

FRANCINE RIVERS

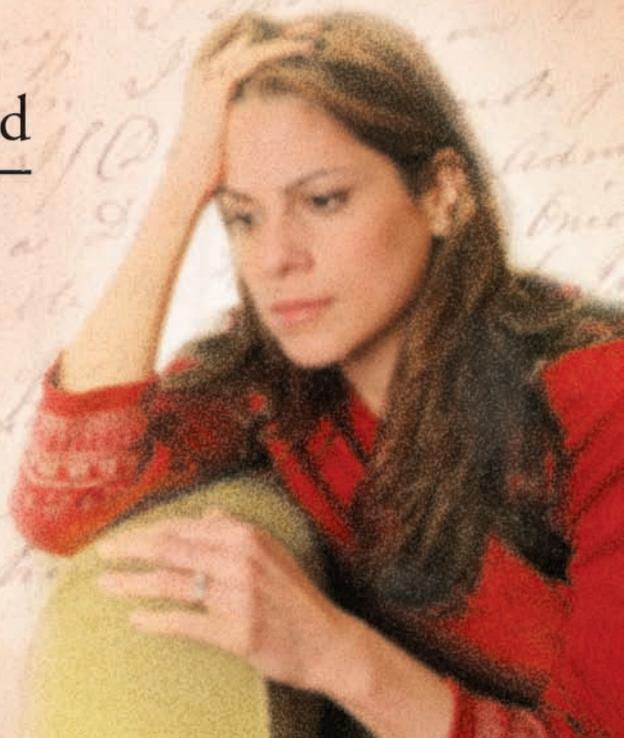
RIVERS

NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR



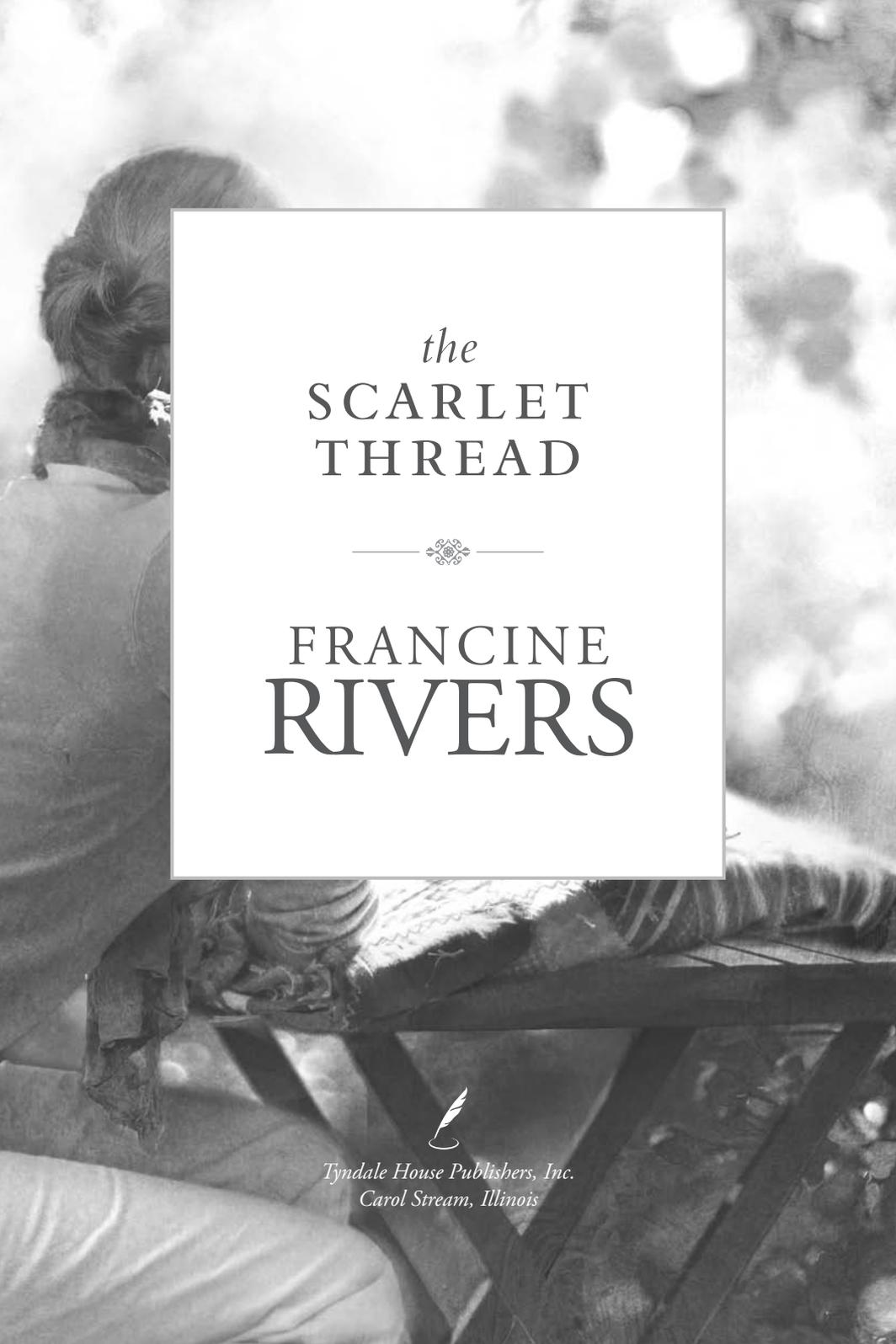
the
Scarlet Thread

a novel



THE SCARLET THREAD





the
SCARLET
THREAD



FRANCINE
RIVERS



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The Scarlet Thread

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PART I

THE CALL



CHAPTER I



SIERRA CLANTON MADRID couldn't stop shaking. Her stomach was quivering. Her head had begun throbbing with a tension headache the moment Alex had told her the news.

