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# chapter ONE

*M*errilee Hunter dug into the pockets of her ragged maternity cutoffs and laid the haul on the drugstore's glass counter: a provisional driver's license, one quarter, one dime, two nickels, a piece of string from the hem of the shorts, a half-empty tube of Avon lipstick, and a scrap of paper with a phone number. The paper she hurriedly stuffed back into her pocket, as though the saleswoman on the other side knew exactly what it was.

In a bony ninety-degree angle, the woman leaned over the counter, sifting the money from

among Merrilee's possessions, pushing each coin with the pad of her index finger into a pile. "Twenty-five, thirty-five, forty-five." She raised her eyes, then folded her arms against the glass. "You ain't got enough, Merrilee," she said, her voice quivering with triumph. "Popcorn'll cost you forty-nine cents."

Merrilee bit her lip. She slid her open palm across the counter to gather her things, but old man Kenner stepped up beside her and stopped the motion with his gnarled, white-haired hand. Four pennies plunked against the glass. "I'll spot her the rest, Paula Jean. Just go get a bag from the machine before her bus gets here."

Paula Jean bustled toward the other end of the counter, fixing Merrilee with a wrinkled frown as she shoveled the popcorn into a red-and-white-striped bag.

Merrilee eased her hand out from under the old man's, ducking her head. "You didn't have to do that, Mr. Kenner," she mumbled. "I can do without."

"Let's just call it one of them bone voy-

agree gifts, okay, girl?" His gaze dropped to her extended belly, which pressed up hard against the glass counter. He caught her glance and smiled, a leer she recognized well. "Ain't ever' day a girl like you runs from town, tail tucked. Now your mama, I coulda seen her doing something like this, but not you. Thought you had more spunk."

Merrilee's face warmed, but she didn't respond.

*One, two, three . . . take deep breaths, Merrilee. Don't let anybody see how you feel.*

The baby poked against the counter as if to break free. Merrilee stepped back.

Mr. Kenner squinted. "You headin' out to look for that baby's daddy? None of the boys round Palmwood here have fessed up, and they generally brag on accomplishments like you're displayin' so proudlike."

Merrilee didn't answer. He didn't really want to know the truth; that was devoured by gossip in this small town as easily as the Laundromat dryers ate up the precious quarters Mama used to hoard in her tip jar.

"Here's ya popcorn." Paula Jean shoved the bag across the counter, her hands stopping well shy of Merrilee's.

"Thanks." Merrilee lifted the bag, then looked Paula Jean and Mr. Kenner square in the eye, hoping for some sort of friendly sign, some expression of farewell. They stared back at her, eyes cold and hard as the iron gates of Palmwood's cemetery slamming shut.

"Well . . ." She gestured toward the door. "Guess I'll wait outside for the bus."

"You do that, hon." Paula Jean wiped down the counter. "Say, Ed, what do you think about the Gophers' chances this fall with their new quarterback? That kid can throw a mighty long pass, I hear."

"Well, now . . ." Mr. Kenner leaned on the counter and launched into a verbal assault on the upcoming team.

Merrilee hefted Mama's battered blue hard-sided suitcase and headed outside. A bell chimed as she exited.

*Never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.*

She smiled wryly as she eased down on the

wooden bench below the ancient metal Greyhound sign.

Mama would've said the bell was some sort of omen—but good or bad? Her superstitions didn't always make sense, and as far as Merrilee could tell, had no basis in any folklore other than that of her own creation.

"I'm tellin' you, Merrilee," she'd said, pointing with her freshly lit Marlboro for emphasis. "Our lives are ruled by chance. Luck. The best we can do is watch for signs."

"Oh, Mama."

"It's true, girl. Heed the bad ones and grab on to the good ones."

Merrilee decided to humor her. "But how will I know the difference?"

"You'll know." Mama had taken a long drag of the cigarette, blown out the smoke, then ruffled Merrilee's hair. "You'll just know."

It seemed to Merrilee that up until the past seven months, all her knowing had been pretty easy. She'd found, if not all her answers, then most of her peace, at the ramshackle Gospel Fellowship Church building just up the road

from the trailer park. When Merrilee was big enough to buckle her own patent leather Sunday shoes, Mama walked with her every week to the church. She'd smile down at Merrilee over an ancient hymnal the Baptists and Methodists had handed down. Merrilee would tuck her hand in Mama's and prop her own hymnal against the back of a splintered pew, gazing at the giant wooden cross down front. Pastor Luke gestured at it every week, at the end of the last hymn before he launched into his sermon. "Can you hear him, brothers and sisters?" he might say, after the final verse of "Softly and Tenderly." "Oh, sinner, he's calling you home!"

