

PART ONE
October, 1985
Arkansas VA Hospital

Yet they are sleeping still

1

The hospital corridor formed a tunnel Katherine prayed would take her straight back home. She did not dare turn and run, for Doctor Spencer blocked her way, and she had nowhere to go but the sunroom.

"He's just over there," Spencer herded her with competent, clean hands. Perhaps psychiatrists had a thing about that, a symbolic washing of their hands to absolve all guilt.

She grasped at such ridiculous thoughts in an effort not to look toward Spencer's patient, who was still merely a shadow seated against the brilliant backlight of the tall windows. Bright bands of October sunlight spilled through the glass, bent up and over huge pots of ficus and fern to puddle on the sparkling tile. The squeak of her worn suede boots sounded much too loud as she approached the man in the wheelchair.

"Though I don't approve of tags," Spencer had said earlier in his office, "you should know the difference between a psychotic and a neurotic."

"Do I have to?"

Spencer interrupted her reverie. "Katherine, this is Glen Thomas. Glen, this is Katherine Kelly." Then he moved away, the coward, and left her to handle the awkward moment. Thomas obviously wasn't going to help any either. Too soon. Way too soon to care about someone else's wounds. Her own had scarcely healed. Picked at, they still bled.

"Glen loses touch with reality." Why did she continue to recall the worst of what Spencer had told her this morning in his office? Was losing touch with reality psychotic or neurotic? Why did it make a difference? Either one was still crazy.

Whatever, she couldn't remain here staring everywhere but at Glen Thomas, so she raised her head, tossed back an errant strand of hair, and met his gaze.

Nothing could have prepared her for the encounter. His brown eyes glittered golden in the sunlight, as fragile as fine crystal. In that brief first moment, they were all she saw. Multifaceted slivers of agony gleamed back at her. Not as if from a physical hurting, but more like fragments of a vicious emotional rape. She recalled the image of an injured hawk captured by well-meaning saviors. Its eyes, the color of Glen's, had that same expression as it alternately quivered in fear and lashed out in fury at all who offered help. Ultimately, the beautiful bird gave up, but the eyes never lost their hatred and despair.

Like his. Dear God, like his.

She forced herself to murmur a greeting and glanced at the canvas on which he'd been working. Much like the samples in Spencer's office, yet she gasped and pinched her mouth to prevent crying out. Looked away, then back again. The painting was hauntingly grotesque. Gray dripping trees set off cold blue figures in all manner of poses, mouths wide in soundless screams, some with no eyes, no arms, legs torn and scattered. Others held gory remains. Babies, women's breasts smeared over the entire

canvas beneath great globs of blued crimson that had to be blood. In this man's world there was no sun, no color but one, no hope of redemption.

Damn that Spencer for exposing her to this. Hadn't she gone through enough when Stan died? She refused to cry anymore. To keep from doing so, she gazed out the windows at the shaded, rolling green lawn, fallen leaves scattered over it like bright quilt scraps. Finally the trembling stopped, and she rubbed her damp palms on the legs of her jeans, lifted her shoulders, and turned back to meet that amber gaze. She felt as if they had taken hours to appraise each other, and Glen still hadn't acknowledged either the introduction or her greeting.

Someone had to do something, so she offered her hand without saying a word. He fumbled with a brush, lay it down, and reached for her, grabbing hold as if to halt a downward spiraling fall, his skin cold. The cracking voice startled her.

"I'm sorry, I don't remember your name."

She leaned forward to repeat it as if he might be hard of hearing and saw with dismay the white jagged scars around both his wrists. Without realizing what she was about to do, she touched them with trembling fingertips, and he captured her other hand too. She had no time to move. His clinging in silent desperation kept her bent over, his breath on her cheek, her nose filled with the smell of shampoo in his shaggy blond hair. She glanced around for Spencer. He was gone. In his place stood an orderly who rocked on his feet. Heel, toe, heel, toe, arms clasped behind his back. The dour expression told her nothing except that she was on her own unless attacked.

Unfamiliar odors of disinfectant and illness trickled into the atmosphere of forced normalcy in the airy room. No matter how many easy chairs they placed in careless precision, nor those fancy plants or lamps or books, this place was for suffering. It was for dying. Escape was her only thought, but this man held on to her, wouldn't let her go. If he had let go at this moment, though, she could not have left. Not after a glimpse at his hopelessness.