She hadn't had a headache like this since prom night during her senior year of high school. Alex had come to pick her up in his father's beat-up Chevy three minutes before her father turned in to the driveway. It was the first time in her life her father had come home *early* from work. She might have known it would be on that night. She could still remember the look on her father's face when he saw Alex—a drop-dead handsome, long-haired Hispanic boy dressed in a rented tuxedo—standing on the wide porch of her family's Mathesen Street Victorian. As if that wasn't bad enough, Alex was reaching forward to pin an orchid to the front of her fancy prom dress. When Sierra heard the slam of her father's car door, she almost fainted in fear.

The headache had started then and was only compounded by the inquiring look on Alex's face. "What's the matter?" he asked. What could she say? She had told her father about Alex; she just hadn't told him everything.

Words were exchanged, but, fortunately, her mother was there to intercede and calm her father down.

In the end, Alex escorted her to his borrowed car and helped her in while her father stood on the front steps glaring at him. Alex didn't so much as look at her as he put the Chevy in gear and pulled away from the curb. They were halfway to Santa Rosa before he said anything.

"You didn't tell him who was taking you to the prom, did you?"

"Yes, I did."

"Yeah, right. You just left out a few important details, didn't you, *chiquita*?" He had never called her that before, and it boded ill tidings for the night ahead. He didn't say anything more on the drive to the expensive restaurant in Santa Rosa. She ordered something cheap, which made him even madder.

"You think I can't afford to buy you anything more than a dinner salad?"

Her face aflame, she ordered the same prime rib dinner he did, but he didn't look any happier.

Things got worse as the evening wore on. By ten, Alex wasn't speaking at all, not to her, not to anyone. She ended up losing the nice dinner he bought her in the bathroom of the Villa de Chantclair.

She'd been crazy in love with Alejandro Luís Madrid. *Crazy* being the operative word. Her father had warned her. She should have listened.

Sierra's eyes smarted with tears now as she drove along the Old Redwood Highway, which linked Windsor with

Healdsburg. For all of its turmoil, she preferred clinging to the now-romantic past rather than facing the uncertain, terrifying present and future.

Prom night had been such a disaster. When most of her friends were going to all-night parties in Santa Rosa, Alex took her home well before midnight. The front lights were turned on—and not discreetly. Her father had probably changed the 60-watt bulb to a 250 while she was gone. Even the inside lights were on that night.

There was plenty of light for her to see how angry Alex was. But his expression revealed something deeper than just anger. She could feel the hurt that lay hidden behind the cold, remote expression on his face. She thought he'd just walk away then. Unfortunately, he didn't intend to do so before he had his say.

“I knew it was a mistake to ever ask you out.”

The words struck like a shotgun blast to her heart. He wasn't finished. “I'm not some character in a Shakespearean tragedy, Sierra. I'm not Romeo to your Juliet. And I didn't ask you out because I wanted to play around!” He turned away with that and almost reached the steps before she could speak past the tears choking her.

“I love you, Alex.”

He turned around then and looked at her. “What'd you say?” His eyes were dark and hot, still filled with anger at her—with good cause. She hadn't considered what her silence would cost him. All she had thought about was avoiding a confrontation with her father.

Alex stood waiting.

“I—I said I love you.”

“Say it in Spanish,” he told her in the same tone he had used when tutoring her.

She swallowed, wondering if he only meant to humiliate

her more before he walked out of her life. “*Te amo, Alejandro Luís Madrid. Corazón y alma.*” She started to cry then, hard wracking sobs. He caught hold of her and poured out his feelings in Spanish. Though she didn’t fully understand the words, she saw in his eyes and felt in his touch that he loved her.

Infrequently over the years, he had fallen back into his first language during times of powerful emotions. He had spoken Spanish when he made love to her on their wedding night and again when she told him she was pregnant. He had wept and spoken Spanish in the wee hours of the morning when Clanton had pushed his way into the world and again when Carolyn was born. And he had spoken Spanish in tears on the night her father died.

But that night on the porch, they both forgot about the lights. In fact, they both forgot everything until the front door was jerked open and her father ordered him gone.

She was forbidden to see Alex. At the time, it didn’t matter to her father that Alex was ranked number four in a class of two hundred students. What mattered was that Luís Madrid, Alex’s father, was “one of those beaners” who worked as a laborer in the Sonoma County vineyards. Her father didn’t care that Alex was working a forty-hour week at a local gas station to save money to put himself through college.

“I wish him luck,” he said, and it was clear that luck was the last thing he wished Alex.

She reasoned, cajoled, whined, and begged. She appealed to her mother, who promptly refused to take her side. In desperation, she threatened to run away or commit suicide. She had gotten their attention with that.

“You so much as talk to that beaner on the phone and I’ll call the police!” her father had yelled. “You’re fifteen. He’s eighteen. I could have him arrested!”

“You do and I’ll tell the police you’re abusing me!”

Her father called her aunt in Merced and made arrangements for her to spend a few weeks there “cooling off.”

