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Raising Hope

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Extract

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Chapter One

Oh, Jesus. I slam the pillow over my head and reach my hand out from the bed to feel around for the goddamn alarm clock. Why, why, why do I live like this? I am not a morning person. Not now, not ever.

Shit. I throw my sheet off and get up quick, grabbing the stupid alarm clock and pushing in the button that'll stop that god-awful beeping. Oooooh, I feel like I've been run over by ten fire trucks. I rub my face hard as I sit on the edge of the bed, and I'm sorely tempted to crawl back under the covers. It's a physical craving, this urge to go back to sleep, as bad as wanting coffee or sex.

Well, wanting something doesn't mean that's what I'm getting. I stand up and slap my cheeks a little to get into the day. *Come on, Ruth*, I tell myself as I head into the bathroom. *The hardest part's over*. At least that goddamn alarm has shut up its racket.

Takes me about five minutes to pee, brush my teeth, and throw on some shorts and a T-shirt. That's the upside of not caring so much about the way you look – gives you a lot of time to fill up with better things. Things like what I'm doing right now – tiptoe-

ing into Hope's room so I can actually look at her for more than two seconds without her whining, 'Ruuuth, stop loo-ooking at me.' She's a big girl now. Turning twelve years old this very day, in fact. Doesn't like me looking at her anymore or hugging her or calling her cutesy little nicknames like buttercup and baby doll. Could be that she has a point about buttercup; I just might grant her that.

I'm standing over my little girl's bed, watching her chest rise and fall, rise and fall, as she sleeps. My little girl. I've been raising her since she was a week old, so I guess I can think of her as mine. Besides, I'd lay odds that Sara Lynn thinks of Hope as *her* little girl. Not that she doesn't have the right after all this time, but I'm not about to let old Sara Lynn get ahead of me, especially when it comes to my own niece.

I smooth my fingers over Hope's dark mop of curly hair and bend down to kiss her warm cheek. 'Happy birthday, baby doll,' I whisper, and she whimpers a little as she rolls over onto her side. 'See you at lunchtime.' She doesn't hear me, just clutches her pillow and makes little smacking noises with her mouth. I could cry from happiness just watching her settle back into sleep, but all I do is shake my head in wonder as I turn and start downstairs. I surely haven't done anything in my life to deserve such joy.

I let myself out of the house just after five, and my car starting in the quiet of the morning sounds like gunfire. I about jump out of my skin at the noise, scared to death I'm going to wake the world. My mother's smug voice pipes up from inside me, jeering that my jitters are nothing but a guilty conscience talking. *Ah, shut up, Ma, I tell her. Just go play your*

harp or whatever the hell else you do in heaven.

See, Ma would believe my conscience is giving me a hint or two because I'm driving over to see Jack. Jack's my boss; he's the owner of the diner where I waitress. He's also my lover, although I hate that word like anything. Sounds like fingernails scratching down a blackboard to me. Makes me think of porn movies, with a big-breasted blondie and a muscleman with a full head of hair going at it. Ha! I'm a flat-chested, short-haired brunette, and Jack is flabby, bald, and pushing sixty. Plus, our lovemaking is nothing like what you see in those movies. For one thing, there are times when we sort of fumble around, trying to watch out for his bad back and my skinny rear end. For another thing, I don't imagine porn star lovers ever have any mess to clean up afterward or times when the sex is okay but doesn't really rock their world, if you know what I mean.

I yawn and flick on my blinker, heading south to Jack's house. I'm like a homing pigeon; I could make this drive blindfolded, that's how long I've been doing it. Down Morning Glory Lane. Left on Ritter Avenue. Right on Lark Street. Left to Main Street. Left on Spruce and a quick right on Pine. Twelve minutes door-to-door. I stretch my aching, sleep-deprived back before I hop out of the car, trot up the back steps, and unlock the door. *Just going over some accounts*. That's what I'd tell anybody who happened to see my car outside. At five in the morning? *Well*, I'd say with a straight face, *Mr. Pignoli is a very busy man*.

