

CHAPTER ONE



LOGAN, UTAH
LATE FEBRUARY

EVERYONE KNEW IT WAS INEVITABLE—EVERYONE BUT AVERY ELKINS Thompson herself.

She smashed the television first, though she hadn't intended to. She had fumbled with the remote for ten minutes, trying to figure out how to record an NBC special, and when the TiVo brought up the screen with the list of programs to record—*his* list, filled with westerns and mysteries and classic comedies—she lost it. She hurled the remote across the room, not intending for it to hit the center of the screen, but it did.

There was something surprisingly cathartic about the sound. The cracking glass and sprinkling shards of glass sounded familiar to her, like the inward sounds of her long-denied heart, which broke into a thousand pieces every morning when she woke up in an empty bed and went into the bathroom, where only one toothbrush now hung in the holder. The sound unlocked years of pain, and emotions rushed out with such ferocity that, as if possessed, Avery lashed out at the other instruments of torture he had left behind—the jammed VCR that only he could coax into releasing the old family

videotapes, and the vacuum cleaner that gobbled one of his errant anniversary cuff links, a crime for which it had paid the ultimate price, complete disassembly. Then, soaked with tears, she went after the real enemy.

She clicked the mouse on the computer and brought up folders filled with letters and love notes sent from across the globe. She read each one, lamenting over the dates in the headers, the last one written almost eight months ago from a hotel in Chicago. Finding it unbearable to read even a word of the text, Avery shut her eyes against the pain but the words came anyway, memorized words read a hundred times over, filled with private jokes and tender expressions of long-distance longings. She could barely breathe, and the waves of shuddering racked her body until anger and fury replaced her sorrow. A final look at an image pasted into one of the letters sent her over the edge, and she began to sweep the entire computer system onto the floor. But as the printer slid off the desk she saw herself reverting to the crisis-driven, fists-at-the-ready person she was before Paul, and she slumped over the keyboard, crying as hundreds of pages of B's swept across the screen.

The next day was more productive. A few hours of work, a broom, a dustpan, and \$3,327.98 later, all was nearly as good as new. All except for the gouge in the wooden floor where the old TV landed . . . and the mangled computer. Three days later her two oldest children and her son-in-law arrived with their youngest sibling to help their mother survive her first wedding anniversary as a widow. They actually seemed pleased to see the changes, assuming them to be signs that their mother was showing interest in her home and life again.

"The place looks great, Mom," gushed Wes with surprise. "Cool flat screen. I'm glad you've finally done something for yourself."

The phrase “You have no idea” rattled around in her mind, but steel-willed Avery said innocently, “Thank you, Wes,” as she offered her cheek to receive the kiss her unmarried, twenty-four-year-old son offered, never missing a beat as she whipped the egg whites for meringue.

The buzzer went off on the oven and Avery began wiping her hands so she could retrieve the yams.

“I’ll get them. You sit down,” insisted Jamie, taking hold of her mother’s shoulders and leading her to a chair. “You look tired.”

The concern in Jamie’s voice brought a protective Luke rushing into the kitchen. He took one look at the meringue and squawked, “Forget the pies! You don’t need to make pies!”

Avery noted the new tone in her children’s voices when they addressed her—the worry-driven, slower-tempo, higher-pitched as-if-they-were-talking-to-a-child tone that annoyingly rose even higher at the end of each phrase, particularly when it included the word “Mom.” It was different with Luke. Only nineteen and quiet by nature, he now tended to express his emotions with volume. Avery saw the same thing in other high school students, particularly the boys. She called it the “Rahhh” principle. Fear, worry, disappointment, hurt—it all came out as “*Rahhh!!!*” Yes, she could see through Luke.

She tried not to think about it but knew that something monumental—no, something cataclysmic—had happened to them as well on the day their adored father died, and it was more than merely losing a father. It was as if the universe had shifted, placing each of them in a new orbit of sorts. Wes had become the self-proclaimed head of the family, Jamie now wanted to hover protectively over Avery, and Luke instantly catapulted himself out of latent adolescence and into adulthood. It was time, of

course, but the rapid shift in her youngest's perspective on life was a rude awakening for both mother and son.

"Mind if I check my email?" asked her twenty-nine-year-old son-in-law, Brady, already seated in front of the computer.

"Uh . . ." she stalled, but it was too late.