Alex was waiting when she returned, but he proved less malleable than her male parent. He had a few succinct Spanish words to say about her idea of meeting him in secret. Alex was a fighter who preferred facing wrath head-on. She had never expected that he would deal with the situation on his own. He just showed up at the house one day five minutes after her father had come home from work. She learned later from a neighbor that Alex had been waiting down the street for more than an hour. Her mother, sympathetic to their plight, invited Alex into the foyer before her father could get to the porch and order him off the property.

Clutching the steering wheel of her Honda Accord now, Sierra remembered how she had felt that day, seeing Alex standing in the front hallway between her mother and father. She had been so sure her father would kill him or at least beat him to within an inch of his life.

“What’s *he* doing here?” She could still hear the anger in her father’s voice as he dumped his briefcase on the floor. Sierra had been convinced he was only freeing his hands so he could get them around Alex’s neck.

Alex stepped around her mother and faced him. “I came to ask permission to see your daughter.”

“Permission! Like you asked permission to take her to the prom?”

“I thought Sierra cleared it with you. My mistake.”

“You’re right about that! A big mistake. Now get out of here!”

“Brian, give the young man the chance to—”

“Stay out of this, Marianna!”

Alex stood his ground. “All I ask is a fair hearing.” He didn’t even notice her standing above them on the stairs.

“I don’t want to hear anything you have to say.”

They were like two dogs with their hackles up. “Daddy, please . . .,” she said, coming down the stairs. “We love each other.”

“*Love*. I doubt that’s what he feels for you.”

“You don’t understand!” she wailed.

“I understand plenty! Get back to your room!”

“I’m not going anywhere but with Alex,” she said, reaching the hallway and taking a position beside her boyfriend, and she knew in that instant that if her father came at him, she’d do whatever she had to do to stop him. She had never been so furious!

Alex clamped his hand on her wrist and firmly pulled her behind him. “This is between your father and me. Stay out of it.” The whole time he spoke, he never took his eyes off her father.

“Get out of my house.”

“All I want is a few minutes to speak to you, Mr. Clanton. If you tell me afterward to back off, I’ll back off.”

“All the way to Mexico?”

“Brian!”

As soon as her father uttered the words, his face turned beet red. Alex, with his own prejudices, had no intention of letting him off easily.

“I was *born* in Healdsburg, Mr. Clanton. Just like you. My father took his citizenship test ten years ago. Not that it makes much difference. He passed with flying colors. Red, white, and blue. He’s never taken a dollar of welfare in his life, and he works hard for what he makes, probably harder than you do in that plush real estate office you have downtown. We don’t live in a Victorian,” he said with a swift, telling look around, “but we don’t live in a shack either.”

His little speech hadn’t made anything better.

“You finished?” her father said, embarrassment burned away by anger.

“You might enjoy knowing that my father and mother disapprove of Sierra as much as you disapprove of me.”

Her mouth fell open.

“Disapprove of Sierra?” her father said, insulted. “Why?”

“Why do you think, Mr. Clanton? She’s white and she’s Protestant.”

“Maybe you ought to listen.”

“I do listen. I’ve got a lot of respect for my parents, but I’ve got a mind of my own. The way I see it, a bigot is a bigot, no matter what color he is.”

A long, hot silence filled the foyer.

“So,” Alex said bleakly, “do we talk or do I walk?”

Her father looked at her for a moment and then back at Alex with resentful resignation. “We talk.” He jerked his head toward a room off the hallway. “But I doubt you’re going to like what I have to say.”

They spent the next two hours in the small office at the front of the house while she sat in the kitchen with her mother, alternately crying and raging about what she’d do if her father wouldn’t let her go out with Alex. Her mother hadn’t said much of anything that day.

When her father came into the kitchen, he told her Alex was gone. Before she had time to scream recriminations, he informed her she could see him again, *after* she’d agreed to follow the *rules* the two of them had established. One phone conversation a night, no longer than thirty minutes and only *after* her schoolwork was finished. No dates Monday through Thursday. Friday night she was to be home by eleven. Saturday night by ten. Yes, *ten*. She had to be well rested for church on Sunday. If her grades dropped a smidgen, she was

grounded from Alex completely. If she missed church, same consequences.

“And Alex agreed?”

“He agreed.”

She hadn’t liked any of it, but she had been so much in love she would have agreed to anything, and her father knew it.

“That boy’s going to break your heart, Sierra.”

Now, fourteen years later, he was doing just that.

Wiping tears from her eyes, Sierra drove across the Russian River bridge and turned right.

She knew her father had hoped things would cool off if he gave the relationship time to develop cracks. He hadn’t known Alex then, nor did he see the determination and drive that burned in him. Alex graduated with honors from high school and entered the local junior college. Sierra had wanted to quit school and marry him, thinking it would be romantic to work and help put him through college. He squashed that idea. He told her in no uncertain terms that he intended to finish college *on his own*, and he sure didn’t want a dropout for a wife. He completed two years of work at Santa Rosa Junior College in a year and a half and transferred to the University of California, Berkeley, where he majored in business, with an emphasis in computer technology. She finished high school and entered a local business college, counting the days to his graduation.

As soon as Alex returned to Healdsburg, he found a job with Hewlett-Packard in Santa Rosa, bought a used car, and rented a small bungalow in Windsor.

When they couldn’t get their parents to agree on the kind of wedding they should have, they eloped to Reno. Nobody was very happy about it.

They had been married ten years. Ten wonderful years. All that time she’d thought Alex was as happy as she was. She

never suspected what was going on beneath the surface. Why hadn't she realized? Why hadn't he told her straight out that he was dissatisfied?

