

About *Darkness Under His Feet*, a novel:

I wasted about 20 years of my life, spiritually speaking, involved in and/or embracing charismatic doctrine. When I finally realized those beliefs were dark and unscriptural, I wrote a couple of novels, hoping to warn doctrinally sound believers not to follow in my footsteps.

Darkness Under His Feet is the first of those and you may read it free in its entirety on this website. The second, *Out of Darkness*, can be purchased through amazon.com or from the publisher, Author House. I did publish *Out of Darkness* under the pen name B.J. Aaron. When I have time, I am planning to have it changed to my real name.

The phrase, "...darkness under His feet," comes from Psalm 18:9. The psalmist David describes a time when he was in great distress and called on the Lord for help. God responded dramatically with earthquakes and fire as He came to David's aid.

The whole verse reads, "He bowed the heavens also, and came down: and darkness was under his feet." (KJV) One of the themes of my book is that God often works under cover of darkness – in other words, secretly – when He comes to the aid of His children. We may not know what He's up to, but we can always trust that He is near, that He cares, and that His ways are infinitely better than our ways.

"*Darkness Under His Feet*," is a mystery set in the fictional town of Deepwater, Texas. Tobi Kirkland is city editor for the local newspaper. Dealing with the trials in her life, including suspicion of murdering a previous employer who has just moved to Deepwater, she finds comfort in Psalm 18. As she sees God unleash His fury on David's enemies, she can believe that He is caring just as tenderly for her.

Darkness under His Feet **by Betty Johansen**

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Darkness under His Feet is a work of fiction. The people and the town are products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

*Dedicated with adoration and praise
to Jesus Christ, the Lord of Glory,
who loves me and gave Himself for me.*

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Characters

This list of characters is provided for reference while reading the novel.

1. Tobi (October) Kirkland - city editor for the Deepwater newspaper, the *City Crier*
2. DeeDee (December) Walling - Tobi's sister, 2nd grade teacher for Deepwater ISD
3. Ben Walling - DeeDee's husband - chief homicide detective for Deepwater police department
4. Alison Walling - Ben and DeeDee's 16-year-old daughter
5. Davy Scot Walling - Ben and DeeDee's 8-year-old son
6. Chuck Warren - Tobi's ex-boyfriend
7. Susie Phillips - Chuck's bride
8. Lyle Harris - Tobi's ex-husband
9. Kent Grantham - former coworker of Tobi's
10. Audrey Mansett - Kent's mother
11. Staff of Deepwater's newspaper, the *City Crier* :
 - Hugh Mansett - incoming managing editor (Kent's stepfather)
 - Clayton Archer - publisher
 - Reuben Garza - reporter
 - Otto - photographer
 - Donna - employed in production
12. Staff of Carlyle Memorial Hospital
 - Joel Trent - CEO
 - Violet (Vi) Crofton - Joel's secretary (husband, Grady Crofton)
 - Faye - switchboard operator
 - Bess Green - nurse on post-op floor

Millie Bledsoe - employed in housekeeping

13. Staff of the newspaper, the *Foxhole Gazette*, where Tobi worked in the past

Tye Ringener - publisher

Mike Temple - reporter

Cinda - employed in production

14. Officers in the Deepwater PD: Rick Macy, Don Rawls

15. Julius Kirkland - brother of Tobi and DeeDee (wife, Joyce Kirkland)

16. Members of Tobi's Sunday School class:

Barry Tuttle (teacher), Marijo Builder, George Walker

17. Eric - Hugh's lawyer

18. Rachel Hudson - Joel Trent's ex-wife (husband, Paul Hudson)

19. Gloria and Grace Trent - Joel and Rachel's daughters

20. Emory Morel - pastor of Church of the Living Vine

21. Mrs. Waterson - hospital patient

22. Nelson Kirby - Texas state senator

23. Brian Jeffers - aide to Nelson Kirby

24. Missy Sheridan - murder victim from Foxhole

25. Ralph Mansett - Hugh's brother

Chapter 1

Friday: The Dreaded Wedding

Tobi sat up straight in her chair and bit her quivering lip. She would *not* cry. She must not. It was bad enough that people thought she was a murderer. She wasn't going to have them thinking she was a crybaby too.

She tried to concentrate on the news story she was reading. But the luminous green letters on her screen blurred. Her fingers were trembling. She squeezed her eyes shut and prayed urgently, "Dear God, help!"

Immediately a vast blackness engulfed her. A velvet blackness. A huge, black ocean of peace.

"Sleeping on the job! I guess you're not so worried about losing your job, after all," a voice chortled behind her.

Tobi started violently, then glared at Reuben Garza. "Why should I be worried?" she demanded. "I haven't done anything wrong."

"Right."

In spite of herself, Tobi glanced at the publisher's office where five of her colleagues were helping the publisher decide her fate. She seemed unable to keep her eyes off that closed door. "What do you want, Reuben?" She didn't even try to keep the hostility out of her voice. "Are you sneaking around scaring people just for the fun of it?"

"I didn't sneak. I merely approached Your Highness to tell you that my hapless article from last Friday is in page one, waiting for you to correct my sloppy spelling and shoddy grammar...Your Majesty...ma'am." He bowed slightly, mockingly, and left.

Tobi bit her lip and returned to her computer screen. Calling up the page one menu, she selected Reuben's story. Funny how he managed to have the article ready bright and early today - Monday. Why couldn't he have been so speedy last Friday when she was standing on her head, waiting for it? She had been angry enough at him to eat nails then.

He knew some of his facts had to be double checked, but he hadn't bothered. And then, a confirming source that *had* to be consulted became unavailable for the weekend. The story had been scheduled as the lead on the front page of Sunday's paper, but she had told him it wouldn't run Sunday, after all. She would replace it with a wire story. He had stomped out in a huff late Friday afternoon.

And she had stomped out in her own huff right behind him. She had already been in a lather all day Friday. By late afternoon she was on the verge of hysteria!

No one in the newsroom seemed to have an ounce of incentive. Two sections of the Sunday edition had to be ready to go to press before they could leave Friday or the crew would be here all night Saturday. But nobody would hurry. Nobody cared that she had to get home in time to transform herself into a vision of loveliness before she went to Chuck and Susie's wedding. Otherwise, her life would be ruined.

Chuck and Susie's wedding. Chuck and Susie's wedding. Chuck and Susie's wedding.

Those four words had echoed in her head all day Friday like a drum beat. She *had* to go. She would rather be eaten alive by fire ants, but she had to go. If she didn't, she would be the object of pity for the rest of her life.

She could already hear the sad whispers that would follow her: "Tobi didn't go to Chuck and Susie's wedding, you know." "It must have broken her heart, poor dear." "Do you think she'll ever marry now?" "Oh my no, she'll eat her heart out over Chuck for the rest of her life!"

Chuck. Tall, sandy-haired Chuck Warren with his quick wit and warm laughter. Tobi had thought the impossible dream was possible two years ago when he came into her life at the ripe old age of 38.

And he seemed to feel the same way about her until Susie - dainty, little, pixie-ish Susie - appeared one morning in their singles Sunday School class. Chuck never gave Tobi another glance after he saw Susie. And now they were going to be married.

Chuck and Susie were going to be married. Not Chuck and Tobi. Chuck and Susie.

How was she going to keep from crying? What if she bawled all the way through the ceremony? She would be better off not going at all. Maybe she wouldn't go. It would be easy enough to say she'd had to work late. She *did* have to work late. But who would she tell? Nobody would ask. They would assume she stayed away because she was devastated.

So, she *had* to go. There was no way around it. She would find a way - some way - to control her emotions. If she had to spend the entire evening pretending she was on a space ship to Saturn, she would *not* let herself cry.

Twenty minutes to 7:00 Friday evening had found Tobi inspecting herself critically in the floor length mirror in her bedroom. The assortment of dresses, skirts and

blouses she had tried on and rejected festooned her bed. Finally, she had settled on a summery blue and green floral silk dress. It was the last birthday present her parents had ever given her and the association was comforting.

Tobi turned her attention to her shoulder length, reddish blond hair next. It was soft and thick and her most striking feature. She wore it long because she enjoyed being able to change her look simply by changing her hair style. Not that she was particularly gifted at creating new looks, but on special occasions, her sister DeeDee could be very creative with new hairstyles. On most occasions, like this one, however, she wore it loose with a slight curl at the ends and it framed her face appealingly.

Just as she was about to turn away from the mirror, Tobi noticed that her green eyes, clouded with the heavy sadness strangling her heart, looked almost black. She closed her eyes. There was nothing she could do about that.

She walked outside into a bright, balmy May evening that, under normal circumstances, would have sent her spirits soaring above the clouds. Now it added to her gloom. "Even the weather has to be perfect for *them*," she fumed. "Why can't we have some blowing dirt? Or a few hailstones? It's May in West Texas, for Pete's sake. We could even have a torna..."

But she stopped herself before she finished the thought. "October Kirkland," she addressed herself sternly, as she drove the short distance to the church, "I'll not put up with any more of those thoughts from you. Chuck and Susie are your friends and I'll thank you to wish only the best for them."

She took a deep breath, squeezed back a tear, and put a tight rein on her emotions. This effort got her to the church, up the aisle and safely seated in a pew before the rush of emotions threatened to overwhelm her again. Then the sight of long, white candles, the faint fragrance of roses and the strains of "You Light Up My Life," combined to hammer at her fragile composure again.

At the very moment when it seemed a torrent of tears was determined to mark her for permanent disgrace, a familiar voice whispered, "Hey, beautiful, you waiting for me?"

She turned to see... Kent Grantham? It was the same line he had been using two years ago. Four years ago. Probably ever since he was in high school.

"Kent! What are you doing here?" She threw her arms around him with genuine affection. She hadn't seen him in two years and hadn't expected to see him again for the rest of her life. Now, here he was at Chuck and Susie's wedding.

"By 'here' do you mean Deepwater? Or do you mean at Susie and the old bean's wedding?" Apparently, nothing about him ever changed - "old bean" probably still referred to someone whose name he had forgotten.

"Both." She withdrew from his embrace breathlessly - breathless with surprise and because Kent's presence always had that effect on her. It was probably his dimples. Or maybe his movie-star perfect face. Or his dark, wavy hair and mischievous eyes. Or... Never mind, she wasn't going to put herself through that grief again. They lived in different worlds. She and her heart had settled the matter a long time ago and she wasn't going to bring it up again.

But Kent wasn't making it easy, fussing over her and telling her she was still the most beautiful woman alive. Her heart fluttered in spite of her stern resolution.

"Would you cut the cheap flattery and answer my question!" she insisted.

"Let's see. What am I doing here? Is that the question you mean?"

She nodded.

"Well, Susie's a distant relative of my mother's so, since I was in town anyway, I decided to drop in on her stroll down the aisle."

"Why are you in town?"

"Because of Hugh. Helping him get settled in, you know."

"Settled in where?" She frowned at the thought of Kent's stepfather, Hugh Mansett. He was the pompous know-it-all who managed the newspaper at Foxhole, a bustling little city south of Dallas. She had worked for him there for five years until she caught him in a cover-up and he fired her.

"Settled in here, of course." He noticed her puzzled expression. "You don't know!"

"Know what?"

"He's your new managing editor. He has an old reporter buddy, name of Reuben-somebody here, who told him about the opening. Hugh's tired of the rat race, wanted a slower-paced lifestyle. So he's been checking out newspapers in the smaller towns. Reuben gave him a ring a couple of weeks ago. Hugh came down to interview and they hired him. Don't they ever tell you peons anything?"

"Peons! I'm city editor," said Tobi. "The old coot told them not to tell me. He wanted to spring himself on me just so he could see the expression on my face."

"Well, you wouldn't have disappointed him. You're turning green," Kent observed with a grin. "And you're probably right. I think I heard him snickering about it to Mom - how he was going to have another go at that smart aleck Tobi Kirkland."

Tobi tried to return his grin, but she was about to lose her supper, so she swallowed hard instead. "You came to help Hugh get settled?" she asked. "I thought you hated him."

"I did. But life's too short. All that hatred isn't good for the health. Besides, I got religion. I'm a new man now."

Tobi's heart missed a beat. "What do you mean you got religion?" she asked. But the volume of the music rose and candle lighters were walking down the aisle.

"Later," Kent whispered.

The thought of Hugh Mansett becoming her boss again was all Tobi needed to take her mind off Chuck and Susie. In fact, she barely noticed the wedding. She had come closer to hating Hugh Mansett than anyone in her life, except her ex-husband, Lyle Harris.

What a loathsome man Hugh had been to work for! A typical media big shot who cared more about validating his own warped views than he did about printing the truth.

While Chuck and Susie said their "I do's," Tobi relived her last days at the *Foxhole Gazette*. A local, so-called paleontologist had found a "missing link," some fossil creature he claimed was an intermediate form between an amphibian and a

reptile. In a social setting, Tobi overheard him bragging about the hoax he was pulling off by assembling a fossil creature made of one animal's limbs attached to another animal's torso and head.

When she exposed the fraud to Hugh, he had thrown his head back and roared with laughter. "That's a good one. We should have been doing it all the time - creating our own missing links! We'll show those prissy little Christians - always going around claiming that no missing links have ever been found!"

"Hugh, what about journalistic integrity?"

"What about it? We're only the press. We can't be experts on every subject. The paleontologist is the expert. We'll print what *he* says is the truth. And if it's not the truth, then he's the liar, not us."

"Yes we are because I just told you the truth."

"Tobi, don't you have anything to do besides mind my business? *Get out of my face.*"

Although his smile was still jovial, there were daggers in his eyes.

But Tobi refused to back down. "As you know," she said quietly, "I'm one of those prissy Christians you mentioned. If you print this lie, I'll go to KXBX. I expect they'll be happy to report the whole story on their morning news show."

"Oh, I don't think so," said Hugh. "How much credibility will you have as a disgruntled ex-employee?"

"*Ex-employee?*"

"That's right. You're fired. As of now."

Tobi shivered and Kent put an arm around her. "You okay?" he whispered.

She nodded and leaned against him. His closeness was comforting and familiar. He had pursued her relentlessly back in their days as reporters at Foxhole, but she had refused to be caught. Kent wasn't a Christian and had no interest in spiritual matters; therefore, as far as she was concerned, romance was out of the question. But they had been friends and their common contempt for Hugh had united them during her years at Foxhole.

What had he meant when he said he got religion? Had he received Jesus as his Savior? Was it possible that she might have a future with him after all? She watched Chuck and Susie exchanging rings. They seemed very remote and small. Why had she let herself get so distraught over a man who didn't want her? Why should she want him if he didn't want her?

She smiled to herself in the warmth of Kent's encircling arm and tried not to think of Hugh.

After Chuck and Susie had been pronounced man and wife and marched triumphantly out of the church, Kent turned to Tobi with his captivating smile. "So let's ditch this place and go get some coffee. What dy'a say?"

Tobi thought about the reception - about Chuck and Susie looking into each other's eyes, Chuck and Susie feeding each other cake, Chuck and Susie leaving for their honeymoon - and sighed happily. "That's the best idea I've heard today," she said.

They walked out of the church hand-in-hand and Tobi smiled smugly to herself as she felt a dozen pairs of eyes watching them. Let the biddies try and feel sorry for her now! Kent made Chuck look as soggy as last month's lettuce.

"Where are you parked?" asked Kent.

"On the back side of the parking lot. I suppose you're still a male chauvinist who hates to be driven by a woman?"

"Not at all. You chauffeur. I'll relax and enjoy."

"Okay. This way." Tobi directed him toward her red sports car, and he opened the driver's door with a flourish.

"They must pay city editors well in Deepwater," he said as he got in beside her.

"Not really. My parents bought this car about a year before they died. After they were gone, the family insisted I take it because the crate I was driving was on its last leg." Tobi smiled as she added, "Dad named the car Cherry and, when it broke down, he said it was his Cherry Bomb."

"Well, Cherry's a beauty," Kent said. "Where's the night life in your hometown?"

"Cleo's Kitchen has the best coffee in town," Tobi replied, pulling into the street.

"Sounds good," he said, watching the homes of Deepwater slide past in the gathering dusk.

Out of the corner of her eye, Tobi watched him watching the passing scenery. She had forgotten how black his hair was, how his dimples flashed every time he looked at her, the square, clean lines of his jaw... Maybe, just maybe, it would be worth working for Hugh Mansett again since his coming had brought Kent back into her life.

At Cleo's, Tobi and Kent slid into a dark, corner booth. The faint aroma of homemade cinnamon rolls - the pastry that was the restaurant's specialty - wafted pleasantly out of the kitchen whenever the doors were opened. The low murmur of voices around them, the clinking of glasses and the tinkle of silverware signaled that the other occupants of the restaurant were engrossed in their own concerns. Kent and Tobi's little alcove was as private as if it were a deserted island.

"You must know I'm wild to hear what you meant about getting religion and being a new man," Tobi said.

Kent smiled. "And I'm wild to tell you. It's all your doing, you know. I really missed you after you left Foxhole. I thought about you all the time, but I couldn't figure you out. You were the only woman I ever wanted that I couldn't have. You weren't impressed by my looks or my money..."

"Oh, I was impressed," said Tobi, "so I wouldn't let myself think about you. In the romantic sense, I mean."

"And the only reason I couldn't get the first date with you was because I wasn't 'born again.' In those days I always said to myself '...born again, whatever that means!' But after you were gone and I was pining away for you, I decided to find out what it meant."

"Who told you?"

"I looked through the yellow pages one day, picked a church and called the minister. I told him I wanted to be born again. He told me what to pray and I did."

Tobi threw her arms around him. "Kent, that's the most wonderful news I ever heard! I'm so happy for you."

"Me, too. Mom was too. Hugh threw a fit, of course, and we had words. Then I walked out. But I realized later that I had to make peace with him. That's in the Bible, isn't it? And I was tired of hating him, tired of the bitterness gnawing away at my gut. So I told him I was through fighting with him."

"What'd he say?"

"Well, you know Hugh. He said to go ahead and be a panty waist if I wanted to. It's been hard but, if I hold my tongue, we can stay in the same room for a whole evening now, and Mom is happy about that."

"I'm really proud of you," said Tobi, beaming at him and trying to control an onslaught of pounding emotions, as she asked meekly, "You pined for me after I left?"

His gray eyes twinkled. "I nearly turned into a Ponderosa."

"I missed you, too," Tobi said shyly, "but I never expected to see you again. Where are you living now? What are you doing?"

"I'm in Dallas doing public relations for Heartland Electronics. It's a lot more fun than journalism and my income makes a reporter's salary look like a kid's weekly allowance."

"Or a city editor's," said Tobi ruefully.

Kent grinned. "No doubt. But, then, you don't have to stay in the newspaper game, you know. How about if I look around the metroplex and find you a *real* job? I have a few connections."

"A few? You're probably as connected as the internet!"

"So what do you say?"

"My family's here," said Tobi, "and I like having a support system. I'll have to think about it but, if Hugh's about to take over the paper, I may not have to think long."

"You really hate him, don't you?" asked Kent.

"Hate? I believe it's wrong to hate anyone, but I can't imagine working for him again. It's going to be my worst nightmare. But I'm proud of you for putting your bitterness behind you."

"It's a miracle, no doubt about that, but he's still not my favorite person. Let's talk about something else."

So they talked over the "good ole days" on the *Foxhole Gazette*. But Tobi's mind was churning with the idea of moving to Dallas and exploring a new relationship with Kent. Yesterday she would have sworn she would never live in Dallas. Today it was the most enticing possibility she could imagine.

Kent kissed her lightly on the lips when she returned him to his car, something she had never allowed him to do before. "I'll be taking off in the morning," he told her, "but I'll keep in touch. Let me know when you've had your fill of Hugh and I'll find you a dream job."

"A dream job as your wife," Tobi muttered to herself as she drove home.

At bedtime, exhausted from the tensions of the day, Tobi scooped up the garments she had tried on and discarded earlier in the evening and piled them on her dresser. Several slid to the floor, so she draped one over the back of the chair in front of

the dresser and heaped a couple more on top of the bureau. Tomorrow was soon enough to deal with them.

Wearily she pulled back the quilt her Grandmother Kirkland had made for her many years ago. It was her grandmother's own design and depicted fields of pink and yellow tulips with dark green foliage on a white background. The quilt served as Tobi's bedspread, but it was too hot for late spring so she folded it at the foot of the bed and collapsed on top of the sheets with her brooding thoughts. Chuck was gone forever. And she missed him heart wrenchingly. But Kent had reappeared. A new Kent. A born-again Kent. Had he suddenly appeared, just when it seemed all was lost, to save her from the dreaded fate of being forever single?

Tobi opened her Bible to Psalm 18, as she often did when she needed to be reminded that the God of Heaven was on her side - cheering for her, loving her, powerfully lifting her over or gently guiding her through the raging storms of life.

"I will love thee, O Lord, my strength," she read. And floodgates opened. All the pent-up tears of the day poured out of her eyes and cascaded down her cheeks.

Tobi slid out of bed onto her knees and prayed as she wept, "Lord, I can't remember the last time I told you I love You. But I do. I adore You. You are everything to me. Please help me never to go through another day without telling You that I love You.

"There have been so many shrieking emotions swirling in me today that I'm beginning to feel like a tornado. I'm sorry I was in a snit about Chuck all day. He really isn't worth it, is he?

"No, I'm sorry. That's not what I mean; I know You love him. But I shouldn't have let myself get so upset about him and Susie. I'm obviously not right for Chuck or we would be together. And yet, I know I would still be in mourning over him this very minute if Kent hadn't showed up.

"And about Kent. Has he come swooping into my life like a super hero to rescue me from the drudgery and despair of my world? It seems too good to be true. Please help me not to get so excited about him that I put on blinders. He's not my super hero and never can be. You'll always be my only Super hero.

"And I need Your help desperately Monday morning when that thug Hugh Mansett walks into the newsroom and starts trying to ruin my life again. I don't want to hate him. I know it's a dreadful sin to hate anyone, so please help me to find some good in him.

"I ask all these things in Jesus' name. Amen."

Chapter 2

Saturday: Blind Date

With a sigh, Tobi tore her thoughts away from the unnerving events of the weekend and returned to Monday morning. She tried to concentrate on Reuben's article. It was an intriguing story - but complex too - about a local scandal. It should have gripped her. It should have been routine for her to read it and follow it and be certain that every nuance was right, that the story unfolded as simply as a blossom emerging and that no one involved would have grounds for legal action against the newspaper.

But her mind failed her. Her eyes took in each word and sent it skimming along the proper neural pathways to be assessed and processed. But the neat, tidy concepts from Reuben's article kept colliding with frantic perceptions about weddings and guns and wind-swept hillsides that were hurtling about her mind like crazed pinballs. And with each cerebral collision, her thoughts shattered and multiplied and skittered off in a thousand new directions. No matter how many times she whacked herself on the side of the head and started over, she simply could not follow Reuben's story.

Finally, she gave up, slumped back in her chair and gazed around the newsroom. It was a huge, windowless room that seemed dingy and cave like, even though every fluorescent light in the ceiling was blazing. It was furnished with identical desks equipped with identical swivel chairs and computer terminals.

Around the room her co-workers were toiling away like enterprising beavers, absorbed with the urgency of their own little microcosms in the daily sprint to deadline. Reuben and two other reporters were hammering out articles for the Monday edition. Otto, the photographer, was submerged in the dark room developing last minute photos. On the far side of the room, members of the advertising department were making phone calls or bending over the ads they were designing.

Tobi frowned. They seemed almost *too* busy. Were they avoiding her? Were all those pairs of eyes studiously focusing on their individual activities to make sure they didn't accidentally connect with her eyes? Had she turned into some kind of pariah?

Well, if she had, it was *their* fault. Tobi's attention returned to the closed door of the publisher's office. *They* had made her guilty with their ominous silence. If only she could hear what was being said. Was anybody on her side? And why was it taking so long!

Clayton Archer, the publisher, had every big shot on the paper in his office - the department heads from production, the pressroom, advertising, circulation and the business office. She was friendly with all of them, but would any of them go out on a limb for her?

Too bad she had lost her temper Saturday night over a layout. Nobody had yelled, but tensions were high. Because of Donna, as usual. What a bumbling boob! Why did they let her make mistakes over and over again? She must be related to somebody important or they would have fired her by now.

Tobi made a wry face. "Shut up, Tobi!" she ordered herself. "Donna's not your problem today, and she wasn't your problem Saturday. It was a nightmare weekend, and you let yourself get flustered. *You* were the bumbling boob."

Saturday - what a miserable day *that* had been!

Tobi had pried her eyes open grudgingly late Saturday morning to behold all her best clothes draped across her bureau, dresser and chair. As if on cue, the chant inside her head began again. "Chuck and Susie's wedding. Chuck and Susie's wedding. Chuck and Susie's wedding."

"No!" she yelled out loud, burying her head under her pillow. "It's over, Tobi. Over and done. Let it go. Think about Kent. Kent Grantham is back. Kent Grantham is saved. Kent Grantham thinks I'm beautiful."

She sat up wearily. But what if Kent wasn't really saved? What if he were pretending just to... Just to what? Make her life miserable? Why would he do that?

She sighed. She had married a jerk once. She wasn't going to let herself get so goofy over Kent Grantham that she made that mistake again. Not that Kent was a jerk. Hopefully. After all, he was a Christian now. But then, so was Lyle. Or so he said.

She got up, jammed her hair into a ponytail, and pulled on a pair of old jeans. In the kitchen she made a breakfast of biscuits and apple juice while her thoughts tumbled over each other with nervous energy. What if Kent never called? What if Hugh was even worse to work for now than he had been two years ago? What if she couldn't take it? Should she call Kent if he didn't call her? And what if she did move to Dallas and start

dating Kent, and it turned out he had never really accepted Jesus? And why...why...why did she keep coming back to *that*?

Somehow, she had to escape from her thoughts before they made her nuts! At that moment, with her teeth closing on the next bite, her eyes fell on the big bookcase in the corner of her living room. It was crammed with books that needed to be dusted and rearranged. What a great way to keep her hands *and* thoughts occupied for a few hours.

Abandoning a half-eaten biscuit, Tobi marched into the living room and began removing books by the armload. She dumped them onto the furniture and piled them high on the carpet. When the bookcase was empty, she dusted it thoroughly and affectionately.

Her Dad had found this bookcase in a used furniture store and refinished it for her. She had been overwhelmed with its size when he appeared on her doorstep with the massive piece of furniture and two burly movers. But, seeing the excitement on her beloved father's face, she had hidden her doubts and enthusiastically directed the men to place it in the corner of the living room. There it had quickly become a fixture and, as soon as Tobi realized she had room for all her books in one place now, her feigned enthusiasm became genuine.

When the bookcase was dust free, she turned her attention to the stacks of books. First a set of encyclopedias. They were antiques - hopelessly outdated - having been purchased by her mother before she married. But they contained children's stories and poetry and whole sections of science and history, written especially for children.

Tobi had been fascinated with them when she was small. Perhaps it was through these dear old tomes that she had first begun to love the written word. She dusted each one carefully - resisting the temptation to sit cross-legged on the floor and read - and placed them on a middle shelf where they were easily accessible.

Her eyes fell next on a plethora of volumes about marriage and children, which she had purchased in her younger days when she had naively assumed she would have a normal life with a home and family. These she dusted quickly and carelessly, before shoving them onto a bottom shelf where she wouldn't have to see them.

Alongside the encyclopedias, Tobi placed her collection of Bible reference books and an eclectic assortment of volumes she had used or might use in research. Sometimes it seemed to her that the curse of being a writer was her endless fascination with various subjects and the compulsion to obtain and hoard information about those subjects, just in case she wanted to write about them some day. Some nebulous day.

Other sections of her library included her college textbooks, general reference, fiction, humor, biography, literary classics and children's stories (most retained from her childhood library.) As hard as she tried, Tobi was unable to resist occasional intermissions where she stopped to read a paragraph, a section or even a whole chapter. At some point hunger pangs drove her back to the kitchen for a can of soup, which she nuked in the microwave. Then she returned to her mission.

Eventually she placed the last book on a shelf, and dropped contentedly onto the sofa to rest. It hadn't been such a bad day, after all, she decided, glancing at her watch.

It was five until four! Impossible. She leaped to her feet and checked the clock in her bedroom. It said four until four! Oh no!

She glanced into the mirror and was horrified at the thought of going to work looking so disheveled. But she had no choice. She took a deep breath and forced herself to relax. "Never mind," she consoled herself, "everybody wears grubbies on Saturday."

Of course, she didn't normally. But today she would. What could it hurt? She smoothed down the wisps of hair that had gotten loose from the rubber band and sprayed them into submission. Then she dusted herself off, washed her hands, hopped onto her bicycle and pedaled six blocks to the newspaper building. Of course she could have saved a few minutes by driving, but she needed a bit of exercise in the fresh air to prepare her for the long evening ahead.

The big newsroom seemed like a different place than it had been the previous day. Everyone was working hard, putting out pages and moving toward an early night. At this rate, the editorial staff would be home by midnight.

At 6:00, Tobi broke for dinner. She always ate with her sister's family the Saturday nights she worked, which had been every week lately. Now that Hugh Mansett was joining the staff - she grimaced at the thought - maybe she would get a Saturday night off. Small comfort, considering that she would have to work with him all week.

Well, there was time enough to worry about him later. She wasn't going to let the thought of Hugh Mansett spoil her evening. She pedaled her bicycle through the warm

May evening and smiled with anticipation at the thought of walking into DeeDee's big kitchen and smelling the homey aromas of dinner in the oven.

DeeDee would be wearing tight blue jeans and a crisp blouse. Her short, auburn hair would gleam with hints of copper and her hands would be busy every moment. Her husband Ben, who was a detective with the police department, was tall, blond and easy-going. He teased Tobi mercilessly, and she teased back. He was more like a brother to her than her real brother Julius. And the kids, Alison and Davy Scot, would vie for her attention as if she were a long lost relative. Well, maybe she was. She had only moved back to Deepwater two years ago when Alison was 14 and Davy 6.

Tobi hummed to herself and thanked God for her family. She had been a goose to put herself into such a dither all day. Why would Kent say he was born again if he wasn't? After all, he could have played that game five years ago in Foxhole if he'd wanted to. But, as much as he had professed to love her, he had never pretended to be interested in spiritual matters. So it must be true now.

At DeeDee's house, she knocked on the back door and stepped inside with a bright smile on her face. But the smile faded abruptly. A strange man was sitting at the kitchen table, drinking iced tea, and grinning broadly at her. He was handsome in a rugged sort of way that she found extremely attractive. He had dark hair receding from his forehead and laugh lines around hazel eyes. His shoulders were broad and, even though he was seated at the kitchen table, she sensed an air of strength about him.

"Tobi, you're right on time!" said DeeDee excitedly. "I'd like you to meet Joel Trent. He's Davy's soccer coach. I've been wanting you to meet him for a long time."

"You've been wanting...? You have?" Words were unmanageable. A picture flashed into Tobi's mind...of herself...with her hair pulled back unbecomingly from her face, except for those occasional fly-away wisps that floated about randomly, giving her an unkempt look. And she was wearing her oldest jeans and a faded shirt.

Had DeeDee lost her mind? What was she thinking to bring this magnificent man around when Tobi looked like a hobo? It was unthinkable. Unbelievable. Unbearable.

The kitchen was beginning to wobble. It made Tobi dizzy. What should she do? What *could* she do? What if she bolted through the back door and returned to the newsroom? No, that wasn't the answer. Then her behavior would be as unseemly as her appearance.

She stood immobilized in the middle of DeeDee's kitchen, feeling like a goldfish in a bowl with her mouth moving but no sound coming out, and waited to die of embarrassment. But Joel, seeming not to notice her discomfort, walked over and held out a hand. "Hi, Tobi, I've been looking forward to meeting you."

"You have?" Tobi frowned quizzically at DeeDee as his hand swallowed hers.

DeeDee scowled back and Tobi stammered, "I mean, I'm pleased to meet you."

Ben Walling came through the kitchen then and, with a "Hello" for Tobi, he took Joel out to the backyard where he was grilling hamburgers. As soon as the door closed behind them, Tobi turned on DeeDee. "Are you out of your mind!" she gasped. "Who is he? What is he doing here? Why didn't you tell me he was coming?"

"If I'd told you *he* was coming, *you* wouldn't have come."

"You've got that right. And I wouldn't have turned up looking like I spent the night under a bridge."

"You do look pretty awful," agreed DeeDee. "Are ya'll having a costume party up there tonight instead of putting out the Sunday paper?"

"I spent the whole day rearranging my bookcase if you must know and the time got away from me. When I looked at a clock, it was nearly 4:00 and I didn't have time to change."

"Rearranging your...oh no...what's wrong?"

Tobi glared defensively. "I didn't say anything was wrong."

"After Mom and Dad died you rearranged that bookcase 35 times..." DeeDee said. Then she broke off and added, "Oh..."

"What do you mean, 'Oh...'?"

"It's Chuck, isn't it?"

"Chuck who? Chuck is the least of my problems. Now."

"And the chief of your problems would be?"

"Hugh Mansett."

"Here, make yourself useful. Slice some tomatoes for the burgers," DeeDee said, handing her a couple of the red fruits. "Who's Hugh Mansett?"

Tobi washed the tomatoes and took them to the sturdy butcher-block island in the center of DeeDee's kitchen. "The jerk who fired me from the *Foxhole Gazette*."

"What about him?"

"He's about to come on as the new managing editor of the *City Crier*."

DeeDee caught her breath. "You're kidding! How do you know?"

"His stepson Kent showed up at the wedding last night."

DeeDee stopped bustling around the kitchen and studied Tobi. "Kent? Didn't you used to have a thing for him?"

"A thing?"

"Oh, you know, a crush."

"Actually, he had the crush on me. He wasn't saved, so I wouldn't date him."

"Don't give me a snow job," said DeeDee waving her knife at Tobi. "I remember the look on your face when you talked about him."

"Never mind him!" said Tobi irritably. "You didn't answer my questions about this soccer coach of Davy's. Where do you get off setting me up for a blind date and not even telling me? I may never trust you again!"

"Quit squawking," DeeDee commanded. "He's the greatest man I ever met except Ben, and he wanted to meet you. So I decided to do you a major favor and introduce you."

"Major favor," Tobi muttered mockingly. "Some major favor!"

"How was I to know you'd turn up looking like a bum? If I'd told you, you wouldn't have come."

"Yes, and I would have been spared the embarrassment..."

"Hey, who's hungry?" Ben yelled. "We've got burgers on the picnic table out here!"

"Where are the kids?" Tobi asked, suddenly noticing how quiet the house was.

"I farmed them out so we could have a quiet meal and you could get acquainted with Joel." DeeDee handed Tobi a basket of buns and a platter of fresh vegetables, while she balanced a bowl of potato salad, a bowl of chips and a tray of condiments. "Now come on. *And be nice!*" She hissed the last sentence through clenched teeth as she pushed open the back door.

"Kent got born again, and he's still crazy about me," Tobi hissed back. "I don't have to be nice if I don't want to!"

While the men watched, DeeDee turned on a dime and whispered into Tobi's ear, "If you've got the sense of a brain-dead goose, you'll be nice to this man. He's fabulous!"

"Would you girls tell your secrets on your own time," Ben called. "I'm starving." He was tending the last hamburgers on the grill, and Joel hurried over to help DeeDee with her load.

The Wallings' big back yard was a lovely setting for a picnic. The lawn was lush and fruit trees along the south and east borders were fully leafed out with tiny peaches and plums the size of pencil erasers marching up the branches. The flower beds next to the house held perfectly groomed dwarf yaupon bushes and a mass of salmon colored geraniums.

The patio that ran half the length of the house was usually cluttered with Davy's toys, but this evening, it was immaculate. Only the picnic table, Ben's grill and four lawn chairs adorned the slab of concrete. With Joel's help, DeeDee and Tobi found a place

for all the bowls and platters on the table and Ben pronounced the last two burgers done.

"And none too soon," he added. "I'm hungry enough to eat the whole cow." He joined DeeDee on one side of the picnic table and Joel sat down on the other side. Then all three of them looked expectantly at Tobi, waiting for her to perch next to Joel.

She returned their gaze, trying not to look as flustered as she felt. "I left my tea inside," she said. "Be right back."

Feeling three pairs of eyes heavy on her back, she escaped into the kitchen as DeeDee called, "Hurry!"

By peering at an angle out the kitchen window, Tobi could see the picnic table where Ben, DeeDee and Joel were chatting amiably. Watching them, she prayed, "Dear Lord, I don't know what DeeDee thinks she's doing or why You're letting her get away with it, but if You'll help me eat this meal and keep it down, I'll thank You forever."

Knowing she couldn't be gone any longer without drawing unwanted attention to herself, she was about to open the back door when she remembered the tea she had come for. Imagining what Ben might say if she had returned without the glass, she grabbed it, hugged it and added a fervent P.S. to her prayer. "Thank You!"

Afterward, Tobi could not remember the conversation at that meal. Ben prayed over the food first; she knew that. And there was some talk of soccer and politics and the weather. But then the conversation turned to Tobi. Ben and DeeDee were determined to draw her out and coax her to "perform" for Joel. And she grew more and more hostile to cover her mounting self-consciousness.

First, Ben brought up the series of articles she did comparing teenagers' perspectives in the '60s and in the '90s for the *Foxhole Gazette* that won her a press award. Then DeeDee gushed about the flair she had exhibited in her five years as a kindergarten Sunday School teacher. Ben recalled her GPA upon graduation from college. At that point, Tobi's chagrin was so intense that she ceased to comprehend the volley of words whistling past her ears. Later, she asked DeeDee sarcastically, "Did you and Ben happen to mention that I was grand champion speller in the third grade? Or that I won the lead in the class play in the sixth grade?"

Through it all, Joel was perfectly genial. But he never seemed to take his eyes off her. She squirmed under his admiring gaze, and by the time Ben was dishing up homemade ice cream, Tobi was at the end of her endurance.

"No ice cream for me," she said. "I have to get back to work."

"No you don't!" DeeDee countered. "You can stay a few minutes for dessert."

"No thanks," Tobi said shortly. She didn't dare put another thing into her churning gastric juices or she might embarrass herself.

She stood up and Joel rose at the same time. "You know, I'd better run along, too," he said. "I have some paperwork to finish at the hospital."

"The hospital?" Tobi asked in spite of herself. She didn't want to know anything else about this man or ever see him again. So why was she asking?

"Tobi, haven't you been paying attention?" DeeDee asked, like an embarrassed mother correcting her child. "Joel is CEO at Carlyle Memorial. He's doing a brilliant job out there for this community."

"Thanks, DeeDee," Joel grinned. "It always helps to have fans."

Tobi ducked her head so she wouldn't have to look at that ever-present grin. Didn't this man ever frown? Or sigh? Or snarl? Or just look...normal?

She thanked DeeDee for dinner perfunctorily. Joel thanked her profusely. Then Ben and DeeDee bid their guests a reluctant good bye and opened the gate to let them out of the back yard. To Tobi's surprise, Joel prepared to mount a shiny silver racing bike that was parked near hers. "You ride, too?" she asked.

"Every chance I get," he said. "Trying to stay healthy."

At that moment, Ben's grumbling voice drifted over the high fence, "I spend the whole day manicuring this yard like it's some rich widow's fat hand and she doesn't even like him!"

"Ben! Hush!" DeeDee exclaimed in a horrified whisper. "They might hear you!"

Tobi groaned and tried to cover her embarrassment. "Listen, I want to apologize for DeeDee, setting us up that way. She should have told us."

"She did tell me," said Joel. "I've read your articles in the paper and wanted to meet you. I'm sorry I ruined your evening."

Tobi's face flushed. Everything she'd said tonight was wrong. "It's not your fault," she said quickly, trying to redeem herself. "But you know how blind dates are. They're always awful."

"Really? Do you go on a lot of blind dates?"

"No, but everything you read in magazines and books - well, you know, they always turn out ghastly."

"Oh, you're one of *those*," he said bluntly. And for once there wasn't a Cheshire grin on his face.

"One of those what?"

"One of those people who believes everything you read in the media." And with that parting shot, he pedaled away, leaving Tobi with her mouth hanging open.

"I do not," she muttered to herself, swinging onto her own bicycle. "What kind of fool does he think I am? Believe everything I read! Arrogant pig!"

She pedaled off furiously in the opposite direction, still talking to herself and wishing her stomach would quit feeling queasy every time she remembered Joel Trent's grin.

At the newsroom, bedlam had been restored. A photograph was missing, Otto couldn't be located, the presses had developed an ominous squeak and production was short staffed, due to a sudden illness. That's why the incident occurred with Donna. At 11:30, long after all the pages should have gone to press, Donna was still laboring over the last two.

"Aren't you done, yet?" Tobi fumed. "We're going to be here all night at this rate."

"I'm doing the best I can," Donna answered with tears rolling down her cheeks. She had been crying before Tobi came in, and now the trickle turned into a river.

"Get off her back!" Reuben said, coming up behind Tobi. "What do you want? She's having to do everything by herself."

"You get off *my* back!" Tobi retorted. "Where's a knife? I'll help."

"You know that's not allowed," said Donna meekly.

"Yeah? Well, tell the new boss about it Monday. That ought to make Hugh Mansett's day. Maybe I'll get lucky, and he'll fire me. Again."

The three had finished the evening in a strained silence and it was well past midnight before Tobi got home. It was going to be tough getting up for church in the morning.

Wearily she opened her Bible to Psalm 18 again, feeling as if she needed its comfort more tonight than she had the previous night. She read through the whole chapter, barely seeing it, and then returned to verse 2. "The Lord is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer; my God, my strength, in whom I will trust..."

On her knees, she hugged her Bible and poured out her heart to God, "Father, I haven't acted as if I even know You this evening. But You are my Rock. You are my place of safety and my mighty Deliverer. Help me to rest in Your strength and trust in You, even when everything else in my world feels as rickety as an old ladder.

"Lord, I'm so sorry I was hateful tonight with Donna. And Joel too. And DeeDee. I don't know what's wrong with me. And I don't understand - why did DeeDee have to bring that *man* around!

"What is it about him, anyway, that annoys me so much? And why should I care? Lord, I don't ever want to see Joel Trent again. I don't even want to think about him anymore. Please help me to quit seeing that great big grin under that bushy mustache.

"Lord, I love You. I adore You. I worship You. And I trust You. Thank You for being everything I need. In Jesus' name. Amen."

Chapter 3

Sunday: Hello, Hugh, Goodbye

As bad as Friday and Saturday had been, Sunday had been worse than both put together. Tobi didn't want to think about Sunday. Besides, it was Monday now, and she had responsibilities to fulfill. Reliving the worst weekend of her life wasn't one of them.

She took a deep breath and turned to Reuben's story again. She would start at the beginning - get a running start at this thing. But it didn't work. She couldn't get her mind to grasp even the first sentence.

She closed her eyes tight, determined to shut out every distraction. But when she opened them again, she was staring at the publisher's door instead of her computer screen. How long was it going to take them to make up their minds? What ever happened to "innocent until proven guilty"? They'd been holed up over an hour now. And her stomach was gathering more butterflies every second.

A door opened behind her and two women from production walked past Tobi toward the break room. One of them had always been particularly friendly, but today she didn't have so much as a hello for Tobi. Tobi watched their backs. They had fallen silent until they were out of earshot, and then they resumed an animated conversation.

