



A  
KINGSBURY  
COLLECTION

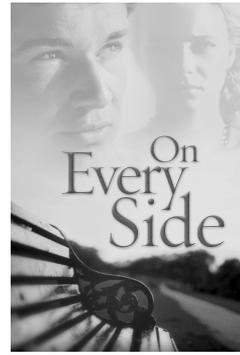
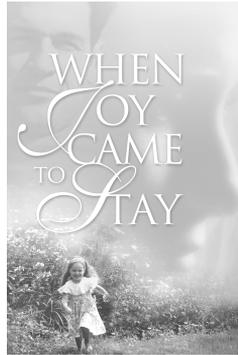
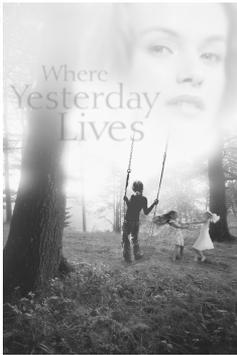
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Three Novels in One

KAREN NEW YORK TIMES  
BEST-SELLING AUTHOR  
KINGSBURY

# A KINGSBURY COLLECTION

THREE NOVELS IN ONE



KAREN  
KINGSBURY



Multnomah Books

This is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents, and dialogues are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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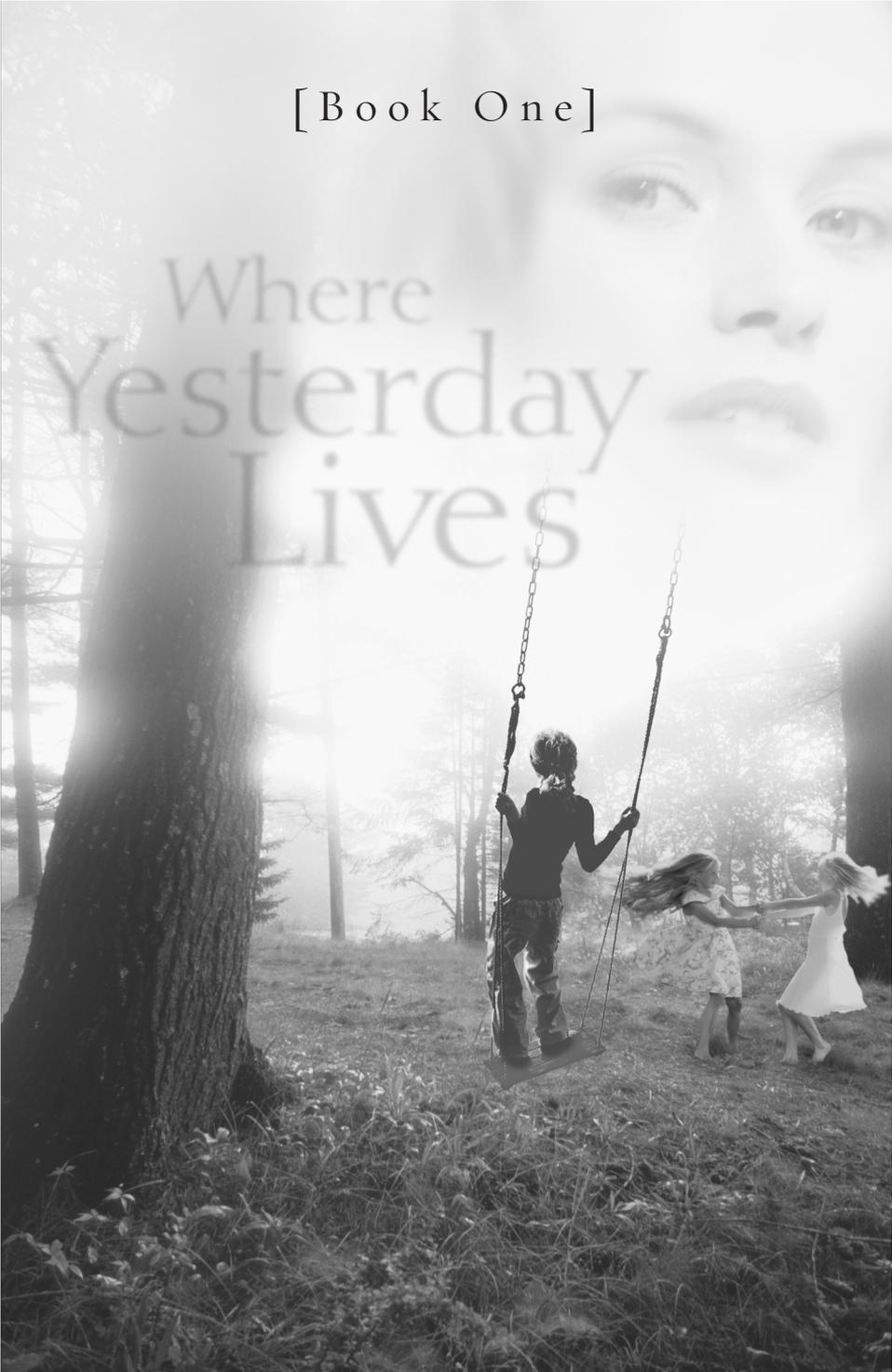
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[Book One]

Where  
Yesterday  
Lives



Dedicated to Dad, that in seeing today what could be tomorrow, you would never wonder how very much you are loved. Mom, for being forever dependable. Your love has no limits.

My husband, my best friend, whose Bible is anything but dusty. Walking through life by your side is the greatest thing this side of heaven. Thank you for loving me enough to tell me the Truth. I love you always.

Kelsey, my sweet daughter. Your love for Jesus is as beautiful as the light in your eyes, the warmth in your smile.

Ty, my tenderhearted boy. I treasure watching you walk and grow in the image of your daddy, as he continues to walk and grow in the image of our heavenly Father.

Austin, our little Isaac. God blessed us with you not once, but twice. You will always be a living reminder that God still works miracles among us. I can't wait to see the great things He has planned for you!

And to God Almighty, who has for now blessed me with these.

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Like any writer, I draw from my experience and the experiences of others when I bare my heart in a work like *Where Yesterday Lives*. And so I thank these who make up my own yesterdays...Donald, of course, and Dad, Mom, Sue, Chris, David, Tricia, Lynne, and Todd. Reporter friends I have known and worked with, and my longtime friend, Lisa. Also thanks to those others who played an integral part in building my scrapbook of rainy-day memories. I remember you fondly.

This book could not have come together without the talented efforts of one very special editor and friend, Karen Ball. Thanks for believing in me and *Where Yesterday Lives*. And thanks for making me a better writer in the process. I'm excited about what God has planned in all this.

Thanks to Dad, Tricia, Gina, Sherri, Michelle, Natalie, Rene, Wendy, and Betty for your feedback and encouragement in the initial process of writing this book. And finally, a special thanks to Rene, Dawn, and Amber for watching my little ones while I snuck an hour or two to write. May God bless your servant hearts.

# PROLOGUE



PETOSKEY, MICHIGAN  
JULY 10, 1998

The first wave of pain seized his chest like a vice grip so that his hand flew to his heart and he gasped for breath. The second wave sent him to his knees. He felt his face contort from the pain, and he forced himself to concentrate on surviving.

*Help!* The word formed on his lips and died there.

Air refused to move in and out of his body, and his lungs screamed for relief. The pain intensified; the grip tightened. There was tremendous pressure now, as if a cement truck had stalled directly over his heart.

He clutched harder at his chest, ripping a button from his shirt. In the recesses of his mind, in the only place that was not consumed with pain, he knew what was happening.

His body crumpled slowly onto the matted brown carpet that lined the hallway. *Get up!* his mind screamed. But he remained motionless, every muscle convulsing in pain. Sweat beaded up on his forehead and his face seemed surrounded by flames. Frantically he gazed upward until he found the photographs that lined the walls.

His eyes darted across the familiar faces.

