

PURPOSES  
OF THE  
HEART

THE FIRST NOVEL OF A TRILOGY BY

DOLLY KYLE - BROWNING

DIRECT  
OUTSTANDING  
CREATIONS  
DALLAS, TX



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For weeks before the thirtieth high school reunion, Kelly had debated about making the trip back to Vicksburg. She figured that Cameron would be there, of course, barring a war in the Middle East or some other international crisis. She didn't want him to think that she would go just to see him, although many others in the class would be there for that very reason. She also didn't want him to think she would stay home just to avoid him. Finally, she decided that having this debate with herself was still allowing him to control her life and she had vowed not to do that any more. In her heart, she really wanted to go and so she did.

Driving her vintage convertible across the Mississippi River bridge, Kelly was greeted anonymously with a colorful street banner proclaiming "Welcome to Vicksburg, Hometown of President Cameron Coulter."

Kelly had made reservations at a small inn off the main street, knowing that the splendidly-restored Vicksburg Hotel would be too crowded to suit her. Cameron, the Secret Service, the entire presidential party and everyone else who could afford it would be staying there. Kelly knew she had made the correct decision when she drove past the venerable building and saw hundreds of locals as well as tourists swarming all around.

A moment later, Kelly heard the distant sound of sirens, soon followed by the thunderous roar of every police motorcycle in Mississippi. She turned quickly down a side street and found an unobtrusive, though illegal, place to stash her car. Chastising herself for her interest in the spectacle, she walked briskly back down to the corner and watched as the presidential motorcade passed by, long black limousine after long black limousine, followed by the black Suburban "war wagon" that painfully reminded her of the ever-present danger to Cameron, even in his own hometown.

There would be ample security for the reunion itself. Everyone in the class, along with the one-per-person guest, had to have White House Security Clearance before receiving

a registration confirmation packet in the mail. There were instruction letters and forms and much ballyhoo about souvenir coffee mugs and tee shirts that would be available. Vicksburg, the tourist city, was well-prepared for the arrival of its most famous son.

Kelly spent less time than she had planned in dressing for the evening, barely glancing in the mirror before leaving her room. She knew without confirmation that she looked good in her simple white silk blouse and ankle-length black skirt slit to the thigh. Walking the two blocks to the hotel in the early evening heat made her wish for a moment that she had worn her long blond hair up off her neck. Then, almost against her will, she remembered her mother's favorite saying, "Beauty must suffer." She chuckled at the breadth of ridiculous adages, old wives' tales and Italian superstitions she had unconsciously picked up from her mother.

"At least I inherited her great Italian skin," she mused aloud. At forty-six, Kelly's face was still as untouched by crow's feet as her mother's had been well into her fifties. It probably helped that Kelly usually kept her pale green eyes protected behind sunglasses to avoid squinting.

Her heart skipped a beat as she approached the Vicksburg Hotel and saw the big black Suburban "war wagon" up close. The door opened as she passed by and she was amazed at the amount of electronic equipment and gadgetry it held. A clean-shaven, crew-cut-type in his forties stepped out onto the sidewalk and looked at Kelly as if he intended to say something. She paused, smiled and nodded, then walked on as he stood silently beside the open door.

She thought about President Kennedy and, as always, said a quick prayer for Cameron's safety. She tried never to think about all the unknowns that could threaten him. Then she remembered Cameron's threat to her. His callous words about their life together cut into her again. "If you cooperate with them on the story," he had warned, "we will destroy you!" Kelly entered the hotel's ancient foyer with more anger than she wanted to acknowledge.

Apparently, everyone else had arrived early to go through the security clearance necessitated by their illustrious

classmate. Also apparent from the sign-in sheet was that everyone else had brought the one allowed guest.

"We thought you'd changed your mind about coming, Kelly," smiled one of the hostesses for the evening. "Here's your name tag," she added, "not that you'll need it. You look exactly the same as ever."

"You, too," Kelly lied, smiling back at the unrecognizable, graying brunette who had gained a hundred pounds in the thirty years since graduation.

As she passed through the portable metal-detector security clearance, Kelly turned to one of the dozen uniformed guards. "I left my thirty-eight in my hotel room, in honor of Cameron," she said sweetly, "so, I'll need an escort when I leave. With whom should I arrange that?"

"I'll take care of it, ma'am," interposed an unusually tall man in a black suit who was standing behind the guards.

"Thank you," Kelly looked up at him. "You'll be easy to find."

Kelly entered the ballroom alone and felt hundreds of eyes staring at her. Everyone was already seated at the big round tables and, because it was an hour after the festivities should have started, they were watching the door, anticipating Cameron's entrance. Only a few couples were dancing at the far end of the room. Kelly was immediately grateful that the music was not too loud. For the first time, she wondered if she would find a dance partner. She strode purposefully through the room, hoping to chance upon a good place to sit.

Someone grabbed her hand as she walked by and squealed, "Kelly!"

The voice belonged to a tiny girl who had been in her World History class. Kelly could not recall that they had ever spoken in high school, but this person acted as if they were long-lost friends. "What's the latest with Cameron?" she asked with a raised eyebrow.

For the millionth time in her life, Kelly wondered what everyone knew.

"The latest with Cameron," Kelly answered knowingly, "is that Cameron will be late."

The eight people seated around the table laughed at her response, probably figuring that Kelly herself had detained him upstairs. She deftly changed the subject by asking if anyone had grandchildren and she knelt down beside the squeally woman and smiled politely for the interminable stories that followed.

A wave of silence washed over the room. Without standing up or turning around or looking toward the entrance, Kelly knew that Cameron had arrived. She imagined him standing tall and handsome in a navy blue suit, his light blue eyes taking in the whole ballroom, with its beautifully-refinished white walls, mirrored columns and brilliant chandeliers. She imagined that he was searching for her in the crowd of four hundred people, that his eyes were drawn to her as always, that he recognized her from the back, that he was focusing on her long blond hair, that he was walking past the first tables and coming directly to the table where she was, closer and closer until she could almost feel the heat from his body.

"Mr. President!" the squeally woman squealed, interrupting her own story and rising to her feet with the rest of the group.

"Excuse me," Kelly requested to no one in particular as she stood up, without turning toward Cameron, and walked away from the table. She avoided looking into the bright lights that suddenly came on and the video camera that was hired for the evening.

It was easy to find empty seats after that because half of her classmates were on their feet, trying to talk to Cameron, to introduce him to spouse or guest, and to have their pictures taken with him. Within a very few minutes, some woman asked Cameron to dance and the parquet dance floor became the place to be. Everybody was warming up and the music was good. Kelly wanted to dance, too, but thought she should avoid the area. Then she remembered her vow not to let Cameron run her life and so she looked around for a partner.

She saw Dan Hodges seated at a table with a pretty brunette who was younger than the class. The tall, now gray-haired Dan had always been a good dancer and Kelly watched

to see if he would head for the floor. He didn't. After a while, Kelly walked over to greet him and he introduced her to his wife. Rachael was very sweet and Kelly found herself drawn into conversation with her. Dan offered to get them drinks. When he left, Kelly asked Rachael if she and Dan liked to dance.

"Dan loves to, but I don't dance at all," Rachael replied.

"Would you mind if I asked him to dance with me?" Kelly asked cautiously.

"Of course not!" Rachael exclaimed. "I'd be so happy! Dan will have much more fun if he doesn't have to just sit here all night."

Kelly couldn't believe her good fortune. Before long, she was having a great time dancing with Dan and then several others who asked her. She felt safe from Cameron on the dance floor, but, later, after the class picture was taken, Cameron started steering his partner-of-the-moment toward Kelly and striking up a conversation with her partner so that she would have to deliberately look in another direction to avoid him. She thought at first that she was imagining it, but it went on for hours and finally she was sure.

Just after midnight, dancing a slow one with Dan, her left hand on the back of his collar, Kelly felt Cameron approaching again. Moments later, he started talking to Dan. Kelly never looked at him. Then Cameron reached over and squeezed her hand as it lay on Dan's collar. She withdrew her fingers gently from his grasp and moved her hand to Dan's shoulder, out of Cameron's reach. He never changed the pace or tone of his conversation with Dan and, mercifully, the dance ended soon.

As they walked off the dance floor, Dan offered to buy Kelly a drink. She asked for plain water again and said she'd meet him at the table where Rachael was waiting. Dan disappeared in one direction and Kelly tried to make her way in the other. She was blocked by a close throng of classmates wanting time with Cameron, who had limited himself to about three minutes per person all night. Kelly had wondered if he were hooked up to some silent alarm that told him when to move on, but at the moment she was frustrated that she

could not move anywhere. The crowd was too thick. Once again, she sensed that Cameron was behind her. She felt his hand gently grasp her forearm. Still, she didn't turn around.

Then, in a voice so sweet and solicitous that no one else would have recognized it as patronizing or condescending, Cameron whispered, "How are you?"

He might as well have repeated, "We will destroy you!"

The hurt and anger that Kelly had worked so hard to overcome surged upward from a depth she had never reached or recognized. She whirled around to face Cameron directly for the first time in two-and-a-half years.

"You are such an ass-hole," she spit the words at him, "I can't believe you'd even bother to ask!"

At the word "ass-hole," the nearby crowd gasped and, simultaneously, a Secret Service agent reached toward Kelly. Cameron put up his arm to block the huge man from grabbing her and nodded to him, "It's okay."

Cameron reached for Kelly's hand and pleaded earnestly, "You've got to understand what I was going through. You have to understand what I was feeling at the time."

Neither Kelly nor Cameron appeared to notice that the crowd had become deathly quiet and was inching toward them.

"I'm sick of understanding what Cammie-boy is going through, what Cammie-boy is feeling! I've got a life and I've got feelings too, and mine are just as important as yours!"

Cameron nodded in agreement. As the crowd pressed closer to him, he took Kelly's arm. "We've got to talk," he said gently.

"I have nothing to say to you. After thirty years together, you threatened to destroy me, and you wouldn't even return my phone call!"

"Please, Kelly, talk to me now. You owe me that."

"I owe you nothing! You have no idea what I went through for you!"

"Tell me," he pleaded.

A blond female version of a Secret-Service type forced her way through the crowd and touched Cameron's arm. The



time-keeper admonished him, "There are people who want to talk to you. Several of the women would like to dance."

Without taking his eyes from Kelly, Cameron waved the woman away.

"Tell them I'm tired of dancing," he said impatiently.

"But," she tried to persist.

"I'm tired of dancing," Cameron repeated firmly, never looking at the intruder.

No longer oblivious to the fact that he was making a scene, Cameron once more insisted that Kelly talk to him. This time, he turned her as if they were dancing and Secret Service agents motioned the crowd back. The people parted and Cameron escorted Kelly toward a couple of chairs placed side-by-side in front of a mirrored column. The austere men, with wires coming out of their ears, took their places a few feet away from Cameron, standing straight and tall with their arms crossed over their chests. No one dared approach.

Cameron and Kelly stood in front of the chairs, staring deeply into each other's eyes, saying nothing. Finally, Kelly sat down and so did Cameron, still searching her face.

"Tell me everything," he began, looking softly into her eyes.

Kelly averted her gaze, not sure if she could be this close to Cameron and keep her wits about her. She noticed that hundreds of people in the ballroom had returned to their tables and now sat with their chairs facing Cameron as if they were waiting for an after-dinner speech to begin.

"You wouldn't even call me," Kelly said quietly, trying to keep her voice even.

"Everyone was afraid you would tape the conversation," Cameron explained.

"Of course, like Sindy Towers did," Kelly responded sarcastically.

"I told them you were no Sindy Towers."

"I guess you didn't convince them. And, then there's the Sindy Towers affair itself, Cameron. That hurt me more than you know."

"It's all lies," Cameron replied too quickly. "How could you believe it?"

"Her story sounded real enough to me. She was pretty specific. She even said that you never wore a condom."

"Everyone knows I never wear a condom. She could have heard that anywhere."

"That's just great, Cameron. 'Everyone knows.' A fine example that is! But it all sounded like your pattern to me." Kelly finished quietly, "I believe her."

Cameron tightened his jaw. "She was nothing," he insisted.

Kelly stared at him and didn't say anything.

"Really, she was nothing."

"She sounded like something to me, from the tabloids and the television, but, I don't want to hear any more of your lies about it, and I definitely don't want to hear the truth."

"Her story simply isn't true. Look, Kelly, don't you see? If someone prints a story and even one word of it isn't true, then the story isn't true. I can just say that it isn't true, and that's that."

Kelly shook her head. "You've always tried to get away with that, Cameron, but it's going to come back to haunt you some day."

"At least they didn't print our story," Cameron tried to be upbeat. "Those tabloid people are such sleaze."

Kelly recognized his life-long pattern of changing the subject, and finding someone else to blame, but decided not to drag that up again.

"I never thought I'd defend a tabloid, Cameron, but you're wrong. The man who talked to me was an incredible reporter who had done his homework thoroughly. He had the story nailed. The whole story, Cameron. It was remarkable. He knew things I had forgotten."

Cameron looked like he had just been kicked in the stomach.

"Still, those tabloid people can't be trusted," Cameron insisted.

Kelly shook her head. "You're the one who threatened to destroy me," she reminded him quietly. "Am I supposed to trust you? That tabloid reporter had more finesse, and certainly more integrity, than anyone who was working for

you! If you had called me back, I would have suggested that you hire the guy."

"Why didn't he print the story?" Cameron wanted to know. "What did you do?"

"I can't tell you why he didn't publish it, but I can tell you that I turned down a half million dollars for your head on a platter," Kelly's voice quivered. "It's too bad that you don't know what the word 'loyalty' means. You threatened to destroy me. You wouldn't even call me because some back-room wimps convinced you that I would record the conversation. Cameron, you don't even know who I am."

The look that Kelly gave him pierced Cameron to his soul. Tears welled up in his eyes and spilled down his cheeks. He sat there unashamed and cried openly.

"I'm sorry, Kelly. I am so sorry." He said nothing else until the tears stopped. Kelly sat still and watched him, wondering about this public performance, wondering about the tears they had cried in private. Were these tears real? Was anything about him real anymore? Could anything he said or did be trusted? He still hadn't addressed the issue of his threat to destroy her. Kelly realized that he never would.

"If you're sorry, Cameron, then, of course, I forgive you, but I'm sure that's of little concern to you now. You're the President of the United States. You're the most powerful man in the world. You have everything you ever wanted."

"Oh, Kelly," he shook his head, "if you only knew."

Kelly sighed, "I do know, Cameron. I told you years ago that it wouldn't be enough. If it comes from outside yourself, it will never be enough."

"You were always so wise," Cameron marveled aloud.

"Right. I was so wise that I was at your beck and call for thirty-three years, until you decided I might get in the way of what you really wanted. Well, I went to Washington and I watched you being inaugurated and then I closed the book."

"You came to my inauguration?" Cameron asked incredulously.

Kelly nodded.

"I didn't see you there."

"I didn't intend for you to see me."

"Then, why did you go?"

"I loved you so much, Cameron, that I wanted to see you get what you always wanted. I was happy for you, even though I couldn't be a part of it. I was really happy for you."

Once again, Cameron's eyes filled with tears.

"Kelly, Kelly, my Kelly," he whispered. "I had no idea."

"You never did, Cameron. It's sad, but you never did."

They sat in silence for several minutes. Kelly inadvertently noticed the crowd again. Except for a few couples on the dance floor, no one was moving. The room was eerily quiet and even the music seemed subdued.

Kelly felt compelled to change the subject. "I finished my book," she announced matter-of-factly.

"Is it still autobiographical?" he wanted to know.

"All first novels are autobiographical," she reminded him. "I've decided to write a trilogy, covering the same time period from different perspectives. Some of the plot lines will overlap and some will be completely new. It will all be somewhat autobiographical, though. I certainly had more than enough material for this first one."

"Am I still in it?"

She nodded.

"Am I recognizable?"

She nodded again.

"Do I run for President?"

Another nod.

"Do I win?"

"You never could stand to lose an election, could you?" Kelly laughed. "How could I make you lose? Actually, the story ends before the votes are counted."

"So, now I guess you'll publish it," Cameron sighed, tightening his jaw in his age-old habit. "Just put the hook in and rip my guts out."

Kelly looked into his eyes for a long time before she answered, "No, Cameron, I know what that feels like, and I wouldn't do it to you."

For the third time that hour, Kelly saw tears forming in his eyes. This time, she felt them in her own as well. They sat and cried quietly, not touching, with hundreds of people

watching and his security men standing three feet away. Kelly wiped her tears carefully with her fingertips so that her mascara wouldn't run. She was tempted to reach out to Cameron and wipe his too.

Instead, after a long while, she questioned, "I suppose now you'll ask me not to publish it?"

Cameron shook his head.

"No," he spoke quietly. "I could never ask that."

"The book won't hurt you, Cameron. It's fiction. If someone asks you about it, you can say you don't have time to read that kind of fluff."

"I could never say that about your work," Cameron replied defensively.

"Call it revenge, then, the fury of a woman scorned," she suggested. "Or, perhaps you could say that you read it and you think it's great that your childhood friend wrote such a love story out of her unfulfilled fantasies about you."

Again, Cameron shook his head.

"It's a true story, isn't it?" he asked.

"Not by your definition of true, though it's as psychologically true as I could make it. I suppose a factually true story would sell more books, but of course, that's not why I wrote it. As I told you years ago, the writing of it was my therapy. The facts are incidental. God knows, it would be too much to go back and reconstruct the past thirty-five years. Too many dates, too many people. Too many people to hurt."

"You're an extraordinary woman, Kelly. I've been a fool."

Kelly laughed, "I'm not going to argue with that."

He took her hand.

"Come to Washington. Live on the Hill. Be near me again. It will be different, I promise."

Kelly patted his hand firmly, "No, Cameron. The answer is, now and forever, 'no.' I won't live like that. Not anymore. Not for you. Not for anyone. It isn't right and I deserve better. I've changed, Cameron. You don't even know who I am." She searched his eyes and added quietly, "I'm not sure you know who you are."

Kelly stood up slowly and Cameron rose with her.

“Say you’ll think about it,” he pleaded, reaching for her other hand.

“It’s too late, Cameron,” Kelly sighed, shaking her head. “It’s too late.” She squeezed his hands, then let them go, and whispered, “God be with you.”

## PART I - 1959

## NINE DAYS IN AUGUST

## Chapter 1

August 1, 1959

Twilight sounds of the other children playing kick-the-can blended with the fading “*kasik-kasiks*” of a thousand locusts and the incessant droning of a monstrous air conditioner futilely battling the Vicksburg heat. Under the lace canopy of her four-poster bed, eleven-year-old Kelly McCain lay still, listening, waiting, her head heavy on the damp pillow. Sweat-matted blond ponytails chafed against her neck.

Kelly opened one eye as the maddening buzz of a lone mosquito circled too close. She followed its erratic path until it landed on her forearm. Without flinching, she waited for the sting. At that precise moment, she smashed it, then, satisfied, opened her hand to reveal a blood-splattered palm, bits of legs and a mangled body. Somewhere out back, a little girl squealed at getting caught and Kelly pictured herself winning the game. She wiped the mosquito-smear on her shorts and headed for the front door. It was finally time to use her new hiding place.

The previous Monday, after Old Man Everett and his wife left on a ten-day vacation trip to Pensacola, Kelly had kicked over the big empty garbage can behind their garage and crumpled up a newspaper in it. All week it lay on its side untouched and so the neighborhood children had become accustomed to its new position as they rode down the alley on their bikes.

This morning before daylight, Kelly had sneaked out her window carrying a squeeze-bottle of dishwashing detergent, a scrub brush, towel, quilt, pillow and the society pages of the *Vicksburg Daily Chronicle*. Quickly and quietly, she hauled the big can around to the Everett’s garden hose and cleaned the inside so that not even a rat would be interested in snooping around it. She ran water until all the suds disappeared into

the thirsty earth. Then she dried inside the can and put it back in its prone position behind the garage.

The August sky was beginning to color as Kelly stashed the quilt and pillow inside the can, crumpled the *Chronicle* just enough to cover them, and propped the lid against the container at about a forty-five degree angle so that anyone walking by would think he could clearly see a garbage can empty of everything but a forgotten newspaper. Satisfied and tingling with anticipation, Kelly hurried home for the long day of waiting.

As usual after dinner, the game began unannounced in the vacant lot next to the McCain's big white frame house. Kelly had forced herself to wait until the younger kids had been called home for baths, then casually walked out to the front porch and sat on the railing watching the game.

"Come on and play, Kelly. What's the matter with you?" came a voice from the yard.

"Nothing."

"Well, then, come on and play."

Kelly tried to sound noncommittal. "You guys can't catch me and you can't find me. It's no fun anymore. Besides, I'm already the Grand Champion of Vicksburg."

"Says who?" from a different voice.

"Yeah, says who?" echoed another.

"Says me, Kelly McCain, the Grand Champion of Vicksburg, that's who!"

"Get on down here!" More voices. "Yeah!" and "We'll see about that."

"No girl is ever gonna be the 'Grand Champion of Anything' in Vicksburg," this last from Lefty Owens, the biggest, meanest kid in the neighborhood, who always had the final say.

"Okay,... I'll... show... you..." Kelly bragged to Lefty as she jumped off the porch to join the game, "but I'm not coming in to save everybody more than once. And there's no time limit on finding me," she announced boldly. "Whoever's 'It' has to keep looking. I don't care if it takes all night. All other rules stay the same. Agreed?"



Lefty glared at her, but said nothing. Kelly looked around at the rest of the kids, who were nervously backing away.

"Agreed?" she repeated louder.

Some of the bolder ones mumbled, "Sure."... "Yeah."... "Okay."... "Guess so."

"And then," Kelly added, "then y'all have to admit in public that I'm the Grand Champion of Vicksburg."

"Fat chance," snarled Lefty himself.

"Why don't you be 'It,' Lefty? Then you can personally make sure I won't be the Grand Champion of Vicksburg."

"I never have to be 'It,'" Lefty menacingly reminded her.

"Chicken!" Kelly sneered at him from ten feet away.

"Who's a chicken?" the huge boy asked incredulously, taking a step toward her.

"You're a chicken!" she repeated louder. "Lefty Owens is a chicken! Lef-ty O-wens is a chi-cken!"

Lefty took another step toward her and clenched his famous left fist.

"Wanna hit a girl, Lefty? Go ahead, hit me!" Kelly taunted. "I'll still be the Grand Champion and you'll still be a chicken. Besides, you cheat at every game."

Kelly was afraid she had pushed too far. Although she was two inches taller than Lefty, he outweighed her by eighty pounds. And, he was really mean. But everyone was watching her and she couldn't back down. Neither could Lefty.

"I don't cheat and I'll give you to two hundred," Lefty challenged, striding toward her, still clenching his fist.

"Forget it. I'll take fifty. I don't think you can count to two hundred."

The last insult, well directed to Lefty's lack of mathematical ability, had the desired effect. Lefty took a swing at Kelly. She sidestepped him and ran for the coffee can in the middle of the yard. In the darkness and excitement, she and another kid collided, but someone else had already kicked the can, and kids were scattering as fast as they could, hollering, "Lefty's 'It!'...Lefty's 'It!'"

Kelly had calculated that she could make it to the garbage can hide-out in less than thirty seconds, but she'd have to take

the long way if anybody followed her. She looked over her shoulder and saw Lefty put the coffee can back in place, then start after her, without even counting to fifty. She ducked behind the gardenia bush and realized that wouldn't help. This was going to be a race pure and simple, so she sprinted toward the alley with Lefty about fifteen steps behind.

She turned east toward the Everett's and noted that the garbage can was still waiting, but Lefty was keeping pace. She neared the end of the alley running as fast as she could and cut sharply to the right, being careful not to go into the street because that was against the rules. Kelly gained a step or two on Lefty at that turn and when she reached the corner, she gained another advantage by jumping the low hedge along the McCafferty's sidewalk. Then it was all-out speed as she headed up the slight incline on the westward leg of the long block. She could hear Lefty pounding his heavy tennis shoes on the sidewalk, but his short legs had to take more steps than Kelly's to cover the same distance, and it was making him madder as he went.

"When I catch you, you are gonna be sorry!" he panted. "You... are... gonna... be... sorry!"

By the second lap around the block, Lefty was getting winded and Kelly was just hitting her stride. At the next corner, she was far enough ahead in the growing darkness to cut between the houses without Lefty seeing where she went. She breathed noiselessly through her open mouth as Lefty huffed by on the sidewalk twenty-five feet away, with no idea where she was. Kelly padded quietly around the corner of the garage, her heart pounding more from the excitement than from the exercise. She listened for a few seconds to be sure no one was in the alley, then crawled into the waiting garbage can, replacing the newspaper and lid as she had planned.

Less than a minute later, Lefty hollered, "Ready or not, here I come," the official announcement that the hunt was on. All the kids realized, though, that the game was out of hand and that Lefty was going to lay into Kelly when he found her. One by one, they let Lefty find and catch them, so that before long there was a loose knot of a dozen and a half boys and girls huddled in the darkness hoping to be "saved" by the

champion who would come to kick the can. When Lefty set off down the alley on another search after Kelly, she slipped out of the garbage can, ran as softly as she could in the dry grass and managed to get within a few feet of the group before being spotted.

“Move back. Gimme a clear shot at that can!” Kelly ordered. Automatically, everyone obeyed. Kelly gave the coffee can a terrific wallop just as Lefty was coming back into sight. Somehow the can flew straight and low, hitting Lefty in the shin. He fell to the ground and screamed from the pain of knowing he was being beaten by a girl.

After that, no one wanted to stay around and all Lefty heard was “gotta go” and “I think my mom’s calling me.” Kelly was already safe in her private cave when Lefty got up to renew the search. She knew he would take it seriously now and she knew she should have been scared, but as she heard Lefty’s futile yard-by-yard search, Kelly almost laughed. Lefty would never find her. A girl like Kelly McCain wouldn’t hide in a filthy stinking garbage can. No girl would.

Chapter 2  
August 2, 1959  
Dawn

Kelly woke up from her cramped sleep about the same time as the McCafferty's rooster, not sure if she'd be in trouble or BIG TROUBLE. Silently, she made a list of her sins as her mother would see them:

1. not coming in all night, nor reporting in (which hopefully would be ameliorated by the note she had left on her father's pillow, explaining what she might have to do);
2. sleeping in a garbage can (but it was clean);
3. not taking a bath on Saturday night after getting all hot and sweaty playing kick-the-can (no way around that one);
4. not brushing her teeth before going to bed (but she did brush right after dinner and didn't eat anything later);
5. not laying her clothes out for Mass (which she could get around by dressing real fast as she had planned);
6. bragging about being Grand Champion of Vicksburg (but she deserved it);
7. making a boy look stupid (but Lefty Owens is stupid); and
8. not being sorry for any of it (true).

Then she made a list of her sins as Father McGillis would see them:

1. bragging about being Grand Champion of Vicksburg (pride);
2. staying out all night and worrying your parents ("honor thy father and thy mother");
3. hurting Lefty Owens' feelings and hitting him with the coffee can (a venial sin subcategory of "thou shalt not kill"); and
4. not being sorry for any of it.

Finally she examined her own heart and tried to feel some real remorse, but she couldn't just yet, so she settled for saying her morning quick-prayer that Sister Mary Teresa had taught her in first grade:

*"Good morning, dear God, I offer to you,  
My thoughts, words and wishes, And all that I do."*

She never added an Amen because it didn't sound like a Catholic prayer -- more like a poem to get God's attention and

let Him know she'd check in later. Having settled up with God for the time being, Kelly listened for a neighborhood status report. The McCafferty's rooster had settled down and Kelly could hear Mrs. McCafferty feeding him and the six chickens that they kept in town in spite of the city ordinance. "Here, chick, chick, chick... here, chick, chick, chick..." then the squeak and double slam of the screen door as she went back inside with the four or five eggs she had found.

No one would be up at Rusty's house because Dr. Grant would be sleeping late after Saturday night in the emergency room and everyone was scared to make a peep until at least noon. Mrs. Travis would be out in the alley any minute to let her little rat-dog do his business. Kelly froze as she heard the old lady's cigarette cough and the nearby scratching of her dog's untrimmed nails in the dirt. Mrs. Travis heaved a thud of spit at the garbage can, then shuffled back to her yard, dragging the rat-dog by its leash.

