



the  
Atonement  
Child



*a novel*

FRANCINE  
RIVERS

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# THE ATONEMENT CHILD





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*The Atonement Child*

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## CHAPTER I



IT WAS ON a cold January night when the unthinkable, unpardonable happened.

The evening had gone as usual for Dynah Carey as she served food at the Stanton Manor House, a retirement home established for Middleton's city employees. She enjoyed her work, often talking animatedly with the elderly patrons who came down from their small apartments for communal meals in the basement cafeteria. Sally Wentworth was a great cook and planned a varied menu. The only complaint Dynah had heard in five months on the job was how much food there was left over. Most of the people who lived at the manor had come through the Depression years and hated to see waste.

The rest of the diners had left for the evening, all but

Mr. Packard, who was taking his time sipping his cup of decaf. “Your car still in the shop, Dynah?”

“Yes, sir. They’re still waiting for a part to come in.”

“Thought it was supposed to be fixed yesterday.”

“I guess there was some kind of delay,” she said with a shrug. She wasn’t worried about it.

“Is that young man of yours going to come pick you up tonight?” he said, watching Dynah fill the saltshakers.

She smiled at him as she moved on to the next table. “Not this evening, Mr. Packard. He’s teaching a Bible study.”

“Maybe Sally can take you home.”

“It’s not far to the bus stop.”

“A mile at least, and a pretty girl like you shouldn’t be out on her own after dark.”

“I’m always careful.”

“Careful isn’t always good enough these days. I’ve gotten so I hate reading the newspaper. Time was you could walk from one end of town to the other without worrying.” He shook his head sadly. “Now the town’s gotten so big you don’t know anybody anymore. People coming and going all the time. You never know who’s living next door. Could be Pollyanna or Son of Sam. Houses spreading all over tarnation, and no plan to the way it’s sprawling. I remember when I was a boy, we knew everybody. We left our doors unlocked. Never had to be afraid. I don’t know what the world’s coming to these days. Makes me glad I’m almost to the end of my life. When I was growing up, we used to sit outside on the front porch and talk. Neighbors would come by and have lemonade. Those were good times. Now nobody has time for anything. They don’t even build porches on houses anymore. Everybody’s inside watching television and not saying much of anything to anybody.”

Dynah stayed close, responding to the ache of loneliness

she heard in his words and voice. He wasn't whining. He was grieving. His wife had passed away four months before. The family had gathered around him long enough for the memorial service and then scattered across the States again. His two sons lived on the West Coast, too far away to make frequent visits. His daughter lived in Indiana but called him every Sunday. Sundays were good days for Mr. Packard.

Tonight was Wednesday.

"I miss Trooper," he said quietly. He smiled wistfully. "I used to call Freda 'Trooper.'"

Mr. Packard told Dynah how he had come up with the nickname just after World War II. He had fought in the Pacific two years before being blown off a transport. He landed in a field hospital, where he spent another three months before he was shipped stateside.

"While I was away, Freda had our son and managed a part-time job. When my father got sick with cancer, she quit and stepped into his shoes to help my mother run the family grocery store. My Freda was a home-front soldier." His expression softened in memory, his eyes glistening with tears. "So I called her 'Trooper,' and it stuck."

"We have to close down, Dynah!" Sally said from behind the counter. She said it loudly enough so that poor Mr. Packard would hear. Dynah looked at his face and wanted to weep.

Taking the hint, the old man got up. "Everybody's in a hurry these days," he said with a glance toward the kitchen. Then his eyes came to rest on her again. "Good night, Dynah. You be careful out there tonight."

"I will, sir," she said with a fond smile, touching his shoulder as he passed. "Try not to worry."

Juan Garcia began putting chairs upside down on the tables. Gathering Mr. Packard's spoon, cup, and saucer,



Dynah watched the old man walk stiffly across the room. His arthritis was troubling him again.

“I didn’t mean to break up your little chat,” Sally said as Dynah put the things into the big industrial dishwasher and pulled the door down. “Some of these old people could talk until your hair turned gray.” She took her sweater from the hook on the wall. “They’ve got no place to go and nothing to do.”

“He misses his wife,” Dynah said and thought about following Mr. Packard’s suggestion and asking Sally for a ride.

“I know. I miss my husband. I miss my kids. You miss your handsome fiancé.” She dumped her shoulder bag onto the counter and shrugged into her sweater and parka. “And as Scarlett O’Hara always said, ‘Tomorrow is another day.’” Picking up her bag, she said a brisk good night and headed for the back door.

Sally seemed in such a hurry, Dynah didn’t want to impose upon her. Besides, it wasn’t that far to the bus stop, and there were plenty of streetlights along the way. Getting her backpack from the storage room, Dynah slipped off her rubber-soled white shoes and pulled on her snow boots. Zipping the shoes into the backpack, she said good night to Juan. Crossing the dining room, she went into the lobby that opened out onto the back parking lot. Sally had already turned the lights down for the night. There was only the soft glow of security lights and the bright lights behind Dynah where Juan was getting ready to wash and wax the floors.

Pulling on her parka, Dynah went to the back door.

The idea that she needed to be concerned hadn’t ever crossed her mind before. The manor wasn’t exactly a center of crime. The worst thing that had happened was someone’s spray-painting graffiti on the walls three months ago. The manager had painted over the bubble letters and numbers

by the next afternoon, and the police increased the number of times they drove by each evening. The vandals hadn't returned.

Pushing the door open, Dynah stepped outside. The air was crisp; the snow from last week's fall was packed hard and dingy. Her breath puffed white in the stillness. She heard the lock click behind her and shivered slightly. She zipped her parka up to her neck and looked around. Maybe it was Mr. Packard's warning that made her edgy. There was nothing else to bother her. It was an evening like any other, no darker, no colder.

There were shadows all around, but nothing unfamiliar or threatening as she walked down the wheelchair ramp. She took her usual path through the back parking lot to Maple Street. It was only a few blocks down to Main, another eight to Sycamore, and a few more to Sixteenth, where she caught the bus. It only took fifteen minutes to reach her stop at Henderson. From there it was seven blocks to the dorm.

Dynah glanced at her wristwatch. Nine thirty. Janet Wells, her roommate, would be in the library studying late tonight. Janet always left things till the last minute and then aced every exam. Dynah smiled to herself, wishing she were that fortunate. She had to study all term long to pull grades high enough to keep her scholarship.

Relaxing as she walked, Dynah enjoyed the clear night. She had always liked this street with its turn-of-the-century houses. She could imagine people sitting on their front porches in the summertime, sipping lemonade just the way Mr. Packard remembered. Like something out of a movie. It was a life far removed from the way she had grown up on Ocean Avenue in San Francisco—and yet similar as well.

