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# Tears of a Willow

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Marie P Dues

154,828 words

*Tears of a Willow*  
by  
M. P. Duess

*Dedicated to the courageous women I love who have fought the good fight . . .*

*Christina Duess  
my brave and beautiful sister-in-law*

*Marie Murphy Purcell  
my aunt who tried to spare us always*

*and*

*Katherine Kilgannon  
whose courage surpassed all*

*and to*

*To Beth Baughman DuPree, M.D.  
who wages this war with a velvet sword and the healing spirit of Mother Nature*

*With love and more love to  
my husband,  
Edward E. Duess  
who has proven that men are just as courageous as women.  
He still makes all my dreams come true*

*To my children  
Mai-Ann and Buddy  
The reason for my every heartbeat*

*And to my nephews,  
Tommy and Christian  
Because I love them.*

*Prologue*

“We’ll bury it here... here under the willow,” the girl in a yellow and black shawl whispered. Her voice was shrill, verging on hysteria. She held crumpled linens against her chest, and the corners of the sheet fell in all directions as though it had been taken up in haste and rolled into her arms. She turned her face to another girl who was slightly shorter than she was and who walked a few paces behind. “Hurry!”

“We can’t,” said the other girl. “We don’t have enough time to dig a hole deep enough to keep it from washing up if the river floods. It can’t be done here. This is too close to the river and the canal.” She reached out to take the wrappings from the taller girl’s arms.

“No, it will be here!” the girl with the sheet said sharply, turning away from the other girl, hugging the linens to her chest protectively. “This is where I will bury it.”

The damp ground on the berm that ran along the silent canal had stained the hems of their skirts and their bare feet were muddy. A light drizzle lay over the land and the water of the canal, and the night was so dark that it was difficult for the girls to see each other’s faces. They could hear the shad jumping in the river, but couldn’t see the water through the inky night. Their breathing was labored and one of the girls grunted when her bare instep landed on a small jagged stone.

“This is a mistake, I tell you,” she said as she balanced on one foot and pulled the stone from her flesh.

“It’s not a mistake. I will always know where it is. I can watch from the house to make sure no one finds it.” The girl pulled her shawl back from her face a little and looked up at the soft branches of the willow. She said in a quiet whisper, “If no one else will weep for it, the tree will.”

“It’s so dark out here we don’t even know if a canal boat is tied up for the night nearby. Someone could see us or hear us.”

“If we can’t see them, they can’t see us. Just be quick and quiet.”

They reached a soft spot of ground behind the willow tree and the girl in the yellow and black shawl with the sheet still pulled close to her, indicated with her head that the other girl should begin to dig.

They stood across from each other looking down at the spot of grass under the tree. A sob escaped from the smaller girl as she slowly swung the shovel she had been holding at her side and pushed it down into the earth. The grass and dirt gave reluctantly, and she tried to use her bare foot to push the tip of the shovel deeper into the ground. “I can’t,” she said in a broken voice.

“Do it! Will you just do it! Quickly! Don’t make me do it. I can feel the blood running down my legs and my belly is cramping. I’m not strong enough tonight.” The girl in the yellow and black shawl looked at the other girl and her voice softened. “Please do this for me.”

The plea propelled the other girl, and she pushed harder and the shovel moved the earth. She dug again, and this time it moved more easily. She sliced the ground once more...and again...and the hole grew, but her movements were strained and she was tiring quickly. The girl with the yellow and black shawl laid the sheet down on the ground gently and fell to her knees. She used her hands to help dig the hole. She could feel the dirt become embed under her nails and her fingers ached with the effort of clawing and pulling the dirt out of the hole.

“Hurry,” she said to the girl with the shovel, “hurry...before I become too weak.”

Together they broke up earth, pushed it to the side, and then broke more. The hole wasn’t large, nor was it deep. The yellow and black shawl fell off the girl’s head and then her

left shoulder, showing a white linen sleeve beneath. She stopped digging with her hands and laid her palms flat against the ground, her fingers dangled over the shallow hole, her back arched up and her head hung down. The mist surrounded her, dampening her fine red hair, and she breathed in the cool wet air with a jagged breath, which made her cough. She grabbed her stomach with a hand that was black with muck and braced against falling over with her other hand.

“I can’t do more,” she said. “I must get back to the house...to my bed. This has to do.”

The other girl dropped the shovel and ran to her companion’s side, falling on her own knees now, and placing her arm over the sick girl’s back. “Will you faint, do you think? If you do, I’ll never get you back to the house without anyone knowing. You mustn’t faint.”

The other girl shook her head slowly. She reached up and wiped her nose with her muddy fingers, and then reached for the sheet, pulling it close to her chest again. Her fingers stained the white linen as she pulled it up and buried her face in it, crying for the first time. She shrugged the other girl off and started to put the sheet into the hole.

“It’s not deep enough, I tell you. You can’t bury it like this. It is too shallow a grave. The dogs will dig it up,” and with those final words, she, too, began to sob. “This won’t be good.”

“We’ll come back when I’m stronger and dig a deeper hole. I can’t go on tonight. Just help me press it down as far into the grave as we can and cover it.”

They reached forward, over the mound of dirt they had dug up and placed the sheet down into the hole. Together with shovel and hands they pushed the mound of dirt over the sheet. The mound lay beneath the willow tree, behind its huge circumference, closer to the canal and hidden

from the house. When they finished, they stayed beside the tiny grave for a long silent moment, each in their own thoughts.

“Was it a girl or a boy?” the girl with the yellow and black shawl asked her younger sister who had just helped to pull the tiny body out of her. It had pushed its way out into the world and with the younger girl’s assistance fell onto the sheet which now served as its burial shroud.

“Don’t ask me that,” the girl with the shovel answered. “It will be harder for you if you know.” The younger girl quickly pushed more dirt over the sheet with her shovel. “I won’t tell you.”

The girl in the shawl grabbed her abdomen again and rocked back and forth on her knees but she had stopped crying now. She raised her tormented face to the young grave digger. “Will you tell me this, then? Will you tell me what color was its skin?”

## CHAPTER 1



From: Lillian Phelan [lpfreeIncrwrtr@aol.com]  
To: Dan Paulsen [dpaulsen1@msn.com]  
Cc:  
Subject: I did it again  
Sent: 6/3 2:47 PM

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Stupid ... stupid ... forgetful idiot that I am. You won't be hearing from me until I find a place to live. Poor Mrs. Snyder sold the house while I was away and didn't know how to reach me. Today's moving day. No place to plug in the computer after this email. Just got home from Oklahoma half an hour ago to find the moving men on the doorstep.

Gotta go ... don't worry. Don't bother calling – the cell phone battery is dead and I can't find the charger (probably in Oklahoma or plane). When in God's name will I get my act together?



From: Dan Paulsen [dpaulsen1@msn.com]

To: Lillian Phelan [lpfreeIncrwrtr@aol.com]

Cc:

Subject: Wait!

Sent: 6/03 2:55 PM

Importance: High

Wait. Are you still there? Lillian, I can't believe you're homeless ... *again*. Come here to me – get the 4:30 to Penn Station and I'll meet you there. My darling, Lillian, you **are** a calamity!

I'm worried now. For all I know you'll be sleeping on a park bench. Don't leave me hanging too long. Call me and let me know where you are.



From: T. Darryl Worthington  
To: BJohnson @ BendersonJohnsonEsq.com  
Cc:  
Subject: Closing 12379 State Street  
Sent: 6/03 3:50 PM

Ben, just wanted to tell you that Eleanor Snyder is about moved out (I can see the brownstone from my office window), and her tenant has returned from her business trip. It's easy telling that she didn't know we decided to close on the house early, which explains why poor Mrs. Snyder was so upset at the closing this morning.

By my estimation, the tenant should be heading to Starbucks on the corner in about ten minutes. She can't do anything without a cup of coffee in her hand.

We'll follow up tomorrow. As always, it was a pleasure. I hope your client enjoys her lovely historical home. Please, I beg of you, don't let your client turn it into another restaurant. We've got too many of them in town as it is.

Sincerely,  
Darryl



From: Lillian Phelan [lpfreeIncrwrtr@aol.com]  
To: Dan Paulsen [dpaulsen1@msn.com]  
Cc:  
Subject: Okay, I'm not on the street  
Sent: 6/03 2:00 AM Importance: Normal

I have a propensity for being stupid and forgetful, as you know, and stop smirking, Danny boy. But somehow it turns out for me – well, *sometimes* it does, and this was one time. Sorry for my earlier panicked email. I have found a home...temporarily anyway. I'll call when my phone is completely charged and fill you in. BTW, thanks for the invitation (which I got too late, obviously). I knew I could come to you, but then that would have been too easy, and I never do anything easy. I'll call.



From: Fourforlife@comcast.net

To: BJohnson @ BendersonJohnsonEsq.com

Cc:

Subject: mission accomplished

Sent: 6/03 2:55 AM

Importance: Normal

Thanks for your help. Everything worked out perfect so far. I'll keep you informed, and you keep me in your prayers.

## CHAPTER 2

Lillian hit the “send” button, waited to make sure that her email went through to Dan, and then turned off her laptop and closed it. Her cell phone rang. It was still plugged into the charger and resting on the floor near the outlet. She smiled. He just couldn’t wait until *she* called *him*. She wasn’t certain if she liked the fact that Dan was so worried about her or resented it a little. *Probably both*, she thought as she put the laptop aside and grabbed the cell phone.

“Yes, you impatient pest,” she answered, sitting on the bed and leaning back against the headboard. “You do know it is two o’clock in the morning, right?”

“You can’t do that to me,” Dan responded, “first email me to tell me you had no place to live, then email me to tell me you have a place and you’ll call me later. I’ve had my laptop and cell phone next to my bed the whole time waiting for your next email or call. For all I know, you’ve taken up residence with a traveling circus.”

Lillian smiled. “Would that surprise you?”

“Not at all...but I’d like to know.”

“Okay, here’s my sad story. As you know, I left for Oklahoma three weeks ago to interview a veterinarian who makes holistic potions for sick cattle and who claims to communicate with them through mental telepathy...*all right, Dan, that’s enough, stop laughing*. The truth is I was getting some really strong vibes that she’s for real, but that’s another story...and not the one I was supposed to send to my editor earlier today.

“Anyway, I had left for the airport early in the morning so I didn’t have a chance to say a word to poor Mrs. Snyder about where I was going. I thought I had plenty of time to find another apartment and move out when I got back from Oklahoma, but it turns out that the buyer for her house wanted to close earlier and Mrs. Snyder couldn’t reach me to tell me.”

Lillian took a quick swallow from a bottle of water before finishing. “When I got back to Newtown, I drove down State Street thinking that I’d have the rest of the afternoon to finish the story and email it out to my editor and then I saw the moving van parked outside and two large smelly, sweaty men carrying Mrs. Snyder’s lovely antiques out the door.”

“*That’s* a pretty picture,” Dan commented.

“At first I thought she had died. I was relieved when she came out of the house when she saw me walking down the street. The poor old thing was so upset. First, she has to leave that gorgeous old home that has belonged to her family for hundreds of years to live in the assisted living place, then I wasn’t there and she didn’t know what she was going to do with my things—meager as they are—and most of all, bless her ancient old heart, she was worried sick about where I was going to stay when I got home and the place was empty. I reassured her that I would be fine, and she felt better by the time her son came and drove her off to the Quakers, but I must have put ten years on her life.”

“Living with you for four years has put more than ten years on her life,” Dan offered.

“But let’s get to the point, where the hell are you staying?”

“Here’s the weird part of the story. I went to Starbucks on the corner to get my usual *plain old ordinary coffee*, which always makes them smirk because nobody orders plain coffee that way anymore. I didn’t have enough cash to take the train to New York to stay with you, and my checking account has about twelve dollars in it, barely enough for my coffee at Starbucks, and there’s this blonde woman sitting in a chair in the corner watching me, smiling at me. It took me a good twenty seconds to realize she’s my cousin, Ann, whom I haven’t seen in about twenty years. Turns out she’s moved back to Bucks County and is living in our old family homestead.”

“Your grandparents’ old house?” he asked.

“The same. Remember I told you about five years ago that Ann’s husband died? A heart attack or something and he was only 28. She’s got two kids, a boy and a girl. Well, anyway, I told her my story and she asked me to stay with her. She drove me over to a car rental service and we got a utility van, and she helped me move my stuff from Mrs. Snyder’s and then into her house... or rather her garage at this point.”

“Luck...,” Dan said. “I always say you have the most unbelievable luck.”

Lillian stretched her leg out and winced when the muscles in her hips and back protested. “I’m exhausted and I ache all over from moving my things. And it’s a weird feeling being in this old house again after such a long time, Dan. It was my grandparents’ house, and then my Aunt Helen—Ann’s mom—and her husband moved in for a few years before they moved to Florida. My aunt was always my favorite person in the whole world. I could never believe she was my mother’s sister, and it killed me when I found out she has Alzheimer’s. Ann said she’s in a place now down in Florida where they had moved when I was in college. And now, after all these years, Ann lives here.”

“It sounds like Ann’s had a tough time,” Dan said, his voice softer now as he referred to the death of Ann’s husband and the fact that her mother was ill. “How are her kids?”

Lillian thought the question over. She had just met them for the first time and spent only a few minutes before coming up to her room to settle in. “Her kids seem okay, but you know I’m not crazy about kids—except your gorgeous, brilliant daughter, of course. I’ll have to put up with them temporarily until I can find my own place. First I need to email my article to my editor, get a check for it, and then I’ll be free to live wherever I want again.”

Dan started to reiterate that she should come to his apartment, but she interrupted. She was too tired for that argument.

“Did I say I feel weird being in this house again? There are good memories here, like all the times I was here with Ann and my aunt and uncle and grandparents. But then there are some pretty sick memories that I would prefer never to remember.”

“Lillian...”

“No, please, Dan,” she groaned, “not tonight. I...”

“I was going to say that maybe it’s good you’re there. Maybe you could exorcise those bad memories.”

“You mean exorcise my *demons*,” she laughed now.

“And then move on with your life,” he continued.

“I’m forty-two, Danny boy, if I haven’t exorcised those demons by now, I probably never will.”

He was silent then, and she pictured his thoughtful blue eyes and knew he was thinking unspoken wishes. “Hey,” she said.

“Hey,” he answered.

“My demons go away when I’m around you.”

“You *are* a demon when you’re around me,” he answered, his voice lightening, suggestive.

“All right, that’s enough... anyway, you can stop worrying. I have a roof over my head, I haven’t become the first and only homeless person to sleep in the park in Newtown, Pennsylvania, and I’m fed and fine. I’ll call you tomorrow. Luckily, Ann has the same type of cell phone, and she’s letting me use her charger.”

“Be a good girl, Lillian,” Dan said, “be nice to your cousin and her kids.”

“Aren’t I always good?” she answered, huffing. “Haven’t I always been nice?”

“No.”

She chuckled, “Tomorrow, Dan.”

“Tomorrow...call my office. I’m meeting with a new author whose book I’m going to edit.”

Lillian agreed but neither one of them hit the end button on their cells. They sat in silence connected by their phones, and it always surprised her that whether in person or over the phone, silence was very comfortable with Dan. He always refused to be the first to hang up, and she always protested, but it made her feel safe.

“You first,” she said at last.

“No ... you.”

“You’re such a child!” she laughed. “All right, good night,” and she flipped the phone closed.

She looked around the room. Except for the curtains, everything in the room was exactly as it had been when she was a child and came to visit the house. It was the same room she’d always slept in when she stayed with her grandparents and later when she visited her aunt. It had been the same room her mother and aunt had shared as little girls growing up.

When she was a young teenager, she spent many nights sleeping in this room when her aunt would ask her to baby sit for Ann who was five years younger than she. Ann would beg to sleep in the wrought iron bed with her and then nag Lillian to tell her elaborate ghost stories, which Lillian would do, but always after feigning great annoyance. An accomplished storyteller even then, Lillian would make the stories very scary until Ann would start to whimper in fear

and pull her sheet all the way up to her round terrified blue eyes, and then Lillian would give the story a silly ending, and Ann would giggle and complain all at the same time that it really wasn't the right ending.

They would snuggle down under the luxurious lavender satin comforter that was always on that bed, and Ann would fall asleep with her little blonde head on Lillian's shoulder. Lillian would experience a tenderness and gentle contentment when next to her sleeping little cousin—a unique experience for her. She always slept well in that room. The loneliness that was such a constant companion for most of her childhood—most of her life in general—would always seem very far away in that room with her little cousin next to her.

But that all seemed to be a million years ago, in a lifetime Lillian had chosen to get away from at her first opportunity.

Lillian sat on the edge of the bed and glazed into the oil painting on the wall above the headboard. It was an inexpensive old pastoral that some unknown Bucks County artist had painted early in the 1900s and her grandmother had bought at an art fair and hung in her daughter's room.

*If I've ever really been happy as a kid, it was probably here in this room...*

She heard a very tentative knock on the door. "I'm up, come on in," she said.

Ann opened the door a little. "Can't you sleep?"

"I haven't tried. I just finished sending an email. I had to finish my article and email it to my editor. You have no idea how happy I am that you have wireless. When I first walked into the house this evening, with all the same furniture in place and so little seemed to have changed, I felt like I had stepped into a time machine and sent back to before PCs were even a twinkle in Bill Gate's eyes."

Ann smiled. “It may seem like it’s the only change I’ve made, but there are some others.”

“Yeah, I noticed the flat screen TVs, too.”

