

THE BRAID

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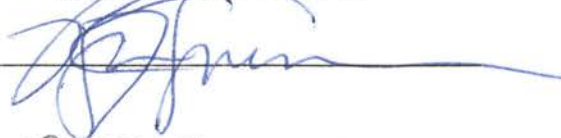
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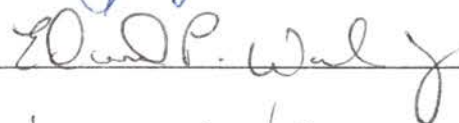
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PREFACE

Anti-Aesthetics and Characterization

"Give homage to old coffee cups, sparrows, city buses, thin ham sandwiches," Natalie Goldberg encourages the writer in *Writing Down the Bones* (100). This homage to the ordinary prevades *The Braid*, because our daily lives *are* basically ordinary, and, like old coffee cups, eventually become stained, often chipped. But the chipped coffee mugs provide the backdrop for the smattering of events that make our lives *extraordinary*--the once-steaming tea which cools, forgotten, on the yellow marble-topped chrome table in the shabby trailer kitchen while a preacher attempts rape in the bedroom; the thick dregs of yesterday's coffee on top of the TV while the husband on the shabby avocado tweed couch, who considers himself a man of great wisdom at nineteen, informs the naive, insecure girl, who thought love was "forever," that he's leaving her for an older red-haired woman named Stella. Somehow, the attempted rape and the matrimonial betrayal would be less effective against the backdrop of an opulent, glittering setting. The average reader might be less empathetic to the protagonist.

In "The Real Thing," Henry James' account of his own ideas and plans for development of plot, he writes of the high class lady and gentleman characters who live "at country-houses, watering places and clubs, . . . utterly unable to do anything . . . just simply *being*," as opposed to the common London girl and the ill-dressed Italian fellow (957). The shallow affluent lady and gentleman who are only interested in *showing* themselves as models are ineffective illustrations of characters in writing. According to

James, they have no "pictorial sense" because "they are only clean and stiff and stupid" (957), merely mannequins. To be effective, flat characters must be "contrasted, confronted, juxtaposed" with "pictorial" characters such as the common London girl who lives in a hovel and the poorly clothed Italian with garlic on his breath. In "The Real Thing," Henry James stresses that beginning from the early germination of an idea, the writer must present a realistic picture. The entire fiction must be a picture or a series of pictures. James states, fiction "must illustrate something. God knows that's enough--if the thing does illustrate" (957). *The Braid* is a sequence of pictures--pictures that are not air brushed to conceal the stretch marks on Lily's stomach, or Sister Melvina's large bottom in its maroon jersey dress spread along the piano bench.

My purpose in *The Braid* is, like Henry James' purpose, to provide "an intense illusion of reality." According to James, the mere illusion of reality is inadequate. Illusions of reality are innumerable. The writer-artist must make choices among the many illusions of reality, finding those that are worthy of being intensified (Booth 44). Well-chosen "illustrations" result in achieving an intensity of illusion that "genuine life has been presented" (44). Thus, in the illustration of the right pictures, intensity becomes magnified with the juxtaposition of common objects and dramatic situations.

One illusion of reality is "emotional reality." The writer desires the expression of emotions in his work for the purpose of closing the distance between the reader and the narrative. Consequently, the reader will identify with the narrator. The "objective correlative," or finding the right "set of objects, a situation, a chain of events," evokes an intensity of emotions, according to T. S. Eliot (qtd in Burroway 322). The desired specific emotional effects depend on the objects, situations, and events of a particular

work. The reality of the situation pictured in *The Braid* is the Quail Run Trailer Park with its stale mediocrity. It's the too-long plastic floral curtains dragging on the floor at the kitchen window, the glass-ringed stains on a cheap maple coffee table.

The backdrop of the detailed mundane brings characters to life. How do they emotionally confront their socio-economic status, exemplified by Lily's careful counting of the money in the Mason jar, during this time period immediately before and during the Vietnam War in western Arkansas? Do they, like Norvin, complacently envision a lifetime of fried Spam, beer, and sprawling on the couch, although he later gets called to the front lines? Or do they, like Lily, cut off the bottoms of the sagging plastic curtains and make tiebacks?

Pictures are not always beautiful, but the details in the pictures appear to be the truth. Concerning his use of the stream of consciousness technique as a method of presenting accurate and realistic characters, James Joyce states "the artist has no interest in making his works religious, moral, beautiful, or ideal; he wants only to make it truthful . . ." (qtd in Ellman 49). The anti-aesthetic must be included with the aesthetic to be true to human nature. In *On Humor*, Luigi Pirandello calls the writer of anti-aestheticism a humorist, stating that the humorist writer sees the king, normally viewed in all his splendor--"his crown, sceptre, and mantle of purple and ermine"--in his shirtsleeves (143).

The modern southern writer Flannery O'Connor consistently depicts the anti-aesthetic through the use of both comedy and tragedy in her works. For example, in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" the grandmother is arrayed in splendor for the family vacation to Florida, wearing her fine navy blue dress with tiny white dots, white gloves, and a navy blue hat with white violets.

But the same afternoon when the grandmother, still wearing her finery, cries, "Bailey Boy! Bailey Boy!" to her son as the Misfit's two helpers lead him into the woods, O'Connor gives the grandmother's appearance as "a parched old turkey hen crying for water" (949). Both the aesthetic (the grandmother's fine clothing) and the anti-aesthetic co-exist in a scene that is both tragic and comic. In O'Connor's works, the anti-aesthetic often provides the comedy as well as the eventual tragedy.

This simultaneous existence of both comedy and tragedy in Flannery O'Connor's works sets up a constant tension. In *The Braid*, I consciously strive to portray this co-existence of the comic and tragic to evoke tension, because with tension there is the drive, or the passion, to tear away the smiling masks to reveal what are often suffering faces. Without trouble, fiction is uninteresting.

Although I made no conscious effort to emulate Flannery O'Connor's technique, anti-aestheticism and tragicomedy prevade *The Braid*. One example of my use of both comedy and tragedy occurs in Chapter 3 when Lily, sick to her stomach from her first stage of pregnancy, runs into the restroom at Harold's Conoco Station to vomit, then gets locked inside. Late for school, she pounds on the door with both fists, yelling, "Help! Help me! I'm locked in the restroom!," almost falling out the door when Norvin opens it (31).

Another juxtaposition of both the tragic and the comic occurs in the Friendly Manor Nursing Home, Chapter 21, when Lily realizes that Brother Oliver is a patient there and enters his room, where the familiar navy tennis shoes with holes set by his bed. Brother Oliver spots Lily. "Woe is the wicked woman who arrays herself as the harlot!" he yells (239). Lily jumps, then turns, flees. Although Brother Oliver is pitiful, has lost his mind from a

traumatic head injury, and Lily is frightened, they both appear almost as caricatures in this scene. Another example of the comic and the tragic is in Chapter 5, when Norvin tells Lily on their honeymoon night in Van Buren, Arkansas that he's always been a bed wetter.

These juxtapositions provide or heighten specific conflicts such as the conflict of "man against man." For example, one conflict of "man against man" occurs in Chapter 19 with Lily's and Sister Melvina's confrontation in the bank, when Sister Melvina, standing splay-footed in the bank's restroom, informs Lily that she and Brother O, who calls her "Muffin," now live together. Sister Melvina also tells Lily that she is a "mouse of a girl." Lily retaliates by telling her "Good riddance" when she walks out the door (224). In Chapter 21, the conflict of "man against himself" is exemplified in one instance when Lily is pulled to Brother Oliver's bedside by the memories of their laughter together, yet also repulsed by his attempted rape and obsession (239).

Of the male characters in *The Braid*, the character of Brother Oliver Schwazier is probably the most colorful and well-developed. Brother Oliver Schwazier epitomizes the modern day pseudo-evangelist displayed on the six-o'clock news who is eventually caught while manipulating women to build his own ego. These evangelists' attempts to display a public Christ-like perfection, while privately acting quite differently, are eventually brought to the forefront by one careless slipup. Upholding and sustaining public Christ-like perfectionism is impossible; therefore, these pseudo-evangelists set themselves up for a fall.

Yet, unlike many glitzy, rich pseudo-evangelists, Brother Oliver seeks to present the facade of unpretentiousness and humbleness; at the laundromat in Chapter 9, Brother O rolls his brown Bible in his hand, his blue wool

slacks thin and shiny at the knees, as he says to Lily, "I have a little church over on Elizabeth Street ." He tells her only a few come, but "sometimes the spirit moves amongst us, and we get help for our souls" (107).

Brother Oliver is "the fixer," just as is the cunning Mr. Shiflet who carries his toolbox in Flannery O'Connor's "The Life You Save May Be Your Own." Christian liberty to Brother Oliver means owning the pure "Lily," just as christian liberty to Mr. Shiflet means owning the old automobile in Mrs. Lucynell Crater's shed. Both are unashamed, uninhibited in their manipulations of women, doing so in the name of Jesus. Viewing themselves as Christ-like figures, these evil manipulators provide an interplay with the saintly innocent, such as Mrs. Crater's mentally retarded, deaf daughter, also named Lucynell, in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own) and the good, quiet Sister Patricia in *The Braid*.

Brother O is a complex character; although he manipulates Lily into his bed, he also is the mediator between her and the church, where she initially comes to Christ and receives a measure of comfort for the loss of her mother, her daughter, and her marriage. Without Brother Oliver's invitation to the Church of the Brethren, Lily would not experience the love and support of the faithful saints there--Sister Patricia, Sister Darla, and the bald-headed deacon Brother Farguson--the quiet ones who really know Christ. Also, Brother Oliver, even as he manipulates her, offers Lily belief in herself as a woman, mentally, physically, and sexually. He verbally finds beauty in her name "Lily," even in her sagging breasts and stomach. Brother Oliver, with his experience as an older man who studies women, sees the holes in Lily that Norvin, because of his immaturity and inexperience, overlooks. Then he sets about filling the holes, drawing Lily, irresistibly, to him. To Lily, he is

symbolic of the Church, offering her the "peace, fellowship, love" she so desperately needs.

The "lily of the valley" is a Biblical metaphor for Christ, providing Brother Oliver supreme justification for his complete association with Lily. The lily is pure, white, "undefiled," like Christ's church, the Bride of Christ, "not having spot or wrinkle" (Eph 5:27). The white sheets Brother O sleeps on clothe him in "white raiment," symbolic of the Overcomer; like Christ, he is free from sin, "whiter than snow" (Ps 51:7). Yet the red motif is important because it also prevades the house of Brother Oliver. Though the sheets are white, a red cotton quilted bedspread covers his mattress. Brother O's frame house is white, trimmed in red. In Chapter 15, Lily finds him standing in his bathroom in her red nylon bra and panties trimmed in lace; although Brother Oliver defends himself by saying, "Lily, honey, please listen . . . I thought if I put your clothes on, I'd feel how you feel. I wanted to understand you better . . ." (172). His sins are "as scarlet," part of him, and inescapable, for Brother Oliver is both evil and saintly, both defiled and undefiled.

Similar to the Misfit in Flannery O'Connor's *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, (though not prone to murder), Brother Oliver is torn between the impulse to follow Jesus and the impulse to sin. He cannot give himself over to one completely. Where the Misfit "suppresses Jesus' call by killing, burning, destroying" (*Mystery* 70), Brother quells Jesus' call by becoming obsessed with Lily's body and attempting rape.

When Lily first arrives at Brother O's home to do housecleaning in Chapter 12, she thinks to herself when she parks her Catalina in the driveway: "His house is so clean outside, it's probably the same inside" (139). Inside the house, Lily exclaims to Brother Oliver over the bareness of

the kitchen--no notes on the refrigerator, no flour and sugar cannisters, no spoon holder, no potholders. Brother Oliver grins, remarks, "There's some things you can't see" (140). He, himself, provides a forewarning of the negative consequences that will result from Lily's naivete concerning their relationship. When Lily opens the cabinet doors and his bedroom closet, things are packed helter-skelter and on the verge of falling.

The motif of the braid runs throughout the novel, symbolizing change for Lily. In the beginning of the novel, Lily's obesity keeps her from liking herself. Aside from her deep brown eyes, she feels her only physical beauty is her long brown hair, which she continually braids down her back, or, as when she meets the teenage Norvin at the car wash, unbraids her hair and lets it fall around her shoulders. When Starfire dies, Lily cuts her long, thick braid, placing it, wrapped in cellophane, on her grave. The braid is the last precious gift Lily has to offer her.

A symbol of change, the braid also symbolizes growth. By the time of Starfire's death in Chapter 13, Lily has matured and realizes her own internal and external beauty (149). Cutting her hair is symbolic of her starting over, a representation of freedom to be herself; although later she briefly worries about going against the word of God, because Brother Oliver preaches "a woman's hair is her glory" (152).

Hair, in general, is a strong motif in *The Braid*--especially the women's hair. For example, Sister Melvina's coarse black hair, its stiff ends poking out of her bun, provides the reader with an impression of her personality: domineering, outspoken, thoughtless. Sister Darla's fine, blond hair fits her soft-spoken personality. Nancy June's flaming red hair, bushy and long, symbolizes her brashness.

At her graduation from high school in Chapter 4, Lily watches her mother Fern in the audience, noticing her "short, chestnut hair, fluffed on the top Up close little flecks of gray showed in her bangs, but (even) from my seat on the stage her hair looked soft, glowed in the dim light" (53). In comparison to the woman beside her mother, the pretentious Mrs. Eck with hair that looks like the "stiff solid crust" of "sugar and eggwhite frosting" (53), Fern's soft, fluffed hair symbolizes her naturalness, her compassion, and her gaeity.

The prevailing motif concerning Lily is her desire for "warmth." Throughout *The Braid* Lily is often cold. An early example in the novel occurs in Chapter 4, when Lily has just told her mom Fern and her dad Ted about her pregnancy. Her dad eventually sighs, then states resignedly, "The bread's already baking in the oven," and Lily visualizes a "brown loaf" . . . "warm," spread with creamy butter (42). After her marriage to Norvin, Lily seeks warmth in hot cinnamon tea, and its combination with Brother Oliver's words to her "Peace, fellowship, love" make her "feel warm inside." Lily wraps herself in the granny square afghan her mother crocheted for her. In Chapter 7, when Norvin has just left to drink with Wig, Lily pulls her knees up to her chest "just enough so I could tuck the tail of my gown under my toes" (95). Even when Lily breaks out in a sweat from fear in Chapter 9 while watching a thriller movie on ABC, her body is "cold, clammy on the inside." Naked by the side of her bed, she drinks the wine "straight from the bottle," savoring its warm fire as it goes to her stomach, offers a toast, "Peace, fellowship, love," to Norvin as he walks in the doorway" (113-14).

Lily's need to make her physical body warm inside is, of course, symbolic of her need for sincere human emotional contact. When her affectionate mother Fern dies of lung cancer, and later her daughter Starfire

is killed, Lily feels like she's losing everyone she loves. Her body "felt so cold inside, and I couldn't get warm, even though it was July." In Chapter 13, after Starfire's death, Lily wears "an old lavender sweater that used to be Mama's" (150), attempting to identify with her late mother's warm personality. Later in Chapter 18, simultaneous with the heat of her body as she dances in Olga's Topless Dance Club for the men is Lily's feeling of power (204).

The setting of *The Braid* is mainly used as a suggestive backdrop. For example, Olga's Topless Dance Club provides an atmosphere of heat, which Lily craves. As Janet Burroway states, "Setting can often . . . arouse reader expectation and foreshadow events to come" (200). Because Lily has now found a type of "warmth" in the atmosphere of Olga's, the reader may initially think that Lily has found her true setting, and have expectations of her choosing topless dancing as her permanent career. Yet the reader finds out eventually when Lily later scrubs with Dial soap that the setting and the character are in conflict.

The atmosphere of the setting may change in the viewpoint character's eyes due to specific events and actions. Lily is at first delighted to move to the shabby olive green trailer in Quail Run Trailer Park where she and Norvin will begin their married life with a new baby. As their marriage turns sour and scenes in the little bedroom turn violent, the atmosphere of the drab trailer changes. Lily lacks the enthusiasm she first felt when she planted flowers and embroidered pink "His" and "Hers" on the bathroom towels. She allows the trailer to become cluttered, paralleling her emotional life.

When Wig accidentally backs over her daughter Starfire with his van, killing her instantly, Lily comes to hate the trailer with all of its connotations

and memories. Then, after Brother Oliver attempts to rape her in the bedroom, the conflict between Lily and the atmosphere of where she lives becomes unbearable, and she realizes she must move.

"Where you come from affects your writing. Even in the patterns of language," Natalie Goldberg tells the writer in *Writing Down the Bones* (144). Goldberg advises, "Go home . . . so you can penetrate quietly and clearly into your own people and from that begin to understand all people and their struggles" (145). Writing in the rhythm of Brother Oliver's preaching language comes effortlessly to me because of spending hours upon hours inside a small spiritual church as a child and a teenager in the 1950's and 1960's. Natalie Goldberg states that because "a young child is very impressionable, that is when the rhythm of language enters her body" (144). My use of the imprinted patterns of rhythm and colorful expressions such as Brother O's "She's where the roses never fade" and "Praise God, no matter what you been through, you can find help for your soul--somebody say Amen!" may be viewed as ironizing the fundamentalist church, but provides a unique vehicle for expression in writing.

Without Brother Oliver's Biblical language and rhythm, his character would fall flat. With the rise and fall of his voice, Brother Oliver quotes beautiful Bible verses to offer hope and salvation to the people in the church; similarly, with the rise and fall of his voice, Brother Oliver quotes melodious Bible scriptures such as "How can one be warm alone?" to Lily to manipulate her into his bed. Brother Oliver's Biblical language, then, provides the strong ironic twist of my novel.

In keeping with Natalie Goldberg's idea of the importance of going home as a writer "if you want your work to be whole" (143), I established the late 1960's and early 1970's as my setting in *The Braid*. Since I myself was a

teenager during this period, I consider this era of the Vietnam War, revolutions for change, fishnet hose and go-go boots, one of the most dynamic eras of the twentieth century. Yet, for the most part my characters live in their own little worlds, unpolitically minded, with the Vietnam War a vague rumble in the background, even though after he and Lily divorces, Norvin eventually ends up on the front lines. The late 1960's and 1970's also provides me with the advantages of being more familiar with styles of dress and particular dates, since my age coincides almost identically with my point of view character.

The Braid is predominantly a psychological novel. Lily is continually striving to achieve some sense of herself. The psychologist Erik Erikson terms this striving to discover the self an "identity crisis," a period full of inner conflict because "the individual must make commitments on such important matters as occupation and religion" (qtd in *Psychology* 228). Upon her marriage at eighteen, Lily, still an adolescent, suddenly moves from living with and being dependent upon her financially and emotionally secure parents to taking on the responsible role in an insecure marriage with a baby. To achieve maturity, she must break with her childhood. Lily's life is a series of ongoing crises concerning her religion, marriage, parents, child, job occupations, and relationships as she searches for meaning and self-identity.

From past experience, I have developed a paradigm of writing about women who, like Hemingway's wounded hero paradigm, are battle-scarred but survivors, somehow, during the midst of their perseverance, retaining their dignity. Lily epitomizes this wounded heroine prototype. Although she may rest briefly on the closed lid of the commode as she cries enough tears to use a complete roll of toilet tissue, she never fails to act--even if

being financially secure requires that she dance topless at Olga's Topless Dance every Saturday night in order to get off food stamps.

Applying Freudian theory to the dance scenes, Lily's *id*, with its energy, is the driving force which causes her to dance topless, and her *ego*, or the rational part of herself, controls the *id* and calculates the amount of money to be saved for the future (272). In Chapter 20, Lily has a moment of guilt brought on by the *superego* when she wonders what her mother would think of her dancing half-naked. But her qualms are abated when she realizes her mother would reply, "You're strong, Lily, a survivor" (229). It is also the *superego* that causes Lily to scrub her body with Dial soap in the shower as soon as she arrives home from Olga's every Saturday night.

But on the other hand, Lily uses the cheering men in the club to help heal her *inferiority complex*, brought on by poverty, her failed marriage, and Sister Melvina's revelation that Brother Oliver is also her lover. Her club name "Jaguara" allows her room for creativity and less anxiety--she is not bound by what the pure "Lily" symbolizes for Brother Oliver.

In Erskine Caldwell's primitivistic novel *Tobacco Road*, the character of Sister Bessie Rice is a loud singer, a preacher, and a man-chaser. Sister Bessie is a charlatan, representing the stereotypical assumption that those who pray and sing the loudest are closest to God. Pretending that God has called her to come to the house of the poverty-stricken Lester family to pray for Jeeter Lester's salvation, the almost forty-year-old Sister Bessie's real motive is to seduce Jeeter's sixteen-year-old son Dude into sharing her bed and marrying her. When Jeeter and his wife throw rocks at her new automobile, Sister Bessie yells in her high-pitched voice, "All of you Lesters is dirty sons of bitches" (166)!

In *The Braid*, the character of Sister Melvina is highly reminiscent of Caldwell's Sister Bessie, as well as the character Mrs. Ruby Turpin in Flannery O'Connor's "Revelation." These bigger than life women characters all have, to cite Paul, "a zeal for God, but it is not enlightened" (Romans 10:2). Sister Melvina exudes the physical trappings of religion, her voice booming over all the other saints as she bangs on the church piano. She pretends empathy for Lily's loss of her mother and daughter, offering up prayers to shake the rooftop on the humble brown church, yet barges into Lily's trailer with her vinyl purse, lashes out at Lily with her "sharp vinegar" voice, telling her, "Stay away from Oliver. He's mine . . . Me and O had a thing going even before his little puny wife died" (184).

In Chapter Sixteen, Sister Melvina's loud, cackling laugh as she tells Lily, "You just fell off the turnip truck" (184) is suggestive of James Thurber's obnoxious, cliché-quoting character Miss Ulgine Burrows in "The Catbird Seat," and Flannery O'Connors' Mrs. Ruby Turpin in "Revelation," who the critic Anthony Di Renzo describes as a "jovial ogress with an earthquake of a laugh" (207). Another larger than life woman character in *The Braid* is Nancy June, the bushy, red-haired country western singer with the smart mouth who forgets and bites on the paw of her cat, George Jones. The witty Nancy June has a brash, crude way with words, yet her language conjures up a vivid picture. For instance in Chapter 19, she confides in Lily about Tim Jim, the charming, handsome man with "these deep dimples you could swim in I was drownin' Make a girl's panties drop right around her ankles" (220).

All of these women characters above--Sister Melvina, Nancy June, Sister Bessie, Miss Ulgine, and Mrs. Ruby Turpin--are grotesque characters, with Sister Melvina's splayed feet in their tan vinyl block-heeled shoes and stiff,

coarse hair, the ends poking out of its bun; chain-smoking Nancy June's red hot pants, black suspenders and boots; Sister Bessie's nose with its giant holes, Miss Ulgine's donkey bray when she laughs, and the stout, bigoted Mrs. Ruby Turpin's indignant march to the hog pen, a black knot resembling "a miniature tornado cloud" over her eye from a textbook entitled *Human Development* that an acne-faced teenager threw at her.

As Di Renzo states, the grotesque as a comic form delves into the concrete, the material, unashamed to "wade through sewage and frog spit" (7). The grotesque style does not ignore the mismatched, the stupid, the obscene, or the banal. It often vacillates between opposites, evident in *The Braid* with, for examples, the character Brother Oliver's seesawing between the spiritual and the sexual: the symbolic white sheets and red comforter, (he is preoccupied, like Stephen Dedalus, with the bride and the harlot); and the duality Nancy June's tough exterior and soft, sensitive heart.

Often the plight of the grotesque culminates in an apocalypse, according to Di Renzo (206). This is especially true in Flannery O'Connor's works. One obvious apocalyptic example is the horrendous massacre, tragic yet comic, of the entire vacationing family, including the spry, silly grandmother, at the conclusion of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" by the Misfit and his two helpers. apocalypse is a method of demolishing one world and replacing it by another (165). This violent culmination occurs in *The Braid* with both Brother Schwazier and Sister Melvina. For all of Brother Oliver's previous power earned in the name of being "called by Christ"--his pastorship over the small group of lost sheep he has gathered into the fold, his cartoon-like sexual partnership with Sister Melvina, his sly manipulation of the vulnerable Lily to his bed--his final condition bears out the Biblical

message that "for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap" (Gal 6:7).

Brother O's personal apocalypse comes as a result of his head going through the windshield when Sister Melvina wrecks her car. Similar to Tod Hackett's derangement at the end of Nathanael West's surreal tragic-comedy, *The Day of the Locust*, Brother Oliver goes berserk. The doctors offering no hope of his recovery, Brother O, in the Friendly Manor Nursing Home, screams Bible verses about Christ the bridegroom and his bride from his bed, intermingled with screams of the harlot, the seducer, and the whore. Asleep at the wheel, Sister Melvina's life ends in a horrendous crash when her bronze Oldsmobile hits the tree.

As Anthony Di Renzo states, it is not uncommon that from the apocalyptic destruction of the grotesque comes a renewal (216), a violent juxtaposition of death and rebirth. In *The Braid*, my aspirations were to use the idea of the apocalypse, not as a method of destroying evil characters, but as a means of illuminating the disfigurements of pretense and artificiality, a tearing away of the masks, as Brother Oliver's true face is eventually revealed. Behind the disguises is nothingness, death.

The rebirth in *The Braid* transpires with Lily's freedom from Brother Oliver's stalkings and the ominous possibility of his being successful in his next attempt at rape. Because of Brother Oliver's institutionalization, Lily can finally escape completely from his verbal and mental torture. The soporific sound of Brother Oliver's language had the potential to entice Lily before, to lull her into a psychological sleep. But now she is free of the mental stress of constructing and supporting a wall between herself and Brother Oliver. The trauma Lily experiences when Brother Oliver directs his psychotic screams at her in the Friendly Manor Nursing Home finally

releases the slim emotional threads that had previously bound Lily to him. Consequentially, Lily, upon Brother Oliver's mental destruction, experiences a rebirth, the freedom to move forward.

In *The Braid* I avoid authorial interpretation of the characters. The renowned author and professor of rhetoric Wayne C. Booth tells us in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, "Artifice is unmistakably present whenever the author tells us what no one in so-called real life could possibly know" (3). I consider the direct method of presentation, "showing" rather than indirectly "telling," as offering a clearer, more defined portrayal of the characters. The reader, then, by visualizing the characters himself, is actively involved in the novel. To use authorial interpretation in *The Braid* would also be incongruous with my intention to expose artificiality in the content.

But even though we as writers may avoid authorial interpretation, "the author's voice is never really silenced," says Booth, "whether an impersonal novelist hides behind a single narrator or observer, or multiple point of view" (60). According to Booth, the author's voice is "one of the things we read fiction for, and we are never troubled by it unless the author makes a great to-do about his own superior naturalness" (60). I have strived for verisimilitude in *The Braid*, but writing is a craft contrived by the author, a fabrication. If, as an impersonal novelist, I am hiding "behind a single narrator" and a single point of view, the authorial presence must be there, even as I try to be silent.

My purpose for authorial silence in *The Braid* is the idea of impersonal narration providing the advantage of decreasing emotional distance between the narrator and the reader. My central narrator in *The Braid* speaks from the first person point of view because I want the reader's focus to be immediately thrown on the actions and desires of the *I* of the narration.

Since the first person point of view character cannot be omniscient, this character may appear more "human" because of his or her limitations; thus, the reader can relate more to the character as another human being.

According to Wayne Booth, the reader "reacts to all narrators as persons" (273). Because we have no reason to doubt that Lily is a reliable narrator, the reader can take Lily's thoughts and feelings as true to the circumstances she faces. Lily also is morally isolated, and, according to Wayne Booth, the character's isolation combined with his reliability decreases emotional distance between the reader and the narrator even more (274). The reader empathizes with the lone character trying to survive in a "chaotic, friendless world" and experiences the circumstances with the character. Lily, in a sense, is the heroine travelling alone, like the reliable point of view character Miranda in Katherine Anne Porter's impersonal novel *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, isolated in a "day-to-day existence, where survival . . . had become a series of feats of sleight of hand." Although *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* is narrated by the third person point of view, whereas *The Braid* is narrated by the first person point of view, a commonality exists between the two narrators, Miranda and Lily. They are both "alone in a strange stony place of bitter cold" (Porter 159). As Wayne Booth states, impersonal narration "forces us to see the human worth of a character" as well as the "soul of the character" (279), and speaking of his use of the stream of consciousness technique to reveal the content of the mind, James Joyce writes "the soul, in one sense, is all there is" (qtd in Dujardin 99). With the reader's identification with the isolated character's mind, the reader experiences the events as if they were happening to himself.

The characters' appearance is one of the predominant methods of direct presentation in *The Braid*. Although physical appearance is not always

reality, our first reaction to people is based upon how they look. Even the most trivial details of the characters' appearance, such as the stiff hairdo, the argyle socks, the dangling cigarette, the dirty fingernails, the painted-on beauty mark, may provide, according to Janet Burroway in *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft*, "statements of internal values . . . political, religious, social, and intellectual" (157). In *The Braid* the fact that, for example, Ted, Lily's father, is "a large boned man, with iron-gray hair" and a "square jaw," may provide the statement that he is an upright, moral citizen.

The writer may establish narrative tension or conflict merely by presenting a contradiction between the character's physical appearance and the eventual revelation of the internal truth about the character. For instance, in Chapter 4 of *The Braid*, Lily's mother Fern, attired in "tight, lime-green pedal pushers, a fire-engine red top . . . sprigs of blueberries scattered over it," the buttons straining over her rolls of stomach fat, "scuffed black and white saddle oxfords" (51), and her zany, girlish outward demeanor in Trumbo's Grocery, may give the reader, upon first impression, the mistaken idea that she lacks common sense, is likely a messy housekeeper, unreliable, and insensitive. But from the sequence of events that unfold, the reader learns that Fern is wonderfully equipped with all those attributes her physical appearance may belie. This incongruity produces dramatic tension, and according to the author Janet Burroway, the contradiction revealed between appearance and reality at once makes the character interesting (157).

Another important direct method of presentation is sound or speech. In writing realistic fiction, I attach importance to the sounds of individual words and speech patterns. For example, the sound of a character's name may provide an indication of the character's personality. In *The Braid*, the

name "Sister Melvina," pronounced "with a long 'i', honey--like the Vine Street our little church is on," as the character herself asserts, is, I consider, a fitting name for a large, splay-footed aggressive woman with a booming, inarticulate voice who is prominent in a small spiritual church with humble people.

Another important aspect of sound in fiction is the use of dialogue. For instance, the colorful character Nancy June in *The Braid* possesses a unique style of language that complements her personality and lifestyle as a country singer who has "been around the block." In Chapter 17, speaking to Lily about a man in Olga's Topless Dance Club who is looking their way, Nancy June says, "With eyes like that and a muscled-up body--gosh-dern it!" (She snorts) "Make a woman pee on herself" (198). Nancy June's crudity and unique colloquial speech patterns reveal her personality.

Because of the socio-economic status of the majority of the characters in *The Braid*, they express themselves in dialogue as basically unintellectual. Except for the obvious importance of education to the kind, intellectual lawyer Micah who appears near the conclusion, and Lily's brief remorse about not being permitted to attend the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville because of her pregnancy and marriage, the other characters are totally unconcerned with elevating their education past high school. Correct grammar and articulation to them are unimportant. Therefore, since the voice of *The Braid* is from the first person point of view, the voice of the character Lily, who attaches little importance to grammar, I make the conscious effort to refrain from the elevated language of articulation, while still conveying the meaning and emotion. Consistently, the dialogue is extremely simple, often fragmented, and uneloquent.

Paramount to direct presentation is the character's actions. Aristotle's advice in his *Poetics* is that thoughts should be expressed in action as well as in words (Ferguson 164). According to Aristotle, a person's thoughts concerning his goals induce him to determine the action he must take to achieve his desired goals. In *The Braid*, Lily continually has thoughts of improving her financial and emotional situations. Her desire is to be an independent, self-sufficient woman. She also desires human love, symbolized by the "warm" motif. Therefore, Lily has an acute awareness, even when caught in Brother Oliver's snares, of potential opportunities and normally after contemplation, spares no hesitation in taking action.

Lily's struggle for survival, freedom, and self-growth, the basic theme of *The Braid*, is the incentive behind her action. The theme of *The Braid* possesses a commonality with Alice Walker's thematic center in her works, which is, in general, a woman's survival and recognition of the divine within her whole self. Especially prominent in Alice Walker's 1981 collection of short stories *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* is the idea that "the self that survives is not a self dictated by others" (Winchell 72). For Lily to find self-definition, she must let go of others who would drag her down, affirm those things within herself, and from them draw necessary strength.

My novel does not seek to stereotype any groups of people with its characterizations, although it may unintentionally do so. For example, the character of Brother Oliver Schwazier bears no resemblance to any particular person to my knowledge. I do not attempt to satirize any religious groups with my depiction of the Church of the Brethren; if anything, because of my own background of experiences, I would seek to glorify the ambience of the small humble church and its people. In my writing of *The Braid*, my purpose is to search for the real truth of who we

are as unique human beings together in a world. This brings to mind the writer Ralph Ellison's relevant question:

How does one in the novel (the novel which is a work of art and not a disguised piece of sociology) persuade the American reader to identify that which is basic in man beyond all differences of class, race, wealth, or formal education? (qtd in Booth 118)

Ellison doesn't answer the question, but leaves the writer with words to ponder. "Basic in man" is the innate need to survive, but not always, and not always to the same extent. The tragic and the comic co-exist in the everyday lives of man, and the comic lurks somewhere in the most miserable of circumstances. "Basic in man," and in man's lives, are both the beautiful and the ugly, and the war between good and evil. I have attempted to identify and uncover these fundamentals of human nature in *The Braid*.

The reality is that we are one large group of people, rich in diversity, and in the crowd standing next to love may be pretense and deception, not necessarily in the forms of Brother O, Norvin, or Sister Melvina. Lenn Oedman's illustrated poem about Judgement Day, showing a procession of naked cartoons, "short, tall, fat, thin, bald, hairy," is a fitting analogy:

Who Am I?

I am an endless variety
of dissimilarity on parade
to be looked at with respect.
The time is over for the masquerade.
Cast off your garments and reflect. (78)

Although even the characters of Brother Oliver and Sister Melvina have a certain lovable quality, in my novel their artificiality eventually destroys them. I have attempted to depict the "peeling away" of their artificiality and the eventual consequences in *The Braid*.

In his "Preface to the First Edition" included in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Wayne Booth states that the writer may consciously "calculate" in treating technique as rhetoric, or the writer may choose to express himself "with no thought of affecting the reader. But in the end, the writer succeeds only "if he makes us join in the dance" (xiv). If in my endeavors, you as the reader "join in the dance" that is reward enough for me.

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CHAPTER ONE

Today, Daddy brought it all back to me, thirty years later, when I visited him in the Friendly Manor Nursing Home in Fayetteville. We sat in the dining hall eating soggy salisbury steak, mashed potatoes covered with thin brown gravy--food soft on the old people's teeth--and slightly rubbery green beans with no salt.

"This is the sorriest excuse for a meal I ever tasted," Daddy said with a scowl as he stabbed a green bean.

"Now, Daddy--" I said, grabbing his arm that still felt like iron through his shirt sleeve. "You *know* they just want everyone here to be healthy. And since your heart attack, you got to be careful and not eat salt." He looked at me, disgusted.

A nurse in a pressed white uniform came by, no makeup, her fine gray hair in a French twist. "You doing okay, Mr. Hamburger?" she asked, placing her hand on Daddy's shoulder.

Daddy frowned. "The food could be better," he told her.

The nurse glanced at me, grinned. "Hi, Lily."

"Hi, Wana, how are you?" I replied.

When she walked away, I turned my attention back to Daddy. "I know you're feeling stronger now," I continued. "God knows, you still look good, with that tall, straight back. And you've outlived two wives. But remember, it's just been a month since your heart attack. You're seventy-nine now, and you need to watch it--"

"Little girl, shut up!" he said, hitting the table with his fist.

"You're the worst patient I ever saw in my life," I said, then grinned.

He scowled. But I knew he was having fun, pretending to be stern with his daughter. So I kept up my badger, said, "Daddy, you know Dr. Conger said you could go home in another month if you take care of yourself, eat right--and you need a more positive attitude, going around here, griping about the food, bawling out the nurses, and me--" I laughed, reached over and pushed back his lock of iron gray hair hanging over his bushy brow. "I love you, Daddy," I said, looking in his face.

"I know . . ." Daddy squirmed. "Look at you--You're just pretending to eat, picking around in your plate--"

"Quit," I said, grinning. "We were talking about you." I rubbed back and forth on his arm, tried unsuccessfully to get my fingers around his wrist.

"Skinny as a fence post," he continued, staring at me. "No fat on the bones--need a little for insulationHugging bones ain't no fun for a man." His frown made his brows almost meet in the middle. "Course you are a mighty pretty woman, if I do say so myself."

"Thanks, Daddy," I said, reaching over, kissing him on his square jaw. "That's real sweet of you."

"Just need to fill out here and there, in a few spots." He took a big drink of milk. "Why, if we had your mama Fern's cooking now--her cherry cream pie would make a fellow get down on his knees and beg--then you'd be back to my little chubby sweet-faced girl I remember going off every day to school before you left home--"

Of course, I remembered too. I looked at Daddy now, sitting in the straight-backed chair, a slight smile on his face. His memories all seemed pleasant.

I stared at the tall pine tree near the window where we now sat. The pine needles were turning brown. Although I smiled again when I thought of Mama, other memories, especially of my teenage years, still made me sad --if I let myself dwell on them. Through the years, I shook them off by telling myself it took those teenage miseries to make me the strong, vibrant woman I became. Whether this was true or not, I don't know. But I think so.

* * * * *

With a name like Lily Hamburger, I couldn't help becoming chubby. My breasts bloomed, my bulging stomach and hips filling my jeans. My tee shirt sleeves grew tight on my arms.

"I'll take pickles, lettuce, and mustard. Hold the tomatoes, onions, and mayo," the kids at Fayetteville Junior High said, touching me on the arm. *Smile and walk away*, I told myself, because if they saw I was mad they said, "Look at Hamburger. Her face is getting red. Raw meat. You mad, Hamburger?"

One day while I stood looking at the basketball trophies in the hall, I heard Cory Bishop, who I always thought was cute, tell his friend, "There's Big Deluxe." They were looking at me, and I heard them laugh as they walked on down the hall. I stayed for an hour in one of the stalls in the girls' bathroom, skipping my science class even though we had a test. I hate Cory. He's a jerk, I scratched on the wall with my nail file.

Two days later as I walked down the front steps of the junior high building, somebody whistled and said, "Hey, Big Deluxe!" It was Norvin Hueston.

"Go to hell," I whispered. I tried to ignore him. I never liked him anyway, even if the other kids thought he was handsome and funny. He made crude remarks and loud noises in class. Every semester he spent several days in detention, but managed somehow to remain in school. Still, his remark upset me, but not as much as Cory's.

"This is the time when a girl either gets real skinny or gets a little plump," Mama told me. "Now me, when I was your age, I got puny and skinny as a green bean, and Mama hid vitamins in my biscuits, trying to bring me out of it. But nothing seemed to help." While she talked, she beat eggs in a bowl, causing her rear end to jiggle.

