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Opening Extract from...

Missing Pieces

Written by Huther Gudenkauf

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PROLOGUE
1985

LYDIA GAZED ABSENTMINDEDLY outside the kitchen window, the bright June sunshine glinting off the dew-glazed sweet potato vine that cascaded from the window box just beyond the screen. It was barely seven-thirty, and fifteen-year-old Jack and eleven-year-old Amy were already on the bus, making the forty-minute ride to school. Their last day before summer vacation began. She'd have to make a special supper to celebrate the occasion. Waffles topped with strawberries and freshly whipped cream, lemonade garnished with mint snipped from the windowsill herb garden.

Outside, Grey, their pewter-eyed silver Lab, began barking. A relaxed, friendly yapping. Lydia leaned in, scanning the yard for the source of Grey's excitement. From her vantage, the farmyard was deserted. John's truck was still gone and wouldn't return until after six. The bedsheets that she had forgotten on the clothesline overnight flapped languidly in the mild morning breeze. The gravel road that wound its way up to the main highway was empty, no telltale dust announcing the arrival of a visitor. Someone could have come by way of the old mud road, but few dared to, for fear

their tires would become stuck in the mire brought along by the early-summer rain. Lydia cocked her ear toward the window; Grey's barking was replaced by the impatient clucks from the henhouse, the Sussexes waiting for their breakfast. Lydia sighed. It had been a long, lonely winter and spring and she was finally beginning to feel better after weeks of nausea and dizziness and a fogginess she could not explain. She looked forward to the hot summer ahead, taking the kids to the swimming pool in town, going on picnics, spreading a blanket across the front lawn at dusk and staring up into the navy blue night pinpricked with stars.

She turned from the window, mentally ticking off the items she would need to make the waffles: heavy cream, last summer's strawberries stored in the cellar freezer. In her periphery a shadow slid darkly behind the sheets fluttering on the clothesline. She paused. Slowly she turned back toward the window, trying to make sense of what she had just seen out of the corner of her eye. The linens swirled lazily with the rising breeze. Nothing there. A trick of light.

She moved toward the cellar with slow, determined strides and stopped in front of the closed door. Normally she avoided the dank, stale cellar and she reluctantly reached for the knob, briefly considering scrapping the dinner of waffles and frozen strawberries. There was leftover meat loaf and mashed potatoes in the refrigerator, a plate of brownies on the counter.

Lydia laughed shakily, slightly embarrassed with her skittishness. She had lived on this farm for fifteen years and had never been afraid. Lonely, yes, but never frightened. With a deep breath she twisted the knob, her fingers fumbling for the light switch. A rush of musty air filled her nose. Over the years she tried to remove the damp, fetid smell by placing bowls of vinegar on the floor, sprinkling baking soda and mothballs into the corners and strategically placing the box fan as far as the extension cord could stretch in order to blow fresh air down from the top

of the stairs. Nothing worked. The naked lightbulb above her head doing little to illuminate her way, Lydia carefully moved down the wooden steps, sliding her hand down the iron handrail. Shelves of small, neatly labeled jars of strawberry, rhubarb and raspberry jams and quart and gallon-size glass containers of sweet pickles and chutney preserves lined one wall. In the narrow space beneath the stairs was where they kept the twelve-cubic-foot Coldspot deep freezer. John had bought it for her on their seventh anniversary, and while not the most romantic of gifts, she had to admit it was helpful. Whenever she wanted a pound of ground hamburger or the Iowa chops that John liked, all she had to do was go down to the cellar and retrieve whatever she needed.

With effort she lifted the heavy freezer lid and was met with a blast of cold air. Quickly riffling past the wax-paper-wrapped pork loins and the plastic bags filled with blanched kernels of sweet corn, Lydia plunged her hand into the depths of the freezer in search of what she was looking for: a quart-size package of sliced and sugared strawberries from last summer.

The initial push was the slightest of shoves, a nudge, really. Tentative. Almost a caress. A bird, maybe. A wayward wren or sparrow flying down the chimney and into the house and in its frantic state its wings fluttering against her back. That had happened before, birds getting into the house. Jack and Amy would howl with glee at the bird swooping at their heads desperate to find its way back out into the open air.

But a second blow followed immediately, striking her in the lower ribs. Her breath was knocked from her lungs and she scrambled to steady herself against the deep freeze.

With difficulty she twisted around, needing to see, needing to know who wanted to hurt her.

Oh, it's you, was Lydia's final thought before being struck in the temple, their eyes locking one last time.

1
PRESENT DAY

THE CALL, LIKE MANY of its kind, had come in the early hours of the morning, waking Jack and Sarah from a dead sleep. Jack's hand had snaked from beneath the covers, fumbling for the phone. He grunted a sleepy hello, listened for a moment, then sat up suddenly alert.

"Is it the girls?" Sarah asked as she turned on the bedside lamp. They had dropped the girls off at the University of Montana just a few weeks earlier and Sarah's worst fear was receiving an early-morning call like this. Jack shook his head and Sarah breathed a sigh of relief.

"It's Julia," Jack said after hanging up, his voice thick with emotion. "She had a fall. I need to go home."

Now, as their airplane ascended into the blue Montana sky, Sarah settled into her seat and gazed down at the expansive landscape below. The mountains, tipped with white, seemed to burst from the trees, while rivers meandered across the earth and deep lakes glittered in the midmorning September sun. Though she had grown up in Larkspur, she never tired of its beauty and she hated leaving, even for just a short time. She and Jack hadn't strayed from Montana in years, saw no need to travel to exotic

lands, to ocean coasts or dry deserts. All they needed they found in their home on Larkspur Lake.

