

CHAPTER 1

“I’m scared, Darla,” Margie whispered.

“No reason to be, honey. You’ve lived a good life, raised a wonderful family. You always trusted in the Lord.”

“I know, but I’m scared. I’m just not ready to go.”

Darla put her hand softly on Margie’s forehead and stroked her gray, thinning hair. Margie Thumpacker had once been the envy of every woman in town with thick, beautiful hair, but her failing health over the last three years had turned it to wispy at best. It wasn’t Margie’s hair, though, that Darla McGee cared about. The words Margie had just uttered were like blood in the water for a woman like Darla, a woman with a shark-like sense for weakness. Darla could smell it a mile away, a skill finely honed over the years by watching her Southern Baptist father go to work on the guilt and sin of his congregation. Every problem was an opportunity to use the gospel as a weapon, a self-serving gift that Darla exploited often. Unfortunately, Darla was also in a hurry this morning and was struggling to be patient.

“Now don’t you worry,” Darla said. “Heaven’s gates are open for you, waiting for you to come in. You can hold your head high, not an ounce of shame to hold you back as you parade proudly into the Promised Land. You’ve left everything behind, no stone unturned, no little sin hiding that you haven’t asked to be forgiven for. I know that’s true. You know that’s true, don’t you, Margie?” Darla asked as she kissed her forehead. Margie began to weep as Darla looked at her watch for the third time in ten minutes.

“Almost, I... Just one thing, Darla, but it was so long ago. I feel like I’ve been punished many times over for it but it still just hangs out there like a big neon sign, taunting me.”

Margie began wiping the tears from her eyes as Darla tried to suppress a smile. Darla licked her lips, carefully setting up for the kill.

“Honey, if there’s a burden like that hanging around your neck, why, you have to get it out in the open. It’s an anchor, keeping your spirit in place. My daddy always told me we weren’t fully forgiven until we had openly confessed and put our trust unto our brothers and sisters. Margie, don’t hold back. Tell me what is troubling you so badly. Ask to be forgiven so that nothing holds you back from the reward you so rightly deserve. You don’t want that neon sign hanging over the pearly gates, do you?”

“Darla, you’ll think I’m horrible.”

“No, honey, never! We’ve been close friends for so long and I’d be devastated if you passed without driving this demon out of your soul. Margie, quickly now before the Almighty’s angels sweep you away and you lose the opportunity.”

Margie continued to weep as she turned her head away from Darla. Darla felt she’d maybe pushed her a little too far, but then Margie rolled her head back and looked Darla in the eye with determination.

“I’ve been strong my whole life. I’ve always done what’s right, I was always faithful to my husband and my kids and my friends. I’m strong enough to do this,” Margie said. She took a deep breath and continued. “Remember that week, back when we were in high school, that Joan ran away from home and said she’d lived out in the woods for five days?”

“Yes,” Darla replied with a curious look. “Wasn’t that the day after she’d spent the night at your house, when she’d gotten a little tipsy at the class dance?”

“Yes, well she didn’t stay out in the woods. She was at my house the whole time. I was hiding her there because she didn’t want to go home.”

“So what? A lot of us didn’t want to go home at that age. I would’ve loved to have found a place to get away for a week, or two for that matter. Even now I find myself sometimes wanting to be in two places at once.” Darla checked her watch again as Margie wiped her eyes.

“Well, I didn’t want her to go home either.”

“Of course not, you were good friends. You two did everything together and—”

“We kissed on that first night.”

“You what?” Darla asked, startled by Margie’s admission.

“Kissed. And then hugged, and then—”

Darla gasped, putting her hands up in hopes of slowing Margie down. The words, no matter how slowly they came out, were more than Darla could digest. But Margie kept going.

“— she shared her body with me, and I did the same.”

“Be quiet for a minute,” Darla said. “Just be quiet.”

“It’s all out there now,” Margie said with a huge sigh, “I don’t need to say anymore.”

“But what all did, I mean, what happened?”

“What all did we do? Everything two girls could do without boys. I don’t have to tell you, you can probably imagine.”

“I just don’t understand!”

“We didn’t understand it either. We didn’t think we’d get caught, but we did.”

“Who? Who caught you?”

“My mother. She sent Joan home, told her that if she ever came by our house again she’d kill her. Called me a filthy slut and then got drunk.”

“Your mother? Drunk?” Darla asked, shaking her head. She was dumbfounded by Margie’s recollection of the entire event.

“And called me a filthy slut, thank you! For three days.”

“I can’t imagine! What were you doing when she caught you?”

“Darla! You make it sound like a dirty movie. God, I’m sorry I told you anything. I should have given this at confessional years ago like my mother told me to.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“To Father Russ? Can you imagine what my penance would have been?” Darla nodded in agreement.

“Look, Margie, don’t be mad. I’m not judging you, I’m sorry. You surprised me and I didn’t expect it. So was that the end of it?”

“No, Momma brought a boy home to stay with us, made the two of us share a room,” Margie said.

“Why did she do that?”

“I don’t know. Maybe so he could keep an eye on me, tattle if I did anything wrong. Sometimes I wonder if she wanted me to have sex with him so I’d know what I was supposed to feel like.”

“I knew your mother, she’d never do that.”

“It didn’t matter, we hadn’t done anything anyway. Not then.”

“Who was it?”

“I’m not telling you. Jesus, if you aren’t the nosiest woman!”

“Okay, I’m sorry. It doesn’t matter.”

“Damn right it doesn’t,” Margie said, and then caught her breath. “Okay, I feel better now.”

“Good, good. Why don’t you get some sleep?”

“I’m going to. Maybe the good Lord will finally take me in my sleep.”

“Don’t talk like that.”

“Mind your own business. And look, don’t go gossiping about this and don’t ever tell Joan I told you.”

“Do you want to pray?”

“No, I want to sleep.”

“Alright, honey.”

Darla stood and smoothed Margie’s hair back. She was trying to remember Margie’s face as it had been when they’d played together as little girls, but that was seventy years ago and it wasn’t easy to recall that sweet, innocent little face after what she’d just heard. All she saw was a woman who’d aged quickly in the last three years, succumbing to everything nature could throw at her. But her mind was still sharp and Darla believed everything she’d said.

Darla had just cleared the exit doors of Fallon Memorial Hospital when the angels took Margie, ascending high into the heavens as the needles in Darla’s head inevitably began to knit their sinister blanket of guilt and shame to be spread out for others to see. Deep down Darla knew it was wrong but rationalized that by reporting the testimony of others, she would, by

proxy, perform the final act of washing away their sins. It also gave her information that kept her enemies at bay. She looked at her watch once again and felt relieved that one of her lifelong ambitions would be achieved in less than an hour.

Eloise Laine thought she'd be the only person out at the old retreat that morning. Unlike many others, she didn't have anything against the old building, she just enjoyed watching things go up in flames. Her son, Champ, dutifully pushed her wheelchair to a nice grassy spot on the hill and set an umbrella over her to keep off the sun. He sat impatiently in a lawn chair next to her, wishing he were somewhere else.

