

Chapter 1

The angelic face gazed past the camera with serious eyes the color of spring violets and a rosebud mouth turned down. The child in the picture was hardly more than a toddler—around two, two-and-a-half, Claudia Rose guessed—but there was a grown-up wistfulness in the way her chin rested on her dimpled hand.

Studying the photograph, Claudia fancied she could see life experience in those eyes, experience that extended far beyond the scant few months the little girl had been on earth. *An old soul*, she thought as she returned the photograph to the child's mother.

Erin Powers replaced the photo in an envelope and stuffed it into an inside pocket of the battered leather bag at her feet. More saddlebag than purse. Its faded sides bulged with unseen items. "We've always known Kylie was special. As soon as we saw those eyes, we said God has a plan for her. I've *got* to get her back." Erin's head was bowed, her slender shoulders shaking as she choked back a sob. "Please, please tell me you'll help me find them."

Claudia's friend Kelly Brennan leaned over and put an arm around the half sister she hadn't seen in almost twenty years. It had been only a couple of hours since Erin had showed up without warning at her door, and Kelly wore the bemused expression of one still getting used to the idea. But the surprise of her sister's arrival was soon supplanted by an even greater one: Kelly learned that she had a young niece, Kylie. A niece who was missing.

Claudia's eyes returned to the sheet of notebook paper in her hand. "The handwriting is a little disturbing," she said. "I'm glad you asked me to come and look at it." She searched for diplomatic words that wouldn't add to Erin's distress, but they weren't easy to find. Red flags sprouted from the brief note.

Hand-printed in black ink, the note read: DON'T BOTHER LOOKING. THERE MIGHT BE SUFFERING BUT NOT AS BAD AS YOU THINK. GOD'S WILL BE DONE.

Below the words, the signature was just a scribble, which Erin identified as that of her husband, Rodney Powers.

The three women were gathered around a small wrought iron table on the plant-filled patio of Kelly's condo. But no one was paying attention to the lush colors of morning glory or the scent of star jasmine filling the sun-warmed air.

"I thought he'd just taken her for a walk." Tears welled up in Erin's eyes and spilled onto her pale cheeks. "I had a bad night and I woke up this morning with a headache. So I slept late because I thought they'd be right back, but they didn't come back, and when I got up and went into the kitchen—" Her voice broke again and she buried her face in the tissue Kelly pressed into her hand.

"It's okay, honey." Kelly gave her sister's arm an awkward pat and threw Claudia a helpless glance. "The only family news I ever get is from my brothers, and you know how rarely I hear from them." She turned back to Erin with a regretful sigh. "I can't believe how completely I lost track of you. It's been ages since I heard anything."

The sisters shared a genetic history, but there the relationship ended. Claudia had been there when Kelly said goodbye to Erin, to her family. It was a memory that she found could still produce a sharp pang: Erin, four years old. A shy little girl sucking her thumb. Their three brothers madly waving goodbye from the back of an old pickup truck piled high with boxes and furniture. Their mother driving away without a backward glance, leaving her eldest child behind to live with Claudia's family.

Kelly added, "The last I heard was that you'd joined a cult—"

Erin pulled away from her. "It's not a cult!"

Behind Erin's head, Kelly rolled her eyes. "Okay, sorry. New religion."

"Why don't you tell us what happened with your husband," Claudia interjected before an argument broke out. Kelly's emotions could flare unexpectedly, and she would rather not find out whether Erin had inherited the same trait.

Erin began to explain how she'd found the note from her husband on the kitchen table. "Rod left it propped against my coffee mug," she said, sniffing miserably into the tissue. "We've been staying at a cabin near Big Bear for the last few weeks. I—I didn't know what to do; we don't know anyone around there. I called Sean."

"You've stayed in touch with our brothers?" Kelly asked. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised. You're a lot closer in age to the boys than to me."

"I talk with Sean a couple times a year maybe. He lets me know if he hears anything from Mom. She calls him once in a while."

Claudia sensed Kelly stiffen. Erin didn't know that she had just wandered into dangerous territory. She was unaware of the tacit agreement that Kelly's mother was a topic to be avoided if at all possible.

"Those would be the times when she wants to hit him up for money," Kelly muttered.

