the gun blast once, heard Harry's agonized whinny, heard the gun blast again, and then again. I just sat on my bed, trying to remember my next verse, trying not to cry. Finally I broke. I dropped to my knees by the bed. Harry had died because I hadn't minded my own business. I imagined his beautiful smooth head, his eyes, his velvet nose, saw it destroyed in the shotgun blasts.

"Dear Jesus, please forgive me. Please, please, forgive me." It was too late to beg Harry's forgiveness. Daddy always said "sorry" didn't fix it. My head dropped under the weight of my guilt. I think I fell asleep kneeling by my bed.

Momma woke me for supper. Her jaw was swollen, and she had a black eye. I wondered if Daddy had had to get her attention again. Guilt rose, sickening and thick in my throat. At the table I stared at the potatoes, beans, and bread on my plate. No one spoke. Even DJ ate silently. Sarah and DJ finished first and asked to be excused. Bethie finished next and looked silently at Momma. Momma nodded once. Bethie slipped off her chair and disappeared. My plate was still nearly full. I had to finish. That was the rule. "My kids eat what's put in front of them," Daddy bragged to his friends. But I couldn't.

"You are excused, Lainie," Momma said suddenly.

My head jerked up just as Daddy said, "Finish your food, Lainie." His lips were tight, his eyes nearly as red as my own.

"No, Dan," Momma said quietly, defiantly. "She is excused."

"I can see I didn't get through to you this morning," Daddy said.

Momma's eyes dropped to her lap.

My eyes flew between them. I wanted more than anything to just crawl away into a dark corner and curl up and cry and cry, but leaving would be taking Momma's side, betraying Daddy, an admission that he hadn't gotten through to me, either. I saw his red eyes and knew he felt as bad about Harry as I did. If he could eat, so could I. I scooted my fork under my mashed potatoes and raised it to my lips, opened, slid it in, closed my lips, forced potatoes past the lump in my throat. I lifted another, and another, tasting nothing, gagging on every bite. At last I finished.

Momma sat in silence.

When my plate was empty, Daddy said, “That’s my girl, you’re excused. Now go finish packing. We’re leaving for Grandma’s house tomorrow morning. Won’t that be fun?” He said it brightly, hopefully. He sounded like he had when he had led me out to the barn and given me to Harry. I rose from the table. Daddy stood, too. He hugged me tightly, so tightly, I nearly began to cry again. “I’ll miss him, too,” he whispered. And I knew that Daddy loved me, and wanted what was best for me, and would do what he thought was right, what he needed to do to fit me for heaven, even when the cost to all of us was high, so high. Unlike Momma, I had learned my lesson. Daddy would never have to get my attention again. Momma pushed her chair back and wearily began clearing the table.



I had to force myself to write those last words. My hand was shaking so badly, I could hardly form the letters. How could I have missed this? How could I have simply accepted the fact that Daddy beat Momma not once, but over and over, if her bruises were anything to go by? I couldn’t claim the absolution of having “forgotten” how I lost Harry. I could still see the images from that day, hear that day’s sounds, smell the grass, the dust, the gunpowder on Daddy’s shirt, the iron tang from the bloody stain on his sleeve. Perhaps because I could remember it so clearly ... perhaps my mind had constructed a bypass, a detour around that day. It was there, always. The outlines I had thought I knew so well were clearly visible.

I was using Harry to spy on people, and so, to protect the world from my snooping, Daddy had to get rid of Harry. I could use euphemisms in the shadowy outlines. Daddy had to “get Momma’s attention,” or “get through to her.” He had to “get rid of Harry.”

But now I had driven off the well-worn bypass. I had taken the dusty, overgrown road up to the memory. It wasn’t shadowy anymore. Euphemisms were no longer possible. *Daddy beat Momma. Daddy took his gun and blew holes in Harry’s head because he was angry at being seen beating her. Harry died to teach me the value of keeping Daddy’s secrets.* I had learned the lesson well. Daddy had never needed to get my attention again.

I didn't question Daddy's assertion that "Momma wasn't right." I had lived in her fractured world too long to doubt its veracity. The very fact that she stayed with Daddy proved it. She stayed because she was too broken to leave. I had always simply accepted Momma's mental state as a fact of life. Now I stared at the words I had written, and for the first time I wondered what had made her that way.

As I closed my journal and tucked it away at last I acknowledged to myself that, though I didn't believe Daddy had been molesting either of my sons, perhaps Joe had seen him hitting them. For all that now hitting is now politically incorrect, it's not criminal. Daddy must have been disciplining them, getting their attention. I didn't like it, but I had no doubt that he was acting out of love, however misguided. Joe had overreacted. And so I found a peace that allowed me to if not exonerate Daddy, at least excuse him. He was the product of another, harder time. He had been acting out of love. Even if he had temporarily caused my sons pain, they would get over it. They would be fine. After all, I was, wasn't I?

I didn't need Dr. Eaves. I had the explanation that would allow me to make peace with my loss and get on with my life. That was good, because Daddy was about to need me as he never had before.

CHAPTER 3

Bethie

I come alive in my memory the day my grandfather died. I was standing in the Monkey House at the Brookfield Zoo with Elaine, Sarah, and DJ, smelling the rank, sharp shadows, chilly after the blaze of the Chicago summer. We were breathing through our mouths to keep the reek bearable, keeping silent lest we try our parents' love too far. They'd driven us from Oregon to Illinois to visit Grandma and Grandpa. The old green and white Chevy wagon was not air-conditioned. It was August. We kids got carsick. Elaine was sad about Harry and being extra holy so Daddy wouldn't notice she was sad. By day we drove, packed in with the suitcases, tent, boxes of food, and garbage bag full of dirty underwear and damp bedding. By night we camped in fields and meadows along the road.

When we rolled into the sticky asphalt parking lot at the Brookfield Zoo, we knew better than to ask for things. By the time we reached the Monkey House, we knew it was unwise to say anything at all. We also knew we hated camping.

In 1969 nobody thought much about monkeys' mental health. Zookeepers believed in sanitation before sanity. Twice a day masked and coveralled men slung buckets of bleach water over the tile walls and floor, swiped mops through the sludge, then hosed the whole mess into a gutter along one wall. The gutters never emptied; the floors never dried. The Monkey

House rang. Souls in bondage howled to the dim, deaf ceiling, and the stink of monkey shit rose like incense forever and ever, amen. The monkeys were all crazy. I knew what crazy looked like—it looked like Momma, and it looked like me. Daddy was always reminding the others that if they weren't careful, their behavior would put Momma in an insane asylum. When he said that I pictured Momma huddled in the corner of a wet tile cage, clutching her shabby housedress around her, chicken wire embedded in the glass through which we would peer on visiting days. I don't recall specific instances of Momma's crazy behavior, but I remember working very hard to keep her out of the insane asylum. Just like I kept silent for years to save myself the same awful fate.

We all stood silent that morning, Elaine, Sarah, and DJ's blonde heads like scalding metal to my eyes, my head reddish brown—monkey shit brown, as one of my less kind classmates informed me when my teacher read the story of my vacation to the class at school that fall. We stood in silence and waited for directions—for permission to move, actually. Years later, when we could laugh about it, Sarah said that Daddy thought life was boot camp for Paradise: As long as we were good soldiers and obeyed orders as we marched along the Narrow Way in the King's Army, everything would be all right. Some day we would storm the gates of Heaven, blast our way up the golden streets, kick the bodies out of the way, and live as a United Family in a marble mansion studded with pearls, diamonds, rubies, and emeralds. There'd be no television and no jewelry, but our driveway would be paved with gold, and the vegetable garden would never need weeding. That would be something, at least. Then Sarah stuck her finger down her throat and made gagging noises.

Looking back, I think she was right, although I didn't see it at the time, and to tell the truth, I didn't spend a lot of time dwelling on it. I already knew Hell would be my eternal home unless I sneaked through the Pearly Gates undetected. I even knew what Hell looked like—Hell was a burning city, in the midst of which I would live in a blazing frame house, sleep on a smoldering bed, and drink boiling water. It was agonizing, orange, and immediate. Heaven was lost in the blue and holy distance.

When I saw the Brookfield Zoo, I knew what Heaven would look like if God sprang for a decent gardener—long straight walkways, manicured gardens, mansions, animal statuary—not naked people—and lots and lots of animals. No popcorn, striped awnings, ice cream, and hot dog vendors, of course, since those were earthly things. But it would still be beautiful.

Monkeys are filthy, carnal beasts, a fact of which I suspect my parents were unaware. In those days, there was no Discovery Channel, only Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom, with Marlin Perkins, Jim, and chaste, virginal animals. No monkey would dare fornicate on Mutual of Omaha—Marlin would have disapproved, and Jim, a more muscular sort of Christian altogether, would have slapped it silly. We only had antenna TV, anyway, so we saw our monkeys as through a cataract: pale, snowy, and indistinct. Baby monkeys resulted from Virgin Births, like the Christ Child, or, for that matter, us. Mothers didn't behave like that in our house.

The monkeys at the Brookfield Zoo had clearly never met Marlin or seen Wild Kingdom. They fornicated with abandon while we snuck peeks out of the corners of our lowered eyes. So. It happened to monkeys, too. Other children were less restrained. I heard one little boy snigger to another, "They're fucking."

So now I could name it. Fucking. An inexplicable, agonizing ritual, the participants blind to each other—indeed, seemingly unaware that their bodies were joined. The male pumped at his daughter's bottom, staring vacantly over her head. She endured. I wondered if she went away like I did. Momma and Daddy grabbed our shoulders and double-timed us away from the fucking monkeys. Daddy said in a mournful voice, "I'm so ashamed of you kids. You know better than to watch something like that."

They finally called a halt when we reached a display even Marlin Perkins would have sanctioned—Samson, an immense silverback bachelor gorilla, the pride of the Monkey House. His world consisted of mildewed green tile floors glistening wet in the watery light, a tire swing, gorilla shit, moldy straw piled in the corners, and a steel-mesh-reinforced viewing window several inches thick.

Samson was safe. There would be no fucking going on in his cage. Momma and Daddy's hands dropped from our shoulders. We stumbled to a stop, panting. Samson looked sad, mossy, and wet through the thick glass—like he lived underwater. I wondered how he could bear to sit on that slimy, mucky floor. But he had no choice.

People stood eight deep watching Samson slouch on his wet straw and absently pick his nose. We stood at the back of the crowd, jumping to see over shoulders, peering around jutting hips and bulging purses.

And then I saw him standing among the children in the front row, a beer can in his hand. He wore plaid Bermuda shorts, a dingy T-shirt starred with a constellation of tiny holes, black ankle socks with failing elastic stretched tight over scrawny shins, and grimy sandals. As I watched, he adjusted his cap (rectangular sections snipped from beer cans, punched, and crocheted together by somebody who kept dropping stitches) and rotated his shoulders. Then he leaned forward and crisply rapped his beer can on the railing outside the glass.

Samson was squatting apathetically in his corner, his head sunk on his chest. The man rapped again, then grabbed the railing and shook it furiously. It must have been loose, because its rattle echoed over even the craziest monkey's screams. Samson shuffled around to face the corner. The man beat on the railing again, then waved his arms and shouted, "Hey, ya big, ugly bastard! Come 'n' get me." Signs warned that the wire mesh reinforcing the window was electrified. The man never touched the glass.

Momma sucked in her breath at his language and said, "Dan?"

Samson glanced over his shoulder. Encouraged, the man shouted again and waved his arms. Beer droplets sprayed from the open can he held. Some people turned away in disgust. More stayed to watch, spellbound. They didn't rap on the railing themselves, but neither did they try to stop the man in the beer-can hat. By now he was red and sweating, screaming obscenities, the brim of his hat flapping loose as he flailed his arms and cursed Samson. Mothers eyed man and gorilla nervously, and some—motivated by the same instinct that inspires cattle to nose calves deep in

the herd when wolves appear—reached out thin white arms, seized small shoulders, and yanked protesting children back to safety in the crowd.

The man was still screaming. “Yeah, yeah, you’re not so tough, are ya, ya motherfucker!”

And then it happened, the thing we had all been waiting for. Samson leaped around and rocked forward onto his massive knuckles, shoulders bulging. He bared his fangs and roared.

“Da—?” Momma started again, but before she could finish Samson catapulted himself across the streaming tile floor, leaped, spun, and slammed his shoulder against the reinforced glass. With a sound like a shot, a lightning line crazed the window, top to bottom. Samson screamed as he bounced off the electrified glass, but the screams of the parents and children stampeding away toward the caged paradise outside, drowned his voice. The man in the beer can hat and black socks nearly trampled me as he shoved his way to the head of the retreating pack.

I caught my balance and ran with everybody else, but as I ran I sneaked a look over my shoulder at Samson. He was back in his corner, curled down on himself, arms wrapped around his shoulders, crooning—or groaning—and rocking, rocking, rocking.

On the way back to Grandma’s house, Elaine said primly, “The man shouldn’t have been teasing him.”

Sarah said, “I think it would be funny for the man to be in the cage where Samson could get him.”

Momma said, “Sarah, that’s not nice.”

“What did you think, Bethie?” Daddy asked me. I froze. “*What did you think?*” he asked again.

“She can’t talk, Dan,” Momma said, brave in the security of the front seat on a public highway.

“Yes, she can. There’s nothing wrong with one of my girls. Couldn’t shut her up when she was a baby. She’s just being owly. If you’d stop coddling her, she’d be fine.”

Momma didn’t say anymore, but pretty soon Daddy stopped pressing me for an answer, so that was all right. DJ drove his Hot Wheels back and forth

on the back of the front seat, making engine noises in the uneasy silence. He eyed me thoughtfully. Nobody needed to ask what he thought; we all knew he would think whatever Daddy told him to. Daddy finally blustered, "They oughta get rid of that beast. Someday he's gonna break out and kill somebody."

I hoped fiercely that he would.



When we got back to Grandma and Grandpa's house, no one was there. We waited in the car while Daddy walked around back, shouted, then came back out front to us. "Don't know where they've gone," he said. "It's not like Mom to not leave a note or something. I found a window open in back. I'll boost DJ through and he can open the door for us."

Inside, we sat quietly in Grandma's musty living room. Daddy napped in Grandpa's big chair. And then the telephone rang. Daddy picked it up.

"Hello? Mom? Where are you? What's wrong? ...Oh, no...."

He hung up the phone. "Daddy's gone, Gwennie," he said to the telephone in its cradle.

Momma shifted in her chair and fumbled her hands. "I—" she started.

Daddy lifted his face and looked at her. His eyes were as blank as his voice sounded.

"Oh—" Momma started again, wringing her hands frantically.

"I have to go to the hospital," he said, surging out of his chair. He started slapping at his pockets. "Keys...keys..." he muttered. He found them at last, in his front pants pocket, where he always kept them. He strode out of the living room without looking at any of us. I heard the kitchen door squeak open, the screen door bang shut, the car start. He was gone. Momma's hands stopped twisting each other into knots and fell loose onto her flowered lap like two exhausted pigeons.

And everything changed.

CHAPTER 4

Bethie

Back home, we tumbled out of the Chevy station wagon into the sweltering, buzzing morning. Our swimsuits, faded and snagged, lay tangled up with ragged bath towels in the back of the car. Momma had said that if we picked enough blackberries we could go swimming in the river. The sun stung my shoulders and nose, but shadows still lay blue and cool on the fine sand under the shaggy trees. A breeze ruffled over us. Momma handed out tin buckets and gloves—one of each for each of us—and pointed us toward the brambles along the river.

She followed, staggering under the weight of grease-stained, splintered plywood sheets, her slender, muscular arms tight and golden in the sun. She tipped the boards into the brambles, making fragile, unreliable bridges into the tangle's mysterious depths and pulling the glistening, berry-laden top branches down within reach. We were alone in that pocket of sunshine, a universe away from the house, and even farther from Daddy.

In an unprecedented act of bravery and overall saneness, Momma had driven us back home while Daddy stayed behind in Illinois to help Grandma. It had been a month, and already Daddy seemed like ancient history. We didn't know Grandpa. He had lived in Illinois, after all, and we had never visited him and Grandma before that summer. It was hard to feel sad about losing him when it meant that for the first time in my life I

felt safe. Momma made us be quiet for the first day of the trip back, out of respect for Grandpa, but then even she caught the giddiness of it, driving through those long summer days with her arm out the window, the wind ruffling her short, wavy hair, the radio crooning songs by a man named Elvis Presley. She ignored us unless we asked her a question, and then she'd just answer quietly. Sometimes, later in the trip, she smiled.

At home, the house felt different. Momma walked faster, and she, not Elaine, supervised our baths at night and got us breakfast in the morning. We woke late and came downstairs to find Momma making us special breakfasts or out weeding the garden in the morning sunshine. Once Sarah and I even saw her sitting at the table, a brown grocery bag in front of her, a pencil in her hand.

"What'cha doin', Momma?" Sarah asked.

"Oh, nothing," she said, and went to fold the laundry.

"Look," Sarah said. "It's a tomato."

Sure enough, Momma had drawn a tomato. The lines swept and flowed, circled into the tomato's round, glossy body, curled out into delicate leaves and tendrils. Momma had drawn that. Momma. I hadn't known she could do such a thing. Sarah took the bag, tore out the picture, and stuck it up on the refrigerator next to Elaine's last picture of Harry, the one that had been there before we left, that nobody had the heart to take down now, even though we all knew Elaine was carefully not looking at the refrigerator these days.

That beautiful tomato signaled a change for us. We ran through the days and laughed at the supper table. We had pillow fights, dashing from room to room in the moonlight. I didn't think about Grandpa at all, or about Daddy back helping his own Momma sort through their past, apportioning memories among his brothers and sisters.

Momma was better. I knew it was true because she'd drawn a tomato. And because she had decided to make jam, which was why we were at the river picking blackberries. A blue heron flopped heavily overhead. Blackbirds creaked nearby. A lark warbled.

Sarah pushed me. I pushed her back. DJ stood with his finger in his mouth, his white hair shining in the sun, his knees chubby and brown

above his boots. Momma worked a glove over her hand, slipped the bucket handle over her belt, and began stripping the high brambles, leaving the low ones for us.

She picked quickly, gracefully. This was not the Momma I had always known, the woman who stumbled through her life. This was a mysterious woman whose hair had grown out to spring thick, golden, and wavy, concealing the scarred patch on her head, a woman who wore clam diggers and crisp, sleeveless blouses instead of shapeless housedresses, who listened to Elvis Presley and smiled when my sisters sang along, who drew graceful, elegant little pictures.

Elaine grabbed a bucket, tied it to the tail of her shirt, slid the stiff, greasy leather gauntlet onto her left hand, and stepped onto the rocking, tippy board. She jumped a few times, forcing the board down into the brambles. The gauntlet slipped down and she shot her arm above her head, catching it before it slid off, then reached out and grabbed a sagging bramble with the glove and stripped the berries, dropping them by handfuls into her bucket. She was almost as fast as Momma.

Burning to be big girls, Sarah and I grabbed buckets and tied them to our shirttails, too. We snatched for brambles and tried to strip the berries with Momma and Elaine's easy grace, but it was beyond us. Our gloves were too big, too stiff to bend with our hands. The knots holding our buckets to our shirts kept slipping. Our picking hands were soon full of scratches and punctures. "Gol dang it," Sarah swore when a bramble dug into her calf. I sucked in my breath and shot a look at Momma. She should have whipped Sarah for swearing. Instead she just said, "Careful, honey." Sarah let out her breath, then bent and carefully pulled the bramble loose.

DJ staggered into a bramble hidden in the grass and curled up, howling. Momma went to pick him up and kiss the angry red scratches streaking his legs. DJ's head fell back against her shoulder and his eyes closed. The day lay sultry and peaceful upon us. A snatch of music rippled from somewhere far away. I cocked my head to listen. Momma sat in shade, leaning against a tree, her berry bucket and glove by her side. DJ, still little more than a baby, slept in her arms. The sun struck golden sparks off the delicate hairs

on her arms. "Bring me the car quilt, Sarah honey," she finally said, and her voice was just another river sound, low and burring like the bees' hum of the bees and the far-away music.

Sarah turned. Her bucket, sagging below her knees, bumped her shins. She tripped, staggered toward the edge of the board, teetered, caught herself, and kicked out impatiently. The bucket flew up and smacked her in the face, scattering a hail of hard-won blackberries around us. "Ow!" she whispered angrily, rubbing her nose, tears standing in her eyes.

"Don't kick the bucket, Sarah," Elaine scolded softly.

Sarah hopped off the board and limped toward the car and the car quilt while I gathered the scattered berries. And then I heard it. A soft, rough sound. My eyes flew up, seeking the source, and settled on my mother's face, glowing in the dappled shade, her eyes gentle on Sarah, her mouth curved.

My mother was laughing. I stared, awestruck.

"Let me see your bucket," Momma murmured. Sarah limped over, angry tears sparkling in her eyes. Momma leaned forward, careful not to disturb DJ, and peeked over the edge of Sarah's bucket. A few berries rolled forlorn in the bottom. "That's real good, honey," Momma said. "Go get your suit on." She lifted a thin brown hand and smoothed Sarah's bright white hair back from her sweaty red face.

"But what about the jam?" Elaine asked. "We don't have enough berries."

"Who needs jam?" Momma asked. "How many of these days do we get? Hurry, now. Nobody should have to work after they've kicked the bucket." She laughed again.

We stared at her, not getting the joke. She looked back at us, and then she smiled a beautiful, peaceful smile and even though she was a stranger, we fell in love with her.

"Come swimming with us, Momma?" Elaine whispered.

"When DJ wakes up." And then she leaned her head back against the tree and closed her eyes. The sun poured over her delicate ankles and flickered on her face and slender golden arms.

We ran for the car, set our buckets on the tailgate, scrambled into our suits, and dashed for the river, toe-tipping over the rough grass,

wincing and pulling goat head thorns out of our bare feet, hotfooting it across the scalding sand. And then the water poured cool around us, and Momma sat up to watch over us. “Don’t go in too deep,” she called softly. Sarah and I splashed in the shallows. Elaine waded deeper, standing up to her thighs in the slow-flowing water. She raised slim tanned arms, bent her head with its shining cap of white-gold curls, and dove under the surface, swimming against the current. Her head broke the surface in silver splashes and she rose, gasping and laughing. For once she wasn’t thinking about Harry. I could tell because she had forgotten to be holy.

Sarah and I dug a tadpole corral and filled it with hapless tadpoles fished from a nearby mossy puddle, then paddled near the river’s edge. DJ finally woke up and Momma brought him down to wade in the hot, shallow pools between the white, dry rocks. Elaine lay on her back, floating with the current, a pale saintly mermaid with a wavering platinum halo. I heard it again—faint music. I looked at my sisters, at Momma, at DJ. They were laughing and splashing, so I guessed they didn’t hear. The sun sparkled on the river and flashed bright on their wet, tarnished-platinum heads. Leaves rustled gently in a treetop breeze. My skin stung, then cooled as Sarah and I raced through sun, through shade, into the river, and back into sun. As the afternoon waned we settled on the shore, letting the water lap around our feet. Elaine came and flopped down beside me. I lay back between Sarah and Elaine and pillowed my head on my arms. Effortlessly, thoughtlessly, the tune I had been hearing all day vibrated rustily in the back of my throat.

Sarah and Elaine’s heads jerked around. “Bethie’s singing, Momma,” Elaine said, shocked.

“What?” asked Momma. She knelt beside the river, holding baby DJ so he wouldn’t fall in.

“She’s singing.”

“She can’t be,” Momma said. “Bethie can’t talk.”

“She is, too,” Sarah insisted.

“Bethie?” Momma turned and peered at me, eyebrows raised.

The tune withered in my throat. Momma stood and hurried over. “Watch DJ, Lainie,” she said, thrusting him into Elaine’s arms as she leaned over me. “Bethie, honey, were you singing?”

I stared up at her, my throat locked and aching.

Momma’s eyes got soft in a way I had never seen them before. And then she did a strange thing. She sat down beside me, and pulled me into her lap, even though I was a big girl, and she put her arms around me and rocked me gently in the sunshine. And I felt tears, warm and wet on my shoulder.

I closed my eyes and listened to the music and felt it trembling in my throat, and I wanted more than anything to let it out, but I knew better, though I didn’t know why. The knowledge that survival depended on silence stretched beyond memory. My eyes drifted shut. I laid my head on my mother’s shoulder, felt the sun on my back and the trembling in my throat, and just let her rock me. And all the while the music drifted over us.



These two stories, the story of the Brookfield Zoo and the story of the day we picked blackberries, hold the key to understanding my life. The first point, of course, is that my father hurt me. I survived because I learned to hold my tongue—and I learned to “go away,” to slip out of my body and travel paths others cannot walk. The second point is that my mother did the same thing. A third point grows out of the first. I learned that everyone and every situation is more than it appears to be on the surface, and that if one is quiet, and looks for the “more,” one sometimes stumbles upon magic. Magic was there that day by the river. It was in the music only I could hear.

CHAPTER 5

Sarah

Elaine graduated from college the same year that Bethie learned to talk. I don't want to think about Bethie talking, so that leaves Elaine's graduation to talk about. I don't want to talk about that, either, but somebody has to tell the story, and I'm the only one talking these days. Here goes.



"You'll be working for the Lord." Daddy hugged Elaine. His heavy arms looked rough and thick against her loose black robes. She clutched her leatherette degree folder in one slim hand and held her mortarboard on with the other, her head thrown back, laughing, beautiful, so far beyond the rest of us.

Elaine glanced at Momma—sour-mouthed as always—and stepped back, still clutching the folder. Her smile wavered for a minute, but then she turned to Pastor Rayburn, who was standing with Momma, and it firmed up again.

"Thank you so much for the recommendations," she said to him. "And the scholarship and the job—thank you." She smiled, dazzled by success and sunshine, big blue eyes bright above high cheekbones, body tall and elegant in the black robes. A shaft of pure raw envy lanced through me. Why did she have to be so damned perfect?

"It's the least I can do for my family," Pastor Rayburn said. He hugged her, but he was staring at me over her shoulder. I squirmed inside.

"And Joe," Elaine said quickly.

"Sure, sure," Pastor Rayburn said. He winked at me. I looked away. "We'll all be one happy family, right Joe?" He let Elaine go and took Joe's hand.

"Sure, Pastor Rayburn," Joe said easily. "We'll see you at the wedding in August. You ready, Lainie?"

"Can I go, Daddy?" Elaine asked.

"If you want to," he replied, which was code for *how could you even consider leaving me?*

"Thanks." Elaine hesitated. I could see the guilt eating away at her bright, shiny day.

"Ready, Lainie?" Joe asked again. Guilt lost. Elaine hugged Momma and Daddy and Pastor Rayburn again and ran off hand in hand with Joe, her robes fluttering around her long, slender legs.

"Catch up with you folks later," Pastor Rayburn said, slapping Daddy on the back. "See somebody over there I gotta have words with." Momma looked like she'd just bitten a lemon.

Suddenly I hated us all, standing here awkward and out of place and clumsy amid all of the beautiful, educated, sophisticated people—people like Elaine, a whole world of Elaines. It had taken all we had to produce her. I was supposed to go to college this fall, but I had no illusions that I would be allowed to finish. I was supposed to go and find a husband. Or a job. DJ was going to be a minister, so he would go to college, too, but not for a couple years; we had time to recover. Elaine and DJ would be our successes. I would be the family shame. Bethie was, well, Bethie, silent, broken, and mysterious. It was all she could be. Bethie wasn't going to college.

I shoved my hands in my pockets and found a pack of bubble gum. I pulled it out, knocked off the lint, unwrapped it, shoved several pieces into my mouth, and chewed angrily. Bethie swayed beside me. Her face was dead white. I tried not to notice. It would be better for all of us—even her—if we just didn't see. I cocked my hip and chewed my gum. My dress—

last year's hand-me-down courtesy of Elaine—hung loose everywhere except where the floral print stretched tight over my boobs. Elaine must've been standing behind the door when they handed out knockers, because I got hers and mine both. A single button had popped out of its hole. The fabric gaped. I ignored it—I'd been fighting that damned button all day—just worked my gum and started a bubble. I wasn't really expecting much of it, but I surprised myself. That thing got huge—as big as my head.

Thing about bubble gum is that you want the bubble as big as you can get it, but once you pass a certain point it's all downhill. You know that thing's gonna blow, and when it does it's going everywhere. That was this bubble. Bigger, bigger, and bigger, and then, of course, it popped and went everywhere. I had bubble gum on my face, in my eyelashes and eyebrows, caught in my hair. Most of my hair was back in a French braid, like it usually is, so it wasn't as bad as it might have been, but still.... I pinched the wad of gum daintily between my thumb and forefinger, dabbed it over my face, fastidiously removed a single curly red blonde hair, and popped it back into my mouth.

"Spit that gum out," Daddy snapped. "And cover yourself up. You look like a whore."

A lady standing in a nearby group sucked in her breath and turned a shocked face our way. I wanted to die, but no way would I give Daddy the satisfaction of knowing that. I just blew me another bubble even bigger than the last one, took it carefully out of my mouth, and stuck it delicately onto the outside of a nearby trash can, then looked down and slowly slid the button back through its hole. "It's just one button. Jeez, Louise."

"You watch your mouth, little girl. You're not too big to spank." He looked at Bethie. "Liz, what're you lookin' so owly about?"

I looked at Bethie's face, even whiter and more miserable than the last time I looked. I hadn't thought it possible. "She's sick again," I said, even though I knew better.

"She's not sick, she's just owly. Snap out of it, Liz, or I'll give you somethin' to look owly about."

Bethie turned abruptly and started up the sidewalk toward the Fine Arts Center. Her body moved loose inside her dress. Her long, red-brown hair was snarled in the back at her waist.

"You get back here, little girl." More people stared. Reflex made Bethie turn instantly. She gulped, eyes desperate, turned back toward the building, and then—she barfed. All over the cedar shrubs. Nothing dainty like just fainting—nope! This was the kind of barfing that comes from your toes and works its way all the way up and makes everybody around want to do the same. The staring people drew back and turned away, covering their noses and mouths. I was torn between laughter, mortification, rage, and humiliation.

"Cut it out," Daddy hissed. "People are looking."

Rage won. "She's puking," I snapped. "She can't 'cut it out.'"

"Let's get home," Daddy muttered, darting me a look that made my stomach curl. "Meet us at the car, Liz. Sarah, just shut your trap for once. I should never have brought you girls in the first place. I'm ashamed of the both of you."

"I'll help her," Momma murmured. She started after Bethie.

"She's fine," Daddy said impatiently. "Don't coddle her. She's only doing it to get attention. She's gotta learn. Just leave her be."

Momma hesitated, then turned around and followed as Daddy led us, faces flaming, to the dusty old station wagon. We climbed in and sat silent and miserable in the stifling heat until Bethie reappeared and started slowly toward the car. Her hair straggled lank and damp around her face.

"Get a move on," Daddy shouted.

I slid down in my seat.

Bethie walked a little faster. She finally reached the car and climbed in beside me.

"You okay, Bethie?" I mouthed.

She stared back at me, eyes blank, face chalk white. She didn't nod. I wasn't even sure she'd understood what I said. Even though we're not a touchy-feely family, I reached over, squeezed her hand, and smiled bracingly at her. Fear snarled in my belly. Bethie wasn't okay. She was sick

almost every day now. I wondered if she was dying. I squeezed her hand again, down low, where Daddy couldn't see it in his rear-view mirror. Across the neat green university lawn, Elaine was still standing with Joe's family. Joe had his arm around her shoulders. As I watched, she threw back her head and laughed into the sunshine, and I thought how far away from us she had flown, and that now there was no one left standing between Daddy and me but sick, white, silent Bethie.

CHAPTER 6

Sarah

When I think about that day now, it amazes me that Pastor Rayburn saw not that Bethie was sick, or that I wanted to kill Daddy for humiliating us the way he did, but my dress, the dress that betrayed me first by getting me in trouble with Daddy, and then by somehow telepathically informing Pastor Rayburn that I would “understand” him. Pastor Rayburn and me and Motel 6 might be God’s plan—I wouldn’t know; I dodge conversations with the Big Guy every chance I get—but being a slut’s hard, thankless, dangerous work, even if it’s for the Lord.

Pastor Rayburn says he’d sure like to dump the Old Battle-Axe right on her fat ass (like he has room to talk), but of course if he does that he can’t be Pastor Jimmy Jay Rayburn, Televangelist Extraordinaire, anymore. And let’s face it, the man does like getting up there and telling everybody how to get saved. Even more, he likes lying around by the pool afterwards, sunning his hairy white paunch and watching the string bikinis and thongs through his mirror aviator sunglasses. I’m safe, at least for now. He gets a divorce, he loses everything. He’s not dumping the Old Battle-Axe anytime soon.

You all know Pastor Rayburn—at least you do if you watch the *Jimmy Jay Rayburn Hour of Power and Old-Time Gospel Outreach* on TV. I don’t. Makes me sick, seeing him carrying on about how adulterers and fornicators’ll

never make it into the New Jerusalem and sweat flying everywhere. Like he's not right there at Motel 6 with me every chance he gets. Sweat's flying everywhere then, too, come to think of it. Yeesh. Sometimes I wish I could just scrub my brain with Fells Naphtha Soap.

There are a lot of words for women like me. Slut. Cheater. Home-wrecker. Harlot. Fornicator. Whore. Not Adulteress, because I'm not married, but that's splitting hairs. Awful as they are, the names aren't the worst of it, though. When this comes out, I'll lose my job and no way I'll ever get another one. I'll have to go home again. I can't even think about that, so I just keep smiling, dressing nice, and slapping on layer after layer of makeup so nobody'll see the rot. Hell, when the bottom falls out of the Jimmy Jay gig, I can be a mortician, makeup artist to the dead.

I'm the only one who knows what's under all the makeup. But I feel like Bathsheba—I'm running on borrowed time. Which is why I really didn't need to have Momma calling and telling me that Daddy'd managed to run himself through the chopper.

CHAPTER 7

Elaine

I had hoped it would be more. In my dreams, my dress was perfect. Bethie and Sarah walked gracefully up the aisle. Momma and Daddy were proud, happy, and gracious. Momma let her hair grow a little bit, just enough to cover the bald patch that we all pretended wasn't there and never, ever asked about. In my dreams.

Either the veil or my tears, I wasn't sure which, made everything look foggy.

"We can walk out of here right now," Daddy whispered. "We can just turn around and leave."

I shook my head, mute as Bethie. Walking out would be worse than seeing it through. Joe was too nice to deserve that, anyway. He smiled at me from far away at the other end of the aisle. My throat tightened again. I had thought love would be wonderful—not these trembling hands and this terrifying sickness swelling in my middle. August heat beat through the bubbly amber windows. Sweat trickled down my back under the tight white satin bodice.

Bethie started up the aisle and immediately fell hopelessly out of step—it's *just step and glide, step and glide*, I thought angrily. *Not brain surgery*. Bethie stumbled on her way up the steps. I heard her dress rip. Sarah practically loped up the aisle. DJ looked all right. Of course, he only had to stand

there. How hard could that be? Pastor Rayburn's wife touched my arm, smiled encouragingly, urged me into motion with a little push. It was almost over.

I stepped onto the paper runner, *step and glide, step and glide*. Daddy's arm, rock hard, lay under my fingers. A deep gouge ran across the back of his hand. It glistened red and raw in the center, black and crusted on the edges. *Step and glide, step and glide*. The pianist fumbled for the notes. I paused to catch the rhythm, wishing again that the church had an organ. Step and glide. The piano tinkled, insubstantial and tinny in the summer heat.

My vision narrowed to the space between Joe and Sarah. A flash of blue sent my eyes slewing over to Sarah's face. She'd put on make-up, and she'd done it the way she did everything. Her eyelids flashed iridescent turquoise. Her cheekbones glowed magenta. Daddy's arm jerked under my hand. His breath rushed in. My heart sank.

"Please," I whispered. "Not now."

Daddy said nothing, a victory in itself. My anger grew. *Marriage is a sacrament. How dare Sarah make a joke out of it?* Almost as if she could read my mind, Sarah's lips curved into a wide crimson grin. *She can't even smile right*, I thought furiously, glaring at her. My mind flashed to a hot summer day, to monkeys leaping impossible distances, baring gums and shrieking. *It's an aggression display, not a smile*. And then I stood at the steps leading up to the platform, and Joe was walking down them toward me.

What if Daddy doesn't let go?

Daddy's arm dropped and he shuffled back and Joe edged forward and then Joe and I were climbing the steps to stand in front of Pastor Rayburn. He smiled at me. He understood what it was like to stand between two worlds. The danger past, my heart eased. I smiled back.

Joe took my hand, and then DJ lunged past me, knocking me reeling. By the time I had righted myself, Bethie lay crumpled across the paper runner, her dress flipped up over her blue-veined, milk-white thighs, knee-high nylons dark tan below. *Why couldn't she have worn panty hose, just this once? She seemed so exposed*. DJ and Daddy stooped over her, and DJ quickly flipped her dress down over her legs. Dr. Black bustled up from his place

near the back of the church, looked her over, and said, "She'll be fine. These things happen to girls in her condition. Dan, can you carry her?"

Daddy slid his arms under Bethie and lifted her easily. Her dress fell slack. The even ridges of her ribs under the delicate organdy jolted me. When did she get so thin? And then it was over, and I turned back to Pastor Rayburn and somehow we limped through the rest of the ceremony. The sweating pianist chorded out the recessional. In the foyer the photographer waited. "Step this way, please."

Obediently I followed him, asking as I was posed, "Where's Bethie?"

"In the ladies' room," someone said.

"Is she all right?"

"Oh, she's fine, considering," someone else snickered.

"Okay, now a shot with the father of the bride," said the photographer.

And then Sarah was there, and it was time for the group photos. I asked again, "Where's Bethie?"

"Momma took her home," Sarah said. She shot me a look, and I knew not to ask more right now. Later I wished I taken the time to go into the bathroom and see Bethie one last time. I wished that I hadn't been so ashamed of her knee-highs, so angry at her for ruining what should have been my day. Sometimes in the dark nights I have wondered if things might have been different if I had done as Daddy asked and left Joe standing at the altar, not pursued my own happiness while Bethie shattered beyond repair. Maybe I could have saved her. Maybe I could have saved us all. But as I stood posing in my too-short wedding dress, bending my knees a bit so my ankles wouldn't show, I only knew I was almost out of time.

We cut the cake. We opened the gifts. We laughed, hugged, and then, as soon as we decently could, Joe and I jumped into the Corvette he had borrowed from his college roommate and roared away. And, finally, we were alone, and I was terrified and it was all, all wrong.

CHAPTER 8

Sarah

Damn. I hate it when I do this. I start a story, and then realize I've started in the middle, so I do one of those annoying little "Oh yeah, I forgot to say that..." thingies, then I go back to the story, then realize I forgot something else, so it's back in time again, then back to the story, and then I forgot something else ... and by now the person I'm trying to tell the story to has pretty much glazed over and wandered away in search of a soda. Don't think for one minute that I don't realize I'm doing the same thing here. I've started this story I don't know how many times, and much as I want to have it over and done with, I've finally just decided to bite the bullet and do it right—start at the beginning, and when I come to the end, stop. If there ever is an end. But now I've already told parts of it, so I'll be repeating myself.

Tell you what. I'm just gonna start from the beginning, and if you hear me repeating myself just go get a drink or something, and when you get back I'll probably be on to something new. Okay, so, the beginning. Let's see. Our story so far: I've been committing adultery with fat, ugly, sweaty old Jimmy Jay Rayburn for far too long now, even though I know God's against adultery and I'm bound to get caught sooner or later. If it had been anybody but me, I would have been the first to ask, "Why?" I'm sure you're doing the same. So—once more, from the top....

Pastor Rayburn—that's what I called him in those days, not "you fat, pencil-dicked prick," as I learned to call him later when Motel 6 was a fresh and scalding memory. Oops, got sidetracked there.

As I was saying, Pastor Rayburn came to Northwest University for a Week of Prayer my freshman year in college. It was a command performance. If attendance hadn't been required, Pastor Rayburn would have been preaching to about four ministerial majors in the front row, a few night shift workers napping in the back, and a couple groping each other up in the balcony.

I wonder how my life would've turned out if I'd cut chapel that week like I wanted to. But I'd just gotten the pink probation slip that very morning. "Dammit," I said when I saw it in my mail cubby.

"What's wrong?" asked my roommate, pulling her own pink slip out of the cubby beside mine. Neither of us was much on worship.

"This." I waved the slip at her.

"I know," she said sadly. "I wanted to go home this weekend."

"Why?" I asked.

She stared at me. "Duh ... to see my family and my friends?"

"Oh." My face burned.

"Don't you get homesick?"

"God, no!" I blurted. And then I saw the shocked faces of other girls getting their mail and backpedaled. "Well, not yet, at least."

Nobody said anything.

"What happens if I just don't make them up?" I asked into the deadly silence.

"They send a copy to your parents."

My stomach swooped at the thought of Daddy's reaction to a probation slip.

"And then you get kicked out."

"And then you have to go home," I finished. "Something wrong with that logic." I laughed roughly and turned away before my sometimes uncomfortably perceptive roommate could get a good look at my face. The other girls avoided my eyes. My throat ached. So much for friends. I

wadded up the pink slip and tossed it into the garbage on my way out the door to my first class.

And so my fate was set. I went to the Week of Prayer at noon, and, instead of stealing a little more study time in the library, slouched in the back pew along with everybody else who couldn't afford to miss any more worships.

I smuggled my biology book in under my coat and sneaked looks until a monitor caught me and took it away. Then I slouched down farther and leaned my head against the back of the bench. I had just dozed off when that damned monitor jabbed me in the shoulder. I opened my eyes and shot him a dirty look. He raised his pencil, his clipboard, and his eyebrows, asking me if I really wanted to go there. I thought again about Daddy and sat up, seething. The monitor shot me a look fully as dirty as my own and, holding my gaze, scrawled something next to my name, anyway. I sat up straighter, but defiantly thought that they couldn't make me listen. I tried to remember the bones of the human skeleton—the subject of an after-lunch quiz we had been promised—and couldn't. Finally I gave up on the bones and concentrated on making the monitor trip over an extended leg, a trailing shoelace, a cracked tile, anything, through the powers of my will. He turned, caught my eye, and stumbled, dropping his clipboard and pencil with a terrible clatter. Everyone in the place jumped about a foot, including Pastor Rayburn. I felt my face split in an evil grin. It had worked! The monitor scuttled after his clipboard and pencil, scrambled to his feet, and whirled to stare at me, eyes blazing. And then he smiled, a smile so big I could see all his teeth and his gums. He lifted his clipboard, scanned down it, and ostentatiously scrawled another note. The tips of his fingers were white with pressure. Then he turned his back and stalked away.

Only then did I realize that the pulpit up front was silent. Pastor Rayburn was staring at the back of the church, at the monitor ... at me. Hot blood rushed to my face and I slid back down in the pew. Pastor Rayburn went on with his sermon. His eyes never left me.

Afterward he stood at the door and grabbed every hand he could on the way past like he was running for office or something. Which he was,

in a way. Word on the street was he was bucking for Narrow Way Division President. I looked around, hoping to sneak out another door, but the monitor stood right outside, just past Pastor Rayburn. So be it. I stood in the cathedral lobby, shaking his puffy, spongy, sweaty hand.

His eyes slid from my face down past my neck. He squeezed my hand while he said, "Good to see ya, good to see ya. We'll talk later."

I started to shake. All I could think of was that day at summer's end, the terrible day when I had last seen Pastor Rayburn—and when I had lost Bethie.

"Yeah," I muttered past the knot in my throat. I held up the monitor for my biology book and beat feet for the cafeteria. I got my tray of gluten-flavored library paste and noodles—folks on the Narrow Way don't eat meat—and sat at the corner table, nose in my book, cramming for the quiz and trying not to think about Bethie.

The lights went out. I looked up. Damned if it wasn't Pastor Jimmy Jay Rayburn, my own personal dark cloud considerably larger than a man's hand. I wanted him around like I wanted a case of the clap, but twelve years of Narrow Way church schools and more than nine hundred Divine Services left a mark. "Hello, Pastor Rayburn," I said politely. I looked past him at the room full of students and hoped nobody noticed that he was talking to me. Outside, fluffy white snowflakes drifted through black branches set against a dirty cotton sky. An icy little draft shivered across my neck.

"Call me Jimmy Jay," he said, sliding into the chair beside me and scooching his tray over until it touched mine. "You're all grown up now, aren't ya? Cold out, ain't it?" His eyes dropped again. I folded my arms across my chest, slid down in my chair, swallowed, and looked away—the man had loaded two plates of noodles and paste, two pieces of cake, a slice of pie, chocolate milk, regular milk and Postum onto his tray. Meat and caffeine might be out, but he apparently didn't think twice about eating his weight in sugar and carbs. I guessed it was another one of those little deals he'd cut with God. Folks on the Narrow Way, and Pastor Rayburn in particular, are great deal makers.

"I got a proposition for you," he said, proving my point. "I want you to come work for me." He dug his fork into the mess on his plate. His

shoulder bumped mine. Sweat and Right Guard rolled off him in suffocating waves.

"But I've just started college, Pastor Rayburn," I said, edging away. "I can't just turn my back on my education."

"So you'll turn your back on the Lord Jesus Christ, instead?" he asked. He was using his Altar Call Voice, the one I remembered from way back when I was ten and Momma and Daddy decided that, ready or not, it was time I Accepted Jesus Christ As My Personal Lord and Savior.

"That don't sound much like the Sarah Conrad I baptized all those years ago, the little girl who was so on fire for the Lord. What'll your folks think?" He crammed a fork loaded with noodles and paste into his mouth. Creamy white globs appeared at the corners of his lips. He stared at me, chewing with his mouth open, smacking his lips. I looked away.

I knew what my folks would think, which was why I made up my mind right then and there not to tell them. But Pastor Rayburn was way ahead of me. He gulped and said thoughtfully, "I believe I'll give 'em a call, say hi, ask about Bethie. Shame about her, bein' a dummy an' all, an' then disappearin' like that. She ever turn up?" He crammed more noodles and paste into his mouth, chewed, dabbed at his moustache, and rubbed his tongue around over his teeth. His little piggy eyes pinned me to my chair. My fingers jumped. I twisted them into a tight knot in my lap.

"You hear me, Sarah honey?"

"No," I said, leaning into my book and twisting my fingers harder, harder, against the trembling spreading to my arms, knees, belly, jaw. All I could think of was that room full of blood, and Toby lying there all stiff and broken, and Bethie gone—just gone. I dug my nails into my hands and concentrated on how awful Pastor Rayburn sounded when he ate.

"I said—"

"She didn't turn up."

"Think I'll give your folks a call, anyway." He forked another load of noodles into his mouth.

He was a minister. I couldn't tell him no. I just twisted my fingers even tighter and stared past the bristles in his left ear at everybody else, laughing

and eating and living normal lives. “You do that,” I said, and went back to pretending to read my biology book and trying to make Pastor Rayburn not be there. I couldn’t even see the page. My hair fell down around my face like a thick curtain—most of the time I wore it in a fat French braid down my back.

After a while he said huskily, “You have such pretty blonde curls, just like your Momma.”

That was such a lie. Momma was practically bald as a billiard ball, and had been for as long as I could remember, but I did the polite thing and muttered, “Yeah,” and just kept my head down. He reached out a greasy hand. I jerked away. His hand dropped.

“I’ll see you later,” he said at last. It sounded like a threat.

I raised my head, pushed my hair back and watched him waddle across the cafeteria to the conveyor belt that carried our trays through a narrow hatch into the dishwasher. My plate was a cold, congealed mess. As soon as the cafeteria doors swung shut behind him I pushed my chair back and carried my tray to the conveyor belt, too. Then I went to flunk my biology quiz. I already knew it didn’t matter anymore.

Pastor Rayburn didn’t let any grass grow under his feet. Daddy called me that night. I stood in the battered wooden phone booth in the girls’ dorm hallway while laughing, chattering girls in bathrobes and towels ran by me, gripped the receiver and listened to Daddy rave about how the Lord had called me and how I’d be helping win souls. He never for a minute doubted I’d jump at this chance.

Once Momma said, sort of doubtful, “I wish you could finish your education.”

“That’s ridiculous,” snorted Daddy. “This is a great opportunity.” Neither of them said a word about Bethie.

Finally I screwed up my courage and asked, “You call the cops about Bethie yet?”

“Nah,” Daddy said. “She gets over her mad, she’ll come home.”

“You should call the cops,” I said, even though I knew better. No way was Daddy calling the cops.

“She’s fine, just owly.”

“But—” I started, before my courage failed me.

“So when do you leave?” Momma asked quickly.

“Soon’s I get packed,” I said dully. I knew sure as I was standing there that if I turned down this job offer Daddy’d cut off my college money—after all, this was why he’d let me go to college in the first place. I couldn’t do it on my own. I worked every summer, but Daddy didn’t pay us girls in cash. He said he was banking the money for when we got married. He wouldn’t let us work for anybody else. He said men didn’t respect girls who did men’s work.

I had no choice. If I didn’t take this job I’d have to go home, and I just couldn’t do that, not after that last morning, not after all the blood, and Toby dead, and Bethie gone—just gone. And there was another thing. It shamed me to admit it, but even after all that, under the fear and the anger, there was still a tiny part of me that wanted Momma and Daddy to be proud, and I knew this was going to do it. So I shut up about Bethie, and tried to forget how Pastor Rayburn’s eyes kept slipping to my chest, and just thought about how proud Momma and Daddy were.

I went back to my room, packed my bags, cashed the advance Pastor Rayburn had given me—it was more money than I’d ever held in my hand before in my life—and took a Greyhound south to Los Angeles to work for the Lord by helping Pastor Jimmy Jay Rayburn save souls. I sat and stared stonily out the bus window at the dead gray land rolling past. I was dying inside, but I didn’t cry. If I cried I’d get something to cry about.

CHAPTER 9

Sarah

Los Angeles was all gray air and palm trees and pastel, blank-faced apartment buildings set beside breaking sidewalks. I didn't even know where to start looking for a place, but Mrs. Rayburn found me an apartment not far from the office. I paid the deposit and first month's rent with the rest of Pastor Rayburn's advance money and showed up for work on Monday, still without a clue what I'd be doing. Turned out, I was going to be his secretary, but not the regular one. I was supposed to "research and write his sermons."

"But Pastor Rayburn," I said. "I didn't even finish College Writing."

"Aaa—" he waved his hand, "You don't have to be able to write to write sermons. You just gotta know your Bible. And your Daddy's seen to it you do."

Damn straight, I thought, but of course I didn't say that.

"You just listen to some a my sermons so's you c'n get my style right," he said. "My style's the important thing." He shepherded me over to the big Narrow Way Media Headquarters worship room, plunked me down in a swivel chair, and shoved a video into the VCR. On screen, a teensy little fat, red-faced Pastor Rayburn raved, healed, and sometimes bawled. That was Monday. By Wednesday I was ready to kill the man, and a chest-high stack of unwatched videos still stood on the table, not to mention the six-foot-tall cupboard full of cassettes and reel to reels, and the four-foot tower of DVDs.

Thursday morning, I was sitting in the worship room in the second of my two office dresses listening to another damn tape and wondering if I could get away with just fast-forwarding to the end when the door popped open and in sailed this little redhead. She wore a perfect suit on her perfect tiny body, her perfect hair was right from the beauty parlor, and her nails were perfectly manicured peach ovals. I was well on the way to hating her when she said, "I don't believe we've met yet. I'm Janet. From Legal Affairs. Do you have lunch plans?" She sounded like Mary Poppins.

I stopped hating her and decided I loved her instead. "I'd really like that," I said.

"Eleven-thirtyish?" she asked.

"Why not now?" I said, and then stopped, embarrassed.

She raised perfect eyebrows, then glanced at the stack of videos and smiled. "Let me just check my phone messages first," she said.

I looked at the clock. The hands stood at eleven-fifteen. I snapped off Pastor Rayburn—probably a little harder than I needed to—took a quick pee, grabbed my purse, and ducked out the back door. A few minutes later Janet came out, peering into a tiny compact and smoothing on strawberry pink lipstick as she clicked along on impossibly high heels. I followed her across the lot.

We cruised out of the parking lot in Janet's shiny red El Dorado, and she chatted up a storm the whole time she was driving. At the restaurant she surprised me by ordering herself a hamburger and a cup a coffee. Narrow Ways aren't supposed to eat meat or drink caffeine, which isn't to say that Bethie, DJ, and I didn't sneak in a trip to the Charburger every chance we got. I sat there in that restaurant and for a second I was somewhere else—at the Charburger, Bethie sitting across from me while an orchestra played wagon music down the street and somebody shot off blanks in the Happy Canyon stadium. I looked at my sister. She smiled her silent smile. I slammed the lid on memory.

"... better than he should be," Janet was saying when I came back to this table, this restaurant. "He's not terribly bright, but he's got the job. His family has pull. His wife, now, Andrea—she's a piece of work...."

I thought of the Charburger's big, juicy cheeseburgers, took a bite of this hamburger I no longer wanted, and set it back down. Janet rattled on. I nodded in the right places. Instead of thinking about Bethie, I looked at the filthy people camped under the palm trees outside the window. I'd never seen these people, these trees before. Migrant workers sometimes lived in cars at home, but people living under trees? In America? And why were they wearing all those layers and layers of clothes? And how did they get so dirty that all the colors were gone and they were just gray brown everywhere? Did they do it on purpose?

"... and she's smart," Janet was saying, "and she has pull. Just look what she did to Rose ... Paul Bowen's daughter. That poor woman sits in the basement all day, every day. You don't want to get in her way. Her family goes all the way back to the Great Disappointment. A Smyth helped to do the math. Thank goodness Andrea's not in accounting." She laughed. "But public relations is a natural for her. Just be careful."

I swallowed and asked, "Why does Rose sit in the basement? Doesn't her family have pull, too?" Paul Bowen was something of a celebrity among Narrow Waysers. He had started Bring Them Home Ministries, a charity specializing in finding adoptive homes for children from refugee camps and Third World countries. Paul Bowen was a frequent guest speaker—and a frequent recipient of special "free will" offerings taken in church.

"Yes. That's how she got the job in the first place."

"What does she do?"

"They call her the archivist. But that's just a title."

"Why doesn't Andrea just get rid of her?"

"She can't afford to. Bring Them Home Ministries gets a lot of great publicity for the church, and Paul donates heavily." She stopped and sighed. "Poor Rose. Her mother's pretty and dresses just perfectly. Her father could charm birds out of the trees. Her sister is an attorney downtown. And then there's Rose—so mousy you forget she's there. Just goes to show, genes are a funny thing. I'd swear she was the one adopted if I didn't know for a fact it's Megan who was."

"Megan?"

"Her sister—they adopted her just before Rose was born."

"So what does she do?" I asked again.

"Rose? Oh, they bought her a computer and sat her down in the basement. She's made herself a little corner there—sits there all day, every day in the dark, and whacks spiders." Janet shook her head. "People call her names."

"Like what?" I was enthralled.

"The Brown Recluse. Poor thing. She always wears this brown suit. I don't know why. She must think it looks professional. But it's ugly and hairy and doesn't fit her very well—she could be pretty, but she just doesn't make the most of herself." Janet stopped to take another bite, then gave me a critical look. "Mmmm. Neither do you. We need to go shopping."

"Like the spider?" I asked, ignoring the crack about my clothes.

"What?" asked Janet. "Oh, the Brown Recluse. Yes." She looked sad for a moment. "I like her. We go to lunch quite often. I'll introduce the two of you. You're about the same age. She's just finished her Master's. Now that Jimmy Jay, he's got quite an eye for the ladies...." And she was off again, revealing a side to Pastor Rayburn that I'd never heard about.

The Pastor Rayburn I knew had been a preacher, a man of God, next thing to a saint, to hear Daddy tell it. I couldn't stand the man, but I thought it was just me. Janet told me not about the Pastor Rayburn I had been told about, but about the Jimmy Jay who had been shifted around during his career, trailing scandalous whispers like slime across the whole Narrow Way system. Why was she telling me these things? Was she just addicted to gossip? Then the light dawned. She had just warned me about three people I dared not cross and alerted me to a danger I would never have suspected. Pastor Rayburn a womanizer? I'd thought it was just me.

After Janet wiped her mouth, refreshed her lipstick, and calculated the tip, she said something that made sense at the time, but which got me into a lot of trouble later. "If you have to do something nasty," she said through pursed lips, "don't just say, 'Okay,' or 'Yeah.' Say, 'I'll be happy to do that.' And smile. Always smile." She smiled at her reflection in the little mirror, dabbed at the corners of her mouth, capped her lipstick, and snapped her compact shut. "It'll earn you a lot of points, and it costs nothing."

Even though I made up my mind to follow her advice, I almost blew it that very night. I was picking up my purse and getting ready to head back to my empty little apartment and take a swim in the little blue pool behind the building when Pastor Rayburn stuck his head around the corner and asked, “Y’all don’t mind working late tonight, do ya, Sarah honey?”

I looked at Pastor Rayburn the Womanizer and opened my mouth to say, “No way, José.” Then I remembered what Janet had said.

“I’ll be happy to.” I followed him to his office. He plunked himself down on this little loveseat he had in there and patted the seat beside him. “Come on, come on, sit down—we haven’t talked in a coon’s age,” he said.

I perched gingerly on the edge of the seat. He grabbed my shoulder and yanked. I lost my balance and fell against him. “Relax,” he said, “I don’t bite. I’m a man a God.” And then he laughed. I wanted to sit up again, but I didn’t know how to do it without looking stupid, so I just half sprawled there, my shoulder digging into the fat under his arm, my head twisted so my face wasn’t buried in his armpit.

“Ya settlin’ in?” he asked. “How’s the family? Leave a boyfriend behind?”

He was my boss. And a Man of God. Like it or not, I had to answer.

“The family’s fine,” I said, moving my face as far from his armpit as I could. No way in hell I’d admit that I’d never even had a date. My shoulder was pressed against a big wet stain that spread nearly halfway down his side. The smell was terrible—Pastor Rayburn and Right Guard and chalk, all mixed up together.

When I pulled away and struggled to sit up, he tightened his arm around me and said, “Just relax—you been under a lot a strain, what with your sister an’ movin’ an’ all.” He said it nice. I told myself I was wrong to feel scared and embarrassed—he was just trying to be friendly.

“Relax,” he said again.

I told myself it was okay. I hated the way his arm felt around me. And the smell. But that was just me, right? I could trust him. He was a minister, married to sweet, pretty, elegant Mrs. Rayburn, and he was old. He might be a womanizer, but surely he wouldn’t want a green kid like me. That

was just plain vanity, to even think such a thing. My stomach tied itself in knots. I tried to shift my shoulder away from the wet spot under his arm. I stared at our laps, which was all I could see with his arm clamped around my shoulders.

He kept up a stream of conversation. Then his puffy, sweaty hand began rubbing steady circles on my shoulder, down onto my back, up over onto my front, down to where my boob started pushing out my dress. His hand stopped there. His fingers rested just where my body began to swell. His voice went on and on, talking about commonplace things and people I knew. I didn't know how to ask him to move his hand without sounding rude and clumsy and gauche, and I couldn't interrupt him. He was my boss. A tent developed below his zipper. *Maybe that just happens with men sometimes*, I thought desperately. *He's not like Daddy. He can't be. He'll be embarrassed if I let him know I've noticed. He'll think I have a dirty mind. Then he'll fire me, and I'll have to go home.*

I just sat there, a big, fat Sarah lump, too stupid to know what to do. The rubbing started again, over my shoulder, down my back and side, then back up to my shoulder and down over my chest, each time creeping farther down. The tent got bigger. The wet under his arm soaked into the shoulder of my new dress. Finally he stopped rubbing, leaned forward, slapped his knee, and said, "Well, guess it's time to call it a day. You go on home. Get some rest." We hadn't done any work, and he'd practically worn a hole in my new dress, but I didn't even think about that. I just bolted for the door. At home I ran inside, practically tearing that dress to get it off me before I gagged on the smell. I was into my swimming suit and diving into the little pool at my apartment in five minutes flat. I tried not to think of Pastor Rayburn's fat hands on my body, or the tent in his pants. Next day I went to lunch with Janet again. She said, "I saw you and Pastor Rayburn worked late last night."

My face burned. I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. Janet plowed right on. "You want to be careful about that. Men are men—don't ever think just because a man's a minister he won't take advantage of you."

"What happens then?" I asked.

"If it comes out, they transfer him to another service area. You lose your job." Janet said. She picked up her hamburger and took a bite, chewed, swallowed, and sipped her Coke. "The men just don't tolerate that sort of thing."

"But that's not fair."

"Maybe not, but it's the way it is," she said.

"What happens if the woman refuses, or files a sexual harassment complaint?"

"She'll lose her job and her church membership. The men just won't stand for that. A woman can sue, and she might even win, but in the end, she loses."

We went back to work. That night Pastor Rayburn asked me to work late again. I said, "I'm afraid it would look bad, Pastor Rayburn. Janet says people notice these things."

He looked mad. "You wanna be careful with that Janet—she's a real piece a work," he said. He stalked back to his office, and I breathed a sigh of relief. Then he stuck his head back out, winked, said, "We'll just haveta work something else out," and disappeared again.

He didn't ask me to work late all the rest of that week. I breathed easier. That weekend Janet called me. "Come on, honey, we're going shopping."

"But I don't have enough money to buy anything."

"We'll figure something out. You need things that show you off."

A few minutes later the security line buzzed. I looked out the window. Janet's red El Dorado sat at the curb. I grabbed my purse and ran downstairs without answering, feeling light and young for the first time since Bethie had gone.

"Nordstrom's is having a pre-Easter sale," she said. "You've got to take advantage of it." Janet took me to the mall and hustled me into the bright, music-filled store, past the piano player, up an escalator, and through departments until we reached a corner filled with suits. Beautiful suits. I touched one with a reverent finger.

"Not that one," Janet said. "The color's all wrong for you." She lifted another one. "Here, try this. What's your size?"

"I'm not sure," I muttered, embarrassed. "I think sixteen." I stared down at my boobs, red faced. Sixteen was far, far too large. Momma had been very clear on that point. A real lady shouldn't be more than a twelve. Ideally her dress size would be in single digits. I hadn't been in single digits since I was twelve years old. But then, I wasn't a lady, either.

"Sixteen?" Janet looked me up and down. "Not in Nordstrom's clothes. They don't skimp on fabric. I think you should try a fourteen, maybe a twelve for the skirts."

"I can get different sizes in jackets and skirts?" I asked, surprised.

"Yes," she said. "And they tailor them to really fit."

"Here, try this..." she moved to another rack. "And this ... and this ..."
A sales girl appeared and bore the clothes away.

"Go," Janet said. "I'll be along in a minute." I loped after the sales girl.

In the fitting room I thought of my plain, ragged underwear, cringed at the thought of Janet seeing them, and moved fast. I faced the one wall without a mirror and pulled off my jeans and oxford shirt, reached behind me and grabbed a dress, pulled it over my head, then turned around, fingers flying as I buttoned it up. It was beautiful, smooth and sleek, curving gently over my body. I had always felt like a pink truck—big, strong, and tough with femaleness overlaid like a somewhat bizarre afterthought. Looking in that mirror, I saw something else for the first time.

"You decent? Let me see," came Janet's voice. I opened the door and stepped shyly out, smoothing the dress nervously over my hips.

Janet sighed. "It's you. You can't walk out of this store without that dress. Have you tried the others?"

I shook my head, my eyes locked on the mirror at the end of the row of dressing rooms. A woman stood there, tall, curvy, and elegant in a beautiful dress and unlaced high-top tennis shoes.

"Try the others," Janet insisted.

I took one more look, smoothed the dress again, and ducked back into the fitting room. The next dress pulled. The next one sagged. I started to get a sense for the style of clothes that worked best on my body. I riffled through the dresses hanging on the door, pulled one out, slipped it on,

fastened the oversize buttons running down the front, and sighed again. It was perfect, even better than the first dress. I opened the fitting room door and stepped out. Janet sighed, too. My too-square shoulders filled the fitted shoulders of the aquamarine coat dress. Its shawl collar just hinted at my cleavage. Its fitted waist and fuller hips fit me perfectly. I stood and gazed into the mirror while Janet and the sales girl made happy cooing noises that I would have died before uttering.

I didn't say anything, just looked, and for the first time in my life felt pretty. After a few minutes I went back into the dressing room and pulled my jeans and shirt back on, then carried the two dresses out with me. The sales girl took them. I followed her to the counter, feeling rich, pampered, and elegant, even in my jeans. I was shopping in the kind of a store where the clerks actually took care of you, instead of slouching behind their cash registers, popping their gum and waiting sullenly for you to hand them money.

I had to open a charge account to buy the dresses, but no way was I leaving either one there. The sales girl slipped them into hanging garment bags, then handed them over. We stopped at the shoe department on the way out and I bought a pair of neat black pumps, perfect for the dresses. We drove to a restaurant and had lunch, then Janet drove me home. I carried my dresses upstairs, pulled off the plastic, and hung them in my closet. My other dresses, which had looked all right this morning, suddenly looked limp, faded, and cheap. I pushed them aside. I would go shopping again soon, I decided.

The next day I got up early, showered, braided my hair and coiled it high on my head, applied just a touch of make-up, opened a new pack of panty hose, slid reverently into the aquamarine dress, and stepped into the new pumps. I straightened and looked at myself in the mirror, and for the first time I realized that I was beautiful. Not pretty, not cute, but beautiful. I walked back into my bedroom and looked around. A beautiful woman deserved a beautiful bedroom. I resolved to dress my home as well as I dressed myself. I was late for work, but it didn't matter. I walked, tall in my new pumps, to the little car I was buying on time and slid in. I would have

to do something about the Big Mac wrappers living on the floor. A beautiful woman shouldn't drive a messy car. The shopping trip had given me new eyes. I could make something of myself. Maybe I could take night classes, get an education while I worked. In a dress like this, nothing was impossible.

I parked behind the office and let myself in the back entrance. The voices of Narrow Way workers singing hymns told me that worship had already started, so I just went directly to my office, dropped my purse into my desk drawer, and slid it shut. Enjoying the quiet, I smoothed on a little pink lipstick, pulled up my stockings where they were bagging a little, ran my hands over the sleek hips of my dress, and went to turn on the lights in Pastor Rayburn's office. As I stepped through the door, arms snaked out and grabbed me, pulling me farther into the gloom. "Relax," came Pastor Rayburn's voice. "I'm a man a God. An' you know we both want it."

I twisted, pulled back, said, "What? Don't!"

"Quiet," he hissed. "You want everybody to catch us like this?"

"The man they transfer," Janet's voice whispered. "The woman loses her job ... the men just won't stand for it ..." If I lost my job I would have to go home. There was no choice, really, and Pastor Rayburn knew it. I stopped fighting. He did it—right there on his desk with everybody downstairs singing about a rugged cross on a hill far away and the gray morning light filtering in slits through the wide old-fashioned blinds, and the little smiling bobble-head Jesus on his desk keeping time, nodding approval. I just stared past Pastor Rayburn's ear at the dust motes floating in the light and watched bobble-head Jesus smile and nod, and I didn't let myself feel anything. *It's only my body*, I told myself, the way I learned when Daddy used to come to my room. *He doesn't have me.*

When he was done and working himself back into his underwear and zipping himself up, he said, "I just couldn't help myself—you shouldn'ta teased me that way, in that sexy new dress. Drove me right outa my mind. You oughta be ashamed of yourself, you bad girl." And he laughed, and slapped my bare thigh hard enough to sting. I jumped. He looked down at my reddening thigh thoughtfully, then rubbed himself through his pants. Then his hand dropped. "Later," he said, and winked at me. I didn't say

anything. One part of my brain was furious at myself for wearing a dress that would lead Pastor Rayburn to believe I wanted him, but mostly I was just trying not to be there.

I pulled up my torn panty hose, straightened my new dress, and went back to my desk. I sat there staring at the light on my phone that told me he had called someone. I stared, but I really didn't see anything. I just sat there, digging my nails into my palms until I made bloody little half-moons in them. A drop of blood landed on my lap. Another splashed on the floor. I could feel sticky wetness pooling between my legs. My lovely dress was ruined.

Dreamily I leaned over and let the blood drip from my hand into the ivy beside my desk. I didn't even think of using a Kleenex. Pastor Rayburn's line light went dark. He came out of his office, still working that belt under his belly. He took a look at me, rumpled and bleeding into the plant. "Go on home; get yourself cleaned up—I'll say you called in sick," he said. He sounded nervous and disapproving.

"Okay," I said, grateful that I wouldn't have to face everybody when I felt so raw. I went home, stuffed my new dress into a plastic bag for the trash and showered until the hot water ran icy, but I was still dirty. I managed to get band-aids on the cuts in my hands then climbed into bed, but I couldn't stand to be there so I rolled back out and sat on the floor in my bare living room instead, leaning against the white wall, arms around my legs, my head on my knees, my body aching. I couldn't eat. I couldn't sit still. I couldn't go anywhere. I was supposed to be sick. There was no escape. I couldn't cry, so I just paced, arms wrapped tight around my belly. When the water had reheated I filled the tub and sat in it, my knees up, my forehead leaning on them, not thinking anything, just trying to sooth the burning ache inside. What if I had gotten some disease? *What if I was pregnant?*

Late that afternoon Pastor Rayburn called. "I'm sorry. It won't happen again. But I just couldn't help myself. You're too beautiful. You gotta stop teasing me that way. Let me give you something real nice ta make up for it, then this can just never happen again."

I tried to say no. I really did. "I quit," I said.

"You can't quit. People would talk. Besides," he said, "you quit school, so you got no education. You'll never find another job like this one. It's better if you keep on workin' for me and we both just control our animal urges." *Wasn't my animal urges causing the problem*, I thought, but he was so sure I was at fault that I just didn't know how to say any different. Hell, maybe he was right. I should've known better than to wear a dress like that. Finally I agreed—what else could I do? It was my fault. He was a man of God, a minister. He wouldn't lie. A week later he called me into his office and gave me a fifty-dollar bill in an Easter card—signed by both himself and the Old Battle Axe, as he had taken to calling his wife. "It won't happen again," he promised. *What if I was pregnant?*

But of course it did happen again. And again and again, but not so often in the office. He started springing for a room at Motel 6, instead, and coming up with reasons why it was God's will that he screw me. Eventually I got my period, but I knew I was living on borrowed time. Someday, somewhere, this ugly little chicken was coming home to roost.

But that was the future. Right then I took comfort in small things, like learning not to gouge my hands when he fucked me, like realizing I could dress any way I damned well chose; it wouldn't make any difference. I rescued my bloody dress from the trash, got it dry-cleaned, wore the other one, bought more.

I couldn't make him stop. I couldn't even say no when he asked if I wanted to do it. He was a man of God, and my boss. Who would believe me? Besides, saying no never did any good with Daddy. All I had was Janet's advice.

When Pastor Rayburn asked if I wanted to sneak into that Motel 6 off the 710 freeway—he said I did my best work there, and since it was a fleabag he wasn't likely to run into anybody else who worked for the church—I smiled into his fat face and brushed back the greasy flap of hair he combed over the bald spot on top so nobody'd notice he wasn't as young as he used to be, and then I crooned, "Why sure, honey," in this fake southern drawl I'd picked up from listening to so many of his sermons.

"You makin' fun a me, Sarah honey?" Pastor Rayburn asked once.

"Now, why on earth would I wanna go an' do a thing like that, Pastor Rayburn?" I drawled. And then I didn't say any more—I didn't tell him why I was talking that way now. Partly because until he asked I hadn't realized I was doing it. After he asked, though, I figured it out. It was sort of a little joke; I talked like trailer trash because that was what I was. It was a clue, only nobody got it. Nobody but me.

"You can call me Jimmy Jay when we're alone now, honey," he said one time, smiling a lewd smile. We were at Motel 6 that day.

"Oh, that just wouldn't be right, Pastor Rayburn," I said. "It wouldn't be respectful."

"You're probably right," he sighed, flopping onto his back and throwing his arm over his eyes. The odor from his armpits nearly choked me. "I *am* a man a God, after all, and you *are* just my secretary. Maybe it's better this way."

"Maybe," I said, climbing wearily out of the bed and searching for my panty hose.

CHAPTER 10

Sarah

Pastor Rayburn was perfectly safe, and he knew it. He knew I'd never tell anybody what was going on. I knew better. "What happens at home, stays at home," Daddy always said. "We don't wash our dirty linen in public. Loose lips sink ships." Pastor Rayburn said the same thing. "Tighten up those lips a little, Sarah baby. This ship's comin' into harbor. Ah ... ah ... ahhh ... AHHHHHHH." And then he finally quit pulling my hair and shoving on my head.

A part of me knew he didn't mean the same thing Daddy used to mean when he talked about loose lips. For everything else he did, Daddy never made me do *that* to him. But another part of me wasn't so sure. Sometimes it was hard to tell what was real and what was just in my head.

Did I really remember that stuff about Daddy? Had I imagined it? Had I imagined the blood the morning after Bethie disappeared? Had Toby really died? Was I overdramatizing things to think that was really, really wrong? There was no one I could ask. I just tried to remember that I had a good job, if you didn't take Pastor Rayburn into account. Sometimes the Old Battle Axe went with him on his Evangelistic Crusades. I guess her lips helped his little boat make harbor on those trips, because mine sure as hell didn't.

And as time went on, there were even perks. 'Course that didn't mean it wasn't still a dirty job. For one thing, he was so goddamn proud of his

“ship,” it damn near gagged me. I itched to just say, “Pastor Rayburn, that there’s no ship—it’s a rowboat. Maybe even a bathtub toy.”

Daddy always said I had a mean streak a mile wide.

First time I thought this, Pastor Rayburn had as full a head a steam up as he ever got. I was workin’ away and he was carrying on about how he was headin’ for harbor big time an’ all the sudden I thought the bathtub toy thing, and I busted out laughing. I jerked my mouth away so I didn’t bite the poor little thing in half—not that anybody’d notice—and then I thought about sharks and I just doubled up and howled. Pastor Rayburn’s poor pathetic little boat got all saggy and wrinkled just like I pulled the plug out of it. Next thing I knew, I was lying on my side and my ear was ringing.

“Goddammit!” I said. “Y’all didn’t have to go and do that.”

“Get back to business,” he snapped, rubbing his hand. “And watch your mouth.” Then he hauled off and smacked me again, even harder—knocked me right off the bed. As I lay there on the floor waiting for my head to stop spinning I saw that those little old sails were perking right up, if you get my drift. I realized then that he knew he didn’t have to hit me—he just liked to. I stopped laughing and got back to business.

After that, if he got in trouble on the high seas, he just smacked me one. Sometimes he didn’t even have a chance to talk about coming into harbor before the boat was in dry dock, he was having a beer onshore, and I was swabbing slime off the decks. It was just one more thing to put up with. That’s what it took to float Pastor Rayburn’s boat. I told myself that it didn’t matter.

When Pastor Rayburn first figured out God’s plan for him included seeing the inside of my knickers, I was too discombobulated to really think things through. Once I did, though, I remembered Bethie, and I knew what I had to do. I didn’t ask him about it, just huffed myself down to the drugstore and asked the clerk, “What size a raincoats should I get for a pecker oh—say this long an’ this big around?” I held up my thumb.

The clerk snorted and said, “How do you even know it’s in there?”

“He tells me,” I said without even thinking about it.

“He’d have to,” she giggled. Then she picked up two boxes. “Buy both a these.”

“Oh, ah get it,” I said in my best drawl. “Then y’all layer the damn things fer extra pertection, right?”

“Nope,” she said. She held up the box that said “for the larger man” in big letters all across its front. “Ditch these. They’d fall right off an’ you’d be in the ER next to all those poor movie stars with gerbils up their, ah, poop chutes?” she blushed, then finished in a rush, “asking some intern to fish ’em out.” We shuddered. “Then you dump these—” she held up the other box, which I noticed right off did *not* say “for the larger man” on it “—into this box. When you use ’em, make a big fuss about how the guy at the store said this was the biggest they had, an’ how they’re just not big enough, an’ how next time you’ll try a specialty shop. I guaran-dam-tee ya, he’ll love ya.” She winked.

I got the point—I mean, the box didn’t say “junior petite,” or “for the wee one,” or anything like that, but I’m not as dumb as I sound. I bought both boxes, but then I thought, *What the hell am I doin’? I don’t want him to love me.* I gave the box for the larger man to a panhandler in front of the store.

“Here, honey,” I said, “Make good choices.”

The man grinned. “Wouldn’t care to road-test ’em, wouldja, baby?” he asked.

But by then I was *so* gone. Every time Pastor Rayburn slid one of those junior petite raincoats over his little boat—bitching and moaning all the time—I thought of that bum and just had to smile. Pastor Rayburn didn’t like it one bit, either, any more than he liked having his little boat sinking seven times out of ten, and he made sure I knew it was my fault. I had to take a week of sick leave once ’cause he lost it and forgot to stop hitting me. I ended up with some nasty bruises that time, I tell you, and a funny popping in my jaw, and stabbing pains and a weird grating noise in my left ribs. I would’ve left, but I had nowhere to go. Still, though, all the hitting was getting me down, and finally it got me down enough that I did something stupid—I took a man of God’s word for something.

CHAPTER 11

Sarah

But all that was at the end, after DJ got married and Elaine got divorced. In the beginning—and in the middle—I wrote Pastor Rayburn’s sermons on weekdays and let him fuck me after work and between prayer meetings at conferences. He’d go onstage and do his routine, then rush back to Motel 6 for a quickie, shower if he had time, then rush back for his next sermon. If he wasn’t on the platform, sometimes he just skipped the meetings altogether. I guess every head was bowed and every eye closed, so nobody noticed he wasn’t there. Weekends, though, were mine. He had to keep up appearances with the Old Battle Axe, and he was an evangelist, after all. While Pastor Rayburn was out saving souls, I had a little time to myself.

“You should come hear me preach, sweetheart,” he said sometimes at Motel 6. “It’s inspiring.” He’d run his hand over my belly and on up to squeeze my boob, hard. If I jumped, he’d laugh and squeeze again, harder. Took me about three times to learn not to jump. ‘Course, he squeezed it again anyway.

“Maybe,” I said each time, but that was Janet talking. The Sarah answer was “no way in hell.” I’d gone a few times, but I hated listening to him butcher my perfectly good sermons. ‘Course, I didn’t like listening to him in the office or at Motel 6, either—he kept nattering on about how much stress he was under, how I was God’s reward to him for being a minister

(we never got around to what *my* reward might be for putting up with being *his* reward), and how I shouldn't see so much of Janet.

"She's a Bad Influence," he would say portentously. "The men don't like her. She's too mouthy." But Janet was my friend—the only one I had, even though sometimes Rose in PR went to lunch with us. Pastor Rayburn called Rose The Cunt a Last Resort when nobody was around, and then he laughed and grabbed my butt. He was good friends with her daddy, too.

I envied Rose. As Janet had told me that first day, on paper Rose worked in PR, but mostly she hung out in the basement in the back of the archives room. She had this little desk with a lamp and a molting overstuffed chair and a rug with a hole in it and a computer. I saw her there sometimes when I had to take down boxes of Pastor Rayburn's old sermons.

'Course that didn't happen often because he recycled The Message. "The Word a God never changes," he said. "Why spend a lot a time coming up with new spins on the old-time religion? It'd be Sacrilegious. I'm not one a these here godless Libruls, always havin' ta pick things apart."

I got the point. After that I stopped coming up with new sermons for him—I just tweaked the old ones a little and left work early. Pastor Rayburn didn't like it, since then he couldn't make me sail the boat after work, but he couldn't say a thing about it, either. He didn't want anybody checking up on my work habits any more than I did.

Rose, though, Rose just sat in the basement all day, every day. When I'd go to the archives room, I'd see her sitting there in her hairy brown suit in a little pool of golden light. All around her it was dark and cool. I envied her college education, her quiet, her cool, her untroubled golden pool of light. I even envied her hairy brown armor. She had everything I wanted, and while I didn't hate her, I didn't like her much, either. Envy's a funny thing. Janet kept pushing her at me. "She went to Northwest, too," she kept saying, like that was some kind of recommendation, and like I'd gone there for more than part of one year. "Talk to her," she said. "You'll like her."

Maybe, I thought, but it felt dangerous, having a friend. If I started palling around with anybody else at the office, they might find out about Pastor Rayburn and me. I couldn't risk that. So Janet remained my only

friend, and I wouldn't give her up, not without a damn sight better argument than Pastor Rayburn had come up with so far.

Anyway, he should have been grateful—Janet was the only reason I'd ever heard him preach in person after I heard him slaughtering my sermons those first few weeks. He had a crusade in town about a year after that first time he grabbed me in his office. Janet, Rose, and I went together. My own personal feeling was that I heard plenty of him, what with the sermon tapes, the office, and Motel 6, but Janet kept asking and I didn't see how I could get out of it.

We got there a little early and headed backstage because Janet wanted to say hi before the service. There sat Pastor Rayburn in his TV makeup, looking like he'd been hit by a Maybelline truck. The new secretary from Youth Ministries, who had almost finished beauty school, hovered over him. She had offered to do my colors for me when we were introduced at the office a few weeks ago. "Hell, no," I'd blurted out, completely forgetting Janet's advice.

"Why not?" she had asked.

"Well, look at you," I had said before I managed to wrestle my tongue into submission. Things had been a little chilly between us since then. Now she was smearing blush high on Pastor Rayburn's cheeks and rubbing in some dark foundation below the blush, trying to create interesting hollows. I knew what she was doing—and the futility of it—because I used to try the same trick on my own face.

Janet said hi and Pastor Rayburn said hi right back, then he struggled out of the makeup chair—paper cape and all—and gave her a hug and shook Rose's hand and introduced the new Youth Ministries secretary, even though we all saw each other every day at the office. He didn't even look at me. Janet, Rose, and I left the Youth Ministries secretary to serve the Lord by trying to give Pastor Rayburn cheekbones and found our seats in the back of the auditorium, where we could duck out fast if it looked like he was going to run over.

He bounded on to the stage during the opening song, waved his arms to direct us as we sang, shouted, "Praise the Lord, Amen ... Amen," at the end

of the song, prayed long and earnestly for our salvation, and finally started the sermon. He started out jokey—running through a patter built of little digs at “the ladies” who kept agitating to take over the work God gave men to do. He kept darting little glances at the row where Janet, Rose, and I were sitting. I was puzzled. Where had all this crap come from? I hadn’t written it in his introduction. He sounded like a sexist stand up comic.

Then the looks registered, also his remarks about “the men” not liking Janet because she was “too strong,” and his nickname for Rose, a woman who was smart enough to get a graduate degree in something most people didn’t even know existed. He was preaching at *them*.

Janet and Rose just sat there. I did, too, but I was seething on their behalf. *You bastard*, I was yelling at him in my head, *I might be dumber’n a box a rocks, but they’re both smarter than you are. Where do you get off, anyway?* But that was a stupid question. I knew exactly where Pastor Rayburn got off—at Motel 6. My face burned. I looked around at the auditorium full of women—smart, well-off, well-dressed, well-educated. And all of them were listening to Pastor Rayburn tell them that no matter how smart they were, they were stupider than men, that no matter how capable they might be, they’d never be as successful as men. And that it was *God’s plan*. I knew Pastor Rayburn carried his tiny little brains in his tiny little dick, but I never thought I’d hear him admit it out loud in an evangelistic meeting.

Why did it bother me so much that day? Daddy had told us the same thing, over and over again. A woman’s place was supporting a man, not succeeding in her own right. I should have been used to it. And I was. But there was something about hearing Pastor Rayburn say it to Janet, who I respected a great deal, and Rose, who was damned smart, and all those woman doctors, lawyers, and executives in that room that made me hear the words different. I could accept that I was less, but not that all of *them* were.

I leaned over to Janet. “Why do you take it?” I whispered.

“Take what?” she whispered back. Her eyebrows made perfect half-circles over her eyes.

I didn't even know where to start, so I just shook my head. When it was time, Janet, Rose and I stood up and sang the closing song—"God of Our Fathers"—and I realized that's exactly who he was—the god of my father and Pastor Rayburn, not my mother, not Bethie, not Janet, and sure as shit not me. I stood there and sang every verse, and in my heart the last little bit of faith I had in the god of my fathers died.

I should have felt sad or guilty, but I didn't. I felt free. I could stop trying to please a god who stood behind people like Daddy and Pastor Rayburn, a god who said it was okay to look like one thing and be another as long as the people you hurt kept quiet. I didn't have to please a god who said that you could unmake ugly things just by pretending they didn't happen or by saying that whoever they happened to deserved it. I no longer had to please a god who said that being stronger and more powerful automatically made a man right. I didn't have to revere and worship the god who had let my sister disappear in a roomful of blood.

I turned down Janet's suggestion that we go see Pastor Rayburn after the meeting—the word dickhead was too close to the front of my mouth—and went straight home. And there, in my pretty new Laura Ashley bedroom, curled up on my pretty bed with its pretty pillows, smelling the pretty potpourri I got from Crabtree and Evelyn, I allowed myself to think of that terrible day last summer, the day Elaine got married.

CHAPTER 12

Sarah

The day of the wedding, Bethie, Elaine, and I got to the church early so we could dress. Bethie modestly turned her back and shrugged into her flounced bridesmaid's dress while I was helping Elaine into her wedding dress. She never liked anyone to see her naked.

"It's too short," Elaine fretted, looking at the bottom of her dress.

"Momma said she'd run a couple rows of lace around it," I said.

Elaine just looked at me pityingly. I snickered. How to explain to Momma, who was only trying to help, that running lace around the bottom of a dress made the dress look not longer, but only like a too-short dress with lace around the bottom?

Bethie zipped her dress and picked up Elaine's veil. I left them to it and, using the half-truth of "going to the bathroom," snuck down the hall to the rest room where there was a mirror to put on my makeup. Momma and Daddy didn't allow it, but I needed it that day. I dabbed on eye shadow and mascara, then blush to bring out my cheekbones, then decided I'd better take a quick pee before the wedding. I'd no more than gotten the stall door shut when two ladies came clicking in, laughing and clacking like magpies.

"I've been waiting for this ever since I heard Elaine was engaged."

"Think they'll wear shoes? Or just their work boots?"

"Never mind the boots—think they'll wash their hair?"

"I don't think they could get a comb through it otherwise." A pretty, dainty laugh, trilling up elegantly.

"I just can't imagine how she managed to catch *any* man, let alone a *minister*. Poor man. He can't know what he's getting into."

And then I dropped my makeup case. The pink and green Maybelline tube rolled across the tile floor.

Sudden silence. Rustling. I bent down to see if I could reach my mascara. Two stalls down, a red face topped with gray sausage curls appeared. The eyes widened and the mouth made a silent "oh."

I sat back up. I knew the face. It belonged to the woman who had been Elaine's baptismal sponsor, the woman who, after our parents, was supposed to watch out for Elaine's soul.

A stage whisper from further down the stalls. "Who is it?"

More silence. Flushes. Opening doors, whispers. Then awkward, overloud, innocuous chatter on a completely different subject while water ran and the paper towel machine whirled. The door opened and closed.

I sat there in the stall, my dress held up around my waist by my sweaty hands, my high heels planted squarely on each side of the toilet. I stared at my hands and knew the truth. Black grease was ground into the creases on my knuckles. I had always known that these people were not my friends, not Bethie's friends. Now I knew that they weren't Elaine's friends, either. We had to walk up in front of a whole church full of people who sneered at us—and admired our parents, who had made us what we were. Those women hadn't said anything I hadn't already known, but until I actually heard them I'd fooled myself into thinking that Elaine, at least, was normal, and that for one day—for just one day—Bethie and I could pass for normal, too.

I stood up, flushed, and walked out of the stall. I stood at the sink and stared at myself in the mirror—at my long, neatly-braided blonde hair, at my too-ruffled, too-flounced, too-delicate dress. It stretched tight over my too-big boobs, sagged at my narrow waist, and stretched again at my too-wide hips. The lace was way too fragile against my strong, tanned face and arms. I looked ridiculous—like a cross between Mae West and a

clumsy drag queen. My eyes stung, but then I set my too-square jaw and I opened up that makeup case and I started slapping on the blusher and eye shadow.

Daddy called make-up “war paint.” That was how I used it that day—not to make me beautiful, but to make me brave enough to face all the vicious, normal people who had come to watch us make fools of ourselves. I’d be damned before I’d let anyone see how it hurt. I plastered my war paint on with a trowel. And then I went out to fight a battle I had already lost.

Nobody saw my face when I hustled into line behind Bethie and ahead of Elaine and Daddy. All through the wedding, nobody saw my face. They didn’t see Sarah fighting to keep her lips from wobbling, pasting on a smile like lipstick. All they saw was the war paint, all they saw was my chin held high. They talked about how I looked like a painted hussy, and told each other that my parents must be so disappointed, and that somebody needed to take me in hand, and they didn’t see me at all.

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CHAPTER 13

Sarah

The day I sat in church with Janet and Rose, I realized that no one—not Daddy, not Jimmy Jay, and not God—cared two hoots about me. Or Bethie. It's a funny thing. Momma and Daddy had always said that we should pray to God to keep us safe. But Daddy had God in his back pocket. I knew better than to ever seek help from Him, or from the church. I was never sure if Daddy reported to God, or God reported to Daddy, but there was never any question that they agreed on everything. Whatever had happened to Bethie on that dark and terrible night had been just fine by God.

I suppose losing their faith is a painful thing for some people, but I have to say that in my case it was actually a relief; I finally understood that I could stop hoping, that from now on I would rely on myself—and please myself. I could stop factoring God and Daddy into every single damned thing I did. I could know what I knew and say what I pleased. It felt like a tidal wave had hit me. All my life I had lived with the reality of who and what Daddy was, and somehow, some crazy how, I had still bought into the notion that deep down, he was good, kind, and loving, that the terrible things he did were really our fault—because I had pissed him off, Bethie had led him on, Momma hadn't paid attention, DJ had given him lip. There was always a reason. There had to be. God is good, and God was on Daddy's side; therefore Daddy must be good, right?

Realizing that Daddy's god was not good was the first domino. The others toppled right behind it. Jimmy Jay, who was every bit as tight with The Almighty as Daddy was, wasn't good, either. And, finally, biggest and most transforming of all—Daddy. *Daddy wasn't good*. No matter what he said, nothing justified his actions. He was a violent, sadistic tyrant, and I had been lucky to escape with my life. And so it was that the afternoon after God died I sat in my room and acknowledged the twin fears that had lain unacknowledged in my heart since the morning after Elaine's wedding. I was afraid Bethie was dead. And I was afraid that Daddy had killed her.



The night after Elaine got married things got really, really bad. I heard Daddy in Bethie's room, and Bethie, who hardly ever said a word, was screaming. DJ and I ran down the hallway and saw him there, in her room.

"Get out," Daddy ordered us.

DJ and I did what we were told. We slunk back down the hall and we went into our rooms and we closed our doors. Through everything, we stayed in our rooms, just like Momma stayed in her room. We stayed there, choosing to not know what was happening, because knowing was too dangerous.

The morning after the wedding was like all the other mornings after all the other bad nights. That was the worst of it. It was like watching a thunderstorm roll in. You knew it was coming, but you never knew when. And then, without warning, the storm would break, and afterward Daddy always went to Bethie's room, and then, sometimes, if it had been a really bad one, he came to mine. The night after Elaine's wedding Bethie's room was enough.

I stayed in my room and tried not to hear the thuds, the yelps and snarls, the screams. I just stayed in my room until it was over and things got quiet. Next thing I knew, the sun was coming up, and Daddy was yelling about it being daylight in the swamp and that we had to get to work.

I got dressed and went downstairs and, like I said, it was like all the other mornings after. Daddy wolfed down his pancakes. DJ did, too—he was

growing that summer, and never seemed to get enough to eat. Momma flipped pancakes at the stove, and from time to time carried the stack over to the table and put more pancakes on Daddy and DJ's plates. None of us asked why Bethie didn't come downstairs. We knew better. Momma finally asked, "Should I go get her up?"

"Yeah," Daddy said, "an' let that dog out." He swirled the last bite of pancake through the last of his syrup and forked it into his mouth. "Finish up, DJ. We gotta hit the road." He swallowed shoved his chair back, then leaned forward and picked up his glass of milk.

DJ started doing what I was doing—pushing pancake pieces around and around in the syrup. We listened to Momma's feet heavy on the stairs.

"Welp, better get to work," Daddy said cheerily, wiping his mouth and thumping his glass down. "Have to make up all the time we lost this week. You kids come soon's you're finished." He stomped into his boots. The screen door slapped shut behind him. Upstairs Momma's feet shuffled, stopped. A door creaked open and Momma screamed, "Dan Dan Dan."

DJ and I ran upstairs. "What is it, Momma? What's wrong?"

She was standing in the hall outside Bethie's open door, eyes wide, shaking her head, hands up, pushing away—what? "It's not my fault I couldn't do anything about it."

"What's wrong, Momma?" I asked again. DJ and I tried to squeeze by her, but she wouldn't budge. "Bethie?" I called. "Bethie?"

"Who was it? Why wouldn't she say? Everybody knows, now." Her cloudy blue eyes begged us for assurance. "But it wasn't my fault," she pleaded. "I had nothing to do with any of it. I did my best. Nobody can blame me for any of this."

"Nobody's blaming you, Momma," DJ and I said, weary and impatient. And then she moved, and we could see through Bethie's half-open door, and the words were bitter in our mouths. We saw the blood-smeared floor, a pool of blood by the wall dried black around its edges, twisting ropes of tissue piled up in a little mound, blood dried to dark rust on the bed, and Toby's broken body. I pushed past Momma and slammed the door all the way open. "Bethie?" I screamed. "Bethie!" But I was screaming for myself,

out of my own terror, guilt, and anger, not for Bethie. Bethie was gone. Daddy's feet thudded on the stairs behind us. Momma pushed past DJ and fled into her bedroom, slamming the door.

"Stop that racket, Sarah," Daddy said. "Look at this mess. Go get 'er to clean it up." He hadn't even looked into her room.

"She wouldn't do this," I said defiantly. "She loved Toby. She'd never hurt him, and she'd never leave him behind." I looked straight at Daddy. He looked straight back.

"Sarah's right," said DJ, his voice flat and shaking. "She'd never do that. We have to call the police."

"There's no call for that," said Daddy.

"Where's Bethie? There's blood all over her fuckin' room," I shouted.

Daddy backhanded me. "Talk like a lady, Sarah, and stop being so dramatic. It's just a little blood. She probably just got her period and couldn't be bothered to clean up. She's always been lazy. She's probably down by the creek right now, sulking."

"This is not 'just a little blood.' It's too much and she was *pregnant*," I said, still loud and hard. Because that was why she had been throwing up every morning, of course. And that was why she had fainted at Elaine's wedding, and that was why Dr. Black said what he did on the platform at Elaine's wedding, and that was why, as she had lain there on her back, out cold, I had seen the hard, smooth curve of Bethie's belly under the delicate fabric of her dress. My mouth and jaw hurt, but I was damned if I'd rub them and let Daddy know.

"Not anymore," DJ said quietly, looking at the sad little mound of drying blood and tissue on the floor.

"And it's a good thing," snapped Daddy. "Maybe now she'll stop whoring around. You watch your mouth, little girl, or you'll get just what she did."

"What did you do to her?"

He backhanded me again. "Don't you ever accuse me of something like that again, little girl."

But I didn't give up. "Where is she?"

He laughed. "How should I know? Pregnant women do crazy things. You wouldn't believe some of the wild things your Momma did. Why, one time..." He looked at us, broke off. "You kids clean up this mess. Time's money. We gotta get to work."

It was too big to hold. I had always thought that "feeling like your heart would burst" was just a stupid expression, but as DJ and I walked down the hallway to the linen closet, opened the door, and dragged the box of rags that lived there up the hall to Bethie's room, that was how I felt. There was too much to hold. I had to do something, say something, but what, and to whom? In the end, DJ and I did the only thing we could. We did what Daddy said. DJ got a snow shovel and started scraping. I stripped the bed and carried sheets downstairs, then filled a bucket of water in the bathtub, lugged it down the hall to Bethie's room, and scrubbed the walls, top down.

"How will we get Toby out?" DJ's voice was little more than a whisper.

I jumped. The bloody cloth in my hand fell with a wet splat. I turned, my heart thundering. I looked at Toby, and tried to think, but I couldn't. I just shook my head. Finally we took the bloody blanket off the bed and rolled him in it. DJ tried to carry him by himself, but he was only sixteen, and skinny as a rail, and dead bodies are heavy, even dogs' bodies. His hands kept slipping. He managed to get Toby cradled in his arms for a few seconds, but then his fingers slipped on the blood and Toby fell with a thud, stiff, all of a piece. DJ gasped, then sank down and laid his head on Toby's side. His bony shoulders shook. He'd hit a growth spurt that summer. His pants hit him above his socks, even though he'd had to cinch them up until they made gathers at his waist. Those thin ankles with their jutting ankle bones and those sharp little shoulder blades reminded me of bird wings. Finally we pulled ourselves together, put Toby on our laps and started sliding downstairs on our butts so he wouldn't get hurt bumping on the steps.

Daddy came in from outside and said, "What're you kids doing? Momma's gonna have a fit about that blanket."

When we didn't say anything, Daddy sighed and rolled his eyes. "Do I hefta do everything around here?" he asked the ceiling. He tromped

up the stairs in his cracked, run-over boots, yanked open the blanket, grabbed poor Toby's legs, and gave him a pitch. Toby bumped and slid down the stairs. His head kept on hitting and hitting. I felt every bump like it was me bouncing from step to step. DJ's hands were shaking. He had them clenched so tight his knuckles were white. Neither of us said a word. "Now get 'im outta here, then clean up that mess upstairs," Daddy said, "we gotta get to work today sometime." He pushed past us and headed for Momma in the bedroom.

DJ and I walked down the stairs with Bethie's blood-soaked blanket in our hands and wrapped Toby back up in it. Between us we carried him out past the barn and down the path to the cool shadowy creek bottom. We'd forgotten a shovel, but the sand was soft and we were afraid to go back before the job was done.

We used our hands to scrape a deep hole high up next to the bank. Then we wrapped the blanket tight around Toby and eased him into the hole. He had stiffened in an awkward, sprawled position, eyes and mouth half open, back twisted, legs contorted. We couldn't fool ourselves that his had been a quiet death. He had died in battle. We couldn't make him fit into the hole. We scraped some more, carefully wrapped the blanket around his awkward body to keep the dirt off, laid him in the hole, and slid the sand into the hole carefully, trying not to dislodge the blanket and get sand on his poor hurt head.

Then Daddy was half running, half jumping down the steep bank, saying, "What on earth are you kids doin'?" That's no way to get the job done." He kicked the sand into the hole and stomped it down with an awful crunch. DJ's face went chalk white.

I just stood there until I could talk. Then I said, "Let's go finish Bethie's room, DJ. It's one hell of a mess."

Daddy whipped around and glared at me. "There's no call for foul language. You can sound like a lady, even if you're a tramp. I'm not gonna tell you again."

I didn't say anything at all, just looked at him out of my hard, hot eyes. He stared back at me, then he snapped his wrist and rolled his shoulders

and said, "Get moving. You kids're costing me money." He turned and leaped back up the bank. DJ found a big rock and set it where Daddy'd been stomping. I took two sticks and some twine I found in my pocket and made a little cross. I stuck it into the dirt, then sank down in the sand beside the stream, hugged my knees, and rested my chin on them. Right then I just didn't give jack shit about what Daddy might do. The steep shadowy banks of the creek bed shut out the rest of the world. DJ dropped beside me. Finally I said, "I heard her screaming last night."

"Me, too."

"We've gotta go to the police."

"And tell 'em what?" I snapped. That her dog's dead and she's gone? They wouldn't do anything. They'd just say she ran away."

"But you an' I both know that she didn't do that—you know what she was like with that dog," he said.

"I know, an' you know, but who'd believe us? Daddy's an Elder, a Narrow Way Guide in the Youth Division. He sits on the platform every week."

"They'd have to believe us if they saw the blood."

"You know what Daddy'd do to us after the cops left?"

"Yeah." We sat in silence. "Well," I finally said, "better go clean her room." Shame filled me. I was failing Bethie.

"Yeah," DJ said.

After we washed away the blood, we buried the baby that never was beside Toby, where he could watch over it for Bethie. And then we went out to the desiccated fields and brought in what was left of the harvest. When I shut down my truck for the last time as the sun was setting, I could hear Daddy singing about power in the blood.

That night at family worship, he wanted to sing the same hymn again, and then he wanted to sing "This Is My Father's World." We all sat in the living room, not looking at each other, opening and shutting our mouths and making enough noise so he wouldn't hurt us or make us do it again. I thought of Bethie's room upstairs, and I was terrified. A line I had always thought would never be crossed, one I had always relied upon for comfort in the darkest times, had been rubbed out. *He wouldn't actually kill us*, I had

told myself. Bethie's room showed how false that comfort had been. The last boundary had been breached. That night I lay stiff on my bed, eyes wide open. Bethie was gone—just gone. Every creak was Daddy coming to do to me whatever he had done to Bethie. Silent and broken as she was, she had been my bulwark, the thing that stood between Daddy and me. He always went to her room first, and then sometimes, like last night, he didn't come to my room at all. But she hadn't been a bulwark. She had been cannon fodder. Finally I sneaked into DJ's room. "DJ," I whispered.

He rolled over. "You shouldn't be in here."

I swallowed back the choking tears. "Things get too bad after I leave, you call me, okay? I'll figure something out."

"What could you do?" he asked fiercely. "Nothing. Daddy'd find us."

He was right, but thinking of my brother alone in this house after tomorrow made me feel even sicker than I already felt. "Want me to stay here this fall? Start second term?"

"No," he said, just as fiercely. "Get away. Go. Go now, while you still can."

"I'm scared," I admitted.

"I know," he sighed. "Me, too."

"Can I sleep in here tonight?"

"Better not—you know what Daddy'll do if he catches you."

"I don't care. I'm gonna miss you so much. Just let me sleep in here this last night."

"Okay." He pulled the pillow out from under his head and dropped it on the floor, then pushed his top quilt down, too.

I straightened it out and lay shaking on the floor beside his bed. After a few minutes his hand came over the side. I reached up and took it and held it tight in mine, away from my face so he wouldn't feel the tears. At last I fell asleep. I woke myself and sneaked back to my chilly bed in the gray dawn.

CHAPTER 14

Sarah

It's funny how your world can change inside, and everything still looks exactly the same on the outside. I didn't stop sailing the boat. Pastor Rayburn kept right on hating the raincoats and letting me know about it. I'd slip one on and his poor little boat'd just drop its sail in nothing flat. For months I'd been hoping he'd give up and keep his damn boat tied up to the dock at home where it belonged. No such luck.

A few weeks after that evangelistic crusade where he killed Daddy's god, he started nagging me about The Pill. I put my foot down about that—"It'll make me blow up like a Macy's Parade Lucy," I said. Pastor Rayburn wasn't happy, but he couldn't actually force the damn things down my throat. I mean, people would talk. I started hoping harder than ever.

Then Pastor Rayburn had The Operation. "I'm cuttin' the anchor lines," he said, smoothing his hair back over his bald spot. "Nothin' to hold me back now." So that was that. He took a couple weeks off from the Lord's work—at least the part of it he carried on at Motel 6 with me—and then one day he said, "Let's go get the ship outta dry dock." He winked, and I knew I was sunk.

At the hotel I said hopefully, "Maybe we better stick with the raincoats for a while, just to be sure." Pastor Rayburn just grabbed me and tore the crotch right out of my panty hose.

“No—way, José,” he grunted. “I done this for you, baby. I ain’t never wearin’ those things again.”

“But—”

Pastor Rayburn smacked me a good one. By the time my head stopped spinning I was laying in the wet spot and his tiny little dick was cold and slimy against my thigh. I almost threw up. After that Pastor Rayburn’s little boat left a trail of sludge in its wake as bad as the Exxon Valdez, and I started investing big-time in Feminine Hygiene Products.

And there was something else—either Pastor Rayburn had lied to me or he’d laid hands on himself and got God to heal him back up like those fake invalids on his *Hour of Power and Old-Time Gospel Outreach*. No matter how close I looked, I couldn’t see any scars, no stitch marks, nothing. I was almost sure he was lying about the operation, but I didn’t know how to ask him about it without being rude, and he sure never gave me an opening. So I just tried not to think about it.

Why couldn’t I make him stop? Part of me was ashamed because it was my fault in the first place. Part of me didn’t want to make trouble. Part of me was afraid of the consequences if I made a public fuss. Mostly, though, I just had nowhere to run. So I kept on keeping on. It wasn’t really so bad. Like I kept telling myself, it was just my body at Motel 6.

He didn’t have me.

CHAPTER 15

Jennifer

“W here do I start?” I asked the policeman.

He said, “Begin at the beginning, and when you come to the end, stop.” I opened my mouth to do just that when my attorney interrupted me. “This isn’t a fishing expedition,” he said. “When you think of some real questions we’ll think about answering.” And then he chivvied me out of that room. “Didn’t you ever see *Alice in Wonderland*?” he asked me when I asked what was wrong. “Or read the book?”

“No,” I told him. “It’s fiction.”

“So?”

“So we’re told we should think only on ‘whatsoever things are true, honest, just and of good report.’”

“What?” he asked. “By whom?”

I thought he was joking, so I laughed politely.

“Who?” he asked again.

“The Bible?” I prompted. “*Philippians 4:8*?”

“Oh,” he said dismissively. “I’m not much of a one for that stuff.”

“But the church hired you for me,” I protested. “You must be a good Christian.”

“I don’t have to be a good Christian,” he said. “I just have to be a good lawyer. Now let’s go over your testimony.”

I have known since the day we met that this lawyer isn't a nice person—he spent the whole first session staring at my chest and telling me that I should see a psychiatrist. I knew then that he really didn't understand. I thought I could explain, but after he said that about the church, I started to wonder. How could someone who wasn't much for church possibly understand why things had happened the way they did?

Maybe that policeman was right—to really understand this I have to begin at the beginning. I don't know what the end will be yet, but I have faith the Lord will work everything out for good for me. That's what the Bible says: All things work together for good for those who love the Lord. I love the Lord, so I know that, as dark as things look, everything will be all right. The Devil's working hard right now, and even though I've spent my life serving the Lord, sometimes it's hard to trust that in the end Sarah, Elizabeth, and Elaine will be punished, and that DJ will understand that the Lord's guiding hand has been over us all along.

The attorney keeps insisting that I see the psychiatrist. But I don't want to. I'm not crazy. I'm a counselor. If I were crazy, I'd know it. I don't think my attorney believes in my innocence. I've noticed that he's very careful never to ask me about what I did or did not do between the time that Momma left for groceries that morning, and the time Elizabeth found Daddy. I'd be happy to tell him, but he has never asked, not once. When I first realized that he actually thought I was dangerous, I was frightened. How could a man who doesn't love the Lord explain my actions to a judge and jury in a way that they could see the Lord's leading?

And then the Lord gave me the answer, just as He always answers His people when they ask His guidance. I was reading in Ezekiel, where the Lord tells Ezekiel to write everything down in a little book. I read that, and I realized I had my answer. I had to write everything down, explain exactly how it happened, show how the Lord led every step of the way. I went right down to Hallmark and bought a Precious Moments journal—the one with two children kneeling in prayer on the cover. I picked up a pretty pen that writes in lavender ink to match the journal. I do like things to look nice. That's why I like to dot all my i's with little hearts, and add a little smiley

face whenever I sign my name. As a minister's wife and a counselor, it's particularly important that I set an example others can follow, even in the little things like that.

I bought my journal this morning. All day long now, I've been thinking things over, sitting here in this ratty little apartment and longing for my old life: my loving husband, DJ, my cheerful son, Davy, my counseling career, the beautiful lawn that DJ works on every night, the quiet strolls along the river walk in the long, soft summer evenings, just DJ and me. Looking back on it, those were the times I came the closest to the life I'd always dreamed of, the one I thought was mine in the beginning, the one that was stolen from me by the women who should have been my best friends and allies, but who became my Judases, instead.

But the betrayal wasn't the beginning. Was the beginning my childhood in the dark, cheap, little house in the shabby subdivision? Was it the summers, when Vacation Bible School offered me an opportunity to develop my talents in the Lord's service? Even then, the Lord had His hand over me and offered me the opportunities I needed to showcase my gifts, and therefore escape the narrow little life I would have led had my mother had her way. All those things factored in, and I may need to explain them later, but for right now, I think the place to start is at our beginning, at DJ's and mine. In a way, the day I met DJ was the day that my life really started. Everything that went before was just leading up to the moment when I looked at him and realized that the Lord intended us to be together.

His sister Elaine introduced us at an office potluck. "DJ, this is Jennifer," she said. "She's assistant division counselor for Narrow Way Northwest."

DJ had just taken a bite of potato salad, but he put down his plate, swallowed, and said, "Hi." His voice was blurry from potato salad. It was so cute. He swallowed, swallowed again, grinned, cleared his throat, then repeated, "Hi."