After a few years, Merrilee grew to understand why the wooden boards were prominently displayed up front and why some church members danced and clapped their hands with joy during the hymn singing. Mama always just rolled her eyes and smiled smugly, still believing in luck and good versus bad signs. One Sunday morning after a long night out with one of her boyfriends, Mama cracked her bedroom door,

a washrag at her forehead, just long enough to pronounce herself a retired churchgoer.

From then on, eleven-year-old Merrilee walked the dusty path alone every week to the Gospel Fellowship. One Sunday, when Pastor Luke gave the altar call and the choir sang "I Have Decided to Follow Jesus," she also walked alone down front and accepted the significance of the wooden cross into her life.

The members of Gospel Fellowship accepted her as well. They never asked about Mama but welcomed Merrilee as family. Her new brothers and sisters walked and talked with her along the spiritual road, pressing a Bible into her hands, prayers into her ears, and hope into her heart.

Another kick from the baby, and Merrilee's smile faded to a frown. She set the striped bag aside, fluttered a hand over her belly, then reached for the suitcase. Instead, she settled back, folding her hands in her lap.

*Later, on the bus. When it's quieter, and I can think a bit.*  
"Merrilee!"

Sylvie Ponds, Palmwood's only librarian, huffed and waddled her way across the gravel



parking lot. Face flushed with exertion, she fanned her hand against thin bangs slicked with sweat against her forehead. The sleeves of her polyester polka-dot blouse strained at her doughy biceps.

Merrilee smiled. "Mornin', Miss Ponds. I told you there wasn't any need to see me off."

Sylvie heaved herself down on the bench, sucking in gulps of air like a landed catfish. Merrilee grabbed the popcorn and scooted all the way to the end of the bench, till one hip hung off. She braced her feet hard against the ground and held on to the edge of the seat, between her knees. The baby kicked, but she ignored it.

"I was . . . afraid I'd miss you, Merrilee." Sylvie drew one last gulp, then laid a hand over her ample chest as her normal breath returned. "I couldn't have you leave without my saying good-bye, now could I?"

"I'm glad you came." Merrilee glanced at the drugstore's entrance, then back again. "Truth to tell, I'm kinda scared, Miss Ponds. Mama always said someday we'd get to travel, but I

never figured I'd be doing it like this. I feel like I'm sneaking out of town."

*Or being run out on a rail.*

Sylvie patted her hand. "This is a good Christian place where you're going. They'll take fine care of you. I'll miss you over at the library every week, but the books'll be waiting for you when you get back." She cleared her throat. "And if not those at the Palmwood Library, why, those at another one. Just you keep reading, hear?"

"I will, Miss Ponds," Merrilee said solemnly, though she could no more stop reading than she could stop the birth of this baby. Reading library books took her beyond the dingy trailer she had shared with Mama, but reading the Bible took her even further—beyond herself. Of all the Gospel Fellowship members, Sylvie Ponds had encouraged Merrilee the most in this direction. In quiet moments at the children's table at the library, they had huddled in undersized plastic chairs to study passages of Scripture. Especially the ones about God's love and mercy, which Merrilee clung to, even now.

Sylvie squeezed her hand. "What you're doing—"

She blinked hard, then tried again. "What you're doing is about the most selfless thing I ever knew anybody to do."

Embarrassed, Merrilee looked away.

A large silver bus pulled into the parking lot, splaying gravel, its destination shining plainly above the driver's head: Austin. Merrilee thought it might as well have said Exit.

She rose, gripping the worn handle of the suitcase in one hand and the popcorn bag in another. "I guess this is it," she said, trying to smile.

Sylvie rose too, shading her eyes against the sun. "You have a safe trip, okay?" She paused, lowering her voice. "You're a good girl, Merrilee. Don't let anybody tell you different."

Merrilee nodded, but her heart sank clear to the bulge in her belly. She tried to speak, but the words caught in her throat. Where would she have been the past few years without Sylvie Ponds? She couldn't have made this difficult decision without her guidance and love, especially now that Mama was gone and nearly everyone else had turned away.

