

*My
Sister's
Prayer*

MINDY STARNS CLARK
and LESLIE GOULD



HARVEST HOUSE PUBLISHERS
EUGENE, OREGON

Scripture quotations are taken from

The Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

The New King James Version®. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

The King James Version of the Bible.

Cover by Garborg Design Works

Cover photos and images © darkbird77, jocrebbin / Thinkstock; canicula / Bigstock

The authors are represented by MacGregor Literary, Inc.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the authors' imaginations or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

MY SISTER'S PRAYER

Copyright © 2016 Mindy Starns Clark and Leslie Gould

Published by Harvest House Publishers

Eugene, Oregon 97402

www.harvesthousepublishers.com

ISBN 978-0-7369-6290-2 (pbk.)

ISBN 978-0-7369-6291-9 (eBook)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Clark, Mindy Starns, author. | Gould, Leslie, author.

Title: My sister's prayer / Mindy Starns Clark and Leslie Gould.

Description: Eugene, Oregon : Harvest House Publishers, [2016]

Identifiers: LCCN 2016009530 (print) | LCCN 2016015846 (ebook) |

ISBN 9780736962902 (softcover) | ISBN 9780736962919 ()

Subjects: LCSH: Sisters—Fiction. | Life change events—Fiction. | GSAFD:

Christian fiction. | Romantic suspense fiction.

Classification: LCC PS3603.L366 M95 2016 (print) | LCC PS3603.L366 (ebook) |

DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2016009530>

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, digital, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Printed in the United States of America

16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 / LB-KBD / 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Mindy

To the “honorary sister” of my childhood,
Margaret Desmond Dahm,
who came into my life at the age of four and has been
in my heart ever since.



Leslie

To my three siblings, Kathy Fink, Kelvin Egger, and Laurie Snyder,
all best friends in your very own way.



*He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High
shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.*

PSALM 91:1



CHAPTER ONE

Maddie

The cry for help came as I was coasting toward the bicycle rack at the far end of the building. I'd recently assigned a new custom ringtone—a few bars of the old R&B classic “Rescue Me”—to my sister, Nicole, so the moment I heard it trilling from my pocket, I knew exactly who was calling. Pretty sure I also knew why, I decided not to answer right now. One crisis at a time was about all I could handle.

Aiming toward an open slot in the rack, I rolled to a stop, careful not to scuff the suede of my new shoes as I climbed off. By the time I'd locked up bike and helmet, grabbed my purse, muted my phone, and started toward the Learning Commons, the music had ceased, though it still reverberated in my head.

I would indeed rescue my sister if that's why she was calling, but first things first. Right now I had to focus on the appointment I'd come here for. Nicole I could take care of later.

At the door, I caught my reflection in the glass and paused to straighten my blouse. I also tried to fix my hair, which had been smushed flat on top by the helmet and made frizzy at the ends by the

wind. Growing irritated as I fruitlessly fluffed and smoothed, I had to remind myself that one of the reasons for using a bicycle during the workday was exactly this, to give me helmet hair and windblown clothes and otherwise mess with my precisely coiffed and coutured exterior. Thanks to a disturbing conversation I'd recently had with my grandmother, I was determined to conquer my more perfectionistic tendencies, and the bike riding was part of that. I'd already been at it for two weeks now, but thus far all it had really accomplished was to make me waste time at each destination as I desperately tried to put myself back together again.

Thoughts of Nana giving me fresh resolve, I stopped fooling with my hair and went into the building. Detective Ortiz had asked me to meet her on the second floor, third classroom on the right, so I headed there now, the pointed toes of my Via Spiga pumps clicking on each step as I ascended the stairs.

The second floor hallway was quiet and empty, classes still in session behind the closed doors. A glance at my watch told me I was a few minutes early—just enough time for a quick dash to a bathroom mirror.

Or not, I scolded myself, resisting the urge. I continued on down the hall to the door of the designated classroom. Peeking inside, I saw that it was nearly full, with Ortiz standing at the front giving what she'd said on the phone was a guest lecture for the criminology department. The students seemed to be listening intently, which didn't surprise me. As a working detective, Ortiz could bring a wealth of knowledge and experience to Virginia Commonwealth University's criminology department. No doubt she had a lot to teach these students.

I leaned against the wall as I waited for the class to end, my mind consumed with questions about why I'd been summoned here today. Detective Ortiz was in charge of an ongoing investigation I was connected with, but all she'd said on the phone was that we needed to talk in person. Considering that our past few interactions had been via phone or email, I had to assume this was indicative of some new development, which was exciting.

