

CHAPTER 13

I grabbed a quick sip of my extra-thick coffee milk shake and said into the phone, “Mr. Bender, I’m from Chicago. I’m not sure what you mean about not drinking downstream from the herd.”

I could hear Harry Bender clear his throat. I’d just told him how things had gone with Elden. Mrs. Gladstone had asked me to pass it along.

“Oh, wait a minute.” I pictured horses relieving themselves in a pure mountain stream. I made a face. “I get it.”

“You’re catching on,” Harry Bender said. “Got to find us a safe place in this situation. In AA we say, ‘God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.’ ”

AA stands for Alcoholics Anonymous, an important organization that helps people stop drinking. “You’re in AA?”

“Twenty-three years.”

“Wow. I really respect that, sir.” We got my dad to go to one

meeting. He stormed home saying he didn't need to be sitting around with all those losers.

"Saved my bacon, I'll tell you. I was flat out in the gutter slurping slop. You tell Maddy I'm finding support for her out in the field. Lots of stockholders want the company to stay like it is, but Elden's talking big money and people like that kind of talk."

"Is she going to lose the company, sir?"

"Not while I'm breathing."

I smiled. "I'm looking forward to meeting you, Mr. Bender."

"We'll have us a high old time. See you in Texas."

Mrs. Gladstone had her meetings in her hotel room over the next few days so she could stay in bed and nurse her bad hip. She insisted on getting completely dressed, right down to matching shoes, and then laid back down in bed. I mentioned that her hip seemed to be doing worse and she nearly bit my head off. She wouldn't let anyone feel sorry for her and the minute anyone did, she'd just wave it off like no one had the right to care. She got away with this with me and three store managers.

The knock on the door sounded like someone was using a brick. Mrs. Gladstone folded those skinny arms of hers and said, "Well, here we go."

"I'll see who's there, ma'am."

"I know who's there. If you don't open that door, she's just going to knock it down."

The knock came louder.

"Coming," I said, moving quickly to the door. I opened it

and looked down at a very attractive gray-haired woman in a white suit and a crisp yellow blouse and Spectator pumps. She patted down her straw hat with the navy ribbon and shook my hand hard. This woman had a grip.

"Alice Lovett," she announced. "Retired shoe model."

"Uh . . . Jenna Boller. Teen driver."

Alice Lovett marched into the room, took one look at Mrs. Gladstone and said, "Madeline, you look like the devil himself. I'm going to feel sorry for you whether you like it or not."

"I don't like it," Mrs. Gladstone spat.

"Tough cahoonas," Alice Lovett spat back, took off her hat, and sat down on the chair near the bed. I figured she was pushing seventy, which is probably the only way to approach that age. She looked like an ad for an older person's personal product, like Depends or Metamucil, that wants everyone to believe that no matter how old a human being gets they can still live a good life even if their waste disposal system goes south.

"Mrs. Lovett, can I get you something to drink?"

Her face got hard. "Everyone calls me Alice! I don't answer to anything else!"

"Sorry . . ." I backed off to the corner.

"Madeline, what can I do for you?" Alice demanded.

Mrs. Gladstone sat there for the longest time without saying anything as Alice stared at her. Finally, "I suppose, Alice, you can listen."

Alice kicked off her size 5½ white and blue Spectator pumps, stuck her feet on the bed, and listened. Mrs. Gladstone told her everything.

"Your own son!" Alice said and studied Mrs. Gladstone's wrinkled face. Mrs. Gladstone tried staring back at her like nothing was wrong, but Alice wouldn't let her. She inched up close. "Madeline, I've known you for forty-one years and every one of them's been a challenge. I've seen you go to work with a one hundred-and-four degree fever. I've watched you collapse from exhaustion after weeks of eighteen-hour days. I've seen you refuse to cry at your own husband's funeral. But I want you to answer me the way it really is: Can you make it to Texas?"

Mrs. Gladstone sat as straight as she could.

"Well, of course I can!"

Alice yanked on her Spectators, patted down her hat. "I'd say, Madeline, that's mostly bull. But, you know me, honey, I've always liked a good fight. I'm coming with you. But first Jenna and I are going to get you a wheelchair."

Mrs. Gladstone reared up like a wild horse. *"I will not sit in one of—"*

Alice Lovett, retired shoe model, put her hands on her hips like Mrs. Gladstone was a dog who'd just messed the rug. "You haven't got a whole lot to say about it."

Sticking Mrs. Gladstone in a wheelchair and expecting her to cooperate was like plopping a chicken in a church pew and telling it not to squawk.

"I will walk to the elevator!" Mrs. Gladstone shouted.

Alice planted her feet in front of the elevator door and stood tough. "Madeline, you hush!"

I turned away so they wouldn't see me laughing. Mrs. Gladstone had met her match and it was doing me a whole lot of good.

Alice looked at me. "Have you ever thought of wearing bangs, Jenna?"

I put my hand self-consciously over my forehead. "No."

"Bangs would frame your eyes. You have very nice eyes."

Alice studied me like I was incomplete. "And more green," she said. "You ought to wear more green with your hair." My grandmother used to tell me that.

"Green's hard to find," I muttered, feeling ugly.

The elevator door opened. "Not always," Alice said and pushed Mrs. Gladstone inside. We rode to the main lobby in silence. When the door opened, Elden Gladstone, Shoe Rodent, was there to greet us.

CHAPTER 14

"What's all this, Mother?"

Elden glared at his mother in the wheelchair without so much as a how-are-you.

Mrs. Gladstone sat straight and proud and didn't skip a beat.

"My hip's acting up, Elden. Nice of you to ask."

Elden took a deep breath. "Are you all right?"

"That depends on how you define all right."

"Does it *burt*?" he asked impatiently.

"Not as much as other things," she said, staring right back at him.

He looked away. "We need to talk, Mother. You need to hear me out."

"I'm due in Kansas City," she said, motioning to me to start pushing. Elden stood in her path.

"This conversation needs to happen!" Elden insisted. He looked at me like I was a spy with hidden recording equipment. *"Alone."*

"I'm afraid that's impossible," Mrs. Gladstone said.

Alice and I dug in our spurs and tried to look mean.

Elden knelt down by the wheelchair. I didn't think he had it in him. He put both his hands on the wheelchair arms and smiled like a used car salesman. "Mother, you know my feelings on how business could be better."

Mrs. Gladstone's face got stiff.

"Not that business isn't good. It could just be spectacular. And you know how the Shoe Warehouse, which is a highly profitable venture, Mother despite your concerns—"

Mrs. Gladstone reared up. "*Their merchandise is atrocious!*"

"They give the public what it wants!"

Beads of sweat were popping on Elden's pale forehead. "Mother, Ken Woldman of the Shoe Warehouse, who is one of the hottest retail deal-makers going, wants to buy Gladstone's for a great deal of *cash*." He said "cash" like she was hard of hearing. "We would like your blessing to go ahead and—"

"Change the very fabric of the company." Mrs. Gladstone stirred in the wheelchair, enraged.

"Mother, this is how business is done now. It's not the same world you and Dad knew. The shoe business is changing and Gladstone's has to change with it to survive. This opportunity is being handed to us on a silver platter. It will send the stock soaring. We will all make a killing!"

Mrs. Gladstone looked like she was going to crack Elden over the head with her cane.

I said, "Mrs. Gladstone, should I help you into the bathroom so you can take your medicine?"

Her jaw clenched.

"Remember what the doctor said, ma'am." I rolled her toward the ladies' room, a vermin-free zone.

The doctor hadn't said anything about bathrooms, but Mrs. Gladstone got my drift. I pushed her inside. "I don't think this is what Mr. Bender would want you to do."

Her hand gripped the sink in anger.

"Mr. Bender said to just be polite and not give any information and not to slap a man who's chewing tobacco." She looked at me irritated. "It sounds better when he says it."

"All right. All right."

"Maybe you could smile, ma'am."

She cracked her mouth open like she had a toothache. Alice walked in, shaking her head.

I said, "You need to work on the smile, Mrs. Gladstone. It isn't enough to let your teeth show, you've got to look like you mean it."

Alice whipped a big red lipstick from her purse and put it on. "Madeline, this child speaks the truth. If you can't smile at what's going on, think of something else that'll make you happy, and smile at that. I did that through most of my second marriage."

"I can't think of anything that will make me happy."

"Think about Harry Bender and how he's going to help you," I suggested.

She grunted. I wheeled her back out with Alice guarding the rear.

Elden was pacing, checking his gold watch.

Mrs. Gladstone said, "Well, Elden as you can see, I'm just doing poorly. We'd better postpone this until I'm stronger."

Elden didn't like that. "There are decisions that need to be made!"

Alice and I stared at her. *Smile.*

She did, sort of. "Well, of course there are, dear. Just give me a little time. This medicine I'm on makes me so woozy." She flopped back in the chair, closed her eyes.

"For crying out loud, Mother, you're seventy-three years old! You've done fine things for this company, but it's time to let the next generation take the reins. I'll call you in a few days!"

Elden flipped open his portable phone and stormed out. Mrs. Gladstone watched him push through the lobby door, rush out onto the street. She was trying so hard to be brave, her face looked like it was carved from granite. She caught Alice and me looking at her.

"I'm fine!" she spat.

Some people just never let down.

"Madeline," Alice announced, pushing the wheelchair forward, "you are many things right now, but fine is not one of them."

I steered the Cadillac toward Kansas City. Mrs. Gladstone was sleeping in the backseat. Alice was humming, lost in thought. I passed a slow-moving station wagon and clicked into the freedom of driving.

My father used to talk about being on the road, selling. Every day a new city. You've got to smile when you meet the people. I remember him standing at the bathroom mirror shaving, getting himself pumped for a trip. There was a rhythm to it.

Shake hands.

Stay hungry.

Stay focused.

They can't say no.

Push through till the end of the day.

Nobody buys from a loser.

Another room.

Another restaurant.

Another piece of road just like the next.

Go first class.

Deal at the top.

Never let them see you sweat.

Keep driving.

Cars were important to Dad. He got a new one each year. I remember how he'd pull up to our house, honking like mad, and I'd run out and see the new red machine. They were always red. Mustangs, Thunderbirds. Dad liked things sporty. "First thing a customer sees about me is the car I drive," Dad always said. Dad took care of his cars, too. Waxed them each week, wiped them down, got the oil changed on time, the tune-ups. He took better care of those cars than he did his family.

I guess people take special care of the things that are important to them.

I tried my best to be important to my father. I didn't argue with him, even when I knew he was wrong. I didn't call him a drunk, even though he was one. I just tiptoed around his life, hoping he'd notice. He did sometimes, but he'd be gone in a heartbeat, off chasing some scheme that was going to make him rich. He'd say how all the people who didn't believe in him would sure look stupid when he came out on top.

Dad said that money talked. And when he had it, he spread it around—buying things we didn't need, like fur coats and fancy jewelry for Mom, leaving big tips. I realized later it was how he tried to get people to love him.

The stairway in our first house had a hand-carved rail. If you weren't careful, you could get splinters if you slid your hand down it too fast. Faith got splinters in her rear end once; she didn't try that again. The rail curled to a landing just before you'd get upstairs. I remember that stairway more than my room. That's where I'd sit and watch when my father would come home drunk. I'd hear the car pull up, the door slam shut, Dad clear his throat, spit on the sidewalk. I'd climb out of bed and huddle on the landing. I don't know why. He'd slam through the door, grab at the striped wall to keep standing. Mom would meet him or not, depending. Once he saw me watching from the landing, sitting on the hope chest in my nightgown.

"Whatch you looking at?" he shouted and then vomited on the rug.

Daddy's home.

CHAPTER 15

Kansas City. Nine-thirty A.M. I dropped Mrs. Gladstone off at the downtown Kansas City store. I was supposed to wait twenty minutes and then come in to snoop.

I parked the Cadillac, slipped out in spy fashion. Looked around. Typical shopping district. Kansas City didn't seem like a big city, it was more like a community of little towns. I walked slowly down the street, whistling an undercover tune, stopped at a magazine stand searching for clues. Saw the cover of *Business Week* magazine.

"The rise of Ken Woldman, Wall Street shoe baron," blared the headline.

Pretty good clue.

I bought the magazine (know thy enemy), sauntered out. Hit the coffee bar. Got a decaf latte, grabbed a stool, turned to the article and Ken Woldman's tanned, rich, smiling face—a face that said: Worship me. I know about *money*.

I started reading. Ken Woldman had taken Wall Street by storm in only five short years as the Shoe Warehouse broke

records for sales and profitability. "A good price is what people want today in shoes and anything else," he was quoted. "You give them the right price, they give you their business."

He was thirty-two years old and lived in Nebraska. He was a quiet, energetic man, who only needed three hours of sleep each night. There was a picture of him at three A.M. in his office, practicing golf putts in front of a huge map of the world. There was a picture of him and his wife—she had dark circles under her eyes, probably from being married to all that energy. He was tall and impossibly thin and had a computer in every room of his fourteen-room mansion, including the bathrooms. He called himself "a numbers man who can anticipate the market." His motto: Believe in yourself, then tell the world.

