

CHAPTER 1

MY FATHER'S BETRAYAL

Father," I prayed, "You know the darkness I feel from my parents. Be my light today. Honor this obedience." Jerry added his Amen. I massaged my throbbing forehead. We pulled to a stop at Route 34, just south of Halesburg. It was July 1997. My husband and I had driven north, through the cornfields of central Illinois, for our yearly visit to the family farm. I rummaged through the glove box, found two Tylenol Extra Strength, and washed them down.

I leaned my head against the seat back. "My father thinks I'm stupid because I grow flowers rather than tomatoes." I stared at the green cornstalks in the fields. "And has my mother ever asked me a question about my life?"

“Yeah, that’s them,” Jerry said. As he glanced at me, God’s compassion shone in his gray eyes. In our twenty-five years together, Jerry had often seemed to me like the incarnation of Jesus. He even looked a little like I imagined Jesus to look: tall, with strong features and gentle hands.

“I don’t think I’ve talked to them more than twice this year. And once was three weeks ago when I called to set up this visit.” I ran my fingers through my short brown hair as I gazed at the mobile home park on the south edge of town, bigger now than I remembered. Jerry squeezed my shoulder. I smiled at him.

As the medication worked, the throbbing lessened. Passing the metal-sided grocery store downtown, my heart softened as I thought of the large family—eight children, plus my maternal grandmother who had lived with us—that my mother had fed from the proceeds of the small grain farm. They worked winter jobs, too. My father butchered beef at the processing plant; my mother cooked at the steak house. How many headaches had *they* endured?

In the last block of the business district, grayed plywood sheathed the windows of Laughlin’s restaurant, where I had paid a quarter, handed to me by my mother every week after mass, for the Sunday *Chicago Tribune*. Threading my way through the

tables full of townspeople eating their beef and gravy hot plates to the back room where the newspapers were stacked, I had worn my country poverty like a jacket of shame.

Just past the old restaurant, we turned right, passing classmates' houses on our way out of town. Across a railroad, just beyond a winding creek, the 180-acre farm began. Between the water and the road, a stand of pine trees grew. When I was in high school, my father had sheared off the back limbs to foil thieves who'd been stealing them for Christmas trees, but they looked full now.

We turned into the farmyard just past the orchard and pulled up near the old barnyard, where ducks, geese, and chickens had once pecked, but where grass and gardens now grew. Along the driveway, purple clusters of grapes hung heavy against broad green leaves. In my childhood the vines never bore fruit because of my father's herbicide overspray. Beyond the grapes, my parents, in their eighties, toiled among the tomatoes.

As we opened the car doors, my petite, white-haired mother straightened and waved, a watering can in her other hand. Such hard workers—I can respect that, I thought, returning the wave. My father, resting on a tubular metal kitchen chair that functioned as a garden bench, eyed us without lifting a hand. He's a tired old man—he can't hurt me.

He leaned over to grasp his gnarled wooden cane where it had fallen. Despite gripping the cane's rounded top with a shaky hand and using the chair's vinyl-covered back as a second support, he nearly stumbled as he stood on his arthritic knees, breathing heavily.

“Are you still nursing a forty-year hatred?” He wagged a crooked finger at me, his black eyes bright and hard behind his glasses. His unexpected rage felt like a ten-foot tsunami. I planted myself against the onslaught.

Leaning on her hoe, my mother watched us, silent. Behind me, Jerry grasped my shoulder. A few feet away, a cardinal called to its mate in the golden delicious apple tree. As I glanced at the wet black soil surrounding the tomatoes, trying to compose a response, I remembered a day before the time I started hating my father, a day more than forty years ago.



Was that the supper bell? Behind the red corncrib, near the field of green stalks that towered over me, I'd found just the right consistency of black mud I needed to make a pie for a tea party with my dollies.

As I turned to run to the house, my foot slipped in the goop. I sank into the mix of mud and poultry droppings up to the tops of my shoes. Finally, I wrestled myself out, but not without lying down to get some traction. My pants! Tears sprang to my eyes. Mom had just produced them from her stash of rummage sale finds that morning, when I had complained I didn't have anything to wear. She'd found another pair, too, but they were patched and had a big stain on the left leg. I'd whined to wear these today, even though they were good enough for a Sunday afternoon drive. "I'll be good," I'd said. "I'll keep them clean." Boy, would she be mad now! Our pigs kept themselves cleaner.

I ran into the kitchen. At the Formica table, everybody was waiting. Mom stood at the stove with her back to me, dishing up bean soup out of the deep well at the back of the stove. That meant they had already said grace. Grandma, feeding Henry at his highchair at the end of the table, didn't notice me, but my five older brothers and my sister stared. I felt even smaller than my almost four years. My mother turned toward the table to serve the soup, balancing three bowls. She nearly dropped them when she saw me. "You've ruined those good pants! What's the matter with you? Go wash up!"

"I got stuck in the mud," I said, my tears mingling with the black smears on my face.

“Yuk; you smell terrible,” Fred said, holding his nose.