Time started weighing heavily. Kelly had to play the organ for six o'clock Mass. Actually, she didn't have to because nobody besides herself cared if she showed up or not. The early morning Mass crowd just wanted to be quiet and left alone -- the gnarled old women with blue hair and blue veins clutching their cheap rosaries and constantly moving their lips; a few men of the same age staring at nothing and waiting for eternal life; one or two construction workers fulfilling their Sunday obligation before heading to work with a six-pack of beer; a half dozen nurses who had to leave early to make their seven o'clock shift at St. Paul's Hospital, wondering if their kids were going to eat a decent breakfast and do their chores before running off in all directions doing God-knows-what; and three or four of the oldest nuns with their saintly looks and awful secrets -- all of them joined together as one in the mystical union of Christ's body the church, two dozen souls scattered about a sanctuary that could easily seat eight hundred people, keeping their eyes cast down, never smiling or acknowledging their neighbors, their brothers and sisters in Christ, keeping holy the Lord's Day by faithfully attending Mass every Sunday, most of them every day, never killing

anybody or robbing a bank or eating meat on Friday. Good people. All of them.

Kelly crept out cautiously (half expecting to see Lefty Owens coming down the alley after her), then ran to her bedroom window, scrambled in and breathed a sigh of relief. Turning around, she realized with a heart thump that someone was in her bed. She tip-toed closer and still couldn't see who it was. Gingerly, she lifted the cover and found pillows arranged to look as if someone were sleeping there, and one of her father's business envelopes addressed to "Kelly." She opened it quickly.

*"Good morning, Grand Champion of Vicksburg! Sorry your mama and I didn't have a chance to tuck you in last night, but mama went to bed early and I was keeping an eye on the Everett's garbage can, since they're on vacation this week. Do your usual good job at church. I'm proud of you! Love, Daddy"*

Kelly closed her eyes and pictured her daddy's smile, then grabbed a navy blue skirt and white blouse from the closet, changing out of her shorts and top on the way to the bathroom. The hall clock struck five forty-five. Minutes later, she was on her bike, peddling downtown toward Holy Trinity.

Usually, she'd be chattering with Christi as they sped through the streets, but Christi Boudreaux and her mother were in Savannah this week for the wedding of Mrs. Boudreaux's sorority sister's daughter. Kelly wondered if the daughters of sorority sisters would be considered cousins and for a moment was jealous that Christi might form a relationship with this mysterious older girl from Georgia. Ridiculous. The girl was getting married, moving to Virginia and probably wouldn't even notice a little kid like Christi Boudreaux, although she was strikingly pretty with long dark curls and blue blue eyes. Kelly relaxed as she remembered the blood oath she and Christi had shared. They would always be closer than cousins.

Turning onto the concrete drive, barely braking the bike, Kelly jumped off and let it glide into the bushes behind the rectory. She took the stone steps two at a time up to the side door of the church, but stopped short as she noticed

something out of the ordinary. Blinking, she looked again. For certain, there was Mr. Boudreaux's big white Cadillac parked behind the church. Mr. B always went to Mass at noon. Always. Kelly was puzzled but couldn't spare the time to think about it. With both hands, she pulled open the carved oak door and came under the spell of marble, stained glass and glowing candles. She dipped her finger in the holy water font, simultaneously genuflecting and making the sign of the cross, just as the altar boys entered the sanctuary to light the two candles signifying a Low Mass.

Kelly hurried to the back of the church to get the choir loft key from its hook inside Father McGillis' confessional. Although tall for an eleven-year-old, Kelly still had to go in and step up on the kneeler in order to reach the key. Just then she heard the unmistakable voice of Mr. Boudreaux in the adjoining penitent's booth behind her.

"Bless me, Father. I have sinned. It has been six months since my last Confession..."

Kelly turned to stone. She knew she must never overhear another person's confession. And Mr. Boudreaux, of all people. Why was he here so early?

"...adultery..."

It was that word she didn't understand -- the one they didn't explain very well when discussing the Ten Commandments in catechism class. Her mind searched for a clue.

"... no, I haven't told her..."

Kelly wanted to hide, to run away, to feel a cool marble column against her burning face. She couldn't move.

"... heartily sorry for having offended Thee and I detest all my sins..."

Clutching the choir loft key, Kelly fled from her shameful place out into the vestibule. Her hand trembled as she unlocked the door to the stairwell. All the secrets of heaven and hell swirled around her as she raced up the two flights to the organ loft, barely touching the creaky banister that usually caused her panic. Quickly, she opened the organ bench, took out the key hidden under the Saint Gregory Hymnal, unlocked the organ and flipped the "on" switch. By the time

the big Hammond had warmed up enough to begin the processional hymn, Father McGillis was already at the altar and Kelly could feel him glaring at her for being late.

*“Kyrie eleison...”* he intoned. *Lord, have mercy.*

Now she would have to wait until the Offertory to play her first hymn. She knelt at the rail and looked down at the backs of people so familiar, but unknown, searching for Mr. Boudreaux, telling herself it had to be someone else, knowing it couldn't be, wondering about that *adultery* word. She couldn't see that Mr. Boudreaux had slipped out of the church, resolving to say his penance in the car and to return for twelve o'clock Mass as usual. And she couldn't know, because Mr. Boudreaux didn't realize it at the moment, that he would find himself driving aimlessly around town until he came to the house of his new secretary almost by surprise and that he would miss Sunday Mass today, for the first (but not the last) time in his life.

Kelly worried about Mr. B until the Offertory, then afterward became absorbed in watching the altar boys. She wanted to be one of them, with their long black cassocks and white lace surplices, flowing around the priest with a grace they never found in the classroom or on the recess field, lighting candles, kneeling, rising, responding to the Latin prayers by rote, flowing across the sanctuary to perform the countless necessary rituals, carrying the small crystal cruets filled with water and wine, flowing along the communion rail holding the shiny gold paten under each chin as the priest placed a small round cardboard host on each of the outthrust tongues.

Kelly wasn't sure if she should take Communion this morning after all her unconfessed sins of the week, but she convinced herself that none of them was mortal. Habit took over and she was descending the stairs, trying not to disturb the ancient wooden treads that creaked and groaned with the slightest touch, entering the sanctuary, flowing like an altar boy down the aisle to the Communion rail, hands together in Gothic spires pointing to heaven, finally kneeling at the rail, waiting her turn, smelling the church smells, fearing the unknown, trembling as Father McGillis poised the host above



her eyes, trembling more as he waited and waited, why was he waiting, did he see all her sins, finally placing the host roughly on her tongue.

She escaped from Father's stare by turning to swallow in private, but her mouth was too dry. Almost choking, she rushed back through the church, up the stairs, creaking and moaning, telling everyone exactly where she was and how long it would be before the hymn would begin. At last safe on the organ bench, she took a deep breath, steadied her hands on the two manuals, adjusted the volume pedals with her right foot, placed her left foot on the lowest E flat and lost herself in the glorious music, hearing the beautiful words that no one was singing...

*"Panis angelicus  
Fit panis hominum  
Dat panis caelicus  
Figuris terminum.*

*"O, res mirabilis!  
Manducat, dominum  
Pauper, serous,  
Et humilis."*

Chapter 3  
August 2, 1959  
Early Morning

*Adultery.* All the way home from church, Kelly turned that word over in her mind. It had to be something that only grown-ups did. You could tell that by the way it was spelled. Spelled! Of course, why didn't she think of it before? The dictionary would tell her everything she needed to know.

She pedaled faster, foregoing her usual detour along the ridge overlooking the river where you could see the Mississippi laying broad and flat and brown, happy in the sun, or green and angry when the thunderclouds rolled in on it. She sped past the colored peoples' shoebox shacks and the white peoples' houses built long after The War, with their porches and railings, turrets and gingerbread trim, past the houses with names like Twin Oaks that had been built, or at least started, before The War, where the same families had lived for a hundred years, passing down the houses and furnishings, clothes and letters and diaries, silver and china, useful relics of their past lives and daily reminders of The War that had taken almost everything there was to give, the fathers, sons, brothers, cousins, and husbands of the women of the South, leaving them shaken but stronger, alone but not lonely, cautious but unafraid, and proud, of their men, of their own new strengths and of the land that was still theirs, if only a garden plot behind the house where they used to own hundreds of acres rolling down and along the Mississippi laying broad and flat and brown, happy in the sun, or green and angry when the thunderclouds rolled in on it.

Racing up the front steps, the young girl took no notice of the house that so often filled her with pride as she took her friends through the grand hallway past its massive staircase to her many-windowed room with the magnificent four-poster bed, the same house that filled her with shame as she thought of Nellie Mae and little Prudence living out back in three rooms, owning nothing and asking nothing. Today she thought only of the library across from her room and the huge dictionary always open on its spindly rosewood stand.

Carefully, so as not to tip it over, she lifted a fistful of pages from their usual resting place on the “*lawyer*” page. Her daddy, who had lots of lawyer friends, always said they could be found between “*laugh*” and “*laxative*” but were generally of less use than either. Grown-ups always thought that was funny, but Kelly didn’t think about it today. Her fingers fumbled nervously through the first twenty-five pages of the book.

*Adultery. “a-dul-ter-y ... n., voluntary sexual intercourse between a married man and a woman not his wife, or between a married woman and a man not her husband.”*

That would be it. Mr. Boudreaux was “*a married man*” and he must have had “*sexual intercourse*” with “*a woman not his wife*.” Now Kelly had to look up “*sexual intercourse*.” Another fistful of pages got her back to the “*S’s*.”

Disappointed that there was no entry for “*sexual intercourse*,” she read all the “*sex*” words, including those that seemed irrelevant like “*sexagenarian*” because Mr. Boudreaux was only thirty-six and “*sextile*” because that was only about the position of two heavenly bodies.

“*Sexual*” referred to “*reproduction by the union of male and female germ cells*,” which sounded more like what happens when you get a cold and Kelly knew you didn’t have to confess that so she looked up “*intercourse*,” whose second definition was about the sexual joining of two individuals (Mr. Boudreaux and somebody other than Mrs. Boudreaux who was in Savannah this week); “*coitus; copulation*,” and now Kelly was a puppy chasing her own tail because the dictionary said that “*coitus*” and “*copulation*” were both words for “*sexual intercourse*.”

Kelly turned back to the “*lawyer*” page in frustration. One thing was clear to her from all this searching. “*Adultery*,” “*sexual intercourse*,” “*coitus*” or “*copulation*,” whatever you called it, it must be something worth hiding.

“Good morning, young lady!”

“Oh, Daddy! You scared me! I didn’t hear you come in.”

“I imagine not, busy as you were with that book. Find everything you needed?”

"Yes, sir," Kelly lied, blushing from the lie and the truth. "Sure did."

"That's 'surely did,' Kelly. 'Surely' is an adverb and must be used in its proper form to modify the verb 'did.' Using 'sure' in that instance is colloquial and you surely wouldn't want to grow up speaking colloquial English, now would you?"

"Oh, no sir, not me. Not I."

"Why don't we have a little chat, while things are quiet around here? I'm sure you have a lot to tell me, don't you, baby?"

"No, sir, I mean, not really. Unless you mean about last night."

"Of course. Isn't that what's on your mind, my little Grand Champion?" He smiled encouragement, remembering his own trips to the dictionary so many years ago, "You can tell Daddy about it."

How could she? Last night "It" was Lefty Owens and this morning "It" was adultery.

"I'm too hungry to talk right now. What's for breakfast?"

"Soft boiled eggs, toast, and juice. Need some help? Mama's asleep."

"No, thanks. I'll take care of myself. Just relax and read the paper."

Clayton McCain watched his beautiful young daughter walk slowly from the room and ached to know what was wrong. This child was so much like him, but often difficult to understand. She was too young to be fighting that tenuous line between girlhood and womanhood, the line which is approached from the young side with such anticipation and apprehension, and then like a chalk mark across a sidewalk, becomes blurred throughout her lifetime as the female moves mysteriously back and forth across that line whenever it suits her needs.

With Kelly, it was as if her mind were vacillating across a more disparate line -- that of male and female. Notwithstanding the sexual homogeneity of the very young and the obvious tomboy stage most girls pass through on their way to maturity, there appeared to be a deeper dynamic

operating here. The fundamental dichotomy between male and female is most patently exhibited in their thought processes, as exemplified by their approaches to problem solving and dealing with spatial or interpersonal relationships.

Clayton McCain reluctantly formulated the words and heard himself express *sotto voce*, "Kelly thinks like a boy." Having faced that truth, he delved deeper, searching systematically for its causes, and ultimately his mind sought the day of his first child's birth. Then, chastising himself for thinking like a superstitious old colored woman, the tall sturdy man abruptly stopped his pacing. He stared for a long time at the blue sky beyond his reach, dreaming of a son he would never know. Then he slumped into the overstuffed chair beside the fireplace and, silently, he cried.

After breakfast, Kelly aimlessly roamed through the neighborhood, taking no pleasure from it. Mary Margaret McCafferty was the only kid in sight and she was two years older than Kelly, so you could never be sure (surely?) sure whether she would speak or not. Kelly decided to take a chance.

"Your rabbit surely is getting fat and pretty," Kelly observed. "Could I pet her a minute?"

Mary Margaret deigned to acknowledge her, "Only if you're gentle so she won't hop out of my lap. She's almost asleep."

Kelly observed the rabbit's wide staring eyes but didn't mention it. She sat down on the expansive wooden step next to Mary Margaret and tentatively reached for the rabbit's head.

"No. I'm the only one who can pet her on the head and scratch behind her ears. You can pet her here," Mary Margaret pointed to a small spot on the rump. "Only right here," she prissed.

They sat in silence, petting the rabbit, having little else in common. Kelly decided she had nothing to lose.

"Do you know what sexual intercourse is?"

Mary Margaret stopped petting the rabbit and her eyes narrowed as she glared at Kelly.

"Of course I do, you little smart-aleck know-it-all! Don't go trying to impress me with your twenty-five cent words. I heard about you last night. 'Grand Champion of Vicksburg!' Humph! Well, you don't impress me one little bit."

Mary Margaret picked up her rabbit and cradled it in her arms as she stomped up the steps, across the wide verandah, and through the screen door. Her head reappeared.

"And just in case you're sitting there thinking I left because I don't know what 'sexual intercourse' means, it's when you fuck! Now why don't you go fuck yourself!"

Kelly was thrilled at the unexpected wealth of information she had received from Mary Margaret. First of all, she had a new word to look up in the dictionary. And now she knew that it was something you could do to yourself. She ran home.

Kelly saw her father still in the library so she glided noiselessly down the hall to her own room and her smaller dictionary. Such a short word as fuck should be in there. But it wasn't. She tried a different spelling. *Fock*. Nope. *Fack*. No, again. *Feck*. She even tried *Fick*, since none of the other vowel spellings worked, but didn't hold out much hope for it.

Fuck.

Then she brightened. *Phuck!* And then *phock*, *phack*, *pheck*, *phick*.

Another brainstorm. *Fuque!*

Disappointment compounded as she tried every combination of sounds and letters that could possibly spell the little word that rhymed with *duck*. She lay down on her bed and thought about things until she heard her father's tread on the staircase. Then the scene with the little dictionary was repeated with the larger one and Kelly still didn't have her answers. *Fuck*.

If Christi had been in town, they could have attacked this together, although Kelly swore to herself she'd never tell Christi what started it. Besides, she knew she "would die and burn in Hell for all eternity" if she ever "divulged the content of another person's confession." She shivered as the ominous words rang in her head.

Hearing the familiar singing of her father in the upstairs shower and not wanting to wait another minute, Kelly

decided to take a chance and ask her mother who, from the sound of it, was in the kitchen.

“Hi, Mom. May I ask you a question?”

“Yes, of course, ask anything. How was six o’clock Mass? I’m going at noon today. Maybe I’ll invite Mr. Boudreaux for dinner. He must be lonesome with his little family out of town. Oh, that reminds me. You got a postcard and a letter from Christi yesterday. Savannah looks like a beautiful town, although you can’t be certain from just one postcard. I remember seeing pictures of Vicksburg when your father and I met. Then it seemed so different when we moved here. But I know you’ve heard that story before and probably don’t want to hear it again. It’s just that looks aren’t everything anyway. It’s the people...”

“Mom.”

“who really make a place what it is and the people of Vicksburg are...”

“Mom, what’s fuck?”

“so warm and friendly and, what did you say?”

“What’s fuck?”

“Kelly Marie McCain, don’t you let me hear you talk like that again! Where ever did you get such a word?”

Kelly thought about keeping still, but decided on a better course.

“Mary Margaret McCafferty told me to go fuck myself. Could you just tell me what it means without getting all upset?”

“I’m not upset! Just you wait until I call that girl’s mother! Of all the low, white-trash words to say to my...”

“Mom,...”

“baby. What’s her phone...”

“Mom, couldn’t you...”

“number? I’m going to...”

“just tell me what...”

“call her right this minute and...”

“it means? Mom!”

Tears were forming in Kelly’s eyes.

“Mom, please just tell me what it means. Don’t get mad at Mary Margaret. She didn’t say it. I just saw it on the sidewalk

near her house. It said '*Go fuck yourself, M.M.M.*' Somebody probably wrote it to Mary Margaret, so please don't call her mother. Just tell me what it means."

"Oh, baby, it's not something you need to know about yet. And it's a bad word for something adults do that isn't bad at all. Let's forget it now and wait until you're a little older."

"But, Mom, I've got to know now."

Mrs. McCain looked very seriously at her eleven-year-old daughter.

"Kelly, why do you have to know now?"

Kelly couldn't think of anything but the awful truth. She shrugged her shoulders.

"Never mind. I'll wait."

While Kelly was in her room mulling over the bits of information and wondering more than ever about the awesome power of this thing called *adultery*, or *sexual intercourse*, or *fuck*, she couldn't hear her parents upstairs talking quietly, concerned that their older daughter was growing up much too quickly. Maybe they were getting too old to be good parents, but they didn't feel old yet and, as if to prove it, they reached out to each other and broke their long-standing rule against making love while the children were awake.



Chapter 4  
 August 2, 1959  
 Late Morning

Kelly picked up the postcard and letter from the silver tray on the hall table and took them outside to savor the news. From the postcard, Savannah's houses looked like Vicksburg's -- two stories, porches, columns, trees out front. She turned it over.

*"Hi! Having fun! Miss you already! Love, Christi."*

Disappointed, Kelly put the postcard down and rubbed her fingers across the soft white envelope with its beautifully engraved script pronouncing the return address of "Dr. and Mrs. Claude R. Demarest III, Willow Creek Plantation, Old Willow Creek Road, Savannah, Georgia." She carefully unsealed the envelope an inch at a time to preserve its elegance. The heavy matching letterhead had a fancy crest at the top and repeated the engraved return address. Christi was obviously in high cotton.

*Dear Kelly,*

*I wish you could have come with us. Savannah is beautiful, with big trees like Vicksburg and a blue-water river. Mama's friend lives out in the country in a house bigger than ours (plus they have two guest houses and quarters) and we're staying in an upstairs bedroom in the main house. (You can see from the stationery, they call it Willow Creek and there's a giant willow tree outside my window that's creepy at night.) There's a ton of people and lots of parties because this is a big deal! The biggest news is about the reason for the wedding, but it's so amazing that I'm going to save it until I get back, cause you probably wouldn't even believe it unless I was there to cross my heart and swear to die. Can you guess?*

*I'm riding horses and swimming every day. There's lots of people here to fix the horses and everything. I wish you could be here. I'd like to stay forever, but we'll be back next Wednesday night, so see if you can come over. I miss you.*

*Love,  
 Christi*

Three of the summer's longest days followed that letter. Kelly was impatiently playing jacks on the Boudreaux's front

porch and was up to around-the-world sixes when the big Cadillac finally crunched onto the gravel driveway. Kelly jumped up, scattering the jacks, and ran to greet her friend. The slightly plump, pubescent little traveler was opening the back door before the car stopped.

"Christi! It's about time! Hi, Miz Boudreaux. Mama sent a casserole. She says I may stay if that's all right with you, or Christi may come spend the night with me."

"Why, thank you, Kelly. Of course, you're welcome to stay. I'll call your mother. You girls give me about an hour to get settled and reheat the casserole. Then we'll eat. Now don't go off and get lost."

On cue, the girls ran to their hide-out above the garage. From there, they could keep an eye on most of the neighborhood, and in the winter, when the trees were bare, they had a good view all the way to the river.

Christi couldn't wait to blurt out her news, "It was a shotgun wedding!"

"I don't get it," Kelly frowned. "What's a shotgun wedding?"

"I didn't know either," Christi confessed, "but I found out," her blue blue eyes opened wider, "it's when you have to get married because you're pregnant!"

"But I thought only married women could get pregnant and have babies."

"Don't feel stupid. So did I, but Michelle Demarest, she's the bride's cousin, told me all about it," Christi nodded, dark curls bobbing. "She's thirteen and she knows."

"So what happens?"

"Well, when a boy and girl are going steady, they do a lot of kissing and stuff."

"I know that."

"Well, then, eventually they go to the drive-in and they get in the back seat of the car under a blanket and then, you might not believe this but Michelle swears it's true and I believe her, then the boy puts his wiener up inside the girl and she gets pregnant."

"He puts his wiener where?"

"Up inside the girl."

"I know, but where? Exactly where?"

"In the hole you pee out of."

"You're kidding."

"No. I swear."

"Yuk."

"I know."

Silence followed. Christi pulled a splinter of wood from the floor and cleaned under her fingernails with it. Kelly stared out toward the unseen river.

Finally she asked, "What do they call it?"

"Call what?"

"It. What do they call it when a boy does that to a girl?"

"There's lots of words for it."

"Name some."

"Making love. Doing it. Screwing."

"Are they all the same thing?"

"I think so."

"Name some more."

"I can't think of any. There's a big one, though. It's the technical name for it. Actually it's two words, but I can't remember."

"Is it 'sexual intercourse?'"

"Yeah! That's it. How did you know?"

"Lucky guess."

"Come on. How'd you know that?"

"Ran across it in the dictionary."

That was enough to satisfy Christi, although she never would understand her friend's habit of reading the dictionary just for fun.

"Then you know all about it, huh?"

"No more than you do. Just what I read in the dictionary. And another word."

"What? "

"Fuck!"

"Yeah. I heard Billy DeVito say that one. I wondered what it was. He got in trouble for it."

"It's a trouble word, that's for sure."

Kelly watched a squirrel dangling upside down from the tip of a limb, carelessly clinging with his back toes to the

pencil thin branch, his tail looped over the neighboring twigs. With his front paws, the squirrel was grabbing tiny berries and thrusting them in his mouth. Another squirrel approached, and the first one scrambled upright, chattering. They chased each other around and around the tree, up and down, leaping onto other trees and then back again. Around and around. Happy. Christi cleaned her clean fingernails with the splinter.

"Mary Margaret McCafferty told me to go fuck myself."

"Mary Margaret McCafferty said that?"

"Yeah. Sunday."

"What did you do to her?"

"Nothing."

"I can't believe it. Mary Margaret McCafferty? She's so prissy. Wonder why she said that. You sure you didn't do something to her?"

"Sure. She's just weird."

"Yeah, she's weird, all right."

"Let's go help your mom set the table. I'm hungry."

\* \* \*

"This is a delicious dinner, Kelly. You be sure to thank your mother for it."

"Yes, sir, I will," Kelly mumbled at her plate. She couldn't look at Mr. Boudreaux anymore.

"I'm afraid it would have been another night of sardines and crackers for me. I wouldn't expect Miz B to fix dinner after such a long tiring trip. No, siree, I wouldn't."

Kelly wondered why he couldn't fix a better dinner for himself than sardines and crackers. And why couldn't he have fixed a nice dinner for his wife and daughter? Kelly's father could cook, although he didn't do it more than once or twice a year, except breakfast. Why didn't Mr. B? And how did Kelly's mother know? How well did her mother know Mr. Boudreaux anyway?

Kelly blushed and glanced around furtively to see if anyone noticed. They were all eating and talking about the trip. Everyone seemed normal. Or did they? Kelly couldn't

remember how it felt before, although she ate dinner at Christi's house two or three times a week, when Christi wasn't eating at the McCains.

Nothing had changed, but everything was different. Were they all pretending? Did they all know about the adultery, like she did? Mrs. Boudreaux was smiling. Christi told a funny story and they all laughed, even Mr. Boudreaux. How could he laugh? How could they all laugh and act like nothing had happened? Kelly heard herself laughing. She thought about her mother. Surely it couldn't be her mother and Mr. Boudreaux. She felt a lump of casserole catch in her throat. She tried to swallow. It wouldn't go down. This is crazy, Kelly's mind raced, as she struggled to swallow. I'm going to sit here and laugh until I choke to death on a tuna fish casserole that my mother fixed for Mr. Boudreaux, and no one will ever know that I know.

She pictured herself in a satin-lined coffin with people walking by saying, "Don't she just look like Sleeping Beauty?" She wondered what hymns they would sing at her Requiem Mass and resolved to make a list of her favorites so there would be no question about it when the time came. She would want to die early in the week so they'd have her funeral on a school day and the kids would love her because they'd get out of class to attend. This meant that she couldn't die in the summer, but here she was choking to death a month before school and everybody hated her for being Grand Champion of Vicksburg. The thought of her desolate funeral in an empty church made her sigh deeply and swallow hard. The casserole lump went down and Kelly felt hot tears on her cheeks.

"Honey, are you okay?" Mr. Boudreaux patted her on the back.

"Yes, sir, I am," Kelly mumbled at her plate. She couldn't look at Mr. Boudreaux anymore.

Immediately after dinner, she called home. "Mom, why'd you fix the casserole?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, why did you fix it and send it over for dinner? How did you know Mr. Boudreaux wouldn't have something here?"

"Well, honey, you seem to think that Mister B hung the moon, but the truth is, he's so self-centered that he'd never fix dinner for his family. He wants to be waited on hand and foot. Sometimes I feel sorry for Helene. She puts up with too much.

"Do you love Daddy?"

"Kelly, what's going on? Are you okay?"

"Sure, Mom. I'm fine."

\* \* \*

Christi said she was tired from her long trip, but seemed too excited to go to sleep, so Kelly sat up and listened to the endless details about Willow Creek Plantation, the parties, the magnificent church, the wedding itself with twelve bridesmaids and groomsmen, and the extravagant reception at Willow Creek with two bands and dancing until three in the morning.

"I don't get it. If they had to get married," Kelly questioned, "wouldn't they want to keep it a secret? It sounds like everybody in Georgia was invited to their wedding."

"I asked Michelle about that. She said that Mrs. Demarest always wanted a big wedding for her daughter because she didn't have one. And Dr. Demarest said, 'Why not? The bigger the lie, the more people believe it.'"

Chapter 5  
August 5, 1959

Kelly awoke before dawn with fragments of a dream about weddings and shotguns and flower girls. Christi, who was the flower girl in her dream, had actually been a flower girl in three weddings so far. Kelly had never been asked once. She wondered why. She knew she could do it. In the first grade, she had carried a basket of flowers down the aisle of Holy Trinity Church for the May procession. She had picked the petals from her basket in dainty clumps and dropped them down gracefully on the cool marble floor, but that wasn't special like being a real flower girl because all the other girls in school were in the procession too.

She remembered that first procession vividly. It had all started in the classroom in mid-April with Sister Mary Teresa's announcement, "It's time to plan our Mother's Day procession. One lucky girl will get to crown the statue of Mary, the Blessed Mother of Jesus. Today, we'll draw names. Girls, write your name on a piece of paper and put it in this box."

Six-year-old Kelly hadn't really understood what it all meant, but there were pictures of last year's procession in the principal's office and Kelly could tell it was something special. Every time she had been sent to the office for "talking back to the teacher," Kelly had stared at the pictures and focused on the little blond girl up on her tip-toes placing a garland of flowers on the graceful life-like statue of the Blessed Mother. Kelly wanted more than anything to be the one chosen. She was even feeling lucky that day. She picked up her freshly sharpened number two pencil and began to print neatly "K-" when she heard Sister say, "Except Kelly."

Stunned, Kelly looked up at the wonderful teacher who had taught her to read and introduced her to the magic of the library. This wonderful teacher had told her the exciting news about the baby Jesus who would grow up to die on a cross and live again to save her from her sins. This wonderful teacher had assured her that Jesus, the very Son of God, loved

her and that made her special. After all that, how could she do this?

“Why not me?” she frowned, talking back to the teacher, carelessly risking another trip to the principal’s office.