She looked over at Jack, who was shifting in his seat trying to find a comfortable position for his long legs. The cross-hatched lines that rested at the corners of his eyes had become more pronounced overnight and two deep grooves above the bridge of his nose extended to his forehead like a ladder of worry. She had seen this same look on his face when the first of their twin daughters, Elizabeth, was born and had waited a full sixty seconds, an eternity, to take her first breath. Saw the same expression when their other daughter, Emma, took a nasty tumble from her bike and came to them crying, her elbow dangling helplessly at her side. She knew that look. Jack was scared.

She wished there was something that she could say to ease his nerves, but Jack was a reserved man who kept his worries to himself. She reached for his hand and absentmindedly he fiddled with her wedding band, spinning it around and around her finger like a talisman. "When do you think we'll get to Penny Gate?" Sarah asked.

Jack checked his watch and mentally calculated the distance to the small Iowa town where he grew up. "I'd say we'll get there about seven if we go straight to the hospital. Uncle Hal said they stabilized Julia in the emergency room and now she's in the ICU."

"From what you've told me about your aunt, if anyone can pull through such a bad fall, it's Julia. Thank God your sister found her so quickly."

"Yeah, if Amy showed up at the house any later, I don't know if she would still be alive." Jack went silent then, as if lost in thought, focusing intently on the seat in front of him.

Sarah could hear the worry in his voice. What would they find when they arrived in Penny Gate? Would his aunt be awake and grateful to see him or would she succumb to her injuries and not survive the night? "We'll be there soon," Sarah assured him.

"You know, it's been twenty years since I've been home. After the accident, I just couldn't go back there. Hal and Julia took us in and treated us as their own, and I couldn't even be bothered to visit in all these years."

Jack rarely spoke of his life in Penny Gate, of the years before the accident that took the lives of both his parents. He kept those memories well-hidden, the only part of himself that was off-limits to Sarah. All she really knew was that on a rainy spring night the year Jack turned fifteen, his mother and father climbed into their rusty old pickup truck and Jack never saw either of them again.

Jack had been her physical therapist, treating Sarah's injured shoulder after her own car accident, and after twelve painful but productive rehab sessions he announced that he had done all he could for her, at least physical-therapy-wise, then promptly asked her out on a date.

She remembered the night Jack told her about the accident as if it was burned in her memory. They had been dating for about a month and spent the weekend kayaking on Deer Lake, three hours north of Minneapolis. It was a warm summer night; the sun was beginning to set, a large gilded orb melting into the lake's horizon. They were in no rush to return to shore and laid their paddles across their laps and drifted languidly across the water.

Sarah, at the front of the kayak, gently waved away mosquitoes that hummed past her ear and asked Jack about the night his parents had died. She wasn't sure why he chose that moment to answer; he had sidestepped her questions so many times before. Perhaps it was because in the rear of the kayak she couldn't see his face. Perhaps it was the remote location; they hadn't seen another boat in hours. The only sound was the gentle slap of water against the side of the kayak. Jack had breathed the details of the story in staccato, short-clipped phrases that seemed

to punch the air from his chest: *He was drinking again. I should have stopped her. Stopped him. The roads were wet.*

Sarah wanted to turn and reach for Jack but forced herself to remain facing forward in the kayak, afraid that any movement would cause him to stop talking.

He flipped the truck. Upside down in a cornfield. Killed instantly.

Jack's breath came out in jagged chuffs and Sarah could tell that he was crying. Slowly, carefully, as one might to a skittish animal, she reached behind her and found Jack's hand.

A year later they were married, she quit her job as a reporter and they moved to Larkspur to begin a family. In the past twenty years Sarah had wanted to ask Jack so many questions. Not just about the accident and the years that followed, but about what his life was like before his parents died. Simple questions. Did he look more like his mother or his father? What books did she read to him before bedtime or did she call him by a pet name? Did his father teach him to bait a hook or skip rocks across a pond? But every time she broached the subject, Jack would find a way to avoid the conversation. He wouldn't let her in.

Jack released Sarah's hand and ran his fingers through his gray-flecked hair, a nervous gesture that she knew he would repeat a hundred times before they landed. "I shouldn't have waited so long to come back," he murmured.

Jack jiggled his leg up and down, striking the back of the seat with his knee. The man in front of him turned around and glowered with irritation. Jack didn't notice.

"I'm sure they understand," Sarah said, laying a hand on his leg to still it. But she wondered if Jack's aunt and uncle truly understood how the boy they took into their home could stay away for nearly two decades.

"I should have called her back." Jack's voice caught and he cleared his throat. "It just slipped my mind and I knew she'd call again in a few days." Jack's aunt, without fail, called the house each Sunday evening to check in and catch up on the events of

their week. But the previous Sunday they were out for a walk and had missed Julia's call. She had left a message on their machine, but it was late when they returned home and Jack had forgotten to call back the following day.

When they came home and listened to the message, Sarah had thought she detected a shakiness in Julia's voice, a tremor that made her think of Parkinson's. At the time she had dismissed it, but now she wondered if she should have said something to Jack.

"Do you think that Julia sounded different the last few times she called?" Sarah asked, pulling her cardigan more tightly around herself to stave off the plane's chilly temperature.

