

Chapter 1

Darkness Falls

I never saw it coming. Had no idea such a thing could happen, especially to me. In Dr. Bennett's office that day I heard my mother and him discuss me like I wasn't in the next room and able to hear everything they said.

"I'd like to admit her—"

"We can't," she answered.

I didn't understand the "we" she referred to. It couldn't be my father. He sat outside waiting in the car, as usual, keeping a safe distance and remaining as removed as possible. And it definitely wasn't me, for she never took what I *really* wanted into consideration.

"She needs rest and medication," Dr. Bennett said, "The hospital is the best—"

“No!” my mother said, loud enough to startle me. “She can get all she needs at home.”

Sure, Mom, you can do it all! I wanted to stab her with my words.

“Violet, she needs proper treatment,” the doctor said. And I knew he was trying his best to convince her to see it his way. But I also knew just how difficult my mother could be.

“No, I won’t have it,” she said.

I turned and stared at the jars of cotton balls, gauze and tongue depressors, keeping my focus away from the corner of the room, from the examination table and the horrible memory of what had happened there last fall. I stared at my hands, picking and chewing at the skin around my nails, absolutely hating my life.

“I would like you to reconsider,” Dr. Bennett said.

“She’ll not be put in with a bunch of crazy people,” my mother answered in a voice as sharp as a screeching seagull. I closed my eyes, forcing back tears. Before I had a chance to know what was happening, the door flew open and my mother rushed in. She grabbed me by the arm. “Get up,” she said. “We’re leaving.”

I stumbled to my feet and trudged along beside her like a child who’d been misbehaving and must go home.

My mother opened the car door and I slid in the back and waited for her to close it so I could lean against it, close my eyes and try to forget just how much my life had turned to shit.

On the drive home, I was relieved that at least my mother said nothing except to tell my father to stop at the drugstore to get my prescription filled.

Over the next several days, my mother kept asking, “How are you feeling? Are you getting any better?”

The nerve! I wanted to scream. I couldn’t believe she could possibly think me stupid enough to fall for such an act, to believe that she possibly cared after all she’d done to destroy my life. I wanted so much to free my voice, to laugh out loud, the biggest belly laugh ever, and to tell her that she was the crazy one, not me. She would not leave me alone; she even slept in bed beside me at night...something no teenager wants their mother to do.

Most nights I just couldn’t sleep, maybe because I had slept most of the day, I don’t know. But for whatever reason I stayed stiff in bed, my body straight, not daring to move even a finger, all the while imagining whether this was what it was like to be dead. The

slightest move could wake my mother, so I didn't dare get up to pace the floor. I didn't want her shadowing behind me, like a part of me I couldn't escape. The last thing I needed at three in the morning was more of her foolish questions.

During my waking hours, I constantly stretched the neck of my T-shirt away from my throat, pacing the floor, saying, "I can't breathe. I can't breathe." I hated that I could no longer wear the turtleneck pullovers I so loved. I didn't understand why I felt like I was being strangled all the time. I tried to find relief by going to the sink in the pantry and splashing cold water on my face, doubling over, coughing and gagging, trying to clear my throat from whatever was stuck in it. When that didn't work, I switched to drinking glass after glass of water, trying to wash whatever it was down. I tried so hard not to totally lose control, and run screaming through the house like I was on fire.

I could tell no one how scared I was. They wouldn't understand, I just knew they wouldn't. They'd probably even laugh at how ridiculous it all sounded. As much as possible I stayed home from school. Nothing really mattered anymore. I was all alone. I was

going to die. Tears came to my eyes so easily and I could no longer hold them back. I'd lost control. If I started talking, tears began. I had become a broken faucet and unable to stop the flow. I couldn't control anything, even my emotions, the one thing I'd been so proud of being able to control, especially my ability to hold back tears. This frightened me most of all. What did I have left? I'd become like a newborn baby, crying over every little thing. I wanted to be strong again. I wanted to be tough, to have steel for skin, so tough and strong that nothing could ever penetrate me.

In the evenings at suppertime, my younger sister, Kathleen, our cousins, Troy, Margaret and Jamie, Lillian, the latest elderly boarder, all gathered along with Dorothy, who lived with us, my parents and me around our large oval dining room table. During the meal everyone tried their best to avoid saying or doing anything that could possibly upset my father. Over the years we all had learned how easy it was to set him off. We made sure to keep our elbows off the table, chew with our mouths closed, and not start any conversation, or dare to disagree with anything anyone

said. But no matter how many rules we followed, there was always something that made my father angry.

Most nights, he sat staring at whatever food my mother placed before him, usually some kind of meat along with boiled potatoes, peas or carrots. He'd moan and groan and say he had no appetite. Mom would become flustered and fuss over him like a sick child. She'd say, "Sidney, you've got to eat something. My God, you can't survive without eating."

He'd moan some more, put his hand on his stomach and in a weak voice say, "Maybe, some buttermilk."

Off to the pantry she would dash to get a glass, then to the fridge, where she'd shake the carton of buttermilk before pouring the thick foamy liquid into the glass. She'd rush back to the table and set it before him and keep glancing his way while he took small sips as if it was the most difficult thing in the world to do. He sometimes would finish half of it then shake his head side-to-side and say that he couldn't possibly drink anymore. Before long, he would stand and make his way to the bedroom, or something would upset him and he'd make his exit by banging his fist on the table and storming off, cursing us all. I was always amazed at how easily he could turn from such a weak, sick man into a raging monster. And no matter which way our father left the table our mother always

put the blame on us. She would say, “You should all be ashamed of yourselves for upsetting him so.”

