

unworthy

jeanine
collins
malarsky

unworthy

by Jeanine Collins Malarsky

© 2009 All Rights Reserved Jeanine Collins Malarsky
First print edition, November 2010

Please visit <https://jeaninecollinsmalarsky.com>

© 2019 Cover Design and Illustrations by Nadia Nyberg

Publishers Note: This is a work of fiction. All characters and events portrayed in this book are fictional, and any resemblance to real people or incidents is purely coincidental.

All rights reserved. No part of the book may be reproduced in any form or by any means without prior written consent, excepting brief quotes to be used in reviews.

ISBN 978-1-08058-610-3

Acknowledgements

I want to express my gratitude to three professionals for their valuable assistance in my research for this book:

Daniel G. Cronin, Detective

Criminal Investigations Division

North Andover Police Department

North Andover, Massachusetts

Jan Cowan, Case Management Supervisor

Commonwealth of Massachusetts

Department of Mental Health

Cathleen Crowley, Journalist

CHAPTER 1

A Brass Key

Vengeance was the last thing on Rachel Vogel's mind as she tied her apron strings securely behind her back and pulled her new canister vacuum from the utility closet in the kitchen. Tugged by its hose, the sleek, pearl gray machine followed her, its small plastic wheels clicking over the patterned linoleum floor. She smiled to herself as she recalled her mother's old Electrolux gliding along on its chrome runners, the exhaust hole in its butt spewing ancient dust. Her smile faded as she remembered choking on the filthy dust cloud when she had to empty the old fabric bag, reaching her arm up inside to invert the bag and beat it against the foundation of the house. She was so grateful that her husband Butch had allowed her to buy this updated model with its retractable cord, vibrating carpet head, and disposable dust bags.

She frowned momentarily as she navigated the dining room, its scarred wood floor in desperate need of a carpet. In the lord's good time, she comforted herself. She plugged the vacuum cleaner cord into an outlet in the living room wall next to the low bookcase. Her eyes passed over the three shelves of books, used, but treasured. As she stepped on the round gray button, the motor roared to life and her thoughts strayed to Butch over at the church, working with a crew of faithful members who had volunteered to paint the basement rooms over the weekend. She could see why he was well liked: he never refused to help.

She directed the thrumming cleaner head with its pulsing rubber rollers over the fern and floral pattern of the carpet, taking care not to scuff the legs of the furniture, though most of it was used, some from her parents and some from other church members willing to help young families get established.

Rachel unconsciously averted her eyes from the three paintings on the walls, all wedding gifts from her father: a wind-torn young woman rowing a boat into a storm, three frightened horses rearing back from lightning bolts aimed toward their eyes, and a yellow-tinted blackish painting of a dying Indian. Her father had insisted she hang them where they could be seen and admired. But she'd learned to not see them; she hated them.

She did her household chores with great care this sunny morning of July 11th, 1976. The fatigue from sleep deprivation that had been gnawing away at her core for the past six months gave way to happy memories of the day trip Butch and she had taken the day before.

As she vacuumed and reminisced about the previous day, she began to hum "This Little Light of Mine," a tune she treasured from her childhood. Like a loving couple they had strolled through Faneuil Hall snacking on yogurt and fresh strawberries. Then they had joined thousands of residents and tourists near the New England Aquarium to watch the *USS Constitution* lead the Tall Ships parade through Boston Harbor to celebrate the bicentennial of the United States of America.

She cherished her memories of yesterday, clutching them close inside her as she bent to vacuum under the couch. Butch had been so lighthearted and considerate, escorting her gallantly across streets, wiping bits of yogurt off her face and calling her his little owl, like he'd done during the short weeks of their courtship.

"Won't let Satan blow it out," Rachel sang softly as she shoved the vacuum cleaner away with her foot and vacuumed around the coffee table. "What's that?" she asked herself out loud as a rattling sound rose from the vibrating rollers. Instinctively her foot found the gray off button and the motor wound down into silence. She stooped over, lifted the cleaning head and shook it. A tiny brass object fell to the carpet, catching a ray of mid-morning sun pouring through the open window.

