

That Certain Summer

A Novel

IRENE HANNON



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Irene Hannon, *That Certain Summer*

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To my dear nieces,
Catherine and Maureen Hannon—
may you always be sisters *and* friends.

And to Janice McCreary—
a treasured friend . . .
and a sister of the heart.

Prologue

— Karen —

Storms, she could handle.

This, however, was a tsunami.

As the nurse adjusted the drip on her mother's IV, Karen Butler fought back a wave of panic and shifted in her chair to stare out the window. In the distance, a solitary oak tree reached toward the sky, its bare limbs devoid of life despite the lush growth of a Missouri spring all around it. A casualty of the harsh winter.

She could relate.

"Your mother's doing very well. She's lucky it was a mild stroke. How are *you* holding up?" The nurse moved toward the door.

"Fine."

Liar, liar.

"Well, if you'd like some coffee or a soft drink, there's a small kitchen next to the nurses' station. Help yourself."

"Thanks."

Giving up the futile attempt to find a comfortable position, Karen rose, stretched the kinks out of her back, and began to pace.

No matter how mild the stroke, her mother was still going to need lots of help for the foreseeable future.

And guess who was expected to provide it?

Good old reliable Karen.

A weight settled on her chest, squeezing the breath from her lungs. So far, she'd kept all her balls in the air, but how many more could she juggle? Didn't a shattered marriage, a job outside the home for the first time in more than a dozen years, and a rebellious daughter whose transition to teenager had been complicated by her parents' split provide enough challenges?

Pausing at the foot of the bed, Karen watched the steady rise and fall of the white sheet over Margaret's prone form. Her mother had looked the same for as long as she could remember. Iron gray hair, rigidly coiffed in a style twenty years out-of-date. Thin lips that turned down at the corners in a perennially disapproving expression that remained unyielding even in repose. An angular bone structure, softened neither by the extra weight she carried nor by a charitable, tolerant disposition.

In the best of times, she wasn't easy to please. While dealing with a stroke? She'd be impossible.

The knot in Karen's stomach tightened, and she crossed her arms, squeezing the flesh above her elbows. All her life, she'd tried to please Margaret. To accept family obligations without complaint. And what had it brought her? Nothing except criticism.

Yet what choice had there been after Val abdicated all family responsibilities and ran off to pursue a career in theater?

Her gaze fell on the small silver roses in her mother's pierced ears—a gift from her sister on some long-ago birthday—and the familiar resentment bubbled up inside her . . . followed, as usual, by annoyance.

Good grief, would she never grow up? She was too old for such petty nonsense. So what if Val was the golden girl with the charmed life? So what if she was Mom's favorite? She ought to get over it.

But she couldn't.

Because it still hurt.

Huffing out a breath, Karen turned her back on the bed. Enough.

She had more important things to worry about at the moment than her messy tangle of emotions—like figuring out how she was going to deal with this latest complication. It didn't help that Kristen was hobbling around on a broken leg or that the busy season at work, with its requisite longer hours, was kicking in, either.

Face it, Karen. You need help.

No!

She clenched her teeth and straightened her shoulders. Maybe she wasn't as pretty or popular or confident or talented as Val, but she'd always been organized and competent and able to cope with whatever life threw at her.

She'd get through this, like she always did.

A garbled sound came from behind her, and she turned. Her mother jabbed at the air with her good hand.

Karen crossed to the side of the bed. "What do you need, Mom?"

Margaret grabbed her arm with surprising strength and uttered more gibberish as she shook it, her face contorted with frustration.

The heart monitor began to beep.

Her own pulse tripping into double time, Karen grabbed the call button and pressed it.

"Hang on, Mom. I'll get the nurse."

Two minutes later, as the woman calmed her mother down and retrieved a bedpan, Karen backed away.

She couldn't do this alone.

Everyone had their limit, and she'd just hit hers.

Gritting her teeth, she pulled her cell out of her purse. Like it or not, Val needed to come home.