I sipped my latte.

Read on about how the Shoe Warehouse had grown by buying and selling companies, making big profits. Giving the public what it wants: decent shoes at warehouse prices.

And all this time I thought the public wanted great shoes at fair prices.

I kept reading, hoping something would be said about quality, but quality was never mentioned. I guess that's not how Wall Street measures success.

I checked my watch mysteriously.

Time to spy.

I stood in the middle of the downtown Kansas City Gladstone's and felt like I was in an elegant house that had been decorated with cheap furniture.

The ceiling of the store arched upward like a church, but below it were rows of tall metal display cases with so-so shoes on sale. The Gladstone's sign looked out of place and the Texas Lone Star on the wall seemed embarrassed. Lots of shoppers were trying on shoes, but there wasn't any energy in the place. I tried on a pair of leather tie-ons that looked promising; wiggled my toes. Passable, but not great. I took them off. Murray would never settle for passable.

WE'RE NOT JUST SELLING SHOES, WE'RE SELLING QUALITY the sign proclaimed.

Two women went to the small sitting area where a salesperson could help them. Only the manager was on the floor and she was busy at the register. I looked at Mrs. Gladstone. When you've driven 600 miles with a person, you can communicate across a room.

"Jenna's with me, Cynthia," Mrs. Gladstone said to the manager. "She can help those customers."

Cynthia looked at me unsure.

I took my initialed shoehorn out of my pocket, walked to the women. "How can I help you today?"

They looked at me gratefully. I smiled back. Trust moved between us.

The blonde woman's problem was basic—she wore too tight shoes and they were causing corns on the tops of her toes. Some people are so used to feeling bad they think it's normal.

"I can help you with that," I told her, "but you need to try a new look, something that won't pinch so much."

I got her into low-heeled leather walkers that would take the

punishment of everyday use but still look nice; found her a lower-cut, squared toe pump that didn't rub against her skinny ankles. Then I showed the gray-haired woman a Stride-Rite pump that she could almost jog in, a supershoe for business-women on the go. She took three of those in black, camel, and blush vino. Told her nonjudgmentally to think about clipping her big toenail so it wouldn't push against the shoe and ruin the fit.

"Fit is everything, ma'am," I said as I walked them to the cash register, having sold five pairs of quality shoes in under ten minutes. They danced out of the store with happy feet.

I blew on my shoehorn to cool it down, tossed it in the air in a little twirl, and put it back in my pocket.

The days blended together.

Kansas City.

Topeka.

Wichita.

Oklahoma City.

Fort Smith.

Little Rock.

So many stores to see, so many miles to cover. After a while, everything started looking alike. Thirty-five South looked like 40 East. Arkansas looked like Kansas.

Keep pushing.

Eat, sleep, drive, spy.

I learned great road truths that teenagers aren't always exposed to.

Never go into a restaurant with a sign that says GOOD EATS.

Never eat at a place called MOM'S, because it's a safe bet Mom's been dead for years and whoever's in the kitchen didn't have a working relationship with her.

If you see four or more pickups in front of a diner, chances are you'll get a good meal.

I got Mrs. Gladstone and Alice to start slumming it more and we found some excellent down-and-dirty restaurants—but the corn beef hash, fried eggs, and mile-high cinnamon rolls at the Road to Nowhere Truck Stop redefined breakfast as we know it. An old trucker fell in love with Alice and kept sending her love notes at our table. She blushed and grinned and kept every one. "That man," she'd say, rereading the notes, "if he knew how old I was!"

We'd pull off the road to read historical markers and then Mrs. Gladstone would talk about some piece of shoe history that nobody ever heard of like how the first saddle shoes were made in 1906 for tennis and squash players; how the earliest known shoes were sandals and archaeologists found a pair in Egypt made of papyrus braiding that are 4,000 years old.

I learned that every driver on the road *thinks* they drive well, but like Alice said, thinking and doing are two different animals.

I saw that kindness is still alive and well in America when an old woman paid our fifty-cent bridge toll and waved to us as she drove by.

I realized that helping a family put the mattress back on

the roof of their car after it blew off in the wind looks a whole lot easier than it is.

We hit every rest stop known to man, checked in and out of too many hotels, and found the best deep dish cherry pie in America at Pearlle Mae's Roadside Diner. You'd never think a dump like that could offer something so perfect. I saw teenagers in cars, but hadn't talked to one for weeks. You know you've been with old people too long when you can pick out the subtle differences between Count Basie's and Duke Ellington's piano playing.

And then there was the business.

Harry Bender was calling stockholders and was hitting one brick wall after the other. Lots of them wanted Gladstone's to stay like it was, but Elden's promise of soaring stock prices with the Shoe Warehouse sale got people looking at their wallets instead of in their hearts.

Elden kept calling Mrs. Gladstone.

Mrs. Gladstone kept hedging, telling Elden she couldn't talk. Every time she did, she sounded tougher and Alice would shout, "Welcome back, tiger. You're sounding like your old self."

We pushed on. It was August now. The summer heat could slap you unconscious with its strength. We hit awful construction on 40 East in Arkansas that makes you hate the whole world—cars sat backed up for miles while some guy with a cement truck tried to maneuver around a line of angry, honking motorists who were shouting and swearing like Chicago cab drivers. Then the funniest thing happened.

Mrs. Gladstone started getting stronger.

You couldn't tell at first, her being so gruff and all, but after we left Little Rock where the manager gave her the biggest hug you've ever seen and told her how much working for her had meant to him, told her how he'd learned more at Gladstone's than anyplace else, told her how, as a stockholder, he wasn't going to vote for the sale to go through and he knew plenty of other people who felt the same way. The more stores we saw, the stronger Mrs. Gladstone got. Store owners were telling her they loved her, and halfway to Shreveport Mrs. Gladstone started walking on her own, and when I asked what I should do with the wheelchair she got a spark in her eye and said she didn't give a "blasted bloody rip."

Mrs. Gladstone and Alice started talking about how senior citizens were getting pushed aside in America and how older people had to start fighting back. By the time we'd crossed Mississippi into Louisiana, I thought I had a revolution on my hands because they were shouting about all their combined wisdom and experience not being appreciated and what this world needed was to bring some seniors out of retirement to whip everyone into shape.

We headed for the Shreveport store and Mrs. Gladstone and Alice weren't going to take any guff. Alice had a coupon for free stewed prunes at Buster's Breakfast Café and Laundromat and when she tried to redeem it after she'd eaten the prunes the waitress said she could only use it in Arkansas, which caused Alice to shoot up like a firecracker, shouting that old people were getting harassed and pushed out in America

and she wasn't going to take it anymore. Alice shoved her prune coupon in the waitress's face.

"In China a person doesn't become respected for their wisdom until they reach seventy years of age and I guarantee you, I qualify!"

The waitress stepped back and said Alice could have the prunes and Alice said good, she wasn't giving them back except the hard way.

I pushed on to Shreveport, being extra careful not to get any old people irritated.

At the Shreveport store, Alice and Mrs. Gladstone surrounded the manager, Big Bob Capshaw, who was telling Mrs. Gladstone how Elden's new merchandise was the best thing going and it was a privilege to sell it.

"You think my brain's turned to mush?" Mrs. Gladstone asked him.

"No . . . no, ma'am."

"Darn straight," Alice added, stomping her size 5½ pumps.

"You're standing in the presence of fifty golden years of shoe selling expertise," Mrs. Gladstone informed him.

Big Bob Capshaw wiped his brow. "I don't want any trouble, ma'am. I've lost three jobs in four years. I just try to sell what gets sent to me."

"You getting any complaints on those shoes?" Mrs. Gladstone demanded.

"I've . . . well, we've had a few more than usual."

"How many more?"

He gulped. "You want me to get the exact numbers?"

Mrs. Gladstone rammed her cane on the counter. "I want every sale, return, and profit and loss figure you've got in this store."

Big Bob hurried off.

Alice did a little jig. "Madeline, I swear, I feel fifty!"

Big Bob came back with the books. Mrs. Gladstone pored over them, asking him a hundred questions.

"What's the P and L on this brand?"

"What's your monthly return ratio?"

"What's your damaged goods number for the quarter?"

She took notes in her blue leather book; slammed it shut. "You've got quite a system going here, don't you? Buying low-end merchandise, selling it cheaper than our regular prices, but higher than it's worth. No returns for cash. And all in this quarter, too. You've made a lot of money, Bob." She leaned forward, her gray eyes on fire. "Now what in the blue blazes can we make of that?"

"Mrs. Gladstone," he began—

She wasn't having any. *"Isn't this a fine way to make Gladstone's look more profitable for that fancy takeover?"* She reared up. *"How many customers who count on our quality have been snookered?"*

Big Bob was looking smaller. "Mrs. Gladstone, this isn't illegal, it's just . . . business."

"It's immoral! Shame on you! Shame on you all!"

She grabbed her cane, whacked the counter, and stormed out the door.

Big Bob was shaking in his boots.

Alice grabbed his shiny lapel. "We'll be watching, *junior*."

By the time we zoomed onto Interstate 20 heading west to Dallas, we had more horsepower in the backseat than we did under the hood. And that sleazy man pumping gas at the Mobil rest stop rued the day he was born when he tried to cheat Mrs. Gladstone out of the change she had coming, telling her she'd given him thirty dollars not forty. Mrs. Gladstone sprung out of the car swinging her cane.

"I gave you two twenties!" she shouted. "You can give me my proper change now or when the police come."

She got her change, but she still wasn't satisfied. She shoved her cane right under his chin. "Don't mess with seniors," she growled at him. I burned a little rubber out of the station and leaned on the horn just to make sure he got the message.

Finally I passed a road sign that read, WELCOME TO TEXAS—DRIVE FRIENDLY. If I'd been wearing a hat I would have taken it off and thrown it in the air. Alice yelled, "Yeeehaaa!" Mrs. Gladstone rolled down her window to breathe in the Texas oxygen.

Was it my imagination, or did everyone on the road suddenly start driving faster?

CHAPTER 16

It wasn't my imagination.

Pickups raced past me. The right hand mirror with the little sign, "Objects you see are closer than they appear," was making me nervous because a large Chevy Suburban was barreling very close in that mirror like a lion hunting down an injured gazelle. Drive like everyone around you is crazy, Mom always said.

They were crazy. I gripped the wheel and tried a driving trick my grandmother used to use. When she was stressed behind the wheel, she'd make the other drivers around her seem real. She'd ask herself what they did for a living, what kind of lives did they lead?

A vicious truck vroomed ahead of me—"Don't Mess with Texas" the bumper sticker read.

How could this gentleman support himself?

Gun runner?

Prison guard?

It was a hundred miles to Dallas. I got in the far right lane

that was only going fourteen miles over the speed limit. I did my best to stay legal.

One twenty to the LBJ Freeway.

US 175 to 130.

Cars with bumper stickers zoomed by:

"Native Texan."

"Naturalized Texan."

"Purebread Texan."

"Texan by Choice."

Mrs. Gladstone was saying how just being on Texas soil always got her blood pumping. It seemed to have this effect on other people, too.

"I thought people in Texas were laid back," I shouted as two mega-trucks thundered by.

"They are," Mrs. Gladstone said happily, "except on the road."

I sat tall and drove; the Cadillac's wheels were eating up the pavement.

And then Dallas signs and street names hit from left to right, and there in front of me was the Emerald City, except it wasn't green. It was gold and shiny. Huge skyscrapers (not as big as Chicago, but I wasn't complaining) pushed to the big sky.

I shook off tiredness and took it all in. Mrs. Gladstone and Alice were trying to find Pegasus, the flying red horse on top of the Magnolia Building. They were pointing out the NationsBank Plaza that was seventy-two floors high, the Trinity River that flowed underneath the freeways.

I drove on, yielding to hordes of speeding drivers.

Alice said she'd read an article that said men were three times as likely to be in an accident than women, which didn't surprise any of us. A male-driven convertible appeared out of nowhere and cut in front of me without signaling. I gave him acres of room. Have your accident somewhere else, sir.

Finally, I pulled onto the tree-lined streets of Highland Park, a rich Dallas suburb with big-time houses. Minutes later I turned into Mrs. Gladstone's long, curling driveway.

Her huge white ranch house hugged the driveway with an attached greenhouse that my mother would have loved. A wide porch wrapped around the front with hanging plants and rocking chairs. All the windows were tall and glistening. The house stretched before us like it had been there forever, like nothing could ever knock it down. A gardener was watering cascading roses that hung over a trestle. He smiled and waved; his gold front tooth gleamed in the sun. I pulled to a stop. Alice was saying, "Oh, Madeline, you've done so much with the garden."

That's when Elden drove up behind us in his green Mercedes.