Wrinkles deepened in Tobi's forehead. These people really were shutting her out! She settled back in her chair and imagined she was an owl with big yellow eyes, inspecting this busy beaver colony. One of the beavers was bound to slip up eventually.

One of them would look at her. Then what? Would that person smile before going on about their business? Or would they duck their head in a guilty gesture and pretend she didn't exist?

Minutes dragged by. One person, then another, looked up, called to a colleague across the room or simply stretched and yawned. But their gaze always stopped short of Tobi. No one slipped. No one let their eyes stray randomly in her direction.

So she tried to bore a hole in Reuben's back with her big, yellow imaginary eyes, but he was oblivious to her attention. "Come on, accuse me!" she wanted to shriek at the whole room. "But don't ignore me."

And then, before she could stop them, her eyes propelled themselves to the one door she had avoided all morning - the managing editor's door. Hugh Mansett should have been behind that door right now. But the office was dark. She squeezed her eyes shut to prevent tears. How had her life turned into a horror story? And how had a weekend that started out so badly managed to get worse?

She should have known the moment her alarm clock shrilled at her Sunday morning, and she heard gales of wind rattling her window panes that it was going to be an appalling day. Her room was still littered with the dresses she had tried on and tossed aside on Friday evening. Only the floral silk she had finally chosen was hanging up, unwrinkled and wearable. She shrugged. Who was going to notice if she wore it again? Who would care?

Weary from the late night at work, Tobi had to force herself to get up and get dressed. A peek in the mirror revealed that her hair, looking as limp and weary as she

felt, appeared the approximate color of carrots. Her eyes were dark and her fair complexion paler than usual. She turned away from the mirror, not wanting to see any more. The specter of herself was already going to haunt her day.

Outside, the howling wind was full of red dirt. It snatched her dress and hurled her hair into snarls. She pushed tangled strands out of her face and drove to church, fighting gusts that rocked the little sports car.

At the parking lot, she braked while a young family walked in front of her. Two little girls in frilly dresses skipped ahead. Then came the mother and father, walking hand-in-hand. A smile began to form on Tobi's face as she watched the charming family, but the smile vanished when she noticed that the mother was wearing a corsage.

Mother's Day! She had forgotten it was Mother's Day.

Tobi rested her forehead on the steering wheel and tried to decide what to do. Like an obedient, little puppet, she had gone to church every Mother's Day her whole life. Every year she sat in a pew with a tight, little smile pasted on her face and listened to a pastor rhapsodize about the joys and privileges of motherhood. It had been bearable when her own mother was alive but, after the accident that killed her parents and as the passing years removed her hopes of becoming a mother herself, it grew harder and harder for her to sit through another Mother's Day service.

A light honk behind her reminded Tobi where she was. Glancing in the rear-view mirror, she saw two cars waiting for her to move so they could park.

Well, this year she'd had enough. Tobi lifted her foot off the brake, drove through the parking lot and pulled back into the street. She'd managed not to cry last year on

Mother's Day, but by the time the service was over, her whole face had ached with the effort. She wasn't going to put herself through that torture this year. Besides, what if she couldn't hold back the tears this time? Today was supposed to be a happy day. She wasn't going to spoil it for everyone else with her selfish blubbering.

Her little red sports car raced along the deserted Sunday streets on its way to... Where was she going? And what did she think she was going to do when she got there?

Cry. Cry and rant and rave and scream. Where could she go where nobody would hear her no matter how much noise she made?

Gusts of wind grappled with Tobi for control of the car. Grains of sand pummeled her windows with a tedious rat-a-tat-tat as if the air were full of miniature cannons discharging endless rounds of pellets at her. Tobi leaned forward to peer through the grimy haze and clutched the steering wheel with bloodless fingers.

Where could she go? She didn't want to see *anybody!* She wanted to be alone with this gnawing emptiness and shriek at it until it was filled, at least, with noise. She gritted her teeth - she would fill the emptiness with sound and fury.

Homerun Hill. Of course! Homerun Hill was the perfect place for her today. The little rise on the far side of the baseball field, where balls were often lost after being smashed out of the park, was a popular place for hikers, but it would be deserted this windy Sunday morning. Out there she could scream and howl along with the blustering wind and no one would ever know.

Holding back her tears, Tobi drove east through town, asking herself the questions she had asked and answered a hundred times before. Why me? How did I let myself get to be 40 without having a family? I'm old enough to be a grandmother, and I've never even had a baby. What's wrong with me?

The first tears escaped and trickled down her face. She *knew* where she had gone wrong. She had figured it out years ago. After it was too late to salvage the situation.

She had spent her 20s going to college and establishing her career. Then at 30, she suddenly realized she wanted a family too. But who would she marry? Whereas she had known a variety of eligible men during her college days, now she knew only one. Lyle Harris.

So she married Lyle when he proposed. And they lived happily ever after until he found a blond air head he liked better. Then Tobi returned her energies to a career that had become her enemy. If this precious career hadn't consumed her heart and soul in those early years, maybe she would have had the good sense to get married while she was young and had some options. Maybe then she would have found an actual man to marry, instead of a jerk.

Fortunately, she had arrived at her destination, because the tears were streaming down her face now, blinding her. She pulled her car behind a clump of cedar bushes and cried with her head on the steering wheel until the last tear in her body had trickled down her face. Then she got out of the car and walked toward Homerun Hill.

Immediately she realized her mistake - her flimsy shoes and silky dress were not designed for hiking. But she struggled along, stumbling over rocks and snatching her dress back from bristly bushes, too sick at heart to notice physical discomforts. And now she was talking out loud.

"Why didn't anybody tell me?" she demanded. "If I'd known I was going to have to choose between marriage and a career, I'd have chosen marriage. Why didn't I know? Why couldn't I have figured it out for myself?"

"I could have raised a whole family by now. But no, I had to spend my life getting ahead in a job. A stupid job. Who needs it? Chasing money all day every day! What kind of life is that?"

"I wish I could get my hands on Betty Friedan. And Molly Yard. And that other one...what's her name? That Gloria Steinem. I wish I could get my hands around their necks and tell them what I think of them. A career! Ha! They can take their stupid careers and blow them out their ears. What good is a career if you don't have a family?"

By now, Tobi was weeping again and panting too hard to talk, but she pushed on up the trail, mentally detailing everything she would like to tell the women's libbers of the world. The wind threw her hair into her face so often she could scarcely see, and she stumbled suddenly on the gravelly path. Staggering, she was unable to regain her balance until her right hand came down hard on the ground and brought her face to face with a decomposing skunk carcass.

She screamed and leaped back. But the stench of death had already reached her nostrils, exploded inside her head and surged down numberless nerve cells

throughout her body. Tobi lurched backward, shuddering with a nameless horror, until an unnoticed object rolled under her feet, pitching her into the cushioning arms of a scrubby cedar bush. She let herself sink to the ground where she wept in great gasping sobs.

At last, the fetid presence receded, and Tobi found herself wondering if the dirt and tears were turning into red mud on her face. She wiped the fog out of her eyes and started to rise. Her gaze fell on the object that had rolled under her feet and tripped her. It was a baseball bat.

Strange - why had someone discarded a perfectly good baseball bat? She picked it up and tapped it on the ground. The cracked sound was unmistakable. She started to toss it aside, then used it to push herself to her feet instead.

Cradling the bat in the crook of her arm and letting it rest against her shoulder like a hunting rifle, Tobi resumed her trek. At the top of the hill, she paused and turned to look at Deepwater. The little town below her stretched to the horizon. She could pick out City Hall, several churches, the hospital and quiet residential sections of town.

It was like looking back in time - as if nothing had changed since the days of childhood when she had hiked this hill, usually toiling along behind DeeDee and her friends. The same church steeples reached skyward. The same streets, in perpendicular grids, carried the same families to work, to church, to shopping and home again. Probably the same red dirt was being bandied about by the same gale force winds.

Tobi groaned, remembering how often misfortune had struck her on Homerun Hill. Once, it was a painful scrape that took all the skin off her knee and soaked her shoe and sock with blood. Another time, a mesquite thorn pierced her shoe and penetrated so deep into the flesh that she limped for days. But the most terrifying experience had been the time when DeeDee, tired of having her little sister tagging along, had run ahead with her friends and hidden from her. Tobi had raced up one trail and down another, screaming frantically for DeeDee. The experience had so terrified her that she'd had nightmares for months.

Tobi walked along the crest of the hill. She had always believed she would bring her own children up here. Maybe they would bring picnic lunches and eat on the west brow of the hill, while they tried to pick out landmarks in the town below them. She would tell them about the terrible things that had happened to her here and point out the places where they happened.

Only there were no children. Never had been. Never would be.

Tears erupted again, gushing forth in a flood. Her heart pain was so intense she gasped for breath. Panting, she thought she was going to suffocate unless she found a way to ease the deep agony. Glancing around, she spotted a gnarled old mesquite tree and descended on it with 20 years' worth of pent up rage. Holding the bat in both hands, she hacked at it, shrieking, "Take that, Molly Yard! And this one's for you, Betty Friedan! And here are a couple for you, Gloria Steinem!"

The mesquite tree was a fitting symbol for Tobi's attack on the feminist movement. Looking feathery and lovely from a distance, it was actually a spiny titan,

armed with thick, fiendish thorns. Tobi hammered the tree's willowy branches from every side. Pounding with all her might, she was beginning to feel better when a voice behind her said, "Smack 'em a couple of times for me."

Tobi dropped the bat and whirled around to find Joel Trent watching her with an amused expression in his eyes and that stupid grin plastered across his face.

"What are you doing here?" Her hand flew to her face and she tried to wipe away the streaks of mascara on her cheeks. Why did she always have to be a mess when he showed up? *Not that she cared what he thought of her!*

"I'm enjoying the view. It's beautiful up here!"

"Really? DeeDee was telling me what a model person you are, and you don't even bother going to church on Sunday?"

"Normally I do. But not on Mother's Day."

"Why not on Mother's Day?"

"Well, Rachel, my ex-wife, says it ruins this very special day for her if she has to see me in service. She asked me not to come on Mother's Day, so I don't. Then she and Paul, her current husband, and our daughters can have the whole church to themselves."

"You and your ex-wife go to the same church?"

"That's right. We didn't divorce the church. We divorced each other."

Tobi studied him curiously. "What church is that?"

"Church of the Living Vine."

Her face fell. "Oh, you're one of *those*."

"One of those what?"

"One of those Charismatic cuckoos."

"I beg your pardon. I'm not cuckoo."

She frowned. "Don't tell *me!* I've been there. I wasted the best years of my life in those churches. I know exactly what you are."

"And you think I'm cuckoo?"

Tobi faltered. "Well, yes, but I shouldn't have said so."

The grin, which had vanished, returned suddenly. "Well, I guess we're even now."

"Even at what?"

"At accusing each other of being '*one of those!*'"

"No, we're not even, because I'm not what you accused me of being. I'm not some ignorant yokel who believes everything I read."

"Of course you're not," Joel said soothingly. "If you were, I wouldn't be so interested in you. It's just that I tend to get a little crazy about the media in this country. The American public is getting such a skewed version of reality that they often don't have a clue what's going on. Sometimes I'd like to take your bat and beat up a few news anchors."

"And the newspapers?" Tobi asked. "What do you think about us?"

"Newspapers are no different from the networks. The main difference is that the networks have more influence. But all the liberal media agencies make me furious."

The hackles rose on the back of Tobi's neck. "Well, that just goes to show how little you know about it. I majored in journalism in college and I heard the words "fair" and "unbiased" so many times during those four years that I chanted them in my sleep. The number one commitment of the news media in this country is to report events in a fair and unbiased manner."

"Fair and unbiased...," Joel repeated scornfully, then stopped. "Don't move," he snapped at her. And before she could ask why, he swept her into his arms and began backing up slowly.

"Put me down...," she commanded, but the expression on his face silenced her. "What is it?" she asked, but she already knew it was a rattlesnake, and her whole body began to tremble. With dread she looked at the ground where the coiled reptile was rattling angrily. She stared at it, hypnotized, as Joel backed out of striking distance.

When they had retreated far enough, the snake uncoiled and slithered away. Joel put Tobi down then, and she noticed that he was wearing sturdy hiking boots. He was noticing her attire at the same time.

"You're out of your mind coming up here dressed like that," he fumed. "Maybe you're the one who should have your head examined. Calling me cuckoo...!"

With that, he picked her up again. Tobi stiffened. "Now, what are you doing? Put me down!" she ordered.

"I'll put you down at your car and not before. I'm not going to be responsible for letting you wander around up here until you get snake bit."

"You're not responsible for me," Tobi protested, struggling to get free. "Now put me down!"

But Joel paid no attention to her struggle. And, although she had a curious urge to put an arm around his neck and rest her head on his shoulder, Tobi stiffened her body, crossed her arms and glared straight ahead while he made his way down the trail to her car.

In fact, she deliberately fashioned her worst scowl and installed it upon her face like a fixture, but somewhere in her intuition, a voice was whispering that this tiny moment of her life was destined to become a memory she would never forget. Granted, being hauled off a hill by a stupid baboon who didn't have enough sense to understand "Put me down" was a thoroughly humiliating experience. But the fierce gusts of wind lashing hair across her face were more than annoying - they were splendid! Powerful! Invigorating! Compared to the gentle breezes of summer, the exuberant winds of spring were downright magnificent!

Unexpectedly, a tiny smile twitched at the corners of Tobi's mouth. She might as well admit it - Joel was pretty magnificent too! Kent would have dropped her on her head a long time ago if he'd tried to carry her off this rocky hill.

She bit her lip and stifled the budding smile. It didn't matter. She wasn't going to compare Kent to Joel. And she wasn't about to let today's little exhibition of gallantry sway her opinion of Joel. After all, he was...he was...an arrogant pig! Resolutely, she renewed the scowl on her face and continued to glower at Joel and Homerun Hill, in particular, and the whole world, in general.

When Joel set her down beside her car, she got in with a flounce, gunned the engine and drove away without a backward glance. She had never had such an ambivalent reaction to any man in her life. Joel both attracted and repelled her intensely. She wanted desperately never to see him again. Never to have to deal with these warring emotions again.

It should have been enough. The weekend had already been horrible, and it should have been enough. But Ben Walling was waiting for Tobi when she got home.

He met her car, and opened the door. "Where have you been?" he asked. "And what happened to your dress?"

She looked down at the tattered dress that was now full of rips and prickly stickers, aware for the first time that it was ruined, and fought a desire to throw herself into her brother-in-law's arms, howling and screaming. Instead she forced herself to reply calmly, "I've been on Homerun Hill. Why?"

"Tobi, I'm here in my official capacity as detective for the Deepwater PD," Ben said. "Hugh Mansett is dead. He was shot with your gun."

For a long moment, Tobi thought she was going to faint. "My what?" she finally asked. "What gun?"

"It's registered to you."

Tobi closed her eyes and leaned against her car. "Oh, that's right. I did have a hand gun. That idiot Hugh is the one who made me buy it. He said reporters sometimes were in dangerous situations and he made us all buy guns. I don't know where mine is."

"It's at police headquarters. We found it beside Mansett's body."

"Who killed him? How did it happen?" Tobi asked weakly.

"Tobi, listen to me." Ben shook her shoulder lightly. "Somebody is trying to frame you. It was a drive-by shooting. Somebody in a red sports car drove by the newspaper office at 9:00 A.M., as Mansett was going in. They called to him, he turned and they shot him. One bullet through the heart."

"What about fingerprints? Whose fingerprints were on the gun?"

"Nobody's. Not even yours."

"And the bullets?"

"Clean."

"Ben, what am I going to do? How did somebody get my gun? I've never even used it. I put it in a drawer the day I brought it home and haven't seen it since. That was in Foxhole. If I didn't know where it was, how did somebody else get their hands on it?"

"It's okay." Ben put his arms around her then and held her. "I don't know how they got it or where. But I'm going to find out. Don't worry."

"Am I under arrest?"

"Of course not. Even an idiot wouldn't shoot somebody, then drop his own gun beside the victim. Besides, you're too softhearted to kill anybody. Come on home with me. DeeDee is already upset because you weren't in church. When she finds out about this murder, she'll have to have all the details from you."

"I don't know the details," Tobi protested. "I haven't seen Hugh in two years."

"I know. Come on."

So, Tobi spent the afternoon with Ben and DeeDee answering dozens of questions about Hugh, his habits, his enemies, his character, and everybody at the newspaper office who might have ever known him. At last, Ben shook his head. "I still don't know which direction to go. It sounds like everyone who ever knew him could be a suspect. The only way we're going to narrow down the list is to investigate everyone with access to your house, Tobi. The fact that someone had your gun is the key to this case. Out of all the people we've talked about, how many of them have ever been to your house?"

"None of them," Tobi said, shaking her head wearily. "Not even one of them."

"It was that break-in," DeeDee suggested. "Whoever broke into your house last month and took your TV and VCR must have stolen the gun."

"Where did you keep the gun?" asked Ben.

Tobi struggled to remember the revolver. When she had bought it, she had hidden it in the back of a drawer and couldn't remember seeing it again. That was in Foxhole.

She shrugged. "I can't remember. I never took it out of the box. Just dumped it in a drawer. When I packed up to move here, I emptied the drawer into a crate. Then I stowed everything in another drawer when I got here."

"I don't blame you," DeeDee said with a shiver. "I hate guns."

Ben was deep in thought. "So the purpose of the break-in wasn't really to steal the TV and VCR. It was to get your gun and frame you for this murder. They took the appliances to cover the theft of the gun."

"I guess that explains why they didn't take my PC, too," Tobi mused. "They stole enough to look convincing, but once they had the gun, they were more interested in getting away than in stealing something else."

"Maybe," Ben said with a sly sidelong glance. "Or maybe they noticed your computer is old enough to have come over on the Mayflower and doesn't have any street value."

Tobi whacked his arm. "It's not *that* old!"

"It's the great, great, great, great grand pappy of the youngsters sitting on the shelves of electronics stores today," Ben insisted. "I'm surprised you haven't had to pop for bifocals and hearing aids for the poor old thing."

"Didn't you know?" Tobi asked. "I had it fitted for bifocals last week. Now it works as well as the newest models on the assembly line."

"Hey, glad to hear it!" Ben grinned. "Now if you can just get the creaks out of its poor old joints..."

"Maybe I'd rather put some creaks *into* your poor old joints," Tobi threatened.

"Would you two jokers quit clowning around?" DeeDee interrupted. She touched the skirt of Tobi's tattered dress. "I want to know what this is about? Why weren't you in church this morning, sis? I was afraid you were sick."

Tobi sighed. "I went to church as usual, but when I got there, I remembered it was Mother's Day. I couldn't face another Mother's Day, knowing I'm never going to be a mother. So I left. I felt like ranting and raving and screaming, so I drove out to Homerun Hill where I thought I'd be alone."

"I didn't know you felt that way about Mother's Day," said DeeDee. She put her arms around Tobi. "I wish you'd told me."

"Why? So you could have made me feel worse by feeling sorry for me?"

"Probably," DeeDee said sadly. "But I'd like to make you feel better if I knew how."

"Never mind. It's not your problem," Tobi said reassuringly. "And I'm okay."

"Anyway, 40 isn't too old to have children. And besides...," DeeDee's eyes lighted up.

But Tobi headed her off at the pass. She gripped her sister's arm threateningly and said, "Don't even think about mentioning Joel Trent right about here because if you do, I may buy you an all-expenses-paid tongue amputation."

DeeDee glared at her. "Okay, I won't mention any names but, when you finally figure out what a great guy he is, you'll kiss my feet and beg my forgiveness for the way you've persecuted me!"

"When pigs fly!" Tobi retorted.

Just then the back door banged and Alison called, "Anybody home?"

"In the den," DeeDee called back.

The refrigerator door opened and shut before Alison appeared in the doorway with a can of fruit juice. She was a 16-year-old hybrid version of DeeDee and Tobi. She had her mother's big brown eyes and her aunt's strawberry blond hair. Right now her long, wind-tossed hair was full of tangles and her face, arms and legs were pink from an afternoon in the sun. "What's up?" she asked.

Ben, DeeDee and Tobi looked at each other. Before any of them decided to field the question, the back door slammed again and Davy dashed in. "Hey, are you guys going to talk all day?" he asked. "Are we going to church tonight?"

"Look at you, Dip Stick!" Alison exclaimed, stepping away from him to avoid contamination. "You're filthy! What have you been doing?"

"My name's not Dip Stick - it's Davy Scot," he howled, attacking her with clenched fists.

Assuming a bored expression, Alison held Davy back with one hand and took a drink of juice with the other. "Can one of you handle your child?" she asked her parents.

"Can you stop calling him Dip Stick?" DeeDee asked sternly. She seized Davy's arm and pulled him away from Alison, who escaped to her bedroom.

"What *have* you been doing?" DeeDee asked when she pulled the dirty baseball cap off Davy's head and found his blond curls dark with grime. Splotches of mud decorated his T-shirt and shorts. "Just playing," he told his mother, turning his innocent brown eyes up at her. "Pogo and me were just playing."

"Pogo and I." She corrected his grammar automatically. "Is Pogo as dirty as you are? You didn't let him in the house like that, did you?"

Hearing his name, Pogo, the family's ten-year old mutt, joined them in DeeDee's spotless den, tracking mud with every step. "Oh, Davy," DeeDee groaned as Ben leaped to pick up Pogo and return him to the back yard.

"Okay, kid, get yourself in the bathtub. We're going to church as soon as your Dad takes Aunt Tobi home," DeeDee said, pointing the way.

But Davy had just noticed Tobi's bedraggled dress. "What's wrong with Aunt Tobi?" he asked. "Is she okay?"

"I'm fine," said Tobi, "but I'd be finer if I could get a hug from you."

"Oh, Tobi, he's nasty!" DeeDee objected.

Tobi shrugged. "So am I." She knelt down and Davy applied a strangle hold to her neck. "I think I need to pray for you," he said solemnly.

"Oh Davy, would you?" asked Tobi. "That would make me feel so much better."

"Okey dokey. Dear Lord Jesus, please help my Aunt Tobi. I don't know what's wrong with her, but I know You do and You can take care of her. Please hug her for me again after she goes home. Thank You. Amen."

Chapter 4

Monday: Judged by the *Crier*

By 9:00 o'clock Monday morning, Tobi's sense of isolation was complete. The other men and women in the newsroom no longer avoided looking at her, because they no longer saw her.

"It's like they've built a nice, thick beaver lodge up around themselves and walled me out. I'm outside; they're inside, talking and laughing and doing their jobs," Tobi reflected.

She had given up trying to read Reuben's story. The turmoil - and especially the uncertainty - had ravaged her powers of concentration. Never mind. It was 9:00 o'clock. If they couldn't decide she was worth keeping in an hour and a half, then they didn't really need her. Or want her.

Tobi gathered a few personal items from her desk. Suddenly Reuben could see her again. He was watching her every move. "What are you doing?" he demanded.

"Quitting. You can go knock on the door and tell them not to strain their brains anymore. I'm out of here."

"Who's going to put out the paper?"

Tobi shrugged. "I could throw the most famous line from 'Gone With the Wind' into the conversation right about here but, I think I'll just say that it's not my problem. See you around, Reuben."

She was about to walk out when she remembered she had unfinished business. She went in search of Donna and found her laboring over page three of the Monday edition. "Donna, I want to apologize for blowing up at you Saturday night," she said, trying to keep her voice kind. She found Donna hard to like, but was determined not to use her aversion for the woman as an excuse to treat her rudely. "I was having a bad day, but I shouldn't have taken it out on you. Will you please forgive me?"

Donna never looked up from her work. "Whatever," she said with a shrug.

"Good," Tobi thought as she returned to her desk and gathered her personal belongings, "nobody is going to make this departure difficult." Before she was out of the building, Reuben was knocking at the publisher's door. Tobi grinned wryly. Maybe they would make him city editor now. Why not? He might be able to pull it off. He had expected it when they gave it to her, and he never liked her after that. Maybe his time had come.

Fortunately, Tobi had driven to work today instead of riding her bicycle. She settled her things - a framed photograph of her parents, a thesaurus, a note pad - beside her on the front seat and pulled into the street. It was the very street where someone driving a car that looked like hers had slowed down yesterday and shot Hugh Mansett through the heart.

She studied the house across the street from the newspaper office. Someone who lived there had reported the whole incident to the police. Maybe she should call on them and see if they could identify some differences between her car and the murderer's car. Of course, if she did, Ben would be furious and right now she needed

Ben on her side. In fact, now that she was unemployed, she might as well check with Ben and see what had developed in the case.

At the police station, she made her way through a maze of desks and had almost reached Ben's before she realized he was talking to someone seated across from him. As Ben looked up to greet her, his companion turned around. It was Joel Trent!

"*You!*" Tobi sputtered. "Why is it that everywhere I go, there *you* are?"

Ben frowned at her. "What's your problem, Tobi? You used to be such an easy-going, friendly-to-everybody sort of sister-in-law. Why can't you say a civil word to Joel?"

Tobi took a deep breath. "I'm sorry. Good morning, Mr. Trent. How nice to see you again." She made her voice heavy with sarcasm.

Joel rose and shook her hand. "Good morning, Ms. Kirkland. It's nice to see you, too." Like Saturday night, his good will was genuine and his eyes were full of admiration.

Muttering under her breath about this pesky nuisance who kept getting in her way and every time he touched her, her heart raced so fast she thought she would pass out, Tobi took the empty chair next to his.

"Joel came in this morning because he heard about Hugh," Ben told her. "He knew Hugh many years ago, and he wanted to let me know they'd been acquainted."

"You knew Hugh?" Tobi asked with interest before she remembered she had decided to ignore the annoying man.

"Yes, he ruined my father's business," Joel said. "Actually, Dad's opinion was that he saved the business. My opinion was that he ruined it."

"What was your father's business?"

"My family has run a little hometown newspaper for several generations. It was struggling about 25 years ago, and Dad hired Hugh to come in as managing editor and see what he could do with it.

"Hugh turned it from a friendly, homey paper into your typical biased, wouldn't-know-the-truth-if-it-bit-you-on-the-leg rag. He persuaded Dad to subscribe to a liberal news agency and expand the size of each edition. Today it looks like every other newspaper in the country and is just about as reliable."

Tobi scowled at him. "You really have an attitude about the media, don't you?"

"Oh, you don't know the half of it," said Joel. "I think newspapers are wonderful compared to network news. I wouldn't listen to the propaganda the big three networks put out if you paid me."

"Then how do you know what's going on in the world?"

"There are plenty of reliable sources on the radio and internet."

"If those news sources are so wonderful, why is everybody watching the evening news?" Tobi asked.

"Good question," said Joel. "I wish I knew."

"Joel's dream is to publish a newspaper with information from a trustworthy news service," said Ben. "That's one reason he was interested in meeting you."

"Me? Why me?"

"Several of the columns you've written have flown in the face of the media elite's party line," said Joel. "And your writing is beautiful. I was hoping you might be willing to work for me...if I ever take over Dad's business, that is."

"I think you're from Never Never Land," said Tobi. "There's nothing wrong with the newspapers in this country. Besides, who cares about all that? What about Hugh Mansett, Ben? Do you have any leads?"

"Not yet. Right now I'm working on who knew him and knew him well enough to know he would be going into the office at 9:00 o'clock Sunday morning. Look, I know we covered all this territory yesterday but, if you don't mind, let's go over it again."

"Okay. Well, anybody who knew him knew he would be going to the office Sunday morning. He always did that at Foxhole. It was quiet and he could work without interruptions."

"Okay. Who knew him in Deepwater?"

"As far as I know I'm the only one. Except Reuben. Kent said Reuben Garza, the reporter, knew him. In fact, Reuben's the one who told him about the job."

"And Kent is Hugh's...?"

"Stepson."

"Right. Is he still in town?"

"No, he left Saturday. At least, he said he was leaving Saturday, and I'm sure he did because I haven't heard from him again."

"And you think you would have heard from him if he were here?"

Tobi blushed in spite of her best efforts not to. "Pretty sure."

"Sweet on him, are you?" Joel asked, watching her closely.

Tobi glared at him and blushed again.

"Is he a good suspect?" asked Ben.

"Two years ago he would have been. But he got saved and reconciled with Hugh, as much as anybody could reconcile with the old troll."

Ben sighed. "Look, I know Mansett was unpleasant, but you'd better stow the epithets until we find out who killed him. Remember, you were framed."

"I'm not likely to forget it," Tobi said irritably.

"Okay, who stood to benefit? Did he have money, and who would inherit?"

"Nobody is going to get much money out of him. His wife will inherit, I'm sure, but she doesn't need it. Kent's Dad left both her and Kent very well off."

"What do you know about the wife? Any motive there?"

"None that a divorce wouldn't have accomplished."

"That's pretty slim pickins'," said Ben. "I guess Reuben Garza is our best suspect. What do you know about him?"

"He's infuriating to work with because he's slower than molasses in February. And maybe he's in line for my job because I just quit. But I guess he liked Hugh, or he wouldn't have asked him to come here."

"Unless he wanted to kill Hugh, frame you and get a promotion," suggested Joel. "Maybe that's why he wanted Hugh here."

"And he broke into my house and stole my gun last month so he could frame me?"

"Somebody did," Ben observed. "Do you know when Hugh accepted the position on the *City Crier*? If he decided to come here *after* the gun was stolen, then nothing makes sense."

"I only found out last Friday night," said Tobi. "And I didn't hear anything new this morning. The whole executive staff was meeting behind closed doors, trying to decide what to do with me. Obviously, they think I'm guilty or it wouldn't have taken them an hour and a half to reach a decision."

"So they fired you?" asked Ben.

"No. I cleared out and left. The meeting was still in session, but I suddenly didn't want to work there anymore."

"Does that mean you need a job?" asked Joel.

"Why?"

"Well, my secretary is having some health problems. I can offer you a temporary position if you're interested."

"As a secretary?" Tobi's voice was contemptuous.

"Being a secretary is an honorable occupation."

As Tobi opened her mouth to tell Joel what she thought about working for him, Ben said, "That's a generous offer, Tobi. You should think it over."

Again Tobi opened her mouth to express her disdain for any job that required her to see Joel Trent on a regular basis, but the phone rang. Ben picked up the receiver, listened a moment and said, "Send him back."

"Reuben Garza," he told Tobi and Joel. "He wants an interview about the Mansett murder for today's paper."

He stood to greet Reuben, introduced himself and Joel, and went to get another chair.

"I'm glad you're here," Reuben told Tobi. "I could use a quote from the chief suspect."

"Chief suspect? Me? Where did you get your information?" Tobi asked indignantly.

"From the boss. He says your gun was found at the scene of the crime."

"My gun..." Tobi muttered. "My stupid gun..."

Ben placed a chair for Reuben and said sternly, "Tobi is not our chief suspect. Actually, she's not a suspect, at all. If she had murdered the man, she wouldn't have left her gun beside his body like a calling card."

"You're Ben Walling, chief homicide detective. Is that correct?" Reuben asked.

"That's right."

"And you're related to Tobi somehow, I believe?"

"She's my sister-in-law."

"And you're being allowed to handle this case, even though it involves a relative?"

Ben was annoyed. "If Tobi actually had anything to do with the case, I would step aside," he explained tersely. "But she doesn't, so I won't."

"You don't consider Tobi to be a suspect even though the murder weapon is registered to her?"

"I don't consider Tobi to be an idiot; therefore, she couldn't be the murderer," said Ben.

"Maybe that's exactly what she thought you would think when she left the gun at the scene," said Reuben. "After all, she's an obvious suspect since very few people in Deepwater knew Mansett. She had to do something to throw you off her trail."

"And that brings us to the fact that you knew Mansett," said Ben. "How did you get along with him?"

"We were great buddies," said Reuben. "When the position opened up here, I called him and asked him to consider it."

"Do you happen to know the exact date that Mansett accepted the position?" Ben asked.

"Yes, I do. Archer told me this morning that Hugh called to accept the position on April 20."

Ben looked questioningly at Tobi and she answered, "The 25th."

"What was the 25th? What's the significance of Hugh accepting the offer on the 20th?" asked Reuben.

"Never mind. The police department has already given your publisher a statement for the press and I have nothing to add to it. But I do want to interview you about your relationship with Mansett."

Reuben's eyebrows arched. "Me? Are you saying I'm a suspect?"

"At the moment, you're the only suspect," said Ben coolly.

"Really? You must be hard up for suspects." Reuben turned his attention to Tobi.

"So where were you Sunday morning at 9:00 A.M., Tobi?"

"Don't answer that question," Ben said quietly.

"No comment," said Tobi.

"Okay, Mr. Trent, what is your connection to this case?" Reuben asked, turning to Joel.

"Miss Kirkland and Mr. Trent were just leaving," Ben said quickly. "But you're welcome to stay and answer my questions."

Reuben flipped his note pad shut and rose. "We can talk this afternoon. Right now, I have a story to write."

When his footsteps died away, Tobi sighed, "Looks like I'll be making headlines today instead of writing them."

And she was right. The Monday edition had no sooner hit the streets than her phone started ringing. She couldn't deal with the callers. Not today. So she fled on her bicycle to the elementary school where DeeDee taught second grade. It was 3:15 when she arrived and children were erupting from classrooms, pushing, pulling, laughing, shouting and generally acting out their it's-May-and-school's-almost-over enthusiasm with youthful vigor.

Tobi waited for the children to vanish into the sun-drenched afternoon, then stepped into DeeDee's classroom. Two children were still in their seats, being held after

school for misbehavior, no doubt. DeeDee looked up with a questioning frown, and Tobi gestured that there was no rush.

She folded herself into a miniature desk in the back of the room and looked around. The walls were practically papered with summer - pictures of flowers, trees, birds, lawns, beaches and mountains and, in almost every picture, there was a jolly yellow sun bearing curious appendages.

Tobi smiled sadly to herself. How simple life had been when she was seven. Summer would stretch before her like a party that was never going to end. It would consist of an extravagant assortment of activities - swimming, hiking, biking, skating, games... And helping Mom in the garden. Tobi closed her eyes and remembered the warm, fragrant soil that had perfumed every summer of her childhood. What wouldn't she give to go back to one of those summers! To see Mom digging up the soil again. To feel mud squishing between her toes. To see Mom's vegetables growing plump and sweet on the vine.

"Tobi." DeeDee was singing her name and Tobi realized she must have spoken to her before. "Anybody home in there?"

"More or less." Tobi returned to the present and saw that the two children were gone.

"What does it say?" DeeDee asked, picking up the newspaper Tobi had brought with her.

"Lead story, front page: Tobi Kirkland is a murderer," Tobi pronounced, her eyes flashing like emerald flames. "Written by my good buddy Reuben Garza."

" 'Former employee implicated in murder,' " DeeDee read. "*Former employee!*" she gasped. "What happened?"

"The weasels held a big powwow to decide what to do with me," Tobi said. "It went on 30 minutes...60 minutes...90 minutes... At that point, I decided to put them out of their misery. I packed up and left."

"What's their problem?" DeeDee asked indignantly. "You don't mean to tell me they actually think you killed Hugh Mansett, do you?"

"You tell me," Tobi said, taking the newspaper back and beginning to read the story out loud. " 'Tobi Kirkland, former city editor for the *City Crier*, has been implicated in the murder of incoming Managing Editor Hugh Mansett. According to Chief Homicide Detective Ben Walling, who is Kirkland's brother-in-law, the murder weapon was a .38 caliber revolver registered to the former city editor of this newspaper...' Then it goes on to talk about Hugh, how he was about to take over as managing editor and how there was 'bad blood' between us from our previous association at the *Foxhole Gazette*."

"They do make it sound like you killed him," said DeeDee, horrified.

"That's right and I've read the whole story. Nowhere in the article does he mention the fact that I'm not a suspect. It leaves the impression that I've already been arrested, tried and convicted. And look at this," she rattled the paper. "This other story of Reuben's was supposed to be the page one lead yesterday. In the Sunday paper! Today it's below the fold and his story about *me* gets the lead." She tossed the newspaper down in disgust. "That's what he was working on this morning while I was

sitting there on the hot seat. He was writing this rubbish about me and watching me squirm the whole time!"

"Well, he *was* just doing his job," DeeDee said soothingly. "You know he had to do it."

"Sure, I know, but he didn't have to turn me into a murderer," Tobi said more calmly. "My phone is ringing off the hook. Some of the church ladies want to know if they can visit me in jail. As long as I've already been found guilty, I'd like to kill Reuben Garza." She grinned ruefully at DeeDee.

"I'll help you!" DeeDee said enthusiastically.

They both laughed, then cried on each other's shoulders. Finally, DeeDee dried her eyes and said, "So what are you going to do now?"

Tobi hesitated. "DeeDee, please don't lecture me today..."

"Lecture you? About what?"

Tobi took a deep breath. "I stopped by the PD to see Ben this morning after I vacated the city desk. Joel Trent was there. He offered me a temporary job as his secretary."

DeeDee tried to hide her excitement, but her eyes were sending out beacons like a double lighthouse. "Tobi that's wonderful!" She saw the thundercloud on Tobi's face and added, "Isn't it?"

"I don't want to work for him. I don't even want to know him."

"Why not? He's one of the finest men I've ever met, October Kirkland, and you're one of the stubbornest women I've ever met. Why do you have such a chip on your shoulder about him?"

"Listen to you calling the kettle black, December Walling. If there's one person on this planet more stubborn than I am, it's you."

"If you already know how stubborn I am, then you also know I'm going to win. So quit fighting me and take the job." DeeDee glared at her.

Tobi sighed and sank back into the tiny desk. "DeeDee, he's one of those holy roller flakes. He goes to that Church of the Living Vine over on Sixth Street. You know how I feel about all that flaky, hyped up hocus pocus. And I don't trust the people involved in it. They think God is supposed to pour out money on them and, if they fleece somebody along the way, it's the other person's fault for not having enough faith..."

"...and you wasted ten years of your life in Charismatic churches, etc., etc., etc. I know, but maybe the Lord sent you into Joel's life to open his eyes about his church. Maybe he'll listen to you and get free of it. You did."

"Finally, but I was as blind as a myopic bat for 10 years. Nobody could convince me I was deceived. I know what it's like to believe that slop all the way to the depths of my soul. And I can't get up much hope that Joel can be persuaded he's following a false doctrine."

"Talk to him, Tobi. See if he offers you a fair salary and, if he does, consider the job. It's only temporary."

Tobi stood to go. "I'll see, but I'm not making any promises." Then her eyes fell on the newspaper she had dropped on the little desk. She picked it up and poked it in her sister's face. "On second thought, I *can* make you one promise - I'm never going to work for these traitors again."

"Don't say never," DeeDee pleaded. "If you won't work for the *Crier*, you'll be moving again, and I don't want you to leave."

Tobi's face softened. "I know. I'll try not to go off in a snit, but Kent did say he could find me a position in Dallas. The idea grows more tempting every day."

She hugged her sister and left. Yesterday's wind storm had blown itself out, leaving tranquil breezes from the south in its wake. Tobi mounted her bike and wearily let herself be whisked along toward the north. It was good to feel the wind at her back, propelling her forward, instead of whipping hair and dirt into her face, as if some invisible force were bent on halting her progress.

She pedaled along the quiet streets of her hometown. She loved Deepwater. Lost in the wilds of West Texas, most people had never heard of it. And those who moved here were appalled at the barren landscape. "Why," they always asked, "would anybody live here *by choice*?"

Tobi inspected the landscape. She could hardly blame them. Of course, most homeowners planted lawns and shade trees, so the town wasn't so bleak, but vacant lots and uncultivated fields around town were able to sustain only the scruffiest of vegetation. Cedar bushes and mesquite trees were the most common, along with a fabulous assortment of weeds.

But the sky made up for everything! In West Texas, the sky was a dome. It stretched from horizon to horizon, so she could see the whole vault of the heavens. During those years in Foxhole, she had felt claustrophobic. A forest of tall shade trees had narrowed her view of the sky to a small patch directly overhead. Sometimes, lying in her bed at night, she had grumbled to herself that the sky could fall and she would never know it.

But today, the vastness of the sky and the barrenness of the vista combined to depress Tobi's mood. She felt isolated and helpless in a frightening infinity. Where was God? Why was He letting her be accused of a horrible crime? Why hadn't He prevented it? Why hadn't He exposed the killer?

And, even more importantly, why had He let her live so long alone? If she were married, she wouldn't have to lie in the darkness alone every night. Or walk alone through dark days. And why shouldn't she have a husband and children like *normal* people? Without a family, life was a meaningless wilderness.

Tobi shuddered, fighting tears. There she went again, acting as if she were the center of the universe and God had nothing to do except tend her whims. It was a mindset she had developed during her incarceration in the Charismatic world view. And she hated it! She hated herself for falling for such a lie, for letting herself get sucked into a belief system that presented the majestic, omnipotent God of the universe as her private genie.

On the other hand, when she had come out of the Charismatic movement, she had swung to the opposite extreme. It grieved her to ask God for *anything* because she

remembered the arrogance of her previous position. He was God, after all. Why should He have time for her? Why should He trouble Himself with her inconsequential wants and needs?

But she knew the Bible, so she knew He did care. He cared enough to let His beloved Son die. How could she insult Him by pretending He didn't care...even for her?

It became a balancing act for Tobi - taking the truths she knew in her heart and translating them into a lifestyle that was obedient and pleasing to God. She had to carefully feel her way out of the ugly extremes into the middle ground of God's truth. But occasionally, she found herself sliding back into one extreme or the other.

"I'm sorry, Lord," she prayed, as her bicycle zipped along the highway north of Deepwater. "I don't always understand why things happen the way they do, but I do always love You and trust You. Great is Your faithfulness!"

The distant roar of an engine drew Tobi's attention to the sky. She was close to a small airfield and a speck of an airplane was soaring toward her as it prepared to land. Tobi stopped her bicycle and watched.

Airplanes amazed her. How could something so heavy get so far off the ground? She stood statue-still as she watched the graceful aircraft descend and settle to earth.

To her, flight was a mystery, but if that tiny piece of machinery had the guts to take on the whole sky and go soaring through the heavens like an untamed bird, then she should have the guts to find a way to soar, too. After all, she had a simple choice when life grew difficult: wallow around like a pig in a mire of depression or accept the

problems as they came and find a way to soar above them as an eagle rides storm currents into the peaceful sky far above.

Tobi smiled suddenly. If she could choose between behaving like a pig or an eagle, she believed she would choose the eagle. She turned her bicycle around and started home. The wind in her face resisted her every inch of the way, but she laughed aloud as she pedaled and sweated and began to gather speed. When she finally pulled onto the sidewalk in front of her home, her knees were weak with exhaustion, but she felt exhilarated.

She parked her bicycle and collapsed on the front stoop of the white stucco house she rented from longtime friends of her family. It was a pretty, Spanish style house with a rust red roof in a quiet residential neighborhood. The Doyles had kept the house for rental property when they moved into a larger home. Two years ago, when Tobi had returned to Deepwater, they had been elated to learn she would like to live in it. They charged her a ridiculously low monthly rent because they knew she would take care of it as if it were her own.

Although she truly couldn't have afforded to pay more, Tobi had protested that it wasn't fair to the Doyles that she pay so little. And then Mrs. Doyle had sung her a litany of horror stories about the little house's 20-year history in the hands of tenants. Walls had been smashed, carpet destroyed by pets and cigarettes, rooms painted horrendous colors, toilets and bathtubs never cleaned, drains hopelessly clogged...