“You’re too tall, Kelly. It wouldn’t look cute for someone so tall to go up there in front of everyone,” she explained. “You don’t even look like a first grader,” the tiny nun added as an afterthought.

Kelly had nodded and smiled her understanding, swallowing a sob. Immediately, she raised her hand with two fingers extended in the silent signal for a bathroom break and Sister Mary Teresa acknowledged her request with a single bob of her starched white headgear.

The following year, when Kelly skipped the second grade and was in Christi’s third grade class, Sister Mary Teresa tried to make up to Kelly for hurting her so badly. The nun was in charge of the school’s music program and she gave Kelly a church hymnal, promising that she could play the organ for the procession if she could learn the hymns in time. After Kelly’s mother helped her perfect them on the piano, Sister showed Kelly how to operate the two-manual organ. She showed her where the key to the choir loft was hidden and gave Kelly permission to enter the always-unlocked church at any time to practice as much as she wanted.

Kelly wiggled her toes under the covers in the bed in Christi’s dark bedroom and remembered slipping off her shoes at Sister’s instruction and feeling the slim, smooth foot pedals of the big Hammond when she touched them for the first time through her white cotton socks. She had loved the power of it and the awesome sounds that the organ could produce with no effort at all. She just barely touched a key and the voice of a trumpet or a violin or a clarinet, or all of them and more together, would echo from the choir loft high up in the back of the church all the way to heaven.

Now that she had finished the sixth grade, Kelly had played for the procession four years in a row. Every May, as she sat at the organ playing “*We Crown Thee with Flowers*” and jealously watching the cute little first-grader in starched white organdy ascend the flower-bedecked stairs to crown the



Blessed Mother, Kelly felt the hurt of being excluded so unfairly. She had long ago memorized the hymn, knowing she couldn't keep her place on the music through the tears that always came.

Remembering those tears, Kelly blinked and noticed that the first rays of dawn were breaking through the lace barricades at Christi's bedroom windows. Kelly looked around the room which was as familiar as her own and studied it in the black and white of early morning, trying to keep herself from being bored. She hated waiting for Christi to wake up, but knew from hard experience that her best friend would be grumpy if aroused too early.

Kelly pondered again the adultery problem and tried to reassure herself that it wasn't her mother with Mr. Boudreaux. She concluded that she didn't have enough information to decide and realized that she didn't know her mother very well at all. She had heard glowing stories about Regina's childhood in an exclusive Main Line Philadelphia boarding school, but Kelly had been there to visit it and she thought it would be horrible to live in a huge granite dormitory next to the huge granite building where classes were held. Her mother's practice room had been wonderful, though, with a Steinway grand piano, twenty foot ceilings, and great gothic windows overlooking the acres and acres of trees and manicured lawns which sloped down to the eight-foot granite wall separating the school from the rest of the world.

Kelly knew the story about her mother going into nurses training after "finishing school." Nursing was the only advanced education which her grandfather would permit for a girl, because the knowledge itself would be helpful in raising a family. No girl in their family would ever be expected, or even allowed, to work. After graduation, Regina had taken a cruise to Panama, to visit her older sister whose husband worked in the American hospital there. It was wartime. They needed nurses. Regina accepted a job in the hospital without telling her family back home.

Not long after that, Clayton McCain was injured while rescuing three seamen during a serious storm off the coast. He was brought to the hospital on the Pacific side of the Canal

where Regina worked. Kelly always had doubts about the heroic rescue tale because he wouldn't discuss it, but she had seen the big black-and-white pictures of an awards ceremony in Panama. Her daddy looked big and tan and handsome in white. Her mother was petite and chic in a dark and white suit with matching hat and, of course, white gloves. She was the only woman in the huge, white-shuttered auditorium with giant ceiling fans and rows and rows of men in uniforms. In the midst of all that, Regina's long, thick strawberry-blond hair almost jumped out of the picture at you.

Kelly had also seen Clayton John McCain's huge Distinguished Service certificate from the War Department framed in mahogany, hanging in their library, but those items alone would not be enough to convince her. When Kelly learned to read, her daddy had warned her not to believe everything she read just because it was in print. It was her habit to question everything in her mind. Often, she doubted.

She began to wonder if there were others who died in that storm and maybe that's why he didn't ever talk about it. Maybe one was his best friend and he couldn't save him. She looked at her still-sleeping best friend and tried to imagine what it would feel like to lose her. She probably wouldn't be able to talk about it either, but she wanted her daddy to tell about his.

Her daddy had a lot of best friends, it seemed to Kelly, and he told her funny stories about most of them. Her mother, on the other hand, didn't go out and only had two friends that she talked to on the telephone about once a week. That made Kelly feel a lot more comfortable about the adultery problem.

"Thank you, Jesus!" she whispered under her breath, realizing that it couldn't be her mother. Her mother was always at home because she was afraid to drive a car. Kelly began to wonder what she did all day. Nellie Mae kept the house clean and did the washing and ironing. Her mother cooked, but that was about it. She just waited for her husband to come home for lunch and then waited for him to come home for dinner. Kelly remembered hearing somewhere about "ladies-in-waiting" and decided that that must be what her mother was.

She looked over at Christi, still sleeping while Kelly impatiently waited and worried that she was already becoming a “lady-in-waiting.” She didn’t like the way it felt and she didn’t want to be like her mother, who waited at home and always wore white gloves when she did go out. She made Kelly wear gloves too and she wouldn’t allow her to walk barefooted or go out in the sun without a hat and sunglasses. She made her practice the piano every day and take all kinds of lessons so Kelly would be “accomplished.” At least she would never have to go to a “finishing school.” Her daddy had promised her that, for sure, but when Kelly asked why she had to do all these things, her mother said it was to land a good husband.

Kelly thought that her mother had landed a good husband, but the family back east certainly didn’t. They thought that a guy nicknamed “Cotton” because he could pick so much for a white boy, who ran away from the farm when he was fifteen and lied about his age to join the Marine Corps, and then became the alligator-wrestling champion of the Canal Zone, could never be a “good catch.” Clayton had married Regina the day he got out of the hospital, exactly three weeks after they met. Her parents had stopped writing to her when they heard the news and they died before Kelly was born, never finding out how good their son-in-law really was and all the good stories about him.

Kelly’s favorite was about how he always drank at least a quart of Scotch every day. Then, one evening, right before Kelly’s second birthday, Clayton McCain had come home drunk and picked up Kelly for a kiss. She had pushed him back saying, “No! I won’t kiss you! You smell funny and you’re acting funny!”

Of course, Kelly didn’t remember any of that, but what she knew for certain in her heart, was that her daddy had poured out all the liquor in the house that night and never had another drink. His friends didn’t even kid him about it. They all still drank and he didn’t, but they were all still his friends.

Kelly looked over at Christi again, hoping that if she stared long enough, it would wake up her friend. It didn’t work. Kelly sighed loudly. That didn’t work either. The small

Princess phone between their beds flashed a soft glow and Kelly grabbed it before it had a chance to ring.

"Boudreaux residence," she whispered, "Kelly McCain speaking."

"Good morning, Baby," her daddy responded. "Want to go to breakfast? There's a special guest today."

"Sure," Kelly smiled, not needing any encouragement. "Come get me. I'll be ready in five minutes."

Kelly dressed in one minute flat, made her bed, then wrote a note to Christi while going to the bathroom. She figured she'd be back before Christi awoke and Christi would know where she was anyway, but she left the note on her pillow and walked quietly out to the front porch. She had trouble resisting a finger-lick of cream from the top of the freshly-delivered quarts of milk, but her daddy arrived in time to save her from that "near occasion of sin," as Sister Mary Teresa would characterize the temptation.

"Who's the guest?" Kelly asked before she got the car door closed.

"Twenty questions," he smiled.

"Politician?" was her first, and easiest, since that was the pervasive theme of these regular breakfasts at Garrett's Grill. It only took four questions to figure out that Senator Albright would be joining the group this morning. Kelly was excited as they pulled into the big asphalt parking lot and walked in the side door.

"Good morning, LaRue," she smiled at the waitress.

"Hi, Kelly, Clayton," she nodded. "He's not here yet," she whispered, eager as any of them to visit with Mississippi's esteemed veteran United States Senator.

Kelly and her daddy took their regular seats at the big table in the back room, where all the guys but the mayor and the sheriff were already in place, drinking black coffee and arguing politics. LaRue put a steaming cup in front of Clayton and handed Kelly a glass of freshly-squeezed orange juice. Kelly sipped it slowly and let herself become absorbed in the men's conversation.

Suddenly, the buzz of voices died and the men all began scruffing back their chairs, rising to greet the Senator. Kelly

sat up straighter in her chair and tried to look as old as possible for her eleven years, torn between rising to her feet out of respect as a properly-trained child would, or remaining seated as a sophisticated woman would. Senator Albright saved the moment by walking directly over to her, motioning for her to stay seated. She loved him immediately for that and extended her right hand.

"Beauty before age," the tall slender man nodded toward the others, reaching for Kelly's hand.

"I'm Kelly McCain," the young girl smiled up at him. "It's an honor to meet you, Senator Albright."

"It's my pleasure," he insisted. "I had no idea there would be such a lovely rose among these thorns."

The regulars chuckled dutifully at the Senator's remark and, though she had always been as free as the rest of them to make comments and express her opinions, some of them looked at Kelly as if they had never noticed her before. No one but Clayton McCain had ever brought a child into the group. No one else had ever considered it, and, certainly, there had never been any other female in all the years of these informal breakfasts where the political business of running Vicksburg was actually decided. Seeing Kelly through the Senator's eyes gave the regulars a startling new perspective.

One by one, the men shook hands with the Senator, indicating the depth, or lack, of relationship with him by the degree of insults they used to greet each other. Kelly was pleased to hear her father addressed as a "sorry pole cat" while some of the others got only a "glad to meet you, Joe." The mayor outshone them all, however, by receiving the Senator's thanks for the invitation to visit along with the comment that he was the "dumbest son of a bitch to ever run a fair-sized city."

LaRue brought in platters of eggs, sausages and biscuits, along with bowls of gravy and grits. For the first few minutes of the meal, the talk was the usual for a "city-council Wednesday," but, naturally, with their guest, the discussion quickly became more national in scope. Kelly listened in fascination as the obviously intelligent man lead the conversation.

"Any Catholics in this group?" the Senator asked unexpectedly.

There was a slight moment of discomfort in the crowd. Kelly raised her hand and, for the second time that morning, felt all eyes on her.

"I'm a Catholic," she announced boldly, knowing that she was the only one. Most of her daddy's friends were Baptist, as he was.

The Senator raised an eyebrow as he looked across the big table at Kelly. She stared directly into his blue eyes without flinching. Surely this wonderful man wasn't going to make her sit through another Catholic joke. She hoped her face wouldn't flush.

"Fellows," the Senator looked away from Kelly and around the table, "you need to know that there's a young Democratic Senator from Massachusetts who's going to carry some serious clout in this Presidential election. Might even run for Vice-President himself. Name's Jack Kennedy."

A couple of the men nodded in recognition of the name. Kelly had never heard it.

"He's Catholic," the Senator said softly, eliciting groans from some of the men.

"A Catholic couldn't get a nomination," the local congressman opined and several of the aldermen grunted their agreement.

"Mark my words," the Senator continued. "Don't write him off. Being Catholic is not necessarily fatal." He winked at Kelly and she relaxed again, hoping that her face had not betrayed her anxiety. She took another sip of orange juice and listened intently to the rest of the discussion as she finished her scrambled eggs.

Later, she tried to talk to Christi about it, but Christi wasn't interested in politics at all. The girls spent the late morning on their bicycles, riding in tandem through the nearly-deserted streets of residential Vicksburg, jockeying for position in the heaviest shade. By eleven o'clock, they were both hungry again and near enough to Kelly's house to drop in for lunch. However, both girls were specifically hungry for a Dairy Queen hamburger and a strawberry shake.

"Let's go," Christi started off.

"I can't."

"Why?"

"I don't have any money on me."

"But you told Daddy you did," Christi reminded her.

"I lied."

"Why?"

"I don't know," Kelly lied again, thinking about the 'adultery' word and remembering that she couldn't look at Mr. Boudreaux any more.

"Stop here. Let's see if I have enough for both of us," Christi counted. "Nope. Sorry. Why don't we go by your house to get some?"

"We might get stuck there, especially if Nellie Mae has something good started for lunch. And she'll want to hear all about your trip. Then my parents will want to hear it."

She sighed. All she could think of now was a big juicy hamburger with lots of mustard and onion. And a cool thick strawberry shake. There had to be a way.

"Christi, I got it! Follow me."

Minutes later the two girls were talking to Mr. Everett through his screen door.

"Yes, sir, I kept those kids from riding through your yard the whole time you were gone. And, in case you didn't notice, I cleaned out your garbage can really well so it wouldn't draw rats, and I watered your garden some, while I was at it."

"Martha, come here. Did you hear what all this nice child did while we were gone?"

"What? Oh, it's Kelly McCain. Good morning, Kelly, how are you?"

"Fine."

"And who's your little friend here?"

"You remember Christina Boudreaux, don't you?"

"Yes, of course. Good morning, Christina."

"Good morning, ma'am."

"Now what's all this you did? Won't you come in and have some bar-be-cue?"

"No, thank you, ma'am. We were just on our way over to the Dairy Queen for a hamburger and a strawberry shake."

"Now, Kelly, you tell Mrs. Everett what all you did while we were gone."

"Oh, it wasn't much."

"Wasn't much? Why, this child kept those other kids from riding all over our yard..."

"Do tell."

"and she watered the garden..."

"No!"

"and even scrubbed out that filthy garbage can just so's the rats wouldn't come."

"Well, glory be."

Kelly shrugged her shoulders. "It wasn't really much. I just wanted to stop by and see if you had a good trip and..."

"We sure did, honey, but it's awful nice to come home, especially with such nice neighbors. Herman, don't we have a little something from Florida for Kelly and her friend?"

Old Man Everett shuffled to the kitchen and returned with a box of salt-water taffy.

"We were going to bring this to you anyway, but seeing's how you kept an eye on things for us, here's a little something extra," he added, reaching into his pocket and coming up with a one-dollar bill and two fifty-cent pieces.

"Spend the money wherever you want, but don't eat all that candy before lunch. I don't want Nellie Mae getting on me."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir. It's real generous of you. I didn't do much. Really."

Kelly and Christi sped off again on their bikes, this time for the Dairy Queen.

"What a sweet child! Imagine, cleaning out our garbage can and all."

"Yep, we sure are lucky to have such nice neighbors." The glow of being back home lasted for days.



Chapter 6  
August 8, 1959

"Mandy! Mandy! Amanda Jane McCain!"

A chubby, curly-headed little boy waved excitedly, running across the country club's eighteenth green toward the three girls. Christi Boudreaux, Kelly McCain, and Kelly's seven-year-old sister Mandy paused and squinted into the sunlight.

"Who's that?" Kelly asked.

"Warren Coulter," the youngest girl grinned shyly. "He was at Miss Cooper's Kindergarten with me." Mandy paused, then added, "He's kinda cute, don't you think?"

The older girls leaned on their golf clubs, waiting for the sweating, panting boy.

"Hi," he said quietly to Mandy, suddenly discovering his feet when he was close enough to talk.

"Hi," Mandy answered, staring at the same feet through her Coke-bottle glasses.

"Well, hi," Warren repeated with all the finesse his seven-year-old mind could muster.

"Yeah, hi," Mandy agreed, nodding her head and causing her very blond ponytails to bounce in the sunlight.

"Who's that?" Warren questioned, motioning toward Christi and then Kelly, whose attention was focused on an older boy approaching them.

"This is my sister's friend Christi Boudreaux and this is my sister Kelly," Mandy answered.

"What?" Kelly asked absently, hearing her name, but not taking her eyes from the stranger striding toward them with his golf bag in tow.

"Hi," Warren grinned up at her.

"Hi," Kelly responded automatically, without a glance at him.

The older boy, a tall, teen-aged, even-better-looking version of Warren Coulter, now stood a putter's length from Kelly and stared into her pale green eyes. He smiled and the world stood still. Kelly returned the smile, immobilized by the feeling that came from deep inside. Something in her floated free and went to him. Without taking her eyes from him,

Kelly sensed that the grass had become a deeper green, the sky a brighter blue, and the puffy clouds a purer white edged with the gold of the sun.

"Hi, I'm Cameron Coulter," he said, as if that would explain everything.

"Kelly McCain," she responded by rote, unable to think of anything interesting to say.

And then he was gone and Kelly had no idea when or how she would ever see him again.

"I'm thirsty," Mandy complained. "Why did you two have to talk so long?"

Kelly frowned, "What do you mean, 'talk so long?' We barely said hello."

"And then where you go to school and how you're both taking golf lessons and will play in the tournament next month and that he plays the sax and you play the piano and you both love Elvis Presley and fifty-seven Chevies and you both know how to drive already and you can't except on the country roads and that you love to be out in the sun and get a tan and that he burns and was about to burn up now and so he went to the clubhouse, which reminds me that I'm thirsty."

"Well, we can't go to the clubhouse because he'll think I'm chasing after him, so you'll have to get a lemonade by the pool."

Mandy grinned because she actually preferred being near the water rather than in the dark paneled clubhouse where men smoked cigars and played the noisy slot machines in the back.

"May I go swimming?" she asked, without holding much hope. Christi shrugged.

"Sure," Kelly agreed, parking their golf bag by the locker room doors.

"Let's change into our swimsuits before we get the lemonade," Kelly suggested.

"May I have a candy bar with my lemonade?" Mandy dared to ask.

"Just this once, but don't tell I let you," Kelly warned.

Mandy was so delighted with her older sister's leniency that she waited until Christi's mother dropped them off at home to act like a seven-year-old.

"Kelly's got a boyfriend!" Mandy sang as she skipped up the front walk to their big white frame house. "Kelly's got a boyfriend! Kelly's got a boyfriend!"

"You hush or I'll jerk a knot in your..."

"What's all this about a boyfriend, Miss Mandy?" their daddy challenged from the front porch.

"Kelly met a boy and she got so weird you should have seen her!"

Clayton McCain smiled at his two precious daughters and leaned back in the rocker, resting in the porch shade after trimming shrubs all morning. He enjoyed physical labor, and though he no longer wrestled alligators as he once did in Panama, he liked to keep his six-foot frame in shape. He had a deep tan from spending lots of time outdoors with his girls, playing baseball, swimming, and letting them take turns pushing his big new power lawnmower.

"Kelly's got a boyfriend!" Mandy started up the sing-song chorus again.

"Daddy, make her stop," Kelly pleaded.

"All right, Mandy, that's enough. Why don't you go help Nellie Mae peel peaches? I hear we're going to have cobbler for dessert."

Mandy instantly disappeared inside, anticipating sugary treats from Nellie Mae in return for a minimal amount of work.

Kelly settled herself on the wide porch railing and leaned back against one of the massive square columns, anxious to tell her story. She always told her daddy everything because he paid very close attention and asked good questions. The young girl had learned to express her ideas from her father and also had learned when to keep quiet, which had maintained her place at breakfast with her father and his friends. He, in turn, shared with Kelly all the information about work, sports, politics and local color that didn't interest her mother.

Clayton waited with a broad grin as his beautiful daughter settled herself on the railing. She could barely contain her excitement.

"Oh, Daddy, Mandy's right! I met the most wonderful boy!"

"Where?"

"On the golf course. His little brother knew Mandy and we met and the way he looked at me, I thought I would die."

"Oh?"

"His eyes are blue, exactly the same shade as yours, and it's like I could see way down inside of him and he's good and honest and pure, besides being just plain nice and so cute you wouldn't believe it."

"And taller than you, I expect," her father added with a smile, knowing that Kelly was self-conscious about being five-six at the age of eleven, afraid she'd eventually be six feet tall.

"Yes, he's taller, but he's nearly thirteen, or so Mandy says."

"Mandy usually knows what she's talking about," he chuckled.

Kelly nodded.

"And does this wonderful boy have a name, or should I ask Mandy?" he teased.

"He has a beautiful name. It's Cameron. Cameron Coulter."

Her father turned to stone and the color drained from his face. Kelly felt a chill, as if the sun had just ducked behind a cloud. She waited for some familiar expression, some look of reassurance, but instead she felt scared and guilty, as if she had just done something terribly wrong, but didn't know what it was. She waited in dreadful silence, searching for a clue.

Finally, her father said softly, "That's Carolina's boy."

Kelly tried to recall meeting anyone named Carolina, but couldn't. Her father seemed to know everyone in Vicksburg and told interesting stories about many of them. Since Kelly was as good at remembering people and names as her mother was good at forgetting them, she thought it strange that this Carolina would be an unfamiliar name. She frowned and

waited during the interminable silence that marked the first time Kelly had ever experienced the pain of his apparent disapproval.

"I'm sure he's very nice," her father eventually added. "Carolina is a fine nurse. If I ever got really sick, I'd want someone to call her to take care of me."

Kelly wondered why he would want to call another nurse, since her own mother was an RN, even though she didn't work. That question would have to wait because the expression on her father's face made it clear that the conversation was over.

"Guess I'll go help Nellie Mae," Kelly offered, hoping for a change in her father's mood, but he just stared at her blankly and nodded. When the peach cobbler was finally crusted over and bubbly hot, Kelly's father was still sitting on the porch, lost in his own thoughts, and for the first time in her life, Kelly felt excluded.

On her way home from church the next morning, Kelly resolved to ask her father what exactly she had done wrong. She knew it was important to examine her conscience and confess every sin. She just needed help identifying this one.

Turning her bike into the McCain's driveway, Kelly noticed the newspaper on the front porch. Usually her daddy would be reading it when she returned home from six o'clock Mass. He wasn't in the kitchen, but her mother was.

"Where's Daddy?" Kelly asked without saying 'good morning.'

"He wasn't feeling well and so Mr. Everett took him to the doctor. I didn't want to wake up Mandy."

Or drive the car, Kelly criticized silently, never understanding her mother's irrational fear of driving.

The black hall telephone jangled the air and Regina went to answer it. In less than a minute, she returned to the kitchen.

"Your father's dead," she said flatly. "He had a massive coronary occlusion and expired at six thirty-five at Saint Paul's Hospital."

Kelly stared at her mother in disbelief. The floor where she was standing suddenly gave way and Kelly felt herself falling into a dark hole that went down and down until she was

floating in black space with nothing to hold her and nothing to stop the fall.

“What are we going to do now?” Regina asked her daughter, trading roles and looking like a lost child. The sound of her mother’s frightened voice stopped her from falling. Kelly forced herself to make the floor solid again and cover up the hole.

“We’re going to call the funeral home and do what we have to do,” Kelly answered matter-of-factly.

“No! No! Don’t tell anybody!” her mother warned. “Don’t tell anybody!” Regina abruptly left the kitchen, went up to her bedroom and closed the door.

Kelly stood immobilized, but her mind was racing. Panic gripped her, reminding her of the woman down the street who had been taken to some institution when her husband died. She thought of the orphan children in her Charles Dickens’ books and how they lived in squalor and ate gruel. She wanted to grab her sleeping sister and protect her from the people who would come to get them.

She tried to remember anything she ever heard about what to do when somebody dies. They read the Will. Kelly’s father had shown her where he kept all his important papers. Now she was glad that he always shared everything with her. She walked quietly up the stairs and down the hallway, past her mother’s closed door, to the small office her daddy kept at home, with all the forms for selling real estate and insurance that Kelly knew so well. She didn’t allow herself to think that he would never again ask her to separate the white, pink, yellow and blue copies and file them for him, as she had been doing since she learned the alphabet.

Kelly found the small metal box he kept in the bottom of the file cabinet and opened it with the key from the top desk drawer. Along with some envelopes yellowed with age, Kelly found a newer one, sealed, with the words “*Last Will and Testament of Clayton John McCain,*” typed across the front, with the return address of their family lawyer.

Hesitating a moment, trying to convince herself that her daddy couldn’t be dead, Kelly finally opened the envelope carefully.

The first two paragraphs were what she would have expected, but then she began the third: *"Notwithstanding my children, Franklin Todd, Kelly Marie and Amanda Jane, I hereby..."* Kelly stopped. "Franklin Todd?" she whispered, frowning.

Kelly blinked and re-read it: *"Notwithstanding my children, Franklin Todd, Kelly Marie, and Amanda Jane..."*

How strange, she thought. I must have had a brother who died and nobody told me. Wait. If he had died, he wouldn't be mentioned here. Oh, my God! For the second time, the floor beneath her gave way and she was falling, falling, falling through blackness.

With all the strength she had, Kelly stopped her fall and stood once more on solid ground. She resolved never to feel that helpless fear again and she forced herself to finish reading the Will. Then she sat in her father's chair and waited to hear her mother emerge from the bedroom. She waited as long as she could bear it and then knocked on the door. Although there was no response, she entered the room. Her mother was lying on the bed, curled up like a frightened child. Kelly had never before thought about how tiny her mother was, how delicate her strawberry blond hair.

"Mother," Kelly began softly, but firmly, "I want to know about Franklin Todd."

Regina McCain glanced at Kelly in fear and then hostility, but she didn't move as she answered in an angry whisper, "Your father was married before and he had a son! Don't tell anybody about him and don't ever mention his name to me again!"

Kelly nodded and left the room, closing the door behind her. She went back to her father's office and opened the telephone book, easily finding the "funeral homes" listing in the yellow pages. She recognized the name of one that all the important families in Vicksburg used. Taking a deep breath, she dialed the number.

"Hello, this is Kelly McCain. My daddy, that is, my father, Clayton John McCain, has just died at St. Paul's Hospital. Please send someone to get his body and start doing what you do. I will call you back with further instructions.... Thank you."

Next she called the regional head of the insurance company in Jackson for whom her father sold life insurance, thankful that she knew him and could find his home telephone number.

“Mr. Fletcher, this is Kelly McCain in Vicksburg. My daddy just died and we are going to need some money. Will you please help me fill out the forms, and tell me what I should do next?”

After that, she called the lawyer and the pastor of First Baptist Church where her daddy had taught Sunday School. She knew she should call a priest to come talk to her mother, but both the pastor and the associate were new just this week and hadn't even been to the McCains' house for dinner yet. The eleven-year-old child longed to talk to Father McGillis, but he was spending a month in Ireland before his official transfer to Hattiesburg, which might as well have been Timbukto. Kelly reluctantly called the rectory and the new priest said he would come after the noon Mass.



**PART II - 1963****THE CLASS OF '64**

## Chapter 7

October 7, 1963

8:15 a.m.

Seventeen-year-old Cameron Coulter, president of the senior class of Vicksburg High School, surveyed his domain from half a block away. The building's triple levels of blond brick glowed in the early October sunshine as hundreds of students poured into the Confederate Avenue entrance. Cameron knew most of his classmates by name, but there was only one he was particularly interested in seeing today. When the big white Cadillac turned the corner, Cameron started for the entrance, timing his arrival with a band choreographer's precision. Christi Boudreaux opened the front door and extended a tanned leg, followed a second later by her curvaceous body and cheery smile.

"Hi, Cam! Why aren't you at band practice this morning?"

"Mr. Shirley gave the first-chair players a day off, believe it or not."

He glanced toward the car. Cam's heart paused as he waited for her friend.

"Mom's giving Kelly a last-minute drill for her French exam," Christi explained.

A moment later, the Cadillac's back door opened and Cameron involuntarily turned to see Kelly McCain, hoping his heart would keep beating and his voice wouldn't crack. She smiled the way he always saw her in his dreams, as if he were the only other person on the planet. Her pale green eyes met his and held them.

"*Bonjour, mes amis!*" Kelly greeted them.

"*C'est dans le besoin qu'on connait ses amis,*" Cameron replied.

"And are you my 'friend in need' this morning, or just showing off?" Kelly teased.

The honor student captain of the debate team student council representative couldn't think of anything to say, but no one

noticed. All eyes were drawn to the sleek new black Corvette that turned the corner onto Confederate Avenue and slowed down in apparent search of a parking space.

"Whew!" Kelly whistled, "Look at that car! I wonder who that could be."

"It's Larry Llewellyn," Cameron offered. "He just moved here from New Orleans."

"You mean Larry Llewellyn as in the Llewellyns from New Orleans?" Kelly asked. "The ones who just bought out all the Dalton Department Stores in Mississippi?"

"The same," Cameron nodded. "Do you want to meet him?"

"Well, sure. No harm in being friendly to a newcomer at school. How do you know him?"