"I told you about DJ," Elaine said to me. "He's been working in Eastern Regional Evangelism, but now he's home, ready to settle down." She smiled.

DJ blushed, and it was all over for me. He was so beautiful, and a lot taller than I am, and that's saying something, since I'm almost six feet in my stocking

feet. His suit looked like it had been tailored for him. His streaky blonde hair was just a little too long. It curled on his collar and my fingers itched to touch it. He was almost perfect. The Bible tells us that “there is none perfect, no, not one,” so I knew he had flaws, but still, he was at a good starting point, and that’s what marriage is all about, isn’t it? Helping those we love to overcome their flaws? It’s what my life is all about, really—I became a counselor because the Lord called me to help others battle their weaknesses.

“So what’ll you be doing here?” I asked him as we shook hands. My hand looked slim and white in his big, square, tanned one. I lifted my chin a little to tighten up the loose skin under my jaw—I do exercises and even slept with a chin strap for a while and everything, but nothing seems to work—and smiled. We looked good together. I knew it even without anyone having to tell me—both of us so tall, and I was in my new cream silk suit, and it was just perfect.

“... the Happy Valley church. I’m Joe’s associate while I finish my degree, then I’ll take over when he leaves.”

“That’s our home church,” Elaine put in.

“Oh? I’ve been wanting to hear Joe speak,” I said. All I could think of was that Elaine, elegant, perfect Elaine in her perfect suits with her perfect clean jaw, her perfect minister husband, and her perfect little boys, had chosen me—me!—of all the women who worked for Narrow Way Northwest, for DJ. I felt like Hadassah.

“Really? Come for lunch afterward. Can you make it, too, DJ?”

“Think so.”

I caught him looking at my legs, and I knew he was going to ask me out. But he didn’t. Instead, he reached for his plate and turned to go.

“So ... is it just the two of you?” I asked. I knew if I gave him a little time he’d work up the courage. After all, most men find beautiful, intelligent, well-educated women like me intimidating.

“No, we have another sister,” Elaine said.

“Two more,” DJ said.

“Yes,” Elaine said hastily. “Sarah writes for Jimmy Jay Rayburn. He’s an old family friend. She’s based in California.”

"Really? So you guys all work for the church? How wonderful, to have your whole family serving the Lord."

"No," DJ said. "Just three of us."

"What does your other sister do?" I asked.

"We don't know," DJ said. "She disappeared."

"When?"

"A few years ago," Elaine said.

"I'll offer special prayer for her," I said graciously.

"Thank you. I need to check my e-mail," Elaine said, and turned away. Maybe her jaw was a little *too* sharp, I mused. It almost looked like she had clenched it.

DJ looked around. I gave him another chance. "So do your parents work for the church, too?"

"No—my dad's a farmer," DJ said, turning back.

"And your mom?"

DJ looked blank.

"Doesn't she work?" I was starting to get a little irritated. Here I was, showing an interest in him, and he was turning it into a game of Twenty Questions. I knew he liked me. I'd seen him looking at my legs, and anybody could see we were perfect for each other.

"She's not well," he finally said.

"What's—"

"DJ, you ready to go?" a tiny Asian woman called. She was all the way across the room and she just *called out*, like she was *entitled* or something. How tacky can you get?

"Be right there, Angela," he called back. "Gotta go," he said to me. "Nice meeting you." I looked into his eyes and knew that he wished he could stay with me, but what else could he do, with that woman making a public spectacle like that? He smiled again, and I knew he was asking for my help.

I smiled back and said, "Definitely," but he was already walking away. I watched him go and I knew, just knew, that the Lord meant us to be together. It might take a little time and effort, but it was going to happen.

CHAPTER 16

Sarah

I found out about Angela and met Jennifer the weekend that DJ was ordained. At the time, neither one really registered, which is odd, because the events of that weekend would set in motion a chain of events that none of us could have predicted. But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let me just tell the story.

There was no question about my being there. Of course I would. Momma and Daddy assumed it, and since Pastor Rayburn was giving the ordination sermon, he was happy for me to be there, too. He talked for weeks about how the weekend was going to give us "time to really be together." He'd had me make reservations at the Happy Valley Motel 6 and everything.

"I'm not leavin' anything to chance," he said.

DJ and I hadn't talked much after I left home. It was too hard, trying to call and talk to him with Momma and Daddy there, and by the time he was in college I was skippering the Good Ship Jimmy Jay, which meant I couldn't talk about work. Or what I did after work. I told him about the pool, and about Janet, but there really wasn't much else in my life to talk about. And that last morning, when we'd buried Toby and the baby, had both bound us and silenced us. Bethie was a silent presence between us, but I think we were both scared to talk about her. She wasn't dead. She wasn't alive. She was just *gone*. I don't know what it was like for DJ, but for

me, I was equally afraid that she was dead and that she was alive. I couldn't bear for her to be dead, but if she was alive and we found her, what then? Bethie couldn't survive on her own. She'd have to go back home, where Daddy would be waiting. And pissed.

I missed DJ. I ached for the friendship we'd shared. But I didn't call him, and he didn't call me. I heard about him from Momma and Daddy—about how he was doing so well in college, then about how he was working for Narrow Way East Evangelism in New England, and then, at long last, about how he was coming back here to Narrow Way Northwest to serve as Joe's assistant and get ordained.

I could hear it in their voices: DJ was everything they had hoped he would be. DJ and Elaine were their successes, their vindication. They were happy I was working for Pastor Rayburn, of course, but they never hid the fact that they thought it was because he was "watching out for me." They didn't know about Motel 6, of course. But I knew my success was based not on skill, but on a button that kept popping open.

So, anyhow, there I was, the weekend DJ got ordained. Pastor Rayburn and I flew in on Friday afternoon.

I thought I was safe until he said, "Let's take the boat out," while we were on the way out of the airport.

"We can't," I said. "People will ask where we were."

"Which is why we came in in the middle of the afternoon," he said smugly. "Nobody knows just when we got here. An' that's why I had you rent us a car. We're under the radar, babe." He waggled his eyebrows at me.

I sighed and turned away, and he pinched me, hard, on the butt. I swatted his hand away, but even as I did all the flirty things to set his mind at ease, I was figuring out how to get some time to myself.

We checked in at Motel 6 and after a quick little sail, when Pastor Rayburn was still in a good mood, I said, "Think I'll go say hi to DJ."

"Huh?"

"Gonna go say hi to DJ," I repeated, zipping my skirt.

"Don't be long," he muttered sleepily. "We should go to Vespers."

"Sure," I said.

I grabbed my room key, the rental car keys, and my purse, and hurried back to my room. I popped the catch on my suitcase and pulled out the clothes I had thrust in at the last minute, clothes I had worn when I was still strong, and sometimes brave: a pair of jeans, a tank top, a big old denim shirt, and a pair of cowboy boots. Then I pulled my hair back and braided it tightly. I flipped open my cell phone and called Elaine for directions as I strode out to the car, feeling a tiny flicker of the bold Sarah I used to be. I drove with the windows down and the radio cranked.

After a few wrong turns I pulled up in front of DJ's apartment and rang the doorbell. Footsteps. "Surpri—!" The door opened to reveal a tiny Asian woman. I rechecked the apartment number. "I'm sorry," I stammered. "I must have written the number down wrong."

"Who were you looking for?" Her voice held a faint lilt.

"DJ Conrad ... my brother ... I'm sorry"

"Come in. He's in the shower." She stepped back and pulled the door wider. I stepped inside, feeling foolish.

"Have a seat. I'll tell him you're here." She waved a hand at the love seat facing the sofa. I perched on one end, my hands clasped between my knees, tapping my fingers nervously. Soft murmurs from the hall. DJ's deep growl, then "Sarah?"

"Yeah," I called back.

"Be right out."

And he came into the living room. The little Asian woman didn't. DJ and I tried, we really did, but once we got past the "how are you?" and "how long have you been here?" the conversation languished. I don't know what tied DJ's tongue, but all I could think of was that last day at home. And Bethie's room. After a while, DJ switched on the TV and we watched a *Family Values* rerun.

Then the little Asian woman came into the living room, purse in hand. "I'm going to the store, DJ," she said.

DJ stood up. "Sarah, this is Angela. Angela, my sister Sarah."

"We just met." I tried a wide smile.

Angela smiled back uncertainly.

"Pick up some milk," DJ said.

"OK." And she was gone.

I looked at DJ.

"Let's watch the rest of the show," he said.

"No way," I said. "Who is Angela?"

DJ shuffled and made a big business out of getting a soda out of the refrigerator. "I met her in college."

"What's she doing here?" I asked.

DJ blushed fiery red and grinned.

"All right!" I hugged him quickly and let go before I could feel him pull back. We've never been huggers in our family. "So is she living here?"

"Sarah!" said DJ, shocked. "I'm being ordained tomorrow!"

"So?"

"So it wouldn't be right." And he smiled a sweet, shy smile.

I laughed at him, then I took mercy and we finished watching *Family Values*, and then I left. Just before I walked out the door, I asked the question.

"Have you heard from Bethie?"

"No." He stared at his feet. "I don't think we will."

"We should've gone to the cops," I said.

"We couldn't, Sarah. They would never have believed us."

I scuffed a booted toe on the floor. "I better go," I said at last. "I'm supposed to go to Vespers." I sounded bitter, even to myself.

"No point going if you don't want to," said DJ. "An unwilling heart is no good to God."

"Yeah," I said. I pulled open the door. "See ya."

"Don't tell Mom and Dad?" DJ said quickly.

"Why, DJ, whatever do you mean?" I asked sweetly.

"You know." He wasn't smiling.

"Geez, DJ. You know me better than that."

"Yeah, but just in case."

"You know they're going to catch on when you guys start having kids."

"I just want to tell them in my own way. Sort of ease them into it."

“Good luck with that,” I said, and pulled the door shut behind me. On the way back to the hotel I considered the irony of DJ, who had been everything Momma and Daddy had dreamed of, keeping such an explosive secret. Part of me was afraid for him. Part of me felt a sneaking satisfaction in knowing that he wasn’t so perfect, after all.

CHAPTER 17

Jennifer

That Sabbath, I went to the Happy Valley church. When I arrived, I saw DJ standing with Elaine, Joe, their boys, Pastor Jimmy Jay Rayburn, a tall, gray-haired man who looked so much like DJ he just had to be his dad, and a mousy little woman in a dress that looked like she'd made it twenty years ago and been sleeping in it ever since. I started up the steps, expecting Elaine or DJ to acknowledge me, but they didn't. I knew they saw me—they had to—but they all just kept talking among themselves. I climbed further up. I was close enough to DJ to touch him. And, still, they didn't acknowledge me. Then I was past them. And then the Lord took a hand. I stumbled on a pebble, lost my balance, and teetered on my high heels.

"Careful," said DJ's voice. His big, warm hand grasped my elbow.

I could have caught my balance and gone on, but the Lord had granted me this opportunity. It would have been a sin to waste it. I let my body slide along DJ's arm, just a little, before I straightened, laughing uncertainly.

"Thank you," I said, catching my breath.

The gray-haired man looked at me. The mousy woman looked at her shoes. When DJ let me go, it was natural to just give him a little hug and take his arm, and join in the conversation, and when the family—DJ introduced us—turned to go inside, I just naturally walked in and sat with them. When we got to the minister's row a woman in a too-tight, too-short skirt was already sitting there. I couldn't believe it. I mean, everybody knows

about the minister's row. It's almost sacred. And here she was, sitting there as if she owned the place.

"Are you visiting?" I whispered to her.

"Yes," she whispered back.

"You might not know it, but this is the minister's row," I told her in my nicest voice.

"Oh?" she said. "I just thought this was where Elaine usually sits."

"It is. It's the minister's row." I emphasized the words just a tiny bit.

She squinted at me a little and made a "come on" gesture with her hand. She did it down low, where no one else could see, but it was definitely not the sort of godly gesture I was used to making—or seeing—in church.

"It's for the family," I tried again.

"Yeah?..." she said.

"Should you be here?"

"Damned if I know," she said. "Guess we'll find out. And why the hell do you care, anyway? Somebody appoint you row monitor?"

I sucked in my breath, and then Elaine was leaning over the horrible woman, saying, "Jennifer, I don't think you've met my sister, Sarah."

"Hiya, toots," said Sarah. And then she gave me the nastiest, meanest grin I've ever seen.

Fury rose in me.

Sarah grinned wider.

"Nice to meet you," I said, and if I said it a little stiffly I don't think anyone could blame me.

"Right back atcha," said Sarah. She crossed her legs and her skirt slid up dangerously high on her thighs. She started kicking the crossed leg restlessly. Her stiletto heel swung from her toes. I couldn't help remembering what a girl on my hall in college had called shoes like that—she called them "f--- me" pumps. Well, that's what Sarah was wearing. She kicked too hard and it flew off and clattered on the wooden floor. I wanted to die. But then I remembered. The Lord had placed me here for a reason. He had chosen me. Except for Sarah, the family had been warm and welcoming. When I thought about it, I realized that even though I had just met them, I was

already more a member of the family than Sarah, with her cursing, bright makeup, and short skirt, and obscene shoes, was. And who knew? Sarah might grow to love me. Most everyone did. So that was all right.

How can I tell you how it felt that day? Sitting there, with DJ's family, I felt such a sense of rightness, of belonging. I knew then that they had already given their blessing, and everything else was just details. Things aren't going very well for us right now, but I look back on that day and I know—*know*—that DJ and I are supposed to be together.

After church, Elaine, Joe, DJ, Sarah, Jimmy Jay Rayburn—who ordained DJ—and DJ's parents all formed a sort of informal receiving line at the church doors. Since I had been sitting with them I just naturally slipped into place between DJ and his dad.

And then that little Asian bitch from the potluck was there, coming through the line. When she got to DJ he took her hand in both of his and leaned down and whispered something to her. She stood on tiptoe and said something back. One of DJ's hands lifted and hovered, like he was going to touch her face. His dad said something, and DJ's hand dropped. "—later," I heard him finish. I extended my hand to her, smiling. But she didn't smile back or take my hand or even acknowledge me. She just slipped out of line and disappeared into the crowd. I turned to DJ, but he was staring after her, and then he caught himself, smiled, and took the next outstretched hand.

I thought about the woman ignoring me like that—"cutting someone dead," they used to call it in Victorian times—and I thought about her at the potluck, interrupting my conversation with DJ, and I thought of his eyes following her, and the fact that he had not invited her to join his family in the receiving line. And I knew what I had to do.

I noticed Elaine and Sarah looking at me curiously once or twice. I smiled back at them. I knew I was just glowing, I was so happy. Afterward we lingered, talking on the church steps. The little boys fussed about being hungry. I was hungry myself, and was just starting to wonder at Elaine's manners, keeping us all hanging around like that when finally she invited me to lunch. Again, the Lord had given me the perfect opportunity.

CHAPTER 18

Sarah

The day DJ was ordained was bright and clear. I was up, dressed in my nicest suit and my highest heels, and out the door for a contraband Denny's breakfast long before Pastor Rayburn had a chance to ring my room and suggest a quickie. I arrived at the church early, smelling guiltily of bacon grease and coffee. I brushed my teeth quickly in the Ladies', spritzed on some perfume, and was out and in my seat by the time Momma, Daddy, Elaine, Jason, and Joe Jr. arrived. And they didn't arrive alone. A tall, dark-haired woman sidled in with them and sat down beside me.

"Who's she?" I whispered to Momma.

"Jennifer something," Momma whispered back.

I couldn't understand why Jennifer Something was sitting with us, but I was prepared to live and let live. Jennifer Something wasn't. I took a lot of shit from Jimmy Jay, but I wasn't prepared to take it from some ninny in a Grandma suit whose last name nobody seemed to know. I knew what she was driving at when she started talking about the "minister's row," and how it was for "family," but I played dumb and gave her enough rope to hang herself. Which she would have done, if Elaine hadn't intervened. Jennifer Something had just about worked up the nerve to invite me to leave when Elaine leaned over and introduced me. I could see that discovering I was family was a nasty shock for Jennifer Something, but she bore up bravely, and even tried out a smile or two on me.

I ignored her, just kicked my shoe until it flew off, and then I swung my foot. I would have asked the lady in front of me to kick it back under the pew to me, but just then DJ, Joe, Pastor Rayburn, and all the elders came in. Pastor Rayburn preached. Joe prayed. The elders put their hands on DJ and prayed some more. I sneaked a look at Momma and Daddy. Momma was crying. Daddy was sitting stern and unsmiling, but I could see his pride in every line of his face. Jennifer Something sat neatly, knees together, hands folded, smiling a tiny smile. Joe Jr. and Jason played with their felt Bible sets. Elaine sat quietly, inscrutable, sweet, and holy, the perfect minister's wife.

When it was over, we all stood up and shuffled out to stand with DJ, because that's how it's done. The family and closest friends stand with the new minister. I looked around for Angela, wondering if this was when DJ would introduce her to Momma and Daddy, but Angela was nowhere in sight, and somehow, without my ever seeing how it happened, Jennifer Something wound up standing next to DJ, accepting congratulations, shaking hands with a warm, two-handed grasp, smiling graciously.

"Who is she?" I whispered to Elaine.

"She works at Narrow Way Northwest."

"But what's she doing here?"

"I'm not sure..." Elaine said. "I suppose I should invite her to lunch..."

But I wasn't listening. I had just spotted Angela in the line, and she had just spotted Jennifer Something. She came slowly toward us. When she got to me I shook her hand, smiled my best smile, and said, "Hey," as nicely as I could. I don't think it registered. Her eyes were on Jennifer. She shook Elaine's hand, and Momma and Daddy's hands without a word. When Angela got to DJ, I waited for him to say something. He did, but so quietly I couldn't hear. She said something back, and he dropped her hand. Jennifer Something reached for it, but Angela had already turned away. I glanced at Jennifer Something. She was smiling a tiny, catlike smile. And I knew DJ and Angela didn't stand a chance.

Then Pastor Rayburn said something lewd in my ear and I forgot all

about the little smile and the slight sag in Angela's back as she turned away from DJ. Pastor Rayburn managed to sit next to me at lunch. He kept putting his hand on my thigh and slipping it down between my legs. I clamped them tight together, but when he gave my soft inner thigh a vicious pinch, I gave up and just tried to ignore him.

"Are you seeing anyone?" Jennifer Something asked DJ halfway through lunch.

And so it began.

CHAPTER 19

Jennifer

I just asked a simple question. “Are you seeing anyone?” Conversation stopped. DJ’s parents sat there, bites of food halfway to their mouths, staring at him, awaiting his answer. Elaine, who had gone into the kitchen after more salad, turned around and leaned in the kitchen door, a pair of salad tongs in her hand.

DJ swallowed. “Yes,” he said. Nobody else said anything. It was like they were afraid or something.

“Who?” I asked brightly. “Anybody I know?”

DJ’s face flushed. “Angela Chang—you might not know her yet.”

“Isn’t she that little Vietnamese girl in the computer department? Is she old enough?” I laughed.

“She’s twenty-four,” DJ said politely. “And she’s Chinese, not Vietnamese. We met in college.”

Suddenly it was out of my hands. “She’s a *chink*?” Daddy asked—DJ’s father had asked me to call him Daddy by then. “You know what the Bible says about strange women. Find a good Christian girl, like Jennifer here.” I stared down at my lap, embarrassed and pleased. This man who knew DJ better than anyone felt that I was right for him! It had to be the Lord leading—there would be no obstacles once DJ understood.

"Come on, Daddy," DJ said, laughing uneasily, "her family was here when ours was still in the old country saving money for the boat. She's more American than we are."

My stomach soured at the way he was defending her. You only had to look at her to see that she wasn't a *real* American. I mean, her family was probably living in the tunnels under San Francisco for most of those years. And the way she put herself forward was hardly in keeping with Christian principles as I understood them.

"It's not biblical," Daddy said. "You could be disfellowshipped over this. You'd sure never get to preach."

"It's not such an issue anymore," DJ said patiently.

"It should be. You're not marrying *that woman*."

DJ's jaw tightened, and I knew that I had to defuse the situation. I gave silent thanks to the Lord that I, like Hadassah, had been trained for this very thing. I stepped in with the soft answer that turneth away wrath. "Who said anything about marriage?" I asked, keeping my voice soft, gentle, and nonthreatening. "You're just friends, right, DJ?"

DJ looked at me with something like gratitude, but then his jaw set. "We're more than that," he said.

I could have slapped him. I had just smoothed things over, provided him a way out of the fight that was threatening to mar the dinner celebrating his commitment to the Lord, the ministry, and our first real date, and he had refused to take it.

"No son of mine's marrying some chink," Daddy said furiously. "The day you do is the day you're no longer my son."

"Please don't call her that," DJ said, pushing back his chair and bumping me in the process. I almost spilled my juice.

"Why not? Isn't that what she is? Face the facts. You marry her, you'll have a bunch of half-witted, slant-eyed Mongoloids running around the house. These kids from mixed marriages end up with a lot of birth defects."

"That's ridiculous," DJ said, struggling to keep his voice mild and matter-of-fact.

"It's the truth. Oh, nobody'll admit it now that all the standards are gone, but it's still true, just like it's true that marrying somebody from another race isn't biblical. 'Be ye not unequally yoked together,'" Daddy quoted.

"*With unbelievers*," DJ shot back. "It's about marrying out of your *religion*, not your *race*. What about Zipporah? And Ruth? And Esther?"

"You're splitting hairs."

"I don't even know where to start," DJ said, shaking his head.

"Because you can't defend what you're doing," Daddy said triumphantly. "Isn't that right, Pastor Rayburn?"

I forgot to mention that DJ's sister, Sarah—the trashy blonde—and Pastor Jimmy Jay Rayburn, probably the best-known of all of our evangelists—he has his own TV show and everything—had joined us for lunch. It was like I was eating with royalty. It made it all the worse that Angela Chang had ruined everything.

Pastor Rayburn swallowed hastily, laid down his fork, and shifted awkwardly in his chair. "Well, usually it's better for a man in the Lord's work to have a wife who can really understand him. That's hard in an interracial marriage," he hedged.

"Angela and I have known each other for years. We understand each other perfectly," DJ said.

"You want to think real carefully about what you do, son. People will be looking to you as an example. What will the people you're trying to bring to the Narrow Way think? Will they be spending their time looking at your exotic little wife, or will they be looking to the Lord? Sometimes we shepherds have to go the extra mile to avoid offending the sheep."

Sarah choked into her napkin. "You all right, Sarah honey?" Pastor Rayburn asked, patting her on the back.

She muttered something unintelligible and pushed her chair back, napkin clapped to her face, eyes streaming.

"You need some help?" Jimmy Jay asked again.

Sarah shook her head and hurried out.

"What's wrong with her?" Daddy asked.

“Somethin’ must’ve gone down wrong,” said Jimmy Jay. “I better go see if she’s all right. You don’t know how much I appreciate that girl—she’s just like a daughter to me. I thank the Lord for her every day.”

DJ didn’t say anything more. He didn’t eat any more, either. He just sat and answered questions quietly and politely in this dead, flat voice. I did my best to help him past the awkwardness, but it was like he didn’t even know I was there. I felt sick at heart. Immediately after dessert, he excused himself and drove away. Nobody seemed exactly sure where he was going. I sat with the family, feeling like a bride bereft. I listened to Daddy talk to Pastor Rayburn, watched Sarah sitting, chewing bubble gum, arms folded, legs crossed at the knees, kicking her foot again, that harlot’s pump dangling off her toes, watched Elaine playing the perfect hostess and Joe out on the lawn playing with the boys, and I finally realized that my work wasn’t done. It didn’t matter what DJ’s family thought of me if DJ himself couldn’t see that the Lord had meant us to be together. I had to save him before he destroyed himself as well as his ministry. And just like before, as soon as I realized that, I knew what I had to do. It was like the Lord had been preparing me to meet this crisis my entire life.

CHAPTER 20

Sarah

I could have killed DJ for leaving me stuck with Momma and Daddy and the unspeakable Jennifer like that. I listened to Daddy talk to Pastor Rayburn. I listened to Jennifer talking about the Lord and sucking up to the men something awful. I stuck it out as long as I could before I made some lame excuse and bolted for the door and my rental car.

“Wait a minute, Sarah,” Pastor Rayburn called as I reached for the front door, but I just pretended I didn’t hear him and slammed the door behind me, then dashed for the car. I know there’d be hell to pay later, but I just couldn’t stand the thought of an afternoon sailing at Motel 6. Besides, I had to find a phone.

I drove until I saw a convenience store with a phone booth, zipped into the parking lot, and headed for the phone booth, digging coins out of the bottom of my purse.

I dialed DJ’s number and when he answered I didn’t wait for him to say anything, I just burst out, “If you want to marry Angela, do it. Don’t let Momma or Daddy or anybody stop you. Don’t care. *Be happy.*” And then I had to stop because my throat had tightened up.

“O-k-a-a-a-y,” DJ drawled, like he didn’t understand what I meant. And I suppose he didn’t. He didn’t know about Pastor Rayburn’s little boat. I doubted he had seen what I had seen in Jennifer’s tiny, smug smiles. DJ

was a lamb to the slaughter, and he didn't even know it. But there was nothing more I could do.

"Just *be happy!*" I said again, as fiercely as I could.

"I am," DJ said gently.

"Good." And then there was nothing more to say. I just stood there, thinking of poor, sad, lost Bethie, of Elaine in her quest for perfection, of Pastor Rayburn, and of how lost and alone I was. I wanted to cry.

"Sarah?" DJ asked. "You okay?"

"Yeah," I lied. "Bye."

I hung up, got back into the car, slid the keys into the ignition, and realized I didn't know where to go. If I went back to the hotel, there was sure to be a message from Pastor Rayburn. No way he'd miss an opportunity like this. I shouldn't go to the mall I had passed on the way to Elaine's house; that would be breaking the Sabbath. I didn't know where the parks were, I couldn't stand the thought of eating, and if DJ had any sense he was mending fences with Angela right now. Finally I gave up and went to the mall and snuck into a movie. I tried to lose myself in the car chases and murders, but all I could think of was how trapped I was. When the movie was over I went to dinner and left most of my meal untouched on my plate. I couldn't face the thought of Pastor Rayburn, so I went to another movie, and, finally, when I could put it off no longer, I went back to the hotel.

My message light was blinking. I listened to Jimmy Jay's voice, increasingly furious with each message. I didn't call him back, and when the phone rang a few minutes later, I just let it ring. In the morning I snuck out to breakfast again, then returned just in time to pick up my suitcase and a livid Pastor Rayburn.

"Who do you think you are, hijacking the car like that? I'm of a good mind to make you pay the rental fees yourself." He grabbed the car keys out of my hand and practically dragged me to the car.

"And should I explain why I felt hijackin' the car was a good idea?" I asked in my sweetest voice. "'Cause I can, ya know."

He sneered at me. "No way you'd do that. You'd be out of a job faster'n you could spit, 'n' no way would you get another one, not with the refer-

ence I'd give. You play *my* way, honey, an' don't you never forget it." We were at a red light by then, and he turned and gave me a hard, hard stare. The light turned green. The car behind us honked, but he just kept staring until he was sure I'd gotten the message, then he clamped his foot down on the gas and squealed through the intersection on yellow. The car behind us, trapped for the next light, honked furiously again. Pastor Rayburn stuck his hand out the window and waved at them as we drove away. At the airport, he said, "I can see I was wrong to let you see your family. If this is the thanks I get, you can just stay at work."

I didn't say anything. I didn't say anything on the plane, either, when Pastor Rayburn let his blanket fall over my lap so he could grab my hand and force it into his crotch. I just let it lay there. "Do it," he whispered after a minute.

I halfheartedly gave him a few strokes, then pulled my hand away when the flight attendant started up the aisle. Pastor Rayburn glared at me until she had gone, then grabbed my hand and pulled it back under his blanket. I wanted to die. I moved my hand as little as possible, but even that was too much. He hardened, then lurched in his seat, gave an involuntary groan, and I jerked my hand away, not quite fast enough. I stood up and pushed past him and he ran a quick hand up the inside of my leg. I almost died when I felt the eyes of the person sitting across from us on me. I hurried back to the bathroom and scrubbed the stickiness off my hand over and over, then I sat on the toilet seat until the attendant tapped on the door and asked if everything was all right. I came out and stood outside the rest room and chatted with the attendants until the pilot turned the seat belt light on again, and only then went reluctantly back to my seat.

Pastor Rayburn had forgiven me everything, at least for the moment. He rubbed a proprietary hand on my leg, leered at my neckline, and offered to pray with the attendants. In other words, he was back to his usual self. So was I. The bold, free Sarah I had almost remembered on Friday was gone, gone, gone, and the Sarah who meekly went to Motel 6 was back. I had a feeling this time she was back to stay.

CHAPTER 21

Jennifer

The Monday morning after DJ's ordination, I went into Pastor Johnson's office. Pastor Johnson is my boss, but I suspect not for long. He's a perfect example of one of the most frustrating things about working for Narrow Way corporate—the church leaders seem to think that a ministerial credential trumps all other forms of career preparation. We have a minister running human resources, a minister running accounting, a minister running shipping. Elaine is head of public relations, but she's a minister's wife and they even gave her a partial ministerial credential. Not a full one, of course, since she's only a woman, but enough of one so that they keep the perfect set of ministers running every department.

When I'm head of the department—and I will be, soon, since I have a master's degree in counseling whereas Pastor Johnson only has his ministerial credential and a few half-day seminars in crisis intervention—I expect I'll be given a ministerial credential, too. And by then, who knows? Maybe they'll be granting full credentials to women whose godly lives and professional training make them particularly qualified for a life of ministry. It could happen.

But for now, I play the game, and I don't make waves. I didn't that morning, either, even though what I had to do saddened me. I wished it didn't have to be this way. I went into Pastor Johnson's office and sat on the chair

on the other side of his big desk, knees together, hands folded on my neat navy skirt. "I don't know quite how to say this," I finally said.

"Yes?" he asked.

"There's an inappropriate relationship between one of the ministers and an office employee," I said.

"How do you know this?"

"He admitted it."

"To you?"

"In my presence."

"Who else was there?"

"Pastor Rayburn, and the man's family."

"He admitted this *in front of his family*?"

"Yes."

"What did Pastor Rayburn say?"

"He counseled the minister not to carry the matter further. He warned him that it could jeopardize his ministry."

"What did the minister say?"

"That they were all wrong."

"Who 'all'?"

"The minister's family."

"Who exactly are we talking about here?"

"I hate to name names."

"Well, who is the woman involved?"

"Angela Chang."

"*Angela*? I would never have thought it of her. I could have sworn she and DJ Conrad were an item. Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"And you're sure that Pastor Rayburn definitely said the relationship could jeopardize the minister's calling and family?"

"Yes." I didn't correct Pastor Johnson's assumption that the minister was married, and that he was someone other than DJ. I didn't like what I was doing, but DJ had left me no alternative. I gave a tiny, helpless shrug. "I didn't know what else to do."

"Leave it to me," he said in his soothing ministerial voice. "You did the right thing."

"So you don't need to know the minister's name?"

"No..." he said slowly. "Perhaps the less said, the better."

"What will you do?"

"I'll see to it that temptation is removed from his path."

"Thank God," I breathed. And it was done.

"I'm asking that you be present in the interview with Angela," Pastor Johnson said after a minute. "Just to avoid the appearance of evil."

"Yes."

He picked up the telephone and arranged an immediate meeting with the President of Narrow Way Corporate, Angela, himself, and me.



The President arrived first. Pastor Johnson filled him in. He sat, head down, hands between his knees, shaking his head sadly. "I'm sorry it's come to this. I always thought she and DJ were a good match."

I wanted to smack him, but that would hardly have been the Christian thing to do. Instead I sat quietly, my stomach churning. It had to be this way.

The President raised his head. "All right. Let's do this. Send Angela in, Jennifer," he said to me, just like I was some secretary or something. It galled, but I swallowed the insult. I stood and went to the door. Angela was sitting outside in a chair facing my own secretary's desk.

I smiled at her. "We're ready for you now," I said, then I stood back and let her precede me into the room.

The President looked at me, his eyebrows raised. "Yes, Jennifer?" he asked.

"I've asked her to be present," Pastor Johnson said quickly. "Just to avoid the appearance of evil."

"Oh," said the President. I didn't like the way he said it.

"I can leave," I said quickly.

"No, just take a seat," the President said absently, pinching the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. I darted a look at Pastor

Johnson and saw his lips tighten, so I knew he didn't like his boss taking over like this, but he couldn't say anything, either.

The President turned to Angela. "The brethren in Kentucky need your unique talents."

"What?" she asked. "I'm just a network specialist." She sounded confused.

"Well, actually, your position has become redundant here. We're transferring you rather than letting you go."

"But I was just hired a few months ago. I still have a to-do list as long as my arm. Is my work unsatisfactory?"

"No."

"Is it something else?"

The President looked uneasily at me in my seat behind Angela. "We've learned that you're involved in an inappropriate relationship, one that could jeopardize the Lord's work. We could fire you, but we'd prefer to transfer you. Give you a clean slate, the opportunity to start over fresh."

"An *inappropriate relationship*?"

"You know what I mean."

"I didn't think the church looked at it that way anymore."

"God's laws never change."

"But it's so common now."

"That doesn't make it right. You can transfer and start over with a clean record. Or we'll fire you."

"I'll try my luck on my own," she said defiantly.

"You want to destroy his ministry and his family?"

"His family will come around. He says so."

"*His family will come around?* How dare you put them through that?" If the President had had a gavel, he would have pounded it on Pastor Johnson's desk. "This conversation is over. Take the transfer."

She stood up and walked out without a word.

The President looked at Pastor Johnson. "It seems so out of character," he said. "Something's not right." And then he looked at me. "Are you sure about ..."

I couldn't believe he would doubt me. I looked down at my hands and nodded. "Such a tragedy ... so much potential." I sounded as sad as could be.

He sighed, pushed himself to his feet, and walked out. It was over.

I ran into DJ in the hall soon afterward. "I'm so sorry about Angela," I said.

"What about her?"

So Angela hadn't said anything to him yet. Just as well that he heard it from a friend. "They've offered her transfer or termination."

"What for?"

"She's inappropriately involved with a minister."

"That's a lie."

"No. He admitted it. So did she. I thought you should hear it from a friend."

"Who is it?"

"I can't name names. It's confidential."

"But you know."

"Yes."

"When?"

"This morning. But he said it's been going on for a long time."

"I don't believe it. We're engaged."

"Talk to her. If you're really right for each other you'll work it out."

CHAPTER 22

Sarah

Back at work on Monday, it was almost like the weekend had never happened. I retooled one of Pastor Rayburn's old sermons, then went to an early lunch with an unusually preoccupied Janet.

"What's up?" I finally asked.

"Oh, you know.... It's just that thing up at Narrow Way Northwest. It always bothers me when these things happen."

"What things? I was just there, and nobody said a thing."

"I can't go into details, but one of the workers was involved with a married minister. We got pulled in because of the possible legal ramifications. They offered her a transfer, so there must be some question, but she refused it. They're concerned she might sue, so they called us."

"Who is it?"

"I can't say, but the information came through the counselor's office, so it's credible."

I hot-footed it back to my office, made sure Pastor Rayburn was still AWOL, and called DJ on the office line. Hey, it wasn't like Pastor Rayburn was going to turn me in or anything, right? DJ picked up on the third ring.

"So who's the secretary?" I asked breezily.

There was a long, heavy, terrible pause. "It wasn't a secretary," he finally said. The silence closed in again.

"DJ?" I was ashamed to hear my voice quivering.

"I can't talk about it." He sounded like he was choking.

"DJ, it's not true. I saw how she looked at you."

"Oh, it's true, all right. She's leaving voluntarily. Would she do that if she were innocent?"

"Talk to her. You have to talk to her."

"Funny." He didn't sound like he thought it was funny at all. "Jennifer said pretty much the same thing."

"Why were you talking to Jennifer, of all people, about it?"

"She's the one who told me."

"Why?"

"She thought I should hear it from a friend." He sounded a little defensive.

"But DJ—"

"I can't talk." And the phone clicked in my ear.

And that was it. Angela was gone, and Jennifer Something wasted no time in taking her place. I wasn't even surprised when I got the wedding invitation an indecently short time afterwards.

CHAPTER 23

Elaine

The last echoes of the recessional had faded. The last piece of cake had been boxed up. The last gift had been opened and dutifully recorded in the white satin wedding album. The last crepe paper streamer had been pulled down and crumpled into the trash. The limousine—the first ever to grace the Narrow Way church parking lot in Paradise—had crunched down the patched and weedy concrete street and swept around the corner into oblivion.

Daddy had changed back into greasy coveralls and headed for the shop, Momma went into her room and shut the door, and Sarah drove away with Aunt Margaret, Daddy's youngest sister, and the only relative who ever visited us. Bethie's room stood empty, dark shadows etched into the rough floorboards and bare mattress. Hot, dusty wind lifted the sheers at my bedroom windows. The house was too silent to hide voices, so Joe and I fought in the way we had perfected when Jason was born—in soft whispers, hissing our pain and anger at each other.

"Choose, Elaine. Come home with us now, or not at all."

I leaned forward, staring down at my lap, my hands gripping the edge of the bed. The neat linen suit creased across my thighs. *I hate linen*, I thought blankly—it creases as soon as I put it on. *Why do I always buy it?* I pushed myself to my feet and slipped off my long, narrow jacket, then unbuttoned my skirt's waistband. *Loose again*, I noted. *Have to take it to Maria and get the button moved over again.*

"Which will it be?" Joe's voice came from behind me.

I whirled. "How can you even ask this? This is my *family*. Don't you think I'd know if Daddy were capable of something like that?" My hands curled into fists, all by themselves.

"I don't know *what* to think," Joe said. "I just know what I saw. Your Dad had Jason in the barn, and his hands where they shouldn't be—and when he saw me he jerked them away like he'd been burned. And Jason was crying."

"He was constipated—I *told* you that. Do you honestly believe Daddy would ever hurt the boys? He loves them like his own—more than his own." I hauled our garment bag out of the closet, yanked the zipper down, and slid my crumpled jacket over a hanger.

"It's not about love," Joe said. "It's about pederasty—"

"Ask Pastor Rayburn," I interrupted. "Ask anybody at church. For Pete's sake, ask Bethie's old boyfriend—" I snapped my fingers, seeing his face in my mind, unable to remember his name—"whatshisname." I stood there, hands on hips.

Joe took a step closer. "Where is Elizabeth? What happened to her?"

"What does that have to do with anything?" I bent over the dresser, pulling white cotton underwear, walking shorts, and a cotton blouse out of the drawer. I dressed quickly, my back turned to him, my face hidden.

"One day she's passing out at our wedding, and the next day she's just gone. Did your parents ever call the police?"

"How should I know? I was on my honeymoon, if you remember."

"I remember. Do you?"

How could he bring up such a painful memory? Did he hate me that much? I fumbled with the clothes in my hands, thinking of that terrible night, the inexplicable fear, the pain, and then at long last sleep. And the horrifying nightmares. Joe had held me, patted my back, murmured soothing nothings. We'd waited a month before either of us felt up to trying again. It had gotten better in the end, but sometimes I still felt myself freeze, terrified of a nameless, faceless something. I supposed it happened to everyone.

"Elaine," his voice was insistent, "do you remember?"

"Yes," I hissed, goaded beyond caution.

"Did you ever think there might have been a reason?"

"No. I'm fine. You don't have to keep rubbing my nose in it." I crossed the room in long, angry strides, and stuffed my soiled things into the garment bag's pockets.

"But Elizabeth just disappeared. Why? And how?"

"Why not? Who knows what went on in that head of hers?"

"Well, then, what about Sarah? She's gorgeous—she could have anybody. Why has she never had a single date? And you know that's true. You told me that."

"She's just not interested." That was all I could think to say.

His voice became more gentle. "Why do you shake sometimes when I touch you? Why do you wake up screaming? And what's with all your mom's bruises? She's not that clumsy—I've watched her. And why are there bloody streaks on the walls?"

"That's just dirt," My voice came low and hard. "Bethie was retarded. Sarah was a smart-mouthed little brat. DJ was the boy."

"And what were you?"

"*Nothing*," I whispered furiously. "I was *nothing*, just an extra pair of hands." I stopped, appalled at what I had said.

"I'm sorry," said Joe.

My shoulders dropped. "What for?" I asked, feeling exhausted. "Things are different now. I mean, look at us."

"Yes. We're everything your Daddy wanted, aren't we?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Just that you're still trying for top billing? Marrying me was part of it."

The arrogance of the man! "A touch conceited, aren't we?"

"I don't mean me personally—I mean I'm a minister. You thought they'd be proud of you for marrying a minister."

"What's wrong with that? You're the only man they ever approved of. It wasn't like there was a lot of choice." Too late, I bit my tongue, wishing the words back.

Joe's face closed and he swallowed. "This isn't about us," he said after a minute. "This is about the boys."

"You can't honestly think my family would hurt them," My voice was scornful, but it trembled at the edges. I couldn't bear the pain in his face.

"That's it, then," Joe said quietly. His shoulders slumped.

"You can't take my sons away from me." My voice rose.

Downstairs the screen door banged and heavy footsteps crossed the kitchen.

"Gwennie?" Daddy's voice echoed up through the empty house.

My heart eased. *Daddy would fix this. He would tell Joe, and Joe would have to believe him, because Daddy never lied, even when the truth hurt.* I yanked the door open.

"Daddy!"

"Elaine, stop," Joe was beside me, pushing at the door.

"So that's why you had your parents take the boys? Daddy!" I called again.

"What?"

"Joe says you hurt Jason. Is that true?" I wanted my voice to be strong, angry, and mocking, but the trembling undercut the scorn.

"Elaine, stop." Joe pulled me away from the door. "This isn't the way."

"It's *exactly* the way. Let's get this out in the open."

"Do you honestly think he'd tell the truth about it?"

"Why not? He always has before."

"Are you sure?"

"What's going on?" Daddy stood in the doorway. "What did you say?"

"Joe says he saw you ... touching Jason ... in the barn." I could barely say the words.

Daddy laughed. "Boy, you need your eyes checked."

"My eyes are fine," Joe said angrily. "You jerked your hand away."

"You're as crazy as Bethie."

"Where is she?" Joe asked quickly. "Where is your other daughter?"

"Daddy, he says he's taking the boys unless I agree to not let you see them anymore." My voice broke.

Daddy's hands turned into fists at his sides. "Where are they?"

"Somewhere safe," Joe said steadily.

"They were perfectly safe here."

"Were they?"

"Sure they were."

"I don't think so."

"Well, I can't control your filthy mind."

Joe turned away from him, toward me. "Come with me, Elaine."

"He wouldn't do something like that, Joe," I begged. "He loves them. I won't destroy his relationship with my sons."

"I believe he's dangerous. If you refuse to protect them, I'll have to do what I'll have to do. It's your relationship with your sons that's in question now."

"I'm a great mom!" I shouted. "You know it."

"There's no need to raise your voice, Elaine," said Daddy. "You can at least act like a lady."

"A 'great mom' doesn't endanger her kids," said Joe. "Choose, Elaine."

"And I thought you were a good Christian," Daddy said sadly. "The Devil's sure working overtime today."

"He wouldn't do something like that," I begged Joe again.

"Good-bye, Elaine," Joe said.

"You'll ruin DJ and Jennifer's wedding and throw away your career over this?" Daddy asked.

"Yes," Joe said. "For my sons, I will." He pushed past us. Dad's scarred, heavy fists clenched again, and terror kicked me in the belly, but then Joe was past and walking deliberately down the stairs, into the silent kitchen, out the door, and out of my life.

I looked at Daddy.

"Welp, better get back to work," he said cheerfully. He turned and started back toward the stairs.

Something was wrong. My life had just ended. How could he just pretend nothing had happened? "Daddy?" I called.

"What?" he asked impatiently. He wouldn't turn around.

"Is there any truth in what he said?"

“How can you even ask?”

How could I ask? How could I entertain such an idea about the man I had loved and admired my whole life? Such a thing only becomes possible when one is driven to the wall, as I had just been by the loss of my children. I bent my head, twisting my fingers together. “I want my babies,” I whispered, my voice thick.

Daddy came back and patted my shoulder awkwardly. “It’ll all blow over. You’ll see. Every couple has spats. Cheer up! Christians are happy people! Whining never solved anything.”

“But his parents have them. I’ll never see them again.”

“I know, honey.”

“He said I’d hurt them.”

“Did you?”

My eyes flew to his face. “No!”

“You must have done *something*.”

My gut twisted. “How can you even say that?”

“Most of the time, where there’s smoke, there’s fire. If you really deserve to have your children, the Lord will give them back to you. You just have to trust that He’ll do what’s best. If you’re doing what you should be, you have to expect to face trials. Welp, better get back to work.” He ran down the steps. The screen door squeaked, then banged.

I sank down on the bed, my face in my hands. Time stopped. Someone knocked, then pushed the door open.

“Joe’s gone?” asked Momma’s voice.

I looked up at her. My eyes felt raw. “How could he say such things?”

“Maybe it’s for the best,” she whispered.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Her face clouded, closed down. “Maybe you were getting too wrapped up in the things of this world. Now you can focus on the Lord’s work,” she said vaguely.

“They’re my sons.”

“I know.” She hugged me quickly. “There’s a phone call for you. Somebody from your office. They said you should call them right back.”

I reached wearily for my cell phone, thumbed it on, and dialed. "Hello, it's me." I grabbed a pen, dropped it, fumbled for it, picked it up again, and began writing, the strokes shaky at first, then firming as I listened. "Can you give me his number? Okay, I'm on it." I hung up. The pain was still there, but I was no longer immobilized. I had a job to do, an emergency to address. And I could do it. This disaster I could face.

"What's happening?"

"It's confidential," I said. "I need to make some calls, then drive up to Portland, maybe fly to California."

"But you just got here," she protested.

"I have to go." And I did. The disaster at work was real; it threatened Pastor Paul Bowen, head of Bring Them Home Ministries, one of Narrow Way Corporate's largest contributors. Terrible as it was, a tiny, fugitive part of me was grateful that it offered me a graceful way out of this terrible moment.

Momma was still standing there. "But what about Joe and the boys?"

"I have to work." If I didn't work, I would have to think, and I couldn't bear to do that right now.

"All right, if you're sure." She drifted out, humming. It took me a moment to recognize the song: "*This world is not my home, I'm just a-passing through....*"

The jet carried me away, away, away, down to California, to rescue Pastor Bowen. I sat in meetings. I drafted crisis communications plans. I tried to ignore the fact that Pastor Bowen, founder of Bring Them Home Ministries, had been implicated in the disappearance of a girl from one of the refugee camps. I focused on the work and on my job, which was keeping Narrow Way Corporate from being tarnished by scandal. All through the trip to Portland and the flight to California, all through the meetings with the embattled Bowen, the division president, the unpleasant, oily head of public relations and his snooty wife, all through all those things, I kept telling myself that it would be all right. Joe wouldn't follow through, I'd walk in the door at home, and there he and the boys would be, waiting for me. I didn't dare call to check. A week later, all plans made, all media training done, I flew home.

I unlocked the door, kicked off my high heels, set down my suitcase, briefcase, and PowerBook, and called, "Joe? Jason? Joey? I'm home." The house was stuffy and stale. A sharp, mocking echo answered me. *Maybe they're just at the park*, I told myself, *or at Joe's office at the church*. I hurried into the boys' bedroom. Jason's car bed and Joey's crib stood deserted, the blankets tumbled. I pulled open a drawer. It was still filled with baby clothes. My heart lifted.

I strode out of the boys' room, down the hallway, and into the kitchen. Half a loaf of bread sat on the cupboard, exactly where it had been when we'd left for DJ's wedding. Green, white, and blue blotches covered its surface. I opened the refrigerator, found the carton of milk, opened its top, and peered in. The stench nearly gagged me. I shook it gently. The top moved as a unit, solid, then cracked into soft, cheesy bergs. My world cracked with it. I closed the carton carefully, put it back in the refrigerator, and closed the door. *My babies had drunk from that milk carton, and it wasn't all right. It would never be all right again.* Heedless of my business suit, I slid down the cupboard until I was sitting on the floor, knees up, arms tight around them, forehead braced on their bony caps. The telephone shrilled. I let it ring. The machine picked up. I waited. Joe's voice filled the room. "Hello, we're sorry we missed you. Please leave a message."

The machine clicked. "Elaine, can you pick up?" It was my boss. I stumbled to my feet, crossed the kitchen, picked up the telephone.

"Hello? I just walked in the door," I said. My voice sounded strange in my ears.

"I'm glad I caught you," he said, sounding like he wasn't glad at all. "Why don't you take a few days to pack, find a place. No rush. Don't bother coming in to clean out your desk until you've gotten yourself resettled. Once you're on your feet, we'll discuss some contract work. We're needing to find a place for the daughter, out of town for a while. You know. We thought we'd put her in your office."

My head spun. "I don't understand."

Silence. "Haven't you picked up your messages over the last few days?"

"No. I've been busy down south."

"Listen to them. Then call me and we'll talk."

I listened to my messages. It was nothing I wouldn't have expected if I had thought about it, though I would have thought he'd have the courage to fire me in person, rather than on my answering machine. I didn't call him back. What was there to say? I moved through the next days cocooned in an awful, soul-killing silence. I tried to pack, found I couldn't do it, and called movers instead. I rented a storage unit and sent everything there except for my office equipment. I found a house for sale, dipped into my retirement fund for a down payment, set up my office equipment, and bought a new bed. I couldn't sleep in the bed Joe and I had shared.

Narrow Way Northwest's Plant Services director sent the office custodian over to clean, paint, and shampoo our old house. I went back once to walk through it. It was clean and shining. I stood at the sparkling kitchen sink and looked out over the manicured back yard. It looked strange and alien without the boys' toys. I looked in the empty refrigerator and for one mad moment felt the scream rising in my throat. *The milk was gone. The last thing I had fed my babies, and it was gone.* I had wanted to take it to the new house, I realized, to bring something of my motherhood, something of my children, with me. But the movers had thrown it away, severed the last bond while I was drowning in silence.

I had nothing for my babies. And then I realized all over again—my babies were gone, too. I had lost them through some terrible, unidentifiable mistake.

I straightened up, head thrown back, mouth wide in a soundless wail. Who was there to hear me? And at last I had the answer to the question philosophers loved to pose: If a tree falls in the forest and there's no one to hear, does it make a sound? *The correct answer,* said a prissy little voice in my head, *is that it doesn't matter.*

The telephone rang. I let the machine pick up. "Hello, we're sorry we missed you..." said Joe's warm, wonderful, terrible voice. My head snapped around. I crossed the room in three long leaps, seized the machine, ripped the cord loose, and pulled my arm back to throw it. But the custodian had already painted the wall. It would leave a mark, and everyone would know.

I looked around, desperate for release. I rushed outside, only to face the neighbor lady, watering her begonias.

“Why, hello, Elaine. What’s your hurry? Are you about done with the moving? Did you and Joe get another church?”

I stopped, gasping. I fought for control, then smiled and, my heart thundering, the answering machine clutched in my sweaty, shaking hand, made polite small talk while my world shattered around me. And then I turned and, still carrying the answering machine, slid gracefully into my car, pulled out of the driveway, waved to the neighbor lady, and drove away. At my new house I looked at the answering machine and again the urge to crush it rose in me, but then I thought of the terrible silence, and instead carried it carefully into my bedroom, set it on the nightstand by the bed, and plugged it in.

And sometime after midnight, when I finally stumbled into bed only to lie there, eyes wide open in the darkness, at last I gave in, pressed the button and listened to Joe’s comforting voice as I had so many nights in the past.

“Hello, we’re sorry we missed you....”

I turned my face into the pillow and wept.

CHAPTER 24

Elaine

The telephone woke me in the morning. It was the head of Narrow Way Corporate down in California. “You ready for your new office assistant?” he asked cheerfully.

My mind whirled. “Assistant?”

“Rose Bowen?” The cheer leached out of his voice. “We discussed having her in your office. To be on hand for background information? About corporate history?”

“Oh. Yes.” I rubbed a hand across my eyes, stumbled out of bed, and down the hall to my desk, where there was paper and a pen. “When will she be arriving?”

“We got her a ticket for the day after tomorrow. She’ll need a place to stay while she’s up there....” He let it hang, obviously expecting me to step into my Narrow Way Minister’s Wife routine and offer her a room in my house. But I wasn’t a minister’s wife, not anymore, and my home was empty, as barren as I had become.

“I’ll find her a place,” I said in my most professional voice. I got the flight information, hung up, took a shower, dressed, and sat down at my desk to find a woman I didn’t know and doubted I’d like a place to live.



My life became a blur, my only anchor the telephone, over which I conducted interviews, ordered advertising space, and discussed media

opportunities and impending crises. The Narrow Way might not want me in their offices, tainted as I was, but they surely needed me. Parking Rose Bowen with me was probably logical to them. They needed me out of sight, and the division down south needed Rose out of sight. So I was elected to be her nanny until the little girl showed up. It was work. I drew my mantle of professionalism about me. Professionalism became my carapace.

And then Rose arrived. Late. Sloppy. Inefficient. Her suit was appalling. Her behavior and appearance threatened to compromise the one thing I had left, my professional reputation. It didn't help that I was uncomfortably aware that she had found herself in a situation all too similar to mine—and that she had chosen to betray her father. I kept seeing myself in her chair, and Daddy in Paul Bowen, and I just couldn't make myself like her. And to be honest, I was not at my best.

Whatever else I could say about Rose, I had to admit she wasn't stupid. She picked up on my distaste the first day. To my fury, she called someone down at Southern, who contacted their legal department, who called me and informed me that Rose should be paid a lump sum and cut loose, rather than working in my office until everything blew over.

She showed up late again the second morning. I knew she'd talked, and she knew I knew it.

I said, "They've asked me to sit you down this morning and get the background information, then just cut you a check for the full amount of the consulting fee. You need not come into the office again. Just leave me a number where I can reach you if I need to."

"Okay. Whenever you're ready," Rose said.

She sounded exhausted, and suddenly I found myself really looking not at the terrible hair, or at the ugly suit, but at *her* for the first time. "You don't look good," I said. "Want some juice or something?"

"No. Can we just get started?"

"Can't wait to see the back of me?" I asked sweetly, then bit my tongue.

"What do you think?" she snapped. "What the *hell* do you think? Do you think I thrive on dealing with self-righteous, pretentious bitches with god complexes? I've spent my life doing it, and I've had enough! You know

nothing about me, or about my life, but you've decided exactly who and what I am because you have your fucking two sources. Was one of them my dad? A good, reputable, god-fearing pillar of the church, he is! You're too sure of yourself for it to even occur to you that there might be something you don't know, another side to the story? Just what do you think? Of course I want to get out of here." She was screaming. And then she was crying. She turned, groped for a chair, dropped into it and buried her head in her arms. Her shoulders shook.

I was silent—stunned. *Was that really how she saw me? Was that what I had become? How? And when?* All my life, I had been taking care of others—first my sisters and DJ, then the church, and then my own children. I had thought it was who I was, that loving and caring lay at my very core, that caring was too much a part of me to ever fail. But if Joe was right, I had failed. I had failed Bethie. I had failed my own children. I had failed my church. I had even failed this strange woman sobbing in my garage turned office. I had failed at my very foundation. I pushed the thought away. *It doesn't matter*, I told myself. *We just have to get through today. Then we never have to see each other again.* I said aloud, "Sounds like I'm not the only one judging around here. And don't you ever swear at me again."

"Or what?" she blubbered into her arms. "Who the *fuck* do you think you are? I'll swear if I *damn well please*. Let me tell you something. I *never* swear in front of *anyone*. I'm Lumpy Rose, the Brown Recluse. I'm *fucking invisible*. And nobody ever thought to ask why." She gave up then, and just cried.

I just stared at her. And then I found myself thinking of Bethie, and the questions Joe had asked. *Why had Bethie been mute for so many years? And where had she gone?* Failure or not, the habit of caretaking was too strong for me to break. I went and got a glass of water, sat down beside Rose, and held a tissue under her arms where she could see it. "Blow," I said.

She took it, sniffed mightily, and blew her nose.

"Drink this," I said to her, like I used to say to Bethie.

She drank, hiccupped, and blew her nose again. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said all that."

"No, I think it needed to be said." Somewhere inside me a fissure had opened, just a crack, but it was there, and real. I wasn't sure what lay behind it. Inside it. I wasn't sure I was ready to find out.

"But not at the top of my lungs." She managed a wobbly smile.

"Probably not." I looked at her carefully.

She shrugged. "Can we just do this? Then I'll get out of your hair."

"Okay." I flipped open my laptop, opened a file, and held my fingers above the home row, ready to start typing. "Tell me first what you think about the news coverage."

"I haven't seen it," she said.

My eyebrows rose.

"I was packing, then I was traveling, then last night I was too tired and upset."

"Upset? Why?"

"I heard about the investigation. And there was personal stuff."

I looked at her over the laptop. "There is no 'personal stuff' now. This is a media crisis. Everything's fair game. The press will find out. If I get blind-sided by dirty laundry, I can't be effective. The best thing that you can do—in fact, what you're being paid to do—is tell me everything. There are no secrets."

She looked straight at me. "What do you want to know?"

"Let's watch the coverage first." I popped in a video. The screen flickered, and then a pretty Asian woman read in a serious voice: "Elder Paul Bowen, Director of Mission Outreach and founder of Bring Them Home Ministries, an organization specializing in bringing together adoptive parents from America and Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian children from the refugee and internment camps in Thailand, was questioned yesterday regarding his alleged role in the disappearance of Hang Thuy Nguyen."

"The young Vietnamese girl left the refugee camp with Bowen and was last seen boarding the plane with him, witnesses said. Tissue fragments found in the plane are being prepared for DNA analysis to determine if they are linked to the child. The disappearance of the girl is still under investigation, as are previous allegations of child abuse." The screen shifted

and Bowen's face filled the screen. The camera pulled back and showed the Riverside, California, Police Department. Bowen stood straight and tall outside the building, his hair glinting and drifting like silvery spider silk in the sunlight. He strode down the steps toward the cameraman.

"... do you know where Hang Nguyen is?"

"That little girl was like a daughter to me," he replied, looking straight into the camera. "She was fine when we got on the plane." I found myself thinking of my words to Joe, that Daddy "loved the boys as much as he loved his own children." I shoved the memory away.

"Where did she go?" the off-screen reporter asked.

"She must have just wandered off."

"Off the *plane*, sir?"

"No, not off the plane—"

"Then where?"

"I don't know."

"How do you answer the other charges of child abuse?"

"The Devil's working hard in these End Times." Bowen's face filled the screen, his sad eyes looking into the camera. "The Bible says that the 'hearts of the children will be turned against the fathers,' and that 'young women will dream dreams.' It also says that God's people will be persecuted. While it saddens me to see it happening in my own family, and to have my own daughter be one of the instruments of persecution, I take comfort in the love and support of the Lord, my wife, and my remaining daughter, Megan. This persecution is just one more reminder that we are living in the end times and that Jesus is coming soon. Praise the Lord!"

"So you deny the charges? You claim your daughter is lying?"

"I know that she's always had a weak grip on reality, that she's always felt that we were too hard on her, not letting her do exactly what she wanted when she wanted. She probably feels she's getting a little of her own back."

"Where is your daughter now?" the reporter asked.

"I don't know where she is at present. She's not answering her phone—"

Rose shook her head. "But he knows I'm here—I know he does," she protested. "I called them when I got here. I talked to Mom." I held up a shushing finger. The tape played on.

"—you reported her missing?"

"No. I think she's just ashamed of her part in all this and doesn't want to face us. I don't have any reason to believe she's in danger."

The screen dissolved into fuzz. I switched it off. Dread filled me. Bowen's evasive responses sounded too much like things I had heard Daddy say. But the church was standing behind Pastor Bowen. There must be extenuating circumstances. He must be a good man. Then dread poured through me in a flood of images and fragments, things Daddy had said and done, things I had accepted, things that now acquired frightening undertones. *But they couldn't be true! If Daddy was evil, I would have known. It would have been clear.* I forced the dread back down and focused on the task at hand. I couldn't allow the personal and the professional to overlap.

Rose's face was white. She was digging her fingernails into her hands. They left white splotches and deep red crescents.

"Well. That's the gist of it," I said. "There are other interviews, but that one covers the main points." I paused. "Do you need a minute?"

Rose raised her head and turned blank eyes toward me. "I don't think that little girl was fine when she left Thailand," she whispered.

"What makes you think not?"

"Because I know my father."

"Why would you say that?"

"He molested me for years."

The dread surged back. Rose had spoken the unspeakable.

"When did he stop?" *He has to have stopped. The church is standing behind him.*

"He didn't—he still tries every time he can get me alone."

I fought for control. "But there's a big difference between molestation and murder."

"I know."

Rose reached into her bag for another tissue. Her hand stopped, then, scrabbled. "Wait—I think there's a way we can know." She pulled a

videotape out of her purse. "The pilot dropped it off on the way back from the airport, before any of this came up. I took it to AV and had them run a copy, then took the original back for the file and left the copy for them to make dupes."

"But why do you have it here? Why isn't it in the file?"

"Because I forgot. I was going to lunch, so I just stuck it into my bag on the way out the door. Then I forgot it."

It was just too convenient, and if it was true, it was too big. Who knew where it might end? There had to be parameters, safe places, cities of refuge. But what if there weren't?

"Rose," said I slowly, "before we go any further, I need to know. Are you being straight with me? Because if you're using a child's death for your own reasons—no matter how good they may be—if you're accusing your father falsely in this instance, or manufacturing evidence, you can be prosecuted ... and I'll personally make it my business to break you." *Please say you're lying.*

"That's just it," she said wearily. "I haven't publicly accused my father of anything. I only said anything to one person—Joe Rasmussen, head of Narrow Way Corporate. I was trying to convince him to make sure somebody was along during the trip to watch out for Hang. I don't know why my father is saying all those things. The only thing I did was hand over the file to the police when they came in with a search warrant. My director told me to! I've only told one person about this tape—Janet in Legal Affairs. She's looking at the copy down there. If it's still in AV." She looked down at her clenched hands again. One of the crescents was oozing a thin red line.

I reached over and picked up the tape. "Let's see what's on here." I popped it in and adjusted the tracking. A swooping strip of pavement, and then Paul Bowen and Hang Nguyen walked into the frame. A gust of wind flipped Bowen's silvery hair. He smoothed it down with one huge hand, then reached down for the tiny girl. She shrank back, and his hand darted down to grasp hers. He straightened and started toward the camera, smiling and waving.

Hang's little arm was strained up, he was nearly pulling her off the ground. She tried to keep up, but she was stumbling, limping, and at one point she lost her footing completely. Tears rolled down her cheeks, but her mouth stayed firmly closed. Finally Bowen reached down, grabbed her, swooped her up, tossed her into the air, caught her, and then cuddled her close, all the while smiling at the camera.

The child's mouth opened in a soundless scream and she strained back for a second, then collapsed against him, curiously still. As they approached the camera, it jiggled down for a moment to Bowen's hand, cradling the little girl's upper thighs just below her bottom. Above the massive hand a dark wet spot showed, nearly black against the green of her tiny tunic. Spots on a flowered sheet. And then they were out of camera range. The videographer turned to catch a glimpse of Hang's face against Bowen's shoulder. It was frozen in a rictus of pain, tears pouring down her cheeks. But she was silent. Paul Bowen climbed the stairs, turned at the top, just outside the door of the airplane, lifted Hang's face, turned it toward the camera. His lips moved. I could read the word: "Smile." His lifted his lips in a broad pantomime. Hang tried. Her hair stuck to her cheeks in wet streaks, her eyes were dull, but her lips shaped themselves into a grimace—little more than a baring of her teeth, really. She was trembling. And another dark spot spread on the front of her tunic. The screen went black. We were silent. I was horror-struck.

"Where was she before that flight?" I asked Rose.

"Dad picked her up from the camp. He got there early, which was why they were gone by the time Joe Rasmussen talked to his sister, Natalie."

"So she was with him."

"I guess so."

"Anybody else?"

"I don't know. I don't think so. Excuse me." She dashed for the bathroom. I heard her being sick. The old patterns were too strong. I followed Rose into the bathroom, wet a washcloth, held her hair back out of the vomit, and placed the cool, wet washcloth on the back of her neck. Rose sank down on the floor, leaning her head against the side of the toilet. I

checked the washcloth. It had gotten hot. I ran it under the cold water and put it back on her neck.

“Better?” I asked her. My voice sounded as cool as the washcloth. And then, “There’s more than just this, isn’t there?”

“Yes.”

“What?”

“I didn’t stop him. I knew this was going to happen, and I did nothing.”

I thought of my own children. My heart thundered in my ears.

“Doing what?” I could hardly get the words out.

“Hurting kids. Hurting little kids.”

“How did you know?”

“I just knew—somebody told me—I tried to go with him, but he wouldn’t take me. I should’ve gone on my own. I could have saved her. But I didn’t.”

“Did he do that to you?”

“Yes.”

“When did he start?”

“It’s the first thing I can remember, him putting his hands between my legs, and knowing it would hurt, and saying, ‘Please, Daddy, don’t. I’ll be good.’”

I just listened to her. Watched her mouth working.

“And he said, ‘I have to do this. Hold still.’ And I tried. I held still as long as I could, but then I couldn’t any more, and he got mad, and his face got all twisted, and he shouted at me to hold still. But I couldn’t. Because it felt funny, and then it hurt so bad, and I started to cry, and he said, “‘If you’re going to cry, I’ll give you something to cry about, little girl.’ And then it was like I just exploded, and then I think I went into the dark place. I don’t remember any more.”

“When was that?”

“I was still in diapers.”

“And you think that’s what happened to Hang?”

“Yes. But I think it was worse for her. She’s gone, and I’m still here.”

"Did you ... uh ... tell anyone?"

"No. I thought he just did it to me because I tempted him somehow."

"What?"

"That's what my mom said—that I'd been tempting him."

I thought of my own mother, furious when Daddy hugged me in my room. "When did she tell you that?" I asked Rose.

"I think I was about five."

The psych classes I had taken in college had given me the right answer, one that felt frighteningly at odds with what my gut was telling me was true. Why had Daddy's insistence on modest behavior from our earliest days never struck me as odd? Now it did. But I couldn't think about that right now. I parroted my psych book, instead. "A five year old does not 'tempt' a grown man."

"No, I suppose not." Rose sounded mildly surprised.

"Let me ask you this—do you think that your mind could be putting you in Hang's place because you empathize so strongly?"

"No. The knowledge has always been a part of me, something I've always been ashamed of. I just never had a context to put it into. And he kept on doing it—still tries, if he can catch me alone. And my mom knew—she must have known." Again, she sounded surprised. "How could Mom have let it happen all those years? She didn't! Those trips... But she always came back," she finished bitterly.

Terror took root deep inside me. I leaned back and closed my eyes, fighting in vain to separate the personal from the professional. *I couldn't think about this now, not now, not when I had an obligation to the church, not when thinking about it meant wondering if I had let my own boys be hurt as Rose had been hurt, as that little girl...*

"This changes everything," I said. "I'm not the person to help you through this. I'm not trained, and I'm already working for the church." I hesitated, and for the first time in a very long time, I acknowledged that I was more than what I did. "And there are personal reasons." I paused again, amazed at my daring, then hurried on, taking refuge in professionalism. "Rose, you need qualified help. And I need to do my job. We can't do both things at once. And you're a liability." I fell silent again.

"I'm sorry," she said at last.

"It's nothing you did—it's just that with this history, and this video, the picture changes completely. We can no longer work from the assumption that your father is innocent, and that the disappearance is a tragic accident brought about by someone we don't know. We have to acknowledge that he may have—probably—molested that child before she disappeared—and I don't even want to *think* about that." Truer words were never spoken.

"But if he's innocent...."

"It doesn't matter what happened. It only matters what people *think* happened," I said baldly. "That's the reality we have to deal with. There are too many dots for people to connect here. And they will, you can rest assured of that."

"So you're not concerned about what really happened?"

"Oh, I'm concerned, all right, but that can't be the basis I work from. And you can't be a part of that. You raise too many questions."

She sighed. "Do you need me for anything else?"

"I may need you later to evaluate news coverage and statements. I've got your cell phone number if I do. For right now, you've got enough on your plate. I wish I could give you the name of a good counselor, but I don't know any. I've never had occasion to use one, myself." The words rang false. The crumbling of the neat compartments at my core, the tidy boxes that allowed me to survive, told me that I was going to need all the help I could get. I needed the name of a good counselor—not for Rose, but for myself.

Her face flamed. "That's all right. I just need some time to get past this."

"Let me cut you a check." I pulled out the big ledger, filled in the check, and handed it to her.

"But this is for more than the contract specified."

"Call it medical benefits."

"But—"

"Rose, I owe you something. And I might owe somebody else." I thought of Sarah, Bethie, my children, and the terror threatening to swamp me.

“Somebody else?”

“It’s a long story.” I scooted my chair over to my computer, opened up Word, and began typing furiously. A tear glittered on my keyboard. Mortified, I swiped it away.

“Thank you.” Rose said.

I didn’t turn around. I didn’t want her to see I was crying. A minute later the door closed quietly. I was alone again.

CHAPTER 25

Jennifer

DJ almost dropped me when he carried me over the threshold. The second we got inside our new home, his arm just flew out from under my knees, and I had to hold onto his shoulders to keep from falling. It didn't help that he braced his hands on his knees, dropped his head between his shoulders, and gasped like he was dying. I was a little hurt, but worried, too. I mean, he looked like he was having a heart attack. "Are you all right, DJ?" I asked him. "Do you want me to do CPR? Or call a doctor?"

He shook his head, panting, waved me off with one hand, and in a few minutes he stood up again. I gave him a quick hug. "We'll have to get you to a gym, won't we?" I said, and kissed him so he would know that I loved him even if he was a little out of shape. "Go get our suitcases, okay?" I stood in the entry where it was cool and took the smaller bags as he came through the door, carefully carrying the box with the last frozen piece of wedding cake into my brand-new, sparkling white kitchen. The house smelled of paint and fresh varnish. *How sweet of Elaine to repaint for us*, I thought.

DJ followed me, carrying the huge soft drink cup he'd had refilled at the last service station. He took a deep swallow, his tanned throat working, set the cup on the cupboard, wiped his mouth on the back of his hand, sighed, then looked at me and smiled. I smiled back and slid my arms over his shoulders, leaning against him as he leaned against the cupboard.

"It's perfect," I whispered. And it was, or it would have been, if DJ had been just the teensiest bit more romantic.

It hurts me to admit it, but he just wasn't, though, not even in the beginning. All he said was, "Better get unpacked."

I knew better than to push, but I still stepped back reluctantly. "I hate it to end," I said, in my little-girl "Jenny" voice.

And then DJ did a very sweet thing. He drew me back into his arms. "It's not ending," he said. He kissed me slowly, his lips clinging to mine, just the way I had taught him, then he disappeared into the living room and reappeared with a box of computer parts he'd picked up at a cut-rate center. That was a little irritating. I mean, what man wants to go to a computer store on his honeymoon? I couldn't escape the feeling that it had something to do with that Angela person he worked with before he met me. Still, though, I knew better than to confront him directly. *And after all*, I thought with a little spurt of triumph, *he's mine now*.

"I can't believe you bought those on our honeymoon," I teased.

"Just can't break the habit. Angela and I—" he broke off.

My heart clenched, and an angry buzzing started deep in my ears.

He must have realized how deeply he had hurt me, bringing her up, because he started again. "At Eastern, I always had to be watching for parts to keep their systems up and running." He smiled at me again and carried the box through to his workroom, already stacked with computer parts and half-assembled systems. The custodians had been busy, moving Joe and Elaine out, emptying DJ's apartment and mine, moving us in here while we were honeymooning.

I couldn't for the life of me see what he wanted with a roomful of half-built computers. "You ever going to sell any of those?" I called after him.

"I don't know—I suppose if somebody wants one." His voice came faintly from down the hall.

My heart eased. The buzzing faded away. The computers were his hobby, a good thing. They gave him an interest without taking him away from our home. I picked up the box of food Gwen had given us when we stopped to collect our car on the way home. And that was another thing—I knew they weren't being straight with me.

I first realized it while we had been on our honeymoon. DJ and I had been pretty much out of touch, of course, but a week into it, the president of Narrow Way Corporate had called DJ and asked him if he was willing to take over the Happy Valley church. DJ had waffled, even though I was so excited I was dancing around our hotel suite. He put the man off, and then he called Elaine, and then Joe, and when he hung up his face was tense.

"They're divorcing," he had said tightly. "And Joe's taking the kids. He's got a restraining order against us."

I had stopped dancing. "What?" I gasped. "But they're perfect. We *all* are."

He had stared at me.

"I mean, they always *seemed* to be," I had gone on, stumbling a little. "I always thought they were happy. Like we are." I had hated it that it sounded almost like a question.

"Me, too," he said.

"So whose fault is it?" I knew it had to be adultery; Narrow Way ministers are forbidden to divorce for any other reason. Either Joe or Elaine had been cheating. The only real question was which one of them.

"Joe said some things about Daddy, but Elaine disagreed."

"About Daddy? But—"

"He said Daddy was molesting one of the boys." DJ's face had turned practically green.

"That's terrible," I had breathed. "Why would he say such a thing? It can't be true. One of them *must* have been cheating. This is only a pretext." I thought for a minute. "It must have been Elaine. Joe's a minister. He's the one who filed for the divorce. He must be so hurt. We'll have to be there for him."

DJ hadn't said anything. Then he just stood up and walked into the bathroom. I had known he needed my support. I had certainly needed his. This was our honeymoon, after all.

I had gone over and tried to turn the knob on the bathroom door. It was locked. I tapped softly. "DJ? Can I come in?" I had made my voice the way he liked it, sweet and soft and girlish.

“Be out in a minute.” His voice had been muffled. The shower started.

I had stood outside the door, my hand on the locked knob, struggling with nearly overwhelming pain. *He was shutting me out of his life.* But there had been nothing I could do short of battering down the door, and my professional training had taught me that battering should only be used as a last resort. I had finally gone and sat on the side of the bed and just waited for him to be done. I had looked out at the palms waving gently in the soft tropical trade winds, and thought about how appearance and reality can be miles apart. I mean, to the world outside of this room we looked like the perfect couple—and *we were*, I had reminded myself—but inside this room, I was sitting alone on the bed while my husband had locked himself in the bathroom, and under it all lay a frightening, dangerous situation that could destroy us if I didn’t take a firm stance.

And then I had thought about the job offer, and I understood. “All things work together for good for those who love the Lord,” I murmured. This wasn’t about the destruction of Joe and Elaine’s marriage; this was the Lord working in our lives! We should accept the circumstances for the blessing they were, rather than dig around in whatever dirty laundry DJ’s family might have accumulated over the years. How bad could it be, anyway? I knew these people. They really *were* almost perfect. Otherwise, I would never have married DJ. Joe *must* have been mistaken. It was hard to believe Elaine would cheat on him, but still, “man looketh on the outward appearance.” I realized that I had been doing just that—looking on Joe and Elaine’s outward appearance—and I had been fooled. My role was to stand with the family. If I didn’t, DJ and I might well lose everything before we even had it. Narrow Way ministers can’t have scandal attached to their pasts any more than they can commit adultery and expect to continue as ministers. This would all blow over. My responsibility was to see that we put it behind us.

We had left our room and walked down the air-conditioned hallway, then out through the lobby and into the soft tropical evening. We followed the path down to the beach, then turned and walked along the foaming surf. Neither of us said anything. DJ was a million miles away, and I was struck again by the vast gulf that can exist between what seems to be and what is. My throat ached, but it was my honeymoon and I refused to cry.

At last we sat down on a rock and, still silent, watched the sun slip below the horizon. I reached over and rested my hand on my husband's thigh. I'd done it in the past—at Sunday dinners, under cover of the tablecloth, mostly, since we had a position to maintain even then—and he'd always seemed to enjoy it. Now he jerked away like my hand burned him.

"Not now, Jennifer," he snapped.

It had been too much. Honeymoon or not, I had started to cry. His shoulders had slumped, and then he put an arm around me. "I'm sorry, honey. I didn't mean to snap at you. But this whole situation...."

I had known just what to say. "Let's pray about it," I said softly. "The Lord is leading in our lives." And right there, on that rock, we bowed our heads and prayed for divine guidance. And when we were done, I was able to talk to him—not about Joe and Elaine and his dad and the restraining order—neither of us wanted to talk about those things—but about how the Lord works all things together for good, and how maybe, just maybe, this was part of His plan for our lives.

When we had gotten back to the hotel DJ had called Elaine again, speaking so low into the telephone that I couldn't hear, which was a bit annoying. And then he called the division president, and told him we'd take the job. That was how he said it: "Jenny and I have decided to accept the pastorate of the Happy Valley church, at least until this thing with Joe and Elaine is resolved."

Hearing him say that, I knew that he understood that I could and should have an important role in his ministry, that it really wasn't "his" at all: it was "ours." I felt a warm glow inside, even though it was a little irritating that he had implied we'd be happy to step down if and when Joe and Elaine worked things out.

Everything had been almost perfect again when we went to bed. But he didn't hold me that night, and when I reached for him in the dark I realized that he was curled up on the very edge of the bed, his back to me, and when I touched him I felt a fine trembling running through him, even though he pretended to be asleep. After a few minutes, I let my hand drop and curled up on my own side of the bed. I must admit that even though I was very happy about the church pastarship, I was a little irritated at Elaine for spoiling my perfect honeymoon.

When we got home a few weeks later DJ's mom didn't want to talk about the split between Elaine and Joe any more than DJ and I did. DJ and I just picked up our car and his mother put together a box of food for us. I kissed her—DJ's dad was out working—and we drove out of the dusty ranch parking lot, onto the even dustier gravel road, and then finally to the freeway.

DJ hadn't talked much. When we had reached the paved road, he shut off the air conditioning and rolled down the windows, even though it was so hot the sun stung my skin. He just let the wind scream through the car, bringing all the dust and bugs with it. I hunched down in my seat and held onto my hair with both hands, but strands still whipped free.

"Can we use the air conditioner?" I finally asked.

DJ looked at me, eyebrows raised. "Don't you love that smell?"

"What smell?" I shouted over the wind.

"Harvest," he said. And he smiled, an open, happy smile I had never seen on him before.

I smiled back. "What does it smell like?" I shouted.

"I wish I was driving a combine right now," he said.

"What?" I shouted.

"I wish—" and then he broke off, and still grinning, pulled the car off at the next exit. "Roll your window up," he shouted.

He didn't have to tell me twice, though his tone could have been nicer. "Where are we going?" I asked as icy air gushed over my hot face and arms.

"I'm gonna drive me a combine!" he said.

"Two things," I laughed. "First, I am appalled at your grammar. Second, what on earth do you mean?"

"Mom said that Dad just started harvesting the Badlands. I'm going to go drive for him for a while. He'll want to see us, anyway."

"The Badlands? But that's in—"

"It's what we called the roughest dry land fields. Mom says Dad's just started cutting there."

"So?" I asked.

"I'm gonna drive for a load, and then take the truck to the elevator."

"But why?"

And he looked at me. Really looked at me. "This was the part of my life I loved best," he said. "Harvesting with Sarah and Bethie and Elaine was good. Always. Do this with me, please, Jenny."

"Of course I will."

He reached over and took my hand and we rode like that, jouncing over the rough, dusty track, easing through potholes, and then finally climbing up a steep canyon to a flat field with edges like fingers spread over the hilltops, deep shady canyons falling away between. A truck sat halfway up the slope. DJ eased across the field to the truck, turned off the car, flung open his door, jumped out, and started stamping like a crazy man. Then he jumped back into the car and eased ahead so the car sat on the stamped-down area.

I opened my own door and climbed out. "What were you doing?" I laughed at him.

"Knocking down the stubble," he said. "If it touches the underside of the car, it could start a fire."

I left him to stamp down his stubble and walked over to the truck. The driver's side door hung open. Curious, I peered inside. Then I screamed.

DJ came running. "What's wrong?" he asked.

I buried my face in his shoulder and pointed. A mummified mouse lay under the seat. DJ laughed—*laughed*—then grabbed a glove off the floor and swept the mouse out. The flat, dry body spun in the sunshine, then dropped into the stubble.

"Let's take the truck out to Dad," DJ said. "He just pulled out of the cut."

"If you think for one second I'm getting into that truck where a dead mouse was—" I started. But I quickly got control of myself. This was important to DJ. "How about if I just wait here at the car?" I suggested instead.

"But—"

"I'll just sit still and run the air conditioner and stay nice and cool," I said, draping my arms over his shoulders.

He gave me a quick kiss. "Don't run the air conditioner," he said.

"Why not?"

"You'll overheat the engine just idling like that. We're going to be here for a while."

"But I'm hot." I pouted prettily.

"It's harvest, Jenny," he said gently. "It's *supposed* to be hot. Just ride with me. Please." I glanced over to where the dead mouse had been and shook my head.

His face fell. "Let me take the truck out," he said. "Then we'll go."

I was so happy that he understood my feelings. I knew we would be just fine. I was already helping him grow into the man he should be! "Okay," I said, smiling up at him.

He strode through the cut wheat and leaped into the driver's seat. The truck engine rumbled. And sat there. I shifted in my seat, impatient and, to be honest, a little irritated. Why was it all right for him to idle the engine for no reason when it wasn't all right for me to run the air conditioning? He was just dragging things out as long as he could because I wouldn't play along with his little farmer boy routine. This passive-aggressive behavior wasn't worthy of him, not anymore. He was a minister, and ministers didn't indulge in such childish displays. Nor did they drive dirty, rusty trucks. I slid into the car, slammed the doors, switched on the motor, and flipped the air conditioning switch onto "high." Two could play at this game.

I jumped as air whooshed and the truck rolled forward, then there was a snap and the truck lurched forward, then chugged up the hill to the

harvester machine. The truck circled up beside the machine, and a golden stream poured out of the harvester's spout and into the truck bed. DJ's tiny figure crossed in front of the truck and climbed the steps to the harvester's high open platform. A cloud of dust rose from the wheat. Cool air flowed over my face and arms as I watched the wheat stop pouring. DJ leaped to the ground, and the harvester turned and rolled back to where it had been cutting. Another cloud of dust rose. DJ stood beside the truck. I could just make out his tiny, dark silhouette.

I shifted in my seat. *Why wasn't he coming back? He knew I was waiting. We needed to get home.* But he just stood there, staring after the harvester. Finally I got tired of waiting, scooted over behind the wheel, and started easing the car out into the field. I had gotten about halfway to the truck when DJ turned and saw me. He started waving his arms, and I suspected he wanted me to go back, but that made no sense. When I drove carefully on he started running toward me. I sped up and rolled down my window, smiling.

"Didn't you see me?" he panted. "Get this car out of the field."

"But—"

"Scoot over!"

"But—"

He jerked the car door open. "Move!"

"But—"

"*Get out or scoot over.*" He was practically shouting at me.

"What's the matter?" I slid out of the car. He pushed me out of the way and slid under the wheel.

"Fire," he said, and he put the car into "Drive" and pulled away, leaving me standing in a cloud of dirt on that sweltering hilltop.

I had no choice but to trudge out to the edge of the field, choking in the dust cloud the car raised. When the car reached the place he had stamped down DJ stopped, got out, and loped back to meet me.

"Sorry to be so abrupt," he said, "but the car's too low. If it starts a fire, there's no stopping it. It would have been even worse if it had running and everything was hot under there. As it was, though, it had been sitting long enough to cool off."

I thought of mentioning the air conditioner, then realized it wouldn't do any good, and might do a good deal of harm. Part of being a minister's wife and counselor is knowing when it's best to just let a subject drop. I looked around and shivered. "Let's get out of here," I said.

We got into the car and DJ turned the key. The engine turned over, but did not catch. "It's overheated," said DJ. "We'll have to wait."

My face burned.

"Were you running the AC?" he asked me.

"Just for a teensy minute," I answered.

"A minute wouldn't have done this," he said, looking at me in a way I didn't much care for. "How long?"

"Are you calling me a liar?" I asked softly.

"Might as well go out and move the truck for Dad," he answered without answering. He got out of the car and pocketed the keys.

"Leave the keys?" I asked sweetly.

"Why? You can't use the AC anyhow," he said. And then he loped off across the field, taking the keys with him.

I sat there, sad and disappointed, and a little frightened. This was a side of DJ I had never expected. We would have to address his open suspicion and self-centered refusal to consider my needs sooner rather than later.

I opened the car doors to catch what breeze there was and watched as DJ reached the truck and then just stood there, looking at something I couldn't see. I stopped watching him and looked around. The golden field stretched all the way to the hot, cloudless sky. I could have used some clouds right about then, and a little rain, too. I saw a big bird circling high overhead. Sweat started trickling down my face and neck. My shirt stuck to my back. I looked at DJ again, still standing nice and cool in the truck's shadow. I looked for the car's shadow, but DJ had parked it the wrong way; there was no shadow to speak of, so I just sat there and sweltered.

Finally, I leaned my aching head back against the seat and closed my eyes. I must have dozed off, because the next thing I knew I heard the truck starting up. I opened my eyes and watched it bump across the field again to meet the harvester. The golden stream started, then the cloud of dust,

and when it had cleared I could see wheat rising like brown mountains in the back of the truck. The harvester turned back toward the uncut grain. Dust rose again. It made me think of a locust. I had never seen one, but I knew from Exodus that they devoured things.

The truck came rattling down the hill, gaining speed as it came. I heard gears being shifted. My heart lifted. At last we could go home! I resolved right then that DJ and I would have a serious talk about this. He simply couldn't expect me to endure this sort of abuse just to indulge his whims. The truck pulled up beside me and he leaned out of his window.

"Dad wants me to run this to the elevator. Want to ride along?"

"No," I said firmly. "We already had this discussion, DJ."

He laughed at me—*laughed*, after all he had put me through. "It was *under the seat*, Jenny. And it's gone now."

"I do not want to ride in a truck. We need to get home. Now."

"Okay. Just let me get this to the elevator for Dad. It's hard for him to harvest on his own." He reached down to the floor and lifted a dusty water jug. "Want a drink?" I looked at the dirt on it and thought of the mouse and shook my head. "Suit yourself," he said. "Be right back." And he put the truck into gear, raised the filthy jug to his lips and drank greedily, and pulled away without waiting for an answer.

I watched him ease the truck down the hill, creep across the gray valley to the gravel road, then speed up and disappear. A cloud of dust hung in the air behind him. I stood there in the baking sun on that desolate hilltop, that bird circling high over my head (*probably waiting for me to die so it could pick my bones*, I thought), the sound of the harvester coming faintly from over the hill. I would have cried if I hadn't been so angry. By the time DJ got back, the harvester sat waiting at the top of the hill like an evil gray grasshopper, and the anger had burned itself out of me. I was just exhausted. DJ pulled past me, waved, jounced the truck up the hill, parked it, climbed up to the harvester's platform again, then jumped down and jogged down the field to me. I leaned back and closed my eyes, and even when he got into the car, switched it on, said, "Ah, that feels good," as the AC kicked in, and then, "Dad says hi, and that you could have ridden with him," I didn't look at him.

"I don't suppose you're up for another load," he said at last.

I didn't even dignify that with an answer, and after a moment he put the car into gear and eased down the rutted, dusty hill to the gravel road.

We rode back to the freeway in silence. After a bit, DJ said hesitantly, "That's the elevator I drove to."

I said, "Oh," but I didn't sit up or open my eyes.

"What's wrong, Jenny?" he asked.

"I have a headache," I said. Because by then I had thought about it. What could I really complain about without sounding petty? DJ had helped his dad out by moving a truck and driving it to the elevator. I had been hot, true, and it had been miserable, but what bothered me the most wasn't something I could say to him. Sitting there in the field, watching my husband doing things about which I knew nothing, loving things that I found unbearable, putting his family's needs above mine, I had gotten the second indication that DJ's past might tarnish our life together—that the family that seemed so perfect might have hidden undercurrents.

So I said nothing, and once DJ stopped and got us each a Big Gulp at the AM/PM on the freeway, I took some aspirin and felt a little better.

When we drove up in front of the parsonage, I was ready to put the whole miserable mess behind us. Whatever had happened to cause Elaine and Joe's divorce need not concern us. We didn't have children, and by the time we did, I knew I would have DJ weaned away from his troubling dependence on his family. There would be no risk for our children, even if there might have been for Elaine's.

There probably hadn't been, though. *It was probably just adultery. It's none of our business, anyway, except that it means the parsonage and pastorship are available for us right now. All things really do work together for good for those who love the Lord,* I thought contentedly as I slid the fresh tomatoes into the refrigerator's spotless vegetable drawer. I just wished DJ could be happier about it. Maybe if he could talk it out...

"So what do you think about Joe and Elaine?" I asked him as I shut the refrigerator door.

"I think it's too bad. He was a good man. I thought they were happy. But you know how the church feels about ministers divorcing."

"Do you think there's any truth to it?"

"To what?"

"The restraining order," I hinted. *Don't say the words.*

"I don't know."

"*What?*"

"I don't know," he said slowly. "There were times..."

"But that's all in the past," I reminded him quickly.

"Yes," he said. "It's all in the past."

"What'll Elaine do now?"

"Work."

"Didn't she lose her job, too?"

"Sort of, but not really. They're putting her on contract, at least until this blows over. It hasn't been announced yet, so don't say anything to anybody."

"I guess they didn't want to lose her talents."

"No, but with what Joe's saying, they had to do *something*."

"It's too bad," I said sympathetically. "I just wish there was more we could do. I feel a little funny taking over her house. Where will she live?" I looked around the kitchen.

"She found a house over on Cherry Street."

"Sounds good," I said. "So we don't need to worry about her. We'll invite her for dinner."

"Not too soon," he said. "It's got to hurt."

"Why?"

DJ looked at me, smiled, and shook his head. "You're so innocent."

I smiled a tiny smile and toyed with the buttons on his shirt.

"I'll go check on her in a little bit," he said a minute later.

I thought of what my refusal to ride along in the truck had wrought. The lesson in this day was that I needed to keep DJ close, where I could guide him in making the decisions that affected both of us. And so, even though I really didn't want to see any of his family so soon after having been victimized by them, I said, "I'll come along."

I put my arms around his neck and pulled his mouth down to mine, and as we kissed I realized again how well we fit together; I am almost as tall as

he is, so it isn't uncomfortable for us to kiss—not like it must have been for him with that awful Angela person. That relationship was inappropriate, no matter how you look at it. She was just too short, apart from everything else. DJ and I are a perfect couple. I knew it then. I know it now.

DJ lifted his mouth from mine. "I'd never hurt those boys," he said, his mind clearly still on the restraining order.

I was a little insulted that he'd be thinking of other things while I was kissing him. It wasn't very polite. "I know," I murmured. "It'll all blow over. Just give it time." I nestled against him. "And even if it doesn't, we'll make a baby of our own and you'll forget."

"That's not the sort of thing you 'forget,' Jennifer," he said, pulling back and starting to turn away.

But then I kissed him again, slanting my mouth hot and avid over his. At last his arms came around me and I knew it wouldn't be long before I had my perfect family to live in my perfect house. And then he really *would* forget. I'd see to it.

Later, as twilight fell, I stretched lazily against the heap of pillows and smiled. "I could almost purr," I said. For a day that had started so badly, this one had turned out to be almost everything I could have hoped for our first day in our own little home. DJ leaned over and kissed me, then swung his legs to the floor.

"Where you go?" I asked in my "little Jenny" voice.

"To check on Elaine. I'm worried about her."

"Tonight?" I pouted in the way he had thought was so cute before the wedding. "On our first night in our new little home?"

"I won't be long," he answered, pulling on his shirt and pants and kissing me again. I could see his mind was made up. His family was coming between us, again.

"Okay," I said, doing the gracious thing. Then I lay back and closed my eyes, letting my legs separate just the tiniest bit when I felt him looking at me. "Come home soon," I murmured.

The only answer was the screen door squeaking open, then shut. I slammed my fist into DJ's pillow, still warm from his head.

CHAPTER 26

Jennifer

My first Sunday as a minister's wife dawned clear and beautiful. DJ and I were both up with the birds, and I fixed us a special breakfast—waffles, whipped cream, fresh strawberries, vegetarian sausage, orange juice, and milk—while he showered. A fragrant vase of roses stood in the center of the table. I can still see that table when I close my eyes—white linen, gold-rimmed china, sparkling crystal, and behind it the plate glass window and our rolling, perfectly manicured lawn.

I set DJ's Bible and the *Morning Watch* devotional on the table beside his plate. When he came out of the bathroom in his new robe, we sat down at the table and he led us in short season of prayer, then read from the devotional. I had timed the waffles perfectly. They came steaming to the table, topped with the tart red berries and cream, and the sausage almost tasted like the real thing, or like what I've always imagined real sausage tastes like.

I wish now that we'd taken more time over that breakfast. In retrospect, that perfect meal in our shining new home, with a lifetime of serving the Lord before us, is like a diamond set into my life. Never before, and never after, did we achieve that absolute clarity, unity, and joy. And I rushed it, because I was so eager to get to what I thought was going to be the best part of the day—our first time leading a church in worship, together.

After breakfast I did the dishes, then dressed in my “going away” suit from the wedding and put on just the teensiest bit of makeup, not enough

to offend anyone, and finished combing and curling my hair. DJ put on the new suit we had bought for him after he got the Call. When I checked my reflection in the full-length mirror in the big walk-in closet off our bedroom, I was pleased. I looked trim, elegant, sleek, and demure. My pumps matched my suit exactly, my hair was perfect, my makeup understated. I looked exactly like a minister's wife. I smiled experimentally at myself, making my smile gentle, warm, and welcoming, focusing on making sure it reached my eyes. Though of course I would never have voiced this to anyone, I know that on that day I looked perfect. We drove to church, and DJ kissed me on the front steps, then went around to the pastor's study to review his notes and meditate. I walked slowly up the steps and into the vestibule, thanking God that, like Queen Esther, I had been called to lead God's people. I pulled open the glass door and stepped inside, head high, a gracious smile curving my lips. I knew I was making a good impression. I had left nothing to chance.

The church women were milling around inside like a flock of chickens, asking each other about the bulletins, the guest book, the keys to the secretary's room, shut-ins who needed a visit, people who needed a ride to church, all those million little questions about the million little things that go into making a church a success. *I can help with those things*, I thought. *I can really get things going here. Elaine was always too busy with her work for corporate. And then with her family problems. She let things slide. These women are going to be so happy I'm here.*

I stood by the door and waited for someone to recognize me as their new pastor's wife. But no one did. They just scurried around, clucking. Finally I gave up and started toward them, still smiling my careful, practiced, cordial smile. When a woman turned toward me, I was relieved. It was important that I be recognized, not put into the position of having to introduce myself. That would have seemed pushy. I stretched out my hand, only to realize the woman wasn't looking at me at all. She was looking behind me.

"Oh, good, Elaine's here. She'll know," she said. The flock of women brushed past me and clustered around Elaine.

Elaine looked right at me, smiled, answered the women's questions, and then crossed the foyer, still surrounded by those clucking chickens. Her smile had been sad, but there was something more, too: I was sure I had seen just the tiniest bit of triumph peeking out through her eyes.

"Hi," she said as she came up to me. Then she turned to the chickens. "I don't know if you've met Jennifer yet," she said. "She and DJ are taking over here."

The women gave me chilly, polite smiles, and then one said, "Elaine, I wonder if I can talk to you for a minute?" She glanced at the other women, then at me. "In private."

She'll refer her to me, I thought. I'm the minister's wife now. And I'm a trained counselor, after all. I smiled my gentle, welcoming smile again.

"Yes, of course," Elaine said. She turned with the woman and walked away. The other women fell silent, darted glances at each other, shuffled their feet. No more clucking. I was stunned, but of course I couldn't show it. *I was the minister's wife, after all.*

"Is there something I can help with?" I asked pleasantly.

"I think we've got it covered," one woman said.

They drifted away, leaving me standing alone and humiliated in the middle of the foyer. *Why did Elaine come here this week? She's inappropriate. Her husband, her minister husband, is divorcing her and taking custody of their children. She should be the one standing alone, humiliated. How dare she usurp my position?*

I turned and walked gracefully into the rest room, my smile still firmly in place. I locked myself into a stall and concentrated on taking deep breaths and counting to ten.

When my throat stopped aching and I wasn't shaking anymore I let myself out of the stall, went to the sink, ran a little water over my fingers, dried them, checked my smile, and then let myself back out into the foyer, my pain still a hard knot in my belly. It felt like fear. I crossed to the sanctuary doors, stepped inside, found the minister's wife's row—and saw Elaine already sitting there, a group of women with her. In the *minister's wife's* row. In *my* row.

I looked at her perfectly coiffed head, her square, neat shoulders, her elegant scarf, and suddenly everything became simple. Either I was the minister's wife or I wasn't. Elaine knew exactly what she was doing. How dare she flout the system? She had been shamed. She shouldn't be here. Her very presence undermined the church's spiritual integrity.

She had failed in her trust. It was up to me to bring the church back to the Lord. I just wasn't quite sure yet how to do it. So I did what I always do when I'm faced with a trial: I bowed my head, closed my eyes, and said a little prayer. When I opened my eyes I had, if not the answer, at least a better grasp of the question. *She's doing it on purpose*, I thought. *She's undermining me before I've even had a chance to show what I can do.* The organist began the prelude, playing one handed while she fiddled with stops, adjusted the volume, looked around at the congregation, craned around the console to see into the back room off the rostrum, checked for the line of ministers. I had to sit somewhere, but the aisle seats were all taken. I would have to climb over people and sit in the middle of a bench. The church that should have welcomed me with open arms had already closed ranks against me.

And then, in my hour of need, the Lord provided for me as surely as He sent ravens to feed Elijah in the wilderness. Just when I was about to give up, a woman in an aisle seat three rows ahead stood, hefted the child sitting beside her, and hurried out. The Lord's gifts are not to be scorned. I picked up the woman's jacket and the child's bag of toys, slipped into the seat, and hid their stuff behind my legs.

I bowed my head and said a little prayer of thanksgiving for this small miracle. Then, holding the prayer of gratitude in my heart, I settled back, crossed my legs, and opened my bulletin. And there it was—DJ's name. *My name now.* We were Pastor and Mrs. Daniel John Conrad. A warm glow filled me.

"She's in our seat," came a child's shrill voice.

It might have been awkward, but I had been trained to address situations like this. I looked up and smiled sweetly. "Oh, I'm sorry," I said. And then I just waited.

The woman fidgeted, clearly at a loss for words. Finally she gave up. "Can I have my things?" she asked.

"Of course," I smiled. I picked up the bag and the woman's jacket, handed her everything, smiled graciously at her, wiggled my fingers at the little girl, and said, "Bye-bye."

As they walked away the child shrilled, "We were sitting there."

"Yes," came the mother's clipped voice.

"She stole our seats!" In piercing, injured tones.

People turned to stare.

"Hush."

"But where will we sit?"

"I don't know."

"But—"

They were out of earshot. I was miffed. There were lots of seats. They'd have no problem finding something in the middle. It was fine for *them*, just not suitable for a minister's wife to be crawling over people. That woman was doing her child a disservice, pandering to her bad behavior that way. Making a mental note to start a mother's group on child guidance, I went back to reading my bulletin and glowing. The prelude ended. DJ and the church elders came onto the platform. An elder offered the opening prayer. We sang the opening song. DJ preached his first sermon as a senior pastor. It was everything I had ever dreamed of.

Afterwards I slipped out and hurried to stand by his side, shake hands, and meet the church. I was halfway across the foyer—and there was Elaine. *How had she gotten ahead of me?* She must have used some special stealth technique that minister's wives learned and polished over time, because I had left before anyone else. When Elaine reached DJ, she paused, but he didn't hesitate. He smiled, reached for her, enveloped her in a bear hug, and drew her to his side. I gritted my teeth and finished crossing the foyer. When I reached him, he hugged me, too. It was a bitter thing. I should have been able to say, "He hugged me." Full stop. But as always, his family was there first.

He drew me to his other side, and as people passed he introduced me, and I shook hands and smiled graciously, but the sight of Elaine on DJ's

other side, shaking hands first, receiving hugs first, was like poison in my belly. *How dare she?*

At last it was over. DJ and I stood on the steps. Elaine hung around, too, even though I used all my nonverbal communication skills to let her know she was *de trop*. She just stood there, like she had nowhere else to go. And then I realized the truth: she didn't. *But I did*. I had a home. And a husband to feed. Then I remembered who I was. I had a responsibility as the minister's wife. While the custodian locked the big front doors, I asked her in my best voice, "Would you like to come over for lunch?"

"No, thanks," Elaine said quietly. "Not just yet."

How sensitive, I thought, and some of my anger faded. "We'd love to have you," I said warmly. "DJ and I will have years to be alone."

"It's all right, Elaine," DJ said quickly. "You let us know when."

"Thanks," Elaine said. She turned away.

"DJ, that made no sense whatsoever," I laughed, linking my arm through his on the way down the steps. But then I sobered. "You didn't understand. She was being nice, letting us have time alone, since we're just married. I'm not sure it was a good idea, putting the ball in her court like that—it could be embarrassing if she just dropped by unannounced." I giggled and gave his arm another little squeeze.

"She wasn't being sensitive," he said, darting a look at me.

"Yes, she was. Why else wouldn't she want to come over?"

"Because it used to be her house until a few weeks ago. Because there are a lot of painful memories there for her. She lost her children and her husband in one day. She's holding on by a thread. She has nothing left."

And that was the opening I needed. "Oh," I said casually. "I understand that. It's why she's clinging to her position in the church, even though it's completely inappropriate."

"What do you mean?" He looked puzzled.

"You men," I laughed. "You never notice anything."

"I wouldn't say that." He didn't laugh back.

"She started directing the women this morning, even though she knew I was there, and then some woman turned to her for counsel, *and she gave it*."

“So?” he asked. “The women trust her.”

“But she should have referred the women to *me*. That’s *my* place now. I have the training. Besides, it’s really not suitable for her to be giving advice.”

“Why not?”

“Well, you know...” I was irritated that he was making me spell it out.

“What?”

“The divorce doesn’t do much for her credibility, does it? You have to wonder how good her counsel could be.”

“Elaine’s got a good head on her shoulders. I trust her.”

“But—”

“She’s getting a divorce, Jennifer, not a lobotomy. Joe didn’t get custody of her brain.”

The sarcasm stung. “She sat in the minister’s wife’s row.” I heard the sharp note in my voice, stopped, and then continued in my customary gentler tones. “She’s just not ready to give up the old role. I’m afraid it’s going to be confusing for the church.”

“The minister’s wife’s row?”

“You know. The one the minister’s wife always sits in.”

“There is no *minister’s wife’s row*, Jennifer. That’s just where Elaine always sits. She started when she was potty-training the kids. There’s a bathroom in the little alcove right by the end of the row. She could take them out and then come back without disrupting the service.”

“But—”

“When Joe was associate pastor, the minister’s family sat in the back because their kids were noisy. *There is no minister’s row.*”

I let it go. There might not be a sign on the bench, but everyone knew exactly what it was and who sat there. I had to try again. “Well, I’m not sure it was a good idea for you to have her shaking hands at the door.”

“Why not?”

“It might confuse people.”

“In what way?”

“They might think that ministers divorcing is okay.”

“So what do you suggest? That I burn her birth certificate and have a blood transfusion?” His voice had risen, gotten hard. “She’s my sister, Jennifer. Mom was sick a lot when I was little. Elaine took care of me. Heck, she practically raised me. She’s going through a hard time, and with Bethie gone and Sarah so far away, all she has is me and her friends at church. As far as confusing the church goes, what do you think it would do to them to see their minister disowning his own sister, someone they love and respect—and who I always thought you liked, by the way—when her life falls apart? What about Christian love? What about plain old family loyalty?”

I longed to throw the hard, angry words right back at him, but I knew better, have known better since I watched Mommy manage Daddy, since I read *The Fascinating Girl*, since I studied human relationships and what makes them function for my counseling degree. I deflected the anger.

“Oh, DJ, we’re having our first fight,” I pouted. You’re shouting at me.” A tear slid down my cheek. My bottom lip trembled. I sniffed daintily.

“You can’t just expect me to abandon Elaine. I would think you of all people would want to support her.”

“Of course I do,” I said warmly. “I’m just thinking about what’s really best for Elaine and the church. I know she’s going through a hard time, but I suspect a lot of her ‘suffering’ is a ruse to get attention—self-inflicted, in a sense. I don’t think it’s healthy to pander to it. Sometimes you have to use tough love. I’m afraid that coddling her will only prolong things, slow her transition into her new role. But I could be wrong. I’m sorry. I wouldn’t have said anything, but I just want it to be perfect *so much*. It’s our first church. Can we just put this behind us?”

DJ stopped and hugged me. “Thanks, honey. I knew you’d understand. I want it to be perfect, too, but I feel like you’re asking me to choose between my sister and my job, and I just don’t think it’s necessary.”

“Of course it isn’t,” I said, and reached up and gave him a chaste little peck on the cheek. We were, after all, in public. “But do you think you could just ask her to sit someplace else? That really *is* the minister’s wife’s row. If you can just do that, I think the rest will fall into place.”

“Why can’t you guys sit together?”

“Why didn’t I think of that?” I laughed. “It’s settled.”

DJ opened my car door. I thanked him and climbed in and all the way home I kept the conversation to suitable after-church topics—light, airy, uplifting. At home I slipped into something nice, tied on an apron, and got lunch on the table. All through lunch I chattered and laughed. And all the while a hard little kernel of knowledge grew and grew inside me. I would have to deal with this on my own. Fortunately I had the skills and the courage to do what needed to be done.

A few weeks later, DJ asked, “Why does Elaine sit alone in back now? I thought you guys were going to sit together.”

“I don’t know, darling,” I said sweetly. “Maybe she’s making the transition now. Let’s just let her get on with it, shall we, honey?”

CHAPTER 27

Elaine

I almost didn't go to church at all that day, but the silent, empty house drove me to it. Besides, it was DJ's first week, and I knew I should be there for him, and for the church. And so I went. I got up, got dressed, drove to church, climbed the stairs, took a deep breath, and stepped into the foyer. The women were there, as I had known they would be. Men gathered in Joe's study—not Joe's study anymore, I realized—or went in and sat down. The women gathered in the foyer to work out service details. The foyer had been mine. Now Jennifer stood in my place, smiling. When she saw me, anger flashed through her smile like heat lightning, instantly there, instantly gone.

"Oh, good, Elaine's here. She'll know," said Betty, a thrice-divorced widow with lavender hair and designer suits. She started toward me. The other woman followed, all teetering heels, waving hands, arching brows, and coiffed hair. I had always felt a secret scorn for these ladies for whom church was life, even if they didn't measure up to Narrow Way standards. I had considered them fluffy little poodle women, and though some were at least twice my age I felt immeasurably older. Of course I had never breathed that to a soul. Now, as they surrounded me, clucking and chattering, enveloping me in a cloud of Windsong, hairspray, and baby powder, I realized they were also kind.

I hadn't expected it. I had seen them devour their own on occasion. Now, though, the perfectly manicured hands touched me gently, and the

voices said, “Oh honey, we’re so sorry. What can we do? You just call us if you need something.” My sore heart eased. I knew I would never call them. I knew that of course they were discussing us avidly among themselves. We were a scandal, after all. But for just that moment they wrapped me in comfort as no one else had done. I looked at Jennifer. She looked like thunder. I did my best. I made certain the women knew who she was. She didn’t respond. She just turned and stalked to the rest room.

So I went into the sanctuary and sat in my usual place. It felt like home, like all the other weeks when I had sat there while the boys were in their classes. I knew it would be terrible later, when they would have been with me while Joe stood in the pulpit, but I also knew that I had to be there for DJ. He needed me to help him transition the church. There could be no hint of division between us, nothing that the congregation could see as cause for resentment. It wouldn’t be forever, but for now I had to be here, had to smile, had to be gracious. I owed it to the church. I hardly even registered the flock of women who sat around me, lending me their company. It was only later that I realized what they had done, and why. In an odd way, I think the divorce made me real to them as nothing before ever had.

Sarah used to call me “perfect Elaine.” I always hated it, but I knew why she said it. Doing the right things, *being* the right kind of person, was important to me. It’s what being one of God’s Chosen People, a Narrow Way, is all about. Life isn’t easy—it isn’t supposed to be. God’s people have never been popular. They have been persecuted, ostracized, and even killed because their very lives are a reproach to the worldly. By their virtue, if not by their words, they condemn those who choose the easy path.

When I was in college I had read “The Ruined Maid,” by Thomas Hardy. At the time, I had found the poem inappropriate. The idea that there might be advantages to being “ruined” was anathema to me. Now, though, I had Fallen, and I had received comfort from the last source I would have expected it. At last I understood the ruined maid’s cheerful assertion that falling offers comforts of its own. I was no longer Perfect Elaine—and I was surprised to discover a certain relief in that.