Looking back, she realized how she had been protected by her parents and cloistered in homeschooling. In many ways,

she had led an idyllic life with few bumps and twists in the road. Of course, there had been times when she had been curious to know what lay beyond the hedges her parents had planted around her. When she asked, they explained, and she complied. She loved and respected them too much to do otherwise.

Her mom and dad had been Christians forever. She couldn't remember a time when they hadn't been involved in the church or some community service project. Her mother sang in the choir and led Sunday morning Bible studies. Dynah had grown up surrounded by love, protected and guided every step of the way, right up to the doors of New Life College. And now it seemed her life would continue that way, with Ethan Goodson Turner at the reins.

*Not that I am complaining, Lord. I am thankful, so thankful. You have blessed me with the parents I have and the man I'm going to marry. Everywhere I look, I see Your blessings. The world is a beautiful place, up to the very stars in the heavens.*

*Lord, would You please give poor old Mr. Packard a portion of the hope and joy I feel? He needs You. And Sally, Lord. She's always fretting about something and always in a hurry. She has so little joy in her life. And Juan said tonight one of his children is sick, Father. Pedro, the little one. Juan can't afford insurance and—*

A car passed slowly.

Dynah noticed a Massachusetts plate before the vehicle sped up. The red taillights were like a pair of red eyes staring back at her as the station wagon went down the street, then squealed onto Sycamore. Frowning slightly, she watched it disappear.

Odd.

Her thoughts wandered again as she walked more slowly past her favorite house. It was two doors from Sycamore, a

big Victorian with a porch around the front. The lights were on behind the Nottingham lace curtains. The front door was heavy mahogany with small leaded panes of glass and stained glass at the top. The pattern was a sunburst of golds and yellows.

It would be nice to live on a shady street like this one, in a big house, complete with a trimmed lawn, a flower garden in the front, and a yard in the back with a swing and a sandbox for the children. She smiled at her dreaming. Ethan would probably be offered a church in a big city like Los Angeles or Chicago or New York. A man with his talents for preaching wouldn't end up in a small college town in the Midwest.

She couldn't believe a young man like Ethan would look twice at her, let alone fall in love and ask her to marry him. He said he knew the day he met her that God meant her to be his wife.

She wouldn't have met him at all if her parents hadn't insisted she visit New Life College. She had already decided on a college in California. When they mentioned NLC, she declined, convinced the cost and distance should eliminate it. They assured her they had planned for the first, and the second would be good for her. They wanted her to become more independent, and attending college in Illinois was a good way to accomplish that. Besides, her grades were good enough that she could receive scholarships.

Dynah smiled about it now. Her parents had never been subtle in what they wanted for her. Her mother had left pamphlets of a dozen Christian colleges scattered about the house to tweak her curiosity. Each had been opened to beautiful, idyllic places with stretches of lawn lined with manicured gardens. NLC had a quad with six majestic brick and white-columned buildings, two to the east, two to the west, one on the north, and a church to the south. But what appealed

most to Dynah were the wonderful young, smiling faces of the students.

There had never been any question that she would end up at a Christian college. Where better to learn how to serve the Lord than in an environment centered on Christ? Yet, the Midwest had seemed so far from home she had dismissed it.

While completing her final year of work for her high school diploma, she sent out a dozen applications and received as many acceptance letters. She narrowed it down to four possibilities, dismissing all those outside the state. Her father suggested she and her mother take a trip to Southern California and see the three campuses that were there. After visiting one in San Jose, she contacted the others and made appointments with the dean of admissions to discuss programs and scholarships.

While she was gone, her father had contacted four colleges he thought “good enough” for his daughter. One was in Pennsylvania, one in Indiana, and two in Illinois. One sent a video. Two had students call and talk with her about the campus, activities, and curriculum. The last was New Life College. They sent a catalog and an invitation to come and take a firsthand look at what they had to offer.

She thought it preposterous and a terrible waste of her parents’ money, but her father insisted she go. “You have to learn to fly sometime.”

It was the first time she had gone anywhere without her parents or a church group. All the arrangements had been made by the college beforehand, so she had the safety net of knowing she wouldn’t be on her own long. A student would meet her at the airport and bring her to the campus, where she would spend two days with a personal guide.

Dynah smiled as she remembered her reaction when she first saw Ethan with a sign bearing her name. She thought

he was the most gorgeous young man she had ever seen. Her mother had told her the college would probably send a nice young man to meet her and drive her to the college. She hadn't expected someone who looked like he belonged in the movies. She was completely flustered and tongue-tied, but by the time they were halfway to the campus, he had put her so much at ease that she had shared her Ocean Avenue life with him. By the end of the trip, she knew Ethan didn't just look good, he was good. He was on fire for the Lord, ambitious for godly service, and filled with ideas about ministry.

"My father's a pastor, and his father before him," he told her. "My great-grandfather was a circuit rider for the gospel. I'm following in their footsteps."

By the time they drove beneath the brick arch to the NLC campus, she was convinced Ethan Goodson Turner would be the next Billy Graham.

Upon their arrival at the women's dorm, Ethan introduced her to Charlotte Hale, a music major from Alabama. Charlotte was vibrant and full of Southern charm and hospitality. A senior graduating in June, she had already made plans to go with a mission group to Mexico and present the gospel in music and drama.

Over the next two days, every minute was taken up seeing the campus, especially the departments in which Dynah was most interested: music and education. She heard about various programs, scholarships, and activities and met dozens of people. Charlotte seemed to know everyone and introduced Dynah to them all. She met professors and students, the deans, the manager of the bookstore, and even two of the gardeners who kept up the grounds. Dynah loved every minute of her stay.

On Saturday evening, to her surprise and delight, Ethan joined them for dinner at the mess hall. She blushed when

he sat down. He lingered until a girl came over and asked if he was going to an evening Bible study.

“Half the girls on campus wish they could marry him,” Charlotte had remarked, watching him walk away.

“I’m not surprised,” Dynah had said, remembering how embarrassed she had been for daydreaming about just that during the drive from the airport.

Charlotte had looked at her then, straight on, and smiled. “You should come back. He’ll be a senior next year.”

She hadn’t dissembled. “Are you suggesting I join his legion of admirers?”

Charlotte laughed. She didn’t say anything about Ethan after that, but it was clear she had done her best to plant a seed for thought.

They hadn’t been back at the dorm fifteen minutes when Ethan called. He told Dynah he would be picking her up and taking her back to the airport. She thanked him and said she would be ready. By morning, Dynah had decided against coming back to NLC because of Ethan. If she was infatuated after a few days, she knew she would be head over heels in love if she saw him every day of the year. And NLC wasn’t so big a campus that she could miss him. No, she didn’t want to become one of the legion, and she held no false hopes of becoming his choice.

