

Chapter One

August

Anticipation bubbled in her chest with each stroke of her fingers. Moving slowly at first, they kept a steady pace before instinct took over and they skittered across the smooth surface like spiders on parade. Rhythmically they tickled and tapped, jabbed and skipped to make the scene in her mind come alive on the page.

The final chapter.

Her eyes burned from the eight hours she'd been glued to her computer screen, her back and neck ached from slouching – a habit she still hadn't learned to shake – and if she stopped typing for an instant she was certain the magnificent ending that had just come to her, as she was sluggishly wading through the beginning of the chapter, would certainly evaporate into the abyss that most great ideas drifted to. So she pushed through cramped fingers and jittery nerves from the four cups of coffee she'd consumed without bothering to pause for food, and wrote.

Grace Winter had been working on the book for a year, a story she'd kept to herself, her own secret project she'd never planned on finishing, and it was only by the curve of her lips and the way the truth had spilled onto the page that she realized how much she wanted, and needed, to complete it.

She lifted her hands from the keys and stared at the screen feeling an odd sensation of fear and triumph as she dramatically punched the final period with her index finger and reclined in the hard back wooden chair.

The silence that followed was broken only by the steady drumming of rain against her apartment windows. Rain she hadn't realized had been falling for the past three hours. Inside, trumpets sounded, whistles blew and tens, no, hundreds of thousands of hands roared in thunderous applause.

Her memoir, *Facing Forgiveness*, was complete.

Grinning like a fool, Grace ran two hands through her wave of auburn hair and drew her knees up to her chest to rest her chin on the flannel that covered them. She allowed herself an indulgent giggle, something she never did in public, and danced a little in her chair with a squeak of old wood.

“Done, done, done!” she sang to no one in particular. It was one of those rare times she wished she had a cat or dog or, maybe, possibly, eventually, a husband to celebrate with. Instead, Grace saved her project, saved the entire document on a backup hard drive, and slid out of the chair to spin in a circle on the hardwood in her socks and do the kind of boogie in her pajamas that anyone with a sense of humor would laugh at.

She laughed at herself.

Funny, and unfortunate, she thought with a sigh, she hadn't told anyone what she'd been doing in her spare time. Grace Winter, rising children's book author, had written a full-length book. What did that make her? she wondered. The term had her feeling giddy inside, and quickly reigned in her excitement. Finishing a book was a long way from having it published.

Still, she was unable to put the smile away as she carried her coffee mug into the sink to rinse it out. A ring of brown circled the porcelain where it'd been sitting for the past two hours and instead of bothering to wash it, she filled it with hot water and let it soak in the sink.

It'd gotten colder. She wrapped her arms around herself and crossed the carpeted living room to the French doors that led to her balcony and looked out at the harbor where fishing boats, sailboats and everything in between bobbed in and out of the drizzly cove like wandering corks.

The rain drummed against the glass, ran down the panes in tiny rivers that bumped and pushed passed one another as though fighting to reach the bottom first.

She'd finished her first full length book, she thought with a smile.

On the street below and just beyond her balcony, Grace watched a woman and what looked to be her daughter hurry through the downpour, huddled closely under an umbrella for their car. It made her wonder if her family would ever read it if she did get it published. She strongly wished they didn't, for their sake, while a hope drifting within her wanted them to do just that. It'd make it easier to stay away. Easier than it had been the past five years anyway. Seattle was only six hours from Spokane so she hadn't gone *that* far, she thought. Opposite ends of the state was nothing really.

Grace watched the mother help her daughter into the passenger seat and skirt around the hood of the car, wading and splashing through puddles of water in knee high rubber boots to the driver side. When her heart ached with that familiar twinge from the past, she blamed the book.

She turned away from the glass doors and flipped on a light. The rain and charcoal clouds had darkened the afternoon, making it seem more like dusk. She picked up the cordless phone and dialed. He was one of several calls she'd make but since Bryan Tennyson had held the role of boyfriend for six solid months, the number still awed her, she figured he'd appreciate knowing first.

"Hello?" The familiar tenor came through the phone like a punch and Grace grinned yet again before she sank sideways into a plush forest green chair near the couch. "Hey handsome, guess what I just did?"

"Bought a new pair of shoes."

She laughed and swung her feet on the edge of the couch, comfortable in thick white socks. "Nope."

"Well it sounds like you're smiling. You must've gotten a book in the mail."

"You'll never guess," she said deciding not to mention the first edition of Keats she'd recently ordered. "I just finished my memoir."

"What were you reading?" She heard the squeak of leather and pictured him at his desk downtown, reclining in a suit as he stared at the skyline. Then again, Bryan wasn't the kind of man who indulged in fanciful daydreams out windows. He left that to her.

"Oh no, I mean I wrote a memoir. I just finished it."

There was a decisive pause on the other end. "Why?"

"I wanted to. I didn't tell anyone because I didn't want to get anyone's hopes up and not finish it," she said easily. "I didn't even think I would finish it to be honest, but it's done."

"Well that's great. How about we celebrate later with dinner?" He celebrated everything with dinner, champagne and a walk by the water; predictable, but still romantic.

"You thinking fine china or paper plates?"

"Please, Grace, don't insult me."

"I wouldn't dream of it." Of course she would. Would she have enough time to get

ready for that kind of dining? She glanced at the clock in the kitchen and gasped. “I’m late! My meeting!”

“I’ll call you about dinner.” She hardly heard him before she hung up the phone, tossed it on the couch and bolted from the chair so quickly she was surprised she didn’t slip and nosedive onto the coffee table.

She’d completely forgotten about the committee meeting. She reeked of stale coffee, pajamas that needed washing and socks and was about to stand in front of a board to pitch an idea for a project she desperately wanted to get rolling that she’d been planning, organizing, detailing and fine tuning for nearly three years.

She was normally a very organized person, she thought as she yanked off her sweatshirt and started the shower with scalding hot water. Thankfully she’d been prepared, and anxious enough, to put everything in a binder last week. Now it was just a matter of having the right people to follow along with the matching slide show while she sold the information and gave no rhyme, reason or room for the committee to say no.

Hopping on one foot while she yanked off her socks and practically stumbled into the shower, Grace took half a second to celebrate having finished the goal she’d had for decades.

She wasn’t even sure if she had it in her to finish her book. Looking back several years ago, Grace never believed she would have needed to write it. It was interesting how getting it on paper managed to get it off of her heart and mind enough that she had the breathing room to accept what was and what would always be.

Oddly, it didn’t take any pressure off her heart. What had once been a bleeding, swollen, scarred contusion had, over the years and with various coping mechanisms and, she thought quickly, the grace of God, it had healed into something resembling a bruise. If she poked enough it hurt quite a bit. If she poked in just the right places it made her cry; privately of course. She’d spent the previous year or so doing enough poking and prodding to know exactly where she had been wounded the most, and how long she could anticipate the pain to last. Looking at it no longer brought tears to her eyes, but the first few months she forced herself to address what had happened and put it on paper had been the most difficult.

A lot of tears had gone into those pages, but not one of them was wasted.

Grace rinsed the shampoo from her hair, the hot water sluicing it off and sending it down the drain. What had started as a way to shed the pain of her past had turned into a need to finish what had started. Perhaps it was because what started in her own life had never been finished, or even dealt with, she thought bitterly.