I slipped out of church after the last prayer. I didn't think I could face going through the line, seeing DJ and Jennifer standing where I used to stand. I waited too long, though. When I reached the door, DJ was already there. I swallowed and did the right thing. I walked up to him, smiled, and reached out to shake his hand. But he would have none of that. He ignored my extended hand, and enveloped me in a hug instead. I almost started to cry, but this was church.

"Stand here with me," he said.

And so I did. I stood where I had stood for the last few years, and my brother, not my husband, stood beside me, and greeted the congregation as they filed past. Things were different now. Before, I had been the Minister's Wife, a woman apart, above. Now I was Elaine, whose husband had left her. I was one of the congregation as I never had been before. *If only I could have been ruined without losing the people I loved the best,* I thought, *I might have been a better pastor's wife.*

I stood and smiled, and felt Jennifer darting little glares at me between smiles of her own. When everyone was gone, she offered a perfunctory lunch invitation, but I let her off the hook. She dropped the act, clutched DJ's arm to her breasts, and marched him away, leaning into him, laughing up into his face, whispering. I went back to my empty house. I felt lightheaded, but I couldn't eat anything, even if I had remembered to shop. Eating would make this life real.

I sat on the floor in my empty living room, my arms around my knees, rocking, rocking, rocking. Something about this jarred a memory of summer, and stink, and jeering voices, and being trapped, but it was gone before I could pinpoint it.

The next thing I knew the sun was slanting through the blinds from just above the horizon, and I was slumped on the floor. I had lost the afternoon. I lay there because I had no reason to move. I thought blearily that I might just lie there forever. Who would know? Who would it really matter to, now? I closed my eyes and slipped away.

I woke in the morning, stiff and sore. I had to go to the bathroom. I might not be able to eat, but I was not so far gone that I was ready to

soil myself and ruin the living room carpet. I pushed myself to my knees and crawled down the hall, pulled myself up onto the toilet, and felt the exquisite pleasure of emptying a too-full bladder. When I was done, I just sat there, feeling the blessed emptiness. Then habit took over.

I undressed, turned on the shower, and stepped in. The scalding jets stripped away the cottony gray fog. My stomach plummeted. *Joe was gone! My children were gone!* And the reason I had lost them terrified me. Joe had thought I had been defending Daddy. What he didn't realize was that I was defending myself. When he opened his mouth and said those terrible words a black hole, a hole big enough to die in, had opened at my core, and a part of me had whispered, *Yes, of course.*

Of course not, the rest of me had roared. I had to close that hole or die, and I had made a start, but then Rose had shown up with her terrible story, and the hole had spread again, bigger, deeper, darker, and things had started to slither out of it. I stood under the remorseless hot water, opened my mouth, and wailed. It hurt. It felt foolish, overly dramatic. Somewhere from deep inside the hole a voice said, *All right, that's enough. Cut it out or you'll get something to cry about.* I closed my mouth, sealing in the pain, swallowing, sucking in my belly and squaring my shoulders. Exercise might help. I had to stop wallowing in my grief. Lots of people had it worse than I did.

I shut off the water, towed dry, pulled on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt, and left the house. I walked as briskly as I could on my shaky legs. I got three blocks from home before the black swarm appeared, narrowing my vision. I looked around, but there was no place to sit. I walked on, more slowly. I couldn't just sit down in the middle of the sidewalk. What would people think? The black swarm crept out further, blanketed my vision, turned neon green. I stumbled on, blind, hoping for a bench. Then I was falling into nothing.

The next thing I knew I was being strapped to a stretcher, and a worried looking lady carrying a silver poodle was peering down at me. I struggled to sit up. "Just lie still," said the paramedic. "We'll take good care of you."

"But I'm fine," I protested blearily. Mortification was clearing my head. "I just got a little lightheaded. I haven't eaten yet this morning."

"We'll just make sure," said the paramedic soothingly. "Take you in, run a few tests."

"I don't need any tests," I said, smiling through the headache, through the black swarm that was starting to surround me again. "I'm fine. Really." I couldn't be seen at the hospital, not like this. Everyone would know. "I'll sign a release."

"We'll talk about it at the hospital," the paramedic said as he climbed into the ambulance beside me. I closed my eyes, both at the shame of it and so I wouldn't have to see the dancing black specks.

At the hospital, the thing I had feared most happened. The ER doctor knew me, knew Joe, knew about us. He looked at me, circled my arm with his hand, and asked sternly, "How long since you've eaten?"

"I don't remember," I mumbled.

"Don't lie to me," he snapped, and I recalled that he was famous for having no bedside manner. "How long?"

"Since I got home the week after the wedding."

"What about the week before?"

"You know so much about it, what do you think?" I snapped thoughtlessly.

He looked at my arm again, then said, "Check her electrolytes," over his shoulder. "And hook up an IV and get some food and fluid into her."

"I'm fine," I protested. "Just release me. I'll get something to eat."

"You're not going anywhere until I say so, even if I have to tie you to the bed," he said. "Now rest." And he was gone.

That night he came back. The room was dark, lit only by my bedside lamp. He squeezed my arm again, checked my pulse and blood pressure, pulled up a chair, and sat down. He ran a hand through overly long hair, then leaned forward, knees apart. He braced his elbows on his knees and stared at his clasped hands.

"You have to eat," he finally said, not looking at me. "No matter what's going on in your life, you have to eat."

"I know that," I said.

"But you haven't been."

I opened my mouth to protest.

"Your body doesn't lie."

I slumped. "No."

"What's going on?"

"Surely you've heard," I said bitterly.

"You tell me."

"Joe and the boys are gone."

"And you've lost your job, and your home, and your position in the community."

I stared at my lap.

"Was Joe right?" he asked.

"I don't know." It came from the blackness at my core. "No, of course not," I said quickly before the blackness betrayed me further.

"Sounds like there's some question in your mind."

"He's my *father*," I said. "I would *know*."

"Not necessarily."

I laughed. "You don't know how we lived. Believe me, I would know."

"Do you?"

"Yes. There was nothing like that. Daddy was hard on us, but there was nothing like that."

"You might consider seeing someone," he said. He stood up and pushed the chair away. "Do you want a recommendation?"

And have word travel through the entire Narrow Way system that I was crazy? "No," I said politely. "I have someone in mind."



And that's how I found Dr. Eaves. I got her name from an anonymous hotline. Narrow Way Northwest, the branch of Corporate that I work for, offers mental health benefits and counseling, but after two shopping sessions with Jennifer before the wedding, I had no illusions about confidentiality. I went to the mall, found a pay phone, called a crisis hotline, and asked for the name of a reputable counselor. I told the woman on the phone that I had no health insurance and would pay cash in advance. She offered me a sliding scale. Mortified, I told her I was happy to pay full price.

I made the appointment for Sabbath morning, when everyone would be at church. I arrived at Dr. Eaves' office at ten forty-five on the dot.

She met me at the door, a blowsy blonde in Birkenstocks and a khaki skirt that hiked up into creases over her broad backside. She made me think of Sarah.

"What brings you here?" she asked.

Her nosiness offended me. I was fine. I really was, now that I was making sure I ate at least one meal a day. But I had made the appointment. To have nothing to say would make her think that things were far worse than they were. It would work out. In the end, I told her about Rose. When I finished, she asked, "Why are you telling me this?"

"Well, because I want to know if I handled the situation properly," I floundered.

"Do you think you did?"

"I don't know," I said. "That's why I'm asking you."

"You don't strike me as the sort of woman who questions her own judgment easily."

"No, I don't," I said. "I research and make the logical decision. Usually I'm right."

"So why this? Why now?"

"Well, because there have been a lot of changes." The second it was out of my mouth, I regretted it.

"What changes?"

I knew that was coming. I wished I had Sarah's glib tongue, or better yet, Bethie's mute one.

"Just changes," I said. "We're getting off the subject."

"Oh?" She was starting to annoy me.

"Yes. Did I handle that situation correctly?"

"I can't answer that without knowing more about it."

"What else do you need to know?"

"The things you haven't told me."

I was angry. "I've told you everything pertinent."

"How about the things that aren't?"

“Like what?”

“Where are you in this story? You’ve told me about your career and about a distressed woman who entered and then left your life, but you’ve told me nothing about yourself. Why was this situation so troubling to you? Why did you initially dislike her? Why did you come to feel sympathy for her? What makes you think she’s not lying? What was it in her story that resonated with something in yours?”

“Nothing. I just wanted to be sure I handled the situation correctly. It has nothing to do with me.” It did, of course, and the terror of it was what made me both want to run from the office and stay.

“All right,” she said soothingly. “I understand. Let’s talk a little bit more about the situation.” And she took me through it, scene by scene, conversation by conversation.

Finally she sat back. “I think, given what you’ve told me, that you handled the situation well. You didn’t allow yourself to be swept away by the woman’s obvious distress. You tried to alleviate her discomfort. You were honest with her about the limited help you could provide. You even paid her more than you were required to. I’d say you responded like a caring, intelligent, responsible person. Many people would have been unable to respond to such obvious pain. It says a lot about you that you could. I’d like to explore how you came to have such a deep sense of compassion. And such a level head.”

Her praise shamed me. I shouldn’t be applauded for just doing my job, but I didn’t know how to say that without sounding like I was fishing for more praise. “All right,” I said.

She suggested a journal. I left, feeling marginally better. I had taken care of Rose. I was doing something to deal with the pain. And I was doing it without poking my nose into things that didn’t concern me.

Our second session went less well. Dr. Eaves wasn’t going to be satisfied until she had dug out every single scrap of dirty laundry I had. The intrusiveness of it galled me. She kept insisting that I tell her how I lost Harry. But that was private, so very, very private that I didn’t even allow myself to think of it. I left after the second appointment,

and drove back to my new house. My new, empty house. I walked inside, checked my voicemail and e-mail, drafted a press release, sent it for approval, and found myself sitting at my computer, hating the empty silence that lay outside the brightly lit garage.

I should buy furniture, I thought, or get the old stuff out of storage. But something in me shrank from both options. Furnishing this house would make it mine. It would be saying, *"This is where I live. This is my life."* I didn't want to live here, and I didn't want this for my life. I wanted my old life back. I wanted DJ and Jennifer to have never met, to never have fallen in love, to never have married. I didn't want the weekend at home, where Joe had turned on me, and stolen my sons. I didn't want DJ and Jennifer in my house. I wanted to be there with Joe and our babies.

But all those things had happened. And now I sat alone in an empty garage because it was better than sitting alone in an empty house. I wished Rose would come back. It would be good to have somebody to take care of again. But Rose was gone. My journal sat on the kitchen cupboard. I could see it from my desk. *Write about Harry*, Dr. Eaves had said. *Write about how you lost him.*

I opened a new computer file and started to write.

CHAPTER 28

Sarah

If I had any doubts about the church's attitude toward sexual impropriety after what happened to DJ's girlfriend Angela, they were dispelled in the days following DJ's wedding. Rose in PR had managed to get herself into shitload of trouble. I didn't hear all the details, but a little Vietnamese girl Rose's daddy was bringing over from Taiwan disappeared. The police got involved, and she said something she shouldn't—I never did hear exactly what, except that she was accusing her father of something he didn't do, or that he said he didn't do, which amounts to the same thing at a certain level in the Narrow Way bureaucracy. Next thing I knew, Rose was headed for Happy Valley to work with Elaine.

"How does that solve anything?" I asked Janet when she told me. "She's still working for the church."

"No," Janet said, and her eyebrows went up. "Elaine's gone contract."

"Why would she do that?"

"With the divorce and all, it was best."

"What divorce?"

"Elaine and Joe's divorce."

"Elaine and Joe are *divorcing*? Perfect Elaine? No way."

"Didn't you know?"

"Oh, yeah," I lied, my face burning. "I forgot." I called Momma as soon as I got to a private phone.

"Momma," I said, "why didn't you tell me about Elaine and Joe?"

"If Elaine wanted you to know, she would have told you herself."

"So why are they divorcing?"

"Joe had her declared an unfit mother. She can't see the boys."

"Why would he do that? That's crazy."

"I don't know," Momma hedged. "But where there's smoke, there's fire. There must have been something going on."

"But—"

"If you want to know anything else, you'll have to call Elaine and ask her yourself. She hasn't been communicating with me." Momma sounded pissed.

So I called Elaine. "You and Joe are really splittin' the sheets?" I asked.

"Yes," she said. "That's correct."

"Why?"

"I'm in a meeting." And she hung up.

I called back after work hours.

"Elaine? Are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm fine." She sounded dim, distant, chilly.

"What's going on up there?"

"Nothing."

"Then why are you getting a divorce?"

"Joe jumped to conclusions, made some accusations about Daddy...."

"Not you?" I asked.

"No."

"But Momma said—"

"You should know by now you can't trust what Momma says."

"So what was he saying?"

"That Daddy hurt the boys."

"Did he?"

"No! He wouldn't do that. He *loves* them."

"That never stopped him with us."

"Oh, Sarah, get over it," she snapped. "You always did blow things out of proportion. He didn't *really* hurt us."

"What about Bethie?" I asked. My voice started wobbling. I stopped and swallowed. My hand was shaking so hard the phone tapped against my ear. I had spoken forbidden words.

"What about her? She ran away."

"You weren't there, Lainie. You didn't see. Something happened to her, and I *know* Daddy had something to do with it."

"He did not."

"How do you know?"

"He told me."

"What did he tell you?"

"I'm not going into this," Elaine said. "I've had a hard day, what with the new girl and everything."

"How's she doing?"

"Who? Rose? Fine." She paused. "I guess."

"Really? What really happened? Why did she get sent up there?"

"It's confidential."

"Did she really do what they said she did?"

"I think she was just in the wrong place at the wrong time." Elaine sounded exhausted.

"But—"

"I really can't talk any more," Elaine cut in. "I'm going to take some aspirin and go to bed."

"Okay," I said as nice as I could. "When—if—you want to talk, I'm here."

But apparently Elaine didn't want to talk about it. Ever. She didn't call.

So I was no wiser about what had happened with either Elaine or Rose. It bugged me. I mean, one day she was just Rose in PR, aka the Cunt a Last Resort, aka the Brown Recluse, lurking in the basement in her hairy brown suits, and next day word in the Ladies' was that she'd been either canned or transferred so far out of town she'd never find her way back without a *Thomas Brothers Guide* and a trail of bread crumbs. Nothing was ever said officially, of course.

That's how the Narrow Way works. In worship and on the memos, it was said she'd "gone to labor in another part of the vineyard" (a damn

strange phrase for a church that shitcans you for even *sniffing* alcohol), but everybody knew. And once she'd gone, nobody looked too hard at whether she was telling the truth or not. The general consensus was that she was either vindictive or nuts—after all, who'd hang out in a basement all day every day and like it?

And then there was Elaine, who, with one swoop of a lawyer's pen, went from being a shining star in the Narrow Way galaxy to being an embarrassing little asteroid half-buried in the dirt of a distant planet. All I knew was that Rose went up to Happy Valley to work with Elaine doing media relations for Narrow Way Corporate. Janet said Rose had "valuable background information," but I knew it was just a good way to get her out of town. I suppose Elaine's name was first on the list when the men decided Rose needed to go away, being that Elaine was sort of a touchy subject right then herself.

Eventually I heard from Janet that Rose lasted a whopping two days and then disappeared. I thought about what Elaine had said: "I think she was just in the wrong place at the wrong time." I wondered about that.

After Rose left, the janitor moved her desk and chair out of the archives room and into the storeroom. The molting easy chair and the rug went out with the trash. Her computer went home for somebody's wife to use. The archives room sat empty. I missed Rose more than I thought I would. And yet, a part of me envied her. She'd gotten away. There was no escape for me; even if I quit, where could I go? Jimmy Jay made sure he didn't pay me quite enough to save up, quit and look for something else. But he couldn't stop me wondering why I took all the shit he dished out.

Funny thing was, about that time Pastor Rayburn's schedule picked up, and a lot of it seemed to involve Youth Ministries. They say the wife's always the last to know. I suspect that maybe in this case she was the second to last, if only because where Pastor Rayburn was concerned, I didn't *want* to know any more than I already did. I had learned to pretend so well between cruises at Motel 6 that it took me a while to realize that those trips were getting farther and farther apart. It took me even longer to realize that I hadn't had a period in quite a while. About then the whispers started.

CHAPTER 29

Jennifer

If it hadn't been for Elaine, those first days of my marriage would have been heaven, my first days in my Promised Land. Instead, they became my lost Eden, a time I look back on with sorrow and longing. Although Elaine and Joe's divorce had nearly destroyed the spirituality of the church they had been called to nurture, DJ and I were able to repair much of the damage simply by our godly example. It sounds a little vainglorious to say this, and I wouldn't if it weren't so important to set things down exactly as they were, but I *know* that God was using our witness to heal His people. After the first few weeks, Elaine stopped sitting in my place and standing by DJ and me when we shook hands with our people after church, and it wasn't really very long before she stopped coming much at all. I brought it up the day she finally deigned to come for Sabbath lunch. She showed up unannounced.

I had gone to a lot of work that day; it was a special, special lunch, and I hadn't planned on Elaine being there at all. It was supposed to be just DJ and me. I had worked on it for three days. After church, I hurried us home, changed into my prettiest after-church dress, and went to the kitchen. I was just taking the roast out of the oven when the doorbell rang.

"DJ, can you get that?" I called.

He didn't answer, but I heard the front door open, and Elaine say, "Hey."

My heart sank. Why would she pick today, of all days, to drop by for lunch? I heard footsteps, and then she was in my kitchen. "Hello, Jennifer," she said, looking around. "Thanks for having me. It was nice of you guys. I really didn't want to be alone today."

"There have been a lot of hard days, haven't there?" I asked gently, using the voice I used in counseling sessions. "We haven't seen you much in church lately."

"No," she said.

"I've always found that I *want* to turn to the Lord in times of trouble," I said.

"Yes."

I made a business of getting the roast uncovered and neatly sliced while I thought. Finally I just decided to ask outright. "What did you need?"

Elaine looked a little surprised. "Just spending today here is enough."

I straightened and snapped my fingers. "Drat. I forgot something." I hurried down the hall to our bedroom. DJ jumped when I pushed the door open, then relaxed when he saw it was just me.

"Why is she here?" I asked.

"For lunch," he said. "Didn't I tell you?"

"No," I said, my disappointment a lump in my throat.

"Must've slipped my mind," he said. "It's okay, isn't it? I mean, you always cook enough for an army, and it's the first time she's been over since we've moved here."

"But why today?" Tears closed my throat.

"Today's Jason's birthday."

"And?"

He stared at me.

"I don't understand why she'd want to be here on his birthday," I said quickly. "It's been too painful for her to be here before."

"She doesn't want to be alone," he said in a tight voice.

"I understand," I said. "It must be terrible. I feel so sorry for her."

"Me, too."

A heavy little silence fell between us.

"Well," I said briskly, "I'm just glad she feels she can call on us at a time like this. We're family."

"Yes." But he didn't look at me.

"Let me just go set another plate," I said, and I hurried out. I spoke kindly to Elaine on my way through the living room and pushed through the swinging door into my kitchen. Only when the door shut behind me did I allow myself to sag. It was all going wrong. After everything I had planned... But then I thought, *Elaine is family. She's going to know sooner or later. It's too late to change my plans now. It's not my fault she had Jason today, and then got declared unfit. We'll just include her in our joy.*

I pulled a plate out of the cupboard, got silverware, and set a place for her at the table. I carried the food into the dining room and we all sat down and ate. I did my best at that meal, I really did, but Elaine just didn't have much to say, and DJ wasn't much better. I would have thought that her years as a minister's wife would have made Elaine better at small talk, even if she *was* just a few court appearances away from being an ex-minister's ex-wife. I kept the conversation light and pleasant, and saw to it that everybody had all they wanted to eat. By the time the main course was over and I was in the kitchen preparing dessert I was practically fizzing, I was so excited. Elaine's being there wasn't what I had planned, but I've always been able to rise above life's little setbacks. This was a special day for DJ and me, and we shouldn't have to put that aside for anything. I took a deep breath, lit the candle, picked up the cake, and marched into the dining room singing, "Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you..."

DJ's face turned to stone. Elaine blanched, pushed her chair back, and half stood up. My voice quavered a little, but I finished. "Happy birthday, dear baby, happy birthday to you."

I set the cake in front of DJ. He stared down at it, then looked up at me. "Is it true?" he asked.

I nodded, smiling tremulously.

"Congratulations," Elaine said. Her voice was flat and dry, and I felt a little of the joy leak out of my news. She took a hesitant step, swayed, and then steadied. "I'd better be going."

"Stay and have a piece of cake," I urged.

"I'd better not," she said politely. "I've intruded long enough. Besides, I'm on a diet."

I knew *that* was a lie. The woman was thin as a rail, quite possibly anorexic, or at the very least bulimic. She just had a bad case of sour grapes.

"I'll walk you out," said DJ.

I stood by the table and watched them out the door, then—through the plate glass window—down our gracefully curved walk to the driveway, where they stood by Elaine's car, DJ's head bent to hers. Suddenly her shoulders started shaking. His arms went around her, and her head rested on his shoulder for an instant. Then she pushed back, lifted her head, and straightened her back. DJ reached into his pocket pulled out his keys, and walked up to his car, sitting ahead of hers in the driveway.

He turned back to her, saying something. She shook her head. He spoke again. She shook her head again, harder this time, and rubbed a hand inelegantly under her nose. Then she unlocked her car door, slid behind the wheel, and pulled smoothly out of the driveway.

DJ stood in the driveway staring out into the street. I waited by the window, waited for him to turn and look at me so I could smile and wave him in. But he didn't look. He pocketed his keys and was gone before I could hurry to the door and call out to him. DJ is very tall, and even though he doesn't seem to move quickly his long legs eat up a lot of sidewalk in a deceptively short time. That's what they did that day—I stood by the window, next to our unborn child's beautiful first birthday cake, and watched as my husband strode down the sidewalk and out of sight.

I could hardly hold the pain. I had dreamed of this day, planned for it, and it lay in ashes around me, destroyed by Elaine's petty, self-centered refusal to allow us our happiness. I turned away from the window and sank down in DJ's chair at the head of the table. I rested my head on my arms and felt my tears splash on them. This was a moment DJ and I should have been sharing, but he was gone, and I was alone. But then I realized I wasn't alone at all. One hand crept to my still-flat belly. "Happy birthday," I told my baby softly, my voice still rough from my tears.

I think that was when I realized that I was going to have to work far harder than I had ever dreamed if I was going to save my marriage.



DJ came back late that afternoon. I was lying on the bed, warm and tousled from my nap, just the way DJ likes me best. I couldn't have arranged it better if I had planned it, though of course I hadn't. I looked up at him sleepily, my hurt held in my swollen eyelids and sore throat. He sat down on the bed beside me, braced his elbows on his knees, and clasped his hands. I hated seeing him so bowed down. I ran a loving hand down his back.

"Why?" he asked his hands.

"Why what?" I murmured.

"Why did you have to do it that way?" he asked. "*You knew* it was Jason's birthday. *You knew* Elaine was already having a hard time."

"I had been planning it for days," I said. "It never occurred to me that she'd be so petty. I just wanted to tell my husband that I was having his baby." My voice thickened. "I didn't know he didn't want to hear it."

"That's not the point, and you know it," he said. His voice was quiet, but something frightening ran under the quiet words. "It wasn't the telling. It was the way you did it. Why?"

"I already told you. I'd been planning it for days. I refuse to arrange my life around Elaine just because she deigns to come to lunch. Besides, there was nothing else for dessert."

"You hurt her."

"No. She hurt herself. She's where she is because of her own choices and actions. I don't wish her ill, but neither am I responsible for her pain, and acting as if I am will only prolong it. There's a name for people who prolong pain by pandering to it. They're called 'enablers.' I refuse to be one. I'm sorry you don't understand, but the best thing we can do for Elaine is help her to face the reality of her life—by allowing her actions to have consequences, not by padding the corners of her world. She has to take responsibility. It hurts to lance a boil, but only after that can the healing begin."

He looked at me. His eyes looked sad and tired, and, inexplicably, hurt.

"Oh, DJ," I said impulsively. "Don't look me like that. I still think I acted for the best. I'm willing to concede there might have been another way, but I had it *all planned*. I thought you'd be so happy." I let my voice trail off. Two large tears rolled down my face.

He sighed, toed off his shoes, and stretched out beside me. "I know. And I *am* happy. I just feel bad for Elaine."

"I know. I do, too," I said in a sad voice. "But our life can't stop. We're having a baby. She'd have to know sooner or later, anyway. We have to be able to take joy in our child, or what kind of parents will we be? Our baby deserves to be loved and wanted. And anticipated."

"Yes," he said, but he sounded exhausted. "It does. And I do." He closed his eyes. I curled up next to him and watched him drift off to sleep. I knew it would be all right.

But just the same, after he was asleep I slipped off the bed, got the cake off the table, carried it outside, and threw it into the trash can. Time would heal us, but for now, it was better for that cake to just never have happened.

CHAPTER 30

Jennifer

Six months later, I ran a hand over my swelling belly and smiled at DJ. “So can we start this weekend?” I asked.

“I think so,” he said. “Let me check with Mom and Dad.”

“But I thought—”

“What?” He raised his eyebrows.

“I—” I looked down and toyed with one of the bright, oversized buttons on my maternity smock.

“You—” He slipped his arms around me from behind and rested his hands on my belly. When he pressed gently, the baby kicked against his hands. He pressed again and grinned. He may have not responded well to the news of the baby initially, but he had certainly made up for lost time. Lately I had even wondered sometimes if he loved the baby more than he loved me. I put such thoughts out of my mind. It was natural that he would be caught up in the baby.

I turned in his arms and slid my arms around his neck. “I thought it could just be us,” I whispered in my little-girl “Jenny” voice, the one he never could resist.

“I can’t get it all done in time, honey.” His warm breath stirred my hair, and I felt his lips at my temple.

“Just don’t go into the office. You’re on salary.” I smiled brightly. “The secretary can call if there’s an emergency.”

"I can't, Jennifer. The church pays me to serve the congregation, not remodel our house, and I don't have any more vacation time saved up. It wouldn't be right to ignore my church responsibilities for something like this. And Mom and Dad'd like to help."

His family again. I pulled away, and turned my back.

"Don't be like that, sweetheart," he begged, sliding his arms around me again. "I can't do it. And they want to help. Why shouldn't we ask?"

A tear slipped down my cheek. I turned and faced him again. "I wanted it to be special. Just us, getting ready for our baby."

"It will be when the baby comes. Just let them help us get ready for it, okay? It's not like we couldn't use the help, after all."

I smiled bravely. "I know, I'm just being silly little Jenny."

DJ sighed and smiled back at me. "Thanks for understanding, honey."

I understood all too well.



A few days later I was taking my morning rest in our nice cool living room, feet up on a pillow, a glass of raspberry tea close at hand. My water aerobics class had been particularly vigorous that morning, and I was dozing off when a truck roared up our street. I lurched awake, heart pounding. The roaring engine sounded like it was coming right into my living room. I rolled to my side, clumsy with the baby, pushed myself up, caught my balance, and got to the window just as the engine cut off, leaving an oddly musical rattling and clanging to puncture the silence. One of the ranch pickups, its bed heaping with boards, pipes, cans, and sheets of plywood, sat in our driveway. DJ's father strode up our front walk. I couldn't believe it. What on earth would the neighbors think, seeing that junky truck in front of our immaculate house?

I rushed to the door and threw it open, my mind racing. "Hi, Daddy," I said brightly. "Why don't you pull that into the garage out of the weather?"

"I think it's safe enough," he said, squinting up at the clear blue sky. "Truck's under the carport."

"But somebody might steal something," I said. "We've had some thefts on our block." It wasn't exactly a lie. I'm sure there *have* been thefts. It's a

nice neighborhood. The people who live here have things worth stealing. I was only trying to spare his feelings. He couldn't help being white trash.

"You don't say? You should come home. We've got lots of room in that big old house. We never even lock our doors."

"I'll open the garage door," I said.

"Well, if you insist." He sound doubtful. "Wouldn't want it to drip oil all over your nice garage floor, though."

"The floor will be fine," I said. "Let me just get that door." I grabbed the remote on my way through the kitchen. When I opened the door into the garage noise, heat, and exhaust fumes hit me. The truck pulled forward and the rattling became deafening, then cut off, leaving a cloud of blue smoke swirling under the flickering fluorescent bars.

Daddy slid out of the truck and slammed the door, setting off yet more clanging. He gave me a quick hug.

"How's my big girl?" he asked. "And how's my boy?" He touched my stomach.

"We're fine," I said brightly, even though his description of me, the over-familiarity of him touching my stomach, and his assumption that we were having a boy galled. DJ and I hadn't told anybody about the ultrasound results. It was our secret, the one thing his family hadn't spoiled. "Have you had lunch?"

He hadn't, so I fed him sandwiches, milk, and an apple and gritted my teeth while he talked about what he and DJ were going to do to the baby's room. I was furious to discover that he and DJ had planned everything without even bothering to consult me. It was no longer *my* house, *my* baby, *my* life. Finally I broke into the flood of building plans. "Where's Momma?"

"She wasn't feeling very good, so she stayed home."

"Oh." I was a little hurt. DJ had made such a huge issue out of his parents' helping, but his mother apparently didn't even care enough to show up. Still, though, I was kind. As a minister's wife, it was especially important that I show a Christian example, no matter how hurtful she was. "What's wrong with her? Nothing serious, I hope?"

“Nothing that hasn’t been wrong for a long time,” my father-in-law said. He gulped down his glass of milk and stood, swiping the back of his wrist across his mouth. “Better get started.”

I carried the dishes to the sink and washed them, then called DJ on the phone. “Your dad’s here,” I said.

“Good. Tell him I’ll be home as soon as I can.”

I hung up the phone and went back to finish my rest.



When DJ got home, the house was filled with the racket of hammers and saws, the smell of sawdust, and the shouts of men conversing over the roar of power tools. I shut myself in our room with a migraine. When that didn’t work, I locked myself in the bathroom and ran a bubble bath. DJ didn’t even notice.

That night I ordered pizza, even though all I could stomach was a few saltines. I went to bed early. The next morning saws and hammers drove me out of bed long before it was time for my water aerobics class. I did my best with the exercises, but I was exhausted before I ever got into the pool. When I let myself into the house after class, the screaming of the power saws masked the sound of the door opening and closing. When the sawing stopped, I could hear DJ and his father talking.

“—wrong?” Daddy was shouting. “She’s actin’ like she lost her last friend.”

“I think it’s just the baby,” DJ shouted back.

Daddy laughed. “Yeah, women get crazy when they’re pregnant. Your mamma, now, she never really got over it. Better hope Jennifer’s not like that.”

“She’s not,” DJ said loyally, and my heart warmed.

“Couldn’t prove it by me.”

“Why didn’t Mom come?” The saw screamed again.

“Just wanted to stay home. You know how she is.”

That wasn’t what he had told me, but it made sense. He must have been trying to spare my feelings. My heart warmed at the kindness of his lie, even though as a minister’s wife I of course disapprove of all lies on principle.

"Huh. I would have thought she'd want to help," DJ said. His voice sounded a bit odd. "You sure she understood?"

The sawing and hammering cut off abruptly. Dead silence, then, softly, "What did you say to me, boy?"

I found myself holding my breath.

"I was wondering if she understood," DJ said. He sounded young and uncertain, nothing like his usual confident, positive self.

"Why would I keep something like this from your Momma? We could've used her help. The truth is, she's just too bone idle to put herself out for anybody. I would've thought you'd have seen that by now, but there's none so blind ... I should go home right now. You don't want a *liar* under your roof."

Silence again.

"No, Daddy, I believe you."

Daddy? Until then the childish name hadn't struck me as peculiar. I had used it, myself.

"All right, then."

I let my breath out.

The hammering resumed. The saw screamed again.

I carried my wet towel and swimming suit into the laundry room and hung them up to dry.



Remodeling the baby's room turned into a full-scale renovation project. Before I knew it, DJ and his father were digging up the yard and installing an underground sprinkler system, bulldozing out the grass, landscaping the yard, and laying plans for a swing set and play structure. After a few days, I became used to the noise and upset in the house. Much as I hated to admit it, DJ had been right—there was far too much work for him to do alone. Besides, it was midsummer.

The sweat prickled on my arms and legs. When DJ hugged me our skins stuck and clung, and I came away smelling of sweat, lawn clippings, grease, and sawdust. I'd wanted it to be just us getting ready for the baby, but now I was glad DJ had insisted—it was hot, sweaty work, and with Daddy's help I could spend my days lying in my lounge just enjoying being pregnant. By

the time Daddy had packed up the power tools and started the noisy old truck to go home, I could honestly say, "I'm so glad you came. We never could have done it without you."

He hugged me, crushing me to his patched, faded cotton shirt, and said, "You're like a daughter to me." I slid my arms around his waist and squeezed back, my throat full. Why couldn't my relationship with my own father have been like this? I found myself remembering the first time I had met the family, how welcome and special I had felt. Even though Elaine had grown to resent me, DJ's mother didn't care, and Sarah was so self-involved that I might as well not exist, there was one family member who truly welcomed me. I reached up and kissed his cheek, thanking God for this wonderful man.

When Daddy pulled out of the driveway, I stood within the circle of DJ's arms, leaning back against his chest and waving as the truck disappeared down the tree-shaded street. Afterward DJ made love to me slowly, carefully, mindful of the baby. I just had time to think that it had turned into a perfect summer after all, slow, lazy, full of vivid, bright colors, the promise of my belly, and the safety of DJ's love. It was too bad about DJ's sisters and mother, but I couldn't let it upset me. It would be bad for the baby. And then I was asleep in my husband's arms.

CHAPTER 31

Elizabeth

Roses and bread. Peaches and cinnamon. Wood smoke and pine on air that cut like ice through sunshine. Snoring.

Snoring?

My eyes opened on a strange room. Books lying open everywhere. Too many pillows crowding a window seat. Crumpled half-finished embroidery stuffed down between two of the pillows. A tall, paned window, standing open. Sunshine pouring in through wild roses and vine maple clambering over windowpanes and sneaking tendrils over the books and shelves inside. Orange and gold maple leaves flickering chilly shadows on the patchwork quilt covering me. Potted herbs flourishing on the windowsills. Their sharp, clean fragrance tickled my nose. The room was such a jumble that it took me a minute to spot the snorer, a squat, square woman in the corner.

She sat in a battered old rocker—head a-kilter, knees spread, mouth sagging open in her creased, leathery face, silver hair escaping from a tipsy bun and straggling around her weathered cheeks. An embroidery frame dangled from one hand. Her big white cotton apron had faded birds, flowers, and ribbons embroidered on the bib and around the hem. She snored again.

I shifted and gasped. Everything hurt—my head, my throat, my stomach, between my legs, my thighs, my calves, my feet. I had to go to the bathroom so I gritted my teeth, rolled to my side, and pushed myself up. A book fell. The woman's embroidery clattered to the floor, and her head jerked up. Her

eyes settled on me and she grinned. She had a wide mouth—almost like a toad’s—and when she smiled, it just rolled her cheeks back out of the way and stretched forever. She raised her arms and tried in vain to tidy her hair. I smiled back, but it hurt so much I stopped and just focused on sitting up.

“Hold on,” she said. She stopped fiddling with her hair, heaved herself out of the rocker, and hobbled across the room while I struggled to get my feet over the side of the bed. I had to go badly now.

The woman slid an arm around my shoulders. With her help, I managed to stand and actually take a few steps. Something slithered out of me and plopped on the floor. I stared down. A huge blood clot quivered like a blob of jelly between my feet. I couldn’t think why I would be bleeding, but there it was, like an accusation. Then I felt the blood running hot down my legs and splashing over my feet.

“Hold on, honey,” the woman said. She leaned me up against a table and trotted out the door. I heard clattering in another room, and then she was back with a zinc washtub. “Here,” she said. “Use this for now.” She started to hike up my gown and back me up to the tub. Mortified and frightened, I fought to keep my nightgown down, but it wasn’t much of a struggle. I couldn’t hold it any longer. Black spots were dancing before my eyes.

I gave up and let her brace me over the tub. I went, and that hurt, too, burning and stinging all the way from deep inside me. Tears slid silently down my cheeks. When I was finished she wiped me with a soft rag, changed my nightgown, helped me back into bed, and cleaned the tub—the water in it was dark, heavy red—and the floor around it.

Then she settled herself on a straight chair next to the bed and leaned forward, hands braced on knees, eyes serious behind shiny half glasses. She started talking slowly, quietly, like Elaine used to with Harry. *Who was Elaine? And who was Harry?* I remembered the names, but everything else was a blank. Panic rose in me again. She raised her voice, but kept going until I calmed enough to understand her. “... stop the bleeding. I can help, but I’ll have to touch you. Do you understand?”

Another clot slid out of me. I gritted my teeth and nodded. She nodded back, just one quick little bob, then stumped out of the room, only to

return with a big bag of leaves and a huge spear of aloe vera. She took a knife and started stripping leaves, then sliced open the aloe vera and began squeezing it into the leaf pulp, talking all the while, telling me the names of the plants and explaining why she was using each one. One was a natural antiseptic, one helped clotting, one deadened pain, one promoted healing. And all the while she talked, she stripped, pounded, and kneaded until she had a thick green paste.

"All right, now, this is the hard part," she finally said. "I have to lift your nightgown and put this on your hurts. If I don't, you won't get better. All right?"

She waited. Finally I gave a single jerky nod and closed my eyes.

"I'll be careful," she said softly.

She talked all the while, telling me what she was doing and why, explaining how it worked, trying to soothe me with her voice. It was still awful. The paste felt cold and clammy, and it stung at first, though it soon faded to a cool dull ache. I was afraid, and ashamed to have her see me—above all, ashamed to have her see me all bloody and torn up. *How had it happened? How did I get here?*

I wanted to hide, but I had no choice—I just lay there, stiff, my muscles locked against the shaking, and felt the chilly fall air touching me, and slowly, slowly, her words wove a web of peace. At last she pulled my gown down, tucked the quilt around my shoulders, leaned down, and gently kissed my forehead. Exhausted, I slept. When I woke again she fed me warm bread with butter and honey, fresh peaches swimming in sweet cream, and hot chocolate. I went to the bathroom—this time down the hall in her old-fashioned toilet with its overhead reservoir and pull chain—and then I hobbled slowly back to bed. The woman helped me clean myself, then she smeared more of the paste on me where I still hurt. I slept again.

I don't know how long I spent doing that—eating, going to the bathroom, sleeping. Days? Weeks? Months? Time had no meaning. And then one morning I opened my eyes and saw delicate pink roses lying on the quilt at my feet. Sunshine lay golden on them. I reached for them—and it didn't hurt. I sat up and looked out the window at the sunshine, bright on fat

round pumpkins. Tall corn shocks stood in the garden. Grass rolled in great swathes down the valley and up the mountain on the other side to the forest. Black cedars, firs, and red, orange, and yellow maples were crowded so thick I couldn't imagine a way through them. White daisies, orange poppies, and white, yellow, and lavender butterfly lilies dotted the grassy meadow. A stream bordered by a thick swath of yellow, white, and purple flags meandered through the valley. A herd of long-maned horses splashed in the water and grazed on the stream banks.

It didn't occur to me then that fall colors and spring and summer flowers don't happen at the same time.

I eased out of bed, relishing movement without pain—or at least not much, limped stiffly out into the kitchen, and sat down at the round, battered oak table. The floor stretched forever, an expanse of wood scrubbed white. Rag rugs made islands of soft, faded color under the table, in front of the massive black cook stove and by the granite sink. Two Siamese cats were curled into a fawn and black knot under the stove, their sapphire eyes regarding me sleepily. Sun-bleached red gingham curtains hung at the window over the sink. A golden-crust pie sat on the wide sill. Sugar sparkled on it, and it smelled of baked apples, cinnamon, and butter.

Green cupboards faded almost gray ran along the walls and under a long, scrubbed wooden counter that stretched clean and empty except for a crock of whisks, spatulas, and wooden spoons, a massive rusty red cookie jar, and a deep white pottery bowl. French doors opened on a tangle of cosmos, daisies, snapdragons, dandelions, tomatoes, cucumbers, dahlias, sweet Williams, and wild roses. Vine maple and ivy fought a brilliant battle on a crumbling fieldstone wall dividing the flowers from an orchard of ancient apple trees. A silvery wooden rocking chair stood half-hidden by flowers and vines. Another pottery bowl covered with a linen dish towel sat on the back of the stove where it would be warm, but not hot. A fragrant blue-and-white-speckled coffee pot sat squat and steaming on the stove's back burner.

This was the only kitchen I could remember seeing, and I had never been in it before, yet I found myself going unerringly to the cupboard that held the cups, to the drawer that held the spoons, to the tin that held the

sugar. The milk stumped me—I couldn't see a refrigerator. Then I spotted it—a thick door, sealed tight on a tall, narrow opening. When I opened it the chilly blast shocked me. Recovering, I looked in and saw slatted shelves stacked one above the other. Several jugs of milk, part of a wheel of cheese, a bowl of butter, another of eggs, and a hunk of bacon jostled for space. Light filtered in above and below, but it was cold—far colder than the air in the room, or even outside. I leaned in and peered up through the slats. Sunlight slanted down through a screened opening. I pulled out one of the milk jugs and carried it over to the cupboard. When I poured a little into my coffee, yellowish cream threaded the white flow—*raw milk, then, and I'd just upset the cream*. I popped the top back on the jug, replaced it in the chilly cupboard, and settled myself at the table.

A door slammed. Rough humming filled the air. “Why, good mornin’, honey,” the square little woman said as she bustled into the kitchen. A basket of eggs hung over her arm. “You feelin’ better? I’ll fix us some breakfast, then deal with these, soon’s I get rid of these boots.” She toed off tall leather boots to reveal a pair of knobby, grubby feet. Gray curls had escaped the bright cotton kerchief knotted around her head and straggled untidily down her back. Something green smeared one corner of her apron. The cats curled and churred around her bare ankles. She lifted a foot and rubbed it along a smooth back, lost her balance, and dropped the foot quickly. Chuckling, she bent and stroked the cats’ smooth brown backs.

I watched her move around her kitchen, talking, humming snatches of song, lifting, twisting, turning, and bending with an economy born of years. She slid a slice of bread and a bowl of peaches onto the table for me and stumped out. I heard her muttering and humming and moving things around down the hall, then she appeared in the kitchen door holding a deep red dress, stiff with embroidery around the neck, cuffs, and hem.

“Here, honey, I made this for you,” she said. “Careful, might still be pins.” I took it gently and held it in my hands. It felt too soft, too pretty, for someone like me. I touched the embroidery and my eyes grew hot. I blinked furiously. *She did this for me. Why?*

"Try it on," she said. "I had to guess the size."

I wanted to tell her that it was beautiful, but I needed pants, something big, something loose, something I could get dirty, something in which I could hide. *Why?* I didn't know, and I had no words to ask.

"Go on," she said, "See how it fits."

I carried it to the room I'd been sleeping in, shrugged out of my nightgown and slipped the dress on, feeling awkward and false. It was too pretty for someone like me.

"Come on out, honey. Let me see," she called.

I crept out of my room and back to the kitchen to stand by the table, stiff and clumsy.

"Let's see you," she said, and she put her hands on my hips and turned me round and round, tugging here, smoothing there. At last she stood back. "You look so pretty in that."

Who said that before? Why did I feel frightened and sad at the words?

Then she smiled, and my fear and sadness faded, leaving only the words I wished I could believe. I smiled back at her, then sat carefully at the table, trying not to muss myself.

"Rest now," she said. "I'm putting you to work tomorrow."

I smiled and nodded, then walked carefully back to my room, lay down in the sunshine, and fell asleep, my red embroidered dress spilling around me. The next morning, I dressed in my new dress. The woman fed me toast, eggs, and applesauce, then handed me an apron and a basket. "Find the eggs, honey. I can't get to some of the little places those hens wriggle into."

I tied on the apron and took the basket. Walking carefully, holding my skirts out of the wet grass, and peering into corners, I collected all the eggs I could find. I started back for the house, walking up the hill, enjoying the cool air and my skirts swishing around my bare legs. Back at the house I handed over the eggs and she handed me a pail. "Have you milked before?" she asked.

Had I? I thought so. I nodded hesitantly.

"Good—go milk Rosie, then."

I ran my hand down my new dress and shook my head.

"I made it to wear," she said gently. "It'll get dirty. We'll wash it, and it'll get dirty again. When it doesn't come clean anymore we'll make you a new one. It's all right. Go milk Rosie. She's down at the barn."

I went, and this time I let my skirts touch the grass. Rosie turned out to be a jersey cow, a lovely butterscotch color with a creamy belly and a deep brown nose and feet. When I milked her I kilted my skirts up. When I fed the chickens I pulled up the hem and made a sack for the grain, and when I touched something squishy I wiped it on my apron. Slowly, slowly, I learned that dresses—even red embroidered dresses—can get dirty. I never noticed how wearing it changed the way I moved, gestured, saw myself. One simply lives differently in a red embroidered dress.

The days took on a comforting sameness. I woke in chilly mornings, dressed in my beautiful dress, walked down the twisting path to the weathered gray barn now nearly hidden in the falling gold of the leaves, threw a handful of grain into the manger, and then washed and milked Rosie, my cheek pressed to her warm flank in the icy morning air.

I carried the milk up the path to the rough stone house with its blue-trimmed windows and doors, then filled my apron with dried corn and fed the hens. While they pecked in the grass, I hunted their big brown eggs. I collected the squash and pumpkins under the yellow fall sun, picked the apples from the half-wild orchard beyond the crumbling kitchen garden wall, pulled the carrots still in the garden, dug potatoes.

One day I looked around the root cellar and saw baskets of apples, carrots, onions, and potatoes, all packed in sawdust. Brilliant orange pumpkins, and knobby squash jammed the corners and lined the walls. The shelves above held huge cheese rounds, tubs of butter, baskets of eggs, and wax-sealed crocks of jam. The old woman and I had filled the cellar using little but our hands, our aprons, and old bushel baskets.

I hadn't thought about why I was doing all this work—I seldom thought beyond the sun on my face and the task at hand—just as I couldn't have said when I first noticed the sound of an axe echoing through the crystal air, and the heavy thumps on the back porch and in the little shed as someone

unseen stacked wood. The sounds were just a part of the place, background noise for the business of the day.

And then one day I saw him, a distant figure moving easily along the edges of the forest. He wore faded black jeans and a white shirt. His wavy black hair had a golden sheen, like it had been dusted with pollen. I saw him, and my heart leaped and my breath came fast, and I hurried back to the house on shaking legs.

Inside, I sat at the kitchen table and took deep gulps of air while the old woman chattered on about nothing in particular. The next time I saw him, he was closer, crossing the field between the forest and the house. My heart raced and my fingers clenched. Poor Rosie, who I was milking at the time, kicked the bucket over in indignation.

Milk spilled into the dust. I jerked my feet back. A rusty sound startled me, and suddenly I was somewhere else—*standing in blazing hot sunshine by a river, the fragrance of blackberries thick in the air. Sarah was standing beside me, hair blazing white in the sun, a nearly empty bucket in her hand, blackberries scattered by her feet, tears in her eyes. And the rusty sound—I turned and saw a flash of gold in a patch of shade—and then I was staring back at the muddy mess under the cow, and I realized that the rusty sound was coming from me. I was laughing.*

I snapped my mouth shut. Shaking, I reached for the bucket, carried it to the pump, rinsed it carefully, and went back to milking. *What had just happened? Who was Sarah?* I had three names now. Elaine. Harry. Sarah. I groped for the source of the memory, but there was none—the moment had simply come, whole, complete in itself, robbed of context. *What was the flash of gold? Who was laughing? Why was I remembering it now?*

I stood, lifted the bucket, and turned toward the house. And there he was, leaning over the fence. I gasped and dropped the bucket, spilling what remained of the milk. I didn't even look at it. I was transfixed by his face. One half was beautiful, with strong, golden curves and angles. But the other half ... a half-healed gash began high on his forehead, disappeared under a stained rawhide patch over his eye, and reappeared on his cheek, pulling one side of his face up into a vicious sneer. The whole gash looked raw, angry, and inflamed. A few places seeped thick yellow pus. It should

have terrified me, and I *was* startled. But something in his eye, in his very stillness, drew me to him. *I had seen that eye before.* It had danced golden, gazed at me warm and amber. I stepped away from the bucket, first one slow step, then another. Toward him. The air hung clear around us, still chilly from night, warmed by the rising sun.

I reached the fence, slowly lifted my hand. He stood still, his eye gazing into mine. *Remember!* something commanded me. But I couldn't. When I reached for the memories, waves of fear and rage swept me back into the safe, placid present. Still, though, I knew him.

My hand touched his face, not where it was perfect and smooth, but where it was torn and seeping. I ran my fingers gently down the gash, feeling the rough scabs, the sleek scar tissue, and the damp where the wound wept. I wanted to weep, too. Something about his destroyed face broke my heart.

My fingers reached his chin. I lifted my hand to his forehead again. His good eye drifted closed. I lay my fingers on the gash, but this time, warmth flowed from my fingers into the gash, even as I felt the dark poison flow up through my fingers. *A monster lurched through the dark, intent on the one I loved. I stood between them, head down, lips lifted in threat. The god stared down at me, then lashed out.* Sickened by the waves of love, fear, rage, and pain, I jerked my hand away from the gash and stumbled back. His eye flew open. *I knew him.* I stopped. *Comfort.* The word whispered into my mind. I didn't know what it meant, only that if I fled now, I would regret it forever.

I stepped forward, closing the distance between us again. I lifted my hand, steeling myself against what I knew would come. I set my hand gently on the gash, closed my eyes, and felt warm brightness glitter out of me even as the dark, poisonous undercurrent swirled in to fill its place. And then the flood of pictures, blurry, tinged in red.

The one I loved curled around me, and waves of pain, and then suddenly, a shift and a jerk, as if I had fallen through a sheet of plastic, and all was changed. The earth was farther away. Balance was difficult. Bright images of a garden swirled around me. A gate, one I knew I must not pass, swam sickeningly past. In my confusion, I reached for the thing that lay at my center, for the one I loved, and found only waves of pain, rage, and fear. And then she was there,

beyond the gate. I stood on the path, changed as I was, and called to her, but I had never used such a voice, didn't know how. I lifted my arm and beckoned, and my soul begged her to step through the gate and into the garden, into the new, changed place, away from the pain, fear, and anger. But she turned away, and left me alone beyond the gate I must not pass, and at last I accepted that it must be so. I watched her turn away, back into the familiar horror. And we were still bound, but the bond was part love, part hate, part faith, part betrayal. And yet I loved her. I took a long last look at the beautiful garden, then I set my new changed paw on the latch and did the forbidden. I went back through the gate. I did it for her.

The images faded, leaving behind only the sure knowledge that the bond joining us could never be broken, that it was stronger for the scars it bore, that it could be the salvation of both of us, if we let it.

I don't know how long we stood there, but when I opened my eyes the sun stood high overhead. My hand dropped. The gash lay smooth and white. The vicious sneer had eased into a gentle half smile. The golden eye gazed at me with the warmth of the sun, of caramel, of butterscotch, and then the perfect side of his mouth curved up, and the broken smile became whole. I felt my lips lift in return. Exhaustion swept over me and I staggered forward, then everything disappeared in a whirl of glittering specks.



He still kept his distance, but he was always there. I grew used to looking up from my work in the garden, in the barn, in the pasture to see him at the edge of the forest, sometimes walking, sometimes working, sometimes just sitting in the sun, watching me.

His presence comforted me, and I began looking for him as I walked to the barn, the spring in the valley, the field for the cow. The bond that began in the dark terror that cloaked my memory grew stronger by the day. I might not know how I knew him, but I knew that I did, and that he was a safe place.

We weren't friends, exactly, but both less, and more, as we always had been. I knew it. *Or did I? Who was I before I awoke to the smell of roses and cinnamon and the warmth of the sun on my face?*

And then one morning when frost glittered on the meadow and the sun struck a million rainbows from the bare trees across the valley, I waved to

him, and smiled. He waved back, a wide white smile splitting his brown face, and I accepted that the things that bound us were eternal, and had grown out of both joy and pain, fear and love. I accepted that someday I would reach through the dark curtain around my memory to learn what those things were. I accepted the knowledge that my life had been changed beyond recognition by dark events. Change had become my only constant; and the dark current I had taken into myself in healing the man from the forest had changed me yet again.

I found myself noticing things that I, who had no past, had simply accepted before—mint leaves strewn across the doorways, bowls of milk on the doorstep each night, poultices and pastes to heal cuts and bruises, a basin of water set by a flickering candle on the table, reckoning time and seasons by the moon.

I took note, and in noticing began to see the patterns that lay at the heart of my new life. I learned that one can't live without making a mess, that life can be dancing with the world, and that the dance honors the greatest Mother of All. Most of all, I learned to respect mystery, innocence, fertility, wisdom and freedom with responsibility—if it harms none, let it be. I danced through an endless autumn, watching the world ripen and then die in a blaze of glory. And the man from the forest moved through the edges of it all, until at last it was over.

On the night of the dead, the old woman and I were getting dinner: fresh bread, corn chowder, and the last of the salad greens, two women in a golden kitchen, dancing the mystery of bread and corn, of yeast and milk, of life coming from death, and death coming from life. The night clung blue black to the shining windows.

Then something shifted—a shadow, perhaps, or a flash of light, or the fragrance of the bread—and my soul settled. *This is right*, I thought. Then, *I am right*. In that moment I knew who I was, and that when it was time, I would remember who I had been. When we sat down to eat, the man from the forest came in and, without a word, joined us at the table. We smiled, and my heart and soul knew him, though the rest of me didn't know how.

I still had no words, but I listened. I listened to the woman talk and sing, her voice warm and sweet like butter and maple syrup. I listened to the man from the forest, his voice deep and husky, with fugitive intonations that hinted his speech had been learned late in life. I listened to the birds settling for the night. I listened to the dry cornstalks rustling in the garden. I listened to the wind in the pines. I listened to my breath, my heartbeat, my blood rushing through me like the river through the valley. I listened to my soul, and found it both old and wise. I listened to my heart, and heard it speak a name for the black-haired man—Toby. And I didn't know how I knew it.

CHAPTER 32

Elizabeth

A thump outside my window woke me the next morning. I slid out of the pocket of warmth under my blankets, shivered into my dress, washed my face, braided my hair, pulled on thick socks, and padded to the kitchen. Coffee steamed on the back of the big black stove. I poured a cup, gulped it down as quickly as the hot liquid would allow, tied on my apron, stomped into my ancient, battered boots, picked up the metal pail, and started down the path to the barn. Rosie saw me coming and ambled over to the barn pump. I washed her udder, back legs, and belly, then, my hand on her jutting hip bones, we wandered companionably over to the corner of the yard we used for milking these days. I tipped a measure of grain into the manger I had tied to the fence, slid onto the milking stool, set the bucket under her, leaned my icy cheek against her warm, fragrant flank, and began sending powerful jets of milk foaming into the pail.

One of the cats appeared from nowhere. I shot a few jets at her. She caught them deftly, shook her ears, licked the creamy milk off her black masked face and whiskers, and disappeared again. I smiled into Rosie's warm flank. When the udder lay soft and slack under my hands and the milk nearly filled the pail I stood, patted Rosie in farewell, and walked up the path to the house, the bucket sloshing against my knee.

A wagon stood beside the open root cellar door. The old woman stumped out, a heavy wheel of cheese in her arms. Toby followed,

bearing another. The woman saw me standing on the path, the bucket by my knee. "Market day," she called. "Set the cream to rise and get yourself ready. Your clothes are on your bed."

I hurried into the house, strained the milk into rising pans, and slid them into the cool cupboard. Market day? I hadn't realized there was a town close by. I hurried into my room. A soft, deep blue dress was lying on my bed. Shimmering black embroidery edged the neck, sleeves, and hemline. I touched it with a single finger, then stripped off my work dress, sponged myself clean, braided my hair wet, and slipped into the new dress. It settled around my hips and swished around my brown legs.

And then the old woman was there, buttoning me up the back, tugging and smoothing, saying, "Oh, honey, you look so pretty in that." This time, I believed her, in spite of the whisper of fear her words sent down my spine. The red dress had done its work.

Outside, a horse stood hitched to the cart, its lazy tail flicking cold-clumsy flies. Toby was gone. The old woman and I climbed in, and the horse jogged off down the path, past the barn, and onto a faint track that curved down into the valley and ran beside the marshy stream. A few flags still bloomed defiantly, though ice crackled at the water's edge. The sun climbed above us as we wound our way down the valley, the old woman chatting easily about nothing in particular.

Soon after the ice melted in the morning sun, we left the creek and followed the track up and into the chilly, dark pine forests. Damp ground and pine needles cushioned the wheels. The woman fell silent. A crow called overhead. Another answered from deeper in the forest. The air thickened into mist, but we drove steadily on, moisture beading our faces and hair. Trees creaked and cracked, loud in the still air. A squirrel chattered. Something crashed. The squirrel chattered again. The horse's harness jingled. His hooves were quiet on the thick carpet of needles. I rode easily, swaying to the rhythm. The quiet without and the quiet within met and melded. We were no longer horse, cart and women traveling through forest, we were just a small, moving part of the vast forest. The quiet grew deeper, deeper, and soon I felt myself drifting, my eyes slipping closed, my

head nodding. Finally I climbed into the wagon bed, made myself a nest in the straw cushioning our market goods, and slept.

I jerked awake in hot, noisy sunlight and sat up, squinting against the glare. The horse seemed surprised, too. He had lurched to a stop at the forest's edge. The old woman let him stand for a moment, then lifted the reins, clucked, and started him clopping along the track snaking down the hillside to the jumble of red roofs, black beams, and creamy stucco nestling in the valley and sprawling up the hillsides. Taller buildings in the center surrounded a square with bright striped awnings, banners, and pennants floating overhead. A massive golden oak crowned with a single branch of vivid red leaves towered above the buildings. The crowd's roar battered us.

I scrambled back into the seat, swatting straw from my dress and picking it out of my hair. The horse pricked his ears and shook his bridle. The old woman muttered something soothing and he settled down. I, on the other hand, found myself twisting my hands and clenching my teeth.

The old woman laid a comforting hand over my knotted ones. "Just stick close. It'll be fine," she said gently as we drove down the dusty track and between the first houses.

The streets were deserted, but the noise from the square told me where everyone was. We drove on. I swallowed, swallowed again, knotted my hands yet tighter. We broke free of the empty street as suddenly as we had broken free of the misty forest. Shouts, laughter, and music pounded against us. The square swarmed with women in bright skirts and loose linen blouses carelessly fastened, and men in tall boots and forest-colored shirts.

Shop doors stood open along a shadowed arcade. Market stalls with brilliant awnings crammed the square, leaving narrow winding lanes. Laughing people jostled the cart. I grabbed the seat with both hands.

The old woman looked at my set jaw and white knuckles. "We'll find a quiet corner," she said.

The noise and colors blurred together and beat against me in a solid mass. I clutched the seat and stared blankly at the vivid life swirling around me. We broke through the crowd to find ourselves in a quiet corner.

Cobblestones stretched warm and golden to battered white walls. A shadowy alley disappeared between two of the buildings.

"I'll set up here," she said. "We'll sell out quick." People were already gathering curiously and asking her prices. "Help me set up," she said, "then look around, if you want." She spread a coarse mat on the pavement beside the cart and started building a pyramid of pumpkins and squash. I clambered over the back of the wagon seat and carried the linen-wrapped cheese wheels to the back.

"That's good," she said. "Can you get the butter?" I lifted the straw covering the last baskets and took out a few crocks. "Cover the baskets again," she said. "It'll melt otherwise."

I packed the straw back over the remaining crocks and scooted the baskets down by the cheese. She went back to building her pumpkin pyramid, and I stood in the wagon bed, uncertain. She glanced up at me. "Go on. Look around."

I jumped to the ground and, leaning against the wagon, stared at the crowd. It was less overwhelming from here, probably because I could see less of it. I started to pick out individual sounds—two women laughing, a hawker, a flute piping a merry jig. I also smelled fresh bread, roasting meat, and apples. My stomach rumbled. It had been a long time since breakfast.

The old woman straightened up. "Hungry?" She fumbled in her apron pocket and came out with some odd, angular pieces of bone and metal. "Go buy us some lunch."

That wasn't real money. The pieces were too angular, the writing too florid, and the holes in the centers—those were just plain wrong.

"Go on," she said, a bit impatiently.

I shook my head and held out the coins.

"What's wrong?"

I shook my head again and shoved the coins at her.

She sighed. "You know, honey, this would be a lot easier if you would talk. All right, I'll go for lunch. You watch the wagon."

The crowd swallowed her whole, and I was alone. I shrank back into the shadow of the wagon and willed myself invisible. Maybe that's why I saw her.

The girl must have come from the narrow alley behind the wagon because before I even knew she was there, she was already past me. A black velvet band held back her riot of reddish brown curls, and she wore a long green sweater, black leggings, and low boots. She walked slowly, head up, staring at the second stories of the buildings, oblivious to the crowd. Two children darted across her path, but she didn't even pause. She just walked right through them. *Maybe she's blind*, I thought. *But she can't be. She's looking at the buildings.*

She reached the crowd. No one stared at her clothing—which was peculiar, to say the least—or acknowledged her. She stepped into the crowd. No one made room for her, nor did she seek an opening. She simply stepped forward and was gone without a ripple. Then the old woman was back, carrying a fragrant napkin-wrapped bundle. She opened it and shared out meat pie and apples. We ate hungrily, then she turned to selling. I wiped my hands on the napkin, shook the crumbs off my new dress, and looked around.

And there she was again, the girl in the leggings, walking out of the crowd, still looking around, a slight frown furrowing her brow, and then she looked at the wagon and her eyes lit up. She hurried toward me. I shrank back. She disappeared into the alley.

I waited for a moment, then hurried after her, reaching the alley just in time to see a flash of green disappearing into a shadow that I had thought was a wall. I trotted down to the corner and peered into the shadow. Another, narrower alley took off from the first. I stepped cautiously into it—and heard the old woman calling me. I stepped back into the alley leading to the square and hurried back to her.

"Where were you?" she asked.

I pointed down the alley.

She darted a quick look at me. "Okay, let's take a look," she said.

I led the way down to the second alley, turned into it, and groped through the heavy shadows. The old woman puffed behind me. The second alley ended in another sharp twist. I rounded it and found myself standing before a battered gate—more of a door, really. I reached for the rusty latch, but the old woman seized my arm.

“Let me,” she said.

Puzzled, I stepped aside. She pushed past me, closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and put her hand on the latch. The gate swung open on a battered flight of stone steps nearly overgrown with blackberry brambles and cottonwood. The steps led down through the leafy gloom to a river that slid green and placid under the hanging branches. It looked cool and restful after the tumult in the village. The old woman stepped forward, raised her hand and pressed at the air. Then she nodded twice, sharply and turned back to me. “What do you want, honey?” she asked softly.

I looked at the quiet, shady tunnel, at the sunlight glinting on the river beyond, and wanted more than anything to step through the gate and walk there, away from the mob in the village square behind us, away from the dark terror that lay behind everything I knew of life.

She saw the longing in my eyes. “If you go now, you might not find your way back,” she said. “Is that what you want?”

I took another step, then turned to face her. She stood in the gate, watching. I looked at the ancient face, wrinkled as a late-winter apple. She had cleaned me, gentled me, given me a place to find my soul. I looked at the river, and thought of her words. *Was I really ready to take a step that might separate us forever? How could stepping through a simple gate do that?* But then I thought of the gate the man in the woods had passed, the gate beyond which return was forbidden. Was my fear of what lay behind me that strong? How would I ever know who I was, if I never knew who I had been?

In the end there was no question. I turned and was back through the gate in two steps, toward the woman, toward the house on the hill—and toward the darkness in my past. The old woman pushed the gate closed behind me, and then I was in her arms, my head on her shoulder. She smoothed my hot hair, then pushed me back and looked into my face.

“Let’s go home,” she murmured.

I followed her back up the alley to the cart, and this time, I followed her around to the end. I stood beside her, and faced the people who came to look at pumpkins or taste a sliver of the pale, creamy cheese.

When they asked me the price of things I opened my mouth, and for the first time my silent tongue became a burden to me. *Where were my words?*

We finished the day, found supper in a dark, noisy inn just off the square, and then started home through the blue evening. We got through the forest above the town before full dark. The woman made a fire at the forest's shadowy edge while I spread our bedrolls on the ground. We sat in the fire's glow and watched night fill the valley before us, then sweep up to blanket the towering peaks. The forest rose cold and dark at our backs. The woman told me stories, and sang in a cracked, husky contralto. At last she fell silent. The fire crackled. My eyes grew heavy.

I was in that magic place between sleeping and waking when a black and white dog trotted into the flickering firelight. I reached out a hand. "Hey Toby," I said sleepily. He pushed his head into my palm. I ruffled his ears. "What a good dog."

He looked up at me out of mismatched eyes, one amber and familiar, one milky blind. A terrible scar ran over his head and eye, and down to his jaw. I cupped his scarred head in my hands. "Oh, you poor boy," I murmured. He slumped beside me, sagging familiar weight into my hip, panting doggy breath into my face. And then, somewhere in my mind, a pane shattered like the glass in the monkey house. Past poured into present. And for a while there was too much turmoil for me to understand that I was free.

CHAPTER 33

Elizabeth

So when Toby brought me back to myself, I started out with Samson the gorilla at the Brookfield Zoo. Why? Was it because that day in the monkey house was when I first understood what was happening to me? Was it because it was there that I first understood the power of victims—and the fear they inspire? Maybe it was because, having climbed into the sun, I finally understood the power at the bottom of the pit—those with nothing left to lose will dare anything. And why not? They have everything to gain. Victims hold the secret. If ever they can find the way to act, their world shakes and cracks like the window in that stinking monkey house did.

Whatever the reason, I remembered Toby first, then Samson, then my sisters and brother, and at last, my parents, and last of all, that awful man in the beer-can hat. I could only kneel there and gasp. And then I buried my head in Toby's neck as he stood warm and panting and smiling in the firelight, and I wept for the loss, pain, and joy of seeing him again.

Then came betrayal, fear, and shame. The old woman and I finished the trip home the next morning as silently as we had begun it, except for Toby, who rode in the back of the wagon when he wasn't chasing squirrels and birds and barking like a mad thing. Back at the house, I helped carry the blankets inside and milked Rosie. That done, I found myself pacing nervously from one end of the yard to the other. The old woman came out carrying a knapsack. "Lunch," she said.

I slung the knapsack over my shoulder, opened my lips to speak, stopped, licked them, and tried again. Nothing. I gave up and hugged her instead.

"You're welcome. Go."

I attacked the mountains, running, stopping only to gulp from streams. Toby ranged at my side. We returned long after dark, chilled and exhausted. The sky had clouded over and a few snowflakes drifted down around me. I came out of the forest along the ridge line. The house sat below me, a black bulk set with glowing golden squares. The old woman moved between sink and table, in sight, out of sight. I picked my way down the hillside, wearily climbed the stone steps to the back porch, and stepped into the warm kitchen. The old woman looked at me and smiled.

I smiled back, a crooked, feeble attempt, but a smile, nonetheless. She brought me a deep bowl of steaming vegetable soup and a plate of hot, buttered toast. I sank down at the table, cupped my hands around the bowl, and let the heat pour into my icy fingers, through my hands, and up my arms. When I was done eating that glorious soup, I rinsed the dishes in the granite sink, then turned and leaned against the counter. The old woman was sitting in her rocking chair by the stove, stroking the cats curled up in her lap, Toby sprawled at her feet. From time to time his eyes drifted open and the good eye found me, then drifted shut again.

I stood stiff, hands knotted by my sides. I could do this. I had done it in the forest today, asking trees, squirrels, birds, the very sky. I licked my lips, swallowed, opened my mouth. "Can—I—talk—now?" I asked. My throat ached with the effort.

She shot me a sharp look. "Do you want to?"

"Yes."

"Then I'm listening."

"How did I come here?" I asked.

"Magic."

"But how?"

"You needed to be here. That, combined with your weakened hold on your body, was enough."

I thought about that as I crossed the room and sank down on the rug next to Toby. He huffed and flopped his head into my lap. The old woman stroked my cold, rough hair. I leaned my head against her knee, and there, in the warmth of that old kitchen, I broke one of the oldest rules: I talked. I spoke haltingly, forcing my way through the bad parts. At last I came to the end and fell silent. My whole body was shaking. Toby rubbed his face against my thigh. My hand fell on his scarred head, and I thought of the other scarred head, the one I had healed. My fingers ran down the scar, over his face, and suddenly I knew. I looked down and saw them both: Toby my childhood comforter, and the forest man, who had been marked by that terrible night as much as I had. The two images shifted and wavered together, first dog, then man, then dog, then, finally, man.

Had that night really changed him? Or had it only changed me, allowing me to see—and travel—beyond what I had always accepted as the boundaries of the world? I might never know, but having seen him now, I found that while the manner of the change had been brutal, I could not regret the fact of it. In surviving my father, I had become more—and had seen that others were more, too. And I had learned to see that magic was all around me.



I wish I could say that the clarity of that night stayed with me, but the truth is that it came and went. As time went on, I learned to ask questions, to wonder why my father had done such things—and why my mother had allowed it. As winter aged, rage was born. *How dared they?* At first it was just the occasional moment, but then it exploded to fill the frozen world.

“Do something with it, honey, or it’ll eat you alive,” the old woman said to me one bleak afternoon after I had spent two hours ranting and lurching around the kitchen, alarming the cats and driving Toby out to the barn to find a little peace and quiet with Rosie.

I stopped and looked at myself. The storm raging outside echoed the storm raging within. What was I doing? I had turned the peaceful house into a battleground, poisoning the present with my past. I sank down at the kitchen table and dropped my head into my hands. The old woman

stopped kneading the dough—she was making bread that afternoon—poured a cup of tea, set it down in front of me, then went back to her bread. I sipped the tea and watched her thick arms and square fists work the creamy mass.

“Make something,” she said. She tore off a chunk of dough, floured the table, and dropped the dough in front of me. Then she washed her hands, covered the rest of the dough, set it by the stove to rise, and stumped into the living room to sit by the fire, rock, knit, and doze. The fire and candles gilded her in the gray winter gloom. I looked at the dough in front of me, cupped it in one hand, then both, then squeezed it, and then, in a fit of rage, threw it against the wall. I looked down at my hands clenched on the table and thought of my father’s hands, and what they had done. If I couldn’t find a way through the rage, it would finish what his hands had begun. I had fled, I had broken free, but the rage was twisting me as surely as pain had twisted me before. I had escaped my father, but another enemy was camped within my gates.

I tried. All through that winter I wrote furiously in a journal the old woman gave me for Christmas. In the spring I hoed and weeded the huge garden down by the stream while Toby dozed in the sun. I never really understood how he knew that I needed him as my familiar childhood friend in those days, but rarely did I see him as the forest man. I worked until my arms ached and the sweat ran slick down my thighs.

The woman came and said, “Honey, come in and eat. Get some rest.”

I followed her into the kitchen, sat at the table and ate and drank. I walked the mountains, Toby beside me, nosing at tree roots, barking at his sworn enemies, the crows. My leg muscles tightened, became hard bands under my skin and knotted into cramps every night. The garden flourished. The words poured out of me. My pictures became angry slashes on the page. Sometimes the paper tore. I got a new journal, then another and another. And still the rage grew. It exhausted me. It ate me alive. I lashed out at the old woman, at Toby, at myself.

One afternoon, I was milking Rosie. My hands moved in quick, angry jerks, and Rosie kicked indignantly. The bucket went over, soaking my feet.

“Shit!” I righted the bucket and went back to milking, and when I finished, I stood up, turned, and stumbled over Toby. My arms windmilled as I went down over the bucket. Toby yelped.

“You’re never around when I need you, and constantly underfoot when I don’t. You don’t want to get kicked, get out of the way,” I snarled.

The world stopped.

Toby gave me a long, level look. His hackles rose, and for the first time I feared him. His hackles dropped abruptly, and he turned away from me.

“Wait,” I called.

But Toby didn’t wait. He scooted under the bottom fence rail and started down the hill.

“Wait,” I called again, sick at what I had done.

Toby broke into a trot, and then a run. By the time he had reached the stream at the valley floor he was running pell-mell. And then he was up the other side of the valley and into the trees and then he was gone. I knew he wouldn’t be coming back. Why should he? By the time I got back to the house carrying the empty pail, I was sobbing. The old woman was sitting on the porch in her rocking chair. I sank down beside her, staring at my cruel hands, my savage feet.

“I did it,” I sobbed. “I hurt him, and I love him most of all. How could I do that? How could I do that? I’ve lost him, I’ve lost him, the only person who ever loved me.”

The woman was silent.

The sobs quieted, and the anger rose again. I swiped at my cheeks with my hands. “If he cared so much, why didn’t he help?”

“He did as much as anybody could ask,” she said. “He gave you his life. And his death. You know that. You weren’t the only one hurt in that house.” Her voice was flat, not warm and comforting at all.

Stung, I stared out across the valley. *How could she belittle my pain that way?* Burning with anger, I forced myself to sit long enough so it wouldn’t look like I was flouncing off in a huff, then went to bed. I lay and seethed myself to sleep. I dreamed about Sarah on the day of Elaine’s graduation. She was standing by the car, her face and hair bright in the sun. She lifted her face to

the sun, smiled, stretched her arms and swung in a circle. And then Daddy's voice. "You look like a whore," he said. Sarah's smile crumpled. How often had I heard those words, seen that happen? Loss swept over me. When I woke, my cheeks were wet, and somewhere inside me, a door opened a crack. The old woman had been right. I had been too consumed by my own pain to see that beyond it lay a world of hurt, none of it mine.

All day, as I went about my chores, I thought about my rage and how it had consumed me as completely as my pain had in the past. I thought about the selfishness of suffering. I was tired of the pain, weary of defining myself by it. The old woman's words had shown me the falseness of that, anyway; hurting didn't make me unique or special. But letting go felt like giving absolution for the harm done me. It felt like letting Daddy off the hook. It felt wrong. I didn't know how to let it go. So rage had filled the gap.

That evening when I went to the porch, the old woman was already there. She had her foot in her lap, picking at it. I sat down on the steps, wrapped my arms around my legs, and stared out at the horses grazing down by the stream. The peace of the place wrapped me. I thought again of my rage, and how it had turned even this place into something foul. I wished I could will it gone. I'd tried. And I'd failed.

"Why isn't it going away?" I asked as the sky deepened through all the blues in the world into sparkling black.

The old woman took a needle from the embroidery beside her and started worrying at her foot with it. "What?" she asked, not looking at me.

"The anger. It just gets worse and worse, no matter what I do. I don't want to live like this—I can't live like this—but I don't know how to stop. And I don't know if I should. Isn't that saying that what Daddy did was all right?"

She kept picking at her foot.

Finally I asked, "What are you doing?"

"Got a splinter," she said.

"Let me look." I knelt on the worn boards beside her chair so I could see. The needle wavered over the dirty instep. A dark spot on the equally dirty heel drew my eye. I pressed it gently. The foot flinched. "The splinter's over here," I said. "You're digging in the wrong spot." I took

the needle and flicked it at the dark spot in her heel. The splinter slid out. I squeezed the heel until blood came, washing the wound clean. "Where's the alcohol?"

"It'll be fine," she said. "Blood washes it clean. Time for bed." She braced her hands on her knees, pushed to her feet and stumped into the lamplit house. I followed her inside, said good night, went to my room, slid my crisp cotton nightgown over my head, and lay down in the moonlit bed. As the rose-scented breeze drifted over me, I tucked my hand under my cheek and thought about how she hadn't answered my question—and then realized she had.

I had been digging in the wrong spot. I had to go back and leave both pain and rage where they belonged, or I would destroy the very things I loved most, just as I had destroyed the love and trust that had bound Toby and me. I fell asleep looking out at the moon riding high above the roses, wishing I didn't have to leave, wishing it could be easy, and knowing the harder path of leaving was the only true way.

When the sun rose over the valley, I got up, put on my dress and apron, and walked out to the kitchen. On the table sat a small pouch, a pack, and a sheet of paper. The old woman was nowhere in sight. I picked up the paper.

You're strong, she had written. Remember that. Go to my mothers' place. It can be yours, if you want it. If you really need me, you can find me. Be happy.

A sketchy map and directions filled the back of the sheet. She hadn't signed her name. I never knew it, just as she never knew mine. Sometimes I think, *How odd—to live with someone so long, and rely on them for everything, and still not know such a basic fact about them.* But how well do any of us know one another?

I opened the pouch. She had paid me, though I hadn't worked for wages; I had done it because it was part of the dance I learned in that time and place, because it was part of who I had always been. But she paid me, and paid me well. And now I had a place to go, far enough from my parents' house to feel safe, close enough so I could dig in the right spot. Toby was gone. I had lost him in the rage. But maybe, if I found the way back to love, I would find him there waiting for me.

I tucked the pouch into the pack, shouldered it, and walked through the empty, shining house and out the front door into the crisp, brilliant morning. I set off down the hill, past the barn and the garden. I crossed the stream where rocks made a path—if one was willing to jump and possibly miss—and climbed the pass. It was harder than I had thought it would be; by the time I reached the summit I felt like I was walking against the wind. At the summit, just as I reached the mists, the pressure eased and my ears popped, all at once. I stopped to catch my breath and turned for a last look before I stepped into the forest mists.

The valley lay empty below me. The house had disappeared as completely as Toby had. A tumble of stones, timbers, and ivy sprawled where it had been. If you need me, you can find me, she had written. I wanted to cry out to her that I needed her then, that I needed the peace, the balance, the wisdom, and the sense of myself as part of the universe's web that I had found in her house. I had had it, and in my anger I had thrown it away. Such peace is hard-won, and I had not earned it yet. With one last look I set my face toward the lowlands to learn to dance with my past.

CHAPTER 34

Elizabeth

I set the sun on my left and kept walking. When the sun stood overhead I came out of the trees and saw hills rolling away into the blue distance. A strip of blacktop wound through the valley below me and up the next hill. I started toward it, walking carefully on the loose scree, watching for rattlesnakes. Because my eyes were on the ground, I heard the dog barking before I saw the ranch tucked into a fold in the mountains. When I finally looked up, I was almost in the equipment yard, and a yellow lab was running toward me, wagging its entire back half and scattering spit from its lolling tongue.

I stooped and rubbed behind her ears.

"Well, where did you come from?" A worn, pretty woman in coveralls and green boots was standing outside the barn door, a huge syringe dangling from one small, rough hand.

I opened my mouth, felt my throat constrict, and forced the word out. "Hello."

She smiled. "Can I help you?"

I looked around. My mind was a blank. "Where am I?"

"About ten miles out of John Day. Are you all right?" Her face creased, which somehow only made her prettier.

"Yes." It felt right to be talking. "But I need a ride to town."

"To John Day?"

"No." I stopped.

"Then where?"

"I—I need a car," I finally said.

"Come on in while I finish up here."

I followed her into the barn. She ducked into a pen, jabbed the syringe into a heifer's rump in a business-like way, jerked it free, and ducked back out of the pen while the heifer was still bawling her indignation. She strode to the tack room. I followed her uncertainly. She grabbed another syringe, this one with a hose attached, brushed past me, ducked into yet another pen, caught a calf as it careened past her, braced it between her knees, slid the hose down its throat, and depressed the plunger. She straightened and the calf rocketed around the pen, bawling. She watched it, wiping her hands absently on the sides of her coveralls.

"He's about ready to go back out with his mama," she said. She crossed the pen, opened a gate, and let the worried cow in the neighboring pen in with the calf. Outside the barn, she bent and washed her hands at an outdoor spigot, wiped them on a bandanna she pulled out of her pocket, and then squinted at me. "You say you need a car?"

"Yeah."

"New? Have to go into town for that."

"Used is fine."

"Well, we've got that old Jeep nobody drives anymore, now that our kids are gone. You can probably have that."

"How much do you want for it?" I asked, keenly aware of my limited funds.

"Gosh, I don't know. Let me ask Ted. He'll be in for lunch. You want a bite?"

My stomach growled.

She grinned.

I smiled back.

"Come on inside while I get it on the table." I followed her into the kitchen, toeing off my boots in the mudroom just inside the door first. "So how'd you get way up here?" she asked.

"I don't know."

“Need help?”

“I got it. Now I just need a car.”

“Ted’ll be here soon. We’ll see if we can get you fixed up.”

Ted turned out to be a rangy, weatherbeaten, silver-haired man with a limp and a long-sighted squint. He proved agreeable to the idea of selling the Jeep, suggested a price well within my range, threw in the snow tires, checked the brakes, oil and water, filled it with gas at the pump in front of the shop, waved off my offer to pay, and signed off on the title with a flourish. I threw my knapsack into the back seat, waved goodbye, and drove carefully up the dusty ranch road to the highway, then down to the desert valley.

Hours later I left the shimmering, baking freeway at one of those exits that has a number but no name and leads nowhere beyond a little pad of asphalt and a rutted dirt road. Fields lay barren on either side, or yielded such sparse crops I suspected the combines would simply drive through them, headers high, making the tracks necessary if one is to collect on crop insurance.

Ranch houses stood abandoned along the highway, windows broken, shingles flapping, paint peeling. Combines, tractors, and battered International Harvester pickups sagged behind padlocked shops, nearly engulfed by billowing gray tumbleweeds. Morning glory had twined through tumbleweeds and door handles, then withered and died there. White and gray splashes opaqued windows. I drove on, my heart sinking. *Go left three roads to the right past the T intersection*, the directions read. I counted carefully, but even so I missed it the first time and ended up in somebody’s garbage dump. Cattle skeletons draped with tattered ribbons of hide, tin cans, baling wire spools, and empty oil cans filled the gully. The sky stretched hard and empty; even the crows, magpies and starlings had given up on this place. I turned around, drove back to the intersection and started over. *One ... two ... and ... three*. I stopped, tapping my fingers on the wheel. Sagebrush and greasewood-choked tracks snaked up a sandy, wind-sculpted hill. It hardly qualified as a road. Still, my directions had come from a woman who hadn’t been here for years. *How many years?* I

wondered. I turned onto the track, locked the wheels, pulled the Jeep into gear, and hoped Ted hadn't been lying when he said the four-wheel drive still worked.

Brush clawed at the undercarriage as I eased up the hill. When I reached its top I stopped and looked into the valley sprawling before me. The road ran in switchbacks down through rolling, tawny hills smeared with sagebrush and bone-colored sand, down and down in waves to the distant green streak that marked the river bottom. On the near riverbank the road disappeared into a green tangle through which I could see part of a steep tiled roof. At least I wouldn't have to ford the river.

I popped the Jeep into gear again and eased my way down the sandy, rutted, switchbacks, across the wind-sculpted bottomland, and into the green tangle. The road dead-ended at a peeling picket fence staggering under a row of locust and poplar trees. A splintered silvery gate sagged half open. Beyond it lay a wilderness of bleached grass, wild roses, overgrown lilacs, gone-to-seed dandelions, bachelor's buttons, and daisies. A stone walk started at the gate, and disappeared into the desiccated jungle. In the center of it all stood a tall white stucco house. Deep, shadowy verandas overgrown with brittle climbing roses, wisteria, trumpet vines, and ivy ran across the front and along the sides of the house. Tall windows stared blankly from above the veranda. Small round windows peered from dormers high overhead.

I slid out of the Jeep and slammed the door. Heat shimmered off its hood. I kicked my way through the dry weeds to what was now my front porch. A dusty rocker, cracks gouged deep into its withered gray spindles, sat beside the battered black front door. I worked the key into the lock, winced as it rasped, and pushed the door open. A great sigh ran through the building. I stepped inside and dropped my bag and pack in the sandy entry. It was both worse and better than I had expected. An arched doorway on my left led to a dark hallway. Straight ahead a broad staircase swept up to a landing, turned, and climbed the rest of the way to the second story. I could see a shadowy hallway behind the open railing overhead.

On my right wide boards stretched across a spacious living room to a

massive stone fireplace. Sheet-shrouded furniture made islands on the dusty floor. French doors opened onto the verandas, and the tangled wilderness beyond. A broad, heavily-beamed doorway led to a shadowy interior room. The corner of a table showed in another broad doorway. Smoke-blackened beams crossed the ceiling high overhead. Spider webs festooned shadowy corners.

I started down the hallway. Tattered and dusty sheers hung over french doors in the first room. I crossed, flicked the brass catch, and pulled the doors open. Holding my breath and batting at the swirling dust, I propped a hip on the door frame and looked over the veranda at the weed-choked yard, the tawny hills, the scab land in the valley, and the ragged green line where the river ran. A cool, damp breeze feathered by my cheek. Black clouds rolled up. And then, heavy, slashing rain. The cracked, parched earth in my yard and driveway sucked it up thirstily. The sun still glared down halfway up the hill and on the scab land up the valley; rain thundered on the roof tiles and poured off the veranda eaves.

How long since it had rained here? Reluctantly I went back to exploring the house, leaving the window open to welcome in the fresh breeze. A light-washed old-fashioned kitchen sprawled across the back of the house. I crossed the kitchen and circled around through the dining room—yet more french doors—looked briefly into the library that lay in the center of the square formed by hall, kitchen, dining room, and living room, and found myself back in the living room again.

Upstairs, I discovered a series of large, high-ceilinged rooms. Faded stencils ran just under the carved crown mouldings in each. A deep porcelain tub, pedestal sink, and chain-pull toilet occupied the first one. A series of stuffy bedrooms, light filtering gray through their dusty sheers, followed. I opened every window I could find. Cool, damp air flowed in, breathing life into the dead rooms. I climbed to the attic, peeked in to see a dusty jumble, then clattered back downstairs, waking loud echoes in the waiting silence. The smell of rain filled the house, stirring life into long-dead corners.

I expected mice, rats, and maybe even snakes, but though dust lay thick on everything I saw no droppings. No small bodies slithered or leaped

for cover when I opened cupboards. No tiny skeletons lay in corners. The place was filthy, and everything in it outdated, but in spite of all that—or perhaps because of it—something in me responded. I found myself looking not at what was there, but at what had been, what still lay under the dirt, and what could be again. Someone had loved this place, and had been happy here. It filled the very air. I set the cleaning supplies, broom, and mop I'd purchased at the AM/PM on the interstate on the kitchen counter and looked for a bucket. After a little searching I found one, ancient and dusty under the sink. I wiped it out, set it under the faucet, and twisted the taps experimentally. They squealed like lost souls, but they turned. The pipes groaned. A trickle of dust, then rusty water, then filthy black, and finally a gush of clear rewarded me. I breathed a sigh of relief and started by scrubbing the bucket. When it was relatively clean I refilled it, poured a generous dollop of lemon-scented cleaner into the water, lugged it down the hallway and started scrubbing floors, walls, and ceilings.

By the end of the week, the spiders had moved out. The dust covers came off the furniture, revealing a deep sofa and chairs, golden oak bookshelves and side tables, and a long, plain dining room table ornamented solely by its swirling wood grain. The downstairs had survived basically intact; the upstairs had fared less well. While the stencils and crown mouldings weathered the cleaning fairly well, and the tall four-poster bed frames themselves were in good shape, I ended up replacing the mattresses. The furniture store refused to deliver up my road, so I rented an old road grader from a neighboring rancher—after passing a driving test under his gimlet eye—and, masked with a faded bandanna I had found hanging inside the back door, spent a day knocking down weeds and sagebrush, filling ruts, and gasping and choking in the whirling dust.

Where the rain had fallen, the road lay smooth and even. Up on the hill, though, the most I could say for it was that sagebrush no longer stood between the ruts. It wasn't great. It wasn't even good, but without a water truck I could do no more. It would have to be good enough for the man delivering my mattresses. I took the Jeep up to the main road and waited for him that afternoon. When he arrived, he stared at my road, then said,

"They ain't no way I'm takin' this truck up there."

"It looks worse than it is," I assured him. "Once you're past this first bit, it's pretty good, actually."

"No way, José," he said.

"But I use this road all the time, and I just graded it for you."

"You did this *on purpose*?" he asked.

"Hey, you should've seen it before. This is a *good* road."

"No way."

"I'll take it." And before he could say 'no,' I jumped into the open cab, popped the truck into gear, and started up the road. Engine noises gave me an excuse to ignore his shouts. At the top of the hill I stopped, set the brakes, and jumped down. "There, you should have no trouble now," I told him when he caught up with me. "The rest of it's all downhill, and it's good, like I said." It didn't occur to me until much later that my actions had been totally out of character—and would have been impossible before I'd lived in the house in the mountains.

"Lady, I should have you arrested," he shouted. "You stole my truck."

"No I didn't—it's right here," I waved at the truck. "Safe and sound." I smiled. Inside my gut twisted nervously, but one of the things I had recognized during my time in the mountains was that Daddy had felt safe molesting me was because he knew I was afraid of him. I was determined never to give anyone that power over me again.

"I'm gonna report this," he snarled.

"What'll you report?" I asked. "All I did was get you past a rough spot." I lifted my chin and stared him down.

He grumbled a bit more, but I think he was embarrassed. When the new washer and dryer arrived, he delivered them to my door, and if he was a bit frosty, they arrived in good order. The old stove on its dainty curved legs worked well. I found a thick, narrow door like the one in the old woman's mountain kitchen, opened it, and, though temperatures outside neared triple digits, felt the familiar chilly blast.

I'd started my cleaning in the first room off the entry, the one in which I had watched the rain the day I arrived. As I'd scrubbed, something in the

room had come alive around me. Who or what it was I didn't know, but it was real, and it knew I was there. At first the feeling of being watched unnerved me, but as I cleaned the uneasiness settled into a sense of companionship. The house was alive, and this room was its heart. Simple as it was, I loved it best of every room in the house.

When the room shone, I'd braved the attic and found a faded Chinese rug, a table, and a chair. I cleaned the rug and oiled the table and chair, then wrestled everything downstairs, laid out the rug, and set the table in the center of that wonderful room. In the evenings I went there and sat crosslegged in the French doors, braced my back on the door frame leading onto the veranda, and opened my senses. What they told me was that the house was mine, now, as it had been the woman's before me.

I'd cleaned the library next. Deep leather sofas with scarred wooden arms and legs angled by another massive stone hearth. Book-stuffed shelves lined the rest of the room from floor to ceiling except for where a broad doorway led into the dining room. I'd looked longingly at the titles, seeing herbals, almanacs, novels, picture books, and some big, hand bound books with no titles at all that made me think of my own journals. I put off opening them until the house was livable, but it was a struggle. I kept finding myself in that room running my hands longingly over the leaded-glass case fronts, pulling out books, paging through, letting my eye catch on phrases and illustrations.

Late one evening I slid the bucket back under the sink and straightened, hands wearily rubbing the ache at the base of my spine. I crossed the kitchen and opened the screen door, staring out at the quiet evening, remembering the house in the mountains with its rocking chairs on the rambling porches, its rough golden stone walls, its blue-trimmed windows and doors.

There was no back porch here, just worn stone steps down to a white sand path. The wind carried the smell of the river and the calls of water birds. I stepped outside and closed the screen door, crossing my arms against the chilly desert evening breeze. I followed the sandy path leading from the stone back steps past weed-filled raised garden beds, out the back gate, and through silvery Russian olives and alders down to the river. The trees rustled

around me, their voices softened by the river's chatter. I stood on the dark, packed sand and watched the water ripple and bubble over its rocky bed. Filled with the thousand tiny sounds that added up to profound silence, I turned and walked upstream, picking my way along the overgrown path until I reached a marshy feeder stream choked with weeds.

It shouldn't have been there; the land was too arid. Curious, I followed it away from the river, forcing my way through crackling underbrush. Once I had breached the outer thicket the brittle growth thinned. I could see faint traces of a path, and even a few buckled paving stones. The overgrown stones led to another tangle. Vivid green vines and underbrush choked the spaces between massive stones. I shoved through. A placid pool tucked against a black, porous cliff reflected the sickle moon and darkening sky. White sand lay smooth around the still water, its evenness unbroken except for a single flat rock. Daisies, dandelions, and grass crowded thick under the vine-choked trees. Massive cracked and weathered boulders shouldered above the willows edging the sand.

The pool drew me forward. I stepped onto the sand, then into the water. It swirled cool around my ankles. I took another step. It rose around my calves, cool, living, enticing. I looked at its beckoning depths, looked around the sheltered grove, and made a sudden, bold decision. I splashed back to the sandy beach, pulled off my shirt and shorts, awkwardly reached around and pushed the hooks loose on my brassiere, then stepped out of my underwear. My warm breasts tightened in the cool air. Feeling bold, free, and slightly wicked, I walked barefoot to the water, my lean muscles and flesh working and shimmering in the moonlight. The icy water lapped my calves, then my thighs. I leaned forward and did a shallow dive, pushing off the sandy bottom, pulling myself through the freezing shadows, feeling them brush by me almost like living things.

My skin tingled, alive, strong, vital, and immeasurably clean. I felt old and young, wise and innocent. I flashed to my feet when my hands touched the rough rock wall, gasping as the water shattered and settled around my waist. I threw my head back, sucking in the soft dark night, pushing back my streaming hair. And something shifted. The hard little

core I had become deep inside my body woke and responded to the water as the earth responds to rain, It swelled, grew, filled my body, burst free, mixed with the night, then poured back in to fill me, only to sweep out again until I no longer knew where I began and ended.

My nipples throbbed in the chilling night air. Water flowed icy between my legs. A fugitive fear triggered by the memory of my father forcing a response from my body woke, but the night swept back and quenched it. My hands rose to the smooth, cool arch of my brow, the swell of my cheekbones and the hollows beneath, the clean line of my nose, the soft mound of my chin, the angle of my jaw, the muscles of my neck, the fullness of my breasts, the sleek curves of my hips, and told me what no mirror ever had—that I was beautiful, that I was right. I stood rooted, silvered by moonlight, a creature of earth, water, air and fire.

When I finally opened my eyes and turned, a woman wrought of moonlight and shadows stood on the rock, eyes glowing silver, hair drifting in an unfelt breeze. I stepped back, bumped the black stone wall behind me, lost my balance, threw out a hand, and smacked it into something small and hard, something that tumbled over and fell with a tiny splash.

Eyes locked on the woman, I groped behind me, found a tiny water-filled basin, and ran my hand through the icy water, round gravel, sand, and—there, found something bigger. I fumbled, lost it, bumped against it again, closed my hand. The woman nodded, and I sensed more than saw a smile.

I held my catch up in the moonlight. It was a tiny woman, faceless, breasts enormous, hips fecund, sex a simple etched triangle nearly lost in rolls of stony flesh. A tiny fish had been carved into her thigh. Prickles of light and heat rushed into my fingers, up my arms, through my breasts and belly, down into my chilly feet. I stood there in the icy water, filled with light and life.

This was Her place. I set Her gently back into Her miniature pool in the cliff face, then turned to the moonlight woman, and understood they were the same. Beginnings, endings, birth, sex, death—everything was a part of the cycle, the mysterious hub around which the universe wheeled. Now

the last piece of the puzzle fell into place. My father's bloodstained god was not mine. Mine flowed through the world like blood through a body, like a river from the mountains to the sea, touching and shaping, giving life, hope, place, immortality. She bore all, nurtured all, and laid all away. She was the world, the sky, life. She was me. I just hadn't recognized Her. I stood with icy water lapping my waist and felt my borders thin and melt again as I flowed out and filled the world.

When at last I came to myself, the rock was empty. I crossed the pool to the shore. Water and air slid around and through me like two halves of a whole. I sensed the rustling life in the trees, absorbed the wonder that was the world through the very pores of my skin, knew that what I saw was the tiniest fraction of the whole, and that I was a part of everything, and that I danced my small patterns in the Great Dance. I left my clothes lying in the grass under the willows and walked home through the pure desert night, tall, proud and, naked before the Old Ones who had claimed me for their own, carrying nothing but my light, clean, ancient soul. And I was not afraid.

CHAPTER 35

Elizabeth

I drove to town Saturday morning and invested in a scythe, lawn mower, shovel, garden trowel, rake, and hedge trimmer, then drove home and started reclaiming the lawn. By late afternoon when the rains started, I had hacked the weeds back enough to mow. I waited out the rain, let the grass dry, and then mowed as the sun slipped toward the western horizon. Sunday morning, I started on the flower beds, weeding, pruning, clipping, uncovering bulbs, roots, and straggling plants. The rich soil crumbled between my hands and woke around me, turning the garden into my place as surely as the house now was.

I worked in the yard all week, kneeling on grass that grew greener by the day, my hands buried in the soil, loosening roots, clearing away dead leaves and grass, leaving rich, dark flower beds and full, strong plants in my wake. The garden's energy poured into me through my hands, back into the earth, and back into me in a continuous loop. Every day, I stopped when it got too hot, sat on the veranda, sipped iced tea, napped to the sound of rain pattering on the tiles, worked again in the early evening, then walked up the river to the pool as night fell. When I had cleaned out the vegetable beds, I sowed lettuce, carrots, onions, and other fast-growing vegetables, set tomato and pepper plants, filled a bed with strawberries, and lined everything with marigolds and tansy to keep the ants away. I was not surprised to see plants sprouting in hours rather than days.

On the day I weeded the last bed, snipped the last sucker off the lilac tree in the corner, mowed the lawn again—it had sprung up thick and green with the daily rains—swept the winding stone paths and the veranda as the sun slid behind the lacy green trees surrounding the lawn, I realized I had done it. I belonged here. The next day I drove into town one last time and invested in two wooden rockers, three Morris chairs with thick striped cushions, and several big pots of geraniums. I set the chairs under the trees behind the house, dragged the new rockers next to the old one on the porch, and set the geranium pots along the veranda's outer edge.

I cut an armful of peonies, honeysuckle, snapdragons, and roses and carried them inside, toed off my boots and socks inside the front door, then padded barefoot through the breezy house to the kitchen. I laid the flowers by the deep granite sink, retrieved a rough blue bowl out of the high cupboard where I had come across while cleaning, arranged the flowers in it, carried them into the living room, and set them on the hearth. I lit the lamps and then returned to the kitchen, leaving the living room glowing golden behind me, waiting.

Back in the kitchen, I pulled out a huge crockery bowl I had found in a cupboard and assembled oil, flour, sugar, water, butter, eggs, milk, and yeast. I stood at my kitchen table with the breeze lifting my hair and curling around my arms, poured everything into the bowl, stirred until the dough became stiff, sank my hands into the sticky mass, and there, in my clean kitchen, in my clean house, I made bread in the same way that the woman in the mountains and as her mothers before her had. As my hands worked the dough, I sensed them filling the house. Our souls mingled, and I understood that women's work, doing the things central to life—making bread, gardening, cleaning a house, loving children—make a simple, still pool of eternity. No matter what languages we speak, what holy names we whisper in our prayers and curses, what paths we follow, we all carry our secret ancient hearts within us, and we all drink from that timeless pool.

I set the dough on the stove to rise, covered it with a damp towel and walked slowly through the house, touching walls, leaning in doorways, gazing into peaceful, shining rooms, watching the soft golden lamp light

gild the old furniture, and the souls of all the women who had loved and nurtured this place walked with me. If I had turned my head, I could almost have seen them.

I climbed the stairs to the second floor and wandered through the rooms, turning on lamps, leaving glowing, expectant rooms behind me. Room by room, step by step, anticipation built toward—what?

I came to the end of the hall. Every door was opened, every room lit. The anticipation was almost unbearable, but there were no more rooms to open, no more lamps to light. It was over, but it was not done. All that remained was the door at the end of the hall, the door to the attic. I turned, put my back against it and looked at the dim hallway lit by fans of light spilling from each door. I wanted to weep with frustration, but there was no more to be done.

And then, *Come*, someone whispered. I felt it through the wood beneath my hands as much as I heard it. And suddenly it was not done. There was more, and the more was what I had been waiting for all my life. I took a deep breath, turned, twisted the old brass knob and reached for the cord dangling from the bare bulb behind the attic door. Light flooded the steep, narrow stairs and the varnished beadboard walls. My feet whispered on the worn treads. My heart thundered in my ears.

At the top of the stairs I stopped and looked around at the jumble of dark, dust-covered shapes. *Come*, came the whisper again. I swallowed nervously and followed the voice to a dark corner under one of the dormers. A single moonbeam lit a battered chest nearly hidden in dust and shadows. I reached out my hand and touched it. Power shot through me. *Ahhhh. Welcome sister.* I jerked back, whipping around. The attic was empty except for me and the junk of years. *Welcome.*

A part of me wanted to flee, slam the attic door on the terrifying magic, and never come back. More of me wanted to stay, to know more, to step farther into a world which held more than what can be seen and touched. I took a deep breath, braced myself and pressed my shaking hand on the chest until the torrent of sensation slowed enough for me to distinguish voices. No going back now.

We are here we are here we are with you we are you we are here we know now you know you know you know... The women whose place this had been rushed to greet me, to make me welcome, to teach me in a babble of voices. I think I fainted for a few seconds, because the next thing I saw was a small woman bearing a marked resemblance to the woman I had stayed with in the mountains. She was perched on the chest, eyeing me. *Ah, you are better. We are sorry. Too much, too fast, but it has been so long, so very long, and time is short.*

I gaped. "Who are you?"

We are the women of this place.

"But there's just one of you."

Oh this old thing. She laughed and gestured at her body. The familiar expression sounded oddly comforting, in the circumstances. *We just used one so we'd be less confusing. But we are many.*

"Who are you?"

The women of this place, she said again, impatiently. Hurry, time is short.

"For what?"

To learn what you must.

"What must I learn?"

Everything, she said. Hurry, take the chest down to the workroom. I stood and gingerly brushed the chest free of dust. Faded painted flowers and birds decorated its sides and top. *It's only a little dirt, the woman chided me. My, aren't you fussy.* I grabbed the chest by one handle and dragged it to the stairs. *Come on, lift it. You're a strong little thing.*

Stung, I lifted the chest and lugged it downstairs and into the first room off the living room. I didn't even have to think about it; I just knew it belonged there. I set the chest on the floor in the corner and lifted the lid. The sharp, clean tang of herbs tickled my nose. A shallow black basin, a shining sickle-bladed knife, a lumpy black velvet bag, a book with a cracked leather cover, small bags, boxes, and bundles. I reached for them, and the women who had gone before taught my hands what to do.



I never got a power bill. I suppose that says as much about the house as anything. When I walked through the door for the first time, the lights

already worked. A few weeks later, I spent a day tracing wiring. Rather, I spent a day trying to *find* wiring. I spent an entire morning searching the basement's bare, open studs. Finally in desperation I went back upstairs, unscrewed a light fixture, and pulled it out of the wall.

There was no wire. I sat down crosslegged and looked at the fixture's smooth back, then I stood, screwed it back onto the wall, and flipped the switch. Light flooded the room. I walked through the house, unscrewing light fixtures, pulling them out, inspecting their smooth backs, screwing them back to the walls, and switching on lights. I ended up in the living room, where I sank down on the couch, staring at the impossible glow filling the room. My house was lit by magic. Suddenly I realized just how much my world had changed. So much magic must have a purpose. What was I supposed to be doing here?

Because I am at heart a practical person, the first thing that occurred to me was that I needed a job while I figured things out. *Magic is all very well*, I said to myself, *but it won't do for me what I can do on my own. I have to eat and clothe myself*, I told myself virtuously, conveniently ignoring the fact that I knew exactly what I was supposed to be doing here. It was easier to pretend ignorance, to fill my life with good things, to forget, to unmake the past.



The drought became my friend. Ranchers struggling to make ends meet were happy to hire me part-time, rather than looking for a man full-time. I was cheaper, and could be had for a few hours a week. I became something of a fixture in the county, moving hand and wheel lines mornings and evenings, baling hay at night, driving grain trucks during wheat harvest and then corn trucks through corn harvest, servicing machinery in the evenings for harvest crews. I didn't get rich, but I had enough. I had time to work in my garden, feel the sun on my back, put on one of the soft, loose linen dresses I had unearthed in a huge trunk in the attic and lie in one of the Morris chairs under my trees from time to time. I had time to read the books in my library and to make bread.

I forgot that I'd had a life before, that I was here for a reason, and that I still had work to do. I forgot that peace is not a gift; it must be earned, and

it must be protected. I forgot the lesson the woman in the mountains had taught me with a needle and a splinter. I took the peace of the place and used it to patch my angry, tattered soul. I lost track of time, let the days and weeks drift past unnoticed, let myself be enchanted by the pocket of magic into which I had wandered. I fed on it. I took and took, and put nothing back. I forgot that others might need me yet. I forgot that in unmaking my past, I was rejecting its one gift to me—the opportunity to learn from it, rather than repeat it. I forgot that the threads binding me to my present stretched deep into my past. I forgot that magic has a purpose, and a price. I took it for granted. And one day the magic ran out.

CHAPTER 36

Elizabeth

I had no idea what I'd say when I got there; I only knew I had to go and say something. The fear that gripped me was my best reason for turning back—and for driving on. I had thought I could just forget everything that lay behind me and start fresh in my peaceful, beautiful house. For a while I managed it. The house became my world. I cleaned. I worked in the garden. I read. When the rains came—as they did most afternoons, contrary to every law of climate and weather in that arid land—I, who had never been interested in kitchen things in my life, opened my kitchen door and stood at the table and baked bread, pies, and cakes. I gave them away until ranch wives began asking me to bake for them, and offering to pay. It became something of a thriving sideline.

All through that endless summer, the women came in the afternoons. They drove up in battered pickups, their faces and arms coated with dust. They walked up my winding stone path between the mounds of daisies and fragrant, old-fashioned roses, and then—if I wasn't kneeling in the grass weeding the flower beds, or setting out new plants, or cutting blooms for the house—they turned, as women do in the country, and walked around the house to the kitchen door in the back, stood outside the screen, and called, "Hello? Anybody home?"

And I called back from wherever I was, "It's open."

"Strange weather," they said if it was raining, which it often was.

"Is it raining by you?" I asked, even though I could see the sunshine hard and brilliant halfway up the hillside. And a little part of me took a secret, cruel satisfaction in knowing that I had magic, and they did not.

"Dry as a bone," they said.

"Have some iced tea."

And they washed their hands and faces at the kitchen sink and sat at the table—these parched, weary, eternal women in jeans and men's shirts—and sipped peach iced tea and took in my peaceful, eternal kitchen with hungry eyes. And their hunger fed me in a way I didn't understand.

We talked—or rather, they talked and I listened—about children, gardening, dreams living and dead, husbands, and parents. Their hands grew quiet. When the hunger in their eyes had eased, they stood, lifted their still-warm bread, pies, muffins, or cakes—tightly wrapped against the dust—and walked back up the path into their arid lives. They walked lighter and stood straighter for the time they spent in my kitchen. I told myself that the women were the reason for the magic in this place, that everything was fine, that I was doing what I needed to be doing, that the other was behind me.

It still hurt when I thought about it, so I just didn't think about it. I reveled in the presence of the women of the place, reveled in the knowledge they shared. I disregarded their occasional warnings about the misuse of magic, about the need to work from right motives, to give as well as take, to remember that magic was a gift, not a birthright, that it was to be honored and shared, that it was cause for wonder and gratitude rather than hubris. Magic made me strong, and being strong Elizabeth was much, much better than being weak, broken Bethie. I told myself that I had "gotten past it," without ever acknowledging that I had not yet faced "it."

The nights lengthened. The days cooled. The poplar leaves turned yellow. The skies clouded over and the wind developed a bite. My vegetable plants turned brown. I found myself thinking constantly about Sarah, DJ, and Elaine. About Momma and Daddy. I put them out of my mind at first, but the memories filled me. Being strong Elizabeth got harder and harder, then impossible. Then the nightmares started. Slowly, slowly, the magic died. Bethie was back.

Night after night I woke in a panic, sheets sweaty and twisted, throat dry, tongue swollen and foul. I stumbled into the bathroom and drank deeply from the tap, vomited up the icy water more often than not, and staggered back to bed, only to curl up shaking, telling myself, *It was only a dream. It was only a dream. It was only a dream.* Sometimes I slept again, only to wake exhausted at dawn. I felt too sick to bake. The farm women stopped coming. The women in the house stopped teaching me, then stopped talking to me, then disappeared altogether. The lights stopped working. The rain stopped falling. I didn't care. One gray morning I stayed in bed because I couldn't think of a reason to get up.

I stayed there all day, and then all the next, only getting up to go to the bathroom and drink from the bathroom sink. On the third night I dreamed I stood in a field of flowers. The sun shone on me and I felt light, happy. I raised my arms, knowing I could fly. Only I couldn't. I tried again and again, only to be disappointed. Finally I looked down, and saw two jagged pieces of wood piercing my feet, anchoring me.

As I watched the earth loosened around them, but instead of pulling free the splinters sank into the earth, pulling me with them. I woke panting and shaking, climbed out of bed and took a shower, then walked down the river path to the pool. I hunched on the rock, my chin on my knees, and looked at what had been magic, but was now stagnant, murky, and nearly strangled in brush. I willed the Lady to come, wept for her. I thought of the splinter, and finally accepted the truth I could see all around me—living or dead, Bethie was a part of me forever. Sooner or later, I had to face the things that had first broken her, and then driven her from the only life she knew. I had to face those things, embrace them, find their gifts. I had to learn to dance with my past, or it would destroy me from within. And so at last I was driven back to the thing I had fled, and in the decision there was both terror and peace.