The doors to the bus hissed open, and the weary-looking driver trudged down the stairs. He held out his hand for Merrilee's suitcase in a gesture of bored impatience.

Sylvie patted Merrilee's shoulder, then pulled her into a quick hug. They'd never touched before, and Merrilee felt the awkwardness between them as wide as the baby that separated them from a full embrace. Sylvie stepped back quickly as if she felt it too, then smiled lopsidedly. "Go on with you, then. Go see what they got to offer in Austin. Try to make it to the capitol if you can."

Merrilee nodded.

"And drop me a postcard!"

The driver stepped forward. "Miss? Your bag?"

Merrilee clutched the handle tighter. "I'll just carry it with me, thanks."

He shrugged and headed for the bus. "All right, but we need to get going."

Merrilee followed, then turned. "Bye, Miss Ponds. Thank you for . . ."

Sylvie smiled. "It's okay, Merrilee." Her voice

softened. "It'll be okay. I'll be praying for you. 'Where two or more are gathered . . . ,' remember?"

Merrilee glanced over her shoulder and saw Paula Jean and Mr. Kenner standing in the drug-store doorway. Neither waved; neither smiled. There goes Faye Hunter's daughter, their faces said.

Merrilee turned away and boarded the bus. She bumped and jostled her way down the narrow aisle, past four other souls who stared listlessly out windows with no latches. She took the seat farthest back, next to the bathroom, then cradled the suitcase and popcorn bag against herself. She closed her eyes and didn't open them even when the bus shifted from gravel to pavement and lumbered down the two-lane road.

When she knew they must be well out of town, she propped the popcorn bag against the arm-rest of the adjoining empty seat, then balanced the suitcase on her knees. She popped open the rusty clasps, then pulled out a ragged pastel cloth journal and a pen. Making a desk of the

closed suitcase, she opened the book to the next white page, blank and crisp.

Nipping the cap off with her teeth, she poised the pen over the paper for a moment, then wrote slowly and carefully, the way Miss Percy had taught her all the way back in second grade.

*Dear Baby Girl,*

*In all my fifteen years of growing up, I never once thought about what it'd be like for a new mama to leave the hospital with her baby in another pair of arms. I guess I've always fancied the notion of a perfect family, with the daddy beaming over his wife and new child, maybe even a grandma or two hovering nearby, knitting booties or something.*

*I don't know why I think like that, since I never even knew my own daddy. All Mama ever said was that he'd loved her, but not enough to stick around. Except for times like father-daughter banquets, I never really missed having a daddy, though. I had Mama. Or at least I always thought I'd have her.*

*I've prayed a lot about what I'm doing,*

*and this seems to be God's answer. Pastor Luke thought so, when I talked to him about it. So did Sylvie Ponds. They're the only two folks in town who don't look sideways at me for carrying you. Even Mama had her druthers about your life . . .*

Merrilee paused long enough to scoop a left-handed fistful of popcorn into her mouth. She started to write more, but the achy place inside her heart simmered like water on a back burner. She carefully placed the pen in the journal's gutter and set the suitcase and book in the next seat, then wiped her greasy hand on her shorts.

Tucking her legs up under herself awkwardly, she curled up into the seat and stared out the window. Her face reflected back in the fingerprint-smudged glass, and she glanced away. Anyway, the prairie grass and scrub cedars looked the same as they did around Palmwood and probably wouldn't give way to anything prettier before the bus got to Austin.

Mama had been to Austin several times, she'd

told Merrilee. Once when she was in a high school track meet—she'd been pretty good back in her day at jumping the hurdles and running sprints, she'd bragged. Another time with some man for a weekend, just for a lark.

*Mighta been my daddy, for all I know. Maybe that's where they brought me into being. Wouldn't that be funny, me bringing this baby back to be born where I came from?*

Merrilee popped open the suitcase again and slipped her hand inside the frayed elastic side pouch, fingers digging for the carefully trimmed photo she'd downloaded at the library. The paper was already worn around the edges from too much handling, even though she'd never shown it to anyone, not even Miss Ponds.

She squinted at the photo, trying to pretend she'd never seen it before. As if she'd just turned the page of a picture album and come across this couple with their dog—which is exactly how she'd found them on the Internet through the Palmwood Public Library's lone computer. It'd taken her days to work up the courage to even access the Austin adoption agency's Web page, but once she had, she'd list-



lessly paged through image after identical image of smiling, hopeful couples.

