

Esther Minskoff

Dual Identity



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OBOOKO EDITION

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Chapter 1

It was the summer of 2005 when two events skewed the upward trajectory of Hannah's life. Without warning, not one, but two Challenger disasters smashed her life to smithereens. First, there was the discovery of the identity of her biological parents, and then there was meeting Tommy, the man she felt destined to love forever, only to eventually learn that their love was universally condemned as perverted, filthy, the vilest of sins.

Hannah was a kindergarten teacher so her summers were somewhat free, except for the six weeks she taught in a half-day enrichment program for children needing school readiness skills. These students were quite different from her year-round students who were white, middle class, native born, and affluent. Most of her summer school children came from diverse ethnic groups, and/or were poor, and/or were non-fluent English speakers, and/or lived in educationally unsupportive home environments. Hannah liked the extra money she earned during the summer as well as the instructional challenge posed by this special population. With every new letter, number, fact, or song a child mastered, she basked in the success of her teaching. These were the tangible fruits of her labor. Here was evidence that she was making an impact on the world, however infinitesimal.

But more importantly, she craved the infusion of inspiration she derived from contact with children. When she was with youngsters, either her summer or her year-round charges, she felt more alive. Her face became elastic with a range of exaggerated emotions from fear to elation, and her body moved in grand sweeps. She viewed the world through their eyes, a glittering world of wonder and joy. Her throaty laughter merged with their tinkling laughter at jokes only five year olds understand. Their probing, often unanswerable, questions made her look at reality with inquisitive eyes. "How did God make the earth without falling off?" Her awe of nature deepened as she and the children breathlessly observed a wooly caterpillar amble across the classroom floor. Her favorite perch was the child-sized chair she sat on as she gazed down at the upturned rapt faces of her students while reading books aloud, animating her voice deeply for scary characters and lightly for happy characters. She pulled her shoulders back to signal support for the children as they gathered their resolve to climb the small playground equipment, their own Mt. Everest. When she led her students in their off-key singing of children's songs, she proudly shouted the lyrics along with them. The visions she saw through her students' eyes validated Hannah's belief in the goodness of the human race. She fervently believed that humans were born good, but what happened to some people later in life corrupted their innate goodness, but that was true for only despots, mass murderers, and rapists, not everyday people. To Hannah, most of life was to be savored, and every experience had a silver lining if you only dug deeply for it.

When her students looked at Hannah, they saw a wide face on a large head fringed with bangs and a pony tail. Her hair was Asian black, silky, and straight. Her smooth skinned face with large black eyes, button nose, and full lips made her appear like a comic strip drawing. In fact, her students told her that she looked like the cartoon character, Dora the Explorer. Maybe that was one reason why they liked her so much. Imagine being taught by a cartoon character come to life. But the main reason for their affection for Hannah was her kindergarten teacher personality – bubbly, warm, affectionate, and overflowing with praise. She found what was unique in each child and emphasized this to the child, the other children in the class, and the child's parents. No parents ever came away from a conference with Hannah without being prouder of their child than before the conference. She was the most requested teacher at Waterview Elementary. All parents wanted their children to start their education with Ms. O'Brien.

People who superficially knew Hannah thought she was an airhead, lacking depth which was considered of prime importance in the college town in which she lived. She appeared innocent, especially when she widened her black eyes. Some wondered why she was always happy, especially in light of her father's premature death and her mother's Alzheimer. They concluded that she was either hiding her true feelings, or she was a blind optimist who didn't recognize that she was supposed to be depressed about her family situation.

She didn't care that people viewed her as naïve. Her behavior was based on the premise that if she was nice to everyone; then in response, everyone would be nice to her. She wanted the world to be conflict-free, or at least the world around her. She wanted to live in a cocoon of smiles and hugs. In her rare introspective moments, Hannah moved out of her body to gaze at herself, and she liked what she saw - a woman whose calling in life was molding young lives; a woman who smiled all the time sprinkling happiness wherever she looked; and a woman who was lucky to live a comfortable life in a small town in one of the most beautiful places in America.

Hannah viewed her life as a fairy tale. She knew that she had ideal parents who lavished her with love. They desperately wanted a baby and couldn't have one so they adopted her. She didn't know who her biological parents were, and she had no desire to learn their identity. With perfect parents, why would she want to find the imperfect parents who threw her away? Until the age of 16, her life had been blissful. She loved school and got A's in every subject, except math in which she got B's or C's despite studying hard and being tutored. She never had to be told to do her homework. Not only did she do the required homework, she always did the extra credit. She practiced playing her flute without being prompted so she could play on-key in the

school marching band when she was more concerned about not tripping than producing the correct notes. She rehearsed her gymnastics moves at home so she would perform them perfectly in competitions. She rotated through the house with summersaults and cartwheels, somehow avoiding the many fragile knick-knacks and plants crowding the surfaces in every room.

She enjoyed spending time with her parents, even as a teenager when she was expected to rebel against them. Together they went to the movies, bicycled, gardened, and cooked. Some of Hannah's fondest memories were of their annual beach vacations when she and her parents spent hours rafting atop the crests of ocean waves. Then, returning to their beach cottage, her mother would soothe Hannah's and her father's flame-red sunburned skin as she gently massaged them with lotion. The burning pain from the sun would be further diminished by a seafood dinner at their favorite beachfront restaurant.

Hannah's father's death was the first puncture in her fairy tale existence. Death was the evil stepmother, the wolf, and the ogre who brought grief into her life. For three months she mourned his passing, continually asking God why He took such a good human being while letting nasty people live into old age. But then Hannah quelled the evil stepmother, and put her fairy tale existence back on track. She stopped questioning God and started thanking Him for giving her 16 years of complete happiness with the best father in the world. She refused to let her father's premature death squash her rosy view of life.

Once Hannah started teaching, her life gained a richness she had never envisioned. She discovered that she was created to be a teacher; this was her calling. She eagerly anticipated each day she spent with her students. Most of her mental life was devoted to thinking about them, what was happening in their lives, and what fun activities she could create to maximize their learning. But that serenity was shaken three years earlier when her mother was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. The evil stepmother had returned. First God had taken her father's life, and now He had taken her mother's mind. Her students sustained her as she gradually adjusted to her mother's condition. Her house also helped. The Victorian house built in 1925 with its turret windows was her castle, and she was the princess who dwelt within its walls. She loved her house so much that she lived at home during her four years at college despite her mother's encouragement to live on campus so she could better experience college life. She refused because her house was her sanctuary. She thought it would provide an impermeable shield from life's hardships. She was wrong; Alzheimer's had penetrated its walls.

Hannah felt that her mother's illness was another of God's challenges to her positive world view. She battled to maintain her vision of the world as a place where bad things made you

appreciate the good things even more. What helped her in this struggle was her belief that someday she would meet her Prince Charming who would provide a happy ending to her fairy tale. She used this dream as a shield against negativism and depression. She and her prince would marry and have 10 loving, perfect children. Her prince would vanquish death, illness, and unhappiness. His arms would envelop Hannah, giving her complete impregnability against the evils of life.

She had a special prize waiting for her prince – her virginity. She was saving this for him to show that he had always been the only man in her life even before they met. During her high school years, preserving her virginity had not been difficult because she had only gone out on a few dates, usually to school dances. But guarding the prize for Prince Charming became more of a challenge in college. On the first day of classes, she spotted David in her huge freshman psychology class. She was attracted to his light blond, almost albinoish, hair and bright blue eyes. She thought he looked a bit like a prince in a Disney movie, and she hoped she might be lucky enough to find her Prince Charming on the very first day of college. At the second class, she sat next to him. David was extremely shy so she initiated a conversation and asked him out for coffee after class. That was the beginning of their lop-sided relationship where Hannah talked incessantly as she gazed into his face and he listened passively with his eyes averted. She was having difficulty getting him to utter more than a few words although she tapped into a variety of topics from sports to medicine to religion, hoping something would spark a response from him. He was like a turtle, he rarely made utterances. She wasn't even sure she would recognize his voice if he didn't identify himself when he called her.

David was a pre-med major who was strongly motivated to become a dermatologist, like his father. To maintain high grades, he studied every night except Saturdays when he took Hannah to the movies or sporting events. David brought Hannah from the kissing stage to petting. With their first kiss, she realized he was not her Prince Charming. He left her feeling vacant. During their kissing and petting sessions, she thought of homework she had to do and clothes she had seen on a recent shopping trip. Her lack of responsiveness to him left her worried that she might be frigid, a condition she had read about in a woman's magazine. After his freshman year, David transferred to another school that had a better pre-med program, leaving Hannah to continue her pursuit of Prince Charming.

In her second year Hannah dated Stuart, her math tutor. He was a math major who was puzzled as to why Hannah couldn't grasp math concepts when she was intelligent. Hannah had no difficulty making conversation with Stuart who had a great sense of humor and was always joking and punning, until she had to stop him for fear that her uncontrollable laughter would cause her to pee in her pants. He was part of a popular campus improv group so she went to

almost all of the group's performances. She marveled at his quick wit, especially when he created skits from words thrown at him from the audience.

Stuart moved Hannah ahead several notches on the sexual progress chart. Stuart's was the first penis that Hannah had seen and touched. They would spend hours in his apartment with Hannah massaging Stuart over and over again. As soon as he came, they would start again. She didn't know where he got all that sperm. She even let him kiss her naked breasts. Although she was more aroused with Stuart, she still was not fully engaged. She felt as though their relationship was mechanical and goal directed at getting him to set a new ejaculation record each evening. This led her to wonder whether she had reduced libido, which she had learned about in her psychology class sitting next to David, her first candidate for Prince Charming.

Their relationship ended abruptly when during one of his comedy routines, Stuart made fun of his girlfriend comparing her to a sexual crossing guard preventing him from getting to the other side. He described his fantasy of her nude except for wearing a yellow crossing guard vest and holding up a red stop sign in one hand and his dick in the other. He looked at her as he laughed causing everyone in the audience to look at her as she turned crimson. She had never experienced humiliation before and she was overwhelmed by it, wanting to vanish into thin air. She felt as if she were actually sitting in the audience nude wearing a yellow crossing guard vest. At the break, she hurriedly left. After the show Stuart called her, but she banged down the phone when she heard his voice. The next day he came to her house, but she refused to open the door. Did he really think that humiliating her would make her want to sleep with him? She never saw him again, although she did mentally thank him for helping her get a C in calculus and teaching her the details of male anatomy.

The greatest challenge to her virginity came in her junior year, when she met Phil, a business major and a gung-ho fraternity guy. He took her to frat parties which she enjoyed enormously, especially when fortified with beer. She loved wearing pretty evening dresses to dances. She dressed hours before Phil was to pick her up so she could pose in front of a full length mirror as she twirled round and round to create an opening-umbrella effect with dresses of yellow silk or mauve lace. She imagined herself dancing for hours on end, never tiring, never wilting. In reality, she danced a few dances on a crowded floor and then ended up in Phil's room having her dress unceremoniously removed or pushed aside so that she and Phil could engage in all types of foreplay, but never the real thing. After just one wearing, the dresses were often dirty and even torn.

During their five months of dating, Hannah became more sexually responsive to Phil, especially when he touched her vagina. As soon as his hands passed her stomach, she found

that the lower half of her body was no longer under her control. Phil was increasingly insistent that she sleep with him. She didn't want to stop going to parties, but she also didn't want to have intercourse, so she decided to offer him oral sex because everyone knew that wasn't really going all the way. That would save her virginity while keeping him happy. She found it disgusting, and tried not to gag or vomit while feigning pleasure. When his fingers explored her vagina, she realized that she did have a normal libido. She found herself screaming with passion. For a while he was satisfied, but with each date they were getting closer and closer to intercourse. He would insist that there was no difference between having his fingers or his dick in her. But to her, there was an insurmountable difference. Although she was committed to only allowing Prince Charming's penis to enter her precious cavity, she knew she wouldn't be able to resist Phil's advances much longer especially when he plied her with more and more beer so she reluctantly stopped dating him.

Since college, she had dated five guys, but had never gone beyond oral sex. She dated a guy until he was no longer content with what she had to give him or she tired of him. Although she was 27, she was patiently waiting for her prince to whom she would proudly present her virginity. Her friends told her that she was destined to be an old-maid virgin, but she was certain that someday she would meet the right man.

Taking advantage of the extra time she had in the summer, Hannah was catching up on cleaning out the basement of her house. At last she was facing the dreaded task of disposing of her father's papers. Her father, Sean, a sociology professor at the local university, had died eleven years earlier. He seemed to be in perfect health, but as he was grading papers in his office, he fell onto his desk, dead of a massive heart attack. No one understood why this happened to a fifty-six year old, thin man with low cholesterol who exercised regularly. Even if they knew why, it wouldn't have lessened the overwhelming grief Hannah and her mother felt. Over time, Hannah's grief settled into a subliminal sadness which she barred from her daily consciousness. But shortly this sadness would be mixed with questions regarding who Sean O'Brien really was.

Her mother, Mary Ann, stored Sean's office papers in the basement, vowing to go through them someday. She never did. It was too painful for her to see his handwritten comments on student papers, or look at his grade books, or read the article he was writing that abruptly stopped on page 14. These were relics of who he was eight hours a day, five days a week for the 23 years he taught at Central Virginia University.

Now her mother would never look at his papers. Alzheimer's had ravished her mind. In the first year after her diagnosis, Mary Ann could be left alone during the day, but during the

second year Hannah had to hire a woman to stay with her while she worked. Hannah quickly went through five women, who for various reasons had to be fired. Not showing up at 7:15 in the morning was the most frequent reason because this led to Hannah missing or being late for school, while she scrambled to find someone from Mary Ann's church to help out. Hannah had no choice. She couldn't afford to stay home to take care of Mary Ann so she put Mary Ann's name on the waiting list at the nursing homes specializing in Alzheimer patients. Four months later a spot became available at Shady Brook Village and Hannah painfully moved her mother from the home she loved and the daughter she adored to the nursing home that tried to be warm and caring, but couldn't overcome the fact that it was a nursing home.

Over the last six months Hannah had instituted a new ritual in her life. Everyday she visited her mother to report on the happenings of the day. Although Mary Ann was in a private room, Hannah closed the door, sat Mary Ann in a chair and then pulled up another chair facing her so she could look into her empty eyes as she quietly chronicled the day's events. First she hugged her tightly as she said, "Mommy, Mommy, Mommy, I love you. I'll always love you." Then she gently kissed her eyes, cheeks, and lips as if the kisses would wake her to a conscious state, like Sleeping Beauty. She held her mother's hands hoping that the physical contact would kindle some reaction as she described her classroom projects, the progress of her students, problems with the cats, new plants in bloom, and the strange activities of the neighbors who had moved in down the street. Hannah didn't know how this ritual started, but she knew part of the genesis was her need to continue sharing her life with her mother as she had shared everything with her since her father's death. Prior to that, she shared everything with both her mother and her father. No one in the O'Brien family harbored any secrets, or so she thought. Hannah certainly didn't have any secrets. Her life was a book open for inspection by all readers.

If Hannah was in a hurry during one of her visits to her mother, she stayed only 10 or 15 minutes telling Mary Ann about the day's events as she straightened her room. In the spring and summer, there were always flowers from Hannah's garden gracing the bedside table and window sill. Hannah cleaned the petals from the heavy peonies or the budding roses that wilted as soon as they inhaled the overheated, dry air of the nursing home. Most days Hannah stayed to feed Mary Ann and then stroll with her through the corridors, nodding to the other Alzheimer patients who didn't return recognition of human communication. Their evenings together usually ended with Hannah and Mary Ann watching TV with other patients in a large recreation room. Hannah looked around at her mother and the others marveling at how the meaning of what they were watching stopped at their eyes, never venturing upward into their brains. Only Hannah understood the silly sitcoms filled with constant discussions of sex and adolescent humor. Hannah often smiled to herself as she thought that the patients could be

watching hard-core porn and no one would respond. On several occasions, Hannah tried to take Mary Ann outside for a walk, but Mary Ann was afraid of the outside world. She refused to leave the safety she found within Shady Brook Nursing Home.

When Hannah entered the room, she always asked, “Do you know who I am Mom?” Mary Ann would look at Hannah and answer yes, sometimes saying Hannah’s name. But the most painful evidence of the devastation of their lives by Alzheimer’s was May 21st when Mary Ann no longer recognized her only child. Hannah asked, “Do you know who I am Mom?” Mary Ann did not reply, she looked through Hannah as if she weren’t there. She never again spoke the word “Hannah.” That was the day Mary Ann died for Hannah. Mary Ann was 69 years old, and in relatively good health so her body might not die for many years, but Mary Ann, the person, was gone. As of that day, Hannah was an orphan. Sometimes she prayed that God would take Mary Ann and put her out of her misery. Or maybe she was really praying for herself so she wouldn’t have the burden of watching her beloved mother slowly die like the flowers in her room.

Over the six months that Mary Ann had been at Shady Brook, Hannah gradually built a mental moat around her mother. She learned to compartmentalize her mind. When she was with Mary Ann, she was overcome with sadness and mourned for their lost lives, but once she exited the building she was Hannah again, the woman who dwelt within an insulated capsule.

July 10th started out as the hottest day of the year. Hannah went out to weed and do some morning watering of her back yard flower garden. It was too hot to do anything outdoors even at 7:00 AM. She was soaked with perspiration and glad that she hadn’t showered yet. She went back into the cool house, ate breakfast, and read the newspaper. Although the house was 80 years old, it had been re-wired and central air conditioning installed.

Hannah went to fill the bowls for her cats, Spot and Puff, and saw that she was out of food. She went down to the basement to get an extra bag of cat food she kept under the stairs when she noticed the long-ignored boxes of papers. With resolve, she said firmly, “Okay Hannah, this is the day you are going to work on those papers. You are not going to put it off any longer. You do not have an excuse for not doing it.” She went upstairs for a floor lamp so she could spotlight what she would be reading. Before going back down, she called her best friend, Kelly and left a message on her voice mail. “Hey lady, I know you’re working but I wanted to let you know that I’ll be in the basement going through my dad’s papers. At last! If you want to stop by after work, come in. Just yell down. Maybe you can help me get through some of these boxes of junk.”

Kelly and Hannah had been best friends since kindergarten. They were both perky, bubbly girls who were considered popular by the unpopular kids in school. Physically, they were a study in contrasts. Hannah was small, thin, dark-haired, and had deeply dimpled cheeks in a round, apple-like face. Most people would describe her as cute. Kelly's naturally blond thick mane of curls, curvaceous figure, and perfectly-molded features would merit a rating of beautiful by most people. But they were alike in that they both had nurturing personalities. Hannah channeled her nurturing into working with young minds, while Kelly directed hers into working with sick bodies. And over the years they had nurtured each other, cementing their friendship until it appeared unbreakable.

Growing up, Kelly lived with her brother, Phil, who was five years older, and her single mom, a nurse who worked two jobs to support her children. When Phil graduated from high school, he joined the navy and lived the motto, "Join the Navy and see the world." He returned to Lewiston for occasional visits until he married a woman who lived in San Diego where he then spent all his shore leaves. When Kelly was away at college, her mother remarried and moved away. But throughout her life, Kelly's real family was the O'Briens. When Sean died, her family became Hannah and Mary Ann. And now with Mary Ann mentally deceased, her only family was Hannah. They were like sisters, only closer because they chose each other and because they needed each other.

For 22 years, their friendship had strengthened as they weathered life's storms together. It had endured the four years Kelly was away at nursing school in Richmond, while Hannah lived at home and went to Central. But most importantly, their relationship had saved Kelly from a marriage that started like heaven and ended like hell. Hannah gave Kelly the support she needed to end her marriage to her dream man who morphed into a physically abusive brute.

Hannah took a huge glass of iced coffee, another glass filled with ice cubes, and a portable radio downstairs for a long-delayed reunion with her dad. She tuned the radio to a classical music station to serve as background for her trip back in time. The first few boxes she went through contained thousands of old student exams going back to his early days of teaching. Then she went through boxes with term papers. Most had A's and A+'s with positive comments scrawled in green, never red which he considered harsh and punitive. "Creative ideas." "Good application of research." "Your understanding of this topic is amazing." She knew that despite how hard the students had worked on these, she had no choice but to dump them. They had no meaning to her and they certainly had no meaning to Mary Ann. She leafed through his green grade books from every semester he taught, noting that most grades were A's with a smattering of B's and C's and a rare F. She put these back in their box to be brought out for the garbage truck and burial in land fill three days hence.

The next box was filled with his research papers. When he died, he had been working on a paper comparing Asian and Latino gangs in Washington, DC. She recalled him periodically going to DC to interview gang members. She also remembered how worried her mother was whenever he was away, thinking that he might get mugged or murdered. She glanced at the photocopied articles and notes he made of his interviews. She thought she might keep the interview notes, but then decided that they served no purpose and added them to the box headed for oblivion.

She had been downstairs for two hours and had hardly made a dent in all the boxes. She went upstairs to pee and go outside to see if the weather had improved. It was worse than she expected. She really didn't have anyplace to go or anything else to do. She had no excuse not to return to the basement. As she walked down the steps, she had no premonition that this was the end of the insulated fairy tale existence she had created for herself.

The next box she attacked contained Sean's personal papers. He saved letters commending his teaching, recommendations for special teaching awards, and letters informing him of merit raises for his exemplary teaching and significant research. She knew he was a good teacher, but these official recognitions filled her with pride and saddened her to think of what he might have accomplished had he not died so young.

Next she examined the stacks of letters from students telling him how much his class meant to them and how great a teacher he was and how good a person. Among the student letters, she discovered one that would destroy the image of the man who was her adoptive father. Unlike the other letters, this one was in an envelope addressed to:

*Dr. Sean O'Brien
Professor of Sociology
Central Virginia University
213 Linden Hall
Lewiston, VA 28822*

The return address was:

*Brooke Brock
171 Bayside Road
Roanoke, VA 27753*

The word *PERSONAL* was written in caps in the lower left corner. What a hard name to say, Brooke Brock. It was almost a tongue-twister if you said it repeatedly. Brooke Brock.

Brooke Brock. Brick Broc, Brick Brac. The handwriting was beautifully scripted with circles for dots, very feminine. It was dated December 15, 1977.

Hi Sean,

I got home from school a few days ago. I went right to see my doctor because I didn't get my period when I was supposed to. I'm not always regular so it was hard for me to tell if I was pregnant or not. I was on the pill so I told you not to use a condom, but it didn't seem to work. Maybe I forgot to take it. Anyhow there's a problem and I didn't want to tell you on the phone. I'm pregnant!! I'm not calling you to tell you this because I know you'd insist I get an abortion. I can't hear that word – abortion. I won't argue with you about it. You know the problems I had when I had an abortion 5 years ago. I'm not going to go through that again. I felt like I was a murderer and that's why I had the breakdown. I'm going to have this child whether you like it or not. Nothing you say or do can make me murder this baby.

It's due June 13th so I'm going to sit out next semester. I'll probably get a job waitressing and take a few night courses. Then I'll be back in September and I'm going to switch majors. I know you think I should go to grad school and get a doctorate in soc but I don't want to go to school so long. I think I'll switch to social work. I'd like to work with poor people or maybe the mentally ill. I think I'd be good working with crazy people because I've had my problems as you know. I certainly was a little crazy when I was in your class. But I'm fine now. I'm going to stop all my meds even tho the doctor told me I should definitely continue taking them, especially because of all the stress I'm under now. I don't want to do anything to hurt this baby. In fact, I feel emotionally stronger than I've ever felt before. I'm about eight weeks pregnant, but I think I'm showing already. I love caressing my belly and thinking of you in me pumping away. I don't know whether to believe that I was the best woman you ever had, but it makes me feel good to think that you thought so. We fucked good together!!

I know you and Mary Ann can't have children or at least that's what you said. I don't know if I believe all that stuff about her being cold and not wanting to have sex. Now that I'm far away from you things look different. I think you just wanted to get into my pants, but I just wanted to get into yours too. So we're even. And it made me feel so important that a professor wanted to screw me. Especially a popular professor like you.

I definitely do not want to keep this baby!!!! I really don't think I ever want to have kids. It's funny that it's so easy for me to get pregnant when so many women who want to have kids can't get pregnant. This may sound strange, but I want you to have the baby if you want it. Maybe that will bring you and Mary Ann closer together. If you don't, I'll give it to my sister who doesn't have kids. I really don't want to give it to strangers unless I have to. I need to

know that it will be loved and I think you and Mary Ann would love a baby and be good parents.

Let me know what you want to do. We can get a lawyer to figure out how to transfer the baby. You don't have to pay for anything. My parents are taking care of the medical bills. They just want this whole episode in my life to end. I told them you are the father and my father was furious. I thought he was going to have a stroke. He said he wasn't paying tuition for a professor to screw his daughter. He felt you took advantage of me when I was having emotional problems. I told him that I wanted sex with you as much as you wanted it, maybe even more. He didn't want to hear the details. He was going to contact the university, but I convinced him that would be more harmful to me so he won't do anything. I don't want him to ruin your career. There are so many great things you will do in the future. And because of you, I know I'll do great things in the future too.

Sean, I will be forever indebted to you for helping me through those tough times. I think I would have killed myself if we hadn't had sex after class that day when I told you I wanted to end everything. You were so understanding. It was like you read my mind. I think that might have been the day we made the baby or maybe it was one of the times we went to that seedy motel. Wasn't that the pits! But that magic fingers massage bed was so much fun. You have magic fingers too. You made me feel like an important woman who had a future. After the baby, I will have a future, all because of the faith you had in me.

Don't worry about this baby thing. It'll be over in seven months. Everything will work out especially if you want to be the father. I know you'll be a great daddy.

See you next semester. And if we see each other on campus, I'll act like nothing happened so don't worry. But if you want to go back to that motel, I'm open for it. I'd love to do the magic fingers massage again with the bed doing the outside and you doing the inside. Sean, I'm always available for you. You are one awesome lover!!

Brooke

Chapter 2

Hannah felt vomit erupting in her throat. With her lips tightly locked, she raced up the stairs in time to spew vomit into the kitchen sink. For several minutes, she hung over the sink with dry heaves until she was emptied. To get rid of the putrid taste in her mouth, she gargled a glass of ice water and then gulped down an entire can of coke, but to no avail; she still tasted and smelled of vomit. Although the house was cool, she was covered with sweat, the kind of sweat that seemed to have icicles in each bead.

The letter was still in the basement. She had to retrieve it to see if she had really read a letter from the woman who was her biological mother, or if she had had a heat-induced hallucination. She tore down the steps almost toppling head over heels, stopping inches from the letter lying on the floor. She wasn't ready to re-read it. She shut the radio and the lamps and took them upstairs. Then she went back for the letter, this time walking slowly, hoping it had miraculously evaporated. But it was still there, looking like an innocent piece of paper, rather than an anthrax-laced letter that poisoned her life. She picked it up as if it were radioactive, holding it gingerly on the edge and with her other hand, she picked up the envelope.

She took them upstairs and went into the living room, a room she rarely entered. She sat on the old-fashioned heavily upholstered chair facing the defunct fireplace, reading the letter over and over. She lost track of how many times she read it, but after several minutes she had memorized every word Brooke Brock wrote about her baby. Her baby - Hannah.

This one piece of paper was the meteor that crashed into her life, devastating everything in its path. Her biological father was not the man she worshipped. On July 10, 2005, she cried like the baby she was on June 1, 1978, the day she was born to Brooke Brock and Sean O'Brien. Hannah was the "it" of the letter. When Brooke wrote this letter, Hannah was the eight week old fetus growing within her womb.

Although she didn't know anything about Brooke, Hannah was consumed with a searing hatred for her and what she had done to her father. She was sure she had tricked him into having sex by saying she was suicidal. He would do anything to help a student, even have sex. She recalled Sean's tiny office, stacked with books and papers on all surfaces and the floor. She pictured Brooke, a breathtakingly beautiful girl with long black hair covering half her face and tears gushing down her cheeks as she poured out her problems to Sean. Through her sobs, Hannah heard her say, "There's no reason for me to go on living. I'm going to end it today." Then she saw Sean going around his desk to comfort her, saying "Please don't talk like that.

You have a great future.” As he moved to hold her hands, Brooke became the aggressor and grabbed Sean’s crotch. He couldn’t resist her and succumbed. They lay on the top of his desk wildly screwing among the papers and books. Did his semen that didn’t swim fast enough to create Hannah get on the papers on his desk? If so, what did he do with them? How do you explain semen on a midterm exam? It can’t be passed off as coffee. Did he think of locking the door? Did he think of closing the window blinds? Did they keep silent so passersby in the busy hallway outside his office wouldn’t hear their grunts and groans? Her mental video played like a soap opera scene with Sean lunging for the door to lock it and closing the blinds before he pulled out his penis and gave it to Brooke who pulled down her pants as she guided Sean into her. With Sean’s face buried in her neck, he did not see the look of conquest on her face. She had trapped him. Oh, and incidentally she had created Hannah O’Brien.

But then Hannah recalled that they had sex more than once. She couldn’t have been suicidal all those times they met at the seedy motel. She pictured a dingy room with just a bed and a TV. They lay naked on the bed, laughing as the magic fingers massaged their back sides. There were no tears in this scene. There was only laughter and lust. She heard the squeaking of the mattress as they passionately screwed. Maybe Sean O’Brien was a predator who took advantage of his students. No, she couldn’t think this about him. She had to think of him as the innocent victim of Brooke Brock’s attacks. Whatever the truth, he had betrayed Mary Ann, the woman she knew he loved. How could he do that? He was such an honest man, or so she thought, and he loved Mary Ann, or so she thought.

She never suspected that her adoptive father was her biological father even though people often commented that they looked a bit alike. Some people say that living with someone makes you look like them. No, being their biological parent makes you look like them. They both shared a short, thin body build with a black mop of hair, but their facial features were very different. Why hadn’t she ever entertained the idea that he was her real father? He was her real father because he had loved her, not because she had his genes. She couldn’t lose sight of that. She couldn’t let that evil bitch destroy the adoration she felt for her father.

She heard Kelly open the door with the key Hannah had given her so that she could enter at will. As she walked into the front hall, Kelly shouted, “Where are you Han?” She was surprised when Hannah answered, “Here, in the living room.”

Wearing green scrubs that she wore in the hospital emergency room where she worked, Kelly entered the living room with a quizzical look. “What’re you doing in here? Are you sick? What’s the matter? My God, what’s happened? You look like someone died. Is it your mother?”

Hannah handed the letter to Kelly who kept saying “Oh my God, oh my God. What a fucking slut,” as she read it four times.

“Where did you get this?”

“In one of the boxes of letters from students that I was cleaning out in the basement.”

“Why did he keep this? He should have destroyed it. What an idiot! I can’t believe he did this. Do you think your mother ever saw it? I think he wanted someone to know or he would have destroyed it years ago. Very strange. Very strange. Any man in his right man would have destroyed this. Maybe he was proud of his conquest. Sick. Or maybe he felt guilty and wanted you to know. Maybe he's talking to you from the grave. Maybe he thought you'd love him more if you knew he was your biological father. Didn't he realize you'd hate him for what he'd done to you and Mary Ann? I'm sure he kept this so you would find your birth mother. What a shit he was! Why didn't he take all this crap with him to the grave?”

Hannah seemed oblivious to Kelly's words. She was alone in her own world. “I wonder if he gave this to my mother to read after he got it or if he just told her about it. I’m sure she wouldn’t have wanted him to keep it in case I'd find it someday. She would have destroyed it if she knew he'd kept it. She wouldn’t ever have wanted me to know this. Never.

All I can think of is him going to her after he got this letter and telling her that he was unfaithful and that there is this child they could adopt who is his biological child. Do you think she had any idea that he was screwing a student before he told her? Do you think there were other students? Was he one of these professors who liked to do it with his students and gave A’s for good bedroom performance? I just looked in his grade books, and it looked like almost everyone got A's. Maybe, it was only the girls and maybe he screwed them. How can I think that? Kelly, the daddy I knew is destroyed with this one letter. Poof. He's gone with a piece of paper. Oh, I can’t believe it.”

She leaned over and rocked as if she had stomach cramps while moaning rhythmically. Kelly snuggled into the chair with Hannah and rubbed her back.

“You know how I worshipped him. I don’t know what to think of him now. I know he loved me and my mother, but he betrayed us. I thought he was the most honest man in the world. Obviously not. He was always giving me these lectures on how you have to be true to

yourself and know yourself and go after your dreams no matter what. It sounds like hypocritical shit now.

What did he think when he looked at me? What did my mom think when she looked at me? I was this walking, talking product of my father's unfaithfulness.

What a wonderful woman my mother was. How long was it before she stopped seeing me as my father's bastard and started seeing me as her loving child? How did she feel when the transfer was made and she held me for the first time? Did they do it in the hospital or at a lawyer's office? I wonder if she ever saw Brooke Brock and if I look anything like her. If I do, it must have been so hard for her every time she looked at my face. I wonder if she ever stopped thinking about me as her husband's child."

"Hannah, you know how much I loved your parents. I can honestly say I never suspected any of this. Your parents seemed to have the most ideal marriage. I never saw him look at a woman with interest. I always thought of him as the perfect husband. The kind of husband I wanted, especially after Seth. The memory of what he was like has kept me hopeful that there might be someone good in my future. That someday I might have a happy marriage. Now I don't know. Maybe there's no such thing as a happy marriage. Hannah, they were so good at hiding their past. It'll take me a long time to recast my views of them and it'll take you a lifetime, if ever. Oh my Hannah, I love you and I'll help you through this."

As they hugged, they sobbed uncontrollably. The tears on their faces intermingled, diluting Hannah's grief with Kelley's solace. They talked until two when Kelly made a light lunch. "I have to go home and get some sleep. I had a hard night. We had two stabbings from that trailer park on Rte. 58. Come to my place for dinner later."

"I won't feel like eating. I have to visit my mother and tell her about this."

"Hannah, she won't know what you're talking about. Why do you have to do that? It's so ridiculous."

"I have to tell her everything. I have to keep her as my mother. I need to do this for me. Maybe someplace deep inside her destroyed brain, she understands something. I need her more than ever now. I'll call you later."

Hannah went back to the basement to shut the lights. But then she remembered that there might be more revelations in other student letters. She anxiously skimmed the rest of the letters,

relieved to find nothing personal. She read the letters from the girls carefully looking for any clues that he might have gone farther than just being a good teacher. She noticed that all the letters were from girls. He didn't seem to be interested in his male students' problems. She carried the boxes upstairs and put them by the front door to be put out with the garbage. She didn't know when, if ever, she would finish going through her father's things. She couldn't face any more secrets.

She wasn't sure what to do with the letter. Part of her wanted to tear it to shreds, but another part of her wanted to keep it with the hope of re-reading it and finding hints that her father really was an innocent victim who was taken advantage of by a conniving, oversexed girl. She went up to her room and put the letter in the bottom drawer of her bedside table under the diary she kept when she was 11 years old. No one ever came into her bedroom so she was sure it would be safe.

She looked around at the room where her parents had brought her when she was three days old. Then it was a frilly pink nursery with decals of baby animal characters placed on the walls by her mother. When she was three, it was transformed into a room fit for a princess with a single bed with Cinderella pillows and blanket, a canopy of pink tulle, and now decals of castles and princesses on the walls. At 12, it had changed to a teenaged girl's room with walls painted pink and a flowery spread on the single bed. The white lace curtains, white dressers, and white lamps with lacey shades gave the room an air of innocence. A white desk and chair were nestled in the alcove where the turret protruded from the house. She loved sitting at her desk and looking down at the people who passed by looking up at the turret as if she were a princess locked in a castle, or maybe Rapunzel. The laptop she kept on her desk along with the ipod and small TV looked out of place, too modern for a room that looked as if it were still 1925. Although Hannah was 27, she continued to live in this young girl's room. She never thought of changing it.

There were two other bedrooms in the house. The spacious one that had been her parents' was heavily ornate with deep red walls almost completely covered with paintings of rural scenes in thick gold-gilded frames. There were red flowered curtains with a matching bedspread and two chairs upholstered in complementary fabric. This room, too, looked like a bedroom from 1925, except for a large TV against the wall facing the bed. All personal belongings had vanished along with her parents. No perfume, make-up, and jewelry box on Mary Ann's dresser and no family photos on Sean's dresser.

The other bedroom was an all-purpose room with a desk and computer, a table for Hannah's craft projects, and a sleeper sofa in case a guest slept over. The only guest to ever use it was Kelly.

Hannah showered and dried her hair. She applied a light coating of powder to her face, but not much because she knew it would grease up with the heat. She put on lipstick so she wouldn't look too pale. She stared at herself. She didn't see any facial resemblance to her father. She forced a fake smile to highlight the deep dimples in her cheeks. They were clearly visible when she smiled so she tried to smile a lot, knowing that they were her most distinctive feature. Did Brooke Brock have dimples? She puckered her lips to accentuate her rosebud lips. Did Brooke Brock have rosebud lips?

She hoped she would never see Brooke Brock. She didn't want to know what she looked like, and yet she did. As she gazed into her eyes in the mirror, she knew she wanted to find Brooke Brock so she could retaliate for what she had done to her family. She'd make repeated calls to her in the middle of the night to disturb her sleep. She'd slit the tires on her car. She'd steal her mail so she'd have to pay interest on her unpaid bills. Oh, those were so lame. She had to think of more hurtful forms of retribution. Maybe, she'd tell her kids what an evil slut their mother was so they would hate her as much Hannah hated her. Her imagined reprisals against Brooke were suddenly halted by the realization that she might have siblings. Brooke might have more kids and these would be Hannah's half-siblings. She had always wanted to have siblings, but not this way. She would hate these kids as much as she hated their mother. If Brooke had kids, they were probably bastards too. She couldn't imagine the Brooke Brock she knew from the letter as a happily married housewife nurturing her children. Then the thought occurred to her, "I'm a bastard." She had never thought of herself as being illegitimate. That was because she had never thought of her life prior to her adoption by Sean and Mary Ann. "Bastard. Bastard. That's me."

Then her fantasies turned from nuisance retaliation to the ultimate vengeance - murder. She pictured herself stabbing a naked woman with her back turned so she couldn't see her face. She was stabbing her in a frenzy, like the shower scene in *Psycho*. As she turned away from the mirror, she said aloud, "Now that's the end of my belief in the goodness of all people. Thanks Brooke Brock. You're the first evil person I know and hopefully I'll never meet you face to face. I'll just keep imagining all the things I'd say and do to you if I did meet you. I'll try to think of more creative ways of killing you. Maybe slow torture next time. Or maybe rat poison because you're a rat. I'll read some Stephen King or Poe to get some gory ideas. My Danielle Steeles aren't any help."

When Hannah got to Mary Ann's room, the housekeeper was vacuuming so Hannah took Mary Ann for a walk to the arts and craft room. It was harder to get Mary Ann moving. She was shuffling more so Hannah thought she might start using a wheelchair to get her around. They watched a paint-by-numbers class where everyone was painting the same picture of a fruit bowl with the same exact colors. Then they walked to the cafeteria where they had iced tea and cookies.

At last they headed back to her room so Hannah could tell her about the letter. Hannah made sure the door was closed and then set the two chairs facing each other so their knees touched. She had to see if Mary Ann showed even a glimmer of reaction when she told her about the letter. She whispered, "Mom, I have to tell you something very important. I found a letter from Brooke Brock, you know, the woman who is my biological mother." She stopped and looked intently into Mary Ann's eyes searching for a trace of understanding. There was only void.

Hannah continued, "You knew all these years that Dad was my biological father, but you never hinted at it. You and he were so good at hiding the truth from me. I wonder how you felt knowing that your husband had betrayed you. Mom, I have so many questions I want to ask, but I'll never get answers. I'm glad you don't understand what's happening. You'd be devastated if you knew I learned about my birth mother. I hate to call that animal my birth mother. She didn't care about me. I got the impression that I was a prize for having sex with Dad. Whatever. I wasn't a baby that she ever considered loving and that's okay. I had two people who loved me as much as parents could love their child. I wonder if Dad was ever tempted to tell me that he was my biological father. You told me at a young age that I was adopted and I accepted it and didn't really care about who my biological mother and father were. I was so unlike these people who need to find their biological parents and go to the ends of the Earth to find them. I was content with you and Dad.

Why did you take me Mom? How could you raise a child who was a constant reminder of your husband's adultery? Did you want a child so much that you took his bastard? Was your marriage falling apart and did you think I could fix it? You seemed to have such a good relationship with Dad, but was that an act for me? How could you put on an act 24 hours a day for 16 years? I know you loved him. I saw what his death did to you. It was like a piece of your heart actually died.

I thought we lived in a house with no secrets. But now I find that you and Daddy based our whole lives on an ugly secret. But how could you tell me? You couldn't tell me when Daddy was alive. I was too young to understand. I'm 27 now and I still don't understand. You couldn't

tell me after he died because that would be like defiling his memory and I know you couldn't do that. How I wish he had destroyed that letter so I never found it. I could have continued living my happy life. I didn't need to know this. I don't want to know this. I can't stop picturing Brooke and Daddy having sex. It's driving me nuts. I have to stop obsessing about them. I have to get those pictures out of my mind. I feel like I have a porn movie playing non-stop in my head."

Usually when Hannah left Mary Ann, she was able to push aside her feelings of sadness with a smile and a conscious self command to be positive. But not today. She couldn't banish the sadness, hatred, and confusion ricocheting around her brain.

When Hannah got back to her house, Kelly was sitting on the porch waiting for her. "You didn't have to come over."

"I didn't want you to be alone. Why don't you sleep at my place tonight? Otherwise, I'll sleep here."

"No, I'll be alright. I think I'll do some repotting in the greenhouse."

"I don't care what you do. I'm staying here tonight. If you want, we can talk. If not, we can just sit outside in the yard and look at the night sky."

One of Hannah's passions was her plants. Attached to the back of the house was a small, rickety greenhouse where she cultivated plants, mostly African violets and orchids. Throughout the house, she kept a variety of plants - ferns, philodendrons, Christmas cactuses, and ivies. She loved the sensation of running her fingers through the soil so that she could get dirt under her nails as visible proof that she was making life thrive. She often went to nurseries to buy plants that were almost dead so she could revive them. She was sure that her talking to the plants and verbally encouraging them to live did the trick. She even sang them songs, like "The Wheels on the Bus Go Round and Round," and other top-ten kindergarten hits. That plus plant food, rich soil, and good growing conditions in the greenhouse worked. Whenever she gave a gift to someone, it was often an off-spring of one of her plants. When Kelly got a plant, she quickly destroyed it with her black thumb, but that didn't stop Hannah from giving her more plants hoping that somehow her thumb would turn green.

"I know my father's been dead for 11 years so you might not remember him clearly, but do you see a physical resemblance between us?"

“Of course, I noticed that you both were short and skinny and dark haired, but it never occurred to me that you might be related. I just thought it was a coincidence. Your facial features aren’t at all alike. You have a round face and his was long. You have big eyes and his were small. Your coloring is very different too. He was so white skinned and you’re not. I don’t think you’re like him in other ways. Obviously, he was secretive and you’re not. He betrayed a trust and I can’t imagine you doing that. You’re so open. You could never keep a secret.”

“You do know my mother, or other least who my mother was when she was a whole human being. Can you believe that she took a baby who was her husband’s and loved that baby as much as a biological mother would? What a special person she was!” Hannah sobbed as she choked out her words,

“I always thought your parents were a strange match. Your mom was three years older than your dad, wasn’t she?”

“No, two.”

“And she never went to college. She worked as a secretary for your grandfather’s insurance agency. She did inherit a lot of money when her father died. Maybe that was important to him.

Your father was so intellectual. He was always reading. I only remember your mother reading women’s magazines and romance novels. Do you even know how they met?”

“I have no idea. I don’t think I ever asked. It’s like I wasn’t interested in their lives before me. I suppose I’ve always been self-centered. I sorta thought that their lives began with me.

I wasn’t even interested in their wedding. I do know she didn’t wear a wedding dress. When I was about 12, I asked her about that because I wanted to wear her wedding dress when I got married someday, but she just sloughed off any talk of their wedding saying that they went to a justice of the peace, and then went to Boston for their honeymoon so that she could meet his family. There aren’t any pictures of a wedding or even when they dated. It’s like they didn’t start taking pictures until I came along and then they took millions of pictures of me. And we only had a few pictures of my grandparents and other relatives.”

“Hannah, I hope you don’t mind me saying this but your mom was sorta tarty looking. She was very good looking, but she looked like she would be attractive to a truck driver, and not a professor, if you know what I mean. She always wore heavy make-up and had her hair dyed

that platinum blond. She must have used a gallon of hair spray a week. She wore that sparkly blue eye shadow and heavy black mascara which did accentuate her light blue eyes. And her clothes were always tight and short. And you must admit she could have lost a good 20 pounds. I remember we were at Luigi's one night and your mom left the table to go to the john. I can still remember these college guys staring at her wiggling butt as she walked by. They started to make jokes about her, but they stopped when they saw I was giving them the evil eye."

"Well, she's lost weight now. She's as thin as a rail. She hardly eats. She used to love to eat and drink, especially wine. She couldn't have dinner without her two glasses of wine.

She was very good looking and I know men found her attractive. I remember after my father died some guys from her church asked her out. And some man down the street even tried to date her. He kept calling and coming over. She wasn't interested. She always said she was a one-man woman. I thought that was so romantic. But maybe she wasn't interested in sex. Maybe what my father told Brooke was true. We'll never know."

Hannah cried uncontrollably while Kelly tightly hugged her. Then she said, "Your dad was so professorial looking – with the crew neck sweaters and the loafers. His students dug him because he was into a very sexy subject – gangs. Maybe there was another reason the girls dug him. Oh Hannah, I'm sorry I said that. I'm always saying things I shouldn't. You'd think by 27, I'd know how to control my mouth."

"I was so opposite of how she dressed and made up. I've always been plain. And she never tried to make me into her image. She never suggested that I wear make-up or fancy clothes. And I never wanted to look like her. Maybe I felt that she was pretty and I could never be pretty. Or maybe I felt my looks went with my personality. Birkenstocks and long skirts. That's me.

I wonder what their sex life was like. I wonder if he told Brooke the truth that she was cold or if he made that up to get her into bed. How could he talk to a student about his sex life with his wife? That's so repulsive. Oh Daddy, why did you do that? How could you do that? What were you really like?"

Hannah looked up at the ceiling and wailed, "Who were you Sean O'Brien"

Hannah was lost in thought for a few minutes as if she were searching her 16 years of memories with Sean and Mary Ann for signs of passion or love. "Mom did look sexy and I suppose that gives the impression that she was good in bed. I remember my parents kissing,

like at bedtime or for any event like a birthday, but it was usually just pecks, the same sort of kisses they gave me. He pinched her tush a lot, but in a funny way. Whenever she bent down, he would take both cheeks and pinch them tightly. She would laugh and say that it was wife abuse. It all seemed to be in good fun. I never saw them look at each other with desire or love. I never heard them make love. They were always fully dressed even at bedtime. They wore pajamas and robes. Other than when they wore bathing suits, I never saw much of their bodies. Although Mom did wear tight clothes, I think it was because she had put on weight and didn't want to buy new clothes. She was always saying that she was going on a diet and would lose 10 pounds, but she never did. When she did buy new clothes, they were too small because she was hoping to lose weight. I don't think she wore them to attract attention to her body. We were all sorta modest. You remember whenever you slept over, Mom would make sure that you wore a bathrobe whenever you came out of my bedroom. And when we sunbathed in the yard, we had to wear tee shirts when we came in the house. Maybe she thought that if my father saw your gorgeous body, he might be tempted. Oh how can I even think that?

I never thought of my parents and sex. I never really thought much about sex at all when I was growing up. To me, sex was a grown-up topic that I didn't want to know about. I figured I would learn when I became a grown-up. At first, most of my knowledge about sex came from health class, but then you became my teacher. I remember you giving me books like Judy Blume's. Whenever I had a question, I'd ask you. Remember I asked you to tell me about the difference between how a boy and girl masturbates. I was so shocked when you told me that you masturbated. You were even going to show me how to do it. I wasn't interested in doing it. I thought it was for more sexual people than me. In high school, you told me who was sleeping with who. I couldn't believe some of our classmates were sexually active. You even told me that you would sleep with Tony Phillips if he were interested in you. He was the most gorgeous boy in our class and then we find out that when he went to college he came out as gay.

My mother never talked about sex to me. When I got my period, she asked me if I knew what was happening to my body and I said yes. She made me use pads because she said that tampax was not for virgins. Just think how naive she was!! I don't remember her ever getting her period because I never saw pads or tampax in her bathroom. I never thought of asking her about this. Maybe she couldn't have children.

I've always talked about finding my Prince Charming and hoping that he would be just like my dad. Well, there's no Prince Charming in my future now, especially if he's like my dad. That's over. No more silly dreams. Only ugly reality.

I also can't stop thinking of that evil slut who's my biological mother. It's hard to use the word mother for that fucking son-of-a-bitch. Kelly, listen to me using such language. I've never said those words aloud before. I can't think of enough profanity to use for her. I fantasize finding her and ruining her life like she ruined mine. I even fantasize killing her. Can you imagine that? Sweet Hannah, a murderer. I've never been filled with such hatred before. I feel like it's a cancer that's going to destroy me if I don't work at getting rid of my feelings for her. I can't wait until school starts so I can have my kids to help me block her out of my life."

Chapter 3

The three weeks following her discovery of Brooke Brock's letter was for Hannah a period of obsessive preoccupation with her father and mother's lives before her birth. She felt an emotion she had never experienced before – anguish. If asked to verbally define the word, she would have difficulty. Grief, suffering, torment, agony. None of these words described the feeling of having her soul ripped apart. And it was relentless. She felt it during every waking moment, and even when she slept. But strangely, her feelings didn't show on the outside. As she scrutinized herself in the mirror, she could detect no overt change. She expected to see her face grayer, her mouth pulled down at the corners, her eyes cloudy and smaller, and her shoulders stooped. But no, she still appeared perky, happy, and cute. She stood inches from the mirror to peer deeply into her eyes, but couldn't detect the turmoil within. No one noticed any change in her, not the ladies at her garden club meeting, the other volunteers at the SPCA, her next door neighbor who invited her to a luncheon for the neighborhood ladies, her date Carl who took her to dinner and a movie - no one. Even Kelly commented that Hannah seemed to be adjusting to the news about her parentage. She puzzled over how it was possible for the outside of her body to have no correlation to the inside. They seemed to be two different systems, parallel, not interconnecting.

In vain, she tried to block out images of her father screwing Brooke on his office desk. She deafened her ears to Sean's voice as he spoke the words of betrayal to Mary Ann. She shut out visions of her mother's face drowning in sorrow, but not anger. Hannah had never seen Mary Ann angry, nor had she ever heard her raise her voice. She had always exuded a sense of calm and control. But how could she have remained calm and controlled when Sean told her

such life-shattering news? How did they rebuild their relationship? Maybe Hannah was the glue that repaired their marriage, post Brooke Brock. When they held Hannah, they forgot how she was conceived; they only saw the end product, the trusting, always smiling face topped with a black mop. But still, how could Mary Ann forgive him? She had no answers. She never would have. With each passing day she no longer plotted reprisals to punish Brooke for seducing Sean, who steadily became more victim, and less predator.

She was eager for summer to end so she could divert her attention from herself to her 18 new charges. She couldn't wait to turn them on to school, to make them eager to go to a place where they found success and respect. She wanted to create a perfect world in her classroom. A world where everyone was happy and there was no illness, divorce, unhappiness, and most of all, no betrayal. A world without lies, but perhaps a happy world had to have lies.

On August 5th, Hannah and Kelly had tickets to an Arlo Guthrie concert at the university. Hannah was a folk music fan, and especially loved the music of Arlo's father Woody. Hannah taught her students to sing Woody's most famous song, "This Land is your Land," which she used to teach beginning US geography, love of country, and the exuberance of music. As they sang, Hannah had them hold small American flags while marching around a large map of the United States outlined on the floor.

During the concert, Hannah's pony tail loosened so she took out the scrunchy holding her pony tail in place. As she was trying to put it back in her hair, it dropped to the floor behind her. She turned around to get it from the man behind her who had picked it up. Her eyes were drawn to the man sitting next to him. His eyes enveloped her. Her body jolted, making her feel as if she had been electrocuted. She quickly turned around and with shaking hands put the scrunchy in her hair. Throughout the rest of the concert she felt the man's eyes on her. Once she looked sideways and saw him staring in her direction, not the stage. She couldn't concentrate on the music. She could only think of the man. With the one second glance, she had seen that he had long blond straight hair and a flat face. But what she recalled distinctly was the deep cleft in his chin. She didn't know anyone with a cleft.

When the show was over and everyone stood to leave, the man touched her shoulder and handed her a piece of paper. It was his personal check with the name Thomas Evans in the corner followed by his address 313 Locust Hill Rd., Lewistown, VA 28832. And his phone number 540 525-7321. She looked quizzically at him. He said "Turn it over." On the back he had written, "Call me at the number on the front. I need to see you! Call me tonight."

Kelly asked, "What's going on?"

Hannah shoved Kelly into the aisle and pushed on her back to break through the crowd.

Annoyed, Kelly said, "Stop pushing," but Hannah pushed even harder.

When they got out the front door, she breathlessly said, "The guy behind me gave me this note on a check of his."

She showed it to Kelly who laughed. "That's the strangest pick-up I've ever seen. What does he want to pay you to go out with him? How funny. Hey, I know who this guy is. You don't want to get involved with him. He has quite a reputation. He dated two of the nurses at the hospital, and when they fell for him, he dropped them like hot potatoes. Supposedly, if a girl won't sleep with him by the second or third date, he won't go out with her again. Nice guy, huh? He's a math teacher at Eastside. He's also the soccer coach. He played soccer at Central. Did you know him? I think you both graduated at the same time."

"No. How would I know a soccer player? They had a terrible reputation. They were the biggest party guys on campus, known for their drinking and womanizing. You know I was Miss Goody-Two Shoes."

"You still are. Are you going to call him?"

"Of course not. Oh, I don't know. I felt him staring at me throughout the concert. I'm still tingling. I'm even shaking. Something like this never happened to me before."

"Great. Maybe he'll be the lucky one to deflower Princess Hannah. You're the only 27 year old virgin left in the world. I do not understand why you can't have sex with a guy unless you love him. You're certainly not going to love Tommy Evans. You know you could like a guy and have sex. Well not you, just the rest of the world. You're missing a lot of fun Hannah."

They went to an ice cream shop and sat outside enjoying the starry summer night as they licked their chocolate peanut butter ice cream cones. They talked about the upcoming end of summer and how they hadn't had a chance to go to the beach and decided that they would go someplace over Labor Day weekend. Although Hannah acted relaxed, she was on-edge thinking of this man who wanted to enter her life. She wished she could picture him, but she couldn't bring an image to mind.

Kelly dropped Hannah at her darkened house. She went up to her bedroom and put on the lights. She took the check out of her pocket and stared at the phone number as she held her cell phone. She asked herself if she should call him and thought that it couldn't hurt. Then she thought she might call him tomorrow night. But her finger acted like it had a mind of its own as it touched the key pads for his phone number. He answered on the first ring. "Hannah, I knew you'd call."

"How do you know me?"

"My roommate Kevin knows who you are. You know Kevin Wayne. He has the outdoor store next to McDonald's."

"Yeah, I've been in there a few times to get sneakers."

"Hannah, can I come over?"

"Now? It's 11:30. Of course not."

"I'm outside your house. Look down the street. I'm in the white Jeep."

Hannah peeked out the window and saw a white Jeep parked two houses down.

"How did you know where I lived?"

"I looked you up in the phone book."

"You've done a lot of homework since I saw you at the concert."

"Can I come over?"

Hannah thought hard. What was she getting herself into? She should say no, but she found herself saying, "Okay. For just a few minutes."

She put on all the lights in the house as well as the outside lights. Tommy pulled the Jeep into the driveway and was at the front door before she was at the door. She opened the door wide and let him into her life.

“You can’t stay long. It’s late. This is crazy. I don’t even know you. I should never let you in my house. You’re a stranger. What would you have done if I hadn’t called you?”

She felt a sense of danger and an eagerness to explore it. This was not Hannah, the cautious planner; this was a different Hannah - a risk taker.

“I’d have come over anyhow. I want to get to know you Hannah. I think I’m in love with you. I feel I’ve known you all my life.”

“What? You’re crazy. You’d better go. I heard you sleep with girls by the third date and we haven’t even had a first one.”

Her heart was pounding so loudly she couldn’t hear her own voice. She felt like she was drowning and yet she didn’t want him to go. Her vagina was throbbing in time to her heart.

“Hannah, when you looked at me tonight I felt like every nerve ending in my body was shocked. I know you felt it too. For the first time in my life I feel like I’m in love. Look at me and tell me you don’t see love in my eyes”

“I don’t know what love looks like.”

He came to her and said, “I want to make love to you. I don’t want to have sex with you. I want to show you my love with my body.”

“Tommy, please. You’re scaring me. You don’t know me. You can’t love me.”

“If I shut my eyes, I can describe every inch of you. Your black hair, your black eyes, your dimples, your pouty lips, your tiny hands and stubby fingers, your skinny body, your flat chest, and your heart beating so strongly I can see it through your shirt.”

“How do you know how I look from just seeing me for a minute at the concert?”

“I noticed you as soon as we sat down. I studied you during the intermission when you were talking to some people.”

“I was talking to Helen’s parents. She was in my class last year. I didn’t notice you. Tommy, please go. We can go out tomorrow night and start to get to know each other like normal people.”

But even as she said these words, she knew she was under his control. If he wanted to make love to her, he could.

“No, I can’t leave. We’re not like normal people. I don’t want to ever leave you. I want to be with you forever.”

“Tommy, please. I’m a 27 year old virgin. I have put off sex until I found the man I love. I don’t know if it’s you and I certainly won’t have sex with you after just meeting you.”

Tommy closed the space between them, and gently put his arms around her, kissing her tenderly. She went limp in his arms, and groaned. “I don’t know what to do. You’re confusing me.”

“Is there anybody in the house?”

“No, just me. I live alone.”

“Where’s your bedroom?”

“Upstairs.”

He took her hand and ran up the stairs two at a time like he was going to a party, dragging her along. Her bedroom door was open, and he went in. “Is this little thing your bed?”

“Yes. My parents have a double bed, but I can’t use that. There’s a couch in the office, but it’s not much bigger.”

“Get a towel and put it over the sheet so you don’t get blood on it.”

She obediently went to the bathroom and got her bath towel. “Let me shut the light so no one can see in the house.”

She shut the overhead light, but kept the hall light on so she could see what he was doing. He laid her down on the bed and leisurely took her clothes off, and then his. He tenderly touched every inch of her body. She had years of stored-up libido ready to explode and it did. She was amazed how her body opened to him. Her consciousness was suspended. She was unaware of where she was. She could have been on a bed in Times Square with a blaring band and she wouldn't have known. She was a mass of nerve endings. Every sensory receptor was turned on. She wasn't sure where her body ended and Tommy's began. And then too quickly, it was over. They both climaxed with loud sighs and then satisfied laughter. She wanted it to go on for hours. She wanted him in her forever.

"I love you Hannah."

She sobbed, "I love you Tommy."

"I don't ever want to sleep away from you again. I don't ever want to be away from you."

"My God. That was great. I can't believe I did it at last." She felt exhilarated. She was giddy. She kept giggling like she was being tickled.

"You're going to do it with me every night for the rest of your life. Hannah, we were created for each other. I never believed in destiny before, but I do now. Just think, if we had seats on different sides of the auditorium, we would never have met. Or if I decided to go to the movies instead of the concert, we wouldn't have met."

She didn't say anything, but she, too, believed somehow she was destined to be with Tommy forever.

He removed the bloody towel and they nestled into each other. Hannah facing the edge of the bed and Tommy curled behind her with his hands on her breasts and his penis pressing against her butt. Tommy fell asleep immediately, while Hannah stared into the dark smiling at the tornado Tommy had blown into her life. Before she fell sleep, she said, "Good night Prince Charming."

At 6:30 Hannah was awakened by an alarm. It was Tommy's watch. "Hannah, I have soccer practice. I have to get back to my apartment and change. Then I have to tutor some kids till 2:00. I'll be back then. I'm going to bring some clothes and stuff over. I'm going to live here with you forever. Please say it's okay."

She looked deeply into his eyes and whispered, "Okay."

“I’ll never be able to pay attention to the game or tutoring. All I’ll think about is you.”

After he left, she lay in bed in a state of shock. What happened? Was it all a dream? Was she crazy to sleep with a total stranger? Was this any different from a slut picking up a guy in a bar for a one-night stand? Why did she feel so happy? Her body was still tingling. She replayed every minute of their love making and every word he spoke. Did she really say she loved him? She crushed her nose into the pillow to savor his lingering scent. She then smelled the sheets for evidence that they really made love. The bloody towel on the floor was incontrovertible evidence that she, at last, lost her virginity.

She tried to remember if Kelly was working. No, she wasn’t. She had to call her even if it was 6:45. “Kelly, I need to talk to you. Can I come over or do you want to come here?”

In a groggy voice, Kelly croaked “What happened? Is your mother alright?”

“No, it’s Tommy Evans. We made love last night.”

Fifteen minutes later a disheveled, sleep-deprived Kelly rushed through Hannah’s front door. They went into the family room at the back of the house. With a look of utter fear, Kelly said, “What the hell happened? He raped you, didn’t he?”

“No, he didn’t rape me. For God’s sake, we made love. He was gentle and loving. He made me a woman at last. It was the most magnificent experience of my life. I think I love him.”

“Oh Jesus, this is mind boggling. I don’t know how he does it, but he got you on the first date and you didn’t even go on a date with him. I’m so worried about you. You really are not thinking straight. I know you’re not on the pill so I hope he had a condom.”

“No, he didn’t. I didn’t even think of it.”

Kelly moaned, “Oh my God, let me get you the morning-after pill. You can’t get pregnant with a guy you don’t even know. You don’t want to repeat what your father did.”

“I don’t know him, but I love him. I know that doesn’t make sense. If I’m pregnant, that’s okay. I know he’ll want a baby.”

“Hannah, you’re being totally irrational. I think the shock of putting your mom in the nursing home along with finding out about your father has affected you mentally. You’re just not acting normal. I really think you’re having a breakdown. I’m serious. Listen to how you’re talking. When you get nervous, you talk fast. You’re talking so fast, I can hardly understand

you. You're not acting like you've acted for the 22 years I've known you. Please come stay with me for a few days so I can take care of you. I think you need to get away from this guy. I don't know what he's done to you. Maybe he hypnotized you. Somehow he's taken control of you. Believe me, I know how men can do that."

Over the 22 years they had known each other, Kelly and Hannah had taken care of each other. The first time was 11 years ago when Sean died. Mary Ann had fallen apart, unable even to make the funeral arrangements so 16 year old Hannah took over with Kelly's help. Although they were both deeply involved in high school activities, they found the time to plan the funeral, dispose of his personal belongings, work with the lawyer to settle his estate, and fill out the myriad of forms legally proving that Sean O'Brien was no more. But mostly, Kelly provided support so Hannah could mourn, while at the same time being strong for Mary Ann.

Hannah had taken care of Kelly after she learned, too late, that she had married a violent man. After college, Kelly got a job as an operating room nurse at a teaching hospital in Richmond. There she met a "nice Jewish doctor." Seth Berman was intelligent, charming, a graduate of Georgetown Medical School, and in his second year of residency in orthopedic surgery. These traits and his background made up for the fact that he was shorter than Kelly, pudgy, and bald. Kelly was also attracted to him because of his wealthy, well-educated family. When she went to his parents' spacious suburban home, their beachfront house, and their condo at a ski resort, she foresaw a future for herself that was very different from how she had lived for 24 years. Her crystal ball showed a future with a lovely home, beautiful clothes, social status, and two bright, beautiful children.

