

Chapter 1

Even though I am the oldest, I've always been in the middle, stuck between my sisters like the fulcrum of a teeter-totter, keeping each safely balanced. Perhaps it became a habit, and in the years since I escaped home I've brought the role on myself, rather than what it seems: the noose of the inescapable circle of fate.

The thing is, I never see it coming. I always believe that I am on the cusp of being able to live out in the open, and say what I really mean. Twenty one years ago, when I was a breath under eighteen, I got married to change everything. I had to get out from between Madalaine, born after me, and Ellie, the youngest, who's like a fern frond that withered unaccountably before it ever unfurled. I also got married to get out from between Mama and Daddy, who needed a full-time mediator to decide who had failed to pay the electric bill on time, whose fault it was that the Dodge on the street was slumped over a flat tire or the butcher had given Mama a soup bone with no meat on it again. I thought it would all be different, that I could make life be different.

I was fourth in my class. I could have found a way to college or at least to work in some faraway city, instead of marrying Wayne in such a misguided hurry, and my life would have turned on a different dime. In fairness, nobody told me I couldn't, but nobody said I could, and nobody from my family ever had. The idea was as likely as a rose bush springing up in the desert on its own. So I've worked as a secretary for Dr. Hays for the whole of my married life, and watched his patients grow up or grow old, be newly born or newly dying. Of course, I tend to hear the suffering parts of their lives, and I remind myself that surely they have ice cream sundaes and birthdays and Christmas mornings too. "Toughen up, Lydia," Dr. Hays said to me when he found me crying over Mrs. Kinsey's spinal bifida baby the same day Mr. Seeley, who was a bird watcher, had a stroke that took away his vision.

He has a point. I know what life can dish up for breakfast: my own brother, the real oldest child, is retarded. I call myself the oldest, because I was expected to be in charge and to take care of my sisters and Charles. Someone might think that Charles was what I wanted to escape, but that's not true. He is the nicest and happiest member of our family. Mama fusses about him, and Ellie fusses at him

every hour of the day while she carries her basset hound around and mourns for Elvis, but Charles just gives everyone his lolling smile and lets them go on. He claps with Vanna for every letter of Wheel of Fortune. Of course, Mama does too, so maybe that doesn't prove anything about Charles. Madalaine married early, like me, but Mama and Daddy have their oldest and youngest living with them forever in their eye-blink of a house in the part of Maysfield for people who are poor but white. The truth is, I have no idea who takes care of who: Ellie complains like a squeaky door, Mama hardly budges from her chair, and Daddy disappears to the Toyota plant—Kentucky's notion of hope—while Charles watches television. They all live in the same house we grew up in and have canned soup and grilled cheese sandwiches for supper every night. There's nothing I can do about it except feel bad, but I do that really well.

I should have climbed on happiness's coattails and stayed on them when I had the chance even though Wayne Merrill was a good man when I married him, and still is. No woman in her right mind could take that away from him. So what if he parks in a La-Z-Boy and falls asleep holding the remote control every night after supper? I started taking some classes when Claire got into high school, and I read in our bedroom at night while Wayne flips between channels in the living room. He's never said a harsh word to me. He deserves to be loved.

When I first got this same fifteen-point diamond that I've worn ever since on my left hand, God gave me as clear a sign as he did Moses that I was going to pay for being in such a hurry to get out. Wayne took off for two weeks to the south of Kentucky to help his uncle, who'd broken his leg, oversee a tobacco harvest. While he was gone, I stayed in Maysfield and had the thought—so distinctly that it was like someone else's voice in my head—that if he didn't come back it would be all right with me. I'd hardly dated anyone else, and it occurred to me that I might like to, and I even knew who I wouldn't mind going to the diner with. Tommy McDonald, with his flashy grin and confident swagger, had honked and waved mightily at me the previous week.

Maybe it wouldn't have made any difference, though. Sometimes it's hard to distinguish one man from another. After I was married, some mornings I'd start to call Wayne "Daddy," when I saw him in his coveralls, silently wolfing his bacon, eggs and buttered toast before he pecked me on the cheek and left for the

plant an hour before it was time for me to get to the office. His hands are big and chapped like Daddy's, and his face has the same flat expression as the other mens'. He's grown himself a beard to hide behind, but without his knowing, it makes him stand out instead because it has a reddish tint that doesn't match his hair—an ordinary medium brown mixing itself into early gray—or the various mix of his unruly eyebrows. Another man, one I thought was unique, left me just as weighted with worry and alone in my own skin, so, in the end, maybe it would have made no difference at all who I'd married. What turned out to matter was Claire.