Sierra pulled her Honda into the driveway of the Mathesen Street Victorian and prayed her mother was home. Mom had always been able to reason with Daddy. Maybe she could help Sierra figure out how to reason Alex out of his plans for their future.

Unlocking the front door, Sierra entered the polished wood foyer. "Mom?" She closed the door behind her and walked along the corridor toward the kitchen. She almost called for her father before she caught herself.

With a sharp pang, she remembered the call she and Alex had received at three in the morning two years ago. She had never heard her mother's voice sound that way before. Or since.

"Your father's had a heart attack, honey. The ambulance is here."

They had met her at Healdsburg District Hospital, but it was already too late.

"He complained of indigestion this morning," her mother had said, distracted, in shock. "And his shoulder was aching."

Now, Sierra paused at his office door and looked in, half-expecting to see him sitting at his desk reading the real estate section of the newspaper. She still missed him. Oddly, so did Alex. He and her father had become close after Clanton and Carolyn were born—amazing the way grandchildren seemed to break down walls between people. Prior to her pregnancy, she and Alex had seen little of her parents. Her father always found some excuse to turn down dinner invitations; Alex's parents were no better.

All that changed when she went into labor. Everyone was at Kaiser Hospital the night she gave birth. Alex had kissed her and said maybe they should name their son Makepeace.

They had settled on Clanton Luís Madrid, forging both families together. By the time Carolyn María arrived a year later, the Clantons and the Madrids had had plenty of opportunities to get to know one another and find out they had a lot more in common than they ever thought possible.

“Mom?” Sierra called again, not finding her in the kitchen. She looked out the window into the backyard garden, where her mother often worked. She wasn’t there either. The Buick Regal was in the driveway, so she knew her mother wasn’t off on one of her many charity projects or at the church.

Sierra went back along the corridor and up the stairs. “Mom?” Maybe she was taking a nap. She peered into the master bedroom. A bright granny-square afghan was folded neatly on the end of the bed. “*Mom?*”

“I’m in the attic, honey. Come on up.”

Surprised, Sierra went down the hallway and climbed the narrow stairway. “What are you doing up here?” she said, entering the cluttered attic. The small dormer windows were open, allowing a faint sun-warmed breeze into the dusty, dimly lit room. Dust particles danced on the beam of sunlight. The place smelled musty with age and disuse.

The attic had always fascinated Sierra, and she momentarily put aside her worries as she looked around. Lawn chairs were stacked at the back. Just inside the door was a big milk can filled with old umbrellas, two canes, and a crooked walking stick. Wicker baskets in a dozen shapes and sizes sat on a high shelf. Boxes were stacked in odd piles, in no particular order, their contents a mystery.

How many times had she and her brother gone through their rooms, sorting and boxing and shoving discards into the attic? When Grandma and Grandpa Clanton had died, boxes from their estate had taken up residence in the quiet dimness. Old books, trunks, and boxes of dishes and silverware

were scattered about. A hat tree stood in a back corner on an old braided rag rug that had been made by Sierra's great-grandmother. The box of old dress-up clothes she had donned as a child was still there. As was the large oval mirror where she had admired herself with each change.

Nearby, stacked in her brother's red Radio Flyer wagon, were a dozen or more framed pictures leaning one upon another against the wall. Some were original oils done by her grandfather during his retirement years. Others were family pictures that dated back several generations. Paint cans left over from restoration on the house were stacked on a shelf in case touch-ups were needed to the colorful trim. One bookshelf was filled with shoe boxes, each labeled in her father's neat printing and holding tax returns and business records going back twenty years.

A tattered, paint-chipped rocking horse stood in lonely exile in the far back corner.

Her mother had moved some of the old furniture around so that Grandpa Edgeworth's old couch with the lion-claw legs was sitting in the center of the attic. Opposite it was Daddy's old worn recliner. Two ratty needlepoint footstools served as stands for the things her mother had removed from an old trunk that stood open before her.

Marianna Clanton had a tea towel wrapped around her hair. "I thought I should go through some of these things and make some decisions."

"Decisions about what?" Sierra said, distracted.

"What to throw away, what to keep."

"Why now?"

"I should've started years ago," her mother said with a rueful smile. "I just kept putting it off." She looked around at the cluttered room. "It's a little overwhelming. Bits and pieces from so many lives."

Sierra ran her hand over an old stool that had been in the kitchenette before it was remodeled. She remembered coming home from kindergarten and climbing up on it at the breakfast bar so she could watch her mother make Toll House cookies. “Alex called me a little while ago and told me he’s accepted a job in Los Angeles.”

Her mother glanced up at her, a pained expression flickering across her face. “It was to be expected, I suppose.”

“Expected? How?”

“Alex has always been ambitious.”

“He has a good job. He got that big promotion last year, and he’s making good money. They gave him a comprehensive health package and retirement plan. We have a wonderful new house. We like our neighbors. Clanton and Carolyn are happy in school. We’re close to family. I didn’t even know Alex had put out word he was looking for another position until he called me today—” Her voice broke. “He was so excited, Mom. You should’ve heard him. He said this new company made him a fantastic offer, and he accepted it without even talking to me about it.”

“What sort of company?”

“Computers. *Games*. The sort of stuff Alex likes to play around with at home. He met these guys at a sales conference last spring in Las Vegas. He never even told me about them. He says he did, but I don’t remember. Alex has been working on an idea he has for a role-playing game. Players could link up with others online and create armies and battle scenarios. He said it’s right up their alley. And it doesn’t even bother him that they haven’t been in business four years yet or that they started business in a garage.”

