

Part 1

Songbird

Daniel hummed in his sleep. It was an unconscious song, a midnight lullaby, as familiar to me as the sigh of my own breath. I fell asleep at night listening to the cadence of his dreams, and when I woke in the morning, his quiet melody was a prelude to birdsong.

I opened my eyes in the darkness and strained to see an imprint of peach on the horizon beyond my open window. It was coming, but when I blinked at the black reflection in the glass, dawn was nothing more than a promise, and Daniel's every exhalation seemed tuned to charm it into being. I pictured him in his bed, arm flung over the pillow and palm opened toward the sky as if God had set an orchestra before his still-chubby fingers. As if God had chosen my son to coax light into our little house.

Maybe He had.

If there was one thing I had learned in five years of being a single mom, it was that the Lord did exactly that: He used the small, the inconsequential, the forgotten to shame the wise. He worked in contradictions, in the unexpected. And I wouldn't have been the least bit surprised if He hovered over my Daniel, drawing music from the curve of his parted lips with the gentle pull of divine fingers.

The thought made me smile, and for a moment I longed to tiptoe across the cool floorboards and be a part of it all, to slip into the tiny attic nook that was my son's bedroom. I wanted to feel my way through the shadows, stretch out beside him, and kiss the sugar-sweet little-boy mouth that puckered like a perfect bow.

But I didn't. Instead, I did what I did every day. I got up, grabbed the clothes that I had laid out the night before, and headed downstairs. If Daniel was singing, then I danced: avoiding the stair that creaked, twisting around the smooth-worn banister like a ballerina, waltzing to Simon's room, where I peeked through the crack of the mostly closed door.

My ten-year-old half brother was on his stomach, bare back exposed to the unseasonable cool of an August morning. We had all the windows flung open, and the house whispered with a light breeze. It wasn't cold, not really, but the sight of his skin

made me stifle a shiver. I floated into Simon's room, a part of his dreams, and laid a blanket across his shoulders like a blessing. Schoolboy shoulders, I noticed. Thin and angular, but broadening, hinting at the strong man he would soon become as if the clean line of his skin were bursting with promise. A tight bud about to unfurl. Sometimes I still couldn't believe that she had left him here to blossom.

I touched the mop of his dark hair with my fingertips and thanked God that the child below me slept in peace. That he loved me.

When I spun into the kitchen and switched on the coffeemaker, I couldn't stop the prayer that rose, a balloon lifting beneath the cage that held my heart. *Thank You*, I breathed in the silence. For Daniel, for Simon, for my grandmother, who still slipped from bed not long after I turned on the shower to whisk pancake batter or fold blueberries into muffins for breakfast. *Thank You* for the four corners of our family and the way that we folded into each other like one of my grandma's quilts. Edges coming together, softening.

Most of all, I was grateful for the stillness of the predawn hush, for the short reprieve when everything was dark and new, emerging. It was in these moments as the day was still lifting its head that I could believe everything was exactly as it should be instead of the way it was.

Not that life was horrible—far from it. But as the weeks and months circled on, I couldn't deny that our ramshackle family was often more off than on. The whole thing reminded me of Daniel's birthday present: a carved model train track. Though the sleek, red engine could pull a chain of cars around the twining loops for hours on end, there inevitably came a moment when a single wheel tripped off the track. Who knew what caused the quiet stumble? It was a magician's trick, a sleight of hand—everything bustling along one minute and struggling the next. But the train kept going; the engine pulled on. It just dragged the coal cars behind it, clacking unevenly all the way.

I felt just like that engine, hauling everything in my wake. Hauling *everyone* in my wake.

When I pulled back the shower curtain, it became obvious that the DeSmit family train was already well on its way to derailment. There were worms in the bathtub, a

dozen or more squirming in a mound of dirt so rich and black it made me think of cake. Devil's food.

I had specifically told Daniel not to put worms in the bathtub and had even given him an ice cream bucket in which to store his newest collection. My son needed to have his hearing checked *again*, I decided. But it was an exercise in futility. I knew that what plagued Daniel wasn't a hearing problem; it was a listening problem.

As I deposited handfuls of squirming earthworms into the bucket I rescued from the front porch, I felt the momentary bliss of my morning slackening its fragile hold. Hot on the heels of the stark reminder that Daniel was an angel only when he slept came a familiar twinge of worry for Simon, the boy who earned his wings in a thousand different ways. By the time I finally stepped into the mud-streaked shower and turned it on full blast, I could feel concern overflow my fists like worry stones too heavy to hold.