Another wave hit, and he squinted in agony, staring at the people in the photos, seeing them when they were young. When they still liked each other.

He wondered if they knew how much he loved them and suddenly a million memories fought for his attention. Once more he tried to speak, to summon help, but no sound escaped and his eyelids grew heavier.

The strongest pain of all hit then, and in the haze of agony he calculated how much time had passed. How much remained.

He could no longer keep his eyes open—a fact that brought overwhelming sadness. He wanted to see them once more, the photographs. . . the people who lived in them. He struggled with every bit of his waning energy, but his eyes remained closed.

There was a ringing sound in his ears now and he became light-headed. He was fainting, losing consciousness. He told himself that perhaps he was no longer having

a heart attack but rather giving in to an overwhelming urge to sleep. He relaxed and let himself be sucked into the feeling.

Then one last time searing pain coursed through his body, and he remembered what was happening. Someone seemed to be shouting at him now.

*Wake up! Wake up! Wake up!*

He tried to move, to open his eyes. But he was slipping further away and it was too hard to come back. For the briefest moment, he thought again of the people in the photographs...and he prayed they would forgive him.

As he did so, the pain eased dramatically.

Then there was only darkness.

# I



A dense blanket of heat and humidity covered the Florida peninsula the afternoon of July 10, but at the climate-controlled offices of the *Miami Times* the unending process of news-gathering continued at a frenetic pace.

That Friday afternoon, while the city sweltered under record-breaking temperatures, the editors sat quietly at their desks in the center of the newsroom and Ellen Barrett, back from a morning of interviews, worked intently at her computer several feet away.

“Jim, tell me there’s not something more to this murder.” She held up a news clipping and strained to see Jim Western. Jim sat in the cubicle immediately in front of her and worked the environmental beat, dealing with illegal chemical dumping and polluted harbors. He was not interested in homicides.

“Sounds fishy.” His eyes remained focused on his own computer screen and the story he was writing. Ellen watched for a moment, fascinated with his neatly arranged notes, his clean desk, and the way he typed using only his index fingers.

“More than fishy.” She reached for her coffee and took a sip, wiping the moist condensation off the notepad where the cup had been sitting. Her eyes traveled across her desk, searching for a clear spot. She alone could make sense of the disaster that was her work area. Somewhere, buried under layers of rumpled notes, was a picture of her and Mike on their wedding day and a Bible he had given her three years ago. It was dusty now, though its pages were stiff and clean—much as they had been when she received it.

Ellen studied the heap of papers and, as she had once a month for the past year, made a mental note to get organized. For now she pushed her keyboard back and set the hot drink in the space it created.

She looked at Jim again. “Guy lives his whole life in his father’s shadow, tells his friend he hates the old man, and next thing we know Dad opens the door and gets blown away by an AK-47 on the Fourth of July.”

“Some holiday.”

“Neighbors think it’s fireworks and no one sees a gunman. What does the grieving

son do? Hops in Dad's shiny, new Corvette and shows it off to half the people in town."

"Fishy."

"Not to mention the tidy insurance settlement sonny boy figures to get now that Dad's gone."

"Very fishy."

"Know what I think?"

Jim sighed. "What?"

"Prison time for sonny boy."

"Hmm, yes." Jim continued to type, his index fingers moving deftly across the keyboard.

"And won't that be something after everyone's been busy doling out sympathy cards to the guy like he's some kind of forlorn victim? Truthfully, I can't understand why he hasn't been arrested. I mean, it's amazing, how obvious it is."

Jim sighed once more, and this time his fingers froze in place as he looked up from his work. "That all you and Mike talk about at home? Homicide investigations? Must make great dinner conversation."

Ellen ignored him, but she was quiet for a moment. She didn't want to think about Mike and the dinner conversations that were not taking place. She glanced once more at her notes.

"Well, I think the kid's dead in the water. No doubt in my mind. He'd better enjoy the Corvette while he still has his hands free."

Jim continued typing and the conversation stalled. Ellen settled back into her chair and glanced around the office. The newsroom was a microcosm of the outside world and it pulsed with a heartbeat all its own. If a story was breaking anywhere—from Pensacola to Pennsylvania, Pasadena to Pakistan—it was breaking at the office of the *Miami Times*.

The room held twenty-four centers, each with eight computer stations manned by hungry reporters. By late afternoon, most of the reporters were seated at their desks, tapping out whatever information they had collected earlier in the day.

Like the product it produced, the newsroom was broken into sections. News, sports, entertainment, religion, arts, and editorial. Each department had its physical place in the office and operated independently of the others but for the constant relaying of information to and from the city desk located at the center of the room.

Despite the hum of activity from the other sections, Ellen knew it was the editors at the city desk who ultimately made up the life force behind the paper. They had the power to destroy a local politician by placing his questionable use of campaign funds under a banner headline on the front page instead of burying it ten pages into the paper. A plan to expand the city's baseball stadium could be accepted or rejected based on the way the editors chose to play it in print.

Stories from around the world poured into the office through computerized wire services while editors sorted through reams of information and argued about whether

children starving in Uganda was a better lead story for the World News section than Saddam Hussein's latest threat against American armed forces. Whatever was deemed worthy of writing was passed on to the other reporters.

It was a powerful job—one where perspective was difficult to maintain. At the *Miami Times*, editors did not walk in the same hurried fashion as reporters. They sauntered, carrying with them an unmistakable aura of importance and often causing reporters to shrink in their presence.

Except for the editors, Ellen's peers at the *Times* generally enjoyed their jobs, thriving on the kind of pressure that causes stress disabilities in other people. Angry sources, missing information, daily deadlines, mistakes in print...the reporters would have taken it all in stride if not for the wrath of the *Times's* editors. Among media circles, the *Miami Times's* editorial staff had a reputation for being demanding and difficult to work for.

Reporters at the *Times* credited one man with earning that reputation for the paper: managing editor Ron Barkley.

For three years Barkley had been in charge of the *Times's* news desk. Every section of the paper had at some time come under his scrutiny, but he paid particularly close attention to the front section. Stories that made the front section were produced by Barkley's general assignment reporters, a handful of the paper's best writers who gathered and crafted stories that did more than entertain readers. Front-page news changed lives. The *real* news, Barkley called it.

If anyone knew Barkley's wrath, or the impossibility of his demands, it was the general assignment reporters. His presence among them had caused more than a little grumbling in the newsroom. Ellen had even heard talk of a union forming to combat what some reporters considered inhumane treatment.

Ellen had once interviewed J. Grantham Howard, the paper's owner, for a piece about the *Times's* evolution over the years. Howard had acknowledged the friction between Barkley and his staff and told Ellen he kept himself apprised of the situation. Certainly the owner understood that Barkley did not make conditions pleasant for his reporters. But Howard was a multimillionaire with a keen business sense and he readily admitted he was not about to disturb the very successful chemistry in the newsroom.

Howard told Ellen he'd kept a close eye on Barkley and found him to be as brilliant as he was demanding. In the years since Howard had hired the managing editor, circulation numbers had reached more than a million on Sundays and advertisement rates had nearly doubled. The same thing had happened at the paper Barkley had run in New York, and Howard believed the editor was the common denominator. Still, whenever Howard would visit the newsroom, Ellen had seen him cringe at the way Barkley treated the staff. Especially her.

"Barrett!" Barkley would boom across the newsroom on occasion, shoving his chair away from his desk and rising to his full height of six feet, four inches. His eyes would blaze as he pointed toward his computer screen. "Get over here! We can't run

that story unless you verify those things Jenkins told you. You wanna spend the rest of the year in court?”

His voice would echo off the fiberboard walls of the newsroom as other reporters busied themselves in their notes. Ellen knew they were empathizing with her and envying her at the same time. For all the grief she took from Barkley, Ellen knew the position she held at the paper. She'd heard it too often to doubt it: she was unquestionably the *Miami Times's* best reporter.