“So did Apple.”

“That’s different. These guys haven’t been around long enough to prove they can *stay* in business. I don’t see how Alex

can throw away ten years' seniority at Hewlett-Packard when people are being laid off of other jobs left and right! I don't want to go to Los Angeles, Mom. Everything I love is here."

"You love Alex, honey."

"I'd like to *shoot* Alex! Where does he get off making a decision like this without even discussing it with me?"

"Would you have listened if he had?"

She couldn't believe her mother would ask such a thing. "Of course I'd listen! Doesn't he think it has anything to do with me?" She wiped angry tears from her cheeks. "You know what he said to me, Mom? He told me he'd already called a Realtor, and the woman's coming by tonight to list the house. Can you believe it? I just planted daffodils all along the back fence. If he has his way, I won't even be here to see them bloom!"

Her mother said nothing for a long moment. She folded her hands in her lap while Sierra rummaged through her shoulder bag for a Kleenex.

Sierra sniffled into the tissue. "It's not fair. He never even took my feelings into consideration, Mom. He just made the decision and told me it's a done deal. Just like that. Whether I like it or not, we're moving to Los Angeles. He doesn't even care how I feel about it because it's what *he* wants."

"I'm sure Alex didn't make the decision arbitrarily. He's always looked at everything from all sides."

"Not from *my* side." Restless and upset, she walked across the room and picked up an old stuffed bear her brother had cuddled when he was a boy. She hugged it against her. "Alex grew up here just like I did, Mom. I don't understand how he can turn his back on everything and be so *happy* about it."

"Maybe Alex wasn't treated as kindly as you were, Sierra."

Sierra glanced back at her mother in surprise. "His parents never abused him."

“I wasn’t referring to Luís or María; they’re wonderful people. I mean the assumptions too many people make about Hispanics.”

“Well, he can add all that to the other things Los Angeles will have to offer. Smog. Traffic. Riots. Earthquakes.”

Her mother smiled. “Disneyland. Movie stars. Beaches,” she recited, clearly seeing a much more positive side to things. Daddy used to call it her Pollyanna attitude, especially when he was irritated and in no mood to see the good side of a situation. The way Sierra was feeling now.

“Everyone we love is here, Mom. Family, friends.”

“You’re not moving to Maine, honey. It’s only a day’s drive between Healdsburg and Los Angeles. And you can always call us.”

“You talk as though it doesn’t matter to you that we’re leaving.” Sierra bit her lip and looked away. “I thought you’d understand.”

“If I could make the choice, of course, I’d rather you were here. And I do understand. Your grandparents were far from overjoyed when I moved from Fresno to San Francisco.” She smiled. “It was a ten-hour drive in those days, but you’d have thought I’d moved to the far side of the moon.”

Sierra smiled wanly. “It’s hard for me to see you as some sort of beatnik living in San Francisco, Mom.”

She laughed. “No less hard than it is for me to see you as a young woman with a wonderful husband and two children in school.”

Sierra blew her nose. “Wonderful husband,” she muttered. “He’s a male chauvinist pig. Alex probably hasn’t even bothered to mention this to his parents.”

“Luís will understand. Just as your father would have. I think Alex has stayed here for ten years because of you. It’s

time you allow him to do what he needs to do to make full use of the talents he has.”

It was the last thing Sierra wanted to hear. She didn't reply as she ran her hand along the books in an old shelf. She knew what her mother said had merit, but that didn't mean she wanted to listen. Alex had received other offers and turned each down after discussing them with her. She had thought the decisions mutual, but now she wondered. He had sounded so excited and happy when he talked to her about this job. . . .

She plucked *Winnie the Pooh* out and blew dust off the top. Stroking the front of the book, she remembered sitting in her mother's lap as the story was read to her. How many times had she heard it? The cover was worn from handling.

Just thinking about leaving and not being able to see her mother or talk with her every few days left Sierra feeling bereft. Tears blurred her vision.

“Alex gave notice this morning.” She pushed the book back into its space. “It was the first thing he did after he got the call from Los Angeles. *Then* he called me with the *great* news.” Covering her face, she wept.

Sierra felt some comfort when her mother's arms came around her.

“It'll be all right, honey. You'll see.” Her mother stroked her back as though she were a child. “Things have a way of working out for the best. The Lord has plans for you and for Alex, plans for your good, not your destruction. Trust Him.”

The Lord! Why did her mother always have to bring up *the Lord*? What sort of plan was it to tear people's lives apart?

She withdrew from her mother's arms. “All our friends are here. *You're* here. I don't want to move. It makes no sense. What does Alex think he'll find in Los Angeles that he doesn't already have here?”

“Maybe he wants the chance to prove himself.”

“He *has* proven himself. He’s succeeded at everything he’s ever done.”

“Maybe he doesn’t feel he’s done enough.”

“He doesn’t have to prove anything to me,” Sierra said, her voice choked.

“Sometimes men have to prove things to themselves, Sierra.” She took her daughter’s hand. “Sit, honey.” She drew her down onto the old faded couch. Patting her hand, she smiled wistfully. “I remember Alex talking with your father about all the frustrations he felt in his job.”

“Daddy was the one who told Alex to settle in and stay put so he’d have all the benefits.”

“Your father was worried Alex would do the same thing he did.”