To break the somber mood, she smiled, felt like one of those circus clowns with its joviality painted on in thick colored grease. Such an awful lie. Dimples winked on in his cheeks, then went out. The eyes for that mere instant gave her a peek at his soul before disconnecting. A splatter of sunlight revealed scars on his face. Thin lines as if someone had tried to erase them but had not quite succeeded. Look away, she told herself. Do not stare at him.

The silent conversation had gone far enough. Though the painting horrified her, she locked her gaze there. It was easier than to think what had been done to him.

"How long have you been painting these?"

His voice, when he managed to use it, sounded ruptured, each word spoken low and soft and broken. "Who knows?"

"Are you from around here? Arkansas, I mean."

An expectant, hopeful reply. "Yes, around here. A long time ago."

Spencer had told her Glen needed someone to care about him, care about what he did and what he hoped to do. Could she be the one? He ensnared her, this frail and damaged man. She should never have entered this room if she hoped to leave unscathed. Besides, as long as he held her hands in his icy grip she could not think of pulling away.

"I paint too," she said. "I have a studio in Cedarville." Her voice caught, and she cleared her throat, went on. "That's where I live. Maybe I could join you here once in a while. We could paint together."

For an instant she hoped he'd say no and let her off the hook. But it wasn't going to be that easy, for even if he did, neither she nor Spencer could let that be the end of it. It was too late. She was trapped by his need.

"Paint nightmares, do you." His voice more a flat statement than a question.

She jerked away from the anger and bitterness in the question, and he turned loose of her as if from the same reaction.

She fought to keep the conversation moving.

"Sometimes artists do paint their nightmares. But then there's also what comes from the soul or what we see out there." She gestured toward the huge oak trees beyond the window, their leaves dancing toward the ground in graceful beauty. Turned back to the painting before him. "You're too talented to continue to paint these."

His eyes widened, glistened with moisture, and she feared for a moment he would burst out crying. He didn't, so she relaxed and sat in a chair near him. On a table at his side, the paints, a jar of cleaner and pots of linseed oil and thinner among the messy tubes, all exuded a comfortable familiarity, an aroma that eased her tension. The palette held three splashes of color. Umber, blue, and crimson. Beside them, mocking in its purity, roiled a snake of titanium white.

Painting was all that had saved her sanity following Stan's death, and it could be a great catharsis, just smearing paint on a pure white canvas. She understood this man's need to do so, but what was coming from his damaged soul endangered his well being. Easy to see why Spencer thought she could help him. But why had he thought she would? When she glanced back at Glen, he stared at her, and she knew the answer to that.

"If I came back next week, could we paint together?" she asked.

His gaze never wavered, as if he were waiting for something more from her. Unable to meet the challenge, she glanced away.

His question was abrupt. "Do you have bad dreams?" His question abrupt.

A closer look revealed deep creases around his mouth, making him appear older than his thirty-one years, and a rumpled scar doctors hadn't quite been able to fix tucked under his jawline.

"Of course, everyone does." Night after night till she had almost gone mad. Stan falling, her trying to catch him, tumbling after him.

"Do they?" Searching eyes dug deep into her soul, asked if she lied.

Reach out to him, Spencer had advised, and he'll respond.

Glen's pale fingers, two permanently bent at the knuckle, moved minutely into a patch of afternoon sunlight on the arm of the chair. So she took the hand in hers, again startled by the deadly coldness of his flesh. Her heart jerked painfully when he turned his luminous eyes toward her, eyes that overflowed with questions she couldn't decipher, much less answer.

In a voice falsely bright, she said, "We'll start by doing some sketches. I'll come back next week. This fall weather is lovely. If it's a nice day, we'll go outside and do some charcoal drawings."

"I don't go out." The voice frozen over like puddles in January.

"Doctor Spencer tells me you're going home soon. You'll have to go out then. Might as well start now as later."

Until that moment she hadn't realized she was still touching him. Without replying, he turned his hand over under hers and squeezed her fingers. His expression denied something. What?

Encouraged by what little adverse reaction he'd shown, she said, "Paint something for me this week. Not like that." She gestured at the easel. "Something cool, soothing, peaceful. Whatever comes to mind."