At that point, she had paused and sighed, "I could go on, but some of the filth we've seen shouldn't be discussed in respectable company. You would be doing us a

favor if you would rent the house. We talk all the time about selling it, but it was our first home and we love it. Someday, when the grandkids are grown and don't come to visit so often, I want to move back there and sell the big place. Otherwise, I would sell it in a snap." She snapped her fingers convincingly at Tobi.

So, it was arranged, and Tobi had moved in. She had fallen in love with the little house immediately. In spite of its many years of hardship at the hands of uncaring tenants, the DoYLES had determinedly kept the house clean and comfortable. Its walls were painted off-white and the floors were covered with a thick, gold carpet that was warm and inviting. For the living room, Tobi's mother had insisted on buying and hanging drapes with a green, gold and white floral pattern. DeeDee had located a big, soft sofa and matching easy chair that looked as if they were made for the room. And after her parents died, the living room decor had been completed when Tobi inherited a downy, oversized recliner that she snuggled into when she needed the kind of comfort only the memory of her parents' warmth could give.

Now Tobi walked into the cool, quiet house and stretched out on the sofa. A month ago, the sofa had been positioned in front of the big double windows at the front of the house with the television on the opposite wall. After her TV set was stolen, she had put the sofa in its place, facing the big window. In front of the window, on the vacated TV stand, she had arranged family photographs - her parents, her brother Julius with his family, and DeeDee with her family. As she cooled down from her spirited tussle with the hot West Texas wind, she gazed at those dear faces and knew that, if it

weren't for their support, she wouldn't have the courage to cope with the suspicion that she had murdered Hugh. Or any other challenge, for that matter.

Her eyes lingered on her parents' faces - her happy, whimsical mother who had named her children after their birth months and taught them to search their hearts then follow the sweetest dreams they found there - and her steady, gentle father who had quietly supported his family and made sure his children recognized the serious side of life. "If you learn responsibility and integrity, I'll be proud of you no matter what you do and where you go," he had told them on suitably solemn occasions and the pride already shining in his eyes always touched Tobi's heart and made her eager to become a woman he would be proud of.

Her Mom and Dad had been in love with life and with each other. And they should still be alive today, on the other side of town, raising a garden, reading voraciously, spoiling their grandchildren and supporting their church. They should be doing all the things they had looked forward to sharing in their retirement years. But they weren't and Tobi knew it was her fault.

Last year, still enamored with the Charismatic movement, she had persuaded them to drive to Abilene with another couple to attend a healing service one Saturday evening. She had wanted to take them herself because she had been certain that her Dad would be instantly cured of prostate cancer if the big-name evangelist holding the service prayed for him. But she had had to work that night and was still in the newsroom when Ben appeared to tell her there had been a disastrous wreck on the drive home.

Both couples had been killed instantly, along with the driver of a big rig, who had fallen asleep at the wheel and run them off the road.

Joy and laughter had drained out of Tobi's life with his words. She didn't eat or go to work for a week. And the first thing she did when she finally dragged herself out of a crushing depression was to open her Bible and find out where she had gone wrong in embracing the doctrines of the Charismatic church. But the freedom and light she received in being delivered from that deep deception were tempered by the guilt of knowing she had sent her parents to their death.

Tobi was close to tears. Again. When would she ever quit crying over Mom and Dad and wanting them back so desperately the pain nearly suffocated her?

The day's last trickle of sunlight drained out of the room and long shadows veiled her parents' faces. Tobi got up and went into her bedroom. The light on her answering machine was flashing with a message from Kent. Quickly she punched in the number he had recited, but he didn't answer. Instead, a voice mail message informed her he was on his way to Deepwater and would call her in the morning.

She wondered what he knew. Had someone told him she shot Hugh and, if so, was he angry with her? She took a deep breath and told herself not to borrow trouble.

That night she began reading Psalm 18 again. It always thrilled her to see the way God responded to King David's cry for help. She read those verses, imagining that the mighty Creator of Heaven and Earth heard her prayers and answered them just as thoroughly, but she paused at verse 9. "...darkness was under his feet."

What did that mean? Why was darkness under God's feet?

Then verse 11 caught her eye, "He made darkness his secret place; his pavilion round about him were dark waters and thick clouds of the skies."

Why was God hiding in darkness? Could it be that He didn't want His intervention into human affairs easily discerned? Jesus had worked great miracles, then commanded: "Tell no man."

Her thoughts returned to that afternoon when she had felt terrified and alone in a hostile infinity, as if God had abandoned her. But she had been wrong. He hadn't abandoned her. He was simply working under cover of darkness.

"...darkness was under his feet," she read again, wonderingly.

She knelt beside her bed. "Lord, thank You for always being with me. Thank You for showing me that if I feel alone, it doesn't mean You're not here. It just means that You've made darkness Your secret place and You're always taking care of me whether I can see Your hand at work or not.

"And thank You for forgiving me in those times when I've dishonored You or misunderstood You. Thank You for loving me, anyway.

"Thank You for that little plane this afternoon. I know You want to be wind beneath my wings, carrying me into the high places of Your love, even when my life looks like a mess.

"And my life is a mess right now. I can't imagine who killed Hugh or why. I don't know whether to be excited Kent is coming or worried that he'll believe I killed Hugh. I need a job, but I don't want to work for that Joel Trent. Please show me what to do, and give Ben wisdom to find out what really happened to Hugh.

"I'm calling upon You and casting all these cares upon You because I know You are the only One who is able to help me. And You are worthy of all praise. Thank You for Your might and majesty, for Your goodness and mercy. I love You with all my heart, all my soul, all my mind and all my strength. In Jesus' name. Amen."

Chapter 5

Tuesday: Kent's Return

Kent called early the next morning and asked Tobi to meet him at Cleo's for lunch. He expected to be busy all morning packing some of Hugh's things, talking to the police, and generally reversing arrangements Hugh had made in his three-day sojourn in Deepwater.

He was right on time, as always, and Tobi was early. Her stomach had been aflutter all morning, as she watched the minutes drag by and wondered what Kent would say to her. She arrived at the restaurant at 11:47.

She needn't have worried. Kent threw his arms around her and held her for a long time. "You poor kid," he said, "this must be terrible for you."

"I'm so sorry," she responded. "I didn't want him to come here, but I never wanted him dead."

"Of course not," said Kent, taking her hand and leading her inside.

They chose the same corner booth where they had sat the previous Friday and quickly placed their orders. Tobi requested the simplest item on the menu and Kent the most exotic. It was a familiar pattern.

The waitress smiled at the attractive couple, picked up their menus and left. Then Kent brought up the topic that had haunted Tobi's thoughts for two days - the murder of Hugh Mansett. "Mr. Archer said they found a gun registered to you beside Hugh's body. What were you doing with a gun?"

"Don't you remember? Hugh made all of us reporters buy guns. We had to show him the sales slip to prove we'd gotten one, and then we were supposed to carry them on dangerous assignments."

"Oh right," said Kent thoughtfully. "Didn't I go with you when you bought yours?"

Tobi laughed suddenly. "That's right. Remember, I was going to buy a cap gun and show it to Hugh. I figured if I waved it at him across the room, he wouldn't be able to tell the difference."

Kent laughed too, then looked sad. "I should have let you buy the cap gun, then you wouldn't be in this mess now."

"Don't be silly - it's not your fault. If we're going to blame somebody, let's blame Hugh for making me buy the miserable thing in the first place."

"I guess that's the bottom line," Kent agreed. "So did you become a markswoman?"

"I never even took it out of the box," said Tobi. "I stuck it in a drawer and never saw it again until Ben showed it to me at the police station yesterday. You know, I don't

think I ever touched it. Even if the killer hadn't wiped it clean, it wouldn't have had my fingerprints on it."

Kent frowned. "How did it get to the murder site?"

"Someone broke into my house last month. They took my television and VCR and went through my drawers. They must have found the gun. I thought they were looking for money."

"How terrible!" Kent exclaimed. "You've really been through an ordeal, haven't you?"

Tears welled in Tobi's eyes, but she forced them back. "I'm not the only one," she said. "What about your poor Mother? How is she coping with all of this?"

"Not very well, I'm afraid," said Kent with a sigh. "The very idea of murder - of that kind of violence - happening to a family member would rattle anyone, I guess. And I suppose she's mourning Hugh although I never understood what she saw in him."

"I've always wondered about that," agreed Tobi. "She's so classy and lovely and he's...he was a big, slovenly hulk."

"But he could write. I think Mom admired him for his writing before she ever met him. Then when she did meet him, she overlooked his faults because she imagined him to be a modern-day Shakespeare in rumpled clothes and printer's ink."

"Were they happy?"

"Hugh married a beautiful, kind woman with a pile of money. And when he worked constantly, she never nagged him. He had no reason not to be happy."

"And your Mom?"

"I don't know for sure, but I always suspected that she didn't complain about his long working hours because she was glad he was gone so much. How could an intelligent woman be happy with that blustering slob?"

"Where is she now?"

"She's still in Foxhole. She was supposed to be packing while Hugh found a place for them to live. Funny about that. She never packed a box, and I couldn't get Hugh even to call a real estate agent. I guess they both understood he was going to settle into the job before he did any house hunting."

"Will Hugh be buried in Foxhole?"

"Yes, as soon as the police release his body, which should be soon, wouldn't you think?"

Tobi nodded. "I guess so. I believe I'll go see Ben this afternoon and ask him about that."

"Who's Ben?"

"Ben Walling. He's the chief homicide detective for the police department. And my brother-in-law."

"That's right. Archer mentioned that you were related to someone with the PD."

"When did you talk to Clayton?"

"I was at the newspaper office right before I came here. Archer said you walked out on them, leaving them high and dry. The new managing editor was dead and the city editor quit without a word of warning. He's pretty unhappy with you about that."

"What did he expect? He called a summit conference Monday morning to decide whether to keep me or fire me, considering that their new editor was dead and my gun had been discovered next to his lifeless body. The meeting lasted an hour and a half. An hour and a half! How long does it take to say, 'She's innocent until proved guilty'? So I walked out."

"I saw the hatchet job Garza did on you in the Monday paper. I'm guessing you haven't regretted your decision?"

"Not for a minute."

"You know, I have an idea." Kent's eyes were bright with excitement. "Why don't you write up a piece about the murder this afternoon? We'll send it to the *Gazette* by fax or modem. I bet they'll pay you \$300 for it."

"The *Foxhole Gazette*?" asked Tobi incredulously. "Are you serious - \$300?"

"Think about it. Hugh was managing editor there for 20 years. He moves to a town where a former reporter, whom he fired, by the way, is now the city editor of the newspaper. Sunday morning he's found dead outside the newspaper office with the city editor's gun lying next to his body. Now, here's that same city editor offering to write up the whole story for them. You don't think they can sell newspapers with a sweet setup like that?"

"What about conflict of interest? Reuben's story Monday was biased from beginning to end and I'm a suspect! Why would the *Gazette* buy a story from someone who's obviously going to give them a biased account?"

"Because it will sell! Isn't that what the game's all about?"

"I guess so, but it's depressing. I was trained to believe that journalists are honor-bound to give their readers the fair, unbiased truth in every situation."

Kent smiled indulgently. "When did you ever meet *anyone* who was fair and unbiased? Come on, how can one so experienced in the newspaper game be so naive?"

"Rose-colored glasses," Tobi sighed. "I guess I forgot to take off my rose-colored glasses." She thought about Joel's firm convictions about media bias. What if he were right? What if she had devoted her life to a corrupt, unprincipled cause?

Kent hadn't been to police headquarters yet, but Ben was expecting him at 1:30. Tobi decided to go along to show him the way and find out what was new in the case.

"This is a pleasant surprise. I didn't expect to see you today," Ben said to Tobi when they approached his desk.

"Ben Walling, I'd like you to meet Kent Grantham, Hugh Mansett's stepson. We had lunch together so I tagged along to find out what's new."

The men shook hands and exchanged pleasantries before Ben got down to business. "There's not much new, I'm afraid," he said. "I've been hoping you would be able to shed some light in the darkness, Kent."

"What about the autopsy? Is it finished and did it show anything?" asked Kent.

"I have a preliminary report. It's right here," Ben said, picking up and putting down papers on his cluttered desk. "Well, it's somewhere." He began flipping through books.

"Didn't anybody ever teach you a little virtue called organization?" Tobi asked with a mischievous grin.

"I am organized," Ben said. "It just doesn't look like it." He paused a moment to think. Then his face brightened as he opened a drawer and took out his telephone book. "I was using it to mark my place."

He removed a folded paper, replaced the phone book and then scanned the report. "The bullet went directly through his heart and lodged against a rib. No powder residue present. He died almost immediately. Nothing else relevant. He apparently wasn't in great health. The report indicates 'generalized atherosclerosis' and evidence of diabetes. Did you know he was diabetic?"

"Yes, he had been taking pills for diabetes for several years and faithfully ignoring his diet," Kent said. "Mom told me a few months ago he would probably be on insulin shots within the year."

"What about motive? Who would have liked to see Hugh dead?"

"Almost everyone who ever worked for him. I can't think of many who liked him. On the other hand, he was a brilliant journalist, so his employers usually loved him."

"How did he get along with his wife?"

"My mother admired his talent. And they never argued - at least, not when I was around. I don't know of any change in their relationship recently."

"Did he have affairs?"

"None that I know of."

"And your mother?"

"Of course not."

Ben sighed. "You're not a lot of help. Did Hugh know anyone from Deepwater besides Tobi and Reuben Garza?"

"If he did, he never mentioned them," said Kent.

"What about Joel Trent? Did Hugh ever mention him or his family?"

Kent shrugged. "Who are they?"

"A previous employer, but nothing particularly suspicious there. Okay, what do you know about Garza?"

"Reuben came through Foxhole. He was there a few years before Tobi came on staff. He was a kiss-up so Hugh liked him. I didn't think much of him - too slow. But his work was good when he finally got around to turning it in.

"Hugh tormented him about his weight problem - called him the 'Roly Poly Reporter' and said he would be out of a job when he was too fat to get through the door."

"Reuben fat?" asked Tobi. "He's not even close to fat. We must be talking about two different people."

"Unless he lost the weight," observed Ben.

"You know, he has some pretty prominent facial wrinkles," Tobi said. "Maybe they're the result of his weight loss. He reminds me of a basset hound with those rolls of skin and his big, sad eyes."

"And that explains why Reuben wanted Hugh to come to Deepwater," said Kent. "I wondered about it because Hugh did tease him unmercifully. If he had lost the weight,

he probably wanted Hugh to know it. And Hugh had put on some weight himself the last few years. Maybe Reuben wanted to rub his nose in it."

"What do you think? Did Hugh make Reuben mad enough to want to kill him?"

Tobi and Kent exchanged glances, then Kent answered for both of them. "He probably made everyone who knew him mad enough to kill him at one time or another."

"What about you, Tobi?" Ben asked. "What do you know about Reuben?"

"He expected to get my job. When Clayton hired me instead of promoting Reuben, he was furious. And Kent's right, he's the slowest reporter I ever met. But I can't believe he would kill anyone."

"Did he know you didn't like Hugh?"

Tobi frowned. "Well, I guess I mentioned it the night before the shooting. Donna was the only one working production and I started helping out. She reminded me it was against the rules for me to work in her department and I told her to tell Hugh Monday. He could fire me again. Reuben was there when I said it, so he may have picked up on it."

"But you don't believe he might have killed Hugh and framed you to get even with you? Or to get your job?"

Tobi shook her head. "I can't imagine it."

"Kent, what do you think?"

Kent snorted. "I can't imagine Reuben moving fast enough to pull off a crime. But who knows? Where was he Sunday morning?"

"He said he was at home, but his wife went to early Mass, so we only have his word for it. She left before 8:00 and returned around 9:10."

"His car doesn't look anything like mine," Tobi observed. "Could the witness have been mistaken about the vehicle?"

"It was a red sports car," said Ben. "When I showed her pictures of sports cars, she picked out a make and model identical to yours. Of course, Garza could have rented or borrowed a car. I'm checking into that possibility. Is he city editor, now? Have you heard anything?"

"I can answer that," said Kent, looking apologetically at Tobi. "I should have mentioned it sooner. Clayton Archer asked me to take the job temporarily until he can get someone else in here. They haven't met a deadline in two days. And Reuben will never get the job. He's trying to do it now, but he can't handle it."

"Are you going to take it?" asked Tobi.

"I haven't given him an answer, but I'm inclined that way. I have an indefinite leave of absence from Heartland until this situation is resolved. I'd like to know what happened to Hugh, and I might get a chance to nose around and find some clues if I stay. How would you feel about that, Tobi?"

"I don't like it," she said. "But I like having you around." She blushed. "And if you can find out who killed Hugh, I'd like that too. So why don't you do it?"

"I will," he said. "But I wasn't going to take it if you didn't want me to. Anyway, maybe it will hold the job open for you for a few days. You might want to be city editor again when this mystery is solved."

"No thanks," said Tobi. "I've already decided I'm not going back there."

Kent flashed a radiant smile. "Really? Does that mean you're ready for me to find you a job in Dallas?"

"No, it doesn't," Ben interrupted. "She's already been offered an excellent job here. She doesn't have to go running off to Dallas to find work."

"What job is that?" asked Tobi.

"For Joel at the hospital."

"Oh that." Tobi turned to Kent. "The great and noble CEO at the hospital offered me a temporary secretarial position. I should make a mint typing his letters for a week or two. Not!"

"Don't be such a stuck-up ingrate!" Ben said to Tobi, then turned to Kent. "Just for the record, can you tell me where you were Sunday morning at 9:00 and also where your Mother was at the same time?"

"I guess Mom was at home," said Kent. "I was with relatives at their cabin on Clover Lake. We were up late fishing, then slept until noon Sunday."

"And that's why we weren't able to reach you until late Sunday afternoon?"

"That's right. We ate lunch and started home around 2:00. I found the message on my answering machine at 4:00."

"I need the names and phone numbers of your relatives," said Ben.

"I don't have the phone numbers with me, but I'll get them to you," Kent promised.

"Ben, why are you grilling Kent?" Tobi asked. "You can't suspect him!"

"I'm doing my job," said Ben. "I asked you where you were and I'll ask Kent's mother and everybody else I can think of."

"I don't like it," she muttered.

"I don't mind, Tobi," said Kent. "If you really want to know what happened to Hugh, you should be glad he's so thorough."

"Hmph," said Tobi.

"Listen, Ben," Kent said. "Tobi may do an article about this case for the *Foxhole Gazette* this afternoon. I think I can get her a good price for it. Is there anything she shouldn't mention in the story?"

"Really? That's very generous of you, Kent," said Ben. "Just give the facts, ma'am," he said to Tobi. "Just the facts, none of the speculations. I trust your judgment.

"Now if either of you hear anything or think of anything that might help with this case, call me immediately, night or day."

Tobi and Kent promised and walked out of the police station into dazzling sunshine. Kent led the way to his silver sports car and opened the door for her. "Okay, here's the plan," he said. "You go to work on your article, and I'll come over to your place later and cook up a dinner fit for a queen. How about it?"

"One of your unpronounceable gourmet feasts?" asked Tobi.

"Only if you say so, my lady." He shut the door and went around to the driver's side while Tobi weighed her answer.

"You know I never know what I'm eating when you cook," Tobi said as Kent started the car.

"But I always tell you," he said.

"Sure, after you torment me half to death." Tobi was smiling, but it was an effort. "So here's the deal. Promise me that you won't cook anything that crawls in the dirt or lives in water."

"Aw, Tobi, you're ruling out some of the choicest delicacies," Kent protested.

"Right, and all your best teasing," Tobi agreed.

"You drive a hard bargain, but I accept your terms," Kent said. "How about a movie? Do you want me to pick up a movie for us to watch?"

Tobi shook her head. "Nope. I've got nothing to play it on, remember?"

"That's right. How do you stand all the silence?"

Tobi shrugged. "It was tough at first, but I'm getting used to it."

She gave him directions to her house as they rode. At Cleo's, Kent let her out at her car and said, "I'll give Tye Ringener at the *Gazette* a call as soon as I get back to my motel room, then I'll let you know what he says about the article."

Tobi had barely walked through her door before the phone rang and Kent told her to get the story to the *Gazette* by 6:00 p.m. Ringener considered it a bargain at \$300. She should phone a reporter by the name of Mike Temple for any information she needed from the Foxhole end. Then he gave her the phone and fax numbers at the *Gazette* and hung up.

Tobi took her portable phone into the extra bedroom that served as her office and called Temple. He was eager to hear what she knew about the case and willing to tell her what he could about the situation at Foxhole.

"If he'd been killed there, who would you suspect?" was Tobi's first question.

"If he'd stayed on the job, it would have been Tye Ringener," Temple told her. "Hugh got more crotchety every year and a newspaper needs a managing editor with some polish and diplomacy, as you know. But the brass was hesitant to fire him since he'd been here so long."

"But he left, so Ringener doesn't have a motive. Anybody else mad enough at him to kill him?"

"Probably everyone who knew him, at one time or another," said Temple. "I was so angry at him last month I was looking for another job. Then the rumor got out that Hugh was leaving, so I decided to wait it out."

"When was that?"

"What?"

"The rumor."

"I think everyone at the *Gazette* knew he was leaving by the 15th. Most of us didn't know where he was going for a week or so after that, but nobody cared where he went as long as he went."

"What about Audrey...Mrs. Mansett? Did you ever see much of her?"

"Once a year at the Christmas party."

"She didn't take much interest in his work, then?"

"Not so's we could tell. But who could blame her?"

"What about the community? Has the *Gazette* stirred up anything ugly lately that might make somebody want to kill Hugh?"

"Oh we stir things up every chance we get and somebody is always mad at us. Everybody hates the media these days, you know."

"I'm finding that out," Tobi said.

"Let me do some research. I'll give you a call back within an hour if I turn up anything."

"Thanks." Tobi put the phone down with a heavy heart. Everybody hated the old coot, but nobody had threatened him. Nobody had fought with him lately. Nobody had a good, clean motive. Nobody should have killed him. But somebody did. Who?

Tobi wished she could start her article off, as Reuben had, by pointing the finger of blame. Except in her story, she would finger the *real* killer. If only she knew who the real killer was.

She sat down and wrote the story as she knew it, starting with the drive-by shooting that had killed Hugh on Sunday morning and including the reason he had fired her two years ago. Probably even newspapers should be kind enough not to speak ill of the dead and the *Gazette* would probably cut the part about Hugh covering up the fossil hoax, but it felt good to write the truth and hope for a few hours that it might see the light of day.

Around 4:00, Kent rang the doorbell. He was loaded down with bags of groceries, but he told her to get back to work and pretend he wasn't there. Instead, she showed him around the kitchen before returning to her article. Soon, wonderful aromas began drifting into her office and her mouth watered as she worked.

Mike Temple never called, and by 5:00 Tobi had the article at the police station for Ben to look at. He read it, nodded his approval and faxed it to Foxhole.

Back home, Tobi stepped into a cool shower for a few minutes, then put on a gold and white sun dress. When she joined Kent in the kitchen, he was wearing a dab of flour on his chin. His normally well-behaved hair was drooping over his forehead in the humid heat. And his gray eyes were sparkling with satisfaction as he tasted the sauce that was bubbling on the stove. He looked very masculine and very handsome.

"It smells fabulous," she told him, wiping the flour off of his chin.

"I hope you think it *tastes* fabulous," he said anxiously.

"Anything that smells so good must taste wonderful," she assured him. "What can I do to help?"

"By the time you set the table, I should be wrapping things up here," he said, returning to his sauce.

Tobi removed her best china from the shelf and carried it to the table in the dining area between the kitchen and the living room. To her surprise, there was a big basket on one of the chairs. Although the handle was adorned with a huge blue bow, it wasn't quite as high as the table so she hadn't noticed it before.

"What's this?" She looked at Kent and saw that he was watching her with anticipation.

"A surprise. Open it."

Cautiously Tobi opened one side of the basket and found nothing. She looked at Kent suspiciously, then lifted the lid on the other side. In one corner was a ball of black

and tan fur. She picked it up and a sleepy German shepherd puppy nestled in her hand. "Oh Kent, he's adorable!" She cuddled the puppy under her chin and it roused itself to lick her neck. "I used to have a German shepherd," she said, then corrected herself. "Well, actually he belonged to the whole family, but I always believed he loved me best."

Kent had come over to bask in her delight. "I know. You told me."

Tobi stared at him in disbelief. "I told you about BooBoo? And you remembered?" she asked. "When?"

"It was on a dark and stormy night..." Kent said in an eerie voice, then finished in a normal tone, "I don't remember *when*. I just remember how your eyes looked when you talked about him, and I wanted you to have another German shepherd."

Tobi's throat closed with emotion at the realization that Kent had remembered something she had told him more than two years ago. She threw her free arm around his neck. "Thank you so much! But you really shouldn't have. He must have been expensive!"

"Well, I thought he might be good company for you. Besides, if he's underfoot all the time, maybe you'll think about me occasionally."

Tobi gave him a shy look. "You didn't have to buy me a puppy to get me to think of you," she said. "I can't seem to stop thinking of you."

"Really?" His face lighted up. "I think about you all the time, too." He touched her face lightly and bent over to kiss her.

But Tobi backed away. "Not yet, Kent. I care for you more than I can tell you, but I can't get involved in a romantic relationship until Hugh's murder is solved. It would be

too hard to keep a clear mind if I let a lot of mushy emotions get in the way. Can you understand that?"

"Of course I can," he said gravely. "The murder weapon implicates you, and you're smart to deal with that problem before you take on a new one."

"I don't consider you a problem," she said.

"Good." He kissed the top of her head. "Are you hungry?"

"Starved! What's for dinner? Wait! Don't tell me - I still won't know after you say it. Just tell me what's in it."

"Well, there's a salad made of rabbit food. The entree is basically beef and the vegetable is basically green beans. Plus we have rolls and a fancy chocolate cake from the bakery."

"It sounds wonderful. I'll finish setting the table." She returned the puppy to his basket and went to wash her hands. As she was drying them, the phone rang.

It was Joel. "Can you come to work at 8:00 in the morning?" he asked.

"I never said I would take the job."

"I could really use you. When I told my secretary I might have located a temporary replacement, she cried. She'd been wanting to take the time off to see a specialist in Houston, but she didn't want to leave me in the lurch. She was so grateful I told her to go home and not come back until she's well again. If you turn me down, she may decide she has to come back to work."

Tobi's mind raced, trying to concoct a good excuse for refusing the job offer. To her horror, she suddenly heard herself blurting out the truth, "I don't want to work for you, Mr. Trent."

"I *can* be very nice," he said. "And if you'll work for me, I'll try really hard not to tick you off."

Tobi smiled in spite of herself. "Okay. I guess I can quit any time. And this way, your secretary will have the time off she needs."

"Thank you, Tobi," he said earnestly. "I'll pay you whatever the paper was paying you."

"Really?" She was amazed. "And will you expect me to put in 80 hours a week?"

"I think 40 will be sufficient."

"Maybe I should have done this a long time ago," Tobi told Kent after she hung up. "He's going to pay me what the paper was paying me, but I only have to work 40 hours a week."

"I hope this doesn't mean you've decided against a move to Dallas." Kent was setting food on the table and Tobi arranged the silverware and poured tall glasses of iced tea.

"I haven't decided about Dallas," she told him. "This is only a temporary position, and I'm not going to make any major decisions until Hugh's murder is solved. But if I do move, what kind of connections do you have? What kind of jobs might be available?"

Excitedly, Kent described a number of opportunities he knew about in the Dallas/Fort Worth metroplex while they ate. "I can't imagine living anywhere else," he

said, at last, as he pushed back from the table, and Tobi fed the last bite of her meat to the puppy.

"You make it sound exciting," Tobi admitted. "It's hard not to get out the boxes and suitcases and start packing tonight."

"You should," Kent urged. "I don't know how anyone can live in this desert. Don't you ever get lonely for rivers and lakes and real trees?"

"We do have a river," Tobi said, standing up. "Let's go in the other room where it's more comfortable." She snapped off the kitchen light and led him into the living room.

She sat down, but he paused to admire the painting that hung above the sofa. It was a Dutch scene with squatty windmills and a field of multi-colored tulips. "Did you buy this in Holland?" he asked.

"Hardly. I've never been out of the country," she said. "I bought it at an arts and crafts fair ten years ago. It was hanging in my bedroom when I lived in Foxhole."

He sat down beside her. "Would you like to go to Holland some day?"

She nodded dreamily. "It's one of the places I've always wanted to see - during tulip season."

"Well, I hope you get to go," he said. "Now, tell me about this river you mentioned. Where is it? I haven't seen so much as a trickle of water anywhere except from pipes since I got here."

"It's down there." Tobi pointed at the floor. "There's an underground river in this area, at least that's what I've heard. The first settlers got their water from wells, so they named the town Deepwater."

Kent looked intrigued. "An underground river - hidden, silent - and yet it nourishes and refreshes a whole town. Maybe Deepwater isn't such a wilderness, after all."

Tobi shrugged. "For better or worse, it's home. I grew up here. And I've been happy. It would be hard to leave again."

"Would it be harder or easier if your parents were alive?"

Tobi looked perplexed. "What do you mean?"

"Well, if they were alive, leaving Deepwater would mean leaving them, and that would be hard. But since they're dead, maybe staying here is some kind of monument to their memory. Maybe it's your way of paying homage to their way of life or their decision to live here or their...something... Anyway, it might be harder to leave because they're dead than it would if they were alive."

"Do you think so?" It was a novel concept to Tobi, but she wasn't sure it was wrong. And she was amazed that the idea had come from Kent. "How...where...what made you come up with...I mean, how did you know I might feel that way?"

He hesitated and she waited. Finally he said with pain in his voice, "I stayed in Foxhole a long time because of my Dad."

"Your Dad?"

"He brought Mom there as a bride and I was born a year later. He loved Foxhole. He could drive a couple of hours and be in downtown Dallas. But at the same time, we were close to rivers, lakes, caves, cliffs, race tracks, sky diving, hang gliding - almost any kind of exciting adventure you can name - and he loved them all. About a year ago, I realized I was living in Foxhole because he did. I was trying to make my life a living memorial to his life. But that's not a reasonable way to live...is it?"

Tobi thought it was a rhetorical question at first, but he was waiting for her answer. "No," she said thoughtfully. "I don't suppose it is."

"So I moved to Dallas," he finished.

"And now you think I'm doing the same thing - living in Deepwater because of my parents?" Tobi asked.

"Are you?"

"I don't know. I never thought about it that way before."

Kent was silent, and Tobi turned to look at him. His head was resting against the back of the sofa and his handsome face looked as hurt as if he were only six. A tear slid down his cheek. She had never seen him so vulnerable. Was it because they had never talked about his father before?

"You still miss your Dad, don't you?" she asked.

He nodded wordlessly.

"What happened to him?"

Kent didn't answer for a long time, and Tobi thought he might cry. But finally he said hoarsely, "He died in a racing car. It went out of control, flipped and exploded."

Tobi gasped. Even though she and Kent had been good friends for several years, she'd had no idea how violently his father had died. "How old were you?"

"Twelve."

"Kent, you never mention your Dad, but you were obviously crazy about him. Why don't you ever talk about him?"

"I can't. It hurts too much."

Tobi's mouth dropped open. Kent never said, "I can't." And he never let anyone else say it, either. "Don't tell me what you *can't* do; tell me what you *can* do," he always commanded, pounding an imaginary lectern with his fist as if he were some celebrated speaker. Now, watching his ashen face, she wondered if that familiar line was a quote from his father.

Her heart ached for him. She wanted to comfort him, but how? "Kent, I wish I could make your pain go away," she said earnestly, "but I don't know how...or...maybe I do know something that will help..."

She jumped up, looked through her CDs in the bottom compartment of the TV stand, chose one and inserted it in the CD player that now stood where her VCR had once been. Returning to the sofa, she took Kent's right hand in both of hers and let her head lean lightly against his shoulder as music filled the room. It was worship music, performed by a choir and accompanied by a magnificent orchestra.

Tobi didn't know if the music was creating any comfort for Kent or not but the mighty symphonic swell swept around her in billows and flooded her with a peace that

was beyond understanding. She closed her eyes and pretended she was reclining on a cloud, listening to the whole universe as it worshiped and adored its Majestic Creator.

Neither Kent nor Tobi spoke for an hour. At last she straightened up and looked at him. To her delight, she could see the same tranquility on his face that she felt on her own. "What was that?" he asked. "I never heard anything like it."

She showed him the CD and could tell that he was memorizing the name. "Take it with you, Kent, please. I want you to have it," she pleaded. "It would make me happy to know that you have it because I gave it to you."

"Like the puppy...," he said more to himself than to her, but she understood immediately.

"Yes, just like the puppy!"

"Okay. I may go back to the motel and listen to it again tonight. Thank you, Tobi."

"And thank you for bringing the food and Jasper. It was a wonderful evening!"

"Jasper?"

"That's the puppy's name."

"Listen, you don't have to keep the dumb mutt if you don't want to," Kent said. "The pet store will take him back, but he is AKC registered. His papers are in the basket and there's not a single criminal or black sheep in his whole family tree."

"I love him," Tobi insisted. "He's going to be a good friend for me."

Kent beamed. "I'm glad you like him." He held out a hand. "Well, I guess this is good night."

Ignoring his hand, Tobi put her arms around his neck and hugged him. "Good night, Kent."

"Good night, Tobi. I'll call you tomorrow."

Tobi removed Jasper's registration papers from the basket and put an old blanket in it. Then she got herself ready for bed. That night she turned to Psalm 18 again. "I will call upon the Lord, who is worthy to be praised: so shall I be saved from mine enemies," she read in verse 3. Excitement filled her heart as she meditated on those words. It sounded so simple and so certain - she could call upon the Lord and He would save her from her enemies. Whoever they were.

She turned off the light and knelt beside her bed. "What a wonderful God You are," she prayed reverently, "rushing down from Heaven to help Your people in our time of need. I do believe that even now You are dealing with the person who killed Hugh. I believe You are putting all my enemies to flight, and I thank You for being my Deliverer."

She smiled in the darkness, then, and marveled at the way Kent had opened up to her and let her see a side of him she had never known before. His pain had hurt her, but she felt closer to him now. If only he would open himself up to the Lord and let the Holy Spirit bring him the kind of deep comfort she never could.

"Thank you, Lord, for Kent," she continued. "Thank You for moving in his heart to bring him to Yourself. But he still needs so much help from You. Show him how to let You be his Healer and his Comforter. Increase his understanding of Your Word and help him grow strong in his faith. Be with him tomorrow as he works at the paper."

"And please, give Kent or Ben or me or someone the clue we need to know who killed Hugh.

"I pray for Your grace upon me tomorrow as I work at the hospital. Help me to do a good job for that Joel Trent and not be rude to him no matter how infuriating he is.

"I love You. I adore You. I rest in Your grace and love. In Jesus' name. Amen."

Chapter 6

Wednesday: Working for Joel

Tobi stood outside the glass door of the executive suite at Carlyle Memorial Hospital with her hand on the door handle. Joel Trent was seated at his desk in an office beyond the reception area. She knew he was there because the toes of his shoes extended just beyond his desk. The thought of seeing him again sent her heart into double time and took her breath away. How revolting!

Quietly she stepped away from the door and leaned against the wall. She wasn't afraid of him, so it wasn't fear causing her physical symptoms. What was it? She could hardly stand the sight of him, so it obviously wasn't a romantic attraction. It couldn't be! Maybe she was coming down with the flu.

"I can't stand him. I can't stand him. I can't stand him," she chanted softly. "Do you hear that, October Kirkland? You can't stand him! You can't stand him! You can't stand him! So chill. Now!"

"Are you all right, dear?" The sympathetic voice at Tobi's side startled her so much her wobbly knees nearly gave way.

"Yes ma'am," she whispered breathlessly, turning to see a fiftyish woman with dark, wavy hair and soft brown eyes, watching her with concern. "I...I think so."

"Why are you standing out here? Maybe I can help you find whoever you're looking for."

"No, thanks. I'm looking for Mr. Trent, but I stopped a minute to get myself psyched up before I go in."

"Psyched up?"

"You know, get a proper attitude," Tobi explained. "We fight every time we meet, so I was just...taking a few deep breaths before I face the lion in his den."

The lady looked puzzled. "You fight with Joel? That pussycat? I never heard of such a thing. What do you fight about?"

"Well, mainly two things - his weird church and the media."

The lady nodded. "Oh! Now I understand. Well, you just keep on him about that church of his. I've been praying the Lord would open his eyes about it. You wouldn't be Tobi Kirkland, would you?"

"Yes ma'am. And you're...?"

"I'm Violet Crofton, but call me Vi. Most people do. I'm Joel's secretary and I'm so glad you're willing to help out for a few weeks around here, so I can find out what's wrong with me."

"I didn't think you were coming in today," said Tobi.

"Well, Joel told me not to, but I wanted to show you the ropes. You know how it is - the boss thinks he knows everything but, as soon as I'm out of the room, he can't remember where the coffee pot is, much less his appointment calendar and address book. So come on in and I'll show you around. Joel says you're a bright little thing, so I should be on my way in no time."

She opened the door and called out cheerfully, "Morning, Joel, look who I found in the hall."

Joel appeared in his doorway, looking very executive in a dark business suit. He barely resembled the man Tobi had met the previous weekend. Except that there was still an aura of strength about him. It must be that air of authority he conveyed that always left her weak-kneed.

"Good morning, Tobi. I'm so grateful you were willing to come," he said with the wide grin she had found so annoying on Saturday night. "And you, Vi, what are you doing here? I thought you were going to stay home and take care of yourself."

"I am, Chief, but I don't want to come back and find my office in shambles. So, I'm going to show Tobi where everything is. Then you won't have any excuse to come in here and tear the place apart looking for things." She glared at him with eyes that twinkled and suddenly Tobi liked her very much. She liked Vi's gentle dignity, her obvious pride in her work and the quick smile that played at her lips.

Joel winked at Tobi. "She knows me too well." Then he put an arm around Vi's shoulders, kissed her cheek and said, "You make sure those doctors take good care of you."

Vi patted his cheek. "Don't you worry about that. Grady will keep an eagle eye on everything they do and woe to the doc that hurts a hair on my head."

"Good for Grady," Joel said. "Tell him I'm counting on him to get you back to the salt mines ASAP. You'll call as soon as you know something, won't you?"

"I'll call you first and the kids second," she promised.

"See that you do." He grinned and returned to his office.

Vi turned to Tobi. "That was very nice. The two of you didn't fight at all."

Tobi smiled weakly. Joel's wink had turned her knees to jelly and she was silently thanking God that she hadn't fallen on her face in front of him. Now she glanced admiringly around Vi's office and changed the subject by saying, "Your office is beautiful. I wouldn't have chosen red carpet for an office, but it's perfect in here."

"I like it," Vi said. "In fact, I chose it. Last time they remodeled these offices, we were between CEOs - actually, it was right before Joel was hired. Anyway, I made most of the decisions." She smiled at the memory. "I thought the big bosses in Chicago would boot me out as a lunatic when I said I wanted red carpet and chairs. Instead, their interior designer wrote it down and went on about her business. Before I knew it, the office looked like this. I never get tired of it." She stroked her polished mahogany desk affectionately.

"I'll try not to mess anything up," Tobi said. "I would hate for you to come back and find things out of order."

Vi shook her head. "Don't be silly. Look at you - you're neat as a pin. I know you'll take good care of everything. Well, come on, let's fire up the computer and get started."

She quickly introduced Tobi to the filing system, called up a few critical programs in the computer, and took Tobi down the hall to the copy room and break room. "Any questions?" she asked, pouring herself a cup of coffee.

"Yes. Did he really say I'm a bright little thing?"

Vi laughed. "Of course not. He said you're razor sharp and would have no trouble finding things for yourself. 'Bright little thing' is my translation."

Tobi smiled. "It does sound better coming from you."

"One more thing, our nurses are welcome in Joel's office any time. If he's on the phone or has someone with him, just tell them and they'll wait; otherwise they pop in and out at will. If anybody else, from the President of the United States down to the bum on the park bench, comes in wanting to see him, ask them to take a seat. Buzz him and tell him so-and-so would like to see him. If he can, he'll see them right away; otherwise, he'll make an appointment. He makes most of his own appointments, but he'll give them to you to keep up with. Remind him every morning what appointments he has that day. And for goodness' sake, check to make sure he doesn't double or triple schedule himself. Let's see...what have I left out?"

"Why do the nurses get special treatment?" asked Tobi. "Is he some kind of Don Juan?"

"Of course not, although they're probably all in love with him. It's a morale thing. Nurses are always getting caught in the middle of a power struggle. Doctors and patients both think of nurses as their own personal property and sometimes it's impossible to please both sides. I can't tell you how many times one of them has come in, weeping like her heart will break. Joel listens to them, soothes their hurt feelings, reminds them how important they are to the hospital, and sends them on their way smiling. Frankly, I fall in love with him every day and, if you don't watch out, you will too."

"Oh, I don't think so," said Tobi confidently. "He has a talent for making me furious every time we meet."

"I'm on my way, then," said Vi. "Call me at home if you have any questions today. Tomorrow I'll be off to Houston."

Tobi put a hand on Vi's shoulder. "Would you like me to be praying for you?" she asked.

Vi's face lighted up. "Would you? It would mean all the world to me."

"Okay. Consider it done," said Tobi.

"Thank you, Tobi. I'll be calling in a few days to let you know what the doctors say."

And then she was gone. Leaving Tobi alone with Joel.

Tobi went back into Vi's office, sat down in the swivel chair and took some deep breaths. Okay, check Joel's calendar first. An easy place to start.

She opened up the calendar on Vi's computer and sent a list of the day's activities to Joel's computer. "Thanks!" he called, and she called back, "You're welcome."

Vi had a "To Do" list arranged in order of priority and Tobi opened it next. Number One said, "Picnic posters." She didn't know what that meant, so she moved on to Number Two, letters Joel had dictated the preceding day, and began typing them.

She was on the second letter when the glass door flew open and a nervous-looking nurse with big spectacles and short brown hair rushed in. "Is he here?" she asked.

Tobi nodded, and the nurse disappeared into Joel's office. "Good morning, Bess," he said heartily. Then gently, "What's wrong?"

"Dr. Turkey Trot is on his way up here to tell you what an incompetent boob I am." She was close to tears. "At least, he's coming up after he finishes rounds. He sent me for a suture removal tray and there wasn't one in the supply room. I stopped at the patient's room to tell the doctor I would have to go find one, and he went wild. When I got back with a tray, he'd already found one somewhere, removed the patient's sutures, and was waiting to tell me he would get me fired if it was the last thing he ever did. Joel, I'm sorry it happened, but I don't have anything to do with keeping supplies on the floor. I don't know what I should have done different."

"Nothing. There's not one thing you should have done different. Who's in charge up there today?"

"Edith."

"What did she say?"

"That he couldn't fire me so don't worry about it. And that I should quit crying and get back to work."

"But you came down here instead?"

"When I couldn't stop crying, she said, 'Go tell Joel Turney's coming and then get back here. We have a full house today.' So here I am."