She smiled now, thinking of it, feeling his engagement ring on her finger with the back of her thumb. She had been so nervous on the drive back to O’Hare. She had told Ethan he could drop her off in front of the Delta terminal, but he had insisted he would accompany her inside. He parked, took her carry-on, and stayed with her. When they got inside the airport, he stood with her in line as she got her boarding pass. She had been so embarrassed, she wanted to crawl into a hole.

“I know I haven’t seen much of the world, Ethan, but I don’t need babysitting,” she had said, trying to laugh off his concerns.

“I know that,” he said quietly.

“I don’t need a bodyguard, either.”

He looked at her, and she felt foolish and young, too young for him. There had been such an intensity in his eyes that she had blushed.

“Come back to NLC, Dynah.”

It had sounded like a command. She smiled. “Do you have to meet a quota?”

“God wants you here.”

He sounded so serious, so certain, she had to ask. “How do you know?” Surely, if God wanted her at NLC, God would tell her.

“I just know, Dynah. I knew the minute I saw you.”

Looking into his blue eyes, she decided not to dismiss what he said. In truth, she wanted to believe him. She wanted to see Ethan Turner again, and the thought that he wanted the same thing was heady incentive indeed.

“Will you pray about it?”

She nodded, knowing she would be doing little else.

She didn’t hear one word from Ethan through spring and summer, but five minutes after she walked into the gymnasium for registration that fall, he came up to her and put his hand on her shoulder as though staking public claim to her. The first thing he did was introduce her to Joseph Guilierno, his best friend and roommate.

Joe was a surprise. He didn’t appear to fit the NLC mold but looked more like the many young men she had seen around San Francisco on excursions with her parents. Tall, dark-eyed, strongly built, Joe looked street-tough and older than Ethan. Not so much in years as worldly experience.



“No wonder,” Joe said cryptically and extended his hand. His fingers curved around hers firmly as he smiled. Three months later, after she was wearing an engagement ring, Joe told her that Ethan had come back to their apartment the day he picked her up at the airport and said he had met the girl he was going to marry.

“I asked him if he had consulted God, and Ethan said it was God who put it in his head.”

Smiling again now as she had when Joe first told her that, Dynah reached the corner of Sixteenth. She let her mind drift along rosy avenues. Ethan had a wonderful future laid out for them. He would graduate with honors at the end of the year. Dean Abernathy was very impressed with his work and was encouraging him to go on for his master’s. The dean had already arranged for Ethan to work part-time at one of the local churches. Dynah would be able to finish her education as well. Ethan was adamant that she get her degree, convinced that her studies in music and youth ministry would be of great use in his ministry.

She felt so blessed. They would be equally yoked, working together for the glory of God. What more could she want?

*Oh, Lord, You are so good to me. I will do anything for You. All I am, all I ever hope to be, is from You, Father. Use me as You will.*

A car pulled up alongside her and slowed to her pace. Her heart jumped as she noticed it looked like the same one that had passed her on Maple Street. Her nerves tensed as the window lowered and a disembodied male voice said, “Are you going to the campus, miss?”

“Yes, I am,” she said before she thought better of it.

“I can give you a lift.”

“No, thank you.”

“I’m going there myself. Visiting my brother. Unfortu-

nately, I'm lost. First time in town. He lives near the main gate of the campus."

She relaxed and stepped closer. Leaning down, she pointed. "Go down a mile to Henderson and turn right. Keep going, and you'll run right into it. It's a block past the city park." She couldn't see the man's face.

"If I give you a ride, you could show me."

A strange foreboding gripped her. "No, thank you," she said politely and took a step back. She didn't want to offend the man. What excuse could she offer? She looked toward the bus stop, where a woman was sitting, and found an excuse. "I'm meeting a friend."

"Sure. Thanks for the directions," the man said, sounding far less friendly. The window whirred up. As he drove on down Sixteenth, she saw the car bore the same Massachusetts plates. The two red taillights stared back at her as the car passed the bus stop.

Shivering, she walked on. She recognized the waitress sitting on the bench. "Hi, Martha. How are you this evening?"

"So-so. My feet are killing me. Was someone trying to pick you up back there?"

"Not really. He was lost."

"Yeah, right. That's his story."

"He was looking for the campus."

"I hope you told him where to go."

"I gave him directions."

Martha laughed. "I'm sure you didn't give him the ones I would've given him."

They talked about their jobs until the bus arrived. Martha climbed aboard first and moved to her usual place near the back, where she could read her romance novel uninterrupted. Dynah took a seat at the front, across from the driver.

Her first day aboard, she had noticed the pins on the

lapel of Charles's neat uniform jacket. When she asked what they were, he said he had one to show for each five-year period he had driven without an accident. After a few weeks of riding with him, Dynah had gone to a trophy store and had a plaque made up for him that said, "In honor of distinguished service to Middleton, Charles Booker Washington is awarded the title of Driver Emeritus." He had laughed when he opened it, but it was now proudly displayed next to the No Smoking sign at the front of the bus.

"How's things, Charlie?"

He grinned at her as he hit the button to close the door. "Pretty good now you're aboard. Missed your sunny smile last night."

"Ethan picked me up."

"He driving a Cadillac yet?"

She laughed. "No, sir. Still has his Buick." She leaned forward in the seat and rested her arms on the iron railing.

Charlie nodded. "When he gets a church, he'll get his Cad. We don't let our preachers drive anything else. Treat 'em good."

"I noticed." When she had gone to Charlie's church, she had seen the new maroon Cadillac parked in the "Reserved for Pastor" space. She had enjoyed herself so much at the service, she pleaded with Ethan to go back with her. He had gone once, grudgingly, but had refused to attend with her again. He said the service was a little "too lively" for his tastes. He hadn't felt comfortable with the loud gospel music pouring from the choir, nor with the way the members of the congregation interjected their remarks during the pastor's sermon.

"It felt irreverent."

She hadn't shared his discomfort, though the service had been far from the kind of service to which she was accustomed. She felt the Spirit moving in that church. The

members celebrated their love for Jesus and for each other. She had enjoyed the experience. Something about it had stirred her. The pastor had preached straight from the Word, and the people made sure he knew his points were sinking in. However, Dynah didn't argue with Ethan's assessment. She had learned early that he took his role as the spiritual head of their relationship to heart. She also knew he had been brought up in a conservative denomination who showed their zeal in other ways. His parents, like her mother and father, were deeply involved in community action and charities.

She and Charlie talked about all manner of things. He had been driving a Middleton city bus since before she was born and had learned a lot about human nature. He didn't mind sharing what he knew.

Tonight, Mr. Packard was on Dynah's mind.

"I know the Packards," Charlie said. "He and his wife used to get on the bus every Tuesday and ride it to the end of the line. Good people. I read she passed on. Too bad. She was a nice lady."

"Maybe I could tell him you miss seeing him."

"You do that, girl. Maybe I'll drop by and see him myself. Between the two of us, we might get him out of his apartment and back among the living." He brought the bus close to the curb and slowed to a stop at the corner of Henderson.

