

Loran had not only lately come to recognize that she had never really known with any certainty how Maddie had felt about anything---except in the strictest parent-child context.

She knew Maddie's Rules of Etiquette and Social Behavior inside out, but Maddie herself was, and always had been, an enigma.

What little real information Loran had gleaned about her mother had come from the example she'd set, not from anything she'd said.

Did her mother have hopes and dreams beyond getting herself and daughter educated and well employed? Loran had no idea, and, at this late date, she wasn't at all certain she wanted to find out, not when it was too late for Maddie to realize them.

She gave a quiet sigh and made the first of a series of turns that would take her deep into Maddie's peaceful residential neighborhood, driving slowly down the tree lined streets toward the bungalow where Maddie lived, for once paying attention to the houses and the front yards as she passed.

They all reminded her of 1950s television somehow, of a world where families thrived intact and where wives stayed at home, mindlessly happy and wearing high heels and pearls, women who never worried about anything beyond the boundaries of their neatly manicured yards.

They kept their houses and raised their children themselves, while their husbands went out into the real world every day and earned a decent living.

It was *not* the kind of place she would have thought would appeal to Maddie, but clearly it had. Maddie had been living there ever since Loran had graduated from college eighteen years ago.

“Oh,” Loran said out loud as her mother’s house came into view. Maddie was an early riser but her driveway shouldn’t be empty this time of morning.

Her car was gone and the drapes at the windows were still drawn---a sure sign that her daylight-loving mother wasn’t at home.

Loran pulled sharply to the curb and parked. She hadn’t called first to let Maddie know she was coming today, and her immediate thought was that Maddie’s condition had worsened, that she had unexpectedly taken herself to the hospital again, and she hadn’t called yet to let Loran know.

Except that Maddie was Maddie, and it was just likely that she wouldn’t call at all, if she could help it. Loran didn’t want to think that she might be physically unable to use the phone---but either way, it was a contingency she had planned for. She had the patient-information number at the hospital programmed into her cell phone.

When the woman at the hospital answered, Loran made no attempt to try to explain or to justify the reason of her call.

“I’d like the room number for Ms. Maddie Kimball, please,” she said, spelling both names.

There was a pause, one filled with the staccato clicking of computer keys.

“We have no one listed by that name,” the woman said.

"It's possible she could still be in Emergency," Loran said, trying to keep voice steady and not grip the phone so tightly.

"I'm sorry. That name hasn't been entered into the system."

"If she just arrived---"

"All patient data should be entered right away. You could try again later, just in case there's been some unforeseen delay."

"Thank you," Loran said. She snapped the cell phone shut and stared out the windshield. "Okay, Maddie, where are you?"

Out hitting the yard sales? Gone to meet some other early bird for breakfast? Either would be unlikely, Loran thought.

She had no choice but to wait. She had the key to Maddie's house and she rummaged through her purse until she found it.

She glanced at the bright blue sky as she got out of her vehicle---the new and far too expensive SUV Maddie called the domestic version of a Sherman tank---and walked toward the back door. It was going to be a beautiful fall day, crisp and clear. A group of children rode by on bicycles. Someone was burning leaves somewhere---probably illegally.

Loran stopped abruptly when she reached the carport. The back door was slightly ajar. She hesitated, then pushed it open wider and stood on the threshold, ready to run if she had to.

She listened intently and she could hear a child babbling somewhere in the house and a man's voice. After a moment, a portly bald man wearing a bow tie came into view. He was carrying a little girl and holding Maddie's red watering can.

"What are you doing here?" Loran asked bluntly.

He looked around in surprise. "Oh---we're just watering the plants," he said, clearly unperturbed by the question. He held up the red watering can for Loran to see.

"Water pants," the little girl echoed and the man smiled at her. She smiled at him in return, then gave him a hug. "Hi, Daddy," she said.

"Hi, little miss," he said to her. "Aspiring linguist," he said to Loran.

Loran stared at him. "You're...?"

"Andrew Kessler---this is Sara---we live next door."

"Nest-or," Sara said, making her father smile again.

"You have to be really careful at this stage," he said to Loran. "They're a walking instant replay, only the replay might not be instant. It might show up three days later in the middle of church." He proceeded to water the herb pots on the kitchen windowsill.

"Do you...know where Maddie is?"

"Yeah---she gave me the address. Or the vicinity, anyway."

"Where is she?"

"You are...?" he asked pointedly, in the same way she had done.

"Her daughter."

"Oh, yes. Loran. We nearly stole your name and gave it to Sara, didn't we?"  
he asked the child.

Sara nodded solemnly.

"Could you give me the...vicinity?" Lora asked.

"Sure. I don't see why not."

"Did she say how long she'd be gone?"

"Nope. Not really," he said, watering another plant.

"Nope," Sara echoed.

He set the watering can on the counter and reached for his wallet. It took him a moment to shuffle Sara, who didn't want to be put down, and the contents of his billfold until he found a slip of blue paper.

"I'll need that back," He said as he handed it to Loran.

She looked at the paper. *Lilac Hill* had been written in her mother's careful hand, with a phone number below it.

What and where was Lilac Hill?

"It's a North Carolina phone number, I think," Andrew Kessler said helpfully.

"She said something about the mountain. That's about all I know."

“Was she---did she---? Loran stopped, not quite knowing how to frame the question. This man might be allowed into Maddie’s house to look after her greenery, but that didn’t mean he knew anything about her health.

“She seemed fine,” he said, still being helpful. If he thought it odd that Loran didn’t know about her mother’s travel plans, it didn’t show. “Better than I’ve seen her in a while, actually. Kind of excited about going.”

Loran moved to the pad beside the telephone and scribbled down the number, then handed the blue paper back to him.

“Thank you,” she said absently, trying to process the information he’d just given to her.

“Will you be staying for a while?”

Loran looked at him blankly.

“Do we still need to come and water the plants, is what I’m asking.”

“Yes. I won’t be staying. Thanks for doing that, by the way.”

“Oh, it’s our pleasure.”

“Pay sure,” Sara said, and this time Loran smiled.

“She’s very...pretty,” she said, but she’d been about to say “lucky.” Little Sara Kessler had a father who clearly wanted to be in her life, to talk to her, to carry her around with him---something far beyond Loran’s experience.