"Well," said Mrs. Gladstone. "Looks like things are going to get interesting."

Elden stood at his mother's side of the car. She pressed a button. Her window rolled down.

"Mother, we have to talk." He eyed me coldly.

He was a real ace at killing a mood. The gardener stopped smiling. I wondered what it was like to never have anyone happy to see you.

"I'd like to take a look around the house first, Elden. Then we can talk."

"I'm sick of these games, Mother." He opened the car door.

"What a coincidence," she said, pushing him aside with her cane. "So am I."

He watched her get out of the car. "What happened to the wheelchair?"

"Oh, that old thing," said Mrs. Gladstone, walking off with her cane.

I said, "Hello, sir," and got the luggage from the trunk. I'd driven 1,532 miles and didn't feel like being greeted in the Promised Land by a retail turncoat. Alice got out, too, said, "Well . . . Elden," and caught up with Mrs. Gladstone who was talking to the gardener, telling him what a fine job he had done with the flowers. The gardener was so proud and was pointing out the new plantings as she and Alice walked around the grounds. Elden was ready to pop, but Mrs. Gladstone took her time hobbling, admiring nature's blessings. Elden's blood pressure hit full boil. I grinned happily.

A woman in a maid's uniform opened the front door. I carried the luggage inside the house and gasped. Floor-to-ceiling windows, big overstuffed beige sofas, cream-colored walls, huge paintings of flowers, horse sculptures.

Elden and Mrs. Gladstone followed me inside. He said, "Mother, sit down."

She did and motioned me to sit next to her.

"Mother, this is a confidential business discussion. I hardly think that your *driver* can add anything noteworthy."

I could kick you in the stomach, I thought, moving toward the couch. I could drag you across Texas by your pointy ears.

Mrs. Gladstone smiled at me. "She's my *assistant*, Elden."

I sucked in my stomach proudly. Jenna Boller, assistant to the president. Had a nice ring to it. Maybe more money.

Mrs. Gladstone folded her arms. "Now what did you want to say?"

"Mother, I insist on this being a private conversation."

"Why?"

"Because I'm your son."

She leaned forward and raised an angry hand. "You have gone behind my back, you have gone to my board of directors to try to overthrow me, you have sought to make deals with this company you had no right to negotiate, you have been dishonest, disreputable, and devious. You have not earned the right, *my son*, to speak with me privately."

The color drained from Elden's face until he perfectly matched the sofa. He clenched his jaw until I thought blood would drip out.

"*Everything* I have done, Mother, was for the financial good of this company."

"That's manure!"

Elden stood up fast. "We see things differently, you and I. You see some grand moral plan that sells shoes like they're the cure for cancer. They're shoes, Mother. *Just shoes*. Maybe you and Dad needed to think of them as something more. And that's fine. But in the real world, it doesn't matter if you're selling shoes, or widgets, or Lear jets. What matters is the bot-

tom line. How much you make. What the company's worth. How to get the stock up. And you're kidding yourself if you think business is anything more than that!"

"I would not be in business if I thought that was all it was about!"

Elden slammed his hands to his side. "That's why it's time for you to retire. That's why the board will accept your resignation, hands down. It's over. The stockholders want the takeover, we will make a great deal of money. Our profits this quarter have been terrific. Take your millions and have a ball!"

"How do you account for those fourth quarter profits?"

"Smart merchandising, Mother. Just taking the company to the next level."

Mrs. Gladstone looked at him hard. "What about quality?"

He picked at his manicured nail. "Not many people can tell a well-made shoe these days. Decent sells well enough."

"I can tell!" Her eyes blasted through him. Elden looked away. "If your father was alive—"

"He'd thank me! Dad was a salesman. He understood the bottom line. There are no guarantees out there anywhere, and I'll tell you, that scares me. So when I can turn a fat profit, I'm going to do it to protect my future and—"

"Get out," Mrs. Gladstone whispered.

"Now look, Mother, I know you're upset, but—"

"Get out." She said the next part quietly. "Jenna will see you to the door."

I stood super tall and looked down at Elden like he was fertilizer. I wished I was wearing one of those Kung Fu robes and

could stand by the couch and do high kicks like a bodyguard.

He reared up. "I will not be pushed out by some *giant*—"

Mrs. Gladstone rammed her old hand hard on the thick wood coffee table. "*Be very careful of your words!*"

Elden stormed toward the door, saying he could find his own way out. I followed him, in case he was as stupid as he looked. He opened the door, glared up at me.

"I don't like your game," he hissed, his pasty face getting pink. "And just in case you haven't heard, *no one* pushes me around."

CHAPTER 17

Harry Bender, the world's greatest shoe salesman, bent over the Bass shoe display at the downtown Dallas Gladstone's, which was, without question, the biggest shoe store I had ever seen. It had three floors—men's, women's, and children's—and a huge white spiral staircase that wrapped around the largest plastic foot in the universe, with toes that started by the Johnston and Murphy display and a leg that reached to the sky past the women's squared-toe flats. Everything is bigger in Texas.

Harry was about my size. He was wearing handstitched Tony Lama snakeskin cowboy boots and a very large Stetson hat. His starched white shirt was open at the neck—no tie. He had the kind of face you could picture laying in the sewer someplace after getting beat up.

"Now this one here," he held up a leather walker to the man he was waiting on, "this one's got everything you need. Good traction, hugs the road."

"Sounds like a tire," the man said, amused.

"Better than a tire. This old shoe'll take you places a tire only dreamed of."

"Eleven D," the man said, smiling.

Harry Bender tipped his hat to me and Mrs. Gladstone and hustled into the back and came out moments later with a box.

"See," Harry was saying, putting the shoe on the man, lacing it up. "Most folks don't treat their feet right. They just take shoes for granted. I tell you shoes can turn a life around. Twenty-three years ago I was drunk and out of work and so broke I was wearing bedroom slippers. But a priest took pity on me and got me a pair of soft leather tie-ons. I figured then and there that God was telling me to straighten up and sell shoes or join the priesthood."

"I see the shoes won," the man said, chuckling.

"Well, the Lord knew I'd given my wife enough guff. The priesthood would of blown her cork clear to Amarillo."

The man was laughing, standing up in the Basses. "They feel good," he said, wiggling his toes.

"Yeah, those'll do you a good turn. You want to wear 'em or carry 'em?"

"I'll keep them on."

"*Mr. Rodriguez*," Harry Bender bellowed happily at a mustached man behind the counter, "get this fine gentleman checked out so he can go back to celebrating the good life God gave him."

Everyone in the store was grinning. Some people just naturally make you glad to be alive.

Harry Bender raced up to Mrs. Gladstone and grabbed her two bony hands in his big hairy ones. "Blast, Maddy, it's good to see you."

Mrs. Gladstone looked at him beaming. "You making me rich, Harry?"

He patted her hands. "Every day, old girl." Harry Bender grinned at me. He had the most genuine smile I'd ever seen, not a scrap of fakeness in it. "You must be Jenna." He put his hand out to me. "Welcome to Texas."

We ate lunch with Harry Bender and he was putting away as much Texas barbecue as a human being could and still be conscious: brisket, pinto beans, sausage, Texas toast. He was wearing a lapel pin, "Live each day as though it's your last," but I didn't think it was referring to food consumption. The restaurant had long tables covered with paper, and the man carving the brisket shouted "Señor Bender!" when we walked in and sliced us the best pieces of meat, using that knife of his like a sculptor. It was the best barbecue I'd ever tasted, which reminded me of the B minus I got last year on a history paper that should have been an A-minus easy. The topic was, What are the things America will be remembered for? I wrote baseball, jazz, barbecue, and the Constitution. Mr. Hellritter wrote "Limited" across the top of my essay in red pen, which I guess I should have expected, him being a vegetarian. Opal is a vegetarian except when barbecue is around. She says barbecue is a food group unto itself. That's one of the

things I like about her. She doesn't fight it when the lines blur.

Harry Bender and Mrs. Gladstone had moved from talking about Elden to talking about the good old days.

"This man," Mrs. Gladstone was laughing, "came to our Dallas store twenty-three years ago insisting we hire him even though he had no experience."

"You were the biggest thing in town, Maddy. I figured why waste my talent in some joint?"

"What were you doing before, sir?"

"I was a ranch hand in Fort Worth; went from place to place pretty much."

I could see him wrestling cows to the ground.

"Yeah, I stormed right in, told Floyd it was his lucky day, God had sent me. He hired me on the spot. Haven't had a drink since."

I smiled. "You make it sound easy."

"Staying sober is the hardest thing I do. Sometimes I'm with someone who's drinking and feeling happy and I start thinking I can handle it now. I can have one. Then I remember what a fat lie that is. I can't handle a drop."

Mr. Bender's cell phone started ringing. He flipped it open. "You got Harry," he said into the receiver.

He listened, covered the phone with his hand. "One of the fellas I sponsor in AA," he whispered to me and Mrs. Gladstone. "He's new at being sober. Gets the jitters sometimes."

Mrs. Gladstone patted my hand and excused herself to go

to the bathroom. Harry Bender rammed his toothpick on the table. "No, no, no," he said into the phone. "You know if you take a drink you're not going to be able to stop."

He listened some more.

"I know how hard it is, but you can't get near that stuff. It's poison in your life and the Lord couldn't have made that more clear if he'd hung you by your toes over a manure pile. You listen to me, old boy, and throw it out now . . . I know it . . . I know it . . . all right . . . call back if you need to."

Harry closed his phone, stuck it back on his belt.

"That's great you sponsor people, Mr. Bender."

"That's what it's about. Had some fine men help me years ago. Just trying to return the favor."

I took a deep breath. "Boy . . . I, um . . . I wish you could talk to my father. He . . ."

"Hits the sauce?"

"Yeah," I said quietly.

"Your dad at a point where he wants to talk?"

"No."

He sniffed. "You getting help for yourself?"

I told him about Al-Anon and the way we talked about things in my family.

"Best thing you can do for your dad is love him and pray for him and don't let him step on you or let his disease infect you any more than it has."

"I try."

"So many hurting people," Harry Bender said, looking out

the window. "I'll tell you what, though, if you set your mind and heart toward a healthy way of living and thinking, you'll find a way to climb out of the biggest pit life throws your way."

He flipped his Stetson back on his head and smiled.

I didn't say what I was thinking.

How I wished he was my father.

CHAPTER 18

I sat on the white bed in the all-white guest room in Mrs. Gladstone's house and really felt like a visitor. It was the kind of room that forced you to make the bed and pick up your dirty clothes even though it was against your nature. I hugged my knees and wondered what it would have been like if Harry Bender had been my father.

I saw him taking me out in the backyard when I was small and teaching me all about shoes.

I saw him feeding me little bites of barbecue when I was a baby.

Mostly I saw him just being there—someone you could count on who shot hoops with you after dinner. Someone who came to your school plays even though you were playing non-speaking tall parts, like trees and giant lizards. Someone who understood that what kids need most from their fathers is for them to be available and loving.

I curled under the covers and opened the letter my mother had sent me. "Hello out there," it began.

I have told Faith she cannot have your room, despite the fact that she offered me money. I suppose we all have our price, but she was going to have to do a whole lot better than twenty-seven dollars.

We are shouldering work, life, and Chicago humidity with the usual grace and sophistication. I'm working too hard as usual. People continue to do stupid things to themselves and others, so, sadly, business in the emergency room is booming. I wonder sometimes if I'm seeing such a jaded part of life here day after day that it muddies my view of humanity. Part of me longs for a normal job, but I've tried to drop normal from my vocabulary because I have come to the conclusion, rightly or wrongly, that there is no such thing.

I wonder what you are learning and seeing on the road, Jenna. Knowing you, it will be quite a lot. I hope that part of this trip is bringing you peace and understanding in addition to the much-needed time away.

On a more complex note, I need to tell you that we've had to change our phone number to an unlisted one because your father has been calling late at night and he's not been in the best form. I know this is hard news to hear when you're away, but for safety's sake I wanted you to have our new number—555-7790. It will be installed next week.

Faith is handling this, so am I. It's unfortunate that your dad's problems continue, but for now an unlisted number seems to be the best way for us to deal with them.

Don't worry about us, Jenna. We're doing fine. If you want to talk, you can call me at home or at the hospital. I think of you a dozen times each day and wish you grace, strength, and wisdom on your journey.

Love, always,
Mom

A sickening anxiety washed over me. I looked at the white phone on the bedside table. I tried to swallow; I couldn't. I felt a panic take hold.

I shouldn't have left.

I had to call her. I reached for the phone. My hand froze above the receiver.

I closed my eyes and remembered myself as a little girl.

The phone rang. Dad was drunk, told me to answer it; say he wasn't home.

"I don't want to, Daddy."

"Do it."

I walked to it slowly, hoping it would stop ringing before I got there.

No such luck.

"Hello?" I said, small and scared.

"I'm looking for Jim Boller." It was always an angry voice.