"Thanks, Charlie."

"You watch yourself, girl."

"I will."

"Tell Mr. Packard I have a front seat saved for him," he said and hit the button. The doors swished closed, and he gave her a wave through the glass.

Dynah waved back and watched as the bus pulled away from the curb. Adjusting the strap of her shoulder bag, she started the walk to campus.

Henderson Avenue was a long, pretty street with old-growth maples and neat brick houses with snow-covered lawns. In the city park located a block south of the campus was a small community center building used by students interning as youth leaders and teachers. In two years, she would be working there. The center housed a daily preschool program in the morning and youth activities through the afternoon every day of the week except Sunday, when everything in town shut down for worship services. Only a few businesses, mostly nationwide chains, stayed open.

As Dynah came abreast of the park, she paused, frowning. The car with the Massachusetts plates was there, just across the street, parked beyond a cobblestone driveway beneath a canopy of winter-bare branches. She peered at the vehicle, anxious, then noticed with relief that no one sat in the driver's seat. The man must have found his brother after all. He had said he lived not far from the campus.

A twig snapped to the right, and her nerves jumped. She turned and saw a tall, dark shape moving toward her. A man.

Every instinct screamed, "Run!" but surprise made her hesitate—and within a few seconds she knew she had made a terrible mistake. A couple of seconds. That's all it took for the man to have a hold on her.



Purdy Whitehall received the call at Middleton Police Department at 10:37 Wednesday evening, January 8. It had been a quiet evening with only one complaint, about a party disturbing the peace. Sergeant Don Ferguson had reported a few minutes earlier that it was nothing more than a bunch of baby boomers feeling nostalgic and singing to Elvis records.

This call was altogether different.

“Someone’s screaming in the park,” a woman said. “Come quick, please! Someone’s screaming!”

The caller’s telephone number came up on Purdy’s computer screen along with the address. Henderson Avenue. Speaking with a trained calmness, she assured the woman help would be coming and put her on hold in order to dispatch a squad car to the location.

Frank Lawson was just pulling up to Ernie’s Diner on Sixteenth for a badly needed coffee break when his radio crackled with the message. Muttering under his breath, he rapped the radio sharply and picked up the speaker. Depressing the button, he identified himself and his car number. “My radio’s having PMS again, Purdy. Repeat the message.”

“There’s a disturbance at the park on Henderson Avenue, Frank. How close are you?”

“Ten blocks. I’m on my way.” Putting the speaker back, he swung the squad car in a sharp U-turn and hit his flashing red lights. Few cars were on the road at this time of night, so he didn’t use his siren. No use waking people up if it wasn’t necessary.

As he barreled down Sixteenth, he saw a white station wagon heading west. The red taillights glowed as the car pulled to the side of the road in obedience to the law. Frank never passed it. He made a sharp left onto Henderson Avenue.

Coming to a smooth stop by the park, he grabbed his heavy flashlight, made a quick call to Purdy, and got out. He surveyed the park as he came around his squad car. His heart quickened, the hair on the back of his neck prickling.

Something was wrong. He was sure of it.

Adrenaline pumping, Frank glanced around and saw lights on in three houses near the park. A woman came out to stand on the front porch of one.

“Over there!” She came down the front steps in her bathrobe. “Over there near the activity center! Please hurry. Someone’s been hurt.”

“Go on back in your house, ma’am. We’ll take care of it.” Another squad car pulled up, and Frank saw Greg Townsend get out.

The woman fled up her steps and banged the screen door behind her, but she remained silhouetted in the doorway watching, her arms hugged around herself to ward off the cold.

Greg reached Frank. “See anything?”

“No, but it doesn’t feel right. Take the path over there, and I’ll come in from this side.”

“Gotcha.”

Frank knew every inch of this park like it was his own backyard. He brought his three small children here to play every Saturday afternoon so his wife could have a few hours’ respite.

There was enough light from the park lamps that he didn’t need to use the flashlight, but he kept it in his left hand anyway, his right over his gun. He saw evidence of a struggle in the snow near the sidewalk that ran the length of Henderson to the NLC campus. A little further in, he found a backpack. Just beyond it was a torn parka. He walked along the edge of the pathway cautiously, eyes sweeping, ears trained for any sound out of the ordinary.

As he neared the activity center, he heard a rustling sound in the bushes nearby. Something was scrambling frantically away, like an animal clambering for a hiding place.

Instinctively he removed the loop from his gun and pulled it free of his holster. “Police! Come out onto the walkway where we can see you.” He moved slightly, away from the light, so he wouldn’t make himself an easy target.

The rustling stopped, and he heard another sound, soft and broken. A woman sobbing.

*Oh, God. Oh, God, no. Not here. Not where I bring my kids every week.*

Holstering his gun, Frank went to the bushes and drew some branches back. Training his flashlight, he saw a girl huddled beneath the canopy of leaves. Flinching back, she covered her face with her arm. Her blonde hair was tangled and damp from the snow. Frank noticed the ripped waitress uniform, the bleeding scratches on her shoulder, the fresh bloodstains on her skirt.

Anger filled him. "Easy," he said gently. Lowering the light so it wasn't straight on her, he hunkered down. She cowered from him. "I'm Sergeant Lawson, miss. I'm here to help you." He kept talking quietly, trying to give her a sense of safety.

She raised her head after a few minutes, her blue eyes wide and dilated. Her lower lip was split and bleeding, her right eye swollen from a blow. Drawing her knees up, she sat on the dirty snow and then, covering her head with her arms, she cried.

Compassion filled Frank, along with a sick rage. Whoever had done this should pay.

Greg approached from the other side of the park, his footsteps crunching in the hard snow. The girl's head came up again, eyes wide and frightened. He could see the pulse hammering in her throat.

"It's all right," he said, sensitive to her fear. He straightened and stood aside so she could see Greg. "This is Officer Townsend, miss. He was just checking the area to see if anyone's still around." He looked at Greg.

Greg shook his head and looked past him to the young girl huddled in the covering of bushes. "Rape?"



"I'm afraid so. Better call an ambulance."

"No," the girl said brokenly, covering her face again. "No, please don't." Her shoulders began to shake violently.

"You need medical assistance."

"I want to go home."

"You're going to be all right," he said firmly, hunkering down again, keeping his voice calm and low. "I'm not going to leave you alone." He glanced up at Greg. "Tell them no sirens, and lights only when they need them."

"Done," Greg said tightly and strode off toward the west side of the park, where they had left the squad cars.

"Come on out, ma'am. You're safe."

She moved, scooting a little bit closer and then stopping. Sinking back, she started to cry again, her body bent over, her arms wrapped around her middle. She rocked herself slowly, head down.

A lump lodged in Frank's throat. She didn't look more than eighteen. "Was it someone you knew?" He wished he didn't have to ask questions, but every minute counted if they were going to arrest her attacker.