“Gotta have the technology along with the antiques or I’d go crazy,” Ann said, her blue eyes shining. Her short blond hair was in soft shiny ringlets all over her head, and it gave her a waiflike appearance. Lillian remembered that Ann’s naturally blonde hair was always thick and long, but never curly. The short curly hair was probably why Lillian had taken so long to recognize Ann in Starbucks, that and the fact that she hadn’t seen her for so many years. So much had happened to both of them during that time.

Ann had married, had two kids, a boy and a girl, and became widowed—all before the age of thirty-seven. She’d owned two homes in two different states before moving back into this one. And by the look of things, she was pretty comfortable financially—with a Mercedes in the garage and wearing an outfit that would look at home on Fifth Avenue in New York, on a body that was fashionably trim like every other upper crust woman Lillian had known.

Very little had changed for Lillian in contrast. She wrote, she was single; she didn’t have the proverbial pot to piss in. She was fifteen—sometimes twenty—pounds overweight. She traveled for whatever magazine she wrote for. But she never moved forward in life. She was still writing the same novel she had started eight years before.

An awkward silence fell in the room. They both started to speak at the same time, then both stopped, then laughed a little nervously. Ann spoke again, “It’s a little noisy here in the mornings when I’m getting the kids ready for camp. We’ll try to stay as quiet as possible, but I can’t make you any promises.”

“Don’t worry about me,” Lillian smiled.

“Well, I just wanted you to be forewarned.”

“Thanks, I’ll sleep with the pillow over my ears,” Lillian quipped. “I’m sorry I didn’t have much time to get to know your kids this evening. It was nice of your friend to keep them for dinner so you could help me move out of my apartment. They seemed like very nice little guys when they came in to the room to meet me. It’s too bad I was in the middle of writing the article and couldn’t chat with them.”

Ann grinned and leaned against the antique oak dresser against the wall, “They *are* good kids. You’ll have more time with them tomorrow when they get home from camp.”

Lillian could tell that Ann wanted to say more but was hesitating. Ann had a very serious look on her face, as though she was struggling with how to proceed with what she wanted to say or ask. Lillian wished she wouldn’t try. She wasn’t up for any heavy conversations. She got off the bed and started to pull the bedspread off the pillows hoping it would give Ann the hint. It worked. Ann stood up straight and said, “Well, have a good night’s sleep.”

“Thanks,” Lillian answered.

Ann went to the door and then turned back. “Lilly...”

Lillian’s back was to her cousin still bent over the bed covers, and she closed her eyes thinking *here it comes...the talk...the questions.*

“Lilly, I just want to tell you that you’re welcome to stay here as long as you want.”

“Thanks.”

“I’m not just saying it. I’d love to have you stay...indefinitely.”

“Thanks .... *really*. I appreciate your saying that, but,” Lillian shrugged, “you know...I really need my own place. I keep weird hours – sometimes I write all night long, then sleep all

day, then write again all night. I'd wear out my welcome fast. I actually couldn't keep a roommate in college. I drove them all nuts."

Ann looked down at her hands. "You won't drive me nuts, Lilly. I can't tell you how much I've missed you all these years."

Lillian started to unbutton her shirt quickly. "God, I'm tired. I don't think I'll even bother to try to find my night clothes in the suitcase. I'm exhausted."

Ann pulled her bottom lip in with her teeth, and looked away. "Right... I'll see you in the morning. Good night."

Lillian didn't answer, afraid that saying "good night" would perpetuate the conversation. She kept her back to Ann and a few seconds later heard the door close. She sighed and leaned forward on the bed watching her hands turn red and her knuckles white with the pressure of her body against the mattress.

*I have to find a place tomorrow, she thought. This is not good. This is definitely not good for me.*

She climbed in between the sheets and pulled the pillow under her chin. She looked around the room again. She could almost hear her aunt's voice...her grandfather's laugh...*her mother's footstep on the stairs*. "God, no," she whispered aloud, closing her eyes as her heart pounded in her chest. "I can't stay here for more than a few days."

True to what Ann had said the night before, Lillian was awakened by the voices of children trying to be quiet yet whispering loudly back and forth through the hallway outside Lillian's room. Toilets flushed ... water ran through the ancient pipes ... a glass clanged in a

sink ... a door closed ... a shoe dropped ... footsteps sounded on the staircase then disappeared as little feet rushed down to the lower floor.

Lillian stretched and arched her back then turned on her side, slipping back to sleep until she heard a car motor and tires drive down the long gravel driveway a half an hour later.

She decided to pull herself up out of the bed, and as she did, she realized that she had slept quite well considering it was her first night in a strange bed. Not so strange, she thought, looking back down at it. New mattress and box spring, of course, but very familiar all the same. The whole room was familiar. It worried her. She didn't want it to be. This room was in a past she had no desire to return to.

Perhaps she hadn't moved forward much, but backward was not an option. No reminiscing for her. Her past was not a place that gave her comfort; she never longed for her childhood. On the contrary, she dreaded remembering most of it.

After using the bathroom and washing quickly, she pulled her red hair up into a clip, threw on shorts and a tee shirt and went down to the kitchen. The coffeemaker was on and the carafe was full, and she smiled when she saw that Ann had left an oversized mug beside the coffee maker as a message that she was welcome to help herself to as much as she wanted.

She poured the strong fragrant coffee into the mug and took a long drink, throwing her head back as she swallowed. It's good, she thought happily. Thank God ... a good cup of coffee. Is there anything better than that first sip of coffee in the morning? She couldn't think of anything at that moment.

She opened the door of the kitchen and stepped out onto the path that led to an herb garden surrounded by well-groomed boxwood hedges. The day was already hot and the July sun was just peaking through the lower leaves of the trees surrounding the property. The insects

were loud—always a sign of a hot summer day. Lillian looked out at the back lawn, which hadn't changed much at all since her grandparents owned the house. At the very end of the property, down at the bottom of a long graceful slope, stood an ancient willow tree with its soft drooping branches just barely touching the Delaware Canal. A green film had formed over the dark water at one spot just beneath a gazebo that overlooked the quiet ribbon of water. Her grandfather had built the gazebo with his own hands when he was still a young man and a newlywed. It was his contribution to the property that was his through marriage to his wife. It had been in her family for generations dating back to the American Revolution, and although he could afford to build a new home for himself and his wife, he agreed that it should remain in the family. But from the very start of their marriage, he made the property his own by adding the gazebo first, then an addition to the old stone building, and a three car garage in what had been the carriage house. Seventy years later, the gazebo remained overlooking the canal and the river beyond it.

Tears sprang to Lillian's eyes and she was annoyed that this scene could elicit such strong memories. "Granddad's gazebo," she said aloud. How she had loved being in that gazebo when she was a child. How happy to play with her dolls as a tiny girl, pretending to have tea parties with her grandmother and Aunt Helen, who wasn't married yet and had always made Lillian feel as though she was the light of her aunt's life. And Granddad fussing with the garden around the structure, which was painted white and green, pulling weeds and swearing quietly under his breath whenever he found anything awry, then apologizing to his wife, daughter, and granddaughter with a crooked smile. His silver hair would stick out from under his baseball cap as though he always needed a haircut, and his old jeans were always too baggy around his backside.

Looking at the gazebo made Lillian feel lightheaded and breathless.

She wanted to turn back into the house, but her eyes stayed on the gazebo while she remembered a summer day when she was a little older. Her aunt had been married and had given birth to Ann. Lillian was rocking Ann in her baby carriage while her aunt sat in an Adirondack chair reading a book, tanning her legs and arms, and smiling up at them from time to time. “Do you still love me, Aunt Helen, now that you have Annie?” she had asked.

“I love you more than ever, darling, Lilly,” her aunt called back. “You were my first baby, remember that.”

“I was my mommy’s first baby,” Lillian corrected her.

Aunt Helen laughed in that throaty way of hers. “You were *all of our* first baby – the first one of the next generation is always the most special forever. And on top of that you are Annie’s much older, much wiser cousin. She’ll look up to you, and she’ll want to be just like you.”

Satisfied that she hadn’t been displaced by her little cousin, Lillian went back to rocking the carriage and feeling very special that she was the first one of the next generation as well as the very older, very wiser big cousin. This scenario played out often the summer after Ann was born, because Lilly just wanted to make sure it was true, and Aunt Helen never tired of answering.

On those summer days, Grandma would bring out blueberry pie, vanilla ice cream and Coca Cola and they would all eat and drink the sweet dark syrupy soda, shaded from the sun by the roof of the gazebo, listening to Aunt Helen’s transistor radio. Sometimes they would dance to the songs, which were now not just oldies, but *classic golden* oldies. They would bounce and gyrate and do the Mashed Potato and the Bristol Stomp... Grandma, Aunt Helen, and Lillian ...

while Granddad would watch from the gazebo step, the cola bottle in his hand, shaking his head as though all his women had gone crazy.

Then Grandma would pretend to be tired and gather up the purple stained dishes and glasses and say she had to go into the house to get dinner started. Uncle Tim would be home from work in a couple of hours and expect his dinner ready. Aunt Helen would agree, pick up baby Ann from the carriage, kiss her round little cheek, and carry her into the house following behind Grandma to change her baby and dress her in a pretty little dress for when her daddy would come home.

Then Grandma would call out, “Come on, Lillian, your parents will be here soon.”

The words that would make the magical moments disappear. For Granddad, too.

She always thought he looked as disappointed as she felt, and she’d go and sit on the step next to him. He’d put his arm around her shoulders and pull her close to his side. He smelled of clean sweat and earth after working in the garden, and she loved the way the scent clung to him like perfume. She liked it better than her mother’s cologne.

Hearing Ann’s car drive up to the front of the house now brought all the memories full circle – and the happy fullness in her chest turned just as stone cold now as it would when she’d hear her parents’ Impala pull into the driveway at the end of those summer days when they’d come to get her to bring her home to their house just a few miles away. She was rarely ever there by the time big, smiling Uncle Tim got home from his work at the bank. Her parents always picked her up before then. She hated the sound of those tires on the gravel driveway.

The magic of the morning’s memory was gone for Lillian now as it had been then, and so she turned to go back into the kitchen.

Ann was there and smiled. “You found the coffee.”

“I did, and thanks. I can’t function without it first thing in the morning.”

“Did we wake you this morning?” Ann asked, pouring herself a mug full of coffee.

“Yeah, but I fell back to sleep. I’m going out to the van to get some more clothes.”

“Need help?”

Lillian looked at Ann again and realized that she looked even thinner today in her light weight running suit than she did the day before. “No, thanks, you don’t look strong enough to carry anything.”

“Hey,” Ann protested, sitting down at the kitchen table, “I did a good job yesterday, didn’t I? I’m just wiry.”

More like a pipe cleaner, Lillian thought, wondering if Ann had an eating disorder as she walked out the front door toward the small moving van. There were only a few pieces of furniture in there as most of the furniture in her apartment at Mrs. Snyder’s belonged to the house.

She had a desk, some file cabinets, two chairs, three lamps, and boxes of office supplies that she had learned to keep on hand so she never ran out just when she needed to get an article finished. She also had an antique set of china that had belonged to her grandmother, a beautiful porcelain tea set she had purchased on one of her writing trips in Europe, and miss-matched glassware and flatware.

Lillian reached into the back of the van and pulled out a box full of clothing, thinking that she’d keep the van another day in the event that she found another place right away. She could borrow the money from Dan. She dropped the box in the foyer at the bottom of the staircase and looked around more carefully now than she had the evening before when she came in.

The house was the same; and it was different. Her aunt's furniture had been replaced with newer period reproductions that matched the character of the old house, yet they were more comfortable and updated. Deep emerald greens, mixed with light shaded earth tones decorated the large living room. A pastoral scene painted in oils hung over the stone fireplace and the raised stone hearth looked as if it had been repaired very recently. But the old pumpkin pine floors were covered with the huge oval braided rugs she remembered so well from her childhood, and some of the lamps and tables—a little scarred, and seeming smaller than she remembered them—were scattered about the room.

“Some of these older pieces were in the attic,” Ann explained, coming into the room with her own coffee mug in her hand. She had noticed that Lillian was fingering one of the tables. “I think they belonged to Grandma.”

“Your mother used them, too.”

“Until my wedding, then she bought all new furniture to spruce the place up.”

“Oh...” Lillian answered, feeling guilt at the mention of Ann's wedding. Ann had written to Lillian in California where Lillian was working at the time, asking her to be her Maid of Honor. The day after receiving the letter, Ann bought an airline ticket to South Korea. She waited a week, then answered the letter with one of her own, saying she had been assigned a story by a news magazine and would be over there for more than a year. “Sorry I can't make the wedding. Have an extra glass of champagne for me,” she had written, “and send me a picture.”

She had sent the bride and groom a port wine set – a green glass carafe and tiny glasses hand-painted with gold leaf. Then she never contacted Ann again – no Christmas cards, no birthday cards, no letters or phone calls. She never answered any of Ann's correspondence, until finally Ann stopped writing.

Lillian had no idea if any of her family ever wondered if the article she was supposed to have written for Newsweek was never published, or if they even bought Newsweek to read it. She lived in South Korea for a short time, flew to London from there, and lived from hand to mouth from small freelance writing assignments. She saved just enough to fly back to New York, where she lived with a friend briefly until she could manage her own apartment in Queens and lived there for several years. In all that time, she never tried to reach Ann. She didn't come home for funerals or birthdays or anniversaries. Family stopped sending invitations.

Lillian looked back at Ann now. Ann's face was still as sweet as it was when Lillian had last seen her cousin all those years ago. Ann had been about seventeen then and Lillian calculated that she'd be about thirty-seven now. There were fine lines around her cousin's eyes, and a sadness that had faded the blue lights that had always shone in Ann's eyes. These were not the eyes of the innocent, friendly young girl that Lillian remembered. These were old eyes in a still young face – a little thinner, delicately lined, but still a very pretty face.

“So many things have happened since the last time we saw each other,” Lillian began. “I'm sorry about Larry, Ann. Your father wrote me about it after the funeral. . . I should have sent a sympathy card or something, but I'm . . . well . . . oh shit . . . I'm thoughtless, you know that.”

Ann smiled. “Don't worry about it.”

“He died of a heart attack?” Lillian asked, not sure.

Ann shook her head, “A pulmonary embolism...sudden, quick, and deadly.”

“You were going to tell me how you ended up back here in this house,” Lillian said.

Ann sipped her coffee. “I missed my home, that's all. Right after Larry died, I wanted to come back, but I felt I had to stay in New Jersey to keep things as much the same as possible

for the children. Then I wasn't well myself for awhile and had to get over that. But I really couldn't wait to come home."

"How were you able to get back this house, though? I thought it was rented or something."

Ann hesitated, seemed to search for just the right words, then said "One morning I woke up, decided what I wanted to do, drove from Jersey directly to this old house, walked up to the front door, rang the bell, told them who I was, and offered them cash if they would allow me to break the lease. My parents had given me the deed years ago. As luck would have it—and believe me it was pure unadulterated luck—the husband was being transferred to Des Plaines, Illinois, and they took the money and ran. They have no kids . . . she's a pharmaceutical sales rep and didn't seem to care about moving . . . and within a month I was back at Willow Wood Farm."

Lillian shook her head. "Amazing . . . really. If I wrote that in a novel, the editors would say it's too unbelievable."

"Fact is stranger than fiction," Ann laughed, using one of Lillian's own mother's maxims. It made Lillian feel nostalgic and annoyed all at the same time.

"This is a pretty big place for just the three of you. How many bedrooms? Six?"

"And five bathrooms," Ann added with a grimace. "But I don't care. The kids love running around in it. It's a grand place, Lillian."

And now Lillian smiled. *It is a grand place*, she thought. A grand place that had sheltered many grand families—most of whom were their grandmother's ancestors. Aunt Helen wanted to live here after she married so that she could take care of her aging parents, and she did so with great kindness and patience. Uncle Tim was as nice as any man Lillian could remember

from her childhood. Lillian spent as much time as possible in that house with her favorite relatives. She was there the day her grandmother died, and slept in the bedroom she had slept in the night before with her mother throughout the wake and funeral. Although Lillian's family lived only five miles away themselves, Lillian's mother, Regina, seemed to need to stay in the house while she grieved for her mother.

The sisters were close, though Lillian could never understand why. Aunt Helen was the antithesis of Regina, who was bitter, cold, and always dissatisfied with everything around her. Regina could turn angry in a second, and Lillian avoided her mother's moods as much as she could. Her father eased things only a little because he himself did nothing that would raise the ire of his harridan of a wife – even if it meant letting her demean their child. Lillian sometimes wondered if she hated him more for his lack of protection than she did her mother for her biting tongue and stinging palm.

“I always loved this house,” Lillian said to Ann, pushing the bitter memory aside. She pressed her lips together for a minute before saying, “You're lucky to be living in it now, though it's probably not quite the same without Aunt Helen and Uncle Tim, is it?”

The sadness returned to Ann's eyes. “No, it isn't.”

“How is Aunt Helen?” Lillian asked, suspecting that she really didn't want to know the answer.

“Worse,” Ann answered. “She doesn't know who I am at all, let alone my children. She thinks I'm one of her nurses or sometimes she thinks I'm an old neighbor. If I'm very lucky, she thinks I'm her mother and she wants me to rock her, which I love doing. I miss her terribly. I long for her gentleness, her sage advice. She was always such a gentle woman with good

common sense.” She managed a weak smile and tried to sound a little lighter when she said, “Alzheimer’s is the pits.”

Lillian nodded and the news made her feel angry and depressed. “How come the nice guys always have to suffer?”