"I thought I'd always be skinny and straight as a fence post, nothing but eyes with dark circles underneath," she continued. "But Mother Nature just has to run its course. Pretty as you please, when I turned fourteen I started fillin' out in the right places, real shapely and rosy cheeks."

"Oh, Mama. You *know* this isn't the same. I'm already filled out too much," I said, frowning.

"Just wait awhile. You're trying to become a woman, but Mother Nature's wishy-washy right now." Mama poured the eggs in the hot skillet. "You're in that in-between stage when she says one day you're still a little girl, the next day says she might make you a woman, then says no, she likes you as a little girl."

"I wish she'd hurry and make up her mind," I said, watching Mama's round figure as she stood at the cook stove in her apron. Her heavy breasts, like two mounds of covered yeast dough, sagged over the waistband of her red polyester pants, giving her a comfortable look. The apron covering her round stomach was patterned with penny-sized yellow smiley faces. She often told me with a smug smile, "Your daddy likes a *voluptuous* figure."

She raked a heap of scrambled eggs from the skillet onto my plate, adding a slice of dripping bacon on the side with a fork. "I just want one piece of toast," I said, taking the Jiffy peanut butter out of the refrigerator.

Mama was fat. But Daddy thought she was beautiful. I heard him tell her. He came home every weekday around 6:00 from his job at Hamburger's Hardware and Appliance, where he was owner. I was usually at the table doing algebra when he walked into the kitchen, where Mama stood at the sink peeling potatoes or pounding steaks on the cutting board with the silver meat hammer. A large boned man with iron-gray hair, Daddy bent his tall frame and circled his long arms beneath Mama's breasts, finding her hidden waist. "Hi, Fern," he said, nuzzling her neck, his square jaw beneath her short chestnut-brown hair. Then he pulled her up against the buttons of his blue uniform shirt, squeezing her hard until she squealed, "Oh, Ted," like he was pestering her. She giggled, just like the girls at school. But I considered her and Daddy old-fashioned. They didn't know how it was at school--to really be a part of the in-crowd, a girl needed to be skinny enough to wear mini skirts, fishnet hose, and go-go boots. But Mama said, "Now, honey, I know you like this cherry cream pie--have just another little slice." She was such a good cook, I couldn't resist. So I ate her creamy potatoes, brown gravy, and hot rolls, adding inches until my jeans wouldn't zip and Mama had to buy larger. At least I was taller than Mama, 5'9" to her 5'2", so the fat took longer to spread.

"One hundred and eighty-five pounds!" I whispered one morning in the bathroom. I couldn't believe it. I stepped off the scales to make sure the metal arrow pointed toward 0. It did. Then I went through the denial stage for a moment, telling myself, *These scales aren't right. They got to be wrong. They're old, that's it.*

I had turned fifteen two weeks earlier, and hadn't stepped on the scales since I was twelve and weighed 125 pounds. But I knew the scales didn't lie. As I braided my long dark hair down my back, I was glad only two weeks of school remained; then I'd be out for the summer, away from the jokes of people like Cory and Norvin, and the whispers and stares of thin, popular girls who didn't have Hamburger for their name.

When school got out, Mama, Daddy, and I drove to her sister's in northeastern Oklahoma for a week. While Daddy fished with Uncle Edgar on Tenkiller Lake, and Mama exchanged recipes and went to garage sales with Aunt Marsha, I sewed Barbie Doll clothes, made playhouses out of old boards, plastic lotion bottles, and tin cans, and jumped on the bed springs behind the house with my cousins, Mary Grace and Carmilla. Both ten and eleven, they didn't mind my fat, and had grown used to our name long before. Because I was fifteen, they considered me wise about boys, sex, and the dating scene.

"You have to act mysterious," I told them, as I fluffed my bangs and straddled the seesaw of the swing set. Mary Grace and Carmilla perched in the swing seats, both wide-eyed. "Boys don't like a girl who comes on too strong. They think she's desperate."

"How do you act mysterious?" Mary Grace asked. "Tell us how *you* do it."

"Yeah, Lil, tell us," Carmilla seconded. She twisted around and around in the swing until the chains made a tight knot above her, then let go, spinning fast in reverse, her eyes stretched wide. She stopped, looked at me.

I bit my bottom lip, pushed my dirty tennis shoes against the feet props, pulled back on the handlebars. The seesaw squeaked. "It's like this,"

I said. "When I know a boy's looking at me--you can feel when they're looking at you--"

"I can't," Carmilla said.

"Hadn't you ever felt like someone was staring at you behind your back, turned around real quick and caught them?" I asked.

"I have," Mary Grace said, kicking up little puffs of dust under the swing with her big toe. "One day in Miss Twedell's English class, I--"

"Be quiet, Gracey. Let her tell us," Carmilla said, shoving against her swing with her own. "You can tell that any old time."

"Anyway, when you know he's looking at you, kinda put your nose in the air, like this." I lifted my chin and sniffed, turned my head away from them, looked toward the driveway where Uncle Edgar's pickup sat. "But go ahead and do what you was doing, reading a book in class, whatever. Then I do something like this." I pushed my hair back from my face. "Like they do in the movies. Sometimes I swing my foot and let my shoe dangle. I can't do it with these tennis shoes."

"I can do all that," Carmilla said.

"Any girl can. It just takes experience," I said. "You don't want to be too snobby, though. After a little bit, if he's still looking, I turn around slow and look straight in his eyes, letting him know I knew he was looking. Then I smile. But not too big, though," I cautioned.

"Like this?" Mary Grace turned toward Carmilla and me, batted her eyelids, smiled a dreamy half-smile. Then she glanced away, looked back at me. "How'd I do?"

"That was pretty good," I said. "You'll get better with practice. I did."

"Watch me," Carmilla said. She looked toward Aunt Marsha's zinnia bed, then whipped her eyes around to us, smiled a toothy grin.

"That's way too big," Mary Grace said. We both burst out laughing. Mary Grace doubled over in her swing, held her stomach, stomped her bare foot in the dirt. She laughed so hard she started coughing, and I had to get up and pound her in the back.

"I'm gonna tell Mama on ya'll," Carmilla said, starting toward the house.

"We're sorry, Milla," I said. "Come back. We won't laugh." She turned around, walked back to the swing set with her head down. The back of her skirt hung longer in the back where she had caught her hem. I put my arm around her, "You looked so cute. That's why we laughed," I said. "Okay?" I pulled a twig of her fine light brown hair out of her eyes, refastened her red barrette.

"Can we do what I want?"

Mary Grace and I glanced at each other, said, "Yeah."

"I want us all to ride our bikes down Dead Man's Mountain," Carmilla said.

They owned two bicycles, but one was rusty and almost too small for us to ride. So we had been taking turns riding the new blue one down the straight country road, performing tricks such as hiking our legs up on the handlebars while the other two stood watching.

I was scared, but didn't want to admit it. So to give myself time, I said, "Let's walk to the top of the hill and see how it looks."

The top of Dead Man's Hill was about a mile from their house and dropped at a steep angle down into a canyon. "Wolf Holler," my cousins called it. Standing near them at the top, I saw three frame houses scattered across the flat farmland at the bottom, small and square like the plastic

houses in Monopoly. The bottom of the hill seemed so far away. Once a person started down, there would be no stopping.

"I don't know, Milla. It's real rocky, with all those loose white rocks. Lil's not used to that," Mary Grace said. She was right. Dead Man's Hill was covered with small, loose, jagged rocks piled to the sides; car wheels in the middle made two narrow packed-down ruts.

"Oh, she can do it." Carmilla looked at me and said, "Just stay in them smooth grooves where the cars go and you'll be all right, Lil." Then she turned to Mary Grace, "See, she can do it."

"I'm not sure if we ought to," I said. "I know Mama wouldn't like it."

"Me and Gracey do it all the time," Carmilla said.

"We do not," Mary Grace said. "We rode it two times each."

"Well, it didn't hurt us, did it? I'm not scared. I'll even ride down it first," said Carmilla. She looked at me. "I'll show you how, Lil. Just watch me and do what I do."

She straddled the bicycle and took off down the left car rut. She traveled at such high speed, the bicycle tires looked like they were up in the air. I watched her stay steady in the rut until she reached the bottom, coasting a little more until she stopped. She turned around, waved, and we yelled back. "Gosh, you don't know how fun it is, Lil!" she said when she reached the top. "Now it's your turn, Gracey. Then Lil."

Mary Grace followed Carmilla's run with ease, climbing back up the hill and handing the bike over to me. I was still scared, but being the "older woman" and their idol, how could I chicken out? If I did, they would never again look at me with respect. Besides, I liked this attention I didn't get with my classmates.

I swung my leg across the bicycle, stood looking down the hill. For the first time since I was a child I felt small, like you must feel among the giant redwood trees in California, or looking into the Grand Canyon. My arms shook as I gripped the handlebars, and my heart beat fast.

"Go ahead, Lil. You can do it!" said Carmilla.

"It's really not that scary once you start," Mary Grace said.

I slid onto the seat. I placed my tennis shoes on the pedals and took off down the hill. My speed got faster and the wind stung my forehead, pulling my hair back tight from my face. My fingers ached from gripping the handlebars. I was having trouble staying in the rut, and my large bottom in my loose shorts bounced again and again on the seat as I ran over the small rocks on the edge.

I couldn't hear them, but for some reason I knew Mary Grace and Carmilla were doubled over laughing at me. Mad, losing control of the bike, I swerved into the pile of granite rocks on the side.

I landed on my hands and knees, looked up toward my cousins running down the hill. They were grinning, still trying to hold in their laughter when they reached me. "I'm sorry," Mary Grace said, "but it was so funny to watch you bouncing."

She and Carmilla laughed. Then they saw the bloody hole above my knee. "She's hurt, Milla," Mary Grace said. They kneeled down beside me, both shamefaced.

"I've gotta get Mama," I said. My voice sounded weak and high-pitched.

"Milla, ride the bike to the house and tell them."

Aunt Marsha and Mama took me to a doctor in Sallisaw where I got seven stitches. On the way into town, Aunt Marsha scolded Mary Grace and

Carmilla, saying, "Girls, I'm so disappointed in you. I told you both not to be riding down that hill, and Lily's not used to riding bikes like ya'll."

My cousins were quiet in the back seat. As soon as we got back to Aunt Marsha's, Daddy and Mama packed our clothes and we drove back to Fayetteville. I didn't say much on the way home. I was imagining how funny I looked bouncing down that hill.

The rest of the summer I stayed in my room most of the time. I didn't want to be around girls my age in their skimpy cropped tops, halters, and shorts. About the only place I went was to the Fayetteville Public Library, where I checked out Pride and Prejudice, Don Quixote, Jane Eyre, and Gone with the Wind, which I read three times. While I lay across the bed, I could put myself into another time and become Scarlett using her wiles to save Tara, or laugh on the sidelines at Don Quixote dashing at windmills. I didn't read the modern romances so many girls talked about. They reminded I didn't have a firm body, stylish clothes, a boyfriend, close friends.

When I walked up the steps of the high school building to enter tenth grade in August, I weighed over 200 pounds at age fifteen. My breath was short, and my pleated shirtwaist dress made a blue tent over my expanded hips and thighs. I felt like a blimp and knew my classmates, standing in bunches near the steps, nudged each other, rolled their eyes. Hiding out at home during the summer months, I didn't have to face my ballooning body. I looked down at my shoes. A few of the classmates I already knew said "Hi, Lily." But nobody tried to talk with me. I didn't try to talk with them, either. I thought they wouldn't want to be seen with me. Instead of having lunch in the cafeteria, where I'd always eaten before, I sat on a concrete

bench under a tree, read, or worked crossword puzzles. When I didn't bring anything to do, I walked around the large campus, behind the bus garages and storage buildings.

One day I walked between two storage buildings located near the outside chain link fence and ran into Norvin Hueston. His back was against the cement block wall of the storage building; he was lighting a cigarette.

"Oh, hi Lily," he said. His face showed surprise.

"Hi," I said, and turned to walk off. Funny, that was the first time he hadn't called me Hamburger.

"Hey, Lily, wait," he said.

I turned around, questioning with my eyes. "What is it?" I asked, watching him blow a puff of smoke.

"We still have twenty minutes. Stay here and talk awhile. We never really talked," he said.

"Maybe later," I said.

"Please, please, please?" he asked, raising his eyebrows. He grinned at me, mouth closed, teeth showing. "See? I buried my fangs."

I hesitated. This new side of Norvin was strange. "Why are you bein' nice to me?" I asked.

"I like you. C'mon." He motioned me over.

I never considered him handsome. But now, as he smiled at me, the warmth in his hazel eyes lit up his face. I noticed the smooth texture of his tanned skin and the blond highlights in his straight, medium brown hair. As far as I knew, he never really looked at me twice, except to call me crude names like Big Deluxe. "For just a minute," I said, still suspicious.

"Want a cigarette?" he asked.

"I don't smoke," I said, and two feet away from him, leaned my back against the building.

"I always thought you got pretty eyes," he said.

"Really?"

"They remind me of chocolate fudge pudding. Brown velvety," he said.

"Why are you tellin' me this?" I asked.

"Because it's true," he said. He grinned, his dimple making a deep dent in his left cheek.

"Nobody ever told me that before," I said.

"They should have."

The bell rang. I straightened the bow on my belt and said, "Bye, Norvin."

"Wait a minute," he said. "Meet me here again tomorrow?"

"Why?"

"I like talking to you," he said.

"Maybe," I said, and left him stomping out his cigarette.

CHAPTER TWO

In Algebra I the next morning, I watched Norvin sitting two aisles across from me. Our eyes met, and I started to smile. But he turned his head. I felt the blood rise into my cheeks. With a black ballpoint pen, I scribbled heavy zigzags by my name at the top of my algebra homework until my face cooled. I was so angry at him I plotted revenge, ways to humiliate him, such as tripping him, making him fall flat on his face, calling his mother and pretending I was a girl he got pregnant, letting the air out of his tires. I alternated with anger toward myself for thinking he was different than in ninth grade when he called me Big Deluxe. I should have known Norvin would ignore me around his friends.

I told myself meeting him was out of the question. But at noon I wandered toward the storage buildings. I told myself nobody was going to stop me from my usual routine. I automatically slowed my walk when I neared the cement building.

"I was afraid you wouldn't come," Norvin said, grinning. I shrugged my shoulders, not saying anything. "Here, sit by me." He patted the grass where he squatted on the ground.

"No." I leaned back against the building. The wind was blowing open the edge of my denim wrap-around skirt. I grabbed the skirt edge with my hand to hide my knees.

Norvin grinned. "I like watching you walk across campus."

"Why?"

"You look so soft and shy, with your shiny braid down your back."

"You don't really know me," I said.

"But I'd like to. Want a smoke?" he said, taking a package of Camels from the zippered pocket of his bookbag on the grass.

"Okay," I said, still angry at him for ignoring me, then making me feel special. The cigarette felt awkward in my hand. I sat down beside him; he cupped his hand around my cigarette, lighting it. This reminded me of Lauren Bacall in the movies when Humphrey Bogart lit her cigarette. I smiled.

"What is it?" Norvin asked.

"Nothing," I said, drawing in deep, trying not to cough.

"You don't talk much. I said you was shy."

I wanted to ask him why he looked away from me in algebra class, but I knew the answer. I also knew he would make some excuse. When the bell rang, he said, "See you tomorrow."

"I nodded, leaving, knowing he wouldn't want to walk back with me to the classrooms. But still I kept meeting with him everyday, and got into the habit of taking two sandwiches. I also bought Camels and put them in my overnight case in the closet, away from Mama's eyes. I only smoked them with Norvin.

"I can tell you anything, Lil, and I know you won't tell," Norvin told me as we sat flat on the ground, our legs pressed against each other. He reached over, grabbed my hand and held it. "You understand me. The others here at school don't, not really. That's why I can't ever ask them to my house. They wouldn't understand. But you do."

A rush of warmth filled my body. I smiled and squeezed his hand.

"I mean it. I can talk to you about Dad's drinking, the mean way he talks to Mom. He's fine when he's not drinking--me and him work in the yard. We built a sidewalk together this summer." Norvin stared across the school ground at the white frame house where the old man sat in the porch swing. But I could tell his eyes weren't really focused. "Even went fishing, camped out one night over on Tenkiller Lake," he continued. "And he's usually good to Mom, brings her a box of candy on Valentine's Day and everything. Helps her with the dishes."

Norvin stuck the Camels in his shirt pocket. "But I don't know what it is--when he's drinking, it's like Jekyll and Hyde. Turns into a monster. I hate him then, want to kill him." He squeezed hard on my hand. "It's like he's another man. When we hear him raving, me and Beth go to our rooms, 'cause he wants to fight, talks crazy, yells at Mom." Norvin lit another cigarette. "Then I take up for her, and he'll swing his arm at me. He misses, though."

"Gosh Norvin--I'm sorry." I thought about how easy I had it at home.

"Well, thank goodness it only happens about once every two weeks, when he gets his paycheck. Otherwise, he's a pretty good dad . . . I thought I heard the bell."

"Yeah." As I gathered up the sandwich wrappers, I tried to think how I could make it easier for him.

I didn't tell Mama about Norvin. For one thing, she would want me to bring him for dinner. She would also question why we only met for lunch. She didn't think I was fat; I was still her little girl going through in-between stage. To her I was popular at school, though she did ask me why I never brought friends home. I couldn't tell her Norvin didn't want to be seen with

me because I was fat. She'd protest and tell me what a jerk he was, how beautiful I was, my silky long hair, big brown eyes, and I should see someone who appreciated me. Like all I had to do was play eeny-meeny-miny-mo with a line of handsome young men.

I didn't see Norvin much through the summer--just when we both happened to be in Trumbo's Grocery. Often I was with Mama, and twice he was with Beth, but even when we were alone, we only said hello. Once he passed my house in his '62 Chevy truck while I was carrying out the trash. He waved but didn't stop.

I made a feeble attempt to lose weight, and lost ten pounds by omitting white bread, Cokes, and candy bars. This lasted through June, but during the heat of July, I craved sodas to stay cool and candy bars for energy. One food I had no desire to eat was hamburgers. Even though at sixteen I was seldom teased about my name, except by some young kid who thought it was funny, I could still close my eyes and hear: "Look! A Hamburger eating a hamburger--and they're both Big Deluxes."

I was around 225 pounds when my junior year started, and I kept the weight on throughout the school year. I still met Norvin everyday at noon by the maintenance building. Even though I still heard whispers behind my back when I stood at my locker about "Big Deluxe," and one girl asked me if I was pregnant, Norvin said nothing about my increased weight, even told me I looked nice in my aqua flowered sundress, which showed my back and the top of my cleavage.

I went to Erminarti's, the department store all the girls at school talked about in homeroom, that evening and bought a red polyester blouse, cut low,

buttoned down the front, with a wide ruffle around the neck, and a straight black skirt that came just above my knees.

The next morning I covered my eyelids with cobalt blue creme eyeshadow and drew a heavy black line that curved up at the outer corners of my lashes. I added a beauty mark an inch below my left eye with my eyeliner pencil. To be even more dramatic, I wrapped the long, gold chain I bought at a garage sale around my neck. My dangling earrings were red, yellow, and green parrots whose feet scraped against my neck as I walked.

When I stepped around the storage building, Norvin stood up and whistled. "Lil, you're dynamite!"

"Thank you," I said and dropped my eyes.

"I can't get over how good you look," he said in awe, shaking his head.

I knew he liked it, so I kept wearing the sexiest clothes I could find. But he still never looked at me around our classmates. I didn't bring it up with him because I was afraid he wouldn't meet me anymore. I didn't mind the frowns of other teenagers when I knew Norvin liked how I looked.

We didn't see each other much during the summer following my junior year, but I knew from past experience when my senior year started I would see him again. We kept meeting at noon.

Late one evening in March of my senior year, Daddy asked me to wash the family car. "Daddy, I was going to the library to work on my term paper," I said.

"Well, give the Ford a quick wash--here's some money" he said, opening his wallet, removing a five dollar bill, "then drive it to the library," he said.

"It stays open until 9:00," I said.

"Have a Coke with your friends afterwards if you want," he said, smiling. I knew like Mama he wondered why I didn't bring friends around. He gave me the keys and I hugged him.

After Daddy's talk about my friends, I imagined I was dressing up for a night out, looking in my closet to find a suitable outfit. I stood there for a moment, wishing I was slim like Lori in my class, who looked sexy in anything. But as Mama said, I should appreciate what I had. Even though I was going to wash the car, I put on a long sleeved ivory silk blouse with a low scooped neck, several silver chains, an above-the-knee rust colored skirt, and black heels. I took my hair out of its braid and combed it, leaving it hanging around my shoulders and down my back. My brown hair waved from the tight braid.

Around 7:30 I parked the car in a stall at the Orange Spot Car Wash and walked around to the silver box for change. The machine didn't want my wrinkled dollar, even though I kept pressing it flat with my fingers and trying it again.

"Here, let me try it." I recognized the voice and turned around.

Norvin grinned and held out his hand. He straightened the dollar, inserted it in the machine, and four quarters flew out. "It's all in the way you slide it," he said. "Want me to wash your car?"

"I'll do it."

"You aren't dressed for car washing."

"I won't get wet," I said, removing the spray gun from its holder, putting in my money. I was conscious of him behind me, watching my hips, my legs in the spike heels as I walked around the Ford. I washed and rinsed, tripping once over the heavy black hose. I finished just as the water

stopped. He whistled softly. I turned around. He was looking at me. I felt shy, not knowing what to say. It felt strange being near him away from school.

"Where you headed?" he asked.

"To the library."

"You ever been to Bluff Landing?" he asked.

"Fishing with Daddy one day. We put our boat out there," I said.

"I mean at night," he said. "No."

"I'll drive you out there."

"I need to work on my term paper," I said.

"We still have two weeks. Come on, I want to show you," he said.

"I can't stay very long. Daddy said I could have the car a while. We can go in it," I said.

"Follow me to Trumbo's then, I'll leave my truck in the parking lot," Norvin said.

We drove north outside of Fayetteville for about seven miles, then turned off toward Bluff Landing. The landing looked quiet; no boaters or fishermen were milling around on this March night in the middle of the week, even though the weather was strangely warm. The moon made diamond shafts on the water. I parked the car by the dock and turned off the radio in the middle of Janis Joplin's "Me and Bobby McGee."

We rolled down our windows and let the night silence drift in. The light shining on the dark, oily water, framed on one side by a grove of pine trees, looked so beautiful and mysterious for a moment I forgot about Norvin.

"What do you think?" he said, sliding his arm across the back of the seat behind my neck and shoulders.

"It's nice," I said. I found it hard to think about talking because his fingers ran through my hair.

"I like your hair down."

"It gets in the way, so I braid it," I said.

"Did you wear it down for me?" he asked.

"I didn't know I'd see you."

"I think you dressed up for me 'cause you know I think you're pretty. Right?"

"No," I said.

"Then I got to show you just how pretty you are." He scooted over next to me, bending his head to kiss me.

I let him. When he first touched my mouth, I tensed my whole body. But the strangeness of my first kiss went away when a sudden heat spiraled up from my stomach. I slid my arms around his neck, my lips softened, and I kissed him back. I didn't try to stop him when he unbuttoned my blouse.

"Lily?" He looked at me, searched for my reaction. I didn't say anything, just slid my arms out of the blouse. That was his answer. He pulled his tee-shirt over his head. Laughing, we threw all of our clothes, one by one, in the back seat. Then he kissed me again, and we slid down together in the wide front seat. Norvin bumped his head on the steering wheel, and I giggled. He smoothed back my hair, whispered "Let me, Lil" in my ear, and it wasn't funny anymore. I wrapped my arms around his back, pulled him down on my breasts.

When it was over, he bent over the back seat to reach our clothes. I was embarrassed because I had to get out by the car door in my panties before I could get my skirt on. My body was too large under the steering

wheel. After dressing, we sat for a moment, gazing toward the water. He put his hand on my thigh, squeezing it.

I felt mixed up. *I'll just think of now*, I thought. *Can't think long term because it'll never be--if I do I'll just get hurt*. I found my purse in the floor, placed it beside me. "Guess we better go," I mumbled.

"Yeah."

I turned the ignition, then backed the car onto the blacktop drive. "Ms. Grunder wasn't in Home Ec today. We had a substitute." As soon as I opened my mouth, I realized how silly this sounded. But I needed to fill the silence.

"Really?" he asked, gazing out his side window. His tone of voice told me he was preoccupied. He didn't ask who the substitute was, so I didn't tell him. We said nothing on the road back into town. I pulled up next to his truck and he opened the car door. "See you tomorrow, Lily."

"Bye, Norvin."

My legs were shaking when I walked up the front steps of my house. When I walked through the doorway, Daddy and Mama were watching the 10 o'clock news on Channel 8. "Look how pretty my little girl is. Did you have a good time?" he asked.

"I mainly just worked in the library till it closed at 9:00. Then I went to the Sonic and had a Coke," I said, holding tight to my black notebook. I felt like I was babbling. I hoped my clothes were straight. I used the rear view mirror in the car to comb my hair.

"Come here, honey, and tell me who you saw," Mama said. Removing her feet from the coffee table, placing the tea cozy she was crocheting on top of the yarn on the floor, she patted a spot on the sofa beside her.

"Mama, I'm tired--I'll just take a shower and go to bed." I felt guilty for lying. I knew if I stayed I'd probably lie some more, because Mama would ask me lots of questions, squeezing my shoulders, fixing my collar, and curling my hair around her fingers. If I lied about friends I saw, she'd talk about each one and his or her family, where they worked, what they did. I saw disappointment on her face, so said, "We'll talk tomorrow, Mama," knowing she wouldn't forget.

I was glad to close the door to my room because I needed time to think about what I did with Norvin. In the shower I asked myself, *How could you be so stupid? If Norvin really loved you, he would be proud for you to meet his friends.*

I tried to tell myself the next day at school would be different. But I didn't let my hopes rise too high. I couldn't allow myself to be mad or depressed, because if I lost control, I might force a showdown. *Then you'll lose Norvin*, I told myself. I wanted to keep this feeling of closeness with him.

The next day was about like any other. When I passed him in the hall, he said a short "Hi," like he would to any other senior who met his eye, and ignored me in class. But at noon, when I walked around the corner of the storage building, he quickly smiled, asking, "Lil, are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," I said. I sat down beside him, and here, alone together, he put his arm around me.

One month later on my eighteenth birthday I found out I was pregnant.

CHAPTER THREE

When I threw up two weeks after the night I washed the car, Mama thought I caught some kind of virus. I felt dizzy when I raised up in bed one morning to turn off my alarm. I crawled out of bed, and as I stood there I felt faint from the churning in my stomach. I rushed toward the bathroom. Of course, Mama heard me. "Get right back in that bed, hon. You're not going anywhere today. Here, crawl in and I'll cover you up. Poor little girl."

"Just for a minute," I said. My body was weak. She pulled the white spread she crocheted up under my chin, then sat down on the bed, rubbing my hair back from my forehead. "Did you eat something that didn't agree with you last night, honey? It was those enchiladas I made--I was afraid I got them too spicy."

"I'll be all right, Mama. I probably caught a twenty-four hour bug from someone at school I feel better, anyway. I can go to school." I raised up.

"No, you're staying home today. Forget about school," she said, pressing my shoulders back against the pillow and pulling up the sheet. "If you feel better you can go tomorrow." She patted my arm, then went downstairs. In a moment, she brought up a bottle of 7-UP, a glass with ice, a straw, and three vanilla wafers. By then, my stomach was settled and I lounged around the rest of the day, eating a ham sandwich for lunch, drinking sodas, and thumbing through magazines.

I was sick the next three mornings. Mama said I definitely had the flu, and kept taking my temperature, which was always around 98.6. She made me stay home from school the next two days anyway. On my third day at home, I read an article in Redbook that made me sit up straight in Daddy's recliner. In the "Good Health" section, a twenty-year-old woman from Seattle asked for help in getting rid of morning sickness during her pregnancy. Her symptoms matched my own. I gripped the chair arms.

Going up to my room, I sat down in the wicker chair by my bed. I was afraid if Mama looked at my face she'd know what I was thinking. But I was her "baby," and she still thought I'd never been kissed. I tried to imagine what I'd do if I really were pregnant. I couldn't see myself having an abortion. Giving up a baby for adoption would be hard. Pregnancy couldn't be hid for very long, but I was so fat it wouldn't show for awhile. If I had an abortion nobody would know. *Oh, I probably have the flu*, I thought. *Why am I putting myself through all this?* But I was sick only in the mornings, just like the woman from Seattle.

That night before bed I brought a package of saltine crackers upstairs, placing them in my nightstand drawer. The doctor in Redbook suggested them. Before I moved out of bed the next morning, I ate two cracker squares. It did seem to help because I didn't feel so nauseous when I stood. Easing back and forth between the bedroom and bathroom, I got dressed for school. I declined breakfast. For once, Mama didn't push me to eat; she just added an apple in the sack while I made sandwiches for lunch. "Get a box of milk to drink," she said. My stomach turned.

At noon, I ate only half my turkey sandwich, giving the rest to Norvin. He said he missed me at school, and I still looked pale. "You feeling all right now?" he asked.

"I'll be okay, just a bug."

"You're awful quiet."

"I'm worried about all the catching up I got to do," I said.

"You'll do it," he said. "Dad's been drinking more lately. I don't know why. Last night he came home around 11:00 drunk. Started yelling at Mom 'cause she didn't have supper ready. I said, 'Dad, wait--she put it in the oven'. He said 'Boy, get outta my way', took a swing at me, said, 'If you ain't the laziest bum I ever saw. Not doing a damn thing but eatin' us outta house and home'. He gets that way when he's drunk--he knows I'm looking for a job."

"What'd you do?"

"I waited till Mom got his supper on the table and he quietened down, then I took a shower, went to bed. He gets real sleepy after he eats."

"Gosh, that's rough," I said.

"Yeah, if he hits me, I'm outta there." I squeezed his arm.

"What about your mother and Beth?"

"That's why I'm staying now," Norvin said. "But he don't really try to hit them. They just get tired of hearing him yell when he's drunk. Then he brings Mom flowers the next day, sometimes--gives Beth five dollars."

"That's good. Maybe he'll go to Alcoholics Anonymous." I tried to find words that might help.

"I sure wish he would . . . then we could stand to live with him."

"Daddy and Mama are going to buy me a car," I said. "One of our neighbors, Ms. Bolene, has a '58 Catalina Pontiac for sale. It's pale yellow."

"I saw that car. It looks like a good one," he said.

The car sat behind the family Ford when I got home from school. Daddy always drove his truck with the Hamburger's Hardware and

Appliance logo on the side to work. I didn't know it, but he paid Ms. Bolene the night before. She dropped the car by at noon. Mama and Daddy grinned at each other as I sat under the wheel, window rolled down, arm propped on the door. I put on my dark glasses, drove around the block twice, down Main Street, around the Sonic Drive-In on Miller Avenue, then back home. I liked the car, but was too tired to show much excitement.

I drove my car to school the next morning. It seemed weird not riding with Daddy. I started feeling nauseous right after I passed L & B Cleaners. Stopping the car behind Harold's Conoco, I jumped out, ran into the women's outside restroom, closed the door. I barely had time to lift the ring on the commode before I vomited.

After I finished, I washed my face with a wet paper towel, combed back my hair with my fingers. I had forgotten my purse in the car. I leaned against the sink cabinet until I felt better. My watch said 8:11 and class started at 8:15. I grabbed the door knob and pushed, but the door wouldn't open. I checked to make sure the lock wasn't turned, held the knob, shoved against the door again. No luck. I was becoming hysterical, never liking small, closed places with no windows. Swallowing, forcing myself to calm down, I jiggled the door knob, hoping to connect with something that opened the door, I didn't know what. It wouldn't budge.

Humiliated, I pounded on the door, yelling, "Help! Help me! I'm locked in the restroom!" I pounded again with both fists, someone turned the knob from the outside, and I almost fell out the door. Norvin caught me. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," I mumbled. Feeling stupid, I said, "Thanks."

"Hey, it was nothing. I was in the men's restroom next door."

"We're almost late for school," I said, walking toward the car.

"I saw your car. Nice," he said. "Lily, I was inside, drinking a Coke, talking to Harold. We kept hearing someone throw up. That was you, wasn't it?"

"Yes I had a virus, you know," I said. I knew he read the doubt on my face. "I'm probably still getting over it."

"I didn't use one."

"I got to go, Norvin."

"We'll talk later," he said. I nodded.

For the first time since tenth grade, I didn't walk to the buildings at noon. There was nothing really to say. If I were pregnant, I didn't think he would marry me. Besides, he didn't have a job. How could he support a wife and baby? He never told me he loved me. I wondered if I could marry someone who didn't. Then I asked myself would I ever find anyone who really loved a fat woman? There were too many questions without answers.

I was counting my chickens before they hatched. I realized the first step should be to find out if I really were pregnant. If I weren't, most of the questions could remain unanswered. While Mama was gone to Trumbo's Grocery, I called a doctor's number I found in the yellow pages. My fingers were trembling as I dialed. The earliest I could schedule an appointment was at 1:00 o'clock on April 23, my eighteenth birthday. I still had two weeks to wait and wonder.

I went back to meeting Norvin for lunch. I could tell he was scared I might be pregnant. We were both quiet most of the time, and I'm sure his mind was on the consequences. I wondered, *Since he never told his friends about me, will he deny he's the father?* I told him about my scheduled doctor's appointment.

Mama noticed I wasn't eating right; I moved my food around with my fork, leaving half of it on my plate almost every meal. She said, "Lily, honey, I think we should go to the doctor. You're just not yourself lately. Your color's not good, you never seem to have much energy"

"I'm okay, Mama. It's graduation and everything. All we have to do. Standing out in the hot sun on the football field, practicing everyday. Then all these exams. Don't worry. I'll be through with school in three weeks."

"Well, I may just go talk to the principal. He shouldn't make you stay out in this heat we been having lately. You just had the flu," she said.

"Oh, Mama. You better not do that," I said. "I'd be so embarrassed I could die."

She kissed me on my eyebrow, saying "Just take care of yourself, hon."

Two weeks later, the doctor told me I was pregnant. He described to me my options--I could get an abortion, place the baby in an adoption agency, or try to raise the baby on my own. "Is there any chance the baby's father will marry you?" he asked.

"No," I said, shaking my head. I felt hopeless, trying not to cry in front of the doctor.

"How do you think your parents will react to this?" he asked, looking up from my medical chart.

I squeezed my eyes shut, biting on my bottom lip. I couldn't bear the idea of telling them. "I don't know. They'll be shocked," I said, looking down at the mauve carpet.

"Think about your choices. You do have choices, it's still early in your pregnancy. This is a major upheaval in your life, Lily. But lots of young

girls do it, and come out just fine," he said. "But my advice to you is tell your parents soon. It's not a time for you to be alone. You need their support, whatever your decision." As I walked out, he patted my shoulder.

After I left his office, I didn't return to school. Instead, glad I had my own car, I drove the six or seven miles out of town to Bluff Landing. A white sailboat with bold blue and green stripes and three small fishing boats were out on the lake. The vehicles and boat trailers around me were empty. I sat in the Catalina near the water watching two white ducks, feeling alone, feeling sorry for myself. As if being fat in high school wasn't a big enough problem, now I was a pregnant teenager. Tears came to my eyes, then started rolling down my face. I leaned my head on the steering wheel and cried. I liked this feeling of getting away--leaving behind school work, classmates, Norvin, my parents, neighbors. With my everyday physical world behind me, my mind was clear to think.

I didn't want an abortion. I hadn't been taught against it, but I knew I didn't feel strong enough to cope with my feelings afterwards. I thought of adoption and finding my baby a good home. I was sure after my parents heard the news and had time to accept it, they would want me to keep the baby with them. The first problem was telling my parents. I tried thinking of ways to tell them. Every scene I rehearsed didn't seem right. I finally decided the only way was to be straightforward. I blew my nose on a kleenex I found in my purse. I felt better. I watched the ducks for a moment. The wind raised small white tufts on the water. Although I felt alone, a part of me liked the feeling of getting away--leaving behind schoolwork, classmates, Norvin, my parents, and neighbors.

I waited until 6:30, when we all sat down to supper, to tell my parents. Daddy was telling us about one of the clerks, who was caught stealing \$50 from the cash register, putting it in his front pocket. The clerk made up a story about leaving his \$50 in the drawer for safekeeping. At the end of the day, though, the till was short exactly \$50. The clerk got mad, said his salary was too low anyway. Daddy ended up firing him.

I waited until Dad finished his story and Mama made several consoling noises, patting him on his arm. It was so hard for me to get out the words. I opened my mouth, "Mama, Daddy, I have something important I need to tell you."

"What is it honey? What's going on with my little girl?" my daddy asked, buttering his roll. His calling me his little girl made it even more difficult.

My serious expression must have alerted Mom. "Lil', hon, is something wrong?"

"Yes, Mom."

She raised up in her chair, alarm in her voice. "Honey, what is it? Tell us!" She clinched Daddy's arm near his elbow.

"Wait, Mama. I'm not sick," I said, trying to calm her.

"Is it something about school?" she asked. She reached over, smoothed back the strands of my hair that had come out of my braid. "Is it one of your friends at school?"

"I swallowed, knowing that since they knew something was bothering me I'd have to tell them. I'm pregnant," I said, my voice coming out soft and quivery. For a full minute, nobody said anything. I tried to swallow again, but couldn't. Daddy and Mama stared at me stunned, almost open-mouthed,

like they didn't know me, and were trying to figure me out. I focused my eyes on my plate, waiting for what was coming next.

Mama broke the silence. "You didn't say you're pregnant, honey?" she asked, her face puzzled.

I looked down at the tablecloth, then nodded.

Tears came in my Mama's voice, "But Lily, you haven't been with any boys. You couldn't be. Why are you telling us a thing like this?" She blew her nose on her paper napkin, then turned to Daddy. "Ted, what are we going to do?" She shook her head. "Our little girl . . . I thought we raised her right . . ." Mama started crying again.

"Mama, don't cry," I said, tears in my voice. I was so ashamed, but I didn't know what to do. "I'm sorry, I'm really sorry" I said. I put my head down on the table and cried.

"Our little girl . . ." Mama groaned, "I don't know what we're going to do . . ." She sniffled, blowing her nose.

All this time, Daddy had sat staring at us, his expression stiff, unbending. He finally spoke, "Fern, Fern, let's quit crying." He patted Mama's arm. "Why don't we let Lily explain." he said, his voice tight, clipped. I knew he wanted facts and would see that he got them. I thought of the man Daddy had just fired. He probably had this same backed-into-the-corner feeling I was experiencing. But I didn't steal, unless one would call it stealing the opportunity to be held and appreciated. I was a little frightened of this cold stranger who was really my daddy. I wanted to remind him I was still his little girl.

"It only happened once," I said in a weak voice, trying to excuse myself.

They glanced at each other, shook their heads. "It only takes once," Daddy said. "Don't you know that?"

I winced, tried not to cry again, unaccustomed to the sharpness in his voice. "That night I washed your car, Daddy. I didn't go to the library. I'm sorry. Sorry for lying. But I met Norvin at the car wash, he wanted to drive to the lake for just a little while."

"Who is this Norvin?" Daddy raised his voice.

"Norvin. Norvin Hueston. A boy I always went to school with," I said.

Mama blew her nose again, said, "Doyle and Geneva's boy. You know, Ted. Two blocks north of us, over on Ivanhoe," Mama said, always the explainer in the family, even when she was in pain.