Combines drove through fields, headers up and spinning. The wheat was too thin and withered to warrant wasting fuel in cutting, and it was far too late in the season, anyhow. There would be no fourth cutting of

alfalfa this year; the third cutting lay sparse and parched in the fields. Cornfields stretched in sere brown rows. Blight had taken nearly all of the poplar trees the paper companies had planted years ago. The corpse of a bear—one of the many drawn down along the river when the regimented forests grew large enough to shelter larger game—lay skeletal and ragged along the freeway. Branches stretched naked arms toward the gun metal sky. I stopped once for gas and drank thirstily from a cracked and stained porcelain fountain. The two-hour trip took a lifetime. *What would I say?*

I drove into the farm yard, the little carved woman I had brought from the pool riding beside me on the front seat. Fear rose in my throat like dust. I reached over and ran my thumb over the smooth bulges and the worn, delicate etching. A shadow of peace returned. I looked at the sagging, peeling house, the rusting tin shop, the junked equipment rooted in dry weeds behind the shop. This was not a place of life, or even of death—which is, after all, a part of life. This was a place twisted on itself, a knot baffling escape. This was evil, and if we hadn't created it, we had helped make it stronger. Feeling the black fingers of the place groping for purchase, I clutched the little figure tighter, slipped down to the hard-packed driveway, and slammed the Jeep's door. My throat locked, my tongue thickened into immobility. Dust whirled around me as I pushed open the sagging gate and walked up the path to the kitchen steps. I paused, gripped the little figure tighter, took a deep breath, and began climbing. *What would I say?*

The door creaked open. Momma stood dim behind the screen. "Bethie? You came home!" She threw the door open and reached for me, her arms little but bone and loose skin, her face tanned to leather. I gripped the figure tighter as Momma hugged me, set her parchment hands on each side of my face, and reached up to kiss my cheek. Her lips felt dry and papery. "Daddy's going to be so glad to see you. Just let me change the sheets on your bed."

"Momma—"

She stared at me, then the light broke over her face. "Bethie! You talked! This is a miracle. You've been healed. Oh, we've been praying so hard for you at church."

“—Momma—”

“We really need you this fall—Daddy’s been working too hard, and Sarah’s working for Pastor Rayburn in California now and DJ got married and his wife’s having a baby so *he* can’t help—”

“Momma!” At last I managed to stem the tide of words. “I’m not staying.”

The light in Momma’s face died. “You’re not? Then why did you come?”

“To talk.”

“About what?” For someone who had been delighted to hear me speaking just a few moments before Momma looked decidedly unhappy.

About what? But I had made a beginning; I must go on. “About what happened before I left. About what was happening for a long time.”

“*Nothing* was happening!” Her voice rose and cracked. Then she smiled. “I’m just so glad you’re home—and you’re healed. Did I tell you Sarah’s working for the church? And DJ, too? But we always knew *that* was going to happen, didn’t we? He’s married to a nice girl, and they’re having a baby.”

I felt like she’d punched me. *What had happened to my baby?* I hadn’t even wondered until now. I had lost my baby, and then I had forgotten about it. What kind of mother was I? Now I would never know. I stood mute under the swelling sadness.

Momma searched my face for a response, didn’t find one, and blundered on. “Yes—well, Sarah didn’t even get through her first year at college and Pastor Rayburn—I know you remember *him*—he offered her a job. She’s earning a lot of money now.” Her face became pensive. “It would’ve been nice if she’d finished college.” She brightened, “But she’s working for the Lord.”

“Never mind Sarah, Momma. Did you know?”

“Know what?”

“That Daddy was—” I forced the words out past the knot in my throat—“raping me?” *Was this what I had come to say? Was this the person to whom I needed to say it?*

"He most certainly was not. I didn't know. I couldn't do a thing about it."

"Those three things can't all be true, Momma," I said.

"Are you calling me a liar?" Her voice rose and wobbled dangerously.

I held onto my courage. "You're saying three different things."

"I am not."

"How could you not know?" I asked.

"You never told me. None of you kids ever talked to me. It was always Daddy, Daddy, Daddy."

"I wanted to, Momma," I said. "I tried, but you didn't want to hear what I had to say then any more than you do now."

Momma's lips stitched shut, then trembled. Tears filled her vague blue eyes.

The kitchen door squeaked open behind me. I clutched the little goddess and turned to face him.

He stood inside the door, unsmiling. "So. You're back."

"Yes."

"Found your tongue, did you? Your mother's been worried sick. I don't know how you could do this to her. First you get yourself pregnant, then you ruin your sister's wedding, then you disappear without a word, and leave that awful mess behind, and now you show up years later, talking filth, abusing the miracle of your healing." He spat the words at me.

My mouth opened, then closed. The facts were there; the truth was not. *How to start?* I had to say something. My silence had always been his victory. "You were wrong," I finally croaked. "You were wrong to do what you did. You raped me, and then you lied about me. You shouldn't treat kids like that." I was trembling, but I was talking.

"You wanted it. You always wanted it."

"How can you say that?" The words burst out of me. "How can you stand there and say that? I *hated* it, and you knew it."

"You could have asked me to stop any time. You were just too owly to say anything. You wanted to play the victim."

"*I could have asked you to stop?* I shouldn't have *had* to ask you to stop raping me."

“Stop saying that! Just shut your mouth, little girl. You asked for it. When I changed your diapers you were always touching yourself. I just showed you how good it could be.” He sounded reasonable, logical. The old guilt poured into me. *He was right. It had been my fault.* All my anger at him for hurting me, and at my mother for allowing it to happen, turned inward. The blackness of the place curled around me, slid into the chinks in my armor, poured into my soul. I was everything my family had named me—an ungrateful, retarded whore. My hand tightened reflexively on the little figure in my hand, Her contours worn smooth, faceless head, pendulous breasts, fish etched on her thigh. Heat and light flashed through me. For an instant I was back at the pool, knowing myself clean, young, good, a part of the stream of life and time. Strength poured back into me. *That was real, not this.* I could follow my parents into the smoke and mirrors of their life, or I could turn and go another way. I could honor my own reality, learn from my past, embrace the strength and wisdom it had taught me, and let it go—as long as I never forgot it, and its lessons.

“You raped me,” I said again, and now my voice was clear and steady. “You know it, and I know it. You lied about me, and we both know *that*, too.” The anger rose, but this time I used it as it was meant to be used—I turned it outward to keep me safe.

My father took a step toward me, his hand raised. “Shut your mouth!”

I was not afraid. I could fight back. “Don’t try it,” I said quietly. “Don’t ever try it again,” and my power filled my voice.

He wavered to a stop. His hand dropped.

“Daddy?” Momma’s voice came soft and tentative.

“That’s a lie, that I wanted it,” I said. “I *never* wanted you to do that to me—and I never asked for it. You know it now, and you knew it then. You *knew* what it was doing to me. You *knew* why I didn’t talk. At the end, you knew why I was pregnant, and you let everybody think it was Greg. You were willing to kill me because I tried to help Toby. And all the time, *you knew.*” I shook with rage for all the years when I should have been safe and wasn’t, for the waste of pain needlessly and knowingly inflicted.

“Daddy?” Momma asked again. “What’s she saying?” He ignored her. “Dan?” Her voice trembled, but I was so full of fear, rage, and pain that I had no time or thought for hers, or even to marvel at the fact that she was questioning Daddy at all.

“Ask him about that last night, Momma. And if he won’t tell you, ask me. I’ll tell, but you won’t like it.”

“Dan?”

“Get upstairs, Gwen. We’ll talk later,” he ordered. She flinched, but she stayed. *She stayed*, but I couldn’t see her courage through my anger. All I could see was that she’d take his word for things, like she always had. All I could see was that nothing had changed, and nothing ever would. Sadness and anger mixed in my belly. Never mind—I had a new Mother to replace the one who had failed me. I gripped the little figure and willed myself calm. Slowly the rage subsided, and I heard Daddy saying, “—happens in all families. Happened in mine when I was little. All kids play doctor. It’s no big deal. And it was a long time ago—don’t know why you’re dragging it up now. Did Joe talk to you?”

But I didn’t really hear him, either. My own questions were filling me. “What about Elaine and Sarah? And what about DJ?”

“I never touched them. They were mine.”

“Daddy? What are you saying?” Momma’s voice was faint, but this time we heard her.

“You know,” Daddy said bitterly. “All you have to do is look at her. She looks nothing like the others.”

“No—they look like you, but they have my hair. She looks like me, but she has your mother’s hair,” she whispered.

I stared at her face, and now, when most of all I wanted to not be their child, for the first time, I saw the resemblance.

“She doesn’t. She can’t.”

“She’s yours, Daddy, just like the others.”

“No—I never touched them. I’d never do that to my own child. That would have been an abomination.”

“You’re lying,” I said. “You hurt Sarah, too.”

"You keep your mouth shut, little girl."

"Don't call me that. I'm not your little girl. Not anymore."

Momma's eyes flew back and forth between us.

"I've always called you that."

"I know, and I've always hated it."

His hazel eyes filled with tears. "You have no idea how hard it is to hear you say these awful things."

My eyes were dry. "It's no easier to say them."

"I'm just glad there's no one else here to hear you."

"They'll hear. They'll have to. I can't let you keep doing this if there's anything I can do to stop you."

"Go ahead—everybody knows you're retarded," he sneered. "They'd laugh you out of court. There's no proof. Even Joe couldn't find any."

"I am not retarded," I flung back. "I was just afraid to talk."

"Dan?" came my mother's voice. "What about Joe?" But we had grown too used to discounting her, to ignoring her voice. I clutched the little figure. She felt warm and comforting in my hand, but nothing more, now.

"I still have to try," I said.

"Why stop there? Why don't you say I raped DJ, while you're at it?"

"Did you?"

He stared at me, chest heaving. "I wish you had died that night."

"You had your chance. I'm going to talk to the district attorney, and to your minister. People have to know. It has to stop." A part of me knew I must do all those things, but most of me shrank from the thought. I just wanted to go back to my safe, magical place, and hide away, and above all, be at peace. But peace must be earned, and it must be defended or, like Avalon, it fades away into the mists between the worlds. I couldn't walk away from this, or it would own me.

"I've already told him. I offered to step down—he said there was no need. We prayed about it. God's forgiven me."

"Who said that?"

"Pastor Rayburn. I talked to him about it years ago."

"Figures."

"You *told* him?" Momma asked softly. "He *knew*?"

"What do you mean by that?" Daddy asked, ignoring Momma.

"You give a lot of money to his ministry. You've bought his support. It's how things happen on the Narrow Way."

"You say it like you've left."

"I have."

His lips trembled. "I can't believe you've left the Lord. My one prayer has always been that we would be a united family in heaven."

I couldn't imagine anything worse than eternity spent at my father's mercy. My hand tightened. The little figure shot from my sweaty fingers and skidded across the floor to land at my father's feet. He stooped and picked it up.

"What's this?"

"A goddess figure."

His fingers twitched. He switched it to his other hand, and flexed the fingers that had been wrapped around the little woman. "Oh, no. Your healing wasn't of God. It was of the devil. I should have known, the way you're using your voice to do the Devil's work. This stops right here. You're not getting any deeper into that witchcraft business. It's just a license to go to bed with anybody who happens by. Sex, sex, sex, that's all it is."

I started to say, "You don't understand," but then I stopped. I knew before I started that I'd never be able to justify myself to him. "That's rich, coming from you," I said instead. "Just give her to me."

"No."

"Please—she means nothing to you."

"This thing is of the Devil." He turned to the sink, turned on the tap, flipped on the garbage disposal, and dropped the little figure down the drain, shaking his fingers, holding the switch on as the disposal clattered. "If the Lord wasn't on my side, I wouldn't have been able to do that." He smiled triumphantly at me.

"That's not the goddess—it's just a reminder. You haven't destroyed Her—you can't. But you've mocked her by using her gifts to destroy, rather than create. And there will be an accounting."

"There already has been. I told you we prayed about it."

"That wasn't an accounting; that was a whitewash job." We were both shouting over the disposal.

"You're cracked, just like your mother." The disposal shrieked, then ground horribly, then stopped. The stench of burning gears rose on a curl of blue smoke. The silence was deafening.

Momma stared at Daddy, tears running down her cheeks. "How can you say that?" she finally choked out. "I've been a good wife to you."

"Because it's true." He finally looked at her. "We both know you should have been committed years ago. You too, Bethie. The two of you're crazy as bedbugs, always blowing things way out of proportion. You hobbling around the house like a cripple, her never giving us the time of day when she could have all along. She was just being owly. I should have beat it out of her, like I always said I would. You'd have to be crazy to keep something like that up for that long. And now look what you've done. I've gotta fix this thing, too." He peered down into the disposal, then straightened to glare at me.

"I'm not crazy," I said.

"Where are you living?"

"That's none of your business."

"What's your phone number?"

"That's none of your business, either."

"But what if your mother wants to talk to you?"

"Don't you *dare* use me now," Momma said quietly.

"You watch your mouth, little girl," he snarled at her. She cowered, and suddenly I understood something about their relationship that had eluded me until then. How could I have been so blind? It had been right in front of me for years. *Daddy hurt her, too. And she stayed and let him. Why?*

His lips trembled again. "I love you."

"I know, Daddy. I've never doubted that. And that's the saddest thing of all." I stepped forward and, my hand on the switch because I didn't trust the disposal to not restart or him to not turn it on with my hand inside, reached into the drain and removed the little figure. I turned and looked at my parents, Daddy tall and implacable, jaw set, hands trembling, Momma

behind him, eyes wide and staring, mouth working. I thought of hugging her, but if I did, she and Daddy would take that as absolution. I held onto the Mother in my hand, felt the warmth and light rush through me as it had in the beginning, and walked out the door, leaving my other mother to face the darkness alone. I could have asked her to come with me. Maybe I should have. But I didn't. I didn't trust her not to betray me to Daddy. She always had before.

I climbed into the Jeep and started the engine. Daddy strode past me to the shop, jaw set, arms swinging. I had started for the lane when Momma pushed open the screen door and hurried along the walk, waving. I braked, let the dust settle, and rolled down the window.

"He's sick," she said bluntly. "But he won't go to the doctor. He doesn't know what he's saying."

"Oh, he knows." I wanted to hit something, hit it until it smashed and I ground it to powder. A blast of wind shook the house and tore a few shingles off. *Good*, I thought. *Tear it down*. "He just won't admit it."

The wind surged again and more shingles rained down. Momma was silent, then she said, "Bethie, I truly can't remember anything happening to you."

The rage boiled up again, this time at her. "*How could you not?*" I shouted. Overhead clouds whipped in the hot, dusty wind, twisting into a black, poisonous mass. "How could you fucking *not know*? He hurt you, too. He's probably still doing it."

She started to shake her head.

"Don't deny it, Momma. Don't you *dare* deny it. I saw you flinch when he called you 'little girl.' Didn't you ever wonder why I didn't talk? I did when I was little. Didn't you ever wonder why I stopped?" She was gone. I could see it in her eyes.

"Momma?"

"Well, I guess I better start supper," she said wearily. She squinted up at the sky. "We need this. It's been a long dry spell." She turned and walked inside.

The rage died. The storm settled. Rain pattered down, raising tiny explosions in the deep dust. I pulled the Jeep into gear and drove away,

dust choking me. Tears left cool tracks on my cheeks. I had left something of myself behind, and while the leaving was necessary, I had still lost part of my soul. I felt empty, purged, and fragile, and paradoxically, more myself than I ever had. I drove almost by instinct, reaching town, crossing Main Street, continuing on a back street up the hill and across the freeway onto the familiar tree-lined road.

The irrigation ditch that ran between the trees and the road had become a stinking morass. I found the break in the trees, the narrow bridge across the ditch, the ruts leading through the green gray tangle of chokecherries, poplars, elders, and willow that lay beyond the trees. I remembered it green—a misty tunnel leading to a hidden, magical place where there was sunshine, laughter, and music. Now dead branches clutched like gnarled fingers, teasel stood tall and spiky, nettles and buffalo grass fought for space beneath the brushy trees, and goat heads ran rampant along the sandy tracks. At the river, hints of fugitive green still clung along the banks where grass and reeds stood in shallows and moss coated rocks.

I turned off the engine, opened the door, slid out, and walked down to the water's edge, then followed the river upstream until I found the flat rock where I had lain with Sarah and Elaine all those years ago. A miniature meadow still remained. Across the river lay the tiny beach above which sloped a green, even glade. In spite of the season the sun was hot in this sheltered, timeless spot. I sat down, pulled off my boots, stuck my feet in the chilly stream until my toes got numb, then I drew my feet up and rested my chin on my knees. Staring at the water now, clutching the battered little mother in my hand, I could almost see us as we were then, flashes of light in the shadows, shrill screams, my mother's low, rare, rusty laughter and her thin arms encircling us all, keeping us safe while she could, guarding our one afternoon of childhood.

I watched the sun's slow passage over the tiny glade across the stream. An overgrown path led up to a sagging gate set in the underbrush. And then I heard it, the music, like before. And like before, it mingled with laughter. I opened my hand and inspected the little goddess. She had a few more nicks and scrapes, but she'd come through it pretty well. All in all,

I guessed we both had. And even with her laughter echoing around me in the sound of the river, there was no room in me to wonder how my other mother was faring now.

I stood up, brushed off my backside, and drove home through the twilight. When I turned onto the track leading to my house, it was nearly midnight and I was exhausted. When I stepped through front door the heart of the place rose up around me, warm, welcoming, smelling of spice, rose, and peaches. I closed my eyes and breathed it in, letting it salve the wounds the afternoon had opened. And then it came to me: the magic had always been here. I just hadn't been able to see it through the walls I had built to hold back the past. I fell into bed and slept.

I woke in early morning chill, rolled out of bed, pulled on a loose cotton dress and a sweater, and padded downstairs, walking through the shadowy, cool house, learning the peace of the place again. I heated water for tea, made a slice of toast, and wandered restlessly back into the living room. My mother's face rose before me. "I truly can't remember..." she said again. *How could I ever know? And not knowing, how could I find peace? How could I ever trust her? How could she not remember?*

And then I saw the irony—I had forgotten, too. *She was my mother, my heart* cried out. *She should have helped.* Should, yes. Mothers should protect their children. Of course they should. But *could* she?

I remembered seeing her bruised wrists while she flipped pancakes, seeing her hobble unsteadily down the hall to the bathroom. I remembered the black eyes, the swollen jaws, the times she flinched at a loud noise, or at Daddy's voice. How had I not seen it before? *She could have left*, my heart said angrily. *Why didn't she?* I had no answer to that, but the anger felt false. She had abandoned me, true, and the pain of it still made me want to gasp, but I was no longer sure it had been by choice.

I rinsed my cup in the kitchen sink and set it on the drainer, then lifted the little Mother figure from where she rested beside my purse. I walked through the dawn to the pool, slipped out of my dress, and walked into the icy water. The familiar rush of cold, then warmth, swept life back into my veins. I carried the Mother across and put her back into her niche, then stayed in the

water a long time, and when the chill finally drove me out, I sat cross-legged on the stone, the sun's thin autumn warmth on my face. And then She was there. We sat in peaceable silence, me on the stone, Her on the sand.

"How is she?" I finally asked.

Sad. Quiet. Forgetful.

"Is she all right?"

I see shadows and broken threads.

"Do I have to help her?"

You can't.

I sighed, relieved.

But you can make it worse.

"How?"

By breaking the threads that remain.

"What does that mean?"

A hard time is coming.

"What is it? What's going to happen?"

But She was gone.

I walked slowly back to the house, thinking of broken threads. Before I could lose my courage I dialed the familiar number.

"Hello?" asked Momma's familiar, tentative voice.

"Momma?"

"Bethie?"

"Yes. Is Daddy around?"

"No. He's out in the field."

"Good. Don't tell him I called, okay?"

"Why not?"

"Please, Momma, just do this for me, all right?"

Silence. My heart sank. "All right," she said at last.

"I wanted you to have my number." I repeated it twice. "Remember it, but don't write it down, okay?"

"Okay," she said quickly. "I've got to go."

The screen door squeaked as she hung up. I hoped I hadn't made a mistake, hoped the thread I had just strung wouldn't lead my father to my door.

I took a deep breath, picked up the telephone, and dialed again. "Child Services," said a woman.

"I need to report a child molester," I said, the words harsh in my mouth.

"Just a moment, please."

When it was done, I was at peace. I had done what I could, at least for the moment. I turned to my garden and my kitchen. The women of the place were a comforting presence again. The lights worked. A day later, a woman arrived at my back door carrying a sack of out-of-season peaches and a loaf of flour.

I jumped. "I didn't hear you drive up," I said.

"I came the back way," she said.

"What back way?" I asked.

"Past the Lady's pool."

Her faded red skirt and loose linen blouse were familiar—and totally foreign to what women wore around here. I looked at her face. She smiled, and I knew. "Will you show me?" I asked.

She inclined her head. "For a loaf of your bread and a peach pie." When the bread and pie were done I wrapped both, set them in a basket, threw a shawl around my shoulders, and followed her out into the blustery day. We followed the path to the pool. She skirted the shoreline to the cliff and slipped into a narrow crack, visible now that the vines had lost their leaves. I stepped to the crack, took a breath, and slipped into a dry, sweet-smelling cave floored with loose white sand. "This way," the woman's voice drifted back. I followed her footsteps into the darkness. "We're almost there," came her voice again. And then, "Watch your step..." and "Don't look down."

I stretched out a hand to touch the wall and followed blindly, letting my feet and hand feel the way, trying not to think about the echoes of tiny rocks bouncing and clattering far below. At last I saw a crack of light. The cave wall curved, and the light disappeared. The cave's echoing sweetness became the heady, rich smell of aging wine. My feet thumped on boards. My hand bumped against wood. The crack of light disappeared, then

abruptly became a flood as a door opened and the woman's black outline stepped into the light. I looked around and stepped away from the wall.

"Through here," she said. I stepped out to find myself in a busy kitchen. No one seemed to notice us until we were well into the room. "Just leave it here," the woman said, gesturing to the counter. "Take this." She held out a roll and a flagon of something hot. I set the basket on the counter and took the food.

"Think carefully before you eat it. You know what they say," she laughed as she snatched an apron from a hook and tied it over her dress. "This way."

I laughed back. "What do they say?"

But she was already gone. I followed her through a swinging door into a room filled with trestle tables, men in forest-colored shirts and high boots and women in loose linen dresses. A look through the open doors confirmed what I already knew—I was back in the village I had last visited with the old woman from the mountains. I had come home, but it was different this time. This time, I felt the otherness of the place. I sensed the magic that fueled it. My edges thinned as they had at the pool. This was my place, and these were my people.

I stepped out into the square, empty now except for foot traffic and a few horses, walked to the bench under the oak, and sat down. I thought again about the woman's joke—or had it been a joke? Was this place the reality that lay behind the warnings about eating food in the land of faerie? I thought of the old woman's insistence that I not pass the gate in the alley until I was certain I could find my way back. But things were different now. I had a place and an anchor to guide me home. I lifted the roll, took a bite, and then took a long pull of the hot drink. *Mocha, with something in it*, I thought.

And everything shattered. Suddenly I saw not one town, but a million towns in a million prisms, and each town had a million gates that led to a million more towns in a million more prisms. I swung in the center, rooted by the tree at my back, eyes closed against the vertigo. I swallowed the nausea and did the bravest thing I have ever done. I lifted the flagon, took another deep pull, and looked inside myself for my anchor. And it was there, at one end of a shining cord leading back through the door where I had entered,

pulling me to my place. I set my soul on the anchor, took a deep breath, and opened my eyes. The images swung, and then settled. Where before I had hung over an infinite abyss of possibilities, I now sat, firmly grounded. The possibilities were still there, but rather than swirling in confusion they had retreated, waiting to be seen, to be chosen. I understood the gates now—the old woman had been right. When I had been here before I had been new, fresh, raw. The town had overwhelmed me. I had seen the gate as a way to escape. I'd had no link to my past, to myself. I could have wandered forever. Now, with my anchor firm, the town was simply vibrant, alive in the same way that my house was alive, that the mountain woman's house was alive—and that I was alive, I realized suddenly. We all held infinite possibility. And magic and infinite possibility are one.

I lifted the flagon again and drained it, then stood and let the cord lead me back across the square, back into the inn, back into the kitchen, back through the wine cellar, along the treacherous stone paths through the tunnel, and out into the open air by the pool. But the cord didn't stop there, and it didn't lead toward the house. It led away, east, back through space, through time, to a golden afternoon on a riverbank, to the day I had been a child, and beyond that, to the dark days I could hardly bear to remember. Each formed a strand in the cord that tied me to my place in the world. I had thought I was finishing the past so I could put it behind me, and then I had thought I was re-establishing links for my mother's sake. Now I saw that I had made the past my own because it anchored me, and the links were for me, not my mother. I didn't even try to apply logic to it; I was operating outside of the place where logic applies. Logic gives coherence and security—and imposes limits. My magic was rooted in dark as well as light. To own it, I had to embrace both sources.

I stood by the pool, feeling the world open, limitless, and magical around me. And then I walked back down the little path to the river, followed it to the sandy path that led to my back gate, and through my garden. As I stepped through the gate I saw a woman, shoulders bowed, turning away from my door. "I'm here," I called. She turned and I saw her face lift.

"Oh, good. I really need some bread."

“Come on in and have some tea while you wait.”

We walked into my warm, bright kitchen. I washed my hands, tied on an apron, and began mixing yeast, flour, sugar, oil and milk. And all the while I mixed, I listened to the woman talk about her life, about its limitations, about her fears, about the possibilities. And I saw it—we all stand at the center of an endless web of magic, but most of us can't see it. I listened to her and thought about the challenges she faced, and her fears, and I saw they were real. Those things could happen. But so could other things. I thought of those, and instead of feeling smugly happy that I didn't have to deal with those things, I took them into my hands and kneaded them into the bread along with a million other possibilities, and I knew that when she ate this bread she would see them, too. I had done it before, but now that I understood what I was doing, the wishes became realities waiting to be chosen. And suddenly, in the worn, exhausted face across my table, I saw an echo of Momma, and I knew that women like her were why the magic was here.

CHAPTER 37

Jennifer

“A few more tests,” Daddy said on the telephone. “Exploratory surgery. Nothing to worry about.”

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“The doctor says it could be one of several things.”

“What things?” DJ asked on the extension.

“It could be a cyst, a stone, a benign tumor. Or cancer.”

“When do they want to do the surgery?” I asked.

“The doctor says now. He’s sending me to OHSU.”

“You and Momma can stay with us,” DJ said.

I wished he had asked me first, but I understood it was really all he could do. This was his father we were talking about.

“—cancer,” Gwen’s voice said faintly in the background.

“It could also be a lot of other things, too, Gwennie. Don’t borrow trouble. Women!” Daddy snorted.

DJ gave me a wry smile. I smiled back.



Four days later Gwen, DJ, and I were sitting sat in square, orange tweed chairs in Daddy’s room at Oregon Health Sciences University. Baby Davy lay in his car seat between DJ and me. Daddy’s bed lay empty; he was in surgery. Tom endlessly chased Jerry across the muted television screen

bolted to the ceiling. No one was watching. Gwen hunched in her chair, and I noted idly that her hair was growing out. It lay in silvery gold waves, mussed today because she'd forgotten to comb it this morning. The bare spot in back was barely visible.

I haven't mentioned that, have I? Gwen is DJ's mom, and I know he loves her, but there's something just not right about her. She never says much, and she hardly ever smiles, and she's incredibly clumsy. I don't know that I've ever seen her without a bruise somewhere, and that's just the parts of her I can see.

Which reminds me—she's so modest, it's ridiculous. She never undresses unless she's behind a closed, locked door. And her clothes—the woman dresses in these shapeless, faded housedresses that look like the clothes the women wear on those late-night "Feed the Children" ads—you know the ones, where they're standing in line for milky water or a little bowl of cooked rice, and a baby leans against their sagging breasts? And none of them wear brassieres. I think the people filming must tell them not to or something, so they'll look extra pathetic. Gwen wears a brassiere, I think, though she's very flat-chested so I suppose it hardly matters. Not like me. DJ loves my breasts. It makes me glad that I've taken the time and trouble to keep the muscles supporting them firm and tight. I'd like to wean Davy now, but DJ says that he wants me to nurse him for a few more months, for the immunity thing. I think Gwen must have nursed all of her babies for much too long, because either her breasts are completely gone, or they're as flat as fried eggs. She just has no curves at all.

But the strangest thing of all is her hair. As long as I've known her, she's worn it short, and I don't mean cute short. I mean Holocaust short. You can't even tell what color her hair is. It's always rough, like she's just taken a scissors to it and hacked it off herself, and in the back, up near the crown and a little to one side, there's this awful, scarred patch where the hair doesn't grow at all. I just can't understand how someone like Daddy, who is handsome in an older-man sort of way, and friendly and outgoing and a church elder and everything, ever got hooked up with someone like her. She's plain to begin with, and she doesn't keep herself up at all. She

looks like a refugee. That day in the hospital, though, her hair was a little bit longer, and I could see the beginnings of blonde waves. I'm lucky, of course. I have good hair. But I know women—my mother, for one—who would kill for hair like Gwen's. And she doesn't even appreciate it.

"Has she always been bald?" I whispered to DJ. He was sitting in the chair beside mine, his elbows on his knees, staring at the floor.

He looked up. "What?"

"Your mom—has she always had that bald spot?"

"Long as I can remember."

"Did she have an accident or something?"

"I don't know—why?"

"She looks like she got scalped." I giggled.

"This isn't the time, Jenny."

He was under a lot of stress, so it was only natural that he would lash out. I knew I had to be supportive, so I just didn't respond to his ill-natured remark. Instead, I asked, "Why aren't the others here?"

"Elaine's in court and Sarah couldn't get time off. Pastor Rayburn says he can't do without her."

"It would've been nice if they'd shown up, instead of leaving this all to us. Did you guys ever hear from Elizabeth?"

DJ stared at his hands.

"DJ? Did you hear me?"

"No," he said to his hands. "I don't think so." I was hurt, but DJ was right. Now was not the time to address this, either.

So I turned to baby Davy. He had been born at the end of the summer. His vague, milky gaze—so like his grandmother's—roamed from me to his daddy to the television to his chubby hands waving in front of his face. I leaned down. "Here, baby." I picked up a rattle and put it into his hand. He clutched it for a moment, then let it drop onto his blanket. I wondered for a minute if he was all right ... he seemed so clumsy, the way he kept dropping things. If he didn't start developing some skills soon, we'd have to have him tested. Maybe whatever made Gwen so clumsy was hereditary.

The door opened. DJ and Gwen stood up. Gwen swayed, and DJ's arm went around her. She flinched, then leaned into him. It was a little irritating. It would have been more appropriate if his arm had gone around me, but Gwen's always used her weakness as a manipulative tool.

The doctor had taken the time to change from his scrubs. "Let's go to my office," he said, and then he sent my father-in-law home to die.

CHAPTER 38

Elaine

I would never in a million years have wished for Daddy to get sick, but I have to admit that as I packed jeans and work shirts and bought new work boots, my spirits rose. Daddy was sick. It was terminal. My head knew it. But what my heart knew was that I was going home. There would be noise in the house. I wouldn't have so much time to miss the boys. Or to wonder what Joe had really seen.

Almost as if he had heard me thinking, the phone rang. I picked it up and braced the receiver between my ear and shoulder while I rolled socks into neat balls. "Hello?"

"Elaine." Joe's voice sent my belly plunging. The socks dropped out of my hands. I slid down to sit on the floor, my back braced against the bed.

"Yes," I got out.

Silence. Then, "I miss you." His voice was husky.

I had no idea what to say. Any word might break the fragile thread.

"Elaine?"

"I miss you, too," I finally said. My voice sounded flat in my ears.

"The boys ask for you."

My throat squeezed. *Why was he telling me this?*

"I wondered if we might talk," he said. "Just talk."

"I'd like that."

"Tomorrow?"

And suddenly the world closed in on me again. "I can't," I said.

Dead silence.

"Daddy's sick. I have to go help." I could hear my voice pleading.

"Oh."

"I want to talk, but I have to help him. Can you come up there?"

"How can you even ask?" I could hear the anger in his voice. "You're asking me to put our children within reach of a pedophile."

"He's not a pedophile! I would know!" I screamed, but then I stopped, swallowed, and said again. "I would *know*." I meant it to sound firm. It sounded like a question. "And he's dying. I have to go."

"Our children need you. *I* need you."

"I didn't send you away."

"No. I might have felt better about things if you had."

"It's not my job to make you feel better," I said in the careful, restrained tones Daddy had always required of me. "You'll have to deal with your vile thoughts on your own."

Silence. "What's become of us?" Joe asked at last in a whisper I don't think he meant me to hear. And then there was a click.

"Joe?" The phone buzzed. Slowly I hung up.

Joe had forced me to make a terrible, unnecessary choice. Whether I could have stood by that choice had Daddy not been sick and needed me, I will never know. He *did* get sick. He *did* need me, and in choosing to help him I sacrificed my husband and children all over again. The logic of these thoughts was simplifying, clarifying. What I carefully did not think was that I had spent my whole life trying to please Daddy, offering my obedience, my cleverness, and my success as gifts to him. Going home was surely the ultimate gift. This would surely make me worthy. Worthy of what? I couldn't have said. I didn't know. I just knew that Daddy needed me. He certainly couldn't count on Momma, who couldn't be relied upon to remember what day of the week it was, let alone keep track of the complexities of cancer medications and dosages.

I had written her off long ago. She was weak, Daddy was strong. I was strong, too, strong enough to handle anything as long as I kept busy. Strong was better.

When I drove up to the house, the storm of emotion took me by surprise. This was my past. This was where I had been born and raised. From that window I had seen Harry led away to pay the price for my inquisitiveness. In these rooms I had put my children to bed for the last time. From these rooms my sister Bethie had disappeared.

You don't know that, said the brisk, no-nonsense reporter in me. *You don't really know what happened to Bethie.*

I turned off the ignition and waited for the dust and my feelings to settle. Then I got out of the car and carried my suitcase, briefcase, and laptop inside. My wedding picture still hung on the wall. There was Joe, looking buoyant; Momma, looking crazed; Daddy, looking furious; Sarah, her face smeared with forbidden make-up, her lips peeled back like a chimpanzee; DJ, looking like he'd been assembled from PVC pipe and rubber bands. And me, knees slightly bent to compensate for my too-short dress. Bethie wasn't in that photograph. She wasn't anywhere, not anymore.

I ran a shaking finger over the bride in the photo, and gently touched the groom's face. At last, I acknowledged that Joe's questions were mine as well. Why had I been so terrified on my wedding night? Where was Bethie? The question of Momma's bruises had been answered all too clearly. But even as I asked the questions, I knew it was too late. I had chosen Daddy over my husband and sons, and now Daddy was dying. There would be no answers now. All that was left was helping him die well. Then ... well, I would see.

CHAPTER 39

Elizabeth

I opened the chest and gently lifted out the scrying bowl. My stomach was rumbling. Fasting had left my mind clear and open, but my belly served notice that, clear mind or not, it wouldn't mind a PBJ. I ignored it. My mind needed all the clearing it could get for this. I didn't seek foreknowledge lightly; one of witchcraft's fundamental principles is that there is no free lunch. For every action there is a consequence. Laying hold of the possibilities and twisting, shaping the world to suit one's self, is a serious thing.

Momma had called me once, last fall, when they first got the diagnosis. She had called again a few days ago. Suddenly I had to make a decision—and I didn't know what to do. That's why I was in my workroom now, opening the black painted chest, lifting out the scrying bowl. But I had to ask myself a couple of questions: Did I truly need to know the future? Did I really want to know the best action, or was I looking for a "pass" card, an excuse to simply avoid what was happening in my family? Daddy was dying, and Momma needed my help. How could I best give it? I didn't know. I didn't know if I even wanted to. But I had to decide—now. I carried the scrying bowl in both hands through the house, clicked the catch on the screen door with my elbow, and walked barefoot into the blue evening shadows.

I followed the stone path to my back gate, breathing in the roses, mint, lavender and locust trees around me, then stepped through the gate onto the white sand path. It still held a little of the day's heat. I followed

it as it wound and twisted through the Russian olives, then through the cottonwoods and scrubby willows down to the river. Water birds flashed and tipped in the shallows, and round rocks rolled and tumbled in the chattering water. This was my place. How could I leave this house, this pool, and the lively, friendly town through the tunnel to go back to the dead and twisted past? I understood that the past was important, and that it had shaped me, but I shrank from actually stepping back into it. They say you can't go home again. I didn't even want to try.

I followed the familiar path upstream to the thicket, all of my senses sharpened by the coming loss. I had reset the paving stones, and now the path led smoothly into the brush. My hair kept catching in the branches, and I impatiently reached up and twitched out the clip holding it in a knot at the back of my head. I finally passed between the stone markers and into the grassy clearing around the pool. The cleft leading to the village was hidden in leaves again. During the winter, I had taken to going there regularly, lingering in the square, drinking flagons of hot mocha and spiced ale, talking and laughing with the other patrons of the inn, and wandering through the market, but tonight my path stopped here. Moonlight shattered off the spring trickling out of the cliff, and glowed in the deep, clear pool.

I pulled my loose white linen dress over my head and walked into the pool, setting the thin silvery moonlight dancing on ripples. Round pebbles slid under my feet. I pushed off and glided slowly through the chest-deep water—the pool level had been rising—until I reached the cliff, ran a gentle hand over the little Mother in her pool, then turned and pushed off again, the water tingling pure and icy around me like it always did. When my hands scraped the bottom I stood up, scooped up a double handful of the water, raised it to the Lady, then poured it over my head, arms, and breasts, letting tension, anger, and fear flow away with the chilly water, feeling my skin become thin and my soul slip out to mingle with the night.

After a minute, I retrieved the basin from the sandy shore, filled it from the trickling waterfall, and set it down on the flat rock. The waning moon danced on the rocking surface of the water, stilling as it settled.

Still naked, I sat cross-legged on the rock, my hair streaming dark and chilly over my back, shoulders, and breast, and pooling on the rock under me. I breathed in deeply once, twice, thrice, and felt myself slip into the silvery moon glow reflected in the basin. Time slowed as I slid backward, forward, floating on the current, waiting. A chilly breeze ruffled the water. Moonlight splintered, steadied, grew, limned my face in silver. The face in the water stared back at me, familiar yet alien, eyes deep and dark, round and slightly tilted. Moonlight flashed on the gleaming wavelets in the bowl, slid along cheekbone and jaw line, caught on the curve of full lips. I sank back into the current.

Images flickered and then settled. The Lady sat on the stone by the water as she often did here, bare willow whips brushing her body and tangling in her loose hair. Her face was mine, the woman in the mountains, the strange girl in the town. The face slid, moved, loosened and a skull rose to the surface. Its hair lost its silver fire, became feathery and thin. Dread sliced through me. The eyes shrank to little more than sparks deep within the sockets. *The Crone, then.* I waited.

A cracked, husky voice broke the stillness. *What do you see?*

Images flickered and ran, then settled again. Barren fields, dry branches, oozing stumps, bloated cattle in the gullies. And then, in the center, a crowned head, a haggard, familiar face, an oozing hole in a thigh from which ran a river of black, poisonous blood. "I see a wounded king," I answered reluctantly.

What must you do?

"I must heal the king to heal the land." The pattern was an ancient one, set in the days before legends.

But if the king will not be healed?

My mind shrank from the possibilities taking shape before my eyes. Blood, and a world poisoned by the festering wound at its center. I looked up.

If the king will not be healed? She asked again.

"Then he must die, or the land dies with him." My voice was little more than a whisper.

Do you know his face?

"Yes." The word came hard. "But I can't kill my father," I burst out. "That's not why I called you."

Will he be healed?

"No." My answer was soundless, nothing more than a moving of my lips.

Then how can the land be saved?

"I don't know." But the old legend filled my mind.

You know.

If ever I had thought my goddess was easier to serve than my father's god, I repented the thought now. "... Yes."

How, child?

"The land demands an accounting." The words burst out of me. "He's dying. How can I do that?"

Look around you. How can you not?

I looked at the images in the bowl and thought of the parched ranches, the desolate waste, the dead trees. "Is there no other way?"

The king and the land are one. You know his story.

"No," I said. "Only bits and pieces."

Then watch. She paused and I saw the water stir, then clear, and then images flickered in the bowl.

Upriver, beyond warm sun and deep pools of water, where time is just a trickle of snow melt and spring runoff, a house sags against a hill covered by lilacs, snowballs, lilies, maples, and firs. Behind the trees, nearly hidden, a gate leads into a forest.

Occasionally an aged tractor or car putts along the winding, sun-baked, frost-crazed road that runs through the valley. The road divides the hill, on which sits the house, from the deepest valley, wherein lies a wooded swamp. Mosquitoes buzz in angry clouds, trapped within the netted stillness of the trees. Hidden by ferns, daisies, buffalo grass, and black cedars, leeches and crawdads fill the stagnant water, snapping turtles stalk the pools, quicksand and bottomless mud await the unwary.

One summer a towheaded baby, one strap of his faded cotton playsuit dangling down his sunburned back, toddles through waving grass between house and road, his head a bobbing spot of sunlight. An auburn-haired woman, eyes drooping and mouth petulant, stands by the snowballs and lilacs. Behind her, feral children in tattered, dirty overalls dart among the trees, their jaws set, their eyes hard. Her dress gapes over sagging breasts.

In the winter, steamy windows trap the smells of boiling turnips, kerosene, sweaty wool, rancid smoke, wet diapers. Outside, the air smells of snow and frozen shit. Dingy eggshells crackle underfoot in the neglected garden, and rusted tin cans hang limply from string around a hummocky patch of snow. They are supposed to keep the deer out of the garden, but the deer have long since learned that the cans are impotent. Gnawed black cornstalks puncture the snow like knives.

The mother is gone, though the woman still lives there. It would be kind to say that the love has been beaten out of her. There might even be some truth in it. Certainly, she has worked too hard for too long and had too many babies too fast. It would be less kind to say that she is a cold bitch, but there might be some truth in that as well. If there was love in her, it withered in the hours spent burdened like a pack mule, carrying logs through the mud and mosquitoes, in blistering her face over a cook stove while the icy drafts turned her back blue, in watching her father drink and whore, in watching her mother beaten to death by fists and hard work, in trying to keep her one-eyed, palsied husband appeased. She might be a cold bitch, but that doesn't mean she was born one.

She is strong, but not strong enough to be a mother in that house. Though she often looks out the back windows, she never quite sees the gate set back in the trees or hears the music. Sometimes she catches a glimmer, but she always has to turn away to settle a fight, feed her husband, make another baby, or nurse the one at her breast. She is so tired.

The truth is she didn't like children much to start with, and after being pregnant nonstop for seventeen years, she is sick to death of the feverish, coughing, screaming, whining, hitting, shitting lot of them. Her children fend for themselves. They grow up fast, but not fast enough for her.

They live at each others' expense. It would be easiest to say the evil was born with her eldest son, but maybe it isn't that simple. Maybe he found the evil. Maybe it found him. Who made him? His father? His mother? Grandfather? Uncles? Aunts? Who knows? Does it matter? In the end, it is done.

While his mother carries logs out of the muddy swamp on her back, he takes his blonde-haired baby sister into the woods, the bedroom, the barn, and does unspeakable things to her. When she grows big and strong and ugly in his eyes, he takes his baby brother, the one with a head like a ball of sunlight and the faded playsuit missing a snap, his brother who is not strong yet and still beautiful, and he shows him evil as well. In the beginning, the child weeps and begs for mercy. "Please, please, don't take me there. I'll be a good boy," he cries. "I'll be such a good boy!"

But the gods sleep, and mercy is dead. Only rage survives. Rage and pain. Rage, pain, and love, all bound together with blood. The towheaded boy can no longer tell the difference. Eventually this wounded child grows big and strong, and his beauty fades. But not the rage, not the pain, not the love—never, never those. They twist into a dark knot. They bind him tight.

When he loses his brother's love to his little sister, he is both relieved and saddened. His ass no longer bleeds, but now there is no one. Deliverance has a price. He requires an accounting of his little sister, and the rage warms him like love. When it is over, she stands in the river on trembling legs and tries to wash the blood and guilt away. She is only five, and fears she will be carried off in the spring flood, or swallowed by the quicksand or the snapping turtles. She scrubs until she is raw and bleeds all over again, but it is never enough, and the stain etches itself into her soul like blood in a sheet, and into the river like a tainted ribbon of sediment.

When the boy goes swimming, the stain brushes against his bare skin, and he shudders and tries to forget his guilt, tries to forget those frozen times when he was small and helpless and begged in vain for mercy. Sometimes he can forget. Until next time. "You acquire a taste for it," he says later. Eventually he learns that if he blames his sister, the blood on his hands disappears a little easier. And the raging, agonized child locked deep in his soul demands that someone should pay.

He flees to the city and loses himself in the smelters and foundries. He finds a woman who has already learned that seeing monsters makes them real and marries her in the smoke of the factories. They have daughters. When anyone mentions hurt children, the man talks very loudly about what he will do to anyone who touches his little ones. And then his daughters pay, and pay, and pay.... He tells himself that he is making them strong. In church each week, he sings "Power in the Blood" and "This is My Father's World" and sees to it that they, in their shameful bloodstained underwear, sing loudly, too. And for a moment, just a moment, he is cleansed of the blood of his children in the blood of the Lamb.

But the river remembers. And everywhere the river runs, the land tastes the children's blood and tears, and the land weeps with them. And in their salt tears lies desolation.

I sat motionless, my head bowed. "I never knew," I whispered. "I never knew it happened to him, too. I never really knew him at all. I never thought to wonder how he got that way. All I knew was how he hurt me. Hurt us. How can I understand this? What can I do?"

Remember the wounded king.

The images flashed and changed. I stared into the water. The image of the dying king faded into the face of the crone.

You know who you are.

“Yes.”

What must you do?

I answered for the sake of the sunlit child he had once been. “Help him die.” I closed my eyes, holding the image before me. At last I asked my own question. “How?”

But the basin reflected only a sliver of moonlight. I stood up, poured the water out onto the ground, brushed the sand off my legs, and walked slowly back to the house.

CHAPTER 40

Elizabeth

The store still smelled the same—of mildew, dry rot, dust, fresh bread, oranges, coffee, sour milk, and roasting chicken. Battered brick walls, one still bearing a ghostly ad for a long-vanished card room, loomed over sagging shelves. I stood just inside the glass-paned front door, the bell still tinkling above me. The years fell away to the last time I had been here, the day before Elaine's wedding.

I shouldn't have stopped, but I had been a child here, and I'd been seeking comfort. I could almost see us lined up by the cash register, three towheads and one reddish brown, ragged in our faded summer cottons, waiting for Daddy to pay for Carnation ice cream sandwiches. Loving Daddy was safe in the store.

I thought of his hard, callused hands, grease ground deep into the cracks, trembling a bit as he fumbled for change. "Thank you, Daddy, oh, thank you," we chorused, our hands sticky with the dark chocolate cookie and vanilla ice cream sandwich, the foil squeaking on our teeth, our smiles dark, chocolate, delicious. And he looked down at us, and smiled back, then gently, clumsily, rubbed our sun-hot hair with his battered hands. We stood carefully, trying not to flinch and hurt his feelings.

I had stopped that long-ago day before Elaine's wedding in memory of the children we had been, after Dr. Black, after the church, wanting just a

little more time. But then I saw Greg, and I knew time had run out while I was refusing to look.

For a moment the room dimmed, and I felt myself falling into the dark place, felt my throat closing and the words deserting me. I drew a deep breath, held it, and exhaled, centering myself. There—Greg had stood just there, the last time. There should have been something more, something to mark the death it had been. His Grandma Mavis, Dr. Black's office nurse, had already told him. He knew it wasn't his. There had been no promises, but he had been my only friend, one of the few people I could talk to, sometimes. He had no more words than I did that day. I had seen his eyes find me, seen his face freeze, seen his eyes slide past me. I had betrayed him. Betrayal had been forced upon me, surely, but it was no less real for that.

Now, as I stood there, lost in memory, the bell over the door tinkled again. I jumped. Heavy boots clunked down the aisle and rounded the corner. I looked up, the past all around me.

"Hi, Greg," I said.

He looked almost the same—solid, thick, freckled wrists, short, bristly hair now flecked with gray. "Bethie?" he asked.

Unexpected pain nearly choked me. *Too late*, I told myself frantically, clenching my fists. *It's too late. Be cool, friendly.* "How've you been?" I got out.

"Fine. I got married. Married Kelly."

"Oh. Congratulations."

He shifted on his feet, looked past me. "Didn't work out."

"I'm sorry."

"We got divorced last year."

I didn't know what to say to that. An awkward silence fell upon us.

"Well," he finally said, "better get back to work."

"What're you doing?" I asked quickly.

"I'm a paramedic. Getting a little old for it, but I've still got a few good years in me." He looked at his watch. "What're you doing in town?"

"My dad's sick."

"Yeah, my mom said something about that. I'm sorry. He's a good man." He shifted in his feet again.

The words I wanted to say choked me—*too much to say, too late to say it. I can't even speak in this place, how can I give an accounting?* “Well, I'd better let you go then.”

“Yeah. We'll get together before you leave,” he said, his voice hearty, false.

“Sure,” I replied, my voice just as false. The irony struck me. Before, there had only been the one great truth separating us. Now our easy social words and a thousand tiny lies had accomplished the same end.

“Bye, then,” he said.

I watched him pass the window, listened to an engine start, watched him drive past in a dusty pickup, then I pushed the door open and stepped out into the blazing day. The tinkling bell mocked me. I blinked against the late afternoon glare, my eyes stinging. *I shouldn't have come. This is not my place.* I slid onto the Jeep's scalding seat, fumbled the keys into the ignition.

I couldn't face the house, not yet. I popped the Jeep into reverse and backed out onto the narrow strip of cracked and buckling blacktop that passed for Main Street in Paradise. I turned right at the stop sign and climbed the hill past the big old Victorian houses dreaming behind their shady lawns.

I crossed the concrete overpass and found myself abruptly on the familiar road leading to the river. The grass edging the stinking irrigation ditch was already late-summer tawny, even though it was barely June. I sped up, then slowed down and turned onto the familiar sandy track penetrating the tangle beyond. And suddenly, surprising me as it always did, there was the river—shallow, smelly, and slow.

I parked the Jeep and picked my way upstream and around the bend to the familiar flat rock at the water's edge. I sat down awkwardly, slipped off my shoes, and slid my feet into the cool current. *I can't do this. It's too soon. I'm not strong enough. I need more time.* The words pulsed with my heartbeat until the chill of the water slowed them down. I looked down and wiggled my toes, watching them warp and twinkle in the sparkling water. The spirit of the place gentled me. I leaned back on my hands, my feet still in the water, dropped my head back, closed my eyes, drew a deep breath, and released the pain and tension in a heavy sigh. *I'm*

not here for Greg. He belonged to someone who never really existed. I wondered what had happened with Kelly, then remembered it wasn't my business and forced the matter out of my mind.

I have to face the house. But not yet. Please, Goddess, not quite yet. For now, just let me be here.

A skiff of music tickled past my ears. I opened my eyes and, where and when I least expected him, there was Toby, just across the creek, his thick golden arms clasped around a black-clad upthrust knee. His shirt lay beside him, knotted around something, and the grassy bank rose behind him in a tangle of scrubby trees and brambles. The wooden fence with its sagging gate still tottered through the scrub. His lean brown feet rested on the river-bank's narrow crescent of beach. He gazed at me, his scarred face and amber eye warm and steady under his mop of dusty black curls. My heart surged. I hadn't realized how much I had missed him, needed his forgiveness, needed to know I was still worthy of his love and loyalty. A foolish grin spread across my face. The sun broke through the trees and shattered in golden streams over his head. He smiled back, teeth flashing white and strong against his lean, bronze cheeks. I blinked, dazzled by the white blaze of sunshine, and he was gone. His shirt still lay there, white in the vivid grass.

I stayed until the air turned dark and the breeze blew chilly, then, when I could delay no longer, I waded across the river and picked up the shirt. It fell open in my hands, spilling daisies, dandelions, and something dark and heavy into the grass at my feet. I saw him again in my mind's eye, smiling into the sun, just as I had seen him before on the night my old life ended, as I had seen him day after day high in the mountains.

I stooped and picked up a small, crudely carved figure of a full-breasted, broad-hipped woman, a woman like the one I had left safe in her pool at home. I turned her, searching. There it was on her worn thigh—a faintly etched fish. Warmth filled me. The Lady was here, too. Toby had brought me word. I slipped her into my blouse next to my heart, then bent down and collected as many of the flowers as I could hold. I waded back across the river and walked slowly to the waiting Jeep, at peace now and carrying the blessing of the Mother with me.



I climbed the warped back steps, my suitcase dragging my arm down. The screen door's rusty spring still squeaked. I stepped into the dim, stuffy kitchen, taking in the rows of pill bottles, the dishes in the sink, Momma's arms in suds up to her elbows, a heap of sheets on the laundry room floor just beyond the kitchen.

"Hello, Momma," I said quietly. "I've come to help."

"Help him die, you mean." Her voice was husky.

A tall, dark-haired woman appeared in the doorway, saw me, and ducked back out of sight.

"It's all that's left," I said.

Momma turned to look at me. Finally she lifted her soapy arms, and I stepped into them, wrapping my own arms around her fragile shoulders. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "I'm so, so sorry."

Behind me, I heard someone—the tall woman, I assumed—starting up the stairs. I stood there by the sink, my shirt damp from my mother's soapy hands, and wondered if she even knew what she was apologizing for. I didn't ask. Without a word, I just picked up a towel and started drying the dishes.

When the last dish was dry and put neatly away on its shelf, I couldn't put it off any longer. I went into the living room. He was sitting in his big chair.

"Hello, Daddy," I said.

CHAPTER 41

Jennifer

It's funny how things become so clear in retrospect. When Daddy was diagnosed, I knew that hard times were ahead, but I had every confidence that DJ and I would be fine. After all, there probably never *were* two people more compatible and better equipped to deal with such a situation than we were. DJ was a minister. He could keep everyone's focus on the Lord. I was a counselor, trained to guide and direct people in crisis. It was perfect.

When DJ mentioned that his father wanted us to come up to Paradise and help out, I agreed immediately. It was a huge sacrifice, leaving our home and our jobs, but it was the right thing to do. Besides, I just couldn't convince DJ that our place was here, serving the Lord. He was determined we should go, and I could see his point, in a way. Daddy and Gwen needed us to counsel them, to prepare Daddy for eternity. It wasn't going to be long; the doctor had said a few months, probably much less. The cancer was very advanced.

DJ arranged for a substitute minister, and the conference found a minister's wife who was willing to hold my job open for me until we got home again. She wasn't qualified, of course, but it was almost summer, so a lot of my work, which was counseling school kids, was going to be ending soon, anyhow. Daddy's cancer really couldn't have come at a better time.

We drove into the ranch driveway on a day that made me wish I had visited more often. The sky was blue, the air fresh, and everywhere the hillsides

were green. I knew that DJ's family were dirt farmers, but now, remembering that ugly place where I'd grown up, I realized that maybe there had been some advantages. Imagine being able to live in a place like this....

But then I saw the house again. Daddy had done his best, painting the exterior of the house and even the picket fence every year or so and keeping the yard mowed and the parking lot oiled. The place looked nice from the outside. But inside? There's just no way to say this nicely. DJ's mom simply had no sense of beauty. Most of the interior walls were just bare boards that had been primed white years ago. Now they were streaked with dirt and leprous with brown handprints. The wood and linoleum floors were clean, mostly, but they needed to be refinished. The furniture was old and threadbare.

"Why doesn't your mom ever redecorate?" I'd asked DJ the first time we came here. "Isn't she embarrassed when company comes?"

"Nobody ever comes," he said.

"But your dad's so social," I protested. "And he's a church leader."

DJ just shrugged. He wouldn't talk about it anymore.

The day we arrived to prepare Daddy for eternity, I knew what to expect, so the house wasn't such a shock, but still ... I felt sorry for Daddy, having to be sick in such an ugly place because his wife couldn't be bothered.

We pulled up outside the picket fence, and I carried Davy inside while DJ got our suitcases. I laid Davy in the crib Daddy had set up in DJ's childhood bedroom, then started unpacking. I opened the suitcases I had packed for Davy and myself and started putting our clothes in the drawers, or hanging them in the closet. When I opened DJ's suitcase, though, I gasped. DJ had packed his own clothes, and when I saw what he'd brought, I was appalled.

"DJ, what on *earth* were you thinking?"

"What?" He wasn't even paying attention.

"You packed your oldest, grungiest stuff." I shuffled quickly through the suitcase. "And there's nothing in here but jeans."

"I put in a set of church clothes."

"One set!" I snorted. "And no shorts. No loafers. No nice shirts ... oh, I take that back ... one nice shirt. Well, we'll just have to go shopping."

"Why?"

"You'll look like a street person."

"No, I won't. I'll look like everybody else."

"But, DJ, you're a *minister*. You should set an example."

"By what? Wearing a tie while I drive the chopper? I'd probably strangle myself, if I didn't die of heat stroke first." And then he laughed at me.

"That's not what we're here for."

DJ stopped laughing. "That's *exactly* what I'm here for, Jenny," he said. "Dad doesn't need me hanging crepe. He needs me out in the fields."

"But you're a *minister*."

"That's what ministers do," he said. "They minister. They fill the needs they see around them."

"No, they don't!"

"Jenny?"

I felt something trembling, something about to fall and shatter past repair. I backed away from the invisible precipice. "You know I didn't mean that," I said. "You just shocked me. I didn't know you planned on working in the fields. I wasn't expecting that. I wish you'd told me."

"Would it have made a difference?"

"Of course not," I said in my warmest voice, going to him and sliding my arms around his waist. "You know that. You know we've always agreed on our mission. I was just surprised. Can you forgive me?"

He wrapped his arms around me and his lips came down on mine. "Nothing to forgive," he murmured. His arms dropped before I was ready to let go. He pulled on some faded jeans, an utterly disreputable tank top, and a pair of cracked and dusty cowboy boots I had forgotten he even had. Then he kissed me once more, quick and hard, and I heard him thumping downstairs. The screen door slammed. I peeked into the crib. Davy was sleeping peacefully. I finished unpacking our suitcases, then quietly left the bedroom and tiptoed down the hall and moused down the stairs. And there I overheard something I wasn't supposed to hear.

A strange woman's voice—soft, a little husky, with an elusive sort of music in it—was speaking. "—come to help," she finished.

“Help him die, you mean,” Gwen answered, and her voice was husky, too.

I looked quickly into the kitchen. A thin, brown woman with a riot of long, dark red, curly hair was standing stood just inside the screen door. Her unplucked black eyebrows made emphatic slashes over her deep brown eyes.

“It’s all that’s left,” the woman said.

Gwen looked at the thin woman, then her chin trembled and she lifted her soapy arms. The woman stepped into them, wrapping her own arms around Gwen’s shoulders. “I’m sorry,” Gwen whispered. “I’m so, so sorry.” Her hand came up and cupped the woman’s cheekbones.

I felt awkward, as if I were witnessing some private, intimate moment. Logically, I knew that was foolish. It was just some strange woman coming in and calling Gwen “Momma.”

And that’s when it hit me—that woman must be Elizabeth! Elizabeth had been gone for years, presumed dead. And suddenly here she was, come back to life. *Boy, is DJ ever going to be surprised*, I thought happily.

Writing this now, my pen cuts deep grooves in the paper. If I weren’t a Christian and a counselor I would write, *I wish she really had died before she came home*.

But I didn’t know. Just then, my only thought was for DJ’s happiness. I could hardly wait to tell him. I was halfway up the stairs, so I hurried the rest of the way and checked on Davy. He was just waking up, so I got him up, changed him, gave him a bottle, and then patted his back until he fell asleep again. Then I slid on my sporty boat shoes and went downstairs again. Elizabeth was in the living room, sitting in an easy chair. Daddy was just waking up. I paused, thinking I’d take the time to tell him hello before I went to find DJ. From my vantage point on the stairs I could see both of their faces through the doorway. Elizabeth was looking at her father quietly, coolly, not sympathetically, not the way one should look at a dying man.

“So you’re here again,” he whispered.

“Yes.”

That’s all she said.

Daddy tried to sit up a little straighter. “You’ve got me where you want me,” he said with a bitter, nervous laugh.

"What's past is past," she answered.

"I've got nothing to be ashamed of," he said, lifting his chin. "I'm right with the Lord."

"I hope so." But I could hear a thread of doubt running through her voice.

I sucked in my breath. How dare she speak to Daddy that way? How dare she sow doubts at a time like this? Daddy was a kind, loving father. I had seen it myself. I think that's when I first realized that something was missing in her—that little spark of God's grace that lets us feel for others, sympathize with their pain, and minister to their suffering. It's what lifts us above the animals, makes us human and divine, and it was clear to me that Elizabeth didn't have it. She could have directed him to the Lord for comfort and healing. Miracles happened—she could have offered him that hope. But she didn't. She just sat and looked at him.

Thanks to my counseling background, it was easy for me to see that there was a hidden agenda going on here, a relationship that excluded everyone else, something that Elizabeth clearly had scorned a long time ago. *What I wouldn't have done to have that kind of close relationship with my father*, I thought. I would have treasured it and nurtured it, not cast it aside!

A truck roared in the driveway. I hurried outside and saw DJ jump out of it, swat dust from his clothes, and grin at me. He pointed to the Jeep sitting in the driveway.

"Who's here?"

"Elizabeth," I said. All my pleasure in the news was gone.

"Elizabeth? Bethie? *My Bethie? She's alive?*" DJ's voice cracked.

"Yes." I watched his face light in a way it never had for me, and something in my heart twisted. But then he took a step toward me and the pain eased. I smiled and lifted my arms. And then he brushed past me and ran into the house. I dropped my arms and followed, my face flaming. I stepped into the kitchen just in time to see him disappear into the hall. His voice floated back.

"Bethie? Bethie? Oh, Bethie!" His voice broke. And then there was silence.

I followed him into the hall and spotted them in the middle of the stairs, DJ hugging that thin, dark woman so tight I wondered if she'd break. He was holding her tighter than he'd ever held me, the two of them rocking, rocking, rocking. I cleared my throat. DJ looked up, saw me, and stepped back from her, rubbing the back of his hand across his eyes. *DJ was crying? Why? I'd never seen him cry before. And why did he look so guilty?*

That night, at family worship, we all prayed together. "Give us the grace to accept what comes, the wisdom to learn, and the eyes and the will to see the lesson in every situation," Elizabeth said when it was her turn. She didn't pray for healing for Daddy, though I had made sure I went first so my example could remind her. She didn't even have the courtesy to start her prayer with a "Dear Jesus" or a "Our Dear Kind Heavenly Father." I wondered just who she was praying to, anyway. And when we all stood up afterward I glimpsed a pentacle inside the neckline of her shirt. I had learned about pentacles and their satanic associations in a special seminar open only to carefully selected students in graduate school, but I had never expected to see one around the neck of a family member. I realized then that something evil had come into the house, but I was the only one who seemed to have noticed.

That night I passed Elizabeth's open door. She was just unpacking, but already she had set a few things out on a table by her window—a statue, a candle, a Mason jar of flowers, a black bowl set into sand.

"Need any help?" I asked, stepping into the room and crossing to where I could see the arrangement better; I'm always interested, of course, in seeing how people decorate their spaces. The statue was a fat woman with huge breasts, a pendulous stomach, and a fish—the *Christian* fish—etched onto her thigh, right next to her privates. It was not only vulgar and ugly—it was blasphemous, putting the symbol for Jesus Christ down there. I couldn't believe it.

I looked at Elizabeth. She had changed into a white linen dress and was slipping her shoes on and picking up her keys, like she was going somewhere. Her hair was damp.

She wasn't wearing a bra. If I looked close enough, I could see her nipples through the dress. Of course, once I noticed them I couldn't

pull my eyes away. It wasn't too obvious—Elizabeth was almost as flat-chested as Gwen—but still, she could at *least* have worn underwear when she was a guest in someone else's home! She looked slutty, like she was going to meet a man or something. But then my training kicked in. *Maybe she doesn't know any better. Maybe she just needs someone like me to show her the way*, I thought. Here, where I least expected it, was a place to witness. I had to befriend her.

I stepped into her room and put on my best smile. "Where do you live?"

"A couple hours from here."

"And you haven't seen your family in *how* long?"

"It's been a while."

"And you're only *a couple hours away*?" I insisted as delicately as I could.

"Yes."

She was missing the point. I tried again. "What do you do for a living?"

She shrugged. "Whatever needs doing."

"Who do you work for?"

"Several ranchers."

"Are you dating anybody?"

Elizabeth just looked at me and jingled her keys.

I tried again. "You're leaving *already*?"

"Yes, for a little while."

"But you just got here. Where are you going?"

"Out."

"But—"

"Look, Jennifer," she said, daring to interrupt me, "I don't know what you know about our family history, but being here is not easy. I am going out because I need to. I'll be back when I'm ready to be back, and I'm not going to play Twenty Questions with you about it. I'd like to be friends with you, and I'll be happy to talk, but right now I need to go out for a while."

"I was just showing an interest," I said.

"As opposed to actually caring?"

That did it. This woman needed to hear some plain speaking. "Oh, I care," I told her. "It's my job to care. I'm a counselor. I see what your

attitude is doing to a good, kind, gentle man. You're just waiting for him to die. And he knows it."

"What else is there to do?" She sounded angry. "He's dying. Nobody can stop it. What can we do, but wait with him? There's no time for anything else."

"We can look to the Lord for healing. We can give him hope."

"Even though there's no hope to offer?" She worked her keys between her fingers and shifted toward the door.

"Why did you even come here?" I asked her in my best minister's wife's voice. "Why did you bring the devil into this house?" I pointed at that obscenely fat, blasphemous little idol. "Particularly if you're going to run out every chance you get?"

"You have no idea what you're talking about," was all she said.

She had no idea! "Oh, I know the difference between right and wrong, good and evil," I replied.

"Do you?" she asked. "Do you really? I've always found them to be slippery concepts."

It was the opening I had hoped for. "I can help you," I said warmly. "I'll be happy to pray with you and talk about the Lord. This can be a time of healing for both you and Daddy."

"Daddy is dying," she said again. "Denying him the opportunity to accept that and make his peace in whatever way he can is cruel."

"He's ready to meet the Lord," I said. "Are you?"

Elizabeth opened her mouth, then closed it, shook her head, and walked out, leaving me standing there in the middle of her bare, ugly bedroom, like I was too stupid to even deserve an answer.

I felt foolish, but then my professional objectivity came to my rescue. I'm far from stupid—I have a master's degree in counseling to prove it. I stood staring at that blasphemous little idol, wishing I had the nerve to do what needed to be done, to destroy it. And because I was looking at the idol, I spotted something beside it that I hadn't seen before—a tiny, crude carving of a dog. I reached out a finger, and suddenly such a feeling of menace swept over me that I jerked back and fled for the safety of my own room. If

I had had any doubts about Elizabeth before, they were certainly gone now. The evil I felt in that room could only have been the Devil. I snatched up my sleeping baby in my shaking hands and buried my face in his powdery sweetness. When he whimpered, I patted his back, made soothing noises, and paced the room. He kept fussing, so I lay down on the bed and let him nurse, even though he was practically weaned. As we lay there together, I began praying as I had never prayed before. I prayed for protection for the people I loved. Slowly I felt God's presence wrapping me in peace. Davy and I fell asleep together.

When I woke up, it was already morning. Voices and footsteps downstairs told me the family was already up, so I slid carefully out of bed, eased Davy down into his crib, and looked at DJ's pillow. It was smooth, untouched. He hadn't come to bed last night. Unbidden, the image of him holding Elizabeth and crying came into my mind, but I forced it away. *Where had he slept?* My fear resurfaced, and at last I understood the danger that faced my family.

I was still in yesterday's clothes, so I undressed, pulled a peach satin peignoir around me, ran a comb through my hair, tied a matching peach-colored bow around the soft curls, and brushed my teeth. Then I hurried down the stairs. The kitchen was empty. Trucks roared outside.

I opened the kitchen door just in time to see the first one go by, with Elaine at the wheel. The second one, with DJ at the wheel, followed close behind. Elizabeth was sitting beside my husband. As they passed me, I saw her lips—her full, pouting, sluttish lips—moving, no doubt telling him some story. DJ threw back his head and laughed like I had never seen him laugh before, and in his face I saw something I had only ever seen in Bosch and Breughal paintings, the twistedness that joyfully embracing evil brings a man. I had never thought to see such a thing in the man I had married. Sick at heart, I closed the door.

"Liz? Lainie? Gwennie?" Daddy called from the living room.

I swallowed my fear and nausea. "They're not here," I called back.

"That you, Jenny?"

Crossing that kitchen and going to the living room door was one of the hardest things I have ever done. I just wasn't up to offering support

to a sick man, not after what I had seen. Still, though, I was a minister's wife and a counselor. I had a role to fill. "Yes, it's me. How are we feeling this morning?"

"Rarin' to go. You want to drive me out to the field?"

"Just let me get dressed and get Davy up."

"Thanks. You're a good daughter." His praise warmed me, reminding me that I *am* a good daughter, as well as a good mother, counselor and minister's wife. But then he continued, turning all my warmth cold. "You know, with a little practice you could drive one of the trucks. The girls could teach you."

"But I have to take care of Davy." Without warning, I found my ministry under attack from another side.

"Gwennie could do that," he said. "Doesn't take much work to keep a baby clean and fed. Lainie was watching the little ones when she was barely out of diapers, herself."

"I couldn't ask that of her," I said with a smile. I actually couldn't imagine leaving my son in the care of a woman like Gwen. Even though DJ and I had been married more than a year, Gwen and I remained polite strangers. I was always respectful of her, of course, but I just couldn't like her. While Daddy had welcomed me into the family with open arms, Gwen remained aloof and chilly. She rarely spoke to me, and never with affection.

"Why doesn't your mom like me?" I had asked DJ once.

He'd looked surprised. "She does. She's just never been much of a hugger. Give her time."

After that I had watched, and I had seen that DJ was right. Gwen moved through her days in a chilly little cocoon. Occasionally DJ and Elaine hugged her, but it was quick and perfunctory, with none of the deep connection I sensed they had with Daddy. How a woman like her had ever caught a man like Daddy in the first place mystified me.

But yesterday afternoon, when Elizabeth had come home, the facade had cracked. For a few seconds, I had sensed a deep well of pain, shame, and love that I had never even suspected in Gwen. She was such a nonentity, it seemed impossible. What had she ever done to

Elizabeth that warranted such a pain-wracked apology? And the hug between them—it had been more than a hug. It had been two outsiders clinging together. And Elizabeth was a witch. Was that what had kept Gwen isolated from the people who loved her best? Did she know, and conceal the fact? Or was she a witch herself? Daddy's generous offer notwithstanding, I knew all the way to my core that Gwen was the second to last person I would ever consider leaving in charge of Davy. The *last* person was Elizabeth.

"She'd be happy to," Daddy said, yanking me back from my thoughts.

"I might crash," I said in my "Little Jenny" voice.

Daddy grinned. "Yep. You girls can't keep your minds on anything."

"Our girls do," Gwen said from the doorway. "They work *hard*. And they do a good job." I had never heard her differ with Daddy before. She had never seemed to care enough about anything to fight with him. It didn't take my counseling degree to know what had brought about this unprecedented bit of argumentativeness: Elizabeth had come home. Suddenly Gwen had an ally in the house.

"But, honey, ours are different," Daddy said. "You can't compare them to *real* women like Jenny here."

"They *are* real women," Gwen said stubbornly. "Our daughters are, too, real women."

"You know what I mean." He sounded testy.

I had to change the subject. "I think I hear Davy," I said, and the subject of my driving one of the trucks was lost in the growing tension. I would not **I would not** *I would not* drive a truck. Everything in me rebelled. It was fine for Elaine and Elizabeth. Daddy was absolutely right; they were tough. They might be genetically female, but they were not real women, not like I am. Being a woman is more than a matter of chromosomes. A gulf of experience lay between them and me. Gwen had gone out of her way to belittle me, or else, for the first time in her life, to pick a fight with her husband.

Perhaps this unpleasant side of her was what had caused the rift that divided her from the rest of her family. All except Elizabeth. I didn't even

think of Sarah. In some ways, Sarah was as lost to the family as Elizabeth had been. *Look who is here helping—and who isn't*, I thought.

I dressed Davy, then showered and dressed myself. After eating a quick slice of toast—I was still fighting the weight I'd gained during my pregnancy—I followed Daddy out to the pickup. On the way to the field, he returned to the subject of truck driving.

I knew better than to confront him openly, of course, so I hedged, asked questions, and all the while focused on what was real. Driving a truck wasn't my job, no matter what anyone might think. My duty lay elsewhere. My role as DJ's wife and spiritual leader of a church, my relationship with DJ himself, and of course Davy—all these came first. Trucks came last. The church might be lost to me this summer, but my marriage remained, and a marriage needed feeding. DJ needed the woman he'd married. Oh, he might claim he saw nothing strange in women driving heavy machinery, but he'd chosen me—*me*—not some hardened half-woman like Elaine or Elizabeth. Obviously he wanted a real lady. He must find their toughness as repulsive as I did, even though I knew he'd never admit it. I would just keep on keep giving DJ the woman he'd married, making sure I looked cool, sweet, and pretty when he got home at night; and getting plenty of rest so I could be a good, patient wife and mother and offer counsel and spiritual guidance to everyone. It was all I could do, even if the others seemed to think I should do more. DJ wouldn't leave me just because his creepy sister had shown up. That thought shocked me. Was I worried that DJ might leave me? What had I seen between him and Elizabeth to cause this fear? By the time Daddy had tired of the field, I had resolved to carve out a little time each day just for DJ and me. Our marriage needed it. *Breakfast*, I decided. *I'll make him breakfast*.

The next morning I got up while he was still asleep, showered, dressed in my peach silk peignoir, and tiptoed downstairs. I had just begun scrambling eggs when Gwen came in, yawning and knotting the belt of her shabby old bathrobe.

"Good," she said, "you've already started. What're you making?"

"Some eggs for DJ," I answered politely.

She looked in the pan. "This isn't enough for everybody."

"I wasn't cooking for everybody."

"Can you scramble a few more for the rest of them?"

"I guess so."

"Oh." She stopped.

I smiled over my shoulder. "How many do we need?"

"DJ, Dan, Elaine, Elizabeth, you?"

"Not me," I said. "I'm just having toast." I cracked the eggs into the bowl and stirred, then tipped them into the frying pan.

Elaine and Elizabeth came in, both yawning. Elizabeth was still zipping up her coveralls. To my secret fury, I remembered that yesterday I had thought she looked elegant in them, faded, frayed, and stained as they were. Not today. She sat down at the table, pulled her hair forward over her shoulder, and started braiding it.

Elaine had opened the cupboard. "We need plates or bowls?" she asked.

"Plates," Gwen said as the toast popped up.

Elaine pulled a stack of plates out of the cupboard and carried them over to the stove. Elizabeth finished her hair, washed her hands, and poured juice.

My pretty peignoir was now spattered with grease. How dare they take something I was doing for DJ and just assume that of course I'd be delighted to do it for all of them? I was not their servant. I turned the heat up under the eggs and stirred them some more. Little black chunks floated to the surface. Smoke rose from the pan. I stirred them again, harder. Egg sloshed out of the pan and onto the stove. More little black chunks appeared. The eggs splashed on the stove smoked and stank. DJ couldn't eat something like this. I gave the eggs one more quick stir, then gave up, carried them to the table and tipped them out onto two plates.

"Eggs're ready," I chirped.

Elaine and Elizabeth sat down and looked at their plates doubtfully.

"Something wrong?" I asked in my sweetest voice.

Elizabeth took a bite, chewed, swallowed hastily, and gulped juice. "No, it's fine. Thanks," she said.

Gwen brought the toast to the table, looked at the eggs, looked away.

Elaine took a bite of her eggs. "I'll just have toast," she said. "Bethie, we need to go service the trucks."

"You're right. I'll just have some toast, too. I can eat it on the way." She sounded grateful. The two of them stood, gulped their juice, stared rudely down at their eggs again, grabbed a piece of toast in each hand, and left. Gwen silently carried the plates to the garbage, scraped them off, and rinsed them. I heard her walk into the living room and say something to Daddy.

Now that I had the kitchen to myself again, I hastily scrambled more eggs, grated some cheese and onion, chopped a few olives, found a clean frying pan, oiled it, and poured the eggs into it. I also found some boiled potatoes in the refrigerator, chopped them, too, added some salt and onions, and started them browning in a separate frying pan.

Gwen came back into the kitchen, saw what I was cooking and said, "Elaine and Bethie could've used some of that." It almost sounded like criticism.

"You think so?" I asked pleasantly. "They didn't even eat their eggs."

Gwen stared at me. "They work all day, too."

I thought of the scorched, blackened mess I had served them and a tiny part of me wanted to squirm. "I'm not a very good cook," I said. "I was trying to hurry so they could get to work."

Gwen looked at the omelet simmering gently in the pan, the perfectly browned potatoes, the grated cheese, onions, and olives. "Oh, I think you're a pretty good cook when you want to be," she said. She turned toward the stairs. "I better get dressed. Dan goes to the doctor this morning."

I wondered how she could make a compliment sound so much like criticism. So I wanted to make DJ's breakfast a little special. Was that a crime? I dropped some bread into the toaster.

I was just sliding the omelet onto a plate when DJ wandered in, his shirt-tail hanging, his feet bare, his hair standing on end. "Where are Bethie and Elaine?" he asked.

"They already ate and left," I said. "Something about the trucks."

"I better go, too. We need to get an early start."

"Comb your hair and eat first," I said in a firm voice. Even though the husband is the head of the house, a wife has a right and a responsibility to guide and direct him when it's in his best interest.

He peered at the plate. "That looks good. I can take it with me."

"Please." I hated to beg. "Please just sit down and eat, like we do at home. We haven't had any quiet time together all summer. I wanted this morning to be special."

He gave me a hug. "All right. Thank you. I'm sorry I haven't been here for you. This isn't easy on any of us."

"I know." I shook my head and sighed.

The toast popped up. I buttered it and carried it to the table. "Davy still asleep?"

"Yes," DJ said.

I poured us both orange juice, poured DJ a glass of milk as well, then sat down at the table, took a piece of toast, and nibbled at it. It felt good, just the two of us, almost like those lost, perfect mornings at home. "This is nice," I said, giving him my best smile. "Just us."

"Yeah," said DJ. "It's nice." He took a look at his watch, piled some eggs onto his toast, and pushed it into his mouth. He looked at his watch again. Outside the sun was coming over the horizon. It wasn't like those mornings at home at all. But maybe I could still salvage something.

"Has Elizabeth ever had a boyfriend?" I asked.

DJ's eyebrows shot up. "A long time ago, sort of."

"I meant recently."

"I don't know."

"Does she even *like* men?"

"What are you asking, Jennifer?" he asked, his voice sounded chilly in a way it never was at home.

This was the tricky part. I lowered my head, took a dainty sip of my orange juice. "She's a Satanist." I was careful to give the terrible word just the tiniest extra emphasis. "But is she a lesbian, too?" I let this slip out casually, completely nonjudgmentally.

"You're crazy," my husband said. "Bethie's not a Satanist. I don't know where you ever got such a ridiculous idea."

I let it go for now. "Maybe I was mistaken," I said. "But is she a lesbian?"

"I don't know, and I don't care."

"You don't *care*?" My voice rose. "I can't believe you said that. We're told it's a sin. Homosexuals go to hell. You're a *minister*. You *know* that."

"The *church* says it's a sin," he corrected. "I'm not sure the Bible does, and I'm even less sure God does."

"How can you say that?"

"Say what?" He finished his milk and swiped his arm across his mouth.

I winced. He never did such a loutish thing at home. "Here." I handed him a napkin.

"Thanks." He wiped his mouth again, then pushed his chair back and carried his plate to the sink.

I tried again. "She's so tough."

"Who is?"

"Elizabeth. She's so hard. Mannish."

"Bethie?" He laughed. "She's the least mannish person I know. Other than you, honey," he added hastily when he saw my face.

"How can you even compare us?" I asked. "We're *nothing* alike."

All he did was turn the water on and rub at the plate with his hand.

I raised my voice so he could hear me over the running water. "She wears those coveralls. She drives big machines." I couldn't think how else to say that Elizabeth did men's work from choice without sounding like I was going all Donna Reed and June Cleaver.

"So? She's good at it." He turned the water off and set the plate in the drainer, then wiped his hands on his pants, another thing he never did at home.

"She—she's just so—so strong," I said.

"She's had to be. The best women are. Maybe you're right. Maybe you two *are* nothing alike." He walked out the door without kissing me goodbye.

That last snide comment hung like a poisonous judgment between us. He never would have left things like that at home. We would have talked it out, prayed, kissed, maybe made love—we were both on salary, so time wasn't an issue—and everything would have been perfect again.

The door slammed behind him. He just couldn't see. Elizabeth had been causing trouble from the minute she walked in the door. She arrived, and suddenly we were all at each others' throats. She destroyed every life she touched. I thought of the first words she and Gwen had exchanged: she had come home for one reason: to help her father die. What kind of a daughter could do such a thing? And to a man like Daddy?

I thought about it all morning while Gwen and Daddy were at the doctor. I was still thinking about it when they got home and Daddy asked me to drive him to the field.

"Sure, Daddy," I cheerfully agreed.. "Just let me get Davy. He'll enjoy the sunshine."

A few minutes later, as we were driving along, Daddy started in again on how I should learn to drive a truck. I realized that *that* had only started after Elizabeth came home, too. Elizabeth had walked in the door and pushed something, and the pieces of my life had started falling over like dominoes. She had to be stopped.

CHAPTER 42

Jennifer

I stopped the battered Chevrolet pickup by the rutted road, letting it idle so the air conditioner would run. Davy's infant seat stood tall and square between Daddy and me. Daddy was still going on about truck driving. I waited until he stopped for breath, then said as fast as I could, "I think I'll take Davy for a walk." Cool and crisp in my shorts, white boat shoes, and white blouse, I slid out of the driver's side door, leaned back in and lifted Davy out of his car seat, set him on my hip, and started off along the road. The sky arched over the green field, and the sprinklers cast a soft, glittering haze on the other side. I even heard a bird singing.

I would have liked growing up on a farm if every morning was like this one, I thought. DJ and his sisters were so lucky. I thought of my own culturally and emotionally impoverished childhood in that dingy little suburban house with its tiny square of lawn. I remembered the long, boring summers I spent on my stomach in front of the television, watching cartoons. I remembered going roller skating, going to the pool. Given my background, I am amazed and proud that I have come as far as I have. I can't tell you how much it hurt, knowing that Daddy, who I had thought loved me, wanted to destroy it all now.

The passenger door squeaked open. Daddy's thick fingers gripped the frame for a moment, then he levered his wasted, bloated body out of the

truck. He stood there, swaying slightly and squinting across the field to where the machine DJ had told me was called a chopper and another truck moved under a light green mist. Engines whined through the morning air as they drove across the field, accelerating, reversing, swinging around the ends of the rows, turning into the next cut.

I turned around and looked back at Daddy. "When I come out to the field, I just want to sing 'Bringing in the Sheaves,'" I called to him. I knew he'd like that. I started humming the hymn and bouncing Davy on my hip in time to the rhythm as I walked back to the pickup truck. He crowed and waved his arms. The pain of the morning receded a little bit.

Before we reached him, Daddy leaned back into the cab, pulled up a thin, transparent hose, dropped it, recovered it, fumbled it around his head, and shoved the nosepiece into his nostrils. "You know," he finally gasped, "I just don't know what we would've done this summer if you kids hadn't come home. We would've lost the ranch, that's for sure. Next year, you and DJ'll have it."

My grip on Davy tightened. He squawked. The two machines were finished with the bottom land now. They turned and started on the short, steep hillside. The truck pulled ahead, sputtered, died, and rolled back to the bottom of the hill. The engine cranked, then groaned. Elizabeth, nearly lost in her coveralls, jumped out, ran around to the front of the truck, and slid under it. The engine roared. She slid out again, ran back, tossed something into the cab, hitched up her coveralls with both hands, and swung up into the driver's seat, flipping her braid over one shoulder. I suspected she was doing all that to remind everyone that she was thin. Which I wasn't, thanks to Davy.

"Elizabeth's driving that truck?" I asked Daddy.

"Yeah."

I looked around. "Where's Elaine?"

"Some kind of a dust-up in California. She had to do a little work."

"What happened?"

"Oh, people're saying Pastor Rayburn's been running around with some woman, but I don't believe it. The Devil's working hard in these last days."

“Is Sarah coming home soon?”

“Pastor Rayburn says he’ll send her as soon as he can.” The truck rumbled forward again, its sideboards rattling in the clear morning air.

The chopper roared. Its spindly metal fingers flashed in the sun, whipping the green foliage over the sickle bar, under the roller, and into the spinning, razor-sharp knives. As the truck drew even with the chopper, it surged forward. Together, they climbed up the hill, turned at the top, and came down again, leaving neatly mown field behind them. Daddy’s brow furrowed and his fingers started tapping nervously on the pickup’s roof. “Time’s a-wastin’,” he muttered. He watched DJ and Elizabeth make another trip across the field, then snapped, “Let’s go.”

“Let’s take Grandpa bye-bye,” I cooed to Davy as I buckled him back in his seat.

Davy laughed and grabbed at a bug bobbing around his head. I shuddered and waved it away. Daddy eased himself into the pickup as I slid back into the driver’s seat. We lurched down the road, bumped across the flat, and shuddered to a stop at the foot of the hill.

When I came to a stop again, Daddy struggled out.

“Need help?” I asked.

“Nah. I’m just gonna tell ’em t’ cut the other way.”

“Okay.” I pulled the keys out of the ignition and jingled them for Davy. He grabbed them and stuck them into his mouth. “Ooh, no, baby. Icky, icky!” I gently separated the keys from sticky fingers. Davy reached for them again, and howled when they weren’t forthcoming. I lifted him out of his car seat, set him on my hip again, and said, “Let’s go help Grandpa.”

The truck and chopper finished the row, then turned to meet us. The big reel on the front of the chopper swept up off the ground. DJ had showed it to me one day, back when we first arrived. He had pointed out the little metal sticks—he called them “fingers”—that pushed whatever was being mowed in under a huge turning metal pipe, and onto a row of jagged, serrated triangular teeth, and said something about everything going from there to inside and getting chopped up really small, and then spit out of a high spout. The machine made me think of the Egyptians and their

plague of locusts, gobbling up whatever it could catch in its greedy, whirling fingers. DJ had told me that sometimes the chopper swept up ducks, rabbits, fawns, and once, he said, when he was cutting some really high stuff, he actually caught a sheep. Everything the machine caught died. It was horrible. I made him stop before he could tell me anything else. Why would I need to know stuff like that, anyhow? The truck and the chopper had stopped, and Elizabeth and DJ jumped down to the shorn hay.

“Hey,” DJ said, his voice rumbling under the engines’ roar. He smiled at me.

He pulled his shirt over his head and threw it into the cab, then reached under the high seat for the burlap-wrapped water jug. He drank deeply, then sighed and swiped his arm across his mouth. “Want some?” he asked, holding the jug out to me.

I shook my head and stepped back, grimacing. The cut hay, which looked so smooth and soft from a distance, poked sharp ends into my ankles, and jabbed the bottoms of my feet through my shoes. I shifted my feet to the bare dirt between the plants.

“You?” he asked, raising the jug to Elizabeth.

“Yeah,” she said. She took the jug, rubbed her hand across its mouth, raised it to her lips and drank where DJ’s mouth had been just seconds ago. A sudden, sickening realization hit me, and I stood there, struggling not to vomit. I had to be wrong, and even if I wasn’t, this was neither the time nor the place to discuss it. No matter what had happened, it hadn’t been at his instigation. As the older child, it was Elizabeth who was the predator. Addressing the matter with DJ would take all of the professional skill, wisdom, and courage I had. Meanwhile, I had to keep up appearances at all costs and act like he expected me to act, like I always had in the past. I had to be the woman he fell in love with and married. I stood and watched, bile burning my throat, not trusting myself to speak, fighting for my family in the only way I knew.

Elizabeth lowered the jug, wiped its mouth again, and handed it back to DJ. He bent over and poured some of the water over his head, then straightened up and shook himself like a dog. Droplets flew around

him. I squealed and ducked, and that, right there, was another gift from God. Even as I was processing the terrible fact that DJ's sister had quite likely molested him, I was still able to present a cheerful, happy face to the world. No one suspected a thing. Davy jumped, then laughed. DJ smiled at him and stuck a finger into his belly. Davy laughed again. I searched for some trace of my civilized minister husband in this greasy man with the big white smile, but I didn't find it. I felt lost without him.

He's gone, I thought. But he'll come back when we get home again. When I get him away from Elizabeth. It's only for a little while.

"—roll your pants up Liz, or tuck 'em into your boots or something. And do something about your hair," Daddy was saying. "You'll be getting caught on something."

"I did. They keep coming undone," she said. She stooped and rolled her pants up again, and her sleeves, too, for good measure. Her forearms were slender and tightly muscled. She grabbed her braid and dropped it down inside the back of her coveralls. I could see the grease streaks on her hands, her callused fingers and their torn nails. A jagged scratch snaked across her knuckles. But to my fury, all this only seemed to make her more beautiful.

How can she stand to get so dirty? I wondered. *DJ's sisters might be strong, and they might be tough, but they certainly aren't ladies.* I looked down at my white shorts and my good tan, and my heart eased a little. No way was DJ attracted to Elizabeth when he had me! I just had to get him away before she tricked him into something that would destroy his life. Meanwhile, I would do everything I could to lose the rest of the baby weight and keep myself up like I did at home.

Looking nice was important. After all, that's what men saw. "Man looketh on the outward appearance," the Bible said. It was really true. I stood smiling, knowing that my outward appearance was worth looking at, my long, tanned legs, my hair curling softly around my face, my understated makeup. Nothing to offend DJ's parents, nothing out of keeping for a minister's wife, just a little mascara, a little blush, a little clear lip gloss, a little transparent nail polish. I liked hot pink myself, but DJ's parents were

strict Narrow Way—even stricter than my own parents had been. Besides, there was my position as the spiritual leader of our church and now DJ's family to consider. I couldn't wear the colors I liked best this summer, not even at home when no one was expected. But never mind. DJ was smiling at me, and looking tall and tanned and strong, and in spite of the dirt I found myself responding to him all over again. He really was almost perfect, as long as he wasn't with his family. This was temporary. It had to be.

"Davy and Jenny come to say 'hi,'" I murmured, turning my back on Daddy and Elizabeth to create a little privacy.

"Hi, Davy," DJ said. "How ya doin', big guy?" He leaned in to kiss me.

I wrinkled my nose and ducked away. "Daddy just a big icky stinky man, isn't he?" I crooned to Davy.

"Well, I wouldn't go that far," DJ grinned. He reached for Davy. The baby crowed and held out his arms.

"You'll get him dirty," I objected, pulling back.

"Aw, little grease never hurt anybody," Daddy said. "Give him the baby. Us men gotta stick together."

Anger swept through me. We had always had a good relationship, but the fact was that lately he was starting to get on my nerves, offering opinions and making plans about things that didn't concern him.

"It'll be fine," DJ said. "He's only wearing a diaper, and you can bathe him when you get back to the house." He smiled down at me, and I saw an apology for the pain of the morning in his eyes. His hands closed around Davy's stocky middle and tossed him gently in the air as Davy laughed. DJ gathered him close. One hand cradled Davy's sturdy back, and the baby's diapered bottom rested securely on his father's arm. I could see a deep gouge, its center angry red, its edges black with clotted blood, running across DJ's fingers just under where the clean, white diaper met his tanned skin.

"Gad, DJ, what did you do to yourself?" Elizabeth asked. She had finished rolling up her pants and sleeves and walked over to us while DJ and I had been absorbed in our son. My anger grew. Could we never have a moment alone?

"Changed a sickle section," DJ told her.

"Ah." She loped to her cab and returned with a pair of stiff leather gloves.

DJ turned to his father. "How you doing, Dad?"

"Oh. I'll make it. You kids better cut the other way."

"It's pretty steep," DJ said doubtfully. "I'll roll the chopper."

"Every time we get off flat fields, you kids start singin' the blues," Daddy retorted. "I'll do it myself. Liz, get my oxygen tank."

I was a little surprised. I had never seen this impatient, critical side of him before. But then, again, he was sick, and the issues with Elizabeth certainly weren't helping.

"I don't think it's safe," DJ said.

"I know what I'm doing," Daddy snapped. "I just wish I could do it myself." His words were angry, but I heard his voice trembling.

"I know." DJ touched his father's wasted forearm, leaving a black smear on the loose, papery skin. "Come on, Bethie," he said.

They turned together and walked back to the idling truck and chopper. Elizabeth was still carrying the heavy gloves.

"Here," she said, "take 'em."

DJ pushed them away. "Nah."

"Yes," she insisted, pushing the gloves back at him.

I stepped forward. "If he doesn't want them, you need to respect that, Elizabeth," I said firmly but gently. "I think DJ knows what he needs."

DJ gave me an unreadable look, then looked back at his sister. "It's just a scratch, Bethie. You know I hate those things."

"I know. Take 'em with you, anyway. You'll have 'em if you need 'em." She threw them up into the chopper cab, and they fell under the seat.

I might as well have not spoken.

Elizabeth squinted at the hillside. "It's too steep," she said.

"Dad wants us to try."

"Yeah," she said.

"He's sick—cut him some slack."

"I am," she said quietly, "and he's using it."

"I know."

They exchanged funny-looking smiles, and once more fear and anger choked me. I stood in that hot, dirty field, holding my baby son, watching my sister-in-law lure my husband away from me under the guise of going back to work. They walked the same way, with long, countrymen's strides. Once, as Elizabeth stopped to grab her coveralls at the waist and yank them up with another vigorous wriggle, DJ grinned at her and she cocked her head and grinned back. DJ had slipped away into a world where I didn't even exist. It just broke my heart. But enough was enough. If being with DJ in the fields was what it took to save him from the Devil's snares, that's where I'd be.

"Can Davy and Jenny have a little ride?" I called after them.

"Sure thing," DJ called back over his shoulder as he climbed into the high, glass cab.

I picked my way across the field to the chopper, handed Davy up to DJ, then climbed the ladder myself. My sporty white deck shoes were gray with dust by now, and a spot of grease marred one toe. DJ pulled the door shut behind me.

"Why does she wear those sloppy clothes?" I asked.

"Who? Bethie? She's working in the field—what else should she wear? Here, Davy, wanna drive?" DJ set Davy on his lap. I stood behind him just inside the cab's half door. DJ leaned down, pointed to something, took Davy's hand and pressed something else, pretended to turn the key, then pushed a lever forward. The engine's rumble grew to a roar. I got a firm grip on the back of the seat, leaned forward, and watched carefully as, step by step, DJ took Davy through the process of engaging the huge rollers and knives just a few feet below us. It was actually very simple—just a few well-marked levers, pushed into set positions. It certainly wasn't as complex as the issues I dealt with daily in my work as a counselor. The engine roared, the giant rollers and knives below us rattled and groaned. When Davy looked up at his daddy, his bottom lip trembling, DJ drew him close and said something to him. Davy relaxed and smiled. Neither of them even looked at me.

The machine jerked forward. I grabbed for the first thing I could get my hands on and looked up. Elizabeth was staring in at us. I stared back

and ran my hand down DJ's back. Then, still staring at Elizabeth, I leaned down, and said, "I love you," into DJ's ear.

He didn't answer. I told myself he hadn't heard. The header whirled, metal fingers flashed, the sickles chattered, the huge pipe in the middle of the header rolled, the knives ground. We pivoted parallel to the hillside. The header flashed, then tore into the greenery with a whisper like ripping silk. Fine green chopped hay came streaming out of the tall spout and into the half-full truck bed. Truck and chopper labored across the hilltop, swept around the end of the cut, then started around the side hill, leaning sideways as the hill got steeper. Suddenly we started slipping downhill. DJ angled up slightly, struggling to keep the header full-width in the hay. I felt us slipping sideways, clawing at the dusty hillside for purchase.

"Should it be doing that?" I shouted over the roar of the machine.

"As long as we're sliding, we're fine," DJ shouted back. "You might lean uphill, though."

"Why?"

"Your weight will help counterbalance us if we start to go over."

"That's not very nice."

"I didn't mean it that way," he shouted back. "I just meant—"

"I know what you meant." I thought of tiny, delicate Angela and thin, muscular Elizabeth, and my stomach twisted. The chopper slid some more, then its wheels bounced. I grabbed again for the iron pipe around the big glass windows and threw my weight on the uphill side of the cab. The truck and chopper finished the row.

"This is too scary. Let me out," I demanded when the header came to the end of the field. DJ turned the engine down. The header stopped. I climbed down.

"Better take Davy, too," DJ said, handing the baby down to me. I carried him back to where Daddy was waiting by the pick-up.

"Let's go," he shouted, waving at DJ. DJ turned.

It's funny what the Lord uses. He used my fear and anger to sharpen my powers of observation in the chopper. When DJ throttled up, popped the header into gear, and eased the chopper ahead again I found myself going

through the steps in my brain without even thinking about it. Elizabeth's truck jerked alongside. I turned and trudged back across the field, Davy in my arms.

"See, I told 'em it was all right," Daddy said when I reached the pickup. "You gotta work those engines—make 'em howl." He sounded smug, but his voice was still trembling. The truck and chopper had started back along the hillside. Settling Davy on my hip again, I turned to watch.

"She's going to hit him," I said. Dad squinted, shading his eyes with a trembling hand.

"She knows better'n that." He waved his arm again, motioning Elizabeth to move away from the chopper. She glanced over, then looked away. I could see that her jaw was tense. The truck edged even closer to the header. The fingers whirled scant inches from the truck fender. Teeth flashed. Knives howled. I held my breath.

And then, slowly, slowly, the chopper leaned toward the truck. Power cut abruptly. I could see DJ inside the tall glass cab, slamming the header out of gear, thrusting open the window, gripping the frame, throwing his weight as far toward the uphill side as he could. And still it was leaning ... tipping. I felt a scream building inside me and sucked in my breath. The tall spout of the chopper slammed into the high sideboards of the nearly full truck. The truck shuddered, tipped, skidded, then settled back on its wheels with a loud groan.

"Let's go."

"Let me get Da—" I started to say.

"Just hold him and drive."

"But—"

"Get moving! Davy'll be fine!"

I drove, holding Davy on my lap, which was not at all safe, shielding his head with my hand, as we bumped across the field. DJ and Elizabeth stood together staring at the chopper. It leaned drunkenly against the truck, which was sagging on its springs from the combined weight of its load and the chopper. Elizabeth was holding her coveralls in both fists, obviously seizing the opportunity to emphasize again how much thinner than me she

was. She was staring up at the chopper's spout, which was crumpled against the truck's high sideboards. One of the boards hung loose, its end jagged and raw, the newly exposed wood oddly shocking. DJ's face was a peculiar gray under his tan.

As I turned off the engine I heard Elizabeth saying, "This always scares me spitless." Her voice shook, and I wanted to slap her. What right had she to be frightened? She was never in any danger. It was DJ, Davy, and me who had been at risk.

"Me, too," DJ muttered. "Good thing you were watching my back."

"Long as you learned something from this, it wasn't a wasted experience," Daddy said. He was panting. "Liz, do something about your pants. You kids hafta be more careful. You get in a big rush and take stupid chances. You're gonna wind up getting yourselves killed. Somebody get the come-along." Elizabeth turned her back on him and rolled her eyes at DJ.

"That's not very Christian," I said, goaded beyond silence.

"You don't understand, honey. I'll explain later," DJ told me.

He and Elizabeth grinned at each other again. I frowned, but he didn't notice, because he was climbing into the bed of the pickup. He grabbed the hand pulley from the greasy tangle of tools and cable that filled the space and jumped out again, then threw the heavy hook around the upper part of the frame while Elizabeth looped the other end of the cable around the pickup's trailer hitch. Then she trotted around to the cab.

"Everybody clear?" she called.

"We're clear. Let's go," Daddy called back impatiently.

"Ready, DJ?"

"Hit it," he shouted.

Elizabeth eased the pickup ahead, slowly pulling the chopper upright, and DJ turned the wheels until the header pointed straight downhill. When the machine was balanced, he sliced his fingers across his throat. Elizabeth reversed until the cable hung loose, then turned off the pickup, ran back, disconnected the cable, and threw it into the pickup bed.

And me? I stood and watched DJ slip ever farther away from me into the life he'd had before he was mine. In spite of our remarkable relation-

ship, this place and his family made me feel like an outsider—temporary, peripheral, unnecessary. I had never felt that way before.

Daddy walked over to DJ. “Better go up and down now,” he said.

DJ nodded seriously. “Spout’s bent,” he said.

“Just beat it out enough so it doesn’t foul the stream. We’ll fix it later.”

Elizabeth flipped open the toolbox that formed one side of the pickup bed, found a ball peen hammer and a small piece of sheet iron, and handed them both up to DJ, who had climbed onto the chopper’s engine cover. He manhandled the spout around until he could reach the crumpled section. I admired the muscles in my husband’s arms as they knotted and slithered under his heavy tan. Elizabeth stuck another hammer and a coil of baling twine into her coverall pocket, scrambled up the ladder and into the truck bed, grabbed the broken board, beat it back into place, then wrapped the twine firmly around both ends and tied it tightly to the remaining boards. I watched her work, and the Lord showed me that if I wanted to heal my relationship with DJ, I would have to understand him and his past. It just goes to prove that God can use anything, anyone, any circumstance, to save His people.

I had no intention of becoming like Elaine and Elizabeth—after all, both of them had failed at relationships—but finally I saw that I needed to understand them. I watched, and because I was watching something struck me odd that probably wouldn’t have occurred to me before. I turned to Daddy.

“Why is she tying the truck together?” I asked him. “Isn’t that sort of sloppy?” I wasn’t trying to get her into trouble, really I wasn’t. I’m just so used to fostering excellence in myself and those around me that it never occurred to me to keep quiet about substandard workmanship.

“Nails work loose and drop into the feed,” Daddy replied. “We’ll replace the board and bolt it together later.”

“I feel stupid,” I said. “That’s so obvious.” And I laughed. But my face was burning. Even Daddy was taking Elizabeth’s side now, and she had admitted that she had only come home to watch him die.

“You’ll learn if you pay attention,” he said, and he patted my shoulder awkwardly. I hoped his greasy hand hadn’t left a stain on my white blouse.

"Next year," he added in an offhand voice, "you'll need to know these things so you can help DJ."

My stomach twisted. *This is temporary*, I reminded myself. *This is temporary*.

Elizabeth climbed out of the truck and dropped to the ground. Holding the spout with one hand, DJ banged on it with the hammer, hissing between his teeth once when the hammer caught the back of his torn hand. He repeated the process on the other side, shook the spout experimentally, and jumped down. I couldn't see where he'd nailed anything in, but by then I was too troubled to ask.

"Another proud graduate of the 'Beat It to Fit and Paint It to Match Institute of Mechanical Arts,'" said Elizabeth. DJ grinned and tossed her the hammer and metal, and she turned and flipped them into the toolbox, then grinned back at him. I gritted my teeth.

"Ready?" DJ asked.

"Let's hit it." Elizabeth climbed back up into her truck. Gears ground, then engaged with a snap. The truck bounced into position beside the chopper, a respectable three feet now separating the header from the truck's fender. Daddy tottered back over to the pickup where I was standing, bracing himself on the chopper frame, lurching slightly to reach the fender, then working his way to the door. He eased himself carefully onto the passenger seat.

Just a week ago, I thought, he could walk in the fields.

I strapped Davy into his seat, then sat behind the steering wheel again.

Daddy pulled his door shut and said, "Let's go home." He reached down, sucked hungrily at the oxygen hose, then leaned back and closed his eyes.

"You okay?" I asked him.

"I'm fine."

I started the truck. "That was close," I said, partly to make conversation. "Davy and I could've been in there."

"Farming's dangerous work. That's why we always have to be ready to meet the Lord." He gulped in more oxygen. "I just wish Liz'd come back to the fold. I can't tell you how happy we were when DJ married you instead of that Chink girl. We did a lot of praying about *that*, I tell you.

You being a teacher and all, you'll be able to teach Davy yourself when he starts school."

"But I don't teach," I said carefully. "I'm a counselor."

"Ahh." He waved his hand impatiently. "You can get your credential easy enough. You'll need it anyhow now you kids are home. Not much call for counselors in this neck of the woods. People here're too busy making a living to worry about all that mental health nonsense. Yep, the Lord's really blessed. I've already put in a good word for you."

I said nothing, though inside I was screaming, *This is temporary.*

After a minute Daddy went on. "Yep, that's another blessing—you can switch jobs pretty easy. And a course you'll have your summers free. You'll be able to help DJ with the ranch. Learn to drive a truck, and you'll rake in the money."

DJ's a minister, I silently snarled. I married a minister. Not a dirt farmer. But my father-in-law was dying. I found myself hoping he would do it before DJ's family trapped us both and changed my husband into someone else completely. The thought shocked me, though I don't know why it should have.

Davy was waving his little hands, catching the light.

And Daddy was still talking. "We're so proud to have our kids serving in the Lord's vineyard—DJ, Elaine, Sarah, and you. You're like a daughter to us—better than our own have been. They've sure caused a lot of tears and heartache." He stared at the truck Elizabeth was driving. The sun caught her profile as she leaned forward and reached for something. "Let's go," Daddy said again.

I drove slowly out of the field, easing over the bumps and ruts. Silence filled the pickup as we drove back to the farmhouse. The sun was hot, but the breeze still carried a hint of the night's chill. Davy giggled, then fell instantly asleep, the breeze ruffling his hair.

We pulled up to the back door, and I helped Daddy out of the pickup and up the sagging back steps. Elaine's Navigator pulled up as I was lifting Davy out of his car seat. She waited while the dust settled, then switched off the engine and slid out, slender and elegant even in jeans and scuffed,

dusty boots. It seemed unfair. Both she and Elizabeth could dress in rags and still make me feel clumsy and ugly by comparison.

"You're just now getting back from the field?" she asked, lifting a sack of groceries from the car seat. Her wavy blonde hair—frosted now—clung to her scalp in a neat cap. In spite of our difficult past, I was happy to see her. She was a link to Happy Valley. We spoke the same language.

"Mm hm," I said. "Weren't you doing a press release?"

"Yes, but Momma needed groceries."

"You should've waited. I would've gone with you."

Elaine shrugged. "I'm already back. How long since Daddy had a pain pill?"

"About four hours."

"I'll get him one."

The house felt cool but stuffy, its windows and faded, dusty curtains closed tight against the scalding sun. As I went in, I could hear Daddy vomiting in the bathroom off the kitchen. Thank goodness Elaine was here; she would take care of it. It really wasn't my place. I wasn't a daughter in *that* sense. I carried Davy upstairs and put him down for his nap.

When I came back downstairs, Elaine was standing in the kitchen, staring out the window over the sink. "Is Daddy asleep?" I asked.

"Getting there."

"So's Davy. Being a mom really is a full-time job. Now I understand why you had trouble managing the church, a career, and a family." I laughed and opened the round old refrigerator with its long silver handle, pulled out a can of Sprite, took a clean glass out of the cupboard, filled it with ice, and poured the Sprite in. I leaned against the counter and took a long swallow.

"So what happened today?" asked Elaine.

The events of the day rushed back. "The chopper almost tipped over."

"The truck caught it though," she said matter-of-factly.

"Yes. It must've been the Lord's hand. Elizabeth was driving *way* too close right then, so the chopper hit the truck instead of going all the way over."

"Mm hm." She was looking out the window.

"Does that happen a lot?"

"Sometimes."

"Why?"

"Daddy likes clean fields."

"Why don't you say no?"

Elaine turned away from the window and gave me a blank look.

"I mean, if it's that dangerous, why don't you just refuse? I'm sure he wouldn't knowingly put you in danger." I took another sip of soda.

Elaine shook her head. "It's not really that bad."

"It looked dangerous to me."

"You couldn't possibly understand." Elaine ran herself a glass of water and drank it, then washed the glass, dried it, and put it back into the cupboard.

"What couldn't I understand?" My voice rose a tiny bit.

"What it's like."

I took another sip of my Sprite. "He's always been great with me."

Elaine just stared past me like she didn't even hear what I had said.

I tried again. "Your dad's been talking about leaving DJ and me the business."

"Yeah."

"Does that bother the rest of you guys?"

"No," she said. "I'd better get back to work."

"Do you have a lot to do?"

"A couple press releases and an interview."

"Would you like me to check them over for you? Maybe offer a few suggestions?"

"No. I'll do them, then go spell Bethie."

"Why?"

"Days get long in the field."