"Well, you go tell Edith I said thank you for letting me handle it. I haven't had an angry doctor in here in a long time, and I wouldn't want to lose my edge. A hot-tempered surgeon will just about make my day!"

"Thank you, Joel."

"You feeling okay now?"

"Much better." And Tobi could tell from her voice that Bess was in control again. She left with a shy, "Bye," to Tobi and a peaceful look on her face.

Five minutes later, a man of medium height, sporting a crew cut, strode in with the tails of his white lab coat flapping. His appearance was almost comical, but his manner was imperious. "Where's Vi?" he demanded.

"She's off, and I'm filling in for a few days. May I help you?"

"I'd like to see Mr. Trent."

"Sit down, please, and I'll check with him," Tobi said pleasantly. She buzzed Joel and he said, "Send the old humbug in." Trying not to smile, Tobi told the doctor to go right in.

Joel met him at the door. "Hey, Tom, I haven't seen you in a coon's age. Come on in. Listen, I've got this pain in my gut. It kind of moves around, comes and goes. What do you think it might be?"

"I don't know, but you come on down to O.R. any time, and I'll find it for you," said the doctor dryly.

"That's a surgeon for you - when in doubt, cut it out." The two retreated into Joel's office, but it was impossible not to hear their conversation. "What can I do for you today, Tom?"

"There's a nurse on the surgical floor that's a menace. I've been watching her. She never does anything right. Bess something or other. I really think the hospital would be better off without her, Joel."

"Bess Green. She's one of my best nurses. The way I heard the story you got upset because there wasn't a suture removal tray on the floor."

"Time is money. I can't be sitting around meditating on my navel because some nurse doesn't know where supplies are kept. I don't have that kind of time, Joel, and we doctors count on the hospital to hire competent nurses. We can't afford to spend half the morning in one patient's room."

"A pretty cantankerous patient, was it?"

"A pain in the..."

"Never mind," Joel interrupted. "I have a feeling you had to spend a few extra minutes with a patient you don't like and you took out your frustration on Bess. I can understand your being unhappy about that, but I have a problem with the way you treated my nurse. The hospital's policy is to treat our nurses with respect, and we expect our doctors to do the same. You know, I'm sure, that keeping supplies on the floor isn't Bess's job?"

"Probably not."

"So why didn't you talk to Edith about it?"

There was a rueful laugh. "Edith would have taken my head off."

"No doubt," Joel agreed. "Listen, Tom, I know it's asking a lot, but Bess really is a good nurse, and she's pretty tender-hearted. I'm afraid you may have crushed her spirit. Would you be willing to apologize to her and tell her you know it wasn't her fault?"

The doctor sighed heavily. "Now that you mention it, she did catch a bad order I wrote a couple of years ago. I had one patient confused with another in my mind at the moment, and she nailed it. It could have done the patient some real damage if she hadn't been on the ball." He sighed again. "I should have known better than to come here. Look, I'm already behind schedule, but here's what I can do. I'll order her some flowers and have them put the apology on the card. Will that do?"

"Doctor, you're a prince!" Joel exclaimed. "I can't thank you enough."

Dr. Turney came out of Joel's office and meekly asked Tobi if he could use her phone. When she smiled and nodded, he called the gift shop in the lobby and ordered a dozen red roses. He even dictated a fairly nice apology to Bess.

After he was gone, Joel stuck his head around the corner. "Quite a flowery apology for a surgeon," he grinned.

"Are surgeons different from other doctors?" Tobi asked.

"They're the *prima donnas* of the medical world. We can't live without 'em, but it can be very hard to live with them."

Tobi nodded and changed the subject. "You really care about these people, don't you?"

"You mean the nurses?"

"Yes, and Dr. Turney, too. He's not doing himself any favors by treating people like bugs who get in his path just so he can have the pleasure of squashing them."

Joel grinned. "Sure, I care about them. It's my job."

"I think it's more than just a job," said Tobi. "You haven't been going to a fluffy rah-rah church all your life, have you?"

He frowned. "Fluffy rah-rah church?"

She hid her smile. "That's my pet name for churches that major on feelings and minor on everything else."

"Oh." He looked irritated with this explanation. "So what does my church have to do with anything?" There was a hint of defensiveness in his voice, but he was trying to be pleasant.

Tobi shrugged. "Charismatic churches have a great gift for teaching people to love themselves. You must have learned the Christian virtue of caring about others somewhere else."

He sat down in one of the chairs in the reception area. "Why would you say a thing like that?"

Tobi shrugged. "From experience. I spent ten years in Charismatic churches, and it was one long lesson in how to get God to do what I wanted Him to do. I finally realized that manipulating God isn't Christianity, it's pagan superstition." She studied his serious face. "Do you disagree?"

"Yes, of course I disagree. There must be some people in every church with impure motives, but that doesn't mean there's something wrong with the church." He was looking at her as if, for the first time, he doubted *her* motives.

"Yes, but in the Charismatic church, selfishness is cultivated like an orchid. It can become the central focus without a person realizing they've taken their worship from Jesus and begun to direct it toward themselves."

He was shaking his head and frowning. "I just don't see it," he said.

"One day," Tobi said quietly, "back when I was married, I accidentally overheard my former husband Lyle and his girlfriend discussing my future. Lyle was telling her they should pray for me to die since he didn't have any grounds to divorce me. As far as I'm concerned, Lyle is the poster boy for the Charismatic movement."

Joel was nodding sympathetically, "Well, it would certainly be hard not to let a thing like that color your perceptions."

Before Tobi could tell him he was missing the point, the door opened and a round, little man with a bald head walked in. His genial face lighted up at the sight of Joel. "Joel. Good man! I was hoping I would find you in."

"Pastor, good morning!" Joel said, rising to shake hands. "Tobi, I'd like you to meet Rev. Emory Morel. Emory, this is Tobi Kirkland."

"Tobi, pleased to meet you!" the pastor said enthusiastically, reaching across the desk to pump her hand. Before Tobi could answer, he turned his attention back to Joel. "Listen, you probably already know that Mrs. Waterson is upstairs in Room 310. I was

hoping you would come help me pray her out of here. What about it? Do you have a few minutes?"

Joel consulted his watch. "A few. Maybe 15."

"Come on then. Time's a wastin'!" Rev. Morel was already through the door and holding it for Joel.

Joel smiled wryly at Tobi and followed his pastor into the hallway.

Tobi sat at her desk for a few moments concentrating. That funny little man reminded her of... She closed her eyes to let the picture in her mind take shape. "A rubber ball!" she suddenly said out loud. "Rev. Morel reminds me of a rubber ball."

Joel was back in thirty minutes. "I'm sorry we were interrupted," he said, "and I have to go now. I have a meeting. Any calls?"

"No, but I have a question," Tobi said. "The first item on Vi's to-do list is 'Picnic posters.' What does that mean?"

"Oh right! Thank you for reminding me. The hospital throws a picnic for all our employees and their families every May. Everyone has already been invited, but Vi was going to make about a dozen fliers to put up around the hospital as a reminder. Can you do that? They need to go up tomorrow."

"No problem," said Tobi. "When and where?"

"Sunday afternoon from 1:00 to 5:00 in Willowdale Park. Listen, I hope you'll come, and you can bring a guest if you want to. Leave the fliers on my desk when you get through and I'll have them put up."

"I'll do that next," Tobi said.

"And I'll be out of the office until the middle of the afternoon. Go to lunch whenever you want to. Did Vi give you a key so you can lock up?"

"Yes, at least, she told me where to find one in her desk." Tobi opened the middle drawer and located the key.

"If you have any questions, I'll answer them this afternoon. And there are people everywhere in case you need something - I should have introduced you around. I'm sorry I didn't do that."

"Never mind. I can introduce myself. Don't worry about me."

"Of course you can. Thanks, Tobi."

He smiled and started to leave, but Tobi stopped him. "Joel."

"Yes?"

"I never thanked you for rescuing me from that rattlesnake Sunday. In fact, the way I was acting, it would have served me right if you'd tossed me *into* a snake pit."

He laughed. "A similar thought did occur to me at one point."

She smiled. "Anyway - you were very gallant and I appreciate it. I also apologize for being such a brat that day. Not to mention Saturday and Monday."

"You're welcome for the rescue - in fact, it was my pleasure. And I accept your apology although it's not necessary."

"Thank you."

He smiled into her eyes with such a tender expression on his face that her heart went into double time again. Then he was gone.

Tobi collapsed like a marionette whose strings have been cut. "I won't fall for him. I won't. I won't. I won't. I can't. I mustn't," she chanted to herself. "I won't let myself. I can't let myself." Then she buried her head in her arms on the desk and whispered so softly that even she couldn't hear herself, "But, Lord, he has got to be the most incredible man You ever made."

Making the fliers for the picnic was fun. Tobi found a picture of a willow tree in a file marked "Graphics." She centered it in the middle of a page with a title at the top and the pertinent information underneath. In the copy room there were packages of colored paper. She chose green and ran off 12 fliers.

Joel's office was similar to Vi's with red carpet, a couple of armchairs upholstered in red, and a polished mahogany desk. Tobi set the fliers on his desk and looked around. Two diplomas on the wall proclaimed that Joel had received a bachelor's degree in Journalism and a master's in Business Administration.

Under the diplomas was a framed certificate naming Joel "Coach of the Year" by his soccer team. Each player had signed it and she quickly located Davy's familiar, seven-year-old scrawl. Still reading names, Tobi took a few steps backward and bumped into Joel's big desk chair. So she sat down to test it. It was too high for her, but it was comfortable with a tilt lock that held her in a semi-reclining position. She could get used to this.

On the wall directly across from Joel's desk was an oil painting of a rustic windmill in a fenced pasture full of bluebonnets. Tobi's lips formed into a silent "Oh." It was beautiful! She leaned back in Joel's chair, studied the picture and wondered if it

belonged to him or the hospital. Maybe...just maybe...he loved the wide-open spaces of West Texas as much she did.

The jangle of the telephone startled Tobi to attention. She leaped up guiltily and dashed into Vi's office to take the call. It was Kent. Hugh was to be buried tomorrow with only a grave side ceremony. Kent was leaving for Foxhole in a few hours - as soon as the paper went to press - to be with his Mom that evening and the next day. He would return to Deepwater after the funeral.

Ben called next. A friend of his would lend him a small airplane and pilot to take him to the funeral tomorrow. Ben wanted Tobi to go too. They would ask some questions while they were there and see if they could turn up any leads. He would be seeing Joel at lunch and would arrange for Tobi to be off tomorrow if she agreed.

Tobi swallowed hard. Flying was not her favorite pastime. Especially on small air craft. But Ben was right; she should be there, so she told him she would go. They made plans to leave early the next morning.

It was nearly 3:00 before Joel returned. Tobi had completed Vi's "To Do" list an hour before and was getting restless. "There must be something you need me to do besides sit here waiting for the phone to ring," she said as soon as he walked through the door.

"Well, Vi always has reports to compile and graph, but she's done the ones that were urgent. The rest can wait for her unless you really want to work on them. Did she show you where they are?"

Tobi nodded. "I think so." She opened a drawer and began examining files.

"You'll have to study old reports on the computer and figure out how she does it," Joel said, looking skeptical. "Are you sure you want the bother?"

Tobi looked up with a grateful expression on her face. "Yes! This day is never going to end unless I have something to do." She pulled out a file and opened it, then realized he was still watching her. "If you're afraid I'll mess something up, just tell me, and I'll put it back," she said meekly. "There are usually ten things to do at once in the news room and I'm having trouble adjusting to the pace here."

"Of course you won't mess anything up. I was just admiring your initiative," he said. "Listen, I don't know how good you are with graphs but, if you need some help, dial 0 and talk to Faye. She worked in every office in the hospital before she 'retired' and became our operator. She can probably tell you anything you need to know."

Tobi looked thoughtful. "How do you know so much about Faye?"

Joel shrugged. "Part of the job. People are my most valuable resource. I would be pretty foolish not to find out what treasures are lurking in all the nooks and crannies of the hospital."

"You probably listen to everybody from the cleaning ladies to the surgeons when they have something to say."

"As a matter of fact, the folks who work directly with patients are the first ones to pinpoint a problem. And about half the time, the one who notices the problem also has the best solution." He cocked his head. "Why do I get the impression I'm being interviewed for a newspaper article?"

Tobi smiled and returned to her work. "I guess old habits die hard. Thanks for the tip about Faye. I'll probably be calling her."

She only called Faye twice in the next hour and a half, and the time flew. She had finished one report and was amazed when she looked at her watch and saw that it was 4:45. This was fun!

She was trying to decide whether to start another project or save it for another day when the door to the hall opened. She looked up with a smile to see a strikingly beautiful woman glaring at her. The woman had platinum blond hair, a flawless complexion and a scowl that would knock ten years off a troll's life. "Where's Vi?" she demanded.

"She'll be off for a week or so, and I'm filling in. May I help you?" Tobi asked.

"Yes, I'm Rachel Hudson, Joel's ex-wife. You'll have to announce me, of course, since I'm not a nurse."

Tobi reached for the phone, but Joel called, "Come on in, Rachel."

Leaving an expensive fragrance in her wake, Rachel disappeared into Joel's office.

"What are you doing at the hospital?" Joel asked in a monotone. Tobi looked up in surprise. She had never heard him sound so unfriendly.

"Visiting Mrs. Waterson. I hope you've been up to see her."

"What do you need?"

"I *need* to talk to you about your daughter."

His voice returned to normal. "Which one? Is something wrong?"

"Gloria. She'll turn 16 next week, you know."

"I know. What about it?"

"Well, she'll be able to drive then. I want to know if you intend to buy her a car."

"No."

"She is your daughter, Joel. You do bear some responsibility for the extra expenses she incurs." Rachel's soft, musical voice had taken on a whiny tone.

"Rachel, I've had this discussion before with you and with Gloria. When she gets a job and is prepared to help pay for the car and its expenses, then I'll discuss it. Otherwise, please don't bring it up again."

"In other words, the whole burden falls on Paul and me. I might have known it was useless to come here." The whine had taken over Rachel's voice.

"If you and Paul choose to buy her a car, there's nothing I can do about it, but I think it's foolish." Joel's voice sounded tired.

"Of course! You sit around in your ivory tower all day feeling important. I'm the one who has to take the girls everywhere they go. If Gloria had a car, I could do something with my life besides chauffeur teenagers."

"The girls are welcome to come live with me anytime," Joel said. "I'll see that they have a ride wherever they need to go."

"Wouldn't you just love that?" Rachel said haughtily. And before Tobi realized it, she had sailed through the reception area and out the door into the hall, disappearing as suddenly as she had appeared.

Absolute silence followed. Tobi waited for Joel to say something. Or move around. Or rustle papers. But the silence from his office was deafening.

Finally, she went and looked in. "Are you all right?"

He nodded wearily. "We couldn't agree about anything when we were married. I don't know why I should expect it to be different now." He looked at her questioningly. "Do you think I'm wrong?"

"No. I think you're very wise."

He looked surprised at this high praise from her. "Thank you." Then he changed the subject. "Ben told me about your plans for tomorrow. You'll be back Friday, won't you?"

"If the plane doesn't fall out of the sky," she said darkly.

Joel laughed. "You don't like flying?"

"It's not one of my favorite things, but I'll survive. I am sorry about missing tomorrow. I know you were counting on me."

"Never mind. It can't be helped." His eyes were on the window and Tobi guessed that his thoughts had returned to Rachel's visit. And Gloria's desire for a car.

"Goodbye, Joel. I'll see you Friday."

"Okay, Tobi. Thanks for everything."

That night Tobi turned to Psalm 18 again and paused a long time at verse 33, "He maketh my feet like hinds' feet, and setteth me upon my high places."

"Upon my high places," she repeated softly, thinking of the airplane she had watched on Monday afternoon and the way it had challenged her to learn to soar

herself. But it was one thing to think of soaring into high places in a spiritual sense. The idea of being upon high places in an actual airplane was another matter altogether.

And so, when she knelt beside her bed, the first prayer on her lips was, "Lord, please don't let that airplane fall out of the sky tomorrow. And be with Audrey Mansett and Kent as they bury Hugh; comfort their hearts in this time of grief.

"I pray for Vi, too, as she goes to Houston. Grant her a safe trip and give the doctors in Houston wisdom to help her.

"And then, there's Joel. Lord, You know I don't want to fall in love with another flaky holy roller, but he's the most exciting man I ever met. Please help me to see all his flaws - lots of flaws. I need to see lots and lots and lots of flaws.

"And what about Kent? I was planning on falling in love with Kent, so why am I letting my emotions get carried away with Joel? Lord, I need Your help. Please keep me in the center of Your will.

"I love You with all my heart and thank You for being the Majestic Creator of the universe and my Heavenly Daddy, all at the same time. In Jesus' name. Amen."

Chapter 7

Thursday: Hugh's Funeral

Thursday was overcast and threatening rain - appropriate weather for burying Hugh Mansett. Tobi peered out the window next to her seat in the small aircraft, trying to see the patchwork earth far below, but the clouds were too thick.

She settled back in her seat and smoothed the somber, brown crepe dress she had chosen. Normally, she considered wearing dark clothes to funerals a relic of her grandmother's generation, but in this case, it had seemed wise. Since she had been framed for this man's murder, she didn't want anyone to think her dress indicated she was happy about the occasion.

She moved restlessly in her seat, then smiled. The drone of the airplane was annoying - the only thing worse would be if it stopped droning. And crashed.

"What are you smiling at?" Ben asked. "I thought you hated airplanes."

"I was just thinking what an aggravating... splendid... racket that engine makes," Tobi said.

Ben nodded, obviously understanding her feelings. "Reuben Garza's wife called me yesterday," he said.

"About what?"

"Reuben wasn't home Sunday morning when she returned from mass. At first, she claimed he was there, but her conscience bothered her and she confessed to her priest. The priest said she should call the police and tell the truth. So she did."

"Does she think Reuben might have killed Hugh?"

"Not at all. She says Reuben wouldn't hurt a fly and that's why she could afford to tell me the truth. She's certain he had nothing to do with the murder."

Tobi thought about Reuben. "I'm inclined to agree with her. But where was he?"

"She doesn't know and he won't tell her. She's pretty hot that he's keeping secrets from her. She assured me she would find out where he was and let me know. I'll check it out, but I'm guessing she'll find out long before I begin to sniff out his trail."

Tobi grinned. "Probably. Everything he does is so methodical and tedious, she'll worm it out of him before he knows what hit him."

Ben nodded and changed the subject. "We need a strategy for today. Our time is limited, but there's a fair possibility the murderer will be at the funeral, so we have to maximize our efforts."

Tobi shivered. "I hadn't thought about it like that - I thought we were looking for clues to the killer, not the killer himself."

"That's possible. But it's also possible that the killer is so close to the family that he couldn't stay away without looking conspicuous."

"So what's our strategy?" asked Tobi. "I never tried to solve a murder. Who should I talk to, and what questions should I ask?"

"I've been mulling that over most of the night," said Ben. "Our most important contact will be Mrs. Mansett, but I don't want Kent to be there while she's questioned. So here's what I need you to do. Ask Kent to help you question some of the people from the *Gazette*. While he's with you, I'll talk to his mother."

"Why don't you want Kent to be there when you talk to Audrey?"

"There's no way of knowing what she has to say. She might hold things back because she doesn't want Kent to know them, or she doesn't want Kent to know she told me. I'm likely to get more information if I speak to her alone than if I speak to her with anyone else present."

Tobi nodded. "Okay, tell me what to do and what to ask."

"The big question," Ben explained, "is whether someone hated Hugh. Or whether anyone wanted revenge for something Hugh did to them. And you have to keep in mind that the murderer stole your gun. It seems to me that our man has to be someone you know."

Tobi shivered again. "I don't care for this police business. Do you think there's any danger?"

"Not at the funeral," said Ben. "But you might want to come stay with us until this thing is solved. It does make me nervous for you to be alone at night, because your gun at the scene connects you to the killer."

"What about you and DeeDee and the kids? If I'm there, won't all of you be in danger? I could stay at a motel."

"That's not much better than being home alone. We'll be okay, but don't tell anyone where you're going to be. Except Joel - he might need to know."

"You don't consider him a suspect, at all?"

"Do you?"

Tobi wrinkled her forehead. "It's hard to imagine, but he didn't like Hugh. And he has a major animosity toward the media."

"Actually, his motive is as good as anybody else's in this lousy case. And I don't know him well enough to guess whether he's capable of murder. Keep an eye on him while you're working at the hospital - see if he ever explodes. But I can't put him very high on my list because his association with Hugh is buried too deep in the past."

"Unless there's something we don't know," Tobi said.

Ben nodded. "You're right there. If he had a current motive and he killed Mansett, he wouldn't be likely to tell us. I guess I should check him out a little better - but don't tell DeeDee I said so. Do you have any more questions or suggestions?"

"No, but I think I'll write a few questions down just in case I go blank," said Tobi. "It's easier for me to pry into other people's business if I already know what I'm going to ask."

By the time Tobi had written some questions into the reporter's notebook she always carried, the hour and a half of the flight had passed and the pilot was circling over Foxhole. Ben rented a car and they stopped for lunch on the way to the 2:00 p.m. funeral.

Tobi could scarcely eat. The thought of appearing to be a threat to a murderer - or of missing the clue that might unlock the case - took away her appetite completely. Ben, however, ate heartily and seemed to be looking forward to the afternoon's adventure. His last instructions to her as they walked toward the grave site were, "If you run across anybody the least bit suspicious, find out where they were Sunday morning at 9:00. And write it down - whatever you do, don't forget who was where when."

"Who, when, where," Tobi repeated. "I'll just pretend I'm working on a story."

Ben gave her a thumb's up sign, as Kent came to greet them. He wrapped his arms around Tobi and she asked, "Are you okay?"

"I'll be better when it's over." He released her and smiled sadly into her eyes.

"And Audrey?"

He shook his head. "She looks like the gentlest zephyr could knock her over. Come on. We'd better get back to her and make sure she's still on her feet."

"Wait, Kent." Tobi caught his arm. "After this is over, will you help me ask some questions around? Ben is going to talk to your Mom, but he thought you might know who to *interrogate* from the paper."

"Sure. I'll keep my eyes open and see which shady characters show up. Come on now. Mom's anxious to see you."

Audrey Mansett was waiting for them under the canvas shelter that had been erected over the grave. Although she looked frail, she still had the poise of a woman who is accustomed to wealth. And her dark eyes were kind and attentive to everyone

around her. Tobi had always admired the fact that her social status had never diminished the graciousness of her character.

"Tobi!" Audrey greeted her with open arms and embraced her warmly. "Thank you for coming. Kent has caught me up on your life since you left Foxhole. I'm so sorry that you got entangled in this horrible murder. I know, of course, that you had nothing to do with it."

"Thank you." Tobi smiled in relief. "And I'm so sorry for your loss."

Audrey nodded. "Of course you are. What a dreadful thing that a man can be shot down in the street in cold blood, and then the murderer can drive merrily off as if nothing had happened." She shuddered and Kent put an arm around her shoulders.

"It's almost over, Mom," he said. "And I'm sure Ben will bring the killer to justice, so don't you worry about that."

"I just hope he does it before someone else has to die," Audrey said.

An usher came then to escort Audrey and Kent to their seats in front of the casket. Kent caught Tobi's hand and led her along, too. She soon found herself seated with the family of Hugh Mansett, listening to a minister who was trying in vain to think of something nice to say about the deceased.

Tobi was too distressed to concentrate on the service. Besides, she had come to solve a mystery, not to cry over Hugh Mansett's passing. Just as well, she noted with surprise, because no one else was crying over him either. Not even Audrey. Trying to be inconspicuous, she glanced around, looking for a trickle of tears on somebody's face. She couldn't find so much as one person holding a tissue, much less crying.

Audrey was staring straight at the minister, presumably caught up in his words. But, in spite of her black attire, she didn't have the bearing of a new widow in mourning. And under the black veil of her black hat, her shadowy face looked composed. Tobi frowned. She had expected that Audrey, at least, would be sorry Hugh was dead. How sad for a man to die and leave no one to mourn his passing.

Kent was gazing beyond the minister, almost like a man in a trance. "He's just waiting for this thing to be over so he can go on with his life," Tobi realized. "Audrey, too." For the first time since she met him, she felt a pang of sympathy for Hugh Mansett and wondered what had turned him into a *man that nobody loved*. "The Man That Nobody Loved." It could be the title of a movie. A tragedy. That's what Hugh Mansett's life was, a tragedy.

A tear rolled down Tobi's cheek. She had never once told Hugh about Jesus. Never offered him the opportunity to know there was a better way to live. Never mentioned that a Savior had come to the Earth to rescue him from his sins and prepare him for eternal life in Heaven. Because he was loud and ugly and obnoxious, she had recoiled from him. And failed her Lord.

So, the brief service passed without a tear falling, except the penitent tears Tobi shed for a lost opportunity. And a lost soul.

After the final prayer, it took only a few minutes for the dozen people attending from the community to offer their condolences and dissipate. Ben spoke briefly to Kent to make sure Audrey was emotionally able to answer some questions.

Kent nodded and took him to Audrey. "Mom, this is Tobi's brother-in-law Ben Walling. He's chief homicide detective for the police department in Deepwater. I know this isn't great timing, but they'll be heading home soon. Could he ask you some questions?"

"Yes, please," Audrey responded eagerly. "I've wanted to talk to you. If there's any way I can help get that killer off the streets, I want to do it as soon as possible."

Kent kissed her cheek. "I asked Tye Ringener and Mike Temple to hang around so Tobi and I could talk to them. They're the only ones who turned up from the *Gazette*. We'll be nearby if you need us."

"Don't you worry about me," Audrey said. "I'm sure Tobi's brother-in-law will take good care of me."

"How do we do this?" Kent asked as he and Tobi approached Tye and Mike. "Shall we talk to them together or divide and conquer?"

Remembering what Ben had said on the plane about questioning Audrey alone, Tobi whispered, "You take Ringener and I'll take Mike. Big shots make me nervous and, besides, I already feel comfortable with Mike after our conversation on the phone."

So Kent walked with Tye toward the street where the cars were parked while Tobi greeted Mike. "I'm thrilled to meet you," Mike said. "The story you wrote us was a beauty. The issue sold out all over town yesterday. But I never would have guessed the writer was also a beauty to look at."

Tobi blushed. "Thank you. And I'm pleased to meet you too. You were very helpful so I'm glad to have an opportunity to thank you in person."

"Glad to help. And listen. I've been doing some digging since I talked to you Tuesday. I can't wait to tell you what I've learned."

Tobi's eyes widened. "Do you know who killed Hugh?"

"Not exactly, but there's someone else who had a motive. I'll tell you all about it, but let's wait for Kent. He's not going to get anything out of Tye."

Sure enough, within a few minutes Tye's car roared off, and Kent joined Tobi and Mike. "What did he say?" Mike asked.

"Nothing. Hugh was a good ole' boy. Who would want to kill such a fine upstanding citizen? Etc."

"He knows," Mike said. "He probably knows more than I do, but let me tell you about it. In February a local girl was killed in New Orleans and apparently the case is going to go unsolved because a state senator is involved."

"Who was she?" asked Tobi.

"Missy Sheridan. She was a beauty queen - one of the most beautiful girls ever to come out of Foxhole. But her family was poor - a struggling single mother with two younger children. No help from the father. Actually, no one seems to know who the father is, and the mother doesn't say. But Missy was smart. She could have gotten a scholarship, gone to college and done well with her life. Even helped her younger brother and sister.

"Instead, she moved to Austin as soon as she graduated from high school and began working in the office of Senator Nelson Kirby. Kirby is from here and apparently had met Missy and told her she had a job in Austin anytime she wanted it.

"In February, Missy went with an unknown young man to Mardi Gras. While she was there, she was murdered. It was a drive-by shooting. One bullet through the head. The young man disappeared and no one seems to know who he was."

"Who killed her?" asked Kent.

"That's the \$64,000 question. After the murder, it came to light that both the senator and one of his aides were having an affair with Missy. So it looks like either the senator, the aide or the young man traveling with her killed her, but which? And why?"

"When it was obvious the case was no longer making progress, Hugh got on his high horse and decided he was going to be the one to solve it. It was going to be the climax of his career. He would ride into Austin on his white charger, question the senator and the aide, discover the guilty party, and show the world what a great journalist he was."

"I never heard about any of this," Kent said. "What did he find out?"

"Nobody knows. After two weeks he came back to Foxhole and went back to work without a word about his investigation. In fact, while he was gone, I thought he was on vacation. I didn't know he had been to Austin and New Orleans until I began digging around yesterday."

"I don't understand," said Tobi. "Did he discover some evidence or not?"

"If he had, he would have told the world," Kent said.

"Maybe, unless he was threatened," said Mike. "I have a feeling he was getting too close to the dirt in Austin and someone convinced him it was to his own benefit to

keep his mouth shut. I don't know any other reason why he would have dropped the story completely."

"Where did you get your information?" Tobi asked.

"I can't say," said Mike apologetically. "And to tell you the truth, I'd just as soon my name didn't come up either. I don't want to mess with anybody who has enough clout to shut up Hugh Mansett."

"Tye Ringener knows, doesn't he?" Kent guessed.

"I'm betting he was the one who told Hugh to drop the case. And I'm starting to think Missy's case was the real reason the paper wanted to get rid of Hugh. It was while he was in Austin that we started hearing what a detriment he was to the *Gazette*. Tye could have been threatened."

"Still..." Tobi's forehead was creased in a deep frown. "I don't know anyone in Austin. How did my gun get to the scene of the crime if some state senator had Hugh killed?"

"I thought about that," said Mike, "so I talked to the folks at the *Gazette* who were here two years ago. They all remember that you had an argument with Hugh and he fired you. Cinda in production said somebody asked her about it a couple of months ago, but she can't remember who. Or how the subject came up."

"So it's possible that someone from the senator's office was snooping around Foxhole, trying to learn who might have had a motive to kill Hugh," said Kent thoughtfully.

"And they chose to pick on me?!" asked Tobi incredulously. "Because of one little fight."

"Not necessarily," said Mike. "Maybe they broke into the homes of everyone who had fought with Hugh and at your house, they found a gun, so they framed you."

"Can you check into that?" asked Kent.

"I'll go through the police reports," Mike promised.

"Will you give us a call, even if you don't find anything?" asked Tobi.

He smiled sympathetically at her. "Be glad to. Any more questions?"

Tobi and Kent both shook their heads.

"Then I'm off," Mike said. "Good luck."

"Thanks." Tobi tried to sound brave, but she was beginning to feel desperate. What if some hit man, hired in Austin, had killed Hugh and vanished without a trace? Would she be accused and brought to trial? Was it possible that she could actually be convicted?

"Are you okay?" Kent was watching her with a worried look.

"No, but I'll survive. I think. Are you driving back to Deepwater tonight?"

"If Mom seems all right. And I think she does, don't you?"

"Yes. I think she's amazing!"

"It looks like she and Ben are through talking. That's good. I've got a long drive ahead of me." Kent took her hand and they went to meet Ben.

"How long is it?" Tobi asked.

"Between five and six hours. If I get away by 6:00, I'll be there before midnight."

"I wish you could fly with us," said Tobi wistfully. "We'll be home in a couple of hours and you'll still have that long drive ahead of you."

"It's okay. I love driving." He kissed her hair as Ben and Audrey Mansett joined them.

"If we head out now, we'll be home for supper," Ben said. "I'm hungry just thinking about it. What about you, Tob? Are you ready to go?"

"Yes, I'll be glad when this day is over," Tobi admitted.

"I'll call you tomorrow," Kent told her with another quick hug.

"If you can't get me at home, call Ben and DeeDee's. I may stay there until this murder is solved."

"Really?" Kent frowned at Ben. "Is there some danger?"

"Probably not," Ben said reassuringly, "but we didn't know whether we might stir something up today. Besides, Tobi is obviously connected to the murderer in some way since her gun was used. I'll feel safer if she's with us, and so will DeeDee."

Kent nodded in agreement. "I see your point. Take care. Both of you."

Goodbyes were exchanged, and Ben and Tobi were airborne again in 30 minutes. "Did you learn anything?" Ben asked.

Tobi recounted Mike's story about Missy Sheridan. To her surprise, he wasn't surprised. "Do you already know this?" she asked.

"Yes, and more. Audrey filled me in. Mike's right about Tye being the one who shut Hugh up. In the first place, Hugh wasn't learning anything. But he was rattling some skeletons. Someone called Ringener - Audrey doesn't know who - and told him to get

Hugh off the case or else. Ringener called Hugh in Austin and told him to get back to Foxhole or else. They had words that made it impossible for them to work together any longer. Hugh came back, but he began to look for another position immediately."

"Does that make Tye a suspect? Or Senator Kirby?"

"Possibly. I'll call the Foxhole PD tomorrow and ask them to check out Ringener, see if they can find out where he was Sunday morning at 9:00. As for Kirby, he wouldn't have done it himself and our chances of stumbling across his hit man are pretty slim. But I'll still call Austin PD and see if they've can give us any help."

Tobi sighed. "I hope it wasn't Kirby. If it was, we'll never know, and it'll look like I'm guilty. What about Audrey? Who does she think killed Hugh?"

Ben grinned. "The first thing she said to me was, 'I'm your best suspect.' "

"What did she mean by that?"

"She never wanted to move to Deepwater. Never had any intention of going. She'd had all she could take of Hugh, and this job change seemed like the natural time to let him go his way while she went hers."

"I didn't think she looked very sad at the funeral," Tobi said.

"Nobody looked very sad," agreed Ben. "They just looked bored."

"But how does that make her a good suspect? He was leaving and she was going to be rid of him."

"He was threatening to get some high-powered lawyers who would win a big settlement for him from her first husband's estate. Not that he cared so much about the money, but he wanted her to stay with him and he didn't have any other leverage."

"Could his lawyers really have won the case?"

"Maybe."

"Even if they could, I don't believe Audrey would kill anybody over money, especially since she has so much."

"She doesn't have a good alibi. I think that's why she feels like a suspect. She was home with the phone turned off. She was expecting Hugh to call and didn't want to talk to him. She didn't know he had been murdered until Kent drove over from Dallas and told her."

"Well, I think she's a lousy suspect," Tobi said sternly. "There's no way I could imagine her murdering anyone."

"Yep, Kent's a much better suspect," said Ben with a sly look.

"Kent! Kent's not a suspect, is he?" gasped Tobi.

"He was. But his alibi cleared him. I talked to the relatives he spent the weekend with. They woke him just before noon Sunday at Clover Lake. He couldn't have made that trip in under three hours unless he flew and he didn't. I checked with the airlines."

Tobi relaxed. "Good. What else did Audrey say?"

"Well, Audrey's family never liked Hugh, so they never came around him. When she wanted to see them, she went to one of their homes. Hugh didn't get along with his family, either. He and one of his brothers, Ralph Mansett, were particularly hostile to each other, but Audrey doesn't know of any reason why he would suddenly kill Hugh. They've been avoiding each other the last few years."

"Was Ralph at the funeral?"

"Yes, he was sitting behind Audrey and Kent. He scowled at everybody all the way through the service and disappeared as soon as it ended."

"Where does he live?"

"In Austin."

"Austin?" Tobi perked up. "Really? Maybe Hugh called him up while he was there and they fought. Maybe Ralph killed him."

"I'm going to check on it," Ben promised.

"Oh..." Tobi's face fell.

"What?"

"He couldn't have done it. How would he get my gun?"

"I'll check on it anyway," said Ben.

Tobi patted his hand and settled back in her seat. "You're a good man, Ben Walling. I'm glad my sister had the good sense to marry you."

"So am I. And speaking of your sister, I hope you're ready for a third degree tonight. She's ready to marry you off to Joel Trent."

"Hmph. Why can't she be ready to marry me off to Kent Grantham?"

Ben laughed. "Because *she* chose Joel."

Sure enough, DeeDee wanted to hear only the sketchiest details about Hugh Mansett's funeral and the possible suspects who had attended before she turned the conversation to Joel. "What do you think about him now that you've worked for him a day?" she asked eagerly.

"DeeDee! I've been framed in a murder case. Don't you even care whether I'm going to be tried and convicted and hung on the gallows?" Tobi asked indignantly.

"Aw come on, we wouldn't hang you on the gallows!" Ben corrected. "This is the 21st century. The worst thing we might do to you would be to fry you in the electric chair."

DeeDee glowered at her husband and said to Tobi, "Don't be silly. Ben knows you didn't do it, and he won't let them arrest you. Now tell me about Joel."

"Tell me too," Alison chimed in. "I think he's dreamy."

"Come on, buddy," Ben said to Davy. "Let's go throw some balls around while they try to marry your aunt off."

"Is Tobi going to marry Coach Trent?" Davy asked.

"No!" Tobi said emphatically.

"Maybe," said Alison.

"You can bet your life on it," said DeeDee.

Davy looked confused, and Ben lifted him to his shoulders. "Forget it, son. You can't figure women out, so don't try."

"But I want Coach Trent for an uncle," Davy wailed. "Why can't Tobi marry him?"

"Yeah, Ben, why can't Tobi marry him?" Tobi asked.

"I'll put my money on my wife," said Ben, winking at DeeDee. "If she says you're going to marry Trent, then you probably are."

"Oh, get lost." Tobi dismissed them with a wave of her hand and turned to Alison.

"So how do you know Joel?"

"His daughter Gloria is in some of my classes and she introduced me to him once. Plus I've seen him at Davy's soccer games."

"Why do you think he's dreamy?"

Alison shivered. "He's handsome and strong. And he never treats me like a kid; he treats me like a regular person. Davy and his soccer team, too. He treats everybody the same. That's what I like best about him."

"I like that, too," Tobi agreed.

"Aha! You do like him!" DeeDee cried.

"If you must know," Tobi admitted reluctantly, "I find it very hard not to feel infatuated with him. But infatuation is just a surface feeling. It's no indication that we'll ever have a permanent relationship."

"Oh, don't be so cool and scientific," DeeDee scolded. "He's hot and you know it, so admit it."

"Okay. He's hot and I know it! BUT...he goes to that fluffy rah-rah church. I don't want to have anything to do with him unless he gets delivered from that bondage.

"Anyway," Tobi turned to Alison, "wait until you meet Kent. He is the handsomest man I've ever seen. He makes movie stars look dull! Plus, he's rich and he's crazy about me."

"So what are you waiting for? Why don't you marry him?" Alison asked.

"Well, I only found out last week that he was born again. Besides, you two vultures, as I told Kent, I'm not going to get involved with *anybody* until this murder is solved."

"Really?" DeeDee looked thoughtful. "Well, I guess I'll just have to talk to Ben about that."

"DeeDee, you leave Ben alone. He's already doing his best to figure this thing out. And it's not going to help if you start nagging at him from the side lines."

"Nagging! Hmph. I don't nag," DeeDee snorted. "Anyway, I better get supper on the table before everybody starves. Go ahead and put your suitcase in Davy's room, sis."

"Okay, but I hate to push him out of his space."

"Don't worry about him. He'd rather camp out in the living room any day. Besides, he figures you hung the moon, so it's an honor to have you sleeping in his bed. What about that dawg? What did you do with that flea-bitten thing?"

"Jasper doesn't have any fleas, thank you," Tobi answered. "And I don't know where he got off to. I better go find him."

She took her overnight bag to Davy's room and set it on the neatly made bunk bed. DeeDee must have changed the sheets and made the bed; when Davy did it, it had a distinctly rumpled appearance.

Tobi looked around the little bedroom that was to be home for a while. It was obviously a boy's room. Assorted trucks, building blocks and sports gear spilled out of the toy box and the closet. The bedspread was decorated with baseballs, footballs, and basketballs. A Dallas Cowboy pennant and a photograph of the football team were neatly tacked above the bureau. Tobi shook her head. It wasn't exactly her dream bedroom.

She was about to turn out the light and leave when she noticed the picture on Davy's little night stand. It was a picture of Tobi and Davy, taken by a photographer who had set up at a local department store. They had been shopping for a Mother's Day present for DeeDee the previous year and Davy insisted that a picture of them together would be the perfect present.

Tobi picked up the framed photograph and smiled affectionately at the little towhead who won her heart every time she saw him. "Did you want this picture for yourself or for your Mom?" she asked Davy's smiling image.

The little sweetheart. He kept a picture of the two of them together on the night stand by his bed. She turned out the light and left Davy's room feeling warm and wanted.

Remembering her conversation with DeeDee, she went in search of Jasper. He was nowhere to be found until she went outside and found Ben and Davy throwing balls for the puppy. "See, he loves balls!" Davy called.

"And Davy loves Jasper," said Ben.

"That's right. Can he sleep with me tonight?" Davy begged.

"Maybe for a little while. We'll have to see," Tobi said.

But when Davy's bedtime came, he and Jasper both invaded Tobi's space. She was stretched out on Davy's bed reading when the boy and the puppy came in. "I'm all ready for bed," Davy told her.

"Did you brush your teeth."

"Yep. Every single one of them," he said baring his teeth for inspection.

"Very good. So are you and Jasper going to bed now? I'll come get Jasper later and put him in his box."

"Would you tell us a Bible story first? I want to hear one I never heard before."

"Okay. Well, ya'll climb on up and let me see if I can think of one you don't know. You probably already know about David and Goliath and Samson and Noah and Jonah, don't you?"

"Yep."

"Adam and Eve?"

"Yep."

"And you know about Moses leading the children of Israel out of Egypt?"

"Yes. I've known all those for a long time."

"Okay, I'm going to tell you about the Tabernacle."

"What's the Tabernacle?"

"It was kind of a tent like place that the children of Israel carried around with them in the wilderness. It was a little bit like a church because that's where they went to worship God.

"The thing you should remember about the Tabernacle was that it looked plain and ugly from the outside. It was covered with animal skins and, if you came up to it in the wilderness, you probably wouldn't pay much attention to it. But on the inside, there were beautiful gold furnishings and linen drapes of blue and purple and scarlet. The most wonderful thing in the Tabernacle was the Ark of the Covenant. It was a gold box.

The lid was called the Mercy Seat and on each end was a beautiful gold angel. The Ark of the Covenant was so holy that, if a man touched it, he could die instantly."

Davy's eyes widened. "How did they move it if it killed everybody that touched it?"

"It was built with four gold rings - one in each corner. And there were two gold poles that went through the rings. The poles were supposed to stay in the rings all the time and the priests used them to carry the Ark."

Hugging Jasper with both arms, Davy listened spell bound. "Can we go see the Ark some day?" he asked.

"I wish we could, but it's gone, Davy. It was made thousands of years ago and nobody knows what happened to it. But I want you to do something for me. I want you to think about the Tabernacle whenever you meet somebody new. The Tabernacle wasn't very pretty on the outside - all the gold was inside. People can be just like that - not so pretty on the outside, but pure gold inside."

Davy wrinkled his nose. "I thought everybody was blood and guts on the inside."

Tobi laughed. "That's not what I mean. I'm talking about character and personality. Lots of movie and television stars look beautiful, but they act like spoiled brats. And regular people usually look kind of plain, but if they're kind and gentle and loving, then they're beautiful on the inside, and that's what counts."

"Oh." A light seemed to be dawning somewhere within Davy. "So you want to know what Coach Trent looks like on the inside before you decide to marry him?"