Not being the operative word—for both of them.

— Val —

Hand on the door of her condo, Val Montgomery hesitated as the phone began to ring. Her teenage cast was going to freak if she

was late for the dress rehearsal, and spending the first hour trying to calm a gym full of hyper adolescents held zero appeal.

Hitching her purse higher on her shoulder, she dug through her oversize tote bag for her keys. Let the caller leave a message.

“Val, it’s Karen.” Her sister’s voice echoed through the condo as the answering machine kicked in, and her hand froze. “I need to talk to you as soon as possible. Please call me on my cell when you get this message. I have a new phone, and I jotted the number down somewhere. Give me a sec . . .”

In the silence that followed, a tingle of apprehension zipped through her.

If Karen was calling, there must be a serious problem.

Hand still on the knob, she chewed on her lower lip. A crisis wasn’t in her plans for tonight . . . but if she left without talking to her sister, she’d be distracted all evening—and adrenaline-pumped teens required her full attention.

With a resigned sigh, she walked over to the phone and lifted it out of its cradle. “Karen? I was walking out the door. What’s up?”

“Thank goodness I caught you! I’m at the hospital. Mom had a stroke.”

Stroke.

As the word ricocheted through her mind, Val tried to process that bombshell.

It didn’t compute.

Their mother had a lot of problems, but despite her myriad complaints, she’d always been healthy as a horse.

Combing her fingers through her hair, she stared out the window at the gray clouds gathering on the horizon. “How bad is it?”

“Mild, according to the doctors. They’re still doing tests, but it’s clear she’s going to need some help for a while.”

And I expect you to pitch in.

Though the words were unspoken, the message came through loud and clear.

Clamping her lips together, Val tightened her grip on the phone. Not going to happen. The very notion of spending an extended period with her manipulative, self-centered mother turned her stomach. How Karen had managed to live in such close proximity to her all these years without going crazy was beyond comprehension.

As the silence lengthened and she struggled to fabricate an excuse that would absolve her of the implied obligation, Karen spoke again.

“Look, I’m sorry to dump this on you.” A thread of desperation wove through her sister’s words. “I’d deal with it on my own if I could, but Kristen broke her leg a couple of days ago in gymnastics, and things are hectic at work. I can’t manage two patients without some help. With your school year ending soon, I thought maybe you could come down for a few weeks, just to get us over the hump.”

A few weeks!?

As she tried to wrap her mind around that nauseating notion, the second part of Karen’s comment suddenly registered.

“Why didn’t you tell me about Kristen?”

“I didn’t see any reason to bother you. It’s not like you’re close enough to help out.”

Val let the inferred criticism pass. “Is she okay?”

“Not to hear her talk. She missed the final gymnastics meet, the pool’s off-limits, and she’s out of commission for her typical summer activities. In her mind, the world is ending. But according to the doctor, she’ll be fine.”

Val’s lips quirked. “Being a teenager is tough.”

“Trust me, I’m reminded of that every day.”

“Me too. As a matter of fact, I’ve got a bunch of high school thespians waiting for me, and if I don’t show up pronto, the drama won’t all be on the stage. Can I get back to you later tonight to talk about this?”

A slight hesitation, followed by a terse reply, told her Karen recognized the request for the stall tactic it was. “Yeah. I’ll probably

still be at the hospital. Let me give you the numbers for Mom's room and my cell phone."

As Val jotted them down, she checked her watch. "I'll call you in a couple of hours."

"Fine."

The line went dead—and based on her sister's resigned tone, it was clear Karen expected her to bail.

But as she shoved the phone numbers into her tote, guilt niggled at her conscience. When had Karen ever asked for help—with anything? Never, as far as she could remember. Meaning her sister must be at the end of her rope. And it wasn't as if her own plans for the summer were all that pressing, other than two modeling commitments she could commute to fulfill. Plus, she knew how to handle their mother—a skill Karen had never mastered.

She could go.