Ellen smiled, and glanced toward Ron Barkley's office. He thought Ellen feared him much the way her peers did. Her smile broadened. Poor Ron would have been shocked had he known that his prize reporter really thought he was an emotional kitten of a man, a fifty-six-year-old gentle giant, whose rough exterior was only a cover-up for who he really was inside.

Ellen had been at the paper before Barkley's arrival. She had moved to Miami four years after earning her journalism degree from the University of Michigan and had been a sportswriter for a year before being promoted to the front page. When the *Times* hired Barkley, she heard rumors that he was hard to work for. She researched his background and found the names of several reporters who had worked for him in New York.

“Tough as nails,” a senior reporter told her. “He'll yell and scream and throw a fit until you get the story perfect. But don't let him fool you.”

And then the man told Ellen a story she had never forgotten. Ten years earlier Barkley's son had been a bright investigative reporter with a brilliant future in the business. The young man was driving home from the office one night when he was hit head-on by a drunk driver and decapitated. After that, there had been something different about Barkley's presence in the New York newsroom. He still sounded loud and acted angry, but there were times when he would be reading a story about somebody else's tragedy and suddenly start coughing.

“I'd catch him swiping at a tear or two when he thought no one was looking,” the reporter said. “Eventually the memories were too much and he needed out of New York.”

“You liked him?”

“I understood him. The man knows the stuff we write about is more than a way to fill a newspaper. Another thing. He's the best editor you'll ever work for. Ignore the rough package and listen to him. He'll make you a better writer than you ever dreamed.”

That had been three years earlier, and Ellen had taken the reporter's advice to heart. When other writers fought with Barkley, Ellen Barrett gave in. When he demanded, she produced. When he screamed, she produced faster, nodding in agreement and accomplishing all he asked of her. She learned to rely on the man, ignoring his outbursts and allowing him to fine-tune her journalistic talent with each story. As a result, if Barkley got wind of a sensational tip or a front-page lead, he would always pass it to Ellen.

For her part, the effort paid off immensely. She was the highest paid reporter on staff and her name was known throughout Miami. Twice she had worked on Pulitzer-prize-winning articles and she was only thirty-one years old. She had no problem with the fact that the crusty veteran editor credited his editing practices as the cause of her success. Whatever the appearance of their working relationship, Ellen was not looking for sympathy. The situation suited her perfectly.

She flipped through her notepad and considered the homicide story on the screen before her. She wanted to scrap the whole thing and write a story blasting the dead man's son, painting him as the primary suspect. But that was impossible unless the police were at least headed in that direction. If only they'd arrest him and make it official.

She tapped her pencil on her notepad and wondered whether she should call Ronald Lewis, the sheriff's homicide investigator. Earlier that morning she'd visited his office and he'd told her there were at least a dozen leads on the case.

"What exactly are you looking for, Lewis?" Ellen had asked impatiently. "The guy's son did it, and you know it."

Lewis had studied her thoughtfully for a moment. He trusted her. She was thorough and truthful and careful not to burn her sources, and he knew that. She'd made sure that when someone talked off the record with Ellen Barrett, the information never appeared in print. It had been a long road, but she had earned the department's respect—and Lewis was no exception. There were things he would tell her that he wouldn't consider sharing with another reporter.

"Listen, you're probably right," he had admitted finally. "But let me make the arrest first, will you?"

That was six hours ago, and now Ellen stared at her story knowing it was noticeably vague and really only half written. She reached for the telephone just as it rang. "It's about time, Lewis," she muttered, picking up the receiver. "*Miami Times*, Ellen Barrett."

"Ellen, it's me."

It was Mike. She relaxed and glanced at her watch. Five-fifteen. He would be home wondering when she was leaving work. Lately their schedules had been hectic; sometimes weeks passed without a single dinner shared together. But that was the price of being successful reporters, she supposed. The success they both had achieved before they married had continued and grown after the marriage. Mike knew the business well, and so had understood the long hours. He'd even been the one to encourage Ellen to keep her maiden name since that was the name people in the industry knew.

"Hey." She softened her tone. "How was your day?"

"Ellen..." There was a long pause. "Ellen, I have bad news. Your dad's had a heart attack, honey. Your mom wants you to call right away. She's at the hospital in Petoskey."

Ellen felt the blood drain from her face and she hunched over in her chair, elbows on her knees, feeling like she'd been punched. A heavy pit formed in her stomach,

and she pressed her fists into her midsection in an effort to make it go away. She felt nauseous. *Dear God, help me. Deep breaths, Ellen. Take deep breaths and stay calm.*

She had expected this phone call for as long as she could remember.

“He’s alive, right?” Her voice betrayed none of what she was feeling.

“Sweetheart, I don’t know anything. Your mom said for you to call her. I think you should come home.”

She was silent a moment and Mike exhaled softly. “I should have waited until you were off work—” He broke off, then, “Are you okay?”

Ellen squeezed her eyes shut. “Yeah. I’ll be home in a few minutes.”

Friday was the day Sunday’s front-page stories were filed and approved by the city desk. None of the general assignment reporters dared ask Barkley if they could leave before he cleared their Sunday stories. Even so, Ellen stood up, gathered her purse and her notes, and moved mechanically toward Barkley’s desk.

He looked up as she approached. “What is it, Barrett?” he barked.

“Something’s come up and I need to leave. My story’s finished; it’s in your file. I’ll be at home.”

Ellen studied Barkley, waiting, and she thought she saw a flicker of compassion. Maybe losing his son had enabled Barkley to tell when something equally devastating had happened in another’s life. His response surprised her.

“Fine.” Barkley’s tone was almost gentle. He returned his eyes to the computer screen and stretched his long legs beneath his desk. “I’ll call you.”

Ellen turned, barely aware of her surroundings. She made her way to the elevator, and then to the parking garage outside where she climbed into her dirty, black convertible BMW. Vanity plates on the front and back read, *RTNBYEB*: “Written By Ellen Barrett.” She switched off the car radio and screeched out of the parking lot, intent only on getting home.

“Please let him live,” she whispered. “Please, God.”

When Ellen pulled into the driveway of the two-story house she and Mike owned near the beach, he was waiting on the porch.

Even masked with deep concern, her husband’s face was strikingly handsome. Marked by masculine angles and high cheekbones, punctuated with piercing pale blue eyes, Mike Miller’s face looked like it belonged in a high-fashion advertisement or a cologne commercial. For some reason it seemed unfair that he should look virile and healthy when her father was fighting for his life eighteen hundred miles away.

“I’m sorry.” He met her halfway down the sidewalk and nervously pulled her close, stroking her hair. “I’ve been praying.”

Ellen remained stiff, unwilling to be comforted. Mike had never known how to deal with the emotional moments in their marriage, and she didn’t want him practicing at a time like this. She refused to allow herself to break down. Her father was sick, but he was alive.

There would be time for tears later.

She pulled away. "I need to get inside and call."

Mike followed lamely behind her, and as they entered the house he sat on the couch and buried himself in a magazine. As usual, he would let her take care of making the call. Ellen clenched her teeth, but she couldn't exactly blame Mike. Her father, John Edward Barrett, was fifty-four that year and had undergone triple-bypass surgery the previous summer. Since then he had ignored doctors' warnings and continued to smoke three packs of unfiltered Camels a day. He ate eggs and buttered toast for breakfast, juicy beef hot dogs for lunch, and pizza for dinner. It was fairly certain the news would not be good.

Ellen kicked off her heels and picked up the cordless phone, collapsing in a cross-legged heap on the floor as she studied the message Mike had taken. As quickly as her fingers could move she punched in the numbers for Northern Michigan Hospital in Petoskey.

"John Barrett's room, please." She dug her elbows into her knees and rested her forehead in her free hand.

"Nurse's station," a woman announced.

"Yes, John Barrett's room."

"Who's calling?"

"This is his daughter, Ellen. May I speak with him please?"

