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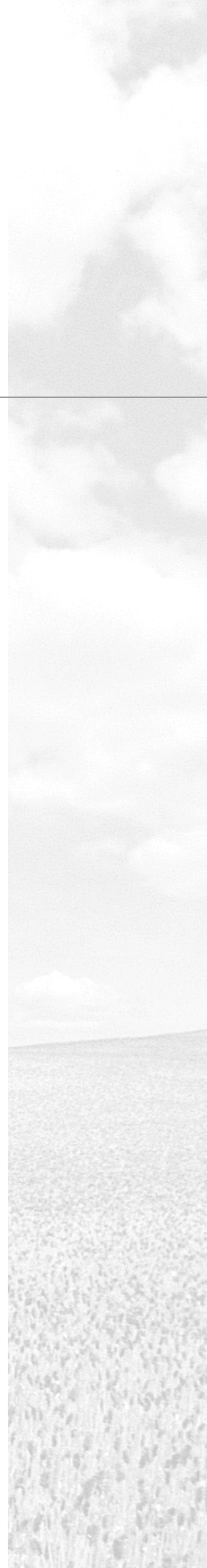
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## Cowley County, Kansas; Present Day

Big Ed Morgan stepped backward off the edge of his barn loft into thin air. He fell twelve feet to the dirt-packed floor and landed with the crunch of a shattering pelvis, the snap of breaking ribs, the pop of a shoulder being wrenched from its socket. Sunlit hay from the bale he'd been tugging scattered across him like leaves on an autumn morning. A piece of frayed twine drifted downward, settling finally on his barrel chest.

He took a ragged breath and lifted his head to peer across the barn. Taking the movement as a signal to play, Gypsy bounded from a corner of the barn where she'd hidden, tail waving in delight. Plopping her front feet onto her master's chest, the black-and-white dog licked his face, pushed her cold nose under his chin, and danced on his injured rib cage.



"Down, Gyp!"

The dog sank to her belly, still panting happily. Her tail brushed wide arcs across the dirt floor. She was smiling.

In rapid succession, three certainties entered Ed's mind, imprinted as if they'd been inked with the forty-year-old rubber stamp he used to address payments of the farm's bills. First, Edward Donald Morgan *wasn't* going to die. Not a chance. Second, he wouldn't be able to milk his small herd of dairy cows this evening. And third, no one would find him.

The telephone was in the rock house, fifty yards away. His pickup sat over by the pond. Pete Harris, the nearest neighbor, was in Wichita attending a conference on wheat diseases.

As Ed lay on the dirt floor trying to focus his thoughts, trying to come up with a plan of action, the smell of the barn draped over his face like a wet washrag, gagging him. Though he'd lived on Morgan Farm all his life, he realized he had never given the odors much notice: moldy hay mixed with cow droppings, the sweet scent of oats, the dry pinewood bins that held leftover winter-wheat seed from the past fall's planting. A tang of metal flared his nostrils, pulleys that dangled from the barn's old beams, shovels and rakes, old tractor parts.

And suddenly Ed remembered Korea, Company C and the ambush at the railroad tunnels south of Chipyeong-ni, the metallic smell of his gun, and the musky scent of damp, half-frozen rice paddies. A grenade had exploded a dozen feet away, leaving him shredded like so much hamburger meat. The first thing that had come to him was the scent of an army boot

lying near his face, smelling of leather and sour socks and mildew, a boot empty of the foot that had belonged to his buddy Jim.

Somehow, Ed had managed to drag what was left of Jim to safety that morning, hauled him down into a ditch, and held his hand as their blood pooled together in the chilly dirt. Later, after the helicopters and the hospital and the months of recovery, Ed had been given a medal. He was a hero, the army said, though he hadn't felt heroic that day in Korea. Not unless heroism had something to do with making up your mind to stay alive. To live one more minute, and then the next. To refuse to give in to death's clutching fingers.

Big Ed Morgan, his fellow soldiers called him, because he was tall and brave and as tough as that leather boot. And he would live through this, too. Now as he lay in the barn remembering, he felt the numbness begin to fade. Pain shot into his hips and traveled down his legs, making them tremble. A knife twisted through his shoulders. His left eye began to twitch, as though a flea had burrowed down under the skin and was trying to get out.

