

# FEAR

## THY FATHER



TruLOVE  
COLLECTION  
NOVELLA

My 'Perfect' Dad  
Made Life a Living Hell

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BroadLit

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# FEAR

# THY FATHER

The timeless love stories from  
True Romance and True Love live on.

Edited by Barbara Weller,  
Cynthia Cleveland and Nancy Cushing-Jones



A BROADLIT BOOK

## FEAR THY FATHER

### My 'Perfect' Dad Made Life A Living Hell

Yesterday I returned to my hometown. It was a warm summer day and I drove my rental car into the little town and stopped at the first building. Carl's Service Station.

"Yes, ma'am," said the young man, pushing his cap farther back on his head and smiling at me. "What can I do for you?"

"Fill the tank, please," I told him, hoping he couldn't hear the fear in my voice.

*No, it isn't fear, I told myself, just uncertainty. You learned long ago to conquer your fear.*

I stepped out of the car and ignored the leer on the young man's face as his eyes took in my tan legs below my snow-white shorts. "Do you have a restroom?"

"Sure," he said, nodding toward the door, his eyes taking in the rest of my body. I knew how I looked and I was used to the way men looked at me. "You'll have to get a key from beside the door. We have to keep it locked."

I smiled to myself and headed toward the door. Things hadn't changed here. You always had to have a key to use the less than spotless bathroom at Carl's.

*Who's Carl, anyway?* I asked myself as I carefully used the facilities and washed my hands. When I lived in Clarksville,

the place had been run by an old, gray-haired man. Maybe that was Carl.

“Carl still around?” I asked the kid.

“Carl?” he said, a frown on his face. “Aw, the sign. No, there ain’t been no Carl here since I been here.”

I paid him and pulled away, the old knot of fear tightening my stomach muscles. I beat my fist on the steering wheel and told myself that I was a grown woman now.

I had nothing to be afraid of.

I passed the dry goods store, the jail, and the police station. A lone policeman lounged by the door, his eyes following me as I drove down the street. I knew he made a mental note of the out-of-town license plates.

Mary’s was still the only restaurant in town, its windows still flyspecked, with what looked like the same dirty, red-checkered curtains. The post office looked like the only new building in town and it wasn’t much bigger than a good-sized bathroom. The school, with its pockmarked yard, was empty, three yellow school buses parked inside the fence. A few houses sat back from the street on each side and in one yard, a teenage girl was washing a car. She glanced my way as I passed and then went back to her job.

I slowly counted the houses I passed. At the eighth one, I saw my first sign of any activity. Five or six cars sat in the driveway, and people lounged on the wide front porch. Heads turned and eyes stared as I parked my car and got out. My knees were weak and I longed to jump back in my car and bolt madly from this place.

I didn't want to go in.

I took a deep breath and went around to the trunk. I pulled out my suitcase and lugged it up the walk. Not a man on the porch offered to help. A sob caught in my throat. It'd always been like that for me in this town, at this house.

Nobody had ever tried to help me.

The years rolled away and I was six again, coming home from school, walking slowly, reluctantly up the walk, my book bag bumping against my legs. Fearfully, I stared at the house, wishing desperately that my mama were home. Sometimes when she was home, my daddy didn't hit me so hard or make me clean and re-clean the bathroom because of some imagined sin.

"Cathy," my daddy said, holding open the screen door, "get in here! What the hell you doing standing out there on the sidewalk?"

"Yes, Daddy," I mumbled, hurrying past him into the house.

"I checked your room this morning and it could use a good cleaning. I suggest you get it done before your mama comes home."

"Yes, sir," I mumbled, hurrying down the hallway. I knew my room was spotless, but I also knew that if he said clean it, then I had to do it.

Changing into some old clothes, I got a bucket and some water. He handed me an old rag as I lugged the bucket down the hallway, trying not to spill a drop. I could feel him behind me and I cringed, trying not to hold my breath. As I went through the door, he stuck his foot in front of me and I went down, spilling the water all the way across the hardwood floor. The small rug in front of my bed was instantly soaked

“What’s the matter with you?” he snarled, setting his big foot in my back and pushing my body into the floor. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen a child so clumsy.”

I knew what was coming and I knew there was nothing I could do about it. I lay waiting for his big hand to slam into my buttocks. I gasped, trying not to cry out. Crying out only made the punishment worse. Three more times his hand hit my bottom, jarring my whole body. Tears sprang to my eyes, but I bit my lip to keep from weeping.

Jerking me roughly to my feet, he stood me up, his face only inches from mine. His eyes were wild as he shook me a few times. “Get this mess cleaned up. You hear me?”

Even at six, resentment was a bitter taste in my mouth as I thought about how unfair it all was. He’d deliberately tripped me so that I’d spill the water so he could spank me. Later, he’d humiliate me in front of my mother by telling her how clumsy and stupid I was. Deep in my heart, I believed she knew that he was the cause of my “accidents,” but I tried not to think about it. After all, she was my mother and she loved me, but she also knew that my father didn’t love me, and I’d learned to live with it.

I sat in misery at the table that night as he explained what had happened to my mother. She just looked at me with sad eyes and shook her head.

The next day was Saturday and the pattern was set. My mother did the housework while I helped. My father liked everything spotless.

“Cleanliness is next to Godliness,” he used to quote, although I found out later that it wasn’t even in the Bible at all. He had many other sayings he quoted from the Bible that probably weren’t really in there at all, but a six-year-old couldn’t know that.

My father was a great churchgoer. We dressed in our finest and went to Sunday school and church on Sunday mornings and Sunday nights. He was a deacon in the church and was well respected by everyone. I understood that. He was a different man on Sundays at church than he was at home through the week.

He always acted so proud of his daughter and his wife. "My reasons for living," he'd say, smiling fondly at us both and ruffling my hair with the same hand he'd used to twist my arm before we'd left the house. "God has blessed me with a fine family and I give thanks for them every day."

Mom would look down at her shoes and smile shyly. We always sat in the second pew from the front, with me in the middle. I was never allowed to look at the hymnals or write on anything or even fall asleep.

Many Sundays my father was asked to pray. He could bring tears to the eyes of the congregation with his long, eloquent prayers. They would rush to him afterward, wring his hand and tell him how much they'd enjoyed his prayers.

"You must be so proud of your father," many a teary-eyed matron would say to me. I'd just nod my head, trying not to grimace from the pain of his big hand squeezing mine.

Sunday afternoons were spent in more cooking and cleaning while he watched the ball games, and then back to church that night. Nobody ever even suspected that he was a different man at home than he was when we entered the doors of the church.

My father was the local postmaster and my mother was secretary to the mayor of our small town, so we were well known to everybody. Our house was in a good neighborhood, and my father drove a good car. I never knew if it was because I was a girl and he'd wanted a boy, that my father mistreated me. He didn't like my mother very much, either. He continually

told her how stupid and ugly she was, and how, if it wasn't for him, she wouldn't be working in the mayor's office.

"Earl would fire you in a minute if it wasn't for me," he would snarl, making my mother cringe.

Earl Hunter had been mayor of our small town for as long as I could remember. Mr. Hunter and my father were good friends. We all went to the same church, and Mr. Hunter was also a deacon. He and his wife, Emmylou, had three boys. They never visited our home, but we all attended church functions together. The Hunter boys were rough and rowdy and Mrs. Hunter had no control over them whatsoever. When they got out of hand, my father would laugh uproariously and tell my mother and me that they were just boys being boys.

But I had to sit quietly between my parents or stand patiently by their sides as my father talked endlessly to other people. If I fell asleep or moved, he'd move toward me and his hand would settle heavily on my shoulder, and I'd know that I was in for it when we got home.

My only outlet for keeping my sanity was school. I liked school. There, I learned to read and do math and color, and I learned history. There was no way that my father could keep me from learning. Any attempt to intimidate the school system would only have made him look foolish, and he was always very careful not to look foolish or mean in front of anyone but his own family.

When my teachers gave me homework, I always sneaked it into the house and hid it in my room. If my father caught me, he'd look at anything I'd written or colored and make fun of it.

"Looks like hen scratching to me," he'd say, his mouth twisting into a snarl. "I can't believe my good tax money is going to a school that can't teach better than this. 'Course, they don't have much to work with, do they?"

“No, sir,” I’d mumble, reaching for my paper, but he’d laugh and tear it to bits and drop it in the wastebasket.

“When you do something worth keeping, I’ll let you know.”

When I was twelve, the real nightmare began. At first, he just began to hug me more.

“You’re growing up, Cathy,” he’d say, his arms tight around me, his stale breath hot on my neck. “Not very pretty, but a good body, for sure. Yessir, a good body. We’ll need to do something about that. Can’t have all the boys gawking at you.”

So he instructed my mother to buy me some long skirts and loose blouses. My hair was pulled back and braided. Of course, no makeup was allowed. I felt humiliated when I went to school and the kids laughed at me. I tried to ignore them and bury my head in books. Life became almost unbearable for me, but I didn’t know what to do.

Coming home one afternoon, I cringed when I saw Dad’s car in the driveway. I wanted to turn and run, but I thought he might’ve seen me out the window. I was right. When I was at the edge of the porch, the front door opened and he stood there with a beer in his hand, a leer on his red, sweaty face.

“Hi, Cathy,” he said. “Your mama called and she’s going to a meeting with the mayor tonight, so it’s going to be just you and me for supper. Come on in and let’s see what we can rustle up.”

I hung back, more scared than usual. He had a funny look on his face and he never fixed supper for me.

“Why don’t you go to your room and put on something more comfortable and I’ll heat up some pizza from the freezer? I think your mama left some salad, too. Sounds good, huh?” His big hand squeezed my behind as I rushed past him.