He nodded, then looked at me. "You sure about this? You go to the doctor?" Although I knew my dad loved me, it was as if he backed away from me, didn't want to know this young sexual woman he used to think was his "little girl." A chasm opened between us, and I felt if I reached out my hand, it would be miles from him.

"You know when we thought I had a virus?" I said, my voice stronger. I wanted to finish explaining where I wouldn't have to answer questions later. "I went to the doctor today at one. He said it was morning sickness and I was pregnant."

They sat at the table, quiet, the food forgotten. Finally, Mama said "I wish you'd told us about this earlier. No wonder you been so quiet and serious." It was as if the life had gone out of Mama. We all sat there a moment longer, then Mama said, "Lily, me and your daddy are going to need some time to get used to this . . . Maybe tomorrow we can talk, okay?"

I nodded, then got up, went to my bedroom, and shut the door. I knew they wanted to be alone.

At the breakfast table the next morning I knew things were better. Mama and Daddy had time to talk it over the night before, so they were ready to discuss my pregnancy. While she buttered her toast, Mama told me, "You know we'll support you, whatever you decide to do." She turned to Daddy. "Won't we, Ted?"

Daddy took a drink of his coffee then looked at me. "Have you made up your mind what you're going to do?"

"I know I don't want an abortion," I said. "I thought about adoption, or keeping the baby. I don't know yet." I couldn't eat the poached egg on my plate.

"It'd be so hard to give that sweet baby up for adoption," Mama said finally. "But it's your decision, hon, and I'll try not to interfere If you want to keep it here with us, I'll help you all I can."

"Thanks, Mama." I could already see her crocheting booties in her mind. *Chain stitch, double crochet, make three shells*, I thought.

"What about college? You had big plans to go this fall," Daddy said. I really wasn't excited about going to college. It was just what most of my classmates were planning, and seemed expected. It always seemed far away. Vaguely, in the back of my mind I had thought I could possibly slim down before then. Being fat among thin co-eds was not my idea of fun.

"I don't know," I said. "I may still try to go."

"Well . . . the university is here in Fayetteville," Mama said, "and I could take care of the baby for her while she was in class and studying. I'm here at home anyway . . . that is, if she decides to keep it."

Daddy stood up, scraping his chair against the tile. "Think about it, Lily. Let us know what you decide." His voice still had an edge to it. "I'm going to work in the garage a while."

"Your daddy just needs some time to adjust," Mama said, after Dad left. "We both do." She came around the table, hugged me. "Just give us some time."

"I understand," I said. I knew they both loved me.

"Does Norvin know?"

"I'm going to tell him tomorrow," I said.

When I told Norvin, the first thing he asked was "Are you going to get an abortion?" After I said no, he said, "What are you going to do?" I told him I didn't know yet. He said nothing. I noticed how carefully he bent down to sit on the grass, how he nursed his side with his hand, frowning when he moved too quickly.

"What's wrong, Norvin?" He raised the bottom of his tee-shirt; a solid purple and blue bruise covered his left side. "What happened?" I asked.

"My dad came in drunk late last night. Started yelling at Mom. I got mad, told him he better hush. He said, 'Ain't no squirt gonna tell me what to do', and kicked me with his boot. We had a fight and I knocked him down . . . I slept outside in the camper."

"Are you going home tonight?"

"Yeah. I'm going to stay until I find a job. Then I'm leaving." He combed back his hair with his hand. "It's not that I don't like my dad. I'm ready to be independent anyway. Find my own place," he said, then paused. "Lily, we could move in together after graduation. I'll find a job. We could raise our baby. Especially if you had a job, too." He looked at me sitting by

him on the grass. The wax paper from our sandwiches lay wadded up between us. "What do you say?"

I was too surprised to answer. I started gathering up the trash, putting it in the paper sack. "You really mean it?" I finally asked.

"Yeah, Lily, I do." He grabbed my hand. "Think about it," he said, walking off when the bell rang.

CHAPTER FOUR

That night at the supper table while we ate Swedish meatballs, noodles, and green peas, I told Mama and Daddy about Norvin's bruise, how his dad kicked him. Daddy still didn't talk much--Mama provided most of the conversation, talking almost nonstop about the letter she received from Aunt Marsha in northeastern Oklahoma, how Mary Grace was head cheerleader at Sallisaw High School and Carmilla cut her hair, the recipe for Italian Creme Cake she gave Mrs. Bolene in Walmart's sewing department, how tall the sunflowers she planted by the fence row were getting. Daddy gave a grunt now and then when she said "Right, Ted?" or punched his arm; otherwise, he ate in silence, addressing himself to the meatballs and noodles.

I knew he found it hard to believe his little girl was pregnant; no doubt he still couldn't let go of the child image and see me as a sexual young woman. Mama said it would take time, and she was right. It had been almost two weeks since the night I told him, and he was still sullen. But this information about Norvin's father sparked his interest. He said, "Doyle always did have an awful temper when he drank. Any other time he's real friendly. No boy should have to put up with his dad kicking him, though. That's a shame." He shook his head. I could tell by his frown he was feeling a little sympathy for Norvin. Daddy directed his gray eyes toward me, "Did you tell Norvin you're in the family way?"

"I told him I was pregnant at school today," I said.

He frowned. "That's what I said, what I meant. Well, go ahead and tell me. What'd he say?"

I couldn't tell him Norvin's first question was "Are you going to get an abortion?" I also couldn't tell him Norvin wanted us to live together when he found a job. Daddy seemed on the edge of exploding the past few days, leaving for his job in the mornings and coming home at night with a long, gloomy face. I knew, even though he was usually mild-tempered, telling him this would be like placing dry wood shavings on a smoldering fire. "We're still thinking about what to do," I said.

"He should offer to marry you. That is, if he's a respectable man, and I don't know about that yet. So far, he hasn't shown me an ounce of worthiness. Sulking around after my daughter."

I took the brownie with caramel swirls and ice cream Mama handed me.

Daddy continued, "Not coming to the door polite-like and asking her out on a date, taking her out to dinner or a movie or anything. Sullyng her reputation. That just goes to show most of these boys nowadays are just after one thing."

"Ted," Mama said.

"Let me talk, Fern." He forked a meatball and twirled a noodle around his fork. "There's some things I been needing to say. In my time if a fellow knocked up a girl--"

"Ted!"

"Be quiet, Fern. You know what I'm talking about. Her kin, her daddy and her brothers, would've shot him full of buckshot or hung him to the nearest cottonwood tree. These boys today don't have a lick of responsibility about them--out for a good time no matter who it hurts."

Daddy stretched his arms out straight on the table, placed both fists around his water glass, and put his head down. "The bread's already baking in the oven," he said, sighing, forking another meatball.

Mama's eyes darted at me. I glanced down at my half-eaten brownie and ice cream, bit my bottom lip, and picked up the pea that had rolled under the edge of my plate. I didn't know where to put it, so I dropped the pea in my water glass, watching it drift slowly to the bottom. Thinking of what Daddy said, I pictured a smooth, brown loaf, crusty around the edges, and creamy butter ready to spread on the warm slices. It was difficult to imagine myself with a baby.

"I wish you wouldn't talk that way, Ted," Mama said. "Think of the baby. Besides, you might hurt Lily's feelings. You know she's always been a good girl, never caused us any trouble, like them two Sumpter girls, for instance. They don't give Trudy Sumpter a moment's peace. Galavantin' around town with any man in pants, no matter if they have a wife or not." Mama scooted back her plate, propped her elbows on the table, primed to talk now she had Daddy's attention. "Stay out till all hours, running wild. Both of them just teenagers. And sass their mama! Mrs. Halterman, she lives right by them, told me it was terrible the way they act, yelling at Trudy she better get back in the house, leave them alone." Mama grabbed Daddy's forearm, "What I'm saying is, Ted, we ought to be grateful the good Lord's given us a daughter like Lily, and do everything we can to help her. You know I'm right. Okay, she's messed up one time. We're all just human. Me and you made mistakes, and I could name a few of them. Why, we--"

"That's enough, Fern. No need bringing up all the past. What matters is we tried to teach her right. Giving her a good home, this two-storey house, her own bedroom, plenty of clothes, food to eat, a car. She's had

anything she wants. I can't help but say I'm disappointed, real disappointed."

I felt a pain in my chest, guilt for hurting Daddy. They talked as if they were alone, just the two of them. I thought about leaving the room, but stayed, didn't move, listening, waiting to learn the outcome. I was glad Daddy was finally opening up, telling Mama where he stood in the matter, how he felt, but the misery I heard in his voice made me almost wish the can of worms hadn't been opened, so to speak. I wanted to get up, put my arms around him.

"But you're right," Daddy continued. "We got to move on. This little one's coming, and that's a fact. Of course, I'll do anything I can to help, but the big responsibility is Lily's and this boy's, if he acts right. I'll give him, or anyone a chance one time, see how he does," Daddy said. "I'll take a cup of coffee, Fern."

I guess Daddy suddenly remembered I still sat on the other side of the table, because he turned to me, said, "You say he's looking for a job?"

"He tried at different places--Elwell's Auto Supply, Hibdon Tire, Truman's Machine Shop. He put a new motor in his truck, so he's good at mechanic work. But nobody's hiring right now. Truman's told him to check back in two months," I said, rolling up the tablecloth edge with my fingers and letting it fall.

"Tell him to drop by the store for an application. I got to replace the guy who took money from the register. We're short handed," he said.

"I'll tell him tomorrow," I said, looking him in the eye. He nodded his head, then turned to Mama.

"Fern, we really need to put some new stakes by those tomato plants this evening before dark. There's ten or twelve wooden posts about five feet tall stacked up in the shed we can use if you help me tie them."

"Go ahead, Mama, I'll wash the dishes," I said, standing up to clear the table.

"Sure, honey?"

"Yeah," I said. She hugged me, said "It's going to be all right," and we smiled at each other. *Co-conspirators*, I thought, although we hadn't really planned a strategy to make Daddy come around. *Maybe if a person has patience, the toughest problems eventually work out*, I thought, trying to be optimistic. She went upstairs to the sewing room for some cord; I piled the dishes by the sink, ran hot water over them, one by one, placing them in the dishwasher.

Daddy had worked hard through the years, beginning at seventeen when the store was Stoll's Hardware and Appliance and he delivered Maytags and Frigidares to different households all over town. When Henry Stoll reached retirement age, impressed with his years of hard work and dependability, he made Daddy manager. Right before Mr. Stoll died, he sold Daddy the store at a low price. Business had always been good, and when he changed the store's name to Hamburger's Hardware and Appliance, in 1959, when I was seven, business grew even faster. In 1964, he expanded the store to hold more merchandise. Later he bought two more delivery trucks to make three, had his logo, *You'll never go wrong with Hamburger Appliances-locally owned and operated--702 S. Perkins Rd. 658-3355* and a fat smiling hamburger sitting on a shiny Maytag washer printed on the truck panels.

I sometimes wondered if of our name had something to do with the increase in business. Maybe new people in town were compelled to stop by to see who had the funny name. Of course, old customers were already well acquainted with Daddy.

I knew how much he valued his store, expecting his employees to uphold good business tradition. Like the other employees, Norvin would need to be a diligent worker, courteous to customers, dependable. If he were lax, Daddy would fire him. He had little patience with laziness. Like he said, he gave everyone a chance; then if they skipped work and didn't call, or sat around on the stool drinking Cokes, talking to girlfriends on the phone while potential customers tried to decide on whether to buy a gas range or a dishwasher, he dismissed them without hesitation. "Teach them a little responsibility--they have to learn it some time," he always said when he fired someone.

I didn't know if Norvin wanted to work with Daddy or not, but when I told him during the lunch hour at school, he said, "Sure. Thanks, Lily. I'll go by tomorrow."

I told Daddy that evening Norvin was coming by the next day. He filled out an application and got a job as delivery boy helping Kenneth Wiggs load and unload appliances, scheduled to begin after school the following afternoon, full-time after graduation, only a week away. I knew Daddy thought the delivery job, the same job he started with twenty-nine years ago, was the best way to find out if Norvin would make a responsible man.

At school, Norvin seemed excited when he talked about his job, telling me about the appliances he and Kenneth delivered the evening before, what part of town they drove to. Within a week, his talk began to include the

jokes Wig told him, how Wig painted his egg yolk yellow pickup with a red pinstripe himself, said he'd help him paint his. Kenneth seemed to play the part of his older brother, and I heard about him so much, I started calling him Wig. Norvin told me Wig's wife was Naomi, they had been married three years, and were trying to have a baby.

The day before graduation after we ate our bologna and cheese sandwiches and Norvin lit up his cigarette--(I quit smoking with him when I found out I was pregnant)--he asked me again if I'd move in with him, said he was looking for an apartment.

"The only way I can live with you is if we get married," I said.

"Why?"

I'd been thinking for two weeks about what I'd tell him if he asked me again. I knew if he didn't want to marry me, I would probably say, "Okay, let's live together," because he asked me to, and I didn't want to lose him. But I said, "I want to be respectable for our baby, and I don't want its name to be Hamburger."

"That's not a reason to get married."

"Yes it is. You were around, you should understand," I said. He rubbed the top of his coarse sandy hair, looked out across the playground. He had to be remembering he was one of those who called me Big Deluxe. "Besides, there's another reason."

"What?" he asked.

"I love you."

He looked at me like I was using everything I could to bribe him into marriage. No doubt he considered me, with my 5'9" 225 pound body carrying the beginning of his baby, a giant steel trap that once the jaws slammed shut would be almost impossible to open. I understood, but I

didn't get pregnant on purpose. "Forget it," I said, turning to leave. *Go to hell*, I thought, *I can make it on my own, I don't need him*. I was tired--tired of trying to get people to like me, tired of trying to figure things out.

"I'll think about this," he yelled behind my back. I didn't turn around.

We only stayed at school until 12:00 the next day, getting out early for graduation night to curl hair, polish shoes, and iron clothes. When I came downstairs late that afternoon to ask Mama if I could borrow her hot rollers, I heard Daddy tell her, as she watered the geraniums on the front porch, how Norvin seemed to be a good worker. But I knew Daddy was concerned about whether he would make me into a respectable woman. Sometimes I caught him glancing at me, as if to ask, "You and Norvin worked out anything yet?"

That night I sang "Farewell to Thee" with the other 1970 graduates, joined the procession that marched up the stage to "Pomp and Circumstance" in my dark green cap and gown to receive my diploma. The green of the loose gown was a good color for me, I thought, with my dark hair, which I let flow in curls down my back, and I wore a pair of large yellow-gold earrings with an emerald rhinestone in the center I bought at Misty's Boutique, which set off my brown eyes. I felt almost pretty.

Norvin said "Hi, Lily" as we passed each other in the long line of 355 students. I looked at him but didn't reply as we filed onto the stage. *Let him figure that out*, I thought, hoping he'd wonder about why I didn't speak.

I sat in my chair, tuned out the monotone voice of the skinny, pale Reverend Tipps from the First Church of the Nazarene. I noticed how nice Mama looked down in the second row, her azure-blue rayon dress that wasn't too tight, the gleam of the pearl necklace Daddy bought her on their

fifteenth anniversary, her proud, expectant smile as she looked up at me. I wanted to wave.

I remembered how all through junior high and high school I was often ashamed of how she looked compared to the other girls' moms--her short, dumpy figure in her mismatched clothes, usually too tight because she gained several pounds and inches since they were new in the fifties. Her clothes were always colorful, I could say that for her.

This reminded me of a few weeks back when we were in Trumbo's Grocery. We were trying to decide whether we wanted spaghetti with mushroom sauce and garlic bread for supper, or beef stroganoff with salad and French bread, when Mama suddenly grabbed my arm, pointed down the cosmetics and medicine aisle, said, "Isn't that one of the girls in your class? What's her name, I know it, don't tell me. Joanna, that's it. The little Eck girl. I remember when she was a little red-haired girl in kindergarten. She screamed and kicked on the first day, her mama couldn't do a thing with her. Miss Price finally let her write on the blackboard with some colored chalk, and she got quiet. She's grown into a pretty young lady. My, she walks just like her mother--that kinda prissy walk with her chin up real high. There's her mother over there by the milk. Marilyn. Yes, her husband is Fred Eck, has the pest control business. You know the one that advertises on the radio 'We get rid of all your pests for you.' I always think of people instead of bugs. Let's go over and talk with them."

"Mama, I'm in a hurry," I told her. "You know I got to make that sugar cookie recipe for my home ec class when we get home."

"That won't take very long. I'll help you, hon. Why, if I counted the number of cookies I've made!"

"Let's go, Mama. I'm tired, I got homework piled up. Come on," I said, like a cranky kid. Mama had on tight, lime-green pedal pushers and a fire-engine red top with what resembled sprigs of blueberries scattered over it, white socks and scuffed black and white saddle oxfords she had worn for years around the house. Even though I was fat, my clothes always coordinated.

"Okay, okay, don't get your bloomers in a knot, hon," she laughed, "we'll go."

Her blouse had slight gaps between the buttons scattered down the front, showing a trace here and there of her white skin. Mama had a tendency to get zealously involved in what she was doing at home, suddenly decide she needed baking soda from the grocery store or embroidery thread from the dime store, hop in the family car with her purse and a list, not giving one thought to how she was dressed, just anxious at the time to get back to her recipe or sewing. We left Trumbo's without Joanna or her mom seeing us.

Now, on the stage, I looked for Mrs. Eck and found her sitting by Mr. Eck just two seats away from Mama and Daddy. Her platinum blond hair looked full and stiff, like it could be lifted off in one piece, reminding me of those cakes Mama made with the sugar and eggwhite frosting that turned into a stiff solid crust when it cooled after a few minutes. I smiled at the thought of Mr. Eck suddenly turning to her, removing it, then looked at Mama's short chestnut hair, fluffed on the top. Up close little flecks of gray showed in her bangs, but even from my seat on the stage her hair looked soft, glowed in the dim light.

The young reverend, the co-valedictorians, and the salutatorian finished sometime during my musings, and the superintendent was walking

toward the podium. After the ceremony, I saw Norvin shake hands with Daddy in the audience, heard him say "See you Monday, Mr. Hamburger."

Daddy said, "Yeah, see you, Norvin."

I heard rumors about the seniors meeting at the lake for a going-away party. I hadn't even considered going, because all through high school I didn't attend any function unless I had to; usually nobody asked me. But Virginia English, another senior, happened to be coming toward me as I waited for Mama to finish talking with Marilyn Eck, and she stopped, touching my arm. "Are you coming with us, Lily? We'd be glad to have you."

Virginia was popular because, for one reason, her dad owned the 500-acre Shadow E Horse Ranch, known for its prime thoroughbred Appaloosas, ten miles southeast of Fayetteville. For another reason, she happened to be a combination of pretty and nice: porcelain-doll pretty, with round ocean-blue eyes, short, curly silver blond hair, and friendly to everyone, from the most to the least popular, the category where I fit.

But I recognized even in high school there was what I considered a condescending friendliness in some people. Although Virginia always said "Hi, how are you, Lily?," her tone sounded pitying, overly kind, as if she were thinking: *Poor thing, you're really fat and hopeless, and I'm supposed to be kind to people like you who don't have it as good as me.* Perhaps she was also remembering Daddy had the hardware and appliance business. Or perhaps she didn't consider me beneath her dignity, and I was being paranoid. But I didn't think so.

"We'd like her to come, wouldn't we, Joanna?" Virginia turned around to Joanna Eck, who stood behind her, waiting.

"Yeah, sure."

"Do you have a ride, Lily?" Virginia asked. "Our car's full, but I could find you a ride with someone."

"I can drive my car. I may be there, I don't know," I said, thinking maybe I should give myself and them a chance, since I was about to be out of high school forever.

"You know where it's at, don't you? Out at Bluff Landing, about seven miles. It's a real nice place to have a party. You'll see the sign," Virginia said.

I saw Norvin leave with his friends, Cory, Jeff, and Tony. They seemed to be enjoying themselves: shoving each other, teasing, laughing. I knew he'd probably go to the lake, and I wanted to see his reaction when he spotted me there.

As we drove home I told Mama and Daddy about the party, how I was thinking about going for a little while. They both thought it would be good for me to be with all my classmates one last time. Even though I still had reservations, I changed into a pair of bell-bottom jeans and a loose blue and green knit top, then put on my sneakers and grabbed my shoulder purse. Going through the kitchen, I picked up the new bag of Ruffles potato chips and took it with me.

On the way, I thought about the time I had sex with Norvin at Bluff Landing--how special he made me feel that night. I also recalled the day when the doctor said I was pregnant. I skipped school the rest of that day, drove out to Bluff Landing to think about what I wanted to do before I told Norvin or my parents.

Bluff Landing seemed different with over a hundred noisy teenagers scattered around the cement picnic tables under the pine trees and on the wooden dock. Rock music was blaring from someone's car stereo turned up

loud enough for everyone to hear. I sat in the Pontiac for a moment, missing the quietness I'd come to associate with this part of Rainbow Lake. I started to panic, even thought about turning around and going home before anyone saw me. "This is silly," I told myself, got out of the car with my potato chips, and walked over to the table where Virginia, Joanna, and Teresa, another senior who was in my typing class, were sitting.

"Hi, Lily," Virginia said. "Glad you came. Sit down by us. Joanna, scoot over where she'll have room."

I heard a muffled giggle behind me, turned around and saw Cory Bishop, the boy who called me Big Deluxe in ninth grade, standing there with three or four more senior boys I knew slightly. I didn't see Norvin, even though I knew he left graduation with Cory.

I placed my chips on the table, and Virginia said, "We're putting all our food, beer, and Cokes on the dock for everyone. Here, I'll take your chips over there where you won't have to get up." She picked up the bag and took off with it. After a minute of awkward silence, Joanna and Teresa started flirting with guys, and I was left alone, sitting at one end of the picnic table watching them.

After ten minutes or so, I got up, walked around through the crowd, trying to find someone to talk with. Several of my classmates said "Hi, Lily," their voices sometimes revealing the shock of seeing me there. I heard someone say "Norvin went after more beer." As I stood by the water's edge, I realized I didn't want to wait around to see his face when he saw me, so I walked back to my car, left without telling anyone goodbye.

It was around midnight when I got home, and Mama and Daddy were already in bed. The next morning I pretended to Mama I had a good time, but I think she saw through my act, because that night after we washed the

supper dishes, and were sitting in the living room, Daddy reading the Newsweek, Mama hand-sewing a stretch maternity panel in a pair of my jeans that were too tight to fasten, and me polishing my fingernails with Rum Raisin, she suddenly jumped up, said, "Look at us, sitting around like a bunch of old folks in the nursing home. We need to liven things up around here. Move this coffee table, Ted. I'll put a record on, and we'll do some dancing. We haven't helped Lily celebrate graduation yet."

"I'll put the record on. I just want to watch you and Daddy dance," I said, flipping through the albums.

"We're all going to," Mama said, holding onto Daddy's arm, swirling him around even before the music started. *She makes her own music*, I thought, and laughed. I laughed, too, because Mama always lightened heavy moods, and because Daddy was finally looking at me as his daughter again, still loved me.

I put an Elvis record, Mama's favorite, on the stereo. She looked at me with a big smile. "C'mon, Ted," she yelled, and immediately started doing the twist to Elvis' smooth, sexy voice singing, "I'm in love I'm all shook up" She ground the toe of her white pump on the floor like she was killing a cockroach. I laughed at Daddy in his avocado leisure suit trying to keep up with her. The years had made his large bones a little stiff, but he was having fun--I saw it on his face when he smiled at Mama.

I danced with Daddy to "Love Me Tender," then moved the needle back so Mama could do the same. They cuddled up close, her head barely reaching his chest. I hoped if I ever married I'd be that happy.

Daddy was right--Mama *was* beautiful, laughing with her head thrown back, trying to hold up the edge of the straight skirt of her dress, twirling. It was her eyes. They reminded me of blue-gray glass marbles

broken up in tiny pieces. *Enclosed in a kaleidoscope*, I thought, *intense and soft, both*. When I looked in the mirror, I didn't see this combination in my eyes. Norvin and Mama said I had pretty eyes, but what I saw was soft dark brown, vulnerable eyes, like what I imagined a wounded deer's eyes looked like. I didn't know how to get that intensity, but thought it probably had something to do with being really happy.

I sat at the kitchen table every morning after breakfast, looked at the classified ads and talked about finding a job. Mama and Daddy didn't want me to work while I was pregnant, but I knew if I stayed in my room and read, like I did the summer before, I'd probably think about Norvin. I missed him, even though I was still angry, disappointed he was ignoring me. I wanted to hear his voice, was tempted to call his house or go by the store on some lame excuse. I remembered when he pretended not to see me at school around his friends, how in tenth grade I was hurt and considered calling his mom, telling her I was a girl he got pregnant, making up a name. Of course, I didn't know then I'd be the one pregnant with his child two years later.

I was helping Mama can green beans when he called one Monday night in the middle of June. "Could we go riding around a while, Lily?" he asked. "I need to talk to you."

"Mama needs me right now." I was filling the jars with beans; she was stacking them in the big aluminum pan. My mind raced ahead, trying to predict what he had to tell me. I didn't think he wanted to marry me.

Mama looked at me, said, "You run right along if you need to, hon. I can finish this up easy."

"Okay," I told him.

"This is important. I been thinking about what you said. I'll pick you up in fifteen minutes."

Taking off my apron Mama appliqued with red apples, I told her "I'm going riding around with Norvin," hurried upstairs, took off the worn, pale-pink cotton shorts with the elastic waistband and white tee-shirt with a picture of Royal Gorge bridge on the front. I gained ten pounds since March when I became pregnant, and now weighed around 200 pounds. I put on the yellow sleeveless maternity dress Mama bought me at Myrna's Maternity Shoppe, which I had never worn, washed my face, and tried to comb the straggles of hair back into the braid. I sprayed Tabu on my neck and wrists.

When Norvin knocked on the door, I was ready. He opened the truck door, helped me in. "Want to drive out to Bluff Landing?" he asked.

"Can we go somewhere else?" I said. I didn't want to be reminded of the night of the party, although Bluff Landing was where I lost my virginity and started a baby with him. *It was the best of times, it was the worst of times*, I thought.

"All right. Want to drive up to Arrowhead Point? It's not too far," he said.

"Okay," I said. Mama, Daddy, and I took Aunt Marsha, Uncle Edgar, and my cousins for a drive up the Timbercrest Mountains to Arrowhead Point one summer day two or three years ago for a picnic.

We were both silent on the fifteen-mile drive up to the point, this time with no loud music blaring on the radio. He pulled up by a huge Ponderosa pine several feet from the lookout. The sun had just disappeared, and the light wind blew wafts of cool air through the truck windows. He glanced at

me across the seat where I sat against the door. "You wore your hair down the other time we took a drive," he said.

I blushed, hoped it didn't show. "I rented a trailer over at Quail Run Campsites," he said.

"That's nice."

"I'm making it all right with my store paycheck. Now I don't have to listen to my dad rant and rave since I moved to the trailer. How you been feeling?" he asked.

"I still get sick sometimes in the mornings, but not as often. I'm gaining weight. The doctor says I'm doing okay--just watch what I eat."

"You look good to me. Remember when I told you one day at lunch I liked watching you walk across the school ground, you wore that turquoise flowered sundress in the eleventh grade, it showed your back and the top of your breasts?"

Embarrassed, I nodded.

"Remember I said you looked nice? You started wearing tight clothes for me, I knew you did. I liked seeing your white skin. You're so round and soft and comfortable-like, it makes me want to squeeze you. I'm making you blush, ain't I?" he said, grinning at me. Red-faced, I turned my head, looked out the window. He touched me on my upper arm, "I embarrassed you, didn't I? Truth is, I've always liked girls other guys call fat, if you haven't already figured that out."

I turned my head, looked at his eyes; he seemed sincere. "I didn't know guys ever felt that way," I said.

"Yeah, they do The trailer's got two bedrooms. 'Course, they're real small--one bedroom's about like a closet. It's old, but it's in pretty good shape. I been thinkin' we could get married if you still want to."

"What?" I said, not sure I heard him right.

"Do you want to get married?"

"You're sure about this You thought it out and everything?" I asked.

"I'm sure."

"You're ready to have a wife and baby?"

"This baby's mine and I ought to take responsibility. Me and you get along okay. I got room in the trailer. We got my truck and your car, and I'm bringing in a paycheck. I can take care of us," he said. "You can even get a job once the baby's born--if you want to. I thought it all out. It seems like the right answer."

"Do you love me?" I asked.

He frowned. "Sure I love you." I sensed he didn't want to talk about love by his sudden fidgeting with the keys hanging in the ignition. I still didn't know if he loved me. I read in Glamour magazine being told I love you was important to women; whereas men, in general, considered showing love by their actions enough. *This is probably true*, I thought, *after all, he's showing me he loves me by offering to marry me.*

"What do you say? Or do you need time to think about this?" he asked.

"I'll marry you," I said.

He scooted over in the middle of the seat, put his arm around me. "Don't you think we better get married pretty soon? What about in two weeks--will that give you time? We can do it at the courthouse," he said.

"I need to talk to Mama first. I'll let you know tomorrow."

"I'll come by after work around 7:30--drive you over to see the trailer. How's that?"

I nodded.

"Could I take your braid down?" he asked.

I turned my back to him. He took off the rubber band. Then his fingers started unbraiding the end near my waist, worked their way up to my neck. He shook out my hair, spread it around my shoulders. "Turn around so I can see you," he said.

When I faced him, he bent his head and kissed me. It brought back to me the first time he touched my mouth, and I couldn't help the same breathless feeling in my stomach. I wrapped my arms around him, kissed him back with my tongue, pulled his head down to my breasts. He moved all my hair around my shoulder, left it hanging down in the front while he unzipped my dress.

I remembered how we threw our clothes in the back seat of my parents' car when we made love the other time. This time, there was only the truck seat, so we dropped them on the floor. The steering wheel didn't get in our way when we undressed, and the wide seat gave us plenty of room when he lay down on top of me. This time I didn't hesitate; I was ready for him.

I'm already pregnant anyway, and we're going to get married, I thought, wrapping my arms around his back, moving to accommodate him.

CHAPTER FIVE

Mama didn't want us to get married at the courthouse, said it didn't seem sacred. She arranged with Pastor Fellows to marry us at Calvary Baptist Church, where my family attended most Sundays, and stayed up two nights sewing seed pearls on my taffeta and lace wedding dress she made.

We had a small wedding on Friday evening, June 30, with Norvin's sister Beth as my bridesmaid and Wig as Norvin's groomsman. Mama's sniffles throughout the ceremony were loud enough for everyone to hear. Even though I faced Pastor Fellows with my back to Mama and Daddy, I had a clear picture of Daddy's arm around Mama, his large, rough hand patting her on the shoulder.

Norvin's mom, Geneva, was a neat, soft-spoken woman with a warm smile she directed at everyone. Something about her wide smile, her turned-under brown hair, and the way she carried herself reminded me of Jacqueline Kennedy. When she hugged me, I felt her fragile bones through her pale pink gabardine dress. Norvin's dad, Doyle, shook hands with me, said, "Welcome to the family, Lily." I had heard too much from Norvin about his dad's temper, his physical abuse when he drank, so I wasn't drawn in by his friendliness.

Aunt Marsha, Mary Grace, and Carmilla came from Sallisaw and helped Mama serve the two-tiered wedding cake, mints, nuts, and strawberry punch at the small reception. During the reception, Wig wrote graffiti all over Norvin's truck with white shoe polish and tied tin cans on the

back bumper. Judging from the way his mouth hung open, he didn't know until Norvin opened the car door we planned to drive my Catalina when we left for our honeymoon.

We hadn't picked a special place to go, but we found ourselves driving toward Van Buren, Arkansas, and ended up stopping at the Loyal Inn on Dewey Avenue, where we spent our one-night honeymoon. In the bathroom, I took off my lavender double-breasted going away suit, slid the red silk floor length nightgown I bought especially for this night down over my protruding stomach. I shook out my braid, then opened the door, walked toward the bed.

Norvin was already between the white sheets, his back buried in the pillows he propped against the mock headboard. Above his head hung a painting of two children walking down a country road, one carrying a bucket of yellow daffodils. I liked Norvin's smooth, hard chest, the movement of his biceps when he leaned over, pulled back the sheet and yellow and orange plaid spread for me to crawl in.

"Lily, there's something I've got to tell you."

I sat up, looked with alarm at his serious expression. "What? What is it, Norvin?"

"I should've told you before now, but I didn't know what you'd think, how you felt about it. I couldn't bring myself."

He's got some kind of awful venereal disease, I thought. My heart raced. *He could've told me about this before we ever had sex*. I imagined some large syphilis canker sore on his genitals he had managed to cover up in the semi-darkness at Bluff Landing. Now, since it would be difficult to hide his nakedness from the light, he *had* to tell me.

I tried to pretend it didn't matter, at least until I knew exactly what it was. "Just tell me. We'll work this out somehow," I said.

"I wet the bed," he mumbled.

My body stiffened under the covers. I wasn't sure I heard right.

"What'd you say?"

"I said I wet the bed." This time his voice was loud, clear, almost angry.

"You do? You're sure?" Stunned, I didn't know how to react.

"I have ever since I was a kid. Not every night, but about every two or three nights."

I imagined lying in soaked, yellowed sheets, washing them, hanging them out for the sun to dry almost every morning the rest of my life, tried not to shudder. "Did you talk to a doctor about this? Is there some kind of medicine?" I asked.

"The doctor said I'd probably outgrow it. Mom tried different things. Gettin' me up in the night at 1:00, and everything. Nothing ever worked."

"It kinda makes me mad that you didn't tell me before we got married," I said.

"I was afraid you'd change your mind."

"It's not that," I said, wondering if knowing really would've made a difference. "I would've married you anyway. You know you can talk to me about anything."

"Yeah."

"Maybe you drink too much water or tea or Coke before you go to bed. There's got to be a reason. It could be psychological." I reached over, grabbed his hand. As his wife, it was up to me to reassure him. "Maybe your dad's drinking caused the problem, somehow." Calling it "the problem"

instead of "your bedwetting" sounded less embarrassing. Somehow the sheets felt clammy against my feet.

I still couldn't get over the shock, but tried to act strong, squeezing his calloused fingers. My left hand with the new Eternity wedding band from JCPenney's looked soft, pale against his tanned skin. "We just have to work this out together. We'll think of something. Maybe being married will help."

He pulled me to him, held me tight. His chest was heaving against mine; I thought he was crying. Concerned, wanting to comfort, I raised up, looked into his eyes. A large smile split his red face, showing most of his teeth. Then he let loose the laughter he had been holding, and cackled, bending over the edge of the bed, hitting the nightstand with his fist. When he was able to talk, he said, "I really had you goin', didn't I?"

I didn't answer. I always heard red was the color for angry. But I was so mad I saw white. I wanted our wedding night to be romantic. I felt used; he had scared me, played upon my sympathy, caused me to worry. He was thoughtless.

"Aw, c'mon, Lily. It was just a joke."

I slid down into bed, pulled the sheet and spread up to my neck, turned my back to him.

"I'm sorry, Lil'. Will you forgive me? Pretty, pretty please?" He tickled me under my arm, then picked up the end of my hair, brushed it across my temple. "With sugar on it? You look so good in your red nightie," he said, biting my ear.

"Quit," I said. But I couldn't help laughing, even though I was still disappointed in him. He turned me over, and I helped him take off my gown.

The next morning when we reached Fayetteville, we stopped at Food-4-Less, two blocks from Quail Run. As we sacked our own groceries and watched \$47.91 pop up on the cash register, I realized we didn't have a choice. We had to be adults now, or else run sniveling back to Mama and Daddy. I didn't want to do that. It was like growing up overnight. I had to leave my family to realize how much I'd been pampered, how much I took for granted.

The trailer was miniature compared to Mama and Daddy's house, but I grew accustomed to having five small rooms in one straight line and a hallway down one side. Norvin and I developed a routine. Each morning I cooked his breakfast, usually bacon, fried eggs, and toast, while he got ready for work. He wanted gravy, but when I set it on the table, he always said, "Would you get me a straw?" or "Would you get me a steak knife?" and grinned like it was funny. I quit trying. Thankfully, by the time we married I was over my morning sickness except for occasional nausea.

After Norvin left for work, I washed dishes, made the bed, hung up his wet towel, screwed the cap back on the toothpaste, threw his dirty underwear in the hamper. When we moved in I embroidered pink *HIS* and *HERS* on the two white bath towels we brought home from Loyal Inn. I saw myself becoming like Mama, which was okay, since I was now a married woman and she was a good role model for any housewife. I draped the towels across the rack, told Norvin not to use them, covered the shower stall with Contact paper flocked with tiny pink flowers.

Sometimes I watched the CBS Morning Movie, which started at 10:00 o'clock, while I dusted and swept the living room. If I liked the movie, I ended up steeping myself some mint tea and sitting down on the couch in my old chenille robe. If I didn't like the movie, after I finished cleaning the

living room I took a shower, dressed, brushed my hair, putting it back into its braid, applied a little lipstick and mascara. Then I went outside and worked in my zinnia bed. Mama had given me some zinnia plants from her garden, and I pulled weeds, made a small round bed in the front yard.

Norvin liked homemade bread, so once a week in the afternoon I kneaded and baked brown loaves while I watched General Hospital at 2:00 o'clock. The other days I ironed, embroidered baby bibs, hemmed receiving blankets, shopped, or went to the laundromat. When Norvin got home at 6:00 o'clock I had supper ready. We watched the evening news while we ate, then he stretched out on the couch and usually slept while I washed the dishes.

We made a pact when we first married that we would go out every Friday night to keep our marriage alive, so we usually went to the Pawnee Drive-Inn, where it cost only \$1 each. The drive-in either showed westerns or R-rated movies such as Cathy Shines in Vegas.

One Friday evening in late September I had supper on the table and was dressed to go out. I pinned my braid in a twist on top of my head and fluffed my bangs, was wearing a new yellow and white seersucker maternity top over blue jeans. Earlier that morning I circled The Good, the Bad, the Ugly in the Gazette entertainment section. Clint Eastwood was Norvin's favorite. Sometimes Norvin stuck a blade of dried grass between his teeth, pulled his banged-up, squashed straw hat low over his forehead, squinted his eyes at me, thinking he looked like Eastwood.

By 7:15 the meatloaf set congealed in its catsup in the pan on the stove, the boiled potatoes had shriveled dry, and the fried okra's crispness had sogged in its grease. I sat stiff on the couch, raised up to look out the kitchen window at the end of the trailer every time I heard a car. The

weather had been hot and still all day, making it difficult for me to breath when I tried pulling weeds in the zinnia bed earlier. The backs of my legs ached from carrying the baby. My ankles and feet were swollen, so I propped them on the maple coffee table. I tried calling Norvin at the store, but knew it was already closed. Nobody answered. I hoped he wasn't in an accident.

At 8:30 I washed the dishes and cleaned up the kitchen, putting Norvin's food in the oven. Then I decided to call Wig and see if he knew where Norvin was. I let the phone ring several times, but no answer. I dialed the Fayetteville Memorial Hospital, and nobody had been admitted by Norvin's name. The police department had no information about him. I was getting angry because Norvin hadn't called. He knew I would be worried.

Tired of waiting for him, I picked up my shoulder purse and keys and drove toward the K-Mart on Thomas Avenue. Inside the store, I pushed the cart through the baby section, feeling the softness of the mint green crib blankets with pink and blue balloon patterns. I squeezed the rubber elephant through its package, took a glass baby bottle out of its box and held it.