I kick off my sneakers and leave them on the doormat, and then I tiptoe through the kitchen and down the narrow hall to Jack's bedroom. I throw my

T-shirt over my head and pull down my shorts, and then off come my bra and panties. I feel like a natural woman, just like in the song.

'Hi, sweetie,' Jack groans from the bed, and I hop in next to him.

'Damn,' I say, elbowing him. 'I was wanting to surprise you.'

'You always surprise me,' he tells me, rolling over to hug me. 'You're the nicest surprise. My angel.'

I can barely keep back my smile. Because I'm pleased, sure, but also because everyone in this town would die laughing if they knew Jack and I were sleeping together. And they'd really split a gut if they knew Jack calls me his angel. His angel! I'm more likely than not headed to hell with a red tail and horns.

'That's me.' I bury my face in his chest hair and laugh. 'I'm your angel.'

'Why don't you ever spend the night?' he complains, running his hands all over my body and giving me goose bumps. He asks me this at least once a week. 'I miss you every night.'

'We've been through all that,' I say between kisses. 'I don't want to set a bad example for Hope.'

'Well then, marry me,' he murmurs, rolling me over onto my back and climbing on top of me. 'Marry me, my angel.'

Being otherwise occupied, if you know what I mean, I can't answer him right away. But when we're finished, lying side by side, I ask, 'Say, did you just ask me to marry you?'

He leans over and traces designs on my stomach with his finger. 'Stop that—' I laugh, grabbing his hand. 'Tickles.'

‘You know I asked you to marry me.’ He smiles. ‘I’ve been asking you for the past two years.’

‘Just checking.’ I reach up and wiggle my ears. ‘Just making sure my ears are still working properly.’

It’s a game of ours. He asks me to marry him, and I act like it’s the first time, like he’s taking me by surprise. And, in a way, it is a surprise, every time. I’ll just never get used to being the one who’s wanted instead of the one on the outside trying to push my way in.

‘Why don’t you?’ he asks. ‘I mean it, Ruth. I want to marry you and be with you all the time, out in the open.’

‘You’re beating a dead horse, Jack.’ I laugh, rolling away from him. ‘Sara Lynn and I are both guardians of Hope. Even-steven. That’s by law. I can’t move out on her, and I can’t take her with me if I go.’

‘Can’t we at least date?’ He puts his hand on my lower back. ‘I’m tired of us being a secret.’

‘For crying out loud.’ I shake off his hand and sit up in bed. He’s just crossed the line from funny to annoying. ‘We’ve been a secret for three years. It’s been working fine as it is; why change it? I for one don’t want the whole town squawking about us. And I’m busy, Jack.’ I kick off the sheets and get up to take a shower. As I turn on the water, I yell, ‘I’m busy raising a child. I don’t have time to date.’

I scrub myself clean, annoyed at how men don’t ever understand that women have other responsibilities besides screwing them whenever they feel like it. As I rinse the shampoo from my hair, a thought comes to me from deep inside, in a little girl’s timid voice: *Maybe he just really loves you, Ruth*.

Bah! I step out of the shower and rub a towel hard on my head to get all that water out. I'm nothing but a sap. I stick my tongue out in the mirror and make fun of myself. 'Maybe he just really loves you, Ruth,' I say in a high, fluttery whisper. Sure. They love you today and throw you away in front of the whole town tomorrow. At least when he dumps me now, I'll be the only one who knows about it.

I dry off and slap on some deodorant. Nothing like a day at the diner to make you smell. I walk back into Jack's room and fish around for a clean uniform in the bureau drawer I claim as mine.

'You're mighty pretty, Ruth.' Jack's lying in bed with his arms behind his head, smiling like the cat that ate the canary. I swear, men get a little action and they feel all macho and sexy, like they're James Bond. Well, I sure as hell am not looking like a Bond girl right now. No Pussy Galore; just plain old Ruth Teller.