"Hey, Avery—" Brady began as he walked back in carrying the mangled remains of a USB cord whose end had been ripped away. He chuckled as Avery hurried over to him, grabbed the wire, and smiled sheepishly as she shoved the contraption into the pocket of her apron.

"I don't think you gave the poor thing a fighting chance, Avery," Brady teased, seemingly unaffected by the glares his wife was shooting him from across the room. "I can fix it for you. I've got some parts from the store out in my car. Would you like me to work on it?"

Avery cringed with each word. The more attention he focused on the problem, the wider her three children's eyes grew. "Sure, Brady. That'd be just great," she muttered in monotone as she hurried over to sauté some Brussels sprouts.

The rest of the day progressed uneventfully. Wes stepped up to say the blessing, and everyone fell silent as that patriarchal landmark was crossed. The meal was accented with light banter—reminiscences of days past—though Avery noted the conspicuous way her children avoided mentioning Paul, as if their father was not only gone but had never existed at all. Feeling as if the best portion of her own life was being obliterated, she folded her napkin with such deliberateness that she brought the conversation to a complete halt. When she looked up, she saw eight worried eyes riveted on her.

"Are you all right, Mother?" Jamie asked softly.

Avery noted how her daughter now consistently referred to her as "Mother" instead of "Mom." She could barely speak,

so she initially responded with a rapid series of nods. “It’s all right to talk about your father,” she finally managed to say. “Avoiding his memory doesn’t ease my sorrow. In fact, it makes it worse.”

“We just—uh—” mumbled Luke.

Pulling herself together again, Avery said, “I know, I know.”

They played board games after supper. Then, while she and Jamie did the dishes, Avery noticed the guys huddled near the TV. She didn’t give it much thought other than to wince at the extravagance of her purchase, a flat screen, which she had selected because an upgrade seemed the only covert justification for replacing the old set that still worked just fine. Around seven, when Brady caught Avery yawning and suggested they leave, she saw a new level of worry wash over Jamie, knowing she was panicking about leaving her mother.

Wes wrapped his arm playfully around his mother’s shoulders and gave her an exaggerated shake. “Up for some Mario Kart Wii, Mom?”

“Some other time, pal,” Avery laughed. “The cook is ready to hit the hay.”

With the tension eased sufficiently to allow Jamie to make a guilt-free exit, the young marrieds left, and Avery went inside and began turning off the lights. In the office where the small desk lamp glowed brightly, she gazed at the bookshelves where fifteen Avery Elkins Thompson first editions stood. They were Paul’s proudest possessions, and Avery knew he had read each one at least three or four times, curled up in the big lounge by the bay window. They brought her no pleasure this night, nor had they any night since her muse died.

She sat at the computer. Just seeing its screen lit again seemed to mock her pain. There would be no sweet notes waiting in her

email file, no links to exotic destinations they fantasized about journeying to. As she clicked the final command to shut down the computer, she noticed a little pile of USB connectors with a sticky note in Brady's handwriting. "Just in case," it read. Avery smiled. She adored that son-in-law of hers, though he was a challenge sometimes, seeming to function better in his techno-babble world where logic revealed the answer to any problem, than in the messy world of illogical human drama.

Jamie and Brady were a mismatched pair, and Avery knew it was as much circumstance as passion that drew her perky daughter to the TA, seven years her senior. He was tall. She was short. He was gangly; she was graceful and lithe. She was always comely and neat, where Brady was equally at ease in wrinkled polyester or four-day-old sweats. Still, he was kind and he was steady, two elements common to the weakening father Jamie had been steeling herself to lose. That fear had made her tough and rigid at times, a woman exerting control over a universe slipping away from her, and sweet Brady yielded to her as much as possible.

"She is not her mother," Avery sighed as she switched the light off. She checked the lights in the downstairs bathroom and passed the "wall of fame," where all the kids' photos were on display. *Cookie-cutter faces*, she mused. She and Paul were very different looking, and yet their children looked undeniably similar, all fair complected and brown-eyed like her, all possessing various shades of Paul's dark, wavy hair and trademark pouty smile. *You could pick the three of them out of any crowd.*

"Did you say something, Mom?" asked Luke as he poured a glass of milk to wash down his second piece of pecan pie.

"I'm just enjoying watching you eat my pie."