Trembling, I went into my room and turned to lock my door. Terror gripped me as I realized that the lock had been removed. Standing in the middle of the room, I felt like a trapped animal. I looked wildly around, but I knew there was no place to hide.

“You ought to hurry up, Cathy. The pizza will be done in a few minutes. You know how fast it cooks,” he called from behind me, where he was standing in the open doorway, watching me. There was a hint of a threat in his voice.

“I think I’ll just eat in this.” I kept my back turned to him and shook my long, shapeless skirt with my hand. “It needs to be washed, anyway.”

“Nonsense,” he said heartily. “You can’t be comfortable in those things.”

Suddenly, his hands came around my waist and lifted up under my loose blouse and covered my breasts. “What the hell you doing wearing that stupid thing?” he growled as his rough, hot hands encountered my training bra.

I struggled to pull away, but he only laughed and pulled me back hard against him. I felt totally humiliated as I felt his hard penis pressing against me. I struggled frantically, forcing myself not to scream. Even in my fright, I knew he’d only punish me more if I cried out.

“What are you doing?” he growled, releasing me for a moment and then turning me around to face him. “You don’t think I’m going to hurt you, do you?”

Numbly, I shook my head.

“Come on, Cathy, I’m your father. I only want the best for you. This is something every father teaches his daughter if he loves her. Someday, you’ll want to get married, and how will you know how to do that if your old man doesn’t teach you? God gave you to me to teach. The Bible says that you belong to

me until you're married, and until that time, I'm to teach you what you need to know. You understand?"

I stopped struggling and stared at him. Was he telling the truth? Was it all right for him to put his hands on me like this? Up until now, I hadn't believed it. I'd heard the other kids at school sniggering about sex, but I didn't know much about it at all.

"Come on," he said, beginning to unbutton my blouse. "Let your old man show you what it's going to be like to be married. It's really very nice and you're going to enjoy it." His voice was soothing and his hands were trembling as he removed my blouse, and then my bra. Throwing the bra across the room, he said, "Don't let me catch you wearing that damn thing again. You don't need it."

"Wh-what about the pizza?" I choked. "Won't it burn?"

"Nah," he said, his eyes glazing over as he took me in. "I haven't even put it in the oven yet, so we can enjoy ourselves and then have something to eat afterward."

He unbuttoned my skirt and pushed it down, leaving me standing before him in my panties. Frantically, I searched the room, praying that my mother would suddenly come home.

*Help! Help!* I screamed silently. *Please, somebody help me!* But there was no help for me.

Pushing me down onto my bed, my father pulled off my panties and began to rub his hands all over my body. Squeezing my eyes shut, I waited, praying he'd be done soon. I felt the bed move as he climbed up over me. I kept my eyes shut. He had to quit in a minute, I thought. But he didn't.

Shock ran through me as I felt his naked, hairy legs on mine and felt the hardness of his organ probing between my legs. Gasping, I clasped my legs together, but I was no match for his strength, and in a moment, I felt a searing pain as he tore into me. In spite of all my resolutions, I screamed out then, but he

didn't seem to notice. He was wild-eyed and drooling, seemingly unaware that I screamed each time he shoved himself into me.

I don't know how long it lasted. At some point, I think I passed out. I came to lying on the bed with the spread drawn up over me. My body ached all over and my legs were so sore that I couldn't move. Tears streamed down my face and my body shook as if I was freezing.

"Come on, sleepyhead," my father said cheerfully from the doorway. "Get up and put some clothes on. The pizza's done. Smells good, huh?"

"I don't want any," I mumbled from under the spread.

"Sure you do," he said, the threat immediately back in his voice. "You have to eat something—need to keep your strength up. I know our little love tryst was fun, but you still need to eat."

"No," I said. "I don't feel like it."

"I said you'll eat!" he roared. "Now get your ass out of bed and eat this pizza I cooked for us!"

Wearily, I dragged myself out of bed and put on some jeans and a heavy, shapeless sweater. I was still cold and the last thing in the world that I wanted to do was sit across the table from my father. Later, I would know that he had raped me, but at the time, I was torn between the thought that all fathers did this for their daughters and I was just being ungrateful, and that what we'd done was ugly and terribly, terribly wrong. I cringed later as I realized how naive I was.

We ate supper in silence that night as Dad watched the news on television, commenting now and then on something going on in the world. The pizza tasted like cardboard and the salad like grass, but I ate mine when I realized he was watching me closely and I'd probably get a beating if I didn't satisfy him.

And so, my nightmare began. But there was no one to comfort me in the dark night because nobody cared.

A dozen times I started to tell Mom about us, but at the last moment, I always changed my mind. I wasn't sure exactly what caused me to stop, but I somehow knew that she wouldn't like it, and if there was something wrong, it would be my fault. I felt like she would always take my father's side against me.

The abuse continued, but I gradually became numbed to the pain and humiliation. At first, it was only once a month or so, and then more frequently. Each time he hugged me and told me that he was preparing me for marriage.

"Someday, you'll meet a nice boy and want to get married. You'll be ready for him and he'll be grateful for my teaching."

I often wondered how I could possibly meet a nice boy when I had to wear such awful clothes and he never let me out of his sight except to go to school. At church, I was tucked in between him and Mom even though she suggested a couple of times that I might be allowed to sit with the other children.

"Do her good to mix with them," Mom said, watching some of the teenagers file into the back pew.

"No," my Dad said coldly. "She has no business with that riffraff. Sittin' back there giggling and punching each other. I won't have a daughter of mine actin' like that in church."

He was even more pious than he used to be. So pleased with himself. Always criticizing people because they weren't like him. Always telling everybody what a happy little family we were.

"Nothin' in the world better than a good family," he would say proudly, pulling me close. "And I got the best family in the world. You won't see my daughter gallowanting around at all hours of the night. I keep a tight rein on her, I'll tell you. I'm makin' sure she's a fit wife for the right young man."

Mama looked at him funny when he said that and about halfway shook her head. She'd come home from work one Thursday night and almost caught him on top of me. She called out as she came in the back door and Dad jumped off of me and scrambled into his pants. He was angry and nervous. He hadn't finished and he was scared. Later, I heard them talking in their room. She was accusing him of something and he was putting her off with Bible verses and quotes like he always used when he got into trouble.

The next morning, my mother looked at me long and hard and turned on her heel and left. Suddenly, I knew.

She knew.

She knew, and she wasn't going to do anything about it. She was scared of him!

Sometimes she'd try to separate us—come home early complaining of a headache, as if she hoped to keep him from harassing me, but she was never successful. He always found a way. I came to believe that she was even more scared of him than I was.

To tell you the truth, I didn't want to sit with the other kids in the back pew. They always made fun of my clothes and my braids.

"When's your daddy gonna let you wear skirts up to your knees?" they'd laugh. "What you hidin' under there, anyway? And that's the worst hairdo I ever saw! Your mama still braid it for you?"

I just kept quiet, hung my head, and walked on by. But by the time I was fifteen, my resentment had grown until I hated my father with all my heart. He was still coming to my bed every night and beginning to make me do things that I couldn't possibly believe were right. When I objected, he'd slap me hard across the face.

"I'm your father!" he'd roar. "You'll do as I say!"

“Fathers aren’t supposed to do this with their daughters!” I said one afternoon. “I saw it on television the other day. They said it was something called incest and it isn’t right!”

“Don’t you tell me about what’s right!” he roared. “I know what’s right and if that’s the kind of stuff you’re going to watch, we’ll just unplug the TV until I can supervise your watching! Now, you’ll do as I say, and I don’t want to hear any more about it!”

At that moment, the front doorbell rang. He hesitated between staying with me or answering the doorbell. I guess he finally decided that whomever was at the door had already seen his car and knew that he was home.

“Damn,” he swore, getting off the bed and pulling on his pants. “Don’t you move. I’ll get rid of whoever this is and be right back.”

But I’d had enough. I couldn’t stay there anymore. I couldn’t live there and look people in the eye. I hated him so badly that I wanted to kill him, but I knew I didn’t have the nerve. So the next best thing was to leave.

I could hear the rumble of voices in the living room as he talked to his visitor. Jerking a pillowcase off a pillow, I began to stuff some clothes into it. I had no money except a little piggy bank where I’d saved nickels and dimes. Grabbing that off the dresser, I raised the window, knocked the screen off, and jumped to the ground outside. I ran as fast and hard as I could across the backyard and past some hedges in our neighbor’s yard. I didn’t worry about someone seeing me; I just ran.

After I was about a mile out of town, I sat down to try to figure out what to do. I knew I couldn’t go anywhere without money. I also knew that I couldn’t go back to that house again. Night was coming on and I was going to have to spend it in the woods. I huddled down against a tree and began to cry again.

But sometime during that first, long, dark night, I stopped crying and began to plan. I knew that I had to go back to that house just one more time. I knew where they kept some extra money. I'd found it one day when I was cleaning. And I was sure that they didn't know that I knew it was there.

I waited in the woods two days before I ventured out. By that time, I was so hungry that I could hardly walk and my legs and arms were scratched so badly that they were bleeding, but I was more determined than ever. I didn't believe that my dad would report me missing. He'd be too afraid that I'd tell the police about what he'd been doing to me. No, he'd look for me himself, and until he found me, he'd make up some lie about me going to his mother's to visit or being home sick. On Sunday, I knew they'd be in church, sitting in their pew, but I'd be missing.

I sneaked into the garage Saturday night and listened at the door as they discussed what they were going to say. Sure enough, I'd been right. They'd decided to let me go to Grandma's for a few days.

"But what if we don't find her, Herb? What if she's run away for good?" my mother said, a whine in her voice.

"Don't worry, I'll find her," he assured her, sounding as arrogant as ever. "She can't get far. She's underage."

