

Prologue

The Way

□My city is like a saltwater pearl, gently, gently cradled by the Wasatch mountains. The crescent of the foothills tenderly curve around the city like the palm of a mother's hand. It is a city one can not lose one's way in, for the range of shale and granite points North and South and the streets run parallel to their perfect inclination for true direction. Others intersect them in a grid that defies confusion.

So the cause for dissention in the family that autumn day was unnecessary. My mother was sitting in the navigator's seat in a brand new Chevy that she hardly ever drove because she had begun to suffer bouts of dizziness. I asked her for directions to Emigration Canyon. It was more for a refresher than born of actual need. I had been home to visit at least once or twice a year for many years and the plan of the city, coupled with its beauty, had not allowed me to forget very much about it. I had just written a novel in which the details of the place had risen, full-blown, from the characters I placed in this setting, like dust on a rarely traveled road. The particulars of this town had been so pervasive, so central to my soul, that no research was needed. I am a product of its wiles—that of the town and the state and the family that still lives there.

I was about to assemble a series of short memories about my family in this book, called *Harkening*. It is full of my recollections—real stories—that I couldn't work into my first book. I hoped that it would open dialogue between family members, work for us like therapy in printers' ink.

Anyway, when I asked Mom-Bertie for directions, I only needed a casual pointer.

“Take 13th South,” she said.

“That will work,” her sister said from the back seat. She was completely blind and giving advice from images still stored in memory. She should have dictated a book of her own, although the whole family thought she had no internal guidance system for anything creative. She had allowed herself to be convinced by them and had built her career around flow charts and yellow-lined pads.

Because the streets of Salt Lake City are geometrically aligned and the major streets are almost all through, there are any number of ways to get to 13th South. I took 21st South absently ignoring the advice of both of the women from the generation before mine. I put my arm out of the window to signal a right as I had done when I learned to drive on the very same streets.

“This isn’t 13th South,” Mom-Bertie said.

The streets had been marked recently with big green signs. They looked like the ones in Los Angeles, or Las Vegas or any number of towns. Here those signs seemed redundant.

“I know,” I said.

“I *told* you to go to 13th South.”

“I think I’ll eventually make it from here.”

“But 21st will take you directly onto the freeway.” Mother’s eyes were wide. Whisps of silver that had once been only at her temples had worked to gray her entire demeanor. She hated being eighty-three, hated that her legs swelled, that her feet got numb. The freeway was being resurfaced and redesigned to accommodate the Olympic

crowds. She wasn't so fond of them anyway and now they were like the ghosts of technology to come. Things to be avoided at all costs.

"It will be OK. I'll zigzag over to 13th."

"This is wrong." There was silence in the car. Only the hum the window as I rolled it up, the whisper of the air conditioner. "This isn't 13th."

"Mom...."

I felt movement in the back seat. My aunt moved forward. I could feel her presence at the nape of my neck. "In the long run it doesn't make any frigging difference," she said. Her voice had changed from the way I remembered it. It was a vibrato, singing words high and wavering like the sound of wind in the bamboo I had planted at home. "There's more than one way to get there."

I stifled a laugh. At her voice. At her vehemence. At her support. And I reflected that I had just thought of California as home. Mom-Bertie shot her a look I remembered from my childhood.

My aunt sat back in her seat, tightened her seatbelt and folded her arms in a tight bow, her elbows flapping with decision across her ribs. "There's more than one way to get there," she said.