

MEG MOSELEY

when
sparrows
fall

a novel



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WATERBROOK
P R E S S



*To my husband, whose love shelters my dreams.
In memory of my father and his mother,
who gave me the dream of writing.*

If running late showed a streak of rebellion, Miranda Hanford was already in trouble. Pulling her van to the side of the narrow road, she tallied the other vehicles lined up on the shoulder. She wasn't the last to arrive at Mason's emergency meeting. She could steal a moment with Jezebel.

She picked up her camera and climbed out. Working quickly in the cold, she framed the last sliver of sun, as red as a forest fire above the pine-stubbed peaks. In the foreground, a maple sapling curled its bare limbs around the sunset, unwilling to let go—like sweet, stubborn Martha at bedtime, refusing to believe the day was over.

Miranda clicked the shutter. Before the sun abandoned the Blue Ridge to the night, she nailed five promising shots. She tucked the camera into its case and locked it in the van. An old lady who'd seen more of the world than her owner ever would, Jezebel deserved tender care.

Holding her cape closed, Miranda hurried up the long, steep driveway. Mason had called only the single women for this meeting. Six who hadn't married yet and two widows.

She hated that word. Widows were supposed to be meek, gray things with grandchildren and arthritis.

Around the last bend of the driveway, the lights of the house shone their welcome. Snow flurries swirled like silver glitter as she ran up the steps to the porch.

She knocked lightly and joined the women in the living room. They'd congregated in a semicircle of folding chairs near the feeble warmth of the fireplace, their hands clasped in their laps and their voices subdued. Like the others, Miranda left her cape on, but a draft crept under her skirt and up her legs like icy fingers. She sat beside Lenore Schwartz, the other widow.

"Where's Nicole?" someone asked.

No one knew. Abigail too was missing, her absence making the room colder still. If Mason's wife had been home, she would have been dispensing hugs and peppermint tea.

The ladies hushed when their pastor strode into the room. Mason crossed to the hearth and picked up the poker. He shoved the logs into compliance, making sparks fly.

Amid the smell of smoke and ashes, he hung up the poker. He cut a handsome figure, his temples barely touched with gray and his face remarkably unlined for his fifty-some years.

"Ladies, thank you for coming on such short notice. I want to share what I announced at the men's meeting last night." He paused, surveying the semicircle like a watchful shepherd inspecting his lambs.

One of the flawed lambs, Miranda shifted in her chair. It squeaked in the silence.

"I have a word from the Lord." Again, Mason took a moment to study the women. "I am to move from Slades Creek."

Mason leaving town? Miranda's heart made an unexpected leap, but Lenore bleated in distress and twisted her age-spotted hands together.

"We're moving to North Carolina," he said, "to a beautiful little town

called McCabe. Where people take care of themselves and each other. Where the government stays out of people's business."

Miranda fidgeted again, and her chair betrayed her restlessness with another creak. If the government didn't stay out of people's business in Georgia, it wasn't likely to be much better in North Carolina.

"If it's the Lord's will, it's the Lord's will," Lenore said, "but I don't know how we'll get along without you and Abigail. We'll miss you terribly."

"No, you won't." Mason smiled. "You're coming with us. All of you. It's a new beginning for the whole church. There are jobs in McCabe. Inexpensive housing too, and clean air and water. It's practically paradise."

A wave of excited whispers rustled through the room, but defiance woke within Miranda and prowled like an angry cat. She couldn't leave Slades Creek. She wouldn't.

"I've already put our house on the market," Mason said, "and the other men will follow suit as soon as they can." He nodded at Lenore, then Miranda, the only single women in the church who owned homes. "I'll be glad to help you start the process."

Some of the men might have argued, but these women without men didn't. They embraced their marching orders with joy.

All but Miranda. She saw an escape route.

Yet, as Mason answered questions with a twinkle of amusement in his eyes, she felt a pang of loss. The church had become her family. She would miss the women, especially Abigail. Friends, secret-sharers, burden-bearers, these women were the sisters Miranda had never had. The mother she'd lost to an Ohio jail.

Once the discussion had played itself out, she spoke, veiling her agitation with a downcast gaze and a respectful tone. "I'll miss everyone—very much—but Carl wouldn't have wanted me to move."

The room hushed to a shocked stillness, punctuated by the snapping and hissing of the fire.

“I only want to honor his wishes,” she added. “He always said we should hang onto the land, no matter what. For the children’s sake. He said it’s as good as money in the bank.”

