

MILLS & BOON®



Vintage *Love™ Inspired*

**In Search of Her
Own**

CAROLE GIFT PAGE

Carole Page
In Search Of Her Own

«HarperCollins»

Page C. G.

In Search Of Her Own / C. G. Page — «HarperCollins»,

WHERE HAD THEY HIDDEN HER CHILD? Victoria Carlin yearned to find her son—the child she'd been forced to give up years ago. With the help of rugged private investigator Philip Anders, she searched for Joshua, clue by clue. Yet the truth remained hidden in shadows, and lie upon lie led them nowhere. Victoria believed that Joshua was alive...and needed her. But how could she help him when all of her determination and Philip's expert skills had failed to unravel the mystery of the boy's disappearance? Now Victoria could only look to heaven above to help bring Joshua back to her arms, and serenity to her heart...Welcome to Love Inspired™—stories that will lift your spirits and gladden your heart. Meet men and women facing the challenges of today's world and learning important lessons about life, faith and love.

Содержание

Table of Contents	6
“How do you do it, Mr. Anders? Where do you begin looking for a missing child?”	7
CAROLE GIFT PAGE	8
In Search of Her Own	9
Prologue	10
Chapter One	13
Chapter Two	18
Chapter Three	24
Chapter Four	28
Chapter Five	32
Chapter Six	36
Chapter Seven	41
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	45

Table of Contents

Cover Page
Excerpt
About the Author
Title Page
Epigraph
Prologue
Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen
Chapter Seventeen
Chapter Eighteen
Chapter Nineteen
Chapter Twenty
Chapter Twenty-One
Chapter Twenty-Two
Chapter Twenty-Three
Chapter Twenty-Four
Chapter Twenty-Five
Chapter Twenty-Six
Chapter Twenty-Seven
Chapter Twenty-Eight
Chapter Twenty-Nine
Chapter Thirty
Epilogue
Dear Reader
Copyright

“How do you do it, Mr. Anders? Where do you begin looking for a missing child?”

Victoria’s pulse quickened.

Philip laughed gently. “Really, Miss Carlin, you don’t expect me to give away trade secrets, do you?”

Embarrassment colored her cheeks. “It’s just so fascinating. If someone were looking for... someone,” she persisted, “you would be willing to go out and search for him—or her?”

” He studied her. “Are you looking for someone, Miss Carlin? A missing child?”

She averted her gaze, her thoughts drifting off to a familiar darkness. *Yes, I see a nameless, faceless child; my sweet little boy lost; heart of my heart, my very life. I never stop looking, and yet I wouldn’t know him if I passed him on the street.*

Victoria’s hands were trembling. “I never said that, now, did I, Mr. Anders?”

His gaze remained unflinching. “Sometimes a person’s silences say more than their words.”

CAROLE GIFT PAGE

writes from the heart about contemporary issues facing adults. Considered one of America's bestloved Christian fiction writers, Carole was born and raised in Jackson, Mississippi. She is the recipient of two Pacesetter Awards and the C.S. Lewis Honor Book Award. Over eight hundred of Carole's stories, articles and poems have been published in more than one hundred Christian periodicals.

A frequent speaker at conferences, schools, churches and women's ministries around the country, Carole finds fulfillment in being able to share her testimony about the faithfulness of God in her life and the abundance He offers those who come to Him. Carole and her husband, Bill, have three children and live in Moreno Valley, CA.

In Search of Her Own Carole Gift Page



www.millsandboon.co.uk

Come now and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow: though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.

Isaiah 1:18

Prologue

March, Easter Sunday

I went to the cemetery this cold, slate gray morning—had to, felt compelled, driven, as if the choice had been made for me. I stood with my back rigid, my hands doubled into fists, the wind whipping my hair, a torrent of tears dammed behind my eyes.

I had to be with Mother.

Hard to believe; the terrible reality still bombards me, like barbs in the flesh, sudden, unexpected, stealing my breath, leaving me reeling.

My mother is dead

Nearly a month now since she died.

I stood in the light powdery snow for what seemed forever—yes, mud-rippled snow and frozen ground on this Resurrection Sunday; no sign of spring, no tree limbs budding with the promise of life. My feet and hands grew numb; my throat ached, raw with the cold

I realize now I should have worn the heavy nubby coat Mother gave me when I began teaching at the university—a long, tailored, practical coat, a deep teal green, a color Mother said brought out the red in my auburn hair and accented the aqua-green of my eyes. I remember she got the coat on sale at Harris's, or was it RobinsonsMay? Mother never paid full price for anything in her life. It was a wonderful buy, she said; it would last me for years, she said.

I accepted it gratefully, profusely grateful, as I accepted all of Mother's gifts She shouldn't have, I told her; it was more than I deserved—I, the daughter who never measured up.

But not even Mother's marvelous coat could have warmed me today I knew it as I approached the grave site. The coldness in my bones didn't come from winter's lingering chill. It was the coldness of death, like a rock in my chest, hard, frigid, unmoving. Today at her grave I noticed the earth was still scarred, not smooth and untouched like the land around it. It was the only sign, the remnant clue, that a funeral had occurred, a burial taken place

Where my mother lies, the frozen earth still speaks of the deed, bears witness to it In time it, too, will take on the bland, anonymous, impeccable look of a rich man's lawn. I accept that fact, as I accept the fact that my mother is gone, her soul is in heaven.

But can I ever accept her going?

This morning I knelt down and placed a perfect white lily on her grave. White on white, life and death blending into a milky blur—the smooth creamy flesh of the lily against the gritty, icy blue snow. There is no marker yet. The headstone will take several weeks to make. It will match my father's stone nearby—that proper, solemn slab of granite with his name precisely carved in large letters—James Edward Carlin, Beloved Husband And Father. Yes, that austere stone is a perfect memorial to a man as imperious in death as he was in life.

When I stood, my nylons were drenched; my knees revolted against the coldness I wanted to do something or speak or walk somewhere. I wanted to feel some satisfaction in standing there, staring down at my parents' graves But I felt as numb as my fingers I wanted to turn and walk away or run to my car and drive somewhere where music was playing and people were singing—some lovely cathedral perhaps where spires rose heavenward and a man of God might declare triumphantly, Death, where is thy sting; grave, where is thy victory?

I wanted to be with somebody today. Not just somebody. I wanted to be with my mother. But there was no one around, except a stranger standing a short distance away by a large marble stone, his head bowed, his back to me—a tall, broad-shouldered man in a leather trench coat, a deep smoky gray color, his collar upturned against the cold. He wasn't wearing a hat and his thick brown hair looked wet from the snow.

“I’m here with you, Mother,” I said aloud, but my voice came out too small, swallowed by the wind. I realized I, too, was being swallowed, but not by the elements—by something more immense and just as impalpable. For this time,—for however long it lasts—I am as immobilized in life as my mother is in death. Perhaps worst of all, in spite of my faith, my life no longer matters to me. I know I should release my pain to God, but how? How can I surrender to the One I’m afraid now to trust?

It was irrational, I know, but I kept talking to Mother as if she could hear me. “I’ve received so many cards and phone calls Even people I hardly know have offered their condolences,” I said, raising my voice against the whistling wind.

The stranger turned and glanced my way, as if he thought I might be addressing him. I caught a glimpse of dark mahogany eyes and chiseled, aristocratic features.

I looked down, abashed, then lifted my gaze as the stranger came my way. Our eyes met and held for a long moment as he passed by, his expression warm with sympathy and compassion. He had the most compelling eyes I had ever seen He seemed to be telling me, We are kindred spirits inhabiting the same emotional place. You’re not alone. I understand your pain.

Something leapt inside me, an instinctive response, a yearning to hold on to this moment of connection with another grieving soul. I wanted to say something, offer a smile But as quickly as our fragile alliance formed, it slipped away. The stranger walked on through the fine blanket of snow, and I felt even more alone than before.

I turned back to my mother’s grave and said, too brightly, “Like I was saying, Mother, you wouldn’t believe all the people who’ve phoned—dozens of your former students, and mine People we haven’t heard from in years, some even since Father’s death six years ago “

Six years

It’s hard to believe Mother and I have been alone, had no one but each other all that time Even our colleagues at the university have maintained a polite distance all these years, comfortably insulated in their lofty bastion of academia. Convivial intellectuals, they are, who enjoy a good time as much as anyone, I suppose, but two lone women never quite fit their scheme of things.

Or perhaps we never tried—or cared to try—to fit their scheme We kept to ourselves, pleased to dwell in peace, living quiet, orderly lives. And, of course, for me, a predictable routine was an immense relief after those earlier days, after that black hole of time seven years ago.

As my eyes returned inevitably to my father’s headstone, memories swirled around me like a dark funnel cloud drawing me into its vortex. In its violent maelstrom I could hear my father’s voice thundering, “How could you do this to us, Victoria? How could you let it happen? You’ve thrown away your future for some gypsy actor. You’ve shamed us all with his misbegotten child. Is this the kind of woman we raised you to be? Mark my words, daughter, you’ll be the death of me yet.”

I was the death of you. Father. No one said an accusing word, but everyone knew the heart attack was my fault, my doing. If only I hadn’t disappointed you; if only I hadn’t broken your heart’

But it does no good to dwell on the past. Haven’t I learned that by now? You’re gone, Father. And now Mother is gone, too. I’m alone for the first time in my life, tied to no one, no bonds by blood, by birth, by affection. My last living relative has died

No, that’s not so.

There is another—blood of my blood, bone of my bone

My child.

Somewhere in this vast world lives a little lost boy whose face I’ve never seen, whose voice I’ve never heard, except that day in the delivery room for a sliver of time before he was whisked away from me forever

Where are you now, my son? Who do you call Mother? Do you have my eyes, my nose, my hair? My penchant for privacy? My love of books? When I lost you, my arms ached for months for someone to hold I felt as if someone had plundered my heart and left me for dead.

*But I denied my pain because I felt I had no right to grieve. For my parents' sake I bore my shame
in silence and denied my son's existence.*

But he lives.

He's somewhere, someone's child

*I've voiced the question over and over through a thousand sleepless nights, but now that I'm truly
alone the question takes on an urgency I can no longer deny. I have to know'*

Where is my son?

Chapter One

It was the first of May before Victoria returned to the cemetery—a gray, chill, cloud-heavy day with only faint streamers of sunlight to remind her it was spring. Her mother’s headstone was in place now, surrounded by a lush green carpet of tender new grass. The imposing granite monument matched her father’s marker, stately without being ostentatious. She stooped down and placed a potted plant in the grass—butter yellow chrysanthemums as bright as sunbursts, her mother’s favorite; the house and garden had been filled with them when Victoria was growing up.

“I’m sorry I haven’t come more often, Mother,” she said, wincing with shame. Somehow, even from the grave, her mother could make her feel guilty! “I don’t know why I haven’t come. I guess coming here makes your death more real and stirs up the pain,” she said, feeling the need to explain, to justify herself. “I’ll do better, I promise.”

God help me, I sound like a schoolgirl who’s been caught cheating or skipping class! God, you’ve forgiven me; why can’t I forgive myself?

Blinking back bitter tears, Victoria turned her gaze away from her parents’ markers. Her eyes settled on the immense gravestone a few yards away where the tall stranger had stood, head bowed, during her last visit. The lowering rays of the sun breaking through the cloudy sky highlighted the inscription Pauline Anders, Beloved Wife.

Victoria could barely make out the dates beneath the name. She squinted, silently calculating. Dear God in heaven, how tragic! The woman died at thirty. So young! Only a few years older than I am, Victoria noted, stunned, recalling the pain, masked but still apparent, in the furrows of the stranger’s brow. She turned and fished in her purse for a tissue I shouldn’t have come. I can’t handle this. My emotions are still too fragile.

Blotting the moisture from her eyes, she squared her shoulders and began walking back to her car. She was almost to the road when she noticed someone approaching—the mysterious man in the trench coat who belonged to Pauline Anders. Only now he was wearing a brown leather aviator jacket with a fleecy wool collar. And he was carrying flowers—red roses in a deep ceramic vase, a dozen at least. He offered Victoria an oblique smile as their paths crossed, and she obligingly returned it. In the fractional moment their eyes met she was reminded that theirs was a peculiar alliance—deep losses borne separately and in a sense shared wordlessly, beyond time and circumstance.