The investigation involved an incident that had taken place nineteen years ago, when my sister, our two cousins, and I were kids and

had been witnesses to a crime scene. Back in the '90s, during a family reunion at our grandparents', we four girls had gone hiking in the woods next to their estate, making our way to a small, deserted hunting cabin where we sometimes played. When we went inside, we were shocked to discover a dead man—a murder victim—lying on a cot, a knife protruding from his chest and blood pooled around him on the floor.

Terrified, we'd run screaming back through the woods to our families, who promptly called the police. But by the time they arrived, listened to our tale, and then hiked all the way back out to the cabin, the dead body was gone and the mess cleaned up, leaving behind not a hint of foul play.

We girls were stunned, especially once the adults decided that we'd merely been victims of our own overactive imaginations and that we hadn't seen what we thought we had. The four of us knew that wasn't true, but there was no convincing the grown-ups—not even our own parents, much to our shock. But with no body or blood or murder weapon to be found, there was no way to prove our claims.

Not surprisingly, the whole matter—both the gruesome sight we'd witnessed and the fact that no one believed us afterward—had left scars on all our psyches. But then, about four months ago, my cousin Renee had come up with an idea. She conducted a forensic-type test in the old cabin using a chemical known to show blood traces, even really old ones. That test proved a tremendous amount of blood had been on the floor at some point in the past, exactly where we'd said it was. After so many years, the four of us were vindicated at last. The evidence from that one test, combined with our statements, was enough to convince the police to take another look.

Detective Ortiz had been working on the case ever since, having our findings retested and analyzed, tracking down leads, and attempting to piece together the few shreds of information she had to go on. We still didn't know who the victim had been, much less who killed him or why or how the body managed to disappear so quickly, but Ortiz was obviously diligent and methodical, and my sister, cousins, and I all had faith that she would eventually solve this puzzle.

In the meantime, as the only one of us living locally, I had become the de facto liaison between the Talbots and the police. I didn't mind, though I sure hoped I'd been asked here for good news.

My thoughts were interrupted by the sounds of doors opening up and down the hall. Students began trickling out, and soon the door next to me opened as well. I waited for the rush to pass by and then stepped into the classroom. Detective Ortiz stood at the podium, gathering her notes.

"Hello, Detective," I said, moving toward her and shaking her hand. "Good to see you again."

"You too, Maddee. How's the family?"

"Eager," I blurted out, thinking how ready we all were for closure on this matter that had hung over our heads for nearly twenty years.

My heart sank as the detective let out a small sigh. Clearly, she hadn't asked me here today to tell me of some new development. She had bad news for me, so bad that it had to be delivered in person.

"I'm sorry I don't have time to take you for coffee," she said, her eyes averted as she grabbed a briefcase and stuffed her teaching notes inside, "but I need to get back to the office soon. I'm sure you do too."

I nodded, unable to speak. *Please don't pull the plug.*

"Why don't we have a seat?" She motioned to a nearby worktable with several chairs around it. "It doesn't look like there's going to be another class in here right now."

We sat across from each other, and I realized I was holding my breath as I waited for her to speak. She paused to pull a file from her case and then met my eyes. "I'm sorry, Maddee, but I have to tell you something you don't want to hear."

"No," I whispered.

She nodded. "You know how hard we've been working this case, but it's been one dead end after another. At this point, things have ground to a complete halt. There are no leads left to follow, nothing else to test or examine. Nada."

"So the trail's gone a little cold," I said. "Nineteen years is a long time. You said yourself it wasn't going to be easy. You can't just give up."

"We're not giving up. The case will remain open. But you need to

know that as of last Friday, it's officially inactive. We can't expend any more resources on it at this point."

"Resources? Detective Ortiz, a man was *murdered*."

She exhaled slowly, sitting back in her chair and meeting my gaze. "We don't know that for sure."

Before I could respond, she cut me off. "Yes, between your eyewitness accounts way back then and the evidence we collected from the scene a few months ago, we do know a man was in the cabin, that he'd been stabbed, and that he lost a lot of blood. But unless you girls checked his vitals before you ran off, we can't say with absolute certainty he was dead at the time."

I thought about that for a moment, my head spinning. "He wasn't breathing. Wasn't moving. Besides, no way could anyone lose that much blood and survive—much less clean up the mess on his way out."