“We think so,” he said. “Well, that’s it for today. Come on, little miss. We’re off to wake up Mommy and take her to McDonald’s.”

“Mommy!” Sara cried, clasping her hands together.

“That’s right! Mommy! It was nice to finally meet you.” He said to Loran, making her feel slightly...absentee, in spite of the fact that she had never neglected Maddie. She had come to Arlington as often as she could.

She stood and watched him walk back across the yard. At one point, he set his daughter on the ground and they continued the rest of the way hand in hand, underscoring something Loran had realized a long time ago. Some men were meant to be fathers---and most men weren’t. Clearly, her own hadn’t been so inclined.

She thought suddenly about leaving the house this morning and about Kent, cranky and half-asleep when she’d tried to tell him about her restless night and her impulsive decision to go to Arlington again.

He’d made a token offer to come with her, but he hadn’t meant it. She hadn’t really wanted him to come along.

What she had wanted---needed---was some small indication that he understood a little of what she was going through. They had lived together for months. Her mother was dying, and her heart was breaking, and he had given her...nothing.

She was still watching as Andrew Kessler and his daughter carefully climbed the steps to their front porch and went inside the house. Step-climbing was clearly another much appreciated milestone. She tried to imagine Kent taking that kind of delight in a child’s simple accomplishments and couldn’t.

He wasn’t interested in being a father, or a husband. He was interested in living unencumbered and in having a large corner office with his name on the door---not unlike herself.

She and Kent made a beautiful, career-minded couple. Everybody said so. Loran and Kent. Kent and Loran. Wunderkinds of the investment world.

She knew that Maddie didn't like him much, regardless of the fact that she'd never said so. Loran had never quite gotten up the courage to ask why not. As inaccessible as Maddie's thoughts might be, one did *not* want to ask her for an honest opinion unless one was ready to hear it.

"Maddie, Maddie," Loran said wearily.

She didn't understand any of this. Her mother was a home-body. She didn't take unplanned trips, even when she'd been in the bloom health.

Apparently, Maddie expected to be gone for a time, or she wouldn't have made plans to keep her philodendrons and her windowsill herb garden alive.

She just didn't expect to be gone long enough to have to inform her only child.

The house was quiet, in spite of the whirring of the refrigerator motor and the wall clock clicking off the seconds. The place looked homey, but it wasn't, not without Maddie in it.

There should be music playing, the oldie-goldie doo-wop station, and Maddie singing along even though she claimed to hate the songs of that era. There should be a pot of soup bubbling on the stove or bread baking in the oven.

The phone rang sharply, making Loran jump. She hesitated, then answered it.

"There you are!" her mother said cheerfully---as if Loran were the one missing.

"Mother, where---"

"I just talked to Kent. He told me you took a couple of days off and you were coming to see me today."

"Well, that didn't work out," Loran said pointedly, and her mother laughed.

"Yes. Well. I...need you to do something for me," Maddie said.

"Who *is* this?" Loran countered in honor of many, *many* times she'd offered her services and been summarily turned down.

"I'm serious," Maddie said. There was something different in her voice.

"What is it?" Loran asked, worried now. "Are you all right?"

"I'm doing great, considering."

"What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to come here."

"Where?"

"To North Carolina. To the mountains."

"When?"

"Right now. If you leave right away, you can be here before dark, if you don't take time to pack. The place isn't hard to find. You can buy what you need after---"

"Mother, I don't understand," Loran interrupted.

"I know I'm asking a lot, and it's short notice. I'll...explain when you get here. Or I'll try.

"Mother, you're scaring me. Can't you tell me something at least?"

"I...not really. I don't want to go into it on the phone. It's important, Loran."

And that was the only thing Loran was reasonably certain about. It was important. Nothing else would explain Maddie's sudden disappearance or her unlikely request.

It was also inconvenient---for Kent. He had a big business dinner on Friday, one that required Loran's presence, not for her investment-banking expertise, but because she apparently had an uncanny and probably fortuitous resemblance to the client's late wife.

"Loran?"

"Tell me how to get there," she said, making up her mind.

She could hear Maddie give what could only be a sigh of relief.

"Have you got a pen? You drive to Charlottesville, then to Waynesboro---"

"Hold on---okay. Go ahead."

"Get onto the Blue Ridge Parkway at the first opportunity and head into North Carolina. Stay on it as far as the Highway 16 exit near Glendale Springs. The mountain scenery is going to be spectacular, and there's a church in Glendale Springs with beautiful frescoes, but don't stop. Take that exit..."

Loran wrote everything down, even the phone number she already had.  
“What is Lilac Hill?” she asked.

“It’s B and B. I’ll get you a room. There’s one called the Rose Room. Very Victorian-girlie. You’ll like it.”

Loran stood looking at what she’d written, still bewildered, still worried.

“Loran?” Maddie said when the silence on Loran’s end lengthened.

“I’m here.”

“Drive carefully, okay?”

“I will,” she said. “Are you sure you’re all right?”

“Don’t I sound all right?”

“You *sound* all right. It’s that answering a question with a question thing that’s bothering me. Does your doctor know about this?” It suddenly occurred to her to ask.

Maddie laughed softly. “Actually, it was his idea.”

“He told you to go to the mountains?”

“He told me it was time to make sure the burners were turned off and the iron was unplugged---but this is what he meant. I’ll see you later.”

She hung up the phone, stood for a moment, then dialed Ken’s number.

“Kent,” she said when he finally answered. “I have to---Are you awake?”

He said something unintelligible.

"Kent, listen. I have to go to somewhere to meet Maddie."

"Okay," he mumbled.

"No, listen. I might not be back in time for the dinner Friday."

"What? Why?"

"I told you. I have to go meet Maddie. I'm not sure when I'll back."

"Loran, this dinner is important. The old man specifically asked if you were going to be there."

"I know, but you can handle it."

"I'm not the one who reminds him of his first wife."

"I know. It can't be helped. I have to see what Maddie wants."

"Well, where the hell is she?"

"She's...staying somewhere In the North Carolina mountains---a B and B called Lilac Hill. She wants me to come, and I have to go. I'll call you when I get there. I'm sorry."