“Et voila,” I say sarcastically as I detail the insertion of a new roll of toilet paper onto the holder with slow, exaggerated motions. I've come out of the bathroom to prove my point that once again he's left it empty. He looks up from the television more confused than wounded. He wouldn't talk to me this way, and I'm often ashamed of myself for doing it, an emotion that's on the losing side of a bout with irritation. Of course, he doesn't know what “et voila” means. I wouldn't either except that I've been surreptitiously studying Claire's French books since her freshman year. My pronunciation is likely off even though I practice with the section called Say It Right! Hints in each chapter. Maybe even Claire wouldn't know what I was saying, though she probably wouldn't miss the intonation. She's enough like me that his ways get on her nerves, and in a smaller way then, I'm in the middle and arguing with her about the merits of what makes me crazy. Wayne's a good father, though, and after it seemed that we'd not have a child, I know that to him she wears the wings and sneakers of Love, even if he's not the sort to display it on his face or speak of it.

I've been addressing invitations to Claire's graduation party to members of his family and mine, and twice Wayne's asked, “Did you send one to Uncle Jimmy?” Another time he said, “What are we getting Claire?” though he's a man who for seventeen years has never known what we were giving her for Christmas until the paper and ribbons were in tatters on the floor. So I know that her graduation next month is getting to him as much as to me, but we'll never speak of it. I certainly can't talk to either of my sisters. Ellie's not had a child, though she thinks her dog is just as important and says she'd die to save him like any mother. Madalaine is so bitter about Bill leaving her that nobody else can dare to have a care of her own.

I knew a man named John Rutledge, the type to replace the empty cardboard roll, who talked and read books and told jokes within jokes, tossing up funny lines one after another like some brilliant juggler. It was partly that that drew me to him and partly that he made me believe I was a beautiful woman, nothing like what I'd seen in any mirror, even the ones that can be expected to dissemble, like that of a mother's eye. My hair was a lush shining expresso so rich it circled around both auburn and black, my eyes much bluer, my face less round, my nose straighter, my breasts bigger. When we were apart, I never once thought that I'd be all right if I never saw him again. It was by loving John that I knew I had never loved Wayne, and that's the only piece of knowledge I can't forgive him for giving me. But, then, maybe I ruined him too. He was married; I was married. He gave me up before I gave him up, but in the end maybe the order didn't matter, regardless of how much I thought it did. We let each other go. It was the right thing to do, but I still miss him.

I think of sending John one of these invitations, but it is pure whimsy. The impulse comes from the notion that I could tell him that this is killing me. "John," I'd say into the softness of his sweater aching with the mixture of his cologne and cigarettes, "she has been all I've had for so long, the point of everything. When she walks across that stage, raising her is over. She's going away to college. What's left? Look at her, fair-skinned and tall, her hair dark like mine, but those big deep brown eyes instead of my ordinary blue ones. She's what I wanted to be. I used to wear my hair the exact way she does when I was her age, can you believe that?" I wrap a short curl around my finger and pull on it hard when I think of him.

"Your eyes are not ordinary, Lydia. How can you say that? You're nuts, you know? I love your eyes; they're like patches of sky in October, you know how the sky turns that pure blue? Periwinkle, I think that's the color." How could a woman not fall in love with a man who will use the word periwinkle?

I can imagine John chiding me that way because he did once, when I said I was just a secretary. "You can take classes and get a degree, you can figure out what you want to be on your own. You really don't have to work for Dr. Hays until one of you dies, you know," he said. That's what I tell myself when I wonder what will

become of me, but today I imagine John saying it again, telling me I will be okay when Claire leaves. It's easier to believe that way.

Chapter 2

"I don't see why Lydia keeps inviting me to these things," Ellie says, examining the mail scattered on the kitchen table. "Was it Daddy brought the mail in?" "Cause sometimes Charles drops something. Is this all there was? She knows I can't leave Presley. You and Daddy'll be at the party, I suppose, so there won't be anyone to watch him." A Hallmark invitation, Please Come printed in fancy script above a bouquet of bright balloons and a mortarboard hat, flutters from her hand back onto the table as she tosses it aside. Dust motes float like separate loose irritants in the late afternoon light as it enters the kitchen beneath the yellowed shade, half-pulled and revealing a small tear and several brown spots.