But as she toyed with the idea of returning to the Missouri river town of her childhood, a wave of panic swept over her.

Tightening her fingers on her keys, she closed her eyes and fought back a surge of painful memories—the same ones that had been cropping up more and more often during the past few months, battling their way out of the dark prison where she'd banished them, clamoring for release. So far, she'd managed to corral them. But they were growing more unruly and insistent, and her control over them was slipping.

One of these days, she was going to lose the battle to contain them.

Then what?

She swallowed. It was time to face the hard truth she'd been dodging for months.

The only way to free herself from the mistakes that haunted her was to confront them and deal with them once and for all.

And maybe she'd just been handed an opportunity to do that.

Her hand began to throb, and she loosened her grip on the keys, eying the angry red imprint they'd left on her fingers. If she'd con-

tinued to hold on to them, the ridges would have become deeper, numbness would have set in, and function would have become more and more limited. Letting go was the only way to restore normalcy.

To her fingers.

And perhaps to her life.

Val closed her eyes.

It was time to go home to Washington.

— Scott —

“Come on, guys, pick up the pace. I’m ready to crash.”

Scott Walker shot Mark a weary grin and transferred his saxophone case to his other hand as they exited the jazz club. “Maybe you’re getting too old for this life.”

“Maybe we all are.” Joe led the way to their van. “What city are we in again?”

“Philadelphia.” Their publicist hit the remote for the locks. “After the honky-tonk dives you guys played for ten years, you should be grateful Prestige booked you in some class places to promote your debut album.”

“We are.” Scott opened the door of the van and climbed in. “But we’ve been doing one-night gigs for six weeks. It takes a toll.” He stifled a yawn. “We’ll be fine after some z’s.”

He hoped.

But the constant travel and disrupted sleep and incessant demands of the recording company for more radio and TV interviews, more social media visibility, more PR appearances and glad-handing were wearing. They hadn’t pursued careers in music to schmooze.

Funny how their big break had given them less time to do what they loved best.

Silence fell as they all settled in and their publicist took the wheel. Joe and Mark fell asleep within minutes. Lulled by the motion of the van, Scott began to drift too—until a rough jolt jarred him awake.

As he struggled to jump-start his brain, he heard a sudden squeal

of brakes. His shoulder slammed against the side of the van. Headlights that seemed mere inches away blinded him. A screeching cacophony of ripping metal ricocheted in his ears, and he raised his hand to shield his face.

There were screams.

Shouts.

Pain that was sharp and intense and suffocating.

Confusion.

But in the moments before blackness engulfed him, Scott knew one thing with absolute clarity.

Their promotional tour was over.

And even if he survived, his life would never be the same.

— David —

“Why are we moving, Daddy?”

David Phelps set aside the stack of plates he was packing and looked down at his daughter. How many times had he answered that question over the past few weeks? Dozens, for sure. But five-year-olds didn’t retain information long—especially information that didn’t make sense to them. And no matter how he explained it, Victoria couldn’t understand why they were leaving the condo that had been her home since she was born.

“Because I have a new job in a different place called Washington, Missouri, and because I want us to live in a house with a yard for you to play in.” David dropped down to balance on the balls of his feet beside her, brushing a stray strand of silky blonde hair off her forehead.

She frowned, planted her hands on her hips, and tilted her head. The stance, so reminiscent of Natalie, clogged his throat.

“I can play in the park at the corner. It has swings and a slide.”

“But it’s not your very own yard. And you’ll have a much bigger room too. We can paint it pink.”

“I like purple better.”

“Then purple it is.”

All at once her shoulders drooped and she hung her head. “I still don’t want to move. I like St. Louis.”

So did he. But prayer had led him to this decision. To the acceptance that certain dreams had died and that it was time to let go of the past.

But how to explain that to a five-year-old? All Victoria knew was that her world was about to be turned upside down. Again.

He pulled her into his arms and gave her a hug. “St. Louis is nice, honey, but I think we’ll like Washington too, once we get there.”