"Damn it, Loran! Well, if you have to, you have to. I'll make do, I guess. I'll tell the old bastard...something."

"The truth would probably work," she said, and he laughed, hopefully an indication that she was forgiven for causing him such a major convenience.

"The call-waiting just beeped, " he said. "Catch you later."

He abruptly hung up, and Loran stood holding the phone, still full of apologetic gratitude for what could only be described as a piddling display of empathy and understanding.

She would have probably apologized a few more times if not for call-waiting. She tried to imagine what Maddie would have said and done in this situation.

She might have *said* the same things Loran had---but she wouldn't be feeling so tentative. Of that, Loran was certain.

"You are *not* your mother's daughter," she said out loud.

## Chapter 2

The new guest shivered suddenly and moved closer to the fireplace. Meyer Conley kept glancing at her as he stacked the heavy cedar logs carefully into a wood box hidden behind an oak paneled door next to it. She stood looking at the flames.

"It's turning colder tonight," he said after a moment.

"I'm sorry---what?" she said.

"it's turning colder tonight," he said again, as if that possibility permitted his intrusion into her thoughts.

She looked at him and smiled suddenly. "I like your haircut. Does it have a name?"

"Cheap," he said, and she laughed softly.

"It reminds me of the boys I grew up with, their summer haircuts."

"Get buzzed in May and it doesn't grow out until school starts," he said.

"That's right. I had one like it myself not too long ago."

"Yeah?"

"It looks better on you, though."

She was teasing him a little bit; he understood that. But she wasn't being suggestive or flirty like some of the Lilac Hill guests. It was done more in a kind of natural friendliness some people seemed to have.

She went back staring at the fire.

“My grandfather used to make things out of cedar,” she said after moment.  
“It’s a little hard to watch these cedar logs going up in smoke.”

Something in her voice made him look up.

“I know this old man---he’s Cherokee, I think. Anyway, he says cedar smoke will take your prayers straight up to heaven. It’s not so bad if you think of it that way, I guess.”

He put another log into the wood box. “So what did your grandfather make then?” he asked. “Out of cedar.”

“Oh...trinket boxes. Pencil holders and wall plaques.”

“You mean the kind they sell to the tourists, the ones with the poems on them?”

“Hillbilly humor,” she said, and he smiled.

“Some people might call it that. Was he from up around here?”

The woman abruptly looked over her shoulder toward the front windows without answering. Apparently, she was expecting someone.

Mrs. Jenkins, the owner of the B and B, came to the doorway. “The second room is for two nights, too?”

“Yes,” the woman said.

“You might find you like our little valley enough to stay longer---isn’t that right, Meyer?” Mrs. Jenkins called to him. He hated being dragged into this kind of token

social banter with the guests, but it went with the job. All in all, he preferred to start and end his own conversations.

“Just might at that,” he said anyway. “A lot of people decide to stay longer than they expected to. It’s helped me out more than once.”

“Meyer is the competition,” Mrs. Jenkins said. “When he’s not teaching at the community college.” The condescension in her voice was heavy enough to pick up and drop-kick. He’d been brought up to behave and not embarrass his kin, however, so he let it go. He also needed the employment Mrs. Jenkins so kindly provided.

“My little place can’t compete with a house like this,” he said, still stacking wood. “I get the deer hunters and the fly fisherman.”

“Your cabin is...charming. Meyer built it himself,” Mrs. Jenkins said, neatly putting him back in his place as wood-carrying employee, whether he sometimes taught at a community college or not. She turned her attention to her new guest. “Did you say your daughter would be here this afternoon?”

“She should be here any time now,” the woman said.

“Would you like some coffee while you’re waiting? Or tea?”

“I would love some tea,” the woman said. “Earl Grey, if you have it.”

“Just make yourself comfortable,” Mrs. Jenkins said. “I’ll bring it to you in here. You can enjoy Meyer’s nice fire. Meyer, are you about done there?” Mrs. Jenkins asked, more to show her diligence as an innkeeper than because she wanted to know.

“Almost,” he said.

“Well, leave some extra logs on the back porch.”

The woman sat down in a Queen Anne chair near the window. "I hope she gets here before dark," said, more to herself than to him.

Mrs. Jenkins brought the tea almost immediately, setting the tray on a low table, and then taking her leave. The new guest sat for a moment looking at it, then leaned forward and poured herself a cup. She looked so...sad, suddenly.

Meyer checked for any wood debris he might have dropped on the carpet, then stood to go.

"I hear a car turning in," he said, and the woman immediately went to the window to look out. "Nice vehicle," he said of the big luxury SUV that was coming tentatively up the drive.

"That's her," she said, smiling and crossing the room quickly to get to the door that opened onto the back porch and the parking lot.

"You made really good time," he heard her say after a moment, and he stood back as she returned with an attractive younger woman he supposed was the daughter she'd been waiting for. The daughter glanced him as she passed and he gave her a nod of acknowledgement. She looked flushed and unsettled.

"Welcome to Lilac Hill, " Mrs. Jenkins said from the doorway. "Are you hungry? Would you like some coffee or tea? Your mother was just having hers in here by the fire."

"No, I'm fine," the younger woman said, getting her cell phone out of her purse. "I need to make a phone call," she said to her mother. "And then we'll...catch up."

“The reception is better if you’re outside,” Mrs. Jenkins said. She pointed out the nearest window. “There along the path that leads to the gazebo is the best place.”

“I’ll be right back, Mother,” the younger woman said.

She went outside, and her mother walked back to the Queen Anne chair and sat down again.

Meyer could hear a sudden burst of laughter from somewhere upstairs---the other guests or the help. The woman did, too. He could tell by the way she stopped midway in the reach for her teacup to listen, as if she found it upsetting somehow. She let the tea go and leaned back in the chair, passing her hand briefly over her eyes.

He toyed with the idea of saying something to her---just to see if she was all right---but he didn’t. If anything was the matter, it was none of his business. His business at the moment was the Lilac Hill fireplace. He went to get another armful of cedar logs.

The reception wasn’t any better outside. Loran walked farther up the steep hill, finally standing at the bottom of the gazebo steps before she tried again. This time, when she punched in the number, it went through.

She stood waiting in the cold wind for Kent to answer.