"Your cooking is the best," Wes chimed in.

Avery eyed them skeptically. “Why are two handsome, single guys hanging around Logan with their mother? Surely there are some nice young ladies who would appreciate your company.” She eyed Wes carefully, watching for any sign she had struck a nerve. “Wes?”

Wes backed away into the family room near the TV. “Talk to me, Mom,” he urged as he pulled her along.

“Wes—” she protested.

“It got to you today, didn’t it? Dad’s death, I mean.”

Avery stuttered and smiled, trying to deflect the worry imbedded in the question. “I’m . . . I’m fine.”

Wes reached behind the cabinet and retrieved some shards of glass that had eluded her. “What really happened here, Mom?”

Avery knew his question wasn’t intended to be intrusive or judgmental, yet if she answered truthfully, it would lead them through a portal from which they might never fully return. Wes could handle it—the acceptance that his mother was fragile and frightened by the prospects of widowhood. And Avery knew somehow that Jamie was already aware of that disconcerting fact. It was Luke, whose sad eyes darted from hers to the floor and back, that she knew would be crushed by the revelation, and for him she would maintain the pretense of stoicism and carry on.

“All right,” she began hesitatingly, “I admit it. I was trying to move the darn thing and dropped it on the floor.”

She looked at her boys to gauge the success of her subterfuge. Wes appeared dubious, but a spark of hope lit Luke’s eyes, so she continued to add more plausibility to her tale. “I know I shouldn’t have, but . . .” She was a terrible liar. It was the last “talent” the pious woman’s kids would imagine her honing, but here she was, going for the

blue ribbon. “I hadn’t cleaned back there for months, not since—”

Wes tipped his head sideways as he weighed the story, but Luke jumped right in, relief evident in his voice. “See, Wes. I told you.” He turned to his mother, chuckling under his breath as he exited the room. “And Wes thought you were losing it.”

Avery sighed, realizing she had temporarily dodged the bullet with Luke, but Wes wouldn’t let it go. “What about the vacuum cleaner? I can understand replacing the VCR. Dad was the only one who could make it work anyway, and I know the Kirby vacuum cleaner was from the Neanderthal period, but it’s in about eight pieces out in the garage. What’s that about?”

Avery tried to dream up more excuses, but she was too wrung out to play that game any longer. “Please, Wes,” she begged with a cracking voice, “I’m trying to be strong.”

“For who, Mom?” he asked incredulously, shooting a look in the direction his brother exited. “For Luke? He’s not a kid anymore.”

“You don’t understand. You and Jamie had more life experiences to prepare you for this.”

“Mom!” Wes turned on her with frustration and then quickly backed down. “No amount of life experience can prepare anyone for this.”

Avery stared at her son in utter confusion. “Dad’s health was failing for years, Wes. Surely you knew.”

“That he was going to die?” His voice was bitter. “Sure, I knew that. We all knew that it would happen eventually. Heck, it’s just about all we’ve talked about for the last three years.”

Avery sank into the chair and Wes rushed to her side. “I’m sorry, Mom,” he said as he knelt beside her. “We’ve all talked about how losing Dad has affected each of us, and all of us, even Luke, can see how hard this has been for you.”

Avery stared straight ahead, musing at her folly in trying to hide such a thing from her sensitive, astute children. “I thought I’d been so strong. I didn’t want to burden you.”

“You’ve been great, Mom, the way you’ve carried on, but it’s just not normal. People are supposed to lean on those they love when they grieve. We’ve had each other to vent and grieve with, but because you were trying so hard to move on, we didn’t feel we could come to you.”

Avery gasped and turned to her son to be sure she had heard him correctly. “I . . . I’m so sorry,” she said as tiny tears wet her lashes.

“No, Mom, no. We’ll be fine. We know why you handled things the way you did. We’re just saying that we’re not kids anymore. Let us help.”

Avery bit her trembling lip to still it.

“I’ve been offered an internship in Florida this semester. My construction program hooked me up with a nice opportunity outside Orlando, working on a resort. If things go well there I might finish the rest of my courses online and relocate. I’d like you to think about coming down with me. A change would do us both some good.”

“Florida? I could never—”

“Why not?” Wes interrupted. “I know you love the water, yet you haven’t visited the Baltimore condo in years. Remember how much you and Dad loved Anna Maria Island those summers when I went to Bradenton for tennis camp? The island is only two hours from Orlando. We can see each other plenty, spend weekends together.”