Jack narrowed his eyes as if mentally shuffling through recent conversations with his aunt. "I don't think so. What do you mean?"

Sarah hesitated. "I'm not sure. Has Hal said anything about any health concerns?"

"No, but that doesn't mean she hasn't had any problems," Jack admitted. He tilted his head back against the head rest and stared up at the plane's ceiling. "I can't believe they still live in that house," he said, changing the subject. "It's too big for two people. And those steps. They're so steep. I tripped down them all the time when I was a kid. I just can't believe that someone hasn't had a bad fall before now. The place is a death trap."

Jack crossed his arms in front of his chest and burrowed more deeply into his seat. "We used to go to this pond," he said as she slid her hand through his arm and rested her head on his shoulder. The comforting scent of his shaving cream and the starch used to iron his shirt filled her nose. "Aunt Julia would pack these elaborate picnics. Strawberries that we'd spent hours picking and pickled herring on crackers, cheese with names we couldn't pronounce and her homemade bread." Jack's voice sounded far away and Sarah hung on his words. "Then we'd all climb into the back of Uncle Hal's truck and drive down the old mud road to the pond. We'd sit on the bank and fish for hours

and would end up with just a few blue gills, a bass if we were lucky. Julia would make a big deal out of each one we caught, though, clapping her hands and jumping up and down."

Sarah thought about the times they had taken Elizabeth and Emma fishing. The girls squealing over the wiggling worms that Jack used to bait their hooks. Their delight at Jack pretending to buckle beneath the weight of their catches.

"Sometimes I can still taste those strawberries." Jack smiled sadly and Sarah squeezed his hand.

"It must be hard going back," Sarah reflected. "Lots of memories."

He nodded tentatively, a ghost of a smile playing on his lips. "Everything seemed so simple then. Easier somehow." Jack turned to the window then and looked out at the far-reaching landscape below. The world was endless from this vantage point, full of infinite wonder and possibility, and Jack drifted off in thought as he took in the view.

"I remember on stormy summer nights," he started, his voice tinged with sadness. "When the power would go out, my mom would scavenge through the cupboards and drawers looking for flashlights." Sarah's breath caught in her chest. Jack never spoke about his parents. Ever.

"Amy and I would grab the clean sheets from the clothesline just before the rain began to fall. Then we'd throw them over the furniture to make forts. We'd pretend the flashlights were our campfire and tell each other stories…"

Jack looked as if he was going to say more but instead he rubbed his hand across his mouth as if wiping away the thought. He turned back from the window and leaned his head against the headrest and closed his eyes.

Sarah wanted to press for more but she knew this fleeting moment of reminiscence was over.

As the airplane carried them away from the life they made together she watched Jack doze. Behind his closed eyelids she

knew that a thousand, secret memories drifted. She wanted him to let her in, to know that he was safe. Safe with her. Maybe she couldn't erase all the sadness and bitterness he was carrying. But she could be there for him and help him through the pain.

Despite the sad circumstances of their trip to Penny Gate, Sarah was looking forward to seeing the town Jack grew up in. She wanted to drive along the roads that he once traveled, to see the bedroom that he once slept in, to spend time with his family, whom she had only gotten to know over the years through phone calls and birthday cards. She thought it might bring her closer to him.

She let Jack rest until the pilot's voice filled the airplane cabin announcing their impending arrival in Chicago. The fasten-seat-belt light blinked on, and she lightly nudged Jack awake. Down below, the blue expanse of Lake Michigan was edged by miles of skyscrapers. Each drop in altitude was jarring, and Sarah's stomach churned. She reached for Jack's hand and closed her eyes, squeezing his fingers tightly until finally the wheels touched the runway.

They had only fifteen minutes to get to their gate in time to catch their connecting flight to the small airport near Penny Gate, and Sarah scurried to keep up with Jack's long strides as they wove their way through crowds of travelers, her carry-on bag bumping along behind her.

When they arrived at their gate, they joined the line of passengers to board their connecting flight. Jack quickly called Hal for an update on Julia's condition.

"She hasn't woken up yet," he reported grimly when he hung up the phone. "She's back from X-ray and she has a skull fracture, a broken pelvis and both arms are fractured."

Sarah handed her boarding pass to the gate agent. "That's terrible. Does she need surgery?"

"I don't know. Not yet, anyway. They're watching her closely to make sure there isn't any bleeding on her brain."

They were the last of the fifty passengers to board the full flight. Because of their late booking Sarah's seat was three rows behind Jack and across the aisle.

It was just a short thirty-minute flight to the small regional airport near Penny Gate, and as they got closer to their destination, Sarah watched from afar as Jack seemed to grow more and more restless. His foot tapped nervously and he kept checking his watch. Sarah knew that a million thoughts were banging around Jack's head. He hadn't seen his aunt and uncle in twenty years. How would they receive him? With open arms or cold reservation? Jack was returning to the town where he was born and raised but whose roads had taken his parents away from him. Anxiety seemed to radiate from his body and Sarah wanted to go to him, to reassure him that everything was going to be okay, and if it wasn't she would be right there beside him.

Sarah peered out the window as they descended. Jack was right. He had told her that Iowa had a beauty all its own and the landscape was a patchwork of verdant greens, golden yellows and rich browns.

When they landed Jack waited for Sarah at the end of the jet bridge. "Are you okay?" Sarah asked with concern. His skin had taken on a sickly hue.

"Just a little airsick," Jack explained as they went in search of a rental car.