"There's nothing left in me but that." So softly spoken she barely heard. He jerked from her touch, shouted something she couldn't understand, and she leaped backward. He pounded his chest until she feared he would shatter apart. Pointing first at the painting, then at her, he went on in a flat monotone of denial. "I don't want you coming back here. There is no peace in here. It won't work." A fist clenched over his heart.

What did he mean no peace in here? "It will work if you want it to."

"Since when did what the fuck I want matter?" The ragged whisper tore through her.

The guard stopped rocking on his heels and stood alert, ready to move. She blinked away sorrowful tears. How could they think of letting him go home like this? She needed badly to say the right thing, something that would make this man accept her.

"His sister is a good woman," Spencer had told her, "but she's so sorry for him, so sympathetic that she brings out the very worst, his own self-pity. Treats him like a child. He has to be made to fight back, to stop laying all his problems out as excuses for not doing anything constructive with his life. A therapy we can all live with. He must learn to deal with reality again. Something has to work, or he is lost."

Glen closed his eyes and rubbed his thumbs aimlessly on the arms of the wheelchair, producing a muted squeak, pulling her away from her reverie.

"You want to sit here and waste away, I guess that's up to you," she snapped.

He raised his fine sandy brows. For a moment she could see an urge to retaliate flash over his features. He settled for continuing to glare at her, as if he were studying an idea he'd not yet considered.

Before she could lose her composure, she rose. "I'll be back next Friday, then. See you. Okay?" The silly fluttering of her fingers faded with the babbling words, and she escaped before her rubbery legs dumped her to the floor.

She hadn't felt so bereft since Stan's funeral eight months earlier.

Spencer leaned against the wall just outside the sunroom, his face one of eager anticipation. She didn't disappoint him.

"I don't think I can do this. What do you expect of me, anyway? My God. How in hell could that happen to him?"

"Prisoner of war camp. More than nine years, best we can figure."

"War? What war?"

"Vietnam."

"That war's been over a long time. Surely he hasn't been like this all those years."

"Oh, no. He'd be dead if he had. In fact—"

"Damn you, Spencer. If you tell me what I do here is a matter of life or death, I'll punch you, so help me." She sucked in a breath. "How? Tell me about it, and I'll try to keep my big mouth shut."

"An intriguing promise." He gave them both a chance to relieve some pressure with smiles. "Let's go get some coffee and sit. It's a long story."

"And you want a chance to think up enough embellishments to hook me."

He didn't deny the accusation.

They strolled together, his hand scarcely touching her bare elbow. She could feel Glen Thomas' eyes boring through her shoulder blades, but didn't turn around.

The psychiatrist's office was much like the man. Rumpled, disjointed, and comfortable. She sat in a chair from which he'd removed a magazine on horses and a *National Geographic*. He sank into the deep cushions of a couch opposite her.

"Usually I have different seating arrangements, but I expect this will probably work out just as well." He stretched out his long legs, crossed at the ankles, and scrunched in the corner.

"Well?" She sipped from the Styrofoam cup of bland coffee.

He did the same. "Ah, yes. Vietnam. He came home in '83."

"But I thought—"

"Ah." He touched his lips, dark eyes glittering at her. "Hear me out as you promised. It will do no good for this to go further than this room. In fact it wouldn't be the wisest move on your part. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

She nodded and reacted by holding a finger over her lips. This was all too histrionic for her taste, but she waited.

"There is an organization based in California. No names are necessary. They are in and out of Asia on a regular basis. In fact most of them are Laotians, and they are experts at what they do. For enough money or other considerations, they, shall we say, perform rescue missions. They ran across Thomas crouched in a four by four foot cane cage hanging in a tree in the forest. Like a goddamned animal. Evidently, the group who had him had been scared off before they could drag him along. By that time, he wouldn't have been doing any moving on his own. He had been tortured on a regular basis. Kept alive as a chip in the politics of bargaining with the United States. Perhaps they abandoned him for expediency's sake. Things were warming up over there on this MIA thing. Anyway, these mercs decided to lift him out along with their original objective, a Senator's son-in-law.