She shook her head slowly.

"What did he look like?"

"I don't know," she stammered. "I never saw his face." She tried to get up and uttered a gasp of pain. Frank reached out, but she drew back sharply, clearly not wanting to be touched. She sank down again, weeping.

"What's your name, miss?"

"Do I have to tell you?"

"I want to help you. I have to know your name to do it."

"Dynah Carey. I live in the dorm. My roommate's expecting me. Her name's Janet, Janet Wells. It's only two blocks. Can I go home now? Please?"

"Not yet. You need to go to the hospital first, Miss Carey.

Just stay put. We'll get help for you." He hoped the ambulance crew had a woman with them.

They didn't. Two men arrived with a gurney. The older man spoke with the girl and coaxed her out of her hiding place. Frank stood close by, watching the paramedic support the shivering girl as she lay down upon the gurney. They wrapped her in warm blankets, snapped the belts around her, and wheeled her along the park pathway to Henderson Avenue. She said nothing and kept her eyes tightly closed.

Frank's mouth tightened when he saw the ambulance lights flashing. The woman who had called in the report was outside on her porch again. So were others all up and down the street. Windows were illuminated in half a dozen houses, faces peering through the curtains. Some, bolder in their curiosity, came out onto their lawns to watch what was going on. He had hoped to save the girl further embarrassment.

She was loaded quickly into the ambulance. One of the men went inside with her and closed the doors behind him. The other took the driver's seat. They pulled away from the curb and were on their way to the hospital before Frank had reached his squad car.

Greg was waiting for him. "We patrolled the other side of the park but didn't see anyone. No cars parked along this street or on the other side. Did she give you a description?"

"She said she never saw his face. I'll talk to her more as soon as the doctor's examined her."



Dynah couldn't stop shaking. She asked the nurse if she could shower but was told she would have to wait until after the doctor had seen her. The nurse helped her undress and don a white hospital gown. Shivering, Dynah watched the

nurse put her torn, stained waitress uniform, undergarments, and shredded nylons into a large plastic bag. Her muddy snow boots were placed in another. Both bags were given to someone waiting outside the door.

Dynah's teeth chattered, but her chill had nothing to do with the temperature of the room, which was kept at a comfortable sixty-eight degrees. The shaking, the terrible cold, came from inside her. Even the blanket the nurse put around her did nothing to ward off the chill.

"I'll get you another blanket, Miss Carey," the nurse said and went out.

Dynah almost protested, afraid to be alone. Clutching the blanket, she sat on the edge of the examining table, wondering what she was going to wear home. The silence increased her anxiety. She wanted desperately to wash. She yearned to stand beneath a scalding spray, so she could soap and scrub every inch of her body and wash away what had happened.

Would she ever be cleansed of it? Could she wash the horror from her mind and heart? She squeezed her eyes shut, willing the images in her mind away. She was safe now. Or was she? Her eyes flew open. She'd thought she was safe before, but that had been an illusion, ripped away. Sitting on the examining table in the short, backless gown, she felt naked and as vulnerable as she had been in the park. Sick with fear, she looked from one end of the cubicle to the other for some avenue of escape. She wanted to go home. Home to her parents. Home to the house on Ocean Avenue. But what would her parents say? Perhaps locked in her dorm room, she would feel safer.

Someone rapped on the door, and she jumped. A doctor entered, the nurse who had taken her clothes just behind him. "I'm Dr. Kennon, Miss Carey. How are you feeling?"

"Fine," she said without thinking. Wasn't that what she

always said in a doctor's office? She grimaced, her eyes tearing up, and he winced. When she spoke again, she hardly recognized her own voice. "Could I take a shower, please? I want to take a shower."

"In a little while." He reached into his pocket and took out a small recorder. Depressing the button, he set it on the counter to his right. "Now, let's take a look at that eye first." As he gently tested the bruised flesh and flashed a small light into her pupil, he told her he was recording the examination in order to help the police apprehend her attacker. He asked her if she was experiencing any dizziness. Some, she said. She was nauseated.

"Lie down, please."

The nurse assisted her, speaking softly, encouraging her to follow the doctor's instructions. Dynah trembled even more violently as he examined her scrapes and asked more questions. As she answered, she relived the nightmare in the park, seeing it from every angle. Some of the questions the doctor asked made her blush with embarrassment and pale in shame: Was she on birth control? When was her last menses? He wanted details about what had happened to her, details she was loath to remember, let alone speak aloud.

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Everything you're telling us will help the police."

And who would help *her*?

*God, where were You?*

When the doctor told her to scoot her bottom to the end of the table and put her feet in the stirrups, she didn't understand. The nurse, sensitive to her anguish, tried to explain as delicately as possible.

"The doctor needs to make sure you're not injured internally, Miss Carey. And he'll be able to collect a specimen. For evidence."

“Evidence?” she said.

The doctor explained; revulsion filled her.

*Oh, God. Oh, God. Why do I have to go through this? Haven't I gone through enough already?*

“I’m going to be sick.” She sat up quickly. The nurse held a small basin for her and stroked her back, murmuring words of sympathy. The doctor went out to give her a few minutes to recompose herself. After a while, the nurse calmed her down enough to continue, and the doctor came back.

The nurse’s eyes were filled with compassion. “It’ll be over soon, dear. Hold my hand. Squeeze if you want to.”

Dynah clutched it tightly, her body tense.

“Breathe, Miss Carey. That’s it. Try to relax.”

The doctor explained everything he was doing to her and why, but it didn’t help. The physical examination was extensive, intrusive, and painful. When he finished, he apologized and then told the nurse to cut her fingernails. More evidence. The clippings were put in another small plastic bag and labeled for the police lab. The nurse took pictures of the abrasions on her shoulder and right hip, the bruises on her thighs, her throat, and her battered face.

Spirit crushed, Dynah fell silent.

Dr. Kennon looked at her sadly and said again that he was sorry.

“You can sit up now,” the nurse said gently.

“I’ll have admissions get all the paperwork going,” Dr. Kennon said, turning toward the door.

“No!” Dynah said, heart jumping. “I want to go home!”

“I understand your feelings, but—!”

“No, you don’t! How could you?” For all his assurances of wanting to make sure she was all right, she felt degraded and reduced to just a recorded voice that would be turned

over to the policeman waiting outside the door. "You don't understand!" She covered her face and cried.

"I'd like to keep you here overnight, for observation."

"No." It was all she could choke out.

"We would start you immediately on estrogen therapy."

She raised her head. "Estrogen—? Why?"

"In case conception has taken place."

Dynah felt all the warmth drain from her. She stared at him in horror as full comprehension struck. "I might . . . I might be pregnant?"

"The chances of that are extremely small, but it's better to take precautions."

If she had conceived, it was already too late.

"There may be some side effects to the estrogen. That's why I'd like to keep you here for one night, possibly two."