No matter.

Many things had helped her through that part of her life and one of them was a gorgeous man she’d just hung up on. She cringed guiltily as she scrubbed and lathered with enough energy to break skin.

Bryan Tennyson. He’d swept into her life like a new, experienced dance partner who somehow knew all the right ways to lead. It’d been something of a miracle, she thought as she shut off the water and reached for a towel. Bryan had been persistent, patient, attentive, generous, and understanding. He had no desire to know anything about the days before she came to Seattle, and she was grateful. It was baggage she’d rather leave in the closet and, besides, there was little there that would interest him anyway. They were comfortable with their casual and respectful relationship, and neither of them had any interest in dating anyone else. What they had was solid and without the dramatics most couples thrived on.

Boring and pointless, her publisher Paula had called it. Grace didn't think so. She had her hands in too many pots to worry about where their relationship was going anyway. This meeting with the committee and the book she'd just completed were the biggest. Besides, who said a relationship had to go anywhere?

Grace nudged it from her mind as she toweled her hair dry and mentally picked out a suit she was certain would be perfect for the meeting. She had no time to think about all that junk about relationships and the past.

She was done writing, finished, and complete. It sent chills up her spine to know it. Now she could focus on the whole reason she wrote in the first place and pray the leaders in her church would give the final push and help her do what she'd been praying she'd be able to do since she ran away to Seattle half a decade ago.

"This Crisis Center is one that can, over time, benefit hundreds of women and children in the greater King County area," Grace explained to the seven men and women sitting at the gleaming redwood table in a conference room at Trinity Church.

It was her church, she was fairly certain she knew every member, including the children and spouse of each individual at the table. It did little to deter her from giving the best pitch she possibly could to those who had the authority to approve or deny her request. She'd been careful enough to pick out a simple dark navy blue suit with white piping that was prudent enough to appeal to those more conservative, and still provided her the edge of professionalism and confidence that made certain they understood she wasn't a pushover.

"I already have the location," she moved forward in the slide show to a late nineteenth century brick building that had once been some kind of schoolhouse or church and was in dire need of renovation. She glanced at the binder that had the same photograph to coincide with what the committee members were looking at. "Of course it needs work, however this building is sitting on ten acres of fertile soil where we can grow our own vegetable garden, fruit trees, and plant flowers and make something of an oasis for those who need an escape from the concrete and glass they've spent their whole lives looking at."

She moved forward in the slide show, noting the interest of five committee members leaning forward in their seats. The next few slides went through a series of pictures of the interior of the building and sketches of floor plans and ideas for expansion. Grace quickly outlined the facts, added up cost, and reached figures that would have led most non-profit organizations interested in financing community projects running in sheer terror.

It wasn't something she dwelled on. Grace smoothly transitioned into the positive effect the Crisis Center would have on the community, particularly women and children, and played to the hearts of the elders, pastors and deacons.

"The fact is, ladies and gentlemen," she'd purposefully stopped the slideshow on a photograph of a single mom with three kids huddling in the doorway of an abandoned gas station to keep dry from a freezing, unrelenting sleet. Grace had taken the picture herself before encouraging the family to get in her car so she could drive them to the shelter across town. After seeing what facilities they had, Grace had considered taking them back to the abandoned gas station.

"There are two shelters in downtown Seattle," she continued. "Both are open to men as well as women and children. Most people in those shelters will resort to, at best, desperate measures to get something simple like a blanket, and while Trinity does countless food drives,

blanket baskets and coats for kids it simply isn't enough." She clicked through several photographs of the two shelters that displayed just how dire were their circumstances.

"We need a safe place for women and children to go with those blankets, coats and canned foods. Otherwise there's nothing stopping nature and the rest of the world from taking it. This city can be cruel enough when you have the protection we take for granted; locks on our doors and alarms on our cars, garages and storage units with padlocks for our treasured possessions." She clicked the remote to jump to another picture of a woman and a toddler staring at the ransacked lean-to that had been their home and was now nothing more than a tarp and garbage.

"We have educated, talented professionals who attend this church, are members of this church, who'd like to volunteer. Among these are doctors and counselors as well as daycare providers, tutors, teachers and teenagers simply looking to earn volunteer hours for college." She covered details regarding living quarters, paid staff versus volunteers and annual budgets before she ended on a slide she knew would do its job.

A six year old boy in a torn t-shirt with dirt smudged across his face sat in his mother's lap with a grin revealing several missing teeth. His mother couldn't have been older than thirty, even though the lines in her face and grief in her eyes made her appear to be someone nearing her fifties, and yet she managed to smile despite the ugly bruise that had nearly swollen one of her eyes shut.

"They need this." The raw truth of it nearly toppled what control she had on her emotions. Not only was there a need for it, but she wanted it. The memory of a familiar face and a life that was so far gone it may as well have been a fantasy, still haunted her. "If we do nothing, nothing will change. Albert Einstein once said, 'The world is too dangerous to live in, not because of the people who do evil, but because of the people who sit and let it happen.' This center gives us the chance to put a stop to that evil. The question is whether we're going to take it or not."

One of the less interested committee members, a woman with folds of pale skin, narrow eyes and a bob of black hair cleared her throat. "To be frank, Grace, we don't have that kind of money. Not even close."

The other committee members glanced at one another and back at Grace. She knew it was true, looked each of them in the eye and shrugged.

"That's fine." She flipped her binder shut. "You all know my profession. I've spent the past four years writing children's books, some that have done quite well for themselves and others that have not." She clicked another button to grab the slide that indicated how much money it would cost to fund the project. She clicked another button that added a six digit number that covered more than half of that.

"That's what I have to put toward this project. All I'm asking," she clicked the remote again as another figure, a much smaller one that added up to meet the total, jumped onto the screen, "is that you provide this."

The senior pastor, Barney Riley, leaned forward on the table with his brows raised. "You're telling me that you've got three quarters of the funds taken care of?"

She kept her face neutral. "I am."

He rubbed the stubble on his chin and sat back looking at the rest of the committee members as if waiting for anyone dumb enough to come up with an objection.

"If you've saved this much so far, why not wait until you've saved the rest?" The question came from a penny pinching elder. He had enough degrees to boil water but the man simply did not understand the concept of a dollar, Grace thought.

“I could do it in about six months to a year,” she admitted. “However, I’d like to get this center done before New Years, to open its doors during the most miserable months of the year. I’m fully aware that what I’m asking from you is no small sum. The truth is I’ve heard each of you preach to the congregation about the importance of giving and what it does for the soul. I wanted to give you another opportunity to practice what you preach and to let the congregation see you do it in a way that benefits the community in their backyard. It might encourage them to do the same.”

She turned off the projector and flipped on the light. Eyes connected across the table, avoiding her completely. Grace waited patiently as Pastor Barney sat up in his chair to speak for the committee.

“Give us a few days to consider. Friday,” he decided. “We’ll have an answer for you by Friday.”

She smiled. “Thank you.”

On her way home Grace made a few phone calls to the girls she mentored in the Big Brothers Big Sisters program.