Seth's parents were disappointed in Seth's choice of a wife because of Kelly's social and educational background, but they reluctantly accepted her as their daughter-in-law because Seth wanted her. They had always indulged Seth, their only child. When he wanted something, his parents gave it to him.

Seth was awed by Kelly's good looks and bubbly personality, but most of all how good they were in bed. They made love every night and on the weekends, they often made love throughout the day. Seth insisted that Kelly be nude at all times when they were home so that he could make love to her whenever she stimulated him, which was most of the time. He often asked Kelly to just stand in front of him so that he could appreciate her beautiful face and body while he masturbated. As he stared at her, he would repeat over and over, "Perfection. I've found perfection."

He said that he owned Kelly, that she was his most precious possession. She liked the thought of belonging to someone, especially since she didn't have a family other than Hannah.

During their six month courtship, he showed no sign, other than occasional rough sex, of the abusive man he would become after marriage. Kelly didn't enjoy the rough sex, but rationalized it as passion on Seth's part. They had so much fun when they were together, always laughing and enjoying each other's company. Everyone called them the perfect couple despite the three inch difference in their heights.

And their first few months of marriage were perfect, but then, slowly their relationship changed. Seth started to criticize Kelly. Every time she made a mistake, no matter how minor, he called her a dummy, an idiot, or a moron. When she broke a dish in the sink, he said, "You may be beautiful, but you are a giant klutz. I'm glad you're not an OR nurse." Kelly tried to find some humor in his voice or on his face when he said this, but couldn't. There was only criticism with a trace of malice. He never spoke to her like this in public, only when they were alone. Eventually the name-calling escalated to profanities. When she lost her keys, he called her a stupid asshole; when she spilled wine on him, he called her a clumsy cunt, amused at his use of alliteration; and when she refused to watch a porn video, he called her a frigid bitch. At first, she ignored this barrage of ugliness, but then she pleaded with him not to talk to her like this, telling him how much it hurt her. He apologized saying he was only joking or that he was under crushing pressure at the hospital and this was his way of dealing with it. After she complained, he showered her with flowers, romantic cards, and gifts. She tried to believe him, but when she rationally analyzed his explanation, it didn't make sense. Why would demeaning her reduce his work-related stress? She was afraid to consider who Seth Berman might really be. She thought it was better not to think of what was happening than face the possibility that she had made the biggest mistake of her life. So life went on with them working long hours interspersed with intense passionate love making, and all the while Kelly vigilant to avoid doing anything that might trigger Seth's anger.

One night after Kelly was late getting home from work, Seth accused her of going out with another resident. He told her he was going to punish her for this so she would never do it again. She told him why she was late and begged him to call her supervisor to check that she was telling the truth. He told her to shut up and tied her wrists to the bed headboard and violently attacked her. She was paralyzed with shock and fear; unable to talk or cry. She lay like a zombie as he did whatever he wanted to her.

When he was finished, he said, "I won't untie you until you promise never to look at another man."

She squeaked out, "I promise."

He untied her and checked her wrists to see if there were any marks that would show. Finding light abrasions, he said, "If anybody asks you what this is from, just say it's a result of some wild love making."

Kelly was too humiliated to tell Hannah what had happened. She buried the memory of what Seth had done to her, and assured herself that it would never happen again. She changed her behavior, carefully monitoring what she said. And when she was late getting home from work, she would call Seth several times so he could be sure she wasn't with another man.

Three months later, they were invited to dinner at Seth's parents' house along with a number of his father's business associates and their wives. Kelly had a wonderful time and seemed to fit in with everyone, but Seth didn't see it that way. As soon as Seth and Kelly got home from the party, Seth screamed at Kelly, accusing her of coming on to one of his father's business partners. Kelly didn't even know who he was referring to. As she started to defend herself, he gave her a one-two punch in the stomach. She didn't see it coming and keeled over gasping for air, sure she was dying. Through her gushing tears, she repeatedly asked "Why are you doing this?"

"Because I love you and no one else will ever touch you and you are never to touch another man. You are never to even look at another man. I saw you eyeing Phil at dinner. I know if you were sitting next to him, you would have given him hand job under the table. You're mine and only mine. Remember I own you."

When she tried to explain that she hadn't looked at Phil, and in fact couldn't remember which man he was, he threw her on the floor and violently forced himself on her. When he was finished, he lay on her as she spoke the words he planted in her mouth.

"Say I'll never look at another man."

"I'll never look at another man."

"Say I promise to do whatever you say"

"I promise to do whatever you say."

"Say If I don't keep my promise, I'll be punished."

"If I don't keep my promise, I'll be punished."

"Say I'll get what I deserve for disobeying."

"I'll get what I deserve for disobeying."

After Seth fell asleep, Kelly lay awake in a state of shock, pondering her future. She knew she had no choice but to leave him. If she stayed, he would either kill her or destroy her mind. She had to plan an escape as if she were making a jailbreak, and in fact, she was, but she couldn't do it without Hannah's help. So the next morning as soon as Seth left for the hospital, Kelly called Hannah and told her to come to Richmond immediately since she had something critically important to discuss with her. Hannah wanted to know what could be so important that they had to talk immediately, but Kelly said that she couldn't talk on the phone. They had to meet face-to-face. Hannah was hoping that Kelly might be announcing that she was pregnant, but she knew that was unlikely given Kelly's ominous tone of voice and the sense of urgency she conveyed.

Hannah cancelled her appointment to work at the SPCA that afternoon, and drove to Richmond, arriving three hours later. Throughout the trip, she envisioned the reasons behind Kelly's call for help: she had a deadly disease; Seth was unfaithful; she was pregnant with a critically disabled baby; and on and on.

As soon as Kelly opened the door, Hannah knew that there would be no good news. Kelly looked like a soldier with PTSD as she robotically described the entire history of the abuse starting with the name calling and ending with the beatings and rapes. Hannah was shocked; she couldn't talk. Like everyone else, Hannah had viewed Seth and Kelly as a happy, loving couple. Hannah and Kelly had kept in touch daily by email and texting, but they just discussed everyday activities. They hadn't talked on the phone so Hannah had no way of sensing what was happening. It's hard to pick up cries for help electronically. Cries had to be heard in a victim's voice or seen on the victim's face.

Hannah wanted Kelly to leave Seth immediately, but Kelly defended him saying that she was sure he was acting that way because he was under so much stress at the hospital and because maybe she had flirted with other men, and just wasn't aware of it. Hannah knew that Kelly hadn't looked at anyone, and even if she had, that was no basis for abuse. Kelly was swallowing what Seth was telling her; he was brainwashing her. She told Kelly that she was sure that the abuse would escalate and Seth might seriously injure her, or even kill her. Kelly said that she was being alarmist, but she shared her fear. Hannah made Kelly promise that if anything, even the name calling, happened again, she'd call her. She would come immediately

and rescue her from Seth. She'd take her home. Kelly's response was "What would people say? What would Seth's parents say? No one would believe me. They'd say that I was making it up or that I was doing what Seth accused me of and I deserved it. Who's more believable – a nurse from a working class background or a doctor from a privileged home?"

Hannah was dumbfounded. This was not the independent, assertive, clear-headed Kelly she knew. This was a woman whose will had been hijacked by Seth. He was damaging her mind even more than her body. Hannah had to do something, but all she could get from Kelly was a promise that she'd call if anything happened. After that, in their everyday email or texting, Hannah sent the cryptic message, "Is everything okay?" And Kelly would respond, "Yes."

But eight weeks later, something did happen. After they returned from dinner with another couple, Seth accused Kelly of flirting with his friend which Kelly vehemently denied. He dragged her into the bedroom, threw her on the bed, pulled down her pants, and spanked her buttocks with a belt buckle raising bloody red welts. He knew how to inflict pain without leaving visible traces that could be viewed by her colleagues so he concentrated on her bottom and her back which only he would see. His abuse was going to be their dirty, dark secret. He was sure she would never tell anyone. When she tried to scream, he stuffed a dirty sock in her mouth causing her to vomit. When he was finished beating her, he raped her as she sobbed into the sock. He dragged her to the shower where he washed the vomit from their bodies. He ordered her to strip the vomit covered, bloody sheets from the bed and replace them. She obeyed him, her mind blank. Then they lay in bed as he gently stroked her saying she would be his and only his forever and that she should never look at another man, or this would happen again. He held her face in his hands and forced her to look at him. He spoke to her like she was a child and told her this was her fault and if she had been a faithful wife, this would never have happened. He made her apologize for making him hurt her. "I'm sorry, Seth. I shouldn't have flirted with Bobby. I know it's my fault and you were right to punish me. I'll never do it again. I'll do whatever you say." As she mimicked these words, she knew that this would be the last time she would ever look at Seth Berman.

After he fell asleep, Kelly went to the bathroom to drown her face in cold water so she could think clearly. She filled the sink with cold water and kept her face submerged under the water, rising for air only when her lungs needed to be refilled. After a few minutes, she was fully alert. She knew she had to escape, and the only way out was Hannah. She called her from the closet so Seth couldn't hear her whispered pleas for help. Not giving details of what had happened, she just told Hannah to come immediately. She painfully dressed, packed a few necessities in a suitcase, and waited in front of the building, ready to run down the middle of the street screaming for help if Seth came after her. Three hours later, Hannah pulled up at

Kelly's apartment. All the way to Lewiston, Kelly laid on her stomach on the back seat because it was too painful for her to sit. When Kelly got to Hannah's at 8:00 in the morning, she called Seth and told him she wanted a divorce and if he didn't cooperate she would press charges and he would be out of his residency. She found that being 120 miles away from him gave her strength to confront Seth. Hannah had wisely taken pictures of Kelly's buttocks as proof, if they were needed for future legal proceedings. He didn't challenge the charges and they were eventually divorced.

Hannah wanted Kelly to go to the emergency room for treatment, but Kelly knew that she would have to disclose what had happened and she was ashamed for anyone other than Hannah to know about the abuse. Irrationally, she thought that the abuse was, in part, her fault. In their short-lived marriage, Seth had managed to begin the process of convincing Kelly that she deserved to be abused. Fortunately, she had escaped before the damage was irreparable. Through some of the nurses she knew at the Richmond hospital, Kelly later learned that Seth had told everyone that Kelly was an unfaithful slut who had run off with another man, which resulted in Seth garnering sympathy from his colleagues and affection from nurses and female doctors. Kelly quit her job in Richmond and got a job at the local hospital in Lewiston. Hannah wanted her to move in with Mary Ann and her, but Kelly said that she needed to be on her own to rebuild her life.

Kelly insists that without Hannah's intervention, Seth would have eventually turned her into an unthinking slave. She didn't want a repeat of her experience for Hannah, especially since she was inexperienced with men. Kelly, on the other hand, had become highly experienced with men. After the divorce, she went out with any guy who asked her out, and slept with anyone she found attractive, and she found most guys attractive. Then Kelly went to the other extreme. She wouldn't go out socially for months on end. At Hannah's dogged insistence, Kelly started seeing a therapist and began the healing process, especially with the help of medication. She joined a support group for abused women, which gave her strength to help herself as well as others in the group. After several years of honest self-examination, Kelly came to the harsh realization that she had married Seth because of who he was, and not because she loved him. There had probably been signs of the real Seth Berman in their months of courtship, but Kelly refused to see them. She was blinded by the vision of the life she saw for herself as Seth's wife – a life of wealth and prestige. Helping her to recover from the trauma of her wrecked marriage was Brad. Several months earlier, she had started dating Brad, who was 40, divorced, and a father of two pre-teen children. He was in love with Kelly, but Kelly didn't know if she could handle marriage, as well as someone else's children. She wanted to go slowly this time. She had to be positive that he wouldn't hurt her physically or emotionally. And she had to be sure that she truly loved Brad. She didn't know if she could survive another

painful divorce. She had to build a trusting relationship, and that would take a while, a long while.

Chapter 4

Hannah ignored Kelly's words of caution as she excitedly shared Tommy's promise to return.

“Tommy’s coming over at 2:00. He says he’s going to bring his clothes and move in.”

“Oh my Hannah, he just took advantage of you. He’s not going to move in. He’s not even going to come back. He just wanted to sleep with you. He’s the kind of guy who wants to brag about being the first for a 27 year old virgin. Hannah, he could be another Seth, or worse.”

“I don’t even know what he looks like. I never really looked at him. I’m not sure I could pick him out in a police line up. There was a feeling I never had before. After we made love, we curled up in a ball and slept like that until this morning. It’s like we were glued together.”

“Hannah, promise me that if he comes over or calls, you’ll slow things down. This is not healthy. You’re so vulnerable now and he’s taking advantage of you. You know what crazy men can do to women. You saw my ass after I was hit with that belt buckle. You know the emotional wreck I was. You’re so naïve and inexperienced.”

“Kelly, I know how you felt when you first fell in love with Seth. I think that’s how I feel now. But then I say, how can I love a person I don’t know? Supposedly you knew Seth and see what happened. I said maybe 20 sentences to Tommy and looked at him for 10 minutes. Is this love at first sight? Is there such a thing as love at first sight?”

They talked until 9:00 when the phone rang. Hannah feared it might be Tommy, canceling his plans to come over. But it was her neighbor, Mrs. Gold. She had seen the lights on late into the night and a strange car in the driveway, and wondered if there were any problems. Hannah

told her that a friend had come over late and assured her everything was fine. Mrs. Gold was her human security system, albeit a few hours late in contacting her.

At 9:30, Kelly said that she had to leave and get some sleep because she had to work later in the day. She hugged Hannah tightly and said, “I’m so worried about you. Please don’t do anything foolish. Call me. I’ll come over and talk to you whenever you need me, my beloved sister. Oh please don’t get involved with this creep. He’s not good enough for you. This can be dangerous. I’ll be there for you like you were there for me. I love you so much.”

As she said these words, she knew that Hannah wasn’t listening. She was waiting for Tommy to come back into her life.

At 10:30 the phone rang. Hannah’s hand shook as she anticipated all the excuses that Tommy might give for not coming. But he didn’t offer any excuses. “Hannah. I cancelled my tutoring. I’ll be over at about 1:00 instead of 2:00. Please be there for me.”

“I’ll be here. I can’t wait to see you. Hurry.”

Hannah showered and dressed. She wanted to change the sheets on her bed, but she was afraid Tommy might not return and she wanted to keep his smell forever. She ate a late breakfast, perked coffee, and sat at the kitchen table looking at the letters of the words in the newspaper unable to process their meaning because she was concentrating on her future.

At 12:52, the bell rang. Hannah raced to the door. It was Tommy with two overstuffed duffel bags. He grabbed Hannah and hugged her tightly. “Let’s start our new life.”

“Let’s start by me getting to know you. But first, did you eat anything today? I’ll make you some breakfast.”

Hannah was moving into her new role as Tommy’s nurturer. Tommy would be one of her kids, only much older. She was going to take care of his every need, cook his meals, do his laundry, shop for his clothes, clean his house, and most importantly shower him with unconditional love. This was the wifely role she had dreamed of for 27 years.

“No, I didn’t have time. I had two gatorades to keep me going.”

“Let me make you something. But first Tommy, I don’t even know what you look like. I never got a good look at you last night. Stand still and let me study you.”

She moved her hands over his face and body as if she were blind, trying to tactilely as well as visually etch his every body part into her memory. She ran her fingers through his too long, thick blond hair as she peered into his eyes, which she saw were dark brown like hers. She lightly traced his flat almost negroid nose which was also like hers. She explored his cleft moving her finger tip in and around it. It was off-centered and looked like someone (maybe God) had stuck his finger in his chin when his flesh was plastic and malleable. She ran her hands over his muscled, tanned arms covered with thick hair bleached white from many hours spent outdoors.

“You know we really exemplify the saying that opposites attract. You’re so blond and muscular and I’m so dark and skinny. But the funny thing is our noses. They’re the same. And we both have indentations in our faces - mine are dimples and yours is that funny, cute cleft.”

“Yeah, I’ve never seen anyone else with a cleft just like that. It’s not cute. It’s weird because it’s off-center. Hannah, we both do have wide button noses. Look at our teeth. We both have these fang molars on top. We look like Mr. and Mrs. Dracula.”

He took her hand and opened his mouth. He ran her finger under the cusp of his fang teeth. Then he took his hand and said, “Open,” and he ran his finger over her teeth. It was such an intimate move, exploring each other’s mouths.

The phone rang. Hannah knew it was Kelly checking up on her. “Did you hear from him?”

“He’s here.”

“Please, please be careful. I know he’s going to hurt you. And I don’t want you to get hurt now, not after what you’ve been through with your mother and father. Tell him I’ll castrate him if he hurts you.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll call you if I need you, but I know I won’t need you.”

“Does Kelly think I’m going to hurt you?”

“Yes, you have a reputation with the nurses at the hospital. She said that you slept with women after the first few dates. She went through a terribly abusive marriage and she’s afraid that’s what’ll happen to me.”

“Abuse you? I’d kill myself before I’d see you hurt. You’re so fragile. I feel like I have to watch over you. I have to protect you. And those nurses, well, I’ll be honest with you. I have to

be honest with you. I can't lie to you. I dated those nurses for sex. Just a quick screw, no feelings. I didn't have sex with you. I made love to you. Don't ever forget that. Anyhow, there won't be any more women for me. Starting last night I'm monogamous until death do us part."

"Tommy, I so want to believe you. Please don't lie to me, ever. Don't take advantage of me. I believe everything you say. I might break if you deceive me."

Her eyes filled with tears which welled over the lids. She wanted to veer the conversation away from dangerous waters.

"Let me make you something to eat. Do you want breakfast or lunch?"

"Do you have food in your house? We don't keep much in our place. Mostly cereal and milk. Our cabinets look like Seinfeld's, filled with different kinds of cereals. Of course, we always have beer and snacks, but that's not food."

"I still stock the place like my mother lives here. There's always food and I cook a lot for Kelly and me. She works odd hours and she's usually too exhausted to cook. How about eggs?"

She made him two fried eggs, bacon, and toast. She sat across from him and watched as he put each bite of food into his mouth. When he dropped his napkin, she darted for it, replacing it in his lap.

"You're like a mother watching her kid to make sure he eats all his food."

"Did your mother watch you eat?"

"I didn't have a mother. She left when I was a baby. I'll tell you about that another time. Not now. Not at this happy time. I don't want to think about the dark side of life now."

"Ok, back to the interrogation. What do you like to do?"

"I love sports, especially soccer. I coach the high school team and play on a team. I hike whenever I can. I lived in Alaska for a while and one of the reasons I moved back here was to hike the Appalachian Trail. I love kayaking. I'm really an outdoor sports person.

What about you?"

"Well, we're really opposites again. I'm more of an indoor person. I don't do any sports. I love gardening and cooking. I'll show you my greenhouse after breakfast. I have orchids and

African violets. I love making new recipes. I watch the food channel to get new recipes. My specialty is Italian. I love making pasta and different sauces from scratch. And I love animals, especially cats. I volunteer at the SPCA. I hate to see neglected and abused animals. I would adopt a whole bunch of dogs and cats if I could. I have two cats, Spot and Puff. Did you see them? They hide whenever strangers come into the house. I wonder what they thought of last night. They sleep with me and last night they were evicted. And most of all I love kids. I teach kindergarten and adore my children. I want to have 10 kids of my own.”

“Of our own. Maybe we should have an even dozen. Hannah, I’ve passed this house before and always admired the architecture and the garden. I figured a sweet little old lady lived her. I never thought a sweet little young lady lived her.

You know I’m a teacher too – high school math.”

“I can’t believe anyone would choose to teach math. One of the reasons I majored in early childhood is that my math is limited to $1 + 1$. I dread the day when I get a math wizard in my class who knows more than me.”

“Okay, now we know each other. Let’s make love. All I could think of this morning was your body and how I felt being in you. I was afraid that I’d have a hard-on and how would I explain that to the kids. Their coach acting like a horny teenager, but also a man in love.”

Hannah said with amazement, “You do love me, don’t you?”

“With all my heart and soul.”

"How can you love me? You don't know me."

"I do. I've known you forever. Don't you feel that way too?"

"Yes, I do."

He pulled Hannah onto his lap and kissed her.

“Tommy, you didn’t use a condom last night. I’m not on the pill. I could have gotten pregnant. Do you have any condoms? There’s a drug store over on Webster Street.”

“Hannah, I have a wallet full of condoms, but I don’t want to use ‘em with you. I don’t want anything to come between us. We’re going to get married soon so it doesn’t matter if you get pregnant. We’ll start on the 10 kids now.”

“What do you mean we’re getting married soon? I don’t even know your birthday or your middle name.”

“My birthday is May 31st and my middle name is Jefferson. Now we can get married.”

“My birthday is June 1st. What year were you born?”

“1978. I’m 27.”

“Me too. You’re a day older than me. Where’d you get the name Jefferson?”

“My dad is a history buff and his favorite part of history is the Lewis and Clark expedition. He didn’t want to give me either of those names so he gave me Jefferson for Tom who sponsored their trip. Hannah, we have a lifetime to learn about each other. We don’t have to cram every bit of information about ourselves into an hour. I figure we have 60 years if we’re lucky.”

“Let me give you a tour of the house since you’ll be staying here, at least for a while.”

“No, for 60 years.”

She grinned at him as she took him by the hand. She marveled at how her hand nestled perfectly into his, as if the two had been molded together, separated, and now united.

“Here’s the back yard. I’m so proud of the flowers I grow. Look at my roses. Have you ever seen so many flowers on one bush?”

“They’re beautiful. Do you know the names of all these flowers?”

“Of course. I’ll name them later and then test you to see if you remember them. Here’s my greenhouse. It’s small and dumpy, but I have enough room for my orchids and African violets.”

“Why don’t you open a florist shop or a greenhouse?”

“This is a hobby, not a job, silly. My father built it more than 15 years ago. He loved gardening. That’s where I got my love of it. Oh God, I thought I got my love of gardening because it rubbed off on me. Maybe it was in my genes.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m adopted, but I’m not adopted. I can’t tell you right now. There’s too much going on in my head. Kelly thinks I’m having a nervous breakdown because I just found out that my adoptive father was my biological father. She might be right. Why on earth would I be doing what I’m doing? If you had come along two months ago, I might never have called you last night. There’s something wrong with me. My brain is not functioning right. I’ve never been like this before. I can’t stop chattering. When I get nervous I talk fast. Can you even understand what I’m saying? I’m usually so in control of what goes on in my mind, but now everything is a jumble, thanks to you.”

“I can understand you perfectly and there’s nothing wrong with you. You just didn’t expect to fall in love at first sight. Neither did I.”

“Let’s not talk about that. It hurts to think about what’s going on in my head and my body. Let’s go on with the tour. This is the family room that my parents added to the house 15 years ago. They redid everything then. Modernized the kitchen, rewired, put in air conditioning. My mother’s dad died and left her money and they used some of it to remodel the house. My dad loved this house so much, but he didn’t get much of a chance to enjoy it. He died 11 years ago.”

“Where’s your mom?”

“She’s got Alzheimer’s. She’s in Shady Brook Village. It’s the nursing home over on Campbell Street. I had to put her there six months ago. I visit her everyday. I have to go in a little while. I won’t stay long so I’ll be back soon.”

“Can I go with you?”

“I don’t know. I was going to tell her about you. I tell her everything that happened during the day even though she doesn’t understand. It makes me feel that she’s still my mother and I’m not alone.”

“You’re not alone. You have me. When should we go?”

“Let’s finish looking around the house and then you can wash up and change. Here’s the dining room with this furniture that was my grandparents’. They lived in the house until my grandmother died and then my grandfather gave the house to my mother when she got married. And here’s the living room. It’s got the round windows that I love. It’s part of the turret. I rarely use this room. I spend most of my time in the family room or in my room. I love the old fireplaces in the living room and dining room, but they don’t work. My dad put a wood burning fireplace in the family room. I use it on cold winter nights. The smell of logs burning is one of my favorite smells.”

Tommy picked up his duffels and said, “We have to figure out where I’m going to put my stuff.”

“Tommy, I don’t know what to do with you.”

“Let’s visit your mom and come back and figure out what to do with me. I know one thing you can do with me the second we get back here. In fact, I think we should make non-stop love for 24 hours. How about it?”

He kissed her passionately. Every cell in Hannah’s body responded. She didn’t know if she was feeling love, her dormant libido coming to life, or both.

They drove to Shady Brook Village in Tommy’s Jeep. Hannah had never been in a Jeep before. Although she wore a seat belt, she didn’t feel safe. She preferred her snug Honda Civic. When they got there, they walked through the halls passing the people in wheelchairs permanently settled in the hall to give them stimulation to which they were neurologically oblivious. When they got to Mary Ann’s room, Hannah found her in a chair facing the open door, but seeing nothing. Hannah kissed Mary Ann in her usual way and then said, “Mom, this is my friend, Tommy. I wanted you to meet him. I think he’s going to be someone special in my life.

Tommy took Mary Ann’s hand in his and held it to his heart, “Hello, Mrs. O’Brien. I’m glad to meet you. I wish I could have known you in the past so I could tell you that you created a magnificent daughter. I love her. I’ve loved her since I saw her almost 24 hours ago. I’ll take care of her for you for the rest of my life.”

Mary Ann looked past Tommy as if he did not exist. Her hand was cold, dry, and stiff, like a frozen fish. Tommy stroked it and then placed it back in her lap. Hannah straightened up the room. There were two vases of flowers, one with roses and another with zinnias that Hannah had brought several days earlier. Hannah emptied the water and added fresh water. “Do you like these flowers mom? The zinnias aren’t too good this year. I don’t know why. I bought them at a new nursery. I think I’ll go back to the old one on Rte. 14.”

Hannah continued to make idle chatter as Tommy stared at them wondering if he could hold a conversation with a vegetable. An aide who brought Mary Ann’s dinner tray was pleased to find that Hannah would feed Mary Ann. The scene reminded Tommy of a mother bird feeding her newborn nestling with mouth stretched open to the fullest, awaiting the downloading of food. Hannah carefully blotted up the food that didn’t make it into Mary Ann’s mouth. After the lengthy feeding, Hannah straightened the room and kissed Mary Ann goodbye. Tommy kissed her on the cheek and said, “I’ll be seeing a lot of you. Mrs. O’Brien.” To himself, he said, “But you won’t be seeing me.”

As they walked to the car, Hannah said, “I wish you could have known my mom before Alzheimer’s. She was so full of life and love. She was vibrant. No more.”

In the car, Tommy said, “I want to take you up to my favorite place in the mountains. I’ve never taken anyone there before.”

“Anything that is your favorite will be mine too.”

They drove up to the mountains on a steep road with continuous switchbacks. One section of the road was covered with tall, heavily leafed trees overarched the road making it dark as dusk. Tommy said, “I love the way the trees arch over. It makes the road dark even at noon on a sunny day. It’s like the entrance to my hiding place.”

He parked in a turn-off and led her through the trees to an overlook. The valley below and the mountain range in the distance were coated with a thin haze because of heat and pollution. The landscape was tinted with a muted softness, giving the appearance of a frameless picture painted in pastel watercolors.

Tommy showed her the view as if it were his personal property. “This is my church. I come here by myself to glory in life. I’m completely at peace when I’m here. Every bone in my body relaxes. Now we’re both completely at peace.”

They sat on a rock outcropping with Hannah nestled between Tommy's legs as they quietly looked at the view, ignoring the gnats flying at their faces. After a while, Hannah said, "I have to tell you one of the most important things in my life so I have to look at your face." She got up and sat facing Tommy cross-legged as she tightly held his hands.

"I know we have a lifetime to learn about each other, but I have to tell you what happened this summer that changed my life forever. Well not as much as you're changing it, I suppose. On July 10th, I'll always remember the date, I was going through my father's school papers. My mother had meant to do it but she never got around to it. Probably because it was too painful. It was good that she didn't find what I found. A letter from a former student who said that she was pregnant with his child. The baby was due in mid June of 1978. She said that she wouldn't get an abortion and that she wanted to give the baby to him because he and my mother couldn't have kids. Tommy, I was born June 1st, 1977. I was that baby. My father was my biological father. I've been having a hard time rethinking my father. I worshiped him and I know he loved me and my mom. I thought we were the most perfect family in the world. But he had an affair with a student. For all I know there was more than one student. Up to yesterday I've been thinking about him and my mom and me constantly and it's making me a little crazy. Maybe Kelly's right. Maybe I'm having a breakdown. And then you come along and make me a lot crazier. What am I going to do?"

She buried her head in her hands and wept like one of her students would weep when skinning a knee.

Tommy tightly hugged her to him and said, "You're going to let me help you with this. I'm your partner for life now. We won't go through anything alone anymore. We'll do everything as one. I'll always be there for you, always, my Hannah."

"Tommy, when I get out of my skin and look objectively at what I'm doing, I think that I can't be sane and do this. But when I get back into my skin and look at this from the inside out, I know I'm doing the right thing. I've never been surer of anything in my life. Up to the minute you came into my life I could only think of my parents and grieve for the life I thought we had, but since you stepped into my house, the grief is gone. It's totally gone. You fill me with happiness and hope for a life I've always dreamed of."

They hugged tightly as Tommy grew harder. She pulled away and mischievously said, "Tommy, I want to make love to you every time I look at you. I can't get enough of you. Can we do it out here? How about in the car?"

"No, people might come by. I'm not the only one who knows about this spot. Save it until we get home. You are a passionate little lady, aren't you?"

“As of yesterday, yes. Never before. I wasn’t really interested in sex until you.”

On the way back, they discussed stopping for supper, but they knew they didn’t really want to eat. They had only one goal and they couldn’t put it off much longer or they would have to pull off the road.

As soon as they entered the front door, Tommy pulled Hannah into the living room. The house was unlit, but there was enough light coming from the street lamp for them to see each other clearly. They pulled their shorts down, lay on the floor, and quickly climaxed. Then they undressed each other and lovingly caressed each other as they leisurely enjoyed another coming together of their bodies.

Then Hannah said, “I’m hungry for food now. My hunger for you has been satisfied, but only for a little while. I don’t feel like making anything. Let’s order a pizza.”

“You’re the cook.”

Before they sat down for the pizza, they noticed that the phone message light blinking. It was Kelly. “Call me. I’m worried about you. I’ve called three times. I called your cell, but you must have turned it off. I figured you were visiting your mom, but now it’s too long for you to be away. Please be careful. Don’t do anything rash. If he hurts you, call me or the police immediately.”

There was a second message, “Hello, Hannah. This is Kevin, Tommy’s roommate. I’ve been trying to reach him, but he has his phone turned off. If you know where he is, could you have him call me.”

“Well, you have your friend who’s trying to have you dump me and I have my friend who’s doing the same thing. When I told Kevin what I was doing, he was furious. He said that that I was ruining my life, that I could date you and get to know you, but why do such a crazy thing as move in with you. He asked if the sex was that great. That was his only explanation for why I would do this. You call your worrier and I’ll call mine.”

Tommy and Kevin had been paired as roommates on their first day at Central. Over the four years of college they became best friends. After graduation, Kevin moved to Alaska with Tommy. He was an adventurer and enjoyed the outdoors. In winter, he did cross country skiing

and dog sledding, and in summer he hunted and fished. He stayed eleven months and would have settled in Alaska permanently had his father not had a heart attack. He returned to Virginia to help run his father's three outdoor stores in the suburban Washington area. His father's health improved, and Kevin's brother-in-law helped with the stores so Kevin could open a new store in Lewiston.

When Tommy returned to Lewiston, he naturally decided to room with Kevin. They got along well because they had similar interests - soccer, hiking, and women. But Kevin was very different from Tommy, both physically and psychologically. Kevin was tall, 6'4", lanky, with reddish curly hair. He was critical of people, especially women, and always saw the negative, never the positive. Every time he got involved with a woman, he found faults with her, usually minor, but not minor enough to keep him in the relationship. Tommy, on the other hand, was short, blond, stocky, easy going, good natured, and positive. But like Kevin, he didn't have lasting relationships with women, that is, until Hannah. In his 27 years, Tommy had had sex with many women, he had lost count, but he never dated anyone more than five or six times. Until now, he had been adverse to a lasting relationship.

Hannah called Kelly, and got her voice mail. She told her she was fine and things were going smoothly with Tommy and not to worry. Tommy called Kevin and also got his voice mail. He left the same message. Then Hannah and Tommy realized that it was Saturday night and they both were probably out.

"Ok. Let's think of the arrangements here. I'll use your parents' bathroom and I'll keep my stuff in their drawers and closet. But we're going to sleep in your bed."

"You mean every night we're going to squish into my little bed?"

"Hannah, I have always been a lousy sleeper, tossing and turning and getting up a million times. Last night was the best night of sleep I've ever had in my life. I didn't move an inch. It's like my body knew it was home. Let's not change anything for a while."

"Tommy, you are going to make two enemies with that sleeping arrangement. I think they're mad at you for bumping them from their bed last night. They always sleep with me."

"They SLEPT with you. Too bad. They'll have to find a new place."

Hannah got on her knees and pulled a black cat with white paws from under the bed. “Say hello to Spot. He thinks I’m his mother because when I sit and read or watch TV, he lays on my chest with his paws around my neck. Let me see if I can find Puff. Puff. Puff.”

A fluffy white cat peeked out from the open closet door. Hannah lunged at him before it could get away. “Here’s Spot’s litter mate. They don’t look at all alike.”

“Where’d you get those names?”

“Didn’t you hear of the Dick and Jane books? They had a pet dog named Spot and a pet cat named Puff. I suppose you wouldn’t really know that since those books haven’t been used for years and years. I know about them from my ed classes. Are you an animal person?”

“When I was growing up we had dogs. My dad’s a hunter so we always had a couple of labs. He lives in Alaska now and has huskies he uses for dog sledding. I’ve never been passionate about animals. They’re okay, but I suppose I’ll have to change or at least get along with these two guys. I know you love them so I’ll have to learn to love them. I feel like they’re your kids from a previous marriage.”

He stopped and said, “Let’s make love Hannah.”

Hannah grinned widely and said, “Great idea.”

They watched each other undress and openly studied each other’s bodies. Hannah commented, “You’re so muscular and strong. I feel like you could protect me.”

“I won’t protect you with my body, but with my heart and soul. I’m surprised you have such wide hips and big butt because you’re so skinny. I think you’ll be good for having babies.”

He softly kissed her body and said over and over, “I love you.” Every inch of her body responded. Every time he said, “I love you,” she said, “I love you more.” Hannah couldn’t stop smiling. She was so happy making love and being held by Tommy. They got into their nestling positions and immediately fell asleep until the phone rang. It was Kelly.

“Is everything alright?”

“Everything is perfect. On a scale of 1 to 10, it’s 1,000. Goodnight Kelley.”

They fell back asleep, but at 1:30 Tommy's cell rang. It was Kevin who sounded drunk.

"What're you doing?"

"I'm sleeping."

"With her?"

"Yes, with Hannah. Everything's fine. I'll talk to you tomorrow when you're sober."

They nestled into each other again, Hannah in a fetal position facing the edge of the bed and Tommy in a fetal position hugging Hannah. The way they would sleep for the rest of their lives.

Chapter 5

At 6:30 Hannah was awakened by Tommy's arms tightly hugging her as he said, "I slept like a baby. God, you're better than a sleeping pill. How did you sleep?"

"I always sleep good, but when you put your arms around me like that I feel a safeness I never felt before. Oh Tommy, how you've changed my life in just days. How is that possible?"

"It's fate. We were meant for each other and we knew it as soon as we saw each other. Just think if I sat on the other side of the theatre or if you decided not to go to the concert, we would have never met. No. We were meant to be. Mmm. I love how you smell of sleep and mustiness."

"Thanks. I'll go brush my teeth."

"No, it's a good smell. Like lying in bed on a cold rainy day when you're a kid and you don't have to go to school. Hey, I have a soccer game at 1:00. I want you to come."

"Of course I'll come, if you'll help me with what I have to do today. I've got a lot of gardening. I do it first thing in the morning before it gets too hot. We'll eat and shower later. Put on your grungiest clothes."

“All my clothes are grungy.”

After washing up, they went to the back yard to find a shimmering, dew-drenched world of bright greens, reds, yellows, and pinks. The blades of grass looked as if they had been washed and left to drip dry. They deeply inhaled the fresh, earthy smell presaging another sweltering summer day.

“Isn’t it magnificent! This is my Garden of Eden. I feel like I’m helping to create something good in the world when I’m gardening.”

Tommy studied the flowers and said, “I don’t think I’ve ever been in a prettier place. You create beauty, Hannah, because you’re the embodiment of beauty. You’re pure goodness. Never in my wildest dreams did I ever think I’d find someone like you.”

He hugged her to him, but Hannah pulled away with an embarrassed laugh. No one, other than her parents, had ever spoken such kind words about her.

To lighten the mood, she barked orders like a drill sergeant. “OK, I’m the boss here so listen up. I’m going to weed and I want you to water all the plants. Lots of water because of the heat.”

“Aye, aye sir. Tell me if I’m doing things right because believe it or not I never watered anything before. Not even a house plant. When I was growing up, we always lived in an apartment complex where we didn’t have grass to take care of.”

They worked for over 30 minutes on the backyard and another 20 on the front. “It’s great to have your help. Everything goes so fast. I’ll deadhead the flowers this evening when it’s cooler. Do you mind running down to the bagel store and getting fresh bagels?”

“For you my lady, I will go to the ends of the earth for bagels. What kind do you like? I bet sun dried tomato with veggie cream cheese.”

“Wrong. Cinnamon and raisin with walnut cream cheese.”

While he was gone, she perked freshly ground coffee, fed the cats, laid out sun flower placemats with matching cloth napkins, set the table, and cut yellow roses for a vase decorated with sun flowers. Then she sat down at the table that looked as if it were being photographed

for Southern Living, folded her hands in prayer, bent her head, and said aloud. “Thank you God for sending Tommy to me. Did you take my mom and dad and send me to the depths of despair so that you could send me Tommy and send me to the top of the world? Did you pick this time to send Tommy to me because you knew I needed a light to lead me out of the tunnel? Oh how can I thank you God? I will treasure Tommy and do everything in my power to make him happy. I know together we can create a life of pure bliss.”

Just then Tommy returned. He beamed as he looked at the table and the flowers. The sun streamed onto the table drenching the yellows of the flowers, the vase, and the placemats.

“This looks like Hannah’s café. What a pretty table and you did this all in 20 minutes. I don’t think I ever had breakfast served like this before. My dad and I just put food on plates and ate. No flowers and no placemats and certainly no cloth napkins. Same with Kevin. In fact with Kevin, we often eat out of cans and pots without putting stuff on plates.”

As they were eating, Tommy said, “I call my dad every Sunday sometime after 2:00. He lives in Alaska so I can’t call him too early. I’ll call him after the game. I’m going to tell him we’re getting married. I want him to come out for the wedding. Let’s do it on Labor Day weekend.”

“What? That’s only four weeks away. It’s so close. Shouldn’t we wait, maybe till Thanksgiving? Anyhow, you haven’t proposed.”

Tommy immediately dropped down on one knee, took Hannah’s hand in his, and said, “Hannah O’Brien, will you marry me so that we can live happily ever after?”

“Yes, Thomas Jefferson Evans, I will marry you so we can live happily ever after.”

Although they acted like they were joking around, they knew the seriousness of their words. They realized that Tommy’s simple question and Hannah’s simple response bound them to a life-long commitment. Their mouths smiled flippantly, but their eyes reflected the gravity of their words.

“If I had it my way, we’d get married tomorrow. I was thinking we could get married on the Saturday of Labor Day weekend and have a few people over. One of the fathers of a kid I coach is a minister. I don’t know what kind. I’m not religious. Are you?”

“Not really. Any minister will do unless he’s too religious. I don’t like all that fanatical stuff. Are you sure you want a wedding? We can just go down to the courthouse and get married.”

“I think my father would really like it. Next to you, I love him more than anyone in the world. He waited until I graduated from high school to move to Alaska. It was his life’s dream. If he’d lived in the 1800’s, he would have gone on expeditions westward, just like Lewis and Clark. Alaska is his frontier. ”

“What does he do?”

“He’s an operator, or an entrepreneur as they say today. He’s always made money. Everything he touches turns green. Up in Fairfax, he owned a construction business and did a lot of contracting with the military, and then he built some strip malls that he still owns. He’s a partner with two other guys who manage things locally. When he moved to Fairbanks, he went into construction again with the bases up there. I know he has money because he’s very generous to me. He says what’s his is mine. Last Christmas he took me to Vegas, and the year before, we went to Hawaii. He bought me that Jeep last year when I moved back here. He usually gives me a thousand dollars for my birthday and for Christmas. He tells me to ask for whatever I need.”

“That is sooo nice. When were you adopted?”

“When I was a few days old. I don’t know who my birth parents are and I’m like you, I don’t care. My father is my only parent. My parents adopted me because they thought it would help their marriage. She was an addict and an alcoholic. I can’t call that woman my mother. I can’t call her anything but dirty words which I would never say in front of you. I think my dad was into that stuff when they were married, but now he’s very straight – no drugs and just an occasional beer or wine. She left when I was about six months old. We’ve never seen her since. In fact, I’ve never seen any pictures of her. My father destroyed them. My dad says that his life was totally screwed up until I came along and when he got me, everything in his life turned around. He stopped drinking and started making money. He says that he’s had two lives – one before me and one after me.

You will love my father. He’s a kind, caring person. He loves to do anything outdoors. I think he’ll like you once he gets to know you. He might look at your thinness as a drawback. The girlfriends he’s had over the years have been sort of bawdy and buxom. The bigger the boobs the better, and the taller the hair the better. But he’s never wanted to marry again. I think

he's happy with his life, but I know he misses me. He's always asking me to move back, but I can't. Especially now. I could never leave you and Lewiston.

After I graduated, I moved to Alaska and worked for Dad for a year. Kevin moved with me and he worked for him too. Kevin and I were sorta wild when we were there. We tried everything outdoors and indoors. Then Kevin had to come back to Virginia because his dad had a heart attack and he had to help run his business. Kev really didn't want to leave Alaska. He loved the outdoors there. And after he left, I went to the University of Alaska to get certified to teach math. For a year I was a bush teacher in an Inuit village on the Bering Sea. I thought I would love the experience of living in the wild and being totally independent. It was awful. It was the worst experience of my life. I was so lonely I thought I would go crazy. I needed to be with friends. I missed Kevin and women. The kids I taught and their families weren't enough for me. I couldn't bond with them and I really didn't want to bond with them. I just wanted to get back to civilization. Somehow I lasted the year and then, I quit. I despised Alaska. I love the outdoors, but not the frozen outdoors. I got depressed by the endless dark days. That was the only time in my life I was ever depressed. Have you ever been depressed?"

She shook her head. "You can't imagine how low and paralyzed you feel. I would sit for hours and stare at the weather channel without processing what I saw. Of course, the weather was always the same – snow and cold. I took some meds, but the only thing that helped was getting out of Alaska. So I came back to the place I was happiest – Lewiston. And look what I found here – the love of my life. But I do miss my father. He loves me more than anything in the world. He was crushed when I left Alaska because he knew I'd never come back. We email everyday and talk every Sunday and whenever I have vacation, we go someplace nice or I go there or he comes here. He's really more than a father. He's my best friend. But it is so hard maintaining a relationship when you're thousands of miles apart."

After they showered and dressed, they went to Tommy's game. As they approached the field, Tommy pointed to the stands, and said, "Sit over there. You'll hear all the gossip from the girlfriends and wives. I'm nervous about you watching. I always want to win, but now I want to win for you." He gave her a peck on the lips and ran off.

Hannah had never watched a soccer game and didn't know the rules. Although the stands around her filled with women and kids, she focused only on Tommy. She didn't attend to the other players, the movement of the ball, or the actions of the refs. She marveled at how swiftly and gracefully Tommy moved. His legs moved so fast, they looked motorized. She thought back to last night and how she explored his body. She recalled the taut feel of his arm, leg, and stomach muscles. They felt like they were made of metal. From afar, she realized he was short, maybe 5'6" at most. When he held her, she thought he was six feet tall or more. She looked at

Tommy and pictured him dressed as a prince dressed in a blue velvet jacket and white tights as he kicked a soccer ball. She laughed aloud at the comical mental image.

Her ears perked up when she heard Tommy's name. A woman sitting in front of her was saying, "Kevin told me that Tommy has flipped out. He met some woman on Friday and moved in with her on Saturday. Is that not unbelievable? That is not the Tommy who loves 'em and leaves 'em. Kevin says she's not even good looking. She must have done something to Tommy sexually because he wouldn't do something so crazy especially since he's quite good in bed, or so I hear. Knowing Tommy and how he likes to change girls I'm sure it'll last a week at most."

Hannah mulled the words over. She knew they were wrong. She was certain that Tommy would never leave her. She also knew that she was cute, maybe not pretty, but not bad looking. She was surprised at how she was able to push the woman's chatter out of her mind. Nothing they could say detracted from the most important fact in her life – Tommy was her true love. Half way through the game, Tommy made a goal and turned to Hannah blowing her a kiss. The women sitting in front of Hannah turned to look at her and reddened knowing that she had heard their conversation. Tommy's team won. Tommy reacted like a ten year old boasting and laughing. He and Kevin jogged over to Hannah. "Hey Kevin, remember Hannah from Friday night?"

"Yeah. Hi Hannah."

Mechanically, he said, "Good to see you again."

"Hi Kevin."

Tommy put an arm around Hannah pulling her close and said, "See, I told you she'd bring us good luck. I told Kevin we'd be over later or tomorrow to collect some more of my stuff. He says he'll help me move."

"I'm doing it reluctantly. You know I think he's making a mistake. This is not the Tommy I've known since the first day of college. I'm not saying this to stop your relationship. I just want you to slow down. I don't want either of you to get hurt when this doesn't work out."

"Kevin, it's going to work out. We're going to get married."

Kevin looked as if he had been punched in the stomach. “You’ve got to be kidding. Right?”

“No, I’m not kidding. I think we’re going to do it on Labor Day. You are my very good friend and I really want your support. When you come to our 50th wedding anniversary, I’ll remind you about today.”

Kevin walked away as if he were leaving a funeral. He repeatedly shook his head back and forth expressing disbelief at what was happening.

As soon as they returned to the house, Tommy called his father. “Dad, how’s everything?... Where are you?... How many did ya catch?... Are you frying em?... Who’s she?... No, I don’t remember meeting her... Dad, I have something important to tell you. I’m getting married... Well I didn’t say anything because I just met her on Friday... Yeah, this last Friday... It was love at first sight... She’s a kindergarten teacher who was sitting in front of me at a concert and I fell in love with her pony tail... I’m serious... No, I’m not drunk. Can you come out over Labor Day if we wait until then?... Well, I’d like to get married tomorrow, but she wants to wait a bit... No, she can’t be pregnant already and no she isn’t one of these girls who wants to be married before she has sex. Dad, you know I don’t do foolish things. I know this is right. In fact, this is the rightest thing I’ve ever done. I know you’ll like her, except her looks. She’s skinny. Well, she does have a big butt. But she’s the cutest girl in the world. She has dimples to die for. And oddly enough, we have the same noses and fang eye teeth. Maybe that’s why we love each other... No, her dad is dead and her mom is in a nursing home with Alzheimer’s. That’s why I want you at the wedding. You’re the only parent we have... O.K. Go ahead and make a reservation for that Wednesday and we’ll plan to get married on the Saturday. I’m going to ask a minister I know to marry us at Hannah’s house. I mean our house. Anyhow, come on Wednesday so we’ll have some time together. Maybe we can convince you to come back to Virginia... I know. I know. You’ll never leave your Alaska. And we’re certainly never going to leave Lewiston. Dad, I’ve never been happier in my life... I’m glad you feel that way. I love you too. Let me know your itinerary as soon as you book your flights... Oh yeah, her name is Hannah O’Brien. She’s from Lewiston. Her dad was a professor at the university... His name was Sean. Why are you asking his name?... What’s the matter?... Are you okay?... You’ll know she’s right for me when you meet her. Bye Dad, Love ya.”

“I suppose it’s settled. We’re getting married Labor Day weekend. Let me check the calendar. Saturday’s the third. Let me call Joe Harper to see if he’s available that day. He’s the minister I was telling you about.”

Tommy's cell phone rang. "Hey Dad, what's up?... Dad, why are you doing this?... Stop yelling... You've never said anything like that before. You can't order me not to get married. I'm 27. I'm going to do this whether you like it or not. What?... Tomorrow... You know you can't stop me from doing this even if you come here. OK, call me when you get into Dulles. Do you want me to pick you up or are you going to rent a car?... Ok. See you tomorrow. You really don't have to come, ya know. You're not going to stop me from doing this... I'm not crazy and no, she's not crazy either... Stop screaming... You're out of control. I'm not the one who's out of control. Alright, I'll see you tomorrow."

He turned to Hannah with a frantic look. "My father's flying out tomorrow. He wants to talk to us. He thinks we're making a huge mistake. He's never been like this before. Did you hear him yelling? I've never heard him yell before. He's always trusted my judgment. I suppose it's because he raised me alone and I never had a mother. Anyhow you two will get a chance to meet. The two people in the world I love. Maybe this will work out for the best. He'll meet you and know why I want to marry you."

"I'm nervous about meeting him. He's all set to hate me. He probably thinks I did something to trap you. Oh Tommy, don't let him take you away from me. I'll die if he does."

"Hannah, no one will take me away from you. Ever."

Suddenly Hannah was filled with determination. She was going to do everything in her power to keep Tommy. No one, not even Ben, would take him from her.

"We'll have to get him a hotel. There's no room for him here. Anyway I don't want anyone else but us in this house. It's ours and only ours. Let's take him out to Giovanni's. Does he like Italian food?"

"That's his favorite. Let me call Joe now."

While Tommy called Joe, Hannah made supper. She made a tuna noodle casserole and fruit salad. She had bought the fruit Friday morning before she had met Tommy. Could it be that she knew the cantaloupe, blueberries, and strawberries longer than she knew Tommy? She sat down on a kitchen chair and sobbed. Tommy heard her and cut short his conversation saying that they would be glad to meet with him later in the week to go over what they wanted in a ceremony. He ran to her. "What's the matter?"

"I was just thinking that I've known you less than 48 hours and it seems like I've known you all my life. I do want to marry you Tommy. I'd marry you right now if I could. I was

thinking of my life Friday morning when I bought this fruit and my life Saturday morning after I met you and I know I never want to be away from you. Oh Tommy, I'm so afraid your father will convince you not to marry me. He'll separate us. What'll I do then?"

"Hannah, nobody can stop me from marrying you. The fact that my dad is against this only makes me stronger in my commitment to us. This is right. We were meant to be together. Destiny brought us together. I know that sounds like a bunch of hooey, but I know it's true. We were meant for each other."

After supper Tommy called Kevin to ask if he could help him move more of his things. Since Kevin owned the townhouse where they lived, Tommy assured him that he would continue paying rent until he got another roommate. When they got to the townhouse, Hannah was aghast at all the stuff Tommy had amassed. He had a kayak, four pairs of hiking boots, a duffel bag of soccer balls, two TVs, a Bose radio, two ipods, a cd player, computer game boxes, boxes and boxes of cd's and games, a laptop and a desktop with a printer, math textbooks, notebooks, files, and books on sports, especially soccer and hiking. And lots of clothes for soccer, hiking, and teaching. They decided that they would only take the things Tommy would need for the next few weeks and they would rent a storage locker for the rest.

Hannah had no idea where they were going to put Tommy's things so they dumped everything in the living room. When they finished unloading, Kevin joined Tommy and Hannah for a beer at the kitchen table. Kevin said, "You're not starting out like most couples. You're starting out with a lovely old house that's fully furnished. Maybe that will make it easier or maybe harder because this is Hannah's place and you have to fit in."

"It's not my house anymore. Now it's our house. Tommy replaced a light bulb in the hall and that makes him co-owner of the house."

"Hey guys. I wish you the best of luck. When I see you together I think there's a slight chance you might make it. It's like you've been together for years and not 48 hours. Tommy, I've never seen you like this before. I can't explain it. It's as if you've been transformed into a different person. If this works, you'll set some kind of record. You'll be in the Guinness Book of Records for the shortest courtship ever. Tommy, I love you man and I'll always be your friend and if Hannah throws you out, you've got a place to come."

Fighting conflicting emotions of anger and support, Kevin hugged Tommy and then Hannah. "Take good care of my man."

After Kevin left, they performed what would be their evening ritual. They stripped and got into bed. Tommy kissed all of Hannah starting with her face and working downward. By the time he reached her vagina, they were both bursting with sexual tension. Tommy entered her and they both soared into a mindless world of pleasure. Then they got into their fetal positions and said to each other, "I'll love you forever. Good night. Sweet dreams of us."

The next morning they got a call from Tommy's father, saying he would be arriving at about 9:00 in the evening. He asked them to make a hotel reservation and for directions to Hannah's house. Hannah and Tommy were apprehensive about what Ben would say or do to try to stop them. They were nervous knowing that the first serious assault on their plans to marry would be launched by the second most important person in Tommy's life. At 5:00, the phone rang. Ben had missed his connection and wouldn't be able to get to Dulles until the next day. He would call later with a new time of arrival. Hannah and Tommy felt as if they had been given a 24 hour reprieve. They decided to pack sandwiches and hike a trail at a local park, but first they dropped in on Mary Ann to update her on their plans. Although they spoke with wild enthusiasm, Mary Ann sat like a statue with the words falling around her. After 10 minutes, they left, not wanting her lack of responsiveness to their marriage plans dampen their spirits.

The next day at 3:00, Ben called to say that he was at Dulles and would be in Lewiston in about three hours. Hannah kept herself busy making a lasagna, salad, and chocolate cake. Tommy installed his game box on a TV in the small bedroom. To control his tension about the upcoming meeting, he played games until shortly before Ben was due to arrive. He and Hannah sat on the wicker chairs on the front porch drinking lemonade, nervously waiting for the big, bad wolf to try to blow their house down.

When Ben pulled up, Hannah was surprised at his appearance. He was so different than his son. She knew Tommy was adopted, but still, it was as if Ben and Tommy were from different species. Ben was huge, well over six feet tall and with his cowboy boots, several inches taller. He was massively built, like a wrestler, with his short-sleeved polo shirt clearly highlighting his muscular arms. This was one way that Tommy did resemble Ben, they both were muscular. Ben's hairline had inched back from his forehead while his remaining thick long hair was bunched into a pony tail. His hair which had been blond like Tommy's was now a colorless gray. A handlebar moustache of the same color gray as his hair made him look like he was a member of a barber shop quartet. Hannah didn't think he looked like an Alaskan, but she didn't really know what an Alaskan looked like. To her, he looked like an aging hippie Texan weightlifter.

Ben tightly hugged Tommy who looked like a little boy clinging to his daddy. When he let Tommy go, he riveted his attention on Hannah, inspecting her as if he were considering her for purchase. His face was a mix of emotions, but mostly controlled anger. His cheek muscles were so rigid, they looked as if they might pop through his skin. He bent down and gently hugged Hannah afraid of crushing her thin body with his massive arms.

“This is Hannah, the love of my life. And this is the greatest dad in the world - Ben.”

Neither knew what to say. They made small talk about the trip and then went into the house for dinner. Ben was clearly ill at ease, wanting to be anywhere but 76 Vista Road. The more they talked, the more uncomfortable he became.

“This is a lovely home.”

“My grandfather bought it many years ago and lived in it with my grandmother and my mother. When my grandmother died, he gave the house to my mom and dad when they got married. My dad is dead and my mom has Alzheimer’s so I’ve lived in the house alone for the last six months until three days ago. Now it’s our house.”

“Tell me about your parents.”

“My dad taught at the university and my mom was a stay-at-home mom. They were wonderful people and I miss them beyond words.”

“This house is really pretty. You’ve got it all fixed up. And you’re a great cook. The lasagna was delicious. Maybe Tommy told you that Italian food is my favorite. I should have been born Italian. You’re such a good cook, especially being Irish.”

“I didn’t think I was born Irish because I’m adopted. But recently I found out that my adopted dad was also my biological dad.”

“How did you find that out?” Ben asked casually.

Had Hannah and Tommy looked at Ben closely, they would have seen more than curiosity about Hannah’s family. They would have seen a detective carefully crafting questions to find out what Hannah knew about her birth. They would have seen a man who needed the wisdom of King Solomon to decide whether to tell his son that he had committed incest with his twin sister or allow him to live in blissful ignorance. They would have seen a man who in a fleeting moment reverted back to a day 27 years earlier when he had saved Tommy’s life. Now he

resolved to again save Tommy's life and never let him know the truth of his birth. But Hannah and Tommy were too centered on their own feelings to focus on Ben. They did not suspect that he held their lives in his hands.

"When I was cleaning out his papers from his office last month, I found a letter from a student saying that she was having his baby. She offered him the baby after it was born and they took me."

"Is that all you know?"

"Well I know the girl's name, but I'm never going to contact her. I don't want to know anymore. Anyhow she can't answer the questions I really have. Like how could my mom take a baby that was born from her husband's adultery. I don't want to get into all that now. It hurts too much. I just want to bury it."

"That's been how Tommy has felt about his biological parents. He hasn't wanted to know and I've been glad about that. Some things are best kept buried."

Hannah didn't want to continue this conversation so she said, "I've got to show you my flowers. I have a greenhouse where I grow orchids and African violets. Let me show you."

"Why doesn't Tommy show me? I want to talk to him alone."

They left Hannah to clean up while they went to the greenhouse. From the kitchen she could observe them as they yelled at each other. Although she couldn't decipher their words, she knew Ben was doing everything possible to dissuade Tommy from marrying her. After 30 minutes, they returned, both simmering with rage.

Ben said, "Hannah, you seem like a wonderful girl, but I don't want Tommy to marry you now. I'm not saying that you shouldn't get married ever. I'm just saying wait a while. You need to spend more time together before you commit to marriage. I don't know why you can't just live together. Tommy refuses to listen to me. This is the first time he's done this. He's always listened to my advice, maybe not followed it, but at least listened. Now he won't even listen. There's nothing I can do. I would like to say that I won't come to the wedding, but I can't turn my back on Tommy. He's the only person in the world I've ever loved. So I have to approve, but I want you to know that if there are any problems, I'll be there for both of you. I will always be there for you no matter what happens in your lives."

Tommy asked, "What do you think is going to happen?"

“I don’t know. But life can throw you all kinds of punches, especially since you know so little about each other. All I’m saying is that I’ll be there to help you when that happens. Just like I’ve always been.”

Hannah said, “Our life is going to be perfect. Nothing bad will happen. We love each other completely and overwhelmingly.”

Ben just looked at each of them with sadness. He shook his head back and forth, much like Kevin had done at the soccer game. There was nothing he could do to stop them.

Later in the solitude of his hotel room, Ben asked himself, “How could this have happened? Was it just bad luck? Was it fate? What was the probability of Hannah and Tommy meeting and falling in love?” He didn’t believe in God so he didn’t question divine intervention. Ben hoped then when he got home, he would stop thinking about why and start thinking about what he could do to prevent a disaster from happening in Tommy’s life. Ben was a problem solver who prided himself on his rationality and self control. He had saved Tommy’s life once and he resolved to save it again. He didn’t know if or when he would be needed, but he vowed to wield his strength to save his son again.

The next day they showed Ben around town, visiting both Tommy’s and Hannah’s schools. They went out for dinner at their favorite Italian restaurant. Ben ordered one of the most expensive bottles of wine on the menu to toast Hannah and Tommy’s future.

“I know you two love each other deeply. I’ve never been with two people who are so bonded. It’s like you’ve known each other for years. So I’d like to make a toast. Here’s to a long, happy married life.”

Silently, he said, “And never finding out that you’re twins.” They clinked glasses and drank deeply. Hannah and Tommy were elated that they had won Ben over.

Ben left the next day promising to return for the wedding on Labor Day weekend. He hugged Tommy tightly not wanting to let him go, hoping that his arms would shield him from ever finding out Hannah was his twin. Since Tommy had moved back to Lewiston, Ben had hoped that Tommy might change his mind and return to Alaska, but now he knew that would never happen. Tommy had become part of Hannah’s life in Lewiston and would live there forever. Ben hugged Hannah tightly as she sobbed. There was so much Hannah wanted to say to him, but she was afraid of him and afraid of what he might do to harm her relationship with Tommy.

After he left, Tommy told Hannah, “I’ve never seen my father like that before. That’s the first time I ever heard him yell. When we were in the greenhouse, he was so angry I thought he’d explode. He seemed to have so much anger pent up in him. It was scary. It seemed to come out of the blue. It doesn’t fit the situation. He says he’s angry because he’s worried about me and what will happen to me. You’d think I was a seven year old going out on my bike alone for the first time. No, it’s more drastic. Like he’s afraid I’m going to die. At first he said I had to choose between you or him. I don’t know why he wanted me to choose between the two people in the world I love. When I told him that I would choose you, he cried. He said he couldn’t lose me. He told me he would always stick by me no matter what. He seemed to believe that something terrible, something ominous was going to happen. He’s always looked on the bright side of things and now he’s so opposite, just thinking of bad things that might happen and he doesn’t even know what these bad things are. I was spooked when he talked like that. I don’t think I’ve ever seen my father cry before. But then in the end I was happy to see him come around and support us. As long as he’s behind us, we’ll always be happy.

Hannah, I wasn’t going to tell you this now, but I have to. It’ll make you understand my relationship with my dad. He didn’t adopt me from a stranger. He got me from his sister-in-law, my mother Lucy’s sister, who had this baby she didn’t want. He and Lucy were having lots of marital problems and they thought that maybe a baby would bring them together. My dad had just gotten out of the army, and they were living in Norfolk. She was into drugs and booze. Dad thinks she might have been bipolar. She would have these wild mood swings. When she was high, all she wanted to do was have sex and when she was low, all she wanted to do was hurt herself or someone else. He did a lot of drugs and booze then. Anyhow, they got me which was an unbelievably stupid idea since Lucy was so screwed up. Her sister was crazy to give them a baby. She must have known what was going on. Maybe she just wanted to get rid of her little bastard in the easiest way possible by giving it, ME, to her sister.”

As Tommy’s story was unveiled, Hannah couldn’t help but think of the similarities in their adoptions. Both had biological mothers who didn’t want their babies and gave them to someone to adopt. In one case, it was to the biological father, and in the other to the biological aunt and uncle. Maybe this was one of the reasons that they bonded so readily; they shared a history of adoption.

Tommy continued, “My dad was going into business with some of his army buddies. They were contracting with the military to build stuff around DC so he went up there a lot. They were planning to move there once he got the business going. Anyhow, when I was six months old he was gone for a few days, but then he came back to Norfolk early. He didn’t tell Lucy. He knew she was screwing around and I think he wanted to catch her in the act. He walked into the

apartment to find her nude, passed out on the couch, with coke all over the table. He heard me screaming in my bedroom. He found some naked guy leaning over my crib hitting my head with a baby lamp. Dad says that he vividly recalls the lamp. It had a merry go round on it and there was blood splattering around from the wire as it flew in the air. He said the creep was screaming over and over, "Shut up you little shit." The idiot was trying to make me stop from crying by hitting me. Makes a lot of sense, huh? Well, maybe if you're high on coke. There was blood all over my ear and my head. Dad pulled the guy away and hit him a few times. He even held me while he was hitting the guy. When he got him controlled, he called 911. I had stopped crying and he didn't know if I was dead or unconscious. He said that he held me as tight as could be hoping to transmit life from him to me. The 911 guys came quick to take me to the hospital. They examined me quickly and said that they thought I would live. My father said he would come to the hospital in a few minutes. He locked the door and proceeded to beat the shit out of the guy and Lucy. He wanted to be with me, but he knew he would never have a chance to retaliate for what they had done to me unless he beat them up then and there. He needed his vigilante justice. When the police came, he left for the hospital. The cops didn't charge him because they thought he'd done the right thing. Lucy and this guy were both high on coke and didn't even fight back when he beat them. He knocked out most of Lucy's teeth and broke the guy's nose and cheekbone and ruptured his spleen. You see he's such a big muscular guy. It's a miracle he didn't kill one of them. Now that I saw him get so angry the other day I can understand how he reacted when he beat them up.

