

Chapter 1

The angelic little face gazed past the camera with serious eyes the color of spring violets and a rosebud mouth turned down.

The child in the photograph was a hardly more than a toddler—two, two-and-a-half at most—but there was a grown up wistfulness in the way she rested her chin on her dimpled hand. Studying the picture, Claudia Rose fancied she could see life experience in those eyes, extending far beyond the scant few months the little girl had been on earth. *An old soul*. She couldn't help wondering what it was that had captured the child's attention as she returned the photograph to the child's mother.

Erin Powers took the photo and replaced it in an envelope, then 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. Erin's slender shoulders shook as she choked back a sob. "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. Please, please tell me you'll help me find them."

Claudia watched Kelly Brennan lean over to put an arm around Erin and murmur soothing sounds. They 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 or the scent of star jasmine filling the sun-warmed air.

It had been only a couple of hours since the half-sister Kelly hadn't seen in twenty years had showed up at her door, and Kelly wore a slightly stunned expression, as if she were still getting used to the idea. The even greater surprise Erin dropped on her was that Kelly had a niece. And that the child was missing.

Kelly had called Claudia, her closest friend, and asked her to come right over.

“The handwriting is a little disturbing,” Claudia said, her eyes dropping to the sheet of notebook paper in her hand. Kelly had asked her to analyze the handwriting in the note Erin had brought to show her. “I’m glad you asked me to 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, it 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 little more than a scribble which Erin identified as that of her husband, Rodney Powers.

“I thought he’d just taken her for a walk,” said Erin, tears welling up and spilling over. “I’d had a bad night and woke up 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 Erin’s knee an awkward pat. She might be a family law attorney, but she tried to keep her distance from her clients and wasn’t used to dispensing warm and fuzzy. She gave Claudia a helpless glance. “The only family news I ever get is from the boys, and you know how rarely I hear from them.”

The sisters shared DNA, but Claudia was aware that the last time they’d seen each other Erin had been about four years old, a shy little girl sucking her thumb—not much older than Kylie was now. She had a clear memory of Kelly’s three brothers waving goodbye from the back of a pickup truck piled high with boxes and furniture as their mother drove them away, leaving Kelly behind to live with Claudia’s family. Now they were little more than strangers.

“I can’t believe I lost track of you so completely,” Kelly said to Erin. “It’s been ages since I heard anything from anyone. I mean, I’d heard you joined this cult—”

“It’s not a cult!” Erin insisted hotly.

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

"So, tell us what happened," Claudia interrupted before an argument could erupt. She was familiar with the speed of Kelly's emotions and how quickly could flare. It would come as no surprise to her if Erin had inherited the same trait.

Sniffing into the tissue, Erin explained that she'd found the note on the kitchen table. "Rod left it propped up against my coffee mug. We've been staying at a cabin in Big Bear for the last few weeks and we don't know anyone around there. I didn't know what to do, so after I figured Rod really wasn't coming back, I phoned Sean."

"So, you've stayed in touch with the boys?" Kelly said. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised. You and they are pretty close in age."

"Only Sean. I talk with him a couple times a year maybe. He lets me know if he hears anything from Mom."

Claudia sensed Kelly stiffen. Erin was treading in dangerous territory. She didn't know that they had made a tacit agreement that Kelly's mother was a topic never to be discussed.

"Those would be the times when she wants money," Kelly muttered.

"Look, I get that you hate Mom, but she's not..."

"Let's not go there, Erin," said Kelly. "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. If it hadn't been for Claudia's parents and some of the other neighbors pitching in, the rest of us would have either starved or been split up and put into foster care long before you were even born."

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

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

The sudden flare of hostility charged the air and Claudia found her neck muscles aching from it. She was hit with a flash of memory: her first glimpse of Kelly, the day the Brennan family had 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. It had stood there since the previous Christmas when Mr. Drew had suffered a debilitating stroke and his children put him into a nursing home. Now, on the Saturday before kindergarten was to start, the weeds were taller than the flowers they choked; the concrete driveway cracked and stained with the oil of the 1952 Dodge Coronet that had rested there, probably since before Claudia was born.

She had hidden behind an ancient elm in her own parents' garden, and watched two sweaty men in T-shirts unloading a moving van stacked with furniture shabby enough to match the house. A little girl about her own age was running all over the yard in a futile attempt to corral two younger boys. A woman stood on the doorstep, cigarette dangling from nicotine-stained fingers.

Georgia Brennan, Claudia later learned. The mother.