"I know. But this is a crucial element, Maddee. We don't have a body. I mean, really, no victim, no crime. Frankly, I'm surprised the chief let me work this one as long as he did."

I leaned toward her across the table. "What about DNA? Your people recovered enough dried-up old blood from the floorboards to run tests. You got the results. You said so yourself."

"Those tests return genetic markers, not names. Not identities."

"So you compare those markers with some database to find a match—"

"Done. We tried every state and federal database available to the Commonwealth of Virginia and received not a single hit."

I sat back, defeated.

"We worked this case from other directions too, you know," she continued, her tone kind but weary. "Slogging through old missing persons reports, old hospital records, old cold cases, trying to find something relevant. We canvassed neighbors, worked through scenarios, and attacked the forensics with every tool at our disposal, but in the end we have nothing except proof of blood and a DNA profile. We can't know for certain he was dead. We can't figure out who he was. With no body and no weapon, we've taken it as far as we can."

"So this was all for nothing."

The detective reached out and placed a hand on my wrist, giving it a squeeze. “Not true. Don’t forget, at least you were vindicated. There *was* blood there, lots of blood, and you girls proved it. Where it was and how it was disbursed directly corroborate your account of what happened. That’s not much, but it’s going to have to be enough. For now at least.”

I swallowed hard, working to keep tears from my eyes. Everything she said made sense. It was just really painful to hear. Vindicated or not, the four of us were still going to have to live with some very big, apparently unanswerable questions. And the thought of telling that to my sister and cousins broke my heart.

“Is there anything at all about this case that I could pursue myself?” I asked softly. “More records to dig through or people to question or online searches to conduct? Anything?”

Detective Ortiz shook her head, pushing a lock of straight, shiny black hair behind one ear. “I’m afraid not. We’ve already covered every base there is.”

I nodded, looking away, knowing that couldn’t be true. Surely there was some angle she’d missed, some approach that could turn up something.

“How about the records from your investigation?” I asked, gesturing toward the manila folder. “The case file. Could I get a copy of that? I’d like to go through it myself to see if anything jumps out at me.”

“No, sorry,” she said, looking startled at the thought. “I mean, you’re allowed a copy of the initial police report, of course. But not the evidence reports or the notes or anything like that.”

Desperate, I decided to play on her sympathies. “You probably don’t know this, Detective, but my sister was in a really bad car accident.”

Her eyebrows raised. Clearly, that wasn’t what she’d expected to hear. “Nicole? When? Is she okay?”

“About six weeks ago. She’s not great. She has multiple fractures in her legs, two cracked ribs, and a whole bunch of nasty cuts and bruises. Anyway, I think she’ll be coming to stay with me for a while as she continues to recuperate. Something like this could give us a project to

work on together, especially if we had access to the things you've done thus far."

Her face tightened. She knew what I was trying to do. "Well, I'm sorry about your sister, hon, but you'd better get out your scrapbooking supplies or take up crocheting because this is one project I can't help you with."

"Are you sure?"

She studied me for a long moment and then seemed to relent, though more out of weariness than anything else. "Well, we can probably give you copies of a few things that don't have to be kept confidential, but I'll need to go through the whole file first and talk to the chief. We'll share what we can."

I could tell she was trying, and I immediately felt bad for using my sister's misfortune this way. "I appreciate that. We all appreciate everything you've done."

"Thanks." She slid her chair back and reached for her briefcase. "I guess that's about it. I'll let you know if by some wild chance we get a break in the case." As we stood to go, she met my eyes and added, "But...I'm sorry, Maddee. Don't count on it."



Once I was back outside, I took a look at my phone. Nicole had called two more times while I was with Ortiz, though she hadn't left any messages. She had, however, sent a text. Taking a seat on an empty bench near the bike rack, I opened it up and read:

This. Woman. Is. Driving. Me. Crazy.

I smiled in spite of myself. Poor kid. I could sympathize. Our grandmother could be trying at times, and Nicole had been staying with her for two weeks now. To be honest, she'd lasted longer than I had expected her to.

After her car accident and subsequent surgery, Nicole was in the hospital for two weeks, followed by an inpatient rehab facility for two more. From there, we'd moved her into Nana's house just west of Richmond, near Subletts. With both of her legs in casts, Nicole couldn't

walk and had to be tended to around the clock. So Nana, with her expansive home and legion of hired help, had been the logical choice for taking her in. Our parents, who lived in Suffolk about an hour and a half away, both worked full-time, so they weren't the best choice. And though I was happy to help out, and my home was the most convenient, being in Richmond proper and the closest to her doctors and physical therapists and such, I also worked full-time. We all agreed Nana's would be best—all except Nicole, of course, who had balked. She loved our grandmother, but Nana wasn't always the easiest person to be around. She could be critical, especially of Nicole, who had made a mess of her life in so many ways.