'And you're mighty blind,' I snap. I get dressed quick, my back to him. 'Damn,' I mutter, struggling with my zipper.

Jack gets out of bed and zips me up the back, giving me a little spank on the bottom when he's through. 'I love you, I love you, I love you,' he sings like a lullaby, pulling me to him for a hug.

I can't help but hug him back because I'm so glad he knows not to take my nastiness personally. Just ignores me and goes on singing me songs and telling me he loves me. 'Yeah, yeah,' I say, slapping his hands away from my bottom. 'Now, would you please let me go so I can open up your diner?'

'Promise me you'll think about it.' He holds me tight, not letting me squirm out of his hold.

I sigh. ‘About what?’

‘About marrying me.’

‘How many times do I have to tell you I’ve got Hope to think about!’ I finally break free of his grip, which is starting to feel too damn tight. He’s hanging on to this idea today like a dog gnawing at a bone. ‘You don’t understand, Jack. She’s . . . she’s this fragile little creature who’s mine.’ I point at my bony chest and start talking fast and loud, probably to drown out the firecracker-loud sound of my heart beating. I gotta make him see, gotta get it through his head that this marriage thing we talk about is just a sweet little joke. Hell, he doesn’t really want to marry me anyway. It’s just that his brain gets addled after sex. That’s all it is. And even if he really was serious, I’ve got responsibilities to Hope. And, dammit, I’m going to be there for her. Going to see my job through. ‘Listen to me – my whole life, I’ve never had squat. And then one day I had this little baby girl handed to me to raise. I . . . she’s everything to me. I worry about her all the time. What if something happens to her? What if she can’t handle all the crap this world is going to throw at her? I need to be there for her. I need to make sure she’s all right.’

‘Ruth,’ Jack says, ‘she’s a beautiful little girl. What could possibly happen?’ His eyes are real sad, like he’s sorry for me, like he knows the worry I put myself through. He’s being so nice that I have to blink hard to keep back tears, tears of sheer relief that someone in my life can look at me and say, ‘You feel like shit, Ruth, and that’s okay.’

‘Can you just quit being nice to me and let me blow my nose?’ I wipe my eyes and try to laugh.

He rubs my back and chuckles. ‘Angel, do you

think you're the only one who's ever worried over a kid? When Donna and Paulie were babies, there were times I'd wake up in the middle of the night and go into their bedrooms just to be sure they were still breathing. Then when they were a little older, I was convinced they were going to kill themselves on their skateboards and bikes. And when they were teenagers' – he rolls his eyes – 'oh, boy. Diane and I would sit up nights waiting for them to come in. We'd watch the clock and worry and get no sleep at all until they were in their beds. Safe.' He pauses, and his voice thickens. 'And then when their mother died, there was nothing I could do for them. I couldn't protect them from feeling sad. . .'

His voice trails off, and I hug him as tight as I can because there aren't any words to make that hurt better.

'Listen,' he says, his face in my hair. 'Share your worry with me. Marry me, and we can tear our hair out worrying about Hope together.'

'Be careful what you wish for, Jack,' I say as I twist out of his arms. 'You've got little enough hair left to lose.'

He laughs, and I'm glad I lightened his mood. I kiss him and run out the back door, hollering, 'See you at three! Don't be late! I've got a million things to do for Hope's birthday today!'