"My dad knows his dad."

"Small world," Kelly nodded, then added, "Oh, hush! Here he comes. He'll think we were talking about him."

"Hi, Larry! Come on over and meet some folks! We were just talking about you. Kelly, Christi, this is Larry Llewellyn. Larry, I'd like you to meet my good friends Kelly McCain and Christi Boudreaux."

Cameron watched Kelly smile and say hello to the tall freckled red-head. He searched her face for that special look and was relieved that it didn't appear for this ordinary stranger, as he admitted, "We were admiring your car, Larry. Of course, everybody in Vicksburg will."

"I'm afraid it might be a bit ostentatious here," Larry admitted, "but in New Orleans it was just another sports car." He rolled his brown eyes.

"I think it would be beautiful even in New Orleans," Kelly assured him. "You're being modest because no one here has a car like that. It's certainly not something to be ashamed of. I wouldn't be."

"Well, then, maybe you'd like to drive it sometime. How do you get home from school?"

Cameron searched Kelly's face.

"Christi's mom picks us up today."

"Well, if you like, I'll give you a ride home instead and you can try it out. You wouldn't mind, would you, Christi?"

"No. Of course not, if that's what Kelly wants to do."

Cameron's heart was pounding in his temples. "Kelly's pretty popular around here, Larry. She's usually booked up after school."

"I'll take my chances. Or are you trying to tell me I'm stepping on your toes, Cameron? Are you two going steady or something?" Larry asked with a grin. "I can take a hint."

Cameron gave Kelly a pleading look and she responded with the special smile.

"So what's the story?" Larry insisted. "Is there some big secret here?"

"We're all just good friends, Larry," Christi smiled. "Isn't that right, Cameron?"

Cameron stared at the sidewalk and heard Kelly say, "Well, anyway, I'd love to ride home in that car. I'll meet you here after school."

"Great! By the way, are you both seniors?"

Kelly and Christi looked at each other and grinned.

"Don't tell me! Another big secret?"

"No, not really," Kelly assured him. "I would be a sophomore, but I skipped a grade a long time ago and got in Christi's class. Now Christi and I are supposed to be juniors but we took extra courses and went to summer school so we can graduate early."

"Why?"

"Christi wants to go to Ole Miss with her boyfriend Grover Jones next fall," Kelly explained. "Grover will probably get a football scholarship there."

"And what about you, Miss McCain? Where's your steady going to college?"

"No one has asked me to go steady," Kelly smiled at Cameron, "nor to follow him to college."

Cameron felt her words cut into him. "Cameron and I are just good friends."

"Then why are you graduating early?"

Cameron held his breath for the answer to the question he had been afraid to ask.

"So I can be in the same class with my dearest and best friend in all the world."

Larry looked from Kelly to Cameron.

"You mean Christi?"

"Of course," Kelly agreed with a smile at Cameron, "who else?"

Grover Jones approached the group in a rush. "Christi, I've been waiting at your locker."

"Sorry, Grover. We got to talking."

"That's all right. Hey, did you see that 'Vette parked in front of my truck?"

"Yeah. That's what we were talking about. It belongs to Larry Llewellyn here. Larry, this is my boyfriend Grover Jones."

"Pleased to meet you, Grover," Larry said looking up at Grover's wide face. "Am I correct in assuming you're the largest high school football player in Mississippi?"

"Biggest white one. Don't know about the niggers. You play ball, Larry?" Grover asked.

"I did in New Orleans, at a small prep school. I'd be afraid to try it in Mississippi, though. You all take your football too seriously for me. I'd better get moving. I need to get a locker assignment before class," Larry said. "It was nice to meet all of you. I'll see you after school, Kelly."

The newest Vicksburg High senior walked through its double doors, followed by Grover and Christi. Cameron stood staring at Kelly, mesmerized by the sunlight shining from her blond hair and the pale green eyes that wouldn't let him go.

"I didn't think you'd accept a ride home from a stranger," he admonished quietly.

"He's hardly a stranger. After all, you introduced us. Is something else bothering you?"

Cameron took another look at the Corvette and tried to blame it.

"I guess not."

"Why aren't you at band practice this morning?"

"Mr. Shirley gave the first-chair players a day off."

"And so you came over here... to . . .?" Kelly paused.

Cameron groped to finish the sentence, "Enjoy the sunshine. I came to enjoy the sunshine. There seems to be more sunshine over here."

"Well, I hope you got enough because it's really time to go in."

"Kelly?"

"Yes?"

"Oh, nothing. I guess we'd better go in."

Cameron sneaked a last glare at the Corvette before opening the door for Kelly. The bell rang and they ran in different directions.

"Late for my French test!"

"Calculus."

Cameron slid into his seat before the prayer and scripture reading. No harm done. Thank God we're not having a test this morning. I'd be in trouble. Why does she do this to me? I can't even think around her. Surely she knows how I feel. Doesn't she realize I've got to study? I've got to get a scholarship to a great school. How will I ever be somebody?

"Mister Coulter!"

"Yes, sir."

"I said, 'will you please illustrate problem number one on the board?'"

"Uh, yessir," Cameron nodded as he pictured Kelly and considered his own 'problem number one:'  $CC + KM = ?$

Larry Llewellyn was assigned a back seat in the small calculus class, giving him the opportunity to look around without being obvious. The classroom walls were public-school beige but the view through the east-facing window provided some compensation. Oak, maple and magnolia trees covering the ridge which curved around toward the river were densely populated with half-tame squirrels who occasionally paused from their work to look at the captive students in the brick and glass box. A large bold squirrel, its bushy tail twitching, stood upright on the ground, sniffed the air, and made eye contact with Larry, chattering *'Welcome to Vicksburg. Please feel free to join us for lunch out on the lawn.'*

A fat blond girl in a purple dress leaned across the aisle and handed Larry a note. *'Welcome to Vicksburg. Please feel free to join us for lunch out on the lawn.'* Larry looked over to see the girl smiling at him through teeth that should have had braces. He glanced out the window and picked up his pencil. *"Thanks for*

*the welcome. Sorry I already have plans for lunch.*" He passed the note to the girl, then winked at the squirrel.

"Mister Coulter!"

Larry was startled by the unfamiliar male voice rising in an unmasculine squeak.

"Yes, sir," came the composed reply.

"I said, 'Will you please illustrate problem number one on the board?'"

"Uh, yessir," Cameron grinned as he picked up his homework paper and walked to the front.

Looks like Cameron Coulter has a firm grip on things, Larry muttered to himself, except for Kelly McCain. Something's going on there that nobody's talking about. Maybe I'll find out this afternoon. What luck to meet her on my first day at school. She must be the best-looking girl in Mississippi. Classy, too. Daddy will sure be impressed. Cameron, ole buddy, if you had any plans for Miss McCain, you should have staked a claim sooner.

"Lawrence Llewellyn?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Is that correct? Your enrollment card says '*Lawrence Launfal Llewellyn.*'"

"Yes, sir, but I prefer to be called 'Larry.'"

"Very well, then, Larry, let me just jot that down here. Did you understand what Cameron was doing with his problem?"

"Yes, sir, quite well. I've seen that problem before."

"Oh? So you find that we're a little behind you?"

"Not by much, sir. Just enough to give a newcomer an even chance."

"Good. Good. Now, Lucinda, will you please take the next one?"

"Yes, sir," the girl from the note replied. The purple dress strained across her rear as she waddled up the aisle. Larry counted, starting with Lucinda, only four girls among his twenty classmates and all of them were calculus types. Too bad that girls like Kelly McCain never took calculus. But then, why should they?

As the morning classes progressed, Larry became increasingly comfortable. Most of the students in his Calculus

class were also in Physics and Honors English. He half-expected to see Kelly McCain in English, but she wasn't. Disappointed, he invited Cameron Coulter to lunch instead.

"At the country club?" Cameron repeated.

"Yeah. You see, our house is being remodeled and we don't have a kitchen, so I couldn't bring a lunch from home. We're eating most of our meals at the club."

"Why don't you join us in the school cafeteria?"

"Thanks, but let's do that tomorrow. I told Dad I'd see him at noon. It would make him feel real good to see that we're going to be friends. He thinks a lot of your father. Now, how about lunch? Llewellyn's treat."

"Sure, but I can buy my own."

"I realize that, but Dad won't take your money. No use arguing with him. He always gets his way."

"And you?" Cameron asked as they walked toward the magnificent black car that Kelly would ride home in. "Do you always get your way?"

"Not always," Larry confessed, patting Cameron on the shoulder, "but often enough."

Cameron sank into jealousy and despair as he opened the door, slid into the low-lung black leather bucket seat and stretched his long legs. Larry turned the ignition key. The engine purred with quiet confidence as it powered the car smoothly from its parking space, then gained speed along Confederate Avenue gliding out toward the club. Music from perfectly balanced speakers stirred Cameron's soul and he relaxed into the luxury. Someday he would have a fabulous car. He would show her. He would show them all. Someday...

But, today! Today she would be riding in this car, relaxing with this music, feeling this surge of power. Is this why he invited me to lunch? Something sour rose in Cameron's throat. This is ridiculous. He's just trying to make friends here. I'm the first person he met in Vicksburg. This has nothing to do with Kelly.

"By the way, Cam, thanks for introducing me to your friends this morning. That Kelly McCain is something else! Glad you

don't have any claim on her, or we'd probably have to get out our dueling pistols," he laughed.

Cameron stared at Larry as they pulled up to the country club and coasted to a stop behind a silver Mercedes limousine.

"Good. Dad's already here. What's wrong? You look like you just lost your best friend."

"Nothing," Cameron choked as a young black man in uniform opened his car door and informed them that the Llewellyn party was seated in the dining room.

Larry led the way with long confident strides across the tiled entrance hall to the expansive dining room overlooking the golf course. Cameron barely kept pace as he compared this daytime club to the one he knew only as a dance guest of Carol Jean Tolbert. Without crêpe paper, balloons and blaring music, the dining room was elegant.

Larry headed toward the corner table where Mayor Adam Roarke was sitting with George Llewellyn. Several local officials and businessmen stopped by during lunch. The mayor's introductions were cordial, but brief. Cameron, who had met President Kennedy during the past summer, was not awed by these local politicians. He did, however, recognize the deference accorded to those in power. Cameron decided that he liked the feel of it.



Chapter 8  
October 7, 1963  
3:35 p.m.

Kelly felt a hundred pairs of eyes on her as she slid gracefully into the soft leather seat. The first thing she noticed after the door clicked shut was a small gold plaque above the radio engraved '*CUSTOM BUILT FOR LAWRENCE LAUNFAL LLEWELLYN.*' She watched as he walked around the front of the car with an air of confidence that was attractive and repulsive at the same time. He isn't cute enough to act so cocky, she thought, with all that red hair and those freckles. Who does he think he is? Obviously, he knows who he is. Or who his daddy is.

"Thanks for letting me be your chauffeur, Miss Kelly," Larry smiled at her, "and you like classical music, I believe, so this tape should do nicely."

"I'm flattered that you know my tastes," Kelly said, "but I'm curious about your source of information."

Larry maneuvered out of the parking space and past the school grounds before he looked over at her.

"Your friend Cameron Coulter seems to know all about you. We had lunch today."

"I heard about that," was all Kelly commented, biting her bottom lip, not daring to ask what else Cameron might have said about her and their past four years of playing cat-and-mouse. She wondered if he would talk to a stranger about her, or if Cameron ever talked to anyone about her. How would he ever explain his habit of taking someone else to a dance, then dumping his date early to pick up Kelly after she dumped her own date so she could ride around with Cameron half the night talking and singing along with him and the car radio?

"Don't you want to know what else he said about you?" Larry baited.

Kelly recognized a no-win question and smiled.

"I'd rather hear about your first day in school and what classes you're taking," she replied in a flat voice.

"Would you really?" Larry asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Of course. Would I lie to you?"

After a brief pause for reflection, Larry answered, "Probably, although I suspect you are basically an honest person, according to your own code."

"Do you go around analyzing everyone like this?"

"Yes and no," he replied after another silence.

"Meaning?"

"I analyze everyone, but not like this."

"And what is this?"

"This is the 'get-the-beautiful-princesse-into-the-car-where-she-can't-get-away' analysis. I only use it on special occasions."

"And how long does it take?" Kelly asked with genuine interest.

"I'm all finished with my preliminary analysis and here we are at your castle."

"There's my mother. You better come meet her so she won't die of curiosity."

"Anything to save a life," he sighed. "Wait a second, I'll get your door."

Kelly stood on the porch and thanked Larry for the ride home from school. Her mother, obviously impressed with his car and seeing it as just one sign of the vast Llewellyn fortune, invited him to stay awhile.

"I need to go to Tallulah on an errand for Dad," he excused himself.

And then her mother, who hated to drive and was scared of the bridge, offered, "I'm sure Kelly would enjoy the drive over to Tallulah. Wouldn't you, Kelly?"

Kelly frowned as Larry jumped right in with, "That would be great! How about it, Kelly? We'll be back before dark, so you'll have plenty of time to do your homework, unless you have other plans for the evening."

"No other plans," Regina McCain interposed. "She can't go out on weeknights unless it's a school function."

Kelly looked from her mother to Larry and back. It felt like a conspiracy. Her mother never allowed her to go out with Cameron on a school night.

"Does that mean we couldn't take time out for a little dinner on the way home?" Larry asked graciously.

"I can't..."

"Dinner would be fine," Regina agreed. "She has to eat somewhere."

As Larry opened the car door for Kelly, she heard the telephone ring. She couldn't have known it was Cameron and she never suspected how often her mother forgot to tell her when he called.

The black Corvette streaked across the old two-lane Mississippi River bridge and along Highway 80 toward Tallulah, gaining speed as it crossed the flatlands on the Louisiana side of the water. It covered the twenty miles in less than fifteen minutes. Larry slowed to the speed limit as they cruised toward the center of town.

"You can come in or wait in the car. I won't be long."

Kelly looked around the small quiet square and decided, "I'll go in with you."

They entered through the obviously-remodeled-in-the-early-fifties double glass front doors of Dalton's Department Store. Kelly noticed Larry kick at the loose weather-stripping of its threshold. He nodded at the cashier and walked without hesitation across the worn hardwood to a door in back of the store marked '*NO ADMITTANCE. EMPLOYEES ONLY.*' He knocked once and opened the door without waiting for an answer. Kelly stood behind him in the hallway as he spoke quietly with an old man wearing bifocals. Then he picked up three cardboard boxes that were stacked on a side chair and turned to Kelly.

"This is it. Mission accomplished."

Kelly looked past him at the bald head shining under the glare of a bare light bulb. She smiled, but there was no response from behind the thick eyeglasses.

Larry put the boxes in the trunk, then held the car door open for Kelly.

"What's wrong with that poor old man?" she asked Larry as he slid into the driver's seat.

"He's trying to run this store the way his grandfather did."

"And your father is going to help him out?" Kelly inquired, remembering how many times her father had helped people who were struggling with their businesses. "Yeah, I guess

you could say that. Sure. He's going to help him out," Larry agreed.

"What will he do?" Kelly genuinely wanted to know.

"Surely you don't want to talk business."

Kelly took the hint. "Not really," she lied. "Anyway, you haven't told me about your first day at Vicksburg High and what you're taking."

"It'll be fine. I've got Calculus, Physics, Honors English, third year French and World History. And you?"

"English, Chemistry, fourth-year Latin, second-year French, World History and Psychology."

"Why six?"

"So I can graduate early."

"But you're not taking any math. Why not?"

"I hate it," Kelly answered with distaste.

"You can't get into a decent college without at least three years of math."

"I'm going to Ole Miss," she said matter-of-factly.

"And why aren't you in Honors English?" he wanted to know.

"To qualify, you have to make an 'A' in Junior English and I'm just now taking that by correspondence." Kelly looked out the window at the green grass blur and the distant levee running parallel to the road.

"Where are we going?" she asked somewhat nervously.

"There's a place outside Lake Providence that has the world's best crawfish gumbo," Larry answered as they sped north past a sign indicating twenty-eight miles to Lake Providence.

"What if I don't like crawfish gumbo?"

"They have hamburgers, but, you'll like their gumbo."

"Do you always act so sure of things?"

"Only when I am, which is often. One thing I'm sure of is that you need to pick up another math credit. What if you had a boyfriend going somewhere besides Ole Miss and you wanted to tag along? Having only two years of high school math will keep you stuck in Mississippi."

Kelly's throat thickened. She remembered hearing Cameron talk about 'better schools up East.'

"Let's suppose I wanted to drop Psychology and pick up Geometry. How could I? Six weeks exams start Monday."

"I'll tutor you," Larry offered.

"What if I flunk the exam?"

"Simple. You flunk the course, you're one credit short of graduating and you can spend another glorious year at Vicksburg High School in lovely downtown Vicksburg."

"And I'd be so embarrassed," Kelly shuddered.

"Don't be so concerned about other people's reactions."

"Did you bring me along just to insult me?"

"Kelly, I didn't mean to insult you. In fact, I'm sure you are smart enough to do it. Just don't worry about what other people say."

Kelly tried to imagine Cameron's reaction. He had encouraged her to take another math course. Maybe it was because he plans to go somewhere else to school and wants me to go with him. He probably couldn't afford to and neither could I, but maybe...

"Okay. I'll do it," Kelly brightened. "It might actually be fun. A challenge."

"And here's your next challenge," Larry announced. "*L'Ecrevisse!*"

"*L'Ecrevisse? Qu'est-ce que c'est que cela?*" Kelly asked.

"Crawfish."

"A strange name for a shack beside the road."

"Wait 'til you taste the gumbo."

"Here? This is the restaurant?"

"Speak with respect, Mademoiselle. Right here is the finest Cajun cooking you can get to without a *pirogue*."

"And what's a *pirogue*?" Kelly asked, beginning to be exasperated.

"My goodness, girl, you're going to need tutoring in French as well as Geometry. *Un pirogue est un petit bateau, non ponté,*" Larry explained. "A little open boat the Cajuns use in the bayous, almost flat-bottomed, can go anywhere. Louis is the best cook who ever escaped with the family recipes. Come on in. He'll love you."

Larry opened the wood plank door and lead Kelly into another world. The room was dark, with a very low ceiling.

Six unmatched wooden tables, one quite long, and an odd assortment of chairs crowded the dining side of the room. To the left, behind the wooden counter, was the back of a small wiry man, leaning over a steaming pot.

"Louis!" Larry called with a wonderful French accent.

The little man turned abruptly toward Larry, then caught Kelly in his black bird eyes. He flung his hairy arms in the air, a dripping spoon in his left hand.

"*Mon petit Monsieur Cheveux Roux! Bienvenue!*"

Louis dropped the spoon on the counter and threw his arms around Larry. "*Comment allez-vous? Et votre pere?*"

"*Bien, Louis. Il va bien.*"

"*Et votre amie!*" Louis exclaimed. "*Que c'est belle!*"

"*Merci, monsieur. Je m'appelle Kelly,*" she smiled at the compliment and introduced herself.

"*J'ai la bonte!*" Louis beamed. "*J'ai la bonte!*"

Louis held a chair for Kelly as if he were the *maitre d'hôte* at the Royal Orleans. Louis and his "Little Mister Red Hair" carried on an animated conversation in French, while Kelly let her eyes adjust to the dim light and began to observe the details around her. A small window admitted enough light to illuminate a half dozen oil paintings of Louisiana bayous hung haphazardly around the room, their stretched canvasses unmatted and unframed. Next to the window was a door Kelly hoped would lead to a clean restroom.

"*La toilette?*" she asked Louis, nodding toward the door.

"*Non, mademoiselle, les distributeurs automatiques,*" Louis replied with a smile.

Kelly frowned her incomprehension.

"*Appareil a sous,*" he explained in patient French.

Kelly looked at Larry for the translation.

"Slot machines," he whispered.

"*La toilette est en arriere de la cuisine,*" Louis indicated an open passageway behind the counter and Kelly excused herself, following his direction to a tiny water closet. She squatted over the low seatless *toilette* and decided that Larry certainly wasn't trying to impress her with his money, no matter what her mother might think. Regina Costavecchio McCain should see this, she thought.

Larry was waiting for her at their table where two large ceramic bowls of gumbo sat steaming on either side of a long loaf of French bread, placed directly on the bare wood. Another ceramic bowl contained scoops of fluffy rice. A girl about Kelly's age, wearing a low-cut bright pink blouse, black leather mini-skirt, black fish-net stockings, and black patent-leather high heels, placed two frosty mugs of beer on the table beside a lighted candle. She winked at Larry, then sashayed behind the counter, dipped some of the gumbo into a smaller saucepan and carried it out through the back door.

"Surely that's not Louis's daughter!" Kelly whispered, wondering at the likeness in their black eyes and small bodies.

Larry's lips turned up in amusement. "I believe they're cousins. Try the gumbo."

Kelly picked up her spoon and examined it in the candlelight. Larry laughed aloud.

"It's clean," he assured her, as she dipped it into the gumbo and lifted it to her mouth. "I watched Louis wipe it on his apron."

Kelly poised the spoon in mid air and looked into Larry's brown eyes. They were impossible to read. "Clean or not, the gumbo smells great." The spicy blend of crawfish, okra, tomatoes, *file* powder and centuries of secrets warmed Kelly's mouth and made her grab for the mug of beer.

"Whew! Delicious, but hot!"

They ate in silence, watching the flickering candlelight, the quiet interrupted only occasionally by the whine of truck tires on the asphalt highway and twice by the crunch of smaller tires on gravel as a couple of big sedans drove around to the trailer out back. By the time Kelly and Larry finished eating, more cars were pulling into the parking area out back and the room beyond the door was filling up with the smells of beer and cigarette smoke, and the sounds of slot machines clanking and whirling, followed by muffled curses.

"*Souffisant?*" Larry asked.

"*Oui, monsieur, souffisant. Merci.*"

Larry stood up, helped Kelly with her chair, and reached into his pocket. Louis shook his head at the money.

*"Non, non, mon petit Monsieur Cheveux Roux! A beau jeu, beau retour."*

*"Mais, Louis, a chaque saint, sa chandelle!"*

*"Nous sommes actionnaires, mon ami."*

*"C'est bien. Merci, Louis."*

*"Et votre amie! Elle est à peindre."*

Kelly blushed at the compliment.

*"Voilà! Une rougeur lui était montée au visage. Que c'est belle!"*

On the highway heading back south, Kelly asked about the parting conversation with Louis.

"He said you are pretty enough to paint."

"I know that, but earlier, something about a good game?"

Larry frowned, then brightened, "Oh, you mean, 'a beau jeu, beau retour'?"

"Yeah," Kelly nodded. "What's that?"

"An idiom for 'one good turn deserves another.'"

"Hmm. And what did you do for Louis?"

"Nothing. That's why I said, "'A chaque saint, sa chandelle.' 'To each saint, his candle.' It's my father who has helped him out."

"So that's why he said you're 'shareholders in the same company,' but, he doesn't look like someone who would be in the same company with your father. What's the deal?"

"Are you really interested in business that much?"

Once more, Kelly realized that she had overstepped her bounds.

"No. Sorry."

"That's okay."

They drove in silence for a few miles.

"How would you like to drive for awhile?"

"Really? I'd love to. You wouldn't mind?"

"I wouldn't have offered if I didn't mean it," he replied, pulling off the road onto the narrow shoulder. They got out and changed places. Kelly adjusted the rear view mirror down a little and put on her seat belt. As she shifted into gear and touched the accelerator, the car lurched forward, throwing rocks and gravel from the rear wheels.

"Sorry," she said, "I didn't realize it was so quick."



"Not just quick. It's fast. Run it up to about eighty or ninety to get the feel of it."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. Go ahead."

Kelly depressed the accelerator and felt her head jerk back. The speedometer indicated eighty-five, ninety, ninety-five. Kelly's stomach formed into a small knot as the narrow highway disappeared under the hood.

"Scared?"

"No," she lied, "but, I've never driven this fast before."

"There's an open stretch of road up ahead. See what a hundred feels like."

A hundred miles an hour was no more frightening than ninety-five and before she realized it, Kelly was flying along at a hundred twenty. A glance at the speedometer scared her and she took her foot off the gas pedal. At that instant, she saw flashing red lights in the rearview mirror and heard the whine of a siren.

"Oh, God! I can't believe it!" The knot in her stomach tightened and her face flushed.

"Let it coast down. Put on your turn signal, so he'll know you're stopping. Relax," Larry counseled. "It's okay."

She followed Larry's instructions, pulled off on the shoulder and braked to a stop, fumbling in her purse as the huge Louisiana trooper ambled toward the parked car. By the time she found her license, Larry was out of the car and talking to the officer, showing his own driver's license. Kelly stared as the officer grinned and held out his hand to Larry. In two minutes, he was back in his patrol car, saluting as he drove off, leaving them without a ticket or any further conversation.

"Do you want to keep driving, or do you want me to take over?" Larry pantomimed through the window.

"Are you kidding?" Kelly asked as she opened the door. "You'd let me drive after that?"

"Sure. You're a good driver."

"No, it's your turn. My knees are shaking."

Larry laughed at her as they exchanged places again. The Corvette effortlessly topped a hundred as they caught and

passed the state police car. Larry waved. The trooper tweaked his siren and saluted.

"I don't understand what's going on, Larry. Is he a friend of yours, or what?"

"Sort of a friend of my father."

"Does your father know everybody in Louisiana?"

"No, but everybody in Louisiana knows him."

"How?"

"Business."

"Oh, I see."

It was dark as they crossed the Mississippi again. The lights of Vicksburg stood sentinel over the river and welcomed Kelly home from the foreign world Larry had shown her.

"Are going to say anything to my mother about what happened over there?"

"What happened?"

"You know. Getting stopped by the state police."

"Did a state policeman say something to you?"

"Well, no."

"Then what is there to tell?" Larry winked at her.

Kelly sighed with some relief, but another uneasy feeling followed.

"Larry?"

"What?"

"What kind of business is your father in?"

"Department stores."

"It seems a little funny that everybody in Louisiana knows him just because he owns department stores."

"It's not funny at all. Just give him a little time in Mississippi and it will be the same here. But, Kelly," he added, "I really don't like talking about his business."

"Sorry. I was just curious."

"You know what curiosity did to the cat."

Chapter 9  
October 8, 1963  
8:00 a.m.

Accepting Larry's challenge and his offer of tutoring, Kelly arrived at school early for an unscheduled meeting with the vice-principal. He didn't think that girls needed so much math and suggested home economics or typing instead, which Kelly, not so graciously, refused. He shrugged his shoulders and signed the "drop" form for Psychology and "add" form for Geometry, rearranging her mornings.

Kelly was intrigued and excited by the feeling of conspiracy, and the challenge of cramming five weeks of lessons into one. Geometry became her homeroom subject, and, surprisingly, more interesting to her than Psychology. It appealed to her logical mind and tapped into her talent for memorization. She became obsessed with mastering the subject and found Larry to be an excellent tutor.

Every night for the next week, Cameron drove past Kelly's house and every night he saw the hated black Corvette parked out front. At school, Kelly was concentrating her full attention in each class, getting the most she could from the daylight hours so she could study Geometry with Larry at night, so she would have another math credit, so she could go to a better college than Ole Miss, so she could follow Cameron Coulter wherever he chose to go.

In the relief of pressure she felt when the six-weeks exam was over, Kelly realized that she hadn't seen Cameron in almost a week. It still amazed her that he could disappear for days at a time yet be in the same building, his locker only twenty feet from hers. She tried to imagine what she could have done to offend him, but gave up and decided to concentrate on her next maneuver. Homecoming was only a month away and preliminary nominations would be held on Friday. Kelly figured that Christi would easily be elected homecoming queen and she would have Grover as captain of the football team escort her. If Kelly could be elected Senior Maid, then protocol demanded that she should be escorted by the senior class president. Cameron.

With the election in mind, Kelly poured her charm all over her new Geometry homeroom classmates and by Thursday she felt sure of their votes in the first round. On Friday morning, tingling with anticipation, she spent extra time with her hair and make-up, straining to get the fresh natural look of a homecoming queen.

As the teacher announced that the Geometry homeroom would nominate one girl and the nominees would be voted on in an all-school election on Friday, Kelly pictured herself walking across the lighted football field, all eyes on her in a full-length white dress, like a wedding gown, her white-gloved hand resting gently on the arm of Cameron Coulter, then later, in the gym decorated with green and white paper streamers and balloons, dancing in Cameron's embrace until the lights dimmed and she would be swaying with him, tip-toe in her stocking feet, her shoes lost in a heap under one of the long folding tables set up around the room, each draped identically with a rented white cloth and decorated with a small centerpiece of green candles and white carnations.