Merrilee fingered the scrap of paper in her pocket. They had no idea she was even on her way. The agency said she could call them when she got to town if she wanted to wait. It was her decision, they said. All the arrangements were hers to decide.

Merrilee shivered. She squeezed her eyes shut and wrapped her arms around her thick waist, swaying slightly to a gentle hum.

“Jesus loves me, this I know. For the Bible tells me so. . . .”



Nora Rey clasped her hands in her lap and stared straight ahead. She felt Steven cover her hands with his own, as he did every year at this time.

In the past she'd thought it'd be easier to stay home and pretend to relax with the Sunday newspaper, but that had never proven beneficial. It didn't hurt any less than publicly facing what many might whisper was a private inadequacy.

Father Thomas smiled down the aisles at the members and visitors of St. Mark's Episcopal Church. "This day is always special in the lives of our church families. We honor what is perhaps the most honorable and truly—in my book—oldest profession."

The congregation laughed. Many women nodded their heads in agreement. Steven's hand tightened over Nora's, as though he could feel the building ache in her heart.

Father Thomas smiled broadly. "I call it a profession because according to many women, it's a job. But ladies, it's a calling."

The emptiness in Nora's heart expanded.

"Would the mothers of our church please rise?"

Church bulletins, hymnals, and Bibles were audibly set aside as all around Nora a sea of women rose—great-grandmothers leaning proudly on canes, grandmothers with oversized handbags, middle-aged women whose teenage children looked away in embarrassment, young women with infants in their arms or toddlers tugging at their skirts.

Pregnant women who laughed as their rounded bellies bumped the backs of pews.

Nora stayed seated and blinked. A second time, longer.

*Lord, oh Lord. Why not me?*

“Ladies, you are the hands that rock or have rocked the cradle of our future. On this day, we honor each one of you for your courage, your stamina, and most of all, your love. Please accept these roses as a token of our appreciation and admiration.”

Ushers handed a single pink rose to each standing woman. Neil Harrigan, Steven’s doubles partner at the club, extended a rose to Nora, his eyes sympathetic. She declined with a quick, polite head shake.

Steven squeezed her hand. The ushers moved on and the crowd of standing women dwindled. When the deacon began the dismissal, Nora slipped out the side aisle, followed closely by Steven.

Father Thomas met them on the steps outside the heavy oak main doors. “It’s a hard day for you, I know,” he said, touching Nora’s

shoulder. "I admire you for showing up each year."

"I think I've actually grown accustomed." Nora's laugh sounded hollow to her own ears, and she fished the sunglasses from her Luis Vuitton purse to cover her embarrassment.

"Great message, Father." Steven held out his hand, forcing the priest to release Nora's shoulder.

*I owe you, Steven.*

Nora pushed the sunglasses to the bridge of her nose and smiled what she hoped was a polite farewell. Steven took her elbow, and they turned.

"Any word from the adoption agency?" Father Thomas halted their quick escape.

"Not yet, but we're hopeful," Steven said. "Sorry to run, Father, but we have to be somewhere."

The doors opened and the congregation spilled out onto the steps. Father Thomas turned away, and Steven deftly steered Nora to their car.

Safely inside the Lexus, neither spoke as they

headed toward the hills west of Austin and the security of home. Nora studied Steven's hand as it controlled the gearshift with masculine firmness.

It was his hands that had attracted her to him, hands so smooth yet confident as they dissected specimens in their biology lab at the University of Texas long ago. Hands that would later perform delicate orthopedic surgery. Hands that would join with hers on their wedding day, and for twenty-three years since, but that could never do enough to fill the emptiness of her arms.

After fulfilling their career plans, Nora and Steven had celebrated their fourteenth anniversary by ceremoniously tossing the little round packet of pills away. Then thirty-six, Nora felt ripe and attractive, and she and Steven were both certain a child would soon result from their purposeful intimacy. God had always blessed them.

But the years passed, one after another, in a succession of torn calendar pages and monthly tears of failure. Specialists were consulted and

options weighed, but even medicine couldn't undo what had apparently been ordained.

"Maybe I've been too selfish," Nora had said. "This is God's vengeance for my wanting to establish our careers first."