The clear sky above them was quickly being replaced by a blanket of leaden clouds and a cold wind pressed at their backs, hurrying them along to the rental car. Jack loaded their bags in the trunk and then opened the passenger's side door for Sarah. She smiled at the small act of chivalry.

"The hospital is only about half an hour from here," Jack explained as he drove out of the airport parking lot. Jack was silent as he wove his way through busy interstate traffic past an industrial area with tall sturdy buildings, smokestacks and train bridges. Gradually the landscaped shifted and factories were re-

placed with vast fields stretching majestically into the horizon. Farm buildings peppered the landscape: bullet-shaped silos that reached to the sky, barns painted a crisp white or deep crimson, some barely standing, weathered by years of rain, wind and snow. They passed half-harvested fields of alfalfa, striped gold and green, and acres of sun-bleached corn lying in wait for the following day's harvest. Barbed wire pulled tautly across the wooden fence posts that lined the fields like jagged teeth.

It was nearing seven o'clock and the sun was setting behind the sharp line of the horizon, creating a golden halo across the distant fields. A light rain speckled the windshield and Sarah flipped on the car's heater. Though the speed limit was fifty-five, Jack was barely going forty. She watched him covertly from the corner of her eye. His hands gripped the steering wheel, his eyes staring intently ahead. She wondered if he was trying to delay his arrival at the hospital, reluctant to see his aunt so badly injured, or if he simply dreaded returning to his hometown where he faced such painful loss.

The road followed the path of the Gray Fox River and curled through the countryside. Could this have been the highway his parents were driving on the night they died? Maybe one of the recently harvested cornfields was where their car had come to a final rest.

"You seem distracted," she said. "Do you want me to drive?"

Jack glanced down at the speedometer and pressed down on the gas. "No, sorry, I'm fine. Thanks for coming with me. Are you going to get behind on your column?" he asked.

"Don't worry," Sarah said, patting his knee. "I let the paper know I'd be away for a few days. I've got a bunch of responses just in case," Sarah said of the advice column she had been writing for the past seven years. Sarah nodded toward the landscape. "Has it changed much?"

The ditches were lined with rosy thistle and spiky purple prairie clover. In the distance stood dozens of wind turbines, rows

of towering structures that seemed to have sprouted incongruously from fields of alfalfa. Their blades were eerily still at the moment, waiting to capture the prairie wind as it swept by.

"Not a bit," Jack observed.

The Sawyer County Hospital was just on the outskirts of Penny Gate, and as they pulled into the parking lot Sarah could see it was a small building constructed of dark-brown brick that looked nearly black beneath the ashen sky. Jack eased the car into a parking spot and pulled up on the handbrake. Sarah waited for him to open his door, but he just sat there, looking ahead.

"It's going to be okay," she said, hoping to calm his nerves. They sat quietly for a moment and Sarah wondered what was going through his mind. Was it fear? Sadness? Regret? Probably a combination, she decided, then broke the silence.

"You ready?" she asked.

Jack took a breath and held it awhile before letting it out with a deep sigh. "I think so," he said as he popped open the door and stepped out from the car.

But Sarah wasn't so sure she was ready herself.

2

SIDE BY SIDE, Sarah and Jack made their way across the hospital parking lot, sharp pellets of rain striking their skin. They stepped through the main entrance and were immediately assaulted with the uniquely antiseptic odor of health care facilities. The hospital was clean but dated. Institutional-green walls were lined with faded Impressionist prints and the carpet was worn and thin. Jack inquired about Julia at the information desk and they were directed to the fifth floor.

Once upstairs Jack hesitated outside the room. "I don't know if I can do this," he said softly, rubbing his eyes. Sarah slid her hand into his and waited. She knew how difficult this was for him, that coming home would release a floodgate of memories and emotions that he had kept locked up inside himself for decades.

Finally, Jack knocked lightly, pushed open the door and stepped inside.

The room was dim. The lights were off; the shades were drawn. The redolence of death hung in the air, and it was stifling.

Sarah's eyes locked on the tiny elderly woman lying in the hospital bed. Asleep or unconscious, it was difficult to know.

Next to her, Sarah heard Jack inhale sharply. Beneath the oxygen mask, Julia's skin was bruised and pale. What appeared to be bits of dried blood clung to her tightly curled white hair, a section shaved away and covered with a thick bandage. She was connected to an IV filled with clear liquid. Both of her arms and hands were casted and her right leg was held immobile in a brace from toe to pelvis. A sense of dread washed over Sarah and she rubbed her arms, trying to scrub away the chill.

"Jesus," Jack murmured, tracing the tips of his fingers over his aunt's right forearm. "All this from a fall?"

The room was drafty and the mechanical hum of the medical equipment filled the air. If it weren't for the heart monitor that Julia was connected to, it would be difficult to know she was still breathing.

On the bedside table was a photograph of Julia and Hal from early in their marriage. Julia was young and hugely pregnant, wearing a smile of pure joy. Hal's eyes were firmly fixed on Julia. They were obviously crazy about each other. Next to Julia's bed was a set of rosary beads and daily devotional. Someone had tucked a handmade pink-and-yellow postage-stamp quilt around her small, diminished frame. A powdery, rose-petal scent emanated from the old fabric but couldn't quite mask the odor of iodine and illness that permeated the room. Sarah wondered who had placed these comforts from home so lovingly around the hospital room. Hal, she guessed.