I gulped. Looked at my father, who was staring at me. "He's . . . not here."

"When will he be back?" the voice demanded.

"I . . . I don't know."

"Can you take a message?"

"I can't write good yet."

Click. The angry voice hung up.

I stood there like someday my lying was going to catch up with me.

"Good girl," Dad said. "That wasn't so bad, right?"

I ran into the other room to play with my plastic animals that I kept in a box under my bed. Once Grandma got me a miniature phone so my animals could talk on it, but I gave it back to her because the animals didn't like it.

I shook the memory from my mind, grabbed the phone near the bed, punched buttons, waited, hoping I wouldn't sound as nervous as I felt.

The hospital receptionist switched me to the ER and finally I got Mom.

"We're fine, honey," was the first thing she said.

I could hear someone groaning in the background, the sound of racing footsteps.

"You're busy," I said, feeling stiff.

"A car accident." I knew she couldn't talk.

"Do you want me to come home, Mom?"

"Of course not."

"Is Dad . . . all right? I don't think he means to do these things."

"Right now, Jenna, I'm just dealing with the fact that he does them."

I could hear a man say, "Carol, we need you."

"Be right there," Mom said. "Can I call you tomorrow, Jenna? Are you all right?"

"I'm okay. I don't know where I'll be tomorrow."

"Carol!" said the man insistently.

"It's okay, Mom. We'll talk. I'll write you a long letter."

"I love you, sweetie."

"I love you, too."

I didn't get to ask her about Grandma.

I sat on the bed holding the letter; the weight of it rolled over me. I thought about how Mom had crawled out from such a painful marriage, how she'd pushed herself to look at the things she needed to change.

"If you set your mind and heart toward a healthy way of living and thinking," Harry Bender had said, "you'll find a way to climb out of the biggest pit life throws your way."

Then for some reason I saw myself as a little girl again.

The phone rang.

Dad told me to answer it; say he wasn't home.

This time I dug my red sneakers into the blue braided rug and said *no*.

Not this time, Daddy.

The next day Mrs. Gladstone and I had a fight about her thinking I needed a day off and me saying I didn't.

"You need to rest!" she hollered. "You've been on duty day and night."

"I'm not too good at resting. It makes me nervous."

"Now what in the world are you saying?"

Alice came out of the other guest room in the midst of it, looked me up and down like I needed fumigating, and held up a small pair of scissors.

"It's time, honey," she said. "You need bangs."

"Um . . . no . . . I . . ."

But retired shoe models get pushy. She plopped me down on a bench in the hall in front of a floor-to-ceiling gold mirror. "Just a few wispy bangs," she said, lifting my hair off my shoulders and letting it fall. "It'll frame your face so nicely; give you some softness. Won't hurt a bit."

I said, "I'm not sure about this," as she parceled out my hair over my forehead.

Alice stood back. "I'm sure. I was the lead hairstylist at the Queen for a Day Beauty Salon and Nail Emporium for seven years before I went into shoe modeling. My customers begged me to stay, they were hanging onto my arms on my last day, weeping themselves silly. You'd have thought somebody died."

I groaned, closed my eyes. I hated the sound of snipping scissors close to my face.

She snipped a bit, a bit more, stood back.

More still.

"I'm taking some off the sides," she said, not asking. Hairdressers never do. If they touch your hair, they think they own it.

"Not much," I pleaded.

She took some off the sides, some off the back to even it out. By the time she was done, I was close to being a different person.

"Very nice," said Mrs. Gladstone.

But Alice Lovett, retired shoe model wasn't satisfied. She dragged me out the door in search of green clothing.

CHAPTER 19

“Suck it in, honey.”

I sucked in my stomach and stood in front of a three-way mirror in the women’s changing area of Northrop’s Fashion Central, wearing a green shirt and a green checked skirt and a fat leather belt with a silver buckle that Alice had scooped from a fifty-percent-off basket like a prospector finding a hunk of gold in a stream. I grinned.

Alice adjusted the belt, poufed the shirt out a bit. “I always told my customers, the beginning of true beauty is how you feel inside.”

“I feel pretty good, Alice.”

“And that’s radiating outward,” Alice said. “Just look at that glow coming from you. It almost hurts my eyes.”

I did a little twirl in the skirt, laughing; the fabric lifted full and light over my knees.

“Green’s the color of new life,” Alice explained. “It shows off your red hair, and those big belts work on tall women. You’ve got a good waist.”

I looked down happily at my waist. "I do?"

"I couldn't wear a belt like that to save my pension."

We found another green shirt, a few green sweaters. I kept looking at myself in store windows, in mirrors. I was so used to not looking. Sales clerks' eyes didn't cloud up when they waited on me. They kept eye contact, didn't look away. People always leaned closer to Faith when she was shopping.

When Alice and I returned to Mrs. Gladstone's, I don't mind saying it, I looked great. My eyes seemed brighter, my face looked sparkly, my hair was close to perfect. Alice was being humble like all great miracle workers, saying she didn't do much, really.

Mrs. Gladstone beamed at me and insisted I take the rest of the day off. "Go," she said, pushing me out the door. "Clear your mind."

"My mind doesn't work that way, Mrs. Gladstone. It needs to have things in it."

"Go!"

But where?

I drove downtown, sucking in my beauty. Matt Wicks didn't know what he was missing. Dallas is the second largest city in Texas, but I don't think it's a good idea to mention it to anyone living in Dallas. I was driving past the Dallas Public Library, thinking how Opal and I could make this day into a party. We'd walk into stores pretending we were rich, we'd make up stories about people we saw. Opal was always looking to have fun, even when it wasn't appropriate—like in school.

School, I'd try to tell her, is about pain, pressure, and homework. But she'd never listen.

"The problem with you, Jenna," she'd say, "is you're too responsible."

I guess she's right, but I don't think I can change.

I turned left and headed back toward the Dallas Public Library.

There was something I had to do.

I was sitting at a library study table. My grandma always said that God made libraries so that people didn't have any excuse to be stupid. Close to everything a human being needed to know was somewhere in the library.

There was plenty I needed to know.

I'd just typed "Woldman, Ken" into the library computer, pressed "Search," and came up with five articles about him. I had them piled in front of me on the table and was studying his angular face on the cover of *Fortune* magazine, trying to figure out what he wanted with more shoe stores when he seemed to have enough already. I looked at Ken Woldman's blue eyes—bright like flames. He was looking right at me, it seemed, hands on his bony hips, shoulders shoved back. He didn't look like a man who would sell second-class shoes; second-class anything, for that matter. He seemed to wear his power easily, the way you toss a sweater over your shoulders on a summer night.

His father had been poor, the article said. Ken Woldman had three newspaper routes when he was a boy, a lawn-

out because he'd been a paper boy and mowed lawns. You're getting to the core of people when you touch their grass and their morning paper.

I made copies of the articles and you could have knocked me over with a pair of peds when a decently cute guy smiled at me right there at the Xerox machine. I smiled back and headed out the door in all my splendor to see what was up with Harry Bender at Gladstone's.

I've never been too good at taking days off.

CHAPTER 20

"Caring about people is the greatest secret of success I know."

Harry Bender was sprinkling Johnson and Johnson Baby Powder on his thick, hairy hands, rubbing them together like a surgeon scrubbing up for an operation. We were standing in the back room of Gladstone's, surrounded by shoe boxes. I'd asked him if he could give me some sales pointers, and I was taking everything in.

"Folks might not like my face or the way I dress or what I'm selling, but they can't deny I care about them." He looked at me with my sparkling new fashion essence. "Texas sure seems to be agreeing with you."

I grinned and followed him onto the floor.

We were off.

And Harry Bender was everywhere, listening . . .

To a woman who had weak ankles.

To a little girl who needed to beat her brother running.

To a man who loved saddle shoes.

"You seen these?" Harry asked, holding up tan calfskins with a brown saddle.

The man's eyes got soft. You can see when it's a passion. Harry just let him stand in the presence of the shoes. Finally the man whispered, "Twelve medium." Minutes later he had them on his feet and Harry said quietly, "My guess is you're not going to be taking them off."

"You guess right," the man replied.

Regulars came with their visiting grandchildren, mothers brought babies who were ready for their first pair of shoes, and Harry Bender found their buttons. He didn't push. Didn't get frustrated. He could tell when people needed him and when to back away. They could tell he cared the way a class knows a teacher cares about her subject. Too many people try to fake their way through life. That's why the real ones shine so brightly.

When a woman came in apologizing for the battered-up shoes she was wearing, Harry looked at those disgusting things and said, "Those've been good friends."

When an older man came in looking sad, Harry said to him, "How's the world treating you today, my friend?" and that man almost broke down because his wife had died last month and she always came with him to pick out his shoes.

It's the little things, not just in selling, but in life that make the difference. The small moments when you can touch another person. Harry Bender was always looking for them and he found more than any person I'd ever met.

I was walking back to the parking garage when I heard the music. Hand-clapping country music. The kind that makes you want to get up and dance and make a fool of yourself—if, that is, a person was a dancer, which, trust me, I'm not.

I walked toward the sound at the end of the mall. A stage was set up and a band was playing and people in western hats were dancing in a line. I stood on the sidelines to watch, tapping my foot, looking down at my new belt and my green checked skirt, feeling pretty close to perfect.

"All right now," said one of the musicians on the stage, "grab a partner for the Texas two-step!"

I folded my arms and leaned against a wall when a male hand reached out, grabbed my hand, and started leading me to the dance floor. He was really tall and had blonde hair and nice brown eyes and was wearing a big brown cowboy hat.

"Come on," he said grinning. "I've been watching you. You need to dance."

He'd been watching me?

"Uh . . . no . . . I don't dance . . . I . . ."

"Everybody dances in Texas."

"I'm from Chicago, though, and—"

"Well, you can't help where you're from, but you don't have to let it limit you."

We were on the dance floor now.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Um . . . Jenna, but . . ."

"Pleased to meet you, Jenna. My name's Will. Now all you have to do is follow me and remember, step, together, step, touch." He showed me the patterns with his feet.

"I . . . I . . . won't remember this."

He showed me again. I tried, messed up. He showed me again.

My heart was thumping bad. I knew I was going to blow this and I wanted to sit down. Will took his left hand and grabbed my right one, then he put his right hand around my waist and I realized that Mom had been right. Social dancing skills were always appreciated later in life. I'd never been this close to a younger person of the opposite gender.

I gulped.

The music started.

"Step, together, step, touch," Will said. I did it, sort of. "Now just do another step, touch and then repeat."

I tripped, but he didn't mind and after I got used to being this close to a male I'd never met, after I got used to the steps and going counterclockwise, after my breathing had slowed down, and my face had stopped blushing, I got it.

Step, together, step, touch, step, touch.

"You got it," Will said, going wide to cover more of the dance floor which I hadn't expected, but I'm here to tell you it was a miracle in the making.

I stayed with him.

I was dancing!

Will was saying how I was a fast study, and I was laughing as we two-stepped around that floor. We danced two dances and

I only tripped twice and when his friend came up to us and said they had to go, Will said it had been a pleasure to dance with such a pretty young woman and he wished me well in Chicago. Then he tipped his cowboy hat in a show of respect for my beauty and he and his friend were gone.

I leaned against a store window and watched him go.

Part of me wished he had stayed, but more important than that was the gift he gave me. I looked at myself in the store window and smiled.

Now there, I thought to myself for the first time ever, is a pretty young woman.

CHAPTER 21

It was nine days to the stockholders meeting, and despite the support from many store managers, the news was bleak. The mail-in ballots were coming in at Gladstone headquarters and Harry Bender's friend, Lyle, said that Elden and the Shoe Warehouse were going to win by a landslide. We'd had an all-out telephoning marathon with me, Harry, Mrs. Gladstone, and Alice calling all the stockholders and asking them for their support. In one hour seven people hung up on me, two asked if I was crazy, and one said she'd think about it.

I'd just come off the sales floor with Harry Bender, who'd shared with me his two golden sales rules that lifted him from the sewer of despair to the top of his profession.

Rule Number One: Care about people more than what you're selling.

Rule Number Two: Never miss a good opportunity to shut up.

We were sitting in the backroom; Harry Bender was studying a can of Coke like it held some hidden secret to victory.

"It looks pretty bad, doesn't it, Mr. Bender?"

He took a long drink, wiped his mouth. "There isn't any stockholder we talked to who doesn't want to make more money, but there are still lots of folks out there who don't want the Gladstone quality changed. That's the good news. The bad news is we're in the minority."

"It doesn't sound like anything can be done."

He slapped his knees. "This dog fight isn't over yet." His phone rang. He flipped it open.

"You got Harry . . . "

He listened for a while, then spoke into the receiver: "Well, that's the worst thing about it, cause the booze doesn't know how to talk to you any other way than lying. So you got to remember that and keep reminding yourself how it was when you were drinking. Feelings get in the way of facts, friend, and you got to distinguish between the two . . . all right then . . . you stay clean. Call back if you need to."