Too soon she looked away, breaking eye contact with the stranger, feeling suddenly self-conscious, almost flustered. The man’s amber eyes were so vivid, so penetrating; it was as if he could read her very soul. She walked on, shivering, pulling her long, hunter green cardigan tighter around her, her cold fingers burrowing into the marled, slubby yarns. It was nearly dusk, and the chill air was already invading her bones. The overcast sky promised rain. Lots of it. Weren’t April showers supposed to bring May flowers, not just more rain? Right now she wanted nothing more than to be at home in her little condominium, snuggling on the couch in her comfy flannel robe, sipping chamomile tea and watching the evening news on TV.

Unexpectedly, Victoria was aware of a sound behind her—heavy footsteps padding through the thick grass. She glanced around and felt a ripple of surprise. The stranger was striding her way, a shadowy form against the darkening skyline.

Victoria increased her pace, pretending not to notice him. Her automobile wasn’t far—the gray compact parked just outside the cemetery’s huge iron gate.

But the man’s gait also increased. She sensed him just behind her, his breathing nearly as audible as her own. She walked faster now, her pulse racing, her ankle nearly turning as her stacked heels sank into the grassy, uneven ground. You hear such awful stories all the time, she thought frantically, breaking into a run. Women alone attacked by strangers, psychotics, madmen; women foolhardy enough to venture alone into dangerous desolate places like this one...

A deep masculine voice behind her shouted, “Stop! Wait!”

Was he kidding? She wouldn’t give in without a fight. She bolted through the open iron gate, running to her car. She glanced over her shoulder and saw him running after her. Finally she reached the car. She leaned panting against the door. Now if only she could find her keys! She looked down at her empty hands. Her purse—it was gone!

“Miss, I think this is what you’re looking for.” The stranger hovered over her, surely more than six feet to her five feet six inches. She caught the clean fragrance of his spicy after-shave and the minty warmth of his breath. He held out her handbag, managing an amused, crinkly smile “You dropped this back there in the grass “

She looked up at him, dazed, her pulse suddenly racing with something quite different from terror, and mumbled, “I did?”

“I’m sorry,” he continued, those mesmerizing eyes holding her captive. She couldn’t help noticing that he had an uncommonly handsome face, and at the moment he seemed almost to be enjoying her predicament. “I mean it,” he went on seriously “I really didn’t intend to frighten you “

She took the purse and with trembling fingers found her keys “That’s all right,” she murmured, fumbling with the lock. She opened the door and glanced back briefly. “I feel so foolish It’s just that this place can be a bit unnerving “

“Don’t I know it,” he said with a faint smile.

Feeling the need to say something more, she gazed up at the gray, drizzling sky and said, “This really isn’t the sort of day to be out, is it? It looks like it’s going to pour any minute now.”

His voice was warm, almost a confidential tone “I know Some weather for May, huh? I was hoping to beat the rain, but no such luck.”

She opened her palm to the sky “You’re right. It’s already starting I guess I’d better go.”

He nodded and flipped up the large fleecy collar of his leather jacket. “Drive safely,” he said, his candid brown eyes still boring into hers

As the first large drops fell, she gave him a fluttery wave and climbed into her car. He returned the wave with a good-natured smile, then turned and walked quickly to his automobile. Victoria fastened her seat belt and turned the key in the ignition, but nothing happened. She tried again, and again, but there was only a dull click-click-click.

She heard a tap on her window and glanced over to see the stranger. “Release the hood and I’ll check it for you,” he told her.

A minute later he returned to her. “The water level in your battery’s down. The terminals are corroded. You’ll need a new battery.”

“Oh, great.” She sighed. “I’ll have to call the auto club.”

He leaned into the open window, his face close to her own. “I wish I had some jumper cables,” he said with an earnestness that touched her. “I’ll be glad to drive you to a gas station where you can make your call.”

She stiffened. “No, thank you. I—I really couldn’t impose.”

“Please, I insist. It goes against my gentlemanly instincts to leave a lady stranded in this downpour. I’d really like to help.” When she still looked doubtful, he offered a reassuring smile “I know what they say about riding in cars with strangers, but I assure you I’m harmless.”

Victoria weighed her options, and finally offered a noncommittal, “Thank you. I’d appreciate a ride.” She picked up her purse and followed the man to a sleek, metallic-red foreign sports car.

As he drove toward the business district of the city, he glanced over at her and said, “I suppose this would be a good time to introduce ourselves. I’m Phillip Anders.”

She smiled “I’m Victoria Carlin.”

“I’m glad to meet you, Victoria. Actually, I remember seeing you at the cemetery before.”

“Yes. I remember seeing you, too. It was Easter Sunday “

He flashed an ironic smile. “There has to be a better meeting place than Rest Haven.”

Victoria laughed faintly. She wasn't quite sure how to take this unpredictable man, Phillip Anders. One moment he seemed brooding and introspective, the next he was making droll jokes and offering the most disarming smile.

They drove to a nearby filling station where Victoria made her call "It'll be at least an hour or more before the tow truck can come," she told Phillip when she returned to his car.

"All right," he said. "I'm in no hurry. Before I take you back to your car, let's stop by the little coffee shop next door."

"Oh, no," she protested. "You don't have to wait with me."

"I never leave a lady in distress." Laugh lines appeared around his eyes. "Like I said, I want to make sure you aren't stranded in this miserable weather."

In the Dew Drop Inn, a waitress showed them to a corner booth just off the kitchen. Several yellowed western prints decorated the mauve walls and an antique coatrack stood nearby. Phillip hung up their coats, then they sat down and ordered coffee. "Hot and black," he told the teenage waitress with backcombed, tangerine hair

Victoria shivered involuntarily "I didn't realize how cold I was."

"It shouldn't be this cold in May. We've had enough winter."

She nodded. "That's how I feel. It seems as if winter has lasted for years,"

"It has," he murmured thoughtfully. "And there's no end in sight."

"I have a feeling you're not talking about the weather now."

"No." He paused. "Tell me, Miss Carlin—or is it Mrs.?"

She felt her face flush slightly "Miss."

"Then that's not your husband's grave?"

"No. My mother's."

"I noticed two headstones."

"My father died six years ago."

"I'm sorry. I know how hard it is. I lost both my parents when I was young."

"And now your wife," she said softly

He nodded, a tendon tightening along his jawline. "It's been nearly a year. You'd think it would get easier."

"She was so young. Do you mind my asking? Was it an accident?"

"Cancer. She never gave up. Bravest woman I ever knew."

They were both silent for several moments, sipping their coffee. Finally, in a lighter tone, he asked, "Just what is it you do, Miss Carlin—other than frequent cemeteries, that is?"

"I'm an instructor at the university. Contemporary American literature. I'm finishing my third year of teaching."

"Oh. one of those studious types—your nose always in a book?"

Victoria unconsciously lifted her hand to the back of her neck. "I suppose you could say that. I'm working on the thesis for my doctorate."

"I'm impressed," said Phillip. "My remark about studious types wasn't meant as an insult. I admire intelligent women. It's just that you don't look like any of the teachers I had in school—you know, the old-maid schoolmarms with their hair in a bun and spectacles halfway down their noses."

Victoria forced a laugh. "In just which century did you attend school, Mr. Anders?"

He accepted her mild rebuff. "All right, I'm exaggerating. But you look like you'd be more at home on the tennis courts or horseback riding in the country."

Victoria sipped her coffee, then said, "I've never played tennis or been on a horse. I've spent most of my life in libraries and classrooms "

"Even when you were a child?"

"Yes. My parents were both professors at the university and, for as long as I can remember, they stressed the importance of education. They naturally expected me to become a teacher, too."

“Doesn’t sound like you had much fun.”

“Fun wasn’t one of my priorities.” Victoria realized immediately how smug she sounded, so she added, “Learning was fun for me.”

“Well, for me it was just plain hard work. I got through law school by the skin of my teeth.”

“Then you’re a lawyer?”

“Not anymore,” he replied “I passed my bar exams and set up practice as an attorney, but after a couple of years of sitting in a stuffy office, neck-high in paperwork, I decided I’d had it. I closed up shop and began working as a private investigator.”

“Really? How exciting,” said Victoria.

“To be honest, it’s not as exciting as it looks on television,” said Phillip. “I’m rarely into the shoot-’em-up cops-and-robbers stuff. In fact, sometimes my job is downright tedious. And I still get bogged down with paperwork, but at least there’s a certain undercurrent of adventure that I didn’t have as a lawyer.”

“Exactly what do you investigate?”

“Missing persons. Kids mostly.”

Her breath caught momentarily. “Missing children?”

“Well, there’s always the husband or wife looking for a spouse who’s left town. But most of my clients are searching for children—parents looking for runaway teenagers or divorced people whose mate has stolen their children.”

Victoria’s interest perked. “Really? You mean, someone just comes to you and says, ‘My child is missing,’ and you go out and find their child?”

“Essentially yes. But it’s not quite that simple. Like I said, there’s a lot of paperwork involved, and I run into my share of roadblocks and dead ends. And frankly, sometimes there’s not a happy ending.” His voice trailed off. “Some kids end up dead.”

Victoria shuddered. “But most of the time you find the missing child?”

“Most of the time.” He chuckled. “I’m a very persistent man. I don’t give up easily.”

She sat forward, her pulse quickening. She could feel the rhythmic pounding in her ears. “How do you do it, Mr. Anders? Where do you begin?”

He laughed, a gentle, warming sound she found most appealing. “Really, Miss Carlin, you don’t expect me to give away trade secrets, do you?”

She sat back, embarrassment coloring her cheeks. “I’m not trying to pry. It’s just so fascinating to think that you can go out and track down someone who’s missing. You must make a lot of parents very happy.”

He laughed again, mirthlessly. “And I’ve enraged a few, as well. But that’s another story.”

“But if someone were looking for someone,” she persisted, “you would be willing to go out and search for him—or her?”

“Well, I would need to know the circumstances, of course. I may push the boundaries at times, but I stay within the law.”

“Of course. That goes without saying.”

He studied her with a disquieting frankness. “Are you looking for someone, Miss Carlin? A missing child?”

She averted her gaze, her thoughts drifting off to a familiar darkness. Yes, I seek a nameless, faceless child—my sweet little boy lost, heart of my heart, my very life. I never stop looking, and yet I wouldn’t know him if I passed him on the street.

“Did you hear me, Miss Carlin? Do you know of a missing child?”

Victoria rotated her coffee cup between her palms. Her hands were trembling. “I never said that, now did I, Mr. Anders?”

His gaze remained unflinching. “Sometimes a person’s silences say more than their words.”

“I’m just very intrigued,” she replied with a nonchalance she didn’t feel. “I never knew a private investigator before. It must be a very challenging and rewarding occupation.”

“It keeps me busy. In fact, too busy at times.”

“Too busy?”

“Yes—when my wife was alive, anyway. Pauline and I didn’t have the time together we should have. I was gone a lot.” Phillip’s words fell away, as if he realized he was saying too much, revealing more about himself than he intended. He drained his coffee cup. When the waitress walked by, he signaled her for a refill.

“Do you have children?” asked Victoria, knowing immediately it was a subject she shouldn’t be broaching. What if he turned the question back to her?

Phillip grimaced. For a moment he said nothing. Finally he looked away, a glint of pain evident in his sable brown eyes. “No, we never had children,” he replied somberly. “To tell you the truth, it’s the greatest regret of my life.”

Victoria looked away, discomfited by the man’s unexpected confession. “Well, there’s more to life than children,” she murmured without conviction, her words unnaturally stiff and precise. She quelled the impulse to admit to Phillip that she, too, knew how it felt to regret something deeply, to live daily with a raw emotional wound that ruptured at the slightest inadvertent prick. But exposing her own pain would serve no purpose. She and Phillip were, after all, virtual strangers.

“Well, now that I’ve bored you with my life story, I think it’s time for me to pick up the check,” said Phillip offhandedly.

“Thank you, but I really wasn’t bored,” she assured him with a heartfelt smile. Suddenly, illogically, she didn’t want their conversation to end, but she could think of no legitimate reason to linger, so she said dutifully, “I guess it is time to get back to my car.”