“Hello?” someone said finally. The voice wasn’t Kent’s. The voice wasn’t male.

“Don’t answer the phone!” Kent yelled in the background. “Damn it---“

“It was *ringing*, silly,” the first voice said. “It might be impor---“

There was sudden click and the line went dead. Loran stood staring at the phone in her hand. Her first impulse was to redial the number, but she stopped halfway through.

Her heart was pounding and her fingers trembled.

So.

She abruptly sat down on the steps of the gazebo, understanding now. She had been attributing Kent's recent distraction to his trying to close a lucrative deal with the man whose first wife looked like her. Now, however, she could give it a more precise name.

*Celia.*

Celia was the newly divorced investments counselor at the banking firm where Kent worked, the smart, pretty, ambitious and self-assured one, who had come into Kent's office without knocking one afternoon when Loran was there. The kind of woman Kent admired. A woman a lot like Loran herself, actually---except that she was annoyingly younger.

*Damn it, Kent!*

She didn't feel like apologizing now. Already she knew how this would go. He would be oh, so offended that she would jump to such an unflattering conclusion about him and a woman he worked with, whether she'd answered the phone or not. He'd try to convince Loran that *he* was the wronged party, and, when that didn't work, he'd tell her that Celia didn't mean a thing, that it had just "happened."

And Loran would show him that she was Maddie Kimball's daughter after all. She would tell him to get the hell out of her house.

*Her* house.

She wondered suddenly if having had a father would have made a difference, whether she would have been better at maintaining meaningful relationships with men if someone like Andrew Kessler had been in her life, someone who would have carried her when she wanted to be carried and let her walk on her own when she didn't.

Of course it would have, she thought immediately. How could it not? Even if she'd had a bad father, she would have been better able to tell the gold from the dross--and before the wrong person answered the phone.

She gave a wavering sigh and put the cell phone into her coat pocket, wiping furtively at the tears she suddenly realized were sliding down her cheek.

"Do you smoke?"

"What?" she said, startled. The man she'd seen in the house stood a short distance away from her.

"I asked you if you smoke."

"No," she said shortly.

"I was going to offer you a cigarette. I carry a pack around in case one of the guests needs one. You'd be surprised how often that comes up. Quitting tobacco just doesn't take sometimes, especially if there's a bump in the road. I've got this from great aunt---Nelda, her name is. She *thinks* she's quit dipping snuff. And she's just fine as long as the sun shines on her back door. But you let the least little thing go wrong and she's right back at it." He paused long enough to make her glance at him. "So how about this instead?" he asked.

He stepped forward and held out a peppermint candy wrapped in cellophane, the kind that pizza restaurants gave out to customers, ostensibly to keep them happy and coming back to buy pizza again.

She stared at it as if she'd never seen one before.

"Go on," he said. "You need it."

"I don't need it," she said, getting to her feet. It put them at eye level, but she still felt at a disadvantage.

"You might feel better."

"No, I won't---and who *are* you?"

"The name is Meyer," he said.

"As in *Oscar*?"

He smiled. He was older than she'd first thought, and he had dimples.

"Now, you know what? I may not look it, but I've been out of the hills enough times to actually get what you just said. That was pretty good, too---only I'm *Meyer* with an *e*, not an *a*. So...you don't want the peppermint."

"Okay," he said. "I'm going to put it in my coat pocket. If you change your mind, I'll give it to you. I'm just about always around here someplace---except when I'm to home."

"And where is that?" she asked in spite of herself, even knowing that the quaint colloquialism was likely affected just for her benefit. "To home?"

"It's up there. See?" He pointed off into the distance---toward a hillside with a winding road going up it. "See where the sun is shining on that silver roof? That's my place---except when I'm letting people rent it. I'll show it to you sometime, if you want. Don't worry. I don't have any etchings," he added in a whisper.

She smiled slightly without wanting to. "Well, that's...good to know."

"Got a couple of deer heads, though. They're kind of scary if you're not used to them. You do understand that nothing helps when you're feeling down and misplaced like a good piece of peppermint."

"You've felt down and misplaced enough to know, I take it."

"Damn straight," he said. "I've pretty much made a career of it."

"And what career was that?"

"The United States Army. I'm telling you, if you don't let the little things make you feel better, you'll have a hell of a time getting through the big things."

"If you think---"

"If you think---"

"It doesn't matter what I think. What I *know* is you look like you're running on empty---and when that happens, a little hit of sugar can help. I used to carry these all times when I was deployed---my aunt Nelda would send them to me, whether she could afford to or not. They'd help when you were so tired you thought you weren't going to make it, and if your mouth was full of sand. I used to give them to the kids sometimes---they were scared of us, and maybe it helped. I don't know. I liked to think even if they hated the taste of them, they could still appreciate the effort."

She glanced at him, not certain if he meant some foreign child or if he meant her.

“All right,” she said impulsively. He was trying to be kind when he didn’t have to.

“All right what?”

“All right, give me the peppermint. Please,” she added, letting him make her work for it.

He smiled slightly and handed it over. She unwrapped it carefully and popped it into her mouth. It was rather good, actually. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d eaten this kind of candy.

He stood quietly, with his hands in his pockets. She glanced at him, but she was afraid she was going to cry again.

“Okay, then. I’m just going to go to do what I’m supposed to be doing,” he said. “You ought to sit out here for a while. Give that peppermint a chance to work. Admire the view. You ought to enjoy nature every chance you get---that’s what it’s there for---especially when you’re going through a rough patch. Everything’s going to be all right,” he added in a quieter voice, as if his impertinence might offend her if he said it too loudly. “You’ll see,”

She tried to take offense at his unwelcome reassurances, but he didn’t give her the chance. He turned and walked away toward the woods beyond the gazebo.

“Hey!” she called after him. “Oscar!”

He looked around.

"Thanks."

He gave her a thumbs-up and walked on.

She sat down on the steps again. She was grown-up, independent woman. She had a high-paying job with a lot of responsibility. She had a house *and* an expensive vehicle she'd bought for no reason other than the fact that she could. And--- incredibly---a piece of peppermint candy was making her feel better.

She cried a little anyway. She didn't want her mother to die. She didn't want to be here. She didn't want strange women to answer *her* telephone at *her* house.

