

Remembrance
By Velda Brotherton

Chapter One

Luke 22 19 ...do this in remembrance of me.

Tiny bits of daylight dribbled through gaps in the ivory drapes. Groaning, Becca fumbled around on the night stand, knocked something off.

Pills. They rattled from the bottle when it hit the carpet. Zoloft? Valium? Prozac?

Morning again. Dear God, when would it end?

When she had the courage to make it end, that's when.

If she didn't wake up, he would still be alive.

No good. She had to move, function. Open one eye, then the other. Blink. Wait for the devastation to hit.

Downstairs the phone rang, and she stared at the muted instrument beside the bed.

Go away. I'm not home. Rebecca Kraft is out. Gone. Left. She doesn't live here anymore.

After a while the ringing stopped. She swung her legs from under the sheet, felt hard little cylinders underfoot. Capsules filled with blessed oblivion. Another groan.

God, she was pitiful. Pathetic.

There was nothing for it but to get out of bed. Eyes squeezed shut, she staggered into the bathroom, pulled up her nightgown, and plunked down, landing precisely on the commode.

Getting better at that all the time. Could be blind and get along just fine. Could be dead and get along better.

Finished with that chore, she moved in front of the mirror and eased one eye open, then the other. Opened her mouth and stuck out a coated tongue.

You're a mess, Becca. What would Jeremiah think if he could see you now?

Tear-filled, bloodshot eyes stared from the glass. How long had she made it this time without thinking her son's name? Two minutes, three? Maybe she'd get a stopwatch, start timing it. Write it down.

Hell, after four-hundred-sixty-nine days, you'd think she could manage five or ten minutes without-... If it's four-hundred-sixty-nine days, why then it must be April 12.

That's it, girl, hang in there. Dredge up all the silliness you can. Forget. Forget.

Brush your teeth, wash your face, comb your hair. Do something besides-... die. She made her way through each task murmuring the mantra over and over.

Teeth, face, hair. Teeth, face, hair.

Teeth, god-dammit. Face, god-dammit. Hair, god-dammit.

The phone ~~started to ring~~ rang again.

"If you want to talk to me, Jonathan, then come to the house. Don't keep calling me 'cause you're too much of a coward to face the mother of your dead son."

You bastard.

But he wouldn't. Hadn't been out here once all winter, not even for the anniversary of Jeremiah's death.

Someone banged on the front door.

Oh, my God! My God. The room tilted... whirled.

When she opened the door there they were. Two of them. Detectives, they must've been, because they didn't have on uniforms. One a woman. She flashed the badge, the man didn't... wouldn't look at her. Stared over her shoulder into the house, still decorated for Christmas. Lights gleaming, the heated aroma of the huge pine tree seeping around her shoulders into the brisk, cold night.

"Mrs. Kraft?" The woman asked, pity softening her official tone. "Do you have a son... Jeremiah?"

They knew she did. Of course, she did. Well, she had, anyway. Until they came to the door. For an instant there, she'd thought it was David they were talking about, off in Europe bumming around. David who had stepped in front of a car, or fallen in with bad company, or been shot by some Irish Catholic soldier.

Would it have been worse, better, or the same, had it been her other son who died that night? Dear God, how could she even wonder such a thing?

Downstairs, someone banged again, then leaned on the damned doorbell. She looped an arm over her head to stop it exploding.

"Go away, go away." The shout only added to the painful cacophony.

Not the cops, surely. Come to tell her Jeremiah was dead all over again. She wanted to scream, but instead staggered across the bedroom and opened the door. Glanced down at herself. Dirty gown, nipples like matching pearls beneath the stained blue satin.

Who the hell cared, anyway?

Gripping the balcony rail, she skidded down the carpeted stairs, rather proud that she didn't tumble head over toenails. The drugs made her dizzy, but by God, she'd take them if she wanted to. Shuffling through the hallway, she grasped the cold knob in the center of the wide door and swung the pretentious thing open. Hanging on. Peering out.

A young man stood there, sandy hair windblown, scowling furiously, holding out a rolled newspaper.

Jeremiah? Oh, God, my baby.

For a moment, a flickering moment, she'd thought—but, no.

"Mrs. Kraft?"

"What?"

"Mrs. Kraft, it's me, Len. Ma'am, you haven't picked up your papers in a while. Uh, I thought maybe, uh, ma'am, are you okay?"

She leaned against the jamb, squinted at him. "Why would I be okay? Of course I'm not okay. Stop bringing them, then. I don't need them."

He shrugged, continued to hold out the folded paper.

With a hand that shook, she took it, just to get him to stop poking it at her.

"I'd be glad to gather these up for you, ma'am. Put 'em out in the trash." He had begun to look at her as if he expected some insane reaction, eyes jittering down to her breasts, then away, like he didn't want to look but couldn't help it.

"Do what you want with them."

He didn't move, continued to study her tits.

"What?"

He jerked his eyes away. "If you want me to cancel delivery, I'll leave a bill. You can pay it by mail."

"Fine."

"Mrs. Kraft?" He caught her glance with embarrassed eyes.