"Just a minute, ma'am. Let me get your mother."

Ellen waited, praying against all odds that she was wrong, that the news would be good. Her father's health was poor but he had never suffered a heart attack. There was a chance he might recover completely if he had made it to the hospital in time.

"Ellen?" Her mother's voice was raspy and tired, and Ellen could tell she'd been crying.

"Mother, is he okay?"

"No." A single sob escaped from her mother and for a moment she was unable to continue. Ellen waited breathlessly. "He didn't make it, honey. I'm so sorry."

Ellen could feel the floor drop away from beneath her. She refused to believe it. "No, Mom, that can't be true. People live through heart attacks all the time. He was—"

"Not this time," her mother cut in. "He died four hours ago. Ellen, he's gone."

"No! Mom, please! He...he can't be gone."

"I'm sorry, honey. He loved you so much. You know that."

Ellen was silent as the truth coursed through her veins, searing her, weighing her down. Her father was dead. "Ellen?"

"Mom—" her voice was barely a whisper—"what are we going to do?"

"We're going to survive and we're still going to be a family."

Ellen nodded and fought a wave of anxiety. "Are you by yourself?"

"No, Megan and Aaron are here with me, and Amy's on the way. I've called Jane. She's coming out Sunday afternoon."

“How are they handling it?”

“Not well. Especially Aaron. He hasn’t said a word since it happened.”

A thousand memories crowded out Ellen’s ability to speak, and she realized there was a lump in her throat. Her father was gone, and she hadn’t gotten to say good-bye. Certainly Aaron, her only brother, would be devastated. The others, too. *He’s in heaven. He’s still alive, just happier now.*

Ellen thought about the last time she’d talked with her father, only a few days earlier. He had sounded fine. There had been no warning that it was the last time she’d ever talk to him. She called him often, keeping him up-to-date on her latest assignments. He had always been interested in the little-known details and behind-the-scenes anecdotes that went into her reporting. Now he was gone, and Ellen wondered if she would suffocate from the shock.

“Are you okay, honey?”

Her mother’s strained question pulled her back. “Mom, what happened?”

“Well,” her mother drew a ragged breath. “He wasn’t feeling well when he woke up this morning, and he took a long nap in his chair until about one o’clock. Then he got up and had something to eat. He was walking back to take a shower when he collapsed in the hallway.”

Ellen closed her eyes, picturing the familiar house, its aging dark brown carpet and narrow hallways.

“He didn’t have a chance. We lost him before the paramedics arrived.”

Ellen was quiet for a moment. “When do you want me home, Mom? When’s the funeral?”

“Oh, honey, I don’t know. I guess we’ll have the funeral next Saturday. That’s when your father’s sister can get here from California. I don’t know, it’s all happening so fast.” Her mom’s voice cracked and she began to cry. “I guess none of us should be surprised, but it doesn’t make it any easier.”

Hearing her mother cry triggered something in Ellen and she felt her eyes well up with tears. Her parents had been married thirty-two years. How did one let go of something like that?

“Mom, you sure you’re all right? You shouldn’t be alone.”

“I’m okay and I’m not alone. Listen, why don’t you try to get here Sunday. Jane’s plane is coming in around noon at Detroit Metro. If you and Mike could get here about the same time you could all ride up to the house together. Then we’d have a week to take care of everything.”

“Okay. I’ll make the plans and call you back. Where will you be?”

“At the house. I’ve already signed the death certificate so there isn’t much else I can do here.” Her mother sobbed softly and struggled to speak. “Dear God, Ellen. How on earth am I going to get through life without him?”

Ellen had no answers. She was too busy asking herself the same question.

She finished talking with her mother and then moved into the next room. A shaky sigh escaped her and she stared at Mike. His long body was stretched out on

the couch, his feet dangling over onto the floor. He had fallen asleep, still dressed in his designer shirt and tie, the magazine clutched in one hand. She wiped her tears and wondered why she was angry with him.

“Mike.” The word came out flat, cool.

He stirred and instantly sat up, wiping a trace of saliva from the corner of his mouth and trying to look awake. “Sorry, honey. What happened? How is he?”

Ellen sat down in a chair across from him and leaned back, staring at the plant shelves that lined the high walls of their living room.

“He’s dead. Died before the paramedics arrived.”

Mike leaned back and sighed. “Ellen, I’m sorry.” He loosened his tie. “Come here.”

She paused a moment. Mike had never made an effort to be close to her father, and now that he was gone, she was angry with Mike for not trying harder. He didn’t understand what she had just lost—and with all her being she wanted to refuse his comfort.

Instead, she fell slowly to her knees and crawled the few steps that separated them. Then she dropped her head in his lap and gave way to the despair that gripped her.

“Why didn’t he take better care of himself?” Her anger brought fresh tears, and they spilled from her eyes. “It makes me so *mad* at him.”

Mike stroked her hair and said nothing. Finally, Ellen wiped her eyes and looked wearily up at him. He was her husband, and she believed God had brought him into her life. She loved Mike whatever his shortcomings, but she did not always feel loved by him. He rarely made an effort on her behalf—especially where her family was concerned. Now his attempts to ease her grief seemed too little, too late.

“My mom wants us to be there Sunday afternoon.” She leaned up and away from him. “That’s when Jane’s coming in. The funeral will be later that week, Saturday morning.”

“A week from now?” He sounded incredulous.

Ellen blinked twice. “Yes. That’s the soonest Aunt Betsy can get there. Is that a problem?”

She saw Mike’s hesitation, watched his eyes look away from her, as though he were trying to think of the right way to say something he knew she wasn’t going to like.

“Honey,” he started, shaking his head, “I’ve got a baseball game to cover that Saturday. I don’t know how I can find a replacement on such short notice.”

There was more to it than that, Ellen was sure. She knew Mike wasn’t comfortable at funerals, knew he wouldn’t be looking forward to spending a week at her parents’ house in Petoskey. She loved her family, but she was aware that they had their problems...that there would be bickering even as everyone pretended to get along...

Still, the least he could do was be there for her. “A baseball game?”

“Honey, maybe it’d be better if you went by yourself.” He searched her face for a

reaction. "I could always join you later when I can get away."

She burned with anger and she didn't even try to hide it. Drawing herself up onto her knees, she stared at him. "No, that *wouldn't* be better, Mike." Her voice was even and measured, a study in controlled fury.

"I have a game Saturday. Come on, Ellen, you know how the producers are about last-minute changes."

"Wait a minute. I don't believe what I'm hearing." Ellen's temper blazed. "This isn't some friend's wedding or a class reunion where you can back out and blame it on your work. My father is *dead*. My mother wants us both to come out for the week. Can't you understand that?"

"I'm not married to your mother." Mike looked like he regretted the words as soon as he said them, but it was too late.

Ellen's mouth dropped open. "Fine. *I* want us both there. Okay?"

"Ellen, you know I can't take a week off without any notice. Work is a fact of life." He paused. "Besides, I don't like funerals. I never know how to act."

Ellen's eyes grew wide, full of disbelief and accusation.

He cleared his throat before she could speak. "You'll have your family there," he insisted. "It's not like you'll be all by yourself." Mike shook his head. "Oh, forget it! You don't understand."

"You don't like funerals!" Ellen stood up and paced the floor. "No kidding, Mike—" She stopped and stared at him. "Me, neither. I don't like *death*, for that matter. But my dad is dead, and I need you there. So don't tell me I don't understand!"

"Don't yell at me. I don't deserve that."

"*What?* I deserve a husband who has complained about attending social events with me since we got married? A husband who doesn't want to go with me to my own father's funeral?"

"It's not that I don't want to go, Ellen. I told you I can't get away. Not on such short notice."

"What if it was *you* who died, Mike? I bet the station could get by somehow without folding."

She went to slam the cordless phone back onto the receiver.

She was so furious she was shaking. She turned to face him, and when she spoke, even she heard the hatred in her voice. "What is it, Mike? Some ditzy little news anchor have your attention?"