In the old days, someone would have found Ed right away. Pop and Grandpa, one or the other of them, had sauntered in and out of the barn all day as they worked the cattle or tended the crops. Maybe a brother would have wandered by, Tom or Ben. But they were all gone now, buried in the cemetery in town. Tom was killed in a car wreck, drunk, his fault. And young Ben hadn't been tough enough to survive Vietnam.

There'd be no wife calling Ed to lunch, either. Ruby had died years before, left him alone to manage everything. And he had. Each of their four daughters had up and abandoned the farm almost the day she was grown. At the memory of his children, the crushed bones in his chest began to throb. Gypsy was all he had.

The Border collie scooted closer on her belly and nudged his hand. Ed ran his fingers across her warm silky head. Some people would be praying like crazy right about now. Not Big Ed Morgan. Oh, he believed in God, all right. He just figured the Almighty had more or less lost interest in his creation a long time ago. If folks were going to survive in this world, they'd do it on their own.

"Well, Gyp, looks like it's just you and me." Her tail thumped the floor. "Let's get a move on."

Edging up onto one elbow, Ed began to drag himself toward the barn door. His fingers raked the hard dirt, burying grit under his thick, flat nails. One leg was strong enough to push off with. The other scuffled along, the heavy leather work boot slowing his efforts. Once he made it out into the sunlight, he paused to catch his breath. His fingertips were bleeding.

He braced himself and began to pull again. Gyp raced around him in circles, barking encouragement. The sun rose in the sky, grew hotter, beat down on Ed's back, baked him inside his overalls. He stopped and retched. Then he wiped his mouth on his shirtsleeve and continued on.



## Northern Wyoming

The medical compound had once been a small elementary school built to serve the farming community. Far from any town, poorly heated and electrified, the wood-frame structure butted up against the foothills of the Bighorn Mountains. Each of the six classrooms had held a single grade.

When Dr. Milton Gregory purchased the property, he found scattered textbooks, palettes of cracked watercolor paints, and bottles of dried ink scattered across the floor like remnants of a parade that had passed through long ago. The wooden floors and walls exuded the scent of sweaty bodies, mingled with the smell of pencil shavings, chalk dust, and a bygone lunchtime's cooked cabbage. But the windows were boarded up; the playground equipment had rusted.

Dr. Gregory deemed it perfect.

In a single year's time, the physician and his colleagues had moved into the building and remodeled it to serve their purposes. Nineteen men and women devoted to a single cause built bunks in the classrooms, rewired the entire building, rehabbed the plumbing, and transformed the cafeteria into a laboratory. Long wooden tables embedded with the grime of countless lunches had been scrubbed, bleached, and painted. Computers, microscopes, incubators, test tubes, culture plates, and flasks now lined the room—a laboratory as sophisticated as many hospitals could boast.

Gregory was aware that few of his colleagues could fully comprehend the vast scope of the work they had undertaken, its import for the future, its ramifications to humanity. None of them was as well trained or as experienced as he, yet in the passing months, they had become essential to him, more of a family than he had ever known. Young and idealistic or old and embittered, each individual in his organization had been following a dream. Now, with Milton Gregory as their guide, they had dedicated themselves to this quest. They were, in a sense, knights seeking a holy grail. And he was their lord.

Dr. Gregory enjoyed his colleagues' dedication, and he had worked hard to earn their respect. Yet, despite hours logged on the Internet, intensive experimentation, and two field tests, the first phase of the project had failed. A mixture of anger and disappointment flooded through the physician as he studied the group gathered on metal folding chairs in the lab.

"Good afternoon, everyone." He paused to regard them, their faces strained with concern. "I want to thank you all for stepping away from your work schedules for a few minutes to gather here with me for this time of debriefing and reassessment."

His colleagues shifted in their seats. Restless. Disheartened. "As you all know, Phase One has been completed," the physician continued. "Team A, our research experts, pinpointed the excavation site in Utah. Team B, those of you involved in our actual scientific experimentation, accomplished the harvest, albeit on a small scale. I know we all appreciate the dedication and long hours both teams put in."

He began to applaud, and the others joined him. There was no point, he felt, in discouraging everyone to the point of resignation. They had, in fact, worked very hard.

"And Team C administered the viability test," he resumed as the applause died. "Then they attempted to carry out the destruction of the test sample. I'm afraid *attempted* is the operative word here."

Gregory spotted Mike Dooley, hunched over as if studying the pattern on the linoleum between his feet. The physician knew the young man was troubled. He had been active on both the excavation and the experimentation teams.