She plucked the small key from the green nylon fibers of the carpet where it had been hiding and stood up, turning it over and over in her hand and studying it closely. Unlike any other surface in her home, it was blemished by spots of rust. This must be the key to Butch's family Bible she thought. I wonder if he knows he's lost it.

She stepped over the vacuum hose and took a seat on the faded crushed velvet couch, locking her gaze on the thick antique Bible in the center of the coffee table. With its worn tooled leather covers it looked more like a leprosy victim than a treasured heirloom.

“It’s the only thing I have left of my mother,” Butch had told her when he’d brought it home three years before. “When I leaf through the pages and see her entries for her marriage and my birth, the ink black and fresh against the older entries in fading brown, it brings tears to my eyes.”

He’d placed the Bible gently on the coffee table and said, “I’d like to keep it here where I can see it every day. It’s all I have left to remember her by.”

“May I look through it with you?” Rachel had asked, noting the wide strap with its brass clasp was securely locked.

“You know how my mother died,” Butch had said, his eyes tearing up as he’d looked into her eyes for understanding. “I’m not ready to share this with anyone yet. Perhaps another time.”

Rachel grasped the tiny key between her thumb and forefinger, closed one eye and peered into the minute hollow barrel. She stared at the Bible and back at the innocuous key. *What harm could come from just a peek? Oh, no, I mustn’t. I’ll just lay the key here and tell Butch about it.* She placed the key carefully on top of the Bible and drew her hand back. She stared at the key. *Just a little peek.* As though speed would negate her sin, she leaned forward swiftly, grabbed the key and inserted it into the brass lock. With a quick turn of her wrist the metal clasp fell away.

Through the dull roar of trepidation that beat against her eardrums, she could still hear the soft music from a religious program on the radio in the kitchen. She didn’t listen closely to the Sunday morning sermons that radiated their exhortations to obey God and love thy neighbor, but she liked to tune in so she could enjoy the choral music and the powerful, deep-throated organs that echoed through the great churches from which the sermons were broadcast.

She gently lifted the thick cover, feeling as though she were invading the most intimate parts of her husband. Guilt threatened to attenuate her courage, reminding her that sneaking behind her husband’s back was

against his explicit instructions. It was also against God's wishes. It was a sin to violate Butch's privacy. Perhaps the Bible's contents will bring us closer, she argued with herself. I know so little about him. The emotional chasm between them since the day they'd been married had always haunted her thoughts. Now it teased her to continue.

The marbled paper that lined the inside of the padded cover and formed the first page was yellowed, causing the maroon swirls to look like smears of very old, dried blood. She leafed through the first few pages, brittle with age and browned on the edges, like they'd been singed with a match.

Funny, she thought, furrowing her forehead into thin ripples and squinting her eyes at the faded ink as she scanned the first page of family events. No Vogels listed. Silly me, she chided herself. Look at the dates. Of course, I wouldn't even know his grandmother's maiden name. Rachel leafed through two more pages of marriages, deaths, births... 1910? That's the last entry? Where is Butch's family, his mother's birth, his own birth?

Rachel shifted her knees aside, pulled the heavy book closer to her and began flipping through Genesis, pages at a time. She saw the begats, as her father called them, and smiled when she skimmed across Methuselah's genealogy and spotted Enoch's name. Her brother had been named Enoch because of the biblical Enoch's righteousness. Methuselah's father Enoch had not seen death. He'd walked with God, which her father had explained meant: He'd been so perfect that God had taken him to heaven without allowing Enoch to experience death. I wonder if my brother will see death, she pondered. He wasn't far from a saint himself.

She tried to ignore the throbbing in her head as she flipped into Exodus, choosing an obvious break in the splayed pages. The old stitched spine creaked as the book flattened to reveal its contents before her on the low table. A colored 8" x 10" photograph of a little girl lay exposed in the sunlight, the child's alluring smile gazing up at Rachel. Rachel did not smile in return. She instinctively reached out to snatch the picture to destroy it, but withdrew her hand as though a poison adder had sprung from the pages and sunk its fangs into her blue-veined wrist.