He stood up, recoiling as if he'd been slapped.

"That's unfair."

"Is it?" Her voice was still angry, but softer now. "Is it really, Mike? My dad dies and you won't take one lousy week off work for me? What am I supposed to think?"

Mike looked past her then and reached toward the fireplace mantel for his car keys.

"I don't know what you're supposed to think," he said, pausing by the front door. Ellen was speechless.

"Listen," Mike's voice was calmer as he continued. "I'm sorry about your dad. I loved him, too."

"Oh, don't give me that! Not now. You never even knew him, Mike. You never *tried* to know him. And you certainly didn't love him. Not enough to take me to his funeral, anyway." She snorted sarcastically. "I get the worst news of my entire life, and *you* can't think of anyone but yourself. What's happened to you, Mike? You're supposed to be a *Christian*, remember? The spiritual leader of the household?"

Mike shook his head. "Oh, don't throw that in my face. Not this time. Besides, I don't exactly see you rushing to the Bible for comfort."

"I'm not talking about comparing my walk with yours. I'm talking about you and me. You're supposed to love me like Christ loved the church, give up everything for me. But not you, no sir. You won't even take a week off work for me. What kind of Christian love is that?"

Mike's shoulders sagged and he sighed loudly, dramatically.

"Ellen, I won't let you guilt me into going with you to Petoskey when I have work here in Miami. I could meet you down there the day before the funeral, but I can't possibly get a whole week off with no notice."

"Forget it, Mike." She turned her back to him.

"Look at me, Ellen," he demanded.

She whirled around and put a hand on her hip. "What?"

"You obviously need time to accept the facts." Mike's voice was measured and forced. "Your dad's dead. Nothing I can do can bring him back. You have family and friends in Petoskey, and you don't need me tagging along for a week of funeral preparations. I can probably get out there for the funeral. But that's all. Otherwise the topic's closed."

"Fly out for one day? I need you all week." Her icy anger melted and she began sobbing softly as she turned away from him again. "Forget it. I don't want you there."

Mike was silent, then his voice came from behind her, cold and hurt. "Fine. I won't go at all." He strode across the room, and flung open the door.

"Jerk!" she shouted, glancing at him over her shoulder so that their eyes met for an angry moment. Then he stepped outside and slammed the door.

She stood frozen in place, studying the door and relishing the distraction of her renewed anger. At that moment it seemed Mike had always been like this, and she cursed herself for marrying him.

"Jerk!" She said it louder this time, even though no one was there to hear her.

She marched across the living room, picked up the telephone, and sat down at the kitchen table. She dialed the *Miami Times*, and in a voice that was almost unrecognizable, she told Ron Barkley that her father had died.

"I'll need a week, Ron."

"Listen, I'm sorry, Barrett." Barkley's voice was soft. "Call us if you need more time."

She hung up and dialed the airline, scribbling flight numbers on a pad of paper and making reservations to fly to Detroit without Mike. When she was finished, she

folded her arms on the kitchen table, laid her head down, and sobbed until she thought her heart would break.

Of course she had seen it coming. Her father had heart disease and diabetes, and if high blood pressure and excess weight were any indication, he should have died more than a decade ago. But that didn't make his death any less painful.

"So, this is it, huh, Dad?" she whispered, her eyes closed. "Time to say good-bye."

She silently summoned a strength she had not known she possessed, one she would certainly have to draw on in the days to come. She would go home and face her four younger siblings, all of whom had been unable to get along for years. She would help her mother pick out a casket and plan a service. Then she would see that her father was buried. She would remember the past, walk through it, relive it, and try her best to put it behind her.

"God, help me get through it." But the whispered words felt foreign, as if praying was something she had forgotten how to do.

She sighed and wiped her eyes. How could he be gone, the father who had shared so much of her life? How could she bury the one person who had always believed in her? He was the man who had attended football games with her, teaching her the rules of play even after she'd been hired as a sportswriter for the *Detroit Gazette*. There was nothing he would not have done for her, and now she would have to learn to live without him.

Never mind about Mike. She would be on a plane soon enough and then she would have one week before she would see him again. Meanwhile, she had a lot more to think about than what was wrong between the two of them.

Ellen lowered her head back down onto her arms. There had been a time when she thought the world revolved around Mike Miller, a time when she couldn't have imagined a scene like the one that had just taken place. Back when they spent Saturday mornings laughing at *I Love Lucy* reruns and Sunday mornings at church. But somewhere along the path of deadlines and breaking stories and babies that would never be, something had changed.

She tried to think back to the beginning, to the days when she and Mike couldn't stand to be away from each other. Images drifted through her mind.... Mike bringing her breakfast in bed on their first anniversary and the two of them giggling for hours because the eggs were rubbery and the toast like cardboard.... The birthday when she left work to find her BMW plastered with flowers and balloons, a task that had cost Mike a double lunch break....

It felt good to remember those things—and it forced her to think of something other than her father. The memories raced through her mind like a highlight film and, despite herself, the corners of her mouth lifted as she remembered.

Mike Miller was handsome and intelligent, a Christian man with morals and a sense of humor. He had completely swept her off her feet. But too many times since then he had left her alone when she needed him. If he could let her face the week ahead by herself, then what strength did their marriage have?

Ellen dried her cheeks with the backs of her hands. She would go back to beautiful Petoskey, to the shores of Little Traverse Bay along Lake Michigan, to her childhood home. She would say good-bye to her father, then she would come back to Miami and see if there was still a heartbeat in her marriage... or if that, too, had grown ill and died.

Ellen sighed. Every muscle in her body ached. She barely had the energy even to stand. Rising from the chair, she stretched and headed toward her bedroom. She peeled off her clothes, leaving them scattered about the floor, and slipped into a long T-shirt. Then she pulled back the covers and slid between the cool sheets.

She did not often dream and that night was no exception. But in the hours before she finally drifted to sleep, she found herself remembering a time when her father was still very much alive. A time when she and Mike were just starting out... when Mike had loved her completely and had done something no one else had been able to do.

He made her forget about Jake Sadler.

As she closed her eyes, she found herself there, immersed in the vivid memories of a time that would never be again.



For as long as she could remember, Ellen Barrett had known what she wanted to be when she grew up. She was not like other little girls who talked of being princesses or famous ice-skaters. Ellen was a writer. It was something that grew from her heart and worked its way through her very being.

As a child Ellen spent hours writing short stories and poetry. Her mother took her for a silly dreamer, but Ellen was nothing of the sort. She was merely a single-minded young girl honing a skill she was certain to draw from in years to come.

When she was ten years old, Ellen first understood her need to place on paper all that already existed in her heart. It was then that she made her decision. One day she would write for the *Detroit Gazette*.

The *Gazette* was the biggest newspaper in Michigan, and after high school, when Ellen began plotting her way toward a journalism degree, it was with the sole purpose of one day being employed by the *Gazette*. A position on staff would mean living in a small apartment by herself, four hours away from her family and the small town she loved. But Ellen wanted a staff position desperately. She would have lived on the moon if it meant working at the *Gazette*.

In 1990, she was in her final semester at the University of Michigan when she was selected to do an internship for the *Gazette*. She was a Christian by then, and many of her childhood plans had undergone significant changes—but not the dream of working for the *Gazette*. From the beginning she saw the internship as an answer to prayer.

“Ms. Barrett,” the sports editor said when he called her at her dormitory that January. “We’ve reviewed your application and selected you as one of our sports interns for the coming semester.”

“Sports,” she repeated blankly. She had requested an internship in the news department, but her hesitation lasted only a moment. “Fantastic. That’ll be perfect. What will I be doing?”

“You’ll be taking scores over the phone several nights a week. Of course, you’ll need a complete understanding of most of the major spring sports. Baseball, track, softball, volleyball, wrestling, tennis, swimming. And the city league sports, bowling and high-pitch softball. That kind of thing.”