Erin made a sound of distress. "Fine, Kelly, I get it that you hate Mom, but she's not—"

"Let's not go there, Erin. You and Sean weren't around when I was raising Mickey and Pat. Mom was out hurling herself at as many bars as would take the grocery money. It's only thanks to sheer luck and the good will of people like Claudia's parents and some of the other neighbors pitching in that the rest of us didn't starve or get split up and put into foster care long before you were ever born."

Erin's eyes widened. "But she's— I didn't know it was going on that long."

"I'll just *bet* you didn't."

The sudden burst of hostility charged the air and Claudia found her neck and shoulders aching from the tension. Reaching up to massage the taut muscles, another flash of memory washed over her: the day the Brennan family moved into the rattiest house on the block.

The hand-lettered cardboard For Rent sign had finally disappeared from the front yard of the old Drew house across the street and a few doors down from Claudia's parents' home. The sign had stood there since the previous Christmas when the widowed Mr. Drew had suffered a massive stroke. His children, who apparently had their own busy lives and couldn't be persuaded to take him in, had moved him into a nursing home, where he died six weeks later. A realtor hammered the For Rent sign into the grass the day after the funeral.

On that Saturday, the weekend before Claudia was due to enter kindergarten, the weeds in the yard of the Drew house were taller than the flowers they choked. The concrete driveway was cracked and stained with the oil of the 1952 Dodge Coronet that had rested there, probably since before she was born.

Squeezing herself behind an ancient elm in her parents' garden, six-year-old Claudia watched two sweaty men in sleeveless T-shirts unload a moving van stacked with furniture shabby enough to match the house. A car pulled into the driveway. She could still remember being impressed by the woman who climbed out of the driver's seat. Ruby red halter top, shorts that showed

off long, tanned legs. Georgia Brennan, Claudia later learned. The mother.

Three children spilled out of the car. Two small boys and a little girl around Claudia's own age. They had been out of the car only moments before the girl was running around the yard in a futile attempt to corral the boys.

"Kelly Ann Brennan!" the mother screeched, oblivious of curtains twitching in disapproval in windows across the street. "Can't you do anything right, you lazy girl? You're about as useless as your father was. Didn't I tell you to watch your brothers?" The mother's voice reached a pitch that could set dogs howling. "You get those boys inside right now and wash them up. And don't let me see or hear a peep from any of you till dinner. You hear me, Kelly Ann? Do you *hear* me? What did I just say?"

That night, Claudia's own mother held forth over dinner about what she termed "that unladylike caterwauling." It was the first of her many commentaries on the Brennan family matriarch.

On Monday, when she and Kelly met on their way to the first day of school, Claudia had invited her new friend over to play with her Barbie dolls. Kelly looked like she desperately wanted to say yes, but instead she told Claudia that she had to go straight home and take care of her brothers because her mother would be passed out on the couch. At the time, Claudia didn't understand what that meant, but over the years there were many occasions where she saw for herself.

Before Kelly turned sixteen, two more fatherless Brennan kids—Erin and Sean—were crammed into the two-bedroom house. But by then, Kelly spent most of her free time at Claudia's home anyway. She made her escape from the sardine can with great relief when Claudia's parents invited her to live with them full-time until the girls completed high school.

When Georgia Brennan informed her eldest daughter that she was moving her four younger children to Banning, where housing was far cheaper, Kelly had said nothing. Banning was only about a ninety-minute drive from their current home in Santa Monica, but it might as well have been a thousand miles away.

Returning her attention to the present, Claudia realized that the uncomfortable silence between the sisters was unbroken. She cleared her throat and prepared to mediate. "Why don't we get back to the little girl who's missing. That's where we need to focus our attention."

Kelly's cheeks puffed as she blew out a long breath. "You're so right, Claud. The only thing we should concentrate on is making sure my niece is safe."

“You’re gonna help me, aren’t you, Kelly?” Erin looked young and vulnerable as she made her appeal. “Sean said you’re a really smart attorney and you’d know what to do.”

“He said that because I kept him out of jail when he got arrested for dealing pot. But that’s another story. I think we have to take this note to the police. This line about ‘the suffering’ is scaring the crap out of me.”