"Thomas, it seems was a navy chopper pilot, and he went down during a dust-off mission that went awry. It was presumed that no one came out of it alive, and they all were classified MIA. After he was, uh, expatriated, they kept him in a hospital out on the coast for several months, patching him up as best they could, then quietly put him on a plane and sent him home to his sister. It rated a small notice in the local paper, but it sounded as if he'd been in hospitals for a long period of time. Vague stuff that raised no questions.

Uncomfortable, she shifted, stared at Spencer, then through the glass into the sunroom where Glen continued to smear paint on the canvas as if she had never interrupted him.

Dear God. Nine years kept in a cage and tortured. That would destroy anyone.

"Anyway, the Thomas family owns a farm outside Cedarville, and he lived there, oh, up until a little over a year ago, managing somehow to get through the days, though I gather from what his sister told me, some of them were hell and all his nights were one continuous nightmare. One night, he lost it. Became that man in the cage trying to kill his captors. Julia called the sheriff only because she didn't know what else to do. After a night in the county lock-up, we got him. He just shut down. Quit walking, tried to quit eating and sleeping, got hold of a blade from somewhere and slit his wrists.

"Then, out of the blue a couple of months ago, he asked for paints, canvas, brushes, and a wheelchair. God only knows what prompted it, but he started painting. At first he couldn't even sit up without being tied in. He ate and exercised and turned out those hideous canvases, as if trying to tell us something, send us a message. One he couldn't bear to speak aloud. If we could somehow keep him at it, make him want something more, goddammit, anything....

"He has to have been tough as hell to come this far, and I can't let him down. But I'm at my wit's end. We've never treated anyone with his history of captivity and abuse. The results go far beyond post traumatic stress syndrome. Someone has to help him—"

"And you think that someone is me?" Incredible as it sounded, she could do it. At least give him an outlet. A blank canvas on which to express himself. Maybe.

"Professor Endlebeck says you're a damn fine artist and teacher, a sympathetic human being. Says you minored in psychology and sociology."

"Spencer, don't push it. Endlebeck didn't say that about the sympathetic human being. He never would have said such a thing. Besides, we've known each other a long time. Would you believe all that about me?"

"It's you who doesn't believe it." He smiled, but behind it was a silent, morose plea.

For a moment, she couldn't think of a thing to say, stuttered into something. "I-uh-I thought you doctors didn't get involved with your patients." She tilted her head, studied his dark eyes for a moment. "You love him, don't you?"

"If I had a son ... something like this ... my God, I would hope ... it's difficult to get someone to care about themselves if you don't care yourself. Yes, I love him. It begins with giving a damn, then moves on. The bravery of someone like him is unbelievable. I abhor what happened to him while he was still just a green kid. If I could help just one like him, if you could, Katherine. I promise you more satisfaction than you could possibly dream of ... just to see him smile. Once."

She stared at the cuffs of his brown slacks, slid her gaze up the long, gangly figure, the jacket with its leather elbow patches, the features that were all extreme unto themselves. Eyes too large, nose too long, lips too thick. He was trying very hard to hide a smugness that should have angered her, but didn't. The bait was cast, and the bastard knew she couldn't help but bite.

"And all I have to do is come here once a week, help him with his paintings, steer him away from those monstrosities?" She cast a quick look through the glass.

"Well, that and after he goes home let him come to your studio as a private student. They have the money to pay whatever you care to charge. That isn't the problem."

"Don't you dare suggest that all I care about is getting paid for this." She started to rise from the chair, and he held up large hands in supplication.

"Hey, we all have to make a living. I get paid too. So cool down, Kate."

"Katherine. My name is Katherine. Don't call me Kate. You don't know me that well."

"And only your dead husband called you Kate." He watched her over tensed fingers. "So what do you care about, Katherine Kelly? Stan's been dead eight months, and what do you care about this very minute? Why do you continue to exist? What is your purpose?"

"You're a real son of a bitch, you know that?"

"Why? Because I know my job?"

"No, because you're so damned self-effacing about it."

"Well, that would indeed be the day." He laughed, a strained laugh, and she made herself join him.