"Jack?" came a voice from behind them. Startled, they both turned to find a small woman with dark, curly hair and large green eyes that shone with warmth. Sarah recognized her from Christmas photos exchanged each year and the photographs didn't do her justice. Her heart-shaped face was unlined and pale, a stark contrast to her black curls. Her full lips curved into a disarming smile revealing a deep dimple in her left cheek. She was beautiful.

"Jack," the woman said again, and Sarah sensed a tone of relief in her voice.

"Celia," he said, and smiled, perhaps for the first time since they had arrived in Iowa. The woman stepped forward to wrap her arms around him and Sarah felt as if she had suddenly disappeared into the room's white walls.

"It's so good to see you. I can't believe you're really here," she said into his ear.

Sarah had never met Celia, the woman married to Jack's cousin, Dean. In fact, the last time Jack had gone home to Penny Gate was for Dean and Celia's wedding. Sarah had stayed behind with the twins, who were under a year old at the time. It was a quick trip, just two nights and three days. *Three days in Penny Gate is more than enough*, Jack had said, but looking back, Sarah wondered if Jack was relieved that she opted to stay behind.

Sarah had looked forward to finally meeting Celia in person. They had talked briefly on the phone several times over the years, exchanged Christmas cards. But now she couldn't help but feel intimidated by the woman.

Jack pulled away from their embrace and took a step backward, holding Celia by the forearms to get a better look. "Of course I came."

For the first time Celia seemed to notice Sarah. "Sarah?" she asked, and Jack nodded in affirmation.

"It's so wonderful to finally meet you in person," Celia said, drawing her into a tight hug that felt a little too familiar. "All the nice things Jack has said about you, I feel like I've known you forever." Celia looked around the room. "Where are the girls? Did you bring them?"

"No, no," Sarah said. "They couldn't make it." She was about to explain how the girls were tied up with school when Jack's cousin, Dean, appeared in the doorway and diverted her attention. He was a tall broad man who wore the weathered look of a tired farmer and a son worn down with worry.

He didn't look like the same recklessly handsome man she had last seen twenty years ago when he was the best man at their wedding. He had gained well over fifty pounds and his thick dark hair had disappeared. His face was scoured and lined by hours spent out in the fields beneath the blazing Iowa sun.

"Jack," Dean said, and the two men embraced with heavy claps on the back. "Thanks for coming." Dean pulled away and swiped at his eyes with the back of one large hand. "I know it means a lot to Mom that you're here. She thinks the world of you."

"I'm so sorry about Julia," Sarah said, and reached out her arms as he pulled her into a hug. "What are the doctors saying?"

Dean shoved his hands into his pockets. "She has a fractured skull and broken bones. Almost too many to count. But she's a strong old bird."

"What happened?" Jack asked, looking down at his aunt. Sarah knew that he was thinking the same thing she was: it was a miracle this elderly wisp of a woman was still alive.

"All we know is that she fell down the stairs sometime early yesterday evening. Amy was the one who found her and called 9-1-1."

"How's your dad doing?" Sarah asked. "I bet he's just sick about it."

"He's doing okay. I don't think he can believe this is happening. He's down in the cafeteria with Amy getting something to eat."

"I've been trying to get ahold of Amy for weeks," Jack said, "but she never answers her phone."

Dean hesitated before speaking. "That was something I was hoping to talk to you about."

"Why don't we take a walk and get some air," Celia said to Sarah, but Jack shook his head.

"I don't mind if Sarah stays if you don't," Jack said. "Is something wrong?"

"It's about Amy," Dean explained. "Let's go outside."

They moved into the hallway and Jack looked expectantly at his cousin. "Is Amy okay? Did something happen?"

"We're worried about her," Celia said uncomfortably.

"I hate to spring this on you," Dean said, scratching the back of his neck. "And I know this is the last thing you need to hear right now, but Amy's been having a hard time lately."

"Of course she's having a hard time," Jack said with confusion. "Julia's like a mother to her."

"It's more than that," Dean said. "She was acting strange before the fall, too."

"Has she been drinking again?" Jack asked. Sarah thought of Jack's dad and his drinking. Alcoholism ran in families, but Jack drank only socially, never allowing it to impair his thinking.

"I think so, maybe pain pills, too. She lost her job at the motel a few weeks ago."

"She's worked there for over two years. Do you know what happened?"

"She was showing up late, not showing up at all—that's what I heard."

Two nurses dressed in green scrubs brushed past them and Sarah's eyes followed them down the depressingly dim corridor. She noticed on the ceiling that a brown spot had bloomed against the white plaster and rainwater dripped rhythmically into a large bucket below. She imagined mold and mildew festering behind the walls.

"Amy walks around like a zombie half the time and she's lost a lot of weight. I just don't want you to be shocked when you see her."

"How's she paying her bills?" Jack asked. "Has she found another job yet?"

"I don't think so, but she's still living in that little rental house on Oleander, so she hasn't been evicted yet. I'm guessing that my mom and dad have been giving her some money to get by."

Dean shifted his weight uncomfortably. "They're on a fixed income themselves and don't have a lot of extra cash to spare."

"Hal and Julia shouldn't have to pay Amy's way," Jack said quietly. "She's a grown woman."

"We just thought you'd want to know," Celia said. "I've tried talking to her, but she hasn't been answering my calls, either."

Jack opened his mouth to speak when something down the hallway caught his eye.

"Jack?" Sarah asked, but his eyes were fixed on a point in the distance, down the hall. He didn't answer and Sarah repeated his name, this time more loudly. "What is it?" she asked as she turned and followed his sharp gaze, but all she saw was a doctor standing at the nurse's station taking notes on a chart.