He folded the phone shut, looked at me.

"Mr. Bender, can I talk to you about my dad?"

"Sure thing."

"I'm getting to the point with him that I'm not sure how to handle things. He hurts me so much when he's around and when he's gone I worry about him and never know if he's coming back. It's like I lose if he's here and lose if he's gone and . . ."

"You told him you feel that way?"

"I couldn't say that to my dad. He doesn't take responsibility for anything, he's just filled with excuses."

Harry Bender leaned forward. "Maybe saying it isn't as much for him as it is for you."

I was about to say he didn't understand when Mrs. Gladstone walked in the back.

Harry Bender patted my hand. "We'll talk about it later. Think about what I said."

Mrs. Gladstone was looking brave, like a politician who knows they've lost an election. "Is this the wake?" she asked, sarcastically.

"Don't go getting negative on me, old girl."

"I'm simply being practical, Harry."

"Shoot, Maddy, any fool can be practical. You want to start exercising your brain capacity, find some faith and hold onto that."

Mrs. Gladstone laughed. "I've got faith in you, Harry."

"Well," he said smiling, "let's see what that'll do."

He patted down his Stetson hat, got out his car keys. "I've got a meeting with a man who can maybe get us more votes."

"Who?" Mrs. Gladstone demanded.

He smiled mysteriously. "I haven't got it all clear yet in my head."

"Harry Bender," Mrs. Gladstone shouted, "you tell me what you're up to!"

"Not yet," he said, laughing, and headed out the door.

You know the thing about hope, how it sneaks up behind you when you're sure everything's in the toilet, and starts whispering to you that maybe, just maybe, things could turn around.

That's the gift Harry gave us that night. Some people, all you have to do is stand next to them and you feel protected. Mrs. Gladstone said he was always like that, too, a presence of hope, even after all he'd been through, able to laugh darkness in the face.

I wondered if that came from knowing the darkness so well, he'd figured out how to beat it.

Mrs. Gladstone said if anyone could bottle and sell Harry Bender, they'd make a fortune. I didn't think any bottle could hold what that man's got.

I pictured him getting out of his Chevy Suburban, saddling up to some millionaire's house, and talking that man over to our side.

I saw him standing up to a podium at the stockholders meeting, giving a speech about truth, justice, and selling shoes, winning the trust of everybody in that room, even Elden, and saving the company.

I saw him telling me that he'd always wanted a daughter like me and that if I didn't mind, he'd be so proud to be my surrogate father and that I could come down and visit him and his wife in Texas any old time I liked.

The stockholders meeting was eight days away. Alice was having dinner with friends and Mrs. Gladstone and I were sitting on her beige couch drinking iced tea. I looked at Mrs. Gladstone's face. She had deep wrinkles around her mouth, the skin around her eyes was cracked by lines and too much sun—but still, she was beautiful. She smiled from her heart and handed me a big envelope.

"I want to thank you, Jenna, for being so kind to me these weeks. You've made this time downright bearable. Open it."

I did. Took out a stack of important-looking stiff papers.

"Fifty shares of Gladstone's stock," she said. "Worth around twenty-two dollars a share at the moment, but at the end of the week, it should be worth more."

Twenty-two dollars a share. That was over a thousand dollars. I looked at the papers. Jenna Boller, stockholder.

"Mrs. Gladstone . . . wow . . ."

"But you remember, Jenna, business is more than stock, more than profits. Too many people see work as something they've got to do. Floyd and I were lucky, we loved selling shoes, loved meeting the customers, loved trying to do the best we could with what we'd been given. You just can't put a price on that. My father said that God gave people work to help them grow in grace." She laughed. "He'd usually tell me that when it was my turn to clean out the chapel."

The knock on the door woke me from a deep fog. I checked the clock next to my bed—2:13 A.M. I'd fallen asleep with the light on while I was checking the stock market figures in the *Dallas Herald*.

I croaked out, "Just a minute."

The knock came louder. I tossed the newspaper aside, knocked over the water glass.

Nice one, Boller.

"I'm coming."

I blinked hard to find consciousness, half-remembering the

dream I was having about me in a solid red Mustang zooming down the highway with a tall, gorgeous college guy at my side. The knock came again. This better be important.

"Jenna!" said Mrs. Gladstone from the hall.

I opened the door. Mrs. Gladstone stood in her robe, holding it closed close to her throat, crying. Her face was stone gray. Alice stood next to her, crying, too.

"Mrs. Gladstone, Alice, are you all right?"

Mrs. Gladstone took a faltering step toward me. I reached my hand to help her.

"What is it?"

Her shoulders heaved in sadness. She sat down on the bed, overcome.

She bent over.

Alice cried harder.

"Mrs. Gladstone . . ."

"It's Harry Bender," she said finally, choking back tears. "He was in a car accident. Hit head-on by a drunk driver." She shook her old head in disbelief. "My Lord, Jenna, he's dead."

CHAPTER 22

I sat at the Halverston Funeral Home with Mrs. Gladstone and Alice in "the viewing room." That's what the sniveling funeral director had called it and I instantly hated him for using that term. He should have said, "Here's the place where everyone is paying their last respects to Harry Bender, the greatest shoe salesman in the world." Calling a place like that the viewing room made it sound like we were going to see a movie instead of a person we loved cut down in his prime on a mission of mercy.

I bent over, crying. The tears kept coming and the longer I cried, the longer I needed to keep at it.

I couldn't believe how much you can love a person you've only just met.

I hadn't looked long at the big wooden casket with the flag of Texas draped over it. Sad people were filing past. The men were holding their hats in their hands and the women were dabbing their eyes, but I mostly looked at the leather pumps and western boots slowly moving by. I knew if I looked at the

casket with Harry dead and lifeless in it, I would have to leave and I really couldn't handle any of this alone. I needed to stay in this room, surrounded by shoe people.

Mrs. Bender looked like she was being held up by sticks. Her face was a mess. The front of her blue dress was wet from sobbing. A man who looked a little like Harry was helping her stand. Every once in a while, someone would just break down loudly and the weeping would fill the room, echoing the loss and sorrow of every person there.

"Lord, have mercy," a woman cried out, "struck down by the very people he was trying to save." Her husband helped her outside.

A man said to a woman that Harry was being buried in his Tony Lama boots that had the lone star of Texas hand-stitched on the sides, like a cowboy coming home to rest.

Mrs. Gladstone sat stiff and small. Alice was all cried out. We sat there for I don't know how long as Harry's friends and family filed by and then another wave of weeping would wash over me as I remembered Harry and all the hope he brought into a room just by breathing.

It was 10:27. I still hadn't gone up to the casket. Mrs. Bender left with the man who looked like Harry. Only a few people were left in the room. The funeral director peeked in like he wanted to go home.

"Go," Mrs. Gladstone said to me. "Say good-bye to your friend."

I stood up, weak from the tears, walked slowly up the aisle to the dark wooden casket surrounded by flowering cactus

trees, saw Harry's head lying there, eyes closed, his cheeks sucked in and all made up, his brown hair too perfect, his mouth sealed shut, it seemed. He looked smaller without the Stetson.

I looked away.

Say good-bye to your friend.

The tears came so hard and from such a deep, ancient place in me, I held onto the casket to steady myself. I was crying big for Harry, sure, but somehow I knew I was crying for all the places in life where dreams die and people get ripped from this earth. I was crying for unfairness and pain and loss and death that comes in so many forms. I was crying for my grandmother who had died to her old self and who would never know that part again, for my father who had lost himself to drinking. I was crying for people who had problems so big they couldn't see them, for myself and Faith and how the father we both needed was so messed up, he could never be who we so hoped he would be. I was crying for my mother and the nightmare she had lived trying to hold things together. I was crying for all the times I felt guilty because my father couldn't stop drinking, which I know wasn't my fault, but the rawness of it, the feelings that I should have been able to help him, but couldn't, burst from me with such stinging, ringing clearness.

I looked down into Harry's dead Texas face. I didn't want to remember him this way. I wanted to remember him booming from the Bass display in the downtown Dallas Gladstone's. I wanted to see him throw back his head and laugh that brave laugh that sends the darkness flying back where it belongs.

That's what you should have in the viewing room. A movie of the dead person's life.

I touched the lapel on his dark blue jacket.

I couldn't say anything, so I didn't even try. But if I could have, I would have said, "I wish I had known you all my life, Harry Bender . . . but I know this . . . I'll never forget you."

I was in the Cadillac with Mrs. Gladstone and Alice, following the funeral procession past the winding gravel road to the back of the Last Roundup Cemetery and Crematorium. Harry Bender's grave was by a little hill overlooking a field of sagebrush. Last night Mrs. Bender said the field was going to get turned into a duck pond by next spring, but I think Harry would have preferred sagebrush to duck poop any day. I think he should have been buried somewhere in the mall near the store he loved, but a grave by the ATM machine outside Gladstone's might have killed the festive buying mood and Harry would have hated that.

I'd told myself I wasn't going to cry and I didn't until Mrs. Gladstone, Alice, and I walked to the freshly dug grave where all the people were gathered. That's when I saw the headstone.

HERE LIES HARRY BENDER—HE GAVE IT HIS BEST SHOD.

It was the ultimate farewell to a true shoe person.

I crossed my arms tight like that would hold me together somehow, and lost it, crying deep and full like I'd lost my dearest friend. I cried for a long time and decided for once in my life not to keep the sadness manageable. It wasn't manageable. It was awful.

The Texas heat was a killer and my tears were mixed with sweat. My face and hands felt sticky. People were crowding in around me. Mrs. Gladstone grabbed my hand. Alice bent her head low.

There were only some parts of the funeral I could focus on.

Mrs. Bender asked everyone to wear bright colors to celebrate Harry's life. I wore my bright yellow jacket.

Murray Castlebaum had flown in from Chicago and gave a speech about "the great Mahatma" and all the shoe people put their hands together and bowed down.

A minister said that we don't understand God's ways and that Harry lost his life to the very forces he was fighting against.

A nun said Harry had personally saved hundreds of people from alcoholism and he wasn't going to heaven alone.

Then people were coming up to the grave from the left and right to say something about Harry Bender.

A woman from Shreveport said that if people were just wearing sandals in heaven, Harry would get them all in leather walkers before they knew what hit them.

A man named Peds Jawarski said he'd personally witnessed Harry's greatest moment in the shoe business, when he'd waited on Imelda Marcos (the wife of the fallen president of the Philippines and a famous shoe lover) who bought thirty-three pairs of shoes from him in two hours. It took two servants to get the boxes in her stretch limo that was parked outside.

A man named Monk Fischer said Harry was such a great salesman, nothing could stop a sale. "It was the height of flu season," Monk said, sniffing. "Harry'd just written up a six-shoe order, but he was looking pretty green around the gills. The woman signed the Visa slip, walked out the store, the last customer of the night, and it wasn't until then that the great man vomited. All over the register, too, but he held that sales slip over his head. Harry would never have puked in the middle of a transaction."

Mrs. Gladstone said there was never a better man, never a more magnanimous employee, and she would be forever grateful to God for calling Harry Bender to sell shoes.

I didn't say anything because I was crying too hard. Murray was sitting next to me on the folding chairs that had been set up.

"You've got something to say, kid, you should say it."

"I can't."

"Sure you can."

Murray gave my elbow a tug and scrunched over so I could get by.

"I don't know these people," I said to him.

"So?"

I looked around. Elden was sitting behind me, staring at me hard. He was the only one who didn't look sad.

That got me up.

I walked to the front.

Stood by the podium, my legs shaking, the tears coming.

A man was saying how Harry had lent him money when he

was down and out. He stepped back from the podium. I walked forward, clutching my Kleenex.

"I only knew Harry Bender for a week," I said. "But I loved him like he was my father." I was crying pretty bad now, but I looked straight at Elden for the next part. "He knew about selling shoes and what makes business special and how to treat people. He wasn't afraid of saying the truth, wasn't afraid of telling people about the things he'd learned, about the things that almost ruined him. Those were the things that probably became his greatest strength. By talking about them and turning from them, he taught me to not be afraid of the darkness." I stared at Elden who was staring at me. Everybody from Gladstone's was staring at Elden now.

I used my height. "So I'm not going to be."

Elden looked away.

Murray Castlebaum said, "Amen."

I squared my shoulders and sat back down. Everyone around me smiled. Mrs. Gladstone patted my hand. Alice whispered, "I never had kids, but I would have wanted a daughter like you, Jenna. No changes." I held her hand.

A priest who was Harry's friend got up and walked slowly to the casket. He made the sign of the cross, pain and sadness carved across his face, took off the small silver cross he wore around his neck, kissed it, and placed it on the casket.

"Rest well, Harry Bender," he said softly. "We've all been made finer for having known you."

CHAPTER 23

It was five days after Harry Bender's funeral. The stockholders meeting was tomorrow at three o'clock and there was no way Mrs. Gladstone was going to win. It was hard to care about that anymore.