A while later, standing outside in the parking lot, she stared up at the windows in the three-story brick hospital, gleaming in the golden dusk. Which room was Glen's? A puff of wind blew her shoulder length hair across her face, and she shoved it back angrily. Like everything else she'd let go since Stan's death, the auburn strands were unkempt. There were smudges under her eyes from a combination of lack of sleep and crying too much. Every morning she gazed upon herself in the bathroom mirror and did not know the woman who looked back at her. A woman of forty who looked much older. God, she would soon be forty-one. And she was a mess, but up until this moment she hadn't really cared.

Stan had loved her hair, used to tousle it, sometimes at the most inopportune moments when she was concentrating on painting or studying for an exam. And she would get exasperated and push him away. So impatient then. Probably because she waited so long to get her education and felt as if time were passing her by. Then, when she had it all, came the cruelest of jokes. God declared she could have everything she wanted but happiness. In retaliation she eradicated God from what remained of her life.

For a long time after that she hadn't wanted anything. Did she want this? Away from the influence of those wounded eyes and Spencer's suspicious manner, she wasn't sure if she could come back the following week after all.

She wheeled her blue and silver van in a wide circle and left the parking lot.

2

That night Katherine fell easily into her old habit of lounging on the fur rug in front of the fireplace, loose caftan pulled around her feet while she sipped at homemade elderberry wine and conjured up fantasies of Stan.

Her parents had died within six months of each other when she was barely eighteen. By the time she was nineteen, there was Stan, taking over where they left off. Caring for her, soothing her heartache when she found she could not bear children, encouraging her in her mid-thirties to go back to college and finish her education.

Dragging herself away from the memories, she stared through the burgundy liquid at the dancing flames, then took a long drink, savoring a bite that edged the wine's smoothness. Why was everyone she loved dead? Their desertion had left her incomplete, unfinished, with no ambition or desire. To answer Spencer's question, she had no purpose.

From the shadows of the darkened room came the voice she had known so well for so long. "Come on, sweetheart. Time for bed."

"Oh, Stan. Oh, dear God, Stan. Why did you leave me?" Again with the tears, as if that would solve anything. When the only reply was the bright snap of the burning hickory logs, she banked the fire and trudged upstairs to bed.

The nightmare was long in coming and jerked her awake, her body bathed in perspiration. Men, thousands of them, screaming to get out of the gray jungles in which they were caught. Their mouths, open and silent, emitted gouts of torn organs. Their cries soundless because no one listened. How could she bear to return to that hospital and Glen's bleak world? She drew in a ragged breath. How could she not?

Sunday morning she carried her easel and paint box down the hillside past the studio to the creek. The bright, cerulean blue sky and the hills flamed in colors cried out to be captured on canvas. But her mind remained as dry and crackling as the leaves under her feet. Before she finished the preliminary sketch on the canvas, she knew the painting would be no good. Still, out of stubbornness, she kept at it until the light faded and a damp chill tumbled down on her from the mountains. Before gathering up her things, she scrubbed across the wet surface with a turpentine-soaked rag. Rivulets of thinned colors ran to the bottom and dripped onto the ground.

Everything she did that week bespoke of an inexplicable anger. By the end of her art classes on Thursday evening, she was exhausted. She hadn't slept and had eaten little all week, but she would go to the hospital tomorrow. It wasn't a decision she felt comfortable with, but any other would have been intolerable. Guilt over things left undone never rested easy with her.

After the last student left, she remained in the studio. Sat alone in the room among the things she most loved, inhaling the oily odors. The spacious workroom bubbled with Stan's laughter, something she had not heard since his death. What an odd thing. Until now all she had remembered were her own regrets at things she failed to do. Like telling him goodbye or how much she adored him. Now, he was laughing?

He built her the studio, put in the skylight, and patiently resealed it after every rain until it quit leaking. She could still see him standing on the sturdy worktable, calling down to her, calling her Katie darlin'. He had always called her that, as if it were one word.

She jumped up, gazed around the room at the paintings on the walls, at the easels and paint-smeared rags, and somebody's empty Pepsi can overturned on the long table. Shrugging wearily, she walked out the door and closed it behind her.

3

Spencer peered up through his eyelashes. "You look terrible, Katherine."

"I appreciate that."

He fluttered his fingertips over the desk top, a nervous move that sent a few papers flying.

"How do you find anything in that mess?" She dropped into the chair across from him.

"Bet you've got nice legs."

"What?"