“We can ask Joel about it,” Claudia suggested. “He can tell us who to talk to.”

Kelly made a gun finger and pointed it at her. “Obvious choice. But first, I think we need some more information about what kind of person Rodney is.”

“There’s a lot of information in this handwriting sample,” Claudia said. “And as I said earlier, some of it is troublesome.”

Kelly said, “If you were to write up a report on it, we might be able to get a judge to—”

“Wait,” Erin interrupted. “Who’s Joel?”

“He’s my guy—my—” *Boyfriend* felt slightly ridiculous at forty. Significant Other was worse. “He’s a detective with LAPD.”

Erin looked doubtful. “I’m not so sure we should—I mean, I don’t want Rod to get in any trouble. I don’t think he would actually *hurt* Kylie.”

“Well, pardon me,” Kelly said, throwing up her hands. “But what about what he wrote in this note? Holy Christ, Erin, if you don’t think Kylie is in trouble, what the hell are you here for?”

“I didn’t know what else to do.” Erin rubbed her hands over her face, which was pretty, even without the benefit of any makeup. “He didn’t take Tickle with them. That’s what really got me worried.”

“*Tickle?* Who, or *what* is Tickle?”

Erin leaned down, unzipped her bag again and reached inside. When she withdrew her hand, she was holding a fuzzy brown stuffed bunny that had seen a lot of wear. “Kylie never, ever goes anywhere without Tickle. That means she had to be asleep when Rod took her. She’s probably come totally unglued by now.”

The three women looked at each other with sober faces, fully comprehending the importance of the stuffed toy to a small child.

“What the hell was Rod thinking, Erin?” Kelly asked. “Don’t you have any idea at all why he would take Kylie like this? What do you think he plans to do with her?”

Erin shook her head. “I don’t know, Kelly, I just don’t know.”

“Why don’t you tell us what led up to it,” Claudia encouraged her. “Something like this doesn’t happen in a vacuum. What’s been going on lately between you?”

Erin began to speak, slowly at first, drawing the words out as if she were reluctant to part with them. “We’ve been arguing on and off for a couple of days. He never said anything about leaving, though. I never guessed he would take the baby! Can’t you do something, Kelly?”

“Is he Kylie’s father?” Kelly asked.

“Of course he is.” Erin said indignantly.

“And you’re legally married?”

“Yes! We’ve been married almost six years.”

“You got married at eighteen?” Kelly looked as if she was going to explode, but she forced herself to stay on track. “Has he ever abused her or you? Hit you or . . . ?”

“No, of course he’s never done anything like that. We’re God-fearing people. He’s a little older than me, but Rod’s been a good husband. We did missionary work together for three years before I got pregnant.”

“Even missionaries can get into trouble,” Kelly pointed out. “How much older than you is he?”

Erin answered reluctantly. “He’s thirty-eight.”

Kelly did a quick calculation in her head. “Fourteen years is more than just *a bit* older, honey child. Okay, like Claudia said, we’ll start by talking to Joel about taking the note to the police; see if he thinks they would view it as a threat since there’s a child involved.”

“I’ll call him right now,” Claudia said, taking out her cell phone.

Kelly rose and stretched her arms high above her head. “Erin, let’s go to the kitchen while she’s making the call. I could use a cold one.”

Claudia watched them go, hoping her friend was talking about iced tea or a soda. Kelly had been working hard at staying sober and for the past several months had been successful. She hoped the stress of Erin’s situation wouldn’t push her into changing that.

After a disappointing chat with Jovanic, Claudia joined the sisters in the kitchen.

“He said that as Kylie’s father, Rodney has a legal right to take her. I asked him about the possibility of issuing an Amber Alert, but he said under

the circumstances, they can't. The wording of the note is ambiguous. It's not a direct threat, so there's no evidence that he intends to harm her."

"Damn." The ice cubes clinked against the glass as Kelly handed Claudia a diet cola. She turned to the refrigerator and got out a bag of French rolls, mayonnaise and mustard, sliced meats and cheese, arranged them on the kitchen counter. Claudia had a feeling that it wasn't because Kelly was in the mood for lunch; she just needed something to do, to help her contain the agitation that her busy hands telegraphed.

