Chapter 1

She felt like she had been punched in the stomach. Nausea, dizziness, swept over her.

“I have to sit down.”

“You are already sitting down,” a voice gently stated.

“Then I have to stand up, do something,” she said but she remained sitting.

“Sara, talk to me. Are you okay?” the young man asked.

“I’m not okay. I gotta get out of here. I have to go home.” A ray of sunlight slipped through the window onto the table. How could it be sunny, she asked herself?

“You are home, Sara. This is your apartment.”

“Oh,” she said as she looked around. Nothing looked familiar. Nothing seemed real. It didn’t seem possible. This couldn’t be her home. Nothing looked the same.

“Then you better go,” she told the man sitting next to her.

“Not till I know you are okay.”

“I’m not okay, but you have to go. Please go. I can’t deal with this now.”

“Okay, if you say so,” he reluctantly got up and started for the door then turned back to look at her. “Call me, or I’ll call you later, okay?”

Sara didn’t respond as he let himself out the door.

“What has just happened?”she asked herself as she sat, the nausea giving way to numbness. This couldn’t be real. Couldn’t be happening to her. She had her whole life ahead of her, a life she had planned out, a life she had been going to share with Jeff. Now that was all gone.

Was it only yesterday that she had been in love? Two students at Michigan State University, young and in love. She remembered …

“Hi ya, sweetheart,” the lanky young man snuck up behind the petite figure sitting on a stone bench and staring intensely beyond the book in her lap, across the expanse of green grass behind the administration building and sloping down to the rapids of the Red Cedar River. Across the concrete steps on the neighboring shore were fat ducks sleeping in the sun. Across the expanse of campus the bright spring sky was broken only by the outline of white clouds. In one fell swoop, Jeff engulfed her from behind into a giant bear hug that knocked the book off her lap and onto the sidewalk and almost lifted her bodily off the bench.

“Jeff, what are you doing?”

Jeff continued to hold her in his bear hug, resting his head on her head with a wild toothy grin and rocking gently back and forth, his arms clasped firmly together under her full breasts.

“You’re crazy. Let me go. People are staring.”

“So let them stare.”

“You’re impossible,” Sara said with a true note of frustration but inside she loved it, loved the feel of his nearness towering above her. She loved the strong arms around her waist, loved his impetuousness and his open displays of affection, so different from her own inhibitions. Somehow Jeff, with his warmth and enthusiasm, had broken through her tight space that kept others at a distance and had done it sogenuinely that she had not felt offended. He wasn’t like the other guys who invaded her space, tried to thrust themselves into her personal atmosphere, not because they liked her and respected her but because they wanted something from her. He gave his friendship and love so that she wanted to give to him in return. Because he made no demands she felt free to give, whatever she wanted to give, and both slowly and like a whirlwind he had zoomed into her life and won her over.

Theirs was an easy friendship, easy and natural. Not full of the silly hassles that seemed to beset the relationshipsof other couples they knew. They had met in the dorm and shared several of those general first-yearcourses that no onewas allowed to escape. Together they went through all the frustrations and traumas of the first year at a mega-university. They both came from small towns USA, Michigan style, middle class families.

As Sara allowed herself to relax in Jeff’s arms, Jeff let go and sidled up next to her on the bench. Sara felt both a feeling of relief from the embarrassment of being stared at by others, seeing two people so obviously in love, but also a sense of disappointment at having the warmth of his arms removed from her.

“You love it and you know it,” Jeff remarked as he sat next to her.

Sara had to smile, “I love you, not everything you do. Look what you did to my book, all my notes have been scattered all over and I’ve lost my place.”

“You weren’t really studying anyway.”

“What do you mean I wasn’t studying, how do you know?” Sara enjoyed fighting with Jeff, even when she knew he was right and she was just being stubborn. Jeff knew it too. He enjoyed their little verbal repartees. So far they had never had a real argument, a serious fight, just teasing and love spats.

Jeff stared at Sara with his big impetuous grin. Sara couldn’t resist his smile, yet because of that she felt she had to withstand his attraction.

“Stop smiling at me like that. I’m serious.” Jeff just continued to grin. “And I was too studying. I’ve been going over some of these pictures of paintings by early impressionists and studying their style. I’m thinking I might do a series of paintings imitating their techniques and try to incorporate them into my own style, or something like that,” Sara lied. Jeff just grinned, further confusing her.

“And then you know, I’ve been studying that time period, trying to put it into perspective with the painters of the times, their lifestyles, and how that influenced their paintings . . . Darn, will you please stop staring at me like that.

“But I like to stare at you.”