He droned on about the details. The job involved taking hundreds of scores and statistics from local sporting events and turning them into brief copy for the score-card in the back of the sports section.

“Sound okay to you?”

Ellen thought quickly. She didn't know the first thing about the rules of sports. She wasn't even sure she knew how to keep score. “Definitely,” she said before she could stop herself. “No problem. When do I start?”

“Next week. Stop by the office and pick up your schedule. You can fill out the paperwork then.”

When Ellen hung up the phone, she let out a shriek so loud it brought students from several rooms away rushing to see what the problem was.

“I got the internship! I can't believe it! I'm on staff at the *Gazette!*”

The other students rolled their eyes and returned to their business, unaware of the significance of the moment. Within two minutes Ellen was on the phone with her father.

“Way to go, Ellen! That's my girl! I knew you could do it, honey.” Ellen could see his smile as clearly as if he were standing in front of her. “This is only the beginning.”

“There's one small problem, Daddy. I've been assigned to the sports department.”

“Sports?” John Barrett laughed out loud. “Honey, you wouldn't recognize the difference between a ball and a strike. Why would they put you in sports?”

“My clip file included a few sports features I did. Remember?”

“You don't need to know sports to write about the Michigan quarterback's asthma condition. Didn't they ask you if you'd ever covered a game?”

“They asked me if I understood the games.”

“What did you say?”

“I said yes.”

“Oh, honey,” John muttered. “When do you start?”

“Next week. But I don't have classes until then. I could get time off from the restaurant and I was thinking, maybe...”

“Get in your car and get here as soon as you can. We haven't had snow in a while so at least the roads are clear.”

Her father's voice was kind and understanding. He was a professor at North Central Community College in Petoskey and spring classes didn't start for another two weeks. “I'll give you a crash course on everything you'll need to know. Maybe between the two of us we can fool 'em.”

Ellen broke into a smile. “Thanks, Daddy. I'll be there in time for dinner. One thing though.” She paused. “If Jake calls, don't tell him I'm coming up. I don't want to talk to him.”

“I won't say a word, but he's got it bad for you, Ellen. I'll never understand you two.”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

She and Jake had dated for six years. But they had been broken up for ten months and the subject was closed.

“Okay, but you’re breaking his heart.” Her father sighed dramatically. “I’m sure you have your reasons.”

*I do*, Ellen had thought. *Jake Sadler broke my heart first*. “It’s nothing I want to get into. Just don’t tell him, okay?”

“Okay, okay. Get your things together and get down here. I’ll have Mom fix something special for dinner.”

The week flew by in a blur of guidelines and rules and scoring methods. She memorized player positions, team violations, and rules of play. She learned the difference between the higharc and windmill softball pitches and that a slider was a type of baseball pitch, not to be confused with sliding into base. There were the spikes and sets and digs in volleyball, and whereas baseball gave its batters three strikes to get a hit, volleyball allowed three hits to form a play. She learned about the pin in wrestling, the splits in swimming, and the triple jump in track until finally the rules and terminology didn’t seem quite so foreign.

Once in a while they’d be working and the phone would ring. Her mother would answer it.

“Just a minute, Jake,” she’d say. Then in a whispered voice, “Ellen, it’s Jake. He talked to your roommate and he knows you’re here.”

Ellen would look up from her pages of sports notes and shake her head. “Tell him I’m out.”

Then she and her father would exchange a glance and Ellen would direct their conversation back to sports. She hated to lie, but where Jake Sadler was concerned, the greater evil would have been giving in to her feelings and seeing him. Jake was the only boy she had ever loved and now she could never, ever see him again. There was too much at stake. *My life depends on it. My spiritual life.*

“I’m sorry, Jake,” her mother would say. “Yes, we’re all doing fine. Yes. Well, I’ll certainly tell her you called.”

At week’s end Ellen was certain she knew at least enough about sports to take phone scores at the *Detroit Gazette*. Her father had been so thorough that she even had time to spend with her sisters and brother.

There were long talks with nineteen-year-old Megan about her troublesome boyfriend, and time spent helping Amy with her homework. Amy was seventeen that year, the quietest of the Barrett siblings, and Ellen enjoyed her company.

On the last day of her visit, Ellen, Amy, and sixteen-year-old Aaron, the only boy among them, played Password until they were laughing so hard they had to quit. Later Jane stopped by and the seven Barretts gathered round the worn oak dinner table as they had done every night before Ellen moved away.

Jane was twenty-one then, two years younger than Ellen. Growing up, the two had been inseparable, but in recent years they had grown strangely distant. Ellen

searched for something that would explain the change in their relationship, but there seemed to be no answer. *When I finish school*, she told herself that night after Jane left, *everything will be like it was before.*

The next morning she leaned up and kissed her father on the cheek. It was time to get back to the city. "Thanks, Daddy." Their eyes met and held for a moment.

"Ah, honey." He pulled her into a hug. "You're so grown up now. I can't believe this is your last semester."

"Yeah, I might even pass, thanks to you." Her eyes twinkled as she pulled away and grinned at him.

"It'll be our little secret. Deal?"

"Deal!" Ellen's eyes grew watery. "I love you, Daddy."

"I love you too, honey. Let me know how it goes."

"Ellen?" Her mother had called from the other side of the house. She'd been packing Ellen a sack lunch for her trip back to Ann Arbor and was a blur of motion, moving across the kitchen, reaching into the refrigerator, then up into the cupboards and back to the refrigerator again.

"Yes, Mother?"

"Now, Ellen, remember to eat these sandwiches in the car while you're driving," she said in a pleasant, breathless voice loud enough to reach across the house. "You don't want to pull off I-75 and risk getting abducted by some stranger at a backwoods gas station."

"Yes, Mother," Ellen said obediently, raising her voice so her mother could hear her.

"And whatever you do, be sure to fill that car of yours with gasoline before you leave Petoskey. You should probably stop at Mr. Gardner's station, right on the way out of town. You remember Mr. Gardner's station, don't you, dear?"

"Yes, Mother."

"He's been asking about you because he wants to send his son, Travis, to U of M next year. He'd love to see you, maybe hear a little bit about campus life and all. Could you do that for me, dear?"

"Yes, Mother."

"You know, that Travis of his is certainly a smart one. He won't have any trouble getting into U of M if you ask me. Of course Travis always did have a secret crush on you, Ellen. He was always..."

She continued on. Ellen and her father exchanged a conspiratorial grin and he hugged her once more.

"Go get 'em, honey. You want to know something?"

"What?"

"You're going to be a great writer one day."

Ellen nodded, too choked up to speak.

Her mother rounded the corner with the lunch sack and presented it to Ellen as she caught her breath.

"Don't forget what I said, dear." She leaned over and pecked Ellen quickly on the

cheek. “Drive safely and don’t take any chances in those small towns along the way. And that sports department is bound to be full of men. I guess there’s nothing we can do about that. But don’t you let them corrupt you. You’re a good girl, Ellen. I understand that this is an important break for you, but I’m concerned all the same. I don’t care what the modern school thinks of such things. A sports department is no place for a young lady, so watch yourself and be careful.”

“Okay, Diane, okay,” Ellen’s father said gently. He placed his arm around his wife and pulled her toward him. “Let the poor girl get on the road or she’ll never make it back before dark.”

Five minutes later Ellen was on her way. Her first night shift at the *Gazette* was two days later and suddenly she was busier than she’d ever been in her life. Her hours were filled with senior level courses, labs and lectures and on-campus reporting. She would finish her course work, grab an apple and a bagel, and fly out the door for the *Gazette*. The days became weeks, and before Ellen realized it the semester was half over.

Once in a while she was allowed to forgo phone duty and cover a high school game in person. But most games were played on the weekend and Ellen’s Friday and Saturday nights were spent at the *Gazette*, manning the phones in the sports department. The paper had a system whereby coaches would call in their scores when the games were finished. Ellen took scores from dozens of coaches of sports ranging from track to T-ball, bowling to baseball.