"Take him with you," Mama says from her recliner in the patchwork living room. "You always do." A peach and green unicorn oversees the room from a metal frame on the wall behind her. Clear glitter outlines wings, mane and tail. A picture of a guitar with a gilt halo above it faces the unicorn from the opposite wall, behind a couch. The couch, covered with an old multi-colored knit afghan, is positioned at an odd angle to afford an equal view of the television to two or three people who might sit there at once. A metal pole light fixture flanks one end, and a ginger jar lamp on a Formica end table is on the other side of the couch.

"Well, I'm not going to this time. He hates being tied up, and Madalaine's kids tease him. It's not fair. Is it Presley?" Ellie's tone becomes a tender wheedle as she bends to scratch the loose skin behind the basset's ears. She follows her mother's voice into the living room in three steps. "I don't ask her to tie her kids up when they come here."

"Might not be a bad ider," Mama chuckles in a conspiratorial tone. The flesh of her bare arms emerging from her sleeveless shirt is enormous and dimpled, almost luminous in the darker corner of the room. A safety pin holds the top of her blouse together where a button is missing. Ellie is torn between correcting Mama's pronunciation and capitalizing on a rare chance to criticize Mama's prize grandchildren openly.

“She really ought to teach them better manners. All that roughhouse and hollering jangles my nerves. Presley is much better behaved.”

“Presley’s all right for a dog.” Mama lands heavily on the last word and draws it out. She loudly blows her nose, its bulbous tip exaggerated with redness, and then awkwardly tosses the crumpled tissue toward a paper grocery bag open near her chair. It misses, tumbling on the floor by several others.

“Shut up Mama. He has feelings, you know. And by the way, the word is pronounced idea.”

Charles, intent on the television, laughs from the couch and claps for *The Price Is Right*. His glasses are half-way down his nose again, his graying hair askew as he chews the Juicy Fruit gum that Lydia brought him. Usually Ellie takes it away and chews it herself because Charles leaves a sticky mess of it on every table in the house, but Lydie has started tucking it in his pants pocket when Ellie isn’t looking. Then he gets to have it unless Ellie takes his pants to wash them, and whatever was left of the pack glues his pocket together in the dryer. Well, Charles can just wear them that way, Ellie’s decided. Too damn bad. It should hardly be her job to check Charles’ pockets with everything else she has to do.

“Thaaz righ, idea, idea, ider. Seventeen thousan dollar.”

Mama ignores Charles and narrows her eyes at Ellie. “So says you, Miss Fancy Pants High Horse.” She holds up a wrist and flounces it. Her layered chin rearranges itself against the bottom of her neck.

Ellie is disgusted as she often is. “Charles, for God’s sake. This is a stupid rerun. You’ve seen it.” Then to Mama, she changes the subject, anticipating a chance to win back the high ground. “Did you remember to tell Lydia that she has to take Charles to the doctor Tuesday at four?”

“You take ‘em.”

“I have told you over and over that in the first place I have to work, and...”

“Lydie works later ‘n you,” Mama taunts.

“Lydia works for someone who will let her off just whenever she wants. And you know I can’t drive on Dixie Highway. Those turning lanes, off this way, then that way...I can’t, you know that. Why do we have to have this conversation every other month?”

Mama snorts. “Git me a Coke, will you?” She says ‘git’ deliberately, Ellie can tell, knowing how it irritates her daughter.

“Get up and get it yourself,” Ellie’s retaliation feels cheap, but still she puts her shoulders back and walks from the living room to her bedroom instead of into the kitchen, where the linoleum is cracked and chipped down to the black glue in spots and two of the stove burners haven’t worked for three or four years. Ellie’s bedroom is festooned in pink with white gilded furniture which she bought and paid for herself because it put her in mind of Lisa Marie’s room in Graceland.

“That dog’s about as fat as Elvis when he keeled,” Mama shoots just before the slam of Ellie’s door tallys her bull’s-eye. “Charles,” she says, then repeats, louder. “Charles! Get me a coke, will ya?”

“Seventeen thousan dollar...” he says without moving.