“Just stop it,” Sara was starting to get angry. “All right, have it your way. You can sit there and grin all day if you want. I’m leaving.” Sara closed her book and prepared to leave. She took one last look at Jeff before making her move, not really wanting to leave. Jeff was still grinning. He loved it when she was angry like that.

“I was just thinking,” he said and paused. “I was just thinking, we ought to discuss what we’re going to do in the future.”

“What are you talking about?”

Jeff became suddenly serious. “Our future, together, you know.”

“No, I don’t know.” She paused before adding, “You’re not talking about marriage, are you?”

“Why not? We’ll be seniors soon, and then graduates, why not do this together, plan a life together.”

“Marriage, you and me?”

“It would be difficult to do so alone.”

“Jeff, I . . .” She didn’t know what to say. They were still so young, he was so impetuous. And what about a career? And yet Jeff was so supportive of her art, what better person to have by her side while she built a career?

“But we’re both so young.”

“More time for us to be together. We aren’t teenagers any more. If we get married now we have a better chance of making it sixty years.”

“What about our parents?”

“Mine love you as much as I do.”

“It’s so soon, so impulsive . . .” So unlike her, she thought, she who was always so careful, who liked a plan despite her artistic side. It wasn’t exactly her dream proposal and yet ... here he was, her dream man. She couldn’t imagine finding anyone she loved more. She looked across the expanse of lawn and river to the opposite side as she pondered the question, avoiding his gaze. How could she say no?

“Yes,” she finally said, much to Jeff’s relief.

“I knew you would say yes if I kept asking,” Jeff said as he picked her up and planted a kiss on her lips. “Let’s celebrate.”

That had been last spring. What had happened since then to lead to this? It was just yesterday, just this morning that she still had that illusion of love. Now it was gone. Would it ever return? Popped by one phrase, the bubble that had been her life had exploded. What would she do now?

Her roommate found her at the kitchen table, still sitting where Jeff had left her that morning.

“Sara, are you okay?”

Sara appreciated the concern in her voice but it seemed to be spoken through a tunnel.

“Sara,” Anne repeated, finally breaking through to whatever place she had retreated.

Sara looked up, “Oh, hi, when did you get here?”

“Jeff called me. He told me what happened. Are you okay?”

“Sure, yeah, I’m fine. I’m okay,” Sara repeated.

“You don’t look okay.”

“No, I’m fine, just fine. I just need a little fresh air, yes, fresh air will help,” she said and proceeded to try to stand up only to have her legs buckle underneath her as her head swam. Anne stepped in beside her to help hold her up.

“Here, let me help you. Let’s get you to a more comfortable seat.” She helped Sara edge her way to the couch, slipped her into her favorite spot and wrapped a blanket around her.

“You just sit there. I’m going to fix you some tea. Sit back. I’ll take care of everything. Everything is going to be okay,” Anne assured her. Sara knew she was wrong.

Chapter 2

“There’s no easy way to say this. We are changing our food services from our own program to another provider. We expect to save well over thirty thousand dollars by doing this. It will mean some changes in staffing, but I want to assure you that you will have the opportunity to apply for positions with the new provider,” the executive director informed them at the mandatory employee meeting for food service workers.

When she had first heard about the meeting she hadn’t been concerned. Probably some more minor policy changes. Seemed someone was always coming up with changes. Every time they got a new executive director, that director had to make amark by introducingchanges, whether warranted or not. There had been some rumblings, always were rumblings and rumors in any organization where there were people, so this one was no exception. At times there had been talk of unionizing, but overall, she had been happy with management and saw no reason for a union. She had already outlasted four executive directors. She knew the drill. She figured she would outlast this one as well.

She had started working at the retirement community part-time out of high school, left when she had her babies then began working again for over twenty-five years once her youngest started grade school. She was one of the old-timers. As such she had the first option at the check-in desk where she could sit and rest her feet, but she didn’t always take that option, enjoying waiting on the residents who had become friends over the years. They had become like family. She enjoyed her job, enjoyed the people she worked with and for, and looked forward to working there for another ten years until she was ready to retire.

She had heard it all before but this time was different. She tried to ignore the tension forming in her shoulders and the unsettled feeling in her stomach as he went on to introduce the management staff for the new company. Her boss would have the opportunity for a management position with the company at another site. Everyone else would have a month probationary period as they decided who would stay and who would go. They were told not to say anything to the residents until they were told about the change at the meeting that afternoon.

“What do you think?” one of her co-workers asked as they walked out of the meeting together.

“I don’t know what to think. It’s too soon to tell.”