"Oh." An awkward silence fell between us. "Well ... I've got to take care of Davy." To my fury, I heard a defensive little note in my voice.

"We all know that."

Her tone of voice hurt me. "That almost sounded like a criticism," I said. "I can't help it that—" I stopped.

"That I don't have my boys?"

“Well...”

Elaine turned and started rinsing out the sink.

“It’s lucky in a way that the church put you on contract,” I finally said, helping her see the blessing. “You can work from anywhere. Maybe God knew this was coming and saw to it that you didn’t have any real obligations. It was a lot harder for us—finding somebody to step in for us and everything. And we were just getting the church on track after—” I stopped again.

“Yeah,” Elaine said. She bent and pulled some cleanser out from under the sink, and really started scrubbing.

Our shared knowledge of what Elaine’s personal failure had cost the church hung heavy in the air, but something stopped me from saying the words that cried out to be said. Who knows what tips the balance of our lives? If I had had the courage to confront her with the truth on that day, would Daddy have needed to die the way he did? I will never know, now, because no amount of wondering can change what happened. I failed, as a counselor and a minister’s wife. I saw evil, and rather than confronting it, I changed the subject.

“What should we make for dinner?”

“I don’t care.”

“Where’s Gwen? I mean, Momma?”

“Downtown seeing the lawyer.”

“Then I’ll just run up and take a little nap. It’s been a long day.”

Elaine rinsed the rag, put the cleanser away, and disappeared into the study, though she left the door open. As I crossed the hall to go back upstairs I looked in and saw her. She was sitting in her daddy’s cracked leather chair, her laptop open on the desk where he had written out his invoices by hand. She was typing. Her fingers were shaking. And then, as I watched, her hands settled down in her lap. She stared at them, lifted them as if to type again, then rested her arms on the desk and dropped her head onto them for just a second. Then she sat back up, squared her shoulders, and went back to typing. Her fingers were still shaking.

No matter what else you say about her, I reflected as I went upstairs to take my nap, you have to admit that Elaine is as strong as an ox. As long as she has her work to do she'll be just fine. I don't think there's a sensitive bone in that woman's body.

CHAPTER 43

Elizabeth

All day long, as we danced our familiar dance and watched each others' backs in the way that had become instinctive in the constant danger of our lives, I reveled in being home. But the day ended, as all days always did, and I found myself where I had been times beyond counting—leaving my field home to spend the night in the presence of my enemy.

But now I had a voice, and my enemy was weak. I should have felt safe, but I didn't. I washed dishes while Elaine showered. She finished before I did. I was still rinsing out the sink when DJ came inside and went upstairs. The shower started again. I resigned myself to another wait and heated a pot of water for tea. Elaine came into the kitchen barefooted, combing her wet hair back into a sleek cap. I poured us each a cup and we sipped in companionable exhaustion. She had started and ended the day in the field with us, but she had taken off in the afternoon to do something mysterious and urgent for one of her clients.

"How was Daddy today?" I asked her.

"About the same. He threw up after Jennifer got him home. So what happened at the field?"

"He got mad because DJ said the hill was too steep to chop around. 'Course we did it his way—and almost rolled the chopper. Then he said we needed to be more careful." I stood up and carried my mug to the stove,

refilled it from the teapot, and raised the teapot questioningly at Elaine. She nodded and I carried it back to the table.

"It's hard for him not to be in control," she said after a minute.

"Mmm."

Silence.

Then, "Elizabeth?"

"What?"

"What happened?"

I didn't look at her. "When?"

"The night after my wedding. Why did you run away? And when did you start talking?"

"You sure you want to do this now?"

"Yes."

"I lost a baby."

"You were *pregnant*?"

My heart sank.

"Who was the father?"

I felt the old trembling start in my fingers. "Daddy."

"How can you even joke like that?"

"I'm not joking."

"Then I hope you're crazy, like Daddy said, not just trying to get attention."

"Elaine," I asked in a perfectly reasonable voice, "why would I do that?"

"Because you always did. I used to try to help ... until Daddy finally explained. He said if I'd just leave you alone you'd stop ... and I did ... and you stopped ... but you didn't talk at all anymore." She broke off, staring at me. "Have you been talking to Joe?" she asked suddenly.

I felt like I had been hit by a blizzard. I didn't know which part of what she'd said to question first. "No—why should I talk to Joe?" Then, "Daddy told you I was crazy?"

"Actually, what he said was that you and Momma both had a weak grip on reality."

"And you believed it," I said, staring into my mug.

"Why wouldn't I? Come on, Bethie, look at it from my point of view."

I clenched my jaw so hard my teeth ached.

After a moment Elaine looked up. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean that."

"Yes, you did. How could you possibly understand? I know you tried to help, but you were always so beautiful, so good, so strong. You were perfect. You had no idea what it felt like to be me—I suppose you still don't. It's easier to just take Daddy's word for things."

"He's never lied to me."

"Did I? Did I ever lie to you? To anybody?" I was angry now, and I didn't care if she knew it.

"No. You never said anything."

We stared at each other, holding our mugs of tea so tight our knuckles were white, the tea forgotten. "Then ... it's ... it's true?" Elaine finally asked.

"Yes. It's true. Whether you believe it or not."

She shook her head. "Then how ... how could you come home?"

"Because they need me."

"Daddy does?"

"Both of them do."

"Momma's fine. She knows how to take care of herself. "

"Momma's not fine. Momma hasn't been fine for a long time."

"She could be if she wanted to be," Elaine said stiffly.

"You know, I used to think so, but now I'm not so sure."

"So ... you're saying Daddy actually raped you."

"Yes."

"He didn't do other things?"

"He was multifaceted," I said bitterly. "Why do you ask?"

"I just wondered," she said after a minute. "I had some dreams when I was little.... But if he did that to you, I didn't know about it."

I couldn't help but laugh, but my laughter was filled with my bitterness. "I thought everybody knew. I thought that was why Momma hated me. I thought he did it because I wasn't really one of the family—all the rest of you

had such blonde hair, and mine was brown—monkey shit brown, the kids at school called it. He said something like that the last time I talked to him.”

“The night you left?”

“No. I came back once afterward.” My sister and I sat in silence. *I will be damned if I’ll justify myself to her*, I thought.

“If that’s true,” she still sounded like she didn’t understand, “then how can you stand to be here?”

“Because I have to be.” Sorrow replaced my anger. “He was a kid once. And now he’s sick and weak, and if I have to, I can fight him off. Or at least run away. This is our last chance to fix things.” My voice died away. “But he hurts so bad. The pain’s eating him alive. And he’s so scared. I look in his eyes, and they’re nothing but black holes. I look at him, and I know it’s already too late for us to fix anything. Now I just want to help him die well. It’s all we have left.” I leaned forward and rested my head on my arms. A few minutes later I lifted my head and pushed back my hair. “I suppose the water’s hot again now. I better go take my shower.”

We heard footsteps in the hall and turned to the door.

“Hi, Momma,” said Elaine.

Momma walked past us to the door and slid her feet into a pair of cracked rubber boots. They stood loose around her slender calves.

“Where you going?” Elaine asked.

“To weed the garden.”

“But it’s dark.”

“The weeds are still there.”

“Want help?”

“No.” Momma’s blue eyes were blank and terrified. “I just have to get out. The garden’s a mess.” She pushed open the screen, and we heard her boots slapping down the steps. Elaine and I sat together in the warm, bright kitchen and looked through the screen at Momma’s dark outline, hunched between the rows in her dying garden.

“She’s forgotten the light,” I said, then I bowed to years of conditioning and pushed myself out of the kitchen chair. “I’ll help her. I’m still dirty.” I slid my aching feet back into my boots, rotated my tight shoulders, flipped

on the outdoor light, and pushed open the screen door. Elaine followed me. Momma looked up. Her face was wet.

"Let us help you, Momma," Elaine said gently from behind me.

The last threads of Momma's composure snapped. "I just can't take any more."

I crouched down beside her, laid one hand on a weed.

"It's too much." Her voice rose. "I just wish it was over."

"Hush, Momma," Elaine whispered. "He'll hear you."

"Don't you shush me in my own house," she shot back. "I've kept my mouth shut all my life, and I'm not going to do it any more. He's destroying all of us. He has been for years. And now he's dead already and just doesn't know enough to lie down. I wish he'd get it over with." She yanked at a plant.

I was stunned. Momma had never, ever criticized Daddy in my hearing.

"That's a tomato, Mom," Elaine said.

"It's not in the row." Momma yanked and the roots tore free. "I've got no say in my own house. I never did." She tossed the plant behind her. "He just keeps getting worse. He can't even swallow now. When he does, it won't stay down. He can't walk anymore. I can't stand seeing him like this. And he's pulling us all down with him." Her voice rose and cracked, and she looked at me. "And Jennifer told me you've got all that Satanic stuff in your room. I can't do anything about that, either, and your dad's too sick to deal with it like he should." Her eyes dropped as she finished the sentence.

"It's not satanic, Momma," I said. I had never thought she was happy, but neither had I ever realized the depth of her anger. "But I'll put it in my car if that'll make it easier for you."

"Do what you want. You've already done your damage."

My stomach twisted into the old familiar knot. "What do you mean?"

"Do you know what he did after you left that day? He came back inside after you drove away and he sat down at the table and he cried. He cried like a baby. 'We've lost her,' was all he could say. 'She's gone. She's left the Lord. Doesn't she love us anymore?' The doctor said that stress

brings on this kind of cancer. Coming back like you did, saying those terrible things—you might as well have put a bullet in his head.”

The injustice of this rocked me. I had come to help. It had been the hardest thing I had ever done. And now Momma was blaming me for bringing on Daddy’s illness in the first place, simply because I had at last had the courage to name him for what he was. Suddenly I was deeply, bitterly angry again. *How dared she? How dared he?* Not trusting myself to speak, I stood up and ran inside and up to my room. I’m not sure what I was thinking, except that I had to get out of that place and that I needed Toby. I picked up the little statue I had carved and hurried back outside, tears snaking down my cheeks. I didn’t look at Momma or Elaine, just walked on by, out past the diesel pumps, past the shop and the barn. I climbed the splintering fence behind the shop and crossed what used to be the barnyard, back in the days when we had chickens and eggs. I climbed the fence on the other side and stopped at the crumbling edge of the creek bed, at last daring to approach the place I had been avoiding since I got here. Bracing my feet, I slid down to the sandy creek bottom.

Here, I thought, smelling the cool, damp sand, feeling my way. Just about here, DJ said. My hand brushed an upright stick. I ran my fingers down it until I felt the crossbar, and then I sank down in the sand and grass, kneeling there, arms on knees, head on arms, listening to the water trickling a few feet away. I ran my thumb over the tiny, rough Toby in my hand. The white blaze down his face and his four white paws were barely visible in the starlight. I wanted him so much I ached with it. No matter what he was, no matter what he had been, I wanted him now, as he was now. I needed to run my fingers through his hair, to lay my head on his shoulder, wrap my arms around his neck. But he was gone, free, no longer mine to command. He came and went as he chose.

My soul reached out, but only the night, the crickets, and a distant coyote answered. Tonight, Toby did not choose. The little carving felt warm in my hand. Crying would have relieved the ache. If there had been time I could have opened the floodgates and poured out my pain, anger, and fear, and eventually the flood would have subsided, bringing healing

and regeneration in its wake. Even as I thought that, though, I knew it for a lie. I had tried, that day in the kitchen. I had said it all and neither he nor Momma had heard me. Now there was no time to say those things again, even if I wanted to, even if by some miracle they would hear them this time. The walls I had built that day would have to stand. The king would not be healed; all that remained was the accounting, and I didn't know how to even begin it.

At last the cool of the evening penetrated the hot, roiling pain at my center. Crickets. Owls. Rustling grass. I breathed in the breath of the Goddess, pouring out my pain and anger on my hot breath. And then I just sat there, quiet, and felt the Earth hold me on its bosom. I was here for a reason. I had known it would not be easy, but it was necessary. I was where I had to be. At last peace came, and my borders thinned. I rode the night air through the wash and up, up, where I could see the dark barn and the floodlit shop, the dark old house with its glowing windows, the two women crouched in the garden, the man dozing in the recliner in the living room, the younger man, his wife, and their son, a complex mixture of sweet baby breath, grief, and black rage. I stayed as long as I dared, until the chill penetrated the dust and grease on my skin. I still needed to take a long, hot shower. I stood up before I was ready, squared my shoulders, and walked back to the house, where death crouched waiting.

CHAPTER 44

Jennifer

DJ slid between the cool sheets and wrapped himself around me. “Mmm, you smell so good,” he said, “and you’re warm....” A night breeze lifted the sheer curtain at the open window and brought the cries of owls and coyotes into the house. A truck rumbled on the distant freeway. Closer, Davy baby-snored in his crib across the room.

I rolled over and curled against my husband’s cool, still slightly damp body. He smelled of apple shampoo, grease, and himself. My hand slid over his chest, my fingers tangling in the blonde curls frosted silver in the moonlight. “Jenny was really, really scared today,” I whispered in my little-Jenny voice.

His arms tightened around me as my lips found his in the dark.

“Daddy wants us to take over the business,” I murmured softly against his mouth when I felt him begin to respond to me, but before things had gone too far for conversation. Experience had taught me that this was the best time to discuss things with DJ.

His arms tightened. “Yeah.”

“What do you think?” My hand slid down his body.

“I don’t know.” His hand wandered down over my curves, and I congratulated myself on having had the self-control to stick with plain toast for breakfast. Men look on the outward appearance, after all.

"But it's so dangerous," I murmured, still in my little-Jenny voice.

"Lots of things are dangerous." DJ's hands roamed across my belly and down into forbidden territory.

I pushed his hand back and slid away from him, punching my pillow into a more comfortable shape under my cheek. "You could've died today. And what would've happened if Davy and I had still been in there?"

"What happened anyway—the truck would've caught the chopper. That's why Bethie was driving so close. We watch each others' backs."

I braced myself on one elbow and looked down into his face. "You're missing the point, sweetheart."

He looked at me, his eyebrows raised.

"You'd have to give up the ministry, honey."

"I know that."

"And Davy would never see you." I ran my fingers over his gouged hand, then lifted it to my lips and let him feel the tip of my tongue against his knuckles. "You'd kill yourself by inches." I licked the wound again.

"It's just a scratch, Jenny." He reached for me again.

"He's already talked to the school board chairman here."

"That could be a good thing."

"But I like Happy Valley. Everything's almost perfect there. I don't want to get stuck in some one-horse town with a bunch of hicks who won't appreciate me." I bit my tongue. Too late.

"I'm one of those hicks, Jenny," he said in a quiet voice.

"Not anymore! Can't you see how much you've grown since we met?"

I wrapped my arms around him and sought his lips in the darkness, but they were suddenly stiff and unyielding. My heart clenched, but I knew we had come too far to throw everything away now. "You've grown so far beyond this," I said in my most persuasive voice. I found his lips again, ran the tip of my tongue over them in the way he liked, then ran my hands down his body. His lips softened and his arm tightened around me again. My heart eased. The danger was past. Maybe now he could see reason.

"You don't know what it's been like for me," I told him.

"I don't see that it's been so bad," he replied. "It's not like you've had to work in the fields or anything."

I couldn't believe he was throwing that in my face. "*Not so bad?*" I repeated. And I must admit my voice wasn't as sweet as it might have been. I stopped. "Look at this," I finally said when I could trust myself to sound reasonable. I held my hand, with its clear, polished nails, up where he could see it in the moonlight.

"So?"

I almost lost it again. *There are none so blind...* "They complained about my pink nail polish," I said, "so I gave up and quit wearing pink. I have to keep my hair down so they don't see the holes in my ears."

DJ just laughed at me. He laughed, and his laughter felt like the beginning of the end. "Honey, listen to yourself," he said. "This is about *nail polish and earrings?*"

My heart broke. "Well, I know it sounds petty when I say it out loud, and it's not really the nail polish or the earrings, but ... but ... well, it's just that this is not my life. I don't want it to be, and now it looks like it will be. Forever."

"But you have to do those things in Happy Valley, too," he said. "You know the Narrow Way rules about makeup and jewelry just as well as I do. You went to work for Narrow Way Northwest of your own free will. You married me knowing I'm a minister, knowing you'd be expected to follow the rules. At least in public. If we take over the business, you can wear hot pink nail polish and earrings to your knees every day, and twice on Sundays."

"I know that," I said, my voice hoarse, my throat aching. "DJ, you're missing the point. In Happy Valley we *are* somebody. Sure, we have to keep up appearances, but we also have time when we can just be ourselves. Here I can't. I can't wear my earrings or my wedding or engagement rings, even at home. I haven't even been able to take a long hot bath—somebody always needs to get into the bathroom. And it *stinks* in there. How can you even *consider* living like this?"

"The land's in my blood, Jenny. Dad wants me to have it. He wants that so much." His arm tightened around me. I could feel his face damp against my

neck. "He started with nothing and he built this. When he's gone, the land will be all that's left. It's the best part of him. He wasn't always very nice."

"You all say that, but he's always been nice to *me*."

"Yes." DJ's voice was flat and forbidding, but I was too hurt to care.

"So why is it you guys never miss a chance to run him down?" I asked. "I can't tell you how tired I am of hearing what a tyrant he is. I'm a counselor. I know what to look for, and believe me I've looked, but I just don't see it."

DJ sighed. "You wouldn't understand. If you did, you wouldn't believe me."

"I am so *sick* of everybody telling me that! I'm not a moron, you know. Don't underestimate me."

"It's too big," DJ said. "You had to live through it to really understand. It's nothing against you, Jennifer."

"So tell me."

DJ was silent. "I can't," he said at last. "I don't even know how to start."

"So if he was so awful, why do you want the ranch?"

"Like I just said, the ranch was the best part of him. If he wants us to have it, I have to at least consider it. I owe him that."

"But you don't really want it."

"Yes and no." He sighed again. "I just don't know."

"You could take it and sell it, you know, after..." I said hopefully.

"Maybe. I'm just not sure I'd want to. It's part of me," he repeated.

"You'll take it." By now, I didn't even care that my voice was hard and sharp, not soft and gentle like a minister's wife's voice should be. "No matter what I say, you'll take it. You don't care that you're throwing away our ministry. Did you even want it in the first place?"

"I don't know," he said after a minute. "Everybody just expected it."

"I wish I'd known that before we got married."

"Would it have mattered?"

"I don't know. Maybe," I said impatiently. "You should have let me know what I was getting into. It's dangerous. Davy deserves to have a daddy."

"Lots of things are dangerous, Jenny." He leaned over and kissed me. "You're in danger now." His hand slid down my body again, teasing me.

Oh, no, you don't, buster, I thought. You won't get around me that easily. Not after the things you just said. "We can't. What if Davy wakes up?" I kept my voice very, very firm, so he would know I meant business.

DJ lay back with a sigh. "I know, Jennifer. Good night."

I turned my back to him. When his arm slid around my waist, I stiffened, fighting the contrary urges to continue pressing the point, or to turn, weep, and be comforted. Before I could make up my mind, however, he sighed, removed his arm, turned over, and was instantly asleep. I lay awake, staring out the window at the moon and the stars, realizing too late that what I wanted was comfort. My tears dried on my cheeks, pulling my skin tight in narrow paths. After a while I slipped out of bed, tiptoed down the hall to the bathroom, and splashed cool water on my face to remove the salt. Then I smoothed cream over my cheeks and worked a little into the tiny creases I saw beginning at the corners of my eyes. Then I trudged back to the bed, where I slept with DJ, alone.

CHAPTER 45

Elizabeth

Lamp light glowed golden over the book lying face down on the arm of the sagging chair. I knelt beside the old recliner, a palmful of painkillers in one hand, the plastic sports bottle in the other. “It’s time for your pills, Daddy.”

He fumbled at the blanket. “Need to get up.”

I could hear Davy whimpering upstairs. I helped Daddy with the blanket. “Do you need to go to the bathroom?” I asked.

“No. Get Lainie.”

Davy’s whimpers became wails.

“She’s sleeping,” I said. “Is there something I can do?”

“Need *her*.”

“Right now?”

“What d’you think?” His shoulders heaved. His mouth clamped shut as his eyes flew wide open. I grabbed the basin beside the chair and caught the dark bile and blood, steeling myself against the sympathetic urge to vomit. At last his spasms eased and he lay back, limp, white, and sweating. His hair clung to his skull in thin wisps. I could see the fused edges where the bones lay under his transparent scalp.

“Get Lainie *now*.”

Thinking of Elaine’s tired eyes as she’d climbed the stairs to bed, I tried one last time. “How about if I help you with the pills first?”

"Do what I say."

He was dying. I was here to help him die well. If he needed Elaine so badly, well, then, I would get her.

A door upstairs opened. Davy's wails turned into screams. I carried the basin to the bathroom, tipped it into the toilet, flushed, rinsed it out, and dumped the rinse water in the toilet, too. After wiping a towel around inside the bowl, I flushed again and carried the empty bowl back to the living room.

Jennifer was standing in the hall, patting her son's back. "He's teething," she whispered. She swayed, loose-hipped, patting in time to the movement. Her lacy peach peignoir swirled.

"Can you watch Daddy for a second?" I asked her. "He wants me to get Elaine, but I'm afraid to leave him alone."

"Sure." Jennifer carried Davy into the living room. "Hey, Grandpa," she chirped, "can Davy and Jenny sit with you for a little bit?"

I went upstairs before he answered. Elaine was lying sprawled on her stomach, snoring gently, her hair glinting silver. A patch of moonlight through the window cast diamond patterns on the floor. I touched her shoulder.

She bolted straight upright. "What? What's wrong? Is it Daddy?" Before I could answer, she threw the covers off and swung her feet to the floor, her eyes wide and startled in the moonlight.

"He's okay," I said quickly, "but he's asking for you. I know you're tired, but he's pretty insistent. Can you come down? I'm so sorry."

"S okay." She fumbled her way into a bathrobe.

Momma stepped into the hall. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Daddy wants to talk to Elaine."

"Now?"

"He's insisting."

"Oh, no." Momma disappeared back into her room. Elaine and I stared at each other. Why would Momma say that? But before I could speak, she reappeared, belting her robe. Downstairs, Daddy lay still, staring at the door. When we came in, he struggled to sit up.

"Just lie back, Daddy," Elaine murmured. "Here." She knelt beside the chair. "Let me rub your legs for you." I watched her, envying her grace, wishing I could lovingly render the simple services that gave him comfort.

Daddy sank back, closing his eyes.

"How does that feel?" she asked.

"Good."

"Bethie says you wanted to talk to me?"

"Yes."

"I'm here."

"When you were a baby," he began, and Elaine's hands paused, then continued the long, soothing strokes. His eyes drifted closed. "We—did—things. Sexually. Had to confess my part in it—get right with the Lord. Need to know it's forgiven."

A coyote howled in the distance.

The silence rang around us. "Of course it's forgiven, Daddy," Elaine said. Her hands faltered and fell to her lap. Her head hung over them. Her shoulders heaved once, then stiffened.

"Good." His voice was firmer now. "I'll take those pills now. And you can rub my legs some more."

The coyote howled again, closer this time, then gave vent to a series of yips and barks. It sounded like laughter. I thought of Toby, and waited for someone to say something, anything. But no one did. I realized no one was going to. I looked at Elaine's hands, lying on her lap. I looked at her bent head. And I knew why the Lady had wanted me here.

"Jennifer," I said, "help Daddy with his pills."

"I've got Davy."

The next howl came from right outside the window, high, shrill, and mocking. We all jumped, then jumped again as defiant barks circled the house, pelting toward the yips. The barks and yips crashed and tumbled into growls and snarls. We listened transfixed as the growls and snarls turned into ki-yiing and faded into silence. I shook myself. Toby had come. *I am not alone*, I said to myself. *I can be strong*.

"Momma," I said, "can you hold Davy?"

"He'll cry," Jennifer said quickly.

"Well, I might as well go back to bed, then," Momma said.

"What's the matter, Lainie?" asked Daddy. "Rub my legs some more."

Elaine half-lifted her hands, and let them drop again.

"Me, too," said Jennifer.

So that was going to be it. Daddy had told Elaine he had molested her. Momma and Jennifer listened politely and then went back to bed, leaving Elaine to rub his legs. Not on my watch. There wasn't going to be another Conrad girl left alone to deal with the sins of her father.

"Wait a minute," I said, my voice hard and low and aimed at their retreating backs.

I strode across the room and stood in the doorway, facing Jennifer and Momma. "Jennifer, please give Davy to Momma and help Daddy with the pills. Elaine's got to get out of here."

"She can go if she wants," Jennifer's chin lifted. "But I won't play into her drama."

"She can't go alone. Do it now." The rage burned bright and strong, protecting me, protecting Elaine, doing its job.

"Mom can help him."

"Jennifer, *do it*. You came to help. *Now help*."

Momma was just looking down at the floor, not saying a word. Jennifer sulkily handed the now-sleeping baby to her and collected the pills and water.

"Here, Daddy," she chirped. "I've got some pills and some nummy water that'll make you all better!"

I stooped beside Elaine and gently pulled her to her feet, resisting the urge to snap at Jennifer that water was not "nummy," and that nothing would make Daddy all better ever again. Putting one arm around Elaine, I guided her into the hall.

"What's wrong with her?" Daddy asked. "I wanted her to rub my legs."

"I don't know," Jennifer said. "Can you hold the cup?"

As we passed Momma, she whispered, "I'd come with you but I don't have a blanket for Davy."

Bullshit, I thought. The house was full of blankets. One lay over the back of the chair I'd just been sitting in. If she wanted to be with us, she could be.

I eased Elaine down on the steps. Fury was choking me. How could they do it? How could they just unmake reality? But they always had. They always would. I could only choose for myself. Elaine would not go through this alone. I drew her head onto my shoulder and stroked her hair. A fine trembling ran through her. "Just a sec," I said. I went out to the Jeep and pulled the blanket out of the back seat, came back, and draped it around her shoulders.

She clutched it with both hands and hunched over her knees. I silently stroked her fine hair back from her forehead. The night was chilly around us. The stars hung bright overhead. Crickets chirped. The coyote howled again in the distance.

"I knew what he was going to say," Elaine said. "When he started, I knew."

"Yes," I said.

"All my life ... I've gone all my life not hearing that. Why did he have to tell me now? Why not before, when I could have saved my family? I could have saved my marriage. I could have kept my babies."

All I could say was, "I don't know."

"I said it was forgiven, but he's dying. How could I say anything else? I can't leave, but how do I face him tomorrow? How do I do that?"

"You don't have to," I said. "Come to my house. Stay there for a few days, then decide."

"In that house—I can't go back in there."

"No. I'll get your things." I stood up and turned toward the door.

"Why are you doing this?" she asked. Her ravaged voice stopped me. "I—I left you alone with him. I wouldn't believe he could hurt us that way. I always defended him. Even tonight, I didn't believe you. No matter what he did, I always defended him. Even when he shot Harry, even when he hurt—" she swallowed, "hurt you and Sarah, I defended him. And he let me. He knew, and he let me. I lost my babies because of him—Joe said he'd hurt the boys, but I defended him—I said he

wouldn't hurt anybody. And I lost my babies. And Joe was right to take them." She started to cry.

"I'll be right back," I said, and walked into the shadows beyond the screen door.

Momma looked at me from upstairs. "How is she?" she asked.

"How do you think? I'm taking her to my house."

"She should stay here." Momma sounded miffed.

"She can't. Not right now." I climbed the stairs.

Momma took a step away from me. "But who will help me?"

Aha, I thought. So now we come to the heart of it. "I'll be back in the morning," I said. My stomach knotted at the thought. How would I face him? I wanted to drive back to my peaceful house by the river, to the Lady's mirrored pool, to the raucous, bright inn just a sidestep away from this world, to the endless possibilities of my new life, to the magic. I wanted to forget this dark, sick place even existed. But I couldn't. I had to help my father die. He had wanted it to be Elaine, but after last night it had to be me. I had to help him die because I was the only one who would, but I had to ask again. "Momma, did you know?"

Her face worked. "How can you even ask?"

"Because I need to know."

She looked straight at me. "I can't remember seeing or hearing anything like that."

"What about me?"

"You, either. I didn't see anything."

"Do you doubt it's true?"

"No," Momma whispered. "No. I don't doubt it."

"Thank you," I said. "I think."

I picked up my duffel bag and Elaine's suitcase, then knocked on DJ and Jennifer's door and pushed it open. DJ was still sleeping.

I shook him awake.

"Huh?" he muttered groggily, pushing himself up on his elbows. His hair was sticking up in tufts.

"Something's come up," I said. "I'm taking Elaine to my house. I'll drop her off and be back, but you might as well sleep in."

He rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands and shook the sleep off. "What happened?"

"I'll tell you in the morning."

He searched my face in the moonlight. "Want company?"

"If you're not too tired."

"I'm fine." Rubbing the sleep from his face, he sat up.

"Thanks."

I went back downstairs, paused in the doorway, steeled myself to kiss Daddy's forehead since Elaine could not, and I found I couldn't do it, either. Across the room, Jennifer was rocking furiously, her mouth tight. Davy, awake again, was gnawing on one of her fingers, so I knew Momma had come back downstairs.

She was sitting with Elaine on the porch steps, but they weren't looking at each other. A whole universe lay in the eighteen inches of porch step between them. When I came out, Momma stood up. "Have a safe trip," she said, tight-lipped.

"Thank you. See you tomorrow." I guided Elaine into the back seat of my car. DJ came down the stairs, still buttoning his shirt against the chill of the desert night.

"You're *all* going?" Momma asked.

"We'll be back in the morning," I answered.

She let the screen door slam behind her.

"Want me to drive?" DJ asked.

"Sure." I climbed into the back with Elaine. DJ looked at me quizzically. "So I'm the chauffeur tonight?"

"Home, James," I said with a half smile, "and don't spare the horses."

"Certainly, Madame," DJ said in a plummy voice. His tired blue eyes held mine in the rear-view mirror.

"Later," I mouthed over Elaine's head.

We drove in silence, and at last pulled up outside my darkened house.

"How'd you find this place?" DJ asked as he switched off the engine.

“It belonged to a friend,” I said.

We walked up the path through my fragrant green yard in silence, listening to the chorus of frogs, night birds, and river. And underneath it all lay the voices of the women, offering comfort. I was home, and I was comforted.

CHAPTER 46

Jennifer

DJ came into the living room, bent, and kissed Davy's downy blonde hair. Then he turned to me. "I'm driving Bethie and Elaine over to Bethie's house," he said. "Be back in the morning." He tried to kiss me, but I turned my face away. He stood there for a minute, and then he left me there in the lamp light, holding our son, already aching at his absence. A car started outside. The screen door squeaked. I heard Gwen's slow steps crossing the kitchen.

I stood and waited for her. It took her an unbelievably long time to get to the living room. "I have to take Davy up to bed," I said when she finally appeared in the doorway.

"Yes," she said. She looked at her hands, at her feet, at the window, at everything except Daddy and me. I wondered if she had understood me.

"You don't believe it, do you?" The minute the words were out of my mouth, I wished them back.

Gwen's face turned toward mine. It was perfectly blank.

"Gwen?"

She flinched.

"I'm going up to bed now," I said slowly and clearly.

"Who will help me?" Her words were little more than a whisper.

"You'll be fine," I said in my best minister's wife voice. "He's had his medicine. He should sleep for a while now."

She hadn't moved. "But who will help me?"

"You'll have to watch him tonight," I said firmly. I was already halfway out of the room. "The others will be back in the morning. I'd help, but I have Davy to care for."

"Yes," she said. She shuffled to the chair Elizabeth had been sitting in and sat down.

I carried Davy upstairs, laid him in his crib, and then lay down on the bed. The sheets were chilly under my back. I shivered and wished DJ were there to warm me. But he was gone, gone with Elizabeth and Elaine. It was the first night of our marriage that we were spending apart. He had promised me that would never happen.

"No matter what happens, I promise I'll spend every night in your bed," he had told me on our honeymoon. Well, *that* was a worthless promise.

All through that long, long night I lay awake in my Gethsemane, agonizing over how I might bring my husband back to the Lord, and back to our life of service in Happy Valley. When the sun came up and DJ slipped guiltily into our room, I was no closer to a solution than I had been when I lay down.

"What time did you go to bed?" he asked me.

"Right after you left," I said.

"And you left Mom to watch Dad all by herself?"

"Yes." Something in his voice frightened me. "Why not?"

"She's not strong."

"All she had to do was sit in the chair. He was asleep. She's done it before."

"No, she hasn't," he said. "Elaine and Bethie have been doing it, and before they got here I did it. Don't you remember? Jenny, staying up one night wasn't so much to ask. I can't believe you just left her on her own down there. Particularly after what happened."

"You don't *know* what happened," I snapped at him. "You were in bed, asleep, while I was up caring for your son. All you have is your drama-queen sisters' no doubt highly edited, self-serving versions of what happened."

DJ stared at me. "What's happened to you?" he said at last.

"*This family* has happened to me," I hissed. "All I wanted was to have my own little family in my own little home and serve the Lord." My throat closed. "We were so close," I whispered.

At last DJ took me in his arms. "I'm so sorry, honey. I wish it had been different. I wouldn't have chosen this, either. But sometimes life chooses us." He laughed a broken laugh. "It'll get better."

I sniffed against his shoulder. "I'm sorry," Now was not the time for arguments or recriminations. Not now. Not yet.

"Can you just sit with Dad for a while this morning?" he asked. "So Momma can get some rest?"

"Yes, of course," I said. "Just let me get dressed."

"Thanks, honey. How long do you think you'll be?"

I wanted to scream. "Ten minutes," I said. "Just give me ten minutes."

When I went downstairs, Daddy was still sleeping in his recliner in the living room. DJ and Elizabeth were both gone, and Elaine was nowhere in sight. When I looked in the kitchen, I saw Gwen at the kitchen sink, up to her elbows in suds, as usual. She stared vacantly out the window. Her hands were still.

"I'll take over now, Mom," I said as cheerfully as I could. "You go get some rest."

She turned. "I can't. I have to go to town and see the lawyer again this morning."

"OK," I said. "I'll just go take a shower then. Maybe I can get a little more sleep before Davy wakes up. Come get me if you need me."

As I stood there, watching her, Gwen silently washed a plate, then two cups, then a pan, then another plate, then a glass. "You should wash the dishes in order," I said. "It's glassware first, then silverware, then bowls and plates, then serving dishes, then pots and pans."

She washed a few more plates, then deliberately reached for the frying pan, then a glass. She didn't even look at me.

I had never felt so completely rejected by anyone in my entire life, and she had done it with nothing more than a frying pan and a few dirty glasses. After a few minutes I went back upstairs and fell across the bed.

It occurred to me that DJ might have checked with his mother before he started criticizing me for not helping. I couldn't help a woman who didn't want to be helped.

CHAPTER 47

Elaine

The room fell silent. “Of course it’s forgiven, Daddy,” I had said. My voice was steady. I was not overdramatizing. I wasn’t feeling anything at all. I was blank, like the beach is when the sea rolls out, out, out. It would come crashing back, but for now I was blank. Empty. This wasn’t real. I wasn’t real. I stared at my shaking hands. I would not cry. I felt too numb for that, and anyway, if I cried, I would get something to cry about.

“Good,” Daddy said. “I’ll take those pills now. And you can rub my legs some more. That feels good.”

The first tremor of feeling flickered in. It was nausea. I recognized it from the distant place where I was watching what was happening here.

“Jennifer,” came Bethie’s voice, “can you help him with the pills?”

“I’ve got Davy.”

A coyote howled. It sounded like it came from right outside the window, high, shrill, and mocking. I jumped, then jumped again as defiant barks circled the house. The howling turned into yipping, and the barking and yipping crashed into growling and snarling. Then the sounds faded into silence. How often had I heard those sounds before? When Toby was alive? When had he died? But I couldn’t remember. How could that be? Toby had been part of the family. How could he have just disappeared? How could Bethie have disappeared? But Bethie had come back. Would Toby be back, too?

Bethie's voice came again. "Momma, can you hold Davy?"

I was wrapped in cotton. The words drifted in, one or two at a time ... "cry" ... "bed, then" ... "pills" ... "legs" ... "get out of here" ... "alone. Do it now" ... "help."

Bethie's hands pulled me to my feet. Then her arm was around me, steering me gently into the hall. I felt foolish in a vague sort of way. I should be able to walk into the hall myself, shouldn't I? But it was hard to move my body when I was so far away.

"I'd come with you," Momma whispered as I shuffled past her, "but I don't have a blanket for Davy." Her words were too far away to matter.

Bethie pushed open the screen door, steered me through, and eased me down on the front steps. Her thigh was warm against mine, her arm was strong around my neck, her hand dry and rough, touched my cheek as she drew my head down onto her shoulder and started stroking my hair.

The tide rolled back in. A fine trembling ran through me.

"Just a sec," Bethie said. And she was gone.

My side felt cold, and suddenly I was alone, alone, alone. Then she was back, and a thick heavy blanket that smelled slightly of horses went around my shoulders. I hunched forward, shivering, and clutched it with both hands. Bethie's hand stroked my hair back from my forehead. I couldn't remember anyone doing that for me, ever. The night was chilly. Stars hung bright overhead. Crickets chirped. The coyote howled again in the distance.

"I knew what he was going to say," I finally said. "When he started, I knew."

"Yes," Bethie said.

"All my life I've gone not hearing that. Why did he have to tell me now? Why not before, when I could have saved my family? I could have saved my marriage. I could have kept my babies."

"I don't know."

"I said it was forgiven, but he's dying. How could I say anything else? I can't leave, but how do I face him tomorrow? How do I do that?"

"You don't have to," she murmured. "Come to my house. Stay there for a few days. Then decide."

"I can't go back in that house."

"No. I'll get your things." My sister stood up again and turned toward the door.

"Why are you doing this?" I looked up at Bethie. "I left you alone with him. I wouldn't believe he could hurt us that way. Even tonight, I didn't believe you. I failed you. No matter what he did, I always defended him." I had to look down. I couldn't face her now. "Even when he shot Harry, even when he hurt—" I swallowed, "when he hurt you and Sarah, I defended him. And he let me! He knew, and he let me. I lost my babies because of him—Joe said he'd hurt the boys, but I defended him—I said he wouldn't ... and I lost my babies ... and they were right to take them." I was drowning in pain. I started to cry, hard, unaccustomed tears torn from my raw soul.

"I'll be right back," Bethie said. She walked into the shadows beyond the screen door.

I heard the screen door creak open again. I hoped it was Bethie, but it was Momma. She came out and sat down beside me, but she didn't say anything. She didn't touch me, even though I needed a mother's arms more than I could remember ever needing them in the past. I needed them, but I didn't expect them. She was not that kind of mother. Not anymore, if she ever had been. A half-memory suddenly surfaced—Momma standing, backlit in my doorway, saying, "I love you." Thirty years and eighteen unbridgeable inches lay between us.

The door squeaked again. Bethie came out, and Momma stood up. "Have a safe trip," she said.

"Thanks. See you tomorrow." As Bethie guided me into her car's back seat, DJ came down the stairs, still buttoning his shirt against the chill of the high desert night.

The drive was quiet, just Bethie's voice saying, "Turn here," "Left at the sign," "Left again in a couple miles." I think maybe I slept, because the next thing I knew, we were pulling up in front of a dark house.

I lay sleepless in Bethie's house that night, and all the things I knew, all the knife-edged thoughts whose edges I had kept dull by keeping

them in bits and pieces, all those thoughts mixed in with other, safer memories, and then they all slid together into a terrible, inescapable picture. The funny thing was, I would never have known he had molested me if he hadn't told me. I had no memory of it. But in telling me he had slipped a missing piece into our family history, and suddenly I saw all the things I had known in a new light. I thought of all the "fights" when Daddy would have to go into Bethie, Sarah, or Momma's room and "settle them down." I thought of the screams, the blows, then the muffled sobbing, and Daddy's stern, "Cut it out, or I'll give you something to cry about." And the sobs would immediately stop. I thought about that for a long time. I thought about how the women in my family seemed prone to mysterious, clumsy behavior no one else ever witnessed, and how often their clumsiness resulted in their walking hunched, feet apart, hands braced on walls. I thought about the walls, streaked with what I had known from the beginning was blood, and had learned to tell myself was dirt. When had I learned to do that?

I thought about the day Bethie went silent for good, all those years ago.

I opened my eyes. Bethie was sitting beside my bed. "I have something I need to tell you," I told her.

"What?" she asked. Her voice was quiet, little more than a low hum in the golden lamp light and the sage-scented breeze.

"I didn't protect you. I'm sorry."

"You did your best," she said.

"No, I didn't. I could have known what was happening. I *should* have known. I just didn't *let* myself know."

"You were only a kid."

"No. I was a self-righteous little prig. I wanted so much to be the good girl that I sacrificed everything for it."

She shrugged. "You were what you were made to be."

I had to laugh. "I went to a counselor, you know."

"No, I didn't know."

"Yes. A whopping two sessions." I couldn't keep the anger out of my voice. "She kept digging at me about Harry. And how I lost him."

"Did you tell her?"

"No! Are you kidding? I wrote about it, though. In my journal."

"How did it happen?"

"You don't remember?"

She shook her head. "I don't remember much before the zoo."

"I don't remember that. I lost a lot that summer. I seem to remember having a pillow fight and running around the house in the moonlight, and Momma running with us, but I must have dreamed it. We never did things like that. And Momma sure didn't. She could barely walk most of the time."

"I remember those things, too," she said.

"But how can that be?"

"Momma brought us home from Chicago alone. Daddy stayed to help Grandma when Grandpa died. Things were different for a little while. I came closer to talking that summer than I had for years. Then Daddy came home." She stopped and rubbed her hands together. "The memories of that summer kept me going for a long time."

"I think I remember the day you stopped talking," I said after another minute.

"I don't remember ever talking before DJ taught me," she said.

"When you were little, you talked all the time."

"Really?"

"Oh, yeah," I laughed. "Couldn't shut you up." That was stretching things, but Bethie would never know.

"Why did I stop?" she asked.

And so, there in the lamp light, in the wee hours of the morning, I told her.

CHAPTER 48

Elaine

“It was when you were two,” I told Bethie. “Right after DJ was born. I was wearing my new birthday pants. I remember that. They were bright orange, with pink and yellow flowers. The day started badly. You had wet the bed again, and I had to change it, and I was so mad. Daddy said you were just too lazy to get up and go to the bathroom.”

“Where was Momma?” Bethie asked.

“Sick again. It was right after DJ was born. So anyway, I get halfway through the kitchen, and my bare foot sticks to the floor. I can’t see anything because the sheets are in the way, so I just pull my foot loose and sort of hop the rest of the way to the washer. I’m still too short to reach the dials on the back, so I drag a bucket over to stand on. I cram the sheets in the washer, pour in the laundry soap, and start the washer. Then I hop off the bucket, sit down, and pull my foot up where I can see the bottom. There’s dirt stuck to it all over, and when I touch it with my finger the dirt and the sticky stuff stick to my finger, too. I pick up one of the dirty towels on the floor and do my best to rub it off. And just about the time I’m finished I see the rest of it,” I realized I had slipped into present tense and stopped.

“What?” asked Bethie. “What was it?”

“Honey,” I said. “It was honey. I had stepped in it, and tracked it all the way across the kitchen.”

"Oh, no," Bethie said. "Where was Daddy?"

"Outside."

"That's a mercy."

I wasn't sure how to reply to that, so I just went on with my story, telling myself as I spoke that it was over, past, and I should use past tense. "I hurried back into the kitchen. You and Sarah were both sitting at the table in your sagging diapers and T-shirts. There were toast crumbs under your chairs, and you both had honey in your hair. I could see honey dripping down your necks, down your backs, over the pans you had to sit on to reach the table, onto the chairs, and all the way onto the floor. I didn't know the honey bear held that much."

"I think I remember those pans," said Bethie. "I was always afraid mine would slide off the chair and I'd fall down. But why wasn't Sarah in the high chair? DJ wasn't using it yet, was he?"

"No, but Daddy insisted that you and Sarah both use pans from the day DJ came home from the hospital. 'Now there's another man in the house, things have to change around here,' he said. And he got a pan out for Sarah and took her out of the high chair and he never let her use it again."

"Poor Sarah," Bethie said.

"Anyhow," I said, "you were holding the honey bear upside down and scribbling away. 'What are you doing?' I shouted. I grabbed the honey bear and put it over on the cupboard where you couldn't reach it. You jumped, then you gave me the sweetest, stickiest grin I ever saw. 'Make Lainie,' you said. 'Bethie make Lainie. See?' And you had. You'd drawn me. There was this straggly stick girl with an enormous smiling mouth lurching across the tabletop. You were so happy, and so sticky, I couldn't help grinning back at you. I even told you it was good. Which it was, for a little kid."

"I *said* that? I *talked*?"

"Then." I stopped. Now I was coming to the hard part. "But I had to be responsible." The words felt heavy in my mouth. "I remembered that you'd wet your bed, and the stinky sheets, the sticky floor. And now the table. And you and Sarah were a mess, and I was responsible. I knew Daddy was going to be so disappointed in me. I got so mad, I think I called you a brat."

And then I slapped you. My hand left a mark on your cheek. I could see it. ... I still can. 'You'll get us all in trouble,' I yelled at you.

"Your lip quivered and your eyes got huge and dark, but you didn't make a sound. You knew better." All these years later, the words were bitter in my mouth. "I grabbed both of you by your sticky arms and towed you upstairs into the bathroom. I filled the tub with hot water, pushed your heads under the tap, and slapped your legs until they were red when you jerked away. And through it all you never made a sound."

"Course, Sarah went off like a tin whistle, like she always did. I yelled at her to be quiet. 'I've got to get you clean before Daddy gets back.' Bethie, I was scared, and so I was rough. I was scrubbing as hard and fast as I could, but the honey just wouldn't come off. I made the water so hot it burned my hands. I used the Lava soap on you both. You curled yourself into a knot so I couldn't scrub you. You were crying, but you were so quiet. 'Course Sarah was screaming enough for both of you. She kept trying to climb out of the tub, but I just kept pushing her back in. I was almost crying myself, I was so scared. I slapped Sarah again, then I slapped you, too. Daddy always said it was wrong to show favoritism, and anyhow, it was your fault in the first place.

"'You made this mess,' I yelled at you, 'and now I have to clean it up. You want Daddy to know?' The honey melted in the hot water and trickled down. I scrubbed you and Sarah until my back and arms ached. My hands stung from the slaps and the scalding water. Finally, though, the honey came off. I pulled the plug and drained the tub, dried you both, dressed you, and hugged you so you'd know I forgave you. Then I scrubbed out the tub. I was just finishing when I heard the kitchen screen door squeak. I knew Daddy was looking at that awful kitchen. I jumped up and ran downstairs, still carrying the wet washcloth I'd been using on the tub. Daddy stood in the middle of the kitchen staring at the toast crumbs and honey coating the table, the chairs, and the floor.

"'Where's your momma?' was all he said.

"'Upstairs with DJ.'

"'What happened here?' he asked.

"‘The honey got spilled,’ I said. And, you know, I felt guilty. I thought I should confess, because I knew you’d squeezed the honey out deliberately.

"‘Who did this?’

"‘I don’t know,’ I said.

"‘Yes you do.’

"‘It was an accident.’

"‘He looked at your stick girl. ‘This was no accident. Don’t lie to me.’

"‘I just kept staring at the floor.

"‘Where are they?’

"‘Upstairs.’ What else could I say?

"‘Come on.’ He started for the stairs, unbuckling his belt as he went.

"‘I’m sorry, Daddy,’ I said as I followed him. ‘I did it.’ It was another lie, but I just kept thinking about what he was going to do to you upstairs with that belt.

"‘No, you didn’t,’ he said without even turning around. ‘You draw better than that. Tell me the truth, or you’ll get it again for lying.’

"‘I said, ‘They don’t know any better.’

"‘Now he did turn around and look down at me. ‘Then why weren’t you watching them closer? I’m ashamed of you, Lainie. I depend on you when your momma’s sick. You’re a big girl. They’re little. Now tell me who did this.’

"‘I did,’ I said again.

"‘Come on,’ he said. And I knew there was no point in saying anything more. We were all going to get it.

"‘All I could was follow him up the stairs, then down the hall to Sarah’s room. I didn’t say a word. He pushed open the door. And that was too much.

"‘I started to cry. ‘Please, Daddy, I did it. I did it. Just spank me.’

"‘Daddy doesn’t say a word. I see the belt in his hand, and you and Sarah sitting on the floor. Your little legs are still all red from the hot water, and the slaps. They stick straight out in front of you. Daddy still doesn’t say anything, he just grabs Sarah, slings her over his thigh, and that belt

comes down so hard on her back and legs that it whistles before it hits. For a second, she's so shocked she doesn't make a sound, and you know Sarah, that doesn't happen often. Then her mouth opens and she starts screaming. Loud and high. Sarah always did dramatize everything. The belt slices through the air again. She kicks the scream up a notch.

"And then Daddy drops her. I see the wet stain on his leg, where Sarah peed on him! So Sarah's thrashing around on the floor, trying to get away from the belt, and she rolls right into the puddle of pee. Daddy stares down at her. I can't see his face because I'm behind him, but he's still slashing at her with his belt. 'Clean her up,' he says without even looking at me.

"So I pick Sarah up and as I start for the bathroom I see Daddy reach for you. I don't see what happens next because I'm in the bathroom cleaning Sarah up, but I can hear slaps, thuds and grunts. And Daddy saying, 'Stop that...' smack. 'Hold still!'

"And I'm trying to clean Sarah up without hurting her, but Daddy's hit her everywhere. She's just a mass of red welts. "If you'd just hold still when Daddy spansks you, he won't have to hit all of you, just your bottom," I tell her, but I know it won't do any good. I wet a washcloth and just try squeezing cool water over the welts, hoping she'll get clean without me having to touch them. And all the while, down the hall, I can hear you fighting him. *Cry*, I shout at you in my mind. *Cry so he'll stop*. And finally I hear you cry, and Daddy say, 'Okay, that's enough ... stop carrying on like that. Cut it out, or I'll give you something to cry about. I didn't hit you that hard.' And you stop crying, and I hear Daddy's footsteps. 'Now get up on the bed, like a good girl.'

"And then Sarah's door closes.

"I don't know what to do, so I just stand there in the bathroom. Sarah's clean and dry, but I can't get her any clean clothes because of the rule. When Daddy's in a room and the door's closed, you can't ever go in. Finally I remember the laundry. I carry Sarah downstairs, get some warm clothes out of the dryer and get her dressed, put her in the living room, and tell her to stay there. Then I run back into the kitchen, fill a bowl with hot water, and start scrubbing the table.

"I dump your sitting pans in the sink, then scrub the chairs, the floor around the table, the trail I've left through the kitchen. And all the while I'm shaking so hard I can hardly hold the rag. The door opens upstairs, but I'm not done yet. I scrub harder than ever, as hard as I can, hoping that if he can see me trying it'll be okay. I know it won't be, but I don't know what else to do."

I stopped. Bethie's hand was gripping mine so tightly my fingers ached. Her knuckles were white, her tanned face gray. But I had to finish this memory. This awful story. I had to finish it. I took a deep breath.

"I hear Daddy start downstairs and scrub even harder. My hand is moving so fast it's blurry, and I ache everywhere. I'm behind the table, and I think, *Maybe he won't see me. Maybe he'll forget about me. Maybe if he sees I'm trying as hard as I can....*

"'Elaine.'

"Maybe if I'm really, really nice to him.... 'What, Daddy?' I try to smile.

"'You know what. Get over here.'

"I stand up. My knees are cramping. My shoulders ache from all that scrubbing.

"'Hurry up,' he says, 'or you'll get it twice.'

"I walk over to him.

"'You know why I'm doing this, don't you?'

"'Yes, Daddy.'

"'I expect better of a great big girl like you. Look at this place. It's a pigsty. What would your momma say if she saw this? You should be ashamed of yourself.'

"He's right. It is a pigsty. Momma wouldn't like it at all. I say the only thing I can. 'I'm sorry, Daddy. I'm cleaning it up right now.'

"'It shouldn't have gotten like this in the first place.'

"He grabs the back of my head and pushes me forward so my stomach's forced over his thigh. He grabs a handful of my new pants—my new birthday pants—and stretches them tight over my butt. I brace my feet and grit my teeth, like I always do. And then I wait, and I stare down at Daddy's

dusty, runover boot. If I can just hold still, he'll only hit my bottom and maybe my legs, some. Daddy's boot is split around the steel toe. I feel so sorry for him, not able to afford new boots. The air hums around me. *Just don't move*, I keep telling myself. And then the belt hits. It feels like a thousand wasps, but you know that."

"I don't remember," Bethie said. "What happened then?"

I took a deep breath. "My feet slip, and I fall hard across Daddy's knee.

"'Hold still,' he snarls at me. I try. I really do. So he uses the belt for a while, and then he starts hitting me with his hand, over and over. Boom. Boom. Boom. And all the sudden I realize I have to go to the bathroom, but I haven't cried yet. *Cry*, I tell myself in my mind, like I told you upstairs. But it doesn't do any good. I open my mouth. I try to cry.

'Stop faking, or you'll get it again,' Daddy says.

"So I close my mouth and lock my jaw. My eyes won't cry. Daddy's hand slams down onto my new birthday pants over and over again and again, driving my bladder against his knee. And I can't hold it any more. The pee starts trickling down my leg, and still his hand keeps slamming down on me. I try to hold still, to cry enough but not too much, to hold it, but every time he hits me again, a little more pee comes out, and then the dam bursts, and it all comes flooding out.

"Oh, no," Bethie whispered. I barely heard her.

"He pushes me away. 'You're disgusting,' he says. 'No better than Sarah, wetting yourself. A great big girl like you. Get yourself cleaned up, then take care of Bethie like you should've done in the first place. I don't know what I ever did to deserve this family.' And he drops me on the floor where the pee is and slams out the door.

I stopped talking and looked at Bethie. She had her eyes closed. I had to finish this story.

"I peeled off my wet pants and put them into the washer with Sarah's diaper and your sheets. Then I scrubbed the floor with bleach, and then I tiptoed upstairs and went into my room. I grabbed a clean pair of underpants and another pair of pants, and then I snuck down the hall and into the bathroom. I stood in the bathtub, ran the water, and splashed it over

myself. Then I realized I had left all the clean towels stacked on the dryer. I just stood there in the tub, wondering what to do without a dry towel. It was too much. That's when I almost cried. I felt the tears pounding behind my eyes, trying to get out. But I just pushed them back with my hands and did what I had to do. I ended up using one of the towels left over from Sarah. I put on my clean underpants and clean pants.

"Then I went to take care of you. I didn't understand why I had to. I had just cleaned you up. But Daddy had said to. You're sprawled on Sarah's bed, with a blanket over your legs. And you're looking at the wall. When I bend over I can see your eyes are open because you blink. I touch you. You flinch and whimper and go limp and rubbery.

"Come on, Bethie,' I whisper to you. But you just keep staring at the wall.

"Come on,' I say again, louder. 'Daddy says I have to clean you up again.'

"I pick you up, carry you into the bathroom, and sit you down in the tub, but you sag sideways so I lay you flat on your back. I find a clean washcloth, soap it up, and start scrubbing, but you flinch and whimper.

"I look to see what's wrong, even though I know I'm not supposed to look at anybody's privates."

I stopped and swallowed.

"What?" Bethie asked. "What? I have to know." Her voice was raw and hoarse.

"You were red and ragged down there. And covered with blood and sticky white snot."

I stopped again.

"Go on," she said.

"You're sure?"

"I need to know all of it."

I took another deep breath. I didn't want to tell this. I didn't want to remember it. "Well, I finally said, 'what I saw was blood trickling on the bottom of the bathtub. Then it flowed into the water. It looked like a ribbon. All I could do was soak the washcloth with water and squeeze it over

you over and over again until the bleeding was almost stopped. I didn't know what was wrong. I thought maybe it was an infection, you know, from wetting the bed so much. Bethie, I didn't know. I had no idea. I swear I didn't know, and if I had, I wouldn't have done what I did!"

"I know," she replied. "You were—what? Not quite seven? There was nothing you could have done. You shouldn't have had that much responsibility in the first place."

I blinked. I had never thought about that before.

"Is there more?" she asked.

"A little. I found one of Sarah's diapers and pinned it onto you even though you were potty-trained except for the bed-wetting. Then I carried you back into Sarah's bedroom. Your bed still wasn't remade. I flipped the blanket back and leaned over to lay you on the sheets, and then I saw the wet spot. I thought you'd peed the bed again, and you'd only been in it a few minutes. I was so mad at you! I'm sorry, but that's how I felt. I felt like I'd tried so hard to keep you safe, and you weren't doing anything to help me help you.

"So I yanked the wet blanket and sheets off the bed. When I shoved you over to pull the sheet out from under you, you felt like a half-empty sack of grain, all loose and floppy. And then I saw all the spots of blood, almost hidden in the rose pattern on the sheet, and I knew then that you were really hurt. Even though you were being so ... so ... so quiet.

"I lay down on the bed next to you and finally I started to cry. 'I'm sorry,' I kept saying. 'I'm so sorry. I tried. I tried so hard.' I brushed your curls back from your forehead. I tried to take you in my arms, but you kept flinching and pulling away, and I was afraid I'd hurt you worse, so I just laid you back on the bed and stroked your hair instead.

"Then I remember Sarah's playing downstairs. I go get her and bring her up with us, get her a dolly, and go back to you. I stay as long as I can, just stroking your hair, but it's like I'm not even there to you. You just stare at the wall.

"Finally I have to go finish scrubbing the floor. I was almost done when Momma came downstairs.

"What happened this morning?" she asked me.

"We got in trouble."

"What for?"

"I didn't watch the little ones and they made a mess, and then I told a lie."

"Oh," she says. "You shouldn't do that." And that's all. She limps over to the sink, runs a glass of water, and drinks it. Then she goes back upstairs.

"What happened then?" Bethie's voice sounded strained.

"Nothing. Life just went on."

"Momma never asked what had happened to me?"

"I don't think so. I don't remember."

"Did you ever ask Daddy about what he'd done? No, of course you didn't." She answered her own question. "I wouldn't have, either."

"I'm sorry, Bethie. I'm so sorry."

"You couldn't have protected me from Daddy. Nobody could have, except maybe Momma, and she didn't."

"No," I said. "That wasn't what I was apologizing for. Until I was telling you, I didn't really realize what I had done to you myself. When I think about how I treated you and Sarah, how I hit you, and yelled at you, and one second I was a kid and the next I was Daddy in a little girl's body. Bethie, I don't think you stopped talking because of what Daddy did to you. I think you stopped because of me. And I can never fix that, no matter how sorry I am."

I watched her think about that for a minute. Then, "I don't know," she said. "But I do know this. You were too young, and you did your best, and if sometimes you hit us too much, you loved us, too. You did what you could. You were just a little girl, doing the best you could."

"But I should have been better."

"No! No, you shouldn't. You've done everything right your whole life. You've always been the perfect one. You've never needed anything I could offer. I was broken, and everybody knew it. But you were broken, too—just not where other people could see. You were asked to take on responsibilities that were too big for you. You did your best, but you

were only a little girl. Even when you grew up. I wish you could have heard yourself just now. It was real, like you were living it again, back in that place and time. I could hear the little girl in your voice, and I ached for her. I still do. Let *me* help *you*, for once. Let me be good enough. I was hurt, but it was a long time ago. Lainie, tonight isn't about me. It's about you."

"But it was a long time ago. I never forgot that day. Why does it hurt so much now to talk about it?"

"I don't know. Maybe you left a part of yourself back there, like I did. For us, it's still present tense."

"How can you forgive me?" I asked her.

"It's not a matter for forgiveness," she said. "It happened. It was. That's the big thing. It *was*. And no matter how it may feel, *it is not that way anymore*."

"Why can't I feel like that?" I asked.

"The hurt's too new," she said, pulling the blanket up over my shoulders and stroking my curls the same way I had stroked hers all those years ago. "Just let it hurt. You can find your way through it tomorrow."

She turned the lamp down. I closed my eyes and let the peace of her house and the cool desert night soothe me to sleep.



When I woke the next morning, the sun was high in the sky. A lark was warbling outside my window. The house felt empty. Downstairs, I found a set of keys on the table, weighing down a note from Bethie. I walked through the house, feeling new, raw, and restless.

I needed to work. I could get my laptop and bring it here. Or I could just go home. I knew I couldn't go back into the house that I had called "home" for my entire life. It wasn't home anymore. It never would be again. Home was a lie created to benefit Momma and Daddy, a false world to hide the real one in which we kids had lived. I didn't know who I was anymore. My center had been blown away. Even my name, Elaine, sounded strange in my ears. Was I truly Elaine? What did that mean? I didn't know.

I took the keys and drove back to Momma and Daddy's farm, hoping everyone would be gone. I could handle it if Momma was there; Momma in the house or Momma out of it, it made no difference.

My luck failed me. Daddy sat sleeping in his chair in the living room. I felt the bile rise in my throat. The blood pounded in my ears. I barely heard Momma when she said, "Can you take me to town? I need to see the lawyer and buy some groceries."

It never occurred to me that she might have been inventing the errand to spare me having to care for Daddy.

"Who will stay with Daddy?" I asked, ever the dutiful daughter. My voice sounded amazingly normal.

"Jennifer," said Momma.

"All right," I said. "Bye, Daddy," I said as normally as I could as I followed Momma out the door.

I couldn't look at him. I just pulled the door of that awful house shut behind me and walked down the steps, grateful to escape from the terrible, loving, confusing man dying in the living room. If I had known then what I do now, I wonder if I would still have gone. I like to think I would have stayed and saved his life. But I will never be certain.

CHAPTER 49

Jennifer

When Gwen finally tapped on my door, the sun was high in the sky, though Davy was still asleep in his crib. I stumbled to the bathroom and splashed a little water on my face. The thought of going downstairs and being cheerful to anybody was almost more than I could bear. I thought about our mornings in Happy Valley, listening to DJ sing in the shower while I made him lovely, balanced breakfasts, to be eaten slowly and savored. I thought about being trapped here, in this terrible place, with these terrible people, forever. Daddy was still asleep. When I went into the kitchen Elaine was there, holding keys in her hand. I went back into the living room and found a chair. Pretty soon, Gwen came downstairs, dressed in one of her shapeless, faded dresses. Her hair lay in soft waves over her head. I wondered why she took the trouble now, when by all reports she had made herself as ugly as possible throughout her married life. It was amazing that Daddy had stayed with her, and even more amazing that he had never cheated on her. No one could have blamed him if he had. A woman has a responsibility to make the most of herself.

Her purse was over her arm. "Goodbye," she whispered.

I muttered something, and then she was gone, leaving me alone. I occupied myself by redoing my nails—I defiantly used my hot pink nail polish—but then I must have dozed off again, because when I woke up Daddy was sitting up in his chair, struggling to slide his feet into his shoes.

"Let me help you," I said, hurrying over and working his ugly, run-over farming shoes over his heels and tying them quickly, neatly. He had already put on the pants and shirt that always lay in a pile behind his chair these days. I must have been deeply asleep to have missed all that.

"What's that on your hands?" he asked me sharply.

"What?" I asked innocently, though I knew.

"That paint," he said. "You know better than that."

"Where are you going?" I asked him, rather than allowing myself to be drawn into a pointless discussion.

"To work," he said.

"Want me to drive you?"

"No, Just going to the shop. DJ needs me."

I opened my mouth to tell him DJ wasn't there, but then I looked at him. He actually looked better this morning. "How do you feel?" I asked, instead.

"Like a million bucks," he said, and he smiled. "I think the Lord's performed a miracle. Haven't felt this good since before they found the cancer."

Horror filled me. "Do you want some help?" I asked, feeling like a stranger had taken over my mouth.

"I could use it getting out there," he said. "Then you can watch. You'll need to know what to do, so you can help DJ later."

What could I say? "Let's go," I said in my sweetest voice, though I thought I might throw up. "DJ's probably waiting now."

"How about Davy?"

That almost broke me. "He's fine. He's asleep," I said.

"Maybe we'd better wait for Gwen," he said. "So she can watch him."

Up until then, I had almost fooled myself that this was no more than me being loving to Daddy. "No. We should go now. DJ needs you."

"OK. If you're sure." He turned and shuffled toward the door. I followed him, hands out so I could catch him if he stumbled or fell. But it hardly seemed necessary. He moved slowly, but he stood straight and steady.

We went through the kitchen, down the steps, across the shop yard, and into the shop I knew was empty I kept thinking, *Someone will come.*

Father, let this cup pass from me, I prayed, as Jesus did in the garden. *Provide a lamb, as you did for Abraham.* But the cup did not pass, and there was no lamb.

Someone will save me. Someone will stop this. All the way across the shop lot I kept expecting God to intervene. But he didn't. No one did. At last I accepted that this was His will. And so I drained the bitter, bitter cup.

CHAPTER 50

Elizabeth

“S lucky we finished that field yesterday,” DJ said, yawning over his tea at my kitchen table. “And today’s Saturday. I vote we just move the truck and call it good. I got the knives and spout last night. We can take the chopper over and start first thing Monday.”

“Sounds good,” I said absently, my eyes closed, my nose buried in my own cup.

Outside, the rich green lawn stretched to the raised vegetable beds and beyond to the misty trees and the gate to the river. Morning fog laced the air. I had snuck in a trip to the pool that morning, sitting sleepily on the rock, gazing heavy-eyed at the water. It rippled silvery and blank, reflecting only the trees and the cliff’s black face. I had only stayed a few minutes, then hurried back to fix tea for DJ and myself. I’d wanted to go through to the inn so badly that I could almost see it, the innkeeper sleepy and subdued as she brewed steaming coffee and pulled hot cinnamon rolls out of the oven, the other regulars sitting drowsy and quiet like me, hands wrapped around coffee cups, hunched into the fragrant steam.

But time ran differently there; I couldn’t risk it when the need was so great here.

“How’d you sleep?” my brother asked.

“I didn’t. Spent most of the night up with Elaine.”

"How's she doing?"

"She finally dropped off around five this morning."

"Will she be okay here by herself?"

"Hope so. She sure can't go back there right now."

"Do you believe it?"

"Yes."

"Maybe it was just the morphine talking," he said.

"He hadn't taken any for hours."

"How're you?"

"I'm okay. I'm strong. I can do this."

"And Jenny and I are here. "

"Yes. Maybe we can hire a nurse to do the night care for the next few days. Elaine shouldn't be alone right now, but you and Jennifer can't do all the night shifts by yourselves. I can drive over and help you days." I felt guilty. Even though my reasoning made sense, I wanted to stay here so much I didn't trust my own logic.

He looked up at me. "That's almost two hours each way."

"It can't be helped."

"I just don't want to get into the middle of anything."

"Nobody's asking you to."

After we finished our tea, I scrawled a note for Elaine and anchored it on the kitchen table under the keys to the old pickup I used for trips to the dump. "It's not much, but at least she's not stranded," I said as DJ and I stamped into our boots, grabbed a flannel shirt each from the assortment hanging by the door, and crossed the veranda. I looked across my dew-soaked, flower-filled yard and thought longingly of the village so close ... and so impossibly far. "I hate to leave," I said.

"You've done a nice job with the place," DJ said. "It's peaceful."

"Thanks." I started up the walk. "It pretty much takes care of itself now. I'll drive."

"Kay." DJ slumped in the passenger seat, braced his knees on the dash, wadded up his shirt, jammed it against the window, leaned his head on it, and closed his eyes.

The road ran straight, rolling over the hills in even waves under the pearl and azure sky. Sage, juniper, and dried grasses lined the road and filled the corners between the fields. I let the village slip away with a sigh. My roots were here. Morning peace washed through me, blurring the line where I ended and the universe began. It was almost enough.



Momma was standing at the kitchen sink when we got there.

"Morning," I said.

She sniffed.

"How did it go last night?" I asked.

"I got no sleep at all."

"Didn't Jennifer help?"

"No one did."

"Maybe you can take a nap today," I said diplomatically. "I'll call about a night nurse."

While we were talking, DJ ran up the stairs two at a time. He returned a few minutes later. "Jenny's up," he said. "Mom, soon's she's taken care of Davy she'll sit with Dad if you want to sleep."

Momma sighed. "Don't think I can now."

"Well, at least you'll have a break."

"I know. And thank you. I know I'm not being very nice, but I'm just so tired." Her eyes filled. "It's been hard. And last night—I just had no idea."

Something rang false in her voice, but I was too tired to ask again.

"I know, Mom," DJ said.

"I feel so bad for Elaine. But it wasn't my fault."

"Could you be with her for a few days?" I asked, though I already knew the answer.

"No. Your daddy won't let me stay away that long. He doesn't even like me going to town."

"Elaine needs you."

"No, she doesn't. It's always been Daddy for her."

"Okay," I said, keeping a firm grip on my temper. "DJ, I'll drive over and help you days, and I'll spend my nights at home so she's not by herself."

Momma spoke to the pan she was washing over and over. "It was a long time ago. She's going to have to let it go. It's just ridiculous to make a fuss now."

"Leave it alone, Momma," I said.

A nasty little silence stretched between us. Momma turned on the water and rinsed suds off the pan, set it in the drainer, and started washing cups, one by one, over and over.

"Who'll help me with Daddy?" she finally asked.

"Jennifer," DJ said. "And we'll get a night nurse, like Bethie said."

"I don't want just anybody traipsing into the house."

"Then we'll check references." He started for the door. "Ready, Bethie?"

An hour later, we had dropped the truck at the field we'd be cutting Monday morning. DJ cut the engine, set the parking brake, pulled the key, and put it under the floor mat. Then he jogged over to the Jeep where I was waiting.

"Shall we take the freeway?" I asked as I eased out of the field.

"Nah. Might as well stick to back roads. It's not that far."

I turned onto the narrow paved road that led up into the hills and to the network of paved, gravel, and dirt roads that crisscrossed the back country. DJ leaned against the door frame, his eyes closed again, his knees propped on the dash. When we hit the familiar bumps of the farm road he sat up and opened his eyes.

"Stop and I'll get the mail," he said.

"Okay. Want me to wait?"

"Nah. I'll walk in. Might wake me up."

"Okay."

I pulled into the farmyard with a screech of brakes. My old pickup was sitting outside the kitchen garden gate. I could hear the chopper roaring inside the closed garage. *Elaine must be here, I thought. And she's got the chopper fired up. But DJ sharpened the knives last night.*

Alarm bells went off somewhere in my tired brain. I took the sagging back kitchen steps two at a time and banged into the kitchen.

“Momma?” My boot heels clumped solidly on the uneven pine floor, echoed on the worn boards in the hall, thumped into the living room. “Momma? You here? Daddy?”

Blankets were heaped on the floor by his empty chair. His pajamas—the flannel ones Momma and Elaine had gotten him last spring, when there was still hope he might wear them out—lay in a puddle next to the blankets. His boots stood dusty and abandoned by the door, as they had since his feet had swollen too much to get them on. His shoes were gone.

My heart thumped in my ears. The alarm bells clanged louder. I pulled the door closed, then ran back into the hall. “Momma?”

A door creaked open, then I heard footsteps, and Jennifer appeared at the top of the stairs. Her face was blotchy and her eyes red and irritated, but her nails sported a fresh coat of hot pink polish, her hair was swept up into a froth of curls, and diamond studs glittered in her ears. “She’s not here.” Davy’s angry howl rose in the background. “Did you have to make so much noise? I’d just gotten him to sleep.”

“Sorry,” I whispered reflexively. “Where is everybody?” I took a second look at the earrings. “You going somewhere?”

Jennifer’s hands flew to her ears. “Hold on.” She disappeared then returned, this time with Davy in her arms. Her earlobes were bare.

I asked again, “Where is everybody? Who’s in the shop?”

“I don’t know—I was asleep.”

“Where’s Daddy?”

“In the living room.”

“No, he’s not.”

“Well, I don’t know then. Davy’s teething. I got, like, no sleep last night.”

“Is that Elaine in the shop? Why’s the chopper running?”

“Elaine went to town with Mom.”

“Then who’s out in the shop?”

“Must be Daddy.”

And I knew. I slammed through the screen door, jumped the steps, and ran across the equipment yard, following the chopper’s roar. My boot

caught on the concrete apron in front of the door and I crashed down on my hands and knees, but I was up and running again in a second, cursing myself for not having come here first.

I grabbed the handles on the big, rolling, equipment door, the *closed* equipment door, the door that had, combined with the roar of the engine inside the shop, first told me that something was terribly, terribly wrong. I heaved on it, but it was stuck fast. It had to be locked from inside. I ran around the corner to the small metal door that opened into the alcove that served as both office and workbench. The door flew back, rebounding off a metal shelf and banging shut behind me. Thick, stinging blue diesel fumes, fumes that should have been escaping through the wide-open equipment door, choked me. The chopper was screaming. I started forward, eyes streaming.

He has to be here. Maybe he fell. Maybe he was going to do something and he fell. Maybe I'm in time. Open the door, get some fresh air in here. What was Jennifer thinking, falling asleep when she was supposed to be watching him? That screaming. Why is the header running? The auger's jammed. Where's Daddy? Why is there power steering fluid under the header? Has a hydraulic hose broken?

I stared at the shiny puddle next to the chopper. Dark red. A part of me knew, had known when I saw the empty chair, when I was having that inane conversation with Jennifer. I ran around the end of the header, the screaming pounding against me, and I knew. I took one look at his legs scrambling weakly on the floor, at the neatly tied shoes scoring long clean scrapes in the greasy dirt, and I knew. I felt the blades whirling, the sickle bars slicing, the auger jamming. For a second, my head buzzed with the high, pure pain.

My mind stopped, restarted. Turn it off. His feet are moving. He's still alive. Turn it off. Turn it off and call 911. Don't pull him out, might do more damage. Find a clean cloth.

I scrambled up the metal ladder, slid into the seat in the high cab, and popped the header out of gear. I idled the machine down slowly, then flipped the key off. The engine shuddered into silence.

Now I could hear his voice, whispery, screaming. I shut my ears, slammed my heart shut. If I heard him, if his pain filled me, I couldn't

do what I had to do. I jumped down from the cab, stumbled, ran into the yard, screamed at the house.

“Call 911! Call 911!”

“Is everything okay?” Jennifer called cheerily from the kitchen steps. The sun glinted on her dark curls.

“Call 911,” I screamed at her. “Get DJ.”

I turned and ran back into the shop. *Clean cloth. The cleanest here's my shirt. I should use it. But then he'd see me! No! No, he won't, he's got blood in his eyes, and I can outrun him now, it doesn't matter, I can't, but there's nothing else.* I ran back to the header, yanking the tails of my blue denim work shirt out of my jeans, jerking at the buttons.

His voice was weaker now.

“I'm here,” I said, making my voice strong, stretching through the header and laying my hand on his bloody neck. I couldn't reach his head—it was wedged under the roller. The metal, spring-loaded fingers on the header had scored deep, bloody grooves in his back, buttocks, and legs.

He got quiet. And then he threw up.

“Be right back,” I said, and ran to the chopper's toolbox and grabbed the huge wrench we used to turn the header backwards when it got plugged. *Should I turn it back? No, might do more damage. Where's the ambulance? Where's DJ?*

Hearing Daddy gagging again, I raced back, stripping off my shirt as I ran. *The key. Have to pull the key. The person under the machine always holds the key.* I climbed up the metal ladder, reached under the seat, pulled the key out, and jumped down again, dropping the key into my pants pocket. *Get him air.*

The gagging sounds were getting weaker. I slid under the fingers, over the sickle bar, and in beside Daddy. Wadding up my shirt, I wiped his face and carefully scooped the blood and vomit away from his mouth. He could see me. I could hardly bear to look into his open eyes, but to look away would be to abandon him. I wiped his face gently, staring into the blackness, willing him to know I was there. His mouth opened and he gasped something out. “Need ... to—”

“Shhh,” I soothed him. “Help's coming.”

"Lainie—"

"Lainie's fine," I said automatically.

"NO!"

"It's okay. Hold on. Help's coming."

Daddy took a deep, shuddering breath. His eyes drifted closed. I lay there next to him, inside the header, lightly stroking as much of his bloody, misshapen head as I could reach, repeating my stupid, stupid litany.

"Hold on. Help's coming. I'm here."

Even as I said the words I knew they wouldn't do any good. He might have been comforted by Elaine's presence, but I was no comfort to him. I never had been. He had hated me for what he had made me. Still, though, right now I was all I had to offer him.

He's resting—good. He needs it. Maybe I should get some morphine from the house. But it might make it worse. In the end, I simply lay on my stomach beside him, my cheek in the stream of blood and vomit, and told him it would be all right.

I couldn't see him breathing. But it would be all right.

"The ambulance is on its way," someone near my feet said.

He's supposed to die in bed, not like this. I was still talking to him, soothing him, trying to give him hope.

"Is he all right?" someone asked.

Stupid question. "WHAT DO YOU THINK?"

When the ambulance came whooping into the yard I said, "Hold on, Daddy, the paramedics are here," and slid out of the header and ran outside.

"Please hurry!" I showed the paramedics the wrench and asked if it was all right if I turned it.

They reached through the header and pressed their hands against his neck and told me that it would be all right, and, released at last from the terrible stalemate of waiting, I turned the wrench. They lifted Daddy gently out of the machine and onto a gurney. They covered his head.

"No!" someone screamed. "No, he can't breathe. Let him breathe." I realized it was me.

I forced myself to focus on the yard. Momma was crying on Elaine's shoulder. Then a man in a blue shirt was there, and he gently wiped the sticky mess off my cheek and pushed back my blood-soaked hair, and then Momma was saying, "Cover up, Elizabeth, what will people think?" and then Jennifer was shouting, "What have you done? How could you do this to him?" And someone else said, "Jenny, get ahold of yourself," and there was DJ, holding Jennifer's face against his shoulder so she wouldn't have to see the blood and the terrible wounds. And the man in the blue shirt gave me a clean blue jacket, and then he turned the sheet back so Daddy could breathe. I realized it was Greg the emergency medical technician, not the awkward Greg I had seen in the store, but as he had been in my other life, when he was my only friend besides Toby. His mouth was angry, but his eyes were sad. And then DJ was saying, "What happened? Did he fall? How did he get out here?" but I had no words to answer him. Speaking them would make them true.

The ambulance doors closed and it pulled slowly out of the yard. "They need the siren!" I shouted. "And the lights! Can't they go any faster?"

"No," someone said gently. "They don't need to go faster. They don't need the siren and the lights. They don't need those things at all." And something snapped.

The next thing I remember is the edge of the emergency room's orange chairs cutting across the backs of my thighs, and feeling so, so cold. Greg sat beside me. I stared at his dusty boots. My face felt stiff and sticky. The bitter iron smell of blood and vomit hung all around me. "What was he doing?" Greg asked, his voice faint behind the high hum in my head.

"I don't know. I don't know how he got out there alone. He can't walk that far anymore. I don't know how he even got his shoes on and tied." I knew I was talking, but I could barely hear my voice.

From somewhere far away, a nurse was saying, "We need you to sign some papers." A pen and clipboard appeared between my eyes and Greg's boots. A hand jiggled the pen, then thrust it at me. I took it clumsily and scrawled something on the forms. "He has cancer," I said, knowing she would need to know. "I forgot his morphine. He'll need pain pills. It's been too long. Can we get some here?"

I heard some far-away noise and bustle. DJ and Jennifer, carrying Davy, and Elaine and Momma appeared in the white mist around me.

"Where's Sarah?" I asked. "We need Sarah here. We have to call for a night nurse. This'll be a terrible setback."

"No, sweetheart," Greg said. "You won't need nurses."

The world snapped again. I gasped.

"Here, take this." A nurse handed me a pill. I took it automatically, put it into my mouth, took the little cup of water, and swallowed.

We all sat there, silent, waiting for someone to come and tell us what to do. At last the doctor—when did they get so young?—pushed through the swinging doors. He'd taken the time to wash his hands and change his scrubs.

"I'm sorry," he said. "There'll have to be an autopsy."

"Why?" DJ jumped to his feet. "His head got caught in the chopper. That's pretty obvious." Just as suddenly, his shoulders slumped and he dropped back into chair, burying his head in his hands. "God, he got caught in the chopper. He was always so afraid of that. That last day, he was worried about Bethie's pants getting caught."

"Honey," Jennifer murmured, "'Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain.'"

"I'm sorry, sir," the doctor said, "but any time a death occurs in suspicious circumstances, there has to be an investigation."

"I was asleep," Jennifer said.

So what? I thought. This isn't about you.

"With Davy. He's teething. If I just hadn't fallen asleep...." She buried her head on DJ's shoulder again.

He put his arm around her and pulled Davy into his lap.

She held onto his neck. I could see a tiny fleck of dark brown lint marring the perfect pink finish of the nail of her index finger.

She'll fix that this afternoon.

DJ's hand stroked Jennifer's upswept hair, ran around the delicate, naked curve of her ear. The tiny hole in her lobe was barely visible.

I wondered why I was even noticing such things. I knew, of course. The tiny things were all I could afford to let in right now. If I let in the big things they might sweep me away.

"Anyway," the doctor finished, "I've called the coroner."

"Can I see him?" I asked. "Can I see Daddy?"

"It's better if you don't."

"Please. I need to. Just for a minute."

"The doctor said no, Elizabeth," Momma told me.

"Please?"

"Well, if you're sure..." The doctor sounded doubtful.

"Yes. Please."

"Me, too. I need to—" DJ began.

I turned toward him gratefully.

"We have to get home," Jennifer interrupted. "I need to feed Davy."

DJ looked at the swinging door for a long moment, then at me. His eyes apologized, then he turned and followed Jennifer out the door, only to turn around and come back in. "Here," he said. "Take my keys. I'll go with them."

"Come on, DJ," Jennifer called.

Mom and Elaine hurried after DJ and Jennifer. Greg stood silent before me, waiting.

"Thanks," I said to my brother, pocketing the keys. *The crone stands alone.*

"Do you want me to go with you?" Greg asked.

"It's okay." I looked down at the floor. "I came here to help him die. And then he died. But this is all wrong. It's too sudden. I can't understand it. I have to see."

"All right," he said. He led me through the swinging doors. "In there," he said, pointing at a door.

I took a deep breath and stepped inside.

Daddy still lay on the gurney. I took a step forward, then another, and looked at his battered face. I slid onto plastic chair against the wall, gazed at the black bag around his body. I concentrated on breathing evenly, felt the chill of the room. *He needs a blanket and his pajamas*, I thought. *That plastic*

won't keep him warm enough. But I knew it didn't matter. He was dead. Sound receded again. My body had become a shell enclosing a vacuum, a universe of emptiness between the tiny kernel of my soul and the world. I stood up and felt my legs working. I marveled that a tiny spark could control such an immense, distant, cumbersome thing as my body. I looked at Daddy's battered face again. I reached out and pushed the black plastic back a little more. His hand lay beside him, not over his chest, the way he liked to sleep. I gently touched it. It lay curiously slack and dull beneath mine. He was gone. I turned away, but something inside me screamed, *Don't leave him alone!* So I turned back to bear witness to his passage.

Why is this so hard? I wondered. *I've been afraid of him my whole life. Shouldn't I feel relieved? He was my father. Shouldn't I be crying? But I don't feel relieved, and I don't like crying. I don't feel anything.*

From somewhere far away, Greg's voice was asking, "You okay, Bethie?"

I nodded. How could I shout across the void?

His arm slid around me. It felt strange. I stood politely for a few minutes, then slipped out of his arm and turned toward the door. There had been a time when I needed comfort from him. But he had failed me, and now that time had passed. "Bethie," he said.

I looked at him.

"Whose was it?"

It didn't seem strange that he should ask me now. I had been expecting the question ever since the day Elaine got married. Only now did I realize that it was far, far too late. Questions have a time and a season, and this one's time had come and gone.

"Does it really matter anymore?" I asked him. My voice was dim in my ears.

"I thought we were something special," he said. "How could you give yourself to someone else?"

"I didn't 'give' myself to anyone," I said. "He just took. But no one would see it. Not even you."

"I see it now."

"Do you?" I searched his face. "I don't think so."

He sighed and touched my shoulder. "Let's not decide this now. It's not the time. You've just lost your father, and I know how close you always were. We can talk later. When you've pulled yourself together."

"You know nothing at all about me," I said to the man who had been my only human friend. "You never did. I saw to it. And even if you did, I'm someone else now." My quiet words left a sharp little echo in the air.

He stepped closer, his face anguished. "What's wrong? Was it the baby? Whose was it? I can handle anything, but I have to know."

"His," I whispered. My hand twitched toward the body on the gurney.

"Your dad's?" His voice rose.

There was nothing worth saying; I could hear the rejection in his voice.

"Are you serious? That's impossible—he was my Narrow Way Guide. I don't believe it. How can you say such a thing when he's dead and can't defend himself? Whose was it, really? You didn't keep it, did you?"

The tiny part of me that had, against all reason, hoped withered and died. I opened my mouth, closed it, and shook my head. All I could do was turn and walk out. I had no explanation he would be able to hear. And I realized afresh that it didn't really matter now. The girl to whom it might have made a difference had died a long time ago in a pool of blood. For the first time, it occurred to me to mourn her passing.

"Bethie!" His voice followed me, but I just kept walking out of that place, out of the hospital, finally feeling something, feeling the long strides my legs took, the impact as my boots hit the polished tile floors. I followed the blue line on the tile floor toward the scalding sunshine outside.

"Bethie! Wait!"

I walked across the sun-softened asphalt to DJ and Jennifer's red minivan. I slid behind the steering wheel, fumbled the key into the ignition, and pulled out of the parking lot, seeing the other cars, the stop signs, the shops, in a vague, distant sort of way. I drove through town, up the sweeping hill to the high desert, then followed the shady road by the irrigation ditch and turned into the dusty track. I parked the car and walked upstream, stopping when I got to the flat rock. I stared into the water, not seeing it.

The sounds of eternal summer surrounded me—the whirl of grasshoppers, the tuneless chirping of birds, the rustle of leaves, the voice of the river.

The music came so softly I didn't even sense it at first. It wrapped itself around me, whispering, bidding, calling. I waded into the current, bracing myself against its tug. I climbed the opposite bank. And then Toby was there beside me, smelling of ripe wheat and clean sweat, his hair shining blue black in the sun. I thought of him dying for me, with me. I thought of all the might-have-beens forever destroyed by my father's hands, and now again by his death. I thought of my family, hurrying away from Daddy, from me, from the ugly reality that we had been.

I think that was when I understood why I had to be there. I had to be there to bear witness not only to Daddy's death, but to the death of the child I had been, to the death of the children we had all been together, to Toby's death. No one had mourned us. No one had acknowledged the loss. They had just pretended we had never been. I thought of the Lady's words. *There must be an accounting.*

I had to remember, to know, to mourn. I turned to the man beside me, the man who had somehow come out of all that death, the only person who remained to bear witness with me and mourn the loss of what we might have been, and buried my face in his warm chest. His arms came around me, holding me, shutting out the world, leading me up the path and through the gate. I felt a slight shifting, a slight resistance. The music came louder, and I heard voices shouting, laughing. A hawker's voice wove a counterpoint to it all. I turned in his arms and saw a motley, familiar, tumble of red roofs in the valley below.

"Do you want to go?" he asked softly.

"It's the village?" My heart lifted.

"Yes."

He took my hand, and we walked down a winding path that became a narrow twisting street running past creamy houses and shops and ending at the square. My vision expanded, and I saw again the infinite network of possibilities the universe holds like a shimmering web, dark, light, harsh, gentle, coarse, smooth. I breathed them in, and felt my heart ease. This

was my place now. My father's hands might have destroyed a bit of the web of possibilities, but infinity remained. The sun shone clear and warm, the breeze was cool. Across the square. The baker set out fresh loaves of bread. Children fluttered and laughed, winking in and out of sight. Colors flashed bright in the sun.

Someone was looking at me. I turned, seeking out the source. The woman I had first seen in my attic stood across the square. Behind her stood a little cluster of women, and though I had never seen them, I knew them. I thought of the house, of the women whose place it had been over the years, of the women who came to my door, the magic in the place, and my conviction that I was there for a reason.

I looked at the town, felt the magic in the air, and knew I could simply walk away from everything, walk into a new life here, with Toby, one filled with endless possibilities. I wondered fleetingly if the town was real, if he was real, or if I was just imagining this because I needed it so much. And then I thought again of the women who came to my door, women who needed me to help them find their way back to hope, to courage, to magic. I thought of Elaine and DJ, who needed me to watch their backs. I thought of Momma, who had abandoned us in her need to escape. I thought of the dog Toby had been, of the girl I had been, never could be again. I wondered who that girl might have become, had she been allowed to live. I would never know.

I looked longingly at all the possibilities, and I chose my path, not just for my family, though they were part of it, but for the girl I had been, for the woman I would never be. I could not unmake those terrible events—I wasn't sure I would if I could—but I had to finish the story, to stay and bear witness, give an accounting, grieve the loss, lay it away. Only then could I turn my face to the new.

"I can't go there," I said simply.

"Why not?" Toby asked. "They don't understand you."

"No," I said slowly, "but they need me. Whether they know it or not. I am their memory." My throat closed.

He nodded once. "Being needed is a powerful thing," he said, and something told me that he understood.

We walked back up the hill and stood in the gateway, listening to the joyful town, smelling bread baking, watching the sun glint off the roof tiles. Then we stepped through the gate and it was gone, leaving only a whisper of music behind. Sorrow weighed on me like summer heat. I swallowed against the lump in my throat and recrossed the river. Toby followed. The pain, the loss, the anger—for now, this was my life, and I had to live it, no matter how much it hurt. Bitter as it was, I needed to be here. I sank down on the grass beside the river, silent and dry-eyed. Toby's arms came around me. I leaned back against his shoulder. Sunshine warmed my head. Daddy would never feel the sun again. I thought of his hair, silvery and thin, and his huge, strong hands wrenching bolts, trembling as he counted out change for ice cream sandwiches, and suddenly feeling poured through me, flooding the void, and I couldn't bear it. I thought of all the things that would never happen. He would never say he was sorry. I would never learn to love him without fear. A whole web of possibilities had died in the chopper today.

Toby's arms tightened around me, and his hand came up to cup the back of my head like I had cupped Daddy's head as he lay dying. And suddenly it was all real, unbearably vivid, hard bright colors, sharp smells, thundering hearts. I wailed, and then I sobbed, and all the while Toby held me, rocking me until I had exhausted myself and lay limp in his arms. And into the quiet came an old, old knowing. *No escape, but here was comfort.* We had been irrevocably changed by that long-ago night, true, but the bedrock of us had survived. His fingers came under my chin, lifted gently, and his lips kissed my salty cheeks and then my lips. The kisses slowed, deepened. I clung to him, kissing him blindly. He paused, and I drew him back to me. And then I was lying on the crushed grass, and he was lying beside me, then over me.

"How can you touch me, knowing what I am?" I whispered.

"How can I not?" he whispered back. "You're the other half of me."

"What are you?"

"Does it matter?"

I thought about that. "Not really. But how did you do it?"

"How could I leave you?" he asked simply. "I love you."

I caught my breath, then laughed. "Could you always do this?"

"I don't know," he said. "I never tried before that night." And then he kissed my nose quickly, lightly, like he had before, and I knew it was true, that I was not the only one who had learned that I was more than I had ever expected to be. Daddy's hands had destroyed one net of possibilities—but they'd left room for another to grow among the ruins.

I laughed, and threw my arms around Toby, and because he had always held it carefully, I opened my heart as well as my body. He held me through the afternoon, finally stirring when the sun dipped behind the trees. I rose and walked with him to the river, then into it, stopping in midstream.

"You can find it again, you know," he whispered. "As long as you can find it in your soul, it will be here. And so will I. As long as you need me."

"Thank you," I said, and put my arms around his neck, pulled his face down to mine, and rested my forehead against his for a long moment. And then I let him go.

He went up the hill, through the gate, out of sight. When he was gone, I sank down, letting the chilly water rise over my thighs, breasts, shoulders, face, hair. I held my breath as long as I could, then shot to the surface, gasping, and pushed my way back to shore. Where we had lain, the grass was strewn with daisies and dandelions. I lay down among the flowers, still smelling our lovemaking on the fertile earth. Daddy was dead. I was alive. Light, dark. Infinite possibility. Mourning a stillborn future was useless. I had to bear witness and remember, true, but that needn't keep me from making the most of what the life I had offered. I got up and dressed, my soul quiet, and then I walked back to the car in silence and drove through the chill evening to my mother's house.

I walked into the stifling kitchen, the river's cool silence still wrapped around me like a blanket. For the first time since I'd arrived, I knew what I had to do.

The first thing I heard was Jennifer's voice. "Where have you been?" she asked. "How could you do this to us? We were worried."

"Not worried enough to wait for me," I said. "Where's Elaine?"

“Upstairs.”

I climbed the stairs. The old crystal knob on her door wobbled in my hand. Elaine lay curled on the bed, eyes closed, arms tight around her middle. I sat on the bed, my hip warm against her belly, and rubbed her shoulder gently, letting the river’s quiet flow over her. When she finally spoke, I had to bend to catch the raw whisper. “He got away clean. All my life, I tried to be what he wanted me to be, even when it hurt so bad. He just dumped all that and then he checked out so he wouldn’t have to deal with it. All those years ago, if he’d told me I could have saved my babies, maybe my marriage. That was my last conversation with him. That bastard.” She sounded sad.

My hand made slow, gentle circles on her back.

“He took all the help and love and loyalty I had to give, and then he threw it in my face. And he’s getting away with it. Now he’ll never have to answer for the things he’s done. They’ll sit there at the funeral and talk about what a wonderful Christian he was, and what a loss, and what an inspiration and example to us all. They’ll talk about how he was such a wonderful father, and even if we told them the truth they wouldn’t believe us. They’d just say we were crazy.”

There was nothing I could say to that. She was right.

Finally she turned over and sat up. “What do you think, Bethie? Am I wrong to feel this way?”

And there it was, one of the reasons I was here. Elaine had always done what she was told, maybe now more than ever. If she was told she should forgive, forget, unmake the past, she would try. And maybe for a while she would succeed. And she would be broken forever. If I told her she was right to be angry, she would get angry. All the love, loss, confusion, and pain would morph into rage, and she would be just as broken. My words had to be the ones that would set her free, would allow her to choose her own path, even though what she wanted from me was direction. I thought for a minute, then answered her question. “The universe has a way of making us face ourselves. One way or another, there’ll be an accounting.” Even as I said it, I knew it wasn’t enough.

"I wish I could believe that," Elaine said into the darkness.

I sat with her until I heard her breathing slow and even out with only the tiny hitch in it to betray her troubled dreams, then I tiptoed out, and pulled the door shut behind me. Light from the kitchen glowed in the stairwell and hit the ceiling. Voices rose, carried on the light. "—miss him ... loss ... morphine talking ... overreacting ... get over it ... blame someone ... inappropriate ... smell her? ... and Daddy not even cold...."

I went into my old room and closed the door behind me, crossed to my altar, picked up the little carved Toby, and took him to bed with me. I lay there, holding him to my heart, and thought of Daddy and ice cream sandwiches and DJ and "Alice's Restaurant." Of Sarah and the Charburger on hot Saturday nights. Of Elaine shining and joyful, pouring across the fields like gold on Harry's smooth back. Of Toby laughing and panting beside me during harvest. Of Elaine's wedding, and that long, peaceful day by the river, the day Momma had held me for the first and last time. The moonlight touched the dark stain by the wall. I rubbed my thumb over the carved dog's rough sides. If I could have cried again, maybe the loss would have eased, but I couldn't.

It wasn't that I wanted to go back—nothing could have been further from the truth—but I found myself aching for the girl who had disappeared forever on the night Toby and I died. I think that until that night I had thought that maybe with Daddy gone it would be safe to recapture some of the closeness with Elaine, Sarah, and DJ. I think I had some hazy idea that we could build a life of the happy moments—work the farm, share the harvest like we had this summer, have long, bittersweet fall evenings sitting at the battered iron tables beside the railroad track behind the Charburger, lie on our bellies and sing along to "Alice's Restaurant." I think I had thought we could be safe, happy, children. But the time for us to be children was long past.

I left my bed and went to sit on the windowsill, my knees drawn up to my chest. I looked out into the moonlit night, aching at the nearness of the past, and the impossible distance. It lay all around me, just a timeslip away. I stared out at the dark smudges that were the trees along the creek

and knew the truth: I had been wrong in hoping to heal the past. It was long past healing. We would never be a happy family. I would never have a happy childhood. I would never erase the scars on my soul. I would never be the person I might have been. I would never even know who she was.

I sat there in the moonlight, the little Toby clutched in my hand, and at last I wept. I wept for the girl I had been and for the girl I might have been. I wept for Elaine, who had lost everything for love of Daddy, only to have him sacrifice her to his savage god. I wept for DJ, for the gentle, patient boy he had been, and for the man who had grown up to be everything he had been told he should be. I wept for Sarah, for the loss of her bright, sarcastic wit, her wide, defiant grin. I wept for my mother, who had loved us for a few brief weeks during that long-ago summer. I wept for Toby. I wept for the long drives to the grain elevator with the wind pure and scalding in my hair, for the sun rising pearl and pink as we baled hay. I wept for Greg. I wept for ice cream sandwiches. I wept because my father was dead, and only now was it safe to remember that sometimes he had loved us. I wept for all the stillborn possibilities.

At last the tears exhausted themselves. I sat at the window, drained, empty, at peace, keeping vigil until the sun came up and my father's soul had slipped beyond recall.

CHAPTER 51

Sarah

The phone rang. “Where’ve you been?” Momma asked. No ‘hello’ or anything.

“Right here, Momma,” I said.

“You were not,” she snapped. “I’ve called and called.”

I didn’t say anything. I didn’t have to—she just plowed right on and told me Daddy had gone and fallen into the chopper.

“Was he hurt?” I asked. I’m not much good in a crisis.

“What kind of question is that? He’s dead.” And she started crying.

I felt like I was going to throw up.

“Maybe it’s better this way, though,” Momma went on after a minute. “The cancer was getting real bad.”

“What cancer?” I asked.

“The cancer we told you about.”

“You never told me.”

“We did so. We called up Pastor Rayburn and asked him to tell you so you didn’t have to hear it over the phone.”

“Well, he didn’t tell me.”

“He did, too. He told us he did. You just weren’t paying attention.”

“Momma, I would have remembered something like that.”

“Well, it’s obvious you didn’t. I know we don’t matter to you, but....”

I tuned her out.

After all his preaching to us about being careful, Daddy went and got himself minced. Shit, I'm gonna need a black dress. There'll be a funeral. No doubt about that at all. Half the folks'll be there to say goodbye. The rest of 'em'll be there to make sure the old bastard's planted so deep he can't never crawl out. That's gonna be one closed coffin. Ol' Daddy kept that chopper runnin' like poop through a goose.

The thoughts just ran on and on. *It's a damn good header. I guess they'll just scoop up the pile of corn, bone, blood, shoe leather, weeds, grass, alfalfa, mice and duck parts, tin cans, watch parts, and god knows what else and dump it in the coffin. Why am I even thinking this? It's horrible.* In case you don't already know, choppers are made to strip, tear, and chop up just about anything you want to put through them, up to and including twelve-foot cornstalks and hard, dry cobs. Running Daddy through probably didn't even pull the engine down. He was always on at us to do that. "Make that engine howl," he'd say. "It's like you kids. If it's not howlin' it's not workin'." And then he'd laugh. I bet he didn't even make the engine whine.

I couldn't stop the thoughts. Awful as they were, they were better than thinking about what else was happening in my life, so all the while Momma was talking about Daddy dying, I was thinking about what a great chopper we had. Momma didn't even notice I wasn't saying anything. She just kept carrying on about how the next thing Daddy would see was Jesus' face and how he'd ride a cloud to heaven and live forever with the Lord. At the very end she sorta sneaked in that the cops might call and I should be ready. I was still back on the chopper and the duck parts and being glad she hadn't pushed the "where were you two days ago" thing, so that barely registered.

See, Momma was right. I'd lied. I'd spent the last couple days sailing the Good Ship Jimmy Jay into harbor for what turned out—much to both our surprise and my joy—to be its last voyages ever under my command.

It was just one damned thing too many on top of a lot of little things that'd been niggling for a long time. I was tired of listening to the man rant about all the pressure he was under, how grateful I should be that he was sacrificing so much to screw me, how it truly was God's plan for us to be together, and I should just wait a little longer till he could dump the Old Battle Axe. I was tired of lying to everybody. I was tired of hanging around

so Pastor Rayburn could call me in his spare time, tired of his not calling me often enough to make it worth my while. I was tired of worrying about what I'd do when the Brethren, as Narrow Way ministers like to refer to themselves, realized just what all was in my job description. I was sick and tired of listening to Pastor Rayburn make snide remarks about "the ladies," and how they should be seen and not heard. I was terrified about my missed periods. And then he'd had the nerve to make a crack about my weight.

I mean, there he was, with his hairy white belly spilling over the red groove where the elastic of his bikini underwear cut in under his love handles. It was just about to the point where, I swear, I was going have to call in Search and Rescue to find his little boat, and he had the gall to say I was getting a belly, and that I needed to work out more.

I just lay there counting ceiling tiles and making pictures out of the water stains and waiting for Pastor Rayburn to make it to harbor, and all the while I was getting madder and madder at the nerve of the man, especially since I'd been eating practically nothing on account of I had a touch of the flu. By the time his pathetic little boat came sputtering into port I'd decided I had been sailing longer than anybody should have to.

I hadn't gotten around to figuring out how to tell Pastor Rayburn about that any more than I knew how to broach the subject of my missed periods, his possibly fake surgery, or what I suspected about the Youth Ministries secretary, but I was damn sure when I snuck out of Motel 6 that night it better be the last time, or somebody was gonna wind up in a body bag. I got into my car, started down the freeway on-ramp and thought of his hand jiggling my belly. My foot just slammed down on the gas pedal. By the time I hit the freeway, I was squealing the tires and sliding around corners and on the straightaways I had that sucker pegged. I was truly, royally pissed, and I didn't really know why. I just kept yelling, "How dare he! How dare he!" all the way home.

I called in sick the next day. "Wore ya out yesterday, huh? Can't help it. I'm a reg'lar tiger," Pastor Rayburn chuckled. "Take it easy, baby. Git some rest—we got that big weekend in Vegas comin' up."

"More like a polecat," I muttered.

He guffawed. "Never heard it called that before," he chortled. "Polecat. I like it. I'm a polecat, all right."

"You know what a polecat is?" I asked.

"'Course I do," he assured me. "A cat with a big ol' pole. That's me."

I didn't say another word. I called in sick the next day, too.

"You okay, honey?" he asked.

"Sure, darlin', ah'll be jus' fine," I drawled, and hung up.

He called back that afternoon. "You gonna be ready for the Prayer Conference in Vegas, sweetheart? I've got some big plans for the boat, once I get my sermon out of the way. You got it written, doncha? I boughtcha a new teddy 'n' ever'thang. It's red lace." I could hear him panting. "You been workin' on that belly, like I said?"

"Ah surely am, Pastor Rayburn," I said, all sweet-voiced. "But I don't think I c'n make Vegas. This bug's hangin' in there. Thanks, anyway." I hung up, went back into the bathroom, and stared at the little pink stripes, bright and cheery, on the slip of paper I'd dunked into a jar of my pee.

I stared, then I threw up, and then I crawled into to bed and stared at the wall, just listening to my breath going in and out, and thinking about how it'd feel if I didn't take the next one, how easy it'd be to just stop trying. After a while I closed my eyes and held my breath and just listened to the silence. It was peaceful. And that's where I was when Momma called, waiting for my body to tell me to breathe again, wishing it would just forget to remind me.

Even with everything that lay between us, I still wanted her to tell me it was going to be all right. 'Course I knew that wasn't happening in this lifetime, especially after she told me about Daddy. Terrible as it sounds, I actually felt a little better. Daddy dying that way was horrible, especially with the cancer and all, but a tiny part of my brain saw that now I had a way out of this mess with Pastor Rayburn. Maybe by the time Daddy was planted, he'd have decided to let me off handling the boat, and, in any case, home wasn't dangerous anymore.

Well, I went to the doctor, and Pastor Rayburn headed out for the Prayer Conference in Vegas. He took the new Youth Ministries

secretary—and my new teddy. 'Course I didn't know about that until later, when Janet called.

"Did you know about Jimmy Jay?" she whispered.

I knew more about the man than I was supposed to, but I asked, "What?" just to keep up appearances.

"About him and that new secretary in Youth Ministries? You must've known—you work for him." She giggled. "You know, I thought for a while maybe you...." she trailed off. I just kept quiet. "It made the cover of *Star Magazine* and everything," she went on. "They'll have to transfer him for sure this time. This was just too blatant."

Well, of course, then I had to get up off my deathbed and head out to the Safeway for a *Star Magazine*. And there he was, like she said, right on the cover. Pastor Jimmy Jay Rayburn, the Youth Ministries secretary, and my new teddy. At least that's what I thought it was—the man's bare backside was pretty much blocking the view, but the strap was red lace. If I was mad before, I was livid now. All the sudden I could feel for the Old Battle Axe. It was bad enough that he'd touched me. Breathed on me. Insulted me. Lied to me. Left little wads of slime where even the nice people at Summer's Eve couldn't get at 'em. Cheated on me. Robbed me of the chance to tell Daddy goodbye. What made me the maddest was that I knew what he was—I knew—and *still* I couldn't tell him no anymore than I could use his first name. *What the fuck was wrong with me?* Hell, *nothing that a few months won't cure*, I thought bitterly. Looked like I was out of jobs all the way around. The upside to all this, of course, was that Pastor Rayburn's boat had sailed into my harbor for the last time.



When the phone rang again, I grabbed it on the second ring and said hello in my sweetest voice, in case it was the cops. Damned if it wasn't Pastor Rayburn, calling all the way from Vegas.

"Hey, babe," he said. "I called as soon as I could."

"Hey, Jimmy Jay," I said.

"You called me Jimmy Jay!" he said, delighted.

"Damn. Guess I slipped."

"Don't swear, honey. Bet you're wondering what's goin' on," he said.

"Not really," I said. "I bought me a *Star Magazine*. What I'm wondering is why you never told me Daddy had cancer."

"You know they just make everything look bigger than it is."

"Not everything," I said. "Take your little boat, for instance. Why didn't you tell me about Daddy?"

"What's behind that crack?"

"Do not ever talk to me about behinds or cracks again, Pastor Rayburn," I snarled. "And why didn't you tell me about Daddy? He was your friend."

He ignored me. "The church is standin' by me. They're keepin' my pay goin' till this thing's cleared up an' I can get back to doin' the Lord's work. And they found me a lawyer. He's a good man—got me bailed out right away."

"I do not even want to think about what you were doin' to that poor woman—never mind where you were doin' it—to get yourself arrested." I wasn't sounding sweet anymore.

"It's just persecution, honey," he told me. "The Devil's workin' hard in these last days. I'm bein' crucified in the media."

"What about the Youth Ministries secretary?"

"They're flyin' her home. She can pick up her last check when she gets to town. We just can't have a woman like that givin' the church a black eye."

"Looks like Janet's battin' a thousand," I said.

"Whaddya mean, sweetheart?"

"She said when a minister fucks a secretary, they fire the secretary's ass an' transfer the minister. Hell, she plugged that one right in the eye."

"You shouldn't talk that way, honey," said Pastor Rayburn.

"What way, darlin'?"

"You shouldn't talk about ministers fuckin'. It's not respectful, and I just won't stand for it."

"You tryin' ta tell me they don't? That dog just won't hunt, Jimmy Jay. Not with me. Ministers fuck anything they can pin down long enough to shove their johnson in. Or wasn't that you on your desk, an' at Motel 6, an' in the baptistry at your last crusade, while my daddy was waitin' for you to find the time to tell me he was dying? Don't try ta come over all holy on me, you—you whited sepulchre!" I knew that'd

get him—he hated it when I quoted scripture in a fight, because I knew more verses than he did.

“It’s okay, sweetheart,” he said soothingly. “It was just a fling—wouldn’t’ve happened at all if you’d been a little more willin’. I really don’t owe ya any loyalty here. Ya know I’m a married man. Anyhow, I won’t be seein’ ’er again—they’re lettin’ ’er go. And you’re probly already over whatever bug bitcha. We can just forget this ever happened, be like we was before.”

“Nope,” I said. “Ah gotta go home an’ help bury ma daddy. An’ ah never even got to say goodbye to him.”

“Talk right, Sarah,” Pastor Rayburn said. “I don’t know where you picked up that cheap trailer trash accent, but you lose it, right now.”

“Why?” I asked. “Ain’t that what ah am? Ain’t ah a-carryin’ on with a fat old televangelist, just like them poor, big-haired, idiot women down south? How am ah different? What about all that truth in advertisin’ shit?”

“You makin’ fun a me?” he asked.

“Hell, no, Pastor Rayburn. Why would ah do somethin’ like that?”

“I don’t know—but it sure sounds like it. You called me Jimmy Jay, which you never done before, an’ then you insult me—an’ I ain’t never heard you swear before an’ here you are, cursin’ every other word.”