*Damn it!*

It was some comfort knowing that she wasn't really in love with Kent. But in love or not, she still wanted his head on a stick.

*In love.*

She would be forty years old on her next birthday, and she still wasn't sure what the term meant. She had tried more than once to identify the elusive emotion she associated with Kent. A certain pride, she supposed. She was proud to be seen with him, to have people know that they were a couple.

He mirrored her own accomplishments. Like her, he had an intensive drive to get ahead and stay there, so intense that she couldn't let herself trust the regard he *said* he had for her.

She had never told him about her illegitimacy, for one thing. She didn't talk about it as a matter of course, but she wasn't ashamed of it, either. She didn't mind people knowing that she had been brought up by an unwed mother, not when that her

mother had been Maddie Kimball, who was dedicated enough and strong enough for both of them.

Even so, she'd let Kent assume that her parents had divorced when she was very young---because she wasn't sure that it wouldn't matter to him. All she knew for certain was that he would never have tried to give her solace with a piece of peppermint candy. He would never have noticed that she was feeling "down and misplaced," much less have any inclination whatsoever to *do* something about it.

No, that wasn't quite true. To be fair, if she'd been obvious enough, she might have gotten some all-purpose flowers from him, the ordering of which he would have delegated to an underling.

Loran would repay him for his thoughtfulness by willingly and enthusiastically offering him access to her body, and afterward she would lie in the dark not feeling nearly as "cheered up" as she did right at this moment.

*Incredible*, she thought. She was by no means happy, but she did feel a little less...forlorn. Maybe there was something to the peppermint, after all.

Or maybe it was having someone offer his own unique brand of commiseration---a simple act of kindness---even if he was paid to do it.

She gave a sharp sigh. She would have to admit he was rather good at it.

The wind grew colder suddenly. She needed to go back to the house and find out where the nearest town was so she could buy the things she needed. And she needed to see what in this world was going on with Maddie.

Maddie's doctor had warned Loran what to expect as the illness progressed. Frailness, fatigue, a gradual fading anyway. Maddie would begin to lose her interests and her appetite. And there would be pain, the kind of pain the two of them couldn't begin to imagine. Indeed, he'd said, she should be suffering already, and why she wasn't, he really couldn't explain. Maddie's X-rays showed significant metastasis to the bones. She *should* be in pain all the time, but obviously she wasn't---not yet.

*Not yet.*

Loran had never seen anyone in the process of dying before, and having to watch Maddie do it was more than she could bear to even think about. She couldn't imagine a world without Maddie in it.

*What will I do without her?*

But Maddie was definitely getting around at the moment, and whatever interests she might have lost, she'd clearly replaced with new ones---like surprise jaunts down the Blue Ridge Parkway.

In spite of her worry, Loran made a mild attempt at taking Meyer's advice. She stayed put for a few moments longer and looked at the surrounding mountains. Coming here was a crazy notion for her mother to have, but Meyer was right. The place was beautiful.

She heard a burst of laughter and a slamming door. A teenaged boy and girl came out of the house carrying a large, green plastic can. They were having to fight the wind to keep it upright, but eventually, they reached the Dumpster and emptied the bagged contents into it. The girl squealed suddenly as the wind shifted and snatched the can out of their grasp. It bounced and rolled down the hill. Still laughing, they

chased after it, scuffling to see who would claim it---but only for a short distance. The garbage can banged into the side of a pickup truck, and the boy and girl suddenly stopped chasing it and went into each other's arms, the embrace they shared so joyful and so unlike anything Loran had ever experienced that it made her catch her breath. The sheer spontaneity of it spoke volumes about the love and the delight they inspired in each other---maybe because they were so young.

Loran wondered suddenly if Maddie and the unnamed male who had been Loran's father had been like these two, if she, Loran, had been a "love" child.

Love child.

Love.

She had never felt anything even remotely like what she'd just witnessed, and it was somehow more than disconnecting to think that her mother might have enjoyed that kind of bond with another person---a man---when she herself had not.

Someone in the house suddenly began playing a piano with great flair. After a few false starts, Loran could recognize something classical---and melancholy---Mendelssohn, she thought.

The boy and girl stepped apart, but not before he kissed her lovingly on the forehead. Watching, Loran could almost feel the pressure of the lips that must be firm and warm on her own forehead.

She abruptly looked in the direction Meyer had gone, wondering if that was his first name or his last. Not that it mattered. She wouldn't be here long enough to call him anything.

The unwelcome memory of Kent's irate voice slid into her mind.

*Don't answer the phone!*

How was she supposed to get through this? Maddie was the only person she had in the world. She couldn't rely on Kent now, couldn't have relied on him even if Celia hadn't answered the telephone. She closed her eyes for a moment and took a deep breath. Maddie and Loran. Two orphans in the storm as much as mother and child. Loran had always felt that they were survivors somehow, but she didn't quite know of what. Life, she supposed. And single-parent family-hood---except that that had been much less of a disadvantage than most people wanted to believe. From the time Loran was very young, she had understood that she and her mother were a formidable unit. Not much taken individually, perhaps, but together there was nothing they couldn't accomplish.

It occurred to her suddenly that Maddie may have simply settled for their life together. She sat there, as surprised by the sudden, unbidden thought as if it had come from someone else. It was something she didn't want to consider---that, for her sake, her mother might have let go of her own dreams. Loran had never asked her about it, and she wasn't astute enough to guess. Or perhaps she had been too self-involved to make the attempt.

She frowned slightly. She had *no* idea why Maddie wanted her to come here, and the last thing she needed was to discover that Maddie considered her life wasted.

She looked toward the woods. Meyer was back. She saw him walking through the trees, but he didn't come in her direction. Instead, he left the graveled path and went down the landscaped hill to get to the parking area without having to pass by

the gazebo. She sat openly watching his progress and the strong and assured way he carried himself. She had no trouble believing that he'd been deployed somewhere. He had the military bearing and attitude. There was nothing tentative about him.

He went directly to a truck, the same one the green garbage can had tumbled into, got inside and drove away, never once looking toward her.

Her mouth still tasted of peppermint.