"Obviously, the sample we used in our experiment was not strong enough," the doctor said, as Dooley began to pick at a hangnail on his thumb. "Either it was the weaker strain of the agent, or we did not harvest enough particles to attack our test sample fully. Without a scanning electron microscope, I find it difficult to make a conclusive determination."

Gregory let out a breath of frustration. Had he not already exhausted most of his financial resources on this endeavor, he would have been able to afford the microscope. As it was, he had been forced to rely only on the polymerase chain reaction analysis of the volume of particles in the sample.

"Furthermore," he went on as he began to walk around the room, "the viability of transporting the agent to our target population on a wide scale is unproven. I'm sure you all recall Desert Storm and the toxins used by Saddam Hussein. They were subtle, indefensible, and deadly, and they moved through our



troops in ways the United States government has yet to determine. In many cases, the government continues to deny these weapons were even used. Our mission is clear, ladies and gentlemen. We cannot allow such treachery against our people. We must protect ourselves from the threat of destruction. Now, as you are all aware, September 15 is our final deadline for this project. I cannot stress that date strongly enough. If we fail to accomplish our mission by September 15, my friends, we fail altogether. Summer knocks on our door. Time is running short."

"Dr. Gregory, may I ask a question?"

"Of course, Bob."

Bob Harper was a new member of the organization, and Gregory noted that he and Mike Dooley had struck up a friendship. Worrying the hangnail back and forth, Dooley turned in his chair so he could see more clearly.

"Sir, where can we get our hands on more of the agent?" Harper asked. "Sounds like we're going to need a lot of this stuff if we're going to be able to protect people the way you said."

"I'm glad you asked that question. It leads me directly to the topic of this meeting." Gregory turned and pulled down a rolled school map with the continents in bright, primary colors. "Once again our dedicated research team has done some great work, narrowing the focus of our next excavation first to the United States, and then to a single state, to a single county, and finally to a single farm. This is quite an accomplishment in itself. But in addition to that, the team has calculated the specific site for our

new probe. Along a hilly ridge beside a river that runs through this farm, we believe we'll find what we need."

Mike Dooley spoke up. "Are there any towns close by, Dr. Gregory? In Utah, it felt like people were breathing down our necks the whole time we were trying to work."

"There's a small community nearby, but the farm itself is owned by a single man who has no family to speak of. I understand your concerns about interruptions, Mike, but I would ask you to keep in mind the importance of maintaining a clear focus on the goal of this project. Our work is of global importance. What we're doing together as a team will benefit mankind throughout the future."

Gregory noted that Dooley had yanked too hard on his hangnail and was blotting the blood on his jeans. He crossed to Dooley's chair. Removing his wallet from his pocket, the physician spoke softly. "Give me your hand, young man."

Dooley did as he was told. Gregory took a sterile Band-Aid from his wallet, peeled back the protective paper, and stretched the adhesive wings over the young man's thumb.

"Is that better?"

Dooley swallowed. Clutching his bandaged thumb into a fist, he mumbled, "Yes, sir."

"Infection can creep into open wounds like that, Mike. The results are often painful, even dangerous. We'll find you some antibiotic lotion after the meeting."

"Thank you, Dr. Gregory."

"Focus, Mike," Gregory said gently. "You'll do fine on

this new effort, I know you will. As long as you keep your focus."

"Yes, sir."

"Then pack your bag, Mike. You, too, Bob. We'll leave in the morning."

"Where are we going, sir?" Harper asked, dropping his cigarette and grinding it out with his heel.

Gregory turned and pointed to a small yellow rectangle in the center of the old school map. "Kansas."



Odd that Ruby's face swam before his eyes, Ed Morgan mused as he crawled toward the barbed-wire fence that lined the gravel road. He hadn't thought much about her in years. His late wife had been pretty enough. Dark brown hair, fair skin, strong hands. Ed recalled that Ruby's fingers had been rough from her constant dishwashing, laundry, mopping. In and out of water all the time, you'd have imagined them as soft as soap. But through the years her skin had grown dry and hard and cracked, like sandpaper when she touched his cheek. There always seemed to be a little dirt in the crevices, too, from her gardening.

Ed had never understood what Ruby loved so much about her rock-lined flower beds, but when she came in from weeding, her eyes always sparkled like morning sunlight on the pond and her cheeks glowed bright pink. "The purple cone-flowers are up," she'd say. "I can see the leaves poking through

the dirt, dark green and all ruffly. Oh, Ed, we're going to have masses of flowers this year!"