Tobi laughed. "This family has a one-track mind. But you're right. I surely would like to know exactly what he's like on the inside. Kent too." A light suddenly dawned in *her* mind. "And that gives me an idea how you can help me out, Davy."

"Help you out! How?"

"Well, someday I'd like to marry a fine prince who will ride up on a white horse and slay all my dragons."

"There's no such thing as dragons!" Davy protested.

"No, but there's something worse. Bugs!"

Davy grinned. "You don't like bugs, do you?"

"No, I don't. And I would love to find a man who will protect me from all the nasty bugs in the world."

"So what am I supposed to do?"

"There's a picnic Sunday. Would you like to come?"

"Sure, if Mom says I can."

"Okay. Now, this has to be our secret. Do you promise you won't tell anybody else?"

"I promise," Davy said solemnly.

"Okay, here's what we'll do..." Although they were alone in the room, Tobi whispered her plan into Davy's ear. He listened closely and nodded agreeably.

"One more thing," she said in a normal voice. "Whatever you do, don't you dare let a grasshopper actually touch me. If you do, I'll grind you up and feed you to the pit bull down the block."

"I'll remember," Davy said.

"And you won't tell a soul what we're going to do - right?"

"Right."

"Okay. Let's say our prayers and get you to bed before your Mom comes around and finds you still awake."

Tobi and Davy climbed out of the bed and knelt beside it. "You start," Tobi whispered.

"Dear Lord," Davy prayed. "Please let Coach Trent be Tobi's prince and save her from bugs, so I can have him for my uncle. And please help Daddy find out who murdered that poor man, so people will quit thinking my Aunt Tobi did it. In Jesus's name. Amen."

Then Tobi prayed, "Lord, help all of us - Ben and DeeDee and Alison and Davy and me - to grow more beautiful on the inside. And help us to remember not to judge other people by how they look on the outside, but to find out how beautiful they are on the inside. And, Lord, I'm so sorry I never told Hugh Mansett about You. I never even prayed for him, and he needed to be prayed for more than anybody I've I ever known. Help Davy and me both to remember to pray for people we meet, even if they're ugly on the inside. We love You forever. In Jesus' name. Amen."

Chapter 8

Friday: A Clue in the Clutter

Tobi's red sports car crawled into the driveway of her house the next morning at 6:30. She yawned, switched the key off, then let her head rest on the steering wheel. Why were nights so short?

She lingered only momentarily before getting out of the car and starting toward the house. She had decided it would be easier to shower and dress at home each morning than to haul cosmetics and clothes back and forth. But, of course, she would also have to drag herself out of bed a few minutes earlier each day. Too bad she hadn't accepted the cup of coffee DeeDee offered her as she passed through the kitchen.

Oh well. Live and learn. Tobi aimed her house key at the lock with another yawn, then stepped back with the gasp. The door was slightly ajar. With her heart in her throat and her stomach in a nosedive, she peeked into the living room.

Furniture had been turned over. Papers and books, note pads, pens and pencils littered the floor. It was the same chaos some burglar had created in April when he stole her TV, VCR and hand gun. What had he stolen this time?

Trembling, Tobi ran next door to use the phone. The older couple who were her neighbors fussed over her gently until Ben's car pulled into Tobi's driveway and he jumped out looking grim. Tobi thanked the kind couple and joined him on the porch. He was holding his revolver.

"Wait here," he said tersely. "And don't touch anything."

Moving like a shadow, he stepped into the house. Tobi's whole body tensed, as she waited to hear a gun roar and a body fall. "Dear God, don't let it be Ben's body that falls," she begged silently.

Suddenly, he was back on the porch with her, and the gun was out of sight. "Nobody there," he reported.

Tobi gulped in air as if she had forgotten to breathe. "Thank God," she gasped. "What did he take?"

"Search me." Ben looked perplexed. "I want you to walk through every room and see what's missing, but remember not to touch anything."

Angry tears burned Tobi's eyes as she walked through her living room, kitchen, bedroom and office. As near as she could tell, nothing was missing. But her home was upside down. Why would the intruder turn over chairs, seed the carpet with the contents of every drawer, and pull clothes from the closet?

"What's the deal?" Ben asked when she finished. "What was he after?"

Tobi shook her head. "You've got me. Is it possible this has nothing to do with Hugh?"

"If it didn't, then why wasn't something stolen?"

Tobi shrugged. "If it *did*, why wasn't something stolen."

"They didn't find what they wanted, I guess," Ben said. "Well, come on back home. I'll get somebody out here to take fingerprints this morning and then we'll straighten up for you. Or maybe you'd rather skip work today and straighten it up yourself?"

"I'd better go to work. I skipped out yesterday at the last minute, and I'd hate to do it two days in a row. Let me get something to wear."

"No," Ben said quickly. "Don't touch anything yet. You can wear something of DeeDee's."

When Ben and Tobi reported to DeeDee, her distress turned to excitement. "Oh boy!" she exclaimed. "I know exactly what you can wear. I bought it on sale last week at The Grotto and it will be beautiful on you. I'll do your hair and, when you walk in, Joel won't know what hit him."

"Sis, you're going to be late to work," Tobi objected. "It's bad enough that I'm going to be late. And besides, I think Joel already likes me too much as it is."

"Get in the shower," DeeDee ordered. "I'll call the school and have an aide handle my class until I get there. Then I'll call Joel and tell him you're going to be late. Alison can take Davy to school."

Ben laughed. "You've known her longer than I have, Tob, so you know there's no use arguing with her."

"Yep. I never won an argument with her yet," Tobi sighed elaborately.

"You two make me sound like a nagging, old shrew," DeeDee fussed. "I'm not like that."

"Of course, you're not," Ben said, kissing his wife on the cheek. "You're as meek and mild as a kitten. I'm off to work. Good bye, ladies."

DeeDee was waiting with makeup, curling iron and her new suit when Tobi emerged from the shower. "You're not going to send me to work looking like a little girl all fluffed up for Easter Sunday," Tobi warned her, eyeing the paraphernalia.

"You can bet I'm not," DeeDee agreed cheerfully. She held up a forest green suit and a crisp white blouse for Tobi's inspection. "I'm going to send you to work looking like a hot babe who just happens to be dressed in business clothes."

True to her word, Tobi didn't look frilly or fluffy when DeeDee finished, but the feminine cut of the suit gave her a soft look. And its shade brought out the emerald color of her eyes. "You did good," Tobi said gazing into the mirror. "Maybe I should let you fix me up every morning."

"Never mind the flattery. Just get out there and remember that all the single women in Deepwater are in love with Joel Trent. So if you're not careful, you could lose him to someone else."

"Well, if he's that easily lost, maybe I don't want him," Tobi said, thinking of Chuck and Susie.

"Sometimes, Tobi, I wish I could wind you up and operate you like a robot," DeeDee sighed. "Why is it so easy for me to see that you and Joel are perfect for each other, and you can't see past your nose?"

"Maybe you would change your mind if you met Kent," Tobi said. "At least he doesn't go to church with a bunch of flakes who think they can lead God around by the nose."

"What kind of church *does* he go to?" DeeDee asked.

"I don't know," Tobi answered. "I'm not sure if he's found one yet."

"Ah, and the feminist in you figures you can train him up in the way he should go. Tell him what church to attend. Tell him what to believe. Is that the kind of man you want?" DeeDee asked with a sly look that wasn't wasted on Tobi.

"Truce!" Tobi exclaimed, "before I pull your hair out. You know how I feel about libbers."

"Then, be consistent. If you really don't like the Amazon Nation, then don't act like them."

"I'm not," said Tobi. "I've known and cared for Kent a long time. I've just met Joel. Why should I jeopardize a relationship I'm sure of for a relationship that may never happen?"

"Okay. Bring Kent over for dinner tonight and let me meet him. I promise to be as fair as I can about him."

"I'll invite him," Tobi promised, "and let you know what he says."

As soon as Tobi opened the door to Vi's office, Joel appeared in his doorway. He had started to say something but, at the sight of Tobi, the words lurched to a halt and he stood staring at her.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

He swallowed hard. "Wrong?...Wrong?" He gazed about the room, looking for something to be wrong.

Finally Tobi asked, "Joel, are you all right?"

Instead of answering, he retreated into his office. Tobi followed and found him sitting in his big swivel chair, holding his head in his hands. "Joel, you're scaring me. Should I call a doctor?"

"No, I'm all right." He looked up with a rueful smile on his face. "I had promised myself I would keep our relationship very businesslike and dignified so I wouldn't upset you. Then DeeDee called this morning and told me about the break-in at your house, and I was so frightened for you...and furious that something like that could happen, and I couldn't do anything to help. Then you walked in here looking more beautiful than any woman I've ever seen, and I nearly swallowed my tongue. Instead of being businesslike and dignified, I'm making a fool of myself. Again."

"To tell you the truth," Tobi said, "it's very flattering to be admired by the most eligible bachelor in town."

"The most eligible bachelor in town? What gave you that idea?"

"DeeDee. She says all the single women in Deepwater are in love with you, and I'd better be nice to you or you'll find somebody else. In fact, she dolled me up this morning for your benefit."

"Really?" Joel gazed at her with admiring eyes. "Would you do me a favor?"

"What?"

"Don't let her do that again unless you're willing to let me hold you."

Tobi blushed. "I shouldn't have let her do it today. I'm sorry, but I didn't actually think you'd notice."

"I notice. I always notice," he said, almost to himself.

"I'm sorry about being late today," Tobi apologized. "I feel bad about it, especially after running out on you yesterday."

"Forget it. It's not your fault. Tell me about the break-in. DeeDee said nothing was stolen. What was the lowlife looking for?"

"I can't imagine," Tobi said. "Maybe he was planning to steal something and got scared away." She thought about the state of her house. "You know, he must have been looking for money, the way he tore everything up."

"Were other houses in the area broken into?"

"None that I know of."

"Does it have something to do with Hugh Mansett's murder?"

"Ben thinks so, but I don't see how it could. Unless..." Tobi stopped and shivered.

"Unless what?"

"Unless it was the murderer and he was going to kill me, too. But why would he? I don't know anything."

"Maybe he thinks you do. Tobi, is Ben sure you're safe? Maybe you should be hidden away somewhere until this is over."

"I'll be okay at Ben and DeeDee's," Tobi said bravely. "I'm sure Ben would tell me if he thought I were in danger."

"Of course he would. Well, what about the funeral? Did you learn anything there?"

Tobi told Joel about Hugh's trip to Austin and New Orleans and the possibility that he had been shot by a hired assassin.

"Does Ben think that's a good lead?" Joel asked.

"I guess it's as good as any," Tobi said. "He's going to follow it and see if it goes anywhere."

Joel's face was solemn. "I'm afraid for you. Why don't you go somewhere safe for a while?"

"Where's somewhere safe?"

Joel shook his head. "I don't know..." He hesitated, then added. "Yes, I do. The only place safe is in Jesus, and I know He's taking care of you. I'm praying for you, by the way."

"Are you? Thank you, Joel! That means a lot to me." The thought of Joel speaking to the Lord in her behalf warmed Tobi's heart. She beamed at him.

"It's my pleasure, but I wasn't sure if you would have any faith in the prayers of a flaky holy roller like myself," Joel said with a twinkle in his eye.

Tobi twinkled back. "Normally I wouldn't, but I'm hoping there's a normal Christian somewhere inside you."

"I guess that's depends on your definition of a normal Christian," he said, serious again.

Tobi sighed. "I sound like I'm attacking you - I apologize for that. The person I'm really angry with is myself for falling for the elaborate system of lies the Charismatics spin. I should

have been more aware of what the Bible actually says and means so I wouldn't have been taken for a ten-year ride on a collection of deceptions."

"A collection of deceptions in which I'm presently embroiled if you're right," Joel observed.

"Yes," Tobi said quietly.

There was an uncomfortable silence before Joel said, "Well, are you ready to get to work? I've got a pile of it."

Tobi brightened. "Great! Let me at it."

He picked up the stack of papers he had been working on. "I'm going to have to fly to Dallas this evening for a meeting with the owners of the hospital tomorrow. I need this information formatted for my presentation to them."

Tobi's eyes widened. "We should have started on it Wednesday."

"We would have if I'd known. This meeting was scheduled for next month, but a conflict came up and now it's tomorrow."

"No problem. We'll whip it out in no time," Tobi said, sounding more confident than she felt.

Joel showed her what he needed and soon her fingers were flying over the keyboard, as briskly as if she were racing to meet a press deadline. Once she caught herself humming.

Ben called shortly before noon. "Tobi, I'm at your house," he said, sounding serious.

"What did you find?" she asked. "Was something stolen?"

"When is your lunch hour? Can you meet me here?"

"Ben, what's wrong?"

"I found something, but I haven't figured out how to interpret it. I want you to see it. Can you come?"

"I'll be there in 15 minutes."

"Okay, I'll get us a couple of sandwiches. What do you want?"

When Tobi went into Joel's office to tell him what Ben had said, she found him waiting for her with a worried expression on his face. "That was Ben on the phone, wasn't it?" he asked. "Is something wrong?"

"He found something at my house and he wants me to see it, but he won't say what it is. So I'm meeting him there for lunch."

Joel nodded. "Go on then and take as long as you need."

Tobi laughed. "How long can it take to look at something? I'll be back in an hour and finish your presentation. It won't take too much longer now."

His face relaxed. "Really? You're pretty amazing, Tobi."

"Actually, I'm having fun," she said. "Who'd have ever guessed? I'll see you in an hour."

Ben was standing by Tobi's table eating when she arrived. He handed her a sealed plastic bag containing a business card. It was from the office of Brian Jeffers, Aide to State Senator Nelson Kirby. On the back, printed in blue ink, were the words: "Mansett arriving 5/7."

Tobi gaped at it. "You're not telling me you found that in my house, are you?"

Ben nodded. "It was lying on the floor in your office. Have you ever seen it before?"

Tobi shook her head. "How did it get here, Ben?"

Ben studied her. "Are you absolutely certain you didn't bring it in the house and forget it?"

"With Hugh Mansett's name on the back? Not likely." Tobi's thoughts were churning at the speed of light - and going nowhere. "What does it mean?"

Ben's forehead was creased in a deep frown. He looked more worried than she'd seen him since the case began. "I frankly don't know if it was dropped there by accident or if it's a plant," he admitted. "There's your sandwich," he added, nodding toward the table. He was already halfway through his.

"I suddenly don't have an appetite," Tobi said in a small voice.

Ben stopped chewing, set his sandwich down and put his hands on her shoulders. "Look, Tob, you've been a real trooper so far. Don't bail on me now. Okay?"

"Ben, I'm scared."

He gave her a crooked half-smile. "I'm a little scared too, but we're going to figure this out. Do you trust me?"

Tobi took a deep breath and nodded. What choice did she have?

"Okay." Ben took one of her hands and prayed, "Lord, we both need courage and wisdom to get through this ordeal. We're looking to You and trusting You to help us. We also thank You for this food and pray that You sanctify it to nourish our bodies. In Jesus' name. Amen."

He picked up her sandwich and handed it to her. "Sit down and eat. You'll need your strength to survive the afternoon with that cruel taskmaster you work for."

Tobi laughed. "You and your wife are the ones who *forced* me to work for him." Her appetite was returning.

"So sue us," Ben smiled. "I have some news. Reuben Garza's wife called this morning. He admitted he was at the newspaper office working Sunday morning. When he heard the gunshot, he looked outside and saw Hugh's body. So he shut down his computer and left. He thought he would be a suspect if anyone knew he was on the premises at the time of the murder."

"Well, isn't he?" asked Tobi.

"Maybe. But I showed his car to our witness, and she thinks it may have been there when Hugh was shot. After she called the police and came back outside, it was gone, and she forgot about it. She's pretty iffy on that part of the story, but if Reuben's car was there at the time of the

shooting, he put himself in an awkward situation. He would have had to remove two cars from the scene of the crime in a very short space of time. It's not a smart way to handle a murder."

"So he's off the hook?" Tobi asked.

"I would say...probably."

"Who does that leave? Besides me, of course."

"Tobi, whoever broke into your house last night murdered Hugh Mansett. I don't know who that was, but I intend to find out."

A chill ran down Tobi's spine. "Do you think he wanted to kill me, too?"

"I don't know," Ben said. "You'll be careful, won't you?"

Tobi nodded. "You can count on it." She studied him. "Does this break-in have something to do with the funeral yesterday? Was someone angry that we were there asking questions and so they ransacked my house? Or tried to kill me? Or whatever they were doing here?"

"I can't rule that out, of course," Ben said thoughtfully, "but Brian Jeffers wasn't at the cemetery, so what's the connection?"

"How do we know he wasn't there?"

Ben frowned. "Good question. I'll call Audrey this afternoon and check on that. And in the meantime, you probably don't need to be coming over here by yourself. Can you collect the rest of your things and plan not to come back here alone until the case is resolved?"

Tobi nodded. "Do you think Jeffers is lurking around Deepwater like a spook, waiting for a chance to...to..." Her voice trailed away. She didn't want to think about what he might do.

"We won't know until we figure out his motive," Ben said. "Or *somebody's* motive."

"Then you don't think Jeffers did it?"

"I don't know."

After she had eaten half her sandwich, Tobi threw the rest away. She gathered everything she would need for the weekend and searched the house again for items that might be missing or out of order. But everything seemed to be accounted for. "I give up," she told Ben, at last.

"Okay, well, I'll see what I can find out about Brian Jeffers this afternoon," Ben said.

"Thanks for coming."

Tobi had just gotten back to the hospital, told Joel about Brian Jeffer's business card and sat down at her desk again when Kent called. "What are you doing tonight?" he asked.

"I was hoping you would come to dinner and meet my family," Tobi said. "I would have called and invited you this morning, but I knew you were on deadline."

"I'd like to come," Kent said, sounding pleased.

Tobi gave him the address, then called DeeDee's answering machine to report that Kent would be coming for dinner. She was hard at work again by 1:30 and pulled the last sheet of the presentation out of the printer at 4:15. With a sigh of relief she took the whole report to Joel. "Check it over and see if I need to make any corrections," she suggested.

"Is that all of it?" he asked.

"Yes."

He thumbed through the pages, looking pleased. "How did you do it? I don't think Vi could have done it much faster and she's been working in this office for years."

"Joel, this was a picnic! Now whipping out three news stories in one morning - that's a challenge!"

"Three?" he looked impressed. "Do you have to do that often?"

"When I was reporting, I did sometimes. But most of the time I could write one or two of them the afternoon before the edition went out."

"Well, I'm glad this was a picnic. I was feeling bad about working you so hard," Joel said, turning his attention to the papers in his hand.

Tobi returned to her desk just in time to greet two pretty, dark-haired teenagers who had entered from the hall. "May I help you?" she asked.

"You're Tobi, aren't you?" asked the taller one.

"That's right. How did you know?"

"I'm Gloria Trent. My Dad has told us all about you." She reached across the desk and offered a cool, soft hand, which Tobi shook solemnly. Gloria had golden brown eyes like Joel's and his wide grin. She was studying Tobi with curiosity, but no animosity apparent on her face.

"What did he tell you about me?" Tobi asked, liking the girls immediately and deciding they must have taken after their father instead of their mother in temperament.

"Hi, I'm Grace," said the other sister, holding out her hand too. "He said you're the most beautiful woman in the world."

Tobi shook Grace's hand, noticing that she had huge blue eyes like Rachel's and the same delicate features. "That was very nice of him. Did he say anything else?"

Gloria grinned and nodded toward Joel's office. "Is he in there?"

Tobi nodded.

"Maybe we better tell you another time," she said.

"Maybe you better!" Joel called.

"Hi Daddy," Grace called, dashing into the other room.

Gloria followed at a more dignified pace. "Hi, Pops," she greeted Joel, stepping into his office.

"Hi Toots," he answered.

"Don't call me that!" she scolded.

"I have to. It goes with Pops." Tobi could hear the amusement in his voice. "What are you girls doing at the hospital?"

"Mom is visiting Mrs. Waterson."

"Of course."

"And I couldn't wait to tell you about my car." That was Gloria speaking. It was easy to distinguish their voices. Gloria spoke rapidly and excitedly. Grace's voice was soft and musical like her mother's and the pace of her speech was slower.

"What car?"

"I'm going to get a car when I turn 16. We had a special prayer time at youth meeting Wednesday night and the Lord revealed it to me." Gloria's voice was full of confidence. "I can't wait to see it. Do you think it's all right if I tell Him I want a yellow convertible?"

"I think it's all right for you to tell Him anything," Joel said quietly.

"Oh boy! I was hoping you'd say that! I just know it's going to be the one I saw on the used car lot last week!"

"Gloria, don't be believing God for some old used wreck," Grace said earnestly. "If the Lord's going to give you a car, He'll give you a beautiful, new one."

"Look, girls, could we change the subject?" Joel asked. "I'm tired of this one. We've already discussed it from every angle 20 times."

"I'm tired of it too," said Grace. "Anyway, I have something exciting to tell you, Daddy."

"What?"

"At our prayer time Wednesday night, I received my prayer language."

"Really? Tell me about it."

"Well, you know, I prayed for the baptism in the Holy Spirit last month, but nothing happened. Finally, I told Pastor Morel and he said for me to start saying syllables - any syllables

- just string them together and my prayer language would come. So I tried it and it happened! It's so beautiful! Do you want to hear?"

"Not here at the hospital, baby," Joel said. "Maybe next time you come over to the house."

Sitting at Vi's desk, Tobi had broken into a cold sweat. "Oh Joel," she groaned, "make her stop. Tell her it's ridiculous nonsense, that it's just gibberish and doesn't mean anything. Tell her. Tell her."

Instead, Gloria was saying, "We have to go or Mom will be in here rounding us up like a herd of cattle."

Tobi flew out of her chair. She didn't want to see them again, not after what she'd heard. She couldn't bear to look at them. She glanced around wildly. There was a small office beyond hers with a desk and several storage cabinets. She could go into it, pretend to look out the window and be out of the view of anyone in the reception area.

She stepped silently into the empty office, rested her forehead against the window and waited. How many times had she been in church services full of meaningless chatter - people jabbering like lunatics, telling themselves and each other they were doing something spiritual and holy? How could she have been part of it for so long? What a fool she had been! She clenched her fists and willed herself not to cry, not to make a sound.

She could hear Gloria and Grace in the next office with Joel, saying their goodbyes. Then Joel called her name. After a moment, he came up behind her and asked, "Tobi! What are you doing?"

"Trying not to cry."

"What's wrong?" He put his hands on her arms to turn her around, but she shook him off violently, as if his touch had contaminated her. Then she whirled to face him.

"How can you do that? How can you make God a laughingstock like that? Show me one place in the Bible where anybody ever had to be taught to speak in tongues. It was a gift, not a lesson. How can you...how can you...?"

Suddenly tears poured down her face and she threw herself into his arms. "I'm sorry. It's not you I'm mad at. I'm mad at myself. I'm so sorry I keep taking it out on you."

Joel didn't say anything, but he held her until she realized where she was and backed away, appalled at her forwardness. He watched her, waiting, obviously at a loss for the right words to say.

Tobi took a deep breath. "You must think I'm a total lunatic," she said. "But God has been so good to me. I can't bear it that I was involved in a church that treats Him so disrespectfully. And then to know that your beautiful daughters are walking down the same hideous path..." Her voice broke.

Joel still didn't speak and Tobi looked up. His face was somber and his eyes were far away. She waited until his expression changed and then asked, "What are you thinking?"

"What were you talking about just now when you said tongues was a gift, not a lesson?"

"Stringing syllables together and that becomes a prayer language!" Tobi repeated Grace's words. "That's not in the Bible and it's not a language - it's just...jabber! Can't you see how ridiculous it is? There's no such thing as a prayer language in the Bible."

His frown deepened and Tobi added, "I did it too. I believed it too. But it was *wrong*. Spiritual gifts are supposed to be under the power of the Holy Spirit, but Grace offered to speak in tongues for you. It's under her power. It doesn't have anything to do with the Holy Spirit. Can't you see that?"

"...making God a laughingstock? Is that what you think?"

Tobi nodded miserably.

"A laughingstock..." Joel said to himself again. He went into his office, and Tobi could hear him gathering up papers. A moment later he was back with a briefcase in his hand. "Let's close up, Tobi. I have to get to the airport."

"You go on. I'll make sure everything is turned off," she said.

"Right. Well, have a good weekend."

"You too." Tobi watched him walk away, thinking, "Well, if he doesn't hate me now, he should."

She buried her face in her arms on Vi's desk but, for once, she was too heartsick even to pray. What if she had offended him so deeply that he lost all interest in her? What if he never wanted to see her again? What if he walked in here Monday morning and fired her? And what if she suddenly realized he was the only man she could ever love?

"Tobi, don't be an idiot," she said out loud. "You barely know the man. You'll forget him so fast it'll make your head spin." But she knew she wouldn't.

She left the hospital feeling depressed and weary. She was in no mood to spend an evening with Kent, but he rang the doorbell at the Walling's home at precisely 6:58 and she greeted him warmly.

He was wearing a sports coat and slacks and looking as handsome as ever. DeeDee and Alison were properly impressed with him. Ben was amused at their open admiration, and Davy was hostile.

"Tobi has told us all about you," Alison gushed. "She thinks you're wonderful."

"Really? Tell me more," Kent said, with a glance at Tobi.

She turned bright red and put a hand over Alison's mouth. "I think Alison has said quite enough."

"Yes, Alison, you come help me in the kitchen," DeeDee instructed. "I think Tobi and your Dad want to talk to Kent about Mr. Mansett's murder."

"Aw, Mom," Alison grumbled, as DeeDee took her elbow and dragged her away.

"Sit down," Ben invited Kent. "Have you found any suspicious characters at the newspaper office this week?"

"They're all suspicious if you ask me," Kent said, smiling at Tobi. "But I can't put my finger on anything that links any of them to Hugh. Except Reuben, of course, and I haven't been able to get him to talk about Hugh."

"He's probably not in the running anymore," Ben said, explaining Reuben's alibi.

"Well, what about Tye Ringener and Senator Kirby?" Kent asked. "Did the police in Foxhole or Austin know anything about them?"

"They're still checking," Ben said, "but there's been a new twist in the case. Someone broke into Tobi's apartment last night."

Kent looked horrified. "Tobi! Are you all right! What happened?" He took her hand and held it tightly in both of his.

"They tore up the place," Tobi explained. "I was here so I didn't know until this morning."

"What did they take?"

Ben answered. "Nothing that we know of. But in the clutter, I found a business card belonging to Brian Jeffers." He paused and waited for Kent's reaction.

"Brian Jeffers," Kent repeated. "Is that someone I should know?"

"According to the business card, he's Senator Kirby's aide," Ben said. "Somebody had written on the back of the card, 'Mansett arriving 5/7.' I know Kirby is from Foxhole. Do you happen to know Jeffers?"

Kent thought a moment, then shook his head. "No, I don't believe I've ever heard the name. Of course, I've met the senator a couple of times in Foxhole, but I'm not familiar with his staff."

Ben sighed. "This little wrinkle in the case has me baffled. I don't know if Brian Jeffers was in Tobi's apartment last night or if he sent someone to break into Tobi's apartment last night or if some enemy of his wants me to think he was in Tobi's apartment last night. What do you think, Kent?"

"I think I'm glad I didn't pursue a career in law enforcement," Kent said shaking his head. "Did you say there was something written on the back about Hugh?"

"Mansett arriving 5/7," Ben said. "Is that the day Hugh moved to Deepwater?"

Kent considered the question for a minute. "It sounds about right. I would have to look at a calendar to be sure."

"Here's one." Ben took a plastic card from his wallet and handed it to Kent.

Kent glanced at it, nodded and handed it back. "May 7th. That's the date all right."

"Did anything unusual happen that day?" Ben asked.

"Not that I know of," Kent said slowly, trying to remember. "Unless you count the fact that Hugh and I didn't have any arguments."

"I called your Mother this afternoon to see if Jeffers might have been at the funeral yesterday. She doesn't know him, but she did know everyone who attended, so he wasn't there."

"Maybe he's in contact with someone who attended," Tobi said.

"That's possible," Ben agreed. "I also called Senator Kirby's office. Jeffers is no longer working there. The secretary who answered said he left a couple of months ago. She doesn't

know where he is now and the senator wasn't available, so I'm waiting for him to call back. Hopefully, he'll be able to direct me to Jeffers. Or..."

He paused. Tobi and Kent both waited expectantly for him to finish. "Or what?" she finally prodded.

He looked at her grimly. "Or maybe I'll have to go to Austin myself and beat the information out of him."

Tobi felt goose bumps rising on her arms. "Ben, he's a state senator! You can't beat *anything* out of him."

Ben sighed. "Probably not. But if I find out he's the one who's trying to frame you for Mansett's murder, I may forget who he is."

"He's not worth losing your job over no matter what he's done," Tobi said urgently.

"Maybe...Maybe not..." Ben's face softened. "Tobi, you're not just my wife's sister. You're like my sister, too, and I can't wait to get my hands on the thug who's putting you through this nightmare."

His words warmed her, but Tobi said sternly, "Then you probably shouldn't even be on this case."

"Oh? Well, okay then," Ben said, looking hurt. "I'll turn it over to Rick Macy who doesn't know you from a hole in the wall. He'll take one look at the evidence and lock you in a cage."

DeeDee had come up silently, and now she flicked her husband with the dish towel she was carrying. "You try it, and *you'll* be living in a cage," she threatened him. Then she added to all of them, "Dinner's ready."

Tobi caught Ben's arm and kissed his cheek. "It's not that I don't appreciate everything you're doing," she said. "But I love you, too, and I don't want you to do something you shouldn't because of me. You know that, don't you?"

He laughed and hugged her. "I know, baby sister. I'll try to be a good boy, just for you."

"What you are is a brat!" she retorted, and their usual camaraderie was restored.

DeeDee seated Tobi next to Kent and watched their every move. It made Tobi nervous, but Kent, charming as always, complimented both DeeDee and Alison and tried to win Davy's affection.

After dinner, DeeDee began clearing the table. When Tobi and Kent offered to help, she dismissed them. "Go out in the yard and see Jasper," she suggested. "We'll take care of the dishes."

"Come on, Davy," Tobi said. "Let's show Kent the tricks you're teaching Jasper."

"Oh boy," Davy said, relieved that he wasn't going to be pressed into kitchen duty. "He's really smart. I bet I can teach him all kinds of tricks. Do you know how to teach a dog tricks?" he asked Kent, opening the door and leading the way into the back yard.

"Well, I've never tried," said Kent. "Do you know how?"

"I found a book in the school library," said Davy. "It's all about dogs, and it tells how to teach them to roll over and heel and fetch and lots of stuff."

"What have you taught him so far?" Kent asked with interest.

"Well, nothing yet," Davy admitted. "So far, he just gets all excited and wiggles."

Jasper, pleased to find himself the center of attention, got all excited and wiggled for them. But he ignored every command Davy gave him to, "Sit!" or "Lie down!" or "Fetch!"

"Never mind," said Kent, picking Jasper up and ruffling his fur. "He's still young, but he'll learn."

"I know he will," said Davy. "Then I'm going to take him to school for Show 'n Tell."

Kent handed Jasper to Davy and smiled at Tobi. "You haven't lost your puppy, have you?"

"Shhh, don't give him any ideas," Tobi said. "Come on, let's go sit on the patio." She gave Davy a meaningful look over her shoulder.

Davy grinned and disappeared around the side of the house. As Tobi and Kent paused to admire DeeDee's flower beds, he suddenly yelled, "Tobi, come here! Quick!"

"Why?" she yelled.

"Just come here," he insisted.

"I'll be right back," she told Kent. He watched her walk away, then lazily followed. She disappeared around the corner of the house, then abruptly reappeared with Davy in hot pursuit, waving something in his hand.

"You get that nasty thing away from me, Davy Scott Walling," she shouted, racing around the yard.

"It's just a nice grasshopper," he shouted back. "It wants to meet you."

After she took a turn around the yard, Tobi ducked behind Kent, "Save me," she panted, peeking around him to see which way Davy was coming.

Instead, Kent pulled her forward and enclosed her in a bear hug from the back, pinning her arms to her sides. "I've got her," he told Davy.

"All right!" Davy cried, waving the grasshopper in Tobi's face.

"Davy, if you don't get that thing away from me, I'll grind you into mincemeat," Tobi yelled, struggling against Kent's hard grip and kicking at her nephew.

"Aw, you're no fun," Davy said, "scared of a little grasshopper." He tossed it away and went back to playing with Jasper.

"A big help you turned out to be," Tobi said to Kent. She made her voice light, but she suddenly felt depressed, as they walked to the patio and sat down.

"It was just a grasshopper," Kent said scornfully. "You're not afraid of a stupid bug, are you?"

"I'm not *afraid* of it," Tobi said, "but I don't like it."

He shook his head. "A 90s woman like yourself running away from a grasshopper could set the women's movement back 100 years."

"Kent, if I could set the women's movement back, I'd have done it a long time ago," Tobi said hotly. "I'm sick to death of loud-mouthed men-bashers trying to make me want to be a man. Talk about a crock! If they think men are so inferior, why do they think I should want to be one!"

Kent cowered playfully. "You don't have a chip on your shoulder, do you?"

Tobi smiled ruefully, took a deep breath and stepped down from her soap box. "As a matter of fact, the women's movement may be the biggest chip up there. Sorry, I didn't mean to lecture."

"I would have guessed that the monster who tried to frame you for Hugh's murder would have been the biggest."

Tobi shook her head. "Do you know how many babies have died since the feminists had their way about abortion?"

Kent shrugged.

"Millions," Tobi said. "And do you know how many women's lives have been devastated because they can't figure out how to live with the horror of knowing that they've killed their own children?"

"Millions?"

She nodded. "I've been so angry at the libbers for so long that it would take Hugh's killer years to catch up."

Kent studied her thoughtfully. "Surely you don't disagree with everything the feminists stand for?"

Tobi sat down in a lawn chair and said, "Not quite, but almost." She closed her eyes for a moment to savor the cool south breeze that was quietly displacing the heat of the day. "If Shakespeare were still alive, I believe he would say, 'Methinks they doth protest too much.' "

"Who doth?" Kent asked.

"The whole Amazon Nation," Tobi said, turning a bright green gaze on him. "I don't think women have to go barging into men's clubs or demanding to be on football teams to prove they're as good as men. Being a loud-mouthed intruder doesn't make a woman anything except a loud-mouthed intruder. I think we accomplish more by being ourselves and respecting our own dignity."

When Kent didn't answer, she said apologetically, "I'm sorry. Am I starting to yammer? Talking about feminists has that effect on me."

"Not at all," he said quickly. "I was just comparing you to some of the whining, wailing libbers I've seen on TV, and you're right - they have no dignity at all. Just strident voices." He paused and, sensing that he was searching for words, she waited. Finally he added, "I wish I had understood you better three years ago, four years ago, at Foxhole. I wanted you to change and be more like me. What a fool I was! I was the one who needed to change and be more like you."

"Kent, that's ancient history. What's important is now. And you made the most wonderful change possible when you accepted Jesus into your life. You shouldn't ever look at me or anybody else and try to be like us. You want to keep your eyes on Jesus and let the Holy Spirit begin to make you like Him - that's the only way you'll ever have the wonderful, exciting life God wants you to have."

"Do you know everything?" he asked in such a serious tone it alarmed her.

"Of course not. Far from it! But God does, and I try to pick His brain whenever I can by reading the Bible."

"Picking His brain. Is that what you call it?" he asked, grinning.

"I never called it that before," she admitted, "but I guess it fits."

Ben and DeeDee joined them then. "Are you planning to stay in Deepwater much longer?" Ben asked Kent.

"Probably not. I haven't helped the case at all, which is the only reason I stayed. And I'm beginning to remember why I was so glad to get out of the newspaper business last year."

"When are you leaving?" Tobi asked.

Kent searched her face. "Tomorrow or Sunday. Mom thinks I've been here too long and she's probably right."

"That's too bad," DeeDee said. "I wish you weren't leaving just when we were having a chance to get acquainted."

"Maybe we'll have another occasion to meet," Kent said. "If I find Tobi a job in Dallas and she moves there, we can get together when you come to visit."

"No way!" said Ben. "You're not leaving, are you, Tobi?"

Tobi sighed. "I've thought about it. Right now, I don't know. I don't know anything except that I want to know who killed Hugh Mansett."

"Don't we all," agreed Kent.

He left soon afterward and Tobi walked him to his car. "When will you decide if you're leaving tomorrow?" she asked.

"I'll probably get up in the morning and see what kind of mood I'm in. If I decide to leave, I'll call you." He wrapped her in a long, hard hug, then got in his car and drove away.

DeeDee was waiting for her inside. "Well, he's everything you said he was," she conceded. "I tried not to like him, but he's hard not to like."

Tobi smiled. "That's for sure. Listen, I'm tired. I think I'll turn in. Do you need me to do anything first?"

"No, of course not," said DeeDee. "Are you sick? You don't seem to be yourself."

"Just tired. It was a long week. Are you sure I can't help you clean up?"

"Nothing to do," DeeDee said. "I'm going to water my plants and then read the mail. You go on."

Tobi nodded. "Okay. Good night."

"Night, sis."

Tobi passed Ben and Davy engrossed in a video game in the den. Alison had disappeared. In Davy's room she roamed around restlessly, picking up toys and putting them away. She paused to study the bulletin board. It held a picture of Davy's soccer team from the newspaper, a few wallet-size photographs of school mates, and a drawing.

Tobi frowned at the drawing. It was done with crayon and was obviously an animal, but what kind? Then she noticed the word in the bottom right hand corner: "Jasper." Oh.

Obviously, Davy had quite a crush on the puppy. Tobi got ready for bed thinking about Davy and Jasper. They belonged together. Poor old Pogo couldn't last much longer, and it might be easier for a little boy to lose a dear old friend if there were already a new little friend around to comfort him. She would have to talk to Ben and DeeDee about letting Davy keep Jasper after she moved back home.

When she picked up her Bible, it fell open to Psalm 18 again. Tonight verse 6 seemed to have been written just for her, "In my distress I called upon the Lord, and cried unto my God: he heard my voice out of his temple, and my cry came before him, even unto his ears."

And then she read again with wonder the description of God's response to King David's call for help - setting the earth to shaking, igniting fires, flying upon the wings of the wind, thundering in the heavens, raining down hail stones and coals of fire, shooting out arrows and lightning - all this to save David from his enemies.

She knelt beside Davy's bed and prayed, "Lord, I'm sorry I'm such a baby sometimes. You can save me from so much more than a silly grasshopper. I do call upon You in my distress. You know who killed Hugh Mansett, and I pray that You will make that person known so my name will be cleared.

"You are the Master of every situation. Thank You for being my Rescuer and my Deliverer every day in every way."

She paused and thought about Kent and Davy and that ugly bug being thrust in her face. She returned to her prayer with a sigh. "Lord, I guess I'm a real Looney tune. It's stupid to be disappointed in Kent because he didn't save me from a grasshopper, like some obsolete knight in shining armor. But I wish he had. I wish so much that he had..."

"I pray for Kent, that You help him seek You every day of his life. Help him to know You better and love You more every day.

"And Joel..." She paused again, feeling the same heartsick sensation that had overwhelmed her that afternoon. "Lord, please help me quit attacking Joel. And please, please don't let him hate me. Keep him safe in Dallas and on the airplane when he comes home. And help him in the meetings he's having with his bosses.

"Continue to be with Vi and give her doctors wisdom.

"And, Lord, thank for You for my sweet Davy. He was wonderful tonight. And Ben - he's been a real hero through this whole murder investigation - thank You for his faithfulness. Be with

each member of my family. Help us to walk in the light of Your Word and stay in the safety of Your high tower.

"I love You for all the wonderful ways You bless my life, but most of all I love You for being You. In Jesus' name. Amen."

Chapter 9

Saturday: Hugh's Files

Tobi slept fitfully and dreamed of Kent. Not Kent exactly. It was a toy top that looked like Kent - sculptured features, jet black hair and flashing dimples - but every time she reached for him, he whirled away. And she followed him. But he moved further and further away until he was a speck in the distance.

When she woke, there were tears in her eyes. "Good bye, Kent," she whispered. "I hope you have a wonderful life."

She stretched and sat up, feeling more tired than she had when she went to sleep. And sadder. And angrier at herself. "What an idiot you are, October Kirkland," she fumed, "losing interest in a man because he didn't save you from a grasshopper! What kind of stupid test is that? He's kind and affectionate, not to mention rich and gorgeous! So what difference does it make if he didn't save you from a grasshopper? How was he supposed to know how much you hate bugs?"

Then her face crumpled. "Oh, Kent, lots of women hate bugs. Why couldn't you have *wanted* to save me from that miserable grasshopper?"

She took a deep breath, got up, put on a robe, and went to find Ben and DeeDee.

Ben was gone and DeeDee was putting dishes in the dishwasher. "What are you doing up so early on Saturday?" she asked.

"I couldn't sleep."

DeeDee studied her. "You're upset because he's leaving, aren't you?"

"Who?"

"Come on, sis. Don't play games with me."

"Kent?"

"Of course I mean Kent. Who else are you desperately in love with?"

Tobi sighed. "I'm not desperately in love with anybody. And I'm not upset he's leaving."

"Why not? You've been telling me all week how wonderful he is." DeeDee gave her sister a sharp look. "You're moving to Dallas, aren't you? Tobi, what am I going to do without you? Please don't go."

"I'm not moving to Dallas. I'm not making any decisions about anything until somebody figures out who killed Hugh Mansett."

"Ben knows," said DeeDee.

"Ben knows what?" Tobi asked.

"Who killed Hugh Mansett."

Tobi's eyes widened. "He said that?"

"No, but he knows. I can tell."

"If he knows, why doesn't he say?"

"Proof. He doesn't have proof and it's just a gut feeling now. He gets these feelings, but he won't say anything until he has proof."

"Where is he?"

"He called Kent first thing this morning to get the key to Hugh's apartment. The police looked it over last Sunday, but Ben wanted to check it out again. He said for you to come over as soon as you got up so you can go through the files on Hugh's PC. Hugh hadn't even unpacked it yet, but Ben was going to get it out of the box and hook it up. He says there might be some kind of clue in it."

"That's right!" Tobi brightened. "He might have written down what happened in Austin. There might be names and addresses or phone numbers. Why didn't we think of it before?"

"I think Ben did, but he hasn't had time to follow through. Now Kent's talking about leaving today, so it has to be done this morning or else someone will have to go to Foxhole to look at it."

"I'll get dressed and get over there," Tobi called over her shoulder, pulling off her robe as she went.

"What do you want for breakfast?"

"Nothing. I'm too excited to eat."

"Orange juice and toast are already made. You're not getting out the door until you've put something in your stomach," DeeDee called, following Tobi to Davy's room.

Tobi had her head in Davy's closet, looking for something to wear. "You're just as bossy now as you were when we were kids, DeeDee Walling." She looked over her shoulder. "And I'll always love you for it."

"I love you, too," DeeDee said.

The day was gray. Low lying clouds blanketed the sky with the tantalizing prospect of rain. Tobi glanced up and considered going back inside for an umbrella. But long experience told her that the apparent approach of rain in West Texas was more often a tease than the prelude to water falling out of the sky. So she didn't bother.

The apartment Hugh had rented occupied the space above a garage. Tobi walked up rickety stairs, opened the door and sneezed explosively as she encountered a cloud of dust suspended in the stale air.