I felt dirty, and not just on the outside. I smelled bad, and I was bad. And my stomach was empty. I could smell the soup, with its bits of ham. If I went and washed up, I might lose out. For sure, there’d be no ham left. I hesitated, one muddy shoe on top of the other, biting a fingernail. My father, even though he had his back to me, seemed to sense I was still there, because he looked over his shoulder at me. His dark eyes looked tired. He must have seen the fear in my eyes because he said, “Go get cleaned up. I’ll make sure there’s enough left for you, Snooks. I’ll even save a piece of ham.”

I smiled really big at him, and with a little snort at Fred, turned to go to the bathroom. I heard my father say to him, “That’s enough, now. She’s just a little kid.” He said that last part like it was okay to be little and not know enough to keep out of the mud. He came in from the fields almost as dirty as I was, so maybe I was okay, after all.



“No. I stopped hating you a long time ago,” I said to my father. Small purple eggplants shone in the noonday sun. My parents were legendary

gardeners. Next to the eggplants, the Brandywine tomatoes were starting to turn. Orange blossoms and gleaming fruit peeked out of the big zucchini leaves. A few feet away a bushel of onions awaited the cellar, and, down the middle of the apple trees, potato plants were blooming. The golden delicious apples, like most of the others, were still hard and bitter. Last week, however, when I phoned to say we were coming, Mom had said the Wolf River apples, an early variety, would be ready, and she'd bake a pie. I loved her pies. For days, I'd been imagining the taste of her flaky crust, enclosing the cinnamon richness of soft apples. Dessert on the farm never disappointed.

Nancy and Joe, my sister and brother-in-law, were out of town that weekend, or they would have joined us. They lived a few miles away, and, in addition to helping Mom and Dad, they raised their own vegetables at the farm. My other sibling who might have come for the day was Al, but his wife, Ann, had had surgery recently and wasn't able to travel. Another brother, Harold, lived in Illinois, too, but he was an institutionalized schizophrenic. My other brothers—Herb, Craig, Fred, and Henry, along with their families—were spread across the country. Today, it was just Dad, Mom, Jerry, and me.

Heart thumping, I forced myself to advance toward my father. He stiffened as I put my arm

around his shoulders. I couldn't remember the last time I'd hugged him. Feeling his heat through the thin fabric of his dirty shirt took me back to the place where the hatred had begun.



It was an unusually warm October day, again wet from a rain. After lunch, my little brother, Henry, and I had been sent outside to play. I'd learned my lesson, so I was wearing an old stained pair of shorts that day, with a red flowered shirt. My frizzy brown hair stuck out at odd angles. We'd picked several hollyhock flowers and buds, and I was teaching Henry how to make "ladies."

"Here," I said, guiding his stubby fingers, "put the toothpick through the stem." I held the bud end as he jabbed the pick in.

"Now, put this flower on the other end of the toothpick." I held the open flower stem up for him to attach the two pieces. "Isn't that pretty?"

He just grinned. He didn't talk much yet. As we lined up a row of purple dolls, I felt like a real teacher. That's what I wanted to be when I grew up, ever since I'd met Mrs. Carter, the kindergarten teacher, last Saturday when Mom and I were at the grocery store. She had made me feel important, squatting down to

my eye level, telling me about the picture books and toy kitchen area in her classroom.

I was imagining the pleasures of kindergarten play when Henry swept all our pretty ladies into a pile, crushing them. As I opened my mouth to yell at him, my father rounded the corner of the barn behind us, and his midafternoon shadow engulfed us both. I turned to tell him how Henry had ruined my little schoolroom, but I changed my mind when I saw the firm set of his face. He wasn't in any mood to listen to our little squabbles.

"Karen, come with me to the store," he said, holding out his hand. Gulping back my tears at Henry's destruction of my happy school scenario, I grabbed his hand and jumped up and down. He wasn't in a bad mood, after all. And he wanted to take me for a ride in the big Nash!

"Me, too!" Henry said.

"No, just Karen. You go inside. Now."

Henry began to cry, scrunching up his face in that silly way of his. I scowled at him. I got to do something he didn't. He swatted at me, missing my leg, before he ran toward the house. He'd tell Grandma how he didn't get to go with us and she'd stop sweeping the kitchen floor and read him a book. But I got to have my daddy all to myself. When you're one of eight kids, you don't get much time alone with your daddy, so even if you miss getting a book read to you, it's okay.

We walked, hand in hand, across the barnyard. I had to run, practically, to keep up. The chickens and ducks pecked nearby, but nobody else was around on this school day. It seemed odd Daddy would go to the store instead of Mom. If he went to town, it was to get parts or feed or seed. He'd take one of the boys for their young muscles. But Daddy knew what he was doing. I didn't question him. As if he could read my thoughts, he said, "It's too wet to get the picker in the fields, and Mom needs bread for supper."

"Can we get ice cream?" We'd had the treat for my recent birthday.

"We'll see." I knew that meant to be quiet and good and maybe, even probably, my request would be granted. "Get your shoes on."

"Should I change my shorts?"

"No, they're fine."