Melissa Turner was a teenagers struggling through the most difficult years of adolescence with a single mom strung out on meth as her only family. The girl craved attention to such a degree she recently chopped off the majority of her beautifully long blonde hair that made it look like she’d taken a weed whacker to her head. Grace handled the traumatic experience as best she could through the phone and promised they’d get together the next day for ice cream and talk it out. Though it was Melissa’s first outburst in two months Grace had to remind herself the girl was making tremendous progress.

She took a moment to swing through Starbucks for her second latte of the day before she called Isabel Camden, a fifteen year old who lost both her parents in a drive by shooting three years earlier. Isabel’s grandmother had eagerly taken her into custody with a firm determination she not face the same fate. They’d moved from a large house in a neighborhood close to a dangerous gang to a smaller home in a quieter district.

Grace could remember how difficult a time Isabel had had with the transition. For months Mrs. Camden, who was the epitome of a southern bell, sweet tea and bless your hearts included, had no idea how to handle her. Part of the job, Grace mused, was being there for the family as well as the girl if it was possible. During the call with her oldest client, or Sister, she was pleased to hear Isabel hadn’t gotten into any fights lately, though Grace figured the punch she’d given to a soccer player behind the bleachers when he’d called her a name she had no interest in hearing repeated was relatively excusable.

There were some girls Grace saw for only a few months, other’s she’d been seeing for a solid two years. She loved it. She loved mentoring them, guiding them in positive directions, ones that often put Bible’s in both of their hands in study, helping them make life decisions, teaching them to take care of themselves, and simply be there for them, being needed, encouraged Grace.

She noted the time on her phone, saw she’d missed a call, and grimaced at the memory of how she’d hung up on Bryan earlier.

She’d call him back, she thought, making a mental note to do just that when she returned home. When she remembered why she’d called him in the first place, she grinned. She’d probably send it to her publisher for a second opinion and, though it was probably crap as far as

memoirs went, maybe it'd sell. She didn't dare hope, but miracles happened.

If she got her miracle... well, she'd jump that bridge when she came to it.

Chapter Two

November

Rain or shine the café by the pier was crowded with customers. The misty afternoon was no exception. Grace discovered the little spot by the water the first week she lived in Seattle and had fallen in love with Old Ben's cappuccinos and his wife Molly's freshly baked croissants. The couple had owned the shop for more than a decade, and turned it from a leaning shack into a quaint little cottage-like café with an apartment above where the couple lived. There was fresh coffee however the customer wanted it and home-baked goods with none of the luxury one might find at Starbucks and all of the hospitality of a small-town home.

Grace found it to be one of the best places to people watch, as the diversity that was Seattle seemed to rush through in droves. Parents could bring their children, trusting them to remain occupied in a designated corner. Molly would often award them with candy for good-behavior. Fishermen and those who worked the shipyards came in for the black sludge Old Ben reserved for them, but primarily for conversation with the man who'd worked the docks for twenty-three years, making him one of their own.

Grace sat at a table by the window with a newspaper opened to an article she'd found that morning, her fingers drumming restlessly on the text as the crowded café bustled around her. It'd been three months since she finished her book, one month since *Facing Forgiveness* was published, and the success it had was wreaking havoc on her nerves. As the bell above the door jangled, Grace eagerly searched for a familiar face and sighed when one merged into the crowd.

"Paula," Grace raised a hand to catch her attention and smiled when her publisher's dark brown eyes met hers.

Paula weaved her way through the crowd in her familiar Dockers, deep colored blouse and blazer, uttering half a dozen excuse me's before she managed to sink into a seat with a sliver of dignity.

"Why do you always insist on meeting here?" She ran her fingers through her pixie-like black hair as if to put it back into place.

"I like it. The fact that it annoys you, Ms. Magdalene, is just a bonus." She wanted to smile when those dark eyes narrowed and realized her nerves wouldn't allow it. Paula ignored those nerves for a moment, knowing they'd talk about why Grace's hand wouldn't sit still eventually, and glared at the incessant line. "I knew I should've stopped at Starbucks."

A scrawny teenage boy emerged from the throng of people, his long unruly hair pulled back in a small pony tail with pale hands steadily holding a steaming cup of coffee.

"Here you go," he set it in front of Paula.

"Thanks, Vin," Grace glanced up in gratitude, however short-lived and the boy's hesitant eyes warmed as he nodded and smiled before returning to work.

"I told him to bring it over when you came in."

Paula's surprise faded to annoyance. "I should be buying you a cup." But she lifted the cheerful winter mug, mismatched against all others in the café, to her lips.

Five years ago Paula couldn't be paid to explore this neighborhood. She'd gotten lost when searching for an author's home and when Grace emerged from the pile of rotting wood masquerading as a café with a notebook in a hand and a clean shirt on her back, Paula took a chance. She pulled over and asked for directions. Grace had needed a ride to another part of

town for a job interview and Paula gave her a ride in exchange for a safe route to her destination.

It wasn't until that night Paula found the notebook on the floor of the passenger seat of her car. The story was hand-written for crying out loud, and it took confronting Grace the following day for her to believe that a young woman living in that frightening of a neighborhood could write about teddy bears, little girls and angels that didn't end in bloodshed.

The story had nearly made Paula's eyes sweat, though she'd never admit to it. It was good enough, to say the least, that she talked Grace into signing a contract for Crossroad Publishing. Her editor approved the story for publication and Grace had gotten her first paycheck. The two were opposite sides of a coin, but they both had the same focus in life. They just went about completing it in different ways.

Grace held up her copy of the *Seattle Times*, her eyes wide, expectant. The section she displayed had printed a list of recommended books to read including editor's favorites and what was on the *New York Times* bestseller list. *Facing Forgiveness* had reached number fifteen.

She waited for any kind of expression to show and quickly decided she was never playing poker with her publisher.

"Do you see this?" Grace jabbed a finger at the article. "Am I on the right page?" She pretended to look for the page number and dropped it in front of Paula with the article facing up.

"Are you talking about your book?" Paula frowned as though making sure there was nothing else on the page that would spark her interest.

"No, I'm talking about John Grisham being five spots ahead of me."

There was only so much teasing Paula could do. She cracked a smile.

"Okay, she's back. Why didn't you tell me it was doing this well?" Grace was pleased to see the rising popularity of her book, not to mention the money it was bringing in, but it was also making her a bit nervous. She hadn't expected a lot of people to read it, and the more that did then the more likely would her family read it, and if they read it...

She stopped herself from getting carried away.

"It's not done going up," Paula said simply.

"What do you mean?"

"I expected this." She nudged the newspaper back with a shrug. "If you had less talent than number fifteen on the *Times* would be something to brag about. Fact is, you've got more talent than you give yourself credit for. *Facing Forgiveness* will keep going up."

Grace frowned at her confidence, lacking so much of it herself, and wondered if that was one of the reasons Paula wasn't just her publisher, but her closest friend. One of many reasons, Grace decided. They didn't exactly make the most complimenting pair at first glance. Paula rarely smiled, yet still managed to pull off a rare beauty that made passersby want to stare regardless of the expression she wore. When she smiled, it only added to an already stunning face. Grace, on the other hand, had the kind of quiet beauty that wasn't noticed without a second or third glance but left people stunned in her wake if they managed to draw out her laugh, which stuck out like a willow in a wheat field.

Grace tore at the corner of the newspaper and folded it into miniscule pieces.

"Why are you so concerned?"