"Sorry," Ben called from the sofa where he was excavating under the cushions. "I've been stirring up the accumulations from the last few dirt storms."

"This is a dump," Tobi said, observing the littered floor and shabby furniture. "Why would he want to live here?"

"I would say his living conditions weren't important to him," Ben said. "And maybe he was hoping his wife would join him, and he would find something better then."

"Maybe so. How's it going - do you have the computer hooked up?"

"Near as I can tell. I should have waited for you. I use one of these things at work occasionally, but they're mainly a mystery to me. You probably could have put it together in half the time."

"Never mind, you've got it now," Tobi said, sitting on a folding chair in front of the computer screen. "Okay, let's see what Hugh has in here."

Ben watched her punch buttons and maneuver the mouse. "Y'know. It's a funny thing," he said musingly, "that the killer never broke in here and smashed up the computer or stole it or searched for incriminating evidence on it or..."

Tobi paused and looked at him. "DeeDee says you know who did it."

"I have suspicions."

"About?"

"I can't say until I have some hard evidence. I'll tell you as soon as I can."

"All right, keep your little secret," Tobi shrugged, returning to the computer. "Do you think I'm going to find anything helpful on here?"

"Maybe. I just know we have to check it out. Kent should be here any time. He's going to help you."

"Okay, good," Tobi responded absently, concentrating on the screen.

"And I've got to figure out where that red sports car is," Ben muttered to himself as he opened doors and drawers.

Tobi looked up. "My car's outside."

"No, not yours. The one the killer was driving. That car has to be somewhere."

Tobi cocked her head. "That's right. Somebody must have rented it or stolen it. How long will it take to find out?"

"It wasn't stolen," Ben said. "At least, it was never reported stolen. And I've checked all the rental places in a two-hundred-mile radius. No luck."

"So the killer just happened to own the right kind of car or he borrowed it from someone."

"Or he bought it specifically to frame you. In any case, where's the car? Somebody has to know where that car is."

"What car is that?" Kent asked, walking in.

"A red sports car exactly like Tobi's," Ben said.

"I've been wondering about that, too," Kent said. "You haven't located it?"

"I've checked out every red sports car in town," Ben said. "All 12 of them. None of the owners are connected to the case in any way and the cars are all accounted for last Sunday morning."

Kent looked thoughtful. "You know...if you could find it, it might be the key to the whole case."

"My thought exactly," Ben agreed. "Look, Kent, if you don't mind, I'd like to go through every pocket in every article of clothing in the closet. If you like, I'll pack Hugh's things in his suitcase as I go. Then when I'm finished, you'll be that much closer to having the job done."

"Great idea," Kent said. "I wasn't looking forward to doing it myself."

Ben went into the bedroom and Kent pulled up a chair next to Tobi's. "Here are Hugh's passwords," he said, setting a small note pad on the desk. "I called Mom and she told me the

ones she could think of. He mainly used 'deadline' but he occasionally used birth dates and license plate numbers."

"What a relief! I was afraid we'd be here all day trying to get access to the files."

Quickly and methodically, they opened each file and printed the ones that might shed some light on the case. Then they began reading. Finally Tobi called, "Hey, Ben, come here! Here are some notes about his trip to Austin and New Orleans."

Ben joined them. "What's it say?"

" 'Rattled some cages, made some noise in Austin and New Orleans,' " Tobi read. " 'Finally got a call from some little mouse claiming to work in Kirby's office building. Wouldn't give name. Claimed Missy tired of being Kirby's concubine. Tried to blackmail him. Instead of paying her off, he sent her to Mardi Gras with an assassin and she never came back.

" 'Mouse claimed there's no evidence. No way to verify story. So I confronted Kirby. He denied everything. Two minutes later I'm being paged, Ringener's on the phone shrieking at me about slander and getting back to Foxhole before I get stuffed in a jar.

" 'What I wouldn't give to wipe that smug look off Kirby's face. But he'll walk and there's nothing I can do about it.' "

Tobi looked up. "That's it. He goes on to something else."

"What about you, Kent? Have you found anything?" Ben asked.

Instead of answering, Kent handed the page he was reading to Ben. "Look, I can't take this," he said, wiping his hand across his eyes. "I've got to get out of here. Mom can send for Hugh's things."

He got up and walked out. "Was he crying?" Tobi asked.

"I think so."

"I'll be right back," she said and hurried out. "Kent wait."

He paused beside his car. "I'm sorry, Tobi. I'd like to help, but I...can't. I'll call you."

There it was again - Kent saying, "I can't." Her heart ached for him. "It's okay. I understand," she said quietly, putting her arms around his neck. "I'll always, always love you, Kent. You've been a good friend, and you always will be."

He held her a few moments, kissed the top of her head and said, "Bye, Tobi."

She watched his car pull away, waved one more time, and went back inside. Ben was folding up his cellular phone and jamming it into his pocket as she entered. "What was that all about?" she asked.

Ben handed her the page Kent had been reading. It was a letter to Audrey. A note really. "My dear lady," Tobi read, "It's not too late. We can work it out. But if you're determined to go ahead with the divorce, Eric's certain he can get me half of everything in the settlement. Think it over. Hugh"

Tears welled in Tobi's eyes. "Poor Hugh...poor Audrey...poor Kent. I wish it could have had a happy ending." She fumbled in her purse for a tissue while Ben leafed through the rest of the pages from Hugh's computer.

"What's this?" he asked, holding up several pages.

"What's it say?"

" 'Hit List,' " Ben read aloud, then he scanned the rest of the page. "Whew! Hugh was one angry man."

"Why? What is it?" Tobi tried to look at the page, but Ben pulled it away from her.

"It's what he really thought about certain people. I don't think you want to see it. Some of his language is pretty ugly."

"Who does he talk about? Am I on there?" Tobi settled back and watched Ben's face. He was right; she had no interest in reading Hugh's foul language.

"Here's Audrey. She's first. Tye Ringener. Mike Temple. Nelson Kirby. Cowardly Mouse..."

"What does he say about Kent?" Tobi asked.

Ben shuffled through the papers twice. "Kent's not here," he finally said with a frown. "Neither are you." He grinned mischievously at his sister-in-law. "I bet you would have been here two years ago."

"I probably would have been at the top of the page," she agreed wryly. "What does he say about Audrey?"

"Hmm...well, I'll bleep the bad words," Ben decided. "'Starch-faced bleep witch," he read. "Thinks she should be able to toss me away and pull me back like a bleep bleep yo-yo. Like I was put on this Earth for her convenience. I should cut her bleep nose off. Then she couldn't look down it at me..." "

"That's not fair," Tobi said indignantly. "Audrey's not like that!"

"Maybe," Ben said, glancing down the page, "he wrote these notes as some kind of therapy. Maybe he wrote his feelings so he wouldn't speak them. Or act on them."

"That's possible. What about Tye Ringener and Mike and Kirby? Had any of them threatened him in any way?"

Ben scanned the pages. "There's nothing new here. He thought Tye was a crybaby for not helping him tighten the noose on Kirby. Kirby's a cold-blooded killer and an exploiter of women..." Ben paused and read silently for a few moments. "I think he was jealous of Mike Temple," he finally said. "Mike's young, handsome, well-liked. Everything Hugh wasn't"

Tobi sighed and stretched. "Look, is there anything else we need to do here?" she asked. "Why don't we take all this stuff to your house and read it? This place is depressing."

"I have a better idea," Ben said. "I'll take it down to the station. We have officers who are paid to solve mysteries. They can read all this stuff and you can go enjoy your day off."

"Good idea," Tobi said. "Reading what Hugh has written is a little bit like being with him, and I never cared for his company."

"Tell DeeDee I won't be home for lunch. It's time to find that red sports car and I intend to locate it today."

"How?"

"Police work. Good old-fashioned police work. I predict that before bedtime tonight one of my fine colleagues in blue somewhere in the great state of Texas will have located that missing vehicle."

"And where in the great state of Texas do you predict they'll find it?"

Ben hesitated. "Well, if you must know," he finally said, "I'm putting my money on Austin."

"In Senator Nelson Kirby's garage?" Tobi guessed.

Ben laughed. "Well, I have to give him credit for being a little smarter than that. No, I don't expect it to be in his garage."

Tobi stepped out of the stale apartment into the sweet scent of rain. She turned her face upward, and it was spritzed with rain drops. They weren't tumbling out of the sky in a fast and furious torrent, but floating down on dandelion wings and landing with lovely, languid splats on the thirsty earth.

Tobi instinctively stretched her arms wide, increasing the landing sites on her body for the droplets, and strolled to her car. In her arid world, the smell of rain was the smell of hope. Of renewal. Of a good cotton crop and a healthy economy. She rolled the window down and let the heady fragrance fill her car as she drove.

By the time Tobi arrived at the Wallings' home, the rain was falling harder. She breathed a prayer of thanks to the Lord, as she dashed inside. If this easy drizzle continued all day, it would soak into the soil and do local farmers a world of good.

Tobi spent the day working on a photograph album with DeeDee, helping Alison organize a research paper, and playing video games with Davy. By bedtime she had forgotten Ben's prediction about finding the red sports car. But he received a late phone call and shortly thereafter DeeDee poked her head into Tobi's bedroom to report, "Ben was right. The car is in Austin."

Tobi's mouth dropped open. "You're kidding! Where? How did Ben know it would be there? Whose car is it?"

"It was in a shopping center parking lot. The license plates had been removed. They're trying to track down the owner."

"Nelson Kirby's hit man," Tobi said grimly. "But how can Ben prove it?"

DeeDee shrugged. "If I knew, I'd be the police detective. Anyway, he'll find a way. Don't you worry about that. Good night, sis. I hope you sleep well."

"I hope I do, too," Tobi said doubtfully after DeeDee had shut the door. "And I hope I don't dream about Hugh's ugly mug."

She opened her Bible to Psalm 18:35. The last phrase made it one of her favorite verses in the whole Bible: "...and thy gentleness hath made me great."

The idea of gentleness in the omnipotent Creator of planets and suns, galaxies and universes was too awesome to comprehend. Yet His incomprehensible gentleness permeated her soul and created a quiet sanctuary there where she could withdraw into refreshing fellowship with her Lord any hour of the day or night.

Tobi slid to the floor and knelt beside the bed. "Thank You, Lord," she prayed, "for your awesome gentleness. Thank You for Ben and for making him such a good detective. Thank You for my beautiful family and my wonderful life. And thank You for the rain.

"I pray that You continue to give Ben wisdom to know how to prove who killed Hugh. And keep him safe during this investigation. Be with all the policemen and women who protect us every day. Be their place of safety and their high tower.

"I pray for Your guidance and protection for each member of my family. And for Kent and Audrey. And for Joel, too. Lord, I don't want to be attracted to Joel. But I am. Help me not to make a stupid mistake. Like falling in love with another Charismatic flake.

"I'm sorry. I know you love Joel. And the rest of the Charismatics. Even Lyle. Please open their eyes to the deceptions they're believing...or else open my eyes if I'm the one who's wrong.

"I love You more than words can say. In Jesus' name. Amen."

Chapter 10

Sunday: Picnic at Willowdale Park

The telephone was ringing off the hook before anyone was up Sunday morning. The first call woke Tobi, and she could hear the buzz of conversation as Ben spoke into the phone and then to DeeDee.

Suddenly, it rang again. She was about to go find out what all the excitement was about when she remembered it was Sunday. Better get a shower first. She could find out about the phone calls later.

When she walked into the kitchen, toweling her hair dry, Ben and DeeDee were poring over the morning newspaper. "What's going on?" she asked.

Ben handed her the paper. The headline at the top of the front page read, "Detective shields sister-in-law."

Tobi looked at Ben. "You're the detective and I'm the sister-in-law, I presume?"

He nodded. "They say you're the chief suspect, and I have refused to so much as bring you in for questioning. A gun registered to you killed their new managing editor before he was

able to officially take his post. It was no secret that there was bad blood between you and Hugh, etc., etc. They make it clear that you're guilty, and I'm covering for you."

"Written by Reuben Garza, I see," Tobi observed. "Wouldn't I love to get my hands on him and shake the teeth out of his head!" She sighed. "So what were all the phone calls about."

"The Chief called to take me off the case," Ben said. "He picked up his paper this morning, swallowed the whole pitch, and called to tell me he was replacing me with Rick Macy. He said Rick would be picking you up for questioning within the hour."

Tobi's eyes widened. "He's coming here? He's taking me to the police station? It's Sunday. Can't they wait until tomorrow?"

"Calm down, sis," DeeDee said soothingly. "You've only heard the beginning of the story. As soon as the police chief hung up, Ben called Julius."

"Julius? Why?"

"He's a lawyer. He knows a few big shots around the state. In less than 30 minutes the Chief called back and said Ben was in charge of the case again."

"You're kidding! Julius did that?" Tears flooded Tobi's cheeks, tears of gratitude for the older brother she hardly knew. He had been 15 when she was born and left for college when she was three. She remembered adoring him when she was little and following him around like a small, shy shadow when he came home for vacations, but he was a serious student. He didn't come home often. "How?" she asked.

Ben grinned broadly. "He made phone calls to some good buddies. They made phone calls to their buddies, and within a few minutes my police chief and the publisher of the *Crier* received phone calls from Austin. The Chief was furious. He said he was going to personally look into this case and, if I've been covering up anything, he's going to call *his* friends in Austin and make sure I never work in Texas again. Archer called to rant and rave at me, saying I was a

high-handed bleepety bleep bleep, and that he would make sure the truth came out if it was the last thing he ever did."

Ben leaned back in his chair and smiled contentedly. "All in all, it's been an invigorating morning," he said cheerfully.

"But, Ben, it's not right for you to get in trouble over all this. I never realized you might be blamed for not arresting me," Tobi said urgently. "Maybe it would be better if you did take me in for questioning."

"Don't be an idiot, Tobi," DeeDee said. "Ben's going to wrap this case up in a few days, and it won't help him or you or anybody else if he pretends he thinks you're guilty."

"Really?" Tobi asked Ben.

"Really," Ben said reassuringly.

"Okay," Tobi said with a sigh of relief, "but I feel bad about Julius finding out about this mess this way. I should have called him when it all started, but I didn't even think of it." She blushed and bit her lip. "I've been so involved with myself and my problems it never even occurred to me to let Julius know what was going on."

"He knew," Ben said. "I called him last Sunday and told him about it. We've talked every day since. He knows everything I know about the case."

Again Tobi felt overwhelmed. "Julius knows all about it - the murder, the suspects, the red car, everything?" Ben nodded. "And it never even occurred to me that he would be interested," she said sadly.

"Oh, Tobi," DeeDee said, "you have no idea how much Julius cares about us. I know you think he's too busy to have time for us, but he's still our brother and he loves us. Last time we visited him and Joyce, she showed me a box he keeps on the shelf of his closet. It's his box of

treasures, and in it there's a scribbled drawing you sent to him when he was in college. Joyce said he gets teary-eyed every time he looks at it."

Tobi shook her head in disbelief. "He's always been one of my heroes, but I thought I was like a gnat buzzing around his head and he hardly knew I existed."

"So now you know," DeeDee said. "He knows you exist."

"If you ladies will excuse me," Ben said, "I have to be going." He kissed DeeDee, then put a finger on her mouth and added, "Don't say it! I'll be careful. I promise." He kissed her again, winked at Tobi and left.

"Where's he going?" Tobi asked.

"Austin. And maybe New Orleans."

Tobi swallowed hard. "Why?"

DeeDee's mouth smiled, but her eyes were dark with fear. "He says there's a state senator he wants to see. After he talks to Kirby, he'll decide whether or not he's going to New Orleans."

Tobi's mouth was so dry she could barely speak. "Hugh was murdered after he went to Austin and New Orleans," she croaked.

"I know." DeeDee poured a glass of juice and set it in front of Tobi. Her lips were stretched into a thin, bloodless line, but her eyes were dry. So far. Suddenly she lowered her head and whispered, "Dear God, please take care of my husband."

Tobi gulped down some juice, then put her hands in DeeDee's and added, "Father, it doesn't matter whether we ever know who killed Hugh. Please, just bring Ben back safe. In Jesus' name. Amen."

They sat in silence for a while, drinking juice and coffee and letting their faith in an omnipotent God translate into the peace they needed to walk into a frightening day. Finally,

DeeDee said, "The case is solved, and I think Ben will have the proof he needs when he gets back. I'm pretty sure it has something to do with the car."

"Were there fingerprints in it?"

"No." DeeDee frowned, then smiled fondly at the thought of her husband. "Ben can be such a pain! Sometimes, I think he's afraid of jinxing an investigation if he says too much too soon. Normally I don't care, but this time I want to know so bad I could wring his neck."

"If the case is solved," Tobi asked thoughtfully, "why didn't he just tell the chief of police instead of calling Julius about it?"

DeeDee grinned. "Mainly because the Chief made him mad with his high-handed attitude. He didn't call up and ask how the case was going - he just started ranting about Ben's protecting you when he's paid to protect *all* the citizens of Deepwater, etc., etc.

"But he also wasn't taking any chances. A herd of buffaloes couldn't drag him off this case, especially now that it's nearly solved. So he called Julius for insurance."

Tobi sighed. "I hope he knows what he's doing. I wouldn't want him to lose his perspective and cause trouble for himself because of me."

DeeDee's smile reached her eyes now, as she said confidently, "I've known Ben over twenty years and I can almost guarantee you that he knows what he's doing. So, what do you say? Let's get the kids up and get ourselves to church on time."

"Right." Tobi got up, but she moved slowly. She wasn't looking forward to her singles Sunday School class. Now that Chuck and Susie were married, the class was down to three faithful students, three occasional students, and a teacher. Chuck's lively temperament had always created a cheerful dynamic among the participants. What would Sunday School be like without him? Tobi was afraid it was going to be 10 shades of dull.

Sure enough, when she walked into the classroom, she was met by three pairs of eyes - "basset hound eyes," she told herself silently - and three deeply furrowed countenances.

"Are you all right?" Barry Tuttle, the teacher, asked solicitously.

"Of course," she said firmly. "And I'm not interested in talking about Hugh Mansett's murder."

"But you weren't here last week," Marijo Builder said earnestly. Her voice pulsed with the pathos of her empathy.

It was all Tobi could do not to tell Marijo to mind her own business, so she said nothing.

"And then we heard the new editor of the paper had been shot with your gun and you were the only suspect," Marijo continued. "What were we to think? We were horrified!"

"Speak for yourself," said George Walker. He was the oldest member of the class at 55 and the only pleasant one left, now that Chuck and Susie had moved to the couple's class. "Obviously Tobi couldn't have done it." he said calmly, "She's not stupid enough to leave her gun at the scene of the crime."

"Well, of course not," said Barry soothingly. "Nobody thinks she did it."

Marijo looked skeptical, but said nothing, and Barry began the Sunday School lesson. Tobi stared out the window and wondered what it would be like to be in a couple's class, like *normal* people. What it would be like to be happily married like *normal* people. What it would be like to have children like *normal* people.

She fought back tears and wondered if Joel were out hiking on Homerun Hill again this Sunday. She wished she were there, even if she had to share it with him...hmm...*especially* if she had to share it with him. She blushed at the thought and hoped no one noticed.

Wouldn't it be nice if she could get him to save her from another rattlesnake? This time she would enjoy it. She would put her arms around his neck and rest her head on his shoulder and *relax*. Tobi imagined that charming scene and smiled to herself.

The Sunday School hour finally ended, and Tobi walked with her class into the sanctuary. To her surprise, Kent was sitting with Alison. They were having an animated conversation, and Tobi knew Alison was enjoying the curious looks of her friends, as they wondered who the handsome stranger was.

"Hi, Kent," she beamed at him. "I didn't expect to see you today, but I'm glad you're here."

"I decided I was too upset to drive yesterday," he explained. "And then I got to thinking about today and how much I would like to go to church with you just one time." He sounded sad.

"Well, I'm glad you came," Tobi said. "Davy and I are going to a hospital picnic after church. We'd love for you to come with us if you want to."

"Thanks, but I'm packed, and the car is loaded. When I leave here, I'm on my way to Dallas. I'll be back on the job tomorrow."

"I'll miss you," Tobi said quietly. "I want us to stay in touch this time."

He nodded as DeeDee, with Davy in tow, joined them. DeeDee patted Kent's back with an approving smile and Davy scowled in his general direction. Tobi leaned over and turned up the corners of Davy's mouth. "You're packing a pretty scary face," she whispered to him. "Don't you remember how to smile?"

"Don't want to," he growled, batting her hands away. Tobi scooted down so she was face to face with him and put on the biggest scowl she could muster.

"Quit it," he said, turning away, so she wouldn't see that his smile was about to break through.

"Don't want to," she muttered in his ear in a fair imitation of his voice. He grinned then and pushed her away, trying to recapture his frown.

"What's your problem?" Tobi asked.

"Don't like *him*," Davy said with a brief glance at Kent.

"Why not?"

"He didn't even save you from the grasshopper. Why don't you make him go 'way?"

"He's still my friend, Davy, and I hope he always will be. But I'll tell you a secret if you promise not to tell anybody."

"What?" He had forgotten his bad mood now and watched her face with deep interest.

"You didn't promise."

"I promise not to tell anybody in the whole wide world," he said solemnly.

Tobi leaned over further and breathed into his ear, "I like Coach Trent better."

Davy beamed and applied one of his stranglehold hugs to her neck. "Me too," he whispered.

Tobi straightened up and joined in with the congregation singing "Open My Eyes That I May See."

As the service progressed, she watched Kent out of the corner of her eye, wondering what he was thinking. He stood straight as an arrow, almost like a soldier at attention, when the congregation stood. When seated, he never moved. "He could be a statue of a Greek god," she thought, "except that he's wearing clothes." His dark blue suit looked expensive and set him off as easily the handsomest man in the congregation.

The pastor had just opened his Bible to begin his sermon when DeeDee nudged Tobi. "Looks who's sitting in the back pew, right hand side."

Trying to be unobtrusive, Tobi glanced back and saw Joel. Her body went limp. "Stop it!" she fussed at herself. It had been several days since she had felt a similar reaction in Kent's presence. In fact, he had never affected her as intensely as Joel did. "Help, Lord," she prayed silently. "Why do I have to turn into a rag doll every time I see him?"

To DeeDee she whispered, "What's *he* doing here?"

DeeDee gave her an exasperated look. "As if you don't know!"

Pastor Brighton was calling their attention to the text for the day, Luke 12:2, "For there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; neither hid, that shall not be known."

"First of all, I want to apologize to Tobi Kirkland," he said. "I was out of town all week and unaware of the ordeal you've been going through, Tobi. I arrived home late last night and only learned about your situation when I read the story on the front page of the paper today. I want you to know," he said smiling into her eyes, "that if I'd known, I would have skipped my meetings and come home on the spot."

"Frankly, this is something new for me. I've never had a member of my congregation falsely accused of murder so I have no precedent to follow. But my first impulse upon hearing the story was a deep desire to make it clear to every person in this church and this town that the truth will be known. Tobi, there is nothing covered that will not be revealed. You can count on that."

Tobi hadn't expected Pastor Brighton to offer such strong support from the pulpit. She struggled to hold back tears of gratitude as he continued with his theme that nothing could be hidden forever - eventually, everything will be brought to the light. The words were music to her ears. And to her heart, the sermon became a promise that Hugh Mansett's killer would eventually be arrested.

When the service ended, Tobi was the center of attention. Friends and acquaintances flocked around her to add their words of support to those already voiced by the pastor.

Fifteen minutes elapsed before Tobi could extricate herself, feeling warmed and encouraged, from her well-wishers. By then, Joel was gone, and Kent was looking impatient. "Come on," Tobi said, catching his hand and leading him toward the door. "I'll walk you to your car."

They had almost reached the door when someone called, "Yoo hoo, Tobi!"

It was Chuck and Susie. "What a dreadful week you've had!" Susie gushed. "I'm so sorry you're having to go through this. Who do you think really did it?"

Tobi shrugged. "Ben has some leads, but it's too complicated to go into now. I'm sure he'll solve the case soon."

"I'm Chuck Warren, and this is my wife, Susie," Chuck said, holding out his hand to Kent.

"Kent Grantham," Kent said, shaking Chuck's hand and nodding at Susie.

"Kent is a dear old friend," Tobi said and, grateful for an excuse to cut the conversation short, she added, "He's been in town this week, but he's about to leave for Dallas, so you'll really have to excuse us."

She and Kent stopped at the door so she could hug the pastor and thank him for his support. "I can't tell you how much it means to me for you to say right from the pulpit that you believe I'm innocent."

"It was the least I could do," he answered. "Now, tell me what else I can do to help."

"I'm okay," Tobi assured him. "Ben and DeeDee and the kids are looking after me. Kent, too. Pastor Brighton, I'd like you to meet Kent Grantham. He's the stepson of the man who died. We're old friends."

The men shook hands, and then Tobi and Kent continued to Kent's car. "Did you hear that the police in Austin found the red sports car?" Tobi asked.

"No! That's wonderful!" Kent exclaimed. "Whose is it?"

"We don't know yet. The license plates were removed. Ben is in Austin now, trying to wrap up all the loose ends."

"I wondered where he was," Kent said. "I have a feeling that if anybody can solve this mystery, he can."

Tobi smiled bravely. "Of course he can. And we'll keep you and Audrey informed whenever there's any news."

"Thanks. I'll look forward to hearing from you. And maybe you'll decide to move to Big D one of these days."

"Maybe so."

Kent embraced her for a long moment, kissed her cheek, then released her. "Bye, Tobi."

"Good bye, Kent."

A sad, empty feeling began creeping over Tobi as Kent drove away, but it was quickly forgotten. Davy raced up, grabbed her hand and tugged. "Come on, Tob, let's go. We'll be late for the picnic!"

"I'm coming. You don't have to drag me," Tobi said.

The picnic was in full swing when they arrived, and Tobi had a hard time finding a parking place in the gravel parking lot. Finally, she squeezed her car into a tight corner, and they got out. "Wow, there's lots of people here," Davy said, surveying the scene.

"There sure are," Tobi agreed, feeling uncomfortable as she realized how few of those active, brightly clad individuals she knew. At the edge of the parking area, she paused to get her bearings.

Willowdale Park was one of the most beautiful spots in Deepwater. Its picnic area was a shallow valley carpeted with lush grass and decorated with graceful willow trees. It was like an oasis in the wilderness since willow trees rarely thrive in arid West Texas. It was only with the greatest attention to their needs that these had been persuaded to grow and flourish.

Over a hill, in a flat, parched area that was more typical of West Texas, the city had built a playground, tennis courts and a volleyball court. Beyond these were a softball field and then further yet, Homerun Hill.

Tobi shuddered suddenly. "Davy, watch out for rattlesnakes today."

"Rattlesnakes?" Davy looked at her as if she'd lost her mind. "Aunt Tobi, there's no rattlesnakes around here."

"Right, no rattlesnakes around here," she repeated to herself, then added, "you be careful anyway!"

"Look! There he is," Davy cried, pointing to a group of people in the center of the picnic area.

Tobi followed his finger and saw Joel, holding court like a king. He was surrounded by hospital staff - mostly nurses, Tobi guessed - all competing for his attention. Well, who could blame them? He was tall and muscular, dressed for the scalding afternoon in shorts and a tank top. She felt her own heart beginning to rev up at the sight of him.

"Okay, you go talk to him, and I'll find a grasshopper," Davy said excitedly.

Tobi caught his arm before he could take flight. "Not now. There are too many people around. Anyway, I'm not sure I even want to try it today. Don't you think it's kinda' dumb?"

"No," Davy replied with the honesty of childhood. "I think it's fun."

"Come on, let's get something to eat," Tobi suggested. "Aren't you hungry?"

"Sure!" Davy was usually hungry.

There was a delicious array of food - fried chicken, barbecue, hot dogs, salads and desserts. "Mmmmm boy," Davy said. "I'm glad I'm hungry."

They filled their plates and looked for a place to sit. "Let's go over to that table," Tobi pointed. "I think I recognize someone I know."

"But there's no kids," Davy objected. "I'm gonna' go sit with the rest of the kids under that tree," he said, nodding toward a magnificent old willow tree whose feathery boughs touched the ground and created a cool cave around its trunk.

"Good idea. I'll see you later," Tobi agreed, continuing to the picnic table she had chosen. "You're Bess, aren't you?" she asked one of the women who was sitting there.

Bess looked up. "That's right. And you're..."

"I'm Tobi Kirkland. I've been filling in for Vi Crofton."

"Oh, right!" Bess's face brightened. "You were there the other day when I came in acting loopy. You probably thought I was a big baby, falling apart because one cranky doctor yelled at me."

"No, I didn't. I would have probably had to go home and cry the rest of the morning if someone treated me that way. I think you nurses are wonderful to put up with so much abuse and not take it out on your patients."

"Who says we don't take it out on our patients?" Bess asked with a grin, then added seriously, "Of course, we try not to. Listen, what's the news from Vi?"

"We haven't heard anything yet," Tobi said. "If she doesn't call on Monday, Joel may try to call her."

"Well, if you hear, let me know. Everybody at the hospital loves her as much as we do Joel. Sometimes he's not there and then she lets us cry on her shoulder."

"They're a pretty amazing pair, aren't they?" Tobi asked.

"There's nobody like 'em. Listen, there was an article in the paper this morning about a Tobi somebody. That wasn't...?"

"Yes, it was. I'm the famous murder suspect."

Bess's eyes widened. "How terrible for you. How do you keep on functioning, knowing that people think you're capable of...?"

"Nobody who knows me believes it," Tobi said. "And I'm pretty much on autopilot right now, just cruising until this mess is over."

"Would you tell me about it?" Bess asked eagerly. "I like mysteries. Wouldn't it be cool if I could figure out who did it?"

Tobi nodded. "It would be cool if *anybody* figured out who did it."

She told Bess the details of the case and they discussed it from every angle. Finally Bess said, "I get the impression you think Kirby did it?"

Tobi nodded. "I think I do. For one thing, I think he may be the only person involved who's capable of doing something so horrible. And for another, I keep coming back to Kirby because it's my greatest fear. If he paid someone to do it, I'm afraid he'll never be connected to the case, and I'll always look guilty.

"I don't think he did it," said Bess.

"Why not?"

"The gun. Why would someone who's going to hire an assassin steal your gun and try to frame you? Why bother?"

"Maybe so, but then who do you think did it?"

"The widow," Bess said confidently. "I'm certain she's the one. She has absolutely no alibi, and she's the only one who has anything to gain."

Tobi shook her head. "I don't want it to be Audrey," she said sorrowfully. "Anyway, Hugh could have taken half her money and she never would have missed it. I just don't think it's a good motive."

"Don't you know anything?" Bess asked scornfully. "It's not the money, *per se*. It's the principle of the thing! That lousy excuse for a human being trying to take her money when he has no right to it. Why he deserved to be shot! I'd have done the same thing!"

"Really?" Tobi grinned. "How many guns have you fired in your life?"

Bess looked startled, then laughed. "You're right. I'd still be there shooting at him if I had to put a bullet through his heart."

"Me too," said Tobi, "which is probably the main reason Ben hasn't arrested me. In fact, he probably laughs himself silly at the idea of my even trying to aim a gun, much less shoot it."

"Anyway," Bess added, "I'm not buying the idea that somebody broke into your house last month to steal your gun. It's too chancy. You could have sold it or given it away or hidden it too well. I'm telling you; the widow stole it while you were living in Foxhole."

Tobi shook her head. "It couldn't be Audrey. It just couldn't; she's too soft-hearted."

"Okay, try this on for size. Somebody hates you so they decide they'll give you a good scare by breaking into your house and stealing a few things. When they do, they find the gun. Then the word gets out that your old nemesis, Hugh what's-his-face, is moving here, and they decide they'll really make your life miserable, so they kill him and frame you. The motive isn't hatred of Hugh; it's hatred of *you*."

"You've been reading too many mystery stories," Tobi said. "Nobody hates me that much. How could they without my knowing about it?"

"Easy. You wrote an unfavorable article about them. Or they don't like the opinions you express in your columns. Or..."

"Wait, wait!" Tobi objected. "If it's somebody in the *Crier's* readership who doesn't actually know me, how could they know to choose Hugh for their victim?"

"Never underestimate the deviousness of the criminal mind," Bess warned in an ominous whisper. Then she added cheerfully, "I'm going for dessert. How about you? Want me to bring you something?"

"No, I'm through eating for now," Tobi said. "I see Joel's free. I'm going to go talk to him a minute. Catch you later."

She tossed her plate and plastic fork in a trash can and approached Joel. "I saw you at my church this morning. How come?"

"Curiosity, I guess. And the fact that..."

"That what?"

"That I..." He hesitated. "That I...that...my admiration for you has grown since I met you. So I wanted to know what kind of church you attend." He avoided her eyes.

"So?"

"So what?"

"How did you like it?"

There was a long pause as he searched for words. Finally he said, "I didn't...well, I didn't exactly sense the presence of the Holy Spirit there."

"Or some unholy spirit," she added.

His eyes flashed. "What do you mean by that?" The hostility in his voice told her he knew exactly what she meant by that.

She shrugged. "I always used to say the same thing. If I didn't get goose bumps or warm fuzzies or see something exciting happening, I always said the Holy Spirit hadn't bothered to

show up. But Jesus said that where two or more are gathered in His name, He will be in the midst of them. Do you think He was lying?"

"Of course not!"

"Then He was there. And if you're going to depend on feelings and experiences to indicate God's presence, some unholy spirit is going to show up, give you a feeling or an experience, and lead you astray."

Joel frowned. He didn't like her answer, but he was thinking about it when Davy came hurtling down upon them. He was shrieking like a war plane tearing into battle and waving a grasshopper in his hand.

Tobi screamed more from surprise than fear of the grasshopper. Instinctively, she leaped behind Joel. The next thing she knew, Joel had swept Davy up to his shoulder and was bearing him away like a victorious warrior, brandishing a trophy.

"You won!" Davy screamed. "He wins, doesn't he Aunt Tobi?"

"Shut up!" Tobi yelled, but it was too late. Davy's delight was too great to squelch.

Joel halted. "Who wins what?"

"You win my Aunt Tobi. You saved her from the grasshopper, so you win."

Tobi was redder than a new stop sign. "Davy Scott Walling, if you say another word, you'll be a pit bull's dinner!"

Joel's enormous grin was broader than she had ever seen it as he pivoted and carried Davy away. When they were far beyond earshot, Joel stopped and shook the grasshopper out of Davy's hand. He set Davy down, and they huddled. Tobi had never felt so mortified in her life as she did at that moment, watching her nephew explain their ruse to the enemy. She turned on her heel and went to find less embarrassing company.

Joel was kind enough to avoid her the rest of the afternoon, except that once in passing he whispered, "I would consider it a privilege if you'll let me save you from all the grasshoppers in the world."

"Davy has a big mouth," she sputtered and walked on.

Joel watched her go with that exasperating grin all over his face. Not that she was looking at him, but she knew it was there.

A rousing game of softball rounded out the afternoon. Tobi and Davy returned home sunburned, dusty and tired. "Thanks for taking me, Tobi, I had a great time!" Davy said, throwing his arms around her neck.

"You're welcome, Davy dear, but I'm not very happy with you. You weren't supposed to tell Joel the plan."

His head drooped. "I'm sorry. I thought you meant *before*. I thought it would be okay *after*."

Tobi sighed and kissed his rosy cheek. "Okay, I guess I have to forgive you. It's my own fault for not being sure you understood."

"Anyway, I'm glad he won!" Davy grinned. "Are you going to marry him now?"

"Davy! Women don't marry men unless they're asked."

"Well, if he asks, are you going to marry him?"

"That's not even the question, baby. The question is whether I'm going to go on a date with him if he asks."

"Are you?"

Tobi nodded. "I think I just might," she said softly.

Ben called from New Orleans around 9:00 to say he was still alive and expected to stay that way. He would be home sometime in the night and had plenty of news, but it would have to wait until morning because his flight had just been announced.

Tobi and DeeDee eyed each other in dismay. They would have to live with the suspense for a few more hours. "Well, it has to be good news," Tobi said finally. "I mean, we know I didn't kill Hugh so anything he found out will help clear me. And that's good news, right?"

"Makes sense to me," DeeDee agreed.

Later, reading Psalm 18, Tobi stopped at verse 28. "For thou wilt light my candle: the Lord my God will enlighten my darkness."

It was the same thing Pastor Brighton had preached on that morning. Nothing can stay hidden forever because the Lord can shine His light in any darkness. And she could trust Him to bring to light the truth about the murder of Hugh Mansett.

Tobi went to her knees and prayed earnestly, "Thank You, Lord, for lighting my candle and enlightening my darkness. I believe You will do whatever it takes to reveal the truth in this case, even if some hired assassin did it. Thank You for being omnipotent.

"And thank You so much for taking care of Ben and for bringing him safely home. Whatever he found out today, help him to know what it means and what he should do next."

She sighed before she continued. "Lord, I know it's silly, but I'm glad Joel saved me from the grasshopper. I'd rather be saved from a grasshopper than a dragon any day - dragons breathe fire, but grasshoppers are gross!" She shuddered.

"But, please, protect me from infatuation. Help me to see the real Joel. Help Joel to see the real me so we don't slide down a slippery slope of false expectations into a relationship that You never called us to.

"Thank You, Father, for being You, for being my Shelter, my High Tower, my Buckler, my Savior. I love You. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Chapter 11

Monday: A Visit to Clover Lake

The next morning, Ben was still asleep when Tobi was ready to go to work. DeeDee reported that he had gotten home at 3:00 A.M. and collapsed without telling her anything. "But I'll make sure he calls you first thing," she promised.

Reluctantly, Tobi walked out the door instead of shaking Ben awake and demanding answers. At the hospital, she pushed open the outer office door just in time to hear papers rustling in Joel's office. Then a whole newspaper was hurled against the wall opposite his desk. She could hear him muttering angrily to himself, but the only word she understood was, "Idiots!"

"Which idiots would that be?" she asked, going into his office and gathering up the scattered sheets of newspaper. She glanced at the front page and answered her own question. "Ah, the clowns in D.C."

"Tobi! Good morning. You don't have to clean up my mess," Joel said apologetically. "I was suddenly fed up to the eyeballs with liberal media elites talking about the 'radical right' and lumping conservatives in with fascists. Why don't we ever hear about the radical left?"

Tobi grinned. "No alliteration, I guess."

Joel didn't return her smile. "More likely, they don't think there is any such creature as a radical liberal. The fact is - they all are." He snorted derisively. "If George Washington and Abraham Lincoln were alive today, our brilliant journalists would be bending over backwards to discredit them - the greatest statesmen this country has every produced!"

He smiled then and nodded at the newspaper she held. "Sorry. I should know better than to buy that garbage."

"I'm glad you did," Tobi said. "I acted like such a lunatic Friday afternoon that I was afraid you'd never let me back in the office. So it's reassuring to hear you ranting and raving a little bit yourself."

"Right, Friday afternoon," he said thoughtfully. "You didn't act like a lunatic. And what you said made sense. I thought about it all weekend." He sighed. "I was embarrassed for you to hear what both Gloria and Gracie said, and that disturbed me. My beliefs never embarrassed me before."

He studied her face. "You said we're making God a laughingstock."

She nodded.

Joel winced and pressed the left side of his chest with his right fist. Tobi understood the gesture. The words were a knife in his heart. She knew the feeling well. And she understood why he changed the subject then - such brutal pain can only be tolerated in small doses.

"Did Ben learn how the business card of Senator Kirby's aide got in your house?"

"I don't know." Tobi frowned. "He may have. He flew to Austin and New Orleans yesterday, but he didn't get home until 3:00 this morning and was asleep when I left. DeeDee promised she would make sure he calls as soon as he wakes up."

"So there's nothing new in the case?"

"The red sports car was located in Austin Saturday. And DeeDee says Ben knows who murdered Hugh. He went to Austin and New Orleans to get the proof, but we're still waiting for him to wake up and tell us about it."

Joel brightened. "That's wonderful news! It means you're practically in the clear, doesn't it?"

Tobi nodded and said fervently, "I hope so."

"Oh!" A huge grin suddenly spread across Joel's face. "I have to tell you I was gratified to learn that the movie star clone turned out *not* to be your knight in shining armor."

Tobi blushed as the humiliation of the previous day swept over her again. "Would you please drop it? I'm already so embarrassed I could die. Davy wasn't supposed to tell you *anything*."

Joel suppressed his grin slightly and said, "I'm glad he did."

Tobi pursed her lips. "I feel like a fool."

"Well, join the club," he said unsympathetically. "How do you think I feel - mooning around over you, and you won't give me the time of day because you don't like my church, of all things!"

"Your church and your faith are very important things."

"Granted, but what's it going to take for you to agree to a date with me? Am I going to have to leave my church?" His voice made it clear that such a request would be unreasonable.

"No, just save me from a grasshopper."

He froze at attention. "I already did that."

"So you did."

He studied her for a moment, then asked carefully, "May I take you to dinner tomorrow night?"

"Yes. That would be lovely."

He studied her again. "You mean just because of that grasshopper...?"

"No, of course not."

"Because I came to your church?"

"No."

"Because the movie star's gone?"

"Do you have to have a reason?"

"No. In fact, I think I'll disappear before you change your mind. I have a couple of meetings this morning so I'll be in and out. Why don't you see if you can reach Vi and find out what her doctors say?"

"Will do. What else?"

"There's some typing in your in-tray. Look it over and, if you have any questions, I'll answer them when I get back."

He put his hand on the door to walk out, then paused and looked back. "Do you know what Davy told me yesterday?"

Tobi groaned. "There's no telling."

Joel looked wistful. "He said he prayed I would save you from that grasshopper because he wants me to be his uncle." He whistled softly. "I'm glad that kid is on my side!"

The door swung shut behind him, and Tobi thought gratefully, "I'm glad he's on my side too!" Then she clasped her hands and whispered, "Thank You, Lord, that Joel asked me for a date. I was afraid I was going to have to ask him first!" She stared off dreamily into the distance.

He had invited her to dinner even though she had criticized him repeatedly. Even though he had every reason to think she might reject him. She smiled. The man had guts. No wonder she liked him so much!

She wondered where he would take her. And what she should wear. And if he would kiss her goodnight. With that lovely thought, she leaned back in her chair, closed her eyes and imagined Joel's kiss. How it would feel. How it would taste. How she would...

The phone jangling at her elbow startled her back to reality. It was Vi. "Hi, Tobi, you still there?" she asked.

"I'm hanging in here," Tobi assured her. "And you missed a great picnic yesterday."

"I'm sure I did, but I'm not losing any sleep over it. Hot picnics in dusty parks don't tempt me anymore."

"It was hot and dusty," Tobi admitted. "What's going on with you? Has your doctor found out what's wrong yet?"

"They say I have an adrenal tumor. They don't think it's malignant, so when they take it out, I'm going to be as good as new."

"Oh, Vi, I'm so relieved it's good news, but I'm sorry you have to have surgery."

"I am, too, but I'll be all right, now that I know what it is. It was the not knowing that was the hardest."

"I can understand that. Listen, Bess asked about you yesterday and several others. I'll let them know what's going on. Do you know when you'll be home?"

"In a week. Or less. The doctor says a week. I say less. Look, I have to go, but I'd like to holler at Joel first. Is he there?"