"Nothing," Jack replied, and shook his head. Sarah thought he seemed confused. "It's nothing," he repeated with finality, and turned his attention back to them. "So, you think Amy's been abusing pain pills? Have you talked to her about it?"

"My mom has. I know she was worried about her and they argued about it a few days before the fall."

"Thanks for letting me know. I'll try and talk to her before we go back home."

"Here comes Hal now," Celia said.

An elderly man wearing work boots and a frayed tan barn jacket approached. Though he was nearly six feet tall and broad-shouldered, he was a smaller, softer version of Dean. His bald head was speckled with age spots and sun damage and his weary, deeply lined face lit up when he saw them. "Jack," he said warmly. Behind thick glasses, his eyes glistened with emotion and worry. "Thank you so much for coming."

"Uncle Hal," Jack said, reaching for the older man. They clung to each other for a long time and Jack closed his eyes as he settled comfortably into their embrace. "I'm so sorry," he whispered.

Hal pulled away, smiling through tears. He took Jack's face

in his hands. "You know when she wakes up she's going to give you hell for taking so long to come back home."

Dean snickered and suddenly the tone felt lighter. Easier. "He's right, you know. I can hear her when she wakes up. 'You mean all I had to do is fall down a flight of stairs to get that boy to come home?'" Dean's voice rose an octave as he mimicked Julia's voice.

"That sounds about right." Jack said, giving a small laugh. "You remember Sarah, don't you?"

"You haven't changed a bit," Hal said as he embraced her. "Thanks for coming."

Sarah watched as her husband fell into the comfortable banter of a family catching up after so many years of lost time. She was surprised by how easy it was, not even a hint of the devastation that had befallen them all that time ago. Jack and Hal interacted like a father and son and Sarah could see the mutual love and respect in their eyes. She was so enrapt by this unseen side of Jack that she almost didn't notice the small frail woman who had seemed to arrive from out of nowhere.

"Amy," Celia said, "look who's here."

Amy's brown eyes were flat and expressionless, and Sarah thought she looked even thinner than the last time she had seen her. Her pale skin was pulled tightly against her bones and seemed paper-thin. Almost translucent. Her hair was bleached a nearly colorless blond and was pulled back into a lank ponytail. Sarah could understand why Dean and Celia were so concerned about her. She looked sickly.

"I wasn't sure you'd come," Amy said almost accusingly. She hesitated and then wrapped her reedlike arms around her brother. At first taken aback, Jack returned the embrace.

The last time they had seen Amy was four years earlier. She had called out of the blue all the way from Spokane, Washington. From what Sarah could gather, Amy had traveled there with a man and it ended badly. Jack made the drive to collect her

and six hours later Amy arrived in Larkspur, haggard, bruised and hungover.

Sarah never quite understood the dynamic between Amy and Jack. She knew Amy had had a hard life and didn't think she ever quite forgave Jack for going away to college and leaving her behind in Penny Gate. He didn't talk to or see his sister very often, but when he did it was usually in conjunction with some major catastrophe, usually of Amy's own making: a job lost unfairly, a poisonous relationship with a man, a brush with the law. After the phone calls Jack would hang up drained and distracted.

Jack murmured in Amy's ear, too quietly for Sarah to hear, but she could tell by the way Amy's demeanor seemed to soften that Jack had said something to ease her. She nodded and wiped her eyes, leaving behind black streaks of mascara beneath her eyes.

Sarah was suddenly overwhelmed at the sight of Jack comforting Amy. Blinking back tears, she could almost picture them as children, Jack the protective older brother, always looking after his fragile little sister. "Amy, it's so good to see you," Sarah said, taking a hesitant step toward her sister-in-law. "It's been way too long."

"Hi," Amy said hoarsely, surprising Sarah by giving her a hug. The odor of cigarette smoke clung to Amy's clothes and Sarah could feel the sharp point of each rib. Sarah carefully returned the embrace, afraid of squeezing too tightly against Amy's thin frame. "Thanks for coming."

"Of course." Sarah reached into her purse and pulled out a small package of tissues and offered them to Amy.

"Amy, did you get something to eat?" Celia asked.

Amy nodded and Celia gave her a pointed look.

"I did," Amy said with annoyance. "You can even ask Hal."

"She did eat," Hal confirmed. "Not much, but then neither did I."

"You need to take care of yourself," Celia pressed. "Why don't you stay at our house tonight? Get a good night's sleep."

"No, I think I'll stay here tonight," Amy replied, hitching her thumb toward the hospital room. "I'm going to check on Julia." She hugged Jack again. "You don't know how glad I am that you're here." She wrapped her arms around her midsection as if warding off the cold and moved past them down the hallway toward Julia's room.

"She's taking this really hard," Hal said, looking fondly after his niece. "But she's been great. She's been glued to Julia's side almost the entire time."

"Amy loves Julia more than anyone else in the world," Jack said.

"Is she the one who decorated Julia's room with all the photos and things from home?" Sarah asked.

"No, Celia did that," Hal responded, rubbing his hand absentmindedly across his head.

"That's really nice," Sarah said. "When Julia wakes up she'll have some comforts of home nearby." She was not only beautiful, Sarah observed, but Celia was thoughtful, too. It was obvious she made it a priority to take care of everyone in the Quinlan family.

To confirm Sarah's observation, Celia started gathering up empty coffee cups and stray napkins. "Hal," she said, "didn't you have your hat earlier?" Celia asked.