I started working for Jack twelve years ago, right at the end of the summer straight from hell. See, Ma died in early June that year; then, about three weeks later, my brother Bobby's wife died in childbirth; then Bobby just plain took off, too grief-stricken to stay and look after his baby daughter. Everything

happened at once that crazy summer. It was like a goddamn soap opera, it truly was. I walked through it like a sleepwalker, just putting one foot in front of the other with no clear idea of where I was going. But one good thing did come out of all the crap, all the sorrow: I got Hope. Sara Lynn and I did, that is. Bobby gave her to both of us, and we decided between us that I'd move in with Sara Lynn because her house was bigger and she had her mother to look after. Hell, I didn't mind. It had been only Ma and me living in her little house on South Street. Bobby and his wife, Sandra, had been up in Maine for a little less than a year, and my other brother, Tim, had already gone off to Montana to find himself. You know, it's something, it really is – all the men in my family who have felt the need to run off and find themselves. It's my opinion they'd have been better off squinting real hard to locate themselves right where they were.

Once I moved in with Sara Lynn, I thought I'd continue to clean the houses Ma and I had been doing together. My friend Gina Logan said, a little jealously, as is her way, 'Oh, I guess you won't be needing to work now that you'll be living high off the hog over at the Hoffmans' mansion.'

I looked her hard in the eye and said, 'I have no idea where you're getting your information. I am not a charity case. This is a business arrangement between me and Sara Lynn Hoffman regarding what's best for little Hope. Nothing more. Nothing less. I'm going to keep up the cleaning business Ma and I worked so hard to build.'

But I couldn't do it. I was tired from being up nights with Hope. I missed her every second of the

day I was away from her. And I hate to admit this, but I was damn mad about the fact that Sara Lynn was getting more time than I was with my own niece. She'd taken a leave from her magazine job and was just pleased as punch about it. 'The magazine has a maternity leave policy, and I talked them into applying it to my situation,' she explained. I just nodded and smiled, trying to act thrilled for her, trying not to mind that she was cooing over Hope while I was out vacuuming and dusting and polishing. I was so afraid Sara Lynn would win Hope over to her, that she'd gain Hope's love as easily as she'd gained everything else in her life, and that, as always, I'd be left with the short end of the stick.

There was also the fact that I saw Ma in every nook and cranny of the houses we'd cleaned together for so many years. I knew I had to find another way to make a living when Mrs. Oliver set out her silver set of 120 pieces for polishing, including fish knives and asparagus tongs and other nonsensical items. I burst into tears when I saw those pieces lying on the dining room table, and it wasn't because I dreaded the way my arms would ache after polishing them. No, I cried because I was remembering the last time Ma and I had cleaned that silver and she had held up a serving spoon with flowers twirling up the side. 'Oh, Ruth,' she'd said softly, 'look how lovely this is. Sometimes I wish I had something like this.'

I'd felt a lump in my throat when she'd said that, thinking of everything in her life that she'd probably wanted and had never got. 'Oh, Ma,' I'd scoffed, 'you'd hate having this dumb old silver set. Think of how the boys would come over on holidays and eat with it and scratch it up.'

'You're right.' And she'd laughed, gently setting the spoon down. 'Besides, getting to keep all these pretty things in order is the next best thing to owning them for myself. I'm awfully lucky, Ruth.'

Well, not me. As I cried over Mrs. Oliver's silver after Ma's death, I knew I couldn't spend the rest of my life looking at other people's pretty things and thinking I was living. After work that day, I drove right down to the diner, where I'd seen the help wanted sign in the window for the past month.

I parked my car, got my courage up, and walked into the diner and right up to Jack. 'I'm inquiring about the job,' I told him. I knew Jack because everyone in this town knows everybody else, although I didn't know him well because he was so much older.

'You're the Teller girl, right?'

'Ruth,' I said, sticking out my hand. 'Ruth Teller.'

'I was sorry to hear about your mother,' he said, and he really did sound sorry, so I had to narrow my eyes and clear my throat to prevent myself from crying. He told me years later that he'd decided to hire me right then. He always was a soft touch.

'So,' he said. 'Let's sit down and talk.' He led me to a booth, sat me down, and asked about my waitressing experience – a big fat zero – and my requirements. I remembered how Sara Lynn had told her magazine what she would and would not do now that a child had been dropped in her lap, so I took a chance and decided to do the same.