Somebody announced over the intercom the store would be closing in five minutes. It was almost 9:00. Not buying anything, I left the store, noticing a build-up of dark clouds in the west as I drove back to the trailer. Norvin's truck wasn't there.

When I got out of the car, the wind was blowing small dust typhoons in the driveway, and the hanging potted petunias swung above the trailer steps. I set the petunias on the ground by the steps, went inside, closed and locked the metal door.

I rushed to the phone when it rang, thinking it might be Norvin. But it was Mama calling to tell us about the thunderstorm warning issued for Zachary County on Channel 8 until 11:00 o'clock. She always worried during stormy weather about our living in a "flimsy trailer."

"They blow over so easy," she said again. "You feeling all right, honey?"

"Yeah, Mama, I'm fine."

"How's Norvin?"

"He's okay. We were out of milk, so he drove to Food For Less," I lied.

"Tell him I said hello when he gets back. Your daddy said tell you hi. Guess we better get off the phone--it's dangerous. 'night, hon."

"Goodnight," I said, and hung up the phone. I crawled up into a kitchen chair to reach the three candles I had in the top cabinet, in case the electric went out. Then I turned on the TV. Three's Company was on; Jack had just lost his job again at the Regal Beagle. The occasional static got on my nerves, but I left the TV on to cover the silence in the trailer.

Getting the ice out of the refrigerator, I put three cubes in a glass and poured myself a Coke. I took the new fall/winter Sears catalog from the wrought-iron magazine holder, thumbed through it as I sat on the couch. I found a square kitchen wall clock and a white wicker shelf for the bathroom I liked. I thought I heard a car motor above the wind, which was causing the window awnings to rattle. Through the kitchen window, I watched the car lights as they turned in at the trailer across the street.

Rain started pelting against the sides of the trailer. Lightning turned everything white for a moment; then a huge clap of thunder made me shiver. I turned off the TV, wrapped up in the afghan at the end of the couch. A

mouse suddenly came out from under the metal bookshelf and ran into the kitchen.

We'd had trouble with mice since moving to Quail Run, but thought we'd got rid of them. The first month, late at night Norvin sometimes sat on the couch with his B-B pistol aimed toward the opposite wall, a squint-eyed Clint Eastwood preparing an ambush for outlaw rodents. It worked. He killed thirteen mice, then decided after being on the lookout for an hour one night, none were left.

I hated mice, was even frightened by them. But now I felt a small degree of satisfaction that Norvin was wrong. I thought about getting the pistol out of his underwear drawer, but decided against it. *Let the little boy play guns and outlaws*, I thought.

I was tired and it was 12:30, so I put on my gown and went to bed. The wind whistling through the cracks around the window made it hard to sleep. The last thing I remembered was listening for Norvin's truck, thinking I heard it over the wind and rain. I woke up at 3:30; Norvin was snoring in his clothes beside me. He was drunk.

CHAPTER SIX

"Norvin," I said. "Wake up. Talk to me. Where you been all night?" I shook his shoulder, watched a dribble of spit form a skinny trail from the corner of his mouth down to his ear. I shook him again, hard, making his head swing from side to side. He moaned, then let out a deep snore, his mouth sagging open. His hand flopped down and hit the floor.

I propped my pillow against the bookcase headboard, leaned my aching back against it. The baby kicked in my stomach. My long cotton gown had worked its way up to my hips, and I squirmed, trying to pull it down around my legs, jarring the bed with my heavy body. Norvin let out a long sigh and turned over flat on his back. His blue work shirt, Hamburger's Appliances embroidered above the right pocket, Norvin above the left, was stained and wrinkled. He smelled of stale beer and sweat, and a long twig of straight, greasy hair hung over his eye.

I hated him. He knew I looked forward to going to the Pawnee Drive-In on Friday nights, that I'd have supper ready, be waiting on him. *He could at least have the decency to call*, I thought. Tears stung my eyes. I pulled a kleenex out of the box sitting in the bookcase, blew my nose hard, hoping the noise would wake him. He didn't stir. I started crying in earnest, tears rolling down my face, my nose dripping. I realized I was feeling sorry for myself, and this made me mad. "Wake up, Norvin," I said, shoving him in the side.

He was silent.

Sniffing, I picked up my blue plastic hair brush on top of the headboard, hit him over and over in the face. He jerked up his arm, trying to dodge the blows. "Hey! What? What you doing?" His eyes opened, tried to focus on me, but they were dull, dazed-looking.

"Where you been, Norvin?" I asked. "How could you do this to me?" His eyes drifted shut. I punched him in his side with the brush, but he just sighed, then let out a snore. It was no use. I got out of bed, went into the kitchen, made myself some instant coffee.

I sat at the kitchen table and drank three cups of black coffee in a row. Dr. Conger at the health clinic told me to avoid caffeine, said it wasn't good for pregnant women. I usually did what he said. The coffee didn't help my nerves any, but I needed the warmth of the steaming cup in my hand. Besides, the hot coffee felt nice in my stomach.

I propped my swollen feet on another kitchen chair, looked out the window at the end of the trailer, watching the sun slowly come up around 5:30. The few green leaves still left on the elm and mimosa trees looked fresh and clean after the night's storm. I saw several small limbs on the rain-peppered dirt road.

The storm hadn't refreshed me; I couldn't sort out my cluttered mind. Everything seemed unstable--our money situation, our marriage, our coming baby. I felt tired, fat, and ugly as I sat there in my worn chenille robe stretched over my eight and a half months' stomach. I had a hard time sleeping, my back ached most of the time, and I was miserable in the late September heat.

Thinking of the baby, I went to the Frigidaire and poured myself a glass of milk. Then I made myself some toast and a bowl of oatmeal with cinnamon and raisins. After I washed the dishes, I sat at the table with the

October utility bills, figuring on paper we should have around \$113.54 left after we paid the rent and bought a month's groceries. It wasn't much.

I put the bills back in the napkin holder and gazed at the plastic floral kitchen curtains. They were hanging in the trailer when we moved. I kept them scooted back on the rod as far as I could to see out the window. The curtains dragged the floor, collecting dust. It dawned on me I could cut off the plastic bottoms with the scissors, using the strips I cut off as tiebacks for the curtains. I eased myself down until I sat on the floor with the scissors. Then I screwed two cup hooks into the facings, neatly swagged the curtains with the tiebacks. I stood back, looked proudly at my work, thinking I should send the household hint to the Dear Heloise column.

Around noon, I heard Norvin showering in the bathroom. I sat on the couch in my faded red sleeveless dress, trying to get cool in front of the electric fan, when he walked into the kitchen in a white tee shirt and jeans, poured himself a cup of coffee. I pretended to be engrossed in the "Bugs Bunny and Friends Hour" on TV.

Wile E. Coyote was, as usual, trying to make a meal of the Roadrunner, and was just opening a new box of explosives from the Acme Company. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Norvin staring at me, as if waiting for my reaction to the night before.

I stared at the TV. Wile E. Coyote fastened some makeshift wings and a huge rocket on his back as he stood on the high cliff, staring down at the running speck that was Roadrunner in the valley far below. The coyote struck a match and lit the rocket, sending himself straight up into the air. Then he reversed at full speed downward, the fire in the rocket going out halfway down the sky-high cliff. Desperately, he tried to relight the rocket--then, failing to do so, frantically worked his wings to save himself, landing

with a splatter at the bottom, the rocket blowing up as the Roadrunner watched from behind a rock several feet away, then whizzed past the frazzled, wild-eyed Wile E. Coyote, letting out a "beep, beep."

Norvin laughed. I glared at him, and he suddenly got quiet. "I'm sorry for last night, Lil'," he said, his elbows on the kitchen table.

I didn't answer. Picking up my Dr. Pepper from the coffee table, I sucked on the straw, making a slurping noise. I carried my empty glass into the kitchen, placing it in the sink.

"Me and Wig got to talking--he wanted to show me this new bar over on Twenty-First Street. Called the Eager Beaver." His eyes shifted toward me. I stood against the sink, making him look up at me from the chair. He continued, "I told Wig I had to get home for supper, me and you was going to the movies. But he said we'd just get one beer. 'Course, we had more than one." He scooted back his coffee cup, came over, stood beside me. He bent down, tried to nuzzle on my neck. "Forgive me?"

"Leave me alone," I whispered, pulling away from him. I got the Pledge and a pair of his ragged cotton underwear out of the bottom cabinet, started dusting the maple coffee table. I scrubbed at the white ring where one of the renters before us let a wet glass set too long.

"That won't come off," he said. I kept scrubbing, adding more furniture polish. "We could go out tonight, Lily--I could take you to that new Pizza Hut."

"You *know* we can't afford it," I said, rubbing hard and fast with his underwear. I looked at him like he was crazy, then sprayed on more Pledge. I gave him another long look, designed to make him squirm for spending our grocery money on beer while I sat at home. "We got a

hundred and thirteen dollars and fifty-four cents to last us the whole month . . . that is, we *did* have, unless you spent it," I said, quiet and low.

"I didn't spend much. Wig bought some of my beers." He frowned. "My god, Lily. Lighten up. All I hear is 'bills, bills, bills'. You're gettin' plumb boring to be around."

I knocked the Pledge off the coffee table as I hurried toward the bathroom, slamming the thin metal door as hard as I could, locking it. I put the ring and the lid down on the stool and sat down, straightening out the wrinkled pink shag rug with my foot. I unrolled a length of toilet paper, blew my nose.

"Lil', I'm sorry. I didn't mean it. You *know* I didn't. I don't know what got into me. You pregnant and all." I heard his feet shuffle in the hall. He twisted the knob. "Open the door, Lil'. You okay? I'm *real* sorry. You *know* how much I care about you. I know you're just scared about not having any money with the baby coming. I understand-- Open up, Lil'. I wouldn't want to hurt you for nothin'--"

"Shut up," I said.

"Aw c'mon. You don't mean that. Let's don't fight," Norvin said. "I don't want us to be mad. I'll do better."

I knew he was waiting for me to say something. But I busied myself picking up the wet towel, spreading it on the rod, fixing the shower curtain. Then I brushed my teeth and tweezed my brows.

"Lily--"

I didn't answer, just turned on the water. I heard him walk down the hall and slam the front door. I opened the bathroom door, went into the living room. Hearing his truck motor rev up, I peeked out through the slit between the short tan curtains. Norvin had the hood up, tinkering under it.

Then he got back in and pushed down the gas pedal, sending a roar all over the neighborhood. I wondered if anything was really wrong with his truck. He revved the motor several times, then slammed the truck door, started back toward the trailer.

When I saw him coming, I hurried back into the bedroom and stretched out on the bed, pretending to be asleep. The bed creaked as he sat down on the other side. "I don't know what else to say, Lily. I told you I was sorry. I'll try to be thoughtful from now on. I promise. You forgive me?"

He sounded so sincere. I opened my eyes, looked at him to make sure he really was. His face was serious, like my forgiveness meant everything to him. "Okay," I said. "But I don't know if I can forgive you if this ever happens again. Besides, you think I'm boring. Just because I'm all swollen and fat don't give you no right--"

"I didn't mean it, Lil'. You look good to me, and I like to be with you." Norvin patted me on the arm. "I want to take you to the Pizza Hut, if you'll go." He took out his wallet, spread it open. "See, I got fifteen dollars, right here."

"Well . . . I guess," I said. My stomach was growling, pizza sounded good, and I wouldn't have to cook in the hot kitchen. I raised up, slid on my houseshoes. "Give me time to change clothes. You need to change yours, too. We could dress up."

"I guess I could do that," he said, unbuttoning his shirt. He threw it on the bed. "Want a hug first, just to make sure we made up?"

He slid his arm under my braid and squeezed me. I leaned my head on his shoulder, let it rest there a moment. "We *could* go to bed for a little while. We got time," he said. I pulled away and opened the closet door.

Saturday night, the Pizza Hut was crowded. But Norvin found us a little secluded table in the corner, enclosed with two panels. This was only our second time to eat pizza, just becoming a hot item in Fayetteville in 1970. Norvin liked pepperoni, and I liked supreme, so he ordered a medium size, half pepperoni, half supreme. He wanted to hold hands while we waited for our order. I let him, since he was being especially nice to me, although the night before and what he said were still fresh in my mind. But I felt I should give him another chance, since, after all, Friday night was the only time he hadn't kept his word with me, and he *did* ask forgiveness.

So I drank iced tea with lemon while he held my other hand. My stomach was so big, I couldn't get close to the table. My back hurt, too. But for the first time in a while, I felt attractive, dressed in my navy crepe maternity dress Mama bought me for church, large white button earrings, and pumps.

When Norvin told the joke again about the camel on the desert, I laughed like it was new to me. I'd forgotten the punch line, anyway. It felt good to laugh--even though I knew he was trying to make up for what he did and said. Norvin could be charming if he wanted; after all, he charmed me when we first talked out by the school maintenance building in tenth grade. "Now, you tell me a joke," he said.

"I don't know any."

"Sure you do. C'mon. Just anything." He *did* look handsome, sitting there in a light blue dress shirt that brought out his hazel eyes, and the black slacks that were part of his wedding suit.

"Okay--What's black and white and red all over?"

"Ah, Lil', everyone knows that."

"No, it's different than you think," I said, raising my eyebrows at him.

"A newspaper?"

"No. The *color* red. You got one more guess."

"I give. Tell me."

"An embarrassed zebra." Norvin gave me a disgusted look, and I smiled. Then frowned. It was wet between my legs, and I felt water dripping on my feet. I glanced at my tea, thinking I spilled it. I hadn't. "My water broke," I said.

"What?" He stared puzzled at me.

"My water broke. You know," I said quietly.

"But it's not time. It can't be. It's three more weeks." Norvin's voice grew louder and louder, and he kept running his fingers through his straight chestnut hair until it stood up in tall spikes. "You spilled your tea!" he said.

"No. I got to get to the doctor," I said. I hoped the baby would be all right.

He jumped up. "Here, let me help you."

"I'm okay. I'll go to the bathroom first, and clean up," I said. People stared as Norvin helped me to my feet and held my elbow as we walked to the women's bathroom. "I'll wait by the door," he said.

Inside, I grabbed several paper towels, went into a stall, tried to dry myself off. A woman flushed the stool in the next stall. Suddenly, a sharp pain cut across my lower stomach, causing me to brace myself against the wall with both hands. I leaned my head against the wall until the pain went away. Then I sat down on the stool to catch my breath before I went outside. I knew most first babies took several hours to be born, so I didn't worry much.

The pain came back and I felt an intense need to push down. I knew pushing came in the last part of labor. I stood up, banged on the door. "Help me," I said to the woman, now running water at the sink. She didn't hear me. "Help me," I said again. I heard her pulling paper towels from the holder. "I'm having a baby!" The baby was coming fast, and I knew it. I tried not to push, but I couldn't stop myself. I felt the baby roll over inside my stomach, felt it sliding down into the birth canal, then a sudden sharp pain. "Ma'am, it's coming!" I screamed. "The baby's coming right now! Please, we don't have time--"

When the woman pushed in the door, I squatted with my feet apart, feeling the baby's head slid down to my vagina. "Get some more paper towels!" I yelled. Then I pushed again because I couldn't help it. "No, wait, it's coming!" I said, grabbing her arm. The gray-haired woman kneeled down in the floor, held the full skirt of her green cotton dress under me like a cradle. I said "Here it comes!" and pushed. The baby slid head first into her skirt. It was a girl. She let out a hefty wail. The woman and I looked at the baby, then at each other, and laughed.

As I eased myself down on the floor, Norvin opened the bathroom door to see why I was taking so long. His mouth hung open when he saw me. "It's a girl," I said.

"You okay?" He looked in a daze.

The woman on her knees smiled, still holding the baby wrapped in her skirt, unaware her thighs and panties showed.

"We're fine," I said.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Somebody called an ambulance which rushed the baby and me to Fayetteville Memorial Hospital. The ambulance driver put me on a stretcher, tucked a sheet around me. I shivered when his helper wrapped the baby with the afterbirth in another sheet. They placed the baby on my chest, and I held her on the way to the hospital. She seemed so little, like my first doll.

"She looks healthy," the man beside me said.

"Yeah." I already knew she had all her fingers and toes. But it was hard to tell what she looked like with the film of dried blood and mucus on her skin.

After Dr. Conger cut the cord and the baby was cleaned up, a nurse named Darlene brought her to my hospital bed. Norvin left the room while she showed me how to get the baby to nurse. The baby hardly made a sound, only whimpered and moved her mouth in tiny, stretched O's, trying to find milk.

I thought I loved this baby who had been in my stomach for several months. But I felt detached. It was hard to believe I was really a mother. "What do I do?" I asked the nurse. I felt awkward and embarrassed with her watching me.

"It's okay," she said. "Keep trying and it'll work." She patted me on the shoulder. Finally, the baby found my nipple and settled down to sucking. As she nursed, I relaxed and looked her over. A little tuft of chestnut hair just like Norvin's stood up straight on the crown of her head.

When Norvin came back, he looked at me with a strange frown on his face, then shifted his eyes toward the window and sat down in the metal chair beside the bed.

"You look awful," I said. His face looked greyish-white with blue circles under his eyes to match his wrinkled blue dress shirt. He kept drumming his fingers on the wooden chair arms and looking out the window. "What do you want to name her, Norvin?" I asked.

"We could name her after Mom," he said. "She'd like that."

"She don't really look like a Geneva," I said, although I liked his mom.

"What name you think she looks like then?" Norvin asked, facing me. "We could call her Pruneface. That's what she looks like."

"She does not. How could you say such a thing?" I patted the baby's bottom through the tightly-wound, thin, pink receiving blanket. "We can't just call her the baby--we got to name her something."

"What about all them names you tried out on me before? Weird names like Leora, Shelley Dawn, Jonita, and stuff?" he asked. I thought we had it settled on Jonita Dawn."

"I want something different, special, 'cause she came early and was born in the Pizza Hut," I said.

"Ain't them names weird enough?" He fidgeted in the chair. "I need to go home and feed Clyde. You go ahead and name her what you want to. I guess I can live with it. You *could* use Mom's middle name."

"What is it?" I asked.

"Ann," he said.

"What about Mama's middle name? She might be hurt," I said, knowing I didn't want to name my baby Maude.

"Do what you want. I'll go feed Clyde, be back in about a hour," he said, and left.

I rubbed my baby's soft hair. In the morning sun, it had red glints in it. Her tiny, round face was a bright, scrubbed pink. *She don't look like a prune to me*, I thought. I moved her up and down, trying to get her to open her eyes. The nurse told me earlier if I wanted her to wake up to pat on the bottom of her feet. So I unwrapped her and tried it, but it didn't work.

I re-wrapped her like a Christmas package and thought about her name. I wanted something exotic, a beautiful name everyone would notice, where she'd never lack attention, a name like those in Harlequin novels. "Starfire," I said aloud.

I liked its sound. It fit the shine in her hair, the glow on her face; and she was a little star. I thought Mama would probably like it, even though the others in our families might not. I remembered Norvin's mother. "Starfire Ann," I said. It sounded okay. Not much went with Starfire anyway. I leaned over and whispered "Starfire Ann" in her little shell-shaped ear. She screwed up her face.

Mama and Daddy came in the room just as Nurse Darlene came to take the baby back into the nursery. Mama handed the pot of gold chrysanthemums to Daddy and oh'ed and aw'ed over the baby, saying, "Oh, Ted, her little rosebud mouth and the shape of her head look just like Lilly's when she was a baby." She brushed her fingertip across Starfire's cheek, said to the baby, "Nanna's gonna be the best grandma this little darlin's ever had, yes she is," and groaned when the nurse said it was time for the baby's nap.

Mama hugged me and fixed my pillow, and Daddy patted my arm like he wasn't sure what to do. "Is my little girl all right?" he asked.

"I'm fine, Daddy," I said. He hadn't called me this since before he knew I was pregnant. It felt comforting to know I was still his little girl. "Ya'll grab a chair," I said. "Let me tell you what I named the baby. Starfire. Starfire Ann . . . what do you think? Do you like it?"

Mama paused. "That's a *beautiful* name, honey. Just beautiful. We can call her Star." She hugged me, then turned to Daddy, "Isn't it lovely, Ted?"

He cleared his throat, "It's a pretty name." He nodded his head.

Mama went on, "Oh, I'm so excited, Lil'. I just finished that last pair of pink booties I showed you the other day. You know the ones with the crocheted flower and the two white pom poms on the toe?" She opened the gold clasp on her square black patent purse. "See, I have them here. Somehow I knew it was going to be a girl, even though I crocheted two pairs of boy booties--"

"Fern, she's tired. Let her rest. She can look at booties later." It sounded funny when Daddy said booties. Mama and I looked at each other, smiled. Then Nurse Darlene entered, told us visiting hours were over. Norvin came a few minutes later but didn't get to stay. I was already half asleep anyway.

Three days later, Norvin took me and Starfire home to the trailer. Clyde barked when we drove up, as if he missed me, was glad to see me. Mama had cleaned the trailer, put clean yellow sheets on the bed, turned back the covers, and set vases of fresh flowers from her fall garden on the TV, the kitchen table, and the bedroom dresser. The trailer smelled like Pine Sol. The baby's room was ready. I had made the sky-blue checked curtains with pink balloon patterns on them. Mama made the pieced, Dutch Doll

blue and pink quilt spread across the bassinet. I laid Starfire in it, changed her diaper, and covered her. Norvin was outside feeding Clyde.

I went into the bedroom and stood in front of the full-length mirror on the sliding closet door. My eyes looked huge and dark in my pale face, and the shine was gone from my dark hair. I pulled my braid around in front and loosened it. Then I went into the bathroom, locked the door, turned on the shower, and unzipped the maternity dress I wore home from the hospital.

I hadn't lost as much weight as I hoped. I hated the way my stomach looked, and tried to avoid touching it. The skin was stretched and hung down in a loose fold above my soft, fat thighs. I didn't want Norvin to see me naked. I stood under the shower, let the hot water beat down on my head, cried.

I felt better after I put on some jeans and a large cotton shirt, then towel-dried my hair. I planned to exercise and watch what I ate. Mama told me earlier if a woman nursed, it helped her lose weight, pulled her stomach muscles back in. This reminded me of my huge breasts, so full and tight they ached. I felt like a big milk machine.

For the next three months, I *was* a milk machine, staggering in when the baby cried three times each night around 11:00, 2:00, and 5:00, changing her diaper, sitting in the rocker, and opening my gown. Norvin usually slept through it all. Even though I tried, I couldn't keep the house clean; dishes piled up, dust collected, and the diaper pail overflowed. I was tired, cranky, and didn't want to think about sex.

"You neglectin' me, Lily," Norvin snapped at me. He tried to be patient, but couldn't for very long. It wasn't in him. He washed dishes a few times and kept the baby while I went to the laundry. For a while, he picked

up his wet towels and dirty clothes and sometimes cooked supper. He liked to fry Spam. Then one Sunday night he put his arm around me and whispered "Lil', let's do it."

"I'm too tired, Norvin," I said. "I got to get up in two hours. You understand, don't you?"

He jumped up, and I blinked and covered my eyes when he turned on the light. "Dammit, *no*, I don't understand. I'm *tired* of tryin' to understand. It's been two weeks, Lily, and you act like I'm crap or somethin'. I've had about all I can take. It's not right, the way you been doin' me." He started pulling on his jeans, tucking in his tee shirt. "I gotta get out of here."

"Norvin, wait--" I said. I sat up as the front door slammed. Clyde started howling. The truck motor started, then spluttered, and died. He tried again and again, but his truck wouldn't start.

I got out of bed, took my car keys out of my purse, and hid them in the baby's diaper pail. A few seconds later, Norvin slammed the front door, then I heard him at the stool in the bathroom. He walked into our bedroom.

"Can I use your keys?"

"Forget it," I said, and rolled over, facing the wall.

Norvin jerked my shoulder, pulling me over on my back. "Listen here. When we married, it made your car just as much mine as yours." He jumped up off the bed. "You don't need to think you're so high and mighty."

I heard him rummaging in my purse. "I'm the only man that'll have you. I work hard to make a livin', and you don't appreciate nothing--don't even treat me like a man." He threw my purse on the floor, then opened my underwear drawer, piling my panties, slips, and bras on top of the chest.

"You probly hid 'em behind this drawer." He yanked the drawer out, raked his hand in back of the chest. The drawer fell over on the floor with a bang.

"Go ahead," I said quietly. "Tear everything up. I don't have to worry about *you* finding them." Starfire let out a whimper, then a loud cry from her room. "See what you done, you woke the baby." I said.

He sneered. "Oh baby, smaby. That's all you care about."

"Shut up," I said, and reached for my chenille robe in the chair by the bed. He wandered into the living room.

After I got the baby quiet, I heard him open the silverware drawer and the Frigidaire in the kitchen, then dialing on the phone.

"Wig. This is Norvin. I know it's late, but you think you could pick me up? I need to see you." He was silent for a moment. "Okay. I'll be waitin' out front," he said, then hung up. The door slammed. In a few minutes I heard Wig's truck pull up next to the trailer, then leave.

I put Starfire back in her bed, then sat on the couch picking off the petals of the bronze chrysanthemum plant on the end table. The petals fell on the floor. I picked off three flower heads before I realized what I was doing and stopped. I twisted my wedding band around and around my finger, wished I had gone to the state college like Mama and Daddy planned, never married Norvin. *But you made your bed--now lie in it*, I told myself.

A big tear dripped into my lap. I blew my nose on one of the linen doilies that covered the chair arms. Then I stretched out on the couch, pulled my knees up to my chest just enough so I could tuck the tail of my gown under my toes. My chest ached from what was bottled up inside, and I squeezed my eyes tight, trying to get it all out. A few tears slid down the

sides of my face, and I wiped them away with the doily balled up in my hand. But I couldn't get rid of the pressure that squeezed my windpipe.

I needed to talk with someone, hear another person's voice. I couldn't call Mama and tell her the mess I was in. I would start bawling, and she would be mad at Norvin, get Daddy out of bed at 2:00 a.m. to bring me back home.

I opened the phone book and took the receiver off the hook. I slid my finger down the list until I found a name I liked. I dialed the number--472-7698.

"Hello," a low-pitched, sleepy voice answered.

I pinched my nose. "This is the Arkansas Hills Electric Company. Am I speaking with O. Schwazier?" I asked, drawing out the last two syllables of the name. I liked the way it rolled off my tongue.

"Yes. This is Oliver Schwazier . . . is something wrong?"

"Is your refrigerator running?" I asked.

There was a pause. "Last I checked," he said.

"You better go catch it," I said in a rush, then slammed down the receiver.

How stupid can you get? I kept asking myself the next day as I washed the breakfast dishes, bathed Starfire, and cleaned house. Telephone pranks were what kids did, kids like Carmilla and Mary Grace. A nineteen-year-old woman, married with a baby, didn't do those silly things. But I had to admit that for a moment the night before I forgot about Norvin. I laughed when I remembered, and felt free and good.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Norvin and I sat at the breakfast table not saying a word as we ate the buttermilk pancakes and coffee I made. After he opened a can of Bolo dog food and fed Clyde, he tried to start his truck again, but it still wouldn't start. Norvin came inside to get his work cap. While he was running water in a glass at the kitchen sink, it dawned on me he was stalling, so I said, "Drive my car."

"All right," he said, then took a long drink of water, his Adam's apple working up and down.

I suddenly remembered my car keys in the diaper pail. "Wait. I'll go get the keys," I said, throwing the striped dish towel on the chair back. I tiptoed into the baby's room, and fished the keys out of the diaper pail. Then I scrubbed them in the bathroom sink with soap and hot water, but they still smelled a little like urine.

I handed Norvin the keys. He held them up to his nose, then looked at me as it dawned on him where I hid them. Neither of us spoke. Then he opened the door, said, "See you this evenin'," his way of telling me not to worry, he'd be home for supper.

The next few nights, Norvin *did* come home for supper. He and Wig fixed the truck on Thursday night in the yard. I planned a romantic dinner for Friday night, bought two bottles of blush wine at DuLaney's Retail Liquor Store. Then I cooked a pot roast and made yeast rolls, Norvin's favorite meal. I served dinner around nine o'clock so Starfire would be

asleep and I could also light the two pink candles I bought. The kitchen looked soft and inviting in the haze. The pot roast in the oven, I showered, put on the long, black silk negligee with the front lace inset Norvin bought me for Christmas. I brushed my hair, left it hanging loose around my shoulders.

While Norvin showered, I opened a bottle of the chilled wine, poured it into glasses, brushed butter on the rolls. He sat down at the table in clean jeans and white tee shirt, his wet hair parted, slicked to one side. He smiled at me as he scooted his chair closer to the table. His fresh-scrubbed face, freckles scattered across his nose, reminded me of a little boy.

You look like Cat Woman in that gown," he said.

"You like it?"

"Yeah. 'Specially the lacey part." He reached over, touched it with his fingertips. I raised my hand to my hair, moved it behind my shoulders to show my dangling silver earring with the rhinestone setting. I knew it sparkled in the candlelight, gave my face a glow.

I passed him the roast, carrots, potatoes, and a roll. He buttered it and I served myself. Then the baby started crying. "It's okay. I'll get her," I said, getting up from the table. She usually slept until around 4 a.m., but I thought she was catching a cold. She had been a little cranky all day.

By the time I finished rocking Starfire, Norvin was through eating. He said "Good meal, 'Lil" and went out to check on Clyde. When I looked out the kitchen window, he was tinkering under the hood of his truck. I washed the dishes, then turned on the TV. Norvin came inside, and we watched Hogan's Heroes and Dick Van Dyke together, but the romantic mood was gone. I finally went to bed, and Norvin stayed up to watch what sounded like Perry Mason.

The next day Starfire's cold was worse. She had fever and trouble breathing. Her throat was sore, too, which made her fussy. Norvin held her some while I cleaned house. He even changed her diaper. I made him go outside to smoke.

"I've had enough of this," he said around eight o'clock that night after he fumbled through the TV channels for the third time. Starfire was asleep on his shoulder. He had walked her back and forth between the living room and the kitchen. "I hate being cooped up on Saturday night." He handed Starfire to me. "Here, take her--I gotta get some air."

He grabbed his jacket off the wooden coat rack because the November air had turned chilly. I eased Starfire in her bed, then watched the tiny red light from his cigarette as he stood beneath a broken limb of the elm tree in our yard. I turned on the radio and the disk jockey was playing love music for couples on Saturday night. I sat down in the rocker and hummed to the tune of "Love Me Tender," remembering how Mama loved Elvis, how she and Daddy danced on my graduation night.

Norvin came inside, said, "I'm going to call Wig, see if he's home." He dialed, then glanced at me. "Me and him might go down to the Eager Beaver. Play a little pool for an hour or so." He looked away. "Yeah, Wig. Glad you're home--" When Norvin hung up the telephone, I didn't say anything. "You don't care, do you?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "Do what you want," I said, then mumbled, "What difference does it make?"

He didn't hear me because he was splashing water on his face in the bathroom. When Wig honked his horn outside, Norvin came out dressed in his new gold plaid shirt, smelling like Aqua Velva. "Be home in a bit," he said. He grabbed his coat, then slammed the door.

I stopped rocking, waited for Starfire to cry. But she didn't. So I turned the radio up a notch, rocked, and sang "There Goes My Everything" along with Englebert Humperdink. I'd forgotten how much I liked to sing.

After a while, I took a shower and put on my nightgown. Then Starfire woke up right before midnight. I changed her, then nursed her, and she went back to sleep. Her fever was gone.

In the kitchen I set the rest of the wine from the night before on the table and took my prettiest glass out of the dish drain. I poured the wine and held it up to the light, turning my glass around, liking the color. I took a sip, holding it in my mouth, then swallowed.

I was surprised when "I'll Have A Blue Christmas Without You" came on the radio. I started thinking about the Thanksgiving dinner we were having with Mama and Daddy the next week, then about Starfire's first Christmas, what we would get her. I took my writing tablet out of the cabinet drawer, started a Christmas list, finished the bottle of wine. Sleepy, I covered up Starfire, stood watching her sleep on her stomach, her hand made into a little fist. I kissed her, then went to bed.

I heard Norvin come in the front door around 6:30 the next morning. I pretended to be asleep when he dropped his clothes on the floor by the bed. He said a soft "Damn" when his belt buckle scraped the iron bed rail. By the way he eased into bed, I knew he hoped I wouldn't wake up.

We didn't talk about the night before at breakfast that morning. I tried to keep my mind on helping Mama shop for Thanksgiving dinner and planning the jello salads and pumpkin bread I was going to make. Norvin said bye and left for work, and I cleaned up the breakfast dishes.

The day after Thanksgiving dinner with Mama and Daddy, Mama called. "Lil', I know things aren't right between you and Norvin," she said. "I told Ted last night I could tell by the way you and him didn't look at each other or talk."

"It's okay, Mama."

"No, it's not, and don't you lie to me, honey."

"Mama, we did have a fuss right before we came over. You know. Every married couple gets into it sometimes." I hadn't told Mama about Norvin's drinking and staying out all night.

"I have a feeling it's more than a little fuss," Mama said. I didn't say anything. "You know you can always talk to me, honey. You *do* know that, don't you?"

"Yes, Mama Do you want to go Christmas shopping next week?" I had to wait until Norvin got his paycheck. "I saw where Sears is having a big sale."

"You're changing the subject. Oh well, you know I'm here when you get ready. Yeah, shopping would be fun. What's Starfire doing?"

"She's on a blanket in front of the TV, playing with her plastic keys," I said.

"That little sweetheart. She's Grandma's baby. Well, gotta go, my bread's about done."

We went shopping the next week on Friday. I didn't talk to Mama about Norvin and me, and she didn't press me because she was busy holding and playing with Starfire. Once while I was driving, I saw her look at me with a question in her eyes. But then Starfire pulled her hair, and she laughed, trying to untangle it.

By the time we got home, Norvin was there, waiting for his supper. After he ate, he showered, then told me he and Wig were going out.

"I wish me and you would go out sometime."

"Now don't start that. You act like I never take you nowhere."

"You don't."

"We'll talk about this later. I don't got time now."

"Sure!" I yelled. "Go on and leave me here with the baby!" I slung the dish towel on the table.

"Somebody has to stay with her, and you probably wouldn't trust me--you think I can't do nothing right."

"That's not true. You're just turning it around on me," I said, close to crying.

Wig honked his horn. "I gotta go, there he is," Norvin said.

I knew there was no use waiting for him to come home. Our marriage seemed hopeless, and I didn't know where to turn. Norvin was becoming like his dad, drinking every time he got his paycheck, staying out all night, coming in drunk.

On Monday, I called Alcoholics Anonymous. "Does your husband recognize he's an alcoholic?" the counselor asked.

"I don't think so," I said.

"Until he admits it, we can't help him," she said. "If you can persuade him to come to our meeting tomorrow night, he might hear something in our group he could identify with."

"I'll ask him," I said.

"We've also got Alanon for the alcoholics' spouses. It's real helpful."

"I'll think about it," I said.

After we ate the beef stew and cornbread I made for supper, before Norvin left the table I said, "I want to talk with you about your getting drunk, Norvin."

"What about it? Every guy my age gets drunk some once and a while."

"I think you got a problem with it."

"Where'd you get a stupid idea like that, for god's sake? A guy can't have any fun without someone nagging."

"I'm not nagging."

"I thought you were different, Lil'. But you're just like all the others--got to hound me to death."

"I called Alcoholics Anonymous."

"What? I can't believe you did that." He stood up and scooted back his chair so fast it turned over. "How could you do such a thing? That's just how much you think of me!" His eyes glared. The chair rocked on its legs as he sat it up. "You can forget it, and I don't want to hear no more about it." He went into the bathroom, locked the door.

My legs trembled as I got up to clear the table. It was up to him. There was nothing I could do. At the rate he was going, he'd have to find out the hard way because he wasn't going to stop. Not now, anyway. The trouble was, Starfire and I would suffer until he came to his senses.

When Norvin came out of the bathroom, he wouldn't speak to me. For almost a week we hardly said a word to each other. He did ask me, "You feed Clyde?"

I answered, "Yes." That was our conversation. When he came in from work, we ate supper in silence. If the salt was out of his reach, he

stood up and leaned over the table to get it. After supper he laid on the couch and watched TV. Sometimes when he held Starfire, he talked to her and laughed. But he ignored me.

CHAPTER NINE

Several days passed. We ate and slept together, but I felt alone. Starfire was my only company most days. She and I were at the laundromat one day doing our weekly laundry. I separated the white clothes from the dark, loaded them and Starfire's diapers in the washer. After I filled all six washers, added Tide, and punched in the quarters, I found a chair, sat Starfire in her infant seat on the floor in front of me, and opened the May issue of Redbook. I didn't care that it was six months old and the corners of the pages curled up. The magazine reminded me of when I was in high school, at home. Mama always got Redbook because she liked the new recipes and crocheted sweaters. I liked to read the stories under "This Happened to Me" and the agony columns.

I was in the middle of "When Everything's Great . . . But the Sex" when the man using the aqua blue washers across from mine sat down beside me. "Cute baby," he said. He looked about forty and wore a long-sleeved white cotton shirt, open at the throat, and blue wool slacks, worn thin and shiny at the knees. He crossed his long, lean legs like a woman, knee over knee. "Good, too." He smiled at Starfire in her infant seat. "Girl, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"I have a daughter, but she's almost grown now. Twenty-one," he said.

"Oh," I said. I noticed his right hand rested on a brown leather Bible in the seat next to him.

"Live here in Fayetteville?" he asked.

"Two blocks over," I said.

He bent over, let Starfire grab his finger. She tried to pull it to her mouth, and he laughed. When she let go, he raised up, then turned to me, "I pastor a little church over on Elizabeth Street. Right on the corner of Elizabeth and Vine." He picked up his Bible, held it, rolled, in his hand. "We'd be real happy if you'd bring your baby and come visit us. Husband, too, if he wants to come." He picked a piece of white thread off his blue slacks on the inside of his thigh and swung his leg a time or two. He wore brown wing-tipped shoes, and I saw his pale, hairy leg above the top of his gold and brown argyle sock.

"We don't have but a few, but sometimes the spirit moves amongst us, and we get help for our souls. God says 'Where two or three are gathered in my name, I will pour out my spirit in their midst'." His dull, blond hair had touches of gray at the temples and made little swirls flat against his head. He leaned back in the orange plastic chair. "That's true, Praise the Lord. We leave feeling happy, full of fellowship, able to face the world and whatever's out there." He turned, faced me. "Be real glad if you'd come." His raised black eyebrows and his gray eyes, stretched open, asked a question.

What he said sounded good. A place full of love, where everyone was happy. *Maybe church is what me and Norvin need*, I thought. "What do you call your church?" I asked. Somehow, he seemed different from the Baptist people I grew up with.

"Church of the Brethren. Don't mean just for men. Sisters are welcome too--Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't introduce myself." He laid his Bible on top of his blue and brown polyester leisure jacket in the chair, stuck out his hand. "I'm Brother Schwazier. Oliver Schwazier."

My hand suddenly grew limp in his. He was the man I called on the phone that crazy night. "Nice to meet you," I mumbled.

"The pleasure is mine," Brother Schwazier said, and smiled. His front tooth had a chip in it. "And your name is?" He waited.

"Lily Hueston."

"Lily. That's a pretty name. Right out of the Bible, did you know it? The Bible says 'Consider the lilies in the field'--over in Deuteronomy I think. About the sixth chapter, verse fifteen. You can look it up." His eyebrows wrinkled and he frowned, looked up at the ceiling. "Says 'Solomon in all his glory didn't look arrayed like one of these'." He shook his head slowly as if amazed, then turned, grinned at me. "Lilies, I mean." For the first time, he seemed shy, waiting for me to say something. "Fits you," he said when I didn't answer.