"I just didn't expect it to really go anywhere. I figured we'd do a few thousand copies, manage to make enough of a profit to get us a paycheck that wouldn't be too embarrassing, and that'd be it."

Paula smiled. "Surprise."

“It’s in your face,” Grace said.

She nodded. “Yeah it is. That’s certainly part of what makes it so intriguing. You’re not afraid of success are you?”

“Of course not.” But her stomach clenched at the idea. “What happens if my book goes up on the list?”

Paula studied her through narrowed eyes as she leaned back in her chair. “I’ll start getting phone calls from talk shows, newspapers and radio stations to get an interview. We’ll do a book tour.”

Grace nodded slowly. “Okay.”

Her publisher chuckled at her nerves. “Relax. We’ll jump that bridge when we get there.”

Grace tried to be reassured, but the definitive “when” rather than “if” Paula had confidently spoken nauseated her.

Two weeks later...

A driving rain mixed with snow drummed against newly installed window panes and echoed through the empty, unfinished living room of the Crisis Center.

Her center, she thought taking in the room she’d designed. Friday had come and it had been Pastor Barney who’d given her the good news. It was a six to one vote to start the center immediately and, big surprise, her penny pinching elder was the one who’d voted no.

It was freezing despite the space heater she’d placed nearby and it seemed every thirty minutes she was kneeling by its red hot bars to ease the stiffness in her fingers brought on by the cold. Things were moving quickly, no doubt about it. Construction workers had put up the insulation and drywall just last night. She thanked God for that as a gust of wind whistled and screamed outside.

She wiped damp hands on her jeans and tossed aside paint spotted hair as she bent to open the two remaining paint cans she’d spot on the wall. She wished she could’ve slapped the colors on last night and made a decision this morning but Bryan had called and persuaded her out to dinner. Then proceeded to pester her for the entire hour about what they were going to do for Christmas.

She dipped a new brush into a sunny yellow and brought it to the wall, dripping a few drops onto the plastic at her feet. The holiday was an entire month away, for crying out loud. She was a planner; the fat, crinkled day planner she carted everywhere, instead of using the calendar on her phone as most people did nowadays, could attest to that. As busy as she was she’d been unable to fill those last two weeks in December with something, anything, other than what he had in mind. Perhaps she could convince him to take a trip to New York or something.

The idea only brought her mind back to the one thing she’d been trying to ignore – the success of her book. She’d been reading the *New York Times* like an obsession every week, noting with sweaty palms how *Facing Forgiveness* had jumped up to number six this week. To forget about it, or try to forget, she did what construction she could on the center, she spent more time with Melissa and Isabel and she let Bryan take her out more than usual and picked fights with him to keep her mind off of the anxiety caused by her book.

The picking hadn’t lasted long. His request to meet her family had been an annoyance at first and when he began pushing she hadn’t needed to pick a fight. He first mentioned the idea in passing; it was a suggestion kind of like, “Let’s go to Paris one of these days.” She hadn’t believed he was serious until he started mentioning the cost of flying versus driving and asking

whether her family would be gathering together for the holidays this year like they did every year. “Someday” turned into “this year” and “is it an option” turned into “let’s do it.” Grace felt like a cat being nudged toward water.

The very idea of spending Christmas, of all times, with her family, all together, over one dinner table, made her more lightheaded than the paint. It wasn’t that she hated her family. She could handle them all just fine... as long as it was in small doses, one at a time. She called, sent cards and presents and managed to remember every birthday, anniversary and special event under the sun. Wasn’t that enough?

Besides, she’d thrown herself into the Crisis Center as soon as it had gotten approved. She couldn’t just *leave*. Too many people were unknowingly counting on her to get this place up and running. Knowing how much of an impact the place could and would have, she threw her back into the project with almost as much fervor as she had her book.

A heavy ball of guilt landed in her gut as she spread a layer of beige paint on the wall beside the yellow and sky blue. She had to admit, reluctantly, going home didn’t look nearly as appealing as it might have looked before her book had gotten published.

Facing Forgiveness was as the title implied; not exactly original but it got one’s attention. She wondered if her family had read it, then quickly realized that if they had, she wouldn’t have to wonder. They’d let her know.

She smeared the final color on the wall in even strokes, a mossy green, beside the others, her brow furrowed in concentration.

Grace covered the paint cans and wrapped the brushes in plastic before carrying them to a temporary utility sink down the hall. She ran her fingers through the soft bristles, sending splatters of paint down the drain and grimacing at the ooze and slime that slipped through her fingers when the paint mixed with water.

A sudden gust of wind blew down the hall with a vicious howl and she wondered if it had blown the door open. When it ceased, someone called her name.

“Back here.” She exchanged a clean brush for a dirty one and glanced at the door as a familiar body leaned against the jam. She smiled. “Hey, Pastor Barney. Come to see how things are shaping up?”

“I did.” He crossed thick arms over his broad chest and smiled, creating crow’s feet in his rugged face. He’d forgotten to shave this morning, again. “I also wanted to check on the brains of the operation; see how she’s doing.”

“Brains are haggard, as usual. What do you think of the outside?”

“Even in this sorry excuse for weather it looks great. Hard to believe this much progress has been made in a couple months. Have you taken a day off?”

She shrugged. “I’ll get to it.” Shaking the water from the clean brushes Grace carried them back to the living room as Pastor Barney trailed behind. “Liz came by yesterday to check the place out,” she said speaking of one of the church deacons, a volunteer counselor with a PhD specializing in treating rape victims.

“She’s in love with the garden of all things,” Grace continued. “It’s winter, spitting rain and she likes the garden more than the fireplaces.” She understood to a certain degree. The gardens were practical and, to some, anything less than that would be a waste of space in a city like Seattle; it was that sort of thinking that led Grace to consider it a good investment.

“Did she ever get you the list of certified nurses in the congregation who want to volunteer?”

“She did. The only thing I think we need that we haven’t really considered is a physical therapist. It’s way down on the list of priorities right now though. Just something I’m tossing around. I figure I’ll talk about it with the committee when I go over the big list.”

“Volunteers, assistants, residents, exactly,” he mused. “How many bedrooms does this place have?”

“Twelve. Ten bathrooms, a chef’s kitchen, a dining room the size of a small cafeteria, eight acres of property and soon enough we’ll get the security system installed.”

“This really is a great idea, Grace.” He slid his hands in his jeans pockets as his gaze proudly took in the renovated bare room.

“Thanks for voting yes,” she said.

“Your idea. Your plans.”

“I couldn’t have done it without you guys. Clearly.” She neatly lined the paint cans on the tarp.

“Take a little credit would you?” His tone was light but Grace felt a tingle of aggravation on the back of her neck.

She’d always been uncomfortable taking credit for any good deed, yet she met his eyes over her shoulder and smiled. It always seemed to her like climbing up another rung on the ladder; eventually you had to fall and the higher you were the harder the impact.

“I’m meeting a few of the other deacons for lunch,” he continued. “Care to join us?”

Grace stood and wiped the dust from her hands on her jeans. “Can’t. I’m meeting my Little Sister.”

“Which one?”

“Melissa.”

“She’s the...”

“Thirteen year old. Mom’s a meth-addict, Dad took off when she was ten. She was failing her classes and now has her grades up to C’s if you can believe that,” Grace grinned. “She actually told me she had a goal at our last get-together.”