Mason’s silver blue eyes flashed a warning. “We’ll discuss it later, Miranda.”

She studied the blunt toes of her sturdy brown shoes. Now she’d reinforced her status as a troublemaker.

But so what? Her pastor was leaving town. And soon.

She frowned. Why the rush? Well, Mason and Abigail could hurry. They had no family. No children to uproot from their home or leave behind.

Miranda looked up, startled, when a paper appeared before her, in Mason’s hands. She took it, and he gave one to Lenore too.

“A checklist to help expedite the process,” he said. “Weed out, fix up, sell. It’s almost spring. The perfect time to attract buyers.”

The photocopied list was written in Mason’s neat, square printing. With bullet points. With tips for increasing the value of a home. With phone numbers of handymen, painters, and real estate companies. He’d even included the donation drop-off hours for the local thrift store.

He dismissed the meeting. Each woman folded her chair and leaned it against the wall beside the piano. Abigail’s living room returned to normal except for her absence.

“Somebody needs to tell Nicole,” Lenore said. “I wonder why she never showed up. And where’s Abigail?”

Mason laughed and opened the front door, admitting a gust of cold. “Why should my wife attend a meeting of single ladies?”

Because she’d attended every other women’s meeting, Miranda thought, wondering if Abigail’s absence was related to Nicole’s.

“Well, tell her we missed her.” Lenore turned to Miranda. “You’ll find another nice piece of property, honey. You’ll find a new husband too. You’re so young.” Lenore seized her oversized handbag in one hand and her cane in the other and led the charge to the front door. “All you pretty young things, you’ll find husbands there.”

Miranda hung back as the chattering pack traipsed onto the porch, exchanging their good-nights. When Mason closed the door on the cold and faced her, she'd never felt so much like an ungrateful and obstinate child.

"Miranda, Miranda," he said with a heavy sigh. "I hope you aren't serious about staying behind."

"I am." She folded his checklist in half, then in half again. "I can't imagine uprooting the children. And the land has been in Carl's mother's family for generations. I can't sell."

"Land is only land. Your children are young enough to adjust to a move. So are you. You're young enough to start over."

The paper rustled in her fingers as she folded it twice more, making it a tiny rectangle. "I don't want to start over. I want to raise my family right here in Slades Creek."

"It'll be harder to raise your family if you don't have help from the church when you can't quite pay the bills."

"Yes, but—"

"And what if there's a good, godly man waiting for you in McCabe? What if God plans to play matchmaker? Don't take this lightly, Miranda. If you deny God the chance to act, you may be depriving yourself of a husband. Depriving your children of a father. You need to hear from God about this. It's a question that deserves fasting and prayer."

She would start fasting, all right. She'd fast down to skin and bones so no man in his right mind would want her.

"You'd better start packing," Mason said. "The move will take you beyond the chastisement of God to true repentance and blessings."

"Wouldn't the church be better off if a black sheep like me stayed behind? I know I've been a trial to you and Abigail."

"No, no. Black sheep or not, you're part of my flock. Of course you'll move. And you'll be careful not to sow seeds of rebellion in the others."

She hesitated, wary of his new sternness. "I need to do what's best for my children."

“Then you’ll submit to the authority God has placed over you.” Mason shook his head. “I’ve invested in your life for years, Miranda. I’m the one who made sure Carl had excellent life insurance, and I’m the one who writes the checks from the benevolence fund. You would have lost your property years ago if I hadn’t looked after you, and now you won’t listen to my guidance?”

He still spoke softly, but this wasn’t the genial pastor who preached on Sundays and prayed for the sick and made a mean chili for potluck suppers. This was a different man. A hard, unreasonable man.

“What’s right for the church as a whole isn’t necessarily right for me,” she said, quaking inside.

“Remember, Miranda, ‘rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft.’”

The prowling cat inside her tested its claws. “I’m no witch, and it’s not rebellion to make my own decisions.”

“Before you make this particular decision, remember you’re still paying for some of Carl’s unwise choices.”

Her knees went weak. “What does that have to do with it?”

“This is your opportunity to put some distance between yourself and the things you’d like to keep quiet. If the state ever gets wind of what happened, if DFCS steps in... .”

She twisted her hands together behind her back. “I’ll take my chances.”

“Don’t be foolish. As you said, you have to do what’s best for the children. You want to protect them, don’t you?”

Tears stung her eyes. “Of course. Always.”