The sun has set and Ellie emerged from her room to heat the soup when Madalaine arrives with a foil-covered Pyrex dish, and her ten-year-old in tow. The screen door into the kitchen slams from the vacuum of the May breeze, and Ellie jumps.

“Hello Lainie, hi Jennifer,” Ellie says, composing herself deliberately.

“Hey Auntie El, where’s Presley?” Jennifer, so blonde she looks out of place with her dark-haired mother, ducks her head around to glance into the living room.

“Please, Jennifer, I’ve asked you nicely...”

“Sorry. Aunt Eleanor. Where is Mister Presley?” The girl’s voice is sassy as she enunciates with exaggerated precision.

“Jen...” Madalaine warms her with the syllable. Then she aims her voice at her sister, gesturing with her chin toward the living room. “How is she? Is the cold better?”

“What do you care?”

“Don’t start with me, El. Look, I brought you a meatloaf.” Madalaine holds it out, trying to distract her sister.

“Well I’m sorry. It’s very nice for you and Lydia, isn’t it? I’m the one left to take care of this freak show.”

“For God’s sake.” Madalaine speaks with the frustration of the long-weary, in a conversation that repeats itself like hiccups. “Does it ever occur to you that I have problems too? My husband’s child-lover is about to give birth. Does it occur to you that Jennifer and Brian are affected by that? That I am affected by that? How do you think I feel about my life these days? Geez, hand me a rag. This counter is covered with grease.” She swipes at the discolored space next to the stove, noting that the stove itself is equally dirty. When she tries to flip on the light over the chipped sink, nothing happens. “How do you see anything around here? That light was burned out last week.”

“At least you had a chance. You had a husband. It’s not my fault if you didn’t take care of him.” There are faint lines across Ellie’s forehead and deeper ones that connect her nose to the corners of her mouth, but her long brunette hair is fixed much the way her niece, Claire, fixes hers, which is with the sides pulled up and fastened in the back, the rest hanging loose. Ellie fixes hers with a bow, whereas Claire uses a plain tortoise shell barrette. Today’s pink bow bobs as Ellie flounces her hair with a girlish gesture related to the way she has taken to cinching in her belts two holes more tightly than would be comfortable.

Madalaine is overcome with indignation for a fleeting moment, then her eyes fill. “Bitch,” she says under her breath. “Jennifer, come on, we’re going.”

Jennifer is in the living room teasing the dog with a handkerchief that Charles left on the end table. Presley is becoming frenetic, dashing back and forth between Charles and the television as Jennifer waves the handkerchief toward his face. "It's mine and you can't have it," she teases. From her recliner, Mama chuckles but her throat breaks it into a cough. A moment later, Jennifer's thin arm is wrenched upwards and startled, she looks up into her mother's teary face.

"I said, we're going. Leave the goddamn dog alone." The upward pressure of Madalaine's grip makes it awkward for Jennifer to get her feet underneath her, but her mother does not loosen her hand.

"Bye, Maw Maw," Jennifer says, scarcely above a whisper. She'll take on Auntie El, but she knows not to cross her mother when she's crying again.

Her mother is still sniffing when she and Jennifer reach the car, so Jennifer gets into the back seat of their blue Chevy. She looks out the side window as Madalaine sighs, blows her nose into a Kleenex and starts the car.

"I didn't mean to pull on your arm that way, baby," Madalaine says into the rear view mirror.

"It's okay," Jennifer says to her own faint reflection. She's told her mother that she wants her nose straightened, made straight and small as Christina Uhlman's. Not one cheerleader at her school has a big nose, and she is afraid hers will even keep growing until it looks like her mothers' family's. All of the Sams sisters have faces and noses something like MawMaw's.

"No, it isn't. Aunt Eleanor can just be...difficult, you know how she is. Tonight she said something mean and it just, well, my feelings got hurt."

"Like Daddy hurts your feelings?"

Madalaine pauses, considering whether or not there is any similarity. "I guess so. I mean, well, see, Ellie thinks that her life is just so hard, you know? Like it's my fault that she never got married. But we both know the real reason..." (Jennifer had once confided to Madalaine her theory about the the real reason a man never

proposed to Auntie El, which is Auntie El's nose, even more like MawMaw's than Aunt Lydie's or her mother's.)

"She told me that when Aunt Lydie got married she threw her bouquet to you, but when you got married you threw yours to someone else so she'd have to stay with MawMaw and Poppy and Charles," Jennifer says.