The paper received hundreds of calls each weekend and interns worked the phones until midnight. No exceptions. Ellen was thankful for the work because it left her little time to think of Jake.

“*Gazette* Sports, what team are you reporting?” Ellen would say as she answered the phone and prepared her fingers for action. Then she would cradle the receiver against her shoulder while her fingers flew across the keyboard, transferring the details as accurately as possible into the computer. When the call was finished she would organize the information and file it to the sports desk.

“*Gazette* Sports, what team are you reporting?” The calls continued through the night.

The questions became part of a formula. Who was the winner, what was the score, where was the contest played, why was the game important, when would the teams play again, and how did the winning team manage to win. Space was tight, and details beyond that had no chance of making the paper.

A few interns complained about being used by the paper. There was no pay, no bylines, and no promise of promotion.

The hours were long, and Ellen’s neck grew stiff while she typed in details about park league T-ball games and high school volleyball matches.

She wouldn’t have traded a minute of it.

She had waited tables in Petoskey and then in Ann Arbor for five long years while she earned her journalism degree. Now she was working for the *Gazette*. *Staff mem-*

ber, her employee badge said. Ellen took the words to heart.

As the semester drew to an end the *Gazette's* assistant managing editor John Dower spoke to Ellen's advanced news writing class. Dower was in charge of the news desk. He was pompous and condescending and had all the compassion of a frustrated drill sergeant. Ellen watched him size up the class of seniors and was silently thankful she worked in the sports department.

"Right now all of you are sitting there thinking you're hotshot reporters about to take the world of journalism by storm." The editor sneered, pacing before the class of fifty senior journalism students. "You think you'll breeze out of here with your University of Michigan degree and waltz your way on to the staff of some big paper like the *Gazette*."

He stopped and stared at them. "You're wrong. Let me tell you how it's going to be." He began pacing again. "When you leave here you'll move off to a small-town paper, which, if you're lucky, might publish three times a week. You'll work every department, every beat, and make half of what it costs to survive." He stopped and smiled sardonically. "You'll do that for five years before anyone at the *Gazette* will even consider bringing you in for an interview. Any questions?"

Only one student in the room dared to raise a hand.

"Does that apply to interns at the *Gazette*?" Ellen asked.

The editor leveled his gaze in her direction and vaguely recognized her from the batch of interns currently doing time at the paper. "It *especially* applies to interns at the *Gazette*."

Ellen began brainstorming ways to be more valuable to the *Gazette* staff. Instead of asking only the routine questions when scores came in, she asked a few more, searching for news worthy of more than merely a box score. She hit pay dirt a week later, four hours into a Friday night shift.

She was filing the information from the previous call when a score came in from a young boy named Chin Lee wishing to report the results of a junior-high basketball tournament. As Chin Lee rattled off the score, Ellen saw that the boy played for a school located in a neglected part of town. Most of the players had Asian names. *Strange. Usually the coach calls in.*

Ellen took down the usual information and then paused a moment. "Who's your coach, Chin?"

The boy was quiet a moment. "Uh, well, we don't have a coach. Is that okay?" Bells went off in Ellen's head.

"Sure, but who works with your team, who makes up the plays for you?"

Chin hesitated. "We, uh, we get together a few times a week and watch tapes of the Los Angeles Lakers. We see their plays and we learn them. Then we use them in games."

Twenty minutes later Ellen had the phone numbers of the other players on Chin's team and enough information to write a magazine article on the boys.

She stood up from her desk and located the sports editor, Steve Simons.

“What is it, Ellen?” He looked up from his computer screen.

Ellen cleared her throat and proceeded to tell him. Three hours later she had written her first feature story for the *Gazette*. Simons told Ellen it would probably run in Sunday’s paper.

On Saturday night Ellen could barely sleep. It was like being a little girl, waiting for Santa Claus to come. Only this time he rode a bicycle and his knapsack carried nothing but a stack of newspapers. The moment she heard the paper smack against the sidewalk outside her dormitory, Ellen rushed outside and tore it open. What she saw made her gasp aloud.

The *Gazette* had played her story on the front page.

After that there were other stories. A ninety-year-old runner attempting a final race in memory of her recently deceased husband; a Little League coach who had taken three boys from his son’s team into his home when their parents turned out to be drug dealers. The list grew.

Two weeks before graduation Ellen learned of an entry-level opening in the sports department at the *Gazette*.

“They told us we’d need more experience, but I’m going to go for it, Daddy,” Ellen told her father that night on the telephone. “Think I have a chance?”

“Are you kidding, honey? They’re probably hoping you’ll ask for an interview. Otherwise they might lose you to the competition.”

“Pray for me, will you?”

She knew the request would make her dad smile. He had raised them in the Catholic church, and at first when Ellen started attending a Protestant church he had been discouraged, disappointed in her decision. But he was used to the idea now and seemed to enjoy her open discussion of prayer.

“I’ll pray, honey. Now get back to school and get that job.”

The interview came one week before graduation. Ellen bought a new skirt and jacket for the occasion and then worried that she was overdressed. She was the picture of professionalism as she walked up the marble steps and went inside, but she was assailed by doubts. *I’m too young...I don’t have enough experience...They don’t want a woman sportswriter...I should turn around and go home...Who am I kidding?*

She made her way through the newsroom and into the sports department just as she remembered the words John Dower had spoken to her senior class: *“When you leave here you’ll move off to a small-town paper, which, if you’re lucky, might publish three times a week. You’ll work every department, every beat, and make half of what it costs to survive. You’ll do that for five years before anyone at the Gazette will even consider bringing you in for an interview.”*

Ellen entered the sports editor’s office and the first person she saw was John Dower. He smiled kindly and motioned for Ellen to sit down. There was no mention of her inexperience.

An hour later she left with her first job offer.

She called her parents with the news.

"I don't know, Ellen," her mother said, her voice filled with concern. "I'll worry about you out late at night covering sports games in a city like Detroit. Working with all those men. You'll have to be so careful, dear. Are there any other women in the department?"

"No, but I've made a lot of good friends, Mom. I'll be fine."

"I just wonder if it's smart for a young lady to be involved in a job surrounded by men."

Then her father got on the line. "Honey, I knew you could do it!" He was bursting with pride. "Aaron and the girls will be so happy when they hear about this."

"I'll be covering high school sports for a while, but that's fine with me. Can you believe it, Dad? Me? A full-time staff reporter for the *Gazette*?"

"It's what you've always wanted, honey."

"As far back as I can remember."

"Before you know it you'll be covering U of M games. Then I'll be down every week."

Ellen laughed. The Barretts had lived in Ann Arbor fifteen years earlier and her father was fanatical about Wolverine football. "So that's why you taught me all that stuff about sports."

"You better believe it. I'll expect sideline passes to your first U of M assignment."

Graduation came and went, and Ellen began working sixty-hour weeks. She covered more high school sports than she thought possible. Newspaper copy was measured in column inches, and most of Ellen's assignments carried a maximum length of twelve inches. But there were times when she was given more in-depth projects, feature pieces on high school coaches and star prep players.

Two months passed. Ellen found a simple, one-bedroom apartment five minutes from the office and bought a few meager furnishings. Occasionally she ate a late meal with the sports staff after deadline on Friday nights, staying out until long after midnight swapping anecdotes and unwinding after an evening of tight deadlines.

Now and then she was asked out by one of her coworkers, but Ellen was adamantly opposed to the idea. There were nineteen writers and a dozen part-time reporters working for the *Gazette* sports section. As the only woman among them, Ellen would not consider being anything less than professional in their midst.

She spent most of her free time on the telephone with her parents and her sisters. They talked about a hundred different things from boyfriends to schoolwork to part-time jobs, but they respected Ellen's wishes and none of them ever mentioned Jake Sadler.