Phillip nodded, reached for the check and tossed a crisp one-dollar bill on the table. A contemplative silence settled over them as he drove Victoria back to her stalled automobile.

Chapter Two

That evening Victoria couldn't get Phillip Anders out of her mind. His presence lingered like an afterglow, baffling, disconcerting and yet undeniably pleasant. As she rattled around her small, modern condo, sorting her mail, putting away dishes and browsing through her latest educational journal, his image was never far from her thoughts. She turned on the late-night news, but the newscaster's voice sounded so disturbingly similar to Phillip's, she quickly snapped off the set.

Even as she drifted into a restless slumber shortly before midnight, she saw his face in her mind, his classic features as solidly chiseled as a Michelangelo sculpture—and those eyes, so expressive and compelling, seemingly reading her very heart. And his voice—surely it wasn't the television now. In the hazy, rainbow reveries of her dreams she could hear the richness of his deep baritone and the mirthful ripple of his infectious laughter.

When she awoke the next morning, the image of Phillip Anders still occupied her mind, like some rare, esteemed object her consciousness had instinctively decided to accommodate. As she bathed and dressed and ran a brush through her cascading curls, fragments of her dream lingered. As she sipped her coffee and nibbled a slice of whole-wheat toast, she wondered where he was and what he was doing at this very moment. Even as she sat at her kitchen table grading test papers, her thoughts strayed inevitably to him.

She found herself absently tracing Phillip's features in her mind—his long, distinctive nose, his generous mouth and that sturdy cleft chin. In her imagination she could picture his riveting, darkly lashed eyes, his sardonic smile and the thick umber brown hair that just touched his collar. The images appeared unbidden and left her feeling disconcerted, perplexed

She wanted to see him again, but she knew she didn't dare.

What's wrong with me? she wondered. Had she taken leave of her senses, allowing this stranger to monopolize her thoughts? Surely it was a temporary aberration, perhaps even a predictable corollary of the grief process. After all, for the first time in her life she was utterly alone, perhaps her mind was simply filling the void with the first person who happened by.

“And if I believe that, I'm sure someone has a bridge somewhere they'd love to sell me,” she mused dryly.

No, there was something about Phillip Anders that set him apart from everyone else she had ever known—a mysterious quality that attracted her and disarmed her at the same time. She wanted to see him again and learn more about him.

But she hadn't thought to ask for his business card, nor did she have the slightest idea where he lived. Surely he would be in the phone book, but she had no logical reason to call him. He might think her forward, even brazen. But, in fact, women did phone men these days and no one considered it unseemly.

But the thought of phoning him, of pursuing Phillip Anders in any manner, left Victoria with a knot of panic in her chest and a sudden dryness in her mouth. What made her think he would even want to see her again? They had nothing in common. Surely he had demonstrated no interest in her as a woman. And he was, after all, still grieving for the wife he loved so deeply and to whom he was obviously unswervingly devoted.

But there was more to her hesitation. Much more. And before her fantasies whisked her into the tempting arms of Phillip Anders, it was time to acknowledge the real reason for her reluctance to face him. Yes, already she could feel that old barrier resurrecting itself in her mind—the nameless, inscrutable panic that welled in her chest at the prospect of a man becoming close—any man.

There had been no man in Victoria's life since Rick Lancer seven years ago. In fact, there had been no man before or after Rick. And even now, because of Rick, there would probably never be anyone for Victoria.

Now, on this quiet Saturday just a few weeks before the end of the school term, Victoria allowed herself to think about Rick and about those days that still moldered in the deepest recesses of her emotions. She was standing before the bathroom mirror about to apply a hint of blush and a dab of mascara. Her long, natural red curls were pulled back from her forehead and spilled down the back of her neck. Her large green eyes were framed by thick, dusky red lashes. Her teeth were even and perfectly white. Her flawless ivory skin was marred only by a spattering of freckles that dotted her nose and cheeks. She didn't wear much makeup; she preferred the natural, clean-scrubbed look, the look her father had loved. It was that sweet, guileless naiveté of face and spirit that had prompted him to call her "Daddy's good-as-gold little girl."

She paused, the mascara wand in hand, and gazed critically at her unadorned face. It was no longer the face her father had loved, childlike and innocent, but the face another man had praised. Rick Lancer had called it a beautiful face, but he could have been lying even about that. Still, Victoria had been told, with a note of approval by an occasional student and an air of condescension by a fellow faculty member, that her natural good looks made her appear much younger than her twenty-six years.

But Victoria didn't feel younger. Sometimes she felt incredibly old. She wasn't sure she had ever felt young or attractive, except perhaps when Rick Lancer had called her beautiful. For a time he had made her feel beautiful. But not for long. Even now, when she thought of him, she felt ugly inside, damaged. She still wondered how Rick could have prompted such intense, contradictory emotions—love and hate, joy and despair, a sense of beauty and degradation.

Thinking of Rick sent her spiraling into one of those dark moods that compelled her to reach for her thick, well-worn journal. She sat down at her desk and, in handwriting marked by quick, gracefully scrolled letters, she wrote:

Saturday, May 2

I keep going back to the past, reliving it, as if I've been sentenced to play it over and over again in my mind like a broken record, the sound always shrill and discordant.

I keep asking, How could I have been so foolish?

I was naive, I admit that, and overly protected by my parents. From earliest childhood my life followed a strict regimen—full days of classes and long hours of homework so that I could excel in every subject. Piano and voice lessons filled whatever free time remained. There were few opportunities for friends and recreation, and little chance to indulge in frivolous pastimes like shopping or telephoning, daydreaming or watching TV.

I remember vividly the most defining—and devastating—moment of my childhood. I was a young girl—seven years old. My parents threw a birthday party for me and invited my classmates. My father overheard me on the phone telling a classmate what present I wanted—a certain doll, or book, or game. Afterward, Father scolded me, saying, "You shouldn't ask your friends for gifts. It makes you look greedy, as if that's your only reason for a party. If someone asks you what you want, tell them you don't want a present."

"But I do want presents," I argued plaintively in my reasonable seven-year-old logic. "Why should I say I don't when I do?"

"Because a proper young lady is careful not to appear self-centered, as if gifts are all that matter," my father explained. "It's the company of your friends that counts. In fact," he added in that intrepid voice of his, "to teach you a lesson, I'm going to instruct all the parents not to send gifts, so you'll understand what's truly important in life."

So no one brought gifts, and I felt deeply shamed to think that everyone considered me a selfish person. That party was the worst event of my young life; all the children seemed to understand even without saying it that I didn't deserve to receive presents. As my classmates played games and ate cake and ice cream, I struggled to pretend that nothing was wrong, but I couldn't keep back the tears. At last I ran to my room and collapsed on my bed in deep sobs. My parents sent the children home and

never mentioned the party again. but from then on I was known to my classmates as “the girl who doesn’t get presents.”

After that party, I made it a point never to ask for gifts for Christmas or birthdays; I simply showed grateful appreciation for whatever I was given. But Father’s lesson had been too well learned I found it difficult to ask anyone for anything—a favorite food, help with homework, a preferred television program. At all costs I would not be considered selfish.

My goal in life became to accommodate others, to make sure they were happy and content. I found a sort of spiritual satisfaction in sacrificing my wishes for another’s, as if I could somehow atone for my childhood greed.

That attitude carried over into the rest of my life. I grew up feeling that my own needs and desires were somehow shameful and suspect, and that it was in bad taste, if not actually sinful, to let others know what I wanted. The proper thing was to pretend I had no needs or yearnings—better to acquiesce to the wishes of others and make them happy. So I grew up determined to please my parents by behaving like their perfect little girl.

I was careful never to vent my emotions around them—anger, fear, frustration, disappointment or sadness; rather, I always wore a smile and pretended everything was wonderful, so that my father would give me his smile of approval and praise me for being his “good-as-gold little girl.”

My mother, too, seemed to love me most when I was on my best behavior, so I saved my tears and anger for moments when I was alone in my room, where I could sob into my pillow or pound my mattress with my fists when I was angry.

I realized as an adult that my parents had taught me, perhaps inadvertently, never to be candid with another human being, nor to express my own wishes and desires, but rather to bow to the opinions of others and deny in a sense my own personhood, my own right of expression, even my own right to make mistakes.

But when I turned eighteen, things changed. I was seized by the same sense of daring and rebellion that was typical of others my age. I found myself wanting to strike out against the limits imposed on me, to stretch myself, to do something bold and excessive, perhaps to begin walking down an unknown road and never turn back. I was obsessed by a restless yearning for something that had no name, no substance, no form. I dreamed of recklessly toppling my sane, sensible world.

It was during this period of inner conflict that I met Rick Lancer. He was playing summer stock at a little theater near the university. A classmate introduced us. I loved Rick immediately. He flattered me, courted me and carried me away with his dreams and schemes, only to eventually compromise me and cast me aside.

Rick was an actor with an actor’s flair and sense of the dramatic. He prodded me out of my shyness, chided me for my rigidity of spirit and taught me to “loosen up.” He promised me the world, the moon and the stars—or at least a wedding and a honeymoon, as soon as he saved up the money from his next gig. He gave me an inexpensive ring with diamonds no more real than his love for me. I still recall his words: “We’ll announce our engagement when I get the lead in summer stock. Doll, we’re as good as husband and wife. Don’t let some silly little paper keep us apart. Let me love you the way a husband should “

I never actually said yes to Rick, but neither did I quite say no. I felt emotionally overpowered by him, mesmerized by his flamboyance and style. And, of course, I had been brought up to please without protest those I loved. and so I let Rick Lancer take what he wanted.

By the time I realized I was pregnant, Rick had already journeyed to New York with a local acting troupe. My letter telling him about the baby was returned marked Address Unknown.

My pregnancy devastated my parents and put an irreparable chink in their carefully laid plans for my life. They told me I had betrayed the long years of nurturing and intense devotion they had invested in me. My father considered my pregnancy an act of rebellion against him. “After all I’ve done

for you, to think you could do this to me— heap shame on the family name!” But he had a remedy for every situation, even the tragedy of an unwanted pregnancy.

“You made a mistake, but we’ll take care of it,” he told me, his voice edged with contempt. “It’s all arranged. Your mother will go with you. No one will ever need to know Your life will be back on track before you know it.”

I burst into tears and for the first time in my life stood up to my father “No, no, no! You can’t make me kill my baby! It’s mine and you can’t have it!”

When I refused the abortion, my parents sent me to a private university in another state where no one knew me. I completed my sophomore year and earned a straight-A average, but I was going through the motions, dazed and numb. I was painfully alone, except for my baby growing inside me— my wee, constant, unseen companion. At night I would lie in bed and talk to my child, pouring out my hopes and dreams for the two of us. I would feel him kicking, a foot here, an elbow there. We played a little game: I’d press the spots where he kicked and he’d nudge me back. Kick and nudge, kick and nudge. I vowed I’d let him grow up to be his own person, but even as I made the promise, I knew I could never keep it...because I couldn’t keep him.

My parents made it clear I couldn’t come home with a baby, and when I threatened to go elsewhere, my mother told me the awful news My father was seriously ill and needed me at home “He asks for you constantly, dear. You’re the only one who can comfort him.” Two weeks later I delivered my baby—a pink, thrashing, bawling seven-pound boy I saw only briefly as he was taken from my body and placed in a bassinet I wanted my son more than I had ever wanted anything in my life, but in my mind all I could hear was my father’s voice denouncing me: “You’ve sinned You don’t deserve to keep your child!”

So I signed the papers for his adoption, convinced my life was over at the tender age of twenty. I never anticipated the emotional upheaval I would experience by giving up my child. After he was taken away, I felt a physical ache for him—my arms ached to hold him, my breasts ached to nurse him. It was as if my very heart had been torn from my chest

Three days later I returned home, desolate, my arms empty, to offer my ailing father what little comfort I could muster. But without a word or a glance he’d delivered his ultimate rebuke. He’d died of a massive heart attack hours before I arrived home, and somehow I knew it was my fault; my weakness and selfishness were to blame.

As I settled in at home and began my junior year at the local university, my father’s death struck me with its staggering reality. His desk was cleared, his chair empty, his possessions gone The walls were silent, the rooms enormous without his voice, his presence. Worst of all was the growing conviction that I had caused his death. My shame had killed him

“No,” Victoria said aloud with a decisiveness that startled her She dropped her pen on the desk and slammed her journal shut. She was trembling, the memories assailing her as if it had all happened yesterday “No, it wasn’t my fault’ Dear God, why can’t I put it behind me?”

