

Chapter 1

Desperate Attempts

SHE STANDS BEHIND ME, hands resting on either side of my chair. Wisps of her coercive breath crawl against my neck. It licks my soul with a forceful twist and rasps against my waning spirit. I steady myself against the desk, feet flat on the crimson shag carpet. As I stare at the laptop screen, her shadow shrouds my shoulders. My heart beats slow and hard, pushing against my ribs. I'm dying to rebut her ominous intimidation. She's worn me down. I'm now mystified and curious as to what Seven Hills, New York, might offer, this mysterious place of puritanical suffrages.

Grandma said it all the time, "Puritanical suffrages." She'd roll her eyes in disgust. "My mother," she'd cry out without finishing her thought, until the day she died. The religious burden released her soul but captured mine before I even knew it.

Mom's been rattling desperate attempts for years to get me away from our hometown of Pittsburgh, and she dauntingly continues. "I have job contacts in Seven Hills," she brags, leaning over my shoulder to see what's on the monitor. "Rob and Angie so look forward to your coming," she urges. *Yes, Mother*, I think in anger. *I miss them, and I need a new job, but I hate the pretended subtlety of your suggestions.* "It will be good for you, Jael." Mom pricks the last speck of my remaining defense.

Pissed at her whining assumptions, I swivel my chair, hitting her hip—on purpose—pushing her into the bedside. Without regard, I ignore the surprised look I know sweeps across her face. I step to the bedroom window. Rain begins to fall. I touch the meshed metal screen. Droplets filter through, wetting my fingers. Religious angst hangs over my head, the worst of all the angsts. It tears at your guts and gives you no answers; death seems its only resolve.

Yes, I eavesdropped a little last night when she sat in the hallway to avoid Dad's earshot. Her driveling ended up catching mine instead. She said, "Yes, Thomas, I know," and followed it with, "We all need released." Although I heard Mom begging Thomas for some type of "determination" for herself, I chalk it up to another one of her pious blatherings, something she probably inherited from Grandma, the "puritanical suffrages." Mom sounded distressed and pressured. I recognize the type of voice, when a person's being squeezed by another's desires, like mine when she begs me to go to Seven Hills.

"I'll go," I tell her. "Now go away. Let me pack in peace."