“She’s not suffering—not really,” Ann told Lillian. “We who love her are. But she is not, though at the beginning she railed against it. Daddy takes wonderful care of her. He visits every day for hours. He has not abandoned her as some men might. I’m so proud of him for it, yet I worry about his mental health. It can’t be easy for him. I haven’t been able to visit lately. As I said, I hadn’t been well, and then with the kids it’s hard to travel. Joey goes down whenever he has a break at school.”

“Joey . . .” Lillian said.

“Yes, my brother is in graduate school in Boston now, you know. He’d like to be an architect, but first he’s thinking he’d like to teach, maybe be an assistant professor next year when he gets his Masters degree.”

“That’s great,” Lillian said, too quickly, then lowered her eyes, and grabbed the box she had dropped earlier. “I have to take this upstairs,” she said, then quickly followed with, “not for long. I’m going to look for an apartment today.”

Ann frowned. “It’s hard to believe you forgot you had to move.”

“Yeah, well, I forget a lot of things. A friend of mine says I’m self-absorbed and self-centered, and I can’t see beyond my own nose.”

“Oh? Is this a *good* friend?” Ann asked, smiling.

“Yeah, actually, he is my best friend. But that’s another story.” Lillian turned and started up the steps with the box. “I’m glad you live here, Annie. I hope you’re happy here.”

“I would love it if you’d stay. You can stay as long as you like. Actually, Lillian, you’re welcome to move in with me permanently. As you, yourself, mentioned, there’s plenty of room, the kids would love having someone other than me around, and it would be fun to reminisce about the old days.”

“No, but thank you,” Lillian said, knowing that she sounded too sharp and her smile was too forced. “I’ll probably see you in town all the time, though. We’ll meet for coffee. I’ll let you know where I wind up.”

Ann followed her and persisted. “Lillian, please. I mean it. I need you.”

Lillian turned back, puzzled, and the box slipped a little from her arm.

“I mean, I’m a little lonely in the house,” Ann told her. “It would be nice to have you here, too; it would be so nice to get to know you again. We only have each other, Lillian ... and Joey. No other siblings or cousins. Couldn’t we become reacquainted?”

Living in this house was an answer for Lillian, and Lillian knew it. She didn’t want to move back to New York yet. She wasn’t ready to move in with Dan. She had nowhere else to go, and she did love this old house. There were some warm memories for her here. But there were other kinds of memories, too. Could she be as adept at keeping them at bay as she had been doing for so many years while living in Newtown? She knew she couldn’t.

Yet, she felt drawn to this house...to this cousin she used to love dearly.

“You’re sure I wouldn’t be a ...”

Ann smiled warmly. “Oh, no, you would only be welcome, Lilly . . . truly.”

She leaned the box against the rail and looked down at her cousin again. “I guess I could stay ... for a little while.”

Lillian was certain she was misreading the look in her cousin's blue eyes, but she could have sworn she saw relief in them, relief and happiness.

“I'm thrilled, Lilly. I really am. We'll celebrate tonight. I'll have a pot roast with gravy and mashed potatoes and carrots.”

Ann turned quickly and walked back into the kitchen, while Lillian wondered how her cousin, whom she hadn't seen in more than fifteen years, would remember that pot roast with mashed potatoes and carrots was Lillian's very favorite dinner.

### CHAPTER 3

Lillian put the box down in a corner of her bedroom. She took some of her makeup and toiletries out of the box and brought them into the bathroom that was adjacent to the bedroom, and although the fixtures were old in the room, they were in perfect condition. They reminded her of Mrs. Snyder's house. There was a white sturdy looking pedestal sink, and a clawed bathtub where a shower had been added. And of course, a commode, which Lillian was happy to see was new.

She was more depressed about moving out of Mrs. Snyder's than she thought she'd be. For what it was worth, those four rooms in that lovely old house on State Street was the closest thing to a home she'd had since she moved out of her parents' home when she was nineteen years old.

But as she came out of the bathroom here in her ancestors' old stone house, she looked around in the early morning light and smiled. Ann entered the room with a box she'd taken from the van.

"Why are you smiling like that?" Ann asked now while Lillian stood in the threshold of the room.

"I'm remembering an annoying little brat who always wanted to stay up all night but could never make it past midnight."

"I did too!" Ann frowned, and placed the carton on the bed. "I always stayed awake. You were the one who used to drowse."

"Taking care of you was exhausting," Lillian threw back, smiling and walking to the front window of the bedroom. It looked out over the circular drive, down at the magnolia tree and garden beneath it. She always wanted to be married out of this house, when she was a little

girl and still believed in white knights who rescued damsels. She dreamed that this would be where she married, here at Willow Wood Farm, and not out of her own parents' house only a few miles away.

“Nothing’s the same, yet everything’s the same,” Lillian mused. “That magnolia tree is ancient, but the garden beneath is all different. The gravel drive is paved now, but it follows the same exact route—around, in front of the door, back to the driveway where you can go right to leave or left to the garage.”

“Can I help you unpack?” Ann asked her.

“No, I’ll take care of it.”

“Good, because I have some food shopping to do. Will you make a list of the things you like to eat and drink and whatever else you need?”

“I can go with you,” Lillian offered.

“No, that’s not necessary,” Ann answered hastily. “I have another appointment first. I’ll just stop on my way back.”

Lillian shrugged and bent over the box. “Okay, I’ll think about what I want. But, Ann, I don’t have any money right now to give you for my share of the food. I should receive a check for the article I sent last night, but in the meantime...”

“Lillian, please don’t worry about it. I’m just so happy to have you here with me.”

“Well, I’ll have to give you...”

“Sure, later on. We’ll work all that out later on,” Ann said and backed out of the room and started down the staircase.

“Ann,” Lillian called coming to the doorway. “I haven’t said thank you. It isn’t that I’m not grateful, I am. Just a little surprised to be here I guess. I do want to thank you, though.”

Ann's smile was thin but warm. "Well, I can't have my cousin the only homeless person walking the streets of Newtown now, can I?"

loved it, and Lillian knew that the stories she told made her seem very glamorous and exotic to them. That suited her. Most of the stories she wrote were benign, fluffy and anything but journalism—like following a house-call-making veterinarian who did Reiki over cattle—but, hell, the kids didn't have to know that. She liked playing the role of idol for a change.

And she knew that it wouldn't last long. She'd be "found out" eventually.

"I loved your article about the Monarch butterflies that you wrote for **Women's World,**" Ann said.

Lillian was surprised and pleased that her cousin had read it and remembered it. It was barely 350 words...a little blurb. "You saw that?"

"Of course . . ."

"I'm impressed."

"I wish I could find more of your articles. You jump around so much, I never know what magazine to subscribe to. One time you've written an article about makeovers, and the next your work is in a healthcare journal. I can't always find you."

"I didn't know you were looking," Lillian said, taking a last forkful of the lemon cake they had for dessert.

"Always," Ann answered, standing and picking up the dishes. "You are the *famous* person in the family."

The children were looking at Lillian with renewed interest after their mother's statement.

"Are you rich?" Philip asked then.

Lillian laughed, suddenly thinking that being here with these kids wouldn't necessarily be such an awful thing. "I'm *famous*, and that's got to be good enough 'cause God knows I'm not rich."

Philip wasn't as interested after hearing that, but Suzy was still wide-eyed. "Will you write stories while you're living here with us?"

"I had better. That's how I earn money as little as it is."

"So, that means," Ann said to her children, "that when we tell you that Lilly is writing, you have to be quiet and leave her alone."

"I promise," Suzy said, her face serious with the importance of having a famous relative who would be writing articles in her house.

"Whatever," shrugged Philip again.

"Writing runs in the family, I think," said Ann from the kitchen where she was stacking dishes near the dishwasher.

"It does?" Lillian asked. "I don't remember anyone else in the family who wrote."

"Ah, but there were," Ann corrected her, coming back into the dining room to gather more dishes. Lillian stood up to help now, while the kids ran outside into the yard. "When I was in the attic looking for the old furniture, I found an old blanket chest, and it was filled with handwritten papers, several tied together like separate manuscripts, and there are lots of letters that date back to the late 1700s."

"Get out of here!"

Ann laughed. "I thought that would pique your interest."

"How did they survive? I mean, this house was owned by strangers for a few years. How come they didn't get rid of the furniture and the chest?"

Ann shrugged, “I don’t know. I guess they knew the antiques might be worth something, maybe the letters are, too. When I moved into the house, I went to Doylestown—to the Spruance Library where all the historical papers and records are kept—and I looked up all sorts of information about the house. The main part, here where the kitchen is, is very old. There’s a book called the History of Bucks County, Pennsylvania, that was written by a General Davis—I think he was a general during the Civil War—and our family name is mentioned all over the place. We had ancestors that fought in the Revolution, the French and Indian War, the War of 1812, and the Civil War. But this house seems to have been handed down through our mothers’ family and their maternal line. It got so confusing that I just gave up.”

“Okay, now *that’s* amazing,” Lillian said sitting down at the kitchen table and looking around the room with renewed interest.

“I haven’t had time to read the papers and letters in the chest, but I’m sure they fill in the gaps.”

“Well, *yeah*, I guess so...is there a lot in there?”

Ann was very pleased to have her cousin’s complete attention and she smiled slyly when she turned from the dishwasher to answer. “You bet there is; there are *lots*. Journals, letters, sketches, photos...it would take months to read them all.”

Lillian walked over to the screen door to watch the kids running around in the yard catching fireflies, but her mind was on the attic.

“Can I go up to look?”

“Lilly, this is your house now, too. It’s *our* ancestral home so don’t ask me what you can and can’t do in it. However, I suggest that you do it in daylight because there’s this one bulb that doesn’t give off much light, and I think there may be things up there.”

“What kind of things?”

“Spiders at the very least...but I suspect that there are bats.”

“Oh, come on, you’d know if there were bats,” Lillian chided her. “Wouldn’t you?”

Ann shrugged again and made a face. “Go up in the morning, that’s all I’m saying. It’s really creepy up there at night.”

There *were* bats. Lillian couldn’t wait until morning. She grabbed a flashlight and ran up the first flight of steps, down the hall passed the bedrooms, and up five more steps to the attic door. Just as Lillian opened the old oak door to the third story of the house, one of the “things” Ann mentioned opened its wings and flew at her flashlight. She slammed the door shut with a scream and fell back down three steps, landing with one leg up the steps and one against the wall. She didn’t breath for a moment, looked around her to make sure the bat hadn’t escaped through the door, and then relaxed.

That took care of exploring the attic until the exterminator arrived.

## CHAPTER FOUR

The first few weeks that Lillian lived with her cousin were tolerable, if not perfect. There were adjustments that had to be made in all their lives and attitudes. The first week they existed on what could be called a “honeymoon,” with everyone on their best behavior and tiptoeing around each other. But by the end of the second week that had worn thin.

Lillian slept late in the morning, because she sat up late into the night writing. She found the noise of children getting ready for school in the morning annoying, and although she tried not to show it and said nothing, she knew her mood was dark when she entered the kitchen at noon each day, looking for coffee rather than lunch. At first, Ann would greet her with a big, happy grin, but before long, she just let Lillian come down, pour herself a cup of coffee, and sit alone at the table while Ann cleaned and straightened up in the rest of the house.

After the second cup of coffee, Lillian would come around and help Ann dust, vacuum, and whatever else needed to be done. She never mentioned the noise in the morning, and Ann never mentioned it either. Lillian did notice that after the first week, Ann stopped hushing the children as they rushed around in the morning. It was useless anyway.

Ann came down one night to make herself a cup of tea while Lillian was still working on her computer in the library on the first floor. It was nearly 2 a.m.

“Don’t you get tired?” Ann asked from the doorway.

Lillian shrugged.

“Do you want a cup of tea?”

“No,” Lillian answered, clicking away on the keyboard.

“Why don’t you write during the day and sleep at night?”

“You mean like *normal* people?” Lillian asked, knowing that there was an edge to her voice but unable to soften it.

It took a long time for Ann to answer, but when she did, her tone was gentle. “I’m just asking, Lilly. I was just curious.”

“Because I don’t do anything else all day, so why don’t I write *then*? This way, your kids wouldn’t bother me in the morning, because I’d be awake like the rest of the world.”

Ann backed away from the doorway. “Good night.”

Lillian didn’t answer. She heard Ann moving around the kitchen and then listened to her footsteps on the staircase. She knew that Ann would check on each of the kids in their rooms, before going back to her own bedroom. Ann never closed her door, and Lillian wondered why every night when she passed Ann’s room and went to her own. How can anyone sleep with their door wide open? Doesn’t everyone close their bedroom doors, for God’s sake?

It was during the third week that Ann asked Lillian to baby sit. “If you could just get them off the bus at the end of the driveway, give them their snack, and get them started on their homework, I’d really appreciate it.”

“Where are you going?” Lillian asked. This was not part of the deal, and she didn’t want to start a precedent by saying yes. Lillian lived with them, but they weren’t her kids and she didn’t ever want to be “stuck” with them.

“Philadelphia . . . I have an appointment there and I’m afraid I won’t be home in time.”

Lillian thought it over a long minute. “All right . . . this time. But Ann, I really don’t want to be saddled with babysitting on a regular basis. Your kids are great – really they are – but

I'm not ... I don't know ... into the kid thing. They bore the hell out of me. Not yours only, all kids. They just don't have anything to say that I care to listen to."

Ann smiled at Lillian. It was a small, sad smile.

"Is this going to be a problem?" Lillian pursued. "I mean, have I offended you now?"

Ann shook her head and sighed. "No, Lilly, it's okay. Just for today ... all right?"

"Sure, no problem. Bus ... snack ... homework ... I can handle it today. Are you driving to Phili?"

"I'll get the train in Yardley," Ann answered, pulling an old sweater she was wearing closer around her. "I hate driving I-95."

Lillian watched Ann as she placed her coffee mug in the dishwasher, and wiped the counter top.

"You're losing weight ... no wonder you're always cold. Are you feeling all right?"

Ann smiled over her shoulder, "I'm good."

They looked into each other's eyes for a brief moment, and Lillian thought Ann's eyes were a little too bright, tearful almost. "You're sure?" she asked her cousin, sorry now that she had given Ann a hard time about taking care of the kids.

But Ann laughed a little, turning her face away. "I'm sure, Lilly." She finished wiping the counter and put the sponge in the sink. "But I'm late. I've got to go get dressed."

Lillian detected an uncharacteristic moodiness in Ann, but she shrugged it off after Ann left the kitchen. She's been through a lot, Lillian thought. It only stands to reason that she'd get into moods. Yet it bothered Lillian. She had come to rely on Ann's perpetual optimism in contrast to her own lack of cheeriness.

*We love having you here with us, Lilly ... it's an honor to have you set up your office in the library and write your masterpieces there ... the kids adore you, you know ... they look up to you the way I always did as a kid ... you're a brilliant writer ... you're wonderful with the children ... you make me laugh, and I never thought I'd laugh again—not really laugh ... remember when Grandma ... remember when Granddad ... remember when my mother ... remember when your father ...*

At first, Lillian was wary of all of Ann reminiscences. She waited for Ann to move into dangerous waters, but Ann always spoke of the gentler memories—the memories that didn't hit Lillian in the gut. And Ann rarely mentioned Lillian's mother, in fact she didn't mention her parents much at all. If she did, it was always in generalities or just to place everyone in the memory of an event or party.

So, Lillian didn't pack up her things. She stayed in the house that had belonged to their grandparents, becoming firmly ensconced in the day to day uneventful hours of Ann's little family.

I should let her know one of these days, Lillian thought, as she listened to Ann moving around above her on the second floor, that I'm starting to like living here. I have to stop being a bitch—she doesn't deserve it. One of these days I have to start acting like a nice person.

She passed the rest of the day on Granddad's gazebo, drinking diet cola and listening to the frogs jumping into the canal. She brought her laptop out with her and worked on her novel—the one she'd been writing for seven years but never finished. She put it on the wrought iron table, double clicked on the “my documents” icon, and then again on the non-title, “the novel.” She worked for two hours, then the battery died, and since there was no electricity in the gazebo,

she closed the laptop and leaned back on her chair and put her head back until she could look up at the gazebo's ceiling.

The ceiling was an intricate pattern of boards, juxtaposing at odd corners to form a hexagon, the joints covered with perpendicular beams. Where once it had been a beautiful golden color, now it was a silvery gray. Granddad had never painted the inside of the gazebo; just the outside was painted white. It always made the gazebo look a little shabby to Lillian, but no one else seemed to notice or they didn't care. And so it sat on the edge of the canal berm, opposite the graceful willow tree, gray inside and white washed out, surrounded by day lilies, Shasta daisies, and black eyes susans. There were even more plants on the banks of the canal, hostas and ferns and others, the names of which Lilly couldn't remember, and wild vegetation grew along the thin ribbon of canal water.

Dragonflies would land on the vegetation, hover a moment, then whiz away. The area was occupied mostly by frogs, their calls at night could drive people crazy if they weren't used to it, but Lillian wasn't noise conscious. She watched the canal's world in silence, wishing her laptop hadn't died, and feeling the same melancholy she thought she'd seen in Ann earlier in the day.

Then a humming bird appeared from nowhere just beside her head as it explored the bright colored flowers in the basket that hung in the open window of the gazebo—Ann's touch in making the gazebo inviting during the summer months. The humming bird's wings were invisible because of their rapid movement, and it *hummed* from one side to the other side, its long beak supping on the nectar inside each flower.