"What?" Why couldn't she stop saying that, like a dog barking over and over at some damned shadow?

"I'm sorry, I mean, I was sorry about Jerry. I never got to tell you that."

Jerry. Don't call him.... A whimper started deep in her belly, the pathetic wave of sound that erupted every time someone said they were sorry. A choking that kept her from speaking. This boy... this boy was alive and he dared tell her he was sorry Jeremiah was dead? Dared call him Jerry.

She leaned against the door frame clutching the hard roll of newspaper and watched Len write out a bill and rip it from a pad. When she didn't take it, he shrugged again and, leaning forward, gently tucked it into the paper she held. He exuded a whiff of dusty weeds and sweat and something sweet like grape or strawberry, maybe that goop boys spiked their hair with.

What a beautiful boy. So full of promise. God, how she wanted to gather him into her arms, tell him to be careful. There he stood, unaware of all the horrible things that could happen to him. She blinked, stepped back.

"Len? I think I remember you. He was older than you, my Jeremiah. Yes, I remember you. I wish.... Oh, do be careful. Don't let anything." Her throat closed over the words, her eyes filled.

In silence he studied the littered ground. Without looking at her again, he quickly gathered the mess from the porch and walked away, shoulders squared, all long legs and big, sneakered feet. How old? Fifteen, sixteen?

How old had he been when he'd known Jeremiah? They'd played baseball together. Basketball, too, maybe. Len looked like he was just now reaching Jeremiah's age. An age her son would always be. Forever, into eternity, he would be fifteen years, eleven months, and fourteen days old. And she would never see him again. Never.

All the kids in Chota went to the same school, so they all knew about the boy who carried a 4.0-plus grade point average, who was a math genius and a star basketball player. A boy who laughed easily, whose eyes were blue as periwinkles and twinkled as if frosted. The golden boy who once swam around the tip of Monkey Island to impress little Jillian Wentworth, whose parents owned three banks in Tulsa. And then she'd gone out with his best friend and broke Jeremiah's heart, for all of two days.

A boy whose heart would never be broken again.

There it came once more, the dreadful moan from out of the darkness of her soul. She backed up, closed the door, and leaned against it for a long while, staring through tears into the desolate bowels of the house. Listening to the echoes of her grief.

Much later, when she could breathe again, she put on a pot of coffee and

dragged open the ivory drapes to let in the morning sunlight sparkling off the lake beyond the sweep of deck. Bright, shiny, as if nothing bad had happened. Could happen. Not in a place like this. It was too early in the season for water sports, but a few boats plowed the surface, mostly fishermen. In another month or so families with summer homes along the lake shore would begin to arrive. Kids would water ski and swim, houseboats and cabin cruisers would form a crisscross of white wakes over the cobalt water. The smell of barbecue and hickory smoke and the sound of laughter would feather through the warm air, drifting from shore to shore.

And she would spend another summer without Jeremiah. Without Jonathan. Without anyone.

Maybe she'd call Christi, see if she wanted to come out for a few weeks when school let out. David was still off somewhere in the Middle East, living there now, in a place called Bazratian. No, that wasn't right. Something Bazra. Digging wells, building huts, doing God knew what with those mysterious women who covered their bodies from head to toe, dark eyes peering out like trapped, frightened animals. He'd flown home for the funeral, then right back out, square jaw clenched against the pain of losing his younger brother. But did he cry? Not on your life. Too much like his father.

Father of Jeremiah who'd made it very clear that she had to get past her grief before he'd come near her again.

"Face it, Becca," he'd said. "It's the way life is. You take your lumps and stand up again. Stop moping about and get busy. Go back to work with Lorraine. You always loved the coffee house. RainTree is your creation. For God's sake, do something. You can't expect to get over this until you work through all the stages of grief. You can't stay stuck in the middle the rest of your life. It's been nearly a year, for God's sake." This at Christmas, the last time she'd seen Jonathan.

As if a year were the time allotted to recover. Stages of grief. How like him to say something like that. She'd wanted to hit him, just haul off and beat on him until he came to his senses. But she didn't. That would've taken a passion she no longer possessed.

"You may be able to forget our beautiful son and act like nothing ever happened. I can't. I won't. You and David and Christi, all of you, just go on like he never existed."

He'd taken her by the shoulders then, gently, because Jonathan was never a violent man, though he could clench that granite jaw when the occasion called for it.

"Oh, Becca, that's so unfair. We loved Jeremiah, we'll always love Jeremiah. But he wouldn't want us to give up the rest of our lives to mourn him. He wouldn't. You've got to get hold of yourself, love. You shouldn't live this way and I can't. I won't. Not anymore. It's killing me. Killing us."

All but struck mute by his words, she managed, "God forbid you do something you don't want to do. Go. Stay in Tulsa and work and have lunch with clients and forget all about what happened. That's about all you ever did anyway."

He gazed at her for a long while, hazel eyes forlorn, then rubbed a thumb down her cheek. "That's not true, Becca. You know it isn't." Then he'd kissed her in the same spot where he'd touched her, lips so cold they branded her with his betrayal. Without another word, he turned and walked out the door, closing it oh, so

softly. Just like him.