“What’s the goal?”

“She wants her mom to come to church. Before the school year is out.”

“Really? Not a new bike, straight A’s or making the JV softball team?”

“This is more important to her.” She considered the young girl and shook her head in disbelief. “It’s amazing really. I don’t know how she does it.”

“What’s that?” He picked up a clean brush and ran his fingers over the soft bristles.

“Hope. Forgive.” She picked up her winter jacket she’d tossed over a folding chair and shrugged into it. “I’m not sure if it’s the ignorance of youth, her love for her mom despite all the terrible things she’s done, or what. She just keeps on hoping that one day her mom will turn around and keeps forgiving her when she doesn’t.”

“You don’t think she will?”

“I don’t know. Let’s just say I’m not putting all my eggs in one basket.” She zipped up her jacket and glanced at her watch as he tossed the brush on a pile of plastic. “Anyway, I’ve got to pick her up from school. I’m already late.”

“Hey.”

“Yeah?” She wiggled her hand into a glove and realized she’d misplaced the second. “Crap.”

Barney picked up the second glove from beneath a folding chair and handed it to her.

“Thanks.”

“You’re good people kiddo.”

She grinned and fastened her glove. “Sometimes I wonder.”

“I don’t.” He pulled paint from her hair and flicked it to the ground. “How’s that man of yours doing?”

She sent him a knowing smile. “Are you speaking to me as my pastor or as my surrogate big brother?”

“Both.”

“He treats me right and respects my boundaries,” she said pointedly. “He’s also been pestering me about going home for Christmas.”

“To Spokane?”

She nodded with her lips pressed shut as she continued to tug on an already snug glove. “He wants to meet my family.”

His brows spiked in surprise. “Does he –”

“No,” she interrupted. “He doesn’t.”

Pastor Barney nodded and scratched his chin. “Has he read your book?”

She couldn’t look at him. Didn’t trust her eyes to lie well enough for eye contact.

He nodded. “So he doesn’t have a clue what he’s getting into by pushing you to go back there.”

“Not a clue,” she agreed. “I keep telling him no. I’ve even suggested other vacations, but he’s adamant. I don’t want to face them after...” she waved a hand as if to brush the memory away and shook her head. “I know I need to give Bryan some excuse sooner or later but I really cannot fathom telling the truth right now, or going back there anytime soon. I mean, since when did it become a rule that after six months of dating you had to meet what could be your future in-laws?”

“Do you love him?”

She met his eyes for an instant, looked away, embarrassed. “Yeah. I do.”

“Is there any reason why you two wouldn’t get married in the future?”

“Not as far as I can tell. Unless he meets my family,” she cocked her head with a smile that meant to tease, but both of them knew how true the statement rang.

“Look,” he placed a hand on her shoulder as if to comfort and Grace found, unsurprised, that it did. “I know who they are because you told me so yourself. I know more now after reading your book, but it might be something to think about to know he hasn’t taken the time to. He doesn’t know anything about your past even though he’s clearly interested in your future. The only reason a man wants to meet his girl’s parents is to see if he could handle them as in-laws.”

“You think that just because he spends a few days with them at Christmas doesn’t mean he has to know the whole story.”

“I think the more he knows the better. That way if he does propose, he’ll know exactly what he’s asking. But I don’t see why he needs to know right now. Either way, I’d do some serious praying about it, and him.” If she hadn’t met his mossy green eyes she’d have mistaken his concern for a scolding.

“I will.” She smiled. “Thanks.” She took one last long look around the home. “I suppose it’d be good for him to meet them. Johnny’s been bugging me to visit for awhile now, anyway,” she said speaking of her youngest brother. “Maybe I can just make it an in-and-out visit.”

“Do what you need to do. But please,” he added gravely, “don’t you dare pick that pee-yellow color you just tossed on that wall.”

She laughed. “Give it some time to dry. It looks different on the swatch.” Her watch beeped, signaling the top of the hour. “And now I’m really late picking up my girl. Give yourself a tour. I think you’ll approve.”

He was making his way up the stairs when she trotted down the porch that wrapped around the brick building like an embrace, for her truck.

She didn’t know whether she wanted Bryan to read her book or not, she thought as she pulled out of the lot. She liked how things were and certainly had no desire to change it. He’d already said he didn’t want to know about her life before she got to Seattle, and that was all her book was about. So if she tried to push it on him, she’d be asking for trouble. After all, until this particular vacation, Bryan had never manipulated or pressured her to do anything she didn’t want to do. Of course that really wasn’t saying much as Grace was usually open to trying just about anything once. Almost.

His request to meet her family for the holidays was more than reasonable for someone who didn’t understand just what it meant to her to go home. It wasn’t a matter of reuniting with relatives. Perhaps it’d be best to simply glaze over it. Allow him to meet the family she hadn’t seen in five years, keep things on the surface and do what she could to adjust.

Adjust? How much was she supposed to adjust before she compromised what she swore she’d never compromise? She picked up her phone and dialed Paula’s number. The phone rang several times as Grace adjusted the Bluetooth in her ear and crawled over an unfinished, muddy road.

“Your calls are going to give me an ulcer.”

“Very funny,” but Grace was smiling. “I’m deciding not to think about my book right now. I actually had an entirely different question.”

“All right, I’ve got a few minutes.”

“Bryan wants me to take him to my family’s place for Christmas.”

Paula was grateful they were on the phone. Her speculative brow shot up too quickly to hide. “I think that’s a good idea,” she said. “Get away for a few days. You haven’t been home since you moved here.”

“This is my home.”

“True enough. Though I think if you’re serious about him, he ought to meet your family.”

“See, the goal is to keep him interested.”

“Take it from an expert.” It sounded like she was spitting glass. “If he loves you, he’ll take you as you are. All of you.”

Grace had heard through various grapevine’s how Paula’s marriage had collapsed like a house of cards several years ago. Twenty years earlier, more than a decade before she and her husband met, Paula had been a prostitute; while she hadn’t flaunted the information she hadn’t bothered to hide it when it managed to leak. At nineteen she became a Christian, turned her life around and got into the publishing industry. Nearly a decade later, married and pregnant, her husband found out about her past, what she believed wasn’t worth the breath to speak about, and treated her as though she’d kept it as a side job. He’d left her and four weeks later Paula miscarried. The last she heard from her husband came in the form of divorce papers two months later.

It’d been six years, and the bitterness she carried was like a few drops of oil in a gallon of

water.

To Grace, Paula was a silent reminder that if a man couldn't love all of her then he wasn't a man to encourage.

How far did she want or expect their relationship to go?

She'd been certain that a man was the last thing she wanted in her life, but he'd proven more than capable of withstanding the chaos that was her life with a clear head and want to stick around.

"Did you think Isaac would've accepted your past if he knew?" she asked.

"Doesn't matter now, does it?"

"Indulge me."

Paula sighed and hesitated long enough Grace nearly asked if she was still there. "I thought he had accepted all of me, past and present, which is why I thought my history was irrelevant to us. Now I see that I should've given him the chance to know the worst of me before he married me."