"I said—"

"I heard you."

"If you'd wear something besides jeans, they'd show."

"You sound angry. What are you so mad about, anyway? You wear that same ratty brown jacket day in, day out."

"How about some properly placed outrage?"

"About what? I'm not sure I—"

"Yes, you do know what I'm getting at. You going to mourn in silence the rest of your life, or scream and stomp and cry, then get on with it?"

She straightened, drew her feet under the chair, crossed her ankles, and flashed him an icy stare.

He smiled. "I like you, Katherine Kelly. Always have."

She tilted her head, let the anger flow away. Not sure she could return the compliment, she said nothing.

"You're gutsy. You just don't know it yet."

Despite herself, she laughed. "What kind of doctor talks like that?"

His merriment joined hers for a moment, but then he sobered. "Glen didn't think you'd come back."

"Oh?" She picked at a fingernail. "I'm not sure I thought so either."

"Don't try to lie to him about your motives."

"That would be hard since I'm not sure yet what they are."

"I know you're not, but you will be. And Katherine?" He stood and went to a window. She watched him and waited. When he turned he was serious. "He's strangely perceptive or maybe just overly suspicious. Of pity, of pretension. All you really have to do is care and show it, otherwise he'll see right through you."

She picked up her case. "That I can do. Just tell me one thing. What's the difference between pity and compassion?"

"Pity is feeling sorry. Compassion is doing something about it." Spencer looked quite pleased with himself.

She waited until she left the office before muttering aloud, "Thinks he's got a two-for-one sale." The doctor had subtly taken her on as an unofficial patient, but that didn't upset her. What did was the idea of facing Glen and those mournful, accusing golden eyes.

Two elderly gentlemen sat across the sunroom from Glen, playing checkers in front of one of the windows. The soft murmur of their voices followed her across the room. His back was to her, and he sat so still he might be asleep. His overseer slumped on a couch against the wall, concentrating on a magazine. He looked up at the sound of her footsteps, put down the magazine, rose, and went to the wheelchair. The two men spoke in muted tones for a moment, then Glen turned the chair slowly toward her.

He may not have expected her, but he was quick with an angry greeting. "Come back to get another look at the crazy guy, did you?"

She set down the case, took the chair the orderly had placed near Glen, and lay her hand easily on his arm. Thin flesh corded under her touch.

"Why are you angry with me?"

He refused to look at her, glared instead at her long, narrow fingers, the unpolished, bluntly cut nails, then put his other hand over hers. The touch was wary and insecure, his words a challenge. "I didn't do the painting you wanted."

"It's okay. You'll do it next time."

"Will I?" Again, that defiance.

She tilted her head toward the hovering orderly. "What's his name?"

"Harry. He's your bodyguard."

"I thought he was yours."

"Mine? I don't" He peered at her broad grin. His dimples winked on and off in an almost smile.

If that smile ever reached his eyes—but that was just another if to cloud her life. Probably his, too.

"Harry is going to take us somewhere we can work, aren't you Harry?" It amused her to catch the somber faced man off guard. He fussed around with the magazines for a minute before starting toward them.

She lay her case in Glen's lap and signaled Harry to lead the way. "I'll push," she told them both.

"I can do it," Glen objected.

"Be a gentleman and carry my books." She lay them carefully in his lap, afraid she might break him, and maneuvered the chair out the double glass doors, following Harry onto the back lawn.

They moved beneath giant oaks along a curving blacktop path. It sloped gently. Halfway down the incline a sycamore had dropped huge, curly leaves that crunched underfoot. The air smelled bright and clean, with only a smidgeon of the town's industriousness. At the bottom they came upon a small creek that murmured over its rocky bed. The largest of several oaks clung to the edge of the opposite bank, its mammoth roots jutting out above the water. The tree must have stood as a sentinel when the Union soldiers marched through over a century earlier. Warm sunlight filtered between half-naked branches to form patches of yellow across an old wooden bench that faced the stream.

Harry sat on the far end, leaving the other end free for her. Glen handed her the heavy case, his strength surprising her. She set it down. No one said anything, and the moment hung there, untouchable and precious. A small gray squirrel darted down the tree across the way. Holding its tiny feet as if praying, the animal stared at them with bright eyes. The silky tail twitched, once, twice, again.