She ran to the bathroom and splashed cold water on her face and blotted the wetness with a towel. She stared soberly at her reflection, a dark accusation clouding her eyes. “I didn’t kill Father,” she told herself severely “God has forgiven me The guilt is gone.if only I can someday forgive myself.

“I’ve got to get out of here. Maybe some fresh air will clear the cobwebs of memory from my head.”

Victoria went to her closet and took out a suit, a double-breasted blazer and pleated trousers in powder pink crepe wool. She dressed quickly and left her condominium.

Her car was still in the shop, but the local mall was within walking distance, and she could use the exercise. She would walk to Elaine’s Fashion Boutique, a chic little women’s shop she frequented on occasion; she liked their styles, and their prices weren’t exorbitant. Yes, she would go there and buy herself something frivolous. No, not frivolous The annual faculty tea for graduating seniors was

scheduled for next weekend and she needed something new to wear—perhaps a pretty pastel dress, something delicate and springlike.

But later, at Elaine's, as she browsed through a rack of high-priced garments, she had second thoughts. Maybe I'd better make do with what I have at home, or I could try the rack of sale dresses, she mused, then chided herself for always giving in to her practical nature.

I'll just try on a couple of these expensive dresses, she decided, just to see how they look. She walked over to the dressing rooms where several women stood waiting. She noticed a little boy sitting in a straight-back chair near one dressing room. He sat stiffly, frowning, obviously fighting an advanced case of restlessness. Something in his features made Victoria take a second look. He had thick, obstinately curly red hair, large green eyes and a turned-up nose lost in freckles.

Victoria's heart began to beat faster. He looks like me as a child, she marveled silently. Her thoughts raced. He's about the right age. He could be my son!

Victoria struggled to remain calm. This had happened before—a chance encounter with a child who looked as if he could be her son. The likelihood of meeting her own child was remote at best, so why did she always react this way, with such a flash flood of emotion? Why couldn't she put her child out of her mind as she had intended six years ago at his birth?

She knew the answer. Too much had happened since then. Since her conversion three years ago, Victoria had been plagued by the question of her son's eternal destiny. Did he have Christian parents? Would someone tell him about Jesus? Would he listen? How Victoria yearned to find him and tell him herself.

Since her mother's death, she admitted it had been even more difficult to quell the desire to see her son, to touch him just once, to share her faith with him and assure herself he was happy and healthy. Now, staring at this child—a stranger's child—fidgeting in his chair, Victoria realized the desire had become an obsession.

She had to find her son.

And, as if she had found the missing piece of a long-troubling puzzle, she thought of Phillip Anders. "Of course! I've got to call him! He's the answer! He'll know what to do!"

That evening, with trembling fingers, Victoria riffled through the telephone book and found Phillip's number. But now that she was actually dialing him, she was assailed by misgivings. "I shouldn't be doing this," she said, her voice barely audible. And when she heard him say hello, her throat refused to emit a sound.

"Hello? Is anybody there?" he questioned. "Who is this?"

"It's... Victoria Carlin," she said at last. "You came to my rescue yesterday at the cemetery."

"Well, hello, Miss Carlin."

"I don't mean to bother you—"

"Bother me? To tell you the truth, I was hoping I might hear from you again."

"You were?"

"Yes, I enjoyed our chat at the coffee shop."

"So did I. And I was thinking..." Her voice trailed off.

"Thinking about...?" he prompted.

"About you being a... a private investigator, Mr. Anders."

"Yes, Miss Carlin? Is there something I can do for you?"

"I'm not sure." Her voice faltered again. "You said you... you find people... children."

"Yes. Like I said, I do my best," he replied. "Is there someone you want to locate?"

"Yes," said Victoria, her tone growing decisive. "I would like it very much if you could help me find a little boy."

"A boy, you say?"

"Yes. He just turned six."

"What's his name, Miss Carlin?"

“I—I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

“No. I’m sorry. I don’t know much about him.”

“Well, we’ll work with whatever you have, of course,” he replied patiently. “Just who is this boy, Miss Carlin?”

She closed her eyes; it seemed to take her forever to force out the words. “He’s...he’s my son.”

Chapter Three

Phillip Anders suggested they discuss Victoria's case over dinner on Tuesday evening. He met her at seven at the Dingho Chinese Restaurant just north of the university. It was a quaint place with intimate tables and soft lights, accented by jade carvings, porcelain vases and wall scrolls depicting squat Buddhas and towering pagodas.

As Phillip settled back in his wicker chair opposite Victoria, the delicate china on the linen tablecloth gave his brawny good looks a rough-hewn texture. He looked out of place, this tall, square-jawed man with hands too large for the tiny teacups.

Victoria smiled impulsively. "I'm surprised you picked this place, Mr. Anders. You look more like a steak-and-potatoes man to me."

He grinned. "I am. But I thought this atmosphere would suit you."

"I'll consider that a compliment," she replied.

"It is."

Their gaze held for a moment. She felt a velvety warmth steal over her and she quickly dropped her gaze to her menu. Wait a second, she reminded herself. This is a business meeting. Not a date.

"I suggest their Peking duck or steaks Manchurian," said Phillip with a smile.

She looked at him in surprise. "You've been here before?"

"With clients a few times."

"Then I'll defer to your judgment."

"Peking duck," Phillip told the round-faced Oriental waiter. "With egg flower soup and sauteed snowpea pods."

"It sounds like a culinary delight," said Victoria.

Phillip leaned across the table confidentially. "What I like best are all the little take-home cartons to warm up the next day. It beats my usual frozen dinner fare."

"I know what you mean. I hate cooking just for myself."

Phillip's eyes crinkled with amusement. "I hate eating my own cooking. No matter what I fix, it ends up tasting like overcooked cardboard."

"Perhaps you should invest in a cookbook."

"I have dozens around the house. My wife, Pauline, was a gourmet cook. She collected recipes like some women accumulate jewelry. There was nothing she couldn't make."

"She must have been a very remarkable woman."

Phillip's burnt-sienna eyes took on a distant sheen. "She was the best." He looked up and blinked as the waiter brought their soup.

"Very hot," warned the man.

As Phillip picked up his china spoon, Victoria bowed her head and silently offered a quick prayer of thanks for her food. She looked up, embarrassed to see Phillip watching her.

"My wife and I used to do that," he said. "She never let a meal pass without saying grace."

"It's still a bit new to me," Victoria murmured self-consciously.

They ate in silence for several minutes. Then Phillip cleared his throat and said, "You telephoned me about locating a child for you, Miss Carlin. Would you like to tell me about your son?"

She dabbed a corner of her lips with the linen napkin. "Please call me Victoria."

"If you'll call me Phillip."

"Of course... Phillip." She touched the back of her neck nervously. Her face felt uncomfortably warm. "I must tell you, Phillip, I've never talked about my son to anyone. It's very difficult for me. Now that both my parents are gone, no one even knows I have a child... except you."

"I can understand your reluctance to share something so personal."

"It's just not the sort of thing I want people to know about."

“But surely there’s not the stigma there once was. “

“Perhaps not But wrong is wrong I know it no matter what anyone says, no matter how people try to whitewash it.” She didn’t add that she could still hear her father’s voice in her head condemning her for her actions Lamentably, his voice was often louder than the voice of God in her heart.

Phillip’s expression softened “You sound like you’re still struggling with guilt feelings.”

Victoria sipped her tea before replying. “I know I’ve been forgiven I’m just not sure I’ve forgiven myself.”

He flashed a wry smile. “Self-forgiveness can be a hard-won battle Frankly, I haven’t quite managed it, either.” His words were throwaway. With a change in tone, he was quickly back to business, but he had stirred Victoria’s curiosity. I want to know more about this cryptic, contradictory man, she acknowledged silently But he obviously doesn’t want to talk about himself.

“How can I help you, Victoria?” he asked in his professional, take-charge voice.

She told him sketchily about her strict upbringing, her whirlwind romance with Rick Lancer and the child Rick still didn’t know about—the baby she had carried and loved but never held, the child who belonged to strangers now.

“Did you consider keeping your baby?” Phillip wondered.

“No,” Victoria replied without hesitation. Then she relented. “Of course I did. Every day of my pregnancy. It was all I could think about I wanted my son more than I’ve ever wanted anything in my life. But it was out of the question My life was already predetermined—my education, my career My parents had everything planned. There was no room for a mistake, especially not one resulting in an illegitimate child “

He eyed her curiously “Are you bitter about that?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. I suppose on some level I am, but I remind myself that my parents had my best interests at heart.”

“Did they?”

“I like to believe they did. At the time I felt too overwhelmed to go against their wishes And my father was ill. He needed me. So I did the only thing I could do.”

“You gave away your child.”

“It was the hardest thing I ever had to do. I regretted it the moment I signed the papers.”

“And now? Do you still regret it?”

“Now it’s too late. It doesn’t matter how I feel. What’s done is done I’ll never know what might have been.”

Phillip sat forward, his elbows resting on the table, his fingers interlocked. “Yet, now you want to find your child. After six years, you want to intrude yourself on his life.”

“Is that what you think I’m doing?”

“Isn’t it? Your son has his own life now—parents, a home, a future that has nothing to do with you. Are you prepared to interrupt all that and change the course of your son’s life?”

“That’s not what I want, Phillip I don’t intend to hurt my son. I just want to know how he is. I need to see him, just once.”

Phillip poured more tea. “Have you considered the consequences?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, the unpredictable events you may set in motion, the problems you could cause your son and his adoptive family?”

Victoria’s voice was tremulous. Was she hearing right? “Are you saying you won’t help me?”

“I’m saying I want you to think this through very carefully, Victoria. Do what’s right and best for your son.”

She stiffened, her defenses flaring. Was she wrong to think she had found a friend in this man? Obviously he had no intention of helping her. “Do you talk this way to all your clients, Phillip?” she asked coolly.

“You bet. And if I believe the child isn’t a client’s first concern, I don’t take the case.” He paused while the waiter served their Peking duck. They helped themselves to several slices of the crisp, golden meat. “You know, Victoria,” he continued between bites, “there are a lot of distraught people out there who want to use their children as pawns or weapons against their mates. I refuse any part in such cases.”

“My case isn’t like that at all!” she protested. This wasn’t going the way she intended. She never should have come. Maybe she should just get up and leave and forget she’d ever met Phillip Anders.

“I know your case isn’t the same,” Phillip assured her. “But I can’t help wondering whether your emotions aren’t clouding your judgment.”

“My emotions?” She stared incredulously at him. How ironic that he would accuse her of letting her emotions cloud her judgment when she had lived a life so devoid of emotion-based decisions.

“What I’m saying, Victoria, is that perhaps the best gift you could give your son is to stay out of his life.”

She was trembling now. “You don’t understand, Phillip. I’m not going to tell my son who I am, nor do I intend to alarm his parents. I just want to see my child from a distance I want to know he’s well and safe.”

Phillip nodded soberly; he still wasn’t ready to concede his argument “I must warn you, Victoria. You may have to go through an awful lot of trouble for that one distant glimpse.”

She lowered her gaze. “There’s more, Phillip,” she said quietly. Talking about something as private and personal as her faith wasn’t easy, but it had to be done. “Three years ago I made a commitment. I don’t know quite how to explain it to you, but I put my faith in Christ.” Her eyes met his. “Since then, I’ve felt a deep burden for my son, for his eternal destiny. I’m not trying to sound like some religious zealot, but what if no one ever tells him how to find God?”

Phillip studied her for a long moment. He seemed to be weighing his response. Finally he said, “I made that same commitment some years ago, Victoria, before I was married. Pauline was a Christian, too, although I must admit my own faith is rather rusty these days.”

“Then, being a believer, you must understand my concern for my son”

“I understand, but I don’t necessarily agree. Can’t you trust your son to God’s care and get on with your own life?”

“You don’t think I have a right to find out about his spiritual upbringing?”

Phillip heaved a disgruntled sigh, as if he knew what he was about to say would get him into hot water. “Okay, Victoria, let me put it on the line. I think you’ve got other motivations going on inside that you’re not even aware of, but it feels safe to put it all under a spiritual umbrella.”