No one knew who Harry had been going to talk to the night he died.

No one knew the plan he was cooking up to get more votes at the meeting.

All his power died with him, it seemed.

Death is a strange thing. Some people die flat out in the midst of something important like Harry, others, like my dad and grandmother, seem to follow a slow path toward it from such different places, taking another step toward dying each day.

I'd been checking the stock market listings every day in the paper because it helped me think about something else. Mrs. Gladstone was right—the price of my shares had been climbing, except for Monday, when the market dipped and Glad-

stone's stock went down a dollar twenty-five per share, which meant I'd lost sixty-two dollars and fifty cents in one day without even getting out of bed. It gained a full two dollars the next day, but I wasn't sure if I had the raw courage it took to be a stockholder.

Mrs. Gladstone was angry at Harry's death. She said there was enough unfairness in the world without losing Harry Bender in the prime of his life.

"What did his dying serve?" she shouted.

Alice shook her head and walked off.

I said, "I don't know, Mrs. Gladstone. I just know bad things happen more than I'd like because the world has got more than its share of problems."

"Well, it's not right!"

"I know it's not, m'am, I—"

She rammed her cane on the floor. "I don't need platitudes!"

"I didn't mean to—"

"What?"

"This is a hard time for everyone, Mrs. Gladstone, and—"

"Enough!" She stormed from the living room, but it felt like she was still standing there. Anger hangs in places sometimes long after the person is gone. I stomped my foot hard because I had to do something. I hate it when people stop a conversation and I have more to say.

My grandma used to say that some things in life don't have an explanation. What kept her going was believing there was more good in the world than there was bad.

"Sometimes you have to look real hard for it," she said. "But

I swear to you, Jenna, it's there."

I promised her I'd look.

And I've been looking ever since.

When my grandmother had to be put in Shady Oaks, she got Gladys as her roommate.

When Mom started the nightshift, she got time and a half pay.

When Dad came back to town, I was pushed out the door to Texas and got to know Mrs. Gladstone and met Harry Bender and Alice.

You never know where the road's going to take you. I think sometimes it's less important that you get to your destination than the sidetrips you take along the way.

I walked down the hall to Mrs. Gladstone's room and knocked on the door.

"What?" she shouted.

"I'm going to make a grilled cheese sandwich, Mrs. Gladstone, and wondered if you wanted one."

Silence.

"I make the best grilled cheese sandwich in the world," I added humbly.

The door opened. She was standing there in camel slacks and a cream-colored shirt. "I haven't had a grilled cheese in years."

"This is your lucky day," I said and headed toward the kitchen.

I stood at the long tiled kitchen counter, brushing olive oil on thick oatmeal bread; I spread the other side with honey

mustard, layered on cheddar cheese, tomato slices, and sautéed Canadian bacon, placed a slice of oatmeal bread on top, put the two sandwiches in a cast-iron skillet sizzling with butter. Mrs. Gladstone leaned against the opposite wall, watching me. Never miss a good opportunity to shut up, Harry Bender had said. I kept quiet, flipped the sandwiches when they got perfectly browned on one side as Mrs. Gladstone cleared her old voice. We were standing there, as different as two human beings on this earth could be, and yet we were connected.

I put the sandwiches on two plates, cut them at an angle to show off, put them on the round glass kitchen table by the window that overlooked the rock garden. Our kitchen table at home overlooked the fire escape.

Mrs. Gladstone came to the table slowly. She'd been moving slower since Harry Bender died. We all had. Grieving sucks energy from a person's core. She took a bite of the sandwich; her face lit up.

"Superb."

I tried mine. It was, too.

She said, "If Harry were alive, Jenna, what do you think he'd be doing right now?"

I checked my watch. Four-thirteen. Wednesday. "He'd be selling shoes, Mrs. Gladstone, doing his level best to make you rich right up until the store closed."

She laughed.

"And he wouldn't be giving up. He'd be talking to people,

thinking about what he was going to say at the stockholders meeting. I think being in AA for as long as he was, he got used to seeing all kinds of problems turn around and that gave him courage.”

Mrs. Gladstone ate the last bite of her sandwich. “I’m about to lose my company, but I certainly am well fed.”

I put my sandwich down. “Mrs. Gladstone, I don’t think you realize how strong you are.”

She looked at me irritated, but I couldn’t stop.

“I know your hip hurts and you’ve got that operation coming up—I mean your strength as a person. I know what it’s like to be tossed aside by an important person, Mrs. Gladstone. It makes you think you’re not worth fighting for, that people can do whatever they like and you don’t fight back or tell them how you’re feeling. You just keep being a good sport, hoping the person will change, while people walk all over you. I let my dad do that. I just took it like I was powerless, like I didn’t have a right to be angry and say no.”

“And do you really think telling him would have changed anything, Jenna?”

“Probably not. I don’t know. But I think speaking the truth would have changed me.” I was standing now, waving my napkin. “Because I’m angry, Mrs. Gladstone! I’ve been afraid of it for so long. Afraid that if I let him know how I felt, he’d hate me, like I was supposed to be perfect and make up for the fact that he had all these problems!”

Mrs. Gladstone was studying her plate like the answer was

in the blue and white flowered pattern. "I'm angry, too," she said quietly.

"Then go to that meeting tomorrow and kick some butt, ma'am. That's what we're in Texas for, isn't it?"

She stared at the plate. "I don't know anymore . . . "

"And wave the cane around, Mrs. Gladstone. That cane's a real killer."

CHAPTER 24

Whack.

The killer cane came down on the banister.

Mrs. Gladstone announced, "I'd rather eat live snakes than go to this meeting!"

It was three-thirty—Thursday. The stockholders meeting started in one and a half hours. I was standing in Mrs. Gladstone's kitchen, wearing my green shirt, khaki skirt, and 1½-inch-heeled pumps. Mrs. Gladstone stuck a bony thumb toward the door, which meant we were leaving now or else.

We walked out the door. Alice was waiting for us on the porch. The heat was mean and heavy. I'd washed the Cadillac myself early this morning, but nobody noticed. Mrs. Gladstone said, "Let's get this over with."

Alice put her hand around Mrs. Gladstone's shoulder, but Mrs. Gladstone shook it off. I helped her in the backseat. She was wearing a red two-piece suit with a striped blouse, and sat there trying to be tough, writing notes in her blue leather folder with angry movements.

Alice said, "Madeline, honey . . ." and got glared at.

I started up the Cadillac. "You sure look ready for anything, Mrs. Gladstone," I said and headed down the driveway as she grunted. It wasn't until I took a quick peek at her in the rearview mirror that I saw her smile.

I pulled up to the tall glass headquarters of Gladstone's Shoes in downtown Dallas. The windows were sparkling like they had no idea the deceit that was going on behind them. The sun was shining like all was well. The parking lot was filling up with Mercedeses and Chevy Suburbans. I dropped Mrs. Gladstone and Alice off at the entrance and said I'd meet them inside.

Mrs. Gladstone moved slowly to the glass double doors, looked back at me and smiled bravely. Then she squared her old shoulders and walked inside with Alice behind her.

I parked in the Executive Only section and if anyone gave me any guff about it, I was going to give it right back. I cracked my knuckles and got out of the car.

The heat hung thick and depressive like a rotten mood. I walked in the building, followed the signs to the stockholders meeting, down the long, polished hall. A large, jovial man was standing at the door to the meeting room, checking off people's names as they came in. I jingled the car keys in my hand and started toward him.

That's when Elden Gladstone jumped in front of me.

"Jenna," he said, "I want to thank you personally for *all* you've done for my mother."

You could have knocked me over. I looked down at him.

Then he swiped the car keys from my hand, put them in his pocket. "But we're not going to be needing your services now that she is retiring."

My heart was beating very fast.

"You understand," Elden said smoothly. "We'll have someone drive you to the airport."

This wasn't happening.

"I'm sorry, sir, I don't understand. I'm supposed to drive your mother back to Chicago."

Elden broke into a fake smile. "Let's put it another way. You're *fired*."

I stepped back.

"You will be on the seven P.M. flight today back to Chicago. Here's your ticket." He slapped it in my hand. "Your severance check will be mailed to you at home along with your luggage. Don't expect a referral from this company. *Ever*."

I stood there holding the ticket, frozen.

A tall man with a bushy mustache appeared like a bad dream. Elden said, "Mac will get you a taxi. *No one* pushes me around." Then he laughed and started walking off.

"I'd like to talk to your mother, Mr. Gladstone. She's the one who hired me." I said this with more courage than I felt.

Elden Gladstone turned to me like just looking at me hurt his eyes. "My mother doesn't have anything to do with this company anymore," he snapped.

"She wanted me at that meeting, sir."

He looked at my shoes. "Stockholders only."

"But . . ."

He nodded to Mac, who took my arm firmly and led me out the door, onto the stifling street. I tried to shake my arm free; I couldn't do it. My insides were shaking.

A cab pulled up, Mac gave the driver thirty dollars.

"Dallas Airport," Mac said coarsely to the driver, and opened the door for me. I got inside because I didn't know what else to do.

Think.

"Any bags?" the driver asked.

"They'll be sent," Mac said flatly.

I felt like I was getting kicked out of the country.

Mac stood firm by the cab in case I made a break for it. He crossed his thick arms and glared at me.

I looked away. I couldn't think.

"Dallas Airport it is," said the cabbie and started off.

CHAPTER 25

Defeated Teen Departs Dallas.

The cabdriver moved in and out of traffic like a man on a mission. He was wearing a Dallas Cowboys hat, talking about how the Cowboys were the winningest team in football history. Ask me if I care.

"Where you headed, miss?"

I didn't answer. I wasn't sure.

"Where's home?" he tried again.

I sat there frozen.

Mrs. Gladstone had hired me.

Mrs. Gladstone needed me.

"You okay back there?"

"Can you stop?" I asked him.

He pulled to the side of the road.

"I just got fired."

"Tough break."

"It shouldn't have happened."

The driver turned to look at me. "You make somebody nervous or what?"

I looked up. "I guess I did."

He nodded. "My brother used to say you can't make nobody nervous unless they got something to hide."

That cleared my mind. "Will you turn around, sir?"

"You want to go back?"

"Yes."

"You sure?"

Was I?

"I've got something to finish," I said.

"Hold on, miss." The cabbie did a three-point turn, nearly sideswiping a potato chip truck, and headed back to Gladstone's headquarters. "Those big shots in suits, they think they can push anybody around. I pick 'em up, drive 'em to the airport, they act like I don't exist." He pulled into the driveway. "You want the front or the back?"

"I don't want anybody to see me."

"You want the back."

The cabbie drove around the back and stopped at a smaller door. I told him to keep the money.

He smiled at me. "Those guys breathe the same oxygen as anybody else. Remember that."

It seemed like a good idea at the time. The problem was the back door was locked.

It was 5:15. The meeting had already started.

How could I get in?

The Texas sun cast a long shadow of my figure. Grandma always said there was nothing more commanding than a tall woman who used her height. Height was about all I had left. I walked tall to the front of the building, through the front door, past a medium-sized bored security guard.

"ID please," he said.

I had one of those. Whipped it out, looked down at him like if he tried something funny, he'd be sorry.

"I'm late for a meeting," I said brusquely.

"Okay, okay." He waved me forward.

Perception is everything.

Took the escalator up past waterfalls, flowering cactus trees, shiny mirrored walls that showed my tallness off at every imaginable angle. Took a Texas-sized breath. Don't panic now. Saw the sign pointing to the meeting room. Walked to it quickly.

Locked.

I could hear the din of voices inside. I ran to the side door—locked, too. I raced down the hallway of Gladstone's corporate headquarters, my 1½ inch heels clicking on the floor tile, and ran smack into a gray-haired man with a briefcase, almost knocking him down.

"I'm sorry, sir."

He pointed to the closed door. "That one locked, too?" He had a deep Texas voice.

I nodded.

"Well," he said, "there's always knocking." The man strode to the big wooden double doors and gave them a strong *rat-a-tat*.

Instantly another man in a gray suit opened the door.

"Looks like we're late," the man I almost knocked down said.

"Come on in."

The gatekeeper motioned us inside. Elden was sitting on a platform, listening to a woman with a bun read minutes from the last meeting. He froze solid when he saw me.

"I hate these things," the man I almost knocked down whispered to me.

"This is my first one. I'm pretty excited about voting my shares."

"Good to take an interest in your investments."

Elden was shooting daggers at me from the stage. He caught Mac's eye who looked shocked and started walking toward me. I thought about asking the man I almost knocked down if he wouldn't mind being a human shield just for this meeting. He was big enough—six three at least. Just stand in front of me, sir . . .

Mac stood at the end of my aisle and motioned me toward him.

I shook my head.

The woman reading the minutes of the last meeting was droning on and on about how many people were present and how many employees Gladstone's had nationally.

Mac made an emphatic gesture that said I was to obey *now*.