Lillian was breathless as she watched the pretty little bird—or she believed it was a bird—and she didn't move. Then the hummingbird moved from the flower basket closer to her

to check out her bright red tank top. Its beak pointed at her heart, probably trying to decide if Lillian was a trumpet creeper, and Lillian held her breath as it hovered in front of her. Then it popped up higher, eye to eye with her.

It repositioned itself so quickly, it was dizzying. From Lillian to a flower in the basket, to another flower, to the garden flowers, back to the basket of flowers, and then back to Lillian's red shirt. It came so close Lillian could hear the hum and then felt the tiniest movement of air from its whirling wings.

Lillian held her breath and sat so perfectly still that the muscles in her back started to ache.

*I told my aunt right here in this spot. I told my aunt and I cried. And she cried.*

The humming bird came eye to eye with Lillian again. She thought that it must be her red hair that was attracting the bird at the very same time she was remembering Aunt Helen's pale face, her eyebrows drawn together in anguish, her eyes overflowing with tears, at first showing shock, revulsion, then compassion and sorrow.

Lillian's breath drew in with a sob and the hummingbird started away, turned back a split second, then disappeared. Lillian's chest constricted with another sob, then another...deep, stomach wrenching sobs that she hadn't felt in more than 22 years.

She covered her face with her hands, turned her body to the side in the hard metal chair, and pulled her knees up to her chest. "Aunt Helen," she sobbed, "Oh, God, Aunt Helen."

The kids didn't get off the bus, as Ann had told Lillian they would. She hadn't quite made it up to the end of the driveway when the school bus carrying the campers slowed, then kept going. Lillian panicked, wondering what to do next, when a black Lexus SUV pulled into

the driveway, but Lillian ignored it, still looking after the bus, trying to remember exactly what Ann had told her about the kids getting off the bus. Then she heard Suzy's voice calling from the car.

"Lilly ... it's us. We're in here!"

The relief she felt was tremendous. The car stopped beside her. The automatic window at the driver's side opened and a woman with brightly streaked dark to light hair and a smile with perfectly aligned bright white teeth called out to her.

"Hello, there, you must be Ann's cousin. The kids were just telling me all about you."

Lillian nodded as she realized that Philip and Suzy were jumping out of the car, followed by four more children.

"I'm Monica *Handel*?" It was a statement that sounded more like a question.

*An up-talker*, Lillian thought, and tried to hide her frown.

"Ann's *friend*?" Monica tried again.

Lillian shook her head slightly. She had all she could do not to ask "are you sure?" Instead she held out her hand and said, "I'm Lillian Phelan."

"It's sooo nice to meet you. I hope you don't mind, but I thought I'd bring the kids home from camp myself. I know Ann had an appointment in Philadelphia today, so I wanted to make sure the kids got home okay."

"Don't they usually take the bus?" Lillian asked.

"Well, yes, but ..."

"Were you afraid Ann wouldn't have me meet them at the bus stop?"

"No, of course not, she's so protective of them, but I..."

"You thought I might forget?"

“No...” and now the sunny smile slipped a little from Monica’s face. Ann felt a little guilty about enjoying Monica’s discomfort. Quick to make amends, however, in case it got back to Ann, she said, “Monica, would you like a cold drink?”

The sunny smile was back. “I would love one.”

Lillian led the way into the kitchen, noticing with a glance that the six children ranging in age from about 12 to six were playing in the side yard.

“Ann’s and my kids became fast friends in the spring when she first moved into the area,” Monica explained, “especially Suzy and my Montana.”

“Montana?”

“My daughter ... her name is *Montana*?”

“Oh,” Lillian said, perplexed but concentrating on pouring a diet coke over ice and putting it on the kitchen table in front of where Monica had seated herself.

“You’re a writer, I hear,” Monica said.

“I freelance,” Lillian offered.

“I hear you’re famous.”

“Who did you hear that from?”

“Oh, Suzy’s all abuzz about you. Even Philip talks about you once in a while and you know how quiet Philip is.”

*I didn’t even think Philip knew I existed*, Lillian thought. He barely spoke to her.

“Well, they’re exaggerating. I’m anything but famous,” she said, pouring herself a glass of diet soda now.

“It’s awful about Ann’s husband, isn’t it? It’s really nice of you to move in with her to help her raise the kids.”

Lillian put her glass down and looked carefully at Monica to make sure she understood her meaning. “I’m not here to help Ann with her children. In fact, Ann helped *me* out when the house I was living in was sold. It’s a temporary situation until I can find a place of my own.”

“Oh,” Monica was clearly disappointed. She was looking for more drama in the story of the beautiful young widow and her writer cousin.

“Well, it’s nice she has some company, some family living nearby.”

The children stormed in, Philip leading the way. “Can we have ice pops?”

Lillian shrugged, “I don’t know, can you? Do we have any?”

“They’re in the freezer – we have them every day when we get home.”

Lillian shrugged again, “Then I guess you can have some today.”

Everyone just stood still, and Lillian suddenly realized she was supposed to get up and get the ice pops, which she did.

“I want blue.”

“I want orange.”

“I like the raspberry.”

Little hands were all reaching out at her and she backed up against the fridge, hitting her head lightly on the open freezer door. One of Monica’s kids grabbed the box from her hands and started to hand out the frozen sticks, then threw the box back into her hands and they all ran back out into the garden. All except Suzy, who was looking at Lillian with wide eyes.

“Is your head all right?” she asked.

Lillian rubbed the back of her head. “Yeah, I’m all right.”

“Thank you, Lilly ... for the pop,” Suzy said holding it out as she ripped the cover off before turning to run back outside. She left the white paper, stained and sticky with the remnants of sweet red ice, on the counter.

Lillian left it there and sat down across from Monica, who obviously couldn't stand the paper being left there and stood up, grabbed it, and threw it in the trash can.

*Mommy Lesson Number 1 – throw sticky ice pop papers in garbage*, Lillian thought, rolling her eyes after turning her head away. “Where do you suppose the other kids put their papers?” she asked, knowing that they were probably strewn in the grass in the yard.

Monica ignored the question. “So, are you originally from here too?”

“Born and bred.”

“But you haven't lived here all this time?”

“Actually, I've lived in Newtown for the last four years. I left when I went to college, moved around the world for quite a number of years, lived in New York, then in Boston and Philadelphia. Four years ago I rented an apartment in an ancient brick home in Newtown.”

“The one catty-corner to Starbucks?”

“Yes, that one.”

“I saw that it was sold. Who bought it?”

“I have no idea.”

“Are they going to turn it into another restaurant?”

“I have no idea.”

“I hope not,” Monica said, trying to frown, but her brow didn't move and it fascinated Lillian to see how smooth and unexpressive that brow was. Botox, Lillian thought, frowning herself and feeling satisfied when she felt her skin move.

“We agree on that,” Lillian said, smiling for the first time.

“My husband and I moved here with the kids about a year ago. He was transferred to Princeton and Bucks County seemed like a nice place to raise the children. It’s close enough to where he works.”

*Like I care.* Lillian thought, then bit her lip. “That’s nice. How do you like it here?”

*When the hell is she going to leave?*

“We love it. We came from the Chicago area, which was great, too. But this is a great place. We love the schools. Our oldest son—Dakota—it was a little hard on him. He had to leave all his friends, but the others were young enough to be flexible. Dakota has settled in nicely now.”

“Are you guys originally from the West?”

Monica tried to raise her eyebrows, Lillian could tell by the way her eyelids opened up, but again nothing happened to her brow. “No, why do you ask that?”

“The names of your children...they’re a little, um, Western.”

Monica laughed. “Oh, that ... we just like unusual names. There’s Dakota, Steele, Montana, and Malory.”

Lillian moved her head back and forth at the mention of each name, taking them in. Monica seemed to be expecting a reply, so Lillian said, “Well, they’re probably the only kids in the school with those names. There’s something to be said for that, right?”

“I like the names,” Monica said, sounding a little wounded.

“Oh, yes, I don’t blame you. Very...very...nice names”

They heard Ann's car driving up to the house and her car door closed quickly. She entered the front door, which surprised Lillian as she usually used the kitchen door, and they could hear her go right into the powder room.

Monica looked at Lillian, and Lillian smiled. "I guess she had to go."

Monica smiled back, "I guess so."

A few minutes later, Ann called from the foyer. "Hey," she said, "I'll be right in. I just have to run up to my room for a minute."

*Oh great, make me socialize even longer with this brainless wonder,* Lillian thought, getting up from the table. "More soda?" she asked Monica.

"No, thank you. So what are you writing now?" she asked, looking at the closed laptop on the counter that Lillian had carried in and left before she walked to the end of the driveway to wait for the kids.

"Nothing."

"No articles for a magazine?" Monica persisted.

"No."

"Oh, I get it, you keep it to yourself until it's published," she said and she pressed her lips together and pretended to lock them up.

*Who does that anymore? Who does that?!? I've stepped into a bad Lifetime movie.*

"No, I'm just not writing anything right now. I'm between jobs, which explains why I'm living off my cousin's kindness."

Ann walked in then, and Lillian could tell she had heard. She was pale and tired looking, but she laughed as she stepped into the kitchen. "You aren't living off my kindness," she said, leaning over to kiss Monica's cheek. "What are you doing here?"

“I brought the kids home,” Monica answered, and in Ann’s presence she seemed more relaxed and genuinely happy to see Ann. “I picked up my own and thought I’d give yours a lift, too. I was going to take them all for ice cream but then realized Lillian might worry if they didn’t get off the bus.”

“I *was* worried when they didn’t get off the bus,” Lillian said, remembering how anxious she was when the bus didn’t stop.

“I’m sorry ... but I was right behind the bus. It wasn’t a minute...”

“Thank you for thinking of them,” Ann said with a warm smile. “They hate taking the bus.”

“You look so worn out, Ann,” Monica said.

“And I hate taking the train, almost as much as I hate driving I-95. It exhausts me. I think I’m getting a migraine.”

“Where did you have to go?”

“Center City,” was all she said, then looked into the refrigerator. “I don’t know what to make for dinner tonight.”

“How about a pizza?” Lillian asked. “I’ll drive in to get it. I haven’t had pizza since I moved in with you and I’m craving it.”

Ann straightened and closed the door of the fridge. “Now that’s a good idea.”

Monica stood and put her glass in the sink. “Well, I’d better get the kids and go. You’re reminding me that I have to figure out what to do for dinner myself.” She turned to embrace Ann. “I’ll see you soon.” Lillian noticed that the hug was genuine and warm, and for the tiniest moment, Lillian was almost jealous that Ann seemed so close to this stranger. It occurred to her that she and Ann hadn’t embraced at all, even when they first met in Starbucks.

By the way Ann responded to Monica with quick and genuine affection, it was clear she truly liked her. So that would mean that it was Lillian who must be a cold jerk. She hadn't realized that about herself. She was always affectionate with Dan and his sister Louise and daughter Janice. Or she thought she was.

Monica called out to her kids and they all piled into her Lexus. As she drove away everyone waved to each other—everyone but Lillian who had stayed in the house. She left the kitchen and carried her laptop into the library, plugged it into the socket, and made sure that the charging light went on. Then she returned to the kitchen. Ann obviously wasn't expecting Lillian to return so soon. She jumped when Lillian entered the room. She had been sitting at the table, her forehead in her left hand, her right hand over her mouth.

“You look green,” Lillian said concerned now. “You're sick, aren't you?”

“I think I have a stomach bug. Maybe I've been drinking too many cold drinks.”

“Go to bed right now,” Lillian said, taking her arm and pulling her up from the chair gently.

“I can't, that's not fair to you. It's bad enough that I asked you to watch the kids after camp today...”

“Forget that. I'm sorry I made an issue of it, Annie. I'll take care of them now. We'll go into town for the pizza.”

“I feel terrible that I'm ...”

“You feel terrible, but it shouldn't be about me and my moodiness.”

“I'm taking you up on it, then. I have to get to bed.”

As she was leaving, she squeezed Lillian's arm. “Thanks,” and Lillian saw that her eyes were glistening with tears as they had that morning.

“Let me know if you need anything,” Lillian answered.

Lillian’s favorite pizza place was packed with the summer crowd. “Don’t they know families don’t go out in the middle of the week?” she mumbled, giving her name and leading the kids against a wall to wait.

“That’s not true,” Suzy told her. “Families go out in the middle of the week all the time, especially in the summer.”

“They do?” Lillian asked, smirking a little.

“All the time,” Philip joined in. “When Dad was alive, we went for pizza every Wednesday.”

“Yes, and then on Fridays we went to a nice restaurant, and every week we’d each get a turn to pick which one. Sometimes Mommy would pick, sometimes I would...”

“And I would sometimes,” Phillip told Lillian.

“Well, I stand corrected then,” Lillian said. “Do you guys like anything on your pizza?”

“Plain,” said Suzy.

“Pepperoni,” said Phillip.

“I hate pepperoni,” said Suzy, pushing at her brother’s arm.

“I like it.”

“I hate it, too,” said Lillian.

“Two against one,” Suzy said smugly.

“Mom likes Pepperoni,” Phillip said, just as smugly. “We have to bring some home to her.”

Lillian grimaced, “Oh I don’t think your mother wants any pizza at all tonight, let alone pepperoni.”

“Why not?” Phillip’s question seemed a little tense to Lillian.

“She’s not feeling well. She’s got a little stomach bug.”

The children looked at each other, their eyes meeting a long time, their entire demeanor changed. “Is that what she said? A little stomach bug?” Phillip asked.

“Yes. She’s just a little sick to her stomach.”

“But did she say ‘a little stomach bug?’”

The teenaged girl who was acting as hostess called Lillian’s name. Lillian took the kids by the shoulders to lead them to their table, saying, “For crying out loud, she’s fine, guys. Don’t make a federal case of it.”

They didn’t say anything more, but they were very quiet during their meal. Phillip didn’t make an issue about getting pepperoni on his pizza, and Suzy picked at one piece and wasn’t as gabby as she usually was.

“Look,” Lillian said half way through eating the pizza, “I know I’m not as much fun as your mom, but ...”

“Will she lose her hair again?” Phillip asked Lillian directly.

Lillian was surprised by his question. “No ... no ... that was from nerves. Really, kids, this is nothing. Everyone gets sick from time to time. You can’t expect bad things to happen just because they have in the past.”

Lillian felt genuinely sorry for them for the first time since meeting them. On some conscious level she knew they had gone through a lot with their father’s death and having to move to a new home, but it didn’t strike her until now how much they had faced at so young an

age. In addition to his death, Ann must have been grieving hard and Lillian saw that this, too, would have had an impact on them. Their faces pulled at her heart as she looked at them over the tray of pizza.

“How about we go for Rita’s Italian Ice after this? It’s right across the street.”

“I like Rita’s Italian Ice,” said Suzy, brightening a little.

“All right, but you have to finish that piece of pizza.”

Suzy lifted it and took a bite. Phillip wasn’t as easily comforted and his large blue eyes, so like Ann’s, studied Lillian’s face. She was compelled to reach out to touch his cheek, but half way to getting there, she pulled her hand back. “What’s your favorite flavor?” she asked him quietly.

He shrugged and looked down at the plate. “I like the vanilla gelato with the orange ice on top,” he answered finally.

“Yeah, me too, that’s my favorite,” Lillian said smiling. “We’ve got somethin’ in common!” she said cheerfully.

He smiled this time when he shrugged. Suzy finished her slice of pizza. “I ate it all!”

“You did. I’m impressed. Well, all right then, it’s Rita’s for us!”

Ann was in the kitchen on the phone when they returned home. They were laughing and telling each other silly jokes, the sillier the better. Ann looked up pleasantly surprised to see how much fun they were having together. Suzy ran to her giggling and Ann put one arm around her little girl. Lillian noticed Ann looked a little better; a little color had returned to her cheeks.

“Yeah,” Ann said into the phone. “they’re home now.” She listened to the person on the other end and answered, “I will. I promise. Next week, same time. No, I don’t want that.”

Ann's voice was insistent. "No, Joey, you stay there and finish the semester. Love you, too. Be good."

She hit the "off" button on the cordless phone, and smiled at Lillian. "That was Joey."

Lillian didn't say anything.

"My brother, Joey," Ann repeated, not certain that Lillian knew who she was talking about.

"Yes, I know who Joey is," Lillian answered, putting her purse on one of the kitchen chairs.

"You guys looked like you were having a good time," Ann said, pulling Suzy close to her again and smiling down into the little girl's face.

"Lillian took us to Rita's and guess what?"

"What?" Ann asked, placing her cheek on the little girl's blond hair.

"She likes the same flavor that Phillip likes!"

"Wow," Ann said, laughing a little. "What a coincidence!"

"And she doesn't like pepperoni on her pizza just like me!"

Ann chuckled again, "Well, you know, she *is* our relative. She's bound to be slightly normal."

Lillian groaned, "Don't make it worse. They already think I'm an ogre."

"No, that's not true, they don't," Ann said smiling at Lillian.

"What's an ogre?" Suzy asked.

"Not me!" Lillian answered.

"Shrek," Phillip answered.

"Who's Shrek?" asked Lillian, which made them all laugh.

Ann told them it was bedtime and they balked. “We want to catch fireflies,” Suzy said. “Lillian said we could.”

“Oh she did? Well, two minutes of firefly catching and then bed.”

The kids ran outside and Ann flipped on an outdoor light in order to be able to watch them in the dark.

Lillian sat down heavily on a chair in the sun room overlooking the lawn and the children. “I’m exhausted.”

“From going for pizza and ice? You must be getting old!” Ann chided her.

They were quiet a few minutes, sitting in each other’s company without feeling the need for small talk. Then Lillian said, “I like them, Annie.” She looked across the table at her cousin. “Your kids.”