"I better check my clothes," I said, picking up Starfire.

"Watch your baby girl for a while? I'd be happy to."

"That's okay. I can manage," I said.

"'Course I know how you mothers are about your babies. My wife Bernice was the same way, God rest her soul," he said, his eyes getting a far away look.

For a moment I felt sorry for him, a widower all alone, in worn, faded clothes, doing his own laundry. I gave him a kind look. "My clothes are done washing," I said. I moved Starfire to the table top, scooted the wire basket on rollers over by the washers, and unloaded my clothes, pushing each load over to the dryers.

Starfire discovered her hand and was holding it up, examining it, which made her dark eyes cross. I smiled. When I glanced up, Brother

Schwazier was staring at me. He turned his head, pretended to be interested in the Tide and Downy vending machine.

I folded and hung my clothes as they dried, then carried my three laundry baskets to the car, one by one. I went back for Starfire. As I started to pick her up, Brother Schwazier touched my elbow and held out his hand. "Remember what I told you," he said while we shook hands. I nodded. He held open the door as I left.

I thought about Brother Schwazier and his Church of the Brethren as I drove back to the trailer. I wasn't sure how I felt about him. That I should go to his church seemed almost fate, since the same man I called by chance that Sunday night when I was lonely and being silly turned up at the laundromat, even made a point of speaking to me. I knew I needed to get help somewhere. I said to Starfire, "Me and your daddy will work this out. We'll talk. We can be a real family. I know we can."

I felt better as I pulled the Catalina up by the end of the trailer. Clyde started barking, wagging his long, stiff tail. He barked like he hadn't seen another human being all day. Leaving Starfire asleep in the car, I ran water in Clyde's bowl and rubbed his head for missing me. Then I unloaded Starfire and the clothes.

Norvin kept getting drunk. I tried everything I could think of to get him to stop. I bought a six-pack of Coors and placed it in the refrigerator, thinking this might keep him home at night.

"What's this doing in here?" he asked when he opened the refrigerator door. "What if your mom comes by? What would she think about you, buying beer?" He pulled open a tab. "I'll drink it since it's here," he said, shaking his head. He turned on the TV, sat down on the couch with the beer.

This worked for two days. I could tell he was getting restless by the way he walked the floor, pulled out kitchen drawers, slammed them. He came in from work on a cold Friday evening, said, "I'm froze. Me and Wig going to run by the Eager Beaver--heat us up a little." He rubbed his hands together as if to warm them. "That wind cut right through us today, delivering a icebox to that woman on Hazel Street. Had to take off the front door to get the icebox in. Seem like it took us a hour." He wiggled his fingers.

"Me and Starfire are going over to Mama's," I said. I didn't want to stay home by myself.

"You sure go over there a lot lately."

"She's been sick. You know that," I said. I worried about Mama. She had the flu two weeks earlier and couldn't get over it.

"There's Wig," he said, grabbing his fleece-lined denim jacket and opening the door. "See you later." The door slammed, shutting out the cold.

Starfire was asleep, so I sat down on the couch a minute to think. It was 6:30, already getting dark. I decided to call Mama to see how she was feeling before I went over. "I'm okay, honey," she said. "Daddy and I are sitting in the living room watching TV. I made some caramel popcorn and we're eating it."

"I can come over, Mama, if you need me," I said.

"Don't you worry about me, hon. I feel better today. You spend some time with your family, and stay warm," she said. She sounded stronger than she had the two weeks before. When she called me every morning, her voice dragged, like she was worn out. Usually in the mornings she was full of energy, telling me about her late fall garden, what she was crocheting, gossiping about the news she heard in Trumbo's Grocery.

"Glad you're feeling better, Mama," I said. The trailer seemed a little chilly, so I turned up the thermostat to 80. The furnace kicked on as I ran water in the teakettle for hot cinnamon tea. When the kettle whistled, I grabbed it before Starfire woke up, poured the hot water over my tea bag.

As I swished the bag up and down in the cup, I thought of Brother Schwazier in the laundry. He seemed an odd man, with his black brows and blond hair. But something drew me to the message he offered. I decided I might take Starfire and go to his church some night, see for myself. "Peace, fellowship, love," I thought aloud. "That's what he said." These words, mixed with the cinnamon tea, made me feel warm inside. I drank the tea, made another cup, turned on the TV. Laverne and Shirley was on. Shirley's pet parakeet had flown out their basement apartment window into the raging snow blizzard. Shirley sat by the open window waiting for her bird to return, slowly turning into a frozen snow woman. Somehow, it didn't seem funny to me. I shivered, grabbed the granny square afghan Mama crocheted out of all colors of yarn, tucked it in around my legs.

After Laverne and Shirley finished, I watched a thriller movie on ABC about a woman locked overnight in a huge, three-storey department store with a murderer. Sometimes, hearing his breathing behind her, she ran up and down stairs, rode the elevators from floor to floor, trying to escape. She struggled in her red heels, finally dropping them on the stairs. He found her squeezed behind a row of dresses hanging just inside the dressing room entrance. She tried to hit him across the face with a lead pipe, but he grabbed her arms, tied them behind her back, strangled her to death while he laughed in her face. I hated movies that ended this way. I wanted her to live, at least get away.

While Walter Kronkite told the news, I checked on Starfire. She seemed to be asleep for the night. I patted her little bottom. I almost wanted her to wake up. The movie had made me jittery, a little scared at the sound of the cold wind blowing the metal on the trailer. *Peace, fellowship, love*, I thought again.

I went to bed, but couldn't sleep. My body felt hot, sticky on the outside, cold, clammy on the inside. The clock on the chest said 11:57. I kicked the sheet and blanket to the end of the bed and got up. In the bathroom I pulled the plaid flannel nightgown over my head, threw it in the floor. I saw my naked body in the long door mirror. My skin looked pale, washed out, and I had brown circles under my eyes. "Your breasts are sagging," I said to the tired-looking woman in the mirror. I watched her eyes get watery.

I sat down naked on the crocheted commode lid cover and cried, blowing my nose now and then on the toilet paper I kept unrolling. The trash can was filling up. "You're silly," I said, and laughed. "Sittin' here, feeling sorry for yourself, bawling like a baby." Leaving my nightgown in the floor, I walked back to my room, crawled back into bed. I pulled the sheet up over my breasts, leaned my head back against my pillow.

"Balance is what I need," I said. "I should be warm on the inside to match the outside." I sat up in bed, took down my hair, rebraided it. "Warmth." I didn't want any more hot tea.

When Norvin walked into the bedroom at 2:38 a.m., I sat naked on the floor by the lamp light. I was propped against the side of the bed, drinking wine straight from the bottle. I lifted the wine bottle. "Peace, fellowship, love," I said.

CHAPTER TEN

Norvin grabbed the wine bottle from my hands, flung it across our bedroom. The bottle hit the square mirror I hung above the built-in chest. The mirror turned into splinters of glass. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"Getting warm," I said. It felt good to be numb.

"My wife--sittin' pie-eyed by the bed. I'm tellin' your mom and dad tomorrow." He unbuttoned his shirt, pulled it off his shoulders, threw it in the corner. "They need to know how you are. Some mother--gettin' drunk, with a baby in the house." I stared at him. "You oughta be ashamed of yourself," he said.

It seemed like I watched him from far away, like I wasn't really a part of the picture. *I'm watching a movie*, I thought. I grinned.

"You can sit there and grin like a idiot if you want to. I'm goin' to bed." He unbuckled his belt, dropped his jeans in the floor. "I'll kick you out, you ever pull a stunt like that again. Ain't no wife of mine gonna be a drunk."

Sometime in the night I must have crawled in the bed, because the next morning when I woke, I was under the covers with a bad headache. Norvin had his back to me, facing the wall. His breathing told me he was asleep.

I sat at the kitchen table drinking coffee, staring out the window at the heavy frost covering the ground and the trees. I had changed and fed Starfire, and she sat in her playpen.

A bright red cardinal came and perched on a low branch of the elm tree. The bird twisted its head, as if looking at me. "You got to show off just like all the other males, don't you?" I said. "Can't be satisfied helping around the nest. No, you got to prance around, flex your wing muscles. Make sure everyone knows who's boss." I put a toothpick in my mouth. "Keep the little woman in her dull-colored feather duster at home, tending eggs or babies." The bird flew. "Couldn't stand the nagging, huh?" I laughed, but it sounded hollow.

I poured another cup of coffee. Drinking wine the night before hadn't solved anything this morning. "Church of the Brethren," I said. "What about Church of the Sisters?"

I daydreamed I started a Church of the Sisters, a spiritual church like Mama said she went to one time when she was twelve. Her friend, Leona Mae, took her. Mama told me how the people clapped their hands and shouted "Amen!"

Two or three times on Sunday mornings I watched Brother Jimmy Swaggart on TV. He had a service like Mama talked about. While he preached and sang, people closed their eyes, clapped their hands. Once, I heard a woman say, "Hallelujah!" I started picturing myself and several other women in a small church where we were each free to rise, give our testimony about the way men treated us.

"I cooked all day for him," I said as I stood behind the pulpit and looked out toward all the sisters. "I planned a romantic evening, got all dolled up in dangly earrings and a fancy black nightgown."

"Amen! Tell us, Sister Lily," the sisters said, nodding their heads.

"What does he do?" I yelled, then hit the pulpit hard with my fist.

"Never takes me anywhere. Lays out drunk all night. Then comes home, expects me to wash and iron his clothes."

"Preach it, Sister!" a little bird-like woman yelled from the second pew. She stood up. Her black silk pillbox hat with a velvet bow sat sideways on dyed carrot-orange curls. "I know just what you mean. I'd like to give my testimony. I'm Sister Becka."

"Come on up here, Sister Becka." I motioned her behind the pulpit, then took my place on the front pew.

"I tell you, I identify with Sister Lily," she said as she walked to the pulpit.

"Amen!" the other sisters and I said.

"I been married seven years with two kids, and my old man drinks like this country's about to have a shortage of hard liquor and he's gotta get all he can."

"C'mon. Preach it, Sister Becka!" a big-bosomed older woman yelled from the back. Her stout arms crossed under huge, pointed breasts.

Above the pulpit, the top of Sister Becka's head barely showed. She tiptoed, leaned her body up against the pulpit, hanging on to the sides with her small hands. "Drinks like a fish. Stayed out last Saturday night, come home Sunday evening right before dark. I even found out he'd been swimming nude with some other naked men and women at the Flamingo Motel over on Fifty-Nine Highway."

We all shook our heads. Someone said, "Lord bless Sister Becka."

"I tell you, I sat down and cried like a baby." Sister Becka walked out in front of us. Her freckles stood out on her white skin. Her cheekbones

were sharp, dark circles around her eyes, her purple shirtwaist dress with the Peter Pan collar drooped on her bony body. "Then he had the nerve to tell me all I did was nag!" she suddenly yelled, then burst into tears.

We all rose and moved toward her, our arms out, ready to hug her. "It'll be all right, Sister Becca." "Don't cry." "Just let it all out, you'll feel better." All the sisters gathered around, hugged as one. "It's okay, Sister Becca," I said, with all the comfort I could muster in my voice.

"What'd you say?" Norvin asked. He stood by the kitchen table looking bleary-eyed and grouchy in jeans and no shirt. He stared at me like I was crazy. Heat rose up in my face. "I said 'We're out of black pepper'."

"You did not."

"What difference does it make?" I said as I scooted back my chair, went to the sink, and washed my hands. I took a long time with the towel, not knowing what to say.

"I didn't forget about last night," he said.

"I didn't either."

"I wasn't the one sittin' naked by the bed, guzzlin' wine outta the bottle."

"So? What's it to you?" I yelled. *Two can play this game*, I thought.

He slapped me, made tears well up in my eyes. I looked at him, shocked, raised my hand to my face. "I'm sorry, Lil'." His voice was soft. "But you had it comin'." He touched me on the shoulder, then turned and went into the bathroom. I heard him twist the faucets, then the hard spray of the shower.

At five o'clock, I took a bath, put on my pleated plaid wool skirt and royal blue sweater. Starfire was awake after I brushed and braided my hair,

so I slid the frilly red dress with the white lace over her head, then white tights and black patent shoes with a strap. By this time it was 6:30. Brother Schwazier said his church started at 7:00 p.m., so I sat Starfire in her playpen, went outside and warmed up the Pontiac. The chill in the air made me shiver, and I hugged my corduroy coat to me, holding it together against the wind. The weatherman said snow was on its way, would arrive by morning. The TV blared with the sounds of a basketball game. Norvin sprawled on the couch, his head propped up high on a rolled-up green sofa pillow. He had his mouth open, his eyes closed.

I put on our coats and got the diaper bag. Then I touched him on the shoulder, said, "Norvin, we're going to church over on Elizabeth Street."

"Huh?"

"Me and Starfire are going to church."

"Church? It's too cold to get the baby out."

"I got her wrapped up," I said. "Besides, you weren't going to stay home anyway, were you?"

"Wig's comin' by," he said. "What church is this?"

"Church of the Brethren," I said.

"Brethren?"

"It don't mean like it sounds," I said, then opened the trailer door.

Starfire and I pulled up in the church yard fifteen minutes late. I thought I knew where Elizabeth Street was, but probably because it was already dark, I missed the sign. I ended up in the Greenbriar Addition on the west side of town. I finally found Vine Street, then made my way to Elizabeth. The church was lit with bright lights when I found it. Old brown-speckled siding covered the outside. Above the door hung a large church

bell. The yard and the church looked neat and bare. No trees stood in the yard, just a tin sign swinging in the breeze that read Church of the Brethren, Pastor: Bro. Oliver Schwazier. I couldn't read the small print underneath. The sign was welded to a cemented rock foundation.

Through the curtainless windows I saw women and men standing, clapping their hands to the beat of their singing. Someone played hard and choppy on the piano. I rolled down the car window an inch to hear the words. A woman with a loud soprano voice boomed over the church members' voices as they sang, "Once like a bird from prison I dwelt--No freedom from life's sorrow I felt--" The singing grew louder as it neared the end of the verse. "Glory to God, He se-et me free!"

So Brother Schwazier told the truth; the church had sisters. I put my keys in my purse, the diaper bag strap on my shoulder, and picked up Starfire. When I opened the door, heads turned and looked. I found a seat on the second pew from the back. The people kept singing "He broke the bonds of prison for me--Glory to God, He set me free." I busied myself taking off our coats and didn't see Brother Schwazier until he stood in front of me, holding out his hand.

"Well, Praise the Lord!" he said, and grinned. "I been praying you'd come, and God just answered my prayer." He tickled Starfire under her chin. "Make yourself at home, Sister Lily, and join right in if you feel like it!" His long-sleeved white shirt was a little wrinkled, but he had shined his wing-tipped shoes. He wore a navy tie with red specks and brown polyester slacks that fit loose in the seat as he walked to the pulpit.

A tall woman in an olive green sweater brought me an open church hymnal, said, "It's here. Page two thirty-four. 'He Set Me Free'." She shook my hand. "I'm Sister Patricia."

"Lily Hueston," I said. She moved back to her seat as the singing stopped and it grew quiet.

Brother Schwazier looked out at the small congregation, two or three on each pew. "Well, Praise the Lord! God has seen fit to bring our little flock together one more time. We have a new sister here tonight with her baby. Amen! Sister Lily Hueston from here in Fayetteville. Met her over at the washateria the other day." He looked at me and smiled, nodding his head. Then he clasped his hands together, said, "Brothers and Sisters, let's do our best to make Sister Lily feel welcome, like this is home."

Some turned to me and smiled, and I heard two or three say, "Amen."

"Before we have the testimonial service," Brother Schwazier said, "I'd like for us to sing one more song, dedicate this song to Sister Lily." He nodded his head at me. "Let's all turn to page three thirty-eight. I feel like singing 'The Life-boat'. Go ahead, Sister Melvina." He grinned at the piano player, motioned with his fingers for her to begin. Sister Melvina played a fast, choppy line of the song. Her wide foot in a tan vinyl shoe with a two-inch block heel pumped up and down on the pedal at every note, making her large bottom, in its maroon jersey dress, paisley print, jiggle on the bench. She had coarse black hair with speckles of gray, parted in the middle, pulled back in a twist, low on the back of her neck. Her face was broad with an oily complexion, and I saw a large black mole by the corner of her full lips. She threw back her head and started the song with her loud soprano voice.

Holding Starfire in my lap, I found the page, then opened my mouth and sang with Sister Melvina and the others, "We're floating down the stream of time, we have not long to wait--"

Starfire looked up at me as if to say, "What's going on?"

I smiled down at her, sang "--the life boat soon is com--ing, to gather the je-wels home--" I felt good.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Mama died of lung cancer on Christmas Day. I couldn't get over the shock, even though the New Year of 1971 had begun.

"Mama, you got to see Dr. Conger," I told her one day when I visited her a week before Christmas. She still coughed, looked pale, and seemed weak--not like her usual zippy self.

"It's just from the flu," she said. "Lots of people have it and it takes a while to get over. Don't you worry so much, hon."

"But Mama, you could go to Dr. Conger and he'd give you a penicillin shot. It would help."

"You just take care of that little sweetheart and I'll be okay. Flu's rough on anyone," she said, then coughed a dry, hacking cough. "You have to ride it out, that's all there is to it."

I took her some chicken and dumplings one day. Then I went another day and did her laundry. Business was good at the store, so Daddy worked hard, sometimes overtime. People always bought appliances around Christmas. He hired two new stock and delivery boys and was training them. So he couldn't spend much time with Mama, except at night. But he worried about her.

Mama's flu turned into pneumonia, and she had to be put in the hospital on oxygen four days before Christmas. Dr. Conger ran tests and took x-rays, and found a large spot on her lungs. Daddy cried when Dr.

Conger told him she had cancer in the advanced stages. In the intensive care waiting room, I sat next to Daddy, and we held hands.

We sat silent for a while from the shock, then Daddy said, "I never in a million years thought we'd be without your mother--Fern's always been full of energy, always into things . . . "

"I know, Daddy . . . She's the one that keeps everything going, the one that gets me and you to dance--remember when we all danced in the living room after my graduation?" I put my arm around him, leaned my head on his shoulder.

"Yeah, she always liked "Love Me Tender." He put his head in his hands and cried dry, heaving sobs.

"Oh, Daddy--" I squeezed his shoulders to me, and we cried quietly together on the vinyl couch.

Dr. Conger came in, told us we could see her for ten minutes, one at a time. "Go ahead," Daddy motioned to me.

I stood by Mama's bed. It was hard to believe she had gotten so weak this suddenly. Our eyes met, and I tried to hold back my tears. "Mama--" I said. She reached up her arms to me, and we hugged.

"It's okay, honey," she whispered in my ear, smoothing down my hair with her hand. "It's okay, baby . . . don't cry."

"But Mama, try to get well, all right? If we both believe--" I rushed on with my words, not wanting to think about her dying.

--No, honey, it's my time. I can feel it," she whispered. I raised up, looked into her face. She smiled at me, and her eyes and face had the same glow that I noticed the night we danced.

"Oh, Mama," I sobbed, and put my arms around her again.

She rubbed my hair back, said "Listen, honey . . . wherever I go I'm going to have fun You know that . . . don't you?"

". . . Yes." Her voice was weak, but I believed her.

"Cooking . . . crocheting . . . making tea cozys . . . door knob covers" I knew she was trying to make me smile, help me to get through this. I stood by her bed a few more moments, then the nurse told me my ten minutes were up.

"Daddy's coming in to see you, Mama," I told her, patting her shoulder. "Then I'll come back."

"Take care of Daddy, honey, and Starfire" she whispered.

"I will, Mama, but don't say that," I said, squeezing her hand. "You'll get better. I know you will."

She smiled, squeezed my hand. Daddy came in the room, so I walked out trying to hide my tears, leaving them alone. When he walked into the waiting room ten minutes later, I saw in his face she was gone.

I called Brother Schwazier the night before the funeral. "Mama died," I said, then started crying. I couldn't talk anymore.

"Lily, listen to me. Your mama's in a better place." His voice grew excited. "Think of it! She's where the roses never fade! Amen. God's prepared a place like that for the faithful."

"Mama did love flowers."

"She's singing right now with the angels," Brother Schwazier said. I thought of how Mama always sang a little off key, usually when she cooked. Thinking of how her voice would stand out in heaven, I felt better.

"I want to come, Lily, to the funeral, that is. Where will the funeral be?"

"The Calvary Baptist Church at two o'clock tomorrow," I said.

"Thank you, Brother Schwazier."

At the funeral as I sat between Norvin and Daddy, I realized how many friends Mama had. She was such a loving person. I thought of how she would walk up to strangers in Trumbo's Grocery or anywhere, introduce herself, or break into conversation about how she grew rhubarb or something.

Brother Schwazier was there in a dark suit and tie that hung loose on his slim frame when he walked down the aisle. I couldn't help glancing at him now and then as he sat quietly on the second pew across the room. Somehow, it was comforting for him to be there.

As I stood by Mama's grave while the people were leaving, Brother Schwazier came up to me, rested his hand on my arm. "Sister Lily, the book of Proverbs, Chapter Thirty-one, says 'For what is a virtuous woman? Her price is far above rubies'. Praise God, from what I've heard today, your mother was a virtuous woman."

"Yes," I said, looking down at the dead grass.

"Remember, you can find help for your soul in God's house. Like to invite you back to our little church, if you'll come. The Bible says 'I went into the house of the Lord and sung a new song.' Praise God, no matter what you been through, He can give you a new song."

"Thank you, I will."

Later, back at the trailer, I questioned God, trying to figure out why he took her. But I couldn't find an answer. I ignored Norvin, and it was all I could do to take care of Starfire. I wasn't interested in cleaning the trailer, and it grew messy, with clothes piled on the couch and dishes in the sink.

Norvin was patient with me for about a week. Then he started grumbling, "Why can't you clean up this place? What do you do all day, anyway? Sit and mope? There's still some of us livin' who've got to make it, or ain't you noticed?" He moved a dirty coffee cup from the table to the sink. "I ain't had some clean socks in two days."

"I'll wash them," I mumbled, hating him.

"Where's breakfast?" he asked.

"There's Cheerios," I said, wondering for the first time if whoever named the cereal Cheerios meant for breakfast to be cheery.

"Cheerios," he sneered. "We used to have bacon and eggs. And you made them big buttermilk biscuits." He looked thoughtful. "You were good at it, too." The idea of food turned my stomach. Every since Mama died, I couldn't eat and didn't want to cook.

Starfire and I went to Daddy's house every day while he was at work. He worked extra hard, and always stayed late at his store. I tried to clean the house, do the laundry, and wash the few dishes Daddy used. He cooked his own food. When I got home it was too much of an effort to cook or clean my own house.

I stayed tired, had lost my energy. It was hard, carrying Starfire around on my hip. But for the first time, it was easy to lose weight. It showed on my tall frame. My shirtwaist dresses grew too big, and I cinched them in with a belt.

Norvin's mother Geneva had kept Starfire during the funeral. Now she started keeping Starfire every Saturday and Saturday night. Starfire liked her and Norvin's sister Beth. Norvin's dad didn't seem to drink like he had before, and was even getting to know his granddaughter. This gave me some time to rest or do what I wanted.

One Saturday three weeks after Mama died, I felt a need to get out of the trailer. I decided to visit Brother Schwazier's church again that night. I put on a white blouse with tucks in the front and no collar and a pleated powder blue wool skirt. I brushed and rebraided my hair while the car was warming up. The night was cold, but the sky was clear and the stars shone. The wind was still.

It felt good to get out, like for a little while I could get away from my problems. I turned on KFSA and sang "Cherish is the word that I use to describe, all the feelings--" I stared at the dresses hanging in Hunt's Department Store as I drove by. "You don't know how many times I wish that I had told you--" I slowed the Pontiac, searched again for Elizabeth Street and Vine.

I went inside with Sister Melvina, since we arrived at the same time. "Sister Lily!" she said when she saw me. "I'm so glad you're back. I'm Sister Melvina, in case you don't already know."

"I remember," I said, thinking she would be hard to forget.

She patted my arm. "We haven't really been introduced. It's Sister Melvina with a long 'i', honey--like the Vine Street our little church is on." She smiled. "You know, Brother Schwazier's been requesting prayer for you almost every church night." She squeezed my shoulders and put her lips near my ear. Her coarse hair was coming out of the bun low on her neck, and it scratched against my face. "Honey, I'm *really* sorry about your mother. I lost my mother last April--such an awful thing. But I came here, played the piana, and sung. That's what helped me. Sung my heart out and pounded the keys of that old piana."

I smiled, remembering what Brother Schwazier told me about singing a new song. She squeezed my shoulders again. "You get right in church, honey, and God will help you."

"Thank you," I said. She patted my arm again, said, "Guess I better get up to the piana. Song service is about to start." She walked up the aisle, heavy on her feet. Brother Schwazier came toward the back and shook my hand, said, "Glad you're here, Sister Lily. Lord bless you." Sister Patricia, still wearing her olive green sweater, brought me a hymnal again.

Someone selected page 216. Sister Melvina played a hard line, opened her mouth, started "I'll Meet You By the River." Everyone joined in. Trying to keep up with the fast words was fun. I let myself go, singing as loud as I could. My lungs felt good and clear, and I felt free, like a weight was lifted.

We sang two more songs, then Brother Schwazier asked for prayer requests. Sister Patricia said, "I have an unspoken request," and people nodded. Another woman said, "Pray for my son." I raised my hand, since it seemed the right thing to do, even though nobody else did. Brother Schwazier said, "Sister Lily?"

"Please pray for my daddy," I said. They nodded, and Brother Schwazier said, "Let's all come to the altar and pray." People started rising from their seats and kneeling at the altar. Their voices all blended together in prayer. As they prayed, their voices grew louder. I heard a few say, "God, please help Sister Lily's daddy." "Help him to bear his sorrow." "Help Sister Lily to find strength and grace in her hour of need."

I didn't know what to do. At the Calvary Baptist Church, we all just bowed our heads while the pastor prayed. I leaned over, put my head in my hands until they finished.

After the testimonial service, Brother Schwazier rose to preach. He had the same brown leather Bible he carried in the laundromat that day. Sister Melvina said, "Lord, bless Brother Schwazier while he preaches." An older, bald-headed man sitting on the stage said a loud, "Amen!" I thought he might be a deacon.

Brother Schwazier opened his Bible. "I'm going to take as my text tonight Chapter Sixty-three of the Psalms of David, when he was in the wilderness of Judah. A--men." His voice spread over the room. He paused, and it grew quiet as he looked over the audience. "You know, when I prayed today for God to give me a message, I thought about how so many times we feel helpless, like we're wandering in the wilderness. Somebody say Amen."

"Yes! Amen! Preach it, Brother O!" a man on the second row yelled. I remembered Brother Schwazier's name was Oliver.

"We search and pray for an answer to our problems, we cry and we plead, but we can't seem to get anywhere." He grabbed the podium, leaned over it, raising his voice. "We feel *lost* in the wilderness, wandering to and fro. But I'm here to tell you, like the Good Book says, 'joy cometh in the morning'. A--men! Glory!"

"Help him, God!" Sister Melvina yelled. I jumped.

"What do we do when we feel lost in the wilderness? We lift up our eyes to the hills, like little David said in the Twenty-third Psalms, from whence cometh our help. A--men."

"Amen!" several in the crowd answered.

"Bless Brother O, God," said the young blond-haired woman with two kids in front of me. Her voice was soft, tired, and her little girl, about two years old, kept crawling all over her, whining, saying, "Mama, I wanta go home."

Brother Schwazier's body relaxed behind the podium, and his voice dropped low, like he was making everyday conversation. He ran his fingers back through his short hair. "Sometimes we wander around for days, saying 'woe is me', gettin' down in the valley. When all we really need to do is lift up our head, and redemption will draw nigh to us. God said it in His Word."

"Yes!" "Amen!" "Bless him, Lord!"

Brother Schwazier turned back to his Bible. "Read along with me, what David said." He raised his voice, leaned back his head, squeezed his eyes shut, said, "'O God, thou art my God!'" His eyes opened and he stared at the audience. Then he looked back to the Bible. "'*Ear-ly* will I seek thee! My soul *thirs-teth* for thee--'" He closed his eyes again, shook his head. "'--in a dry-- and thirs--ty land, where no water is'." He looked at us. "Praise God. We all been there!"

"Amen! Preach it, Brother!" said the bald man.

"But David says 'I have *seen* Thy power and Thy glory in the sanctuary!' He says 'I *know* this can be done!'"

"Yes! All right!"

"What we need is some trustin' and believin' around here. A-men! Some lookin' up to the hills! The Bible says 'Stand still and *see* the salvation of the Lord at work'." Brother Schwazier paused and made his voice soft. "Saints, if we look for it, we'll find it. God has His table spread in abundance for us. Anything we need, all we have to do is stand still and see it, as the Good Book says." He stood silent for a moment. "I feel His presence here tonight," he said, his voice still low. He looked toward the piano, said "Sister Melvina, get a song." She rose from the front pew with her hymnal.

"Does anyone here tonight feel like givin' your heart to God?" Brother Schwazier asked. "Just turnin' it all over to Him, because He cares. --Let's all stand as we sing the altar song."

Sister Melvina's voice rang out, "Oh, why not tonight?" The soft voices of people in the front joined in--"Oh, why not tonight? --Wilt thou be saved? --Oh, why--not--tonight?"

They seemed to be looking at me, expecting something. I wanted to go to that altar, bend down, and lay my head there, leave my burdens there. So I walked down the aisle, kneeled, put my head in my arms, and cried in great heaving sobs.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I started going to the Church of the Brethren every Saturday night. After the night I cried at the altar, the next week I felt much better. When I walked into the trailer that night after church, I saw how much it needed cleaning. This reminded me of Brother Schwazier's message about opening your eyes, seeing what was in front of you. That night, I swept and mopped the kitchen linoleum, washed the dirty dishes piled in the sink and on the table. It was as if God washed me clean inside and I didn't want to be around anything dirty.

While I mopped and picked up clothes in the living room, I found myself singing, switching back and forth from soprano to alto on the chorus of "I'll Meet You By the River." I smiled when I remembered how Sister Melvina bellowed out "What a happy meeting that will be!" She shook her head back and forth, her mouth open wide as her fingers came down hard on the piano, the ends of her stiff hair coming out of her bun.

When I finally went to bed around 12:30, the trailer looked much better. I needed to go to the laundry and wash Starfire's diapers. As I stretched out in the bed, I planned to clean out the kitchen cabinets the next Monday and move the clothes that were too big for me to the back of my closet. I felt happy as I fell asleep, even if Norvin wasn't there. I was almost glad he wasn't home. I didn't think he would understand what happened to me at church.

After two months of going to Brother Schwazier's church on Saturday nights, I grew to be good friends with some of the women. The young woman with the fine blond hair, Sister Darla, brought me a sack of baby clothes her two-year-old daughter outgrew. They fit Starfire. I asked Sister Darla over for lunch one day. Her little boy was in kindergarten, but she brought Stephanie. She and Starfire played together in the playpen while we sat at the kitchen table and talked.

"J B drives a backhoe for Harris Dozer Works," Sister Darla said. "He makes good money when the weather holds up."

"Your complexion is so nice," I said. "Like peaches and cream." I missed talking to Mama, liked having a woman friend to talk with. Sister Darla, even with tired blue eyes, looked like a fresh-scrubbed teenager, no makeup, her hair pulled back into a barrette.

She blushed. "I guess it's because I'm happy. J B's a good husband, helps me with the kids, brings me flowers sometimes." She took a drink of her iced tea. "I just can't get him to go to church with me. But he doesn't care if I go. 'Whatever makes you happy', he says."

"Brother Schwazier's a good preacher," I said. "He seems like he wants to help everyone."

"Yeah. Even though I love J B, I started feeling like I needed to go to church somewhere. Something was missing--my spiritual side, I guess. I met Brother Oliver in Sears automotive department over by the motor oil." We both grinned. She took out her barrette, smoothed back wisps of hair, put the barrette back in. "He helped me find the ten-w-thirty weight, and invited me to his church. I liked it, and kept going. Sister Melvina and the other saints are so friendly."

"Yes. Sister Patricia's been nice to me, too. Knitted a pink sweater with yellow roses for Starfire." I drew roses with my finger on the tablecloth. Then we talked about the church bake sale the next Wednesday to raise money for a new Sunday school room.

Starfire and I went to Sunday school at the Church of the Brethren on my nineteenth birthday, April 23. After everyone sang "God Put a Rainbow in the Cloud," Brother Schwazier said, "Since today's Sister Lily's birthday, I'd like for us to sing page one fifty-two, 'The Lily of the Valley'."

The saints looked at me and smiled. Embarrassed, I smiled back. I didn't know Brother Schwazier knew my birthday. I felt a warm glow inside as we sang "--the fairest of ten thousand to my soul . . ."

After church service, Sister Patricia surprised me with a birthday cake she baked. Sister Melvina brought punch and passed around plastic plates and forks. Everyone sang "Happy Birthday." The women hugged me, the men shook my hand. I felt tears in my eyes.

I was watching Sister Darla holding Starfire when Brother Schwazier walked up. "Hope you're having a happy birthday."

"It's wonderful, such a nice surprise," I said. "Thank you for all you've done, Brother Schwazier."

"You're welcome. Just something we like to do for the saints here at Church of the Brethren." He smiled and his eyes crinkled at the corners. "You know, Sister Lily, there is something I been meaning to ask you."

"I'd be glad to do anything I can, Brother Schwazier."

"This don't really involve the church, except in a roundabout way. It would give me more time to read God's word, prepare my messages." He paused and frown lines gathered between his eyes. "The thing is, I'm

needing someone to clean my house once a week. I thought of you. Didn't know if you needed a job or not, with that little sweet girl of yours." He glanced at Starfire, smiled, then raised his brows, looking at me.

"Well--I never thought about working lately, but I could sure use a little extra money." I stood there for a minute. "My mother-in-law keeps Starfire on Saturdays. That's the only day I'd be free."

"Saturday would be fine. One day's good as another. How does five dollars an hour sound? If that's not enough just tell me."

"That sounds fine, Brother Schwazier," I said, twisting my ring around my finger. "Only I might ought to think about it a little. Could I call you tomorrow?"

"Sure," he said, and grinned. "Think about it and let me know." He patted my shoulder, then walked over to Sister Melvina.

On the way home, I thought about all the things I could buy for the trailer, for Starfire, for me. I liked the idea of having my own salary, even if it was small. I decided I would take the job.

Brother Schwazier lived in a small house by Morgan's Bakery on Fuller Street. New grass was growing in his yard, and one tall, straight maple tree, which somehow reminded me of him, stood in the front. I liked his big porch, bare except for the swing and ladder-backed rocker. The house was painted white with cherry red trim. *His house is so clean outside, I thought, it's probably the same inside.*

I parked the Pontiac in the driveway behind his olive green Ford Fairlane. I hoped I was dressed right. I wore a long denim skirt and a red and yellow plaid cotton blouse tied in a knot at the waist. I thought the skirt would be cooler than jeans to clean house.

Brother Schwazier came to the door when I rang the bell. "Sister Lily--come right in. I been expecting you."

"Hello, Brother Schwazier. I didn't know if I needed to bring cleaning supplies or not." My eyes traveled around the living room. The gold tweed furniture was old but well kept. I liked the red brick fireplace with the oval hooked rag rug in front. I turned to Brother Schwazier, "Your house looks clean to me."

He grinned. "There's some things you can't see. Closets and stuff." He put his hands in his jeans pockets. "I'm not good at that." He combed his fingers back through his fine hair. "C'mon, I'll show you around. Here's the kitchen. As you see, I been working on the toaster there on the table. Suddenly decided not to pop up. Gettin' old like me, I guess."

"You seem young to me," I said. I looked around. The cabinets, stove, refrigerator were bare; no flour and sugar canisters on the cabinets, no spoon holder on the stove, no notes stuck on the refrigerator. I didn't even see a potholder. I raised my eyes to his.

"I know," he said. "Like I said, you can't see. Let me show you." He opened a cabinet door. Inside, spices, macaroni and cheese boxes, cereal boxes, oatmeal and popcorn boxes, baking soda boxes, flour, sugar, and cornmeal sacks were crammed every which way. He grinned. "They're jammed in there so they won't fall."

"You're right," I said. "You need help." We both laughed. Mine trailed off because I suddenly felt shy about laughing with the preacher. He must have known, because he said, grabbing my arm, "Let's look at the rest of the house. There's only two bedrooms--one for my daughter when she comes home to visit. About twice a year. She lives in Tucumcari, New Mexico."

We walked down the hall. "Here's the bathroom. You don't have to worry about cleaning it. I'll do it." The white tub and sink shone, smelled of Pine Sol. A shaving mug with a picture of a moustached man and FATHER written on it set near the sink. "Quindella got me that," he said, and grinned, remembering. "My daughter. Here, I'll show you her bedroom."

He opened the door to a lilac gingham checked room. The white wooden bed was covered with a lilac gingham ruffled comforter and a ruffled canopy top. Ruffled gingham curtains hung from the two windows. I walked around, thinking how this room would be pretty for Starfire.

"I know," he said, smiling. "It's still a little girl's room. But that's all right." He picked up the picture on the nightstand. "Here's her mother, my wife Beatrice. Died of tuberculosis on May 23, 1960." Light brown hair framed her heart-shaped face with soft curls. Her dress had a rolled collar, and she wore a brooch at her neck.

"She looks graceful," I said.

"She was. Walked into the room like she was walking on air. The sweetest woman. I was almost afraid to touch her, afraid she'd break. She just faded away."

"I'm sorry."

"Hey, I'm doing all right now. Still think of her sometimes, but it don't hurt--just happy memories. God seen fit to let me have her for a season. You know--'a time to weep, a time to be born, a time to die, a time to mourn, a time to plant'--beautiful scripture over in Ecclesiastes, Chapter Three."

He opened another door. "This is my bedroom, here on the left. Not much to be done in here. Might have you change the sheets once a week. I like clean sheets." He grinned. "You're feeling a little shy, aren't you, Lily?"

"Yes."

"I understand. The idea of being in your pastor's bedroom." He touched my shoulder. "Don't worry. You'll get over it."

I laughed, embarrassed. "Okay," I said, "I'm sure you're right."

A red cotton quilted spread covered his queen-sized bed. A wooden blind was pulled down over the one window, and an antique dresser with a huge round mirror and a padded bench sat in the corner. On the dresser was a white linen scarf, plain, hemmed around the square edges. In the middle of the scarf was a small brown ceramic lamp with a tan shade. A round white alarm clock was beside it. Another hooked rag rug, large and round, was spread over the hardwood floor by his bed. "This is a nice, big room," I said.

"Yes, I like it," he said. "Here, I'll show you the linen closet in the hall." He led me out, opening a small door. Blankets, towels, sheets, pillowcases were neat on the shelves. "As you can see, most all the sheets are white," he said. "Those flowered ones are for Quendilla." He pointed them out, then turned towards me. "I got this thing about white sheets--pure as the snow, I guess. I always sleep on white sheets. Do you think that's weird?"

"No--we all like some things better than other things," I said, searching for words. "Like me, it bothers me to have empty ice trays in the refrigerator."

He laughed, touched the back of his hand to my cheek. "Oh, Lily, you're sweet."

"Where do you want me to start?" I asked.