“Then you’ll move to McCabe.” Mason came closer, exhaling minty toothpaste. “I won’t be held accountable for the consequences if you stay.”

The veiled threat took her breath away.

She imagined a car in her driveway. A car that bore the state seal on its doors. At the wheel, a social worker who had the right to tear a woman’s children from her arms and feed them to the foster-care system, backed up by the Bartram County Sheriff’s Department. It happened, all too often. It happened even to parents who’d done nothing wrong.

“Agreed?” he asked. “You’ll sell? You’ll move with the rest of us?”

She shivered. She’d seen his anger before, she’d even been the target of it, but she’d never seen him as an enemy.

Now, though, he had threatened her children.

Slowly, she nodded. Fingers crossed behind her back. A liar.

Mason squinted, seeming to assess her sincerity. His somber expression warmed with that Hollywood smile. “Excellent. Now, don’t make waves. Don’t try to sway anyone into staying behind. Good night, Miranda.” He dismissed her with a nod.

Speechless, she stepped outside, jamming the checklist into the pocket of her cape. Night had fallen, and the cold mountain air chilled her to the core. She stared numbly at a cardboard box in the corner of the porch, stuffed so full of clothing that its flaps refused to stay folded down.

Abigail must have started weeding out their closets for the move. Her Christmas pullover lay on top, the same red as the construction-paper hearts the girls had cut out for Valentine’s Day. Abigail’s sister had mailed it from Topeka, but Mason said the color wasn’t appropriate for a pastor’s wife and the neckline was indecent.

Rubbish. It was perfectly modest.

Miranda tiptoed across the porch and snatched the sweater. She tucked it under her cape and ran down the steps. Now she was a thief too, but what was one more black mark against her?

She jogged down the steep driveway, slick with the barely-there snowfall. “I’m not moving. You can’t make me.” The jolting of her footsteps made her voice bounce as if she were jiggling a baby on her knee. That was what finally made her cry.

Her children. He had threatened to send the state after her children. They’d be like the family that had been in the news, their little ones scattered to different foster homes and the parents helpless against the authorities.

In the morning, she would ask her attorney about naming a new guardian. Someone outside the church. Someone with no ties to Mason. She had no

family though, with Auntie Lou long gone. No brothers, no sisters, no cousins.

Jack? It might have to be him, but she couldn't call him yet. Couldn't risk giving him the idea of showing up on her doorstep again. Not until it was safe.

With unsteady fingers, she unlocked the van. She fumbled the key into the ignition and shone the headlights on the dark, twisting road before her. She hadn't felt so alone in years. Nine years.

It was even longer since she'd felt free.



Two weeks of fasting and early-morning prayer walks had left Miranda shaky but clearheaded. She eased the back door closed, allowing only a faint click that couldn't possibly wake the children, and hung her camera around her neck. Making no sound, she walked down the weathered steps. The wind snatched at her skirt and cape, flapping them around her like wings of blue and gray.

She hoped God knew she'd started her fast not because Mason had told her to, but because she wanted to hear God too. She wanted to hear Him tell her to stay in Slades Creek.

Fighting the dizziness that always accompanied a fast, she kept her eyes on her shoes as they nosed through long grass and the first violets. By the time the girls finished their morning studies and went outside to pick a teacup bouquet for the kitchen table, Mason might have called again. He didn't give up easily.

"I don't either," she said under her breath.

Her choices were limited, but she wasn't helpless. She could arrange for childcare and hold down at least a part-time job. She could earn money with her photography, and she had the monthly income that she never would have seen if Mason hadn't talked some sense into Carl, years ago.

Yes, Mason was smart about money. He was smart about a lot of things.

He liked to document everything. He kept better records than God, she'd heard somebody say at one of the Sunday meetings. He'd probably hung onto his notes from that long-ago counseling session.

With the old fears nipping her heels, she slipped behind the barn and into the clearing. The camera rocked against her stomach and kept time with her footsteps and the swishing of her skirt. The faraway bleating of the goats faded as she ducked beneath the big dogwood and entered the dripping woods.

Thinking she heard footsteps, she looked behind her. No one was there, of course. It was only the wind making bare branches sway and creak.

She faced forward again. Her foot skidded across last year's dead leaves, slippery with moisture. She nearly fell but regained her balance and walked on. Rounding the last bend, she slowed her pace to take in the view that never got old.