"So what's the fascination with this building, Mother?"

"It's nothing to me, I've never been inside. I just like watching fire trucks and buildings burn."

"You're the only one, then. Half the town is sorry to see it go, the other half can't wait. I'm surprised Darla isn't here lighting the match."

"She'll be here, don't worry. Darla sees this place as a monument to everything she hates. It's just a damn building but you'd think it was an altar for sin."

"It was a swinger joint, what's the big deal?"

"In our day it was a really big deal. We weren't open like everyone is today. People swapping wives and having all those sex parties out here. I heard there were drugs and gambling, but that wasn't what shut it down. Darla told me one time she was afraid to even touch anything in there because of all the disgusting things she saw."

"That was a long time ago, why all the fuss now?"

"Because it changed the whole town. Or at least I'm convinced it did. There were several people in my class that worked there cleaning or being valets or whatever and I'm telling you it changed them all."

"I heard it was just for rich people who liked that kind of lifestyle, kind of a secret society."

"I think it was supposed to be, but it wasn't just rich people coming out here, some of the locals were showing up, too. The whole damn town just became more curious and wild when they learned what was going on out here. And what did I care? Let people do what they're going

to do, but it seemed like everyone was unhappy after it. They just couldn't settle down and I think half of 'em couldn't believe that something like that could go on this close to us right under our nose."

"I still don't see what the big deal is."

"That's because your generation was all about smut if you asked me. Brother McGee would have been standing on your chest and ready to drive a stake through your heart with half the shit you kids did."

"That I did?" Champ said as he laughed. "I didn't do anything like that."

"The hell you didn't. Kids do what kids do, don't think I don't know."

"That was Darla's dad, right?"

"Yeah, Brother McGee. I swear he invented fire and brimstone, but I think even this place wore him down. The harder he preached against it, the worse it got. For ten years after this place closed down he attacked everyone he thought had a link to it. I think he was just fanning the flames, bringing more attention to it. My understanding is that he was pretty hard on Darla, too. She swears it killed him. He had a heart attack in mid-sermon, yelling and slamming his fist on that pulpit and then he dropped to the floor."

"Well, he left the business in good hands. She seems like a chip off the old block."

"She wasn't always like she is now. Something in there changed her. She was a pain in the rear before, but after the big blow-up she spat venom from then on."

"Speak of the devil," Champ said.

Darla's car came roaring up and stopped close to Eloise and Champ. She got out of the car, concerned as she looked down the hill at the retreat.

"Why isn't anything moving?" Darla asked angrily.

"Any what moving?" Eloise replied.

"The machines, the men? Don't you think somebody should be doing something down there? The fire trucks should be here by now, what's going on?"

"I don't know, they don't call me for permission."

"I'll light that thing on fire myself if I have to."

Darla opened her trunk and began taking out hand-painted signs stapled to wooden stakes. There were ten in all and she laid them out side by side and then pulled out a small mallet that she had trouble lifting.

“Here, Champ, help me put these signs up.”

“What do they say?”

“It doesn’t matter, just hammer them down in the order I have them.”

“Go help her, Champ, before she starts getting all high and mighty,” Eloise said.

“Yes, ma’am.”

Champ took the mallet from Darla and walked along the row, reading the words on each sign. He shook his head, looked up, and saw a line of cars heading toward them. He grimaced, knowing everyone would see him putting up the signs with bible scriptures.

As the cars parked, people began congregating in the area around Darla and Eloise to watch the spectacle. Darla paced back and forth, looking down the hill at the building that she swore was looking back, mocking her. As more people gathered, the crowd became louder with laughing and light-hearted conversation and she became infuriated.

“What are you people so happy about? Nothing is being done and none of you care a wit!”

“Calm down, Darla, for God’s sake. It’ll happen,” Eloise said.

“Don’t use the Almighty’s name so carelessly, Eloise. And I’ll have you know that I paid for the legal fees and insurance myself so the fire department could practice by burning this building down. Now I want to see some movement and I want to see it fast.”

“Well, it isn’t going to happen today,” a voice said from behind the others.

Everyone turned around to see the young man making his way to where Darla stood.

“What are you talking about, Alton?” Darla asked.

“Someone bought the building last night before it could go into foreclosure,” Alton replied. “He paid all the back taxes and fees and it isn’t going anywhere.”

“I don’t believe you. Nobody around here has that kind of money and what would they do with it anyway? This place is going to burn today, by God—“

“Ms. McGee, I sold it to him myself. It’s done.”

“You did? The grandson of my best friend sold it out from under me? You knew I wanted this place gone and you, the worst realtor in the county, kept the devil’s lair of lust alive and well...” Tears were forming in Darla’s eyes and her voice quavered with emotion.

“Well, I’d say he did a good job,” Eloise interjected. “Good for you, Alton, good for you. I hope you made a nice commission for yourself.”

“No shit,” Champ said, with a measure of awe in his voice. “Who the hell did you sell it to?”

“Stop encouraging him! What is wrong with you people? As long as that building stands this town will never heal.”

“Let’s give it some time, Ms. McGee,” Alton said defensively. “Mr. Kranz says he has some plans for the old place.”

“Kranz? Kranz who?” Darla’s eyes became wild and round.

“Edwin Kranz. He said he stayed there one night and—“

“I didn’t think it could get any worse.” Darla’s face reddened, matching her hair and her temperament. “Of all the people that have no business in this town or with this piece of property, he would be at the head of the line. It can’t be, I won’t allow it.”

Darla walked calmly to her car, got in, and began driving down the hill toward the retreat. The news of who had bought the place started a whole new conversation of excitement and intrigue among those standing around, except for Eloise, who watched as Darla’s car got closer and closer to the retreat. She reached over and tugged at Champ’s hand to get his attention.

“Hey, better go down there and stop her. She’ll damn well burn that place down.”

“Well, what do you want me to do about it, Mother?”

“You’re the damn cop, go down there and arrest her or something,” Eloise said.

Thirty minutes later Darla had her own escort detail of one police car in front of her and two behind to ensure she left the area without being arrested. A warning was also given about returning after everyone had left. But at the top of the hill where everyone was still gathered, Alton tried to answer everyone’s question about the newest interest in town, Edwin Kranz.

That evening, Alton regretted having said anything at all. Edwin had asked him to keep his name confidential, but since the sale was already complete, Alton didn’t feel a need to keep it quiet any longer. Before the end of the day, the whole city was buzzing about what would become of the old retreat.

Ellie Mintzer rushed up the jetway, her heart pounding from both excitement and exertion as she prepared to see her father. Though they’d spoken often by phone, she hadn’t seen him for four years and had grown concerned about his health. His excuse was merely a matter of their schedules not aligning but she wasn’t so sure. But today was supposed to be a turning point for

them, a new beginning that she'd begged for for years and he had finally relented. They were going to spend a week together in his home town, where she hoped to learn how he ultimately became a grouchy, headstrong son-of-a-bitch.