Grace met him that evening at their usual restaurant where the champagne flowed, crystal gleamed and every table was adorned with fresh linen. The host recognized her the moment she stepped through the glass doors opened by the doorman and escorted her to the table where Bryan was already waiting in candlelight. The man could pass for Dermot Mulroney, she thought as he stood to greet her. His complexion was darker, reminding her of coffee after adding a bit of cream and sugar, the sharp planes of his face brought out the Indian mixed in his heritage. His dark eyes flickered with delight at her entrance in the deep blue sequenced dress she knew was his favorite.

He welcomed her with a kiss on the cheek as he always did. "Hello darling." Warmth spread from her cheek to her lips.

"Hi," she smiled. He smelled of Armani and tobacco and looked entirely unruffled in his black suit and purple tie despite the long hours he spent at the office. "How are you?" she asked as the host pulled out her chair for her. "Thank you."

"Pretty good. The store on the west side looks like it'll open on schedule." He managed a chain of large bookstores on the west coast and had been looking forward to opening a new branch on the other side of town. He seated himself after she was settled and drank the champagne that had already been poured.

She smiled with him, amazed, as usual, that he'd picked her and stayed with her. His smile, when generous, was wide yet held many secrets, which only added to his appeal.

He linked his fingers with hers. "I want to tell you something before you give me an answer," he began. Grace inhaled quickly in a failed attempt to settle her nerves. "I don't think I ever told you why I wanted to meet your family or why this is so important to me. I love you Grace, and I'm thinking very seriously about spending my life with you. I'd like to get to know the family that I may decide to make an extension of my own. Fair enough?"

She couldn't explain why there was a streak of fear that pierced her heart as well as a cloud of joy that seemed to expand with each breath.

She nodded. "I've decided."

"You're sure you don't want another day or so to think about it?" he asked.

"No. I'm sure." She was certain her choice would lead down a difficult road, but what was life without turning down a few wrong roads? Sometimes those roads forced her to put her faith

in God more than when she'd been coasting on the highway. Even as her heart skipped at the mere thought of following through, she'd prayed, and while everything in her told her to run away, that deeper pull guided her elsewhere.

"We'll go to Spokane for Christmas."

He grinned. "Thank you."

Her heart melted foolishly. She loved to make him happy, but this was a leap she was certain would become a fall, and one she wasn't sure she was going to recover from. Perhaps with him by her side she could get through it without losing too much of herself in the process.

He kept his hand in hers and squeezed. "I'm really looking forward to meeting them."

"We need the vacation," she reasoned. "Might as well kill two birds with one stone."

He nodded, already moving on to the next thing. "I went ahead and ordered for us. I figured you might be in the mood for the roast duck you enjoyed so much last time."

She wasn't really. A hamburger and a beer sounded much more appetizing at the moment, but the duck could be a decent substitute.

"Thanks."

She breathed deeply and drank the champagne, hoping it would calm the nerves strung tighter than a drum. Many things could change in five years. Many things could be forgotten. Had anyone changed or forgotten what happened that night so many years ago?

She swirled the champagne in her glass, and stared at the chipped nail on her hand.

Chapter Three

December

Mistake, mistake, mistake!

It was all she could think as she paced from the closet to her usually immaculate bed where her suitcase lay open – and empty. Clothes had been pulled from her closet and dresser drawers, tossed in piles on her bed and her floor, half folded in her suitcase only to be pulled back out again in haste. Grace tossed back what was left of the red wine in her glass and grit her teeth at the mess she'd created. A stress mess, she thought furiously, and picked up her cordless phone. Shoving the sleeves of her blouse up and swiping stray hair from her eyes, she dialed.

"This is all your fault," she said when Paula answered.

"Oh good, at least the police will know who to convict." Paula put the manuscript she'd been reading on the coffee table and tossed her reading glasses on top of it.

"I mean it," Grace rushed. "If you hadn't started talking about Bryan needing to accept all of me I wouldn't be in this mess. And I do mean mess; it looks like a bomb went off in here."

"Having trouble packing?"

"What am I doing, Paula?" Grace groaned and sank onto her mattress and the clothes on top of it. When Paula didn't respond, she plowed on. "I was doing just fine." She waved her empty glass as if to emphasize the remark and brought it back to her lips only to remember there was nothing left. "I never wanted to go back there. I hoped I'd never have to after finishing my book. It was supposed to be like turning the key in the lock to keep me out, and instead I'm going back in. Why? Why?" she demanded.

"Grace –"

"I must be going crazy," she interrupted.

"You're not crazy. You're human."

"I'm stupid. I can't believe how stupid I was to give you my book! What if they've read it? What am I supposed to say to them? What am I supposed to tell Bryan?"

"Why are you going back?"

"So Bryan can meet his future in-laws. The man hasn't even proposed. Why am I doing this when he hasn't even proposed?" She launched herself from the bed and stalked to the kitchen to refill her glass with what was left in the bottle. Not even alcohol was taking the edge off her nerves.

"You want him to ask without knowing who he's taking on for family?"

"They're my family. My family, my problem," she snapped.

"Not when you get married," Paula shot back. "Use this vacation to ease him into the parts of you he doesn't know yet."

Vacation – was that was this was supposed to be?

"There is no 'easing' when it comes to my family. It's a crash course and that's the only way they know how to do it. I should've just waited until the day of the wedding – assuming there's going to be one – and given him the crash course then."

"That's called a trap," Paula reminded her. "They're not all bad."

Grace thought of her youngest brother and her brother-in-law. "No," she sighed. "Not all of them. But there's a handful that certainly make up for it. God, I could strangle that man."

“Who?”

“Bryan! It was his idea in the first place for this whole mess. And you for that matter. Why’d you publish that piece of crap I gave you?”

“Because it’s not crap, and I imagine you needed to write it.”

“I did, but that didn’t mean you had to publish it.”

Paula rolled her eyes and pulled herself from the couch to make a cup of tea. “So now I’m at fault?” She didn’t believe it, but it felt good to remind Grace of what she was saying.

“Yes! No,” she quickly corrected, pressing a palm to her forehead. “This isn’t your fault. It’s mine. I never should’ve given my book to you.”

“Well, you did. Now you have to deal with the consequences.” She let Grace digest her words for a moment before settling herself back on the couch with the aroma of honey lemon wafting in the air. “Your book is a work of art, Grace. It’s brilliant. It wouldn’t be at number six on the *New York Times* if it wasn’t. Why don’t you stop blaming and digging up the negative side of this trip and consider it a chance to grow some character.”

“Character, right,” Grace muttered.

Paula grabbed on to what was left of her patience and didn’t care that her friend was not in a mood for optimism. “Romans 5:3-5. Sufferings produce endurance, endurance produces character, and character hope and –”

“Hope doesn’t disappoint,” she finished lamely.

“Right. After you read that, read 8:18, and,” she picked up her Bible from the end table and flipped to a familiar page. “2 Corinthians 1:5-7.”

“I hate it when you heap Bible verses on me in a time of legitimate crisis.”

Paula smiled at Grace’s renewed calm and edge of resentment. “You’re welcome.”

Grace shuffled through her nightstand for a pen and paper and wrote down the verses. “2 Corinthians what?”

“Chapter one, verses five through seven.”

“Got it.” She set the pen aside and rubbed the space between her eyes. “I don’t really think this is your fault.”

“Glad to hear it.”

“Thank you.”

“You know what? Read James 5:13, too. Then do it.”