“What if we don’t?” Her tear-laced words were muffled against his shirt.

“Then we’ll move somewhere else.”

She backed up and scrutinized him. “Solemn promise?”

Their private version of “cross my heart and hope to die,” reserved for only the most serious matters.

David’s gaze didn’t waver. “Solemn promise.”

She fingered a button on his shirt. “Okay. But we won’t know anybody there. We’ll be all by ourselves.”

“No, we won’t. Remember, Jesus is always with us, no matter where we go.”

“When you can’t see someone, though, it’s hard to remember they’re there.”

Pulling her close again, David cradled her head against his chest. No argument there. During the past few years, there had been many occasions when God had seemed far away to him too. But he had to keep believing that even on his most challenging days, when he felt most alone, God wouldn’t desert him.

Because he had a feeling moving to Washington would bring a whole new set of daunting challenges.

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“Karen? Put the food out. We’ve waited long enough. Just leave some for Val in the oven. She can eat when she gets here if she’s hungry.”

At her mother’s annoyed call from the living room, Karen leaned on the kitchen counter and counted to ten.

Slowly.

All the while battling the temptation to snatch her purse, walk out the door, and tackle the bills and the laundry waiting for her at home instead of fetching, carrying, and cooking for her mother after her demanding day at work.

“Karen? Did you hear me?”

As the shrill question reverberated through the house, she squelched the impulse to flee. She was the responsible daughter, after all. But was it uncharitable to wish her mother’s speech hadn’t returned to normal with quite such alacrity?

On the threshold of the living room, she paused as her mother flipped through the TV channels. “I heard you, Mom. But it might be nice to wait for Val. I’m sure she’ll be ready for some food after the long drive.”

“The theater business is unpredictable. She probably got tied up.”

Her blood pressure edged up another notch. “She teaches high school drama. She’s not on Broadway.”

“She could have been. I never understood why she didn’t try harder to make a name for herself. Help me into the kitchen.”

In silence, Karen moved beside her. By the time she managed to hoist her mother out of the easy chair, she was breathing hard.

“You need to get in shape. A young woman like you shouldn’t be winded from a little exercise.”

Compressing her lips, Karen counted to three; she didn’t have the luxury of ten this time. “I don’t have a spare minute to go to the gym.” *And you’re not exactly a lightweight.*

“Val never went to the gym, and she was always thin.”

Sure. Rub it in.

“Maybe her metabolism is different.” The comment came out sharper than she intended.

“You don’t have to get huffy about it.”

Biting back another retort, Karen handed her mother her cane. Too bad she hadn’t insisted Margaret take the walker or wheelchair that had been offered, despite her mother’s protest that she didn’t want to look like an invalid.

But the assertive gene seemed to have passed her by.

At least physical therapy should restore full function to her mother’s left arm and leg—and the sooner the better; her shoulder screamed in protest as they inched toward the kitchen, Margaret’s weight dragging her down.

“What’s for dinner?” Margaret settled into her chair and re-adjusted her cutlery, straightening the knife and spoon, putting a more precise crease in the napkin, moving her water glass two inches to the right.

Her stomach knotted. She couldn’t even set a table to her mother’s satisfaction.

Let it go, Karen.

She tried, even managing to infuse her voice with a dash of ani-

mation. “One of your favorites. Shepherd’s pie. And since there’s nothing to cut, you should be able to manage on your own.”

“You didn’t use canned carrots, did you?”

Karen turned her back to retrieve the casserole from the oven. *Lord, give me patience and strength.* “No. I followed your recipe.”

She set the casserole on the table. It was a little crisp around the edges, but it had held up well despite the delay. The mashed potato crust was golden and the aroma enticing. “Smells good, doesn’t it?” Karen dished out two generous servings.

“The test is in the tasting.” Margaret gave the crust a prim, exploratory poke with her fork.

No thanks for going to the trouble of making the involved dish. No comment about how appetizing it looked. No enthusiasm.