She bristled. “Are you suggesting I’m not being honest with you about my motives for finding my child?”

“Maybe you’re not being honest with yourself,” said Phillip.

She reached for her purse. “If you won’t help me, Mr. Anders, I’m sure there are other detectives who will.”

“Wait, Victoria” He reached across the table and seized her hand. His touch sent a warm ripple of pleasure through her, touching off pinwheels of emotion she hadn’t experienced since she was in Rick Lancer’s arms. For a long moment neither of them spoke. It was as if they had connected on a new, unexplored level that neither had anticipated, and neither of them knew where to go with it from here. At last he released her and her heart rate slowly returned to normal.

“I didn’t say I wouldn’t help,” he told her solemnly. He looked as shaken as she felt.

“But you said...”

He averted his gaze and picked absently at his Peking duck, as if he weren’t ready yet to say more. After a moment he looked up at her, his eyes crinkling wryly. “What I’m trying to say, Victoria, is that I never take a case I can talk a client out of. The road ahead is too tough for the weak-willed or faint of heart.”

“Are you saying you will take my case?”

“I’m saying you’ll have to search your motives as we go along and make sure your head is on straight, okay? Do a whole lot of soul-searching. And then, if you’re willing to put yourself in my hands and trust my judgment—”

“Oh, I will. I do!”

“Even then,” he cautioned, “I can’t guarantee a happy ending.”

“I don’t ask for any guarantees, Phillip,” she assured him. “Just help me find my son, and I’ll do whatever you say.”

“Then I guess we’ve got ourselves a deal. I’m your man.” He shook her hand vigorously and once again their eyes locked with a riveting intensity. Goose bumps prickled her skin. She was excited, of course, about finding the son she had never known, but if she would admit it, she also felt a heady exhilaration at the prospect of spending time in the company of this remarkable man, Phillip Anders.

Chapter Four

Wednesday, May 6

I keep thinking about what Phillip said last night about my motives. What if I'm not being honest with myself? What if I'm just using my spiritual concerns about my son as an excuse to indulge my maternal yearnings?

What if I find my son and all I care about is getting him back? Am I opening a Pandora's box? Am I just inviting more heartache? Maybe Phillip's right. Maybe I should just trust my child to God and get on with my life.

But what life?

How can I go on with my life when such a big part of me is missing? When I walked away from my son six years ago, I thought that was as bad as it got; everything after that would be easier, and the pain would lessen with time. Instead, the emotional wound has festered and spread, infecting even the healthy parts of my life. I don't know how I could have survived these years without God's strength and comfort.

But now new concerns taunt me. What realities will I have to deal with when I find my child? What sort of life did I release him into six years ago? In my mind I've concocted a perfect world for my boy—loving parents, a happy home, a future any child would envy. I've consoled myself with the fantasy of an ideal life for my son. If I can't have him, at least he has the best of all possible worlds with his adoptive family.

But does he?

Surely reality can never match my dreams.

Will I be able to accept a less-than-perfect situation for my child? If the life he's living now is less than what I could have provided, then what was my sacrifice for?

Dear God, I'm so afraid of what I'll find, of how I'll feel. What if this all blows up in my face and my life is more messed up after I find him than it is now?

What if I find him and I can't let go? Will I become one of those crazy, obsessed women who won't stop until they've destroyed their child's life?

To be honest, I don't know what my motives are. Yes, I want to be sure someone tells my boy about God. I want someone to be there to answer his questions and point him to faith in Christ. I admit, I would give my life to be that person. But I know how improbable that hope is. So I will be satisfied just to know that someone will be there to help him find the answers.

It's still not real to me what I'm doing. Looking for my son. Starting the process in motion. My baby' Only not a baby now. A little boy. Six already. Will I know him? What will he look like? Will I feel that connection I felt when he was in the womb and we played our silly little bumping games?

The questions bombard my mind. Will I be able to transfer the love I feel for this fanciful child of my imagination to my real flesh-and-blood son? Or will he be a stranger to me? Surely I will feel a mother's love for him. If only he could feel a son's love for me!

When I let myself think about it—all the possibilities—my excitement bubbles up and spills over and colors everything I do, every waking hour. No matter how many doubts and anxieties—and yes, at times, stark terror!—I feel, still, my overriding emotion is pure joy. To think that I may actually, on this earth in this lifetime, lay eyes again on my child. Perhaps even hear the sound of his voice. I can ask for no greater gift.

But for now I must play this waiting game, waiting for Phillip to call with news, waiting, praying. How long will it take? Dear God, please don't make me wait too long!

* * *

The following Tuesday Phillip telephoned Victoria and said, "I have some information. When can I see you?"

Her pulse quickened. This was the call she'd been rehearsing in her mind for days "You found my son?"

"I'd rather discuss it with you in person. Are you free now?"

"Yes, of course. I'm just grading final exams."

"I'll be there in a half hour."

Victoria found waiting for Phillip an excruciating exercise in patience. She touched up her makeup and ran a comb through her hair. She straightened her tiny living room, replacing the stack of test papers on the coffee table with a bowl of fresh fruit. She returned several partially read books to the large oak bookcase. As she busied herself with incidentals, she sensed she was running purely on nervous energy.

When Phillip finally arrived, Victoria greeted him with clammy, trembling hands Her mouth was dry; her throat ached. "I haven't felt so anxious since my student teaching days," she told him as he took the velvet wing chair she offered. "I feel almost as if you're giving me back my son."

"Not so fast," said Phillip. "I told you before, a search like this is likely to have its ups and downs."

Victoria sat on the sofa across from Phillip. She clasped her hands to keep them from shaking. "What are you trying to say, Phillip? Is it bad news?"

The tendons in his neck tightened, his eyes took on a shadowed, thoughtful expression.

"Please, Phillip, tell me. I've got to know "

He sat back, his muscular frame filling the lime green chair "Your son was adopted by a couple in their mid-twenties named Frank and Julia Goodwin."

She pressed her fingertips against her lips. "You already know their names—the couple who adopted him? Oh, Phillip, I think I'm going to cry. Tell me all you know about them."

"Not a great deal, I'm afraid. They lived in a small town in Oregon, not far from where your baby was born."

"Lived? They aren't there now?"

"No." Phillip's brow furrowed. "There was an accident, Victoria. Over six months ago."

"An accident?" She sat forward, her muscles suddenly tense.

"A car crash," said Phillip.

Her pulse quickened with alarm. "Oh, no! Phillip, don't tell me—!"

His deep voice was somber, almost a monotone. "Frank and Julia Goodwin were both killed."

Victoria's breath caught. Dear God, she didn't want to know, and had to know, but how could she cope? To find her child and have him immediately snatched away? She couldn't stand it if—please, God, don't let it be! "And my son?" she barely whispered.

"He survived," said Phillip quickly. "He was injured, but my sources indicate that he recovered."

Relief radiated through her body. She sank back, every muscle like jelly. "Where is my baby now?"

Phillip removed a slim notebook from his vest pocket. He thumbed through several pages. "Your son was released into the custody of his maternal grandparents—Julia's parents—Maude and Sam Hewlett. They live in Middleton, a farming community north of San Francisco."

"San Francisco?" Victoria repeated carefully. "That's not far. Maybe half a day's drive."

"No, it's not bad," Phillip agreed. "The boy could have been in some remote city halfway around the world."

"Middleton, you said? North of San Francisco? All right, wonderful. That's where I'll go to find my son." Impulsively she added, "Would you like to go with me, Phillip?"

"Hold on," he said, reaching over and touching her hand, a cautionary gesture. "There's more, Victoria."

"Bad news?" she asked with apprehension. She didn't want to hear anything that would dampen her spirits. She knew now where her son lived. What more did she need to know?

“Not exactly bad news,” said Phillip. “It’s more puzzling than anything.”

“What do you mean?”

“I had a colleague of mine from San Francisco check your son’s neighborhood and the local school system for some record of the boy. So far he hasn’t been able to uncover any evidence of your son’s existence.”

Victoria shook her head, baffled, “Wait a minute, you’re confusing me. No record of his existence? How can that be?”

“I don’t know. I’m just telling you what we’ve found.”

“My son is six years old now. He should be in first grade, or at least kindergarten.”

“I agree. But there’s no record that a Joshua Goodwin or a Joshua Hewlett was ever enrolled in any public or private school in the area.”

Victoria’s heart stopped in mid-beat. “Joshua, you say? That’s my son’s name?”

Phillip nodded.

“Joshua.” She repeated the name several times, marveling. “Joshua. It sounds strange and wonderful all at once.” Tears welled in her eyes and spilled over. “I always wondered what he was called, my son, what name he answered to. Joshua. I like it. Don’t you, Phillip? It’s a good, strong name. A biblical name. If I recall correctly, it means ‘Jehovah is salvation.’”

Phillip sat forward and rubbed his hands together methodically, as if marking time until her emotional outburst subsided. At last he cleared his throat and said, “Unfortunately, Victoria, it’s a name we can’t trace past the accident that killed his parents.”

Victoria looked back in stunned silence, trying to make sense of Phillip’s words. “That can’t be,” she said, shaking her head. “Surely you’ve missed something, some clue. Have you checked with his grandparents?”

“No, not yet. That could be a ticklish situation, especially since we don’t want them to know Joshua’s natural mother is looking for him.”

“You think there could be trouble?”

“It’s happened before.”

“Have you talked to the Hewletts’ neighbors?” She tried to keep her voice under control, but couldn’t help hearing the nervous, urgent edge as she questioned Phillip.

“My colleague contacted every house on the block,” he replied. “No one has ever seen the youngster.”

Victoria’s voice rose with a shrill desperation. “But that’s impossible. Little boys play outside. They have friends. Surely someone has seen him.”

“No one,” said Phillip. “Everyone says the Hewletts are very private people. Not much is known about them. But all the neighbors agreed on one point. The Hewletts live alone.”

Victoria stood and walked to the window, hugging herself protectively. She felt a chill inside, like a clammy hand crushing her heart, making it hard to breathe. “Something’s wrong, Phillip. Something’s terribly wrong.”

He joined her at the window and placed a sympathetic hand on her shoulder. “That’s the way I read it, too, Victoria.”

She turned to face him, tears wetting her cheeks. “I’m scared, Phillip.”

Impulsively he drew her into his arms and gently stroked her back, a friend offering comfort. He whispered against her hair, “It’ll be all right, Victoria. I promise.”

Hearing him say those words, she believed him, as if he truly could make everything right for her—this man of such strength, integrity and sensitivity. She wanted to stay in the warmth of his arms and savor his consolation; she had never felt so safe before. But as he held her she sensed the stirring of something more between them, not just comfort, but a physical attraction. It was the same delicious rush of adrenaline she had felt with Rick Lancer, only better, for she had always been on her guard with Rick. In Phillip’s arms she felt almost as if she were home where she belonged.

She lifted her face to his and for an instant she thought he might kiss her, but even as his lips parted, he released her and stepped back abruptly. “I’m sorry, Victoria. I didn’t mean to—I promise, that won’t happen again.”

She brushed back a stray lock of her burnished hair. She felt flustered, breathless and disappointed. “Don’t apologize, Phillip, please. I’m sure you were just trying to calm a distraught client.” She laughed feebly. “I suppose it’s all part of the job description, isn’t it?”

“Not until today,” he murmured, smoothing his hair back and straightening his jacket.

It was obvious they both felt at a loss for words, so she said with forced lightness, “What are we going to do, Phillip?”

His brows arched quizzically. “Do?”

“About my case.”

“I knew that,” he said with a sheepish smile. When he spoke again he was all business. “I think we’ll have to confront the Hewletts and see what they have to say.”

“We?”

“I thought you might want to drive down the coast with me and meet them for yourself.”

“Do you think that’s wise?”

“We have no other leads. And frankly, I think the situation warrants a face-to-face meeting with your son’s grandparents.”

“When should we go?”

“I’m free next weekend.”

“All right That works out well for me, too. The school term is over. I’ll be finished with my duties at the university and have my grades turned in by then” She paused and searched Phillip’s eyes. “What will we say to the Hewletts?”