Dynah sat on the edge of the examining table, her eyes closed tightly. She had attended several pro-life rallies with Ethan. She knew he was talking about an abortifacient.

"No." She shook her head. "I want to go home. Please."

Dr. Kennon glanced at the nurse, and she moved to his side. They talked in hushed tones for a moment; then the doctor left the room. The nurse put the blanket around her shoulders again. Dynah clutched it tightly.

"I'm sorry you had to go through this, Miss Carey. Dr. Kennon was only trying to make things easier on you." She offered her a cup of cool water. "I know how difficult this is. If you'd rather not take the medication right now, that's fine. You can take it tomorrow."

Dynah shook her head.

"You've been through enough tonight. You can wait a few weeks. If you miss your period, you come back and have a pregnancy test. If it's positive, you can have a menstrual extraction."

Dynah didn't want to think about what the nurse was saying. Being raped was horror enough without considering the possibility she might have become pregnant.

*Oh, God, You wouldn't be so cruel. Would You, Lord?*

"You can take a shower now, if you'd like."

Down the hall, in a quiet room, Dynah stood beneath a hard, hot spray of water, scrubbing and scrubbing. Still feeling dirty, she sank down hopelessly in the corner of the stall and wept.

*God, why? I don't understand. Why did You let this happen to me? Where were the angels that are supposed to be protecting me? What did I do to make You angry?*

Someone tapped on the door, making her start.

"Are you all right, Miss Carey?"

"I'm fine," Dynah said in a choked voice, huddled beneath the hot, pounding water. "I just need to stay in here for a little while longer."

"Your roommate brought you a change of clothes."

Dynah pushed herself up. "Janet's here?"

"She just arrived. She's in the waiting room. Officer Lawson is speaking with her now."

Dynah closed her eyes in relief and leaned her head back against the wall.

"I'll leave the clothes on the seat for you. Don't feel rushed, Miss Carey. Take all the time you need. I'll be right outside the door if you need anything." Dynah sensed the unspoken message. The nurse would be far enough away to give her a sense of privacy but not so far she would be left alone.

Dynah emerged from the shower and dried herself quickly. She donned the fresh cotton underwear, a light-weight white turtleneck, a pair of faded blue Levi's, and a cable-knit pale-yellow sweater. Even after pulling on the white woolen socks and gray vinyl zip-up boots, she was still

shivering. She couldn't seem to stop. The dark violence of the assault gripped her soul and wouldn't let go.

Looking in the mirror, she saw the reflection of a face she barely recognized. Raking trembling fingers through her tangled blonde hair, she tried to make a French braid. After a few minutes, she gave up. She didn't care how she looked. She just wanted to leave. She wanted to go back to her room in the dorm, bury herself beneath a mountain of heavy blankets, and never come out into the light again.

The nurse ushered Dynah to the waiting room. She saw Joe first, standing in the middle of the room, his expression filled with pain and compassion. Janet was sitting on the couch; Ethan stood near the windows. As she drew near, he turned and looked at her, his face etched with a terrible grief and anger. Janet bolted from the sofa and hugged her tightly. "Oh, Dynah," she said, crying. "Oh, Dynah, Dynah. Come on, honey. We'll take you home. You'll be okay now."

On the way out, Ethan touched her once, a brief squeeze on her bruised shoulder. She flinched, and he withdrew completely, eyes shadowed. She felt his anger and was frightened and confused by it.

Janet bundled her into the backseat of Joe's Honda. She kept her arm around Dynah, holding her close. Dynah glanced up and saw Joe looking at her in the rearview mirror. His eyes were dark, reflecting her pain.

"There's a blanket back there, Janet," he said quietly, starting the car. "Keep Dynah warm."

Ethan didn't say anything until Joe pulled out of the hospital parking lot. "We'll find the guy, Dynah. I swear. And we'll—"

Joe glanced at him sharply. "That's enough, Ethan."

"It's not enough! It's not enough by half!" Ethan's voice cracked. He turned. "What'd he look like, Dynah?"



“I don’t know.” She felt her mouth trembling, but she couldn’t stop it. “I never saw his face. All of a sudden, he was there, a shape in the darkness. And he grabbed me.”

“Leave it alone, Ethan,” Joe said firmly. “The police will handle it.”

“Yeah, right. They’ll handle it, like they handle everything else these days.” He kept looking at Dynah. “You must’ve seen something. Weren’t you paying any attention when you walked up Henderson?”

“Leave her alone!” Janet said, angry now as well. “You act like it’s her fault she got raped!”

“I didn’t say that!”

As soon as Joe parked in front of the dormitory, Dynah pulled away from Janet and fumbled for the door handle. Joe got out of the car and opened the door for her. He helped her out. Contrite, Ethan caught up with them at the front door. “I’m sorry, Dynah. I didn’t mean—”

“I just want to go inside.” She pulled at the handle and found the door locked. Curfew had long since passed. Her heart hammered. The glass door rattled loudly as she fought to open it.

Joe put his hand over hers. “Easy. The housemother’s coming, Dynah. She’ll open the door. You’re safe.” His calm, reassuring voice and presence calmed her slightly.

Mrs. Blythe opened the door. She allowed Dynah and Janet inside. “She’ll be all right now, gentlemen. Thank you. We’ll look after her,” she said and closed the doors again. Dynah glanced back at Ethan standing on the other side of the glass. She was thankful to hear the sound of the key turning in the lock. Mrs. Blythe turned to her in concern and put her arm around her. “I thought the hospital would keep you overnight.”

“She wanted to come home,” Janet answered for her, a solid presence on her other side.

“Well, that’s all right, I suppose, if you’re sure she’ll be all right.” She looked at Dynah, assessing her and grimacing in sympathy.

“I’ll be all right,” Dynah said, forcing a smile, wanting to allay the dorm mother’s worries. She wanted to stay here, not in a strange room with strangers to care for her.

“I called the dean. I’ll let him know you’re here so he won’t go to the hospital in the morning. He’ll want to know how you’re doing.”

Mortified, Dynah said nothing. How many people knew what had happened to her?

“He’s alerting the student body tomorrow to the danger in our community,” Mrs. Blythe went on. “He assured me your name wouldn’t be mentioned, dear, but it’s important for everyone to be warned until this man is arrested.” She pressed the top button to call the elevator. “Dean Abernathy wants to save you as much embarrassment as he can.” She assessed Dynah’s bruised face again. “I think it would be best if you stayed in your room for a few days.”

“I have classes.”

“I’ll send word to your instructors that you have a bad case of the flu. They can send your assignments here. And Janet can bring you your meals. How does that sound?”

Dynah nodded bleakly as she stepped inside the elevator.

“I’ll call your parents in the morning.”

Dynah slapped her hand against the door to keep it from sliding closed. “No! Please, don’t do that!”