### Chapter 3

Meyer waited on the church steps. It was warmer in the sun, but the wind was too cutting for him to stand out in the open for long. He stepped back into the alcove and glanced toward the sound of a backhoe digging a new grave in the cemetery across the road, all too aware that he could easily have ended up over there--- and a lot sooner than later.

There had to be at least five generations of valley people buried in that patch of ground, friends and enemies, relatives claimed and unclaimed, but he had no idea who they were digging this grave for. There had been a time when everyone in the valley would have known, and friends and neighbors would have dug the grave themselves with a pick and shovel.

He could remember when it had still been done, and when people had bought the best food they'd had to offer and sat up all night with the homemade wooden coffin placed on sawhorses in the living room. There was a lot to be said for the kinship of it, for neighbors coming together in times of trouble and sadness. It was the main reason he'd returned to the valley---that and the fact that he belonged here and whatever he needed to be---friendly or standoffish or something in between---he could be, and no one would hold it against him.

Unfortunately, he had returned just in time to see that sense of community die away. He didn't know half the people who lived around here anymore.

It occurred to him that the two new guests at Lilac Hill might be friends or relatives of whoever had died---which would explain the younger woman crying after her

phone call. It hadn't looked like grief to him, though. It had looked more like "significant other" or husband trouble.

Significant other, he decided, because she wasn't wearing a wedding ring.

It surprised him a little that he found her...interesting. He hadn't been interested in much for a long time. And it wasn't just that she was self-assured and attractive and drove an expensive vehicle. Caught crying, she'd still had presence of mind to conclude that he was an idiot for bothering her and react accordingly---but she wasn't rigid about it. She'd revised her initial opinion of him once she'd understood that he only meant to help.

He liked woman like that---feisty, but still reasonable. He also liked the fact that she didn't seem to be all that aware that everything she had was working for her. Or maybe she just didn't waste such an obvious advantage on the help unless she wanted something.

In any event, she was obviously rich and she was definitely good-looking. She was also about as unhappy as he'd first thought, even before he'd seen her crying on the gazebo steps.

He didn't like having to witness a woman's sadness. It reminded him too much of the things he was trying so hard to forget. He had seen enough sadness when he'd been in the army. That relentless kind of sorrow that beat a woman down until she couldn't hide it no matter how hard she tried. Hundreds of them. It lived inside them and looked out of their eyes.

The image of an altogether different woman's face suddenly rose in his mind, and he had to work hard to push it away and force his thoughts back to the present.

Whatever was going on with the Lilac Hill guests had nothing to do with him, and he had too many things on the concerns list already. Things like not sleeping night after night and not being able to find enough work to make ends meet.

He had told the younger woman that everything was going to be all right. He shouldn't have done that. He certainly didn't believe it. Whatever optimism he'd once had had desiccated in a foreign desert. Nobody knew any better than he did that good deeds never go unpunished.

Which should have kept him from hanging around the church steps now.

He walked to the double doors of the church, expecting them to be locked. They were, but he thought not for long. If there was a funeral on the church schedule, then Estelle Garth would be arriving soon for one of her white-glove inspections. If it was possible for any one human being to own a house of worship, then Estelle Garth owned this one. She lived halfway up the hill just beyond the church, where she could see *everything*. Nothing happened on the premises night or day that she didn't know about, and he expected that sooner or later she'd see him down here.

Estelle didn't like him. As a boy, he'd spent an extraordinary amount of time trying to stay out of her crosshairs.

At first, he'd thought it was because he'd lived in Chicago with his parents before they'd died, and those years had somehow canceled out the fact that he was a

Conley and he'd been born here. Somehow, his brief absence had turned him into an outsider, and everybody knew how Estelle felt about them.

By the time he was ten or eleven it had gotten so bad that he'd had no alternative but to ask his great-aunt Nelda about it---and she hadn't been nearly as helpful as he'd hoped.

"I reckon everybody's got their cross to bear, Meyer, and she's yourn," she'd said.

He owed Nelda a lot, and he wanted to accept her simple philosophy of life, but he couldn't do it, regardless of the fact that he was the pitiful homeless orphan none of his other relatives wanted. He must have lived in a dozen foster homes before Nelda stepped up to claim him and bring him home to the mountains again. By the time he came to live with her, he'd already had plenty of crosses to bear and the last thing he needed was Estelle Garth throwing another one of the pile. So he kept after Nelda. He needed a *real* reason, so he could deal with it.

"Maybe she thinks you done something," Nelda said finally.

"If she thought that, she'd come to you about it---or she'd make the preacher do it. I've not done anything, Nelda. I swear it!"

"It...might not be you, Meyer."

"Well, who then? She's after me all the time---accusing me of things when there's not a word of it true. I ought to know what it's about, Nelda. How else am I going to stand it?"

“It might could be it’s got something with me, honey, something Estelle thinks I done, and the Lord knows I’d be sorry if you was having to suffer for it. Estelle, she thinks what she thinks, and whatever it is, can’t nobody on this earth change her mind about it. She’s been that way ever since I knowed her---when we was little girls even. If I was to go to her about you, it would just make it worse.”

The possibility that Nelda was the real target led to a certain moral indignation on his part. He didn’t like being chastised for his sins when he was guilty. He *really* didn’t like it when he was innocent, especially when it was done to persecute his beloved Nelda.

Estelle Garth.

There was something about being innocent that made him bold, made him just *have* to annoy the woman, if the opportunity presented itself. He was always respectful when he did it---he had Nelda’s standing in the community to consider---but he didn’t just toe the ground and let Estelle blame him for everything but the Great Flood after that.

He spoke up for himself, no matter how many people were around to hear it, stating his innocence and politely reminding her of all the *other* times she’d thought he was guilty of something when he wasn’t.

He especially enjoyed pointing out the time she’d accused him of throwing rocks at the church windows when he’d gone on a school trip and wasn’t even in the country.

Estelle had understood immediately that there had been a big change in their relationship, and that, for all intents and purposes, they were at war. And still were, as far as he knew. Nelda had been right about one thing. Estelle Garth didn't change.

Not too long ago, he'd overheard some of the women in Poppy's store talking about how she still marked on her kitchen calendar exactly when every wedding took place. Evidently, she didn't do it to avoid scheduling conflicts. She did it so she'd know in nine months if the marriage was a case of "have to." Mostly legitimate wasn't good enough for her.