Prior to the accident, my sister had been living in the seediest section of Norfolk, addicted to drugs, and running around with all the wrong people. Since the accident, she'd been a prisoner of her own injured body, cut off completely from the methamphetamine she lived for and forced into sobriety, cold turkey. That was the silver lining in all of this. Perhaps now, finally, she would be off drugs long enough to get some perspective and change her life for the better.

In the meantime, she still had much pain to endure. A few weeks ago, when Nicole was still in rehab and I'd been charged with getting her on board the Nana plan, I'd told her that if she would stick it out as long as she could, when it got to be too much for her I would figure out a way to shift her over to my place instead.

"So why not just start there and skip Nana's altogether?" she'd pleaded, her bruised eyes making her look like a sad raccoon.

I explained that I'd only been at my job for two months, not nearly long enough to have earned any time off, and that the first few weeks of her care were going to be quite time-intensive. "You're better off with Nana in the beginning. I can't be there for you enough, but she can."

"Seriously, Maddee?" Nicole whined. "She'll be all up in my business twenty-four-seven."

"No, she won't. She'll be in charge of your care, sure, but only in an administrative sense. She'll hire a daily aide to do the hands-on stuff."

"Okay, so why don't I just move in with you, and we get an aide to

come help me there instead? Then I would be where I want, but you wouldn't have to miss any work on account of me."

I raised an eyebrow. "And you'd pay for that aide how?"

Nicole's face reddened. We both knew that at the time of her accident, she'd had no job or any means of support. Thus far, Nana's wealth had been a huge blessing, providing Nicole with the finest care at the best hospital from the top doctors. But the only way to ensure Nana's continued generosity was to do this next part on her terms—and her turf.

Helplessness filled my sister's eyes as she finally seemed to accept the inevitable. "You know she's going to drive me crazy, right? What happens when I can't stand it any longer?"

"Then I'll come get you, like I said."

Nicole swallowed hard. "You promise?"

"Yes—but only if you promise to stick it out first for as long as you possibly can."

"Fine," she muttered. "I promise."

Nicole had kept her word. Now it seemed it was time to keep mine. And though I was hesitant to take her in, a part of me was excited at the prospect. She and I had been separated for so long by the life choices she'd made. Surely this was our chance to reconnect and forge a new kind of relationship, the sort I'd always wanted.

I thought for a moment and then began to type.

Sorry, was in a meeting. Will swing by tonight so we can figure things out.

After a moment, I got her response:

I'll be counting the minutes. And by counting, I mean sweating, praying, biting my tongue, and doing everything I can not to bop this woman over the head with her own day planner. Would you believe she brought in a hairdresser this morning to fix "that disaster you call a hairdo"? Like that's something I felt like fooling with right now! Arg! Come as soon as you can. Please! I can't take it anymore.

Chuckling, I responded:

Will do. Back to work for now. See you tonight.

I was still smiling as I took off toward my office on Cary Street.

Though much of Virginia was a wonderland of vivid fall colors by mid-October, here in Richmond we wouldn't reach our peak for another three or four weeks. For now, there were just hints of orange and yellow and brown among the green.

The bike ride took eight minutes, long enough for my mind to wander from the situation with Nicole back to Ortiz. As I sailed down Main Street and then cut over to Cary, I focused on coming up with a new ringtone for the detective. Until today, it had been a line from a Barbalettes song: *Gonna solve this puzzle for you.*

So much for that. The time for optimism was over.

There were plenty of song lyrics that would work for a cop, like *Put your hands up* or *You've stolen more than my heart*, but I needed something specific to our situation. Thanks to my near-encyclopedic knowledge of even the most obscure '50s girl bands, I finally thought of a perfect choice, a little-known gem by Tammy and the Smash. I made it to the office with seven minutes to spare, just enough time to buy the ringtone I wanted and edit it down to one line: *I've done all I can but it's over now.*

"That's what you think, Detective," I said as I assigned the clip to her number in my contacts. She might believe this investigation was finished, but I wasn't giving up that easily.