Steven had taken her in his arms and stroked her hair, the way he always did to comfort. "God isn't punishing you. You helped me through medical school and residency and built your own real estate career helping people find homes. Why would he want to punish you for that?"

She hadn't been able to answer, but the medical tests all pointed to her own, not Steven's, physical inadequacy. Nora struggled to reconcile her infertility with her faith in a good God who gave children as a blessing. Was her medical condition a curse, or did the Lord intend a higher purpose?

"We may never know the reason," Steven said. "But we have to walk by faith."

Nora smiled wryly. "I feel more like I'm crawling."

"At least we're moving forward."

Renewed, Nora had agreed to fertility treatments. Perhaps this was all a spiritual test, rather than a curse. But after two unsuccessful years, Steven tentatively broached the subject of adoption. Nora gratefully agreed, relieved to abandon the heart-wrenching pain of each month's failure. Surely *now* God would grant her a child.

Yet three years of waiting had passed—marked by daily, rather than monthly failure—as younger couples were repeatedly selected by birth mothers to be the parents of their children. Apparently Nora's adoptive clock was winding down as rapidly as her biological one had.

Steven pulled off Ranch Road 2222 and onto the gravel road that wound its way to their lake-front property. He mashed the remote-control button, and the privacy gate swung open. They drove up the road toward the dream home that felt to Nora more like a yellow brick shell every day.

Inside the garage, Steven parked the car beside Nora's SUV. She entered the house first, listlessly tossing her purse onto the kitchen counter. Beyond, Lake Travis sparkled through

the expansive living room's floor-to-ceiling windows.

She felt Steven's hands on her shoulders. "Want to go for a swim? or a boat ride?"

Nora shook her head. Patient Steven always understood.

"Please, Nora?"

She turned. His forty-sixth birthday was in three months, and while he was still handsome and youthful from tennis, waterskiing, and swimming, he had developed age lines around his eyes. Nora laid her hand against his cheek and smiled. How could she refuse him anything? "A swim in the pool might be nice."

Steven smiled, and the lines deepened. "Put your suit on, Blondie," he said, squeezing her shoulder playfully. "I'll meet you outside." Whistling, he loosened his tie and headed toward the back door that led down the steps to the pool.

Nora grinned, knowing that he'd probably worn his swim trunks under his suit in anticipation of an afternoon outdoors. She wondered what his patients—especially the more conserva-



tive, elderly ones—would think if they knew how unconventional Dr. Rey really was.

In the spacious, orderly walk-in closet, Nora changed out of her suit and carefully hung it next to the others. She pulled on her favorite swimsuit, the size six white maillot that best complemented her tan, then scooped up a beach towel. Pulling back her hair with a terry-cloth band, she followed Steven's trail of shoes, socks, suit coat, pants, and tie as she passed through the kitchen and hallway. Fingering the collar from the shirt hanging on the back-door knob, she smiled.

Outside, Lucky bounded toward her and barked an enthusiastic greeting. The German shepherd wound around Nora, bumping against her hips. He nuzzled his head against her hand. Laughing, she rubbed his ears affectionately. "Poor old Lucky. You think you're a cat, don't you?"

At the sound of her voice, he sat back on his haunches and stared at her imploringly.

"Lucky!" Steven called. Quickly transferring his affection, the dog loped down the grassy

slope toward the swimming pool. Steven threw a tattered tennis shoe across the slope, and Lucky gave chase.

“Thanks.” Nora descended the stairs to the pool area. “Sometimes his affection can be—”

“Annoying?”

“Embarrassing.”

Steven grinned and dived into the pool. He bobbed to the surface and flipped onto his back, whistling “How Much Is That Doggie in the Window?”

Nora draped her towel over the back of a chaise lounge, then slathered her arms with sunblock. She leaned over to apply lotion to her legs, and when she straightened, Steven was treading water in the deep end, watching her.

Nora turned to the CD player and popped in Billie Holiday. She rested her fingers on the machine as it crooned “Lover Man.” When she turned back to the pool, Steven was still watching her.

Nora moved to the edge of the water’s deep end and studied the bouncing reflection of the sun and the ripples of light at the bottom of the

pool. Up from the lake behind her roared the sound of a boat, punctuated by squeals of children being towed on an inner tube.