When he got to the ER, he found that I had a concussion and damage to my ear. They didn't think I would die, but they were worried that I might be brain injured or deaf or both. Because I might have a concussion, they tried to keep me from going to sleep so they had my dad play with me when I was all woozy and out of it. I do have a moderate hearing loss in my left ear, the one that got beat up, but my hearing in the other ear is great so I don't think it's affected me too much. When I need to listen carefully to something, I turn my head so that I can use my good ear. Anyhow, they kept me in the hospital for a few days to make sure I didn't have brain damage. It's a miracle I'm so normal after all the beating on my head. It didn't affect me because I've always done well in school and never had any behavior problems. Hannah, you'll find out that I'm one of the most normal people in the world. I don't have any hang-ups. Some people say that makes me sorta boring, but that's me. You probably think I'm not normal because of how I screwed around with women, but I think that's normal. At least to me and a lot of other guys.

Anyhow, Dad stayed with me in the hospital and vowed never to let anyone hurt me again. That was the bond that tied him to me. He knew that if he hadn't come home when he did, that guy could have killed me or made me a vegetable. He's been my protector since then. He gets

mystical when he talks about how he felt when he held me when I was semi-conscious. He feels that he was meant to save my life. If he had come home a little later, the guy might have killed me. He's not sure there's a God, but he does believe that something or someone was at work to save me.

There were no charges filed against Dad because the guy didn't want child abuse charges filed against him. Everything was kept quiet because they both had important military connections. My father left Lucy and told her he'd kill her if she ever tried to see us. Of course, she didn't really want to see me. We've had no contact with her since then. Dad thinks both she and the guy died, but he doesn't know for a fact. He said he heard it from some old army buddies who knew both of them. He said they both deserved to die so it would be good if there was justice.

We moved to Alexandria where my dad hired a great Mexican lady, Consuela, to take care of me. She was my substitute mom for 18 years. She cooked and cleaned and baby sat whenever Dad had to be away. She was a wonderful, kind woman. My dad still keeps in contact with her and sends her a generous gift every Christmas. He even helped her out when she needed money to send her daughter to nursing school. That's the way he is. He never forgets people who've been good to him.

My dad devoted his life to me. He never missed a conference with my teachers. If I got a B in a course, he would tell me that he knew if I worked harder I would get an A, and he was usually right. He never missed any game I was in when I played little league or soccer or football. I played the trumpet in the school band and he came to every concert to hear me play even though most of the notes I hit were off-key. To him, I was the greatest in everything I did. He always praised me. He never criticized me. He was one parent, but he gave me enough love for two. I suppose that's why he's so worried about me. He has protected me since that day."

Hannah ran her finger over the area where Tommy indicated he had been hit by the lamp. She felt the irregularity in his skin and kissed the long-healed scar.

"Now his behavior makes sense. Maybe we should wait a while until he gets to know me."

"No. Absolutely not. We're getting married on September 3rd and that's that. I won't change no matter what he thinks.

"When did you find out about all this?"

“Well I always knew that my mother left and that I had an accident when I was six months old, but I didn’t know the specifics until he told me he was moving to Alaska. He said he wanted to get away from some of the horrible memories he had of Virginia. Then he told me the story. What would I have been like if he hadn’t devoted himself to me? I think I might have been screwed up. And if he hadn’t given up the drugs and booze, I probably would have been taken away and put in foster care. Or what would have happened if he killed the guy or her? God, what a terrible thought! He always watched over me to make sure I didn’t get into drugs or hang with the wrong kids. And he was the gentlest man I ever knew so it’s so hard to imagine him being violent. I know it seems incongruous when you look at him. He’s so buffed up, but he’s basically like a lamb. I’ve never seen him violent in any way with anyone. But I suppose it shows what he’s capable of if he’s angry. He’s never exploded since that day when I was a baby. Or at least, I never saw it.”

The next week was their last free time before they started teacher meetings. Hannah shared her gardening with Tommy even allowing him to water her greenhouse plants. Hannah accompanied him to practice and games whenever she was free. They shopped at Kevin’s store for hiking shoes for Hannah. They began their lives as husband and wife without the official license.

On a warm, cloudless Wednesday afternoon they went to the Appalachian Trail, a first for Hannah although she lived nearby her entire life. She was overwhelmed by the sense of wilderness although it was only 50 miles from Lewiston. They hiked for an hour as Tommy pointed out wild flowers and named trees. There were trillions of black eyed susans, columbine, and yarrow. This was his area of expertise. He knew the flora and fauna of the Blue Ridge Mountains. She knew the flora at 76 Vista Road. They saw wildlife peeking at them like a scene from a Disney movie. There were lots of Bambi on their needle-thin legs leisurely feeding or spritely prancing by. Chipmunks spied on them, while squirrels teased them before darting away.

“Isn’t this God’s country? Can you believe the quiet and the peacefulness? There’re endless trees and plants and animals. Do you feel like you’re part of nature, an infinitesimally small, but yet important, part of a big plan?”

“Yes. We’re part of God’s plan that created us to be husband and wife for eternity.”

At the end of two hours of hiking, they sat down on a rock overlooking the valley and had water and trail mix. He pointed out West Virginia in the distance and named every town in the valley.

“Do you like it Hannah? I mean hiking?”

“Yes, I honestly do. I think I could do this a lot, but only if it’s with you.”

“I so want to share my loves with you.”

They went hiking twice that week. And of course, they visited Mary Ann daily. After the third day, Tommy said, “Do you mind if I don’t go with you everyday? I have so much to do before school starts.”

“No, I don’t mind. I really like the idea of me telling her my secrets again, but they’re not really secrets, they’re just the things we do.”

They had arranged with Joe Harper to have the wedding ceremony on Saturday at 3:00. They invited friends and people from school, soccer, and the SPCA to the ceremony. Everyday they would think of more people to invite so they were constantly upping the amounts they needed to buy for the cheese, fruit, and sandwich platters, cake, cookies, and drinks they planned on serving at the reception. And Hannah would get to use the dining room that had last been used 11 years earlier for her father’s wake.

By Friday before the wedding, Tommy found places to stow his stuff. They thought that in the future they might finish off part of the basement for an office. Although there was an office in the extra bedroom, it didn’t seem big enough for Tommy and Hannah’s stuff. She wondered how the house had ever contained the three O’Brien’s possessions.

Their days always ended with them getting into Hannah’s single bed where they made gently passionate love and then curled up into their fetal ball to dream blissful dreams of their lives together.

Chapter 6

The two weeks before the wedding were the most exhilarating of Hannah and Tommy's lives. Forgotten were the secrets of Hannah's birth and her mother's affliction. Remembered only were the moments shared since August 2nd.

After a few days of teacher meetings, school began. Although this was Hannah's fifth year of teaching, she was nervous about the first day of school, in fact almost as nervous as the children. She was pleased that her love for Tommy had not lessened her passion for teaching. She was able to use her ability to compartmentalize her mental life and thought only of her students when she was within the walls of Waterview Elementary School, and only of Tommy when she was outside its walls.

For the next ten months, her life would be intimately intertwined with the lives of her 18 students. This year's group would be more challenging than previous years because of the diversity in the children's backgrounds and educational levels. One of her students, Ally, read at the sixth grade level and had already mastered the four computation processes; Ross, the son of a Russian professor, was trilingual, fluent in Russian like his father, French like his mother, and of course, English; Erdelan, a Kurd who had immigrated from Iraq two years earlier, had not fully mastered English yet; and Grant had been diagnosed as autistic and would be accompanied by an aide throughout the day. Each and every one of her students posed a test of her ability to meet their unique needs. And that challenge was what Hannah loved most about teaching; finding the key to opening the door of learning for each of her children, and for six hours a day, they were her children.

Hannah spent ten hours decorating her classroom so the children would feel welcomed as soon as they stepped over the threshold to enter the enchanted Land of School. Since it was the first time many of the children would ride a school bus, she chose the school bus as one of her classroom themes. Each child had a tag in the shape of a yellow bus with four little wheels that actually turned and was imprinted with their name and bus number.

Tommy was also excited about starting classes. He had two algebra and two geometry classes. He taught these subjects the previous year so he felt relatively comfortable presenting the content. His concern was turning his students on to math, something that was a challenge since so many kids dislike math, or even the idea of math. When he wasn't coaching his soccer team, he worked late into the evenings preparing games and grading papers. Unlike Hannah, he was unable to block her out of his mental life when he was at school. At least once an hour, he thought about what Hannah was doing at that minute. He pictured her sitting cross-legged on

the floor of her class as she enthusiastically presented letter flash cards. Sometimes while daydreaming, he would murmur "I love you," hoping that somehow the sounds would travel the distance from his school to Hannah's, and waft into her ears, warming her heart.

Both Hannah and Tommy announced their impending wedding at their first teacher meetings, and extended an open invitation to anyone who wanted to come to 76 Vista Road on Saturday, September 3rd at 3:00 to celebrate the beginning of their lives together. Tommy also invited the kids on the soccer team he coached as well as the players on his soccer team. Hannah invited her fellow volunteers at the SPCA and the Garden Club. She called friends and neighbors with invitations, and from almost everyone, received shocked reaction to her speedy romance. She had no close relatives on her mother's side, but on her dad's side she had two uncles. Sean had two older brothers who still lived in Boston where Sean had been spent his early years. Pat was a retired fireman and Ted a retired accountant. Neither could come to the wedding on such short notice, but they promised to visit later in the fall so they could meet the new addition to their family. Since Sean's death, they and their wives came to visit once a year so as to maintain ties to their shrinking family. They had children scattered across the country, but Hannah had no contact with them.

Hannah wasn't sure what to do about her mother and the wedding. She knew Tommy was opposed to having her mother at the wedding, but she felt compelled to bring the matter up. "Tommy, should we bring my mom to the wedding in a wheelchair? I know she won't know what's going on, but it will be nice to have her. I feel I should share the most important thing in my life with her. I can't leave her out of this."

As she expected, Tommy said, "Hannah, I know how you feel, but I really don't think we should have her come. It'll put a damper on things. Every time we look at her, we'll be reminded that she can't really share our happiness. It'll be depressing for everyone. Being here physically is not being here psychologically. Please, let's not have her."

Hannah agreed. She knew he was right, but she wanted to share this event with the woman who had loved her as long as she was able to love. She knew that if her mother were at the wedding, she would cry uncontrollably at how this magnificent woman had been ravaged, and she didn't want that. She wanted to have a story book wedding with fairy dust wafting through the air. Alzheimer's didn't fit with fairies, it fit with vampires and werewolves.

When they made a list of food to buy, they had no idea how much to order. They might have 20 people, or 100. To be on the safe side, they decided to order for 100. They went to Costco and ordered the biggest wedding cake available as well as trays of cookies, sandwiches, cheeses, and fruit. They asked Kelly and Kevin to pick up the food on Saturday morning. Their

best friends were going to help with the wedding they didn't support, whether they liked it or not.

When Hannah asked Kelly to help with the wedding, Kelly reminded her that as they were eating ice cream cones a mere four weeks earlier, they had made plans to go to the beach on Labor Day weekend, never imagining the possibility of Hannah getting married on that weekend. They stared into each other's eyes. Hannah blinding herself to the fear in Kelly's eyes, seeing only her own happiness reflected back to her.

The Sunday before the wedding, Hannah and Tommy drove to a mega mall in Fairfax County to buy their wedding wardrobe. Neither particularly liked shopping, viewing it as a necessity, not a form of recreation. Tommy was uninterested in clothes so he let Hannah select what she thought would be appropriate dress for her groom. This would be the last time he would shop for clothes for himself. For the rest of his life, Hannah bought Tommy's clothes, and if something didn't fit, she'd return it. And he always liked what she selected. Also for the first time, Tommy's clothes would be ironed. Tommy had never owned an iron. If something was overly wrinkled, he would take it to the cleaners or hang it in the bathroom with hot water gushing out of the shower hoping the steam would dissolve the wrinkles. After marriage, his clothes were wrinkleless. The folds in the khakis he wore to school looked like the razor-sharp creases on a general's pants.

Hannah selected a blue blazer, gray flannel slacks, a light blue shirt, and brown loafers. She even selected new underwear and socks. He would go tieless. She had him try different items on as she considered whether they looked good on him. She walked around him as he stood still as a mannequin. He felt like a Ken doll being dressed to accompany a Barbie.

Then it was Hannah's turn to select her wedding wardrobe. She modeled several different dresses for Tommy. He liked them all. "You look gorgeous in anything. In fact you look best with nothing on."

"You're absolutely no help."

When she modeled a diaphanous pink and purple flowered dress with a full skirt that reached mid-calf, she twirled and twirled to puff the dress out. She reeled with dizziness and fell into Tommy's arms. "This is perfect."

She, too, got new underwear, but for the first time sexy underwear. Her white, cotton virginal underpants didn't fit with a wedding dress. She bought high heeled silver sandals, making her almost Tommy's height.

Then they went to a jewelry store where they picked out matching thin gold wedding bands. They both had short fingers so they didn't want wide bands that would make their fingers appear stubby. There was no time to get them engraved. They thought they might do that after the wedding, but they never did because they didn't want to part with their rings for even a few minutes. Tommy bought Hannah pearl and diamond drop earrings as her wedding present. She was planning to put her hair up with flowers and these earrings would be perfect. As they drove back to Lewiston, they were euphoric. They wore their wedding rings because they felt married. They had felt married since making love that first night.

Hannah and Tommy left school early on Thursday so they could get to the courthouse for their wedding license before the 5 o'clock closing. They delighted in completing the paper work that would bring them closer to the moment when they would officially be Mr. and Mrs. Evans. Tommy proudly paid the \$30 fee with three crisp new ten dollar bills. As they left the courthouse, Tommy squeezed Hannah's hand tightly as he said, "I feel like I just bought a wife. I think thirty bucks is a pretty fair price. It's cheaper than three camels."

Kelly was taking Friday off from work to ready the house. Mrs. Gold's cleaning lady was coming to clean the house on Friday, and on Saturday, she would put out the food and then stay to clean up. Hannah was planning to use flowers from her garden for her bridal bouquet, her hair, and vases throughout the house. She wanted every room to be filled with the colors and aromas of her beloved garden.

Ben arrived Wednesday looking like he was going to a funeral instead of a wedding. He had been honored that Tommy had asked him to serve as best man. He couldn't and wouldn't say no, but officially sanctioning the wedding by being part of it was harder than he thought it would be. It was also difficult for him because he had to wear a suit jacket and slacks for the first time in many years. He had worn jeans everyday for as long as he lived in Alaska and hadn't even packed his more formal clothes when he moved from Virginia. So the first order of business after Ben's arrival was a shopping trip with Tommy to outfit Ben.

Tommy wanted to spend time alone with Ben for a few days because he knew such days would be rare in the future. So on Thursday, Ben and Tommy went hiking on the Appalachian Trail and on Friday, they shopped for Ben's new clothes, beer, wine, and soft drinks. They were away for a long time and Hannah was sure that Ben was still trying to turn Tommy into the

runaway groom, but she wasn't worried. She knew Tommy was hers forever. Nothing and no one could separate them.

Saturday was a perfect day, cloudless and mild. They arose at 6:00 eager for the day's events to unfold. They began the day with a visit to Mary Ann. Hannah hadn't been to see her for four days, ostensibly because she was busy with school and wedding preparations, but really because she felt guilty about not including her in the wedding. As they entered the room, an aide brought Mary Ann's breakfast tray. Hannah was happy to have the chance to feed her, deceiving herself that she was providing her with sustenance that only she could give.

Hannah said, "Mom, I'm getting married today. I wanted you to be there for my wedding, but it's not to be. You have loved me so much and now I want you to know that someone else is taking over your job. Someone good. Someone I love with all my heart and soul." Hannah put her arms around Mary Ann's neck, but Mary Ann did not respond.

Then Tommy took her hand and brought it to his lips for a kiss. "I'll take care of Hannah for you. I will love her forever."

They both sobbed all the way to the car. As they sat in the car staring into space, Hannah said, "Let's believe that deep down she understands and is happy for us. Let's pretend everything is perfect today. Let's block out all ugliness from our minds today and forever."

Tommy said, "We can do it for today, but Hannah, I can't promise we can do it forever." Hannah felt a cold shiver down her spine as she registered Tommy's words, and quickly discarded them.

They had met with Joe Harper on the Wednesday before the wedding, and told him that they wanted a short service and that they would make a few remarks. Neither had time to write what they were going to say, but they had been creating their wedding vows since Friday, August 2nd so their ideas were etched into their memory banks.

At 2:30 people started ringing the doorbell and by 3:00, there were over 70 people crowded into the main floor rooms. People from all aspects of Hannah and Tommy's lives filled the house - fellow teachers, members of Tommy's soccer teams, neighbors, SPCA volunteers, Garden Club members, and friends.

Hannah's principal, Janet Smith, volunteered to serve as the official photographer and snapped pictures of everyone in attendance as well as each minute of the ceremony. With her high speed digital camera, she took 60 pictures in two hours. A soccer team mate of Tommy's served as videographer, capturing the rapturous looks on Tommy and Hannah's faces. Every September 3rd for the rest of their lives, Hannah and Tommy looked at the photos and videos, reliving the most innocent day of their lives.

Exactly at 3:00, Joe Harper called everyone into the living room. He arranged Hannah and Tommy facing him as he stood with his back to the round windows in the living room's turret. Kelly stood to Hannah's left and Ben to Tommy's right. As if on cue from an unseen director, the afternoon sun shone through the windows and created a spotlight on them. The room was awash in light and warmth. The sunlight blinded the eyes of some in the audience, but no one moved. No one wanted to break the spell of the halo encircling the room.

Joe started the ceremony with the usual welcoming address... "Dearly beloved, we have come together in the presence of God to witness and bless the coming together of Thomas Jefferson Evans and Hannah Elizabeth O'Brien in holy matrimony." He spoke about the sanctity of marriage and the significance of the vows. When he reached the part of the ceremony where they declared their consent, he said, "Tommy, will you have Hannah as your wife, to live together in the covenant of marriage? Will you love her, comfort her, honor and keep her in sickness and health, forsaking all others, and be faithful to her as long as you both live?" Tommy shouted yes, yes, yes, as everyone in the room broke into laughter. Then he asked the same question of Hannah and she said yes, yes, yes in a softer, but equally emphatic voice.

When they exchanged rings, Kelly handed Hannah Tommy's ring and then Ben gave Tommy Hannah's ring. Neither Tommy nor Hannah was able to hide their quivering hands as they placed their rings on each others' hands.

Joe said, "Tommy, do you have anything you would like to say to Hannah?"

Tommy turned to look into Hannah's eyes, speaking as if they were alone. "Hannah, since I'm a math teacher, I figured out that I've known you for 29 days or 696 hours or 41,760 seconds. But I've really known you forever. I have loved you since we were both born 27 years ago. Hannah, I love you more than life itself. You were created for me to love. I will love you until the day I die and then for eternity."

By the last few words, Tommy's voice was choked and he had to fight back tears.

Hannah spoke in a surprisingly loud, clear voice. “Tommy, you came into my life like lightning and you have brightened all of the 41,760 seconds since August 2nd. I will love you with all my heart for the rest of my life and afterwards. All I want to do with my life is make you as happy as you have made me.”

To Tommy’s surprise, Hannah recited the words from Leonard Cohen’s song based on the book of Ruth. “Whither thou goest, I will go. Whither thou lodgest I will lodge. Thy people shall be my people. Whither thou goest, I will go. Whither thou goest, I will go. Whither thou goest, I will go.”

Joe ended the ceremony with “By the power vested in me by the Commonwealth of Virginia, I now pronounce you man and wife.” Tommy enveloped Hannah in his arms and dipped her as he passionately kissed her. Some of the boys and men hooted and whistled, as everyone applauded.

It was fortunate that Hannah and Tommy couldn’t examine Kelly, Kevin, and Ben’s faces during the ceremony. Kelly’s face reflected trepidation over Hannah’s future with Tommy along with wistful sadness that she might be losing her best friend, her sister. Kevin’s face blazed with anger that he couldn’t stop his friend from making what he considered a fatal mistake and a feeling that their friendship would end. Both Kelly’s and Kevin’s premonitions about their withering friendships with Hannah and Tommy would come true.

But the face that showed the most anguish was Ben’s. He looked like a drowning man unable to reach a life raft; a man who was trying to stop a dike from breaking by holding his finger in a hole; a man who saw an out-of-control truck headed for him but was paralyzed. But another stronger emotion showed on Ben’s face and in the set of his shoulders. It was iron resolve to protect Tommy, and now his wife Hannah, from the knowledge that he alone had, the knowledge that could shatter their lives.

In their talks as they walked along the Appalachian Trail on the previous Thursday, Tommy had talked about his sex life, a topic he had never previously broached to Ben. He described how when he and Hannah made love, he felt as if he had known her all his life and was somehow connected to her. He said that it was almost mystical. How could Ben tell him it wasn't mystical, it was biological? They had shared the first nine months of their lives, and their bodies knew this. But at the same time, he felt that there was indeed something mystical about how Tommy felt that his bond with Hannah went back to the day they were born. He wondered whether on some unconscious level, Tommy knew that he was Hannah's twin, but then he quickly discarded this notion as unreasonable.

After most of the guests had congratulated Hannah and Tommy, Ben donned a happy face and approached them. “Hannah, you know I was against this marriage, but now that it’s a fact, I’m behind both of you 100%. I’ll always be there if you need me.”

He enveloped Hannah, hugging her tightly as he wept. “I’m getting to be a sentimental old fool. Forgive me. I want to give you your wedding present and let’s talk about going on a great trip together at Christmas. I’ll be with you part of the time so I can get to know my daughter-in-law, and you can have the rest of the time for your honeymoon.”

Ben handed Tommy an envelope with a wedding card and a check for \$10,000. “Dad, this is unbelievable. You’re too generous.”

He showed the check to Hannah whose wide eyes took over half her face. “I’ve never seen a check for so much money. You’re so good to us Ben.”

Neither Tommy nor Hannah said, “You shouldn’t have given us such a generous present,” because they knew that he could afford to and that he wanted to share his wealth with them as a way of showing his love. And mostly, because they liked the idea of having all that money.

“I want to make sure you have everything you need to start life although you don’t need anything for this house. Let’s talk about a 10 day trip over Christmas. I know you can both get away for that long. I’ve been thinking of renting a condo in Cabo San Lucas, in fact maybe even buying one. So should we plan to go there for Christmas? Do you know where Cabo is?”

Hannah was overwhelmed by his generosity and answered in a haze, “I never heard of Cabo.”

“It’s on the tip of Baja California in Mexico. It’s a gorgeous spot. The best thing is getting a boat and going back and forth from the Sea of Cortez to the Pacific. What a feeling!”

Tommy replied, “That would be perfect. Just tell us when and where and we’ll be there. You are the greatest father ever!!”

Tommy held Hannah and Ben in a three way hug. “We’re all family now.”

After everyone left and the house was cleaned, Hannah and Tommy sat in the back yard watching the sky darken. They gently massaged each other's wedding rings.

"Well, we did it. Do you feel any different Hannah?"

"Yes, I do. I feel like I'm tied to you by an invisible umbilical cord. I'll never ever be separated from you Tommy. My heart is almost breaking with the emotions that I feel now."

"It was right to get married and not wait. There was nothing to wait for. Let's go in our house and make love as Mr. and Mrs. Evans."

Hannah and Tommy settled into a routine. Tommy left for work at 7:00 fortified with a breakfast of cereal and fruit prepared by Hannah. She perked coffee for him to take in an insulated mug as he drove to school. He had never eaten breakfast before, but Hannah made sure he was ready for a day of teaching and soccer. No matter what time Tommy had to be up, Hannah was up before him so she could have his breakfast waiting on the table.

Hannah left at 7:15, and after school visited her mother. When she got home at about 5:00, she cleaned, cooked, did laundry, and tended her plants. Tommy usually got home later because of soccer practice or after-school meetings. As soon as Tommy entered the house, he found Hannah wherever she was, and said, "Hannah, I thought of you every free second at school." And they made love wherever they were. Sometimes it was on a quickly cleared kitchen table or against the washer and dryer in the basement or on the computer chair in the office. After a few weeks, Hannah made a hide-and-seek game of their after-school lovemaking and hid in a closet in her parents' bedroom, behind the couch in the family room, in the greenhouse, or in the pantry. Then Hannah added spicy humor to their after-school adventures by wearing different clothes. Sometimes just a bra, Tommy's underwear, a winter hat and gloves, or an apron. They laughed like children playing games, even as they climaxed. On warm, moonless nights, they spread a blanket on the grass in the backyard and silently made love so as not to draw the attention of the neighbors. With each new coupling, they meshed into one persona. When their bodies merged, so did their psyches. They found that this more than physical passion was the basis of their craving for each other. This need for complete oneness.

They saw friends on the weekends if they were invited out, otherwise they did things by themselves, usually hiking in the mountains. When Kelly called to ask them over for dinner, they would go, but throughout the meal they would be distracted by the idea of going home so they could be alone. When Kevin asked them to join him for a concert, they went, but thought

only of the time when it would be over and they would be home again. They felt that they didn't need anyone except each other. Kelly and Kevin sensed their growing separation and were hurt, but helpless to do anything about it. The waning of their friendship with Hannah and Tommy was happening faster than they thought it would.

Hannah and Tommy did not use birth control because they wanted to have a baby as soon as possible, and because they didn't want anything to come between them when they became one. When at the end of October Hannah didn't get her period, she bought three home pregnancy tests. She did the first one alone and held the indicator as she peed onto it. As it turned blue, she found herself growing so excited she thought she would scream. Soon they would be parents. They would be part of the greatest of all miracles - creation of life.

When Tommy got home from school, Hannah said, "I have a surprise for you. Come into the bathroom."

"Why? Are we going to shower together?"

"No, you're going to watch me pee. Hold this." She handed him the pregnancy kit. She held the indicator as she peed over it, and they watched it turn blue.

Tommy gleefully said, "We're parents. Oh Hannah, I couldn't be happier. You, and now a baby. We are so blessed."

They hugged for a long time, each lost in their dreams of their future. Finally Hannah said, "Let's not tell anyone for a while in case something goes wrong with the pregnancy."

"Nothing will go wrong. You're healthy and the baby will be too. When should we tell my father? He's the only one I really care about telling."

"We'll see him at Thanksgiving, but I think it'll be too early. Let's announce it to him when we go to Cabo at Christmas."

Hannah waited another two weeks and then made an appointment with an obstetrician she had heard good things about from the teachers at school. Tommy accompanied Hannah to this and every subsequent appointment. He was going to be a hands-on father, like his dad had been with him. They both liked Ellen Samson as soon as they met her. She was warm, outgoing, and person-centered. She asked them about all aspects of their lives so she could know them as individuals, and not just patients. After a thorough examination and blood test, Ellen estimated

that the baby would be due about July 8th. To Tommy's expressed concern about Hannah's thinness, Ellen responded that Hannah had a wide pelvis and should have no difficulty delivering vaginally. She thought that because Hannah was in perfect health, the pregnancy should be an easy one, and she was right. Hannah had some morning nausea in the first three months, but for the next six months she had boundless energy and glowed with the patina of budding motherhood. After the appointment, they visited Mary Ann. Hannah said, "Mom, you're going to be a grandmother. I can't wait for you to hold your grandchild. Oh, if you could only understand me."

An aide who happened to be in the room when Hannah told Mary Ann about her pregnancy, suggested that they give Mary Ann a doll, saying that some Alzheimer patients showed some emotion when they held a doll, treating it like a baby. Immediately after their visit, Tommy and Hannah went to a toy store and bought a soft, cuddly doll that Mary Ann could hug. On their next visit, they presented the doll to her. Mary Ann held it in the same way she would hold an orange – with no feeling.

Every night after they made love, they would dream aloud about what their baby would be like. If it was a boy, they were sure he would be a soccer player. And if it was a girl, they were sure she would collect stuffed animals like Hannah had done as a child. They thought the boy would have black hair and the girl might have blond hair, the opposite of their parents. They talked about how unlike them, their baby would know its genetic heritage. Secretly, Hannah envisioned all the possible catastrophes that could happen with this pregnancy – the baby could die, she could die, or the baby could be born with mental or physical disabilities, or someone would kidnap the baby from the hospital nursery. With each scenario she envisioned, she prepared herself for how she would respond. She felt that she could cope with any catastrophe as long as she was prepared.

It was their first Thanksgiving together and they wanted to start a tradition of sharing their thankfulness with friends and family so they invited Ben, Kelly and her boyfriend, Brad, and other people they knew who didn't have a place to go for the holiday. Ben flew in the Tuesday before the holiday and went kayaking with Tommy on Wednesday. He seemed to have overcome any reservations about the marriage. He affectionately greeted Hannah, saying, "How's my cute, dimply daughter?" and asked her to smile so he could kiss her dimples. Hannah was starting to love Ben like a father, but never like her real father.

Hannah cooked a huge turkey and the trimmings. Kelly brought a cranberry mold, her boyfriend, and his two preteen sons. The boys were sullen until Tommy set up his computer games for them to play. Kevin came with his girlfriend of the week, a lawyer in the district

attorney's office. She was attractive and friendly. Tommy kidded Kevin that he couldn't be critical of her because she didn't have any faults. Kevin said that she couldn't cook. Tommy replied, "That's why restaurants were created." Mrs. Gold, the widow who lived next door came with her son who was visiting from New York. They also had a teacher from Hannah's school whose husband had died the previous summer and was alone for the holiday.

Hannah was nurturing everyone who needed it on this holiday when she was so thankful for the double blessings that had been bestowed on her in the past three months. She found that since she met Tommy, she had frequent dialogues with God. Her earlier conversations with God were after her father's death and after learning of her mother's Alzheimer's. Those conversations were centered on why bad things happened to good people like her. She felt she deserved good things since she was a good person. As her life settled into an uneventful routine, she spoke less and less to God. Now that she resumed their conversations, she focused on thanking Him for his blessings and asking Him what she could do to show her appreciation. He answered that she could continue being a loving, giving teacher and friend to all who needed help. Occasionally, her fear of the future would creep into her conversation. She would selfishly ask God not to visit anything bad on her and Tommy since she had her share of unhappiness already and she was such a good person. Her final plea to God in their conversations was, "Please God, shelter Tommy and me under your protecting arms."

Hannah was using her dining room table for the second time. It was a joyous feast and everyone at the table, except Brad's two sons who were too embarrassed, expressed what they were thankful for. Hannah said she was thankful for Tommy, and silently added and my baby. Tommy said he was thankful for Hannah and also silently thanked God for his baby.

After everyone left, Hannah said, "That couldn't have been sweeter. Everyone was happy, but we were the happiest especially because of our secret. I love having secrets with you. It makes me feel like we're in a gossamer ball and no one can get in. They can only see us through a hazy film. But soon our secret will be evident to the world when my belly gets big. I can't wait to see people's reactions. It'll be like when we told people we were getting married. Tommy, where were you last Thanksgiving?"

"I went to Roanoke to Kevin's family, his very dysfunctional family. Everyone argued all the time. I see where he gets his negativity from. His parents were the worst of all. His father criticized everything his mother did, and his mother called him names. Even his newly married sister and her husband bickered. I've never been in such a setting, especially on a day when everyone's supposed to be happy. My head and stomach ached for days afterwards. I can't

stand when people argue. I'm like you. I want everybody to get along and be nice to each other. I don't want to be in situations where people are confrontational. I promised myself never to have Thanksgiving with him again even if I had to spend it alone eating a TV dinner and watching the Macy's parade. Where were you?"

"With my mom and the other inmates at Shady Brook. We ate dried-out turkey and I tried to be thankful that my mother was alive, but I really wasn't. I would only tell this to you, but I really think she would be better off dead. Isn't it terrible for me to think that? But I do think she would be better off. And let's admit it, so would I. So would we. Is that selfish?"

"Yes. I feel that way too. She's not really alive. She's just a vegetable."

"I feel like I'm visiting her grave whenever I see her. I'm forgetting what a vibrant woman she was. I'm afraid that after she actually dies, I'll only have memories of her like she is now and not how she was."

"Maybe you shouldn't visit her so much. I hate to see you get upset, especially because it might affect the baby."

"Yeah, maybe you're right. Maybe I'll just see her a few times a week instead of everyday. She doesn't know I'm there anyway. I think sometimes the reason I visit her is so I can consider myself a good daughter."

"You are a good daughter, but you have to think of yourself and the baby now. So just see her occasionally and then for short periods of time. That'll make it easier for you when she dies."

A week later Kelly went to Hannah's house after school when she thought she would be alone. Hannah hadn't returned any of her phone calls for several days so she decided to drop by unannounced. Perhaps she should have called because to her surprise Tommy was home. He and Hannah were making love on the living room couch. Kelly rang the bell, and when no one answered said, "I know you're in there. Your cars are here. Are you two doing something I would like to be doing too?"

Hannah pulled her clothes on and went to the door. She knew looked disheveled, and said through the closed door, "Kelly, can you come back later. We're busy now."

Kelly laughed uproariously. “Hannah, you’re making love in the middle of the day. How wonderful! The perfect after-school snack.”

Tommy opened the door and said, “Come on in Kelly. We were just finishing up.”

The three laughed. “I never thought I would still find you like this. I guess you two will be newlyweds for a long, long time. I came here to have a girl talk with Hannah.”

“Good. I’ve got papers to grade so if you’ll excuse me”

After Tommy left, Hannah said: “So you’re pregnant.”

“What makes you think that”?

“I can see your breasts under your shirt. They’re actually visible. You’ve never had breasts before and you probably won’t have them afterwards. You also have the pregnant woman’s glow.”

Hannah threw her arms around Kelly’s neck, and said, “Oh Kelly, we are pregnant. We’re expecting in July. I didn’t want to say anything until I was sure everything was ok. I can’t tell you how happy we are. I know many people say this, but I think we have the deepest love in the world and now we’re having a baby. We couldn’t be happier. I’m so afraid something’s going to happen to demolish our lives. No one can be so happy. Something’s got to happen.” Hannah surprised herself as she articulated these words. She hadn’t realized that she felt this way until she verbalized her thoughts.

“Hannah, don’t be such a worry wart. Nothing’s going to happen. You deserve great love and a baby considering what you’ve had to go through with your father and mother. I’m glad for you and Tommy, but I’m concerned that our friendship is sorta melting away. You don’t seem to need or want anybody but Tommy. Please don’t push me away Hannah. You’re my sister. I need you.” Her eyes and voice were pleading. She took hold of Hannah’s hands and tightly squeezed them to her lips.

“Don’t be ridiculous Kelly. I still love you. I’m not pushing you away. It’s just that right now my life is Tommy and the baby. Even school has become secondary for the time being. I know that eventually things will change and I’ll go back to involving you in my life, but right now I only want Tommy. I want us to be alone for a while until we’re so strong nothing can damage our relationship.”

“Hannah, you can build your marriage but still have an outside life. It’s not good to just have each other. It’s not healthy.”

She saw that her words were alienating Hannah.

“I don’t agree with you. But don’t worry Kelly, you’ll always be my best girlfriend.”

She hugged Kelly but her body was slightly withdrawn, reflecting the message that things had changed. As Kelly left, she hid her tears knowing that the change in Hannah wasn’t temporary. She would always have just one person in her life - Tommy.

At Christmas, Hannah and Tommy met Ben at Cabo. He rented a condo, which he was considering buying. It had three bedrooms, three baths, and a view of the ocean. Hannah had never lived in such luxury – each room had tiled floors, ceiling fans, and floor to ceiling windows – and she liked it, more than she thought she would. Their days were filled with typical tourist activities, jeeping through the desert, swimming with the dolphins, snorkeling, and boating.

For the four days Ben was with them, Hannah tried to hide her pregnancy, but Ben knew something was up when she refused to eat breakfast. She, the advocate of a hearty breakfast for living a long, healthy life, was avoiding the breakfast table. Hannah wore a bikini making her newly-grown breasts apparent to Ben. When they returned to the condo for lunch, Ben said, “So you’re pregnant. When’s the baby due?”

Hannah said, “How do you know? I’m not showing yet.”

“Why else would you turn green when you look at food in the morning and why else would you grow breasts? Unless you had a breast enlargement, which I can’t imagine you doing. There’s only one other reason for bigger boobs.”

“Oh Ben, we’re due in early July. We were going to tell you tonight at dinner. We were going to make an official announcement.”

“Sorry, I jumped the gun. So I’m going to be a grandpa. I can’t wait. Do you know if it’s a boy or a girl?”

“It’s too early. Tommy doesn’t want to know, but I do so I can decorate the baby’s room in the right color. Wait. Let me get something.”

She went to a dresser drawer in her bedroom and returned with an envelope and a beautifully wrapped gift which she presented to Ben. He opened the card to find that it was a greeting of congratulations for becoming a grandparent. The gift was a silver picture frame with the words “My grandpa and me,” on the edge of the frame.

“Hey, this is great. I never get presents. This means so much to me. I can’t believe how well everything is going for you. A loving marriage and a baby. You have it all.”

And then Ben abruptly walked out of the condo, taking a long walk on the beach to worry about how this baby would turn out having parents who were siblings. When he learned that they were going to marry, he had gone on-line to research all the potential problems that might arise if they had a child, and he was overwhelmed with the many possible syndromes, deformities, and disabilities that awaited his grandchild. He would worry every day until the baby was born. And even if the baby was born without problems, he would anxiously await the appearance of each developmental milestone and sweat out every illness. Willing himself to appear composed, he returned to the condo.

Tommy said, “Hey what was that all about? Why did you leave?”

“You’ve never seen me learn that I’m going to be a grandpa. I really never thought that I’d be a grandpa someday and it has hit me hard, but in a good way, a very good way.”

After Ben returned to Alaska, Hannah and Tommy had their belated honeymoon. During the day, they laid on the beach slathered in lotion until they turned honey brown, like Hannah’s Thanksgiving turkey. As soon as they returned to the condo, they laid their wet towels on the tile floor so they could make love coated in sand, dried salty sea water, and suntan lotion. Then they took long hot showers followed by more love making. They ate late suppers in outdoor cafes at 9:00, the time they usually got ready for bed back in Lewiston. The late time, the sunbathing, and the lovemaking made them ravenously hungry. They ordered multiple courses and cleaned their plates. After dinner, they sat naked on their secluded terrace overlooking the black Pacific with Tommy drinking Corona beer and Hannah a coke, as they dreamed together about their baby.

They shopped for souvenirs, baskets, and straw hats that they would store in the basement upon their return, never to be touched again. They took endless photos and videos so they could

recall the perfection of their days together in Cabo. Every anniversary, they would look at these pictures along with those of the wedding to relive their blissful existence before they learned about the reality of their births.

Chapter 7

The school year went smoothly with both Tommy and Hannah enjoying their students and the challenges of teaching. They delighted in their shared careers, each respecting the impact the other had on their students' lives. When they discussed their shared love of teaching, they agreed that they had differing attitudes toward their professions. For Tommy, teaching was a job that he loved, but it was a job, and he might find another just as fulfilling. But to Hannah, teaching was more than a job – it was a calling, a passion. She couldn't see herself in any other job – only teaching. She and Tommy believed that she was born to teach.

Frequently, they attended events at each other's school. Tommy served as the official videographer of Hannah's class at the holiday concert as the children performed *Frosty the Snowman* and *Rudolph the Red Nose Reindeer*. Hannah joined Tommy as a chaperone at his school's homecoming dance, enthusiastically participating in all dances, especially the wing-flapping chicken dance.

With the coming of the baby, they knew they had to change bedrooms. They planned to sleep in her parents' bedroom and convert Hannah's room back to the nursery it had been 27 years earlier. Regretfully, they gave up the single bed that was their nocturnal cocoon and replaced it with a double bed, not a queen or king size, so they could continue to nestle.

Hannah and Tommy approached the redecoration of their new bedroom with a zeal based on their feeling that they were creating a hideaway. It wasn't just the place where they slept and made love, it was the place where they escaped the world. Tommy wanted to get rid of the Victorian theme. He said that the flowers and bright red made him feel like he was in a 1900's brothel, not that he had ever been in one, even in more current times. He preferred a soft, mellow ambiance. They painted the walls a comforting pale shade of green, laid light colored

wood flooring, bought a contemporary bedroom set, and hung plantation blinds on the windows. Throw rugs on the floor, piles of fluffy pillows strewn on the paisley patterned bedspread, and a soft leather settee added warmth to the room. They covered the walls with photos and drawings of the outdoors. One wall held a collection of Ansel Adams photos, most prominently his iconic photos of the moon over Yosemite, and the Snake River with the Grand Tetons in the background. Another wall featured watercolors of their Virginia mountains drawn by a Lewiston artist. The room was now stamped with Tommy and Hannah's imprint. After the room was completed, they would spend hours nestled in their bed on thick percale sheets covered with a fluffy quilted comforter.

When Hannah first felt the baby move, she thought she would explode with joy. This was confirmation that, truly, there was life within her. She was at school playing a math game with her students when she felt the flutter, like a butterfly moving its wings. She was being tickled from the inside. She stopped and stared into space willing the baby to move again. But she had to wait until later in the day when she felt a slight movement like a nudge which made her laugh aloud. The kids were working on an art project and some looked up at her quizzically. She wanted to shout, "My baby moved. It poked me." But instead she told them that she just had a funny thought. As soon as school was over, she called Tommy, but he was at a meeting about a problem student. She left a message saying that they were going to have a special show-and- tell performance that night.

For dinner, Hannah made two of Tommy's favorites, meatloaf with macaroni and cheese. Hannah had planned to tell Tommy after dinner, but she couldn't wait. As soon as she placed the food on the table, she said, "Oh Tommy, the baby moved. It actually moved. At first it felt like a flutter and then I felt a light kick. I think it's going to be a gymnast. After supper we're going to sit on the couch and wait for it to kick, even if it takes all night."

It didn't take all night. In the middle of dinner, Hannah stopped and said, "Now! It's moving." She grabbed Tommy's hand and guided it so that he could feel their baby do the flutter kick. He waited for several seconds and then he felt the faint movement. His eyes popped with the thrill of touching his child for the first time.

"It's communicating with us. It can't talk yet and it doesn't know Morse code so it's kicking and telling us I'm cooking and can't wait to get done and see my folks. I think it also likes your delicious meat loaf and mac and cheese."

"Tommy, I can't imagine being any happier than I am now. I have you, our baby, and a job I love. I am so blessed, but I'm so afraid something terrible's going to happen to change this.

No one can have such happiness and good luck. Look what happened with my family. We were such a happy family and then my father died suddenly and my mother got Alzheimer's. I can't put this feeling out of my mind that something bad is going to happen. Maybe something will be wrong with our baby."

"Don't worry so much. Our baby will be fine. We'll be happy forever."

But he, too, felt a shiver go through him as Hannah's apprehension pierced his skin.

Tommy didn't want to know the baby's gender; he wanted to be surprised. But Hannah prevailed, convincing him that she should get an ultrasound so they didn't have to call baby "It." She also wanted to decorate the nursery with gender-appropriate colors. So at 20 weeks, Hannah had an ultrasound. They waited eagerly for the pronouncement as the technician glided the sonar detector over Hannah's abdomen. "I'm pretty sure it's a girl. Congratulations. Buy pink."

They looked at their daughter's salamander form on the ultrasound and wondered how anyone could determine gender from such little information. Tommy kissed Hannah's slimy abdomen and said, "Welcome daughter. Can't wait to meet you in person. It is now She."

They had copies of the ultrasound made to adorn their refrigerator. Tommy sent a copy to Ben with a note saying that this was his granddaughter's first photo. Tommy and Hannah did not know that for the next two weeks every person Ben came into contact with was subjected to a presentation of his granddaughter's sonogram. She was famous in Fairbanks, but more for the effect she had on her grandfather who was known as being brusque and business-like in most of his dealings, and now was showing a never-before seen soft side.

For her daughter, Hannah reconstructed her nursery as her room had been 27 years earlier. She wanted her daughter to have an ideal childhood like she had. On weekends, Hannah and Tom hung wallpaper with fairy tale characters and shopped for baby furniture.

Tommy and Hannah hadn't talked about baby names, fearing that naming the baby too early would make it harder to handle if she miscarried. They were content to refer to their child as "She." But by Hannah's seventh month, they decided it was time to personalize their relationship with their daughter. They searched lists at baby name web sites. They were overwhelmed with all the information on the websites. They both agreed that they didn't want an exotic name, or a name that is more often a last name than a first name, like Bailey or

Cameron. Finally, they narrowed the choices down to Leslie, Lisa, and Laura. They both liked L names. They kept repeating Leslie Evans, Lisa Evans, and Laura Evans. They wrote the names in cursive and script. Using different fonts and colors, they typed them on the computer. Finally, they decided on Leslie Ann. Using a washable pink magic marker, Tommy wrote Leslie Ann across Hannah's abdomen. From then on, they addressed their daughter by her name.

Once they decided on the name, Hannah said, "I wonder if my parents went through this same process when they named me or if your parents did. Tommy, it's so special that we're having a biological child. Being adopted makes it more meaningful because we know how important it is to love this child with all our hearts. We know the difference Ben made in your life and Sean and Mary Ann made in mine. What would our lives have been like without them? What if our biological mothers had kept us? What a horrible thought! I think I would have been crazy if Brooke Brock raised me. She wouldn't have been able to keep me for long. I would have been put in foster care or adopted, but only after she had time to damage me. Oh why am I talking about that bitch? I can't think of her without feeling hatred well up in me and I don't want any of that feeling to penetrate the umbilical cord to our Leslie. I only want my good thoughts to reach her.

You know how all the time I read web sites about prenatal development. Well, I read something yesterday about some studies that show that fetuses are influenced by their mother's mental health and the effects can be long-term, coming out later in life. They think that even heart problems in adulthood can be attributed to the mother's mental health while the baby was in utero. I hope that Brooke's craziness doesn't affect me. It hasn't so far, but it still could. I think any affects of her craziness on my mental health were counteracted by my parents and my loving upbringing."

Tommy responded, "Well, think of the magnificent prenatal environment you're providing for Leslie. She'll be healthy in every respect. From all your reading on prenatal development, I think you're now an expert!"

As Hannah's pregnancy progressed, she had to pee once or twice at night. When she got up, Tommy sat up in bed like a child awakened in the middle of a dream. His eyes remained closed so he seemed to be sleeping in an upright position. When she returned to bed, he laid down. In the morning when she asked him if he recalled this, he said no. He slept, yet sensed her being gone. She kidded him that he was afraid that she was going to run off in the middle of the night so he had to keep tabs on her.

With a due date of July 8th, Hannah was able to work until the end of the school year. She was taking a leave the following year. She wanted to stay home with her baby, yet she didn't want to give up the job she dearly loved. Teaching was her source of inspiration, it made her feel that the world was a good place and people were, at heart, good. But at the same time she didn't want anyone else raising her baby. She knew things would work out financially if she stayed home. They didn't have a mortgage or car payments so it was just food, utilities, and everyday expenses. And they could always rely on Ben if they needed money. Tommy was insistent that she stay home and when Tommy wanted something, Hannah gave in no matter how much she might disagree. She felt that he had better judgment, and she didn't want to do anything to challenge him. They rarely disagreed and when they did, she gave in almost immediately so there would be no argument. She wanted her marriage, like the world, to be conflict-free.

The end of the school year was filled with parties for Hannah, making it easier for her not to think about the end of her teaching career, perhaps for a year or perhaps longer. In May, Kelly hosted a baby shower for Hannah at a local tearoom. Hannah didn't know what to expect as Kelly had been secretive about planning the party. Hannah was instantly enchanted as she entered the private room decorated with pink balloons and a huge baby girl congratulations sign. The tables were set with pink cloth tablecloths, flowery English china, and centerpieces of pink roses. The waitresses, wearing white, frilly short aprons, poured tea and served finger sandwiches, scones, and pastries.

After the women poured refills from their individual, caddy-covered teapots and daintily ate the food, Hannah opened the gifts wrapped with shimmering paper or in colorful gift bags. Hannah had signed up on an on-line baby registry so many of the presents were things Leslie needed to start life – baby monitors, crib sheets, bath towels, clothes, pajamas, blankets, and hundreds of disposable diapers. As she opened each gift, Hannah pictured Leslie with it. She envisioned Leslie wearing the hand-knit pink sweater; she saw her swaddled in the rubber ducky-designed, hooded bath towel; she visualized her in her crib batting her feet at the circus animals on the crib mobile. Each gift made Leslie's existence more of a reality.

Toward the end of the shower, Tommy came to take the gifts home, and eat some of the delicious sweets that Kelly had saved for him. He was glad that he was there to hear Hannah's thank you speech. Hannah was usually reticent about speaking in public, but not now. She was at ease expressing her gratitude as she personally addressed each of the women who had shared her party, relating what someday she would tell Leslie about their uniqueness.

“Leslie, I want to tell you about my friend Penny. She’s been a second grade teacher at Waterview for at least 100 years. She’s a whiz at defusing tense situations. There was a time on the playground when two boys were arguing, almost ready to fight, when she started tap dancing. Everyone broke into laughter, even the boys. What a talent! She can make us laugh and make us realize what’s important. So Leslie, every time you wear your bathrobe with ducks on it, think of Penny.”

Many of the women cried as Hannah intently looked into their eyes as she proclaimed what was special about them. Her last speech was about Kelly. She held Kelly’s hands as she looked into her eyes, ignoring everyone else in the room.

“How can I thank my best friend Kelly for making today possible? She has been like a sister to me since we met on the first day of kindergarten. I could talk about Kelly for hours and still not fully describe her goodness, her unselfishness, and her ability to love unconditionally. She is a magical nurse whose touch is worth thousands of pills. She is a magical human being who brings out the best in everyone around her. I can’t imagine life without my Kelly. I will always love you.” Hannah and Kelly embraced as they shed tears of happiness.

As the women left, they hugged Hannah and thanked her for making their lives special and commented that Leslie was one lucky baby to be getting a mother like Hannah. The last to leave was Kelly. As they hugged again, Kelly hoped that maybe today was the renewal of their close relationship, silently thanking Leslie for returning her closest friend to her. Tommy beamed with pride as he watched Hannah, knowing that one of the reasons he loved her was her ability to recognize what was good in people and make people feel good about themselves. Sometimes when he looked at her, he was sure he saw an aura about her, a glow emanating from her entire body.

The last week before school ended, the Waterview teachers made Hannah a farewell party. The principal, Janet Smith, who had served as photographer at the wedding, had collected videotaped testimonials from Hannah’s past and present students, expressing their feelings about Mrs. Evans (nee Ms. O’Brien).

Joseph said, “Miss O’Brien taught me how to count to 1,000. That was great because I could count all my pennies.” From Samantha, “Miss O’Brien showed me how to tie my shoes. Now I tie my little sister’s shoes for her. I even tie my daddy’s sneakers before he goes to the gym.” Jason beamed as he said, “Miss O’Brien always made me feel happy to be in school. She liked me even if I did something bad. One time I said something bad on the bus and

everyone was yelling at me and that made me cry. But Miss O'Brien let me go first in show-and-tell so I would forget about it and I did.”

From her current students, Heidi was most thankful for Hannah's ability to utilize her linguistic talents. "Mrs. Evans helped me write my first book. It's a chapter book about a fairy who lives in the playground at Waterview. She's going to try to get it published in a children's magazine." Andrew held an illustration he had drawn for Heidi's book, "I like Miss Evans because she got me special art material so I could draw pictures for Heidi's book." Phillip said, "I like Miss Evans because she always smiles. She never gets mad, even when I spin round and round." At the end of the video, all the children called out, "We love you Mrs. Evans."

Parents of current and past students gave Hannah presents thanking her for doing so much for their children. She would treasure each and every memento for the rest of her life. Unlike the boxes containing her father's past, the boxes containing these mementos would be opened occasionally so Hannah could relive her enriching, invigorating days as a kindergarten teacher at Waterview Elementary School.

Her last day at school was wrenchingly painful because she didn't want to say goodbye to her students or to the classroom that was her second home. She cried continuously, prompting the children to ask what was wrong. "These are tears of happiness because I am so glad I was your teacher." After the children left, she stripped the room of all decorations. She was supposed to be home at 5:00, but at 6:00 she was still trying to memorize every inch of the classroom. Tommy called, worried about where she was and wanting to know if he should come for her. She said no, she wanted to say good-bye alone. Tommy had permeated every inch of her life, except her classroom. She wanted to keep it separate from him. It was a different part of her and a world that she might never enter again.

The time between the end of school and her due date of July 8th seemed like an eternity. Hannah tried to keep busy with her flowers and crafts project, but every day seemed 100 hours long. Her ankles had swollen so she was having difficulty moving in her quick, energetic manner. At the beginning of her ninth month, they decided it was time to stop having sex, which made going to sleep harder.

Tommy was teaching summer school so he kept his cell phone on at all times, ready to leave class if he got the call that Leslie was ready to enter the world. He didn't have to leave class because while they were watching fireworks on the fourth of July, Hannah's water broke, soaking the blanket they were sitting on. Hannah thought that the vibrations of the fireworks

might have given Leslie a push to exit early. They called Ellen and asked if they should go straight to the hospital. Since Hannah wasn't having contractions yet, she told them to go home, get her things, and then meet her at the hospital. As soon as Tommy got off the phone, Hannah had her first contraction. It was a small one, but within fifteen minutes they were growing stronger, although still irregular. They got to the hospital at 11:00 and were settled into a room by 11:30. At 12:30, Hannah was given an epidural and the pain disappeared. When she watched her abdomen contract, it seemed to be someone else's. She relaxed and looked at Tommy. He was a mess. His hair was sticking up from running his hands through it, his clothes were rumpled, and his complexion was gray. He couldn't sit down. He seemed to be quivering. He hovered over Hannah or paced the floor like the expectant father he was. Uncharacteristically, he babbled on and on. "Are you feeling alright? Should I call the nurse for anything? Can I get you anything? Should we call my dad or wait until Leslie is born? Should we let Kelly know we're here?"

Hannah said, "Tommy my love. Hug me. Don't be so worried. This is going to go fine. I feel great, believe it or not, and I know the baby is going to be fine."

"I don't know what I'd do if something happened to you or the baby. You're my life."

Tears slid down his cheeks. The nurse entered and he turned away, embarrassed.

By 6:00, Hannah was ready to give birth. After three pushes, Leslie popped out at 6:15 AM on July 5. She started screaming as soon as she exited the birth canal, not waiting for a slap on her bottom. With shaking hands, Tommy cut the umbilical cord freeing Leslie from Hannah.

"That's one of the greatest experiences of my life. I just helped my daughter enter into the world." Tommy beamed, as all fears and apprehensions evaporated.

Ellen placed Leslie Ann Evans on Hannah's chest as Hannah gently stroked her. Tommy took countless pictures of Hannah and Leslie. He asked the nurse to take pictures of the three of them. Then he called Kelly, who was working in the ER, and asked her to come to the room before Leslie turned an hour old and was an old lady. Twenty minutes later Kelly was hugging Hannah and Tommy and then she held Leslie. Tommy took pictures of the three of them. The pictures from Leslie's first day would fill an album that would be followed by numerous albums documenting each phase of Leslie's life.

Hannah said, “We’re not going to have her christened or anything, but we would like you to be her godmother. I suppose that means if anything happens to us, she’s yours. We trust you to take care of her and love her. I know it’s asking a lot, but you know I feel like you’re my sister. Would you do that?”

“It would be my honor to be Leslie Ann Evans’s godmother. Does that mean I have to turn pumpkins into coaches and rags into ball gowns?”

“Hey, that would be great if you could do that. We’d all get really rich.”

Both Hannah and Tommy couldn’t stop giggling. They repeatedly counted Leslie’s fingers and toes and examined her beautiful body. She was cleaned, swaddled, and hatted, and given her first test. All systems were working fine – heart, lungs, and responses. She got a 9 Apgar rating. She couldn’t do much better than that. It was like a near perfect SAT score.

After an hour, Hannah said that she had to sleep. Although Tommy had lost a night’s sleep, he was fully alert. He felt that he had to keep watch over his daughter in the bassinet and his wife in bed. For over an hour, he stared at them as they slept peacefully. He looked at his watch. It was 10:00. It was time he called Ben even though it was just daybreak in Fairbanks. He was afraid his talking to Ben would disturb Hannah so he called from the bathroom with the door cracked so he could continue to keep an eye on his girls. After one ring, he heard Ben’s sleepy voice, say: “Has Leslie arrived?”

“Yes. Congratulations Grandpa. Leslie Ann Evans made her entrance into the world at 6:15 this morning. She weighed in at 7 pounds 3 inches and is 19 inches long. She’s beautiful. She’s perfect.”

“I can’t wait to see her. I’ll fly out in a few days. There’s some business I have to take care of tomorrow. As soon as I can get away, I’ll come see my gorgeous granddaughter. Oh Tommy, I’m so relieved everything went well.”

“Why were you so worried Dad?”

“Oh you know, I always think of the bad things that could happen, but there will be no bad things in the Evans family. I’ll make sure of that.”

When Ben arrived several days later, he delighted in Leslie and spent most of his time holding her as he babbled baby talk to her. This rugged Alaskan was transformed into a giant teddy bear as he cooed at Leslie, even singing lullabies, which he didn't realize he knew. When he held her close to his chest, his strength radiated to her and she seemed to nuzzle into him. Every time she burrowed into him, he glowed with contentment.

At first he was embarrassed to be in the room when Hannah breast fed Leslie, but he soon got used to it. Hannah's breasts had ballooned from grapefruits to cantaloupes. She gloried in breast feeding her daughter, feeling that she was giving life to her with every suck.

Ben felt the need to take care of his children and grandchild in the only way he knew, financially. He told them that he would give them a new car, a Honda SUV, as a present for Leslie. He didn't want the baby in the Jeep which he felt was unsafe. The house was long ago paid for so they had no mortgage payments and Ben was buying them the car so there would be no car payments. Hannah and Tommy thought that they could get by on Tommy's salary. Ben said, "You both know that I have a lot of money. It's all yours when I die so why wait. Let me share it with you now. I'll give you the equivalent of Hannah's salary so that you don't have to worry about money."

Ben realized that his generosity was based on more than his desire to see them free of money concerns. It was also a way that he supported his family. He was the patriarch even though he lived thousands of miles away.

Hannah and Tommy shared Leslie completely, except for breast feeding. But even then, Tommy would sit next to Hannah watching as Leslie suckled at her breast. When she got up at night to breast feed, Tommy would either sit up in bed and watch, or sit next to her on the settee with his arm around her. He encouraged Hannah to pump milk so that he could bottle feed Leslie and feel that he, too, was giving her sustenance. He shared the diapering and bathing. They loved taking her in a back pack carrier on hikes. She was a good baby, sleeping through the night after four weeks, and adjusting to everything new, even solid food, like peas. She laughed readily, especially when Tommy made faces at her. Hannah and Tommy secretly watched Leslie as she lay on her back in her crib or on the floor, kicking her legs wildly and cooing and gurgling as she explored and ingested the world with her eyes. She seemed to hold a one-sided conversation with the clock on the wall, the flowers on the table, and the picture of Humpty Dumpty above her bed.

They delighted in examining everything about her, especially comparing her features to theirs. Tommy said, "Look at that nose. It's like ours. Another flat nose. And those big black eyes are yours Hannah."

“It’s sad that Ben couldn’t do this. He never knew who you looked like. And with me, I’m sure my poor parents couldn’t articulate that I looked like my Dad. That would only add to the pain they felt about how I was conceived.”

The summer passed quickly with Hannah busy nurturing both Leslie and her flower garden. Despite the duties of a new mom, she always found time for her flowers. She was disoriented when September came and she didn’t return to school. This was the first September since the age of 5 that she wasn’t headed off to some sort of school. She missed buying school supplies or a new outfit to greet the children on opening day. On that first day of school, she felt wistfully sad when she saw the neighborhood kids lined up for the school bus. She tried not to think of what she would be doing on this day if she were in her kindergarten class. But when she looked at Leslie, she knew she had made the right decision. There would always be classes for her to teach, but there would only be one first year to witness the miracle of Leslie becoming Leslie.

They settled into a routine of Hannah being totally involved with Leslie until Tommy came home from school when he would take over. One day Tommy came home from school to find Hannah crying. “What’s the matter? Do you have post-partum depression? No, you can’t. It’s too late for that.”

“No, I don’t have post-partum depression. You read too many baby books. Can’t I just cry sometimes? Anyhow, I’m crying because I love our baby with all my heart and soul, but I realize something terrible. I love you more than Leslie. Tommy, there’s no one in the world I love more than you, not even my child. Does that make me a bad mother?”

“No. I feel the same way. I would do anything for Leslie. But you are my life.”

“If you died, I think I would want to die too.”

“We’ll both live till an old age and then we’ll arrange to die together.”

“I can’t be without you Tommy.”

“Let’s not talk of dying when we have such a full life. When we’re 90, we’ll drive off a cliff and go to heaven together. OK?”

Hannah and Tommy did not use birth control so Hannah expected that she’d get pregnant as quickly as she did with Leslie. But time elapsed with nothing happening. By March, Hannah

wanted to see Ellen to find out if there was a problem, but Tommy insisted that she wait. He was sure that eventually she would get pregnant, and he was right. After Leslie's first birthday in July, a pregnancy test verified that their hopes had come true. They were on their way to having their 10 kids. Although they were as jubilant as they had been at the news of Hannah's first pregnancy, they decided to wait a few weeks before seeing Ellen.

On a hot morning in early August, Hannah was working in her garden when she felt blood running down her legs. She ran into the house where Tommy was painting the small bedroom.

"Tommy, I'm bleeding. I'm having a miscarriage. I'm losing our baby."

Hannah could not believe the words she was uttering. Although she hadn't wanted to tell anyone about the pregnancy, she really hadn't foreseen the possibility of a miscarriage. She hadn't mentally prepared herself for this calamity, but she was calm, knowing there was nothing she could do to stop the expulsion of her baby from her body. A frazzled Tommy called Ellen who told him to bring Hannah to the office immediately. As soon as they got there, they were escorted into an examining room, bypassing the usual lengthy wait for routine visits. Ellen examined Hannah and confirmed that she was miscarrying and gave her medication to flush out the fetus.

"Hannah. This is a nonviable pregnancy, meaning that the baby probably has a genetic or chromosomal flaw and this is nature's way of taking care of it. This often happens in the early weeks of pregnancy. About 15 to 20% of pregnancies end with miscarriages so this is not unusual. I know it's easy for me to say, but don't worry. This doesn't indicate any type of problem with you or Tommy. I'm sure you'll have no trouble getting pregnant again and carrying a baby through term. You and Tommy are both healthy and I don't think this is indicative of a major problem. Wait at least three or four months, and then try again.

You know I have three kids and I had a mis between my second and third pregnancies, and it was just like this. It's just not that unusual, but that doesn't lessen how much it hurts. It's still your baby. If you're having sad feelings about the loss of the baby and I want to stress that that is entirely normal, I can give you some meds and refer you to a support group. Many women grieve for the loss of the baby just as if the baby had been full term. It's okay to feel that way."

"I don't know how I feel yet. I'm in a state of shock. I have to think about what just happened to us in the last few hours. I'll get back to you if I think I need help in handling this. Anyhow, Tommy will help me through this. He's my rock and he'll take care of me. Geez, I

never anticipated this happening. I just thought that everything would go perfectly like it did with Leslie.”

As they left, Ellen hugged both Hannah and Tommy and said, "I'm always here for you. Call if you have any concerns."