I ran to the garage where I'd left my shoes and buckled them on quickly. I hopped into the frayed front seat of the Nash, where I'd never ridden alone. Mom always rode in the front passenger seat, with Henry between her and Dad, now that he was the baby. Today, I had it all to myself. I was the special one today. The dark interior of the car smelled like the King Arthur tobacco Daddy smoked in his wooden pipe. I struggled to close the door as the engine rumbled. I loved the sound, like a lion

roaring. After I got the heavy door shut, I sat on my legs to see out the window better. The tires crunched on the gravel of the driveway as we pulled away.

“Pretty hot for October, isn’t it,” he said.

“Yeah.” I couldn’t remember any other Octobers, even though it was my birthday month. I remembered the big chocolate cake Mom had baked, with my name written in yellow icing. I got to eat a big piece, even before dinner. Then I got to eat another piece afterward—even better with the ice cream!

We pulled into a diagonal parking space in front of Cross’s grocery store. I scrambled across the wide seat to get out Daddy’s side of the car. He lifted me up on the high sidewalk and stepped up himself. The little grocery displayed all kinds of good food, but Daddy headed right for the bread aisle. Picking up a Honey Wheat, he turned toward the front of the store, not stopping at the ice cream freezer.

“Daddy, you said we could get some ice cream.”

“I said we’d see. I see it’s not on sale.” He frowned at me as he pulled out some coins from his trousers and handed them to Mrs. Cross.

“How are you, today, Alice?” he said.

“Pretty hot. Okay, though.” She handed him a dime change.

“But I’ve been good,” I said, tugging on his sleeve.

Mrs. Cross smiled at me. “You are a good girl, aren’t you?”

Daddy unhooked my hand from his sleeve and pulled me through the door. “We can’t afford it. Now be quiet about it.” He lifted me into the car.

I was crying by then. “We’ll see” was almost a promise, and you were supposed to keep promises.

He sped toward home, but when we approached our driveway, he kept going.

“Where are we going?” I said.

“Out to see if the fields are still wet. Come over here. You can drive.”

I dried my tears on my faded shirt, scooted onto his lap, and grasped the big wheel. I was driving. Wait until Henry hears about this. It’s even better than ice cream!

When we got to the corner, half a mile north of our house, I slowly turned the big wheel to the left. After we crossed the creek flowing out of our back fields, Daddy helped me turn onto the rough ground of the half-picked cornfield. He stopped the big Nash behind the tall stalks. Just over the fence, a spring bubbled. When my big brothers took me to play with them at the creek, we usually got a drink from the spring. Maybe we’d walk down the farm road that forded the waterway to see whether there were any fish in the creek. I loved playing in

the water, and I wasn't allowed to go to the creek by myself, so that would be fun. Just me and my Daddy. He never took me out just by myself. We'd probably get a drink first. I was thirsty. I could almost taste the fresh water.

But we didn't drink from the bubbling spring. Daddy didn't show me the shiny fish in the water. Instead, he held me in silence for what seemed like a long time, his grip on me slowly tightening. What was he doing? Why weren't we getting a drink? Abruptly, he laid me out on the car seat, squashing the bread on the seat beside us with my head, and began to touch me in ways that I had never imagined. I couldn't breathe. I wanted to scream, but I couldn't breathe. I stared in horror at his expressionless eyes, fixed on me—but not in love.

Finally, he let me go. I scrambled to the passenger door and pressed against it, even though the armrest dug into my side. I hardly noticed. I stared out the window at the bubbling spring. I felt dry as a desert.

He restarted the car. "Now, you get back over here and sit on my lap, or I'll do it again." He grabbed my arm and yanked me back onto his thigh.

"Don't tell Mommy. This is our little secret. I did it so you'll let your husband play with you, too." Play? Not like any play I knew. I never wanted a husband if that's what they did to you.

“What about the bread?” I whispered. It lay half-mashed in the corner.

“We’ll say we dropped it.”

When my father pulled up in front of the garage, before he even turned off the ignition, I bolted out the car door.

He hollered after me. “Here, take the bread in.”

I dared not disobey. Though out of his reach, I was still inside his authority. I ran back to the driver’s side and grabbed it out of his hand, careful not to touch his fingers. The chickens pecked around my feet as I hurried into the house. My mother, weeding the garden, waved. I didn’t stop. Dropping the bread on the kitchen table, I escaped to my bedroom. My heart raced as I ran up the back stairs, crying. Annie, my big dolly, was leaning in the corner. Wiping my nose on my sleeve, I took her over my knees, pulled down her pants, and hit her bare bottom. “You nasty girl. You’ve been playing with George again. He’s a bad boy.”

Throwing Annie aside, I picked up my baby Cathy doll, and curled on the bed, hugging her to my chest. I squeezed my legs together and rubbed my eyes. My father had looked at me through his bifocals. Maybe rubbing my eyes would get that image out of my head. My whole body felt empty, as if he’d gutted my insides. Through the open window,

I could hear the grinder out at the machine shed. He was probably sharpening hoes to go help Mom in the garden. Usually I liked to stand at the entrance to watch the sparks fly, but now I never wanted to watch the sparks again. The smallest one would set fire to this wilderness inside me.