I crawled into a cabinet behind some sleeping bags in the garage. I found a battered suitcase on which to lay my head and decided to take it with me the next day. My pillowcase was dirty and I knew I'd be suspicious anywhere I went carrying it.

I slept until I heard them come out of the house Sunday morning. I heard the garage door slide down and knew that I could get into the house through the kitchen door. We never

locked it because Dad figured we were safe enough with the mechanical garage door.

I didn't go to my room. I didn't want them to know that I'd been in the house. I went directly to their bedroom and looked in the little box under some scarves in their closet. My heart jumped when I saw two one-hundred-dollar bills nestled there. I stuffed them in my jeans pocket and went back out through the kitchen.

On the way out, I picked up a pair of scissors, and after only a moment's hesitation, I whacked my pigtails off almost at the root. I stuffed the hair into my shirt and pulled on an old cap that hung by the door. I didn't think they would miss that.

Pushing the button that raised the garage door, I waited.

When it was all the way up, I pushed the button again and scooted out from under the door before it could go all the way down. I'd done it before and I knew I could make it.

Almost everybody in town had gone to church, so I slipped out of town unnoticed. At a soft spot in the woods, I buried the hair. Defiance rose in me for perhaps the second time in my life, and it felt good. My hair had always been my dad's pride and joy. I wanted to take it back and sling it all over the kitchen floor, but I knew I could never indulge in whims like that again.

I retrieved my pillowcase and jammed it into the suitcase. I walked all the rest of the day and all night, my hatred for my father like a red-hot fire inside of me. I ignored the hunger pangs, swearing revenge of every different kind imaginable, vowing that someday, I'd get even.

Weak with hunger, I came to a small town about nine-thirty the next morning. I went into a flyspecked diner and ate, breaking the first hundred-dollar bill. The cashier looked at me funny, but never said a word. I was glad that she clearly thought I was a boy.

I found the bus station in town and inquired about a ticket to the largest city in the state. Buying a ticket, I settled on a bench outside the station, my cap pulled low over my eyes, keeping my gaze on the street. I didn't think my dad would ever come this far looking for me, but I didn't want to take any chances.

The bus ride took ten hours and by the time I got there, I'd been offered a job as a male prostitute, a man's companion, and various other seamy propositions. Most people thought I was a boy and I let them believe it. I didn't talk to anyone and stayed close to the bus driver as we traveled. Once in a while, he'd glance in his rearview mirror to check on me. I kept my head turned away and got quickly off the bus when we reached our destination and disappeared when we arrived in the city. Almost immediately, I was in a maze of run-down houses and abandoned buildings.

Suddenly afraid, I remembered the money in my shoe—what was left of the money I'd taken. In this neighborhood, somebody was sure to take it away from me, and I had to have it to survive. Gritting my teeth, I took my bearings. To the left looked like a better area, and I hurried toward it. My instincts were right. Soon, I came to a neighborhood with fairly well kept yards and houses.

Straightening up, I pushed my cap back on my head and strode down the cracked sidewalk. Three blocks later, I came to a small grocery store. An old man lounged behind the counter and a gray-haired, bespectacled woman behind the old-fashioned meat box.

"Hi," I said, setting my battered suitcase beside the door. "Could I get something to eat?"

"Sure," said the old man. "The wife'll fix you a sandwich if you'll tell her what meat you want, and providing you can pay

the price she asks.” His eyes twinkled behind his black-rimmed glasses.

The woman peered at me over her rimless glasses and a warm smile lit her face. “I might even fix you a sandwich without any money just this once if you’re broke.”

“No,” I told them both. “I’ve got money to pay.”

“You don’t live in this neighborhood, do you?” she asked as she cut a generous slice off some pressed ham I’d indicated.

“No, ma’am,” I said, wandering over to the cookie counter. I hadn’t had a cookie in so long, I could feel my mouth water. I picked up a package and laid it on the counter and hunted for something to drink. The old man watched me, his eyes friendly and curious.

*I’d better take my sandwich and get out of here as soon as I can,* I thought, as the woman put mustard and lettuce on my sandwich.

“Come on back and sit at the table,” she said, motioning me behind the meat counter.

I hesitated, but I was tired and hungry and these people seemed so nice. Surely they didn’t mean me any harm.

So I sat at a small table which I knew at first glance was where this old couple ate their own sandwiches at lunchtime. The sandwich was the best I’d ever tasted, and I washed the cookies down with the last of the canned soft drink.

“You’re not in any trouble, are you, son?” the old man asked as I pulled some money from my pocket.

“No, sir,” I said, looking him in the eyes.

“You a runaway?” the woman asked, coming up beside the man.

“Yes, ma’am,” I said, edging toward the door, “but I didn’t do anything wrong except. . . .”

“Except what?” The man’s eyes seemed to pin me to the wall.

"I stole some money from my parents, but I'll send it back as soon as I get a job," I blurted out.

"Why did you leave home, son?" the woman asked gently.

"I'm not a boy," I said. "I'm a girl and my dad's been forcing me to have sex with him since I was twelve and before that, he beat me anytime he wanted to even though he went to church all the time and everybody thought he was wonderful and—and—"

My voice broke, and suddenly, I was sobbing bitterly. Whatever resolve I'd made to keep all my troubles to myself was gone. I was scared and lonely.

"Poor thing," the woman said, taking me in her arms and patting my shoulder. "You come a long way, honey?"

"Yes, ma'am," I said, stopping short of telling her where I was from.

They both stood and waited, him propped up on the counter, and her with her arms around my shoulders. Wiping my eyes with my sleeve, I pulled away from her and started out of the store.

"Wait," said the man. "Where are you going?"

"Someplace to find a job," I said.

"You don't look old enough to get much of a job," he said, walking around the end of the counter and standing between the door and me.

Suddenly, I was scared. Were they going to keep me here against my will?

He must've seen the look on my face, for he held up his hand and smiled. "Wait. Just hear us out." He looked over my shoulder at his wife and nodded his head. "We'd like to offer you a job here until you get your bearings. We need someone to help us out in the store. Our only child was killed before he had time to marry and have kids, and we have no other relatives who're interested in us. You can't hire good help

anymore. The neighborhood kids want to work for a little while, and then they're off to do something else or they steal from us."

"How do you know I won't steal from you?" I blurted out. "I stole from my parents."

"I just believe we can trust you," he said. "I just think you're a girl in trouble and I hate to see you go out in the streets and maybe get involved in something wrong. You know, like so many young girls do these days."

"Come on, honey," the woman said, pulling me toward the back of the store. "Stay here with us awhile. You can stock the shelves and we'll pay you and give you a room to stay in until you get on your feet."

It sounded good, so I let her pull me along. It felt good to have someone care about me. The man picked up my suitcase and followed us as the woman opened a door to a small room in the back of the store, complete with a cot and sink.

"It's not much," the woman said, "but you can stay here until we can find you something better. Fix it up any way you like. There's a bathroom through that door." The man set my suitcase inside the door and left us as a customer came into the store.

And so began my stay with the Hunters. They were kind and friendly, showing me how to stock the shelves and receive merchandise from shippers. I waited on customers, but was never allowed to run the cash register. I knew why. They didn't really trust me and I couldn't blame them. They did pay me a small salary, though, and they gave me a place to sleep and food to eat.

After a week, Mrs. Hunter made me call home so they'd know I was safe.

“They don’t care whether I’m safe or not,” I tried to tell her, half-afraid that my dad would trace the call and come after me. But Mrs. Hunter was adamant.

I breathed a sigh of relief when my mother answered the phone.

“Mom,” I said. “This is Cathy.”

“Cathy!” she cried. “Oh, where are you? Your dad and I have been worried to death about you! Why did you leave, Cathy? Your dad has been looking everywhere for you! Tell me where you are and he’ll come and get you right away!”

“Mom,” I said, fear making me lose my breath, “I—I’m not coming back. Daddy has been raping me and I can’t—I can’t come back to that.”

“Cathy,” she said harshly, “don’t talk like that about your father! He’s a good man, Cathy. He said you were probably going to say things like that, but we all know it’s not true.”

“I’m not coming home, Mom. He’s a monster. You know it and I know it. I just called to let you know that I’m okay.”

I quickly broke the connection and stared at the phone, my heart pounding. What if he found me and made me come home?

I couldn’t do it. I would kill myself first.

“That’s a good girl,” Mrs. Hunter said, patting my arm.

I didn’t feel like a good girl. I was shaking all over and I kept looking at the door every time somebody came into the store for the next two weeks, jumping when the phone rang and not sleeping well at all. My nightmares began again and I was deeply sorry that I’d let Mrs. Hunter talk me into calling home.

Gradually, though, things got back to normal and I began to enjoy my work again. I’d been there six months when a fat man with a mustache came into the store. I was behind the meat counter, cleaning the shelves.

“Hello,” he said to Mr. Hunter.

I don’t know how I knew there was danger, but my heart jumped and the hairs on the back of my neck stood up. I crouched behind the meat counter immediately and looked at him through the glass of the display case.

“Yes, sir,” said Mr. Hunter. “Can I help you with something?”

“Maybe,” he said, his eyes taking in the store.

I gasped, sure that he’d seen me.

“I’m looking for a girl. She’s a minor and she’s run away from home. Her family wants her back. I have reason to believe she’s around here.”

Without waiting for Mr. Hunter to answer, I crawled behind some boxes and into my little room. Stuffing my clothes in a pillowcase and jamming my money in the pocket of my jeans, I let myself quietly out the back door and began to run.

Terror drove me away from my safe haven. Sobs tore at my throat and the old hatred for my father rose right to the surface of my soul.

Why couldn’t he leave me alone?