Hannah was sad about the loss of the baby, but she didn't go through a period of grieving like many women. When she felt sadness, she thought of how blessed she was to have Tommy and Leslie. A tiny black cloud tried to cover her fairy tale life, but she blew it away. She knew that so far their lives had been perfect, but she recognized that there had to be some glitches in everyone's life. She blocked out the possibility that this was more than a glitch, she wouldn't let anything mar her idyllic life. And to keep ominous thoughts from intruding into her consciousness, she concentrated on Leslie, who was always happy and smiling. How could she be depressed when Leslie slurped kisses on her cheeks and hugged her neck tightly with her plump arms as she said over and over, "Mommy, Mommy!" Or, how could she be depressed when Tommy tenderly kissed her eyes, nose, dimples, and lips before making love to her. Tommy seemed to sense when Hannah was thinking about their lost baby, nearing the threshold of sadness, and without saying anything, he would press Hannah to him and stroke her hair.

Again, it took a while for them to conceive which worried Hannah. She thought that either she or Tommy was somehow becoming infertile. It wasn't until February that Hannah learned that she was pregnant again. She and Tommy were hesitantly happy, eagerly awaiting another child, while apprehensive about another sloughing off of their child from Hannah's womb. Hannah tried not to think about another miscarriage, but whenever she was away from Leslie or Tommy, she would return to the sensation she felt of the blood dripping down her legs last August. She tried not to do any heavy housework and spent time resting, something that she had not done with Leslie or the previous baby. When she sat in a chair while Leslie napped, she thought of how rest would not help if this was a nonviable pregnancy, but she forced herself to sit quietly, preparing herself for the tragedy of another miscarriage. For three weeks after the pregnancy test, they anxiously waited for something to happen and it did. Hannah was taking Leslie for a walk, when she felt painful cramps. She hurried home and found that she was bleeding. She called Tommy at school to tell him to come home and then she called Mrs. Gold to ask her to baby-sit with Leslie. Since it would take at least 30 minutes for Tommy to get home, Mrs. Gold insisted on driving Hannah the 10 minutes to Ellen's office so Hannah called Tommy and told him to meet her there.

Ellen took Hannah into her office before Tommy's arrival. After her examination, she said,

“Hannah, this is another nonviable pregnancy. I think it might be a good idea to have genetic testing to see what’s going on since you both seem healthy.”

Just then Tommy came in and Ellen repeated the results of her examination. In response to Ellen's suggestion for genetic testing, Tommy said, “We really don’t know anything about our backgrounds since we’re both adopted.”

“Oh yes, you told me about that at your first appointment. Well then, it’s all the more reason to get tested.”

Tommy said, “Ellen, I’d like to wait. If we lose another baby, then we’ll do it. I’ve been doing some reading on this and some women just have trouble carrying.”

“Tommy, that’s not what’s going on here. I don’t have any record of you using birth control. I think you should not try to have a baby for at least six months and then try again. Hannah, I can prescribe the pill if you want.”

Tommy said, “No, we don’t want her on the pill. We’ll use condoms.”

“Hannah, how do you feel?”

“I feel the same way Tommy does. We always agree on everything.”

Ellen was surprised at this robotic answer from Hannah. She had thought that Hannah was more independent. Maybe she was wrong. She felt that she didn't understand their relationship and that they didn’t want her to understand it.

After they left the office, Hannah asked, “Tommy, are you going to use a condom? I thought you hated them.”

“No, we’re not going to use anything. I just told her that. I don’t like her telling us how to make love.”

“But then, I might get pregnant again. She said to wait six months.”

“Then you’ll get pregnant and if you miscarry, we’ll have genetic testing. But I’m not ready for that yet.”

“Are you afraid of genetic testing? I am. I’m afraid of what demons I have in my genes.”

“It’s too early to be afraid. You worry too much. Just take it easy and see what happens. I’ll take care of the worrying. I’m afraid if you become too uptight about this, you will have trouble conceiving.”

One night three weeks after Hannah’s miscarriage, Tommy decided it was time for them to make love again. Hannah said, “Tommy, maybe we should use birth control. I’m not sure we should try to have another baby so soon. Please, use a condom.”

Tommy angrily replied, “Never. We are going to do what we’ve always done. We’ve got to stop obsessing about miscarriages. We have Leslie and we will have another perfect baby. And we will continue to make love as we’ve always done. No birth control. No change in our lives. Do you understand? I will not wear a condom and you will not take the pill.”

“Well, maybe I should keep track of when I’m ovulating and then we won’t have sex then.”

“We will make love every night I feel like it except when you menstruate. Do you understand? We will not change.”

"Tommy, think of me and how I feel. I'm so scared. I feel like I don't own my body anymore. I can't control it. It can't keep a baby in. What does that mean? I don't know what we should do."

"I do. Just do what I tell you. I know this is very hard for you emotionally, but you have to be strong and if you can't be strong, let me be strong for both of us. Don't you understand that I will take care of you. You are my responsibility. I will make everything right for us if you just trust me."

Hannah murmured, "I trust you with my mind and with my life." She realized that their relationship was changing and she was moving farther from being his equal to being a baby bird under Tommy's wing. She was his to do with as he decided. Maybe there never really had

been equality in their relationship. Maybe since that first night they met, Tommy had been in control. She had slept with him because he wanted to make love a few minutes after they met. And since then, she had made love whenever he wanted, even if she didn't always want to. Her wedding vow to go wherever Tommy went meant more than just going where he went, it meant doing what he wanted her to do. They did not have the word "obey" in their wedding vows, but she did obey him so perhaps the word had been there, but unspoken.

After Hannah's first miscarriage, she had been able to keep black thoughts out of her consciousness, but not now. With this second miscarriage, Hannah was sure that there was something seriously wrong with her, Tommy, or both of them. She felt that their perfect lives were ending and something ominous was forming. It was like a big black, sooty cloud that was morphing into shapes until it looked like the devil hovering over 76 Vista Road. During the many hours of free time when she was alone with Leslie, Hannah thought about all the possible causes of her miscarriages. Perhaps, there would be something genetically wrong with all the fetuses they created and they would never be able to have another child. Or perhaps, they would have another child who would be horribly deformed and mentally defective and they would be unable to love it. It would destroy their lives and they would have to institutionalize it. She searched on line for genetic disorders and brought up rare genetic diseases that she was sure that she and Tommy carried.

She began to worry that somehow their love was tainted and there was a mark of evil in their relationship embodied in the defective fetuses they were producing. She dared not voice these thoughts to Tommy because she knew he would be angry. He might even force her to see a therapist, which she did not want to do. She didn't want to share her feelings with Tommy so she certainly didn't want to share them with a stranger.

She knew that they could find answers through genetic testing, but she needed to find answers another way. She needed to contact her birth mother. She thought that if she could find out about Brooke Brock, she would get closer to an answer of why her body was betraying her. She knew genetic testing would give answers, but she was afraid of those answers. Testing might show that she or Tommy carried genes that made it impossible to have another normal child. And then what would they do? Stop having children or have defective children or adopt?

One night after they had put Leslie to bed, Hannah said, "We need to find our birth parents. We need to find out why I'm miscarrying. I can find my birth mother. I know her name. I can find her and find out if she has any genetic flaws in her family that are causing this to happen. I have to know. And you can probably find out about your birth parents from Ben."

Tommy's face contorted in anger, "I thought we decided not to talk about this anymore. What is the matter with you Hannah? Don't you even think of contacting her! I order you never, ever to try to find her. I would never, under any circumstances, try to find my birth parents. If we have some genetic problem, we'll deal with it, but I don't want you to fuck up our lives with those people who made us. We can get genetic testing. We don't need to find them."

He put his face inches from hers, "Do you understand me?"

When she wouldn't look at him, he grabbed her chin and forced her to look into his eyes.

"Answer me."

"Yes, I won't do anything."

To control his anger, Tommy left the room to try to read the newspaper. When he returned 10 minutes later, Hannah was sitting in the same spot.

"What's the matter with you? Hannah, I hate to see you like this, but we have to get on with our lives. I'm disappointed in you. You're acting like a child. Maybe you need to get some meds to get you undepressed. Call Ellen for a prescription."

She sobbed, "I don't need meds. I need another baby."

"Hannah, stop this. You're acting nutty. Call Ellen tomorrow and tell her you want to see somebody to help you work through some of the feelings you're having. And if you don't do it, I will. You need help Hannah. I'm sorry, I yelled at you. I just don't want you to screw up our lives.

The next day Hannah talked to Ellen about her feelings and she prescribed an anti-depressant. She offered information about a support group for women who suffered miscarriages that was run by a social worker at the hospital. Hannah took the information on the group, but didn't follow up. She wasn't ready to share her feelings with strangers. Talking wasn't a solution - action was. She had to do something.

Hannah spent endless hours surfing the web for reasons behind her miscarriages. The more information she found, the more frightened she became. When she looked at herself in the mirror, she searched for signs of the poison harbored in her body. She had to find a way to

contact her biological mother without Tommy finding out. She always obeyed Tommy, but not this time. To Tommy, she seemed to be improving with the medications. She seemed happier when she was with him, but he didn't know that she filled her days with computer searches and constant re-reading of the letter from Brooke Brock for a hint, however impossible, as to why she was miscarrying.

One night after they put Leslie to sleep, Hannah said, "Tommy, I can't stand this anymore. I can't have another miscarriage. I can't stand the thought of us losing babies. I want to contact Brooke Brock and find out what in her family is causing this. I know the problem is caused by her. I know there's nothing in my father's family and we don't know who your parents are. I hate the thought of finding her because I despise her, but I have to know. This is eating me up alive. I can't think of anything else."

Hissing at her with anger and staring deep into her eyes as he tightly held her upper arms, he said, "I thought you were over this craziness. Hannah, you will not contact Brooke Brock. I forbid it. God knows what will happen if you do that. It will be worse than not knowing. If you have another mis, we'll definitely have genetic testing and that'll tell us more than talking to her. If you want to have testing now, we'll do it now. Anyhow, it could be my parents who are contributing to these misses and I will never try to find them. I'm sure our next pregnancy will be fine. Think positively. You have always been so positive. I don't know what's happened to you. You're out of control."

When he let go of her arms, he saw that he had left fingerprints from pressing so hard on her skin. He tenderly kissed her arms. "I'm sorry I hurt you. I didn't mean to hold you so tight. I thought you were through with this shit. I just don't know what to do with you. You're not acting like my sweet Hannah."

Tommy picked her up and held her on his lap, like he held Leslie, and as he stroked her hair, he said, "You've always been my little Hannah. Don't change. Don't ruin our lives. Lots of women have miscarriages and it has nothing to do with genetic problems. It's due to something wrong with their plumbing. Perhaps you should go to a specialist and find out if there's something wrong with you."

Hannah listened to his words, but knew there was nothing wrong with her. There was something wrong with the babies being created by their eggs and sperms. It was the genetic material in their eggs and sperms that held the answer.

Chapter 8

Everyday as soon as Tommy left for school, Hannah settled Leslie on the floor amid a wall of toys and googled the name Brooke Brock. And voila, there she was staring out at Hannah from the homepage for the National Association for Mental Health Professionals. As Executive Director of the organization, her picture and bio headed the listing. The vanity headshot showed a fleshy, round face with a double chin, almost like a frog's bloated throat. Her nose was incongruously small and upturned, looking like a dollop of butter on a huge pancake. She had straight blond hair cut stylishly short, neatly-applied make-up, and piercing dark eyes staring out from behind rimless glasses. Although she was smiling, she looked stern...like a government bureaucrat who was ready to say no, regardless of the question. Hannah couldn't understand what Sean had possibly seen in her. She found her unattractive, even ugly, but she might have looked differently 29 years earlier, or her looks might not have mattered, only her willingness to have sex.

Her resume listed her as 49 years old, with a B.S. and an MSW from Eastern Virginia University. She had authored a number of papers and presentations on community services for the mentally ill. Since 1995, she had served with the organization, first as Assistant Director, and last year she had been promoted to Executive Director. As she predicted to Sean in 1977, she had achieved her goals and become successful.

And there was Brooke Brock's email address beckoning Hannah to contact her. Hannah had set up a new gmail account so Tommy wouldn't learn about her internet intrigue. She practiced writing emails asking this stranger if she had given birth to her. Whenever she wrote an email, she would strike the cancel button before she was tempted to hit the send button, and then she would write another email and repeat the ritual of discarding it. The time between composing the emails and discarding them was growing shorter.

She planned to contact Brooke Brock no matter what Tommy said. She decided to use the name O'Brien to draw Brooke's attention, fearing that if she used Evans, she wouldn't know who she was and might not respond. She had to write the email in such a way that it would not embarrass Brooke if an assistant were to read it, but would give enough information for her to know who she was.

On the subject line she wrote: *Sean O'Brien's daughter*

Dear Ms. Brock.

My name is Hannah O'Brien and I was born on June 1, 1978 in Norfolk, VA. I was adopted by Sean and Mary Ann O'Brien. I would like to know if you have any information about this matter.

Her finger was poised over the send button for several seconds and then she clicked it. She gulped air as if suffocating, and whispered, "It's done. There's no turning back now. Tommy doesn't ever have to know I did this." As she spoke these words, she knew she wouldn't be able to hide this from him. She knew that eventually she would tell him.

Hannah checked her email every few hours over the next three days until she found an email from Brooke with a gmail address.

Dear Hannah:

Thank you for not asking if I'm your birth mother since my office email is not private. I am your birth mother. I do not want to see you or have any relationship with you. But I am curious. How did you find out about me? I know your father died some years back. Did he tell you before he died or did your mother tell you? If you have to contact me, use this email address.

Hannah immediately responded.

Brooke,

Let me make it clear that I do not want to have a relationship with you. I want to find out about my medical history. I have had two miscarriages recently and I want to find out if there's anything in my genetic history causing this.

Neither my father nor mother told me about you. My mother has Alzheimer's and is in a nursing home. When I was cleaning out boxes from my father's office. I found the letter you wrote to him telling him that you were pregnant.

Hannah had to wait until the next day for a reply.

Dear Hannah,

You have got to be kidding! Why did he keep that letter? He was a fool to do that. He must have wanted you to find out. Maybe he was proud of his conquest. I'll meet with you for a short time to answer your questions. Anyhow I'm curious to see how you turned out, considering how you were conceived.

Also, I will not give you any money if that's what you're after.

The thought that Hannah was after Brooke's money infuriated Hannah. She indignantly replied.

Brooke,

First let me assure you that I do not want your money! All I want is information. I'll get back to you when I can find a date to come up to your area.

Hannah had to find a weekend when she could get away without Tommy knowing where she was going. As she looked at their calendar on the refrigerator, the date jumped out at her. It was circled in red with the notation, VHSM. Tommy was taking a group of students to a math competition in Washington on Saturday, April 18th. He was leaving at 7 AM on Saturday and wouldn't return until Sunday afternoon. This was the first time he would be away from Hannah overnight and he was acting as if he were leaving a child alone for the first time. He insisted that Kelly stay with Hannah. She would serve as babysitter for both Leslie and Hannah. That would be the perfect weekend to meet Brooke, but only if Kelly agreed to be Hannah's accomplice.

The next day Hannah called Kelly to see if she was free for lunch. She wasn't, but they made plans for the following day. Kelly came to the house and played with Leslie as Hannah made salads for them.

"What's up? You look like you're plotting something. I haven't seen you like this in ages. In fact, since high school."

"Oh Kelly, you won't believe this. I contacted my birth mother. Remember the slutty Brooke Brock. She's a psychiatric social worker who's the director of the National Association for Mental Health Professionals in Washington. I want to meet with her. I have to find out what's causing me to miscarry. I can't have Tommy find out about this. You know he'd be furious. We've never argued about anything except this. He absolutely refuses to let me contact her. I have to do this alone. I've never deceived him, but I have to now. I'll go crazy if I don't see her. I've been obsessing about the possibility that she gave me something terrible when she conceived me. She poisoned my babies. It's all I think about. Kelly, you've got to help me."

"Hannah, I've told you over and over, you will learn a lot more from genetic testing than asking questions about your mother's background. Anyhow, you won't know about Tommy's parents. I don't know why you want to meet with this bitch. And I hate the thought of you hiding something from Tommy. He's so controlling and you do everything he wants. I'm afraid if he finds out I helped you, he won't let you see me anymore."

"He can't stop me from seeing you. Don't be silly. Remember on April 18th you're staying with me and Leslie because he's going to take a bunch of kids to DC. I want to see her then and have you stay with Leslie. I'll just be away for a few hours on Saturday. You have to do this for me. I can't go on like this."

"If Tommy finds out, he'll go ballistic."

“Don’t worry about Tommy. He won’t find out, at least when I tell him a few weeks afterward. You have to do this for me. You’re the only one I can depend on. I don’t know where else to turn for help. These miscarriages are ripping me up. I need to find out why they’re happening. I feel that there’s something else going on and I don’t know what.”

Kelly felt good to be needed by Hannah, but she was uncertain if Hannah should meet Brooke Brock without Tommy’s knowledge. But she knew that Hannah would never be satisfied until she met her birth mother. Genetic testing wouldn’t answer Hannah’s questions, only Brooke Brock would.

“Ok. We’ll do it, but we have to plan this carefully or there’ll be hell to pay.”

Hannah hugged Kelly. They heard Leslie saying, “Huga, huga.” She had her arms up so that she could be included in a group hug. They picked her up and the three giggled as they nestled together.

After Kelly left, Hannah sent Brooke an email saying that she could meet her on April 18th at 11:00, and asked where they should meet. Brooke replied that they could meet at her home, but Hannah refused. She wanted to meet in a public place; she was afraid to be alone with Brooke, not knowing what she might say or do. She still had occasional fantasies of killing her. Now that she knew what her face looked like, her fantasies were focused on mutilating her face, especially that nose. They agreed to meet for lunch at a Marriott near the highway that Hannah took to get to the Washington area. Much of Hannah's free time was spent rehearsing various dialogues for leading Brooke to disclose deep dark genetic secrets. She also mentally role played telling her what she thought of her for enticing her father into her web of evil.

As the time of the weekend meeting neared, Hannah became visibly nervous, biting her lip frequently, drumming her fingers on surfaces, and frequenting the bathroom with diarrhea. Tommy thought it was because this would be the first time they would be apart since they met. He tried to comfort her by saying that she would be safe with Kelly and he would keep in touch by phone. She did nothing to dispel his misconception.

Before Tommy left at 7:00 on the morning that would change Hannah and Tommy’s life irrevocably, he kissed Hannah and Leslie goodbye and said that he would call whenever he had a free minute. She told him to call on her cell since she and Kelly planned to spend most of the day out. Kelly came over at 7:30. Hannah gave her detailed instructions about what to do with Leslie, what to feed her, where to take her for a morning walk, and when to put her down for a nap. She tightly hugged and kissed Leslie and then kissed Kelly. “You are the best friend in

the world. I can't thank you enough for doing this for me.” As Hannah handed Leslie over, Kelly had a premonition that something terrible was going to happen, but when Leslie snuggled her face into Kelly’s neck, her concerns evaporated.

As Hannah got into her car, Kelly sat on the porch swing holding Leslie as they waved goodbye. Leslie repeated, “Bye, bye Momma. Wuv you.” When Hannah looked at Leslie, she knew she was doing the right thing. She was convinced that the only way to create another miracle like Leslie was to see Brooke.

Hannah arrived at the Marriott at 10:40. So far she surprised herself by her calmness. She wasn’t shaking or sweating. She entered the lobby and didn’t see Brooke so she went to the bathroom to freshen up and practice relaxation exercises. As she approached the bathroom door, she began to disintegrate. Every bone in her body quivered, every muscle contracted, and every nerve ending was poised to fire. The calm before the storm ended; the storm began to rage.

When Hannah came out, she saw Brooke entering the revolving door. She was heavier than she appeared in the photo, probably 50 pounds overweight and short even with her three inch pumps. She was dressed like the professional women of Washington, wearing an expensive, tailored navy pant suit and white silk blouse with pearls encircling her goiterous neck. Although it was Saturday, she was dressed as if she were going to the office. Had she gotten dressed up for her meeting with Hannah? Or, was she always formal when she went out in public? Was there no casual side to Brooke? Did she always cloak herself in a uniform of self importance?

Hannah approached her and spoke in a voice that sounded surprisingly steady, “I'm Hannah O'Brien. Are you Brooke?”

“Yes. Do you mind if I don’t hug you or touch you. I’m not a touchy feely person.”

“Not at all. I have no desire to touch you. As I told you in my email, I only want information.”

Brooke exuded a coldness that formed icicles around Hannah's heart. Evil was usually associated with fire and hell, but in this case it was associated with frigidity. They found an isolated corner in the lobby and sat facing each other, not speaking for a few minutes. Small talk about the weather or Hannah's drive up was irrelevant. Brooke looked Hannah up and down.

"You look a little like I remember your father – skinny and a mop of black hair. But I think you look more like me. You have my flat nose. You wouldn't know that now since I had a nose job. I hated my nose. It made me look like I had some black blood in my past, and maybe I do. Who knows? You like this nose better?"

"Brooke, it's very nice, but I don't really care about your nose."

Hannah felt anger boiling up in her and she had to force herself to refrain from screaming, "I don't give a shit about your fucking nose."

"I'm a big advocate for cosmetic surgery. I had a face lift which I think makes me look 10 years younger. I'm planning to have some liposuction and a tummy tuck."

Hannah remained silent, unbelieving that Brooke was babbling on about plastic surgery when she wanted to tell her about her medical history.

"Tell me what happened to your father. How did he die?"

"He had a heart attack. He was sitting at his desk working."

"You sure he wasn't fucking a student when he keeled over? Too much testosterone mighta done him in. I'm sure he continued screwing students until the day he died. "

Hannah felt as if she had been punched in the chest. She could hardly breathe, but quickly recovered as she hissed, "Oh don't be so cruel. Try to be civil. How could you talk like that?"

Hannah spoke to Brooke as if she were a mother chastising her daughter for using bad language. Hannah knew that Brooke was baiting her; she was saying things to anger her. The hatred she felt for Brooke was mounting with each second and she feared that she might spew forth endless profanities, or even slap her. The sight of this woman filled her with the urge to physically attack her, something she had never felt before. Hannah was fixated on her surgically-created nose. She had this desire to repeatedly smash it down.

"Hey, I'm not cruel and I certainly wasn't cruel back then. I could have destroyed your father's career if I had told the people at the university what he had done to me. No, I was good to him and to Mary Ann, although they probably didn't deserve it. They despised me, I know.

Especially Sean. When I talked to him on the phone, he was so hateful, telling me that I trapped him, that I got pregnant on purpose. Who in their right mind would want to get pregnant on purpose? Except you, of course. I forgot why you came up here - to get a normal pregnancy so you can pass on your beloved father's genes, and of course my genes too. Never forget that."

Hannah could see the venom in Brooke's eyes. She was retaliating against Sean through Hannah. She would destroy Hannah's view of a loving father and replace it with the image of the oversexed predator. She hated Hannah as much as Hannah hated her. Mother and daughter were bonding with mutual loathing.

To diffuse the growing animosity between the two women, Brooke asked: "Whatever happened to Mary Ann?"

"My mother has Alzheimer and is in a nursing home."

"Did he have other children that you know about?"

"No, just me."

"What about you?"

"There's not much to tell. I was a kindergarten teacher and now I'm a stay-at-home mom of a little girl. My husband is a high school teacher. I've had two nonviable pregnancies that may be due to genetic problems. That's why I want to know about your medical history."

"You obviously didn't inherit my drive to succeed professionally. You're just a kindergarten teacher." As she spoke the words *kindergarten teacher*, she coated them with derision.

"You look like a teacher with your earthiness. The Birkenstock type. And you even picked a husband without much drive. Just two simple people. Sean probably wouldn't have been satisfied with either of you if he were alive. He only respected education and high achievement. Maybe it's good that he didn't see you not live up to his expectations."

How could Brooke know how Sean would view Hannah and Tommy? She didn't really know Sean. Hannah knew Sean. She had lived with him for 16 years. Or maybe, she didn't really know Sean. Maybe he would have been disappointed that Hannah had not selected a more prestigious profession or a higher achieving husband. But then she thought that she and

Tommy were not working at McDonald's; they were in a respectable profession. This attack on their jobs was just another attempt by Brooke to denigrate anything to do with Sean and his family.

Hannah's train of thought was interrupted as Brooke abruptly stood up and said, "Let's get some lunch. I'm starving. I didn't eat breakfast." Hannah was relieved to end their first verbal skirmish. It was apparent to Hannah that the reason Brooke came to this meeting with Hannah was to wage war against Sean, and so far she had won the first round. For the past 29 years, she plotted revenge against Sean even though he was dead. Now was her chance to get back at him through Hannah. She would skewer him as Hannah helplessly saw her image of Sean burn to a crisp.

They entered the restaurant and asked to be seated at a table in the back. To the casual observer, they looked like two strangers meeting for business, perhaps a realtor and a home buyer. No one would suspect that they were a mother and a daughter meeting for the first time. They certainly looked nothing alike, Brooke fat and blond and Hannah skinny and dark. Their one similar characteristic - their noses - had been transformed on Brooke from a wide flat nose to a pinched turned up nose, thanks to the marvels of plastic surgery. There was no emotion evident in either woman. However, if an observer looked into their similar dark eyes, the rage and mutual hatred smoldering close to the surface would be apparent.

Hannah started talking so she could get her information and escape from this woman's poisonous presence. She didn't know how long she could control herself. She feared she might erupt with profanity and violence. If she did, then Brooke would really win the war.

"Brooke, as I told you in my email, I've had two miscarriages. I've been told that the fetuses had chromosomal or genetic flaws. I want to know if there's something in your medical history that could account for this. Obviously, I can't ask my father. He did have a heart attack at 56 which shows heart disease, which may account for some genetic problems. He had two older brothers who are both alive and well at 73 and 76 and they each had normal kids."

"So you don't think he had tainted genes. Of course, you wouldn't think anything could be wrong with your beloved father. You worshiped him, didn't you?"

"Yes. He was a loving father. I don't want to talk about him. Let's talk about your medical history."

“I don’t think there’s anything in my family that might account for your miscarriages. I have addiction in my family. My sister was a drug addict and alcoholic. She was murdered 24 years ago. My father was an alcoholic, but he lived to 72. My mother is alive and healthy at 85. There’s some cancer in the family – uncles and an aunt. I’ve been healthy. I have no high blood pressure or high cholesterol even though I’m slightly overweight.”

Hannah almost burst into giggles when this grossly overweight woman referred to herself as being slightly overweight. From the way she hesitated at the end of her recitation, Hannah felt that there was more.

“Is there anything else?”

“Yes, I’ve had a history of depression. This is strictly confidential. No one in my present life knows this, but I suppose you’re entitled to know since you caused it. After I had you, I totally fell apart. I tried to kill myself and had to be institutionalized. I was heavily medicated and gradually got better. It took me a year to recover, but I still take a lot of meds to make sure I don’t fall apart again. After that, I had my tubes tied so I wouldn’t have any more children. Finally, I finished my degree at Eastern. Then I got my master’s and worked as a psychiatric social worker. I worked for the Virginia Department of Human Services and then went to the professional association. I love my job. I’m well respected by people all over the country. Thanks to your son of a bitch father I have no desire for sex. I’m asexual and quite happy. My life is my work.”

“Why do you blame my father?”

“Why? Don’t be so naïve. Because I was crazy when I was in his class and he took advantage of me and screwed me and got me pregnant.”

“From the letter I got the impression that it was your fault that you got pregnant.”

“He should have used a condom.”

“Didn’t you have an abortion when you were 15?”

“Yes. I was raped by my date when I went to my first high school dance. But I got over that with lots of counseling. My problems were caused by your father.”

Hannah realized this was a battle she couldn't win so she changed the subject. She didn't want to give Brooke any more opportunities to vent her hatred toward Sean.

“Did your sister have other kids?”

“No.”

“Do you have other siblings?”

“A gay brother. Maybe the dead babies had gay genes.”

Hannah looked at her with horror, shocked at her cruelty. Her hatred of this woman was escalating with each word she uttered.

“Can I ask you some questions about the adoption?”

“Sure.”

“Do you know how my mother reacted to the adoption?”

“Well let’s see, Sean called me after he got the letter. He was furious that I wouldn’t get an abortion. He told me he would arrange it and come and get me and take me to it. The more he pushed, the madder I got. I refused to talk to him. He kept calling until my father told him he’d contact the university if he didn’t stop calling. Your mother called back a few days later and said he showed her the letter. She said they wanted the baby. Your poor mother was the one who had to handle all the shit your father gave her. My family hired a lawyer to handle the adoption, but your father ended up paying for everything. He was shocked when he learned that I was having twins.”

“What?” Hannah was sure she misheard Brooke.

“Didn’t you know?”

“No, I didn’t. What was the other baby?”

“It’s funny. I had twins born on two different days. I had a boy on May 31st at 11:45 and then I had you a few minutes after midnight on June 1st. “

“Excuse me for a minute.”

Hannah raced to the bathroom and had the dry heaves, unable to vomit because she had no food in her stomach. Then she splashed cold water on her face. She stared at herself in the mirror and knew that this was the biggest challenge of her life. She couldn't panic; she couldn't let Brooke know that she was married to her twin brother. She had to quell the hysteria roiling inside her. She wanted to run out of the hotel, away from this monster who had created Tommy and her, but she knew she had to return to the table and give the most important performance of her life. If she let Brooke know about Tommy, this heartless woman would expose them. She would crush their lives in her fat hands as she gleefully laughed. She would get the ultimate revenge against Sean.

Hannah carefully walked back to the table, concentrating on her balance and the placement of her feet. Fortunately, Brooke did not look at her; she was preoccupied with eating.

“Well I'm sure I shocked the hell out of you. Can you imagine how I felt when I found out I was having twins? I got doubly depressed and doubly angry at your father. I stayed in bed for the last three months of the pregnancy, not for health reasons. I was fine, but I was in the depths of depression. I couldn't go any lower. My mother watched me all the time. She thought I was going to kill myself or you and your brother and I probably would have if she hadn't been so good at guarding me. Two days before I was due to have a caesarian, I went into labor. Your brother was born first on May 31st right before midnight and you were born on June 1st a few minutes later. After the birth, I really went crazy. I was out of touch with reality, although I was in touch enough to sign over the babies to your parents and my sister. I never saw you or Thomas. That's your brother's name. I was sedated and when I came to, you were out of me. I wanted you out of me. I kept yelling. Take them out or I'll kill them. I was pretty nuts at that point in my life.

I didn't get to see your mother or father. They worked everything out with the lawyer and my parents. I don't know why they decided to take you and not your brother. Maybe they flipped a coin. I think my sister's husband wanted a boy. He was this macho guy, but really he was the only nice person in the whole lot. My sister was crazier than me. She was bipolar. She left him and the baby before Tommy was one. She moved to Las Vegas and was into drugs big time. She was shot when she was at some drug orgy. The guy who killed her was never caught. The police thought it had something to do with her not paying her bills. My parents sent me some of the articles from the Las Vegas papers, but I didn't really want to know anything about what happened. In a way she was trying to kill herself with the drugs anyway. My parents went

out to claim her body and buried her back home. I didn't want anything to do with her after she screwed up her life. I also didn't want people to know that my sister was a junkie.

I come from a dysfunctional family. I have depression, my sister was bipolar and an addict, and my brother is a very, very gay man. When he cross dresses, he's better looking than me, even though he's really, really fat. He asked to borrow some of my clothes, but they were too small for him. Anyhow, none of this would explain your miscarriages. It's later on that you'll have to worry about your kids. They'll probably be nuts or sexually screwed up."

The waitress came to refill Brooke's coffee cup so they stopped talking. After Brooke finished her BLT and fries, she ordered apple pie for dessert. Hannah hadn't touched her chef's salad. She wanted to drink her coffee, but she knew her hands would shake violently spilling the coffee. She couldn't show any emotion, she couldn't let Brooke know what she now knew.

"Aren't you going to eat anything?"

"No, my stomach's upset. This is quite traumatic as you can imagine. It's not everyday you find out you have a twin."

"I brought this for you. It's your birth certificate. I don't know what you'll do with it, but I don't want it anymore. I don't even know why I kept it. I was thinking of mailing Thomas's to Ben, but I don't know where he is now. The last I heard they were living in northern Virginia. I'll probably just throw it out. Do you want to know your twin's name? Maybe you can contact him and see what's happening with his kids if he has any. Maybe his wife is having the same problems. That would be funny."

"No. I don't want to contact him."

"I don't blame you. He probably doesn't know about you either. It's best to keep your twin a secret. No one needs to know. As a professional, I would say it's best to bury traumatizing secrets that can destroy your life. I know that's quite different from the prevailing view in my field that it's best to dig up every little thing in your past and spend megabucks for therapy and meds to cope with what's basically uncopeable. I do not agree with that. There are some things that are best kept buried."

Hannah had heard those last words – "there are some things that are best kept buried" before. Ben had said almost the same exact thing when she had told him that she was Sean's biological child, the result of an affair with Brooke. Maybe she needed to believe this too so

she could go on living. Maybe it would be the motto of the Brock-O'Brien-Evans family: some things are best kept buried.

"You know now that I look at you closely, I don't think you really look that much like your dad. At least how I remember him. I only knew him from our post-class fucks and our three encounters at the motel. But then I didn't look at his face. I sucked his dick. Boy, it was huge. I remember how red it was - it looked like a huge sausage. I always felt like I was eating it when I sucked him. Once I joked about putting mustard on it and he liked the idea. I think if he some, he'd have let me do it. God, he was oversexed. I probably was then too. All through his class, my pussy was dripping. As soon as he ended his lecture, I would ask him if I could talk to him. If other students asked to see him, he would tell them to call for an appointment. But he'd tell me to come to his office. He never turned me down. All the other kids knew why I didn't have to call for an appointment. I had an open appointment as long as I kept my legs open. Ha-ha. I'd either give him a quick blow job or if there was time, we'd have a full fuck. It's funny, I remember he'd check his calendar before we started to see if he could squeeze me in for a full fuck or if he'd only time for a quicky blow job. He was very careful to lock the door, take the phone off the hook, and shut the blinds. I knew he'd done this many times before. All the girls in class lusted for him and I think he screwed half of them, but only at their appointments. He had quite a reputation on campus. Everyone knew you could get an A in his class by just shutting his door and opening his fly. I suppose if I could get a stud like your dad today, I might consider having sex again."

Hannah was quaking with anger and disgust at this woman who gave birth to her. She had to stop her vitriol. "Why are you telling me these things? He's my father. You know I loved him. Why do you want to hurt me like this? I'm your daughter. Doesn't that mean anything to you? You're not human. And you're in a helping profession. What a joke! You're not a professional, you're a professional animal."

Hannah had never spoken like this to anyone before. This woman was bringing out an ugliness in Hannah that she didn't know she harbored. She hated the woman that Brooke was transforming her into, but she hated Brooke more. This was the reason Hannah had tried to shield herself from evil and create a cocoon of good things. She knew that exposing herself to evil would cause her to become evil and it was happening now in a restaurant at a Marriott Hotel.

Brooke glared at Hannah with the same hatred she felt toward Sean, but at the same time it was apparent that she was enjoying every second of her lurid description of their relationship knowing how much it disgusted Hannah. "I don't think of you as my daughter. You're only

Sean's daughter even though I did contribute a little genetic material to you. And I certainly wouldn't have picked someone like you to be my daughter. You're like a simpleton, just wanting to make babies.

Your father took advantage of me and sent me into a world of madness. It was through the help of meds and a great psychiatrist that I brought myself back to normalcy."

"Maybe you were the one who lured him into sex. You asked for it, didn't you? You were a crazy bitch who wanted to trap a professor?"

"Let's not argue about something in the past you can't possibly know anything about. We both wanted it and I didn't have to trap him, believe me. He started grabbing me the second the door closed. He worshiped my cunt."

Brooke reveled in the destructive words she hurled at Hannah. If she could have, she would have painted graphic pictures of their sexual antics. Hannah knew she had to stop her or she would become hysterical.

"Oh shut up. I despise you, you hideous bitch."

"You don't want to hear about your perfect father. And the stories he told me about your mother. He said that she was a cold bitch who wouldn't let him in, but she screwed other men and even women, but not him."

"Why are you making all this up? I know it's not true. Why are you torturing me?"

"Because I know you loved him and worshiped him and you shouldn't. He was like all other men, after only one thing. I'm surprised he didn't go after you. He was so oversexed, he probably would have fucked you if he could have. Well, maybe he did and that's why you loved him so. Maybe those good night kisses turned into more. But maybe not. You probably weren't pretty enough for him."

She stared at this woman who was defiling her father's and mother's memory and making up lies and destroying her life. Hannah thought that Brooke couldn't be viler, but she had hit rock bottom when she accused Sean of sexually abusing his own daughter. She had to leave or she would make a scene. She'd attack Brooke. She might even throw coffee at her or stab her with a knife.

Hannah grabbed the birth certificate and rushed out of the restaurant. She sat in her car, trying to gain a modicum of calm so that she could drive home. Unless she gained some self control, she wouldn't be able to drive and she had to get to the safety of her home. As Hannah sat in her car doing deep breathing exercises, Brooke waddled out of the hotel and got into her BMW. Brooke was yards away from Hannah, but Hannah was sure that Brooke was smiling, gloating over her final victory over Sean. She had destroyed Hannah's respect for her father. She had won. As she drove past Hannah's car, without looking at Hannah, she waved.

Hannah had visions of starting her car and crashing into Brooke and killing her so no one would ever learn the secrets she kept. She wanted the world to be rid of this evil animal who didn't deserve to live. She had to gain control of herself; she had to stop fantasizing. She had to put as much distance between herself and Brooke as possible.

Hannah started her car, but she was afraid that she couldn't handle the simple act of driving. She refused to think about how she would face Tommy. She couldn't hide the change in herself from Tommy. He would see it the second his eyes landed on her. She drove slowly, concentrating on her speed and every car that came near her. She feared she might be pulled over by a cop for driving too slowly on the interstate, thinking she might be drunk at 1:00 in the afternoon.

She couldn't process what Brooke had told her. She stored away the stories about her father and mother's sex lives. She knew they were lies created to hurt Hannah as only Brooke could hurt her. But she couldn't put the thoughts about Tommy away. Tommy was her brother. Tommy was her twin. Tommy was her husband. The word incest kept forcing itself to her lips. She screamed aloud over and over. "I'm fucking my brother."

Brooke had confirmed what Hannah had unconsciously suspected, but never broached to Tommy or herself. She knew they had the same nose and teeth. Not a coincidence. She knew their birthdays were one day apart. She knew that her biological mother had a sister with a bad marriage. She knew that Tommy's parents had a bad marriage. She knew that when she slept with Tommy, she was back in the womb with him. She knew that when Tommy was in her, they were connected in a way that no one else in the world was connected. It was as if their souls merged. She knew from the first night they met. She also realized that Tommy knew. That was why he didn't want her to contact Brooke.

She had turned off her phone when she was with Brooke. Now that it was on, it rang three times. It was Tommy. She couldn't talk to him. She couldn't trust herself to sound minimally rational.

When she got to Lewiston, she drove directly to Shady Grove Nursing Home to confront her mother. She barely whispered, "Why didn't you tell me I had a twin? You knew. You knew about Tommy. How can I live with my brother as my husband? My life is destroyed. Can you believe that I'm having an incestuous relationship? Incest – that's the vilest word in the world. I don't know if I'll be back for a while. I have to figure out what we're going to do. But I know one thing. I can't live without Tommy, no matter who he is. I'll die if we're separated. And we have to protect our Leslie. No one can know or they'll take our baby away."

Hannah stayed only three minutes, too frazzled to pay any attention to Mary Ann. When Hannah got home, Kelly was frantic. "Tommy knows you weren't here. He called you on your cell a bunch of times and when you didn't answer, he called here. I made the mistake of picking up. He asked for you and I said that you were at the store and would be back soon. He asked why you weren't answering your cell. I told him something was wrong with it. He said – 'Kelly, you're lying. Where is she?' I said, 'I can't tell you.' He's coming home early. He should be here any minute."

"Kelly, take Leslie to your place until I call you. I have to talk to him alone. Maybe Leslie should stay with you tonight. She can sleep in bed with you. Just put pillows on one side. I'll get some clothes for her."

"What did you find out?"

"There's nothing in her medical history that would cause miscarriages. That woman is pure evil. She said the worst things about my father. I can't even repeat the things she said about him. Tommy'll be furious at me. Go before Tommy gets here. I'll call you when I can. Take care of my precious darling."

After Kelly left, Hannah went upstairs to Leslie's room to wait. She sat in the rocker, slowly rocking back and forth. There was a haze in her mind preventing her from thinking. It was as if a thick fog coated her brain. She was shocked into awareness when she heard the front door slam. The fog was cleared and she knew what she had to say.

“Where are you Hannah?” Tommy screamed on the top of his lungs. Tommy went from room to room screaming “Where were you?” The last room he went into was Leslie’s where he found Hannah sitting in muted light with the blinds drawn and the princess night light on. Tommy looked like a mad man. He was out of control. His face was crimson. His body was tensed as if he were going to strike out at Hannah.

She cringed in fear. Her heart was speeding as if she were being attacked by a wild animal. Adrenaline was putting her body in a state of heightened alert. She was shaking violently as if she were having a seizure.

“I went to see Brooke Brock.”

Chapter 9

“Why didn’t you listen to me?” Tommy screamed as he roughly pulled her out of the rocker, shaking her like a rag doll.

“I had to know if I had genetic problems.” Hannah cringed as she pulled away from him until she was trapped against Leslie’s crib.

“Do you?”

“No, we don’t. Tommy, our perfect world is destroyed. We lived a fairy tale and now we’re in a nightmare.”

Hannah took her birth certificate from her pocket and handed it to Tommy. “This is my birth certificate. Look at the box that says if there were multiple births. It’s checked She told me she had twins. She gave the girl to Mary Ann and Sean O’Brien and she gave the boy to her sister and her husband Ben Evans.”

A look of horror overtook Tommy's face, draining blood from every pore. He was choking, unable to talk. Finally, he belched out, "That explains why my dad didn't want us to get married. He knew. He knew from that first phone call. He didn't want to tell us because he saw how happy I was, but he didn't want us to commit the ultimate sin. The act that's banned in every society. The ultimate taboo. Fucking your sister. But he let me do it. He let me fuck, fuck, fuck my sister."

"You never fucked me. You made love to me."

"When I think of incest, I think of people who know they're related. We didn't know what we were doing. It shouldn't count. We were strangers when we met. How were we to know? We didn't do anything wrong. Our love isn't wrong. I can't think of us as committing incest. It just doesn't apply to us. Now I understand why I fell in love with you at first sight. There was something mystical when I saw you. I felt like I knew you before I was alive and I did. Is it possible that somehow I knew who you were unconsciously? I was drawn to you from the first second I saw you. I thought it was love at first sight, but it was something else. And now I understand why I feel safest when I lay in a fetal position at night. That's how we slept for nine months. I ignored our same flat noses and our fang teeth. Well, maybe I didn't. I thought it was odd that we shared these unusual features, but I never suspected. That's not true. Oh, God I'm lying. I did think we might be twins, but I thought it was too preposterous. I put the possibility out of my mind. I did think of it though, probably more than once. Did you?"

"Not consciously, but I think I knew. When you told me about your adoption I considered the possibility, but I said no, it couldn't be. Tommy, we can't let this separate us. If I can't be with you, I want to die. This has made me love you even more because now I love you as my brother and my husband. I feel I've loved you since our conception."

"We can never let anyone know this otherwise we might go to jail. People would look at us like we're perverts. Us perverts. Yeah. You – Miss Goody Two Shoes kindergarten teacher fucking her brother. Impossible. And our Leslie would be taken away from us. She'd be marked with our sin, but it's not a sin. It's love. Maybe it's the greatest love because it's brotherly love and husband love."

Tommy's posture was changing, from anger to determination. "We have to be in control at all times. You can't tell Kelly even if she is your best friend. No one can know. Do you think Brooke knows?"

“Definitely not. I used my maiden name so she would know who I was and she'd answer my email. She doesn't want anything to do with me. She's evil. She made up all these awful things about my father. She made him out to be an oversexed monster who took advantage of her. I know it's not true. She went on and on describing his penis. Oh how disgusting. She even accused my father of sexually abusing me. She just wanted to think of every possible way to hurt me and destroy my image of my father. She was getting back at Sean by hurting me.

My naïve view that all people are basically good has been demolished by that animal. I've never met anyone more despicable. I'm so ashamed that we come from her. If she ever tried to find out us, I'd kill her. I'm a non-violent person, but I wouldn't hesitate to murder that woman if she told people about us. I have no idea of how I would do it, but I'd do it. Maybe we should kill her so that no one can ever prove that we're twins.”

“Don't talk like that. That's stupid. We're not killing anybody. Hannah, nothing can separate us. We need to make a pact that if anything happens, we'll kill ourselves.”

“Yes, yes. I can't live without you. Your dad would get Leslie, but he couldn't raise her. We'd have to ask him to let Kelly raise her. I already asked her to raise her if anything happened to us when I asked her to be Leslie's godmother.”

“I'm going to get a gun.”

“Why? I thought you didn't want to kill her.”

“Not for her, for us. How the hell are we going to kill ourselves? Stick our heads in our electric oven?”

“But a gun. Do you know how to use one?”

“Yes. I hunted in Alaska. I know how to use a rifle. We're not going to use it, but it would be here if we needed it. I have to know we have a way of escaping if we're found out.”

“We'll drive off a mountain or something, but no gun. Not with a child in the house. It would make it too easy for us to kill ourselves. Please, no. I will not have it.”

“Ok. Don't worry about it. But Hannah, we can't have any more kids. We were so lucky with Leslie. The two miscarriages were because we're twins. We can't ever do any genetic testing.”

“Oh Tommy, I wanted lots of kids.”

“I’ll get a vasectomy, but meanwhile I’ll use condoms.”

“Tommy, we can’t ever do anything to let the world know about this. If one of us needs a transplant or something like that, we can’t give out any of our genetic information. People might think we’re cruel not to donate something to each other or to Leslie, but we can’t. We have to hide what’s in our genes. We could always say that we won’t do that for religious reasons, like we’re Jehovah’s Witnesses or something.”

Suddenly Hannah began to sob. She ran into their bedroom and threw herself on the bed. Her sobbing started softly and then it grew into ear-splitting wails of desperation. She was lost in a world of grief. Tommy sat on the bed trying to comfort her. Suddenly she jumped on him, attacking him like a cat. The rage she felt at what she had learned that day was directed at Tommy. She bit him as she ripped at his clothes.

The violence and lust of Sean and Brooke’s fucking in Sean’s office were being reenacted in Sean’s former bedroom. The decor of the room may have changed, but the memory of Sean’s infidelity was present. At first Tommy tried to fight off Hannah, but then he was pulled down into the spiral. They both came with screams, but they didn’t stop. They continued for hours of angry, fierce passion doing things to each other that they didn’t know people did. When they were totally spent, they sobbed. Tommy was covered with bite marks and Hannah’s face and body were smeared with semen.

Tommy angrily looked into Hannah’s eyes and hissed, “That was fucking. That was incest. Don’t you ever make me do that again. We can only make love like we always have. Peaceful and loving, not violent and angry like this. This isn’t us.”

“I couldn’t help it. I just didn’t know how to get rid of the rage I felt. I know you felt it too. Don’t blame me. You were just as involved as me. We did it because we’re petrified. That was fear and anger and hatred of Brooke and everything else that’s going on in us. We hurt each other so no one else could hurt us. I don’t want to do that again either. But maybe when we’re threatened again, we’ll do it. I can’t say we’ll never do it. It released so much emotion. I feel calmer now. Maybe because I’m totally exhausted.”

“It didn’t solve any problems. It just let us release our frustration so that we could think rationally and start to solve our problems. Hannah, let’s wash ourselves and cleanse ourselves from the evil that’s in us, that’s in everybody. We thought we were good and pure, but we’re not. But let’s try to be. Let’s get rid of every trace of Brooke in us.”

Hannah got in the bathtub first and Tommy washed her much like he washed Leslie. He tenderly soaped her body and then rinsed the soap off with a washcloth. Throughout the bath Hannah lay back with her eyes shut and hummed as the pain of the day melted away. Hannah ran fresh water and Tommy got in the tub so Hannah could wash him as he had washed her. He, too, shut his eyes and let the warm, soapy water cleanse him. Although they washed each other's genitals, they were not aroused. They were brother and sister, not husband and wife.

After they finished, Hannah used Leslie's baby lotion to soothe their wounds. She gently massaged the lotion onto the bite marks she had left on Tommy's chest, buttocks, and stomach. She had bitten his neck so he would have to wear a turtle neck for a few days to cover the bright red welts. She massaged his penis with the lotion, but he did not get erect. Then Tommy massaged the lotion onto Hannah's face and body. The soothing of her body also soothed her mind.

Hannah said, "Let's eat something now. We need to think straight and plan what we're going to do. We can't do things impulsively. We have to be in control at all times. We can't ever let our guard down."

Tommy, I will listen to you and do whatever you tell me, but you have to admit it was a good thing I saw Brooke and found out. What would have happened if we had another miscarriage and we had genetic testing and we found out that way? Ellen would have to tell the authorities and our lives would be demolished. We would lose our Leslie. No, believe it or not, this worked out for the best."

"Maybe you're right, but don't do anything without telling me ever again. Please. Don't ever lie to me again. Our lives are at stake now. We need to see my dad. He has to know that we know and he has to plan with us for how we'll hide."

"What do you mean hide?"

"We can't live here anymore. We have to get away. You know that as well as I do. We can't take the risk of anybody ever finding out. Maybe we should move to Alaska. No one cares about your past there."

"Nobody will ever find out here. We'll be careful."

“We know. Everything is changed. We know and we'll think about it every time we look at each other or touch each other. We will live in constant fear that we'll be found out. We have to leave.”

“This is crazy. You can't ask me to leave this house. You know how much I love this house. It's been my home since I was a baby. I want to live here until I die. This house is me. I'll never leave here. Never. You can't make me.”

“I'm telling you that we have to leave this house to survive. We have to leave our bedroom where we fucked like animals. I can't continue to sleep on that bed because I will think of Brooke and Sean and how they created us. And you have to leave your mother and Kelly and all the places and people you love.

You know how I hated Alaska, but I'll go back there if it's safe and we can keep our secret hidden. Hannah, this has been our Garden of Eden. We've been Adam and Eve, but we sinned big time and now we have to leave.”

“We didn't sin because we didn't know we were twins. We're sinning now because we know. But we'll always live in sin because we can't be apart.

How can I leave my mother? She has no one. Maybe we can take her with us.”

“No, only the three of us will go.”

“Kelly has been my best friend since kindergarten. How can I just leave her? I need to tell her.”

Tommy took Hannah's face in his hands and stared into her eyes. “This is an order you will not disobey. You will never, ever tell Kelly. I know she loves you, but she may not when she finds out I'm your brother. She'll hate me and later you for what we do. She'll imagine screwing her brother and think of us in the same way. Anyone who found out about us would imagine fucking their brother or sister or even their mother and father or worst of all fucking their own kid. Don't you understand the seriousness of this? This is a matter of life and death. We need complete secrecy.”

“Tommy, we'll never be happy again. What kind of life will we have?”

“We’ll be happy again. Maybe not for some years, but eventually we’ll be happy as long as we have the three of us and we keep our secret.”

They had been sitting on the couch in the family room. The room was dimly lit with one table lamp on lowest wattage. “Tommy, I’m going to put on all the lights. I want to look at you again. Remember when I looked at you after our first night together. Now I have to look at you again, not as the man I love, but as my brother. My brother. My brother. I can’t conceive of that.”

Hannah put on all the lights in the room and carefully examined Tommy. “We both have Brooke’s nose, but you wouldn’t know it now because she had a nose job. You look a bit like her. She has straight, blond hair like you and the same round face with high cheekbones. She’s short and fat. You’re certainly not fat, you’re muscular. You’re short like her. She may have been built like you when she was young. But I don’t see any resemblance between you and my father. Although my build and coloring are like his, I don’t really look like him either. What does it matter who we look like? It’s what’s in our DNA that counts. That’s invisible to the eye.”

They examined each other’s faces. Hannah touched Tommy’s eyes, nose, cheeks, and mouth as he touched hers. She opened his mouth and felt his eye teeth and he did the same.

“Let’s not make love without a condom. I’ll get some at the store later. Hopefully, I can get a vasectomy in the next few weeks.”

“Oh Tommy, we’ll never have any more children. I wanted us to have a lot of kids and now we can’t.”

Suddenly Hannah was struck by a crying seizure. She sobbed violently as she licked the salty tears streaming down her face. As if the crying were contagious, Tommy, too, sobbed. They hugged, mingling their tears together. Each tried to comfort the other, but to no avail. After a while Tommy said, “We were both adopted. Maybe we were meant to adopt a bunch of kids.”

“Yeah, maybe after we figure out our future, we can adopt a little boy. I want to have a little Tommy.”

“I think we should go see my dad this week. He has always helped me when I needed help and I need it more than ever now. He knew this day would come and now it’s here. I’m going to tell everyone at school that my dad’s sick and we have to go to Alaska immediately.”

He went to the phone and called his dad. His hands were shaking causing him to hit the wrong numbers. When he finally got through, he found that Ben was unavailable so he left a message.

“What about my mother? I can’t leave her here?”

“We can’t take her. She doesn’t even know that you visit. Hannah, face it, she’s a vegetable and it doesn’t matter that you visit her. You can come back and visit every few months if it’ll make you feel better. But you have to accept that she’s brain dead and doesn’t know anything. Accept it.”

“You’re asking me to leave everything I’ve loved for my entire life and go off to Alaska?”

“Look at what I’m asking of myself. I love this house, this town, my job, but I know I have to give it up to move to a place I hate. I was unhappy in Alaska, but hopefully I won’t be with you and Leslie there. We’ll start a new life there.”

“What will you do?”

“I can teach or work for my dad. I’ll get through the depressing winters by loving you and seeing our beautiful daughter grow. I want to live forever sleeping with you as we did in that woman’s womb. Maybe we knew she was rejecting us from the moment we were conceived and that is why we became so close from that moment on. Somehow her hatred was a toxic chemical that was conveyed to us along with the nutrients in the umbilical cord. We knew then that she didn’t want us. Maybe if we hadn’t had each other for support, we might have gotten her hatred. We might have turned out like her. We were saved by each other. We had each other then and we have each other now and we’ll have each other forever. I want us to die together and be buried together. We probably couldn’t get an undertaker to do it. Maybe we could be cremated and have our ashes mixed together. When Leslie’s an adult, we’ll tell her what we want. I wonder if we’ll ever tell Leslie. Maybe when we’re old, but then what will she think of us. No, we’ll probably never tell her. We’ll want her to love us as we are. If we tell her, she’ll think of us as perverts or sinners even though she’ll recall us as good people. No, we can’t tell anyone.”

“Tommy, Brooke told me your biological mother moved to Las Vegas and was into drugs and was murdered. Do you think your dad knew that?”

“Maybe, but even if he knew, he wouldn't tell me. I'm not surprised that she was murdered. She lived such a sleazy life. Thank God, my father got away from her. You know, she's my aunt. And your aunt too. God, this is all so crazy. It's like I'm my own grandpa. We're like West Virginia hillbillies.”

“Tommy, is moving to Alaska our self-inflicted punishment for our sin?”

“Maybe.”

“But we're not guilty.”

“We weren't guilty when we didn't know, but we know now and we are guilty and we have to live with that.”

Tommy grabbed at the phone as soon as it rang. “Hello, Dad. Where are you?... Hey, we need to talk privately. Can anyone hear you? Ok...Go outside. We know...We know about us...Hannah went to see Brooke Brock...She wanted to find out why she was having miscarriages...No, she doesn't know that we're married...She told her that she had a twin and gave her her birth certificate...Dad, we have to get away...Someone may find out...I don't know how, but I can't live here with that fear. I'd be paranoid thinking that everyone was trying to find out about us and our secret...No, I don't think I'll change my mind when I calm down. I think we want to move to Alaska if it's okay with you...I knew you'd say that.

Tommy cried as he said, “Daddy, you saved my life when I was a baby. Now you have to save my life and Hannah's and Leslie's...I love you too Daddy...We want to fly out this week and talk to you about it...I don't know, tomorrow maybe or Tuesday...I'm going to call into school and say that you had a heart attack and we're going out to see you...We're both crazy right now, but we're trying to calm down so we can talk to people. We have to slow down and think carefully and not do anything to give ourselves away. I don't want to live the rest of my life like that. In Alaska nobody knows us and nobody cares. You could screw your mother and father and no one would care... I'm going to get a vasectomy. We can't risk having any more kids or any more miscarriages...Now we understand why you were so against us getting married...Thank you for not telling us...If you had, we would have been destroyed. We wouldn't have survived. We might have killed ourselves...I know I'm talking crazy, but if

we're found out now, we'll kill ourselves. I'm serious. You'll have you take Leslie legally and then have Kelly raise her here...Or maybe you could raise her. You could hire a lady like Consuela to help you, the way she helped you when I was little. The only problem is your age. If we tell Kelly, she'll tell the world. Not on purpose, but she has a big mouth. I don't think she could look at us the same way anymore. She might react with disgust thinking of herself sleeping with her brother...Do you think of us with disgust?...Do you think of us as dirty?...Do you think we're animals?" Then Tommy started to cry convulsively. "I'll call you back when I have the plane information."

"I'm going upstairs to get the birth certificate and burn it. We can't risk anyone ever finding it."

When he came downstairs, he had the birth certificate and the letter from Brooke Brock. "Look at the birth certificate. There's no name listed for the father. I thought they would have put Sean's name down. Unless he said that he didn't want it listed because then he couldn't adopt since he was already our father legally. Only Mary Ann would be involved in the adoption. I suppose it made it easier not to give his name, and it kept his identity secret which he wanted.

We have to destroy the letter. We can't leave any evidence that someone might find that would lead to discovering that she's our mother. I really think I would murder her, but then we would be found out in a murder investigation. I think I could be a murderer if I knew it would keep our secret buried. I don't think her life has any value and I think the world would be a much better place without her."

He took a match from the fireplace mantel and lit the birth certificate and threw it into the fireplace and watched as it turned to ashes. Then he handed the letter to Hannah and said, "Burn it." She struck the match and lit the letter laced with verbal anthrax.

"We burned the evidence and the only other birth certificates are in the court house in Norfolk. No one will ever think of finding them there." Then Tommy broke into tears again. "I can't keep crying like this."

"You can when we're alone. We have to mourn for our previous lives. We'll never be happy again. Never."

"No, we can be happy someplace else if we start over. I promise you. I will do everything I can to build a new life, a good life, for us."

“Can you imagine if our situation became public? We’d be pariahs. We’d be in the news. We’d be derided by Jerry Springer and made fun of by Jay Leno. We’d be the brunt of jokes. The paparazzi would be after us. We’d have no privacy. Our pictures would be on the front page of the Inquirer. Everyone checking out in the supermarket would be smirking at us. Our lives would be destroyed forever. And so would our precious Leslie’s.”

“Hannah, we have to be careful with what we say in front of Leslie. Even though she’s 21 months, she’s smart and picks up on whatever we say. We can never talk about any of this in front of her. Maybe that’ll help us heal and cover up our secret. We can only talk about this when we whisper in bed, and even then we have to be careful. We’ll try to get away alone so we can talk freely, but it’ll be harder and harder when we move. But we’ll need to talk and let off steam so we’ll have to plan when we talk and never just blurt out our feelings about this.”

“Now I understand how my mother and father kept the secret of my birth. They couldn’t talk about it in front of me and soon it became buried and they stopped thinking about it. And it became like a shadow in the background. Maybe that’s what’ll happen with us. I hope so.”

They talked until 5:00 AM when Tommy said, “I don’t want to go to sleep today. I don’t think I could sleep. Let’s go up to the mountains and then call Kelly at 8:00 and get Leslie.”

They dressed warmly and drove to their favorite spot to await sunrise. They sat in their favorite position with Hannah between Tommy’s legs and his arms around her neck. The sky was streaked with pink and purple clouds awaiting the sun’s arrival from behind the mountains. When the sun arrived, it instantly cloaked the world with light. “Remember, the first time we went to the mountains and the sun was setting and I told you that was the end of your life without Tommy. Now this is the beginning of our new life knowing that we love each other as husband and wife and brother and sister. Now we know why no one could love each other more than we do.”

“Tommy, I can’t stop thinking of how much I despise that woman. She looked at me with such hatred and all she could do was make up things about my, er I mean our, father. I don’t think I’ll ever get used to thinking of my dad as your dad. Ben’s your only dad.”

“Maybe because I never met either of them, but I can’t think of them as my parents. Sean will always be just your father and Brooke will be a slut who seduced him to create a child, you. I don’t figure myself in any of this. I don’t know why. I think of myself as hatching from an egg and Ben there to get me. Stupid when you think I’m a well-educated teacher who took lots of biology classes.”

Hannah focused back on Brooke, “She just kept saying uglier and uglier things and describing in detail what they did together. She enjoyed seeing me suffer. She’s a psychiatric social worker and she’s a nut. She’s a sadist. Maybe she’s not a nut, maybe she’s just evil. What kind of person would say things like she did? And why would she want to hurt me like that? You would think if she was a person with feelings, she would feel sorry for me. I’m still her daughter. Isn’t it ironic that I was worried about us inheriting a medical condition that might damage us? Instead I found something I never expected - a defect of the soul. I found evil. I thank God that neither of us inherited that. I know our pure, angelic Leslie never got it. Maybe the two miscarriages were caused by the infection of evil in the fetuses. It was best they weren’t born. And we were so lucky to have our Leslie. Somehow she was missed by the infection. Thank God.”

“Do you really think evil like that was inherited or was it caused by her environment?”

“Nothing in her environment could have caused that. No. She was born with a rotten core that nothing can destroy, except death. I hate to think of how many people’s lives she’s damaged professionally. She used her professional background as support for her belief that people should not dig up their past, but let it smolder and eat away at them. God, with that view she must have screwed up so many people she worked with. I can’t believe that she’s the director of such an important organization. But maybe she’s smart enough not to share her views. She only shared them with me because we both have secrets that can destroy each other. She doesn’t know that she holds the key to completely annihilating me. She does know that I hold the key to telling the world about her past and to her that would be just as bad as our secret. I think if she wouldn’t get tarnished by this mess, she would make it public just to hurt us. She hates us because we’re half Sean’s. It’s hard to understand such burning hatred. It has eaten at her and will probably destroy her someday. I’m not sure how. Maybe she’ll kill herself. I hope so. That would solve some of our problems.

You know, it’s strange, but she doesn’t see me as her child – only as Sean’s child. If she recognized me as her daughter, she would have to acknowledge that there has to be some maternal love and she certainly has none of that. I’ve always wondered how mothers could kill their own children and now that I’ve met Brooke I understand. She had such hatred in her that if she could have killed me to hurt Sean she would have. Did you ever hear of Medea from Greek mythology?”

Tommy indicated that he hadn’t.

“She killed her children to punish her husband because he left her. Obviously, women killing their kids is not a new thing. For some women, there is no such thing as maternal love. It’s their genetic flaw.”

“Try to put her out of your mind Hannah. I know that’s almost impossible, but you can’t keep thinking about her. We have to make plans for our future. Plans for us to live a good life no matter what.”

At 7:30 Hannah called Kelly and told her that they would be picking up Leslie in 30 minutes. When they got to Kelly’s apartment, they found Leslie practicing taking off and putting on her shoes. When they entered the apartment, Leslie ran to Tommy calling, “My daddy.” Tommy picked her up and threw her in the air. “How’s my sweetheart? I missed you so much.” He kissed her as she squealed with delight. Hannah put her arms out for her, but Leslie shook her head no. She was her daddy’s girl. Hannah gave her a peck on the cheek.

Kelly said, “This is the best little girl in the world. She ate her whole supper of chicken nuggets and fruit and mashed potatoes, and then we read books and she went to bed at 7:30 without a peep. Of course, she slept through the night but I didn’t because I was afraid that I’d turn over on her or she’d break through the barricade of chairs and pillows I put up on the other side of the bed. What a magnificent child you guys have! I want one just like her.”

