

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.