I’m not sure how long I ran, but eventually, I came to a shopping mall. Traffic swirled around me and the sidewalk ran out. Horns sounded as I tried to cross against the traffic, and I’d never been so frightened in my life. But I had to keep moving.

People stared at me as I went into the parking lot of the big shopping mall. I pushed through the doors and blended in with the people hurrying from store to store. Spotting a big arrow pointing to the rest rooms, I hurried in and went into a stall. Shaking all over, I sat on the toilet until my trembling stopped.

I knew I had to do something. I couldn't stay there. But where could I go? I had no job, not much money, and a pillowcase full of clothes.

I waited until the place was empty, then took the lid off the trashcan, praying no one would come to empty it until I got back. I rushed down the mall and found a place to buy a big shopping bag. Then I went back to the bathroom to rescue my clothes from the trash.

Now I looked like everyone else. The difference was that they all had a place to go and I had none. So I walked the length of the mall and came upon a small fast-food restaurant with a HELP WANTED sign in the window.

The harried girl at the window motioned for me to come in the door when I told her that I needed a job. A young man in a white shirt and black pants was cooking hamburgers and slapping them on buns as I approached him.

"I'd like to have the job you advertised in the window," I told him, trying to look older, more mature and competent.

"You know how to cook hamburgers?" he asked, swiftly wrapping the sandwiches in white paper and sliding them down a tray.

"Yes," I lied.

"Then go wash your hands and come help me. There are aprons by the bathroom and a box of gloves there to handle the trimmings. You cook the burgers and I'll dress them until you get the hang of it. My two best workers didn't show this morning and we're in a mess. What's your name, anyway?"

"Audrey," I said, using my middle name almost without thinking. I'd left Cathy far behind.

In a few minutes I was slapping patties on the grill and the man was dressing them according to the orders the girl took out front. The man was good and never scolded when I made a

mistake—just raked it off into the wastebasket and helped me do it better the next time.

At two, the crowd thinned and things quieted down. Wiping his hands on a paper towel, he extended one to me. “Hello, Audrey,” he said. “I’m Nate. Nate Casper. Thanks for the help. You still want the job?”

“Yes,” I said, my head light from lack of food. The smell of the frying burgers was overwhelming.

“Then come on back and let’s fill out some paperwork on you. The job pays five bucks an hour and all you can eat.” He laughed and flung his hand at the grill. “That is, if you can eat this stuff after you’ve been here awhile.”

I filled out the paperwork, giving a fictitious address, eternally grateful that Mr. Hunter had gotten me a Social Security number. Suddenly, though, I was afraid. Was that how my father had traced me? But I had to have a job, I realized, so I wrote it down, anyway, using the name Audrey instead of Cathy.

*I won’t stay here long*, I told myself, handing the paperwork to Nate. He barely glanced at it as he dropped it in the desk drawer.

“I see you have no references,” he said casually, and my heart pounded against my ribs. “I wouldn’t have hired you if I’d seen your application first, but I’ve seen how well you work, so we’ll skip it for now. Anyway, better fix yourself something to eat and get a little rest. The supper crowd’ll be here soon. Eat out front, if you like.”

But I didn’t. I stayed behind the wall, not wanting to expose myself to the crowd. I made myself two cheeseburgers and relaxed on a stool against the wall.

The counter girl came in and introduced herself. “The name’s Sheila,” she said, motioning for me to make her a

burger. "I'm starved. Boy, was I glad to see you! This job is the pits when we don't have enough help."

We talked a little more and I found out that she was unmarried and had a baby. "The father helps out a little," she told me, "but if it weren't for my mother keeping Caitlin, I don't know what I'd do. You married or anything?"

"No," I replied. "Not married or anything."

"Where do you live?" she asked. "You got a car?"

She seemed so interested, that I just told her the truth. "I don't have a place to stay or a car."

"You in trouble with the law?"

"No," I said firmly. "Nothing like that."

She turned and walked back to the front as a customer came to the counter. With a sinking feeling, I wished I hadn't told her anything at all.

**W**e were mobbed the rest of the afternoon and night. At nine o'clock, Nate finally locked the door.

"Let's clean this place up, kiddies, so we can go home."

So tired that I thought I'd drop, I was glad when Sheila pitched in to help.

"It isn't always like this," she said. "Mike is usually here to clean up, but his mother's sick and he went to see her. He ought to be back tomorrow."

It was ten o'clock by the time we finished. Nate bolted the door behind us and we started down the long, empty mall.

"I'll show you the door that the maintenance people leave open for us so you can park close to it next time. Where's your car? I'll take you to it. Don't want you wandering around in the parking lot this late at night by yourself."

“Go ahead, Nate,” Sheila said. “I’ll take her.” She took me by the arm and led me out the door to a small, beat-up car parked beside Nate’s pickup.

“You two take care and I’ll see you tomorrow.” He waved his hand as he got into the pickup and pulled out of the parking lot.

“Thanks, Sheila,” I told her. “But I have to go back in and get my bag. I didn’t want Nate to see it with my clothes in it. He’d know then that I don’t have a place to stay, and I really need this job.”

“Leave it,” she said. “We’ll come early and you can sneak it into the car. We don’t serve breakfast, so we don’t open till ten. So come on—you can stay with me tonight. I’ll have to swing by my mother’s and pick up Caitlin, though, so we’d better hurry. Mom worries if I’m out past eleven.”

Gratefully, I got into the little car and relaxed as we left the huge parking lot and drove five or six blocks to a small white house on a quiet street. Hurrying in, Sheila came out with a small girl who was already dressed for bed.

“Caitlin, this is Audrey,” she said, placing the small child in my lap. “We’ll dispense with the car seat tonight. I’m too tired to worry with it.”

The little girl cuddled down in my lap and I put my arms around her. Everything was fine for the moment.

I slept on Sheila’s couch that night while she and Caitlin occupied the only bedroom. The only other rooms were a tiny kitchen and small bathroom.

“It ain’t much,” Sheila said. “But Caitlin and I are satisfied with it, aren’t we, baby?” She hugged the little girl to her and nestled her face in her shiny blond hair.

“I’ll find a place of my own as soon as I can,” I assured her, just grateful to have a roof over my head that night.

“You might check with the landlord and tell him to let you know when he has a vacancy. These places aren’t much, but they’re pretty decent. He doesn’t allow any drug dealing or stuff like that here. Also, if you lived here, you could ride back and forth to work with me. I hate driving by myself late at night.”

“Thank you, Sheila,” I said, tears springing to my eyes.

Work was easier the next day because we had more help, but Nate kept his eye on me and smiled when I did well. He was a very good-looking guy—dark hair and eyes, slim and trim, always neat and clean. I found out that he was the manager and enjoyed his job, although he teased all of us about his having to work so hard.

“You guys would do well to do a good job or Audrey here will put you all in the shade. She can work rings around the rest of you!” he joked.

The guys laughed and told Nate that he was just saying that because I was a good-looking broad.

“Well, she is that,” he said, his eyes sparkling.

I blushed beet red and hurried to the bathroom. Was I really good looking? Staring at myself in the mirror, I saw a girl with big blue eyes and strawberry-blond hair cut short, and clear skin that had lost all its baby softness. Was I really pretty?

Yes, I thought. I was pretty. Brushing my hair away from my damp forehead, I went back to work.

**W**hen Nate offered to teach me to use the cash register and let me work the window, I told him that I’d rather not. I wasn’t ready to meet people yet. I felt safe back there, working the grill and joking with the other workers. I was beginning to relax and fit in.

Sheila and I got along okay, and I knew that Caitlin was beginning to like me, but I also knew that I needed to find a place of my own. I'd talked to the landlord and he'd assured me that I could have the first available apartment, but I didn't have any real hope that it'd be anytime soon.

In the meantime, Nate had asked me for a date.

Stunned, I'd stared at him. Why on earth would he want to go out with me? He was such a nice guy, after all. So pleasant all the time, and helpful. And then he told me that he'd ask the boss for a raise for me.

"You've earned it," he said. "You're a good worker and you're always here. You don't know how much I appreciate that, Audrey. I usually don't make a habit of going out with my employees, but I think I'll make an exception in your case, if you'll go. So how about it? We're both off tomorrow. Wanna take in a movie?"

"I'm supposed to baby-sit Sheila's little girl," I told him. "She usually leaves her with her mother, but her mother isn't feeling well and I promised to give her a break."

"Well, bring her along, then," he laughed. "We'll take her out to the kiddie rides and then have hot dogs or something."

"I'll have to ask Sheila," I told him. "Caitlin's her little girl and I wouldn't want to take her without asking."

"So ask." He grinned, touching me gently on the shoulder.

As it turned out, Sheila was all for it. "The poor kid never gets out. Mama never feels like taking her and I never have time."

The three of us had a great time. Nate was so sweet to Caitlin, and also very attentive to me.

"You got kids of your own?" I asked him, seeing how good he was with Caitlin.

"Nah," he said. "But I have six brothers and three sisters. I'm the oldest, so I learned about kids early on in life."

We were sitting on a park bench, watching Caitlin play with a little boy who was pushing her in a swing.

“And how about you, Audrey? You have any brothers or sisters?”

The question caught me off guard. My heart pounded for just a moment until I realized that he was just making conversation.

“No, I’m an only child.”

“I thought so.” He smiled. “You always have that lonely look in your eyes, like you’ve spent most of your time alone.”

Suddenly, I wondered what it would’ve been like to have a brother or sister. Would my father have found a way to abuse us both? Tears came to my eyes and I turned my face away.

“Hey, what’s wrong, Audrey?” Nate asked softly. “Did I say something wrong?” He turned me toward him and tried to get me to look at him. “Please tell me. Maybe I can help.”

“Nobody can help,” I gasped.