He hadn't paid much attention to Ruby's flowers, though she arranged them in vases and glass jars all over the house. But he did remember one time, an evening when the girls were all away at a ball game, when she had pinned a cluster of pale pink asters in her hair and dabbed on some perfume. He'd been watching *Bonanza*, but Ruby had come into the living room, sat down on his lap, and kissed him right on the lips.

Spikes of sharpened steel tore across Ed's forearm, opening slender rivers of bright blood as he worked his massive body under the fence. The barbs caught his blue chambray shirt, trying to hold him back. He ripped the fabric loose and dug his path slowly under the wire. Gyp followed, tufts of black hair clinging to the barbs as she wriggled through the narrow opening.

Ruby had been soft that night, all gentle curves and the taste of lemonade as Hoss and Little Joe and Ben Cartwright chatted quietly in the background. Times like that, Ed had felt sure he loved Ruby. Loved her with a passion that drove out the memories of his losses, filled in the emptiness, healed the hurt.

After Korea and his long recovery, Ed had chosen a young wife in much the same way he had selected the 1959 Chevrolet pickup he still drove. And through the years of their marriage, he had grown to care about Ruby. He had given her all he had, and he had expected the same in return. By all that was right, his wife's wide, comfortable hips should have borne him a son. Was that asking too much?

But four squalling daughters was all he got. Ed rested his cheek on the dusty gravel driveway that led to the old rock house his great-grandfather had built. Marah had come first. Then Deborah. And finally the twins, Sarah and Leah. Sara Lee Cupcakes, he'd called them. Ruby had laughed, but she knew he'd been counting on sons.

"I'm sorry," she had whispered in the hospital, her eyes bloodshot from straining to give birth to the twins. And he hadn't been able to comfort her.

"I'm sorry, too," was all he'd been able to muster.

Pausing on the road, Ed allowed Gyp to lick the sweat from his face. After the twins, Ruby had gotten sick. Female troubles. She was a religious woman, always carting her daughters off to church, and she prayed for God to heal her. The doctor took out her parts anyhow.

"How's a man supposed to run a farm without a son?" Ed had growled at Doc Benson. "Our land has been in the Morgan family more than a hundred years. I need a son."

But the doctor had just shrugged.

Marah, the oldest daughter, could have taken over the farm. She was strong enough, smart enough, stubborn enough. She had the Morgan backbone and the Morgan looks—thick black hair and eyes as bright blue as chicory blossoms. He could almost see her now, shinnying catlike up a tree, long legs and skinny arms everywhere. Ed had taught his oldest daughter to drive a tractor, drill wheat, work the cattle, even pull a calf.

*Now look at her. A doctor. What a waste!*

The gravel on the road cut through denim and scraped skin from his knees. Ed glanced over his shoulder once and saw the trail of slick blood that marked his progress.

*A doctor.* There were more than enough doctors in this world.

"What we need is more good farmers," he said. His voice sounded far away, the words muffled. Something bitter and metallic filled his mouth, but he couldn't bring himself to spit.

Black spots swirled before his eyes. Vultures, probably. He'd show them. He reached the first step of the front porch. His chin dropped suddenly, cracking hard against the splintered wood. Gyp bounded onto the porch, barking, yapping, whining.

Ed hefted his good leg up onto the step. White-hot pain exploded through his hip. The vultures descended.



## Jal, New Mexico

"Ugly sign, ain't it?"

"Nah. It's a work of art."

The neon cactus on the Saguaro Motel flashed alternating pink and green light across the fake adobe walls. One-room cottages rented by the night, the week, or the month. Television, pay phone, private bathrooms. Not mentioned in the advertising: no maid service, no restaurant, infrequent hot water, three billion cockroaches, and the occasional scorpion.

"You nervous about tonight?"

Judd Hunter shook his head.

He stuck his hands in the pockets of his jeans, leaned one shoulder against the door frame of his bungalow, and regarded the cactus that gave the place its name. A decent saguaro wouldn't set foot in this part of the state. The roadside inn, with its row of crumbling cottages, was lucky to have a few mesquite bushes and an occasional prickly pear to break up the endless sea of dry grass that filled the landscape.