I looked away.

"I think that fella is trying to get your attention," the man I almost knocked down said.

"Actually, sir, he's trying to kick me out. I got fired today. I'm Mrs. Gladstone's assistant."

He took off his glasses and looked at me.

"They tried to send me back to Chicago without my luggage," I whispered. "But I'm going to vote my fifty shares in this meeting even though I'm scared to do it."

Mac started pushing past seated people to get to me. He stood angrily by the man I almost knocked down and whispered, "Stockholders only."

"She is a stockholder," said the man.

"Fifty shares worth," I whispered to Mac whose face got red. "Mrs. Gladstone gave them to me and I'm going to vote them. And I'm not too happy about that dip in profits on Monday."

The man I almost knocked down stifled a laugh.

Mac tried to push past him, but he held out his big arm to hold Mac back. "I think that's enough," the man said quietly to Mac, and I absolutely agreed.

"I let the cab driver keep your money," I added. "And I'd rather pack my own suitcases, too. You know how it is."

Mac backed off and stood razor straight by the locked door. Elden was steaming on the podium like a bad radiator. He glared at Mac. Mac shrugged at him. Ken Woldman was sitting next to Elden, just grinning away. You could almost hear the calculator going off in his head tallying how much money he was going to make with this new deal.

I looked toward the podium because Mrs. Gladstone had just been introduced. She walked toward the microphone with

absolute elegance. I sat extra tall so she'd see me. She looked at the microphone like it was crawling with bugs.

"Not everyone gets to be present at their own funeral," she said, looking out at the crowd, looking into the faces of the people, not running or hiding, just being brave.

Alice was up front. The shoe people leaned forward, the other ones leaned back.

"My son tells me that the days of Gladstone's Shoes are over as we knew them," she said crisply. "He tells me that price cutting and warehousing are the new world order of this new retail world. I must tell you truthfully, I don't know how to do business in this new environment. I only know how to sell one good pair of shoes at a time.

"My father, many of you know, was a Baptist minister. You can't live in a house with a preacher and not have some of it rub off."

People were smiling.

"I'd like to tell you a story I heard him tell over the years about a man who owned a big construction company and wanted to build the best house that money could buy. He put his son in charge of the building, since his son was his partner in business and he trusted him. Every week the man asked the son, 'Are you building it well, son? Are you using the best materials, the best builders?' And every week the son answered, 'Yes, Father. I haven't skimmed anywhere.' But the truth was the son had cut corners in materials and workmanship and was pocketing the money. And when the house was finally built, the father asked him one last time, 'Did you build it well, son,

with the finest of everything?’ Again the son said he had. And then the father, busting with joy, said, “Then I give it to you, son. It’s your home to live in. I wanted to give you the best I knew how to give.’ ”

Quiet hung in the room.

“And so,” Mrs. Gladstone concluded, “I am retiring today; officially, unequivocally, after fifty years of building and growing and aching and celebrating with this company. I leave you with the words of my late husband, I commend them to my son and to every person involved in this company and beyond: If the time ever comes when you can no longer look the customer in the eye, then it is time to get out of the business. I am taking his advice. I am getting out now.”

There was an audible gasp as Mrs. Gladstone turned slowly like a great queen and sat down.

I jumped up. “Mrs. Gladstone, *no!*”

People didn’t know what to do. A few clapped. Most just sat there, their mouths hanging open like dead fish. Elden lunged toward the podium and said something mangy about his mother’s great contributions to the shoe industry and her charisma as a leader, but who he really was spoke so loudly, his fake words were drowned out in a cloud of bull. Then Ken Woldman tried to convince Mrs. Gladstone that her company would be safe under his care, he guaranteed it. Then other people got up and started talking and saying how everyone wanted the stock to go up and Gladstone’s would be made stronger by this merger and the company was going full steam ahead.

If Harry Bender was alive, he would have done something.

"You got something to say, kid," Murray Castlebaum would have said if he'd been here, "you should say it."

So I started walking.

I didn't know why.

Didn't know what I was going to say.

Squeezed past the man I almost knocked down, past other stockholders' knees and feet, past Mac the bouncer, who was cracking his knuckles like tough guys do right before they're going to beat someone up. He grabbed my arm tight, but I ground my 1½ inch heel into his foot and he let go fast. I started toward the aisle, walking tall, looking Elden straight in his angry face because when you've already been fired, what else are they going to do to you?

Elden whispered something to his mother who said loudly, "Oh, but she is a stockholder, Elden. Fifty shares. I gave them to her." Mrs. Gladstone saw me walking up the aisle and her face lit up like Chicago's Michigan Avenue at Christmas. I walked up the stairs of the platform, grabbed Mrs. Gladstone's welcoming hand, pushed past Elden, stood in front of Ken Woldman, said, "How do you do, sir, I had a paper route, too." I walked to the podium like I had one free throw left before the whistle.

I really hate public speaking.

I looked at the microphone and aimed.

"I got fired today," I said as the crowd gasped. "I'm Mrs. Gladstone's driver and assistant and Mr. Gladstone tried to put me on a plane back to Chicago because I didn't like the

way he's been treating his mother. I don't like the way he's been treating this company, either."

Elden started toward me, "I think that's enough!"

The man I almost knocked down bolted from his chair and shouted, "Let her speak!"

Yield, rat boy!

Elden sat down, blistering.

I took a huge breath, gripped the podium. "See, I know what selling shoes ought to be because I had the privilege to know Harry Bender. I also work with Murray Castlebaum in Chicago and I've been hanging with Mrs. Gladstone all summer. I've gotten dunked in what good business should be like so much so that I can smell something wrong a mile off."

Mac was steaming.

I could hear Elden behind me making rodent noises.

"I've been on the road with Mrs. Gladstone this summer. We've visited Gladstone stores from Peoria to Shreveport. And I can tell you those economy brands aren't doing this company one bit of good. People come into a Gladstone's expecting quality, just like people on a paper route expect the carrier to deliver the paper they ordered. You don't start tossing a *Chicago Weekly* on the porch if your customer wants a *Chicago Tribune*. You won't have any chance of keeping that business." I turned to face Ken Woldman. "Will you, Mr. Woldman?"

"No," he said quietly, "you won't."

Keep talking, Boller.

I looked back at the crowd. "I understand we need profits to keep business going. I understand we need marketing to

make sure companies do well. But I don't understand why you have to sacrifice quality and good feeling with that. The people Harry Bender sold shoes to came back to him again and again, they brought their children to him, and their grandchildren to him not because Gladstone's is the only shoe store in Texas but because they trusted him to do the right thing by them.

"I'm the youngest person in this room by far, but I can tell you that the teenagers I know take their money seriously. We work hard for it just like all of you. We're looking for products to buy that we can trust. We're looking for respect when we walk into a store. I think one of the best ways to show respect to anyone is to give them the best you've got to give. I can't believe that what Gladstone's has offered to customers all these years is now old fashioned." I turned to Ken Woldman and saw that he was smiling at me. So I took a chance and tried to land one sweet on the porch. "So I'm taking my fifty shares of stock and I'm voting that Mrs. Gladstone stay with this company somehow. I know that's not on the ballot, but that's what I'm going to write on mine. Because I know that if she stays connected, this company will have a chance to keep the good things that everyone expects from Gladstone's Shoes that people like Mrs. Gladstone and Murray Castlebaum and Harry Bender always kept safe."

I looked out at everyone who was looking back at me and swallowed so hard I almost choked.

"I'm done," I said.

The man I almost knocked down was waving his hat in the

back. "I'm voting with you!" And several other people shouted that they were, too.

Then more said they would and I turned around to look at Mrs. Gladstone who was grinning. Elden was darting back and forth like a rat who'd just been caged.

TEEN 1

VERMIN 0

I strutted off the stage.

The man I almost knocked down said that Harry Bender had been to his house the night he died, having sold him, a large, independent stockholder, on the value of Gladstone's all over again. I smiled big because if anybody could keep selling after he died, it was Harry. Soon over half the people in the room were applauding.

But the majority has it.

We filled in our ballots, sent them forward, and waited. Ken Woldman shook my hand, paper person to paper person, then he went over to talk to Mrs. Gladstone. They huddled together for the longest time while Elden groaned. I heard Alice say, "I did her hair, you know."

Then the secretary with the tight gray bun, who looked like she hated the world, walked to the podium, holding a piece of paper.

"The sale has been approved by the holders of seventy-three percent of the voting shares," she announced.

It was so hard to hear the official words.

Mrs. Gladstone stood straight and proud on the podium like the true person she was.

Elden shook Ken Woldman's hand gleefully.

"But," the woman continued, "over four hundred voters have written in requesting that Madeline Gladstone stay with the new company."

People were applauding and Ken Woldman took the microphone and said to the crowd, "Now I'm a numbers man, and I know the numbers don't lie. There's room in this company for both kinds of shoe stores. Madeline and I have been having a real interesting talk and I'd like to keep her on as a member of the board of directors and give her complete charge of quality control. I need to learn what this woman knows about selling shoes."

Elden jumped up and said maybe they should talk about this in private before making big decisions, but his voice got drowned out by more clapping. Mrs. Gladstone clomped up to the podium, raised that wicked cane of hers, and said, "*Complete* charge, Ken?"

Ken Woldman held out his tanned, prosperous hand. "Yes, ma'am. That's what I said."

She rammed that cane on the floor, shook his hand neat, and said, "I accept. And my son can tell you that the women in my family live to a ripe, ornery old age." She turned to Elden. "So, Elden, I'm going to be around for a long, long time. Won't that be nice, dear?"

Elden half-smiled because the whole world was watching and slumped in his chair, soleless.

CHAPTER 26

I steered the Cadillac onto I 20 East and watched the last of Dallas disappear in my rearview mirror.

It was so hard to leave, but like my grandmother always said, wherever we go, we take everything we've ever learned with us.

Alice was staying in Dallas to visit with friends and gloat. She told me how to keep my bangs wispy and that my hair needed to be cut like clockwork every six weeks or everything she'd done for me would go out the window. She flounced out my shirt and told me to always keep my belt buckle shined. I hugged her for a long time and then she said, "Oh, we'll see each other again, honey. I'm not through changing your life yet."

We didn't stop much along the way. Mrs. Gladstone had to get to work putting traps down around Gladstone's to catch the rodents that were sure to crawl in through the pipes. She said that she was going to need to be coming back and forth to

Texas after her operation to kick butt and she'd sure like me, her assistant, to be driving her if we could coordinate trips with my school vacations.

When we caught sight of the Chicago skyline, it just took my breath away. There isn't a better skyline anywhere with the old and the new combined, with the vision of the architects so proudly maintained. I mentioned that the same thing could happen at Gladstone's Shoes, combining the old with the new, and Mrs. Gladstone said she wasn't *that* old, and I lied and said of course not, and tried to change the subject.

Mom and Faith were waiting for me when we pulled onto Astor Street and they hardly recognized me with my new haircut and adult persona.

"Your daughter," Mrs. Gladstone said to Mom, "is an extraordinary young woman. It has been an honor to be with her this summer."

Mom's lower lip started going and she said she knew and I stood tall like the assistant to the Director for Quality Control and didn't cry even though I wanted to.

I pulled the Cadillac into the garage with everyone looking and didn't lurch or lunge once. We all helped Mrs. Gladstone with her bags and she said she'd see me Monday morning for brainstorming.

"Yes, ma'am. You want me to pick you up?"

"Well, of course I do."

"Sorry."

Mrs. Gladstone got strict when she was feeling emotional.

We spent days catching up.

Faith told me how she visited Grandma every Tuesday when I was gone. She even wrote down what happened at each visit so she wouldn't forget to tell me and showed me her notes. Little sisters do have their moments. She said that Grandma called her Jenna twice and once Grandma remembered her name.

"I didn't do it as well as you, Jenna, but—"

"You did great, Faith."

"I did better with Grandma than I did with Dad."

Dad started calling the house drunk late at night a week after I left. Faith was home alone.

"I couldn't understand him half the time, Jenna. I wanted to talk to him, tell him what I was doing, but . . ."

"You can't talk to him when he's drunk."

"We got the unlisted number and the calls stopped." Faith's eyes got sad. "I never knew what you had to go through, Jenna. I never understood how you protected me."

I shrugged and said it was no big deal.

"It's a big deal," Faith assured me.

Mom got a raise and a new boyfriend while I was gone. The raise didn't take any getting used to; the boyfriend did, even though Mom assured me, "We're taking it *very, very* slow." Not that I didn't like Evan right off—he didn't try to win me over like some men do. He was funny and knew all about computers. I'd just expected Mom and Faith to be exactly the same when I got back—no changes. I knew this wasn't fair

because of how I'd changed. We'd all been on journeys this summer.

I was walking through Lincoln Park, my favorite thinking place, past the South Pond with the paddleboats and duck feeders. I walked up Dickens to Clark Street, heading to Opal's house, when my father pulled up beside me in a little gray Saturn.

