

Chapter 1

What did Christine ever see in him?"

"Those eyes. It's always a man's eyes get to a woman if she's gonna fall hard, and big brown eyes like that, she's thinking she sees the good earth instead of a pile of crap on top of it."

"Black Irish," Cora muttered.

"Sure I remember," Jolene said on beat, as if Cora hadn't interrupted. "I stood behind you at their wedding. What're you going to do about him?"

"Nothing."

"Do you think he might hear about Christine?"

"I can't worry about that," Cora said, but then she went on, because worry was already eating at her mind like a mouse working on drywall making a hole big enough for his whole body to slip in and do its dirty work. "You know well as I do," she said, "I wouldn't trust him to get that child across a road safely, could of been a road that hadn't seen a car in ten years, wouldn't make a bit of difference. I'll do whatever I have to. Christine might've loved him, but young as she was, even she figured out to let him go."

"Just not soon enough," Jolene said, but there was no criticism in her voice, just a worn cotton blanket of understanding.

Cora had been rocking off and on through the calling hours, not that the chair was a rocker, but she'd rocked her large body as if it were. She'd rocked her babies through whatever small and large pains had seized them for so long it was natural to her, even if her arms were empty now. Everyone except Jolene had left, even Christine's surviving child. Lexie was waiting at Cora's, kept company by the small throng of school friends, until whenever Jolene brought Cora back home. Cora wasn't ready, but the fifteen-year-old had had all she could take.

The arthritis in Cora's back, hips, knees and feet complained. She felt every one of her sixty-three years and then some. First her one son stillborn, then the death of Lexie's twin, then Marvin taken by a heart attack. Now cunning old death had swooped down and stolen Christine while Cora was spending all her time trying to beat back its black wings from hovering over Rebecca, her other daughter, whose left breast had been cut off not six months ago.

"I don't see how I can go on anymore," she said softly to Jolene, a handful of tissue in her knobby right hand. Glasses, framed in neutral plastic, lay on Cora's thighs. She needed them on to talk, something no one particularly believed, but it was true, so they'd been off and on all day between private crying and turning to greet people politely.

"I know, honey. I know," said Jo, whose only child had been killed by a land mine on the Ho Chi Minh trail. She hesitated a minute, not from uncertainty, but for the sake of timing. Her head, dyed a deep brunette, was an inch and a half from Cora's, though they both faced Christine. "But you've got to think about what Christine wanted. She named you guardian. Lexie needs you."

"I won't fail her," Cora said. "I just don't see how, right now. It just feels like I can't... She needs me to be strong."

Cora closed her eyes against new tears. "Oh, Jo, this would kill Marvin. He loved her so much. He wasn't much for telling them, you know how he was, but he loved the girls so much."

"And you," Jolene said. "Talk to him tonight. He'll help you through."

"He's a better listener now than when he was alive. Doesn't interrupt so much," Cora said.

Jo persisted. "Sometimes I feel Paul when I talk to him. I just get a feeling. Not always, but..." She was quiet, letting Cora absorb the thought before she changed the subject. "You going to bury Christine by Marvin and the babies, right?"

"There's a place for me, too. I bought another one."

"You can't be using it anytime soon," Jolene cautioned.

“He was handsome, Alex was. Stringy but handsome.” Cora wasn’t finished on the subject of Christine’s ex-husband. “No way around that much. Give the devil his due. He was like a mosquito on Christine—got her itching and then she was scratching, and the next thing she knew, she was out to here.” She pantomimed a swollen stomach. “Course they thought it would keep him out of the war....”

Cora took off her glasses again, to wipe her eyes, reddened all around the pale blue irises. She knew she was rambling, but Jolene had been her friend for forty-five years, and if Cora hadn’t kept talking, she would have climbed into that box, squeezed herself next to Christine and pulled the lid down over them both. Instead, she was going to have to pick up her cane, walk out and shut the door behind her.

“I know, honey. Sometimes it happens that way. Christine managed to keep Lexie from that mess, though, and look at how she loved that girl. She would’ve gone through it all over again to keep her. In spite of what she lost, don’t you think?”

“And she was a good mother, too.”