One day Simons asked to see Ellen in his office. He was an intelligent man in his late fifties with two young grandchildren. Ellen thought he was the kindest editor at the paper.

"The Wolverines have their first scrimmage of the season this Saturday," he said. "We want you there."

Ellen was stunned.

“We’ll have a senior writer cover the game, but we’d like to try you on a few U of M sports features and see how you do.” He grinned. “Congratulations, Ellen.”

The day before the game she was given her press credentials. Ellen stared at them and remembered the long hours taking scores over the phone. She was twenty-three and she had arrived.

Her assignment was a simple one. Interview the offensive coordinator and determine the Wolverines’ approach for the coming season. They had a freshman quarterback known throughout the country for his passing ability. Would Michigan stick to its ground game with such a talented athlete leading the offense? Ellen’s story would answer that question and reveal the personal side of the coach.

Game time was ten o’clock Saturday morning, and Ellen’s apartment was thirty miles east of the stadium. She planned to be there at seven, eat breakfast somewhere off campus, and go over her list of questions before arriving at the stadium at nine. That gave her fifteen minutes before her interview with the coach.

Ellen was aware that this would be her first time to work an event alongside male sportswriters who were far more accomplished than she. Certainly the broadcast journalists would be there. Joe Stevens from WGRT, a grizzled veteran with years of sports experience, and Mike Miller from WCBS, a handsome newcomer who had played tight end for Michigan before suffering a career-ending knee injury. Mike was also actively involved with a Christian Athletes’ Fellowship and helped out at the local Children’s Hospital. He had a promising career in broadcasting, and Ellen admired his work.

She prayed she could earn their respect and come across confident and capable. She planned to work among them often.

The morning began badly. She overslept and couldn’t decide what to wear. She finally pulled onto Interstate 94 at 6:45, telling herself she would skip the leisurely breakfast and stop for fast food in Ann Arbor. Half an hour later she was minutes from the stadium, driving along State Street looking for a place to stop.

At the intersection of State and Stadium Way she stopped at a red light and glanced at the seat beside her to check how much cash she had. But her purse wasn’t there. *Strange*. She looked nervously up at the light. Still red. She scanned the back-seat of her four-door compact and again found nothing.

At that moment the white van in front of her began to move. *Green light*. She pressed her foot onto the accelerator and scanned the floor of her car once more, desperately hoping to find her purse.

The crash came almost immediately. She jolted up against the steering wheel and then back against her car’s headrest.

“Green means go, buddy,” she mumbled. Then she looked up at the light and felt her heart sink. It was flashing red. The van in front of her had moved forward only one car-length. She had presumed the light was green and that it was moving on through the intersection.

The van turned slowly into a gas station, and Ellen spied the letters on the side of the vehicle. WCBS.

*Oh no.* Ellen's heart sank. *They're on the way to the game. Please God, don't let Mike Miller be inside.*

She followed the van into the station and killed the engine just as two men stepped out. One of them was Mike Miller.

Ellen forced herself to get out of the car, furious with herself and the way her face was blushing a deep red.

"I'm so sorry! I thought the light was green and then you stopped and I guess I just didn't see it coming. I mean I've been down this street a hundred times and I've never seen that light flashing red before."

*Great. I sound like my mother.*

While she spoke, the driver of the van checked out his bumper and brushed off a few chips of paint that had come from the front of Ellen's car. Meanwhile Mike moved closer to Ellen. He seemed to be staring at her shirt and she finally grew flustered.

"Do you mind if I ask what you're looking at?"

Mike straightened and Ellen saw that he was easily six-foot-three. He grinned at her—and for the first time in Ellen's life someone other than Jake Sadler made her heart skip a beat.

"Sorry, miss," Mike said. "It's just, well..." He pointed toward her blouse and Ellen followed his gaze. The buttons were fitted into the wrong holes all the way down so that the left side of her rayon blouse hung four inches lower than the right.

Ellen quickly shoved the longer piece of rayon into her slacks. As she did, she bared a layer of white lace that ran along the top of her camisole. Mike raised an eyebrow and smothered a smile.

"Oh!" Frustrated at herself, Ellen yanked the blouse back into place and folded her arms over the section that was now, once again, hanging outside of her slacks.

"In a hurry this morning?"

"Yes, in fact, I am." Ellen was totally flustered and she prayed neither of them would figure out who she was. Perhaps Mike wouldn't see her at the game. With any luck he'd be transferred to a different department or hired by another city.

The driver of the van smiled in her direction. "No harm done, ma'am. Looks like you've got a pretty good dent, but nothing you can't drive with."

"I have my insurance information if you'd like it." She did her best to ignore Mike Miller's partially concealed grin.

"Sure," the driver said. "Never a bad idea after a fender bender."

Ellen opened her car door and searched frantically for her purse. It contained her insurance card, her driver's license, and her press credentials. Suddenly she knew with sinking certainty that it was back at her apartment.

She pulled out of the car slowly and put her hands on her hips, exposing her

uneven blouse once more. “I’m sorry. I can’t seem to find my purse. It has everything, all my information.”

The driver of the van nodded and Mike tried to contain a chuckle.

“No problem. Everything’s okay on our end, right, Mike?” Mike cleared his throat and tried to look serious. “Well, my neck’s a little sore...” He rubbed his hand along the base of his skull. He wore leather loafers, dark wool slacks, and a starched white button down which contrasted sharply with his paisley silk tie. He was the picture of cool confidence.

Ellen stared at him beseechingly.

He caught her glance and smiled warmly. “No, I’m just kidding. But you better retrace your steps and see if you can find your purse. That could be a real disaster.”

Everyone laughed, though Ellen’s sounded a bit hollow, and the men bid her farewell as they climbed into their van. Ellen watched them disappear, then quickly got into her car and headed back toward Detroit.

She had ninety minutes until her appointment with the coach.

Two hours later, still breathless from the morning’s events, she walked out of the offensive coordinator’s office. She did not have a front-page story, but she had enough information to pull a feature together. The stairs to the press box seemed to go on forever and she was weary by the time she located her seat. She filed her notes and began checking her purse for a pencil.

“I see you found it.”

Ellen looked up and found herself staring into Mike Miller’s teasing blue eyes. Seating assignments for members of the press were made long before game time, and he was seated right next to her.

Ellen sighed and dropped her head in her hands. “Why can’t this day end?”

“Hey, why didn’t you say you worked for the *Gazette*?”

Ellen peered at him through the spaces between her fingers. “I was hoping once I fixed my buttons you might not recognize me.”

Mike laughed. For the rest of the game he teased and talked with her, and the morning flew by. She had expected him to be ruthless—condescending and unforgiving of the mistakes she’d made earlier in the day. Instead he was helpful. He treated her with respect and consideration and was careful to avoid discussing the accident.

When the game was over Ellen gathered her things. “Guess I’ll see you next week.” She smiled at him.

“Hey, Ellen, you mind if I get your phone number?”

Ellen felt the heat flood her cheeks. “Oh, the accident. Right. I’ve got my insurance information here somewhere.” She began digging through her purse, suddenly nervous. “I have insurance, really, I do. I just didn’t have my purse with me. But I guess you know that, don’t you?”

Mike placed his hand gently on her arm so that she stopped talking and looked up at him. He had the palest blue eyes she’d ever seen.

“I don’t want your insurance information, Ellen. I asked for your phone number.” His smile warmed her all the way down to her toes. “I was hoping you might have dinner with me sometime...”

The memory of that smile tugged at Ellen’s weary heart, and she rolled over in bed, squeezing her eyes tight against the tears that threatened to fall. If only things had stayed that way...if only she and Mike had found a way to hold on to the wonder they’d found together...

If only life had turned out differently.



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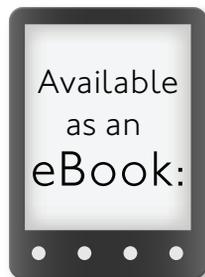
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