Odd how in three months a man could go from thinking he'd stepped off the end of the earth to believing he'd discovered a rare treasure. A sunrise in these parts boiled across the sky in shades of orange, blue, and pink. Noontime heat sent waves that rippled the horizon in bands of gold. Night brought a symphony of crickets, barn owls, toads, and the chilling howl of the coyote. Hunter was going to miss this place.

"I didn't figure you'd be nervous." The older man set a hand on Hunter's shoulder. "You've proven yourself one of my best boys, you know? It's not everybody'd be willing to hunker down here in the middle of nowhere, not with the Feds sniffing our tails every time we turn around. But you've done good, son. I'm real proud of you."

"Thanks, Jim."

"Reckon you'd like to come visit me and the wife after this deal goes down? We've got ourselves a nice little house, and the wife's a bang-up cook. It'd be real homey for you."

"Sounds all right." Hunter couldn't picture "homey" if he tried.

"We got a spare bedroom. Now that the kids are all grown

and gone, the house gets awful lonely. You just make plans to stay awhile, why don't you?"

Hunter nodded, aware of the headlights on the straight stretch of road that ran past the motel. "Here's the bus."

Jim stiffened. "OK, all right. Let's stay calm."

"Yes, sir."

"You look in on the teenagers who checked into that other cottage down the way. We don't want nobody stepping into our business unexpected. I'll check the main desk, make sure they're watching TV, like always." Jim leaned back into Hunter's small room and called to the eight men who waited inside. "Boys, the bus is here!"

Hunter felt for the pistol under his denim jacket. Then he scanned the endless blanket of black that surrounded the motel. Heart hammering, he crept to the window of the cottage occupied by the motel's only other customers. The curtains were drawn; the black-and-white television set cast a square glow through the thin cotton fabric.

A long yellow school bus left the highway, crossed the grass, and pulled to a stop behind Hunter's cottage. In silence, the men who had arrived at the motel with Jim the day before began to file out through the back door.

Hunter drank down a deep breath. It looked like the operation would go off without a hitch. For three months he had lived at the motel, receiving small shipments of ammonium nitrate brought by individual members of the group until his room was stacked to the ceiling with the explosive fertilizer.



He had written down names of couriers, noted sources, kept track of everything. Finally, Jim had arrived. The shipment was due to go out at last.

Missouri had been chosen as the target state for this operation. Because of its recent failure to pass a law allowing citizens to carry concealed weapons, Jim and his men felt that Missouri needed to be taught a lesson. Such a violation of constitutional rights could not be tolerated.

Jim's plan seemed faultless. The school bus, pencil yellow with tinted glass windows, would provide an ideal cover. Groups of fifth-graders always visited Missouri's capitol in the springtime. Their buses were seen throughout the city during that season. After Jim and his men hid the explosive under the seats, the driver would pass the adjoining security building and park beside the capitol. At 3 P.M. sharp, with the legislature in session, a radio signal would activate the detonator.

"Get over here, son." Jim motioned Hunter to the back door of his cottage. "We need your muscle on these bags."

Hunter nodded. "Grab that end, and we'll get this one together."

Jim had been standing to one side, keeping watch on the empty roadway. He shrugged and bent over the bag of fertilizer.

"I reckon I'm good for a bag or two," Jim said. "The ol' back ain't what she used to be, but—"

A semicircle of headlights suddenly flicked on. The nearly loaded school bus glowed brilliant yellow. Men stood out like wax statues. No one moved.

"This is the FBI." The amplified voice drifted across the dry grass and echoed against the motel walls. "You're under arrest for—"

"It's the Feds!" The line broke as men dropped their bags, fell to their knees, scrambled toward open ground.

Hunter watched shock drain the color from Jim's face. Nostrils flaring, the older man let his half of the bag fall to the ground and began to run. Hunter took off after him. The door to a cottage they'd thought was empty burst open, and uniformed men poured into the motel's open courtyard. Gunshots popped like a string of firecrackers. A bullet whanged into the school bus. Another sent up a puff of dust at Hunter's feet.

"Jim!" Hunter shouted as he crashed into the man's shoulder. "Get down!"

Both fell, their legs tangling, their arms clutching, pushing. "Let me go!" Jim cried. "What are you—"

"Just stay down. Don't move." Hunter reached into his back pocket. At that moment, a bullet grazed his thigh and buried itself in Jim's abdomen.

"I'm hit!" The older man coughed. "I'm bleeding."