For a second the idea brought back pleasant memories of splashing along the beach with Paul and the kids, but the thought of going alone made Avery’s stomach knot, and she stood abruptly. “Thank you, Wes, but I couldn’t. I just couldn’t.”

“Why not?” he asked softly.

Avery looked at the floor and shook her head. “I wouldn’t feel right. Not without Dad.”

Wes gritted his teeth so hard his jaw bulged. “You shouldn’t punish yourself because of Dad’s choices, Mom.”

Avery heard the accusation in her son’s voice and spun around to stare at him. “What are you saying?”

Wes quickly backpedaled. “All I’m saying is that Dad did what made him happy.” The acrid tone was still there. “Wouldn’t he want you to do the same now?”

Avery knew that wasn’t all he had been trying to say, but she couldn’t get into this discussion—not this night. “I’m going to bed, Wes,” she said firmly as she headed for the stairs.

“Just think about it, okay?” he called after her.

Avery headed over to the mirror on the wall at the top of the stairs to look at her reflection. She wondered if the overwhelming fatigue overtaking her was as apparent on the outside. It had been so bad lately that she had gone to see the doctor to be sure her own heart wasn’t failing. Surreally, the thought didn’t frighten her, not at first, anyway. Life had become so daunting, and the promises of eternity were so sweet that joining Paul in paradise seemed fine to her. That was until she considered what losing two parents would do to her children, so she made the appointment and saw the doctor. As soon as she knew her heart was fine the rest of the diagnosis seemed trite.

“You’re depressed,” the doctor declared.

Ya think? she felt like saying, but she simply closed her eyes and nodded politely as two prescriptions were shoved into her hand.

She studied the image in the mirror, vaguely recognizing the face. It was a nice face, not beautiful but pleasant enough.

She noted that her mouth now fell into a natural frown unless she made it a point to smile, and she was distressed to note that her eyes were now droopy too. Removing her glasses, she stood nearer the mirror to better see herself. The past few years had doubled the lines surrounding those forty-eight-year-old eyes, around which she had previously spent years slathering anti-aging cream. She stared at her disappointing reflection again. Her hair was a drab brown, neither long nor short, her brows bushy and her complexion pale. Why had she let her appearance go? She knew the answer was the same as it was to every other thing that had gone awry in her life. *Because Paul is gone.*

Avery pushed the Anna Maria Island thing from her mind but suddenly focused on the catalyst for Wes's idea. *He's going to Florida.* She wondered why that seemed so worrisome to her, and then she knew. It meant he was still rootless. Two years after returning home from Peru on his mission for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, he was still unattached and floundering.

"Floundering." Avery knew it wasn't a word anyone else would ascribe to her oldest son. He was academically successful and a hard worker. The foreman at the construction job where he worked part time couldn't say enough good about him, but Wes couldn't settle down. He hadn't even had a steady girlfriend since he got home, though most of his mission buddies were married now, some with babies. Avery's sisters back in Maryland couldn't understand her preoccupation with marrying her kids off, but then they didn't understand very much about their Mormon sibling and her peculiar lifestyle and expectations. Their kids were churchgoers. A few had even served missions of their own, heading to Indian reservations or flood-ravaged communities during summers to clean up

and rebuild. They were good kids with good values, so their mothers could never understand why or how Avery sent Wes to Peru for two years.

She tried unsuccessfully to explain it, how it was the best and the hardest thing she had ever done—until this. The pain of those early letters no longer tore at her heart, the ones where Wes had tried to focus on the spirit of the Missionary Training Center despite the tremendous inadequacies he felt. And then the letters began to turn as he was filled with a more personal testimony of the Savior. She wished she could have been a fly on the wall and watched him grow into the man he had become by the time he returned home.

She remembered that day so clearly, the look on his face when he came through customs and saw the changes in his father's appearance. That was when she too was forced to accept the truth about Paul's condition. It had been the worst day of her life, and also the best, because in watching the way her son responded to his father, disguising his worry with respect and honor, she understood the reward for such missionary sacrifice. Oh, there had been such incredible growth! He understood and dealt with people in a new way, and the discipline he had developed was a boon to him academically and professionally, but it was that personal growth that still astounded her, never more severely tested than during these past few months.