"But before we vote," the newly-familiar voice interrupted Kelly's reverie, "I'm going to hand out your six-weeks Geometry exams. To be honest, I am generally disappointed with your grades," he continued, going up and down the aisles distributing the bad news, "and I would have given you a break by putting the scores on a curve," he announced over the moans rising in his destructive wake, "but for the fact that one of your classmates made a perfect score," he sympathized as the groans increased, "thus forcing me to give most of you the C's and D's you rightly earned and to give several of you the failing grades which you can see prominently displayed in red at the top of your first page," he finished as he returned to his desk at the front of the room.

"I would be remiss as a teacher, however," he continued without expression, "if I failed to acknowledge the superior performance of your classmate whose one hundred percent mark made a curve impossible. Congratulations, Miss McCain, on your outstanding achievement. Now if you will each take out a sheet of notebook paper and write on it the name of the one girl in this class you would like to nominate

as your representative in the homecoming election, I will collect the votes and tabulate the results while you look over your test papers. Should you have questions about any of the theorems or proofs while I am counting the votes, I'm sure that Miss McCain would be happy to assist you."

Kelly's face burned as she wrote her own name in nomination, folded the paper and handed it in. When the totals were posted on the board, Kelly wondered who was the one other person who had voted for her, but she was too embarrassed to look into any of their faces as she joined her classmates in applauding the nomination of Gretchen Poindexter for 1963 Homecoming Queen of Vicksburg High School.

Larry was waiting in the hall after Geometry class. "I saw what's-his-name carrying the test papers in. How'd we do?"

Kelly clenched her teeth and glared into his expectant brown eyes.

"Great. Just great," she mumbled through clenched teeth.

"Exactly how great? You don't sound thrilled."

"I made a hundred."

"Kelly, that's fantastic! I knew we could do it! That showed 'em all!"

"Oh, yeah, that really showed 'em all."

"What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing."

"Don't insult my intelligence. Tell me what's wrong."

"I've got to get to class," Kelly insisted, turning away. "I'll see you later."

Larry grabbed Kelly's arm, forcing her against the wall by the water fountain.

"Tell me now!"

"It's silly, really."

"Tell me, damnit!"

The intensity of his voice stirred something new in Kelly. She jerked her arm away and spit the words at him, a sharp whisper in the crowded hallway.

"We had homecoming nominations this morning and I didn't get picked."

"Big deal. Do you know what being Homecoming Queen is worth?"

Kelly was silent.

"That's right. Nothing. It's worth nothing."

Kelly's bottom lip began to quiver and he softened.

"It's okay, Kelly," he tried to comfort her, "if you were the Queen, you probably wouldn't be my date that night."

Kelly closed her eyes to keep from crying as Larry slipped his arm around her shoulder and held her for a brief moment, the same moment in which Cameron Coulter rounded the corner to quench his thirst at the water fountain. Kelly felt Larry's body tense.

"Excuse me," she heard in an exaggerated drawl. "Is this water fountain reserved?"

At the sound of Cameron's voice, Kelly whirled around to see hard brown eyes and soft blue locked in the most ancient combat. Cameron flashed his student council smile at Larry.

"Excellent choice of weapons, my friend. I relinquish the water fountain to you," Larry gestured with a flourish. "See you at lunch, Kelly. Meet you outside the cafeteria."

She stared at Larry's back as he sauntered down the hall. Cameron bent over the water fountain waiting for Kelly to say something. Anything. Any explanation of what she'd been doing for the past week. The silence between them grew heavier, broken only by the splat-splat of water against metal. Cameron finished drinking but held the faucet open.

"Thirsty?" he asked, stepping aside, searching her face.

Kelly nodded and leaned over the arched stream of water, prolonging the moment, waiting for Cameron to say something. Anything. Her eyes rested on his hand, still holding the faucet for her, his long slim fingers with their easy assured touch. The tightly woven cotton of his shirt cuff was magnified a hundred times, its unreal white stiffness emphasizing the lightly tanned texture of his flesh. She wanted to touch him, to have him touch her again. She let her eyes travel up his forearm, to his shoulder, to his mouth. The shrill blast of the second period bell shattered the moment. Her eyes sought his.

"We're late for class," she breathed without moving.

"I know," he responded, returning her look.

Kelly noticed that the hallway had become silent as the other students disappeared into their classrooms. She felt helpless and unsure as Cameron stood only inches from her and she didn't know what to say. The air was heavy between them; the silence overpowering. Finally, Cameron tightened his jaw in his familiar nervous gesture, nodded to her, and turned without another word toward his classroom. Kelly watched him walk away, sad and frustrated at not knowing what to do. The rest of the morning passed in a fog.

The cafeteria at noon was alive with news of the nominations. Kelly tried to be excited for Christi as the group gathered for lunch at their regular table. Carol Jean Tolbert's grin told Kelly that she was also in the running as she plopped her plastic lunch tray onto the big wooden table and pulled out a chair.

Carol Jean waved at someone, then called, "Cameron! Over here! I saved you a place!"

Kelly stared at her fish sticks and Brussels sprouts and thought she was going to be sick. Cameron took the offered chair beside Carol Jean and congratulated her on her nomination. He looked at Kelly with a question on his face. She shook her head and lowered her eyes.

"Kelly! I thought you were going to wait for me out in the hall," Larry scolded as he pulled out the chair next to her.

"Did I say that?" Kelly asked in genuine confusion.

"No problem on such a great day. Congratulations, Christi! You too, Carol Jean. I propose a toast." He lifted his milk carton in salute.

Grover and the other jocks at the table wholeheartedly joined in the cheers. Cameron raised his milk carton silently and gave a soft look to Kelly. She managed to smile throughout the ordeal, but couldn't force herself to eat lunch. She blamed it on the menu.

"Gotta get to art early today," Grover announced, breaking up the party. "See y'all later. Congratulations again, girls." He walked around behind Kelly, leaned over and whispered in her ear, "I'm really sorry you didn't get nominated, Kelly. I was hoping you and Christi would be in this together."

"Excuse me, I need to go with Grover," Kelly smiled as she pushed her chair back. "Okay, Grover, I'm ready. Congratulations again, y'all."

Kelly made it through the cafeteria doors before the tears welled up in her eyes. Grover frowned and then put his arm around her shoulder.

"Gosh, Kelly, did I say something wrong?"

She shook her head and fell against him.

"Nuh... nuh... no," she sobbed. "I... I... just couldn't st... st... stand it uh... uh... nother minute... with Carol Jean... gl... gl... gloating.... Sh... sh... she... m... muh... makes me s... s... sick!"

"I really am sorry, Kelly. I wish I could do something."

Grover looked around the deserted hallway and suggested, "Why don't you go to the girls bathroom upstairs before anyone sees you out here like this? You wouldn't want Carol Jean to know you were crying. Go on," he gave her a hug, "and I'll tell Christi where you are."

"Nuh... no,... don't go buh... buh... back in there. I'll be okay. Thuh... thanks, Grover."

Kelly spent the next two class periods hiding out in the girls bathroom before recovering enough to meet Larry in the gym as planned. The pep band's dozen drums beat a smart cadence which reverberated through the wood-floored, high-ceilinged room and into her temples.

"Larry, I've gotta get out of here. This is giving me a headache."

"If you leave, you'll look like a sore loser. Here comes the drill team now. How long can a pep rally last anyway? Just relax."

Thirty-six arch-rival friends high-stepped their routine around the polished gym floor, swishing their green and white pompoms in perfect synchrony, ending at last in formation of the letters "VHS," shimmying their pompoms overhead in a tribal frenzy, as the eight virginal cheerleaders (chosen from the ranks of last year's drill team after weeks and months of practice and agony and plotting to date the right football players), cartwheeled in a circle, all arms and legs and perky ponytails, awaiting the disorganized arrival of the gods



of Friday night who would mass together in clumps instead of rows, chewing wads of bubble gum, acting nonchalant at the adoration which was their birthright, storing up glorious memories to be drawn upon during a lifetime of low-paying jobs and nagging assaults by these young beauties who would become their wives and the mothers of their slow-witted children, all the while helping to make the trailer payments and buy groceries and medicine by working as beauticians or checkers at the five-and-dime or aides in the county nursing home, their dreams of a Hollywood career fading with the thickening of their bellies and ankles.

*"... and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."*

Drum roll. Crashing cymbals. *"Oh - oh, say, can you see, by the dawn's early light, what so proud-ly we hailed at the twi-light's last gleam-ing..."*

Kelly stood silently as the band played and her classmates sang facing the flag, right hands reverently placed over hearts or stomachs or collarbones, but by the time the trumpets took over on the high part, she couldn't resist any longer.

*"... and the rock-ets red glare, the bombs bur-sting in air, gave proof through the night, that our flag was still there."*

Carried away by the music, Kelly sang louder and louder until most of the kids around her were staring and even Larry was becoming a little embarrassed.

*"Oh, say, does tha - at Star Span - gled Ba - an - ner - er ye - et way - ayve"... drum roll... "o'er the la-and of the free"... crashing cymbals... "and the home"... drum roll... "of the"... cymbals... "brave."*

Chapter 10  
May 3, 1964  
3:35 a.m.

The deliciously sweet smell of honeysuckle drifted through the open windows of the Coulters' big Buick. Kelly rested her head on Cameron's shoulder, his right arm cradling her gently, lulling her to sleep after hours of conversation.

Cameron stared ahead at the wide dark river, knowing it was inevitably moving toward the sea, though it might appear still from up on the ridge. He tried to collect his thoughts and recapture the elation he had felt when his news was fresh. He had worked toward his goal for such a long time, it never occurred to him that attaining it might not be enough. He recalled the weekends spent studying, the hours of extracurricular activities, the pressure of performing every task well. Now that he had succeeded, all he could think of was the indelible image of Kelly arriving at the senior prom on Larry's arm earlier in the evening, just like Homecoming six months before, laughing and talking in her animated way until she focused her gaze on Cameron with the look that made his heart stop and he wondered why he was ever with Carol Jean and why his life seemed to be controlled from somewhere outside himself.

At midnight, Cameron had touched Kelly's arm and whispered in her ear, "I have to see you. May I come by in an hour?" She nodded and smiled as if he had only complimented her in passing, then turned back to Larry for the last dance.

Now Cameron felt Kelly shift her weight slightly and snuggle closer to him, gently placing her right hand near his heart.

"Penny for your thoughts," she whispered dreamily, massaging his chest softly with her fingertips.

"I was thinking about college. I've been meaning to tell you," he hesitated, trying to sound excited, "I've been accepted at Georgetown."

The fingers stopped.

"In Washington? And you're going?"

"Of course," he replied. "It's a wonderful opportunity, a foundation for anything I might want to do."

"And what do you want to do that's so important?" she asked, straightening up in the seat and facing him.

Cameron looked into her expectant eyes and wondered if she would laugh at him, if she'd think he was grandiose or arrogant or crazy. He stared at the river, avoiding her gaze.

"I want to be President," he whispered.

"You mean, of the United States?"

He nodded.

In the moonlight, Kelly studied Cameron's profile, memorizing every detail as if she had never seen him before and would never see him again. She thought of the countless evenings they had spent together, walking hand in hand, riding in the car, talking, laughing, singing together with Elvis on the radio, then daring to kiss and touch and wonder what it would be like to make love, always afraid to take the step that might lead them into forever.

Forever used to seem so far away, but Kelly could see it now. Four years of college would be forever. Cameron was too young to go away forever. Yet, even while she stared at him and thought about how young and vibrant he was, she could see him old. An image of John F. Kennedy appeared to her and she realized how much Cameron looked like him. Cameron would make a handsome president, like Kennedy. She pictured herself beside him, in the White House, happy and in love. Now she was glad for all the language classes she had taken. Like Jacqueline Kennedy, she would be able to charm foreign dignitaries in their native tongues. And, like the beautiful blond Joan Kennedy, Kelly could play the piano masterfully. Would she be able to take her own antique Steinway to the White House, or would they not let her? Of course, Cameron would want her to have her own piano, and he would be the President, so they would let her.

She smiled. It would be a glorious time, another Camelot, and they would have beautiful children to fill the White House with laughter. But first, Cameron would be going to Washington alone -- to Georgetown for four years. She realized it would be impossible for her to go with him. She

remembered again the interminable weeks when he was away last summer. Hot tears formed in her eyes and she tried in vain to fight them back.

Relieved that Kelly hadn't laughed at his ambition, Cameron dared to take his eyes from the river and look at her. The sight of tears on her face made him uncomfortable and he pulled her close, kissing her hair and holding her.

When the crying subsided, Cameron was still holding her and kissing her hair.

Kelly pulled away enough to look into his eyes as she said plaintively, "I thought you'd be going to Ole Miss. You know I'm going there."

Cameron nodded.

"Will you write to me?" she asked, expecting a promise.

"No," Cameron shook his head. "No. I can't."

"What do you mean, you can't?"

"You're a distraction to me, Kelly. I have to concentrate on where I'm going. I'll have to study hard up there."

"Then I'll just write you and you won't have to write back."

Cameron shook his head again, "I'd rather you wouldn't."

Kelly studied his face and frowned, "That doesn't make any sense."

"I was afraid you wouldn't understand."

Not wanting ever to misunderstand him, she nodded and smiled, "It's okay. I understand. I'll wait until you're finished with college and..."

"I'm going to law school after college and then I've got to get established, and after that I..."

"Is it all planned then? Your whole life? Is it all planned and you can't even write to me?"

"Kelly, your plans and wants and needs are different from mine. You need somebody to take care of you, someone whose life will be more certain. Someone like Larry..."

"Larry? Larry? I don't even like Larry!"

"Larry's in love with you. And he could always take care of you."

"I don't need someone to take care of me!"

"Maybe not. But, wouldn't you like to be married and have a nice home? Children?"

"Only if..."

"If what?"

"Nothing."

Silence filled the air between them.

"I think you should marry him. Larry could make you happy, give you everything you need."

"If you think I should marry someone else, why do you keep seeing me like this, night after night, year after year?"

Cameron shook his head, "I guess I shouldn't. I'll take you home now." He reached for the ignition key.

"Not until you kiss me goodnight," she leaned toward him.

Cameron's lips brushed hers lightly, once, and again. He felt her body warm against his chest, her hands caressing the back of his neck. He remembered the feel of other girls, other nights, other towns, the pleasures they had taught him -- girls he had touched and made love to, hiding even from himself what he felt for this one girl. His lips found hers again, soft and giving. His fingers sought the softness beneath her clothes.

Somewhere far away, he heard the sound of a mellow saxophone, or imagined he heard it, and remembered his fantasy. The music, soft and distant, one hesitant note and then another, disconnected at first and without direction, tentative, longing, a theme introduced, a pause, the theme repeated and embellished, other instruments joining and echoing, the theme becoming more discernible, then certain and insistent, until its power filled the night with melody and counterpoint, finally rising to a crescendo that would play in his mind forever, over and over, unresolved, the last clear dominant chord eluding him, a melody without end...

Her body arched up against him. He felt her touching him, guiding him, wanting him, and he tried to pull away.

"Kelly, we can't," he whispered hoarsely.

"Why?... Why?... I want you, Cameron!"

"You don't know what you're saying. You'd be sorry tomorrow. You don't know!"

"I know what I want!" She held him tightly, moving her fingers with an urgency he had never felt before. "I've waited for you! I want you!"

"Kelly, if you don't stop, I'm going to come all over you! Kelly!... Oh, God, Kelly!... It's too late!"

As Cameron pressed himself harder against her, moaning softly and calling her name, Kelly felt warm fluid on her belly. She forced herself to lie very still, frustrated at not knowing what to do, and becoming strangely detached as the deliciously sweet smell of honeysuckle drifted through the car's open windows.

The five-fifteen freight train, clattering towards Vicksburg on the old iron bridge spanning the Mississippi, woke Cameron and Kelly from their cramped sleep on the red leather front seat.

"Will you be in trouble?" Cameron whispered sheepishly.

"Nothing happened," she replied flatly.

"I mean, for staying out all night."

She shook her head. "I said I'd spend the night at Christi's. And you?"

"It's okay, as long as I get the car back in time for Mom to go to work at six-thirty."

Kelly pictured Carolina Coulter in her stiff white nurse's uniform with her stiff black hair and painted-on eyebrows. She said a silent prayer for the patients who would encounter the formidable woman today.

As they talked and tried not to look at each other, Cameron and Kelly carefully put back on the clothes which had come off so easily not long before.

"I have to play the organ for six-o'clock Mass," Kelly reminded him.

"Oh, no," Cameron gulped as he started the engine. "I didn't realize you'd do that today."

"Always," she nodded. "Every Sunday. They're counting on me."

"I understand," Cameron assured her, suddenly feeling the weight of his own responsibilities.

As they drove to her house in silence, Kelly considered telling him the truth. Actually, she didn't have to play the organ this morning because nobody besides herself cared if she showed up or not. Week after week, year after year, the

early morning Mass crowd just wanted to be quiet and left alone.

"You can drop me off in the back by the garage," Kelly offered as they approached her neighborhood. "Just go down the alley."

Cameron smiled, "I remember the alley. Do you remember all the nights we parked there under the oak tree and..."

"I remember everything," Kelly interrupted him.

"How about the first time we kissed?"

"In the kitchen, by the sink, nearly three years ago, specifically, June 12, 1961."

"Nine thirty p.m.," Cameron added.

"Til eleven," Kelly laughed. "Just kidding. More like eleven seconds."

"I was scared."

"You got over it nicely."

"Maybe."

Kelly nodded. "Maybe."

Cameron stopped the car behind the garage.

"See you later, Pretty Girl."

"Sure. And congratulations on Georgetown. You'll do great," Kelly forced a smile. "I know you'll do great."

Kelly got out of the car quickly and closed the door quietly. She didn't watch as Cameron drove away, but headed straight for the garage and her chunky bicycle. This morning she was too tired to think how embarrassing it was to be a senior in high school, but only fifteen years old and too young to get a driver's license. Instead, she mechanically inspected the tires, seat and pedals of her bike, then pushed off down the alley with her ever-present book of *Bach's Preludes* bouncing in the metal basket.

The clock on the bank said five-fifty and Kelly speeded up her pace toward Holy Trinity. Turning onto its wide concrete drive, then forking onto the priests' asphalt parking area, barely braking, she grabbed the Preludes and jumped off the bike, letting it glide into the bushes behind the rectory. She took the stone steps two at a time up to the side entrance of the church.

Pulling open the massive carved oak door by its decorative brass handle, Kelly came under the spell of marble, stained glass and glowing candles. She dipped her finger in the holy water font, simultaneously genuflecting and making the sign of the cross, just as the altar boys were leaving the sanctuary after lighting the two candles signifying a Low Mass. She hurried to the back of the church to get the choir loft key from the hook inside the spare confessional. For a moment, she paused to consider going to confession, but there was a line and she was already late. She thought about being naked with Cameron and wondered exactly what kind of sin that was and how she should confess it.

An old lady stared at her and Kelly panicked, thinking maybe she had put her dress on backwards. Clutching the choir loft key, she fled from the shameful place and out into the vestibule. Her hand trembled as she unlocked the door to the stairwell. All the secrets of heaven and hell swirled around her as she raced up the two flights to the organ loft, barely touching the creaky banister that usually caused her panic. Quickly, she opened the organ bench, took out the key hidden under the Saint Gregory Hymnal, unlocked the organ and flipped the "on" switch. By the time the big Hammond had warmed up enough to begin the processional hymn, Father Sullivan was already at the altar and Kelly could feel him glaring at her for being late.

*"Kyrie eleison..."* he intoned. *Lord, have mercy.*

Now the sinner would have to wait until the Offertory to play her first hymn. Kneeling at the rail, looking down at the backs of people familiar, but unknown, she tried to imagine Cameron from the back. Instead, she pictured his blue eyes and the way he always looked at her, as if he were thirstily drinking cool water on a hot summer day, like the day they first met on the Vicksburg Country Club golf course almost five years ago.

Sanctuary bells signaling the consecration jolted Kelly back to the morning after the prom and she realized that, in her reverie, she had missed the Offertory hymn. Guilt compounded as she watched the altar boys flawlessly performing their sacred duties.



Back in the fourth grade, Kelly had helped train the altar boys, tutoring them in Latin that she had taught herself by studying it in her Missal and comparing it to the English on the facing page. Although girls were never allowed to be altar boys, Kelly had always wanted to be one of them, with their long black cassocks and white lace surplices, flowing around the priest with a grace they never found in the classroom or on the recess field, lighting candles, kneeling, rising, responding to the Latin prayers by rote, flowing across the sanctuary to perform the countless necessary rituals, carrying the small crystal cruets filled with water and wine, flowing along the communion rail holding the shiny gold paten under each chin as the priest placed a small round white cardboard host on each of the outthrust tongues.

Kelly wasn't sure if she should take Communion this morning after her unconfessed sin of being naked with Cameron all night. She thought about how much she wanted him and she knew that must be some kind of sin, but he didn't want her and soon he would be gone and she would never see him again, except maybe at high school reunions, and she thanked God that he had made her smart enough to skip two grades so that she could be in Cameron's class, but now all her past manipulations were useless because she couldn't afford to go to a college like Georgetown to be with Cameron because her daddy was dead, and she remembered the thud of dirt and rocks as they shoveled it down onto her daddy's casket and she thought about how Jesus, the very Son of God, died and rose from his grave to save her from all her sins, and then tears came to her eyes as she felt sorry for all of it, more sorry than she had ever felt in all her fifteen years of life, even sorrier than when she actually went to Confession, and she convinced herself that it was all right for her to go to Communion this morning, without going to Confession first, because she was really and truly sorry.

Thinking of Cameron, she descended the choir loft stairs, trying not to disturb the ancient wooden treads that creaked and groaned with the slightest touch, entering the sanctuary, flowing like an altar boy or Cameron's bride down the aisle to the Communion rail, hands together in Gothic spires pointing

to heaven, finally kneeling at the rail, waiting her turn, smelling the church smells, fearing the unknown, trembling as Father Sullivan poised the host above her eyes, trembling more as he waited and waited, why was he waiting, did he see all her sins, finally placing the host roughly on her tongue.

Kelly escaped from Father's stare by turning to swallow in private, but her mouth was too dry. Almost choking, she rushed back through the church, up the stairs, creaking and moaning, telling everyone exactly where she was and how long it would be before the hymn would begin. At last safe on the organ bench, she took a deep breath, steadied her hands on the two manuals, adjusted the volume pedals with her right foot, placed her left foot on the lowest E flat and lost herself in the glorious music, hearing Cameron harmonizing with her the beautiful words that no one was singing...

*"Panis angelicus,  
Fit panis hominum,  
Dat panis caelicus,  
Figuris terminum.*

*"O, res mirabilis!  
Manducat, dominum,  
Pauper, servus,  
Et humilis."*

### PART III

#### AFTER THE PROM

##### Chapter 11

April 4, 1968

"Are you sure you want to go through with this?" Larry asked for the dozenth time, as he put Kelly's two huge suitcases in the back of their station wagon.

"Yes. And don't make me miss the plane," Kelly snapped in reply. Already settled into the front seat, she adjusted the seat belt and pushed it down low to accommodate her enormously pregnant body.

Her tall, red-headed husband opened the driver-side door. "I'm just concerned about the baby, that's all," Larry responded, ignoring the hostility in her voice.

"I've only miscarried once and Laurie was born without any problems, so quit worrying. You'll get your quota of kids," Kelly finished sarcastically.

Larry started the car and drove out their expansive circle driveway without comment. Kelly thought wistfully about leaving eighteen-month-old Laurie with her mother and sister, but knew the child would get more attention there than with her own father. Although their parish priest kept assuring her that her twenty-two-year-old husband would become more responsible with age and more children, Kelly had her doubts. Larry seemed to be just like his father and, like him, was even now having another affair. Kelly resented it, not because of love or jealousy, but simply because she felt so fat and unattractive, carrying a hundred and seventy pregnant pounds on her small five-nine frame.

The station wagon headed out of Vicksburg, toward Jackson, with the late afternoon sun glinting on the rear window. Larry reached for the radio knob.

"Don't turn that thing on," Kelly ordered. "I'm so sick of news and politics I could throw up."

"With Lyndon Johnson out of the race now, it's going to be an interesting election," Larry countered. "I just like to keep up."

"Do it when I'm gone," Kelly replied. "You'll have plenty of time to keep up with everything." Especially that whore you're screwing, she thought, but, as usual, she didn't mention it. She wondered briefly if he even knew that she knew.

Larry shrugged his shoulders and drove into the twilight without comment. A quiet hour later, he checked Kelly's bags with the American skycap at the Jackson Airport and handed her the plane ticket.

"Want me to wait until the plane takes off?" Larry asked dutifully.

"Yes," Kelly smiled, "of course. Park the car and I'll meet you at the gate." She chuckled to herself, knowing that this would make him late for dinner at his girlfriend's house.

Finding the ladies' bathroom to relieve herself, Kelly tried to avoid looking in a mirror, but the full-length one caught her. She stared at the yards of pink and white checked gingham that flowed from her crisp white collar into what she could only describe as a circus tent. She turned sideways and felt even bigger. Facing the mirror again, she acknowledged her puffy cheeks and chin, even her puffy eyes, taking comfort only in the fact that her long blond hair was as thick and lustrous as when she was young. Almost immediately, Kelly realized that she was still relatively young. She would only be twenty next month when her second baby would be born. Tears came to her eyes as she contemplated the futility of her life with Larry and the idiocy of having gotten pregnant and marrying him in the first place. As usual, she allowed herself to feel stupid for getting trapped, but she defensively and subconsciously buried again the intense rage that tried to rise up in her every time she thought of the horrible night that started it all. Then, remembering precious Laurie, she swallowed her anger, wiped the moisture from her face, and vowed once again to make the best of it.

Kelly found Larry near the gate and they waited in silence for the flight that would take her to the National Conference of Catholic Women's annual meeting.

"By the way..." Larry began.

"What?" Kelly snapped at him, then smilingly added, "dear."

"I took the liberty of calling your old friend Cameron Coulter and asking him to pick you up at the airport in Washington. I figured you'd probably call him sooner or later anyway, since you'll be there three days."

Kelly's heart grabbed her throat and she hoped that her expression did not betray what she felt. For once, she had no intention of calling Cameron. She was entirely too fat to see him. How could Larry dare to call him? How could he be so cruel?

"How thoughtful of you," she smiled.

"Well, I didn't want you riding in a cab with some uppity Yankee nigger."

"Always the southern gentleman, aren't you?"

Kelly could not erase the memory of Larry's smug smile as she woke up for the plane's descent into the twinkling lights of the capitol city. She pulled out her mirror and, in the dimly lighted first-class cabin, she didn't look nearly so terrible as she had in the airport bathroom.

"You look lovely," the flight attendant patted her on the shoulder. "Pregnancy becomes you."

Kelly smiled, grateful for a kind word.

"Thank you," she acknowledged, feeling hot tears forming.

The same flight attendant opened the plane's exit door and fussed over Kelly who paused before descending the steep metal stairs in the darkness.

"Do be careful, honey," she cautioned. "Oh, look. I'll bet that's your handsome husband waiting," she pointed.

Kelly blushed at the sight of Cameron Coulter. Timidly, she waved at him and cautiously began her descent.

"It's so nice to see people in love," the flight attendant gushed. "Have a wonderful evening, honey. And, good luck with that baby!"

The year that had passed since she last saw Cameron melted into the night air as he embraced her and buried his face in her hair.

"Kelly, Kelly," he whispered. "My beautiful Kelly."

Cameron held her close until the life she was carrying began to kick outrageously.

"So, we have company," Cameron laughed. "I didn't know."

"You mean Larry didn't tell you to watch for the fat lady?" Kelly asked in disbelief.

Cameron shook his head, then suddenly turned serious. "I'm glad he called, though. I guess you've heard the news."

Kelly gave him a questioning frown.

"Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was just assassinated."

"When? How?"

"Earlier this evening. He was shot. In Memphis. I'm afraid that all hell is going to break loose around here."

"Here?" Kelly echoed in wonder.

Cameron nodded and took her hand.

"Come on. Let's get your bags and get you to the hotel."

A few miles from the airport, Kelly was surprised to see military troop trucks on the streets.