Most evenings I stayed in my room and pretended to sleep so that I could avoid the nightmare of eating at the table with my family. It seemed that all my life I’d been pretending. Our family photo album was like a work of fiction, filled with pictures of Mom, Kathleen, me, and our German shepherd dog. It was the family Mom presented as real. The children boarders were nowhere in sight; neither was Dorothy, nor anyone else who lived with us. This was the family Mom wanted me to believe was real... a family that didn’t exist. Where was Roy, the man in a wheelchair? Where was Harold, the fat man who had stayed in the kitchen all day, wanting to hold us on his lap? Where was Minnie, the strange old maid who’d stayed with us during the winter months and had played weird games? And all the kids: Timmy, Keith, Nancy, Little Ray, and on and on, all the others whose names I found it hard to remember? Where were the pictures of Troy, Margaret, and Jamie who’d been living with us since they were little, and would probably never leave? It was all so confusing, so hard to keep straight. Sometimes my head would spin because I just never knew where it all would end.

In front of me my parents tried to act like everything was fine, but they didn't fool me. The air in the house was much heavier than normal, the tension like an elastic band pulled so tight it would soon snap. They argued behind their closed bedroom door, where I guess they thought no one could hear them, but their angry words escaped around the door like swirling smoke. Dad told Mom that she should listen to what the doctor tells her and she told him that she knew what was best. I came to believe that whatever was wrong with me must be so serious that they couldn't bring themselves to tell me, something so terrible they didn't want me to know; I figured I must be dying.

Mom doled out the little yellow antidepressant pills the doctor had prescribed. Without argument I swallowed them like an obedient dog, happy to please its master, to gladly wag my tail. Anything to keep her from nagging me with more foolish questions about whether or not I was feeling better.

I waited and hoped for the magic of the medicine, for the relief it was supposed to bring. I waited with anticipation like I had waited many times over the years for the tide to come in, for the pleasure

of swimming and floating in the waves, for the possibility of all my troubles disappearing, and for just one minute having nothing to worry about.

On a Thursday evening after Mom and Dorothy finished the dishes, Dad came out from the bedroom and sat in the kitchen by the wood stove. He rolled one of his handmade cigarettes and kept it in his mouth while he laced up his work boots, getting ready to take Mom to town for the weekly grocery shopping.

Between the dining room and kitchen I paced, unable to sit still and unable to watch TV with the rest of the kids. Back and forth, scuffing my slippers over the floor, stretching the fabric of my T-shirt away from my throat to try and stop the endless feeling of not being able to breathe.

“Get dressed,” my mother said to me. “You’re coming with us.” I paused, rubbing the side of my face, searching for an answer, something that would allow me to find a way out of going. The bright yellow kitchen walls hurt my eyes, making it hard to think. All I knew was I didn’t want to go... I just didn’t want to go...

But I couldn't figure out what to say and no longer had the strength to argue about my greasy hair and that I hadn't bathed in days. For I knew none of those things would be enough reason for my parents to allow me to stay home. They didn't care that I would follow behind them in the store while they shopped, like a lost puppy.

Upstairs in my bedroom, I pulled on my jeans and a clean T-shirt then made my way back down to the kitchen. But before entering the room I overheard my father say, "She should stay home with Dorothy."

I paused and released a frustrated breath, thinking about Dorothy. She wasn't a maid, or a servant, or even a relative, but someone who helped around the house in exchange for a place to live.

Dorothy was now twenty-eight and had been with my family since her early teens, when I was too young to remember her arrival. My mother didn't allow her to go out on her own. She couldn't date, couldn't go to dances. She couldn't do anything a young woman should be able to do. And even stranger was the fact Dorothy obeyed and didn't talk back. I just couldn't understand how she allowed herself to remain such a prisoner.

I had been endlessly fighting for my freedom, fighting to not end up like Dorothy—but now in this state I was in I wondered if it had

all been in vain. My life was in shambles and I was no freer than before. In fact, my life had become much worse because I no longer had any strength to fight at all.

Dorothy often spoke of wanting to marry and have children of her own. But I didn't think it would ever happen unless a man dropped from the sky and landed in our backyard, and even then I was sure my mother would quickly put an end to any chance of a romance ever happening.

I decided that I'd rather die than end up like Dorothy.

It was these kinds of things that made me hate explaining my family to anyone who didn't know us. We were like a circus act, only without a tent. Instead we performed in a big two story house with six bedrooms, usually filled to the brim with boarders, both young and old—all kinds of freaky people.

The radio stayed on all day, and the TV blared in the afternoon and evening, kids ran around and people talked, mostly over one another. No one ever seemed to listen to anyone else. It was a maddening nonstop noise that didn't end until the lights went off at night and everyone finally settled into bed. And even then there was always the possibility that some kind of chaos could still strike.

My mother's voice brought me back to the moment, "No, Sidney! For the last time! Barbara Ann is not staying home with Dorothy." I stepped into the kitchen and ended their argument. I followed them to the car, obediently sitting in the back seat.

While my father drove, I stared out the car window into the darkness that surrounded us. Invisible hands tightened around my throat and I struggled for air. More than anything, I wanted this madness to end. I wanted the month of March to once again hold the promise of spring, the kiss of new beginnings.

I coughed, gagged, cleared my throat, and opened my jacket, tugging at the collar of my shirt. I just wanted to go back to being the girl I'd been before, back to when I knew nothing of what would happen, when I was innocent and unaware, back before the string of events that would eventually take me down, before this darkness swallowed me—this endless darkness that refused to spit me out.