How did he find me?

He motioned me inside the car.

I wasn't ready for this.

"Okay, Dad."

I got in. It wasn't until he started down Clark Street that I realized he'd been drinking.

"Dad, stop."

He shook his head like he was trying to clear it, grabbed the wheel tighter, veered the car away from a bicyclist.

"Dad!"

"I'm okay, Jenna girl." He kept going, swerving.

"You're not okay! Stop the car!"

He didn't.

He turned right on Armitage, tires squeaking, almost rammed into a stop sign.

"Dad, you're drunk! Stop the car!"

"I'm driving here, Jenna girl!"

"No! You're not driving anymore!"

"Whose gon stop me?"

"I'm not going to be road kill! Do you hear me? I said, do you hear me?"

I tried to take the wheel from him, but he pushed me away.
How do I stop the car?

I looked madly around.

Couldn't reach the brakes.

Couldn't take the keys out.

Think.

I shoved the gear shift into neutral, pulled like crazy on the hand brake between us.

Work!

"Hey!" Dad shouted as the car went slower, slower, then finally stopped just short of hitting a parked van.

"No more, Dad!"

A policewoman got out of a patrol car, ran toward us.

I pushed the door open, jumped out. "This is the hardest thing I've ever had to do," I shouted. "This man is my father. He's been driving drunk."

"What're you doing?" Dad bellowed.

"Step out of the car, sir," said the officer.

Dad did, not well.

"Sir, have you been drinking?"

Dad looked down, swayed a little. "Nah."

She gave him the alcohol balloon test; Dad reeled in front of the little white balloon, finally blew it up. In seconds, my father became an official drunk driver.

"Sir, I'm going to have to bring you in."

"Ahhhh . . ." Dad shook his head, looked through me like I wasn't there, and was led off.

"It could have been you who killed him, Dad! It could have been you!"

I ran home, pumping my long legs, stretching faster and faster on each block. I took the stairs to our apartment two at a time, and crashed against the front door.

"I'm okay."

I said this as much for myself as for my mother as I ran past her and Evan. They were sitting at the dining room table eating Brie and oatmeal crackers, gazing into each other's eyes.

"Jenna?" Mom got up and started after me. She was in her white nurse pantsuit with her name tag: "Carol Boller, R.N." Her hair was extra curly because of the humidity.

I held up my hands. "I'm fine."

"You're not."

If you both watch closely you can see me fall apart.

Ready?

I ran through the kitchen.

Ran past Faith, who was making an egg-salad sandwich.

Ran into the bathroom that Faith and I shared, locked the old, scratched door with the bent copper key, kicked aside the hair dryer on the floor, turned on the shower full blast.

I shook off my stacked leather shoes, threw off my clothes, pushed back the ornamental fish shower curtain, and climbed in.

I threw back my aching head as the water pulsated over me.

I hated him.

Terrified Teen Has Drunk Father Arrested.

I closed my eyes, stuck my face directly under the warm spray.

Just wash it off me.

I saw in my mind Dad staggering home when I was small.

Sitting there in his white bathrobe, hungover, when I'd come home from school.

I never wanted friends to come home with me.

Daddy's sick, that's what we'd say.

The water pounded my eyes, face, neck. I washed myself three times. I remembered when I cut my foot and was in the hospital getting stitches. Everything is scary when you're six. Dad walked in holding the biggest stuffed elephant in the world.

I slammed the memory blinds shut.

Let the water do its work.

Clean Teen Faces World—Vows to Fight On.

I turned off the shower, thankful for the fog that had settled on the mirror, which meant I didn't have to see myself. The towels were heavy with wetness, I dried myself as best I could, put on my yellow terry cloth robe. A knock rapped on the door.

"Jenna?" It was my mother.

I unlocked the bathroom door to her worried face.

"Evan's gone," she said.

Mom hadn't had a boyfriend in a long time.

"Did he leave because of me?"

"He left because it was the right thing to do." Mom planted her emergency room nurse shoes in front of me like she did when she had to give a patient a shot who didn't want one.

"Tell me," she said.

I leaned against the door; told her. I didn't cry.
Mom pushed her own angry tears away.
Don't cry, Mom. I know how much you hate him.
She went into ER nurse mode, sitting me down, getting me
water.

Was I all right?

Yes.

Hurt in any way?

No.

Did I want her to stay home tonight, not go into work? She'd
be happy to—

No.

We sat on the wobbly wooden stools as night fell on the
kitchen—mother and daughter trying to reach each other, but
more than anything just swallowing the pain.

CHAPTER 27

I bought my car the next week—a Chevy Cavalier with a sun roof and torn bucket seats. It wasn't quite the one I'd dreamed of—I couldn't afford the Corvette convertible—but it was red, and most importantly, it was mine. Opal came with me when I drove it off the lot. She christened it with sparkling apple cider—opened the bottle and poured it over the left front bumper as the used car salesman applauded.

A red car. My dad would approve. He'd gotten out of jail when Sueann Turnbolt paid his bail. I knew this because I'd called the jail. I'd had the car for three days and already I'd waxed it twice. I used the gentle circling motion Dad taught me when he used to wax his cars, careful to not leave any streaks or buildup. It's funny the things we hold onto from our parents and the things we leave behind.

I was driving down Lake Shore Drive with the picnic in a basket—fried chicken, olive rolls, fruit salad, and lemon cookies. I pulled into the driveway of Shady Oaks Nursing Home and walked inside, up the stairs, past the nurses station, past the

tired, blank stares of the old people in wheelchairs and walkers to my grandmother's room. Gladys was sitting in a chair by the window reading. She smiled so big when I walked in.

"Well," she declared, "look, Millie, it's Jenna. Back from Texas."

"Texas," my grandmother said flatly.

I handed Gladys a postcard of the big Texas sky. "That piece of the sky I promised you."

Gladys held it to her heart, smiling.

"Come on, Grandma," I said, "we're going on that picnic."

Grandma looked at Gladys, who said, "Millie, you go on now with Jenna. She'll take good care of you."

Grandma wanted to wear her pink sweater even though I told her it was hot. I helped her on with it. The memory board had my daisy postcard pinned to it alongside one of Faith's new modeling photos. I took off my little sign that read "Jenna's gone to Texas. She'll see you when she gets back."

I pointed to Faith's smiling face. "Faith and I are going to come together next week to see you Grandma, but I wanted to spend some time with you alone."

Grandma walked out the door with me like a little child. It took a few tries to get her in the car, but once we got moving, she started smiling.

"I know you don't remember everything like you wished," I said as I pulled onto Lake Shore Drive, "but I promised you when I got my car I'd take you on a picnic."

"Picnic," said my grandmother.

I drove to the Belmont Harbor exit, got off by the boats,

parked near the water, and helped my grandmother out of the car. She walked with me slowly. I found a park bench, put a blanket down. Her face lit up for a minute.

"Jenna?" she said.

I smiled. She remembered. "Yeah, Grandma, it's me."

"You never liked keeping your underpants on," she announced.

I laughed. "That's not true!"

"You were always running buck naked around the yard."

I opened the picnic basket, laughing. Of all the things about me to remember. "I got over it," I said and handed her a plate.

"I don't remember things like I used to," she said sadly.

"I know."

"I can see you as a child sometimes, but not . . ."

"I know."

"I would like to remember you more," she said, looking off as a pigeon swooped down and ate a piece off her cookie.

"I know. It's not your fault."

She ate a little bit and didn't say much; she fed the squirrels, though.

So I talked.

About shoes and Harry Bender.

About Mrs. Gladstone and Cadillacs.

About driving and earning money and buying my car and what happens to a person when they've been to Texas.

"I think Texas makes you think about things in a bigger way," I said. "I've never been anywhere that changed me so much."

Grandma was picking at her shoelaces.

"Tight," she said.

I bent down to check them, loosened the laces, made sure the tongues lay flat; relaced them. She was silent as I helped.

The grass was scorched and brown from the hot summer sun. We headed toward the car, Grandma and me.

I said, "I remember when I was a little girl and we'd make that grape jam from the grapes in your yard and I'd get it all over everything . . ."

"Including the cat," she said softly.

I opened the car door. She got inside and grabbed my hand like it was a life raft. I crouched down, held her hand for the longest time.

So much sadness.

So much pain.

But remembering the good things—that's what keeps anyone going.

CHAPTER 28

I sat on the rock in the Rookery of the Lincoln Park Zoo waiting for my father. I always liked the Rookery because it was a little haven tucked away from the noise of the city. It had a small pond and rocks and moss and plants surrounding it. Ducks swam and birds sang and butterflies fluttered overhead. I always felt at peace here, even if things were going wrong other places.

A mother duck and her babies swam by. Funny, how in nature you see so many single female parents. Lions, bears, dogs, cats. The mother always gets the kids, the father goes off somewhere to start another litter. I mentioned this to my mother once. She said anyone who gets the kids gets the deal.

I threw a piece of bread into the water. The mother duck let the lead baby get it. Then another piece of bread hit the water; it wasn't mine. I turned to look.

My father was standing there holding a bag of bread.

"I didn't know if you'd come," I said.

He threw another hunk of bread into the pool. "I didn't either."

I tried not to study him to see if he was drunk. He looked okay, but . . .

"I'm not drunk," he said, sounding normal.

"Okay."

"You wanted to talk."

"Yeah."

Dad sat down on the rock that was higher than mine. He was wearing clean jeans and a golf shirt.

"I don't apologize for what happened with your license," I started.

He let out a long sigh.

"I would do it again, Dad, to save your life . . . and mine. I had a good friend who—"

"I was handling it, Jenna."

"No." This was going down the toilet fast.

"I lost my license, Jenna! I've got to do six weeks of community service!"

Good.

"Just listen," I pleaded.

I threw up my hands and the words poured out of me.

"I remember the smells mostly, Dad—the drinks with the half-eaten olives—the aroma of my childhood was gin, bourbon, and scotch. I'd sniff the glasses in the house; took a lick off a bottle once. It was awful. Something's wrong with us, I kept thinking. This doesn't happen at my friends' houses.

"I'd go to liquor stores with you, Dad—all the store owners

knew you. You were happy in those shops and I tried to be happy, too, but I knew that in just a few hours things were going to change.

"After the divorce I used to sit on your side of the bed and pretend you were still there. I'd wrap myself up in the bathrobe you left behind and curl up like you were going to drop through the ceiling all healed. I'd look for you around every corner. I'd try so hard to be perfect so you'd come back. I tried to protect everyone—help Faith, be no problem to Mom. I thought if things were easier you might stop drinking."

I slapped the rock, shaking. "I took your drinking on my shoulders, Dad! But I can't keep it there anymore. *I've changed.* I love you, but I can't be with you unless *you* change because seeing you so out of control, seeing you wasting your life is too hard for me. I can't pretend like you don't have a problem. You need help, Dad! You're an alcoholic. There's help everywhere for what you've got. But you've got to want to get it."

"I know," he hissed, *"how to handle my liquor."*

"No," I said back to him. "That's a lie. You don't."

He got up slowly, glared at his bag of bread, and hurled the whole thing into the pond, scaring the ducks that scattered quacking in every direction.

I stood up, too—stood tall. "Please hear me, Dad. If you keep drinking I won't see you, I won't talk to you on the phone. I need a sober father. Faith does too."

"That's pretty rough, Jenna."

"I know it."

Dad walked heavily across the stepping stones toward the

gate, then turned back to look at me—anger, hurt, and love carved on his face.

I looked at him, too, but not the old way with guilt and fear. I didn't know what would happen now, later, or ever. All I knew is that I'd said it finally—spoke the truth—and saying it was like losing five hundred miserable pounds that I'd been lugging around for most of my life.

He stood there for the longest time, then shrugged finally and headed out. It wasn't until then that I realized I'd been crying.

I always wondered why I had a father who was an alcoholic. Now I knew.

It made me strong.

It made me different.

It showed me how to say no to the darkness.

I looked at the pond. A few ducks were back swimming around Dad's plastic bag.

It wasn't right, throwing that bag in there. This was a bird sanctuary.

I found a long stick and fished it out of the pond. "It's okay," I said to the ducks, tore up the bread, and tossed it in the water. I folded the wet plastic, put it in my pocket.

I was always cleaning up after him.

I sat on a rock, aching for my father. But with the ache, I felt lighter and older. I always thought I'd have a permanent broken part in me because of the problems with my dad. Now I see that it isn't the problems along the way that make us or

break us. It's how we learn to stand and face them that makes the difference.

I squared my shoulders; heard a rustle in the bushes. A scared baby duck stuck his head out, gave a little quack.

I had one piece of bread left. I held it out for him.

He waddled out, unsure.

"Go for it," I said. "Make me proud."

I threw the bread in the water. He dove in after it, raced past the other ducklings, gobbled it up.

Daring Duck Beats Odds to Win.

Another true survivor.

Like me.