Hal's hands went to his bare head. "I think I left it down in the cafeteria."

"I'll go get it," Jack offered. "I could use a cup of coffee, anyway."

"I'll go with you," Sarah said, not wanting to be left alone. Jack's family was nice enough, but she hardly knew them, and she was eager to avoid the grim scene inside the dark hospital room. The drawn shades, the stuffy air, the pneumatic hum of the oxygen machine. It was practically suffocating.

Sarah and Jack made their way to the elevators. "Amy doesn't look good," Jack commented. "I'm worried about her."

"She's the one who found Julia after she fell, right? That must have been very traumatic."

"Yeah, but there's something else." Jack pressed the elevator's down button, and then again and again, as if the elevator couldn't come quickly enough. He searched for the right words. "Something in her eyes," he added.

"You should talk to her," Sarah said. She caught a flurry of movement out the corner of her eye. A doctor was hurrying down the corridor, her long white coat flowing behind her. Sarah's first thought was Julia had taken a turn for the worse and held her breath until the doctor turned in the opposite direction of Julia's room.

The elevator door finally opened and they stepped inside. The doors closed and Sarah leaned against Jack.

"I don't know. I probably should, but I'm sure it won't make a difference."

The old elevator creaked and groaned and was excruciatingly slow in its descent, stopping at each floor, though no one was there to get in. Sarah figured whoever was waiting gave up and used the stairs instead.

"I think she'd listen to you, Jack. She seemed so glad to see you."

Sarah's thoughts suddenly went back to their earlier conversation about Amy. She recalled how Jack had become distracted by something he had seen down the hallway.

"What did you see earlier?" Sarah asked. "When we were in the hallway talking to Dean and Celia?"

Jack pushed the first-floor button again as if it could speed up their descent. "I'm not sure what you mean," he said, feigning ignorance.

"Come on, Jack, tell me," Sarah pressed.

"It was nothing," Jack insisted. The elevator finally arrived at

their floor and the doors opened to an empty, quiet hallway. It was cold and eerie, and Sarah couldn't help but wonder if they kept the morgue down here, as well. Jack turned right, following the sign directing them to the cafeteria, and Sarah quickened her pace to keep up with him.

"Jack, you looked like you'd seen a ghost."

Jack stopped abruptly. "Cut it out, Sarah. I didn't see anything," he said, but Sarah looked at him expectantly. "Okay. Fine. For a second I thought I saw my dad."

"Your dad?" she questioned in confusion. He was the last person she expected Jack to mention. "That's impossible.".

"I don't know. It's not like I got a clear look at whoever it was."

"I know it's not easy being back here. I'm sure it's bringing up a lot of old memories."

They entered the cafeteria, where the dim recessed lighting and a low ceiling made the room feel downright dismal. The smell of overboiled broccoli and strongly brewed coffee filled Sarah's nose. The room was empty except for a woman in a white apron and a hairnet perched behind a cash register flicking through a magazine, and a man sitting alone at a table staring out a rain-spattered window into the black night, his food untouched in front of him.

Sarah's eyes searched the room and landed on a table in the far corner. "There," she said, pointing. They walked past the cashier, who didn't look up from her magazine, and made their way toward the back of the cafeteria.

"God, he still wears this old thing." Jack smiled as he bent over and picked up the hat from the worn green linoleum. "I think Amy got this for Hal for Christmas, like, twenty-five years ago."

"It must mean a lot to him," Sarah said.

Jack grew quiet.

"Hey." Sarah nudged him gently. "It's okay. Everything's going to be fine."

"I just can't shake the feeling that I saw my dad," Jack said. "You must think I'm nuts."

"Of course not," Sarah replied, trying to comfort him, though she couldn't help but feel a little uneasy. "Last month I thought I saw my grandpa at the grocery store and he died when I was seven."

"Yeah, but I bet you'd be happy to get the chance to see your grandpa again. I can't say I feel the same way about my dad. I won't ever be able to forgive him."

"Never?" Sarah asked. "You'll never be able to forgive him?"

"Would you be able to forgive your dad if he killed your mother?" Jack asked pointedly as he motioned to leave the cafeteria. Sarah followed as Jack bypassed the elevator and pushed open a heavy metal door that led to the stairs. The stairwell was windowless and weakly lit by dusty fluorescent bulbs. Cobwebs swung precariously in the corners where drab cement block walls met the ceiling and Sarah quickened her pace.

"I don't know," Sarah answered honestly. "I'd like to think I'd be forgiving, especially if it was an accident."

Their footsteps reverberated on the metal stairs as they wound their way upward. Sarah almost preferred the rickety old elevator to the confines of this dingy, damp stairwell. It was with a relief when Jack pushed open the door to the fifth floor. They were both slightly winded from the climb.

"You must be a better person than I am," Jack said somewhat breathlessly, and Sarah decided it was best to end the conversation there.

When they returned to the waiting area, Hal was sitting by himself staring up blankly at a television set affixed to the wall.

"Found your hat," Jack said, handing it to his uncle. Hal set it on his bald head and adjusted it into place.

"No coffee?" Hal asked, noting their empty hands, and Sarah realized they were so distracted they had completely forgotten to get the coffee. She instantly longed for the rush of caffeine.

"Coffee looked like sludge," Jack replied, and Sarah wondered why he didn't just tell Hal the truth. "Where is everyone?"