Ann smiled. She still looked tired and ill. “I like them, too ... so much that I sometimes think it will split my heart into a million pieces. When you’re first in love you kind of feel that way, but then love settles down and becomes less intense, just as beautiful, of course, but not so *extreme*. The love you feel as a mother never cools down, though.” She looked a little embarrassed then. “Listen to me talking to you as though you’ve never been in love.” She waited for a response, then asked Lillian, “Have you?”

“No, yeah, well, yeah I guess I have...am.”

“Don’t be so certain,” Ann said laughing, and Lillian joined her.

“There’s this guy in New York,” Lillian explained. “He’s a little older than I am. He’s a senior editor at one of the largest publishing firms in New York. I worked for him a few years ago, and he’s just such a great person that the next thing I knew, I wanted to be with him all the time. He was...is...divorced. He has this beautiful daughter who is a senior in high school now.

She's a doll, and we really get along—more like best friends. And he also lives with his sister, Louise, who has never been married. She's an editor, too, for a fashion magazine. She's a lot of fun ... I don't know why she never married, except that sometimes it's just not for some people. Like me.”

Ann thought about what Lillian had just said, and she asked, “How do you know?”

“What?”

“That marriage isn't for you?”

“It isn't.”

“How do you know that?”

“I don't want to get married. Even when I first fell for Dan, I never even thought about marrying him. When he even broaches the subject, which is not very often because of my reaction, I find myself running away for weeks. In fact, that's how I ended up back here in Newtown four years ago.”

“He understands?”

“He understands about everything that concerns me. He's my very dearest friend in the whole world. But I won't marry him. It's been a source of contention from time to time, but now he just accepts it. He lives his life and I live mine, and when I can't stand being apart from him, we get together, and then we part again. I adore him for allowing me to be this way. I adore him, period. I just won't marry him.”

Ann sighed and pulled her sweater closer around her. “That's the most you've told me about yourself in three weeks.”

“I've been a royal bitch, haven't I?”

Ann was surprised by the statement, but she didn't deny it.

“There’s a lot more of my mother in me than I ever wanted to admit.”

No comment from Ann.

“Hmmm?”

Still no comment, Ann just looked down at her hands.

“She was a bitch, Ann, and you won’t offend me if you admit it.”

“You aren’t a bitch. And your mother was unhappy, Lillian. Her whole life was a disappointment to her, and that does awful things to a person.”

“I was the biggest disappointment...from birth on.”

“I don’t think that’s true, Lilly. You were her only child. Think about what I said before about a mother’s love.”

“Oh, Annie, come on. I received more love from your mother than I did from my own. I wouldn’t even know how to be a mother myself. I detested my own mother, why in God’s name would I want to be one?”

Ann continued to look down and not at Lillian. “And that’s why you won’t marry?”

“I won’t marry because I don’t want to be tied down to any one person or any one home or any one thing.”

They were quiet again, each lost in their own thoughts.

“Tell me something,” Lillian said after a long while. “Did my mother commit suicide?”

Ann didn’t answer her.

“Annie, look, I never really wanted to know—I never cared how she died—so if you don’t tell me, then fine, but sometimes I wonder if ...”

“Yes.”

There it was, the conversation neither of them really wanted to have, in a one-word answer.

The humidity from the summer night permeated the kitchen now despite the central air conditioner. Lillian felt almost unable to breath from it.

Ann inhaled ready to speak, her eyes were bright and her face looked about to crumple after telling Lillian this most upsetting news, but Lillian held her hand up to stop her.

“Good night,” Lillian whispered, getting up from the chair and walking toward the back door of the kitchen. She opened it and stepped out.

“Good night,” Ann answered, sounding choked.

## CHAPTER 5

The pair of exterminators arrived early the next morning, and Lillian let him in since Ann had decided to drive the kids to camp. She showed them to the stairs leading to the attic, and then disappeared into her room with her door closed. She turned the lock with a shiver—*just in case bats knew how to open doors*. She listened at the noise above her...*men's voices...footsteps... faster footsteps...a strangely high-pitched scream for a man...a thwack...another thwack...another scream...a crash...and then the slam of the attic door.*

“Lady?” she heard one of them call.

She carefully opened the lock and pulled the door open a sliver. “All gone?” she asked, her eye peaking out at the exterminators.

“All gone...but you have to call someone to close up some holes. You can see daylight through them. It's an old house, you know.”

Lillian opened the door wider. “Yes, we knew that.”

“Call a contractor or a handyman. It's not the roof, the roof is sealed good, no holes there. It's the siding.”

“But the bats are gone now, right?”

“For now, right,” he said, handing her a piece of paper to sign.

“And I can go up there without worrying?”

“I can't see why not...but call a handyman or a siding company so they don't come back. Bats are one thing, but you get a squirrel up there and you could get some real damage. We put some poison pellets around, too, so don't let your pets go up there.”

He was holding a black garbage bag. “What in that?”

The men looked at each other and grinned. “What do you think it is?” one of them said.

“Where are you going to put it?” Lillian asked, worried that they intended to put the garbage bag filled with dead bats in the trash can outside the kitchen.

“We’re taking it, don’t worry.”

She signed the paper and escorted them to the door, watching carefully that they threw the bag in the back of their pickup when they left. When they drove away, Lillian looked at the ceiling. There was nothing between her and the blanket chest filled with letters and hand-written journals now, yet she couldn’t bring herself to go up alone. She decided to wait for Ann...just in case there was bat blood around or something gross like it.

But when Ann returned, she was feeling ill again. She just couldn’t seem to get over the stomach bug. She’d be feeling better, then it would hit her again, then she’d be all right for a few days. Lillian suggested she go to the doctor, which Ann did, and the medicine the doctor gave her seemed to help a little. After a few days, she perked up but still looked sick.

Ann complained about it. She even went to the most exclusive hair salon in the area and got what she called a “makeover,” although to Lillian it looked as though she just shortened her hair even more and darkened the color just slightly. She bought some new makeup, which did improve her color a little, and Lillian noticed she was using new mascara, the lengthening kind, because her eyelashes were a longer and thicker suddenly.

There was no further mention of Lillian’s mother. No mention of the conversation they had that night at all. Talking about Dan made Lillian a little lonesome for him, and she called him twice since.

“Is it time for a conjugal visit?” he asked her, his voice warm and amused.

“I’m horny, so I guess it is,” she answered.

“I’m only good for a lay, then?” he teased.

“That and a back rub. You give the best back rubs, you know.”

“So I’ve been told,” he answered.

“By me only, right?” she asked, laughing a little.

“What do you think I *am*, a priest?”

“You are totally devoted to me, Danny boy, and the only relief you get is me in your bed or choking the chicken.”

He laughed heartily then, and a warm feeling of contentment coursed through Lillian to hear his warm cackle.

“I do have to come soon, Dan. I really do miss you.”

He grew serious, just as she had. “I’m here, babe...anytime and on your terms.”

“Forever, Dan?” she asked him. “You won’t feel that way forever.”

“Forever, Lillian. It won’t be forever, anyway. One of these days you’re going to let yourself love me the way I want you to. Until then, I’ll love you the way I want to.”

“Okay. I’ll come soon. I promise.”

“In the meantime, I’ll be choking the chicken.”

They both laughed. As she slid her cell phone closed, Ann walked into the library where Lillian had been working at her laptop. “Hey,” Ann said, looking better than she had for a long time, “Wanna go up to the attic and see what’s in the chest? I’m dying for you to see it.”

The holes in the attic had been closed up by the local handyman, who Ann had hired to do that chore and some others while he was there. He was on his third day filling in holes, checking for rotting wood around the windows, and replacing that, and anything else that the old

house needed done. Lillian felt confident enough that they wouldn't be attacked by a ferocious animal at this point. She leaned into Ann, "Yeah, let's go."

Like children, they rushed up the stairs and then to the attic landing. Ann reached the door first and turned the knob slowly and pushed at the heavy oak door just enough to peak in and make sure the exterminators had left nothing behind. "Coast is clear," she said and pushed the door open all the way.

They walked into the hot dusty attic. It was still early morning, but the room held the heat of the summer. It smelled of dust and old wood, and slashes of sunlight from the dormer windows gave them just enough light to look around. Except for the cedar blanket chest, some wicker baskets, broken pottery, and a box of old books, the attic was empty. It was decorated with some pretty serious spider webs, however, and worn ruffled blue checked curtains hung on the four windows.

"A little creepy?" Ann asked looking at the intricate webs.

"Nah," Lillian answered, "just an attic." She walked to the blanket chest. It was very plain, without much adornment, but the piece, although thick with dust, looked like it had been built with cherry wood and it was taller than most she had seen, about three feet tall and four feet wide. The lid was slightly larger than the rest of the box, its edges were beautifully carved in clean lines and the corners were rounded. The likeness of a bird sitting on a magnolia branch surrounded by double oval lines was carved lightly into the top, and an intricate brass keyhole was the only adornment on the front of the chest. "It's beautiful in its simplicity, isn't it?" she said aloud. She pulled on the top and it opened easily.

"There was no key in it," Ann offered as Lillian pushed it open until the hinges locked.

Inside, there was indeed a wool blanket that looked as though it had been used just the winter before it was so pristine. “Is this your blanket?” Lillian asked, picking it up.

Ann shook her head no. “It was there. The cedar protected it, I guess. There’s not a hole in it.”

The strong scent of cedar did surprise Lillian because she imagined that the chest must be more than a hundred years old. Wouldn’t the cedar have faded a little over the years, she wondered. “They knew how to build things in the old days, didn’t they?” She handed the blanket to Ann and bent over the chest. On the small shelf attached to the inside of the lid were two pins, a hair clip—all made of metal—and around ten old photos. There were also pencil renderings of two young women, probably sisters Lillian discerned since they were obviously different people but had very similar features. And the rest of the chest was filled with papers of all colors, some tied with satin ribbons, most very yellowed and the papers at the bottom were ready to crumble under Lillian’s fingers.

“Wow,” Lillian breathed in a whisper. “This is so cool, Ann.”

Ann chuckled. “I *knew* you’d be impressed. We can’t really read them up here, it’s much too dark. How do you want to handle it? We can’t carry it all downstairs.”

Lillian thought for a few minutes. “Let’s get the handyman to help us carry it down to the library,” she said rushing toward the attic door, leaving Ann standing alone before she could even respond. Within minutes, Lillian was leading Patrick up the attic steps. “It’s going to be heavy,” she was telling him. “It’s a huge chest.”

He was a quiet man, tall and graying at the temples. He was wearing the uniform of the Handyman organization, and he had taken his cap off and stuck it in his belt. “Mornin’,” he said to Ann, who greeted him with a smile. Then he walked around the chest, eyeing it carefully,

measuring its weight in his mind. “This is a beautiful piece of furniture,” he commented as he pulled up at one end and grunted with the strain. “And it’s pretty heavy.”

“We can do it,” Lillian said, eager to get it out of the attic.

Patrick looked at the thin and drawn Ann, and shook his head. “No, I think it’s too heavy.” Ann didn’t protest, and Lillian realized she was still recovering from her stomach bug.

“I can handle it with you,” Lillian insisted. “Believe me, I’m a work horse. I’ve lifted heavier than this.”

Patrick pursed his lips, debating whether he should encourage it, but Lillian went over to the chest, closed it, and placed her hands under it without waiting for him to protest. “Come on, let’s do it,” she said.

The tall man’s face now had a look of resignation. She wasn’t going to take no for an answer. He went to the other side of the chest and they lifted it up together. Ann flew to Lillian’s side to help lighten the load. Lillian would have protested except that she couldn’t speak with the strain of the chest’s weight in her hands.

“I’ll go first,” Patrick said and he led them to the attic steps, taking the brunt of the weight as they lowered down to the next floor where the bedrooms were. The three of them put the chest down on the hallway floor.

“New idea,” Lillian said, breathing heavily and leaning on her thighs, while Ann sat down on the second step suddenly very pale. “Let’s just put it in my room. I don’t think I could carry it all the way to the Library.”

“Thank you,” said a relieved Patrick, his face and hair soaked with sweat from both the exertion and from being in the overheated attic.

When they caught their breath and rested a minute, Patrick and Lillian alone this time moved the chest into her room against an empty wall. Now that it was in brighter light, they could see just how grimy it was from being in the attic for an unknown number of years. They could also see it was even lovelier than they had originally thought.

Ann patted the man's arm, "Come on, I'll get you a bottle of water. You need it." They walked out of Lillian's room, Patrick wiping the sweat from his face with his handkerchief, a dark stain spreading on the back of his khaki shirt from perspiration. Lillian closed the door behind them and pulled off her white t-shirt which was smeared with filth now. She washed her hands and face in the bathroom and quickly put on an old sleeveless shirt. Walking past the chest, she drew her finger over the top leaving a furrow in the dust and grime. She felt more exhilarated and excited than she had in a very long time, as though she had come across a great buried treasure. She wanted to dive right into the papers in the chest, but she knew that it would be more prudent to clean the piece first so that whatever was inside wasn't ruined with soil. She hunched down in front of it looking at the elaborate brass keyhole.

"What stories have you to tell us, lovely old chest?" she asked out loud. "What secrets to reveal? What heartaches? What skeletons do we have here?" She chuckled at herself. She was much too gleeful. It just wasn't her shtick to be this keyed up, yet here it was, a thrill coursing through her. Just then someone knocked at her door and she called, "Come in."

Patrick entered with a drop cloth and some heavy duty cleaning materials. "Let's put this under the chest so that when you clean it, the floor doesn't get ruined," he said, speaking like a true carpenter of great sense. "And I brought these from my truck," he said putting some cans of liquids and rags on the floor near the chest. "Wear rubber gloves when you use this stuff. It's a homemade recipe to clean old wood furniture—just some linseed oil and turpentine and some

other stuff. It'll help clean off that grime without hurting the wood. The other can is a really good furniture moisturizer. Once you get it all cleaned off, I'd like to see it again. I have a strong hunch it's worth a lot of money. It looks Quaker to me and really old. It was probably built right here in Bucks County...maybe Philadelphia...but like I said, I have a hunch. Take care you don't damage it when you're cleaning it."

Lillian looked down at it with surprise. The treasure for her was what was inside the chest. She hadn't even thought of the value of the chest itself. But that was Ann's department. It didn't belong to Lillian.

Patrick lifted the front while Lillian pushed the tarp under it, then he lifted the back so that she could pull it through. Together they spread the floor covering wide so there was enough room for Lillian to work.

"Thanks, Pat," Lillian said smiling at him. "You're a real pal."

The quiet man just smiled shyly and left the room without saying anything else to her. A few minutes later Ann appeared.

"So, have you gone through it yet?" she asked sounding almost as excited as Lillian was feeling.

"No, I think I better clean it first, don't you?"

"Let's do it," Ann said, picking up the cleaning fluids that Patrick had left. They each took a side and started to wipe the chest down, and Ann was glad that Patrick had put the drop cloth under it. Years of dust, grime, and even bird droppings came off the large cherry wood trunk. They were still working on it when the children's camp bus stopped at the end of the driveway. Ann dropped her rag and ran down to meet them, and Lillian could hear the kids laughing at seeing dirt all over the front of her shirt and sleeves. Lillian sat back on her heels

and looked it over. It was starting to look much better, just a little dry. She decided that she'd begin the moisturizing process the next morning. It was certainly clean enough for her to open it now and rummage inside a little.

There were so many papers—letters without envelopes, letters in envelopes, and what looked like hand-written manuscripts—that she didn't know what to pick up first. Then she noticed a large tan envelope with type face in a single line: *It is better to know some of the questions than all of the answers—James Thurber (I think)*. Lillian turned the manila envelope over and saw that it had been sealed but the dry air had loosened the glue at each corner. With just a gentle movement of her thumb it opened. Inside were about one hundred single spaced typed sheets. She pulled them out and smiled at the old fashioned typewriter print. The “t” must have been slightly bent as it didn't show completely. She glanced through the pages and could tell when the typewriter was just about out of ink because the print got lighter and lighter and then when the ink ribbon had been replaced, the printing darkened. It was familiar to her but she couldn't figure out why.

The first page contained a title of sorts, simply: *Our Mothers and Daughters, Our Life Beside the River*. There was no author's name. Lillian backed up and sat on the edge of her bed before turning to the next page. There were no page numbers, and she made a mental note not to get the pages mixed up in case it was a story in sequence. “God help me if I drop this,” she murmured to herself.

The first sentences read, “I don't know why I'm writing this. I'm not one to record history and although I have played with the idea of being a writer my whole life, I have no talent for it. However, all the letters and papers in Great-great-grandmama's chest are in a hodgepodge, and it's hard to understand the who's who of ancestors whose accounts are in this

chest. It's easier for me to understand, I have the benefit of having had the stories handed down verbally. For some reason, I never really passed many of the stories on to my girls. It seemed so old fashioned to do it. Helen may have liked hearing some of it, but my Regina would have thought it boring and 'old news.' She wouldn't have had the patience, I'm sure." Lillian gasped a little surprised when she realized these pages had been written by her own grandmother.

"Now that I'm dying," Lillian continued to read, "I realize how important it is to keep the history of our mothers and our mothers' mothers preserved and the stories of their lives as women who worked and dreamed and cried beside this beautiful Delaware River. Their whole lives—our whole lives—revolved around this river and the canal. Both gave life, both took life, and both just kept moving along at their own momentum even while the women in this family suffered and rejoiced. Perhaps Helen and Regina's girls will want to know these stories someday. My beautiful Lillian seems to like stories. She's always got her nose in a book and she's kept busy for hours when we give her a notebook to write in. Her little stories are so adorable. Sometimes they are very disturbing, though. She's hurt and angry, I can tell that by some of what she writes. I ache for her. But there is nothing I can do to change her mother. God knows, I have tried for many years, and I'm old and weaker now than I was when Regina was a child. I can't do this, or I will crumble up and blow away. Or wish I did."