He shrugged. “Let’s see what happens when we get there “

She nodded, then patted Phillip’s arm in a gesture of camaraderie. As anxious as she felt about her son, she was grateful that God had sent her a man like Phillip, a man she sensed she could trust to help her with her quest. She gave him a pleased, slightly abashed smile and said, “I just realized you’ve been here an hour and I haven’t even offered you a cup of coffee “

He grinned and squeezed her hand, the warmth of his touch as pleasurable as a kiss “Thank you, my lady I thought you’d never ask.”

Chapter Five

Early Saturday morning, Phillip and Victoria drove down the coast to Middleton through a slanting, presummer rain. After lunch at a local pancake house, they drove to the Hewletts' home on Blackberry Street. As Phillip pulled up beside the shingled, Victorian-style house, Victoria emitted an exclamation of dismay. "Oh, Phillip, it looks like one of those frightful haunted houses from a horror movie!"

The rambling, slate gray house sat back from the street on a steep, grassy incline. Beveled crystal windows, dark green shutters and gingerbread-gothic trim gave it a remote, turn-of-the-century aura. Even in the mid-afternoon sunlight, it seemed to possess a life of its own, an ominous presence that tightened a knot of foreboding in Victoria's stomach.

"Can you believe it, Phillip? To think that this is the home of my child's grandparents!"

"Not the most inviting place I've ever seen, but no use sitting here letting our imaginations run wild." He pulled the door handle. "Guess we'd better go up to the house and see what's waiting for us inside."

"Wait," said Victoria. "Both of us going may arouse suspicion. Maybe I should go alone."

"Do you think you can handle it?"

"I've got to, for Joshua's sake."

"Are you going to tell them who you are?"

"I don't know. Right now I just want to meet them and see if I can find out something about my son."

"They may not take well to a prying stranger."

"I won't pry. I'll be very subtle."

Phillip took her hand and held it for a long moment, his eyes searching hers with a mixture of concern and admiration. "You're quite a courageous young lady, you know that?"

She flashed a grateful smile. "You really think so?"

"I know so."

"I've never considered myself a brave person," she admitted. "It must be my maternal instincts taking hold. I need to protect my son, whatever the cost."

He squeezed her hand. "You know I'm in your corner, Victoria."

She nodded, a pleasant warmth flushing her cheeks. "You don't know how much that means to me, Phillip. You're the one who's given me the courage to look for my son."

With obvious reluctance he released her hand. "But if you're not back here in ten minutes, my brave lady, I'll come looking for you."

"Pray for me," she murmured as she slipped out of the car.

"My prayers haven't got past the ceiling lately, Victoria," he called after her.

She looked back at him. "Pray, anyway. My knees are knocking."

As she approached the massive door with its arched windows and frosted-glass panes, Victoria noticed a small, hand-lettered sign tucked in the molding—Room For Rent. An idea formed as she knocked soundly. A full minute passed before she heard a scuffling sound inside. As the door swung open, a large-boned woman in a flowered, ill-fitting housedress glared out at her.

"Yeah?" the woman grunted, her shrewd, hazel eyes narrowing.

Her brows were thick and unattended; her white, wispy hair was pulled back tightly from her full-lobed ears.

Victoria squared her shoulders and drew in a sharp breath. "Hello," she said with a buoyancy she didn't feel. "I—I'm Victoria Carlin—"

“So?” the woman interrupted. She stepped back, a beefy hand on her hip as she gazed appraisingly at Victoria. She had a long horse face with sagging cheeks and a rippling neck. “You selling something?”

“No,” Victoria said quickly. “I—I saw your sign about the room for rent.”

The woman’s thin lips twisted into a smile. “You’re looking for a room? Why didn’t you say so?”

Victoria chose her words carefully. “I’m very interested in finding just the right place.”

“Well, I’ll tell you right up front I’m very particular,” said the woman. “I just put the sign up a few days ago, and I already turned down a couple of drifters I don’t take kindly to strangers in my house, but with times so bad and the pittance we get from Social Security—well, a body has to pay the bills somehow, and my Sam can’t work anymore with his lame back.”

“I know how it is,” said Victoria with genuine sympathy. “It’s very hard to make ends meet these days.”

“And getting harder all the time,” said Maude. “Anyways, you look like a decent sort. Come on in.” She held out her hand. “I’m Maude Hewlett.”

Victoria shook the woman’s hand, then followed her into the dimly lit living room with its antique cherry wood furniture. The heavy drapes were closed, and the flower-print walls were cluttered with primitive paintings and knickknack shelves. Scattered randomly were several artificial plants and wicker baskets overflowing with yarn.

“The room is fifty dollars a week,” said Maude. “Twenty more for meals. I want references and a month’s rent in advance.”

“I’m really not sure I..” Victoria began. She looked around, flustered. The television set was on, distracting her—a game show blaring with overeager contestants laughing, clapping, shrieking.

Victoria’s gaze moved to a framed photograph on top of the TV—a large picture of a young woman and child, their heads together, smiling, the boy’s arms wrapped adoringly around the woman’s neck. Something in the child’s face clicked in Victoria’s memory—the recollection of a photo of herself at age five. The same curly red hair, freckled cheeks and laughing eyes. My son! she thought with a sudden swell of emotion. She felt tears gathering, rimming her eyes. She knew she was staring, but she couldn’t pull her gaze away. She wanted desperately to reach out and touch the picture, pick it up, caress it, but she sensed she was raising Maude’s suspicions, so she glanced away before the woman saw her face.

But Maude Hewlett had already followed Victoria’s gaze “That’s my daughter and grandson,” she said matter-of-factly.

“It’s a lovely portrait,” Victoria managed to say.

“They’re both dead,” Maude continued in her detached monotone.

Victoria stared incredulously at her. She felt as if the woman had struck her with a two-by-four. “Both dead?”

“A car accident six months ago.” Maude’s mouth contorted slightly. Her expression hardened as if she were defying Victoria to pity her. She turned abruptly toward the hallway. “You wanna see the room now?”

Victoria clutched the back of a chair. She felt faint; her mind was reeling. Surely it wasn’t true. Her son couldn’t be dead. Oh, God, please, no! Not after I’ve come so close to finding him!

“You coming or not?” inquired Maude sharply.

With great effort Victoria found her voice. “Yes, I—I’m coming.”

The room was small but pleasant enough, with chintz curtains, a polished oak floor with rag rugs and a patchwork quilt on the bed. The dresser mirror was dim with age, the wallpaper yellow and peeling in spots around the mahogany cornices.

“How long you planning to stay, Miss Carlin?” queried Maude.

“I don’t know,” Victoria replied distractedly. How could she carry on a rational conversation when her mind registered only one appalling thought—her son could be dead! Somehow, God help

her, she had to convey a semblance of normalcy. “I—I’ll be staying just for the summer,” she said with forced brightness. “I teach up north at a state university. I’m working on my doctorate in contemporary American literature. I need a place with lots of peace and quiet to write my thesis.”

“This is the place,” said Maude. “I don’t like lots of people coming and going. My husband and I keep to ourselves. We don’t mind nobody else’s business and they don’t mind ours.”

“That sounds fair enough,” said Victoria. She inhaled sharply, gathering her courage. “I’ll take the room, Mrs. Hewlett.”

“All right. If your references check out, you can move in first of the week.”

When Victoria finally left the Hewlett home and climbed back into Phillip’s waiting automobile, she felt stunned, emotionally drained. She was trembling and her legs were unsteady. She had held back her feelings with such fierce resolve that now the dam of tears threatened to break. She collapsed into the seat beside Phillip and covered her face with her hands. The anguish tore from her throat in dry, racking sobs.

For an instant Phillip stared helplessly at her, then instinctively he gathered her into his arms. “Victoria, talk to me. Are you okay? What happened?”

She swallowed her sobs and pulled away from him. “I can’t talk yet. Just go. Drive. Get out of here “

Phillip started the car, merged with late-afternoon traffic and drove in silence for several miles, the pulse in his jaw throbbing with tension. Finally he pulled off at a rest stop and parked. “We’ve got to talk, Victoria,” he said, swiveling in the seat to face her. “You were gone so long, I was about to come in after you I never should have let you go in there alone.”

She found a tissue in her purse and blew her nose. “No, Phillip, I had to do it. I—I just didn’t know how hard it would be.”

He slapped his palm against the steering wheel. “I let you down. I’m sorry. I’ve seen enough in this business to know when things aren’t what they should be I was a jerk sending a woman in to do a man’s job.”

“No, Phillip, you did the right thing.”

He grimaced. “Do you feel like talking now? Can you tell me what you found out?”

Her tears started again. “Mrs. Hewlett—she told me—oh, Phillip, she said my son is dead!”

He slipped his arm around her shoulders and gently massaged the back of her neck “She came right out and said it?” he asked with a catch in his voice. “You mean, she knew you were Joshua’s mother? How could she—?”

“No, she didn’t know. But I saw a picture of Joshua, and Mrs. Hewlett noticed me looking at it. Out of the blue she came right out and told me about the accident. She said her grandson died in the crash.”

“To tell a complete stranger such a thing—that’s strange.”

“She seemed like a strange woman. But she was fairly blunt about everything,” Victoria told him “Phillip, is it possible your sources made a mistake? Do you suppose my son really is dead?”

“It’s possible, Victoria, but not likely. My gut feeling is that the Hewletts are hiding something “

“I have that feeling, too,” she said, finally regaining a measure of composure. “That’s why I took the room, Phillip.”

He stopped rubbing her neck. “You did what?”

“There was a room-for-rent sign on the door It seemed like the perfect excuse for my being there. Then when Mrs. Hewlett told me Joshua was dead, I knew I had to stay. I have to find out what happened to my son, Phillip.”

“That’s *my* job, Victoria.” His expression took on a stony grimness. “There are a lot of crazies in this world. I’m prepared to handle them. You’re not.”

“What are you saying, Phillip?”

“I’m saying I want you to telephone Mrs. Hewlett and tell her you’ve changed your mind about the room.”

“I can’t. I won’t.”

“You must,” Phillip said levelly. “I’ll continue the investigation. I’ll keep you apprised of every detail. But I can’t let you get personally involved like this.”

“I’m already involved,” she protested “I won’t give up the room. Don’t you understand, Phillip? The Hewletts are my only link with my son. I’ve got to find out what they’re hiding, no matter what it costs”

“It could cost you everything,” he warned, his tone edgy, almost accusing With a nervous energy he drummed his fingertips along her neck to her shoulder. Then he pulled her against him and pressed her head against his. Neither of them spoke for a long time. His breathing was ragged, perhaps hers was, too—she couldn’t tell. She could smell the spicy fragrance of his after-shave and the tangy, masculine aroma of his skin. His chin was already showing the faint stubble of a fiveo’clock shadow.

He was holding her almost too tight, but it wasn’t a romantic embrace; it was as if he wanted desperately to protect her but wasn’t sure he could. “I won’t risk losing you,” he said at last, his voice raw with feeling

She didn’t reply, didn’t ask what he meant by such a cryptic statement, but she understood now that a powerful connection was growing between them that went beyond their professional relationship. Perhaps even beyond friendship.

Chapter Six

Monday, May 18, 2:00 p.m.

Believe it or not, I'm packed and ready for the drive to Middleton—ready outwardly, but inside I'm filled with doubts, terrified of facing Mrs. Hewlett again. I keep wondering what horrible secrets she's keeping. And what if she guesses the truth about me? Could I make matters worse for Joshua by blundering into his life like this, by playing this bizarre charade?

I've always been such a cautious person, conscientious to a fault, never stepping outside my boundaries, never testing the limits, except once, of course, with Rick Lancer—and look at the trouble that got me into! But I can't compare this situation with that one. I'm doing what I have to do to find my son. I must keep reminding myself of that. I can't rest until I know what happened to him.

The thought that he might be dead haunts me. What kind of mother was I to let him go without knowing what kind of life he would have and what kind of people would raise him? How could I have trusted others so completely to do what was best for my son? And how could I have had so little faith in my own ability—and right—to care for him?

Not that I have great reserves of faith in myself even now. When my parents were alive my life was so simple and straightforward I tried relentlessly to be their obedient daughter, to make them proud of me; and even though I often failed, I was consumed with trying.