“I don’t know about you but I’m going to start looking for another job. I can’t afford to be without work,” another said.

“At least my husband still has his job. It will be hard if I lose this job, but not impossible. But what will you do, Esther? You still have kids at home.”

“I guess I’ll worry about it when it happens. Maybe it won’t be so bad.”

“Let’s hope so,” Margaret said as they went to their cars.

Esther didn’t know what to think. After all, she had lasted for twenty-five years; she figured she could make it another five to ten years. Still she felt dizzy, unsure of herself; her legs were like lead weights as she walked to her car.

Chapter 3

Sara woke up after a hard sleep. She felt strangely calm. It had all been a dream, a bad dream, she told herself. In her dream, Jeff had broken off their engagement. In her dream he had told her he was gay. Couldn’t possibly be true. What a nightmare. Today she would get up and go to class, then go to work and she would see Jeff at lunch as they always met for lunch and she would tell him about her dream and they would both laugh. And then the world would be right again. She just had to get through the morning until she could see him.

She got out of bed, took a quick shower, dressed and prepared to leave for her eight o’clock class.

“You up,” Anne asked

“No, I’m sleep walking. What do you think I’m doing?I’ve got my eight o’clock. Can’t sleep through that.”

“I thought after yesterday that maybe you wouldn’t go to class.”

“Why wouldn’t I go to class?”

“Because, you know,” Anne hesitated, unsure how much to say, “After your break-up.”

“No, that was just a bad dream. I just need to talk to Jeff and everything will be fine.”

“No, Sara, it wasn’t a dream, it was real. Remember?”

“No, it was all a mistake. Just wait till I talk to Jeff. Now I have to go to class,” Sara stated as she pulled on her coat.

Anne walked over and gently put her hand on Sara’s arm. “No, Sara, it’s true.” Sara pulled away, finished putting her coat on and walked out the door.

“No, it’s not true, and if you were a good friend you would let me go.”

Sara sailed through her eight o’clock class and worked her three-hourshift at the book store as if nothing had happened. She met Jeff at the Union grill, same as she had every Wednesday for the past two years, as long as their work and class schedule allowed.

Jeff seemed surprised to see her.

“I wasn’t sure you would show up.”

“Why wouldn’t I? It’s Wednesday, isn’t it?”

“Yes, but after yesterday I wasn’t sure you would want to see me.”

“Why wouldn’t I want to see my fiancé?”

“Sara, remember? Yesterday? We can’t get married.”

“Oh, that, that was just a mistake. I’m sure you’re mistaken.”

“No, Sara, I’m not. I’m gay. I’ve struggled with this for years. I’ve only just recently found the strength to admit who I am.”

“But how do you know? How can you be sure? This is just a bad dream. This can’t be happening to me.”

“This isn’t just about you, you know. It’s happening to me, too. I didn’t exactly choose this.”

“Yes, you did, you chose . . .” Sara struggled to find the words, “You chose ‘this’ over me, over all we shared. How can you do this?”

“No, I didn’t choose this. I didn’t want this, tried to avoid it for years but I can’t lie to myself anymore. And I can’t continue to lie to you.”

“But what about all of our plans? I thought you loved me.”

“I do love you, just not in the way that you want.”

“Then why did you propose? Why did you go out with me?”

“Maybe because I just wasn’t ready to accept the truth back then. I do love you, if I were to marry any woman, it would be you.” Jeff paused to allow what he was saying to sink in. When Sara didn’t respond he continued, reaching for her hand, “I know it’s hard. I’m hoping we can still be friends. Just think how hard this has been for me?”

“You don’t get to decide whether we can be friends or not.” Sara pulled her hand away. “You’re the one who broke up with me, remember. I think you better go.” Sara didn’t know what to say. She had been so sure it was a mistake, a cruel mistake, but here was Jeff again, saying the same terrible things he had said yesterday so maybe it was true. But it couldn’t be true.

Sara stared down at the salad untouched on her tray. “If you don’t leave, I guess I will.”

“No, don’t get up, Sara, I’m going,” Jeff said as he left.

Sara called Anne. She didn’t wait for Anne to say hello before saying, “Anne, Jeff and I are broke up.”

“I know, Sara, Where are you?”

“At the Union.”

“I’ll be right there,” Anne said and hung up.

Sara’s salad remained untouched when Anne found her.

“I can’t believe it. It wasn’t a bad dream,” Sara told her.

“I know. Let’s get out of here.”

“He couldn’t be gay, could he? I would have known, should have known. How could I have been dating someone for two years and not know?” she said as she left with Anne.