The mountain peaks still hid in the mist, but the sun was fighting its way through in a glorious dazzle of white light. She held her breath and savored the sensation of standing in a cloud that had descended to her little piece of the earth.

No matter what Mason held over her, she couldn't sell her family's land.

Venturing closer to the heart stopping drop-off, she peered over the edge of the cliff to the rock-choked creek far below, crisscrossed with fallen trees. It had been years since she'd dared to stand so close to the edge.

The first time she and Carl had walked his late mother's property together, he'd reminded her that the cliffs were no place for children or even for sure-footed goats. When he was a boy, one of his grandfather's young goats had fallen the twenty feet to the bottom. She'd landed on a boulder, breaking her neck.

Miranda had swallowed, sickened by the imagined sound of slender bones snapping.

The far side of the ravine wasn't an abrupt fall like the near side, but it was treacherous too, especially when wildflowers came into bloom and disguised its dangers. Rock-cress, bloodroot, stonycrops, and bluebells would soon soften every cranny.

By the time the asters blossomed in the fall, Mason might have moved far away.

She reached into the pocket of her cape and pulled out his checklist, still folded in a neat, thick rectangle. She opened up the paper, just enough that she could crumple it, and pitched the lightweight ball into the air. The small white wad bounced off a mossy ledge and disappeared into a tangle of leafless brush.

“Lord, help,” she said softly, as if anybody could hear her so far from the house. “Help me outsmart him.”

There were no sounds but the soft splashing of water on rocks and a few birds singing. Far from the commotion of her household, she could almost believe that God would speak to her, but either He wasn’t answering or He’d struck her heart deaf to punish her sins.

Mason heard God though, or claimed to. If he heard correctly, heaven had asked a hard thing of her. It wouldn’t be the first time.

Miranda removed the lens cap from her camera. The fog was lifting. If she worked fast, she could capture the mountains veiled with fog but kissed by the sunrise.

There it was. The perfect moment. She tripped the shutter.

A new wave of dizziness blindsided her. She hung her head to send blood to it, the camera still held to her face, and smiled at the silliness of staying in picture-taking mode when she had only a clump of dry weeds in the viewfinder.

She fought to step away from the cliff’s edge, but her feet melted beneath her. Someone dropped a curtain from the sky, shutting out the light.

Jack Hanford hated early-morning phone calls. They never brought good news.

Abandoning his briefcase and his half-eaten toast on the kitchen table, he went in reluctant search of his aging cell phone. Over the clatter of a trash truck in the alley and the distant roar of Monday morning traffic on the interstate, he tracked down the phone where it vibrated between piles of books and papers on the couch.

The screen showed an unknown number from outside the Chattanooga area. Not one of his colleagues, then. Not his ex, who wouldn't be calling anyway. Not her parents, who just might.

The phone buzzed again as he took it back to the kitchen and the mess in his briefcase. His students deserved a slightly higher level of organization on his part. February was nearly over before he'd adjusted to being out of January.

"Updated syllabus. Hold that thought. And stop talking to yourself."

The phone vibrated a third time. He lifted it to his ear. With his free hand, he resumed rifling through his papers.

“Hello.” He checked the clock on the wall. If he wasn’t in the parking lot in twenty minutes. . . .

“Hello?” The caller sounded young. Nervous. He said nothing after the initial greeting.

“How may I help you?”

“I need to talk to Jack Hanford, please.”

“Speaking.”

“This is Timothy.”

“Timothy?”

“Timothy Hanford.”

Jack lost his place in the papers. The name took him back—how many years?—to two towheaded toddlers and a young mother with a sad smile and dazzling blue eyes. Wearing a gray cape and a circlet of blond braids, she’d reigned over a rickety porch in the mountains of north Georgia.

Miranda’s son should have had no reason to call.

Dread slowed Jack’s response. “Carl and Miranda’s son?”

“Yes sir. Mother—” The boy’s voice cracked but he continued in a terrible, stiff calm, as if he were reading from a script while somebody held a gun to his head. “Mother said if anything happened to her, I was supposed to read this letter.”

“Why? What—what happened? Is she all right?”

“She fell off the cliffs behind the house. They’re taking her to the—to the hospital.” The kid sucked in a noisy breath and kept going. “Here’s what the letter says. ‘I pray you’ll never need these instructions, but if anything should happen to me, call your father’s half-brother, your uncle Jack Hanford. In my will, I have named him as the guardian of you precious children. I believe he is a good man who wants to do right.’ That’s all it says. Plus your phone number and stuff.” Timothy exhaled, long and loud.