With an unnatural ease she lay her hand on Glen's arm, and together they watched the squirrel until it leaped high into the trees and raced away, scolding.

In the deepening silence, she became conscious of the warmth of his skin under her palm, the slight movement of muscles and tendons as he reached and took a strand of her hair between thumb and fingers. He held it a moment, then caressed the curve of her cheek, cupping his palm over her ear. Without moving she turned her eyes toward him. Her breathing was shallow, her heartbeat thundering. She should be afraid. But this man she scarcely knew looked at her with eyes full of wonderment, and she smiled.

"What's your name?" His tone sounded puzzled.

"Katherine." Her breath trembled.

His fingertips trailed across her cheek, like a butterfly tasting honey. He didn't speak or alter his expression. A ripple passed through her, and she closed her eyes for a moment of sheer and unexpected pleasure. He took his hand away, suspending it in

front of her breasts. She glanced at Harry, who nodded his head and continued to watch as if they were specimens in a lab.

Lower lip caught in her teeth, she waited for Glen to move or say something. He reached toward the top button of her blouse. A muscle across her back twitched, yet she remained immobile. When his cool fingers contacted her warm skin, he licked his lips, and she did the same.

"May I call you Katie?" he whispered.

Her breath drifted out when he took his hand away, and for a brief moment she wanted him to touch her, slide his hand under the fabric, and hold her aching breast in his palm.

Katie? Katie darlin'. Only Stan called her Katie.

"Yes, call me Katie." Maybe that would chase away the ghosts or at the very least soften the loneliness.

His eyes were moist and bright and aimed at her, and she wanted to shout at him not to look at her that way. She couldn't help him, not with the dark foreboding questions he never asked but questions always present..

With a businesslike gesture, she picked up the case and snapped it open, took out pads, pencils, short fat pieces of grainy charcoal, and a large red eraser.

"Time we got busy."

He accepted the proffered materials and opened the tablet to a glaring white page. They sketched in silence, the scratch of the charcoal across the paper loud above the faraway traffic sounds. She made long heavy strokes over the page, capturing the magnificence of the great trees and the soft contour of the ground beneath. When she finally looked up to see what he was doing, he sat staring at her. Without a word, he handed her his sheet of thick paper. He had done a full page study of her face. Fine hair blew gently around high cheek bones, one strand across the small nose. He had captured her round chin and long neck. The lips were soft but unsmiling, and she glanced from under half-closed lids, as if expecting something wonderful to happen at any moment.

He had made her beautiful, and she couldn't believe he saw her like that. There were no crow's feet, no smudges beneath the eyes, no puffiness at their corners. She might have been twenty instead of forty.

She took the drawing. "That's really very good." That was inane, but it seemed to satisfy him.

After she shared her sketch with him, he began another of his own. She watched the horror grow on the paper, his face drawn tight while he struggled to capture what was before him. All he found were the tormented memories pouring from the charcoal like oozing sores. Tortured and deformed faces grew from within the shadows of skeletal trees. His breath caught in his thin chest like growing sobs. The air around her shoulders turned frigid, the branches of the trees danced in a macabre ballet. She snatched the charcoal from him, slipped the paper from his fingers, and ripped it in half.

He sat there a moment staring at his empty hands, then gazed through her and asked, "Are you going to leave now?"

"No. No, it's okay. But I'm cold, let's go inside."

He nodded and the expression on his face, even his restless body language, told her he thought she was lying to him. He must think that the minute they reached the

safety of the hospital, she would abandon him. Her heart jerked in her chest. Just as he had been abandoned over there so long ago, if what Spencer said was true. So she didn't rise, but remained sitting there to reassure him everything was fine. Desperately he blurted an explanation she found quite unnerving.

"I can't get them out of my mind, you know. They all just keep dying on me. I couldn't hear their screams over the noise of the chopper, but I can hear them now. Doesn't make sense, I know."

She hugged herself and shivered.

"Cages don't always have bars, do they, Katie?" He reached out and touched her. She flinched.

Where had all this come from? His compulsive need to speak of the horrors? The deep insight he had into his own hopelessness? As quickly as the mood had come upon him, it was gone. He smiled at her. Not a good smile, not at all. It gave her the chills.