“Mus’ be all the pressure,” I said. “Ah’ve got so much stress.”

“Me, too, punkin, me, too.” Pastor Rayburn sounded relieved to be on familiar terrain. “I’m havin’ a terrible time sleepin’. Want me to come preach for your daddy’s funeral? It’d be a good place for me ta expose myself away from Vegas, maybe save a few souls. I might even be able to wangle a transfer up there. We could be together again.”

I started to cry. “Goddammit, Pastor Rayburn, *why didn’t you tell me?*”

“I just didn’t see how I’d get along without you. I kept wantin’ to say somethin,’ but I didn’t want you to leave. Let me make it up to ya, honey. Let me preach at his funeral. He was like a brother to me.”

“Ah don’t think that’s a good idea, Jimmy Jay,” I said. “Ah don’t think you should expose yourself anywhere.” I laughed through my tears. “You’d just open yourself up to ridicule, if not prosecution.”

It went right by him. "Maybe you're right, sweetheart. We should probly lay low, just till this thing blows over."

"What thing?" I asked.

"You know—this media thing. Like I said, they been persecutin' me. I know it's a sure sign I'm doin' right—the Devil works hardest on the souls that're followin' the Lord's will. But I'd sure appreciate your prayers, an' knowin' you're with me in this, even if we won't be seein' each other for a while. The Old Battle Axe's said she forgives me, but she's gonna be keepin' a close eye on me here, what with the Youth Ministries secretary, an' all. It just ain't right. I mean, ah've put away temptation. They're transferrin' her, ain't they?" He sounded injured.

"Well hell's bells," said I, cheerful as anything. "Ah guess this's truly a shitty time to tell ya ah'm pregnant."

"Don't kid around, baby. That's not funny."

"Ah ain't kiddin'."

"Get rid of it."

"No way, Jimmy Jay. Ah ain't murderin' mah baby. This here's a miracle baby, what with you havin' that operation an' all. Hell, I swan I'm the first woman since Mary to get pregnant by God, since it for damn sure can't be your baby, right? You went under the knife, remember? Snip snip? Cuttin' the anchor lines? This ain't your baby, Jimmy Jay. It's the Lord's. I'd probably go straight to hell for even thinkin' a killin' the Lord's baby."

"Well, you can't go waltzin' a belly in to work an' expect nobody to notice."

"What do you care? I'll just explain to everybody how it *can't* be *yours* since you had that operation before you *fucked me without a rubber* until you took up with the Youth Ministries secretary, so it must be God's. Hell, they'll probably give me a raise—maybe even my own office."

"What do you want?"

"You're gonna have to help." I was making this up as I went along—I didn't really have a clue where the hell I was headed. I hadn't even really thought about it, I was just so damned mad.

“What you got in mind?” He sounded leery. No doubt about it, in some ways the man knew me in a more than biblical sense.

“I’m gonna need some cash. Lots a cash.”

“How much?”

“Lots.”

“But, but ... I can’t account for it.”

“Just tell ’em ya gambled an’ lost,” I said, all sweet reason. “Gotta go. Somebody’s at the door.”

“Don’t tell ’em anything! I’ll help. Just don’t tell ’em.”

I just laughed and hung up while he was still spluttering. Then I wiped my cheeks and went to get the door. It was the cops.

CHAPTER 52

Sarah

“W e need to ask you a few questions,” the thin, dark cop said.

The thick, red-headed one just sat there with a notebook on his knee.

I thought back. “It all started at Elaine’s wedding,” I finally said.

“And when was this?”

“The year I moved down here. Let’s see ... four, five years ago. Actually, it probably started a long time before that, come to think of it.”

“Stick to the subject, please, ma’am,” he said. “I don’t need to know your whole life history.”

That was wrong on so many levels that I just opened my mouth and said, “Why the hell’d you even ask me if you don’t want to hear what I say? And don’t call me ma’am.” I gotta admit the “ma’am” bit bugged me as much as anything. It really hammered home that he knew nothing about me.

“Maybe a night in jail will help you focus,” he said, smiling evilly.

“And maybe it won’t,” I said right back. “Let me tell this my way. Or write the damned statement yourself. And good fuckin’ luck getting a signature out of me.”

“I’m thinking jail time,” he said, dropping the evil smile and going for the hard stare.

I folded my arms and stuck out my jaw and stared right back.

Finally he sighed. “Okay, let’s have it.”

And so I let them have it.

When I stopped to breathe the first cop leaned back in his chair, tilted his head back, and rubbed his eyes with his thumb and forefinger. Then he leaned forward again, braced both his arms on the table, and looked at me. His eyes were red. "Let's talk about the rest of your family. Elaine...."

"What about her?"

"Tell me about her."

I didn't even have to think about it. "Elaine's perfect," I said instantly.

"Perfect how?"

"She's smart. She's beautiful. She's thin. She married a minister and has two sons. She works for the church. She's done everything right."

"But she's divorced, and—" he consulted the damned notebook again "—and she lost custody of her sons. Doesn't sound so perfect to me."

"Yeah, well, she's still perfect."

He looked at the notebook. "Says here she lost custody because she refused to block your dad's access to her sons."

"Elaine wouldn't—"

"Why not?"

"She was Daddy's girl. Always was."

"You don't think she might have, oh, harbored some ill will at the thought that your dad might have cost her her children?"

"Not Elaine. She didn't even get mad at him when he shot Harry."

"Harry?"

"Harry the Hairless Horse."

"Why did he do that? Shoot a hairless horse?"

"I don't know."

He gave me a long look. "When did this happen?"

"Uh, the summer Grandpa died ... it was when we were kids."

"And you don't know why he did that?"

"No. We weren't allowed to talk about it."

"But you did."

"No. We didn't."

"Why not?"

"Who would I have talked to? Elaine always did what Daddy wanted. Even if I'd asked her, she wouldn't have told me. Hell, she probably would have ratted me out to Daddy. Bethie didn't talk at all then. She wasn't quite right, anyhow, so she wouldn't know. DJ was—I don't know how to explain it." I stopped and thought. "It was like he was made of crystal, you know?"

"Why?"

"It started when he was born. He was born really early, so Momma took care of him while Elaine watched the rest of us."

"How old was Elaine then?"

"I think ... six ... or seven, she was seven."

"And she was responsible for you and your sister?"

"I guess. I remember bits and pieces, but I was only two or three, so I don't remember much, just that Lainie took care of us."

"But that was just when your brother was a baby."

"No. She took care of us whenever Momma was sick."

"Was your mother sick a lot?"

"All the time."

"So Elaine took care of you 'all the time'?"

"Off and on, yeah."

"Back to DJ..."

"It was like DJ was *right*. He was the son. He was going to be the minister. That was set for as long as I could remember. It was like he was a trophy, you know? Like something you hang on the wall and only take down to dust. DJ never wanted to talk about what happened to the rest of us."

"Did he know?"

I felt the bitterness swell within me. "Oh, he knew. We all did."

"But you never talked about it?"

"No."

"Didn't you want to?"

It took me a long time to answer this simple question. "We were afraid," I said at last. "Talking would have made it real, you know? Besides, who would have believed us?"

"Your minister?"

"You know who our minister was?"

"Who?"

"Jimmy Jay Rayburn."

"The televangelist? The one under investigation?"

"Yeah."

"Hmmm." He looked at the notes again. "So Elaine wouldn't have done anything against your dad. You've been down here in California. DJ probably wouldn't have done anything, either, because he doesn't want to acknowledge the situation. That leaves your mom and DJ's wife, Jennifer, and your sister, Elizabeth."

I laughed. "If Momma was going to do anything, she would've done it years ago. And DJ's wife's a counselor. I think they're trained to handle situations like that."

"So that just leaves Elizabeth."

"No, it doesn't. I told you: Daddy killed her years ago."

"No, he didn't. She came back just before your father died."

My mouth fell open. I gaped at him—definitely not my best look. "Bethie came back?" I whispered. "She's back?"

The cop looked at me, his eyes hard. "Are you trying to tell me you didn't know?"

All I could do was stare at him. Bethie had come back, and I had just finished explaining why she had every reason in the world to want Daddy dead.

The cop snapped his notebook shut. "I think we've finished here for the moment," he said. "I'll pass this on to the detectives in Paradise. I'm sure they'll want to talk to you when you get up there. But I don't think there's much question what happened."

"Yes," I said, "not much question." And then I went into the bathroom and threw up. When I finished doing that I hauled my biggest suitcase out of the closet and started stuffing clothes into it. I had a plane to catch. Bethie had come back, and thanks to my big mouth she was going to need me more than she ever had.

CHAPTER 53

Jennifer

“It was only a matter of time,” I told Gwen gently after the police came and took Elizabeth away. “We’re lucky they waited this long to come get her.”

“But why?” Gwen asked. “I don’t understand why they would even think such a thing.” She watched the police cars ease slowly down the driveway. Elizabeth sat in the middle of the back seat of the second car.

“I had to tell them,” I said, putting my arms around Gwen. “I’m a counselor, a mandated reporter; I have to report these things.”

“Tell them what?” Gwen’s voice was shaking.

“That I heard her talking about killing him. And with what she was saying—even if it’s not true, the fact that she would even say such things at a time like this points to some very deep-seated hostility. And he was alive when she found him. She said so.”

“But—”

“I know it’s hard to believe.” My arms closed around her and I rocked her gently. “But we can’t close our eyes to the facts. And the facts are that Elizabeth came home planning to—” my voice broke “—planning to—” I couldn’t go on. I broke down into tears, and felt Gwen’s arms coming around me. And then, at long last, it was my turn to be rocked gently, soothed away from the horror of the pictures in my head...



The woman opens the door and follows the faltering man into the shop.

"What do I need to do?" she asks. But she already knows.

"Can you fire her up?" the man asks. "I need to check the sickle bar."

"You'll have to tell me how." She feels like she's dreaming.

He tells her how to do it. The machine roars into life. He asks her to engage the header. The woman, up in the chopper now, pushes the lever down and forward, hard, the way she saw her husband do it. And then she stands up, slips on some gloves, climbs out of the high cab and down the ladder. She hurries around the machine to where the man is swaying, staring down into the whirling fingers, the flashing knives, the spinning auger. Her hands come up and out, protectively, like they were when they crossed the farm yard. The man totters, catches his balance. The hands flash forward. The man's head snaps back as he tumbles forward into the whirling fingers, the flashing knives, the spinning auger.

She hardly even had to push at all.

The man's feet struggle for purchase. The woman stares, then turns and walks slowly out of the shop, leaving the roaring machine behind her. She crosses the shop yard, climbs the steps into the kitchen, climbs the steps to the second floor, takes a shower, dries and curls her hair, slips diamond studs into her ears, puts on fresh, crisp clothes, walks down the hall to her bedroom, crosses to the crib to her screaming child, lifts him, and carries him to the bed. She lays him down, lies down beside him, opens her blouse, and gives him her breast. Her eyes drift closed as the child nurses. A few tears streak her cheek. Mother and child fall asleep.



I only did what had to be done, what they asked me to do, or would have asked, had they been capable of seeing the bigger picture, like I was. Their very inaction forced me to save us all.

CHAPTER 54

Sarah

So I showed up at the Paradise airport in a little dinky, rattly plane, and first thing I did was throw up on the “Cowboy Up” mosaic in the terminal. I hit the cowboy’s head dead on with the first heave, and by the time I was done I’d pretty much repainted the floor. Didn’t think you could get that much coverage with airplane peanuts, a teensy little cup of soda, and a baby vitamin. I didn’t recognize anybody there, but this tall, dark-haired woman with a blonde baby sitting on her hip sashayed over. She looked sort of familiar, but I couldn’t place her. She was wearing this Chessy cat grin, and sick as I was I knew that somebody with thighs like hers shouldn’t wear a little kid blouse with a Peter Pan collar and a denim jumper minidress. I mean, there’s bad taste, and then there’s tacky, something on which I had become expert, thanks to Pastor Rayburn. She looked like she belonged on *Hee Haw*, for God’s sake. She came up to me showing all her teeth. I dropped my purse and that big old bottle of baby vitamins just rolled right across the floor. She stooped down and picked it up and said, “I used these.”

“Oh,” I said. I grabbed the bottle out of her hand and stuffed it down into my purse. All the while I was looking past her for somebody I knew. I mean, it hadn’t been *that* long. I saw almost everybody at DJ’s wedding two years ago—I should recognize *somebody*. Unless they forgot me.

And then the penny dropped.

I looked at the dark-haired woman and mentally added a big white dress with a long, long train carried by six little kids, the biggest hair I'd ever seen north of the Mason-Dixon line, an even bigger veil, white pigeons pooping all over their golden cages at the reception, and a line of bridesmaids that looked like the ladies room after one of Pastor Rayburn's altar calls. It was a wonder there was any room in that church for guests. But I guessed there didn't need to be—all of her friends were already being held hostage onstage in cheap pink dresses. Okay, okay, so I'm a bitch. I'm sure it was all lovely, and in the very best taste.

"Hiya, Toots," I said. "How's the God business?"

"Hi, Sarah," said the fat lady.

There I go, being bitchy again. What can I say? No matter what I thought then, I know what I think now. But if I'm gonna to tell this I'm gonna have to be fair, or I'm no better than Momma, rewriting things to suit myself. Pin me down on an anthill and coat me with honey and I'd have to admit that when I saw Jennifer in the airport I didn't think she was fat, I thought she was gorgeous—tall, toned, pretty. I also noticed she had little holes in her ears. Those little holes told me that she didn't always stick as close to the Narrow Way as you might think, what with her being a church counselor and a minister's wife and all. She might understand what it's like, having to be two people in one body. I forgave her for wanting to kick me out of the family and got ready to like her.

She gave me this big hug, then shoved her little boy into my face and said, "Davy, say hi to Auntie Sarah." Davy gave me a toothless grin.

I touched my belly and grinned back, hoping my baby might look like him. We walked out the door and around the corner, where some guy in blue cotton coveralls pushed through a swinging door, dumped my bags on the sidewalk, and disappeared before I could fish a tip out of my purse. Jennifer sashayed off to get the car. I waited by my bags, although why I don't know—the place was deadlier than a doornail under the blazing summer sun.

Jennifer drove up in this big red minivan, Davy strapped amidships. I heaved my bags in on the floor beside him, then climbed in front to ride

shotgun. We cruised down past the old army base where all the whores and drug dealers and welfare people lived when I was a kid. Still did, from the looks of things. Burn marks streaked the end of one building. Curtains blew out of a broken window the next row over. Wires dangled from telephone poles. Cars were propped on blocks in brown front yards. It stank of sewage and rancid laundry—what I'd always thought of as The Welfare Smell.

"You want something to eat?" Jennifer asked.

"God, yes. A Charburger might settle my stomach."

Her eyebrows shot up. "I thought you walked the Narrow Way."

"I do, but sometimes I pull over for a burger and fries." I grinned at her. The holes in her ears told me she'd understand.

"Oh," she said. "Okay ... but we'll have to throw away the wrappers. I wouldn't want your mom to see them."

"Come to think of it," I said, "I would've thought you'd stick pretty close to the straight and narrow yourself."

"I do," she said. "DJ's a minister, after all. We have to set an example. What makes you think we don't?"

I tugged at my earlobe like Carol Burnett and grinned. She got a little pink. "That's not the same thing."

"Why not?"

"There's nothing in the Bible says jewelry's wrong."

"What about that old thing about not putting on gold and costly apparel?" I asked, still grinning, waiting for her to grin back and share the joke.

"What about the thing about not plaiting your hair?" she flashed back, nodding at my French braid. "It just says that jewelry shouldn't be our main concern, not that we can't wear it at all."

"It doesn't say anything about not eating Charburgers or drinking Cokes, either."

"You *know* they're not kosher."

My grin slipped. "What the fuck—you're *serious*."

"I have a position to maintain. And *please* don't *curse* in front of *Davy*."

"I *cannot believe* we're having this conversation."

"You started it."

"You know what? Just skip the Charburger."

"No, you want a burger, you'll get a burger. It's not for me to judge." She gunned the engine, swung that minivan around the corner like it was the Indy 500, and whipped us into the drive-thru.

I ordered a double Charburger with cheese and onions, a Diet Coke, fries, and a chocolate shake. "And make that King Size, please," I said sweetly, just to piss her off. I could see her almost choking on the words as she placed my order. When I got it, I held it in my lap. It smelled like heaven. I could see Jennifer darting little glances at the bag, and she kept licking her lips and swallowing. I just left it there—couldn't eat any of it, anyhow, not with her sitting there all holy and disapproving. I wanted to cry.

After a minute she said in this saccharine voice, "We all just feel so bad about Jimmy Jay."

"Yeah," I said.

"It's not true, is it?" she asked, and darted a look at me out of the corner of her eye.

"What?" I asked. My heart sank right down next to the Charburger bag in my lap.

"About that woman. It's just the tabloids, right?"

I had no idea what to say, so I tried not saying anything. No dice.

"You worked for him," she went on. "You must know." And then I saw her eyes drop to my purse, where I had those damn baby vitamins. Her mouth crooked up for a second, before she remembered she was a good Christian and a counselor. Then she smirked anyway ... at least until the sympathetic mask dropped back into place. I didn't need to read her mind to know she was thinking. *Let he who is without sin cast the first stone.*

I also knew that even if she didn't cast any stones, she'd make sure there was a nice big pile between the two of us. But then it hit me—rock piles work both ways. This one would shield me as well as damn me.

"Yeah," I told her, "he was havin' an affair."

"With her?" But she smirked again. She knew better.

"With me."

"Oh, Sarah. He's so old and ugly. And he's married."

"So ... you objectin' to my morals or my taste?" I asked, slipping into trailer-trash lingo like I'd been born to it.

"It's not for me to judge," she said. I wanted to smack her silly. "I won't tell anyone but DJ—we have no secrets."

"Tell whoever you want," I said. "You don't know jack shit about it." Just before I turned my back and started looking out the window, I saw her lips tighten and her eyes get hard. We didn't talk much after that. She had pissed me off enough to do what I had to do anyway. I was pregnant. I fucked up. But I'd be damned if I'd apologize. And in spite of everything, I wanted this baby more than I could say. Not because it was Pastor Rayburn's, but because it was mine. I wouldn't apologize for that, either. The hills rose black and stark on both sides of the freeway. The acrid smell of burned grass tainted the air.

"When did it burn?" I asked.

"What?"

"The range fire," I said impatiently. "When was the range fire?"

"What range fire?"

"Doh ... the one that burned off all these hills? That wiped out all the crops around here? The one that probably put some people out of business?"

"Oh. That. I have no idea. There was a lot of smoke a couple days ago. Maybe then."

I thought of the farmers struggling for survival, of the animals trapped in the wheat, dying in the scalding smoke. "You could at least *pretend* to care," I said.

"Why? I've got enough going on in my own life without worrying about a bunch of grass," she said.

"But it's more than that," I started. "You just don't—"

"Do not tell me one more time that I don't understand," she snarled at me. "I understand plenty. I understand that you and your sisters are a snobby, elitist bunch of bitches that can't stand being compared to a real lady—" she broke off.

I stared at her. “Well, well, well,” I finally said, sweet as sugar. “Trouble in Paradise?”

Silence.

I unwrapped the hamburger and took a huge bite. It tasted like sand, but I ate it anyway, just to spite her. And I chewed with my mouth open.

Jennifer’s jaw flexed.

“I’m so sorry about your daddy,” she said when she finally remembered her manners.

“You got no freakin’ idea what you’re talkin’ about.” I took another bite of hamburger and chewed and just stared out the window at the dead, black hills.

CHAPTER 55

Sarah

While I loitered over carrying my bags into the house and upstairs, Jennifer carried Davy into DJ's room. When I couldn't avoid it any longer I gritted my teeth, opened the door, and dropped my bags inside my room. Then I knocked on Bethie's door.

"There's nobody in there," Jennifer called from DJ's room.

I opened Bethie's door anyway and peeked in. The room looked better than it ever had when I lived here, and sure as shit better than when I left. The walls were still just shiplap over studs, but they'd been painted bright white. A patchwork quilt faded almost white covered the bed, and fat pillows edged with white crocheted lace lay on it. White cotton dresses hung from nails pounded into the studs. The floor was still uneven, worn into smooth waves and hollows. Over by the wall there was a shadow, just a shadow, of a stain. I glanced at it and looked away, fast. DJ and I had done a damn good job. A breeze came through the open window and lifted the sheer curtains. I heard Jennifer come down the hall.

"Don't go in there," she said. "It's creepy."

"DJ told you?" I asked, working up the nerve for another peek at the stain.

"I saw for myself. She's a Satanist—look."

She didn't know shit. I looked around. The stain was the worst thing there, which was pretty bad. If I hadn't known Bethie was alive, it would

have been too much. But I knew she was, and Daddy wasn't. I could handle anything.

"Look at what?" I asked.

"That." Jennifer pointed at the table in front of the window. Bethie had poured some white sand on it. A fat white candle was stuck into the sand, and a little dark basin full of water had been scrunched down into the sand until it looked like a little pool. A fat lady with no face, a bowl with some herbs in it, and a worn black book also lay on the sand. Next to all that stood a Mason jar full of sunflowers and daisies. It was pretty—and it definitely made a statement. But I loved Bethie, and at the moment I wouldn't have pissed on Jennifer if she was on fire.

"So?" I asked.

"It's evil."

"I don't see any evil," I said. "But if it is, she's entitled."

"No one's entitled to be evil."

But I wasn't listening. I'd just seen it—the little carving of a black and white dog. It wasn't very good, really, it had this goofy smile on its little black and white face, but I knew Toby the minute I saw him. She'd gouged holes and poked in tiny pieces of beer bottle glass for his eyes. I crossed the room and picked it up, and all the sudden I was back there, back in that black, black time, and DJ and I were in this room, *and we were trying to pick up Toby's broken, stiff body but he keeps slipping away from us, and we're trying not to think about all the blood our knees are sliding around in, and Bethie's gone—just gone—and Daddy's down the hall, and we're so scared he's gonna come back. Our bloodsuck hands are shaking, and we can't get our footing, and we're both crying and trying not to let each other see, but mostly we're trying to be quiet so Daddy won't remember us and do to us whatever he's done to Bethie. Because she's gone—just gone. And all that's left is only Toby and a room full of blood.*

"Sarah? Sarah!"

I jerked. I was still standing by Bethie's altar, still holding a statue of the little dog I'd helped bury down by the creek. I stared down into the basin pool in the sand. Something shifted, and I saw a wavering face, not mine, and not Jennifer's. I shook my head to clear my vision and looked at the

little dog in my hand. I swear its mouth opened just a little bit more. I know I felt its little sides heave. It was panting. I looked back into the basin, and I for a second the basin looked back. But before I could be sure, Jennifer piped up again.

"Sarah, you all right? Come away from that stuff."

The face was gone.

I turned around. "Dammit, where's Bethie?"

"In jail," said Jennifer, cool as a cucumber.

"In jail?" I asked, my voice rising. "Since when?"

"Since the day after your daddy died."

"But that was four days ago, goin' on five."

"I know." Jennifer just stood there, trying to stare me down.

"An' were you all plannin' on tellin' me this anytime soon?"

"It just didn't seem like my place," she said, so cool butter wouldn't melt in her mouth.

"Why the hell not?"

"Please don't use profanity in my house."

"*Your* house?" I laughed. "When the hell did it get to be *your* house?"

"Your parents said so. They wanted DJ to take over the business. They said—" and all the sudden she clammed up.

"I don't give a rat's ass about the house." I had to stop myself from yelling. "Take it. Burn it down. Turn it into a fuckin' museum. Run a string a girls out of it. I wouldn't have this place on a silver platter. But Bethie don't belong in jail, an' I'm gettin' 'er out right now."

"I'm not sure that's a good idea."

"Why the hell not?"

"We're not sure she's completely sane."

"And jail's the best place for crazy people?"

"We just weren't sure it was safe for Davy."

"Who's this 'we' you keep talkin' about?"

"Well, all of us."

"All of us who?"

"Well, me and your mom."

"An' Momma's a good judge of sanity? Geez, Jennifer, where'd you get your diploma? Out of a Froot Loops box? What about DJ? What about Elaine?"

"Elaine's not been much help. And DJ and I make all our decisions together." She was starting to look a little angry. "And I got my degree from a highly accredited university."

"I surely do wonder if DJ knows that," I said, more to rile her than anything else.

"He does." She looked downright pissed-off now. And guilty, for some reason.

"Well, here's what I think," I said. "I think y'all're just chock full a shit. She's no crazier than I am, an' a hell of a lot saner than Momma ever was." I stormed out of the room. I got halfway down the stairs before I heard her call me.

"Wait ... Sarah, there's something you should know." She paused, obviously thinking about her words now. "When she came here, the first thing she said was, 'I've come to help him die.' And she was the last person to see him alive. I had to tell the police that. As a counselor, I'm a mandated reporter. I'm required to report things like that."

I looked up at her, and for a minute I admit I was rattled. But then I remembered—this was *Bethie* we were talking about. "I still say it's a crock a shit, her killin' Daddy. If she was gonna do it, why wait till he was dyin'?"

I ran the rest of the way down the stairs, only to realize I had no car. But I'm nothing if not resourceful. I headed over to the shop, and sure enough, the spare pickup was parked there like it almost always is. I hunted around, but couldn't find the keys, so I just leaned under the dash and found the wires DJ and I had stripped long ago. I was ready to twist them together when I heard Jennifer's van start up and come crunching across the gravel.

"Get in," she said. "I'll drive."

"If you're sure it's not too dangerous," I snarled.

"Get in," she said again. Her halo had slipped. For a second there, I wondered if it was really safe to get into the car with her—I might be better

off just hotwiring the damn pickup. But I finally got in—the day was starting to get me down, truth to tell, and I took the easy way out.

On the way into town I asked, “So where is everybody?”

“Mom and DJ are down picking out the casket, and Elaine’s over at Elizabeth’s house, I think.”

“Why a casket? Seems to me a couple Hefty bags’d work just as well.”

She glared at me. “Don’t you think that’s pretty cold? He was your *father*.”

“Well, there’s sure as shit not much left now, is there? That’s a damn good chopper.”

“He didn’t go all the way through,” she said. “He got stuck under that round thing. Elizabeth said he was still alive when she found him. And I’d *appreciate* it if you didn’t *curse* in front of *Davy*.”

And that’s the first I knew that Daddy hadn’t run himself through the corn header. ‘Course, finding out that he got himself stuck in the hay header wasn’t a whole helluva lot better. That hay header used to pick up all sorts of things, mice, rats, moles, rabbits, even ducks and pheasants. One time we chopped ourselves a fawn. DJ was driving. He always was softhearted, so he stopped and worked that poor baby out of the sickle bar and tied up its stump where its leg got cut off, clean as a whistle.

If Daddy’d been there, he’d’ve just pulled out his sledge hammer and whacked it across the noggin and thrown the carcass in the waste land beside the field—he always said it was kinder in the long run not to let them suffer. But Daddy wasn’t out at the field that day. We jumped in the pickup and went roaring into town with this little fawn. Couldn’t’ve been more than a couple days old.

I was all for naming it Lucifer because of the foot thing—you know, cloven hooves. What can I say? It seemed funny at the time. But DJ and Bethie shouted me down. We settled on Bubba.

The vet promised to try, but poor little Bubba/Lucifer didn’t make it—too much of a shock, I guess. Another time we managed to chop a sheep. DJ was just sick, of course—had to go around the chopper and throw up while Daddy and Bethie and me tried to get it out.

Finally DJ asked from behind the chopper, "Is it dead?"

"Yeah," I said. "It's dead."

"No, it's not," said Daddy. "The lungs're movin'. And look, you can see its heart's still beating."

"Why'd you have to tell him that?" I asked while DJ was busy heaving into the weeds again.

"Because it's true," said Daddy. "A lie's never right."

"Maybe not right," I said right back, "but maybe kinder."

"Kindness's got nothin' to do with it. Kindness like that'll keep you out of heaven. Sometimes the best kindness is a good whack upside the head."

I had wanted to laugh, but I was still sick about the sheep. If it wasn't dead when we got the chopper stopped, it sure as shit was by the time we got done picking it out of the header a piece at a time. Now I thought of Daddy, caught in that thing, lungs heaving, heart pumping, and I knew that he was right; a whack upside the head can be a kindness. Nobody, not even Daddy, deserved to die like that.

Davy set up a howl in back. I twisted around and saw his toy on the floor. I reached back and gave it to him again, then asked Jennifer, "Why isn't she stayin' here? Elaine, I mean."

"I think she just wants some time to herself," Jennifer said, but she sounded so cagey I knew there was more to the story.

"Woulda thought she'd wanna help pick out the coffin. She always was tight as ticks with Daddy."

Jennifer shook her head. "Not at the end. She's been saying some terrible things, and at a time like this ... well, it's causing a lot of pain."

"What sorts of things she been sayin'?" I asked.

"I don't think I should repeat them. Your daddy said some stuff when he was drugged, and she just overreacted."

"What kind of stuff?"

"Just the morphine talking. Nothing, really. But you know her—always blowing things out of proportion and painting herself the victim."

"Don't sound much like the Elaine I remember."

"Well, she's changed," Jennifer said, snipping the words off with her teeth.

We got to the jail and I wrote a big old bastard of a check courtesy of Pastor Rayburn.

"Guess the wages of sin are pretty good," Jennifer said. She sounded kinda snotty.

"Tell you what, Jennifer," I said. "Why don't you just go over there an' piss up a rope?" I turned my back before she could get her mouth closed. Half an hour later we were walking out of the jail, Jennifer, Davy on her bulging hip, Bethie, and me.

"You sit up front with me, Elizabeth," said Jennifer. "Sarah, you ride in back. I'm sorry Davy's seat takes up so much room. You really can't sit on the middle seat. But you know how it is." She hopped into the driver's seat, keys jingling, humming "Just as I Am." She'd started the engine and popped in her "Savior Like a Shepherd Lead Us to the Foot of the Old Rugged Cross" CD by the time she realized that Bethie'd climbed into the back seat with me. She hiked herself around in the driver's seat, showed all her teeth, and asked, "Elizabeth, are you sure you wouldn't rather ride up front with me?"

"Perfectly sure," Bethie said. "I'll ride back here with my sister." Her hair was a snarled, greasy mess—four days in jail take a toll—and she smelled like sweat, disinfectant, urine, and fear. I gave her a hug, anyway, then moved my arm. We've never been much for the touchy-feely stuff.

"You sure? It's cooler up here." Jennifer was using her Good Christian voice, but it had a bite to it. We all knew that she just wanted Bethie up where she could keep an eye on her, but she didn't quite have the brass balls to say so out loud.

"I'm fine."

I could feel Bethie's muscles in hard knots in her arms. I reached over and laid my hand over hers. "It's okay," I whispered. "I'm here."

I could feel her shaking. I put my arm around her again and she leaned into me. She felt like DJ did all those years ago—like a bird fluttering against my side. The green lenses of Jennifer's trendy

round, horn-rimmed sunglasses kept pointing our way in the rear view mirror, but I didn't give a good goddamn—it was all I could do not to flip her off.

“Guess we're not gonna be close,” I whispered to Bethie.

She didn't say anything. Neither did I, after that. I just sat there, kept my big mouth shut for once, ran my hand gently over my sister's awful hair, and held her up until she found her strength again.

CHAPTER 56

Sarah

Didn't take long. By the time we pulled up outside the house, Bethie was sitting bolt upright and I'd moved my arm again. As soon as she pulled the key out of the ignition, Jennifer grabbed Davy and bolted for the house like she had starving Rottweilers in the back seat. "Get a load a her," I snickered, jerking my thumb over my shoulder.

Bethie managed a crooked smile as we climbed the steps. "I'll wait here while you shower," I said when we got to her room.

"I'm not showering here," she said. "I'm going home." She started folding the cotton dresses into the suitcase on top of faded overalls, underwear, and socks.

I said, as nice as I could, "The cops say you gotta stay here."

"I can't. They don't want me here." She sounded flat, like she didn't care.

"I do," I said. "I need you."

"But the way he died..." She swallowed.

"Hey," I said, "Daddy's gone. The worms crawl in, the worms crawl out. He won't hurt ya no more. Ya gotta tough it out till we get 'im planted. Then you can go home."

"Gods, Sarah," she said. "How can you joke about this?"

"If I once stop jokin', I'll start cryin' an' never stop." Truest words I have ever spoken.

"It's that bad?"

"I'm havin' a baby. The father's that son of a bitch Pastor Rayburn. He paid your bail, ya know, but he don't know it. Ya don't haveta thank him or nothin'."

"Jimmy Jay Rayburn?" she asked. "I never could stomach that man, not even when he was trying to drown me like a kitten in the baptismal tank."

"Please," I begged, "Do not mention Jimmy Jay and stomachs in the same sentence."

"Any redeeming qualities I don't know about?"

"None."

"Why, then?"

I'd been asking myself the same question. "He never gave me a chance to say no," I finally said.

Her mouth twisted. "What'll you do?"

"Don't know."

"You keeping it?"

"Yeah," I said. I touched my belly. "Yeah, I am."

"Then stay with me," she said. "I have a big house."

"Let me think about it," I told her. "We ain't seen each other in donkey's years—let's make sure we get along before we jump in with both feet."

"I can't believe how calm you are. I fell apart."

I didn't say anything for a minute. I couldn't. Then I said, "I'm choosing to have this baby, an' I never for one second want him to think otherwise, or that I'm ashamed, no matter how he started. Long as I can remember that, an' talk trash an' laugh, well, then, I'm okay."

"I never thought of it like that," she said. She grinned. "I just may try it myself." And then we started doing imitations of Jennifer hearing us talking trash at church, the funeral, Sunday dinner. Before we knew it, we were rolling around on the floor, grabbing our stomachs and howling and bawling and gasping, "Stop, stop, you're killin' me," to each other."

Jennifer knocked on the door and said, all sweet, "Can you guys hold it down? I'm trying to put Davy to sleep. And your mom will be home soon."

She might be hurt to hear you carrying on like that so soon after your daddy died.”

“Why, thank you, Mother Theresa,” I gasped, and then I doubled over laughing again.

Jennifer sucked in her breath and swished away.

“We’ll try,” Elizabeth shouted after her, and we did, but you know how it is when you’re trying to stop laughing but your body isn’t ready to yet.

One of us would say “would you guys please keep it down?” in Jennifer’s best fake holy voice, and it would set us off again, and there we were, right back where we started, laughing and drumming our heels and swatting our hands on the floor. Finally we wore ourselves out and sat wiping the tears off our cheeks and catching our breath. Then Bethie caught my eye and we started in cackling all over again until finally it was out of our systems. We lay there on the floor, staring dreamily at the ceiling, our heads touching, bellies aching, feet going four different directions, and we both knew the noise had done us a world a good.

“Well,” Bethie finally said, rolling over onto her hands and knees and pulling herself up on the bed, “Now I gotta shower. I stink like a dead badger.” We laughed some more at Bethie trying to talk trailer trash. She stood up and grabbed one of the dresses she’d just folded into the suitcase and strode down the hall to the bathroom. A few minutes later I heard the toilet flush, then the shower started. Davy started wailing, but I ignored him—Jennifer’d have my hide if I tried to help, anyway—and wandered over by the window instead.

I picked up the woman on the altar, ran my fingers over her, then put her down and touched the candle. It was a little soft from sitting in the sun. I took a pinch of the herbs and sniffed—mint and something else. I flipped open the book. Words—*I’ve spent a good part of my life trying to unmake the rest of it*—leaped out at me. I stood there by the little pool in the pile of sand, the sun beating in on me, a breeze lifting my hair, and I started reading at the top of the page. A few minutes later I picked up the book, crossed the room and sat cross-legged on the bed, the book open in my lap.

CHAPTER 57

Elizabeth/Sarah

In the beginning is the word, I read, and the story sweeps us up like a flash flood, carrying us along, willy-nilly. Sooner or later, though, we must all take up the pen and write for ourselves. But by then the story has developed a flood channel of its own, and sometimes scrambling out of its turbulent, splashing center—at least far enough to see what’s going on—is all but impossible. Life happens, but until we put it into words it’s hard to see its shape. Unnamed things live a sort of half-life floating beneath the surface: wild, unpredictable, deadly, snagging keels and ripping hulls. Until a thing has been named there is still the chance that it doesn’t exist, that it can be unmade. Understanding that is the key to understanding my life. Naming a thing makes it real, gives it a shape. I’m writing this to do the thing we all avoided doing when I was a child. I am writing to make my life real to me, to make a record, to name the thing that must not be named. Maybe I’m brave. Maybe just foolhardy. In any case, I have to make a start. So here goes.

We lived in an old house, which my parents were “fixing up.” Their first year in the house they managed to get the house and fence painted on the outside, the worst of the blackberries torn out of the yard, and the plaster and wallpaper stripped down to the shiplap and lath inside. Then they ran out of time, money, and inclination. As long as I lived there, the walls were bare and unfinished. We never had anyone over because then they’d see how we lived. But every year, Daddy painted the front of the house and the outside of the fence. From the road we looked great.

We never talked about it. Eventually we didn’t even see the raw boards. If you can’t—or won’t—fix something, you can’t afford to see it, give it a name. A named thing takes on a life

of its own. And that was my life—knowing but not knowing, seeing but not seeing, refusing to know by refusing to name. And never, ever, telling.

But to understand what happened, to make sense of myself, I have to see my past for what it was—see it, name it, know it. I don't know who will read this, but someday someone will, and when you do, you'll understand. Maybe better than I do. Fear cost me my voice for years. I don't want to see the words on paper any more than I wanted to say them, to make them real. But what is my alternative? Am I ready to retreat into silence again? The answer is simple, but not easy. When I pick up my pen to write about those days my hand shakes, my stomach knots, and I start remembering all sorts of things I need to be doing. But I dream about them—those days, I mean. I dream about hands, and eyes, mostly—my mother's eyes, my father's eyes, Toby's eyes. At night Toby comes to me and his eyes ask why I let him die like I did. Why didn't I protect him like he protected me? I let him down. And he died.



The shower stopped, but I didn't even notice. Who knew Bethie could write like this? Daddy was wrong about her being retarded. I knew it long ago, but the label had become the reality. Elaine was the good girl. Bethie was retarded. I was the slut. For the first time, I found myself wondering if any of our labels were true, or if they were just names that had been spoken into existence. My mind flashed back to that morning in Pastor Rayburn's office. Though Daddy had seen to it that I knew all about men's bodies, I had still been a virgin when he laid me out on that desk. Virgin. For whatever that was worth.

The door squeaked. I jerked, slammed the book shut, and tried to stuff it under my thigh, all in one fast move. Bethie stood there in the doorway, toweling her hair, staring at her book in my hands. I felt my face get hot, but I just squared my jaw and lifted my chin and stared right back.

"It's okay," she finally said. "I wrote it to be read."

"You sure?"

"I'm sure."

"What happened?" I burst out. "Where did you go?"

She gestured to the book. "Read it. Then we'll talk." She smiled a sad smile, still rubbing the water out of her hair.

"What will you do?"

"Take a drive," she said.

"Want me to come with?"

"No—I'm meeting someone." Her smile was shy, beautiful. She was glowing.

"Anybody I know? Greg?" I was guessing.

"Gods, no!"

"Gods?" I snickered and drew out the S. "What's up with that?"

"Long story," she said.

"So where'd you meet this guy?"

"I've known him forever," she said. The shy smile became a foolish grin.

Bethie was in love? She lifted a linen dress out of her suitcase and slid it over her head, grabbed a comb, and twisted her wet hair into a heavy knot on the back of her head. She slid her bare feet into flat leather slippers and straightened up, and a stranger was standing there—not the broken, silent, little girl I remembered from all those years ago, not my big sister, either, who drove trucks in worn-out coveralls, not the beaten woman we'd just bailed out of jail, not even the sister who'd just been rolling around on the floor with me laughing fit to kill. None of those. A serene, lovely, mysterious stranger. Then she grinned and my sister peeked out of the stranger's eyes. I remembered Elaine's wedding, how Bethie had clumped up the aisle and torn her dress before she'd finally passed out cold on the platform.

When did she get so graceful?

Something of what I was thinking must have shown in my eyes, because she said, "Red dress. Long story. Read." She leaned down and picked up a little canvas pack, slung it over her shoulder, and walked out.

"Wait," I called. "You forgot your makeup."

"Nah," her voice floated back.

And she was gone. I looked around the airy, bright, serene room my sister had created out of nothing, trying to remember last time I'd had the nerve to go out without makeup. The house was so still I could hear the kitchen faucet dripping. I wandered downstairs, carrying Bethie's

journal and my bottle of baby vitamins. I poured myself a glass of ice water from the pitcher in the fridge, popped one of the vitamins in my mouth, screwed the cap on the bottle, and set it on the window sill right where everybody would see it—might as well get things out in the open. I went back upstairs, took a pee, laid myself down on my bed, toed off my shoes, and opened the journal again. My sister's writing flowed across the page, carrying me with it.



An eagle—or maybe a vulture—what Sarah would call a big damn bird—soared overhead in lazy circles. I tracked it longer than I should have. One of the duals bounced off the asphalt and onto the narrow gravel shoulder. My eyes snapped back to the road. I yanked the wheel, pulling the big International back onto the pavement. I glanced at the deep pocket of white sand and dead grass lying between the raised road bed and the fence line fifty feet away and shuddered.

Heat lay on my skin like an itchy wool blanket. Thank God I could go decorate for the wedding this afternoon. After I went to the doctor. My stomach clenched. I ran an experimental hand over my belly. It felt the same except for a hard little knot. Maybe it was nothing. The hot wind, smelling of scorched dirt and wheat, poured through the truck cab in a never-ending stream. The sky glared overhead, forcing my eyes closed. From the top of each rolling hill I could see the road shimmering straight to the horizon like it would never end. In the cab beside me, Toby, our black and white Australian cattle dog/shepherd mix, grinned and panted. He glanced up at me with his laughing amber eyes, then stood up, propped his feet on my thigh and swiped his tongue quickly over my cheek—something strictly forbidden.

“Wanna go to the wedding, too, boy?” I asked, ruffling his bat wing ears. Words had always been safe with Toby. He knew all the secrets, had curled beside me as I wept. And he was as silent as I was. Most of the time.

He whined and scraped a paw over my knee.

“Maybe I’ll just sneak you in under that big, big dress.” I grinned back at him, the words sounding strange and rusty in my ears. He flopped down onto the dusty blanket I kept on the floor between the seats and sighed. I sighed, too, turned back to the endless strip winding across the rolling hills, and tried not to think about the hard knot in my belly, about why, when all of my classmates had graduated last year and gone on to college no one even considered that my life might move on, too. I tried not to think about how I still seemed to be trapped in an eternal childhood, even though I was nineteen now, and by every standard I

should be considered a young woman. I tried not to think about how even though I longed to escape, the power of the family assumption that I was unfit for any life other than the one I led was too strong to challenge. Mostly I tried not to think about how my life stretched before me like this road, endless, merciless and immutable.

A red spot appeared, disappeared, then reappeared on the shimmering black ribbon of road. I watched the spot resolve itself into a lean, high greyhound of a truck with massive sweeping fenders, round fuel tanks, and a peculiar swooping, bouncing gait. It was Sarah and the Coaster. The truck came closer. An arm appeared, waved frantically, then disappeared. I could just make out an elbow hooked through the wheel. Sarah was shifting both the main transmission and the Brownie auxiliary transmission—something that required both hands, close attention to gear ratios, a straight stretch of road, and nerves of steel. I had never really mastered it, but Sarah had courage and speed. She and the Brownie were meant for each other.

The gears engaged, and Sarah's brown, dusty face appeared, split by her wide grin. Her arm shot back out the window and fanned frantically. I stuck my own arm out and fanned back, now that she could see me. And then she was gone, leaving a hailstorm of pinging wheat swirling around me. She was going too fast. I pulled my arm in, shifted, and concentrated on the road.

Maybe some tunes would take my mind off the knot in my belly. I switched on the radio. Static filled the cab. From long habit, I ignored the tuner knob and reached for the bare wire dangling under the radio. With a flick I hooked its end over the metal guard on the fan mounted to the roof, in effect turning the whole cab into a giant antenna. A deep, cultured voice spoke through the static: "This is your one-minute vulture training lesson for today...." The voice faded, then came back. "... says Three Fingers Levine, former vulture trainer...." Shoot. I was missing it.

It was part of a series. DJ and I listened eagerly for each new one. He memorized them quickly, then recited them to me in odd moments (during altar calls at church was a favorite time), using a slow, careful voice, enunciating the words, urging me to repeat them.

"Come on, Bethie, you can do it. I know you can. I've heard you talking to Toby when you think nobody's around. You're smart. Come on, say it: This is your one-minute vulture-training lesson for today...."

I wanted to—oh, how I wanted to. I opened my mouth, and then my throat always swole up and froze, jammed with all the words I dared not say. I had learned my lesson. But DJ never lost patience, never lost faith.

"Come on, Bethie, you can do it. I know you can ... pretend I'm Toby...."

But I couldn't, not with him, not with anybody in the house. And so I watched him, throat aching, longing for the simple, impossible release of words. Before the vulture/walrus/ostrich training lessons it had been "Alice's Restaurant." We'd gotten the old record secondhand and played it over and over one Saturday night, lying on our stomachs on my bedroom floor. DJ sang along with Arlo Guthrie, laughing so loud he set me off. When he heard my strange, croaking laugh, though, he stopped. Then a grin split his face.

"You're doing it, Bethie. You're laughing." I stopped. "Come on, do it again."

Still under the spell of our laughter, I opened my mouth, quickly, before I could think. "You can get—" I whispered.

Then the door slammed open. "What are you doing in here?" Daddy raged at DJ. My mouth slammed shut.

DJ, too elated to hear the danger, said, "She was talking, Daddy. She was starting to sing 'Alice's Restaurant'! Bethie was talking!" His words just tumbled out.

"What have I told you about being in here alone?"

DJ finally heard the danger in Daddy's voice. He scrambled to his feet, but he couldn't let go of the victory. "I'm not supposed to," he gabbled hastily on the way out, then rushed on. "But she was talking, Daddy. Bethie was talking!"

"Close the door behind you," Daddy shouted at him. DJ looked back at me one last time, and then the door shut, cutting me off... and the danger was all around me now.

"... mother-rapers ... father-stabbers ... father-rapers ... all sitting there, next to me, on the bench..." Arlo Guthrie was saying.

Daddy's head whipped around. "What is that trash?" He stomped across the room, scraped the needle across the record, pulled it off the spinning turntable and snapped it in half. "I won't have that garbage in my house."

Our laughter was as dead as if it had never been.

Daddy crossed the room again to stand over me. "So ... DJ says you were talking..."

I stared up at him, my throat frozen.

"Say something."

I blinked and stared some more.

"Come on. Say something for Daddy."

I opened my mouth, hissed out air, shook my head.

"DJ doesn't lie. If you can talk to him, you can talk to me." His voice got deep and heavy. The danger swelled, deadily and familiar.

"Come on," he repeated. "Say something for Daddy."

I shook my head. I couldn't make a sound.

His hand shot out, slapped me. "If I have to beat it out of you, I will."

I flinched as his hand caught my cheek, just a glancing blow.

"Hold still!"

I steeled myself, watched his hand come up again, deliberately, slowly, then felt it slam into my cheek. "No child of mine is going show me defiance. DJ says you can talk. So talk. I'm sick and tired of coddling you." I regretted my laughter, my few words. I knew better, but I had been seduced by DJ's determination, his love, his faith in me. I knew Toby was the only safe place there was for me, but I had allowed myself to forget. Daddy's hand hit my throat, knocking me backward. As I fell he seized my breast through my long flannel nightgown, squeezed viciously, twisted. I fought him, kicked out, thrashed, even though it was forbidden. I was supposed to lay quiet. Fighting would only make it worse, but somehow, that night, none of that mattered.

I fought. I fought so hard, and when somebody knocked on the door and Sarah's voice asked, "Is everything all right?" I opened my mouth. But Daddy saw me and slammed his fist into it.

"It's fine," he yelled at the door. "Mind your own business." Through the blood and sweat in my eyes I saw the doorknob turn, saw the door crack open. I opened my mouth again. Daddy whipped around, Sarah's face was staring in at us. Shame swept me. Now everyone knew.

"Get out," Daddy snarled at her, "or it'll be your turn next."

She looked at me, her eyes sad, angry, afraid, ashamed. Then she pulled the door shut.

And Daddy went back to either trying to force the words out of me or reassuring himself that they would forever stay locked in my throat—by that time I wasn't sure which—jamming himself into me, first my mouth, then, ah—then—and I find that even now I can't write the words. I lost track of time, of sound, of everything but the pounding pain and the shame. Sarah had seen. She knew. Everyone would know me for what I was.

Everything changed that night, but not in the way I expected. At breakfast the next morning, Sarah looked at me, shame in her eyes. But she didn't say a word.

Momma took in my bruises. "What did she do this time, Dan?" she asked nervously.

"DJ says Bethie talked to him, but even when I asked her nicely, she refused to say a word."

"But—" Momma's voice broke off.

"But what?" And the black danger swirled into the kitchen.

"Nothing," Momma muttered, and went back to flipping pancakes. She didn't look at me again.

DJ came into the kitchen. "Hey, Bethie," he said gently.

I looked back at him, and suddenly I, who never cried, I had tears in my eyes, shattering my world into prisms.

"You okay?" DJ asked.

It nearly broke me—would have, if Daddy hadn't said impatiently, "She's fine. This wouldn't have happened if you hadn't been where you shouldn't have been, DJ. Let this be a lesson to you. I mean what I say. You stay out of the girls' rooms."

DJ didn't say anything. He just stared down at the plate Momma put in front of him, concentrating on pouring even drizzles of syrup over the pancakes. I sat hunched behind my plate, looking at my sisters, my mother, my brother, all busily looking at other things, saw my father's eyes on me, hard and triumphant. Nothing had changed, or so I thought.

I was wrong. I didn't realize it for a few weeks, but then the changes started. For one thing, I started getting sick. For another, I found that occasionally, just occasionally, words were possible. DJ and "Alice's Restaurant" had broken open what had seemed an impenetrable barrier. I still didn't talk often, and never in Daddy's presence, but I talked to DJ, to Sarah, sometimes to Elaine, occasionally to my only friend at school, Greg. But never to Momma or Daddy. I think after that the others knew not to mention that I was talking to them. And indeed, my words were hardly worth mentioning—just the occasional chuckle, maybe a three-word sentence. Nothing dangerous. After a while, what I said hardly seemed noteworthy. I thought my safety still lay in my silence, but my world had already changed forever, and silence would no longer suffice.

I had an inkling by Elaine's graduation, but told myself it couldn't possibly be true. I tried to vomit quietly in the mornings, to hide my white face behind my curtain of hair. I didn't mention that my periods had stopped; they had never been regular, anyhow. At last, a week before Elaine's wedding, Momma said, "You've been under the weather a long time, Bethie. I'm going to make you an appointment with Dr. Black."

"She's fine," Daddy said. "She's just being owly. Snap out of it, Bethie, or I'll give you a reason for that long face." And I saw the memory of that night in his eyes, and I trembled. I sat up straighter, pushed my food around on my plate, and tried to look like my usual self. But I wasn't my usual self, and by the day before the wedding, when my doctor's appointment was scheduled, I could no longer deny it.



I groped under Toby's blanket and found my burlap-wrapped water jug. Twisting off the sand-caked lid, I steadied the jug over my forearm and gulped down the familiar mixture of mineral-rich water, bleach, sand, and grease.

A pickup was toiling up the next incline. The empty road stretched before us. I eased off the accelerator and the Jake brake chattered. Harvested fields on the left and the Navy bombing range on the right stretched equally gray and empty. The pickup disappeared over the hill, and I hit the pedal again, pushing the tach up to 2200 so I wouldn't have to downshift before I got to the top. I swept onto the high plateau with rpms to spare, pulled out—my turn signals were broken, too—and blew past the pickup. I wondered just how fast I was going. I passed a lot of people. Sarah passed even more in the Coaster.

It was funny, seeing drivers stare at the massive old truck sweeping up the road behind them, watching their faces change as they realized the rusty red behemoth was being driven by a tanned, blonde girl who looked barely road legal. Over the years we had become something of a legend in the county.

We knew our business—no more than eighth gear, 2000 rpms on a still day on the way to the grain elevator, blow the doors off on the way back. I passed Bertha's hood in its resting place deep in a gully. Bertha was the 1956 International. DJ had actually managed to blow her hood off on his way back to the field a few weeks ago. True to his training, though, he didn't stop; he drove on, hoodless, power steering fluid from a leaking hose spattering the windshield like blood, switching his feet on the accelerator in a tricky little system he'd developed to keep his shoes from actually melting onto the scalding steel pedal. Daddy was after him constantly to wear boots, but DJ could be stubborn when he wanted to be. He stuck to his melted shoes. I didn't understand how he found the courage to tell Daddy no about anything. It wasn't allowed, but DJ did it anyway. Sarah didn't say no, but she smarted off a lot. I didn't know how she did that, either. I had decided long ago that I was just missing some piece, and that was why I was like I was, and why Daddy did what he did. But for today, the hood made me smile a little. It would lie there until the end of harvest, when someone would find the time to pick it up and maybe even get it back on Bertha. Or not. A truck doesn't need a hood to run.

Toby scrambled up onto the backless passenger seat and hung his head out the window, panting. "Here, boy." I snapped my fingers, afraid the door would pop open and he'd fall

out. He dropped back onto the blanket piled between the seats, his glossy black and white head on my knee. I checked the tach—1900 rpms—and pressed the accelerator harder. The needle crept back up.

Nausea hit. I slammed on the brakes and fought the truck to a stop, my lips sealed into a thin line against the heavens. I shoved the door open before the truck stopped rolling, leaned out, and vomited, hoping no one would drive by and see me. When the spasms eased I rinsed my mouth, spat, swallowed a fresh round of heavens, slammed the door, and inched back out into the road, working my way up through the gears using engine speed ratios rather than the clutch to shift.

Toby's paw hit my knee again. I glanced down into his worried eyes. He lifted his upper lip in his smile—no one except for DJ, Sarah and I knew he did this—whined, and then dropped his head on my leg, eyes fixed on my face.

My throat tightened. "Yeah, boy. I'm worried, too. But hey, I've got you. I'll be fine." I swiped a quick hand across my cheek. Think about the wedding. It might be nothing.

It wasn't "nothing." A part of me had known before I went in. I left Dr. Black's office feeling like I'd been wrapped in cotton. The glare that Mavis—his secretary, and Greg's grandma—gave me hardly even registered. I carried a prescription for prenatal vitamins crushed in one hand. In the other I carried a clear plastic bag. In its bow was a little pink peanut. Doctor Black told me that peanut was the same size my baby was right now. The bag held infant formula, the names of baby photographers, a few tiny diapers, and a little booklet on the advantages of breast feeding in the other. I stuffed the plastic bag into the garbage can on the sidewalk outside his office. Dr. Black's new Caddy sat at the curb, pristine except for a bumper sticker just to the right of his license plate: IT'S A CHILD, NOT A CHOICE. Dr. Black was a good Catholic. He was also the only doctor in town.

I somehow made it back to the pickup and navigated the cracked back streets to the tiny church crouching on its patchy yellow lawn. I crunched into the parking lot, parked beside the station wagon, and walked across the potholed gravel lot. My legs and feet seemed very far away. I opened the door and crossed the quiet foyer to the double doors leading into the sanctuary. My mother was kneeling by the front pew, struggling to tie a dainty bouquet of silk flowers with her scarred, big-knuckled hands.

Elaine had begged Momma to let her hair grow for the wedding, and it had come in heavy, blonde, and wavy, like Sarah's. She wore it scraped into a bun high on her head to cover the bald spot. The summer sun had streaked the waves with gold, and tanned her face to bronze. Momma's hair was beautiful. Why did she keep it so short? I reached out to touch it without

thinking. My fingers barely brushed the golden waves, but Momma jerked so hard she lost her balance and fell over, smacking her forehead on a pew.

I opened my mouth and shook my head.

“Don’t you ever do that again,” she hissed. This was, after all, the Lord’s House. Her hair stuck to her forehead in damp ringlets, and perspiration stains spread across the back of her faded yellow cotton blouse “Don’t you ever sneak up on me like that.”

She righted herself and gingerly explored the knot on her forehead. There’d be a big bruise there tomorrow, but at least it wasn’t a black eye. “What did the doctor say?” she finally asked.

The words rose aching in my throat. Then she looked up, her vague blue eyes red-rimmed. I looked at her set mouth and the words dried up. The mother I could have told wasn’t here anymore. I shook my head and spread my hands.

“Good,” she said. “Get in there and help Elaine and Sarah.” She jerked her head toward the double doors into the foyer.

I turned and walked back up the aisle, across the foyer, and down the hall to the room where we had potlucks after church, played basketball on Saturday nights, and held wedding receptions. Elaine was standing on a table, stretching to tape a streamer to a bank of fluorescent lights. Sarah was leaning over a box. She must’ve flown on the way back to the field, I thought. She had gotten home, showered, and changed in time to ride to town with Momma and Elaine.

“Aha,” she crowed. “Got the little bastard!” She straightened up, waving a roll of tape at me.

“Sarah, how can you use that word?” Elaine asked.

“I just open my mouth and it flies right out,” Sarah said, grinning. “Come help,” she called to me.

Elaine hopped off the table. “I’m checking the punch stuff.”

Wordlessly I crossed the room and leaned down to stare into the box. Nothing registered.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” Sarah asked. “You okay? What’d the doctor say?”

“I’m fine,” I said. My voice sounded dim and distant in my ears.

“You sure? You don’t look fine.”

“I’m fine.”

“What’s Mom doing?” Elaine called from the kitchen.

“Spoilin’ for a fight,” Sarah called back.

“Sarah!” said Elaine. “She’ll hear you.”

"Well, she is," Sarah insisted, her voice only marginally softer.

Elaine came out and, ignoring Sarah, turned to me. "Why don't you go help her? She'll get mad if we leave her to do it all by herself."

"She'll get mad if we help, too," Sarah put in.

Elaine sighed.

"She said help you," I said. "Aunt Margaret here?"

"No," Elaine said. "She called and said Michelle's baby's due, so she can't come."

"Damn," said Sarah. "She could've helped Mom."

"Somebody has to."

"She said come here," I sounded a little desperate.

"Well ... okay." But Elaine looked dubious.

"Ya dodged that bullet," Sarah snickered.

"Sarah." Elaine glanced toward the sanctuary, then back at me. "What'd the doctor say?"

"I'm fine." I lied again, betraying my child for the third time. Admitting my shame in the face of Elaine's perfection wasn't possible. Besides, she was getting married tomorrow. I couldn't spoil it for her. Talking about it would make it real. If I just didn't say the words, we could all pretend it wasn't happening. And maybe I could die before it started to show.

"So what goes up next?" Sarah asked in a bright voice.



It didn't take Grandma Mavis long to spread the word of my shame. I left the church before the others to go home and start supper. Momma had given me money and instructions to stop at the grocery store and pick up butter, eggs, cheese, and lettuce on my way. I had just taken a carton of eggs out of the cooler and was reaching for cheese when I looked up and saw him. Greg and I had sat next to each other in first grade. For some reason I had never understood, he had decided to be my friend. Greg was everything that I was not—he talked constantly, smiled at the least provocation, and never turned down a friend or a fight. He moved through the world, assured of his place as part of a large, boisterous, well-connected family. Now he stood in front of me by the dairy chest, and I saw the knowledge in his eyes, knowledge and betrayal, hurt, and anger. Suddenly it occurred to me that Greg might have seen himself as more than my friend. But it was too late—it had always been too late. He didn't know about me, about my family. His eyes told me his grandma had already been on the phone. That was something I hadn't expected, the publicness of my humiliation. How would I ever explain? And then I realized that I wouldn't, and neither would anyone else. Momma and Daddy were

above reproach. No one would dare raise the subject with them. No one would raise it with me, either. No one would ever hold me accountable because they all thought I was simple, retarded Bethie. They probably thought I didn't even know where babies came from. And that would be the story. Simple. I looked at the pain in Greg's eyes and knew there was nothing I could do to make it better.

I turned and walked away, leaving him standing alone next to the eggs.



I laid the book down and closed my eyes, seeing us in that room at the church, hanging crepe paper streamers and bells from the lights, pretending that we were normal. I thought about Bethie carrying her secret with her like she did that baby, knowing that it was just a matter of time before they both popped out. I ran my hand over my own belly, and suddenly I realized how lucky I was. I picked the book up and turned the page.



Wedding programs rustled in the sultry air. People vied for seats by windows. The piano tinkled. My sisters stood behind me, Sarah at the back of the line, just in front of Elaine and Daddy. Nobody was touching anybody else.

"It's not too late to back out of this," I heard Daddy say. "We can walk right out of here and you can stay home with us. I should walk out of this church right now, matter of fact."

Elaine said nothing, but when I glanced back I saw her knuckles were white around the silk flowers she carried.

Sarah was standing between us. She was a mess. She'd smeared on makeup until there wasn't a piece of bare skin showing above her high neckline. There'd be hell to pay after the wedding. If I'd been her, I would've been afraid that Daddy would come stomping up on the platform and scrub my face for me during the ceremony, then make me wear the smeared makeup the rest of the day to teach me a lesson about vanity. Or do the punishing later, in private. But that didn't seem to worry Sarah. She had slapped metallic blue eye shadow on all the way up to her eyebrows, and her lips glowed bright crimson. Her cheeks each bore a slash of magenta blush—she was trying to make her face look thinner again.

Momma was always onto her about her weight, although as far as I could see, the only place any fat had settled was her chest. I looked down at my own meager assets. My sisters and DJ were tall, elegant, and blonde. I was thin, ropy, and brown. They used to call me

Raisin when we were little. A shadow of old hurt swept through me again. And then a wave of nausea. Oh, no! Please, no. I breathed deeply, slowly, and it receded.

The music changed and the wedding coordinator—Pastor Rayburn's wife, looking as much like a bride in her lacy "banquet" dress as Elaine did in her simple gown—touched my arm. I turned, got a death grip on my bouquet, and started down the aisle. I looked like a fool—I knew I did. Dresses on me were like spats on a pig. I felt the eyes hit me and faltered. "Go on," whispered Mrs. Rayburn with a little smile and a nod. "You look so pretty in that dress."

The kind little lie warmed me, and I lurched into motion again, forgetting the tricky step and slide she'd tried to teach me and falling into the long, ground-eating stride that was really the only way I knew how to walk. I strode up the aisle like what I was—a farm kid who'd grown up knowing she had to cover a lot of ground before sundown. I fell easily into the rhythm, heels firm, strides long, walking that long, long aisle like I'd walked countless miles of fence lines. The church's tiny center aisle took much less time to cover than the space from our shop to the house, but it felt like forever. I thudded up the steps, one foot coming down hard on the ruffled hem I had forgotten to lift. I winced at the loud rip, jerked the ruffle free, and clomped to my mark, face flaming. I turned in time to see Sarah halfway up the aisle, head high, smiling, stepping and sliding, stepping and sliding. Her eye caught mine and she grinned and winked, eyelids flashing, just before she gave up on that ridiculous step and loped the rest of the way up the aisle. Momma's lips stitched themselves shut.

From across the platform, DJ, who was the best man, flashed me a grin. Then his face fell back into its usual sober, quiet lines as he turned to watch the aisle. "Here Comes the Bride" tinkled from the piano. Elaine and Daddy were standing together in the shadowy foyer. Elaine tugged at her dress again. It wasn't quite long enough for her, but there had been no way to lengthen it without destroying its elegant simplicity. Momma had suggested running a couple rows of lace around the bottom, but Elaine had said no and looked at Momma like she pitied her. I watched her feet shuffling to the door of the sanctuary. Everyone stood up. Elaine tugged her dress one more time and at last took Daddy's arm.

His jaw was set, his eyes wintry gray. His fine, faded hair had been slicked down, but he'd missed a patch in back. Suddenly, I could see the face I'd only seen before in pictures, the light-haired, narrow-faced boy with the cowlick, grinning, a front tooth missing. I felt a surge of guilty, angry love. How had that boy turned into Daddy? I looked at his hands, thick, cracked fingers, scarred, grease-blackened knuckles. They were trembling. I thought again of the boy, and my father's hands, and my throat tightened. What had gone wrong? Daddy and

Elaine had reached the front of the church and were standing at the foot of the steps leading up to the platform and the preacher.

"Who gives this woman to be married?"

"Her mother and I do." Daddy's voice sounded uncertain, a bit defiant. I let out a breath I hadn't realized I was holding. Elaine's shoulders dropped the tiniest fraction of an inch. Joe walked carefully down the steps, and then there was a confused little shuffle—loud in the rustling silence—as Daddy stepped back and shuffled into the second pew beside Momma. Elaine and Joe came carefully up the steps. And she was safe—home free.

It filled my throat. She was home free. Sarah was going to college in a few days. But I was not beautiful, and I was not smart. Actually that's not quite true—I was smart enough that day to know that any future I might have had with Greg was stillborn, and, as Daddy said, college would be wasted on somebody like me. Now that Elaine was taken care of, better save it for Sarah, who was smart and who needed to snag a man quick before she got herself knocked up, and for DJ, so he could be an evangelist. There would be no escape for me. I would never be "home free."



I had to close my eyes. Alone, with no way out—how had she done it? She'd laughed at our jokes, helped Elaine with her veil, told me I looked pretty. (Of course, that was before my little trip to the bathroom.) Had she just put everything out of her mind? Or was her laughter like my makeup—the thing that held her together? And I had walked away and left her, not once, but twice. The enormity of my betrayal swept over me, and I almost threw the book down. But I owed her a hearing. To deny her that would be turning my back on her again.



I stood in the heat of that summer day and watched my sister, the one person who might have helped, leave me forever in that quiet little white church filled with silk flowers, the hum of confused bees, and the odors of perspiration and baby powder. I saw her receding down a black tunnel surrounded by swirling neon specks. The bees buzzed louder. I stared harder, focused my blurry eyes on her white dress, felt myself sway, saw DJ's eyes flick toward me, away, then back. The bee chorus swelled. DJ took a giant step, his arms out, and everything went black.

"... 'course she fainted, in this heat, in that dress, and her in the Family Way." The strident voice piercing my darkness belonged to Greg's Grandma Mavis. "I told my Carolyn her Gregg'd better drop this one like a hot potato if he knows what's good for him; she's no better'n she should be. Come by Doctor's office yesterday askin' 'im to kill her baby. I ask you! 'That little tramp's nothin' but trouble,' I says to my Carolyn. I says, 'I always thought it'd be Sarah who'd get herself into trouble.' I thought Liz was the quiet one, and here she's gone an' made a spectacle of herself at her own her sister's weddin'." The old woman pointed. "Look—she's already showin'." A hand plunked down on my belly, pulling my dress tight and revealing the hard bulge. To my horror I felt it shift and flutter.

Mavis gasped. "It's movin'!"

I lay still, eyes closed. Ever since I'd seen Greg at the store, I'd known this was coming. Doctor's office confidentiality or not, Grandma Mavis never could resist a scandal. Of course she had told everyone she knew.

"Elizabeth? Get up, I know you're awake." Momma's voice was high and sharp, like it got when she was embarrassed or angry. I opened my eyes. All around me ... faces. A few sympathetic, a few embarrassed, most of them avid, greedy to suck the last ounce of drama out of my humiliation. We lived quiet lives. I closed my eyes again and felt a stinging slap.

"What are you doing?" Mrs. Rayburn's shocked voice.

"Bringing her to her senses." Momma's voice.

"Let me get her a drink."

"She's fine." Momma's hand dug into the soft flesh above my elbow, yanking me to my feet. I opened my eyes. "Get out to the car," she hissed.

My tongue felt woolly, stuck to the roof of my parched mouth. My dress hung crumpled and clammy. The world lurched around me. I paused to lean over the water fountain, but Momma yanked me off balance again. I took a giant step to keep from falling, and then we were outside. The heat blasted me. We climbed into the car. Momma started the car and pulled out of the parking lot, her eyes bored straight ahead, her lips clamped tight. I curled down into my seat and stared out the side window at the telephone wires rising, falling, rising, falling.

"That Greg," Momma snarled. "When did it happen? At school? You were never with him any other time." I shook my head. How could she not know?

"Whose? Whose is it?" Her voice rose. "How could you? We didn't raise you to do this. And to find out like this—in front of everybody. Why didn't you tell me? I'll never be able to face them again."

I sat as still as I could, still looking out the window at nothing. I wasn't real, wasn't here.

"I don't know what Daddy's going to do when he gets home. How could you do this to me? Out running the roads when I was doing everything I could to keep you safe at home."

A dead rabbit flashed by, nothing more than a pile of bones and fur beside the road.

She shifted gears. "I wouldn't have expected it of you."

Maybe she knew after all.

"I thought Sarah was the one I had to worry about." Her eyes raked my thin body, which was nothing like Elaine's greyhound elegance or Sarah's voluptuous curves. For just a second I saw pain, fury, triumph, fear, and guilt in Momma's eyes. Then everything was gone, and I knew we would never talk about this again. Never again would she offer me the chance to say the unspeakable words.

We pulled into the driveway. I shouldered open the car door and plodded through the shimmering glare to the warped, peeling back steps, holding onto the fence for balance, lifting my wilted, torn flounces out of the dust. I climbed the steps one at a time. My hand fumbled on the burning metal latch and then I was inside the dark, stuffy kitchen. Nails clicked on the floor, a choke chain jingled and then Toby was there, head butting against my knee. I leaned down and buried my face in his glossy black neck. I couldn't let Momma see me cry. I straightened, braced my hand against the wall, and climbed the steps, one at a time.

The kitchen door rattled behind me and I heard Momma drop her purse on the counter, then walk into the bathroom. The door clicked behind her. I climbed on, slowly, heavily. Toby trotted beside me. Back at the church, Elaine and Joe would be cutting their cake by now. Elaine would be throwing her bouquet, Joe throwing the garter.

I went into my bedroom, closed the door, crossed to my patchwork-covered bed, and lay down. Toby's head dropped beside mine on the pillow. He sighed. I rubbed the itchy spots behind his ears. He groaned in ecstasy. His stump of a tail thumped on the floor.

"Oh, Toby," I whispered. My voice broke. "What a good dog you are." He panted happily, and I rolled off the bed and sat beside him on the floor, wrapping my arms around him and burying my head on his neck. He dropped his chin on my shoulder and sagged into me. I had been wrong. There might be no escape, but here was comfort.

I grew sleepy, so I climbed onto the bed and patted the quilt beside me. "Here, boy." What was one more broken rule in the face of such disaster? He hopped up, turned his customary three times, then flopped down, his back solidly against my chest, his head on my arm. I closed my eyes and listened to his soft snoring. And then I slept.

Even in my sleep, I heard the door slam. Feet ran up the stairs. My doorknob rattled. Daddy's voice said, "Leave her alone."

"I want to see if she's okay."

"I'll check. You go scrub your face, young lady. I was ashamed of you, painted up like a whore."

The doorknob stopped rattling and high heels clicked away down the hall. Sarah'd given up too easily. She'd be back. She was good at finding ways around the rules.

Silence. I'd have to get up soon. Toby would need to go to the bathroom. So did I, for that matter. In a few minutes. I closed my eyes. The peaceful dark pulled me. Then the door squeaked, and Daddy was a black silhouette against the hall light. He flipped on the light. The glare blinded me.

"Get that dog out of here."

I thought of DJ's shoes, of Sarah's makeup, of the baby in my belly. "No," I said aloud. I didn't know where it came from, that word. I'd never told him no in my life. It wasn't permitted. I'd learned that before I could walk.

"I said get him out of here. You know better."

"No."

In two long strides, Daddy stood beside my bed and his hands were tangled in my hair. He yanked me up. "What did you say?"

"No!" I said it again, and swallowed. I bent my head, tugging frantically at my hair.

Daddy yanked again. I screamed in pain. And then Toby flashed by me, snarling. His teeth slashed Daddy's sleeve, and suddenly my head was free. I stumbled back, shaking. Toby stood before me, legs braced wide, head lowered, the ridge of hair from his ears to his tail rampant. I heard the soft rumble deep in his chest.

The door opened again. "Bethie?" Sarah's face appeared. I was safe. Sarah would help. Sarah could fight Daddy. For a second we froze, Daddy, Toby, Sarah and me. I think all of us were stunned. Sarah had just broken one of the cardinal rules of our home. She had opened a closed door when Daddy was alone in a room with one of us.

Daddy whipped around. "Get out," he said, his voice low and deadly.

"But—"

"Do what I say."

Sarah looked at me for a long moment.

"Get out now."

Sarah wouldn't go; I knew it. She would stay and fight. We could be strong together.

Her eyes searched my face, asking for something. And then the door closed between us, and I was just Bethie, mute, retarded Bethie, and he was Daddy, who could do anything he wanted. Daddy's foot lashed out and caught Toby squarely in the chest. Toby yelped, then snarled and launched himself at Daddy's throat. But Daddy's heavy hands caught him by the ruff, and Toby flew across the room to slam solidly against the wall. Daddy leaped after him, a single long, swooping stride, his heavy hands out before him, his tattered sleeve fluttering. Toby slid into a crumpled heap, and Daddy's foot smashed down on his back. There was a horrible crunch, and Toby yelped. Daddy stood over him, panting. Toby whimpered and rolled onto his chest, front legs scrabbling on the hardwood floor, head bobbing. His back legs lay motionless. He lifted his head and snarled, then yelped again when Daddy drew his foot back and kicked him in the head. Toby whined. His eye had gone, and only bloody cavity was left. The foot rose and fell.

Somehow I was on my knees beside that swinging foot, struggling to get to Toby. I crawled around Daddy's legs. I curled myself around Toby's hurt head, protecting him as well as I could. The foot slammed into my belly. I grunted. Toby's amber eye opened and stared into mine. And then he left me, too. I saw him go. The foot hit my belly again and pain ripped through me.

"You don't wanna get kicked, get outa the way," Daddy snarled between blows.

I don't know how long I lay curled around Toby. I suppose until Daddy's leg got tired. I barely felt him drag me to the bed, heave me onto it. I barely felt his body invade mine. I simply stared over his shoulder as he slammed into me and thought about the Brookfield Zoo, its long, straight paths, its beautiful old buildings, its vivid gardens. From far away I heard Daddy panting as he pounded into me.

"You don't ever, ever, tell Daddy no. Do you hear me? Never! Never! Never!"

The cool marble buildings of the zoo beckoned. I slipped among them, watching sunlight on flowers, sparkling on pools, shining on striped umbrellas. Back on the bed, the girl felt something tear. Hot, bright pain lanced through her, but I was too far away to feel it. In the distance a man stood in on a hillside, and the sun was bright on his dark hair. Something about the angle of his head told me he was sad and that it was because of me. My fault. I saw him take a step in my direction. I closed my eyes and turned away, and the dark swept over me.

It took me a minute to realize that it was over. I opened my eyes to see Daddy tucking in his shirt and zipping his pants. Incredibly, some shred of defiance remained. "I'll tell," I said.

He laughed. "Who'd believe you? Everybody knows you're simple-minded. You don't even talk. You'd be laughed out of court. When a dog attacks you, you have to show him who's boss."

The defiance withered. He was right. Who'd believe me? At last I heard his footsteps outside the door. A minute later, I heard Momma's voice in the hall, asking, "How is she?" and Daddy's voice answering, "She's fine—just being owly. There's no call for this. We've gotta get rid of that dog. He's a killer." Then silence.

I cradled Toby's body, clenching my jaw against the cramps rippling through me. I felt the first hot rush of blood, then another. I looked down at the floor and saw my blood and birth water mingling with Toby's blood. I stroked his head, his poor, battered head. Dimly I knew that I needed help, but there was no one, and I was too tired and hurt to care any more. I laid my cheek against Toby's silky ears, closed my eyes, and let the darkness carry me away to the gardens. I wandered ever deeper until I reached the fence. Beyond it stood a forest. A little gate led to a footpath. I stared over the gate and into the forest. In the distance I saw Toby, and then he was gone, and the man stood there instead, smiling and beckoning me onward, and after the blood in my room, the blood on his face no longer repulsed me. I laid my hand on the gate, but something held me back.

Back in my room, the girl on the floor wavered, then vanished. And so did everything else.



I couldn't read anymore through my tears. I closed the book and curled up on my side, remembering that night, the screams, the blows, the fear. DJ and I had run down the hallway and seen Daddy in Bethie's room, Toby between them. "Get out," Daddy had ordered. And we got out. Through everything, we stayed in our rooms, just like Momma stayed in her room. We stayed there, choosing to not know what was happening, because if we knew we'd have to help, and we were afraid to try. And so we let Bethie die, alone with her dog. At last I understood that we truly were our mother's children. Shame filled me.

Bethie came back late that night. I was waiting for her. I wanted to hold her, clutch her to me, say, "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," until my throat wore out. Instead, I asked, "Have a good time?" She grinned and brushed past me. She smelled of roasted meat, sweetness, grass, river, crushed daisies, and sex.

"Guess so," I muttered. And then I smiled. "About damn time," I shouted after her.

Bethie laughed.

Jennifer sighed heavily and shut her door with a nasty little snick.

CHAPTER 58

Sarah

I simply could not believe it—I left those damn baby vitamins on the window sill for a whole week, and every morning of that week I was in the john noisily driving the porcelain bus, and nobody said a word. Finally, the day of Daddy’s funeral, I couldn’t take the suspense any more—I just came right out with it.

“I’m pregnant, Momma.”

“I know.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I’ve had more important things on my mind.”

“Like what?”

“Like planning your daddy’s funeral. Like dealing with the police. Like trying to hold things together in this house for a few more days.”

“Don’tcha even care who the father is?”

“Jennifer told me.”

“That bitch,” I said.

Momma hauled off and backhanded me across the mouth, and her in her good black funeral dress and heels and everything. She’d never done that before. That was always Daddy’s job. I stared at her, amazed. This was a Momma I’d never seen and I didn’t much like.

“You watch your mouth, young lady. I won’t have talk like that in my house. She’s been very good to us—better than our own daughters. She

and DJ were there when your Daddy was in the hospital. They came up and helped this summer when you were too busy seducing men of God to bother with your dying father, and Bethie was who knows where.”

“Men of God, my ass, Momma,” I screamed. “How can you stand there in this house where that ‘man of God’ raped his own daughter an’ then blamed her for it an’ say that to my face? How *dare* you?”

Her face crumpled, and she was the old familiar Momma. “I didn’t know. I couldn’t stop him,” was all she said.

“How could you not know? These walls’re so fuckin’ thin you can see daylight through ’em. We all heard! An’ none of us did a damn thing!”

“I can’t remember,” she screamed right back, then she sort of slumped. “Why are you saying these terrible things?” she asked. “Bethie’s just fine and your Daddy’s dead. It’s over. Isn’t that enough for you? Why do you have to rake it all up? Why can’t you be happy?”

“Have you forgotten that the police arrested her for murder? Have you, Momma? And what about Elaine? Have you even talked to her since Daddy died, or have you just left her alone and hoped she’d forget all about it? Am I supposed to be happy about that, too? Will that make me a good Christian? I’ve been a good fucking Christian my whole life, an’ everything’s falling apart anyhow.”

“You just have to have faith,” Momma said, and, incredible as it sounds, I could see she meant it. “You just have to believe it’ll be better in heaven. Otherwise, it’s all been for nothing. I don’t think I could stand that.” She sounded like she wasn’t even talking to me.

“What?”

Her eyes were closed. “That it was all for nothing.”

“We all ready to go?” Jennifer chirped, coming into the kitchen, her black purse over one arm. Davy sat on the other in his little black suit.

Momma shook herself and said, “Just let me get my purse,” but I wasn’t about to let her off that easy.

“That’s it?” I asked Momma’s back. “I tell you I’m fallin’ apart an’ you say I just haveta have more faith? It’ll be better in heaven? What the fuck kinda help is that? I can’t do this any more, Momma. If this is what heaven

requires, it's not worth it." To my fury I could feel the tears building up in my eyes. I slapped them away.

Momma turned around. "I just wish you could find comfort in the Lord."

"I don't think the Lord's got my best interests at heart," I said sadly.

Jennifer put on her best minister's wife's voice. "I assume this means you're not going to the funeral with us?"

I gave Momma my answer, not her. Momma was the one who needed to understand the why of it. "I can't go, Momma. I just can't sit there an' listen to everybody talkin' about what a wonderful Christian he was, what a wonderful father, such an example to us all, an' not set things right. I just can't do it."

Momma sighed and ran a hand through her hair. "To be honest," she said, shocking the hell out of me, "I don't feel much like it myself. But what would people think?"

"So it works out," Jennifer said brightly, "we can all ride together in our van. Elaine's gone ahead; we can meet her there. Come on, Momma."

Momma didn't say anything more. She just settled her hat on her head, adjusted the veil over her eyes, picked up her purse and gloves, and walked out the door.

I stood alone in the kitchen, thinking for no particular reason that I'd never seen Momma in a hat or gloves. My head ached, my throat was parched, outside the sun beat down. I got a glass of water, put some ice in it, downed some aspirin, collected the cordless phone, and slowly, heavily climbed the stairs to my room. I lay down on my bed in the baking heat, wondering why I had come home in the first place. What had I hoped to find here? Whatever it was, I sure as hell hadn't found it.

The phone rang. I picked it up. "Hello?"

"Sarah?"

I closed my eyes. "I should have known."

"Come back to me, baby," begged Pastor Rayburn's voice. "Nobody'd have to know. You could get it taken care of an' I can wangle a transfer up there an' ever'thang can be just like it was. I think I've finally figured out a

way to get shut a the Old Battle Axe once I'm transferred up there. Just be patient a little longer an' we can be together."

"I don't want to be with you, Pastor Rayburn," I said wearily. "Don't you go a-wanglin' a transfer up here on my account."

"What happened to 'Jimmy Jay?'"

"I don't want to be that personal," I said. "I don't think you really want me to be, either."

"Don't what we have mean anything to you?" He sounded weepy, just like he did when he was trying to get sinners to come to the foot of the Cross at his Evangelistic Crusades. First time I heard him do it, I was ten, and Daddy'd decided it was time for us girls to get baptized and start walking the Narrow Way. I didn't want to, but Daddy'd made up his mind. That was years ago, but I reacted the same way now—I got sassy.

"Nope. Can't say as it does," I said, in a voice as chipper as Jennifer's.

"But I love ya, baby." Now he sounded mournful.

That did it. I guess it was just my day for tellin' people home truths. "Pastor Rayburn, let's get real here. You don't love me. You just screwed me. In more ways than one."

"I hate it when you talk like that."

"You think ah don't know that?"

"So when you comin' back?" he asked in his "let's be reasonable" voice.

Just then, Bethie poked her head in and saw me sitting on the bed with the phone to my ear. I rolled my eyes at her.

"Jimmy Jay?" she mouthed. I nodded.

"Hold on, Pastor Rayburn," I said, then I put my hand over the mouthpiece and asked Bethie, "Elaine's really at the funeral?"

"Yeah," she said.

"No shit?"

"No shit. I saw her drive out all dressed up."

"Huh," I said, and I sat there thinking and tapping my fingernail against my teeth till Pastor Rayburn's squawking at me from the phone finally penetrated. I took my hand off the mouthpiece and told him, "Ah'm gonna say this one time, Pastor Rayburn, an Ah'm not gonna repeat mahself, so you

jes' listen up." I felt bold and free—I had nothing left to lose. I had never realized what power there is in having the worst happen. "Ah'm gonna say this real slow so you're sure to understand. I'm not even going to talk trash while I say—"

"You *was* makin' fun a me!" he broke in. "Ah *knew* it—"

I rolled right over him. "It's not always about you, Pastor Rayburn. Let's stick to the subject here. You used me. You lied. You cheated. You do not love me."

"But—"

"Don't interrupt," I said. "I worked for you. You signed my paychecks. We both knew if I didn't let you fuck me I'd be out of a job, and then I'd have to come home because nobody else'd hire me, and then I'd have to face Daddy again. I didn't want you to fuck me, and you knew it—I just couldn't say no. And you used that."

"But—"

"And one more thing," I went on. "Don't call that thing in your pants a ship. It's not a ship. It's not even a rowboat. Come to think of it, it's not even a bathtub toy. It's more like a Monopoly piece."

Bethie clapped both hands over her mouth. I could hear her cracking up behind them. Pastor Rayburn could hear her, too. "Somebody there?" he asked in this scared little whisper.

"Just Bethie," I said. "She's laughin' fit to kill and tryin' ta sing 'Nearer My God to Thee' all at the same time."

"She knows?" His voice trembled.

"Damn straight," I said. "I've told everybody all about your poor, pathetic little boat. They all think it's just a hoot. 'That's just so *cute*,' is what they say when I talk about it. And then they split a gut laughin'. 'Course, they didn't think it was so funny that you had to black my eye to keep it up long enough to knock me up."

"How *could* you? How could you violate the sanctity of our love? What's gonna happen now?"

"What we did wasn't sanctified, Pastor Rayburn, an' you weren't the one violated here," I said. "And ta tell ya the truth I don't give a rat's ass

what's gonna happen. I'm tired a sneakin' through my whole fuckin' life." Bethie gave me a thumbs up, then waved and slipped out of the room, still grinning. A minute later I heard her Jeep pull out.

Pastor Rayburn wasn't done yet. "But what about the baby? I'll be ruined if word gets out. And think what it'll do to the Lord's work."

"You do talk such shit sometimes. I don't give a rat's ass about the Lord's work, either. I already told ya this can't be your baby. You had that operation, remember? Bon voyage, Jimmy Jay. Don't even think of comin' up here." After I hung up, I watched my hand trembling for a minute, then stretched out on the bed and picked up Bethie's book again. The house was so quiet I could hear the walls creak as they heated up. Some damn bird was croaking outside my window. They were burying Daddy. I chose to not be there, but still, it hurt. And now Bethie had deserted me, too, going out and doing the grass tango with God knows who. A part of me was glad she could do it and enjoy it—it was more than I'd ever managed. But another part of me felt sad and broken, like I'd lost something I never really had in the first place.

To take my mind off things, I found my place in her book and started reading again. As I read about the house in the hills, the old lady, and how Bethie lost herself long enough to find herself, I started to understand. In an odd way I envied her pain. It had set her free, whereas I'd spent all those years trying to please Momma and Daddy, scared to death to hit bottom, when all the time that was exactly what I needed to do. Finally I finished the book, lay back, closed my eyes, and drifted off to sleep. I didn't wake up till I heard Momma, Jennifer and DJ trooping in downstairs with a whole gaggle of relatives who had turned up at the funeral and followed them home, supposedly to support us in our hour of sorrow, but really to scarf down all the funeral buffet leftovers. I lay there with my eyes closed, and when somebody knocked on the door I just played possum.

The door creaked open. Heels clicked straight over to the bed. Somebody grabbed me by the shoulder and set in to shaking and saying, "Sarah? Sarah, honey, wake up. There's lotsa people here to see you." It was Aunt Margaret.

I rolled over and groaned and rubbed my eyes and said what time is it, but she wasn't fooled. She'd raised foster kids for years and had probably seen better acts than mine every day of the week and twice on Sundays. Anyhow, she kept on at me till I had my eyes open.

"You want something to eat?" she said. "There's lots of food downstairs."

"Thanks, Aunt Margaret, but ah don't think so rahght now."

She frowned at me. "Why you talking like that?"

"Like what?" I asked, even though I knew.

"Sweetheart, you're talkin' army," she said.

"What the hell's that supposed to mean?"

I saw the shock on her face and a part of me wished I could take the words back, but it was too late now.

"You remember my Andy? Runty little thing? Crazy for guns?"

"Yeah?"

"You remember when he came back from boot camp?"

I didn't have to think about it. I could still see him, strutting around in his fatigues, cap pulled down over his eyebrows, talking in this fake drawl that he thought sounded tough, hardbitten, invincible. We called it talkin' army. Shit. My face burned.

"You're smart, Sarah," she said. "Don't dumb yourself down. Now you get downstairs and say hello to the relatives. Just let me run down the hall and get Elaine."

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"Whyever not? Her family wants to see her. I'll be right back."

Shit. Shit-shit shit shit SHIT. I did not want to be doing this. I especially didn't want to be doing it without talkin' army. Fuck Andy and fuck the horse he rode in on. I'd talk army if I damn well pleased. But I knew that now every time I started doing it I would think of him and his banty rooster attitude. Shit again. I heard Aunt Margaret down the hall, beating on Elaine's door.

"Elaine? Elaine?"

The door squeaked. "Hello, Aunt Margaret."

"Everybody's here. It's time to come downstairs."

"I can't. I have some work to do."

"Not today you don't."

"Yes. It needs to be done today."

"But your family needs you."

"My family?" Elaine sounded blank.

"Yes, everybody's here."

"That has nothing to do with me."

"It most certainly does. You're part of this family."

"Not anymore."

"This has been hard on all of us."

"*You made him. Your damned family made him what he was.*" Elaine's voice was suddenly furious. "*You knew*, and you left us alone to save the family name."

"Now's not the time to air old grievances," Aunt Margaret said stiffly.

"Then I'd better not be there." Elaine's voice was level and quiet.

"But it's your *family*," Aunt Margaret insisted.

"No," said Elaine. "I can't afford this family. It's taken everything."

"But it's given you everything, too."

"Just what exactly has it given me?"

I figured I'd better step in before there was bloodshed. 'Course, it wouldn't be the first time in this house. I walked down the hall. "What's goin' on?"

"You talk to her, Sarah." Aunt Margaret's voice was cold. She brushed by me in a cloud of violet fragrance. Elaine started to shut her door.

"Wait a minute," I said, sticking my foot in the door so Elaine couldn't shut it in my face.

Elaine looked straight at me. "Move your foot," she said. She said it real quiet, but I jerked my foot back fast. She shut the door. Silence. Deadly, icy silence. I wanted to go back to my own room, but I knew sure as shit that Aunt Margaret'd be back. I gave up and went downstairs.

The living room was packed, wall to wall. I recognized faces, but that was about it. Just when I was thinking it was safe to hightail it back to my room,

though, I realized Bethie was back, standing with a glass of something in her hand and talking to someone who looked like he might be a cousin. I walked over just in time to hear her say, "They arrested me because I was the last person to see him alive. And I had a motive."

"What?" he asked.

Jennifer bustled up. "Tony, let's get you something to eat."

So now I had him pegged—a cousin, son of Dad's younger brother.

"I'm fine." Tony turned back to Bethie. "What motive, Elizabeth?"

"He raped me," she said calmly, "and I got pregnant. Then he beat me until I lost the baby. And he killed my dog."

"We don't know that for sure," Jennifer said in her best professional voice. "It might be a false memory. It probably is. These things often are manufactured by unethical counselors."

I stepped forward. "Well, we could always dig up the grave down by the creek where DJ and I buried Toby and the baby. Should still be bones there. We could probably even test DNA. Know for sure. How about that, Jennifer?"

"Boy, there sure were a lot of people at the funeral today," she said. "I think some even had to stand outside."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, back up," said Tony. "Hold the phone. Elizabeth, my Uncle Dan raped you? He beat you? He killed your dog? *Uncle Dan?*"

"Yes," Bethie said. She was still calm, but I could see the words were taking a toll.

"Did you tell anybody?"

"I bet there were more than two hundred people there," Jennifer said a little desperately. "It was real nice."

"Who could I tell?" asked Bethie. She said it to Tony, but she spoke loudly enough for anybody passing by could hear. "Daddy was a pillar in the church."

Tony didn't say anything for a minute. Then he said, sort of questioning, "You *didn't* kill him, did you?"

"No," said Bethie. "If I'd wanted revenge, I would've just switched the morphine for vitamins or something and let the man do pancreatic

cancer without pain medication. I wouldn't have pushed him into the chopper."

"Why not? That's got to be a pretty brutal way to go."

"Yeah, but it's just not believable."

"It's not?" asked Jennifer.

"It's not?" asked a voice behind me. I whipped around to see a man in a nice suit. A badge and a gun hung from his belt.

"Cheese it—the cops," I said. Everybody ignored me. The Invisible Woman—that was me that night.

"Officer Jerry Freidman," said the man behind the badge. "Why isn't the chopper believable?"

"For one thing," Bethie said, "Daddy couldn't climb the ladder into the cab anymore, even if he could've gotten out to the shop on his own. Also, have you tried engaging the header?"

"No."

"You should."

"Show me. The forensic guys are done now."

"Excuse me," Jennifer said suddenly, "I better go see how Davy's doing. I don't know anything about machinery, anyway." She bustled off toward where DJ's blonde head rose above the crowd.

Officer Friedman followed Bethie, slim and elegant in her white dress. Her hair fell almost to her knees in dark, wild, reddish-brown curls and waves. Its sway seemed to hold him mesmerized.

Tony and I followed them. 'Course I knew what was coming. They got out to the shop, Officer Freidman tore down the Crime Scene Do Not Cross tape, and Bethie pulled open the corrugated metal door. It squeaked like it'd never seen grease in its life, which was no more than the truth. Bethie stopped, took a deep breath, and squared her shoulders, and I remembered that this was the first time she'd been in here since she'd found Daddy.

She stepped in carefully, groped for the light switch, then grabbed her hair and twisted it up into a quick knot to keep it out of the dirt. The halogen bulbs flickered, then glowed, dim and watery. Bethie led Officer Freidman over to the chopper and gestured for him to climb the ladder

ahead of her. He looked a little disappointed that she wasn't going first, then he pulled himself up and reached down to open the bottom of the half door. He couldn't do it. He climbed back down the stairs, opened the catch, and started back up. The half door slammed shut and he had to start over again. It took him three tries before he could coordinate opening the door, climbing the steps, and stepping into the cab.

"Is it always that hard?" he asked.

"It's a knack," said Bethie. "I hadn't thought about it because we're all used to it, but you're right: for a man on morphine who has trouble even standing up...." Her voice trailed off, but Officer Freidman got the point.

"Okay," she said, "this is what I really brought you out here to see. Sit down." She waved her hand at the cracked seat. Its foam rubber was so old it was turning to sand.

Officer Freidman settled himself on that seat like a hen settling on her eggs. "Now what?" he asked.

She pointed to the header lever on the floor. "Push that lever into gear."

I climbed up the ladder behind them and stuck my head through the door. Tony, who apparently had developed an instant case of separation anxiety, climbed up onto the ladder behind me and leaned out so he could see, too. I ignored him in favor of what was happening inside the cab. This was what I'd been waiting for. Officer Freidman twisted himself around the steering wheel and tried to push the lever into gear. He couldn't do it. He pushed again. And again. Finally he figured out the trick to it—you have to sort of push it down and to the side and forward, all at once, and you have to do it hard and fast, because it's really stiff. The lever finally popped into gear.

"And you have to do that every time?"

Bethie nodded. "Mm hm. Can you actually see a man who has trouble standing up, who's been taking morphine, who shakes so badly he can't get pills to his mouth and can't swallow them when he does, who can't even lift a glass of water anymore ... can you see this man walking out here, climbing up to this cab, getting the door open, going through the whole process of

turning the machine on—and we haven’t even talked about that—and then twisting around the steering wheel and getting enough leverage to push the lever—and him with an unhealed incision in his stomach? And then climbing down those stairs, walking around the header, and somehow getting himself caught in it? I sure can’t. Daddy couldn’t even bend far enough to tie his shoes.”

“I see your point,” Officer Freidman said.

“Yes!” I shouted, punching my fist in the air. “He can be taught!”

Officer Freidman shot me a nasty look, but that was all right. It took my mind off the picture Bethie’s words had painted. I had known Daddy was sick, but hearing her describe it made me realize that it really *hurt* him, that he wasn’t just fine one day and dead the next. I thought of him hurting, and then dying slowly, and I thought of Bethie trying to make him feel better, knowing there was no way he could live. All the sudden it was real. I thought of myself down in California, reluctantly skippering *The Good Ship Jimmy Jay*, too cowardly or blind to see that I could just leave. Daddy was dead. I’d never see him again. We’d never have a chance to fix what was wrong between us. And thanks to Pastor Rayburn’s little boat, I never even got a chance to say good bye.

My throat closed up on me, so I stopped thinking about it and just gave Officer Freidman my best, biggest, smartest-asest grin. Tony jabbed me in the ribs. I kicked one foot back at him. He sucked in his breath, lost his balance, and jumped to the floor to avoid falling. I cackled like it was the funniest thing I’d ever seen.

“So,” Officer Friedman asked Bethie, “if you were going to kill him, what would you use?”

“The morphine,” she said promptly. “I’d just give him a couple extra pills. I’d crunch ’em up and put ’em in his Ensure. Or in his drinking water. At this stage, no one would’ve known—the doctor stopped regulating dosages for him over a month ago.”

Officer Freidman nodded and stood up. Mindful of my baby, I climbed down the stairs and carefully stepped down, rather than just dropping to the floor like I usually did. Bethie stepped out of the cab. Officer Freidman

clambered out after her and scrambled down the ladder. Craning to see his backside while he dusted off his pretty new pants, he said, "So if I follow that line of reasoning, that rules out everybody in the house."

"Everybody who's driven the chopper much, at any rate," said Bethie.

"But could somebody who wasn't familiar with it start the machine and engage the header?"

"Yeah, if they'd had a chance to see it done a few times." She frowned.

"What?" the cop asked.

"I'm not sure...." she said slowly. She shook her head.

"If you remember, give me a call," the cop said.

Bethie nodded. We all walked back to the house. Officer Freidman dusted himself off once more—what was a finicky man like that doing in ranch country, anyway?—slid into his car and drove away. Inside, Bethie made a beeline for the stairs, but Aunt Margaret headed her off and made her talk to more relatives. I managed to dodge the worst of the vultures and sneak up to my room, abandoning Tony to his own devices. I knew he'd be running his mouth before my head hit the pillow, but what did I care?

A few minutes later Bethie came in. She was pale under her tan.

"What's up?" I asked her.

"Where's DJ?"

"No hello? No how you feeling?" I joked.

"Where's DJ?" she asked again.

"All right, what's up?"

"I need to talk to DJ."

"Did you really—"

"Later," she cut me off, and took off out the door like a scalded cat.

Well, I couldn't let that lie. I was off that bed like a scalded cat's sister, and out of my room and down the hall and with my foot jammed in her door before she could close it.

"Go away," she said.

"No. Tell me."

"Please."

"You should know by now that please don't work with me."

“Yeah, you always find out everything, don’t you. Come on in. I’ve got something to do, but then I’ll tell you.” Her shoulders dropped and she stepped back, let me in, and closed the door behind me. Her room was peaceful. The low rumble of relatives munching on funeral meats, chewing the fat, and jump-starting the old family feuds filtered through the thin walls. “You gotta be quiet,” she said. “I need to concentrate.”

“Okay.” But it had been too easy. I curled up on her bed, hugged her pillow, and set myself to wait her out.

She turned out the light, lit her candle, and leaned over it. The candlelight shone on her face, outlined her hair, and caught on her hands as she moved them.

And then something shifted. I can’t tell you how I knew it, but I felt the tension in the air, like the world was suddenly changing focus, spinning down to a more condensed version of itself. When Bethie traced something in the sand and started muttering, I realized there was some truth to all Jennifer’s cracks about witchcraft. Bethie spoke again. The tension snapped, and before I knew it I was out like a light, snoring and drooling on Bethie’s pillow. Not pretty, and definitely not a nice thing to do to your own sister.

I didn’t wake up until she rolled me over and said, “Go to bed.”

CHAPTER 59

Jennifer

The day of the funeral, I took special care with my appearance, and with Davy's, too. After all, we would be the focus of all eyes, and I wanted us to honor Daddy's memory. It would be the first time many of these people had seen me. I think I can be pardoned for wanting to make a good impression. It would have been nice if the family had been equally concerned with behaving appropriately, but by that time I was hardly surprised to discover that they seemed to take a perverse delight in flouting decorum.

For reasons that will forever remain a mystery to me, Sarah chose that morning to tell Gwen about her pregnancy. Fortunately I had already shared that information, so Gwen wasn't caught off-guard. Still, it didn't go well. I came down the stairs just in time to catch the tail end of their conversation:

"—had more important things on my mind."

"Like what?"

"Like planning your daddy's funeral. Like dealing with the police. Like trying to hold things together in this house for a few more days."

I was hurt. After all the support and counseling I had provided, Gwen was pretending that she was solely responsible for "holding things together," as she put it! It wouldn't have killed her to give a little credit. I mean, the woman was and is a basket case. Everybody knows it.

"Don'tcha even care who the father is?" Sarah asked.

"Jennifer told me."

"That *bitch*."

I sucked in my breath at the pain of hearing myself spoken of so crudely, but Gwen didn't let it pass. I heard a slap. Then Gwen said, "You watch your mouth, young lady. I won't have talk like that in my house." She told Sarah how "very good" I'd been to her and Daddy. She said that DJ and I were the ones there when Daddy was in the hospital and that we came up and helped when Sarah was "too busy seducing men of God to bother with your dying father." All of which was absolutely true.

Sarah, I'm sad to say, was very disrespectful to her mother. "Men of God, my ass," she shouted, and then she said, "How can you stand there in this house where that 'man of God' raped his own daughter an' then blamed 'er for it an' say that to my face? How dare you?"

"I didn't know. I couldn't stop him," Gwen whispered.

By now Sarah was screaming. "How could you *not know*?" She yelled that the walls of the house were so thin anything could be heard through them. Well, yes, if people were yelling like that, of course people could hear through the walls. "We all heard," she screamed, "an' none of us did a damn thing."

"I can't remember," Gwen screamed right back. Then silence. Then she asked, "Why are you saying these terrible things? Elizabeth's back and Daddy's dead. It's over. Why can't you be happy? Why do you have to drag all that up now? You just have to have faith," Gwen counseled her.

I was so proud of her! I bowed my head and just said a little prayer of thanks that I had been able to have a small part in her healing.

"You just have to believe that it'll be better in heaven," Gwen went on. "Otherwise it's all been for nothing. I don't think I could stand that," she said in such a soft voice I could hardly hear her. Apparently Sarah couldn't, either.

"What?" Sarah asked.

"That it was all for nothing."

I judged that it was time to intervene before things got unpleasant again. I walked into the kitchen with my biggest, most cheerful smile on my face.

"We ready to go?" I asked. I must say, I looked particularly nice that day. Black suits me, and I had known this day was coming, so I'd been able to do a little shopping ahead of time. And Davy looked so handsome in his little black suit. I had even put a little black armband on him, like he really was in mourning, which I suppose he might have been, in his baby way.

Gwen turned to me. "Let me get my purse."

But, as I have noted before, Sarah simply doesn't know when to let a subject drop. She acted like I wasn't even there, just continued her conversation with Gwen. "That's it?" she asked. I must say, this family seems to have forgotten all about the Sixth Commandment. "I tell you I'm fallin' apart," Sarah said, "an' you say I just haveta have more faith? It'll be better in heaven? What the fuck kind a help is that? I can't do this any more, Momma. Heaven's not worth it."

The catch in her voice shocked me a little, even though I knew she was just trying to manipulate the situation.

Gwen said, "I just wish you could find comfort in the Lord."

"I don't think the Lord's got my best interests at heart, Momma." Sarah sounded like she was going to start crying at any moment. I intervened before her dramatics could undermine Gwen's faith.

"I assume this means you're not going to the funeral with us," I interjected gently. I couldn't imagine trying to project the proper image to the congregation with Sarah pitching fits every five minutes.

Even though she was answering my question, she said to her mother, "I can't go. I just can't sit there an listen to everybody talkin' about what a wonderful Christian he was, what a wonderful father, such an example to us all, an' not say somethin'. I just can't do it."

Gwen sighed and ran a hand through her hair. "To be honest I don't feel much like it myself," she said.

I was angry on Daddy's behalf. *How dared she act like mourning him was a burden?*

"But what would people think?" she asked. I could see that she was very confused. Thank God I was there to help her.

"So it works out," I said. "We can all ride together in our van. Elaine's gone ahead. We can meet her there." I had been worried about Elaine, but

I must say that she had behaved fairly well, maintaining a dignified silence rather than taking part in Sarah and Elizabeth's dramatics. She hadn't said anything about going to the funeral or not. She had just put on a black suit and driven away. The suit bagged and sagged on her. She really should have taken the time to have it altered, but at least it was black, and she was keeping quiet rather than carrying on as she had done that night she claimed Daddy had "confessed."

Gwen didn't say anything more. She just picked up her purse and gloves and walked out the door. I followed her, jingling my keys. At the church Gwen, Davy, DJ, and I sat together. Elaine was nowhere in sight, and Elizabeth and Sarah, of course, were conspicuous by their absence. People asked about them afterward. I hardly knew what to say, so I just murmured softly behind my handkerchief and let them see I was grieving.

A crowd of friends and family accompanied us back to the farm after the funeral. Elaine and Sarah were still sulking in their rooms. When Elizabeth finally showed up, it was obvious she'd been out rolling around in some field. I was appalled. DJ's Aunt Margaret bustled up to me.

"Where are Sarah and Elaine?" she asked.

"Upstairs in their rooms," I said.

"Go let them know everyone's here," she said. She did not ask. People like Aunt Margaret do not ask you to do things. They issue directives. Still, though, I had had a certain amount of experience in dealing with overbearing women, and of course my counseling training has given me tools many women simply do not have.

"I think they know," I said. "I think they just need a little time alone."

"Nonsense," said Aunt Margaret briskly. "Go get them."

"Oh, my, I think DJ's looking for me," I said, and I walked across the room, leaving Aunt Margaret standing there with her mouth open.

She obviously ignored my hints about leaving Elaine and Sarah to themselves, since that seemed to be what they wanted, because a little while later, I saw Sarah slouching down the stairs, her face a thundercloud. I groaned inwardly. In her present mood, she was capable of just about anything. But then I shouldered my burden. I had managed to hold the

family together this long. Surely I could continue until the last guest had been shown to the door. I looked around and spotted Elizabeth across the room, talking to Tony, a cousin DJ had introduced me to at the church. Sarah must have seen her at about the same time, because she started toward her. My stomach knotted. The two separate were bad enough. Together, they were deadly.

"What?" Tony was asking as I came within hearing distance. I hated to think what Elizabeth might have said.

I walked up to them, smiling. "Tony! Let's get you something to eat."

He ignored me. "I'm fine. What motive, Elizabeth?" he asked.

"He raped me," she said calmly, "and I got pregnant. Then he beat me until I lost the baby. And he killed my dog."

"Now, we don't know that for sure," I said in a soothing voice, though I wanted to slap her. "It might be a false memory." I went on to explain about how counselors less ethical than I am sometimes can actually *create* memories in vulnerable clients. It all made sense, but Sarah just had to put her two cents in. She said something about digging up the dog and the—I hate to say it—the *fetus*. She said they could do DNA testing. Then she had the nerve to ask me if "those unethical counselors" could create DNA matches.

"Boy, there sure were a lot of people at the funeral today," I said. "I think some even had to stand outside." Though I was too professional to show it, I was furious. *What on earth were they talking about? And how dare DJ let me walk into something like this with no warning?*

"My Uncle Dan raped you?" Tony sounded like he didn't believe his ears. How could he? Elizabeth's claims were outrageous.

"Yes," Elizabeth said. Her face was as cool as her voice.

"Did you tell anybody?"

"I bet there were more than two hundred people there," I said. I hope I didn't sound as desperate as I felt. "It was really nice." Why on earth did Elizabeth feel it necessary to air family laundry like this?

"Who could I tell?" she was saying. "Daddy was a pillar in the church, a Narrow Way Guide for years. I couldn't talk then, anyway."

As Elizabeth spoke coolly about how she would have killed her father by substituting vitamins for his morphine and letting him suffer, someone else walked up.

"Cheese it." Sarah thrust herself into the conversation. "The cops." She was right. A police officer in plain clothes had walked up and was standing beside her. "I'm Officer Jerry Freidman," the policeman said. "Why doesn't it make sense?"

Elizabeth turned to him. "For one thing, Daddy wasn't capable of climbing that ladder into the cab any more, even if he could have gotten out to the shop on his own. Also, have you tried engaging the header?"

When Officer Friedman suggested that she show him, my heart all but stopped. "Excuse me," I said, smiling around the circle. "I'd better go see how Davy's doing." They started walking away. No one even had the manners to suggest I accompany them. "I don't know anything about machinery, anyway," I called after their retreating backs. Then I turned and hurried away in the direction I hoped DJ was.

Terror was buzzing in my ears like a million flies. Could there be something I had missed? Surely not! Surely the Lord would protect me! It had been an accident. I had been acting to preserve and defend my family. It wasn't my fault. He had been a dangerous, dangerous man. I didn't find DJ, and eventually I found myself on the stairs. I hadn't intended to go upstairs yet, but I was in no shape to present the correct image to the funeral guests. Anyhow, what would people think, seeing me start up the stairs, then come back down, all for no apparent reason? I decided to go up to our room, take a few deep breaths, calm myself down, then return and do my duty as a proper hostess.