"I haven't showed you the closet in my room yet. Didn't want to scare you off the first day." He grinned, raised his eyebrows at me. "Tell you what, we'll just use today as an explainin' day. I'll take you round back,

show you the back yard--there's really nothing to do behind the house. But I'll show you the patio where you can come and rest when you get tired, have some lemonade or something."

"But I came to work."

"Don't worry, you will. I'll let you start cleaning out the cabinets next Saturday. How's that?"

"Okay."

He had a big fenced back yard, and I pictured two flower beds, zinnias, marigolds, petunias, planted on each side. "A time to plant," he had said earlier.

I left after he showed me around the house outside. "Don't worry about bringing cleaning supplies. I'll buy them," he said. "Get some rest, and I'll see you at church tonight."

I felt good as I drove home. Not only was I doing something on my own, I was helping out the pastor. But I felt a little strange being alone with him in his house. If he were an old man it would have been different. In his house, he seemed more relaxed in his tee shirt and jeans, like a man instead of a preacher. *You'll get used to it*, I told myself, pulling up in the driveway by the trailer.

Norvin had been helping Wig work on his van all day, and I knew he would come home just long enough to shower and change before he went to the Eager Beaver. Around six o'clock I ran some bath water, poured in a capful of the Private Moments bubble bath I got at Walgreens when Mama and I went shopping. I looked at my naked body in the mirror before I stepped into the bubbles. Although the skin on my stomach and breasts was

saggy, and my eyes looked big and tired, I liked the slimmer me. I made up my mind to lose thirty more pounds.

I toweled off and put some Murine drops in my eyes. Then I dabbed some Cover Girl concealer under my eyes for the circles. I covered this with beige foundation, brushed on some gray eyeshadow, outlined my eyes with Midnight Black liner, added mascara, Luscious Pink blush, and Ivory Coast Mahogany lipstick. I brushed my thick brows straight up. I looked better, and my face had more color.

I rubbed Jergens lotion into my skin, put on my underwear and a gray wool dress that was too tight for me before. I brushed and rebraided my hair, winding it around, making a bun on the back of my head, pinning it with pearl hairpins. *I look older than nineteen*, I thought.

For a moment I felt a little ashamed I was taking such pride in my appearance, and thought it might be ungodly. After Mama's funeral, I read the part in the Bible Brother Schwazier mentioned to me about the virtuous woman whose price was far above rubies. One verse said "She maketh herself coverings of tapestry; her clothing is silk and purple." That sounded like it was all right with God for a woman to take pride in her looks. But another verse said "beauty is vain." I decided I would ask Brother Schwazier what he thought.

When I got to church, Sister Melvina said, "Sister Lily! You have such a pretty face with your hair pulled up like that." Sister Darla and Sister Patricia both liked my gray dress.

Brother Farguson, the elderly bald man who was also the deacon, said, "You sure look nice tonight, Sister Lily" when he shook my hand. I smiled at him, pleased that I dressed up.

Brother Schwazier asked me to lead the testimonial service. After I told what God had done for me, I looked out over the small congregation as several stood up and gave their testimony. I felt at home with these people, knew they cared for me.

I had a dream about Norvin that night. We were at the Arkansas State Fair eating corn dogs. He said he would wait under a tree while I went into the ladies' restroom. When I came out, he was gone. I bought myself some cotton candy and spent the rest of the day laughing, riding the Tilt-A-Whirl, roller coaster, and the Octopus, going through the spook house and the House of Mirrors, looking at crafts, cows, and homemade jelly. I was sunburnt, happy.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Norvin and I slept together, but we hardly ever had sex. I thought he was probably sleeping with someone else on the weekends, because I found a slip of paper in his shirt pocket tht said *Stella Stiles 482-3797*. I didn't bother calling the number. I knew I should be working on our marriage, but it seemed useless. His main interests were Wig and the Eager Beaver; mine were church and my housecleaning job. I cleaned Brother Schwazier's kitchen cabinets and started on the closets. Norvin and I were still able to talk about everyday things at the table, and laugh together at Starfire when she tried to feed herself.

By June, Starfire was walking, even though she was only nine months old. She already had two bottom teeth, and her shiny, fine brown hair was long enough for me to put a bow in it. She looked like a cute little chipmunk when she grinned.

One evening after supper, Sister Darla brought Stephanie over to play with Starfire in the sandbox Norvin built at the end of the trailer. While they dug in the sand with spoons, I thinned my marigolds and Sister Darla put them in a bucket to plant in front of her house.

The warm dirt felt good in my hands. I went inside, washed in the bathroom sink, made two glasses of iced tea. We sat in the webbed lawn chairs under the tree and talked. I was glad I had a friend my age. The sun

was about to set, but the air was still warm on my arms. Starfire and Stephanie made humming noises, using their spoons like cars.

Norvin was in the driveway helping Wig, who was having trouble with the carburetor on his van. He and Norvin looked under the hood. Then Wig got inside the van while Norvin tinkered with something. "Wig, start it!" Norvin yelled. Wig turned the key and the van started, making sputtering noises. Wig got out of the van.

"It's still not running right--can't figure what the Sam Hill is a matter."

"Somethin's sure not right," I heard Norvin say.

I turned to Sister Darla, said, "Have you ever noticed? When men work on cars they always talk extra loud."

"They do, don't they? J B does that too," she said, grinning. She frowned. "Wonder why?"

"It's like it's real important. Man stuff. We're not supposed to understand." We laughed.

Wig pulled on his earlobe, then took his cigarettes out of his shirt pocket. "I took it over to ol' Bill Cobb's garage. You know, the one over on Choctaw has the '55 Chevy pickup sittin' up in the air on that tall pole?"

"Yeah."

"Got a tune-up. Just been a little over two weeks ago."

"I'd take it back, tell ol' Bill the carburetor's just not firing," Norvin said.

"I sure ought to."

"Here, let me go get the gas can, pour some on it. See what that'll do," Norvin said.

"I'll back the van up a little, move away from that tree limb. Get under the hood better that way."

Wig started the van. It spluttered and died. He started it again, revving up the motor to keep it running. I heard the gears shift into reverse just when I saw Stephanie standing at the end of the trailer. She jabbered something, pointed her finger towards Wig. My eyes darted toward the empty sandbox.

"Starfire!" I yelled. I saw her shadow move behind the back wheel of Wig's van. "No!" I cried. I started running, praying as I ran, "Dear God, protect my little girl--my little girl!"

I was too late. We were all too late. I knew it when I saw the bottom of her little red tennis shoe, size four. Wig ran inside the trailer to call an ambulance. He came back outside, stood in front of us, face drained of color, saying over and over, "Lily, Norv', I didn't know, I didn't know, please believe me, you don't know how sorry I am, I didn't know"

Sister Darla grabbed me, hugged me while Stephanie hung onto her leg, crying. "Take Lil' in the trailer," Norvin told her.

I kept saying, "My baby, my baby, my baby." Sister Darla led me inside, pulled me over to the couch. She put her arms around me, and I rested my forehead on her shoulder. I couldn't cry yet. We didn't move when we heard the ambulance in the driveway.

We buried Starfire two days later. At the funeral Daddy held me, said "Lily . . . my little girl." I knew he was remembering when Mama died. It seemed like I was losing everyone I loved. I tried to pray, and still believed in God. My body felt so cold inside, and I couldn't get warm, even though it was July. Most of the time, I wore an old lavender sweater that used to be Mama's.

The first week in August when I cleaned Starfire's room, I cried most of the day. I wouldn't let Norvin or nay of the sisters at church help me. I sat on the floor, picked up her toys, folded her clothes, put them in boxes. Norvin was going to take them and the baby bed to the Goodwill store on the way to work the next morning.

After I put the blankets, sheets, and pillow into a box, I went into the bathroom, found the scissors and cut off my braid at the nap of my neck. I lay the braid out straight, wrapped it in clear cellophane, tied a pink ribbon at the end. Then I drove to Willow Tree Cemetery, spread the braid out at the head of Starfire's grave. I didn't think people would understand. But that was the last thing I could give her.

I went back to work for Brother Schwazier in September. I planned to find a full-time job. Miss Bolene, Daddy's neighbor, helped him clean house. He had bought my car from her when I was in high school. When I drove over to his house one afternoon, she was there. At first I was shocked and a little mad, feeling like nobody could take the place of Mama. Especially a woman ten years younger than Daddy. But she was a nice woman and good to Daddy. Finally I realized I was happy for him.

I knew I shoud stay busy. I had lost almost twenty pounds and needed money for new clothes that fit. Norvin would have bought them, but I didn't want to ask him. He didn't go out drinking like he did before. He drank whiskey and watched TV at home most evenings. In his own way, he tried to be there for me.

I started going to church on Wednesday and Saturday nights and on Sunday. Sister Patricia put up a quilt frame at her house, and the women of the church started meeting there on Tuesdays to piece quilts. We worked on

a Wedding Ring quilt through the month of October, started a Log Cabin quilt in November.

It took the other sisters a while to get used to my hair. I combed it straight back from my forehead and slicked it back on the sides. The ends just touched my collar. When they asked why I cut my hair, I explained the best I could. They nodded their heads and didn't mention it again. But I remembered Brother Schwazier saying in Sunday School class right after I started going to the Church of the Brethren, "A woman's hair is her glory. The Bible says that over in First Corinthians, Chapter Eleven, Verse Fifteen. It says 'her hair is given her for a covering'. If God blesses you with long hair, women, you should treasure it."

I asked him about my hair one Saturday in his living room. "Lily, do how God leads you and you'll be all right," he said. He grinned as he sat on the edge of the chair, pulling on his socks. "You *did* have a beautiful braid, thick, hung down below your waist. That's looking at it in the flesh, though." He stood up, gazed at me, thoughtful. "You're still a pretty woman. What's inside you shines out." What he said reminded me of the light in my mother's face. He touched my hair. "That's what counts."

I loved him for seeing that. "God says 'Let your light so shine'," I said, smiling, then turned toward his room. "I'm about finished with your closet, all except your shoes." I took off my heavy black sweater, put it on the couch, then straightened the belt on my green cotton dress. Although it was early December, I bought the dress at a summer clearance at J C Penney because the little green sprigs of parsley reminded me of life. I also noticed how the green brought out the deep brown of my eyes. "I'll move those three boxes out of your room--you know, those you were going to take to the Salvation Army."

"No, go ahead and do the shoes. Let me drink the rest of my coffee, then I'll get the boxes." He sat down at the table. "Want another cup?"

"No," I said. "Your shoes are calling me." I grinned, started down the hall.

"I'm going to throw away those old brown workboots," he said. I wasn't sure if he was talking to me, or to himself.

I placed all his shoes in a line by the bed. He had eight pairs, counting the navy tennis shoes with holes and the broken-down, stiff workboots. *He's probably had most of these for years*, I thought, dusting them off. When I saw him away from home, he wore the brown leather wing-tips. At home, he wore the navy tennis shoes with holes.

He walked into the room in his brown socks, carrying a small cardboard box. "Time to make a fresh start," he said. He bent over beside me, picked up some black lace-up dress shoes, put them in the box. "Had these for years," he said. I smiled.

"You said you wanted a fresh start," I said, handing him the navy tennis shoes with holes.

"But I--" He looked at my face. "Yeah, you're right. Let me have them." Smiling, I handed him the shoes. His face was sad as he set the shoes in the box.

"What about these cowboy boots?" I said, touching the tooled leather tops. The square toes were scuffed.

"Huh?" He looked dazed. "I'll keep them." He put his hands in the back pockets of his Levis, rocked back on his heels. "You know, think I'll wear these tennis shoes today, then I'll put them back," he said, taking them out of the box. "Have to throw them out anyway."

I grinned. "Sure."

"Quit looking at me that way. Besides, it's cold in here. Aren't you cold? I need to put some more wood on the fire." He was changing the subject, but he was right. It was a little chilly. I shivered. When my body was cold, I felt alone. *Starfire was so little*, I thought.

Brother Schwazier grabbed my arms, facing me. "You're thinking of her, your little girl."

"Yes." He searched out my eyes, tightened his hands on my upper arms. "What is it?" I asked.

"Lily, the Bible says in Ecclesiastes four and eleven, 'How can one be warm alone?'" He eased me to his chest, hugged me close. "I don't want you to be cold." He rubbed the back of my hair. "You've been so brave. Been alone for so long. I want to make you warm." He kept rubbing the back of my hair with his hand.

His flannel shirt was warm, so comforting. I let my head fall on his shoulder. "Honey, lean on me a little bit. You been carrying this load." His hand rubbed my back in circles, over and over. I cried quietly, getting the front of his shirt wet while I listened to his soft voice. "Sometimes we need each other. We take it to God and He helps us carry our burdens. But sometimes we need to touch someone, be touched, feel their warmth." He pressed my head to his shoulder. "Cry, Lily, let it all out, all the pain." He combed my hair with his fingers. "You're so strong, my beautiful Lily, but you don't have to carry it alone. I'll hold you, make the pain go away." I relaxed my body against him, hugged his shoulders to me.

"I desire you, Lily. It's okay to want to love someone. Psalms says if we delight ourselves in the Lord, 'he shall give thee the desires of thine heart.'" Brother Schwazier kept rubbing my hair, "I know the pain, honey, how it feels to lose the one you love." He raised his hands to the sides of my

face. "Lily, look at me. The Bible says in Ecclesiastes, 'If two lie together, then they have heat'. I want to lie with you, love you, make your blood pump hard inside, make you warm."

I backed away from him, not touching him. I stood in the middle of the floor, my arms at my side, and looked at him. Then I walked to him, put my breasts against his chest. He wrapped his arms around me, held me tight, rocking me back and forth. I felt my nipples get hard. I rested my forehead on his shoulder while he unzipped my dress. He pulled the straps of my slip down around my hips, then took one of my breasts in his mouth, sucking on the nipple. "You're beautiful, Lily," he mumbled.

"No. My breasts sag, they hang. I have stretch marks."

"You're a woman, Lily. First Corinthians says 'the woman is the glory of the man'. You are my glory. I love your stretch marks, your thighs, your stomach, your sagging breasts. Beautiful to me." He pulled back the red spread and I lay down on the white sheet, watched him unbutton his shirt. He stood before me naked, then crawled on top of me, slid himself inside.

When I woke up, the clock on the dresser said five o'clock. I opened my eyes wide, turned my head. Brother Schwazier smiled. "I was waiting for you to wake up."

"I got to go. Norvin will be wondering." I didn't know if he was home or not.

"How do you feel, Lily? Are you all right?" He propped on his elbow, looking at me.

"Yes." My voice sounded little. "I have to go."

"I know. I got to get my sermon ready for church, too." He smiled. I jumped out of bed, picked up my clothes. His shoes were still lined up by

the bed. I stepped into my dress, pulled it up around my shoulders. "Here, let me zip it for you." He was up, directly behind me. He nibbled on my neck and I shivered.

"Brother Schwazier--"

"You can call me Oliver."

"No."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. I just can't."

"Okay," he said. "See you at church tonight?"

"Yes." He pulled me to him and kissed me. I put my underwear in my bag, he helped me get into my coat, and I left.

That night at the Church of the Brethren, Brother Schwazier stood behind the pulpit and opened his brown Bible. "Saints, if you would all get your Bibles, I'd like to turn to the Book of Isaiah. Amen. God gave me a message to preach to you tonight. Chapter One, Verse Eighteen." He paused, his eyes traveling over the congregation, meeting mine, moving on. He leaned his weight on the pulpit, his hands grabbing the sides. "Isaiah had a vision in the days of Hezekiah. Somebody say Amen."

"Yes! Amen! Preach it, Brother O!" Brother Ferguson said.

"The children of Judah and Jerusalem were rebellious, and their lands dried up and parched. But God didn't quit on them, just like God doesn't give up on us today. Yes! Praise God!"

"Hallelujah!" Sister Melvina yelled from the front pew.

"Through Isaiah, God told the people to mend their ways. Amen. Yes, He did." Brother Schwazier walked across the stage, stood in front of the women's altar. "Sister Patricia, He said quit offering up burnt offerings

of rams and the blood of bullocks. Quit watching the new moons and having feasts!"

"Amen," Sister Patricia said in a calm voice, her hands pressed together.

Brother Schwazier's voice grew even louder. "He said 'Wash you, make you clean!'" He looked across the congregation, lowered his voice, walked over and stood in front of the men. "That's what He wants us to do, make ourselves clean. Ain't that right, Brother Farguson?" he said, shaking his hand.

"That's right. Lord bless Brother O!" Brother Farguson nodded his head.

Brother Schwazier walked behind the pulpit, his eyes sweeping across the people. "He said 'though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow--though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool'. Amen."

I didn't hear the rest of his sermon. My mind dwelled on a red cotton quilted bedspread and white sheets.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

When I came home from having Sunday dinner with Daddy and Miss Bolene the next day, I found Norvin and a red-haired woman in our bed. Miss Bolene wouldn't let me do the dishes, and I had a headache, so came home early. Norvin's truck was in the driveway, and I opened the trailer door, said as I walked down the hall, "Norvin, I thought you and Wig were cutting firewood--"

They both scrambled for their clothes, trying to keep the sheet pulled up under their chins as I stood in the doorway. "Get out," I said. I meant both of them.

"Lily, you know me and you ain't been--"

"I don't care. Just leave. I can't stand the sight of you." *I did the same thing*, I thought, *only I didn't bring it home*. It was hard to be mad at them without feeling guilty myself. I went into the living room, sat down on the couch.

I pretended to look at a McCalls until I saw their feet go out the trailer door, heard Norvin's truck start. *Slinked out with his tail between his legs*, I thought, laughing out loud. I felt a tear slid down my face, so I stretched out on the couch face down with my arms wrapped around my head. But I couldn't cry.

Two hours later, Norvin came back while I was folding clothes at the kitchen table. He pulled out a chair and sat down. Playing with the salt and pepper shakers, he said, "I'm moving in with Stella."

I stopped folding a blue striped towel and looked at him. "Okay," I said.

"You can keep the trailer."

"It's not yours. We rent," I said.

He gave a disgusted snort. "I know that. I meant I'll pay the rent and you can live here." He frowned. "For a while, anyway."

"I'll get a job," I said. Norvin stood up, scooting back his chair. "I'm goin' to take that big tan suitcase. I'll bring it back later."

"Here's your underwear," I said, handing him four pairs of folded white shorts and three white tee shirts.

"Thanks." He grabbed them from me, went down the hall. I heard him taking the suitcase down from the top of the closet, then pulling out drawers, shoving them in. After a few minutes, he came back into the living room carrying the loaded suitcase and a paper sack filled with jeans. I stood up beside the kitchen chair, held on to the marbled green plastic back.

"Norvin," I said.

"Huh?"

"I want you to be happy."

"Yeah. You too."

I went to the State Employment Office the next day. I talked with Mr. Youngblood, a job counselor, and we looked at the listings together. I applied for a secretarial job at Bruce's Poultry Company; but the next day Mr. Youngblood called, told me they hired a woman with three years' experience in payroll. I tried at Bonnie's Floral Bow-K's, thinking my experience with planting flower gardens might help. But she wanted someone with experience arranging flowers.

On Friday, a week before Christmas, I started working as a waitress at Gerta's Diner. Gerta was only about five feet tall and wore her thick gray hair in a bubble, swirled back above each ear, a duck tail in the back. She had a habit of patting the sides of her hair every few seconds as she talked in a fast, nasal voice. It was hard to guess her age, but I thought she was around fifty. She stood stiff behind the register, greeting customers with red, tight lips, her uniform a starched white blouse and straight black skirt. Her jewelry was a heavy gold matching necklace and earrings, with four large diamond rings flashing on her fingers as she punched the register buttons.

She watched me with sharp gray eyes as I moved from table to table. It was harder work than I thought. The bottoms of my feet hurt, and I needed to buy better shoes. Judy Ann, the fuzzy-haired cook, bawled me out for not picking up the plates fast enough, and I took a chicken fried steak dinner to the man who ordered a hot link sandwich and onion rings.

But at 5:30 when I sat down at my own kitchen table, propped my feet on another chair, counted my money, I made \$7.75 in tips. I put the tip money in a gallon Mason jar, slid it back behind the pans in the kitchen cabinet by the stove. I decided to work at the diner as long as I could to save some money. I didn't want to ask Daddy for help. He still didn't know Norvin left me.

I told Gerta I already had a Saturday job, even though I wasn't sure I would keep working for Brother Schwazier. Sometimes I was ashamed of what we did, especially when I was at church. Other times I kept remembering how good it felt to be held, told I was beautiful.

On Saturday morning as I drove to Brother Schwazier's, I made plans to tell him we couldn't be lovers. When I knocked on the door, he opened it, pulled me inside, and kissed me hard on the mouth. "I couldn't wait for you

to get here," he said. "Come here, I want to show you something." He pulled me into the living room, pointed over in the corner by the fireplace. "See--a Christmas tree." I couldn't help smiling back at him. He was like a kid.

"It's big," I said.

"Yeah, isn't it great? I went out to that Christmas tree farm about twelve miles north of town yesterday evening. You know--the one they advertise on TV. Batalo's Christmas Tree Farm--cedar, fir, blue spruce, pine, the tree of your Christmas dreams. Even have mistletoe," he said, pulling me over to the kitchen doorway, where a sprig hung above us. He bent his head to kiss me again.

"Brother Schwazier--"

"Call me Oliver," he said, right before his mouth touched mine.

"I don't think--"

He raised his head, grabbed my upper arms. "Want to decorate the tree?" He smiled. "That's the job I have for you today. Nice job, huh?" He looked at me, made his eyebrows go up and down. I nodded. "Let me go get the box of decorations," he said. "Be right back."

I sat down on the fireplace hearth as he went down the hall to get the box from the attic. It was warm, cozy by the fire. Brother Schwazier made me feel warm on the inside, too. I realized I filled an empty spot for him, just as he did for me, which was why I found it hard to tell him I couldn't go to bed with him again.

He came back with a big cardboard box with Extra Large Grade A Eggs written on the side. "I been saving these for years," he said, setting the full box on the end of the hearth. He held up a white and yellow painted rabbit made from popsicle sticks. "Quendilla made this in first grade."

"It lost a leg," I said.

"Yeah. We never could find it. Didn't really matter--we hung it up anyway." I pictured him, the dreamy Beatrice in the picture, and his little girl all gathered around, laughing, decorating the tree.

"You must have been happy," I said.

"Yes. But changes come." He combed his hair back with his fingers. His toe showed through the hole in his navy tennis shoes. "Now I got you, and you got me." He laughed, "Sounds like Sonny and Cher, doesn't it?" Thoughtful, I looked at him. "Hey, we need some Christmas music," he said, turning on the radio. "Psalms of David says 'make a joyful noise unto the Lord'."

"--five more shopping days till Christmas, folks," the radio announcer said. "It's thirty-two degrees here on a Saturday morning and I'm here to play all your Christmas music, get you in the mood--" I realized I hadn't bought any gifts for Christmas.

"Jingle bells, jingle bells, jingle all the way!--Oh, what fun--" Brother Schwazier sang along with the radio. He handed me a little box. "Here, put on these icicles." I took the box and threw a few icicles here and there.

"Come on," he said. "Where's your Christmas spirit, Lily?"

"Norvin left me."

Brother Schwazier scratched his ear. "The Bible says 'if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out'." He glanced at me. "Norvin gave you lots of trouble."

"Yes. But I failed," I said, looking at the floor.

"Lily, Lily, Lily, honey--you're too hard on yourself. You take on the weight of everyone. 'Let us lay aside every weight that so easily besets us'.

That's what it says over in Hebrews twelve and two." He touched me on the shoulder. "You understand me?"

I nodded.

"Norvin was a weight pulling you down. Like dragging around a two hundred pound steel ball and chain. Now you're free. Free to do whatever you want."

"I wanted to be a good wife."

"I know. God knows. He's on your side. He won't forsake one of His children. 'He shall cover thee with His feathers'--that's what the Bible says in Psalms." Brother Schwazier rubbed soft circles on my back as he talked. I wanted to curl up in a ball, hide under this pile of light feathers. *But sooner or later, I thought, I'll have to come out and breathe.*

"Feathers make me sneeze," I said, grinning.

"Then I'll cover you with me," he said, wrapping both arms around me in a bear hug. "I won't make you sneeze." I stiffened my body for a moment, then relaxed against him, feeling his warmth. "Brother Schwazier--"

"Huh?"

"You're a preacher," I mumbled.

He pulled back from me, still holding my arms, looking at my face, "I know. But a preacher's still a man with feelings." His fingers tightened on my arms. "Lily, I can't deny I want you."

"But the people at church--" I said, pulling on the button on his shirt pocket.

"We won't tell them," he said, and smiled. He pulled me to him, squeezed me. "Come here, let me love you," he whispered, nuzzling my neck.

"We could--" I said.

"We could what?"

"Tell them," I mumbled against his shoulder.

"Huh?" he said, bending his ear to my mouth. "Did you say we could do this?" He made little bites up and down my neck. "You mean this?" He started unbuttoning my blouse. I shivered. He studied my eyes. "You like what I'm doing, don't you, honey?" I swallowed, nodded. "I'm going to take you to bed, you know that, don't you?"

"Yes," I whispered. "Take me."

In his room, I slid naked between the white sheets. He got in beside me, then pulled me on top of him. "Lily, Lily, baby--you don't know how beautiful you are." He groaned. "Pure, beautiful white Lily," he said against my neck, "waiting for me to suck your sweet nectar--"

"Brother Schwazier . . ." I forgot what I wanted to say. I bent my head to kiss his eyelid.

Later, I watched him as he slept. His mouth was relaxed, half open, his forehead smooth. I traced his eyebrow with my finger, and he opened his eyes. "Hi," he said and smiled.

"Hi."

He slid his arm under my neck. "You look serious," he said.

"Brother Schwazier--"

"Yeah?"

"I don't want to hide it," I said.

"Hide what? You can tell me anything, honey." He squeezed my shoulder. "You know that."

"I mean I don't want to hide us," I said. He didn't say anything, didn't move. "I'm single now, you're single," I continued. "People like both of us at

church." I turned my head, looked at him. "We love each other. Why can't we tell them we're dating?"

"Lily, Lily, wait, hold on a minute, honey." He patted me on the arm with his free hand.

"I don't understand--"

"Will you listen to me?"

"Okay," I said.

"Some of the older folks frown on a divorced person, or a person who's separated, dating someone. In these old-fashioned people's eyes, you'll always be a married woman." He paused. "I don't agree with them. But I can't afford to lose one saint. You understand?"

"I--I don't know. Maybe," I said. "I need to think about it."

"I've gathered God's sheep into the fold. He wouldn't like it if I did anything to turn away even one of His little lambs. You see that, don't you?"

"Yes." I didn't want to cause anyone to be lost from God. "I want everyone to be saved," I said.

"Now," he said, "we better get up from here. Church will be in a few hours, and I got to get my message ready." He sat up in bed. "Why don't you run along home, and you can come back and spend the night with me after church tonight. What do you say?" He stood beside the bed, picked up his jeans and put them on.

"I don't know," I said, gathering up my clothes. My body felt heavy. I knew as long as we were together, I would only fit into a little square corner of his life. I could never cross over the boundary lines into the other little squares. My square had high walls around it.

That night, Brother Schwazier preached from Philippians, Chapter Four, Verse Eight. I took my Bible with me to church, the red Bible Daddy bought me for Sunday School when I was seven. "Saints," Brother Schwazier said as he walked behind the pulpit. "I want to preach to you tonight about keeping your minds clear and open for God to dwell there. Amen." He grabbed the edges of the pulpit top. "Sometimes we get so caught up in utility bills, the hole in the roof, how unfair the boss is, we fill up our minds with garbage. Praise God. Brother Farguson, say Amen."

"Amen, Brother O. Preach it." Brother Farguson shook his fist in the air.

"Yes. No room for anything beautiful. Our minds get full of trash--cluttered up, can't make any sense out of it, can't reach God. Amen. Ain't that right, Saints?"

"Yes!" Sister Melvina yelled. "God help Brother Oliver!"

"But Paul said to the saints and the bishops and the deacons at Philippi--'Whatsoever things are pure . . . whatsoever things are lovely . . . think on these things'." Brother Schwazier's eyes roamed over the congregation. "Yes, Brother Paul knew what he was talking about. 'Pure, without a spot or wrinkle', it says over in Ephesians."

Pure as new-fallen snow, pure as a dove, pure as a beautiful white lily, I thought. I squirmed on the church bench.

I drove back to the trailer after church. I watched the ten o'clock news on Channel Eight for thirty minutes, then locked the trailer door and drove to Brother Schwazier's house.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The click of a door either opening or closing woke me up just before daylight. I was alone in Brother Schwazier's bed. The clock said 5:15. I pulled up the white sheet around my neck, then decided I needed to go to the bathroom. *Brother Schwazier's probably reading his Bible for the Sunday sermon*, I thought.

I stretched as far as I could to reach his blue plaid flannel shirt on the padded dresser bench, grabbing its collar. Sitting up in bed, I put it on, buttoning three buttons. His brown and gold argyle socks were in the floor by the bed, so I put them on, too. Then I slid out of bed and stepped over to the dresser mirror. In the dim light from the window, I combed my short hair back with my fingers, tried to wipe off the mascara under my eyes. *I need some lipstick*, I thought.

I padded down the hall. A strip of light shone under the bathroom door, not quite shut. I decided Brother Schwazier probably left the light on by mistake, since a lamp was on in the living room. He always studied the Bible in his leather recliner. I pushed open the bathroom door, took a step inside. Brother Schwazier stood in front of the long, narrow wall mirror, his eyes wide, staring at me.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't know you . . ." My eyes dropped from his face, to his chest, then lower. He wore my red lace bra and bikini panties,

the red lace panel in front stretched tight. I turned my head, squeezed my eyes shut. Chills ran up my legs.

"Lily--Lily, honey, wait . . ." Zombie-like, I turned, walked out, down the hall toward the living room. Brother Schwazier came after me, pulling his jeans around his hips. "Lily, stop, honey, let me explain--" he said, trying to button his fly.

"There's nothing left to explain," I mumbled. I looked down at the floor to keep from looking at him, made my way back to the bedroom. I unbuttoned his flannel shirt, threw it on the dresser bench, grabbed the toes of his socks, pulled them off, threw them in the floor by the bed. I stepped into the short green shift with the yellow Peter Pan collar I wore the night before. I tried to reach the zipper.

"Let me," he said, his hands reaching for the zipper.

"Don't touch me," I said, moving away from him. I zipped my dress up halfway, then searched for my black flats. I found one under the foot of the bed, but couldn't find the other.

When I raised up from the floor, he held my shoe in his hand. "Lily, honey, please listen . . . I thought if I put your clothes on, I'd feel how you feel. I wanted to understand you better, understand where you were coming from . . ."

"I've heard about men who wear women's clothes--get turned on by it," I said, and reached for my shoe. He held it tight in his hand.

"I love you, Lily. It's *you* that turns me on, not your clothes. You got to believe me, how much I love you." I turned away from him, looking for my purse.

"Lily, I was trying every way I could to understand you with my heart. God told Isaiah, tell the people of Israel to 'understand with their hearts'."

Brother Schwazier paused, looked at me. "Guess I made a mistake, honey. My desire for you, to know all of you, got in the way. Wrong way to do it." He shook his head, gave a small laugh. "Shows us preachers are human, too."

"I want my shoe," I said, holding out my hand.

"Will you forgive me if I say it won't ever happen again?" His face was sincere, his eyes pleading.

"I don't know. I got to go home where I can think," I said, slipping my foot in my other shoe. I hitched the strap of my purse on my shoulder. "I'll talk with you later," I said, and walked out the door.

Brother Schwazier called me on Tuesday and Thursday nights during the next week. I said hello, but hung up when he said, "Lily--." I was too tired to let the sound of his voice bother me. I worked hard at Gerta's. When I didn't have customers, I scrubbed countertops and tables, filled salt and pepper shakers, added napkins to the holders, squeezed out catsup and mustard. I swept and mopped the floors, carried out the trash.

Gerta's small eyes watched me. "Lily, I'm glad I hired you," she told me on Friday when she handed me my paycheck. "You're a good worker, and people like you."

"Thank you." I folded my check, put it inside my billfold.

Gerta gave a little laugh. "That cranky Mr. Dodgen even asked for you when you were on break--you know the one sits in the corner over there with that smelly cigar?" She wrinkled her nose and pointed.

I nodded. "He ain't never said a kind word to nobody," she said, smiling at me with tight lips. "See you Monday. Have a nice weekend." She patted the side of her hair.

"You,too," I said, and left.

When I got back to the trailer, I put my tip money in the gallon Mason jar. It was a habit every evening when I got home from work. I had \$103 in my jar. I made up my mind I was going to move out of Quail Run Campsites. It gave me too many unhappy memories. Every evening when I drove up to the end of the trailer, I thought of Starfire. It always sent a sharp pain through my chest. I hadn't decided where I would move, but I planned to look around.

When Saturday morning came, I went back to Brother Schwazier's to clean his house. I still wasn't sure how I felt about his wearing my underwear. Part of me wanted to believe he was sincere, wouldn't do it again, that he made a mistake through his love for me. But another part of me said no. I thought if I saw him again it might clear my mind. Besides, I needed the money.

The front door was unlocked, so I went in, got the broom and dustpan, started sweeping the kitchen. The radio in his bedroom played Tommy James and the Shondells' "Crimson and Clover." Under my breath, I sang "o-o-ver and o-o-ver" along with them. I didn't know Brother Schwazier was there until he grabbed me around the waist from behind, started dancing me around the kitchen. "Don't," I said, trying to move his arms. He laughed, wouldn't turn me loose, started making little bites on my neck. "Quit!" I yelled, twisting my body, trying to break free. "Leave me alone!" I faced him, beating on his chest.

Brother Schwazier dropped his arms. "Lily, Lily, honey, I was just playing--I didn't mean to scare you, baby, I was just having fun." His voice was soft, soothing. He touched me on the shoulder, and his hand was warm.

"I know I got to win your trust in me again I just forgot to take it slow . . ." He reached up, traced my eyebrow with his fingers. He looked at me, then whispered, "Come here," holding out his arms. I walked into them again, let him hug me close to his chest.

I went to bed with him, but I kept remembering the red bra and panties, seeing a picture of him standing in the bathroom. I couldn't let myself be free, couldn't return his lovemaking with my whole heart. He knew.

Later, we lay in bed, quiet, his arm around me. "It's okay, Lily. It'll just take time." He squeezed my arm. "I can wait, honey."

I said nothing, but thought *Why am I letting one thing change how I feel? What about all the ways he's shown me he cared--listened to me cry, felt my pain, made me laugh?* I turned over, put my arm around his chest. Fifteen minutes later we got up. I made a pot of beef stew, vacuumed the living room, then went back to the trailer.

I didn't go to the Church of the Brethren that night, nor to Sunday School the next day. After I left Brother Schwazier's on Saturday, I went home, had lunch, then drove to the Fayetteville Public Library on Keetowah Avenue. I looked in the card catalog under *sex roles*, thinking I might find a book on men wearing women's clothes. Somehow, women wearing men's clothing didn't upset me. I remembered wearing Brother Schwazier's blue flannel shirt and argyle socks that same morning.

None of the books I found had anything on cross dressing. Instead, I found a book with the title Finding the Love You Want by Dr. Morris Avant. I sat down at an empty table for almost an hour, reading the chapter about "Knowing Yourself and Your Partner." I realized I expected Brother

Schwazier to think like me; maybe I needed to give him more room to be himself. But I still felt mixed up.

Afterwards, I put the book back on the shelf. I checked out 101 Ways to Decorate on a Budget and They Met in Zanzibar, a Harlequin romance. On the cover was a blank-faced couple--a girl with a smooth yellow bob holding a tennis racquet, her curly brown-haired boyfriend in his tennis suit behind her.

On the way to the trailer I bought myself a three-dollar bottle of ruby red wine at DuLaney's Retail Liquor Store. After I stopped, I wished I picked another liquor store, because it reminded me of the romantic night I planned for Norvin and me that fell flat. Our marriage kept moving downhill. We kept moving faster, and we finally moved so fast we couldn't stop until we reached rock bottom. Like being on the elevator for the ride to the bottom beneath the Royal Gorge bridge. I didn't know how to stop the elevator once it started. So I just tried to hang on.

I knew the Bible said "Be not drunk with wine to excess"; but I didn't plan to drink it all--just enough to get warm. The last three years, seemed like I spent my time trying to get warm. With wine the nights Norvin was out drunk, with Mama's sweater, with hot tea, with the saints at Church of the Brethren, with Brother Schwazier in bed. I wondered if I'd spend my life searching for heat.

That Saturday night, I sat at the kitchen table, poured the red wine into a jelly glass, tried to read the Harlequin romance. The first page told me eighteen-year-old Jill Ashton, whose father was the president of Ohio State University, had just volunteered to be a candy striper at the Columbus Memorial Hospital. She and her mother were excited about her first job. When she glanced in the mirror, Jill loved how she looked in the bright red

and white uniform. I supposed her wealthy dad was going to pay for her cruise to Zanzibar later, where she would meet a handsome coffee plantation owner who shared her love for tennis. After little tiffs, they would declare their undying love, then sit out on the veranda watching the sailboats breeze by, while servants brought them banana daiquiris.

I threw the paperback book across the kitchen. The book fell in the sink, and I had to fish it out of a large blue plastic bowl of water. I made cornbread in the bowl the night before. I dried the book's pages with a cotton tea towel the best I could, then turned the oven on low, put it on the top rack.

I propped my bare feet on the chair beside me, gazed out into the night's blackness that showed in the crack between the flowered plastic curtains. I didn't see a moon or stars. If I was going to stay, I'd buy new curtains. But I wasn't. I had to leave.

I found a piece of paper and pencil in the kitchen drawer, sat down, wrote Choices at the top. I wrote Go home to Daddy underneath. "No," I said, but left it. "Apartment or one-bedroom house in Fayetteville, rent for one hundred dollars a month," I said, making a list. At the bottom I wrote Move in with Brother Schwazier, knowing this was impossible, and Leave Fayetteville. "For God know's what," I said. I took a big drink of wine, sat still while it warmed my insides.

I drank half the bottle and still hadn't made any decisions. So I took a shower, looked at my body in the mirror, and went to bed. My body looked better. My breasts still sagged, but they were big and full, though not nearly as big as they used to be. I hadn't gained back my weight after Starfire's funeral because I didn't have much appetite. My waitress job at Gerta's, with all the walking, helped firm my stomach, hips, and thighs. "You're a fine

looking woman," I said, lying naked in the bed, then laughed. I still wanted to firm up my hips, flatten my stomach some more. The mattress felt lumpy, but I went to sleep with the other pillow pulled up to my chest. "I'll think about things tomorrow," I said, feeling like Scarlett.

In the night I heard someone banging on the door. The clock said 2:30. I found my chenille robe, tied it in the front. I turned on the porch light. "Lily, honey, I need to talk to you Come on, let me in and I'll just stay a little bit . . . please?"

I thought of the Three Little Pigs.

"It's about church. We all missed you tonight. Sister Patricia, Sister Melvina, Brother Farguson, and all the others. *We need* you, Lily, the saints need you."

I stood holding the door knob, then turned it, let him in. He looked cold. The end of his nose was bright red. He pulled out his white handkerchief, blew it, jammed the handkerchief back in his pocket. "Lily, could we sit down here at the table and talk?" He motioned me toward a chair. I sat down across from him, and we looked at each other. "You look so clean and fresh, Lily, sitting there in your soft bathrobe . . . It's hard for me to think what I was going to say . . . Can't I hold you a little first?"