As the jetway opened to the concourse, she found a hole between some of the passengers to shoot through. Her flight was two hours late and the connecting flight they would share to Houston left in thirty minutes. Ellie stopped at the desk of the gate attendant, waiting impatiently behind a passenger who was arguing loudly. Ellie looked around for a clock but didn't see one. She got out her phone to look at the time and became more frustrated. The argument didn't seem to be resolving and she looked around for another gate attendant. She picked up her bag and turned to rush down the concourse when it occurred to her that the man's voice sounded familiar, very familiar. She turned and looked again at the desk and there he was.

"He chewed his goddamned gum with his mouth open the whole time and had his headphones turned up so loud I couldn't get to sleep," Edwin Kranz complained.

"Sir, I'm sorry that happened, but I'm not sure what we can do about that."

"Make a damn policy or something, for Pete's sake. No gum, and the blasted headphones ought to have limiters or something—"

"Dad?" Ellie said nervously, with a huge grin and her arms wide.

Edwin didn't hear her and the gate attendant pointed over to Ellie to redirect his attention. He looked over his shoulder, annoyed with being interrupted.

"Dad, it's me, Ellie!" she exclaimed, her arms still extended.

"Hi, I'll be with you in a minute," he said and turned back to the attendant. "Now who the hell do I talk to so we can get this changed?"

"Well, you can go to our website and contact—"

"And that's another thing, I couldn't get a damn connection with my computer—"

"Dad, we're going to miss our connecting flight," Ellie demanded.

Edwin turned and looked at her again, this time studying her and her words, and finally picked up his attache case.

"We'll pick this up at another time," he said to the flight attendant. He turned toward Ellie who was shaking her head with her hands on her hips. "You're late, what the hell took you so long?"

"I don't fly the planes, Dad, and it's great to see you, too."

“Guess it couldn’t be helped, then. Good to see you.”

Edwin finally held his arms out and embraced her. Ellie became emotional feeling his strong arms hug her and pat her on the the back. Edwin neither looked nor acted his eighty years and Ellie found it to be a relief. She wanted all the time she could muster with him and while he was still able to do things that she wanted to do.

“You look great,” she said as she wiped her eyes. “I don’t think you’ve aged one bit.”

“I still run and ride my bicycle. Sometimes I swim. I don’t eat very good, but I don’t care. You’re looking good. You look tired, though. Do you get enough exercise? Don’t you and Gary get out and do things?”

“Larry, Dad. His name is Larry. No, I’m not the exercising type, I suppose. He isn’t either, I guess we’re two peas in a pod.”

“I see. Well, let’s get to the right gate so we can get out of here. I never did like Dallas. I never really liked Houston either, but it’s better than here. Have you eaten yet?”

“No, I didn’t—“

“We can grab a hotdog on our way.”

“A hotdog?”

“Yeah, what’s wrong with a damn hotdog?”

“Well, they aren’t very good for you.”

“Neither is not exercising. You get a carrot or whatever you like, I’ll get a hotdog. Unless I find donuts.”

“Jesus,” Ellie mumbled as they walked.

It wasn’t hard for Ellie to understand why her mother had only put up with him for two years, but Ellie still adored him. He had tried to visit at least once a month as she grew up and she’d never wanted for anything. The only thing she ever knew for certain about him was that he worked long, hard hours and travelled often for his job. He was in the oil industry but she wasn’t sure what he did, and to her it didn’t matter. To her, he was what she always wanted to be. Always in charge, always sure of himself, and always able to withstand any challenge. He could also be very stubborn and smug, and impossible to follow through an airport.

“Dad, would you slow down?”

“A bit much for you? Sorry. Let’s go here, they’ve got those fries with chili on them.”

“I’ll pass, maybe I’ll get one of those yogurts instead.”

Edwin shook his head in bewilderment.

“So is your daughter normal?”

“What?”

“Your daughter. Does she eat bacteria, too?”

“It’s good for you. It’s good for your digestion.”

“So are the chili fries, they’ll go right through you.”

“That’s your measuring stick?”

“One of ‘em.”

“So this surprise you have for me. It isn’t a restaurant where I have to eat something like this, is it?”

“No, where we’re going you can order anything you want.”

“Really?”

“Really. You can order what you want, you can decorate any way you want, you can even be your own boss.”

“I don’t get it.”

“You will. Come on, get your cup of germs and let’s go.”

Ellie smiled. It might take some time but she was determined get used to his abrasive nature. She also hoped that he might mellow some once they had spent a day or two together. None of that was important now, she was going to focus on their trip to Fallon, Texas where she could learn all about his early days.

Karen Trimble stood in the doorway of the manager's office, determined not to lose her temper. She watched in anger as the two women in the office chatted about a television sitcom while the nurse call bells chimed endlessly and the yells for help echoed down the hall of Fallon Nursing Home. Karen couldn't think of a polite way to interrupt and had never been known for subtlety.

"You don't hear those?" she asked calmly.

The two women ignored her and continued to talk.

"Excuse me? The alarms? You don't hear those?"

"I'm sorry, what are you asking about?" the woman sitting behind the desk asked.

"I'm wondering if you hear those alarms and all that yelling?"

"Yes, I hear them. What are you doing about it?"

"I'm trying to keep up with them, but I don't have a lot of help."

"I put ads in the paper and online, I don't know what else you expect me to do."

"Call in the temps, that's what they're for. And until then, it would be nice if you would help out. This is a nursing home and you're still a fucking RN, aren't you?"

"Karen, don't swear at me. I'm doing my job and if I'm on the floor, I'm not getting that job done."

"What job is that, sitting on your ass and bullshitting all day with the cook?" Karen looked at the cook, who was trembling in fear. "No offense, Grace, but her time would be better spent working than shooting the shit with you."

"I suppose I should get back to the kitchen—" Grace replied as she stood.

"I don't think I like your tone," the manager said.

"I don't think you have time to like or dislike my tone. It's almost four o'clock and the visitors will be arriving soon. I've got four people that I know need their diapers changed, two that have been vomiting for awhile, and one pair who were making out in the chapel."

"What? Who were they?"

"It doesn't matter," Karen replied. "If you're that worried about it then go see for yourself."

"You just left them there?"

"Damn right I did, they're the only two people in this building who seem happy. Look, I've got work to do and maybe you can find time between stories to hand out meds."

Karen walked out of the door with her head held high, predicting to herself that within a week she would storm out of there again but with her final paycheck. It was the principle of the matter and finding another job had never been much of a challenge. She smiled as she passed the old couple holding hands while sitting on the porch swing by the entrance. They returned her smile, and it gave her a sense of hope that some day she, too, would find someone, even if it was for a short time in the back pew of a chapel.

Ellie sat in the window seat, looking down at the trees and small ponds as they approached Houston. Edwin had insisted on sitting in the aisle for more leg room, which meant that a defenseless elderly woman was forced to sit between them.

“It’s very pretty out there. When was the last time you were in Fallon?” Ellie asked.

“About twenty years ago, I came through while traveling,” he replied.

“Traveling? Where all did you travel?”