She was the self-appointed gatekeeper to eternal salvation, and she took the job seriously. Nothing deterred her, not even finding out that her late husband, Emlin, hadn't walked the chalk line she had so carefully laid down for him. It had to have been a terrible shock to find out that the meek and mild Emlin had been on a first-name basis with every waitress in the country.

Meyer smiled slightly at the memory of all of them coming to his wake and telling Estelle what a generous tipper her Emlin had been. Big bad Emlin had also taken money Estelle didn't know he had and slipped off to Cherokee gambling with his fellow veterans from the American Legion Post.

But, worst of all, he hadn't disowned his and Estelle's only son the way Estelle told him to. She'd had to take to her after the will was read---a will she'd forced Emlin to hire a lawyer to write because she wanted to make absolutely sure it couldn't be contested. Emlin and his lawyer had certainly gotten that part of it right.

Even so, it seemed to Meyer that the more Emlin's sins come to light, the more high-and-mighty Estelle got, and, as much as he enjoyed it, he just wasn't in the

mood to aggravate her today. He owed her a little something, he supposed. She was the reason he'd thought army drill sergeants were rational.

"Come on, Bobby Ray," he said aloud, stomping his feet to get the circulation going. All he knew about his being here was that Bobby Ray Isley wanted to talk to him.

Now.

And, because he'd known poor old Bobby Ray for as long as he could remember and because Bobby Ray was like a big overgrown and easily disappointed child, *here* he was.

He couldn't even begin to guess what was happening with the man. Bobby Ray was scared to death of Estelle, and that alone made this location *not* the best choice for meeting place. Besides that, he was scared of being struck by lightning whenever he used the telephone, storm or no storm, regardless of the season, and he had actually called Meyer at Lilac Hill---a huge indicator of how serious Bobby Ray thought the situation was. Needless to say, the conversation had been quick. Bobby Ray hadn't given him a chance to ask anything. About all Meyer had gotten out of it was how distressed the old boy was.

But, there was a definite limit to how accommodating Meyer intended to be, and Bobby Ray drove his truck into the circle drive in front of the church just about the time Meyer reached it. Meyer stepped out into the cold wind to meet him, waiting impatiently while Bobby Ray struggled to get the driver's side window down.

"Did she say her name, Meyer?" Bobby Ray asked when he finally got the glass to move an inch or so. "Did she?"

“Who, Bobby Ray?”

Bobby Ray’s train of thought constantly derailed, leaving big gaps in his conversations. He never could seem to tell the difference between what he thought to himself and what’s he’d actually said out loud.

“That woman. The one that went---to stay---up---at the house where you work,” he said, still struggling to roll the wobbly window in his truck the rest of the way down. “Did you find out what her name is?”

“No, I didn’t.” Meyer said, hunched against the wind. “I didn’t know you wanted me to.”

Bobby Ray quit fiddling with the window. “How come she wouldn’t tell you, Meyer?”

“Because I didn’t ask her. I’m the hired help, Bobby Ray. If the guests don’t come right out and say who they are, I don’t go asking things like that for no reason.”

“You got a reason.”

“No, I don’t.”

“Yeah, you do. I’m wanting to know, Meyer.”

“Bobby Ray Isley wants to know’ isn’t what most people would call a reason. Why do you want to know her name anyway?”

“I just do,” Bobby Ray said, his big hands opening and closing on the steering wheel. “She’s driving that little gray car and she bought gas at Poppy’s. And I want to know what her name is. Didn’t you even see her up there?”

"Yeah, I saw her."

"Did you talk to her?"

"A little bit---"

"Didn't you find out nothing?"

"Not much, no. I think her granddaddy might be from the mountains, here or somewhere," Meyer said. "She said he used to make things---cedar boxes and pencil holders---stuff like that. Things to sell to tourists."

"Oh, no," Bobby Ray said. He gave a sharp sigh.

Meyer tried not to smile at Bobby Ray's growing alarm. Ordinarily, Bobby Ray was not the kind of man to let himself be troubled by anything. He might get his feelings hurt if Poppy forgot his birthday, but basically he lived in his own little world of simple and perpetual bliss. Nothing worried him, not the local happenings and not world events. He went to his more or less token job at Poppy Smith's convenience store every day, and then he went home to his trailer right next to the road that led to the Parkway, the monotony of it all broken up by coon hunting and trout fishing and ice-cold bottle of beer now and again.

That he would be so undone by a woman he'd seen buying gas at Poppy's store was more than a little unusual. That he'd wanted Meyer to meet him at the church to talk about it bordered on the absurd.

"So what's going on, Bobby Ray?" Meyer asked after a moment. "One of your chickens come home to roost?"

"Ain't *my* chicken, he said. "I ain't got no chickens. Not that kind anyways."

"Whose then?"

"I can't tell you, Meyer." Bobby Ray looked at him. "It might not be her, you know," he added hopefully. "Poppy didn't guess who she was."

"Did you ask him?"

"No! I ain't asking Poppy. His eyes ain't that good anymore anyway."

"Well, who do you think she is?"

"You reckon you can find out her name for me, Meyer?" he asked instead of answering. "Reckon you can?"

"Maybe. But names change, Bobby Ray. Especially women's."

"I know that, Meyer. I ain't that dumb. You can find out both her names, okay? Her *first* name ain't going to change, is it?"

"No, probably not, unless she's a movie star or something." He was trying to make Bobby Ray laugh, but it wasn't working. For once, Bobby Ray was staying on topic.

"Will you do it? Will you ask?"

"If I get the chance, I'll ask. Why are you so worried about her? She seems nice enough."

"I just am."

"How did you find out where she was staying?"

"That car she was in went up where you work."

“What were you doing---following her?”

“No, I wasn’t,” Bobby Ray said, clearly insulted by the question. “Somebody told me it was there.”

“Yeah? Who?”

“Poppy, that’s who. He seen that car was up there when he took his wife to work. He was real glad about it, too, because it was still around and she’d be buying more gas.”

“But you’re not glad,” Meyer said because he was beginning to get a little worried about him.

Bobby Ray ignored his observation.

“Addison got real mad,” Bobby Ray said, looking out the windshield of his truck again.