Tommy, Leslie, and Hannah had a group hug with Kelly. “Thanks for being such a wonderful friend and keeping Leslie. We needed to talk and work things out.”

They sat at Kelly’s kitchen table drinking coffee and beginning to sow lies. As they talked, Tommy and Leslie played a color matching game with fruit loops. They each had a group of loops and when one put out a loop of a particular color, the other had to match it. Leslie loved the game and could play it for hours.

“So what did your mother tell you? Do you have genetic problems?”

“No, although there’s lot of mental illness and addiction.”

“What was she like?”

“Cruel, disgusting, a savage. You think of a word for an unfeeling bitch and it applies to her. All she wanted to talk about was how she and my father screwed. She went into lurid detail that made me sick. Then she told me that she had a breakdown after I was born. Of course, she

blamed my father and me for that. I can't tell you what a ghastly experience it was. She kept saying cruel things as if she delighted in hurting me and my image of my dad. She would be the last person in the world I would want for my mother."

"Well maybe you should have listened to Tommy and not gone."

"What made me mad was that she lied to me. It was the first argument of our marriage and I hope the last. I don't want her ever to lie to me again. Also, I had a feeling that Brooke would be like this. I knew that Hannah would get hurt and she did.

Kelly, on top of everything else, my dad had a heart attack yesterday. We're flying up to Fairbanks on Tuesday. I think he'll be ok, but I have to see for myself. You know what he means to me. Next to my girls, he's the most important person in my life."

"Wow, what a time to go when all this other shit – oops, I mean stuff is happening in your lives."

"Kelly, will you take care of the cats? Check on them and feed them and also my plants. I think we'll be back on Sunday so there shouldn't be too much to do."

"Tommy, why don't you go alone? Hannah doesn't have to go."

"I want to go. I feel like Ben is my father, not just a father-in-law."

"Do you two feel alright? I know you were up all night, but you both look like shit. Oops, there I go again. I have to remember not to say those kinds of words around this kid. She repeats everything. Did you get any sleep at all?"

"Not much and Tommy was on the phone with his dad a lot. We'll go to sleep as soon as Leslie goes down for her nap later. Thanks again. You're the best friend in the world."

On the way home they discussed their first lie to the world. "I think we did really well. I don't think Kelly suspected anything."

"I think so too, but it won't always be so easy. The hard part is when we tell people we're moving to Alaska. Everyone knows how much we love it here. People will be quizzing us to see if there's another reason for us to be moving."

It was a blindingly clear day so Hannah and Tommy went home to get Leslie's papoose for another hike. They were both exhausted, but thought they might be invigorated by the spring

day with the budding trees and early flowers and the warmth of the sun as it baked their skin. They refused to think that such days would shortly be memories.

As Tommy carried Leslie in the papoose on his back, he said, “I keep thinking about Leslie’s future. She’s ok now, but who knows what’s in her future. She could get something like leukemia and we couldn’t give her bone marrow or if she needed a new kidney we couldn’t give it to her. Oh my beautiful Leslie, stay healthy. I sure hope she doesn’t get the crazy genes from her grandmother and great aunt. Don’t you wish there was a way to examine our genes and see what’s in our future?”

“No. That would be terrible. If we do have a dreaded disease programmed in our genes, we would live our lives just thinking about it instead of living our lives to the fullest. We would just be waiting for the disease to hit. As the saying goes, ignorance is bliss.”

“I think it would be the opposite. I’d live fully because I know that I would be dying early.”

“Do you think someday Leslie will find out about us through genetic testing which will probably be routine when she’s an adult?”

“By that time we’ll be old and no one will care. Who’s going to arrest an 80 year old man for screwing his sister?”

“Don’t say that, especially in front of Leslie. Remember, we have to be careful.”

Hannah looked at Leslie who was pre-occupied with the flowers that Tommy had picked for her. She hadn’t been listening, or Hannah hoped she hadn’t been listening.

They went home, had lunch, and took a nap when Leslie did. They spent the rest of the day doing household chores. When they went to bed, it was as if nothing had happened. They buried their past a few inches below consciousness. Tommy had gone to the drug store to get condoms, which he reluctantly used. They knew they had to make love. It was like getting on a bike after a fall. Their fall was a fall from innocence. They approached each other carefully because they were still in pain from their earlier encounter. Their gentle physical lovemaking did not reflect what was going on in their confused minds. As they came, they clung to each other for life.

“I’ll get a vasectomy as soon as possible so we don’t have to use these damn things. Maybe you should get your tubes tied.”

“We don’t need to do both. I’m not ready for that. Tommy, did you feel any different this time? Did it matter that we know we’re brother and sister?”

“Yes. It felt different. Better in a way. Because I know that nothing will ever part us. We’re fused forever. But all the time I was aware of the change in our relationship. That I was no longer just making love to my wife, but also to my sister. I couldn’t get that out of my mind. But it didn’t make me feel like we were doing something wrong. Well, maybe it did. Maybe it added a sense of danger. I don’t know and I don’t care. It doesn’t matter. How about you?”

“It was different but I’m not sure how. Did I feel that we were doing something wrong? I don’t think so, but it doesn’t matter because we’re going to do it forever.”

Chapter 10

The trip to Fairbanks seemed to go on for days. The Evans’s flew to Seattle, Anchorage, and finally Fairbanks. They had purchased a seat for Leslie and had taken her car seat, but she refused to sit in it so Tommy, and occasionally Hannah, had to hold her throughout the trip. The pressure changes from flying hurt Leslie’s ears, and this happy child who rarely cried, constantly whined until she fell into short, fitful, sweaty sleeps. When she woke, she resumed her droning whine. Her body was in a perpetual state of tension reflecting what she sensed in her parents' bodies. Even gentle back rubbing and cooing words couldn't allay her nameless fears.

On the final leg to Fairbanks, the situation was exacerbated when a man sitting in the row behind them rudely asked them why they couldn't shut their child up. Tommy felt a surge of anger which he feared would erupt into physical violence, but with self-talk he was able to rein in his feelings, ignoring the man. When the man complained about Leslie's whining to the

stewardess, she politely reprimanded him for not understanding the difficulties of air travel with a small child. Hannah had been quiet throughout the trip letting Tommy provide most of the care for Leslie. She only drank water, abstaining from eating anything. Tommy was too preoccupied with Leslie to think about Hannah's closure of herself from the outside world.

By the time they arrived in Fairbanks, they were weak from exhaustion and disoriented by the time change. When they disembarked from the plane, the cold pierced their flimsy winter coats. Now Leslie cried because of the cold. It had been 70 degrees and sunny when they left Virginia, and in Fairbanks it was a biting 35 with light snow. The snow that had been on the ground since October was gray and sooty, awaiting warm days for final melting. Just a few days ago, they had luxuriated in the warmth and spring flora of Virginia, now they were shivering in the winter death throes of Alaska.

As soon as Tommy and Hannah saw Ben, they collapsed into his massive arms, desperately seeking comfort and protection, wanting him to take control of their lives. Putting on an airy manner and a jovial voice, Ben said, "Hey kids. You're here and I'm going to help you through this. I'm here to protect you. Tommy, you know I've protected you since you were a baby, and now I'm going to do the same for the three of you. I won't let anyone or anything hurt my family." His words didn't match his face which was racked with pain and worry, but Tommy and Hannah only heard his words offering succor and a safe haven.

After a short wait for their luggage, they piled into Ben's Subaru and drove to his house. Although the car heater was blasting on high, Tommy and Hannah's feet were numb with cold which inched up from their toes pushing out any body heat through the tops of their heads.

Hannah asked, "Is it possible that my eyeballs could be frozen?"

Tommy responded. "Yes, it's possible because mine are frozen in place. I can only look straight ahead."

Ben laughed, and said, "In a few days, you won't even notice the cold. Anyhow, cold is good for eyeballs. It keeps them from crying. And before you know it, it'll be warm. The weather changes suddenly here. Next time you come, it'll be lovely."

Tommy and Hannah looked at each other. "The next time you come." These were the dreaded words. They couldn't escape the reality that they were moving to this awful place.

The snow had stopped and the sky was colorless. A dismal pall settled over everything and everyone. The grayness of the day and the city permeated Tommy and Hannah causing them to move like gun-metal gray robots, trying not to think, blindly following Ben.

Ben's house was a log A-frame with a wrap-around deck. It looked like a ski chalet nestled in the Rockies. The back deck had a tourist-book view of the Chena River and surrounding hills. The setting was harshly beautiful. They entered the house into a spacious great room with a 20 foot ceiling. There was a dying fire in the massive stone fireplace which reached the ceiling. The first thing Ben did upon entering the house was stoke the fire. Leslie ran toward the fire as everyone screamed in unison. "No." She was frightened by the screams and broke into uncontrollable crying. Tommy picked her up, pressing her hard to his chest. He pointed to the fire and said, "No. That's very hot. Don't touch that or you'll get hurt. Remember I told you that when we were at home." The first time they had used their fireplace at home, they had only needed to caution Leslie once not to go near a fire. Now she was disoriented and had forgotten the lesson they had taught her. Tommy sat on the couch rocking Leslie back and forth until her sobbing turned to whimpering and finally stunned silence.

Ben brought their bags in and told them that he only had two bedrooms and that they would have to share a room with Leslie. He had bought a pack-and-play bed for Leslie because he knew he would need a place for her to sleep whenever she was at his house. Tommy and Hannah went to the guest bedroom to unpack. There were twin beds as well as the pack-and-play crowded into the room, making it difficult for two people to move around at the same time. Tommy wistfully smiled and said, "At last, we'll get to sleep like we did in the old days, but we'll have to be careful with Leslie in the room. We wouldn't want to wake her up. She's too young for sex ed."

"I don't know how you can think of anything but sleep. I don't think I have ever felt more exhausted. Tell Ben I'll see him tomorrow. I have to sleep now. I think the time change screwed Leslie and me up as well as the endless traveling. I thought we would never get here. I don't know how the early settlers moving west did it. I could never have been one of them. I think I'll hibernate for a year now. Maybe I can do that when we move here. I'll sleep through the winter and only come out for the three days that it's warm."

She changed a sleeping Leslie into flannel pajamas and covered her snugly under two blankets. Leslie hugged her favorite toy kitten and immediately began her bee-like snoring indicating the deep sleep of childhood. Moving like a zombie, Hannah went into the bathroom, washed, and changed. Although she wore warm pajamas, a robe, and wool socks, she was

shivering. She got into bed and pulled the covers up. Tommy bent to kiss her, "I'll be with you a little later."

"No, let's sleep separately tonight. I just want to be alone. Anyhow I don't know if we should make love in your father's house."

Tommy answered sternly, "No, we will never sleep separately. Especially now. I will sleep in this bed with you tonight. Don't you ever block me out. I need you. I don't want to make love with Leslie in the room, but I need to be near you. I need to nestle with you like we did when we were conceived. Stop thinking of yourself and think of me and what I need."

Hannah turned away unable and unwilling to argue with him. She wanted to ask, "What about what I need?" But she knew, she would never articulate such a thought to Tommy.

Tommy went out to the great room where Ben was waiting for him with two cans of beer. They sat in front of a raging fire.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Believe me, I thought long and hard about that when you called me and told me you were marrying Hannah. Anguish is an understatement for how I felt. Torment might be a better word. I had your future in my hands. I couldn't destroy your happiness. I really thought you'd never find out."

"Why didn't you ever tell me I had a twin?"

"I didn't see any reason to. I didn't think you would want to meet your twin. Even if I had told you, do you think you would have realized it was Hannah? Brooke found out on her second visit to the doctor that she was having twins and later she learned that one was a boy and the other a girl. She asked Sean and Mary Ann which one they wanted, and they picked the girl so we were left with the boy – you. Just think, they could have picked you and I could have raised Hannah. How different our lives would have been. I can't imagine raising a daughter. And can you imagine your life with Sean and Mary Ann?"

The day after both of you were born, they came to Norfolk to pick up Hannah and sign the paper work. We never met and I don't think they saw Brooke. I knew their names because Brooke kept cursing Sean for knocking her up. She was so ambivalent about him, hating him for the sex but loving him for the sex. All she talked about was the great feeling she had when

he shot his sperm into her. You can imagine how her parents reacted when she talked like that. She was totally loony.”

“She still is. She told Hannah all about the sex she had with Sean. She told her that Sean was a predator going after his innocent students. She even suggested that Sean sexually abused Hannah. As you can imagine, Hannah was devastated by her crazy talk. But Hannah doesn’t think she’s crazy. She thinks she’s evil. Whatever you call it, she’s toxic.”

Ben continued, “When you told me her name on the phone, I didn’t know what to do. All the way to Virginia, I debated whether to tell you. You’d already slept with Hannah so the damage was done. When I saw the two of you together, I saw how deeply in love you were. I had never seen you happier. I couldn’t ruin what you had. I decided not to say anything and figured no one would ever find out. I was worried when Hannah got pregnant because I thought the baby might have problems. I tried to hide my worries when we were in Cabo, but I don’t think I was successful. You saw how I felt, but I just passed it off as being a worrier. I was so relieved that she was normal. She is a gorgeous doll. And she’s so smart and sweet. Let’s hope she never has any medical problems in the future.”

“Dad, did you know that Lucy was murdered? Brooke told Hannah that she moved to Las Vegas and was murdered by someone when she was at a drug orgy.”

Ben's face clouded over. "Yes, I knew."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"What good would that have done? I wanted her out of your life and mine. Anyhow it was a long time ago."

"How did you find out?"

"I'm not sure. I think from some army buddies. She had moved to Las Vegas with the guy who beat you up. They both became hard core druggies and I think they both got into dealing the stuff too. I heard that they both got shot. No one knows who did it or why. But everyone assumed it was related to drugs. They probably didn't pay their bills. You don't mess with dealers, especially in a place like Vegas. Anyhow, it's best she's out of our lives permanently. I'm glad she's dead. I'm glad both of them are dead. I feel as if justice has been served for the crime they committed against you and me too. They would have murdered you if I hadn't come home when I did. They would have taken you away from me, the person who is most important

to my life. They deserved to die. Justice was done." He spoke the final words as if he were making a pronouncement from the pulpit.

Tommy looked at him incredulously. He felt the same way, but he couldn't and wouldn't articulate it. He couldn't be happy over someone being murdered, even if it was a woman he hated. Tommy had to move to another topic. He didn't like the look on Ben's face or the feelings that this discussion was stirring. He didn't want to find out any more unknown sides of Ben.

"Dad, we can't stay in Lewiston anymore. Even though no one knows, I have this pathological fear that someone will find out. I want to move out here if it's ok with you. I figure no one will follow us here and no one would care about us here if they found out."

"I would love to have you live here. But I'm worried about Hannah. I know she doesn't want to leave Lewiston. I think you can adjust after a while, but I don't know about her. Her whole life has been Lewiston. I don't know if she has the flexibility or the inner strength to adjust, or even the will to do it. She seems so fragile, so breakable. Do you think she'll have a breakdown? Maybe she's having one now. She's so withdrawn."

"No. I think that Hannah will change when she sees Leslie and me adjusting to life here. Leslie will thrive wherever she lives as long as she has her loving family. It'll take a while, maybe a long while, but Hannah will come around. She's gone through so much trauma this last week. First meeting that crazy bitch and having her desecrate Sean's memory. That would have been enough to screw her up. But then finding out I'm her brother threw her completely. Do you know I don't think of myself as her brother? I think of myself as part of her. I can't describe the difference. But we're two parts of a whole. What do you think of us? Do you think it's wrong that a brother and sister find making love the most important thing in their lives?"

"Tommy, I don't think of you and Hannah as brother and sister. You've never known each other. You fell in love and that's it."

"Dad, you don't think we're doing something sinful, do you?"

"No. Do you?"

"No. Oh, I don't know. If you asked me about two other people in such a relationship, I would say it was wrong and they should split up. But when I look at Hannah and me, I don't think that we're doing something wrong. And I couldn't ever split up from her and I know she feels the same way. I suppose we'll always feel guilt. She says that we're punishing ourselves

by moving to Alaska, which she thinks is hell. Maybe she's right. I feel like we should be banished from the place we love. Boy, do I sound crazy."

"Tommy, you have to build a life and put this twin business out of your consciousness although I know you'll never be able to bury it completely. You have to get on with your life. If you don't, it'll eat you up and you'll never be able to make it. Do you have any idea what you want to do when you move here?"

"I could teach, but I thought I'd work for you if you have anything for me to do. I don't want a job that takes a lot of mental work right now. I'm afraid it'll be awhile before I can think straight."

"I opened a coffee shop near campus last year. I've had trouble getting a good manager. I've fired three people in the last few months. You could run it. I have eight kids working there with a temporary student manager who doesn't know his ass from a hole in the ground. I think you'd enjoy working there and it's very profitable. In fact, it's the most popular place in town for coffee now. Drinking expensive coffee warms everyone's bones in the cold Alaskan winters and even the short summers. And it fills my wallet and hopefully yours too."

"That sounds good as a starter. We need to look for a place to live."

"We'll go out to the shop tomorrow so you can see the business and meet the kids. Then we'll drive around so Hannah can get an idea of the area and the different neighborhoods."

"She probably won't want to do that, but I'll make her. I'm afraid she's going to become catatonic unless I force her to do things. I think eventually she won't hate it here. Maybe she'll even like it. You know how she feels about that house and her mother. Leaving her mother is really like burying her. And you know how much I love Virginia and the mountains and our house, but it's a small price to pay for safety."

Ben went over to Tommy and put his arms around him. "Hey buddy, my heart goes out to you. You know how much I love you and how happy I was that you had such a perfect family. Now to see it endangered is killing me. It's not destroyed, but you and Hannah will have to work hard at rebuilding your life. I just hope Hannah has the mental health to make it through this. I'm really worried about her."

"I hope so too. I think maybe she should get some psychological help, but then she'd have to tell a therapist our secret and she couldn't do that."

After two more beers, Tommy fell asleep in mid-conversation so he staggered into the bedroom. Still wearing the clothes he had traveled in, he got into the single bed and curled up behind Hannah. He hugged her and found that she was crying. “Oh my Hannah, everything will be alright. Don’t cry. We’ll survive. We’ll more than survive. We’ll thrive. I promise with all my soul to make you happy again.”

Hannah took his cold hands and placed them on her warm breasts, and they fell into a sleep as deep as hibernating bears.

The next morning, they got up to the smell of bacon frying. They showered and dressed and gave Leslie a quick bath. Then they went out to meet Ella. The previous night Ben had told Tommy that his housekeeper would be at the house in the morning. Ella came in every day for four hours to clean and prepare the day’s meals. She did not look like Hannah’s idea of a housekeeper. She looked like a Hooters waitress. She was a curvaceous woman of about 40. Her artificially-created flaming red hair was spray frozen into a six-inch high hairstyle that would have been stylish in the 60’s. She was heavily made up, even wearing long fluttery, false eyelashes at 8 in the morning. She had somehow poured herself into tight jeans, or perhaps they were painted on. Her flimsy tee shirt outlined her braless, surgically enhanced, perfectly formed breasts. Her large nipples were clearly outlined under the picture of a grizzly bear painted on the thin cotton fabric.

She introduced herself, “Hi folks. I’m Ella and I keep this place looking nice and the owner happily fed.” Her voice was gravely from years of smoking.

Ben added, “And she makes the owner happy in other ways too, especially in the bedroom.” He pulled her over to sit on his lap as he hugged her tightly. Then he patted her bottom, giving her permission to go back to cooking.

“I wasn’t going to tell you about my relationship with Ella right away, but as you can see it’s hard to cover up. Tommy and Hannah, I’ve told her everything. I had to. I needed someone to talk to about what was happening in my life and she’s a great listener and she doesn’t try to give her opinion unless I ask.”

Tommy and Hannah looked at each other, feeling angry that Ben had been so careless with their secret. Tommy said, “We’re not happy about this Dad. We don’t know Ella and now she knows our most intimate secret. But there’s nothing we can do about it now. God damn it Dad, the idea of moving here was for no one to know about us and now she knows and God knows

who she'll tell. Maybe we shouldn't move here. Maybe there's no place safe for us. Maybe we need to go to Siberia."

Ben answered, "Don't be an asshole. Stop over-reacting. She won't tell anyone. You have to realize that Ella is my wife, certainly not legally, but in all other ways. I had to tell her. I wanted to tell her."

Ella calmed the situation by serving bacon, eggs, homemade biscuits, orange juice, and freshly-perked coffee. She had cereal, a book about sled dogs, and a small Eskimo doll for Leslie who acted uncharacteristically shy and refused to thank her or even look at her. The poor child was overwhelmed by all the changes taking place minute by minute. She also sensed the tension between the adults. She could find no solace in that kitchen because her father and her grandpa were glaring at each other with anger, while her mother's face was vacant.

Tommy asked, "Why didn't you tell me about Ella before?"

"Well to tell you the truth Tommy, whenever we talk on the phone, it's always about you and Hannah and Leslie. You rarely ask about my life. Anyhow it's not as if I plan on marrying her. It's just the arrangement we have for now. Who know how long it will last?"

You should know a little about Ella. She moved to Fairbanks about 18 years ago. She came up here with her first husband who was in the army and stationed here. She had her son John with him. He's 16 now. Then she divorced him because he beat the hell out of her every night. In fact, Ella has beautiful teeth thanks to that mother fucker. Geez, I have to remember that Leslie's here. I have to stop using that language. Anyhow, her teeth are false since he punched out the real ones. Then she married another soldier and had Ellen who's 13. She found out too late that this guy was ac-dc, and eventually became more dc than ac. Now she's divorced and vows never to marry again which is the way I like it because I'll never marry again either. We decided not to live together, especially because I don't want to take care of her kids. They're both into teen age stuff and I don't want to deal with that shit. Tommy, you spoiled me for raising kids because you never got into any trouble. John's into dope which most kids up here are into. As long as he goes to school and promises to finish, we haven't tried to stop him. I don't think we could make him stop even if we wanted to. Anyhow, it's mostly light stuff. You know, like weed and a coke sometimes. Ellen's not into drugs - yet. Her choice of rebellion is sex. She just had an abortion. We decided that 13 was way too young to have a kid, and Ella didn't want to raise it. We had her fitted with birth control so thank God there won't be any more pregnancies. Our problem is that she disappears for a few days and we can't find her. Then she comes back like nothing happened. I think she's servicing the guys up at the

base at no charge. I've told Ella – I don't like her kids and I certainly don't want to be their surrogate father. I don't want them living here and I don't even like seeing them. I have only one son and that's you Tommy.

Ella has her own house, but she spends a lot of time here even when she's not working. I support Ella. I bought a house for her and I pay her a generous salary for working four hours a day. Enough to support the kids. I won't give any money to John because I don't want him pissing it away on drugs. He got a job at McDonald's so he could use his own money to support his habit."

Tommy asked, "Well it sounds like Ella's just your whore."

Ben stared at Tommy with venom, clenching his fists controlling his urge to punch Tommy. "Don't you ever say that. Especially considering that you're screwing your sister."

Hannah feared that this first argument between Tommy and Ben would grow out of control and they would say things that they would regret.

Hannah spoke up like a teacher chastising misbehaving children. "Stop this. Don't hurt each other like this. We're all like open sores just looking for salt. We just want to hurt each other. Please think of what you're saying. Ben, understand that we're moving here for privacy and the first day here we find that you've told Ella about us. She's a stranger to us even though we know she's important in your life. When we get our heads back on straight, we'll realize that you did the right thing by telling her. If Ella didn't know, we wouldn't be able to talk freely and we need someplace where we can feel comfortable talking. We know Ella's not going to tell anyone else. Anyway, we'll have to get used to the idea of you having a significant other."

Hannah changed the direction of the conversation and directly asked Ella, "How long have you and Ben been together?"

Ella picked up on the change in the topic with the intent of further defusing the conflict between Ben and Tommy. "About two years. We met through one of Ben's business associates, a guy named Walter who had a bush plane company that Ben had invested in.

Ben changed me a lot in the last two years. He helped me cut down on my drinking and I've even stopped smoking after almost 25 years of 2 packs a day. He's made me happy and I could never say that before I met him. I was never happy until the day I met Ben Evans."

Ella said all this while washing the dishes, never looking at anyone. Ella dried her hands and joined them at the table. She looked into Tommy's eyes and said, "I'm petrified of you Tommy because Ben loves you more than anyone or anything in the world. I'm petrified that you'll think I'm not good enough for Ben and turn him against me. I wasn't happy to hear that you want to move here, but there's nothing I can do about it. All I ask is that you give me a chance. Don't turn Ben against me."

Hearing such words of vulnerability from a hard looking woman who appeared to fear nothing was startling.

"Ella, all I can think of now is myself and Hannah. I won't ever turn Dad against you if he wants to be with you. All I can say is that when we move here, we'll do everything to try to build a relationship with you."

Ben said, "We'll talk later at dinner. We better get going now. Ella, do you want to come with us?"

"No, I think I'll clean up here. Go ahead. I'll see you at dinner. Hey Ben, before you go, introduce them to your other kids."

"Oh yeah, come out back and see my dogs. I've got two huskies, Aurora and Borealis. I named them after the Aurora Borealis because my old dog, Star, had them one night when the northern lights were especially gorgeous."

About 30 feet from the back deck were two dog houses each containing a gray and white husky barking from a round window. They barked wildly at the sight of people. Leslie cringed with fear and started crying.

Tommy said, "Leslie's afraid of them so we'll meet them another time."

"They're really tame. They don't bite. They're just lonely and love people. Hopefully, Leslie will get used to them after you move here. You'll probably want to get a dog. Everybody here has dogs."

Hannah asked, "Do people have cats here? I have two cats, but I'm not going to bring them, but I thought I might eventually get a cat or two."

Ben replied, "I'm sure people have cats, but I don't know anyone who does. This is dog country."

Ben pointed to a shed with two large snowmobiles. "And those are my other pets – my snow machines. I love going out into the wild racing with friends. Tommy, I know you weren't interested in snowmobiling when you lived here before, but maybe you'll try it when you get here."

Tommy replied, "We'll think about it later."

They drove to the university area where Ben's coffee shop was located. It was a popular spot for students who drank their coffee as they studied on deep, cushiony couches under heads of deer, wolves, and bears mounted on the walls. Ben introduced the Evanses to the student workers. Everyone played with Leslie, welcoming a child, a rarity in a university coffee shop. Leslie, still in a state of shock, was silent and shy. She was especially affected by the mounted heads, wondering where the rest of the animals' bodies were. She whispered to Hannah as she pointed to the mounted heads, "Where's the legs?"

Then they drove around Fairbanks and North Pole, one of Fairbanks's nicer suburbs, so Ben could show them the two strip malls he had built.

Hannah said, "I don't see any Victorian houses. I don't see much in the way of architecture except log houses and nondescript apartments."

"Well, I think you should rent a house or an apartment and then buy a lot in a nice neighborhood and eventually build a house. You can design any kind of house you want."

"Let's just rent at first. Maybe we'll decide not to move here so I don't want us to buy something." Hannah said hopefully.

Tommy spoke firmly, "Hannah, be positive. We will like it and decide to move here. We'll drive around and pick a nice neighborhood, one that has a good school for Leslie."

"Do you really think we'll be here that long?"

"I think we'll be here forever."

“I’ve never seen such ugly houses. Everything looks so depressing and don’t say it’s because I don’t want to move here. It’s ugly and squalid.”

Ben interjected, “It’ll look much better once everything greens up and there are flowers.”

“Nothing could make this place look any better.”

Hannah took a large intake of breath and sobbed. She frightened Leslie who started to cry.

Tommy said harshly, “Stop it Hannah! You can’t let Leslie see you acting like this. Control yourself.”

Ben interjected, “Tommy, let’s not make long-term plans. Let’s take it a day at a time.”

They had a late lunch at McDonald’s. Hannah was shocked at how much more expensive all the menu items were than at home. Tommy told her to expect higher prices on everything because all products had to be brought up from the lower 48. They continued their tour of Fairbanks with Ben showing them Walmart and Safeway, two stores he knew Hannah would be frequenting often. Then they returned to Ben’s house so Leslie could nap. When Leslie fell asleep, Hannah laid down and stared at the ceiling as if she were in a trance. Tommy got in the narrow bed with her.

“What’d ya think?”

“What do I think? I think this is the worst place in the universe. I can’t do it. I can’t move here. Let’s go someplace else. Let’s go to Tucson or Denver or even Hawaii. No one knows us there and they’re nice places to live. Please Tommy, don’t make me do this.”

“We have to move here. We need my father’s support. We just can’t move to a place because it has nice weather and nice housing. We would have no one to support us. We have to move here. There’s no other choice.

We also need his money. I know we’ll make a bundle on the house, but I don’t know how long that’ll last. And if we went someplace else, I might not be able to get a decent job for a while. I don’t know if my Virginia license would transfer to other states so I don’t know if I could teach anywhere else. We need my dad’s financial help. I was worried for a while when we were talking to Ella that he might marry her and then she would get all his money, but I was relieved to learn that he has no plans to marry her. I know I sound like a money grubber, but when suddenly the source of it might be cut off, I worry. I know you never think about money, but now you have to.”

"I can't think of money now. Anyhow that's your department. All I can think of is how much I despise this hellhole and the type of people we're going to be living with. I hate to sound like a snob, but Ella is trailer trash. I feel like we're moving into one big, cold trailer park. I can't imagine ever being able to relate to her. When I look at her, I think I'm looking at a hooker. How low we're falling by moving here."

"Hannah, please. I don't want to think about her now. If that's who Dad wants to screw, it's his decision.

Hannah, I don't want to live here anymore than you do, but it's something we have to do if we're going to survive. I promise you, we will be happy here someday. I will make you happy. I will devote myself to your happiness. I'll do anything. Anyhow, maybe after 10 years or when Leslie's grown, we can move someplace else. Let's do what my father says, let's take it one day at a time."

Hannah looked at him for a long time. "The only way I can be happy is to stay in my home. If we move anyplace, I don't think I can ever be happy again."

"That's not true. Think of Leslie and be happy. Think of me and be happy."

"I still don't understand why we can't stay in Lewiston. No one will ever find out. I think you're being crazy. You just want to punish us so no one else will punish us. You keep saying I'm crazy, but I think you're paranoid. No one cares about our lives and no one will find out.

This is more of Brooke Brock's work. If it weren't for her, we wouldn't be moving. She's the cause of all our problems. I wish I could do something to get revenge for what she's done to me."

"Stop obsessing about Brooke. That's over. She's not making us move. I am. We can't take any chances at being found out. We can't stay in Lewiston. We're moving here. There's no more discussion. We're going back and I'm going to resign as of the end of the school year and we're going to put the house up for sale. We'll ship the furniture here and put it in storage until we have a place to live. We will tell everyone we're moving here because I have to help Dad because of his health. We will tell no one the truth, especially Kelly. Do you understand? Never tell Kelly. We'll arrange with the attorney to cover your mom's expenses at Shady Grove. With what she inherited from her father, there should be enough money to cover her

expenses for some years. I don't think she'll live much longer anyhow, but maybe that's only wishful thinking. I want her out of our lives. And so do you."

Hannah didn't respond because he was right. She did want her mother to die. That would make leaving her easier. She wouldn't have to feel like she was deserting her. She wouldn't have to shoulder that guilt too. How much guilt could her skinny shoulders bear?

"We'll plan to move sometime in July or August. I don't know if we'll drive or fly out. We'll decide that later.

Hannah, I'm going to ask you this question once and only once. Do you want to move to Alaska with me or do you want to stay in Lewiston without me? Decide now. I don't want you ever to say that I didn't give you the chance. Do you want to divorce me? I don't know what we'd do with Leslie because we would both want her, but we'd work something out. Do you want a divorce?"

Hannah became frantic. She had never considered divorce. "Tommy, don't ever speak that word. Do you really think I would pick Lewiston over you? My God, I can't believe it. Don't you know you're my life? I'll live here and learn to adjust, and maybe even like it after 10 or 20 years. Don't ever ask me if I'd leave you. How could you even think that?"

"

Because you're so unhappy about leaving Lewiston."

"If you think I'm unhappy now, I'd be a thousand times more unhappy without you. I'd probably kill myself without you and I'm not just saying that. I mean it. Just let me grieve for the life we had. We had a perfect life. That's over. It's dead. Let me grieve. Please. Maybe I'll never be happy again, but I'll have you and Leslie."

They hugged tightly until their bodies seemed intermeshed. Hannah whispered in Tommy's ear, "Whither thou goest, I will go."

Ella made a delicious dinner for them. She grilled salmon that Ben had caught and moose that he had shot. She baked a blueberry pie with fresh blueberries. Ella's kids joined them. They were both very different from Ella, who despite her outrageous hairstyle, make-up, and clothing was a good-looking woman with finely formed features and an excellent figure. The kids were anything but good looking. John was rail thin with long stringy, greasy hair and

tattoos and piercings covering most of his body. His face was so narrow, he seemed to lack cheeks. Ellen was totally opposite, short, fat, and a face dominated by chipmunk cheeks. She had an upturned nose which gave her a porcine appearance. She was wearing a tight sweater that showed layers of thick flab around her waist and hips. Tommy and Hannah understood Ben's reaction to Ella's kids. Their appearances did not engender positive feelings.

During the meal, John and Ellen alternated between being sullen and uninterested in the adult conversation and playfulness with Leslie. For the first time since she arrived in Alaska, Leslie laughed, delighting in guessing the identities for faces John made or drawings by Ellen. At the end of the meal she sat on John's lap as she questioned him about his various tattoos. When she sat on Ellen's lap, Ellen put her bracelets on Leslie's arm and even let her keep one. After the kids helped clean up, they eagerly left. Hannah put Leslie to sleep and then the four adults sat around the fire drinking beer, reviewing their day, and talking about their plans for the next day.

During a lull in the conversation, Ella said, "You're not the only ones with a secret. I want to tell you about our secret, which is not really a secret since most people in Fairbanks know about it. Maybe a better word is our history. I could have put this off until you move here, but I want you to know about us. I told you that Ben and I met through a mutual friend, Walter. Actually, I had been living with Walter for three years when I met Ben. Ben and Walter were snow machine buddies and went off for days a couple of times during the winter. They had similar personalities and really liked each other. They even looked alike. Big and brawny and graying and sexy. Walter brought Ben over for dinner one night and the very next day Ben and I started an affair. Ben called me the next morning to come to his house to talk about a job being his housekeeper. I went over after the kids went to school and we screwed as soon as I came in the door. And we've been screwing almost every morning since. Ben needs his screwing along with his morning coffee before he goes to work. He says it makes him a better businessman. Maybe it does. We were very attracted to each other the second we met, and we still are. Frankly, I've had lots of men, but I've never liked a man as much as Ben. I wanted to leave Walter, but Ben told me he didn't want me to. He didn't want to have a permanent relationship with me. He liked our relationship the way it was so we've had an affair for two years. I think the only one in Fairbanks who didn't know about it was Walter. Even John once asked me who was a better fuck - Walter or Ben.

Then Walter started having financial problems. He had four bush planes that he rented out. He also gave aerial tours for tourists. But then he bought two more planes, and of course the economy tanked. He asked Ben for a loan, but Ben refused because he thought his company

was overextended. Ben knows how to separate friendship and business. That's why he's so rich. The most important thing in Ben's life is you Tommy and second is making money.

Walter was desperate for Ben's help so he asked me to sleep with Ben to get him to give him the money. He knew Ben lusted after me. He just didn't know that he had been doing something to satisfy his lust for a long time. When I told him that I had been sleeping with him for two years, Walter said that was the reason Ben wouldn't give him the loan. He was totally pissed as he should have been. He ranted at me for hours and said that I had betrayed him and was just trying to hook a rich guy. He was wild and out of control, but he never touched me. He wasn't into physical stuff. Walter said that Ben was trying to ruin his business so he could buy it cheap. He stormed out of the house and flew off in his plane in blinding snow, and he crashed. We'll never really know if it was suicide or bad weather. I think he killed himself. Walter took me in after I left my second husband and he saved me from going on welfare. He supported me and the kids. He said that I betrayed him and he was absolutely right. I'm responsible for his suicide. I suppose I killed Walter or maybe Ben did by not giving him the money he needed. Ben has no remorse. I have enough for both of us. I have to live with the guilt of what I did to Walter. Sounds like a soap opera – huh?"

After a few seconds of silence, Ben said, "I sure don't feel any guilt about what Walter did even though Ella does. Sure we were having an affair, but he wanted Ella to give herself to me for money. That was pimping. She doesn't agree, but that's the way I see it. He killed himself because he was going bankrupt and was losing his planes, which were his true loves. He was a fantastic pilot, but a lousy businessman. And I don't think he killed himself over Ella. He had a bunch of women he was screwing at the same time. Just ask Janet, the bartender at The Last Frontier. Every time he went in for a drink, he'd first go into the back room with her for a quickie. And he was also a regular customer at Lulu's, one of our better classes of whore houses here in Fairbanks. I don't think he would have cared that you were screwing me or anyone else. The only reason he was mad was because he thought that was what stopped me from giving him money, and of course it wasn't. Anyhow, we have our story like everybody else. I don't want to talk about it anymore. It's a closed book."

He glared at Ella and said. "Don't talk about this anymore. Do you understand me?"

She whispered, "Yes."

After they went to their room, Hannah said, "Wow – your father is not exactly the man I thought he was. I just never thought of him as being so sexual and so back biting in business.

I've only seen the side of him when he's with us when he's so warm and affectionate, especially with Leslie. There's a real hardness to him, even a meanness."

"I'm seeing a different side of him too. Even when I lived here, I didn't see him like this. I ignored what he did and how he lived. I was too concerned about myself to think about him. I knew he liked a certain kind of woman, like Ella. I remember meeting some of them, but he never dated any of them for very long. They all looked like Ella, but she's really the best looking of them all. I knew some of them stayed over because I would hear talking or laughter or the sound of sex coming from his bedroom, but I didn't usually see them. It was like he snuck them in and out. I didn't know what a good businessman he was. I just knew he was always making money, lots of it."

"Tommy, if we don't know who your father is, I certainly don't know who I am anymore. I feel like I'm losing myself. It's not just the move – it's everything. I could always think of myself as this sweet teacher who loves everyone. That's not me anymore. I can't stop what's happening to me. I'm changing and I don't know who I'm becoming because this is going to last for a while. I feel like I'm on an out-of-control roller coaster and I don't know what I'll be like until the ride stops."

"Yeah, I feel that way too, but not as much as you probably. We'll both be changed by what we've learned about ourselves and the move, but we'll come out the same people in the end. You'll always love people, but not everyone. You'll be more discriminating. I suppose you're losing your innocence, and that was one thing I loved about you."

"Does that mean you'll love me less?"

"No. Never. I could never love you any less than I do."

Although Leslie was soundly asleep in the pack and play, he whispered softly "Good night my wife and sister."

Hannah murmured, "Good night my husband and brother."

Chapter 11

When Tommy and Hannah's plane landed in Virginia, they felt a bitter-sweet pleasure at being back in their lovely, soon-to-be-former home and trepidation about how convincing their concocted story would be. They gazed forlornly at the velvety green, gently-sloping mountains that greeted them, trying to block out the memory of the white streaked, jagged mountains they had left behind.

They had carefully rehearsed the façade of lies they would present to the world. Kelly would be the first test case to hear their work of fiction. Tommy didn't want Hannah to talk to her alone; he didn't trust her to be able to carry off their deceit. He was filled with resolve to present a flawless story that no one would have reason to question. Although he knew it was highly implausible, he feared someone might suspect the true reason behind their move.

When they drove up to their house at 76 Vista Road, Leslie shouted happily, "My house. I gonna see Spot and Puff. Yeah!" After they brought her into the house, she rushed to the living room which had been transformed into a playroom. After hugging each of her dolls and saying "I'm home" repeatedly, she immersed herself in her toy kitchen, cooking spaghetti for her hungry dolls seated at the child-size table and chairs. No more scary dogs, cold weather, and people talking in angry voices. She was safe, if only for a little while.

Spot and Puff appeared, meowing a welcome home greeting. Leslie chased them from room to room. Obviously, they had been lonely since they uncharacteristically showed themselves. Hannah went to the greenhouse and cried out for Tommy. He ran after her shouting, "What's the matter?"

"One of my orchids died. We were gone for only five days and it died." She gently stroked the wilting leaves and browned flowers. "Poor Kelly will think it's her fault. It's not. It's because I'm going to leave them. All my flowers and plants are going to die. They can't survive without me. They know I'm deserting them."

"That's the most bizarre thing I've ever heard. How the hell would your flowers know you're leaving?"

"I don't know, but I've never lost an orchid before. You know I have a way of communicating with my plants."

Tommy gave her a look as if to say she were nuts. “Yeah, you’re the plant whisperer.”

They had called Kelly on their way home from the airport, and asked her to come over when she was free. Fifteen minutes later, Kelly rang the bell. As Hannah opened the door, she asked, “Why didn’t you use your key?”

“Oh I thought you might be talking or doing something private. Here’s your key back. I think it’s a good idea for me not to be able to come in whenever I want.” Hannah didn’t dispute this. Kelly shouldn’t have a key. Only members of the Evans should freely enter their home.

“Look at my left hand.” She raised her hand, rotating it to catch the light reflections from the large diamond gracing her ring finger.

“Kelly, you’re engaged! What a huge rock! When did this happen?”

“Last night. Brad proposed and I thought I would try marriage again. I do love him and I know he’s wild about me. I told him I’d only marry him if we could have a baby. A baby like your wonderful Leslie, and he agreed to start a new family even though his kids are 12 and 14 and he’d have to go through the all night feedings and all the other negatives of parenthood, but he knows the positives far outweigh them..”

Tommy came in. “Hey, what’s the good news I hear? Wow! What a rock! Congratulations. Brad’s a great guy and I know you’ll be happy.” He gave her a warm kiss and hug.

Kelly picked Leslie up and said, “I missed you, gorgeous girl. What did you do when you were in Alaska?”

“I was on airplane up in the sky. Grandpa has bad doggies. Big teeth and big tongues. I sleep with Mommy and Daddy. ” Leslie continued describing the details of the trip until Hannah distracted her with her toys so they could talk

“Hannah, we’re going to have a small wedding, and I want you to be my maid of honor. Of course, there’s no one else I want but you. We’re getting married over the Fourth of July. And I’d like Leslie to be my flower girl.”

Tommy said, "That'll be a good time for us because it'll be right before we move. We're moving to Alaska this summer. We're moving for good."

Kelly's whole body jolted with shocked disbelief. "What? You're not serious. Why're you moving?"

"My dad's ill. You know he had a heart attack, but the doctors think he'll make a good recovery eventually. He wants me to take over his business."

"But you hated Alaska."

"I have to do this for my father."

"Can't he come here?"

"He has all his businesses there. I'm going to take them over."

"Why don't you just sell them?"

"I want to run them."

"Why? For the money? I never thought you were interested in money."

"Kelly, get real. Everybody's interested in money."

"Hannah, how can you leave your mother?"

"Her mother's a vegetable and won't know."

"I'm talking to Hannah."

"And I'm answering for her."

"Hey, I don't know what's happening here, but I don't like it. You're totally controlling Hannah. You're not even letting her talk. Hannah, talk to me."

"Tommy can speak for me. Whatever he says is what I feel."

“God, you’re like a robot. Something has happened in your life and you’re not letting me in on it. You’ve never hidden anything before. We’ve been so close. We’ve been family. Now we’re not, and I don’t know why. And it’s breaking my heart.”

“Kelly, we’ve been as close as sisters and I love you. I love you so much that I want you to raise Leslie if anything happens to us. I would trust you with my most precious possession.”

“What’s going to happen to you?”

“Nothing. But what happens if we had a car accident on a slippery road in Alaska? Ben’s older and not in good health. He couldn’t raise her. I know you would love her like your own child.”

“Hannah and Tommy, it makes me really happy that you would entrust Leslie to me, but I’m worried about the two of you. You’ve become so different. You’re secretive and you shut everyone out of your life. It’s like the two of you are growing into one person and that one person is Tommy doing the thinking, making the decisions, and talking, and Hannah, you being the caretaker, the cook, and the cleaner. You used to be so strong willed and independent and now you’re like a puppet. You’re Tommy’s door mat. It’s scary. It’s not normal.”

“You and your idea of what’s normal. You said that to me when I first met Tommy and I wanted to marry him after knowing him for one night. Now you’re saying it again because I know him too well and trust him with my life. He’s the most important person in my existence. I love Leslie, but someday she’ll leave and go out on her own. Tommy will never leave. He and I will be together until we die.”

“Why do you keep talking about death? You’re so morbid. What is going on here that I don’t know about? Does one of you have a serious illness?”

Tommy took over Hannah’s side of the conversation. “No, don’t be silly. Kelly, we’re not talking about death. It was just a way of saying that Hannah and I have a love that few people in the world have. We can’t imagine loving each other any more than we do and maybe that looks abnormal from the outside, but it’s not. It’s the greatest thing a couple can have. Complete love.

I don’t want to talk about this anymore. We’re moving to Alaska in mid-July so we can certainly be at your wedding. I know Hannah would not miss it. And neither do I want to miss

it. Kelly, I love you for the friend that you've been to my Hannah and for being such a good human being."

Kelly sobbed as she said, "What am I going to do without you Hannah?"

Tommy replied, "You'll have Brad."

Her face turning a bright red. she screamed at him. "I'm talking to Hannah. Shut up."

"Tommy's right. You'll have Brad. And it doesn't mean we won't be communicating. I'll be back every few months to check on my mother and we'll email everyday. I'll need your support in this move. I feel like a frontierswoman of 100 years ago."

They had ignored Leslie who had been playing, but now they looked at her as she anxiously asked, "Mommy, why everybody yelling?"

Hannah picked her up and calmed her, saying, "Oh, we're just excited about all the things that happened on the trip."

Hannah went to the kitchen and returned with juice and crackers to soothe Leslie.

When Leslie returned to her play, Kelly asked, "Hannah, did you like Alaska?"

"It doesn't matter whether she liked it. I don't like it and I'm moving there. We'll both learn to like it because the three of us and my dad will be there. That's all that matters. Being with the people you love."

"I still don't understand why he can't move here."

"He doesn't want to. He loves Alaska."

"And you two love Virginia."

"It's not the same. He has lots of investments there. We only have the house and a teaching job that I can get anywhere."

"Tommy, it's not just a house. It's Hannah's home. It's the only home she's ever had. This house is part of Hannah."

“Kelly, a house is just a pile of bricks. It’s inanimate. It’s things. It’s not a human being.”

“No, this house is like a human being. It has precious memories of Hannah’s life with her parents. They live here. They’re real. When I see the stove, I see Mary Ann mixing her secret spaghetti sauce. I can actually see the sauce that’s splattered onto her apron. When I look at the leather chair in the family room, I see Sean reading the paper before dinner. I remember how he would doze off and the paper would slide down his chest. We would laugh quietly so as not to wake him up. When I look at Hannah’s bed, I see her burrowing into the pillows and blankets the night Sean died. She was trying to escape the reality that her father was gone. The memories are in the walls and the furniture and the air in this house. They’re alive.”

“The memories aren’t in the house. They’re in Hannah’s mind. If the house burned down tomorrow, Hannah would still have her memories. Anyhow, enough of this. We’ve made a decision and we’re not changing it. Please don’t try to convince Hannah to change her mind. She knows I’m going and she has decided to go with me. I gave her the option of not going. Tell her what you told me.”

“I told him I’d follow him to the ends of the world. I couldn’t live without him. He’s my life. Remember my wedding vow. Whither thou goest, I will go. I meant it then and I mean it now.”

“I still feel something happened when you saw Brooke. Did she tell you about some dreaded disease in the family that might come out later and is genetic? Something like Woody Guthrie’s Huntington’s Disease?”

“I told you no. There’s no genetic disease like that. Only addiction and mental illness and sizzling hatred and cruelty, which I hope no one inherits.”

“Kevin and I talked about this. Frankly, he thinks you had an affair and Tommy found out. Maybe that’s why you’re moving away from this guy.”

Both Tommy and Hannah laughed until their eyes teared. “Leave it to Kevin to come up with a story like that. Hannah and I have never and will never have a relationship with another person. I haven’t looked at another woman since I first saw Hannah. The most gorgeous woman could offer herself to me without anyone ever finding out, and I would say a loud NO. Hannah, I’m not going to talk for you now. Tell her.”

“That is funny. I haven’t looked at a man since August 2nd. I could never be unfaithful. If anything, it’s the opposite. I’m more attracted to Tommy than ever and have a hard time refraining from not jumping him, even when we’re in a crowd of people. Sorry to be so crass, but it’s true.”

“I will miss you so much. I know I’ll have Brad, but I need you too even though you don’t need me. I don’t want you to move. I want you to stay here forever. I don’t want our relationship to change.”

Tommy did not want the conversation to continue for fear that Hannah would break down. “Kelly, bring Brad over to dinner on Saturday so we can celebrate your engagement. Hannah will make her lasagna.”

“He has the boys this weekend. Can we bring them?”

“Of course.”

After she left, Tommy said, “I think we did it. I was convinced we were leaving because of my dad’s health and because I want to cash in on his business. Just be careful with her. I don’t want you to see her alone for a while. Until you’re sure you can control yourself which may be never.

Hannah, how’d you feel about that conversation about your house?”

“I don’t know. She’s right about the memories living in the house, but I also know I’ll have those memories with me until I die. Frankly, I think it’ll be harder for me to leave this house than to leave my mother. Speaking of which, I want to see my mother now. I have to see her alone. I want to tell her about what’s going to happen. Will you stay with Leslie for an hour or so? It’s late but she’s not sleepy because of the time changes and sleeping on the flights and in the car. Try to keep her up so she can go to sleep at 9:00 or 10:00.”

“I’ll take her food shopping. Write down what you want me to get.”

Hannah was surprised at the change in Mary Ann. In the week since she had last seen her, she had shriveled. She was in a wheel chair all the time now. She was bent over, her unseeing eyes focused on the floor. Hannah pulled a chair up to her wheelchair and cupped her hand under her chin so she could look into Mary Ann’s eyes.

“Mom, it’s me Hannah. I have bad news for you. I’m moving to Alaska. I’m moving to a frozen hellhole so I can save my marriage. Tommy is so afraid we’ll be found out if we stay here. He insists we move. I know he’s right, but the thought of leaving you and my house is tearing me apart. You’ll be taken care of. We’ll arrange for your care with Charlie Hastings. He’ll have power of attorney to make decisions for you if we’re not available. So don’t worry. I know you don’t worry. I worry. I worry enough for both of us. I worry enough for everyone in Shady Grove Nursing Home.

Oh Mom, I wish you could appreciate Leslie. She’s giving us such joy, but there won’t be any more babies. If we make a decent life in the future, we’ll adopt. I want more kids even if they’re not mine biologically. All I can think of is how good you and daddy were as parents and Tommy’s father was the most loving dad imaginable. So we’ll go with adoption, but that’s a long way off. There are so many things we’ll have to give up that will break my heart. I don’t think we’ll take the cats. They probably wouldn’t be able to adjust to the transient life we’re going to have for a while. And I don’t think they could adjust to the cold even though they’d be inside all the time.

And my plants. What am I going to do without my plants? They’re part of me. They’re extensions of my fingers. Can you believe that one of my orchids died in the few days we were gone? I have to give them away before they all die. I wonder if I could ever get a plant to grow in Alaska. I’d like to get a cat, but the big thing there is dogs. Ben has two huskies. Poor Leslie was terrified of them. Whenever we said the word dog, she whimpered. I’m sure she’ll eventually overcome her fear, but for now I think we’ll forgo pets. Oh, how I’ll miss those loving cats. How many times did I calm myself by just stroking them as they purred in my ear? I will miss their quietly pulsating bodies on mine.”

Hannah spent almost two hours with Mary Ann, most of it in silence with Hannah staring into space and Mary Ann staring at the floor. During that time, Hannah was saying goodbye to Mary Ann, knowing that the time they would spend together before the move was ebbing away. When she left, she found that she was not sad as she usually was; rather, she was calmed. Being with her mother and the silence had been like warm compresses on her eyes.

When Hannah got home, the house was quiet. Tommy had dimmed the lights and Hannah felt a calmness as she walked from room to room caressing what she saw with her eyes. She went up to her bedroom to find Tommy and Leslie asleep in their bed. Tommy cradled Leslie in his arms, as if protecting her from their unknown future. They appeared peaceful and safe. She knew she would never tell Kelly or anyone else the truth. She couldn’t jeopardize the

precious treasures she had. She got in bed with them. With Leslie between them, she gently touched Tommy. He smiled, but didn't move until 6:00 when he got up for school.

When Tommy returned from school, he told Hannah that he had informed his principal that he would be resigning and moving to Alaska. She was surprised because she knew that Tommy liked teaching and she knew his passion for hiking and the outdoors of Virginia. He told her the fiction about his father which she readily accepted. He also told Hannah that he had made an appointment for a vasectomy a week from Friday, thus giving him the weekend to recuperate. He looked at her sadly and said, "It's sad because we won't have any more babies and it's good because we can make love without anything coming between us."

Eleven days later, Tommy had a vasectomy. As Hannah drove him home from the doctor's office, Hannah said with resignation, "Well that's the end of Evans biological babies."

She saw that Tommy was overcome with emotion and had difficulty talking. "I feel less like a man, which I know is silly, but I do. I suppose I felt that somehow my manliness was related to baby making. I'll have to be more rational. I can't let my guard down until we leave. No one can know about the vasectomy because that would be a red flag that something was wrong. We were always saying we wanted 10 kids and suddenly I have a vasectomy. No, we have to add that to our growing pile of secrets."

Hannah reached over and held his hand, "You are my man whether you share your sperm with me or not. And you can let your guard down when you're with me. You can't be vigilant 24/7. You might break and I won't be able to take over. I don't have your strength. I couldn't make it without you. With twins, there's always a dominant one and that's you. I'm the weak one."

And that night, she had the good dream for the first time. She dreamt that she and Tommy were frolicking in turquoise blue, clear water in a small enclosed tank, like one at an aquarium. They looked young, possibly five or six years old. They were nude and their hair was floating above them in undulating swirls. They laughed as they did somersaults and played tag. As she touched Tommy, she felt his skin was like that of a seal, rubbery and cold. And she heard them laughing joyously against a backdrop of a beating heart. It sounded like Poe's tell-tale heart, only more muted. She didn't realize that her senses could be so vivid in a dream. Her sense of touch, hearing, and seeing were sharp, even sharper than in reality.

When she woke in the morning, she vividly recalled every aspect of the dream, the sight of them in the tank, the feel of Tommy's skin, and sound of their laughter. So that she wouldn't

forget it, she immediately described the dream, in great detail, to Tommy. As she spoke, she noted down what she was saying so she could forever savor the glorious sights, sounds, and touch sensations of the dream. Just the memory of the dream made her feel good. It made her smile warmly at the sight of the innocent happiness of the two children.

“Tommy, what do you think about my dream? Do you think I was actually recalling our time in utero or was I imagining how it must have been?”

“Hannah, I don’t think you could possibly recall the time in utero. Dreams aren’t records of actual events; they’re the mind’s creations based on events. They’re the mind’s wildest fantasies. Go on-line and read up on the meaning of dreams.”

Later in the day, she googled dreams and read explanations from religious to psychoanalytic, but nothing seemed to fit hers other than her explanation that she was recalling her time in Brooke's uterus. With each subsequent dream, she tried to remember more. She saw that she and Tommy were connected by a thin cord, but they were not connected to anything else; they were not connected to Brooke.

She had the dream three more times and then the bad dream came. It started like the good one, but as they were playing their games, the tank filled with a black ink-like substance. It filled their lungs, choking them. Hannah could actually see the ink enter their mouths as they tried to swim away from it. Their laughter was replaced by a booming evil laugh, Brooke's laugh. The noise of the pounding heart was now fast and deafeningly loud. She jolted awake afraid that she and Tommy would choke to death. She actually felt a choking sensation and coughed convulsively. Tommy startled awake, and asked with alarm, “What’s the matter? Are you ok?”

She described the dream. “This time Brooke was trying to infect us with her evil. She was trying to kill us. And she will if she ever finds out about us.”

He tried comforting her, but he was spooked by the dream too. "It was only a bad dream. She’s not going to find out about us and she can’t kill us. When you obsess about Brooke all day, it overflows into your sleep and that’s why you had that bad dream. Put her out of your mind. She can’t do anything to us. Now go back to sleep."

Hannah continued to have the good and bad dreams off and on over the next few years. Most of the time it was the good dream, but when there were crises in her life, the bad dream returned.

Tommy and Hannah made lists of the many things they had to do in the following two months: sell the house, arrange for the move and storage of the furniture, give away the plants and the cats, and make arrangements with the lawyer for Mary Ann's needs. The list grew daily. Although they were busy, they got out to hike as often as possible knowing that their opportunity to do so was drawing to a close. As the weather grew warmer, they took their suppers to the mountains staying until the sky began to lose light.

Hannah did not get her period the next month. She knew she was pregnant. From her three previous experiences, she knew her body well. She was sure they had created a life that night when they fucked. She didn't say anything to Tommy because she thought she might miscarry. Maybe she was hoping to miscarry so the baby wouldn't be a reminder of that night of violence and rage and her meeting with Brooke. But this pregnancy was more like her first one. Her breasts swelled immediately, she had morning nausea and insatiable hunger. Two weeks after she failed to get her period, Tommy said, "You're pregnant, aren't you?"

"How do you know?"

"Your breasts, your glow, your morning nausea, your eating everyone's leftovers. You weren't like this when you miscarried. You were like this when you were pregnant with Leslie."

"You know when it happened, don't you?"

"Maybe. It could have been then or the night before. Remember I was so worried about leaving you alone that we made love in the greenhouse before we went to sleep and then again in the middle of the night. It's just as likely it was then. We'll never know, but I know you think it was that time I want to forget. If this baby makes it, it will remind you of our orgy and Brooke. You'll think this baby wasn't produced by love, but by lust and guilt and fear."

"Don't say that. This baby will be loved just like Leslie. I don't want to go to the doctor for a while. Let's wait and see. I don't want to get involved with Ellen. She might want to do some tests and I only want an ultrasound. I have to be careful around her. I like her a lot and she has a way of getting me to talk."

"Maybe you should get an abortion."

Hannah looked at Tommy with horror. "Don't you even think that! Are you crazy? I want another child. You don't mean it. I know you don't mean it."

“But what happens if it’s defective or deformed?”

“Then it’s defective and deformed. Lots of people who aren’t twins have kids who are defective and deformed.”

“I don’t know.”

“Tommy, I let you make all the decisions now. I suppose I feel you’re my older brother and you know what’s best, but this is one decision I will not let you make. If this pregnancy doesn’t end naturally, I’m going to have this baby. Please Tommy. I need this baby now. I need to bring it to our exile.”

“Our exile. Don’t be so God damn melodramatic. Our exile. Where we going – to the island of Elba? You’re getting crazier all the time. Exile my ass.”

“I think I may love this baby in a very special way knowing what’s in its genes. Can you love it?”

“Of course, I’ll love it.” To himself, Tommy said, “I hope.”

Tommy stopped playing soccer and hiking. He told his friends and team mates that he had too much to do with the move to Alaska. Everyday when he returned from school, he called real estate agents, talked with the lawyer about plans for Mary Ann, arranged to sell what they weren’t planning to take, or packed. They found a real estate agent who said she had a buyer who had always admired the house. So they never put the house on the market and they got their asking price. The only thing that the buyer didn’t like was the greenhouse. She thought it was a dumpy eyesore, and furthermore, she didn’t grow flowers. She wanted Tommy and Hannah to pay for its removal. Tommy said that it was part of the house and she would have to remove it herself. After some negotiating, the buyer agreed to take it down after she took possession. Tommy never told Hannah about this. The symbolism of the destruction of the greenhouse and the destruction of their lives would be too painful for Hannah to bear.

Tommy established an arrangement with their attorney and accountant to manage Mary Ann’s affairs. Money would be available for her care as well as any necessary medical needs. Hannah couldn’t meet with them. It was too hurtful to formally cede responsibility for her mother to relative strangers. With each passing day, she felt increasing guilty about abandoning Mary Ann so she spent longer and longer times with her on her daily visits. She brought Leslie and her toys hoping that Leslie would have some memories of her grandmother buried deep in her psyche when she grew up. But she really didn’t want Leslie to remember Mary Ann as she

was now. Somehow she wanted her to have a memory of the vibrant, loving woman Mary Ann had been pre-Alzheimer's. But that was impossible.

Hannah was unsure what to do with Spot and Puff. They were 12 years old and still had many years ahead of them. She knew they wouldn't adjust to cold Alaska even if they were in the house all the time. Sylvia, one of the women Hannah worked with at the SPCA said that she would gladly take them. She already had three cats and welcomed the idea of two more. Cat people didn't seem to be affected by numbers, like dog people. Although Hannah knew they would be well cared for, she felt like she was giving her children away. She also gave her plants to friends and teachers she had worked with at Waterview Elementary. With every plant she gave away, she felt as if she were cutting off a piece of her finger.

Hannah had waited until she missed her second period before making an appointment with Ellen. Even before Ellen had a chance to examine Hannah, Tommy told her that they would be moving to Alaska in July. She kidded that she hoped there were doctors there. Tommy responded that he would deliver the baby since he was experienced at cutting the cord.

After examining Hannah, she said, "Well folks, this baby is big. The heart beat is strong. Hannah, as I recall you talked about checking with your biological mother about genetic problems because of your two misses. Did you contact her?"

"Yes, but I didn't find anything special. Just heart problems."

"I think everything will be fine with this pregnancy. Don't worry. Contact me when you get a doctor in Alaska and I'll send your records. This kid is going to be a rugged Alaskan. He or she will probably win the Iditerod someday."

After they left the office, Hannah asked Tommy, "What's the Iditerod?"

"It's a thousand mile dog sled race from Anchorage to Nome in the middle of winter. You'll hear lots about it once we're up there."

"Tommy, aren't you glad I didn't have an abortion?"

"I would never have let you go through with it. I was just talking. Only seven more months to worry about how this baby will turn out. Even though she says it's healthy, I still worry. Just like my dad."

"We'll be so busy, we won't have time to worry." As she spoke these words, she knew they were untrue. Unconsciously, she and Tommy would foresee the many catastrophes that might affect their baby.

The first time Hannah felt the baby move, she was in the shower. Although she was ecstatic when she first felt Leslie move, this time was different. This was an affirmation of life. Tommy was undressing for bed when a dripping nude Hannah entered the bedroom.

"The baby moved. I'm not going to miscarry. We're going to have another child. Tommy, we're going to make it with this one. I know it."

Tommy caressed and kissed her stomach waiting for any signal from within. He said,

"Let's nudge the baby." They then got into the shower together. After soapy, bubbly intercourse, Tommy said, "I didn't feel anything. Let's try again. Let's go to the greenhouse because that's where things grow." After a dirty encounter against a table of plants in a pitch black greenhouse, the baby still hadn't moved.

"Well, I think we'll have to wait. Maybe we're scaring the baby with all this activity. I also don't know if I can do this anymore. Twice in a row and I'm running out of steam. We used to be able to do it three times a night in our early days. I'm not as young as I used to be."

They returned to the shower to remove the greenhouse dirt and as Tommy was washing Hannah's stomach, the baby moved. They both laughed with relief and joy. They hugged under the streaming water until it turned cold. Shivering, they got into bed joyous in the knowledge that they would have another baby, perhaps a disabled or sick baby, but their baby.

As their time in Lewiston was drawing to an end, friends and teachers from their schools offered to host farewell parties, but Hannah and Tommy refused knowing it would be too difficult to say goodbye to the people they didn't want to leave. The only Lewiston parties Hannah wanted to remember were her wedding, Leslie's baby shower, and Kelly's wedding.