She blew her nose and glanced at her mother. “What do you mean?”

“Your father changed jobs half a dozen times before he settled into real estate.”

“He did? I don’t remember that.”

“You were too young to notice.” Her mother smiled wistfully. “Your father intended to be a high school biology teacher.”

“Daddy? A teacher?” She couldn’t imagine it. He wouldn’t have put up with anything. The first student to shoot a spit wad would have found himself upside down in a garbage can outside the classroom door.

Her mother laughed. “Yes, Daddy. He spent five years in college preparing to do just that and after one year in a classroom decided he hated it. He said the girls were all airheads and the boys were running on testosterone.”

Sierra smiled, amazed and amused. “I can’t even imagine.”

“Your dad went to work in a lab then. He hated that, too.”

He said staring into microscopes all day bored him senseless. So he went to work for a men's clothing store."

"Daddy?" Sierra said again, astounded.

"Yes, *Daddy*. You and Mike were both in school when he quit. After that, he trained to become a police officer. I was as strongly against that as you are against moving to Los Angeles." She patted Sierra's hand again. "But good came out of it. I used to lie awake at night, worrying myself sick over him. I was so sure something would happen to him. Those years were the worst of my life, and our marriage suffered because of it. And yet the greatest blessing came from it, too. I became a Christian while your father was working the eleven-to-seven shift as a highway patrolman."

"I didn't know all this, Mom."

"Why would you? A mother hardly shares these kinds of struggles with her young children. You were four and Mike was seven. Neither of you were happy. You sensed the tension between us and didn't understand. You didn't see that much of your father when he was home because he had to sleep during the day. I spent most of my time telling you two to be quiet and trying to keep you busy with games and puzzles and long walks. The hours and stress were bad enough for Daddy, but I think it was missing you and Mike that finally made him quit. Before he did, he studied for his real estate license. He gave it a try and loved it. As God would have it, he started at the time when real estate was booming. It was a seller's market. Within two years of getting his license, your dad was one of the top Realtors in Sonoma County. He became so busy, he dropped residential and specialized in commercial properties."

She squeezed Sierra's hand. "The point I'm trying to make is this, honey: it took your father sixteen years to settle into a career he enjoyed." She smiled. "Alex knew what he wanted

to do when he went to college. The trouble is, he's never had the opportunity to accomplish it. The greatest gift you can give him is the freedom to spread his wings."

Again, this wasn't what Sierra wanted to hear. "You talk as though I've put a ball and chain around his neck." She stood and began pacing again. "I'd like to have been consulted, Mom. Is that so hard to understand? Alex didn't even discuss the offer with me. He accepted it and then informed me of his decision. It's not fair."

"Who ever said life was fair?" her mother responded, hands folded.

Sierra felt defensive and angry. "Daddy didn't make you move."

"No, he didn't. I would have been delighted if he had."

Sierra turned and stared at her. "I thought you loved Healdsburg."

"Now I do. When I was younger, all I could think about was getting away from here. I thought how wonderful it would be to live in a big city like San Francisco where lots of things were going on. You know I grew up on Grandma's farm in Central Valley, and believe me, it was anything but exciting, honey. I wanted to go to the theater and attend concerts. I wanted to immerse myself in museums and culture. I wanted to walk through Golden Gate Park. And, despite warnings and pleadings from my parents, I did just that."

"And met Daddy."

"Yes. He rescued me from a mugging on the Pan Handle."

Sierra thought of the wedding photo on the mantel downstairs. Her father's hair had been long then, and his "tuxedo" consisted of worn Levi's and heavy boots; her mother, dressed in a black turtleneck and capri pants, had woven flowers in her waist-length auburn hair. The photo had always jarred

with the image she had of her parents. They had been *young* once—and rebellious, too.

Her mother smiled, remembering. “If I’d had my way, we would have settled in San Francisco.”

“You never told me that before.”

“By the time you and your brother came along, my ideas about what I wanted had changed drastically. Just as your ideas will change. Life isn’t static, Sierra. Thank God. It’s constantly in motion. Sometimes we find ourselves caught up in currents and carried along where we don’t want to go. Then we find out later that God’s hand was in it all along.”

“God didn’t make the decision to move to Los Angeles. Alex made it. But then, I suppose he thinks he’s God.” Sierra could hear the resentment in her voice, but she hardened herself against any regret or guilt. Emotions raged and warred within her: resentment that Alex had made such a decision without talking to her beforehand; fear that if she fought him, she’d lose anyway; terror of leaving a life she loved and found so comfortable.

“What am I going to do, Mom?”

“That’s up to you, honey,” her mother said gently, tears of compassion in her eyes.

“I need your advice.”

“The second greatest commandment is that we love one another as we love ourselves, Sierra. Forget yourself and think about what Alex needs. Love him accordingly.”

“If I do that, he’ll walk all over me. Next time, he’ll jump at a job in New York City!” She knew she was being unfair even as she said it. Alex had given her two beautiful children, a nice three-bedroom home in Windsor, and a secure, happy life. Life had been so smooth, in fact, she had never once suspected the turmoil within him. Realizing that frightened

her. It made her feel she didn't know Alex's heart or mind as well as she thought she did.

She couldn't see a way out. Part of her wanted to pick up the children from school and come back here to the Mathesen Street home and let Alex face the real estate woman alone; he couldn't sell the house if she didn't sign. But she knew if she did that, he'd be furious. The few times she had unintentionally hurt him, he had retreated into anger, putting up a cold front and withdrawing into silence. He didn't come from a family of yellors. She didn't even want to think about how he would respond if she hurt and angered him deliberately.