Typical.

Shaking her head, Karen covered the rest of the casserole with foil and put it back in the oven. After sliding into her seat at the table, she bowed her head.

“Lord, we thank you for this food and for the many gifts you give us. We ask you to keep us in your care and continue to provide for all of our needs, both physical and spiritual. Nourish our souls with your love, as you nourish our bodies with this food. Amen.”

Margaret scooped up a forkful of potato. “It’s too bad some of your faith didn’t rub off on your daughter.”

So much for any hope of a pleasant dinner conversation.

“Kristen’s just going through the usual teenage rebellious stage. She’ll find her way back to God.”

“Hmph. God isn’t the only one she’s deserted. I haven’t had more than a glimpse of her since my stroke.”

“It’s hard for her to get around with the broken leg.”

“It wouldn’t kill her to make a little effort to see her grandmother.”

“How’s the shepherd’s pie?”

The question came out before Karen could stop it. Prompted in

part by a need to change the subject, but more by the need to win her mother's approval about *something*.

"Too much salt." Despite that critique, her mother continued to eat with gusto.

The last vestige of Karen's appetite vanished, and pressure built behind her eyes.

No! Don't you dare cry! Just hang on a few more minutes. As soon as Val gets here, you can escape.

Two minutes later, after she managed to choke down a couple more bites, she heard the crunch of gravel in the driveway.

Yes!

She was already pulling open the back door as Val lifted her arm to knock.

As her sister's hand froze, Karen did a quick inventory. In the year since she'd seen her younger sibling, Val hadn't changed much. Same sleek blonde hair. Same perfect figure. Same chic taste in clothes. Same aura of glamour.

In other words, her polar opposite.

Karen smoothed down her crumpled khaki skirt and rubbed at a spatter of grease on her blouse. She already knew she was a slightly overweight woman approaching middle age, with dull brown hair, drab clothes, and a mundane life—but standing next to Val, she felt downright dowdy.

Then again, what else was new?

Val inclined her head toward the table and spoke softly. "A little anxious for relief, are we?"

Karen stiffened. "You're late."

"There was major road construction an hour north of here. My cell was dead or I'd have called. I didn't think it would be a big deal."

"Kristen's waiting for me at home. She hasn't eaten yet. I held dinner as long as I could, but Mom was hungry. I left you some in the oven."

"Close the door! You're letting all the cool air out. My electric bill will be sky high." Margaret waved a fork in their direction.

“It shouldn’t be this hot in the middle of May. Must be that global warming they keep talking about. The world is going to pot, if you ask me.”

A humorless smile twisted Val’s lips. “I see she hasn’t changed.”
“She’s sick.”

“She’s always been like this, sick or well.” Val took a deep breath. “Okay, I guess I have to face the lion.” She resettled her purse on her shoulder, stood up straighter, and stepped past Karen. “Hi, Mom. Your prodigal daughter has returned.”

“It’s about time.” Margaret looked her up and down and sniffed. “It’s good to see you too.”

“Hmph.” Margaret pushed her glasses higher on her nose. “Well, of course I’m glad you’re home. Karen can’t keep up, and I need help.”

“That’s true.” Val’s reply sounded innocuous, but Karen caught the double meaning.

Margaret didn’t.

“We’ll have to talk in the morning.” Margaret chased the last minuscule morsel of ground beef around her plate and forked it into her mouth. “I need to lie down. Karen, help me into the bedroom.”

“I’m here now, Mom. I can take over those kinds of chores.” Val dropped her purse on the table and moved to Margaret’s side.

“You’re too thin to have any strength. Let Karen help. She has more meat on her bones.”

A warm flush suffused Karen’s cheeks.

That’s right, Mom, just keep rubbing it in.

“We’ll both help.” Val flexed one of her arms. “I’ve been doing weight training. You might be surprised how strong I am.” She motioned Karen to the other side of Margaret’s chair.