"Army," Cameron nodded grimly. "They've called in the National Guard, too."

Another mile down the road, Kelly heard a crash and saw a glass storefront shatter. Four black teenagers threw something inside and the building burst into flames.

"Oh, my God, Cameron! Look!"

Another group of teenagers came from the alley and began throwing bricks into adjoining storefronts. In the time it took for the stoplight to change, dozens of other teens had responded to the sounds of shattering glass. Cameron downshifted and sped away from the intersection. Kelly turned around just as a brick crashed through their rear window, disintegrating it into a thousand pieces, then thudding against the back of her seat.

"My God, Cameron, they've hit the car!"

"Get down!" he shouted. "Get down on the floor!"

Kelly tried to move but her body wouldn't cooperate in the small space.

"Just get us out of here," she pleaded, and flinched as she heard shouts and gunshots behind them.

They sped silently through the streets and soon came upon another scene of burning buildings, crashing glass, and belligerent teenagers. Cameron turned down an alley to avoid a group standing defiantly in the middle of the street. Kelly was nauseous from the plane flight and the erratic driving. Smoke and sirens filled the air. The smell of a restaurant's garbage assaulted her through the broken back window.

"Cameron, I'm going to be sick," Kelly gasped.

"I'm not stopping here! Throw up on the floor!" Cameron ordered as the sound of gunshots and sirens came closer in the dark, unfamiliar surroundings.

The car careened around a corner, then another. Bracing herself against the dashboard, Kelly gagged and leaned forward, but nothing came out of her mouth. Her heart pounded. The child within her was kicking her painfully. Ten minutes later, Cameron slowed the car and turned sedately into the circle drive of the Mayflower Hotel.

"Good evening, Madame, and welcome," the uniformed attendant smiled, opening her door. Kelly looked over at Cameron.

"Friendly town," she quipped.

As the bellhop took her bags, Kelly said firmly to Cameron, "Let the valet park the car, Sweetheart, and let's not worry about that broken glass until tomorrow. I need you to stay with me right now."

Kelly headed for the massive hotel doors, leaving Cameron little choice but to follow her.

"Llewellyn," Kelly announced to the reservation clerk behind the marble counter.

"Ah, yes. Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence L. Llewellyn, from Vicksburg. Welcome to the Mayflower."

Cameron didn't say a word until they were safely locked behind the door of a lovely suite.

"Mister and Missus?" he asked. "How did you manage that?"

"Larry insists. He doesn't mind paying for two persons because he doesn't want anyone to think I'm traveling alone. That might make me look available."

"And are you available?" Cameron asked, encircling her in his arms.

"For you? Always."

The telephone rang in two short bursts, causing Kelly to jump.

"Better answer that. It's probably Larry," Cameron advised.

"Amazing that he could tear himself away from his girlfriend long enough to call. Hello.... Yeah, I'm fine.... Uh-huh, I heard.... No.... No problems around here. Perfectly safe.... Don't believe everything you hear on the news.... I'm tired. I'll call you tomorrow.... Oh, Cameron's fine.... No. He had to go study. I'll order room service.... Okay, bye."

Cameron questioned Kelly with his eyes. She shrugged her shoulders.

"No point in telling him you're here. Besides, I'm not worried about being in a hotel room with you."

"Remember when you'd come see me at the Vicksburg Inn?" Cameron asked.

"I remember everything," Kelly smiled, recalling the hours that she and Cameron had spent whispering in the dark at the Vicksburg Inn, hardly daring to touch or kiss for fear that little Warren would wake up and see them in the small room. It was ironic how much time they had spent together in hotel rooms without ever making love.

"Oh, yes, Cameron, I remember it well, but I always thought it was a little strange."

"What do you mean?" he asked defensively.

"You told me that your folks liked to go there just to get away for the night, but then they took you and little Warren with them, which never seemed like a get-away to me. And, besides that, I never actually saw your parents there. It was just you and your little brother."

Cameron thought about telling her the truth. Sometimes his alcoholic stepfather would go on an abusive rampage and his mother would seek refuge for herself and her sons at the



Vicksburg Inn. If the torment coincided with a night she had to work, the boys would stay there alone. Cameron wondered how Kelly might react to such a story. Then he decided, as he always had, to keep the family secret.

"You must be exhausted," Cameron changed the subject.

Kelly nodded. "And hungry," she added, patting her tummy. "Always hungry."

"Then, why don't you go take a nice relaxing bath and I'll order room service," he suggested. Cameron turned on the television as soon as Kelly left the room and became so absorbed in the news that he forgot to order.

"I don't smell anything juicy yet," Kelly scolded, emerging from the steamy bathroom a half hour later, wearing a flowing pink gown.

"Oh, I forgot!" Cameron exclaimed. "Here," he thrust the menu at her, "why don't you order what you want?"

Kelly took the menu and stared at Cameron, but he was lost in the news about Martin Luther King and the rioting which was erupting like a wave across the country. When the food finally arrived, Kelly insisted that Cameron turn off the television.

"I don't like gunfire while I'm eating," she explained.

Cameron laughed and turned his attention to the steak, baked potato, Caesar salad and whole wheat rolls, all of which he ate voraciously.

"You know, Kelly, there are too many people in this country without work and without hope."

*Like me,* Kelly thought.

"They're just existing."

*I certainly understand that,* she told herself, nodding sadly.

"Eventually, if they're not brought into the mainstream of society, they will bring down our major cities. They will sap the resources and the strength and the potential greatness of our whole country."

"You sound like you're running for office," Kelly commented wryly. "Maybe you've been hanging around the Senator too much. Tell me more about him."

"Albright? Hell of a guy. One of the greatest minds ever to come out of Mississippi. I'm damned lucky to be working for him."

"What exactly do you do?"

"More than I ever expected. And, remember, when I first came to Georgetown, he took me under his wing, introduced me to everybody, took me to lunch, and even let me sit in on private meetings among the Senators."

"A real mentor, then?"

"Absolutely the best. I owe everything to him. You realize how powerful he is, don't you? And it's because of him that I'm going to go to Oxford on a Rhodes Scholarship."

Kelly's heart sank.

"Oxford? In England? For how long?"

"Two or three years. Then to law school. What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I thought I had dealt with this already," she said, remembering her disappointment when he left for college. "I miss you so much and being separated by an ocean will make it seem worse."

"We'll manage to see each other," he assured her. "We always do."

Kelly nodded, but didn't seem convinced.

"But, what about the war?" she frowned. "Everybody is getting drafted. What will you do about the draft?"

"Don't worry. I'll be okay. I've got some ideas and I've talked to the Senator about it, too. This Viet Nam issue is tough, though. The Senator thinks we're wrong to be there. I agree with him, but, anti-war sentiment isn't popular in Mississippi. Good ole Senator Albright doesn't care. He says to go with what's right, even if it's not popular. He's always so sure that he knows what's right. I don't know how he does that."

"He knows who he is and what he believes," Kelly offered, remembering her daddy and her first meeting with Senator Albright nearly ten years earlier. "A person like that doesn't sway in the wind."

"I guess so, but it may be dangerous for him. What good is it to be right if you're voted out of office?"

Kelly listened and observed Cameron's passionate intensity as he carried on about politics. When he paused, she simply nodded in acknowledgment of his monologue. Finally, she added quietly, "Well, Nixon will be elected and the war will go on a while longer, but there's nothing we can do about it tonight. Why don't you take a shower and then let's get some sleep?"

"I'm not sleepy and why do you think Nixon will win?"

"Well, I am sleepy, and there are some things I just know. One is that I want you to sing me to sleep," Kelly smiled, remembering the nights he sang Elvis tunes to her.

"You want me to sleep here?" Cameron asked, finally understanding.

Kelly nodded. "It's safe. And, no matter what you do, I won't get pregnant."

Cameron realized that he had been avoiding this issue all evening. Here was Kelly, alone with him and, though pregnant, as willing and available, and amazingly as desirable, as she had always been. Why had he always stopped short of making love to her? He still could not face his answer.

"I should go," Cameron whispered.

"Of course, you should," Kelly agreed.

"This isn't right," he added.

"Of course, it's not."

They stared at each other in awkward silence.

"But, as you said," Kelly quoted, "'What good is it to be right if you're voted out of office?'"

"Are you always going to feed my words back to me?" Cameron grinned.

"Somebody should. If you knew you'd have to eat all of them, maybe you'd regulate the flow."

Cameron laughed aloud, then sighed.

"Go take a shower," Kelly repeated her earlier suggestion.

Cameron nodded and obeyed, emerging in a few minutes from the bathroom wrapped in a thick hotel robe.

"I don't have anything to wear to bed," he explained unnecessarily.

"I'm sure you at least have a condom stashed in your wallet somewhere."

Cameron shook his head. "I never use condoms. I hate them."

Kelly frowned and started to scold him for ignoring all the dangers of herpes and God-only-knows-what other diseases, but decided against it. Instead, she turned back the bed covers and motioned for him to get in.

"We've been naked together enough times before," she reminded him.

"Oh, God! I remember. And you were so beautiful!"

"Things have changed, Cameron," Kelly said quietly, acutely aware of her ever-growing body.

Cameron leaned over and kissed her gently on the mouth.

"Your lips are the same, if not more delicious," he whispered.

Then Cameron buried his face in her hair, kissing her ear, her throat, and softly calling her name.

Kelly reached over to turn off the lamp, but Cameron stopped her. Taking her hand, he began kissing her fingers and licking her palm.

"Please leave the light on. I want to see you." Cameron kissed her again and, with his left hand, he began undoing the dainty pearl buttons on the front of her gown. "You are so beautiful," he murmured, kissing her throat and slowly moving downward.

Kelly sighed, remembering all the nights she had been with Cameron, his touch, his kisses, and his soft words. She frowned, wondering for the thousandth time why he had never actually made love to her, why he always held back.

"Cameron," Kelly took his face in her hands and spoke firmly, resolved not to have another night of frustration with him, "if you are not going to make love to me, completely, I want you to stop. Now."

"Oh, Kelly," he gazed into her pale green eyes, "I promise I will make love to you. Completely. Tonight. And I will never stop."

Once again, Cameron began to unbutton the tiny pearls, kissing her gently and whispering her name. Kelly responded

with a smile and reached to loosen the sash on his luxurious robe, separating the fabric gently with her hands, then pulling his body close.

Chapter 12  
July 25, 1972

Karen Carter frowned as she hung up the heavy black phone on her kitchen counter. The slim, attractive brunette, chairwoman of the Warren County Democratic Party, was excited to be involved in the presidential campaign, but something about this impromptu fund-raiser was bothering her. She reviewed her notes from her just-completed conversation with the Mississippi State Campaign Coordinator for George McGovern and saw nothing amiss in the plans to raise some money for the Presidential candidate. She shrugged her shoulders and called her husband at work.

"Gardener Law Firm, may I help you?" came the cheerful, yet professional, voice.

"John Carter, please," she requested. "This is Karen."

As she waited, Karen looked at the big kitchen clock and mentally calculated what she needed to do before the guests would arrive at seven. The Carter house was, as usual, relatively straightened and clean. All three children were out playing, probably over at Kelly's in the big, cool billiard room on such a hot day. She would have them bathe and go to bed a little earlier than usual tonight. This afternoon, she would borrow silver serving pieces from Kelly and set out food which she could pick up at Cornell's.

Her conversation with Johnny was brief, but loving, as always. Though married for ten years, Karen and Johnny were still on their honeymoon. He promised to get a good turn-out from the firm and to pick up the wine on his way home. Karen was satisfied. Then she made the call that was troubling her.

"Kelly, we're going to have a little fund-raiser at the house tonight. Senator McGovern and his wife will stop by for a few minutes. You and Larry should come."

"You know Larry doesn't like McGovern's politics," Kelly told her best friend for the umpteenth time. "He won't want to get cornered at a fund-raiser, even for you and Johnny. We'd better pass. Do you need to borrow the usual silver?"

"Sure."

"I'll bring it over," Kelly volunteered, "but, don't ask me to come tonight."

Karen hesitated a moment. "I promised I'd get you here. Your old friend Cameron Coulter just called and insisted that you be here. He's the state coordinator for McGovern. I've got to deliver."

At the mention of Cameron's name, Kelly's heart skipped a beat. She hadn't seen Cameron in almost a year and hadn't talked to him since Christmas

Kelly tried to be nonchalant, asking, "What did he say?"

Karen frowned a moment before answering. There was something strange in the way Kelly and Cameron communicated through her that she couldn't put her finger on. Karen and Johnny were so happy together that she had never thought to analyze the relationship between Kelly and Larry. For her part, Kelly saw no point in discussing her feelings for Cameron with Karen. Though they were best friends, Kelly knew that Karen would neither understand nor approve of her relationship with Cameron.

"He said," Karen began, "that he really wanted to see you here and that he was counting on me. That's all. Cameron is very persuasive. I suggested that he should call you himself, but he said he was too busy."

"I see," Kelly replied flatly. "Well, I'll try to be there."

Kelly spent the rest of the day thinking about Cameron and catching up on the campaign news. She really didn't much like McGovern, but, obviously, this was important to Cameron, so she tried. It was easy to get Larry to decline the invitation and Kelly walked through the adjoining backyards to Karen and Johnny's house alone at six-thirty.

"I'm here!" Kelly called out, walking through the Carter's patio door without knocking. "What can I do?" she hollered to no one in sight.

Johnny barely gave her a glance as he walked down the hall to the kitchen.

"Get those kids out of the tub so I can take a shower," he answered, heading to the kitchen for a beer. "Karen probably needs a new hairdo, too."

For the thousandth time, Kelly tried to figure out what Johnny was really thinking. She didn't know if he liked her or if he just tolerated her as Karen's best friend. Johnny was like a frog on a lily pad, eyes half closed, soaking up the sun, but you could be sure that he never missed a thing. No stray fly would be safe in the area. Kelly wondered if he realized what was going on in her relationship with Larry and what he might know about the Llewellyns themselves. She figured it was more than he pretended to know. She wondered if he would ever discuss it with Karen, which brought her back to his comment about Karen's hairdo. She considered Karen's hair for a moment, but the short, dark coif had looked fine earlier in the day. Kelly decided to pass on that assignment.

"I'll just get my godchild," Kelly replied.

The doorbell rang as Johnny headed back down the hall.

"Answer that first," he called to Kelly over his shoulder. "I'll tell Karen you're here."

Kelly opened the kitchen door and was stunned to see Cameron. He looked lean and tanned, better than she had ever seen him. Her knees buckled and her voice caught in her throat.

"Come in," she finally managed to smile at him. "I never expected you to be early. I'll tell them you're here."

"Don't!" Cameron whispered urgently, taking her in his arms. "I came early to see you. I've missed you so much!"

He held her tightly and started to kiss her passionately. A second later, Johnny walked into the kitchen.

"Excuse me," Johnny said nonchalantly, reaching around them to the ancient refrigerator's chrome handle, "Karen wants a beer."

Johnny pulled a cold bottle from the top shelf and, as an after-thought, held out his right hand. "I guess you're Cameron Coulter," he reached toward the visitor, who quickly disentangled himself from Kelly to shake hands. "Johnny Carter. I understand that you and Kelly are old friends. Don't let me interrupt," he nodded, leaving the room with Karen's beer.

Cameron frowned for a moment, then asked softly, "I guess he knows about us?"



“Apparently he knows something now,” Kelly shrugged. “I never have any idea what Johnny knows, or what he thinks, except that he’s still crazy in love with Karen. And he’s straight as an arrow,” she added, suddenly fearful that he would talk to Karen about what he just saw. Her face flushed as she feared the rejection that could come from that disclosure. “After that, I’m clueless.”

“I doubt that you’re ‘clueless,’ my dear, but you definitely are gorgeous,” Cameron smiled. “How are you, Pretty Girl? I want to know everything. Don’t leave tonight until we have a chance to talk.”

Kelly nodded as the doorbell rang. Guests began pouring in early, being very comfortable with the Carter’s casual, but gracious, hospitality. The party lasted for hours, though Senator McGovern and his wife were there less than thirty minutes. Karen seemed pleased with the evening and Cameron was suitably grateful.

Cameron pulled Karen aside in the kitchen and offered, “Let me clean up. Why don’t you and Johnny join the party animals at the club for awhile? I’ll bet Kelly would stay to baby-sit.”

“How nice of you!” Karen smiled into Cameron’s sincere eyes. “That would be fun. Kelly, do you mind if we leave for awhile?” she asked her friend.

“I’m tired,” Kelly demurred for a moment, “but I guess I could just go sack out in the guest room. Sure. I’ll call Larry and tell him I’m staying over. You guys have a good time.”

As Karen and Johnny’s car backed out of the driveway and Cameron loaded the dishwasher, Kelly called Larry, who mumbled that he was already in bed and didn’t care where she slept. She hung up, and then checked on the three sleeping Carter children.

“Everyone is out like a light,” Kelly reported to Cameron as she joined him in the kitchen. “Let me help you with those plates.”

Kelly picked up a handful of dishes and leaned over to put them in the bottom rack. Cameron encircled her from behind as she stood up to start the dishwasher.

“Oh, Kelly,” he sighed deeply. “I missed you so much!”

"It was hard to tell," she said, starting the machine, then turning to face him. "The last thing I got was your Easter card."

"You can't imagine how busy I've been, with law school and then the campaign," he explained.

Kelly nodded, "I understand. 'Out of sight, out of mind.'"

"Don't say that!" Cameron frowned. "Don't ever say that! You're part of me. Like breathing, or my heart beating. You're always with me. Oh, Kelly, you're always with me." He took her in his arms and held her close and Kelly willed to believe him. She let him kiss her and she longed to lie in his arms. Cameron reached for the switch to turn out the kitchen light, took her hand, and led her from the room.

"Let's go outside a minute," he suggested. "The moon should be beautiful."

The three-quarter moon was startlingly close in the hot, still, night air. Kelly could feel the humidity pressing against her skin and filling her hair. The closeness of Cameron as they walked across the expansive back yard made it hard for Kelly to breathe. She felt their hands getting sweaty as they strolled toward the small grove of trees where her children and Karen's would take afternoon refuge from the sweltering Mississippi sun.

Kelly tripped over a *chaise-lounge* cushion that the children had left near their "fort." Cameron used her stumble as an excuse to grab her, though she would not have fallen. He sat on the cushion, pulling Kelly down beside him, and began to kiss her all over. Then, he wrapped his arms around her and lay back, pulling her on top of him.

"Kelly, Kelly, my Pretty Girl," he whispered. "Tell me everything."

Kelly wondered what she could possibly say that would be interesting to Cameron after his years at Georgetown in Washington, at Oxford in London, traveling around Europe and Russia on vacations, and then going to law school at Yale, where he was undoubtedly surrounded by fascinating, intelligent people. Kelly was stuck in Vicksburg with three children, and a husband whose personal and business affairs were becoming more intolerable by the day. She sometimes

felt like she was going to go crazy if she didn't get away. She couldn't tell him that. She couldn't expect him to do anything about it. She didn't think he really even wanted to know.

Kelly turned it back on him. "You tell me first," she whispered. "Mine will make a better bed-time story."

Cameron laughed. Kelly loved to hear him laugh. She didn't know why he laughed so much around her. She didn't think of herself as all that funny. Her life wasn't funny at all.

"Tell me," she repeated, rolling off him, and Cameron began to talk. They lay back on the cushion side by side and stared at the mid-summer moon through the trees. Cameron started by telling her about the campaign and how Senator Albright had connected him with Presidential candidate George McGovern. Cameron held them both in high esteem and Kelly listened to his impassioned description of the older men and their principles.

"I'm glad that Senator Albright is still interested in you," Kelly said during a pause in his monologue, "but, it's too bad for you," she added artlessly, "that McGovern can't win."

"How can you say that? McGovern's our only hope."

"Cameron, when are you going to learn that things won't happen just because you want them to? You've got to learn to face things as they are."

"But, I really believe in McGovern's ideas. All of us do," Cameron insisted.

"Of course, you do," Kelly replied softly, "or you wouldn't be working for him, but, most people don't."

Cameron wanted to argue the point.

"If I had wanted an argument tonight," Kelly insisted, "I could have gone home. Can we talk about something else? Tell me about you, not McGovern."

"Here's what you need to know about me," Cameron responded. "I miss you." He took her in his arms and Kelly lost herself in his kisses. Then, he rolled over on top of her and Kelly felt smothered in the hot night air, her hair matted against her neck. She pushed him away.

"I'm too hot," she panted.

Cameron sat up and took off his shirt, then his pants. "Take off your dress," he whispered, rising to his feet and

reaching for her hand. Kelly let him help her to her feet. She slipped off her dress, and felt the slightest breeze caress the sweat on her skin. She looked at Cameron's body in the moonlight, standing in front of him, close, but not touching. She could feel the heat between them. Cameron stared into her eyes, still not touching. Neither of them moved. They gazed at each other in the flickering shadows and let the humid southern air envelope them with desire.

Finally, Cameron whispered, "I want the moon, Kelly. I want the moon and I want you."

"I would give you the moon, Cameron," she answered honestly, reaching toward the star-filled sky.

Cameron encircled her with his arms and pulled her close. Under the pines, in the flickering shadows of the moonlight, they made love, their bodies bound to the ground, but their spirits rising above the trees.

"Oh, Pretty Girl, my Pretty Girl," Cameron whispered as he looked up at the moon which had been in his grasp. "I thought this part of my life was over."

Kelly frowned, "What do you mean? Over? Do you not want to see me again?"

"Feeling like this," Cameron responded. "I thought I would never feel like this again."

"Why?"

"I thought I had outgrown it," Cameron confessed, remembering his lovemaking of the past several months, but not wanting to tell her that he had moved in with Mallory. "I thought I would never feel like this again. I thought it was over. Oh, God! Kelly, will I always feel like this with you?"

Kelly was puzzled. She waited for him to make sense, but he didn't. Finally, somewhat frustrated with his cryptic comments, she turned and walked naked across the yard, thankful that she lived in a quiet neighborhood without street lights where all the old folks went to bed after the ten o'clock news. She picked up the garden hose by its nozzle, turned it on to a trickle and dragged it back to Cameron under the trees. They stretched out on the chaise-lounge cushion and let the warm water flow slowly and gently over them.

"Ooh, this feels good," Cameron moaned softly. "We should have started with this."

"Don't even think about starting over!" Kelly warned, and Cameron laughed in response.

"Talk to me," she snuggled up against him, the water making their body heat tolerable. "Tell me everything you're feeling and what it is you're worried about."

"What makes you think I'm worried about anything?" Cameron asked defensively.

"If I don't know you, who does? I can tell. Talk to me. Just spill it," Kelly insisted bluntly.

To her surprise, Cameron began to talk about his feelings and not about politics. He never mentioned McGovern, or even Senator Albright. He told her all the secrets that he had held in for years, most of them the sort that everybody has and thinks they're alone in hiding. Then he paused and considered a moment before asking Kelly to swear she would never reveal what he was going to say next. He sounded so serious and so fearful that Kelly was afraid to listen, but he seemed to want to talk and so she promised she would never, ever, in a million years, tell anyone.

Cameron hesitated often, and his voice broke, but he managed to say everything as Kelly listened in stunned amazement. Suddenly, she felt a chill in the hot night air.

"My God, Cameron!" she exclaimed softly. "Why did you tell me all this? You could never be elected to anything if people knew."

"You promised you wouldn't tell," Cameron said simply, placing his political future in her hands. "No one else knows."

"Then, why are you telling me?" Kelly cried. "Why, Cameron, why would you do this to me?" Tears formed as she felt the burden shift from his shoulder to hers. "What did I ever do to deserve this?"

Cameron gently wiped the tears from her eyes and whispered, "I had to tell someone. I can trust you, Kelly. I know I can always trust you." He pulled her close and felt her trembling. "Please forgive me," he pleaded. "I need you."

Kelly nodded and looked up at the moon. "I'm glad you need me," she replied quietly. "It's nice to be needed."

After Cameron tucked her into the Carter's guest bed and left to join the party at the club, Kelly stared out the huge window, watching the magnificent moon slowly trace its path across the star-filled southern sky. The beginning of a melody drifted through her mind and Kelly scribbled a few lines on the bedside notepad:

*"The bright yellow moon slowly rises,  
The lights of the town grow dim,  
And the moon pales to white, gliding high through the night,  
With the clouds chasing after him;  
But, the clouds lose the race, and watch the moon take his place  
as King of the Night-Time Sky,  
All the stars gather round, and as I watch from the ground,  
The moon passes slowly by..."*

The young songwriter caught a glimpse of her own rooftop through the trees and sighed at the thought of going home in the morning. Kelly McCain was only a trophy to Larry Llewellyn and she knew it. Cameron Coulter, on the other hand, needed her. Though she felt a little guilty and silently confessed her recent sin of adultery with Cameron, Kelly followed her night prayers with a promise to herself and to the moon that she would always be available for Cameron whenever he needed her.

Chapter 13  
August 17, 1972

"Mommy! Mommy! Lily got soap in my eyes! Help! Mommy!"

"Shhh, Laurie, I'm right here. You don't have to scream," Kelly consoled her oldest daughter. "I told you that when you're six years old, you're too big to bathe with your little sisters. Now, see what happened."

"No!" Laurie yelled at the top of her lungs. "No! I can't see anything! Lily got soap in my eyes!"

Leaning over the tub and balancing two-year-old Leesa with her left hand, Kelly grabbed a clean washcloth and gently began wiping Laurie's face. The six-year-old kept up her screaming, which Kelly knew from hard experience was only for dramatic effect. The soap was actually baby shampoo and didn't sting at all.

"There, sweetie, it's all clean. You can open your eyes now," Kelly cooed.

Laurie maintained her squint and screamed again, "Lily got soap in my eyes!"

"Yes, honey, but it's all gone now," Kelly soothed her. "Open your eyes."

"Make Lily get out of the tub!" Laurie demanded, still in her self-imposed blindness. "It's not fair! Make her get out of the tub! She got soap in my eyes!"

Kelly looked over at the perpetrator of the crime, knowing in advance that her four-year-old daughter would be sitting quietly, sucking two fingers on her left hand and twirling a strand of her beautiful auburn hair with her right index finger.

"What do you think, Lily? Are you ready to get out of the tub?" Kelly asked.

Lily just stared at her with huge blue eyes and looked so innocent that her mother almost laughed.

"I'm ready for a story," four-year-old Lily answered clearly, without removing the fingers from her mouth or slowing down the hair-twirling.

When the two-year-old Leesa heard the word "story," she resumed flailing her arms wildly and splashing water all over

Kelly. It had been enough trouble keeping Leesa from diving headfirst into the bubbles while she dealt with Laurie's eyes. Now the slippery child was about to get away from her.

"Story! Story!" the little blond Leesa echoed. "Story! Story!"

"How about that, Laurie? Are you ready for a story, too?" Kelly gently coaxed her toward a settlement.

"Lily shouldn't get a story. She got soap in my eyes!" Laurie screamed one more time.

"What if Lily says she's sorry for getting soap in your eyes?" Kelly suggested.

Laurie finally opened her big green eyes and looked at Lily. "Are you sorry?"

Lily's expression didn't change as she continued to suck her fingers and twirl her hair, staring straight into the eyes of her angry older sister.

"Well, are you sorry?" Laurie asked again, a bit louder this time.

Still sucking her fingers and twirling her hair, Lily slowly shook her head repeatedly from side to side, setting off another tirade from Laurie, "Lily got soap in my eyes! Lily got soap in my eyes and she's not even sorry!"

"Okay, little girls," Kelly said firmly, "it's time for everybody to get out of the tub, dry yourselves and let's see who is the 'hostess with the mostest' for tonight."

Although each girl had her own bedroom, decorated in her favorite colors, every night they insisted on sleeping together in somebody's big bed. Tonight Leesa would be judged to have the cleanest room and, thus the "hostess" for her sisters. Thirty minutes after the bath, they were all dry and snuggled in together. All feuds were forgotten as darkness approached.

Kelly found Larry on the phone in the billiard room. He put his caller on hold to peek in and say good-night to his daughters. Kelly turned off the lamps, leaving on a small night-light, and sat on the bed with the girls. First, they said their prayers, with varying degrees of comprehension, followed by two stories. Then, Kelly picked up her guitar and began singing softly. After three of their favorites, Leesa was sound asleep.



Lily whispered, "Please sing your 'Daddy's Song.'"