“How do you know if you don’t let anyone try? You know, sometimes talking helps.”

But I couldn’t talk about it. Nate seemed normal and happy. How could he possibly even *begin* to understand what I’d gone through? And if he found out that I was under eighteen, I knew he’d send me away. So I sat very still, feeling utterly miserable.

“You’re underage, aren’t you?” he asked softly. “I think I knew it that first day, but you were so eager to work and I needed someone so badly, I just ignored my instincts.”

“Are—are you going to fire me?” I asked, my beautiful day suddenly ruined. Across the park, I heard Caitlin squealing with joy and I prayed that nothing like what I’d suffered would ever happen to her. She was so little and so sweet.

“Why would I fire you, Audrey? You’re my best worker. But it might help if you’d tell me why you ran away. Also, if there’s anyone looking for you.”

“I ran away because my father was raping me,” I said bitterly. “I just couldn’t stay there anymore.”

I heard Nate gasp, and then I felt his arms come around me. “You poor kid. I’m so sorry. I’ve heard of things like that, but I’ve never met anyone whom it happened to. Don’t you have a mother?”

“Yes, but she didn’t know. I tried to tell her, but she wouldn’t listen. Sometimes I thought she knew, but didn’t care. I didn’t have anybody to help me. Everybody thought my dad was such a wonderful man. Nobody would have believed me.”

“Did you tell anybody?” he asked, tightening his arms around me.

“No!” I sobbed. “There—there was nobody to tell!”

Nate rocked me back and forth gently in his arms.

“And then after I ran away, I was working in this grocery store and a private detective came looking for me and I ran away again. I walked and walked and came to the mall and then I saw your sign and came in. I know he’ll find me again, but I don’t know what to do.”

“Don’t worry,” Nate said fiercely. “I won’t let anybody hurt you ever again, Audrey.”

It sounded good, but I knew that if my dad sent someone after me, I’d have to go. The police would never believe me because even my own mother didn’t believe me.

**O**n our next day off, Nate took me to see a friend of his. It was a small, drab attorney’s office. I tried to leave, but Nate wouldn’t let me.

"I told Stan your story and he thinks he can help you," he told me, pushing me in front of him into the small office.

I liked Stan right off. He seemed so honest and sincere. Motioning to a chair, he pulled a yellow tablet in front of him.

"Start with your real name, your father and mother's real names, and the town you came from."

I told him everything he asked for.

"Now," he said, leaning forward, "tell me everything that happened to you, beginning when you were born, or the first thing you can remember."

His pencil scratched as I talked. Every once in a while, he'd glance up at me as if not quite believing me. When I hesitated, though, he encouraged me to go on. When I'd finished, tears streaming down my face, he handed me a tissue and waited. It was such a relief to have told someone who actually believed me. Or, I thought he believed me.

"Now, Audrey," he said, sternly, "you're sure that all of this is true. Every word of it. You didn't make up anything."

"No, sir," I sniffled. "Don't—don't you believe me?"

"I sure do," Nate said stoutly. "I believe every word of it."

"What you believe isn't relevant here, buddy," Stan told Nate. "It's whether or not the police will believe her that matters."

"The police," I gasped, half-rising out of my chair.

"Sit down," Stan commanded in a stern voice. "Of course, the police. How can I protect you if we don't tell the police? I have a friend on the force. We'll tell him—have him do some investigating and see what we can do to protect you."

"My dad won't tell the truth," I said dejectedly, knowing I was going to have to go back home. Looking wildly around, I began to think about running away again.

As if Stan had read my mind, he said calmly, "How much longer can you keep on running, Audrey? Don't you think it's

time to stop and fight? Where will you go if you leave here? Do you have someone who'll care for you, or will you end up a prostitute on the street, the possession of some pimp who sells you to the highest bidder, not caring how they mistreat you? Is that what you want for yourself?"

"No." I cringed down in my chair.

"Then let us help you," Stan said. "Let Nate help you. Let your friends help you. There are laws in this country that protect girls like you. We'll use them if we have to. We're going to do everything we can to keep your family from dragging you back home."

"Thank you," I said. "I don't have much money, but I'll pay you what I can."

"Don't worry about that right now," he said. "Now, I'm going to have my secretary type this up just the way you said it. You'll need to come back, read it, tell us what we got wrong, and sign it when we get it right. Will you do that for me, Audrey?"

"Yes," I whispered, getting up out of my chair.

"You understand, if you're lying, we'll find it out and you could go to jail. You understand?"

"Yes, sir," I said, turning to Nate, who'd remained silent most of the time Stan and I were talking. Putting his arm around me, we started toward the door.

"One more thing," Stan called. "You two aren't sleeping together, are you?"

"No," we both said at once, and my face blushed red.

"Good," Stan said. "See that you don't start. It won't look good for our case."

We were both uncomfortable as we walked down the dingy stairs to the street.

"How about a Coke and some ice cream before we go back?" Nate suggested, taking my hand in his.

I followed him down the street to a small restaurant.

“Do you really think Stan can help me?” I asked him after we were seated and gave our order.

“If I hadn’t, I wouldn’t have taken you there.” He smiled at me and pointed to my ice cream. “If anybody can help you, Stan can. You see, his father abused him terribly from the time he was six or seven until he finally ran away from home. He may never tell you about it, but understand that he knows what it’s like.”

I hung my head and my heart was sad for Stan. It must’ve been worse for him than it’d been for me. He’d been a boy, after all. “How can I pay him?” I asked.

“He’ll set up a payment system and you can pay a little from each paycheck. I’ll help you.”

“Why would you help me?” I asked suddenly.

“Because I think I’m going to be in love with you when you come of age,” Nate said with a gentle laugh, reaching across the table to touch my cheek with his finger. “Hey, don’t look so scared. I’m not going to take advantage of you, and when you come of age, if you don’t love me, I’ll understand.”

“Oh, but I will, Nate!” I breathed, sure that my heart was going to jump out of my chest. “You’ve been so good to me...”

“I don’t want you to love me because I’m good to you,” he said, a faraway look in his eyes suddenly. “I want you to love me because you’re a woman and I’m a man and we want to live the rest of our lives together.”

Before I could speak, he lifted his hand, palm out. “Don’t talk now, Audrey. Just eat your ice cream and enjoy your freedom. Can you imagine being free to come and go as you please without looking over your shoulder, without being scared of every man who comes into the restaurant? That’s what you should concentrate on right now—living your life in freedom. Everything else will work itself out in due time.”

Hand in hand, we left and wandered down the street to his car and I was so happy that I thought I would burst.

I went back and read the statement I'd made. I remembered more things and told them to Stan. Finally, I had told him everything I remembered and Stan had it typed up and I signed it.

Two days later, a middle-aged man in a dark suit came into the restaurant looking for me. Nate talked to him first and then told me it was okay. He was the policeman friend of Stan's. I was so nervous that I could hardly talk, but he soon put me at ease. He was checking with me a second time to be sure that everything I'd said was true.

"If you just ran away because you thought your dad was too strict, you need to tell me right now. If I find out that you're lying, I'll take you back myself."

"But how will you find out?" I asked, my hands shaking. "My dad isn't going to *admit* that he did anything to me, and everybody in town thinks he's a saint."

"I wouldn't worry about it," he told me gently. "I've been working on cases like this for a long time and I've never made a mistake yet. Stan and I do this on our own time, so we don't have to report to anybody, so we'll try to keep it quiet. I may not be able to put your dad in jail, but I should be able to keep him away from you."

"Thank you," I said gratefully. "I wish I could help more."

"You can." He grinned at me, getting up. "Just get that scared look off your face and let us handle this."

I felt jumpy and nervous for the next two months, but I don't know when the private detective found me. He never talked to me and as far as I know, never talked to anybody at

work. Everybody knew a little about my case, and they were all very protective of me.

About the time I'd given up finding an apartment of my own, the landlord told us that he had a two-bedroom place just empty and Sheila and I decided to take it. The rent wasn't much higher than what we'd been paying. We were still riding back and forth to work together and Caitlin and I had become good friends. She was a sweet little girl and I tried to relieve Sheila every chance I got.

One night about two weeks after we'd moved into the new apartment, someone knocked on the door. We were used to a little boy from down the hall knocking on the door in the morning to come in and play with Caitlin.

Opening the door, I gasped in fear and anger.

"Get your things together, Cathy. You're going home," my father said, pushing past me, the old authority in his voice.

"No!" I screamed, causing Sheila to come to the door of her bedroom. "No, go away and leave me alone! I'm not coming back! I'm not!" I felt like I was six years old again.

"What the hell's going on here?" Sheila demanded. "Who are you?"

"I'm Cathy's father and I've come to take her home." He followed me across the room and grabbed me by the wrists.

Struggling to get away, I felt him overpowering me and I knew I was lost again. His eyes were angry and hateful. I knew if I went back, it would be worse than before. He would probably lock me in my room and tell everybody he was doing it for my own good.

"Hang on, Audrey," Sheila yelled, and then I heard her dialing the phone. "I'm calling the police."

"It won't do any good to call the police," my father said scornfully. "She's underage and until she becomes of age, I'm responsible for her."

“Does that mean you can rape her anytime you like?” Sheila spat, contempt in her voice.

He stopped for a moment and looked at me. “I don’t know what she’s been telling you, but I always treated her better than she deserved. I never touched her. She’s always told lies. I just didn’t discipline her enough. But I’ll take care of that when I get her home!”

“You’re not taking her out of here until the police come!” Sheila shouted, slamming the door and standing with her back to it.

“That’s what you think,” he said, dragging me across the floor. “Now get out of my way!”

“You lay a hand on me and I’ll have you in jail for sex abuse and assault!” Sheila warned. “Don’t think I can’t do it. I already told the police that there was a crazy man here knocking us around!”