"I was going to paint you a chocolate ice cream cone until I decided you weren't coming back. That's why I didn't do the painting. Is it okay?"

The agility of his mind jumps evaded her, and it took a moment for her to remember she'd asked him to paint something cool and soothing. His asking if it was okay placed them in a peculiar relationship of student and teacher. Or did it go deeper than that? Was he asking his captor to give him permission to do something? She had to turn away so he couldn't see the tears in her eyes.

"It's okay," she finally managed in a hoarse voice.

"All the other guys wanted steak and French fries, things like that, but I craved chocolate ice cream. All I wanted."

All the other guys? For God's sake, how many were there left over there to rot? She glanced up, saw he was waiting for her to say something. "What do you want now?" She hoped for a simple wish that she could somehow magically grant.

"Chocolate ice cream." Mischief lit his eyes. A brief promise that perhaps he would recover after all.

She gathered their things and stuffed them into the worn, paint-smeared case, set it once more in his lap, and took him back, Henry trailing along behind like a patient dog.

They were inside before Glen spoke again. "Do you have to go right away?"

With no place to go, she could not lie to make her escape, so she didn't. "No, I don't have to leave yet."

A smile almost reached his eyes, and she marveled at the joy it gave her.

"Talk to me, then. Tell me things."

Harry left them in a secluded corner of the sunroom and went back to reading his magazine, as if he'd never been interrupted. She sat on the low couch, and Glen rolled the chair as close to her as he could, touching her knees with his. Unabashed, he reached for her hands, held them while she talked, clasping them together over his knees.

He needed to eat more, his bones lay just beneath the flesh.

"There are movies we can watch at home on our television sets. And we sent the first Space Shuttle up in 1981." His eyes widened, but he said nothing. "Elvis died in 1977."

"Hound Dog," he murmured, then stopped her, fingers squeezing her hands. "I want to know about you."

"Like what?" This was not supposed to get personal, but it was rapidly doing so, and she was frightened in a way she hadn't expected.

"Family, friends, what you do."

"No one, nothing. I don't do anything."

He fingered her gold wedding band, rubbing at it so it turned round and round on her finger.

"He's dead," she whispered. Stan left me. Stan's gone. But dear God, she'd never said aloud simply he's dead. Perhaps because the words were so final, so empty of future and hope and security. In the back of her mind, the thud of a door closing. She collapsed to her knees on the floor beside him. He held her head in his lap, patting her back clumsily and touching her hair while she cried, a final mourning of Stan's death.

"Mrs. Kelly," someone said.

She lifted her head. Harry stood over her with a strange expression on his face. Like he wanted to pull her away from his patient. His charge.

"They're serving supper. He has to go now. I'm real sorry."

Maybe he thought they were being intimate. Strange, foolish man.

The room was lit against a closing darkness. How long had she been here? She sniffed and wiped her nose with the back of her hand. When she stood, Glen held on to her hand with a firm grip. The weakness of the moment had overcome her stoic reserve, leaving her feeling damn stupid. She was ready to leave, but Glen wouldn't let go. Harry tried to get behind the chair, and Glen turned on him.

"Just a goddamned minute." Chords stood out on his neck, his face turned red. "We're not through yet."

"It's okay." She caught his attention and nodded, smiled. "I have to go. It's all right."

"Are you?"

"Of course I am. I shouldn't ... I mean I didn't intend to do that. I apologize."

"No, don't. It's okay." His effort at controlling the outburst was amazing.

She wanted to take time to help him adjust to what had happened between them. Make him understand. But Harry insisted on inserting himself into the moment, his dark eyes impersonal and unreadable.

"I'm coming back here next Friday. I'd better get a painting, or you'll get an F. Got it?"

Glen snapped a mock salute and let her fingers slide from his other hand. "Yes, ma'am."

In the parking lot, she sucked in the frosty night air. She could still feel his touch, his hand on her back comforting her. This man who had nothing to live for, with eyes haunted by the horrors in his own personal valley of hell, had reached out and cared for her pain. An almost forgotten sense of clean pleasure flowed through her. She might not yet be free of her grief, but at least she was being offered a chance. But was it at Glen's expense? Would he now carry her sorrow as well as his own? Somehow she would have to fix this.

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