Grace scribbled the verse on her notepad. “Read, then do.”

“You sane enough to pack now or do I need to come over?”

“You hate what I wear anyway, so that’s a loaded question.”

“How about you call me in an hour if you don’t think you have all your underwear?”

After they hung up, Grace stepped out onto the balcony of her apartment as panic began to fall in chips from her heart. To separate her from the chaos that was her room a bit more, she shut the French doors and took in a stinging breath of cold air. In the frigid waters of the Puget Sound fishing boats coated in ice and frost coasted out to sea or into safe harbor. She had her own treacherous waters to navigate in the coming week and tomorrow she prayed the weather would be clear enough to start the journey smoothly.

She was picking up Bryan from his apartment in the morning, and then sighed remembering she had no idea how she’d handle him with her family if they decided to read her book between now and when they arrived. It would’ve been easier if he’d read it himself, she thought bitterly.

Then again, he'd made it clear he had little interest in the person she was before she came to Seattle, and if he really was thinking about a future with her she should be excited. Just thinking about all seventy-three inches of her lean, handsome, considerate man turned her defensive walls into dust. She was going back for him. Was it because she loved him? She liked to think so. The idea of going home turned her stomach over, but there was another edge of anticipation she'd never felt before.

Deciding she'd better pack now before she put it off any longer, Grace returned to the room she was usually so meticulous with, determined to return it to its original oasis.

Her life was full of organized chaos; it was a kaleidoscope of deadlines, details, facts and creativity. She'd intentionally created her room to be entirely separate from the rest of her world. She'd spent two careful years piecing it together from her bed's plush maroon and gold comforter and the six decorative pillows to the art on the walls and the ficus plant by the window with fruit and spice candles strategically placed on shelves and night stands. There was comfort, joy, and indulgence.

Until she'd allowed panic to take control.

She peeled a bra from the branches of the tree, glaring at the frenzied mess. She stooped to pick up an armful of sweaters, still on their hangers, and tossed them on the bed. Ignoring the loose strands of auburn hair that fell from the clip holding most of it in place, she picked up a t-shirt and absently folded it surveying the war zone.

She had to get everything together before tomorrow morning. Focusing on details, she sorted through a stack of cotton shirts and managed a full five minutes of calm. As she picked up her favorite jeans and slowly folded them into the case, her brow furrowed with annoyance and her shoulders sagged with a weight she had been so certain she'd discarded.

Seven days with her family was going to turn her world upside down. Christmas was Saturday and it seemed difficult enough to make it past day one.

The Winter's were no picnic. They never had been, Grace thought, purposefully excluding herself from the bunch. She had no memories of a happy, unified team working with or for one another to make it through an already difficult world. It came as no surprise when her parents separated when she was eight. Even though Delilah and Aaron had four children in ten years, they'd also been through twelve marriage counselors in equal time. He worked to bring in the money, and she brought men home while he was away. Six years after the separation, six years of manipulation, guilt, and court ordered therapy and lawyers to determine who got what and who, they finally divorced. Grace hadn't been bitter. It was better that they weren't together.

Then again, if they'd stayed together she might've had the protection she needed. A knot the size of a fist lodged itself in her chest and she took a deep, ragged breath to clear it.

Protection? She'd never been the kind of person someone protected. Her mother made that apparent when Grace was thirteen. An... incident, for lack of a better term, forced her to live with her father, and the degree of hate that burned against her mother would've put blistering coals to shame. Her father may have had unrealistic expectations, a thimble of sympathy and spent the majority of her childhood wrapped up in the money that lined his pockets for his new family; he at least made it easy to pretend he was the father she wanted.

Grace rubbed her eyes, pushing the memories of her childhood back into her mind's proper closets. Her book was done, and those trips down memory lane needed to be done with it.

She picked up her glass, remembered the Bible verses Paula had mentioned, and

snagged the scrap of paper and her Bible before turning her back on the mess and retreating to the kitchen to finish what was left of the wine and breathe.

Inspiration surrounded her. Most might consider it eccentric, but there was order behind the chaos. From the wood polished, diamond studded elephants on her bookshelf overflowing with every genre of reading material including first editions, to the microfiber furniture with a quilt she'd made tossed over the back, framed photographs of friends and family cluttering mantels, and antique cameras and a typewriter on display in a corner armoire. There were oddly placed signs and art that made one both laugh and ponder. Floor sweeping curtains adorned the windows and plants that needed watering spotted table tops. Grace picked up a movie case from the kitchen counter and slid it into its alphabetically organized position in her movie library. She had a television that was about eight years old but only turned it on to catch the news, a children's show for inspiration or to watch a DVD. It seemed she rarely had time for even that anymore.

The telephone rang.

Grace stared at it, her wine glass to her lips, her Bible open and her finger tapping the counter, annoyed, while she weighed the consequences of ignoring the call. It could be someone who wanted to tell her something about the Crisis Center, or perhaps Isabel or Melissa. Cursing her fat heart and equally fat conscience, Grace picked up the phone.

"Hello?"

"Rumor Has It you're venturing east for Christmas!" her younger sister practically squealed.

Despite herself, Grace smiled. "I Wouldn't Go That Far."

"You Lie."

She grinned; pleased Emma was continuing the game. "But Why?"

"Read My Mind."

"I Wish That I Could Tell You."

"Secret?"

"I Want a Cowboy."

"Don't we all!" Emma laughed and Grace found herself joining in, the tension draining.

"You lose every time!"

"Hey there are only so many Reba McEntire song titles I can think of off the top of my head. Besides, that was too perfect."

"You've already got Mr. Perfect," Grace said speaking of her brother in-law.

"Yeah," Emma sighed. "I do. Anywho, are you really coming home for Christmas?"

Grace hesitated for an instant. "That's the plan." She glanced over the scripture Paula had given her and guessed by her younger sister's enthusiasm that she had yet to read *Facing Forgiveness*.

Her sister gave a squeal of delight. "Ohmygosh! Oh. My. Gosh. Grace!"

"Oh come on, it hasn't been that long."

"Almost six years. I mean, we talk *sometimes* and you always seem to know what's going on anyway, but still! I get to see you!"

"You guys will be there too, then?"

"You're the only one who doesn't come home for Christmas, Seestor. Everyone else keeps up with tradition."

"Well, I'll be there this year."

“Fan-tastic.” She broke the word up as if it were two. “I have so much *stuff* to tell you. I can’t babble now though, the hubby just walked through the door. When are you arriving?”

“Sometime tomorrow afternoon. Depends on the pass.”

“Why not fly?”

Then she couldn’t make a quick escape. “It’s been awhile since I’ve taken a road trip,” she reasoned. “I’ve seen enough of the sky for awhile.”

“Fair enough. Okay, I’ll see you soon then. Luke and I are catching a flight tomorrow morning so we won’t be too far behind you.”

“Great.”

“Grace.” Her sister’s bubbly animation sobered. “I really am happy you’re going to be home. This is going to be great.”

She sincerely doubted it, but couldn’t have been more warmed by the sentiment. “Thanks, Emma.”

“Gotta go. Love ya!” She made kissy noises into the receiver, leaving Grace with a smile as she hung up.

“Dear God, have mercy,” she sighed as she took a drink of wine. Mid-swallow, the cordless rang again. She slapped the counter, annoyed.