That stopped him for a minute and he looked wildly around the place. Then he decided he was going to drag me home at all costs. Using one big hand, he pushed Sheila away from the door and reached to open it. His other hand slipped from mine and I jerked away and ran to my room, slamming the door shut behind me. I put a chair under the doorknob. I knew he could break it down, but maybe it would take him longer.

I shuddered as his fist pounded on the door. “Open this door, Cathy!” he shouted. “Open this door or I’ll kick it down!”

Cowering on the bed, I just stared at the door. I was in some kind of nightmare. My tormenter was outside my room again, demanding to be let in. An agonized scream tore from my throat and I wrung my hands in distress. What could I do? What could I do to save myself? I raised the window, but it was too far to drop to the ground from here.

I watched in horror as the door burst open and the chair was tossed aside. He stood there glaring at me with such hatred, that I knew I would die if I went back with him.

"I'm not going!" I screamed. "I'll kill myself first!"

He was across the room before I could get to the window. That time, his hands gripped my wrists with such force that I knew they'd snap if I moved the wrong way.

"Give it up, girl," he snarled, his face close to mine. "You're going back home and when I get you there, you're going to be sorry you caused me so much trouble!"

He dragged me across the room and out into the living room. Sheila stood in front of the door with a baseball bat in her hands. We'd laughed about it being our only protection earlier. Now, though, she gripped it fiercely and waved it back and forth threateningly.

My father laughed and made a grab for it, but Sheila swung the bat and hit him on the shoulder. He flinched, but kept right on coming. She swung again, but that time, he turned loose of one of my hands and grabbed at the bat.

Suddenly, I was a lot angrier than scared. This had always been my problem; I'd always been so scared of him that I hadn't done anything to protect myself. Now, though, pulling myself around in front of him, I swung my leg as hard as I could.

Pain rippled across his face and he turned loose and gripped his genitals with both hands, howling in agony. Sheila hit him again then—a good whack on the head. He dropped to the floor and groaned.

"Hit him again!" I screamed, but Sheila backed off and looked down at the man on the floor.

"He can't do anything to you now," she said, her voice shaken.

But I wanted him dead. I tried to take the bat from her hands, but she held on tight.

“You can’t hit him again, Audrey—it might kill him and you don’t want that, do you?”

“Yes,” I hissed, but even as I said it, I began to calm down.

We looked around to find Caitlin standing in the hallway, her eyes wide and her mouth open. “Mama,” she whimpered. “What are you doing?”

“Oh, Caitlin!” Sheila cried, gathering her daughter up in her arms and carrying her from the room. “It’s okay, darling. The bad man fell down. Everything’s okay now.”

The room was quiet except for my father’s labored breathing. I reached for the bat as he moaned and tried to turn over onto his back.

“If you move, I’ll hit you again,” I said coldly, standing over him.

He stopped moaning and lay still. I backed up and watched. I didn’t trust him.

A knock sounded on the apartment door. For a moment, I stood terrified, thinking it might be the private detective.

“Audrey,” Nate called from outside, “it’s me.”

Flinging the door open, I rushed into his arms, the bat almost knocking him down.

“Nate!” I cried. “It’s my father! He tried to make me go with him and we hit him with a bat! I don’t have to go, do I, Nate? Stan said I don’t!”

“Stan’s on his way,” Nate said calmly, holding me close. “He’ll be here in a minute.”

Leaving the door open, he took the bat from my hands and set it in the corner. Walking around my father, he almost smiled. I got as far away from him as I could be and still be in the room.

In a minute, my father moaned and began to sit up. I started for the bat, but Nate held me back.

"Come on, Mr. Cartieri," he said. "Let me help you up."

"Who the hell are you?" my father demanded hoarsely, rubbing at the knot on his head. "And what are you doing here?" He glared around the room, his eyes stopping on me. "I'm going to have everybody here arrested for assault! I came here to take my underage daughter home where she belongs and some woman attacked me!"

He started to get up, but Nate pushed him back down. He was bigger and stronger than my father was. "We're waiting for Audrey's attorney. We'll see what he has to say before anybody goes anywhere."

"Attorney!" he yelled, glaring at me. "I don't care if she *does* have an attorney, she's going home with me!"

My soul curled up within me and I vowed that if I had to go home with him, I'd kill myself.

"I don't think so," said Stan from the doorway, closing the door firmly behind him. "The young lady is staying right here."

"I'll call the police and have you all thrown in jail!" my father blustered. "I know my rights!"

"Perhaps," Stan said coolly, "but do you know your daughter's rights? And if you insist on calling the police, go right ahead, but first, I'd better tell you that we have a deposition from your daughter saying that you abused her from the time she was four years old and started sexually abusing her a few years later. In fact, that's why she left home. She was terrified of what you were going to do next."

My father opened his mouth to yell, but Stan held up his hand. "If you're going to say that she's lying, that's your privilege. But keep in mind that we're going to prosecute you for molesting a minor, child abuse, and sexual abuse of a minor. We may not be able to prove beyond a shadow of a

doubt that you did those things, but we'll raise enough doubts to make you an outcast in your community—a man whose friends keep their daughters away from him, not really knowing whether or not all your daughter alleges is indeed true. I believe we have a good case and we can put you in jail where you belong, sir. I have a man in your town right this minute questioning all your friends and neighbors about what kind of reputation you have around young girls. He may not ruin your reputation, but there will be some questions in people's minds when he's through."

My father's face was horrible to look at. He was white and sweating and you could almost see him shrivel up. He put his hands out in front of him as if to shield himself from the words Stan was saying.

"No, no!" he howled, his eyes pleading with me. "I didn't mean to hurt her! I loved her! I wouldn't hurt her! Just ask her mother!"

"I will," Stan said brutally. "Take my word for it. I'll put your wife on the stand and question her long and hard if this goes to trial. Do you think she can hold up under that kind of questioning?"

Wild-eyed, my father rose from the floor and I thought he was going to attack Stan then, but Nate quickly stepped between them.

"Sit down, sir," Nate said coldly. "Sit down you S.O.B. or I'll beat the hell out of you. See how it feels when you're smaller than your tormenter. Not a nice feeling, is it?"

My dad slumped on the couch and glared at each of us in turn. Then his shoulders sagged and a look of defeat came over his face. I'd never seen him look like that before.

"What do you want?" he muttered at long last.

"Leave your daughter alone," Stan said, slowly and carefully emphasizing each word. "Leave her alone. Don't come near her

again. If anything happens to her—if she disappears or anyone attacks her—I’ll come after you with a vengeance. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes,” my father said, never raising his eyes from the floor.

I reminded myself of how many times I’d stood before him with my eyes on the floor, listening to his abuse, to keep myself from feeling sorry for him. I knew what a proud man he was and this was going to be a crushing blow to his ego.

Without another word or a backward glance, he shuffled from the room. I collapsed in Nate’s arms then, tears streaming down my face, while the rest stood around smiling.

**I**t took me about a month to really realize that I was finally free from my father. I clung to Nate and looked over my shoulder every time I went outside. Gradually, though, I believed, and it was like a heavy load lifted from my shoulders. The freedom was heady and I went around singing and laughing at nothing.

Nate was kind and counseled me on how to save my money. He encouraged me to work hard, but look for a job where I could make more and would have a chance to work my way up and make something of myself.

“Without an education, there isn’t much you can do except what you’re doing now. That’s why I’m working here. It’s going to be hard for me to support a family on what I earn.”

“Why don’t we both get an education, then?” I asked, hoping I would always be a part of his future. “We could go to night school together and get our diplomas and maybe even earn some college credits.”

Nate’s eyes lit up and he pulled me close against him. “Do you really think we could do that?” he asked softly.

We did it. It was hard work, and sometimes we got discouraged, but by the time I was eighteen, I had a high school diploma and two semesters' worth of college credits.

By that time, Nate and I were sure that we wanted to get married and spend the rest of our lives together. We talked about it often, and he finally gave me an engagement ring. Sheila threw us a party, and I was so happy that I cried and cried.

I'm not sure what made me do it, but I decided to call my mother at work and tell her that I was okay and planning to get married. Wondering if she still worked for the mayor, I dialed the number.

"Hi, Mama," I said when she answered the phone. "This is Cathy." The name sounded strange on my lips. I was still using Audrey.

"Cathy!" she gasped. "Oh, where are you? What do you want? Your dad is not going to like me talking to you."

"I know, Mama," I told her. "That's why I called you at work. I just wanted to know how you're doing and to tell you that I'm engaged to be married. He's a nice man, Mama. He really is. You'd like him." I knew I was babbling, but I didn't know what to say to her now that I'd called.

"You hurt your father badly, you know," she said in a sad, soft voice. "He hasn't been the same since he got back."

"I don't care about him," I said sharply. "I just wanted to see how you're doing. Mama, I went back to school and got my high school diploma and I've completed two semesters of college. They say I have a flair for fashion design, Mama, so I'm majoring in that. I want to have a good job and make lots of money." I laughed shrilly and knew that I sounded childish, but I couldn't seem to help myself.

"You should care about your father!" she exploded suddenly. "He's sick, Cathy! He has cancer and he'll probably never get

well again! And if you ask me, you are partly to blame! He felt so badly when he got back and acted so funny, I know it must've been something you said or did to him! Besides, somebody started some ugly, hateful rumors about him around town!"

"I couldn't have said anything to make him get cancer, Mama!" I almost yelled. "I just wanted him to leave me alone! That's all I ever wanted, Mama—to be left alone!"

"Well, we've done that now, haven't we? You got what you wanted, Cathy, no matter what we wanted." Her voice was so bitter, I shrank away from the phone, wishing I'd never called her in the first place.