"No, he just left for a meeting. I'll ask him to call you."

"Never mind. When he gets back, I'll be in the middle of surgery."

"You mean it's today?"

"That's right. The men in green will be coming to take me away any minute now. Listen, you haven't had any major rows with Joel while I've been gone, have you?"

"Nothing major. In fact, you were right when you said I would fall for him."

"Was I now? What happened?"

"He's taking me to dinner tomorrow night."

"Good for you! You have fun and tell me all about it when I get home."

Tobi said she would, and they exchanged good byes. She had barely set the receiver down when the phone rang again. It was Ben. "It's about time!" she said. "What happened? I want to know everything."

There was a long hesitation. "Ben, are you still there?" Tobi asked.

"It's not good news, Tobi." He was obviously dreading to tell her what he'd learned.

"Why? Did you find out I did it?"

"No."

"Please tell me it wasn't Audrey."

"It wasn't Audrey."

She was exasperated. "Then who?"

This time, when he paused, she waited him out. "Kent," he said finally.

"No! Ben, you said yourself he couldn't have done it."

"Unless he flew."

"But he didn't. You checked."

"He didn't fly commercial. He's a pilot."

"No, he's not! He's never said a word about flying or airplanes or being a pilot or...anything..." She choked on her words, but she wasn't going to cry because she wasn't going to believe it. *She wasn't!*

Ben sighed. "Look, I'm flying to Clover Lake today to wrap this thing up. I'd like you to go with me because it's possible Kent is there, and you might be able to persuade him to surrender. But he's dangerous, Tobi, so, if you don't want to go, just say so."

Tobi nodded, but she didn't trust her voice, because she was remembering DeeDee's words: "I've known Ben over twenty years, and I can almost guarantee you that he knows what he's doing." Kent was guilty. She had to believe it whether she liked it or not and the impact of the realization drained her strength. She was suddenly too weary even to weep.

"Tobi, did you hear me?"

She nodded again and managed to squeak, "Yes."

"Will you go?"

"Yes."

"We'll use the same plane and pilot we used last week to go to Foxhole. And we'll leave as soon as you can get away. When will that be?"

Tobi looked at the typing Joel had left. "An hour."

"Okay, meet me out front in an hour."

Tobi put the phone down, then buried her head in her arms on the desk. "Lord," she prayed, "how can I bear it if Kent is the murderer? He's my friend. My good friend." She brushed away the tears that were brimming in her eyes - she didn't have time to cry. "Please give me strength to do this work and get through this day."

She took some deep breaths, walked down the hall for a drink and then tackled the typing. While she typed, she called Bess and gave her the update on Vi. "Can you pass the word around?" she asked. "I have to get some work done and be out of here in an hour."

"You got it, kiddo," Bess said.

Tobi barely missed a beat as she replaced the phone on the hook and went on with her work. It was almost like being in the newsroom again, making phone calls and typing at the same time. She finished the work Joel had left with ten minutes to spare and composed a note to leave him:

"Joel, I promise this is the very last time I'll abandon you. Ben says he's wrapping the case up today, but he has to fly to Clover Lake to do it. I'm going with him. He says Kent killed Hugh. I hope he's wrong.

"Vi is in surgery this morning. She has an adrenal tumor, but they don't think it's cancer. She's in good spirits and should be home in a week or less.

- "I called Faye and asked her to take your messages.

"I'm looking forward to our date tomorrow.

Tobi"

Ben was waiting when Tobi hurried out of the hospital. He pulled up beside her, and she got in. "Don't even start," he warned, holding up a hand. "Let's get airborne, then I'll tell you everything."

"Okay, but you have to answer just one question now," she insisted.

"Yes, I'm really, really, really, really sure it was Kent. And I'm sorry, Tobi. I wish I could make it be somebody else."

Tobi let her head sink down against the seat and closed her eyes. She had wanted desperately to believe that Kent had turned his life around and that he was born again. But if he had killed Hugh, then it had all been an act.

"Was Joel upset that you deserted him again?" Ben asked when Tobi finally sat up, took a deep breath, and seemed ready to face the world.

"Who knows? He had gone to a meeting. I left him a note."

"Well, if he says anything, let me know. I'll talk to him."

"I don't think that will be necessary," Tobi said. "He asked me to go to dinner with him tomorrow night, and I said I would."

Ben wheeled around so suddenly his pickup swerved. "You didn't!" he exclaimed.

"I did."

"Life is good," Ben said. "When DeeDee hears this, she'll be on top of the world for a good week. And when DeeDee's on top of the world, well..."

"You poor thing," Tobi said with mock sympathy, "my evil sister is so mean to you most of the time!"

Ben grinned. "She hasn't been mean to me a single time since the day I met her - unless I deserved it, of course. But when she finds out that you've got a date with Joel and I've solved this case, she's going to be so happy, she'll be looking for somebody to take all that happiness out on. And there I'll be!"

Tobi's eyes misted. "Well, as far as I'm concerned, you've earned it. I'll never be able to thank you enough for believing in me and then proving I was innocent."

"Just doing my job, ma'am," Ben said, as he turned into the small landing field where their aircraft was already waiting to take off.

In a matter of minutes they were cruising above the clouds. Ben pulled a couple of papers out of his pocket. They were stamped "Copy."

"Look at these," he said gently. "These are copies of pages from Hugh's computer - the originals are at the station. Do you recognize them?"

Tobi studied them. "Sure, this is Hugh's 'Hit List,' where he ranted and raved about everybody he didn't like. What about it?"

Ben didn't answer. He just waited. So Tobi studied the pages. "Hey, look, Kent's on here. I thought you said he wasn't here."

"His name wasn't on the print out we made Saturday," Ben said. "The copy you're looking at was printed the previous Sunday - the day Hugh was killed - by our computer whiz at the department. He went through Hugh's files and printed everything he could access. The following Saturday, when you and Kent did the same thing, the entries about Kent had mysteriously disappeared."

"So that's why you suspect Kent?" Tobi asked.

"That's part of it. I first suspected him Friday when your house was broken into. At that point, Kent was the only one who knew you had moved out. I'm still not sure whether he was trying to muddy the waters by breaking in again or whether he actually thought he could divert our attention to Brian Jeffers."

"Breaking in *again*?"

"Yes, he broke in a month ago and stole your television and VCR."

"That's right. And my gun!" Tobi exclaimed.

"Maybe. But it's more likely he wanted you to think the gun was stolen then so you wouldn't realize it was stolen years ago in Foxhole. You and Kent were pretty friendly in those days, weren't you? Did he ever come over to your apartment?"

"Sure. All the time."

"He took the gun, then. It's the only thing that makes sense."

"That's what Bess said."

"Who's Bess?"

"A nurse at the hospital. We were discussing the case yesterday, and she said the gun had to have been stolen while I was living in Foxhole. She suspected Audrey."

Ben nodded. "She's half right anyway. Kent probably took it soon after you bought it."

"I still don't understand," Tobi said. "Why did he kill Hugh? Why now? Why did he frame me? And how can you be so sure he really did it?"

Ben hesitated before he said slowly, "There's so much to tell you I almost don't know where to start. Do you remember how he suddenly had to leave Saturday morning while we were looking through Hugh's computer files?"

Tobi nodded.

"When he took the bait like that, I called the station and put a tail on him - Don Rawls."

"Took the bait?"

"Don't you remember? I was talking about finding the red sports car, and he said it could be the key to the whole case. The next thing you know he has an emotional break down and has to leave. Don followed him to an old farmhouse south of town with an attached garage in the back. It turns out that Kent had rented the place and had the car stashed there."

"You're kidding!" Tobi gasped. "All this time he had the car hidden away?" She wasn't sure whether her stronger emotion was anger or sorrow. "I thought he was in love with me and, instead, I was nothing but his fall guy. Once again, I demonstrate my rare capacity for choosing losers when it comes to men."

"Don't be too hard on yourself," Ben soothed. "He put on a good act." He studied her stricken face. "Do you want me to go on?"

She nodded.

"I made a tactical error then. We should have picked him up on the spot, and we would have him in custody today. But I knew he was going to Austin to ditch the car, and I wanted to know if he would contact Brian Jeffers. Or Senator Kirby. So Don followed him to the outskirts of Austin - then lost him in traffic. He's pretty sure Kent had spotted him by then. The next time the

car was seen, it had been abandoned in a mall parking lot, minus the license plates. Kent had disappeared."

Ben shook his head. "It never occurred to me that he might do something as risky as come back here. He must have been watching the house and known I was leaving. If I'd only told you or DeeDee he was my suspect, Rick could have picked him up yesterday at church."

He looked so distressed that Tobi patted his hand and said, "Never mind. You'll catch up with him. Maybe today."

He looked skeptical. "It's possible, but I'm afraid it's too late."

"Why?"

"I'm guessing he's left the country by now."

Tobi's eyes widened. "Left the country? You mean left the whole United States?"

"We don't know for sure, but we're checking on it," Ben said.

"But what about Senator Kirby and Brian Jeffers?" Tobi asked. "Are they involved? And why did you have to go to Austin and then all the way to New Orleans?"

"Before I explain that, you'll be happy to know we recovered your television and VCR."

Tobi's eyes widened. "Where?"

"In the old farmhouse Kent rented. They're at headquarters now."

"Then he must have rented that place way back in April." Tobi frowned. "He's been working on this a long time."

"Longer than you know," Ben said. "Now, to get to my travels yesterday. I went to Austin to talk to Senator Kirby, of course. He claimed that Jeffers simply failed to come to work one day. He insists that he hasn't heard from him since."

"So where is he?"

"Nobody knows," Ben said, "including his family. And I asked the Senator about Missy Sheridan - you remember Hugh's notes indicated she was blackmailing Kirby?"

Tobi nodded.

"Well, I was wondering how Jeffers fit into that picture, so I mentioned Missy's name. Kirby blubbered like a baby - he'd loved Missy, didn't know how he could live without her, etc. And he claimed Jeffers was as loyal as Old Shep. He never would have turned on the Senator or stolen his woman - not if his life depended on it!"

Ben sighed. "I honestly don't know if the man is completely deluded or if he's the best liar I ever met. Anyway, he was a dead end, so I went to New Orleans. I read the police reports about the shooting and went to the hotel where Missy and her mysterious companion stayed last February."

He paused so long Tobi looked up into his face. "And? Did you learn anything?"

Ben sighed again. "I took pictures of Senator Kirby, Brian Jeffers and Kent with me. Two hotel employees identified Kent as the man who was traveling with Missy."

Tobi's stomach twisted into knots. "You're not telling me that Kent is Senator Kirby's hired assassin, are you?"

"I'm just suggesting the possibility," Ben said gently. "I called Heartland Electronics to verify his absence at the time of the murder. It turns out that Kent resigned from his job in February, just before Missy went to New Orleans. No one at Heartland has seen him in three months."

"And so you think Kent killed Hugh because Hugh had found out too much about the senator?"

"There's that. Plus the fact that Kent hated Hugh. I think he stole your gun two years ago because he wanted to kill him then. Either that or..."

"Or what?"

"Maybe he makes a habit of stealing guns since he seems to be in the assassination business. I'm sure there are occasions when it's convenient to have someone else's gun on hand. Especially someone like you who never reported it stolen."

Tobi turned pale. "You think he was killing people two years ago when we worked together at the *Gazette*?"

"I think it's likely. Tobi, don't even think about it," Ben advised.

"So how do you think Kent shot Hugh at 9:00 in Deepwater and got back to Clover Lake by noon?"

"His cousin, Floyd Masters, keeps an airplane at the Lake. I think Kent used Floyd's plane and his identity to fly to Deepwater, kill Hugh, and be back in bed when Floyd knocked on his door around noon that Sunday."

"So we're going to the lake today to find out whether Kent used Floyd's plane?" Tobi asked.

"Yes, and to take a statement from Floyd."

Tobi sighed and turned her attention to the papers she was still holding. "What did Hugh say about Kent?"

"Several things. Kent got pretty hostile when he learned Hugh was going to try to get a big settlement from Audrey in the divorce. Hugh wrote something about Kent glaring at him with smoldering eyes, the way he did when Hugh and Audrey were first married. He even said he thought Kent would like to kill him. I guess Kent thought those comments were too incriminating to let us find, so he deleted them."

"But you were way ahead of him!" Tobi exclaimed. "I always knew you were smart, but I didn't know how smart until today."

"Well, it's about time you found out. Feel free to refer to me simply as 'Excellency'."

Tobi snorted. "Maybe I'll refer to you simply as 'Big Head'."

" 'Big Fat Head' to you, Miss Kirkland."

Tobi abandoned the wisecracking. "That's another lie Kent told."

"What?"

"He knew about Audrey wanting a divorce all along. He told us nothing had changed between Hugh and Audrey recently."

"That's a good point," Ben said. "Maybe he was worried the divorce would make his mother look guilty."

Tobi sighed. "All the time I've known him, he's had murder in his heart, and I never guessed it. It makes me wonder if I really know *anybody*."

"I've wondered the same thing myself many times," Ben said. "When you're in the business I am, it can be hard to trust anyone."

"Then why were you so sure I didn't kill Hugh?"

Ben grinned. "Two things. I knew you were too smart to leave your gun beside the body. And I knew you couldn't hit the broad side of a barn with that revolver, much less put a bullet through somebody's heart."

"Nothing about my sterling character and the fact that I'm too gentle and kind to kill anyone? Even Hugh Mansett."

"Well, there was that too," Ben smiled. "But if you'd had a murderous inclination, you'd have probably wasted Lyle Harris instead of Hugh Mansett."

Tobi nodded. "You're right about that. Does DeeDee know Kent did it?"

"I told her this morning."

"What did she say?"

"Something about a meat cleaver and chopping his heart up into tiny pieces."

Tobi laughed. "Yeah, right. She'd do that about like I'd shoot Hugh Mansett."

Ben smiled. "Yep, you two are a pair of raging bulls, all right."

"There's something else," Tobi said. "I didn't think about it at the time, but I introduced Kent to Chuck and Susie yesterday. Kent didn't act like he knew Susie, but at the wedding he said they were related. Why would he lie about that?"

"He had to explain his presence at the wedding without arousing suspicion. And there could be a couple of reasons why he wanted to 'accidentally' bump into you that evening. For one, he needed to know what kind of car you drove. For another, he may have been aware you didn't know Hugh was moving to Deepwater, so he had to see you and tell you Hugh was taking over the *Crier*. It would have been hard to frame you for murdering the man if you didn't even know he was in town."

"He really was diabolical, wasn't he?" Tobi asked.

"He wasn't as smart as he thought he was," Ben said cheerfully. "He snagged the bait like a chump when I planted the suggestion about finding the red sports car. By that time, he could see I wasn't going to fall for his first frame, so he drove it to Austin Saturday and abandoned it in the shopping center, probably hoping we would latch onto Jeffers as the killer."

"How did he get back to Deepwater?"

"With Kent, that's hard to say - bus, airline, rental car, Kirby's chauffeured limousine. Who knows?"

"And you're checking on that too, I suppose?"

He stretched and yawned. "You bet we are."

The plane was descending, and the pilot called, "Check your seat belts. We're landing."

A police officer in a squad car was waiting for them. "Call me Vic," he told them. "I spoke to Mr. Masters a few minutes ago. He's at his cabin waiting for you, along with the suspect's mother."

"Audrey's here?" Tobi asked.

"Mrs. Mansett? Yes. It seems she was hoping her son would be at the lake and she would have an opportunity to talk to him and see for herself whether she believes he killed her husband."

"But he's not here?" Ben asked.

"No one has seen him in these parts since the day his stepfather died."

Tobi dreaded facing Audrey. What an ordeal she was going through, learning that her only child had murdered her husband. Tobi crawled into the back seat of the police car where she could be alone with her thoughts. Ben rode up front with Vic and discussed the details of the case, especially what he hoped to learn from Floyd Masters.

Clover Lake was a wide spot in a tributary of the Trinity River. The Masters family owned most of the land on the east shore of the lake and four generations of the family had turned the property into an idyllic getaway, adorned with ancient oaks, manicured lawns, tennis courts and stables.

"How beautiful!" Tobi gasped when Vic turned into the driveway that led to the cabin. "They call this a cabin? I would call it a mansion!"

"Well, I gather it's just a small vacation home for the Master's family," Vic said. "If you really want to see a mansion, visit them in Dallas. Well, not Dallas, actually. I think they live in one of the suburbs."

"Aren't they related to Kent?" Ben asked.

"Yes, through his father, I believe," Vic said. "Floyd is a cousin or a second cousin of Kent's, I've been told."

As they pulled to a stop, Audrey came out of the house with a man who bore a striking resemblance to Kent. Floyd was taller and heavier. He wore glasses and had a distinguished touch of gray at the temples, but he could have been Kent's older brother.

Audrey was visibly distressed. She hugged Tobi and apologized urgently. "I'm so sorry, my dear. I can't believe Kent has done this to you. And to Hugh. What a dreadful, dreadful way to treat people. I almost feel like I never knew my own son. And yet..."

Tobi could almost see Ben's ears prick up. "And yet...?" he prodded gently.

"Now that I know what happened, I think I should have seen it a long time ago. I should have recognized the hatred that Kent has been nursing all these years. I should have realized it. Maybe then I could have prevented it. I'm so sorry," she repeated with a look that took them all in and included them in the apology.

"Now, Aunt Audrey," Floyd said, "don't start thinking it's your fault." He put an arm around her shoulders and led them toward the house. "If we're going to lay blame, then I'll have to take my share. After all, he was here that weekend. I should have noticed something in his behavior. I should have done something to prevent it."

"You're right, of course," Audrey said. "It's not your fault or my fault. Kent is a man and he's responsible for his own actions." She turned to Ben, Tobi and Vic. "Would you mind if we sit here on the porch? It calms my nerves to look at the lake."

"I'd prefer that myself," Tobi said, taking a chair.

The others sat down and Floyd said, "Okay Lieutenant Walling, what do you want to know?"

Seeing that Audrey was near tears, Ben directed his questions to Floyd. "You called Mrs. Mansett Aunt Audrey?"

"Yes. Well, she's only my aunt by marriage. Her first husband Kendall was my mother's brother, but we still claimed her after Uncle Kenny died. Kent too. They were part of our family and the fact that Uncle Kenny had to go out and kill himself didn't change the fact that we loved Audrey and Kent."

"He killed himself?" Ben asked.

"Not on purpose, of course. He was a daredevil. Couldn't be happy unless he was risking life and limb. He died in a race car doing over 90 miles per hour. Just a hobby he played at in his spare time."

"Along with sky diving, skiing, big game hunting, deep sea fishing, spelunking and anything else he could think of," Audrey added. "Anything dangerous fascinated him. The ways he played terrified me, but Kent idolized him. No child ever adored a father more than Kent adored Kenny."

She looked forlorn. "I probably married Hugh because he was so safe and dull, compared to Kenny. Maybe Kent saw my marriage to Hugh as an insult to his father. He hated Hugh the first time he walked in the house, but I thought he had outgrown those feelings. Obviously, I was wrong."

"I'm guessing that Hugh's challenging your divorce resurrected a lot of the old animosities," Ben said. "And when Hugh took a job in Deepwater where Tobi was working, it seemed like the perfect time to take care of him once and for all." He and Tobi exchanged glances and neither mentioned Missy Sheridan. Audrey had enough to deal with for now.

Audrey bit her lip. "I'm so sorry I didn't know what was going on in his head and that I couldn't stop him."

"We understand that," Ben said soothingly, then he turned to Floyd. "Tell me about that weekend. Did anything unusual happen?"

"I didn't think so," Floyd said. "We did some fishing and horseback riding. Kent wanted to fly to Shreveport for dinner Saturday - said he knew a great restaurant there, but the plane wouldn't start. The next week when a mechanic looked at it, he couldn't find anything wrong except a few wires disconnected."

"You mean the plane wasn't working that weekend?" Audrey asked with hope in her voice.

"I think that's what Kent wanted everyone to think," Ben said quietly. "But the records at the airfield at Deepwater show that Floyd Masters flew in that Sunday morning at 7:30 and departed around 10:00."

Audrey looked at Floyd. "You?"

"No, not me," Floyd said. "I was here asleep."

"It was Kent, using Floyd's name. He probably hoped we wouldn't think to check on private planes flying in and out that day. Or if we did, that we would ask about him, but not Floyd."

"But you asked about Floyd?" Audrey asked.

"I asked about incoming planes," Ben explained. "The controller said only one came in that wasn't local - flown by a Floyd Masters. Kent had given me Floyd's name when I asked for his alibi. There was obviously a connection, and I had to figure out what it was."

Audrey looked devastated. Every clue pointed directly at her son. "That's it, then. I guess I might as well quit denying the obvious."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Mansett," Ben said gently. "I really didn't want it to be Kent for Tobi's sake, but everything points to him."

Audrey nodded and took Tobi's hand. "I'm glad to know you were rooting for him too. Why don't you come on into the kitchen with me, and we'll see if lunch is ready? You will eat a bite, won't you, before you go?" she asked, including all three of them. "It's after 1:00."

"That's very generous of you," Ben said. "I'd like to look at the airplane while I'm here."

"Run along, then," Audrey instructed them. "We'll have lunch on the table when you get back." She led Tobi into the house while Floyd drove Ben and Vic to the airfield where the plane was kept.

"Audrey, did Kent ever tell you and Hugh that he had been born again?" Tobi asked.

"Born again?" Audrey wrinkled her forehead. "What does that mean?"

"Well, Jesus said that a person must be born again in order to go to Heaven. In other words, everyone is born once physically, but He was saying that we also have to be born spiritually."

"Oh, you're talking about becoming a Christian. No, Kent never said anything like that."

Tobi sighed. "That's what I was afraid of. He told me he had become a Christian, and you were very happy about it, but Hugh was furious."

"Why would he tell you a thing like that?"

"He probably knew I wouldn't suspect he had killed Hugh if I thought he was saved. You see, when a person is born again, they become a new person, a member of God's family. The Holy Spirit moves into their heart and helps them to live right. A Christian would never murder anyone, so I never imagined that Kent might have killed Hugh."

"I never heard of such a thing!" Audrey exclaimed. "You're saying that a person who is a Christian never does anything wrong?"

"Well, no, I'm not explaining it very well. We do things we shouldn't sometimes, but to murder somebody... I just can't imagine a true Christian doing anything so horrible."

"Are you telling me there's something different about a Christian, something inside you that makes you want to live the way you should?"

"Yes, well, *Somebody* really - the Holy Spirit lives in us and gives us *what-for* when we do something wrong."

"It sounds like some kind of wonderful magic," Audrey said.

"It's not magic, but it is wonderful," Tobi said. "I wanted so much for Kent to be born again. It's the only way to have real joy in this life, and Kent needs some joy."

"He needs to learn to forgive, too."

"Yes, that too," Tobi agreed.

After a delicious, light lunch, served by the Masters' housekeeper, Tobi bid Audrey a sad goodbye. "I'm so sorry about Kent," she whispered as they embraced. "I'll be praying for him."

"What a gracious lady you are," Audrey said. "You should be furious with him for betraying you. I don't believe I've ever met anyone so kind."

Tobi smiled through tears. "I wish I could take credit for being so virtuous, but the truth is that he has always been a good friend. I'm not being noble; I care about him."

"Thank you," Audrey said. "And goodbye." She shook hands with Ben and Vic and went inside.

The rest of the group adjourned to the police station where Floyd gave a formal statement, concerning the events of the weekend of Hugh's murder. He assured Ben he would be in touch if he heard from Kent.

Ben reluctantly told him about Kent's apparent association with Senator Kirby and the death of Missy Sheridan in New Orleans. "I don't want your aunt to hear about it on the evening news," he said, "but I wasn't sure she could handle any more bad news today."

Floyd nodded. "You're probably right. I'll tell her tomorrow."

"Well, I guess that wraps it up for me," Ben said. "You ready to go home, Tob?"

She nodded. "The sooner the better."

The sky was pale blue without a cloud in sight, Tobi noted as she climbed into the airplane. She would be able to enjoy the scenery on the ground no matter how high the pilot flew. It wasn't that she particularly *liked* to be so high in the air but, when she *had* to be up there for some reason, she relished a cloudless day for the spectacular view.

As she strapped herself into her seat, she noticed that her usual nervousness was gone. She must be getting used to this flying business. Or maybe she had begun to trust the plane and the pilot.

Looking up, she realized Ben was watching her. "Hmm, you're not as white as bleached buffalo bones this time," he said. "Next thing I know you'll be taking flying lessons."

"Don't hold your breath," she advised. "I'm two or three centuries away from crawling into one of these crates for fun."

As she spoke, the engines roared and the airplane began to taxi. In minutes it was soaring skyward. Tobi settled herself with her face next to the window and watched Mac trucks turn into Matchbox trucks on the tiny ribbon of highway. The river was a ribbon, too, silent and stationary. And the Masters' estate, even the massive oaks that hid it, were indistinguishable in the forest along the lake shore.

Audrey was still down there, weeping for Kent. Floyd was probably trying to comfort her. Vic had moved on to his next assignment. Everything in that world was intense and important and a little bit terrifying. But up here, in the realm of the clouds, all the desperately crucial issues of life seemed small and remote.

Maybe it was a good thing, occasionally, to go to a high place and look at life from a different perspective. Maybe King David had wisely climbed a high mountain when life seemed

overwhelming and so he wrote in Psalm 18, "He maketh my feet like hinds' feet, and setteth me upon my high places." She would try to remember this peaceful world the next time she found herself "under the circumstances" and needed to see her own world from the top down instead of from the bottom up.

DeeDee was awaiting their return anxiously. "What happened?" she asked, hugging Tobi, then clinging to Ben.

"Nobody knows where he is," Ben said. "Mrs. Mansett is devastated, of course."

"What about you, Tobi?" DeeDee asked. "Are you all right?"

"Not yet," Tobi said, "but I will be. Where's Jasper?"

"In the yard," DeeDee said, nodding toward the back door.

Tobi went outside and sat down on the back steps. Jasper rushed into her arms wiggling all over and trying to lick her nose. She buried her tear-stained face in his fur and held him tight. "Oh, you dear, little puppy. Why can't Kent be half as sweet as you are?"

Kent had killed Hugh. And Missy. And maybe others too. It was a horrifying thought. How could he? How could he? How...

Pogo joined them and rested his chin sympathetically on Tobi's lap. Ben and DeeDee came out a few minutes later and sat down beside her.

"I'm sorry it turned out this way," DeeDee said.

"Thank you," Tobi answered softly. "I guess I really am stupid when it comes to men. The ones I care for the most always turn out to be the rottenest."

"You're not stupid," DeeDee protested. "Anybody can make a mistake."

"I'm two for two," Tobi said.

"Well, Joel's different," DeeDee said confidently.

"How do you know? I think he's a flaky, mixed up... No, I don't. I don't know what I think." She sighed. She was beginning to think Joel was the most wonderful man alive, and the thought scared her. In fact, it terrified her. Why hadn't she learned her lesson the first time? Hadn't the fiasco with Lyle taught her that falling in love with a man of the Charismatic persuasion is like *asking* for trouble? Well, she would worry about that later. "What happens now?" she asked Ben.

"We have to find Kent," Ben said. He slammed his right fist into his left hand. "Why didn't I pick him up Saturday when I had the chance?"

"You had a good reason," DeeDee said. "You wanted to know if he was connected with Senator Kirby."

"Well, I didn't find out," Ben said angrily. "Saturday was nothing but a wild goose chase." He looked at Tobi, "Do you have *any* idea where he might be?"

"I thought you said he left the country."

"I said I was guessing he would, but I just called the station. Rick says there's no evidence that he's been on any international flight this weekend. And he'd be a fool to leave the country now because all the airlines have been alerted to watch for him."

Tobi shrugged. "When I think about it, it's pretty amazing how little I actually know about him. Let me sleep on it, Ben. The only places we talked about this week were Foxhole and Dallas and here. But maybe something will come back to me from the 'old days' if I think about it."

"Do you think he might still be in Deepwater?" DeeDee asked.

When Ben didn't answer, Tobi looked up and saw the anxious expression on his face. "You do!" she exclaimed. "Why would he still be here?"

"He's not if he has any sense," Ben said, "but I won't rest easy until he's in custody."

"Because of me?" Tobi asked.

Ben nodded.

"Do you think he might hurt Tobi?" DeeDee asked sharply.

Ben shook his head. "I don't know why he would, but I sure would like to see him behind bars." Tobi's face was solemn and DeeDee's was ashen. "Listen, I'm tired of talking about Kent Grantham," he said, forcing a cheerful tone. "Let's talk about food. Anybody else hungry?"

"Not me," said Tobi.

"Not me," said DeeDee.

"Well, I'm going to order pizza," Ben decided, "and I hope the two of you will manage to perk up before the kids see you looking like the world's about to come to an end."

"We will, dear," DeeDee said. "Pizza sounds good. Thanks for thinking of it."

Ben had gotten to his feet, but now he sat down again. "I thought of something else, Tobi. Other than actually catching Kent, the case is pretty much resolved. You might want to write a follow-up piece for the Gazette and send it to them. I should think they would pay you as well as they did for the other article. Plus we need to get the word out that Kent is a murderer and a fugitive so that if anyone in the Gazette's readership has information about him, they can inform the authorities."

Tobi nodded wearily. "You're right and it's a great idea. I'll do it this evening."

"And I'll get the story to the local media," Ben said.

That night when Tobi opened her Bible to Psalm 18 and read verse 39, tears flooded her eyes. "For thou hast girded me with strength unto the battle:" it read, "thou hast subdued under me those that rose up against me."

She slid to the floor on her knees and prayed, "Lord, I thought I wanted that murderer to suffer. I wanted everyone to know who it was and to know that You had subdued him and

brought him low. But since it's Kent...I don't want him to suffer, after all. I just want him to know You and serve You and live the life You planned for him.

"Father, thank You for giving me strength for the battle. It has been so long and so scary, but You brought me through it..."

She could go no further. She wept for a long time, tears of gratitude and love for the majestic God who has enough time and love to take care of one insignificant person.

"I love You so much," she finally whispered before she crawled into bed and slept the deep, sweet sleep of a child who knows she is in the loving protection of a powerful Father.

Chapter 12

Tuesday: A Rift in the Darkness

Tuesday morning when Tobi arrived at work, Joel's suite of offices was unlocked, and the lights were on. But he was nowhere to be seen. She was half disappointed and half relieved. The prospect of their dinner date that evening was making her feel self-conscious about her appearance, her words, her actions, everything.

But she needn't have worried. He wasn't there.

Then she saw a note on Vi's desk. She took a deep, deliberate breath and picked it up.

"Tobi," Joel had scrawled, "Grace had an appendectomy last night. She's in room 217 and I'm with her. Joel."

Tobi's stomach tightened. Joel had needed her last night, and she hadn't been there for him. Why hadn't he called?

"Well, why should he, you moron?" she scolded herself as she rushed to the elevators. "You were never there for him before. Why should he expect anything from you now?"

The sudden rush of tenderness for him that swept into her chest left her breathless. And it alarmed her. She wasn't ready to care this much for this man. But there was no turning back

now, and she hurried to the nurse's station on the second floor, trying not to look as frantic as she felt.

Gratefully, Bess was there, and Tobi spoke her name urgently. Bess looked up, recognized her and grinned from ear to ear. "Congratulations! I'm so glad you didn't do it!"

Tobi gaped at her. "Didn't do what?"

Seeing her expression, Bess came around the desk, took her arm and led her away from the nurses' station. "Kill that man, of course. What's wrong? You look as if they discovered you did kill him, after all."

Tobi shook her head. "I just found out Joel's daughter had surgery. Is she okay?"

"Is that all? Sure, she's fine, thanks to..." Bess paused for a furtive look around, "...our favorite surgeon Dr. Turkey Trot. He's the doctor I least like to work for, but if I ever need surgery, he's the first doc I'm calling."

"I guess Joel feels the same way?" Tobi asked.

Bess nodded. "The word from E.R. is that she came in with a surgical abdomen - hard enough to bounce a ball on. Pretty amazing that our CEO would let his own daughter get in that condition but, of course, she doesn't live with him. Maybe he didn't know."

"Probably not," Tobi said, wondering. "Are you saying she was in danger?"

"Sure. You let an appendix go too long and rupture and it can get pretty messy. You get a belly full of infection and then the patient has to be hooked up to I.V. antibiotics until the infection clears."

She glanced around. "Listen, we've got docs coming and going like flies this time of morning. I have to get to work. Gracie's room is the second door on the left down this hall." She pointed.

"Thanks, Bess," Tobi said to her retreating back, then walked to room 217.

When she pushed the door open into the darkened room, she saw Grace's still form in the bed and Joel resting in a recliner nearby. No one else was there. She left her shoes inside the door and walked silently to his side. He seemed to be asleep and she was about to leave when she saw the trickle of tears on his cheek. Before she realized what she was doing, she brushed them away with her fingers.

Joel's eyes flew open. "Tobi," he said. "I'm glad you came." But he didn't grin as he usually did when he saw her. He didn't even smile. Instead, the lines of tension in his face had erased any evidence that he had ever smiled in his life. And Tobi realized that the boyish, beaming grin that had annoyed her so much the first night they met had become one of the most beautiful sights in the world to her.

"Let me get you a chair," he said, beginning to rise.

But Tobi stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. "No, you stay put. I'll get it."

She pulled a straight-backed chair next to his and sat down. "Bess told me about it. She said Grace is going to be okay."

Joel nodded, but his face was a thundercloud. "You were right," he said so softly she could hardly hear him.

"About what?" The pain in his face, in his words, in his whole bearing tore at her heart. She had to touch him, so she wrapped both her hands around his big, right hand, lifted it to her lips and kissed it.

He didn't seem to notice the tender gesture. "About my church. About my religion. About everything." He was far away, reliving the events of the preceding night. "Gloria called me right after midnight - as soon as Rachel and Paul went to bed. She said she was afraid Gracie was dying, but all her Mother and that clown she married would do was pray for her and claim her

healing. Claim her healing! They're sitting around claiming her healing while she dies before their very eyes."

The anger disappeared and his voice broke. "They didn't have to claim anything! Tom was right across town with healing in his hands. I called him at 12:20 and he walked into the E.R. at 12:25. I've never been so happy to see anyone in my life. Gracie was out of surgery and out of danger by 1:30."

"Joel, I'm so sorry." Tobi still clung to his hand with both of hers and, in spite of his brokenness and sorrow, the connection seemed to transfer strength and courage to her. What would it be like to be married to such a gentle, powerful man? And why in the world had Rachel let him go?

Joel was studying her. "I thought you'd call last night when you got home," he said. "I waited up until midnight, expecting the phone to ring any minute." The hurt in his voice was unmistakable. "I thought our relationship had changed when you agreed to go to dinner with me."

Tobi was crushed. She had been so self-absorbed last night she had never even thought of calling Joel. "You're right. It has changed," she said. "But...look, Joel, I'd like to be closer to you. Do you think I could just sit on the arm of your chair?"

He looked surprised. Then the deep tension in his face began to dissipate. "Of course you can. Or...," he held out his arms, "you can come sit with me and let me hold you. My arms are aching to hold Gracie. Maybe if you would..."

"I will," Tobi said eagerly, slipping into his lap. She put her face next to his as his arms enclosed her. "Dear Lord, I must have been out of my mind not to do this sooner," she thought, letting her hand rest softly on his neck.

"Do you know what I was thinking about last Sunday in church?" she asked.

"What?"

The nearness of his voice took her breath away for a moment. When she was able to speak, she said, "I was wishing I was with you on Homerun Hill again. I thought that if I could go back and do it again, I would relax and enjoy being in your arms. Now here I am, and I wish I could stay here forever."

Like a sunrise, Joel's grin reappeared. She could hear it in his voice even though she couldn't see his face. His arms tightened around her and he whispered into her hair, "You can."

Tobi nestled in Joel's arms, feeling safer and happier than she had ever been in her life. His breathing was soft and regular and close to her ear. She listened to it for several minutes. How had she lived so long without noticing the beauty of slow, deep breathing?

Then she realized their breathing had synchronized. She inhaled when he inhaled, exhaled when he exhaled. Had she done that on purpose - matched her respirations to his? Of course not! Why would she? But their breathing continued in rhythm for a few more minutes and she began to feel as if they were connected by some invisible power. Maybe, if she checked their pulses, she would discover that their heart beats were in synch too.

Given the option, Tobi would have frozen that lovely interlude and stayed in Joel's arms forever. But the office was unmanned and her sense of responsibility was summoning her back to duty. "I'm going back to the office now," she said softly. "Will you let me know if you need me? For anything?"

Joel tightened his hold on her and said, "You still haven't told me about yesterday."

"I will. Later. It's not important now."

"Okay. I was hoping Gracie would wake up so I could tell her how much I love her. But I'm going to go home in a little bit and sleep even if she doesn't wake. I don't know if I'll make it to the office today or not. Are we still on for dinner tonight?"

"Won't you be too tired?"

"No! But maybe we could make it at 8:30 after visiting hours here."

"Okay." She lifted her head and kissed him lightly on the cheek. He responded by pulling her face toward his. At the very moment she realized he was going to kiss her, a bright light clicked on and a shrill voice cried, "Oh my God! Oh, my God! Paul, he's got some hussy in bed with him right in our daughter's hospital room. Do something. Hurry!"

Instantly, Joel's powerful legs brought the recliner to an upright position and he lifted both himself and Tobi to their feet. She winced at the lights and he put his arms around her face to shield her eyes from the glare. "Rachel, do you always have to behave like a shrew?" he asked calmly.

"A shrew! A shrew! Did you hear what he called me, Paul? What are you going to do about it?"

There was a long pause, and Tobi touched Joel's arm to let him know her eyes had adjusted. He lowered his arms, but let his hands rest protectively on her shoulders as she observed Paul and Rachel.

Paul was a small man with unruly brown hair. He had a nice face and Tobi thought he looked rather likable. Rachel was as tall as Paul and perfectly groomed. Her clothes were simple, but obviously expensive. Tobi suddenly felt frumpy in her tailored skirt and blouse.

"Paul, did you hear me?" Rachel demanded.

"I expect the whole hospital heard you," Joel said. "Would you kindly keep your voice down?"

"Paul!" Rachel's voice was shriller and sharper.

"Dear, it's hard to fault a man for speaking the truth," Paul said at last. Joel and Tobi both gasped at the unexpected answer. "You know as well as I do," Paul continued, "that Joel is the

picture of respectability. Now, we came here to see how Gracie is. Why don't we see how Gracie is?"

"Gracie feels like she was run over by a bus," said a small voice from the bed. "But I still feel a zillion times better than I did last night when I was on fire and upchuckin' my guts!"

"Oh, my poor baby," cooed Rachel, rushing to Grace's bed. Paul followed. Before Joel joined them, Tobi squeezed his hand and left.

The phone was ringing when she got back to the office, and she raced to answer it.

"Tobi! It's Mike Temple. I was about to give up on you."

"Hi, Mike. Sorry, this has been a strange week."

"Listen, the story is tremendous and the check, as they say, is in the mail. Or it will be as soon as somebody writes it. Thanks for keeping us in mind."

"Well, it's my pleasure to tell the world that I'm not a murderer," Tobi said.

"Good point," said Mike. "Say, are you in the market for a job? Tye said to ask you. He's thinking about moving our city editor up to managing editor if you'd like the city editor position."

"Oh." Tobi looked around, suddenly aware that Vi would be back soon, and she would be unemployed. "I guess I am."

"Great. Give me a fax number and I'll send you a job description and an application."

Tobi gave him the hospital fax number and thanked him for calling. She set the receiver down in a daze. Go back to Foxhole? Did she want to go back there? What about Joel? She didn't want to move away from him, but she had to have a job.

The phone rang again, startling Tobi out of her reverie. This time it was DeeDee. "Tobi Kirkland, you welsher! You didn't tell me you were going to dinner with Joel tonight! Why didn't you tell me?"

"I'm sorry DeeDee. I had other things on my mind."

"If it weren't for Ben, I still wouldn't know. When were you going to let me in on the secret?"

"It isn't a secret, DeeDee. I don't know when I would have told you. Joel's daughter had an appendectomy last night, and things are pretty hectic around here today."

DeeDee's voice softened. "I'm sorry, sis. I didn't mean to get carried away. Is it Gloria or Gracie?"

"Gracie."

"Is she okay?"

"Yes, as far as I know."

"Are you and Joel still going to dinner tonight?"

"Yes."

"Good! What time?"

"8:30."

"Okay, as soon as school is out, I'm going to buy you the most beautiful dress in town. When you get off work, go straight to the house and wash your hair. By the time Joel gets there, I'll have you looking like you just stepped out of *Vogue*."

"But DeeDee..."

"Don't 'But DeeDee' me. It's all decided."

Tobi opened her mouth to object, then thought of Joel's exquisite first wife and said meekly, "Thank you, DeeDee."

After DeeDee hung up, Tobi switched the computer on and had just pulled up Joel's schedule for the day when the phone rang again. This time it was Joel. "I'm sorry Rachel made such a scene," he said. "I should have realized she was going to walk through the door at any minute, but it didn't occur to me until she was there."

Tobi smiled. "I'm glad you weren't thinking about your ex-wife at that particular moment."

"Thank you for understanding. And, Tobi, before you came this morning my nerves were unraveling. I had the feeling that I was teetering on the edge of a pit and it was only a matter of seconds until I would fall in. Then you touched me, and I knew I wasn't going to fall. Thank you for coming. And thank you for not being a hysterical bimbo like Rachel. I was proud to be with you this morning. You handled yourself with dignity while she was carrying on like...the shrew she is..."

He sighed. "I'm sorry. I didn't call to rag on Rachel. I was going to see if I had any appointments today."

"You have a lunch appointment and a 3:00 o'clock meeting. I was just checking," Tobi said.

"Right. Would you cancel those? Just explain that Gracie got sick last night and she's okay now. I'll call and reschedule both meetings tomorrow."

"No problem. Now you get some sleep, and we'll talk tonight."

"Okay. And, Tobi, thanks for everything."

The phone rang continuously. It seemed that everyone who knew her wanted to hear from her own lips how Ben had solved the case of Hugh Mansett's murder. Except for Pastor Brighton, she explained politely that it was a business phone and she couldn't tie up the line. She did take the time to tell her Pastor all the gruesome details. After all, he had been kind enough to tell the world she was innocent - and from the pulpit, no less.

In the midst of the well-wishers, Clayton Archer called to ask when she was coming back to work. Tobi's mouth dropped open and she couldn't speak for a good five seconds. "Tobi, are you there?" he asked.

"I'm here," she said finally. "Did you ask when I'm coming back to work at the *Crier*?"

"Well, of course. Now that you've been exonerated, your job is waiting for you. Frankly, we need you."

Tobi prayed quickly for the wisdom to say something beneficial and the grace not to sound hostile. "Clayton," she said in the kindest tone she could muster, "the paper has always demanded loyalty from its employees. But loyalty has to be a two-way street or it's worthless. Doesn't it bother you, at all, that the *City Crier* tried and convicted me without asking me to say a single word in my own defense?"

"We didn't convict you," he objected.

"Really? Maybe you should reread the lead story on the front page of the paper a week ago Monday. And last Sunday, too. Both stories made me a murderer. Good bye, Mr. Archer."