CHAPTER TWO

Maddie

The sun was nearing the horizon as I headed out on the twenty-minute drive to Nana's. My afternoon had been so busy at work that I hadn't had time to dwell on the full implications of the change I would be instigating tonight, but as I pulled onto the highway, my earlier elation about taking in Nicole was slowly replaced with anxiety and a gnawing in my gut that told me to move slowly, to be careful.

Nicole's addiction was at the heart of the issue. Years ago, it had driven her from us and into a difficult and miserable existence. Six weeks ago yesterday, it had led her to climb into a car while high on meth and go for a drive along the back roads south of Virginia Beach. It had caused her to wrap her car around a tree at fifty miles an hour and nearly die of blood loss while waiting for help to arrive. The thought of almost losing her made my hands tremble on the steering wheel.

Addiction was the enemy, but did I have what it would take to help her face such a powerful foe? Sure, she'd been clean now for forty-two days. She'd already gone through the initial physical withdrawals, but that meant nothing in the face of a habit that had overwhelmed her life

for years, starting at a young age. It went further back than that first, quick joint behind the middle school cafeteria, that initial sleepover with the friend who'd stolen a bottle of vodka from her parents' liquor cabinet. In fact, I believed the roots of my sister's addiction could be traced all the way back to that day in the Dark Woods, when at just six years old she'd been exposed to a grisly, horrifying crime scene.

She started acting out soon after. Refusing to believe our claims about what we'd seen in the cabin, our parents simply called her behavior a "phase." Mostly, they just placated her, giving her whatever she wanted. But as she grew, placating turned to enabling, which went on for years.

It wasn't just my parents, either. I'd enabled her as well, consumed by my guilt over what had happened and my inability to protect my baby sister way back when. It wasn't until I was in college and well on my way to becoming a psychologist that I'd learned about the nature of addiction and about boundaries and how best to help a loved one who was an addict, no matter the root cause. For a good five years now, I had been applying all of that knowledge to our relationship, drawing healthy lines with my sister. But now that she was moving in with me, could I stay strong? Could I hang on to all that I'd learned and maintain the kind of tough love she needed—especially considering how pitiful and helpless she was right now?

Bottom line, I would have to care for her and love her while still guarding my own heart. She wouldn't get the casts off for at least three weeks, possibly more, and after that she would need even more weeks of intensive physical therapy before she could walk normally again. But once she was fully ambulatory, she might very well walk right back into a life of drugs.

It is better to trust in the Lord than to put confidence in man.

Words from the Psalms popped into my head, a reassurance from God that this wasn't my problem but His. As I took the exit for the road that would bring me over the James River, I was comforted by that truth.

Settling back into my seat, I enjoyed the rest of the drive. Once on Huguenot Trail Road, I took in the beauty of the passing landscape as

I drove westward. It was darker now but still light enough to see the tall trees that lined both sides of the street and the massive homes that peeked out here and there between them in the distance. I turned onto Willow Lane and neared Nana's house, which was one of the biggest in the area. As I eased up her driveway and around the curve, the impressive sight came into view.

A three-story red brick Colonial set amid acres of graceful wooded land, the Talbot estate was a testament to our Huguenot heritage and its legacy of talented craftsmanship combined with a strong work ethic. Our ancestors had come to this country back in the early 1700s, and though they had started modestly, over time they had established and grown the family business, Talbot Paper and Printing, until it had become one of the largest and most well-respected paper and printing companies in the nation.

Nana met me at the door herself, leaving behind a whiff of Calèche perfume after she kissed my cheek. She looked lovely though tired, as if not even the most artfully applied concealer could hide the dark circles under her eyes. Those circles had been there since the accident.

She seemed to have taken it harder than any of us, and though I knew that was due in part to her love for her youngest granddaughter, I had a feeling it was as much about the shock of it all. Wealth tended to cushion one against many of life's uglier realities, but in the space of a single, near-fatal crash, Nana's cushion had been jerked away, forcing her to face the fact that bad things happened, and most of them were totally out of her control. For someone like her, life was all about control, about engineering and organizing and dictating all the details into their proper places. I wasn't all that different from her, if I were being honest, yet another reason for my bicycle plan.

"How's she doing?" I asked, giving a smile and a thanks to the maid who magically appeared to take my jacket.

"I hope you didn't come straight from work," Nana replied, ignoring the question as she eyed my dark-wash jeans. I'd worn them with a pair of Franco Sarto ankle boots and a hunter green V-neck top, and I thought the outfit looked great, its colors complementing my long auburn hair.