"Uncle Charles," Madalaine corrects automatically, then her voice changes. "She told you that? God, I don't believe her. When did she say that to you?" She didn't wait for an answer. "She doesn't need to stay there. I've told her a million times to get her own apartment. Maw Maw and Poppy are still okay, they can take care of Charles."

"But MawMaw is so fat..." Jennifer says cautiously. "Will you get fat like MawMaw when you're old?"

"Absolutely not. Do you see me getting fat now? She's always been fat. It's not like Ellie really does anything, anyway. Why do you think I brought that meatloaf over?"

"Because Charles and Poppy must get tired of grilled cheese." Jennifer gives her line of the litany in a sing song. She blows her wispy bangs off her forehead, aping her mother's irritation.

"I guess they must." Madalaine feels drained and falls silent for several minutes as the car passes through aging downtown Maysfield, past Gosset's Drugstore, Lorenz Jewelry, and the hundred twenty year old courthouse, into an area still solidly settled in middle class. The homes here aren't new, but they're more substantial, some brick, some aluminum sided, and there is landscaping. How to keep the house chews at Madalaine's mind. She absolutely does not want to move back into an area like the she grew up in, a scant step above the white trash, who were a scant step above the blacks in Maysfield. All the boundaries on that miserable west side were blurry, though. There wasn't that much difference in the run-down, patched-roof houses, but the white streets mostly had sidewalks and got electricity back quicker after a lightening storm than the mixed and all-black ones. Her parents' house has a sidewalk in front of it all right, but it's a slatternly

place, constructed forty years ago by an unexacting builder and little repaired since.

“Will Brian be home yet?” Jennifer says tentatively, risking a change of subject.

“He should be, honey. Aunt Lydie was going to let Claire have her car this afternoon, and Claire’s going to run Brian home after...I don’t remember, some meeting at school. That was nice of Claire, don’t you think, to say Brian and Christy could double with her and Keith to the prom? I really didn’t want him driving. I know Aunt Lydie suggested it, but, still it was nice of Claire to go along with it.”

“You let him drive me,” Jennifer observes, a little miffed.

“Oh sweetheart, that’s different. I don’t have to worry about you trying to sit on his lap to make kissy face while he’s driving now, do I? Here, come on, climb over the seat and come up front with me.”

Jennifer hesitates a moment but then complies, her coat legs folding and then depositing her sideways into the front seat. Her mother laughs and reaches over to help her right herself, then caresses her hair, long as Ellie’s and Claire’s, but downy and flyaway, angel hair on a Christmas tree. Clips meant to hold ponytails slip right out of it because it is so thin. Madalaine is always after her to have it cut short, but Jennifer wants it to be like a cheerleader’s. Now Madalaine plays with the loose strands that have come loose from the rubber band to float beside Jennifer’s face and over her neck. She tucks one behind Jennifer’s ear, channeled neatly as a little whelk shell, nothing like Brian’s, oversized and raw-looking as his hands and feet. Madalaine has always observed the details of her children closely.

“I guess you’re getting too big to climb over the seat,” Madalaine says, a suppressed smile playing about the corners of her mouth. It’s important that Jennifer not think she was laughing at her.

“Mom, could you...I mean, could you, like, I mean, have another one...a baby?” Jennifer hesitates and lurches through the question.

“Are you wishing for one?”

“Sort of, so Melody won’t have anything over us any more, but, I don’t know, ’cause you said being a middle child is awful.”

Madalaine breathes in sharply. Her eyes fill and she lets go of the wheel to use a bare wrist to wipe the sudden overflow. She doesn’t answer for a moment, then exhales in a long blown-out sigh and rakes the same free hand through her straight hair. Its chin-length darkness shows odd strands here and there all over the top. When she looks in a morning mirror, she is often startled; her hair looks as though she’s walked through a faint spider web. It makes her unaccountably angry and she wonders if Lydie is coloring her hair these days. “I don’t want another baby,” she says, fighting to keep her tone light and losing right off. “I’ve got you, babe...” she sings, her voice wavery.

Madalaine signals left and turns onto the avenue that borders the section of neat cross-hatched streets that Jennifer calls her neighborhood. By the time they reach their brick ranch house, with its orderly yellow shutters and doors, three bedrooms and family room with a fireplace, neither has found anything else to say.