A muffled cry rose from Rachel's constricted throat as she tried to reach forward again. More than anything in the world, Rachel wanted to pull her eyes away from the picture and run back in time, to breakfast this

morning, to yesterday on the wharf, anywhere but here with her eyes riveted on the innocent child's rosy cheeks above the gauzy lilac camisole, the bare abdomen, the slim, undeveloped hips, and her tiny fingers spreading open the lips of her dewy vulva.

The dull roar in Rachel's ears became a crashing wall of waves bludgeoning her brain, blocking her hearing and blinding her sight. Grasping her heaving stomach, Rachel raced through the dining room, smashed the bathroom door back against the wall and threw the toilet seat upright. With trembling hands, she grasped the sides of the cool porcelain bowl, dropped to her knees, and thrust her face downward. She vomited so forcefully that the diluted mixture below splashed upwards and bathed her burning cheeks and perspiring forehead.

With her elbows akimbo, Rachel bowed lower and retched, spewing her breakfast in great gobs of pancake lumps that bobbed fitfully in the blueberry stained water.

As her body disgorged her breakfast, deeper inside, her latent memories—acquiescent from years of smothering and denial—began to disgorge their secrets; horrible secrets, ugly secrets, excruciatingly painful secrets.

She wiped her mouth with fat wads of toilet paper. She flushed the toilet and sat back on her heels to slow the tremors that shook her body. With another wad of toilet paper, she swiped at the bits of blue slime clinging to the sides of her shoulder length hair. She cried out as disgust and nausea rolled through her body again. She bent forward and vomited until dry heaves racked her ribs and she could expel no more.

Exhaustion held her prisoner on the bathroom floor, crumpled in a heap beside the toilet. She wept until her tear ducts ran dry, then pushed herself upwards and slithered closer to a wall where she could lean and gasp for breath. She grabbed a towel hanging above her head and rolled over on her hands and knees, using the wet toilet rim to help herself stand up.

When she had completed washing herself and cleaning up the floor around the toilet, she returned to the living room, gripping chairs and touching walls to support her efforts to stay upright. Like a rat drawn to the trap by the smell of fresh cheese, Rachel sat down on the couch, leaned

over the shabby Bible and methodically paged through the huge volume, sobbing quietly as she studied each pornographic picture.

Though the girls were a cross-section of races, mostly Caucasian, they were all very young, somewhere in the range of three years to perhaps six. Waves of pain and tortured memories washed through her head as she turned to each succeeding picture. Near the last third of the Bible, her already stunned and shocked mind encountered more than she could have imagined, a Polaroid picture of Charlotte, the little girl upstairs. A slight paralysis held her frozen in time and space as she studied the pose of the angelic, blond-haired child, her intense blue eyes gazing in trust, giving the camera its fair share of her enigmatic smile.

Charlotte's mother and father had rented the upstairs apartment for the past five years. Charlotte's father went away in the Navy for months at a time. When he was between jobs, Butch had always been kind and accommodating to Charlotte's mother, volunteering to baby-sit and making it possible for her to run errands or have an occasional evening out. Charlotte's mother had called Butch, "Sweet." Yes, Rachel thought as she stared at the little girl's picture, everyone loved Butch.

Rachel closed the Bible and carefully locked it. She slipped the key into the deep pocket of her apron and looked around the room, now unfamiliar to her, expanding and contracting as she tried to focus.

Three ceramic birds, perched on the top of her bookcase, rose and fell in her vision like gulls tossed about on stormy waves. Rachel tried to steady her focus on the tin flue cover on the far wall that Butch had painted over when he'd painted the living room two years before. The fluted cover blended in with the tan wall, barely noticeable, yet still reminiscent of the brass flue covers in her parents' home when she'd been little. She winced and shook her head. Being little had hurt. Her brain felt soggy, like thick, ooze mud. She could barely think.