Lillian put the page down on the bed. *So, my grandmother knew how cruel a woman she had raised. She knew I was abused, obviously. No one to my rescue, then, even among those who knew. What kind of power did mother have over everyone that no one could stand up to her? Including me. I left, but I never confronted her.*

Suzy appeared at the bedroom door. "Hi, Lilly," she said, sounding tentative as though she wasn't certain how Lillian would respond to the interruption.

“Hey, gorgeous,” Lillian answered smiling.

Suzy took that as an invitation and ran into the room and jumped on the bed. “Easy, bucko,” Lillian said, grabbing at the typewritten sheets for fear they’d fall off the bed. “You’re rambunctious today.”

“I rode a horse today,” Suzy said very proudly. “We had equestrian day at camp. He was big and brown and had a black mane.”

“Sounds like my kind of guy,” Lillian answered, lying back on the pillows beside where the little girl sat with her sandaled feet on the bedspread. “So did you fall off?”

“Nope,” Suzy said, shaking her blonde head from side to side. “I wore a helmet, too, just in case.”

“That’s a good thing, I guess,” Lillian answered as she yawned against the back of her hand.

“I couldn’t wait to come home to tell you,” Suzy told Lillian, as though they’d been friends for the girl’s entire life.

*I can’t be all that bad, Lillian thought, if this little person wants to share her stories with me.*

“What’s that?” Suzy asked her pointing to the chest.

“That, my little urchin, is a treasure chest of information and if I’m right, it will give us all the answers to our ancestors and maybe why I’m so fu..., uh, messed up.” She caught herself, and was proud of it, although it wouldn’t have been the first time she slipped with the “f bomb” in front of the kids.

“You *are* messed up,” Suzy agreed. “You and Mommy are filthy today.” The little girl made a face when she said it.

Lillian laughed so hard it startled Suzy. When she stopped laughing, she asked, “Did your brother ride a horse today, too?”

“No, he’s in the ‘Tigers’ because he’s older and a boy. I’m in the ‘Chipmunks’ this year. We do different things on different days.”

“Oh, I see.”

“No, you don’t, but that’s all right. You’ll get the hang of it some day,” Suzy reassured her and she pulled herself to the edge of the bed and jumped off. “You better get washed up and changed before you come down for dinner, Lilly.” She threw the order back over her shoulder as she moved toward the door.

“You’re a bossy little imp, aren’t you?” Lillian, who was still lying on the bed, called after her with no reply.

With a sigh and a strain, she pulled herself up off the bed and put the typed pages back in their envelope. She closed the lid of the chest and placed the envelope on top, over the carved bird, and as she did, she whispered, “I don’t care that you knew and did nothing, Grandma. I love you anyway.”

## Chapter 6

She had decided to go to New York that weekend to be with Dan. There was so much to tell him, especially about the chest and its contents. She planned to bring some of the very old letters in hopes that he'd be able to read some of the old English that she and Ann found difficult to understand. And she had two very old, first edition books from the attic that she knew he'd love.

For the three days after finding the chest, both Lillian and Ann read some pages from their grandmother's typewritten journal. Much of it was very dry reading, and even though it was their grandmother's attempt to help clarify which person was which in their ancestral line, they were still confused. It didn't help that a lot of the names were repeated from one generation to another. "Which Hanna was that?" Ann would ask Lillian, who would shrug just as confused.

However, they were both enthralled with the numerous cards, letters, old photographs and daguerreotypes they found as they dug deeper into the chest. There were old graduation autograph books from the twenties and thirties and poetry written by courting gentlemen and lovelorn young girls.

"The things in this chest will help to introduce my granddaughters and their children and perhaps the many generations to come to the women who were born to and lived in this house," their grandmother had written. Ann and Lillian chose not to rush and open all of them at once. Instead, they decided to take a few at a time and read them when the house was quiet and they weren't pressured to do anything else. This way they could absorb them, laugh at them, and sometimes cry reading them.

Ann took three of the letters from the chest to read aloud one afternoon when they sat in the gazebo waiting for the kids to come home from camp. It was one of those surprising July afternoons that had turned cool and dry after a long heat spell, and they each had a glass of iced tea with a lemon wedge and sprig of mint taken from Ann's herb garden. The sky was cloudless and there was a lovely breeze off the river that moved through the open windows of the gazebo, gently playing with the corner of one of the old letters Ann had just taken out of its envelope.

"This one was written on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of April in 1905," Ann said, steadying the thin paper against the breeze by splaying her long delicate fingers out at the top and bottom.

*Dearest brother,*

*I hope this note finds you much improved. Tom tells me that you may be coming home soon and I can't express just how happy I am. Please know that I have readied a room for you at Willow Wood and so you must not worry about where to go. I insist that you come here to us. This house is so full of life with the laughter of the children and I know how much you love them. The spring peepers are singing in the canal already, and the breeze from the river has been delightful. Until you are ready to work again, I will set a fine rocker on the back porch and you can while away the days watching your little nephews and niece at play and call to the mule drivers and boat captains as they go by. You must start a list of your favorite meals, so that I will know what to prepare for you.*

*Your Godson is learning his letters, you know, and quite well. PJ is six, and a big boy who helps me with his little brothers and sister. Tom-tom is also trying to learn to write. He's always imitating his big brother. Anna is a quiet little girl most of the time, but I find that even at two years old, she can hold her own with the boys. She's very sweet and I'm so happy that God saw fit to give me a girl before sending me another boy. Teddy, our baby, is*

*just about ready to get up and walk. He gets so excited when his brothers start running around, he jumps up and down in his crib, and I know he can't wait to join them, bless his baby's heart.*

*My prayers and thoughts are with you every day, Patrick. Although you are my husband's brother, you are the brother of my heart, the older brother I never had, and I only wish the best for you. I know you will be well soon enough to come home, and when you do, there will be great rejoicing at Willow Wood. You mustn't fret about coming home. You will be here with us who love you, and I will do everything in my power to protect you from any sadness or worry as will your loving brother. Take care, my dear Patrick. I will write again next week.*

*Your sister,*

*Kate”*

Ann passed the letter across the wrought iron table to Lillian who glanced down at it. The note paper was very fine and had been well preserved. The woman's handwriting was typical of the day, scrolling and elegant, yet not oversized. “She must have been very fond of her brother-in-law,” Lillian said.

“Let's figure out who they are,” Ann said, picking up the typewritten guide their grandmother Julia had prepared before she died. “Let's see, 1905...Katherine...okay, this was her own grandmother, Katherine Ginley Fitzpatrick. She was born in 1882 and died in 1906 and had six children. Good Lord,” Ann said looking up at Lillian, “she was so young.”

“She really was,” Lillian agreed. “Who was the man she wrote to? I wonder where he was when she wrote this to him...prison, do you think?”

“No,” Ann said frowning, “she mentions his health. He must have been sick...Tuberculosis maybe.” Ann read silently for a minute then said, “Katherine was married to Thomas O’Reilly, who was a boat builder in Uhlerstown. Patrick was his younger brother...he was ‘put away,’ as our grandmother states it, in a mental hospital in the Poconos. He had had a nervous breakdown when the girl he was in love with rejected him. She actually did more than that, she and her friends went to the store where he worked and apparently scorned him...I guess she means ridiculed him...and treated him terribly. He was so mortified and bereft he tried to drown himself in the canal. His brother saved his life and the family doctor advised them to put him in a mental institution until he recovered.”

“I wonder if he did. Read the next letter and see,” Lillian coaxed.

Ann opened the envelope and unfolded the same notepaper the first letter they read had been written on. “This one was written a few weeks later,” she told Lillian. “It basically says the same things, just chit chat, but very encouraging and supportive. She doesn’t mention his coming home this time though, so he must not have been ready. She mentions that she’s enclosing two pictures drawn by her sons for him to display in his room to cheer him.”

Ann leaned forward and said, “Listen to the end of her letter, Lillie.”

She then proceeded to read, *“I do not mean to bring anything to your attention that will hurt you or upset you, dear brother, but I would prefer you hear this from me than from anyone else. They read the banns in the Church today and Eileen is engaged to be married to Bolton Johns in September. I don’t know how many of your friends continue to correspond with you, and since most go to St. Andrew’s as we do, I am certain that someone will let you know. I wanted it to be me, who loves you as a sister. And since I haven’t mentioned it before, and intend never to do so again, I feel it is a good opportunity for me to say that Eileen never felt*

*worthy of you, Patrick. She felt that she was never good enough, kind enough, intelligent enough for a man of your keen intellect and true compassion. I believe that was the reason for her profound abuse of you that night. She didn't hate you, Patrick, she hated herself. She was frightened, Patrick. She was frightened that you would marry her and come to think of her as she has always thought of herself. She didn't have the fortitude to realize that had she embraced your goodness, learned from you and your gentle ways, she herself could have embraced the goodness that you seemed to have found in her. It's a complicated matter. It's a complicated and harsh world, Patrick. Sometimes Tom says to me that he always felt that you were too fine to be able to understand the harshness of this life. I don't know if that's true, but I do know that there are others like you in this world, and you will find someone who will adore you and cherish you, but it will have to be someone who is intelligent enough to like herself as well. Let this news of Eileen help you to let her go so that you can live again and come back to us."*

Ann stopped reading and shrugged. "Do you think he bought it?"

Lillian shrugged too. "Who knows? But what a sweet person Katherine was," Lillian said, carefully folding the other letter. "I mean, it was so nice of her to take the time to write to him even with four babies under foot. He wasn't even her brother." She smiled at Ann, "That's like something you would do."

Ann shook her head no. "That's not true, Lillian. I'd be nervous about what to say and what *not* to say, afraid I'd say the wrong thing. I'd avoid writing him, but *you* wouldn't."

"Me?" Lillian asked surprised.

"Look at how you write a note or send a card to your old landlady every week come hell or high water. I think that is so thoughtful."

Lillian brushed the compliment off with a wave of the folded letter. “That’s different...she was my friend for four years. I feel sorry that she’s in that assisted living place. She liked her home and now she has to do what they tell her.”

“It’s a wonderful facility and you’re wrong—it’s not a prison, for goodness’s sake. They will take wonderful care of her. But that’s not the point,” Ann continued. “You haven’t deserted her. You write to her, send her lovely little cards with smiley faces. *You* are more like Katherine.”

Lillian laughed. “Minus all the brats,” she said off-handedly. “Okay, read the last one.”

*Dearest Patrick,*

*At last, you will be coming home! Tom is elated. As you know, he never felt you should be there in the first place. But that is behind us now. You are well and we can’t wait for your arrival next week. Your mother gave us a little bit of a hard time about your not going back to her house, but Tom has explained the situation to her satisfaction, at least for now. Once you are home and you discern when the time is right, you can decide what to do and where to live.*

*PJ and Tom-Tom spend their days drawing pictures for you. They intend to decorate your room with them, and I’m enclosing a little note that PJ wrote to you. He asked that I put it in my own letter. He is most excited about your coming.*

*Well, then, we will see you next week. Tom will pick you up bright and early on Sunday. Until then I pray that you are happy and looking forward to coming here to us.*

*Your loving sister,*

*Kate*

Lillian raised her eyebrows. “I wonder how it all worked out. How sad that she died the year after. Does Grandma say what she died from?”

Ann studied several of the typewritten pages looking for the answer. Red blotches appeared on her fair, almost lucid, neck and face before she said, “It must have been breast cancer. She found some lumps in her breast just after her sixth baby was born. She died eight months later.” Ann put the papers down and looked out toward the river. “It must have been a very aggressive cancer. Of course, there was no real treatment then either.”

Lillian saw her cousin swallow hard a few times and knew that Ann was holding back tears.

“You’re such a softie,” Lillian said lightly.

Ann raised her eyes up to the gazebo’s ceiling, still trying to control her emotions. “It’s sad; just very sad,” she said. She picked up their grandmother’s manuscript again and told Lillian, “Grandmother says that Katherine’s husband remarried within a month and the new wife came into the house to live and raise the children. Apparently she didn’t give birth to any of her own. She died young, too, and eventually the daughter Anna—Grandma’s own mother—took over running the house. Grandma writes, ‘My mother always said that her stepmother was stern and a little cold, but kind enough.’ Two of the boys got jobs out of state and moved away, PJ eloped with a local girl and moved in with her family, and Anna and her husband inherited Willow Wood and the care of her youngest brother when her father died.

“Grandmother notes that Patrick was devastated by Katherine’s death and after her funeral—on the very day of her funeral—he took a train west to Colorado. He was killed

waiting for a train at a Chicago train station during a robbery twelve years later. He was on his way home to Pennsylvania when it happened.”

Ann sat up straight in her chair then, still reading. “Oh my God, Lilly, he was on his way home to marry the woman who had originally rejected him, that Eileen, who caused his nervous breakdown. They had been corresponding through letters and she agreed to marry him after all those years. She was widowed herself by then. He had made a lot of money in silver mines in Colorado, and he left half of his fortune to his Godson—that would be PJ who is mentioned in Katherine’s letters I guess—and the other half to this woman with whom he had always been in love.”

“Wow,” Lillian breathed, “what a freakin’ love story that is!”

“It’s tragic, Lilly. It’s absolutely heartbreakingly tragic...the whole story. I can’t stand it...” with this, Ann broke down and started to weep. She put her face into her hands and choked on the tears that flooded her eyes and throat.

Lillian was alarmed and jumped out of her chair. “Ann, for God’s sake stop,” she demanded. “It was years ago. Why are you so upset?” But Ann put her head down on her arms at the edge of the table and continued to sob uncontrollably, her body convulsing with each one.

Lillian put her hand on her cousin and stroked her back. “Stop, Annie, don’t do this to yourself. It was so long ago. We didn’t even know them. This is ridiculous.”

Ann shook her head against her arms and couldn’t speak, so deep was this sudden sorrow. Lillian put her cheek down on the back of Ann’s head, “Hey, kiddo. Please calm down. I know it’s been hard for you, too. Cry if it helps, but don’t make yourself sick over it, Annie. This isn’t good for you. And I’m not much comfort, as much as I wish I could be. I’m just too shallow and self-centered to be of any comfort to you.”

Ann continued to cry and Lillian put her arms around her. “Aw, don’t, Annie, don’t cry like this.”

Lillian could see Ann was trying to get a hold of the sobbing; she just couldn’t succeed. “God damn it I wish I was more like Aunt Helen,” Lillian said in exasperation. “She’d be able to help you. She’d know what to say and just how to say it. She wasn’t a worthless piece of shit like I am.”

Ann pulled away from Lillian then and they looked at each other. Lillian put her hands on each side of Ann’s red, tear-stained face. “Just ...a...worthless...piece...of...”

Even through Ann’s tearful misery, she smiled, then laughed a little. “You aren’t a piece of shit,” she said before Lillian could finish.

“*Yahhunh*,” Lillian answered in exactly the way she’d heard Suzy say it when telling Philip she was right and he was wrong. She wiped Ann’s face with her thumbs. “Cow dung...no worse, elephant dung...no, wait, I’m no better than what comes out of a man who’s been on a beer binge for seven—no, ten—days and has the beer shits!”

Ann burst out laughing now, and her laughter was almost as wrenching as her sobs had been a minute earlier. She fell back in her chair, her mouth wide open, gasping for air. She pushed at Lillian. “Stop,” she begged, “that’s disgusting.”

“It’s true, and he had beans...lots of beans... and kielbasa, too!” Lillian added, smiling herself now as she relished playing the comedian.

Ann pulled her knees to her chest laughing harder. “No more,” she begged, “just shut up.”

“Okay, as long as you’ll stop crying.”

“I’ve stopped,” Ann assured her, grabbing the condensation soaked napkin from under her iced tea to wipe her face and blow her nose.

Lillian went back to her chair and sat down again, satisfied that she had somehow pulled her cousin out of near hysteria.

Then Ann jumped to her feet, her hand gripping her stomach. “I’m going to be sick,” she said, and ran to the edge of the berm and vomited into the canal several times. Lillian followed her, saying, “I told you that you were going to make yourself sick! And since when am I ever right?”

When she reached Ann, she helped ease Ann onto the grassy bank and they sat there quietly until Ann felt better.

“I’m sorry I made such a fool out of myself,” Ann started. “It’s just thinking about that poor young woman, how she must have been agonizing over leaving her children when she died.” Ann raised her eyes to Lillian’s. “Who would love her little guys? Who would know what to do when they were afraid in the night and how to comfort each one differently when they were sick? Kids are so different, they each have different needs. Who would comfort them when she died? Katherine went through an awful hell, Lillian, before she died; an indescribable kind of hell.”

“Well, her husband was there. He would know...he’d take care of them. And at that time, before she died, her brother-in-law was there. She made it sound like he loved her kids in her letters.”

Ann pulled her knees up and hugged them against her chest, looking out at the river beyond the canal. “It’s not the same, Lillian. Men don’t always have the same intuition about children that women do.”

“That’s ridiculous. My friend, Dan, is absolutely wonderful with his daughter Jessica. He’s this sensitive, caring man, and she shares everything with him. She even talks to him about her boyfriends and school. Men can be as intuitive and loving as women can.”

Ann leaned her mouth against her knees and Lillian could see that although she didn’t want to argue, she wasn’t convinced.