Karen moved into position, and between the two of them they had Margaret into her room and ready for bed in fifteen minutes flat. Once she was settled, they returned to the kitchen.

“I made shepherd’s pie.” Karen picked up a pot holder. “There’s

enough for you and Kristen. I thought you might be hungry after the long drive.”

“I appreciate that, but I stopped and got a salad along the way.”

“That’s all you’re eating for dinner? Lettuce?”

“There was chicken in it.”

“That’s not much of a dinner. This is a lot heartier.”

Without comment, Val moved toward the counter as Karen peeled back the foil.

Unfortunately, the dish hadn’t held up as well the second time around. The filling had spread over the bottom of the casserole, and small pools of grease dotted the surface. The once-fluffy potato topping had caved in and dried out, and the carrots were tired and limp.

Karen caught the curl of distaste on Val’s lips before her sister masked it.

Her blood pressure moved into the danger range.

“It looked a lot better an hour or two ago, when you were supposed to be here.” Hot spots burned in her cheeks.

“Hey, I appreciate the thought. But the salad was all I needed.”

Turning away, Karen recrimped the foil over the casserole and shoved the dish into a thermal tote. “I have a daughter at home who’s probably starving. I’m sure she’ll be happy to eat your share.”

“Look, I’m sorry. I know you went to a lot of trouble. This is one of Mom’s favorites, isn’t it? I bet she enjoyed it.”

“Not that you’d notice. She said it was too salty.” Once more, tears pushed against the back of her eyes. Once more, she fought them into submission.

“That sounds like Mom.”

“Sometimes I wonder why I even try.” Karen zipped the tote with more force than necessary.

“So do I.”

She fisted her hands and faced her sister. “Look, I don’t need any more criticism tonight, okay? I try because I have no choice. I live here. I have to make an effort to get along with her.”

For a moment, Val regarded her in silence. “You do have a choice, you know. And maybe you try too hard.”

“That’s easy for you to say. You don’t deal with her every day.”

“By choice.”

“I couldn’t walk away.”

“Why not?”

“My life was here. I was married.”

“Also a choice.”

And not a good one.

Although Val didn’t say the words, the message resonated.

Karen picked up the casserole. “I need to leave.”

“I did too.”

There was an odd undertone in her sister’s quiet response, but she was too angry to dwell on it. “That didn’t absolve you of family obligations. I’ve had to do everything around here since you went off to college seventeen years ago and never came back. Didn’t you ever feel guilty?”

A shadow crossed Val’s eyes. “Why don’t we leave this discussion for another day? I’m tired and you’re stressed.”

“Fine with me.” Karen hoisted the casserole into the crook of her arm and grabbed her purse. “Call me tomorrow and I’ll fill you in on Mom’s therapy schedule and medications. Do you need any help bringing your stuff in from the car?”

“I can manage.”

“I made up your old room for you. There are fresh towels in the guest bath.”

“Thanks.”

At the door, Karen paused. Val was leaning against the nicked Formica countertop that had been in the kitchen for as long as she could remember. Not much had changed in the house since they were kids.

In any way.

But walking out in a huff wasn’t going to improve things.

“I don’t know how we got into all that stuff tonight, but I do

appreciate your willingness to help.” Her words came out stiff. Grudging instead of grateful. But she’d been at her mother’s beck and call for years. This was only fair.

Val lifted one shoulder. “It was my turn.”

“Don’t let Mom get to you.”

“I’ll cope.”

“I’m sure you will.” Being their mother’s favorite hadn’t spared Val from Margaret’s acerbic tongue, but she hadn’t let the criticism bother her. “I’ll talk to you tomorrow. Welcome home.”

“Thanks.”

The response was perfunctory—but from Val’s tone and expression, Karen knew that home was the last place her sister wanted to be.



The TV was blaring when Karen stepped through her own kitchen door ten minutes later, and the pounding in her temples went from easy-listening bass to heavy metal.

“Kristen? I’m home!”