Now that I'm alone, my life is in chaos. I don't know who to try to please, except God—and all too often He has my father's voice, so that I can't distinguish between the two; I can't tell what God wants for me and what my father would have wanted I don't want to hear my father's voice anymore, but it's there; I can't get it out of my head.

I know I ought to think about pleasing myself for a change, but even that idea is distressing, because I don't know what I want. I've spent too many years denying my desires. I want my son, but I have no idea where my search for him will lead me, nor what it will cost—not in dollars, but the emotional drain.

And to complicate matters even further, there's Phillip. Without meaning to, he's turned my life upside down and thrown my mind into the worst sort of turmoil and confusion. Even as I value his help and friendship, I find myself longing for more from him—yearning for him to see me as a woman, to cherish and caress me and make me feel loved. And at the same time, the idea of a romantic relationship strikes terror in my heart. In the very same breath I want to pull him close and push him away. How can I give my love to another man after what Rick Lancer did to me? How can I trust him? Or myself?

Even though I'm filled with doubts, I can't let Phillip see my misgivings, or he'd never let me drive to Middleton alone. When he comes to say goodbye this afternoon, I must put on a brave, smiling face and pretend that I have every confidence in the world.

Dear God, help me to put my confidence in You!

"I still don't like you going," Phillip told Victoria shortly after four o'clock as he carried her suitcases out to her car. "It's just too risky."

Victoria followed with her pillow, makeup case and a sack of crackers and cheese. "Really, Phillip, you're thinking like a detective now. What risk is there in spending a few weeks with an elderly couple who just happen to be my son's grandparents?" Now if only she felt as brave as she sounded! She prayed Phillip wouldn't see through her bravado; if he guessed how frightened she was, he'd never let her go.

"It's not that simple and you know it," he told her, his dark amber eyes shadowed as he looked at her.

Victoria felt warmed by his concern. If only he were going with her! She had known him for such a short time and already she felt lost without him. "I'll be fine, Phillip, believe me," she assured

him. And if he believed that, she was a better actress than she thought. “I’ll keep in touch, I promise. And if I find out anything at all, I’ll let you know.”

He pulled her into his arms. “I—II can’t let you go.”

Softly she said, “You can’t stop me, Phillip.”

His brows furrowed. “I wish I could go with you.”

“You can’t. You have your work. I’m sure you have lots of other clients needing your help.”

“You’re the only client on my mind right now.” He pushed her hair back gently from her face and moved his knuckles slowly over her cheekbone. He lowered his face to hers and she had the impression that he wanted to kiss her goodbye, but instead he brushed his lips against her forehead and released her. “Be careful, you hear?”

She managed a tremulous smile. “I will.”

He squeezed her hand tightly as she slipped into the driver’s seat. “Call me when you get there.”

“It’ll be late,” she warned.

“That’s all right I’m a night owl at heart.”

As she waved a last goodbye and pulled out of the driveway, she felt a disconcerting reluctance to go. She dreaded the long drive down the coast alone, but even more so she hated leaving Phillip.

“I can’t let myself feel this way,” she chided herself as she turned onto the freeway heading south. “My involvement with Phillip was supposed to remain strictly professional. All right, who am I kidding? We’ve become friends, but that’s all it’s going to be. Neither Phillip nor I are ready for an emotional entanglement. It’s the last thing either of us wants.”

She sounded so certain, so positive. Why then wasn’t her heart listening?

The drive down the coast was longer than Victoria remembered. It had seemed so short last Saturday riding with Phillip. They had been so engrossed in conversation that the miles had flown by. Now the miles dragged with a dull, grudging sameness.

The closer Victoria got to Middleton, the more her son weighed on her mind. Would she be able to solve the mystery of Joshua? Would she find him? And what would she find? Dear God, please let me find my boy, and please let him be all right Let him be alive! Give me a chance to see him, and know him, and love him!

When at last Victoria pulled into the Hewlett driveway on Blackberry Street, her head throbbed and her back ached. Was it the long drive or the anticipation of her stay with the Hewletts? In the heavy, fog-shrouded darkness, the rambling old house looked more ominous than ever. Victoria shuddered. If Phillip were with me, I wouldn’t be afraid, she thought, and immediately cast the idea aside. Forget Phillip, she scolded silently.

As she climbed out of the car, she arched her shoulders, then strode purposefully up the walk to the porch. Lights were on inside, so someone was home. She knocked soundly, her heart pounding. It was ridiculous to feel so nervous. There was nothing to fear. She had come to find the answers about her son Nothing else mattered now.

After a minute the door opened and a tall, angular man in glasses and a striped work shirt stared down at her. He was bald except for a patch of gray-black hair on each side of his head His long, thin, hangdog face merged unceremoniously with his neck. “Miss Clarkin?” he muttered.

“Carlin,” she corrected.

“In your letter you said you was arriving today. I didn’t expect you meant after dark.”

“It was a longer drive than I remembered.” She looked past him into the living room. “May I come in?”

He stepped back slowly and nodded, but his small, dark eyes remained fastened on her through his thick lenses. “Make yourself at home.” His voice was monotone.

“You must be—” she began.

“Sam Hewlett.” He looked over at the heavysset woman in the kitchen doorway. “You already met Maude.”

Victoria nodded and forced a smile. "It's good to see you again, Mrs. Hewlett"

"You missed dinner," snapped the woman. "It's at six sharp. I can't keep things sitting, getting cold."

"I picked up a bite on my way," Victoria told her. "I'm really very tired. I'd just like to bring my things in and go to my room."

Maude's expression softened. "It's too late for dinner, but I got some herb tea brewing. It's called Almond Pleasure. Smells real good, don't it?"

Victoria smiled reluctantly. "It smells wonderful."

Maude gestured to Sam. "You go help her bring in her stuff. I'll pour the tea and set out some glazed doughnuts."

With Sam's help, Victoria quickly transferred her belongings from her compact car to the old-fashioned bedroom that would be hers. Now, sitting across from the Hewletts in their cozy, Early American kitchen, Victoria wondered why she had felt so nervous. Although the Hewletts were rather gruff, unschooled people, they seemed like decent, unpretentious folk. Perhaps it had been nothing more than Victoria's overactive imagination that had aroused her suspicions about them in the first place.

"You want another doughnut, Miss Carlin?" asked Maude.

"No, thank you," said Victoria. "But I will have more tea. It's delicious."

"It's just tea bags I get at the grocery. They got all kinds of fancy stuff these days."

Sam sat back and rubbed his large hand over the fine network of bluish veins in his forehead. The pouches under his eyes puffed slightly as he worked his mouth into a curious grin. "You an authoress, Miss Clarkin? The wife says you came here to write a book or something."

"Not exactly a book," said Victoria. "I'm a university instructor in American literature I'm working on my doctoral thesis."

"That sounds pretty highfalutin to me," he replied. "What you writing about?"

Victoria hesitated. Should she tell him or get by with an evasive answer? "I'm doing a comparison study," she said.

"Whatcha comparing?"

"The lives and works of Flannery O'Connor and Sylvia Plath"

"Never heard of them," he scoffed.

"They were American writers who died in the early sixties," she explained patiently

"So why bother about them?"

She felt as if she were back in her lecture hall at the university. "They both wrote intensely and perceptively about the dark side of human emotion."

"The dark side?" Maude echoed suspiciously. "Sounds like devil talk to me."

Victoria shrugged. "I suppose you could put it that way Both women explored the dark, disturbed or evil side of human nature. I want to demonstrate how their God-consciousness, or, in one case, lack of it, influenced their lives and work."

"God-consciousness?" Sam grunted, as if she had said something stupid.

"Yes," replied Victoria, wishing she hadn't pursued this very personal subject of her thesis with the Hewletts. Her thoughts and ideas were still in an embryonic stage, fragile, vulnerable. She didn't want to damage them by exposing them to the Hewletts' scorn or contempt. Still, she had begun this conversation; she might as well finish it. "O'Connor embraced God heartily," she explained, "and her faith shows in her work just as it showed in her life. In spite of a long, debilitating illness, O'Connor managed to achieve a fulfilled, abundant life."

"So?" snapped Maude. "What was she? Some saint? We all got our crosses to bear, you know"

Victoria cleared her throat imitably and pressed on. "Plath, on the other hand, desperately longed to believe in God, but ultimately she rejected Him In spite of career success, marriage to a famous poet and two healthy children, Plath succumbed to despair and committed suicide when she was thirty."

“That don’t mean nothing,” said Sam. “Lots of people do that. What’s your point?”

“My point is,” persisted Victoria, quelling her exasperation, “a person’s God-consciousness affects and, in fact, determines his or her earthly and eternal destiny.” She considered adding a word about Christ and redemption, but witnessing about her faith was still a new and terrifying prospect for Victoria. She had already said more than she intended. She didn’t want to come across as a pious prude or a bookish, intellectual boor

“It’s all a lot of hogwash, if you ask me “ Maude snorted. “The way I see it, the devil’s the one you gotta watch out for. I learned that at my mama’s knee “

Victoria managed a smile. She carefully pushed back her chair and said, “I’m really tired. I think I’d better get to bed.”

Maude stood, too. “Suit yourself, Miss Carlin I’ll show you the way “ She led Victoria down the hall to her room and opened the door. “Everything’s ready. There’s extra bedding in the closet. Sam plugged in an extension phone for you. Of course, you pay for any long-distance calls you make.” She looked around as if trying to recall something else, then added, “The bathroom next door is yours. You get fresh towels and sheets twice a week.”

Victoria gazed appreciatively around the neat, homespun room. How inviting the bed looked with its fluffy eiderdown quilt! “Thank you, Mrs. Hewlett. I’m sure I’ll be very comfortable here.”

Maude nodded. “You should be. It’s a good, comfortable room. Belonged to my daughter when she lived at home.” She stepped back out of the doorway. “I’ll leave you be now. Breakfast is at seven sharp.”

As soon as Victoria shut the door, she sank down on the bed with delicious relief and let her aching muscles relax. If she wasn’t careful, she would fall asleep in her clothes. I promised to call Phillip when I arrived, she remembered suddenly. He’ll worry if he doesn’t hear from me tonight.

She sat up and reached for the phone on the night table. Phillip answered on the first ring. The sound of his voice sent a tickle of excitement through her She missed him already. “Were you sitting on the phone?” she inquired lightly.

“Just about,” he admitted. “Frankly, I was beginning to think I should have driven you, after all.”

“I was beginning to wish that, too.”

“The trip that bad?”

“That long.”

“I’m sorry. I really would like to have been with you.”

“Me, too. You have a way of making time pass more quickly.”

“I’m not sure that’s a compliment, but I’ll take it as one.” His voice lowered a notch as he asked, “Have you found out anything yet?”

“No, nothing. It’s too soon. I had a rather interesting chat with the Hewletts tonight, but I’m afraid I did most of the talking.”

“Is that wise?”

“Probably not. But they asked me about my thesis. Once I get going on that, I—”

“Victoria,” Phillip interrupted.

“What is it?”

“That sound in the phone. Do you hear it? Sort of a hollow, airy echo.”

“I hear you fine, Phillip.”

There was a sudden click and the echo was gone.

“Someone was listening in, Victoria,” said Phillip.

“You mean someone here.the Hewletts?” asked Victoria incredulously.

“You bet. We’ve got to watch what we say. If you have something to tell me, go to a pay phone somewhere.”

“Are you saying the Hewletts suspect something?”

“Who knows? But we can’t take a chance. Everything you do and say must be above suspicion. That’s the only way I’ll let you stay there.”

“This was my decision, Phillip,” she reminded him gently. “And I alone will decide when I leave.”

“All right, Victoria,” he replied coolly. “But let me remind you, this isn’t a game you’re playing. The stakes are very real. Your life could be in danger.”

Phillip’s warning played jarringly in Victoria’s mind later as she slipped into bed and pulled the covers up around her neck. Even though her body was exhausted, she wasn’t sure her mind would let her sleep. She argued silently with herself. Surely Phillip doesn’t really believe my life is in danger. But how trustworthy are the Hewletts? They’re an odd sort, but certainly they wouldn’t harm me. Nor can I believe they would do anything to hurt their own grandchild. But then, where is Joshua? One thing for sure, he’s nowhere in this house, or Maude never would have rented me this room. But why does she claim he’s dead? Is he? she wondered. The idea was unbearable. After all these years, when Victoria had finally dared to reach out to her son—he couldn’t be dead!