“Oh, what? What!” Letting out a groan, she answered the phone as kindly as the first time.

“Hey.” Bryan’s voice had her shoulders sagging with relief and guilt rolling in her belly all at once.

“Hey Bryan.” What was she getting him into? She was the root to the majority of her family’s hostility, and she was going to do some unintentional damage simply by coming into Spokane. Did she really want to bring a man who had never known real family conflict into that mess?

“Are you packed?” he asked. Grace thought about the clothes stringing their way across her room.

“Nearly.” She sipped her wine and leaned on the counter. He’d probably been packed since noon.

“I finished early at the office and was wondering if you wanted to get dinner?” He probably had the location and reservation made, and yet Grace felt a nudge of responsibility coming from the direction of her bedroom.

“I don’t think I can. When I said ‘nearly’ I meant I’ve nearly started. I’ve also got to make a few calls before we hit the road tomorrow.”

“All right. Why don’t I order a pizza and help?”

She smiled as warmth spread down to her toes. “You don’t mind canceling the reservations?”

“Not really. Pizza sounds a lot better all of a sudden. I’ll come over around six. I’ll help you finish your packing and after you’ve made your calls we’ll unwind.”

Having him lingering nearby while she packed, talking to keep her mind out of the whirlpool of memories, was exactly what she needed.

“Sounds perfect. See you soon.”

After they hung up she glanced at her watch. She had forty-five minutes to make her room look less like a hurricane had hit it and do what she could to pack a suitcase. She’d packed hundreds of times in the past. A week at her parents’ home shouldn’t have been too difficult. But as she considered the fact that her sister, a cosmetologist, her brother Jonah’s

girlfriend, who was some kind of dancer in San Francisco, would both be there and she'd be facing her mother and brother after a much undignified goodbye five years ago, this could be considered the most important of times to have the proper wardrobe.

It took several hours, but when her suitcase was, more or less, packed, she couldn't have cared less what it was filled with, much less the gray cotton pants or stained blue t-shirt she'd thrown on. As the credits to a Law and Order rerun flashed on the television, she was tucked under the arm of a man who'd brought her a pepperoni and sausage pie. A half-empty pizza box and paper plates littered her coffee table, and all she cared about were the lingering effects of the wine, and the muscled arm holding her close to a firm chest.

"You have some of the greatest ideas, Mr. Tennyson," she murmured with her eyes drifting shut.

"I do my best." He smiled down at the comfortably ruffled woman against him and pressed his lips to her hair. He hadn't taken the time to change from the slacks and dress shirt he wore to the office, but he didn't mind. He was most comfortable in money and marveled at Grace's ability to go from Louis Vuitton to no-name thrift store sweats in a matter of seconds with relief.

"What time is it?" she asked.

He glanced at his watch. It wasn't the Rolex he'd had his eye on for the past few months but he'd have it soon. "Almost ten. What time did you want to leave tomorrow?"

Grace eased up with a sigh and stretched stiff shoulders. "Seven. I figure if there aren't any problems on the pass we should make it to Spokane around lunch." She straightened to pick up the trash on the table as Bryan rubbed a hand down her back. She gazed at him with a tired smile. His shirt was slightly wrinkled and he'd rolled the sleeves up to his taut forearms. The haircut he'd gotten last week still looked brand new and had been styled with a bit of a lift in the front. Grace felt the urge to run her hands through it to mess it up.

"You sure you don't mind missing Christmas with your family this year?" she asked as she picked up the trash and carried the leftovers to the kitchen. Out of habit she considered saving it, and settled on throwing it in the garbage. She didn't think he'd approve if he knew she was the kind of woman who ate cold pizza for breakfast.

"I'll see them after the new year."

Curiosity had her wondering why, but kept the questions to herself. "All right."

"When's the last time you saw your family?" he asked with his eyes on the television.

She considered lying, but Paula's words echoed somewhere in the back of her mind. She might as well start with honesty now. "Five years."

She waited for him to ask why. She expected shock, curiosity, or empathy.

"I bet a lot has changed," he said as his flipped through commercials.

Grace moved her shoulders. Indifference worked too. "Have you finished packing?"

"Yep. Did it this morning." He turned off the television and carried two glasses to the sink. She leaned against the counter and was pleasantly surprised when he placed his hands on either side of her, caging her in. He kissed her, lightly, affectionately and with just enough heat to entice.

He was doing a pretty good job of keeping his hands to himself until she slid her hands around his waist. He framed her face in his hands, deepening the kiss that left no question about how far he wanted it to go.

“My suitcase is already in the car.”

She heard his question, was tempted to allow it, and even entertained the idea for a second. But a memory, cold and bitter, cast a dark shadow over her face.

He saw the change and willed the heat in his eyes to cool. It didn't take long for them to become frigid with frustration. “Do you want me to put it in your truck right now or when you pick me up?”

She felt both relief and regret. “When I pick you up.”

“Very well.” He kissed her quickly on the forehead, and to keep from leaving her embarrassed he let his lips linger on hers without a trace of desire or lust, but a comfortable affection to which she was far more accustomed.

“Seven o'clock?” he asked as he pulled the full trash bag out of the can.

“Seven o'clock. You don't have to do that.”

Bryan picked up the trash with a smile, and winked. “See you in the morning.”

As he closed the front door he took every bit of her false security with him. Not knowing what else to do, she straitened the apartment, washed dishes, vacuumed the living room, dusted her bedroom, recorded a new voicemail on her machine so people would know how to get a hold of her, and by one in the morning she was nowhere near calm enough to sleep. Her suitcase was packed and sitting by the door. She had the day's traveling wardrobe figured out, but as she paced the apartment straitening pictures that didn't need straitening and organizing drawers, cabinets and closets that hadn't seen the light of day in months, she still hadn't calmed.

She wanted to call Bryan and spew every ounce of her insecurity to him. She wanted to tell him to come over and do what she swore she'd never do – let him stay.

Grace tapped her fingers on the counter and glanced at the Bible verse Paula had instructed her to read and then follow with action. James 5:13. Knowing it wasn't exactly the greatest reason, she didn't have anything better to do.

She found the verse with ease and smiled, shaking her head. Leave it to Paula to know exactly what scripture to point to. *Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise.* Grace pulled a sweatshirt over her head, slipped her feet into slippers cracked and faded over the years and, as she had before Bryan's arrival, stepped onto the balcony.

The crisp harbor air had dropped several degrees, cutting into her lungs like a frozen knife. The neighboring porch lights had been shut off, but across the Sound she could see the glowing white dots of homes on the opposite shore; silhouettes of boats drifted across the harbor and bobbed, anchored for the night, evidence of their presence nothing more than red and green orbs on the water.

Below her the sidewalk was dimly lit with street lamps for those late night joggers or dog walkers who enjoyed the shoreline as she did. This time tomorrow she wouldn't have the haven of her harbor to settle her nerves.

Grace cast her eyes heavenward and did as James instructed. She prayed.

She was leaving in four hours with a man she loved, and feared to let love her, to spend the holidays with her family. Family she'd rather ignore existed, two she was actually looking forward to seeing, and all of whom she threatened by showing up, because she still held onto the secret that, when revealed to them, would uproot everything they counted on as a family in order to maintain their façade.

She just had to make it through the next week without letting them get near her book.