“All over.”

“All over where?”

“All over the United States,” he grumbled. “You know, I sent you the pictures.”

“Yes, pictures say a thousand words. Thank God, because you don’t seem to have many today,” Ellie sniped, but Edwin only nodded as he continued to play solitaire on his computer.

The woman between them sat motionless, doing her best not to get in harm’s way. She thought about suggesting they exchange seats again, but as she looked over at Edwin, his stern demeanor quelled the idea.

Edwin’s lack of communication wasn’t new to Ellie, and his irritation with everything that moved made things even less tolerable. His nature ran contrary to everything for a man his age; he was active, driven, and terribly independent. He was quiet but temperamental and had an air of sophistication that could be misconstrued as arrogance. Ellie hoped that someday she would feel as confident as he looked. She reached her hand across the lady between them and gave his arm a light squeeze. The woman smiled approvingly.

“I love you, Dad.”

“I know. When we get there I’ve got a few things to do so I won’t see you until tomorrow morning. Breakfast at eight in the lobby?”

“Yeah, that sounds good. And Dad?”

“Yes?”

“I love you.”

“I heard you a moment ago. Thanks.”

The woman between them sighed.

CHAPTER 2

Darla drove down the hill and parked her car behind an excavator at the old retreat. It was early and she didn't think anyone would be coming out there now that the commotion had died down from yesterday. She desperately wanted to burn the place down but knew she'd be the first one they'd look for if she did.

Today, she thought, might be the last day she'd be free to look around the old place without being noticed. She'd been out here hundreds of times, scouring every nook and cranny for more of the 8mm films like the ones she found right after the place had closed. She knew there must be more of them, and maybe a lot more, but there was only one, maybe two that she was interested in. She made her way into the back door where the chain gave away just enough for her to squeeze in like she'd done almost daily for the last fifty-plus years.

Darla sat down on one of the old chairs inside, trying to decide where she might look today. She couldn't think of anywhere she hadn't looked, at least not in any of the obvious places. In

fifty years she could have torn all the plaster board and paneling off of every room in the retreat but she never had, and now she was too old and frail to do so and she regretted it.

Her emotions began to overwhelm her, remembering the things she'd seen on the old films. They didn't make movies like that back then, not that she was aware of and certainly not in Fallon. The sex, the perversion, and every kind of lust imaginable were on those films and they had been enough to incriminate at least a dozen people. She remembered well-to-do men and women exposed and shamed on the front page of the paper, their actions and offenses smeared across page after page of the Fallon Courier. That was when she had first begun to panic, after she'd seen what happened to so many people when she gave the films to the police to take the spotlight off of her. Since then she'd spent a few hours every day looking for more tapes, hoping to get rid of them, hoping to keep anyone else's past from being discovered.

Edwin sat in the motel lobby eating his third donut in five minutes. He hated feeling rushed but his run had taken longer than usual because of a cramp in his right calf. He'd showered, shaved, and gone over his stock portfolio much faster than he would have liked, all in an effort to be down in the lobby on time. Edwin looked impatiently at his watch. He had just stood up and brushed the crumbs from his mouth when Ellie rounded the corner, still in her pajamas.

"What are you doing?" he growled.

"I came to get some breakfast, what are you doing?"

"I'm ready to go. I thought we agreed to meet here at eight for breakfast?"

"Yeah, it's a quarter after eight. I'm going to eat, take a shower and fix my hair, and then we can leave. It won't take that long."

"Alright, call me on my cell when you're ready and I'll come pick you up," he replied. She knew he was irritated and decided she would try to appease him.

"Dad, I'll grab a bagel and get a quick shower."

"No, take your time." Edwin purposely tried to change his tone to mask his obvious frustration. "I've got plenty to look at, I can pick you up later."

Without waiting for a reply, he pushed his chair under the table and hurried through the door. Ellie sighed, knowing she should have gotten up with the wake-up call. She'd known exactly

what he meant when they agreed to meet but had gotten distracted by emails and doing web searches, and now she regretted it. The confrontation was another in a litany of failures at trying to get his approval. She picked a few things from the continental breakfast, no longer feeling as hungry as she had just moments ago.

Ellie's phone rang and the caller ID showed the picture of a little boy with the name "JACK!" below it. His voice was just what she needed to cheer up.

"Hello, Jack," she said.

"Hi, Grandma. Where are you?" Jack asked.

"We're in Texas, where are you?" Ellie replied.

"We're at home, mom got me up early so I could call you before I went to daycare. When are you coming back to see me?"

"Soon, buddy. We're going to be gone for about a week and then I'll be back."

"Good, I don't like daycare, I'd rather stay with you."

"I know," Ellie said, feeling her heart sink a little. "Well, I promise when I get back I'll let you stay with me for a few days. How's that?"

"Okay. Mom says I gotta go. I love you, Grandma."

"Love you, too. Be good for your mom."

"And my dad."

"Yes, and your dad. Bye now."

"Bye."

Ellie closed her eyes, now with something else to worry about. She'd taken some personal time from work and had spent a few weeks watching Jack while his mother worked. Only recently had Jack become close to her and nobody could explain why. As a toddler, he'd shunned Ellie which had pained her. Now that he wanted her love and attention, it would be difficult for both of them when she went back to work. He'd be starting kindergarten soon, but there were still those off days where some sort of daycare would be needed. His father refused to watch him during the day, claiming it kept him from focusing while he searched for a job, and it frustrated Ellie.

"Hello, miss," a voice said. An elderly woman with a pleasant smile stood beside her with her hands nervously clasped. Ellie recognized her as the motel clerk who had checked them in the night before.

"Hello," Ellie replied.

"Was that your father that just left?"

"Yes, is anything wrong?"

"Edwin Kranz?"

"Yes, that's him."

"May I ask what your mother's name is?"

"Excuse me?"

"Oh, I know it seems like I'm being rude but I was curious to know what your mother's name is. We knew Edwin and we wondered who he might have married."

"Really?" Ellie replied. It was an odd request yet the sweet and almost childish manner in which the woman asked made it impossible for Ellie to resist. "Her name was Lydia."

The woman frowned, puzzled by the response.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm quite sure."

Ellie had an urge to smile, the innocence and inquisitive nature of the woman was charming. Ellie refrained, not wanting to seem rude or condescending.

"I don't remember a Lydia. Was she from around here?"

"Uh, no, she was from Utah."

"Utah? Well for heaven's sake I would have never guessed. What on earth would he be doing in Utah, I wonder?" she asked with a laugh. "True to form, he did get around."

"Did he?"

"He was a dashing young man, your father was. Sort of."

"I am surprised."

"And what is your name, honey?"

"Eleanor, but I go by Ellie."

"Oh," the woman sang as she put her hand to her mouth. "That makes all the sense in the world! He would have loved that name because of.... Well, we haven't seen Edwin in ages. What brings him back to Fallon?"

"He's just showing me where he grew up, kind of taking me on a tour of the city. What is it about the name Ellie—"

"How nice, getting to know his roots and yours, too! Do you like it here?"