Handsome as Simon was, and growing more mature by the day, he still wore loss like a chain around his neck, heavy and awkward, dragging his head down. He loved us, I knew that, but he missed her. And why shouldn't he? Janice was a terrible mother to me, and yet I missed her every single day. I felt her absence in the shadowed corners of my heart, where longing echoed. It was a sound track of hurt—soft, but always there.

And Janice had been a *good* mom to Simon. Or at least, as good as she could bring herself to be. No wonder he bore her ghost like an anchor.

"Do you like it here?" I asked him once, in the beginning, when Janice's departure could still be considered nothing more than an extended trip. I had wanted to ask him, *Do you like us?* but I couldn't bring myself to say those exact words.

All the same, Simon's eyes sprang to mine, wide and startled. The question was innocent, but the look on his five-year-old face told me that the answer wasn't quite so benign.

"It's okay," I said then, reaching to ruffle his hair. "You don't have to—"

"I do," he interrupted me, and his voice cracked with the emotion behind the words. "I like it here."

It took years for me to realize that the problem wasn't Simon's affection for this newfound family and home; it was his own fears about our affection for him. No matter

how hard we tried to make him believe that he was a part of us, I knew he continued to battle the personal pain of wondering, deep down, if he was an outsider.

And the problem was only exacerbated at Mason Elementary. Although I was quite sure that Simon was off-the-charts brilliant, the sort of student every teacher longed to shape and mold, he dreaded the start of a new school year. I knew it, even though he had never ventured to so much as whisper a word against his classmates.

As far as I could tell, the kids were decent to him. Mason was a rural community, and the area boasted a substantial population of Latin American immigrants, many of them already second or third generation. The local schools were, at least in theory, diverse and welcoming. Simon seemed to fit right in. Sometimes, when people mistook him for Mexican, he didn't even bother to correct them or point out his North African roots.

But there were other things that set him apart. Like the fact that he was parentless—I knew the pain of that particular stigma all too well. Or that he lived with his half sister, whom most of Mason considered a child herself and only fourteen years his senior. An unwed mother on top of it all. And no one could forget that the woman Simon called *Grandma* shared no blood ties with him, or that the boy he named *brother* was in fact his half nephew. In a community where families were formed along staunchly traditional lines—cue the theme song from *Leave It to Beaver*—our home was a mismatched patchwork that was more than just an aberration from the norm. It was a source of almost-morbid fascination.

I groaned and turned to face the stream pouring from our antiquated shower faucet. The water coursed over my forehead, pooled in my open mouth. *It'll be fine*, I told myself for the thousandth time. *We'll be just fine*.

“Mom! I have to go pee!” Daniel's fists on the bathroom door sent shock waves through the quiet worry that shaped my morning.

Spitting out a mouthful of lukewarm water, I called, “Almost done! I'll be out in a minute.”

“A minute? That's, like, forever. I can't wait that long!”

“Give me a break,” I muttered, turning off the faucet and throwing back the shower curtain. The brass hooks screeched against the metal rod in perfect harmony with my mood.

Before hopping in the shower, I had laid my towel on the back of the toilet, and when I reached for it now, I realized that the old porcelain was beaded with sweat from the steamy room. I had forgotten to turn on the bathroom fan, and even the rose pink wallpaper of the tiny room was covered in rainbow-colored droplets. I stifled a sigh, forcing myself not to think about mold and mildew and rot. We were already battling enough of that in the cellar beneath the mudroom.

“My towel’s wet,” I told Daniel through the door. “Could you grab me a clean one from the linen closet?”

“No time!”

Whipping the damp towel around me, I unlocked the bathroom door and threw it open. “A little patience would be nice,” I chided Daniel. But even though I was annoyed, I couldn’t resist reaching a hand to smooth the sleep-creased skin of his cheek.

“Get out of the way!” he screeched, yanking me by the wrist. When he could wedge himself between the doorframe and my dripping form, Daniel threw his shoulder into my side and deposited me in the hallway that opened onto the kitchen. The door slammed at my back.

“Good morning.” Grandma smiled from the counter.

“*Good* is a relative term,” I told her.

“The sun is shining.”

I turned to look out the window over the sink. “So it is.”

“You have a beautiful son.”

Though I cocked an eyebrow at her, I felt my lips rise in assent.

“But you are leaving a puddle on the floor.”

When I looked down to assess the damage, rivulets of water from my drenched hair deepened the gathering pool at my feet. “Sorry. I got kicked out of the bathroom.”