Guardian? *Guardian?*

Jack stared around the kitchen as if the sight of his bachelor digs could

anchor him there, safe from startling developments and complicated relationships. A sniffle from his caller prodded him back to less selfish concerns.

“Is she going to be all right?”

“I don’t know.” Timothy sounded younger now. Frightened.

“Is anybody there with you?”

“A man from the sheriff’s department.”

“May I speak with him?”

“He’s outside, talking on his radio.”

“All right.” Jack tried to harness his thoughts as they galloped away. “You’re in good hands, for now. I’ll be there as soon as I can, but it’ll be, say, a two-hour drive. I’ll have my phone, so call again if—if you hear anything.”

“Okay.” Timothy hung up without another word.

Jack snagged his raincoat off the back of a chair and ran out, hardly remembering to lock up. He remembered the way to Miranda’s ramshackle log home though, up in the hills behind a tiny town with only two traffic lights. The route to Slades Creek was seared into his memory with painful clarity, along with the rest of his time there.

This was his chance to make amends for long-ago wrongs. A chance to restore what someone else had stolen.

He climbed into his car with a vague sense of conflicted triumph coloring his sense of impending doom. Carl had hated him. Now, without so much as a by-your-leave, Miranda had put him in charge of Carl’s children.

“Lord, have mercy.” Jack swung the car into the street, shifted into first, and punched the accelerator. “It can’t get any weirder than this.”

Unless she didn’t make it, and then God help them all.



Having missed the morning traffic in Chattanooga, Jack made it to Slades Creek in ninety minutes. That still wasn’t enough time to fully grasp

the situation, but a patrol car at the end of Miranda's winding driveway was evidence that the call hadn't been a prank. To Protect and to Serve, read the motto on the car's door.

A large white van stood there too. Mud-spattered and disconsolate, it warned Jack of the burdens of parenthood. PTA meetings, soccer practice, piano lessons.

If Miranda had died while he was on the road, he had inherited those responsibilities. Those kids. A boy and a girl. To his shame, he couldn't remember the girl's name.

"God, I need some time here," he said under his breath.

His cowardly feet led him around the side of the house, where he spotted a path leading behind the barn. After a five-minute hike, he found cliffs dropping down to a shallow, rock-filled creek.

Two feet from the edge, his vivid imagination took him where he didn't want to go. She might as well have fallen from a two-story building. Hands in the pockets of his raincoat, he hunched his shoulders, not so much against the cold as against the dire possibilities.

Across the ravine, purple gray mountains faded into a smoky horizon streaked with remnants of morning fog. The vista must have been Miranda's last sight before she flew past rocks and brush and fallen trees on her way down.

An accident or a deliberate dive? He wasn't ready to face the answer.

A twig snapped. Jack turned.

A boy stood in the muddy path, his hands balled up in the pockets of a denim jacket. He was twelve or thirteen, his eyes a cold, clear blue. "Are you Jack?"

"I am. You must be Timothy."

"I heard your car. Why didn't you come to the house?" Timothy didn't sound young and scared anymore; the blunt question made him seem oddly adult.

"I needed a few minutes to think, that's all." Jack drew a slow breath of chilly air, delaying the news for one more moment. "Your mom...?"

“She was unconscious when they put her in the ambulance. That’s all I know.”

A pox on the small-town hospital that would keep the family so ill-informed. Maybe they didn’t know who to call though. Especially if they had bad news.

“I’ll keep praying for her,” Jack said.

Timothy nodded, a quick jerk of his close-shorn head. Tears glazed his eyes.

Jack turned away, giving the kid his privacy, then shifted to watch from the corner of his eye. Teaching had given him a sensitivity to young people who were a tad off the track. This one bore watching.

“How do I know you’re really who you say you are?” Timothy asked.

Jack swallowed a phrase that wasn’t fit for young ears and dug in his pocket for one of his cards. Still not quite facing the boy, he held out the card. Timothy took it without comment.

“How’s your sister doing?”

Timothy didn’t look up. “Rebekah? She’s all right. The younger ones don’t really understand what’s going on.”

Younger ones...plural?

“I don’t know, ah, how many of you there are...now.”

The boy picked at one corner of the card with a fingernail and took his time answering. “Six.”

Jack let out a low whistle. Miranda had better pull through.

“Why did Mother choose you to be our guardian?”