She raced across the room, flung it open and shouted at him. "Why don't you get mad, Jonathan? Slam the damn thing." And she'd done just that, so hard the crystal porpoise David had sent from London for her forty-eighth birthday this spring fell from the corner shelf in the foyer and shattered into jagged pieces across the ivory terrazzo stones.

That had been the day after Christmas and just before the anniversary of Jeremiah's death, December 29th. Jonathan hadn't been back since, though he called at least twice a week. Sometimes, like today, she didn't answer. But she knew it was him, same as she knew her life was over.

She hadn't seen David since he stalked away from Jeremiah's funeral, shoulders hugged up to his ears against the bitter cold wind.

In spite of what she'd said about Jonathan's never being there, she missed the times they had spent together. Mornings sitting on the deck drinking coffee and eating those gooey sweet rolls he loved so much, and never gained an ounce from. Still looking his old sturdy self and handsome as that boy she'd met in college and fallen for almost before they exchanged a word. And all those years later, sitting together, laughing and discussing the kids while a gentle breeze off the lake tousled his silver-streaked auburn hair so he looked young again. Where had it all gone? Why couldn't they have held on to it through the tragedy? Lent each other enough support to struggle through.

Because he knew, that's why. He knew that not all the support in the world would have gotten her through Jeremiah's death. Jon was right. She was stuck as if in quicksand, could do nothing about it. Each time she considered the idea of stepping out into the sunlight, offering her flushed cheeks to the wind's caress, heading with purpose to the silver Nissan in the garage and driving into Chota to RainTree, she fell into an even deeper funk.

Sighing, she poured coffee and sat down, hands wrapped around the mug as if they were cold. Dead. The newspaper she'd brought in lay open on the table, and the name in a headline caught her eye. Letting go the cup, sloshing liquid everywhere, she pawed at the pages, squinted at the headline—PELL RELEASED TODAY

Flattening the paper under both palms, she smoothed down the dampened wrinkles with fingers that shook as if palsied. A dark arrow of pain shot through her heart, making her gasp. Blood roared in her ears. Darkness threatened her vision until she could scarcely read the small print under the headline.

Didn't want to anyway. Wanted to burn the damned thing, make the reality go away. But she had to know. Picked it up. Read.

Lucas Pell reached the age of accountability today and was released from Juvenile Detention where he has been held since December of 2008.

Because Pell was a juvenile at the time of his arrest, no details were available as to the charges, but Pell said that he would continue to live in Chota where he grew up.

"Everyone in town knows what happened," he told the Sentinel. "It's a joke to say different. And I'm so sorry for causing those good folks grief. I will do anything to

make up for what I did.”

Pell spoke to this reporter candidly, saying that he hopes the community will understand how he feels about what he did and forgive him.

“I would like a chance to make up for what happened,” he added. “Especially to that poor family. I did a terrible thing to them and I hope to make it right.”

Becca clawed the paper into a ball, threw it across the room. “Little bastard. Make it right.”

The telephone rang and she stared at it through half a dozen long tones, then picked up.

“Becky?” Lorraine. Her best friend.

“Yes, it’s me.”

“Did you hear that Lucas—?”

“Yes. I read it. Raine, how could they let him out? He killed Jeremiah. Got drunk and climbed in a car and ran him down.”

“I know, sweetie. God, don’t I know. I’m sorry. I just wanted to make sure you’re okay.”

“Well, I’m not. Of course, I’m not.”

“Honey—”

“No, don’t worry.”

“I can come over if—”

“No, you have to get to the shop. Please, I’ll be fine. Go to work.”

Silence, then, “I’ll call you later. Why don’t you come down? See what we’ve done to the place. It’s yours too.”

“Not today.” Not today. Not tomorrow. Not the next day. Not ever. If she held herself very still, didn’t venture out of the house, maybe she wouldn’t shatter into a million pieces. Maybe she’d heal, if only she never moved again. She felt like a broken china cup mended with glue that never dried. And everyone kept pouring her full of water, but it drained out through the seeping cracks.

“Okay, but, well, I’ll talk to you soon.”

Oh, Raine, I’m so sorry. Please understand. I don’t know how to explain it.

Becca hung up without saying goodbye. Sat there for a long while as coffee grew cold in her cup. Then stood. There were ways to get back at Lucas Pell for what he’d done, and if the law couldn’t do it, she damn well could.

She went to the island in the center of the kitchen, yanked open a drawer, and pawed around till she found a small notebook and a pen. Perching on a walnut stool, she made a list of all the ways she could get back at that little killer for what he’d done to her and her family. He wouldn’t get away with serving a lousy year and some few months in a sissy home and getting out so he could go about his business.

Sitting there, thinking and writing, the pen point cut deep into the paper. Something infinitesimal glowed deep in her gut, like a fanned coal in the ashes of a long ago fire. She felt alive for the first time since that night she’d swung open the door and found two harbingers of death standing on her door stoop.

All she had to do was find Lucas Pell and make him pay for murdering Jeremiah. Then everything would be all right. She wrote it down with big, broad strokes.

MAKE HIM PAY.

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