“I really don’t know, we just came in last night. We flew into Houston and drove up. The people here certainly seem nice.”

“Well, thank you. My name is Ruth Zingg, by the way. May I?” she asked, pointing at an empty chair next to her. Ellie nodded. “I guess we all wondered what became of Edwin. Some said he was in the service, some people thought he might live overseas now. You know, some people thought he might’ve wound up in prison.”

“My dad? That’s funny. He’s Mr. Straight-laced himself. No, he might get locked up for being a stuffed shirt but never for doing anything criminal.”

“Really? Edwin Kranz?” Ruth asked with a doubting look, but she knew Ellie was sincere. “Well, of course not, bless your heart!”

“Yes, Dad was in the service for awhile and after he and Mom divorced he went to work for some oil company.”

“I’d love to talk to him. When is he coming back?”

“I’m supposed to call him when I’m ready.”

“I can have my nephew take you out to him, I’m sure he wouldn’t mind.”

“I have no idea where he is.”

“I’m pretty sure I can guess. If not, then you can call him and my nephew can take you to meet him.”

“Well, I don’t want to put you out or anything.”

“Oh it’s no trouble. My nephew would be glad to. Hold on here and I’ll go ask him.”

Ellie sat holding her coffee, sorry she’d said anything. Now she felt trapped and wanted desperately to run out of the lobby and to her room. Ruth was by the waffle maker talking to a man who looked to be in his mid-twenties. Both looked back at her as they talked and after a minute they came to her table.

“Ellie, this is Alton Chandler, a realtor and a good family man,” Ruth said.

“Ms. Zingg, I really don’t think this is necessary,” Ellie said, but Alton had already extended his hand.

“Forgive my aunt, she gets all excited. But she told me who your father was and I’d be glad to help. I’m really looking forward to meeting him.”

“He’ll be coming back to get me, I just don’t know when. Did you have an appointment with him or something? He didn’t mention meeting anyone.”

“Oh, uh, I thought he might be wanting to meet out at the retreat. I didn’t know he’d be coming to town so this it’s somewhat of a surprise for me.”

“A retreat? I don’t know anything about a retreat. Are you sure we’re talking about my Edwin Kranz?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Ellie looked at the ground, frowning and trying to put the pieces together. None of this made any sense to her except when she considered how anxious her father had been to get out and about this morning. Ruth took the opportunity to nudge Alton and put her finger to her lips to keep quiet. After a moment, Ellie looked up at Ruth, who seemed like the least harmless person she’d ever met, and Alton, who was the essence of a spit-and-polish realtor and decided that there wouldn’t be any danger in taking them up on the offer.

“Tell you what, I’ll take my rolls up to my room and get cleaned up and meet you back down here in about twenty to twenty-five minutes?”

“I’ll finish my breakfast,” Alton said with a nod.

The Fallon High School Class of ’54 stuck together like glue. Even those who didn’t like the rest were somehow sucked into the perpetual vortex that held them and their memories captive as the years went by. Even in death, their memories and scandals would live either like perennial flowers or open wounds. There was only one notable exception: Edwin Kranz. He’d walked away years ago without the courtesy of letting the rest of them get their pound of flesh before his departure. But that was about to change.

Ruth Zingg used her smile and a few nudges to make her way past the mourners to get to the end of the pew. Everyone who mattered in their clique was congregated on one side of the church where two windows had been opened. One allowed fresh, morning air in and the other provided Hester Jorgensen with a place to throw up from her psychosomatic withdrawals. Margie Thumpacker’s funeral was scheduled for ten in the morning, precluding Hester from having her customary first drinks of the day. Darla McGee and Belle Chandler were sitting in the middle pew while Belle’s husband, Cary, sat with Joan Campanella in the row ahead. Darla tried to keep some distance between Cary and Belle to avoid any public spats between them. Joan

seemed to be the only one truly mourning for Margie, weeping quietly while Cary tried to put his arm around her.

“You’re married,” Joan said as she pushed Cary’s arm away.

“Just trying to be nice, what the hell?”

“Guess who I saw this morning?” Ruth asked.

“Who? You’re a goddamned busy body, you know that?” Belle said loudly.

The rest of the congregation became quiet for a moment and Darla patted Belle’s hand. Cary turned around and glared at Darla.

“Can’t you keep her quiet?”

“She’s your wife, you keep her quiet,”

“I told you we shouldn’t have brought her.” Cary began.

“Who the hell is he?” Belle asked Darla, but when she didn’t get an answer she looked up at Ruth. “Who the hell is this man?”

“That’s your husband, Belle, now shut up, this is good,” Ruth said. “I saw Edwin Kranz today.”

“Oh, God forbid,” Darla said with a sigh. “I’d hoped that this was all a bad dream. I was hoping he’d denounced his citizenship and run off with some foreign woman.”

“Utah. He met a woman in Utah and married her. They’ve got at least one child, a girl. I met her this morning. Her name is Ellie, short for Eleanor. Kind of like an Eleanor we knew,” Ruth said while hooking her thumb toward the casket. Darla’s mind began to race.

“I bet he thought she was one of them polygamists. That boy couldn’t ever be happy with one girl, always talking like he was some prized bull or something,” Belle blurted.

“Now, Belle,” Darla said, “Let’s keep our hearts and our minds pure here.”

“Wagging that tongue,” Belle repeated, “Licking in the air like he was some kind of Casanova. Pure evil is what he was.”

“Belle, you’re grandson, Alton, was there. He talked to Edwin’s daughter, too. He’s supposed to take her out to the Eros place by the lake. I figured that’s probably where Edwin was headed to.”

“Probably looking for a place to open a goddamned whore house,” Belle griped.

The organist looked at the group with a scowl as he took his seat. He began playing the obligatory death medley that they had become so accustomed to hearing, only louder than usual in his attempt to drown out their conversation.

“It’s almost sinful to be talking about him and that place in here,” Darla said. “What in the world is he planning to do with that place?”

“I don’t know that he was actually out there but I had hunch. Plus, Alton was trying to make contact with him. He said he’s never met the man, they did the deal through mail and the internet.”

“If I said it once I said it a thousand times. We should have burned it down years ago after it ruined this city and it’s people.”

“It didn’t ruin anybody but you,” Ruth said to Darla. “You were tolerable until that place opened and then you got all high and mighty, going off worse than your daddy ever did. Let’s talk about something else, I don’t want to get you started on your pulpit.”

“I don’t have a pulpit and I’ve never acted high and mighty. Doesn’t it seem odd to any of you that Edwin’s here in town and he’s not at Margie’s funeral? I mean, you all know why I ask, don’t you?”

“Well, Edwin would probably never step into a church, I’m afraid,” Ruth said.

“Maybe,” Darla replied and shifted her eyes to the others. “But that isn’t exactly what I was talking about.”

“Darla, don’t start gossiping now,” Joan said.

Darla put her hands to her chest and pretended to gasp. She feigned innocence, hoping that someone would take her bait.

