

Chapter 1

Pastor Steve's voice boomed out of the car speaker. "Do not doubt. Stand firm in your faith. Trust God to smash the obstacles in your path."

I pictured the veins bulging in his neck, his hand pounding the pulpit. I slapped the steering wheel and shouted back, "I trust God. It doesn't matter what Ma says. I will go to The Ark." If hearts smiled, mine was grinning.

When his sermon ended, the cassette ejected from the tape player and the news came on. "More countries are joining the boycott of the Summer Olympics in Moscow..." I turned it off as I pulled into the driveway. My headlights shined on Gram's Buick parked in Dad's spot.

Although it was a warm June night, a shiver ran down my spine. Gram didn't drive at night. That's when her lover, Smirnoff, visited. Light blared from every window on the first floor and flooded out the open front door. My heart hammered as I hurried up the stairs.

Quiet roared through the house. I rushed down the hallway toward the den and stopped. The furniture was cockeyed like we'd been robbed. My pulse pounded in my ears.

"Hello?" I backed toward the front door as I called out. "Anyone here?"

"In the kitchen." It was Gram's hoarse voice.

She sat at the table caressing a glass of vodka. Cigarette butts filled the ashtray beside it.

"What happened?" I said, afraid to touch anything.

Gram looked up at me with watery eyes. Her arthritic hand clutched an empty package of Camels. "She told BB her head hurt. She fell to the floor." Each word sounded heavy in her mouth.

"Gram, what are you talking about?" I spoke as if she were a deaf person.

"For Chrissakes, Kate. Your mother"

“Where is she?” I grabbed the edge of the table. “And where’s everyone else?”

Her expression stabbed my insides. “She’s at the hospital. Your father’s with her.”

“We’ve got to go too,” I said.

Gram’s arm shot out and her icy hand caught my wrist. “No. He wants you all to stay here.”

“Okay,” I said and nodded until she let go. “I’m going upstairs.”

At the second floor landing, Pam stood waiting for me with her hands on her hips.

“Where’ve you been?” She glared at me as if she were the older sister. “Were you at one of those Bible studies?”

“I was at work. Why didn’t anyone call me? You know there’s a phone at the giftwrap desk.” I jingled the keys in my hand. “What hospital is she at?”

“Dad said to stay home.”

“What’s wrong with you? We have to go.”

“Don’t do it Kate.” Pam wagged her finger at me just like Ma would.

I left her in the hallway and went into BB’s bedroom. She sat against the wall hugging Precious, her purple stuffed cat. She looked more like a scared little kid than a twelve-year-old. She wouldn’t be going to the hospital with me either.

The lamp on her nightstand cast a long shadow across the floor. I sat cross-legged opposite her so our knees touched.

“You alright? What happened?” I said. A storm churned in my stomach.

BB laid the cat on her lap and patted its back. “We were watching TV.” She spoke like she was in a trance. “Ma said her head hurt and told me to get her some aspirin. When I got back, she was on the floor. I shook her, but she didn’t say anything.”

Her lip quivered and my heart crumpled.

“Ma wouldn’t wake up. I must’ve screamed because Pam and Dad were there. Pam called 9-1-1.”

I followed BB’s glance toward the hall. Pam entered the room without a sound and sat on the end of the bed.

“Dad rolled Ma onto her side. Checked her mouth to see if she was choking. When the ambulance got here, he told us to call Gram and wait in our rooms.”

“When did all this happen?” I said.

Pam answered, “About three hours ago.”

BB rocked back and forth. “Red lights were flashing. I looked out my window. They’d strapped Ma to a stretcher...she didn’t move.” BB let out the hint of a moan. “She’s not going to die, is she?” Tears pooled in her eyes. “Sometimes I wished she was dead. But I didn’t really mean it. You know about God. He wouldn’t do that, right?”

I tried not to gasp. Pastor Steve’s words echoed in my head. *Trust God to smash obstacles*. BB’s first question about God, and I was afraid to answer her.

“Dad will be back soon. He’ll tell us everything is going to be alright,” I said reaching out to pat her knee. It was as close as I could get to her.

No one moved. No one spoke. Minutes later, tires crunched on the gravel driveway. We went to the window and saw Dad’s station wagon.

“Girls, come down,” Gram said. Her words wore the slur of alcohol. She’d never been mean to us, but stories about her terrified us. Born on Friday the Thirteenth with a veil over her face, she claimed to talk to the dead at séances and read fortunes with tarot cards. We called Ma a witch, but Gram was the real deal.

Pam, BB, and I sat at our regular places around the table. Gram stayed in Ma's spot and stirred the ice in her drink with her finger. Pam shredded a napkin while BB rolled and unrolled the hem of her T-shirt. I tried to pray, but the words wouldn't come. Emptiness filled the space where God should have been.

The second hand clicked twice around the clock before we heard Dad thump up the back stairs. He opened the door and came into the kitchen stooped over like an old man. More than anything else, it was Dad's red-rimmed eyes that frightened me. I swallowed hard.

"The doctors said it was a cerebral hemorrhage." His voice sounded hollow. "A blood clot burst in her brain. She's in a coma. They have her on life support."

"Ma. You're talking about Ma," I said. No one met my eyes. "Listen, please. God will heal Ma if we all pray for her. I'll call everyone at Bible study—"

"Kate, don't you get it?" Gram said and shook her head. "Praying won't fix her. Your mother's brain dead."

Her voice slapped me. I couldn't take in a breath. Ma's last words crashed over me.

"You'll go to that cult over my dead body."