"I'm sorry, Mama, but you know how it was. I couldn't come back."

"No!" she said fiercely. "Don't you *dare* try to tell me anything bad about your poor, wonderful father! I won't listen!" She sounded hysterical.

"I'm sorry, Mama," I said again. "I just wanted to call and tell you that I'm okay. I thought you might like to know what was happening to me."

"Oh, Cathy!" she said then, her voice breaking. "Of course I wanted to hear from you! I'm glad you called. Why don't you give me your phone number so I can keep in touch with you?"

"Okay, Mama," I said slowly, "but you know I'm over eighteen now and nobody can force me to go anywhere that I don't want to go."

"Yes, of course," she said, sounding like her old self again. "Now, what's that number?"

I could hear other people talking in her office and knew that she was wanting to get off the phone.

Later, when I told Nate about the phone call, he hugged me close. "I'm glad. A girl should always keep in touch with her mother," he said confidently.

But I wasn't so sure. Mama had sounded the same to me—always so protective of Daddy, not really caring anything about me as long as I didn't make any trouble for her.

**M**ama did call me once in a while over the next two years, but it was mostly about Daddy and how his cancer was worse.

In the meantime, because of my teacher at school, I'd been offered a good job with one of the large stores in town. I'd worked my way up to assistant manager and was shooting for manager. Nate was so proud of me, and Sheila was ecstatic. I'd been able to get her a good job in the same store at a much better salary.

Nate had just been offered a job as assistant manager of a large shoe store. He was a natural at it. He was so good with people and I just knew that we could finally think about getting married.

It was apparent that Nate felt the same way, for the night he was offered the new job, he took me out for a candlelit dinner and gave me an even bigger engagement ring.

"I love you, darling," he said softly, his beautiful brown eyes looking into mine. "It's time we got married and started a family of our own."

"Yes," I breathed, my heart pounding. I'd known him so long, I just couldn't imagine living without him.

"We'll wait until we're both established in our jobs before we start our family, but I think we know each other well enough to know that we want to spend the rest of our lives together."

"Yes," I said again. "Yes, Nate—I love you, and I can't imagine living without you."

He pulled me into his arms then and kissed me so passionately that my knees would have buckled had he not held me up. He took me back to his apartment that night and

we made love for the very first time. I was the happiest girl in the world.

All our friends were excited for us and Nate suggested that I call my mother and tell her.

I hesitated, because I didn't want anything to spoil my happiness, but Nate said it would be the right thing to do.

That time, I called her at home. Blood roared in my ears when my father answered the phone.

"Can I speak to Mom?" I asked him, almost feeling his hatred searing through over the phone line.

"Your mother doesn't want to talk to you, Cathy," he said coldly. "We've decided we don't have a daughter anymore."

I started to hang up on him, but then decided that I didn't have anything to fear from him anymore. "That's perfectly fine with me," I said as calmly as I could. "But could you put her on, please? I won't keep her long."

I could hear her in the background, and then his growl before she came on the line.

"Your father doesn't want me to talk to you, Cathy," she said, and I could hear the pain in her voice.

"Then don't talk, Mom," I said quickly. "I just wanted you to know that I'm getting married next week to a wonderful man. I thought you'd want to know that I'm finally happy. Good-bye."

After I hung up the phone, I vowed I'd never call again. But it's hard to give up your family, even when they've given up on you.

Our wedding day was wonderful and we went to the mountains for a short honeymoon. Nate was everything any girl would want in a husband.

Both our careers took off, and we were named managers the same month. We bought a new house and had a wonderful

time decorating and buying furniture for it, including fixing up a nursery for a baby. Life was wonderful.

The morning I learned I was pregnant for the first time was the time the phone rang and my mother was on the other end of the line.

“Cathy,” she whispered, “your father is dead and I want you to come home for the funeral. It won’t look good if you don’t come, Cathy. After all, you’re our daughter, our only child. How will it look if you’re not here?”

“Mama,” I said, “he never wanted to claim me as his daughter in life. Why do you think he would want me there for his death?”

“Please, Cathy,” she begged. “You have to come. The whole town will be here and how will it look if his own daughter doesn’t come?”

Puzzled at her choice of words, I talked it over with Nate and he encouraged me to go.

“I can’t get off tomorrow, but I could come down on Saturday if you need me there.” He began to check the airlines for schedules.

**A**nd now, here I was, almost six years from the day I’d sneaked off through the woods, bruised, scared, and lonely. The looks from the men on the front porch were hostile as they stared at me.

I choked back a sob and wrestled my heavy suitcase up the steps and across the porch. I could hear the murmur of voices coming from the kitchen, so I set my suitcase down in the hallway and went back toward the sound. Mama and the women sat around the table drinking coffee and talking.

“Mama,” I said quietly. “I’m here.”

The silence was deafening as all eyes turned on me. There were a few gasps, and I realized that they were probably appalled at my dress. It wasn't really appropriate for a funeral in this part of the country.

"Cathy," Mama said in a dead voice. "Come on. I'll show you to your room." She didn't even touch me as she passed by.

Upstairs, opening the door to my old room, she motioned me in, closing the door behind us.

"I hope you brought more suitable clothes for the service." Those were the first words out of her mouth. "Shorts aren't suitable for church."

"They're dress shorts, Mama. They're worn everywhere now."

"Not here," she said. "And especially not to a funeral. Change into a dress and come downstairs. We have to be at the church at two. You do have a dress, don't you?"

"Yes, Mama, I have a dress."

She turned swiftly and opened the door.

"Welcome, home, Cathy," I said softly.

Why, I wondered as I hastily unpacked, *did she almost beg me to come if she wasn't even going to talk to me?* I asked myself many grim questions as I laid out a stylish black dress trimmed in white lace and a pair of black pumps. Why had I come back to this house of horror?

Finally dismissing everything else from my mind, I dressed quickly and went downstairs to the living room. It was now overflowing with people, some of whom I knew. But none of them hurried to meet me or even offered a handshake.

I passed through the dining room with a table piled high with food that would be served after the service. Our town was famous for the generous spreads of food provided at funerals.

Going into the kitchen, I poured myself a cup of coffee and found a vacant place against the wall. My knees were weak and I struggled to stop my hands from trembling. Nothing here

seemed to have changed. This looked like the same tile floor I'd been forced to scrub time and time again when my father had felt like punishing me.

Mama stared at me from her place at the kitchen table and nodded as if she approved of the dress I'd chosen to wear. The other women turned to stare a moment, then turned their eyes away when their glances met mine.

The murmur of voices started again, and I heard one of them begin to talk about what a wonderful man my father had been, and how much he'd be missed. My stomach churned, and I walked back through the living room and out onto the front porch. The same group of men still lounged there, sipping iced tea and coffee.

One man actually nodded at me as his eyes swept over me. If he was someone I should've known, I didn't. Feeling awkward and uncomfortable, I sipped my coffee and looked out across the town. God, I was glad I didn't live here anymore. I'd lived here for the first fifteen years of my life and nobody cared. Not one friendly smile, not one person who wanted to know if I was doing okay and happy with my adult life.

Suddenly, though, I smiled. Because suddenly, it wasn't important what these people thought. I had Nate who loved me with all his heart, and just the bare beginnings of a new life growing inside of me. Placing one hand protectively over the new life in my belly, I felt as if a great load had truly lifted from my shoulders. I was somebody now, and nobody in this town was ever going to make me feel small and unwanted again.

Turning, I smiled at the first man and held out my hand. "I'm Cathy," I told him. "I don't know if I should know you or not. I'm afraid I've been gone so long, I've just about forgotten everyone if I ever knew you before."

The man lurched to his feet as a look of shocked surprise flashed across his face. "Mort." he said. "Mort Zucker. I think I

probably came to town after you left.” His hand gripped mine for a moment, and then he turned and introduced me to the rest of the men on the porch. Some I remembered, some I didn’t.

After talking with them for a few minutes, I walked into the house and repeated the same performance in the dining room and kitchen. Some of the women tried to shy away, but I made them either shake hands with me or look rude not doing it, and Lord knows, these women never wanted to look rude.

“Mama,” I said, when people began to look at their watches and move toward the front door, “you can ride to the church with me.” I took her by the arm and led her out to my car.

If her intention had been to embarrass me one last time, I’d finally taken the ball right out of her hands.

I cannot describe the service at the church. I sat stiffly by Mama, trying not to stare at the gray coffin at the front of the sanctuary. I tried to feel some remorse, but I just couldn’t. Still, I wasn’t happy that he was dead, because he couldn’t hurt me anymore.

Mama sat beside me, tears streaming down her wrinkled face as the choir sang and the preacher spoke. I walked by the open casket with only a slight shudder. For just an instant, I felt as if he was going to reach out and grab me, but the moment passed, and then I helped Mama out the door and into the big, black hearse we were taking to the cemetery. In all that time, Mama never said a word to me.

The ceremony at the cemetery was brief, and in a few minutes, the crowd dispersed and we were on our way back to the house to eat. I’d been to these things before and I knew they could last quite a long while. Getting Mama settled in a big chair, I went to work helping to serve the food. The other

women objected at first, but I insisted, and soon, they were working side by side with me, talking about everything except the funeral or the man we'd just buried.

"You and your husband don't have any children, Cathy?" a young woman named Cindy asked.

"We're eight months away," I told her with a smile, passing my hand over my stomach.

"They're wonderful," she said, smiling brightly. "They give your life meaning. My husband and I have three. I'm married to Rob, whose father used to be mayor. You probably don't remember him. I think he was ahead of you in school."

"I expect so," I said, glancing over at Rob. I didn't recognize him.

"He said he remembers you—said your dad used to make you wear long dresses with your hair in braids. He says the kids used to tease you."