"Okay, Sweetie," Kelly whispered back, "but you must promise to be asleep by the end of it." She continued strumming the guitar quietly as she spoke, then hummed.

"I will, Mommy," Lily promised, with two fingers in her mouth.

"Me, too," Laurie volunteered, in her only quiet voice of the day.

"All right, then. Shhh. I love you.

*Hmmm, hmmm, hmmm, hmmm.*

*When I was a little girl, and Mississippi was all my world,  
I loved to ride with Daddy in the car;  
'Specially in the evening, in the twilight make-believing,  
When we would sometimes wish upon a star;  
"But the best part was his singing, see, he always sang the kind  
of songs My Philadelphia Momma didn't know,  
Songs 'bout Crawdad Holes and Fishin' Poles and Casey Jones  
and a Yellow Rose, and Chariots A-Swingin' Sweet and Low.*

*"Now, Daddy, just look who's singin' country,  
I hope that you can hear me where you are;  
When those choirs of angels take a break from singin'  
Listen for me here in Vicksburg, singin' to my kids 'n'  
pickin' my guitar.*

*"Well, the Halls of Montezuma and the Shores of Tripoli  
Were places real to me as the house that we called home;  
And my Daddy's darlin' Clementine was a girl before my  
Momma's time,  
She lived out 'Where the Deer and Antelope Roam;'  
And my Daddy sang about Amazing Grace and I remember well  
the place... that Casey went -- it was the 'Promised Land,'  
But, then, when my Daddy joined him there,  
I didn't think that it was fair,  
Guess I was just too young to understand.*

*"Now, Daddy, just look who's singin' country,  
I hope that you can hear me where you are;*

*When those choirs of angels take a break from singin'  
Listen for me here in Vicksburg, singin' to my kids 'n' pickin  
my guitar. Hmmm, hmmm, hmmm, hmmm, hmmm, hmmm."*

Kelly resisted the temptation to kiss each sleeping child at the end of the music because she had learned the hard way that it would wake up one of them for sure. She tip-toed out with her guitar and went to the music room to work on the lyrics of a new song she had started earlier in the day. Larry was still in the billiard room on the telephone, but stuck his head in the room after a few minutes to say that he was going to the office to check on something.

"Just like PapaLew," she said sarcastically.

"And what is that supposed to mean?"

"You know exactly what it means because you know exactly what you are going to do at this hour of the night. You may be worse, though. I don't think that your father usually leaves home after dark. This must be something special. Maybe you'd like to tell me about it," Kelly suggested with feigned sweetness.

Larry glared at her, but asked calmly, "Why do you bother me about business every time I try to leave the house?"

"And why do you bother trying to keep up the charade of this marriage?" Kelly asked quietly.

"Are you calling our marriage a charade?" Larry asked incredulously.

"It's more of a charade than a marriage and it always has been. Frankly, I'm getting sick of it," Kelly finished, surprising herself as much as Larry. She had been wanting to get it out in the open, but didn't expect to hear those words come out of her own mouth tonight.

"Sick of it, are you? Fine. We'll see about 'sick.'"

Larry turned and abruptly left the room without another word. Kelly heard his car start and pull out of the driveway. She was tempted to use this as an opportunity to call Cameron, but, what would she say? To be honest, she would have wanted to leave Larry even if she had never known Cameron. It would be best to deal with this alone.

Kelly strummed a chord on the guitar and tried a new phrase. She picked up her pencil and filled in the notes and words on the composition paper. She liked the sound of it and the rest of the song came quickly. She was so engrossed in the music that she didn't hear two cars turn into the driveway and the den door open. The sudden sound of subdued voices in the kitchen terrified her. She grabbed the thirty-eight caliber pistol from the top of the music cabinet and ran toward the sleeping children.

"Oh, no, you won't," Larry yelled at her and grabbed her arm as she fled past the kitchen down the hallway to the bedrooms.

"My God!" Kelly gasped. "You scared the living daylights out of me. I thought someone was after the children."

Only then did she see Larry's mother standing behind him. The middle-aged fading redhead was wearing her usual sour expression, but she didn't even try to be civil to Kelly. She just started down the hallway toward Leesa's room.

"Don't go down there," Kelly stage-whispered at her. "The children are asleep."

She tried to pull away from Larry, but he grabbed her arm even harder and twisted it roughly, wrenching the pistol out of her hand.

"Let me go!" Kelly demanded as loudly as she dared.

Cassiopeia Llewellyn emerged from the bedroom carrying Leesa, still sleeping, over her shoulder.

"Put her back in bed!" Kelly hissed at her. "What is going on here?"

"Now, now," Larry patted her shoulder while still holding her arm painfully, "just don't get violent, Darling, and everything will be all right."

Kelly's eyes darted wildly from Larry to his mother and she wanted to scream. Her heart was pounding in her throat and she could hear herself breathing.

"I don't know what's going on here, but you better leave these children alone!" Kelly warned.

"Oh, now, Darling, we couldn't leave these children alone with you. You were about to shoot them. We saw you. We know how upset you are," Larry proceeded with exaggerated

slowness and precision, as if he were speaking to an idiot who didn't understand plain English.

Cassi returned from putting Leesa in the car and headed back down the hallway for the other girls.

"Don't you dare take my children, you witch!" Kelly yelled loudly at her, knowing the girls were going to be awakened anyway.

Cassi ignored her and she tried harder to get away from Larry, but he had her pinned back against the corner and she couldn't move at all. She struggled to scratch or bite or hit him, but was overpowered.

"Now, now, Darling, this will be much worse if you are violent," Larry spoke in an aggravatingly smooth tone.

"Mommy? Mommy? Where are you? Mommy, what's going on? Mommy!" cried Laurie as she and Lily were taken from their cozy bed. Without a word, their grandmother led them down the hall. Kelly saw that Laurie had grabbed her always-ready overnight bag on the way out.

Larry twisted Kelly's arm harder and whispered, "Tell your daughter she's going to spend the night with Cassi and PapaLew." Kelly struggled to break free. "Tell her!"

"Your father and your grandmother are being bad to me!" Kelly shouted. Larry clasped his hand over her mouth and pulled her into the kitchen. Kelly bit his hand, hard, and, in the brief respite, shouted, "They are lying and being bad!"

Larry dragged her to the floor in the darkness and she heard Laurie and Lily crying as they were led out to the car.

"Let me go, you sorry son of that bitch!"

Larry didn't release his grip on her until he heard his mother's big, new white Cadillac pull out of the driveway. Then he shoved Kelly away from him and pointed her own handgun at her.

Kelly leaned back against the dishwasher and rubbed her arm, staring defiantly at Larry, though he was the one with the weapon.

"So, now you're going to kill me?" she asked with mild curiosity.

"Maybe you are so despondent that you are going to kill yourself," he suggested. "After all, you were about to kill your own children."

The doorbell rang.

"That would be the pharmacy delivery," Larry informed her politely. "They have your medication, dear. Would you like to sit here and be quiet? Or do you want to make a spectacle of yourself in front of one more witness?"

Kelly dropped her head and, in that split second, decided what she would have to do. She sighed and looked up at Larry.

"Maybe I could use a little something to calm my nerves. How thoughtful of you. If you'll go answer the door, I think I'll start a bubble bath," Kelly said calmly. "A nice hot bath helps everything."

The second that Larry disappeared, Kelly grabbed a handful of ice from the freezer's ice machine, ran down the hall to the master bathroom, and turned the tub faucets on full. She poured half a bottle of pink bubble bath under the spout, stripped off her clothes, and stepped into the tub, wrapping the ice in a washcloth.

Kelly had barely settled under the clouds of bubbles when Larry appeared in the doorway without knocking.

"You didn't slit your wrist, did you?" he asked half-seriously.

Her right hand was holding the ice-packed washcloth over her face. The left was under the bubbles. She lifted it, dripping pink foam, for him to see.

"Here's the medicine that mother's doctor ordered for you," he indicated the white paper bag in his hand. Kelly's eyes were covered, but she heard the sack rattling.

"You are to take one of each of these. There are four. The doctor said that this will keep you calm and comfortable until he can get you into MSH tomorrow. Now, are we going to do this the easy way or the hard way?"

"A glass of water, please," Kelly requested without removing the washcloth. "No ice," she added as he headed for the mini-bar in the bedroom.

Larry took Kelly's crystal goblet from her dressing table and filled it with water from the tap. He opened the sack and put the four prescription vials on the counter. He was stunned that Kelly would be this cooperative about taking the pills. In the seven years of their marriage, she had never even taken an aspirin. When she was pregnant, the doctor couldn't get her to take vitamins.

"Nothing from a drug company," she always had said. "If God intended for me to take vitamins, He would have made a vitamin tree."

Larry poured out one pill from each bottle and held them out to her.

"Take these. All of them," he emphasized. "I'm dead serious about this."

"I know you are," Kelly replied under her breath. "Pour some clear water on my hand. Bad enough to take pills, without having soap on them."

She lifted her left hand again and Larry poured water from the goblet on it, rinsing the soap away. He deposited the pills in her hand and refilled the water goblet.

"Here," she indicated, removing the washcloth from her face and handing it to him in exchange for the water. "Would you mind getting me some more ice for the washcloth?"

"After you take your medication, dear. What kind of a fool do you think I am?" Larry smirked. "Go on. Take them!"

Kelly let her disappointment show. She hesitated a moment and looked at the handful of pills. She sighed in resignation. With her left hand, Kelly tossed all four of the pills into her mouth, took a huge gulp of water, and swallowed hard.

"There. I've done it. Now may I please have some more ice. I have a terrible headache."

"Certainly, I'll get you some ice," Larry agreed, disappearing to get it and finishing his sentence when he returned, "but, in just a very few minutes, my dear, you won't be having any aches anywhere."

The telephone rang and Larry decided to answer it. Kelly couldn't hear what he was saying because she had filled the tub full of water and left the faucet running so that the

gurgling overflow drowned out his voice. She assumed it was his mother. PapaLew was out of town, probably with his girlfriend.

Kelly wondered what PapaLew would say about all this, but she realized that blood was thicker than water. If Larry had his way, by this time tomorrow, Kelly would be in the Mississippi State Hospital. It didn't even take the kind of money and power that the Llewellyns had to get someone committed in Mississippi.

Kelly spit the pills out into her left hand and pushed them one by one through the tub's overflow drain. She chuckled to herself, remembering how her aunt had tried to make her take vitamins once when she went to visit her as a kid. Kelly had honestly tried to swallow them, but after three glasses of water, not one of them had gone down her throat. Something always closed off and stopped it.

"That beats anything I ever saw," her aunt, who was an RN, had exclaimed in exasperation. "I've seen you swallow a chunk of steak that would gag a tiger, and you can't swallow one little pill. There's something wrong with you, girl."

There's a lot wrong with me, Kelly thought, but there's a lot more that's right.

She stretched out in the tub and pretended to be asleep when Larry returned. She barely cooperated as he got her out of the tub and into bed. She kept her eyes closed and her body limp, but her mind was racing.

Finally settled in for the night in the darkened room, Kelly reviewed the events of the evening and then forced herself to go all the way back to the beginning, asking herself when and if she should have known about Larry and his family and why she didn't see any of this coming. Kelly sadly admitted to herself that she should have known from the first day she and Larry met.

*She had stood on the front porch with her mother, who was so impressed with the Llewellyn's fortune that she pushed Kelly into going with Larry to Louisiana. Kelly couldn't blame her mother. Only Kelly was there to see the Llewellyn's illicit world. It had been dark as she and Larry crossed into Mississippi again. The lights of*

*Vicksburg stood sentinel over the river and welcomed Kelly home from the foreign world Larry had shown her.*

Kelly remembered the conversation well.

*"Are you going to say anything to my mother about what happened over there?"*

*"What happened?"*

*"You know. Getting stopped by the state police."*

*"Did a state policeman say something to you?"*

*"Well, no."*

*"Then what is there to tell?" Larry winked at her.*

*Kelly sighed with some relief, but another uneasy feeling followed.*

*"Larry?"*

*"What?"*

*"What kind of business is your father in?"*

*"Department stores."*

*"It seems a little funny that everybody in Louisiana knows him just because he owns department stores."*

*"It's not funny at all. Just give him a little time in Mississippi and it will be the same here. But, Kelly," he added, "I really don't like talking about his business."*

*"Sorry. I was just curious."*

*"You know what curiosity did to the cat."*

Kelly shuddered. Lying in bed in the dark, hearing no sounds in the house, she wondered what Larry would do next. He had said that the doctor would put her in the Mississippi State Hospital tomorrow. For a moment, she tried to convince herself that the doctor wouldn't cooperate, but, of course, he would do whatever the Llewellyns ordered. She also knew, from her psychology classes, that once a person was put in the infamous MSH, there was little chance of getting out with sanity intact, if at all. Kelly considered the other horrible things she had seen and heard about "the family" since she and Larry married. The Llewellyns seemed to have no moral limits, either personally or in "business." Kelly knew they would do anything. She finally fell asleep and her dreams were not peaceful.

When the sunlight woke her hours later, Kelly forced herself to keep her eyes shut. She listened for morning



sounds. Larry was probably in the kitchen, but she dared not move. Amazingly for a person who never slept past eight o'clock, Kelly was able to go back to sleep. Menacing images tormented her dreams again, as they had all night.

Larry finally roused her around noon. He sat on the edge of the bed and nudged her shoulder. Kelly moaned and didn't move.

"Kelly, wake up," he said, more gently than he had spoken to her lately.

She moaned again and still didn't move.

Larry pulled her by the shoulder and rolled her over on her back.

"Wake up, Kelly," he repeated a little louder.

Slowly, she opened her eyes and tried to focus. Even more slowly, she smiled at him and mumbled, "Good morning, sweetheart. Did I over-sleep? I have a terrible headache."

Larry stared into her eyes.

"Are you okay?" he asked, frowning.

"No, honey, I have a terrible headache. I think I should go back to sleep," Kelly whispered.

"We need to talk," Larry insisted.

"Please, darling, can't it wait? My head hurts," Kelly whined softly.

"The doctor is coming."

"What?" Kelly exclaimed. "What happened? Where are the girls?"

Larry frowned again and studied her face.

"Don't you remember what happened last night?" he asked.

Kelly frowned, "I guess I don't. I have a terrible headache," she repeated. "Why is the doctor coming? Is one of the girls sick?"

Larry sat on the edge of the bed and sighed.

"Do you want a divorce?" he blurted at her.

"A divorce? Honey, is this some kind of bad joke? Why would I want a divorce? Now tell me that the children are all right," she insisted, trying to sit up.

"They're fine. They're at my mother's."

Kelly sighed in relief and lay back down.

"You had me worried, sweetheart, saying the doctor was coming. Don't do that to me again."

"So you don't want a divorce?"

"Larry, what's the matter with you? Did you have a bad dream, honey?" Kelly asked with compassion in her voice. "Tell me about it," she smiled sweetly.

Larry shook his head, "No, it was nothing. Don't worry about it."

He picked up the bedside phone and dialed a number.

"Larry Llewellyn here. Let me speak to the doctor right away.... Catch him before he leaves. I'll hold."

"Larry, what's wrong?" Kelly demanded to know.

"Shhh!" he frowned at her, then spoke into the phone, "Yes, tell me, could any of that medicine you sent out here for Kelly have caused a memory loss? She doesn't seem to know what happened last night.... I see. Well, thank you. I don't think you'll need to come by after all. She seems to be back to normal.... Oh, yes, I'll keep an eye on her. Thanks again." Larry hung up the phone and turned to his young wife.

"You had a bad headache last night, Kelly, and you were acting strangely, so I ordered some medicine for you. I guess it worked."

"No, it didn't. I still have a bad headache. Maybe I have a brain tumor or something," Kelly suggested, with fear on her face.

"Maybe. We'll get some X-rays, if it will make you feel better."

"Just let me sleep a little longer," Kelly requested. "I'll probably be all right."

Larry nodded and left the room without another word. He called his mother and asked her to return the children in a couple of hours.

\* \* \*

Kelly awoke again to the sound of her mother-in-law's Cadillac pulling into the driveway. In a moment, she heard loud voices in the den and she went to the bathroom, rather than going to see what was happening.

"Kelly," Larry yelled to her, "you'd better come here and see this."

Kelly slowly walked down the long hallway. Her mother-in-law was in the den and was furious. Laurie, Lily and Leesa ran to their mother for hugs and kisses.

"Don't kiss those horrible children!" Cassi screamed at her, as Kelly grabbed and hugged the three little girls.

"What's wrong?" Kelly frowned.

"Come see what they did!" she yelled at her. "It's all your fault!"

Kelly followed the irate woman out to her new white Cadillac with the custom white brocade upholstery. Cassi opened the back door and pointed, "Look!"

Every brocade-covered button in the exquisitely tufted back seat had been snipped off. In each hole where a button had been, there was in its place a peeled crayon, oozing and dripping its bright color after melting for hours in the suffocating August heat. Tiny bits of the crayon wrapping paper were scattered on the seat and floor. Kelly remembered that Laurie had grabbed her overnight bag on the way out of the house last night, the bag containing crayons and scissors and all her favorite supplies. The young mother recognized, in the multi-colored back seat, the artwork of an angry, frustrated Laurie, with the assistance of her finger-sucking side-kick. It took all of Kelly's self-control not to burst out laughing, but it felt good to know that someone in the Llewellyn family was on her side.

Chapter 14  
August 18, 1972

By the time Cassi drove off in her new white Cadillac with the multi-colored rear seat, it was mid-afternoon. Kelly spent some time with the children, trying to convince herself that they had not been traumatized over the past twenty-four hours. When they were all down for a late nap, she left them with the maid and walked through the back yard over to Karen's with the daily crossword puzzle.

"*Scrabble* time!" she called, as she entered the patio door without knocking.

"In here," Karen answered from the kitchen. "I thought you weren't coming today. Larry called to say you were sick. I'd have gone over, but he said to leave you alone. Are you okay now?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," Kelly answered nonchalantly. "Did you wait for me?"

"Sure. Let me stick this chicken in the oven and I'll be there."

Kelly fixed herself a glass of ice water and sat down at the long pine dining table.

Karen joined her in a minute with her copy of the *Vicksburg Daily Chronicle*.

"Ready?" she asked, picking up a ball-point pen.

"Ready," Kelly nodded, and the two friends raced to complete the crossword puzzle. Kelly won and Karen sighed, "I guess you're going to hit me with another fifty-point bonus word in *Scrabble* today too."

"It's no fun otherwise," Kelly laughed, "but, I'm going to make it up to you."

"How?" Karen asked hopefully.

"I've decided to accept the nomination for vice-president of the Holy Trinity Women's Council. You can tell the nominating committee it was your incredible powers of persuasion that did it."

"Great!" Karen smiled. "Why'd you change your mind, though?"

Kelly hesitated a moment, but decided that the whole truth was out of the question. She answered simply, "I've decided to get more involved in the community."

Karen studied her friend quizzically. "I'm glad," she said. "Does this mean you want to get involved in politics too?"

"Everything," Kelly nodded, "but, first, I'm going to beat the bee-geebers out of you in *Scrabble*. Draw."

Kelly made her highest score ever. She took it as a positive omen for her plan to escape from the power of the Llewellyns by becoming a well-known and well-respected person in her own right, someone who would be missed by the community if she ever disappeared. Within weeks, she was serving with distinction as the vice-president of the Women's Council and on various committees of the church, the Democratic Party and her sorority alumnae group.

The nun who taught junior high school music at Holy Trinity left the convent the week after the semester started, and Kelly agreed to teach her classes of a hundred and sixty-four students on Monday, Wednesday and Friday afternoons. She found working with young teen-agers to be challenging, but maneuvering the ancient pastor into the twentieth century was the hardest part of all. She took it in stride and became a regular fixture at the church as well as the school.

Kelly enrolled Lily and Leesa in the Montessori School's afternoon classes rather than leave them with the maid while she taught music. Before long, she was volunteering at the Montessori School as well. She didn't hesitate to chair the fund-raising committee for its new building. To her amazement, the little coffee-and-dessert get-together at her house which she had planned as a kick-off for the project, raised enough pledges to fund the entire budget.

For the next sixteen months, everything that Kelly touched was magic. The anniversary party that she planned for PapaLew and Cassi in early December of 1973 was no exception. Kelly honestly believed that the older Llewellyns would probably kill each other before they reached a significant milestone like their fiftieth anniversary and she wasn't willing to wait any longer to test her own social wings,

so she planned a surprise event for the second Friday in Advent.

Kelly had carefully listened to every “family” conversation for months, determined to get the names of all the relatives, friends, and business associates of PapaLew and Cassi. She had not sent written or engraved invitations, but had visited the locals and called long distance each person individually, threatening them with death or serious bodily harm if they breathed a word about the party to the honorees. Her strategy worked, almost too well.

On the night of the party, when PapaLew and Cassi were lured into Kelly and Larry’s darkened den, the yell of “Surprise!” nearly caused PapaLew to have a heart attack. He recovered quickly enough and seemed to enjoy the festivities. Kelly was delighted and somewhat amused with her success until the next morning when the old man showed up unannounced at her door.

“That was some party you had last night, Girl,” her balding father-in-law stated matter-of-factly as he walked into the living room and looked around.

“I’m glad you enjoyed it,” Kelly beamed.

“Didn’t say I enjoyed it,” he corrected her. “I came by to pay for it.”

“I don’t understand,” Kelly frowned. “If you didn’t enjoy it, why would you ever want to pay for it?”

“Matter of principle,” he answered, his logic lost on Kelly.

“Well, I’m sorry, PapaLew, but you can’t pay for the party. It was a gift.”

PapaLew pulled his ever-present huge roll of hundred-dollar bills out of his front pocket. “How much?” he asked, starting to peel off hundreds.

“I’m not taking your money, PapaLew,” Kelly shook her head. “It was my party.”

“That’s my point,” PapaLew nodded. “It was your party. I want it to be mine, so I’m going to pay for it. That’s the way I do business.”

Kelly shuddered at the word “business.”

“Then maybe you need to understand how I do business,” Kelly smiled sweetly.

"I think I do," PapaLew replied evenly, "and I don't like it. You surprised me, Girl. That was the first time in my life I was ever one hundred percent, completely surprised..."

Kelly smiled, until he continued, "and I don't like being surprised."

PapaLew's small brown eyes pierced the space between them. Kelly flinched and then quickly recovered.

"Well, PapaLew, I'm sorry you don't like surprises."

"I talked to Hank about it this morning," PapaLew complained. "You'd think a man could count on his best friend to tell him what's going on, but, no, Hank said you threatened to kill him if he breathed a word to me. I don't like that, Girl."

Kelly laughed to herself, finally realizing that what she had meant only as a figure of speech was much more serious to PapaLew and his "business" associates. Could they have actually believed she was capable of murder? The thought intrigued her.

"Put your money away, PapaLew," Kelly insisted. "Your way of doing business won't work in my house. I'm half Italian, as you know, and we have our own way of doing business. Don't make me mad and we'll call it even."

PapaLew shrugged his shoulders and grinned. "You win this one, Girl. I don't like it, but, you win this one."

Kelly spontaneously hugged the old man and kissed him on the cheek. "I really didn't mean to hurt you, PapaLew," she said sincerely.

"But, you could have, Girl," he answered hoarsely.

"Yeah," Kelly nodded, "I could have. I hope I won't ever have to."

PapaLew stared at her in amazement. "You've made some powerful friends," he acknowledged grudgingly.

"Including you?" she smiled and held out her hand.

PapaLew gripped her hand firmly and looked her in the eye. "Yes, Girl," he nodded, "including me."

"In that case, PapaLew, I want to tell you something right now, so it won't come as a surprise to you." She paused to take a deep breath. "I'm going to divorce Larry."

PapaLew didn't act surprised at all, simply asking, "So, what is it you want, Girl? A new car? Bigger house? Jewelry?"

"I've had all that, PapaLew. It's nice, but it isn't everything."

"So, what is it you want?" he repeated.

For the next hour, Kelly tried to make the older man understand, but he just kept upping the ante, trying to get her to stay with his son.

Exasperated, Kelly finally blurted out, "You just don't seem to be getting it, PapaLew. What I've been trying to say is, you can take all of your stinking money and cram it up your ass!"

"You could have saved us a lot of time, Girl," he grinned, shaking his head, "if you had said that in the first place. You know," the old man added, "most people have a price, but there's no point in messing with the few that don't."

"Then you understand?" Kelly asked hopefully.

"Hell, no, I don't understand," he answered truthfully. "It's the damndest thing I ever heard, but it's your business."

"So, then," Kelly dared to breathe a sigh of relief, "can I count on you to stay out of my business?"

"Yes, Girl, you can count on me," he nodded, getting up and heading for the door. Kelly followed him to the front porch and watched with unexpected sadness as he walked to his limousine alone. Opening the door, he looked back, shook his head, and gave her a wry smile.

"I'll tell you this, Girl. You sure pulled off one hell of a going-away party!"

Kelly hoped her luck in winning over powerful old men would hold when she made an appointment to see her irascible, antediluvian pastor, the Very Right Reverend Monsignor Francis Xavier O'Hara. She and the eighteenth-century cleric had nearly come to blows over the issue of guitars in church for the children's Mass. Kelly had finally offered to direct a "Vatican-Two-outlawed" Latin Mass at the early service for the enjoyment of Monsignor and the old folks in exchange for permission to have guitars for the kids. At their meeting on the twenty-eighth of December of 1973, however, Kelly had nothing to swap. She entered



Monsignor's tidy study to negotiate with nothing but sweaty palms.

"Kelly, you out-did yourself for the Christmas Masses," Monsignor beamed, leaning back in his huge leather chair. "That was a stroke of genius, arranging the liturgical words to Christmas carols so we could have a High Mass at all six services without a choir. The Pope should hear it!"

"Thank you, Monsignor, I'm glad you liked it," Kelly smiled.

"Liked it? It was extraordinary. I'll bet I've had a hundred phone calls about it. Now, what are you going to pull on me next?" the old man grinned.

Kelly had never seen Monsignor in such a good mood. He was famous for his hellfire-and-brimstone sermons about such weighty issues as people leaving snotty Kleenex in the pews. In light of his mood, Kelly forgot her prepared speech and blurted out, "I have to resign as President of the Women's Council, as Representative on the Parish Council and," she sighed, "as Choir Director. I'm going to divorce Larry and I don't want to bring any disgrace on the church."

Her mind raced as she watched the octogenarian's face. Divorce was so bad that Monsignor had never even mentioned it in his sermons. Kelly braced herself for a tirade.

"Nonsense, Kelly," he shook his head slowly. "You don't have to resign from anything. It's no disgrace to divorce a Llewellyn."

Kelly could not believe her ears.

The Monsignor nodded. "Just bring me the papers when you're ready and I'll make sure your annulment goes right through to Rome. It shouldn't take more than five or six weeks." He paused a moment, then asked, "Anything else?"

She shook her head and walked out of the rectory in stunned silence. Even though it was strictly a church matter and had no legal effect whatsoever, every Catholic annulment Kelly had ever heard about took between ten and twenty years. The words "no disgrace to divorce a Llewellyn" played over and over in her mind.

Kelly began to consider that perhaps everyone else already knew about the Llewellyn's illegal activities which Kelly

thought she alone had discovered. That notion was confirmed several weeks later when the divorce was final. She got a call from the FBI, wanting to know what evidence she had against "the family." The Feds had been following Larry and, among other interesting items, had all the dates and times of his *rendezvous* with his latest girlfriend. Kelly found it amusing that they thought those meetings were related to the drug ring simply because Larry's girlfriend's brother was a drug dealer.

"I can't help you now," she told them, thinking back to how hard she had worked to get out of the marriage alive, sane, and with legal custody of her children. She had made her peace with PapaLew. Although a part of her wanted some kind of revenge on the Llewellyn's for all the pain they had inflicted on her, she realized that it would be crazy and really asking for trouble to get involved with the Feds at this point.

"You must have figured out a long time ago that I wasn't one of the bad guys," Kelly told the FBI's regional investigator over the phone. "You should have called me sooner. A year ago, we might have had something to negotiate."

## PART IV - 1974

## STARTING OVER

## Chapter 15

January 17, 1974

Kelly eagerly opened the long white envelope showing the return address of Mandy McCain in Oxford, Mississippi. She plopped down on the comfortable living room sofa and stretched out luxuriously, anticipating all the news.