Their last event in Lewiston, Kelly's wedding, was July 3rd. It was being held in a small stone country church followed by a reception at a quaint country inn. Hannah had helped with the arrangements which kept her mind off the move that would take place five days after the wedding.

Every pew in the church was crammed tightly as Kelly walked down the white runner on the main aisle. She was ravishingly beautiful in a white silk dress and a lace veil covering her hair which she styled in a mass of curls. She held a bouquet of multi-colored summer flowers from Hannah's garden. Kelly's natural beauty and her joy at marrying made her glow; she shone as if she had an internal light that had been switched on as she strolled down the aisle.

Brad was dressed casually, wearing a blue shirt and khakis. It didn't matter what he wore because all eyes were on his face which radiated adoration for Kelly. Brad's sons, dressed like Brad and also looking happy, were serving as his best men.

Hannah, in a midnight blue low-cut dress which showed her growing bosom, preceded Kelly down the aisle. Hannah walked next to Leslie in case she needed help strewing the rose buds in Kelly's path. Leslie wore a white dress with a sash of the same shade of blue as Hannah's dress. They both wore flowers in their hair, but unfortunately, the flowers kept slipping out of Leslie's thin hair. She had inherited Tommy's thin blond hair, and not Hannah's thick black hair. Although there was an official wedding photographer, Tommy took countless photos of his girls, especially posing them outdoors against a backdrop of the lush mountains and the charming church. He wanted to preserve as many pictures as his memory card could hold. When Hannah looked back on these photos years later, she was surprised at how happy she looked. There was no trace of anxiety or sadness about her impending move to Alaska. Hannah looked like Hannah always looked in photos – perky and smiley. She would wonder about these photos. Was she a good actress who could hide her true feelings? Or had she been able to compartmentalize her mind, happy for the moment without a thought for where she would be headed in five days?

Kelly and Brad's departure for their honeymoon was emotional for Hannah and Kelly. They hugged tightly because they knew they would not see much of each other in the future. Their honeymoon to Jamaica would last seven days so Hannah would be gone when Kelly returned. They both knew that their loving sisterly relationship was ending. When they got in their car to go home, Hannah said, "I will never have a friend like that again. I feel like my life before I met you is officially coming to an end now."

Two days later was Leslie's second birthday, but Hannah and Tommy were too busy to observe it with anything other than cupcakes and new toys to keep her occupied as she embarked on her new life.

Packing was the hardest part of the move. Hannah had to decide what to take from her life in Virginia and what to discard forever. She discarded the remaining boxes of her father's school materials that had yielded her birth secret just three years earlier. She never looked in any of them. Although she was certain they contained no surprises, she was taking no chances. She packed all family pictures, knowing she would pore over them many times over the years. Without Tommy's knowledge, Hannah took photos of every room in the house, the outside of the house from every angle, her garden, her greenhouse, every indoor plant, and the cats. She printed the pictures and put them in an album. She knew she wouldn't be able to look at these for a while, but she needed to know that she would always be able to see her Garden of Eden.

Hannah and Tommy decided to sell the antique furniture in the dining and living rooms. They had estimates from several antique dealers and took the highest price which was many thousands more than they anticipated. Seeing the furniture movers take away the table, chairs, and sideboard from the dining room and the two chairs, settee, and antique tables from the living room was painful. Although Hannah knew they were just pieces of wood and fabric, they represented her life for 30 years and her family's life for much longer. Without the furniture that had occupied them for almost 50 years, the rooms became hollow caverns.

On July 8th, the movers packed the truck for the cross-continental trip to storage in Alaska. They put their Honda on the truck since they planned to fly. Hannah had sold her car because it couldn't withstand the rugged driving in Alaska. As Tommy and Hannah watched the moving truck leave Vista Road, they expressed surprise and shock at how easily and swiftly it had been to dispose of their lives in Lewiston. Hannah had wanted to drag out the move, but she knew it was best not to linger.

Kevin had loaned them sleeping bags so they could spend their last night in the house even though it was empty. Leslie thought it was fun that they would all be sleeping on the floor. Hannah asked Tommy to take Leslie for a walk so that she could be alone in the house to say her goodbyes. She walked from room to room as she talked to her mother and father reminiscing about memories that lived in each room. "Daddy, remember how you always tried to get the tallest Christmas tree to fit in the round window. One time you had to cut the top off because it got squashed on the ceiling and we couldn't get the angel on top. Mom, remember the time you burned the Thanksgiving turkey because it was so big it overflowed the sides of the pan. It took days for you to scrub the grease off the oven. Dad, remember putting pencil marks on the wall in the back hall to see how much I grew every few months. And remember

how we always roasted marshmallows in the fireplace when it snowed. Oh God, I hope I don't lose these memories. You were the best parents. I'll always love you."

She went to Leslie's bedroom and stood at the turret window. This was the room where she had spent most of her life. This is the room where she and Tommy had come together for the first time. She ran her hands over the walls as she said good-bye over and over. She had to leave the room or she knew that she would start crying and she didn't know if she would ever stop.

She ended her tour in the greenhouse. "Oh Daddy, we both loved our plants so much. Will I ever be able to make anything grow again? Hopefully, the life I'm growing inside me will be a good one."

Tommy and Leslie came back with burgers and fries Tommy had picked up at a nearby Burger King. They ate their last meal in the house they all so dearly loved. When they were sure that Leslie was asleep, they moved their sleeping bags to the sunroom and for the last time they made love in their home. They made leisurely love until they were satiated. They returned to the living room and curled up in one sleeping bag. Tommy said, "Good night my sister." Hannah replied, "Goodnight my brother."

The next day Kevin picked them up for the drive to Dulles. They were glad that they could not talk about their feelings. Kevin kept the conversation light and they all pretended that they were heading to a happy existence in a new land.

Chapter12

During the weeks before their move, Tommy and Hannah had little time to openly share their apprehensions about their uncertain future because their days were filled with non-stop, necessary to-dos to formally end their lives in Lewiston. On the first leg of their trek back to Fairbanks, suppressed, simmering emotions surfaced. Leslie fell asleep immediately leaving them free to concentrate on each other. Tommy and Hannah communicated solely through their eyes and bodies. Words were unnecessary, and in fact intrusive. Tommy signaled that the inevitable was happening. Hannah replied that she would cling tightly to him as if they were being carried on a tsunami to Alaska. They tightly clasped each others' hands as they stared ahead trying to see what was unseeable. Tommy witnessed Hannah changing as they neared Fairbanks. She appeared frailer, even older, as her body and face drooped. Tommy's consciously willed his energy to penetrate Hannah's skin. He needed her to gain strength to face the difficulties that awaited them, but he was unsure if she was capable of this.

They viewed the coming days with fear, dread, trepidation, and anxiety, not foreseeing how Alaska would transform their very beings. They would change from wanting their lives to be fairy tales, to recognizing that their lives had to be non-fiction. They would mature, they would mutate. Although they were fraternal twins, they would react to the changes in their environment in uniquely different way.

The Evans's permanent move to Fairbanks was exhausting like their previous trip, but this time they arrived to pleasant weather with temperatures in the 60's, sunlight throughout the day and much of the night, and a rested child. When Ben greeted them at the airport, he said, "Look at the good weather I arranged especially for your arrival."

Tommy replied sardonically, "This will last a whole two or three days and then we'll have a blizzard."

Ben shot Tommy a stern look reverting to his role as THE father, and said, "Tommy, remember, we're going to be positive. I don't want to hear any of that shit."

"Yeah, I'm sorry. I'm just exhausted. I had to hold Leslie for most of the trip. She wouldn't let me put her down for a minute and my arm is aching. She knew she was coming to the land of the scary dogs."

"Then give my sweetheart to me."

He held out his arms and Leslie eagerly jumped into them. Ben's sternness evaporated as he spoke fondly to his beloved granddaughter. When Ben was in Leslie's presence, he mellowed, becoming a human teddy bear. He even reverted to baby talk, which was laughable coming from this hulk of a man.

"I've got a special present for a little girl named Leslie." He pulled a toy dog from a bag he was holding. It was a replica of one of his huskies.

"Is this my doggie?"

"Yes. We need to think of a name for him. How about calling him Alaska for your new home?"

As she hugged the dog, she said, "I love you Laska." Laska was to be one of Leslie's favorite stuffed animals in her menagerie of hundreds of animals, almost all purchased by her doting grandfather.

Hannah reminded Leslie to thank Ben. Leslie put her arms around Ben's neck and gave him a strangling hug punctuated by a kiss squarely on his lips. Turning to Tommy and Hannah, Ben said, "I know this is selfish to say, but for me, to have Leslie greet me like this is worth your move here."

Tommy and Hannah thought to themselves that at least one person was happy about the move.

Ben drove them to a car rental agency at the airport. He had arranged for a rental until their Honda arrived. They followed Ben as they drove through barren, nondescript streets to the place he had rented for them. When they pulled up to their new "home," Tommy and Hannah gasped with disbelief at the hideous, small duplex with a gravel parking area in front of the door. The only comparable housing in Lewiston were the squalid buildings where many immigrants lived. Never had Hannah and Tommy envisioned themselves living in a slum. Soon, they would learn that their new home was not unusual in Fairbanks, but it wouldn't lessen their abhorrence at how low their lifestyle had sunk.

Ben selected this place because it was a five minute walk to the coffee shop where Tommy would be working, thus freeing up the car for Hannah until they could buy a second vehicle. They also were able to rent it month-to-month which gave them the flexibility to move to a bigger place without worrying about getting out of a lease. Ben led them to the front door and threw the keys to Tommy who unlocked the door to the place they would unsuccessfully try to call home. They entered directly into the living room with its sole window showcasing a close-up view of their rented car. They walked through to the eating area and the kitchen which led to a small laundry room and a back door to a yard with playground equipment that Ben had bought for Leslie. The bright orange and yellow of the plastic play cube brightened the bleak landscape of the sparsely grassed yard. Leslie ran to the equipment, ready to slide down its short incline, but Tommy stopped her saying, "Not now, Leslie, we'll play later. You'll get lots of time on it because soon it'll be too cold and snowy to play outside. I suppose we could bring it inside, but it'll take up half the living room. Hey grandpa, thanks for the playground set. I think Leslie is going to love being spoiled by her grandpa."

"And her grandpa will find lots of ways to spoil her," Ben said with a broad grin which he beamed at Leslie.

They walked back into the house and went into the master bedroom which would be just large enough for their bed and dressers and a second, smaller bedroom which would hold Leslie's child-sized bed and dresser. The sole bathroom, between the two bedrooms, looked like a before-scene on a TV ad to re-do a mildewed, grungy bathroom. Hannah couldn't begin to estimate the number of hours it would take to scour the dirt from the grout between the tiles and scrub the rust stains from the toilet bowl. She would have to buy an army of toothbrushes for the grout battle. And there was no way anyone in the Evans family was going to sit in the grimy tub until it was cleaned. Until the tub passed Hannah's inspection, they would take showers, even Leslie.

After the tour, Hannah coldly said, "Where's the rest of it?"

Ben replied, "I know it's small, but it'll be okay until you find what you're looking for. And it's the best place I could find with a month-to-month lease so you can move as soon as you find something better. I'm sure you'll be out in a month or two. You'll sleep at my place until your furniture arrives."

As they drove to Ben's, Hannah whimpered, like a puppy dog. Tommy harshly hissed at her, "Stop it Hannah. I don't want Leslie to hear you. Try to present a strong front. I know it's hard, but think of her. I don't want her to see you showing such weakness. That's not how you

want her to perceive her mother – as some sniveling weakling. She won't have any idea of why you're crying and it'll scare her."

Hannah knew he was right so she struggled to control herself. She would have to save her crying for when she was alone. She would have to make an appointment with herself to shed tears.

When they arrived at Ben's house, they found that Ella had prepared an elaborate Italian dinner to welcome them to Alaska. She served the meal like a waitress and while everyone was finishing up, she sat down to eat her meal. Her behavior was reminiscent of mothers of earlier generations who always served their family first. She rarely spoke unless asked a question, but her body language showed that she was aware of the conversation.

After dinner, Tommy, Hannah, and Leslie retired to the guest room. Leslie was tired and immediately fell asleep in her pack and play. Tommy and Hannah looked at each other unable to articulate their feelings about the horrible place they would be living. In all their planning for the move, they had never thought about where they might live. Had they tried to predict their future "home," they never would have foreseen such an ugly, squalid place.

Hannah's tearful reaction to their new home had turned to seething anger, which was confounded by extreme fatigue from traveling. She was riding a seesaw of emotions – from sadness to anger to fear to sorrow. Her mind was never still; it was in constant flux. She felt like a mental chameleon, shedding one emotion for another as her thoughts jumped from green, lush Lewiston to harsh, unforgiving Fairbanks; from her spacious, sparkling clean home on Vista Road to the grimy, cramped duplex; from the thought of Mary Ann and happy childhood memories to the thought of Ella and a future with seedy people like her; and from recalling Kelly and the joys of friendship to a life with no friends, a life of solitary confinement, except for Tommy, Ben, and Leslie.

"It's not bad enough that we have to live in this wasteland, but your father picks a shithole for us to live in. Maybe he really doesn't want us to move here after all. Could he really think we could adjust from our lovely home to this? No one could. I can't imagine anyplace in Lewiston like this. I can't imagine anyplace like this anywhere."

"Hannah, believe it or not, that place is not considered a bad place here. I'm sure it was the best he could find. You know he wouldn't pick something bad on purpose. For God's sake, he wants us to move here. He doesn't want to do anything to make our move harder for us. It'll be okay for a while."

“Where are we going to put the baby? It’s due in January. Are we going to be able to get out by then?”

“I’ll make sure we do, but if we don’t, we can put a small crib in our room.”

“This place is worse than my picture of hell. I feel like we’ll be living in a slum with rats and filth and drugs and crime. Can you imagine anything growing in that backyard? Even grass can’t grow. Just think of my gorgeous yard with its flowers that grew just by breathing. And our front yard is gravel with a picturesque view of a car and beyond that more slum housing. How can Leslie grow up in this environment? She won’t be able to go out and play. During the winter we’ll be locked in this prison. Long, long winters in this prison.

We don’t deserve this punishment. I think I’d rather have public disdain for our relationship and live in Lewiston than live with our secret in this place. I don’t have to worry about going to hell after I die. I’m there now. Tommy. Why are you punishing us like this?”

Tommy replied angrily, “I’m not punishing us. And stop exaggerating. Sure you’d rather be arrested for incest and have Leslie taken away from us and live in jail in pretty little Lewiston. If you think this place is bad, try a jail cell. You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Hannah got into the twin bed and coldly said, “Why don’t you sleep in the other bed.”

With fury in his voice and body, Tommy said, “No way. I told you I will always sleep in bed with you. I’ve been sleeping with you since we were conceived and I will sleep with you until I die.”

Hannah didn’t reply. She just turned her back to Tommy. He got in bed and took her in his arms. “My Hannah, I know you’re angry about where we’re going to live and so am I. I don’t want to live there anymore than you do and I don’t want Leslie to grow up in a place like that. Just try to adjust for a little while. Everything will be temporary until we find what we want and create a home for ourselves.

Maybe this is a test to see if our love is as great as we think it is. I don’t care where we live as long as I have you. I have the strength for both of us so let me share it with you. I’ll make you stronger. We developed our will to live in our nine months in the real hell of Brooke’s

womb. We fought to survive then and we'll fight to survive now. Just think of this as another battle against Brooke. She made us move here. But we'll beat her. She'll never beat us."

Hannah pulled back to look into his eyes. The anger was melting as she choked out the words, "Whither thou goest, I shall go, even if it's to a slum in the frozen north. Tommy, maybe you're right. Maybe this is a test of how strong our love is. If it is, we'll pass it with flying colors. I promise. I promise to get stronger. Just help me. I can't do it alone." Then she snuggled into his arms and fell into a deep, exhausted sleep.

Over the next few days Hannah had little time to think about anything other than making the duplex habitable and shopping for necessities. They had unexpected help from Ella's two kids. Ben bankrolled the \$15 an hour Tommy paid them for their help, and they provided much-needed muscle to clean the bathroom and the kitchen. Ellen was relentless as she wielded toothbrushes to carefully clear mold and dirt from the bathroom tile and floors. She also proved to be a responsible baby sitter, entertaining Leslie with books and doll play while Hannah ran errands. Although John was rail thin, he showed surprising physical strength as he easily moved furniture and carried heavy boxes. Tommy and Hannah looked on John and Ellen as oddities, but they found themselves gradually more accepting of them. They were just kids struggling with the challenges of drugs, sex, and the unique demands of growing up in Alaska. Tommy realized they weren't too different from some of the kids he had taught in Lewiston. Ellen and John sensed Hannah and Tommy's changing attitudes toward them and responded with friendliness. They knew Ben disliked them, even despised them, so they were glad to get some positive attention from someone in Ben's family.

At the end of one of their evenings of strenuous house cleaning, Tommy offered them cokes and asked them to hang around for a while.

John said, "You guys are really nice. Not like Ben. He's a shit. We don't usually like grown-ups, but you're different, maybe because you were teachers and know kids. But actually our teachers don't like us so it's not that I suppose. I wish Ben was more like you. He hates our guts and can't stand to be with us. All he wants to do is screw Ella. He can't wait until we move out. He never talks to us or even looks at us. And he won't give us any money. He makes us work."

Tommy found it hard to defend Ben, agreeing to himself that John and Ellen fully understood Ben's feelings towards them. "Maybe if you did things for him, he might see you in a different light. Or, if you didn't show how much you hate him."

Ellen said, "It's Ella too. She can't stand us and we're her kids! She can't wait until we're gone so she doesn't have to be bothered with us. She wants me to run away with some guy so she won't have to be embarrassed by me. Don't you think I know how she looks at me? She thinks I'm disgusting. She tells me to wear loose clothes so no one will see my fat. I tell her to wear loose clothes so no one will have to look at her silicone balloon boobs. She keeps telling me to go on a diet and that I look like a pig. She stares at me when I eat, like I'll really stop if she keeps staring. She used to tell me that guys wouldn't be interested in me because I'm fat, but I proved her wrong. Guys tell me they don't care if I'm fat as long as I'm good at sucking and fucking, and I am super good at that. Well, I think she's a disgusting whore. She's just fucking Ben so he'll support her in style. She knows he's filthy rich. At least I don't do it for money. I just do it for fun."

John joined in complaining. "She's such a hypocrite. Before she was with Ben, she'd do weed with me and I was only 12. I started smoking at 10 because of her. She always gave me cigarettes. She's not supposed to give me money for smokes or weed, but she does. She just doesn't tell Ben. Now she acts like some anti-drug, anti-smoking crusader. She keeps yapping at me about how wrong it is when Ben's around. She only says that because she knows Ben's against it. She's like those preachers who're against sex and then it comes out that they're screwing little boys."

The conversation was quickly moving in a direction that Tommy didn't like. He didn't want to get involved in their lives. He didn't want to hear their complaints. He had enough of his own problems without taking on theirs. He abruptly cut the conversation short.

"Hey guys, why don't you share your feelings with Ben and Ella sometime. Maybe you can work things out. I think it's time for you to hit the road. You have school tomorrow."

After they left, Tommy said, "Does everybody in this state have issues? Aren't there any just plain old happy people? It's not just this state. It's people all over and we didn't see it in Lewiston. All the nice weather and pretty scenery and affluence got in the way of seeing the world for what it really is. We were blinded. We lived in our house with steel walls so we wouldn't have to see what was outside 76 Vista Road. That wasn't just our house, it was our jail. We locked ourselves in and we locked people out.

Just think of the people we knew in Lewiston starting with you and your father and mother. Think of your father honestly. He did screw his students. I know you don't want to hear it, but it's true. He was a lech, a predator. I think that crazy Brooke was telling the truth. And he was

my father too. God, what a terrible thought! I hate thinking of that man as my father and how he created me. It wasn't Brooke's fault. It was his. Supposedly, he was a responsible adult, but he took advantage of a sick girl who he should have helped. I think of us being created when they were in this seedy motel just enjoying a good screw. Not the way you'd like to think of being created. No love, just pure lust. Just sex for the sake of sex – no emotion, just physical satisfaction. That's what we're the product of. It really was cooperative rape. He raped her and she wanted it. What would you say if I took advantage of one of my students when I was teaching? Would you forgive me like you're forgiving your father? No, you'd throw me out like an animal who uses his students for his own needs."

"Don't talk about my father like that. He's not really your father. You never knew him. You can't understand my feelings for him." Hannah couldn't accept Tommy's words. If she did, her image of her beloved father would crumble. She put her hands over her ears to block out Tommy's words, but he pulled them down.

"No, I can't, but I can see him clearer than you can."

Hannah sat on the couch next to Tommy, looking away from him at an array of pictures of Leslie on the coffee table, as if looking at the purity of the baby in these photos would cleanse their conversation.

"Think of me and my father and mother. My father lived with that animal even though she was a crazy addict. You couldn't get any worse than Lucy. She was at the bottom of the pit for humanity. And she was OUR aunt. How the hell could he have adopted me when he knew what Lucy was like? He must have realized what she would do to me. And think of my father now. I hate to see how he's changed. He wasn't like this before he moved here, but I really don't know since I was away at school and when I lived in Fairbanks, I lived in an apartment. He certainly wasn't like this when we lived in Virginia. I don't remember meeting any of his girlfriends even though I knew he had women he saw, I suppose for sex. And he never even stayed out all night. When he said he was going out for business, I never knew if it was really business, but I could tell that he was different some nights. He looked disheveled and once I even saw lipstick on his shirt. On those nights, he took a shower as soon as he came in. I never asked about his love life or his sex life. It was a topic that was none of my business. Anyhow, I didn't really want to share him with anyone else. I wanted him and his complete adoration. I needed it. He was the only person who loved me. I needed his love so I could love myself. And

I'm so thankful for the love he gave me because it made me into a good man, a man who is totally devoted to his wife and child. He put his family first and now I'm doing the same.

Now he's just after money and sex with that bitch. I can't even say her name. She's just after his money. She's a whore. God, I can't stand to look at her and her make-up and her big hair and her braless bouncing boobs. I agree with Ellen. She's disgusting. Maybe with us being here, he'll get rid of her. He won't need her. He can get sex from whores or women around town.

But it's not just our family. Consider Kelly and her first husband. This great doctor who beats up his wife and Kelly stayed with him, finding excuses for his abuse. And Keith who only complains and sees the dark side of everybody and everything. He wouldn't recognize something good if it hit him in the face. He wallows in negativity and darkness. The people here are the same as the people in Lewiston. They're the same as people all over. Weak, sinful, evil."

Hannah turned to Tommy, taking his hands as she looked into his eyes. "I don't want to believe that. I can't. I have to believe that everybody is good at heart and the world is a happy place, or at least the rest of the world outside Alaska. If I lose that belief, I won't be Hannah anymore. I don't know who I'll be. I can't lose myself."

Tommy got up from the couch to pace the floor, refusing to look at Hannah. "Don't be so stupid. God, you're like a five year old. Grow up. I think you're deteriorating. You're becoming a simple minded idiot. You're becoming like your mother. People are the same everywhere and we're like everyone else. We're no better."

"We're good people and we were good people in Lewiston and we'll be good people in Fairbanks. Just think of what loving parents we are."

"Yeah, we're good people. Brother and sister refusing to stop sleeping together. We're like everybody else. We do what we want. We're selfish. We're risking having this baby even though we know what it could be born with. If we were moral people, we would have aborted this baby. How could we knowingly bring a baby into the world with all the possibilities of it having problems? If we were moral people, we would split up. But we'll never do that."

"I could never split up."

“You know I couldn't either, but let's admit that what we're doing is wrong and live with it. Yes, I am punishing us by living in this God-forsaken place. I think that will atone for what we're doing, but it won't. Nothing will. We just have to recognize ourselves for what we are. People who choose to do evil, and it is evil, otherwise there would be no genetic consequences. The reason there are laws against incest in all societies, even the most primitive, is to control people's urges when they live close to each other and the more modern reasons for laws against incest are based on what we know happens genetically. The closer the relationship, the more likely the recessive genes containing all the bad things that are overcome in a random pool have a chance to get expressed. From early man to now, incest is wrong and should be wrong. But we'll do it anyhow because we have no choice. To split up would be to die. We can't. We're bound by an unbreakable umbilical cord that grew between us when we were inside the bitch's uterus. This is not a cord that can be cut.”

“Tommy, we're good people who love each other and our daughter. You know I'm good and I know you are. How could you think of us like these other people?”

“Hannah, you're one of the kindest people in the world, but you are still consciously committing an immoral act. You are screwing your brother. I have always thought of myself as a good person, but I am screwing my sister. We're just like everybody else. No, we're worse. We are consciously violating a rule that every culture has. No, we're not violating it – we're flaunting it. I can't take anymore of this. I have to get out.”

But the farthest Tommy could go was the back yard. He took a kitchen chair so he could sit in the yard waiting for darkness that never came. Tommy did not go to bed that night. After Hannah went to bed, he came in and slept on the sofa. Hannah could not sleep. She stared into space thinking of how her life was heading into a crash landing on an unknown landscape. She was too terrified to cry.

At 5:00 in the morning, Tommy got into bed and took Hannah into his arms. “Hannah, I love you with all my heart. Forget what I said. I didn't mean any of it. It's just the pressure of the move.”

They made tender love, but they both knew that Tommy meant every word of what he had said and that they would be changed forever by their acknowledgement of their sin.

Their lives settled into a routine. Tommy went to work at 8:00 and returned at 5:00 on Mondays through Fridays; and on the weekends, he dropped into the shop at different times to

make sure everything was going smoothly. He bought a used Subaru wagon which freed up the Honda for sole use by Hannah, who was busy finding places to shop. She shopped at the local Walmart at least once a day. She bought paint for the walls so that she and Tommy could cover the grimy white walls with bright colors. She never thought the bright yellow paint she used for their bedroom would look good, but she was pleased to see that the walls reflected the occasional sunlight that managed to penetrate the windows, actually brightening the room. The shocking pink she painted Leslie's room made it dazzle. Perhaps the new paint didn't change the rooms that much, but Hannah had to believe it did, and anyhow the rooms were better than before. She bought blinds and curtains for the windows. The lacey curtains over the kitchen window gave the room a quaint country look, or perhaps that was again Hannah's imagination working overtime. The blinds for the bathroom and bedroom not only finished off the rooms, but provided much needed privacy because these rooms faced other duplexes on the other side of the yard.

Although Hannah was busy everyday with household chores, she made time to email Kelly and Mary Ann's nurse at the nursing home. Every day the nurse sent the same return email. Mary Ann did not change. Kelly was happy in her marriage and said that she and Brad were working on making a baby. She passed on the latest gossip from Lewiston, most of which became less and less interesting to Hannah.

Hannah and Tommy were so busy that they didn't pay much attention to Hannah's pregnancy. With her first pregnancy, she was aware of every change in her body and constantly imagined what her developing baby was like based on her daily visits to websites describing fetal development. Now she only became aware of her pregnancy when she had a pronounced bout of morning sickness or someone commented on her voracious appetite. She was always hungry no matter how much she ate. Her pregnancy provided her with boundless energy for all the necessary house work she had to do to make the duplex habitable, and it also helped counteract the physical effects of the underlying depression hovering just below the surface of her consciousness. Perhaps she didn't want to think about her pregnancy because of her fear of what this baby would be like. Would it be Rosemary's baby? Would it be the devil's baby? She knew that Tommy tried not to think about her pregnancy because he, too, feared what monster might be developing in Hannah's abdomen.

Their public disclosure of Hannah's pregnancy came about one night when they were having dinner at Ben's,

Ben said, "Hannah, Ella tells me that you're pregnant."

“How does Ella know? Is she a witch doctor or something?”

“No. She noticed that you eat all the time and that you have a lot of energy and that you’re getting thicker in the middle. She went through two pregnancies so she knows.”

“Ella, why didn’t you say anything to me?”

“Well frankly, I’m not too comfortable talking to you. You guys have decided that you don’t like me and that I’m only good as a maid or a mother of kids who can help you.”

“That’s not true. We just don’t know you. I suppose we have to get to know you, but there’s no time for that. And the only way we see you is when you’re here working. Anyhow, you’re right. I’m pregnant.”

Ben said, “Tommy, I thought you had a vasectomy.”

“I did, but it was too late. I didn’t realize we made a baby just before Hannah went to see Brooke. We have to find a doctor here.”

“We don’t want an ob/gyn. We want a family doctor who will take care of all of us and deliver the baby. Do you know anyone like that?”

“Yeah. I’ve got a great doctor. His name is Ralph Sheldon. We all use him. He arranged for Ellen’s abortion even though he’s a Mormon, or anyway a fallen away Mormon. He moved here from California six years ago. He was married and had four kids, but he was leading a secret life as a gay man. He came out of the closet and moved here with his lover, a Chinese guy named James, who’s also the nurse in his office. You know I hate gays, but this guy is different. Not only is he a great doctor, he’s a fine man. I don’t even mind when he touches me when he examines me. I don’t ever feel like it’s a gay thing with him. The Chinaman is sorta spooky and I really don’t see what any guy would see in him. He rarely talks. Anyhow, Ralph hasn’t been able to see his kids since he left. The family disowned him. It’s his greatest sadness. You can actually see it when you look at him. It’s like he has a mask of grief on his face all the time, even when he’s smiling.”

Tommy commented, “Well, there’s another example of someone escaping the place they want to be to a place where all types of people are accepted, even gay Mormons living with Chinamen. Unbelievable.”

The next week Hannah and Tommy had an appointment with Dr. Sheldon. They felt a kinship with him as soon as they met him, but they still were not tempted to tell him about their secret. Yet they sensed that if there was a medical reason to disclose their twinship, Dr. Sheldon would not jeopardize their safety. Tommy said that this was why they had moved to Fairbanks, to find accomplices if they needed them. There would be no accomplices in Lewiston, only prosecutors.

Dr. Sheldon's office was like all other buildings in Fairbanks, one-story, gray, and plain. A receptionist, Sylvia, sat at a front desk surrounded by shelves of patient files. Sylvia was a middle aged woman with a welcoming smile who made all patients feel like family members. The waiting room was filled with toys to entertain waiting children. Leslie played with the toys and didn't want to leave them when Sylvia announced that Dr. Sheldon would see them. A Chinese man named James introduced himself as Dr. Sheldon's nurse. He took Hannah's vital signs and history. After a few minutes, Dr. Sheldon entered the room. He was a tall, angular man with a totally bald head. But Tommy and Hannah didn't notice his appearance, they focused on his manner. He exuded authority, warmth, and calmness. In just two minutes, Hannah and Tommy felt as if they were in the hands of a competent, caring doctor. He asked that everyone, except Leslie, call him Ralph; Leslie was to call him Dr. Ralph. He chatted comfortably with Leslie for a few minutes and then turned to Hannah and Tommy. After reviewing Hannah's medical records that Ellen had faxed, he asked Hannah and Tommy probing questions about their lives and health. He examined Hannah and told her that her pregnancy was going well and that he didn't anticipate any problems. Hannah had put on considerably more weight with this pregnancy than with Leslie indicating that the January 10th due date might be an early estimation, but they would have a better estimation of her due date after the sonogram. Because of the baby's size, Ralph hoped that Hannah could have a vaginal delivery, but she might need to consider the possibility of a caesarian. He suggested they might want to have an obstetrician monitor her pregnancy, but Hannah and Tommy said that they preferred him and if she had to have a caesarian, they would deal with it later. Ralph sensed that there was something more to this pregnancy and their move to Alaska, but he respected their privacy and didn't ask any questions because he didn't want any questions asked about his life and why he moved to Fairbanks, although it was common knowledge. He said that he would have an ultrasound taken at their next appointment and asked if they wanted to know the fetus's gender, and in unison Hannah and Tommy said yes.

Next Leslie eagerly presented herself for examination after watching her mom being examined. Tommy and Hannah waited with silent, hopefully hidden, apprehension about what

problems Leslie might suddenly evidence because of her parentage. But Ralph pronounced her healthy and then presented her with her choice of a sticker of a dog or a cat. She chose the cat.

At their next appointment, they learned that they were having a son. Ralph said with certainty, "This baby is definitely a boy. Look at his penis. There's no doubt." Tommy and Hannah looked, in vain, for a penis or anything that protruded, but they could only identify their son's spine.

When they returned home, Tommy and Hannah decided it was time to christen their son with a name.

"Hannah, what do you think of calling our son Thomas Jefferson Evans Jr.?"

Hannah's face lit up. "I think that's a great idea. I didn't think you'd consider that. But we can't call him Tommy. What would we call him?"

"How about T.J.?"

"Perfect. T.J." As she rubbed circles on her stomach, she said, "That fits him."

That night when they were in bed, Tommy caressed her stomach as he murmured over and over. "I love you T.J."

Hannah put her hands on top of Tommy's so they could both caress their son. "I love you too TJ."

Chapter 13

Tommy and Hannah shared their duplex with a neighbor, Denise, and her three year old son, Ringo. For the first three weeks that they lived in the duplex, they greeted each other warmly when they met by chance, but one Sunday morning, there was a knock at the door. It was Denise.

“Hey neighbors. I thought it was time we got to know each other. How about coming over for lunch later?”

Hannah replied, “We’d love to get to know you, but we hate to have you go to the trouble of making lunch.”

“I was making a pot of chili to last a few days so it’s no trouble. See you about 1:00. Bring lots of beer.”

Tommy was in constant contact with people at the coffee shop and had even met some men who he thought might eventually become friends. But Hannah was isolated, spending her days solely with Leslie and people she dealt with in stores. When they first moved to Fairbanks, Hannah kept herself busy fixing up the house, shopping, exploring Fairbanks, and caring for Leslie. The busier she was, the less she thought about Lewiston and the more she seemed to be adjusting to her new surroundings, but only on the surface. Although she missed Lewiston less and less, she found that she missed interacting with adults more and more. She needed to discuss something other than Elmo's problem of the day on Sesame Street or why the lettuce in Safeway was so brown. She yearned for acquaintances to discuss the stuff of everyday life. She dared not dream of having a friend. That was outside the realm of possibility.

Promptly at 1:00, the Evans family knocked at Denise’s door and were ushered into a nicely furnished apartment. But they didn't look at the furniture; instead, their eyes were immediately drawn to the bold oil paintings of a nude Denise gracing the walls. They had the feeling that they were in an art gallery where people just happened to reside.

Denise pointed to the walls and said, "Take a good look at the pictures first. Everyone does. We won't be able to talk until you get your fill of the art work."

After they settled Leslie into playing with her dolls and Ringo coloring in his coloring books, they leisurely examined each painting. Although Denise was nude in all the paintings, her body was secondary to the focus on her strikingly beautiful face. It was as if the beauty that resided in her face made her thin, almost boyish body inconsequential. The artist had painted Denise with blond hair, sans the shocking pink streaks she now had. The nose and eyebrow rings as well as the earrings circling her ears were also absent from the paintings. And the artist had imagined her arms with clear skin, rather than coated with the multicolored dragons and serpents encircling her arms. In each of the paintings there was a muted background of a different outdoor Alaskan scene, one showing Denali, and others grizzly bears, glaciers, and salmon jumping in streams.

As Tommy and Hannah examined each painting, Denise delivered a treatise on the artist and her relationship to him.

"All these were painted by David Blackeagle, a pretty well known artist from Anchorage. He charges \$500 to \$1,000 for each one and he gives me 20% of the sale price so I make pretty good money from posing. I met David four years ago when he came in for a haircut at the beauty shop where I work. He told me that I was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen and that he wanted to paint me so he came to my place with all his art stuff. We fell in love that first time he painted me. He paints me indoors, but he adds outdoor Alaskan scenes after he finishes with me. He says that I represent the white half of Alaska. He also does nudes of his wife who's Eskimo like him. She lives in Anchorage with him and his four kids and two grandkids. She's real round and fat. Just the opposite of me. He paints her with backgrounds representing Eskimo culture, like totem poles and dog sleds. He says that she represents the native half of Alaska. A lot of people buy a painting of me and one of her to show the two sides of Alaska.

I don't know if you know anything about art, but when he paints me, he uses Modigliani's style and when he paints his wife, he uses Rubens' style. Do you know who these artists are?"

Both Tommy and Hannah indicated that they did not so Denise showed them large books of each artist's works that graced her coffee table. She leafed through the pages as she spoke.

"You notice how David always paints me with my head tilted to the side. That's pure Modigliani. And here are some of Rubens's heavy women. David is kind to his wife. He doesn't paint her like she really is. He paints her as plump, but I've seen pictures of her. She's not plumb. She's grossly fat. Of course, I've only seen photos of her. I haven't seen her in person. I think if we met, she'd hit me. She's jealous of me. She hates that David pays me for the paintings of me that he sells. And believe it or not, she doesn't even know about Ringo's

existence. I wish David would tell her, but he says that she would be hurt because we produced such a perfect child. Two of their four children are retarded so I understand where he's coming from.

Most people find it hard to believe that he never actually studied art and yet he's able to paint in these very different styles. I don't think he had ever heard of Modigliani or Rubens until he became famous and people started comparing him to them.

We have what you might say is an interesting relationship. When he's in Fairbanks, he stays here, but most of the time he lives with his wife and family in the Anchorage area. He doesn't pay child support for Ringo. That's why he gives me a percentage of the pictures he sells of me and Ringo. He's very generous to us. He buys us presents all the time. But I really don't need much from him because I make great money at the hair salon. I have quite a following of people who like my work. In my own way I suppose I'm an artist, only I use hair as my medium. Hannah, why don't you come down to the shop and I'll do your hair. You certainly need to do something with your hair. It's a mess."

She was right. Hannah hadn't had her hair cut in a beauty shop since two weeks before Kelly's wedding. Denise walked over to Hannah, undid her pony tail holder, and ran her hands through Hannah's thick mass of hair.

"You have great hair. I could really create with it, but first I'd cut it. You haven't cut it in a long time and it's a million different lengths. Call me and I'll fit you in whenever it's convenient for you."

After she had replaced the pony tail holder, she returned to her lecture on the artwork. "David has also been working on paintings of Ringo to show the coming together of the two halves of Alaska. Some of the paintings of Ringo are in western clothes, like a baseball outfit, and some are in native dress. Come on into Ringo's room so you can see these."

Decorating Ringo's room were three paintings highlighting the beautiful child Ringo was. His skin had been darkened to emphasize his native background and to represent his white half, his eyes had been changed from dark brown to light blue.

"Art critics have said that the paintings of Ringo look like Mary Cassatt's. She was a famous artist who painted kids. I don't have a book of her work yet. I have to buy one. David's been described as an artistic chameleon - changing his style to fit the subject he's painting. It's

funny to compare him to a chameleon. That's an animal that you'd never find up here. You'd have to go several thousand miles south to see one. They should compare him to the Alaskan rabbit that's white in winter and brown in summer. That would be more appropriate for an Alaskan artist."

After the tour, they sat down for chili while the children ate peanut butter and jelly sandwiches which Denise had cut in the shape of stars. The adults talked to the children about their favorite toys and T.V. programs. After lunch, the children returned to their play and Denise returned to lecturing about herself.

"I hope you get to meet David one day. He's unique. There's no one in the world like him. A modest genius. He never brags about how talented he is. He just says that God gave him a special talent and he uses it as best he can. And he's very virile. He radiates sex. I was attracted to him the second he came into the salon four years ago. He's much older than me. He's 52 and I'm 25. I like older men. They're experienced and know how to satisfy my needs which are quite strong. I won't go into detail on my sex life, but I pride myself on how many orgasms I can have at one time. I probably could be in the Guinness Book of Records, if they had a record for that. Maybe they do. Most older guys are turned on by that. They want to satisfy the woman. Younger guys are just interested in satisfying themselves, not the woman. I don't think I've ever slept with a guy under 40. Oh well, maybe I did with a few guys when I was in high school."

Hannah and Tommy couldn't believe that at their first meeting, Denise was discussing her sex life as matter-of-factly as she would describe the weather in Fairbanks.

"But I'm really worried about David. He has emphysema from smoking two, three packs a day since he was 12. And he won't stop smoking no matter what the doctor tells him or no matter how much I pester him. It's slowing him down. I don't know what I'd do if he couldn't keep coming to Fairbanks. I've even thought of moving to Anchorage, but his wife wouldn't let me. She hates me because she knows that he loves me more than her. Hey, enough about that. I don't need to share my personal stuff with you the first time I meet you. Anyhow it depresses me to think something might happen to him. Let's have some dessert."

Denise served apple pie which she had baked just a few hours earlier. When she cut it, the room filled with the sweet comforting aroma of hot fruit. She scooped ice cream on each of the pieces she served, licking the drippings from her fingers. As she licked her middle finger, she moaned to express the deliciousness, but she also looked seductively at Tommy. She was

explicitly sending him a message that she would be glad to lick him too. So much for only being interested in much older men.

She continued to talk endlessly about herself and how she was the best hairdresser in Fairbanks. She boasted about her "famous" clients, like the mayor and the president of the university. She didn't ask about Tommy and Hannah who were prepared to tell the lies about why they had moved to Alaska. She was interested only in her listeners' ears, not their lives. She was delivering a lecture on Denise Hale, and didn't welcome any audience participation. After 20 more minutes of hearing about Denise's life, Tommy and Hannah silently signaled each other that it was time to leave. Although Hannah was happy to hear another woman's voice, she was bored by Denise's egocentricity.

As they were walking to the door, Denise said, "Hannah, if you want to leave Leslie any time, I'd be glad to take care of her when I'm not working. Maybe you could do the same with Ringo. The kids need playmates. I think they like each other. Maybe Leslie can be Ringo's first girlfriend. Oh by the way, there's a really good preschool and day care center where Ringo goes that you might want to try for Leslie. It's the Northern Lights Learning Center over on Fir Street, about three blocks toward the university. The woman who runs it is an Eskimo named Celeste Harrington. She takes mostly Eskimo kids, but she has some white kids who are supposed to be role models because it's some kind of model demonstration center for educating Eskimo kids. Ringo's half Eskimo so he can go there free. I think white kids have to pay. I don't know if she's taking any kids right now because she needs to hire another teacher because a teacher just up and quit last Friday, right before the beginning of school."

Hannah was electrified by the words – "she needs to hire another teacher." It hit her like a bolt of lightning. That was what she needed to do. Teach.

"I was a kindergarten teacher back in Virginia. Do you suppose she would hire me part time?"

Hannah couldn't believe she had blurted out these words.

"Maybe. Call her."

They parted with the usual pleasantries and promises to have Denise and Ringo over at the Evans's sometime in the future.

When Tommy and Hannah walked into their place, Tommy said, “I was surprised to hear you ask about that teaching job. I didn’t know you were interested in working. What would you do with Leslie? And what about being pregnant?”

Hannah tried to hide the wild excitement swirling inside her as she considered the prospect of working with kids again. An automated slideshow of her former students, her old classroom, children's drawings, and picture books flashed through her mind.

“She could go there with me or I'd find child care. I hadn’t thought about working until Denise mentioned it. I can’t believe how thrilled I am about the idea. Oh my God, this is the best thing I’ve heard since we moved here. Oh Tommy, this will give me a reason to get up in the morning. This will give me a reason to go out and not hibernate. Please say it's okay for me to do this. Please.”

“What about being pregnant?”

“You know I have more energy when I’m pregnant than when I’m not. It wouldn’t be a problem.”

“If working makes you feel better, I supposed it’s okay. I hadn’t really considered it. Go ahead and contact this woman Celeste. But don’t do anything until you talk to me first. Remember, you are not to make any decisions by yourself. Not now especially. You're not in the best mental state.”

Tommy put Leslie down for her nap and returned to Hannah who was lost in daydreams about teaching. Tommy was bursting to talk about Denise. Hannah was glad because she didn't want him to place any obstacle in the way of the new dream that had popped into her life a mere five minutes earlier.

“Denise is some character, isn't she? I don't think I've ever met someone like her. I don't think there are any people like her in Lewiston, or at least I've never met them. I'd like to meet this David Blackeagle. She has one of the most beautiful faces I’ve ever seen, but I don’t know why she has to mess her body up with all those tattoos and piercings.”

Hannah responded, “I was trying to figure out what the tattoos were. They looked like snakes and dragons. But I didn't want to stare or ask. Why would anyone put those awful things on their bodies, especially someone so pretty? And all those rings around her naval. She

could never have an MRI, she'd be sucked into the machine. She's different, but I think maybe she's more typical of the people in Fairbanks than we are. Everyone is different here. I was hoping that maybe we could develop some sort of friendship, but I don't think so. She's not my type of person. But she may be your type of person. You did seem a bit preoccupied with the art on the walls. And she did come on to you when she was licking the ice cream off her finger. I think if the kids and I hadn't been there, she would've wasted no time in giving you a licking job. So much for her great love for David Blackeagle and her liking only older men."

"Don't be silly. She was only flirting. Anyhow when I looked at the pictures, I was just comparing her to you and there's no comparison. You win. You've got a better bod, especially now with your big boobs. She doesn't really have any boobs. She's too skinny. She looks too much like a boy for me. No boobs and a shaved pubic area made her look like a doll. Well, look at me. The sight of your body does strange things to me." He pointed to the erection pushing through his pants as he smiled wickedly.

Although Leslie was napping in her room, Tommy didn't want to make love in the living room so he led Hannah into their bedroom and locked the door. They laid on the bed as Tommy sucked Hannah's inflated breasts murmuring, "Delicious. Much better than apple pie. You are the most beautiful Virginia belle in all of Alaska."

"And the only one."

For the first time since they moved to Fairbank, they made afternoon love. Perhaps because of her pregnancy or their sensual experience with Denise or the prospect of having a teaching career again, Hannah opened to Tommy as she had not done since they moved to Fairbanks. She offered Tommy an endless cavern lined with primal, musty secretions.

Hannah joked, "It's quality, not quantity. Denise may have more orgasms, but she couldn't have a better one than that."

Tommy responded, "That was the best ever. How can our love making keep getting better and better? Maybe our move here is making us bond even more."

"There has to be something good about living in this shithole."

"Hannah, please. It's getting better."

"Maybe for you. Anyhow our love making is getting better. I think maybe it's because our move has made us closer. I need you more than ever. I have to cling to you for survival." They lay quietly looking at each other's bodies which were highlighted by the rays of sun beaming onto them. As Tommy rubbed Hannah's belly, T.J. kicked. They both laughed at this surprise visit from the unseen observer.

Hannah said, "T.J.'s saying, don't push me around so much."

Tommy murmured, "Can't wait to see you buddy. Stay safe. Do you think he'll have a memory for this on some level? Just like we knew about Brooke's rejection and maybe even her screwing around."

"Babies in utero are supposed to hear sounds. Obviously they can't understand words, but I bet they can understand the tone of voices. We probably heard Brooke screaming at people. We heard the venom in her voice. T.J. hears our loving voices. And I'm sure he's getting his share of the endorphins I'm pumping when you fill me with so much pleasure. If he remembers anything from his nine months inside me, he'll remember that he was loved and that we made him because we loved him."

"I thought you felt that we made T.J. during our orgy after you saw Brooke."

"No. I changed my mind. I'm sure we made him the night before you left. This pregnancy is too sweet to have been created by fear and lust. This baby was created by pure love."

Just then, they heard Leslie shout, "Mommy. Daddy. Where are you?"

They both dressed quickly. Before unlocking the door, Hannah said, "Let's make a date for every Sunday afternoon during Leslie's nap. We won't go anywhere from 2 to 3 except into each other. What will we do when she stops taking a nap?"

"Give her a sleeping pill."

Hannah felt more content than she had since the move to Fairbanks. What a good day she had! She had met an interesting, but odd, person; made sweet, satisfying love; felt a strong kick from her growing son, and had a new goal to guide her life - teaching. Suddenly she felt lighter as if a burden on her shoulder was being lifted. If she stared long enough into space, she saw a flicker of light at the end of the tunnel.

At 8:00 the next morning, Hannah called Celeste Harrington at the Northern Lights Learning Center. She told her about herself and asked if it would be possible for her to work half days until the baby was born. Celeste said that she would prefer someone who could work full-time and would not have to take off for a maternity leave, but at this time she had no candidates for the position and was desperate. They arranged for Hannah and Leslie to come in for an interview the following morning. Hannah spent the rest of the day preoccupied with thoughts of her classroom and former students. Strangely, she didn't look forward but only backward because she couldn't envision what this school in Fairbanks might be like.

The next morning was gray and cold even though it was August 26th. Leslie said, "Mommy, I'm cold." Hannah zipped up her light jacket and made a mental note to get warmer clothing for all of them - soon. She realized that she hadn't thought about being cold even though she was; she was focused on her visit to the school and was allowing nothing to distract her. She knew that winter did not come on December 21st here. It came 365 days a year. She would go to Walmart in the afternoon so she could start stocking up on heavy outerwear. Maybe she would order some stuff from L.L. Bean or Lands End too. She tried not to let the impending cold weather dampen the promises that this little school might hold for her.

The school was housed in a one story, concrete building several blocks from the Evans duplex. On the scrawny lawn in front of the school, there was a large sign with the name Northern Lights Learning Center printed against a picture of the aurora borealis. The vivid greens, purples, and pinks brought to mind the awe that Hannah and Tommy had experienced a few nights earlier when they saw the northern lights. Although Tommy had seen them when he had last lived in Alaska, he wasn't as affected by them as he was now when he could share them with Hannah. When he lived in Alaska before, the depression coating his mind blunted all his experiences. When he saw them for the first time, he recalls saying, "What's the big deal about them?" Now he was eager to be transported by this mystical spectacle. They slept with their blinds pulled up not wanting to miss their first brush with the lights. Hannah was awakened by the feeling that someone was in the room. She woke Tommy and they both leaned on the window sill observing nature's light show. Tommy had always been in awe of nature, but this was different. This was more enveloping. The undulations of the lights made them appear to be alive. What did these lights signify? Were they just an astronomical phenomena or was there something more? They both felt the light rays penetrate their bodies. There was something magical radiating from the sky into their bedroom making them feel part of a larger plan, part of the universe.

Hannah tried the door to the Northern Lights Learning Center, but it was locked. She saw a security lock, but didn't know the code so she rang the doorbell. Through the windows next to the door, she saw a woman emerge from an office. As Hannah stepped over the threshold, she was transported into a new world. The first sensations to hit Hannah were the sounds of children laughing, singing, and chattering. Hannah realized that a building with happy children was beautiful wherever it was, be it frigid Alaska or sweltering Africa.

“Hello, I’m Celeste Harrington. You must be Hannah Evans and this adorable child must be Leslie. Please come into my office.”

Celeste was a 33 year old short, pudgy Eskimo woman with a long, thick black braid down her back. Her face was apple-round, tawny, smooth-skinned, and with the barely visible, Asian eyes of many Eskimos. Her face and demeanor created the feeling that she was the fairy godmother in Cinderella. The smock she wore decorated with cartoon characters also contributed to this feeling. Hannah could almost see sparkles emanating from her body. Although she looked quite different from Hannah, Hannah would learn that she was identical to her as a teacher. She radiated warmth and love for children. But what Hannah found most unusual about Celeste was her unique openness to everyone. She sent a message saying, give me a reason, any reason, to like you and I will. And Hannah gave her many reasons to be liked. Eventually Celeste would become Hannah’s best friend. She would become the Alaskan version of Kelly, but their relationship would be based not on years of growing up together, but their shared love of teaching and similar values and world view. With time, they would come to learn that although they came from widely different backgrounds, and despite having suffered tragedies in their lives, they maintained a love of people, a drive to do good in the world, and an optimism that life was good, that life had to be good if you were to survive. The positive life view that made Hannah Hannah took a while to be rekindled, but eventually it was, thanks to Celeste. But most unexpectedly, Celeste extended Hannah's world beyond Tommy. Hannah had never conceived that she would be more than Tommy's wife, but Celeste helped her create a new multifaceted Hannah. She helped mold Hannah into a new person, one who still kept her husband and children at the center of her life, as her reason for being; but also a discrete human being with burgeoning ideas and interests previously unknown to her. Celeste was to become Hannah’s fairy godmother, taking her in new undreamt directions in her pumpkin coach.

Celeste stooped down to reach out for Leslie who readily went to her. Leslie had been shy with most of the people she had met in Alaska so far, but when she entered Celeste's sphere, she was transformed back into the outgoing, verbal child she had been in Virginia. Celeste and Leslie discussed the cartoon characters on Celeste's smock. After a few minutes, Celeste gave Leslie some toys and books to occupy her so she could speak with Hannah

“Now, tell me all about yourself in five minutes or less.”

This was another opportunity for Hannah to recite the reason why she had moved to Fairbanks. The lies came so easily to her lips that they no longer felt like lies. Then Celeste asked what she most wanted to know about Hannah. “How do you feel about kids?”

“I was supremely happy when I taught. I find kids inspirational. It’s their natural goodness and curiosity about the world. I hadn’t thought I wanted to work with the move and the pregnancy, but I haven’t been able to find myself since we came here and I think this will help me and I know I’ll be good with the kids. Celeste, I’ve been so disoriented and unhappy. I need direction. I need this job for me as much as you need me for this job, maybe even more.”

“Hannah, you sound too good to be true. I had hoped you might be a filler until I found someone who was better suited to the job, but I may not have to do that. But let me make sure that you want to be part of our school. It's very different from what you're used to. If you work here, you'll find that it's not just a job. It's a commitment to a philosophy; it's a passion.

I was a teacher in the Fairbanks schools for six years. I had designed a curriculum on Eskimo culture that was adopted by the schools for first through third grades. I also wrote some children's books on Eskimos that were illustrated by another teacher. They got published and are used throughout Alaska as well as some schools in the lower 48. The school administration thought that I was an exemplary teacher so they selected me Teacher of the Year for Fairbanks and then I was chosen Teacher of the Year for the whole state. How that changed my life! I got to go to Washington along with the teachers from all the other states. Even though I didn't win the national award, it was the greatest honor of my life. I got to meet President and Mrs. Bush and toured the White House and the Capitol. Later I'll take you into the conference room so you can see pictures of me shaking hands with the governor, the president, and the senators from Alaska. I can't tell you how gratifying it was for an Eskimo woman from a poor, uneducated family who's a single mother to get such an honor. It was a validation of me as a teacher and a professional and an advocate for my people.

Because of the honor I received, there were articles about me in the papers in Fairbanks and Anchorage. A woman named Barbara Watson read these articles and contacted me. She's a philanthropist who lives in Anchorage. Her husband made lots of money in oil, gas, and gold. He died about ten years ago leaving her with many millions. She has no children so she's devoted herself to her foundation. She channels most of her money into health care, education,

and preserving Eskimo culture. When she was young, she was a teacher in California so she appreciates the importance of education. Since living up here, she's always wanted to start a model educational program for Eskimo kids so she contacted me. She felt that an intensive, high quality education from the ages of 2 to 8 would give these kids the foundation they need to be more successful in school and life. She asked if I would develop the curriculum and head the school. How could I say no! It was the opportunity of a lifetime. But there was a problem. She wanted me to move to Anchorage, and I couldn't. Fairbanks is where my roots and my family are and I didn't want my daughter to change schools. At last Mrs. Watson relented and let me do it here. She was convinced that I was the only person who could build the type of school she envisioned. I hope I have proven her right.

We spent a year developing the curriculum, buying the building, and setting up shop. We've been in operation for three full years. This will be our fourth and I'm hoping our most successful. We've had lots of problems we never foresaw, but we've been able to overcome most of them. Of course, a perennial problem is staffing. We demand dedication and hard work from our teachers. Although everyone starts with this commitment, some just can't handle it. So I'm interested in having you work here, but only if you think you can give us what we need. I know you'll say the right words now, but only time will tell if you'll come through.

We're affiliated with the University education and psychology departments. We get lots of interns that way and also the expertise of the faculty who consult with us. Staff from the university supervise our assessment program to evaluate whether we're meeting our goals for educational progress for our kids. We're also affiliated with Fairbanks Pediatrics, who do all our health monitoring of the kids. And we have a contract with Psych Associates for family and individual counseling. And of course, we work closely with social services. All of our kids are on welfare or in foster care. So you see we're not just an isolated school, but rather a center for education, health, and family support for native kids who are in need of comprehensive services. And for now we don't have to worry about funding. Mrs. Watson has been very generous and has made sure that we have enough money to run for at least 10 years. Obviously, if we were part of the school district, we wouldn't have the funds to do most of what we do. So we are blessed with an angel, a very rich angel.

Okay, I don't have much time left so let me tell you as much as possible about our day-to-day operations. We have day care from 6:00 to 8:00 for those who need it and then school from 8 to 12 for the preschoolers and 8 to 3 for kindergarten, first, and second grades. Then we provide daycare until 6:00. About 80% of our kids are Eskimos and the rest are non-native middle class kids who serve as role models. Our teachers are trained for a year by apprenticing to one of our master teachers. That way we control the curriculum and the quality of the

teaching. We know that the teachers are doing what they're supposed to be doing. I also prefer hiring Eskimo teachers, especially male, but they must meet the same criteria I have for all teachers here. Unfortunately, there aren't many certified Eskimo teachers, but we're working on identifying academically talented kids in high school and giving them scholarships if they major in teaching and are willing to sign a commitment to work with us for four years, a year for every year of financial aid. If they follow through, they don't have to return any money. If not, they have to pay us back, but with no interest.

I lost a teacher last week. She had served as an apprentice to our master teacher for the four year olds and was to have her own class this year. She was a super teacher. Her husband just decided he didn't want to live up here anymore so she had to make a choice - her husband or her job. I really hated losing her, but attrition seems to be one of my major problems and unfortunately I'm getting used to it.

I can't place you in a class by yourself because you don't have Alaska teacher licensure, which I'm sure you can get if you have Virginia licensure. But more importantly, you don't know our curriculum or the instructional methods we use. If I hire you, I'm thinking of possibly placing you and another apprentice together in the four year old class and having a master teacher supervise you in your own classroom instead of hers. I have to do some juggling of scheduling, but I think that might work out. How does that sound so far?"

"It sounds ideal. I could easily teach from 8 to 12. Could Leslie be in the 2 year old group then?"

"Yes, I think that might work out."

"And then there's my pregnancy. I can work until right before the baby's born in January and then I'd take six weeks off if I could and then I'd be back, but I'd have to get child care for the baby."

"Hannah, there are so many potential problems, but I have a good feeling about you. I think you might work out. In fact, I have a feeling that you could be one of my star teachers eventually, but I want you to first be sure you could work with our special population of children. They're different from the kids you had back in Virginia. Our kids are from poor homes where their families are uneducated, often unemployed, and have health and addiction problems. We have quite a few kids with fetal alcohol syndrome spectrum disorder because their moms, like so many native women, drink when they're pregnant, and of course when they're not pregnant too. We don't get the kids with the extreme problems because they go into

special ed classes in the schools, but we do get kids with milder problems who aren't developing on schedule. Leslie would be a good role model because she's developing normally. In fact, she seems quite advanced."

Hannah had not discussed her evaluation of Leslie with anyone, but she felt comfortable with Celeste. "Yes, she's flying ahead with all of her developmental milestones. Her language is phenomenal. And her understanding is scary. When my husband and I are discussing things, she seems to understand what we're talking about." She silently reminded herself that she and Tommy had to be vigilant about not discussing their secret with Leslie around.

After a tour of the center, Hannah was sure this was the place that would provide her with salvation. This would be her refuge for renewing her faith in the human race. In these rooms she could erase Brooke Brock, Sean's infidelity, Mary Ann's Alzheimer's, and most importantly, her incest. These kids would cleanse her soul. She would again become the Hannah she wanted to be – good, sweet, optimistic Hannah. She could do good in the world, even if the world was harsh, cruel Alaska.

"Oh Celeste, I really want to teach here. When can I start?"

"Well, you need to go through the police check and you need to start the paperwork for applying for Alaskan licensure."

"I'll start on these as soon as I leave."

"And here is information about our school. This includes our mission statement and a description of our target population and our educational goals. And this is our curriculum guide for our program at each instructional level. I want you to see what goals we have before the kids get to you at age four, and the goals that they need to meet if they're to be successful in the five-year-old program. Our curriculum has building blocks at each age and if kids don't master skills at one level, they're at a disadvantage at the next. That's why we include so much assessment in our program."

After Hannah completed the job application and legal paperwork, she tightly hugged Celeste, surprising her with the intensity of her feelings. Leslie gave Celeste a kiss and said, "Bye, bye, Miss Sles."

After leaving the school, Hannah headed to the police station for the required background check and fingerprinting of teachers. To Leslie's delight, the policeman fingerprinted her and gave her a copy of her tiny finger smudges to show her daddy.

As soon as Hannah got into the car, she called Tommy, "I have fantastic news. I'm going to teach mornings at the Northern Lights Learning Center and Leslie will go with me. I can work there until the baby is born and then after a few months maybe I can go back if everything's okay. Tommy, I'm so excited. I never thought I'd be a teacher again. I need this. God, I didn't realize how much I needed this."

"I told you not to make any decisions without checking with me first."

"Oh Tommy, I couldn't wait. I needed this so much. I couldn't wait. This isn't like when I went to see Brooke Brock. I couldn't wait for you. I had to know immediately that I could do this. That there was a way out of the tunnel I'm in. You must say it's okay. Please my darling."

"Well, I suppose there's no way of getting out of it now. And I do think that this might be good for you."

"Leslie and I went to the police station. I was fingerprinted for the police check. And the cop also fingerprinted Leslie. We both loved it. Oh I have so much to share with you. Come home for lunch so we can talk."

Tommy realized that Hannah hadn't spoken so much or with such animation since they arrived in Fairbanks. For the first time, Tommy returned home for lunch so he could share Hannah's excitement. As he unlocked the door, he heard Hannah singing "Do, a deer a female deer" from "The Sound of Music."

"Hannah, you're singing! How great!"

"I'm excited because I'll be doing something that has meaning. I just hope this works out. And I didn't even realize I was singing. Oh, how wonderful! I was singing. I was actually singing. I haven't sung since the day I met Brooke Brock."

Hannah smiled and then she laughed heartily, for the first time since arriving in Alaska. Leslie, seeing Hannah laughing, laughed too. And soon Tommy joined in. A stranger entering

the room might have thought that they had heard the world's funniest joke, but they were laughing at possibility, the possibility that life might again be good.

Chapter 14

Hannah spent the rest of the week doing the paperwork for licensure and repeatedly reading the materials Celeste had given her. The following Monday, she felt prepared when she started work, at least prepared to begin building a relationship with each of her students. She was paired with another apprentice, Louise Ford, who had just received her teaching degree from the University of Alaska-Fairbanks. She had student taught at the Center so she was familiar with the children and instructional model. Hannah was immediately impressed by Louise's enthusiasm, warmth, and teaching abilities. They would be a team that would complement each other; Louise providing the knowledge of the curriculum and instructional methods and Hannah providing the experience of teaching.

Both Louise and Hannah were being mentored by Helen Rostov, an Eskimo woman who had taught with Celeste in the public schools and had assisted Celeste in designing the school. Helen assigned only six students to Hannah and Louise so they would not be overwhelmed by children with differing needs. Hannah studied their case files until she had memorized the results of the developmental, educational, medical, and home evaluations for each child. She learned that all were from homes below the poverty level with unemployed or absent parents; all had significant health problems, ranging from fetal alcohol syndrome spectrum disorder to attention deficit disorder to asthma to childhood diabetes; and all showed developmental delays in language and cognition.

The curriculum designed for these students was more intense and more academic than the one that Hannah had used in Lewiston. It included explicit language instruction based on the assumption that reading and thinking were rooted in a foundation of language, auditory perception training as the basis for phonics instruction in reading, and most interestingly, rigorous goals for mastery of computer skills. To achieve this, there were three state-of-the-art computers in each classroom. The goal was to make these children, starting at age two, as

computer literate as students from culturally enriched homes and well-funded schools. The computer instruction was targeted to tap into the children's visual abilities, areas that are more important for computer mastery than verbal areas.