“The best. She learned from the best.” Jolene’s dark head nodded. The roots of her hair were grayish white; she needed a touch-up. It’s not possible to schedule hair coloring to coincide with unexpected funerals, she’d decided that morning while she tried to blur the line of her side part. She needed another permanent, too, but there hadn’t been a minute of time or space to make herself presentable.

“I don’t know about that,” Cora said, and Jolene sensed that Cora had been reviewing her relationship with her daughter. “I tried. I always tried.”

Her voice dropped to a near whisper even though they were alone with a dead person surrounded by cold and the silence of a small town closed up for the night. “I’m thinking about raising a teenager. It’s been a long time, Jo. Things are different. I always thought Christine told me most everything where Lexie was concerned, but there’s a lot she didn’t want me to fret over. I’ll have to now, won’t I? No choice. You know what Lexie said to me in the first hour after Christine was gone? She said, ‘I won’t have to go live with Alexander the Goddamn Great, will I?’ and I just told her no, I was her guardian. But I never heard a word like that from Christine. Do you suppose Lexie picked that up from Marvin before he died? And she doesn’t know the whole story, not as far as I know, anyway. I don’t know why Christine kept it from her.”

“Thought it would upset her, I guess. The kids all talk like that to each other, with the swearing. She’s just scared.”

“Well, of course. But she needs her mother,” Cora said and left silence after to demonstrate the sucked-in yawn of emptiness where Lexie’s mother had been. “I feel like I’m in a terrible, terrible mistake, and some giant hand is going to reach down and make things right again any minute. Like a bug, caught in a spiderweb and I’m not even the kind of bug the spider can eat, and a human being comes along and says, oops, this was an accident, and cares enough to get me out and let me go on my way. This can’t be happening.”

“I know what you mean, like it’s too big to take in, and it can’t happen. It’s wrong.”

Cora ducked her face into her cupped hands and let her shoulders heave. Jolene inched forward on her chair so she could rotate her legs toward Cora. She reached behind her friend’s hands and extracted the glasses from her face. After she set them in her own lap, she took Cora in her arms and the women rocked awhile together while Cora sobbed. “It’s so wrong, it’s so wrong. I don’t mean to be sacrilegious, but what kind of God would do this? What kind of God takes away a girl’s mother and a mother’s daughter, a good person like Christine? Thirty-five years old.” Cora pulled back a little so she could see Jolene’s face, half of it lit by the glow from the light behind the casket, the tops of wrinkles highlighted. Jo’s eyes were mostly pupil, black-looking in the low light.

“I don’t know.”

“You think that’s bad to say?”

“No. I’ve said it myself. I didn’t take the least comfort from the church when Paul died, that’s for sure. Just over time, I accepted it better, that I’d never know the reason, not while I’m alive, anyway. What reason would we ever think was good enough, anyway?”

“So where is she? I mean, it just doesn’t seem possible that everything that was in her mind and heart and soul can be wiped out. I know I can’t see it, but it’s got to be somewhere. Lexie wants to put all kinds of things in the casket with her, you know, pictures and the like.” As she spoke, Cora stood up. Jolene picked up the cane Cora had propped against the back of the chair and extended it, but Cora waved it away

and leaned against the side of the coffin, right alongside her daughter's face. Jolene took a step down toward Christine's waist to give Cora space, but stayed next to her.

"That's all right. The pictures and all. That doesn't mean you have to do it, too."

"I know. I want to know where she is, that's all."

"Try talking to her, sometimes it works. Try talking to her, then be real quiet and wait to hear her inside you. It's not like a voice, it's just like you know something, like she's answered you."

Cora stroked her child's face and put her fingers in Christine's hair the way she always had when Christine was little. "They put too much hair spray on her. Christine didn't like hair spray. Even her hair doesn't feel like her now," she said. "She had good hair. Thick. I got to like it short—once I was used to it."

"Yes," Jolene said. "She had good hair." She put her arm around Cora's waist, lightly, but enough that Cora could feel her living flesh to living flesh.

"I need to get home to Lexie. Can you take me now?" Cora whispered, picking up her cane from where it rested against the back of Jolene's chair. As a girl, Cora had been tall, broad-shouldered, and in spite of her arthritis and the stoop in her back, she was still bigger and heavier than Jolene. It took both Jolene and the cane to support Cora when she stepped away from the casket and the first minute toward the door, but the farther they got, the more Jolene could feel Cora plant each foot toward where she had to get herself.

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