“Don’t get me wrong,” she added, seeing the expression on my face. “You look impeccable, as usual. I just didn’t realize blue jeans were suitable for—”

“They’re not, Nana. I went home and changed first.”

“Oh, good. And at least everything else is perfect, as always. Well, almost.” She patted down some imaginary loose strand on the side of my head and then took my elbow, leading me across the solarium toward the study. “Speaking of hair, wait till you see your sister. You won’t recognize her.” Lowering her voice, she added, “That hideous bleached-blond disaster is gone forever, thank goodness.”

Poor Nicole. How she had managed to stick it out even this long was beyond me.

I held my tongue as we reached the door and gave it a quick knock. My late grandfather’s study, which hadn’t been used much since his death almost a year ago, was currently serving as Nicole’s temporary bedroom. Fortunately, it was large enough to accommodate her massive hospital bed as well as her wheelchair and other medical devices.

Our knock was answered by Inez Valero, the aide who cared for Nicole each day. She handled everything from dressing to feeding to bathing and more, and I could only hope Nana would let her continue in that role once we’d shifted things to my house.

Inez greeted me warmly before leaving the room to give us some privacy. I looked to Nicole, who was pale and thin but had a definite sparkle in her eyes that hadn’t been there last Sunday when I’d visited after church. This was the glow of *relief*, no doubt.

I moved over to the bed and gave her a hug, careful not to jostle her healing ribs. I resisted the urge to smooth her gown and tuck in her blanket and otherwise mother her. She would always be my baby sister, but at twenty-five she was no baby and hated being treated like one.

“Hey, you,” I said softly.

“Hey back,” she replied. “Is it time for our racquetball game already?”

I laughed.

“Well?” Nana exclaimed, stretching the word outward and upward. “What do you think?”

It took a moment for me to realize she was talking about Nicole’s

hair. I hated to admit it, but there was no denying she looked a thousand times better. The two-toned dye job had been replaced by carefully foiled and highlighted blondish-brown locks. The style was cute too, a shoulder-length bob with long layers that curved in at the bottom.

"She looks amazing," I said.

"Thanks," Nicole replied. "I think this shade of blond is the perfect complement to my orange-and-yellow legs."

With a huff, Nana turned and left the room, no doubt the very response my sister had been going for. Nicole's vibrantly colored fiber-glass casts had been a source of embarrassment to our grandmother since she first saw them at the hospital. "What's wrong with good old plaster of paris?" Nana had cried. "At least it's white, unlike this ridiculous pair of oversized Popsicles."

"Oh, Mom, it's what all the kids are doing these days," my father had said, trying to calm her down but causing a quick jab to my gut. How many times had he uttered that sentiment?

"She's drunk? Oh, well. It's what all the kids are doing these days."

"Moving in with some guy? I suppose that's the way kids are these days."

"Arrested for possession? It's okay, honey. I think it happens to a lot of kids these days."

Shaking those thoughts from my mind, I focused on the girl in front of me. "How are you feeling?" I asked. "Think you'll be up to making the big shift by Saturday?"

To my surprise, Nicole's face fell. "Saturday?" she whimpered, and in that moment I realized she'd thought I would be taking her back with me tonight. How very much like my sister to expect the thing she wanted without giving any thought to the complicated logistics involved.

Trying not to sound aggravated, I explained I needed time to shift stuff around in my apartment and make room for her, plus we'd have to get a bed delivered, plus Nana and I needed to work out the details of her care.

She huffed. "Fine. Just don't leave me here any longer than that."

"I won't, I promise—as long as you're sure you still want to come once you hear my ground rules."

A hardness passed across her eyes, but she was in no position to refuse. If she really wanted out of here, this was the price she'd have to pay.

"Go ahead," she said with a heavy sigh.

"I just have three rules, but they're nonnegotiable. First, no visitors or phone calls except those preapproved by me—and I'm not approving anyone who might come in and slip you some drugs, so don't even ask."

"How am I going to call anyone anyway?" she retorted. "My phone got busted up in the crash."

"You have the burner phone Nana gave you."

"Yeah, but without my contacts, what good does it do?"

I hesitated, realizing she'd never bothered to memorize her friends' numbers. I would check the activity on her device periodically just to make sure, but I had a feeling rule one was probably a nonissue for now. Deeply relieved, I continued with my list.