Lillian got to her feet and pulled at Ann’s long sleeved t-shirt. “Come on, let’s forget it. It was all a long time ago and doesn’t have anything to do with us. The kids will be getting off the bus in a few minutes and they shouldn’t see you looking like you just fought a bunch of Iraqi insurgents.”

Ann let Lillian help her up and they started to walk back toward the house after gathering their tea glasses and the old letters. They didn’t rush, but strolled slowly across the lawn as the three o’clock sun slanted rays from the west in patterns under their feet. When they reached the kitchen door, Ann took Lillian’s arm. “I like you, Lillian,” she said. “I *always* loved you, but now I really *like* you. The truth is, *you’re* not the shit...*I* am.”

“Yeah, right,” Lillian said, pushing against her cousin’s shoulder with her own as they entered the house at the same time.

Ann put the glasses in the sink and whispered in a sigh, “Yeah...right.”

## Chapter 7

Lillian set the alarm on her cell phone to wake her at six o'clock so she'd get an early start for New York. She wanted to get up before Ann and the kids had to get up for camp and try to catch the train from Trenton before the rush of commuters. When she turned the shower on, she realized she didn't have any shampoo, so she threw on her robe and ran down the hall to Ann's room to see if she had any in her bathroom. She didn't want to wake Ann, so she didn't enter Ann's bedroom.

Although a part of Ann's bedroom suite, at one time her bathroom was the only bathroom in the house, and there was still a door to it from the hallway. Lillian reached up to feel over the door sill to see if there was still a key to the bathroom up where it had been when she was a child. Her fingers found it, and she quietly put the key in the lock and turned it, careful not to awaken Ann.

She moved the door ajar only slightly when she realized Ann was in the bathroom. She could see her right arm and half of her back. Ann was looking into the mirror, her robe pulled aside. Lillian started to apologize when Ann spun around, startled at the intrusion. Lillian could see her fully in the reflection of the mirror now.

Ann was touching a scar on her collar bone, there was a bump beneath the scar. And where her arm crossed her chest, Lillian could see that where her breast was, there was no nipple and another scar below. But most startling of all in that split second was the fact that Ann was completely bald.

Lillian pushed the door open wider, and Ann pulled her robe around herself quickly. Now Lillian could see the short wig stretched over a head form on a shelf beside the sink. Ann's mouth was open wide, as though she was about to scream.

“What in the name of God ...” Lillian started.

“I ...” Ann croaked, unable to speak, unable to say a word.

Lillian backed out of the bathroom doorway and walked down the hall to her own room. She was shaking and struggling to understand what she'd just witnessed. She closed her bedroom door behind her and sat down on her bed, holding her own robe close around her in the same manner Ann usually did with her sweater.

She heard the tap on her door, but ignored it. She was trying to take it all in, trying to make sense of what she'd just seen. There was a tap again, and again she ignored it, but this time the door opened.

“Lillian, we have to talk.” And just as Ann said this, the whole situation became clear to Lillian.

“You have cancer. You have breast cancer. You're sick to your stomach because you have been going for chemotherapy every week. You didn't get a makeover, you got a wig!” She stopped speaking and stood to pace from the bed to the window, understanding even more as she talked it out. “And the last time you went bald wasn't alopecia from grief, you had cancer then, too.” Lillian turned from the window and pointed at Ann, who was holding her robe up tight against her throat. “And this cancer is a recurrence.”

Ann's bald head nodded twice. Her eyes looked sunken in her head, dark circles outlining them.

“You didn’t think to mention this to me?” Lillian asked, outraged. “You let me come and live here, let me take care of the kids every Wednesday, and cook for them every night when you couldn’t because you had ‘a little stomach bug’ that wouldn’t go away, but you never thought to mention that you have cancer?”

“You would have left,” Ann said.

Lillian just stared at Ann now.

“You would have left,” Ann said again.

Lillian took a deep breath and brushed her hair off her forehead letting her hand stay against the top of her head. She stared at Ann a long moment and said, “You’re Goddamned right I would have left!”

“There’s more, Lilly.”

“What do you mean there’s more?”

“The cancer is in Stage 4. I’m not going for chemo anymore, because it won’t work anyway. I decided that this past Wednesday. So, here it is...I’m going to die. And I was the person who bought the house you were living in, and I arranged to have the closing a week earlier than we originally agreed hoping that when you got home you’d have no place else to go. And I arranged to be in Starbucks when you came home that day.” The words poured out of Ann.

Lillian sat down on the edge of the bed trying to comprehend everything Ann was telling her. “You manipulated all of that?” Lillian asked amazed, quieter now.

Ann nodded.

Lillian shook her head and looked at the bald woman. “Why?”

“I wanted you to love my children.”

Lillian continued to stare at her cousin, but it was painful to see her so frail, so frightened looking, her scalp shiny, her eyelashes missing completely. “You wanted me to love your children? You wanted me to love...” and then it was completely clear, and Lillian recoiled against the headboard. “Are you serious? Oh, my God, you manipulative bitch,” she whispered at first, then more loudly, “you fucking manipulative bitch.”

“I want you to take care of them when I die.”

“You picked the wrong person,” Lillian said getting off the bed and throwing her suitcase on it. She didn’t even bother to hold her robe closed now. She opened the dresser drawer and threw clothes into the suitcase. “You *tricked* the wrong person.”

“Lillian...”

“Who do you think you are? My God, Ann, what right have you to plan someone else’s life like this?”

“I’m desperate ... desperate people do desperate things ... someone has to love them. Someone has to take care of them.”

“Maybe that’s true, but it doesn’t have to be *me*,” Lillian said pointing to her own chest, even more enraged. “Not this someone. I don’t want to take care of your children, Ann. I don’t want to be their substitute mother, for God’s sake; I don’t even want to live here with them anymore.”

“Shhh,” Ann said, closing the bedroom door. “Please don’t wake them.”

Lillian threw more clothes into the suitcase and then put on her underpants and a bra. She pulled on jeans and a t-shirt, grabbed her suitcase and left the room, brushing past Ann.

Ann followed her down the front stairs and into the library where Lillian went to get her laptop, but she didn't say anything. There was no begging, no trying to defend herself. She just kept following Lillian around the house, still holding her robe closed, her hands shaking.

But then she stood in front of the door, barring Lillian's way. Her blue eyes were larger than Lillian had ever seen them in her pale bald head. There were no tears in them now – just fear.

“Get out of my way.”

“I need you.”

“Get out of my way.”

“*They* need you.”

“Find ... someone ... else,” Lillian said slowly and deliberately.

“I'm dying, Lillian,” Ann said, “we need you. Please don't leave.”

“Pretend that I don't exist. Pretend that I have never been here. Okay? Get someone else.”

“There is no one else. My husband hasn't any family either, he was an only child, and his parents are too old, too frail. My mother has Alzheimer's, my father has all he can do to take care of her, and my brother is still in graduate school. My children need a mother, Lillian. They need *you*.”

“No! No! No!” Lillian shouted at her getting louder with each word. “Do you hear me? Now get the hell out of my way.”

Lillian pushed Ann aside, and even in her anger, she was astounded at how easy it was, how light and frail Ann was, and even through her anger, she felt a pang of remorse and fear.

She walked to the garage, opened it, and threw her things into the car and drove out of the garage and down the driveway, spitting gravel behind her. She didn't dare look in her rearview mirror.

She didn't get a train. She drove directly to Manhattan, parked in the five level garage three blocks from Dan's apartment building between First and Second Avenue. He was in the lobby leaving the building when she bolted through the door, ignoring the doorman who was about to greet her.

Dan stepped back, surprised to see her, and she stepped back when she saw him, then she fell forward into his arms, sobbing. "Oh, boy," he said above her head, his hands finding her arms and pushing her away so he could look down into her face. "This can't be good," he said, speaking to no one in particular.

He took her suitcase from her hand, and led her to the elevator without saying anything else. He shrugged a little at the doorman who was still watching them. The doorman shrugged in response, pulling both palms up in a familiar New York gesture with the universal message of "whatever."

They didn't speak in the elevator. Lillian turned away from him and faced the corner, trying to control her sobs. When they entered his apartment, Dan took her in his arms again.

"What's up, kid?" he asked. She just shook her head, her face buried in his suit jacket. "I've known you for twelve years, and I have never seen you cry. I've never even seen you well up! Not even when you found out about your father's death and then your mother's...not a tear."

"I need to sleep, Danny. I'm so freakin' tired."

"What has happened to you?" he wanted to know, his face close to hers, his eyes more worried than she'd ever seen them.

"Later...please. I'll tell you later. Now I just need a bed."

He led her into his daughter's bedroom and closed the blinds against the summer sun and heat. She was exhausted, he could see that, but he suspected that she wanted more to escape.

"Go to work," she said to him. "We'll talk when you get home."

"I'm not leaving you like..."

"Go to work, damn it!" she shouted. "Go to work, Dan. Let me alone for awhile. I need to sleep and I need to think...*alone*."

He left her then, and she fell asleep on his daughter's lavender sheets.

When he arrived in his office, Dan called his sister, Louise, to warn her about Lillian in case she got home before he did. She had already left for work before Lillian arrived.

"I've never seen her this way," he said to Louise.

"Well, whatever it is...we'll take care of her," his sister told him.

Dan tried to call Lillian once, but she didn't answer her cell phone. He couldn't concentrate on the work on his desk, and half way through a meeting in the middle of the day, he excused himself and left the office. When he entered the apartment, Lillian was sitting on the sofa still in his daughter's pajamas. Her knees were drawn up to her chest. The television was on, but she was looking in another direction. He stood at the doorway of his living room and she turned to look up at him.

"I'm the meanest bitch you've ever known," she said matter-of-factly.

"Yeah, I know," he answered, moving into the room, dropping his keys on the coffee table as he sat down next to her and pulled her against his chest.

"You have no idea, Dan. I'm going straight to hell, and I don't even care."

Just then they heard the apartment door open and Louise walked into the apartment and stood in exactly the spot her brother had when he entered a few seconds earlier. “I came home early,” she said.

“I’m the meanest bitch you’ve ever known,” Lillian said looking at Louise with her head still on Dan’s chest.

Louise raised her eyebrows and looked at her brother. Paternal twins, they looked exactly alike except for the fact that she was strictly feminine and he was all masculinity. They were natural blonds, complete with pale brows and eyelashes. Now almost 52, Louise was leaning toward plump, but she dressed in designer clothes, her fair hair was always cut in a classic bob, and she wore subtle but effective makeup.

“Tell me something I don’t already know,” Louise said with a grin, moving across the room and sitting on the sofa on the other side of Lillian. She rubbed the younger woman’s back with her perfectly manicured hand.

Dan relinquished Lillian to his sister and stood up, “I’ll get us all a drink.”

Dan was taller than Louise, but only by an inch, which put him over six feet. He always wore his shirt sleeves rolled up casually, and never wore a tie, which was typical for the informal publishing business. He had a full head of curly hair that he kept short, and his and Louise’s eyes were a deep shade of blue, which they both complained were failing them because they were dependent on reading glasses.

They had a tender relationship, siblings first, friends forever. The only time they had a falling out was when Dan married his first wife, who Louise detested, but when Dan’s daughter was born, they made amends. Louise couldn’t live without her niece in her life. And when the marriage ended, Dan moved back into the same apartment Louise and he had shared with their

parents all their lives. Louise lived in their parents' bedroom now that they were gone, Dan slept in the same bedroom he'd always slept in (except when he was married), and they fixed up the extra bedroom for Julia, who visited every other weekend, and often during the week since Dan had joint custody with his first wife.

When she first met her, Louise liked Lillian, but with reservations. She was afraid her brother would be hurt again, and she never wanted to see him as sad and unhappy as he had been with his first wife and then after his divorce. But in time she learned to trust Lillian. She realized Lillian wasn't out to hurt Dan, except by not marrying him. Louise wondered why they weren't married. The truth was, all three of them—Dan, Louise, and Julia—had fallen in love with the elusive Lillian, with her devil may care attitude, her wit, and the way she could bring fun and excitement to the apartment the moment she walked into it. And they all accepted her wandering in and out of their lives because they knew that when Lillian was with them, she was with them heart and soul. Then she'd leave. She always emailed, or called, and each time she visited, they hoped it would be the time she'd finally stay forever, but they harbored no expectations.

Louise had come to know Lillian's moods. Sitting on the couch with Lillian's head in her lap now, she knew that there was something deeply wrong with Lillian this time, and it wasn't just her usual funk or her need for a place to stay.

Louise also realized as soon as she saw Lillian that she needed to leave the two of them alone that night. Dan was the only person Lillian ever opened up to, and Louise didn't want to be in the way. When Dan came back with three vodka tonics, Louise took hers, kissed Lillian's forehead as the younger woman sat up, and left them on the couch to go into her own room.

She made a few phone calls, planned a get together at a restaurant with her friends, walked into the living room and kissed Lillian on the forehead again, bade her brother goodbye, and left them alone in the apartment—all within ten minutes.

Dan turned to Lillian in the now silent apartment. “Time to talk yet?” he asked, not waiting for her to initiate the conversation.

“I have never been angrier in my life.”

“I doubt that,” he said, “but what’s happened and who are you mad at?”

“I’ve been completely manipulated, duped, lied to...”

“Duped means the same thing as lied to...”

Lillian looked at him and groaned, “Oh, please, leave the editor at the office...”

“Sorry, go ahead,” he motioned with his glass.

“My cousin is dying of cancer.”

Dan brought his lips together and let out a long, slow whistle. “That’s a tough one.”

“You’re immediately feeling sorry for her, aren’t you?” Lillian said, putting her drink down on the coffee table in an angry gesture.

“Tell me the rest,” he said, putting his arm around her and pulling her against his chest again.

“Apparently, she is the person who bought Mrs. Schneider’s house. She was waiting for me in Starbucks when I got back that day from Oklahoma, though I don’t know how she knew that I was away or that I’d go to Starbucks. She brought me into our grandparent’s house, made me feel comfortable and content, made the bad memories seem insignificant compared to all the good memories she reminded me about, and then she made me love ...”

She picked her glass up again and drank deeply of the clear potent liquid.

“Made you love...?” Dan prodded.

“Her kids...”

Dan leaned back against the couch while Lillian rested her elbows on her knees and held her head between her hands, the cold glass to her cheek. “And her,” she finished.

“You mean Ann?” Dan asked.

“Yes Ann. She orchestrated the whole thing so that I’d be hooked and I’d take care of her while she is dying and then the kids after she is gone. I can’t believe her duplicity, Dan. I can’t believe how cunning she’s been. Like I have no right to my own life because now she’s dying and needs a mother for her children? I haven’t seen her in years. What would make her think I’d even consider it?”

Dan didn’t say anything, and when Lillian looked back at him, he had tears in his eyes. She jumped up from the sofa angry at *him* now. “I should have known you’d take her side of this.”

“I haven’t taken anyone’s side, baby. I’m just moved by how desperate she must feel.”

“Oh, yes, she used that same word.”

“Desperate people do des...”

“Please,” she stopped him by holding up the palm of her hand. “Don’t even!”

He took a long sip of his drink now. “It was wrong of her to do what she did, Lillian. It was very wrong of her.”

“Thank you,” Lillian said, waving her arm in satisfaction. “Thank you.”

“It *was* manipulative and deceitful.”

“Yes, it was.”

“Thank God you found out when you did, before the children grew even fonder of you. That would have been cruel for them.”

“*Exactly!* Imagine how that would have been!”

“What will you do now, darling?” he asked.

She walked back to the couch and took his hand. “I’ll make love to you, first. Then we’ll go for our blood tests and plan a nice, sweet little wedding at City Hall.”

His eyes met hers. “You want to marry me?” Dan asked her, his voice flat.

“It’s been too long in coming, Danny boy.”

“But first we make love?”

“Yep.”

“Nope.”

“What?”

He pulled her down to her knees in front of him and put his hands on each side of her face. “Look, I love you more than there are words to express how much. Making love with you has given me the most spiritual and tremendous moments of my life. I’ll be yours for the rest of my life, even if it means being alone for the rest of my life. That’s how in love I am with you, Lil. But tonight I won’t make love to you, and don’t think it won’t bother me.”

She was completely perplexed. “I’m sorry, Danny, I don’t get it.”

“Well, when we make love, it’s so special—so infrequent—that I won’t have it sullied with what’s going on in your mind tonight. You’re feeling anger, betrayal, and you’re also feeling selfish and self-centered. You won’t be in my bed with me alone, there will be three additional people in there with us, and I deserve better than that because I don’t get it enough from you.”

“Dan?”

“Get your head together, and then we’ll talk.”

“Are you impotent suddenly, is that what this is about?”

“No,” he chuckled, despite being annoyed. “I’m not impotent.”

She lowered her rear end down to the floor, and ran her tongue over her lips. “Is it because you are disgusted with me—disappointed in me because I won’t stay and take care of her and her brats? Is that it? I disgust you because I’m so selfish and self-centered?”

“You *worry* me, but no, Lil, you could never disgust me. Lillian, you are who you are and I’ve always known that.”

“A selfish bitch, right?”

“A beautiful, free-spirited, deeply wounded and sad woman.”

“Don’t bring that up.”

“I don’t want to, but I’m telling the truth. If nothing else, kiddo, you’ve always been able to tell the truth about yourself to *me*.”

She looked at the carpeted floor for a long time before she said, “Look, Dan, I know you think I want to marry you to save me from Ann—from all that crap—but the truth is, I really do love you and want to be with you,” she told him in as reasonable a tone as she could.