She was trembling as she set the telephone receiver in its cradle. Maybe she shouldn't have burned this bridge. Maybe she would be willing to go back to the *Crier* if she couldn't find another job in Deepwater. Maybe Clayton would blackball her name in newspapers all over Texas. All over the United States. All over the world! Maybe...

"Good day, Miss. And how are you doing this fine day?" The Rev. Emory Morel's cheery voice interrupted Tobi's impromptu gloom fest.

"Hello, Rev. Morel," she replied. "I'm fine."

"And that boss of yours? Is he around today?"

Tobi shook her head. "He was up here all night with Gracie, so he went home to get some rest."

"Good man," said Rev. Morel approvingly. "I just stopped by to see her myself. She seems to be doing well."

"Yes sir, I believe she is."

Rev. Morel started to leave, then turned back, "You know, we haven't seen much of Joel at church lately." His eyes narrowed as he studied her face. "You wouldn't happen to know what's going on with him, would you?"

Tobi smiled innocently. "You'd have to talk to him about that."

"So I would. So I would." Rev. Morel gave her another searching look, then vanished with a wave of his chubby hand.

The rest of the morning flew past. Just before noon, as she was trying to decipher an obstetrician's handwriting, the office light clicked off. Now what?

The computer was still on, so it wasn't a power failure. As her eyes adjusted to the dim light, she realized someone else was in the office.

"Hi, beautiful, you waiting for me?"

"Kent?" She stared at him in disbelief. He was wearing blue jeans, a dark T-shirt and sneakers. She had never seen him attired so casually in the middle of a business day. "What are you doing here?" she asked, trying unsuccessfully to control the quaver in her voice.

Instead of answering, Kent demanded, "Who else is here?" He nodded toward Joel's office and she realized he was clutching something in his right pocket. He had a gun!

"No one. Joel is gone for the day."

He took his hand out of his pocket. "Lock this door." His voice was gruff and commanding. She had never heard him speak in such a tone.

In the semi-darkness she fumbled through the desk drawer for Vi's key. But her hand was shaking so badly, she knew she wouldn't be able to fit it into the slot. She handed it to Kent wordlessly.

As he locked the door, the phone rang. Tobi started, then asked, "Shall I answer it?"

He thought a moment, then shook his head. "Let it ring."

They both waited nervously for the jangling to stop, but it rang over and over. Just when Tobi thought she couldn't bear to hear one more ring, it stopped. She took a deep breath and thanked God for silence.

"Let's go in there." Kent indicated Joel's office and his voice sounded more like himself. He led her to the back of the room where they couldn't be seen if anyone looked in from the hall. "I know you have a few choice things you want to say to me," he told her, "but, first, let me tell you why I'm here."

At some level, Tobi was praying urgently that the Lord would dissolve her terror with His peace. Or, at least, that He would calm her enough to keep her hands from trembling and her voice from quavering. But she was also acutely alert to Kent's every movement and every nuance of his voice, as she tried to discern how much danger she was in. "Okay," she said quietly, meeting his eyes boldly.

"I want you to come with me," he said. "When I drove away from here Sunday and realized I would never see you again, I could barely breathe. It was the same sense of despair I had when Dad died."

Tobi couldn't disguise her shock at his suggestion, and he hurried on. "I know what you think of me - I'm evil personified: a liar, a thief, a murderer. I'm everything you hate. But I do have something to offer."

Her face registered her growing astonishment and, although she wasn't aware of it, her terror was melting away as her absorption in this preposterous conversation grew. Kent sat down in Joel's chair and Tobi leaned against the desk.

"You're no dummy," Kent continued. "And you're not some country hick who doesn't know what's going on in the world. There's a group of wealthy, powerful people in Europe, Asia and America who are quietly manipulating nations and governments. They realize the only hope

this world has for survival is to unite every tribe and nation under one global government. I believe it's going to happen in our lifetime. And I believe the only hope we have for a satisfying lifestyle then will be to align ourselves with those future leaders now."

"Do these people believe murder is an acceptable method of achieving their goals?"

"Murder can be a necessary evil," he said simply.

"Is Senator Kirby a member of this global conspiracy, and did he hire you to kill Missy Sheridan?"

"No," the harsh tone returned to Kent's voice, and his gray eyes were steely. "The Senator had nothing to do with Missy's death. She had to be removed to protect him and I handled that problem, but he had no foreknowledge of her execution."

"Then who hired you to do it?"

"Nobody hired me. I'm not a paid assassin, Tobi. Senator Kirby is my doorway into the power structure. It was in my own best interests to make sure Missy wasn't allowed to interfere with his career."

"And Hugh?"

"Same thing. With pleasure." His eyes glittered.

"What happened to Senator Kirby's aide...um...Brian Jeffers?"

"Disappeared. He was working with Missy to bring Kirby down. After she was eliminated, he prudently vanished. If he resurfaces, he'll be dealt with." Kent looked at his watch. "I don't have all day. If you come with me, I can offer you a life of excitement and luxury. But if you stay here, you'll find your standard of living spiraling downward when the global government begins redistributing capital and resources to third world nations. I love you, Tobi. I'll take care of you if you'll let me."

She shook her head. "No."

He sighed. "Of course not. Well, you'll have to come with me anyway. For a while. Otherwise, you'll have that brother-in-law of yours on my tail before I'm out of town." He rose and took her arm.

"Let me call Faye at the switchboard and ask her to take Joel's messages," Tobi pleaded. "I won't let her know there's anything wrong."

"Make it fast."

Tobi called Faye, picked up her purse and walked out of the office. A great calm had settled upon her, and she locked the door behind them without a tremor. Kent took her hand and interlaced their fingers. His grip was gentle but firm, and she suspected it could harden and he could snap her fingers in an instant if he chose to.

They stepped out of the cool hospital lobby into the hot, stagnant air of early afternoon. Tobi squinted in the blinding sunlight, as she tried to locate Kent's silver sports car. Instead he directed her to a black, medium-size pickup and helped her in through the driver's door. "There's a seat belt in the middle," he said getting in beside her. "Buckle it."

He turned right out of the hospital parking lot and Tobi asked, "What are you going to do with me?"

"It's not a question of doing something with you," Kent said. "The question is how I'm going to get out of here without you making trouble for me."

"How are you?"

"Not by hurting you," he said, glancing in his rear-view mirror. He turned left, and then added three more left turns that took them around a block. "There's an SUV following us," he told her. "Who is it?"

Tobi craned her neck, trying to see behind them. "What color is it?"

"Blue. Dark blue."

"I think it's Joel," she said.

"Who's Joel?"

"The hospital's CEO. I work for him."

Kent nodded. "I remember. You weren't exactly excited about working for him, as I recall."

"Well, he's not as bad as I expected."

Kent was studying the streets. "He must not have a cell phone or we'd be surrounded with cops by now."

"He must not," Tobi agreed, wondering what he'd done with it.

"Well, do you have any suggestions?" Kent asked. "If we can't shake him, I'll have to have a hostage, and you'll have to go with me, after all."

Tobi's heart sank. "Where?" she asked.

"That's hard to say."

Tobi sighed and struggled desperately to think of a way to lose Joel. But Deepwater was a simple town and whatever ruse Kent tried was more likely to attract the attention of the police than to lose a tail.

Finally she said, "Keep driving east on this street until you come to Franklin Drive. At Franklin go north to Second Street. Second is one-way. Stop there until the way is clear and turn right, which is against traffic. Go half a block and turn right into the first alley you come to. About half way up the alley, you can turn left into a drive way and get out of the alley - I'll help you watch for the turn."

Kent was listening closely and nodding as if he could see their route in his imagination. She wondered if he had studied Deepwater so carefully that he already knew her hometown as well as she did. "Then what?" he asked.

"When you come out of the alley..." She hesitated and closed her eyes, as she tried to picture the best way to go. "When you come out of the alley, turn left. Go back to Second Street. This time we'll turn left and go with the traffic. Maybe Joel will continue through the alley and we'll lose him."

Kent was following her directions to the letter, but he said unpleasantly, "If you think you're going to end this by causing me to pick up a nail in the alley, you'd better think again."

Tobi gave him an exasperated look. "Kent, if we lose him it's going to be pure luck - this isn't an easy town to get lost in. And I can assure you that I don't want to be a hostage. Besides garbage trucks go down the alleys all the time, so there shouldn't be any danger to your tires."

"Okay, we'll give it a shot." He turned onto Franklin Drive. It was only a few blocks to Second Street with its one-way sign pointing to their left. Although there was no traffic in sight, Kent waited patiently until several cars appeared and were only a block away. Then he turned right and gunned his engine toward the oncoming cars. They honked, squealed brakes and tried to move out of his lane. One little gray car, driven by a little, gray man didn't see them in time to turn or brake.

Tobi saw his mouth open in horror as Kent barreled toward him. Then the black pickup hurtled into the alley and the gray car streaked past their tailpipe with inches to spare. Kent gunned the engine again and almost immediately Tobi saw the open driveway to their left. She pointed it out to Kent, and he skillfully maneuvered the pickup down the driveway onto the street. Within moments they were at Second Street again, turning left.

Tobi collapsed against the back of the seat and held her breath. "Did we lose him?" she finally asked, as Kent kept a close lookout behind them.

"Maybe..." Kent continued to scrutinize the traffic behind them. Suddenly, he pounded the steering wheel. "No, he's turning onto Second now."

"Okay, the next street we'll come to is Baxter. Turn left there," Tobi said urgently. "In about three blocks we'll come to a cleared lot. Jump the curb, drive through the lot and you'll see an apartment complex with a circular parking area. Drive through the parking area and, when you come out of it, take a hard right up the alley. The road circles away to the left and there's a fence blocking the view of the alley. It's a short alley that will take us back where we entered the apartment's parking area. If we're lucky, Joel won't notice the alley and will follow the road to the left. Then we can put some distance between us before he realizes he's lost us."

Without a word, Kent turned onto Baxter Street. He jumped the curb at the vacant lot like a stunt man and sped across the open space with gravel flying and dust rising. Tobi pointed out the apartment complex and he accelerated up the street.

"Kent, slow down!" Tobi cried. "If you turn a residential street into a race track, we'll have police all over us like fuzz on a peach!"

He ignored her, braking only when he came to the turn at the entrance to the apartment complex. They whipped into the parking area, just as a cat bolted in front of them. Fortunately, Kent hit the brakes at the sight of the cat because a child was in hot pursuit of the animal.

Kent braked so hard, Tobi thought the pickup was going to do a somersault. Instead it skidded sideways, tires squealing, and stopped in front of the wide-eyed child. The cat forgotten, the little girl stared at the pickup, frozen to the spot.

"Get out of the way!" Kent yelled when the child remained stationary. He honked his horn impatiently.

Then the door of a nearby apartment flew open and a pudgy, middle-aged woman ran to the child, caught her up and carried her inside. Tobi buried her face in trembling hands. "That's enough, Kent! Stop it, now. Go wherever you want to go and take me for a hostage." She was crying softly.

Kent drove out of the apartment complex onto the street, frowning. "What about Mr. CEO?" he asked harshly.

"Forget him!" Tobi lifted her tear-streaked face. "He won't do anything that might endanger me."

Kent studied her face momentarily. "How can you be so sure?"

"I've gotten to know him pretty well, and I'm certain he won't do anything stupid."

Kent smirked. "In other words, he's another goody-goody Christian, I suppose?"

"That's right."

Kent considered his options momentarily, then made a decisive turn and headed east. They rode five minutes before Tobi felt steady again. When she did, she lifted a quick prayer for wisdom, and said quietly, "Kent, these people you're working for are nothing but international thugs. Except for their wealth, they're just another street gang. Can't you see that?"

"You're wrong, Tobi," he said with conviction. "These people...we...are the only hope for the future of this planet. Unless we succeed, the whole globe will go up in a nuclear mushroom one of these days. Somebody has to step forward and take control before it's too late. That's what we're doing."

"There's no hope for the world or the nation or you or anybody else from people who kill and steal and take the law into their own hands. These people are too corrupt to accomplish anything good."

He sighed. "I should have known you wouldn't understand. How could you with your narrow, holier-than-thou view of life? Everything is black and white for you...and I'm black."

"You're not black. You're my friend."

Kent offered no response, so Tobi tried again. "Why do you want to live this way?"

"I'm doing something meaningful for myself and the whole world. And it's exciting! I never know, when I wake up in the morning, what might happen that day."

"Walking in your father's footsteps," Tobi observed.

"You might look at it that way." Tobi could tell from his voice that he did look at it that way.

"Kent, your Dad wasn't a god," she said. "Worshiping him is destroying your life."

He didn't argue the point. "I can't seem to help myself."

"Don't tell me what you *can't* do; tell me what you *can* do," she said softly. When he didn't respond, she said, "If you'll turn yourself in, I'll do everything I can to help you."

"What? And spend the rest of my life rotting in prison?" he asked in disbelief. "I don't think so."

To her surprise, Kent drove to Homerun Hill and pulled in behind the same clump of cedar bushes she had parked beside two Sundays ago. He leaped from the pickup and pulled Tobi out. He was hustling her up the same trail she had followed on her previous visit when Joel parked and started up the trail behind them.

"Stay back," Kent warned. He pulled the gun out of his pocket and aimed it at Joel. "I don't want to hurt either one of you, but I will if I have to."

"Joel, please go away," Tobi pleaded. "He really will shoot if you get too close. But he's not going to hurt me if you stay away."

Joel hesitated, as they continued up the trail. Almost immediately a bush hid him from view. "Hurry!" Kent gasped, pulling her along, and Tobi tried to put Joel out of her mind as she concentrated on the gravel path.

The fiery glare of the sun blinded her. A hidden choir of cicadas filled the air with a pulse that throbbed like a jackhammer inside her head. Grasshoppers bounded to the right and left,

clearing a path for them. Tobi felt dizzy. The whole scene seemed unreal. Maybe she would wake up and find it had all been a nightmare.

Suddenly, their rushing, stumbling feet raised a cloud of dust. Tobi inhaled it and choked. She coughed fiercely, then gagged and choked again. This was real all right. Too real.

At the crest of the hill they paused, panting, and Kent listened intently for sounds of pursuit. But their heavy breathing and the roar of the cicadas drowned out every other sound.

"What's all that noise?" Kent asked irritably, trying to locate the source of the racket.

"Cicadas," Tobi said, puffing.

"They're all I can hear," Kent complained. "Where do you think your boss is?"

"I hope he went to call the police," Tobi said fervently.

"Well, you better hope that's where he is. Come on."

Kent pulled Tobi along with his left hand and carried the gun in his right hand, glancing back frequently to look for Joel. As they hurried across the hill, Tobi scanned the landscape urgently. What in creation were they doing here? And then, as they approached the mesquite tree Tobi had trounced so thoroughly with the cracked bat, she spotted a helicopter in a clearing beyond it. Of course.

The closer they came to their destination, the faster Kent ran. But he was moving too swiftly for Tobi and she stumbled. At that moment, Kent was hurled to the ground and Tobi went down with him. She hit the ground hard, but she was free. Kent had released her hand as he fell.

Looking up, she saw that Joel, lunging from behind a low bush, had tackled Kent and they were struggling for the gun, which Kent still held firmly. Tobi scrambled to her feet and looked around frantically for something to use as a weapon. She had just spied the cracked bat where she had dropped it on her last visit when a shot rang out.

Tobi froze. Joel looked at Tobi. And Kent used the distraction to kick Joel hard in the chest. Rolling free, he aimed the gun at Joel's head. "Kent, no!" Tobi screamed. Without thinking, she leaped forward and kicked the hand holding the gun. Kent's shot went wild.

Swearing, Kent seized Tobi's arm in a viselike grip and pulled himself to his feet. Pointing the gun at her head, he growled hoarsely to Joel, "Don't move! Don't even let me see you breathe."

Joel had raised himself to a crouching position, but he could only watch helplessly as Kent, pulling Tobi with him, backed cautiously toward the helicopter. "I'll be all right," Tobi called reassuringly as they ducked under the boughs of the mesquite tree. "Kent's in love with me. He won't hurt me."

They were within a few yards of the helicopter when Kent, walking backwards, towing Tobi, and watching Joel, misjudged his step and stumbled over a pile of boulders. He went down, flailing his arms, as he tried to recover his balance. Before Tobi realized what had happened, he howled in agony. Then he was on his feet, shooting the rocks.

Turning to watch this spectacle, she thought he had gone mad.

Instead, he had stumbled - literally - upon the den of her old buddy the rattlesnake.

Kent dropped the gun and pulled his belt off. He slid the cellular phone hooked on it into the dirt and began pulling the belt tight around his left arm.

The moment the gun left Kent's hand, Joel sprang forward. He scooped up the gun and the cell phone.

"You run that hospital?" Kent growled at him.

"Yes."

"Then you can come with me and radio your emergency room you're bringing in a snake bite victim."

Joel went to Tobi. "Are you okay?" he asked.

When she nodded, he handed her his keys and the cell phone. "Be careful going back down that hill."

"You be careful too."

He winked and smiled, then strode over to Kent. They climbed into the helicopter, Kent put the big rotor blade into motion and they lifted off the hillside.

Dust and leaves and brush swirled around Tobi. Her hair slapped her face and her skirts flapped, but she held her position, watching, as the helicopter buzzed away. She thought it looked strangely like a titanic cicada itself and it out-roared the whole hill full of insects in its guttural solo voice.

When the quivering air quit throbbing, Tobi opened the phone and punched in Ben's cell phone number. He answered on the first ring. "Ben, it's a long story, but Kent is on his way to the hospital in a helicopter. He's been snake bitten and Joel's with him."

Ben didn't waste words. "What's their ETA?"

"Five minutes or less. Joel has Kent's gun."

"Are you all right?"

"Yes."

The receiver buzzed in her ear. Tobi grinned, snapped the phone shut and slid it into her pocket. Then she gingerly stepped toward the pile of boulders. The dead rattlesnake was stretched out under the mottled shade of the mesquite boughs.

She studied it almost mournfully. It had been a granddaddy of a reptile. Long. Thick. And deadly. But now it was motionless with two bullet holes through its head.

She looked beyond the shade of the old mesquite tree. The world seemed unreal again. The sun was still glaring. The cicadas had taken up their pulsating drone again. Grasshoppers were bouncing about.

Nothing had changed.

Everything had changed.

When Tobi got to the hospital, police cars were everywhere. People were milling around the helicopter and spilling out the doors of the hospital. Joel was watching for her. She ran into his arms and he held her, trembling, for a long time.

"I've never been so scared in my life," Tobi said at last.

"Same here," Joel said huskily. He tightened his embrace. "You saved my life."

"Don't say that," Tobi whispered, suddenly breathless with fear again. "Don't even think it!" She snuggled deeper into his arms and tried to block Kent's face entirely out of her memory.

Finally Joel said, "We'd better go find Ben. He's of a mind to dump Kent into a pit full of rattlesnakes. It might soothe his feelings if he can see for himself that you're safe."

Tobi nodded, and they started toward the hospital. "Where did you come from, anyway?" she asked. "How did you know Kent had me?"

He took her hand and held it tightly as they walked. "After I called you this morning, I talked to Ben. He was worried about you, and that made me so nervous I wasn't sleeping very well.

"Finally I got up and tried to call you, just to reassure myself. Nobody answered and then I was really nervous. I should have called Ben on the spot, but I didn't. I knew you could have stepped out of the office for a few minutes, and everything was probably fine. But I had to know, so I got dressed and came up here to find out. When I pulled into the parking lot, I saw you and

Kent getting into that black pickup. I didn't actually know who he was, but I suspected. When did Kent realize I was behind you?"

"Almost immediately. When he saw you pull out of the parking lot, he made four left turns and knew you were following us."

Joel sighed. "Well, I'm not very subtle, but I am persistent."

"Where's your cell phone, anyway? I couldn't figure out why you didn't call the police."

"It's at home on the charger. The batteries were low."

"Oh well," Tobi said philosophically, "maybe it's just as well you didn't have it. I'm afraid there would have been some shooting if the police had gotten involved."

They stepped into the emergency room, and Ben saw them at once. He hurried over and encased Tobi in a hug that nearly smothered her. "I'm so sorry," he said earnestly. "God knows I wanted to give you protection, but the Chief said we didn't have the manpower. Are you sure you're okay?"

He released her, and she came out of his bear hug, pounding at him with both fists. "I'll be fine if you don't smother me!" she gasped.

Ben beamed at Joel over Tobi's head. "She must be all right. She's beating on me."

"What about Kent?" Tobi asked. "Is he going to be all right?"

"Yes. Unfortunately," Ben said darkly. "Why didn't you two leave him out there to rot? He wouldn't have hesitated to do the same to you."

"Because you would have arrested us for murder or manslaughter or whatever that is," Tobi retorted, "and you know it."

"Somebody may have, but it wouldn't have been me," Ben said with conviction. "Well, I guess you'd better both come down to the station and tell me the story."

"You two go ahead," Joel said. "I need to get my ribs X-rayed and see how many are cracked. I'll meet you there in a few minutes."

"Joel, why didn't you say something?" Tobi's face was immediately creased with lines. "Does it hurt terribly?"

"Pretty bad," he admitted.

Tobi looked at Ben angrily. "You're right. We should have left Kent out there to rot!"

"Someday you'll learn," Ben grinned. "Your local police officers are always right."

"Always?" she asked.

"Almost always."

"You go on," Tobi said to Ben, slipping her hand into Joel's. "I want to stay here for the X-rays - if that's all right with you, Joel." She looked up at him questioningly.

"Of course," he said, "I'd be grateful."

Once Tobi and Joel joined Ben at the police station, it took Ben nearly two hours to satisfy himself that he had heard everything he needed to hear about the afternoon's escapade. Finally, he leaned back in his chair and said with a scowl, "He came back for you - to ask you to go with him. He took the major risk of coming back here when he had to know you wouldn't go with him. At least, not of your own free will. Are you buying that?"

Tobi had to laugh in spite of her mounting weariness. "Ben, you must be the most insulting man alive! Of course, he came back for me - beautiful, exciting, charming me. How can you doubt it?"

"Sorry, I didn't mean to be insulting."

He looked so pitiful that Tobi relented. "No, I don't think he came back for me. But he did sound convincing. What do you think was the real reason?"

"To protect Senator Kirby," Ben said. "He had to leave the country anyway, so he might as well collect the guilt, cram it in his luggage and carry it with him."

"Always protecting the Senator," said Tobi bitterly. Then she shrugged. "Well, who cares? I'm sick of this case. Can we go now?"

"Sure. If you think of anything else, you can let me know later."

"You already know everything except Aunt Matilda's favorite color," Tobi protested.

"You don't have an Aunt Matilda," said Ben.

It was nearly 6:00 when Joel let Tobi out at her car in the hospital parking lot. "I believe this has been the longest day of my life," she said wearily.

"Look, if you want to call off the date tonight, just say so," he told her. "I know you're exhausted."

She studied his face. "Not half as exhausted as you are - or should be, considering the night you had. Plus two cracked ribs. Do you want to call it off?"

"Not unless you do."

Her eyes sparkled. "Good, because I don't want to either. But, Joel, I'm going home. Pick me up at 2121 Dawson Drive."

He smiled. "I know where you live."

If Tobi thought all the hard parts of the day were behind her, she was wrong. She threw the Walling household into an uproar when she announced she was leaving.

"That's silly," DeeDee insisted. "You're exhausted. You have a date with Joel tonight. Why don't you go tomorrow?"

Davy hugged her legs and wailed, "Please stay here."

Alison complained that they hadn't had time to do anything fun yet. And Ben, who had beaten her home by five minutes, said mildly, "I've grown accustomed to your face. Why don't you hang around until we're sick of you?"

"Maybe I'm *already* sick of *you*," Tobi countered with a grin.

He laughed, said, "Suit yourself," and disappeared into the den with the newspaper.

"Now," said Tobi, turning to Davy, "I need some help from you."

"How come?" he asked.

"It's Jasper," she said and swallowed hard. "I don't think I can keep him."

"Why not?"

"Well, he reminds me of Kent, and I don't like being reminded of Kent. Would you take care of Jasper until I can figure out what to do with him?"

"Oh boy, can I, Mom?" Davy begged.

DeeDee nodded, and Davy jumped up and ran outside to tell Jasper the good news. "I guess that's my cue to get out while the gettin's good," said Tobi, picking up her suitcase.

"I'll be there at 7:30 to do your hair," DeeDee said.

"DeeDee, you don't need to do that," said Tobi. "Your family is hungry, and..."

"I'll be there at 7:30," DeeDee said firmly.

At home Tobi put on a CD, hiked the volume up a couple of levels, and stepped into a bubble bath. The music was an instrumental version of favorite hymns. She shut her eyes, as the beautiful melodies and the sudsy water closed around her, and the tension of the day quietly drained away. "Thank You, Lord," she whispered, "for Your goodness and Your wonderful works to the children of men."

DeeDee arrived early and hugged Tobi fiercely. "Ben told me everything that happened today. Are you sure you're all right?"

"I am now."

"And Joel has two cracked ribs but, otherwise, he's okay?"

"Yes."

DeeDee took a deep breath. "Okay then...I'm cool now. I'd love to get that monster's heart on a chopping block, but I guess I'll have to leave him to the justice system."

"I think that would be the wisest course," said Tobi smiling, "but I do appreciate your desire to torture him. Personally, I'd like to break a couple of his ribs - just to let him know how it feels."

DeeDee laughed. "Well, he'd better thank God he's in the hands of a nice benign judge, instead of us brutal sisters." She picked up the blow drier and aimed it at Tobi's wet hair.

While DeeDee worked, Tobi told her about the host of callers who had kept the phone ringing all morning, wanting to know about the case and how Ben had solved it. "Clayton called, too, wanting me to come back to work at the *Crier*," she added. "He said I was welcome now that I've been exonerated."

"I hope you told him off," DeeDee said indignantly.

"I guess I did," Tobi admitted. "But then it dawned on me that Vi will be back in a week or two and I won't have a job."

"Never mind. You don't need a job," DeeDee said. "Just marry Joel and let him make the living."

Tobi laughed out loud. "I met the man ten days ago. Even if we do get married some day in the *far* distant future, I have to make a living in the meantime."

"So what are your options?"

Tobi told her about Mike Temple's phone call. DeeDee flatly nixed the idea of Tobi's returning to Foxhole. "No chance," she said. "The only way I'll let you leave Deepwater is if you marry Joel and he decides to move."

"December Walling, you're hopeless," Tobi protested. "We're going on our first date tonight. Would you drop the marriage talk, at least until our second date?"

"Don't you want to be married?" DeeDee asked, smoothing the last curl into place and standing back to admire her work.

"Of course, I do, but I refuse to marry another stranger. Right now I don't know Joel well enough to know whether I want to be married to him or not."

"Don't be such a snob. I knew I wanted to marry Ben the first time I set eyes on him." DeeDee misted Tobi's hair lightly with hair spray, then unveiled the dress she had chosen for her. It was a sleeveless, knee-length, black sheath, elegant in its simplicity.

Tobi touched the satiny fabric and shook her head. "Don't you think it's a bit much?"

"I think it's perfect! Put it on - I can't wait to see you in it."

Tobi stepped into the dress and held her hair out of the way so DeeDee could zip her up. "It's gorgeous," she said, "but you have to let me pay for it. It must have been expensive."

DeeDee zipped the dress and stepped back to study Tobi critically. "It's perfect!" she pronounced. "Joel doesn't have a chance - one look at you in this will fry his brain!"

"Oh great," said Tobi sarcastically, "just what I need, a man with a fried brain. And that reminds me - I have good news."

DeeDee gave her sister a strange look. "You have good news about a man with a fried brain?"

"No, just the opposite - an unfried brain. Joel's ex-wife was praying for Gracie last night and claiming her healing instead of taking her to the hospital for treatment. The whole thing scared Joel so much he's ready to reconsider his Charismatic beliefs."

The news silenced DeeDee for two or three seconds. "You're kidding," was all she could say.

Tobi shook her head. "Nope. I wouldn't kid about a thing like that."

"Then that's it!" DeeDee exclaimed, quickly adapting to the new development. "It's gone - the final obstacle standing between you and Joel and happily-ever-after is out the window. You can elope to Las Vegas tonight. I wish I'd known. There was a white dress just like this one - I should have gotten it instead."

"DeeDee Walling, if I didn't love you so much, I think I would knock you upside the head," Tobi fumed. "I don't need you pushing me toward Joel. I need you holding me back so I don't do anything stupid or reckless. Can't you see I'm already too infatuated with him?"

"No," DeeDee said seriously. "I can't see that, at all. You've been resisting him since day one."

Tobi let out a long, soft sigh. "Not any more. I like him so much it scares me to death."

"Oh." DeeDee gave her sister a quick hug. "Well, I'll be serious then. If you guys elope to Las Vegas tonight, I'll never forgive you. How's that?"

"Better."

"Yep, but if you wait until next week, Ben and I can make arrangements to go with you."

Tobi glowered at her. "DeeDee!"

"Sorry," DeeDee apologized. "I've been doing it so long I can't stop. But I'll work on it. And now I'm out of here."

Tobi was studying her reflection in the mirror. "I'm going to feel pretty silly if Joel is dressed in blue jeans and takes me to McDonald's," she said.

"I wouldn't worry about that," DeeDee said. "Bye, sis. I hope you have the most wonderful evening of your life."

"If I do, it's thanks to you."

"Nonsense," DeeDee said, but she looked pleased.

Joel rang the doorbell at 8:30. He was wearing a light gray suit and an after shave with an intoxicating fragrance. With both hands he was carefully holding a ceramic planter shaped like a Dutch windmill. The blades of the windmill were made of wood and actually turned. Delicate pink tulips were growing in the top of the windmill.

When Tobi opened the door and saw him, her eyes and mouth formed doughnuts. "Oh, Joel! It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen." He held it out to her. "It's too much - you really shouldn't have," she protested. "Where did you find tulips in May! And, Joel, how did you know?"

They both said, "DeeDee," at the same time and laughed.

Tobi settled the windmill on the TV stand among her family pictures, then threw her arms around Joel, being careful of his injured ribs. "There's no way to thank you enough. I love it!"

"That's thanks enough," he said, holding her for a long moment.

"Where did you get live tulips so late in the spring?" she asked again.

"The florist flew them in from Boston."

"In one day?"

He laughed. "Not exactly. Do you remember that day last week - Monday - when we were both at the police station seeing Ben?"

"Yes."

"Well, that was the third time I'd seen you in three days and, each time, I left you feeling sure you would hate me forever. So I called DeeDee that evening to tell her I didn't have a chance with you."

"I bet that made her day."

"It didn't faze her. She said, 'Not so fast, Joel. I can tell you how to wrap Tobi around your little finger.' "

"Really?" Tobi said indignantly. "She's got her nerve."

"Well, far be it from me to want you wrapped around my little finger," Joel said, grinning, "but I did ask what she had in mind. She said, 'Tulips. Get her pink tulips and she'll follow you to the ends of the Earth.'

"I called the florist the next day and she promised she would have tulips for me on Friday. I was going to have them delivered to you at the office Friday, but DeeDee called Thursday night and said to wait. She said you had just told her you weren't going to get romantically involved with anyone until the murder was solved, so I had to wait until the murder was solved."

"And if the tulips died in the meantime?"

"Well, DeeDee said not to worry; Ben was closing in on the perpetrator. Fortunately, she was right."

"Fortunately," Tobi echoed gratefully.

Riding along in Joel's SUV, with long evening shadows stretching across the homes and lawns of Deepwater, Tobi said, "I'd like to ask you a question."

"Okay."

"Why me?" It was a question she had been wanting to ask all week. "I think DeeDee's right. There must be a hundred women in this town who would love to be with you tonight. Maybe 200. Maybe 1,000!"

"Really? Where?" Joel peered into the gathering darkness.

"Seriously. I want to know," Tobi insisted. "Why me?"

Joel smiled at her fondly and took her hand in his. "It was something you wrote in a column for the *Crier* one time," he said. "After I read it, I wanted to meet you, so I asked around about you and - what do you know? - your nephew turned out to be one of my best soccer players. I knew Ben so I called him and asked him if he would introduce us. He said that was his wife's department so he introduced me to DeeDee. And the rest you know."

Tobi laughed. "You really won DeeDee's heart. She's still lobbying for you as if her life depends on getting us married."

"Well, I guess that was money well spent!"

"I don't think so," Tobi replied. "DeeDee can't be bought. So which of my columns did you like so much?"

"The title of it was, 'Greatness sown in seeds of gentleness.' And you talked about a verse in the Bible where King David said to the Lord, 'Your gentleness has made me great.' Rachel had thrown one of her tantrums that day because I had the girls out five minutes late and I remember praying, 'Dear God, wouldn't I love to meet a woman who is gentle!' And I couldn't get it out of my mind that, since you valued gentleness enough to write about it, maybe you were a gentle person."

"And do you think am I?" Tobi asked, dreading his answer as she recalled their first meetings.

"Well, I once saw you thrash a mesquite tree that never did a thing to you." He smiled at the memory. "But that's okay - I don't think being gentle means being a spineless jellyfish. Gentleness is a fruit of the Spirit and I've found you to be gentle. And warm. And kind. And intelligent. And creative. And perfectly delightful in every way...except that one."

He didn't crack a smile, but Tobi could feel a grin hovering beneath the surface. "Okay, I'll bite. What's *that one*?"

"Well, it's this terrible prejudice you have against poor, innocent grasshoppers. You're going to have to work on that, you know."

His face remained serious, and Tobi laughed. "You're never going to let me forget that, are you?"

"Not in a million years." He beamed at her. "Well, here we are." He stopped in front of a small, rundown house in a poor part of town.

"Here we are where?" Tobi asked, looking around. "Is this Grasshopperville? You have grasshoppers who are personal friends and you're going to use them to put me through some kind of desensitization therapy. Right?"

"Actually," Joel said, "what I told you Sunday still goes - I'll consider it a privilege if you'll let me save you from all the grasshoppers in the world."

The same rush of tenderness for him that had nearly suffocated her that morning engulfed her again. "My hero," she said softly, smiling into his eyes.

Joel came around and opened the door for her. "This is the home of Millie Bledsoe," he explained as they walked to the house. "She works part time in housekeeping at the hospital and she has cooked dinner for us. She's a fabulous cook and a meticulous housekeeper. And she can use a few extra dollars. You'll love her; I promise."

A plump, white-haired woman met them at the door. "You're right on time. And this must be Tobi." She took Tobi's right hand with both of hers and clasped it warmly. "She's just as beautiful as you said. Come in, both of you."

She led them into a dark room where a small round table was draped with a long table cloth and lighted with elegant candles. The two chairs were positioned very close together. "You

sit down here. I'll bring out your salad. I do hope you like Italian food?" She paused for an answer.

Joel and Tobi assured her they would both love her dinner, and she disappeared into the kitchen. After that, they scarcely noticed her quiet comings and goings for the rest of the evening.

"First," Joel said, after Millie had put salads in front of them, "shall we ask God to bless our meal?"

Tobi nodded. Joel took her hand and bowed his head. "Thank You, Lord, for being with us today and keeping us safe. Thank You for this beautiful evening and for this good food. Please sanctify it to nourish our bodies. And Lord, please bless the dear, gracious lady who prepared it. In Jesus' name. Amen."

"Amen," Tobi murmured.

"So, tell me about yesterday," Joel said, picking up his fork and attacking his salad hungrily. "I've read an article in the paper and heard the radio reports, but I want to hear it from you."

"Well, Ben explained how he knew Kent killed Hugh," Tobi said sadly. "So Kent never was saved. That part was all an act." She quickly reviewed the evidence against Kent. "Even Audrey, his mother, agreed that he had to be guilty," she finished.

"That's tough on a Mom," Joel said sympathetically.

"Then last night when we got back to Ben and DeeDee's house, I was pretty depressed about Kent - knowing that he not only murdered Hugh, but Missy Sheridan too. And who knows who else! So when Ben suggested I write an article for the *Foxhole Gazette*, I jumped on the idea. It was better than sitting around all evening moping over Kent."

Joel stopped eating. "Do you still have feelings for Kent?"

"Oh yes. Lots of feelings, but not romantic ones. I didn't realize it then, but the romantic feelings began fading the night I met you."

"Really? And I thought I made you so angry that night."

Tobi laughed. "You did. But the thing that made me absolutely furious was the way I looked. I never go around looking like a scarecrow. Then the one time I did, I met the handsomest man in the world."

"Handsome? Me?" Joel looked genuinely surprised. "With my bald pate? And you had the movie star clone in your back pocket?"

"You're not exactly bald but, even if you were, I would still think you are the handsomest man in the world."

He looked surprised and touched, as she continued. "Anyway, the *Gazette* paid so well for the other article I wrote, I thought I couldn't afford to miss the opportunity to send them another one. And I spent the rest of the evening writing."

"And did they use it?" Joel asked.

Tobi nodded. "Yes, but I'm sorry I didn't call you instead. I didn't even realize you might expect..." She paused, unable to put into words the sorrow she felt for letting him down. "And then this morning at the office when I got your note, I was disappointed you hadn't called me about Gracie. I would have liked to be there for you."

"Really? I would have liked that too," Joel said, "but it never occurred to me to disturb you at that hour."

"Next time, disturb me," Tobi said. Then she asked, "So what happened? You said Gloria called you right after midnight?"

Joel laughed suddenly. "It wasn't funny last night. It was deadly serious, but she waited at the front door for me and took me to Gracie's room. I picked Gracie up and smuggled her out

like a burglar walking out with the family jewels. Gloria said Rachel and Paul threw a huge tantrum this morning when they found out what I'd done. Rachel was screaming about having me locked up and suing me and taking away my visitation rights. So Gloria said, 'Maybe Dad will have you arrested for recklessly endangering Gracie's life.' Then Rachel shut up...for a while anyway."

He looked pensive. "I did a lot of thinking last night, Tobi, about the things you said against my church. I decided that you're right."

"Really? Why?"

"It wasn't just the thing with Gracie - where Rachel and Paul prayed and claimed her healing like a couple of ignorant buffoons. But this morning, when Rachel was acting like a brat and you were so quiet and dignified, I wondered for the millionth time when she's ever going to grow up. And then it dawned on me that she never will. She never hears anything in church about growing in holiness and maturity. All we ever hear is how to get what we want from God. How to tap into His power. How to manipulate Him. It's all superstition, just like you said."

He had been so engrossed in the conversation that he had stopped eating. Now he picked up his fork again and smiled sadly at Tobi. "I never want to see the inside of another Charismatic church as long as I live. Or any of its relatives."

"I know that feeling." Tobi said sympathetically, then added, "Speaking of church, your pastor came by the office this morning. He'd been visiting Gracie. When I told him you weren't there, he said he hadn't seen much of you at church the last few weeks and wanted to know what was going on with you. He was giving me some strange looks - like he thought I'd bewitched you and kept you out of church."

"Maybe he's right. I do feel a little bewitched sometimes when I look at you."

Tobi smiled. She was beginning to feel a little bewitched herself. "How's Gracie this evening?" she asked.

"Great! Tom sent her home."

"How wonderful!" Tobi said, then added softly, "God's good."

They ate in silence for a few minutes and then Joel said, "I called my folks today to tell them about Grace's appendectomy. Mom said Dad is ready to retire."

Tobi frowned, trying to recall. "What business did you say he's in?"

"The newspaper business."

"Oh right! The newspaper Hugh Mansett ruined. So what happens to the newspaper when he retires?"

"They'll sell it unless I want to take it on."

Tobi's eyes widened. "Do you?"

"I might. If you'll come along as managing editor."

Tobi put down her fork. "Are you serious? Is that a firm offer?"

"Yes."

Tobi leaned back in her chair. Leave Deepwater? Move to a strange town where Joel was the only person she knew? Did she want to do that? "Lord," she prayed urgently, "I don't know what to say."

She wanted to be with Joel and believe in him more than she had ever wanted anything in her life. But what if he were following an impossible dream? What if there was no such thing as a "trustworthy news service"? What if they bankrupted the newspaper? She probably had more hands-on experience in journalism than he did - if this were a losing proposition and she failed to recognize it, she would always feel responsible for the fate of his family's business. She felt as if he were asking her to step out into utter blackness.

Suddenly a slight movement from the kitchen caught her eye. Millie was in the doorway, checking on their progress, seeing if they needed anything. And, even in the dim light, the look of satisfaction on her face and the pride in her demeanor were obvious. Then the plump, little figure disappeared.

"I never met anybody like you, Joel Trent," Tobi said quietly.

"How's that?"

"You not only helped Millie with her finances, you've made her feel useful and important. Not many men even notice things like that, much less *do* something about them. I've been looking for you my whole life."

He shrugged. "Don't give me too much credit. I wanted you all to myself this evening and this was the only way I could think of to pull it off."

"If I believed that, you could sell me your beach front property north of town," Tobi said.

"Well, the beaches *are* fabulous - sand as far as the eye can see." He grinned. "But first, do you want the job?"

She smiled bravely. "I think I'd like to follow your dream with you."

"I think I'd like to kiss you," he said.

She rolled her eyes. "Finally!"

He put a hand under her chin and pulled her face close to his. His lips were soft and warm on hers, but only for a moment. Then he pulled back and glared at her with mock fierceness. "You've got your nerve, saying 'Finally!' to me like that after the torment you've put me through the past week."

Tobi grinned, put her arms around his neck and pulled his mouth down onto hers. When she released him, he winked and said, "Finally!"

They both laughed and Millie poked her head in to see if they were ready for dessert. "Give us ten more minutes," Joel told her. "This is too good to rush through."

Millie disappeared and Joel touched Tobi's cheek with gentle fingers, then turned his attention to his food. Tobi pretended to eat, too, but she couldn't swallow. Her heart was too full.

She took a sip of the cold water in her crystal goblet and let her eyes wander around the room. The darkness snuggled up so close to the white pool of candlelight on their table that she could barely see the dim shapes of the furniture in the room.

"...and darkness was under his feet." The words from Psalm 18 came to her with startling clarity. The Lord was there with them, she realized. Even in the darkness. Down through all the years when she had sometimes felt alone and abandoned in deep darkness, He had been there.

In the darkness...

For the first time in 10 years she didn't resent the career that had consumed her and kept her so preoccupied that she had missed her chance for a family. Joel was worth waiting 20 years for.

Pictures flashed through her mind. Joel on Homerun Hill rescuing her from the rattlesnake and carrying her to safety. Joel calming Bess's tears and turning Dr. Turney's wrath to meekness. Joel carrying Davy and his grasshopper away Sunday afternoon in Willowdale Park. Joel's lips pressed against hers only two minutes ago.

She thought of the long, dark years she had spent in Charismatic churches, believing God could be manipulated to produce health, wealth and anything else the mind could conceive. But she never would have conceived of Joel. He was, at once, more real and more wonderful than any man she could have imagined. How foolish she must have seemed to the Lord in those years - a lump of clay presuming to order the Potter's hands. And yet, even in the deep

darkness of her stupid arrogance, the loving God who created her had been gently leading her to this day. And to Joel.

A breeze drifted through the room and its cool breath stirred Tobi's hair. She glanced at the open window and saw a single star framed there. She smiled at the luminous pinpoint of light twinkling in the vast ocean of cosmic blackness. "Thank You, Lord," she thought, "for those lovely times when You prick a hole in the darkness and let us see Your glory shining through."

The End