Still flummoxed by it, Jack rubbed his chin. “Well, now. I met her when you were two or three years old. I remember sitting on the porch, drinking lemonade. Passing the time of day.”

“But if you’re our uncle, where have you been all this time?”

“In Chattanooga, cramming the joys of literature into the hard heads of college students.”

“That’s not what I meant. You wrote all those letters, but you never came around.”

“Your father strongly encouraged me to stay away, son.”

“I’m not your son.” Timothy took to the trail, his shoulders squared.

Squinting after him, Jack recognized the irascible tone and the inflexible body language. Timothy was only following Carl’s example. Carl, who’d warned that the letters would go straight into the trash. Maybe they hadn’t though, if Timothy knew about them.

Jack faced the ravine and the ever-changing Blue Ridge beyond. Glimmers of light on far-off glass and metal revealed the whereabouts of tiny towns tucked into the hills of Bartram County. Somewhere behind him lay the drowsy streets of Slades Creek. The place had grown to a six-stoplight town.

Somewhere behind him too lay Rabun County, his birthplace. The rainiest corner of Georgia, it snuggled up against the Carolinas and shared their beauty and their poverty.

Straight ahead, the mountains stretched away toward the comparatively flat sprawl of Atlanta, two hours south. The vista was beautiful—the light, the blues and greens, the shreds and patches of drifting fog—and everything held the wet, green scent of spring.

He inched closer to the edge and peered down at an outcropping of rock ledges. Slippery with moss and seeping water, they slanted this way and that, untrustworthy stair steps that went only partway to the creek. Its banks and waters were muddied from the movements of many feet. The paramedics must have had a devil of a time transporting their patient.

Maybe she’d left the kids sleeping. A widow with six children wouldn’t have much solitude, and sometimes solitude was a soul’s lifeline. Other times, as Jack knew all too well, it was the lead weight that took a drowning soul to the bottom.

Dizzy, he backed up. After one last gander at the view, he returned to the wet, trampled path toward the house, pushing aside damp branches of dogwood and laurel.

A flash of bright white in the mud caught his attention. His card, crumpled.

Jack picked it up for proper disposal and walked on, entering the broad clearing where the wind bent tall grass to earth. On the other side of the clearing stood an ancient barn, a wooden shed of more recent vintage, and finally the boxy, story-and-a-half log home.

Wood smoke warmed the air as he made his way around to the front of the house. The two weathered rockers on the porch were exactly as he remembered them, but years had passed since he'd sat there with Miranda and her toddlers. Nine years.

In the drive, the sheriff's cruiser still blocked the van. The utilitarian vehicles dwarfed Jack's black ragtop, a toy beside them.

He crossed the weedy lawn under the gnarled branches of a giant oak, then counted five wide steps to the porch where he'd first met Carl and his mean streak. Rooted in unfortunate family history, the animosity had been insurmountable. Miranda had made up for it though, in spades.

The rustic door held a wreath of dried flowers and golden wheat, something the earth-mother type might have handcrafted. Jack knocked then waited, examining the wreath. Seven bunches of wheat, seven brown rosebuds—

The door creaked open. A large, graying man wearing a khaki uniform and a silver star filled the doorway and studied Jack with sad eyes. "Can I help you?"

"Yes, sir, I hope so. I'm Jack Hanford. Carl Hanford's brother."

"Timothy told me you'd be here directly." The man's thick eyebrows drew together. "I never knew Carl had a brother."

"Most people don't know. I'm a half-brother, actually."

The officer ducked under the low door frame and stepped onto the porch, forcing Jack to retreat. "I'm Tom Dean. May I see your ID, sir?"

"Certainly." Jack pulled out his driver's license.

After examining the license, the man studied Jack's Audi. "Nice car. You aren't much like Carl, are you?"

"I don't know. I only spoke with him once."

"But Mrs. Hanford named you as the guardian?"

“According to Timothy, she did. I had no idea until a couple of hours ago when he called.”

“Come out of the blue, did it?”

“Yes sir. I’m still trying to get a handle on it. I guess I’m the best she can do.”

“Well, then.” The deputy handed the license back. “Come on in.”

Jack stepped inside. The house must have been a hundred years old. Inside, it was warm. Cozy. Directly in front of him, stairs rose to the second floor. To his left, a bright orange fire crackled behind the glass of a black wood burner. For a house full of kids, the place was blessedly quiet.