"Amy's still with Julia, and Dean and Celia went to see if they could find out what time the doctor is doing rounds tomorrow."

"I'll go see if Amy needs a break," Jack said. He gave Sarah a peck on the cheek and she smiled warmly as he turned and exited the waiting area, leaving her alone with Hal.

Sarah sat down in one of the stiff-backed chairs next to Hal. Purple rings of exhaustion circled Hal's eyes and were magnified by the thick lenses of his glasses.

"I shouldn't have left her home alone," he said, sliding his thumb and forefinger beneath his glasses and rubbing his eyes. "Her balance hasn't been very good lately. She's been stumbling a lot."

Sarah thought again about the phone message that Julia had left on their machine and the tremble in her voice.

From across the corridor Sarah watched as Jack entered Julia's room. Moments later, Amy emerged handling a pack of cigarettes as she moved toward the elevator.

"I wish she'd give those things up," Hal said.

"It must have been terrible for Amy to find Julia after her fall."

"She found Julia at the bottom of the steps and called an ambulance right away. Then called me."

"That probably saved her life."

"I think so, but a social worker came to talk to me this afternoon. Have you ever heard of that? I mean, after an accident?"

"A social worker?" Sarah repeated. "Why?"

"She was asking all these questions about Julia's accident. I wasn't even at the house when she fell. I was in town. She asked if there were any problems in the family, any reason Julia wouldn't feel safe."

"They probably have to ask those kinds of questions when there's an accident in the home," Sarah said, though she wasn't

quite so sure and didn't want to let on to Hal that it worried her. "What did you say?"

"I told her what I just told you. That she's been stumbling a lot lately. I mean, hell, so have I. We're getting older.

"The social worker said someone reported that the fall might not have been an accident, after all. Why would someone say such an awful thing?" he asked incredulously, rubbing the sharp gray stubble on his chin, his blue eyes clouded with worry.

"What did Dean and Amy say? Did the social worker talk to them, too?"

"Just to me, I think. I haven't told anyone. I didn't want to bother them with it." He shifted in his seat, pulled out a white, linen handkerchief from his pocket and smoothed it with his blunt fingers. "Do you think we should be concerned?"

"I think you should tell them. Tell Jack. They can help you talk to the social worker," Sarah advised, and Hal said that he would.

"It really helps having family here," he said, and crossed one leg over his knee, his heavy brown work boot weathered with age and toil. "I know Jack doesn't like coming back here."

"He wanted to come. We want to be here for you and Julia." Sarah reached out and patted Hal's knee and he covered Sarah's hand with his own.

"Well, I can't tell you how much it helps," he said, and cleared his throat. For a moment Sarah wondered if she should seize the opportunity to ask Hal about Jack, about the ghost of his father he thought he saw earlier. But instead she allowed silence to fall between them.

For the next hour Sarah sat in the waiting room while Jack's family took turns sitting with Julia. Hal was the last and after what felt like eons he finally emerged from the room, haggard and weary.

"I think we're all tired," Dean said, pushing himself up from

his seat with difficulty. "Maybe we should all go home and get some rest. The nurses will call if there's any change."

"What if she wakes up?" Hal asked, twisting his hat in his hands. "She'll be scared if she wakes up and no one is here."

"Everyone can stay at our house," Dean said. "We're close enough to the hospital that we can get here quickly if she wakes up. Jack, you and Sarah are welcome to stay with us. We've got the room."

Jack rubbed the shadow of bristle that had grown on his chin. "I don't think that's the best idea, Dean."

"No shit," Amy muttered from her seat.

"Be quiet, Amy," Dean said, tossing a magazine onto the coffee table. It slid across the surface and fluttered to the floor.

"Fuck you, Dean," Amy snapped.

"Whoa, settle down," Celia interjected.

"Amy," Jack pleaded. "Please don't."

"Really, Jack?" Amy's tone softened, the anger replaced with hurt. "You think that coming back here after twenty years is going to make everything okay?" .

"None of this is good for Julia and that's who we need to be worrying about," Jack said. "Hal, why don't you stay at Dean and Celia's tonight? Sarah and I will get a hotel room."

"What's the matter, Jack?" Amy asked archly. "You don't want to spend a night in the house of horrors?"

"Amy, just shut the hell up." Dean's face flushed with anger.

"What do you mean, house of horrors?" Sarah asked before she could stop herself. Up until then she had uncomfortably watched the tense exchange in silence. She didn't really know Jack's family, didn't understand their dynamics, and it was clear that it was better for her to stay out of it.

"Never mind," Jack said sharply, and Hal lowered his face into his hands.

"Please don't fight. Not here."

"You're right," Jack said. "You should get some sleep. We can take you back to your house."

"Stay with me," Hal insisted. "It's silly for you to stay in a hotel. I want to sleep in my own bed, but I can't stand the thought of going home to an empty house. Please stay."

"Sure, Hal," Jack said soothingly. "We'll stay at your house." To Dean he said, "Thanks for the offer, but it would be strange staying in the old house."

Why would it be strange? Sarah wondered. And what did Amy mean by "house of horrors"? It brought to Sarah's mind an image of chain saws and rubber knives, a silly Halloween gag. And yet the words lingered in her thoughts.Was Amy just being dramatic, like Jack said she always was, or was there more to it than that? And why had Jack brushed her off when she asked about it?

She wanted to believe that he'd meant nothing by it, that he was merely trying to keep his family from combusting. But she had a sinking feeling that there was more to it than that. Jack was keeping something from her.