No response as she set the casserole on the counter. Given the volume on the TV, that didn’t surprise her.

Girding herself for the onslaught, she waded into the noise.

She found Kristen in the family room, angled away from the door, her thigh-high cast propped on an ottoman while she typed on her laptop. She wore headphones and was tapping her uninjured foot to a beat only she could hear.

Shaking her head, Karen picked up the TV remote and punched the off button. Blessed silence descended.

With a frown, Kristen pulled the buds from her ears. “I was watching that.”

“It’s impossible to do three things at once.”

Kristen scowled at her. “It’s called multitasking. Kids do it all the time.”

“So do adults. But you constantly have to switch back and forth. That takes a lot of effort and it’s not very efficient.” She motioned toward the blank TV screen. “And that particular program wasn’t worth the effort.”

“You don’t like anything on TV.”

“Not much. Are you hungry?”

“I had some chips earlier. I thought you were going to be home sooner.”

“Val was late. I tried to call twice, but the line was busy.”

“I was talking to Gary.” Kristen gave her a defiant look.

Karen resisted the bait. She might not care for Kristen’s latest heartthrob, but she wasn’t up to another argument tonight. “I brought you dinner. Come on. I’ll help you up.”

Far lighter and much more agile than Margaret, Kristen didn’t need much assistance. Once her daughter was on her feet, Karen picked up the crutches from the floor and handed them to her.

“This broken leg stinks.” Kristen grimaced at the cast as she fitted the crutches under her arms.

“It could have been worse.”

Kristen rolled her eyes and expelled a noisy breath. “Are you going to bring up Steven again?”

“You did it for me. Thinking about him should give you some perspective. Being forced to use a pair of crutches for a few weeks is a lot better than spending the rest of your life as a paraplegic. He’s got a tough road ahead.”

“Yeah.” Kristen furrowed her brow. “The accident was awful. I feel bad for him.”

“I hope you also pray for him.”

“It won’t do any good.” Her daughter’s features hardened. “He isn’t going to get better. And why did God let him get hurt in the first place?”

“I don’t know. Only God has that answer. That’s where faith—and trust—come in.”

“That doesn’t make bad stuff any easier to accept.” Kristen

stared down at the iridescent purple toenails sticking out of the bottom of the cast. “Erin said she heard from her boyfriend, who’s Steven’s cousin, that he tried to kill himself.”

Karen’s heart stuttered. “When?”

“After he came home from the hospital.”

“Then we need to pray harder.”

“God doesn’t listen to my prayers.” Kristen’s jaw firmed. “I prayed you and Dad would get back together, but you got divorced instead.”

The pounding in Karen’s head intensified. “There were problems in our marriage that couldn’t be overcome.”

“You didn’t even try! You sat back and let Stephanie take Dad away from you! Why didn’t you stand up to him? Tell him to stay with us, where he belonged? You always let him walk all over you, just like you let Grandma boss you around!”

Karen drew in a sharp breath. “Kristen! That’s enough!”

“It’s true!”

Instead of responding, she turned on her heel and spoke over her shoulder. “I’ll put your dinner out.”

Thirty seconds later, the zipper balking under her shaky fingers, she opened the thermal tote. She shouldn’t let Kristen get away with that kind of disrespectful behavior, but she hated confrontations—especially with her daughter.

Besides, Kristen was right.

She *had* let Michael walk all over her. She’d put up with his moodiness, his demeaning comments, his autocratic manner. Had deferred to his opinion and his judgment, hoping her acquiescence would keep peace in the household. She’d done the same with her mother, convinced that if she was docile, if she did what she was told, the relationship would improve.

But that approach hadn’t worked with either of them. Margaret continued to fault-find and Michael had left for greener pastures. Namely, Stephanie.

The creak of crutches signaled Kristen’s arrival, and Karen lifted

the foil off the casserole. The food was in worse shape than it had been earlier, and Kristen's reaction mirrored Val's. In fact, with her long blonde hair and vivid blue eyes, her daughter bore a striking resemblance to her aunt at the same age.