A long, dark trestle table stood on the far end of the room. He imagined it filled with children. There was an old-fashioned wooden high chair too.

“Any news on Miranda?” he asked.

“She was banged up pretty good. Unconscious. You could call the hospital and find out.”

Jack nodded and continued his survey of the living room. Except for a few modern touches, it could have sprung from the pages of the Little House books he’d read to Ava’s niece and nephews. Sturdy furniture, braided rugs, needlework. Wooden pegs studded the wall by the front door. They were draped with jackets and capes in a variety of sizes but a paucity of color. Shades of gray and blue, all of them.

An eight by ten photo of the kids hung above the pegs, and Jack counted six blond heads. He didn’t know why he’d hoped for a lesser number; Timothy knew how many siblings he had. There were two girls, a little one and a big one, in matching dresses. Four boys in blue polo shirts. The smallest boy looked young enough to be in diapers.

A thud shook the wide-beamed ceiling. Feet thumped across a room upstairs, and young voices rose in a muffled argument. Someone else murmured something. The hubbub subsided and a faint tootling began. A recorder, perhaps.

Jack abandoned his study of the photo. “May I see the letter she left for Timothy?”

“Sure, but it looks legit. It’s her penmanship. I found the same writing all through the kitchen, on recipe cards and lesson plans.”

“Lesson plans?”

“For homeschool.” The deputy led the way toward the table.

Jack followed, keeping his thoughts to himself. He gave grudging respect to parents who did the job right, for the right reasons, but he hadn’t much patience with homeschoolers whose driving force was fear of the modern world. From the little he knew of Carl, it was easy to believe the man’s family would have been on the radical fringe of the movement.

The table held a sheet of paper, a blue tea cup filled with lavender violets, and a litter of construction-paper valentines in all sizes and all the wrong colors. The wrong colors, nearly the wrong month; it was disorienting, like seeing purple shamrocks at Halloween.

Jack picked up the letter. Written in the perfectly proportioned italics that he remembered from the two notes he’d received from Miranda, it read exactly as Timothy had given it over the phone, except it concluded with: *You have always been a good son. I’m counting on you, Timothy. All my love, Mother.* The boy hadn’t read that part aloud.

She’d signed and dated the letter two weeks earlier. At the bottom of the sheet, she’d included Jack’s full name, address, and cell phone number. All the information was current. He was somewhat suspicious of the timing but attributed his qualms to his overactive imagination.

“I wonder if this is official enough to put me in charge while she’s out of commission,” he said.

“It’ll do for now, while you try to round up her lawyer. That’d be better than bringing in the DFCS folks. Department of Family and Children Services, that is. Once they jump in, it’s hard to pull ’em off again.”

“Do you happen to know the name of her attorney?”

“No, but if it’s somebody in Slades Creek, it won’t take long to track him down.” The deputy hitched up his trousers. “You’ll stay with the kids, then?”

“Of course, but for how long? I called in to work to explain that I have a family emergency, but I’ll need to be more specific when I call back.”

“Where do you work?”

“Chattanooga. It’d be a bit of a commute.” Jack handed over his second card of the morning.

“My, my. A genuine PhD? We don’t have many of those in these parts.”

“We’re pretty useless, most of us.”

The deputy smiled. Then, sobering, he peered in all directions. “You could make yourself useful here,” he said in a low voice. “Because I suspect Mrs. Hanford will need help for quite some time. It was a long, hard fall.”

“Any idea how it happened? And who found her?”

“Timothy found her. We ran down there right after we got the call, and she had a big ol’ camera hanging around her neck. Maybe she was setting up a shot and didn’t realize she was so close to the edge. She—”

Shoes clattered down the stairs. A freckled scamp flew around the corner and came up short. Eight or nine years old, he had the air of having been interrupted in some kind of mischief.

“Hey, there,” Jack said with a modicum of hope. Maybe they weren’t all like Timothy.

“Hi.” The boy jammed his hands into the pockets of his jeans and inspected Jack with frank but friendly curiosity.

Then came another kid. And another and another, until five fair-haired siblings had gathered at the foot of the stairs. Jack sought a resemblance to his late father, their grandpa, and found bright blue eyes and square chins. A surge of satisfaction hit, like the rush of fitting the last pieces into a jigsaw puzzle, but it lasted only until Timothy brought up the rear, unsmiling.

The deputy moved toward the door. “Anything you need from me?”

“Not right now. Not that I can think of, anyway.”