Closing her eyes, Nora hooked her toes around the rough concrete edge, bent her knees, and leaned forward. She broke the surface cleanly in one fluid movement.

Underwater, life hung suspended, muted. She pushed back to the surface in long, clean strokes, and when she broke free, Steven was waiting beside her.

"You looked like Katharine Hepburn in *The Philadelphia Story*," he said. "Nice dive."

Nora started swimming away. "Thanks, Cary Grant. Race you to the shallow end."

"Hey! No head starts!" Steven splashed after her, and they reached the pool steps at the same time. Breathless, they fell across each other in a wet tangle, laughing.

Nora leaned back against Steven, resting her head against his shoulder. He loosened the hair band with his fingers, fanning her hair against the water. She closed her eyes, feeling her stomach tighten as his fingers trailed the strap of her swimsuit.

“Nora,” he said softly. “About today . . .”

“Shh.” She’d nearly forgotten, in the sweetness of being at home. Of being with the man she loved on a warm day in a pool beside a beautiful lake, listening to Billie Holiday wail her sorrows.

She had so many blessings—was it selfish to want more? And yet motherhood, so basic, so biological, didn’t seem to be part of God’s plan for her life. His purpose was larger than her desires, yet not having even a glimpse of his blueprints was often so difficult.

*Show me. Please show me.*

“I love you,” Steven whispered into the curve of her neck. “We’re in this together.”

She squeezed her eyes shut, the ache rising to her throat. “Steven . . .”

The poolside phone rang sharply, slicing the moment. Steven exhaled with resignation and released her. “It’s probably about Mrs. Wimbers and her hip replacement. When I saw her on rounds yesterday, she was having a lot of pain.”

He grabbed the phone and a towel at the same time, already rubbing his hair. “Steven Rey.”

The water lapped against Nora's too-flat stomach, and she extended her arms for balance. She turned her head against the glare of sunlight across the pool's surface, winking back tears.

"No, we didn't know." Steven bent to scribble on a pad of paper. "We'll check it out. Yes. We'll contact you as soon as possible." He set the phone back on the table, then stared out at the lake.

Nora sighed. The day felt broken, ruined. "Trouble?"

Steven turned, a goofy grin on his face, like the day the dentist had given him nitrous oxide to remove an impacted wisdom tooth. "We've been chosen," he said.

She stared blankly. "Chosen for what?"

"Chosen as adoptive parents. A birth mother saw us on Adoption Lifeline's Web site and moved into the agency just yesterday. They called to say she'd left us an E-mail. Nora! She wants to talk to us about raising her baby."

Lucky charged across the grass, barking,

chasing a squirrel up into an oak. He planted himself at the bottom, wagging his tail in invitation for play.

Another boat roared past, followed by a Jet Ski.

Nora drew a deep breath, tightening her arms to maintain her balance. Her heart beat quickly, singing against her ribs.

Another chance. Perhaps their last one, after all the days and months of disappointment.

*It'll be a perfect match, this baby and us. It has to be!*

Steven walked to the pool steps and held out his hands to help her stand. "Before we call . . .," he said, squeezing her hands.

"Yes," Nora murmured in agreement, bowing her head as Steven prayed aloud for the young girl and her baby, for their own desire to raise a child. For the first time in a long while, hope filled the voice of his petition.



Steven logged on to their Internet service provider, his hands still damp. Standing

behind him, Nora curled her fingers around his towel-wrapped shoulders, holding her breath as she leaned over to watch the mail screen pop up.

“We have eleven messages,” Steven announced unnecessarily, scrolling through the list.

Nora dragged an antique Windsor chair beside Steven’s ergonomic one. “I wonder why she didn’t phone.”

Steven shrugged, his eyes trained on the screen. “The agency said we can call her. Here’s the E-mail, the last one. It’s from . . . Fatgirl.”

“Fatgirl?” Nora had always pictured their birth mother as a slim, beautiful cheerleader who’d gotten caught up in the throes of passion with an athletic boyfriend.

Steven poised the cursor over the on-screen envelope. “Ready?”

Nora nodded. Steven double-clicked the mouse, and they both leaned forward.

Dear Nora and Steven,  
I saw your picture on the Adoption  
Lifeline Web page. You look very  
nice. I like your house and your dog

too. Please call me at the agency if you want to talk. My name is Merrilee Hunter.