She returned to the refrigerator, dug in the crisper drawer and found a tomato and lettuce. Went back for a jar of pickles. Went back again, but found nothing more. "Let's talk about the handwriting," she said, busying herself with her sandwich-making preparations. "You saw danger signs, didn't you, Claud?"

Claudia chose her words with care. "There are indications of some . . . problems. But I'd like to enlarge the note on the computer so I can look at it in more detail." There was no point in offering a hasty opinion that could lead to mistakes. She added, "If you would scan it and e-mail it to me, Kel, I'll have a proper look at it when I get home. Six-hundred DPI would be high enough resolution to show the fine points when I blow it up."

She asked Erin to let her see the note again. The block printing Rodney Powers had penned on the scrap of lined paper told her that the writer had high control needs. He could be opinionated and more than a little self-important. It wouldn't be easy to get to know him—or to break through his defenses if he didn't want to believe something, regardless of how hard one tried to convince him.

Flipping the paper over, she ran her fingers across the back, feeling ridges where the pen had dug hard into the paper on the other side. She glanced over at Erin, who was watching her closely. "Do you know what kind of surface he wrote on?" she asked. "Do you think he might have put a magazine under the paper, or something like that?"

"We don't read outsider magazines," Erin said, disparaging. "we just took our Bibles. I'm pretty sure he wrote it on the kitchen table. That's where I found it."

Without comparing the note to additional samples of Rodney Powers's handwriting, there was no way to know for certain whether the degree of emotional depth indicated by the considerable pen pressure was his habit, but of one thing Claudia was certain: when he wrote the note Rodney had been laboring under powerful emotions.

“He’s stubborn,” she mused aloud. “Needs to feel he’s in control. I believe he would have planned this ahead. This is not the type of person who would act on the spur of the moment without first knowing what he was going to do and how he was going to accomplish it. He’s not someone who easily caves under pressure.” She glanced over at Erin, who was twisting her tissue to shreds. “Who do you know that he might have gone to for help? It would be hard for a man to handle a small child on his own.”

Erin shook her head. “Not Rod. He’s crazy about Kylie. He spends more time with her than I do. He knows how to handle her. Anyway, he was raised TBL. He doesn’t know any outsiders.”

“TBL? What’s that?”

“Our church, The Temple of Brighter Light. We don’t associate with anyone who’s not a member. Well, unless it’s for a good reason, like this, of course. That’s why I’m sure Rod doesn’t know anyone outside well enough that he could ask for help.”

Kelly left her sandwich-making for a moment to wipe her hands on a kitchen towel. She tossed the towel onto a small washing machine in the corner and turned to her sister. “Erin, if you’re both so heavily involved in the church, how about your pastor? Wouldn’t Rodney listen to him?”

Erin looked as though she might begin to weep again. “Brother Harold would be so disappointed in him. I don’t want to tell him about Rod leaving. That’s why I have to find him and Kylie myself. With your help, I mean.”

“If you don’t associate with outsiders, can you think of anyone *inside* the church he might have turned to?” Claudia said. “Someone he has a close relationship with?”

“*All* the TBL members are close. It’s the most supportive, wonderful bunch of people you could ever meet. I’ve been a member since I was fifteen.”

Kelly said, “I was in the middle of a divorce back then. I was pretty messed up, but one of the boys told me that you’d run away from home.”

It was a period in their lives that Claudia remembered well. Kelly, inconsolable when her second brief marriage ended, had gone on a bender that lasted months; a month more in rehab. Surprising that any of the details of Erin’s split from the family had stuck.

“Don’t worry about it, Kelly,” Erin said. “You and the older boys were all gone by then, so it was pretty much just Sean and me. Mom kept taking off for days at a time, but nobody knew, we never told anyone. At school they said I was a delinquent, so I decided to become one.” Her laugh sounded

hollow. “Unfortunately for me, living on the streets of Banning was even worse than being home, so I ended up hitchhiking to Hollywood.”

Kelly turned away from them and started layering slices of turkey and provolone on the French rolls, assembling sandwiches as if her life depended on it. But not before Claudia noticed the tears of regret that brightened her eyes.