“You really do love me, Lillian, and I know it, but you’ve got some things to clean up first and I won’t put myself in a situation where you’re half the time with me and half the time pining away over them, feeling guilty and hating yourself, while pretending to feel righteous. You already had enough of that type of thing going on as it was. I won’t marry you right now. It’ll happen, but not now. Not this way.”

“Are you telling me to go back there? To do this thing she wants? Are you out of your mind?”

“No, I’m sane.” He stood up from the couch and pulled her to her feet with him. “Sleep in Julia’s room tonight...stay here as long as you want, but eventually, you’ve got to work this out with your cousin, even if it’s just to explain to her your reasons for not helping her. Otherwise, you’ll always feel that you are ‘The meanest bitch we’ve ever known.’” He smiled then, “And you aren’t, darling. Not even close.”

Lillian pushed him away and walked into the kitchen to pour more vodka into her glass. “You want me to help her. I know you. You want me to help her because you’re such a bleeding heart. The hell with what *I* want. The hell with what’s good for *me* or right *for me*.”

“No, Lillian, and stop throwing a temper tantrum. That may not be what’s right for you or for them, but it has to be resolved one way or another before we get married. You’re much too upset over it. Not now, not tomorrow, but eventually you have to go back and get rid of all the shit you’ve been carrying around all these years. I think this may be your way of doing it.”

“What Ann was trying to do to me is supposed to scare away all my ‘demons’ as you’ve always called them? Are you crazy? It’s just adding to them, Dan. Taking on a dying woman and her two children will not erase the past. It will just add more crap to it. I will not do this. I will not do this. I will *not fucking* do this. Do you understand?”

He didn’t answer her.

“Marry me,” she challenged him, leaning over a chair toward him.

He raked his hand over his blonde curly hair before shaking his head no.

“Dan, don’t do this to us,” she threatened.

“Lillian, don’t *you* do this to us. Give us half a chance.”

“Has it occurred to you that if you don’t marry me, Dan, I’ll get on a plane and never come back?”

“No.”

“Did it occur to you that if I go back to Ann and the kids, I’ll come back to you all used up...depleted of all emotion and energy?”

He kissed her forehead, then her eyes, and her cheeks, and lightly brushed her lips with his. He pulled her against him, the customary longing he felt whenever he touched her surged through his body. How many times had *he* asked *her* to marry him? How many times had he dreamed about her finally saying yes? And now he was telling her no.

“That didn’t occurred to me either,” he said holding her closer to him, thinking what a child this independent, feisty, beautiful woman really was when all was said and done. What a wounded and complex person he loved. “What *has* occurred to me is that you may come back to me all *filled* up.”

## CHAPTER 8

Ann sat in the Gazebo watching the children playing in the yard. The wig was uncomfortable in the heat, her scalp itched, but she refused to allow the children know that she was bald again. It seemed to deeply upset Phillip. She wondered if he suspected the real reason why she'd been bald. He was too young to be told the truth, and she didn't think his friends from their old neighborhood had known about her illness, so there was no reason for Ann to think that Phillip knew she had cancer. Nonetheless, it had upset him before when she lost her hair and she didn't want them to know this time no matter how hot and uncomfortable the wig felt.

She was feeling desperately guilty about what she had tried to do to Lillian. She knew at the time it was wrong. Now she felt foolish. In fact, it *was* a foolish thing to do. She hadn't been around Lillian in years. For all she knew, Lillian could have become like her mother, and was that the type of person Ann wanted raising her children? What was she thinking? She wasn't thinking obviously. She was appalled that she could be so dishonest and ruthless, and so careless with her children's future.

Ann looked over at the kids trying to play badminton. She had put up the net herself earlier and it was already falling over. She had no strength in her arms, although she felt a little stronger since she'd stopped the chemo. What a difference even a week made.

She watched them playing and thought, *who will love my little babies?* Joey already loved them, but he was so young. His own life hadn't even begun yet, and to saddle him with two kids just wasn't fair. He didn't care, Ann knew that, and he had begged her to let him come home from school to help out. It looked like that was going to have to happen now. Her father had enough on his plate with her mother. Joey was the only person she could turn to now.

*Mommy, she thought, closing her eyes and dropping her head back against her lawn chair. Oh, Mommy, if only you weren't sick. God how I need you; how my babies need you. I miss you, Mommy. I miss you.*

Tears slid from the corner of her closed eyes. *This won't do*, she admonished herself. *This is just self pity, and I don't have time for self pity right now. I have to figure out what to do about Phillip and Suzy.*

In the seven days since Lillian had left, Ann asked herself a hundred times a day why she hadn't told Lillian the whole story before that morning. She felt now that somehow it would have made a difference and Lillian would have stayed, or at the very least, helped her figure out a solution before she left. It was the wrong way to go about it. She was never manipulative before. But then she was never dying before and leaving two children orphaned.

*Help me*, she begged the universe. *Please help me.*

She heard a car in the driveway and she wanted to get up to see who it was, but she was too weary. The motor stopped and she waited. Soon, coming from the other side of the house, she saw a figure in black with just a little square of white showing at his neck. Ann smiled.

"Could you find a prettier place to sit?" asked Fr. John Murphy as he approached the gazebo.

"Actually, Father, I can," Ann answered. "Sometimes I sit in that Adirondack chair under the willow tree—*that's* the prettiest place to sit."

He followed her gaze to the chair under the graceful tree, which was dancing in an unusually cool breeze off the river. "Isn't it buggy under there?"

She laughed, "Sometimes, but I love the feel of the tendrils on my cheeks." She took his arm and said, "Come with me, I'll show you."

Fr. Murphy went with her, allowing her to lean heavily on him for support, and when they got to the chair, she sat down and motioned for him to sit on the wide flat arm, which he did. The breeze lifted the sweeping branches and they swung gently around them. Then, since it was early in the morning and the dew was still clinging inside the downward branches, Ann reached up, grabbed a handful of the leaves, and tugged. The dew rained down on them, and she laughed when Fr. Murphy jumped up.

“It’s crying, Father,” she said, smiling up into the seeping downward hanging branches.

“Well, its tears are drenching my cassock,” he said, laughing now.

The kids ran over to them.

“Hi, Father,” said Suzy.

“Hi,” said Phillip not looking directly at the priest, but aside as he usually did.

He touched them both on their heads. “You’re good badminton players,” he told them.

They smiled shyly. “Mommy’s making the willow tree cry again,” Suzy said, moving over to the chair to hoist herself on her mother’s lap.

“I see that,” he said, laughing when Ann pulled again and the dew trickled down on all of them.

Fr. Murphy looked up into the tree, allowing a few sprinkles touch his face. “The tears of the willow,” he said quietly. His eyes met Ann’s. They were a sparkling hazel color, surrounded by dark lashes, and the crows feet spread out from the corners of his eyes to his graying temples.

“Go play,” Ann told Suzy and Phillip. “Fr. Murphy and I have to talk.”

They ran back to grab their rackets and started to hit the birdie again. Ann turned her face up to the priest. “Making a sick call?”

“It’s called the sacrament of the sick, Ann, and it’s to sustain you. But I came more to talk to you, or rather to listen if *you* want to talk.”

Ann had met Fr. Murphy sitting in the waiting room at the cancer center where she had been getting her infusions. Fr. Murphy was being treated there, too, and they had started talking one day. Ann hadn’t been to church since her husband’s funeral mass, but she considered herself a Catholic still, albeit a non-practicing one.

Fr. Murphy had been so accessible, and although he himself was going through radiation treatment for prostate cancer, he said very comforting things to her, always taking the time to show concern even when he himself was going through so much. She’d been back to see him a few times at the rectory where he lived, taking comfort from his gentle demeanor, his wit and his belief in God and an afterlife. She called him when Lillian left and cried on the phone with him for an hour, but didn’t go back to see him.

“How are you feeling?” she asked him.

“Treatments are over,” he said, almost with pride in his voice.

“Good, you’ll get stronger now.”

“And you?”

“No more treatments for me. It’s futile.”

“There is always hope, Ann.”

“I’ve got to be well enough to take care of the kids now that my cousin has left. That is, I can’t afford to be sick from chemotherapy right now. I imagine I’ll get weaker as the cancer spreads, and I will need pain medication, but for now, it’s all about the kids.”

“You’ve got to fight this cancer for them. That’s more important. I was thinking that I might be able to find someone to come in to help out, Ann. And if you can’t afford...”

Ann laughed gently. “That’s definitely not a problem for me, Father. But I’m afraid to bring a stranger in to take care of us. Besides, I want to take care of them myself for as long as I can.”

He looked out at the canal and sat on the grass at her feet, pulling his knees up under his cassock and holding them with his arms. “I guess I can understand that,” he said.

She leaned forward and put her hand on his arm. “Now *you’re* depressed, Father. Don’t be. I’m all right. I’m too happy for you that your treatments are finished to allow you to be worried about me. I’ll work this all out somehow. My brother is coming home this weekend so we can discuss it.”

The priest looked at her again. “You’re a strong lady, Ann. I can’t believe that there’s nothing else that can be done. I know of a doctor at St. Margaret’s. She’s a brilliant oncologist. She believes in combining naturopathic remedies and holistic therapies with whatever medical science has to offer. She’s had some wonderful outcomes, and she’s full of life. Her patients adore her. I’m one of them, so I should know.”

Ann looked away and didn’t answer him.

“You’ve given up, Ann?”

“No...but God—or the universe—has given up on me.”

She heard another car come up the driveway and he turned to her. “More company?” She shrugged. They watched for a minute. The back door of the kitchen opened, and Ann sat up surprised. She thought she’d locked the front of the house when she came out back with the children. Lillian appeared at the kitchen doorway and stepped out. She was wearing a yellow sun dress, and her long red hair was loose around her shoulders. As she walked toward them, Ann, still shocked at seeing Lillian, couldn’t help notice how much Lillian looked like Ann’s

mother Helen. She had never noticed just how alike they looked until this moment. It took her breath away.

“Who is it?” Fr. Murphy asked.

“My cousin,” she whispered.

He was surprised now. “Really?”

Lillian walked halfway to Ann, but stopped to look at the children. They were standing silently staring at Lillian, rackets at their sides. “Well?” she said. “No hello?”

They both said hello, and Suzy dropped her racket and ran over to Lillian and took her hand. She kissed it twice with a delicate touch of her lips and then looked up into Lillian’s face with a huge smile—another tooth missing since Lillian had last seen her. Suzy led Lillian toward her mother. “She came back, Mommy. She’s back.”

“I see that,” Ann said, smiling at her little girl, but looking nervously at Lillian.

Suzy looked up at Lillian, her eyes bright and happy as she pulled Lillian toward Ann and the priest. “I told Mommy you’d come back. I told her that you would miss us as much as we missed you.”

Lillian smiled at the little girl. “You missed me, did you? What did you miss most, my cranky face or my bitchy personality?”

Suzy leaned into her and whispered, “Language ... there’s a priest around.”

Lillian covered her mouth, “Oops.”

“It’s okay, though, he’s a cool priest. He won’t yell.”

Lillian was overcome with delight in seeing this child again, hearing her silly chatter, seeing her gap-toothed smile, and she scooped Suzy up, laughing, and carried her across the yard

until they reached Ann. “You were right Suzy Q, I did miss you,” Lillian whispered in the little girl’s ear.

Ann was still smiling, but she felt worried, or perhaps cautious was more accurate.

“Hi,” was all she said at first.

“Hey,” Lillian answered.

“This is Fr. John Murphy,” Ann said to Lillian and without taking her eyes from Lillian’s she added, “Father, this is my cousin Lillian.”

Lillian shook the priest’s hand. “I’m very glad to meet you,” he told her. “Ann has told me a lot about you.”

Lillian grimaced. “I bet she has.”

“All good,” he reassured Lillian, but letting her know by his eyes and his sheepish smile that he knew the whole story.

“We met at the hospital,” Ann told Lillian, “weeks ago when we were both waiting for treatments.”

Lillian raised her eyebrows and looked at him. He was thin and a little pale, but looked so much healthier than Ann.

“I’m finished with my radiation, and those treatments don’t take as much out of us as chemo does,” he explained as though reading her mind.

Lillian nodded, not knowing what to say, then she looked at Ann.

“I’m feeling better, too,” Ann answered the unspoken question in Lillian’s eyes.

“Good.”

“She stopped going to chemotherapy, though, and she had several more treatments to go,” Fr. Murphy blurted out, turning slightly red when Ann looked at him sharply.

“You did?” Lillian asked her. “Why would you do that?”

Ann just shrugged and looked over at the canal away from both of them.

“I’ve just been trying to talk her into seeing another oncologist I know who is remarkable.”

“Father...” Ann said, trying to hush him.

“I’m sorry. You’re right. I’ve said too much and minded your business beyond the limits.” He took Ann’s hand in both of his. “Will you forgive me?”

Ann smiled despite being annoyed. “Will you have me give you absolution and penance? Then say six decades of the rosary and an act of contrition.”

He stood back, feigning surprise, “But there are only five decades of the beads!”

“Go the extra mile, Father.”

They all laughed. “All right, I’ll be off. I’ve got a lot of Hail Mary’s to say tonight it seems.”

He shook Lillian’s hand again. “I’m happy to have met you, Lillian.”

“Thank you,” she answered.

He leaned down and kissed Ann’s cheek. “If there’s anything, you just...” he let the sentence hang. Ann nodded.

He bade them goodbye and walked away, waving to the children as he passed them.

The two women watched him leave, neither of them knowing how to speak to each other at that moment. Then Ann asked, “Lillian, why are you here?”

Lillian went over to sit on the broad arm of the Adirondack chair, and she leaned back so that her shoulder was just touching Ann’s head. Now they were both looking out in the same direction toward Philip and Suzy. “Because I want to be, Annie.”

“I don’t believe you,” Ann said sadly. “I think it’s out of shame, or guilt, and worse, pity.”

“That would have been true four days ago. Maybe three days ago. But today it isn’t true, which is why I’m back. I wouldn’t come back until it was right in my head.”

“You forgive me for manipulating you that way?”

“No, I do not! Let’s not ask for the impossible, here, kiddo. Do you forgive me for being a bitch?”

Ann sat up and turned to look at her cousin. “I’m serious, Lillian. What I did was pretty horrendous. I tried to trick you into how *I* wanted you to live the rest of your life. I had no right to do that, and you had every right to be angry with me.”

Lillian pulled her bottom lip in with her top teeth. She took a long while and a deep breath before saying. “I do resent it, Ann. I don’t know what to tell you. I was furious with you, but I was also scared to death to think you would want *me* to raise your kids. I have been the most irresponsible human being who ever walked the earth for most of my life. I’m not mother material, and I think you’ve come to understand that.”

Ann sat back again in the chair, and this time she sighed heavily, then she leaned her head on Lillian’s arm. “I don’t care, Lilly. I need someone to love my children. You *might* turn out to be a horrible mother, I don’t know, but I saw you starting to love them. I saw you coming around, and you were kind to them. When my mother was first starting to become forgetful and the doctor told us that she probably had early onset Alzheimer’s, she told me that if I ever needed anyone once she couldn’t help me any more, to get a hold of you. She told me that I could trust you. I argued with her, Lilly, I won’t lie. I actually laughed at her, but she was dead serious.”

Lillian whispered, “Pay back.”

“What does that mean?”

“You don’t know?”

“No, I don’t know.”

Lillian took a deep breath, thought a minute, then said, “It’s stupid. Never mind that I said that.”

Ann reached over and took Lillian’s hand in hers; her head was still resting on Lillian’s arm. “I need you, Lillian. You can hate that as much as you want, and you can hate me for it, but the truth is I need you.”

“I know. Annie, I’ll try. Can that be enough? Can I try and if it doesn’t work, we’ll figure out what will? That’s all I’ve got ... that and the fact that you are right, I *have* grown to love your children ... and I realize that I have always loved you like a little sister. I’m telling you that because you have to realize that even if you *were* my sister, I’d be afraid of all of this. I’d still want to run away from it. I’m being honest with you; I want to jump right back in my car and escape. I don’t think I’ve ever been more afraid in my life—except about learning the truth about my mother’s death.”

They were quiet a long time, and then Ann asked, “Should I have lied? Should I have told you what my mother told you when she called you all those years ago—what she told everyone about your mother? That she had an allergic reaction to some medication?”

“No. I asked because I wanted to know. Hell, I knew anyway or I wouldn’t have asked.”

“She was very ill, Lilly, truly mentally ill. She never meant anything she had ever done. It was all because of her illness.”

“I hated her, Ann. I hated her for so long that it almost became love.”

“It was always love, Lilly, never hate. *Hurt*...it was hurt and pain, but it was never hate.”

“No fairytales, Annie. Life is what it is, and life with my mother was hell and I hated it.”

“Okay, I’ll give you that – you hated *it, life* with her, but not her.”

“Listen, Pollyanna, I think we’ve had enough of this conversation,” Lillian tried to sound lighter. “So, do you take me back or not? Cause if it’s *not*, I finally get to sleep on the park bench in Newtown.”

“The room is exactly the same as it was when you left. In fact, the bed still isn’t made. I couldn’t bring myself to go in the room. So that means the sheets are dirty.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time I slept on dirty sheets. Now about this oncologist the priest mentioned...”

Ann stood up and pulled Lillian with her. “Tomorrow, okay? We’ll talk about it tomorrow. Today we celebrate, let’s go ride on the carousel at Peddler’s Village. I want to have fun today.”

She put her arms around her cousin and hugged her tightly. And her cousin actually hugged back.