"I expect they did," I said nonchalantly. If she was trying to get a rise out of me, she was failing. None of the things that had happened to me at that time in my life were important now. Now, I just wanted to get this over with and get back to my husband and friends. I didn't hold any bitterness toward these people anymore. After all, they hadn't ever known about my father and me.

Then it was finally over and everybody was gone except Mama and me. The women had cleaned the kitchen and put all the leftovers in the refrigerator. Mama stood uncomfortably in the kitchen doorway, looking at me. Her eyes darted back and forth, but never met mine.

"Why don't we sit down, Mama, and have a cup of tea?" I suggested, moving to put a kettle on. "You could probably use a little soothing and I could use a little rest."

"You didn't have to help, you know," she said sharply. "They could've done it all without you."

“I know, Mama,” I said, reaching for the tea, “but I don’t like feeling useless. Now,” I continued, dropping into a chair across from her, “you want to tell me why you asked me to come.”

“Well, he was your father, and I knew the whole town would talk if you didn’t come. After that detective came to town nosing around and asking questions, everybody got the idea that you’d left town because your daddy was abusing you, and I wanted you here so that. . . .” Her voice trailed off suddenly and she looked away.

“That is the reason why I left, Mama. I left because Daddy was forcing me to have sex with him. He forced me to do that every time you were late getting home or went to town without me or any other chance he got.”

The slap of her hand against my cheek sang out in the quiet room. For only a moment, I almost hit her back. Instead, I rubbed my hand against my cheek and leaned toward her.

“You can hit me all you want to, Mama, but you can’t change the facts. Daddy did rape me, and I think you knew or suspected it all along. Maybe you felt you couldn’t have helped. But if you ever hit me again, I’m liable to hit you back.”

“How can you say that about your own father?” she sobbed. “He was a good man! He was a deacon! He—he—”

“He was a deacon who raped his daughter, Mama. Not only did he rape her, but he abused her when she was little, just like he abused you. He was a monster, Mama, and I doubt if he ever even repented of it. Therefore, he is probably in hell at this very minute.”

Raw fear showed in her face then, and she clenched her hands on the table. I rose and poured hot water into two cups, setting one in front of her.

“You shouldn’t say things like that about your father,” she said, her voice rising. “He was a good man—he really was!”

“You’re just repeating what he said, Mama,” I told her. “He was a sadistic monster. He mistreated both of us. Just because he’s dead doesn’t make him a good man. Why did you want me here, anyway, Mama? Did you think I’d have forgotten what he did to me? I haven’t, Mama. I hope, for your sake, that he did repent before he died, but he was still a monster.”

She sipped her tea, her eyes avoiding mine. She was in denial, and perhaps she had expected total forgiveness from me for what he’d done. Well, I was working on it, and I knew it would be easier now that he was gone.

I waited for her to speak, but she just sat there, staring straight ahead. Finishing my tea, I went to the living room and called Nate.

“Hi, sweetie,” his strong, familiar voice came over the wire. “I just got home. Do I need to catch a plane down there tomorrow?”

“No, darling,” I said, my heart beating wildly. “Everything is fine. I’ll catch the plane out tomorrow. There’s nothing left here for me to do.”

“Well, I’ll be looking forward to seeing you,” he said eagerly. “How was the funeral?”

“Just a funeral,” I said steadily. “Lots of people, lots of flowers, and lots of food.”

“Now, if you don’t feel right about staying in that house,” he said, “please get yourself a hotel room. Promise?”

“I promise,” I told him, “but I’ll be okay here. He’s dead now. He can’t hurt me anymore.”

**M**y brave words came back to haunt me when I went up to my old room and got ready for bed that night. My breath came shallow and fast as I lay down and tried to sleep. Closing my eyes, I tried to will myself to sleep, but I couldn’t. He was still

there. I could feel him. I could almost feel his hate covering me, enshrouding me. I tossed and turned and tried not to remember.

Then I tried to remember why I'd come back. I'd come back because I was safe with Nate.

Turning on the light, I reached for something to read. I knew that I was being silly, but I just couldn't help it. So much terror had been inflicted on me in this room, that I couldn't forget.

*But I must forget*, I told myself, throwing the book aside and rising from the bed.

I walked to the window and looked out. Then I felt him behind me. Whirling, I put my hands out in front of me as if to ward him off, but there was no one there.

Looking at the clock, I saw that it was twelve-thirty. I couldn't stay the night, after all. I'd pack my bag and go to the airport. I'd be safe there.

Reaching for my bag, though, I stopped and let my hands fall to my sides. I was running again. I had to stop. Before, I'd been running from a real, live threat. But now, I was only running from a ghost.

Even if I hurried back to Nate and my safe little world, wouldn't I always hate myself for not facing up to my fears?

"Yes," I said aloud.

So I had to face this thing and I had to face it tonight. I couldn't run again.

Crawling back into bed, I pulled my pillow up behind me and slowly surveyed the room. It was just a room. The same bureau sat against the wall, the same cane-backed chair with the checkered cushion by the closet, and a small cedar chest at the foot of the bed.

Climbing out of bed, I opened the cedar chest, but it was empty, as was the closet and the small table by the side of my

bed. Somebody had removed any reminder of me from my room. Tears sprang to my eyes then, and I crawled back into bed. There was nothing left of the little girl who'd lived here for fifteen, terrifying years.

Suddenly, I laughed. If there was nothing left of the girl who'd lived here, then there certainly wasn't anything left of the man who'd terrorized her. Turning out the light, I snuggled down in the bed and went to sleep, Nate's smiling face in front of my eyes.

The sun was shining when I awoke and I smelled coffee. Jumping from my bed, I hurried into the bathroom, eager to get things done and get on my way back home.

Mama was sitting at the kitchen table drinking coffee when I entered.

"Morning, Mama," I said, pouring myself a cup. "It looks like a beautiful day."

"Good morning, Cathy," she said sourly. "I'm glad you think it's a beautiful morning. I guess you slept well, too."

"Sure did," I said, popping some toast into the toaster. "And I'd prefer it if you'd call me Audrey from now on. I changed my name, and it'll be easier all around if you call me that."

"Well, you sure seem chipper this morning," she said, her eyes taking in my face, my hairdo, and my outfit. "You seem happier than I thought you would."

"Really, Mama," I said, sipping my coffee, watching the toast, "I am happy. I have a loving husband, and we are going to have a baby. I have a good job and a nice house. I also just realized last night that Daddy can't hurt me anymore. I've almost gotten rid of all the old hurt and fear and I plan to work on it some more. I'm sorry if you're disappointed by this, but I plan

to live my life in a way that makes me happy despite what you might think.”

“Your father was buried yesterday,” she snapped. “You could show a little compassion—a little respect!”

“Compassion, Mama?” I said levelly. “Who showed me compassion when I was growing up? Who showed me respect? Certainly not him, and most of the time, not you.”

She turned her face away and I saw her shoulders shake as she began to weep. “I didn’t know, Cathy! I really didn’t know at first!”

“When did you know, Mama?” I demanded on a sob. “When did you know that he was a monster who raped your daughter for years?”

“I don’t know!” she sobbed, tears streaming down her face. “He—he always said it wasn’t true when I asked! He always threatened to leave me if I said anything! I—I couldn’t leave, Cathy? Where would I have gone? I did the best I could, Cathy!”

“Sure you did, Mama,” I told her, handing her a tissue, gathering myself together. “I know how scared you were of him, and I guess I never blamed you so much.”

“But I should have protected you!” she wailed. “I should have *done* something! Oh, dear God—it—it was such a *relief* when you got away! I prayed he wouldn’t find you and bring you back! And when that man came asking questions, I thought he was going to *kill* me!”

“He threatened you, Mama, because he knew he couldn’t get to me anymore. He was a bully, Mama. You are well rid of him. What are you going to do with yourself now?”

“With *myself*?” she asked, wide-eyed, as if she’d just now realized that she was finally free to do as she pleased.

“Did he leave you any insurance or anything?”

“Yes—he had a policy—but it wasn’t much. I think I can draw part of his pension from the post office.”

“Why don’t you sell this house, Mama, and start over someplace new? You’re still a young woman. You don’t need to stay here in this house smothered by its memories. This town will cram Daddy down your throat as long as you live. So sell it and go someplace and start all over again.”

“You—you think I really could?” she asked, her eyes as wide as a child’s. “You think I could sell it? He said. . . .”

“He’s dead, Mama,” I said coldly. “Dead. You don’t have to be afraid of him anymore or do anything he said. Wouldn’t you like to live someplace else? Some other town?”

“Yes,” she said, squeezing my hand. “Would you—would you help me, Cathy? I know it’s awful—me asking for help from you—but I don’t think I can do it by myself.”

“We’ll help you,” I said, putting my hand over hers. “Nate and I will help you. I gotta go now, Mama, but I’ll call you when I get home. In the meantime, you start cleaning out this house. Throw all the junk away. Give all his stuff away. Call a real estate agent and put the house up for sale. Decide where you want to go. We’ll come help you. Can you do that, Mama?”

“Yes,” she said, staring wildly around the room.

And she did. I can’t say it was easy for her, or how far she would’ve gone if Nate and I hadn’t been there to help and encourage her. Sometimes, the old fear would creep back into her voice, and she would need encouraging words from us, but gradually, she got everything done. A month before the baby was born, she moved into a small apartment about ten blocks from us. I don’t know if Mama and I will ever be as close as most mothers and daughters are, but we’re both working at it.

Nate and I are ecstatic about the birth of our first son. We named him Daniel, and he is the light of our lives. Mama loves him dearly, and we let her baby-sit once in a while. Now, we will have another baby in six months. I pray every day that we will be good parents and be able to keep our children safe.