Upstairs, I paced around the room. Then I sat down. Then I lay down for a few moments. Then I got up and paced some more. Nothing calmed me. In the end, I spent the rest of the evening in our room, wringing my hands, breathing deeply, praying to the Lord for guidance. When I heard DJ start up the stairs, I lay down again and pretended to be asleep. He came in quietly and tucked Davy into his crib. I heard him moving around, rustling as he took off his suit and tie. The bed gave as he lay down beside me.

I pretended to wake up, rolled toward him, and slipped an arm around his waist. "What time is it?" I asked sleepily. Then, a little louder, "Oh, no, I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to do this."

"Shhh," he said. "It's okay. It's over."

"Are you all right?" I asked him.

"Yes," he said. He didn't ask how I was, or even turn toward me. He just lay on his back, staring up at the ceiling, his jaw square and tight.

I lay beside him, my pulse thundering. Eventually we fell asleep. But then I woke up again. One minute, I'd been lying next to DJ trying not to shake, and the next, I was alone and the bed beside me was chilly to the touch. I lay there, wishing I could hold back the dawn, and at the same time wishing I could turn the clock ahead and have all this behind me. I had calmed down a little in the night. I had overreacted to Elizabeth's comments about her father's death. Surely I had. If I had anything to worry about, certainly I would know by now.

I got up, showered, got Davy up, and took him downstairs for breakfast. Gwen was sitting alone at the table. Elaine drifted in, drank a glass of water, and then disappeared. DJ, Elizabeth, and Sarah were nowhere in sight.

"Where are they?" I asked Gwen at last, furious that I had to track my husband down through his mother.

"Outside." She sounded as vague as ever.

"Where?" I asked when it became clear she wasn't going to elucidate.

"Probably the creek."

I put on my cheeriest voice. "Oh, the creek? What fun! I'll join them."

"I'd leave them be." She got up, crossed the room and started running water to wash the dishes.

"But—"

And then Gwen turned to look at me. I wished she hadn't. I didn't finish what I started to say. I just lifted Davy out of his high chair and took him back upstairs for his morning nap.

Davy and I spent the morning in our room. DJ spent it out in the shop. Or so I assumed. At any rate, he wasn't with me, where he belonged. Sarah

and Elizabeth drove into town. When they came back, I heard them talking in Elizabeth's room. Later, I saw them weeding Gwen's garden.

That's what they were doing when the police car rolled up. They kept weeding when Officer Friedman asked to talk to me. I don't remember the questions he asked or how I answered them. The Lord must have "been with my mouth and taught me what I should say," as he did Moses, because fear had compassed me about with a high wall and I could see, hear, and remember nothing, and yet the answers I gave satisfied the officer that I was telling the truth—that I am a woman dedicated to my home, my family, and my mission.

When Officer Friedman left, I went upstairs again, buoyed up by the Lord's presence in my life. He had saved me as surely as He had saved Daniel in the Lion's Den and the Three Worthies in the Fiery Furnace. Truly, if the Lord is for us, who can be against us? I bathed my son, thanking God for His guiding and protecting hand.

It never occurred to me that my trials had been brought on by the women who should have been my closest allies, the women who had the most reason to understand what I had done, who should have been grateful and admiring, who I had longed to have for my sisters in truth as well as in law.

CHAPTER 60

Sarah

The morning after Daddy's funeral I woke up at the crack of dawn to pee—it seemed like I spent half my life in the crapper these days, what with all the peeing and puking—and right about the time I was ready to flush, I remembered that Bethie was supposed to tell me what she'd figured out last night, and then I remembered her muttering and tracing something in the sand. And that's when I fell asleep. I was royally pissed. I stormed down the hall and slapped her door open, but she was already gone. I yanked one of her dresses over my head, ran down the stairs, and got out the door just in time to see her head disappearing down over the creek bank.

I slipped my feet into one of the big pairs of rubber boots that are always standing around on Momma's porch, took two steps to get the damn things started, and went galumphing after her. I hit the creek bank and had to take two steps to get those boots stopped again, then went down that steep, twisty path real slow and careful. I got to the bottom and, sure enough, there she sat, right by where we'd buried Toby, and the baby. DJ was there with her. The place gave me the willies. Every time I ever came here I started feeling like all the light in the world had been smothered in its sleep, that the drought would never end, that everything was winding down and in a few more years the world itself would just forget to wake up. I didn't know why it was like that for me, but it always was. Always had been, even before the

baby and Toby. Fear and hurt had seeped right into the dirt. I would've thought if any place felt like that, it would've been the house. Nothing ever happened down here, but shivers chased up and down my arms. The place felt haunted; there was no other word for it.

I was standing there, rubbing my arms to knock down the goose bumps, when DJ and Bethie saw me. Oddly enough, I, who have all the sensitivity of a warthog, was embarrassed. I saw their faces and decided my little talk with Bethie could wait.

"Uh, sorry," I said, and turned to go, but Bethie said, "It's better if she hears this, too, DJ. We can't afford any more secrets."

"I'm not making any decisions without Jenny," DJ said stubbornly. "She's my wife."

"Just hear me out," said Bethie. "You might as well sit down, Sarah."

I sat.

Then Bethie said, straight out of left field, "I never did thank you guys for taking care of Toby—" her voice broke "—and the baby."

"You would've done the same for us," said DJ. "We watch each other's backs." It was true. Surviving Daddy bound us together in a way that none of us really understood—and that none of us doubted.

We sat there together, and after a minute Bethie rested one hand on Toby's grave. I felt a little sorry for the baby, left out and all alone in this creepy place, so I scooped over and laid my hand on the spot where we'd buried what would have been a baby if it hadn't been for Daddy's size-thirteen steel-toed boots.

"I need to tell you something," Bethie finally said.

"Okaaaaay," DJ drawled, like he did when wanted you to know he was being patient on purpose.

"The first thing I remember after that night is waking up in a house. It belonged to an old woman. It was way up in the mountains. In the time I was there, I learned to look for patterns rather than isolated events. They're everywhere. If you see them, you can understand things you might not otherwise."

"For instance?" DJ asked.

"You know how it is when we get on a side hill, and first you feel yourself sort of slipping off the seat, then you start leaning to compensate, then your foot starts slipping off the pedal sideways, and when the chopper starts sliding, and we know to pull the trucks in real close?"

"Yeah," DJ said. "So?"

"So that's a pattern. And we've seen it often enough that we don't even really think about it. But somebody who wasn't familiar with chopping on hillsides would just see the truck driver getting too close to the chopper—they'd think the driver was screwing up. They'd misunderstand because they hadn't seen the pattern. Then when the chopper went over, they'd think we were lucky. Or psychic."

"So are we getting to the point any time soon?" DJ asked. I was shocked. He never would have spoken to any of us, let alone Bethie, like that in the past.

Bethie looked a little hurt, but she went on. "I've been looking for the pattern in Daddy's death," she said after a minute, "and I can only make the pieces only fit one way.

"And that is?" DJ's jaw was hard, like it used to get when he was angry. But what was he mad about? Bethie must've pulled him away from something important for this little chat.

"Last night when we were out in the shop, I remembered a couple things. I was showing the cop how the header engages and explaining that nobody who really understands how hard it is to do would stage an "accidental" death that way. Daddy couldn't have done it on his own. It's just too complicated. Requires too much strength. The cop asked if somebody who wasn't familiar with the chopper could start it and get the header in gear. I said yes, provided they had seen it done a couple times—and that it might not occur to them that it's always so hard. They might think it was just because they weren't doing it right.

"Get to the point, Elizabeth."

He never called her that. Ever. She was Bethie. I looked from his set face to her strained one. Couldn't he see that this was both important and terribly, terribly hard for her? I could never remember Bethie speaking so many words at one time.

"That's when I remembered," said Bethie. "That last day. Jennifer drove Daddy to the field. Then she and Davy rode with you, and you showed Davy how to get the header in gear. And Jennifer was watching. That's the first thing."

"So?"

"The other things were tiny—just details you don't think about much. Her nail polish. All the while I've been here she's been wearing clear—why?"

"Because Daddy had a fit about her hot pink."

"An' she hasn't been wearin' her earrings," I put in, remembering that first day and the tiny holes that had fooled me into thinking she might be a friend.

Bethie shot me a grateful look. "When we got here that day, I went into the house," she continued. "She came out of the bedroom looking all red-eyed, but she had on diamond earrings and her nails were freshly polished—hot pink. And a little piece of brown lint was stuck on one of the nails—the same color as the lining of the gloves I gave you the day she rode with you. At the hospital she'd taken her earrings out."

"So?"

"So why was it okay to wear her earrings around the house that day? How did she know she could put on colored nail polish that day? And why was brown lint stuck to her nail? She had to know that Daddy wouldn't be complaining about her nails and jewelry anymore. And she must've had her nails in brown lint—like the gloves—while they were still tacky, and so recently that she hadn't noticed it yet."

"You're nuts. Why would she want to hurt him? She got along with him better than either of you did."

I gritted my teeth.

"Did she?" Bethie asked. She sounded curious.

"Yes."

"Course she did," I drawled. "He never raped her. He never knocked her down—or up, for that matter. He never blacked her eyes. Everything was just *peachy* between them."

Something moved in DJ's eyes. "I'm not going to listen to this," he said. "He was my daddy. Jenny's my wife. We don't know for sure exactly *what* he did, but now he's dead—it's over, and we don't owe you any explanations."

"No, you don't, and if you say they had a good relationship, then that's all there is to it," Bethie said steadily. But her face was white under her tan. "You owe yourself an explanation, though. If you never know what happened, or why, it'll shadow the rest of your life. Either way, it shapes you. But if you know, you have some control over *how* it shapes you. Knowing gives you a choice. There has to be an accounting before you can close the book on it. And what about Davy?" She stopped.

DJ was on his feet. "That's enough." He was shouting, and DJ never shouted. "I don't want to hear any more about it. She's my *wife*. I love her." He turned and went up the bank, reaching the top in four long leaps.

Bethie sagged like all the air had been let out of her.

"She's a sneak," I said.

"What?"

"She's a sneak. She lies."

She looked straight at me. "How do you know?"

"The day I got here, she stood there an' told me—volunteered it, actually—that she wouldn't tell anybody about the baby. Then she turns right around an' tells Momma. She's a sneak."

"But from sneaking to murder's a big step."

"So what do we do?"

"I tell that cop what I saw. Then we do nothing."

"Nothing" pretty much summed up the results. The cops evidently didn't find tacky nail polish and a ride around the field suspicious enough to arrest squeaky-clean Jennifer, though they did question her that afternoon.

DJ was livid. He came storming out to where Bethie and I were weeding in the garden and stood over us, fists clenched, panting. I looked at him and for the first time I saw not my baby brother, but Daddy. It both frightened and saddened me.

"You've destroyed this family," he said in a hard, mean voice. "You're a couple of crazy, jealous, vindictive women who can't keep a man or have

babies of your own—” he choked there and had the grace to blush, but he didn’t apologize. Instead he turned and walked stiffly back into the house. Bethie and I didn’t say anything, but the words hung between us. Even talkin’ army wasn’t enough to keep that from hurtin’ like hell.

CHAPTER 61

Jennifer

DJ pushed the bathroom door open. “Get packed,” he said. “We’re leaving. Now.”

I looked up from the bathtub where Davy was splashing. “Now?”

“Now.” The door slammed shut and I heard him going down the hall, his steps hard and fast.

“Come on, baby,” I crooned to Davy. “Daddy say we go bye-bye.” I lifted him out of the water, wrapped him in a towel, pushed my nose into his belly to make him laugh, and carried him down the hall and into our bedroom. DJ was lunging between the bed and the closet, yanking my pretty summer dresses off their hangers and cramming them into the open suitcase on the bed.

“Honey?” I stepped forward, Davy in my arms.

DJ didn’t answer. He just started yanking drawers out, carrying them to the bed, and upending them over the already overflowing suitcase.

“Honey?” I tried again. “What’s wrong?”

DJ still didn’t answer.

“If this is about that policeman talking to me, it’s fine. I just told him the truth, and it was okay.”

Davy held out his arms and crowed at his daddy.

DJ could never resist Davy when he did that. He paused and ran his hand gently over Davy’s silky head. “Hey, Davy.” He didn’t look at me.

I gave up. "Come on," I said to Davy. "Let's help Daddy pack." I dressed Davy quickly and set him in his crib, then started gathering his toys and clothes and folding them neatly into the second suitcase. DJ's suitcase was a tangled mountain of clothes, my beautifully ironed dresses all twisted up with his worn-out farming jeans and shirts.

"Let me put some of that in here," I said.

"It's fine."

"But the suitcase won't close."

"It'll go or it'll break," DJ said grimly. He forced the lid down, wiggled it, shoved the heap of clothes around and forced it again. It was no good.

"Let me," I said quickly, frightened by his anger.

He flung the lid back and stalked out of the room. I started pulling my dresses out, folding them, and stacking them neatly in the second suitcase. When I heard the van start outside, I folded faster, then gave up folding and just rolled the dresses up, sticking as much as I could into corners of the suitcase. Davy pulled himself up and stood in his crib, holding onto the rail.

I heard DJ coming down the hall. The door flew open. "Let's go."

"But the suitcases—"

"Sit on them. You're big enough to force them closed."

The mean-spiritedness of his remark hurt me, but now wasn't the time to talk things out. Clearly, something was very, very wrong.

"Wiggle," the stranger who was my husband commanded.

I wiggled. "DJ, we—"

The latches clicked.

"Let's go." I can't even describe how cold his voice was.

"But shouldn't we say goodbye?"

"Mom's in the kitchen. Say it on your way through."

"But—"

He was gone, taking the suitcases with him.

I picked up Davy, my purse, and the diaper bag and looked around. My hands were trembling. What could be wrong with DJ? It was all right about the policeman. I'd told him it had been all right. I'd told the truth. I carried Davy down the stairs and into the kitchen.

Gwen was standing at the sink. Her eyes were red. Just then, Elizabeth and Sarah stepped through the kitchen door and stood right inside it, side by side, together. It struck me that that was what was wrong with this family—even though there were deep divisions, something very deep bound them tightly, too tightly to allow for anyone else. Even a sister-in-law. I had been absolutely right to try to help DJ distance himself from his family's suffocating coils.

Elizabeth looked across the room at me. "You're leaving?"

"Yes," I said, smiling and confident. "DJ and I are needed at home."

"Oh," she said. Something in her voice raised the hackles on my neck. Now wasn't the time, though. At long last, I was escaping from this terrible family, from this terrible house. In a funny way, though, I found myself realizing that I would miss it. This would be a summer I would always remember. Parts of it had been wonderful. Parts of it had changed me forever.

DJ came back into the kitchen. "Let's go," he said again. He crossed to Gwen, hugged her quickly. "Bye, Mom." He turned and faced Sarah and Elizabeth, still standing between us and the door. He looked at them. They looked back steadily.

"Just think about it. That's all I'm asking," Elizabeth said.

My stomach clenched. "Think about what?" I asked.

He stepped around his sisters and was out the door. "Come on," he called back to me.

"Say bye-bye, Davy," I cooed. I carried him to Gwen, who hugged him. I gave her a quick hug as well. She felt like a sack of bones. When I turned, Elizabeth and Sarah were gone.

As sad as it is to have to admit this, I have pledged to be honest in this statement, so I must acknowledge that I was relieved. I didn't have to choose between letting them touch my son and being rude. I hurried outside and down the walk to the gate, my heart joyful. We were going home! No matter the manner of it, we were going home. DJ opened the back door of the van. I buckled Davy into his seat, then climbed into the front and fastened my seatbelt. Then I bowed my head to pray, as usual,

for traveling mercies. But the van started with a jerk, slamming me back against the seat before I could get the words out of my mouth. I opened my eyes and started to protest, but when I got one look at DJ's white, set face, well, I just closed my mouth, bowed my head, and did the traveling mercies prayer silently for all of us. What a tragedy it would be if we had an accident and my husband died while his heart was filled with anger!

He drove, his jaw set tight. Every once in a while the heavy muscle at the angle below his ear rolled and flexed, and his hands slowly opened, stretched, then tightened again on the steering wheel. His big knuckles were white, the scars on them flickering like heat lightning as the skin tightened, tightened, tightened, eased, tightened, tightened, tightened... He never said a word. Eventually, the cut over his knuckles opened and blood oozed out and dripped on the floor. I was so glad I had thought to put vinyl mats down over the carpet!

When we pulled into our driveway that afternoon, I was exhausted. The lawn was shaggy, the leaves on the giant oak tree in the front yard dusty and brittle. Davy was being fussy. DJ climbed silently out of the van, grabbed both suitcases, unlocked the door, and had the suitcases in the house before I finished getting Davy unbuckled. I picked him up, then picked up the diaper bag and walked to my house.

As I stepped into our hot, musty foyer, I heard the door to DJ's workroom slam. Even though I was hurt by his behavior, I knew the best thing to do would be to give him a little time on his own so he could work through some of his issues. Then I would make it clear to him that he could not be allowed to subject me to these tantrums. We'd talk it out later. That's one of the things that makes our relationship strong. I've seen to it. We talk things out—and I am wise enough to choose the time.

Davy fussed again, so I carried a blanket outside and spread it on the back lawn. Then I changed him, fixed him a bottle, and carried him out to play on the blanket. I lay down beside him and brought my arm over my eyes. My ears were still buzzing from the altitude changes and the charged silence in the van. I don't know how long it was, but eventually the sun slid behind the big trees along the edges of the lawn. The door opened, and I

heard DJ's steps rustling through the long grass. I squinted up at him, my arm still over my eyes. He sank down on the blanket with a sigh. I waited for him to apologize, to begin the conversation that would clear the air, explain his behavior, and allow me to bring healing to our relationship.

"Hey, big guy," he said gently, lifting Davy in his arms.

I watched, my arm still over my eyes. Any minute now, he'd turn to me, apologize, and then I could begin the healing and everything would be perfect again. He reached toward me. *Oh no, you don't, buster*, I thought, *Not until we've talked about this and I've had an apology*. But his hand stopped short. He picked up the bottle and the little blanket I'd brought out for Davy. Then he wrapped Davy in the blanket, cradled him in his arms, and gave him the bottle. He never looked at me, never spoke to me. He just sat there, our son in his arms, staring at something I couldn't see. I lay there, silent and stony, waiting for the apology I now realized would never come.

CHAPTER 62

Sarah

That afternoon, after DJ and Jennifer went roaring out of the driveway in their shiny red minivan, I zipped up my suitcases and rode back to Bethie's house with her. I knew she worked on ranches for a living, so I was expecting a typical ranch-hand house—a little frame cottage, an elderly Airstream, or maybe even a doublewide parked in sagebrush, greasewood, and sand dunes. When we left the freeway and took off down a dirt road, I started expecting the worst. Which is why, when we pulled up in front of her gate, I was shocked, to say the least. The place was huge, with the sort of wide flat porches that just beg for rockers, which she had. Massive trees shaded the green rolling lawns and flower beds. A stone path led around the house. "Shit, Bethie, did you fall on your feet, or what?"

"Nice, isn't it?" she said.

"Nice? It's a fuckin' palace!"

She grinned and hauled our suitcases out of the Jeep's cargo area. "It's good to be home," she said. We walked up the path and in the front door together, then she dropped the suitcases in the entry and started down the hallway. "My room's last one on your left upstairs. Otherwise, take your pick," she called back over her shoulder. "I need a drink."

"I'm right behind you," I said, and followed her into her big old kitchen. I crossed to the back door, opened it, and gazed out at the back yard through the screen. Raised vegetable beds marched in neat ranks along a

winding path. Lounge chairs with striped cushions sat under the big old trees. Overhead, the sky arched like a bottomless blue lake. Bethie put a tall glass in my hand, and I took a sip and sighed. She slid her arm around me, squeezed, then let go.

"Pick your room." I chose the first bedroom on the left, closest to the bathroom. And so I came home to the house by the river.



The next morning I woke up to scraping and thumping coming from the room between mine and Bethie's. I rolled out of bed, yawning and rubbing my head, and stumbled down the hall in the big T-shirt I was sleeping in. "What's up?" I asked, bracing a hip on the door frame, curling my toes against the chilly wood floor, and smothering another yawn.

"Oh, sorry. Did I wake you up?" Bethie straightened up and grinned unconvincingly.

"What're you doing?" I asked.

But it was obvious. She'd torn the bed apart. The mattress was leaning against one wall, the headboard and footboard against another. She'd spread a ragged sheet on the floor and was dragging the heavy old dresser onto it.

"Here, let me help," I said.

"Thanks." Then she stepped back. "No, you shouldn't be doing this."

"It'll be fine," I said, but I stepped back, too. "What're you doing?"

"Getting ready for the baby."

I looked down at my stomach. Not too poochy yet, but you could tell. "We got lots of time."

"Only a few months," she said. "We gotta have a room ready, and clothes, and food, and—" she broke off "—and I'm painting the dresser, and then I'm gonna go buy a paper and look for a crib. And blankets. We need blankets. And diapers. And bottles."

I stood there, my mouth wide open.

"What?" Bethie asked. "I'm just being practical here."

"I guess it just never occurred to me that this baby would ever actually come out," I said.

Bethie snorted. "What color you think we should go with?"

"White?"

"Do you know what you're having?"

"No."

"You gonna find out?"

Suddenly it seemed intensely important. The baby was real. It would be a boy or a girl. It would need a name. Clothes. Love. How had I ever thought I could do all this on my own? I stopped laughing and looked gratefully at my sister. "Yeah," I said. "I'll ask about it at my next appointment. Oh, shit—I gotta find a doctor." I looked around the room, picturing it with a crib, a toy box, a rug, a rocking chair. "Yellow," I said.

"Yellow?"

"Yellow walls. The dresser's white. So's the crib. The rug's blue and cream, with maybe a little pink and a touch of green in the borders."

Bethie looked around, squinting. "Where's the crib?"

"Right over there, where the baby can see outside."

"Have you thought of names yet?"

"Not really." Until that day, a name hadn't seemed necessary. The baby was a part of my belly, not a real person.

Bethie dropped to her knees and started pulling drawers out and setting them on the floor. "There's stuff for breakfast in the kitchen," she said over her shoulder.

"Oh. Okay." I felt a little nonplussed. "I want to help."

"Eat first. It's only sanding right now, and this is so old the paint might be lead-based. You shouldn't be breathing the dust. We still have to buy all the new paint and stuff."

A wave of nausea reminded me that Bethie was right. Bathroom first. Food second. Work third.



While Bethie and I were still treating each other with the good manners we reserve for cordial strangers, while we were still tiptoeing around the reality of Bethie's life and the fact that I had kept screwing Jimmy Jay long past the time I would have had to, while we were still afraid to talk

about Bethie's dead baby back by the creek, working on the baby's room gave us common ground. Even before it was born, that baby was building bridges between us, giving us time and a reason to stay in the same room long enough to ask the hard questions. And really listen to the answers. 'Course we had a few rough spots. Bethie never put me to sleep again, but remembering that she could spooked me. I knew she felt it, and that it hurt her, but I couldn't help it—she scared me.

And then there was the room off the living room. She never told me to stay out of it, but I did, anyway, after the first time. It happened one morning right after I got there. I was alone in the house, wandering around and minding my own business, when I happened into the first room in the hallway off the living room. I wasn't doing any harm, wasn't even touching anything. It was almost bare in there, just a table with a candle, some salt, some sand, a pentacle, a knife, some greens in a jar, a painted chest in the corner. A breeze lifted the gauzy curtains and ruffled my hair. I was just turning to go back out when I felt it. *Someone was looking at me.* I spun around. But the room was empty. I crossed the floor and looked out the window. The porch and the yard were both empty. But I could still feel eyes on me. I shivered and hurried out, pulling the door shut behind me.

Give me something solid to fight, and I'll give a pretty good account of myself. But put me up against something I can't see, and I wilt like Pastor Rayburn's little boat in a raincoat. Maybe that's why I never could fight Daddy: I couldn't understand how he could hurt us so bad if he loved us. If I'd known that, I could've kept us all safe. But I never knew where to take hold.

The other thing that spooked me was Bethie walking around naked. I'm not talking about in the house; I'm talking about outside, starkers, down by the river, in front of God and everybody. Every night she left the house dressed normally, for her, at least—loose dress, hair wadded up or braided. That was fine. But when she came back her hair was wet and more often than not she was barefoot and buck naked. First time I caught her, I almost had a coronary.

I was in the kitchen getting a glass of iced tea when she came parading in the back door, naked as a jaybird. When I choked on the tea, she rushed over and whacked me on the back.

"Take a deep breath," she said. "Here, eat this." She tore a little chunk of bread off the morning's loaf. I chewed and swallowed, swallowed again. She stepped back. "Better?"

"Geez, Bethie, where the hell are your clothes?"

She looked around. "Guess I left 'em by the pool."

"You didn't notice?" I was appalled. "How could you forget your clothes? Why'd you take 'em off in the first place?" And then my face started burning. "Oops," I said. "Sorry."

"Sorry for what?"

"It's not my business if you're meeting that guy."

"What guy?"

"The one you hooked up with at Momma's place?"

"It's not like that," she said.

I was following her. "So why'd you take your clothes off if there's no guy?"

"I went swimming."

"And forgot to get dressed afterward?"

"I guess clothes just seemed ... ah ... irrelevant?"

"Oh." My sister, who had been too modest to change her clothes with anyone else in the room, considered clothes *irrelevant*?

"Want to come with?"

"Huh?"

"You want to come to the pool with me?"

I thought about that room and her big books and the belly I'd been growing under the big, old, men's cotton work shirts Bethie'd found in the attic. "I'm not sure," I said.

"It's okay," she said. But I could see it meant a lot to her. She started across the kitchen.

I just couldn't do it. But I was so curious. Then I remembered Janet, and I remembered what she told me. "Well sure," I said, "I'd love to."

Bethie grinned at me, then disappeared down the hallway.

As the sun set the next night, we walked down the sandy path to the riverbank, picked our way up this little creek, squeezed through a patch of jungle, then fought our way through a bunch of dead weeds and willows. I wondered how the hell Bethie'd ever found this place to begin with and what she was looking for out here, anyhow, and then a willow whip cut me across the face and then the mosquitoes came and then the no-see-ums. About then I remembered that following Janet's advice got me to Motel 6 with Jimmy Jay Rayburn. I started talkin' me a little army—"Shitdamnitalltohell."

Bethie's giggle drifted back to me. I cracked my elbow against this big damn rock and then we broke through into a little clearing. Bethie was standing straight and quiet in her white cotton dress, her hands against her sides. The moon hung silver white overhead, though the deep blue sky still held hints of rose, gold, and pearl at the horizon. A pool lay in front of us, its surface black and smooth and shadowy. I opened my mouth to make a smartass remark ... and all the sudden the world opened up. I don't know how else to say it. I felt the wind against my skin, the water against the shore, the day's heat seeping up into the cool night air, the rip an owl's wings made in the night. I felt myself standing at the edge of the trees with my sister, as much a part of the night as the owl, the pool, the sky, and all of us together moving, breathing, in a slow, stately dance with infinite embellishments.

Something in me that had been knotted up a long time smoothed out. If I'd heard someone actually say that, I'd be happy for them. It sounds so peaceful, so liberating. But it was neither of those things. It was terrifying, is what it was. That knot had been holding me together for so long, I was afraid I'd fly apart if I lost it. I slammed my soul shut so fast, it felt like dying ... and when I saw the woman sitting on the bench, I didn't even *begin* to let myself think she might hold the key to something unimaginable. Instead, I blurted, "Shit, Bethie, you a lesbian?" because it was safer than admitting that I didn't know *what* the hell she was anymore, and I knew even less what I was becoming myself.

Bethie didn't answer. The woman looked at me. *Into me.* She saw all the fear, all the anger, all the pain. I can't tell you how I knew that, I just did, like I knew something in that spare room was watching me, even though I couldn't see it, and like I knew that Bethie was a lot more than I'd ever suspected. It didn't occur to me to be offended. What I was, was terrified. That woman saw me as I was, so I did what I always had done when that happened. I tried to brazen it out. I lifted my chin and looked her in the eye and waited for her to pull away, to laugh, to vomit, to strike me dead. But nothing happened. She just looked at me, at the Sarah behind the war paint and tough talk. Her eyes got sad. Then she gave a little nod and smiled at me, and suddenly I knew she understood about Daddy, Pastor Rayburn, the baby, war paint, and talkin' army, and because she did, they didn't look so big anymore.

I couldn't look away from her, but I heard Bethie shucking off her dress. Five minutes ago, you would've needed a blowtorch to get me out of my clothes. Not anymore. The Lady had seen me as I was and it was all right. I found myself thinking of Bethie's word for it—my clothes seemed irrelevant.

Under the Lady's gaze, I peeled off my dress, and in her eyes I saw admiration. I looked down at my bloated breasts with their immense nipples like dark smears, at my round, hard belly, and no further, since my belly blocked the view. The baby moved. I watched my belly shift and roll as a tiny elbow or knee slid around. I smiled, and when I looked up the Lady was laughing. I laughed back, and knew I'd never be ashamed of my boobs and belly and saggy butt again. I was a woman. I had a woman's body. Beauty and perfection are entirely different things. I heard splashing, so I stepped into the water, gasped at the chill, and then stepped in deeper, and together my sister and I washed away the pain, hurt, and dirt of our lives. Then we went to meet the Lady, who was still waiting for us. And it was all right.



Bethie and I drove down to see Momma a few weeks later. When we pulled up by the kitchen gate, though, all we could do was stare. A "for sale" sign swung on the peeling fence. A dust devil kicked up a baby

tornado in the dead garden. Bethie and I walked up the steps and into a ghost house. The battered kitchen table still sat in the middle of the room, its chairs pushed neatly in around it. The old round-top refrigerator door stood propped open, its interior dark and empty.

"Momma?" I called. "We're here." My voice echoed up the stairwell.

We crossed to the living room, our footsteps loud in the silence. Dust coated the old rabbit-eared TV. Daddy's chair sat where it always had. Something inside me clenched.

"Look upstairs," Bethie's voice sounded harsh and strained. I felt her hand grab my arm. We climbed the stairs together. I resolutely did not look at the dark streaks along the walls. Everything was still in place, and everything was dead. Momma's clothes hung in her closet. The dresser still held her hairbrush and hand mirror, and the little bowl for spare change. Everything sat in its place, but the house had died. Bethie and I stood uncertainly in the hallway, then went back down to the kitchen and just stood there. I looked at the kitchen chairs, and though my legs and back were aching, it didn't even occur to me to pull a chair out and sit down. The death hush of the house must not be broken.

"Let's go," Bethie said at last.

"Where?" I asked as she locked the door behind us.

"To find Momma."

"How?"

"Call her."

We climbed back into the Jeep and I called her on my cell phone while we sat there in the driveway.

"Where are you?" I asked as soon as she answered. My voice sounded angry, but I didn't feel that way. I felt lost and off-balance.

"I'm at home, waiting for you girls," she said, her voice high in the way it got when she was irritated.

"No, you're not. We're here."

"Oh," she said, and then, "Didn't I tell you I moved?"

"No, you didn't."

"You watch your tone, young lady," she said. "I'm still your mother."

"Why didn't you say anything, Momma? Why didn't you tell us?"

"It slipped my mind. I bought a new house with the insurance money."

From anybody else, it would have sounded ridiculous. From Momma, it made a screwy kind of sense, given the stuff that'd slipped her mind in the past.

She gave us directions, and we headed into town and into one of the weirdest experiences of my life. Everything about Momma's new house was *pretty*. The brass door knocker was polished within an inch of its life. The furniture was covered in light blue and pink velvet. Pictures of Jesus, flowers, and landscapes in gilt frames were hanging on the wall. She had flowered wallpaper. The carpet was flowered, too. Even the bathroom soaps were tiny carved roses. I felt like Peter Rabbit, lost in Mr. McGregor's garden.

Momma had invited people over for Sunday dinner. That had never happened, not once in all the time while I was growing up. We sat in her pretty living room after dinner while Momma made pretty, godly conversation with her company, and they all kept sneaking looks at my belly. Nobody quite had the nerve to comment. Finally I put them out of their misery and went down the hall to the pretty, flowery guest room and laid myself down on the pretty flowery bed Bethie and I were sharing that weekend. A few minutes later Bethie came in. "They're talking about Pastor Rayburn," she reported.

"Oh?"

"The consensus is that it must've been the Youth Ministries secretary's fault, since she lost her job and he was just transferred."

"Lucky thing I came in here."

She lay down beside me, folded her arms behind her head, and stared at the ceiling, just like I was doing. "You ever think of filing a sexual harassment suit?" she asked after a few minutes.

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because it was partly my fault."

Bethie's head turned on the pillow. "Sarah, come on! The man *raped* you."

"Nobody was holding a gun to my head at Motel 6."

"Maybe not physically."

"Thing is, I could've said no, if I'd been willing to take the consequences. He didn't really force me. He just took advantage. And that's not against the law."

"It should be." She sat up. "I'm going for a drive."

I didn't offer to go along. I turned on my side and curled up as tight as I could around my swollen belly, and I gotta admit it, some tears slipped out. I mean, I just didn't have a place anywhere. I was living with my sister. The house I had lived in for most of my life was worse than sold. It was a dusty corpse, a body whose soul had fled. I had no education and no job, I was scared spitless about trying to be a mother, and my own mother was busily defending that shit, Pastor Rayburn.

About then, Momma poked her head in. "You awake?"

"Yeah," I muttered, rubbing my eyes.

She came all the way in and sat down on the bed. "You ready to go to vespers with me? Pastor Rayburn's speaking." She didn't comment on my red eyes.

"No."

"But what will he think? It'll hurt his feelings if you're not there."

"I don't want to see him."

"Why not? He always said you girls were like daughters to him."

"Momma!"

"What?"

"The man raped me and got me pregnant and then cheated on me. Why would I want to see him?"

"Hush, Sarah! You shouldn't say things like that. Somebody might take you seriously."

"Why shouldn't they?" I asked wearily. "It's the gospel truth."

"You misunderstood," she said huffily. "You must have led him on. He's a good man."

I tried to remember why Bethie and I had come here. What had we hoped to accomplish? It had been for Momma, of course, but as I stared at this pretty

aging woman in her pretty clothes, in her pretty house, I couldn't find any trace of my mother. The woman who had limped through the house, bracing herself on the walls, the woman who had, for one brief month, given us a childhood, the woman who had resolutely ignored the reality of our home was just not here. The woman here was someone entirely different, a stranger. My mother was a lost, broken, bitter, self-centered woman who from time to time showed flashes of who she might have been under other circumstances. I had no doubt that, terrible as our lives had been, she had loved us as well as she could. We had shared a history. But I had no history with this pretty woman and all her pretty things, and I wasn't sure I wanted one. It was more than just the fact that Momma'd decided to move into town; I could've understood that. It was the absolute rejection of all her life had been before that hurt. She had just walked out the door on a past that included not only Daddy, but us, too. She had left our childhoods behind, killed our child selves along with all the terrible memories. Our shared past had become collateral damage. In unmaking the pain of her life, she had also unmade the things that bound us. If we had no shared past, how could we hope to have a shared present? Or future? I looked at her. A stranger I didn't like very much looked back.

I rolled off the bed, hauled myself to my feet, waddled over to where my duffle bag sat open on a chair, and started cramming my clothes in.

"What're you doing?"

"Packin'."

"I can see that, but why?"

"Because I'm leavin'."

"But why?"

I wheeled around as fast as I could, my belly being what it was. "I'm sick of you blamin' victims. You did it to Bethie, and you're for damn sure not gonna do it to me. You want to believe I led him on, fine. Yeah, I made him grab me and yank me into his office. Yeah, I made him tear my clothes, I made him hurt me so bad I bled for a week. Yeah, I made him do that. My office dress that came down past my knees and up to my neck and had no waist was just too provocative. Right, Momma."

She was white, but she had grit. "But that wasn't when you got pregnant."

"No," I said, slumping down on the bed, my hands dangling between my knees. "Nope. I kept lettin' him do it."

"Why?"

"What else could I do? If I'd said no, I would've lost my job. And you and Daddy made it real clear you wouldn't pay for any more college. I would've had to come home."

She looked like I'd slapped her. "Would that have been so bad?" she asked. "We kept your room ready."

"Momma, how can you even ask? Hell, look at you—you've abandoned everything we were, and here you are, just pretendin' that you're somebody else who's always lived like this. You've left everything. After what Daddy did to us all those years, after what he did to Bethie and Elaine—hell, after what he did to me—how can you even ask?"

"But I didn't know. I'm still not convinced anything actually went on. Do you think I would've just let it happen? Anyhow, it couldn't have been that bad—you all seem to have survived."

"There's more to life than just survivin'."

But I knew it was useless. She was already ironing out the flaws, turning the blood and bruises and torn flesh and shame into something unreal, something imagined, something that we girls had, for some inexplicable reason, invented.

"Well," she said after a minute, "I'm not sure that Bethie didn't imagine some of what she claims happened. She didn't talk for all those years...."

"You think she imagined all that blood? Did she imagine Toby dead? Bethie didn't get pregnant by imagination. Daddy admitted he molested Elaine. Hell, Momma, every chance he got, he was smackin' us or shovin' his hands inside our clothes. We all knew it."

"I didn't," she insisted. "I always thought that Greg had something to do with it," she finished in a stiff voice.

"Greg didn't. Daddy did." What else could I say? "Beth told me what he said when she came home the first time. You were there. You heard. You know. Why are you saying these things?"

Her face crumbled. "I had nothing to do with it. I did my best for you girls. I didn't know. It wasn't my fault."

I found myself searching for the words that would make a difference, that would reveal the path back to a world that, terrible as it was, we had shared. "But sometimes we choose not to know the things that will put us in danger. Momma, if you think back, weren't there ever things that bothered you?"

"I didn't like it that he spanked you kids so hard. But the other ... I just had no idea."

"But all the rest of us knew that somethin' was goin' on. How could you not?"

"I can't remember!" she screamed suddenly. "I can't be blamed for what I can't remember. Stop accusing me!"

"Nobody's accusin' you of anything, Momma."

The moment was gone, if it had ever been there. Her story was in place. She had not known that she was living with a monster. *Of course* she would never have permitted such things to happen to her children! She was a good mother. It wasn't her fault. She bore no responsibility for Elaine, for Bethie, for me. That was her story, and she was stickin' to it.

Well, it wasn't a story I could live with.

I went back to shoving stuff into my duffle, although I'd realized by then that I couldn't leave until Bethie got back, and then only if she agreed to go.

Momma was still sitting on the bed, sniffing. I reached back and handed her a tissue without looking at her. She blew, then said brightly, "You better get ready. Vespers starts in forty-five minutes."

"I told you I'm not goin'." I zipped my duffle shut.

"Why not?"

"I don't want to."

"But why not?"

"I just don't." I just couldn't face going through the whole pointless discussion again. Momma had built herself a nice, pretty world, and she wasn't about to let me screw it up for her.

"Well, all right ... if you're sure. I'll say you're not feeling well."

“Don’t lie for me, Momma.”

“I’m not doing it for you. I’m doing it to keep from hurting an old family friend.” She walked out. A few minutes later, I heard the garage door slide up. I looked out the window to see Momma’s pretty new car—a Camry—purring down the driveway. I let the curtain drop, sat down on the bed and stared at nothing.

“Can we go?” I asked Bethie as soon as she got back.

“Now?”

“Yes.”

“Shouldn’t we wait till Momma gets back?”

I sighed. “I suppose. But can we at least get out of this house for a while?”

“What happened?”

I told her, trying not to cry. Why the hell should I cry over Jimmy Jay? He was an asshole. I was a slut. These things happen. So Momma moved to town. So she had decorated her house. What was there to cry about in that?

When I finished, Bethie hugged me and said, “Come on. You need a Charburger.” We drove down the hill and each got a Charburger deluxe with cheese, fries, and a chocolate shake. All the tables were taken, but I rubbed my back, hovered by the tables, and looked pathetic, and pretty soon a couple cowboys took the hint and gave us their table on the little strip of grass out by the railroad tracks. I’d hoped for one inside, but beggars can’t be choosers.

Beth and I said, “Thank you,” and smiled nicely at them and sat out in that still, hot night between summer and autumn, listening to the music from Happy Canyon down the road. We talked about all the Happy Canyons we’d watched before, and the sadness of it made our throats ache. We didn’t speak of the house that had held our childhoods sitting abandoned and empty while our mother busily pretended our shared history didn’t exist. We didn’t speak of the silent machinery, the abandoned fields. The pain of that cut too deep. The wall Momma had built around her safe, pretty new world was never going to come

tumbling down. What had been her prison had become her refuge, and there was no room for such as us.

When we pulled up in front of Momma's new house, the windows glowed golden between the Priscilla curtains. She met us at the door, still wearing her lacy dress.

"Where have you been?"

"We just went out for supper."

"I was worried. Somebody's here to see you, Sarah."

"You didn't, Momma."

"It's my house. I can invite whoever I want." Her chin lifted. Being in charge of anything was still a heady experience for her.

"Yes, you can. But I don't have to be here. Can you get my bag, Bethie?"

"Sure thing."

I turned right around and waddled back out to the car, one hand pressed to the ache in the small of my back.

"Come inside," Momma hissed. "What will he think?"

"Don't give a rat's ass," I snarled. "How *could* you, after everything I said?"

Momma's lips got tight and she stepped back through the screen door when Bethie pushed it open, carrying our bags.

"Bye, Momma," she said. She loped down the sidewalk, threw our bags in the back, jumped into the driver's seat, and we pulled away. She drove to the end of the cul-de-sac, did a U-turn, and headed back toward the freeway. As we passed Momma's house again, I saw Pastor Rayburn's big old belly behind the screen door. He lifted his hand. I looked away.

As we drove out of town, I felt tears sliding down my face, leaving chilly tracks. As we approached the freeway exit leading to the ranch I felt the pain around my heart twisting tighter, tighter, tighter. The reflectors glowed in the dark. The yellow strip shone. It was almost here. Home. All the pain. All the shame. All the shared, stolen laughter with Elaine, DJ, and Bethie. The last night, when I lay on the floor beside DJ's bed, grieving and terrified. It was here, and just like we had countless times before, we veered off the

freeway onto the exit ramp, rode to the top, rolled through the stop sign, turned left, and drove away from the lights into the warm summer darkness. The headlights shone on the dusty gravel road as they had countless times before. I looked at Bethie. Shiny streaks ran down her cheeks, too, and off her jaw. We rode in silence, every fencepost familiar, every curve known. The night air pressed hot and dusty around us. At the T-intersection we turned right, like always. The headlights flashed over hummocky, plowed stubble fields and the brush-filled gash that snaked through the bottom of the valley. A startled deer bounded across the road. The crumbling stone cairns that marked the road to our ranch loomed up out of the darkness. Bethie turned between them and eased up the rough road.

After she pulled up by the gate, she killed the engine and we sat in silence. I realized I was clenching my jaw. We stared at the dark house, at the gate knocking in the wind, at a forgotten seed bag flapping against a tree trunk.

“Should we go in?” Bethie asked into the silence.

The pain rose in a great wave, pressing, pressing, pressing. “Yes,” I choked.

We opened the car doors, slid down to the dusty, rock-hard ground, slammed the doors behind us. We stood side by side outside the gate, then wordlessly pushed it open, listened to its familiar squeak, and walked up the path to the back steps. As with many ranch houses its age, no one had ever used the “front” door, which was buried at the end of a long walk around the side of the house. The “back” door—the one that faced the road and led directly into the kitchen—was the only door that ever got opened. Now we climbed the familiar sagging steps, and the feeling both of homecoming and leavetaking twisted the tight, aching pain in my heart until I thought I would die.

Bethie slid her key into the lock, and we walked into the kitchen. I flipped the grubby switch by the door. Light flooded the room, bringing life to the faded cherries on the curtains over the sink, the old yellow cupboards, the wide, scarred planks on the floor, the yellowy, marbled Formica and chrome table. The kitchen’s familiarity and emptiness nearly broke my heart.

We walked into the living room. Bethie crossed to the lamp by the sagging easy chair and switched it on. She reached out a slender hand and straightened the afghan that lay across the headrest of Daddy's recliner. I looked around at the shabby, familiar room, the room where I had played with my dolls, where I had sat for countless family worships, where I had chafed at the senseless restrictions and endured the pain on the mornings after one of Daddy's little disciplines. Bethie ran a hand over the chair's armrest, then sat down in the sagging armchair and rubbed her hands over its arms. I wondered what she was thinking.

We went upstairs, leaving the downstairs lights burning behind us. We went from room to room, turning on lights, seeing the ghosts of our past in neatly-made beds with dusty pillows, knowing we were seeing them for the last time. Bethie opened the door to her room, and I looked in at its simple white beauty, a beauty built of things worn and faded, things rooted in a precious part of our past, things that had been overshadowed by its pain and terror—a part I had only now realized had been every bit as real.

"I was there," she said. "I was right there when I left." She crossed to the bed, sat down and ran her hands reverently over the faded patchwork quilt.

"How did you go?" I asked. It had long puzzled me, but I had somehow never had the courage to ask. "How did you get away?"

"I don't know," she said, staring past me at nothing. "I don't know how it happened. I just know that one minute I was on the bed and Daddy—" she broke off. "And then I was following Toby through a garden, and then I woke up and I was in a place I had never been before," she finished. "I couldn't live here anymore. It was my home, my whole life, everything, good and bad. It had made me who I was, and I had to leave forever, or die. And so I left, but I left behind things it broke my heart to leave as well as the hurt. Like now," she said softly.

And that was it, of course. Momma's move into town hadn't just cut us off from a house that had been both home and torture chamber. In walking away from everything, in leaving her entire life behind, our mother had left us behind, too. I looked into my room a minute later and saw my child self, alone, playing on the floor, with no mother in the house.

And then I realized—it had almost always been like that. The pain resulted not from Momma's recent departure, but from being orphaned from the place I had been a child—from having to walk away and leave my child self behind, along with the child selves of DJ, Elaine, and Bethie.

At last I knew what this night was about. It was Bethie and me, recovering another part of our life only when it was forever gone. We left the house, leaving the lights blazing behind us. We turned on the shop lights, too, and climbed into the trucks and smelled the ghosts of grain, alfalfa, and corn. We watched our ghost selves driving down the roads in the scalding summer heat, saw the grain fields smelling like baking bread, felt the sun on our arms sticking out the windows, waving to each other. We remembered how we'd smiled in clear, pure joy.

Then we left the trucks and walked down to the creek bed one last time. Bethie braced my arm while I turned my feet sideways and cradled my belly. We sat in the sand by her baby's shallow grave, and we spoke of her baby, of Toby, and I wasn't surprised to learn that there had been more to him than met the eye. Well, hadn't we always known that? We spoke of DJ, and Jennifer, and Daddy's death, and Elaine, and how she had always tried to watch out for us. We didn't wish for our past back—there was too much pain for that—but I think we both mourned the loss of the closeness that had once bound us, the fleeting, fragile beauty we had snatched every chance we could. Daddy's life had bound us in profound ways, but his death had ended all that. When Daddy died, the family we had been had died, too. Momma's move to town had just hammered the coffin lid down.

Sitting there in the dark, Bethie and I marked the family we had been. We mourned the family we might have been. We sat between selves, cut adrift without the old, not yet able to grasp the new. I looked at Bethie's shadowy face, and she looked at mine, and for the first time we marked the passage of the years in each other's faces. At last, we did what we had done countless times in the years we had shared. We stood before we were ready to, brushed off the seats of our pants, climbed the steep, dusty path to the top of the gully, and walked wearily back to the house. One last

time, we opened the gate, went up the path, climbed the steps, crossed the bright kitchen, and climbed the stairs. And then, steeling our hearts and setting our jaws, we went from room to room, looking at our childhood with lost, hungry eyes. Then we brought the lights down on childhood, forever. When only the kitchen and living room lights remained on, we stood in the hallway between the two rooms, knowing what must be done, but somehow, at this last moment, unable to do it.

"I can't," I cried. "I just can't."

Bethie's arms came around me, cradling me. "We have to," she said. "Leaving them on will cost too much."

And then we both cried together for all the things we had lost, but most of all for the fact that we had lost them when we were too hurt to recognize them for the treasures they were—all the thousand, thousand sun-blessed moments that made the dark times endurable.

I knew Bethie was right: it was time to turn out the lights and walk away. I crossed to the chair where Bethie had sat vigil with Daddy that last terrible night, reached out with aching fingers, and twisted the knob that would plunge the memories into darkness. I walked for the last time into the bright kitchen and sat once more at the table. Bethie reached the teapot out of its cupboard and found some teabags. She made us tea, and we sat and drank, taking out moments and turning them over, watching them sparkle, and then laying them away forever. Bethie's cell phone rang.

She looked at her Caller ID, flipped it open, and said, "Hello, Momma ... I think you understand why ... out at the ranch ... all right ... good bye." She clicked her phone shut and said, "Momma says to be sure we turn off all the lights before we leave."

"That's all?" I asked.

"Pretty much."

We sat at the table and finished our tea, then we rinsed our mugs, I used the bathroom for the last time, and then we did as Momma instructed. We put out the lights on our childhood and turned our faces to the future. That night when we got home I cried and cried, and Bethie held me, and rocked me gently, and then, when the storm

of tears ended, we walked naked to the pool to wash the pain from our bodies. And I was comforted.



The sun in my face woke me. I went downstairs and made some toast, then waddled out the back door into the Indian summer to work in the vegetable garden. The sun felt warm on my back, the shade cool on my face. The grass stretched impossibly green and even, the flowers stood bright and tall, the sky was the deep rich blue you only ever get in spring and fall. I've never been much of a one for navel-gazing, but even I knew that last night had been the end of something. This morning was the start of something new. The simplest acts acquired significance. I had never thought vegetables could be beautiful, but as I weeded the raised beds—shining plants in neat rows, loaded with produce—these were. I was kneeling down awkwardly picking a basket of fat strawberries when the woman showed up.

They did that a lot—they just showed up, carrying the weight of the world. Bethie baked something for them while they sat at the table and guzzled down tea and talked. When they left, they went with fresh bread, a pie or a cake, and a spring in their step. I had just watched in the beginning, seeing Bethie move around her kitchen, mixing dough with unhurried grace, flour to her elbows, listening to the women and nodding.

It wasn't long after I got there that they starting showing up with stuff for the baby—a homemade quilt, a box of used baby clothes, a bag of diapers. Some offered advice. "Ginger and peppermint'll help you keep food down." "Rubbing mineral oil on your belly'll help with the stretch marks." "Don't let anybody tell you it's easier to have a baby lying down. Walk. Walk as long as you can. It'll go faster and hurt less." All sorts of things changed hands at that table as we sat and sipped and smelled the baking.

This morning, I could see the woman had a lot on her mind. "Bethie's out today," I said, struggling to my feet, one hand rubbing the ache in the small of my back.

Her shoulders drooped. "I really need some of her bread."

I took pity on her. "I can bake it," I offered, and then I waited, wishing I hadn't, knowing she'd turn me down. She wanted Bethie, not me. I

stood there and waited for the polite refusal, knowing I'd be equally relieved and disappointed.

"All right?" she said tentatively.

I was caught.

"Let's go inside," I said. "I'll get us some tea." We climbed the back steps and stepped from the warm outside to the dim, cool kitchen. I tied an apron over my belly, poured her out a glass of peach tea, got the big blue bowl Bethie used, poured in yeast, flour, milk, oil, sugar, and salt, and started mixing.

As she started talking, I felt awkward; I knew nothing about this woman, other than that she came here sometimes, and here she was unburdening herself to me. I had no clue what to say. I stared at my hands—flour to the elbows—and watched them work the dough. Flour dusted my belly. I thought of all the other women who had stood at this table, kneading bread, bellies rising like dough, and I suddenly understood.

The talking, the listening, the baking, the used baby clothes, the diapers and the tea ... all of these things had woven me into a world I had never seen, or even known existed—the world of women. Now that I had shed my old world I could see it. I looked out the window and watched the breeze ruffling through the treetops, knowing that the really important things—bread-making, bearing children, working the earth, and the sisterhood of women—are eternal. We are caretakers, not owners. I didn't have to say anything. I just had to stand there and knead the bread, feel the still pool of eternity within me, and listen. So I did.

I listened to her, felt her words fall one by one into the peace of the day, and as I listened, I worked the dough. I remembered watching my grandma do the same thing on one of her rare visits, and watching Momma do it that one time Daddy stayed in Illinois to help with his daddy's funeral. I thought about watching Bethie do this, her back straight and narrow, her hair loose and soft in its braid, her face quiet. I thought of all the women who had made bread this way in this kitchen, and their hands were there, working with mine.

I set the bread to rise, washed my hands, poured myself some tea, and pulled up a couple of chairs. I sat down on one, put my feet up on the

other, sipped my tea, and listened some more. I listen to the woman, to the breeze in the trees outside, to the river, faint over the hill.

I put the bread into the oven, and listened some more while it baked. When it came golden and fragrant out of the oven I wrapped a couple loaves in a towel for the woman and cut us each a slice from the third. We sat and ate hot bread, laughing as butter and Bethie's homemade apricot jam dripped over our fingers. Eventually the woman left, carrying her bread with her, and darned if she wasn't walking lighter. I took the money she gave me for the bread and stuck it in the cookie jar, then I cleaned up the kitchen, still licking butter and jam off my fingers.

When I finished and looked around the clean kitchen, still warm from the baking, I knew I belonged here. I didn't have to have answers. The women would find their own. I just had to listen. I stood at the back door for a while, one hip braced on the frame, sipped my peach tea, and watched the breeze rustle the trees. After a while, I finished picking the strawberries, cleaned them, slipped them into freezer bags and then into the freezer. Then I went into the library and looked at the books. After a while, I took one down and started reading. If I was going to be a part of this place, I wanted to understand it as well as I could—even the parts that seemed frightening.

Sea changes, watersheds, and Damascus roads are supposed to involve fiery beings, deadly peril, and possibly angelic choirs. Mine had none of those things—and it was no less momentous for the lack. I had stood in that kitchen, flour to my elbows, and realized that I could put down my sword. I didn't have to top every story. I didn't have to shock anyone by talkin' army. I didn't have to wield my tongue like a deadly weapon. I was safe. I could lay my weapons away sometimes. And in laying them away, I was freeing up my hands to receive unimaginable gifts.



Our lives fell into a pattern. I got up in the mornings, helped Bethie with breakfast, then worked in the garden, cleaned, baked, and then in the afternoons, while I rested, I read. I read every book in the place, then started over. Some were confusing. Some sounded just plain loony. Some

made a crazy kind of sense. I read them all, and slowly I started to see connections between ideas, and one day I realized that the things that had spooked me most about Bethie in the beginning didn't seem creepy at all now. The logic of the place, the sense behind the pattern, had assumed a shape. The world had changed around me while I wasn't looking, and I found the new world a lovely place.

Which was good, because our lives were about to fall apart again, dammit.

CHAPTER 63

Sarah

As summer turned into fall Bethie got more and more preoccupied.

“What’s wrong?” I finally asked her one blustery night. We had lit the fireplace for the first time that season. We both cradled cups of hot chocolate in our hands, and Bethie had dragged a quilt down from her bedroom and wrapped herself up like a mummy. Personally, I could have done without the fire and hot chocolate. I had sweltered through most of my pregnancy. The fire was pretty, though, and I wanted the company, so I pushed my chair back, fanned myself with an old magazine, and tried to keep the sweat from running into my eyes.

“I’ve been thinking about the day Daddy died,” she said.

“What about it?” This was relatively uncharted territory for me. Bethie had only told me a little, and I couldn’t quite make myself ask. I might be brash, but I’m not mean. Still though, now that she brought it up...

“His shoes were tied.”

“His church shoes? In the shop? Why wasn’t he wearing his boots?”

“His feet were too swollen to get them on. But never mind that—” She waved her hand impatiently, dismissing the boots.

“So why shouldn’t his shoes be tied?”

“He couldn’t tie them. At the end we had to put his shoes on and take them off for him. He couldn’t bend over to do it for himself.”

"Did you tell the cops that?"

She shook her head. "I didn't really put it together until now."

"What does that mean?" Bethie was still a miser with words, so if she was telling me this, there had to be a good reason.

She gave me a steady look. "Jennifer must have tied them."

"And this changes things how?"

"I don't know that it does. But it bothers me."

"Why?"

"DJ and Davy."

"What about 'em?" My voice hardened, and Bethie's quick glance told me she'd heard it, but she let it go.

"I called the other day," she said after a minute.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Nobody answered."

We sat quiet. Finally I said, "Uh, Bethie?"

"Mm?"

"Don't you, ah, have other ways of finding things out?"

"What do you know about that?"

"I ... I saw your scrying bowl in your workroom one day."

"You were in my workroom?"

"Uh, yeah. Sorry. It was right after I came here. I didn't know what it was then."

"It's okay. I just thought..."

"I've been doing some reading, and, uh, I've sort of changed my mind about some things."

She smiled. "What have you been reading?"

"Those." I jerked my head toward the library. "That all right?"

"Yeah! It's, uh, great. I just hadn't expected it. You reading anything?"

"You sure you don't mind?" Something in her face worried me, like I'd taken something from her.

"No. I've been wanting to read them, but I've been too busy lately."

I was ashamed. Bethie was floating us, and I was doing the things she'd like to if she had time. "I'm sorry," I said again.

"For what?"

"For taking advantage."

"You haven't."

"Yeah, I have. I'm living here, and you're paying for everything. You need time to do what you love, too."

"I do have time. And I love having you here."

"Well, from here on out," I said, "we do things a little different. You have to have the time to read, too."

"I'm probably not smart enough to understand it, anyway."

She said it so matter-of-factly, it took me a second to understand. "Daddy was *wrong*, Bethie," I said, leaning forward as far as I could over my belly and smacking my hand on the arm of my chair. "He was *dead wrong*. You're *plenty* smart. He just didn't want you to know it."

"Maybe," she said doubtfully. "Anyhow, all this doesn't help DJ and Davy. And when I look in the scrying bowl—yes, I've used it—I can't see them."

"So what does that mean?"

"I'm not sure ... did you read anything about that in the books?" She sounded hesitant.

"Not that I understood." And I realized that while I'd read about magic, Bethie *was* magic. I was wrong to think that just because she hadn't read the books she knew nothing.

She was looking thoughtful. "Well, we need to find out. Something doesn't feel right. Let's try again. Help me?"

"Yes," I said simply.

Neither of us had to voice what a change that simple word signaled. She took her dark-glazed scrying bowl out of its chest and we walked to the pool. We bathed ourselves, then I hung back, quiet, while she gathered water from the Lady's waterfall, came back to shore, and set the shallow black bowl of water on the flat rock. Then she settled herself on the sand beside the rock and looked at me.

"Come sit here," she said.

I sat down opposite her, crossing my legs awkwardly under my belly.

The water in the bowl gleamed like a pale moon. "Ready?" she asked.

I swallowed and nodded. We sat quietly, staring into the water. My breathing and pulse slowed. I drifted, feeling the power building around us, sealing us in its still center. In a flash everything was gone, and I was staring into the water from the other side. I felt Bethie's surprise like an echo of my own, then felt her make room for me in her mind. For a second I sensed a third presence, soft, inquisitive, and vague. I reached toward it, but it flickered away and lingered at the edge of my conscious mind. When I reached for it, it retreated again. I sensed Bethie's impatience and turned my attention back to the business at hand, leaving the mysterious presence to creep forward and observe. Together we gazed into the still, moonlit water.

After a long time we looked up. The Lady was sitting where I had been sitting, where my body still sat, eyes closed. Her—my?—mouth opened, and Her voice came out, deep, sweet, and ringing like copper bells.

Send him the dog, she said.

The power snapped like a rubber band and suddenly I was facing Bethie again.

"What the hell?" I asked.

"Toby," she said.

"But he's not here."

"I know where to find him."

Early the next morning, Bethie roused me out of bed, poured of cup of tea down me, and herded me down the path to the pond. I stopped by the rock, as I always did, and sleepily started to unbutton my blouse, but she stopped me.

"Come on," she said. *"This way."* And she lifted the heavy vines blanketing the cliff and slipped out of sight. I stumbled after her into a dry cave.

"Bethie?" I called. *"Where—?"*

"Here," she said. *"Careful. It's not lighted."*

"No shit, Sherlock," I muttered. *"So is there a point to all this?"* I asked just about the time I stepped into pitch darkness.

"We're almost through," she said. *"Hold my hand."*

I reached forward and clasped her hand, and we went on together.

"It smells like the Main Street dance at Round-up," I said a few minutes later.

"That's the beer," she said.

"You have *beer* in your cave? Bethie, Bethie, Bethie."

"It's not *my* cave. Look around."

"Sure enough, the cave had been getting lighter so gradually I hadn't even noticed. Ahead, though, I could see a paler shade of black, and beside us I could just make out round shapes. I reached out and touched wood. "Barrels?" I asked.

"Yup," she said. "Ouch. Watch your hip. This one sticks out a little bit."

We eased past, turned a corner, and found ourselves in a cellar. "You have neighbors?" I asked, surprised. "Neighbors who make their own beer?"

"I guess. Anyway, this is the fastest way."

"To where?"

"To find Toby." She opened a door and stepped through. I hurried after her ... and found myself in a bustling kitchen. I stopped to sniff appreciatively at a pan of fresh cinnamon rolls just coming out of the oven.

"Come on," Bethie said impatiently. "We'll eat later."

"But I'm hungry now."

She sighed heavily, took an odd, triangular button out of her pocket, and handed it to a woman. "A roll for her?" she asked, jerking her thumb at me.

"Is she ready?"

"I guess we'll find out," said Bethie. "I'm here to see her home."

The woman looked at me, then slid a warm, sticky roll onto a cloth and handed it to me. I lifted it, bit into it, felt a momentary spinning, and then nothing.

Bethie was watching me carefully. "You feel all right?" she asked.

"Yeah, now that I've got something to eat. This is good." I took another bite.

Bethie looked at the woman with the rolls. They both shrugged.

"What?" I mumbled, my mouth full of cinnamon roll.

"Nothing," said Bethie. "If you don't feel anything, there's nothing to explain."

"What should I feel?" I asked, as always keen to scent a mystery.

"I'll tell you later. Let's get going. It's a long way."

"Whoa, hold on. How long a way?"

"I'm not exactly sure. Come on."

"Tell me again why we're doing this?"

"To find Toby. For DJ and Davy."

"Oh." I finished my roll, licked my fingers, drank a cup of milk one of the women gave me, stole another roll, and followed Bethie out of the kitchen. We went through the tap room of some quaint eating establishment and out into a town square. I was puzzled. *There was a town this close to Bethie's house? Why hadn't I heard it?*

Bethie turned right, skirted the square to a side street, and turned down it. I hurried after her. Soon we went through a town gate and found ourselves on a mountain track. The trees blazed with fall colors—trees I didn't recognize, and I'd lived around here all my life. As Bethie strode up the hill, I trotted along behind, both hands supporting my belly. At the top I gave up.

"Hey, slow down," I panted. "I'm in fair shape for a pregnant lady, but we're gettin' down to the wire here and I don't think I'm up for what this looks like it's shapin' up to be."

"It'll be fine," she said. "We're just gonna walk a little." And then the mists closed in. She set off through them like she knew where she was going, and I followed, and, sure enough, a little later we broke free on the other side.

She walked to where our track joined another one meandering along a stream, turned left, and walked on. Two hills and a valley later, I was good and lost. Also pissed off. Bethie kept chivvyng me along, and I was just about ready to smack her silly when we rounded a hillside and found ourselves in this pretty little valley cupped in the mountains.

The trees here were just touched with gold and scarlet—nothing like what we had seen around the little town, but pretty, all the same, and on one slope just where the mountains really started getting serious stood a golden stone house with faded blue trim. An old woman sat on the porch.

A black and white dog slouched beside her. My sister sighed what sounded suspiciously like a sigh of relief.

I had to ask. "Were you lost?"

"I knew I could find her if I really needed to. I just wasn't sure I needed to bad enough," she said.

"An' you dragged me out here with no better directions than that? Without tellin' me?" I guess my voice sounded pretty shrill. "I could have this baby any time, an' you hauled me way the hell and gone up in these mountains because you *thought* you might need her bad enough?"

"You wouldn't have come if I'd told you," she said in a cool voice, "and I wanted you to see her. And you're having the baby at home, and not for a long time yet."

"Who's 'her'?" I asked. By now I was furious. "And I most certainly am *not* havin' this baby at home. I'm havin' it in a hospital, an' I'm havin' drugs. I already told you that. It's all planned." I could feel the army talk takin' over like it hadn't in a long, long time.

"That's not how it'll work out," was all she said.

"Says who? Lemme tell you something, little Miss I-Wasn't-Sure-I-Needed-Her-Bad-Enough—"

Just then, the dog spotted us and shot off the porch, hitting the ground at a dead run. He flashed up to us, pushed his nose into our hands, skipped around our feet. *I knew him.*

DJ and I had buried our Toby years ago, and even though Bethie had written about him in her journal a part of me hadn't really believed, but when I looked into this dog's eyes—one amber, one horribly scarred and missing—and I saw that he knew us, and loved us, and then he did this little jig step Toby used to do to lure us into a game of catch, and in this place, well, I could accept that that was Toby then, but this was Toby now.

I couldn't help but wonder if dogs could have ghosts, but then Toby nipped me on the ankle to get my attention and I dropped that thought in a hurry. I never did hear of a ghost that nipped anybody—or peed on tree trunks, for that matter, which is what he did next.

"Don't overdo it," Bethie told him.

Toby turned his back on her and danced up to me again. I picked up a stick and threw it for him, and he ran and snatched it up, his hindquarters sliding in a half-circle on the wet grass as he reversed directions. He came tearing back to drop it at my feet, dancing, panting, and lifting his lips the way he did when he was happy. Bethie snorted. I threw the stick again, and he tore off after it. Only when he went blurry did I realize I was crying.

I swiped my hands across my eyes so I could see him race back, and then I just knelt down and put my arms around him and buried my face in his shoulder like Bethie used to do, and I cried like a baby, and the poison left by the night that he died washed out of me along with my tears.

We stayed the night there, sitting up late in the old kitchen with the woman who lived there, eating, drinking, and talking, and when we left in the morning, Toby went with us part of the way, just ranging around, nosing into stuff, trotting back, poking his nose into our hands, then tearing off after some rustling in the brush, and then we looked around one time and he was gone.

"Where'd he go?" I asked.

All Bethie said was, "He knows where he needs to be," so I didn't worry. I knew it would work out all right.

Back home that night, Bethie asked, "So did you feel anything at all when you ate that cinnamon roll?"

I thought back. "It just seemed for a second that there were a lot of ways I could go," I said slowly. "Like all kinds of paths led from my feet. In all different directions.

"Didn't that scare you?"

"Why should it? I can only walk one at a time."

She laughed. "Weren't you afraid of getting lost?"

"Hell, no," I said. "It's what I've always known—something happens, you deal with it. It doesn't, you don't have to. Imagining what might happen, thinking about what might have happened, well, that doesn't really change anything, does it? This is just more of the same—I choose which path I want, and then I live with it. Why would I be afraid?"

"But what if you can't get back?"

I thought about that, and I understood what that last night with our childhood had taught me. “Why would I want to? I’ve got the things I need—you, the baby, the things that made me what I am—with me. What’s left for me to go back to?”

She looked at me like she’d never really seen me before. “You know, Sarah Conrad, sometimes you’re a very wise woman.”

I laughed. “Like shit, I am,” I said.

And so it was that I found my way into a world I had never expected, a world of magic and possibility, a world limited only by the limitations I set myself, a world I would never have found had Daddy not been a monster, had Momma not been so weak and self-involved. The very things that hurt me the most were the things that set me free. Bethie and I passed a quiet fall. And then one night Bethie carried her scrying bowl to the pond, and when she came back she said, “It’s time.” The next morning she was gone, and I knew that our lives were about to change again.

CHAPTER 64

Jennifer

It was a stray—just a stray. We came home after church one fall day and there it was, lying on our doorstep, panting.

“Look,” DJ said. “He’s smiling. Toby used to do that.” He squatted down and ran his hands over the dog’s sides. The dog stood up, stretched, and licked DJ’s cheek. I thought I might be sick.

“I don’t *believe* this,” my husband burst out. “If I hadn’t buried Toby myself, I’d swear it’s him. He’s a dead ringer for him—” he paused to looked more closely at the stray “—or for what he’d be if he’d survived. Look at this scar ... and this little swirl of white hair behind his ear ... and he’s even lost the right eye.”

“The ‘right’ eye?” I asked, stepping back so the dog wouldn’t jump on me. “How can losing *any* eye be right?”

“This is the eye Toby lost,” DJ said lamely. “When he died. But just look at this guy! He’s great!”

“It’s just a dog,” I said. “A stray.” What I meant was, *This is a slobbery, shedding, poop machine that will probably embarrass me by taking liberties with people’s legs during sundown worship.*

If DJ had been listening, he would have heard it in my voice and called the Humane Society immediately. But sometime in the last few months DJ had stopped listening. Now he was on his knees on our front porch—still wearing his good church suit—cupping the dog’s head in his hands, digging

his thumbs in behind the dog's ears, laughing when the dog closed his one eye and moaned in bliss. He was getting dirt, dog hair, and dog spit all over his good church suit, and he didn't even notice. I'm the one who had to deal with the mess, and I had just gotten it back from the dry cleaner's on Friday. Since Daddy's death, I had come to realize that DJ was one of the most self-centered men I'd ever known, as well as the sloppiest. I could hardly blame him, though. His whole family was that way. *But*, I told myself resolutely, *I married him for better or worse. I just have to help him grow. That's what marriage is all about.*

I sidled past DJ and the dog, changed my clothes, and got lunch on the table. "It's ready," I called.

"Come on in, boy," DJ said. "It's okay ... you're among friends."

He walked into the dining room backwards, coaxing the dog, which followed him, wagging his whole back end and panting up into DJ's face.

"Should he be in here?" I asked.

"Just for today. He's had a hard time. Okay?"

"Okay," I agreed reluctantly. "Go wash your hands."

"Sit, boy," DJ said. The dog trotted over to Davy's high chair and sat down. Davy crowed and nearly toppled himself reaching for its filthy black head.

"He's got good manners," DJ said approvingly. "And he likes Davy."

I looked at the filthy, scarred animal panting up at my son and wagging its stump of a tail. I didn't say anything.

DJ heard my silence that time, all right. "Be right back," he said awkwardly. "Be good, boy." He said that to the dog, but I knew he meant it for me, throwing me the words as he might have thrown the dog a bone. His footsteps receded down the hall.

I resolved to ignore the filthy animal. If DJ wanted it, fine. It would be *his* dog. All I had to do was leave it alone. I slid into my chair and leaned forward to tie Davy's bib around his neck, but the dog was there, right in my way, leaning against the leg of the high chair.

That's when I realized that maybe the dog wasn't going to leave *me* alone. We would have to come to an understanding. "Move, dog," I hissed.

The dog didn't move. In fact, he wedged himself between me and Davy, using his dusty, scarred body to force me back. I looked down. He had stopped panting. He wasn't slouching anymore, either. He was sitting bolt upright, staring at me, into me, through me. My heart beat faster. "Move," I said again. To my fury, I could hear a tiny quaver in my voice. The dog heard it, too. He didn't move. "I'm just going to feed him," I said, and then I felt stupid for explaining myself to a dumb dog.

"Boy, I'm hungry," DJ said, striding into the room and sliding into his chair at the head of the table. "Here, boy." He snapped his fingers.

The dog stood up and, after one last, level look at me, trotted over and flopped down by DJ's chair. I leaned forward again and, ignoring the dog's gaze and the slight trembling in my hands, tied Davy's bib on him and started spooning strained peas into his mouth. DJ took a heaping spoonful of vegetarian roast, another of vegetables, another of salad. He ate with gusto—something I had almost given up hope of ever seeing again. And he started talking to me, and laughing, something else I had hadn't seen for a long time. In between bites and jokes he fed the dog bits from his plate. Except for that, it was like old times—better than old times. The tightness around my heart eased. By the time I was clearing away the plates from the main course and cutting the pie, I knew that I'd just been silly. I'd been giving the dog too much credit. How could it possibly know? It was impossible. And DJ was back, *more* than back. He was young in a way I had never known him to be. A core of sadness I had never really seen because it had always been there was gone. I could almost have liked the dog for that, if it hadn't been so ugly. I just couldn't get past the terrible scars. It was sad, because I could see how much DJ liked it. But I knew he could learn to like another dog just as easily.

Over dessert DJ said, "So what do you think, honey?"

"It's not really suitable for a minister's family," I said gently, not wanting to see DJ retreat into the silent shell he had built around himself since his father's death.

"Why not?"

"You're kidding, right? It looks like it got run over by a lawn mower." I nearly bit off my tongue. *How had that slipped out?*

DJ stared at me. "So what? He's great. Just look at him."

I had been doing nothing else ever since we got home from church. I knew what the animal looked like. It was just a dog, scarred, uglier than most. DJ was seeing something that wasn't really there. He remembered some dumb dog from his childhood, and now, thanks to my slip, he was thinking about Daddy, who had gotten caught in the lawn mower to end all lawn mowers. Right then was when I began to really hate that dog.

"Shall we get him his shots and keep him?"

It wasn't really a question, and I knew it. DJ's voice was hard in a way it had never been with me before. The dog was here to stay. All that remained was to let DJ make the decision *with* me, rather than in spite of me. Besides, although the initial euphoria was gone, he still looked almost like the DJ I'd married. If the dog had this effect on him, maybe it wouldn't be so bad.

"Oh, all right," I said, and I smiled, even though I didn't feel like it. People in our position should have something like a miniature dachshund, or a spaniel, or possibly even a Doberman, something purebred, AKC registered, and regal, or something that looked cute frisking with Davy on the lawn. People like us didn't adopt beat-up mongrels. But DJ had already decided. The dog looked at me, tongue lolling, panting. *It's laughing at me*, I thought. Then I thought, *That's silly*. But I couldn't escape the notion.

I tried, I really did. I bought it a box of dog treats, which the dog refused to take from me and begged for from DJ and Davy. Once I threw a ball for it, like I'd seen DJ do. The dog just stared at me out of its one good eye. *Not very smart*, I decided, *or else stubborn*. But I knew the dog was smart enough—it kept watching me, measuring, weighing, assessing, judging, rejecting me. It never growled or offered violence, but condemnation lay in its eye.

"I don't feel safe with that dog in the house," I finally told DJ.

"What do you mean? He's a great dog—just look at 'im," DJ said. Sure enough, with DJ it was a great dog—wagging, jumping and fetching like the fate of the free world depended on it, and running to bring the leash

DJ had bought for it every time DJ said the word “walk.” When it looked at DJ and Davy, its eye looked warm, sparkling, and golden. It practically danced. But when it looked at me, its eye became flat and opaque, the scar across its missing eye a threat.

The dog was great with Davy, too. It watched him, kept him from going outside—the dog would actually stand in the doorway and block Davy in. Davy hated this. He’d get mad and scream—sometimes even pound on the dog’s back and pull its hair, but the dog stood like a rock until I could get there. “Good dog,” I’d say. And then it would look at me out of its flat, knowing eye, and all my wonder and appreciation would wither.

The day DJ started calling him Toby, I knew the dog had to go. It wasn’t healthy. DJ was investing too much of his heart in a relationship that would let him down. *The dog strayed into our life*, I said to myself, *and it can just stray right out again*. The next morning I dawdled through my shower and breakfast, one eye on DJ as he hurried through his morning routine and drove down the driveway. I waited a few more minutes, loaded Davy into the car, then went into the backyard. The dog was nosing around under the big trees at the bottom of the yard.

“Here, Toby, here boy,” I called. I had known it would ignore me, so I had baited my trap. “Come take a ride with Davy.” The dog lifted its head, looked at me, and then slouched in my direction. I clipped the leash on it before it knew what was what and pulled it to the minivan. When I slid open the big side door, it hopped right in and curled up on the floor in front of Davy’s seat. I slipped the leash off, slammed the door, and hurried around to the driver’s seat.

I drove fast out into the countryside, over bridges, past orchards and fields. DJ had told me this was a herding dog. Fine, it could start herding. When I saw a flock of sheep on a distant hillside, I stopped the van and opened the door. “Come on, dog,” I said, snapping my fingers at it. The dog stared at me. “Come on,” I said again, slapping my thighs, irritation making my voice sharp. It wasn’t the voice a minister’s wife should use, but who was there to hear? The dog just looked at me. “Sheep, dog! See the sheep?” I enthused, pointing at the distant flock.

It lay in front of Davy's seat and stared at me out of its hateful eye.

I looked at the dog. It wasn't really that big. I could pull it out. I reached into the van to grab its chain collar. The dog didn't move, but its lip fluttered ever so slightly. Its stare bored a hole right through me.

He likes Davy, a voice whispered. *Use that.* "We're going to take Davy for a walk," I chirped, as if everything were all right. I lifted Davy out of his seat, set him on my hip, and started down the road. The dog didn't budge. "Come on, boy," I called. By now I was nearly around a curve in the road. I stepped off the road and set Davy in the tall grass. He looked up at me, uncertain, then reached for a butterfly. I stepped back quickly, turned, and started back to the van. "See, boy? Davy's staying here," I called. "Come help Davy." The dog was looking at me out the side door. A bee flew past. I swatted at it absently. I was almost back to the car by now. *If the dog doesn't go to Davy, I'll just drive a little way, maybe a quarter of a mile, enough to convince it I mean business,* I decided. *Davy'll be fine for a few minutes.* I got in, jingled my keys, put them in the ignition, started the engine.

And then Davy started screaming. I switched off the engine and jumped out and raced back for him but the dog passed me in a black and white blur. It was out! Davy was still screaming, but this was too good an opportunity to miss. I ran back to the van, slammed the side door and the driver's door, and then ran back for Davy.

He was lying on his back in the grass, arms and legs thrashing. One hand was swollen and red. *The bee,* I thought. The dog nosed him and started licking his face. "Stop that," I said. The dog ignored me, as usual. I snatched my son up and cuddled him. "Oh, poor Davy," I crooned. "Poor, poor Davy. Bad doggie make Davy get hurt." I found the stinger and pulled it out as I hurried back to the van, the dog at my heels, in front of me, beside me, nearly tripping me up. I wanted to kick it away, but I was afraid it would attack.

I stopped at the van. Davy was still wailing in my arms. If I opened the side door to put Davy in his seat, the dog would get back in. And then, as He has so often in my life, God gave me the answer. I slid to the driver's side door, keeping my body between the dog and the door. The dog

panted, waiting. I opened my door barely enough to squeeze in. The dog crowded against me, trying to force past me. I took a chance and kicked it hard enough to show it who was boss. It yelped and lunged at me, but in the second I had won I pulled myself into the van, slamming the door behind me. The dog yelped again, then snarled and leaped at the window. I laid Davy on the passenger seat, braced him with my right hand, reached awkwardly across with my left, and pushed the keys into the ignition.

Outside the van, the dog barked furiously, mixing growls and snarls in with high, sharp yips. It was making so much noise I didn't hear the rap on the window behind me. I turned back and almost jumped out of my skin. A weathered face in a nest of frizzy gray hair stared in at me. I rolled my window down a crack. The dog leaped snarling at the opening. *Stupid dog*, I thought. *No way are you getting back in here now.*

"You dog?" the weathered face asked.

"No," I panted. "No. It's just a stray." Inspiration hit. "It bit my baby."

"No yours?"

"No," I said again. "I have to get my baby to the doctor."

"I keep? Good dog for—" he made sweeping gestures with his hand, then waved at the sheep.

"Yes," I said, relieved. "You keep." I rolled up my window, started the van, braced Davy with my hand again, and drove off. As I rounded the corner I looked in my rearview mirror. The dog was racing after us. The old sheep herder thudded after him, waving his hands and shouting. I sped up.

When we were safely away I stopped, cuddled Davy until he stopped howling, then opened my door, slid open the back door, and buckled him into his car seat. I slammed the sliding door, climbed back in, and drove away, feeling light and free. The dog was gone forever. It would never find its way back.

I left a still-sniffing Davy at the sitter's, gave an edited explanation for the bee sting, and drove to work. I met with clients, listened, offered suggestions, but all the while a tiny part of my mind kept replaying the morning's incident, seeing the dog running after us, disappearing from

view as we rounded the bend. I had taken control of my life, done what needed to be done, protected my family. I felt peaceful, wise, and strong, whole for the first time in a very long time.

At home that afternoon, DJ asked me, "Where's Toby?"

"Isn't he here?" I asked, eyebrows raised at a finely judged angle, careful not to lie.

"No," DJ said. "I haven't seen him."

"Check in back."

He went to the back door. "Toby! Here boy," he called.

And then, fainter, as he walked out into the yard, "T-o-o-b-b-b-y..."

I hadn't lied, but I still felt guilty for misleading DJ. It was for his own good, though, and there had been no other choice. I had acted for the best, but DJ would never see it. I set Davy into his high chair and mashed up some bananas for him.

"Toby?" came from the back yard. "You here? Come on, boy."

I spooned bananas into Davy's mouth. His hand was still red and swollen. I realized I should have packed it with soda. I could hear DJ in the back yard.

"Toby? ... Come on, boy ... well, there you are ... where've you been, big guy? You're covered with burrs.... And look at your poor feet. They're bleeding! What have you been up to? Well, come on. Mommy's got some medicine. We'll fix you up."

I jerked and the spoon pulled at Davy's mouth. He jumped and whined. "Shhh, sorry, baby," I soothed him absently. *How had the dog gotten back? It had been over thirty miles.*

"Come on, boy, I'll carry you. It's all right. You hungry?" DJ's voice dropped to a murmur. I closed my eyes, then opened them again quickly.

"Here he is. He was outside the back gate ... don't know how he got out. Look at his feet ... Did you leave it open this morning?"

"No," I said truthfully. "I didn't leave the gate open."

The dog looked steadily, coolly, at me from the shelter of DJ's arms.

I'll have to try something else, I thought.



I tried a little ground glass in some hamburger. The dog refused to eat from its bowl, preferring to mooch from DJ at night, and slurp water out of the toilet. I ground up nightshade berries and put the juice in his drinking water. He started drinking out of the toilet. I saw a news story about the dangers of anti-freeze for household pets. The reporter said that anti-freeze was like dog Kool-Aid, they couldn't get enough of the stuff. The next morning after DJ left I poured a gallon of anti-freeze into the toilet, spread towels on the floor, and locked the dog into the bathroom before. The dog drank out of the toilet all the time now. I made a mental note to get the toilet flushed before DJ got home, although even that wasn't really critical. The anti-freeze looked just like Ti-D-Bowl. I called DJ from work early that afternoon. "Hey, can you get Davy tonight, maybe take him to the park or something?"

"Sure, but why?"

I gave him a light laugh. "Oh, I just need some girl time, you know..."

"Oh," DJ's voice came sympathetically. "Bad, are they?"

I had wanted him to think that I was preparing myself for a romantic evening—something we hadn't had in such a long time that I refused to allow myself to think about it, but I couldn't really correct him without seeming pushy, and cramps made an equally compelling, if far less attractive, reason. "Yes," I said, making my voice low and patient, like one a cramp-ridden woman might use. "It's bad this time."

As I drove home that afternoon my heart beat fast at the thought of what I both dreaded and hoped to see. I stepped inside and closed the door. The dog lifted its head and surveyed me from the rug in front of the fireplace. *It was still alive? And in the living room? It must have clawed the door to pieces.* I was furious at the thought of having to replace the door, but I knew it would only be a matter of time. It *had* to have drunk from the bowl. It did it all the time.

I set down my briefcase and hurried down the hall. The door was closed. I opened it. My eyes flew to the toilet bowl. Bright blue liquid filled it. The dog *had* to have drunk some. Dogs loved that stuff, the TV reporter had said so. I looked at the inside of the door. It was unmarred. How could that be? I closed the lid, flushed, sank down on the toilet,

and buried my face in my hands. Toenails clicked on the floor. I lifted my head to see the dog watching me from the doorway. It had the anti-freeze jug in its mouth, and looked healthy as a horse. As I watched it dropped the jug and gave it a contemptuous shove with its nose. The jug rolled to a stop at my feet. The dog turned its back on me and left. I stared after it. Toenails clicked again, growing fainter. Gradually it dawned on me that it hadn't drunk anything at all. I stared at the perfect door. *How had it gotten out? And how had the door gotten closed again?*

I stood and walked out into the living room. The dog was lounging by the fireplace again. It didn't even bother to lift its head this time, just followed my progress with its one good eye. I stood behind the couch and stared at it. It stared back. The hair on its neck and shoulders lifted. Its lip fluttered. "What are you?" I asked shakily. "Why are you here?" I half-expected an answer.

The dog dropped its head and closed its eyes. I backed out of the living room, never taking my eyes off of it. That night, watching DJ and Davy playing fetch with the dog, I knew I'd overreacted. Dogs open doors all the time. *And close them again?* a nasty little voice niggled in my head.

They returned home over long distances. Look at *The Incredible Journey*. *But that takes months or years*, the voice said. *That dog would have had to be driving its own car to make it home by nightfall.*

I ignored that, too. I watched the dog dash after the Frisbee, leap into the air and snatch it, drop to the grass, and fly back to DJ to drop it at his feet. It was just a dog. Maybe not as dumb as I had thought, but still just a dog. I was imagining things. Everything was fine. Almost perfect, in fact. It wasn't until that night, as I waited for DJ to finally come to bed, that I remembered that I had buried the empty anti-freeze jug, the jug that the dog had used to mock me, deep in the trash can in the garage, the one we made sure to keep a big bag of sand on so the raccoons didn't get into it.



Then Elaine moved away, and DJ lied to me about it. It was a lie by omission, but still, a lie's a lie. He let me find out by accident. One day I drove

by Elaine's house. I saw that grass had sprouted in her cactus and gravel front yard. The living room window had star-shaped hole in it. Cracks crazed the glass. A "For Sale" sign leaned against the mailbox. If it hadn't been for that, I would have thought she was just letting the place go.

"Elaine's selling her house," I told DJ that night.

"Yeah."

"Did you know she was leaving?"

"Yeah," he said again.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I asked, hurt. "I thought we had no secrets."

He looked away from me. "It slipped my mind," he said.

I knew by the way he said it that there was more to the story. I also knew he wouldn't tell me now. I would have to address it later. "Where did she go?" I asked.

"She bought a ranch up by Ukiah."

"Ukiah, California?"

"No, the one up in the mountains south of Paradise. I hope she's okay."

"Why wouldn't she be? She's very good at getting what she wants."

DJ didn't say anything. He just turned around, went into his workroom and closed the door in my face when I casually followed him. I couldn't believe it; I knew it must have been an accident, him shutting the door in my face like that, so I opened the door again and followed him in. "Why'd she buy a ranch?" I asked, picking up computer parts at random, turning them over, flicking switches, and setting them down again—keeping my hands busy to set him at ease.

"She wants to breed horses." DJ's head was bent over a panel of circuitry.

"Elaine wants to breed horses?" I laughed.

"Why shouldn't she? She's always loved them."

"But she makes good money at media relations."

"She can still do that up there, long as she has a phone and a computer and an internet link-up."

"But it's so far from everything."

"Maybe that's the appeal."

"But it's just not her," I said. "She's so ... so urban. What does she know about horses?"

"All due respect, Jennifer, but you really know nothing about her." He finally looked at me.

I felt like he'd slapped me.

His eyes dropped to my hands, which were still fiddling with the electronic things on his table. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing," I said, turning the thing over in my hands, trying not to cry.

"Can you set that down, please? I'm going to need it pretty soon." He sounded tense, strained, polite. He was pressing the piece he was holding so hard his fingertips were white.

I set the piece down on the table. "Why didn't you tell me?" I asked the back of his head. "I thought we had no secrets."

"I don't know." He stood, took a tiny box of tools off a high shelf, then bent over the circuit board again, manipulating something with a tiny screwdriver. I would get to the bottom of this, but now wasn't the time to press it. I turned and walked out of the room. He didn't notice. *The list of things I will have to address later is getting very, very long*, I thought.

Though I knew DJ wouldn't see it, I saw the Lord's clear leading in Elaine's decision. She had remained a disruptive influence in the church. Some people insisted on seeing her as the real minister's wife, and going to her for counsel, even though she wasn't qualified. Now that she was gone, it would be simpler, cleaner. I would be more confident in my role, freer to be myself without the constant comparisons that always left me feeling second best.

It wasn't like we ever spent a lot of time together, anyway. I soon came to see Elaine's absence as a blessing, much as I saw Sarah, Elizabeth, and Gwen's distance as a blessing. In retrospect, I see that the Lord gave me that time to build the relationship with DJ that our marriage is going to need to withstand our time of trouble. But I'm getting ahead of myself. I have to tell this in order. Summer was quiet and, if it was peaceful on the surface, I sensed undercurrents that hurt me as a wife and concerned me as a counselor. And then, that fall, DJ's family interfered again, bringing disaster in their wake. As usual.

CHAPTER 65

Jennifer

When I drove into our driveway that fall afternoon, I had no idea that my world was about to come crashing down on me. The old oak stood in our front yard, its leaves turned to gold, its bark scarred and faded to silver. The parsonage snuggled on its wide lawn, huge windows sparkling in the sun. The big white daisies, purple phlox, and yellow broom that DJ had planted when we moved in hung over the rock wall running between the lawn and the street.

How terrible it would be to leave all this and go back to that shabby, dirty farm, I thought. Sorrow swept over me, but then, as so often happens, in the wake of sorrow came enlightenment. The Lord had used our grief to further His own purposes. If DJ had even considered moving back to the farm and taking up the family business, his father's death had finally shown him how dangerous farming is. No, he had settled down into the place God had prepared for us right here in Happy Valley. Since we'd gotten home he'd been happy landscaping our yard and keeping up the vegetable garden and playing with Davy and the dog when he wasn't serving the church. He didn't even talk about his family anymore.

I'd often held him up before the Mercy Seat. I'd shed many tears. Though I both disliked and feared the dog, I had come to believe that it was a part of the Lord's plan for healing my husband. Since the dog had come, DJ was more like his old self, though we still were far from perfect.

Still, though, I knew we'd get through it. We had a strong marriage. The dog and I had struck an uneasy truce. We circled each other warily, maintained armed civility in the shared territories of DJ and Davy, and silently avoided each other otherwise.

Now that Elaine was out of our life, I had high hopes for DJ's healing. But things weren't falling into place as quickly as they should have. DJ spent hours writing his sermons and counseling parishioners. He spent all his free time with Davy, working in the yard, or building computers in his workroom.

"Why do you build these things?" I asked him once. "Yours works perfectly well, and you never sell any."

"I don't know," he told me. "I just like doing it." He didn't even look at me when he said it, just kept right on maneuvering a board full of circuitry into a tan-colored metal box.

It's natural that he's a bit withdrawn, I reminded myself. Daddy just died, and he's grieving. He has a lot on his mind. He'll get over it. A support group might help. Maybe I'll see about getting one together. I can lead it, really tailor things to meet his needs.

I wanted to help him! I also wanted him to see what a pivotal role I played in our home ... and in our ministry. Mostly, though, I just wanted him to see that his real family was right here, waiting for him to come back to us. Daddy's death had ended all the talk about moving to Paradise. I doubted he would ever be able to drive that chopper again without seeing his father's body in it, seeing his blood painting the header and floor red, spattering all over the window.

It made me wince to even think of it, so I tried not to. It must have been painful for a little while, but the man had been living in pain for such a long time—I bet he'd probably felt more relieved than anything. He probably would've chosen this way to go, anyway, rather than a lingering, painful death. Besides, he'd have hated hearing the awful things Elaine, Sarah, and Elizabeth were saying about him. And seeing how Elizabeth had turned to Satanism. And how Sarah had given His work such a black eye getting herself pregnant like she had and then being so blatant about it. And Elaine and Joe, divorcing and causing such a division in the church. *The Devil certainly has worked overtime in that family, I thought. Dying was the best*

thing that could've happened to him. And Daddy's death had saved my family. Sometimes you have to use tough love.

I said a little prayer thanking God for the lovely fall afternoon, and rejoiced that there was still time to take Davy for a walk—maybe down to Barnes & Noble, get a coffee for me, a juice for him, a book for both of us. I saw DJ's car in the garage and decided to ask him to go with us. Not that he would. I had to be patient, but it was hard. It seemed that DJ had plenty of time for everyone except me. But he was grieving. It would get better. The support group idea was a good one. And we had a strong relationship.

I pulled Davy out of his seat, sat him on my hip, shouldered the diaper bag and my work bag—client notes to review again tonight—and tapped on the door of DJ's workroom. DJ was leaning over his workbench fiddling with some computer part. The dog was curled up at his feet. Its one eye opened and stared insolently at me. I stared right back. *Stay out of my way, dog*, I thought at it. The eye drifted shut. So what if it knew? It was just a dumb dog. It couldn't talk, even if it *was* indestructible.

"I'm taking Davy out for a walk—maybe to Barnes & Noble," I said. "Want to come along?"

DJ looked up at me, and I noticed that his eyes were red and watering. "I've got to finish this." He leaned over his workbench again.

I had expected it, but it still hurt. I dropped my bag on the table, went back into the kitchen for Davy's stroller, and strapped Davy in. "Can you watch him a minute?" I asked DJ, smiling through my pain.

"Sure," he said.

"Here, baby," I cooed. "Watch Daddy." I walked down the hall to the bedroom that used to be ours. More and more, DJ was sleeping in the big bed in Davy's room, Davy out of his crib and curled against his father's side.

We never started out like that. Every night Davy fell asleep in his crib in his own room and DJ lay beside me, the sheet an arctic no-man's-land between us. I had crossed that frozen waste again last night, cuddling close to his back, running my hands over his body in the way he liked. He lay like a stone. Finally I broke.

"You never hold me anymore," I wept against his back.

He pretended to be asleep.

And sometime in the night Davy started crying and DJ's side of the bed lifted. Then it was my turn to pretend to be asleep. After he was gone I turned my head and cried again, quietly, despairingly. He always soothed Davy's tears but not mine, even when they were running down his back.

This morning, his empty pillow had been like an ice pick in my heart. I'd gotten out of bed and walked barefoot down the hall, and there they were. Davy flat on his back, arms flung out, mouth slightly open, DJ's arm curled around him like it had once curled around me, the dog stretched beside DJ's long legs. I looked at them in the morning light and pain pierced me. *DJ was mine first. He should be in my bed, curled around me, helping me make a little sister for Davy. Davy could get through the nights by himself now. I hated waking up alone.*

I'd stood in the door watching them sleep, wondering what had gone wrong, and how I could fix it if DJ wouldn't help. And then DJ's eyes opened and for a second I saw a flash of panic, and then he smiled his new, polite, distant smile. His arm tightened around Davy for a second, then he slid it carefully out and slipped off the bed. He walked to the doorway and kissed me politely. "Good morning," he said, and "Excuse me," and he brushed past me. The shower started. The dog stared at me. I looked at Davy and found myself thinking, as I had more and more of late, that I should never have had him, that it had been better when it was just DJ and me. But when had it ever been that? From the day we met, his family had been there, been all around us, if not physically, then psychologically. When would he ever be just mine?

I shook off the dark thoughts as I stripped off my work dress and stockings. *It's Daddy's death, I told myself again. It's only been a few months. He's grieving. Things will improve. We have a strong relationship.*

I pulled on a crop top and some walking shorts, then slipped on a pair of tennis shoes. I looked good—really good for having had a baby less than a year before. I had lost the last of the baby weight, a little more, in fact. Maybe one of these days DJ would notice. If he didn't pretty soon, he couldn't blame me if I found someone who would. No, no, no—I pushed

the thought away as I walked back down the hall to the workroom. Cheating on DJ was out of the question. That would make me no better than Elaine. I pushed open the door saying, "Baby ready to go?"

Davy was sitting on DJ's lap. DJ had wrapped one arm wrapped around him and was working one-handed at the hard drive on the workbench. The dog was leaning against DJ's knee, grinning, panting up at him.

"See, son," DJ was saying, his voice gentle and gruff as he eased components into place, "it goes, right ... here ... on the ... *motherboard*."

Davy stared up at his daddy's face, his round blue eyes unblinking. He smiled suddenly—a wide, toothless grin—and crowed, waving his fat little arms.

"Muh," he said.

"That's right, *motherboard*," said DJ, hugging him and smiling. "*Good boy!*"

"*Muh*," Davy said again.

The word should have been mine. For a horrible instant I felt like I was looking at somebody else's family. Loss and rage swept me. After all I'd done for them! "If you guys're okay," I said, swallowing the knot in my throat, "I'll just go on my own."

"We're fine," DJ said absently. "Just about done, anyway. You go on."

I wanted to ask if I should wait so we could all go together, but I knew if I waited he'd work all night, so I walked quickly out the door and hurried down the curving drive past the big old oak. I turned right at the street, walking quickly, blindly down the pavement. I turned at the corner, stepped up onto the sidewalk, and walked up the hill, legs protesting as they always did until my muscles warmed up. I tightened my lips and held my pace against the pain, against the knot in my throat, against my fear. Slowly the rhythm of walking took over in the beating of my heart, in my breath, in my feet on pavement. The late afternoon stretched quiet and cooling around me, the heat of the day undercut by the chill of autumn.

I walked to the end of the beautiful new subdivision and turned around. When I came back to our street, I crossed it, walked another three blocks, and then turned left on Cherry Street. This neighborhood wasn't nearly as nice as ours. I paused at Elaine's dusty mailbox, leaning on it to catch my

breath while my eyes searched the house. It looked even worse than it had a few weeks, ago—windows like blind, dead eyes, neat cactus beds sprouting grasses and thistles.

It was too bad about Elaine, but she'd just gone off the deep end. Really, someone like Elaine in the mountains, where snow blocked the passes for six months of the year? Bizarre. It was a bid for attention. I saw it all the time in my youngest clients. Maybe someday Elaine would grow up and realize that everybody has hard times in their lives, and most of us manage to get through them without running away from home. Still, though, there was a family pattern. Elizabeth had run away, too.

Well, DJ and I were going through a hard time, but I wasn't running away. *Of course, I reminded myself, I have the benefit of my training. I have tools to address the situation. We'll get through this. We have a strong relationship. I've made it that way.* I walked on and turned up the street toward Barnes & Noble, squinting against the setting sun's glare.

The store lights shone warm and welcoming. I hurried across the parking lot like I used to hurry home, pushed open the glass doors, breathed in the scent of paper, ink, and coffee, and let the chamber music wash over me. The racks of books and the muted conversations coming from the Starbuck's entrance off to the left worked their familiar magic. The tension left me in a great sigh. I just had to give it time. It would get better. I'd acted for the best. DJ would understand. If he ever found out. He was a minister, and he understood that sometimes God's will was beyond human comprehension.

I walked slowly down the wide central aisle and turned in at the spiritual section. Maybe that was the answer—maybe if we started having family worship again ... but when had we stopped? Before or after we'd gone to help Daddy die? I thought after, but I couldn't be sure, and, it didn't really matter. The fact that we had stopped at all showed how vigilant Christians have to be. The Devil uses anything to separate God from His people.

I browsed with new purpose, found the perfect devotional, then went on into the self-help section. I found a book on nurturing my inner child, one on grief work, then noticed another dealing with the loss of a child.

I recoiled from the thought. *Lose Davy? Unthinkable.* Still, though, I would probably come through such an event better than most because I had built a strong relationship with my husband. Dealing with a loss like that would probably bring us closer, if anything. Who knows? It might be the way God would choose to heal the ever-widening rift between DJ and me. We could make a fresh start. Maybe a baby girl... How might it happen?

Stop it, I told myself. I put the book on losing a child back and bought the others. Since Davy's birth I'd been neglecting myself for my family. And DJ's. The support group idea looked better by the minute. I carried my books into the coffee shop, bought a low-fat venti mocha and a biscotti, sat down at a table, sipped, read, and nibbled.



When I finished my coffee, I looked up, blinking the room into focus. My reflection stared back at me from the black windows. Night had fallen, and I hadn't fixed supper for my family before I left. But I pushed the guilt away—it wasn't a productive emotion. Anyway, DJ was perfectly capable of opening a jar of baby food, mashing a banana, and mixing baby cereal.

I bought another mocha—non-fat this time—started for the door, hesitated, and went back and bought the book on dealing with the loss of a child. *It might be helpful for Elaine,* I told myself. I sipped it slowly as I walked home. The lights were on when I turned in the driveway, warm golden windows against the dark blue night. *My beautiful house. My wonderful little family. My perfect life.* I'd fought so hard for it. So why was I standing outside in the dark, watching my husband rocking our baby to sleep, his dog leaning against his knee? Why wasn't I there in the rocker, my baby in my arms, my husband's arms around me? What had gone wrong?

I had to fix it.

I clutched my bag of books and strode up the walk. I'd suggest that DJ lead us in family worship tonight—I would insist on it, actually. It was a start on the right path. I ran into an something big and unfamiliar parked next to the garage, stumbled back, rubbing my aching arm, and peered at it through the dark. *A sport utility vehicle? Whose was it?* Maybe a parishioner was in crisis. If so, DJ needed me there, I had specialized training. My eyes

flew to the living room window. Just DJ and Davy? Nobody was sitting in the living room with him. I started up the driveway again, hurrying now.

And then I saw her, drifting in from the bathroom, a white robe belted around her skinny body, toweling her long, reddish brown curls dry. She reached out her arms. DJ stood up, smiled an open, welcoming smile—not his frozen polite one—and handed Davy to her. My stomach turned over—*my perfect baby in that witch's arms*. Elizabeth sank gracefully into the rocker. Davy cuddled against her breast. Toby turned in a circle, stopped, leaned his head on her knee, and gazed up at her. She reached a hand down and scratched behind his ears, ruffling them in a way he had never permitted me—not that I would have done such a thing, anyhow. Davy's hand came up and grabbed at the pendant around her neck. I didn't have to see it to know that it was the pentacle.

As I stood there, out in the dark, cold night. DJ disappeared into the bathroom. Elizabeth began rocking. I watched her mouth opening and closing. She was talking, or singing, to my son. Davy's eyes drifted shut, hand still clutching the pentacle. Rage and fear shook me. *My house. My husband. My baby. My damn dog*. I took a deep breath. Storming in there wouldn't solve anything. I forced myself to walk calmly up the drive and in through the back door. By the time I was lifting Davy out of Elizabeth's arms I was able to smile and whisper, "We weren't expecting you. I'll just put him to bed and be right back." I carried him down the hall to the nursery and laid him in his crib, covered him with his fuzzy yellow blanket, then walked firmly back down the hall and into the bathroom. This was *my* house, *my* husband. I didn't have to knock. We were *close*. The steamy heat blasted me. I sat down on the toilet and waited. When the shower turned off I handed DJ a towel around the end of the shower curtain.

"Hey," he said.

"What's the Wicked Witch of the West doing here?" I asked, smiling so he would know it was a joke.

"Bethie?"

"Who do you think? What's she doing here?"

"I'm not sure. Does she have to have a reason?"

"She's never visited us before. Did she tell you she was coming?"

"No."

"And it doesn't bother you?"

"What?"

"That she just dropped in? No warning? No reason?"

"No. Should it?"

"Did she give you an explanation?"

"She just said that she wanted to mend fences."

"What fences?"

"We had a disagreement last time we talked. She said she didn't want it to come between us."

"What about?"

"The way Daddy died."

The room blurred around me, a lump came into my throat. I dug my nails into my palms and asked around the lump, "Is Davy safe with her?"

"With Bethie? Are you kidding?"

I swallowed. "I'm not convinced she's completely rational."

"Come off it, Jennifer."

"They never did figure out how Daddy died, and she's a Satanist. Who knows what she might say or do, what she might be bringing into our home? Everything else aside, it doesn't really look very good, having someone like her here. I mean, she's *admits* she's a witch."

He stopped drying himself and stared down at me.

"Not that I think she had anything to do with Daddy's death," I said hastily, reading his face, "but they *did* arrest her, and if she's telling the truth, her life has been enough to unbalance anybody...." I let it trail off, letting him reach the logical conclusion on his own.

"You're actually standing there and saying she may have killed her father. *Our* father. Jennifer, I don't believe this. You just have no clue, do you?" He turned and began toweling his head.

It was too much. All the years of being excluded slammed into me, pushing me beyond caution. "Do you have any idea how sick I am of hearing that?" I hissed.

"Hearing what?"

"That I don't understand. I understand a lot more than you think I do, DJ."

"About what?"

"About your family. About how jealous your sisters are of me. About how much they hated your father. About how cold they are. There's not a one of them that's not warped, and Elizabeth's the worst. She's evil, or else crazy."

"Evil? Crazy?" DJ's voice was muffled by the towel, but something in it warned me to go carefully.

"Well, maybe not exactly evil or crazy," I said, making my voice softer. "Maybe just ... I don't know ... different. But she's still wearing that satanic necklace...." My voice trailed off again. I stared at DJ's back. The muscles made deep ridges down both sides of his backbone. His shoulder blades rose and fell like wings as he worked at his hair. "DJ..." I stood up and ran my hand down his back to his tight buttocks. It had been so long. My hand slid around. "Talk to me," I whispered, reaching for him, touching him in the way that had driven him wild in the beginning.

Without warning he spun around to face me. "Fine," he blazed. "You want to have this conversation, we'll have it. But not here. We'll have it out in the living room. All three of us. I'm not going to get in the middle."

"Not with her," I whispered, sliding against him, using the most powerful weapon in a woman's arsenal. "Just us."

He recoiled from me, then his shoulders slumped. "Okay, just us. But we'll do it now."

"Now?" I swallowed.

"Now." He wrapped the towel around his hips and strode to the bedroom, returning a minute later wearing a pair of sweatpants and yanking a sweatshirt over his uncombed head. His hair stood up in spikes where it wasn't plastered flat. "Let's go."

"Aren't you going to comb your hair? What will people think?"

"It's fine. Come on."

"But Davy—"

“Bethie’ll stay with him.”

“I don’t—”

“Give it a rest, Jennifer. We do this now or not at all. I can’t live like this any more.”

I stared at him, furious at the ultimatum, but too wise to show it. “All right,” I said, and I turned and walked out of the bathroom and through the living room, feeling the dog’s gaze on my back every step of the way. I went through the kitchen, out the back door into the garage, and stood hugging myself against the blue evening chill until DJ came out. We set off walking, long fast strides. We are both tall, athletic people—well matched physically as well as spiritually and professionally. I knew then, just as I know now, that he wouldn’t have been happy with a small woman—with that Angela person. I was absolutely right to intervene. We followed the street to the walking path along the river, then turned and walked down under the bridge and along the paved trail. It was our favorite walk; we had gone this way so often there was no need for words.

At last DJ stopped. He faced the river, leaned his arms on the top rail of the fence, and stared out at the water. On the opposite bank, stone stairs rose through black tangled shadows to a half-hidden gate. Funny—I’d never noticed them before, and DJ and I had walked here a lot in the beginning. In fact, once we had nearly made love in a secluded nook we found. We probably would have if I hadn’t had the presence of mind to remind him of our position in the community. I wanted to touch him now. Maybe if I let him make love to me here, now, it would heal the breach. I could only try. I reached for him.

He stepped away from my hand. *It’s so dark ... he must not have seen. Surely he didn’t avoid my touch. I am the best thing that had ever happened to him. Everybody says so.* Yes, of course, it had been a coincidence, but I didn’t quite have the courage to reach out again. I just stood beside him, giving him time. As a trained psychologist, I knew time and space were necessary, just as I understood that good communication is vital to a strong relationship.

But on that night, I didn’t know how to start.

“Did you do it?” he asked baldly, his eyes on the river.

"Do what?" I asked, although I knew.

"Don't play word games, Jenny. Did you push him?"

His use of the name only he ever called me nearly undid me. "Why do you ask?" I said. "Is this what you and Elizabeth fought about?"

"Just answer the question."

I stared at the river, too. "What makes you think so?"

His shoulders dropped. I hadn't realized he had them tensed. "Little things," he said. "The way things turned out, everything just like you wanted. Did you hate him that much?"

"No!" I cried, crushed that he could think such a thing. "I loved him. He was like a father to me."

"Like a father? Jennifer, *you shoved him into the chopper!*"

"I did not. Not really. It was mostly an accident. I just let nature take its course."

He stared at me.

I hurried on, angry that I should have to explain what was so very clear to me, willing him to see the logic, the rightness, of what I had done. "I loved him," I said, "but I hated what he was doing to us. It was so dangerous. And such hard work. You almost fell over that day. And then I started thinking about our future ... if ... if we stayed on that—on the farm. If you didn't die from an accident, you'd spend all your time in the fields. We'd never see you. I'd have been next thing to a widow. And what about Davy? He'd slave away in those fields, too, and it would *never end*." My voice kept rising. I couldn't help it. I stopped, swallowed, and then went on. "You're a minister, not a dirt farmer! You're worth more than that! You should be doing the Lord's work. Your father wanted to take all that away from me—from us."

"Would that be so bad? To serve God by serving the land?" He finally turned and looked straight at me. His eyes seemed to be searching my face.