“But they should know what happened, Dynah.”

“There’s nothing they can do. You’ll just worry them. I want to forget it happened.”

“We’ll talk in the morning. You get a good night’s sleep first.”

“Promise me, you won’t call them.”

“Do you think they’d blame the school?”

“They’d be upset. I don’t know what they’d do.”

“Well, we’ll wait and see then.”

Janet stood by solicitously while Dynah got ready for bed. She asked how it all happened, and Dynah told her. She wanted to talk about everything, to pour out her anguish and fear, her feelings of shame and degradation, but at the facts, Janet grimaced in repugnance.

“I’m sorry I asked. We won’t talk about it anymore. It’s better you forget it happened.” She pulled the blankets up and tucked them snugly around Dynah. “Put it out of your head and get some sleep.” Bending down, Janet kissed her forehead. “I wish you’d called me. I would have picked you up.”

Dynah felt a stab of guilt for not having done so. She should have heeded Mr. Packard’s warning. She should have asked Sally Wentworth for a ride. She should have listened to Charlie and watched herself. “You said you were going to study at the library tonight.”

“I didn’t go. I went out with Chad for coffee instead and then came back here and studied.”

Dynah didn’t say anything more. She couldn’t speak past the lump of pain tightening her throat. If only . . . if only . . .

“Will you be all right by yourself for a few minutes? I need to wash my face and brush my teeth.”

Dynah nodded, forcing a smile as she fought back the tears that burned so hot.

Janet picked up her pink silk pajamas and her toiletry kit, then turned out the bedside lamp. Opening the door, she pressed the switch for the overhead light and sent the room into darkness. She stood silhouetted against the light

from the corridor. "I won't be long, Dynah. Try to sleep. Everything will look better tomorrow." She closed the door behind her.

Turning onto her side, Dynah curled into a fetal ball, pulled the covers over her head, and sobbed.



The next day, Dynah called Sally Wentworth and quit her job at Stanton Manor House. Surprised, Sally asked why.

"I'm going to put more time into my studies." She ignored the feelings of guilt that tugged at her. It was true, in part. She was going to have lots of work to make up once she resumed classes.

"If you need more money, I can get you a dollar-an-hour raise."

"It's not the money, Sally. Really." She knew she would have to find some kind of job soon. She didn't have the luxury of not working at all. The scholarship took care of part of the tuition. Her parents paid the rest, as well as her dorm fees. However, there were still the expenses of clothing and books and her car. She had to pay for insurance and gas and repairs.

If her car had worked last night, maybe . . .

"Mr. Packard has been asking for you. He'll miss you, you know."

"I know," she said, her throat closing up. She thought of the old man's warning and felt the added burden of not having heeded it. "I can't help it, Sally. I just can't come back." She couldn't bring herself to even say she would come to visit.

"I guess I can understand your feelings. This isn't exactly a happy job."

"I enjoyed it."

“If that’s true, you wouldn’t be quitting. Are you sure there isn’t more to it, Dynah? This is awful sudden.”

She hesitated, then leaned her forehead against the wall. She couldn’t bring herself to tell Sally the truth. It was too humiliating. And worse, she couldn’t stop thinking about it. She was afraid, so afraid. Even the thought of being across town from the campus made her heart race. Ethan had gotten her car for her this morning, but what if it broke down again? What if Janet couldn’t pick her up? What if Ethan was too busy? She would have to make that long walk down Maple to Main and catch the bus. She would have to walk up Henderson past the park—

No. She shook her head. She couldn’t face it.

“I’m sorry, Sally.” She was ashamed to quit without notice. She was sorry to leave Sally and Juan with added responsibilities. She was sorry Mr. Packard would miss her. She was sorry about everything.

“Well, I took a chance hiring a student. I should’ve known better. I’ll have to work overtime until I can find a replacement. Don’t expect a recommendation.” There was a sharp click as Sally hung up.

Over the next few days, Dynah tried to pour herself into her studies, but she found it difficult. She was so tired, all she wanted to do was sleep. When she did, she was tormented by strange, vivid dreams. She couldn’t concentrate.

Officer Lawson called and arranged a follow-up interview at Middleton’s police station. He said he could send a squad car to pick her up, but Dynah said she would get there on her own. The last thing she wanted were rumors starting. Janet said the campus was already buzzing with the news of someone’s being raped in the community park.

Ethan insisted he would drive her. When he picked her up, he said if anyone saw them at the police station, he had a

plausible reason worked out. They were doing jail visitation and research. "Let me do the talking," he said.

Neither spoke after that. He seemed preoccupied, grim, and her own thoughts were rushing headlong toward disaster. Her stomach churned. It was the first time she had left the dormitory since that night. Instead of driving out the east entrance, Ethan took his usual route straight through the front gate and down Henderson. She kept her eyes closed until he turned onto Main.

Once at the police station, Ethan waited in the lobby. Dynah endured an hour of questions about the night of the rape. She mentioned the white station wagon with the Massachusetts plates. She couldn't remember any of the numbers or letters. Officer Lawson kept going back to the man again and again, gently but persistently prodding for details about his appearance, voice, anything that might identify him. Was he tall or short? Heavyset or thin? What was he wearing? Did he have any kind of an accent?

"All I saw was a dark shape. He didn't say anything. He just . . . grabbed me."

There was nothing conclusive to connect the man driving the white station wagon with the man who had raped her.

She went home with a splitting headache that kept her vomiting half the night.

Dynah returned to her classes nine days after the attack. The first day was torturous. She had always felt comfortable around people. Now she was nervous with so many around her. Worse, her friends chose the "incident" as their primary topic of conversation.

"I wonder who it was."

"Maybe that girl from Maine. Didn't she leave school a few days ago?"

"I heard she was pregnant."

“I didn’t hear that. Really?”

“What if it was her? Could you blame her for leaving? I wouldn’t want to stay here if anything like that happened to me. Would you?”

“Did they catch him?”

“No. I saw a police car on Henderson yesterday. I think they’re talking to all the neighbors, trying to find someone who might have seen something.”

“It was in the paper yesterday that they’re looking for information about the driver of a white station wagon with Massachusetts plates.”

“My boyfriend doesn’t think they’ll catch the guy. He’s probably over the border and long gone by now.”

“Back in Massachusetts.”

“I hope he stays there.”

“I hope he has a wreck on the way.”

“Doesn’t it give you the willies thinking about it? I mean, can you imagine? I’ve been going down there every afternoon to study since I came to NLC. It sure doesn’t have the same feel now, does it?”

“Where are you going, Dynah?”

She blushed, trapped by their curious looks. “To the student employment office,” she said, backing away, her books clutched against her chest like a shield.

“You already have a job, don’t you? At Stanton Manor House.”

“I had to quit.”

“I thought they paid pretty well.”

“The pay is all right, but it’s too far away and was eating into my study time. I’m going to see about getting a job here on campus.”