“I’m so sorry, Erin,” Kelly said in a trembly voice. “I abandoned you, too. But after I got out of that house I didn’t want to ever look back. I wanted to believe you were going to be treated better than I was. I made myself think that way. I’m just so freaking sorry I failed you.”

“It’s okay, you don’t have to feel bad. It all worked out for the best.” Erin gave a weak smile. “It was actually exciting and fun for a while, but I got tired of that life really fast. There are hundreds of runaways in Hollywood. They have this amazing network, sharing what they’ve got with each other and helping each other survive. Their methods may not be exactly conventional, but they sure are effective.”

Kelly was busy getting plates out of the cabinet, so Claudia asked, “Dare I ask what happened next?”

“God sent me to the TBL shelter, Teens for the Lord.” Suddenly, Erin’s face was shining and her prettiness became more apparent. “It was so awesome. It was a day that Brother Harold ‘just happened’ to be preaching there. But I know that was no coincidence; it had the hand of God written all over it. They do so much good at the shelter.”

“Tell us about this Brother Harold. You mentioned him earlier.”

“He’s our spiritual leader at TBL. He and Sister Grace—she was in charge at the shelter—they talked to me about the end of time, which was pretty terrifying until they showed me how I could be saved. They invited me to go back to the Ark with them,”

“You mean like Noah’s ark?” Kelly interrupted. “You live on a boat?”

Erin gave her head an impatient shake. “No, it doesn’t *look* like the Bible ark. It’s the best! Sort of our own little world that keeps TBL separate from the outsiders. In Bible times, God told Noah to build an ark to save his family from the flood. *Our* Ark is to keep the TBL family safe until the end-of-time days, which is coming soon.”

“Back up a minute,” Claudia said. “This Brother Harold took you there to live when you were fifteen?” She did her best to look neutral, but she knew her skepticism must show on her face.

“Brother Harold and Sister Grace—she was his wife, but she had cancer

and the Lord took her to be with him about five years ago.” Then Erin’s mouth dropped open as she got the implication. “Hey, wait a minute, there was nothing inappropriate going on. It’s just, I wasn’t going to go back home, no way, no how. So when they invited me to the Ark, I said I’d go with them and try it out. Right away, I knew I was in the right place. I finally had a *real* family.” She shot an uneasy glance at her older sister. “I mean, at the Ark we eat all our meals together—real food, not Chicken McNuggets or a box of macaroni-and-cheese every other night.”

“It’s okay, hon.” Kelly looked unusually chastened. “I understand. Our family wasn’t exactly Leave It to Beaver.”

For the first time, Erin seemed to relax a little as she extolled the virtues of her substitute family. “The brothers and sisters at the Ark couldn’t have been more kind and loving. They were willing to work with me and help me clean up my act, get off drugs. I started going to school again—we have our own private classes at the Ark. There are regular school lessons, plus I trained to become a missionary. They taught me how to talk to other people about what we believe in, to help them be saved, too. It was really hard at first, talking to strangers who didn’t want to listen. But now I can talk to just about anyone.”

“A minute ago, you said something about the end-of-time days,” Claudia said. “What’s that about?”

Behind her sister’s back, Claudia could see Kelly shaking her head, discouraging her, but Erin’s face lit up as she jumped at the chance to explain the beliefs that she had adopted. “We’re living in the End of Time days right now!”

“End of Time *daze*,” Kelly muttered.

Erin ignored the jibe and continued. “The earth is about to be destroyed--”

“What does that *mean*?” Claudia asked. “Destroyed how?”

“We’re gonna see a whole series of natural disasters. Everyone who doesn’t know how to be saved will be destroyed with the earth, and it’s gonna happen really soon. This time we’re living in, it’s like, well, it’s like just before your alarm clock goes off in the morning—you know how you wake up just before the alarm? That’s where we are now, the alarm is about to go off. If you want to be saved, you have to pay attention *right now*, and wake up.” She nodded in earnest as she spoke, as if encouraging her listeners to think hard about what she was saying.

Kelly brushed aside the sermon. “Look, Erin, I want to know what

happened with Rodney that would make him do something so drastic and so rash as to take Kylie?”

Erin’s beatific look faded fast. Her lower lip quivered and her eyes filled. “I told you, we’d been fighting.”

“Yes, you did. So, what was the fight about?”