Most of the time Avery was amazed by Wes, trusted him, and leaned on him, but she knew his prolonged grief had skewed his thinking. He was bitter about something now and she needed to set things right.

The next morning, Avery showered and put on a comfortable top, then reached for a pair of jeans. But when she pulled up the jeans they were too snug, and in utter humiliation, she was forced to reach for a size-14 pair of knit pants, proof that Wes

was right. Paul's death had been getting to her for a while. She was a nervous eater, someone who worked her problems out in front of the fridge or over a quart of ice cream, and she knew she had been employing these very coping mechanisms the past month as the calendar page turned to April and she faced her first spring without Paul. Feeling too frumpy to bother with any further efforts at self-beautification, she rejected the effort required to wear contacts that day, slapped on her glasses, ran a hairbrush through her mousy hair, and headed downstairs to begin making a big breakfast.

"Food is love." It was another page from her nurturing catalog that was being demonized by Oprah and all the thin people and thin wannabes. She scowled at the refrigerated calories bundled up in her arms. She kept the eggs, put the sausage back, and grabbed some low-fat shredded cheese and a carton of mushrooms. As she was washing the mushrooms, she heard the squeak on the upstairs floor heralding Wes's walk from his bed to the bathroom.

She smiled unconsciously at her ability to read the sounds of her beloved old Cache Valley house. She knew each squeak of each floor board in each room, as well as the fall of each person's individual footsteps, to the point that she had even learned to decode the reluctant trudge of a negligent school child from a perky step when the child's backpack was fully loaded with the day's completed assignments. Yes, she could stand down here making breakfast and judge what kind of morning they were having just from the sounds of their feet above her.

It was a somewhat isolated house, approachable only by climbing the steep bank of a jutting cliff that overlooked the river more than a hundred feet below, or by the long, winding drive that snaked along the mountainside. It was a bear to

access in the snow, but it provided a beautiful view coming and going. Paul and she built it after her first mystery was published, despite the fact that it only sold a few thousand copies. Paul's teaching-assistant salary from Utah State University could hardly pay the mortgage, but he believed so heartily in her talent that he insisted they move ahead, and before their closing date, book two of her mystery series was in the publisher's hands, and Paul had passed the bar.

It was not a fancy house by today's standards, but it was far more extravagant than anything Avery had ever imagined living in after growing up in a row home in Dundalk, Maryland. She discovered quite by accident that her sisters snidely referred to it as "the chalet," a term that had hurt her initially, considering that the combined total of her entire family's visits to her and her family was four, despite annual invitations for them to come there to vacation. In time, Avery came to rather like the term, and she and Paul would don French accents and thusly refer to "the chalet" when discussing their home or when shopping for bric-a-brac.

How she loved its handmade, brown brick walkways, cedar siding, and cedar-shingle roof. It was a maintenance nightmare, but she loved the open and airy living area with broad, exposed beams and an expansive kitchen divided from the living area only by the large, family-style pine table and eight chairs. She loved the view from her work area that faced the huge stone fireplace where they had all popped popcorn and roasted chestnuts, things she had only imagined as the stuff of books and songs before Paul.

Paul was a book nerd and she was a dreamer. The two of them snuggled up in quilts before that old fireplace and slept there, warmed by the glowing embers and their love, each of them believing that no one had ever loved as they had—a

love so fulfilling that sorrow and greed were unfathomable because the best treasures of life lay in their partner's embrace. Sleeping in front of the fireplace became a Christmas Eve tradition, as much out of need as romance when, too exhausted to drag their bodies to bed after hours of assembling bikes and dollhouses, they would collapse in front of the hearth in one another's arms.

Avery turned to spy the open staircase, with its pine steps and handrail. It had provided the perfect backdrop on Christmas morning. The children would stand on the top landing, calling to their sleepy-eyed parents, begging for permission to come down. Avery would stave them off as best she could while Paul got the camera. Then utter pandemonium would break out.

Memories overwhelmed her as she reached for a small bowl. *How I miss the pandemonium!* She cracked three eggs into the bowl and whisked them before pouring them into the sizzling omelet pan.

I still have my memories and this old house. Perhaps that was what made Wes's offer so unthinkable. Avery knew he wasn't trying to lure her away forever, but right now, the thought of closing up the place and leaving it to sit empty and alone somehow made her feel the way she felt about Paul's death.