*Lies, lies. There were so many lies now. . . .*

“There’s a job open at the library. I know because I just quit. Shelving books was a bore.”

She got the job, and by the end of the week, she had her work schedule. She started work on Monday.

To all outward appearances, everything was fine. If she seemed to smile less, friends just assumed it was because she was distracted by midterms looming. Wasn’t everyone?

But deep within, Dynah knew. . . . She was shattered and didn’t know how to put herself together again. She lay sleepless in her dorm room, a nursery rhyme running through her mind again and again.

*Humpty-Dumpty sat on a wall.*

*Humpty-Dumpty had a great fall.*

*All the king’s horses and all the king’s men*

*Couldn’t put Humpty-Dumpty together again.*

She wanted to talk about her feelings with Ethan, but every time she tried, he changed the subject. She felt the distance between them like a yawning chasm, growing as each week went by. They still studied together in the library between classes. They still went to dinner on Friday and the movies on Saturday and to church together on Sunday. Yet she was left yearning for what had been. She missed the tenderness and intimacy they had shared. They had always talked about everything. They still talked, but not about anything that mattered—not about what preyed constantly on her mind and heart, not about whatever was eating away at him.

Tonight, she sat in a small booth in a quiet Italian restaurant and listened to Ethan talk about his homiletics class. Over the past hour, he had gone over four different ideas he was considering for his final presentation. The waiter had



given them menus, returned to take their orders, delivered Ethan's salad and veal parmesan and her side order of pasta, and left the check.

"What do you think?" he said finally, finishing the last of his dinner and looking at her over the edge of his water glass.

Dynah pushed her pasta around the plate and raised her head slightly. "What do *you* think?" she said quietly, aching inside. She wanted to say, "What is it you really feel about what happened to me? Do you blame me, Ethan? Do you think it was my fault I was raped?" She voiced none of those questions, but he must have seen them in her eyes because his face hardened.

"Why can't you just forget about it?"

"Can you?"

"I'm trying. I'm trying to forget it ever happened."

His eyes were dark, though whether from anger or pain she couldn't tell. She knew he wanted to forget about it, but burying it wasn't helping. She didn't know what would.

"I'd like to forget, too. I would. But I can't. Every night, I dream about it." She looked down at the red checkered tablecloth, biting her lip. If she cried, it would only make things worse for him.

"Maybe you ought to get counseling."

She wondered if he realized how dispassionate he sounded, how uninvolved. Was this just her problem? Didn't it concern him as well? He was going to be her husband in a few months. Shouldn't he care about what she was feeling? What was he really telling her? She searched his face, hurt and confused. "Maybe we both need counseling."

"Maybe we need time."

"You're angry."

"Yes. I'm angry. I'd like to kill the guy. I think about what I'd like to do if I ever got my hands on him. Is that what you

wanted to hear, Dynah? Sits nice with my chosen vocation, doesn't it? It tears me up every time I think about what was taken. So if you don't mind, I'd rather not have this topic as dinner conversation." He tossed his napkin on the table.

Snatching up the check, he looked at it, dropped it on the table, dug for his wallet, and extracted enough cash to cover the bill. "Let's get out of here. It doesn't look like you're interested in eating anything." He tossed the money on the table and slid out of the booth.

She didn't say anything on the drive back to campus. What could she say that would change anything? Ethan didn't tell her what was wrong, but she felt it. She saw it in his eyes sometimes, though he tried to hide it from her and from himself.

She was defiled.

Ethan pulled into a parking space near the dorm and shut off the engine. Gripping the steering wheel, he sighed heavily. "I'm sorry, Dynah. I don't like to think about it, let alone talk about it." He looked at her bleakly. "It wasn't your fault. You didn't do anything wrong. We'll just have to live with it."

*"Live with it."* The words reverberated in her mind. *Live with it. Live with it. We'll have to live with the monstrous reality of what happened? It will grow like a living, breathing thing between us, a crouching beast waiting to devour . . .*

"Oh, Ethan, I wish you'd hold me and tell me everything will be all right."

He reached out then and drew her close, but she felt the difference. His touch was tentative, almost impersonal. "Will things ever be the way they were?" She didn't have to look up at him to feel his withdrawal.

"If God wants them to be."

His words were like a blow. Dynah drew back and looked at him, stunned. "You think God was punishing me for

something. You think He allowed it to happen because He wanted to teach me a lesson.”

“I don’t know. Maybe. Maybe not. We’ve always agreed there’s a lesson in everything. Look, I don’t know why things like this happen. Why are there wars? Why do people in third world countries starve? I can’t pretend to understand the mind of God. All I do know is God has a reason for everything He does.”

Dynah looked at him, sick at heart. Ethan had always been so certain he knew what God wanted. God wanted her to come to NLC. God wanted her to be his wife. Had all that changed?

Turning away, she opened the door abruptly and got out.

“Dynah, wait a minute!” Ethan got out the other side. “Dynah, don’t be like this!”

She ran up the steps and went inside the dorm before he could close his door and follow. Several girls were just coming out of the elevator when she reached it and ducked inside. She punched the button for the third floor.

Thankfully, Janet was out on another date, and she could be alone to think, to feel. She put her purse on her desk and sank down, head in her hands.

She remembered the violence of the Old Testament. It was filled with stories of adversity, slavery, and deliverance. The Israelites had wandered in the desert. Even after they entered the Promised Land, things hadn’t gone smoothly. There had been wars, death, tragedy. The people were stubborn and rebellious. Prophets cried out for repentance. Israel turned away over and over again. God’s people wouldn’t listen. They wouldn’t trust and obey. They were stiff-necked and headstrong. And God punished them in order to turn them back.

*Oh, God, I trusted You. I’ve obeyed.*

*All men sin and fall short of the glory of God.*

She tried to think how she had displeased the Lord. She loved Him. Sometimes she thought she was born adoring Him. As far back as she could remember, Jesus had been real to her. He was the Bridegroom, the Holy One, her Savior and Lord. She had been raised to feel secure and safe and protected in His love. She had been taught that His loving hand was in everything.

In everything.

*Are You in this, Lord? Are You?*

*God is the potter. I am the clay.*

She could see her mother smiling and saying, "God is molding you into the beautiful woman He wants you to be."

*Oh, God, why have You crushed me? Why have You cast me into the pit? Aren't acts of violence wrought in retribution? Oh, Jesus, what did I do to displease You? Was it because I was too proud of Ethan? Was I too happy about marrying him? Was it because I didn't spend enough time with poor Mr. Packard? Was I rude to that man in the white station wagon? Haven't I prayed enough? Have I loved Ethan more than You? Is that why You've put this wall between us? Oh, Jesus, what did I do wrong? Oh, Jesus, Jesus . . .*

The telephone rang. She knew it was Ethan and didn't answer.