*Dear Big Sister,*

*I hope this is the first letter you receive in your new home. Congratulations on the divorce. You did the right thing and don't let anybody tell you differently! I'm glad the girls are doing so well. The Montessori School sounds great.*

*The law school admissions folks thought it was a little strange that it took you seven years to finish college, after you were such a scholastic hot-shot in high school. I explained that during those seven years, you had three kids and four miscarriages and had to commute to Jackson for classes. Then they indicated that we're both a sure bet, so I don't understand why you're applying to all those other law schools. Ego? Trying to prove you can get in? Oh, well.*

*Mom says your house is real nice, even though it's small, and that you'll be able to lease it easily while we're in law school. There are lots of duplexes to rent or buy near the campus and I think that would be ideal. We can be close and still have privacy.*

*So, how's your love life? I've met a guy you may know -- Tim Dugan. He teaches here at Ole Miss, but not in my field. He's a friend and occasional business partner of Senator Albright, so I thought maybe Cameron had introduced you to him sometime. If you hear anything about him, let me know. I want to check him out. He's got a lot of big ideas about making money in real estate, but he's a political science professor and you know how those guys are. (Or maybe you don't, since you're not up here in the ivory tower collecting a worthless master's degree!)*

*Anyway, there's nothing serious with Tim, and I'm still seeing Warren when he's in town. He's about as dependable in a relationship as his older brother, so I'm not expecting much.*

*Speaking of Cameron, though, he wants to talk to you. He's going to run for Congress and he'd like for you to help him. I told him to call you himself, but he thinks you might be mad at him because he made himself scarce when he heard you filed for divorce. If you're not too mad, give him a call. He's going to keep teaching in the law school this semester (and next fall as well), but will take the summer off for campaigning. You'd probably enjoy a good campaign. I told Cameron that I'm already committed to working for Senator Albright. This is going to be his toughest challenge in thirty years and he needs all the help he can get. If you decide not to do the Cameron thing, you'd be welcome at Albright headquarters. Let me know.*

*Don't read this letter to Mom. She still can't stand Cameron and would be mad at me for being his mouthpiece. By the way, if you hear that Cameron's living with Mallory Cheatham, some female lawyer, it's partly true. She is a lawyer. Who knows what his motives are? It can't be love. Give him a call. He needs you!*

*Love,  
Mandy*

Kelly put the letter down and frowned. Karen had mentioned that Cameron was supposedly living with someone, so it wasn't a total surprise. Kelly just didn't understand it. She decided there would be no harm in calling Cameron anyway and maybe he would explain everything to her. She dialed his number in Oxford and there was no answer. She called a dozen times over the next two days and never caught him.

On Sunday after church, while the girls were visiting with their father, Kelly called Mandy to tell her that she couldn't get in touch with Cameron and that it was all right for him to call her because she wasn't mad. Mandy agreed to pass along the information and the sisters made plans to visit on the eighth of February when Kelly would drive up to Oxford to join her in taking the Law School Admissions Test, or LSAT as Mandy called it. Cameron didn't call until after that weekend and after the divorce was final. Kelly found his cowardly absence somewhat amusing and wrote to her sister:

February 16, 1974

Dear Mandy,

Cameron finally called on the 13th and asked me to join him for a breakfast meeting with some guys at the Vicksburg Hotel this morning. I had a great time. It reminded me of going to breakfast with Daddy and his friends. All the talk was of business and politics, but I really got into it, because of nostalgia, I suppose. Anyway, Cameron told me after the breakfast that I was great! (And that was before we went up to Senator Albright's room and made love.) It seems that when I excused myself to go to the bathroom so Cameron could "close" the deal, these old guys pledged a ton of money to his campaign. Cameron seemed to think that my incredible wit and charm had something to do with it. Who knows? I've been lucky lately.

I asked Cameron when I'd see him again and he told me that "the warden" didn't let him out too often. He didn't mention her name, but seemed to assume I knew about it, so that was the end of it for now. You know how he and I always take years to get to the truth of the matter. I'll keep you posted, but don't hold your breath.

Love,

Kelly

P.S. I got a Valentine from Christi. It made me feel guilty for losing touch with her. It was one of those cheap little cards like we used to exchange with the kids in school, which only made me feel worse. She just wrote, "We're fine," but I doubt it.

Kelly's next letter from her younger sister was postmarked February 26th, from Oxford. It didn't arrive in Vicksburg until Friday, the 29th, as Kelly was heading out the door to go shopping. She wanted something special for the press party that night.

Dear Kelly,

I saw you with Cameron on the news last night -- both six and ten o'clock. He sounded good and you looked terrific. They gave great coverage to his press conference. I assume you used your media connections to help him. Good job. He does need you!

I noticed that Warren was conspicuously absent from the scene. He's been smoking a lot of dope lately and I'm concerned about him.

*Tell Cameron to read him the riot act. I've never had any luck talking to Warren about it. Or, about anything important, actually. Oh, well.*

*Sorry you were on a guilt trip about Christi. Hope you're over it. She made her bed . Now she has to lie in it. God, I sound like Mom.*

*Tim Dugan and I have been busting our butts for the Senator, but, we're going to spend our spring break looking at some potential investment property in northwest Arkansas. Why don't you and Cameron join us in Hot Springs? We could go to the races and pig out at Coy's. It would be fun. Get Mom to take the girls and ask Cameron if "the warden" will give him a weekend pass. Call me when you find out.*

*Love,*

*Mandy*

*P.S. You better be right about Cameron's career. I asked him to be the guest speaker at the Ole Miss Democratic Students meeting and introduced him as "future Governor of Mississippi and future President of the United States Cameron Coulter." If you're correct, I'll look like a brilliant political prognosticator. If not, I'm a dumb ass! Oh, well, let me know about Hot Springs.                   -- M*

Chapter 16  
March 22, 1974

Cameron Coulter officially filed as a candidate for the United States House of Representatives on Friday, March 22, 1974, at 2:00 p.m., in the Secretary of State's office in Jackson. He drove directly to Vicksburg to pick up Kelly who had re-arranged her life to spend the weekend with him. Regina Costavecchio McCain was visibly displeased with Kelly's plans, but did agree to take care of Laurie, Lily and Leesa until Sunday afternoon. She welcomed any opportunity to spend time with her only grandchildren and didn't like Kelly to leave them with Larry's family.

Kelly was tingling with anticipation at seeing Cameron and at having her first real adventure as a divorcée. She was surprised to hear Cameron turn into her driveway only an hour late. He gave her a quick kiss at the front door, picked up her small suitcase, and headed for the car. He didn't bother to apologize for being late since, as usual, he wasn't aware of his tardiness. Kelly was so happy to see him that she didn't care.

As they crossed the Mississippi River heading out of Vicksburg, Cameron shook his head in wonder. "I still don't know how you found a hotel room in Hot Springs on a weekend in the racing season. And reservations at Coy's for Saturday night? They don't even take reservations."

"I told you that my daddy went to business meetings and had a lot of friends there. I remember going to Coy's back in 1954, the summer before I started first grade. They served hamburgers, barbecue and steaks on their big screened-in front porch, right at the intersection of the two main streets. I can still smell it. And then we went to Doc Rowe's Drug Store with the big cold white marble countertop and I had a double-scoop vanilla ice cream cone, but I had to promise not to tell Mom because she never let us have sweets."

"That's all very nice, Kelly, but your father has been dead for fifteen years. I don't see how the connections could last that long," Cameron insisted.

"Friendships last forever," Kelly replied simply. "My daddy was loyal to his friends and they are still loyal to him. Just because he's dead,..." Kelly stopped, feeling herself choking up.

Cameron reached over and patted her on the knee. "It's okay. I understand," he said. They didn't talk for a long time as the car sped north on Highway 65 toward Lake Providence and Kelly recalled to herself her first drive on this road with Larry, the day they met so many years ago. She didn't say anything to Cameron as they approached *L'Ecrevisse*, but, to her surprise, he started slowing down.

"I've heard they have great crawfish gumbo here," Cameron offered.

"It's a little early for dinner, don't you think?"

Cameron shrugged and resumed cruising speed. "Probably," he agreed, remembering it was Larry Llewellyn who had told him about the gumbo. They drove for another thirty minutes and then Cameron broke the silence by saying, "Kelly, you realize I could never marry you?"

Kelly was stunned. "Did I miss something? Were we talking about getting married?"

"You're a political liability," Cameron said, as if he were reading a report to her. "You were married to Larry Llewellyn. That is a political liability I could not overcome."

Kelly's first inclination was to argue with him, to restructure his thinking as if she were planning to market a project to the community. It was all so simple and so obvious to her. The story would be of childhood sweethearts torn apart by a tragic marriage, then finally re-united in love, with her three intelligent, exquisitely beautiful daughters being raised by a protective, doting step-father. A good public relations firm and a photographer could have a field day with this one. Cameron would be the hero, the knight in shining armor, coming to the rescue of four beautiful damsels in distress. It was almost better than a conventional boy-meets-girl-and-they-get-married story. Kelly was amazed that Cameron didn't recognize the potential.

It was nothing but pride, false pride, that kept Kelly from responding to his concerns. She had just spent two years



selling herself to the community to accomplish her goal. She would not try to sell herself to the one person on earth who should have known who she was and what she had to offer. Pride maintained her silence.

Cameron launched into a monologue about political liabilities and Kelly smiled to herself, remembering that Cameron had told her enough two years ago to destroy his chances of ever being elected to public office. Apparently, none of that was on his mind as he talked about his 1972 association with Senator McGovern's presidential campaign.

"If my Republican opponent is willing to tote Nixon, I'm willing to tote McGovern," he vowed, setting his prominent chin and jaw firmly. "The overriding issue in my campaign today," he went on, "is the need for a stronger Congress to protect the American people against the abuse of power and the breakdown of law and order in the executive branch of the government.

"We have a system of checks and balances in this government," Cameron raised his voice, "and if Congress would stand up for itself, there would not be this great loss of confidence by our people in our government. My Republican opponent has failed the people of Mississippi by supporting Nixon's vetoes, which are bringing Congress to its knees...."

Kelly noted to herself with satisfaction that Cameron had already mastered the art of not mentioning his opponent's name. He incorporated every marketing strategy that she or anyone else ever suggested. Cameron would be an outstanding politician. It was unfortunate, though, that he didn't always get the big picture, so focused was he on the details. She considered again saying something about her children and the possibility of marriage, making political lemonade out of the lemons, but Cameron was too wound up in his monologue. Pride forced her to wait for a better time.

"... It was common knowledge in Washington several years ago that the Nixon administration was trying to beat down the Congress, but we never heard about it in our district in Mississippi. My Republican opponent has tried to make the people of the district feel that he is in touch with them, but that's only half the job of being a Congressman. A

Congressman should serve as a buffer against the abuse of executive power and he should have spoken up about these abuses.

“Until the Congress is stronger, the government will not be able to deal effectively with inflation and our food prices will continue to rise. Until the Congress is stronger, the government will not be able to solve our energy problems. Until the Congress is stronger, we citizens will continue to pay more for less comfort, less freedom of movement, and an uncertain future.

“My campaign will speak to the needs of the people. It will be one they can be proud of. I will make the Congress stronger,” Cameron finished with authority.

Kelly smiled at the irony of it. Cameron would single-handedly whip Congress, the President and all of Washington into shape. He just couldn't handle one young divorcée with three small children. He looked over at her and smiled. She held her hands up and applauded lightly. Pride kept her from doing anything else.

Over a late-night supper in Hot Springs, Cameron found another attentive audience in Tim Dugan. Cameron had met the fortyish, slim, balding man briefly in Senator Albright's office and once again on campus at Ole Miss, but, they had never really talked. The young law professor running for Congress and the older political science veteran explored a lot of common ground, which Mandy and Kelly variously joined and ignored, the sisters taking time to catch up on personal matters and family gossip, while the talk about politics proceeded throughout the meal.

Over dessert, Tim Dugan spoke in general terms about some of his business ventures with Senator Albright, which gave him credibility in Cameron's eyes. Cameron openly and eagerly let Dugan know that he would be interested in participating in a money-making real estate scheme, though he admitted he didn't have any investment capital yet and had no practical knowledge of real estate.

Kelly, who had listened to her father talk about real estate since she was a baby and had watched PapaLew for the past nine years, was a bit more reserved. She did not think the

idea of developing resort property in northwest Arkansas was the slam dunk that Dugan envisioned. In her mind, the kind of people who would buy a second, or third, home in that price range, would demand more infrastructure and amenities than that area of the state could provide. She rolled her eyes at Mandy as Dugan went on about his proposals. Everything Kelly had to say came out sounding like a wet blanket, so she decided to keep it to herself until Cameron would ask her opinion in private. He never did and her pride kept her from broaching the subject on her own.

Kelly tried not to let her consternation over Cameron's "non-proposal" intrude into their bedroom that night, but she knew that something was terribly wrong. Again she found herself comparing Cameron to Larry. She thought about how she had had great sex with Larry right up until the day she moved out. It never seemed to matter what else was going on between them. They always had an incredible physical relationship. Kelly suspected that there was something wrong with that too, but she couldn't figure out what it was. How could she have great sex with Larry on the day her divorce was final and then be so frustrated after sex with Cameron? She lay awake most of the night with Cameron's words ringing in her ears. 'You realize that I could never marry you. You're a political liability.'

On Saturday afternoon at the racetrack, Cameron's painful words haunted her again when Mandy suggested splitting a two-dollar bet on a horse named "Political Lil."

"Do you think I'd be a political liability to Cameron?" Kelly asked her younger sister as they stood in the place ticket line.

"If what?" Mandy asked.

"If we got married."

Mandy widened her eyes in disbelief and broke into a loud laugh. Then, seeing the hurt in her sister's face, she said simply, "Cameron would never marry you."

Kelly stared absently at the place ticket in her hand.

"Because of Larry?" Kelly asked plaintively.

Mandy shook her head. "Because of you."

"Am I such a terrible person?"

"No, but your life would not hold up well to journalistic scrutiny."

Kelly silently considered her life. It was irretrievably wrapped up with the Llewellyns now. She wanted to blame it all on Larry. Life with him had become unbearable, but she had to admit that there had always been some compensation. She recalled the years of first-class travel and the best seats everywhere. Then she remembered the other physical pleasures of being with Larry and she caught herself comparing him to Cameron. Once again, she wondered what was wrong with her. She would have traded all of it for Cameron and yet even Mandy realized that the ambitious politician would never marry her. She pushed the thought from her mind and remembered that the Llewellyns had box seats at the finish line.

She looked to see if she could remember where the Llewellyns' box was, having been there only once with her mother-in-law several years ago. She decided that it was the one with only two people in it and she excused herself to walk down there. Kelly had already decided that she did not like standing in the midst of the milling racetrack crowd, with the close smells of cigarette smoke, beer and perspiring people.

With Mandy at her side, Kelly approached the two middle-aged men in the box and inquired if these were the Llewellyns' seats. Then she introduced herself as Kelly McCain, an old friend of PapaLew, which really wasn't a lie because they had declared themselves friends and the divorce hadn't changed that. The men were some of PapaLew's business associates from Louisiana and invited the sisters to join them. Kelly cringed at the thought of Louisiana business associates, but decided she had put up with worse for less.

"We have a couple of friends with us," she demurred.

"No problem. We've got four empty seats. Y'all feel free to join us."

"Only if you don't mention this to PapaLew," she whispered conspiratorially. "He would have a fit if he knew I came here without asking for his box seats in advance."

"I understand," the older of the two nodded. "It'll be our little secret."

Kelly waved for Tim and Cameron to join her in the finish-line box. PapaLew's friends bought the snacks and drinks all afternoon and, amazingly, none of Kelly's group ever even asked how she got the seats. They also made no comment when they were ushered to a table at Coy's, past a crowd of at least a hundred people who had arrived at the steak house ahead of them.

Over the delicious bacon-wrapped filets, Cameron, Tim and Mandy resumed the political and real estate discussions of all the grand things they were going to do. Kelly sat quietly, watching Cameron wolf down his steak and enormous, stuffed-with-everything baked potato, following salad with crackers and honey, all consumed with enormous quantities of iced tea. He ordered cheesecake for dessert before Kelly had even finished her entree. She relished every satisfying morsel of her perfectly-prepared meal and wondered if Cameron would ever slow down enough to notice and enjoy what was on the plate in front of him.

Chapter 17  
May 28, 1974

Kelly McCain sat at the small library table in her cozy, feminine bedroom and reviewed her calendar for the past two months. She had decided that it was critically important to put as much pressure on herself as she could stand to prepare for law school in the fall. In addition to finishing her term as President of the Holy Trinity Women's Council and her other jobs at the church, including choir director, and her civic and political activities, she had enrolled for twelve hours of classes at Vicksburg Community College to be sure she could still do school work.

Now that the spring semester was officially over and Kelly had made A's in all her classes, she had a nagging feeling that she was coasting and should do more. The idea of doing more housework didn't appeal to her, though she had been forced to take on that responsibility since the divorce. The child support check simply didn't allow the long-enjoyed luxury of a full-time maid. Kelly actually had fun learning how to do housework efficiently and was thinking about writing a book on the subject. She realized that, as more women were going to work outside the home, they needed some good housekeeping tips. Kelly flipped through her notebook of ideas, but it didn't intrigue her enough to get started on it.

She considered Laurie, Lily and Leesa's activities. They were spending one night a week with Kelly's mother and one night with Cassi and PapaLew. They were having a good time in school and they had found it fun to do laundry, polish the silver, and run the vacuum cleaner. Kelly did not delude herself. She knew that the novelty of it would wear off before too long and she would have to have other new projects for them.

The girls were so precocious that it took a lot of energy to stay ahead of them. Kelly considered that after she moved, there would be no family and friends around to take up the slack. The thought of it concerned her for a moment, but she decided it would all have to work out. She resolved that, as always, the children would come first. In the past, all her

activities apart from them had been planned around the girls being with their grandparents or friends, or in school. Kelly would not let the inaccessibility of family and friends hurt them. She was watching for signs of trauma from the divorce, but they actually seemed to be happier and more at peace in their small new home than they had been in the big house with Larry. Things were going so well that she almost hated to change again, but she had to qualify herself to earn a living and law school seemed the most logical choice. It would take only three years and it couldn't be that difficult, if the lawyers she knew were any indication.

The only troubling item that was obvious from looking at Kelly's calendar was her social life. Since her divorce, she had gone out with dozens of guys because everyone told her that it would be good for her. Reviewing the entries for the dinners, movies, plays, concerts, even church, and too many overnights which she would rather forget, Kelly had to conclude that her social life was an empty, frantic, ridiculous waste of time. Only Cameron was really interesting to her and he had made it clear that marriage was not an option. Like Peter Pan, however, he seemed to want their relationship to continue unchanged into Never-Never Land. Kelly had not seen him alone since the weekend in Hot Springs over two months ago, but she could keep up with his activities through his sporadic phone calls, as well as newspapers and television. He was getting a lot of good coverage. She felt certain that he would win the primary today and was happy for him as she cast her vote after attending eight o'clock Mass and taking the girls to school. Larry would pick them up and take them to his folks tonight..

"VOTE!" was where she was on the calendar. The rest of the day looked blissfully blank until "8:00 p.m. -- p/u CC @ airport." Cameron would be flying in on someone's private plane for a live interview at the television station downtown. He had asked Kelly to pick him up, take him to the station, then to Senator Albright's campaign headquarters for a brief show-of-support visit, and then back to the airport. Kelly had no illusions about spending the night with Cameron. He would be up all night watching the returns with his campaign

workers at Ole Miss, which was as it should be. She was just happy that he wanted to be with her for a while on this momentous evening of his first election.

Kelly considered going back to her precinct's polling place and trying to get a few more votes for Cameron, but realized that he didn't need them. He would easily win the primary count in his hometown. She decided that she deserved a day of pampering and that Cameron would appreciate that as much as anything. He would want his "Pretty Girl" to look her best. She never thought about her physical and emotional stress of the past five months, much less that of the past nine years, so it never occurred to her that she deserved more than a single day of recovery from it. She saw it as pampering and took it.

Having given up her previous routines of beauty shop hairdo's, facials, manicures and pedicures because they didn't fit in her recently-constricted budget, Kelly had purchased everything she needed to glamorize herself at home. She gathered all her beauty products and laid them out on the bathroom counter. Then she prepared a bubbly pink bath just for fun, knowing she would bathe again and wash her hair closer to their *rendezvous* time.

Kelly luxuriated in the tub, with a blue masque on her face and dreamed about Cameron. She considered what he might like her to wear and decided on the new aqua and white knit dress with a jacket that she had worn only once. She had bought it to do a regional television commercial which hadn't aired yet, so it would be new to Cameron. She smiled, thinking about how Cameron would look at her in that dress, and her smile caused the blue masque to crack. She dabbed some more blue goo on her face and resolved to keep still. In a few minutes, she was sound asleep on the inflated pink bath pillow that Mandy had given her two weeks ago for her twenty-sixth birthday.

By the time Kelly left the house at 7:30 that evening, she was refreshed, relaxed and as radiant as any bride. She sat in the car with the air-conditioner on as she watched Cameron's plane taxiing toward the general aviation area. The gate attendant had waved her in with a friendly greeting and then



looked puzzled as she turned left instead of heading to the right toward the private hangars where the Llewellyns kept their big jet and their smaller twin-engine prop. She wondered if the gate attendant had heard about her divorce. It would be good to be away from Vicksburg for awhile, she decided, since everything and everyone in her hometown seemed to bring back more memories than she wanted to consider.

Making the Sign of the Cross and thanking God that Cameron had landed safely, Kelly waited eagerly for the Aero Commander's props to stop and the cabin door to open. Cameron was the first person off the plane, followed by a dowdy-looking woman and three innocuous young men in gray suits. Kelly opened the car door and resisted the urge to run to Cameron's arms. She always took her cue from his body language and, to her amazement, he extended his right hand in the gentleman's traditional gesture of greeting.

"How good of you to come," Cameron enunciated formally. Kelly laughed to herself, thinking she could never "come" with this kind of foreplay. She took his offered hand and looked into his eyes, seeing confusion, weakness and fear. Her heart went out to him and she wished he had spent the afternoon in the pink bubble bath with her. He obviously needed some pampering.

The dowdy-looking woman stepped up beside him and Kelly realized that she was of their generation, not middle-aged as her first glance had indicated. Kelly wondered why Cameron would haul such a person in the plane with him in public. She was wearing a misshapen brown dress-like thing that must have been intended to hide her lumpy body. The garment was long, but stopped too soon to hide her fat ankles and thick calves which, to Kelly's amazement, were covered with black hair. Thick brown sandals did nothing to conceal her wide feet and the hair on her toes. Kelly looked up quickly, embarrassed for the woman and afraid she had already been rude for staring as at a deformed or crippled person.

The training her daddy had given her took over and she looked into the woman's eyes, searching for the good and

their common ground. The eyes, however, bulged out of focus behind coke-bottle thick lenses in dark, heavy frames, competing with the dark, thick eyebrow which crossed from one side of her forehead to the other. Sensing hostility behind the glasses, Kelly glanced quickly at Cameron for direction. He hesitated. In that instant, she noticed that the woman emitted a definite odor of perspiration and greasy hair. Kelly's heart went out to the poor creature.

Finally, Cameron spoke. "Kelly, this is Mallory. Mallory, Kelly."

Kelly stifled a laugh at the cruel joke. She didn't know where Cameron could have found someone so bizarre to play this little trick on her, but she vowed not to let this theater-major, or whatever, know how hideous she had made herself look.

"Pleased to meet you," Kelly smiled and extended her hand.

The Mallory-impersonator responded only with a stare, and, finally, a grudging nod. Kelly had to admire her for staying in character. After all Kelly's acting classes and television work, she knew how difficult it could be. This woman was carrying it off well. Kelly vowed to notice every gesture and movement of her body in case she ever got to play such a role. She realized, though, that it might be a long time before she would ever be cast as anything but the All-American girl-next-door.

Kelly turned her attention to the three young men as Cameron introduced them to her. They seemed pleasant enough, but certainly no threat to Cameron's domination in a crowd. He did enjoy being the center of attention and, later, at the television station, it seemed to annoy him slightly that so many people were making a fuss over Kelly. The sandalshod woman with the lank brown hair stood off to the side and glared. Kelly thought that Cameron should have told her to lay off it at the station, but he never even seemed to notice she was still there. Kelly vowed to not drive off without her, no matter how bad she smelled.

The interview at the station went well and Kelly was happy for Cameron. Kelly didn't have to worry about the strange

woman being left behind because she wordlessly followed Cameron to the car and got in the front seat beside him as she had done at the airport. The three gray suits were silent in the back.

"Where are we going?" Cameron asked Kelly as she turned out of the parking lot.

Kelly silently considered a plethora of possible philosophic replies. "To the Senator's campaign headquarters," she said simply. "I understood that was the plan."

"It was," he agreed, "but the plan has changed. Take us to the airport."

Kelly asked, "Why? Mandy said that the Senator is expecting you."

"He'll understand," Cameron defended. "We have to catch a plane."

Kelly couldn't deal with his logic. She had been flying in private planes for the past nine years and she knew who should be in charge of the take-off time.

She maintained her course toward Albright's headquarters and said quietly, "The plane will wait. It's important that you stop by to show your support to the Senator."

"Didn't you see the returns coming in at the station?" Cameron asked impatiently.

"Of course," Kelly replied. She hated it when Cameron asked her stupid questions.

"Well," he countered, "Albright's losing." Cameron said it as if this should be an explanation for not going to see his mentor on the most critical night of the statesman's thirty-year career.

"So?" Kelly asked, obviously missing his point.

"So," Cameron explained with strained patience, "I don't want to be seen with a loser."

Kelly felt as if she had been kicked in the stomach. She idolized Senator Albright and she always thought that Cameron did too. Her own sister would be at the campaign headquarters with the elder gentleman and his wife. Mandy had flown all over the state with them to political rallies and picnics. The Senator had taken Mandy under his wing, as he had done for other promising young people, but none more

intensely than Cameron, his bright and shining star. Kelly pictured the Senator watching Cameron's interview on television, knowing that he was only ten blocks away, and then realizing that his young protégé had abandoned him at the mere count of a vote. She felt hot tears forming in her eyes as she steered away from the headquarters and back toward the airport.

"Senator Albright may not win this election," Kelly spoke softly, her voice breaking with emotion, "but," she swallowed, then continued with firm drawn-out emphasis on every word, "he will never be a 'loser.'"

Kelly made no pretense of further conversation with the foreign people in her car. She drove them to the airport in stony silence, dropped them off without a word, and drove straight to Albright's headquarters. She found Mandy in tears and hugged her gently.

Mandy gratefully returned the hug, then asked her older sister, "Where's Cameron?"

"I took him back to the airport."

"I don't blame you," Mandy nodded. "I can't believe what he did to you."

"What?" Kelly frowned.

"I heard that he had Mallory with him when you picked him up."

"No," Kelly laughed, "it wasn't Mallory. It was one of the most pitiful-looking women I ever saw. I don't know where he found her. I guess Cameron meant it to be some kind of a joke. I just ignored it."

Mandy shook her head.

"He found her at Yale, Kelly. That was Mallory," Mandy said bluntly. "I just talked to a friend of mine at the station who knows her. I was calling to see why y'all weren't here yet and he told me. He said you were really cool about it, though."

For the second time in the hour, Kelly felt like she had been kicked in the stomach.

"I can't believe he would do this to you, Kelly," Mandy said sympathetically, "but, since you weren't mad at him for that, why didn't you bring him with you? The Senator was

looking forward to congratulating him and having some pictures taken. He said that tonight is the beginning of his dream for Cameron.”

“Cameron made me take him back to the airport without coming by here. He said he didn’t want to be seen with a ‘loser.’” Kelly spat out the word ‘loser’ and looked over Mandy’s shoulder at the tall, slim, elegant Senator Albright. His wife stood loyally by his side, a hint of tears brimming in her eyes as she envisioned the end of their thirty years of distinguished service in Washington.

The lights glared harshly on the Senator as newspaper and television reporters fired their questions at him, asking him if he were ready to concede the election. Senator Albright nodded and smiled graciously in defeat, searching the faces in the crowded room and thanking his friends for their support. Mandy and Kelly joined the others in enthusiastic applause.

Seeing the tears in her older sister’s eyes, Mandy hugged her again and whispered, “Oh, Kelly, I can’t believe that Cameron would do this to you.”

Kelly replied softly, “I can’t believe he would do this to the Senator.”