She thought about the photograph in the living room of Joshua with his adoptive mother. She traced his features in her mind—his soft red hair, his little impish smile, the darling freckles on his upturned nose. She imagined herself holding him in her arms the way the woman in the picture held him. Then a wrenching thought gripped her. Who was comforting Joshua now that his adoptive mother was dead? Who was wiping his tears?

Dear God, please—where on earth is my son?

Victoria found that more than her anxieties over Joshua kept her awake. Being in a strange, new place made sleeping difficult, too. She heard peculiar noises—water running through the pipes, the constant scotch-scratch of a tree limb on her window and the chill wind creaking through the weathered timber of the old house.

At last she fell into an uneasy slumber punctuated by garish dreams and heart-pounding nightmares. Shortly after midnight she woke with a start and looked around wildly. The room was dark except for the green glowing hands of the alarm clock. She had heard a sound, something more than the steady ticking of the clock. Lying still, her body tensed, she listened, waiting, scarcely breathing.

There was nothing but the rhythmic scratching of the branch on the windowpane.

Just as she was about to sink back into her dreams, Victoria heard the sound that had yanked her bolt upright out of sleep. An agonized, ear-splitting scream.

Victoria jumped out of bed and flung on her robe. She crept silently across the dark room. Trembling, she opened her bedroom door and peered out into the hall. Nothing but silence, darkness.

What do I do now? she wondered.

As she stood in the doorway, she heard the scuffling of slippers from the far end of the house. The hall light went on and Victoria blinked against the brightness as her eyes gradually focused on Maude Hewlett.

The robed woman scowled at Victoria and snapped, “What’s the matter?”

“I—I heard something,” said Victoria. “It sounded like a scream.”

“Naw,” grunted Maude. “It was them cats in the backyard. When they get going they sound like a bunch of banshees. Don’t worry. I shoed them away.”

“I see,” said Victoria, hesitating.

“Go on back to sleep,” Maude ordered.

Victoria slipped back into her room and shut the door. Even as she lay back down, she couldn’t quell the alarm she felt. It wasn’t a cat she had heard. The sound hadn’t come from the backyard. The terrible, flesh-crawling scream had broken from somewhere in the very soul of the Hewlett house.

Chapter Seven

At breakfast Victoria waited to see whether the Hewletts would mention the scream she had heard last night. Neither Maude nor Sam said a word. Victoria decided not to bring up the subject, either. “Is the library near here?” she inquired as she finished her coffee.

“Coupla miles.” Sam snorted. “On Pine Avenue, north of here.”

“More scrambled eggs?” asked Maude, offering Victoria the bowl.

“No thanks,” said Victoria. “But everything was delicious.”

“You don’t eat enough to keep a flea alive,” scoffed Maude. “Our Julia was like that. Always on a diet. Always afraid of putting on a few pounds.”

“You mean the girl in the photograph?” asked Victoria, perking up.

Maude nodded. “Yeah. Our daughter. I told you that before.” She handed the bowl of eggs to Sam. “Here, you finish these. No sense them going to waste.”

Victoria waited, hoping Maude would continue talking about her daughter. I need all the information I can get, she reflected, but I don’t dare probe. Asking questions will only arouse suspicion. But if Sam and Maude are the closemouthed types they appear to be, how will I ever find out what happened to my son?

“You gonna go work on that book of yours?” queried Sam.

“What?” Victoria asked absently.

“The library—you going there to write your book?”

“My thesis? No, I’m still in the research stage. I need to check out books written by the two authors, plus whatever has been published about them by other writers.”

“Sounds like a heap of work,” said Sam, swallowing a mouthful of coffee.

“Yes, it is,” Victoria agreed. “But I enjoy it.” She stood and carefully replaced her chair. “I probably won’t be back until early this evening.”

“Dinner’s at six sharp,” Maude reminded her.

“I’ll be here,” said Victoria. She returned to her room for her briefcase and sweater. As she passed back through the living room, she paused. The Hewletts were still in the kitchen. Quietly she walked over to the television set and picked up the photograph of Julia and Joshua. With Maude always in the room, Victoria had given the picture only a cursory glance before. Alone now, she stared hard at the photo, hungrily memorizing every feature and angle of her son’s soft, pliant face. He was beautiful, with dreamy, vulnerable eyes and a gentle, trusting expression. Unruly, reddish-blond hair fell over his forehead and curled around his ears just as Victoria’s had done when she was a child. He had the same button nose, round, chipmunk cheeks and finely carved mouth she had at five. There was no doubt about it: This was her son.

Sudden tears filled her eyes and a painful lump formed in her throat. All of the unspoken yearnings of seven long years threatened to surface. Victoria blinked quickly and replaced the photograph, but not before her eye caught a glimpse of Maude in the kitchen doorway. The woman’s expression was cold, cryptic, severe; her lips remained tightly pursed.

“I was just looking at your daughter’s portrait,” Victoria stammered as she moved awkwardly toward the door.

“Dinner’s at six sharp,” Maude answered, her tone unmistakably menacing.

Victoria was grateful for the vast anonymity of the public library. Here she could relax and be herself, without being on guard for every deed or word. For her, research was always an invigorating mental exercise. It did for her mind what she imagined jogging accomplished physically for Phillip, who had once mentioned he loved to run.

If Victoria admitted it, delving into the lives of Flannery O'Connor and Sylvia Plath gave her an opportunity to forget herself and her own problems. Their very different, difficult lives reminded Victoria she had no room for complaint about her own lot.

Victoria's hours of study passed quickly. At five she returned to the Hewlett home with an armload of books. Sam opened the door to her and whistled appraisingly. "You actually going to read all those, Miss Clarkin?"

"Victoria," she puffed. "Please call me Victoria."

"Long as you call me Sam."

"I'd be pleased to, Sam." She adjusted her load. "I'm going to put these in my room and freshen up a little. Then I'll help Mrs. Hewlett with dinner."

"Don't bother," said Sam. "She don't like no one else puttering in her kitchen. Just be at the table at six—"

"Sharp," Victoria finished with an amused smile.

Sam flashed a crooked grin. "You learn fast, girl." He followed her to her room and opened the door for her.

"Thanks." She sighed and closed the door behind her. She dropped her bundle of books on the dresser, then sank down wearily on her bed. Aloud she murmured, "Even if I never find my son, this little adventure is forcing me to dig into my thesis and get it done. Whatever happens, the summer won't be wasted."

She returned to the dresser, removed her pendant necklace and gently laid it in the velvet jewelry box her mother had given her. She looked again curiously. Her jewelry was in disarray. Was I in that much of a hurry this morning? she wondered. Usually I keep everything so neat.

An uneasy feeling crept over her. She opened her dresser drawers, one after another, surveying each one. Nothing seemed to be missing, but somehow she sensed that things weren't exactly as she had left them.

Someone's been in this room, she thought with a shudder. There's no lock on the door, no way of keeping the Hewletts out. But what were they looking for? And what did they find?

She thought suddenly of her journal. If they read that, they would know everything! She ran to her bed and reached under the mattress where she had tucked the journal after writing in it this morning. Thank heavens, it was still there—and she had remembered to lock it. She reached for her purse and checked her key chain. The key was still there. But from now on she would have to keep her journal with her. She tucked it into her roomy handbag.

By the time Victoria had showered and changed into a comfortable slacks outfit, she had nearly convinced herself that she was mistaken about someone searching her room. My nerves are on edge and my imagination is playing havoc with me, she decided as she took her place at the dinner table.

"You get a lot of work done?" Maude questioned as she set a platter of ham and fried potatoes on the table.

"Yes, I did," said Victoria. "Did you and Mr. Hewlett have a nice day?"

"Same as usual," said Maude, sitting down. "Sam fixed a broken shutter out back. I worked on my soap crafts and watched my game shows on TV."

"Are you retired, Mr. Hew—I mean, Sam?" Victoria asked politely.

"You bet. I worked nearly forty years for Brownlin Utensils on the east side of town. Retired three years ago. Since then I done some part-time work—carpentry, manual labor—till my back gave out this spring."

"He worked in that awful factory, same job all those years," Maude said bitterly. "He shoulda been a supervisor, a foreman, but no, he set back and let the young fellas snatch up all the promotions."

Sam cleared his throat irritably. "I was happy doing my job, Maude. I didn't wanna be no boss of nobody, making decisions about this or that. I liked things fine the way they was."

“No backbone, that was your trouble,” she snapped. “You got the backbone of a jellyfish.” Maude looked narrowly at Victoria. “You find yourself a man who can stand up for what he wants, not some spineless fella who lets everybody walk all over him.”

“Miss Clarkin ain’t interested in your opinion, Maude,” snapped Sam. “Specially of me.”

There was an uneasy silence until Victoria, grasping for a safe topic of conversation, said, “You mentioned doing soap crafts, Mrs. Hewlett. Just what are they?”

Maude brightened immediately. “Oh, you probably already seen them around the house—in your bathroom and on my knickknack shelves. They’re bars of soap inside crocheted turtles and fish. I’ve made them for years. Sold a lot, too. The novelty shop downtown carries them for me. So does the little boutique up north, near our summer cabin. For years I’ve taken them a supply every time we go up there on vacation, haven’t I, Sam?”

“Sure have. No one makes them things quite like Maude. They’re pretty enough for rich folks’ fancy houses.”

“I’d like to see them,” said Victoria. “Did you do all the paintings in your living room, too?”

Maude’s complexion blanched. She looked away.

“No, our daughter, Julia, did them,” replied Sam quickly. “She was the artist in the family. She could make anything look beautiful.”

“She woulda been a famous artist if she’d lived,” muttered Maude. “If that blasted drunk driver hadn’t killed her. It was murder, plain and simple.” She shook her head mournfully. “My beautiful little girl, gone just like that, no warning, nothing.”

“It must have been terrible for you,” murmured Victoria.

“I’ll never get over it, never!” said Maude under her breath. “She had so much promise. She shoulda been the one to live.”

“Didn’t you say her husband was killed in the accident, too?” ventured Victoria.

“The whole family, wiped out in one fatal blow. Killed instantly. They never knew what hit them.”

No, that isn’t true! Victoria wanted to scream out. My son’s alive! The hospital records showed that he survived. But she forced her voice to remain calm as she inquired, “Your grandson died, too?”

“They all died, that’s what I said,” replied Maude, her eyes narrowing. “Sam and I lost everything that mattered to us. It’s been over six months, but it seems like yesterday.”

“It’ll always seem like yesterday,” agreed Sam quietly.

“I blame it on the devil,” declared Maude. “The devil and his devil water!”

“The fella that hit our Julia was soused on whiskey. Don’t even remember what he did.” Sam’s voice cracked. “He walked away from the accident without so much as a scratch.”

“It seems it always happens that way,” observed Victoria, holding her emotions in check. She couldn’t let the Hewletts see how shaken she was by talk of the accident. She poked idly at her potatoes. Somewhere during the course of their conversation, she had lost her appetite.

After dinner, in spite of Maude’s protests, Victoria helped clear the table. As she returned the salt and pepper shakers to the pantry, Victoria spotted a basket of toys on the bottom shelf. Her heart skipped a beat as she realized they were undoubtedly Joshua’s toys. She stooped down and examined them lovingly—miniature race cars, plastic building blocks, action figures and a worn brown teddy bear with a single button eye. Impulsively she picked up one of the little cars and tucked it into her pocket. I just want to hold it and look at it for a while, she told herself. It’s something Joshua played with. I’ll put it back later.

“What’re you doing?” growled Maude. She was suddenly hovering over Victoria, her beefy hands on her enormous hips.

Victoria stood guiltily, her hand covering her pocket. “I just noticed the toys. I suppose they belonged to your grandson.”

Maude promptly shut the pantry door. “They were Joshua’s, all right. I never had the heart to get rid of them.”

Victoria nodded. “I’d feel that way, too,” she said softly. “It must make him seem nearer, having something special that belonged to him”

Maude looked thoughtful. “Yeah, I guess it does.”

“I felt that way when my mother died this past year,” said Victoria. “I felt better just having a few of her favorite possessions nearby—books, jewelry, photo albums “

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.