A gnawing pain wrenched Avery's gut but she shook her head, pushed the thought away, and hurried on to make toast. Wes came ambling in wearing a pullover she hadn't seen in a decade but that had crossed her laundry pile about a million times back in the day.

"Why are you smiling like that?" Wes asked as he tried to flatten a deep crease in the shirt.

"Where in the world—?"

Wes laughed like the kid who once wore the shirt. "It was

stuffed in the back of my bottom drawer. It used to be my favorite shirt. Why'd I stop wearing it?"

"Turn around and look in the mirror," said Avery with a chuckle. "Remember the great blueberry battle of '99?"

"Oh, yeah," laughed Wes as he pulled the shirt off over his head.

"Sit down. I've got an omelet and toast ready. Are you in a hurry?"

"No, but I thought I'd make sure the pine needles aren't clogging the gutters before I go."

"Uh-huh." Avery nodded absently. "I've been thinking about our conversation last night."

Wes brightened. "And?"

"I can't go, Wes."

His hands immediately flew to his hips as they did when he was a little boy and a situation aggravated him. "Why not?"

"I can rattle off a number of reasons, but I'd rather you just accept my answer."

"I'd like to hear some of those reasons, Mom."

Avery was caught off guard. She had never been an iron-fisted parent, but there had always been a clear but unspoken rule in the house—"Don't sass Mom"—which the kids rarely broke, and then only at the risk of being grounded, or death.

"I have obligations, Wes," she said with a raised eyebrow of warning. "I can't just pick up and go gallivanting around the countryside."

Wes pursued more gently. "What obligations? The high school? You're just a volunteer." Obviously regretting those words, he immediately countered with, "Not that that's not important. I know you mentor the kids in the writing lab. It's

just that, well, someone else can do that. Your needs should come first for once.”

Avery heard an indictment hiding behind his words, just as it had the previous night. The fact that Wes felt strongly enough about this Florida thing to cross her assured Avery how important this decision was to him. The question was, why?

“What I need is to stay here, around the people and things that are familiar. I’ve had enough change in my life for one year.” Wes’s face fell flat and Avery placed a hand on his shoulder. “Tell me why this Florida move is so critical to you. And don’t try to convince me that it’s the best opportunity you’ve been offered. What’s really going on?”

Wes poked holes in his toast with his fingertip, clearly stalling. Finally, he looked at his mother with pained eyes. “I can’t be here anymore, Mom. At least not for a while.”

Avery felt as if someone had kicked her in the heart. “Why?” she barely managed.

“I have all these emotions boiling inside me since Dad died. They’ve gotten worse since I’ve come home.” He jumped from his seat and strode towards the corner of the room.

Avery followed numbly behind him, struggling to get around the implications of his words. “I don’t understand.”

“It’s as if every one of my good memories is threatened now. I see that photo of us camping in Yosemite, and Dad’s face smiling like he’s so happy to be with us, and then I have to ask myself, ‘Was he, really?’ If he was, then why didn’t he take care of himself so he could stay with us, Mom?”

Avery slumped into a chair by the fireplace. “I had no idea . . .”

“That I was angry?” Wes blew out a long breath of air. “He was a diabetic with a heart condition. The doctors warned him what would happen if he didn’t change his habits, but he didn’t.

He didn't slow his work schedule down, he didn't exercise, he missed doctors' appointments, he didn't eat properly. I read the report. Man alive, Mom! His sugar was off the charts and he still had two candy bars in his pocket when he dropped dead at O'Hare!"

Avery just stared into the empty fireplace. It was true. It was all true. "Wes you have to—" She bit her knuckles to stave off the tears. "I never should've allowed you to go with me to Chicago to identify Dad's body. Maybe if you hadn't seen him that way . . . maybe you'd be able to remember—"

"Please, Mom," Wes said, holding his hand up to stop her. "It would've been the same. And please don't tell me to remember the good times or to hold on to fact that we'll be together forever. How can I when Dad didn't even care about being with us now?"

Avery felt as if the last threads of her tattered world were being pulled apart. "Are you the only one who feels this way?"

Wes sat on the coffee table facing her. "No. Jamie cries because Dad didn't hang around to see her have babies, and now she worries about losing you."