“Merrilee,” Nora whispered. It was a pretty, old-fashioned sort of name. At least it worked to dispel the image “Fatgirl” evoked. Given the two discordant pieces of information, Nora pictured a stocky girl with a ponytail, dressed in a gingham shirt and jeans.

“She didn’t give us much to go on.” Steven pushed back his chair, clearing his throat. “Do you want to call, or should I?”

“We can each get on an extension.” Nora rose, shivering as air blasted from the vent and chilled her wet swimsuit. “Don’t you think we should change clothes first?”

“She might decide we’re not interested and leave for a while,” Steven said, the practical surgeon taking over.

Nora nodded. “I’ll go to the kitchen phone. Will you do the talking, to start us off?” Negotiating real estate transactions had wrung any shyness from her personality, but now her hands shook as she lifted the phone from the marble



countertop. Steven was more accustomed to taking charge in delicate situations.

"They're calling her to the phone!"

Nora pressed the receiver's Talk button just as the phone was picked up at the other end.

"Hello?"

Nora gripped the countertop, her heart pounding. *Say something, Steven. And please let it be good.*

"Merrilee? This is Dr. Rey."

There was a pause at the other end. "Dr. who?"

"Rey. Steven Rey. My wife and I are posted on the Adoption Lifeline Web page. . . . Are you Merrilee?"

"Oh, Steven. Of course! I forgot you were a doctor. You're a doctor of . . . of . . ."

"Orthopedics," he said, then added, "a bone doctor."

"Oh! I see," Merrilee said, though she sounded like she didn't.

Steven cleared his throat. "Merrilee, my wife—Nora—is on the line too."

"Hello, Merrilee," Nora said in the calmest

voice she could muster. What had the adoption agency suggested as an opening line with a birth mother? "How are you feeling?"

"Pretty good. It's kinda hard to sleep at night, what with my belly being so big. But other'n that, I can't complain."

Nora swallowed hard. "How far along are you?"

"Near as I can guess, I'd say seven months."

"You haven't been to a doctor?" Steven said. Nora held her breath, hoping he hadn't offended the girl.

"Not yet. I haven't had the money. But the agency said they . . . well, I guess you . . . would pay for things like that. If we decide to make the swap, that is."

The swap? Nora frowned, walking back to the office where Steven sat. He saw the expression on her face and put a finger to his lips. "The agency said you just came to Austin yesterday, Merrilee," he said. "Where's your hometown?"

"Nearby. Palmwood."

Nora and Steven exchanged glances. Palmwood was scarcely a blip on the highway from Austin to Houston. "Do you like it here

so far? Austin, I mean. And at Adoption Life-line?” he said.

“I guess so. I’m still settling in. My room’s real pretty.”

A muffled popping sound indicated the girl was probably wrapping the telephone cord around her fingers. Nora also heard a rhythmic squeak-creak and realized the girl was sitting in a rocking chair.

“Merrilee,” she said softly, “what made you contact us today?” She paused. “Did you know it’s Mother’s Day?”

The chair’s tempo increased. “Yes, ma’am, I do. I been thinking about my own mama most of the day. That’s why I needed to come to Austin.”

“But did you want to come?” Steven said.

There was a pause at the other end of the line. “Yeah.”

Nora drew a deep, happy breath. She and Steven smiled at each other over their respective receivers. “Name the day, and we’d be delighted to meet you,” he said.

“I guess Wednesday would do fine. Mrs. Pennywood wants me to see a doctor.”

“Wednesday it is.” Steven doodled the word on a pad of paper. “What would you like to do?”

“The agency said sometimes people like to eat supper together or something.” She hesitated. “It don’t . . . er, doesn’t have to be anything fancy. I don’t want to impose.”

Impose? “We’d be delighted to have dinner with you,” Nora said. “We know many wonderful restaurants, and it would be our pleasure to treat you and get to know you. And let you get to know us, too.”

“Okay.”

Nora gave Steven a thumbs-up sign but was surprised to see him frowning, like he did whenever a patient wasn’t being totally honest with him. The girl’s tone was definitely more subdued than when the conversation began—did he think she was entertaining second thoughts? Nora started to ask, but Steven again put a finger to his lips.

“Merrilee,” he said gently. “There are so many adoptive families listed on the agency’s Web page. Why did you choose us to call?”

They heard her draw a soft breath. “Because your dog’s name is Lucky.”