"It might help to take your mind off the matter for a few hours and then try to think about it later," her mother said.

Heart aching, Sierra sat down on the sofa again. She looked at the open trunk and piles of boxes. "Why are you doing all this now, Mom?"

Something flickered in her mother's eyes. "It's a good winter activity, don't you think?" She glanced around. "It's such a mess. Your father and I meant to go through all this stuff years ago, but then . . ." She looked sad. "Time has a way of getting away from us." She looked around the room at the odd assortment of treasures, some ratty and from long-forgotten sources. "I don't want to leave all this chaos for you and Mike to have to figure out."

She rose and walked around the attic, brushing her hand lightly over an old rocking chair, a bookshelf, a baby's pram.

"I'm going to sort and put all of Mike's and your things over there in the north corner. You two can decide what you want to keep and what you want to throw away. Special things from your father's family and mine, I'll repack. Most of your father's papers from the business can be burned. There's no point in keeping them. And Grandpa's paintings . . . some of them are disintegrating."

“Some of them are really bad,” Sierra said, grinning.

“That, too,” her mother agreed with a laugh. “It kept him occupied.” She stopped near the window, glancing out at the front lawn, her expression pensive. “There are a lot of family papers. I’ll have all winter to go through and organize them for you and Mike.” She glanced back at Sierra and smiled. “It’s a big job, but I think it’ll be fun and interesting.”

She came back and sat down on the old flowered sofa. “This trunk belonged to Mary Kathryn McMurray. She was one of your ancestors. She came across the plains in a wagon in 1847. I was just glancing through her journal when you came,” she said, taking up a leather-bound volume from the trunk and brushing her hand over it. “I hadn’t gotten very far. Apparently, this was an assignment book and then it became her diary.”

She set the volume between them on the couch. Sierra picked it up and opened it, reading the childish scrawl on the first page.

*Mama says livin in the wildurnes aint no resun to bee
ignurant. Her papa wuz a larnud man and wud not
want fuls in his famlee.*

“The trunk was part of Grandpa Clanton’s estate,” her mother said. “I haven’t gone through these things in years.” She lifted out a small carved wooden box. “Oh, I remember this,” she said, smiling. Inside was an embroidered silk handkerchief. She unfolded it carefully and showed Sierra the antique gold chain and amethyst cross.

“Oh, it’s beautiful,” Sierra said, taking it and admiring it.

“You may have it, if you’d like.”

“I’d love it,” Sierra said, opening the small clasp and putting it on.

Her mother took out an old tintype in an oval frame. The

couple were dressed in wedding clothes, their expressions solemn rather than joyful. The groom was handsome in his dark suit and starched shirt, his dark hair brushed back cleanly from chiseled features and intense pale eyes. Blue, Sierra decided. They would have had to be blue to be so pale in the picture. The bride was very young and lovely. She was wearing a gorgeous white lace Victorian wedding dress. She sat while her husband stood, his hand firmly planted upon her shoulder.

Sierra took out another box. Inside, wrapped in tissue paper, was a small woven Indian basket with designs. Around the top edge were quail plumes and beads. "I think this is a gift basket, Mom. It's worth a lot of money. They have them in the Indian Museum at Sutter's Fort."

"Is there anything inside the box to tell about it?"

Sierra removed everything and shook her head. "Nothing."

"Look at this old Bible," her mother said, distracted. As she opened it, a section slipped free and fell onto the floor. Her mother picked it up and placed it on the sofa beside her.

Sierra picked up the paper yellowed with age and read the pretty script.

Dearest Mary Kathryn,

I hope you have changed your mind about God. He loves you very much and He is watching over you. I do not know what hardships and losses you will face on the way to Oregon or what will happen once you reach the end of the trail. What I do know is God will never leave you nor forsake you.

You have my love and are in my morning and evening prayers. The ladies from the quilting club send their love as well, as do Betsy and Clovis. May the Lord bless your new home.

Aunt Martha

Sierra's mother thumbed through the black, cracked leather Bible and then picked up the portion that had fallen. "Look at how worn the pages are." She smiled. "Mary Kathryn favored the Gospels." She took the note from Sierra and read it. Folding it, she tucked it in the loosened pages and set the Bible carefully beside Mary Kathryn McMurray's journal.

Sierra took out a decaying flowered hatbox. She found a note on top saying simply, in beautiful black calligraphy, "Save for Joshua McMurray." The box was full of animals, carved of wood, each wrapped carefully in a scrap of flowered calico or checked gingham. She unwrapped a fierce-looking wolf, a majestic buffalo, a coiled rattlesnake, a prairie dog standing on its hind legs, a comical jackrabbit, a beautiful antelope, two mountain goats locked together in fierce battle, and a grizzly bear standing upright, ready to attack.

At the bottom of the trunk was a large package wrapped in butcher paper and tied with string.

"I don't remember this," her mother said and slipped the string off so she could remove the wrapping. "*Oh*," she said in wonder and excitement. "I think it's a crazy quilt." She unfolded it enough so that Sierra could take one end of it and then stood, spreading the folds to reveal the full pattern.

It wasn't a crazy quilt, but a picture quilt with squares made of hundreds of different scraps of cloth, each with a different scene, each framed with an edging of brown, and all stitched together with vibrant scarlet thread. Each picture block was surrounded by a different stitch: blanket, crosses, herringbone, doves, fern, olive branches, feather, open cretan, fly, zigzag chain, wheatear and sheaf filling stitches, Portuguese border, and star eyelets.