"And Luke? Is this why he hasn't turned in his mission papers?"

"Partly. Like Jamie, he's afraid something will happen to you if he goes far away for two years. Other than that, I can't really read him. All I know is that I need to get out of here for a while. I can't be surrounded by images of my happy childhood until I can get past this anger I feel towards Dad."

"Wes—" Avery began again.

"No, Mom. Admit it. You feel it too. That's why you crushed the TV and hammered the computer. You can't understand his choices any better than I can."

Avery felt the cramping begin in her stomach, the cause of

which she had denied the past several years. She wrapped her arms around her midsection and fought it again.

“I feel just like that.” The voice came from beside her. It was Luke, pointing at her.

Avery tearfully reached for his hand. “I can’t explain Dad’s choices,” she sighed. “I only know that he loved us, loved us with all his heart. Why he chose to do or not do certain things—well, I can’t answer those questions, but I don’t doubt for one second that he loved us, and if you were honest with yourselves you’d admit that too.”

Luke sat by his mother on the arm of her chair. “I know, but it still doesn’t make sense to me. We’re each making peace with it in our own way.”

Avery looked into his sad brown eyes. “What about your mission?”

Luke cut her off. “Dad was my spiritual anchor, Mom. Losing him this way . . .” His voice trailed off. “I need some time, okay?”

Avery didn’t press it.

Wes drew close and placed his hands on his mother’s knees. “I need to get out of this valley for a while. We think it would do you some good too.”

“What about Jamie?” Avery asked.

“She knew we were going to raise this with you. That’s why she was so anxious last night. She doesn’t want you to go so far away, but she can’t bear to see you carrying on like a zombie any longer. You’re not yourself, Mom. You haven’t been for a long time.”

Avery looked at her sons with an anxious frown.

“I know how busy you’ve been taking care of Dad. You look worn out, and you haven’t published anything the past few years.”

“That’s because I haven’t been able to write anything worth printing. Maybe there’s nothing left in me to say.”

“Or maybe it’s all just locked up inside you like your feelings. Maybe once you make your own peace with Dad’s death you’ll be able to write again.”

Looking now to Luke, she had to admit to the changes in him. She marveled at how it was the silent sounds that resonated the loudest in her life—the stilling of Paul’s once-mighty heart, the change in her status from married to widowed, the sound of Luke’s retreat. “Do you feel the same way Wes does?”

“I do,” Luke said softly. “I wanted to deny it, but after talking to Wes last night, I have to admit that I’ve felt it too. Bit by bit you’ve been shrinking, just like Dad, and since he died, well, you’re like a ghost of who you really are. I fought Wes on this at first, but I’ve changed my mind. I agree with him and Jamie. I’d gladly let you go for a while if it meant getting you back again—the way you were.”

Hours later, staring at her downcast face, Avery could understand what they meant. She had become a ghost of herself, and she didn’t know what to do about it or who she really was anymore. Growing up in a home that served up a dysfunctional kind of love had made her a streetwise, self-protecting person, but Paul had changed all that. He and the gospel had helped her develop the best of her traits and make strengths from the others, but without him she felt herself becoming a new personality—a persona of withering hope, and this Avery frightened her the most.

Dropping her head into her hands, she cried, “Is this how it will be forever?”

CHAPTER TWO



ANNA MARIA ISLAND, FLORIDA
FEBRUARY 21

EMILIA CARSON CAME RUSHING THROUGH THE FRONT DOOR OF THE PRICEY Anna Maria Island waterfront home yelling, “Daddy!” with such intensity it brought her father from the kitchen in a shot.

“What in the—?” Gabriel Carson shouted as the color slowly returned to his tanned face. He stared at his twenty-three-year-old daughter.

“I got it! The internship with the Colton Agency!” she exclaimed as she tossed her chic denim jacket onto the sofa.

“Millie! You nearly scared me to death. No wonder my hair’s snow white at fifty-two.”

“Sorry, Daddy,” she offered contritely, embracing him with her cashmere-clad arms while simultaneously reading the mail clutched in her hands. “It’s just that I thought I didn’t have a chance, and now the job’s mine.”

“Internship.”

“Whatever,” she said, discounting his correction. “If I do a great job on my assignment, they’ll definitely offer me a permanent position. Imagine, your little girl, an executive