"Second, you'll do thirty meetings in thirty days. Between Narcotics Anonymous and Celebrate Recovery, I've found plenty to choose from. You can start next week."

"Next *week*? My casts don't come off for another month."

"Doesn't matter. Nana said the doctor just cleared you for moderate activity."

"Yeah, but he meant like physical therapy. Not trudging down to some church basement to talk about my feelings and sing 'Kumbaya' with a bunch of other losers."

She was trying to be funny, but her words broke my heart. "You're no loser, Nicole."

"Yeah, yeah," she said. "What's the third rule?"

"As soon as your casts come off, you'll get a job—preferably with me. I talked to my supervisor this afternoon and lined one up for you if you want it. It's just clerical-type stuff, but you can work from a seated position, it pays hourly, and the schedule would be flexible enough to accommodate your meetings, physical therapy, and endurance level."

She didn't reply.

"And that's it. Respect my home and my things, and in return I'll

happily share with you what I have. I'll take the best care of you I know how, and I'll do it without judgment or criticism or, uh, hairdressers. If you play your cards right," I teased, "I might even teach you how to knit."

"Why stop there?" she snapped. "We could plant some grass and watch it grow. Maybe hold turtle races down at the nursing home."

Despite her sarcasm, I couldn't help but smile. "What do you think, sis? Do we have a deal?"

Nicole was quiet for a long moment, and though I couldn't read her expression, I had no doubt what was going through her mind. This line I had drawn in the sand made me both her dearest friend and her greatest enemy.

"Maybe," she said at last. "But I want it on record that you're a big meanie."

I chuckled. "I am. And I'm so sorry. But that's how it has to be for now, you know? Boundaries and all that?"

She shrugged, looking away.

"So is it a deal?" I cajoled, reaching out and taking her hand in mine. "I'll get you all your favorite foods. Pop-Tarts. Strawberry milk. Macaroni and cheese." Leaning closer, I added, "You can pick the board games. You can control the remote. You can even eat the marshmallows out of the Lucky Charms, and I won't say a word."

Again she met my eyes, but this time I could see she was trying not to smile.

"Okay, I accept. I'll be a good girl," she said.

And in the moment, at least, I believed her.



Convincing Nana to go along with the plan ended up being not nearly as difficult as I had expected. A part of her seemed relieved, and that made me nervous. If she felt overburdened by Nicole's care in a mansion this big with a full staff and everything, how much harder was it going to be for me in my tiny carriage house with just a single day-time aide for help?

Then again, Nana wasn't exactly a spring chicken. Perhaps at her age just the responsibility was burden enough—and that was something I felt fully equipped to handle. My new job as an individualized education program coordinator had turned out to be a lot less demanding than the one I'd held for the past year in my postdoctoral internship at a children's clinic. That internship had kept me running from morning to night. In comparison, this new job was a walk in the park, a true nine-to-fiver that had felt almost like a vacation thus far—which was something I sorely needed after the craziness of the past year. But I knew that once I finished catching my breath, this new job would likely grow less than satisfying. I wanted to work with children, but these days I spent most of my time with reports and papers and other adults. Eventually, if things didn't change, I would need to move on.

Right now, however, this current situation might prove to be a real blessing because it freed me up as much as possible to focus on my sister. This time a year ago, no way could I have taken care of her. But now, I would be available from five in the evening till nine in the morning and all day Saturdays and Sundays, no problem.

And wasn't that just how God worked? Here I'd been concerned about my employment not being challenging enough when, in fact, that was exactly what I needed in order to care for Nicole.

By the time Nana and I finished hammering out the details, including Inez's continued employment for the time being, I was feeling good about everything.

"One last matter," Nana said as she settled comfortably into her chair. "Do you remember how much you girls enjoyed reading the journal of Catherine Talbot?"

"Of course." The journal had been written by my eleven-greats grandmother in 1685 when she was just eighteen years old, during a time that Huguenots were being persecuted in France for their faith. It told of her courage and determination and had made for a fascinating and inspiring read.

"Well," Nana continued, "it recently struck me that there's something else you really should see that is related to Catherine. Information about her daughters."

"Her daughters?" I thought for a moment. Though Catherine's journal only covered the span of a few months, we knew she'd gone on to have six children in her lifetime. Her son, Emmanuel Talbot, had been the first male in the family to come to America, though I seemed to recall hearing he'd been preceded here by two of his sisters.

"Some of their old letters have been preserved in the family archives," Nana said. "I was reminded of them last summer when Renee was researching the pamphlet."