The overwhelming urge welling up inside her was to not exist, an old feeling to which she had never found a solution. "The Lord never gives us more than we can bear," she reminded herself in a soft murmur. As though navigating a foreign space, Rachel rose from the couch, grasped the wands and hose and began pulling the vacuum back toward the kitchen. Half way through the dining room, she let her shoulders slump, dropped the wands and hose and stumbled into the bedroom she shared

with Butch. Tears welled up again as she looked at the neatly made bed where she had tried to be a good wife. She had failed miserably.

She pulled the bedspread back and folded it carefully, laying it on the faded rose boudoir chair as was her habit each evening. She fell on the bed weeping. How much of her life had she longed for surcease of pain, for the peace that passed all understanding as promised in the Bible? She longed for solace, for comfort. Never, not since she'd been very young, had anyone been there to help her bear her cross. She lay on her side and stared at the small chair, thinking back to the auction where she had purchased it for a dollar. Her mother, Willa, had encouraged her to buy it.

Yes, Willa, her mother, had gone to the auction with her.

She closed her eyes and pictured her mother. Willa Keller was a homemaker, mother of three, minister's wife, church organist, and piano teacher. For Rachel, Willa was a shell; never really there, not when Rachel had needed her. Rachel buried her tear-stained face in the pale green pillowcase and prayed she would never wake up. Though her mother had never shared her inner feelings with her children, Rachel sensed that her mother had also felt this way most of her life, spending endless hours at the church practicing the organ or hiding away from her family in the darkened bedroom, weeping or pretending to be asleep. "Just a little sinking spell," she'd tell her children when they knocked on her bedroom door after school. "I'll get up later and fix supper. Please peel the potatoes and scrape the carrots."

No, Rachel told herself: Willa was no help.

She couldn't talk with her father, even though he was a minister. Weren't ministers kind and loving people? And I do love him deeply, she hurried to remind herself. But she'd never felt comfortable with her father. Fresh tears flowed onto the pillowcase.

What about her siblings?

All through his childhood her older brother had been committed to the ministry. But after his marriage failed, he had become a policeman. On occasion she and Enoch talked but when the discussion turned to family and more personal things, she changed the subject. Enoch had introduced

her to Butch and she was ashamed to admit she wasn't happy. No doubt Enoch would blame her like Butch did.

And Jessie, her younger sister? Smart, energetic, but impetuous, and so defiant. "She kicks against the pricks," their father said of Jessie's resistant behavior. "She'll burn in hell the way she's going." Rachel often defended her thoughtless sister though she too had caught the lash of her unkind words and self-centered behavior.

Once Jessie had moved into her own place in Boston, she'd had little time for home and family. If Willa asked, Jessie would join them for Sabbath dinner, proof that she did have a kind heart. Maybe, this one time, I could talk with her. Rachel's head pounded as she propped herself up on an elbow and reached for the bedside phone. Maybe this once.

When Rachel heard Jessie's cheery message on the answering machine, she almost hung up. Instead she stayed on the line long enough to leave a brief message saying her call wasn't important and not to worry. She'd been right; there was no one she could talk to. She must carry her own cross. That's what she'd been taught. That's what she would do.

END OF SAMPLE CHAPTER 1 from UNWORTHY



About the Author

Jeanine Collins Malarsky was born on the shores of Cayuga Lake in upstate New York in 1944. The middle daughter of a peripatetic dairy farmer, she was moved from house to house and state to state east of the Mississippi. She left home to attend college in New England where she met her husband and found a permanent home near Boston, MA.

Ms. Malarsky spent thirty-six years in business management, focusing on financial accounting and computer systems, including twenty-two years operating her own company. Following years devoted to gourmet cooking, sewing, and raising two children, she is now retired and living with her husband, a retired airline pilot.

She has traveled extensively including most of Europe and the Far East, indulging in her love of history and learning. An avid life-long student of human behavior, she now devotes her energies to travel, reading and writing.

Thank you so much for reading this sample chapter. I hope you will read the whole book and write a review so others may learn about my stories.

Please visit me on my web site

JEANINECOLLINSMALARSKY.COM

Follow my blog posts at [CHEEKIN SQUAWKS](#)

My books are available on Amazon.com:

[BLACK RASPBERRIES](#)

[MAGGIE'S MIRAGE](#)

[UNWORTHY](#)