"It's beautiful," Sierra said, wishing she could have it.

"If I'd known it was here, I would have had it cleaned and hung on the living room wall years ago," her mother said.

Sierra looked at the squares one by one. Along the top row was a homestead with a man, a woman, and three children. Two boys and a girl stood in the open space between the cabin and barn. The second square was bright with consuming flames. The third showed a baby in a manger, a young girl watching over him while darkness surrounded them both.

The telephone rang downstairs. A second later, the portable phone rang from nearby. Sierra's mother handed her the other end of the quilt and went to pick up the phone from the top of a box and answer it.

"Yes, she's here, Alex."

Sierra's heart lurched. Hands trembling again, she folded the quilt while listening to her mother's side of the conversation.

"Yes, she told me. Yes, but that's to be expected, Alex." Her mother's tone held no condemnation or disappointment. She was silent for a long moment, listening again. "I know that, Alex," she said very gently, her voice husky with emotion, "and I've always been thankful. You don't have to explain." Another silence. "So soon," her mother said, resigned. "How are your parents taking it? Oh. Well, I imagine it's going to be a shock to them as well." She smiled faintly. "Of course, Alex. You know I will. Let me know after you've spoken to them, and I'll call."

Marianna cupped her hand over the receiver. "Alex wants to talk to you."

Sierra wanted to say she didn't want to talk to him but knew that would put her mother between them. She laid the folded quilt back over the trunk and crossed the attic to take the phone from her mother's hand.

"I'll make us some coffee," her mother said with a gentle smile.

Sierra watched her go down the stairs, knowing her

mother was allowing her privacy to speak with Alex. She felt a tangle of emotions, from relief to despair. Her mother hadn't said one word to discourage Alex from his decision. Why not?

"Yes?" she said into the receiver, her voice coming out thin and choked. She wanted to scream at him and could barely draw breath past the pain in her chest. Her throat was tight and dry.

"I was worried about you."

"Were you?" Why should he worry about her just because he was ripping her life apart? Resentment filled her and hot tears welled again in her eyes.

"You're not saying much."

"What do you want me to say? That I'm *happy*?"

He sighed. "I suppose that would be expecting too much, especially considering this is the biggest opportunity of my career."

She heard the tinge of disappointment and anger in his voice. What right had he to be angry with her after making a life-changing decision without so much as hinting it to her?

"I'm sure the children will be thrilled to hear they're being uprooted and torn away from their friends and family."

"*We're* their family."

"What about Mom? What about your parents?"

"We're not moving to New York, Sierra."

"I guess you're saving that for next year's big surprise."

Silence followed. Her heart picked up speed; she could feel his growing anger.

Stop this now, an inner voice cautioned her. *Stop before you go too far. . . .*

She wasn't interested in stopping. "You might have hinted what was going on, Alex," she said, clutching the phone.

"I've done more than hint. I told you about this company

weeks ago. I've been telling you for the last four years what I want to do. The problem is you don't listen."

"I listen."

"And never *hear*."

"I do too hear!"

"Then hear *this*. You've had it your way for ten years. Maybe, just for a change, you could cut *me* a little slack."

Click.

"Alex?" Dead silence filled her ear. Sierra blinked, shocked. She stared at the phone in her hand as though it had turned to a venomous snake. Alex had never hung up on her before.

More distressed than when she had arrived, Sierra went downstairs. The tantalizing aroma of freshly ground caramel au lait decafé filled the kitchen. Her favorite. So, too, were the Toll House cookies her mother had put on a dessert plate in the sunny alcove overlooking the back garden. Clearly Mom wanted to cheer her up. Fat chance.

She plunked the phone down on the pretty flower-embroidered cloth covering the small table and sank down onto the chair. "He hung up on me." Her mother poured coffee for her. "He's never hung up on me before," Sierra continued, her voice breaking as she looked up at her mother. He'd made a decision he knew would tear her life to pieces, and then *he* hung up on *her*? "He said I don't listen."

Her mother set the carafe on a sunflower trivet and took the seat facing her. "Sometimes we only hear what we want to hear." She picked up her coffee cup and sipped, distracted.

"You look tired, Mom."

"I didn't sleep very well last night. I kept thinking about your father." Her mouth curved faintly, her expression softening. "Sometimes I imagine him sitting in his chair watching the news on television. The house creaks and I awaken, thinking he's coming along to bed." She smiled sadly and

looked down into her coffee as she set the cup back in its porcelain saucer. "I miss him."

"I miss him, too." He might have been able to talk Alex out of going to Los Angeles.

Her mother lifted her head and looked across at her with gentle humor. "Your father wasn't an easy man either, Sierra, but he was worth it."

"If Alex insists, I'll go, but I don't have to smile and pretend to be happy about it."

"Maybe not, but it'd be better if you came to terms with his decision. Resentment and anger eat away at love as quickly as rust is corroding that metal lawn chair out there in the backyard. One of life's great tragedies is watching a relationship unravel over something that could've been resolved in one intelligent, adult conversation."

Her mother's words hurt. "One conversation isn't going to change Alex's mind."

"Then it depends on what you really want."

Sierra raised tear-soaked eyes to her mother's clear hazel ones. "What do you mean?"

Marianna reached out and took her daughter's hand. "It's simple, Sierra. Do you want your own way, or do you want Alex?"