I stared at him a second. "Oh, c'mon," I said, grabbed his hand, led him down the hall. I wanted to go back to bed anyway. About 4:00 o'clock, I smelled the book burning but didn't get up. I put my arm around the sleeping Brother Schwazier.

He left the next morning before I got up. I put on the teapot, threw the charred book in the trash, sat down at the table. I felt dazed, mixed up, but warm.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

After Brother Schwazier came to the trailer, I went back to the Church of the Brethren the following Wednesday night. I decided Sister Melvina must not be feeling well because when she sang her voice came out weak. Nothing like her usual strong bellow. She didn't bounce on the piano bench like before.

But Sister Patricia, Sister Darla, and the other saints had high energy, clapping their hands, raising their arms, telling me before church service how glad they were to see me back. Although I was tired from work at Gerta's, it felt good to sit on the bench and sing "When He Put a Little Sunshine In" along with the sisters and brothers. "All the world is bright and cheery," I sang. Brother Ferguson turned around, grinned at me. I grinned back.

Earlier, I decided I still wanted to be Brother Schwazier's lover. *What does it matter?* I asked myself. *We aren't hurting anyone, and we need each other.* But in church I felt like people were looking at me strange, like they couldn't figure out what I was up to. I decided it was all my imagination.

Norvin came by the trailer on Thursday evening with the divorce papers. I knew it was coming, so I wasn't shocked, just a little sad. I signed them at the bottom, then we gave each other a tight hug. He said bye. After

he left, I sat down on the couch, cried a few tears, then got up to wash the dishes.

I kept working hard at Gerta's, trying to save money so I could move by March 1. My jar was getting heavier. I watched the ads in the Fayetteville Gazette, hoping to find a house or an apartment I could afford. On Saturday, February 15, after I left Brother Schwazier's, I drove to a rent house on Tull Avenue listed in the paper. When I got there, the olive green paint was cracked everywhere and the front door hung crooked. No screens covered the old, loose windows. I left before the landlady got there.

On my way back to the trailer, I picked up a few empty produce boxes out of the trash bin behind Trumbo's Grocery. I needed to clean out my closet, get rid of all the clothes too big for me. My maternity clothes still hung in the closet, too. I decided I would go ahead, pack them and the dishes I could do without until I moved.

After I finished wrapping newspaper around glasses, bowls, saucers, plates, packing them in the boxes, I made myself some instant iced tea in a pint Mason jar. Sitting at the table, I thumbed through 101 Ways to Decorate on a Budget. I needed to get the book back to the library, pay for the Harlequin I ruined.

I missed Clyde when Norvin took him, and the sound of another dog barking made me look out the kitchen window. A long, bronze Oldsmobile pulled up at the end of the trailer, and Sister Melvina got out.

She's going to talk to me about doing more in church, I thought. I sat on the pew, listened mostly, and sang along with the other saints. But I hadn't been standing up, giving my testimony.

I watched Sister Melvina shut the door of her car. She frowned, like something was hurting her eyes. The corners of her mouth turned down.

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male." She put her hands up to her bun, took out a long hairpin, jabbed it back in her hair.

"But he would've told me. We always said we'd be open with each other," I said, talking to myself.

"O don't open up much. He's just good at getting women to open up. He's got a gift that way. Knows the right strings to pull, makes them pour their heart right out, lay it on a soft pillow, offer it up to him. Like one of them sweet little lambs in the Bible he talks about." Sister Melvina's foot scooted against the coffee table leg, making the lid rattle on the glass candy dish. She glanced hard at me. "What do you think now?"

"I don't know," I mumbled.

"Thought it was high time I told you, 'fore you get any silly ideas." She smoothed out the doily on the arm of the couch. "He did like I expected when you started to our little church. The soft, shy little girls always gets him at first. Brings out his protective nature, and he has to save them from the big, bad wolves out there." She laughed, looked at me, like I was supposed to think this funny. "Little girls like you, that lost look in their eyes, like they don't know what they want, can't figure out how to find it."

"You don't know what you're talking about," I said, standing up. I walked over to the kitchen window, stood with my back to her. The chill in my stomach spread inside me, into my arms and legs. I tried to keep from shivering.

"Believe me, honey, I seen it happen before." She stood up, walked into the kitchen, scraped a chair across the linoleum, sat down. "But you know what? He always comes back to me. I'm the strong woman with the big tits he likes to lay on. Makes him feel like a little boy all over again."

"Get out." I turned around, faced her. "Get out of here!" I yelled. I grabbed the door knob, threw the door open wide. "Leave! I don't want you here!" I ran to the couch, picked up her heavy purse, threw it out the door into the yard. It landed against the big elm tree. I hoped a mirror or something broke.

"My goodness! Don't get your bloomers in a knot!" her sharp voice boomed. She laughed, walked with splayed feet to the door. I remembered Mama teasing me when I was cranky, saying those same words. Only Mama's voice was honey; Sister Melvina's booming voice was sharp vinegar, an insult to my memory of Mama. As I watched Sister Melvina's broad, flat hips swing out the door, I fought against a strong desire to raise my foot, push her out on her face.

She picked up her bag by the tree, hunted through it, trying to find her keys. I ran to the door. "You're all a bunch of hypocrites!" I yelled, then slammed the door hard as I could. The pictures and the sunbeam clock on the wall rattled. I shook inside.

I took down the rest of my ruby red wine from DuLaney's, poured it into a glass. It was 5:30. I knew I wasn't going to church that night. I didn't think I would ever go again. At least not to the Church of the Brethren.

By 7:30 my wine was gone. My head hurt a little, but I felt the wine working its magic in my stomach. The stone was still there, but the wine warmed it, took the chill away. But I needed more.

I went into the bedroom, opened the closet. I pulled my faded purple sweat shirt over my head, threw it on the bed, stepped out of my old jeans. I took down the white textured body shirt I bought to look sexy for Norvin, slid it over my head, fastened the snaps in the crotch. Then I put on my best bell-bottomed jeans with the plaid flannel inset on the legs. After I combed

my hair, teasing and spraying to give it lift, I added more eye shadow and liner to bring out my eyes. I blotted my Candy Red lipstick on a piece of toilet paper, grabbed my tan corduroy coat and shoulder purse. I had ten dollars.

Five minutes later, I pulled in at the Hide-A-Way Bar on Sallie Street, two streets over from mine. I had never been inside this bar, but I always liked the neon flashing glass pouring out the martini, the way the olive blinked on and off.

The lights were dim when I opened the door. At first I had to strain to see through the haze of smoke. But I found an empty booth against the wall under a black cat clock. The cat had roving eyes and a swaying tail.

"Could I take your order?" A skinny waitress in a pink stretch mini-skirt stood waiting with her pen and pad. Her shoulders were bowed, and her shoulder-length blond hair hung in two lank strands on each side of her narrow, oily face. She looked tired, like she needed a good shower.

I hadn't thought about what drink I wanted. "I'll have a shot of tequila," I said.

"Coming right up," she said, and sashayed away.

I tried to relax, pretend I was used to bars. I felt eyes on me and squirmed, but didn't look up. Finally I got the nerve to raise my eyes, glance around. There were three other red vinyl booths and four green topped tables in the center. In one corner was a large pool table, and barstools lined the bar at one end. I hadn't thought about the music before, but it dawned on me a woman was singing. My eyes found her standing behind a microphone in the corner. I knew the song. "Stand by your man--" she sang, "and tell the world you love him--" She opened her arms as if to include the whole world, then threw back her long, bushy red hair, closed

her eyes and sang, "Give him two arms to cling to, when the nights are cold and lonely--"

Her voice made me want to cry. My nose started running and I sniffled. I picked up the white paper napkin, blew my nose. This short, little woman knew what being cold and lonely was all about. It was in her voice. I took a drink of my tequila in its shot glass and started choking. Trying to hold it down, I grabbed my water glass, drank. The bearded man sitting in the next booth watched me with a half-grin. My face turned red. He nodded his head at me and raised his glass of beer. I looked down at the table.

"I ain't seen you here before."

I raised my eyes. The woman singer stood next to my booth in tight jeans and a denim shirt with red and yellow beadwork on the yoke. "I haven't been here," I said.

"Mind if I joined you for a minute?" she asked.

"No, have a seat," I motioned.

She sat down, took her lighter from her pocket, lit a cigarette. "God, it's quiet here tonight--" she took a long drag. "especially for Saturday night. You live around here?"

"Quail Run Campsites. Over on Chesapeake Avenue," I said. When she sang, the dim spotlight made her skin look soft and smooth. Up close, I noticed her skin was dry and wrinkled. She wasn't as young as I first thought.

"I had a girlfriend lived there once. Delphine rode a Harley. Moved to San Francisco," she said. "By the way, my name is Nancy June. Nancy June Cooper." She held out her hand.

"I'm Lily Hueston," I said, taking her hand. It felt funny shaking hands with a woman.

Nancy June puffed on her cigarette and I took a small sip of tequila. "Annabelle!" Nancy June called to the waitress. "Bring me a Bloody Mary, hon." She turned to me. "Annabelle's groovy. A real sweet kid. Had a hard time, but she's pullin' out of it."

I didn't know what to say. "That's nice." I wiped the ring on the table with my napkin. "How long you been singing?" I asked.

"Bout all my life," she said. "I been singin' in bars for around ten years." Nancy June stubbed out her cigarette. She sat back in the booth. "You got a job somewhere?"

"Over at Gerta's Diner on Deer Street."

"I ate there two or three times," she said. "You a waitress?"

"Yeah."

"Good tips?"

"Pretty good. I'm trying to save enough money to move," I said.

Nancy June propped her elbows on the table, leaned forward. "You ever notice that place across the street from Gerta's? Olga's Topless Dancing?"

"Yeah. But I never went inside," I said.

"It's a classy place--white linen tableclothes and lit candles on every table. Good dancers, too. I sung there two or three times when they had a party," she said. We both sat quiet for a moment in the booth.

"How old are you?" Nancy June asked.

"Almost twenty," I said.

"I was thinking, with boobs like yours, you could probably rake in eighty to a hundred dollars a night dancing at Olga's," she said.

I looked at her, shocked. "I don't think so--"

"Be a quick way to earn your movin' money."

"I'd be too embarrassed," I said.

"They show you how. It ain't like you're all alone doing it."

I didn't want to be all alone. I wanted to be part of something, to belong. For a while, I thought I was a part of a family at the Church of the Brethren.

Nancy June touched my arm on the table. "Tell you what, how about me and you going over to Olga's next Friday night? I'm off work then."

"Okay," I said. It didn't hurt to check it out.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Catalina wouldn't start on Wednesday morning when I left for work at Gerta's. I waved at Cal Nunley, the sandy blond young man in the trailer across the street. He was warming up his Ford pickup in the late February chill, on his way to his job at Rerun's Barbeque, where he smoked meat. His wife, Jodie, watched out the trailer window, holding their two month-old baby boy, Dougy. The skies hung heavy with gray clouds.

"What's the problem?" he asked, walking over to me, rubbing his hands together, pulling his sock cap down lower.

"I don't know. I can't get it to turn over," I said, trying the switch, pumping the pedal.

"Maybe your battery's dead. You going to flood it if you don't quit," he said.

"I got to start it," I said, pumping up and down. "Got to get to work."

"Will you quit?" he asked, looking aggravated. "Let your car set a little bit. I can run you by work if it won't start."

"Okay. But I got to get it running," I said.

"Scoot over," he said. He scooted in beside me. "We'll sit here, try to start it in a minute." He looked at his watch. "I got fifteen minutes before I open up."

I smelled his clean soap scent as he sat next to me. He was handsome, scrubbed-looking. With him inside, the cold car started to feel warmer. For a minute, I envied Jodie, her being able to lie next to him at night. I shook my shoulders. As usual, I craved warmth.

"Want my coat to spread over you?" Cal asked.

"No, I'm fine," I said.

"How's Norvin?" he asked.

"Last I heard he was doing okay," I said. "Still with that red-haired woman, Stella. We filed for a divorce last month."

"Yeah," he said, his head down. He shook his head, then looked at me. "I'll try it again," he said, turning the key. The only noise was a click. "Why don't you ride with me to work? I'll jump it when we get home this evening."

"Okay." I waved to Dougy as I climbed into the pickup.

After we got home from work, Cal jumped the Pontiac and it started. Then he followed me to Brackett's Garage, where I left my car. An older man at the cash register told me, "You'll need to see Simon. He's the mechanic who looked at your car." Then he yelled, "Simon, there's a pretty woman out here to see you."

When Simon walked in, the older man said to him, "See--I told you she was pretty." The mechanic grinned at me, said a shy "Hi" in response to my hello.

"What did you find out?" I asked him.

"You need a new alternator, ma'am," he said. He was a man of few words. I realized he was tongue-tied. *I'll bet he's not that way around the men*, I thought. I wondered what I could say to make him feel at ease.

I smiled at him. "I really appreciate you looking at my car," I said. He didn't answer, just nodded his head and grinned as he wiped his hands on the grease rag.

"When should I pick up my car?" I asked.

"Take me about two days," he said.

"Boy, that guy had the hots for you," Cal said on our ride back. "Never seen nothing like it--a shy mechanic, of all things." He laughed, shook his head. "You know," he said, glancing at me, "he's right. You're a fine looking woman. I just haven't been looking you over," he said, grinning. He turned his head sideways, studying me, "Not bad--not bad at all . . ."

"Will you hush," I said, smiling, secretly pleased.

I thought about how I was going to pay for the car repair. I knew I would have to use my tip money in the Mason jar. This made me depressed because I didn't want to spend my moving money. I needed to move out of the trailer.

I didn't have to be at work until 10:30 the next morning, so I walked three blocks north of Quail Run Campsites to the Department of Human Services and applied for food stamps.

"We can allow you fifty dollars a month for the next three months," the counselor told me, looking above her bifocals. "That should get you by this tough spot you're in."

"Yeah, that's all I need," I said, sitting on the edge of the avocado molded plastic chair. "If my car didn't break down, I would've made it--" I pushed up and down on the top of the ballpoint pen I used to fill out the application.

"Those things happen sometimes," she said, signing her name at the bottom of the form. She tore off a carbon copy, stood up, handed it to me. "You should be getting your first allotment in the mail within two weeks. Okay?"

"Thank you. Like I said, I'm looking for a better job, too--"

She dropped my file in her metal desk drawer. "Good luck," she opened the door. "Let me know if your situation changes."

"I will." As I walked down the hallway, I folded up the form as small as I could get it, put it in my billfold.

Nancy June called me at seven o'clock on Friday morning. "We still on for Ogla's?"

"I don't have my car," I said. "It's in the garage."

"Hell, that don't matter. We can go in my Pinto." I hesitated. "Pick you up tonight at nine?" she said.

"Okay."

"Which trailer you in?"

"Number twelve," I said. "It's the olive green and white one with the big tree--what'll I wear?"

"Somethin' sexy--the sexiest thing you can find," Nancy June's laugh was throaty, coarse. "I'm wearin' my red hot pants with black suspenders and black boots. We got lots a competition, all them naked women." She hung up.

That night while my bathwater ran, I looked through my closet, took down the low-cut white silk blouse and short black skirt I wore the first night I made love with Norvin at Bluff Landing. "Almost four years ago," I said aloud. It seemed at least ten years, so much had happened.

When I packed boxes a few days before, I left the blouse and skirt hanging in my closet, hoping, somehow, I could seam it up. I unbuttoned my maroon striped waitress uniform, let it fall to the floor. Then I stepped into the black skirt, slid my arms through the thin chiffon sleeves of the blouse. Walking into the bathroom, I stood in front of the mirror buttoning my blouse down the front, fastening the clasp on the skirt. As I thought, both were too big. I could get both hands inside the waistband of my skirt. The shoulder seams of the blouse sagged. I felt good that I lost so much weight. Still, I needed something to wear to Olga's.

After I took a bath, I finally settled on the grass green silk button-down-the-front blouse with a collar. The blouse was plain, but the vee neck showed my cleavage. That was about as sexy as I could get with the clothes in my closet, except the white body shirt I wore to the Hide-A-Way bar. I put on a cream colored corduroy skirt that came just above my knees, stepped into tan heels. I added large gold hoop earrings. I smiled at myself in the mirror, tossed my hair back, puckered my lips, said, "Not bad--not bad at all."

Olga's was dimly lit with when we entered, rose-colored lights against black. After Nancy June paid the three dollar cover charge for both of us, a waitress in a tuxedo jacket and black hose led us to a table near the center of the large room. "I'm Cindy," she smiled stiffly. "I'll be your waitress tonight. Just raise the little white flag here, like this." She held up the flag between her thumb and forefinger, like she was afraid she might break a scarlet nail, then propped it in its black metal holder.

"See?" We both nodded. "I'll be back for you to order your drinks," she said, handing us the wine list. She prissed off to meet two men standing near the door.

"La de da and kiss my ass to you too," Nancy June mocked behind Cindy's back. "See?" She pinched the little flag between her fingers, waved it in front of my face, closing her eyes, her face in a smirk. I grinned, sat down in the black plush chair, lay my purse on the table, then glanced around. A red velvet curtain was pulled across the stage. As I thought, the customers were mostly men sitting around small tables, waiting, holding their drinks.

"You're right," I said, turning to Nancy June. "The place is nice. The candles and everything."

"This is one classy hangout," she said, raising her brows up and down, grinning. "Look at the chandeliers. You ever see anything sparkly like 'em in your cotton pickin' life?"

"No." I felt men eyeing us, probably wondering why two women were at a topless bar alone. "You Send Me" played soft in the background. I twisted my mood ring around on my finger. The stone was a dark, cloudy gray, which meant I was tense, nervous, or excited. *Probably all three*, I thought. Wondering when the act would start, I fidgeted with the hoop in my ear, trying not to look up, catch some man looking at me.

With her finger, Nancy June made three fast pecks on my arm. "That man over there's watchin' you."

"Where?" I asked, turning my head.

"Don't look! Don't look!" she whispered loud, sharp. "He'll see you. He's the man that came in ahead of us, in the orange polo shirt, 'member? Play it cool. Keep 'em guessin' a while."

"What's he look like?" I whispered back. I couldn't remember. "Is he good looking?" I leaned forward, my arms crossed beneath my breasts.

Nancy June studied him, was quiet. Finally, she said, "To tell the god-honest truth, the man's kinda wimpy lookin'." She puckered her engine-red lips, "Still, there's something catchin' about him, 'round the eyes, I think. He has pale eyes--you ever seen pale eyes on a man?"

"No, I don't think so." I thought a second. "No, I haven't." I thought of Brother Schwazier's gray eyes. "Not real pale ones."

"Kinda gives 'em a dreamy, softy look." She unrolled the red cotton napkin, was turning the salad fork around in her hand. "With eyes like that and a muscled-up body--gosh-dern it!" She snorted, shook her head, red hair sliding around her shoulders. "Make a woman pee on herself!"

I grinned, couldn't help myself. I wasn't used to hearing another woman talk crude. I didn't want to laugh, but Nancy June brought it out of me.

"That little guy over there, though, he don't have it," she continued. "Narrow shoulders, no ummmph! to 'em--'cept his eyes, that is." For someone who told me not to look, she stared hard at him, her eyes breaking him down into little pieces. "I wouldn't mind takin' him in the sack, I tell you. Them little guys can surprise you sometimes." She laughed. "Bet you don't know what to think of me, do you? Your eyes look like pie plates."

I smiled. "I'll get used to you, I guess," I said.

She took her Camels out of her purse, lit one with a gold lighter, initials NJ written curlique on the side. She took a deep drag, held the cigarette out in front of her with a flair, propping her arm on the table. "It's takin' that Cindy girl a god-awful long time to come back to our table." Nancy June grabbed the flag, stood it up straight in its holder. "There."

"Yes? What will you ladies have tonight?" Cindy stood at my elbow.

"I'll have a Bloody Mary," I said. I'd never had a Bloody Mary, but it looked interesting when Nancy June ordered it at the Hide-A-Way bar.

"Give me a scotch, hon," Nancy June said, patting Cindy on the arm. She stubbed out her Virginia Slim, said, "When I sung here it was Country Night. In between the cowgirls flopping around their boobs, I sung 'You Ain't Woman Enough to Take My Man,' Brenda Lee's 'I'm Sorry', and 'Big Girls Don't Cry', and my version of 'Hello, Darlin'--I saw tears in some of them men's eyes." She stared into space. "They'd say 'Sang it, Nancy June!'" She shook out another cigarette. "I did--I sure did! I sung my gol-derned heart out!" In the dim light, her eyes looked wet, shiny. "I tell you, there ain't nothin' like it, not even sex--and believe you me, I had some good lovin' men in my bed." Nancy June shook her head, took a drink of her scotch. I smiled, sipped at my Bloody Mary.

The music suddenly grew loud, and the steady drum throbs of "Gimme Some Lovin" hit the air. She grabbed my arm, "It's about to start. You'll see--I know you'd be so good at this. A natural, or my name ain't Nancy June!"

The curtain rolled back, and three women were dancing in short skirts and halter tops. Men put their fingers to their lips and whistled shrill. "The one in the middle's Olga's main dancer--Veronica's her name. 'Course, it's not her real name. She's real nice when you talk to her. I don't know them other two women." Nancy June looked at me. "She's enjoying herself, you can tell--Veronica, I mean. Who wouldn't, with all these men pantin' after you." Veronica's reddish-brown hair, pinned high on her head, was starting to fall. She didn't have the perfect figure; her waist was thick. But she

moved her body to the drum beats as if she were the most beautiful woman in the world. *Confidence, that's what it is*, I thought.

By the time "Gimme Some Lovin'" finished, the women had slung off every piece of clothing to the audience except their g-strings, which had dollar bills stuck in them. The curtain closed, and the men relaxed back in their chairs, smiling at each other. "Chantilly Lace," turned down low, became the background until the next dance.

"There's Olga," Nancy June said. "See her, over there talkin' to the bartender?" An older woman made hand movements as she talked rapidly to the man mixing drinks. Her slick gray hair was twisted into a high knot on top of her head, her eyes thick with dark charcoal eyeshadow, giant earrings dangling almost to her shoulders. She wore a watery gold brocade mu'u mu'u with turquoise beads sewn on the yoke and around her ankles. "Olga!" Nancy June stood up, waving at the owner, motioning her over. She glanced down at me, "I just gotta have her talk to you, let her see you."

Her back straight, head back, Olga worked her way toward our table, waving and blowing kisses at different men as she walked. "Nancy June! How good to see you!" They hugged tightly. She pulled out a chair. "I just have a moment, but I wanted to visit with you." *Elegance*, I thought. *She's overweight, but she has elegance*. I liked the word.

Nancy June grabbed my hand, "Olga, this is a good friend of mine, Lily Hueston. A looker, ain't she?"

"Nice to meet you," I said, embarrassed.

"I'm so happy to meet you, Lily," she said as we shook hands, smiled at each other. She seemed to be around sixty.

"Lily here's looking for a job. I told her I thought you might be looking for another dancer, Olga. She might be a smidgin' shy at first, but she's got the build, don't you think?"

Olga looked at me. "Tell you what, Lily, why don't you come by Monday night around eight, and we'll talk. Will that be suitable?"

I nodded, said "Yes, that's fine." On the stage, Veronica was in the middle of swaying to "Light My Fire." She unfastened her bra, threw it out into the audience. Men reached, grabbed, trying to catch it. Men whistled. I realized how much I wanted attention, wanted men to admire me.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I stood shaking behind the velvet curtain. My fumbling fingers tried to pull up the front of my royal blue sequined blouse. I was afraid my breasts would pop out. "What difference does it make?" I mumbled. "You're going to show them anyway." I remembered my supper of canned hominy, a bread heel, and this made me lower my arms, stick out my breasts. My food stamps hadn't arrived yet.

I was supposed to be a cool lady of the night in black seamed hose with three tiny diamond rhinestones at the ankles, spiked alligator heels, a long skirt with a split to my thigh, the sequined blouse, and a small black satin hat pulled low, the veil covering my eyes. I loved the outfit. The black shimmery skirt reached to the bottom of my calves, wrapped so tight I was afraid I would pop the one button holding it at my waist.

Santana's "Black Magic Woman" began. The curtain came open. I closed my eyes, let the music cover me. Somewhere in the background I heard the whistles of men. I allowed my body to go limp, swayed to the feeling inside me. It had been too long since I was with a man. I now knew what good loving felt like. Brother Schwazier taught me that. I moved my wide hips in a circle, unbuttoned my skirt. It fell on the floor. I kept moving my hips, turned around where the men could see the seams of my hose up the backs of my legs, a hint of the royal blue satin g-string. Still swaying my hips, I unfastened the one snap of my blouse, slid it off my arms, tossed it to

the side. I *was* the Black Magic Woman. I straightened my shoulder, slit my eyes. "You put your spell on me, baby--you put your spell on me, baby--" I reached down one leg, released the top of my hose from the black lacy garter belt. "Be-cause you're mine--" Sliding it down my leg, I leaned over, brushed the toe of my thin hose across a man's face. They whistled, yelling for me to throw it.

The air was hot, heavy. But I had never felt so light, so powerful. I kept dancing. Sweat ran down between my breasts. I unpinned my hat, threw it to the men. Now I was unveiled, but I didn't care. I narrowed my eyes, looked at the men, unfastened my lacy midnight blue bra in front with one hand, releasing my big breasts. The air felt good. I saw the pleasure on their faces. In the crowd, one face seemed to stand out in the dim light, draw my attention. He wore a suit and tie, and I wondered how he could see, with his dark glasses. My eyes glided over him, and I realized the song was almost over, gyrated to the edge of the stage. Hands reached for my g-string. I bent over, let my breasts swing, slowed my dance.

It was over. The men whistled, clapped, yelling "More, more!" The curtain closed between me and them. I glanced down at myself, realizing how naked I was. I picked up my clothes, tried to wrap them around me, headed for the dressing room. "You did great, Lily." Veronica passed me in a lavender satin robe, touched me on the shoulder.

"Thanks," I said. I couldn't wait to get my clothes back on. I was pulling on my jeans when someone knocked on the door. Olga came in, stood beside me. "You're a natural, Lily," she smiled. "I'm so pleased to have you here with us."

"Thank you." I tucked in my blouse.

"So, how much cash did you make? Good, I'll bet."

"I haven't counted the money yet," I said, pointing to the roll of bills mixed with the tubes of makeup on the dressing table.

"Here, I'll help you," Olga said, picking up the bills. She flipped fast through them, made a neat stack in her hand, looked at me. "Two hundred and eighty-seven dollars. That's very good--especially for your first night." She handed me the money, smiled at my surprise. "Take it home and celebrate, and I'll see you tomorrow night, honey."

"Okay. Bye," I said. I sat down, stared into the oval mirror, not seeing myself. "I can get off food stamps if I keep this up," I whispered. "Move out of the trailer, get a better car" I jumped up, jammed the money in my purse, grabbed my coat, turned out the light. I was nervous as I slammed the metal side door, headed for my car, like eyes were watching me. So I walked fast.

I pulled in front of the trailer at 4 a.m. I was so tired, my bones ached. But as soon as I walked in the door, I took the Mason jar down from the kitchen cabinet. "I need to buy a money order," I muttered, cramming the roll of bills in the jar. "Or put it in the bank." Taking off my clothes, I threw them in the bathroom floor, then showered.

The phone rang just as I crawled into bed. I thought about not answering, but made a mad dash down the hall, grabbed the receiver off the kitchen wall, wondering who could be calling at this ungodly hour. "Hello?"

"The daughter of Zion is haughty, walking and mincing, with a stretched forth neck and wanton eyes--a Jezebel--" The male voice was soft, raspy.

"What?" I yelled. "Who is this?" I swallowed hard, knowing the voice.

"God will smite with a scab the crown of the head of the daughter of Zion--the chains, the bracelets, the rings, and nose jewels--"

--"I won't listen to this!" I moved the receiver from my ear, started to put it on the hook.

"Lily, Lily! Listen to me! I was there--I saw you, watched you dance!" Brother Schwazier said.

I remembered the man in the suit and dark glasses. "I got to hang up."

"No, no, wait, honey. Please, just give me a minute--" He paused. I was silent but didn't hang up. "Lily, baby, God is not pleased with you turning your back on His church."

"I still believe in God," I rushed in. "Dancing has nothing to do with it."

"Lily, listen to me, baby. You're a daughter of Zion. You been born into His church, *sanctified, purified* for the Master's use!" Brother Schwazier let his voice fall, "You know that, don't you?" I didn't answer. "Lily, my beautiful Lily!" he whispered. "He brought you into the fold to do His work, not to become as the harlot, bringing lust and lasciviousness to the eyes of men Think about this, baby."

I swallowed, feeling a pain of guilt in my stomach. "Why were *you* at Olga's?" I yelled.

"The Bible says 'Go out into the highways and byways, seeking lost souls'--'*seek* that which has gone astray', it says over in Matthew, eighteen and twelve My work calls me, sometimes, to the men and women who got off the path. The lost lambs."

--"You don't fool me anymore. You came to see the women's navels, their breasts bouncing," I said. "just like all the other men."

He groaned. "Oh, Lily, I confess, when I saw your body moving, your hips, your titties in the dim light that I've held, squeezed--"

I hung up the receiver with a bang. My heart pounded hard in my chest. For a second as he talked, I fought a war inside myself, wanting him. I shivered, turned on the kitchen faucet, took out the hot water bottle from the cabinet in the corner, filled it. The phone rang again, kept ringing. I carried the red bottle back to bed, put it against my stomach.

The phone quit ringing. I saw the Sunday morning daylight just before I finally dozed off, the hot water bottle lukewarm against my ribs. I dreamed I was at the Church of the Brethren singing "Come--unto Me--and I--will give you rest" with Brother Farguson, Sister Patricia, Sister Darla, and the other saints. "Do unholy feelings--struggle in your breast?," we sang.

From the piano bench, Sister Melvina smiled back at me. Her mouth moved. She tried to tell me something, but I couldn't hear. She stood, stretched out her arm to me. Above the singing, I heard her voice. "Peace, fellowship, love," she said, and smiled at me again.

"No," I said, shaking my head. I woke myself saying "No! No! Stay away! It's not here, not here . . ." I opened my eyes, shivered. My whole body was chilled, wet, like I fell in an ice pond. The sheets were soaked.

Something hard dug into the small of my back. I reached under myself, pulled out the black stopper from the hot water bottle. I felt the empty rubber bottle under my thigh.

I kept dancing at Olga's on Saturday nights, waitressing at Gerta's during the week. Working at Gerta's Diner was hard work, but I didn't want to stop yet because I needed to stay busy, waitressing had become routine, and I still needed the money--even though the smell of greasy

hamburgers sometimes made me feel sick. At Olga's, I watched Veronica and the other girls, learned how to put on the heavy stage makeup and handle myself with men. I learned how to tell them no without hurting their feelings, where they'd pay to come back. I loved the red sequined, tight-fitting dress, the silver spiked heels. Each night I danced, I played a part, a role, whether it was the snobby rich girl dancing to the Rolling Stones' "Satisfaction," or the innocent, wide-eyed girl moving, swaying to "Love Me Tender." When I danced to Elvis's song, I always thought of Mama, even though I didn't want to. One night I glanced across the crowd of men, thought I saw Brother Schwazier. But when I looked again, he was gone. I decided I was imagining things.

"Think about a stage name," Olga told me after my second night of dancing. "Something exotic, mysterious, like your slanted velvet eyes, the way you move."

I felt a little embarrassed. "Okay," I said.

"Something pantherish." She smiled, waved her inch-long silver fingernails, "I'll think about it, too--then we'll get together and talk." She touched my arm, "By the way, honey lamb, you were great tonight. The men really love you." She wiggled her wet black penciled brows, smiled, then left.

The next Saturday night, Olga stepped to the mike, said, "Men, let's give a big hand for our hot mystery lady, Jaguara!" The men clapped hard, whistled, cheered when I walked out wearing a small black mask studded with diamonds.

After that, every Saturday night I became Jaguara, which seemed so far from Lily. But when I danced, I didn't feel like Lily. For a little while, I

wasn't the tired, scared Lily that waited tables, filled plastic catsup and mayonnaise bottles every day at Gerta's, saved money in a Mason jar, lived on food stamps, alone in a trailer park. I became the beautiful, sexy Jaguar men wanted but couldn't quite touch. They couldn't get past my silky, lacy g-strings.

But every night right after my dance, when I started back to my dressing room, I couldn't wait to get into my jeans and cotton shirt. I started counting my money in the dressing room; then when I got back to the trailer at 4 a.m., I could stick the roll of bills in the Mason jar, then take a hot shower. I always scrubbed down with Dial, then rubbed Jergen's lotion all over my body so the soap wouldn't dry my skin.

By my birthday, Monday, April 23, I had saved \$1000. I was twenty, felt like thirty. I sat at the kitchen table at 6 a.m., remembered my birthday the year before. At Sunday School, Brother Schwazier had the saints sing "Lily of the Valley" in my honor, and Sister Patricia baked me a cake. That was the day Brother Schwazier asked me to work for him on Saturdays. Suddenly I laughed. "You've gone from working for a preacher to dancing topless in a joint," I said out loud. "In one year." I snorted, shook my head. "You're moving up in the world, girl."

Nancy June came over that night, brought her guitar, a bottle of red wine, a quart of Blue Bunny vanilla ice cream, and a Strawberry Jello cake with twenty yellow candles. "I know the candles don't match," she said, her jeans so tight when she bent over the table I wanted to stick her bottom with a pin. She was a good friend. "Them being yellow and all," she kept talking, "and the cake being pink." She glanced at me under her coarse mane of red hair to see what I thought of the cake. "Yellow's all the store had."

"I think it's beautiful!" I got up from the chair at the end of the table, hugged her. "Thank you, Nancy June, for baking me this cake." I squeezed her to me. I knew she liked the hug, but I felt her stiffen up.

She turned back to the table, rolled up a fork and spoon in white paper napkins, laid the two tight, skinny rolls on the table. "I just used a Pillsbury cake mix. Bought a little box of froze strawberries, threw in a package of strawberry jello. Easy as snorin' in church on Sunday."

She took out her gold lighter with NJ on it, lit all the candles. Pulling out a chair, she said, "Now, you gotta make a wish." I bent over to look closer at the cake, and Nancy June thought I was about to blow. "Take your time, take your time," she said. "No hurry, we got all night. Make it a good one. Think hard." She jumped up. "Tell you what, I'll sing Happy Birthday to you, how's that?" She grabbed her guitar, ran back with it. Nancy June sat in the kitchen chair, sang to me with her soulful voice. Tears came to my eyes

"My god and tarnation, girl!" she said when she finished. "This is supposed to be a party. Don't you go and get all sappy on me."

"Okay," I sniffled.

"I'm so proud of you, I want you to know! I told you, didn't I? Bet you're the best dancer over there You make a wish yet?"

"Yeah." I hadn't, but I hurried and wished for my own house. I looked at Nancy June. She held up her hand, "Don't tell, don't tell!" she said. "It won't come true if you tell." She looked hard at me. "I bet it's about some man, ain't it?" I shook my head.

"No," I said.

"Like I believe that--'bout like I believe cows can fly."

"Pigs."

"Huh? Well, go ahead and blow!"

I blew out all the candles, then smiled at her. "Don't you move," she said. "This is your birthday." Nancy June cut the cake, dipped ice cream, popped the cork, and poured the wine.

Later we moved into the living room, drank the rest of the wine, watched the Monday Night Movie on CBS. Daddy and Kay called, wished me Happy Birthday. Then Daddy asked, "Things still going all right at Gerta's, hon? You making a living okay?"

"Yeah, Daddy, I'm fine. Don't you worry about me." I twisted the phone cord between my fingers, glad he was still wrapped up in his new marriage to Kay. He would have been heartbroken if he knew his little girl danced topless at Olga's.

"Guess you know about Norvin, don't you?" he asked.

"No, I haven't seen him lately," I said. "What is it?" I suddenly felt a chill. "Nothing bad, I hope."

"He's been drafted. Left two days ago for Vietnam. Our boys just bombed Hanoi, so I guess he'll be right in the middle.

"I didn't say anything for a moment. "I was hoping the war was about over," I said. *Why didn't he call me?* I thought, half mad. *But why should he?* I asked myself.

"No . . . I've got to go, hon. Kay has supper ready," Daddy said.

"Happy birthday, little girl."

"Thanks Daddy," I said, and hung up feeling sad, remembering Norvin laughing, trying to make jokes to cheer me up the night at the Pizza Hut. I felt guilty. If we had stayed married he might not have been drafted.

By midnight, Nancy June and I were both almost asleep. "Want to stay all night?" I asked. "I don't have an extra bed, but we'll manage."

"I gotta get back to my apartment, my cat's probly throwing a conniption fit, prancin' back and forth to his bowl. I call him George Jones." She glanced at me, "You know--the whole thing, George Jones. He looks kinda possumy too." She stood up stiffly, limped over, picked up her guitar. "I set still too long," she said.

"Thank you, Nancy June, for everything," I said as she walked down the steps.

"Yeah. I'll call you tomorrow," she said, moving out to her Pinto, yawning. I heard her shift into gear and roar out of the driveway.

I locked the front door, went into my bedroom to get my nightgown before I showered. The window was open, and the curtain blowing. I thought I closed it right before Nancy June came. "Guess I didn't," I said out loud. I stood in my bedroom, trying to remember for sure.

"Hello, Lily." I whirled around. Brother Schwazier leaned against the wall behind my bedroom door.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

I gasped. "What the *hell* do you think you're doing here?" My legs trembled. I didn't want him to know how he scared me, so I kept standing, facing him, mad.

He propped one shoe against the wall, crossed his arms. "This was the only way I could get you to talk to me. Break in your bedroom."

I noticed he wore the ragged navy tennis shoes I put in the trash at his house. "Get out of here, before I call the police!" I glared at him.

He snorted. "Go ahead," he said, barring the doorway with his arm, grinning. "You got to move past me."

I sat down on the end of the bed. "What do you want, anyway?"

"Them other men can't have you, Lily." He stared at me, tight-lipped, making his hands into fists.

"Them other men *don't* have me!" I yelled, standing up. "Besides, what's it to you? You don't own me, never will!"

"You're mine in God's sight, Lil'," he said. "I showed you love and the Truth, God's Truth." He moved, put out his arm, moving it toward my hair. "The lust of other men would defile you," he whispered.

I backed up, felt the closet door against the back of my legs. I bent down, started grabbing all the shoes I could find, throwing them one by one at Brother Schwazier--my red pumps, white pumps, black spiked heels, work shoes, garden shoes.

He kept dodging, saying "Ouch!" when the black spiked heel caught him above his left eye. Then I started on my purses. He moved in on me. I grabbed the gold ceramic lamp, pulled the cord out of its socket, aimed it. "Lily, Lily, Lily," he said, his voice low, "you couldn't, wouldn't do that, baby." He moved toward me. "Remember? I was the one showed you how to love" He took a step closer. "You're mine, God made you mine." He held out his hand, reached for me, "Come on, baby, quit being foolish--"

I threw the gold lamp. He stepped back and the lamp crashed against the corner of the chest, breaking in pieces. "See," he said. "You wasted a good lamp for nothin' Come here, baby."

He slammed me down on the bed, straddled me, his knees pinning down my arms. I couldn't move. I tried to bring my knee up between his legs, but his legs were around my waist. He leaned down, put all his body weight against my chest. "Nobody does that to Brother Schwazier, sweetie," he whispered. "You *know* what I'm going to do to you now, don't you?"