"Kelly Ann Brennan!" the mother screeched, oblivious of curtains twitching in disapproval in windows across the street. "Can't you do anything right? 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. Don't you let me see or hear from any of you 'til dinner. You hear me, Kelly Ann? Do you *hear* me? What did I just say?"

Claudia could still remember being more impressed by the mother's bright red halter top and the shorts that showed off long, tanned legs than by what Claudia's mother would later term *that unladylike caterwauling*.

On the following Monday, when she and Kelly met officially on their first day of school, Claudia had invited her new friend over to play with her dolls. She hadn't understood what it meant when Kelly reluctantly declined, saying she would have to go straight home and take care of her brothers because her mother would be passed out on the couch. As the years passed, Claudia learned plenty about what it meant.

By the time Kelly was sixteen two more fatherless Brennan kids had been crammed into the two-bedroom house—Erin and Sean—and since she spent most of her time there anyway, Kelly had finally escaped to live with

Claudia's family.

When Georgia Brennan told her eldest daughter that she was moving her four younger children to Banning where housing was far cheaper, Kelly had expressed nothing but relief. Banning was only about a ninety minute drive, but it might as well have been a thousand miles away.

Returning to the present, Claudia realized that the uncomfortable silence between the sisters was still unbroken. "Okay, ladies," she said, straightening in her chair and returning to the position of mediator. "Why don't we get back to the most important subject at hand—the little girl who's missing."

Kelly's cheeks puffed as she blew out a long breath. "Yeah, you're right, Claud. Right now, the only important thing is to make sure my niece is safe."

Erin said, "Sean told me you're a really smart attorney and you'd know what to do."

"That's because I kept him out of jail a while back, which is a whole other story." Kelly said. "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, we need more information about what kind of person Rodney is."

"There's a lot of information in this handwriting sample."

"If you 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 trouble. I don't think he would actually *hurt* Kylie."

"Well pardon me," Kelly said, throwing her hands up. "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 got me worried.”

“Tickle? Who, or what is Tickle?”

Erin reached down, unzipped her bag again and pulled out a brown woolen rabbit that had seen a lot of wear. “Kylie never, ever goes anywhere without Tickle. That means she had to be asleep when he took her. She’s probably totally unglued by now.”

The three women looked at each other with sober faces, fully comprehending the importance of the stuffed rabbit 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’s gonna 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 said. “Something like this doesn’t happen in a vacuum. What’s been going on lately?”

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

“Is he Kylie’s father?” Kelly asked.

“Of course he is.” Erin sounded insulted.

“And you’re legally married?”

“We’ve been married almost six years.”

“Has he ever abused her or you? Hit you or....?”

“No, of course he’s never done anything like that. We’re godfearing 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 thought for a moment, “I’m twenty-four, he’s thirty-eight.”

“That’s more than just *a bit* older, honey child. Okay, 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.”

Claudia took out her cell phone and gave the voice command for his number. “I’ll call him right now.”

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

Claudia watched them go, hoping that 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.

Joel Jovanic’s response to her question was a letdown.

Claudia joined the sisters in the kitchen. “I asked him about issuing an Amber Alert, but he said under the circumstances, they can’t. Rodney’s the father, so he has a legal right to take her. 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 as Kelly handed Claudia a glass of Diet Coke. She turned to the refrigerator and began taking out sandwich makings and putting them on the kitchen counter. Claudia had a feeling that it wasn’t because she was hungry; she just needed to do something to help her contain her agitation.

“What about the handwriting?” Kelly asked, slathering mayo on three french rolls. “You saw danger signs, didn’t you?”

“There are some problems, but I’d like to enlarge it on the computer so I can look at it in more detail.” Claudia hesitated. There was no point in offering a hasty opinion that could lead to mistakes. “If you could scan it and Email it to me, I’ll take a closer look at it when I get home. Six-hundred DPI

would be high enough resolution to show the fine points.”

She glanced again at the words Rodney Powers had penned on the scrap of lined paper. The carefully controlled block printing told her that the writer could be opinionated and more than a little self-important. It wouldn't be easy to get to know Rodney, or to break through his defenses if he didn't want to believe something you needed to convince him of.

Flipping the paper over, she ran her fingers across the back. She could feel ridges where the pen had dug hard into the paper on the other side. She looked 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 with what Claudia thought sounded derision. “I think he wrote it on the kitchen table.”