"What is it?" Kristen wrinkled her nose in disgust.

"Shepherd's pie."

"Gross." With one more glance at the sorry casserole, she turned away. "Can I order Chinese?"

Swallowing past the tightness in her throat, she choked out a single-word response. "Fine."

As Kristen clumped away, Karen surveyed the pie and blinked back tears. Her daughter was right. It was a mess.

Just like her life.



Even through the thick plaster walls of the solid brick bungalow she'd called home for the first eighteen years of her life, Val could hear her mother snoring.

At least someone was sleeping.

Rising on one elbow, she peered at the bedside clock. Two in the morning.

There wasn't going to be much sleep this night—but her mother's snoring wasn't to blame.

She flopped back on the pillow and stared at the dark ceiling. Nights were the pits. In her idle mind, the unwanted memories crept from the darkness and swooped like hawks stalking their prey.

After twenty more minutes of tossing, Val gave up the battle and swung her legs over the edge of the bed. The mattress creaked in protest when she rose, then the room fell silent again as she moved through the shadows, letting her fingers brush over a beauty pageant trophy, a framed program from a school play, a blue ribbon for a dramatic reading she'd done while on the speech team.

Those represented the good memories.

She paused in front of the bureau, where the object representing her worst one was hidden, and wiped her palms down her gym shorts. She hadn't opened the top drawer in years. And maybe it was a mistake to take this step on her first night home.

But she had to look inside sooner or later—and it might be easier to take this first step under cover of darkness. In the shadows, perhaps she could hide from herself . . . and God.

Grasping the handles on the top drawer, she gave a tentative tug. It didn't budge.

She tried again, with more force.

This time, it shifted a little. But it was clear no one had opened it in a long while.

Val hesitated. Maybe this was a sign. Maybe she wasn't supposed to stir up the ashes of the long-ago fire that had consumed her soul and left her heart in tatters.

But if she didn't, would she ever vanquish the nightmares that were growing more intense as she approached the anniversary of the day that had changed her life forever?

No.

She had to do this. Now.

Val grasped the handles again and pulled with more force. After a squeal of protest, the drawer gave way. She paused, but Margaret's snoring continued unabated. That figured. Her mother was as oblivious to her younger daughter's nocturnal activities now as she had been eighteen years ago.

Once the drawer was half open, she reached inside, feeling her way into the farthest corner.

For a brief second she thought it was gone, and she groped with more urgency. Then her hand grazed the familiar cylinder, and she closed her eyes.

All these years it had lain undisturbed. Hidden. In the dark. Seen only by her since the long-ago day she'd tucked it here.

But maybe it would have been better if someone had discovered her secret, had called her to task for her terrible mistake. Perhaps

if she'd been caught and punished, she would have found her way to absolution years ago. Been freed from the yoke of guilt that had weighed her down far too long.

But she couldn't change the past. She could only deal with the present.

Fighting down her dread, Val withdrew the innocuous brown cardboard cylinder that had once held waxed paper.

Now it contained something far more precious.

Clutching it to her chest, she groped her way to the window seat. Her hands trembled as she fitted her fingers inside the tube and eased out the single sheet of paper. It was curled into a tight scroll, and as she carefully spread it out next to her on the faded floral upholstery, the yellowed paper crinkled in protest.

For several minutes, Val stared at the brittle sheet, heart pounding as silent tears ran down her cheeks. One splashed onto the paper, forming a damp, dark circle. Once dry, it would leave a spot with ragged edges. Like all the others scattered over the sheet.

This was why she'd come back to Washington. Across the miles and across the years, her tragic mistake had hung like a shadow over her life, awaiting her return. It was time to confront it. Make peace with her past. Move on.

The destination was clear.

Figuring out how to get there, however, was far more murky.

And even though caring for her mother wasn't going to be easy, it would be a piece of cake compared to her quest for redemption.