I shook my head. "No" I pleaded, trying to move.

"Like I said, you're mine, you're my woman." He grabbed the neck of my blouse with both hands, popped off all the buttons, pulled it open. "You *know* I can be gentle, baby," he said against my ear. "Remember how good it was for us? How our loving made you cry?" Holding my arms apart, he nibbled on my ear.

"No!" I yelled. "Not anymore." I twisted my body but couldn't get him off. "It's over," I said. He kissed me up and down my neck. "Get off me!" I yelled, trying again to bring my knee up. This time it worked. He yelled, stood halfway up, grabbing his crotch.

I jumped up, ran toward the door, yelling, "I'm going to my neighbors, calling the police!"

He moaned.

"You better be out of here by the time I get back!" I yelled.

"Lily--" he said.

I didn't wait to listen to his next words. I ran, holding my blouse together.

From Cal and Jodie's trailer window, I watched Brother Schwazier stagger out the door a minute later. Cal walked me back to my trailer. Then I locked the window and the front door, took the hottest shower I could stand. "I hate him," I said aloud, knowing a part of me would always remember the good in him. I scrubbed my skin with the towel. I changed the sheets, and crawled back into bed. The clock said 3:30.

At Gerta's the next morning while business was slow after the breakfast rush, I looked through the Fayetteville Gazette for a place to rent. I circled a one-bedroom duplex on Oktaha Street, a partially furnished one-bedroom apartment at Keetoowah Village Apartments with gas and electric paid, an upstairs apartment above Sunshine Dry Cleaners on Fredonia Avenue.

I moved in the apartment above Sunshine Dry Cleaners on Thursday. The building was old, but clean and private. "Nobody bothers you up here," Mr. Brosek, the landlord and the owner of Sunshine Cleaners told me, catching his breath after we stepped inside the door. "Especially at night when the cleaners is closed "Whew! Those stairs are about too much for an old man."

"Here, sit down," I said, motioning toward, the only piece of furniture, a spool-backed wooden chair pushed up against the huge wooden post in the center of the apartment.

"Yeah, I better," he said. He pulled on the front legs of his gray khaki pants, squatted down on the chair. Pushing his black-rimmed glasses up on his round nose, he said, "Be glad when my son takes over the business full-time. 'Course, he's too busy, working on his law degree Go ahead, missy, look around all you want."

The apartment was all one big room and a small bathroom, with a partition which looked like fence posts, floor to ceiling, dividing off the bedroom. I liked it. I checked the burners, turned on the water, flushed the commode. "I'll take it," I said, smiling at Mr. Brosek.

He grinned. "I like a woman that can make up her mind," he said. Standing up, he removed his red baseball cap, ran his square fingers through his soft white hair.

He really is a sweet old man, I thought, handing him the cash for \$175 rent and \$100 deposit. The utilities came with the rent. I was pleased.

Nancy June and I loaded everything we could in her Pinto and my Catalina. George Jones came along, kept following us up and down the boarded stairs, until I accidentally stepped on the white tip of his smokey-colored tail. Then he screeched, ran and hopped through the open window of Nancy June's Pinto.

We carried egg boxes back and forth until our legs ached. Cal helped us after he came home from Rerun's, loading the couch, end tables, coffee table, kitchen table and chairs on his truck. The moving took him two trips, but he didn't seem to mind.

After we cleaned out the trailer, Nancy June and I took the broom, mop, and cleaning supplies back to the apartment. I made some Nestea in a plastic pitcher, unwrapped two jelly glasses, found a metal tray of ice in the small Frigadaire. Covered with sweat and grime, we took the tea out on the veranda, sat cross-legged on the board floor, looking down at the cars and heads of little people on the sidewalk.

I told Nancy June about Brother Schwazier, when I first met him in the laundromat, the Church of the Brethren, cleaning his house, being his lover, and how he broke in the trailer the night of my birthday. "I'm all mixed up," I said, rubbing the back of my neck.

"My god and tarnation, no wonder, honey!" Nancy June gripped my wrist. "That man's crazy as a loon!"

"Part of me hates him, but I still keep giving in," I said, trying to rub a black grease mark off my leg.

"Probly full of charm, ain't he? Them kind of men will get you every time." She played with George Jone's paw, looked across the street, her eyes focusing on the flashing Donut Hole sign. "I knew this one man. Talk about handsome! Make a girl's panties drop right around her ankles just lookin' at him."

I shook my head. "Nancy June," I said, and laughed.

"Name was Tim. I called him Tim Jim, I don't know why. We spent five months together. Five months of heaven and hell. I was always either floatin' on Cloud Nine sangin' with the golden angels, or down in the dark pits of Hades. I oughta write a song about it." Nancy June lifted the cat's paw, squeezed it between her thumb and forefinger, started to bring it up to her mouth, then realized what she was doing. "Ohhhhh, sorry George Jones

... Mama is *so* sorry ... " She pulled the cat up to her chest, hugged him to her, rubbing his back.

She stared at the blinking donut again. "He came waltzin' in one Saturday night at Spanky's over on York Street. I remember I was sangin' "Don't Come Home A Drinkin' With Lovin' On Your Mind'. Back in 1963. Winter-time. I remember it was cold Anyway, I had on this bright green sequined dress--a sheath, they call it--slit up my thigh . . . " George Jones purred in his sleep.

"He had these long, never-ending legs in Wranglers and alligator boots. I almost forgot what I was sangin'. He grinned straight at me, and Lily," she stared at me, "he had these deep dimples you could swim in. I was drownin' right thencouldn't help myself" She looked at a white puffy cloud.

"So he asked you out--" I said, trying to bring her back to earth.

"Hell. He moved right in that night. I gave him half the closet for all his pointed boots and Wranglers, he'd stay two weeks and I'd have some lovin' that was out of this world--stars, moons, and all, circlin'. Then he'd wake up one mornin', tell me he was suffocatin', pack everything, be gone for three weeks." Nancy June took a drink of the watered-down tea. "I'd drop straight down into the fiery depths of hell and damnation, drink like a dog for a week. Then just when I was pullin' out of it, lookin' around, admirin', I'd open the door, and there'd stand Prince Charmin' hisself, dimples and all, plain as the nose on your face."

"What did you do?"

"What any red-blooded, crazy woman would do--I led him straight to the bed, pulled back the covers." She looked at me to see how I took this. We laughed.

"How'd you get over him?" I asked.

"Another man. Name was Herman Escoc. A older man, 'bout seventy. Real thoughtful 'Nancy June', he'd say, 'you look cold here, take my jacket, honey'. Then he'd spread it out real nice like on my shoulders. He was educated, traveled a lot overseas, Spain, Tokyo, and all. I was lovin' him."

"What happened?"

"He died. Keeled over, dead as a door knob, one night right at the kitchen table. I cooked a big pot of spaghetti and meatballs, was gettin' the bread out of the toaster. Herman opened a bottle of this expensive white wine he bought, eleven dollars I think, was pouring it into two glasses. 'I think we'll really like this, honey', he said, then fell, face down, in his clean plate I would of married him," she said, looking at me.

I didn't know what to say. "I'm sorry."

"Hey, he kicked the bucket, okay? My goodness, look at us, settin' out here on this porch gettin' more down in the dumps ever minute. Pretty soon, our heads will be hangin' so low we'll just plain fall down into the street." She jumped up, "Come on, George Jones, let's go home and take a shower."

I slept in my bed in the new apartment that night, happy Brother Schwazier didn't know where I lived. I had a fresh start. I listened to the hums of cars slowing at the stop sign, starting up again, and now and then the creak of old wood settling in its joints, and felt free, like a load was lifted. "Now my yoke is ea-sy, and-- my burdens light," I sang aloud in the dark. I knew I waited too long to move from the trailer, with its memories of Starfire, Norvin, Mama, and Brother Schwazier. "My Sunshine Apartment,"

I said, rubbing my legs against the clean pink sheets. I prayed for Norvin. Then I rolled over, went to sleep.

After waitressing at Gerta's the next day, I went to K-Mart, bought a wooden lawn chair, a matching patio table, a wind chime made of yellow and red metal parrots, and a green ivy plant to set on the small veranda. I also bought a small charcoal grill, two large steaks, some potatoes to bake, sour cream, lettuce and tomatoes.

When I got home, I unpacked the rest of the boxes, then counted the money left in the jar. After paying the \$100 deposit for the apartment, I still had one thousand nineteen dollars. But I knew I might have to trade cars soon.

I dialed Nancy June's number, invited her over. We sat out on the veranda in the night air while the steaks sizzled on the grill. The soft breeze made the parrots hanging from the wind chime clink together, making a tinny melody. We ate the steaks and baked potatoes on paper plates as we stared down at the cars and the people going in and out of the donut shop.

"You ever been in love with two people at the same time?" Nancy June asked as she sawed back and forth on her steak with a knife. She sat cross legged in her flourescent green shorts on the wooden floor of the veranda. I noticed her legs were covered with downy red hair. I couldn't get her to sit in my only chair.

"No," I said.

"Do you think it's possible?" she asked.

I thought for a moment. "I guess . . . you might could connect with two people in different ways Why?"

"Cause one time I was in love, and I *do* mean *love*, with these two brothers . . . "

I smiled to myself as I ate my baked potato, waited for her to go on. But Nancy June was quiet. It suddenly hit me that she wanted me to respond. "Two brothers.

Wow. What'd you do?" I asked.

"For a long time, 'bout two months, they didn't either one know about the other one." She laughed. "Names were Leonard and Clifford Pritchett. Good lookin' strappin' boys." She shook her head.

I grinned. "Where'd you meet them?"

Nancy June's eyes got that dreamy look I'd seen before when she talked about Tim Jim. "Back in the summer of fifty-nine. My folks had a farm down in the bottoms in northwestern Kentucky, and we raised hay--alfalfa and lespedez' and stuff--and I'd help the boys haul hay." She shook her head again. "My, you talk about some sexy hunks. Sweat pourin' off them bulgin' muscles. Make a girl get right down on the barn floor and cry. Lord have mercy." Nancy June squinted her eyes closed and shivered.

I waited.

"Anyway, I lost my virginity to Clifford one night, right there in the hay barn." She smiled, remembering. "Everyone else had left. We sat there on a bale a lespedez', talkin' and drinkin' a little hooch he had stashed away behind his truck seat . . . I was all young and dewy fresh, ripe for the pickin'--been drivin' his truck all day, both of us all sweaty. And I fell in love, right there in Papa's barn . . . He woulda shot me and Clifford both full of buckshot if he knew . . . "

"What about Leonard?" I asked.

"He came later," she said, then looked at me and grinned. "About two weeks." She threw her head back and laughed, hit her knee with her hand, rocking back and forth. "Look at you! You oughta see your face That's why I like tellin' you stuff." She kept hitting her knee.

I grinned back at her, shook my head. "So what'd Leonard and Clifford do when they found out?"

"Had a fight over me, of course. I was a prancin' around like the Queen a Sheba." Nancy June grinned, and I loved her. She jumped up suddenly. "Hey, let's turn on your radio, find some good ole' country music--Conway Twitty, or somebody--and dance out here on the patio. Wouldn't that be jim-dandy, out here under the stars?"

We scooted back the table and she showed me how to two-step and do the Cotton-eye Joe. After she went home, I showered and went to bed, glad I had her for a friend.

The next day, Gerta let me take off work an hour early to open up a checking account at First Bank and Trust, where Daddy banked. When I finished depositing my money and received my new checkbook, I went into the ladies' bathroom.

I washed my hands and was reaching for a paper towel when someone said, "Well, if it isn't Sister Lily!" I knew the voice even before I turned around. "Small world, ain't it honey?" Sister Melvina stood there with a sneer on her face, her stout legs splayed apart, large hands on her square hips. She still carried the huge tan vinyl purse I threw out the trailer door that day. Her navy floral dress gapped in front from the power of her big breasts behind the buttons.

"Hello, Melvina," I said, leaving off the Sister and making sure I pronounced the "i" with a long e sound.

"It's *Sister* Melvina, rhymes with vine," she said, looking disgusted. "I told Oliver the other day, I said, 'I wonder what ever happened to that young Sister Lily? She was such a timid little mouse of a girl'. O says to me, 'Muffin, you're always so concerned about the lost lambs, we got saints right here in church that need our prayers'. He calls me Muffin--guess you heard we're living together now didn't you?"

"No, I missed the good news," I said, throwing the wet paper towel in the trash.

"We kept running back and forth every night to each other's place, so O said one night when I was making his favorite Biscuit-Topped Turkey Casserole--'Honey, why don't you move your nighties and things into my bedroom? We're spending every night together anyway'."

"I said, 'Oliver, baby, I just don't know. It's such a big step, even though we been involved all these years'." Sister Melvina's laugh came out a cackle, "Anyway, he convinced me, I'm not going to say how" She put her hand to her mouth, as if she had a sudden thought, "Oh! I'm sorry! You thought for a while you and O had a little something going, didn't you, dear?" She looked at me with pity.

"Good riddance," I said. "You deserve each other." I slammed the swinging bathroom door, and it still shook on its hinges when I left the bank. I climbed the steps to my Sunshine apartment thinking of ways I could put a hex on Sister Melvina. For a minute I thought of planting a bomb under the hood of her long bronze Oldsmobile, and then decided a firecracker planted under her broad, flat rear would be enough, if I could watch. I couldn't believe how I had let her fool me before.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Brother Schwazier called me at 8:30 a few nights later. The sun had just gone down. I washed my hair and was drying it with a towel. When I picked up the phone, he rushed, "Lily, wait, don't hang up--I really need to talk with you--I'm sorry for what I did--"

"How'd you get my number?"

"The operator gave it to me--look out your window, I'm right here in the phone booth under the donut sign--see?"

"Leave me alone! I'm calling the police!" I yelled, banging down the phone. I walked to the front window. There he stood, waving up at me, smiling, underneath the flashing neon donut. He wore a red plaid short-sleeved shirt and black slacks. I shivered.

The phone rang again. I let it ring several times, then picked up the receiver. "Lily . . . Lily, it's me. I got to tell you how sorry I am. I wouldn't do anything to hurt you. You're beautiful to me." He rushed on. "Just let me talk one last time. I wasn't in my right mind that night. I'd been taking medicine for my bad cold, had me all messed up . . . Please forgive me, baby You know how much I love you You're my angel. There's no one else in the world--"

I slammed down the receiver.

When I dialed the police a tear dripped off my nose onto the phone. I told them a man was harassing me from the street, described him. A few

minutes later, I saw a policeman talking with Brother Schwazier. He nodded his head, turned, walked down the street. I swallowed, feeling both relief and guilt watching his back as he walked away.

"He won't bother you again, ma'am," Officer Medlock told me. "But call me if anything suspicious happens."

"Okay. Thanks, Officer." I locked the door behind him, listened to his footsteps walking down the stairs. Then I sat down at the table, wrote a grocery list. I made another list of things I needed to do the next few days. When the phone rang, I picked it up, thinking it might be Daddy or Nancy June.

"Lily, my beautiful Lily. I'm home now. God gave us one more chance to be together. The Bible says over in First Corinthians, 'Let not the wife depart from her husband--' "

"But we're not married--"

"On paper, we're not . . . but in God's sight we are. You submitted yourself to me, just like it says in Ephesians Five and Twenty-two. And no matter what happens, you'll always be my wife, the pure Lily, who 'hath made herself ready', like it says in Revelations. The Bible says 'rejoice with the wife of thy youth'. And we did, Lily, and still can, if you'll give us a chance--"

"Bye, Brother Schwazier."

I eased the receiver onto the phone. He made me feel sad, but I wouldn't let him mess with my mind. I tried to forget him. Polishing my nails, I thought about running into Sister Melvina at the bank. I remembered when I first went to the Church of the Brethren I believed all church-going people were saints. Because Sister Melvina was the church piano player, sang and prayed loud, I thought she was even more holy. "Evil woman,

crazy," I said aloud. Then I shook my head, laughed. "You didn't know beans," I told that little girl who was me a year ago. "Nancy June, with her good heart, will be miles ahead of Melvina, waltzing through those pearly gates." I laughed again. "Okay, she cusses, sleeps with Tom, Dick, and Harry--but at least she's real." I didn't know where I was seated on the soul train to heaven, but I was myself.

After dancing one night at Olga's, I sat at a table talking with one of the customers. Carlis was a truck driver for Bama Pies and came by Olga's every Saturday night on his way back to Nebraska, where he lived. Slim, clean-cut with thick, sandy brown hair, he always dressed in Levis, a denim shirt with a button-down collar, and brown loafers. I met him a month earlier when he bought me a glass of white zinfandel one night after I danced. We were becoming friends, and for some reason, I trusted him.

"I'm feeling lonely tonight," I told him at the table. After I said this, I wished I hadn't.

"You can talk to me," he said.

"I know. You're a good friend."

"So--what's making you feel lonely?" he asked.

"Sometimes I get to thinking about what I've lost--my mother, my little girl, my marriage--and wonder what I could have done differently, and why I'm living all alone in a one-bedroom apartment . . . Listen at me. Most of the time I'm real happy." I looked at Carlis and laughed.

He grinned back. "Everyone gets a little lonely sometimes."

"Sounds like a song," I said.

"Yeah, one of those tears in your beer kind." We laughed.

Then his face grew serious. "I know what you mean, though. Sometimes out on the road, I'm driving, way in the night. And the loneliness is like a heavy pain in my chest." He looked at me. "You know, when there's a knot down deep in your throat, like a grapefruit you can't swallow?"

"Yes." That was exactly how it felt. "I know."

"Feels better to share it, don't it?"

"You're right," I said. "I feel better already. Now, let's talk about something pleasant. Like how you like living in Nebraska . . ."

He talked about the house he had just bought, describing the big, wide cement porch with its thick post. He had already told me he was divorced, lived alone, no children.

After we talked awhile, I started yawning, told him I had to leave.

"Want me to follow you home tonight?"

I looked at him. "Carlis, I'm tired. Not very good company. But you're welcome to sleep on my couch."

He grinned. "Sure," he said. "I been wanting to do that for a month--sleep on your couch, I mean."

We finished our drinks and he followed me in his semi, parking it a block away in the Safeway parking lot. I heard him climb up the stairs, and when I opened my door, he handed me three boxes of Bama pies, one vanilla, two chocolate. It was awkward between us for the first few minutes. I turned on the TV, but not much was on at 3:30 in the morning.

"Come here, let me kiss you," Carlis said. I looked at him, a little shocked, but moved over closer to him on the couch.

"I've watched you dance on Saturday nights, wanted to touch you like this . . ." he whispered. We moved towards the bed.

The next morning while he took a shower I cooked Hungry Jack pancakes for him. We ate. He had to leave early because of his time schedule. At the door, he hugged me, said, "Can I see you again?"

"Maybe," I said, grinning at him. "We'll talk about it at Olga's." I knew he gave me what I needed that night, and that was all. But I wanted his friendship.

I was still Jaguara on Saturday nights. Dancing as Jaguara was my escape, maybe my therapy. Sometimes in my bed at night during the week I asked myself, *What would Mama think, seeing you show yourself naked? Would she be ashamed? Or would she say "Do what you have to do to make it?"* I knew she'd say, "You're strong, Lily, a survivor. But ask your Daddy--let him help you." I couldn't do that. So I kept dancing, saying to myself, *Just a little while longer.* By July, I had over \$3000 in First National Bank and Trust.

One Wednesday evening, July 19, when I got off work at Gerta's, I drove to Pine Tree Memorial Gardens. Starfire died a year ago on that day. It was near six o'clock, but the day was still hot. Even though the lawn was green from the sprinklers, the ground seemed hard and dry as I walked toward Mama and Starfire's graves.

This was a beautiful old cemetery, the evening sun reflecting on its tall soldier monuments from earlier wars, small rolling hills, and trees. I saw a few new grave mounds with fresh flowers, tiny American flags, metal headstones, and thought of Norvin.

I was glad Mama and Starfire were both buried underneath the shade of a tall Ponderosa. For months after Starfire died, I came by only long

enough to glance at her grave, make sure it looked clean. This time, I felt like staying a while. I pulled off a faded, rain-spotted ribbon from a bouquet of yellow flowers on Mama's grave, then sat down under the tree, leaned my back against it. I noticed three or four grease spots on the front of my uniform and felt grimy. The smell of fried food was in my clothes, my skin, my hair. I untied my white work shoes, took off my socks, wiggled my toes in the dirt where grass wouldn't grow from the shade.

"Fern Maude Bonds Hamburger," I read aloud, "born June 17, 1922, passed away on Christmas Day, December 25, 1970, loving wife of Theodore Daniel Hamburger." A picture flashed before me of Mama standing in her kitchen, her yellow smiley-face apron, her blue-gray eyes with little crows feet at the corners lit up. I saw her face behind the pot of gold mums she brought to the hospital when Starfire was born--her pride when she pulled out of her square black purse the pink booties with the white pom poms she crocheted. "Mama," I smiled, shook my head, "you were quite a woman."

I closed my eyes, sat for a while against the tree. Then I pulled my knees up against my breasts, hugged them to me. "Starfire Ann Hueston," I said. "My baby." My voice broke. I read, "Born September 12, 1970, passed away on July 15, 1971, baby daughter of Lily Dawn Hamburger Hueston and Norvin Doyle Hueston, in loving memory" I smiled. "You would've been almost two now. . . getting into everything."

I picked up my long braid in its plastic bag, held it in my hands. The cellophane and the plastic had preserved it, but the sun faded the pink ribbon to white. The braid and the ribbon were still clean when I took them from the bag. From my pocket I took the new plastic bag I found at Gerta's, placed the braid wrapped in the cellophane inside.

I stretched the braid back out on the grave. My hair had grown in the past year. I unfastened the barrette at the nape of my neck, let my hair fall around my shoulders.

"Pretty hair," a voice behind me said.

Startled, I turned around, my eyes first seeing a pair of strong hairy legs in cutoff jeans frayed at the edges. He wore a light blue tank top with a rust-colored bugling moose and Yellowstone National Park printed on the front.

I stood up, tried to brush the grass and dirt off the back of my uniform and my legs. My chin was level with a *MOM* tattoo, green vines intertwined, spread across his large upper arm.

He caught my gaze on his arm, then laughed, embarrassed-like, said, "I got that in the Navy--Fiji Islands." He rubbed his upper arm with a big, square hand.

Charles Bronson, I thought when I looked into his face--the same deep lines curving from the corner of his squinty eyes to the edges of his wide mouth, the straight black hair, the dark tanned face. His hair stood up in stiff spikes above his forehead like he'd been in the wind, a yellow ball cap, the bill on backwards, covering the rest of his head. *Not Charles Bronson's nose*, I thought. This tall man had a big nose, round on the end.

He stuck out his hand, "Name's Micah--Micah Brosek." He smiled and his bright green eyes squinted, made deeper crows feet. "Micah Herman Brosek. Some people call me Mike." Heavy dimples creased on each side of his mouth, giving him a little boy look for a moment. But I guessed him to be in his early thirties.

"I'm Lily Hueston," I said, feeling rough callouses in his hand. "Your name--Micah--I never heard it before. I like it. Are you American?"

"Yeah," he grinned. "Dad found it in the Bible--a Hebrew prophet, the book after Jonah. He was a wise prophet, knew good from evil. Had a vision." He raised his thick black eyebrows up and down, smiled.

"You could almost be a prophet yourself," I said, "coming up behind me from out of nowhere in a cemetery." I smiled back at him. In the cutoffs and yellow ball cap, he didn't look like a prophet. "Your father was religious?" I asked.

"No, he just liked to read," Micah said, grinning. Then his face grew serious, "So, you have relatives here?"

"Yes," I said, motioning towards the graves, "my mother and my baby daughter." Realizing I was barefoot, I bent to pick up my socks.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Must be tough."

"It's better now," I said. "Still hurts, though. My little girl died a year ago today" I picked up my work shoes.

"Here, let's go over to that bench," he said, motioning across the walking trail several feet from us, "be easier to put on your shoes." The cement bench set under another huge pine. Nearby was a large mound of fresh dirt covered with new flowers of several colors. We sat down. "My dad just died a few days ago," he said. "This is his grave, here by Mom's. Heart gave out sudden."

I touched his arm, looked at him, "I didn't know," I said. "I'm so sorry." I read the name on his gravestone, then looked at Micah.

"My landlord's name was Herman--he just passed away," I said. "I live above Sunshine Cleaners."

"That's my dad," Micah said. He gazed across the cemetery towards the orange sunset.

I was quiet, remembering the day I rented the apartment, talked with Mr. Brosek. "He was a sweet man," I said. "A gentleman." I looked at Micah, smiled. "He called me Missy," I said, tying my shoe. "Talked about how proud he was of his son--about to finish his law degree. You?"

"Yeah, I'm his only son--only child, in fact. Doing my internship. They wanted more children, but Mom never was very strong," he said, reaching down, pulling a blade of grass. "She died three years ago." He glanced down at the grave. "Dad's happy now. He's with my mom. They really loved each other."

We sat quietly, watching the sun go down. The only sound was a tree swallow up above. "I remember now--you said your middle name was Herman," I said. The evening breeze felt good. "Will you sell his business?"

"No, I'll keep it for a while, at least." He grinned. "I've got special feelings for that place--after I did my stint in the Navy, I worked there with Dad for eight years, pressing and cleaning, trying to put myself through law school." He laughed, shaking his head. Then he turned to me. "How do you like the apartment?" he asked.

"I do," I said. "Much better than the trailer I lived in. I call it Sunshine," I smiled, looking at him.

"Nice name." Micah grinned. "Lily's Pad would also be cute."

"Yeah," I said. We both laughed.

"Let me know if you need anything," he said. "My home number's in the book, the office where I work is in the Professional Building on Main. Sanders Sanders and Sullivan. Just ask for me.

"Thank you, I will," I said, standing up. "Guess I need to be going--it's getting dark." I held out my hand. "I'm glad we met," I said.

"So am I. It's been good, talking with you Need a ride home?" He took off his cap, combed back his hair with his fingers, put it back on, backwards.

"I have my car," I said. "But thanks." I watched him as he walked toward a shiny yellow Mustang with a black top. *About a 'sixty-seven*, I thought. He waited until I pulled out before he left.

That night I mopped the kitchen floor, thinking about what a nice man Micah was, while I watched the 10 o'clock news. I stopped mopping when a picture flashed of a bad wreck that happened on I-44. "Apparently the driver of the 1966 bronze Oldsmobile went to sleep at the wheel about 2 a.m. this morning, and the vehicle swerved, hit a tree," the reporter stated. "The driver, Melvina Hubbard, was killed instantly, and the passenger, Oliver Schwazier, remains in critical condition in Fayetteville Memorial Hospital."

I dropped my mop, sat down on the couch, feeling queasy. Brother Schwazier had asked me for one last chance. Earlier, at the bank and in the trailer, I had wished for something bad to happen to Sister Melvina. "But not like this, Lord," I prayed, hoping God understood.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

In the middle of August, I got a job at Dortha's Flowers and Gifts and put in my week's notice at Gerta's. It was a pleasure to work around the smell of fresh flowers instead of greasy food. I delivered flowers all over town in Dortha's van and loved to watch people's faces light up in surprise. After my guilt over Sister Melvina's and Brother Schwazier's accident, it felt good to do something which brought people pleasure. In the flower shop, I swept the floor, changed the window display, dusted shelves, unpacked boxes, filled out order forms.

When we had time, Dortha gave me lessons in flower arranging. She knew how much I wanted to learn. She was a spry woman in her late forties, a teased blond, witty, full of good humor. Only a little over five feet tall, she seemed to be everywhere in the shop, hopping here and there, chattering to me, a customer, or on the phone. I loved my work and learned fast.

One Tuesday morning in late September, I delivered a dozen red roses in a clear glass vase to somebody's grandmother in the Friendly Manor Nursing Home. The nursing home sat at the top of a hill, the winding road that led up to it lined with tall trees, their leaves just beginning to change colors.

I stepped out of the van into the sunshine, reached inside for the flowers. Stopping at the front desk, I asked a thin young nurse for Mrs. Maggie Youngdeer's room.

"She's in the left wing, 196," she said. "What beautiful roses!" She came around the desk in her neat white uniform, stood beside me, no makeup, her fine brown hair in a French twist under her white cap. The pin on her uniform said her name was *Wana*. "Let me show you the way." She checked her watch. "I need to check on Mrs. Goines in 173 anyway."

The telephone behind the desk rang. "Oh darn." She looked at me. "I'm sorry. I've got to get that. Think you can find her room? Her name's by her door."

"Sure," I said.

"Let me know if you can't."

I wandered down the left wing. I found Room 173, Mrs. Goines's room, and through the half-opened door saw her big, round shape under the covers. I was headed in the right direction. I kept walking. The roses in my face suddenly made me sneeze.

"Bless you!" an elderly male voice yelled from the room next to me. "Thanks," I said, smiling. Garland Winford 194, his nameplate read. I slowed down, then stopped in my tracks by the next door. The name on Room 195 was Oliver Schwazier. It didn't seem possible anyone else had the same name.

White-faced, I wandered into Mrs. Youngdeer's room. She sat in a maroon swivel rocker crocheting what looked like a houseshoe out of blue yarn, her short yellow-gray hair spread thin over her scalp. When she saw me, she stuck the crochet needle in the houseshoe, said in a crackling voice,

"Hi, honey! Red roses, I *love* red roses!" Her wrinkled, spotted hand shook as she reached out to touch them.

"Happy Birthday, Mrs. Youngdeer," I said, handing her the flowers. "These are from your granddaughter, Alecia." I opened the card. "She says, 'Happy Birthday, Grandma--I'll be by to see you Love, Alecia!'"

"That's sweet," Mrs. Youngdeer said.

"Here, I'll set the roses next to you," I said, taking them from her shaking hands. I set them on the nightstand. "See, you can still smell them." My mind was on the man in Room 195. A week after the car wreck, I had called Fayetteville Memorial Hospital, told the nurse I was Brother Schwazier's friend. She told me he was out of ICU, his condition improving. After that, I had no desire to see him. *If it's Brother Schwazier, what's he doing here?* I asked myself. *He has a home But I have to check the room, I thought, I got to know.*

My elbow brushed Mrs. Youngdeer's water glass. I caught the glass before it spilled. "I'm sorry," I said. I touched her shoulder. "Hope you enjoy your flowers," I said, "and Happy Birthday!"

"Thank you, honey." Her arm shook as she raised her hand to her hair, ran her gnarled fingers through its strands. "Come back and see me."

"I will," I said, leaving.

I stood out in the hall, let myself lean against the opposite wall for a moment, staring at Room 195. The door to the room was open only about inches. But I knew I was going to open that door wide enough to see inside. I couldn't leave without knowing.

I walked toward the door, put my hand against it. Swallowing, I pushed it open. Brother Schwazier sat up in bed in blue print pajamas, his back straight against the headboard. His light gray eyes darted to me. His

navy tennis shoes with holes set by his bed. Something drew me toward him. "Brother Schwazier--" I said.

"The bride cometh," he said, his voice low, but excited. His eyes focused on me, but his body was stiff, hands resting limply on the folded down bedcovers. "Prepared for the bridegroom! Yes! John says 'He that hath the bride is the bridegroom!' --Without spot or wrinkle, pure for the Master's use--"

I backed up a step. "Brother Schwazier, I'm sorry for your accident--can I do anything?"

"*Woe* is the wicked woman who arrays herself as the harlot!" he suddenly yelled. I jumped. "Walketh up and down the streets! *Jezebel!*" he screamed. I trembled. He didn't move, but his eyes burned fire. "Every man is turned away by his own lust--the lust of the eye! Lust of the flesh . . . ! Second Timothy says 'Seducers wax worse and worse!'" My heart pounded like a drum in my chest. I edged toward the doorway. Out in the hall, I still heard him yelling, "The whore shall be devoured by the sword!"

Wana, the nurse with the French twist hurried to meet me. "Are you all right?" she asked.

"I think so," I said. My knees felt wobbly.

"Oliver's head went through the windshield--car accident," she said. "Almost two months ago. Been like this every since. Doctors don't think he'll change."

"Oh," I said.

"Most of the time he's real peaceful, though. Always quotes Bible verses. Used to be a preacher." She smiled at me, patted my shoulder. "I'm sorry if he scared you."

"I'm okay now," I said. Trembling, I backed Dortha's van out of the parking lot. As I drove back through the trees, I thought of Brother Schwazier in the rest home, felt sad for him, but the slim thread that kept me tied to him was broken.

The phone rang just as I walked in the door of my apartment on Friday afternoon, the first week in October. "Hello," I said, setting the bag of groceries and my black shoulder purse on the kitchen cabinet.

"Hello," a male voice said. "This is Micah Brosek. How're you doing?"

"Fine," I said. "Did you get my rent money?" I asked. "I gave it to your secretary the first of September and the first of October--"

"Hey, wait a minute! I'm not calling about the rent money," he said, laughing. "But I got your checks, by the way."

"Oh--good." I wondered why he called; then it dawned on me. "Everything here's working great, nothing needs repair. It was in good shape when I moved in."

He laughed again. "I'm glad about that," he said. "it's such a beautiful time of year, this month. I called to see if you might want to go on a picnic tomorrow, to Phoenix Park. Have a picnic in the leaves--what do you say?"

I thought a moment. "Okay," I said. "What would you like me to bring?"

"Just yourself," he said. "I'll bring the picnic basket Pick you up around eleven in the morning?"

"That's fine," I said. "Bye, Micah." *What a nice surprise*, I thought, hanging up the phone. I began looking forward to the next day. After I

showered, I ironed a purple blouse to wear with my jeans and white tennis shoes.

"Nice day, isn't it?" Micah said when we got in his car to leave. The picnic basket set on the back seat. He wore the same yellow baseball cap, bill backwards. His black hair still stood up in front. I wondered if this was the way he approached the bench, and I laughed.

"What is it?" he asked.

I shook my head. "Nothing."

"That's not fair," he said, cutting his eyes at me. "You're not supposed to keep it a secret. People will think you're laughing at them."

I grinned. "So we're going to Phoenix Park? I've only been there once when I was twelve."

"You're changing the subject," he said. This time he wore red shorts and a white tank top with Los Angeles Lakers written on it. "You must have been cute at twelve."

"I don't know," I said, remembering how overweight I was. "I was a little pudgy." I grinned at him.

He looked me over. "You? Hard to imagine--a little puppy fat, huh?" He smiled and his green eyes crinkled.

"A little."

"Bet you were cute as a bug," he laughed. We drove past the information booth at Phoenix Park, took one of the winding roads that led down a hill near the large lake. Micah parked the Mustang in a parking space by a picnic table, and we got out.

"I'd rather have our picnic under this tree--what about you?" he asked, setting the wicker basket under a huge oak tree. "I got a blanket in the car and a tablecloth in this basket."

"Yeah, let's have it here," I said. Micah went back to the Mustang for the blanket. The picnic table and the oak tree were at the top of a hill that sloped down to a clay beach on the water's edge. All the way down, the hill had a thick carpet of many-colored leaves that looked knee deep at the bottom.

When Micah got back with the blanket, he had a half-loaf of Wonder bread in his other hand. We walked down the trail to the bottom of the hill, threw bread pieces to the mallard ducks, mocked their quacks. We laughed at their tails sticking up out of the water when they fished for the bread.

"Let's go sit on the blanket, spread out our lunch," Micah said when we ran out of bread. I shook out the cotton tablecloth while he opened a bottle of wine.

"Nice!" I said. "I'm not used to this special treatment."

"You deserve it."

I smiled, taking out the ham and cheese sandwiches, potato salad, pickles, paper plates, forks, and wine glasses. We ate quietly for a few minutes, enjoying the peaceful rustles of a leaf falling now and then. Sometimes a bird sang a short song, another would answer, then silence.

"How've you been since your dad passed away?" I asked after I finished my sandwich and we were gathering up the food and paper plates.

"I'm doing all right," he said. "Like I said, he's happy now. His heart was causing him pain . . . He wanted to see me get my law degree. For that, I'm sad. I'm so close . . . But he'll know."

"Yeah, he'll know," I said, smiling at him.

"Here, stretch out and relax," Micah patted a place beside him on the blanket. I stretched out, closed my eyes. The warm sun felt good on my back.

Micah glanced at me. "So, you're a waitress? I noticed your uniform the other day at the cemetery."

"I was," I said. "I did work most days at Gerta's Diner over on Deer Street. But I found a job working at Dortha's Flowers and Gifts about two weeks ago, arranging flowers and delivering."

"I used to go in Gerta's for a bowl of beef stew and cornbread now and then," Micah said, grinning. "Dortha's over on Willow Avenue?"

"Yeah, there by Spensers' Donuts."

"Nice flower shop. I always look at the display when I drive by," he said, and grinned.

I looked at him, said, "Then on Saturday nights I dance at Olga's Topless Dance Club--it's on Deer Street too." I waited for his reaction.

"You know, Olga's always was a nice club. Haven't been there in five or six years, though. Too busy, I guess." He looked at me and grinned. "So, you're a dancer. I can picture that. The graceful way you move when you walk."

I smiled, glad I had told him. I rested my head on the blanket. He turned on his side, facing me. "You're wearing your hair loose today you know, it's beautiful. Silky brown around your shoulders."

"Thank you . . . I'm letting it grow. I used to wear it in a long braid, before I cut it."

He was silent a moment. "Was that your braid on your daughter's grave?"

"Yeah. I wanted to leave her something of myself," I said.

Micah looked at me, "That was a beautiful thought, gesture." He put his arm around my shoulders, gave me a quick squeeze.

"You ever been married?" he asked.

"Once, for a year and a half," I said. "It didn't work What about you?" I had already noticed he didn't wear a wedding band.

"No, I never experienced wedded bliss Somehow, I never did get around to it," he said. "Came close a time or two, but the Navy got in my way, then I got preoccupied with law books." He grinned and I grinned back.

"Look at all those leaves down the hill there," I said. "Orange, red, yellow, brown, a few still green spotted. All sizes and shapes."

"Yeah, I see purple leaves, pink leaves, blue leaves, maroon, fuchsia, puce" He laughed.

"You do *not*," I said, pushing against his bare upper arm. "You're just laughing at me."

"No I'm not."

"Quit," I said, grinning. I glanced at him. "I never met a lawyer before." He made a weird face at me, and I laughed. "You know what I always wanted to do?" I asked.

"Jump off the Empire State Building?" he asked, propping himself up on his elbow.

"No Roll down a hill with someone Did you ever want to do that?"

He looked thoughtful for a moment, then stared me straight in the eye. "You know, I *always* wanted to do that!" He jumped up. "Come on!" He reached down, pulled me to my feet.

"You did?" I asked, laughing.

"Yes!" He grabbed me, carried me to the top of the steep slope, yelled "Hang on!" and we hugged tight, careened down the hill.

* * * * *

The honking of a nearby car brought me back to the present. I vaguely remembered telling Daddy bye at the Friendly Manor Nursing Home, admonishing him when I hugged his neck to take care of himself and not harrass the nurses.

I smiled now, thinking of him getting crankier every day, as I turned my van, Lily's Floral Boutique written on the side above a huge, sprawling white lily, into the passing lane on Memorial Drive. I hoped Micah had started the grill. I set the cruise control on 55 miles per hour, hummed a few lines of "You Ain't Woman Enough to Take My Man," then, with one hand, untied the ribbon on the end of my braid, let my hair fall full around my shoulders. I laughed.

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