It took Meyer a moment to adjust to the switch in topics. The only Addison he knew was a former sheriff who’d been dead for years.

“Did he?” Meyer said because that seemed the quickest way to get Bobby Ray to the point.

“He said, ‘Shut the hell up, Bobby Ray! Quit that cryin’!’ But I couldn’t quit it. I didn’t know what to do. He put Tommy in handcuffs and *he* was a-crying---“

“Addison was crying?”

“No, not Addison. Tommy. He was crying---and him a soldier---crying in front of people. And I knowed how he was wanting to ask Addison for a little bit of time.

That was the bad part, Meyer. He was wanting to ask him so *bad*. But he never did. He just stood there with his hands locked in them things behind his back. And Addison---he was all mad. He never wanted to do it. He said, 'I got to, boy. The army's in it now.' I never seen nothing like that in my life, Meyer." Bobby Ray looked up at him. "It was raining real bad."

Meyer was about to ask who "Tommy" was, but he didn't.

"His fingernails was tore off," Bobby Ray said, his bottom lip beginning to tremble.

"Bobby Ray---"

"Don't tell nobody her name but me, okay?" Bobby Ray said, taking the conversation back to its starting point. "Don't you go telling Tommy Garth. Please, Meyer!"

"Now, Bobby Ray, how am I going to tell Tommy Garth? If he comes into Poppy's store even twice a year, he's doing good," Meyer said.

"And don't you go telling the preacher," Bobby Ray said, clearly unimpressed by Meyer's logic. In Bobby Ray's reality, happenstance was clearly a bona fide and terrible thing.

"Why don't you want me telling the preacher?"

"I just don't. He knows too many people."

"Like who?"

Again, Bobby Ray didn't answer him. He sat there instead, his face as sad as some old coon dog that got left tied to a front-porch when its master went off hunting with the rest of the pack.

"Like Estelle?" Meyer asked, and Bobby looked at him with such alarm that he immediately regretted the question.

"Okay, okay," Meyer said. "I won't tell Tommy Garth. Or the Preacher. Or anybody, but don't call me up at Lilac Hill anymore---unless it's something really important."

Bobby Ray gave another wavering sigh, his downhearted expression still in place. Clearly, *this* had been "really important."

"You're smart, ain't you, Meyer? He asked after a moment, and Meyer laughed softly at his brand new topic.

"I wouldn't go that far," he said.

"You been places. You been in the army. You been to college. They let you teach school, Meyer."

"Yeah, but it takes more than that to make a man really smart, Bobby Ray."

"Tommy, he was in the army like you."

"Yeah?" Meyer said, trying to remember if he'd known that about the man and realizing that Bobby Ray hadn't changed the subject after all.

"He didn't stay in jail, though. He went back in the army anyway. Estelle, she---"

Bobby Ray abruptly stopped and stared through the windshield again---at nothing as far as Meyer could tell.

"Don't you let nobody hurt her," Bobby Ray said quietly, more to himself than to Meyer.

"Who are you talking about, Bobby Ray?"

"I hope she ain't come back," he said. He looked at Meyer. "And I hope she is too, Now ain't that a crazy thing?"

There wasn't much Meyer could say about that, even if he'd actually understood it. "You better go on to the store before you go into trouble with Poppy---or Estelle sees us."

"Yeah. I better," he said. "You ain't going to forget to try to find out what her name is, are you?"

"I won't forget, but I'm not promising you anything.

"You got any candy, Meyer?" Bobby Ray asked.

"Yeah, I got candy," Meyer said. He reached into his coat pocket and tossed him a couple of pieces. "You're going to rot your teeth, you know that."

Bobby Ray already had a peppermint in his mouth. "I ain't worried," he said around it. "You ate these when you was in the army, didn't you, Meyer? Nelda used to send them to you, didn't she? She'd go to the post office and mail them."

"That's right, Bobby Ray."

Bobby Ray reached to start his truck, then looked at him. "His fingernails was tore off, Meyer."

Meyer didn't say anything. He stood back to let the truck labor forward, then stared after it, trying to recall what he knew about Tommy Garth---mainly that he was Estelle Garth's only public failure. Meyer vaguely remembered something about Garth's trouble with the army, that he'd gone AWOL one time when he knew he was going to be sent to Vietnam and his mama had been the one who's turned him in.

That must have been when people knew once for all that Sister Garth had a tight handle on what was right and what was wrong, and she didn't turn loose of it for anybody, not even her own son.

Today, the man was little more than a backwoods hermit, living on a piece of land up on one of the ridges most people here had once thought he didn't even own--until his daddy's will had been read.

Nobody had known he had been letting his boy stand on it. And, now that they did, nobody knew exactly what went on up at the place, how Tommy Garth made his living or what sins he was guilty of.

And Tommy clearly didn't care what went on down here in the valley. He hardly ever showed his face, and when he did, it was only to buy what little he could afford and then go. He never asked after anybody or commented on any of the ongoing topics---the government's latest doings, the apple crop, the flatlanders, the weather.

Every now and then somebody would see his truck pass through with a load of lumber on the back, and the rarity of that was enough to cause comment in the store and on the church steps on Sunday mornings, precipitating rampant speculations as to

what he could be using it for. The more generous of the group thought he was doing carpentry work for the new people moving in---his daddy and his granddaddy both had been good with their hands. Others thought it had to be something illegal, growing marijuana or something like that, which led to a lively discussion about how there wasn't much money in running a still anymore, and Tommy Garth wasn't the kind who would do it anyway as a courtesy to his neighbors.

The few times Meyer had seen him, the man had certainly had no intention of staying in what passed for civilization any longer than he could help. He'd been in and out, and if he'd recognized any of the regulars sitting around the stove in Poppy's store or outside under the shade trees, it hadn't shown.

Even Poppy, who knew every single person born and raised in the valley and everything about them past and present, didn't presume to be familiar with this man. He took Tommy's money in silence and skipped the usual "old home week" small talk.

*His fingernails was tore off---*

Meyer's thoughts suddenly went to the woman crying on the gazebo steps. Her mother might be mixed up in all this somehow, and if Tommy Garth was in it, then so was Estelle.

And Meyer wouldn't wish that on his worst enemy.