The tears dried as fast as they’d started and Erin’s tone sharpened. “What does it matter what we fought about? It’s personal. The important thing is, he took my Kylie away, and I want her back.”

“Erin,” Claudia said. “If you want our help, we need to know what happened. Why don’t you want to tell us what you were fighting about?”

“Because you won’t understand if I tell you, I know you won’t. Why isn’t it good enough just to know we had an argument?” Erin said it like a petulant child, peeved about not getting away with avoiding something unpleasant.

“We can’t help you if we don’t have all the facts,” Claudia pressed.

“Just tell us the truth,” Kelly added. “We’re not going to judge you. You don’t have to hide anything, just tell us what happened. And don’t bother to bullshit a bullshitter, Erin. Believe me, there’s nothing you can say that I haven’t said or done a thousand times over. Maybe if we know what we’re dealing with, we can come up with a plan to get my niece back.”

Erin looked from one to the other of them with the distrust of a wounded animal in the forest. When she realized that neither was going to back down, she shrugged, giving up on the debate. “Okay, fine. But don’t say I didn’t warn you. I know how you outsiders are; your minds are totally made up and closed.”

Kelly and Claudia exchanged a surprised glance, their eyes telegraphing the same message—*What’s going on here?*

“Like I told you, we were in the mountains,” Erin said. “We were there because we enrolled Kylie in a super-special TBL program. It’s called Jephthah’s Daughters. It’s one of those things that comes up only once in a lifetime. It was getting to be time for her to go into the program and we were there in the mountains, getting her ready for it.”

“Let’s go back to the patio,” Kelly suggested, picking up her sandwich. “This is getting interesting.”

When they were settled around the table once again, Kelly said. “Okay, *whose* daughters?”

Claudia said, “Jephthah’s. I remember the story from Sunday school because at the time, it scared the hell out of me. Jephthah was a judge in

ancient Israel. He asked God to help him win a big battle, and in return, he offered to sacrifice the first person who came out of his house to greet him when he got home.”

“Oh, hell no,” Kelly said. “I don’t like the sound of this.”

Erin nodded, looking gratified that Claudia was familiar with the name. She took up the story. “The Lord gave Jephthah the victory. When he got home, the first person to come out of the house was his only daughter, who he loved with his whole soul.”

“Holy shit.”

Throwing her sister a glare of disapproval for her use of profanity, Erin continued. “Jephthah was devastated. He told his daughter about the promise he’d made, but she was, like, *You have to keep the promise, you gave your word to the Lord God*. So she asked if she could have two months off to mourn her virginity, because, of course, she would never get to be married and have sex or anything. At the end of the two months, she was ready to let herself be sacrificed.” Then she hastened to add, “Of course, the way we do it is more like a *symbolic* sacrifice. Like going to a convent.”

Both Claudia and Kelly stared at her. “You’re sending your three-year-old *baby* to a convent?”

“Well, that was the original plan. That’s why we were in the mountains; we had the two months to get ourselves ready. But the longer we stayed there, the more I knew I couldn’t do it. When I told Rod I’d changed my mind, he wouldn’t listen to me. He loves Kylie, but he’s been working toward becoming an elder since he was a kid, and putting her into the program would seal the deal for him. It’s a really prestigious thing for a TBL member. This is a rare opportunity that only comes up once every few years.” Erin huffed a big sigh. “Look, I know it’s a great thing to give your child to God, but . . . I just wasn’t ready to do it.”

“Good choice,” Kelly mumbled, stuffing potato chips into her mouth as if to gag a comment that she knew would be left better unsaid.

Claudia said, “Why couldn’t Rod wait until she’s old enough to have a say in the matter?”

Erin’s eyes went to the bits of sodden tissue that dotted her jeans. She picked at the pieces, not looking up as she spoke. “It’s not like that. It has to be done at a certain time. She has to go into the program on her third birthday. That’s the requirement.”

An awkward silence fell over them, and Claudia knew that Kelly was thinking the same thing she was. When no one spoke, she put the question

into words. “When is Kylie’s third birthday, Erin?”

Erin buried her face in her hands. Her words were muffled as she spoke through her fingers, but Claudia had no trouble understanding her.

“It’s on Saturday.”