“Good man. It’ll all work out.”

“Yeah.”

The deputy gave the children a grave smile and a tip of his hat. As the door closed behind him, six pairs of eyes examined Jack.

“Guess I’d better introduce myself. I’m your Uncle Jack. Your dad’s half-brother. I don’t know how much you know about the situation, but—” He stopped, loath to mention Miranda’s will or anything else that smacked of death. “Your mom asked me to take care of y’all until she’s better.”

Nobody spoke, but somebody sniffled. He couldn’t tell which one.

“Let’s start with names and ages. Timothy, looks like you’re the oldest. How old are you?”

“Twelve.” He bit off the word as if he begrudged the bit of breath required to speak it.

“Who’s next?” Jack asked.

“Me,” said the older of the two girls. “I’m Rebekah.” Her hands clamped down on the shoulders of the freckled scamp in a grip that he wouldn’t easily escape. “I’m ten.”

“You’ve grown a bit since last time I saw you, Rebekah.” Jack moved his attention to her captive. “Next? Name, rank and serial number, sir.”

The boy smiled—the first one to smile. “I’m Michael. I’m eight. I ain’t got no rank or serial number.”

A smaller boy, not as freckled, gave Jack a gap-toothed grin. “I’m Gabriel. I’m six.”

Two smiles and counting.

“And this is Martha.” Rebekah released Michael and tugged a round-faced little girl into the limelight.

Martha was a small replica of her big sister. They both wore white T-shirts under long denim jumpers. Clunky shoes. Blond braids. The girls were miniature earth mothers.

“I’m four.” Martha held up four chubby fingers. “And I’m learning my phonics.” She spoke precisely, as if she delighted in pronouncing each syllable exactly right.

“Good girl. Phonics, that’s the only way to go.”

Her dimples blossomed. “Yes sir.”

The youngest was a curly-haired toddler. He studied Jack with calm disinterest, then dug in his pocket and pulled out a chunk of granite, glinting with mica. He displayed it on the flat of his hand for everyone to see but didn’t say a word.

“That’s Jonah,” Rebekah said. “He’s almost two.”

Born shortly after his father’s death, then. A come-after child.

The ages were easy to remember—two, four, six, eight, ten, twelve—but the names wouldn’t be so easy. They were all Bible names. Somber saints and mischievous angels. It would take a while to remember which freckled archangel was Michael and which one was Gabriel.

“Is that last one potty-trained?” Jack asked. “Noah, is it?”

“Jonah,” Rebekah corrected. “Yes sir, he’s potty-trained. Mostly.”

“Mostly.” Jack jingled the coins in his pocket. “Okay, here’s the deal. If y’all can show me how your mom runs the household, I’ll help out the best I can. Sound good?”

No one answered out loud, but almost everyone nodded. Even the youngest, who was busy scratching his granite chunk with a grubby thumbnail. Timothy, however, stood motionless, his face a blank. Maybe he was reliving the moment he’d spotted his mom crumpled on the jagged rocks beside the shallow creek.

Years before, Jack had gone ice-fishing on a northern lake, impossibly clear and deep. Out on the glassy slab, nothing but a few inches of ice had separated him from drowning. Something about Timothy recalled that threat of a sudden fall into deadly waters.

Jack told himself to get a grip.

He crouched, lowering himself to Martha’s level, the hem of his raincoat settling damply on the wide planks. “We’ll make it through, Lord willin’ and the creek don’t rise.”

Martha's eyes went round, looking oversized in her little face. "Which creek?"

He smiled. A literalist. "Any creek you want, sugar."

"The one my mama drowned in?"

"She didn't drown, sweetheart. She had a real hard fall, but the doctors will take good care of her. We'll keep praying that she'll be fine."

Martha leaned closer. "Maya isn't," she said in a confidential tone. "Maya fell. And died."

"Who's Maya?"

Her long-lashed, crystal blue eyes widened further. "I don't know. Timothy knows."

Jack sought Timothy in the crowd of kids. "Who's Maya?"

"I don't know anybody named Maya," he said.

Rebekah laughed softly. "A pretend friend."

Martha was the right age for it, but imaginary friends weren't supposed to die. They were supposed to be cast off like outgrown clothes.

Still crouched beside her, Jack looked up at the boys in the middle, trying to remember which archangel was which, then over at the littlest guy. Noah. No, it was Jonah. The big fish, not the big boat.

Timothy brushed past Jack and walked outside without another word.