“I heard.” Grandma opened a drawer and extracted a flour-sack towel. “Here. It’s thin, but it’ll help.”

I crossed the room and took the towel from her outstretched hand. Wrapping it turban-style around my hair, I gave her a wry grin. "I'd go upstairs and get dressed, but I left my clothes in the bathroom with Daniel."

"They're going to be wet." Grandma's smile was apologetic. "When I got up, I could tell that you forgot to turn the fan on."

"I was distracted," I muttered, trying to defend myself. "Daniel put worms in the bathtub again."

"Remind me why the bathtub is prime earthworm real estate?"

"Who knows? Daniel's mind is a mystery."

Grandma laughed. "Right you are. Why don't you head upstairs and find some dry clothes? By the time you come down, I'll have coffee on the table."

"Sounds great." I did a quick scan of the kitchen counter and realized that she hadn't started breakfast yet. "But I'm in charge of grub this morning. You, sit. Put your feet up. I'll make French toast."

"French toast?" Simon enthused, stifling a yawn. He had materialized in the archway that led to our small living room, and I was stunned by how he seemed to fill the space.

"Yup," I told him, swallowing the feeling that I was looking at a young man instead of a boy. "Good morning, by the way."

He removed his glasses, rubbed his still-sleepy eyes, and replaced the plastic frames on his nose with a yawn. Finally taking the time to focus on me, he gasped. "Get some clothes on, Jules!"

"It's not like I'm naked."

"You're wearing a towel!"

Grandma and I exchanged amused looks as he hurried back to his room.

"I think you may have scarred him for life," she laughed when we heard his door slam.

"Only if I'm lucky." I was trying to be funny, but suddenly Grandma's eyes glazed over. It was a quick change, a transformation that I was starting to get used to. She misted over easily these days. "Hey," I whispered, tightening my towel with one hand and squeezing her arm with the other. "I was only teasing."

“I know.” Grandma sniffed and patted my fingers where they rested on the terry-cloth arm of her robe. She was staring at the place where Simon had stood as if she could see the faint glow of the aura he left behind. “But I worry about him.”

“Me too.”

“You don’t think we’re . . . ?”

“Scarring him?”

“Yes,” she breathed, the word so faint it was barely voiced.

“No,” I assured her. “No, we’re not.”

“But our house is so small.”

“You mean cozy.”

“We’re practically on top of each other, Julia.”

“It draws us together.”

“Simon is surrounded by women.”

I laughed. “There’re only two of us. And two of them, I’ll remind you. The boys are hardly outnumbered.”

“A little privacy would be nice. . . .”

“Tell me about it,” I groaned, drawing her attention to my towel toga with a gentle hip-to-hip bop.

Grandma shook her head and covered her eyes with one hand, but I could tell that the mood had passed. “We’re not exactly your typical family unit.”

“It’s okay,” I said, bestowing a kiss on the lined knuckles that hid her expression.

“We’re doing the best we can.”

“Is it enough?”

It was the question I asked myself every single day. But I didn’t tell her that. Instead I parroted the words I had heard her say a hundred times. A thousand. “It has to be.”

I made my way upstairs, leaving Daniel to his morning routine, Simon to his preteen disgust, and Grandma to her thoughts. It felt selfish, almost indulgent, that I stole away when everyone was, for one reason or another, preoccupied with their own concerns. As I gathered a new outfit from the drawers of my old-fashioned bureau, I wished for a moment that I could crawl back between the sheets of my double bed. I’d yank the duvet over my head and pretend that Daniel was obedient, Simon well-adjusted, and Grandma a

decade younger. Maybe more. I could use another adult in this house with energy to match my own.

Twenty-four, I thought, yanking on a pair of khaki cargo shorts. *I'm almost a quarter of a century old*. Sometimes I felt double my age.

And maybe I was. My life seemed divided in two. There was the mundane, the everyday, the work. The frustration and wondering and worry. The times when I felt like no matter what I did, it was the wrong thing to do. And then there were the moments that transcended it all. The laughter, the warmth, the awed understanding that in spite of everything, we were so blessed.

Sometimes I woke up and believed, really believed, that God sang over us.

Had I felt that way only an hour ago?

“What do you want from me?” I asked the reflection in the mirror on my wall. The woman in question just stared back. I wasn’t even sure who I was talking to. Myself? The three people who depended on me downstairs? God? I might be failing all of them, but heaven help me, I was trying. It had to be enough.

Straightening my Asian print T-shirt, I gave the hazel-eyed girl in the mirror a nod of encouragement. “You’re doing just fine,” I told her.

I almost believed myself.