Without comparing it to additional samples of his handwriting, there was no way to know for certain whether the degree of emotional depth indicated by the considerable pen pressure was Rodney Powers' habit, but of one thing Claudia was certain: at the time he wrote the note he was laboring under powerful emotions. “He's very stubborn; strong need for control,” she mused aloud. “I believe he would have planned this ahead. He's not the type to act on the spur of the moment without knowing what he was going to do and how he was going to accomplish it. He's not the type 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.”

“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 really associate with anyone who's not a member. Well, unless it's for a good reason, like this. That's why Rod doesn't know anyone outside well enough that he could ask for help.”

Kelly left her sandwich making for a moment and turned to her sister. “Erin, if you’re both that involved in the church, how about your pastor? Wouldn’t Rodney listen to him?”

Erin looked as if she might begin to weep again. “Brother Harold would be so disappointed in him. I don’t want to tell him, so I have to do this myself. With your help, I mean.”

Claudia said, “Okay, then, if you don’t associate with Outsiders, can you think of anyone *inside* the church who he might have turned to? Someone he’s close to?”

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

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

That was a period Claudia remembered well: Kelly, on a months-long bender, then another month in rehab. The stress levels had been so high during that time, and Kelly so out of it, that Claudia would have been surprised if her friend remembered the details of Erin’s split from the family.

Elaborately casual, Erin said, “Don’t worry about it. 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. At school they thought I was a delinquent, so I decided I would become one.” She gave a hollow laugh. “It turned out that living on the streets in Banning was even worse than being home, so I ended up hitchhiking to Hollywood.”

Kelly’s eyes brightened with tears of shame. She turned away from them and started layering slices of turkey and provolone on the french rolls. She made sandwiches as if her life depended on it, her shoulders stiff and tense. “I’m sorry, Erin. You’re right, I abandoned you, too. After I got out of that household I didn’t want to 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 sorry.”

“It’s okay, you don’t have to feel bad. It all worked out.” Erin gave a weak smile. “It was actually exciting and fun for a while, but I got tired of that

life real 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 busying herself taking out sandwich plates and potato chips, so Claudia asked, "What happened?"

"God sent me to the TBL shelter, Teens for the Lord. 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's 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 a quick shake of her head. "No, it doesn't *look* like the Bible Ark. It's 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?" Claudia did her best to look neutral, but she knew the skepticism she felt showed on her face.

"Brother Harold and Sister Grace—she was his wife, but she died about five years ago." Erin's mouth dropped open. "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, we eat all our meals together—real meals, not McNuggets, or a box of macaroni and cheese every night."

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

Reminiscing, Erin smiled. “The brothers and sisters at the Ark couldn’t have been more loving. They were willing to work with me and help me clean up my act, get off drugs. I went back to school there—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 hard at first, but now I can talk to anyone.”

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

Behind her sister’s back, Kelly pulled a rude face at Claudia, but Erin’s face shone with zeal as she jumped at the chance to explain further. “We’re living in the End of Time days right now! The earth is about to be destroyed by a series of major natural disasters and everyone who doesn’t know how to be saved will be destroyed with it. It’s going to 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 at the other two, encouraging them to think 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 look of beatification 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, if you want our help, we need to know what happened,” Claudia said gently. “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 there was an argument?”

Claudia thought she sounded like a petulant child not getting her way. “We can’t help you if we don’t have the facts,” she said.

“Just tell us the truth,” Kelly urged. “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 cornered animal. When she realized that neither was going to back down, she shrugged. With a deep sigh she said, “Okay, but don’t say I didn’t warn you. I know how you Outsiders are; your minds are totally closed and made up.”

Kelly and Claudia glanced at each other, eyebrows raised. Neither spoke.

Erin’s chin went up, telegraphing her defiance even before she related her story. “I told you were in the mountains. We were there because we had enrolled Kylie in a super special TBL program called Jephthah’s Daughters. It’s one of those things that come up only once in a lifetime. We were there, getting ready for her to go.”

“*Whose* daughters?” Kelly repeated. Before Erin could answer, she picked up her sandwich and gestured for them to follow her back to the patio.

When they were settled around the table once again, Claudia said, “Jephthah. I remember the story from Sunday school because 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 took up the story. “God 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.”

“Jephthah was devastated,” Erin continued, with a glare of disapproval at her sister’s profanity. “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 towards 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 a potato chip in her mouth.

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

Erin looked down at 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.”

Silence fell over them, and Claudia knew that Kelly was thinking the same thing she was. At last, she put the question into words. “When is Kylie’s third birthday?”

Erin buried her face in her hands and spoke through her fingers. “A week from Sunday.”