“Well spit it out, for Christ’s sake,” Cary said as he spun around to face them. “Anything to shut you up.”

Darla gave him a cold stare and then leaned in toward the middle of their group. The rest of them moved to get closer.

“Edwin had a thing for Margie,” she said and each of them looked briefly over at the silver hair sticking up over the end of the casket, the only part of her they could see from their vantage point. “I understand that they may have seen each other secretly for about three months.”

“Her mother would’ve killed her,” Ruth said.

“No, her mother wanted her to see him. She said it was therapy for her. He supposedly spent quite a few nights over there, from what I hear, and a few mornings after.”

“Therapy? What kind of therapy could that boy—” Ruth began to ask but Belle cut her off.

“Therapy, hell! He was interested more with getting under her skirt.”

“Belle!” the women said in a chorus as the organist increased the volume. Belle sat without remorse, her Alzheimer’s making her oblivious to any shame for what she’d said.

“How do you know this?” Ruth asked. “I have a hard time believing it, and goodness knows I’m not calling you a liar.”

“She told me herself the day she died. I suppose she just wanted to get it off of her chest and she needed someone to tell it to. I just happened to be there.”

“What kind of therapy could seeing that son-of-a-bitch make any sense?” Cary asked.

“Keep your voice down, there’s her sister,” Ruth said, and all eyes shifted to the back as Karen Trimble pushed her mother, Norma, up the middle aisle and stopped in front of the casket.

Karen helped Norma stand so she could see her sister one last time. The rest of the congregation looked on in pity as Norma’s scarred and disfigured face contorted as she wept. Pastor Carl Hauswirth joined them, providing comfort for a few moments and then helping them to their seats in the front row.

“Good morning, brethren,” Pastor Carl said quietly as he looked over at the group around Darla and Belle. He stared at them the way a patient parent stares at a delinquent child. “We’re gathered here to pay our final respects to Margaret Eleanor Thumpacker, a beautiful and loving woman...”

“I’ll finish later,” Darla said, and the group turned their attention to Pastor Carl. Hester made one final retching sound, then pulled her head back in the window while wiping her mouth and taking her seat. She nodded to Pastor Carl, who smiled at her with sympathy.

Pastor Carl performed brilliantly as expected, noting the good works, faithful heart, and generosity of a woman he’d never met, expanding on a few notes someone had handed to him at the last minute. Margie’s regular preacher, Pastor Hugh, had only outlived her by a few days and his prepared speech was forever lost in his lifeless mind. But given the choice, everyone would have rather heard from Pastor Carl than Pastor Hugh, simply because Carl gave better odds of getting into heaven. Many of the women Carl said eulogies over had once been his baby-sitters which provided almost a familial bond between them. Darla, however, had a palpable animosity

toward him. He was the competition, there to usurp her attempt to perform God's work in Fallon. Worse still was the fact that her old classmates and acquaintances seemed to prefer him over her for their spiritual needs. It wasn't like her to let those things go by unnoticed, nor was it like Pastor Carl to care what Darla thought or did.

The hornet's nest Darla had stirred up about Margie worked out better than she could have ever planned. She'd planted the seeds, was interrupted before the payoff, and had to leave halfway through the eulogy because of Belle's behavior. Belle became unruly and when Cary tried to take her out, she slapped him. Darla quickly obliged, leaving the rest of the group hanging by a thread of gossip. At the end of the service, each of them took just a little bit longer in viewing Margie, the woman they thought they knew, for the last time and in a different way.

While the others were watching Margie being carefully lowered into the ground, Darla and Belle crested the hill and looked down at an old building on the edge of the lake.

"I don't see him out here," Darla said.

"See who?"

"Edwin. Ruth thought he might've come out here, but I don't see him. There's a car down there, though, I wonder if it's his."

"Let's go down there and find out. It's hot in this car, let's go swimming in the lake."

"We're too old to swim, honey. And let's just wait here, see if somebody comes out. I'd know that man in a second if he showed his face. I don't think it's him. I think Ruth's full of it."

"Full of what?"

"Never mind. Look at it, Belle." Darla pointed at the building. "Beelzebub's playground. Do you know where you're at? Does this place look familiar?"

"Bubba's what?"

"Beelzebub. The devil?"

"Why do you have to make everything hard. You and that damn daddy of yours with all those names."

"Do you know where you are?"

"We're out at the lake. It's getting hot, let's go inside there. I need some water."

"This place is closed for business. And do you see all those machines over there?" Darla asked while pointing at the bulldozers and crane. "They were supposed to push all of the ashes of this place into a big pile and get rid of everything once and for all."

“Why would they do that?”

Darla looked at Belle with pity. She didn't understand much these days with her Alzheimer's starting to erode her memory. Six months ago she would have told anyone that was willing to hear what had gone on in the old retreat. But now her secrets were getting harder to discover and she showed little interest in anything.

“It's been sitting all these years inches from foreclosure and in the last second the son of Satan bought it up. We should be mixing the ashes with cow manure right now, but there it stands,” Darla snarled, shaking her bony fist in the air.

“Why cow manure?”

“Because it...never mind. Let's just sit here and get one last look. I can see it now, that big old wrecking ball over there knocking it down room by room and inch by sinful inch into one big pile. I would have lit the match myself. I told them let's knock it down and then set it afire the next morning just before dawn. It'd be like Easter sunrise. We could have lit up the predawn skies with the sweet smell of God's vengeance on the carousers and fornicators.”

“I just want a glass of water.”

“I'll get you one, just give me a few minutes.”

“A few goddamn minutes.”

“Don't say that, Belle! You know using the Lord's name in vain insults me.”

Belle stared at her blankly for a long time. The empty look in her eyes made Darla wonder if she was about to apologize or if she simply wasn't able to follow the conversation.

“You're a bitch,” Belle said, and then closed her eyes and leaned her head against the window.

CHAPTER 3

“So how far do we have to go to get to this place?” Ellie asked. They seemed to have been driving through the woods for miles.

“Not much further, it’s right on the lake in an area that they planned to develop a long time ago,” Alton replied.

“Planned? That doesn’t sound good.”

“It’s quite a nice area and there’s beginning to be some interest out here again. Every other adjoining property around the lake has either been developed or is gearing up that way.”

“So what is it about this property?”

“I don’t know. Something about the retreat we’re going to.”

“It’s really a retreat?” Ellie replied.

“Yeah. It was actually called Eros Retreat although it was only in business a few months. My understanding is that it was the place to be for big shots and those with money. Sort of a Playboy mansion before they had Playboy mansions.”

“Is it haunted?”

“No,” he laughed, “Nothing like that. Not that I know of anyway. But something happened, some kind of scandal brought the place to its knees. It’s been closed ever since but it’s in remarkable condition. I’ve never seen anyone out here, but somebody’s been taking care of it until recently. My guess is that someone died or something and whoever was overseeing it was going to let it go into foreclosure rather than keep paying taxes on it.”

“How long has it been shut down?”

“Fifty years? Sixty, maybe?”

“Interesting.”