'Well,' I said, sitting up straight and trying to sound self-assured like Sara Lynn, 'you may have heard that I'm taking care of my brother's baby girl. I'd like to see her as much as possible, so I'd prefer to work out some flexible hours.'

'Hmm,' said Jack, drumming his fingers on the table and thinking.

'Or not,' I said, filling the silence. I started talking a mile a minute. 'I mean, I don't really care. All I know is that I'm desperate to get out of cleaning. It makes me think of my mother, and I'm not getting to spend any time with Hope, and I'm going crazy for wanting a change. It's all right for every member of my family who feels like it to take off for California or Montana or God knows where, but I need to stay right here. I have responsibilities now. I have this child to think of. So what I'm telling you is that I really need a new job, and this job sounds tailor-made for me. I'm friendly and I work hard and I'll do whatever you say. And just forget all about my need for flexible hours.'

He looked at me like he was trying to hold back from smiling. 'You got it,' he said. 'Job's yours. And we can work out the hours that make sense for you and your baby.'

'Really?' My face must have lit up like a neon sign; that's how happy I was. Not only did I get the job, but he'd also called Hope my baby. It was the first time anyone had acknowledged Hope as mine, as my little girl.

'Absolutely,' he said.

'Thank you. Thanks from me and from . . . from my baby.'

My baby . . . God, she's twelve today. I shake my head to imagine it; it was truly yesterday that she came to me and I started working for Jack. It's like I blinked my eyes and suddenly she's twelve. Better watch it – I'll blink again and she'll be thirty-two.

Dammit! I squint hard and shake my head to get rid of the tears misting up my vision. Sweet Jesus, it must be the menopause coming on early. Ma's revenge from up in heaven, I think as I rub my eyes hard. But how can I not be sad for Sandra, who didn't live to raise her own daughter? Or for Bobby, who ran away from his heartbreak and left his little girl behind? There's a flip side to my happiness at having Hope to love as my own child, and that's the losses that led to her becoming mine.

'She's doing great, Sandra,' I say out loud as I pull into the back lot of the diner. I'm crazy as a loon, talking to a dead person as if she's sitting beside me, but I don't care. Sandra died and her baby was born twelve years ago today. That's important. 'Thank you,' I whisper to her. 'Thanks for having Hope.'

I park the car and roll up the windows – the goddamn AC's on the blink again – and I wonder about Bobby for a minute. The last letter from him came, oh, four or five years ago, postmarked California, no return address. It just said, 'Hi, Ruth. Things are good. Give my little girl a kiss for me. Bobby.' That was it. I haven't heard from him since, but I don't doubt I will one of these days. That's Bobby, sort of breezing in when you least expect him.

I lock up my shitbox car out of habit and then unlock it again, hoping God will see fit to have someone steal the damn thing. I wonder if Bobby doesn't come back because he doesn't want to face Sara Lynn. She hurt him real bad when she broke up with him. Not that I thought it was a great idea for those two to be carrying on together. But he did love her in his own weird way, and she broke his heart when she told him good-bye. Of course, if Sara Lynn

hadn't broken up with Bobby, Bobby wouldn't have got together with Sandra and made Hope. Poor kid! I shake my head. So much trouble and sorrow bound up in her coming into the world.

Well, there's no trouble now. I narrow my eyes as I walk up the cement step to the diner. No more goddamn trouble on my watch.

Jesus! I straighten up and look around, hoping nobody's watching me nod and mutter in a public place like a crazy person.

Oh, hell, I'm just being paranoid. It's six-thirty in the morning, for Christ's sake, and I'm standing here alone in the teeny back lot of the diner. I laugh out loud as I turn my key in the door and punch in the alarm code. That's what I like best about getting up a little on the early side – no one's around to see me acting like the lunatic I surely am. I laugh again, and the sound echoes in the empty diner. I whistle as I get the coffee started.