Hunter rose to his knees. "Stay calm, Jim. You'll be all right."

"Get me out of here! You got to help me, son, or I'm—"

"Hold on, you two." A flashlight beam lit up the pain etched across Jim's face.

The man moaned as he clutched his stomach. "Officer, I'm hit. You got to get me some help."

The federal agent flicked the beam to Hunter's bleeding leg. "Looks like you took a bullet, too."

For a moment, their eyes met, and Hunter saw the other man's eyebrows rise slightly. His own face remained implacable. "Get over here with some stretchers!" the agent called. "We winged a couple of 'em."

Hunter pressed the wound on his leg as Jim was lifted onto a stretcher and rolled toward the ambulance now pulling up at the scene. Sirens blared as the agent knelt to slip a pair of handcuffs on Hunter's wrists.



Forcing himself out of his blackness, Ed tried to muster the strength to move. The sun was sinking. Time to get the cows in. Time to milk.

Never missed a milking. Those pretty guernseys of his wouldn't appreciate this delay. He could see their faces now, their big brown eyes.

Taking a ragged breath, he pulled himself up the steps . . . up the rocky slopes of Hill 453, Lieutenant Mitchell in command, shouting orders. Company C rifle platoon, Second Infantry Division, United States Eighth Army, and Lieutenant Mitchell in charge of the drive toward the railway tunnels south of Chipyeong-ni. Grenades and mortars and screams all around. The Chinese scrambling up Hill 453, and all forty-four members of Company C climbing the frozen ridges, too. Big

Ed Morgan, a hole in his stomach and his fingers all broken, climbing and climbing . . . climbing up to the front door and sliding inside the cool rock house.

The black telephone sat on a low table beside the sofa. Ed stared at it. Unplugged, as usual. That ringing could drive a man buggy.

Gyp watched her master, his big fingers trying to insert the plug into the phone jack. It slipped into place with a tiny click.

"See there?" Ed picked up the receiver. For a moment he lay beside the sofa, breathing hard, fighting nausea, trying to stay conscious.

Who could he call?

Lieutenant Mitchell was dead. Ruby was dead, too. His neighbor Pete was out of town. The four daughters had all gone away. Left the farm as though it were diseased. Marah despised her father. Deborah, married and living in Oregon, was due to have a baby this month. Sara Lee Cupcakes had both joined the army.

Ed swallowed the bile that rose in his throat.

Then he punched out a sequence of numbers he'd memorized long ago, the way he had memorized the numbers on his dog tag, the serial numbers on his brand-new tractor, the scores of the Royals and the Chiefs through the years.

A nasal voice came on the line. "Gateway Pediatrics, may I help you?"

"Get Morgan."

"I'm sorry, sir, I can't hear you clearly. Could you repeat—"

"Morgan!" he barked.

"Dr. Morgan is not on call this afternoon. May I take a message, or could one of our other pediatricians—"

"You tell Marah to call me." A dark veil began to slip over his eyes. "Tell her . . . her daddy needs her."



### St. Louis, Missouri

The high-pitched beep of monitors, the whoosh of ventilators, the gurgle of fluid-filled lungs barely registered as Dr. Marah Morgan studied the chart in her hands. This was odd. Two young patients had been brought in nearly a week ago from the same incident—a state-subsidized day-care center had burned to the ground in an arson blaze attributed to a worker's angry boyfriend. The patients had both suffered third-degree burns, smoke inhalation, broken bones. Despite the severity of their injuries, the little girls had begun to rally. As always, Marah fought for professional detachment as she watched the children struggling to survive. But she knew a part of her would die, too, if they lost the battle.

Then an unexpectedly high fever began to rage through each tiny charred body. There was no sign of pneumonia, the burns were healing at a normal rate, and yet the children hovered on the brink of death.

"What do you think?" Dr. Sam Girard, head of the hospital's burn unit and Marah's most persistent admirer, took the chart of one of the youngsters. "It doesn't make sense to me."

"It must be a secondary infection of some sort," she said.

"I don't think it's bacterial."

"Viral?" Marah shook her head. "Look, Sam—"

"Dr. Morgan, please dial 103." The intercom cut off her words. "Dr. Morgan, dial 103."

"Gotta go." She started for the door. A child's life might be hanging in the balance.

Sam caught her hand. "Marah, we're set for Friday night? The Fox Theatre?"