The car topped a hill where the trees abruptly ended and below was a building sitting by itself on the edge of the lake. She could see the fencing for a tennis court, a large building to the back that extended over the edge of the lake, and a large parking lot. There were acres of well-manicured land around it and sidewalks surrounding the footprint of the property. The design of the building seemed more like that of a cottage than the three-story building it was, giving it the air of a home instead of a retreat or hotel.

“Wow,” Ellie said in a whisper.

“Wow is right. It’s a charmer to say the least. It’s dated inside, though, and I think that’s what scares people away. There’s a lot to be done to update it and make it usable again.”

“I wish you a lot of luck. I sure as hell couldn’t afford this if that’s why we’re out here.”

“No, not quite,” Alton said with a smile.

“How much would it take to buy this thing?”

“Two point three million was the price with everything involved. That covered the building and the taxes.”

“You’re really fighting the odds trying to unload this place.”

Alton refrained from telling her that her father had already purchased the place. He’d let the cat out of the bag the day it was supposed to be torn down against Edwin’s wishes, but thought better about telling Ellie. He wasn’t sure if she already knew but he wasn’t going to take any chances at drawing the ire of Edwin.

“I’ve always been an optimist, much to the displeasure of that woman there,” Alton said as they drove past a car. There were two women inside, the driver glaring at Alton and the passenger asleep.

“Who is that?”

“Someone who hoped the place wouldn’t get sold. She hates this place and wants nothing more than for it to get bought by the city and razed. Her father was the Baptist preacher here in town for the longest time, a real fire-and-brimstone kind of man. She takes after him except she’s a bit more vicious about it. At least that’s what I’ve heard, but I’ve heard it from everyone. Anyway, you’d think sin was invented here if you talked to her. The other woman was my grandmother.”

“Look down there, my dad’s car. Now how did your aunt know he’d be here?”

“I’m sure we’re about to find out. My aunt said he had some ties here a long time ago.”

“That’s odd. Dad’s kind of a stuffy guy, I’ve never seen him be nostalgic about anything.”

Alton pulled under the carport close to where Edwin was standing. Edwin had been staring at the car with contempt until he saw Ellie in the passenger seat and his face broke out into a big smile.

“Dad, what are you doing out here?”

“Looking the place over, I’m glad you made it out. How did you know I was here?”

“The lady at the front desk said you might be out here and she had her nephew bring me out.”

“Who the hell is the lady at the front desk?” Edwin asked. His mood went from cheerful to cautious.

“Ruth Zingg, Mr. Kranz. She’s my aunt. Do you remember her?”

“I do, so what?”

“She said she knew you and thought you’d be out here. I’m Alton Chandler.”

“Did you say anything to Ellie about this?” Edwin asked.

“No, sir,” Alton replied.

“Good, don’t go anywhere. Ellie and I will be awhile.”

Edwin took Ellie by the arm and started leading her to the front door of the building when Alton called out to them.

“I’ve got a key for you if you’d like to see inside.”

“We can get in, don’t worry about it. The door is busted, you can walk right through.”

“It wasn’t like that yesterday when I was out here. I wonder how that happened?”

“I broke it, don’t worry about it.”

“But I have a key.”

“Well, hold onto it. It might fit the other doors if you want to try. We’ll be back in a bit.

Don’t go anywhere.”

“Yes, sir,” Alton said and then began mumbling to himself. “I’ve got a damn key right here, why would he bust down the door? The man is nuts.”

Inside Edwin turned on his flashlight which revealed the ornate interior of the old building.

“Incredible,” Ellie said. “They definitely catered to the upper crust. And in a gaudy way, too.”

“What do you know about this place?”

“Alton said it was a not-so-nice place.”

“I see. Well, that was in the past and this is your future.”

“What?”

“Right here,” Edwin said as he shined the light through a doorway, “A big kitchen. It needs updating, just like everything else. You can have anything you want to eat. This grand entrance here, all of the rooms and everything outside. You can decorate any way you like.”

Ellie looked at him as if he had gone out of his mind.

“I don’t get it.”

“You told me over the phone last month that you were frustrated with your job. You said that no nursing home should be run like that and if you had your own it would be the best. Well, here it is.”

“You’re kidding? Dad you don’t just open... I mean... wait a minute. Let me catch my breath.”

“Take your time, it’s not going anywhere.”

“Dad, wait a minute. Do you know how much this place costs? And the taxes and—“

“Yes, I do. I have a budget for renovation and a contractor and everything. We just need your input.”

Ellie opened and closed her mouth several times, trying to say something but not knowing where to start. She alternated putting her hands on her hips and turning, trying to see in different directions and then rubbing her head.

“So I would up and move from Phoenix to do this. Have my own nursing home that used to be a bordello, for lack of a better term. I guess Larry should give up his business on a whim and come here, too?”

“Are you two still an item?”

“He’s still my husband, yes.”

“Then it would only be fitting for him to come here, too. You’ll need a handyman and caretaker.”

“I don’t know what to say, this is just out of the blue.”

“Why don’t we look around and let’s see what you think.”

“Right now all I can think is how much money—“

“Forget about the money. I’ve got money, don’t worry about it.”

“How much do you have?”

“Enough for a few more lifetimes. Now quit stalling and let’s look around.”

Ellie took a closer look around the kitchen. Across the hall was a large room filled with tables and chairs, big enough for an activity room. From the back door she could see the outline of a pool that was filled in with dirt, and next to that what might have been a shuffleboard area. There was a disheveled dock and a boat house down by the water.

“We’d have to put in elevators,” Ellie said.

“So you’re starting to put a checklist together? Good, but you can take elevators off the list. There’s three.”

“Three?”

“One right here across from the kitchen and dining area and one on each end of the building.”

“Really? How long have you been checking this place out?”

“I’ve been here before.”

“Before, as in this morning?”

“No, years ago.”

“When it was a one of ‘those places’? I don’t think I want to know why.”

“It isn’t what you think.”

“So let’s look at the rooms. Are they all the same?”

“Most of them, each floor has a few suites and each level has a large gathering area in the middle, just like the grand foyer right here at the entrance.”

“There’s some beautiful woodwork and detail here, I... wait a minute. Why are we even talking about this? Do you realize the work involved, the licensing, and all of that stuff? Who’s going to supervise it? And what am I supposed to do for a living while all that’s going on?”

“I have a contractor in mind. You tell him what you want, you can communicate through email. Come down here and inspect when you want, I’ll pay for it. Keep working at your job for now and Gary—“

“Larry.”

“Larry can slowly wind up what he’s doing. Why don’t you call him now?”

“And tell him what? I can’t just call out of the blue and ask him if he wants to turn his life upside down.”

“Won’t know until you’ve tried.”

Ellie bit her bottom lip and looked around again. She began to envision different colors on the walls, fresh furniture and pictures. But most important, she saw an opportunity to do the job of caring for the elderly the way she thought it should be done and in a beautiful environment. She gave her father a menacing glance.

“This is such a big gamble.”