There was strong emphasis on Eskimo culture with units on Eskimo history, culture, foods, music, art, and games. This emphasis on cultural awareness was evident from the class decorations, which featured pictures of moose, walruses, salmon, and bears; and from games such as blanket tosses on walrus skins and seal hop races; and from Eskimo songs and dances.

When Hannah was with her students, she lived in an alternate universe, immersing herself in their lives, never thinking of the outside world. In Lewiston, she wanted to create a perfect world for her students. In Alaska, there was no perfect world. She only wanted to create a better world than their parents' world. Activities that were easy for her students in Virginia came more slowly for these children with their language, memory, coordination, and attention problems. The children she taught in the special summer program in Lewiston were ahead of the Eskimo children. Her special summer school students had some problems, usually in experiential background, but not the severe health and home problems of these children.

Hannah did not allow herself to become frustrated with the children's slow rate of progress. She knew they could learn, but only more slowly and with better teaching and more emotional support. Her patience was bottomless as was her enthusiasm. She found that the harder she worked, the better she felt. The kids were filling a vacuum that only they could fill. Her need to teach children was unlike her maternal need to nurture Leslie. With Leslie, it was natural for her to teach and love. It was something she was genetically programmed to do. But teaching other children was not something she was genetically programmed to do; it was something she had to do to fulfill the person she was. Teaching made her whole. It completed the pieces of the puzzle forming the unique Hannah.

Looking at the world through these children's eyes was different from her students' world in Lewiston – their world was a child's pure, simple world quickly being smothered by poverty, addiction, and illness. Their world was not ruled by a fat man in a red suit and a white beard, but by a teetering, toothless bogeyman with a whiskey bottle. As she learned the particulars of each of her student's lives filled with poverty, sickness, addiction, and mental illness, she found herself loving them more, wanting to make up for what life was not giving them. But she knew love was not enough. They needed expert teaching and opportunities to learn and develop.

Celeste wanted Hannah to see first-hand what her students' home lives were like so she arranged for Hannah to join her on a home visit. Celeste had to check on six-year old Joe who

did not seem to be getting his anti-seizure medication because he was having more frequent absence seizures in class despite the physician's belief that the seizures could be effectively controlled by prescribed use of the medication.

Joe lived with his grandmother, aunt, a cousin, and an older sister. He had lived with his parents in a Yupik village until the age of two when his family was banished from the village because of his father's repeated arrests for violence, culminating with his arrest for stealing \$5,000 from the local store. It was alleged that Joe's mother had helped his father with the robbery, but she wasn't arrested. Instead, she was banished from the village. The father was given a five year jail sentence, and the mother and children moved to Fairbanks to live with the grandmother. Soon after the move, Joe's mother left to live with another man in a distant village.

Celeste and Hannah visited at 2:00 o'clock so the children would be away at school enabling them to talk freely with the grandmother, Donna, and the aunt, Francis. When they knocked at the door, there was no answer. They peeked in a window and saw the two women watching TV with the volume turned up. Their knocking on the window caught Donna's attention and she let them in. As soon as she entered the three room hovel, Hannah was struck by an overpowering rancid odor, but she immediately fought to cover up her revulsion. Her eyes quickly scanned what was visible in the three rooms: unmade beds crowded together; dirty clothes strewn on the floor leaving little room to walk; unwashed dishes on the table and in the sink; and glasses filled with whiskey on the table next to the couch where the women were sitting.

Celeste asked Donna to shut the T.V. so they could talk. Donna did so reluctantly, seeming like a child being told to shut the T.V. so she could do her homework. After introducing Hannah to the women, Celeste inquired if Francis had been able to work with Joe on his homework, review worksheets of letters and numbers that had been taught previously. She did not ask Donna if she helped Joe because she knew she was illiterate. Francis said that she didn't have time, she was too busy. Hannah wondered what she was busy doing - watching T.V.? Celeste inquired about Joe's mother and Francis told her that they had not heard from her, but they had learned from others that recently she had a premature baby girl with lots of medical problems. The baby had been in the hospital since she was born and they didn't know if she would survive. Joe's mother had never visited the baby in the hospital and said that she wouldn't take her home even if her health improved.

Next Celeste steered the conversation to the real reason for their visit. "We have some concerns about Joe and his seizures. We notice that he's having a lot more at school. When he

has these seizures, his attention is interrupted for a few seconds and then he has trouble getting his attention back to what he was doing. This makes it very hard for him to learn. Before he first started taking the medication for this, he was having about five seizures every hour and then with the medication we were able to completely control the seizures, but now we're back to five an hour. So I wanted to know if there's a problem with Joe getting his medication every morning and night?"

Francis replied, "We try to remember, but we forget. It's so hard to get all the kids ready for school in the morning and at night we all watch T.V. and then we fall asleep so sometimes we forget."

"I know it's hard for you to remember to give him his medication since you're responsible for three kids which is a lot. I know you both have a lot on your mind. But I want you to know how important it is that Joe get his medication, not only for school learning, but for safety. When he blanks out, sometimes he falls and although he hasn't gotten hurt yet, he could."

I talked to Dr. Ames about changing the times for giving him his medication, and he said it would be okay to change. On school days, we'd like to give him his morning meds at school so you don't have to worry about that when you're getting all the kids ready for school. That way you'll only have to remember to give him his meds on the weekends and at night. How does that sound?"

Francis replied, "That's okay with us. I wish you could come over and give him his medicine at night too. That way we wouldn't have to try to remember."

"I wish I could do that too, but that's not possible. So we have to work on some way of having you give it to him at night. Perhaps you can give it to him at suppertime so you won't forget. You could put the pill on the table next to his food when you get supper ready. Dr. Ames said this would be okay too. What do you think?"

"I don't know if that'll work. We don't sit at the table and eat. We sit on the couch and the floor and watch T.V. I'll try to remember to give him a pill when I give him his supper. But, I don't really know why he needs medicine anyhow. He just spaces out for a minute. It's not like he falls on the floor and shakes and has his eyes roll back in his head and stuff coming out of his mouth. That's spooky. It's like a spooky movie."

“Well the medicine really helps when he’s in school. We can see the difference in his attention and his learning when he has his medication. So the change in the times for giving him his medications is okay with you?”

“Yeah, Fine. I don’t care. Do what you have to do.”

After more discussion of how Joe was doing at home and school, Celeste asked an open-ended question to find out if there were any other issues that she should be aware of. "Is there anything else that we should know about Joe and what's happening here?"

Francis replied, "We've had some problems with Ned, his older cousin, and Joe when they sleep together. Ned was playing with Joe's weewee so we put Joe in bed with Clara, but she's still wetting the bed so Joe doesn't want to sleep with her. And he doesn't like to sleep with Ned so we got him sleeping on the floor."

Celeste asked, "Have you talked to your social worker about this?"

"Not yet. This just happened last week. We'll tell her when she comes for her next visit."

"Well, I'll give her a call and talk to her about this. We need to work on having Joe sleep in a bed safely."

Francis replied, "It's no big thing. Boys play with each other all the time. It doesn't mean they're fags."

Celeste did not respond. She wanted to discuss this with the social worker and make a joint decision about what they would try to have the family do.

During their entire visit, the women never looked at Hannah. They only interacted with Celeste, perhaps because they knew her or because she was Eskimo. Hannah realized that it would be a long while before she would be able to interact with her students' families without showing negative reactions. But first she had to discover exactly what her feelings were and then deal with them. If she conveyed her true feelings, she knew the families would not cooperate with her.

After they left, Celeste said, "Go home and think about what you saw in there. After you've digested it, let's talk. It's not the time to talk about this now. You need to analyze the emotions you're feeling now so you can understand the meaning of what you saw."

From the Wednesday of her visit to the next Saturday when they were going out for lunch, Hannah thought about little else than the hour she'd spent at Joe's house. She tried to describe the experience to Tommy, but words couldn't adequately convey the stench and the claustrophobia of the three rooms crowded with furniture, clothes, dishes, and of course, the alcohol. How could she describe their negligence in giving Joe his medication or their acceptance of the child abuse in their own home? She couldn't put the words out of her mind: "I don't care. Do whatever you have to do." That summed up the family's attitude toward Joe. They didn't care about his physical or his mental health. They only seemed to care about their alcohol and their mind-numbing T.V. programs.

When they went out for lunch, Hannah couldn't wait until the waitress took their orders so she could start the conversation, and then she talked non-stop for what seemed like hours. She shared her shock at witnessing the poverty, filth, alcoholism, child abuse, and medical neglect. When she was verbally spent, Celeste said, "Now you see what we're up against. Our wonderful curriculum and teaching may never be enough to overcome that home. Joe's only with us for 10 hours a day. The other 14 at home may be more powerful, but we have to fight with whatever weapons we have. Social workers, doctors, teachers, psychologists. We're all soldiers in the war. You can react by saying that it's a war we can't win and just give up, or you can fight harder knowing that any small victory, like doing homework or learning to count to 20, is worth all the work.

It's easy to blame the family and the culture. These people are beaten down by poverty and bigotry and a dying culture. They are overwhelmed with feelings of hopelessness and helplessness. We have to prevent them from passing these on to the kids because once the kids feel the future is hopeless and there's nothing they can do to change their lives, we've lost. We try to do parent and family training, but as you can see, it's very hard. Donna and Francis can't change, even if they wanted to and they don't want to. We have to prevent them from making Joe like them. Maybe we can give them hope that their kids and grandkids will do better, even if it's just learning to read or do math. We have to be satisfied with small steps, but we must insist on some progress. We can't accept failure."

Hannah looked at Celeste and thought that she looked like a general giving a pep talk to her soldiers before going into battle.

From Monday to Friday morning, Hannah and Leslie eagerly went to Northern Lights Learning Center so they could partake in the pleasure of learning. Leslie, who was in the toddler group where she served as a model for language, motor skills, and socialization, enjoyed playing with the other children and seemed to know that she was part of the instructional team. She took pride in showing her classmates how to play a matching color game or how to differentiate the letter M from N. She also profited from the computer instruction all the children in the class were receiving. She didn't understand why she couldn't use her parents' computer at home. She thought all computers came with built-in children's games.

Celeste and Hannah got into the habit of talking on the phone daily. In the evenings, Celeste called to see how Hannah's day went. On the weekends, Hannah called Celeste to ask her to comment on ideas she had for school projects or how to best work with a specific child. After the fourth week of Hannah's teaching at the school, Celeste invited Hannah, Tommy, and Leslie to her home for dinner. She lived in a small house with her mother who worked as a cleaner at a nursing facility. Entering her home was like entering a mini-museum on Yupik culture. Soon after Hannah had met Celeste, she learned that the term Eskimo was a generic term encompassing different Native American groups in Alaska. Celeste was proudly Yupik.

Celeste had not been born in a Yupik village; she had been born in Fairbanks so she felt somewhat removed from her cultural roots, but that didn't lessen her passion for preserving her cultural heritage. Fortunately, she could speak the Yupik language since she had been raised by her grandmother, who spoke only Yupik. Some of the walls of the house were adorned with native artwork and photos of Yupik peoples.

Hannah had never met anyone with a passion about her heritage as intense as Celeste. Her sense of being part of the Yupik people cloaked her. Celeste reminded Hannah of the blacks in the 1960's when black awareness became an integral part of American culture. Hannah loved listening to Celeste talk about Eskimo culture because her eyes blazed with fire and her body puffed up with pride. Celeste also taught Hannah about the Eskimo's present plight in Alaska. They were discriminated against in all fields, legally, educationally, and socially. Celeste's greatest fear was that the Eskimo culture would die or be perverted, but she was fervently committed to doing whatever she could to prevent this. Hannah visualized Celeste as a tiny fighter wearing oversized boxing gloves: on one hand, she wore a glove to fight to preserve her culture and on the other, she wore a glove to improve the lives of her students.

Hannah asked Celeste how she and her family had been able to avoid the destruction of their lives like other families such as Joe's. She attributed it to faith in God, abstinence from

alcohol, having a little money, and a loving family. When Celeste was eight, her father died in a fishing accident. He had worked as a fisherman on a trawler in the Bering Sea. Fishermen who worked there have one of the highest death rates of any occupation. Celeste's mother went to work as an aide in a hospital, and although she did not make much money, they were able to get by. Celeste's grandmother looked after Celeste and her older brother, Frank, while her mother worked. Frank, who was two years older than Celeste, had finished high school and now worked in the oil fields in Prudoe Bay. There was never any alcohol in Celeste's home, maybe because her mother and grandmother were deeply religious. Celeste had never tasted alcohol. She viewed it as a deadly poison, as fatal as an attack by a grizzly. She knew that it played a significant role in the destruction of the Eskimo culture.

Celeste had one greater passion than her cultural heritage - her 19 year old daughter, Hope, who was a sophomore at the University of Washington in Seattle. From the many pictures of Hope adorning Celeste's home, Hannah noted how different Hope looked from Celeste, especially her thinness and her large eyes. They shared tawny skin color and round faces. Two years earlier Hope had been chosen as a finalist in the Miss World Eskimo Indian Olympics in Fairbanks. Pictures of the contestants showed five pretty girls, but the prettiest was definitely Hope. In other photos adorning the apartment, Hope was dressed in Eskimo garb, her high school graduation cap and gown, and a prom dress.

Although Celeste and Hope didn't look much alike, Hannah was to learn after she met Hope that they had similar personalities. Both were outgoing and warm and exuded a sense of intelligence. When they listened to someone speak, they had an intensity about them; they seemed to be processing what they were hearing with what they had already stored in their brains. You could almost see their brain synapses at work.

Celeste was proud of Hope's being a finalist in a beauty contest, but she was proudest of her academic accomplishments. Hope had had the highest GPA in her senior class when she graduated the previous year. She had been identified as gifted when she started reading at age 4 and learned her multiplication tables at age 6. Since the age of 12, she had a clear career goal - she wanted to be a neonatologist, a term unknown to most people. She wanted to become a physician who dealt with newborns with health issues. She wanted to save babies' lives; she wanted to make a difference in the world. That was another trait Hope shared with her mother. To achieve her goals, Hope chose a school in the lower 48 where she thought she could get the best education. She had been accepted at every university to which she applied, but she chose the University of Washington because they offered the best financial aid package, had a strong pre-med program, and was closest to Fairbanks.

Celeste wanted Hope to achieve her goals, but she was so lonely for her since she had moved to Seattle. Hope had a summer job as a lab assistant on a research project at the university so she had only been able to come home for two weeks in June. Daily emails were inadequate to replace affectionate hugs and face-to-face conversations. For as long as Celeste could recall, she and Hope had snuggled in Hope's bed together before going to sleep. They talked about what happened during their days at school and they always ended with a conversation about Hope's dreams for her future. Since Hope left, Celeste found it hard to fall asleep. She needed to dream with Hope.

Celeste had foolishly entertained the thought of moving to college with Hope, but she knew that would not be good for her and it certainly would not be good for Hope, who needed to create her own life. For 18 years, Celeste and Hope had been best friends. In the year Hope had been at college, Celeste felt lost and lonely, but soon these feelings would be gone. They would be erased by a new phenomenon in Celeste's life – a friend. In her whole life Celeste had never had a close friend. She didn't need one. She had Hope and her work. But now she was developing a close relationship with another woman, and a white woman at that. Not only had she not had a friend before, she had never had a close personal relationship with a white person. Although she went to school and worked with whites throughout her life, she had maintained a respectful distance from them, but now the distance was evaporating as she drew closer to Hannah.

Hannah and Celeste were becoming friends, but initially their conversations focused on education and society, not personal issues. Hannah wanted to know about Celeste's personal life, but never asked questions. And she wasn't ready to share her past so she didn't want Celeste to ask any questions about her pre-Alaska life. She knew that when Celeste was ready, she would share her past. And eventually Hannah, too, might be ready to share. It took another two months for Celeste to open up to Hannah about her past, and she jumped in by describing how Hope was conceived. On a Saturday when Hannah had gone into the school to prepare for a special project for her Monday class, she and Celeste took time for a coffee break.

Out of the blue, Celeste said, "Hannah, I want to share with you how Hope came to be. It's not a secret, many people know, but at the same time, it's also not something I publicize. Fairbanks is a small town and everyone knows everyone else's business."

Celeste took a deep breath and said, "Hope was the product of me getting raped when I was 13. I was walking home from my cousin's house in a blinding blizzard. She lived just a block from my house. I'd brought over some soup my mother made for her because she had this bad cough that wouldn't go away. It was noon but it was dark out and I couldn't see anything

anyhow because of the snow blowing in my face. I don't know how he saw me, but a man grabbed me from behind and pulled me off the road. He reeked of booze. And even though he was drunk, he was strong. He overpowered me and threw me down. First he beat me up. He kept hitting me in the stomach saying "die bitch" over and over. Then he tore my pants off and raped me. I was a virgin and he was a big fat man. He ripped me open. Then he said "goodbye sweetheart" and left me to die. I was semi-conscious. I don't know how long I laid there. It's funny, but the only thing I clearly recall is the smell of the booze. Every time I smell booze, I have a flashback to the snow and the cold and the pain of being ripped open. That's probably one reason I don't drink and no one in my family does either.

I would have died except for a marvelous dog named Balto. He was named after the famous dog that helped save people from a diphtheria epidemic in the 1920's in Nome. Mr. Edwards, an old white man who lived near us had just gotten this cute Huskie puppy he named Balto. He was having trouble training Balto because whenever he put him out to do his stuff, he'd run away. Well, he had put Balto out in this blizzard and couldn't get him to come back in. Fortunately for me, Balto found me and stayed with me, barking for help. Mr. Edwards found us. He pulled me into his house and covered me with blankets and called the police. I was taken to the hospital where I spent a week recovering. The original Balto saved a bunch of people from dying of diphtheria and this Balto saved one person, me, from freezing to death. In the two years between Balto saving me and Mr. Edwards dying, we became close to him. Well as close as you can get to a hermit. Even though Mr. Edwards was our neighbor for many years, we probably only saw him once a week and hardly ever spoke to him. But because he saved me, he felt responsible for me. It changed him. He would come over to our house to eat sometimes. He still wasn't a sociable person, but he wasn't a hermit anymore. Anyhow, when Mr. Edwards died two years later, we found that he had left everything to my family in his will. It really wasn't much – the little house where we live now and beloved Balto. I've never been much of an animal person, but I loved that dog with all my heart. We had a special relationship. Whenever I was home, he would sit on my feet. People would try to get him to come to them, but he would never leave me. He slept in bed with me. He was my guardian. I think he knew that he saved my life and he was sending the message that he was prepared to do it again, if necessary. I've never been able to get another dog because there could never be another Balto. I have his ashes in an urn in my bedroom and I say thank you to him every night before I go to bed.

The police never found the guy who raped me. I don't think they looked too hard. They never even collected semen. The police thought I was just another Eskimo kid who probably got what she asked for. At first, we thought he was an Eskimo, but then we suspected he was a white man. The cops weren't too eager to find the guy. Could you believe this all happened

just yards from my front door? With the blinding snow, I can't figure out how he saw me. Maybe he had followed me or had been stalking me. I don't know. The only one who wanted to get the guy was Frank. For years, he asked around to try to find out who he was. He went after all the white drunks who were big and fat and there were a lot, but he never could identify any guy as definitely being the rapist. I was glad he never found him. Because if he did, he would have killed him. And my brother would have been the one to be punished, especially since the guy was white. The punishment for an Eskimo killing a white man is not the same as when a white man kills an Eskimo. My brother and I have always been close and I know he feels that he should have protected me, even though that would have been impossible.

Two months after the rape I discovered I was pregnant. The first month when I didn't get my period, I thought it was because I'd been punched in the stomach and abdomen, but when I didn't get it the second month, I knew I was pregnant. There was no consideration of an abortion. That was an impossibility, and anyhow I didn't want one. Nine months later, I had my miracle baby girl. I named her Hope to show how something beautiful can come from something ugly. When I saw her after she was born, I was certain that I'd been raped by a white man. It was obvious Hope was half white, especially because of her big eyes. The school officials used this as the explanation for why she was intellectually gifted. Their bigotry refused to allow them to believe that a full-blooded Eskimo could be the highest achieving student in the school, but being half-white allowed them to rationalize their prejudice. They didn't know that I, too, learned to read before school. I read food labels and TV ads when I was 4, but my intellectual gifts were not recognized by the school. I always got high grades, but frankly not as high as I deserved. There were times when my papers were downgraded because of who I was. Prejudice has an insidious effect, even on teachers who claim to be fair-minded. And certainly the schools never encouraged me to have high level career goals. Being a teacher or a nurse was about as high as I was allowed to aspire. I was just another Eskimo with a bastard child.

Since the rape, I've never had sex. The rape was such a traumatic experience that I can't imagine sex as a good thing. To me, sex is violence and pain and ugliness. Maybe I shouldn't blame the guy completely; there's more to my sexual hang-ups. My problem is who to date. I feel guilty if I'm attracted to a white man. I feel like I'm betraying my culture which is totally stupid, but I feel that way. Anyhow I don't know if any white guy would find me attractive. I'm not exactly a candidate for a beauty competition. And I've never found an Eskimo who I was interested in. There aren't too many well educated Eskimos and I'm sorta snobby. I'm not attracted to a poorly educated Eskimo. Most well educated Eskimos are attracted to white women anyhow. Look at my brother Frank. He's not well educated, but he's successful and he sure is smart. He never did too well in school, but if he had applied himself he probably could have gotten a doctorate. He doesn't care about not being educated. He makes lots of money in

the oil fields. He won't have anything to do with Eskimo women. He only dates white women and slutty ones at that. And he's made at least two half-breed babies. I don't know much about them. He keeps his personal life away from my mother and me. You'll learn that the relations between the natives and the settlers in Alaska have been interesting."

Hannah was at a loss for words. "I don't know what to say to all this. Rape is so foreign to me. I've never known anyone who was raped and I've never really thought about how it must feel. I can't imagine the physical pain, but the psychological pain which never goes away. Did you have counseling?"

"No. I probably should have, but it wasn't available when I was a kid and I wasn't ready to talk to anybody about it, especially a white person. I needed an Eskimo woman psychologist, but I don't think there was anyone like that around then. And I never spoke to my mother much about it. After Hope was born, we never talked about it. We didn't want her to know."

"Have you ever told Hope?"

"No. I haven't been able to. I just told her that I had sex with a white boy from school when I was 13 and that he moved to the lower 48 and I never saw him again. I'm not sure she believes me, but she has never pursued it and I certainly won't. She never even asked his name. Maybe she senses there was more to what I've told her. Maybe in the future I'll tell her. But what will she think about being conceived from rape. That's the worst way to be conceived. I don't want her to have to struggle with that."

When Hannah got home later, she started preparing dinner so she wouldn't have to tell Tommy about the rape. But she knew that she had to tell him. He was fond of Celeste, but she knew that this would cement his feelings for her. That night in bed Hannah shared the story of the rape.

"Tommy, I suppose Hope's conception is much worse than ours. Ours was consensual. Hope's was not. Can you imagine a 13 year old virgin being raped. I think the fact that Celeste is so smart in a way made it worse. And her sheltered upbringing also made the violence worse. She lived a simple life with her family with only school and suddenly her world was shattered. She almost died. She had a brush with death that we can't understand. But most of all, how do you reconcile that such a magnificent person as Hope could come from such evil?"

“Hannah, I can’t help but draw parallels to our own lives. We come from evil and we’re magnificent human beings too.”

After that, Hannah became totally involved in Celeste’s life. She spent time with Celeste’s mother and learned about her growing up in a small Eskimo village near the Bering Sea. She met Celeste’s brother, Frank, when he came to Fairbanks periodically to get “culture.” When Leslie met Celeste’s mother and brother, she bonded with them. She seemed to recognize that they were special people who Hannah cared about so she, too, cared about them. Tommy liked getting together with Frank to learn about his life as an oil driller in the northern-most point of Alaska.

With the move to Alaska, Hannah’s life was expanding in an unanticipated way. She had before been so intricately involved in another person’s life before and it changed her – it made her richer, more empathic, and eager to do something to help the Eskimos of Alaska – a people she knew nothing about a mere four months earlier.

Chapter 15

Tommy and Hannah were occupied with the stuff of everyday life so they didn't spend much time talking, but the night of their first snowstorm in Fairbanks afforded them an opportunity to snuggle in bed. Like two children sharing secrets, they whispered. "Hannah, you've changed in the last few weeks. I was so worried about you when we first moved here. You were like a zombie, but you’ve become more like the old Hannah. You’re lively again. It’s so good to see. I can’t tell you how worried I was. All I could think about was how I could get you back to the old Hannah. You almost seem happy? Are you?"

Hannah took a while to respond, "No. I'm not happy and I don't think I'll ever be happy again in the same way I was in Lewiston. That's way too simplistic a word for how I feel now. I've matured, I've adapted since we moved here. I've aged. I feel more like a grown-up. In Lewiston, everything was going well in my life and I was happy. I liked teaching my sweet little eager beavers. I had a man and child I adored. I was involved with safe activities - my

gardening and needy animals. That was enough for me. I didn't pay attention to what was happening in the world outside of Lewiston and Vista Road. I read the paper to get the local news or I read the Style section of the Post to find out about celebrities or new movies. I never listened to CNN or any national news. I felt there was too much ugliness out there in the world and I just didn't want to know about it. So I shut it out of my life. If I didn't know about it, then it didn't exist. Right? But it's impossible to shut out ugliness in Alaska. I see it everyday when I go to school. I see the ugliness of poverty, alcoholism, bigotry. You name it – most of it is in my class. So doing what I love most – teaching – forces me to do what I don't want to do - look at the ugliness in the world. And seeing it makes me want to do something to make the world better, even a tiny bit better.

Other than Kelly, I didn't really have much in-depth involvement with people in Lewiston. I had lots of acquaintances, but they were superficial. My relationship with my students and their families ended at the classroom door. I didn't think I could change the world by changing my students like I do now. Anyway, there was no reason to try to change my students. They had good lives. And although my dad died young and my mom had Alzheimer's, I had a great, great upbringing. My parents worshipped me and I worshipped them. It all just ended too soon. But I was so naive. I thought as long as good things happened to me, I could be happy. I just wished for good things, but I didn't think about making good things happen. I didn't even consider what good things really were. I just tried to create this fairy tale existence, which I see now is impossible. Fairy tales are pretend. They're for children, not adults. And now I'm an adult. We can never have a life like then, and yet stupid me wished for it. I spent my life hoping for Prince Charming, but when you came, you came as Prince Charming with baggage. Unbelievable baggage, life destroying and yet life affirming baggage.

But anyway life isn't about good things, it's about how you meet life's challenges. I know that sounds like an Oprah or Dr. Phil show. I don't know if I ever can be happy. That's too black and white. My life is multi-color now, going back and forth with lots of grays. When I look at Leslie, I am deliriously happy to have such a gem for a child. You know on a scale of 1 to 10, she's 1,000. But, I've had two catastrophes in my life and I can't block them out. I'm learning to put them in perspective and get on with making the best out of what I have. When we first moved here, I really didn't think I could make it. You're right. I was sort of a zombie, just trying to get through every day, trying not to think. I was seeing myself as a victim. I was angry at you. I was blaming you for all our problems. You were forcing me to give up all that's good in life to come to this horrible place. But I was afraid to say any of this to you. I didn't want to challenge you. I have always given in to what you wanted to do, but this time I gave in to you with feelings of rage that I suppressed. And that's why I didn't talk.

But teaching has helped me immensely and so has Celeste. I've never met a person like her. In the short time I've known her, she's taught me so much about life and how important it is to have a cause to build your life around and how important it is to mold yourself into the person you want to be, not just let yourself be molded by events as they happen. I can't believe the person she created in Hope who had every right to grow up to be a drunken whore, but grew up to be a brilliant, loving, giving human being. And look what Celeste has made out of her life – she has created a work of art in her school. This single mother from an Eskimo family has attained a pinnacle of success that was unimaginable when she was growing up, especially right after the rape. I want to be like Celeste. I want to make our children great people, like what she did with Hope, and I want to do something meaningful with my life. It won't be a school. Maybe I can create a stupendous class that changes my students' lives for the better. But I need to do something that will leave a mark on the world showing that I made a difference and it was good that I was born.

Before Celeste, I didn't really know black people or Hispanics or anyone different from me. My life was limited to middle class whites. I had some contact with non-whites and poor people through teaching, but I wasn't really involved in these people's lives. I sorta lived on a white bread island and I think that was true of you too. I feel more part of the world now. I liked living my isolated life when I was living it, but now I realize there was so much I was missing. There has to be more to life than just looking for happiness. I'm not sure what that is, but I think I'll be looking for it here in Alaska. I'll be looking under every snowdrift and rock.

If I sound confused, it's because I am. Tommy, I'm no longer just your beloved wife and sister. I have to be more. But don't worry. You and Leslie and T.J. will always be first in my life, but there will be seconds and thirds now. Not just my family."

Tommy looked at Hannah as if he didn't really know her. This was the woman who shared everything with him, but there was something else going on in her and he didn't know exactly what it was. It surprised him and scared him. He wasn't sure he wanted a Hannah who was questing for meaning in her life. He wanted her as she had always been - sweet, passive, simple, content with him and her life. That Hannah was gone, probably forever. He would have to re-conceptualize Hannah as she changed, but he knew his love for her would remain the same. She was him. Maybe that meant that he would change along with her, whether he liked it or not.

Hannah continued, "And then there's T.J. Every day when he moves, I'm reminded of the miracle of creating life and how glorious it is to be a woman. I've gone back online like I did with Leslie and every day I check to see how he's developing. I can almost see him in my

mind's eye - fattening up and getting cuter. I picture him with round, pinchable cheeks. I forgot how much I love being pregnant and having a human being growing inside me. Sometimes I wish you hadn't had a vasectomy. But then I realize we really don't have a choice - we can't have any more biological children. It's too risky. Someday maybe we'll adopt. There're so many kids in this world who need loving parents like us, especially since we had first-hand experience with loving adoptive parents. God, I can't even think of what our lives would have been like without them.

And then there's you - my husband and brother who I love more every day. Tommy, you are my life no matter where I live or how I change. My heart still flutters when I look at you sleeping or playing with Leslie or pouring coffee at the shop. And I always have this strange desire to kiss your cleft. You're my Pillsbury dough boy who was stuck in the chin by God to check if you were finished baking. Maybe He stuck me in my cheeks to check if I was done. And whenever I start to forget that you're my brother, I have either my good or bad dream about us in her womb and it reminds me of how we were able to fight off the evil juices that that woman secreted. Maybe God made Brooke have twins so we could help each other fight her off. We couldn't have done it alone. If we weren't twins, there would be one of us, and that one would be capable of unimaginable evil like Brooke.

What about you Tommy? Are you happy?"

"Yeah, I think so. I didn't think my life could turn around so quickly either. I love my work, you, Leslie, and T.J., and growing close to my dad again has made life so much richer. He's so important to me. I suppose in a way I'm glad we moved.

I'm also glad you're my sister. You know how some people have dual citizenship; they're citizens of two different countries with different ethnic identities. They might have been born in one country and kept their citizenship after they came to America and then became American citizens. I feel like that; I have dual identity. I have my first identity as your brother and my second, later identity as your husband. It's strange, but I can draw a picture of us in my head. I see us as standing in the bright sun with our bodies sharply focused because of the intense light, but our shadows aren't behind us, they're beside us. There's me holding hands with a jet black outline of myself who's holding hands with you, and you're holding hands with a jet black outline of yourself. That's the four of us – that's who we are.

Hannah, no one has a love like ours. Just loving a woman who's not genetically tied to you is not as great as loving a woman who shares your DNA. I have this mystical feeling when I'm

in you. It's like we're one person who can never be separated. Maybe there was an invisible umbilical cord connecting us to each other and maybe it's still there and maybe that's why we're one.

Hannah, I never anticipated you changing the way you are and I'm not sure I like it. Maybe because I can't control you like I did in the past. I liked having a passive Hannah who did whatever I wanted her to do. Maybe that was the big brother in me taking care of his little sister. I was in control of our lives and I knew that you would do whatever I wanted. Now you're more independent and I can't control you as easily so maybe it's the husband in me recognizing his equal, his wife. I suppose I'm a little afraid of how you're going to change and what it'll do to our relationship. You're not the Hannah I fell in love with at first sight. That doesn't mean I love you any less. I'll have to learn to love you differently. Don't shut me out of your mind. Tell me everything so I can see how you change. I need to know all about you every minute of the day."

"Tommy, I can't shut you out of my mind any more than I can shut you out of my body. Ya know, I dreaded this storm today, and although I hate the weather, I work at not letting it control me. I try to center my life on people, not weather or the outdoors. Some people say it's beautiful here, but I don't see it. I just see the harshness and the cruelty and the drabness of nature. I don't think I'll ever like living here, but living here in this horrible environment has taught me it's not where you live, it's how you live. I think back to how I was in Lewistown. I felt that I had to live only there and I had to live only in my house. Now they don't seem important. Maybe that's why I didn't focus on people there but now I do. In a way I think it's good that we moved because it forced me to look for meaning in my life."

"Well as long as you don't climb any mountains looking for a guru, especially the mountains around here. You'd never find a guru, only bears."

"Tommy, I know you love the outdoors of Alaska. When I see you outside, I see how you look with awe at the mountains, the river, and the sky. You only see the good in nature. But like everything, there is good and bad and I only see the bad in nature. Even after seeing the Aurora Borealis, I still think it's a temporary light show and when the projectors shut down, it's over. I just can't appreciate nature here. I hope someday that will change. I want to share your appreciation of nature as I did in Lewiston, but I just don't know if that'll ever happen."

Like Hannah, Tommy developed a friendship unlike any he had ever had before. Although Tommy had a close relationship with Kevin for 10 years, there were things about him that he didn't like, especially his negativity which seemed to become more pronounced as he aged.

Bruce Dubinski and Tommy were polar opposites, and yet they grew to enjoy a friendship based on their enjoyment of each other's company, especially when they discussed politics, and their desire to grow intellectually. Tommy had taken a math course from Bruce when he was in the master's program at the university. On the first day Bruce came into University Brew when Tommy started working there, he instantly recognized Tommy. They greeted each other like old friends, rather than professor and student. Tommy recalled that Bruce was his favorite teacher, and Bruce recalled that Tommy was one of his most avid students, always eager to learn. After they finished catching up on their past lives, they changed the focus of their morning interchanges to the news of the day. They found that they both shared the same political views, which for Alaska were far left, but for the lower 48 would be considered moderate. They joked that they were the last two members of an almost extinct species in Alaska - liberals. Bruce wrote a political blog that was read by Alaskans of all political views. Some of his more conservative readers christened him with the nickname, "Pinko," which delighted him.

Learning of Tommy's passion for soccer, Bruce invited Tommy to join his indoor soccer league. They played twice a week, one night practice and one night a game. Tommy was eager to play, but was concerned that Hannah wouldn't want him away from home for two nights. When he broached the subject to her, she strongly encouraged him to join, knowing how much he missed the sport. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, Tommy was transported back to his days in high school, college, and post-college. He reveled in the movement of his body, eagerly batting the ball with his head, fearless of any resulting brain damage. As he had done in the past, Ben often came to watch him play. He raucously rooted for Tommy and led the audience in cheering on the team. Occasionally Ben brought Leslie decked out in a miniature cheerleading outfit that he had bought for her. She yelled, "Rah, rah, Daddy."

Tommy met a number of men through the soccer league and enjoyed their camaraderie, but only Bruce became a friend. Like the relationship between Celeste and Hannah, the relationship with Bruce dramatically changed Tommy in a totally unexpected manner. Bruce's joy of learning and intellectual curiosity rubbed off on Tommy causing him to delve into fields of study he was barely aware of before meeting Bruce. Tommy was thrilled to witness his mind expanding, he was becoming smarter. The more he learned, the more he wanted to learn. And he was so glad to have Bruce mentor him as he changed direction in his life.

Bruce was 44, of Polish lineage and a native of Chicago, the city with the largest Polish population outside of Warsaw. Although he came from a family of six children, he had little contact with his parents or siblings since leaving Chicago. He was the "black sheep" of the family, rejecting the strict Catholicism that permeated the lives of his entire family. In fact, the

child his parents were proudest of was his brother who had entered the priesthood. No one in the family was especially proud of Bruce's high academic achievement since he made his agnostic views clear to anyone in the family who would listen, and most did not listen.

Bruce earned his bachelor's degree in math from Loyola University. There, he met Kristina, a fellow student, also a math major, and also Polish. They married in their senior year. To satisfy Kristina's and Bruce's parents, they married in a Catholic church. For both of them, that would be the last time they would enter a church. They seemed to be the ideal match with similar backgrounds, interests, and intense work habits. They went to the University of Georgia for their doctorates in math, choosing Georgia because it was the only school that awarded both of them graduate assistantships. While in grad school, they were under a great deal of academic pressure and found that they didn't really like each other; in fact, they despised each other. Their four years of graduate work were filled with studying intermingled with acrimonious arguments. Upon graduation, they obtained their diplomas and divorce papers. Each looked for a job as far from the other as possible. Bruce took a turn far north to the University of Alaska - Fairbanks, and Kristina went west to the Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff.

During his first year teaching in Fairbanks, Bruce met and married Martha, a considerably older, twice-married professor in the biology department who served as president of the faculty senate. After a whirlwind three-month courtship, they married. However, Bruce quickly learned that Martha had no respect for their marriage vows. Two months into their marriage he came home early from class to find someone in his bed. When this happened again two months later, he moved out and they were quickly divorced. Martha's score – three marriages; Bruce's score – two marriages.

Three years later, Bruce married a gorgeous 23 year old secretary in the English department. Bruce had never before considered a woman's looks important, but with Glenda looks were impossible to ignore. She was a voluptuous, platinum blonde who looked a little like Marilyn Monroe. And she acted like a sex symbol in bed; she was adventurous and tantalizing. He was surprised that she was interested in him because he was average looking and much older than her, but she eagerly pursued him until he agreed to marry her. Bruce's friends commented that he was so lucky to marry such a hot, gorgeous chick. However after marriage, Glenda changed; she turned away from sex to her favorite pastime - watching the home shopping network. Like a gambler, she was obsessed, but not with poker or the slots; she was obsessed with buying junk. She was a compulsive buyer of candles, placemats, cookie jars, lemonade pitchers, The Wizard of Oz figurines, and whatever was the special of the day. The marriage lasted less than a year and cost Bruce a great deal of money for junk which often

stayed in the boxes in which they were delivered, cluttering their small apartment. The most frequent visitor to their place was the UPS deliveryman who came for the sole purpose of making deliveries.

Bruce had struck out three times; he was done with marriage. First he struck out with a woman from his ethnic background and his field of study who he hated; then he struck out with an older woman who was a professor who had no notion of fidelity; and finally he had struck out with a young good-looking shopping addict. He was content with his single life style. He loved teaching and had been honored as the best teacher of the year at the university three years earlier. He thrived on soccer, playing indoors in the winter and outdoors for the short warm season. He volunteered at National Public Radio where he was frequently called on to comment on political issues from the liberal perspective. He wanted to exercise his brain to the maximum so he read constantly to expand the left side of his brain and he played the guitar with a local jazz group to expand the right side of his brain. He wanted to be a quasi-Renaissance man of the North.

Tommy was impressed by Bruce's intellectual side. Bruce had learned Polish as a child and had studied Russian at the undergraduate and graduate levels in college. Every month, he read a Russian book by a master, such as Turgenev or Chekov, authors totally unknown to Tommy. Bruce met with a book club composed of members of the foreign language and English departments to dissect the "big ideas" from their readings. Some read the books in Russian, and some in translation. Bruce read the Russian version followed by the English translation to support his limited Russian. This part of Bruce's life was totally alien to Tommy, and Tommy found it exhilarating. As a challenge to his own intellect, Tommy decided to read the book of the month, Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*. The students at the coffee shop saw him engrossed in a book and assumed it was an assigned reading for a course he was taking. They found it incomprehensible that he did not have to read the book; he wanted to read it. When he told Hannah about his participation in the book club, she was astounded. Tommy had never been a reader of any kind of book since they met. She didn't know if he was trying to impress Bruce, or if he was challenging himself. Whatever the reason, she was glad to see this very different aspect of Tommy emerge. She was glad that Alaska was changing Tommy in this unpredictable way, just as it was changing her.

Tommy was apprehensive about participating in the discussion at his first meeting with the book club. He didn't want to appear stupid so he didn't say anything. But he was delighted to find that ideas that he wanted to put forth were presented by others. He felt good that he had gotten the "big ideas." At the following month's discussion of Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*, he nervously presented his ideas, and to his surprise no one looked at him like he was an idiot. He

realized that they were accepting him as a contributing member of the group. He felt like he had made the winning goal in a soccer game.

When Tommy completed reading his Russian novels, he read political books recommended by Bruce. He became a follower of writers such as Thomas Freidman. Bruce and Tommy discussed political books that they read, and then Bruce would pass the fruit of their discussions onto his Blog audience. Bruce tried to get Tommy to start his own blog, but Tommy wasn't ready to take that step into the public domain.

Bruce and Tommy found that they liked each other despite their different interests and backgrounds. Although they shared political views, a love for soccer, and surprisingly interest in Russian literature, they were poles apart in their views of family. Tommy was a devoted family man and Bruce had no interest in ever having a wife or children. Bruce was puzzled by Tommy; he had never met anyone who was as in love with a woman, especially a wife. When Bruce met Hannah, he was surprised to find that she was just okay looking and sweet, but lacking in depth. She reminded Bruce of the mothers on *Leave it to Beaver* or *Happy Days*. This view of her was especially enhanced by her use of placemats, flowers, candles, and cloth napkins when he had dinner at their home.

His view of her as a light-weight was especially driven home when Bruce tried to talk politics with Hannah. She rebuffed his requests to share her opinions on the upcoming election. She responded that she didn't pay attention to politics because she didn't think that politicians made a difference; they were all alike. Bruce thought she was an airhead, and was shocked at Tommy's choice of a wife, considering that Tommy was eager to explore a myriad of political issues with Bruce. However, had Bruce chosen to discuss social issues, such as the role of government in Eskimo issues or education, he would have seen a very different Hannah.

Although Bruce wondered what Tommy saw in Hannah, he realized that they were madly in love. It was apparent as they kissed each other with their eyes every time they looked at each other. Their voices were laced with sweetness as they spoke to each other. He had never seen such non-verbal love openly expressed by two people, especially husband and wife. Bruce also didn't like being around children so he didn't like spending time at Tommy's house because of Leslie. She was always trying to have him read to her or play with her. Kids just weren't his thing.

Tommy wanted the two men he cared about most to get to know each other so he arranged a get-together with Bruce and Ben. What a disaster! When they talked politics, they almost came to blows over their diametrically opposite political views. Ben was as far right as it was

possible to go without falling off the eastern end of a map and Bruce was as far left as possible without falling off the western end. So Bruce and Tommy's friendship dwelled in the coffee shop, the soccer gym, the houses where the monthly Russian books were discussed, and the clubs where Bruce occasionally played jazz guitar.

While Tommy spent more and more time with Bruce and Ben, Hannah was spending more time with Celeste and Louise. With Celeste, she found a woman of her own age, a woman she admired, even idolized. With Louise, a recent college graduate, she built a mentoring relationship with a young woman who was seeking direction in her life. When they shared time out of class, their conversations were not about the children, but about the challenges of finding a significant other, sex, trying to decide if she really wanted to devote her life to teaching, and popular singers and movie stars of the day. Louise kept Hannah current on pop culture. In fact, Hannah became more knowledgeable about Lady Gaga and Brad Pitt than she had when she lived in Lewiston.

Hannah took on the role of big sister, a role she had never had before and until now, did not realize that she would like. She felt "wise" as she dispensed advice to Louise. Much of the wisdom Hannah shared with Louise was slowing down her search for a husband. She appeared desperate and was scaring away anyone who expressed an interest in her. Hannah also talked about sex, cautioning Louise not to jump into bed with every man that she met. Silently, she laughed to think of how she had jumped into bed with Tommy within minutes of meeting him, but she didn't share this with Louise.

Hannah and Tommy unwittingly complicated their relationships with Bruce and Louise when they made the mistake of introducing the two to each other. One night when Bruce was playing guitar in a local club, he invited Tommy and Hannah, who in turn, invited Louise. They asked Louise to go out with them because her boyfriend of the month had just broken up with her, and they thought she needed a diversion. They hadn't foreseen that Bruce and Louise might be attracted to each other since there was a 21 year age difference between them. But other factors intervened, primarily sexual attraction and Louise's search for a replacement for her most recent ex-boyfriend.

Throughout Bruce's time on the stage, Louise looked at him with hunger. It was obvious she was attracted to Bruce, but at this point in her life she was attracted to most men under 50. After he finished playing with the group, he joined them. After about five minutes it was apparent that Bruce and Louise wanted to be alone.

Tommy said, "I think we're going to head on home. Do you want a ride Louise?"

Bruce interjected, “No, I’ll drive Louise home. Is that ok Louise?”

“Yes,” she said as she gazed into his eyes like a love-sick teenager.

As he put his hand on Louise’s upper thigh just inches from her crotch, he said, “Good.”

So Tommy and Hannah left for home. Throughout the ride home, they pondered what would happen between Louise and Bruce and the inevitable bad ending for Louise.

For the first time, Hannah and Tommy had the house to themselves. Ben was baby sitting with Leslie for the night. They had anticipated a wild night of lovemaking, but it was not to be. They walked around the house nude for the first time, but Hannah found that she was cold so she put on a sweater. A pregnant naked woman with a natty old sweater is not particularly sexually alluring. They talked more about their evening and soon found themselves yawning with fatigue from a day’s work and a night out. It was 11:00, an hour past Hannah’s usual bedtime. They got into bed and laughed as Tommy said, “I feel like an old man who’s too tired to have sex. Goodnight my wife and my sister. It’s good to say that in a normal tone of voice and not whisper. My sister, my sister – I love you.” But in the middle of the night, Tommy was rejuvenated by a few hours of sleep and woke Hannah for some lovemaking sparked by thought of what Bruce and Louise were doing.

“Do you think they’re making love now?” asked Tommy.

“Definitely. I thought they might do it on the table at the club. When he put his hand on her thigh, I thought she’d jump into his arms. I sure hope that he doesn’t hurt Louise. She was so hurt when this last boyfriend broke up with her. I think she comes on too strong and talks marriage as soon as she sleeps with a guy, and of course that scares them away. If she mentions marriage to Bruce, he’ll walk out the door or throw her out if she’s at his place. To Bruce, marriage is the dirtiest word in the English language.”

The next day Louise called Hannah to thank her for introducing her to Bruce.

“Oh Hannah, Bruce is the man of my dreams. We had the greatest sex ever. I thought you might have heard me yelling all the way on your side of town. He’s so sexually experienced having been married three times. What he did with his tongue was unbelievable.”

Hannah quickly interjected, “Louise, I don’t want to know the details. Please.”

Oblivious to Hannah's words, Louise continued. "I hope we can move in together and maybe even marry someday even though he is old enough to be my dad."

"Louise, maybe you'd better slow things down. You don't really know Bruce. He's had three bad marriages, and I know he's not interested in ever marrying again."

"Oh he'll change when he sees how good our life together can be. I'm sure the sex we had last night was better than he had with his three wives."

When she got off the phone, Hannah said to Tommy, "We are going to have big-time problems with Louise. She is so naïve. She's talking about marrying Bruce."

"Let me call Bruce and get his side of the story."

As he said these words, the phone rang. It was Bruce.

"Hey pal, just wanted to thank you for introducing me to Louise. She's a sweet girl and loves sex. I might call her again when I get horny."

"Bruce, I think you might have a problem. Louise is talking about marrying you."

Bruce laughed heartily. "She's just a kid. She's enamored of a professor. She'll get over it. She probably hasn't had good sex for a while and she thinks it's the real thing."

"Maybe you better tell her how you feel so she doesn't get too hurt."

"I won't call her back. She'll get the message."

Tommy and Hannah stared at each other with disbelief.

"How did a simple night out end up with a major catastrophe?"

"Should I talk to Louise now or let her wait for the phone call that will never come."

"I think you'd better wait. You know, Bruce is very much like I was before I met you. I went out with women just for sex and didn't want to get involved with anyone. So I can't put

Bruce down for what he's doing. I see myself in him. If I hadn't met you, I'd probably still be like that."

"I'm sure glad we met. If we hadn't, I'd be a 30 year old virgin and you'd be a wild bachelor without any emotional ties. But maybe you couldn't have any ties to a woman because you were waiting for your sister to come along."

Chapter 16

Every Friday night, the Evanses dined at Ben's. Ella cooked and served the meal, but didn't join them at the table and rarely conversed. She hovered in the background responding to Ben when he asked for service. More than ever, she appeared to be a servant rather than Ben's girlfriend. One Friday in mid-October, Ella was no longer present. Ben brought in a pre-cooked meal from a restaurant.

Tommy asked, "Where's Ella?"

"I got rid of her."

"Why?"

"Because she was only after my money. She kept pestering me to marry her. She had never done that before. She knew I didn't want to get married again. Maybe she was afraid I would stop giving her money because of you. Why would I marry her? I certainly didn't love her and recently I didn't even like her. I knew she lied and cheated me out of money I gave her. Lately, I felt that she was just performing a job when we screwed. She did what she knew satisfied me, not even bothering to pretend to have an orgasm. Sometimes I caught her looking at me like she was just waiting until it was over. Maybe she was always like that but pretended that she enjoyed sex with me. I hate to think that she took advantage of me, but I do think she used me. Maybe she is a whore. I despise her kids and can't stand having them anywhere near me. I liked how she kept my house and cooked, but I can get a housekeeper for that. I'd love to have

another Consuela. She just did her job perfectly and kept her home life to herself. If I want a good screw, there are more than a few accommodating women I know. Sorry Hannah, I hate to speak so frankly in front of you. I exploded when she badmouthed both of you. She even said that Leslie was a spoiled brat. That did it. She thought she could convince me to give up the people I love for her. What an asshole."

Tommy said, "I'm glad you're finished with her. Hannah and I couldn't stand her. I couldn't ever see her being part of our family. She certainly wasn't good enough for you. Dad, do you think she'll ever say anything about me and Hannah? I'm worried that she'll blab."

"I told her if she said anything to anyone, I'd kill her and I mean it. And she knows it so don't worry."

Tommy and Hannah stared at Ben realizing that what he said was the truth. He would stop at nothing to protect his family. Tommy again felt the protective hand of his father shielding them. Hannah had never seen anyone with the look that was on Ben's face - the look that said he would do anything to protect his loved ones, even murder. This is how he must have looked when he attacked the man who had beat Tommy when he was a baby. The look frightened her, but like Tommy, she was strangely comforted by it.

Tommy was glad Ella was out of the picture. He wanted his father to himself. He wanted to rekindle the relationship they shared when Tommy was growing up. As the weather turned cold, he and Ben spent more time together dog sledding and snowmobiling. Tommy developed a passion for these two sports, which was fueled by his growing love of the Alaskan outdoors and the opportunity to spend time alone with Ben. The father and son who had been close since Ben saved Tommy's life 30 years earlier were building even stronger ties. They were becoming best friends.

One Saturday after an exhilarating day of snowmobiling along the river, they went back to Ben's house for dinner. Hannah, Leslie, and Louise were going to a new Disney movie followed by dinner at Louise's. Hannah was helping Louise to forget Bruce and his abandonment of her. Leslie would certainly cheer her up as would an animated Winnie the Pooh.

Ben and Tommy were having an evening to themselves. They brought home a bucket of chicken and two six-packs of beer. As they sat in front of the raging fire, they reminisced about Tommy's high school and college days. Then Tommy veered the conversation to Ben's parents who Tommy had never met because they had died many years before he was born. In the past

Ben had offered only sketchy information about his parents and Tommy had never been particularly interested in them, probably because he felt they weren't really his grandparents. But now he wanted to know about them so he could better know Ben. He knew that Ben had loved his parents deeply and was devastated by their deaths.

At first Ben was reluctant to talk, but a few more beers loosened his tongue. Ben's father, Larry, was career army and had been away for much of Ben's youth, having been based in Korea and Germany. But his time away did nothing to temper the strong father-son bond they shared. Ben paid Larry the ultimate compliment a son can pay a father - he wanted to follow in his footsteps and join the army. He even entertained the wild dream of attending the military academy, which motivated him to keep his grades up. When Larry was home on leave or when he was based in the states, he and Ben would spend all their time together hunting, fishing, bowling, and riding dirt bikes. Larry and Tommy had no outside friends; they needed only each other and Sharon, Ben's mother. But when Ben was 15, the unthinkable happened. Larry was killed in a jeep accident in Korea two weeks before he was scheduled to rotate back to the states.

Although Ben was devastated by the loss of one of the only two people in the world he loved, his adjustment was eased somewhat by his relationship with Sharon. She adored Ben; he could do no wrong in her eyes so Ben did no wrong. He got top grades, especially in math and science, and excelled in sports, lettering in football. He was known for unleashing fierce aggression on the football field, which contrasted sharply with his easy-going, mild social demeanor.

Sharon was a devout Christian and coped with Larry's death by holding fast to the belief that God had a plan for taking Larry which mere mortals could not understand and should not question. She believed that God had meant for Larry and her to be together for eternity. She would never remarry or have a relationship with another man. She was waiting to be reunited with Larry in heaven.

Sharon and Ben attended church every Sunday and participated in all church activities when they weren't working. Ben also knew that Sharon prayed to God every night before she went to bed. Tommy slept on a sofa bed in the living room while Sharon slept in the only bedroom in the apartment. Many nights, he would stand at her door, crying, as he heard her converse with God. "God, thank you for blessing me with Larry and Tommy, two of the finest men in the world. Take care of my Larry until I'm with him. And God protect my Ben, especially in his football game tomorrow. I don't want him hurt. At his last game, he gashed his

leg and I felt it on my leg. I wish I could take his pain away. And God thank you for giving me Ben. He is the perfect boy and he is filled with your love. He has Jesus in him."

Ben didn't feel like he had Jesus in him. He knew that Sharon was comforted by the security of religion and the support of her tight-knit congregation, but he had difficulty accepting her belief that it was God's will that Larry should die at age 39, but he kept his thoughts to himself not wanting to challenge Sharon. He knew that any theological questions he might raise would be as hurtful to Sharon as him turning to a life of crime. Sharon's congregation also viewed Ben as the ideal son, totally devoted to his mother, while his classmates viewed him as a momma's boy. No one ever said anything to him about being a momma's boy because he was a star of the football team earning him utmost respect from adolescent peers, and because he was brawny and could easily beat up most of the kids in his school. His lack of interest in girls led some kids to suspect that he was gay. Had anyone mentioned that to him, he would have unleashed his football aggression on them.

Ben held a number of after-school jobs to supplement their meager income from Sharon's job as a supermarket checker and his father's life insurance. Tommy mowed lawns, bagged groceries, delivered pizzas, and painted houses. When he wasn't studying or at practice, he was working. He spent the little free time he had with his mother, usually going to church activities. Although Ben had few friends, he wasn't lonely. His life was full of school, sports, work, and basking in his mother's love. So that he could be close to his mother and continue to help support her, he attended a local community college despite graduating tenth in his class of 300 and having the credentials for acceptance at any four year state university. He had been offered football scholarships at several small colleges, but he didn't want to be away from Sharon, his sole source of love. At the end of Ben's freshman year, tragedy struck again. Sharon developed pancreatic cancer, dying within six months. As soon as she was diagnosed, Ben dropped out of school so he could help nurse her. Every minute when he wasn't working, he spent with her, watching her rapidly deteriorate despite good medical care, his deep love, and the prayers of her congregation. Just as she had vicariously experienced his pains during his football games, he experienced every pain that racked her body tenfold. She was not worried about her imminent death because she was certain that she would soon be united with Larry, but she was worried about Ben. With her demise, he would become an orphan. He would have no one in his life. Every night she insisted that Ben pray with her although she suspected his faith in God was wavering. Ben did so although the word God burned in his mouth every time he uttered it. Ben could not accept her death as anything other than an act of a cruel God who prematurely took a pure woman who lived without sin. Like Larry, she was 39. Ben was at her side in the hospital when she died at 3:00 AM on a Saturday night. He loudly cursed God, screaming "Fuck you God," repeatedly. The nurses tried to quiet him so as not to wake the

other nearly dead patients on the hospice unit. Sharon's minister came to provide solace to Ben who glared at him as he said, "Fuck you and your damn God. What kind of God would take the kindest, most loving mother in the world? What kind of God would give her so much pain? What kind of God would take the only two people in the world I loved? There is no God and if there is, He's a cruel son of a bitch."

At 19, with no siblings, close relatives, or friends, Ben was alone in the world. He rejected the support offered by his mother's congregation, never again stepping into a church. Ben felt that Sharon's death so soon after Larry's death marked the end of his life. Unlike Hannah who was able to build her life after Sean and Mary Ann's tragedies, Ben could not. At 19, he thought the best years of his life were over. He was offered a job as produce manager at the supermarket where his mother had worked, but he turned it down; instead, joining the army to honor his father and find a way to structure his life. He had to find a reason to get out of bed in the morning and do something of value. The army gave him a reason during the week, but not on the weekends. During the day he immersed himself in his duties, doing an excellent job at all tasks he undertook, but on weekends he turned to alcohol. Before joining the service, Ben had never touched a drink of alcohol. But now, vodka became his weekend companion. It helped him sleep soundly so he could keep at bay the searing memories of Larry and Sharon that invaded his sleep - vivid mental pictures of beach vacations, house painting projects, and camping trips with the three of them laughing and hugging.

Although he had a number of buddies, he couldn't get close to anyone. He always felt a distance between himself and others, maybe because he felt so alone in the world. Vodka was not Ben's only means of escape - so was sex. He had been a virgin when he entered the military. He had always dreamed that someday he would find the perfect girl, like his mother, marry, and the three of them would live happily ever after. Now he knew there would be no perfect girl, there would only be whores. Initially he was afraid of women and sex, but he soon found fleeting release with the prostitutes who serviced the base.

Ben's work ethic and talents in math and science were recognized by the military who paid for him to get a degree in engineering. He found the coursework easy and his academic success made him feel that perhaps he did have a future, but he wasn't sure what it was. He was assigned to the Army Corps of Engineers where he worked on construction projects. He did his job well during the day, and on the weekends he got drunk and screwed anyone who opened her legs to him, especially for free.

He thought that he would make the army his career since he had no idea how he could live in the outside world. He hoped to have at least 20 years under the guidance of the US Army,

and then he would think about the next phase of his life. At age 26, he was assigned to a project in Virginia Beach. He quickly found his favorite bar which he frequented Friday through Sunday. One night he spotted a new woman there - Lucy Brock. She was pretty, short, blond, with huge boobs, his favorite part of the female anatomy. She had spotted him eyeing her and joined him at the bar. She said that she liked his looks as she rubbed her boobs on his arm. He asked her if they were real. When she told him he would have to find out, he was hooked. They went back to her apartment where after he found out that they were real, they screwed for two days. Lucy was a physical therapist's assistant and knew how to exercise Ben's body in ways that he never knew possible. She sniffed coke to boost her sexual energy which seemed bottomless. Ben had never liked drugs so he kept up with her by drinking vodka. When Sunday night came around and he realized he had to go to work the next day, he proposed marriage, irrationally thinking he'd like to do this every weekend. She readily accepted and they were married two weeks later. A month later, reality sank in and Ben realized he had made the biggest mistake of his life. He detested Lucy. She was only good for getting drunk and screwing, and he knew that both of these had to end one day. She would never be his wife, she would never be his family. He was filled with humiliation when he thought of introducing Lucy to his parents, had they lived.

Tommy was surprised at Ben's explicit description of his life, but at the same time, he was glad to learn all about his father, feeling his ties to Ben strengthen as he disclosed more about himself. He hadn't known the details of Ben's parents' deaths and he didn't know the full details of his drinking and womanizing. Tommy realized that his behavior with women before he met Hannah was somewhat like Ben's. He was only interested in getting laid, only getting satisfaction, and once he had been with a woman several times, he no longer wanted any continued contact with her. He had never felt affection with sex until he met Hannah. He knew that if he hadn't met Hannah, he'd still be screwing around. He might be lost like his father had been. And he wouldn't have had a son to save him as Tommy had saved Ben from the life he despised.

When Ben returned from a bathroom break, Tommy said that he couldn't recall seeing pictures of Ben's family. Ben replied that he had destroyed all pictures of the cunt, as he referred to Lucy, but he had a few of his parents. He went to his bedroom where he retrieved a box of old pictures from the closet shelf. They sat on Ben's bed as Ben randomly picked up pictures of himself with his parents, describing where they had been taken - amusement parks, beaches, football games, honor assemblies, and church dinners. Most of the pictures were taken from a distance, but there was one close-up of Ben's mother. Tommy grabbed the picture from Ben's hand and examined it closely. There was a deep cleft in her chin, exactly like

Tommy's. She was blond and had fang teeth. Tommy shivered. He gasped, "I look just like her."

Ben slurring his speech because he had downed five beers in two hours, responded, "I know. You look exactly like her. You're built like her too - short and stocky. She had the same shade of blond hair and she had your cleft. You are the only two people I ever saw with that cleft. So I knew the second I looked at you."

He hesitated and then screamed, "Fuck it. She's your biological grandmother and I'm your biological father."

Ben turned to look into Tommy's eyes. "I was going to tell you this when the time was right and I suppose it's right now. I said before that I was wild when I was in the army, but you wouldn't believe how wild. Even I'm amazed at how obsessed with sex I was in those days. Fucking was all I thought of and Lucy was the same way, only she wanted to do everything kinky possible. She kept wanting me to do a three way, but I couldn't stand the thought of being with a guy. I'm 100% straight and you know I really don't like gays, can't help it. They're scum. Anyhow, Lucy asked if I'd like to do her and Brooke. I'd met Brooke a few times and didn't like her. She was short and chunky, sorta like a fire hydrant. Actually, she was ugly. I don't know why Sean screwed her except that she was willing and able. Anyhow, one night she came over and we all fucked. I enjoyed it. No, I more than enjoyed it. It drove me crazy. It's amazing what three people can do. Even though Brooke was dumpy, she was quite athletic in bed. But at the same time I hated it. I thought it was perverted. It was dirty, especially with sisters. Talk about incest - that was real incest and it was lesbian incest. Whenever we were finished, I'd take a shower for 20 minutes to get the smell of them off me. But the more we did it, the more addicted I became. Ya know what was really interesting was that Brooke never drank or took drugs. She didn't need anything to get sexed up. Lucy needed her coke and I needed my vodka, but Brooke didn't need anything.

Anyhow, throughout the summer of '77 we screwed around right up to the night before Brooke went away to school. I remember asking her if she didn't have to get ready for school and she said she needed this fuck to last her till Thanksgiving. She even asked if Lucy and I would come down to visit her at school. She called some weeks into the semester and said that she found a great motel with magic fingers and we should plan to come for a weekend three-way.

Then at school, she hooked up with Sean. When she announced she was pregnant, I assumed I was the father, but she immediately told everyone it was Sean. I didn't know about

her screwing him, but I was relieved. I didn't want her parents to know about us. She didn't want anyone to know that she had fucked her brother-in-law and her sister. Especially her parents who she was sure would throw her out and she needed their money, and they had lots of it. They showered both Brooke and Lucy with money. I don't know what Brooke spent hers on, but Lucy spent hers on nose candy.

Since I fucked Brooke up until a month before she started with Sean, I really can't tell who's your father. If you were born a month late, you were Sean's and if you were about a month early, you were mine. I put this out of my mind when she was pregnant, but then when Lucy found out she was having twins, she said she wanted one of the babies. I never wanted a kid, especially with Lucy who I knew could never take care of a child. But I had this feeling that you might be my kid. And I knew the only time in my life I was ever happy was when I was part of a family. When we went to the hospital to see you and Hannah when you were born, I picked you because you looked like my mother. I saw the cleft and knew you were mine. You were blond and Hannah had a mop of black hair which wasn't like anyone in my family that I knew of. As soon as we took you home, I changed. I stopped drinking. I wanted to be the father to you that my father had been to me. I hated the life I was leading with Lucy. I felt like a degenerate. I knew that wasn't the real me.