"Sam, 103 is my emergency code."

"It's probably just your father again."

Marah gave a sigh of agreement. "What's playing at the Fox?" she asked Sam.

"*Phantom*, remember? I've had the tickets for a couple of months. You told me you'd go."

"And I will." She swung through the door and hurried down the white-tiled hallway, her open white coat flapping from side to side. She didn't mind spending time with Sam Girard when she had nothing better to do. But frankly, she had to admit, it was only the Phantom of the Opera himself who could lure her out on a Friday evening when she could be soaking in a warm bubble bath, reading the latest Grisham.

"Dr. Morgan here," she said, balancing the receiver.

"They're killing me."

She groaned. It was him. Ever since her father's accident a week and a half earlier, she had yet to get through a day with-

out several long-distance tirades, either in person or on her voice mail.

"They're trying to kill me," Ed repeated. "They won't let me get out of bed. They want me to lie here and die."

"You're in the best hospital in Wichita," she told him, trying to stay firm, trying to keep distant. "Nobody's killing you. Now, will you please stop calling me when I'm on duty?"

Marah was setting the receiver down when her father spoke again. "It's almost June. Wheat'll be turning."

"I guess it will."

*Wheat.* Like a dousing of warm water, the memory swept over her. How long since she had thought of the vast fields of windblown winter wheat, rippling like a yellow gold blanket across an unmade bed? For more than fifteen years, Marah had avoided returning to the family farm. She skipped her sisters' birthdays, high school graduations, even Deborah's wedding. Though Marah once had taken the role of mother to the three younger girls, they understood her absence. They had left the farm, too, as soon as they could.

In the years since Marah had left home, with God's help, her broken, lifeless spirit had been reborn. Her father's consuming presence went into remission, pushed so far away she considered herself healed. Like the parents of her pale little leukemia victims, she prayed for healing, wanted healing, convinced herself she was brand-new and cancer-free.

But these past few days, each time she heard her father's voice, Marah felt the sickness inside her stirring to life, curling and

stretching like a little larva that has lain dormant in the ground all winter, like a small, anemic white worm that wriggles and nudges at the dirt and thinks about looking for something to eat.

Her father was still speaking. "Pete Harris tells me the calves are all out to pasture."

"I'm sure they are." Marah set one hand on her hip, willing away the image of the guernseys' brown eyes and long, silky lashes. Though eighteen years had passed, she might have left the farm yesterday. "Look, I'm really very busy here. I'm trying to save the lives of two victims of a day-care fire, and I need to—"

"Pete can't do his work and mine, too. I gotta get out of this place."

"You're not going to be pulling calves any time soon."

"Beans."

"Your doctor told me you'll be using a walker." Marah made her voice hard, tough, and soldierlike against him. "You might as well get used to the idea. You're out of the farming business."

She almost put the receiver down, but the silence on the other end of the line made her pause. Her father was a mean old buzzard, often thoughtless and sometimes cruel, and Marah had long ago stopped allowing thoughts of him to dominate her life. In this situation, she felt she'd done her part. After his emergency call, she had made sure he was airlifted to Wichita and placed in the hands of a reputable orthopedic surgeon. Why hadn't his doctor told him his farming days were over?

"Marah," he said.

"Yes, sir?" She twisted the cord around her finger. She'd



heard this tone before, knew well the power in his voice that could leave her helpless. Somehow she always did what her father asked, and she hated herself for it. *Please, not this time.*

"Marah, I need you to run the farm until I'm on my feet again," he said.

"That's impossible."

"It's the least you can do."

"I have responsibilities here."

She rubbed the perspiration from the back of her neck. Did he even know she was a pediatrician in St. Louis? Was he at all aware that she had built a full life without him? She owned a calico cat, taught a kindergarten Sunday school class, sang in the choir at her church, grew fifteen varieties of daylilies in her garden, and dined out with friends every Tuesday evening. She drove a new silver BMW, shopped at the Galleria, subscribed to five magazines, walked thirty minutes on her treadmill four times a week, and read every novel that hit the best-seller list.

"Listen to me, Marah, you better come help out." His voice grew more persistent. "You've got to see the farm through the summer."

"I have important work to do here."

"Important work." He was silent for a moment. "Then I guess I'll do it myself. On my walker."

*Beans*, she thought.

"Come to Kansas, girl," he said. "I'll be waiting for you."

The receiver in her hand went dead.