"Yes! Yes, it would. It would have ruined our perfect family, our perfect life. We're happy now, serving the Lord. This is where we're meant to be."

"So you did this for us? And for the Lord?" He sounded like he was getting a cold.

"And for him. He was hurting—it wasn't like he had a long, healthy life ahead of him, anyhow. And that last night, when Elaine was so awful ... well, I just couldn't stand by and let him deal with that on his own, not if I could help it. He wanted to go."

"So ... you were doing him a favor? How did you get him out there?"

"I just told him you were waiting for him. He did most of it himself—he was so proud to think that you needed his help. All I had to do was tie his shoes."

"And in the shop?" DJ was whispering now.

"I couldn't tell him anything—the machine was too loud. He walked around to the front all by himself. And then he just lost his balance. I hardly had to touch him at all. I think he must have wanted it, really."

DJ was staring at me. "You used the best thing about him to kill him."

"Hey, I wasn't the only one who wanted him dead! I heard your sisters talking. I heard your mother talking. They were counting the days."

"So now you did it for *them*?"

"I did it for all of us," I said urgently, willing him to understand. "For the family. It was for the best. Everyone was in so much pain. I ended it so the healing could begin."

He looked at me, his eyes flat and opaque. Just like the dog's eye.

"Don't look at me like that," I said, finally, desperately. "I hear what you say in your sleep. You should be thanking me!"

"What do I say?" he asked quietly.

"Stuff about your dad—you know ... when the nightmares come. I hold you, and I listen to you—or at least I did until you started sleeping with Davy, and don't you think for one minute *that* doesn't concern me."

He took a step back. "What are you saying?"

"Just that we're a family. We keep each others' secrets."

"What secrets?"

"We can get help for you. I'm a counselor, after all. And you're a minister. No one needs to know. We can beat this thing together." I felt like I was drowning. Why couldn't he understand?

"What thing? What thing can we beat?"

"You know. With Davy." I hated what I was saying, but I would do anything to save my family.

"You honestly believe I'd hurt him?"

"Well, it wouldn't be surprising. It runs in families."

He stared at the river for a long time. Finally he said, "We'd better get home."



I woke to a quiet, chilly house, feeling drained. I showered and put on my face—light foundation, understated eye shadow, mascara, and pale pink lipstick. I pulled one of the coat dresses I wore for work out of my closet. I smoothed stockings over my muscular calves, and took a moment to bow my head and thank the Lord for my nice legs, and for the fact that my husband loved them.

Gradually the silence bore in on me. Davy should be awake by now. I walked down the hall to his room, passing the living room on my way. The couch was empty, rumpled blankets thrown back and trailing on the floor. *Elizabeth must be in the bathroom*, I thought. I walked into my son's room. His bed stood empty, too, the sheets cold, his fuzzy rabbit pajamas a wad on the pillow. Elizabeth's backpack was gone.

A part of me began gibbering. I pushed it down. *There's a perfectly logical explanation. There has to be. He took Davy to the sitter*, I assured myself. *He just took him to the sitter. I can check.* I crossed the silent, cold living room, picked up the phone, and dialed. The phone rang. I hung up. How could I check without revealing that my husband had left with our son, and without telling me where he was going? It was early. The sitter would know that he couldn't have done that if we shared a bed. We had a position to maintain. I'd get Davy after my last appointment, like I always did. And I'd give DJ a piece of my mind, too.

The dog was gone. I went into the kitchen and looked out at our big, shady back yard, searching the corners. No black and white shape anywhere—no, wait—there it was. I breathed again and ran to the door and called him. No movement. *No big surprise there*, I thought bitterly. I crossed the yard. The black and white resolved itself into a pile of black

plastic and white pipe left over from when we put in the underground sprinkler system.

I stood under the trees, hugging myself in the autumn chill, longing for the vanished perfection of that summer. But it would be better now! I'd confessed. God had forgiven me—after all, I'd acted from pure motives. It would take time for DJ to come around, of course. He was still grieving, and, besides, pedophiles rarely acknowledge that their actions are wrong. I'd get help for him—better, I'd help him myself. Then no one need know. I'd keep his secret. He'd never dare to issue me an ultimatum again!

I walked back to the house, opened our new devotional, and read the day's selection. The verse for the day was Esther 4:14: "*Who knows but that you have come to royal position, for such a time as this?*" It was a sign! I was on the right path. I bowed my head and humbly gave thanks for my courage, skills and knowledge. I could save my troubled family just like Esther had saved the Jews. I already felt better—family worship was the key. We should do it, anyway. DJ was a minister, after all. We had to set an example.

I walked out the door carrying my bag, feeling light and oddly incomplete without Davy's solid weight on my hip. I hadn't gone through the session notes last night. I'd have to hurry through them at the office this morning, before I left for my first appointment.

I opened the car door, slung the bag into the back seat, slammed the sliding door, and started around the back of the minivan to the driver's side. Then I heard a motor purring down the street. I looked up. It was a perfect day in Happy Valley. The sky arched clear cool blue overhead, the leaves red and gold against it, the grass emerald green.

A police car slid slowly around the corner. My heart thumped. *It's nothing*, I told myself—*just a neighborhood check*. A second car appeared. The first pulled into our driveway.

A man and a woman, both in dark blue uniforms, climbed out and walked toward her, hands on their batons. I waited for them, a smile on my face.

CHAPTER 66

DJ

She stood there as tall and beautiful as the day he'd married her, and the blackness poured out of her mouth, drowning him. It was true, all of it. He loved his son, but who knew how he'd hurt him in time? He had never doubted his father's love, but the hard lesson of his life was that those who love the most hurt the most.

He had married Jennifer because she was lovely, strong, and wise. She had been there after Angela left, comforted him, had known just what to say to make the hurt less painful. She was a counselor. If she said he was all right, he must be all right. And so he had trusted himself enough to touch his son, knowing that her wisdom would never allow him to go too far. Now she was offering Davy as a sacrifice for his silence.

He walked back to the house beside the stranger he had married. She went straight to her bedroom, past Bethie sleeping on the couch. He followed her to the threshold, but found he could not cross. He walked down the hall, and looked into Davy's room, where the baby lay sprawled in his crib, arms wide. DJ longed to take him in his arms, curl around him, keep him safe, take comfort in him. But Jennifer's words had destroyed all that.

She was right—sleeping with Davy, taking comfort from his baby trust and love ... that wasn't healthy. He might hurt his son as his sisters had been hurt by their father. *As he had been hurt?* His mind curled away from the thought. *Impossible. I would remember.* He stood there, grieving for his son, for

the hurt he'd done without even knowing it, watching moonlight glint off the baby's fair hair.

His father hadn't started with rape—but perhaps he had started this way, curling around the small bodies of his children to keep them safe from the beasts in the night. When had he crossed the line? When had Daddy become the beast himself? DJ didn't know. But he feared becoming the beast more than anything. And so he took his dangerous body out to the couch, woke his sister, and sent her to guard his son Davy from his parents.

He lay on the couch, dry-eyed, his gut churning, then suddenly jumped up. He raced to the bathroom, heaved again and again until he was empty. He couldn't bear the thought of lying awake on the couch again, so he stripped, and took a shower, the water a million stinging needles. He thought of his father led to his death by the one person he had treated well, the one person he had given no reason for hate, the one person he should have been able to trust. He thought of Bethie, arrested and imprisoned because of Jennifer's words. He thought of his own words to her just a few days before that: *We watch each other's backs*. He thought of himself in that sad place by the creek, in sight of Toby's and Bethie's nameless, faceless baby's graves, striking out at his sisters, breaking the oldest promise, the one that had saved them all as children. He thought of Davy ... *hurt as he had been hurt? No!*

The water had become icy pellets against his shoulders. He pushed the knob down, dried himself, pulled his sweats back on and went back into the living room. Toby slouched down the hall, choke chain jingling, and laid his head on DJ's knee. *He knows*, DJ thought blankly. He cupped the dog's shining black head in both hands, smoothed back the silky ears, and ran his thumb gently over the massive scar. How had he gotten it? More and more often, he found himself forgetting that the Toby he had known was dead, that this was another dog. He and Sarah had buried the cold, stiff body. He couldn't have survived. The dog's amber eye held his, warm, gentle, loving. At last, when gray morning filtered through the night, he walked quietly into Davy's room and shook Bethie awake. She looked at him blearily, took in his red eyes, unshaven face, and damp, uncombed hair.

"Bethie ... help me," he began, and his voice died in his throat.

She leaned forward and drew him wordlessly into her arms. Her hand pressed his head to her shoulder, ran over his hair—*like I used to comfort Davy*, he thought. *I'll never touch him in innocence again*. He looked at his son sleeping the crib. He'd worn himself out weeping last night.

Bethie had tried to comfort the baby. From the arid living room, he'd heard her patting Davy's little back, heard his bewildered wails, heard when they finally dissolved into hiccups, then snores. Jennifer had woken up. He knew this because he had heard her bedroom door click shut against the loudest cries. His heart broke, and suddenly he was sobbing silently, his shoulders heaving, his head heavy on his sister's shoulder.

Bethie held him until the storm passed, then handed him a tissue. "Blow," she said, just like Elaine had when he was little. He blew, and unaccountably felt better. She gave his shoulder a quick squeeze. "Let me get dressed," she murmured, then scooped up her clothes and headed for the bathroom.

DJ gathered Davy's clothes from the drawer where Jennifer kept them, stuffed them into the diaper bag, found the bottle of formula in the refrigerator, added that to the bag, then grabbed a garbage bag and dropped the diaper bag, the bag of disposable diapers, and a few toys into it. In the bedroom where Jennifer still lay sleeping, he collected a few pairs of jeans, some clean underwear, socks, and shirts, then added his cracked old bomber jacket to the heap in his arms. He left his suits hanging in the closet.

He carried everything back into Davy's room and added it to the big garbage bag, then lifted the still-sleeping Davy, holding him stiffly, conscious of his hand under Davy's diapered bottom. *Was a hand under the diaper abuse? How else to keep him from falling? Had he molested his son without meaning to?* His head said *no, of course not*, but the rest of him wasn't so sure. Bethie came back into the room, stuffed her nightgown into her duffle, zipped it, shouldered it, then picked up the garbage bag.

At the front door, DJ turned and looked around the room at the sofa and chairs he and Jennifer had bought together, at their wedding picture on the mantel, at the arrangement of silk flowers that had been her

wedding bouquet on the side table, at the remote control, the tangle of blankets on the floor, the western he'd been reading, now lying face-down on the coffee table. He swiped one hand across his cheek. Then he pulled the locked door shut behind him.

They loaded Davy and Toby into Bethie's Jeep. "Where to?" she asked. "The police station," DJ said.

He asked for the officer on duty. And then he talked and talked, his voice flat and dull. Bethie sat silent beside him, holding Davy. A Child Services official arrived within a few minutes, looking sleepy, and soon the police officer called the Paradise police department, asked to talk to the investigating officer on the case, and left a message. They sat silent, waiting. The phone rang. The officer spoke in clipped, quiet tones, hung up.

"We'll bring her in for questioning," he finally said. "Normally you'd be responsible for your son, but given the circumstances," he looked at the Child Services official, "we'd like to suggest temporary supervised custody. If your sister can stay with you, we can get you in to talk to some people. Your concern for your son's safety and happiness speaks well for you, but there have been questions raised that need to be answered. Let's do the tests, just for everybody's peace of mind. You'll do this voluntarily?"

"Yes." DJ's voice was hoarse.

"Then let's find a safe place for you to stay. You'll need to be close to Paradise."

"He can stay with me," said Bethie.

"How far are you from Paradise?"

"A couple hours."

"Sounds good. Just give us some contact information and let's go with that. Check in tomorrow morning."

As they walked out of the station, they saw two police cars pull out of the lot, turn down the street, and disappear around the corner.

They drove north to Portland, then turned east to follow the placid Columbia. Davy fell asleep in his car seat. DJ sat bolt upright, staring out the window. "Can we take the old road?" he asked suddenly.

“Sure.” Elizabeth left the freeway at Troutdale and headed up the hill to the old scenic highway, turned left past the art shops, boutiques, and lunch counters that lined Troutdale’s main street, crossed the Sandy River on a rusting iron bridge, then turned right to follow the road along the river and up, up, up through the trees to the tiny, crumbling towns, green fields, gated estates, and rolling hills of the light-washed high highland. The road plunged down a series of switchbacks. Mossy stone walls guarded the steep drop to the Columbia. Brilliant gold leaves massed overhead and made soft drifts and piles on the ground. The Vista House, a round stone building surrounded by a parapet and inset with Art Deco stained glass, appeared through a break in the trees.

“Can we stop for a minute?” DJ asked.

Elizabeth pulled into a parking space. “Want company?”

“Can you just watch Davy?”

“Sure.”

As Bethie sat back in her seat, DJ shouldered his door open and stepped out into the clear blue windy day. He walked toward the stone parapet. His hair, uncombed and wild, blew flat against his head on one side. A few people were wandering around the building. DJ passed them, then sat down on the steps overlooking the vivid hills, the precipice, and the river, twisting blue and sparkling in the vivid yellow forests far below.

A few minutes later Bethie sat down silently beside him, holding a bundled up, sleeping Davy.

Finally DJ spoke. “He brought me here once.”

“Daddy?”

“Yeah. We had to come down to Portland for parts. It was just us. We left before it was light, and I was so cold, all the way to my middle. He wrapped me in a wool blanket and laid me down on the seat.”

“Mm.”

“We stopped for breakfast at Biggs. I had eggs and potatoes and toast. I remember sitting in that warm restaurant ... cigarette smoke made blue spirals in the morning sunshine, and I could smell the coffee, and he ordered us both eggs and toast. I think the potatoes just came with it.” He

frowned, trying to recall. Suddenly the matter of the potatoes became vital. "Yes, I think that was it—they just came with the meal. We sat there and ate, and it was different, quieter, I guess. He was peaceful that day."

Bethie rocked Davy, humming absently and gazing out across the river.

"And when we passed the Vista House on the freeway," DJ continued, still dredging in his memory, "he pointed it out to me, and then he said, 'I think we've got time,' and he pulled off and we took the road up here, and parked. It was empty that day, too. 'Course, it must've only been about eight or nine in the morning. But we came down here, and he put a nickel in the telescope—that one right there." He pointed. "And then he lifted me up so I could look through it, and held me so I wouldn't fall. He let me look as long as I wanted—just kept feeding nickels into it until I was tired of looking. And then we went inside and he bought us each a hot chocolate, and we came out here and drank it. And everything was so green, and so clean, and the river was so blue." He stopped and swallowed. "I know he did some bad things, but he did some good things, too. He loved us as much as he could." He was silent for a long time. "And I miss him."

His sister put her arm around him and after a moment he leaned against her, laying his head on her shoulder like he had when they were children. She felt DJ's shoulders shake, and held him tighter.

"I keep thinking about her tricking him out there by using my name," DJ finally said. "Thinking he was safe.... Did he know you were there ... when ... when ...?"

"Yes."

"Did he say anything?"

"He wanted to, but he couldn't."

"What did you do?"

"I crawled in beside him where he could see me and told him everything would be all right." Her voice broke. "I touched his hair, like this." Her hand stroked DJ's head.

He sat up, wiping his eyes. "I'm glad you were there."

"Me, too."

They looked out through the vast blue emptiness that lay over the gorge.

“I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

“Just get through this,” she said quietly. “Then we’ll figure it out.” Davy stirred in her arms. His blue eyes opened, then drifted shut again. “Want some hot chocolate?”

“No. I don’t think I could drink it.”

They stood and walked back to the Jeep, then drove the rest of the way in silence.

CHAPTER 67

DJ

The house welcomed them, though Sarah was nowhere to be seen. Bethie led DJ upstairs and into one of the high, airy rooms. A crib stood in the corner. “We just got it,” she said. “Lucky thing. You can put your stuff in the dresser.”

“Maybe later.” DJ dropped his pack on the floor. “I’m so tired. Can you take Davy?”

“Sure. Come on, big guy. Let’s go find Auntie Sarah.”

DJ closed his eyes and listened to them start downstairs. Then sleep took him. The next thing he knew, Bethie was standing by the bed, Davy sniffling in her arms. “He needs you,” she said. “I’ve changed him, but he’s hungry, and he needs you.” She laid Davy down beside DJ and handed over a bottle. Davy curled against him, finished the bottle, and fell asleep.

“Wait,” DJ whispered as Bethie turned to leave the room. “Please take him.”

“Why?” she asked.

“What if I hurt him?” His voice shook a little.

“Do you want to?”

“No!”

“Do you need to?”

“No.”

“Do you see him as a sexual object?”

"God, no!"

"Then he's fine. Go to sleep. If you ever feel differently, let me know, and I'll take him in a heartbeat. But until then, he needs you."

"But—"

"Have you ever done the things to Davy that Daddy did to us?"

"No—God, no."

"Then Davy's a lucky little boy. And Jennifer's a foul-mouthed bitch." When Davy jumped at her savage tone, she went on more quietly, "You do realize she was just blackmailing you? She doesn't believe that herself."

"But she's a counselor—"

"No—she's a woman scrambling to cover her ass. Now be quiet. You're going to wake Davy. If I see something that worries me, I'll let you know. I promise."

"Bethie?"

"What?" She turned in the doorway.

"I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"For what I said by the creek. You didn't deserve it."

"You were defending someone you loved."

"But I used your pain against you. I'm sorry."

"It's okay." She smiled at him. "Rest now."

And they slept, DJ's arm curled around his son, and in his heart a grain of comfort took root.

DJ was awakened by the sharp, mournful call of a killdeer. A chilly breeze was lifting the light curtains. He stretched, then folded himself upright, feeling bare floorboards smooth and cold beneath his feet. Davy rolled onto his back, flung his little arms out, and snored gently. Propping pillows on both sides of the sleeping baby, DJ grabbed clean clothes, hurried through a shower and shave, and went downstairs to the kitchen.

Beth was just stepping through the back door. "How'd you sleep?"

"Great. I wasn't expecting to, but I just crashed."

“Good.” She went to the refrigerator and pulled out eggs, milk, and fresh peaches. He studied his sister’s thin, quiet face as she pulled a bowl out of the cupboard and began cracking eggs into it.

“Where’s Sarah?” he asked.

“Out by the pool.”

“It’s down by the river, right? I’ll go meet her.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“It’s a women’s place.”

“Oh. Okay.” But he looked hurt.

“No, DJ, you don’t understand—she might not be dressed.”

“Oh. Is this part of your religion?”

“In a way.”

“Was Jennifer right? Are you a Satanist?”

“Good Goddess, no! How could you even think that?”

“Jennifer said—” he stopped himself and began again. “So ... do you worship God? Do you believe in Jesus?”

“In a way, but I don’t think he’s the only game in town.”

“That’s blasphemy.”

“To you, maybe.” She cracked another egg sharply and added it to the bowl.

Upstairs Davy wailed.

DJ took the stairs two at a time. “Hey, big guy. You awake?”

Davy stopped crying, waved his arms and grinned.

“Let’s get you dressed.” Expertly DJ stripped the baby and washed and rediapered him. After he dressed him in a thick romper and tiny sweatshirt, he carried both Davy and the diaper bag downstairs.

“Can you mix baby formula?” he asked Elizabeth.

“I’ve never done it, but I can try.”

“The directions are on the can in the diaper bag.”

She found the can, read the instructions, fumbled the plastic liner into the bottle, read the instructions again, filled the bottle with warm water, read the directions again, and carefully measured the sticky powder into

the water, then screwed on the lid. "It's all clumpy, and it smells disgusting," she said, handing the bottle to DJ. "Are you sure it's still good?"

"It's always like that," he answered, taking the bottle and shaking it vigorously. The liquid inside turned creamy white. He pulled off the plastic tabs and squeezed out the air.

"Can I feed him?" she asked.

"Sure."

He handed Davy and the bottle to her, and she cuddled him close and guided the nipple into his mouth. Davy's eyes closed and he sucked blissfully. She began swaying and smiling down at him.

"Shall I finish making breakfast?" DJ finally asked.

"Mm?"

"Is that a yes?"

"Oh." She looked up, her eyes shining with unshed tears.

DJ found himself thinking of the little lump he and Sarah had buried with Toby. His throat closed. "You'll have another one," he said gently.

"I don't think so," she said. "I think something broke that night. Anyhow, what kind of mother would I be?"

"A great one! Just look at you—Davy loves you, and you love him."

"Davy doesn't know me."

"He knows you enough to love you."

"I'm not sure it's worth the gamble, even if I could. What if I turned out like Momma? I don't think I could live with myself, and I sure wouldn't want to put a kid through that."

"You wouldn't."

"I wish I could be so certain. But we repeat what we know, if we're not careful, and sometimes even if we are."

"Have you had a doctor check you?"

"No."

"Maybe you should."

"Maybe." She looked thoughtful. "It'd be good to know, one way or the other." She turned toward the cupboard, pulling plates down one-handed.

DJ gently stirred the eggs, added salt and pepper, and watched them bubble and set. To his surprise, his stomach started growling. Bethie finished setting the table, then sat down on a kitchen chair, scooting back to leave room for Davy and his bottle. DJ slid the eggs onto plates, leaving some for Sarah, and added the peaches. When the toast popped up he buttered it and carried everything to the table.

"So what's the plan for today?" Bethie finally asked.

"Well, I need to get some more stuff for Davy. I also need to call division headquarters and arrange for some leave. And I need to check in with the police, and Child Services."

Sarah pulled open the screen door. She was wearing a ratty pink bathrobe and flat shoes on her swollen feet. "Hey, DJ. Hey, Davy." She leaned down awkwardly and kissed the baby. "You guys save me some breakfast?"

"It's on the stove."

"Good. I'm gonna go get dressed." She waddled toward the stairs, one hand pressed to the small of her back.

"I suppose we should call Mom and Elaine, too," DJ added. "They'll have to know. Eventually."

"Do you know what you're going to say?"

"No." He pushed his plate away.

Bethie stood up, leaned Davy against her shoulder, and patted his back until he burped. "So you want to go to town first?"

"I suppose. Better change Davy and go."

She handed Davy over, then turned to clear the table. By the time she'd finished, DJ was back downstairs, this time wearing a clean white shirt and jeans. He slid into his bomber jacket as they walked out the door.

"Is Sarah coming?" he asked.

"No—she's baking."

"Baking? What for?"

"For one of the ladies."

He looked puzzled. "What ladies?"

"The ones we bake for."

"I didn't know you did that."

"It just sort of happened," she said vaguely.

He understood that he wasn't going to get anymore than that. "Oh."

They drove up the twisting, dusty track to the freeway. As Bethie sped up and joined the lane of traffic, DJ turned and looked behind them. "I can't see your house from here. Unless I knew it was there, I'd never believe it. Everything's gray up here." He turned back and to look out his own window. "It's awful out here. How long has it been like this?"

"It was like this when I got here."

"I don't remember it being this bad."

"Me, neither, but it always looks worse to me after I've been home for a while. I forget how bad it is."

"Home at the ranch, you mean?"

"No, my home."

"Why do you come, then?"

"Because I'm needed. When I'm not, I'm gone, and I won't look back."

"That's pretty cold. You don't like it around Paradise?"

"In some ways I hate it, maybe because there were things I could have really loved if our lives had been different. It hurts too much."

"Because of Dad?"

"Partly. Mostly because I just don't fit ... and don't even bother denying it," she hurried on when he opened his mouth. "You know it's true. And now the land's dying, and even though I can't live here, it hurts me to see it."

DJ turned to look out the window again. "I know what you mean. I love it, and it's falling apart," he said at last. A deer lay bloated and dead in the median, its legs pointing stiffly at the sky. Rusted farm equipment lay in the weeds behind trailing barbed wire. "How did I not see it?"

She didn't answer.

Icy wind lifted curtains of sand. Black swathes showed where fires had torn through the range land. As they drew closer to Paradise, more and more farmhouses stood vacant, blind windows cracked and blank.

"I hate to think what the farm must look like by now," DJ finally said. "I'm dreading being there alone, but I want to, too, you know? I just wish I knew it'd all work out."

"Hold on." She steered off the freeway at the next exit.

"Where we going?"

"I want to show you something before we go home."

"What is it?"

"A place I found when I really needed it. It gave me hope—reminded me that there's life here, too." She drove on, turned up the familiar road into the trees, and drove to the river.

DJ looked around. "We picked blackberries here." He paused. "One day...."

"Come on." She climbed out of the Jeep, lifted Davy out of his car seat, and started up the river. DJ followed.

"How far is this place?"

"Just up here across the river."

"Davy and I aren't going into that water," he said firmly.

"Please."

DJ looked at her. "Okay," he finally said. He rolled up his pants, took off his shoes, and stepped into the icy shallows. The water was low this time of year, and they gained the other bank with frozen feet and damp ankles, but no further damage.

"This way."

As she started up the path, DJ limped after her on feet red and aching from the icy water. He stepped through the gate, and a wave of vertigo hit him. He swayed, closed his eyes, and swallowed. "Take Davy," he muttered. When his stomach settled and he opened his eyes, he saw another world. Instead of gray desert, hills climbed to the horizon in red, yellow, green, blue, and purple bands. Over them, the sky arched deep, rich blue. A warm, fragrant breeze was blowing. The path they stood on snaked down the mountainside and disappeared into the tree-filled valley. Red roofs among the trees reflected the sun, and thin music teased his ear. He heard sheep bleating, voices murmuring. He smelled hot bread and warm peaches. Davy crowed from Bethie's arms.

She started down the path again, jouncing Davy to make him laugh. DJ followed. When they stepped into the shade under the trees, the

dirt path became a stone-paved street. Barefooted children sat on doorsteps eating bread, butter, and honey. Women moved behind kitchen windows and laughed in the streets, skirts swinging, baskets on arms. Near the center of town men appeared leading horses and oxen, driving small flocks of sheep and goats, carrying huge platters of breads and pastries, pushing vegetable carts.

"I didn't know they had a living history center here," DJ said.

Elizabeth just walked on, Davy upright and bright-eyed in her arms. The town square opened around them, its arcaded boardwalk fronting a neat square of shops, brightly painted signs swinging over their doors. The green was covered with small stalls where everything from horseshoes to bolts of cloth to fresh flowers to furniture to herbs was for sale. Fiddle, mandolin, flute, and dulcimer music filled the air.

As Bethie threaded a path through the crowd, heading straight into the warren of stalls, DJ looked at the crowd and slid his billfold out of his back pocket and up into the inside breast pocket in his jacket. Bethie walked on, Davy's head bouncing and glowing over her shoulder. He passed a baker's booth. The rolls smelled delicious. The woman behind the counter offered him a platter of free samples. He took one, smiled his thanks, popped it into his mouth, and was *lost in a maze of paths, each beckoning, each terrifying. He took a step, hesitated, stepped back quickly, and swayed. He tried another step, couldn't do it, turned around to look behind, and saw that all those paths looked the same, too.*

"Spit it out," Bethie's hand was on his arm, shaking him. "Spit it out now." He spat the sample on the ground, and the world settled around him.

"What just happened?" he asked, but Bethie wasn't listening. She was back at the stall.

"Why did you do that?" she asked the baker furiously.

"He was with you. I thought it was all right. No harm done." The baker sniffed and turned her back.

"No harm done?" Bethie was asking when DJ reached her.

"That was drugged," he said. "What was in it?"

"Nothing," said Bethie. "Let's go." She grabbed his arm and didn't let go until they had gotten a safe distance from the booth.

"We should turn her in," DJ said angrily.

"To who?" Bethie asked. "And why? She didn't mean any harm."

"Liz, she's selling doped rolls."

"No, she isn't. They're fine."

"They are not."

"You don't understand. It was just a reaction you had to them. You'll be fine here. Just don't eat anything."

DJ's lips got tight. "Let me have Davy," he said curtly.

The woman had said 'no harm done,' but as Elizabeth handed Davy over she realized that no matter how hard she and DJ pretended, that wasn't true. It wasn't true at all. They passed an herb stall. Tubs of fresh green plants sat on the ground in front. Behind them bundles of assorted herbs dangled, each with a label. "Love," DJ read on one. "Protection," "Wealth," "Harmony," and Jennifer's words came back to him. *Witchcraft*, he thought, and his reaction to the small bite he had taken made a terrible kind of sense.

"Liz, wait," he called.

She stopped and turned, eyebrows raised, shadows curving under her chin and cheekbones.

"What is this place?"

"Well, that's hard to explain."

"Take a crack at it." His voice was hard.

Her gaze was level. "DJ, what's wrong?"

"The witchcraft stuff scares me."

"If it gives comfort and confidence, where's the harm?"

"Where's the harm? That roll was deadly. And this stuff? It's—" he started, then stopped. "Thou shalt not—" he started again. "It's evil," he finally said. "It's deceptive."

"In what way?" She turned. "We might as well sit down for this." She spotted an empty bench, and settled herself to listen.

As he gathered his thoughts, DJ found Davy a bottle. Finally, he said, "It's not real. It—it leads people away from God. When I'm here,

I don't know where I am anymore. I don't know which path to take, and so I don't dare move."

"Whose god?" she asked, rather than trying to explain how liberating it could be to have an infinity of paths from which to choose.

"The only real one." He sounded angry.

"So there's only one, and he doesn't work through the natural world?"

"Don't be silly."

"How is this different from, say, using chicken soup to treat a cold? Nobody's proven why that helps, but it does."

DJ ran his fingers through his hair. "You use that stuff?"

"Chicken soup?" She tried a grin.

He didn't smile back. "You know what I mean."

She stopped smiling. "Me? No. Not chicken soup." She looked at the booths and stalls. "Not most of that stuff, either." She smiled. "My magic works in different ways. But I accept the possibility that this may work for others. I really don't understand it well enough to have an opinion. A woman I respect immensely uses charms and spells on a regular basis—and for her, they work. When I see value in casting spells, I cast them. But most of the time I walk a different path."

"The Bible says—"

"The Bible says anything you want it to. You can pick and choose verses to justify anything. The possibilities are endless. Don't you remember Daddy at worship?"

"So you don't accept biblical proof?"

"Not when it doesn't make sense, justifies cruelty, or contradicts itself."

"So you're saying it's not divinely inspired, that it doesn't provide a blueprint for salvation."

"I'm saying you can do a lot of harm by using the Bible to justify your own prejudices."

DJ looked around at the laughing, chattering crowd. "Well," he said after a few minutes, "I agree with you in theory, but this—this just scares me. I've lived here all my life, and I've never seen this place before, and I don't know who I am. Or what to do here."

"You know what Sarah said when she saw this place for the first time? She said it doesn't pay to imagine what might happen, or what might have happened. Since it's here, it must be possible. And if it's here we deal with it, one step at a time."

"I don't understand."

"Neither do I, not completely. But then again, I don't understand how salmon can swim in both fresh and salt water and find their way back to a single creek off a single stream. I don't understand how electricity travels along a wire. Heck, I don't understand algebra. But that doesn't mean those things aren't real. Sometimes we just have to accept that something works, even if we don't understand how. "

He shook his head, trying to clear it. "I'm still trying to deal with Jennifer. I have to keep a clear head. I can't afford to lose my sense of direction."

She leaned forward and hugged him. "I know, DJ, I know. All I'm asking is that you remember that world's a big place and nobody's got it all figured out. Just because you don't see a path doesn't mean it's not there. Okay?"

"It might be there, but we're told there's only one path that leads to God. It's too easy to be misled in a place like this."

"I wouldn't have brought you if I'd realized it'd make things worse. I just wanted you to see that everything around here isn't dying, that life lives here, too. I wanted you to understand that there's hope you might not be able to see, not just the bad stuff you're going through now."

"And I appreciate that," DJ said. "But did you have to bring me here to say that?"

"That wasn't all, but I'm not sure I should show you now." She sounded doubtful.

"Well, might as well," said DJ. "In for a penny, in for a pound. Lead the way."

They wound their way through the stalls, emerging at the mouth of a narrow, dark alley. Bethie led the way into the shadows, then turned abruptly into an almost invisible opening. He followed her, reaching around her to open a silvery wood gate at the end of the narrow space. They stepped through. DJ blinked.

“Well, here we are,” he finally said laconically.

“Yup. In for a penny, in for a pound,” his sister reminded him. They faced a stone path that led through brambles and nettles. It broke into a set of stone steps, down into the stream, and then emerged onto the asphalt river walk across the river from where DJ had stood with Jennifer just the night before.

“This isn’t possible,” he finally said.

“It’s here.” Her voice was firm but quiet. “In a way it was easier for me—I just forgot for a while. I had a chance to see the world without knowing what was possible and what wasn’t. When I remembered, it didn’t seem so important to assign labels anymore.” She looked across the river. “I find it helps if I just remember that things aren’t always what they seem—and that what I know to be true today may not be what I know to be true tomorrow. The path I follow has a lot of unexpected twists and turns.”

“But how can you live like that? Don’t you have a commitment to anything?”

“Yes—I’m committed to pursuing truth. Which is different from believing I’ve got it all sewed up. I’m committed to remembering that the world holds the capacity for infinite good as well as infinite evil. Mostly, I’m committed to doing no harm.”

He ran his hands through his hair. “I can’t live with all those gray areas.”

She looked at him. “That’s my truth, my path. It may not be yours.” She turned away.

“How can you believe that magic works?” he asked. “That this isn’t some trick of the devil’s?”

“Because I’ve seen it happen, and I’ve seen its results. Remember that thing about ‘by their fruits ye shall know them’? In good hands, magic can bring great good.”

“Are you sure you didn’t see it because you wanted to?”

“Are you sure that you’re not seeing it because you don’t? I respect your beliefs, DJ. Please respect mine.”

“It’s just hard for me to swallow.”

"As yours are to me."

"Come on, Liz. You know I'm right."

"How would I know that?" she flared. "You tell me that."

As he flushed, she held out her hand. "I love you, DJ. There's room in my life for both my beliefs and my love for you. But I've changed. Is there room for me in your life? As I am now?"

"I don't know," he said. "I love you, but the Bible says that witchcraft is wrong."

"Why?"

He looked surprised. "Why does it say that?"

"Yes. Why is it wrong?"

He paged through several chapters and verses in his head. "I'm not sure," he said finally.

"How are they using the term? Witches vary, just like Christians vary. Have you ever seen a description of what defines a witch in the Bible?"

"The witch of Endor held a séance. That seems to be part of it."

"But was Saul cursed? Or was the witch cursed? And who wrote the story? Why were they writing it? What's the point the book as a whole is trying to make?"

He started an impromptu sermon, but stopped himself after the first few words and admitted, "I can't just spout all that off the top of my head."

"But you can say unequivocally that all witchcraft is a sin, even though you aren't really clear on what it is. All I'm asking is that you not make judgment calls until you have at least some of the facts."

"I'm not."

"Then why do I feel like I'm on trial here? I want to help you. If you want to do something else, just let me know."

He sat back. "I guess I just wanted to run away to someplace where I could hide—where I'd feel safe, where things could be simple. And then I find myself here, facing something that scares me ... and you're telling me about endless possibilities?" He rubbed his head again. "I don't want to have to think about stuff like this now. I just want somebody to tell me the next step, and I don't feel up to having my

nose rubbed in what you've decided are my limitations. Why did you have to show me this right now?"

"I made a mistake." Her face was white. "So. Where do we go from here?"

"Home," DJ said at last.

"The farm?"

"Yes." They stood up.

"Momma doesn't live there anymore," she said.

"I know."

"What about the supervised custody thing?"

"After the tests, then."

"Okay." She started back through town, walking fast, letting DJ follow as best he might.

"Liz, wait," he called.

She ignored him, walking with her long countrywoman's stride. She was up the hill, through the gate, across the river, and into the Jeep before he caught up with her.

"I don't want you to think I'm not appreciative," DJ said. "I am. More than you can know. But it's just too much for me to deal with right now. I need to be where I have roots, where I know the next thing I need to do. I need to be home." His face begged for her understanding.

"I understand," she replied. But her face said she didn't understand.

"Fair enough," DJ said stiffly. "Let's find a phone and check in with the cops and Sarah. And I need to call my office." Without another word, they turned to the task of dismantling DJ's life, leaving the wind to blow through the dying land around them, tattering the music into shreds, and then nothing at all.



"I've always known you were a minister," Bethie began a few days later. "But I'd hoped ... it's been so long ... and we used to be so close. We always watched each others' backs. We trusted each other. I'd hoped we'd held onto some of that. I wanted to show you some of the possibilities that lie under the surface everywhere. Even here. I wanted you to see that sometimes you

have to take the long hard path. But not always. Sometimes home isn't as far away as it feels. But then you started in quoting the Old Testament at me. It was just like listening to Daddy all over again."

"I'm sorry," DJ said stiffly.

"No," she said, her voice heavy, "I am. I want to help. What do you need?"

"Just be there," DJ said quietly. "Just be you, the Bethie I've always known."

"I'm not that Bethie anymore. I wouldn't go back if I could."

"Yeah. I know."

"At least that's honest." She drove past the rolling gray fields, through the little town, then to the creek bottoms, turning in between the crumbling stone posts that marked the end of the driveway.

"Just drop me off here," DJ said.

"Why?"

"I want to walk home."

"Sure?"

"Yeah. Thanks for everything."

"Want help?"

"No—I got it." He unbuckled Davy's car seat, leaving him in it, and slung the garbage bag over his shoulder. Bethie slid out of her seat and stood beside the Jeep, her hands on her hips, watching him. "This is my place," DJ said at last. He scuffed the desiccated, frozen earth. "It knows me, and I know it." He grinned crookedly. "Thanks again."

She hugged him. "It feels like goodbye, she said sadly.

"For a little while, maybe it is." He smiled sadly and set off up the dusty road.

The house stood grimy and peeling in its dead gray lawn. The realtor's "for sale" sign still hung on the fence. It wasn't sold yet, then. A loose piece of tin flapped on the shop door. Weeds tangled themselves with decaying vegetables in their mother's garden. A rabbit bounded across the shop lot.

DJ looked around, then leaned down, grasped a handful of weeds, and pulled. The first drops of rain began to fall, setting off tiny explosions in the deep, powdery dust.

CHAPTER 68

Jennifer

The van had barred windows. Handcuffs locked her to the seat ahead. They'd unlock her at rest stops if she needed to pee, but a guard watched her. The cuffs would only be removed in Paradise. In prison. As they passed the exit to the farm, she stared hungrily at the hills beyond which the farm lay. In Paradise, the van bounced down a narrow pitted road to a huge old concrete fortress beside the river. The bars on its narrow windows and watchtowers gave mute testimony to its history first as a mental institution, then as a prison.

They issued her blaze orange coveralls. The inmates made them in another building, somebody said. Blaze orange wasn't her color. "I'm a 'spring,'" she had told the inmate handing out the clothes, and she had smiled her most charming smile. The inmate hadn't said a word, just slammed the coveralls down on the table in front of her. They had fallen on the sticky floor and the woman in line ahead of her stepped back on them, ground her boot heel into the fabric, and grinned. The coveralls were filthy before Jennifer ever put them on. They pulled at the crotch and gave her a permanent, painful camel toe. The legs hit her at mid-shin. She had to use bar soap on her hair. They wouldn't give her creme rinse. Her hair got dry, frizzy, and brittle, and she couldn't do a thing with it. Her nails were a mess. Her cellmates scared her.

She had known jail wouldn't be like college—after all, these women were hardened criminals, not good Christian girls—but a part of her had

expected that they'd be roomies, sharing nail polish, talking about men, experimenting with makeup, figuring out what they'd do when they got out. She'd share her faith and start a Bible study or support group. Like Joseph, when he was falsely accused and imprisoned in Egypt, she would become a shining light in a dark place. .

It wasn't like that at all. One woman was withdrawing from something, and she screamed at night, clawed herself during the day, and shook incessantly. The other sulked on her bunk, only leaving it to launch herself at the bars, to slap the screamer, to defecate noisily, copiously, and odiferously in the toilet in the corner, or to growl curses at Jennifer if she tried to pray or share her faith.

An attorney came from Narrow Way Corporate. He stared at her breasts while he talked about getting her certified insane. She interrupted him. "I'm not crazy," she said in her best minister's wife's voice. "I'm saner than anybody else in that family. I'm a highly skilled professional counselor—if I were crazy I'd know it."

He let her finish, then read a list of psychiatrists' names. "Any preference?" he asked her breasts.

"None of them," she said indignantly. "I'm not crazy."

"So no preference?" he asked her breasts again.

"I'm not crazy," she shouted. "Sometimes you have to use tough love. Haven't you ever heard of an intervention? They should be thanking God on their bended knees that I had the courage to do what they all knew needed to be done. *Look at my face.*"

He jumped and raised his eyes. "So shall I just choose one?" His eyes drifted south again, like it wasn't the counselors he was asking about.

"This meeting is over," she snapped.

At the arraignment, DJ sat in the back of the courtroom, rather than in the husband's row, right behind her. Elizabeth sat beside him. Jennifer ignored her and smiled at DJ. He looked away.

The judge said, "How do you plead?"

"Not guilty," Jennifer declared.

"By reason of insanity," the attorney quickly added.

She fired him.

Jimmy Jay Rayburn visited the next day. She'd never thought she'd be so happy to see a short, fat, bald man.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" he asked.

"Find me lawyer," she said. "One that can follow directions."

He squirmed. "Thing is, Jennifer, this guy's the best. I used him in my own time a trouble."

"But he keeps on saying I'm crazy."

"That don't mean he thinks it."

"But I don't want to be locked up with crazy people."

"Would you prefer criminals?" he asked bluntly.

She started to cry. "I want to go home. Can't they see I had to save my family? I just want my life back."

"Thing is, Jennifer, you admitted you did it. All the court'll see is that you pushed a dyin' man into a mowin' machine. They can't just let that pass. Think about how it'd look. Besides, they let you slide and women everywhere'll be doin' in their menfolk. Can't let a thing like this get started, or who knows where it would end. Men droppin' like flies."

"They can if I tell them what he was—and what DJ is."

"What're you sayin'?"

"He's molesting Davy."

"You sure about that?"

She stared back at him. "Yes," she finally said. She felt a door swing shut behind her.

"Talk to Joe," Jimmy Jay said before he left.

Afterward, when Jimmy Jay had arranged her bail and driven her out of the parking lot, he asked, "Where to?"

"Gwen's house, of course," Jennifer answered. She laughed lightly. "Where else would I go?"

Jimmy Jay drove up the hill and then onto the winding street that led to Gwen's pretty new house. He pulled up in the driveway, then hurried around to open Jennifer's door. She knocked on the screen door.

Gwen opened the inside front door and stared out through the screen.

"Hi, Mom," Jennifer said. "All right if I stay here for a while?" She reached for the screen door handle.

Gwen stepped back, then forward again. "No," she answered.

Jennifer's hand was on the knob. Quick as a flash, Gwen's hand shot out and snicked the lock on.

"Mom?" Jennifer asked. "What's wrong? Can't we talk about this?" She kept her voice soft and nonthreatening.

Jimmy Jay had followed Jennifer to the porch. "What's the matter, Gwennie?" he asked, his voice round, rich, and warm.

"She's not welcome here," Gwen said shortly.

"Why not?" Jimmy Jay asked.

Gwen stared at him. "I can't believe you'd even ask that. I thought you cared about Dan." She stepped back again and closed the door behind her.

Jennifer fumbled in her purse. "I've got a key. I know we can work this out." She reached out and seized the screen door handle. It rattled, but refused to give. Gwen had left the lock on. Jennifer made a fist, beat on the door, rang the bell.

"Mom, Mom, let me in, please.... There's nowhere else."

The door opened.

"Can I stay at the farm?" Jennifer asked quickly. "Maybe DJ can meet me there and we can work it, like you and Daddy wanted."

"You can't go there. It's too late," Gwen said abruptly. "I've put it up for sale." She started to close the door again.

"Please, Mom," Jennifer begged., "just let me stay a few days. I'm your daughter!"

"*Get off my land.* Just get the hell away from me, or I'll call the police. And don't you *ever, ever* call me Mom again. I am not your mother, and you are not my daughter." The door slammed.

Jennifer gaped. "She swore," she said blankly as Jimmy Jay led her back to the car. "She cursed at me." She started to cry.

"Aww, she don't mean it. I'll come back, talk her around. For now, though, let's find you somewhere to stay until the cops'll let you go home."

“Where can I go?”

“I still got friends,” he said bracingly. “People here remember me from when I was pastor here.”

He was right, Jennifer thought two hours later as she lay down on a tiny bed in a crowded storeroom that stank of cat pee. People did remember. She supposed she should be grateful. She fished in her bag and pulled out her devotional. Lying back on the lumpy bed she reread the passage she’d read on the day everything had fallen apart. *Who knows but that you have been chosen for a time like this?* She closed the book, bowed her head, and thanked God she’d had the courage to tell the truth. Or what might be the truth. And if it wasn’t the truth now, it almost certainly would be in the future. These things ran in families. DJ would get the help he needed. Davy would be safe with her. If she had custody, DJ would never dare to leave her again. After DJ had treatment, he would come home to his perfect little family, and he’d be so grateful.

They’d thank her in the end. Sometimes you just had to use tough love.

CHAPTER 69

Sarah

They let Jennifer out on bail, of course. We all expected that. What we didn't see coming was that she would start insisting that she wanted to see DJ and Davy. Somebody might have actually bought her dog and pony show—tears and all—and spilled the beans, except nobody but Bethie and me knew he was at the farm, not at Bethie's house. DJ had taken a bunch of tests before he left Bethie's house, and he'd started seeing a shrink right after he started living at the farm—a damned good thing under the circumstances.

It was hard seeing him doubt his every action, distrust his every instinct. The counselor helped, and I think the hard work the farm needed done helped, too. It wore DJ out too much for him to brood. Between all those things, I could see that he was starting to find his way again. And everything he did was one more thing working when Momma finally found a buyer.

When Bethie got home from Paradise, I let her get a good night's rest before I started pumping her for information.

"So," I said, starting off slow, "she's asking for custody. How's it look?"

"Not good. She hasn't been to trial yet, and the law is 'innocent until proven guilty.' She looks good on paper—she's a counselor, a good Christian, a minister's wife, and she's been talking a lot about Daddy and what he did. And you know what she's been saying about DJ."

"But he took all those tests."

"But she's got that damned degree, and she's been swinging it around like a club."

"Think they'll go for it?"

"Hope not. So far, nobody's talking about cutting him out completely—just about giving her joint custody."

"But—"

"I know, I know—she's being tried for murder. But she says Daddy was trying to rape her."

"But—"

"She's subpoenaed me."

"Why?"

"Because of the rape and the baby."

"And that'll help her prove that Daddy deserved to die?"

Bethie nodded. "The worst of it is, it's true."

"That he deserved that?"

"Whether he did or not, it wasn't for her to do."

"I know what you mean," I said. "He was awful to us in some ways, but he was good to her. It would've been one thing if *you'd* done it. But Jennifer had no right—she did it and then she was ready to let you fry. Besides, she snuck," I added. "You kill somebody, you should have the stones to take your medicine. An' you've gotta have a good reason. I still don't understand why."

"She calls it 'tough love.' But DJ thinks that she did it so he wouldn't turn into a farmer."

"How does that figure?"

"Daddy wanted DJ and Jennifer to move home and run the business."

"Yeah..."

"But Jennifer didn't want to be a farmer's wife. She wanted to go back to Happy Valley. She thought if Daddy died before DJ decided, he'd just go back to being a minister. And he did."

All I could do was shake my head. "So she killed him to save her family."

"You got it. She seems to think that she and DJ will be a happy family again."

“Hold on,” I said. “Back up. Something’s not right—why’d she confess? Did she just up and out with it that night? I can’t see that.”

“I guess my being there forced her hand.”

“An’ now she wants Davy back.”

“She wants DJ. Davy’s just leverage. She says all they need is some marriage and grief recovery counseling—and, you’ll be happy to know, she mentioned Jimmy Jay’s name as a qualified counselor—to get past this.”

I was still shaking my head. “She makes it sound like final exams.”

“I think she sees it that way. If she can just give the right answers, it’ll all go away.”

“Will it?”

Now Bethie shook her head. “Maybe. And what then? What happens if DJ refuses to go back to her? And if he goes back, what happens when Davy hits puberty and develops a mind of his own? DJ sees her for what she is now, and even though he’s always believed that husbands and wives should defend each other, he understands that she’s willing to sacrifice anybody to get what she wants. And that she’s willing to kill to achieve her ends.”

“But she looks so damn good on paper.”

“Even if she didn’t,” Bethie said, “she’s likely to show up here looking for DJ.”

“Can she find this place?”

“I’m sure she can. I told Momma, and DJ’s been here. It’d be too much to hope he didn’t tell Jennifer. They had no secrets.” She said it bitterly.

“So what’ll happen?” I asked.

“It could go a lot of different ways. We won’t know until she gets here.” There was no answer to that. Bethie sighed, pushed herself to her feet, and said, “Let’s go to the pool.”

I swung my feet down off the couch, brushed off my belly, which always seemed to be covered with crumbs in those days, and followed her through the house and out into the crisp autumn evening. We walked the twisting, dusty path single file, the tang of early winter and dust in our nostrils. When I got to the pool, though, I forgot all about my aching feet, my aching back, everything. I shucked off my dress and walked right into the

water. The chill sent my blood racing. The baby kicked in protest. I put my hands on my belly and felt her moving in the water in me as I moved in the pool, and then I saw myself in my mother's womb, and I saw my child within mine, and in time hers within her. *Fathers come and fathers go, I thought, but we are all our Mother's children.*

I stayed in the water until my feet went numb, and then I saw Toby nosing around the standing stones, waiting for Bethie. "Here, boy, come on Toby!" I leaned down and slapped my thighs in invitation. But as usual he wouldn't pass the stones when I was there. I walked out of the water, wrung out my hair, pulled on my dress and went to meet him. When I passed through the gate, he wriggled and danced around me, ducking his head and grinning, making a fool of himself and enjoying every minute of it.

"Better get out here, Bethie," I called over my shoulder. "Before Toby ties himself in a knot."

"I'm coming, I'm coming," she said. "Tell Toby to not get his knickers in a twist."

I leaned over and rubbed his ears. "She says don't get your knickers in a twist, boy," I told him, turning his ears inside out so I could rub the itchy parts better.

He panted some more, wiggling his rear end and closing his eyes blissfully.

And then he pulled back, cocked his head, and took off like a shot, tearing up the path to the house. I started up the path after him, shouting for Bethie.

"Toby hears something."

"Toby," Bethie said from beside the pool. It wasn't a shout, but the power of it drummed in my head. I heard brush crackling and then Toby was there, wriggling through the tangle, taking the fastest route. "Find the Lady," she said, and he shot past her and disappeared through the opening in the rocks that led to the village. She grabbed my arm and hustled me back up the path.

"What's wrong?" I panted.

"She's here."

"Who?" I asked, and then I knew—Jennifer. "How do you know?" I asked.

Bethie didn't answer, so I saved my breath and just concentrated on huffing my big old belly up to the house. Jennifer here couldn't be good. I, who had never admitted to being afraid in my life, found my palms getting clammy. Even with Daddy, I had always believed—against all reason—there were lines he wouldn't cross. But with Jennifer, that wasn't true. She had already proven that she'd do whatever it took to get her way—and that she'd still be able to sleep nights with no problem. I wasn't afraid to admit that the thought of facing somebody like that when I was big and clumsy, and when I had a baby to protect, scared me to death. We needed help, and we needed it fast. But who?

Then I thought of the town, and the old woman in the mountains, and what she had said: "Send the dog." Toby was what we needed. Toby was part of this.

I jerked my arm out of Bethie's hand—leaving about a square inch a skin behind—and bellowed, "Toby! Here, boy!"

"Leave him be." Suddenly my sister was not Bethie. She was every inch Elizabeth. "He's with the Lady. He fought for me once, and died because of it. He shouldn't have to face this again."

"And we should? The hell with that! We'll deal with her together. Toby, get your ass back here now!" What if he was too far away already? What if he couldn't hear me? I held my breath and waited. And then I heard his feet drumming, the brush rattling around him, and a minute later I saw him, streaming through the underbrush, head down, back legs passing his shoulders, running flat out.

"Come on," Bethie panted. "We can't let them find the pool."

Before I turned with her and started back up the hill, I leaned down and slapped my thigh and called again, "Here, boy, come on, boy."

Toby came on, shooting past us and going all out around to the front of the house. And then there was an unholy ruckus, Toby barking and growling and somebody squealing like a stuck pig.

Somebody else was blabbering away in the background. I recognized the voice, closed my eyes wearily, and decided to just take my time. When we

got to the house, I went into the kitchen, got a drink, washed my face, and combed my hair. Bethie disappeared down the hall and then I heard her footsteps overhead. I thought about changing my dress, but then decided that was probably taking it a step too far. I didn't want either of them thinking I had gone to any special effort. By the time I hit the porch, Toby had Jennifer treed on the railing, and she didn't look very ladylike. I found me a rocker and got a good rhythm going, then I mentioned her position to her. "Jennifer," I said, "You come on down here. Anybody could see right up that damn mini dress. You look like a pole dancer."

"Getdowngetdowngetdown!" she screamed.

I kept on rockin'. "Ya'll sound like Pastor Rayburn when he gets ta sailin' good—or as good as he ever gets," I observed. "Didn't know you an' Toby had those kinda feelin's fer each other. Mus' be history between you two." Toby glared at me over his shoulder. "Sorry, boy," I added hastily.

Jennifer screamed louder and started heading for the roof.

"I wouldn't go up there without a ladder," I advised her. "It's pretty steep, and you've got that damn little dress on. Besides, it's not very dignified. What'll people think, you a minister's wife, an' all?"

"Call off your dog!" Pastor Rayburn bellowed from the car. He had his window rolled down about one inch. Toby glanced his way. Pastor Rayburn rolled that window the rest of the way up so fast it damn near melted.

"Nah," I said. "Toby's fine. He's jus' bein' friendly."

Toby was getting some real height into his jumps now. Jennifer didn't like that one little bit.

"That dog should be shot." Pastor Rayburn had screwed up his courage and rolled his window down a crack. "I'm callin' Animal Control. He touches Jennifer and I'll slap a lawsuit on you so fast you won't know what hit ya."

"Won't do you a damn bit a good, Jimmy Jay," I chirped. "You're on private property out in the middle a farm country. Nobody thinks twice about a bitin' dog out here. Now if Toby was killin' chickens or runnin' sheep, that'd be different. Nope. 'Less you got a gun or a bitch in heat in there—another one, I mean—I think you're just SOL." I turned and grinned at Jennifer, just so everybody was real clear on what I meant. I used all my teeth, too.

Pastor Rayburn tried a different angle. “Why you doin’ this, Sarah? This isn’t like you. You used to be so sweet. A good Christian girl.”

“Got a news flash for ya, Jimmy Jay. This is *exactly* like me. An’ I wasn’t sweet—I was scared shitless.” I emphasized the “shit.” “Well, no more. Never again.” The rage rose in me like hot lava, and I started considering my options vis à vis Jimmy Jay’s tires and Bethie’s pruning shears. But it’d take too long to get ’em. I let the idea go.

While I’d been thinkin’ prunin’ shears Jimmy Jay’d been nattering on about something “... blasphemy!” He finished. And that corked it. I heaved myself out of that rocker and stomped up the path so he could hear me real good.

“Jimmy Jay, lemme tell ya about blasphemy. Blasphemy’s rapin’ a girl in your office while ever’body downstairs is singin’ hymns. It’s standin’ up in the pulpit an’ rantin’ an’ ravin’ about whores an’ fornicators an’ adulterers an’ then goin’ to Motel 6 afterwards an’ screwin’ somebody who’s not in a position to say no to you. It’s about twistin’ love into sex, an’ sex into somethin’ dirty, then pretendin’ it ain’t damn near the only thing ya think about. Hell, it’s about cuttin’ the goddamn balls off a perfectly good fertility god an’ then pretendin’ he don’t know shit about somethin’ that’s at the center of life.” I put my hands on my hips. “Get a clue, Jimmy Jay—Jesus was sailin’ his boat all over Galilee, an’ I’m willin’ ta bet his was bigger’n yours any day a the week an’ twice on Sundays!”

“Jesus didn’t have a—” and then he stopped, because of course Jesus did. That was the whole point. “God will strike you dead,” he screamed instead.

“Let him take his best shot,” I screamed right back. “I went to church school for thirteen years till you decided I should serve the Lord at Motel 6. I know the goddamn Bible backwards an’ forwards. I walked the Narrow Way right into hell an’ out the other side.”

“Even the Devil can quote scripture,” Jimmy Jay said, getting hold of himself. He shifted focus and called out, “Let’s go, Jennifer. We’re wasting our time here.”

"I want to see my husband," Jennifer blubbered, still perched on the porch railing and hangin' on for dear life. "I want DJ. You've got no right to keep us apart. Jimmy Jay, make them tell me where he is."

Toby gave up lunging for her calves and settled for just lurking about six inches from her feet, growling every once in a while so she would know he hadn't forgotten her. Always ready to include everybody, that Toby.

"You wanna see DJ?" I asked. "You really wanna see DJ? How about Davy? Remember him? The kid you wanted to hand over to a man you say you believe is a child molester, just so he'll keep quiet about you killin' his daddy?"

"But I love him."

"You love 'im? Like the guy you loved so much you shoved 'im in the chopper an' then left 'im to die real slow? What's on the agenda for ol' DJ, Jenny? Ya gonna give the blood a chance to dry first? Or are you just gonna have 'im locked up? Anything to save the fuckin' family, right?"

"We had a strong marriage until you and your sister started meddling," she said. "You've destroyed my life. I'll do anything to get it back. It's God's will."

"Maybe your god's," I told her, "but that god don't run things here. Here the rules are *If it harms none, then let it be*, and *You get back what you've dished out—three times over*. You should know that one—*what you sow, you reap*? Hosea 8:7? Remember? *'For they have sown the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind'*? Remember that, Jenny? Seems to me you've sown some wind yourself." I had to stop myself. When I could speak a bit calmer, I added, "Here the gods understand consequences. They don't give out 'get out of jail free' cards."

"I've confessed and been redeemed. God will protect me," she stuttered. But I noticed she sounded a little confused.

"Maybe," I said. "But who's gonna protect the world from you?"

She didn't say anything, just sorta hung there, sniffing and trying to pull her feet up under that damn mini dress. Toby had that front covered, so I went back to Pastor Rayburn.

“Hey, Jimmy Jay, what about you? You ready to have somebody screw you outta your very soul an’ then say it’s God’s will? I’m tellin’ ya, what ya dish out, ya get back, and ya get it back here and now, not in some sweet by ’n’ by that nobody really believes in anyway.”

Jennifer looked scared, but Jimmy Jay lifted his chin. “I serve the Lord. *‘Yea, though I walk through the valley a the shadow a death—’*”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, Jimmy Jay,” I said, and I said it real snotty. “Don’t get yer panties in a twist. You know nothin’ about the valley of the shadow of death. Why the hell’d you come out here, anyway?”

“I was hopin’ I could save another Christian family,” he said. “And I want you to call me Pastor Rayburn from now on. We’re no longer friends.”

I sneered at him. “We never were, Jimmy Jay,” I said. “An’ why the hell would you want them back together? So it’s not so hard for Jennifer when she decides to off DJ? Or maybe Davy?”

“You’re just like your momma,” he said. “Wantin’ ta cut an’ run when things don’t go your way.”

“You are so full a crap,” I sneered. “Momma never ran anywhere.”

“No, but she wanted to. Years ago. She called me up, whinin’ about how she needed to get away.”

My heart started hammering. “When? Why? Did she say why?”

“Said somethin’ about him hurtin’ her and Lainie, but I knew that was just an excuse. Women been singin’ that tune too long for anybody to take it seriously anymore. Why, my own wife...”

“What did you do?” I cut in, forgetting to talk army.

“I went out to the farm an’ had me a little heart-to-heart with your daddy. Told him what your momma was up to. Man has a right to know what’s bein’ said behind his back. Has a right to fight for his marriage. God’s got no time for divorce. Think what somethin’ like that’d do to the Lord’s work, him a Narrow Way Guide’n’all.”

“What happened?”

He smiled his broad pastor’s smile. “They musta worked it out. She stuck with ’im, didn’t she? I healed that troubled home, an’ you kids grew

up according to God's plan with both a momma and a daddy. There's not a day goes by I don't thank God I had a hand in it."

"Do you have any idea what you did?" I asked, and my fingers curled into fists.

"Yeah. I served the Lord by patchin' up a broken home."

I opened my mouth, then shut it. "Leave." That was all I could say.

"You can't order us around," Jennifer said. "I have a right to see my husband, and I'm not leaving until I do."

"Leave," came a voice from behind me, and Elizabeth stepped through the front door. "Leave now." She stood there on the porch in her loose white dress, her hair dark and tangled around her. "Leave," she said again. A river of power ran under her voice, and under the power a lifetime of pain and rage. *Victims hold the key*, I thought, *and if ever they find a way to act...* Elizabeth had found a way.

"Toby, come here." Toby whined, but he went and stood beside her, his head even with her knee. The fur on his back rose from his ears to his tail and he quivered. They stood perfectly still, a thin brown woman in a white dress and a stocky little black dog, and somehow, because it shouldn't have been scary, that was the scariest thing of all. I looked at her, and I looked inside myself, and saw the same power there, running through me, swelling, pushing at the barriers, surging against the walls I had built through the years. Suddenly I realized why my sister hadn't thought we needed help. We didn't. We were strong enough to face this and win, as long as we watched each others' backs. We didn't need to wait for somebody to save us—we could save ourselves. No. We already had.

And then the Lady was there behind Elizabeth, and her eyes were fire, and the people from the town came through the cave and stood with us, bearing butcher knives, pitchforks, and in some cases, bows and arrows, and there, nearly hidden in the crowd, was the old woman from the mountains. I thought she looked grandmotherly until I saw death in her eyes. I saw the crowd and a great feeling swelled in me, as strong as the rage, stronger, and I realized another true thing. We could fight alone, and we would win. But we didn't have to this time. We had a whole crowd to watch our backs.

Pastor Rayburn looked at the silent crowd fingering the edges of their knives, stringing their bows, waiting. He took one step backward, then another. Jennifer lost her grip on the porch railing and fell into the rosebushes underneath. Toby surged forward eagerly, but Elizabeth made a tiny gesture and he subsided.

There was definitely history between those two, I was sure of it, probably little of it good. I saw Pastor Rayburn's mouth opening and closing. He was probably quoting scripture to himself. Jennifer scrambled out of the bushes and scuttled across the ground crabwise, pushing herself with her feet, balancing on her hands, then turning and scrambling to her feet and making a stumbling run for the gate. She jumped in the car and slammed the door. Pastor Rayburn fumbled the ignition on, and they shot backward up the road.

Elizabeth lifted her hands to her face and her shoulders heaved. She sank down on the step, her head bowed to her knees, and her shoulders heaved again. There was no sound. I managed to get myself folded down on the step beside her, reached over and rubbed her back. Her head snapped up. Her face was dark and twisted. "*He knew,*" she whispered. "*He knew, and he sold us out.*" She drew in a breath. "All the pain. All the shame. All the silence. It was all for nothing. He could have stopped it, and he didn't."

"What he has done will be done to him, three times over," said the woman from the mountains. In her mouth it sounded like a curse. She looked up into the sky and laid one hand on Bethie and the other on me, and suddenly the wind howled around us. I squeezed my eyes shut against the leaves and twigs, but it did little good. I could still feel the wind ripping through me. I wrapped my arms around myself, sheltering my soul and my child.

"Let it go," the Lady said. "You have to let it go. Give it to us."

And, finally, I did. I let the knot that had been my soul slip free, and loosed the powerful current that bound me to the wind, the storm, the river. The wind screamed through me, tearing open the dark, hidden places that Daddy and Jimmy Jay made with their hands and bodies, and then it was gone, swirling up to coil with the storm above us. I felt hollow, lost, clean, and new with the fresh energy flowing through me.

I opened my eyes. The old woman and the people from the town had slipped away. The storm swirled overhead for several minutes, and then began to move, flowing over the first gray hill, then the next, and the next. Rain sheeted down over the dead land. Tumbleweeds, crows, and ravens swirled on the wind. I sat empty and quiet. Bethie reached for my hand, and hand in hand we watched until the storm was just a black line on the horizon and the sun went down in a blaze of red, gold, and lavender. The smell of rain was all around us. The accounting had begun.

Something inside me shifted and fell into place. *Oh*, I thought, surprised, *so that's who I am*. It was so clear I wondered why I had never seen it before. But then I knew—the pain and rage had blinded me to the central, simple truth. We are who we are. No matter where we go, no matter what mask we choose, our lives grow out of that central core. We carry our souls with us always, and they, not the gods, determine our paths and shape our fate.

And then the first cramp hit. I doubled over. Water flooded down the steps and soaked into the ground.

Bethie stared. “Shit.”

The Lady smiled. “Come to the pool,” she said.

“Can’t,” I gasped. “I gotta get to the hospital.”

“No,” she said. “The land needs this birth.”

“But I can’t make it to the pool,” I protested.

“You can and you will,” she said in a voice that made me struggle to my feet and start down the path toward the river as soon as the cramp eased. Bethie walked beside me, her arm around my waist. And then I felt the Lady on my other side, and I realized I could walk after all.

Toby dashed ahead, then back to us, then ahead again. We came to the stones and then we were through, and my soggy, sticky dress was gone and the three of us walked into the water. It held me up, flowing around me, supporting my clumsy, bloated body. Another cramp hit and I curled around my belly, then another, and then somehow I was squatting on the flat rock beside the pool, leaning on the Lady and Bethie, and another cramp hit, and another, and another, and then there was a great whooshing, and then another cramp, and I twisted

and screamed and strained, and the baby slipped free into the Lady's arms.

"Take her," the Lady told Bethie. Bethie reached down and took my child, lifting her gently, waiting while the Lady tied the cord off, then snipped it with her teeth. I caught a glimpse of Bethie wrapping my baby in her skirt, rubbing gently to remove the mucus and blood, and then there was another cramp, and the hot blood poured out of me, and the afterbirth came, drenching the rock, soaking the earth, completing a cycle in a way I never really understood once the birth experience had receded into the past. The Lady lifted me and carried me back into the pool.

The water held my torn body. The spasms eased. I lay in her arms, feeling my belly empty and aching, and then I fell asleep, there in the holy pool, in the arms of the Goddess. I didn't sleep long—when I woke, Bethie was still rubbing the baby—but I felt better. I set my feet down and walked slowly out of the water, the Lady beside me, her arm around my back, and even though it was late in the season, the air here was warm, soft, and scented with the rain just past. A thick growth of grass had already sprung up where my blood had soaked the soil, and even as I watched the growth spread across the clearing and into the brush. I sank down on it and Elizabeth brought my daughter and laid her in my arms. She curled there, staring up at me with berry blue eyes, so I started rubbing at the blood and mucus covering her skin myself. Later I thought to count her fingers and toes, but it didn't occur to me then. I looked at her soul, held in those blue, blue eyes, and saw her both old and wise, young and innocent ... as I had never been. All I could think was that I was no longer alone at the center of my own world. This amazing being, my daughter, stood beside me, and I would do anything to keep her safe and make her happy.

It wasn't dramatic. If you've had a baby, you know how it feels. If you haven't, I can't explain it. But I lay there, and held my daughter while Bethie and the Lady dealt with the mess, and I just knew.

Bethie went back to the house and brought me a thick robe, a pair of sandals, and blankets and pillows. A few women stepped out of the crack in the rock wall carrying bowls of thick soup, loaves of bread, and a pitcher

of milk. The Lady took the food and the women disappeared back into the rock face. Later I thought to thank them, but just then I was too tired. That night we slept beside the pool, Bethie and me on each side of the baby, and in the morning my breasts were hard with milk. When the baby woke, I slipped a swollen nipple into her rosebud mouth. She sucked greedily. Milk squirted from my other breast in sympathy, sprinkling the grass liberally. I was shocked, and a little embarrassed. I switched the baby so the milk poured into her mouth, but then the other breast gushed, and I realized there was no hope for it, and no one to see it, anyhow. The baby closed her eyes blissfully, drawing deeply. I watched her, watched the milk gushing from my other breast, and was awed by my body, beautiful in its bounty and utility.

Toby poked his head through the brush, but as always he respected the circle. He sniffed the air, pulling in the sweet, sharp scent of birth, milk, and newborn baby.

"Come in," called Bethie. "Let her see you."

Toby hesitated, then stepped through the gate. The air shimmered and the familiar dog was gone. In his place stood a tall, lean man with a scarred face and dusty, black, curly hair. Elizabeth reached out her hand to him. I snatched up a blanket and tossed it over my bare breasts. He came toward us slowly, politely averting his gaze from the milky grass. Then he ducked his head and smiled, and I saw Toby in his golden eye and in his scarred face.

He squatted beside us and ran a callused finger along my baby's soft cheek, then looked at me and smiled again.

"Toby?" I whispered.

"I'll guard her well," he said, and I knew he would, because that was who he was—the one who, through everything, guarded our backs, our sides, our fronts, our every vulnerability. I swallowed. "Thank you," I croaked. It sounded inadequate, but I couldn't think of anything better to say.

"Always," he said. He stood, kissed Bethie, backed out of the circle, waved, and was gone.

"Who is he?" I asked Bethie.

"He's Toby."

"But what is he?"

"He's Toby," she said again, and shrugged. "That's enough."

I thought for a minute. "So do you guys do it when he's a man, or a dog, or what?" I asked.

She blushed fiery red. "Mind your own business," she said, and no matter how I needed her she wouldn't say anything else about it.

She brought me a drink from the pool and then we started back for the house, Bethie holding my baby, the blanket draped over her arm. She bent her head over the baby. Her hair fell over her shoulder and made a curtain behind the baby's head, and for an instant it was just the two of them. My baby's eyes opened, and a look passed between them, aunt and niece, two faces, so alike, narrow, dark, serious, old, wise. And I understood the pattern.

I named my baby Elizabeth.

CHAPTER 70

DJ

The trial began on the last day of February, with Elizabeth as the first witness. She told her story simply, her voice quiet and flat.

Jennifer's lawyer rose to cross-examine. "So you would have us believe that you could tell, just by looking, that your father had been pushed? As understandably upset as you were? With all that running around? You still could tell, just by looking, that he had been *deliberately pushed*? That there was *no chance* this was an accident?" He smiled disbelievingly.

"No."

"Well, you must be one remarkable woman, Ms. Conrad." He turned to the jury, inviting them to doubt along with him. "Just how could you tell this?"

"His shoes were tied."

"His shoes were tied." The sneer in the attorney's voice was louder than his words.

"Yes," said Elizabeth. The attorney dismissed her. The prosecutor invited her to elaborate on cross-examination, so she told them what the tied shoes meant. And then she told them the rest.



"Guilty," said the jury at the end of the week. Gwen caught her breath, then sighed. Bethie's shoulders dropped. On the other side of the courtroom, Jennifer stared at them, then buried her face in her hands.

The papers had a field day. Jimmy Jay Rayburn's face and voice became daily fare, first, as he publicly mourned the loss of his friend, then as he explained that Jennifer had acted out of love and mercy, and finally, when news of his disgrace in Las Vegas leaked out, as he publicly vowed his repentance and invited the town of Paradise to join him in forsaking sin and coming back to Jesus.

"Come this Friday night," he invited one and all. "Join me. Jesus is waiting. Let us pray." And he bowed his head, the very picture of penitence.



DJ clicked the remote, then sank back in his chair. Davy was sleeping upstairs. The house was quiet. A beam creaked as the old building settled itself for the night. As clouds scudded overhead, hiding and revealing the moon, DJ pushed himself out of the chair that he still thought of as his father's and walked out into the hall. He leaned in the kitchen doorway, seeing the moonlight slant in through his mother's old curtains, seeing her standing at the sink, bruised arms disappearing into white suds. He saw her coming down the stairs, a bruise purpling her eye, her cheekbone, her jaw. Her hand trailed along the wall for balance.

He turned and climbed the stairs, running his own fingers along the streaks that had lined the walls for as long as he could remember. He pushed open the door to the room that had been his from childhood, checked on Davy sleeping in his crib, pulled the door shut, switched on the hall light, and looked more closely at the streaked walls, seeing his mother's hand, seeing the streaks, some faded nearly to invisibility, some pale sepia, some gray, some reddish brown. *Momma did need her walls*, he mused.

He walked on down the hall, opened his parents' door, and looked in at the bed his mother had made neatly when she got out of it for the last time. He crossed to the closet and tugged open the door. The familiar worn housedresses hung beside his father's old suit, frayed cardigans, and wool shirts. He opened the dresser drawers. The one on the left held his father's underwear, his handkerchiefs neatly folded, his class ring in the jewelry box where he kept his "secret" stash of Christmas money—money he put aside throughout the year so he would have enough to get gifts for

his wife and children. DJ lifted the box out of the drawer and set it on top of the dresser. An envelope lay in the bottom of the drawer. *For Elizabeth*, his father had written on it with a dull pencil. The lead had smeared and faded. The flap wasn't sealed. DJ looked inside. Twenty-dollar bills—one for each Christmas and each birthday she had been missing.

DJ touched the bills gently with his finger, then replaced the envelope, closed the box and slid it back under the underwear his mother had washed and folded before walking away forever. He opened the other top drawer. His mother's underwear lay folded as neatly as his father's. He saw a ragged tear, neatly mended, on the top pair. He lifted them out; no need to leave this to cause his mother shame when the new buyers took over. The next pair were patched, too, and bore a heavy stain. He took them as well. And the next, and the next. He stood with the torn, stained, and patched underwear in his hands, and at last truly understood how his mother had been able to simply abandon everything. For her there had been nothing worth keeping. She had lived her life both trapped and protected by her walls. Without them, she would have fallen long ago.

He left his parents' room and went into Bethie's, crossing to the stain he knew as well as he knew his own face. He squatted, running his fingers over it, remembering that terrible day, the grief and guilt at knowing they had done nothing to help. He remembered other days, too, days when she'd been quiet and pale, days when she'd walked awkwardly. He looked at the stain on her floor and remembered his father singing his favorite song: *Would you be free from your burden of sin? There's power in the blood, power in the blood....* He thought of Bethie standing silent and alone at school, untouchable. And he understood at last why she found trusting the god of their father impossible.

He pulled her door shut behind him and went back downstairs. He crossed the living room and opened the front door—the one no one ever used, the one that led out onto the deep front porch that faced the yard they'd never had time to play in. He thought of his father buying him breakfast in the smoky restaurant at Biggs, then holding him up to the telescope at the Vista House and feeding it nickels.

He stepped out onto the porch and sat down on the steps, thinking, remembering, and then seeing Jimmy Jay and the church taking advantage of his family's pain to launch a recruitment drive. He thought of Elaine, losing her family because she was defending a lie. He thought of Bethie, whose youth had been destroyed before it began, of Sarah, raped by a man who had used her past to entrap her. He thought of Jennifer, willing to sacrifice everything on the altar of her public image. He thought of the evangelistic crusade being launched on Friday night. He thought of ice cream sandwiches. He thought of walls, trapping and supporting. He thought of pain, strengthening and stunting. He thought of a man who gladly, lovingly, bought treats for the children he was destroying. He thought of how simple divisions can be comforting—and completely false. He thought of what Bethie had said: "There must be an accounting." He realized she was right.

He picked up the telephone and dialed. Bethie answered. "Yes," she replied when he asked.

He dialed again. Elaine answered, sounding sleepy. DJ told her what he wanted, and why. She was quiet, then at last said, "Yes," and her voice was cool, confident, professional. "But it needs to be on Wednesday with a follow-up story on Thursday. If we wait until Friday, people will miss it."

His mother answered. "No," she told him. "I've put it behind me."

"I wish you were with us," DJ said gently, "but I understand. I hope you can understand that we have to do this. Bethie was right—there has to be an accounting."

"Why do you have to punish him, now that he's dead?"

"This has nothing to do with punishing him." DJ told her. "It's about us, about stopping the secrets once and for all, talking about who he really was, not painting him as all good, or all bad. It's an accounting, not a judgment. I just want to talk about the man he really was. And I don't want Jimmy Jay Rayburn using us anymore to bolster his own career."

"Well, do what you have to," Gwen said. She sounded resigned.



DJ spent the week thinking, writing, talking to Elaine on the telephone, and pacing. On Monday, the press releases went out. On Wednesday, the press alerts went out. That evening, he dressed carefully in a suit and tie. Bethie and Sarah met him at the farm. Sarah carried baby Bethie in her arms. They smiled shakily at each other. "How are you?" DJ asked. "And how's the baby?"

"Doing great," Bethie said. "We call her BiBi. She sleeps all night now. Hey, Davy. Come see Aunt Bethie."

"All night already? Lucky you." He handed Davy over.

"Yes." As Aunt Bethie was joggling Davy to make him laugh, Elaine drove up.

"Ready?" DJ asked as she slid to the ground.

"No," she said, "but it's time."

"You know they'll never use you after this, don't you?" DJ asked. "You don't have to be there with us."

"Yes, I do," Elaine said quietly, standing elegant, tall, and straight in her tailored suit. "We're all we have. It's all we ever really had."

They climbed into her Navigator and drove down to the public auditorium. A huge banner out front bore Jimmy Jay Rayburn's image and the message, "Come Friday night. Jesus is waiting."

So were the news crews.



On Thursday, DJ called his mother again.

"I'll never be able to show my face in that church again," Gwen said. She sounded like she'd been crying.

"Yes, you will," he said. "I'll go with you."

On Friday, attendance at the crusade was sparse. Someone had scrawled something obscene on the banner, and the news crews besieged Jimmy Jay as he left. The crusade was quietly cancelled.

Sunday morning, the black clouds that had been threatening all week settled down over the town. Lightning cracked, thunder rolled, Gwen stayed home, DJ sat alone with Davy in the back row. He sat through the opening song, the opening prayer, the first part of the sermon. He looked

around at the people his mother had considered her friends, the people she had tried to measure up to her whole life. He leaned over to the woman sitting next to him entertaining her toddler. "Can you watch my bag?" he whispered. She nodded absently.

He stood up, carrying Davy, and walked to the front of the church, feeling eyes boring into his back. Odd, how he'd never had stage fright before, he thought, in all the years he'd preached. But today, today he was afraid. He held Davy tighter and walked past the piano, up the low steps to the rostrum, then to the lectern.

Jimmy Jay Rayburn—the guest speaker—stopped speaking, turned, smiled for the audience, put his hand over the microphone, and whispered, "What are you doing?"

"I just want to say a few words," DJ said.

"Oh, I think you've said just about enough, boy."

DJ had expected it. He turned to the congregation and lowered his voice, speaking without the microphone, using the power he had learned in the fields, the power of speaking under and through a loud noise, rather than shouting over it.

"My mother's had a hard life," he began, "harder than any of you know. She hasn't made a lot of friends here, but it's not because she didn't want to. I wish you could know her for what she is. I wish you could have known the woman she might have been. But that's not possible. We can't change her past—believe me, if I could, I would.

"My sisters and I are her children, and we love her, but we're not the people she admires. That's you." He gestured at the congregation with his free hand. "She stayed away today because she's embarrassed and afraid. She's afraid that now that you know about her life you'll find her disgusting, think she's a liar, or crazy, or to blame for what happened to her. But she's not to blame. She tried to get away, to save us. But she was betrayed by those she should have been able to trust." He paused, and looked hard at Jimmy Jay.

"I loved my father," he continued after a minute, "but he did some terrible things. And the people who could have stopped him—you know

who you are—they didn't even try. Instead they—you—kept up appearances. Followed the rules. And they—you—left her. They—you—left all of us, and he hurt us more. And they—you—knew.

Personally, I don't have any faith in any of you anymore. I think you'll go on keeping up appearances, pretending the ugly things don't exist. Acknowledging them means admitting that the people you've put in the place of God don't deserve to be there any more than you or I do. It means realizing the things we've always believed maybe aren't quite so set in stone as we thought. It's scary, and changing is hard work. Dealing with the ugly things is more than just shuffling ministers around when they get embarrassing; more than just pretending that a man who raped his daughters and raped and beat his own wife nearly every day of their marriage was worthy of respect. Dealing with the ugly things means asking yourself, 'What is it about our family, our church, our society, our nation, that creates and sustains such monsters, and that allows us to live with ourselves after we sacrifice the innocent to protect them?' It means re-examining beliefs, attitudes, values. It means thinking for ourselves. It means taking responsibility for our own salvation and damnation. It means learning how to be good, rather than just look good on paper."

He paused and looked at his son, then looked at the congregation again. "My mother doesn't have any faith anymore, either. She knows, all the way through, that you'll find it easier to blame her for the hell she lived in than it will be to try to explain what it is about the Narrow Way that made it possible for a man like my father to continue as a respected, admired church leader—even when his pastor knew—*knew*—what he was. She thinks she'll be a nine days' wonder, and then people will decide that we all cooked this up for some bizarre twisted reason, that Daddy was really a saint being attacked now that he's not here to defend himself. I think my mother's right. I hope she's wrong. I hope she can count on you now."

He turned and left the building before the deacons could haul him out.

Jimmy Jay Rayburn cleared his throat. "Folks, I say it's a tragedy what's happened to that family. The Devil's sure working hard in these last days."

The silence stretched on. Jimmy Jay dabbed his handkerchief neatly across his forehead.

The Old Battle Axe stood up and walked out.

"Guess I'll be sleepin' on the couch for a while," Jimmy Jay said, winking. He dabbed his forehead again. Another woman stood, and another. Soon they were standing all over the church, filling the aisles, filing out the doors.

"Looks like we all will," Jimmy Jay boomed. He laughed and dabbed his forehead again.

Then a man stood up, shuffled to the end of the row, and walked out, and then another. And then even those who didn't particularly care about Gwen stood up and left, driven by a force they couldn't name.

Finally Jimmy Jay Rayburn stood alone, staring at the empty rows.

The church custodian stood in the big doors at the back of the church. "You gonna omit the closing song, Pastor Rayburn?" he asked. "The pianist's gone, an' I should lock up now."

"Yeah, I'm all done," Jimmy Jay said. "The Devil's workin' hard today." He shook his head sadly, turned and walked out of the building. Black clouds were boiling overhead, and now the rain began sheeting down. The pastor was drenched before he could get to his car.

CHAPTER 71

Elizabeth

She gave her my name. Before the baby was born, I'd sit sometimes and watch Sarah's belly roll and think of the baby I might have had. I wondered what it might have become, and if maybe something of its soul might be in Davy, in little Bibi, or in another baby somewhere. I doubted I'd ever have a baby of my own. Something in me broke that last time Daddy raped me. I watched DJ with Davy, Sarah with Bibi, and the sorrow nearly drowned me. It was the worst when I watched Sarah play with both babies. She made them laugh. She rolled Davy around, chased him when he started walking, then they talked to little Bibi, and played finger games. I would never have thought it, but it was right somehow. I knew that, like Toby, she'd fight to the death for either of them.

Sarah's voice was different now. She still talked army sometimes, but even that had faded to a soft, soothing burr, rather than the rasping drawl she used before. It was still there, and I knew if we ever needed it, it'd be there strong as ever, but right then we didn't need it. We were at peace, and as always, Toby was here, sometimes man, sometimes dog, loving us all, guarding our backs, keeping us safe. He moved between forms and through the worlds easily now, sometimes with us at the house playing with Bibi and Davy, sometimes with me alone by the river or in the town, sometimes with DJ and Davy at the farm.

When DJ had asked me to take him to the farm I was angry. I felt that by living at the farm, he was denying the pain we had suffered. I let him go and wished him well, though I really didn't mean it. I was wrong. All through that winter, while the land slept and Bibi nursed and slept and grew, I carried my hurt like a stone inside me. And then the spring rains came, and the grass leaped up and the crops thrived, and DJ worked through it all, planting, tilling, pouring his life blood into healing the land he loved.

Everyone was saying there hadn't been a season like this for more than thirty years. I looked at the greening land, and understood that while we were a part of the pattern, we were not the purpose of it any more than we could "own" the land on which we lived. We danced our patterns upon it, marked it with our hurts and prejudices as well as our love for each other. We shaped our paths through the dance, but only from a distance could we see how our threads wove through the design. DJ was right. He served the land, no matter who held the paper on it. Our ways might not lie together for the moment, but we each were whole in our own way.

The land was healed. Magic lay everywhere.



In June, Momma called, and a few days later her Camry eased over the hill and into the parking area outside our gate. She fumbled with the latch, then walked hesitantly up the stone path, looking around at the flowers, the wide lawn, the ancient trees. Sarah and I met her at the door. She hugged both of us, then took little Bibi in her arms and rocked her while Sarah and I went into the kitchen and started lunch. When it was ready and I walked into the living room to tell Momma, she was singing. Her voice was rough and off key, but she was singing. And then she laid her head down on Bibi's blankets, and I saw a tear sparkle on the soft fleece. Momma heard me, jerked her head up and rubbed her eyes. "Do you have any idea how wonderful it is to hold a baby and not be afraid for it?" she asked me.

I knelt by the wooden rocking chair she was sitting in and put my arms around her and Bibi. My smooth cheek touched her scarred, hollow one, and I remembered the day we'd picked blackberries and Sarah had kicked

the bucket. I wanted to weep for how different our lives might have been. All I could say was, "Come eat, Momma."

And we laughed as we rubbed the tears from our cheeks, then we went in to eat together. Over lunch she told us the news.

"Pastor Rayburn and his wife are divorcing," she reported. "People are telling jokes about him. It's not nice."

"How can you say that, Momma, after what he did to you?" Sarah asked, "The old bastard deserves everything he gets."

Momma looked surprised. "He never did anything to me."

"Yes he did. He went and told Daddy that you'd asked for help getting away. I thought you knew."

She looked blank. "No. I didn't know. When was this?"

"When Elaine was little."

"How do you know about that?"

"He told us."

Her eyes went vague and cloudy. "Don't go, Momma," I said softly, sadly, but she was already somewhere else. And then I thought of my ladies. My heart in my throat, I went to the cupboard, got out my big bowl, the flour, the yeast, the sugar, the butter, the oil, the milk, and the salt. Then I started mixing.

"What happened?" I asked, watching my hand stirring the batter in the bowl. The room fell silent. Sarah sipped her tea and rocked Bibi. Momma sipped, swallowed, sipped again. The silence lasted so long I almost gave up.

And then, "I can't remember. When I try ... it's like I'm watching some other woman. I don't know if it really happened ... or if I just made it up in my own sick mind."

Silence. Sarah had dragged the big old wooden rocker into the kitchen. She stopped rocking. One arm held Bibi; who as usual was nursing. The sun glinted off Sarah's tea, striking a glare that nearly blinded me. Momma blinked. Sarah didn't say anything, just started rocking again. The sun flashed on the tea, off, on, off. I found myself kneading in time to the flashes. And then I realized what Sarah was doing. A part of me was horrified at that, but I kept quiet. Momma watched the flashes.

“So, Momma,” Sarah said in a very quiet voice, “tell us about the woman.” *Flash, flash, flash.*

I opened my mouth to tell her to cut it out, that hypnotizing your own mother when she doesn’t know what’s happening isn’t right, but then Momma started to talk, and I closed my mouth and held my breath and listened and just kneaded the bread.

CHAPTER 72

Gwen

“**I** first see her in the bathroom mirror. A bald woman is staring back at her. There’s a purple and yellow bruise on her face. Here—” Momma ran her fingers lightly around her right eye “—and her jaw’s lumpy. Her slip strap’s broken, and the eyelet around the bodice is torn, and blood has run down her cheek. It’s dripped onto her chest and dried there. And her hair ... her hair

Momma’s voice failed, then picked up again.

The breeze is chilly. It smells like alfalfa. Her eyes never left the sunlight flashing on the glass of tea. The woman is touching her head. It’s all bristly. She sounded surprised. The mirror woman’s eyes get big and round. One pupil’s spread all over the blue part; the other one’s just a speck. A red stain shaped like California is spreading across the white of her left eye. That’s not right.

Momma touched her soft hair. *She runs her fingers over her scalp until they touch the oozing patch where there are no bristles at all at all, there are no bristles at all.* Momma giggled and began to hum. Her voice echoed eerily in the room. She shuddered and stopped.

She has to be quiet, so quiet, or he’ll find her, and he’ll see her hair, and then he’ll kill her. So she just stands there, and she wraps her arms around herself, and she tries to be so, so quiet, and that’s why she can hear it so well when the car starts outside. And then it drives away. Her voice cracked again.

“What happens then, Momma?” Sarah asked remorselessly.

I wanted to tell her to stop, to let Momma just not remember, but I couldn't. It was too important to all of us.

He calls her, but the door's locked, and he's outside, and she's safe, but then he's in the house, and he's calling her over and over, and then he starts upstairs, and she knows he's coming, and she backs up, as far as she can until her legs hit the side of the toilet and she sits down because she can't stand up anymore, and she's trembling, and she's holding herself, and even her feet are shaking. She's surprised because she's never seen that before.

His voice comes through the door. Gwen, you up here? She hears their bedroom door open down the hall, and her teeth are rattling so loud she clenches her jaws until they ache. Gwen? he calls again, and she hears his feet coming closer and closer, and then they're going down the hall again, and then she hears another door open. You in here?

And she can hear Lainie's voice, babbling in the made-up words she used before she could talk.

Where's Mommy? he asks, and Lainie babbles back, and the woman hopes he's so angry that he'll leave Lainie alone and look for her.

She prays, but she knows God won't help. He's not listening. He's just pulled out of the driveway.

She hears him down the hall again.

Look what you've done to yourself, Lainie, he's saying Shame on you, a great big girl like you still wetting your diaper.

The woman knows she'll have to go, but she still keeps hoping. Please not this time. Please not this time, she prays. Just let me stop bleeding first.

But then Lainie starts whimpering, and she hears him say, Stop that, or I'll give you something to cry about, and the baby girl whimpers again, and he smacks her, and she screams, and then it's quieter, and she knows that it's too late, that she should have gone before. She unlocks the bathroom door and braces one hand on the wall so she won't fall down. Her fingers leave dark streaks, but she can't stop to clean them. Then she's in Lainie's room, saying, I'll do it, but her throat's still sore, and she's still bleeding.

The man jerks around and yanks his pants shut and says, What have you done to yourself?

Nothing, she says, and she won't look at him, because she can't see what he's doing. She just looks at the floor.

Don't you 'nothing' me, little girl. You cut your hair. You're gonna pay for that.

And the woman has nothing to say.

He stares at her with his chin raised, daring her to say something, but she knows better. She just stares down at the floor, and the blood starts to drip between her feet.

What're you looking at? he says, even though she's not looking at anything. It happens in all families. All kids play doctor.

She still can't think of anything to say, but she knows she has to get to Lainie, so she just keeps looking at the floor and edges around him until she can pick up her daughter. She sets the scissors down on the dresser so Lainie won't get them. She hasn't even realized till then that they're still in her hand. She takes a tissue and dabs gently at Lainie's poor little mouth. It's cracked in the corners and bleeding a little.

Pastor Rayburn was here, he finally says.

The woman's so afraid she can hardly hear him for her heart pounding, but she still doesn't say anything. She just smooths Vaseline on Lainie's little mouth.

But the man's voice is getting louder. Well? What've you got to say for yourself? Leave that baby alone and say something! I suppose you tattled to your mother, too, and she's afraid he knows.

The courts'll never give you those kids, not with your mental history, my momma had said. You say anything, it'll just make things worse. And then she left me.

Momma's voice cracked and rose as she became the woman and took the betrayal into herself. She left me alone with him, and she went home, where it was safe, and she didn't have to see the bruises, or Lainie's poor little mouth. Her voice broke. And then, incredibly, she spoke again.

He said Pastor Rayburn told him I should be committed, and that I'd better learn to shut my trap before I mouthed off to the wrong person and made trouble for everybody and got myself put in the insane asylum.

And you know what? All the sudden, I didn't care anymore. I reached behind me and grabbed the scissors and I told him, Do what you want to me. I married you. But if you ever touch Lainie again you'd better never go to sleep.

He knew I meant it. He nodded and then he said to go down by the creek. I didn't want to go, but I knew it was the price I had to pay to keep Lainie safe, so I went into the bedroom and pulled on my oldest housedress because I knew whatever I wore was going to be ruined, and I came back out into the hall. He was standing there, and he made me squeeze by him because he knew I didn't want to touch him. And then I was past, and he said to hurry up.

I said, I can't, but that was stupid. I knew better. Next thing I knew, I was hitting the floor face first before I even felt him smack the back of my head. I got one quick breath before he flipped me over with his boot. Her hand touched her ribs delicately.

Look at me, he said.

I could hardly open my eyes, they were so swollen, and my side hurt so bad, and I couldn't really see him, just a blurry shape, but I heard him fine.

Don't you ever, ever tell me no again, do you hear, little girl? he said. Do you hear me?

I am not your little girl, I said, I'm your wife, I said, and then I bit my tongue because I was so mad at myself. I knew better. And then my head snapped sideways, and I thought my neck would break, he kicked it so hard.

Do you hear me? he said again, and he pulled back his boot again, and I didn't say anything else. I knew better. I just nodded. And he told me to get up and get down to the creek, like he'd told me to do in the first place, and he sounded so reasonable about it that I just lost my temper all over again.

Why? I asked. 'I'm not going to make it easy for you to kill me.'

That time he kicked me so hard everything turned black-green and speckly. When the speckles went away and I opened my eyes, we were down by the creek. You may look like a man with your hair all hacked off, he was saying, but you're still a woman where it counts, and he yanked off my underwear.

I'm still bleeding," I said, and I tried to pull my legs together.

You think I don't know that? I can smell the stink of you every time I go into the house, he said.

And then he did it anyway, and all the while his face was blank and tight, and his eyes were wild, and he just pounded away like he didn't even know I was there, like he was just gone and only his body was left. I closed my eyes so I wouldn't have to see him. I felt the sand rubbing my back raw.

Look at me! he kept saying, but I wouldn't. I squeezed my eyes shut and thought about the sand, and how it was wet and chilly, and how it scraped against my back and legs. Look at me, he said again, and then he smacked his fist into the bruised side of my face, and my eyes popped open, but I still didn't really have to see him because the black dots were everywhere. Don't you ever try a stunt like that again, do you hear me? No one will believe you after I tell my side of the story. You've got nowhere to go, and if you do leave, I'll track you down. You hear me? I'll. Track. You. Down.

I just stared up at him, since that was what he wanted, even though I couldn't see anything by then but the dancing dots. I knew he was wrong. I did have somewhere to go. I turned and went into the dark center of myself, and I closed the door behind me so he couldn't get in. It's just my body, I said to myself. He can't hurt me. I'm not really here. And I hid there, safe in the dark, and I left my body alone with him.

She fell silent again.

Sarah lifted her glass and took a sip of her tea. "Then what happened, Momma?" she asked. Baby Bibi's eyes drifted closed. Sarah pulled her shirt closed and shifted the baby in her arms. Bibi curled against her, sighed softly, and settled deeper into sleep.

Momma blinked her eyes and jumped a bit. "What? Oh, oh, well, I laid there and rested for a while, then I went in and made supper."

"Why was Daddy so mad?" I asked. "Why did he hit you in the first place?"

"He wanted me to put ... that ... in my mouth," she whispered. "But I didn't want to. The last time I'd almost choked, and I was afraid. I still had sores in there from the last time, and I'd just lost a baby. But he made me."

Knead. Knead.

"Then he grabbed my hair—I had long, long hair then—and he yanked, but I pulled back. I shouldn't've done that because it made it even worse. He was so mad, and he pulled so hard, and then my head ripped." She stopped, wiped a shaking hand across her mouth, then touched her head gently and jerked her hand away. "I thought I was dying." She looked at her hand. "There was blood everywhere, but he just kept pushing ... that ... into my mouth, and I couldn't breathe, and the blood was in my eyes and I couldn't see and I felt like I was dying, drowning in blood and ... and" Her voice crested, cracked, then the story went on. "When I woke up I thought maybe I'd just dreamed it, but I didn't used to have this bald spot...." Her hand touched the back of her head again, then fell to her lap. "I told myself it wasn't real, that I must have imagined it. Why would someone who loved me so much he practically never let me out of his sight want to hurt me so bad?" She turned her vague blue eyes toward me.

I had no answer. "What happened then?" I asked, my eyes on the bread pans I was oiling.

"I kept bleeding. So I knew it had to be real, and I was so afraid. I was afraid of what he would do to me, and to Lainie, if I didn't go. I called Grandma, but she was still upset because I'd married your daddy in the first place. She said she couldn't help, that I had made my bed and now I had to lie in it. But I had to get away. For Lainie. Because I wasn't the only one lying in the bed I had made. So I called Jimmy Jay Rayburn. I asked him to help me find a place where we'd be safe. He said he'd try to work something out.

"I was so happy, I ran down to Lainie's room and grabbed some diapers and clothes and stuffed them into the diaper bag. Then I went back to my room and I grabbed my scissors and cut my hair so if Daddy tried to grab me as I was leaving he wouldn't be able to. I pulled together a few more things and was just shoving them into the diaper bag so he wouldn't see that I was leaving when I heard Jimmy Jay's car drive up. I was hurrying, and my hands were shaking so much I couldn't get the zipper closed and my heart was beating so hard I could hardly breathe, but I was happy—so happy, because we were finally going to be safe." She stopped. "But he didn't come to the door. He went to the shop instead." A world of betrayal lay in her voice. "And then he left. He didn't even come to the door to see how I was."

"And then what happened?" I asked.

"Daddy came in looking for me, but he found Lainie instead," she said quietly, "and you know the rest. "He said it happens in all families. But it doesn't! It doesn't! It was wrong, and I knew it, and I told him I'd do anything he wanted, but he had to leave Lainie alone ... and he agreed. And he took me down by the creek, and he hurt me," she swallowed again. "He hurt me so bad I thought I'd die, but I knew that it was part of the deal. So it didn't matter. It was just my body. I didn't complain, because Lainie was safe. And I never told, not in all those years. I did it so he would leave his own children alone."

My hands worked the dough into loaves and started turning them into their pans. That was the only sound in the room for a long time.

"But he lied," she finally said. "He lied. I let him hurt me, and then he broke his word. He hurt my babies, and I didn't know. I couldn't know. I should have, but I couldn't see how to help, and I was afraid that if I saw I'd have to try, so I just didn't see...."

The room was dead silent. Momma looked at her hands, then at us—at us, straight on—and she said, "I know you can never forgive that. And there's no reason you should. But you deserve the truth after all these years. I told myself that if he was hurting me, he couldn't be hurting you, when if I had looked around me I would have seen that was a stupid, stupid lie, that we were *all* being hurt."

She pushed herself out of the chair. "I'd better go home now."

As Momma turned to go, Sarah looked at her again, and I could see both anger and sadness in her eyes. I had to say something. I had to honor her courage now, if not before. I had to return something for the gift of honesty she had given us at such cost to herself. She had just destroyed the comfortable, safe illusion in which she had lived for most of her life.

"I forgot, too," I said to the dough I was shaping into more loaves.

Momma turned. "What?"

"I forgot, too," I said, looking up at her. "After that night, I forgot who I was. And I wanted more than anything not to remember."

"But you did," Momma said, "and you came back and faced him down. I didn't do anything until all the danger was past. If he was still alive, I don't know that I'd have the courage to say what I have now. I'd probably still be there, still be busy telling myself that he had honored our deal."

"I had a safe place to go," I told her. "I found a safe place outside myself, so I didn't have to build one inside myself anymore."

Silence filled the kitchen again.

Sarah held out her empty glass. "Can you pour me another glass of tea, Momma?" she asked.

Momma looked at me. "Is that all right?" she asked.

"Pour one for yourself, and one for me, too," I said, sliding the pans into the oven to rise.

We carried our iced tea outside and drank it in the Morris chairs under the trees. We sat there for a long time, listening to the orioles up in the leaves, the ducks down on the river, the river itself chuckling.

"I never told, either," Sarah said suddenly. "All that time, I never told anybody."

"What?" I asked.

"About Jimmy Jay," she said. And she told us about the first time, and this time she wasn't cracking jokes about his little boat, or talkin' army, or anything. She didn't look at us, she just told us what it felt like to be all alone, to lie in some motel bed and want to stop breathing because there was no way out.

And then Momma was crying, and Sarah was crying too. They reached for each other. "I'm sorry," Momma said. "I'm so sorry."

"It's okay, Momma." Sarah sniffed and almost choked, and we sat there just listening to the birds and the water.

"You want to hear one?" Momma suddenly asked.

"One what?"

"One of the Jimmy Jay jokes. Mrs. Rayburn told it to me, if you can believe that. She's filed for divorce, you know; I think I told you that. I really shouldn't repeat it."

"You have to tell us now," we said. "You can't leave us hanging."

"All right, but it's not very nice. Why did Jimmy Jay put threads on his neck?"

"Why?" we asked.

"So he could screw his head off." She put her hand over her mouth and giggled guiltily. Sarah and I laughed harder than the joke warranted. When Bibi jumped a little, Sarah patted her sweet, soft back.

"I really shouldn't laugh," Momma said. "It's not funny. But he deserves it! When I think about how he hurt you, and then just left you alone...."

We knew that she was talking about Jimmy Jay so she wouldn't have to talk about Daddy, or about herself, and we knew that conversation would have to come, but there's only so much pain anybody should have to relive in one day.

“But I’m not alone now,” Sarah said, looking down at the baby sleeping in her arms. “I’ll never be all alone again. And for her, it was worth it.”

Momma stayed with us for several weeks after that day. We took care of her, let her cry when she needed to, and talk when she needed to. It wasn’t easy. Sometimes she sought her old refuge and talked fondly of Daddy and Pastor Rayburn. Sometimes Sarah and I shouted at her, and sometimes she shouted back, but mixed in with the shouting were moments when she was ready to listen. On those days we talked, carefully, quietly, building bridges to withstand the explosions of the other days. By the end of those weeks, Sarah and I had realized that Momma would probably never be ready to hear all the things we had to say—and that that was all right. We were grown women, strong women. No matter how much talking we did now, nothing would ever change the fact that she had refused to see, that she had left us, and while we could understand why now, the fact remained unchanged. Understanding did not unmake it. All we could do was let go of the anger and the need to judge her. And so we did.

The last night, we took her to the pool. Something about the evening reminded me of that summer day long ago, when we’d gone to pick blackberries and wound up swimming instead. The Lady didn’t show, which was probably a good thing, since Momma still considered anything except the Narrow Way Satanic, but something of her spirit lingered in the place, and I knew Momma felt it and responded to it, even if she didn’t know what it was she was feeling. And that was all right, too. My way was not hers.

When Momma left, she was a different woman ... and I understood what a little of the Lady’s vengeance on Jimmy Jay was. He was having to go around “with his televangelist off,” as Sarah put it. He had become a joke. I saw him once when we went up to Momma’s house. He was in the Safeway, and his cart was full of Hungry Man dinners. He looked little, old, and grimy. When we passed in the aisle, he stank. We’d already gone by when he said, “Hey there, Gwennie, don’t ya have a word for an old friend?”

“You aren’t an old friend,” Momma said without even slowing down.

Jimmy Jay laughed. “Nah, we’re more like family, ain’t we?” he said. “We been through a lot together.”

Momma did stop then. "That's hardly a recommendation, as you very well know," she said coldly. "After what you've done to me and mine, you're lucky I limit myself to telling Jimmy Jay jokes." She away from him. "Did I tell you girls the last one?" She wasn't smiling.

"The Devil's sure workin' hard," he said sadly, turned around and shuffled off. Momma's shoulders slumped. "That was mean," she said. "But when I thought of what he did to us, and to you, Sarah, I had to say something."

"Thanks, Momma," Sarah said, and we stood there in the canned food aisle and hugged our worn, pretty little mother, who for the very first time had stood with us and watched our backs. She hugged us back fiercely. Baby Bibi grinned toothlessly. I don't think Jimmy Jay had even noticed her.



I started dreaming about my father that summer. In the beginning, I woke screaming silently into the night. But as the summer waned and I moved away from the blood in my past, the dreams changed. By early fall, I was dreaming about him not as an adult, but as a small, golden-haired child, crying in spurts as his older brother pounded into him. I saw the blood and heard his cries, and my heart broke for him.

I'll be a good boy, please, please stop, I'll be such a good boy, he wept over and over.

And his brother thrust, stiffened, groaned, and pulled out, wiping his bloody cock on the tail of my child-father's shirt. Almost as an afterthought, he reached out a hand and smacked the golden head, knocking the smaller boy to the ground. You'll forget it before you're married, he sneered, and turned away, buttoning his woolen pants, laughing at his baby brother sobbing in the dirt.

I woke up crying, wishing I could have saved that child. And all the while I knew I couldn't—too much pain, and now death, lay between us. I lay there and wept for the father he always told us he was, for the father he wanted to be and maybe would have been, if he'd known the way.

Samhain, the night of the dead, arrived. I tried to write, to clear my mind, but little came—fragments, snippets of memories, only some of

them mine. What would I say to my father? He was a terrifying, lonely, hurtful man. And yet ... and yet, I looked around me and saw that great good had grown in my life. Would I be here if he had been other than as he was? *But it was wrong—it hurt*, my soul cried out. And I knew it was true. *It was wrong. It did hurt.* And because of it I was both less and more than I would otherwise be. How could I possibly reach a conclusion?

The very idea of Samhain frightened DJ and Momma, so Sarah and I sat alone that night. I wished they could be here, but we each must weave our own pattern, dance our own dance. Healing does not necessarily bring reconciliation. We sat by the fire, my sister and I, staring into the flames, quiet. We had gathered a few things—a shirt he'd worn, a Carnation Ice Cream sandwich wrapper, one of his scuffed boots, a yellow, curling school photo of a laughing narrow-faced boy. We looked at the pieces he'd left. We touched them. I touched the boot and shuddered, stroked the ice cream wrapper, and smiled. *What would I say?*

And then he came to us, sad and silent. I saw his eyes, and in them I saw the weeping child as well as the angry man.

"Hello, Daddy," Sarah said. I half expected her to crack a joke, but she sat as quietly as I did. He was silent, too. At last she said, "You hurt us, but I expect you already know that, don't you?"

I looked into his eyes, and I saw that he did, and I understood that like the passage between the stones at the pool, death is a gate beyond which there can be no pretense, no denial. My father had faced himself at last.

"For a long time," Sarah went on, her voice soft and husky, "I wanted you to pay. But then I thought about how you lived. And how you died. And I knew you'd already paid. You made our lives hell, but you were there in hell with us. That was all you knew, wasn't it? When I read..." her voice cracked and she stretched out a hand before she realized there could be no comfort given that way. Her hand dropped.

"We're trying to do better," she finally told him. "You taught us good things, too. We are what we are in part because of you. We're not here to judge, just to say that we've made our peace with the past, that we accept what you were, and we honor what you wanted to be."

And suddenly I understood. A great weight lifted off me. *I didn't have to judge.* I didn't have to decide if he was good or evil, saved or damned. All I had to do was tell the stories as truly as I could. My mind and heart stretched to encompass him as he was, good and evil, strong and weak, powerful and broken. I looked into his eyes and saw the white-haired baby, the laughing boy, the angry, hurting man, the loving, monstrous husband, the father who both loved and hated his children, the man terrified to die because he had been judged by the harshest judge of all—himself—and found wanting. He had seen the carnage he created in his own pain—seen it too late to mend matters. I couldn't imagine a worse hell. He had paid enough. There was only one thing left to say.

"I love you," I said simply. My eyes blurred. When I blinked them clear, he was gone. I looked at Sarah, and then we were holding each other, rocking, crying for the tragedy that was our father's life and death, crying for Elaine, crying for our brother, for our mother, crying for the parts of ourselves dead at our parents' hands. Ghosts can take many shapes.

We sat for a long time that chilly autumn night, not saying much, just feeding the flames and letting them lick away the last dark corners of our souls, understanding that at long last the glass had cracked and we were free. And at last, arm in arm, we walked out of the night of the dead into the warm, safe, golden kitchen, put on aprons, and set bread to rise with the morning sun. The ladies would be coming soon.

The End

Picture Book

BY BODIE PARKHURST

Building Something Better: A Story in Pictures for Grownups

Building Something Better: A Story in Pictures for Kids

Patrick Saves the Troll

(With Alex Parkhurst)

Secret History: A Painted Journal

The Velveteen Building: Freewater School

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ALSO BY BODIE PARKHURST

Redeeming Stanley:

A Savage Little Tale of True Love, Old Gods, Bitches, Bestiality,

Burnout, and Above All, Payback

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JENNIFER FEDDERSON
Acquisitions Editor, AudioLark Books

IRREVERENT AND ENTERTAINING

Redeeming Stanley is fun and heartwarming. If you offend easily, and believe in turning the other cheek, fair play, and other behaviors that define us as "good," this is not for you. If you recognize that we can be good and exhibit all of the above traits most of the time, but need to acknowledge our inner bitch the rest of the time because face it, we're human, then you will love *Redeeming Stanley*.

I hoped that the blurb on the back of the book was true to the contents and it was. It is "a savage little tale of true love, old gods, bitches, bestiality, burnout, and above all, payback." It is blunt, earthy, and well-written.

KYRA SPERARE
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