“And you can’t lose at this one. What’s the worst that can happen, you have to go back to work for someone else?”

“Yeah.”

“Just like you’re going to do at the end of the week when our trip is over?”

“Look, don’t try to make sense of this. Women don’t operate that way. You’re eighty, you should know better.”

“You’re my daughter, you should be thinking like me.”

“That’s scary. Give me a minute,” she said as she pulled out her phone. “I need some privacy, I’ll meet you outside in a minute. Or two. Give me awhile.”

“Tell Gary I said hello,” Edwin said as he walked to the front door.

“It’s Larry!”

“Whatever.”

The afternoon tea at Fallon Nursing Home was late due to the funeral. Darla had everything set up by the time Joan and Ruth arrived. Hester had excused herself after the service to catch up on cocktail hour and Cary was, as usual, nowhere to be seen. Eloise Laine pushed herself in her wheelchair into the Tea Room to join the others while Darla sat quietly fuming, dying for someone to ask her to finish her story.

“What do you remember about him, Eloise?” Ruth asked.

Eloise always had something interesting to say, and since she hadn't made it to the funeral the other ladies were anxious to talk to her.

“Oh, that's easy. It's been over sixty years since I last saw him but I'll never forget that night we went out. I told him ‘Don't even think about putting my hand down there.’ He pouted the rest of the night. Dropped me off at ten-thirty saying he had a job appointment the next morning. But I knew better, he just wanted someone to give him some lovin' and run off. Well, I let him have the runnin' off part!”

The other ladies laughed, some shaking their heads, others nodding from their own experiences. Eloise kept looking out of the corner of her eye at Darla to see if she could get a rise out of her, but Darla looked annoyed by something else.

“We're talking about sex, Darla, let us know if you need something explained. Anyway, that boy was up to no good as soon as he hatched. Used to come up to me and say he had a secret to tell me and then he'd stick his tongue in my ear.”

“You're kidding!” Joan cried as she held her hands to her mouth.

“Not one bit. Nasty, I tell you! He didn't pass up any opportunity, used to come up behind me and hold my arms by my side to try and do that. He was constantly sticking his tongue out when I passed him in the hall and I'd cover my ears,” she said and then lowered her voice. “Of course I wasn't about to tell him I liked it.”

“You little tramp!”

Darla had pulled her notepad from her purse and was writing, glancing up periodically to see if anyone was noticing.

“Hey,” Eloise barked, “What are you writing over there? Hey, Darla, I said what are you writing?”

“Nothing. I'm just writing down some appointments I have, that's all.”

“Well stop doing it. You’ll be blabbing every word of this if you remember it. Why don’t you go save somebody? Anyway, all he had to do was pretend that he liked me and I probably would have let him do what he wanted. I always wanted to see what he had down there.”

They all giggled except for Darla, who breathed a sigh of relief. Eloise’s bullseye had been taken off of her after she’d put her pad away, but Darla was still taking mental notes when Joan began to comment.

“I must admit, there were times that I envied the rest of you,” Joan said. “I know he was crude, but I was so jealous that he never asked me out or tried anything with me. I just wanted that one chance to say ‘No’.”

“You weren’t a challenge to him,” Eloise said. “You were too insecure and he wanted a fighter and by God he got one with me!”

“Are you saying I would have been easy? I could have stood up to him, too.”

“No, I’m not saying that. Hell, I was the one that was easy. Joan, stop taking everything so personal. He just didn’t like meek girls.”

“Or maybe he had you figured out before everyone else,” Darla said, but with enough emphasis that it quieted the room.

“What? What do you mean?” Joan asked.

“He was quite intuitive, you know. Maybe he knew you might not have been interested in boys at all.”

Joan turned red and her hands began to shake.

“Darla, mind your manners, you little shit. What do you know about men anyway?” Eloise asked.

“I know I prefer them over women.”

“Ever been with one?”

“Doesn’t matter. It’s just that anything other than a man and a woman would be sinful. You probably have a different opinion on that, don’t you Joan?”

There was a gasp throughout the room as Joan glared at Darla with red, teary eyes, her hands covering her mouth. Darla stared back at her, nodding her head up and down.

“Darla, stop it,” Joan begged. “Why must you do these things? Why must you spread your hate for life to everyone else?”

“Because she’s a frustrated, miserable woman who wants everyone else to suffer the way she does, that’s why,” Eloise said.

“I’m only speaking the truth. We should all come to terms with the past before we have to answer to a higher calling,” Darla said.

“My God, you are dreadful. Who are you to tell me what I should do? And when are you going to face the facts that you’re nothing more than a busybody gossip that hides behind that Bible of yours!” Joan screamed and then rushed out the door.

Darla stood still, defiant, with her chin raised in the air, but it was easy to see that she was shaken by Joan’s words. The rest of the group looked at her, half in loathing and half in fear.

“Why can’t you leave well enough alone, Darla? You’ve got plenty of money and you’ve got friends all around you if you’d just quit attacking us,” Eloise said.

“I’m not attacking anyone. I’m helping people find their way to Heaven. Don’t you think she’ll feel better when she’s not living under that cloud of deceit and sin?”

“No, I think she’s embarrassed and hurt. What you did shouldn’t be done in public and it ain’t your calling to bring it out of her. She’s right, you hide behind that Bible of yours to do your dirty work.”

“No, I don’t. I love each and every one of you like sisters. It would break my heart if I thought I ever hurt any of you maliciously. I truly hope you believe that.”

“We don’t. You’re a conniving hussy that we can’t get rid of. You’re like a damn hemorrhoid that keeps popping out.”

Darla looked hurt but still stood defiant in the face of the others, who seemed to gain strength in Eloise’s words and now looked at Darla with reproach.

“Now, let’s get this out in the open so we’re not all taking off in different directions wondering what this is all about,” Ruth said. “We know you’re dying to tell us what Joan did, so tell us and get it over with.”

“Well then, here’s what I understand…” Darla began.

Darla recounted the story that Margie had told her, adding a bit of seasoning to ensure the proper emphasis was put where needed. When she finished, there were troubled looks on the faces of the others but it was hard to determine whether it was because of the story or Darla’s ability to uncover it.

“I guess we shouldn’t be surprised,” Eloise said, breaking the silence that had fallen over them. “We all probably thought we were normal in our time. I suppose we had to expect that things like this were happening. And so what? Keep this to yourselves, girls. Joan’s none the worse for us knowing it in my opinion. She’s a sweetheart and you all know it. Don’t be blabbing this to anyone else, Darla.”

“She’s a sinner, she should repent,” Darla countered, upset that nobody was as shocked as she wanted them to be.

“Ye who are without sin... you know what I’m talking about. I may be in a wheelchair but I’ll bash your little head in with a rock if you don’t keep this to yourself,” Eloise warned again, but Darla was unswayed.

“You asked me to tell you, you’re no better than me.”

“I don’t care, I’m not gonna use it against her, not like you did. Now let’s tend to our other business.”

“What business is that?” Ruth asked.

“Let’s go wait for Edwin Kranz to show up at the motel.”