Back in July, my cousin had solved a centuries' old family mystery involving a pamphlet—and met the man of her dreams in the process. I smiled now, thinking of Renee and her good fortune. Blake had recently moved to Seattle to be near her, and the two were happily dating and more than likely headed toward marriage.

"Last week I was thinking about the relationship between you and Nicole, and those old letters came to mind. I think the two of you ought to read them."

"Sounds great. The letters were written by Catherine?"

"No, *to* her by her grown daughters once they emigrated to Virginia."

I thought for a moment. "They're not in French are they, like the journal was?"

"No. Catherine and her husband fled from France to England, if you recall. Their children were born and raised there." Nana sighed, and I could see how tired she was. "Anyway, once things settle down around here, I'll dig them up for you. Considering the story they tell of two sisters making their way in the New World, I think you and Nicole would enjoy reading them together."

"That sounds wonderful, Nana. We'd love to."

By the time she and I finished our conversation, Nicole was asleep and Inez had gone home, so I left without telling my sister good night. I drove away with a lightness in my heart I hadn't felt in a long while. I was intrigued by the ideas of the letters, yes, but mostly my thoughts were on my sister. Not only was the real Nicole back—for now, at least, I reminded myself—but it struck me how nice it was going to be to come home to someone at night, to not have to eat alone. To bond with her again.

Just don't trust her, said the voice in my head. *Bond, yes. Love, yes. Trust, no.*

I whispered a quick prayer, fully aware that taking Nicole in could turn out to be either a tremendous blessing or the biggest mistake of my life.



CHAPTER THREE

Maddie

I woke Thursday morning to the sound of rain tapping against my bedroom window. The pitter-patter made me want to pull up my blankets and sleep some more. A glance at the clock told me I didn't need to be up for another fifteen minutes, but when I closed my eyes again, all I could see behind my lids was a to-do list of the many things I needed to accomplish before Nicole could move in.

I sat up and looked over at the stained glass window. Despite the rain, a sunbeam must have been piercing the clouds because greenish-blue light was dancing on the wall across from it as it did most mornings. The sight always gave me instant peace, reminding me of the complexity of the inexplicable union between man-made things, like glass, and God-made things, like light.

This tiny building, first constructed more than a hundred years ago, had been done and redone several times throughout the years. My landlady, Vida Zimmerman, had been the last one to make changes, renovating the interior to take advantage of the building's earlier charm. She'd uncovered as much of the original structure's wood as possible, exposing beams and tearing out carpets and polishing the floors until

they glistened. Then she'd painted and furnished the place in light, muted tones, making it feel open and airy despite its small size. Up here in the bedroom, the pale blue walls were a perfect complement to the light that refracted through the stained glass.

Charming as it all was, no one would call this place spacious. The downstairs held a kitchen, living room, and bathroom, all quite small. The upstairs consisted of just the bedroom. It had come furnished with a single bed, a dresser, and a bookshelf, to which I had added a small arm chair by the window and a cedar chest at the foot of the bed. The closet wasn't huge, though I managed to make it work by installing a floor-to-ceiling shoe tree in a corner.

Looking around the peaceful space now, I whispered a prayer of thankfulness. Then I headed down the narrow staircase to the kitchen to start the coffeemaker. In minutes, the rich scent of ground beans filled the room. As the machine bubbled and slurped, I stood in the wide doorway between kitchen and living room, contemplating the space. If I ditched the coffee table, shifted the TV to one side, and pushed the couch all the way against the wall, there might be enough room for Nicole's hospital bed, though it would be tight. She wouldn't have a closet or dresser, but clearing off the bookshelves temporarily should make room enough for her things. There was also the matter of privacy, thanks to the open floor plan. Maybe I could rig a curtain of some kind. Glancing at my watch, I knew these were matters I would have to deal with tonight after work. For now, I needed to focus on getting dressed for the day.

By the time I was ready to go, the rain had stopped and the sun was fully out, which meant I could bike to work. As I headed off down the road, I thought back to Nana's comment that had started me on this anti-perfectionist, self-improvement plan in the first place.

It happened six weeks ago. I had been at the office just wrapping things up for the day when I got the call from my mother, saying Nicole had been badly hurt in a car accident south of Norfolk. Frantic, I raced southeast on I-64 and was well on my way when Mom called back to say that Nana had just arranged to have Nicole airlifted to Richmond's VCU Medical Center, the number one hospital