I made plans to leave the army and set up a construction business with some buddies. I was planning to divorce Lucy and take you away. She totally neglected you and was getting deeper into heavy drugs and crazy sex. We didn't have sex after we got you so she fucked every guy she could find. I didn't care. I just wanted to get away from her. I despised her. I wouldn't let her take care of you. I didn't trust her. I hired a black woman to take care of you when I was away. When I came home and found that guy hitting you, I went crazy. I had to save my son and I did. You changed my life. You made it possible for me to give up booze and be successful. You made it possible for me to be like my father - a good, loving man. I hate to think of what I would have been like if I had stayed with her. I probably would have ended up killing her. You know she was murdered a few years after we split and all I can say is she deserved to die. Whoever killed her did a good thing for the world. She didn't deserve to live. She wasn't a human being. She was slime.

Tommy, I know this is hard. You thought Sean was your father and now I'm telling you that I'm your father. I suppose we can find out with genetic testing to make sure if you really want to know."

Tommy's mind was in a state of chaos. He was trying to throw off the effects of the beer so he could think rationally. His adopted father just told him that he was his biological father.

When Hannah had told him that Sean was his father, he had refused to believe it. He knew he was not Sean's child, he just didn't know whose child he was, not until now. And it made him feel good to know that the man who he loved as much as a son could love a father was his biological father. Unlike Hannah when she learned about Sean, he was happy, he was elated. When he uttered the word Dad, he was changed. He now spoke the word with a new meaning, one that said that I'm yours in every way.

"If you want to, I suppose we could do genetic testing, but then we have to tell Hannah and I don't want her to know. No Dad, I don't want genetic testing. When I see the picture of your mother, my grandmother, I'm sure you're my father. I have no doubt. This is great. The man I love more than anyone other than Hannah and Leslie is really my father."

He fell into Ben's arms sobbing like a baby.

"Tommy, do you recall how upset I was when you told me about Hannah on the phone. For a minute, I was so afraid that Brooke had told Hannah about her and me, but then I realized she would never do that. She could blame Sean for taking advantage of her, but she couldn't blame me for screwing her. She couldn't hide what she was, an animal who screwed anything and anybody. Isn't it unbelievable that she went into the mental health profession, with her craziness and her lack of morality? I suppose you don't have to be moral to be a shrink. She's pure evil.

"That's funny. That's exactly what Hannah said after she met her. She kept saying that she was the only evil person she'd ever met. We always think of people like terrorists or serial killers as evil, but there are people in our everyday lives who are evil too.

Dad, our lives get more and more complicated. Jesus, I feel like we're West Virginia hillbillies fucking everybody in the family. Well now, I have two secrets. Hannah's my sister and you're my father. I can't believe it. It's funny that Hannah doesn't look like anyone in your family. Actually, she looks sorta like Sean. She's short and skinny and dark. I'm short and light and stocky. You would think that we're twins who were fertilized by two different sperm, but I know that's not possible. It's just that as twins, Hannah and I look nothing alike except for the noses and fang teeth. Do you feel like Hannah is your daughter?"

"No. I just can't see her that way. She's my daughter-in-law, my son's wife."

"Dad, I can't go home tonight. I have to start building a wall to hide this from Hannah. It'll be hard to do because we know each other so well. Sometimes we can read each other's minds.

She's making progress in adjusting to our new life, but this will set her back if she finds out. She really might have a breakdown. She can't ever know this. I'll call her and tell her I'm too drunk to drive and so are you. Dad, I don't know if a son could love a father as much as I love you. I'm the luckiest man in the world. I have a woman who I worship and a father I adore and a child I love and hopefully a new one to love as much. How could a man have so much good in his life? And how can all this goodness come from that piece of shit? The more I learn about Brooke, the more despicable she becomes. To sleep with her sister and brother-in-law: that's one of the filthiest things I've ever heard of. My mind feels dirty just thinking about it. That's real pornography."

"When I think of me fucking those two bitches, I think it was someone else. It was not the Ben who I was when I was growing up and it was not the Ben I became when I got you. Shit, if I hadn't gotten you, I don't know what would have become of me. I might have ended up murdering one or both of them. I knew they were shits and I knew if I stayed with them, I would have turned into shit like them. I couldn't fall any lower."

Tommy said, "I really think that finding this out would destroy Hannah. She would never be able to relate to you. She has only one father and it's Sean and that has to stay that way forever. The only one who can ruin our life is Brooke. I just wish she would die so we wouldn't have to worry about her telling anybody about us. Maybe we should arrange for her to die."

Ben said, "Maybe that will be possible."

Tommy was too drunk and too distracted to think of Ben's last comment or to notice the look on his face, a look that said maybe this was something he could make happen.

When Tommy returned home the next morning, Hannah noticed a difference in him, but she wasn't sure what it was.

"Tommy, are you all right?"

"Why?"

"I don't know, you seem different."

Tommy tightly hugged Hannah to him. "I couldn't be better. I'm just hung over from my night out with my dad, who obviously is a bad influence on me."

Later when Tommy was alone in the shower, he pondered why Hannah was able to pick up the difference in him. Did he seem more relaxed knowing who he was? Did he respect his father more for being the kind of man who overcame so much adversity through parental love? Did he want to be more like Ben, certainly not in terms of his womanizing, but in terms of his strength, his ability to make decisions and follow through? He knew that he would have a secret mental life that was off-limits to Hannah. Up to now, he had shared all his thoughts and feelings with her, but that time was over. Maybe the same was true for Hannah. Maybe she was creating mental areas that were barred from him too. He didn't like that. He wanted to know every facet of Hannah's mind, but he knew it wasn't fair for him to know her completely without her knowing him completely. Maybe the move to Fairbanks was having some unforeseen effects. It was morphing them into different people. The lives they were living were diluting the effect of being twins.

Since moving to Alaska, Hannah had retained her ties to Lewiston through email. Every day, she emailed Mary Ann's nurse for an update on her health, which continued to deteriorate. Mary Ann was bedridden and completely closed off from the outside world. Her blood pressure was soaring, unresponsive to medication. Charlie Hughes emailed Hannah monthly financial statements showing how he was managing Mary Ann's finances. These electronic contacts made Hannah feel that she was taking care of her mother despite the thousands of miles separating them. Other than the time she spent emailing to Lewiston, she never thought about Mary Ann. She had completely banished her from her consciousness, as she was starting to do with her life in Lewiston.

When Hannah first moved to Fairbanks, she and Kelly emailed daily. Kelly told her the news of Lewiston or what was happening with people she had known there, but Hannah found that she was becoming increasingly disinterested in Kelly, Lewiston, and anyone who lived there. And when Hannah bubbled about her teaching and Celeste, Kelly responded with less enthusiasm than Hannah would have liked. Gradually, they stopped emailing everyday and were in contact once or twice a week with increasingly shorter messages. The fissure in their relationship that had begun the night Hannah met Tommy was widening into an uncrossable chasm. They had been best friends in the past, a state Hannah had no desire to revisit; there was no relationship for them in their future.

Tommy had kept in touch with Kevin through email also, but he, too, found that he was uninterested in Kevin's life in Lewiston. In early October, Kevin called Tommy with the surprising news that he was getting married to a woman who worked in his store. When Tommy asked about her, all Kevin said was that she was named Maria, she was pregnant, and

that he was looking forward to becoming a father. When Tommy hung up, he told Hannah about the strange conversation in which Kevin avoided answering questions about his future wife. Hannah said that she planned on sending them a wedding gift. Tommy told her to send it quickly because he didn't think they would be married for very long.

As winter set in, Tommy readily adjusted to the weather, not minding the cold and the darkness this time. Perhaps it was having a loving family, a biological father, soccer, Bruce, and a job he liked that enabled him to fight the depression that had enveloped him during his previous stay in Fairbanks. When he had first moved to Fairbanks, he thought that he might get a teaching job the following year. But he found that he liked running the coffee shop. It enabled him to interact with lots of different people, and during the slow periods, it gave him time to read. Now, he thought that he would not return to teaching, at least for the foreseeable future.

Although the cold and snow were difficult for Hannah to cope with, what proved hardest was the darkness. Hannah had an internal clock that had been set by the rising and setting of the sun at times she had come to expect over her 30 years of living in Virginia. In the past she had not needed an alarm to wake in the morning. Her body knew to rouse itself out of sleep at 6:00 A.M., and by 10:00 P.M., her body had wound down, ready for the rejuvenation that can only come from sleep. The lengthening darkness of the days confused her body, and for the first time she had to use an alarm clock to wake in the morning, even though she was eager to get up and go to school. She found that she was often sleepy when she put Leslie to bed at 8:00 and succumbed to sleep by 9:30. The dark did not depress her as it had Tommy, it disoriented her. The darkness was disturbing the circadian rhythm her body had developed over 30 years. She wondered what would happen to her with spring when there was a reasonable amount of dark and then summer when there was ever-present light. Would she adjust or would her body get lost in the constantly fluctuating light?

Tommy and Hannah differed in how they responded to the snows that grew more intense with each passing day. Tommy saw white, pure virgin snow while Hannah saw the gray-black grimy snow polluted by car exhausts. Tommy did not mind driving with just a patch of exposed windshield he gloved off to clear the fog build-up. Somehow he was able to differentiate the white background from the white foreground, never getting stuck in the snow banks lining the streets. He was undaunted by the snow fog that further dimmed the little light that penetrated the sky at the height of daytime. The snow fog looked like suspended ice particles making Tommy wonder how gravity could be defied.

He also welcomed the ever falling snow because of his newfound love of snowmobiling and dog sledding. He was thrilled by the thunderous sound of the snowmobile as he sped

through the white wilderness accompanied only by Ben. For a short while, they were the only two people in the world. Tommy especially enjoyed snowmobiling next to the Alaskan pipeline which transported oil from Prudhoe Bay south to the thirsty lower 48 states. The elevated white pipeline was the only sign of civilization as Ben and Tommy raced through primeval white fields and forests. The excitement that Tommy had felt when he hiked the Appalachian Trail was magnified in the wilds of Alaska. Nature seemed closer in Alaska than anyplace Tommy had ever been. The world of Alaska was the world of nature, not man. Man was a tourist who could only peek at the wonders of the mountains, glaciers, forests, and rivers. Sometimes Tommy would sit on his snow machine with his head upturned and his mouth open to let the snow melt in his mouth, ingesting nature.

Hannah viewed snow as an unavoidable evil. She limited her driving to going to school and shopping. When the weather was especially bad, she had Ben or Tommy drive her. When Ben invited her to go dog sledding and snowmobiling, she emphatically refused. Tommy and Ben were hoping that with time Leslie would warm up to the dogs and go dog sledding, but they knew that Hannah would never participate. Hannah found that she ignored the outdoors. Her life was focused on what happened inside the walls of school and home. She realized that she could be living anyplace. Now only people and ideas mattered to her, not places.

From the first day that they moved into the duplex, Tommy began looking for a bigger house, and in mid-October, he found a three bedroom, two bathroom house that he thought Hannah might like. She had rejected every previous house he had previously found, but she liked this one. It had enough room for them to get some of their furniture out of storage and it had been well-cared for by the previous tenants, requiring no painting and little cleaning. Occasionally, Hannah and Tommy talked about what they would like to include in the house that they planned to eventually build. They found that they were making plans for the future that included living in Fairbanks for a long time, maybe forever.

They had not had a chance to invite Denise to their home for a meal to repay her kindness when they first moved in. They spoke to Denise whenever they saw her at home or when Hannah saw her at school, but their interactions were limited to brief hellos and how-are-you's. Before moving, they decided to drop a gift off to Denise and say good-bye. They knocked at the door several times before Denise came to the door with red eyes, obviously from crying. She invited them in and immediately spurted out the news that Ralph was dying of lung cancer. She could not be consoled. She kept repeating, "What will I do without him? How can I live without him?" Ringo was also crying. "What will Ringo do without his father?" Leslie became upset at Denise and Ringo's behavior so Tommy and Hannah left hurriedly, extending their condolence about Ralph. They had not had the opportunity to tell her that they were

moving and they never saw her after their move. She was one of the people in their lives who come and go and are erased after they have gone.

With the help of some of the men who worked at the coffee shop, Tommy and Ben moved more of their furniture out of storage into the house, but they still had lots of boxes and furniture in storage, hopefully to be retrieved for their final move to their future bigger house. When they were finished moving their furniture in, Tommy presented Hannah with a house warming gift – a philodendron, the hardiest, most indestructible of all indoor plants. Hannah stroked the leaves as she spoke to it, “I’m going to love you and if you make it, then maybe we can all make it. I’m going to call you Phil. Tommy, let me introduce you to Phil. Phil, this is Tommy.” Hannah placed the plant under a fluorescent light to supplement the muted light from a nearby window. And Phil did make it as its cuttings sired countless plants for years to come.

The new house also had neighbors who were more to Tommy and Hannah's liking than Denise. On one side was a couple with two teenage kids, one of whom was a girl who was eager to baby sit with Leslie. On the other side were Mr. and Mrs. Fitzgerald, a retired couple who brought a home-baked bread and bottle of wine to welcome the Evanses to their new house. They had grandchildren in Texas who they saw only at Christmas so they looked forward to acting as surrogate grandparents to Leslie.

When Tommy and Hannah first moved to Fairbanks, they had agreed that they would visit Lewiston for Thanksgiving, but Hannah did not want to take extra time off from teaching and the five days she had available were not enough time for the round trip so they decided to delay going to Lewiston until after T.J.'s birth. Also, Ralph discouraged a lengthy airplane trip because of Hannah's late stage in her pregnancy. Kelly was disappointed that Hannah would not be visiting because she, too, was pregnant and had wanted to surprise Hannah with the news when she saw her. Instead, she had to tell her on the phone which lessened the thrill of sharing the fact that she was having a daughter.

Hannah was pleased to make her first Thanksgiving dinner in her new home in Fairbanks. There was something about Thanksgiving that she liked more than Christmas, perhaps it was the opportunity to highlight the good things in life, even though she wasn't exactly sure what the good things she was thankful for at this point in her life. She invited Ben, Celeste, Celeste's mother, and the Fitzgeralds. Tommy had invited Bruce, but he refused because he didn't like family gatherings. It was a smaller gathering and less elaborate than her Thanksgivings in Lewiston, but it was just as sweet, maybe sweeter because of Ben and Celeste's presence. In the past, Ben had made bigoted remarks about Eskimos, saying that none of them wanted to work and all they wanted to do was drink and collect welfare. But Hannah's concern about how Ben

might treat Celeste and her mother proved unfounded. He acted respectfully because he knew how Hannah felt about them and because Celeste wasn't like most Eskimos. She was one of the few good ones.

As was Hannah's practice before serving the meal, she asked everyone to tell what they were thankful for. Everyone cited their families and friends. This year Leslie joined in saying that she was thankful for her mommy, daddy, poppa, and all her toys, which she enumerated until Hannah told her that she didn't have to list every toy. Hannah said that she was thankful for her loving husband and daughter and her future son, for her new-found relationship with her father-in-law who was becoming a father to her, and for Celeste, who was opening her mind and heart to new people and new ideas. When she finished, she realized that she had more to be thankful for than at any point in her life. Although everyone made a fuss over the turkey Hannah had made and the side dishes and desserts Celeste and the Fitzgeralds had brought, the focus of this dinner was Leslie. She monopolized the conversation and created a limelight for herself. Ben and the Fitzgeralds were a willing audience as they hung on her every word and applauded as she performed songs and finger plays she had learned in school. This Thanksgiving proved to be a celebration of the miracle of childhood.

The Evanses were going to have Christmas dinner at Celeste's. Although Celeste had invited Ben, he declined. It was enough for him to celebrate the holiday with his family alone on Christmas Eve. The Evanses slept at Ben's so Ben could have the pleasure of seeing Leslie open her presents in the morning. In his great room, he had a huge Christmas tree that nearly reached the ceiling. Under the tree were boxes of different sizes wrapped in shimmering holiday paper and topped with huge bows. Hung from the fireplace mantel were six stockings with each of their names as well as Ben's two dogs. Leslie had adjusted to her new life by learning not to go near a burning fireplace and not fearing Ben's dogs, even feeding them treats. Before Leslie went to sleep, she and Ben filled a glass of milk and put out a cookie for Santa. They did not make a fire in the fireplace because they didn't want Santa to get burned. Leslie was so excited the adults were afraid that she would be unable to sleep, but she fell asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow. Before he went to bed, Ben drank half the milk and took a bite out of the cookie, which made him feel as if he had a white beard and a red suit. Leslie woke Tommy and Hannah at 6:00 AM despite the fact that it was dark and she had no way of knowing that it was morning. They knocked on Ben's door so they could all unwrap their gifts together. Leslie opened boxes filled with dolls and stuffed animals from Santa and games and clothes from Ben. After opening each gift from Ben, Leslie kissed him smack on the lips and said "You're the best poppa in the whole world!" He felt that this was the best Christmas he'd ever had. This was his family and he was the patriarch. He looked at his son, daughter, and granddaughter lovingly feeling the presence of an approving Larry and Sharon. He knew they

were proud of him. He had fulfilled a dream that he had thought unattainable. He had a happy family.

At 1:00, the Evanses went to Celeste's house for Christmas lunch. It was a tight squeeze in Celeste's small house with Tommy, Hannah, Leslie, Celeste, her mother, her brother, and Hope. Hope had not had enough time to come home at Thanksgiving so this was a special Christmas since she had not been home since June.

Hannah was eager to at last meet Hope as Celeste talked about her constantly, updating Hannah on whatever was happening at school, which usually was a listing of the perfect grades she got on all assignments and tests. Hannah was shocked as soon as she laid eyes on Hope. She expected her to be pretty, but she was so much more than pretty; she was beautiful. Her perfectly formed features were nestled in her round face with flawless tawny skin. She wore her thick black hair in a braid down her back, just like Celeste. Her light eyes were inconsistent with her dark skin and black hair. But her outer beauty was soon forgotten as Hope exhibited her inner beauty. She was brilliant, socially adept, charming, and exuded a sense of happiness at being alive, a real *joie de vivre*. She made the descriptions of life in the dorm and coursework in biology, chemistry, and physics sound interesting, even exciting.

Every surface in Celeste's house was covered with food. She had cooked and baked for many days, storing the food at her neighbor's and Hannah's. Celeste had prepared an Alaskan version of Christmas dinner with reindeer stew and moose meatballs, Alaskan delicacies that Tommy and Hannah had never sampled. Hannah disliked the salty gaminess of the meats, but she feigned liking them. Leslie was less inhibited about her dislike of the food and said "pooley" when she tasted the reindeer. Hannah had not told her that it was reindeer because she might think that she was eating Rudolph. Fortunately, Celeste also served salmon and pickled herring which were more to the Evanses' liking. Leslie filled up on several slices of home-baked sour dough bread covered with thick slabs of butter. But they all loved the blueberry cobbler that Celeste had made with berries she had frozen in the summer.

The evening ended with gifts that Celeste had for each person. The gifts were all small, but meaningful. For each of the Evanses, she had books. For Tommy, a book on different coffees, for Hannah, a book on the joys of motherhood, and for Leslie, one of Celeste's books on Eskimos.

As Hannah was kissing Celeste and her family good-bye, she realized that she felt like they were family. She marveled at how she could feel kinship with people who were so different from her in every way.

Hannah did not see Celeste for the ten days Hope was home, although they spoke on the phone daily. After Hope returned to school, Celeste went to Hannah's and they spoke for hours about Hope. Hannah knew that Celeste loved Hope deeply, but as she talked about her, she realized that she didn't know any mother who adored her daughter more than Celeste.

As was their custom over the four years of their marriage, Tommy and Hannah spent New Year's eve alone at home. Hannah was very uncomfortable, having gained 50 pounds. She hobbled around on permanently swollen ankles, which gave her the appearance of having elephantiasis. They put Leslie to sleep and then shared their version of their favorite meal that Hannah had prepared with Tommy's help. They had a caesar salad, filet mignon, doubled baked potatoes, and apple pie alamode. They ate by candlelight as they listened to a James Taylor cd playing softly. After dinner, they turned the lights up and poured over picture albums reminiscing about their wedding, honeymoon, Leslie's birth, and their life in Alaska. They relived each photo discussing what happened as it had been taken. At midnight, they kissed and predicted what their life would be like the following New Year's Eve.

"Hannah, what do you think we'll be doing next New Year's Eve?"

"Probably the same as we're doing now, but we'll have two kids asleep or maybe one asleep and one crying his head off. I don't think we'll be lucky enough to have another baby as easy as Leslie was. Maybe we'll go to Cabo again with Ben. I'd like to get away someplace warm and I really loved that place. Ben talked about buying something down there. If he mentions it again, encourage him to do it. I'd love to go there every Christmas. That would be a good tradition."

"Hannah, do you still think about living someplace else?"

"No. I think we'll be here for a long time, maybe for our whole lives. I've resigned myself to it."

"Do you still hate it here?"

"Of course, I detest the weather. But there's Ben and Celeste and Bruce. Ben is so loving to all of us, especially Leslie. He couldn't be a better grandfather. Seeing them together fills my heart with joy. It's good that kids grow up with a grandparent. They have a special kind of love. And he looks at me with such love. Sometimes I think he feels like I'm his daughter. And then there's Celeste, who other than you has changed me as a person. And I know how much Bruce

has done for you. Who would have thought that you'd become interested in Russian literature? I can see Kevin's reaction to that. He'd say 'What's Russian literature?'

And frankly, I'm interested to see how our kids turn out as Alaskans. Living up here will make them different, but I'm not sure how. I think they'll be more independent, maybe even daring, fearless, and self-sufficient. They'll definitely be different from cowardly me. I don't know what they'll be like, but I do know they'll be different than if they were raised in Lewiston. And I think maybe that's good. I look at Hope and see the magnificent human being that Celeste shaped and I hope we can do the same with our children.”

Chapter 17

As her due date of January 10th approached, Hannah spent most of her days tuning into her body. She stared at herself in the mirror in awe of how her belly could extend so far horizontally without dropping to the floor, or that her ankles could puff out so far and still support her. She fantasized poking a pin in her ankles and seeing the puffiness evaporate like a burst balloon. She wondered if she would ever again have normal posture or would she forever strain backward to support her belly. Whenever she sat, she listened to her body, sensitive to the slightest tinge from her abdomen, hoping for the beginning of the end of her pregnancy. She avoided gaseous food because she didn't want gas pains to deceive her into believing that she was going into labor. Although she tried to fill her days with activities, she could only concentrate on herself as she unsuccessfully worked at controlling her impatience.

Her last day of teaching was prior to the winter break. She would not be returning until 6 weeks after T.J. was born. She didn't miss teaching as much as she thought she would because she knew that she wouldn't be able to meet the physical demands of interacting with her kids. Since Hannah was not going to Northern Lights, Leslie did not want to go either. This was fine with Hannah since her play time with Leslie partially distracted her from the wait for T.J.'s entry into the world.

Hannah had hired a young Eskimo woman, Susan, to help care for T.J. after his arrival. She had her begin work on the first of the year so she could get to know Leslie and help with the household chores which were becoming increasingly difficult for Hannah to manage. Susan was the older sister of one of the students at Northern Lights, and had just graduated from high school. She was the oldest of five children so she was experienced in handling young children. She had good references and proved to be a dependable and caring person. Hannah's only concern was that Susan was very quiet, almost mute, and only spoke when spoken to. Even then, she responded with single words as she kept her eyes averted. Hannah noticed that her quietness even permeated her play with Leslie, who monopolized the conversation whenever they interacted. Leslie used language to guide her play, verbalizing her actions as she staged interactions of her dolls. Susan looked on silently with interest, but no participation or commentary.

When Hannah expressed concern about Susan's quietness to Celeste, Celeste posed three explanations: one that Susan was naturally shy and quiet; secondly, she was uncomfortable in a white, middle class, educated family's home, which was so alien to her own home; and thirdly, Susan's different use of language was culturally-based. The Eskimo culture was more nonverbal. Celeste thought that all three explanations were in play with Susan.

Hannah hoped that, with time, Susan would become more comfortable in their home, and more talkative. Hannah was uncomfortable with silence. She felt that words had to fill all air space when there were two or more people together. But at the same time she was coming to the realization that different cultural groups used language differently. Her group, the dominant American culture, used language to govern social interactions and think subvocally. Language was everywhere - in the air, on paper, and in the electronic media. Words, words, words. How could you think without words?

Perhaps native American cultures relied more on nonverbal language than words for their social interactions, and perhaps they used visual processes more to govern their thinking. She thought back to her interactions with her students over the past few months and realized how she was trying to modify their use of language and make it more like that of the dominant culture. She believed that if her students became more verbal, their academic achievement would improve, but at the same time she wondered if that meant they would give up their unique cognitive make-up. She knew that one of the major goals of Celeste's curriculum was the improvement of the students' language. But did that mean they would have to sacrifice their heritage in some way? But maybe it wasn't an either-or choice, maybe it would be possible for the children to improve their verbal language, but still retain their unique cultural cognitive style.

One day after school, Celeste dropped in unexpectedly on Hannah. They had talked on the phone daily, but Celeste hadn't seen Hannah since Christmas. She laughed as she tried to get around Hannah's belly so she could hug her.

"You look like a beached whale. I've never seen anyone blow up as much as you. Are you sure you're not having twins or triplets?"

"Bite your tongue. I can't wait to tell T.J. about all the trouble he caused me even before he was born. I'm going to pile lots of guilt on him."

Celeste had brought a dozen of Hannah's favorite donuts. "I know you don't need donuts to add to your waistline, but I know how much you love these and I want you to enjoy. So enjoy."

As she ate her third donut, Hannah said, "I shouldn't be eating these, but I'm always hungry. The sight of food makes me salivate like Pavlov's dog. Get those donuts away or I'll eat them all."

Celeste got on a chair and put the box of remaining donuts on top of the refrigerator, out of Hannah's reach.

"Save the rest for Tommy. He needs some uplifting now too."

"Celeste, I'm so glad you dropped in. There's something I want to talk to you about."

She made sure that Susan was out of earshot. After Susan and Leslie had eaten donuts and Celeste had played with Leslie, they went into Leslie's room to play.

"Celeste, I'm amazed at Susan's silence. I talked to you about it and you said that it was partly a cultural thing. I've been thinking about what you're trying to do with language in your curriculum. It seems you want the kids to become more verbal so they can succeed academically. But I worry that might mean they'll lose some of their unique cognitive style - their emphasis on nonverbal language and on the visual, rather than the auditory."

"Hannah, we had this discussion when we were writing the curriculum a few years ago. We know that our kids can't master the reading and thinking skills required of a rigorous academic curriculum without a strong verbal language base. If we're successful, we hope that

they can still retain their natural nonverbal orientation from their interactions with their families. We don't want to erase their unique cognitive style or we'll be erasing their ethnic roots. We want them to be bi-cultural. We have to assume that that's possible. We especially want them to maintain their visual strengths because they help them master computer skills.

Let me tell you about my own upbringing and this issue. My mother worked since I was a baby and I spent my days with my grandmother who didn't speak English. She'd been raised in a Yupik village and had moved to Fairbanks to take care of me when my mother went to work after my father died. I recall our silent, loving days together. She'd do crafts with me and never described what she was doing. She'd only showed me. The same with cooking. I wonder how I became so verbal. Sure, I watched TV and interacted with my mother and brother in English. My brother refused to have anyone speak Yupik when he was around. He didn't like being identified as an Eskimo in his early days. That has changed with time. Especially, since the world never lets us forget that we're Eskimos.

Anyhow, I remember starting to read when I was about four. I read food labels. I can still remember telling my mom about Tony the Tiger on the cereal box. I don't know how I picked up the reading or the language skills I had. But that enabled me to excel in school."

Hannah interjected, "What about your brother?"

"Frank was verbal too, but he didn't like school. He was always a behavior problem. I think he read at an early age, but no one paid attention because he was too busy acting out. He did poorly in school and dropped out. I'm sure that if he hadn't rebelled, he would have been academically successful and gone to college. In fact, I think he's smarter than me. Intellectually, he's in Hope's league. Even with a GED, he's been successful. He's done quite well with his job in the oil fields up in Barrow. He loves being outdoors so perhaps his life worked out for the best for him. He could never have had a job that required him to stay inside. But Frank's still rebelling against being Eskimo. He only dates white women. He even has a few half Eskimo bastards that he supports. Believe it or not, I've never met my nephew and niece. They're both from different women. Other than provide some child support, I don't think he has much to do with the kids. It's a shame, but that's Frank. Love 'em and leave 'em with bastards. He has no desire to settle down and be a family man. Well that's not completely true. He's a family man concerning me, my mother, and Hope. He loves us all dearly and has been very good to us."

"Celeste, I think that you and your brother were born with natural verbal talents. Do you think we can instill verbal abilities in kids who aren't born like this?"

"Of course. I have no choice but to believe that we can teach these kids what they need for life. I have to think like that or we'll fail."

The original projected due date for T.J.'s entry into the world was January 10th, but at Hannah's doctor's visit on January 9th, she showed no signs of being dilated. Ralph wanted to see her next on the 14th, and if she still was not dilated, he would induce labor. Hannah questioned him about there being a possible problem, but he assured her that everything was fine. The next morning as she was watching Susan give Leslie a bath, Hannah felt her first contraction. It wasn't a twinge; it was a razor sharp, crippling pain. She sat down and with a smile of eager anticipation, awaited the next one. The welcomed pain came five minutes later. She immediately called Tommy, "It's time. Come home my love. T.J. wants to join our family."

"Don't go anyplace. Stay where you are. No Walmart or Food Lion or walks in the snow. I'll be home in 10 minutes."

Next Hannah dialed Ralph. "Ralph, I think it's time. I had my second big contraction five minutes after the first one. Tommy'll be home in 10 minutes and then we'll be at the hospital in about 20 minutes."

"I'm not so sure about those times. Have you looked outside? There's quite a storm out there. But don't worry, I think we'll have enough time to get you here. Call me when you leave the house. Have Tommy drive carefully. See you soon Hannah."

Hannah told Leslie and Susan that she and Daddy would be going to the hospital so that T.J. could come out of her tummy. Then she got out the bag she had packed weeks earlier, put on her coat, had Susan put on her boots for her since she couldn't reach her feet over her belly, and sat in a chair facing the front door waiting for Tommy to come tearing in. Eight minutes after she had talked to Tommy, he called and frantically told her that he had been in an accident, but not to worry. He wasn't hurt. Because of the lack of visibility and his excitement, he had hit another car as he was turning left. Now he was having a hard time getting his car restarted. He had called Ben and told him to take Hannah to the hospital.

Hannah screamed, "I don't want Ben. I want you. I have to have you there. I can't do this without you."

"It's all right. I'll meet you at the hospital. But it will be faster if Ben takes you. The weather's getting really bad and we have to make sure you make it to the hospital in time. I don't want T.J. coming into the world in a car. He'll freeze his little umbilical cord off. I won't even have to cut it."

As soon as Tommy hung up, Ben called to say that he would be at the house in five minutes. Her anxiety level escalated as she worried about Tommy and about getting to the hospital in time to deliver T.J. The contractions that minutes ago hurt, but in a welcomed way, now hurt in a more overwhelming way; the pain taking over her lower body and blocking out all thoughts of anything other than each paralyzing contraction that seemed to continue for hours. When the contractions subsided, she was filled with dread that something had happened to Tommy. All the fears she had secretly harbored over the last nine months surfaced. She was sure their punishment for their incest was coming. Tommy would die leaving her alone to raise the children. She couldn't do it alone. She couldn't live without Tommy. Fucking Alaska would kill him. She knew there was no escape from their sin. They would be punished wherever they were. Their sin had followed them here and there would be retribution. The price would be Tommy's life. That would be the ultimate punishment for what they had done. Maybe even T.J. would be born dead. Darkness would envelop her life. It would just be Leslie and her to carry on. She would have to maintain some semblance of normality for Leslie, but she wasn't sure she could do it. Maybe if Tommy and T.J. died, she should kill herself and let Ben raise Leslie. He could do it. He was crazy about her so he could give her the affection she would need and he could hire Susan to take care of her.

Eight minutes later Ben came rushing through the door, looking like he was going to a funeral. Strangely, he looked like Tommy. There was something about his mannerisms of running his hand through his hair and pursing his lips that reminded Hannah of Tommy.

Hannah tried to act calmly, and kissed Leslie and told her to be a good girl for Susan and that the next time she'd see her, she'd have a new baby brother. Leslie cried, but Susan held her tightly stroking her hair gently as she cooed, "Everything will be good. Good. Good. Good." Although Susan didn't talk much, she was great at comforting Leslie. Now hugs were better than words.

"Susan, take good care of my Leslie." She hugged her tightly and when she pulled away, she saw that Susan was crying.

Hannah couldn't climb into the truck cab so Ben picked her up. Fortunately Ben knew how to drive in a blizzard and had chains on his truck. Hannah tried not to make noise as she had

each contraction because she knew she was scaring Ben, but she couldn't control the animalistic moans escaping her lips. After a seemingly endless 25 minute ride, they arrived at the hospital. She was quickly checked in and put in a labor room. Ralph smiled brightly as he greeted Hannah and Ben. "Glad you made it so fast. Where's Tommy?"

Hannah said, "He was in an accident."

"Was he part of the big pile-up by the University?"

As she spoke, Hannah became frantic. "I don't think so. I don't know. Maybe. Maybe when he had his accident, other cars crashed into him. Or maybe he was run over after he talked to me. Maybe he's here. Maybe he's injured. Ralph, could you check the emergency room? Maybe he died. Yes, I'm sure he's dead." As she spoke these words, she became increasingly agitated. She spoke quickly with increasing volume until she was screaming hysterically.

Ralph put his hand on Hannah's shoulder and said, "Calm down, Hannah. I'm sure he's fine. I don't think they've even brought any people here from the pile up. Just think of the baby."

After examining her, he said, "He's a big one, but I think we can get him out vaginally. I'll do an episiotomy to prevent any tearing. We're going to set you up with an epidural and then you'll be comfortable."

Hannah, stop worrying about Tommy. It's not good for the labor. Think good thoughts of how happy Tommy will be when he sees his son."

"I don't want to stop the labor, but I don't want to have the baby without Tommy here. Ben, call Tommy and find out where he is."

The anesthesiologist administered the epidural and Hannah's pains subsided, leaving her free to concentrate on Tommy.

"Did you reach him Ben?"

"No, I can't get through. Don't worry Hannah. He'll be here in time."

"Ben, what happens if he died in the accident? How can we live without him? He can't die now when life is beginning to look good at last. God, don't let him die. God, please forgive us. We didn't know. We didn't know. God don't punish us. We're innocent. And don't punish my baby. Let T.J. live. I know that they're both going to die. We're getting punished. But I wish God would take me, and not Tommy and T.J."

"Hannah, stop this wild talk. Tommy's not going to die and T.J. will be just fine. Please try to relax and let the baby come. Don't talk about punishment. Ralph or the nurse might hear."

"I don't care. Tommy's going to die. I know it. I feel it. He's dead already. I don't care who finds out. It won't matter anymore. We'll have to raise this baby alone, just you and me. I know we can do it. But I don't think I can really go on without him. He's my life. This is the punishment that we knew would come someday and it's here. God killed Tommy and he's going to kill T.J. My baby will die too. No, my baby will be blind and deaf and crippled. He will suffer for our sins. Every time I look at him, it will be like being whipped for what we did."

Hannah continued to grow more hysterical so Ben asked Ralph if he could give her a sedative or a tranquilizer, but Hannah said that she didn't want a tranquilizer. She needed to be alert to see her baby and make sure he lived and she had to find out what happened to Tommy. Ben tried to calm Hannah, but she only became more convinced that Tommy was dead and that T.J. would be dead or disabled.

In the span of 20 minutes, it was evident that T.J. was ready to exit. Hannah insisted that Ralph stop the labor and wait for Tommy.

"Hannah, we can't stop nature. He'll just have to see his son when he's a few minutes old."

As Hannah pushed, she tightly grasped Ben's hand making bloody imprints with her nails. With the third push, she ejected Thomas Jefferson Evans, Jr., all 9 pounds, 5 ounces of him.

Ralph held him up for inspection as T.J. cried loudly, announcing to the world that he was here and ready to start living. Ralph looked him over and said he seemed fine, as Hannah and Ben heaved sighs of relief. Hannah said, "Are you absolutely sure there's nothing wrong with him? Can you tell if he's blind or deaf?"

"Hannah, he looks fine right now. I see no evidence that he might be deaf or blind. Don't worry. I'll do a thorough examination in a few minutes."

Since Tommy was not there yet, Ben was given the honor of cutting the cord permanently binding him to his grandson. Ben had never seen a delivery before and had certainly never cut an umbilical cord. He was in a state of euphoria seeing his biological grandson come into the world. He had seen his dogs have puppies so he knew a little about the birth process first-hand, but he was unprepared for the miracle of seeing a human being, especially his grandson, enter the world. It filled him with awe.

As Hannah held T.J., her tears were a mix of joy for her beautiful baby and sorrow for her dead husband. She kept saying, "He's dead. This is our punishment. I know it. Half of me is dead."

Ralph looked at her as she ran on and on about being punished. He looked at Ben and said, "Do you know what she's talking about?"

"No, she's just hysterical from the pain. She's not making any sense. She's a little crazy right now."

Ralph knew that Ben was lying, but this was not the time to find out what was going on. Just then Tommy rushed into the room. Seeing T.J. safely nestled in Hannah's arms, he cried,

"He's here. Is everything ok?"

"Yes, Tommy, everything's ok. You're alive. That's all that matters now."

"I didn't get to cut my son's cord. God damn it. I wanted to be here."

Tommy took his son and laid him out on the bottom of Hannah's bed, unwrapping him and checking his body. He was a big baby who was alert to his surroundings and with his one open eye seemed to be looking into his father's eyes, saying "Here I am daddy." Tommy gently kissed each toe as he counted them and each finger as he counted them. Then he re-wrapped him and held him tightly to his chest murmuring, "My son. My beloved son."

Ralph said that he had to do a more thorough examination and took T.J. from Tommy. He placed him in the infant crib and methodically examined his heart, lungs, stomach, and reflexes. As he went from one organ to another, Hannah, Tommy, and Ben watched breathlessly until Ralph finally pronounced him healthy.

Hannah asked, "Are you absolutely sure there's nothing wrong with him?"

Ralph replied, "I can't be absolutely sure that nothing will be wrong with him later, but right now he looks as good as can be. All systems seem to be working."

Then the nurse took T.J. to cleanse him of the detritus of birth. As she gently washed him, T.J. held onto Tommy's finger as if he knew this was the man who created him. It was like watching a human version of duck imprinting. T.J. was holding his father's finger for the support he would need to grow into a man.

Tommy told Hannah that he and Ben would look after T.J. so she could sleep. She was totally spent from the anxiety and the birthing, and instantly dropped into a deep sleep knowing that T.J. would be safe with his protectors.

Tommy sat in a chair holding his son while his father sat on the chair of the arm stroking Tommy's head. Although he was sure Hannah was soundly asleep, he whispered in Tommy's ear, "Here are three generations of Evans men." They looked into each other's eyes with pride and happiness.

Four hours later Hannah awoke refreshed and devoid of the memories of her fears for Tommy and T.J. Although the nurse asked her not to do so, Hannah kept undressing T.J. so she could marvel at his perfect, pudgy body. Tommy called Celeste and told her to visit as soon as she could make it. Two and a half years ago he had called Kelly with the same request, and now he was calling Hannah's new best friend, Celeste. However, Celeste was not coming from another part of the hospital. She had to come from another part of Fairbanks during a raging storm so she was sure she wouldn't be able to make it for a while. She promised to visit as soon as the weather eased, probably the next day.

Tommy had not had the opportunity to take photos of T.J. at birth so he made up for it soon after his arrival. He took countless pictures of Ben with T.J., and of course Hannah when she first put T.J. to her breast. Unlike many newborns who have to be trained to suckle, T.J. knew what to do as soon as his lips sensed Hannah's breast. He rooted for a breast whenever anyone held him. Ben laughed as T.J. tried to suckle on his shirt.

With anything regarding eating, T.J. did not have to be taught. He relished his first taste of solid food, even though it was Gerber's rice cereal. To him, strained peaches were an exotic delicacy to be savored. When he saw Hannah's breast or a jar of baby food, he would kick his arms and legs furiously with the anticipation of a delicious feast.

The next day the weather cleared enough for Hannah to take T.J. home. As soon as Leslie saw him, she giggled with ecstasy. Hannah set Leslie on the couch and placed T.J. on her lap. Tommy took 12 pictures of the same scene - Leslie staring at T.J. as if he were an alien from outer space while T.J. slept peacefully. Later in the day, Celeste visited and Tommy asked her if she would be T.J.'s godmother. She proudly accepted and then posed for another dozen pictures of her holding T.J. as Leslie snuggled next to her on the couch. Leslie was so enamored of her brother that she didn't even play with her toys. She spent all her time holding him or watching as others tended to him.

To their surprise, Bruce came to visit the next day bearing gifts. He brought a baby-size University of Alaska sweatshirt and a nerf soccer ball. He even held T.J., but with great care as if he were carrying something fragile. Tommy took pictures of Bruce holding T.J. so he could remind Bruce that he had survived touching an infant.

Life settled into a routine again with Hannah spending most of her time breast feeding T.J. He was always hungry. Hannah thought he could eat 24 hours a day. She pumped the endless supply of milk her breasts produced so that Tommy could share the joy of feeding his son, especially in the middle of the night, freeing up Hannah for uninterrupted sleep. T.J. was a placid, sweet baby who smiled early and with each new day delighted in the world around him. With every day, Hannah fell more and more in love with T.J. She spent hours observing him looking around the room, or tracking the circus animals on the moving mobile, or delighting as his eyes alighted on her, drinking in the one person in the world who fed and loved him unconditionally and completely. When Hannah was with Leslie during her first year, she felt overwhelmed with maternal love and the need to be all to Leslie. But she found that her relationship with T.J. was even more intense, perhaps because of Hannah's knowledge of what dwelt within his genes.

Hannah thought of little else but taking care of her two children. When she wasn't with T.J., she spent time playing with Leslie. Hannah had thought that she would send Leslie to Northern Lights while she stayed home with T.J., but she decided to keep her home for a while so that the three could bond. Susan was very helpful with doing chores and shopping freeing up Hannah to be the main caregiver to her children.

Hannah had originally planned to return to Northern Lights six weeks after T.J.'s birth, but after the first few weeks at home, she realized that she wouldn't be able to part from T.J. She wanted to return to work because she knew that teaching fulfilled a need that even T.J. couldn't

satisfy, but she also knew that T.J. came first and that teaching would always be there, but her time with her newborn was fleeting. Her children would be children for only a short time and she wanted to influence every phase in their becoming themselves. She anxiously spoke to Celeste about returning to teaching in September, fearing that Celeste would say that she had to come back by April or not at all. But, Celeste understood Hannah's need to be with T.J. and Leslie. She said that September would be fine and that Hannah could have her own class since she was ready to be a full-fledged teacher at Northern Lights. She said that Louise was handling the class with great skill and would be able to finish out the year under Helen's mentorship. She mentioned that Louise was doing especially well now because she had met someone through an on-line dating service and was hoping to marry him although the guy lived in Denver. If this did work out, Celeste would be looking for a new teacher again.

The daily routine of being a nurturing mother and wife was shattered on March 18th when Hannah received a call from Shady Brook Home informing her that Mary Ann had died. It was 9:00 AM and Hannah had to be alone to process the meaning of her death. She asked Susan to take care of the children while she went out to a coffee shop, not Tommy's, to ponder having no mother. She had already grieved for Mary Ann during her decline so she didn't really feel grief now. When she moved to Alaska, she stopped thinking of Mary Ann other than when she called to inquire about her health status. Now, she felt an overwhelming sadness for Mary Ann's life, her relationship with an unfaithful husband, her inability to have children, her loss of her mind to Alzheimers, her never having seen her daughter happily married, and her never having seen her magnificent grandchildren. She tried to be positive by dwelling on the good times they had as a family and the love she shared with Hannah, but the negative kept crowding out the positive.

She thought it fitting that Mary Ann died so soon after T.J.'s birth. It was like a trade-off. One life going and another life coming. She hoped that somehow Mary Ann's goodness would be passed on to T.J., even though they were not biologically related. She realized that Mary Ann had been a very good human being, filled with love and always doing good things for others. Hannah couldn't recall Mary Ann doing anything mean or spiteful. She epitomized the proverbial enigma of why bad things happen to good people. Hannah thanked Mary Ann for providing her with unconditional love. She hoped that she could do the same for her children. There would be no greater tribute to her mother than emulating her.

There was no funeral for Mary Ann. There were few friends or relatives left to attend. Hannah had taken care of all the legal aspects of Mary Ann's estate before her move to Alaska so she had no need to return. Also, Hannah realized that she didn't want to return to Lewiston. She had no reason to go back. It was no longer home.

Hannah called Kelly to tell her about Mary Ann's death. She wasn't home so she left a message. She knew that Kelly visited Mary Ann every few weeks. To thank her for being so considerate, she sent her an order for a year's worth of Pampers for her baby who was due in May. She knew that Kelly wanted Hannah to come to Lewiston to see the baby and she also wanted to see Hannah's children. But Hannah knew that she wouldn't be going back to Lewiston any time in the near future. She had to live her life in Alaska. When Kelly called Hannah back thirty minutes later, they talked about Hannah's plans to have Mary Ann cremated and her remains sent to Hannah. Kelly begged her to come and visit in the summer so they could have show and tell with their kids. Hannah promised to come, but Kelly knew her words were hollow.

Mary Ann's ashes were sent to Alaska where they would spend eternity. Hannah bought a sky blue ceramic urn to house Mary Ann's remains. Mary Ann's favorite color had been this shade of blue. Hannah wanted to always remember her loving mother who had molded Hannah into the woman she was. Hannah put the urn on her dresser surrounded by three pictures. One was of a young Mary Ann holding a year-old Hannah as they looked out at the valley from a mountain trail. Another showed a voluptuous Mary Ann romping on the beach with eight-year old Hannah. And the third was a close-up of beautiful Mary Ann who was dressed up for a friend's wedding. The photo showed her perfectly formed features and her flawless skin. Her smile seemed to reflect an inner peace that Hannah wondered if she ever really felt. Hannah realized that she had always stared at Mary Ann, marveling at her beauty. Often when they were watching TV, Hannah would sit slightly behind Mary Ann so she could study how her face responded to the messages sent from the TV. She often concentrated on her perfectly turned up nose, comparing it to her own flattened nose. And now Hannah again stared at the close-up picture, even more awed by Mary Ann's beauty and wondering why that had not been enough for Sean. Why did he have to cheat on beautiful Mary Ann with fat, ugly Brooke? She kept no pictures of Sean out. She had hoped that, with time, she would feel forgiveness toward him. That wasn't happening; she was becoming angrier at him realizing that he was not the man she had loved. And she found that she was loving Mary Ann more even though she didn't really know all of her. But her anger and hatred was primarily directed at Brooke, and it grew whenever she thought of her so she tried not to think of her.

As Hannah was showing Tommy her shrine to Mary Ann and explaining her feelings, Ben came in. He visited almost every day. He needed to get his daily dose of being a grandpa. Sometimes he would drop in for 5 minutes, and sometimes he'd spend a whole afternoon. Hannah had never shared her feelings about Mary Ann with Ben. She showed him her pictures and he commented on her beauty and also agreed that he couldn't understand Sean's infidelity.

"Ben, I told Tommy that I hate Brooke more every time I think of her. I thought being thousands of miles away from her would lessen my feelings, but that hasn't happened. The opposite is true. I despise her and want her dead. I still fear that somehow she'll expose us. We can't feel safe until she's dead. I wonder if she kept my emails or has my name in her address book. I don't want her to have any trace of me. She's cruel enough to expose me and Tommy in a fit of hatred. I just keep wishing she were dead."

Ben responded, "Maybe God will make that happen. Sometimes God answers our prayers."

Later when Hannah and Tommy were alone, she said, "There's something mysterious about your father. When he said that God might answer our prayers about wishing Brooke dead, he had a strange look on his face, like he was going to help God. Do you think he could do something like that? Not himself, but hiring someone. He has lots of connections from business and the military."

Tommy replied, "Don't be silly. My father's not a killer." But he, too, silently, wondered about another side of his father that he didn't know. A side that would do anything to protect the ones he loved, even murder.

In May, T.J. began having chronic ear infections. Sometimes he would cry from the pain and other times he would just gnash his fist into his ear trying to churn the pain away. At the first sign of an infection, Hannah took him to Ralph who prescribed antibiotics. His infections cleared up, but re-appeared as soon as he completed the antibiotic regimen.

After his third infection in two months, Hannah asked Ralph, "Is there a reason T.J. keeps getting these infections? It's not normal, is it?"

Ralph responded, "Hannah, it's very common. He's just showing these infections earlier than a lot of kids. I'm a bit concerned that it may delay his language development because he may not be hearing what people are saying to him. If this continues, I'd like to refer him to an ENT in Anchorage. He may want to put tubes in his ears."

Hannah was silent. It was apparent to Ralph that Hannah wanted to say something. "Is there something you want to tell me Hannah?"

Hannah waited a long time, took a deep breath, and dove in. "Yes. Tommy and I are very concerned about both Leslie and T.J.'s health because..." She hesitated and acted as if she were

jumping into icy, deep water, and finally produced a torrent of words, "Tommy and I are twins. We were separated at birth. We met and fell in love at first sight. We didn't find out until after Leslie was born. Right before I met Tommy, I found out who my biological mother was. I also found out that she was a student of my father's who turned out to be my biological father. I had several miscarriages and I was worried that there was something genetic that was causing this so I contacted my mother. She told me about Tommy, but she didn't know that we were married. Anyhow, I'm petrified that the kids will get some rare genetic disease because of this.

Ralph, you're the first person I've told this to. We moved from Virginia so we could hide our secret. I trust you not to tell the police."

Ralph put his arms around Hannah and hugged her to him. "Hannah, I'd never tell the police. It's your private business and no one else's. I need to know this because I can now be alert to any problems that may arise as a result of your relationship, but right now there's absolutely nothing. T.J.'s ear infections are definitely not related to you and Tommy being twins.

Hannah, I feel honored that you shared this with me. You have my word that I will never disclose this to anyone under any circumstances, not only because of doctor-patient confidentiality, but because I feel you and Tommy are friends and I would never betray a friendship."

They hugged again as she wept. Her bodied relaxed. "I feel such relief. I've had this secret pent up and I wanted to tell you. You should know as our doctor, but I didn't feel I could share this until today. And we also feel that you are more than our doctor. You are our friend."

"Hannah, I can understand your concern about the kids' health. I can't promise you that there won't be problems, but if there would have been major problems from this, we would have seen it at birth. Right now both kids are healthy.

Hannah, as you know I'm Mormon and there's lots of incest in some Mormon sects. I personally don't know of any greater incidence of handicaps because of this, but there well may be because these groups shut out outsiders, even Mormon outsiders."

Ralph took Hannah's hands in his and said, "I know you and Tommy love each other very much and you're both caring parents. I would never do anything to jeopardize your family. I also know some problems could arise that would necessitate having genetic testing. For

example, one of you might need a transplant in the future. If we had to do this, I would do all I can to honor the confidentiality of our relationship."

Hannah hugged Ralph tightly. "Thank you for your kindness. You have put my mind at ease about so many problems I have imagined coming up in the future. I will be forever in your debt. You're so much more than a good doctor. You're a good human being."

All the way home, Hannah felt a lightness. She was so relieved that she had told someone, especially Ralph. He needed to know. He had acted as if she had told him that she had a wart. He was not judgmental. She hadn't been able to detect even a glimmer of disdain in his eyes.

After the kids were put to bed, Hannah said, "Tommy, I have something important to tell you. I told Ralph about us today. I couldn't help it. I had to ask him if T.J.'s ear infections were caused by us being brother and sister. He assured me they weren't. He was so accepting. I feel such a load off my shoulders that I told him. I wish you could have been there to see how wonderful he was."

"I'm glad you told him too. As our doctor he needs to know and I'm sure he would never violate doctor-patient confidentiality. But it's more than that, I think he respects our privacy."

Hannah, when the time is right, I think you should tell Celeste. She's your best friend and she should know about us. I know it won't affect your friendship. It may even make it stronger. It's funny. I'm not afraid anymore if someone finds out. Maybe that's why I knew it was right to move here. I really don't think we could have found acceptance from doctors in Lewiston, especially Dr. Samson."

"I have been thinking of telling Celeste. I was just waiting for the right time."

"Although Bruce is my very good friend, I can't imagine telling him this. I think our friendship is based on intellectual things, and not personal ones. There's a separation between us that's based on our views of women and family. Do you understand?"

"Yes. It's a different type of friendship than I have with Celeste. And also I don't think he'd understand because he's never loved a woman or a child like you have. He just couldn't understand even though I don't think he would judge you as doing something wrong. His judgment would be based more on abstracts, such as freedom and not on emotional factors."

The right time for Hannah to tell Celeste came in July when Celeste came over to help Hannah set up for Leslie's third birthday party. Tommy and Ben had taken the children for an outing to a street fair. As Celeste and Hannah were blowing up balloons and filling bags with party favors for the 10 children who would be coming at 3:00, they started to reminisce about their meeting eleven months earlier.

"Hannah, I find it unbelievable that we have become best friends in such a short time. I've never had a best friend before and I certainly never imagined that I would have a white best friend. We're so different culturally. And our histories are so different. I had an absolutely horrifying experience that changed my life, eventually for the good. Hope, literally and figuratively, sprang from that experience. You've never had such ugliness in your life."

That was Hannah's cue. "You're wrong Celeste. I have had ugliness in my life." She poured out why Tommy and she had moved to Fairbanks starting with the discovery of the letter from Brooke. She talked uninterrupted for 30 minutes. The whole time Celeste gently stroked Hannah's hands.

When she was done, Celeste said, "You and Tommy seem to have the perfect marriage. You obviously love each other deeply. I idealize your marriage because frankly I don't know anyone else who is happily married like you. Every time you look at each other, it's as if you're saying "I love you" with your eyes. Even when you're passing the butter at a meal. It's like you're always in love. It doesn't spoil my image, it just complicates it. Thank you for telling me Hannah. Now we have cemented our friendship for all time.

Hannah, you know I'm not a mystical person, but I can't help but feel that you both felt something when you first saw each other. On some subliminal level, you knew you were related. I think that's why you have this very special love. It's like you were fated for each other."

They hugged. Again Hannah felt an easing up on her life, a loosening.

"Do you think there's anything wrong morally? Should we have split up when we found out?"

"Geez, NO. Why would you split up when you have this great love? Anyhow, there's lots and lots of incest in Eskimo life, just like there is everywhere. And don't worry, I would never ever share this with anyone. Friends don't do that.

You know I keep coming back to the mystical stuff. I felt something special when I first saw you. It's like I felt that we knew each other before, maybe in a previous life. I can't imagine how we would have met since we lived thousands of miles apart. There's something about you that brings out spiritual feelings. It's like our souls are communicating."

"Celeste, I know what you mean. I, too, feel like we communicate on a different level than just friends. We're bound by something stronger."

Just then, Ben and Tommy returned with the kids. "Hey, aren't you guys finished? The party's starting in an hour."

As the weather warmed, Hannah ventured out more. She took the children for walks in a double stroller. She and Tommy took the children for picnics along the river. He asked if she would take a hike, but she said that she wasn't ready for that yet. She had to take baby steps in venturing into the outdoors. Alaska still intimidated her; it scared her. When she was indoors, she wasn't in Fairbanks. She was anywhere but Lewiston.

For their anniversary, Ben was taking the family to Cabo. He had purchased a three bedroom condo in the same complex where they had celebrated their honeymoon four years earlier. They decided to also take Susan to help with the children. They helped her get a passport as she had never been out of Fairbanks, let alone the country. She was extremely nervous about flying and going to another country, but at the same time eager to live life more fully. When Hannah talked about the trip to her, she bit her nails and crossed and uncrossed her legs repeatedly. Hannah asked if she really wanted to go with them. Susan answered in a louder voice than Hannah had ever heard her use. "Yes. Definitely." Susan was opening up to the world, perhaps even to the spoken world.

September came and Hannah started back to teaching. On the first day, she kissed T.J. good-bye and handed him to Susan, kissed Tommy goodbye as he headed for the store, and took Leslie's hand and headed off to Northern Lights. As she entered the building, her heart fluttered. She was going to her second home, the place where Hannah, the potter, molded children other than her own. Hannah found that she needed little help in reverting to her role of teacher. It was as if she had never been away. As she greeted her students, she basked in the glow of making a difference in the world, albeit a tiny one.

In October, Hannah received an email from Kelly with the subject line reading "Shocking news." In May, Kelly had a daughter who she had named Rachel. Every few days, she emailed Hannah to report on her progress, with attachments of photos showing a beautiful, blond baby

who looked remarkably like Kelly. They also alternated calling each other on Sunday mornings to discuss their children, the cement that held their dissolving friendship together. But this email didn't describe Rachel, it described the horrific death of Brooke Brock.

As Hannah read the first line, she received an electrifying jolt. "I just saw an article in the Post about the murder of Brooke. I'm attaching the website so you can read about it. What a way to die. Her murder has caused quite a sensation in DC. There was another similar murder of a psychiatrist by a patient last month so the police think it might somehow be related. Maybe a serial murderer of shrinks."

Hannah went to the Post article and saw the headline, "Social Worker Murdered in Her Condo." The article contained two pictures, one, the same photo of Brooke from the National Association of Mental Health Professionals website that Hannah had first seen when she googled Brooke, and the other showed the outside of her apartment building in Arlington. The article described how her throat had been slashed and her apartment burglarized. She had not been sexually assaulted. There were no signs of a struggle so the police speculated that she might have known the killer; perhaps it was a former patient. The records of her private patients were on her personal computer which had been stolen making it difficult for the police to identify who these clients were. There were no fingerprints or DNA material that seemed to have been left at the crime scene. Everything was wiped clean. The only clue was the similarity to the murder of a female psychiatrist the previous month, who also had her throat slashed and computer equipment stolen. With both computers stolen, it was difficult for the police to determine if there was a shared client involved in both murders, or if there was a murderer targeting therapists, or if there was a copycat murderer responsible for Brooke's killing.

After Hannah read the article, she googled for more information. She wanted to know everything that had happened. She savored each and every bit of information on the death of her mortal enemy. Her fantasies about Brooke's death had become reality. She wished there was a picture of the crime scene, but there wasn't so she created one mentally. She closed her eyes and saw Brooke sprawled across a couch wearing the same clothes she had worn when they met for lunch. She focused on her fat throat cleanly cut from ear to ear, with blood flowing downward, turning her pearls from lustrous white to slippery pink. Her eyes were open with a look of horror at what was happening to her. Hannah hoped that she suffered a lot; suffered like she was entering the ninth circle of Hell for what she had inflicted on others.

Hannah was flooded with a mix of emotions, but mostly relief, relief that her secret would remain hidden forever. She felt a surge of happiness, but tried to quell it. She shouldn't be happy about someone's death, even a person like Brooke. But she was happy; so happy she

wanted to shout on the top of her lungs, "The wicked witch is dead." She felt that justice had been rendered. This was morally right; this was biblical retribution. Brooke was evil and deserved to die. There were some crimes, like Brooke's murder, that couldn't be dealt with in the courts; they had to be dealt with by the victims. This was justifiable homicide. Then Hannah thought to herself that she was a good person, and a good person should not enjoy the death of others, even evil others. Then she revised her view of goodness. A good person could see the benefit of the death of evil and still retain her goodness. She could still be good Hannah and feel that Brooke's murder was not wrong. This was good conquering evil.

Then she thought about the missing computer. If there was any evidence of Hannah's relationship with Brooke, it would have been on her computer, and now it was gone. Hopefully, never to be found, or if found, purged of all evidence that Hannah had known Brooke.

Hannah forwarded Kelly's email to Tommy and Ben. When Tommy came home later, he didn't say anything about Brooke, but his face showed elation. After they put the children to bed that night, they called Ben telling him to come over so they could discuss Brooke's murder.

Ben entered the house with a smile and a light step. "She's gone. We don't have to worry about a thing. She can't ruin our lives. I'm sure glad some pervert got her. She was a pervert murdered by another pervert. How fucking fitting."

Tommy said, "Justice was done. She deserved to die and she did."

Hannah looked at Ben and Tommy and saw something she couldn't decipher on their faces. Was it a look of complicity or just shared happiness? Had they killed Brooke? Impossible. Hannah had been with them every day so they couldn't have gone to DC. Had they arranged for someone else to kill Brooke? Who? Impossible. Well, maybe not. How would they do that? Put an ad in the paper? Look on Craig's List? And yet they had this look of mission accomplished on their faces. Hannah couldn't ask them about it. She couldn't tell them that she thought they were capable of murder. Could her husband and father-in-law be murderers? And if they were, was it wrong? No. No. No.

If they had indeed arranged for Brooke's death, that was okay with her. It was more than okay with her. It was morally right. This was the happy ending to her life story. In this instance the bad guys lost and the good guys won.

Ben said, "Brooke's gone now. Let's not think of her anymore. Let's just get on with living our lives."

Several weeks later a former patient of the psychiatrist's was caught and admitted to the murder of the psychiatrist, but he denied murdering Brooke. The police were sure he had murdered Brooke, but refused to admit it because she had been murdered in Virginia, a state with the death penalty. He admitted to the psychiatrist's murder because it had taken place in Washington D.C., which did not have the death penalty. Although the man was not charged with Brooke's murder, police considered the Brooke Brock case closed. The computers in both cases were never found.

Hannah did what she was so good at, she buried Brooke in the depths of her memory bank, rarely to be brought to the surface. Brooke's presence in Hannah's consciousness was gone, but her presence would always reside in her genes, waiting to be released. Somehow.

On the night after another lovely Thanksgiving celebration, Tommy and Hannah sat down to rest after cleaning up. "Hannah, remember last year when I said that we were like people who had dual citizenship. We had dual identities. We were brother and sister and husband and wife. Now I think we have another type of dual identity. We have the Tommy before Alaska and the Tommy after Alaska. The before Tommy just lived life without thinking about things. He was sorta simple. The after Tommy likes to use his mind and explore ideas and broaden his thinking. He's more complex. Don't you think?"

"Absolutely. You're not the same Tommy you were in Lewiston. And I'm not the same Hannah. I have dual identities too. Talk about being simple. That was me in Lewiston, but now I'm different. Alaska has broadened me. I empathize with other people, different people. I have a new best friend who is as different from me as could be, but at the same time we have a mystical tie to each other. I can't explain my relationship with Celeste, but it's like nothing I've ever experienced before. In a way she's as important to me as you and the kids. And now I'm concerned about a group of people, not just myself and my loved ones.

It's like our first dual identity brought us closer, but now we're drawing away from each other, but not in a bad way. It's like we're now more than just husband and wife and brother and sister. We're reaching out and we're not just part of our own world. We're part of the rest of the world."

"Do you ever think of going back to Lewiston or moving someplace else?"

“No. I never thought I’d say this. But Alaska is my home now because I like what it’s done to me. I like the person it’s made me into and I like the person it’s made you into.”

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About the author: I, Esther Minskoff, am a retired professor of special education. At James Madison University, I trained teachers to teach students with learning disabilities, mental retardation, and emotional disturbance. I authored two major textbooks in the field of special education: *Teaching Reading to Struggling Learners* and *Academic Success Strategies for Adolescents with Learning Disabilities and ADHD*, both published by Brookes Publishing. This is my first endeavor at writing fiction. I’d love to hear from you. Contact me at eminskoff@gmail.com



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